



The Iconography of Elephant as Offering at the Temple of Isis at Philae

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Divine offering;
fecundity figures;
western room of pylon;
ivory; elephant.

(JAAUTH)
Vol. 19, No. 3,
(2020),
PP. 48-60.

Abstract

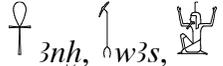
A remarkable scene is attested on the western gate room of the pylon of Philae temple in Aswan. The scene represents three fecundity figures on each vertical's columns. The three male figures personify three districts in Lower Nubia, namely Mekhat, Maâmaâ and Bakt. The function of these figures is explained according to the textual accompanied the scene. Ptolemy IV Philopator was depicted as one of the three offering bearers presenting offering to the main god of the temple. The relation between the Ptolemaic king and fecundity figure is emblematic in order to follow the divine cult of the temple. The scene records a single elephant figure on the pylon room referring to ivory. The ebony, ivory and stones products were brought from Lower Nubia to be offered to goddess Isis. This paper will analyse the connotation of this remarkable scene in accordance to its textual evidence. The researcher will approach the historical, religious background on the elephant as an offering during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator. The analytical study will also allow to differentiate between the three fecundity figures on each vertical hieroglyphic column.

Introduction

The walls of ancient Egyptian temples are covered with symbolic scenes and inscriptions. The act of offering, which unites the two actors, the exchange between man and god is carried out with food, drinks, and animals. This allowed the Pharaoh to meet the deity and supply him with all the material needs. Numerous offering were recorded on the western gate room of the pylon of Isis temple at Philae during the Græco-Roman period. Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-205 B.C) was depicted as one of the three fecundity figures presenting offering to goddess Isis. Few previous studies threw the light on the depiction of the elephant as a divine offering on the walls of the Græco-Roman temples. The researcher aims to approach the meaning of this offering scenes according to the accompanying textual evidence. It will analyse the iconography and the symbolism of a single elephant on the pylon wall of Isis temple at Philae.

Divine Offering Elephant on the Western Gate Room of the Pylon of Philae Temple during the Græco-Roman Period

In ancient Egypt, offerings had variously represented combining numerous types of food, signs and water jars. The most common type of offerings was the traditional

Egyptian offering table on which various signs were placed such as;  *3nh*, *w3s*, *hh*. This offering table can also bear various types of food. In addition to the shape of fecundity figures depicted in the scene in question, other examples of fecundity

figures were attested. These figures were depicted carrying the *htp*  sign itself which means "offering". The function of these figure depends on the textual as well as pictorial evidence. Fecundity figure were found through the temples' reliefs, tombs, stelae, or statutes. The earliest iconography of a fecundity figure (**Fig.1**) is found in the valley temple of the Bent Pyramid at Dahshur from the reign of Senefru, the first king of the fourth dynasty (Baines, 2001).

Fecundity figures are usually depicted as group of male figures (mainly three) presenting offerings and water to the Egyptian kings. In some examples, the pharaoh of Egypt was depicted as one of the three fecundity figures presenting oblations to other deities (Kitat, 2010). The relation between the Ptolemaic king and fecundity figure is emblematic in order to follow the divine cult of the temple. Thus, the king meets the deity and supply him with all the material needs (Baines, 2001). Fecundity Figures are usually depicted as standing male figures wearing a long divine wig or a scull cap, a long false beard. They are represented with long protruding breasts with a cutting line into the body beneath the breasts and pendulous stomachs. They are usually depicted wearing a belt from which between one and four strips hang down. In certain cases, fecundity figures are depicted wearing the short kilt. These figures began to be elaborated with bracelets and armlets by the beginning of the New Kingdom. They are either depicted standing; walking, kneeling, or squatting (Baines, 2001). The solemn depiction of running figures of fecundity is attested in the Nubian temples that date back to the Græco-oman period. Fecundity figures were employed, according to Baines, in four main fields; presenting offerings, protection, libation, and tying the so-called *sm3t3wy* sign.

The scene depicts three fecundity figures divided into three vertical hieroglyphic columns. According to Baines, the three-dimensional group has no specific function in generating the structure, only have imaginary pose (Junker, 1958). Each figure is depicted standing in profile with long nipples, pendulous breast and stomach. The wig is here has a strand in front the shoulder as well as the *nemes* headdress in relief. Furthermore, they are depicted wearing a belt adorned with three strips and abroad necklace (Baines, 2001). Every fecundity figure is depicted holding *3nh*  sign and lotus flower alternatively being suspended on his forearm (Baines, 2001).

This remarkable scene represents three fecundity figures embodying three districts in lower Nubia. The first one to the right (**Fig 2. A**) represents a place named 

mhi(t) Nubian Mekhat¹ district who offers *hbny* "ebony" (Erman and Grapow, 1971); (Faulkner, 1991) The central figure (**Fig2.B**) represents the district

m3m3(t) Nubian Maâmaâ² district who presents *3bw* "ivory" (Erman and Grapow, 1971); (Faulkner, 1991). The third figure to the left embodies the district

b3kt Nubian Bakt³ district which presents *3t nb m3t* "all real stones" (**Fig2.C**) (Faulkner, 1991); (Dickson, 2006); (Erman and Grapow, 1971); (Gardiner, 2007). The three figures carry trays on which their offerings are depicted. The scene is accompanied with inscription revealing that all these oblations are dedicated by king Ptolemy IV Philopator to Isis, the main goddess of the temple (Junker, 1958).

Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his successors achieved several activities in Nubia. Ptolemy II Philadelphus sent a campaign to Kush at Nubia in 270 B.C. for extending the southern borders of Egypt. Ptolemy IV Philopator acquired elephants as well the other African Nubian products (Burstein, 2008). Egypt received large variety of African good including ebony, exotic wood, gold and ivory that were essential in the Egyptian religious cult (Burstein, 2008). The African elephants were used to balance with the Indian kind of Seleucid army in the battle fields. Elephants were found in large groups near Meroe beyond the fifth cataract of the Nile, approximately six hundred miles south of Aswan (Hölb, 1998; Wilkinson, 2010). Ptolemy IV Philopator was the first king who used the forest African elephant⁴ in the Raphia battle. Elephants were mainly used in the wars either for frightening the horses or destroying constructions of the enemy such as; forts, walls and houses. Furthermore, the elephants carried the so-called *Howdaj* which was used to preserve weapons in it (Kitchell, 2014). Raphia battle was occurred near south west Gaza between Ptolemy IV Philopator and Seleucid king Antiochus III in 217 B.C. Antiochus III prepared his army to conquer Syria, in return, Ptolemy IV Philopator marched from Pelusion and

¹*Mekhat* is a district in lower Nubia and located near Qasr Ibram. Weigall referred that this district is the region of Abu Simbel itself. Mekhat is actually situated in Gebel el Adda facing Abu Simbul (Gauthier, 1926); (Weigall, 1907).

²*Maâmaâ* was a thirteen district in lower Nubia (Gauthier, 1926); (Weigall, 1907).

³*Bakt (Baqt)* was a twelve district in Lower Nubia and surmounted by remain of ancient fort. The earliest evidence for Baqtis recorded near Qasr Ibrim "we have fulfilled for you that which we took upon ourselves for you in turning away from your blood and property and that the Nubian merchants are protected". After the reign of Teqerdeamanic, the last of the Meroitic kings, the Meroe Kingdom (800 B.C - 350 A.D) was separated into two - parts ; The Nobatia Kingdom (3090-700 A.D) and Makuria Kingdom (500-1323 A.D). The last kingdom included Nubian Baqt (Gauthier, 1925) ; (Munro-Hay, 1982-1983).

⁴ The reasons for not using the Bush elephant (*Loxodonta Africana Africana*) in Ptolemaic wars was the size of its species which did not reach up to 13 feet. This may not be handled in training elephants in wars (Cervicek, 1974).

reached near Raphia⁵ in 217 B.C. Although, Ptolemy IV Philopator defeated his opponent, but he was disappointed from the performance of the African elephants in the battle (Bevan, 1968). Thus, Raphia battle put an end the king's program for training the African elephants. Despite of being larger, African elephants could not stand against the Indian elephants as the second species were well trained (Mahaffy, 1899).

The symbolism of the Egyptian religion is mostly expressed by the representation of individual animals, birds and reptiles because of their power, strength as well as being scared from them (Budge, 1994). The ancient Egyptian used his magic to keep evil spirits and dangerous creatures he feared from away. Elephants became a healing and curing piece form the sickness of the wearers. This might explain the appearance of elephant-shaped amulets (Kitat, 2006). One of these objects is now displayed in the Metropolitan Museum at New York (**Fig. 3**). Scholars firstly identified these talismans as amulets taking the shape of a bull's head. After that, they merely believed that the depicted animal head belongs to the elephant because of the depicted round face and eyes, the curved horns, and a snout with a defined ridge. The big size of elephants, their large tusks, and their harsh depiction might be reasons behind this sort of amulets (Dorothea, 1995; Kitat, 2011). The elephant was represented as one of the mysterious animals. This led to the appearance of amulet in the shape of elephant as a kind of the protective amulets for its wearer (Kitat, 2011).

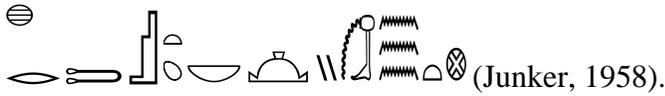
The first figure representing  *mhi(t)* Nubian Mekhat district (**Fig 2.A**) is accompanied with the following text (Junker, 1958) :

⁵The army of Ptolemy IV Philopator consisted of 65,000 men including 25,000 phalanx infantrymen, 6000 cavalry and seventy-three forest African elephants. On contrary, Antiochus III's army had 30,000 phalanx infantrymen, 6,000 horsemen, 30,000 mercenaries and one hundred two Indian elephants. The phalanx infantrymen in the centre of the battle and flanked by troops on the two wings of each army. The royal Ptolemaic guards were commander by Polycrates and Lybic Peltastson the left side, fronted the Antipater, the commander of Antiochus guards. Furthermore, Mercenaries and other troops on the right wings and two elephant species were placed in front of each cavalry army. Antiochus III put forty-two Indian elephants on the left wing and sixty elephants on the other wing. Meanwhile, Ptolemy IV Philopator placed forty African elephants on the left wing and thirty-three elephants on the right wing. Antiochus III's Indian elephants attacked those African elephants of Ptolemy IV Philopator. The forest African elephants of the Ptolemaic army were apparently afraid from the battle noises made by the well-trained Indian elephants. This led to flee the Ptolemy's royal guard and cavalry on the left wing. Thus, Antiochus III wing could defeat left wing of Ptolemaic army. On the right wing, the cavalry and troops of the Ptolemaic army began to attack Antiochus III's wing and the African elephants were in the middle of the battle field. This caused fleeing the Syrian unit. On the other side, both of the Ptolemaic and Syrian Phalanxes faced each other in the center of the war. The Ptolemaic Phalanx were stronger and began to take over the battle. Antiochus III's army began to lose the ground and finally fled. Ptolemy IV Philopater lost 1,5000 infantry, 700 cavalry and sixteen elephants. In return, Antiochus III's army lost 10,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry and five elephants (three Indian elephants died and two wounded elephants) (Mahaffy, 1898).



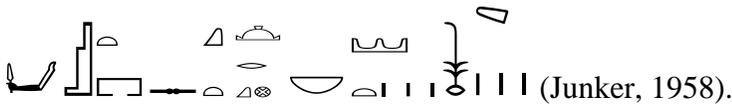
ii nswt-bity iw^c n ntrwi.

"The king comes the heir of the two gods Ptolemy (IV)" (Junker, 1958).



hr.t 3st nb(t) i3t w^cbit .

"With Isis the mistress of mound Abaton" (Junker, 1958).



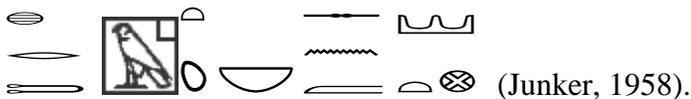
dsr st P3 iwrk rsy h3swt nb .

"Sitting in the scared part of Philae, the southern foreign lands" (Junker, 1958).



ii nsw-bity iw^cn ntrwi .

"The king comes the heir of the two gods Ptolemy (IV)"(Junker, 1958)



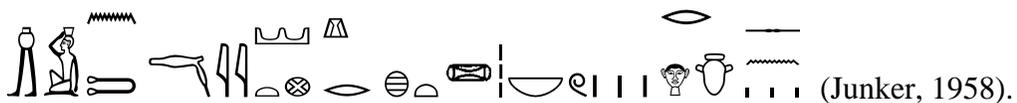
hr.t hwt -hr nb(t) snmt .

"To you, Hathor, mistress of Biggeh (Biga)" (Junker, 1958).



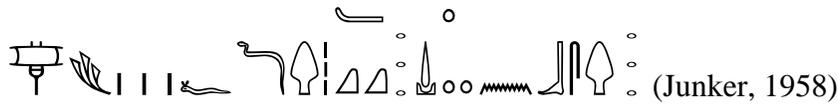
hnwt nb(t) mshn(t) st wrt .

"The mistress lady of the birth place at the greatness seat" (Junker, 1958).



ini.t mhi(t) hr ht nbw hr-ib.sn .

"Bring with her all things from the middle of Mekhat " (Junker, 1958).

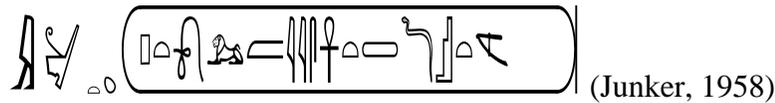


t3w df hkk d3w nbs .

"plants, bread, mats and ziziphus tree " (Junker, 1958).



The middle figure representing $m3^c m3^c(t)$ Nubian Maâmaâ the district (**Fig 2.B**) is accompanied with the following text (Junker, 1958):



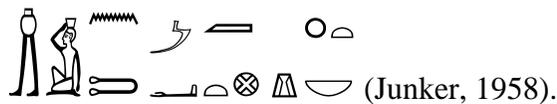
ii d3r.t ptwlmis 3nh dt mri -3st .

"Comes to king (red crown) Living for ever beloved of Isis Ptolemy (IV)" (Junker, 1958)



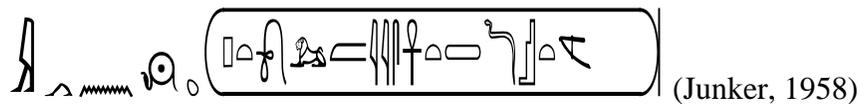
hr.t hwt -hr.t nb(t) snmt

"To you, Hathor, mistress of Biggeh (Biga)" (Junker, 1958).



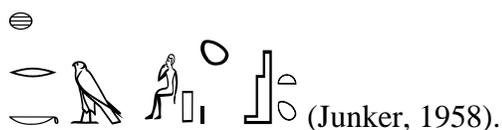
ini.t m3^c m3^c(t) hr nbt.

" Bring with her all things from Maâmaâ" (Junker, 1958).



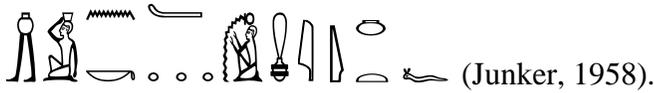
ii. n s3 R^c ptwlmis 3nh dt mri -3st .

"Comes to Ra Living for ever beloved of Isis Ptolemy (IV)" (Junker, 1958).



hr p3 hrd s3 3st .

"To You, Horus the Child (Harpokrates), Son of Isis" (Junker, 1958).



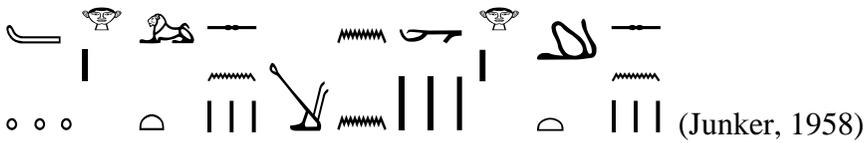
In i n.k 3bw w'c b mi k.d.f.

"Bring to you pure pot ivory like him"(Junker, 1958).



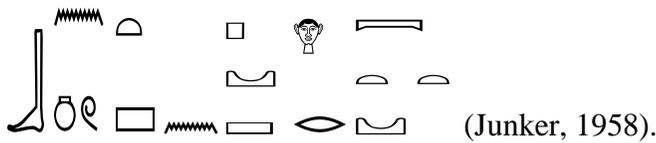
hr inw ht sty.

"In Nubian product things" (Junker, 1958).



3bw hr h3t hbny hr phwy.

"At the beginning of ivory and the end of ebony"(Junker, 1958)



bnw n dw hr imntt.

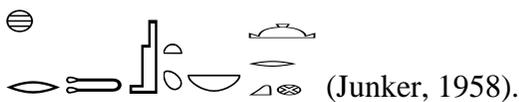
"bennu (heron)from the western mountain" (Junker, 1958).

The third figure to the left embodies the district  *b3kt* Nubian Bakt district(**Fig 2.C**) is accompanied with the following text:



ii nsw-bity iw'n ntrwi

"The king comes the heir of the two gods Ptolemy (IV) " (Junker, 1958).

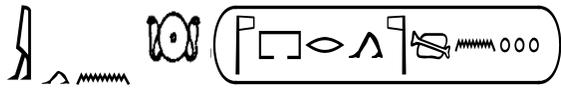


hr.t 3st nb(t) P3-iw-rk.

"To you, Isis, the mistress of Philae" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).
ini.t n. s b3kt hr ht nbw .

"Bring with her all things from Bakt" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

ii nsw-bity iw^c ntrwi.

"The king comes the heir of the two gods Ptolemy (IV)" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

hr.t 3st nb(t) P3-iw-rk.

"To you, Isis, the mistress of Philae" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

ini.t b3kt hr 3wt nb šps .

"Bring with her all-precious stones from Bakt" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

iri.t k3t nb.sn.

" you do all your works" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

hr nb b3kt.t m3wt .

"Horus the lord from Bakt, the spearman" (Junker, 1958).

 (Junker, 1958).

hr shr dbhiw.k i3ty w^cbit .

"He is throwing down your enemies to the mound of Abaton"(Junker, 1958).

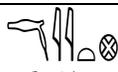
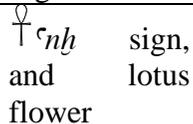
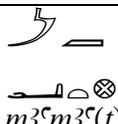
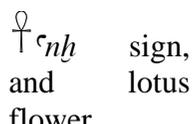
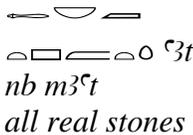
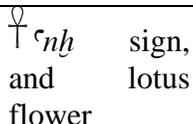
Conclusion

One of the fecundity figures represents the Nubian Maâmaâ district holds an elephant. The animal iconography is unrealistic being depicted smaller in size than the accompanied shapes of human figures. The offering bearers are depicted large. The artist exaggerated the length of the bent trunk as well the elephant's tusks. The elephant's four legs are represented small. Moreover, there is no existence of elephant's tail. In this scene, the figure of the elephant reflects the ivory products which were brought from Lower Nubia to be offered to goddess Isis. Ptolemy IV Philopator looked forward to Nubia for acquiring elephants in the battlefield against Seleucid army. He was the first king who used forest African elephant in the Raphia battle in 217 B.C.

Ptolemy IV Philopator was depicted as one of the fecundity figures presenting various offering to Isis, the main goddess of Philae temple. The three male figures representing three regions in lower Nubia; Mekhat (**Fig 2.A**), Maâmaâ (**Fig 2.B**) and Bakt (**Fig 2.C**) districts.

Table I

Comparative Study of the Fecundity Figure on the Pylon of Philae temple during the Græco-Roman Period

Fecundity Figure	Name of Nubian District	Iconography	Clothes	offering	Symbols Accompanied Fecundity Figure
Fecundity Figure (2.A)	 <i>mhi(t)</i> Nubian Mekhat	Standing in profile, long nipples, pendulous breast, and stomach	<i>Nemes</i> headdress, belt adorned with three strips, and abroad necklace	 <i>ebony</i>	 sign, lotus flower
Fecundity Figure (2.B)	 <i>m3^cm3^c(t)</i> Nubian Maâmaâ district	Standing in profile, long nipples, pendulous breast and stomach	<i>Nemes</i> headdress, belt adorned with three strips, and abroad necklace	 <i>Ivory</i>	 sign, lotus flower
Fecundity Figure (2.C)	 <i>b3kt</i> Nubian Bakt district	Standing in profile, long nipples, pendulous breast and stomach	<i>Nemes</i> headdress, belt adorned with three strips, and abroad necklace	 <i>nb m3^ct</i> <i>all real stones</i>	 sign, lotus flower

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Figures

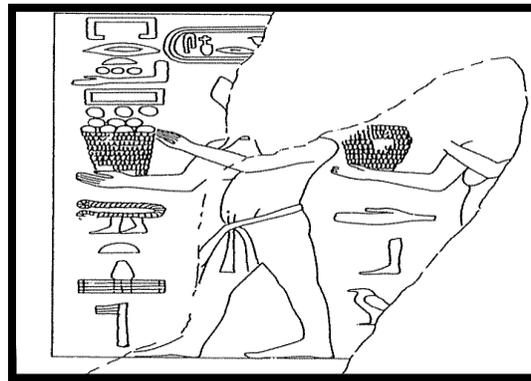
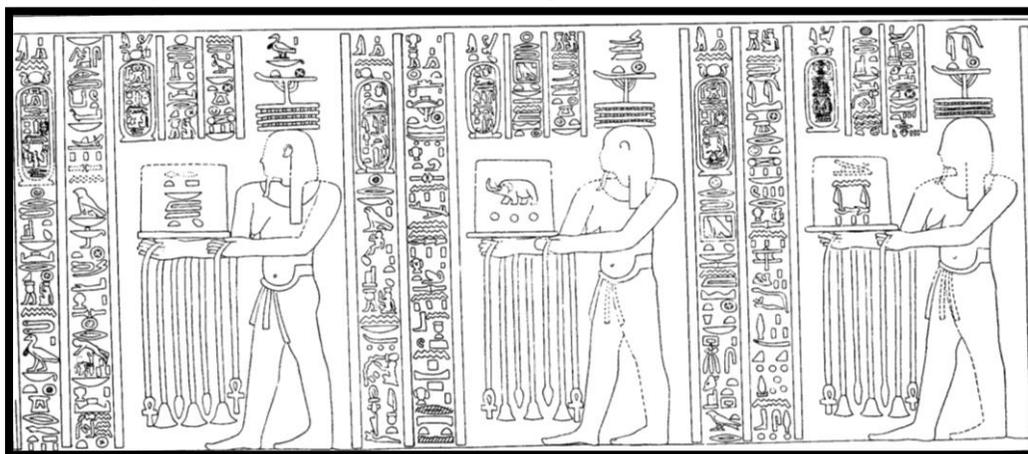


Fig.1. The earliest iconography of a fecundity figure in the valley temple of the Bent Pyramid at Dahshur from the reign of Senefru (Baines, 2001).



C B A

Fig.2. The depiction of elephant offering on the Pylon of Isis temple at Philae (Junker, 1958).



Fig.3. Amulet in the form of elephant head from the Predynastic period now displayed in the Metropolitan museum at New York, no. 59.101.1. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547235>, [Retrieved December 09, 2020].

تصوير الفيل كقربان في معبد إيزيس في فيلة

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المفص

يوجد منظر رائع في غرفة البوابة الغربية لصرح معبد فيلة في مدينة أسوان وهي تمثل ثلاثة أشكال لخصوبة. تصور أشكال الخصوبة على شكل ثلاثة رجال وحيث يظهر كل واحد منهم في عامود أفقى ويمثلون مقاطعات في النوبة السفلية وهم المخات والمعامة والباكت. تظهر وظيفة هذا المنظر وفقاً للنص المصاحب ويصور بطليموس الرابع فيلوباتور كواحد من حاملي القربان الثلاثة الذين يقدمون القربان للإله الرئيسي للمعبد وهي الإلهة إيزيس. فإن ظهور الملك البطلمي بهذه الصورة دليل رمزي لإتباع العبادة الإلهية للمعبد. يظهر شكل الفيل من بين مجموعة القربان المصورة والتي تشير إلى العاج. فقد تم جلب الأبنوس والعاج والحجر من النوبة لتقديمها للإلهة إيزيس. ستحل هذه الورقة البحثية هذا المنظر الموجود في المعبد بما يتوافق مع الدليل النصي كما سيتناول الباحث الخلفية التاريخية والدينية للفيل كقربان في عهد بطليموس الرابع فيلوباتور. ستساهم الدراسة التحليلية في إظهار أوجه التشابه والاختلاف ما بين ثلاثة أشكال الخصوبة المصورة في المنظر.

معلومات المقالة

الكلمات المفتاحية

القربان الإلهي؛ أشكال الخصوبة؛ البوابة الغربية للصرح؛ العاج؛ الفيل.

(JAAUTH)

المجلد 19، العدد 3،

(2020)،

ص 48-60