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Jochen Hallof

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Esna is located on the west bank of the Nile, 64 kilometers south of Luxor. The site was an important cultural center in the Ptolemaic Period, although archaeological evidence dates from as early as the Middle Kingdom. The Temple of Esna was the last Egyptian temple to be decorated with hieroglyphic texts. It was erected in the Ptolemaic Period and enlarged with a hypostyle hall, decorated mainly in Roman times. The temple was dedicated to an androgynous, nameless, omnipotent creator god, which manifested itself as both the male god Khnum/Khnum-Ra and the female deity Neith. Nothing more than the hypostyle hall has survived from the temple. Its walls are decorated with some unique ritual scenes, such as the dance of the pharaoh before the gods, and the catching of fishes and birds with a clap net. The temple's columns, decorated mainly with inscriptions, display the only temple ritual known from ancient Egypt that is preserved in its entirety. The inscriptions are written in Middle Egyptian with some Demotic influence. To broaden the range of meanings of the hieroglyphs, the priestly scholars made liberal use of the acrophonic writing principle. The site of Esna was surrounded by minor temples and sanctuaries, of which only Esna North and Contra Latopolis have survived.

تقع اسنا علي الضفة الغربية للنيل، ٦٤ كم جنوب الاقصر .وكانت تمثل مركز حضاري هام في العصر البطلمي، وهناك دلائل اثرية تدل علي ان الموقع يعود تأريخة الي بداية الدولة الوسطي .يعتبر معبد إسنا هو آخر المعابد المصرية التي زخرفت بالنصوص الهيروغليفية، ولقد شيد المعبد فى العصر البطلمي وتم توسعته بإضافة صالة الأعمدة الكبرى والتي زخرفت بشكل رئيسي خلال العصر الروماني، ولقد كُرِس المعبد لإله مخنث بدون اسم خالق قدير، والذى تجلى فى كل من خنوم وخنوم رع، والإلهة الأنثى نيت، ولم يتبقى من المعبد سوى صالة الإعمدة، والتى زخرفت جدرانها ببعض المناظر لطقوس فريدة من نوعها مثل رقصة الفرعون أمام الآلهة وصيد الأسماك والطيور بالشباك، أما أعمدة المعبد فقد زخرفت بالنقوش، ويعتبر المعبد الوحيد المعروف من مصر القديمة الذى يحتوي علي صورة كاملة للشعائر والطقوس الخاصة بالمعابد. وقد كتبت النقوش باللغة المصرية القديمة (المرحلة الوسطي) المتأثرة بالديموطيقية، ولتوسيع نطاق معانى الكتابة الهيروغليفية استخدم الكهنة مبدا الكتابة الأكروفونية (الصوتية)، كما كان معبد اسنا محاطاً بالمعابد الصغيرة والمقاصير والتى لم يتبقى منها سوى إسنا الشمالية وكونترا لاتوبوليس فقط.

Esna is situated on the west bank of the Nile, 64 kilometers south of Luxor. We have little information on the early history of the town, as it lies buried

under the modern town, but we do know that anciently the site was called *Jwnyt*  (Montet 1961: 47). The name was etiologically explained as the "Heliopolis (*Jwnw*)" of the Esna deities (Esna 60,1; Sternberg 1985: 70, notes a and d). An alternative name of the site was *Tɜ-Snt/Tɜ-Snj* , etiologically explained as "the seat of Neith" (*Tɜ st Nt* = *Tɜ-Snt*) (Esna 60,2; 81,1-2; 104,9; Sternberg 1985: 88, note a), which occurred simultaneously with *Jwnyt*, or possibly earlier (Montet 1961: 47), and from which the modern name of the town is derived. Anciently, the region around the town was named *Jɜt Ṯɜwj*, "Mound of the Two Birds," *ṯɜwj* referring to the deities Shu and Tefnut (Esna 80,4; Sternberg 1985: 84, note r).

In Ptolemaic and Roman sources, Esna is designated as Λατων πολις or Λατοπολις (Latopolis), "town of the *Lates* fish." The *Lates* fish (*Lates niloticus*, or Nile perch; Egyptian *ʿḥɜ*, "fighter") enjoyed a special adoration in and around Esna in Ptolemaic and Roman times, because it was associated with the goddess Neith. Indeed the cosmogony of Esna reports that during the creation of the world Neith changed her figure into that of a *Lates* fish (Esna 206,1; cf. *Esna I*: 27; Gamer-Wallert 1970: 39; 88 - 89). The importance of Esna as a cultural center in the Ptolemaic Period was crowned by the erection of a large temple, of which only the hypostyle hall is preserved. The significance of the town endured even into Christian times, as is testified by the existence of two churches and about fifteen monasteries in and around Esna (*Esna I*: 31 - 38).

History of the Site

The history of the site of Esna prior to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods remains more or less in darkness (*Esna I*: 14 - 17; Sauneron 1977: column 30). Archaeological evidence earlier than the Middle Kingdom is unknown. Tombs from Dynasty 12 onward were found by John Garstang during his excavation of the necropolis some four kilometers northwest of the town (Garstang 1907: 141 - 148). From



Figure 1. Part of the festival calendar (Esna 55), with mention of a stela of Thutmoses III, indicating cultural activities at Esna during that pharaoh's reign.

the town itself, the earliest datable object dates from the New Kingdom. During the cleaning of the temple, Serge Sauneron found a block featuring a cartouche of Amenhotep II (Sauneron 1952a: 36, fig. 2). This block is currently the most ancient historical document we have from Esna. (Compare *Esna I*: 18, note 3, which states that in the temple Labib Habachi found a block bearing the name of Senusret I. This block, however, is unpublished and thus does not allow verifiable dating.) Other, indirect, evidence can be gained from the temple's texts. The well-known festival calendar (Esna 55,4) prescribes that, at the end of the festivity occurring on the 29th day of the second month of the inundation season, offerings should be given to the goddess Nebetu "according to that which is written on the stela of Thutmoses III (fig. 1)." This indicates that a temple and a cult had existed in Esna at or since the time of Thutmoses III (*Esna I*: 19).

From the inscriptions in the extant temple, cartouches of Ptolemy VI (180 – 145 BCE) and of the Roman emperors Claudius (41 – 54), Nero (54 – 68), Vespasian (69 – 79), Titus (79 – 81), Domitian (81 – 96), Nerva (96 – 98), Trajan (98 – 117), Hadrian (117 – 138), Antoninus Pius (138 – 161), Marcus Aurelius (161 – 180), Commodus (180 – 192), Septimius Severus (193 – 211), Caracalla (198 – 217), Geta (209 – 212), Alexander Severus (222 – 235), Philippus Arabs (244 – 249) and

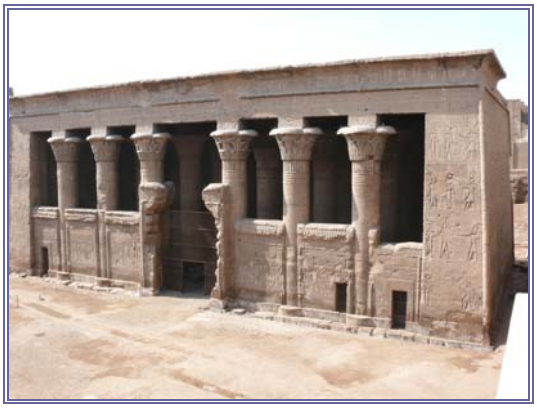


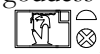
Figure 2. View of the front entrance of the Temple of Esna.



Figure 3. View of rear wall of the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Esna. The Ptolemaic temple lies under the refuse at left.

Decius Trajanus (249 – 251) testify that Esna was an important cultural place in the time of these rulers—a place that profited from their favor and that of their representatives, respectively. These cartouches are the only known hieroglyphic references to most of these rulers in Egypt (Grenier 1989; Hallof 2010), the cartouche of Decius (Esna 495; Sauneron 1952b: 119) providing the last testimony for Esna in pagan times.

The Temple of Esna

The Temple of Esna was named ***Ḥwt-Bꜣw*** , "Temple of the Souls," or ***Ḥwt-Jt*** , "Temple of the Father" (i.e., the god Khnum), or ***Ḥwt-Mwt*** , "Temple of the Mother" (i.e., the goddess Neith), or more directly, ***Ḥwt-Ḫnmw*** , "Temple of Khnum," and ***Ḥwt-Nt*** , "Temple of Neith," respectively (Montet 1961: 47). Of the temple itself, only the hypostyle hall is preserved (figs. 2 and 3). However, inscriptions there mention other structures that must have stood near the temple: a mammisi (birth house), ***pr-ms*** (e.g., Esna 77,11; Daumas 1958: 60); a kiosk, ***ḏꜣḏꜣt*** (e.g., Esna 55,6), or ***zḥ*** (e.g., Esna 77,10), or ***hꜣyt*** (e.g., Esna 284,3), respectively (cf. *Esna II*: XLVIII); and the ***wꜥbt*** (*wabet*, a place where all things necessary for carrying out cultic practices, including embalming, were prepared; e.g., Esna 55,6). Some blocks are the only remains of these adjacent buildings (*Esna I*: 146 - 147).

Construction History of the Temple

The existing temple of Esna was built during the reign of Ptolemy V (205 – 180 BCE) (Arnold 1999: 180 - 181) and decorated by his successor, Ptolemy VI (180 – 145 BCE), during that ruler's coregency with Ptolemy VIII and Cleopatra II (170 – 163 BCE). The cartouches of the three associated rulers can be found in the dedication inscription Esna 3, directly under the cornice of the Ptolemaic façade (Minas 2000: 23 - 24). During Ptolemy VI's reign the whole temple seems to have been decorated in relief or in (painted) line drawing (for an interpretation of the Ptolemaic façade, see Derchain and Recklinghausen 2004). A testimony to his comprehensive decoration activity can be found on the exterior of the rear wall of the Ptolemaic façade, where red traces can be



Figure 4. Traces of red paint on the rear wall of the Temple of Esna showing an offering scene dating to Ptolemy VI (180 – 145 BCE) (Esna 643).



Figure 5. Column capital with floral motif, from the pronaos of the Temple of Esna. In the background is the astronomical ceiling.

recognized on the smoothed sandstone blocks. These traces form the outlines of an offering scene (Esna 643), dated to his reign (fig. 4).

The temple was enlarged in Roman times by an immense hypostyle hall. This impressive hall was erected in the reign of emperor Claudius (41 – 54 CE), or perhaps as early as the reign of Tiberius (14 – 37) (see Arnold 1999: 251; Grenier 1988: 57 - 59). Its decoration was executed from the reign of Claudius (Esna 70) until the reign of Decius Trajanus (Esna 495), who ruled from September/October 249 to June 251. The decoration of the hypostyle hall follows a homogenous plan that was never modified (*Esna II*: XLI, note 1) or, according to an alternative opinion, was only changed during, or after, the reign of Antoninus Pius (Derchain-Urtel 1991). Therefore the scenes of the temple foundation ritual (Esna 71, 113, 136, 162, 183, 497, 499, 529, 530), which were decorated under four different rulers (Vespasian, Domitian, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla), offer no evidence for the history of the temple's construction (*Esna II*: XLI).

Hypostyle Hall

The hypostyle hall of the Temple of Esna, at 37 meters long, 20 meters wide, and 15 meters high, is not as monumental as most other ancient Egyptian hypostyle halls—for example, those in the temples of Edfu, Dendara, Kom Ombo, and Karnak. The richness of representations and especially the unique texts on the 18 columns, however, make this hall one of the most interesting of the Ptolemaic and Roman examples in Egypt. The columns, unlike those of contemporaneous temples, are decorated mainly with texts rather than representations. Indeed, one text, a hymn (Esna 162, 5 – 9), is dedicated to the columns themselves, indicating that the columns were considered deities (*Esna I*: 66). Such eulogistic praise is also given to the capitals of the columns in an inscription located on one of the half-columns of the façade (Esna 169). The columns' capitals constitute an impressive architectural element of the hypostyle hall (*Esna I*: folding plate following p. 173). A basic element of the capitals is their floral motif, yet not one of the 24 capitals of the 18 columns and 6 half-columns is identical to any of the others. The ceiling itself is decorated with representations of the star vault and the zodiac (fig. 5). Embedded in a religious context, the representations of the planets and constellations have only marginal links to the astronomical reality at the time the ceiling was decorated (von Lieven 2000; Hallof 2002).

The entrance to the hypostyle hall was not designed as a pylon; indeed a pylon was never planned for the temple of Esna. Rather, the northern and southern exterior walls of the hypostyle hall are engraved with two enormous ritual scenes (Esna 570 and 619),



Figure 6. Representation of Khnum/Khnum-Ra, the creator god and "Lord of Esna."

fulfilling the function of the traditional pylon engravings. At the front of the hypostyle hall is a small room that was used as a magazine for the storage of the cultic objects of the temple (*dbḥw nw ḥwt-nṯr*), as depicted in scene Esna 120.

Temple Deities

The deity most represented at the Temple of Esna is the ram-headed Khnum, also called Khnum-Ra (fig. 6), both names of the god being frequently referenced in the temple texts. He bears the epithet *Nb Tꜣ-Snt*, "Lord of Esna," and is normally regarded as the temple's principal god—a designation that risks over-simplification. Khnum's partner-deity was the goddess Neith. She too is represented at the temple, where she bears the parallel epithet, *Nbt Tꜣ-Snt*, "Lady of Esna" (for example, Esna 14,8; 62,5 - 6; 136,13; 481,5; 513,9). Neith should thus also be regarded as a principal god of the temple. In fact, both deities are representations of one androgynous, nameless, omnipotent creator god, who is the true god of the Temple of Esna. Interestingly, the androgynous nature of this god was apparently not an inexhaustible source of theological speculation for the priests of Esna. Like a coin, only one side of which can be regarded at a time, the androgynous creator god is either represented as male (the god Khnum) or as female (the goddess Neith). Moreover, not only is the sex differentiated, but also the behavior of the two representations of the androgynous creator god. While Khnum, with his own hands, forms all beings and objects materially on the potter's wheel, Neith creates all beings cognitively, by thinking, and spelling, their names. Furthermore, there is a physical separation of the two deities in regard to their depictions on the temple walls. Khnum is depicted mainly in the southern half of the temple, in accordance with the location of his main cult center at Elephantine, and Neith is depicted mainly in the temple's northern half, in accordance with her main cult center at Sais.

Khnum is represented about twice as many times as Neith on the walls and columns of the Temple of Esna. Surprisingly, these statistics correspond with a statement about Neith (Esna 252,25 and elsewhere; cf. Hallof 2007: 130), who is characterized as follows: "You [i.e., Neith] are Tenen. Two parts [of you] are male and one part is female." This confirms that the Temple of Esna was dedicated to one omnipotent creator god. It shows further, that the decoration of the walls and columns follows a very subtle theological design, observed by the priests even at the chiseling of the last scene, about 200 years after the start of the construction work at the hypostyle hall.

It was part of the theological concept that both principal gods of the temple have a family (Sternberg 1985: 36 - 49), as we see in depictions on the temple walls. Therefore Khnum was married to the goddess Nebetu. Their offspring was the child deity Heka. Unfortunately Nebetu was headstrong and hot-tempered. When angry, she took on both the features and characteristics of the lion-headed goddess Menhyt, who could only be pacified by means of such gory items as streams of blood, roasted limbs of enemies, speared animals, and so on. The unmarried Neith had two children, the crocodile-headed god Shemanefer/Shemanefer-Sobek and the demon-god Tutu (Titheos) (Kaper 2003), both of whom had ambivalent natures: they could cause misfortune but also prevent misfortune.

The pantheon of gods of the Temple of Esna is a complicated one that has not

heretofore been adequately explained. The ram-headed Khnum in fact comprises many gods who all bear the same features but are differentiated by their function—a differentiation made manifest in their distinct epithets. Khnum/Khnum-Ra, "Lord of Esna" (*Nb Tȝ-Snt*), whose image rests in the temple's sanctuary, is the most important, he being the male manifestation of the creator god. As such he bears such additional epithets as "the earliest primordeal god" (*pȝwtj tpj*); "who creates all beings" (*jrj jḫwt nbwt*); "who creates the gods and forms human beings" (*jrj nṯrw nḫp rmṯw*); "who exists at the beginning" (*ḫpr m ḥȝt*); and "Lord of Life" (*Nb ʿnḫ*). From him, another Khnum/Khnum-Ra, bearing the epithet "Lord of the Field" (*Nb Sḫt*), must be distinguished. The temple of this god, now destroyed, was situated in the middle of a field north of Esna (hence the deity's name). This manifestation of Khnum is not a creator god, but rather acts as a god "who keeps creation alive" (*sʿnḫ ḫprww*), "who measures the fields" (*ḥsb ȝḫwt*), "who causes the vegetation to germinate" (*srd smw*), and "who enlightens Egypt with his rays" (*sḥḏ tȝwj m stwt.f*)—that is, he guarantees the continuation of creation.

There are yet more Khnum/Khnum-Ra manifestations—for example, "Khnum, the good protector" (*pȝ nḫw nfr*, Esna 479) and "Khnum, who is in his Great Place" (*ḥrj st-wrt.f*, Esna 508)—who play a secondary role in the pantheon of the Temple of Esna. All together, the manifestations of Khnum, Lord of Esna, form his ennead, who accompany him as his entourage at his processions (a list of all deities represented at Esna can be found in Hallof 2007: 121).

Remarkable Scenes

Depicted on the walls of the Temple of Esna are 243 offering scenes, in which the Ptolemies and the Roman emperors supplicate the favor of the Esna deities. Some of the scenes are quite singular and worthy of special note. In Esna 520, Emperor Trajan is dancing before Menhyt (fig. 7). Dancing pharaohs are very rarely depicted. Except for two scenes in the Temple of Esna (Esna 382 and the aforementioned 520), only three representations of a dancing pharaoh are known from temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (from the temple of Isis at Dendara: Cauville 2007: pls. 106 – 107; from the temple of Horus at Edfu: *Edfu V*: 373 – 374, pl. 141). In all of these scenes the pharaoh must accomplish a difficult mission: to pacify angry goddesses.



Figure 7. The Roman emperor Trajan (98 – 117 CE) dancing before goddess manifestations Menhyt and Nebetu (Esna 520).

A further remarkable scene (Esna 531) shows Emperor Commodus together with the gods Horus and Thoth catching fishes and birds with a clap net (fig. 8). By their pulling the rope, the two parts of the clap net appear to fold together, trapping the fishes and birds within. This action, similar to the clap net scenes found in tombs but seldom depicted on temple walls (not more than five representations are known; Alliot 1946), serves the purpose of symbolically exterminating enemies, since the (wild) fishes and birds were regarded as dangerous and hostile. Their capture symbolizes the destruction of the enemies of the gods.

Opposite Esna 531 is a large scene, Esna 496, which is very interesting from a historical point of view. The Roman emperor Septimius Severus receives the sign of life (*ankh*) from Khnum-Ra, the Lord of Esna. Behind the emperor his wife, Julia Domna, and their children, Geta and Caracalla, are depicted. After Geta's assassination, ordered by Caracalla in 212 CE, the name of Geta was erased and replaced by that of Caracalla. It



Figure 8. The Roman emperor Commodus (180 – 192 CE) catching fishes and birds with clap net (Esna 531).



Figure 9. Unusual correction of content of offering scene from reign of Roman emperor Commodus: the potter's wheel, originally depicted, was replaced by hieroglyphs for "life, duration, and dominion" (Esna 585).



Figure 10. The Roman emperor Domitian (81 – 96 CE) smites enemies before Khnum-Ra, "Lord of Esna" (Esna 570). This type of scene is normally depicted on the front of a pylon; however, no pylon was constructed at the Temple of Esna.

seems that, following this murder, Caracalla had serious difficulty with his legitimation in Egypt. The large number of offering scenes finished during his reign on the temple walls support the assumption that Caracalla wanted to bribe his way toward legitimation through generous donations to the priesthood.

Concerning the history of the temple's decoration two other scenes are remarkable: Esna 585 and 643. Esna 585 shows an unusual correction of the depiction of the king's donation to Khnum-Ra, Lord of Esna (fig. 9). Originally the pharaoh presented a potter's wheel to Khnum. For uncertain reasons, the donation was changed into the hieroglyphic symbols for *ꜥnḫ ḏd wꜣs* (*ankh, djed, was*), "life, duration, and dominion." Esna 643 is preserved in red outline on the rear wall of the hypostyle hall. Dated to Ptolemy VI, this scene demonstrates that the temple was decorated with paintings and therefore already fully functioning shortly after its erection (see fig. 4 and *Construction History of the Temple*).

Finally, the two monumental scenes on the temple's outer walls are worthy of mention (Esna 570 and 619). Both show the same motif: the pharaoh smiting his enemies in the presence of Khnum-Ra, Lord of Esna. Normally such monumental scenes are depicted on the front of a pylon, but a pylon was never planned and executed at Esna. Because scenes of this kind were absolutely essential for every Egyptian temple, an intelligent solution was found for the Temple of Esna: the scenes were depicted on the exterior of the temple's north and south walls (fig. 10).

Rituals

No Egyptian temple reports as extensively on the performance of rituals as the Temple of Esna. Especially devoted to this subject are the inscriptions on the temple's columns. Fourteen of the eighteen columns are decorated with the text of one ritual, celebrated on the first day of the third month of the winter season (i.e., February 25th). It consisted of the ceremonies of two intertwined festivals, the "festival of the installation of the potter's wheel" (*ḥb smn nḫp*) (fig. 11) and "the festival of raising the heaven" (*ḥb twꜣ pt*) (*Esna V*: 71 - 244), and is the only temple ritual from ancient Egypt known to us *in extenso,* with the complete sequence of events, hymns, litanies, recitations, and offerings. The priestly scholars of Esna have chiseled the texts of the ritual into the stone of the columns in such a way that, at the end of every column's text, instructions guide the reader to the next column (for example, *mꜣꜣ r pꜣ ḫꜣḫ n rsj jꜣbj*, "look at the southeastern column," Esna 234,28), where the text continues (an overview of the distribution of the texts among the columns is provided in *Esna I*: the plate following p. 138; and in *Esna VIII*: 7 – 10). The ritual lasted a whole day. The most interesting, and mysterious, component, the "festival of the installation of the potter's wheel," took place late in the evening, when the women of Esna would carry into the sanctuary an actual potter's wheel as a gift for Khnum/Khnum-Ra. No male priest was allowed to be present during the ceremony. Placing the wheel before the god's statue—present but hidden within a portable shrine—the women sang their litany (Esna 320,21 - 23; 321,23 - 24). The creator god, pleased by their litany, would commence work on the wheel, indefatigably molding countless human beings, animals, plants and objects—indeed, all of creation. It was the god's creative energy that the women hoped would be transferred to their own wombs. We know many fertility rituals from ancient Egypt. This ritual from Esna is certainly one of the most interesting expressions of the wish for children.



Figure 11. Depiction of a potter's wheel. The potter's wheel was the object of primary focus in the "festival of the installation of the potters wheel," celebrated on February 25th at the Temple of Esna.

Other rituals, whose content is only partially recorded on the columns of the Temple of Esna, are the festivities on the first to sixth day of the fourth month of the inundation season (*Esna V*: 47 - 67); the festivity of the visit of the goddess Neith on the thirteenth day of the third month of the summer season (*Esna V*: 245 - 308); and the festivity of the victory of Khnum-Ra on the nineteenth and twentieth day of the third month of the summer season (*Esna V*: 309 - 378). In the text of the visit of the goddess Neith a narration is interspersed, which describes the creation of the world by this goddess by means of seven powerful spells (Esna 206; *Esna V*: 253 - 276).

Inscriptions

The inscriptions at the Temple of Esna are written in Middle Egyptian, a language that had passed out of use some 1500 years prior to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, but was regarded as classical by the Egyptians themselves and used especially for the decoration of temples. Only occasionally can traces of the much more recent Demotic grammar be found in the mass of texts in the temple (Quack 1995). The orthography of the words, however, does not follow the rules of Middle Egyptian. A new system had been developed that allowed the priestly scholars to compose in much more manifold ways than in classical times, by adding new phonetical



Figure 12. New hieroglyphic signs, created by the priests of Esna.



Figure 13. Example of innovative hieroglyphs at the Temple of Esna: an inscription composed primarily of crocodiles (Esna 126).

values to hieroglyphs and by creating new signs (fig. 12; Kurth 2007: 31 - 100). Highlighted in this respect are the hymns to Khnum-Ra and Neith (Esna 103 and 126), composed almost exclusively of ram and crocodile signs (fig. 13; Leitz 2001; cf. Hallof 2007: 129).

Moreover, especially for the writing of the names of the main deities of Esna, a method of acrophonic writing was developed (see *Esna VIII*: passim). This method worked on the principle that every consonant of the name of a god was written with a biliteral-, triliteral-, or word-sign, rather than an alphabetic sign representing a single letter. Thus, the hieroglyphs used in writing the names of the deities formed not only the name itself, but an underlying sentence, which served to enhance the might of the god. For example, in Esna 225,25, §77, the name of Khnum is written , *ḥ*(*prw*) + *n*(*ṯr*) + *m*(*rj*) = *Ḫnmw* (by this late stage of the language, the letters *ḥ* and *ḫ* had become interchangeable, rendering the spelling of the god's name as either *Ḫnmw* or *Ḫnmw*). The three word signs, however, can be secondarily read as "The beloved (*mrj*) divine (*nṯrj*) being (*ḫprw*)" and form an impressive epithet of the creator god Khnum. Such litanies with acrophonic plays on words of the names of the deities were composed for Khnum (Esna 225 and 232), Menhyt (Esna 233), Nebetu (Esna 234 and 241), Heka (Esna 242 and 323), Neith (Esna 216), Osiris (Esna 217 and 208), and Isis (Esna 209). They were recited in the presence of the statues of the deities, as stated in the festivity calendar (Esna 55 and 77).

The priestly scholars who composed the hieroglyphic inscriptions at the Temple of Esna created a special inventory of signs for their texts. Some hundred hieroglyphs are restricted to the Temple of Esna; they were not found in contemporary hieroglyphic inscriptions outside Esna (*Esna II*: XXIII - XXXVI). Pecularities can, moreover, be observed in the use of the other hieroglyphs that are not restricted to Esna, some of which—for uncertain reasons—were preferred, and others not (Hallof 1994). The quality of the arrangement of the hieroglyhs in the lines and columns, however, deteriorates at Esna during the Roman Period. Some of the latest inscriptions are very difficult to read, because the sequence in which the signs are to be read is not clear (fig. 14; Esna 499 and 571).



Figure 14. Overcrowded arrangement of hieroglyphs in an inscription executed in Roman times at the Temple of Esna (Esna 571).

Discovery

How long the cult of the Temple of Esna endured cannot be stated with certainty. It seems, however, unlikely that the temple was destroyed in the course of the introduction of Christianity, because the damage to the reliefs and inscriptions of the remaining hypostyle hall is, in fact, not very striking. This speaks for the contrary assumption that the main temple was not destroyed, but rather collapsed due to natural causes and was, in time, overbuilt with the village settlement of Esna. (It is to be emphasized that information on the ancient town is absent, due to its location beneath the modern town of Esna.)

When in 1589 an unknown Venetian trader visited Esna and wrote the first modern description of the temple, he found nothing more than a visitor does today: the hypostyle hall (Voyages 1971: 107, 139, 153). It is only by pure chance that the hypostyle hall still exists. During the reign of Mohamed Ali (1805 – 1849), when many magnificent ancient buildings were destroyed for use of their stone as building materials, the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Esna was used as a magazine for cotton storage. This function prevented the building's destruction.

The first scientific investigation was executed by the members of the Napoleonic expedition (1799 to 1801), who were especially interested in the ceiling of the hypostyle hall, hoping to date the building by means of the astronomical representations there. They did not succeed. It was Jean-François Champollion (1790 – 1832) who (correctly) assigned the building to the Roman Period. In the course of the following century, most of the cartouches of the Roman emperors, but only some of the inscriptions, were published by scholars such as Lepsius, Brugsch, and Mariette. The publication of both the inscriptions and decoration of the entire temple was accomplished by the eminent French scholar Serge Sauneron. Unfortunately, due to his death in 1976, the publication was left unfinished.

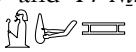
Other Shrines in Esna

The inscriptions at the Temple of Esna provide circumstantial evidence for the existence of other buildings and holy places in the vicinity of Esna that played an important role in the temple's ceremonies, as listed in the festival calendar (Esna 55 and 77; Montet 1961: 48 - 49). According to the inscriptions, north of Esna, not far from the main temple, lay a sanctuary designated , ***Pr-Sꜣḥw-Rᶜ*** (Esna 530,8). Since the element "Sahura" is not written in a cartouche, it is not likely that the name alludes to a sanctuary from the Old Kingdom; we can therefore infer that it was in Ptolemaic and Roman times that there stood in this location a little sanctuary where processions could rest (*Esna I*: 17, 28).

Further north lay , ***Pr-Nṯr***. This was the sanctuary of the seven personified creation utterances of Neith (***Dꜣjsw***), who were buried there to prevent any further efficacy of these powerful beings (Esna 196,2). What are likely traces of the site are preserved near the modern Kom Senun (*Esna V*: 316, note 1).

Still further north lay , ***Pr-Ḥnmw-n-Sḫt***, the main sanctuary of Khnum-Ra, Lord of the Field (***Nb Sḫt***). Early travelers visited the temple in its state of nearly complete preservation. Today nothing remains of the structure, which was situated about five kilometers north of Esna, near

Kom el-Deir (Esna 196,1; *Esna V*: 316, note 1).

Between ***Pr-Ḫnmw-n-Sḫt*** and ***Pr-Nṯr*** a holy lake was located, called  ***Zꜣw-Ḫnn*** (Esna 196,3). Here a battle took place between the followers of Ra and rebellious mankind during the festivity of the victory of Khnum-Ra on the nineteenth and twentieth days of the third month of the summer season.

The inscriptions also name a burial place for deities (***Ḥtptjw***) called  ***St-Ḥrjt*** (Esna 129; *Esna I*: 28 - 29), west of Esna.

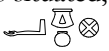
Finally, on the east bank, opposite Esna itself, a small temple was situated, dedicated to Hathor, Lady of Agny  (Esna 55,5). Agny was known in Ptolemaic and Roman times as Contra Latopolis, modern el-Hella. Early travelers visited and described this building, which was destroyed in 1828, just before the arrival of the French-Tuscan expedition under the leadership of Jean-François Champollion (*Esna I*: 29 - 31).

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Image Credits

Figure 1. Part of the festival calendar (Esna 55), with mention of a stela of Thutmoses III, indicating cultural activities at Esna during that pharaoh's reign. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. View of the front entrance of the Temple of Esna. Photograph by Jutta Hellenbarth.

Figure 3. View of rear wall of the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Esna. The Ptolemaic temple lies under the refuse at left. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4. Traces of red paint on the rear wall of the Temple of Esna showing an offering scene dating to Ptolemy VI (180 – 145 BCE) (Esna 643). Photograph by the author.

Figure 5. Column capital with floral motif, from the pronaos of the Temple of Esna. In the background is the astronomical ceiling. Photograph by Jutta Hellenbarth.

Figure 6. Representation of Khnum/Khnum-Ra, the creator god and "Lord of Esna." Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. The Roman emperor Trajan (98 – 117 CE) dancing before goddess manifestations Menhyt and Nebetu (Esna 520). Photograph by the author.

Figure 8. The Roman emperor Commodus (180 – 192 CE) catching fishes and birds with clap net (Esna 531). Photograph by the author.

Figure 9. Unusual correction of content of offering scene from reign of Roman emperor Commodus: the potter's wheel, originally depicted, was replaced by hieroglyphs for "life, duration, and dominion" (Esna 585). Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. The Roman emperor Domitian (81 – 96 CE) smites enemies before Khnum-Ra, "Lord of Esna" (Esna 570). This type of scene is normally depicted on the front of a pylon; however, no pylon was constructed at the Temple of Esna. Photograph by Horst Beinlich.

Figure 11. Depiction of a potter's wheel. The potter's wheel was the object of primary focus in the "festival of the installation of the potters wheel," celebrated on February 25th at the Temple of Esna. Photograph by the author.

Figure 12. New hieroglyphic signs, created by the priests of Esna. Photograph by the author.

Figure 13. Example of innovative hieroglyphs at the Temple of Esna: an inscription composed primarily of crocodiles (Esna 126). Photograph by the author.

Figure 14. Overcrowded arrangement of hieroglyphs in an inscription executed in Roman times at the Temple of Esna (Esna 571). Photograph by the author.