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Antonio Beato,
Colonnade of the Temple of Isis at Philae, ca. 1870-1880

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ANTONIO BEATO

(ca. 1825 – 1906)

COLONNADE OF THE TEMPLE OF ISIS AT PHILAE, CA. 1870-1880

Signed in negative: 'A. Beato.';
Numbered and titled in French in pencil in the reverse.

Albumen print
25.5 x 36 cm; (10 x 14 1/2 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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Antonio Beato's *Colonnade of the Temple of Isis at Philae* belongs to the important body of nineteenth-century photographic views through which the monuments of ancient Egypt were transformed into accessible objects of study, documentation and visual memory. Executed in the 1870s or 1880s, the photograph records the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae in its original setting, decades before the entire complex was dismantled and reconstructed on the neighbouring island of Agilkia. The image therefore possesses an historical significance extending beyond its considerable aesthetic and documentary qualities: it preserves a view of a monument and landscape that no longer exists in precisely this form.

The Temple of Isis formed the principal sanctuary of the sacred complex at Philae, situated near the First Cataract of the Nile. Construction of the temple in its principal Ptolemaic form began in the fourth century B.C., between approximately 380 and 362 B.C., and the sanctuary continued to be embellished over subsequent centuries. Dedicated to Isis, one of the most important goddesses of the ancient Egyptian pantheon, Philae retained its religious importance well into the Greco-Roman period. Its architecture consequently embodied the remarkable continuity of Egyptian religious traditions under foreign rule.

Beato's composition concentrates upon the architectural rhythm of the colonnade, whose successive columns recede into space with an almost measured regularity. The monumental stone surfaces are rendered with considerable clarity, while the low viewpoint allows the columns to rise dramatically against the surrounding landscape. Rather than overwhelming the architecture with picturesque incident, Beato allows the ancient structure itself to dominate the image. The photograph consequently occupies a productive position between archaeological record and aesthetic composition: architectural detail is carefully observed, yet the ordered recession of the colonnade gives the image a strong formal elegance.

The photograph is also significant for what it records of Philae before the modern transformation of the site. Beato's series of views of the island documents the temple complex, its pylons, colonnades, kiosks and surrounding Nile landscape at a moment when these monuments remained embedded within their original topographical context. Comparable Beato photographs of Philae survive in institutional collections, including the Museo Egizio in Turin, where his images are dated broadly to 1870–1888 and demonstrate his sustained interest in the site.

The medium itself is integral to the photograph's character. The albumen process, introduced during the nineteenth-century expansion of photographic practice, enabled Beato to produce finely detailed positive prints from glass negatives, particularly well suited to the recording of monumental architecture. The warm tonal range and delicate differentiation between illuminated stone, shadowed recesses and distant landscape lend the image an atmospheric quality while retaining the descriptive precision demanded by archaeological photography.

Beato, who spent the greater part of his professional life in Egypt, became one of the most prolific photographers of the country. His practice combined the demands of the expanding nineteenth-century market for views of Egypt with a sustained

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engagement with its archaeological monuments. His photographs were consequently circulated not merely as souvenirs, but as visual records through which European and international audiences encountered the ancient landscape.

The historical fate of Philae lends this particular photograph an additional poignancy. Following construction and subsequent raising of the Aswan Dam, the island became increasingly subject to inundation. In the twentieth century, UNESCO's international campaign to rescue the monuments resulted in the dismantling and relocation of the temple complex to Agilkia Island, where it was reconstructed above the rising waters of Lake Nasser. Beato's photograph thus preserves an irrecoverable topographical reality: the Temple of Isis standing upon Philae itself, before the landscape that had framed its existence for more than two millennia was permanently altered.

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