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Beyond Borders: New Evidence of Barbarians in Debod

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Non esiste, io sospetto, frontiera, almeno nel senso che noi siamo abituati a pensare.

DINO BUZZATI, *I sette messaggeri*, 1942.

The finding of a possible Barbarian *graffito* in one of the pylons of the temple of Debod offers the opportunity to review some of the ways in which a hypothetical Blemmyan (or, at least, Barbarian) presence could have taken place in Debod. The cultural implications of the inscription are considered and a reading and a chronology for it are also proposed.

El hallazgo de un posible *graffito* bárbaro en uno de los pilonos del templo de Debod ofrece la ocasión de revisar algunas de las formas que pudo revestir una hipotética presencia blemmia (o, cuando menos, bárbara) en Debod. Consideramos asimismo las implicaciones culturales del epígrafe y proponemos una lectura y una cronología para el mismo.

Keywords: Debod, Barbarian Epigraphy, Blemmyan Anthroponomy, Roman *limes* in Egypt.

Palabras clave: Debod, epigrafía bárbara, antroponimia blemmia, *limes* romano en Egipto.

The gradual disappearance of Roman control on the southern border of Egypt manifested in several ways. The most obvious was the retreat of the defensive garrison of the Nubian *limes* that Diocletian moved from Maharraqa to Aswan in the year 298 CE¹. It proved to be a real strategic success because the recent Nubian frontier of the Empire came to the Byzantine era unchanged. In turn, this displacement of the Roman border northward left Lower Nubia outside the Imperial military control, allowing the arrival and settlement of Barbarian groups from the periphery in the large Nubian centers of the two banks of the Nile².

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- 1 About the concrete circumstances surrounding this decision and the consequences derivated from it, see Hendrickx (2014), *passim*.
- 2 Dijkstra 2012: 243.

The archaeological research in the area shows clearly two levels in the post-Roman *Dodekaschoenus*:

- 1) the material culture formerly called Group X or better, now, Postmeroitic; and
- 2) the subsequent establishment of Christianity in the area, since the sixth century CE.

Between them, or rather overlapping partially with both levels (especially with the first), traces of Barbarians appear; they are traditionally identified as Blemmyes (beside other groups such as Nobadians).

1 | Who were the Blemmyes?

While Classical authors seem to have a clear idea about who the Blemmyes were, archaeologists still fail to provide common cultural characteristics that identify them distinctly. And so, a Roman writer states, “Blemmyes traduntur capita abesse ore et oculis pectore adfixis”, i.e. “Blemmyes are said to have no head, with mouth and eyes in the chest” (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5, 46). This exotic description of the Blemmyes is obviously due to remoteness of these Barbarians regarding the *Urbs*. Historical information on barbaric Blemmyes, fanciful or not so, but certainly numerous, are reflected in the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*³. They are written in Ancient Egyptian (in hieroglyphic, demotic and coptic texts), Greek and Latin, and cover a wide chronology that spans from a unique dated reference in the 7th century BCE⁴ to the 6th century CE.

Different ethnonyms are associated with Blemmyes: Bulahau, Bugaits or Bugas, Be-

jawi or Beja people. In any case, they were a nomadic people, and historical geographers place them in the Eastern Desert, to the south, moving between the Nile and the Red Sea. The Late Roman Empire challenged them repeatedly because of occasional forays being given to the Egyptian territories of Upper Egypt. Christian texts referred to them as “Christ’s enemies”, being pagans and having plundered monasteries and churches in Aswan. Such actions forced the Romans to create a powerful defensive line joining Aswan with Elephantine and Philae (the latter was walled by Diocletian, according to Procopius)⁵. They built a protection wall in the causeway that linked Aswan and Philae under emperor Licinius to defend the caravans from Nubia of repeated attacks. These Barbarians supported various Egyptian uprisings against Rome from the 3rd century CE onwards; they occupied the *Dodekaschoenus* since the end of the 4th century until the middle of 5th, merging with the existing Nubian substrate.

Pagans from a religious perspective, they worshipped Mandulis and Isis in Talmis (Kalabsha). Socially, their structure was tribal, although contact with the Empire accelerated the process towards a complex chiefdom. The head was a tribal chief, *phylarchos* or *basiliskos*, and under him there was a *hypotyranos*. Their main settlements were Talmis and Taffa, both in Lower Nubia. To the south, was another group, the Nobades, which had their center in Primis (Qasr Ibrim).

Rome associated the Blemmyes as *foederati* in the 5th century, but this did not preclude

3 Eide *et al.*: *passim*, synthesized in Barnard 2005: 25-33 and in the Appendix III of Barnard 2008: 132-141.

4 Stela of Anlamani, *ca.* 620-600 BCE (Barnard 2009: 19).

5 Aja 2009: 144.

raids of Blemmyes groups occurring later in Antaiopolis (year 547) and Kom Ombo (567) from the Eastern Desert. Blemmyan attacks on the western side of the Nile are also documented, although in smaller numbers; for instance, the pillaging of Kharga Oasis under Theodosius II.

Currently, an *ethnic approach* suggests that the term “Blemmyes” grouped distinct tribal nomadic groups. They probably had a common language and inhabited a wide area between the Eastern Desert and Lower Nubia, and had a slightly different material culture depending on the area they occupied (*Dodekaschoenos*, coast of the Red Sea or Eastern Desert). Contrary to this view, there is a *political approach* that conceives them as a quasi-state organization compared with Rome. This view set forth that the entire Lower Nubia was occupied by Blemmyes during the 5th century, something that has been denied by archaeologists⁶.

2 | Blemmyes and Archaeology

In written sources Blemmyes appear as a clearly identified entity. However, archaeologists do not *find* so easily Blemmyan remains in the stratigraphical record. Pottery called *Eastern Desert Ware* (EDW) was theoretically assigned by researchers to the Blemmyes⁷, nomadic dwellers of this desert as it has already been mentioned. These clay productions are dated to the 4th-6th centuries CE. It is a handmade pottery (mainly cups and bowls), with carefully incised or impressed

decorations on the surface of the vessel before firing it in the oven. A wide geographical distribution makes it possible to locate this pottery both in the Eastern Desert and along the banks of the Nile between the 1st and 5th cataracts.

Besides the pottery, some type of petroglyphs of quadrupeds, including camelids, and a specific type of burial mounds (*ekratels*) have also been associated with the Blemmyes. However, this evidence can be considered too small to identify an ethnic and cultural group⁸. It appears thus that the Blemmyes *escape* from current archaeological researchers.

3 | Blemmyes in Debod? Possible evidences

As noted, the withdrawal of the border at Maharraqa directly invited various nomadic groups to occupy the demilitarized space including the area where Debod was situated. The Roman garrison was taken to Aswan 298 CE, as previously mentioned. Fifty years before that date, religious activity in Lower Nubia suffered changes probably due to the frequent Barbarian raids in the *Dodekaschoenus*; in fact, the last Greek *proskynema* from Kertassi is dated in 251 CE⁹.

The Blemmyes must have occupied Kalabsha around the year 394 (after reaching the area ca. 378). This is also a plausible date for their possible presence in Debod. From Talmis in 395, they sacked Aswan. In the year 423, Blemmyan territorial control extended from Phoinikon, in the East-

6 Obluski 2013: *passim*.

7 Bietak 2005: 13. On the relation between EDW ceramics and the Blemmyes, see Barnard 2006: 137-138.

8 Barnard 2007: 27, Barnard 2009: 21.

9 Bagnall 1988: 288, n. 28.

ern Desert at the latitude of Luxor, to Qasr Ibrim. This considerable extension was not used with its whole political strength against Rome because of the tribal organization of the Blemmyes.

As for the evidence allowing the association of the Blemmyes to Debod, the main documents are the petroglyphs mentioned above. The caravans of camels are considered an artistic representation that Jackson attributed to these nomads¹⁰. On the northern outer wall of the temple of Debod, a long caravan of camels is depicted schematically coming from the west and heading to a remote square —some ashlar further— a sort of minimalist image of a caravanserai. Probably the *graffito* is showing the actual path of the caravans (coming from the South or the western oases) that occupied the vicinity of the Greco-Roman sanctuary for an undetermined time. This is not the only representation of camels in Debod, they also appear on the pylons and on the western wall. The economic importance of this animal for the Barbarians of the Egyptian deserts has been sufficiently emphasized in recent years¹¹.

These type of representations on the walls of a sanctuary can only be understood if they were considered, somehow, sacred. They would not simply represent a par-

ticular caravan of nomads, but add on the temple walls the expression of the lifestyle of the group. It is worth mentioning at this point, that many religious centers of Lower Nubia (Kalabsha, Taffa, Dendur) were kept running even after the collapse of the kingdom of Meroe.

Thus, the representation of camel caravans would be the most conventional evidence associated with Blemmyes. But there is probably another trace of the presence of these Barbarians in the temple of Debod: what appears to be an anthroponym. In fact, an author commented that “das Verfügbare blemmyische Sprachmaterial (sind) in der Hauptsache Personennamen”¹²; this paper pretends just to be a small contribution to the Barbaric anthroponymy of Lower Nubia.

4 | The epigraph TAΦE

On the door of one of the pylons of the temple of Debod, the horizontally inscribed word TAΦE can be read (fig. 1); it is formed by the *tau-alpha-phi-epsilon* sequence; they are unquestionably four Greek graphemes¹³. It is an epigraph of a scarcely swallow section. It has a length of 18,2 cm and a height of 10,1 cm (measured in the largest stroke, i.e. the vertical element of the letter Φ).

¹⁰ Among others, Jackson 2002: 139, fig. 7.4.

¹¹ Molinero Polo 2012, *passim*, with specific reference to female camels. This paper makes part of an exhaustive documentation of the historical *graffiti* of Debod. On the results reached by the team developing the epigraphical “Proyecto Tahut” and a description of the aforementioned *graffito*, see Molinero Polo *et alii* 2013: 72.

¹² El-Sayed 2004:353.

¹³ In 1912, the Greek texts from Debod to Bab Kalabsha were published. But the author (see Zucker in Bibliography) only included in his work, referring to Debod, the inscription of Ptolemy VI on the second gateway. Neither the *graffito* studied in this paper nor the *proskynema* (see Molinero Polo *et alii* 2013: 74) were the subject of his work.

Since a convincingly translation from the Greek language¹⁴ has proved impossible, the interpretation suggested in this paper will be based on the historical context and related inscriptions found in barbaric Lower Nubia of the 3rd to 5th centuries CE.

The epigraphic group is located on the east side of the door of the second pylon, in the fifth row of ashlar (counting from the floor) on the right door jamb. It is close to but slightly above a magnificent representa-

tion of a coptic *cross pattee*, with which it is assumed that it has no relation; the *tetragrammaton* would precede it chronologically, at least by a couple of centuries (fig. 2).

Spatially preceding the epigraph to the left can be found a vertical sign inscribed -visually a sort of *iota* (fig. 3). However, the excessive *approche*¹⁵ between the vertical stroke and the first sign of the epigraphic group (*tau*) leads to think that it is not a sign to be read, but rather it could be explained as an

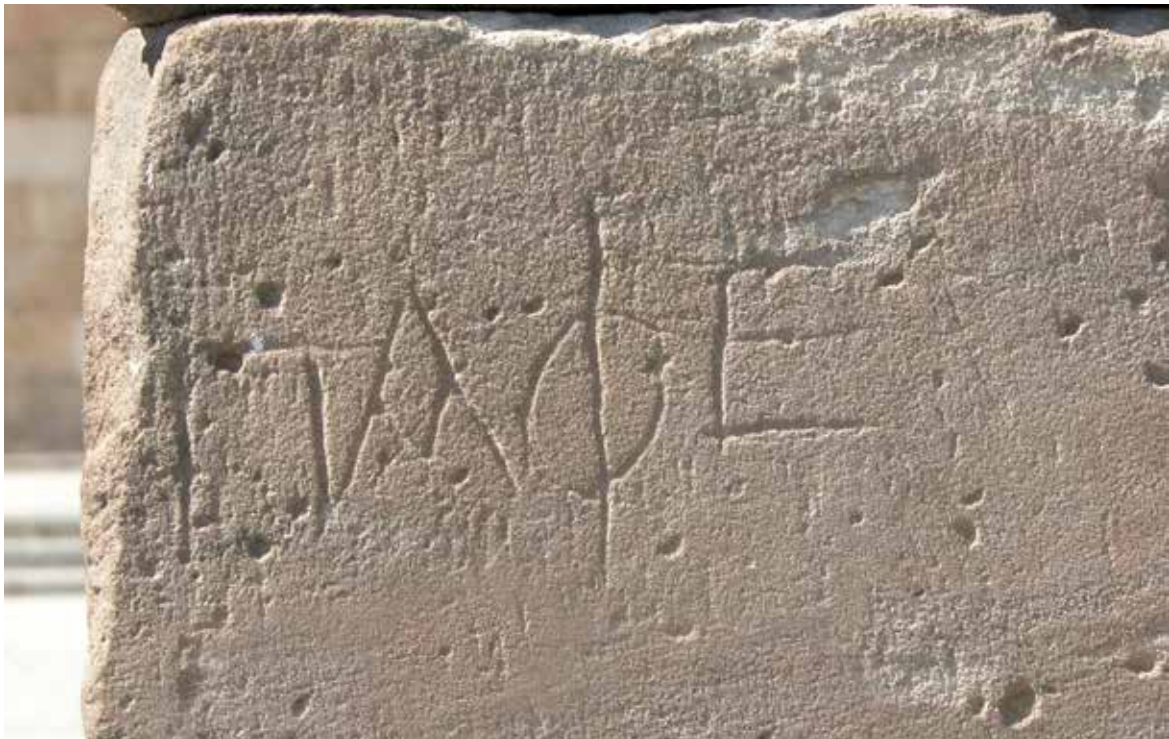


Figure 1.

14 In Greek, the word *τάφε* is the singular vocative of *τάφος*; it is a known term used by the Greeks to refer to one of his funeral rites (prothesis / ekphora / *taphos*). In modern European languages, the word has given such terms as “epitaph” and “cenotaph”. Obviously, the word cannot be considered in this sense in the Debod context. Furthermore, there is also a verbal form aspective (aorist) of the verb *τέθηπα*, “be surprised”, used for example by Pindar in his Pythian Odes: “*τάφε δ’ αὐτίκα παπτάνας ἀρίγνωτον πέδιλον δεξιτερῶ μόνον ἀμφί*”, but it does not make any sense, in our case, with such meaning. Finally, the similarity of *Ταφε* and the word *Ταφίς* / Taphis (Greek name of the toponym Taffeh) is undeniable, but it does not make any sense in Debod.

15 Lalou 2004: 79. *Approche* makes reference to the distance between two graphemes.

epigraphic *pentimento*. It is possible that the inscription was made by an inexperienced *lapidista* and that he began writing the *tau* in the same order in which the current Latin capital T is written: first the vertical stroke, and then the horizontal one overhead. Realizing the limited space available to record the transversal upper stroke (since the block would have already in antiquity an irregular surface in its upper left corner similar to the current one), he abandoned the attempt,

moving to write slightly to the right and above. In fact, a further confirmation of this could be that the adopted *approche* for the *tetragramma*'s graphemes is visually consistent. In addition, in the middle of the first vertical stroke, a short horizontal line is visible, halfway up the stroke that was planned to be abandoned, maybe a kind of *cancellation* of the sign. Perhaps this is not the only form of visual invalidation of this sign; indeed, the top ending (formed by a pair of



Figure 2. The ashlar with the graffito on the second door of the temple of Debod.



Figure 3. Drawing of the *graffito* by D. M. Méndez Rodríguez.

parallel oblique lines) could reasonably also have had this purpose.

This returns us to the initial group TAΦE without prior *iota*. We presume that this word would be a common noun or a proper name, complete or abbreviated, but obviously it cannot be categorically ruled out that it could be a verbal form or even an interjection. Its brevity (only four graphemes) leads to think of it as a complete semantic unit, with its own meaning. And, as it will be seen, it is possible to interpret it from parallels as a noun; in fact, as a personal proper name.

Some remarks about the palaeography of the inscription. The particular form of signs is not especially helpful, in this case, in order to specify the date of the title. The *broken-bar alpha* (“broken bar” refers to the horizontal crossbar of the letter, which appears here as an angled-downwards line) begins to be seen in Attic inscriptions in the late third century BCE and comes to supplant the old *alpha* in the East during the second century BCE. In Debod’s case, the upper apex of the letter appears slightly open. The rectangular shape of the letter *epsilon*, with horizontal stroke in the middle, is common in Hellenistic and Roman times; from the 2nd century CE, it will be the dominant form. The difficulty of writing a circular tracing on stone with a graver, has forced the *lapicida* to build the circle of the letter Φ by two connected semicircles (one upper, the other lower). Finally, *tau* and *alpha* appear in close contact.

As for the meaning underlying these letters, the possibility has been considered that they formed part of an Egyptian-Greek name; perhaps in a short version. In that case, the only anthroponym that could fit in well (in an abbreviated form) would be $\tau\alpha\phi\epsilon\nu\acute{o}\upsilon\phi\iota\varsigma$ (Taphenouphis), that is, the Greek form of the Egyptian female name *t3-p3-ḥr-nfr(.t)*. This name has been found in a pair of mummy labels¹⁶ and also in other written documents (papyri) coming from the cemeteries of Bacchias, Arsinoites (Faiyum), Thmouis (Lower Egypt) and So-

hag¹⁷; these documents were dated mostly in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. However the distance between Sohag, the southernmost city of this group, and Debod is more than 350 kilometres upstream. How could the presence of *an abbreviated name* of an Egyptian *woman* be explained in a *so far* and small temple? This explanation remains possible, but it seems quite unconvincing.

Recently, some works on Blemmyan onomastic names and also proper names of Barbarian peoples who occupied the south and east of the Nile Valley have appeared¹⁸. Several personal names, dating from the 3rd century CE or shortly thereafter, have been identified in a group of *ostraka* found in the Roman *praesidium* of Xeron (Eastern Desert). They expand the list of *nomina* already known and written in Greek at Kalabsha (from the 5th century CE) as well as the names found in Greek and Coptic documents from Gebelein (6th century CE). Among the names of the first group, those of the 3rd century, $\tau\alpha\phi\tau\alpha\phi$ (Taphtaph) can be found, which supports a $\tau\alpha\phi\tau\omicron\phi$ variant. It is a “Barbarian, seemingly Egyptian” name, says Satzinger, who also thinks it might perhaps be read as Taphta and could be translated as “the one who belongs to Ptah”¹⁹. Building names through reduplication is documented among these peri-Nilotic Barbarians in this chronology; this is also the case of $\tau\alpha\tau\alpha$ (Gebelein)²⁰.

Debod’s $\tau\alpha\phi\epsilon$ could be a *hypocoristic* by abbreviation, which could have been produced

16 Vleeming 2011: 955.

17 http://www.trismegistos.org/per/list.php?nam_id=23528.

18 These sources are being collected since the work of Török (1985). The anthroponyms from Xeron (Eastern Desert), are collected in Satzinger 2013. Those of Kalabsha and Gebelein, in Satzinger 1992.

19 Satzinger 2013: 6.

20 Satzinger 1992: 317.

from ΤΑΦΤΑΦ shortened as ΤΑΦ; the desinence -Ε expresses a genitive. In Egypt, the use of hypocoristic names is widely attested, and for an unexperienced *lapidida*, writing a short name it is always less complex than to write the complete name. In addition, it is probably a male proper name, since the female *nomina* documented in the above mentioned written sources finish in -Τ or in -Σ.

As for the specific grammatical case of the word, Satzinger states that for these names, the genitive ends in -Ι or in -Ε (after consonant), or in Υ (after vowel)²¹. Therefore, ΤΑΦΕ could be a proper name in the genitive, and the epigraph can be interpreted as: “belonging to Taf(taf)”. The fact that the name has been expressed in the genitive would perhaps support the possibility of considering it as a *proskynema*. If it is so, it should be included in the “Namensinschriften” type²².

Conclusion

A man called Taftaf, perhaps a Blemmyan or a member of a peri-Nilotic Barbarian tribe, using a short epigraph written in Greek letters, expressed—in a clearly visible space on the second pylon of Debod—that the area, the precinct, a herd, some goods or something unknown (perhaps even the authorship of the *proskynema* itself), was his property. The place chosen to locate the item was not trivial, since it was one of the monumental

entrances to the sanctuary, precisely the one that displays on the lintel a Greek inscription of Ptolemy VI Philometor. It must have been recorded in the late 3rd century CE or, more likely, during the following century. The handwriting suggests that the *lapidida* was familiar with the Greek alphabet or, at least, that he knew how to write his own name and also to decline it in the genitive case. However it was not a good *inscriptor*: the *ductus* of his epigraph diverts slightly upwards (it is clearly visible if we measure the distance between the upper horizontal stroke of the letter T and the top edge of the ashlar, then we also measure the distance between the upper horizontal stroke of the letter E and the same top edge of the ashlar, and we finally compare those two measurements).

In any case, the date assigned to the epigraph suggests that the Barbarians had reached Debod almost at the same time as the Northern Barbarians increased their pressure on the *limes Germanicus*. No graves of Barbarians were found in the cemetery adjacent to Debod²³; the sanctuary was, at this time, a transit station for caravans of dromedaries that went over trade routes with its northern nodes in Talmis and Aswan. Debod, close to the Nile and in the mouth of a wadi, was an especially suitable place for a rest stop before reaching the Blemmyan main village (that is, Kalabsha) and then the Egyptian metropolis, Aswan. There are no trace from those *barbari cum Romanis bella gerebant*; the Barbarians of Lower Nubia in

21 Satzinger 2013: 8.

22 Type 1 of Burkhardt (see Burkhardt 1985: 20-22). Burkhardt’s typology is based, in any case, in demotic *graffiti*, not Greek ones.

23 The necropolis of Debod is fundamentally Ramesside (Török 1997: 86), although sporadically it received burials during the I millennium BCE (as evidenced by the sarcophagus contained in Gau 1822: Fascicle 1, 28) and the Graeco-Roman era.

the third and fourth centuries traded in and with the *limiton* of the Empire, taking traditional African exotic objects of import (precious stones —probably emeralds—, slaves or ostrich feathers) to Roman Egypt.

The easy of movement in this border brings to our mind the reflection of Dino Buzzati in his novella *I sette messageri*. A Barbarian, whose tribal roots lay perhaps in the inhospitable Eastern Desert, wrote his name in Greek characters on the walls of an Egyptian temple. The Roman *limes* in southern Egypt was, without doubt, absolutely permeable to the spread of Hellenism beyond its boundaries.

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