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A Falcon Shrine at the Port of Berenike (Red Sea Coast, Egypt)

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During excavations at the Hellenistic-Roman port of Berenike (on the Red Sea coast of Egypt) in the winter of 2019, work in the so-called Northern Complex documented a religious space from the Late Roman period. The excavation of a portion of this space recorded material that, together with the architecture, suggests a ritual function associated with a falcon cult. This study examines the features of this edifice and the interpretation of the religious materials found in it and proposes a possible relationship with the Blemmyan population who lived in Berenike between the fourth and sixth centuries CE.¹

INTRODUCTION

Founded by Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the second quarter of the third century BCE on the Red Sea coast of Egypt, the Ptolemaic-Roman harbor of Berenike (fig. 1) owed its existence to international trade, and its archaeological remains reflect the wide connectivity of its inhabitants.² Prior to its abandonment sometime before the mid sixth century CE, the port was inhabited in part by the semi-nomadic Blemmyes, whose origins lay in the Nubian region. This is supported by a growing body of evidence associated with the Blemmyes that has emerged through recent archaeological work at the site, particularly in the area denoted the Northern Complex. The present paper offers an interpretation of a late ritual space documented within this complex.

RELIGIOUS SPACES IN THE NORTHERN COMPLEX OF BERENIKE

One of the main areas excavated during the past few archaeological seasons at Berenike is the Northern Complex,³ which lies in the northeastern

¹ The Berenike Project is a joint mission between the University of Delaware and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology. We want to thank the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities for granting the corresponding 2019 permits for excavation at the site. The Fundación PALARQ provided financial support for this work. Archaeozoological research was financed by the National Science Center, Poland, grant no. 2021/43/B/HS3/02749. Editions of papyri and ostraca are cited according to *Papyri.info*, “Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets,” www.papyri.info/docs/checklist. Greek inscriptions are in accordance with *AIEGL*, “GrEpiAbbr: Liste des abréviations des éditions et ouvrages de référence pour l’épigraphie grecque alphabétique,” www.aiegl.org/grepiabbr.html, and are accompanied by their respective Trismegistos (TM; www.trismegistos.org) numeric identifiers.

² For background on Berenike and the excavations, see, e.g., Sidebotham et al. 2008; 2019; 2020; 2021; Sidebotham 2011; 2018; Woźniak 2018; Woźniak and Rądkowska 2019; Woźniak et al. 2021.

³ On the Northern Complex, see Sidebotham 2007, 77–89; Zych et al. 2016, 340–42; Sidebotham et al. 2019, 11, for trench BE15-110 (there called the “putative Early Roman administrative building and warehouse area”); Sidebotham et al. 2020, 14–15.

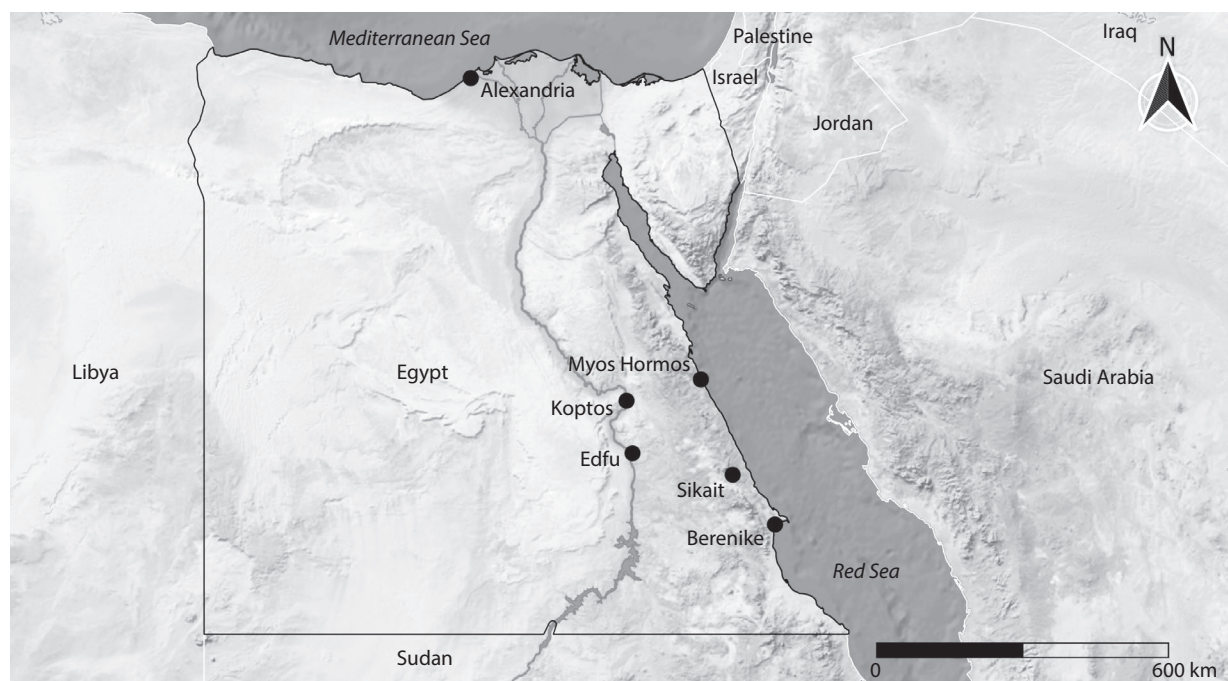


FIG. 1. Map showing the location of Berenike on the Red Sea coast of Egypt and other sites mentioned in the text.

corner of the site and was identified during several geomagnetic surveys conducted in the area (fig. 2). It consists of a large structure consisting of several buildings. The presence of coral heads on its surface (typical of Late Roman building practices at Berenike) suggested a late date for the last period of occupation of the complex.

Excavations in and around the Northern Complex began in 2015, and by the end of the 2019 season there was a total of seven trenches, including those that revealed the Falcon Shrine.⁴ Work in other areas of this complex resulted in the discovery of a square room to the northwest of the Falcon Shrine with walls made of white anhydritic gypsum ashlar and a rectilinear alcove with remains of marble revetment.⁵ The function of this space remains unknown, but amid the tumble inside the room was a portion of a large stone offering table, and a lidless coarse ware jar was buried in a corner.⁶ A room with walls made of recycled anhydritic gypsum ashlar bordered the Northern Complex's

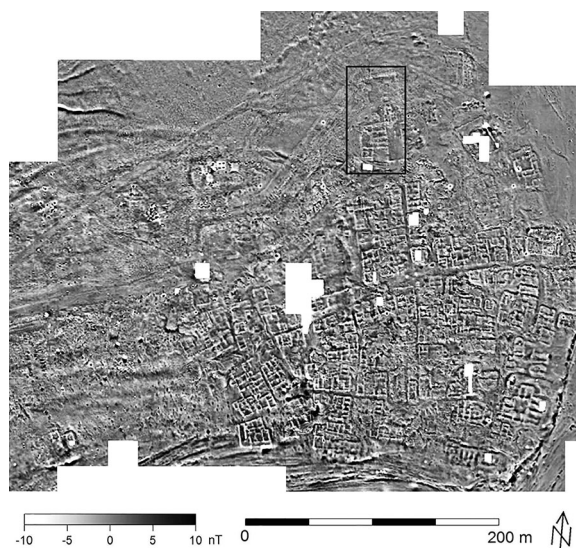


FIG. 2. Geomagnetic map of Berenike with the Northern Complex outlined in black; nT = nanoTesla units of magnetic anomaly (survey by D. Swiech and R. Ryndziewicz; processed by T.M. Herbich).

southwestern side and was accessed from the east.⁷ It contained a large wooden box-like structure that

⁴ These trenches are BE15-110, BE18-115, BE18/19-116, BE19-124, BE19-129, BE19-130 and BE19-131, the last three being the focus of this article, the last two comprising the Falcon Shrine.

⁵ Trench BE15-110, on which see Sidebotham 2016, 8–10.

⁶ Sidebotham 2019, 218–19.

⁷ BE18/19-116, on which see Sidebotham et al. 2019, 11; 2020, 14.

covered a worn ashlar of anhydritic gypsum and was tentatively identified as an altar. Other objects found in the room, such as several statuettes of gods, a lamp base with an incised *labarum*, and an ostrakon with a cross, reinforced the idea that it had served as a ritual space in the Late Roman period, perhaps both pre-Christian and Christian. The room seems to have been abandoned in the fifth century CE.⁸

At the extreme northern end of the complex, excavations in 2018 and 2019 documented other shrines.⁹ They probably originated in the Early Roman period, as indicated by monumental, well-built paved surfaces, but retained importance in Late Roman times as well. A large Greek lintel inscription from the entrance to a shrine in this complex referred to the Blemmyan king Isemne and recorded the name of the interpreter who dedicated the edifice to Isis and Serapis. Its precise date is not known, but it was likely carved in the late fourth or early fifth century CE.¹⁰ A further Greek lintel inscription mentioning a Blemmyan king named Kabantia was found in front of a room located adjacent to this shrine in 2020.¹¹ As with the rooms to the east and southwest, this area of the Northern Complex clearly had religious significance. Moreover, its scale and overall structural complexity suggest that it was of some importance in the city.

EXCAVATION OF THE FALCON SHRINE

In 2019, excavations took place in three trenches just south of the shrine that had been dedicated on behalf of the Blemmyan king Isemne to Isis and Serapis. Two trenches, BE19-130 and 131, were associated with a Falcon Shrine, while the third, BE19-129, exposed part of what appears to have been a separate shrine (figs. 3, 4). While there is evidence of an Early Roman origin for this shrine, excavations concentrated on the latest period of use.¹²

Trench BE19-130 lies in the eastern part of the excavated area and covers a space of 4.0 m north–south x 6.0 m east–west. Excavations revealed it to be a long east–west anteroom that acted as a passage to a small room to the west with a ritual use.¹³ A door on

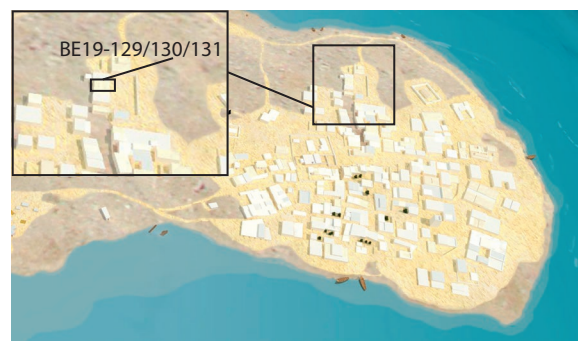


FIG. 3. Graphic model of the site of Berenike. Trenches BE19-129, 130, and 131, in the Northern Complex, are enlarged in the inset at upper left (graphic by M. Hense).

the eastern side of the anteroom connected to a still-unexplored large courtyard located in the middle of the Northern Complex.

The northern wall of the anteroom was made up of ashlar, likely of Early Roman origin. In a second period of use, coral heads combined with some cut ashlar reinforced the walls, suggesting a Late Roman rebuilding phase corresponding to the final occupation of the structure. Excavations documented levels associated with this late phase, with a floor made of compacted clay mixed with small stones and loose sand. Below this circulation level were several deposits, including a concentration of fifteen cowry shells (fig. 5) in the northeastern corner of the room and evidence of two small fires (one beside the cowries, and another opposite the eastern entrance). Cowry shell offerings (in this case, unworked *Cypraea tigris*) are not unusual in late ritual contexts at Berenike; they are present in other religious buildings such as the Late Roman Harbor Temple,¹⁴ and in the courtyard and at the entrance of the main Isis temple on the highest part of the site and ca. 100 m south-southwest of the Northern Complex.¹⁵ In the preparation level for this floor there appeared a billon tetradrachm minted in the middle of the third century CE, marking a terminus post quem for the creation of the latest floor levels (see below on

⁸ Sidebotham et al. 2020, 14.

⁹ Trenches BE18-115 and BE19-124.

¹⁰ Ast and Rądkowska 2020.

¹¹ Ast et al. forthcoming.

¹² See a first interpretation of the area in Sidebotham et al. 2020, 15.

¹³ Trench BE19-131 corresponds to the small room.

¹⁴ There, a total of 53 cowry shells were found in the fifth-century levels. They were mostly deposited in the floor of the entrance to the temple, preserving evidence of pierced holes or cut upper parts and being interpreted as a “*votum* or perhaps for apotropaic purposes” (Rądkowska et al. 2013, 224–25). For the cowry shells found in BE19-130, see Sidebotham et al. 2020, 15.

¹⁵ Pers. commns. of R.C.A. Geerts, R. Ast, and S.E. Sidebotham, 2019.

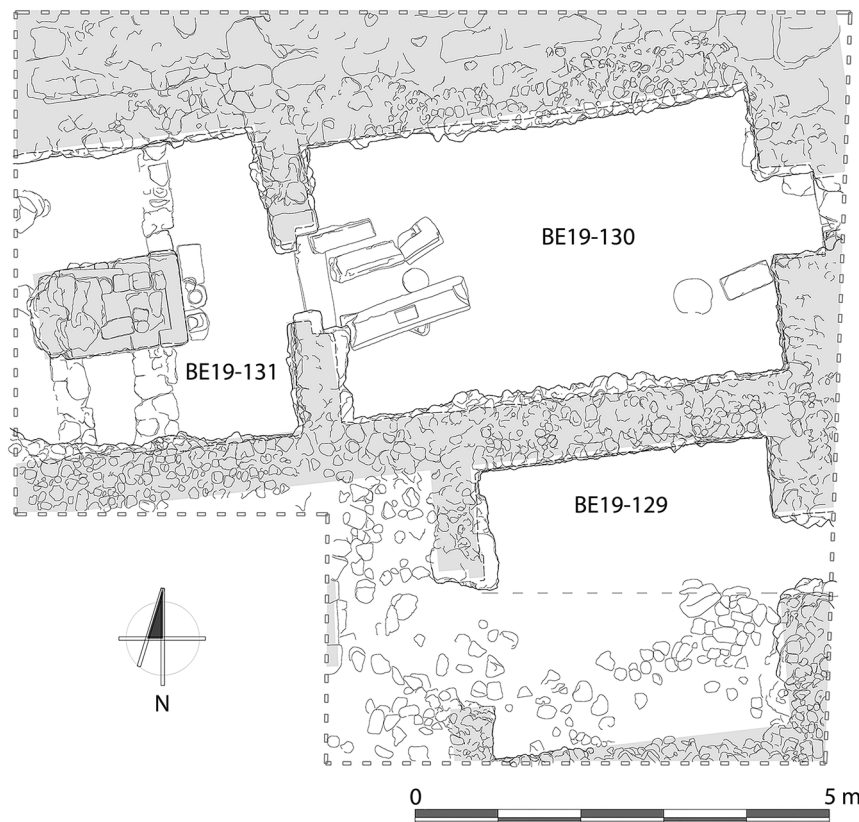


FIG. 4. Plan of the excavated area, trenches BE19-129–131 (drawing by S. Popławski).

coins). Taken together, the foundation deposits, the coin, and the floor belonging to the coral head walls point to a remaking of the space at the end of the third or, more likely, in the fourth century CE.

Reinforcing the impression of an area associated with ritual, excavations recorded two round pedestals or altar bases on the floor of trench 130, the first one just inside the entrance door and the other in front of the door leading to the small room in trench BE19-131. The space was used over a long period of time, as shown by the multiple layers of clay mixed with sand covering the original floor, perhaps indicating occasional repairs to the room. At some point, the space was abandoned and progressively covered with sand and debris. It is worth noting that several anhydritic gypsum ashlar blocks blocked the eastern door, a practice observed in other religious complexes in Berenike, such as in the Isis Temple in its late phase. Especially interesting were remains associated with the door that gave access to the next room. These included a lintel and cavetto cornice found east of the door joining the rooms where trenches 130 and 131 were excavated (fig. 6). In addition, excavations recorded one of the

most important objects documented in the whole area, which lay beneath the lintel and cavetto cornice: a pictorial stele in Egyptian style accompanied by a short inscription in Greek, analyzed below.

The room (trench BE19-129) located to the south of the anteroom (trench BE19-130), running parallel to it along a shared wall, revealed a similar arrangement: a rectangular anteroom communicating with the central courtyard of the Northern Complex on the eastern side and with a possible small room (or rooms) to the west (fig. 7). Lack of time prevented more complete excavation of this space, but similarities with the anteroom to the north (including two well-made doors that accessed a couple of spaces to the west) suggest the existence of another ritual area in this zone.

Finally, a trench (BE19-131) measuring 4.20 m north–south x 3 m east–west lay west of the anteroom (BE19-130). A small door with a threshold 1.35 m wide x 0.33 m deep separated this space from the anteroom. The jambs of the door were built of ashlar and, as mentioned above, excavations at the western end of the anteroom, close to the door, documented additional jambs and a lintel with a separate cavetto



FIG. 5. View looking northeast showing the cowry shell deposition in the northeast corner of the anteroom (trench 130); scale = 10 cm.



FIG. 6. Lintel and cavetto cornice found fallen east of the door between trenches 130 and 131. View looking west; scale = 50 cm.



FIG. 7. Trenches 129 (below), 130 (upper right), and 131 (upper left), looking west-northwest. In the west part of trench 129, there are two consecutive doors on either side of what appears to be a small room (unexcavated). In the west part of trench 130 are the remains of lintels and jambs of the door between trenches 130 and 131, below which the stele was found.

cornice (see fig. 6). Reconstruction of this door using these architectural elements revealed a small, yet monumental entrance.

The entrance led to a rectangular room that had been reworked in the Late Roman period. Thus, the northern wall of the room (left wall in fig. 8) was



FIG. 8. Trench 131 after excavation. The door linking trench 131 (below) with trench 130, the anteroom (above), can be seen in the central upper part and the pedestal in the center of the image. View looking east; scale = 50 cm.



FIG. 9. Detail of the southern wall of the room in trench 131, composed of medium and large coral heads. View looking south; scale = 50 cm.

originally built with ashlar and was, perhaps, of Early Roman origin. Sometime in the fourth century CE, the Northern Complex experienced a complete remodeling and, in this room, coral heads were used to build a wall *de novo* or else were placed over earlier ashlar walls. This is quite clear in the northern part of the room, but uncertain in the southern part, which was not fully explored (fig. 9). It is also worth noting that the western wall of the room was not excavated, which means that the room's precise dimensions remain unknown, although not much space probably separated the western limit of the trench from this wall. It was likely during the later period that builders added the short walls at the eastern side of the room with its

monumental door, separating this room from the anteroom to the east (upper part of fig. 8).¹⁶

The main feature of the room in this late period was a structure (locus 008), probably a pedestal, located in the middle of it and aligned with both doors of the building, quite possibly the *raison d'être* for this space.¹⁷ The pedestal was rectangular and made of well-cut limestone and anhydritic gypsum ashlar, with a partially preserved thin stone wall along the upper western edge of the structure (fig. 10).¹⁸ The interior of the pedestal had an additional row of ashlar,¹⁹ possibly reflecting reuse during an even later period. In front of the pedestal were cultic elements such as an inscribed cube statue and a tapering column that may have been part of an offering stand. They rested on stone bases that probably acted as an offering bench (fig. 11).²⁰ The third base, to the right of the column and cube statue, was not associated with any object, but it is possible that the stele discovered in the anteroom once stood there. Excavations recorded additional evidence for votive use of the pedestal in the form of fifteen bird skeletons lying both on top and around it. Besides those, an iron harpoon lay between the front part of the pedestal and the cube statue, while the presumed top of the incomplete offering stand sat amid the rubble inside the room. The various finds are further described and interpreted in detail below. The stratigraphy seems to show that ritual activity took place both on top of the pedestal and on the floor of the room, where the bird offerings had been deposited. After a period of unknown duration, another layer of sediment covered the floor, where ritual activity continued in the same way. Thus, the several identified floor layers had no abandonment strata between them. They are evidence of a continuous and uninterrupted use of the shrine during this late period of the building.

Excavations permit analysis of only the latest activities on and around the pedestal, as the lack of time prevented completion of its excavation.²¹ The beginning

¹⁶ Wall north of the doorway: 1.4 m long x 1.2 m high; wall south of the doorway: 1.5 m wide x 1.5 m high.

¹⁷ The section below on the shrine architecture discusses why this should be considered a pedestal rather than an altar.

¹⁸ Pedestal: 1.08 m north-south x 1.85 m east-west; thin wall: 10 cm wide x 70 cm high.

¹⁹ This row: 0.72 m north-south x 1.10 m east-west.

²⁰ Total combined dimensions of the three bases: 1.15 m north-south x 0.30 m east-west.

²¹ Unfortunately, no permits have been granted so far to continue with the work in this area.



FIG. 10. The pedestal in trench 131 during its excavation. View looking west; scale = 2 m.



FIG. 11. The pedestal with cube statue and other votive elements in front. View looking west; scale = 50 cm.

of this phase can be related to a first earthen floor traversed by three small rows of fired bricks of unknown function (see fig. 8): two of them south of the pedestal and another one north of it.²² At the southeastern corner, below this first layer, excavations documented a complete cooking pot buried in the floor (fig. 12). As noted above, there are parallels for such buried items: the deposit of cowry shells in the anteroom to the east;²³ the incomplete amphora found in the foundational layer of trench 129;²⁴ and the coarse ware jar

²² Brick rows south of the pedestal: easternmost, 1.15 m long x 0.40 m wide x 0.40 m high; westernmost, 1.15 m long x 0.50 m wide x 0.15 m high; brick row north of the pedestal: 1.35 m long x 0.30 m wide x 0.10 m high.

²³ Trench BE19-130.

²⁴ BE18/19-116.



FIG. 12. Buried deposit found in the southeastern corner of the room in trench 131, consisting of a complete cooking pot. View looking southeast; scale = 10 cm.

in the room to the north.²⁵ It is noteworthy that the pot was empty, probably indicating that it originally contained some liquid, now completely lost, except for some residual white sediment.

The documented pottery from trenches 129–131 dates to the Late Roman period (fourth to sixth centuries CE). Most sherds were Egyptian wares, but there were some unusual fragments, mainly in the room with the pedestal and in the anteroom to the east. These included several sherds of exotic imports such as South Arabian and Aksumite pottery, and some fragments of Eastern Desert Ware. We can also highlight the recovery of some coins. All these materials point to the late third or early fourth century CE and later.²⁶

Above the earliest floor of the inner room, trench 131, there were several other layers linked with the ritual activity of the shrine (including the presence of bird offerings) and showing continuity until some point when the room was abandoned and slowly decayed. After an unknown length of time, a cut through the collapsed walls of the building gave access to the pedestal room. It is uncertain when exactly this late intervention happened, but it was likely sometime in the fifth century CE. It correlates to the bird offering that was placed upon the remains of a wooden surface as part of the last addition to the pedestal (fig. 13). Excavations also documented a bird skeleton inside the room's collapse, next to the door leading to the anteroom. Therefore, until the very end of the occupation

²⁵ BE15-110.

²⁶ We thank J. Oleksiak, one of the pottery specialists of the Berenike Project, for this information.



FIG. 13. Detail of the upper part of the pedestal, with the last row of ashlars added, upon which the last bird offering was deposited. View looking west; scale = 10 cm.

of the area, which likely occurred (as elsewhere at the site)²⁷ around the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century CE, the room had a ritual use.

ARCHITECTURE AND MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE FALCON SHRINE

Architecture

The plan of the building is that of an Egyptian shrine, with two small consecutive rectangular rooms with doorways placed on a central axis (see figs. 4, 7, 14). A doorway with Egyptian decoration consisting of a cornice and torus with a sun disk element on the cornice, which is only found in temples or tombs, separated the rooms.²⁸ The doorjambs have an unusual projecting element on either side (a widening of a few centimeters of the jamb at the upper end), but the lintel and cavetto cornice are of the expected type. Centrally placed on the cornice is a raised rectangle intended to be sculpted in the shape of a sun disk with two flanking cobras. This unfinished state also appears in other cases, even in major building projects such as the temple of Karnak.²⁹ This doorway confirms that this was a shrine in the Egyptian architectural tradition.

²⁷ Sidebotham 2011, 279–82.

²⁸ Koenigsberger 1936.

²⁹ Schwaller de Lubicz 1999, pls. 240, 241.

The central element in the rear room of the shrine (trench 131) is a rectangular masonry structure, which, as noted above, stands close to the rear wall, but the exact location of this wall is conjectural at this stage because it remains unexcavated. In the preliminary reports, the structure had been identified as an altar,³⁰ but this term is problematic. In modern usage, *altar* refers to the focal point of cultic acts involving the consecration of offerings to a god. In Egyptian temples, the offerings were placed on offering stands or offering tables (not altars) positioned in front of the divine statue, and the term *altar* refers to a freestanding platform located in the open court of the temple.³¹ In the present case, the structure should be identified as a podium or pedestal upon which the divine statue rested. Usually, this statue stood inside a naos shrine made of wood or stone, which shielded it when not in use. In fact, an eroded wooden surface was preserved on the upper part of the pedestal that could well have been the remains of such a wooden naos shrine. In larger temples, such as those at Edfu and Philae, the pedestal and the naos could be made of the same block of stone.³² An additional bark stand could be placed in the temple sanctuary, intended for a processional image of the god.³³ There is no indication, however, that this pedestal was a bark stand. They were generally located in the center of a room, whereas the permanent image stood against the rear wall. Also, the known bark stands from Egyptian temples are generally monolithic, as for example the one excavated inside the Berenike Isis temple,³⁴ or are built of only a few blocks, whereas the pedestal in the Falcon Shrine is built of a large number of blocks.

The pedestal is more elevated at the back than at the front. Originally it would have had a flat surface about 1.50 m high, based on surviving pedestals elsewhere (e.g., in the southern temple at Karanis).³⁵ Other surviving examples of masonry podia are in the New Kingdom temple of Luxor and in a Roman-period kiosk outside the temple of Isis in Philae.³⁶ The latter is interesting because it preserved a relatively small shrine on

³⁰ Sidebotham et al. 2020, 11.

³¹ Ernst 2001, 59–61.

³² Wilkinson 2000, 70; Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 87–88.

³³ Kaper 1997, 181–204; Kurth 2016, 196, 204.

³⁴ Sidebotham et al. 2020, 17–18, pl. XX.3.

³⁵ Boak 1933, 53.

³⁶ Brunner 1977, pls. 24, 26, 185d; Hölbl 2004, 92, fig. 124.

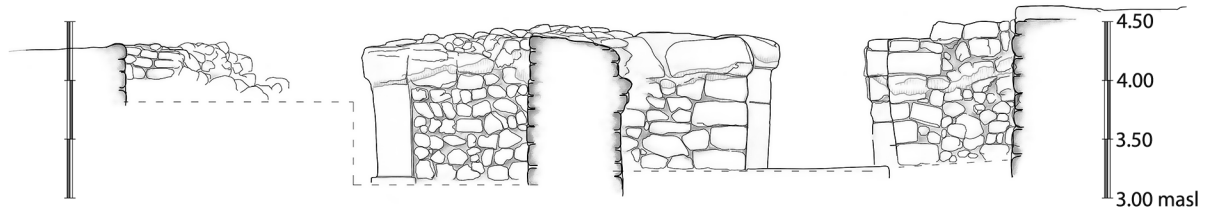


FIG. 14. Elevation of the west walls in trenches 129 (left) and 130 (right). The latter shows the doorway connecting with the inner room, trench 131 (drawing by S. Popławski).

its upper surface, as well as a parapet.³⁷ With its large size, the Berenike pedestal could have accommodated a naos of equally large dimensions. The Philae example also shows that a much smaller naos could have stood on it, but in most cases a pedestal was of the same size as the naos for which it was intended.³⁸

Cube Statue and Offering Stand

Berenike registration number:

BE19/131/033-001 (statue).

Dimensions: ht. 38 cm.

Material: anhydritic gypsum from the Berenike region.

In front of the pedestal were items found on irregularly shaped stone bases (see fig. 11). On the left (south), oriented toward the entrance of the shrine, was a sculpture of a squatting male figure, inscribed on its front with at least four and perhaps as many as five or even six lines of Greek text, of which only three preserve distinct letters (fig. 15). The type is known as a cube statue or block statue, and since the New Kingdom this was “the most common statue type for non-royal persons in Egyptian temples.”³⁹ The latest previously known examples in Egypt do not post-date the mid Ptolemaic period.⁴⁰ The Berenike block statue is probably later; it has close parallels in the Amun temple at Naga, Sudan, where eight block statues from the Early Roman period have been recorded (fig. 16).⁴¹ Wildung has ascribed the Naga sculptures to a local workshop.⁴² The temple at El-Hassa, Sudan,



FIG. 15. Two views of the cube statue from the Falcon Shrine; scale = 10 cm (K. Braulińska).



FIG. 16. Five cube statues from the Amun temple at Naga. Khartoum, Sudan National Museum, left to right: SNM 34575, SNM 31332b, SNM 31332c, SNM 31332a, SNM 34581; excav. 1998 in Naga, Sudan, by the Grabungen des Ägyptischen Museums Berlin (courtesy D. Wildung and the Naga project of the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich).

³⁷ Lyons 1896, 26, photograph no. 9.

³⁸ Hohnack 2020.

³⁹ Schulz 2011, 1.

⁴⁰ Schulz 2011, 4.

⁴¹ Wildung 2018, frontispiece, 221–37. First published Wildung 2001, 320–26.

⁴² Wildung 2018, 14, 221.

contained a statue of similar shape and dimensions.⁴³ The Meroitic temple at Qasr Ibrim also contained a block statue, but this is likely to be a reused piece from earlier times.⁴⁴ The Naga statues have facial features that Wildung described as African,⁴⁵ but the Berenike statue is hard to compare in this respect because its lips and nose have been damaged. Its eyes, however, are different because of the presence of eyelids, which resemble those of some Roman-period statues from the Isis temple at Berenike.⁴⁶ Another difference is the indication of a neck, which is not present in the Naga statues. Finally, the Naga statues all have back pillars, which the Berenike piece lacks. The statue was made in Berenike in local stone, whereas its conception was influenced by Meroë.

The close similarity between the Berenike statue and the Naga series indicates a connection between Berenike and the Meroitic kingdom. Further supporting this connection are finds from the temple of Isis at Berenike, notably a large statue in local stone inspired by the Meroitic god Sebiumeker.⁴⁷ In a room abutting the exterior southern wall of the main Isis temple at Berenike, excavations also documented a small bronze statuette of the Meroitic god Arensnuphis.⁴⁸ Elsewhere in the Northern Complex, found in a room to the south,⁴⁹ was a head of Amun of a type also known from Meroë.⁵⁰ The eight Naga statues and the one from El-Hassa are between 17.5 and 22.0 cm high, which is smaller than the Berenike figure by nearly half. Also, they lack inscriptions. The Naga statues have been severely damaged, although the faces survive relatively well. The Berenike statue is also damaged on the front, particularly affecting the feet, the inscription, and the nose, indicating that these objects were treated differently from other votive statues at the two locations. Rondot opined that such statues served as door stoppers, but Wildung has argued against this, and he con-

siders them to have been used in a devotional ritual, or as grinding stones for grain.⁵¹ The dating of the Naga statues in the first century CE leads us to propose a similar date for the Berenike example. Also supporting this date is the personal name suspected in the first line of the Greek inscription (Χεσθώτης), which seems to be attested in a first-century CE ostrakon found in the Early Roman rubbish dump in Berenike in 1997.⁵²

The Greek inscription appears on the front of the cube statue. However, the text is badly damaged, especially on the left side, where approximately one third of all lines are completely worn away. On the right, meager remains of at least four lines survive. Clearly visible is a personal name ending in -θωτης. Whether there was a line above this is not clear. At least three additional lines preserving traces of lettering follow; it seems likely, given the space and general appearance of the damage, that there was an additional line at the bottom. The carving is somewhat primitive, with letters varying in size. Vestigial remains of red paint can be seen in the incisions of some letters (e.g., ω in line 1).

Very little can be said about the content of the inscription. There is the personal name ending -θωτης in line 1, which was probably the name of the person responsible for either making or, more likely, dedicating the statue. One might expect a patronymic after that name, but the letters in line 2 are too uncertain to indicate whether they formed a name.

```
(- - - - -)
[- - -] . θωτης
[- - -] . ε . . . εΙ (Ι)
[- - -] . α . . . ης
4 [- - -] traces
- - - - -
```

Line 1: The letter before θ is round. The traces most resemble σ but could also be from ε, although there is no remnant of the middle hasta visible. If σ is correct, then a good possibility is the name Χεσθώτης, also written Χεσσώτης. The same name appears to be attested with the spelling Χεσσώτης in *O.Berenike* 1.91 from the mid first century CE. If, which is less likely, the letter before θ was ε, then the name might have been something like Πετρωθώτης. Names such as Παθώτης and Ψενθώτης, both known from Berenike (e.g., *O.Berenike* 3.399, late first century CE; 3.284, late first century CE), do not accord well with the traces on the stone.

⁴³Rondot 2011, 146–47, pl. 25c.

⁴⁴Rose 2007, 97–98.

⁴⁵Wildung 2018, 221: “Die Gesichter zeigen mit vorspringendem Kinn, fliehender Stirn, wulstigen Lippen, kleinen, weit auseinanderliegenden kugelig vortretenden Augen und großen, hoch angesetzten Ohren einen afrikanisch geprägten indigenen ethnischen Typ.”

⁴⁶E.g., the eyes are comparable to the statue of a pharaoh in Sidebotham et al. 2019, pl. 25.3.

⁴⁷Sidebotham et al. 2020, 12, pl. 17.1; Kaper 2021, 58–62.

⁴⁸Sidebotham, et al. 2020, 21, pl. 25.3; Kaper 2021, 62–63.

⁴⁹In trench BE18/19-116.

⁵⁰Sidebotham et al. 2020, 14, pl. 7.3; Kaper 2021, 64.

⁵¹Rondot 2011; Wildung 2018, 223.

⁵²See commentary below regarding line 1 of the inscription.

Line 2: The letter after the initial ε is rounded, probably θ or ο. The penultimate letter looks like σ at first glance, but its squarish character and high position in the line suggests, rather, that it is ε. Thus, several letter sequences present themselves:] εθνει,] εογει, and] εονει, raising the prospect of such words as ἔθνει (“tribe” or “people”) or a form of Θεογεΐτων, although this name is not typical of the region. However, these are not exclusive possibilities. It is uncertain where exactly the line ended.

Next to (and north of) the cube statue stood a tapering round column fragment with a rectangular block propped against its side (see figs. 10, 11). The tapering column may well have been the lower part of an offering stand because it is exactly centered in front of the pedestal, and it may have held a lamp or an incense burner. It is worth pointing out that excavations noted a stone piece amid the tumble of the room that fits with the shape and dimensions of this offering stand (fig. 17). The upper surface of the stone has a square hole, filled with some burnt residue, that suggests it was probably used as an incense burner. Thus, there is the possibility that this fragment was, in fact, the upper part of the offering stand located in the middle of the stone bases in front of the pedestal. Comparable stands in ceramic have been found, (e.g., at the Bucheum in Armant),⁵³ and metal stands are known from the sacred animal necropolis at Saqqara.⁵⁴ To the right (north) of this offering stand was a broad flat stone that served as the base for a third element, which is lost. Perhaps this was the original location of the stele found in the outer room, which fits well onto this base.

The Falcons

The inner room, the room with the pedestal, also produced 735 animal remains: fragments of skeletons of fish, birds, and mammals, as well as pieces of bird eggshells. Fish remains were 5.7%, and mammalian remains 16.5% (table 1). The mammal bones came from six species: pig (*Sus scrofa* f. *domestica*), donkey (*Equus asinus*), dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*), cattle (*Bos taurus*), sheep (*Ovis aries*), and goat (*Capra hircus*).

The bird bones, which constituted 64.2% of the total faunal remains (see table 1), were from three species, representing one genus (*Falco*): peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*), and



FIG. 17. Upper part of the offering stand found in the tumble of the inner room. Each large color increment on the scale = 10 cm.

TABLE 1. Species distribution of animal remains from the inner room, trench BE19-131.

Taxon	No.	%
Fish (Pisces)	38	5.7
Falcon (<i>Falco</i> sp.)	428	64.2
Eggshell	91	13.6
Pig (<i>Sus scrofa</i> f. <i>domestica</i>)	4	0.6
Donkey (<i>Equus asinus</i>)	4	0.6
Dromedary (<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>)	2	0.3
Cattle (<i>Bos taurus</i>)	2	0.3
Sheep/goat (<i>Ovis aries</i> / <i>Capra hircus</i>)	98	14.7
NISP	667	90.7
Unidentified	68	9.3
Total	735	100

NISP = number of identified specimens.

common kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*; fig. 18). In total, there were fifteen falcon individuals recorded from the explored area. Fourteen had been deposited in the central part of the room, next to the pedestal. There were nine individuals of subadult peregrine falcons, two individuals of saker falcons, and one adult kestrel (species identification based on the comparative collection). The remaining specimens were not identified due to both the poor state of preservation and the young age of the birds. In the southeastern corner of the room, a complete skeleton of an adult peregrine

⁵³ Mond and Myers 1934, pls. 80, 98.2, 140.

⁵⁴ Green 1987, 29–34.



FIG. 18. Femurs of the common kestrel from Berenike; healthy bone on the left; pathologically fused bone (with displacement) on the right; scale = 5 cm.

falcon was discovered intentionally placed under an inverted vessel (fig. 19). In the case of the eggshells, they also belonged to falcons.

The anatomical distribution of animal remains from this room was quite specific and deserves discussion. The mammalian remains, mainly caprids, had features typical of what could be called consumer waste. The most attractive parts of the carcass for consumption dominated: the bones of the torso and the proximal parts of the limbs. Only single bone fragments from the distal parts of the limbs and head (a few fragments of teeth) were recorded. The remains of the other species: cattle, donkeys, dromedaries are represented only by single fragments of the limbs.

The bird remains displayed a different anatomical distribution. Excavations recorded skeletons in situ that were almost complete and in an anatomical order. They were all deposited in a characteristic way: with the wings tightly placed against the body. The common feature of almost all the falcon skeletons was the complete absence of skull remains. Only two individuals (the only adults in the shrine) had complete skeletons: a kestrel and the peregrine falcon in the corner of the room (see fig. 19). The presence in Berenike of complete falcon skeletons of different ages, as well as eggshells, indicates that people had direct access to the nests there or that these birds were bred. Considering the location of Berenike and the topographic conditions (proximity to the mountains), both possibilities are equally likely.

Of the three species of falcon documented in the room, the first, the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*),



FIG. 19. Complete skeleton of an adult peregrine falcon in the southeastern corner of the inner room; scale = 10 cm.

appears nearly worldwide. It possesses a fairly stocky and strong body structure, long pointed wings, a relatively short tail, and exceptionally large claws relative to the rest of the body. Humans often use females to hunt pheasants and ducks by engaging in high-altitude circling flight (so-called chats hunting), and smaller males hunt partridges in the same way.⁵⁵ Excavations recorded the remains of peregrine falcons in Berenike both in the room with the pedestal (the individual buried in the corner and at least three juveniles as well as eggshells) and in the city's central Isis temple. Excavations in 2020 identified a single burial of a peregrine falcon from the mid first century CE in the animal cemetery in Berenike.⁵⁶

The second species documented in the shrine, the saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*), is a southern species that lives in southeastern and central Europe and in central western Asia. It occurs from Austria eastward through the Balkans to Turkmenistan, and in Siberia to Central Asia. It is migratory (except for southern birds), wintering in Ethiopia, the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, North India, and West China.⁵⁷ It occurs in open spaces: steppes, the edges of deserts, semi-deserts, and high mountain areas. It nests on rocks, trees, and in abandoned nests of other birds. Excavations documented only young individuals of this species in the Falcon Shrine, all devoid of heads and deposited in the central part of the room, as noted above.

Finally, there were several skeletons of common kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*), one of them an adult; it was the only bird with a preserved head aside from the peregrine deposited in the corner. The common kestrel is

⁵⁵ Mindell et al. 2018; Wink 2018.

⁵⁶ In trench BE20-132.

⁵⁷ Orta et al. 1994.

a medium-sized falcon with a body length of 32–35 cm and a slender figure with a long tail. It inhabits almost all of Europe to the highlands and high Alps, eastern Asia except for the Arctic Circle, and Africa (the north of the continent and south of the Sahara). Kestrels are partially sedentary. Populations inhabiting the northern areas and juveniles do migrate. Usually they fly alone, only sometimes moving in groups of several individuals. The older ones fly to southern Europe and the younger ones to Africa.⁵⁸ The kestrel is most often observed when hovering in the air, flapping its wings. They mainly hunt rodents and insects.

We do not know whether the falcons discovered in Berenike had only religious or symbolic significance or were utility birds. The harbor's location and its extensive commercial contacts make it likely that knowledge of falconry and falcon breeding could have reached there as well; there is good evidence for the use of falcons in Asia and the Mediterranean in antiquity. Falconry probably originated in central Asia about 3,500 years ago. One of the oldest depictions of a man with an eagle is known from Turkey (1500 BCE).⁵⁹ A relief from the time of Sargon II (722–705 BCE) depicting a hunter with an eagle confirms that the Assyrians also knew this hunting method.⁶⁰ Ctesias of Knidos, court physician to the Persian king Artaxerxes II, composed one of the earliest extant treatises on falconry in the first part of the fourth century BCE.⁶¹ It describes in detail the hunting of foxes and hares with eagles and the ways the peoples of Central Asia used birds of prey. (Pseudo-)Aristotle provides evidence for falconry in Thrace in his day (*Historia animalium* 9.36).⁶² Moreover, humans used all known species of falcons in falconry, especially peregrine and saker falcons. In Persia and Arabia, the kestrel was used as a decoy to catch other raptors and to train greyhounds.

From a votive point of view, the presence of the 15 falcons in the inner room of the shrine next to or on top of the pedestal is helpful for reconstructing the ritual activities conducted in this space. Thus, it is worth highlighting that there were no signs of wrapping or mummification, but it is likely that these birds were originally deposited as votive offerings.

Falcon mummies are known from the extensive catacombs at Saqqara, and Herodotus (2.67) mentions the massive burials of hawks at Buto.⁶³ However, they are much older than the remains of falcons from Berenike. In the Nile Valley, falcon burials are known from ca. 700 BCE onward.⁶⁴ Cults for individual falcons have been noted in the temples at Athribis (Lower Egypt), Edfu, and Philae,⁶⁵ but no burials of falcons had been previously identified inside temples. The significance of the cult for the individual falcons relates to the sun god Re-Harakhty or the sky god Horus of Edfu.⁶⁶ Also unique to Berenike are the falcon eggshells found in the shrine. The addition of eggs in votive offerings of animal mummies was common practice, well known from burials of ibises and crocodiles, but falcon eggs have not been identified in excavated contexts previously.⁶⁷

The young animals in the shrine had all been decapitated, but apparently not mummified. Headless falcon mummies have been found at several other sites, but always as isolated cases, never as a group. The authors know four examples, only one of which has an archaeological context. This is from the tomb of Djedhor (G50), located near the Shunet ez-Zebib at Abydos, in which “a well-wrapped mummified hawk” occurred together with a human burial in a sarcophagus. It dates to the 30th Dynasty.⁶⁸ An unprovenanced headless falcon mummy is in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, well wrapped and with a cartonnage mask.⁶⁹ Other headless falcon mummies, which are probably of Roman date, are in Leiden⁷⁰ and Prague.⁷¹

In general, Egyptian animal mummies, especially raptors, are often found incomplete. Ikram has ascribed this to the difficulty of breeding falcons. They were generally captured in the wild and often had suffered injuries while hunting.⁷² However, one of the birds in the Berenike shrine had a healed fracture on its leg (see fig. 18, right), which suggests that it was held

⁵⁸ Richarz 2009.

⁵⁹ Cieřlikowski 2009; Cygański 2014.

⁶⁰ Candil García and Hartman 2007.

⁶¹ Photius (*FGrHist* F 45, 24); see also Karttunen 2008.

⁶² Some ascribe this work to Theophrastus.

⁶³ Davies and Smith 2005.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Morgan and McGovern-Huffman 2008.

⁶⁵ Fitzenreiter 2013, 115.

⁶⁶ Kessler 2005, 57.

⁶⁷ Bailleul-LeSuer 2019, 93.

⁶⁸ Ikram 2007, 423.

⁶⁹ Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 29685; Ikram and Iskander 2002; Ikram 2015, 88.

⁷⁰ Raven and Taconis 2005, 280 [no. 97].

⁷¹ Strouhal and Vyhnánek 1979, no. 128.

⁷² Ikram et al. 2013, 51 n. 2; Ikram 2017, 459.

in captivity. Moreover, Berenike's animal cemetery also contained one complete peregrine falcon from the mid first century CE, as noted above.⁷³ In the Berenike shrine, the falcon bodies were all complete apart from the missing heads. The stele discussed below appears to indicate a religious motivation for separating the heads. Even though two bodies had intact heads, there was a deliberate practice of decapitating most of the falcons in this shrine.

Discussion of the remains of falcons at Berenike cannot ignore the numerous graffiti and images of falcons in rock art from the Eastern Desert.⁷⁴ These images have a very wide chronological range, from the Predynastic to the Roman period. Their sphere of symbolism is also very rich. The main aspects are royal power, solar cults, and the falcon as lord of the desert. Falcon representations are also associated with natural rock formations and with the Egyptianization of the Eastern Desert and Nubian societies.⁷⁵ This iconography is, therefore, an important part of the cultural context of the finds from Berenike.

Stele of the Falcon God and the Head

Berenike registration number: BE19/130/15/001.

Dimensions: ht. 47 cm x wdth. 33 cm x depth 9 cm.

Material: anhydritic gypsum from the Berenike region.

Excavations recorded a round-topped stele of traditional Egyptian iconography, with a Greek text in the lower part, in the anteroom to the east of the room with the pedestal and falcon remains (fig. 20). It shows a combination of raised relief for the Egyptian section and sunk relief for the Greek inscription, as is common also for stelae with Egyptian texts, such as the Bucheum stelae.⁷⁶ It has been designated the Stele of the Falcon God and the Head based on its inscription and the iconography discussed below.

At the top is a winged sun disk with two appended cobras. The principal decoration of the stele depicts a figure of a pharaoh on the right offering a round object to three gods. The king wears the White Crown

of Upper Egypt. The round offering in his hands is a solid object, which could be either a large round bread or cake,⁷⁷ or a lunar disk as a crown.⁷⁸ The first god is clearly Harpokrates of Koptos because of the feather crown of Amun on his head.⁷⁹ He stands atop a stylized ⤵ (smA hieroglyph), which is an abbreviation for the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.⁸⁰ He is a child god, and his role in the scene remains secondary, even though he stands in front of the other gods. The second deity is the principal god, who has a falcon head and wears the Double Crown; apparently, this crown was altered from an earlier disk-shaped crown. The third is a goddess wearing the Hathor crown composed of cow horns and a solar disk. No names appear with the king or gods, and the iconography of the falcon god and the goddess are applicable to several deities.

The stele is well designed, taking all artistic rules and required attributes into account. The carving of the relief is not finished, however; much of the stone around the figures has not been completely taken away. As a result, details such as the staffs in the hands of the gods are not rendered clearly.

Between Harpokrates and the falcon god is an obelisk, which contains a human head at its base. This element represents a shrine shaped as an obelisk, inside of which the head is stored. The obelisk must belong to the falcon-headed god. The key to understanding this scene is provided by a relief in the temple of Edfu, in the first Chamber of the Leg inside that temple, in the second register of the western wall (fig. 21).⁸¹ The scene dates to the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (222–204 BCE). It is comparable to the Berenike stele because it depicts the king offering a round object to a falcon god followed by a goddess, and an obelisk stands in front of the god. This god is Khonsu of Edfu, and the goddess is Nekhbet. The offering presented to this couple is the lunar disk combined with the crescent, which is identical to the crown on the head of Khonsu in this scene. The obelisk is a reference to the shrine, which houses the leg of Osiris at Edfu. It is the task of

⁷⁷ Beinlich 2008, 61–63, 466; Cauville 2011, 69–70.

⁷⁸ Cauville 2011, 136.

⁷⁹ Pantalacci and Traunecker 1990, 10.

⁸⁰ Cf. Vleeming 2001, 267 [no. 192]; Hertel 2020.

⁸¹ Rochemonteix and Chassinat 1984, 254.9–255.17; Chassinat 1929, pl. 27a; Chassinat 1933, pl. 300; Cauville 1987, 54, 56; Baum 2007, 208.

⁷³ Osypińska and Osypiński 2017.

⁷⁴ Espinel 2012.

⁷⁵ Espinel 2012.

⁷⁶ Mond and Myers 1934, pls. 37–47.



FIG. 20. Stele of the Falcon God and the Head; scale = 30 cm (K. Braulińska; drawing by O.E. Kaper).

Khonsu to protect this shrine.⁸² The leg of Osiris is the source of the inundation of the Nile and, thus, of the land's fertility. Osiris and Khonsu are both associated with the moon, which provides another layer of symbolism to the scene. Khonsu is equated to Horus, the son of Osiris and, thus, fulfils the role of the son caring for his deceased father. The obelisk may also be a coffin, as is known from mortuary art, inside which an image of the deceased might be depicted.⁸³ There also exist bronze coffins for animal mummies in the shape of an obelisk, which may also be combined with an image of a falcon god as its protector.⁸⁴

The head inside the obelisk provides another layer of meaning. There are parallels elsewhere for this element, for example in a painting on a Roman-period coffin now in Berlin that depicts a shrine with a head

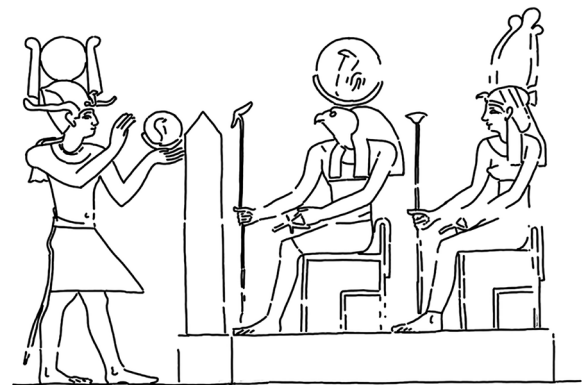


FIG. 21. Drawing after a relief from the first Chamber of the Leg in the temple of Edfu (drawing by O.E. Kaper).

hieroglyph inside.⁸⁵ This shrine belongs to Anubis, and the context refers to Osiris-Re.⁸⁶ On the stele, the obelisk is, likewise, a visual reference to the sun god.

⁸² Cauville 1987, 58.

⁸³ Kurth 2010, 172, fig. 35.

⁸⁴ Daressy 1905–06, 157, pls. 34, 35: Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 38600; Aubert and Aubert 2001, 236: London, British Museum EA 29608; Étienne 2009, 63 [no. 27].

⁸⁵ Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 12442.

⁸⁶ Kurth 2010, 175 n. 1130.

The Greek text on the stele places a taboo on the use of heads, which brings to mind the taboo on heads that prevailed in the nome of Heliopolis.⁸⁷ This taboo probably had its justification in the burial of Re-Osiris in the form referred to as the “noble head,” which was also called *Khentamenty*, “Foremost of the West.”⁸⁸ This tradition should be separated from that of the head of Osiris buried and venerated at Abydos, because the Heliopolis tradition was solar in character and relates to the Re-Osiris form of the god. The Jumilhac Papyrus also contains an image of the head *Khentamenty* inside a shrine, referring to the burial of Osiris,⁸⁹ but this shrine is not obelisk-shaped, which is apparently essential to the Heliopolitan scene.

The Berenike stele from the Falcon Shrine can be interpreted in light of the above parallels as follows. The offering of the king is a lunar-disk crown as in the temple of Edfu, and the parallel suggests that it should display details of a crescent moon beneath the full moon, and a rearing cobra inside, even though this has not been completed on the stele. The obelisk is a shrine for the body of Re-Osiris, represented by his head, and the identity of the principal god connected to this obelisk is Khonsu-Shu, who is assigned to its protection. An image of Khonsu-Shu in Dendera shows him as a falcon enveloping the obelisk with his wings.⁹⁰ Khonsu-Shu is a lunar deity, which explains the offering of the lunar disk in the relief. The goddess in the stele is likely Hathor, as the partner goddess of Khonsu in Thebes, although Isis is also possible because of the presence of Harpokrates of Koptos, who is her son. The presence of Harpokrates indicates that the offering scene is not immediately derived from the temples in Edfu or Heliopolis, but rather reflects another interpretation of the same concepts, which must be linked to the temple at Koptos. The ideas were further transmitted from Koptos to Berenike, which is not surprising because the temples at the two sites were closely connected. The principal trade route linked Berenike to Koptos in the Roman period, and the main temple of Berenike was dedicated to Isis of Koptos.⁹¹ Priests from Koptos must have been involved in the temple’s restoration in the first century CE and its subsequent maintenance.

The god Khonsu-Shu is also known from a temple relief at El-Qal’a (Koptos), depicted as a crocodile with a falcon head,⁹² and it may be significant that a statue of this rare form was also found at the temple of Isis in Berenike.⁹³ It suggests that Khonsu played some role in the local temple among the deities surrounding Isis.

The Berenike stele, depicting Khonsu, was made from stone local to Berenike and was based on complex theological notions imported from Koptos. The constituent elements of the stele are the burial of Re-Osiris in the form of his head inside an obelisk shrine and the protection by his son, the falcon god Khonsu-Shu, the son of Amun-Re, who resembles Horus, the son of Osiris in both his appearance and role. This intergenerational service afforded by a son to his father at the divine level corresponds to the succession of the sun by the moon at a cosmic level.

The Greek inscription at the bottom of the stele is just over two lines of text. It was cut on a raised, smoothed surface that measures 33.0 x 11.7 cm. The rounded lettering is careful, albeit not uniform in size. Among the widest letters is omega, which measures 3.9 x 2.1 cm; phi is the tallest, transcending both upper and lower notional boundaries with a measurement of 2.0 x 4.1 cm. The end of the second line has the curious feature of a slithering snake-like line cut in the stone and extending from the bottom of the last letter, an epsilon, to the lower right corner of the stele. This cut might have been a feature of the stone before the inscription was carved.

The stele can be dated only approximately based on its lettering and reliefs. The rounded character of the letters, especially epsilon and sigma, points to the Roman Imperial period. The letter upsilon, with bowl-shaped top, and phi, with compact circle centered on an elongated shaft, resemble those respective letters in lines 6 and 8 of a dedication from Koptos dated to the reign of Caracalla (14 July 216 CE).⁹⁴ The combination of Egyptian relief and Greek inscription also appears on a Roman dedicatory stele from Koptos from the reign of Antoninus Pius (15–24 April 149 CE).⁹⁵ Earlier stelae of this type, a number of them also surviving from Koptos, are in many cases bilingual: they contain Egyptian inscriptions, mainly hieroglyphic,

⁸⁷ Meeks 2006, 174; Leitz 2014, 302–3.

⁸⁸ Meeks 2006, 174.

⁸⁹ Vandier 1961, pl. 3.

⁹⁰ Cauville 1988, 19–20, pl. 1.

⁹¹ Sidebotham et al. 2019, 13.

⁹² Pantalacci and Traunecker 1990, 60.

⁹³ Sidebotham and Zych 2012, 39, pl. F.

⁹⁴ *I. Portes du désert* 85, pl. 54 = TM 88416.

⁹⁵ *I. Portes du désert* 73, pl. 48 = TM 88380.

alongside Greek. The Koptite dedications were set up by members of a single priestly family and date from the reigns of Tiberius to Nero, thus 14–68 CE.⁹⁶ However, monolingual (Greek) stelae of this kind are also attested in the Early Roman period.⁹⁷ Thus, it is impossible to narrow the date of the stele published here based solely on such formal features. The good preservation of the stone suggests that, regardless of when it was created, it was sheltered from wind and sand.

The inscription reads:

οὐ καθήκει ἐψη-
σαι κεφαλὴν ἔ-
3 σω ὁδε

“It is improper to boil a head in here.”

Line 3: 1. ὁδε

The inscription is a prohibition, which is a type of text previously unattested in Berenike. Most Greek inscriptions from the site are dedications to deities for safe passage at sea or for other services or favors. Many of them were inscribed on dedication blocks that supported statues, while others were carved on smaller, votive offerings set up in the courtyard of the central Isis temple by visitors to the port. The inscription written here, however, is not a dedication acknowledging a gift or service. It is a prohibition that warns the reader not to engage in what was clearly considered a profane activity: the boiling or cooking of a head, presumably that of a falcon, within a specified place—in this case, the shrine in which it was found.

Prohibitions surviving from Graeco-Roman Egypt are of two main kinds: inscriptions prohibiting access to restricted areas and miscellaneous injunctions.⁹⁸ Inscriptions from both groups generally have to do with a sacred space,⁹⁹ and nearly all admonish the reader not

to trespass this space. For example, stelae forbidding unauthorized entry into sanctuaries of asylum were erected along the outer perimeters of the sanctuaries, as we know from inscribed Ptolemaic asylum decrees from the Fayum.¹⁰⁰ These inscriptions are copies of a single ordinance that, among other things, states that stone stelae should be set up at 50-cubit intervals on all four sides of the perimeter of the temple of Isis Sakhchypsis in Theadelphia. On each of the four stelae to be set up was inscribed a brief injunction against people entering the sanctuary grounds who did not have any business being there.¹⁰¹ As chance would have it, there survives a Greek inscription with precisely the kind of injunction called for in this ordinance.¹⁰² It was carved on a stele that included a relief of the god Thoth receiving offerings from the pharaoh. Below the two figures is the following prohibition: ὅ μὴ πρᾶγμα | μηθένει εἰσιέναι (“None is to enter who has no business to.”).

However, not all injunctions were related to unauthorized entry. They could also prohibit other sorts of behavior. Two examples of this miscellaneous type of prohibition are *I.Fayoum* I 18 (second to first century BCE; TM 5947) and *I.Pan* 15 (first century CE; TM 81579).¹⁰³ *I.Fayoum* I 18 prohibits cutting down trees in what was possibly a sacred area (the inscription is very fragmentary, with much detail missing), and *I.Pan* 15 enjoins against urinating and defecating in a place sacred to the god Pan. The Berenike inscription belongs to this small class of miscellaneous prohibitions: it serves as a ritual regulation concerned with the unlawful boiling of a head.

While the message of the Berenike inscription is unusual, the language is relatively clear. It states, “It is improper to boil a head in here.” The word ἐψησαι, the aorist infinitive of the verb ἔψω, usually means “to boil.” In Greek papyri, the verb can describe, in the context of textile manufacturing, the process of

⁹⁶ *I.Portes du désert* 58, pl. 42 = TM 53843, and 59 = TM 53841. See Ast 2018, §8–12; Farid 1988.

⁹⁷ Cf. the Koptite archive just mentioned, *I.Pan du désert* 78a, pl. 65.2 = TM 53837 (21/22 CE); and from Dendera, the somewhat crude *I.Portes du désert* 27, pl. 22.2 = TM 88340 (24 CE, August 27).

⁹⁸ For inscriptions related to sanctuaries that had the right of asylum, see Bingen 2007, 266–73.

⁹⁹ Cuvigny and Wagner (1985, 90–91) make this point in their edition of an unprovenanced stela from the Ptolemaic period that contains an injunction against, as the editors interpret it, entering a κλιβανεῖον, or temple bakery; but see SEG XXXV 1682, which assigns the much later date of third century CE and

suggests that the place in question was a hot bath, not a bakery.

¹⁰⁰ *I.Fayoum* II 112 and 113 = TM 7228 and 7229 (93 BCE).

¹⁰¹ *I.Fayoum* II 112.192–2 (= 113.21–25): “And stone stelae were set up on four sides in a circle around the temple, which contained inscriptions that stated conspicuously that no one was to enter who had no business to” (καὶ προθεῖναι στήλας λιθίνας ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων, κυκλόθεν τοῦ ἱεροῦ πήχεσιν πεντήκοντα, ἐχούσας ἐπιγραφὰς ἐνδόξως ὥι μὴ πρᾶγμα μὴ εἰσίναι).

¹⁰² SEG XLIV 1447 (late Ptolemaic); see Nachtergaele 1994, 140–43. Cf. also Fraser 1970.

¹⁰³ Cf. Cuvigny and Wagner 1985, 91.

boiling linen in order to soften it. In addition, it can denote the dyeing of hair.¹⁰⁴ Here, however, there is no good reason to understand it outside its normal meaning of “to boil.”

A further linguistic point worth making concerns the expression ἔσω ὦδε in lines 2–3. The spelling ὦδε for the demonstrative adverb ὦδε (“here,” “hither,” “in this way”) is well attested in texts from the region, especially in private letters from some of the Eastern Desert *praesidia*. One can compare, for example, *O.Did.* 406.25–26 from ca. 115–150 CE (εἴ τις ἔχει πρᾶγμα πρὸς αὐτὴν ὦδε; “if anyone has a problem with her here”); *O.Krok.* 1.18.7–8 from around the time of Trajan (98–117 CE) (γράψον μοι τεῖνι [l. τίνι] θέλεις δῶ ὦδε; “write to me saying whom you want me to give it to here”); *O.Krok.* 2.206.9–10, also Trajanic (πέμψον μοι αὐτὸν ὦδε; “send him to me here”). The expression ἔσω ὦδε is also paralleled, although in the opposite order: ὦδε ἔσω; the relevant examples are *O.Heid.* 428.7 from Elephantine, dating to the first or second century CE, οὐδὲν ἔχι (l. ἔχει) με ὦδε ἔσω (“nothing concerns me in here”), and the unprovenanced *P.Oslo* 3.161.18–19, from the late third or fourth century CE, καὶ ποιῶ αὐτὸν ἐπεχθῆναι (l. ἐπαχθῆναι) ὦδε ἔσω (“and I am going to make it that he be brought in here”).

From its archaeological context, the stele almost certainly records an injunction associated with the falcon cult. The text forbade boiling the head of a bird within the area in which the stele was set up. In general, Greek textual evidence for falcon cults in Egypt is scarce. However, there was a well-known falcon cult in Philae connected with the god Horus.¹⁰⁵ It persisted into the fifth century CE, and in one late source, the Coptic *Life of Aaron*, there is an episode of possible relevance involving a falcon at the temple.¹⁰⁶ The story, set in the mid fourth century CE, recounts an episode about a Christian bishop named Macedonius who was

sent by the archbishop of Alexandria to Philae to serve the Christian community in the city. After arriving, Macedonius went to the temple where a falcon was worshiped and pretended to want to offer a sacrifice to it (no indication is given of what was to be sacrificed). While the two sons of the temple priest, who was absent at the time, were preparing a fire for the sacrifice, Macedonius pulled the sacred falcon from its cage, cut off its head and threw it onto the fire. Granted, nothing in the story suggests that the head of the bird was especially sacred, and by cutting it off, Macedonius ensured a quick death, if nothing else. Nevertheless, in light of the Berenike inscription one wonders if the beheading of the bird contained some symbolism and if the cult, both in Philae and in Berenike, demanded special reverence for the falcon head.¹⁰⁷

Thus, we infer that the Greek inscription on the stele probably indicates a local religious taboo that must relate to the theology of Heliopolis, as noted above. The specific reference to boiling the head poses some problems of interpretation. In Egyptian temple cult, offering meats for the gods were never boiled but always grilled.¹⁰⁸ There was no problem with boiling meat in the context of daily life, but in temples the term “boiling” is only found in mythological texts, with reference to the destruction of enemies of the gods.¹⁰⁹ We cannot assume that the headless falcons were considered enemies of the god, and the consumption of raptors should be excluded because not only are they not palatable but also their bones have been deposited carefully in front of the god, with their wings folded against their bodies.

As noted above, there were many food remains found in the shrine, which suggests that eating may have been part of the cultic acts performed in that place, in the manner of Greek temple rituals.¹¹⁰ But this did not involve eating the raptors. One falcon was buried in the corner of the room, with its head intact, and this clearly indicates reverence for the animal and its religious significance. We hypothesize that the sacrificial animals were boiled before being presented to

¹⁰⁴ Flemestad 2020, 85; cf. Bogensperger and Rösler-Mautendorfer 2020, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Dijkstra 2008, 209–13. Strabo, writing in the Early Roman period, mentions the sacred falcon there (17.1.49). He comments on the bird’s exceptional size and varied color, and the fact that it came from Ethiopia, but he says nothing about any ritual, let alone about any special treatment of the falcon head.

¹⁰⁶ See the recent edition with text, translation, and extensive commentary in Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2019. The story involving the falcon is in chapter 31. Cf. also Dijkstra 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Points of similarity between Philae and Berenike are also observed in the cult of Isis in late antiquity; see Ast and Rądkowska 2020, esp. 153–54.

¹⁰⁸ Verhoeven 1984, 100–1.

¹⁰⁹ Verhoeven 1984, 107.

¹¹⁰ Larson 2007, 8.

the god, perhaps to facilitate plucking their feathers, and that their heads were removed, according to the prescription on the stele.

In Greek magical texts of Roman Egypt, the solar god Apollo could be identified with Osiris, and he could be conceived as a headless god.¹¹¹ Perhaps this idea was connected to the god Re-Osiris, who was buried in an obelisk-shaped shrine and in whose presence heads were not to be included in the offerings.

The Harpoon

Berenike registration number: BE19/131033-002.

Dimensions: lgth. 34 cm x diam. 2 cm.

Material: iron.

The harpoon, 34 cm long, is made of iron, which is rare for this type of object (fig. 22). The known parallels are mostly made of bronze. The best parallel in iron is from the Roman period,¹¹² in this case measuring 23 cm in length. Its provenance is unknown. The item is identified as a harpoon because of its barb. Harpoons were used to hunt fish, but also hippopotamus and crocodile, and in mythology it is especially the weapon of Horus, a protector god.¹¹³ In Edfu, the temple contained a harpoon that was especially venerated;¹¹⁴ it was stylized and decorated with mythological elements, and it became popular also as a protective amulet.¹¹⁵ There was also a temple ritual in which a harpoon was offered to the god,¹¹⁶ and bronze harpoons could be given to temples as votive offerings;¹¹⁷ Petrie found three bronze harpoons at Koptos.¹¹⁸ Given the material and lack of stylization, the iron harpoon from Berenike seems to have been an actual weapon that was probably offered to the shrine as a votive gift.

Coins

Excavations in trenches 129–131 in the Northern Complex recorded nine coins.¹¹⁹ Three were from



FIG. 22. Harpoon found in the shrine; scale = 20 cm.

trench 129, one from trench 130, and five from trench 131. This discussion focuses on only the six coins from the shrine in trenches 130 and 131, which range in date from the first or second century until the mid to late fourth century CE. Two were billon tetradrachms from the Alexandria mint. The remainder were *aes* issues ranging in size/denomination from AE19.0 (mm) to AE26.4 (mm). Pre-296 CE issues were minted at Alexandria; the fourth-century coins are too worn for attribution but could have been minted outside Egypt. All the coins were very worn, and the only closely datable issue was a billon tetradrachm from trench 131, broken into several pieces but datable to the third regnal year of emperor Philip I or II (246/247 CE).

The general and, for the most part, extensive wear suggests that the coins circulated for some time prior to their loss or deposition. Since few coins minted in the fifth century have been documented from Berenike, one assumes that the fourth-century issues circulated well into the fifth century and later, as was common throughout Egypt and elsewhere in the Near East at that time. The Philip I/II issue, found in one of the lowest strata of trench 131, suggests that the shrine was active sometime in the later third to early fourth century. However, the remainder of the coins were likely deposited no earlier than the later fourth and into the fifth centuries CE, perhaps later.

no./locus no./pottery bucket no.), [registration number], denomination/size in mm, weight in grams, identification/date. Trench 130: (1) BE19-130.016 Pb 18 [BE19-130/016/002], billon tetradrachm (Alexandria mint), 22.6 mm, 10.4 g., mid-late third century CE. Trench 131: (2) BE19-131.019 Pb 17 [BE19-131/019/001], AE19, 2.6 g., unidentifiable mid-late fourth century CE; (3) BE19-131.009 Pb 18 [BE19-131/009/001], AE25 (Alexandria mint), 7.2 g., unidentifiable pre-296 CE; (4) BE19-131.023 Pb 24 [BE19-131/023/003], AE26.4 (Alexandria mint), 6.1 g., Early Roman (first or second century CE); (5) BE19-131.023 Pb 24 [BE19-131/023/005] (broken in several pieces), billon tetradrachm (Alexandria mint), 25.0 mm, 5.9 g., either Philip I or Philip II (246/47 CE); (6) BE19-131.029 Pb 33 [BE19-131/029/002], AE23, 3.7 g., unidentifiable.

¹¹¹ “ἀκέφαλος θεός”; see Bortolani 2019, 164.

¹¹² London, University College 63378; Petrie 1917, 37, pl. 44 [no. V 51].

¹¹³ Bonnet 1952, 317.

¹¹⁴ Griffiths 1980.

¹¹⁵ Petrie 1914, pl. 41 [nos. 243a–f].

¹¹⁶ Beinlich 2008, 173–75; Cauville 2011, 227–28.

¹¹⁷ Aubert and Aubert 2001, 236–39.

¹¹⁸ Petrie 1896, 23, pl. 21 [nos. 4, 5].

¹¹⁹ Details of the coins are presented here in the following format: location of find (format: Berenike 2019 season/trench

THE FALCON SHRINE OF BERENIKE AND OTHER
EVIDENCE FOR BLEMMYES IN THE EGYPTIAN
EASTERN DESERT

After considering all the evidence available, we propose that the two rooms excavated in the Northern Complex of Berenike are a small temple for an Egyptian cult that, in its latest phase, was adapted by the Blemmyan population to their own system of beliefs. The doorway connecting the rooms was made in an architectural form appropriate to a temple. Its statue and the stele may have been brought from the central Isis temple or from elsewhere on the site, but the doorway was made specifically for this location. The cube statue is also typical of temples, and its style displays Meroitic influence; its function, however, remains enigmatic. The stele is an important part of the inventory, as it links the cult to Koptos and to complex theological ideas. It seems inescapable that a priest from Koptos was involved in making this piece at Berenike. The somewhat crude cutting of the relief and in local stone indicate local manufacture by an artisan familiar with the required iconography but not very skilled in making it.

One of the main issues concerning the interpretation of this sacred space at Berenike relates to its chronology and evolution. We suggest the shrine evolved in three main phases. The first would be the creation of the shrine in the Early Roman period. Although we cannot give more details about this period as the related layers have not yet been excavated, the original ashlar walls seem to point in this direction. Also, the pedestal was originally made at this time in the inner room. A second phase would be the general rebuilding of the shrine, with the inclusion of coral head reinforcements in the interior walls. The excavated levels suggest the ritual use of these spaces, with the presence of several votive items and the bird offerings in the pedestal room. The chronological framework can be proposed thanks to the ceramic materials (Eastern Desert Ware, South Arabian and Aksumite pottery) and to the coins. The numismatic evidence is especially relevant, with the documentation of a mid-third century CE coin in the preparation level of the ante-room for this phase, and a coin dating from the mid to late fourth century CE in the last layers linked to this second period.¹²⁰ Considering this, we can tentatively

date the second phase of the shrine between the end of the third and the end of the fourth century CE. Finally, a third and last phase of reuse of this shrine is clear from the reopening of the space through the abandonment layers of the second phase and the latest additions to and offerings on the pedestal. Here, chronological evidence is scarce, but if we consider the dating of the previous phase and the general phasing of Berenike as a whole, the most logical choice is some point in the fifth century CE, with an abandonment at the beginning of the sixth century CE at the latest.

The assemblage of finds is itself hard to date. The block statue has close parallels in Meroitic temples from the first century CE, and this may provide the date for the shrine's foundation. The stele is more problematic. There is no indication that it dates from the Ptolemaic period, and the Greek epigraphy seems to exclude that option. As for a date *ante quem*, the latest stele for a Buchis bull at Armant is from 340 CE, and its relief is still in accordance with the rules of ancient Egyptian art.¹²¹ The final use of hieroglyphs at Philae dates from 394 CE. Therefore, a date in the fourth century CE is still possible, but later is unlikely. The content of the stele presupposes a close involvement of priests from Koptos, which is more likely during the first to early third centuries CE rather than later. The numismatic evidence suggests use of the shrine in the second half of the third to early fourth century CE and the later fourth or fifth century CE and possibly later.

The shrine functioned for a long time, and the deposition of the falcon bodies belongs to the latest phase of use, which is the fourth–fifth century CE. There was still a cult for Isis and Serapis in the same part of Berenike during the later fourth or the fifth century CE, as is shown by the inscription of the Blemmyan king Isemne referred to above, which dates to the late fourth or first half of the fifth century CE.¹²² That text was inscribed on the lintel of an Egyptian temple doorway in the same complex of buildings as the Falcon Shrine, although other elements of the Isemne shrine's architecture are unknown, as they remain unexcavated.

Our working hypothesis is that the Falcon Shrine in its latest phase could have served the Blemmyan population of Berenike. The potsherds of Eastern Desert

¹²⁰ This last coin was recovered in the fill of a robbing hole related to the period of abandonment of this second phase

(locus 019). For details about this coin, see *supra* n. 119.

¹²¹ Grenier 1983.

¹²² Ast and Rądkowska 2020.

Ware found inside the shrine point in this direction, as do the inscriptions for Isemne and Kabantia from the neighboring shrines. The series of shrines in the Northern Complex show a Late Roman-era religious complex in which Egyptian cults were maintained with many reused objects of early Roman date. South of trench 129 there seems to have been yet another shrine, where a Serapis statue and a head of Amun of presumed Meroitic origin were found, as well as part of a bronze incense burner, and other finds around a pedestal.¹²³

Nothing is known about the religious beliefs and practices of the Blemmyes, apart from their association with the temples of Philae and Kalabsha on the Nile. The present shrine could show that they respected the Egyptian tradition and developed cultic practices in which falcons were offered to the Egyptian god Khonsu, in a way not attested in Egypt, but which still betrays its origins in ideas developed in the temples of the Nile Valley. In this regard, it is important to highlight the already noted case of the bishop Macedonius and the destruction of the falcon idol in Philae, as this could be an interesting parallel of similar Blemmyan-Egyptian cults involving falcons, as other authors have already proposed.¹²⁴

The finds in the Northern Complex deepen our knowledge of the semi-nomadic population in this area of the Eastern Desert during the Late Roman period.¹²⁵ Well attested since the end of the fourth century CE by sources such as Epiphanius, Olympiodorus, Procopius, and Cosmas Indicopleustes,¹²⁶ the Blemmyes were not definitively documented at Berenike until recently. The evidence uncovered to date points to the significant role this group played during the final centuries of the port's existence, even though it is unclear if the

Blemmyes had exclusive control of the port or shared it with other political and commercial partners.¹²⁷

The situation in the emerald mines of the Smaragdus region, some 120 km to the northwest and currently in the Wadi Gemal National Park, is somewhat clearer, as the aforementioned sources directly refer to Blemmyan control of the mines and the need for permission from their king to access the area.¹²⁸ Recent excavations in the mining site of Sikait reinforce this vision, and the material culture recovered there (mostly from the fourth to sixth centuries CE) seems to link this settlement with the presence of the Blemmyes. Especially interesting are the finds in the so-called Southern Temple, where excavations recovered several objects depicting birds in a fourth-century CE context, including a bronze figurine of Horus, two stone falcon figurines, and a small plaque showing a pair of birds, presumably falcons, wearing crowns and facing each other, with a palm branch in the middle and a sun disk above each. This evidence could perhaps be considered another parallel for a Blemmyan cult involving birds, and one that occurred in proximity, both geographically and chronologically, to ritual activities in Berenike.¹²⁹

Moreover, there is additional evidence related to increased Blemmyan presence in the area surrounding Berenike from the fourth century CE. For instance, the impressive settlement of Shenshef, about 21 km southwest of Berenike, exhibits clear similarities to sites like Sikait and has a late chronology that may point to its being another Blemmyan center.¹³⁰ We can also highlight what have been called the “enigmatic settlements,” an extensive group of sites identified in the central and southern parts of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, which share similar features, such as the simplicity of their structures, their isolation and, more generally, our own ignorance of their *raison d'être*. One explanation for these settlements links them to precisely those groups, including the Blemmyes, who

¹²³ Trench BE18/19-116; see Sidebotham et al. 2019; Sidebotham et al. 2020.

¹²⁴ E.g., Frankfurter 1998, 110–11.

¹²⁵ The Blemmyes are well documented as exerting pressure on the Roman *limes* from the third century CE. The progressive collapse of the Meroitic kingdom in the third–fourth centuries probably helped increase this pressure. On the Blemmyes, see, e.g., Török 1985; Updegraff 1988; Power 2012; Dijkstra 2012; Pierce 2012. On the collapse of the kingdom of Meroë, see, e.g., Wolf and Nowotnick 2020.

¹²⁶ Epiphanius: Eide et al. 1996–98, 305; Olympiodorus: Eide et al. 1996–88, 309; Procop., *De Bellis* 1.19.27–37; Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* 11.21.

¹²⁷ For a recent discussion of the Blemmyan political configuration and their role in Berenike, see Cobb 2021; Cooper 2021.

¹²⁸ In fact, we cannot discount the idea that the remaking of the Northern Complex by the Blemmyes in the fourth–fifth centuries could have been precisely related to the emerald trade, as has already been proposed in Ast and Rądkowska 2020.

¹²⁹ For the archaeological data concerning these finds in Sikait, see Oller et al. 2019, 2021a, 2021b.

¹³⁰ For Shenshef, see Aldsworth and Barnard 1998; Gould 1999; Sidebotham et al. 2008, 397–402.

established themselves in the area during the fourth century.¹³¹

Although we cannot be certain about the relationships among all these processes and the Blemmyan movements to the north, findings such as the Falcon Shrine and the stele inscription from the Northern Complex of Berenike indicate that references in ancient historical sources to the Blemmyan expansion into the Eastern Desert are based on a historical reality that saw the progressive emergence of new groups in Berenike and its environs as part of a broader political and social reorganization of the region. The excavation of the Falcon Shrine in the Northern Complex seems to show this process from a religious and cultic perspective, thereby illustrating how the Blemmyes adapted to long-standing religious traditions in Berenike, mixing them with their own religious cults and beliefs.

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¹³¹ For discussion of these enigmatic settlements, see Sidebotham et al. 2002; 2008, 407–11; Lassányi 2012; Power 2012, 327.

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