

The approach to the island of Philæ is exceedingly picturesque. The river winds in and out among gigantic black basalt or syenite rocks of most fantastic form and shape, and then, after a sharp turn or two, Philæ comes suddenly in sight. "Beautiful" is the epithet commonly applied to this spot, justly considered to present the finest bit of scenery on the Nile; but the beauty, or rather grandeur, is more in the framework of the picture than in the picture itself. The view from the top of the propylon tower at Philæ of all beyond the island is far finer than the view of Philæ itself from any point.

The Nile valley here takes on a wilder aspect. Huge rocks rise in tumbled masses, and, flamed in a setting of feathery palms, come into view the pylons and colonnades of the famous temple. In the old pagan days no profane foot might tread this sacred spot. Only after purification and prayer might the pilgrim visit this holy shrine. The most solemn oath of the old Egyptian was, "By him who sleeps in Philæ."

On the Holy Isle stands the most beautiful temple in Egypt—that of the goddess Isis and the god Osiris. Familiar as it is from pictures, "age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety."

Nowhere has the mania of the Egyptians for irregularity been carried to such an extent as here. "No Gothic architect in his wildest moments," says Ferguson in his "History of Architecture," "ever played so freely with his lines and dimensions, and none, it must be added, ever produced anything so beautifully picturesque as this. It contains all the play of light and shade, all the variety of Gothic art, with the massiveness and grandeur of the Egyptian style; and it is still tolerably entire, and retains much of its colour. There is no building out of Thebes that gives so favourable an impression of Egyptian art as this. It is true it is far less sublime than many, but hardly one can be quoted as more beautiful."

Never had temple more lovely approach than that through the double colonnade which we enter from the Nile. Mutilated and marred by time and by the wanton despoiler, there is yet a pathetic beauty about those exquisite columns and capitals, no two of which are alike, and some of which were left unfinished two thousand years ago and remain unfinished forever. Through court after court studded with graceful columns, we pass to the secret sanctuary of the god—once the abode of mystery and fear—now open to the light of day and to the wandering foot of the fox and the jackal. Everthing is covered—walls, columns, ceilings, pylons—with exquisite sculpture of the myths and symbols