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*Holger Kockelmann*

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## MAMMISI (BIRTH HOUSE)

### بيوت الولادة «mammisi»

Holger Kockelmann

Geburtshaus  
Temple de la naissance

*Egyptian birth houses (mammisi) are an important feature of many Late Period and Ptolemaic and Roman temple complexes. Being small temple edifices in their own right, their decoration is dominated by scenes that relate to the nativity and bringing up of the divine child of a local triad. As the young god was identified with the king, birth houses were also places devoted to the cult of the living ruler.*

تعتبر بيوت الولادة «mammisi» من أهم السمات المميزة للمعابد المصرية خلال العصر المتأخر و العصرى البطلمي والروماني. حيث كانت تعتبر في حد ذاتها بمثابة معابد صغيرة، و تمثل معظم المناظر المصورة على جدرانها مناظر تتعلق بالولادة وتربية الطفل الإلهي - أحد أعضاء الثالوث المحلى - وبما أن الملك يمثل الطفل الإلهي فإن بيوت الولادة تعتبر مكاناً لعبادة الملك.

**T**he term “mammisi” is a modern creation by J. F. Champollion, derived from Coptic ⲙⲁ “place,” ⲛ “of,” and ⲙⲓⲤⲉ/ⲙⲓⲤⲓ “to bear,” ⲙⲁⲛⲙⲓⲤⲓ = ⲙⲁⲛⲙⲓⲤⲓ meaning “place of giving birth” (Daumas 1958: 15). The ancient Egyptian designation was *pr-mst*, “house of birth.” This name refers to the key theological topic of the decoration of the mammisi, which centers around the birth of the divine child of the triad of the main temple (Daumas 1977: 462 - 463).

Mammisis were added as subsidiary buildings to a number of Late Period temples for a period of more than 500 years; they were dedicated to various child-gods, whose names are given in square brackets (Daumas 1958: 80): Dendara [Ihi], Armant [Harpara]—destroyed in the middle of the nineteenth century, Edfu [Harsomtus], Kom Ombo [Panebtawy-pa-khered], and Philae [Horus/Harpokrates]. Often they were erected in front of and at right angles to the

main temple (Arnold 1999: 162). The hemispeos (a partly free-standing, partly rock-cut cultic edifice/temple) of Kalabsha was most probably also a mammisi (Daumas 1977: 464). There must have been a birth house at Esna—it is mentioned in the inscriptions of the main temple but has not yet been located (Daumas 1958: 60). Moreover, there is a sun-dried brick birth house at the south side of the temple of Deir el-Medina (Arnold 1999: 198; Daumas 1958: 44 doubts this building’s character is that of a mammisi). According to Arnold, birth houses existed in the enclosure of Amun-Ra-Montu in Karnak (for Harpara, see Arnold 1999: 187; see also Daumas 1958: 54 - 55), at Elkab (Arnold 1999: 119; Daumas 1958: 59 - 60), and in Luxor (chapel of Taharqo, see Arnold 1999: 54). In addition, one finds a very late mammisi for Tutu in Ismant el-Kharab (Kaper 2002). It should be mentioned that some scholars also classify a couple of other buildings as “mammisis,” for instance, the temple of Isis at Dendara (Cauville 1992).

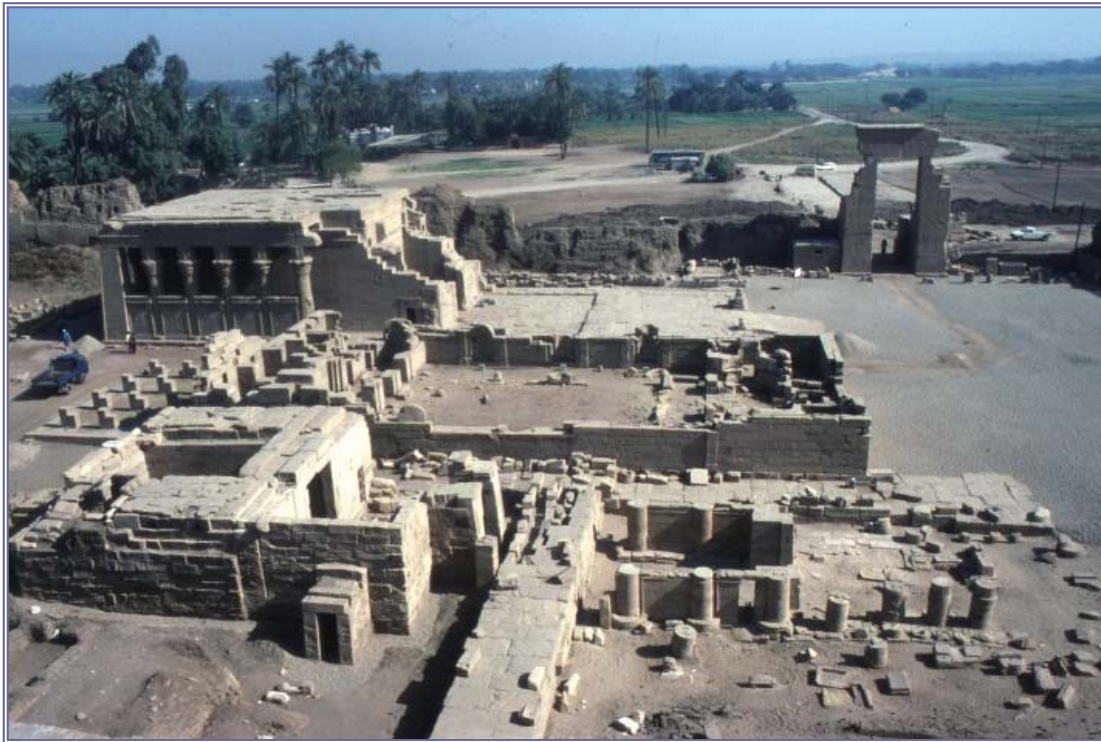


Figure 1. The mammisi at Dendera. In the foreground the birth house of the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty with Ptolemaic enlargements. In the background the Roman mammisi. Between the two edifices are remains of a Coptic church.

The existence of Late Period and Ptolemaic mammisi at Mendes, Nabesha, Medamud, Hermopolis magna, and Qasr el-Ghuweida (cf. assumptions by Arnold 1999: 82, 86, 111, 164, 174) is a mere hypothesis, based on insignificant architectural remains. It seems likely that the temples of Behbet el-Haggar and Sais also included mammisi (Daumas 1958: 61).

#### *Architectural Development*

The oldest surviving, securely identified birth house was built in the reign of Nectanebo I at Dendara. According to Arnold, there are slightly earlier examples, one being the birth house of Harpara at the east side of the Amun-Ra-Montu temple at Karnak, which was begun under Nephertites I and enlarged by Hakoris and Nectanebo I (Arnold 1999: 102, 116, and 101, fig. 56; Daumas 1958: 54).

The 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty mammisi at Dendera (fig. 1, foreground) represents a modest brick

building with a rectangular sanctuary that is flanked by a long chapel on each side. The central shrine and facades of the lateral rooms were cased with stone and decorated by Nectanebo I. At this time, the building was just a small shrine with courtyard and access path (Daumas 1952, 1958: 86). The edifice was enlarged in the reign of the Ptolemies; under Ptolemy II, the stone casing of the interior walls was continued, and a staircase to the roof was added (Arnold 1999: 115, 160).

The Ptolemaic mammisi differ considerably from the rather simple scheme of the Late Period birth houses as represented by the building of Nectanebo I at Dendera. The mammisi are now temples in the proper sense, suitable for a daily cult ritual (cf. Daumas 1958: 86, 96). Their architecture is probably modeled on ancient wooden constructions (cf. Arnold 1992: 39). It should be mentioned that there may have been Ramesside prototypes (Arnold 1992: 39, 1999: 286; see also Desroches Noblecourt 1990 -

1991).

Under Ptolemy V, at the latest, a new form developed: the peripteros (figs. 2 and 3; cf. Daumas 1977: 463; Haeny 2001; Borchardt 1938: 3 - 5), which consisted of a core edifice with a corridor running around the outside, its roof being supported by columns with floral capitals. These columns imitate the papyrus swamps, where the young Horus hid himself in Khemmis (Arnold 1999: 287). Above the capitals, a protective figure of Bes is sometimes carved; alternatively, the sistrum and face of Hathor, the goddess of motherhood and joy, is found (for the significance of Hathor and Bes, see Daumas 1958: 143 - 144). Between the columns of the colonnade are (decorated) screen walls.

Inside, the mammisi comprises a sanctuary and a hall of offerings plus additional rooms such as side chapels. Frequently, there is a staircase for accessing the roof. At this stage of its development, the birth house may stand somewhat elevated on a foundation pedestal and also have a forecourt surrounded by columns and screen walls; in older mammisis, the court is attached as a separate structure (Arnold 1999: 257). The mammisis of Philae (fig. 2), Armant, and the Roman birth house of Dendera belong to the new type. The Edfu mammisi (fig. 4) was also built and decorated according to the new scheme under Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II and Ptolemy IX Soter II: it rests on a foundation, has an entrance kiosk, a colonnaded ambulatory, and high abaci decorated with Bes figures (Arnold 1999: 202, 209).

The sanctuary can be divided into two rooms, as is the case in the late Ptolemaic mammisi of Armant (Daumas 1977: 464). This building with two columned high kiosks in front of the sanctuary (Arnold 1999: 223; reconstruction in Arnold 1998) is somewhat unusual in terms of its architecture (Daumas 1958: 100). Perhaps its construction was already started under Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos, whereas cartouches of Cleopatra VII and Ptolemy XV Caesarion testify to decoration activity under his daughter and grandson. According to Daumas, the



Figure 2. First pylon and mammisi at Philae.

mammisi may go back to Ptolemy X Alexander I (Daumas 1977: 464). It is located behind the main temple dedicated to Montu, but not at a right angle.

Generally speaking, the ground plan of the Ptolemaic mammisi survives into the Roman Period, but becomes more sophisticated. The Roman mammisi at Dendera (fig. 1, background) has the most complex architecture of all surviving birth houses (Daumas 1977: 464). The dedicatory inscription refers to Trajan, but the building may have been initiated by Nero (Arnold 1999: 255 - 257). Erected on a foundation pedestal, it comprises three rooms in the core: the sanctuary (most probably with a naos containing a statue of Hathor suckling Ihi) flanked by a long chapel on either side, the room of the ennead, and the preceding offering room. At the north side of the room of offerings is a staircase to the roof. The aforementioned hall of the ennead is a new element (Daumas 1958: 111), which lies between the offering room and the sanctuary and is well known from major temple buildings. There are also crypts (Daumas 1958: 112 - 114). The rear wall of the

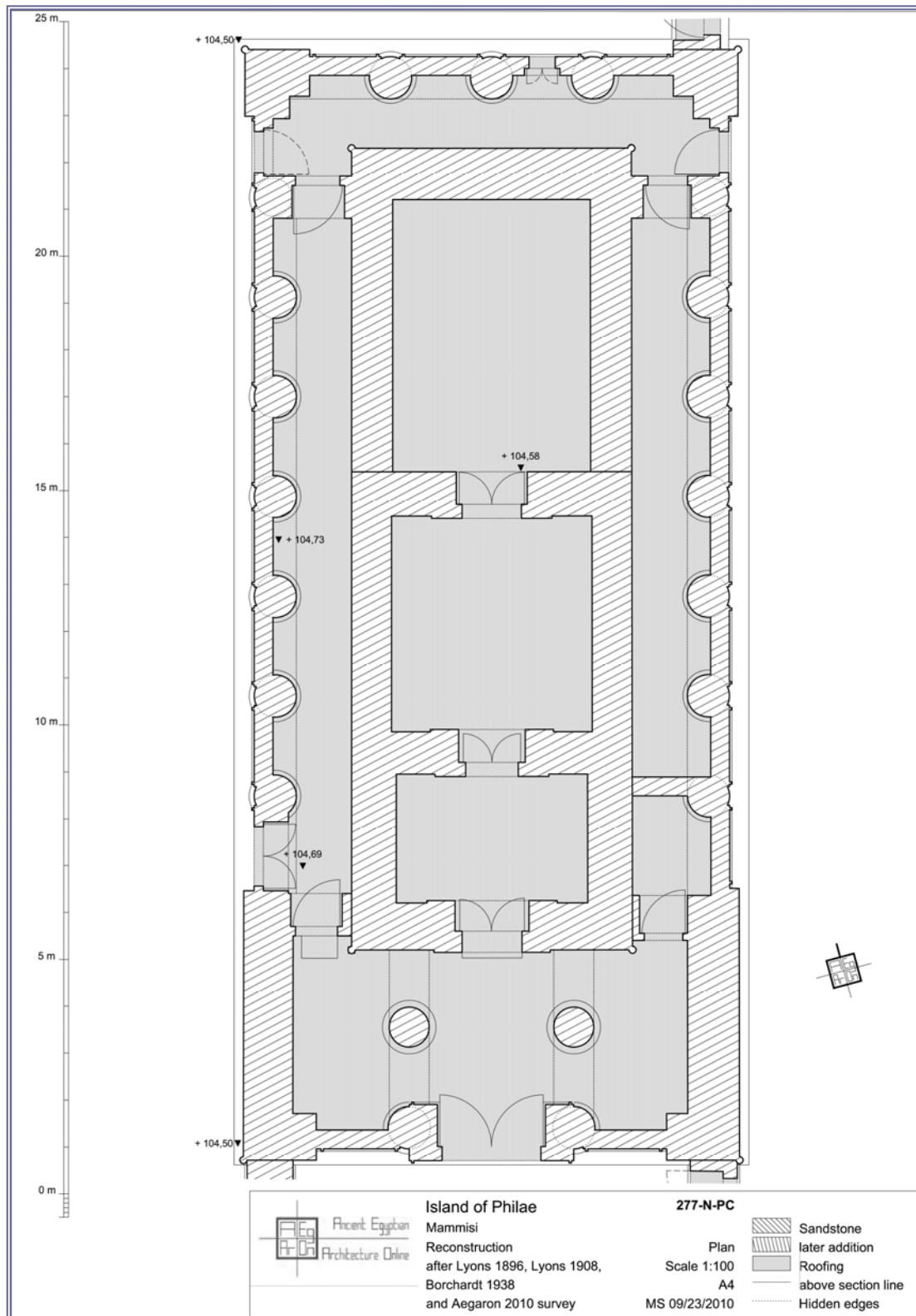


Figure 3. Reconstruction of the mammisi on the island of Philae.



Figure 4. Birth house of the Temple of Edfu.

sanctuary is furnished with a false door and a cult niche. The ambulatory merges with the entrance kiosk, which is a novelty (Arnold 1999: 257).

#### *Decoration*

During the Late Period, a shift to temples for female deities is clearly perceivable (Arnold 1999: 309). This tendency is also reflected in the mammisi, whose decoration centers around theogamy (marriage of a male and female deity), birth, and motherhood.

The reliefs in the sanctuary, which could be gilded, display ceremonies connected to a liturgical drama, *mst-ntr*, “the birth of the god” (cf. Schott 1990: 79, no. 143). They narrate the nativity of the divine child (Daumas 1977: 466). The depictions resemble the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty reliefs of the myth of the divine royal birth in the temples of Deir el-Bahri and Luxor (Brunner 1986). Among other things, they include the creation, delivery, breast-feeding, and enthronement of the newborn god (Daumas 1977: 466 - 472). The replacement of the king of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty myth by the divine child of the mammisis may

partly be ascribed to the experience of loss of native rulership during the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Perhaps the young god, whose status as king and universal ruler is emphasized by the texts and depictions in the mammisi, was regarded as a more stable guarantor of the continuation of the world’s theological-political order (cf. Daumas 1977: 473). However, also the cult of the living ruler was “specifically established in the birth houses,” as “the young king was identified with the son of the divine family”; “the aspect of the birth houses as scene of royal cult would explain the remarkable development of these buildings from the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty on” (Arnold 1999: 94 - 95). Moreover, the juvenal god was identified with the rising sun (Daumas 1958: 127); hence, the young king participated in this daily cosmic renewal.

Among the numerous offering scenes, which are found in the mammisi, the donation of milk plays a very important role. It symbolizes nourishment, motherly care, protection, and purification (Daumas 1958: 44, 174ff.) and is closely related to the birth and bringing up of the divine child.

## *Bibliographic Notes*

Though all the important birth houses of Egypt have been fully published (Dendera: Daumas 1959; Edfu: Chassinat 1939; Philae: Junker and Winter 1965), the contents and the system of their decoration have not yet received a detailed and comparative study. The best general treatment of the mammisi is still the comprehensive monograph provided by Daumas (1958). He discusses the criteria for classifying a building as a mammisi, the architectural development of the birth houses, as well as their theological function and the rites performed in them. The latter aspects are explained by numerous quotations from the inscriptions in the birth houses. For a more concise overview of the mammisis, one may consult an article by the same author (Daumas 1977). The results of Daumas' research on the mammisi were adopted more or less unmodified by Arnold in his monographs on Egyptian sacral architecture (Arnold 1992, 1999). In his contributions, Arnold offers new photographs and technical illustrations of some of the mammisis; moreover, he published a three-dimensional reconstruction of the now lost birth house at Armant (Arnold 1998).

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Figure 1. The mammisi at Dendera. In the foreground the birth house of the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty with Ptolemaic enlargements. In the background the Roman mammisi. Between the two edifices are remains of a Coptic church. Photograph by E. Winter.

Figure 2. First pylon and mammisi at Philae. Photograph by the author.

Figure 3. Reconstruction of the mammisi on the island of Philae. Courtesy of Ancient Egyptian Architecture Online ([AEgArOn](http://dai.aegarou.ucla.edu)).

Figure 4. Birth house of the Temple of Edfu. Photograph by the author.