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Antonio Beato,
Colonnade of the Temple of Edfu, ca. 1870-1880

A Beato

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ANTONIO BEATO

(ca. 1825 – 1906)

COLONNADE OF THE TEMPLE OF EDFU, CA. 1870-1880

Signed in negative: 'A. Beato.';

Titled in French and numbered on reverse in pencil.

Albumen print

25 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 Edfu* belongs to the mature period of nineteenth-century archaeological photography in Egypt, when the camera had begun to assume a decisive role in recording and disseminating the country's ancient monuments. Executed in albumen, the prevailing photographic process for high-quality architectural imagery of the period, the photograph combines documentary precision with an acute sensitivity to scale, spatial recession and the dramatic visual character of pharaonic architecture. By placing two Egyptian figures within the western colonnade, Beato transforms what might otherwise have been a purely architectural record into a carefully calibrated image of monumental space and human presence.

The Temple of Edfu, ancient *Iunet* and later known to the Greeks as Apollonopolis Magna, was dedicated principally to Horus, the falcon-headed god of kingship. Construction of the surviving temple commenced under Ptolemy III Euergetes I in 237 B.C. and continued over successive reigns until its completion under Ptolemy XII Auletes in the first century B.C. It is consequently among the most complete surviving monuments of Ptolemaic Egypt. The temple's exceptional preservation was largely the result of its progressive burial beneath accumulated desert sand and Nile silt, which protected substantial portions of the architecture from later interference. The Metropolitan Museum of Art similarly identifies Edfu as the best-preserved of the Egyptian temples and records that it remained buried until its clearance in the nineteenth century.

Beato photographs the western side of the colonnade from the courtyard before the hypostyle hall, directing the camera along a sequence of monumental columns whose rhythm establishes a powerful recession into space. The architectural order dominates the image, yet the inclusion of two Egyptians provides an essential human scale. Their smallness in relation to the colossal masonry is not incidental: it makes immediately apparent the extraordinary dimensions of the temple and creates a visual contrast between the transitory human presence and the enduring architecture of antiquity. This device was common within nineteenth-century archaeological photography, where inhabitants, attendants or travellers could function simultaneously as documentary subjects and compositional instruments.

The photograph is particularly significant because Beato worked during a period in which many of Egypt's major monuments were being systematically cleared, studied and increasingly incorporated into the European imagination. The French archaeologist Auguste Mariette began the clearance of Edfu in the late 1850s, and by the time Beato produced this photograph the temple had become accessible to travellers and scholars. The transformation from a monument largely concealed beneath centuries of accumulated material into an extraordinary architectural survival was itself part of the nineteenth-century archaeological encounter with Egypt. Earlier photographers had already attempted to record Edfu: Gustave Le Gray photographed the great court in 1867, while Félix Teynard recorded a general view of the temple in the early 1850s. Beato's later image consequently belongs to an evolving photographic record of the monument, documenting it at a moment when

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archaeological clearance had revealed its architecture but before modern tourism fundamentally altered its surroundings.

The technical medium is equally important. Albumen printing, introduced in the 1850s, became particularly well suited to architectural photography because it produced finely detailed images with a broad tonal range and a characteristically luminous surface. Beato's Egyptian photographs were made from glass negatives, a process capable of recording considerably finer detail than the earlier paper-negative techniques employed by pioneering photographers such as Du Camp and Le Gray. His surviving body of work demonstrates a consistent interest in the precision of architectural description. The Metropolitan Museum records numerous Beato views from the 1870s, including photographs of Dendera, Luxor, Medinet Habu and Saqqara, all executed as albumen silver prints from glass negatives.

Beato himself occupies a distinctive position within the history of photography in Egypt. Born in Corfu, he spent the greater part of his professional career in Egypt, unlike his brother Felice Beato, whose career was characterised by extensive travel across Asia and the Middle East. Antonio established himself at Luxor and became one of the most prolific photographers working in Egypt during the second half of the nineteenth century. His sustained presence allowed him to build an extensive visual archive of the country's monuments, particularly those along the Nile, which was increasingly marketed to European travellers as part of the expanding culture of photographic tourism.

The present photograph bears Beato's signature directly in the negative, 'A. Beato', while the French title and numerical designation written in pencil on the reverse indicate its participation in a systematic commercial series. Such numbering reflects the transformation of individual archaeological views into reproducible commodities: photographs could be purchased separately, assembled into albums or acquired as souvenirs by travellers visiting Egypt. Yet the best of Beato's work transcends this commercial function. His photographs possess an authority derived from their close observation of the monuments, while their carefully controlled compositions reveal a sophisticated understanding of pictorial structure.

In *Colonnade of the Temple of Edfu*, Beato thus brings together several strands of nineteenth-century Egyptian photography: archaeological documentation, the developing culture of tourism, the visual fascination with pharaonic antiquity and the technical possibilities of the glass negative and albumen print. The two Egyptians standing within the vast Ptolemaic colonnade provide the photograph's essential measure of scale, while the temple itself emerges as both archaeological evidence and an overwhelming architectural presence. The result is a particularly eloquent document of Edfu at a formative moment in the modern visual history of ancient Egypt.

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