

## ISIS IN KUSH, A NUBIAN SOUL FOR AN EGYPTIAN GODDESS

Marco Baldi

(Università di Pisa – ISMEO – Centro Studi Petrie)

Inquiry on the Napatan-Meroitic kingdom, that flourished in ancient Nubia from eighth century BC to fourth century AD, behoves us to evaluate its strong multicultural nature, which permeated several aspects of the Nubian society. Rich external influxes, especially coming from Pharaonic and Hellenistic Egypt, had a strong impact on the Kushite kingdoms. Nevertheless, it was not a simple introduction of foreign traditions passively received from culturally poor territories; a broad secular trade network and reciprocal territorial occupations allowed a profitable acquisition of manifold Egyptian customs by a lively context that elaborated them within a syncretic frame, giving life to the original solutions of a “polymorphic society”<sup>1</sup>. The spread of the Isis cult in Nubia is a significant expression of this process: the goddess conquered a relevant role in Kushite pantheon, and her iconography and nature were rielaborated according to the local needs.

A little number of evidences suggest the Lower Nubian knowledge of the goddess ever since third millennium BC<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the Isis cult first knew an official structure in Nubia during New Kingdom Egyptian occupation<sup>3</sup>, when the worship of her as “Mistress of Nubia”<sup>4</sup> highlighted her fixed tie with Kush. Temples devoted to Isis were built at Faras<sup>5</sup> and Buhen<sup>6</sup>, and she is depicted on wall-reliefs of several Lower Nubian sacral buildings at Qasr Ibrim<sup>7</sup>, Semna West<sup>8</sup>, Kawa<sup>9</sup>, Beit el-Wali<sup>10</sup> and Gerf Hussein<sup>11</sup>. Depictions of Isis and other deities were especially for conveying a clear political message by Egyptian conquerors in places of popular religiosity.

1 According to a definition by Fritz Hintze.

2 An Early Dynastic rock-cut inscription in Buhen invokes Horus and Isis; the two deities would have been later associated to the Egyptian town (see Török 2009, 55).

3 Cult buildings honouring several deities were erected in this period within an integration policy on ideological and practical levels. Some ones were to constitute local centres of economic administration.

4 This epithet can be seen, for example, in the Festival hall of Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC) in Karnak and in the rock-temple of Ramses II (1279-1212 BC) in Beit el-Wali (see Ricke et al. 1967, 31, pl. 41B). See also Budge 1912, 138-39.

5 Rock temple of Isis of Ibshek, erected during the Eighteenth Dynasty co-regency of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (1473-1458 BC) within a wide project of social, political and economic organization from the First to the Fourth Cataract (see Török 2009, 184-85).

6 Built by Amenhotep II in the Middle Kingdom outer fortress (see Porter and Moss 1952, 129 ff.) and restored during the Twentieth Dynasty (see Török 1997b, 97).

7 Isis is represented, in the company of Min of Koptos, on the northern wall of a local rock shrine dating to the solitary reign of Thutmose III (after 1458 BC); the relief shows officials while presenting tribute to the king (see Porter and Moss 1952, 93).

8 The stone temple, set inside in the local fortress and erected during the co-regency of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, replaced a Middle Kingdom building restored by Thutmose I (1506-1493 BC); it was again rebuilt when Thutmose III remained sole ruler, the decoration changing to honour his accession. On the northern front, within an investiture cycle, the king is conducted by Montu and Isis to Dedwen (see Porter and Moss 1952, 148 (26); Török 2009, 221).

9 The Amun Temple, later rebuilt by Twenty-Fifth Dynasty king Taharqo and known as Temple A, had been erected by Tutankhamun (1336-1327 BC), and some original scenes, even if greatly damaged, can be seen; Isis is shown in the company of Min of Koptos while receiving calves from Tutankhamun on the eastern wall of the naos (Macadam 1955, 39 ff., pl. V/b).

10 The rock temple reports a monumental investiture cycle of deified Ramses II. In the forecourt the legitimation of him is by its military victories, Isis making one of the showed divine triads with Horus of Kuban and Ramses himself in a niche of a side room; the king is legitimated in the vestibule by a group of deities, including Isis, who is finally represented on the sanctuary walls, whose scenes conclude the investiture, while suckling the young Ramses. In the last scene the goddess is referred to as “Mistress of Nubia”, confirming the right of Ramses to rule Kush (see Porter and Moss 1952, 23-25 (6)-(9), (23)-(26), (28)-(30), (32); Török 2009, 246-47).

11 The Nineteenth Dynasty rock temple was devoted to Ptah and deified Ramses II. Each longitudinal wall has four niches containing three cult statues each one; with the exception of one of them, every group represents a triad including deified Ramses and a divine couple, of which the king is clearly presented as heir. Isis makes one of the couples with Horus of Aniba (see Porter and Moss 1952, 34 ff. (8)-(15); Török 2009, 255-57).

## The Napatan encounter with Isis

The poor knowledge on the Nubian history from the Egyptian withdrawal in 1.059 BC to the beginning of the Napatan epoch in the early eighth century BC, does not allow to draw clearly the development of the Isis cult in Nubia before the accession of Piye (747-713 BC), who was the nearest precursor of the Nubian Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, ruling Egypt until 663 BC.

The Napatan kingdom, ruling Nubia until 270 BC, constituted a fundamental period for the widespread diffusion of the goddess throughout Kush, laying the bases for the subsequent large following of her cult during the Meroitic epoch. The Napatan pantheon, almost slavishly taking the Pharaonic one, strengthened the role of Isis by exploiting the foundations of the colonial period and the direct learning of the theological bases of her cult by the temporary control of Egypt.

So far, no Napatan Isis temples have been brought to light, nevertheless the annals of king Harsiyotef (first half of the fourth century BC) confirm her inclusion among state cults by reporting festivals celebrated during his first thirty-five ruling years (FHN II, n. 78 l. 146-61). According to his list, Isis was honoured with Osiris in *Pr-gm-t* (Kawa), *M-r3-w3-t* (Defeia) (Vercoutter 1961, 97 ff.; Zibelius 1972, 125) and *G3-r-r-t* (?), and with Osiris and Horus in *S-b-r3-s3-t* (?)<sup>12</sup>.

The Temple T of Taharqo (690-664 BC) in Kawa yielded a bronze aegis, as neck ornament made from a semicircular base surmounted by a head of Isis. An uraeus is on the head of the goddess, who wears a two-horned crown, whereas the collar is decorated with incised geometrical motifs and shows two falcon heads on the shoulders (Macadam 1955, 174, pl. XCII/c [0627])<sup>13</sup>. Aegises were cultic objects devoted to Isis (or maybe Hathor) adorning prows and sterns of divine barks in temples. The aegis was found in the hypostyle hall of the temple, as well as a coeval bronze situla, decorated with religious symbols and a group of deities made in relief, including Isis followed by Horus wearing the Double Crown. Situlae were used for libations, allowing revivification, in temple and funerary contexts, and were especially associated with the Isis cult (Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 106).

The Harsiyotef's list indicates the Kushite worship of the Osirian triad, that had already found evidences in some of the several little chapels built by Twenty-Fifth Dynasty pharaohs at Karnak. On the lintel of the Osiris *neb-ankh* chapel, Horus receives Taharqo, who offers wine to Isis and Osiris; the lintel of the Osiris *padedankh* chapel shows two divine couples placed according to a symmetrical arrangement: on a side Isis follows Osiris, on the other one Horus appears behind Amun; on a block statue of Pedismen, son of Pekosh (literally "The Nubian"), the Osirian and Amun triads are depicted side by side. Other scenes usually represent Isis stretching out her arms behind the shoulder of Osiris (Leclant 1981, 41-42). The finding at Kawa of many bronze statuettes representing the three deities suggests the local relevance of the triad (Macadam 1955, 143, pls. LXXVIa, e-f, LXXVIIe, LXXXIc, XCIIc).

However, Napatan kings particularly strengthened the connection of Isis with Horus. The goddess, referred to as "Mother of the God"<sup>14</sup>, had in fact a primary role in the divine legitimation of the king, through the association of her and her son Horus with the Queen Mother and the king<sup>15</sup>. It is clearly indicated from titularies of Napatan queens (Török 1995, 99 ff.) and kings<sup>16</sup>,

12 On the identification of these places see Török 2009, 370-71, table J.

13 On a possible relation of Isis with falcons see Gamer-Wallert 1983, 1: 195 ff. with reference to the representation of the goddess in the Hibis Temple (cf. de Garis Davies 1953, pl. 4/3). Cf. also Török 2002a, 201, note 623.

14 On an eighth century BC example in the Nubian land see the inscription of Queen Kadimalo on the façade of the temple of Dedwen and Sesostri III (1878-1842 BC) in Semna West (FHN I, n. 1). In the same inscription the rarer epithet of "Mistress of all the Gods" is.

15 Cf. the Election stela of Aspelta in Gebel Barkal (FHN I, n. 37).

16 See for example the epithet "Son of Isis" attributed to Piye, who in his titlature took elements from Twenty-Second Dynasty kings (FHN I, 49), and Nastaseñ (second half of the fourth century BC) (FHN II, n. 84 l. 3). See also the stela of Taharqo in Tanis (Macadam 1949, pls. 9-10) and the two identical inscriptions on the pylon of his Temple T in Kawa (Török 2002a, 84-85).

as Aspelta's epithet "protector of his mother Isis" (FHN I, n. 40 l. 15)<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the epithet "mistress of Nubia", which had been for honouring Isis during New Kingdom<sup>18</sup>, was often associated to queens in the Napatan period<sup>19</sup>.



Figure 1. *Begrawiya West, Pyramid 846, Amulet showing seated Isis suckling her son Horus. Gold. 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (after Wildung 1996, cat. no. 189).*

The mother-son relationship between Isis and Horus, that was reflected in the one between king and queen mother, had been already in Egypt and was emphasized in Kush, conferring a very high place to royal women<sup>20</sup> and so greatly favouring the widespread of the Isis cult. The association between the two deities was a common theme in Kushite inscriptions and artistic media. It had the emblematic very recurrent expression in the intimate and strongly symbolic act of nursing; though a little number of evidences show the same gesture sometimes made by other goddesses in Kush, as Mut<sup>21</sup>, Bastet<sup>22</sup> and Hathor<sup>23</sup>, Isis still preserved a pre-eminent role. The nursing allowed to share the essence of royalty, as well as when Isis suckled the king, who was sacralised and introduced into the divine sphere (Lohwasser 2001a, 70)<sup>24</sup>. The act was an integral part of the ritual bound to king's birth, coronation and rebirth in the afterworld.

Such theme, that had been sometimes depicted in wall reliefs, was first represented in the statuary in Egypt just during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty. Early examples were bronze statuettes possibly reproducing the features of God's wife of Amun Amenirdis I (Kashta's daughter)<sup>25</sup> and a granite statue representing her successor Shepenwepet II (Taharqo's sister)<sup>26</sup> (Leclant 1981, 41).

Many Napatan objects showing *Isis lactans* have been brought to light, especially as grave goods (fig. 1). Isis was generally shown wearing her typical originally Egyptian crown, in form of a sun disc between cow horns; a decorated band under the crown, spreading

17 This was an unique adaptation of the royal epithet "Horus, protector of his father (Osiris)" (see Onasch 1984, 141). The reign of Aspelta was on the first half of the sixth century BC.

18 See note 4. In the Napatan epoch, for Isis as "mistress of Nubia" in the room B 502 of the Temple B 500 in Gebel Barkal under Piye see Török 2002a, 63. In the Ptolemaic temple of Bigeh Isis is "ruler of Nubia" (Blackman 1915, 14, pl. XIV).

19 On Qalhata – Shabaqo's wife and Tanwetamani's sister – see the "Dream stela" of Tanwetamani from Temple B 500 (664 BC) (FHN I, n. 29 l. 21-22 of the text under the winged sundisc); on Aspelta's mother Nasalsa see the Election stela of the king from B 500 (FHN I, n. 37 l. 1 of the scene at the top and l. 19, 21 of the main text) and the Adoption stela of the same king from Sanam (?) (FHN I, n. 39 l. 1-2 of the text above king's mother and l. 10 of the main text); on Malotara – Atlanersa's wife and Senkamanisken's mother – see the inscription on a serpentinite heart scarab in her tomb in Nuri (Nu 41) (Dunham 1955, fig. 31) and an inscribed New Year seal (from Thebes?) (Letellier 1977, 44); on Harsiyotef's mother Atasamalo see the annals of the king (FHN II, n. 78 l. 1 of the text above the queen); on Nastase's mother Pelkha see the annals of the king (FHN II, n. 84 of the text behind the king).

20 The concept of Kushite queenship was strongly influenced from the institution of Divine Adoratrice.

21 See an aegis of Kashta (Leclant 1963, figs. 2-5) and an amulet from Sanam (Griffith 1923, 135, 166, pl. LV/12).

22 See a menat of Taharqo (Leclant 1961, pl. I) and a faience amulet from a Napatan tomb of an unidentified child in the western cemetery in Meroe (Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 167). See also the Nastase's stela (FHN II, n. 84 l. 32-33).

23 For the only known representation of Hathor suckling a Twenty-Fifth Dynasty queen see Török 1997b, fig. 1.

24 Cf. note 10. See for example a faience Napatan amulet from a Sanam tomb, showing Isis suckling a child having the Double Crown (Griffith 1923, 135, 157, pl. LV/8); a bronze statuette of Taharqo from Temple T in Kawa showing a child crowned with two uraeus (Macadam 1955, 143, pl. LXXVII); a gilded silver amulet from El Kurru (tomb Ku 52 of queen Nefrukekasta, Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) (Dunham 1950, 82 n. 1145, pl. LX/c, LXX/b/4/1). Other references in Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 63, 99. For a Napatan silver amulet representing a rare figure of a queen suckled by Isis, see Wenig 1978, cat. no. 95.

25 Berlin 2878 and Hildesheim 1739. The reign of Kashta was from 760 to 747 BC.

26 Tam Tinh Tran 1973, fig. 7.

from Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, was characteristic for Nubian images. Physical features of round sculptures, as wide shoulders, short neck and massive feet, were ancient Sudanese contributions as well<sup>27</sup>. Very common iconography represents Isis sitting on a throne and holding a child in her lap<sup>28</sup>, whereas a few items show the goddess and Horus standing, she giving breast to the child<sup>29</sup>.

Goods representing Isis were mainly recurrent in royal women tombs, in order to highlight their identification with the goddess. The association of the Kuhite queens with Isis, that mainly justified their relevant role in royal ideology, could have found expression in the burials of some of them at Abydos during Twenty-Fifth Dynasty and the immediately previous period, Egypt being opened to the Napatan kings<sup>30</sup>. Abydos was in fact one of the most important sites of Osiris and Isis cult, and burying queens here strengthened their link with the goddess.

The Twenty-Fifth Dynasty pharaohs especially exploited the Isis legend in order to legitimate their rule on Egypt, as significantly suggested by a stela of Taharqo (690-664 BC), set in a Kawa Amun Temple (Temple T) to commemorate an exceptional inundation of the Nile in the sixth year of his reign (FHN I, n. 22; Török 1997b, 225-26). The inscription glorifies the king and in its final part offers legitimation to his power through the association of Queen Mother Abar and Taharqo with Isis and Horus: recalling his ascent, it describes the visit of Abar at Memphis on Taharqo's enthronement and compares the joy of the Queen Mother with the reaction of Isis seeing her son Horus crowned, in accordance with the Chemmis legend<sup>31</sup>. The essential royal function of the goddess is expressed by the coeval onomatology as well: it is especially significant the name *Diise-hebsed* ("May Isis grant the Sed-feast"), in addition to other ones as *Hetep-iset* ("May Isis be in favour"), *Horsiese* ("(A second) Horus, son of Isis"). *Iset-khal*, the name of Atlanersa's wife (mid-seventh century BC), is composed from the name of Isis and the unclear element *-khal*.

On the other hand, the occurrence of royal women in the coronation and cult scenes was a very recurrent theme of the Napatan period<sup>32</sup>. Mother, wife and sisters of the Nubian king held in this occasions a greater role than their Egyptian counterparts, and they were often entrusted with ritual duties that were only made by men in the Pharaonic kingdom.

Depictions showed king's female relatives accompanying the king, playing the sistrum as preliminary activity to the ritual<sup>33</sup>, and pouring libations to Amun, in the lunettes of royal stelae<sup>34</sup>

27 See for example a faience amulet from El Kurru (tomb Ku 53 of Queen Tabiry, Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, ca 716 BC) (Dunham 1950, 88 n. 1381, pl. LLA-B; Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 3).

28 See for example the faience statuette, of doubtful source, attributed to the Napatan period, in Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 150; a faience amulet from El Kurru (tomb Ku 51 of an unidentified queen of Piye, Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) (Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 19) and an analogous piece from the same cemetery (tomb Ku 52 of queen Nefrukekasta, Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) (Dunham 1950, 82 n. 1092, pl. LIII/a-b); from this latter tomb see a lapis amulet showing the same motif (Dunham 1950, 82 n. 1046, pl. LXX/b/3/2). See the two Twenty-Fifth Dynasty gold statuettes in Meroe West cemetery: tomb W 832 (Wildung 1996, cat. no. 188) and W 846 (Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 189). For a bidimensional representation see the Napatan steatite rectangular plaque showing Isis nursing Horus in a swampland in Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 51.

29 See for example a faience double-sided amulet from El Kurru (tomb Ku 51 of an unidentified queen of Piye, Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) (Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 20).

30 Kashta's wife Pebatma (mother of Piye and Shabaqo), Piye's wife Petekereslo/Peksater and Shebitqo's wife Istemkheb were buried at Abydos (see Wenig 1990; Leahy 1994; Török 1997b, 234-35).

31 Cf. Altenmüller 1974; Bergman 1968, 137 ff. The same model was later used to legitimate the ascent of Anlamani (see FHN I, n. 34) and Irike-Amannote (second half of the fifth century BC) (see FHN II, n. 71). The actual occurrence of this journeys by mothers of the kings on the coronation ritual cannot be proven.

32 See for example the internal wall reliefs of the room B 303 in the Temple B 300 in Gebel Barkal, showing Taharqo followed by his mother Abar and by his wife Takahatamani respectively (Robisek 1989); the "Dream Stela" of Tanwetamani in Temple B 500 in Gebel Barkal, its lunette showing the king followed by his wife Piye-ere in the left scene and by his mother Kalhata in the right scene (FHN I, n. 29); the enthronement stela of Anlamani from Kawa (late seventh century BC), showing the king while offering to Amen-Rê in the company of the Queen Mother Nasalsa (Macadam 1949, 44-50, pls. 15 f.)

33 The sistrum was generally associated with Isis and Hathor. For a faience Meroitic sistrum see Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, n. 141.

34 For Tanwetamani see Grimal 1981, pl. I; for Harsiyotef see Grimal 1981, pl. X; for Aspelta see Macadam 1949, pl.

as well as in temple reliefs<sup>35</sup> and royal funerary chapels<sup>36</sup> (Lohwasser 2001a, 67 ff.). Differently from Egypt, Kushite royal women participated actively in the rite, communicated directly with the gods and, in their identification as Isis, could mediate between people, king and deities (Török 2002a, 304; Bergman 1968, 202). In the coronation scenes, symbolizing the restoration of order after the death of the previous king, mother and/or wife of the new sovereign legitimated his rule through their identification with Isis; this confirms the very relevant role of the female counterpart of the king in Kush (Lohwasser 2001a, 68).

According to Török (1997b, 235), the appointment of royal women as priestesses concealed also more pragmatic considerations, they having to be distinguished as predestined king's mothers. In this sense, royal women were sometimes assigned to priestly offices which were connected to the power of the king. Twenty-Fifth Dynasty Kushite women as God's Wives of Amun in Thebes were especially to legitimate the Nubian pharaohs in Egypt. Representation of them close to the king in official scenes in Egypt, substituting the queen, was the right compromise for the spread of Kushite ideology of queenship among Egyptian people, who were not used to see women accompanying the king in cult and coronation depictions (Lohwasser 2001a, 70).

### The influx of Philae on Meroitic Isis

According to the actual knowledge, the Napatan kings had determined a new phase in the religious history of the Nubian territories. Isis, as well as several Egyptian deities, had been first accepted in the pantheon of an indigenous Nubian state, and she had conquered a pre-eminent role in the Kushite royal ideology. The Meroitic rulers, ascending in 270 BC, respected the Napatan heritage and increased the relevance of Isis<sup>37</sup>, who was to oversee several aspects of the Kushite life<sup>38</sup>.

Meroitic Isis resulted from a general review of the Nubian religion, that feed on a deeper elaboration of the Egyptian theology than Napatans had done, by promoting the ascent of autochthonous and Hellenistic deities. The syncretic process of indigenous traditions and foreign influxes greatly marked the Meroitic identity, that found in the Isis temple in Philae, at the first cataract, the main elements towards a revision of the nature of the goddess. The early religious interest of the Kushite kingdoms for this territory, as early as 690 BC, is suggested by a granite altar dedicated to Amun of Takompo (arabic *Maharraqa*) and showing the cartouche of Taharqo<sup>39</sup>.

Isis as "Mistress of Philae" was worshipped on the island of Philae first on Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (Giammarusti and Roccati 1980, 58 ff.), but the building program of the temple complex started under Nectanebos I (380-362 BC) and was continued by Ptolemy II (285-246 BC) and Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246-221 BC)<sup>40</sup>. Building activity by Nubian king Arkamani (270-260 BC) highlights the active presence of Meroites at Philae during the Ptolemaic period. The great attention to the Isis cult in Philae would be derived from the association of the goddess with Ptolemaic royal ideology and, more pragmatically, was part of a religious policy that the Hellenistic kings inaugurated after the revolt in Upper Egypt between 207/206 and 186 BC. According to Török (2009, 406), they oriented the temple towards south, therefore towards Nubia, not because

40; for Nastaseñ see Schafer 1901, pl. I.

35 On Temple B 300 of Taharqo in Gebel Barkal see Robisek 1989, 113-14; on Temple B 700 in Gebel Barkal see Griffith 1929, pl. V; on Temple T of Taharqo in Kawa see Macadam 1955, pls. 14b, 64e-i. In Egypt, this rite was reserved for the king.

36 According to Török (1997b, note 463), earliest known example is on the pyramid Nu 6 of Anlamani (623-593 BC) (Dunham 1955, pl. XX/A).

37 For Mediterranean literary references on the local worship of Isis see Agatarchides of Cnidus in Diodorus Siculus 3.9.2, and Strabo XVII, 2, 3.

38 As in the Napatan times, Meroitic onomatology confirms the spread of the Isis cult in theophoric names as *Wosmol* (REM 0214), *Wosmheye* (REM 0211), *Wosn.s* (REM 0118), *Wosptkide* (REM 0292), *Wostkel* (REM 0386).

39 This altar, later set in the south-eastern corner of the forecourt of the Isis temple, highlights the most ancient known cult activity at Philae (Griffith 1931, 128).

40 See Török 2009, 386 and further references in his note 47.

they considered Isis a Nubian goddess, but because the inundation arrived from south. Isis was associated in many ways with the Inundation, as confirmed by a Ptolemaic hymn from the Philae temple, which defines her as

giver of life, residing in the sacred mound, [...] she is the one who pours out the Inundation<sup>41</sup>.

The Nubian origin of the annual Nile inundation was alluded by ritual objects, as a fine terracotta statuette representing a female Nubian attendant of Isis of Philae, depicted in kneeling position while performing a Greek-type mortuary wine libation. It was probably made in Alexandria during the second third of the second century BC<sup>42</sup>. According to Török (2009, 4), the object, identified as a libation vessel, could have served as a container for the holy water of the Nile inundation<sup>43</sup>.

The temple in Philae acquired a central role in the geopolitical context of the Lower Nubian region, and conserved its relevance after the Roman conquer of Egypt, as main theatre of diplomatic relations between the northern rulers – Ptolemies before and Romans later – and the Meroitic kingdom to the south. Philae was considered the frontier between Egypt and Nubia in the Roman period (Török 2009, esp. 20-21, 443); a Greek epigram, inscribed in 7 BC on the south pylon of the temple by the Alexandrian pilgrim Catilius, reports that the personified

Philae calls out: “I am the beautiful border of Egypt  
and the far-off limits of the land of the Aithiopians”<sup>44</sup>.

In AD 141-142 the Greek orator Aelius Aristides, who had travelled until the Egyptian frontier region, wrote:

When I was on my way south [from Syene] to the Altars where the Aithiopians have a garrison, the road took me far from the river bank; but I cut over to the anchorage which is the first above the First Cataract (*Katadoupoi*), and passed over to Philae. This is an island on the border between Egypt and Aithiopia, no larger than the city on it<sup>45</sup>.

The (symbolic) donation act of Dodekaschoinos to Isis by the conquerors of Egypt highlights the politic power granted to the temple institution in Philae (Török 2009, 400-401). A Ptolemy VI Philometor’s (180-145 BC) decree donating the region was carved in 157 BC on a stela set in front of the eastern tower of the second pylon of the temple, and later englobed inside a chapel built around it<sup>46</sup>. Augustus was represented while donating Dodekaschoinos to Isis in a relief on the eastern exterior wall of the temple (Hölbl 2004, fig. 106).

The wealth of the temple was assured from taxes on goods transported on the Nile from Egypt to Nubia<sup>47</sup>, donations<sup>48</sup> and tributes, as suggested by a list, inscribed under Ptolemy II after c.

41 Žabkar 1988, 51.

42 It is actually kept in the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. no. T 534.

43 For this statuette see Török 2009, 1 ff.

44 FHN II, n. 169.

45 Aelius Aristides 36.48; FHN III, n. 230. See also Török 2009, 21, notes 79-80. Other sources regarding Philae as frontier: on a Greek epigram on the south pylon of the Isis temple see FHN II, n. 170; on the Strabo’s report see 1.2.32 and FHN III, n. 188; on the emperor Septimius Severus’ account see Cassius Dio 76.13.1 and FHN III, n. 241; on Heliodorus’ Greek novel *Aithiopika* see 8.1.2-3 and FHN III, n. 274.

46 On the text of the decree see Török 2009, 400.

47 Cf. Török 2009, 401 and note 156 for explaining and further references. Cf. also Kormysheva 2010, 150-51 and notes 1315-17.

48 The temple would had already received donations from Alexander IV (317-305 BC), son of Alexander the Great (see Locher 1999, 133, note 63, and Török 2009, 386). On donations from Meroitic kings and officials see for example the graffiti reported in FHN III, nn. 253, 260, 262. Cf. Kormysheva 2010, 150-51, note 1316.

275-274 BC in the Isis temple, reporting Lower and Upper Nubian nomes bringing tribute to the goddess (FHN II, n. 112)<sup>49</sup>.

The several graffiti on the temple, in Hieroglyphic, Demotic, Greek and cursive Meroitic writings, represent the most direct evidences of the great flow of pilgrims to Philae from Egypt and Nubia<sup>50</sup>. The words left on the walls communicate the religious sentiment of the period men, describing a way of worship that preserved Egyptian traditions but also expressed typically African forms of piety; requesting prophecies was common. Moreover, they offer a cross-section of the political relations made by the temple institution with the Meroitic court; Kushite kings received and elaborated from diplomatic network specific aspects of Philaean theological speculations, imposing a new character of Isis to the royal territories.

Supplications and devotion messages of Meroitic people, in Philae and other Lower Nubian places<sup>51</sup>, sometimes report in fact offices and actions made honouring the goddess, as well as dating. In addition to humble pilgrims, graffiti were made by Meroitic priests (FHN III, n. 256; Dak. 32), ambassadors to Philae and high officials in the administration of Dodekaschoinos temples, clearly operating on behalf of the Nubian king and as vehicle of Egyptian knowledge to the Kushite territories. Officials' Demotic inscriptions especially combine *proskynema* with accounts of their diplomatic missions<sup>52</sup>.

The occurrence of Meroitic envoys to Philae has its main evidence in the so-called “Meroitic chamber”, a side room in the forecourt of the Isis temple<sup>53</sup>, depicting an embassy dated around the mid-third century AD, maybe under Nubian king Lahidamani (Török 1978, 313-14) (fig. 2). Two processions of Meroitic officials, flanked by inscriptions in Meroitic cursive script<sup>54</sup>, are depicted along the west, north and east internal walls of the room, for a total of eighteen figures representing six different men<sup>55</sup>; the multiple engraving of some dignitaries suggests that each of them carries out more than one action. They pay homage to Isis, offer letter and gifts of the king to the goddess, while an official is represented making a sacrifice in her honour. The occasion the mission arrived to Philae for is unclear<sup>56</sup>.

Several official titles accompany the figures. According to them, the Meroitic dignitaries making this and other embassies<sup>57</sup> were members of a priestly college of Philae controlling the temples of Dodekaschoinos in the second half of the third century AD; they were also, in an unclear manner, representatives of the Nubian king. For example, the title “chief ritualist of the

49 The preserved names report nomes of *Senmut* (Biggeh), *Hwt-hnt*, “Nearer-compound” (Philae), *Pr-mrt*, “House-of-the-margin-of-the-desert”, *B3kt*, “Taxer” (Kuban), *Ítfy* (= *I'rfAt*) (Sedeinga), *T3-w3d*, “Green-land” (Dongola region?), *P3A-nbst*, “House-of-the-zizyphus-tree” (Pnubs=Kerma), *P-t-tm- Hr* / *IP-t-n-3*, probably for *Pr-gm-Ítn* (Kawa), *Nipt* (Napata), *Mi-r-wA-i* (City of Meroe), *Ph(w)-Kns(t)* (Farthest Upper-Nubia); for the translation see Török 2009, 386. The temple obtained one tenth of income of Meroitic kings, royal legates and other officials: see graffiti Ph. 54/8-13; Dak. 12; FHN III, nn. 253, 260, 261. Cf. Kormysheva 2010, 150-51.

50 Many pilgrims arrived for sure from Nubia; several graffiti in Arminna and Karanog include the invocation “Oh, Isis, take me to Meroe unscathed” (see Millet 1977, 318). On Isis as patron of pilgrimage see FHN III, nn. 260, 262. Juvenal mentioned the pilgrimage to Philae from Meroe in his sixth satire (l. 527 ff.)

51 Lower Nubian *proskynemata* by Meroites have been found in Isis temples at Debod, Kertassi and Maharraqa, besides Philae, and in temples devoted to other gods at Kalabsha, Dendur, Dakka and Korte, as well as in Amara, Arminna, Faras, Karanog, Toshka, Nag Gamus and Argin. Moreover, in Upper Nubian sites as Sedeinga, Gebel Barkal and Meroe similar graffiti were noted (cf. Bumbaugh 2009, 8-11; Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, 21). Graffiti by Meroitic people were sometimes written in Demotic or Greek, besides in the Meroitic language. Twenty-seven inscriptions written in Demotic, two in Greek and thirty-one in cursive Meroitic were attributed to Meroites (see Bumbaugh 2011, 66).

52 Two cursive Meroitic graffiti carved on the Isis temple could suggest a personal visit of king Yesebokheamani to Philae (REM 0119, REM 0120; cfr. FHN III, n. (276)). For a literary evidence of rites in Philae ordered by a Meroitic king see Pope 2014, esp. 580-81.

53 Griffith 1912, 34 ff., pls. XVIII-XXX; REM 0097-0111; FHN III, n. 267.

54 The room yielded the largest concentration of inscriptions in Meroitic script in Philae.

55 They hold a peculiar sceptre made from superimposed upside-down triangles, often called “Isis flower” (see Roeder 1910). Contra: Žabkar 1975, 111-12.

56 On this topic see Török 1978, 315-16; Bumbaugh 2011, 69.

57 On the embassies in AD 252 and 253 reported by Pasan see FHN III, n. 260; on the embassy of Tami and Abratoye in AD 260 see FHN III, nn. 265-66. Moreover, in a graffito dated to AD 253 in Philae a Meroitic man called Sasan identifies himself as Meroe's “Great Envoy to Rome” (FHN III, 260 l. 1; cf. Burstein 2009; Pope 2014); it is the only appearance of such a title in known Lower Nubian graffiti, and seems to suggest a political task.

King of Kush” (Demotic *hr-tp n nsu n Kš*), attributed also to Wayekiye (FHN III, n. 245) and Hornakhtyotef II (FHN III, n. 251), could suggest intellectual contacts between the Meroitic court and influential priestly members of Nubian origin in Egyptian Dodekaschoinos (FHN III, 971-72). The association between the offices of *Peseto* (Meroitic viceroy in Lower Nubia) and *Perite* (“agent of Isis”)⁵⁸ is significant as well (Edwards 2004, 161). Other titles, most of them unclear, indicate different offices serving the goddess⁵⁹.

Despite the religious titles, the role of the all abovementioned officials was generally priestly in name only; their real activity concerned the economic affairs of the temples⁶⁰. According to Török (1984, 166), for example the title “High priest of Amun in *Akiñ* (i.e. Lower Nubia)” (*wo Mni-s-lh Akiñ-te*), borne by Abratoye (REM 0321) and *Hwitror* (REM 0247), could have indicated a sort

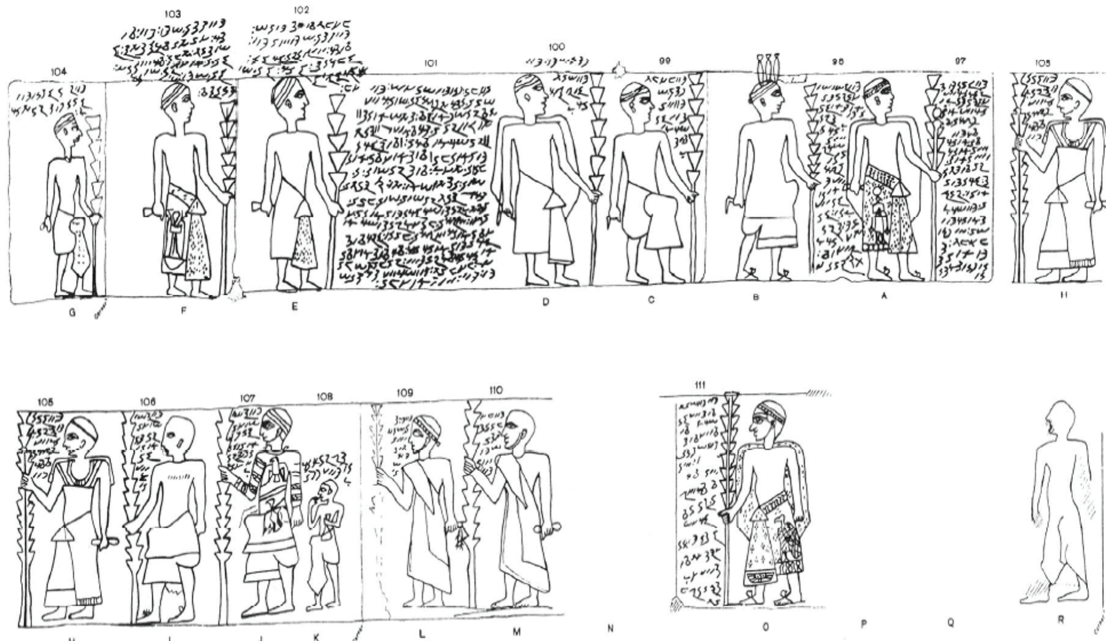


Figure 2. Philae, Meroitic chamber, Images and inscriptions. Mid-third century AD (after Griffith 1912, pl. XVIII).

- 58 The title *perite/pirite*, deriving from the Egyptian *p3rud*, *p rt*, appears in several sources dated from second century BC to late fourth century AD (see FHN II, nn. 162 l. 1, 180 l. 1, 181 l. 1, 182 l. 3, 183 l. 3, 185 l. 8; FHN III, nn. 231 l. 2, 244 l. 2, 249 l. 5, 250 l. 2, 251 l. 2-3, 252 l. 4, 253 l. 1, 256 l. 2, 257 l. 1, 262 l. 4; REM 0088 l. 8; REM 0099 l. 4-5; REM 0111 l. 1-5; REM 0122; REM 1003 l. 10, 12; Edwards 1994, 21 l. 4). The title, usually associated to the name of Isis (Demotic and Hieroglyphic *Ist*, Meroitic *Wos/Wosse*), could have indicated a temple official, with probable financial tasks, serving a centralised authority maybe coinciding with the priestly college leading the main temples in Dodekaschoinos (see esp. FHN III, 968; Török 1979, 35-41). *Perite/pirite* was often associated to the Meroitic title *qoreñ/qereñ*, the same person generally holding at the same time (see FHN II, n. 155 l. 5; FHN III, nn. 231 l. 1, 244 l. 2, 245 l. 12, 249 l. 5, 250 l. 2, 251 l. 2, 252 l. 4, 256 l. 1, 257 l. 1, 262 l. 4; REM 0088 l. 7; REM 0089 l. 6; REM 0100 l. 2; REM 0111 l. 1-5); this title, as well as the rarer *qer* (REM 0109 l. 5-6; REM 0111 l. 1-5), indicated a relation with the Meroitic king (called *qore*) and can be generically translated as “regal man” (see Török 1979, 42-48).
- 59 “Hont-priest of Isis” (D. *hm-ntr n 'Ist*) appoints a prophet (see FHN II, n. 185 l. 11; FHN III, nn. 249 l. 4, 250 l. 3, 257 l. 1, 262 l. 5, 306 l. 1). “Waab-priest of Isis” (D. *p3 w'b n 'Ist*) would indicate a low hierarchic level in the priesthood of a temple (see FHN II, nn. 162 l. 1, 185 l. 1; for interpretation see FHN III, 971). The term “arbetegaye” (D. *3rbtg'y3*), regarded as a Demotic transcription of the Meroitic title *arbetkel/arbtkte* and translated as “measurer of corn”, indicates a tax-collector (see FHN III, n. 261 l. 1; REM 0292; REM 1020; REM 1116; for interpretation see Griffith 1937, 120; Török 1979, 3-13; FHN III, 1014). Other noted titles, of unclear meaning, are “overseers of singer of Isis” (D. *mr-hsiw n 'Ist*) (see FHN II, n. 182 l. 6), “shrine-openers of Isis” (D. *wnw n 'Ist*) (see FHN II, n. 185 l. 2) and “khuite of Isis” (D. *hwyt n 'Ist*) (see FHN III, 263 l. 2). It is unclear if the term “semte of Isis”, only known from funerary texts, describes an administrative position, being applied to women; hypothetically translated as “sister of Isis”, it could indicate a person devoted to a goddess but not belonging to her official cult (see REM 0252; REM 0521 l. 4-5; REM 1281; Rilly and Francigny 2010, 66, note 10; 2011, 77-79, fig. 2, pl. 4).
- 60 See Török 1984, 165.



of supervision over the Amun temples of the province. Moreover, some officials, as Manitawawi and Hornakhtyotef II, were “agents of the King of the Land of Nubia” (*rtw n Pr-3 n P3-t3-n-Nhs*), “princes of the country of Takompsu” (*rpyw n t3 h3st n Ty-km-600*) and “chiefs (?) of the Triacostaschoinos” (*rphtp n p3 t3y-n-30*): it suggests that they appeared as (hereditary) princes (*rp'i*) of the southern Dodekaschoinos and governors of Lower Nubia by the king of Meroe (Török 1997b, 474). Moreover, since the late second century AD Meroitic dignitaries held more once in the Isis temple the office of “lesonis-priest” (*mr-šn*)<sup>61</sup>; the title designated the high priest of a temple, appointed by the priestly college for a tenure of one year. He probably had administrative and economic duties and led daily offer rituals and annual feasts bound to Isis (FHN III, 946; Kormysheva 2010, 151-52)<sup>62</sup>. Such positions increased the influence of these officials on the territories and on the Meroitic court, and made them political tools of the king himself at the same time<sup>63</sup>.

Such feasts attracted a massive pilgrimage; the festivals more often mentioned in graffiti by Meroites are Khoiak<sup>64</sup> and Isis' Feast of Entry, that represented the main occasions of journeying to Philae for Meroitic envoys and pilgrims. The Festival of Entry provided for a visit by Isis to the tomb of her husband Osiris in Abaton on Biga island – very close to Philae – in order to offer him milk libations; two Ptolemaic decrees carved on the Hadrian's Gate of the Isis temple describes the ritual (Junker 1913, 12-17, 55-57). This occasion would seem have been particularly significant for the Meroites, judging from Lower Nubian inscriptions<sup>65</sup> and especially from offering tables from Meroe pyramids showing Abaton-style milk libations, usually performed by Anubis and Nephthys (Yellin 1982b); it suggests that, at least since first century AD, the mortuary practices in the southern half of the Meroitic kingdom, in contact with Philae, were strongly influenced from its rituals.

The month of Khoiak, lasting from 27th November to 26th December, marked the end of the Nile flood; at this time the resurrection of Osiris was celebrated in order to assure the continued richness of the soils, his cult being intimately linked with the fertility of the land (Stadelmann 1982, 1162). During Khoiak, and in other boat processions, Nubian deities visited the Isis temple, strengthening the connection of the Meroitic society with Philae and its goddess. A Greek epigram inscribed around the beginning of the Christian epoch on the south pylon tower of the Isis temple reports so:

Having arrived at the island, the limits of Egypt, most beautiful, holy,  
(place) of Isis, in the face of Aithiopia,  
we saw in the river Nile fast-sailing ships  
which carried the Aithiopians' shrines, worthy of the gods,  
to our land, the wheat-bearing, worth a visit,  
which all mortal men on earth revere (FHN II, n. 170/II).

The constant contact with the island assured by high officials, pilgrims and trade network, as well as the knowledge from Greek-Roman temples in Dodekaschoinos, brought coeval Egyptian theology to Kush, “Isis of Philae” (*Wos Pileqe-te*) first appearing on Meroitic monuments in the late third century BC (Baud 2010b, 220).

The wider authority of Isis than past in Egypt and Kush was the result of a deep syncretic process, the Philae priests unifying different original forms of the goddess in an unique divine entity who preserved her Egyptian traits lacking Hellenistic influxes. In my opinion, in fact,

61 For Meroitic “lesonis-priests” see FHN III, nn. 232 l. 2, 251 l. 11.

62 For the direct witness by these priests see FHN III, nn. 245 l. 12-14, 251 l. 6-8, 260 l. 6-7 12-14, 261 l. 7-8.

63 A significant place is to be reserved to the Kushite family of Wayekiye, a very powerful group in Lower Nubia from the end of the second century to the late fourth century AD (see Török 1978; 1979).

64 Three inscriptions by Meroites are certainly dated during the month of Khoiak (FHN III, nn. 260, 263; Ph. 449). Cf. also Bumbaugh 2011, 67-68. According to Leclant (1981, 49-50), a Greek *proskynema* by the Meroitic envoy Abratoye would indicate his participation to this feast (see FHN III, 265).

65 See FHN III, nn. 244, 245, 251, 253. Cf. also Bumbaugh 2011, esp. 68; Pope 2014, esp. 581.

Meroitic Isis was an elaboration of Isis of Philae<sup>66</sup>, Nubian priesthood adapting the new cult to local needs and specifying the relations of the goddess with the other deities of the renewed Kushite pantheon. Other views have recognized in Kushite Isis the Hellenistic form of the goddess (Kormysheva 2010, 153-54; Hofmann 1984, 128). Nevertheless, Hellenism outlined an exactly opposed course respect to one seen in Philae and Kush, giving life to manifold expressions of Isis, often identifying them with deities of the Greek-Roman tradition. In Philae and Kush she acquired her new form without losing her identity and without suffering the fragmentation in several entities that was a typical tract of Hellenized Isis<sup>67</sup>.

### Isis in the Meroitic royal ideology

The Meroitic rulers gave continuity to the Napatan heritage emphasizing the role of Isis in the divine legitimation of the king<sup>68</sup>, as especially reflected in the decoration program of Musawwarat es Sufra buildings, whose core is dated to Arnekhamani (235-218 BC). Significant scenes appear among reliefs adorning the peristyle of Hall 101 of the Great Enclosure, that reports the investiture-cycle of the king. In the back scene of the column 7 Isis, wearing the two-horned crown, presents the king by offering him the Lower Egyptian crown, while he is embraced by Horus, placed before Isis, and Thot from behind (fig. 3)<sup>69</sup>. An analogous coronation scene can be seen in the first century AD Amun Temple in Naga. The next step of the investiture-cycle in Hall 101, depicted in the frontal scene of the column 8, shows the king in full regalia and protected by a male deity<sup>70</sup> while Isis assures him the divine legitimation by touching his crown ribbons (Török 2002a, 181, fig. 27 right; Hintze et al. 1993, fig. 179).

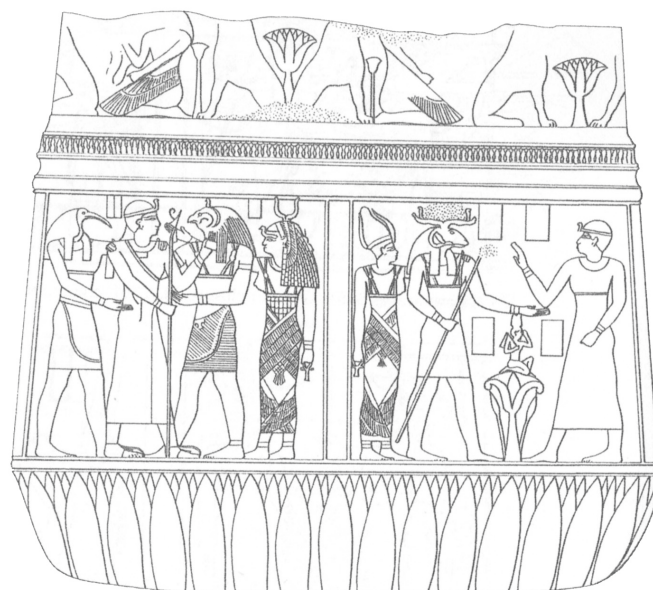


Figure 3. Musawwarat es Sufra, Great Enclosure, Hall 101, Column 7. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (after Török 2002, fig. 26).

In Musawwarat es Sufra itself the ruling-right of the Meroitic king was strengthened from the relationship of the goddess with Horus in their identification with queen mother (*kandake*) and king (*qore*). The reliefs of the coeval Apedemak Temple and Temple II A shows Isis suckling Horus in accordance with the Egyptian and Napatan traditions; while the Chemmis motif appears in the Apedemak Temple in a more general context of legitimacy (Hintze et al. 1971, pl. 81), the Temple II A shows a scene cycle directly linked to the dynastic succession<sup>71</sup>. In a stela in Philae, Isis, presented as mother of king Adikhalamani (ca. 207/6-186 BC), says “(I)

66 Cf. Leclant 1981, 49; Millet 1984, 120; Onasch 1984, 140; Welsby 1996, 75-76.

67 However, in a few cases the Meroitic representation of Isis was influenced by the Hellenistic style (see a statue from the Amun Temple at Naga in Wildung 2001, 326-29, taf. 10.1-4). Hellenism undoubtedly influences the Meroitic culture: for a my brief account see Baldi 2012. Cf. also Török 2006; 2011.

68 Significantly, the epithet “beloved of Isis” (*Mri-Is.t*) is included in the Son-of-Rê name of Meroitic kings, maybe under the impact of Ptolemy IV’s titulary (222-205 BC): for Arnekhamani see FHN II, n. (124); for Arkamani see FHN II, n. (128); for Adikhalamani see FHN II, n. (130). For the occurrence of *Mri-Is.t* in a stela of Adikhalamani from Philae see FHN II, n. 132.

69 See Török 2002a, 181, fig. 26 left; Hintze et al. 1993, 108, abb. 58 right.

70 According to the conservation state, the depicted god could be Amun of Thebes or Sebiuameker (see Török 2002a, note 621).

71 For the Chemmis scene see Török 2002a, fig. 38.

have granted you power (just) as (I once did to my) son [Horus]<sup>72</sup>. The goddess was sometimes associated with queen and king's mother at the same time, as well as in the Napatan period; in the temple of Debod she is “consort and sister<sup>73</sup> of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt<sup>74</sup>”, “the divine mother of powerful Bull” (Roeder 1911, 80, § 216, taf. 31)<sup>75</sup>.

The Chemmis myth appears in a stela in Egyptian hieroglyphic script by king Aryamani (third century BC) found in the Temple A at Kawa (Macadam 1949, 76-81, pls. 32-34), and *Isis lactans* was a recurrent theme in the Meroitic media, as already in the Napatan period, in temple<sup>76</sup> and funerary<sup>77</sup> goods (figs. 4, 5). The divine family was traditionally completed by Osiris<sup>78</sup>, as highlighted by the fragment of a stela of king Adikhalamani reused as building material in the temple of Amasis (570-526 BC) and Nectanebos I (380-362 BC) at Philae: in the inscription the king, shown while offering to Osiris, Isis and two forms of the god *P3 nty n p3 iw-w'b*<sup>79</sup>, is son of Isis and Osiris and thus heir of Osiris (FHN II, n. 132).

### Underworld deities

The association with Osiris was especially recurrent in the funerary context, Isis worshipped as underworld goddess according to the Egyptian tradition. The depiction of the divine couple is on granite stelae of Napatan kings<sup>80</sup>, queens<sup>81</sup> and highly-ranked people; the stand figure of the dead is shown while worshipping Osiris, stand or seated on a throne, whereas Isis is behind the god and stretches out her arm towards him as protection; in a few cases Anubis is also represented behind the goddess. The scene is usually on the lunette, surmounting the invocation text.

According to a custom unknown in Egypt, in the tomb of Tanwetamani (664-656 BC) in El Kurru (Ku 16), that has partly preserved its painted decoration, the doorjambs leading from the anteroom to the burial chamber show the figures of Isis and Nephthys symbolically furnishing bandages to the king<sup>82</sup>. The protective function of Isis founds a peculiar expression in tombs

72 FHN II, n. 132 l. 1 of the scene in front of the Isis' crown.

73 The term “sister” often identified the king's wife.

74 Although the Nubian kings had lost the control of Egypt, this title was often still used.

75 Cf. Troy 1986, in part. 89-91.

76 For a bronze image and a stone statuette in the Isis Temple at Meroe see Garstang et al. 1911, 18. For two faience amulets from Meroe see Shinnie and Bradley 1980, figs. 60, 63. For a faience statuette in the Amun Temple at Naga see Wildung 2001, 308, taf. 3.1-4. For a serpentinite statue in the Amun Temple at el-Hassa see Baud 2010a, cat. no. 313. For a granite statue found in Temple B 500 at Gebel Barkal see Leclant 1981, 55; REM 0075. For a plaquette from Sanam see Griffith 1923, 133, pl. LII/3-4.

77 For goods from western cemetery see Dunham 1963: for W 611 see p. 6 n. 217, fig. 2/e/1; for W 630 see p. 6 n. 236, fig. 3/d/1-3; for W 493 see p. 3 nn. 48-49, fig. 1/c/5/4-5; for W 486 see p. 15 nn. 105-107, fig. 11/n/6-8; for W 761 see p. 22 n. 462, fig. 16/g/1; for W 832 see p. 26 nn. 626-27, figg. 18/f, h/1-5; for W 508 see p. 26 n. 178, fig. 19/h/1/6, p. 28 nn. 180, 182, fig. 19/h/1/7-8; for W 609 see p. 36 nn. 50, 58, fig. 24/b/2/9, 3/6; for W 643 p. 39 n. 305, fig. 28/a/1/5, p. 41 n. 315, fig. 28/a/2/10; for W 846 see p. 50 n. 656, fig. 36/d/3; for W 120 see p. 227 n. 50c, fig. 159/4/1; for W 614 see p. 298 n. 224, fig. 177/15; for W 760 p. 317 n. 457, fig. 182/14; for W 787 p. 320 n. 524, fig. 183/14/2/7. For a tomb in Kawa see Welsby 2011, pl. 18 upper. See also Priese 1994.

78 In the Apedemak Temple in Naga the royal family is assimilated with Osiris, Isis and Horus.

79 For this god see Török 2009, note 103.

80 Examples from Nuri: for king Siaspiqo (487-468 BC), whose stela shows also Anubis, see tomb Nu 4 in Dunham 1955, 176 n. 1910A, fig. 212, pl. LXIXa; for king Baskakereñ (second half of the fifth century BC) see tomb Nu 17 in Dunham 1955, 219 n. 249, fig. 169, pl. LXIXc.

81 Examples from El Kurru: for queen Tabiry (Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) see tomb Ku 53 in Dunham 1950, 87 n. 1366, fig. 29f, pl. XXXa. Examples from Nuri: for queen Amanikataye (first half of the sixth century BC), whose stela depicts also Hathor, see tomb Nu 26 in Dunham 1955, 148, pl. XLIVb; for queen Batahaliye (second half of the fourth century BC) see Nu 44 in Dunham 1950, 231 n. 76, fig. 177, pl. LXXb. For a wall scene from Nuri, for queen Yeturow (Twenty-Fifth Dynasty) see tomb Nu 53 in Dunham 1950 35, fig. 21, pl. IXc. For the stela of queen Sakhmah (late fourth century BC) see Kormysheva and Hassan Hussein Idriss 2006, cat. no. 131; Sakhmah was buried in tomb Nu 15, but her stela was moved to temple B 500 at Gebel Barkal, for unknown reasons.

82 For the Tanwetamani's tomb see Dunham 1950, 60-63, figs. 21/a-d. For a similar scene showing Isis while offering bandages to the dead, on the east wall of the early Meroitic pyramid Beg S 7, in the southern cemetery of Meroe, see el-Saad 1994.



0 5 cm



0 1 cm

Figure 4. El Hassa, Amun Temple, Statuette representing Isis lactans. Serpentinite. Third century BC (after Baud 2010a, cat. 313).

Figure 5. Begrawiya North, Pyramid 6, Seal ring decorated by an image of seated Isis suckling her son Horus. Gold. First century BC (after Priese 1994, fig. 36a).

of Napatan dignitaries in Sanam, that yielded among grave goods faience amulets and plaquettes reporting propitiatory formulas associating the goddess to “life and force” or to a “happy new year”<sup>83</sup>.

In the Meroitic period Isis conserved and strengthened her role in funerary beliefs. Winged Isis protecting dead king or queen<sup>84</sup>, seated on a throne, is a very common occurrence in wall reliefs of the royal chapels of Begrawiya North and Gebel Barkal cemeteries (fig. 6), whose scenes are based on a mixture of Egyptian sources and indigenous elaborations. Especially since the second half of the first century AD, the goddess was sometimes depicted among gods accompanying Re and the dead in the Sun Bark, whose journey was part of the process allowing the transfiguration of the king into a divine being. Anubis, Isis and/or Nephthys are often shown while pouring libations, that recall the Isiac mysteries of Abaton (Yellin 1982b); the same depiction is common on the funerary offering tables (fig. 7)<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, the triad composed by Osiris, Isis and Nephthys is made in relief on the lids of the three known stone royal coffins in Meroe (Reisner 1922, 185).

The tombs of the Nubian ruling class people were modelled on the royal ones, although smaller and having more modest decorations<sup>86</sup>, and were sometimes surmounted by pyramids (Yellin 1995, 2879-81; Török 2002b, 63-69). Libation and offering wares among grave goods suggest the making of rituals linked to the Isis cult (Lenoble 1995; 1998; Baldi 2014, 77-80), as well as scenes engraved on offering tables<sup>87</sup>, widespread in royal, elite and even poorer burials. The figured tables show Anubis and a female deity, Isis or Nephthys usually, while pouring libations, according to an image unknown in Egypt and in Napatan Nubia (Hainsworth 1976; Yellin 1995, 2881-84)<sup>88</sup>. Funerary texts in Meroitic cursive script, and in a few cases in Meroitic hieroglyphs, were

83 See for example the rectangular plaque, showing a *wḏ3t* on one face and an inscription on the other one, in Griffith 1923, 134, 153, pl. LII/17.

84 Isis in her winged form emphasizing her protective function is a recurrent decorative theme of grave goods in many royal and aristocratic Kushite tombs. Among royal burials, for the representation on gold cylinder sheaths in the tomb of Napatan king Aspelta in Nuri (Nu 8) see Gänsicke and Kendall 2004; for a gold pectoral ornament in the tomb Nu 10 of king Amani-natake-lebte (second half of the sixth century BC) see Dunham 1955, 155 n. 6, fig. 117, pl. CXXII/b/1/2. The Egyptian type of Isis protecting Osiris is here received in the identification of the dead ruler as new Osiris proposed by the Meroitic funerary belief; the same model inspired the recurrent Kushite representation of goddesses with outstretched wings.

85 Cf. also Yellin 1982a. For the fragment of a libation ware from Kawa showing the bust of Isis, see Hofmann 1996.

86 On the west wall of tomb W 14 in the western cemetery of Meroe the non-royal dead and Osiris appear seated on thrones opposite each other, each one with a figure of Isis behind (see Dunham 1963, 84, fig. 65a; Chapman and Dunham 1952, pl. 21e).

87 The tables are in sandstone and rarely granite.

88 In a few cases, more than two figures are depicted (see for example REM 0839).

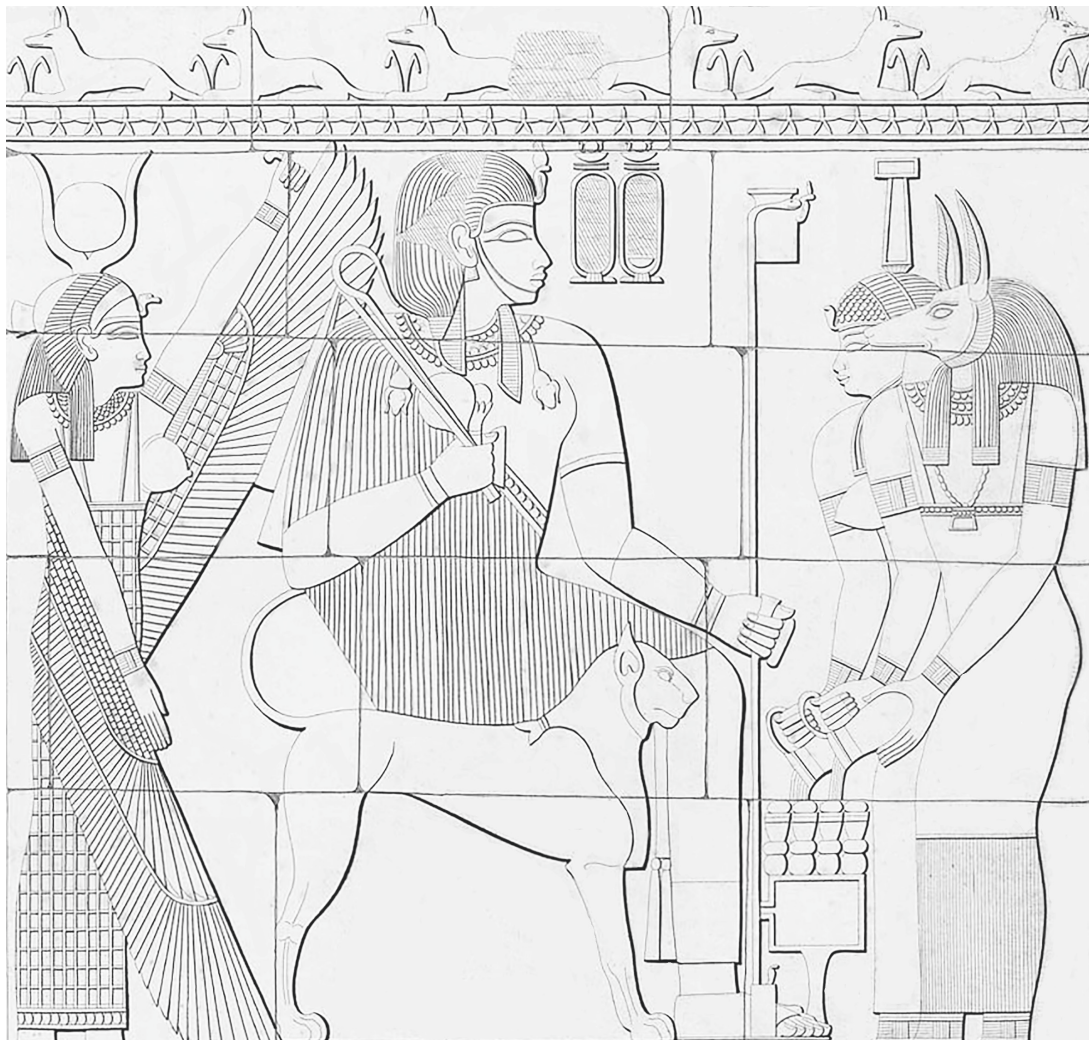


Figure 6. Begrawiya North, Pyramid 17, Relief on the chapel wall (after Lepsius 1849-1856, V: fig. 50d).

engraved on the frame of tables, as well as on stelae<sup>89</sup>, according to a standard structure for the non-royal inscriptions, based on the royal ones. The double invocation of Isis and Osiris (*Wosi<sup>90</sup> Soreyi<sup>91</sup>*) is followed by the nomination of the deceased, of his/her mother and of his/her father, and by the description of the titles of the dead, in addition to the final benediction in the form of utterances on mortuary offerings; a concluding invocation of the two deities was sometimes added (Török 2002a, 458; Heyler 1964)<sup>92</sup>.

### Isis and Apedemak: a Meroitic couple

The Meroitic theology established a peculiar association of Isis with the main autochthonous male deity of the pantheon, lion-god Apedemak, replacing Osiris<sup>93</sup>. This connection was suggested by a

89 Non-royal stelae were often unfigured. Among examples of non-royal figured stelae, see the tomb of Teqedēn in the western cemetery of Meroe (W 19, second century BC) (Dunham 1963, 82 n. 23-3-871, figs. 60b-d), the pyramid 2 of Sedēinga (Welsby 2009, Colour plate XXXII), and a stela from an unidentified tomb at Jebel Dabarosa (REM 1229).

90 The name of the goddess is usually written *wos*, more rarely *wis* or *wes*, and exceptionally *ws*.

91 In an unique known funerary inscription Isis is not associated to Osiris but to Mash-Amani: REM 0430 reads *Wosi Msmni* (“Oh Isis, oh Mash-Amani”). Mash was probably a Meroitic form of Amun (see FHN III, 955). REM 0089 does not report, in an unusual manner, the initial invocation, but starts with the nomination of the dead.

92 According to Török (2002a, 459), the earliest known non-royal funerary inscription comes from the tomb of Lower Nubian Viceroy Tasemerese in Faras, dated to the late second century BC (REM 0543). Contra: references in Török 2002a, 459 note 321.

93 On this topic see Žabkar 1975, 17-21; Millet 1984, 120; Kormysheva 2010, 142-43, 256-57. Contra: Hofmann



0 20 cm



Figure 7. Begrawiya North, Pyramid 28, Offering table representing Isis and Anubis pouring a libation. Sandstone. Mid-third century AD (after Wildung 1996, cat. no. 281).

stela from Meroe showing a Meroitic inscription reporting the names of Apedemak, Isis and Horus in association with some sanctuaries, and not of Osiris (Garstang et al. 1911, 65 ff., pls. XXIV, LXIV; REM 0407). Such a link could be confirmed from depictions in the Apedemak Temple in Naga, Apedemak and Isis respectively leading the male and the female divine processions towards the royal family, and in the Apedemak Temple in Musawwarat es Sufra. In this latter, on the outer southern wall Apedemak leads a procession comprising prince Arka and king Arnekhamani, who is protected by Isis; the goddess is indicated as “mistress of *Ipbr-ḥt* (Musawwarat es Sufra)” (Hintze 1971; taf. 17a, 21), strengthening her relationship with the lion god, who had in this site his main cult place.

Moreover, Isis is accompanied by a hymn entirely based on an Isis hymn from Philae, reported in the Kiosk of Nectanebos and in the Mammisi ascribed to Ptolemy II or III, strengthening the link of the Meroitic theology with the religious speculations in Philae:

Utterance: Hail to you, Isis,  
Goddess, Mother of a god, Who created [her perfection],  
Edjō<sup>94</sup>, Whose magic is great, Lady of the crown in the [hidden chapel?],  
Whose seat is prominent in the (Solar) Bark of a Million Years<sup>95</sup>.

1984, 126; Onasch 1990, 52, anm. 15.

94 A cobra-goddess.

95 See Hintze 1962a, 43-44, abb. 21, taf. XVIIIb; FHN II, n. 127.

The words “Mother of a god, Who created [her perfection]” and her association with Edjô confirm the role of Isis in the divine legitimation of king, the goddess granting the right to rule and sacralising the royal authority. Her power in creating the perfection had been already expressed in Egyptian texts (Münster 1968, 143; Onasch 1978, 61).

The connection between Isis and Apedemak was proposed also for Amara, basing on wall reliefs (Török 2002a, 257)<sup>96</sup>, and for Debod with reference to an inscription on a lintel, reporting, within cartouches, the name of Apedemak on a side and the name of Isis on other one<sup>97</sup>. This association was probably to emphasize their roles in the renewed Kushite pantheon: the authority of Apedemak, lacking in a legitimating worship past, was justified by the link with the main female deity; the new manifold functions of Isis received legitimacy through the powerful local god, who had been among creator deities, oversaw the war and was intimately connected with water.

### An universal goddess

In addition to her place in the kingship ideology, the Meroites contextually imposed the universal character of the goddess fixed by theological speculations in Philae. Meroitic Isis led and influenced manifold aspects of human lifecycle: she granted strength, love, favour of the rulers<sup>98</sup>, and oversaw birth and all daily activities. Epithets by Meroites in Lower Nubian graffiti highlight the new greatest relevance of her: Isis was “great mistress of the entire land” (FHN III, n. 249 l. 9), “queen of the whole land” (FHN III, n. 253 l. 2), “mistress of the countries” (FHN III, n. 245 l. 5), “mistress of the south, the north, the east, and the west” (FHN III, n. 260 l. 2), “mistress of heaven, of earth, (and of) the underworld” (FHN III, n. 261 l. 2). On the other hand, the recurrent depiction of Isis on several items of various materials throughout the kingdom, suggests the relevant spread of her cult among differently ranked Meroitic population.

Among her new features in the Kushite territories, in the Meroitic period Isis determined the richness of soils. Kings clearly worshipped her as goddess of fertility in the dedications in Dakka (Kormysheva 2010, note 1284) and Debod, where she says “I give you land with its fertility” (Roeder 1930, 81, § 220, taf. 32). While the Natapans had not entrusted the goddess with the protection of soils, the Meroites followed the example of Philae; nevertheless, she was already worshipped as goddess of fertility in Egypt in her form Thermothis, who had assimilated the earlier snake-goddess Renenutet. The Kushites knew Renenutet, as suggested by a stela of Shabaqo<sup>99</sup>, and later Isis-Thermothis, who was depicted in items from Karanog<sup>100</sup> and Gebel Barkal<sup>101</sup> in addition to a faience plaquette of unknown source (fig. 8). Representations of snakes on wooden plaques at Qasr Ibrim were hypothetically associated to the Isis cult as well (Driskell et al. 1989, 21, pl. VIa). No evidence shows however that she was worshipped in Nubia; the few objects were importations or local makings without accepting, or knowing, their theological meaning.

Moreover, the association with Apedemak could have strengthened the suggested identification of Isis as war-goddess (Kormysheva 2010, 142). On a gold ring from the pyramid Beg N 6 of *kandake* Amanishaketo (late first century BC) in Meroe cemetery, Isis runs an enemy through with a lance (Priese 1994, fig. 36c). The words of Isis in the temples in Dakka (Roeder 1930, esp. 187, § 427, taf. 76a) and Debod<sup>102</sup> highlight her role in a military context, that finds evidence in the northern outer wall of the Apedemak Temple in Naga, Isis shown while holding a group

96 In the temple built in the late reign of Natakamani and Amanitore.

97 Roeder 1911, 49, § 128, taf. 10a. Contra: Hofmann 1978.

98 See for example FHN III, n. 245 l. 7-8; n. 252 l. 7-10; n. 261 l. 8-10.

99 Found in Theban region (Leclant 1965, 186 B/a).

100 On a ring from the local cemetery (O’ Connor 1993, 151, n. 117).

101 A faience plaque originally decorating a wall of the palace B 1500 (Bosticco 1989, 780).

102 “(I) shall make your enemies fall at your feet, so you are gonna do with them what you will like” (Roeder 1911, 45, § 115, taf. 41; transl. writer).



Figure 8. Egypt (?), Fragment of plaquette representing goddess Isis-Thermothis inside a chapel. Faience. Late first century BC – early third century AD (after Baud 2010a, cat no. 159).

Dakka, where she is “queen, ruler, mistress of crown (?)” (Roeder 1930, 196-97, § 447, taf. 77). Such a role was also known in the Mediterranean world, Apuleius writing “regina Isis” with reference to Egypt and Meroe (Snowden 1956, 116).

The cycle of the divine birth of king, depicted on Amanishaketo’s rings (Priese 1994), highlights in some scenes the identification of queen-mother with Isis. The delivery of the child to the queen by Amun, and then to the king by the queen, shows this latter wearing a head-ornament in the form of crowned scorpion, that was typical of Isis<sup>103</sup>. In a single known occasion a crown in form of a scorpion is worn by a king, depicted in front of Isis, on a Musawwarat es Sufra column (Hintze 1971, taf. 97/6/2/1); this could confirm the inclusion of the goddess in the kingship ideology. A sun disc between two horns and mounted on a skullcap more often associated the royal women with Isis<sup>104</sup>; the goddess sometimes wears a two-feathered crown with sun disc<sup>105</sup>, as a queen in the coronation stela of Anlamani (late seventh century BC) in Kawa (Macadam 1949, pls. 15-16). A peculiar Napatan female crown consisted of three long plumes each springing from the figure of a goddess, Tfenet (?), Isis and Nephthys (Welsby 1996, 31, fig. 9). In a few offering tables Isis wears a peculiar three-tiered crown<sup>106</sup> that, according to Rilly and Francigny (2012, note 9), could be a Meroitic reinterpretation of Isis’ traditional seat-sign.

of prisoners in her right hand (Gamer-Wallert 1983, 3: taf. 27a, bl. 6a) (fig. 9), as well as in the pyramid Beg N 6. The northern outer wall of the Apedemak Temple in Musawwarat es Sufra shows Isis closing the procession behind Horus, on who she lays her left hand as protection; the goddess is preceded by an inscription, also on the great pylon of the Isis temple in Philae, confirming her martial role: “[...] I give thee all the lands in peace, all foreign countries are overthrown” (Hintze 1962a, 45, abb. 22, taf. XVII; Žabkar 1975, 18).

The making of the same gesture by *kandake* Amanitore (second half of the first century AD) on the northern tower of the pylon of the Apedemak temple in Naga, confirms the connection of Isis with the Meroitic queens (Gamer-Wallert 1983, 3: taf. 7); on the northern wall the wearing of the same crown, made from sun-disc flanked by horns, highlights the association between them as well (Gamer-Wallert 1983, 3: taf. 28b, 30b). Moreover, it is recognizable from the titles of Isis in

103 On this topic see Wenig 1978, 251-52, cat. no. 183-84.

104 The connection was sometimes with Hathor, who could wear the same crown.

105 For an example from the temple of Sethi I in Abydos see Calverley 1933, pls 17, 18, 20, 22, 23.

106 From Karanog (REM 0278) and Sedeinga (Rilly and Francigny 2012, pl. 11).



## The places of Meroitic devotion

In Meroitic times sacral buildings were devoted to Isis, who was worshipped in as temple mistress or guest deity. In addition to Isis of Philae and of Abaton, epigraphic sources quote several local forms of the goddess, that had evidence in a few cases in remains of cult places. Among Lower Nubian sites, a Meroitic form of the goddess is associated to Qasr Ibrim (REM 1082), where the excavators have hypothetically bound a multi-roomed temple to Isis. In addition to a horned altar in the naos, the building yielded an offering table showing projecting horns and disc motif, scratched on a potsherds too, and a wooden arm attributed to a statue of the goddess (Driskell et al. 1989).

A temple in Dakka was dedicated by Arkamani to Osiris, Isis, Thoth and Arensuphis (Roeder 1930), whereas a sacral complex in Debod, built by Adikhalamani, celebrated the Osirian triad, Isis presented as “mistress of Debod”. Isis is depicted while giving to Adikhalamani the power of Min, according to a peculiar version of the mythology of the goddess as wife of Min (Roeder 1911, 74-75, §203, taf. 28)<sup>107</sup>. In Karanog a chapel was devoted to the goddess in the local Amun Temple (REM 0215, 0326, 0332; Török 1977, 414 ff.; 2002a, 321-22), while only a text suggests the Isis cult in Arminna (Edwards and Fuller 2000, 89).

The widespread of the Isis cult finds a further confirmation in quoting local forms of her in Upper Nubian places. Isis of Sedeinga (Meroitic *Wos Atiye-te*), whose priestesses are frequently mentioned in the texts of the local cemetery (Rilly and Francigny 2012, 64), appears in a stela of Yesebokheamani (late third century AD) in Meroe (REM 0407 l. 6-7). The cult of queen Tiy, whom husband Amenhotep III (1386-1349 BC) dedicated here a temple, could have favoured the worship of the goddess, nevertheless no evidence shows the erection of an Isis temple. Although the coexistence of two forms of the goddess in so close sites is unlikely, a mention of Isis of Sai (Meroitic *Wos Tsyte-te*) is in the stela of Tañyidamani (late second century or early first century BC) in Gebel Barkal (REM 1044 l. 51)<sup>108</sup>.

As the above mentioned stela of Yesebokheamani highlights, Isis of Abaton, Philae and Sedeinga were worshipped in the capital Meroe, but other sources suggest also a local form. In addition to a graffito in the Meroitic Chamber in Philae (REM 0103), Isis of Meroe is reported in a unusually oval granite stela found at the Temple M 600 of the city (REM 0412); it shows a crudely made representation of king Teriteqas (late first century BC) before Isis, who stretches out towards him



Figure 9. Naga, Apedemak Temple, Relief representing Isis on the exterior northern wall. Second half of the first century AD (photo Baldi).

<sup>107</sup> For a similar case see Qasr Ibrim under Thutmose III (Caminos 1968, 39-42, pl. 10).

<sup>108</sup> Timothy Kendall hypothesized the dedication of Temple B 1330 in Gebel Barkal to Isis, Hathor or Mut, basing on a fragmented inscription reporting *hrj-ib Npt* (Kendall 1994, 144). The suggestion cannot be shared on the actual knowledge.

a palmbranch, whose leaves are in the form of *ankh*-signs, in order to give him longevity<sup>109</sup>; a libation cup is placed between them highlighting the ritual character of the scene (Baud 2010a, cat. no. 224). This stela, in addition to findings<sup>110</sup>, justified the identification of M 600 as Isis temple, the stela giving the dating of (Garstang et al. 1911, 17-19, pls. XIV-XIX; Török 1997a, 170-173, figs. 1, 28, 65; Zach and Tomandl 2000, 134; Wolf 2006, 256).

Another potentially significant inscription is on the northern wall of the Apedemak Temple in Musawwarat es Sufra, showing crown prince (*paqar*) Arka and king Arnekhmani stand before the enthroned lion god. Arka is “King’s Son, Priest of Isis of *’Ipbr-’nh* and *’Irbiklb*”, i.e. Musawwarat es Sufra and Wad ben Naga (?) (Hintze 1962a, 20)<sup>111</sup>. Although the goddess is a recurrent figure in the wall reliefs in Musawwarat es Sufra according to her manifold roles, no architectural evidences of Isis temples in the site have been brought to light; nevertheless, according to Hintze (1962b, 456), the inscription is on a reemployed block, originally coming from an earlier temple called I D, devoted to the goddess and now destroyed<sup>112</sup>. On the actual knowledge, the suggestion cannot be however accepted. Furthermore, a Latin inscription on sandstone block (CIL III: n. 83), brought to light in the site, reads: “bona fortuna dominae reginae”<sup>113</sup>; the dedication was hypothetically attributed to Isis (Török 1986, 357), but in my opinion the writer honoured the Meroitic queen in the context of diplomatic contacts with Rome.

An Isis temple, able to confirm the suggestion by the inscription on her local cult, was brought to light at Wad ben Naga<sup>114</sup> and dated to Natakamani and Amanitore’s rule<sup>115</sup>. The building has been attributed to the cult of the goddess from inscriptions on a sandstone altar found in the northern court<sup>116</sup>, and showing four figures, one for each face, while holding up the heaven (REM 0041)<sup>117</sup>. Isis receives a title, “mistress of the Underworld”, that is not known in Egyptian documents.

Another proposed Isis, Mut or Hathor temple has been identified at Soba in the most southern Meroitic monumental building actually known, where a sandstone capital, showing the head of Hathor on two faces, was found (Zach 1992, 31; Zach and Tomandl 2000, 130). Nevertheless, such an indication needs a deeper inquiry.

109 According to Lohwasser (2001b, 293) a palmbranch ending with *ankh* was only typical of Isis in Kush.

110 The building yielded the fragment of a sandstone statuette representing enthroned Isis with Horus child (see Tomandl 1989; the author gives to the item a dating to the second century AD without argument), and a now lost bronze statuette representing the goddess (see Török 1997a, 173).

111 Priese (1984a, 18) has refused the identification of *’Irbiklb* with Wad ben Naga and has associated the name with Araba. Before his ascent, Arkamani received the same title (see FHN II, n. (128)).

112 Cf. also Näser 2011, 327-28.

113 It is the southernmost Latin inscription known, dated to AD 103-107 (see Shinnie 1961; Hintze 1964; Leclant 1981, 56; Török 1986, 357; Łajtar and van der Vliet 2006).

114 For the architecture of the temple see Priese 1984b.

115 See Vercoutter 1962, 295. Although the attribution of the temple to Natakamani and Amanitore is accepted, later studies have suggested a later dating of their rule than Vercoutter’s report. Their reign is now dated in the second half of the first century AD. See also Porter and Moss 1952, 263.

116 Cf. Leclant 1981, 55; Török 2002a, 31. Contra: Priese 1984a, 17 ff.; Zach and Tomandl 2000, 131.

117 The figures are Natakamani, Amanitore and Ahe and Twe, two of the four goddesses who rule the directions of the heaven (see Wildung 1996, cat. no. 279). Natakamani is flanked by two identical inscription in Egyptian script: “Well established upon thy great place, O Isis, Lady of the Underworld, like the living Aton in the horizon. Thou hast confirmed thy son Natakamani upon his throne”; the inscriptions nearby the figure of Amanitore read: “Established art thou upon thy great place, O Isis, Lady of the Underworld, like as the moon is established firm in the egg, circling round heaven: may she give life to the daughter of the Sun, Amanitore”; the inscription flanking Ahe reads: “I have uplifted the sky for Isis, giver of life, I have separated (?) her place from her (?) Creator, that she may shine therein in her bark like the Aton in the sun boat”; the inscriptions on the sides of Twe are: “I have uplifted the sky-depths for the Mistress of Earth. I have separated her place from her mother (?), that she may shine in it in her bark like the Creator voyaging in his bark” (Griffith 1911, 67-68).

## Conclusion

The Nubian cult of Isis, that found first little evidences ever since Old Kingdom, highlights a deep integration of the goddess in the local cultural milieu. After the colonial and Napatan experiences, that laid the bases for her diffusion, the Meroitic rulers gave a stronger official patronage to her worship in wake of the Philaean model. Isis was an universal deity whose influence was extended to manifold aspects of social and daily life, in addition to her traditional role as underworld goddess. Her pre-eminent place in the local pantheon, as established by the Napatan kings, was reaffirmed and strengthened by the association with autochthonous gods, giving life to new theological speculations and worship expressions. Isis arrived from Egypt, but Meroe could re-think and precise her nature giving her a Nubian soul.

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