The building work in the Temple of Isis proper at Philae, now located on the island of Agilika, is overwhelmingly Ptolemaic and forms part of the Ptolemaic policy of promoting the Isis cult throughout the kingdom and beyond. The core of the Isis temple, everything north of the vestibule, was built by Ptolemy II, just behind the ancient shrine of Amasis, which was then demolished.

The temple was primarily dedicated to Isis, who was worshipped here with her son, Horus, the Greek Harpocrates. Osiris’ name is generally written within a cartouche, with the words indicating "Deceased" thereafter, and Isis’ name was also written within a cartouche. In this region they were seen as deified rulers.

The entrance to the main temple is fronted by the first Great Pylon. It stands 150 feet broad and 60 feet high, consisting of two towers and a gate between them. There are deep grooves for flag poles cut on either side of the portal. The pylon was begun by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and essentially finished by Ptolemy III Euergetes I, though the decorations were carried out.
over a much longer period. In fact, they were never really finished.

The front of the right, or eastern tower is depicted with a huge figure of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos who holds a group of enemies of Egypt by the hair and raises his club to smite them. This, of course, is a common pose of the pharaoh dating back to the earliest times in Egyptian history, and repeated by almost every pharaoh. To the left of him stands Isis, watching the king, together with the falcon headed Horus of Edfu and Hathor. Above this scene are two reliefs. To the right, Ptolemy XII presents the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt to Horus and Nephthys. To the left, he offers incense to Isis and the child, Horus.

On the western tower of the Pylon, the pharaoh is seen in the same stance, slaying his enemies once more while Isis, Horus and Hathor look on. Again there are two reliefs above, one depicting him in the presence of Unnefer (the name given to Osiris after his resurrection) and Isis and the other shows the king before Isis and Hariesis. Unfortunately, these reliefs were badly damaged by the early Christians. Along the whole bottom of the first pylon are reliefs of small Nile figures bringing offerings.

The gateway of the first Pylon predates the structure itself, having been built by Nectanebo at the same time that he built his small temple and vestibule now located at the beginning of the approach to the main temple. To either side of the gateway, Coptic Christian crosses have been carved into the sandstone, and in the thickness of the doorway there appear reliefs of Nectanebo in the presence of various gods, including Isis. On the right is a French inscription recording the victory of General Desaix over the Mamelukes in 1799.

Just beyond the first Pylon is the forecourt of the temple. Here, on the rear walls of the pylon and gateway are additional depictions. On the right or western tower Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos stands before Osiris, Isis and other deities, and below this representation are two sacred boats that carried the priests in processions.

On the left or eastern tower, Ptolemy XII stands before Amun, Mut and other gods. A small
doorway in this pylon leads to a room with reliefs showing Ptolemy IX Soter II before Isis, Hathor and Horus, while his Queen and the Princess Cleopatra stand before Isis. Over another small doorway are reliefs of Ptolemy XII accompanied by standards of the various nomes. This doorway opens onto a stairway that leads to the roof from which there is an excellent view of the island. In the southeast corner of the forecourt near the pylon stands the earliest work at Philae, the granite altar of Taharqa, the Nubian king of Napata who also ruled Egypt.

In the forecourt itself on the left, or western side, is the birth-house, or mammisi, which is similar in plan and decoration to those of Dendera and Edfu. The birth-house is an essential feature of the temples build during the Ptolemaic period. The concept of birth-houses may have originated with the representations in the temples of Deir el-Bahri and Luxor of the divine birth of Hatshepsut and of Amenhotep III. These depictions were an important justification for the divinity of the king, and they grew in importance with the spread of the Osiris cult. The birth-houses, designed to celebrate the rites related to the Osirian tradition of the child Horus, reached their full development during the Ptolemaic period.

After the murder of his father, Osiris, Horus grew to manhood and overthrew the enemies of his father. Horus, as Pharaoh of Egypt, became the ancestor of all succeeding kings. It was therefore essential that each pharaoh on his accession should be recognized as a true descendant of Horus.

Here, in the sanctuary of the mammisi of Isis, the hawk of Horus is shown wearing the Double Crown and standing in a thicket of papyrus. Below that scene, Isis carries the newly born Horus in her arms, surrounded protectively by the gods Thoth, Wadjet, Nekhbet and Amun-Ra.

A colonnade surrounds three sides of the birth-house, with floral
column capitals surmounted by sistrum capitals with Hathor heads. The screen walls between the columns depict Ptolemy VI, VIII and X as well as the Roman Tiberius in the presence of various gods.

The right, or eastern side of the forecourt is adorned with a graceful gallery of columns with floral and palm leaf capitals that support a cornice, bearing a row of uraeus-serpents. The inscriptions assign the building of the gallery to Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, but there are carvings on the walls that depict Ptolemy XII before the gods. There are six doorways that lead through the rear wall of the colonnade to small annex rooms which were used for various purposes such as storing religious equipment, preparing incense, housing the sacred books and perhaps the priestly regalia. One of the chambers is thought to have been a "library" dedicated to Thoth.

Just before the second pylon is a small Roman chapel in the northeast corner, which was built on a natural outcrop of rock and stands at an angle to the outer entrance.

The northern wall of the forecourt is formed by the second Great Pylon which stands 105 feet wide and 40 feet tall. It is set at a different angle than the first Pylon. An incline plane of shallow steps leads to the gateway between the towers.

On the left, or western tower, Ptolemy XII offers incense and dedicates sacrificial animals to Horus, Hathor and other gods. Above this are two small reliefs, horribly mutilated, depicting this king presenting a wreath to Horus and Nephthys and offering incense and pouring water on an altar in the presence of Osiris, Isis and Horus.

On the right, or eastern tower, there are similar scenes but in a much better state of preservation.

At the base of the eastern tower, part of the granite foundation of the original island protruded and this was carved into a stele on which Ptolemy VI Philometor, and his queen Cleopatra II stand before Isis and Horus. This stela was faithfully transferred to the new island with the rest of the temple. An inscription refers to the grant of the Dodekaschoinoi made to Isis, which brought the priests of Philae into parity with those of Elephantine. Dodekaschoinoi is a Greek word for "twelve schoinoi" A schoinos equaled about...
seven miles. It is not a measurement of area, but rather length, so presumably this meant that their foundation estate to finance the temple extended for about seven miles along the Nile River, including the arable land.

Both of the towers of the Second Pylon have grooves for flagstaffs like the first pylon. The doorway between the towers depicts Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, greatly defaced, before a series of equally defaced gods. On the east side of the doorway is an inscription to the Christian Bishop Theodorus.

From here, the second pylon doorway leads into the inner part of the Temple and the main finally to the main sanctuary.

See Also

- Philae Part I: Before the High Dam
- Philae Part II: The Approach to the Temple of Isis
- Philae Part III: The First Great Pylon and Forecourt of The Temple of Isis
- Philae Part IV: Temple of Isis Inner Chambers and Structures to the West
- Philae Temples Part V: Other Structures on the Island
- A Large Map of the Modern Island

Resources:

- The Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt ed. By Katherine Bard
- Island of Isis, Philae, Temple of the Nile by William MacQuitty
- A Guide to the Antiquities of Ancient Egypt by Arthur Weigall
- The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt
- Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt by Richard Wilkinson

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