

Lecture Transcript:

The Goddess Isis and the Kingdom of Meroe

by Solange Ashby

Sunday, August 30, 2020

Louise Bertini:

Hello, everyone, and good afternoon or good evening, depending on where you are joining us from, and thank you for joining our August member-only lecture with Dr. Solange Ashby titled "The Goddess Isis and the Kingdom of Meroe." I'm Dr. Louise Bertini, and I'm the Executive Director of the American Research Center in Egypt. First, some brief updates from ARCE: Our next podcast episode will be released on September 4th, featuring Dr. Nozomu Kawai of Kanazawa University titled "Tutankhamun's Court." This episode will discuss the political situation during the reign of King Tutankhamun and highlight influential officials in his court. It will also discuss the building program during his reign and the possible motives behind it. As for upcoming events, our next public lecture will be on September 13th and is titled "The Karaites in Egypt: The Preservation of Egyptian Jewish Heritage." This lecture will feature a panel of speakers including Jonathan Cohen, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Arab Republic of Egypt, Magda Haroun, head of the Egyptian Jewish Community, Dr. Yoram Meital, professor of Middle East Studies at Ben-Gurion University, as well as myself, representing ARCE, to discuss the efforts in the preservation of the historic Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo. Our next member-only lecture will be on September 20th with Dr. Jose Galan of the Spanish National Research Council in Madrid titled "A Middle Kingdom Funerary Garden in Thebes." You can find out more about our member-only and public lectures series schedule on our website, arce.org. So with that, I am now going to introduce our speaker today. Dr. Solange Ashby received her Ph.D. in Egyptology with a specialization in ancient Egyptian language and Nubian religion from the University of Chicago. She has researched in Egypt at the Temple of Philae and participated in an archaeological excavation in El-Kurru in Sudan. Her first book, "Calling Out to Isis: The Enduring Nubian

Presence at Philae," was released in July by Gorgias Press. Her current research explores the role of women in traditional Nubian religious practices. Dr. Ashby is working on the first monograph dedicated to the history, religious symbolism and political power of the queens of Kush. So now I am turning it over to Dr. Ashby. Thank you.

Solange Ashby:

Thank you. Thank you. Greetings, everyone, from Washington, DC. I'd like to thank the American Research Center in Egypt for inviting me to talk to you today about the goddess Isis and the kingdom of Meroe. We know that Philae is a Ptolemaic temple, that it continued to function long after other temples in Egypt had fallen into disuse. Roman rulers no longer funded the temple cult as Egyptian pharaohs had for millennia. We know that Isis was the principal deity worshiped at Philae and that Lower Nubia had been granted to Isis as her estate. What is less known, despite the overwhelming archaeological and textual evidence, is that Philae is a Nubian sacred space. My doctoral research focused on Nubian prayer inscriptions in all of the temples of Lower Nubia, and what I found dramatically altered the way that I understand the temple economy of the region and the pious worshipers who frequented the temples between Philae and Dakka on the Nile. The image on the lower left of your screen is one of many figural graffiti found at Philae. This one decorates the western exterior face of the Gate of Hadrian, one of the principal areas in which Nubian inscriptions are found. Here are two images of the temples at Philae. The image on the left I took when approaching the island by boat on the western side. You'll note the two monumental gateways here and here, the first pylon and the second pylon. Between the two gateways is the birth house dedicated to Isis and Horus as mother and child. And then jutting out behind the second pylon is the main temple on the island dedicated to the goddess Isis. I'd like to also point out this small structure coming out from the west side of the temple that is the Gate of Hadrian, and I will return to talk about this later in the lecture. On the right, you see a photo of the dromos, or the forecourt, of the Temple of Isis with that first pylon in the background. Colonnades line both sides of this open area, the eastern colonnade here and the western colonnade here. This area includes

several small temples dedicated to Nubian gods Arensnuphis, Mandulis and Thoth Pnubs. The earliest Nubian inscriptions are found on structures in this area, notably the west colonnade and the doorway through the first pylon. I'll also make reference later in this lecture to epic parties thrown by the Nubian visitors as they arrived at Philae, and those parties would've taken place on the dromos, or the forecourt, of Philae. The Greek inscription that I will discuss in the next slide was engraved on the western side of the front of the first pylon shown here. This was not a Nubian inscription. It was an undated Greek inscription describing the spectacle of Nubian boats arriving at Philae to perform the religious rituals that they came to undertake on an annual basis, and so the inscription reads, "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 Aithiopian shrines worthy of the gods to our land." So my dissertation research into these Nubian inscriptions in the Dodecaschoenos revealed that there were three discrete phases of Nubian epigraphic presence at these temples. The dates of the phases of these inscriptions are based on the rare dates that were actually included in the texts of the inscriptions and on family relationships between people mentioned in various inscriptions. As you can see on the bottom right, there are a total of 94 Nubian inscriptions that we can securely say were authored by Nubians. These were based on three factors: the presence of Nubian names that were clearly not Egyptian names, such as Rqe, Mani, Abli, Swny, Slwa, Bekemete and Manitawi. Or the presence in the inscriptions of Meroitic language titles, such as *shashimete*, *qeren* or *hbhn*, and also from time to time, a reference to travel from Meroe. The predominance of Demotic as the language of choice in all three phases of these Nubian inscriptions indicates the assimilation of the Nubian priests and officials into the Egyptian temple hierarchy and their respect for tradition, while the sizable number of Meroitic-language inscriptions attest to the direct involvement of Meroitic royalty in the temple cult and administration at Philae and the prestige awarded to the Meroitic language, even after that kingdom fell circa 330 CE. Only two Greek inscriptions are attested in the second phase of inscriptions, but by the third phase of inscriptions, almost 40 percent of the corpus was written in the Greek language. The kingdom of Meroe had fallen by that time, and Greek had become the language of communication between

Nubians who spoke different languages in the 5th century CE: the Blemmyes, who arrived into the Nile Valley from the Eastern Desert and the Noubadae, who came down into the Nile Valley from the Nuba Mountains. Nubia is located in the Middle Nile Valley between the First and the Fourth Cataracts. Philae Temple is located at the First Cataract, and the sacred site of Jebel Barkal is at the Fourth Cataract, which is also the site of the capital of the Kushite kings of Egypt's 25th dynasty. These two sites, Philae in the north and Jebel Barkal in the south, bracket the land of Nubia. Meroe, capital of Kush during the period in which these Nubian inscriptions were engraved, is located just north of the Sixth Cataract. If you look at the map on the right, I'll describe the different areas that writers of these three separate phases of Nubian inscriptions came from. So the phase one inscriptions are attested in the widest geographical range of temples. The prominent strategos named Abli ... And his title, strategos, probably refers to in this case as him being the occult association president. Abli is attested twice in inscriptions at Philae, once at the temple of Kalabsha and then again at the temple of Dakka, and so all along the temples that line the Nile throughout the area referred to as the Dodekaschoenos, this 120-kilometer area between Philae in the north and Maharraqa in the south. This changes in the second phase of Nubian inscriptions when the priestly family, referred to as Wayekiye ... several members of the family had this name ... come into prominence. This family, the Wayekiye family, is based at Sayala, so immediately south of the southern border of the Dodekaschoenos. They're now located in Meroitic-controlled Nubia at Sayala. In fact, their funerary monuments inscribed in the Meroitic language have been found in a small town called Mediq, but they're also attested at a site called Gebel Adda that is unfortunately off this map but located about 5 kilometers south of Abu Simbel in the vicinity of Ballana and Qustul, which would come to be important centers for the X-Group in the post-Meroitic period. Now, in the third phase of the Nubian inscription, we see a shift to the south for practitioners of this traditional Nile Valley religion, and so we do have inscriptions at Philae and inscribed there, their prayer inscriptions, but there are also inscriptions from the temple of Tafa at Kalabsha, which during this period was a religious stronghold of the Blemmye people, and then also far south in Qasr Ibrim, where the remains of an amazing Temple of Isis have been excavated there and fortunately preserved

because Qasr Ibrim was on a mountain. It's now an island in Lake Nasser. During this third phase, the Blemmye priests negotiated a settlement to provide that they would continue to have access to the divine statue of Isis from Philae so that this statue could be taken back to Nubia annually as a procession to visit the shrines of this goddess located throughout Nubia. So here is a plan of Philae showing the location of the inscriptions from phase one. You can see that they are only located along that dromos, the forecourt area, no access to the interior of the Temple of Isis itself. These inscriptions record specifically agreements, and they are recording promises to arrive with donations and then spell out the apportionment of these mandatory temple donations brought by Nubian cult associations from the surrounding towns immediately surrounding the Temple of Philae and how they would be divided amongst temple personnel. For example, temple singers were donated directly to the temple of Arensnuphis, for example, located here. In this phase, local Nubians were functioning in an Egyptian, in this case Roman-Egyptian, dominated context, and they came to deliver their tithes to Philae as mandated during the preceding reign of the Ptolemies in Egypt. Ten percent of all of the produce of Nubia was to be brought to the Temple of Isis and donated there, and this is stipulated in Nubia nome reliefs and hieroglyphic inscriptions found in this passageway through the first pylon on the Dodecaschoenos stela standing in front of the second pylon and the interior of this area in the first pylon. Some of the examples of offering that Nubians were required at this point to bring to the temple are wheat, wine, wool and above all, gold. These people who inscribed the inscriptions came to worship Nubian gods, Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs. At this early phase, phase one, they were not, apparently, temple priests but rather cult association members, and it seems that they could not read or write Demotic during this early phase. Here is some images from the dromos at Philae where it's spelled out very clearly in the accompanying hieroglyphic texts that Arensnuphis, here, we're told [Ashby reads text] "*i i m Ta-Seti*," so he comes from Ta-Seti, Nubia, and then Thoth Pnubs, depicted here, is said to be [Ashby reads text] "*m Ta-Nehisi*," so an area further south in Nubia, probably ... most certainly located at the area called Pnubs, *panebes*, which is the name of the sacred Jujubier tree that was excavated and found in the sacred circular enclosure at Kerma. So this is a plan, again, of this forecourt area. I just

want to point out these temples to Nubian gods, Mandulis here and Osiris, together with Arensnuphis in this temple. Cruz-Uribe has proposed that the Kiosk of Nectanebo, not shown on this plan, was consecrated as a shrine of Thoth Pnubs. This area was expanded during the Roman period to accommodate the crowds of Nubians who arrived here and created, in fact, a forecourt for the temple of Arensnuphis. Note columns nine and 10, located here in the western colonnade. This architrave, located above columns nine and 10 of the western colonnade, creates a doorway facing Bigeh Island to the west of Philae: Biga Island, of course, being the site of the burial of Osiris. A Nubian inscription, Philae 24, engraved on the eastern face of column nine, refers to [Ashby reads text] "*pa shl lry-hms-nfr*," which I have translated as "the doorway of Arensnuphis," probably referring to this very space in the image on the lower right, and I've used the old Nubian word *shl* to translate the difficult Demotic term which Griffith rendered as tooth, as in tooth of Arensnuphis, and Cruz-Uribe translated as spike, the spike of Arensnuphis, neither of which seem to make sense in this context. So moving onto phase two of Nubian inscriptions circa 175 to 275 CE, we can see that the Nubian inscriptions have now moved into the restricted area of the temple, and I'll just point out the three major foci of Nubian inscriptions during this second phase: the Meroitic chamber here behind the second eastern colonnade, and I'll show you an image on the next slide; this southwest corner of the Pronaos, which is formed as the back of the second pylon; and then that Gate of Hadrian, which I showed you in that original picture of Philae. Nubians in this period claimed the highest religious titles: *hm ntr* priests and *wab* priests while also claiming Meroitic priestly and administrative titles: *qeren* of Isis, agent of Isis, king's son of Kush and the royal scribe of Kush, those two latter titles indicating that they were in the employ of Meroitic royalty. They also claim in their inscriptions knowledge of the movement of the stars, so astronomical knowledge. One priest, Wayekiye A, in his graffito Philae 421, claims the title *hm ntr* priest of Sopdet and priest of the five living planets. Those are the five planets visible to the naked eye: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. And I imagine that they used to astronomical knowledge to determine when would be the appropriate time to arrive at Philae to perform rites on behalf of the rulers in Meroe. These were very high-ranking priests and political emissaries who arrived at Philae with

donations of gold sent by the rulers in Meroe, and these priests, the Nubian priests, were welcomed with honor by the Egyptian priests, their colleagues. Here is an image of the decoration of the interior of the Meroitic chamber.

Unfortunately, this is no longer decorating the walls of that chamber, as it was painted onto the stone as opposed to engraved in it. So we see two processions of Meroitic priests and dignitaries, starting here from inscriptions 97 and going back. This inscription went from the center of the north wall of the chamber and along the western wall, while the second processions meets again in the center of that north wall and then wraps around the eastern wall of the Meroitic chamber. You'll note that these dignitaries are carrying palm staves, which is also a feature of the decoration of Meroitic funerary chapels, and each individual is accompanied by a Meroitic-language text which lets us know the name of some of these individuals: Mashtaraqe, Bekemete, Apamalo and Manitawawi, the second and third individuals being members of the Wayekiye family. The others are not securely connected to that family but probably were also members of this dominant Nubian family of priest. Their titles that we get from the Meroitic texts let us know that they held Meroitic titles such as *hbhn*, *kroro*, strategos of the water, strategos of the land, *qoren* of Isis, so that would be the very same title that is transcribed into Demotic as *qeren*, and then agent of Isis. And I make reference here to the Feast of Entry. What I'm finding through the inscriptions is frequent references to an akh procession, which seems to be a funerary procession performed for Osiris, as he was understood to be one with the deceased Meroitic king, and so these Nubian priests came to perform funerary rites for their king by performing this akh procession. So this inscription inscribed on the southern section of the west exterior face of the Gate of Hadrian is the longest Demotic inscription, Egyptian or Nubian. It is among many Nubian inscriptions on this exterior western wall of the Gate of Hadrian and also accompanies by numerous figural graffiti, including two that I'm showing here, identified by Cruz-Uribe as Sasan, the author of this inscription, Philae 416. So he's shown on the upper right of the screen with his staff. And then Teqorideamani, the Meroitic king whom Sasan served, is shown on the left holding an ankh sign with a barely legible Demotic inscription in front of him. So the translation of this long text ... I'll read you out several sections because it's

very informative. I'm using a translation by Jeremy Pope in "Enchoria 31" from 2008. So the first section I'd like to read out, quote: "I came to Egypt." This is Sasan. "I came to Egypt that I might perform the rites that my lord had ordered for me. I performed them. He had also ordered me to count the money, 10 talents, and to bring them to the temple compound of Isis for the *hm ntr* priests, the *wab* priest and the daughters of the *wab* priest." So this is a clear statement of Meroitic royal financial support directly given to priests at the temple complex of Philae. It might also indicate a ritual role for the daughters of the *wab* priest. Second quote refers to Teqorideamani, the Meroitic king, quote. "He had ordered me to let the whole nome enjoy itself, and we did that in his good name." So this is that epic party that I was referring to that would've occurred on the forecourt of the temple at Philae. Quote, "He ordered the king's son and the *qerens* of Isis to come to Egypt with me until we had performed the festivals and banquets which were celebrated in the temple compound of Isis. We made our burnt offerings in return for the breathe of life for the pharaoh, Teqorideamani, my lord." And so this refers to specific rites that were performed by lower Nubian priests, so again these priests whose home is in Sayala, so just immediately south of the entrance to the Wadi Allaqi that leads out to the gold mines in the Eastern Desert. These local lower Nubian priests are hired and sent to perform rites on behalf of the Meroitic king, precisely because they're able to read and write hieroglyphic Egyptian and Demotic as well as Meroitic, so they're trilingual, and because they are trained as priests, they're able to properly conduct the rites within the Egyptian temples of Lower Nubia. In this case, in phase two, Nubians are now acting at Philae in a Meroitic-controlled context, as employees and ritual specialists on behalf of the king in Meroe. Another quote from this very long inscription: "Beautiful were the honors which the *hm ntr* priest and the *wab* priest and the populace of the town performed for me," Sasan, "until they brought us to the temple compound of Isis." And this indicates the warm and respectful reception by the resident priest at Philae for the Nubian priests arriving from the south. One more long quote from this inscription: "We sent another," quantity of gold, "and made them into a libation jar of gold, which we furnished with the name of our lord, the aforementioned gold amounting to 4 1/2 litras. Wayekiye A, the strategos of the water, had two litras of gold brought, and they were made

into a golden sistrum to be raised before Isis on the three decads. Sasan, together with *qeren*, his brother, too had 1 litra of gold, and we made it into a large hes vessel for making libations to Osiris Wennefer, the great god. The first day of the fourth month of inundation, Khoiak, until the first day of the third month of winter, we celebrated in the temple compound of Isis, together with our brethren, the *qerens* of Isis, the *hm ntr* priests and the priest on duty among the *wab* priests. We passed 8 days dining on the dromos of Isis on wine, beer and meat while the populace of the town, in its entirety, was in jubilation and making obeisance to the pharaoh." So this details something like 16 1/2 pounds of gold that were brought with this one delegation from Meroe and the offering of this gold at the temple of Philae and its working into specific cultic items right there at the temple. I have identified the interior of the second pylon as the place where these golden implements were stored. Virtually all of the inscriptions written by goldsmiths at Philae line the walls of the internal stairs of this pylon. So it was the milk-libation rite more than anything that drew Nubian inscriptions during this second phase. This milk-libation rite, deemed anomalous in the Egyptian context, is shown in each of these images, where a king is pouring milk over an offering table, for example, here, that has on either side of it the loop-handled situlae that are used to indicate that this is a milk-libation rite. Two Meroitic kings performed the rite at Dakka and Dabod, so here we see the Meroitic king Arqamani II and then below, his successor, Adikhalamani, performing this milk-libation rite, while on the upper right, we see Ptolemy VIII making that same rite, pouring milk from a loop-handle situla here, and unfortunately, the offering table has been removed, but he's making this rite before Osiris and Isis. I don't know if you can see here. There are a couple of Nubian inscriptions right in front of their faces, while the hieroglyphic text behind the king made clear that this is milk that is being poured out. This rite in the Nubian context was required to be performed for Osiris at Philae in order to assure his resurrection. These scenes do not appear in temples north of Philae, and as I said, the Nubian inscriptions tended to cluster around these milk-libation scenes, so here is another one from the north interior wall of the Gate of Hadrian. Hard to see the king here, one Roman ruler, performing this same milk-libation rite, the loop-handled situla and then Osiris and Isis, and there are several Nubian inscriptions in that vicinity, as well. So I

make the assertion that this milk libation is a Nubian rite. I follow in the research of Hermann Junker, who identified these milk-libation scenes at Philae, Dakka and Kalabsha, and then Janice Yellin followed up on that research to identify similar scenes on Meroitic funerary chapel walls and offering tables, so here is an image from a Meroitic funerary chapel in which we see Anubis and Nephthys pouring that same milk-libation rite, same pair performing the rite on the Meroitic offering tables here, as well as on a door post from Sedeinga. And this is a Meroitic-language milk-offering formula identified by Claude Rilly. I have proposed that these so-called anomalous milk-libation scenes were, in fact, traditional Nubian funerary rites that were introduced into the temples of the Dodekaschoenos by the Nubian priests, and you can find that information in this article that I had published in "Near Eastern Archaeology" in the fall of last year. Okay. So Horus of Kubban: I'd like to just point out first that this is the relief panel I'll be talking about but that it is immediately to the right of the panel I just showed you of Ptolemy VIII pouring milk libations for Osiris and then Isis here, and then to the right of this scene, again, are those stairs leading up into the interior of the second pylon. So here is the hieroglyphic text that identifies this deity in the relief as *Hor Baktet*, Horus of Kubban. It seems that this was the local god of this prominent Wayekiye family. As I've mentioned several times, their home, Sayala, is just south of the Wadi Allaqi, leading into the gold-mining area of the Eastern Desert, and a Middle Kingdom temple dedicated to Horus is located there on the eastern bank at the mouth of the Wadi Allaqi, Dakka temple being on the opposite bank of the Nile. So in this image, Horus of Kubban is being offering by Ptolemy VIII again, and you can see here two Nubian inscriptions written in Demotic, the one on the top and then a dividing line and a second inscription, so here is a translation of this graffito, Philae 251. It's the earliest inscription by a Wayekiye family member, so Paese, identified here, was the first of seven generations of Wayekiye family members who left inscriptions here at Philae. I'd like to point out that he addresses Isis as Giver of Life. Apparently, this epithet is unique in the Nubian context, and he says, "I cry out to you, rescue," and this verb for the crying out or calling out in Demotic is *shl l*, and so that's what gives the title to my book, "Calling Out to Isis." This verb is only used in the Nubian inscriptions at Philae. So the second inscription just below it is long, and

I'm not going to read the whole text, but it's interesting that it has a colophon by a man named Abaryte, who identifies himself as a goldsmith. In fact, son of a goldsmith for 303 generations, to imply that this is a family craft, and I'd just to point out that his name, Abaryte, the first part, Abar, in Meroitic means man. And then finally, just below these other inscriptions is Philae 253, which belongs to the third phase of the Nubian inscriptions which shows the enduring appeal of this area for Nubian worshipers. In fact, all of the Christians who left inscriptions and identified themselves as Nubian, Nouba. There's a whopping two or three of them, but it's interesting that they chose to engrave their inscriptions on or near these two relief panels in the southwest corner of the pronaos of the main temple. So phase three of the Nubian inscriptions: We actually have precise dates for this phase, so from 408 to 456 CE. You can see that the inscriptions had, by this late date, penetrated much further into the temple, which says to me that the local Egyptian priests were probably no longer carrying out the full cult on behalf of the goddess Isis. I'll just point out here that there's a collection of Demotic and Greek inscriptions on the roof of the main temple, and they are engraved on or near the Osiris chambers located on the roof, so this continues to be a focus of the Nubian cult at Philae to perform rites for the resurrection of Osiris. But also here on the roof of the birth house, there are several inscriptions in Demotic but also Meroitic and accompanying the image of feet. Perhaps these priests had retreated to the roof to avoid conflict with Christians who are attested on the island of Philae from as early as 330 CE, and so it seems Christians and traditional practitioners shared this island for about 100 years, and there's the remnants of an installation of a Christian altar here in the Pronaos, and so this would probably have been contested space. The worshiper during this phase were Blemmyes, those residents of the Eastern Desert who had moved into Lower Nubia, and they were the ones who then funded these priests to arrive at Philae to perform rites. Okay. The Nubian presence at Philae is not limited to the 500 years in which Nubian prayer inscriptions were engraved at these Egyptian temples in the Dodekaschoenos. The 25th dynasty Kushite King Taharqa's monuments are actually the oldest monuments attested at Philae, and they were dedicated to the worship of the god Amun, a god closely associated with kingship in Kush. Meroitic rulers were active in the temples of Lower Nubian during the

Theban revolt, 206 to 186 BCE, so we have several attestations of involvement in temple decoration and construction by Arqamani II and his successor, Adikhalamani, including a fascinating top half of a stela that was found buried under the Pronaos and discovered when the temple of Philae was dismantled to move it. Later Meroitic rulers inscribed their cartouches at the temple of Dakka in the 1st century BCE, so we have the names of Queen Amanitore, King Teriteqas and the prince, Akinidad, and these three rulers were prolific builders in the heartland of Meroe, so it's interesting to see that their range of control had stretched up to the temple of Dakka during this period. And then the last inscription was made in the name of the king Yesebokheamani who was the penultimate ruler of Meroe, and he left two Meroitic-language inscriptions, again, no surprise, in the Gate of Hadrian. They are on the north and the south wall, so paired inscriptions in which he gives his name and claims the title of king, Qore in Meroitic, and relays some type of title that is not yet translatable but related to Isis, who is called Wos in Meroitic. So this records 1,000 years of Nubian presence at Philae beginning before the worship of Isis was introduced under Psammetichus II of the 26th dynasty, and therefore renders Philae as a Nubian sacred space. Thank you very much for your attention.

Louise Bertini:

Wow. Thank you very much. And before we get to the questions, I do just want to draw everybody's attention to the Q&A button, so please feel free to shoot us any questions there. So we're going to start. I have a question from Charles. "Before the pandemic, did you and your students perform archaeological field work at Nubian sites? If yes, do you plan on going back after the pandemic?"

Solange Ashby:

Okay. Interesting question. Here I confess that I am not an archaeologist. I was just hosted on that excavation in Sudan. I am an Egyptologist, so I focus on the language, various language phases in Egypt, and so I was supposed to be going to Egypt multiple times this year, and because of the pandemic, everything has canceled. I would love to get back to Egypt and especially to bring students to show them the Nubian presence at Philae but also at Kalabsha and Dakka, which

are accessible, as well. Finally, I should point out for those in New York, there is a Nubian temple, Dendur, in the Metropolitan Museum, and, in fact, one of the inscriptions ... This is from that earliest phase, phase one, is the one and only inscription in the temple, and if you've been there, they allow you to enter just into the entryway of the temple, and if you look up on the right-hand side, you'll see something like seven lines of Demotic, so that's another one of these Nubian inscriptions.

Louise Bertini:

We actually next have two questions relating to milk.

Solange Ashby:

Yes.

Louise Bertini:

So Charles asked, "Why was milk more sacred to Nubians compared to Egyptians?" And then actually, we have another follow-up question from Elizabeth Bohlman on, "Can you say a little bit more about the milk ritual?"

Solange Ashby:

Absolutely. Yes. So I'm convinced that milk was held as sacred by the Nubians because of the prominence of the cattle culture there. We see that very early in that first capital of Kush, Kerma, where the rulers are buried with hundreds and hundreds of bucrania, and, in fact, the poster behind me is from an exhibit in Switzerland about the kings of Kerma, but this continues down through the C-Group people, who are cattle pastoralists. We see that they are wearing leather garments. They're buried on leather mats. Everything is about the cattle. This continues in the Napatan period, so the 25th dynasty, Egyptian rulers, rules of Egyptian, I should say, come out of this Napatan period, and there are temple inscriptions there in which those kings in Napatan temples are talking about donating, offering to the god Amun at his temple hundreds of longhorn cattle, gold milk vessels, and so this is very much associated with the prominence and importance of cattle pastoralism. And the milk is held to be a sacred substance.

We see this further down into East Africa, other groups where milk and beer are both to hold ritual significance, and so I think tapping into these other African ritual significances for these substance brings a lot to the discussion of why milk was so essential. Of course, it's associated with the breast milk that a mother gives to her new baby, and so we know in the Egyptian tradition that the resurrection after death is seen to be a second birth, and so milk is part, also in the Egyptian context, of coronation for the king but also as an offering to be reborn in the afterlife. I think it's the centrality of this cattle culture. There's an image ... I wish I included it on the slide here ... of a bronze bowl that was excavated at the site of Keranog, a Nubian center of power near Qasr Ibrim, and this bowl is decorated around the rim with an image of a woman sitting in front of a conical hut topped by an ostrich egg. She is seated on the ground topless with her young daughter behind her. Five probably similar bronze bowls are set out in front of her, and a man very regally is pouring milk into the bowls from cattle, who decorate the rest of the bowl. The milk has obviously been freshly taken from these cows, so it's just interwoven in everything in the Nubian culture, and for the Meroitic royalty, it was understood as an essential part of revivifying, bringing back to life the deceased ruler, and I want to stress here in Meroe, that could either be a sole-ruling king or a sole-ruling queen, and so many of the funerary chapels that are appended to the east side of the royal burials in Meroe are decorated with scenes of this milk-libation rite. And you can look to Janice Yellin's article for more specific data about that, and I also talk about that a lot in my book.

Louise Bertini:

Great. We have a question from Steve Harvey. "How can we understand the interaction between Demotic inscriptions and Meroitic ones in the Gate of Hadrian?"

Solange Ashby:

Interesting. Yes, so there's a lot of overlap between the two. It's the same players, predictably members of this Wayekiye family, who are mentioned in both types of inscriptions in the Demotic-language inscriptions and the Meroitic-language

inscriptions. We see similar titles used in both of the inscriptions: for example, *qeren* of Isis, which is still not 100 percent translatable, but the writing in Demotic is determined by a hieroglyph referring to writing, so certainly some sort of scribal or literate priestly position is rendered as *qoren* in the Meroitic language, which is interesting. It might somehow relate to this word *qore* that refers to the king, the title held by the ruling king in Meroe. The positioning of the inscriptions is interesting, as well. They're often right next to each other on that exterior face, the western face of the Gate of Hadrian. I believe all of those inscriptions are written in either Demotic or Greek, and it's interesting. They seem to be paired, two different embassies that came from Meroe in 253 ... Thank you, Sasan, for actually putting a date on that inscription, Philae 416 ... and then another embassy came 7 years later, and that inscription is Philae 417, inscribed by a man named Tami. But there are also then two paired Greek inscriptions that refer to these high-ranking men. Abratoye, who was mentioned in Sasan's inscription, leaves his own Greek-language inscription on the Gate of Hadrian, and then in the interior of the temple, which, of course, is decorated with that amazing Abaton decree on the north wall that is in hieroglyphic text ... We see Thoth, the Egyptian Thoth, who is recording Ra's decree that milk libations should be brought every day to the burial of Osiris on the Abaton, Biga Island, and then all around there, we have Demotic-language inscriptions. Also those two Meroitic-language inscriptions of the King Yesebokheamani, who has usurped an image of the king with a big cartouche in front of him that only includes the hieroglyphs to read *Per-aa*, pharaoh, and so Yesebokheamani has written just above the image of that king presented fields. He's written his two or three-line Meroitic-language inscription, so they're very much in conversation with each other. We see these trilingual priests, trilingual priests sort of flexing, if you will. They're leaving inscriptions in Meroitic, which tend to be quite a bit briefer than the Demotic ones, which are known for their length and their passion, and then also writing in Greek, and Greek seems to have been chosen by the high-ranking political emissaries of the Meroitic king because they would've been conducting political negotiations with the Roman rulers in Egypt in Greek, which was then the diplomatic language. So I hope I've answered your question, Steve.

Louise Bertini:

Since we're talking about Greek, we have a question on the origin of the name of Isis. Is that Greek?

Solange Ashby:

No. Oh! I mean, the version Isis is certainly ... It comes into English from the way that the Greeks would've interpreted the Egyptian word *Aset*, right, which, as you may or may not know, is just written in the hieroglyphic script by a throne. So *Aset* is the Egyptian word, and then we know the Meroites heard and wrote that same name for Isis as *Wos*, W-O-S. So this may give us some idea of how the name was actually pronounced in this period of the late 2nd through the 3rd century CE.

Louise Bertini:

A new question from Anne. "Do you have any idea how long it took for the Nubian priests to sail from Meroe to Philae?"

Solange Ashby:

No. No. I don't. That's a good question because it sort of leads me to talk a little bit more about the multiple ways that they may have arrived at Philae, and so certainly that undated Greek inscription records the majestic arrival of the Nubian ships, but Sasan, in his really long Demotic graffito, also talks about his perilous journey which Jeremy Pope has interpreted the Demotic to allude to a crossing from the Fourth Cataract up to the Nile and Lower Nubia on the Korosko Road, so I would encourage you to go take a look at that article. There were multiple ways that they could've arrived at Philae, but honestly, no, I'm not certain. I do that, for example ... Now, this is outside of this talk, but Piankhi, in his victory stele, talks about coming down into Egypt with the inundation, and that certainly would've sped up the journey and made them arrive faster.

Louise Bertini:

All right. We have a question from Christina, which I think you've already answered this: "For the ritual, what type of milk was used?"

Solange Ashby:

Certainly cattle milk, and ... Ah. There's a ... Let me see if I ... Oh, sorry. Nope. I was trying to see. Somewhere I had included ... Yes. There it is. On the upper left, this is another one of those figural graffito that decorate and actually cover this exterior face of the Gate of Hadrian, and I love this image because it is showing us Isis in her cow form being transported on this boat from Philae over to Biga Island, which is not far at all, but this was a ritual procession which would've taken place, and I love that here on the left is a little ritual jar, so we can understand that the milk would have been transferred into this jar to then be poured out on the 365 offering tables that were decreed by Ra should stand there at the burial of Osiris, so very much it was cow milk that was being offered, but we are to understand it ritually as the breast milk that comes from Isis, in much the same way that she's shown nursing Horus in the birth house and on the exterior rear wall of the birth house, you can see cow goddesses who are bringing milk to the nursing mother, Isis, as she is nursing her son, Horus. This breast milk of Isis is taken to be the fluid that will ensure the revivification of Osiris, as Osiris Wennefer, beautiful of form. On this panel, it's that image to the left, the milk is being described as "*was*," so powerful, "*nedjem*," as sweet and "*hejet*," as gleaming or white, so this is held as a sacred substance and potent to both bring forth ... bring into life and strength Horus as the son of Isis but Osiris as the deceased spouse of Isis, and that's why, I think, in the Nubian inscriptions, this epithet of Isis as Giver of Life is so central, and it only appears in these Nubian temples. It's the magical ability of Isis to not only bring forth her son but to sustain him with her breast milk and to bring back to life her deceased husband with the same liquid.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question from Paul. "What was the effect of the Meroe and Roman border raids in the 1st century BC on Philae and the tributes from the Meroe to the Temple of Isis?"

Solange Ashby:

Yeah, so there were a couple of battles in 29 BCE and then again in 25 BCE. The Roman, after conquering Egypt, attempted to push south into Nubia, and they were met in battle by ... Strabo tells us ... this mannish, one-eyed queen who was one of many kandakes, these powerful ruling queens from Meroe. She actually led her Meroitic troops in battle against the Romans, and although the Romans, of course, claimed victory like you do in your own text, it seems that they were repelled for a time. Of course, they came back later, but so there was battle back and forth trying to determine who was going to control this area of the Dodecaschoenos because the Meroitic rulers already controlled Meroitic Nubia, so up to Qasr Ibrim, maybe a little bit further north, but they were now battling control for northern Lower Nubia. We do see two rulers buried at Jebel Barkal during this period. Everybody else was buried down in Meroe, but we see two queens buried up at Jebel Barkal, which seems to perhaps indicate the Meroitic forces, rulers, doubling down on fighting to control this area. So I guess the follow-up to that is, by around, well, 298, we're told that Diocletian pulls back any attempt that Egyptian control of Lower Nubia, and he brings the border to Aswan. But as the inscriptions of Sasan and all of these other Nubian priests in 250, 260, 270 CE let us know, the Meroites were in actual physical control of the temples of Lower Nubia. Tami, in his Demotic inscription Philae 417, tells us that he crowns a prophet, that he is putting bark on the boat of Isis, that he has planted persea trees at the temple of Philae and that he has chased off men from Elephantine who are trying to go to the Abaton, and so he really is positioned there, in this particular inscription, claiming the title of tax collector, which probably means he's the lesonis of the temple. He's the financial overseer of the temple, and he is establishing and claiming dominance over this space to the extent that he's calling in the Roman dux, and he is having the men from Elephantine, who are trying to go to visit the burial of Osiris on the Abaton ... He's having them expelled, so for this period in the mid-3rd century, it is definitely a Meroitic-controlled sacred space.

Louise Bertini:

I have a question from Barbara, who's from the North California chapter, who says how she's been to Sudanese Nubia, and she's wondering about how much about the Meroitic language do we know?

Solange Ashby:

Good question. Thank you, Barbara. So Griffith, who, of course, collected all of the inscriptions at Philae and the catalog of Demotic inscriptions of the Dodecaschoenos, also wrote two volumes called "Meroitic Inscriptions," something longer, so he was the first to figure out the correspondence of Meroitic hieroglyphs and the cursive Meroitic. So let me just back up a little and say both of these scripts were derived and developed out of the Egyptian scripts, but they're using them in a very different way, so Meroitic hieroglyphs and the cursive script developed out of Demotic, scrapped the very complex writing system of ancient Egypt and instead create an alphabet, and so it's much simpler. There's something like 30 letters, something like that, and this is, in fact, an alphasyllabary, which means that it writes consonants, and there is an assumed A, vowel A, after every consonant, so kandake, for example, unless indicated by another character that would indicate E and I or an O. All that to say that we are not much further than where Griffith got in 1911, I think, which is that we have identified the equivalences of these 30 or so alphabetic characters, but we cannot read very many words. I should give the background that the Meroitic language and the Nubian language both belong to a larger African language family called Nilo-Saharan. They're part of the northeast Sudanic branch of this larger African language, and so quite different than Egyptian, which belongs to the Afroasiatic family, along with Cushitic languages like Beja, spoken by the Blemmye people, or Agaw, spoken by people in Ethiopia, or even Ethiopic, which is a Semitic language. All of those languages belong to Afroasiatic, and Meroitic and Nubian are belonging to Nilo-Saharan, which is a language family that goes all the way down the Nile as far as south as Uganda. For example, Maasai language is part of this larger Nilo-Saharan language family. So it's very different. As Egyptologists, we tend not to know a lot about the rest of Africa, and that leaves us not able to get very far with translating and understanding Meroitic, so a lot more work needs to be done on the related languages from this language family of Nilo-Saharan to be

able to really crack Meroitic. And it's fascinating. I'm working with a group that's trying to preserve Nubian languages, and so we're working with speakers of Nobiin and Ajang, Kordofan Nubian. I'm in touch with some folks, Nara speakers in western Eritrea, and so I think in pulling in an understanding of these living languages, as Claude Rilly has attempted to do, that's how we're going to be able to get a bit further in understanding Meroitic. At this point, what we can understand is terms for family relationships, so from the funerary monuments written in the Meroitic language, so someone ... I would say, for example, "I am Solange, born of ... " and I would name my mother. The Nubians always named their mother first, sometimes to the exclusion of the father. When the father is mentioned, he comes second, and so, "I am sired by ... " my father's name. There's another very important term called *yetmede*, is the Meroitic term, and we're not quite sure what that means, but it definitely positions the speaker or the writer of this funerary text in relation to other members of his or her society, and so I think Claude Rilly has translated it as uncle or niece and nephew, but I think it's something more than that. It's positioning that person in a network of an extended family that comes from a clan lineage that is the organizing principle of Nubian society, and so we see that still with modern Nubians, Nobiin speakers, talking about the different kinship terms that are used in Nobiin, and here I will recommend an article by Nubantood Khalil called "Maternalism in Nobiin" that talks about the centrality of the mother and how every other family relationship is based on how that person is connected to the mother of the family.

Louise Bertini:

I think on a very similar note, we have a question about the best way to find out more about Meroitic language in general.

Solange Ashby:

Yeah. Yes. Oh, my gosh. So it's Griffith, Griffith and Griffith, to start. If you can get your hands on Francis L. Griffith's "Meroitic Inscriptions" volumes one and two, he writes a lot in there. He also has chapters in the Eckley B. Coxe publication from Penn for their excavation at Karanog where he's doing a lot of early language analysis. There's also a six-part journal article series, and I'm blanking on where

that's from, but then in the modern era, there's a couple of books and then a series of articles by Claude Rilly. His last name is spelled R-I-L-L-Y. Many of them are in French, but there are some that are written in English that are more accessible, and I guess as a final recommendation, "The Meroitic Newsletter" is available for free online, and so you can just scroll through all of the articles on there. They're not only about language analysis, but you will find some top-tier language analysis by scholars in the field, and I guess finally, the center of Meroitic language studies as far as I understand is in Berlin, so I hope to get there at one point. Yes.

Louise Bertini:

A question from Virginia on, "Why was Philae temple built where it was?" And a follow-up, "Why is there also a temple to the goddess Hathor at Philae?"

Solange Ashby:

Mm-hmm. Okay. Good question and something I forgot to mention when I was showing you those initial images of Philae. It's on an island. It is just south of the First Cataract, which was the traditional border between Egypt and Nubia, so Philae, on its island, is properly in Nubia, and the temple, unlike most Egyptian temples, which face east to the rising Sun, is facing south, and I think this is noteworthy, and I interpret that as sort of welcoming or looking toward the Nubians who would be arriving by boat or over land as they were the bulk of the visitors to this temple over time. Why was it built there? Also an interesting question. One of the upsides of having to dismantle and move the temple in advance of the flooding of Nubia is that we got to see underneath the standing temple originally built, that main temple, by Ptolemy II, so very early in the Ptolemaic period. But underneath that is a very small temple that sits where the Pronaos of the main temple to Isis is now, and that was built by Psammetichus II also dedicated to the goddess Isis, and apparently, it was situated on a small rock outcropping on the island, so a high space, if you will. What I didn't mention in addition to bark stand of Taharqa that we see in that interior courtyard at Philae, part of the dismantling of the temple for the move revealed also building blocks featuring Taharqa with his name in a cartouche worshiping the god Amun. So

clearly, there were buildings on the site that were dismantled when the 26th dynasty was following up, pushing out the Kushite rulers of the 25th dynasty. They wanted to sort of erase all evidence of a Kushite presence there and start fresh with the goddess Isis. So now to the question about, why is there a temple of Hathor there? This is also a really good question. There are multiple temples on the island of Philae. That one for Isis is, of course, the main temple, but along the forecourt are those temples to the Nubian gods and also the god Imhotep and then the temple of Hathor is located to the east side of the main temple for Isis. There's also a small temple for *Hor Pakhered* just north of the Gate of Hadrian, so a whole temple complex here, but these Nubian gods and Hathor, to me, are all representative of this myth of the distant goddess that talks about Hathor raging in Nubia, and we're told specific locales in Nubia, Keneset and Bugam. She's down there raging because humanity has dared rise up against her father, the sun god, Ra, and Ra decides to send two other gods to bring her back to Egypt. In the traditional Egyptian telling, that's Shu and Onuris who are sent to go and get the goddess, but in the temple of Philae, we see a much more Nubian version of this tale, especially in the decoration of that forecourt area. So it is Arensnuphis and Thoth Pnubs who are sent down to Nubia to bring back this raging goddess, Tefnut, and so they ply her with wine. They speak sweet words to her. They play music for her, and as she becomes very drunk, she becomes more compliant, and they are able to lead her back to Philae Temple. And we're told from inscriptions from, for example, the temple at Medamud that this procession of the goddess being brought back from Nubia was accompanied by specific Nubian tribes who are named by name. Those hieroglyphic inscriptions at Medamud tell us what their attire was, how their king was looking, the dances that they performed, so this is part of this annual procession of the goddess Tefnut coming back, accompanied by various groups of Nubians to arrive at the temple of Philae and partake in rites on the dromos again. So here is that epic partying, right? And so the goddess Isis, she is of love, sexuality, music, dance, divine drunkenness, all of that. So as Tefnut arrives to Philae, she is told, the texts in this area of the dromos tell us, that she bathes in the cool waters of Philae, and the flames of her wrath are extinguished, so in this moment, she transforms into Hathor, and then the party begins. So there is music, dancing, all kinds of drinking and probably a lot of

sexuality, as well, and we see in that temple, the Hathor temple at Philae, images of baboons playing guitars or playing flutes and people dancing, and so it's very much associated with the myth of the distant goddess and the return of Hathor from Nubia. That was a long answer. I hope I got everything that you asked.

Louise Bertini:

We have another Isis question, if you can compare to the Nubian conception of Isis to that of the Egyptians.

Solange Ashby:

Mm-hmm. Okay. Good. Good. Let's see. I guess most basically, the depiction of her is quite different. In Philae, for example, she has the typical svelte goddess form, Egyptian form, and when we see her, for example, depicted on the exterior wall of the Meroitic temple at Naqa, she's considerably thicker, and so she's looking not quite as thick and voluptuous as the Meroitic queens portrayed themselves, but she is noticeably thicker than her Egyptian equivalent. She has a little bit of the warrior goddess to her. In that same image from Naqa, she is shown clasping enemies by the hair and presenting them to the king and queen, but she also holds in her other hand a situla, and that is a clear reference to these milk-libation rites that are also associated with her. So she seems in Meroe to fill this slot in the funerary ritual, so she is really primarily associated with funerary rites, where Hathor then is much more associated with the ruling queen and being paired with the Meroitic king, so the ruling queen is seen as a manifestation of Hathor. I think that's all I have for Isis.

Louise Bertini:

And another question on the situla that you just mentioned. Is it always and only associated with milk?

Solange Ashby:

It is in the Nubian context. I know that that is different in the Egyptian context, but when we see it in the Nubian connection, it is very specifically connected with these funerary milk-libation rites, and we see Anubis and Nephthys holding it very

clearly by that loop handle. Whoops. I'm trying to see it ... Oh, never mind. Yes. It's very specifically associated with the milk-libation rites.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question from Syd, who says, "Much of your talk falls in the Roman period, but you spoke of no inscriptions in Latin. Is that just an artifact of Nubian schooling or was Latin just not used anywhere in Egypt?"

Solange Ashby:

Good question, Syd. There are Latin inscriptions at Philae. There actually, I think, is a Latin inscription at Naqa in Meroe, way down in Meroe, if I remember correctly, but it is definitely in the minority. It was not seen, I think, as appropriate for prayer inscriptions in this temple context, and we should remember that Greek was introduced as the sort of language of rulers during the Ptolemaic period, but the Roman rulers, upon conquering Egypt, just continued to use Greek as well, and so Latin just doesn't appear that much in Egypt, even in the Roman period, so if you think, for example, of the Rosetta Stone, we have hieroglyphs and then Demotic and then Greek, and no Latin is appearing there. I think the few Latin inscriptions at Philae appear on the top eastern face of the birth house, and those are official Roman rulers leaving texts in Latin, but it just doesn't appear much.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question on if you know where Isis is said to have been buried.

Solange Ashby:

No. No. I have no information about that, and that may have something to do with the fact that in Egyptian mythology, Isis never dies. She's the eternal goddess, and part of her role, not all of her role, but part of her role is tending to her deceased spouse and ensuring that he is perpetually regenerated, so it just doesn't enter into Egyptian mythology to even talk about the burial of this goddess who is conceived of as eternal.

Louise Bertini:

And the last question, "Is the prominence of Nubian maternal kinship related to the cattle-milk culture?"

Solange Ashby:

Yes, but maybe vice versa. I think that first and foremost that this was a value of the people of the Middle Nile Valley, and I should say over much of Africa that the role of the mother and her ability to bring forth life and to continue the life of the population was revered, and she's seen as central to society, so that came first in Nubian culture, and then perhaps by comparison, the role of the cow and how she could not only maintain her calf and her young but also provided milk for the entire population of cattle herders that that became then associated to the ability of women to bring forth life, to give life in that same way that the Nubian epithet for Isis recalls her as the one who gives life.

Louise Bertini:

Great. Well, thank you so much for your presentation and for answering all those questions, and lastly, I want to thank all of you for joining us today, and we very much hope to see you at our next open lecture on September 13th. So have a good evening, everybody. Thank you.

Solange Ashby:

Thank you all.

Louise Bertini:

Bye.