

Festival of Nile Inundation

By

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Abstract: *Egyptians during ages celebrated annually the inundation of the Nile –its yearly flooding which brought fertility to the land. Festival of Nile inundation was held in, ancient Egypt, Greco roman times, Coptic era, Islamic era, XVII & VIII siècles and until modern times at same time of calendar but in different ceremonies and concept. Egyptians used nilometer; a tool to gauge the Nile water level and monitor the inundation which was part of their celebration ceremonies during ages.*

The article

River Nile have about fifty-two names reserved as hieroglyphs engraved on Egyptian antiquities in which some metaphorically used to express Nile. Much has been said about the origin of the word "Nile" and that it is derived from Nilus; a word of Greek origin. It was also said that the term "Nile" was derived from the Arabic term "Nawal" means obtained, i.e. the Nile is given from the sky. The flooding of the Nile is important for Egypt happiness and prosperity, and ancient Egyptians believed that the Nile start flooding from goddess Isis tears crying her husband, Osiris.

Hapy the god of the Nile: At Egyptian era; the god Hapy was earlier mentioned as being the personification of the floods and ensuing fertility. Two Hymns to the Nile, one probably composed in the Middle Kingdom, the second written later in the Ramesside period, praise Hapy and the river for its renewed life for Egypt. *"Hail to you Hapy, sprung from earth, Come to nourish Egypt food provider, bounty maker, who creates all that is good conqueror of the Two Lands. He fills the stores, makes bulge the barns, gives bounty to the poor."*

The Egyptians made an important distinction between the Nile itself-which was simply known as "itrew", the river- and the Nile inundation, which they deified in the form of Hapi. He was usually represented as a potbellied bearded man with pendulous breasts and a headdress formed of aquatic plants. These attributes were designed to stress his fertility and fecundity, and in this sense he was interchangeable with a number of other fecundity figures whose depictions draw on the same reservoir of characteristics.

Hapy's major cult centers were in Gebel El Silsela and Aswan, where he was thought to dwell in the caverns among the rocks of the first cataract. The lower registers of many temple walls from the 5th-Dynasty mortuary temple of Sahura (2487-2475 BC) at Abusir to the Greco-Roman temple of Horus and Sobeck at Kom Ombo, where decorated with depictions of processional fecundity bearing trays of offerings. From the 19th Dynasty (1295-1186 BC) onwards there were occasionally reliefs portraying two fecundity figures, one wearing the papyrus of Lower Egypt and the other wearing the Upper Egyptian lotus, in the act of binding together the wind-pipe hieroglyph (*Sema*) signifying the unity of the southern and northern halves of Egypt.

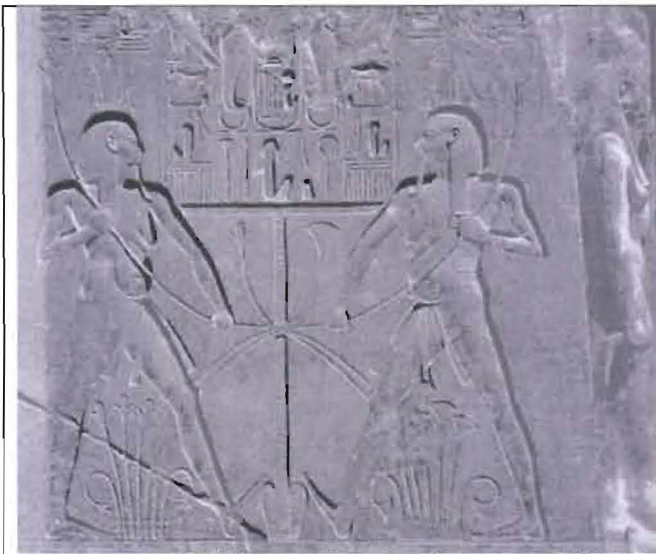
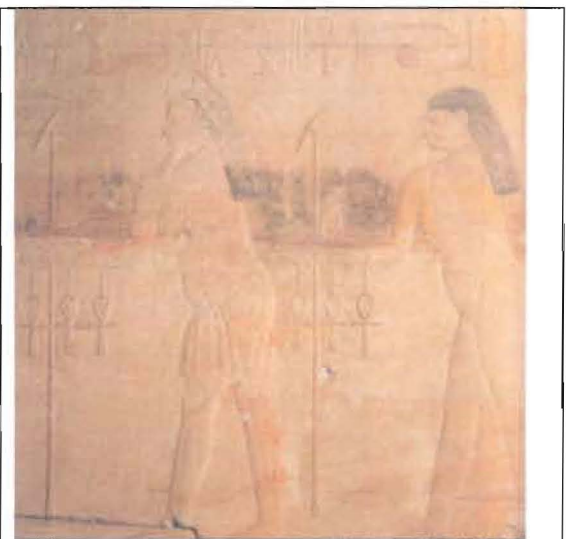


Figure-Dual depiction of Hapy representing Upper and Lower Egypt-tie the symbolic plants of the two lands together in the sema-tawy motif. The corpulent bodies of the gods and the plants atop their heads suggest the bounty of the Nile's inundation which they represent. Throne decoration, colossal statue of Ramsses II, Luxor Temple, 19th dynasty



Figure-Hapy-The god Hapy, father of the gods, clasping symbols of life, receives the worship of Ramsses III in a scene of harvest and fertility 20th dynasty. Mortuary temple of Ramsses III, Medinet Habu, western Thebes.

Figure- Scenes of Hapi in the mortuary temple of Sahure at Abusir



Nile inundation: Found in some of the ancient Egyptian texts that Nile starts flooding in the start of the Egyptian calendar year and Egyptians knows initiation of the year by the emergence of star Sotis in the summer. Duration of Nile flooding between ninety and one hundred days and

Nile starts flooding slowly until reaching the maximum level in Sept. 20; when Nile water color changes during flood turning into green at first when water source come from swamps of Bahr el Ghazal and then become dull red when waters come down from the mountains of Abyssinia and surfaces them to descend into the green and red Nile. Herodotus, the Greek historian said "Egypt is the gift of the Nile", also came in the likes of the Arabs "who drink of the water of the Nile once miss to drink it again".

Nile feasts in Ancient Egypt: The Nile feasts in ancient Egyptian texts, include in song of the Nile written in papyrus Anastasi reserved in London Museum; dating to the reign of Kings Ramses II and his son king Menfatah and Ramses III; in which he give thanks to God for the good gifts given to Egypt in which they provided with the Nile and remember certain times to celebrate the Nile, and permeated manifestations of joy when the principles of flood appear. "Dear blessed flood; I made you offerings and sacrifices, and held you great holidays, and slaughtered you bird snapped up to greet deer from the mountains and prepared you fire Immaculate, and gave you incense and graces and heavenly calves and bulls smelters accept a gift of thanks and recognition you favor". Also, Nile feasts engraved in table for offerings preserved in the Museum of Florence dating back to the first three Egyptian dynasties. According to Egyptologist Maspero, when the holy water reaches to the walls of the city of Seine, priests or governor or one of his deputies offers ox or ducks and deliver them in the water in sealed score of papyrus and writes in the score the Royal Order system concerning flood and when the king will head the celebration.

A rock inscription called the Famine Stela, dated in its present form from the Ptolemaic period, recounts an incident, (whether real or fictitious is not currently known for certain), from the period of King Djoser of the 3rd Dynasty. The King writes to a governor in the south, describing himself as disheartened over the country's seven-year famine. The King learns from a priest of Imhotep that if gifts are given to the temple of Khnum, the creator-god of the region, who it was believed had control over the Nile and its flooding, then the famine would be ended.

The scenes of celebrating inundation of Nile flood found in the temples of Edfu and Dendera. The scenes show the Nile running on steps out of its shrine as its habit every year of its course to fertile valleys and adorned earth with varied plants and vegetation. In Celebration Nile inundation; white bull and three geese and expensive gifts are thrown in Nile, while there is no mention or real reference to the legend of Bride of the Nile or to threw a girl in the Nile as popularized by some legends. As agreed by lot of historians, there is no truth to the report of Ibn Abd al-Hakam (Arabian historian) for throwing a Girl in the Nile by ancient Egyptians and there is no Egyptian text supports what was attributed to the ancient Egyptians; a human sacrifice on the occasion of the Nile flood, but that the Nile was the subject of Egyptians reverence until it appeared in texts of Book of the Dead, about the deceased pleading for himself before God; "I have come to you, O God, adorned with right, erasing all sins, did not act against the irrigation system, and did not cut the channel of water, or damaged farmland".

Nilometer in ancient Egypt: An old nilometer was built on the island of Aswan. King Amenemhat III built another nilometer for the Nile at the end of the increased new borders of the

country. Until end of the thirteenth dynasty, the maximum heights of Nile flood were recorded on the rocky highlands of Semna and the king name was recorded beside them in addition to the date of increasing of height. When the Egyptian borders extended, the nilometer was moved to the south. Nile inundation height was scaled by cubit (equals 45 centimeters), and when it reaches 14 cubits they proclaim the good inundation. Nilometers were distributed on Nile banks in most of the Egyptian temples such as temples at Philae, on the Nubian Egyptian border, and Edfu, Esna, Kom Ombo, and Dendera, as well as the best-known nilometer on the island of Elephantine at Aswan. The Elephantine nilometer was rebuilt in Roman times, and the markings still visible at the site date from this later phase. It was also repaired in 1870 by Khedive Ismail.

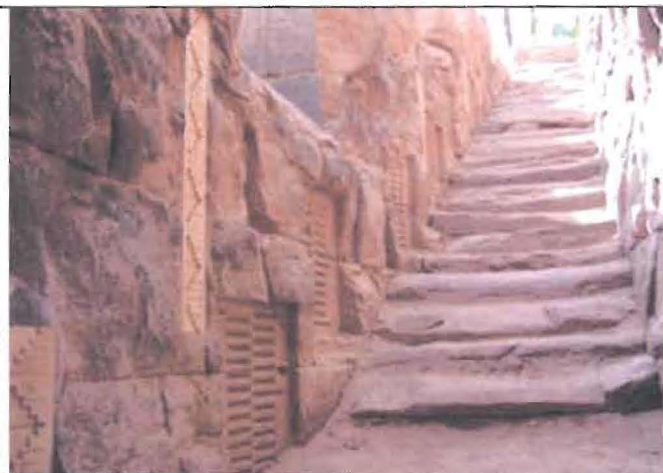


photo- Nilometer at Aswan-belonging to Sateet-shows restorations to nilometer added in Roman time and in Mohamed Ali reign



Photo-nilometer at Elephantine island at early 20th century

Nile feasts in the Greco-Roman times: Greek historians tell that Nile feast was celebrated in all the Egyptian provinces when all Egyptians rejoice the Nile flood. An old text engraved on the stone of Canopus (an Egyptian coastal town in the Nile Delta) reserved in Egyptian Cairo Museum, stating that in the reign of King Ptolemy III (circa 238 B.C); intensified low Nile flood caused famines and terrors. Roman philosopher Seneca said that Egyptians in the era of the Romans used to throw in the river offerings and cast, then their rulers threw their gifts of gold and pieces of jewelry. Egyptians made a special feast for the Nilometer which they used to measure the height of the Nile where it was carried to the temple of Serapis. The Greek historian Herodotus and others said flooding of the Nile begins at the time of solstice in the summer, and when the flood reaches its peak on September 20, Egyptians celebrated their joy for the flood of the Nile flood coming with prosperous, and if the flood delayed they ask the Pharaoh to pray to god with them requesting the flood of the Nile. A recorded incident mention the delay of Nile flood for seven years was translated by archeologists.

Nile god at Greco-Roman times: In Roman mythology, Nile was appeared in the form of an elderly man with beard half lying wearing a crown made from lotus flowers and the horn of plenty and ear of wheat and aquatic plant, and associated Goddess Aothinea.

Flooding of the Nile in Coptic art: According to the annual Coptic calendar, Copts celebrated feast of the heavenly drop that cleanses the air and heal the land from plague before summer solstice by four days i.e.; in the eleventh day of Coptic month Búna. Copts in earlier times considered that the Nile flood resulted from a divine drop descend from heaven. Nile flood subjects appeared in Coptic art in numerous examples in different ores such as carving in stone, engraving on ivory and wall painting as one dated from the seventh century found in Kellia¹; also appeared in colored textiles in the form of a stone column built in the middle of a well on the bank of the Nile in which the column is divided into degrees called cubits and every cubit is divided into smaller degrees called fingers. The nilometer column figured in the textiles topped by a child holding a cone symbolizes the cubit as appeared in the Roman and Coptic statues. The child figure appeared also in Alexandrian coin, pointing to the favorite number of cubits which Nile waters must rise to it. In Coptic art the child appeared in maximized figure holding plaster in one hand and adze in the other hand, with appearance of number of cubits that demonstrate the inundation of the Nile engraved on the Nilometer. An example of this scene in Coptic art appeared in a medallion reserved in Louvre museum dated from V to VI century having two colors; column scale shown in red and stairs shown in green - blue where green and blue color indicates the Nile water that turned into green color when water river arises in June, and red color indicates flooding of the Nile, which begins in July and reaches its peak in September symbolizes the best flood of the Nile in Hermopolis.

This scene combines the symbol and reality highlights the importance of nilometer or Nile scale as a tool to measure the economic situation and sacred religious witness. A Coptic papyrus dated from the sixth century AD, remember that flood of the Nile rises by the power of Christ and nilometer work depends on the church.



Figure- A piece of fabric Coptic reserved Louvre-century fifth - sixth century express the inundation of Nile in September



Figure- festival of Nile inundation in a scene from 18th century

¹ a monastic community founded in 4th century located near Demenhur northern of Egypt

On an ivory pice of the fourth or fifth century in the Wiesbaden museum the iconography is identical, but the workmanship is finer because the material is softer. In two tapestry orbicula in the Louvre, the Nile executed in the style of sixth century Coptic fabrics. Finally, a seventh-century wall painting discovered at Kellia shows a man half-lying on an overturned amphora; the inscription suggests that he may be a new allegory of the Nile. Thus the image of the Nile god, having become a simple allegory of the prosperity dispensed by the flood,, was kept for its decorative value by artists who wished to enrich the Nilotic evocations so highly prized by Coptic art.

Nilometer in Coptic times: In Coptic times, nilometer had the shape of a graduated column divided into cubits. It is built of stone in the middle of a well alongside the river. On Coptic textiles the nilometer is represented surrounded by a cone with a child, symbol of the cubit in Greco-Roman and Coptic statuary, standing near the column. On Alexandria coins the child pointed out the favorable number of cubits. In Coptic art, his hand and a mallet in his right, he carves the proper number of cubits for the place where the nilometer is located. A good example is a medallion in the Louvre (fifth-sixth century), worked in two colors with a blue-green staircase and a red column. The blue-green color recalls the green waters of the initial rise (June), and red the flood itself (July-September). The two Greek and Coptic figures indicate the best flood level at Hermopolis.

In visual form, this conjunction of symbolism and realism presents the pharaonic significance of the nilometer as an instrument of economic foresight and a witness to divine benevolence toward Egypt. Greek papyri of the Coptic period (sixth century) tell us that the Nile flood rises by the power of Christ, and that the nilometer depends on the church. The nilometer is part of the Egyptian land-scape, like the lotus and the thickets of water plants.

Festival of Nile inundation after entering the Arab Egypt: The Copts of Egypt are in charge of measuring the Nile till 247 Hijri year 861 AD when Caliph al-Mutawakkil built a nilometer in Rhoda island and ordered to isolate Christian Copts from the supervision of nilometer which remained supervised by officials of Sultan having annual salary and gifts in feasts. Despite the existence of nilometers in Egypt before the advent of Omar Ibn El-Aas, he ordered to build nilometers in Helwan, Aswan and Dendera. Then Mu'awiya bin Abi Sufyan built a nilometer in Insena, then Abdul Aziz bin Marwan during his reign to Egypt built a nilometer in Helwan and another one was built in Rhoda island in year 97 AH by Osama bin Zaid Altnokhi taxes pastor, then Caliph al-Mutawakkil built a nilometer in Rhoda island in year 247 AH. The height of the river was measured by arm (or cubit), and every arm (cubit) was divided into 24 fingers. The historian Al Maqrizi mentioned that Egyptians consider with great joy the inundation of the Nile when they measure sixteen arms in nilometer, and this was the law of irrigation in old times and continued until this day. It seems that the measure for inundation of the Nile was sixteen arms (cubits) and if it the water level came less, they say it came drought and famine. Al Maqrizi states that in the year 362 AH, when the increase of new flood reached seventeen arm and two fingers El Moez Mitwalli gave the nilometer supervisor a gift and that all Egypt land was irrigated when nilometer measures sixteen arms when controlled all bridges, water barrages and clean all bays. The Persian traveler Nasiri Khosrow in eleventh century described Egypt when Nile extent fulfilled that prosperity of was of a great degree and he saw in one day fruits, herbs, red

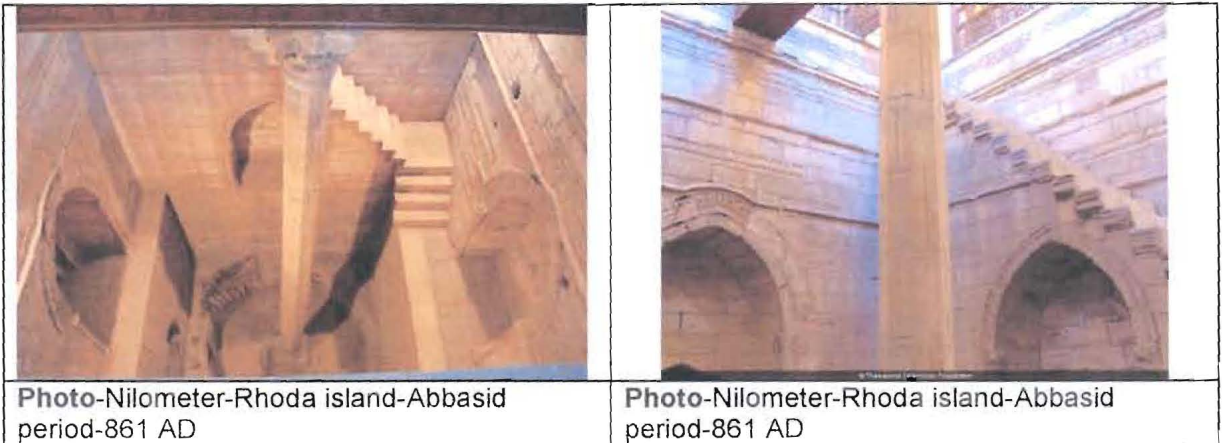
roses, nileoffer, daffodils, bitter orange, lemon, apple, jasmine, basil, quince, pomegranates, pears, melons, bananas, olives and Alahlaj, grapes, sugar cane, eggplant, squash, turnips, cabbage, green beans, cucumbers, cucumbers, onions, garlic and carrots and that the people of Egypt were in a great rich and prosperous during his visit.

Festival of the Nile inundation in the Mamluk era: Books and references dated from Mamluk era have a lot of examples that describe the festivals and feast of the Nile; for example in the year 717 AH (1317 AD) the inundation of the Nile took place in day 29 of Msarri (the twelve month in the Coptic calendar), and in the year 732 AH inundation of the Nile came three days before Nowruz feast (first day of Coptic calendar). When water level of the Nile reaches sixteen arms (cubits) in Shubra (a district in Cairo located beside river banks) they consider it inundation of the river and ushered the huge national Festival marking the occasion involving everyone as a national holiday. If river level completed sixteen arms on the scale, they attach a yellow flag on window of nilometer building to inform people about Nile inundation and celebrate great festival. In celebrations, people light candles and turns Cairo night into light by the large number of candle lights, and attend Koran reciter and singers who sing throughout the night in the House of the measure (nilometer). Next morning, they place eating tables full of barbeque, sweets, and fruit, attended by the Sultan or his representative, and celebration start when the Sultan come from the Citadel with his military commanders and Senate with flags and decorations until procession reaches the nilometer or House of measure and food tables took place.

The celebration was held in two phases, the first phase is to cover the column measure with aromatics and second phase is to break a dike or dam on a Nile gulf or the bay, where Sultan hits the dyke with adze of gold to enable water running in the river. Celebration manifestations of Nile inundation took place annually until the reign of Tuman-bey; last Mamluk sultans in 922 AH. In occasions of flood and celebrate of the Nile inundation, poets tell poems incorporating these happy days full of beautiful memories and noble feelings. People come out in Nile ships sailing in the bays of Egypt, or gather on Nile banks to seek pleasure and amusement, watch and tampering.

Common Prayer for Christians and Muslims for the Nile: It is considered a major disaster in Egypt, if Nile stopped increase water level and people start to pray especial prayer called Istiskaa (Arabic term refer to prayer for water) where the patron and his men inform people with date and place of the prayer for water decided by the Sultan asking people to gather. People may be ordered to fast few days pleading to God to give them good Nile flood. The crowds of people praying to God are Egyptian Christians, Muslims and Jews and every mass pray from their holy book. Historian El-Maqrizi participated in one of these processions in 755 AH and described the procession, which went out to pray for Nile inundation. Also, reference to writings of Ibn Ayas in Badaa'i El Zohoor (title of a book edited by Ibn Ayas) noted that in the year 853 AH happened low level of Nile inundation then Egypt ruler, Sultan Jaqmaq El Alayli ordered that people go to pray (istiskaa prayer) to God asking for Nile water. People gathered having their sheep and cows and went out, all men and women and boys accompanied by scientists and noble men and all are holding the holy books over their heads; the Koran for Muslims, Bible for Christians, Tanakh for Jews. The crowds cried to God asking for mercy and headed toward the

desert at Red mountain, but the Nile flood came in low level in that year. Gatherings like this happen also if flooding of the Nile has increased excessively and sinking the country and threatened to desert farmland.



The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the French campaign on Egypt: Some tourists in Egypt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tells that Egyptians were throwing Bride of wood in the Nile, and the celebration parade consists of the Governor of the country and communities of Copts, scientists, nobles, religion men, Coptic Patriarch and a team of clergy followed by musician and audiences applauding and chanting anthem and then throw the wooden bride in the Nile at the time of opening of the Gulf of Nile. In time of the flood, the Coptic Patriarch goes to Nile accompanied by his men to Old Cairo district and cast in the Nile a silver cross. Turkish people were celebrating an official ceremony and when celebration events finished, masses throw in the Nile grains, fruits, sugar, bread and coins (called dirhams) and children wash in Nile waters. Some people bathe in first water passes in the Gulf seeking for healing and remove infertility. They have a tradition in Old Cairo, to install a couple of huge wooden statues just before the day of the inundation of the Nile and to install great lights on the wooden platform rested on boats. These two statues were called bride and groom and represented as a man and woman and they used to make a bride of mud and throw them into the Nile at time of flood. It was said that when Napoleon Bonaparte came to Egypt, he was on the head of Nile festival as the ruler of the country at that time.

Modern Egyptians still memorize the inundation of the Nile, but in different form of ceremonies. Egyptian author Joseph Niazi said in a book published in Egypt in 1924, that at time of the flood, men in streets inform people by the flood of the Nile at least until the high dam was finished in 1965 and the Nile flood became in control.

Nilometer at Islamic era: At Geziret el-Rhoda in Cairo there is an Islamic nilometer dating back to AD 705-15, although it was possibly built on the site of an earlier Pharaonic example. The Islamic Nilometer worked on the same principles as its ancient counterparts, except for the use of an octagonal pillar (rather than steps) as the measure.

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