Nero at Elephantine

Ewa Laskowska-Kusztal
The article has been inspired by doubts, expressed in the literature on the subject, regarding the correctness of the identification of Nero’s name in inscriptions on buildings erected in Aswan and on Elephantine. With regard to Aswan, there has been a nearly age-long discussion of the two names carved in the lintel above the doorway to the naos (Tempelhaus) of the temple of Domitian, published in J.-F. Champollion’s *Notices Descriptives*.\(^1\) The reading of Nerva in these names\(^2\) has led to a consistent rejection of Wilkinson’s suggestion identifying the name as that of Nero.\(^3\) As for Elephantine, the reading of Nero’s names in the decoration of portal fragments, discovered in 1984/1985 and identified as belonging to the sanctuary of a previously unrecognized temple of Osiris Nesmeti,\(^4\) has been criticized by some.\(^5\) Since their graphy recalled that of the names from Domitian’s temple in Aswan, it is possible that the rejection of the proposed reading was due to the commonly accepted view concerning the reading of Nerva’s name in Aswan. In view of the current results of the research on the temple of Osiris Nesmeti, which is being reconstructed on Elephantine,\(^6\) it is particularly justified to take another look at the issue of Nero’s building activity on Elephantine and in Aswan.

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5 The proposed identification of the names of Nero in the temple of Osiris Nesmeti, although accepted by G. HÖBL, Altägypten im Römischen Reich. Der römische Pharaoh und seine Tempel. I. Römische Politik und altägyptische Ideologien von Augustus bis Diocletian, Tempelbau in Obrägypten, Mainz a/Rhein 2000 [= Altägypten im Römischen Reich I], p. 32 and HALLOF, Schreibungen, p. 97, was rejected previously by LOCHER, Topographie, pp. 66–67.

6 Reconstruction project prepared by Christian Ubertini and implemented by the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research on Ancient Egypt directed by Cornelius von Pilgrim. A full publication of the remains of the temple of Osiris Nesmeti is in preparation.
The disputed names of Nero in the Elephantine temple appear in the decoration of a portal situated between the second undecorated hall and the sanctuary, which was decorated by Vespasian. The preserved sequence of scenes from the portal represents different variants of the transcription of the emperor’s name (Fig. 1). Taking one of the signs with the phonetic value of $r$ as a graphic version of the writing of the phonetic value of $j$, one should refer to similar graphy of an undisputed name of Nero in the temple at Deir el-Hagar (Fig. 2a-c) and recall the names from the lintel of Domitian’s temple in Aswan, which follow the same idea of phonetic recording (Fig. 3). Therefore we would deal with the transcription $Njrs/Njrws$ or $Njrs/Njrws$ on Elephantine and $Nrjws$ or $Njrws$ in Aswan, where $w$ may be equivalent to Latin vowel ‘o’.

An analysis of the writing of the name of Nero from Deir el-Hagar, as well as other certain examples of his name from other places (Fig. 4) reveals the absence of any canon.

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7 UBERTINI, MDAIK 61, 2005, Figs 18, 20.
10 KURTH, Einführung, p. 504, § 11.7. According to a different concept of the reading, the first $r$-sign was identified as a phonetic recording of the vowel ‘e’ from the Latin name of Nero in an unquestioned (because vocalized in Greek) inscribed version of the name identified on a fragment from Aswan (Fig. 4f), cf. S. PERNIGOTTI, I blocchi decorati e iscritti, [in:] BRESCIANI, PERNIGOTTI, Assuan, cat. 30, p. 174 and p. 175, comment 2; CESARETTI, Aegyptus LXIV, 1984, p. 15.
whatsoever in the Egyptian written transcription of the emperor’s name.11 The examples from Fig. 4c-k represent the Egyptian transcription of the Greek version of the name, primarily in the nominative (Gr. Νέρων), but also in the genitive (Gr. Νέρωνος), whereas the predominant version of the transcription from Deir el-Hagar and the hitherto questioned form from Elephantine and Aswan should be seen as recording the original Latin name of Nero.12

The predominance of surviving examples of the Greek vocalization of the name of Nero and the fact that H. Gauthier and J. von Beckerath did not take into consideration the writing of Nero’s name from Deir el-Hagar13 could have established the traditional reading, that is, not as Nero, of the names from the lintel in Aswan.

One should also take into consideration the way Nerva’s name was written in cartouches of Trajan from Elephantine (Fig. 5a).14 The transcription principle where the signs Κ \\ correspond to Gr. -oua (Lat. -va) is different from those of the discussed names.15 This

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12 One could consider whether reminiscences of the Latin name of Nero could not have been fixed by the abbreviated recording of the Greek name of this ruler on Alexandrian coins. This abbreviated graphy, recalling the Latin sound of the name, is attested on coins issued in the fourth and fifth years of the emperor’s reign and was repeated in years nine through fourteen. A. Burnett, M. Amandry, P.P. Ripollès, Roman Provincial Coinage, I. From the death of Caesar to the death of Vitellius (44 BC–AD 69), Part I: Introduction and Catalogue, London 1992, p. 706.

13 The sole exception is a version of the name noted in Fig. 4g, cf. LdR V, p. 73; J. von Beckerath, Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen, MÄS 49, Mainz a/Rhein 1999, pp. 254–255, E4.

14 H. Ricke, Die Tempel Nektanebos’ II. in Elephantine, BABA 6, Kairo 1960 [= BABA 6], p. 62 n. 85, Fig. 18. An identical graphy of the name of Nerva is repeated on unpublished fragments GR 205 and GR 418, also belonging to columns from the courtyard of the Khnum Temple.

15 Kurth, Einführung, p. 481, § 6.4; p. 504, § 11.9.
line of reasoning is supported further still by the name of Nerva from cartouches of Trajan found in his kiosk in Philae (Fig. 5c) and Nerva’s names inscribed in a similar context in Esna and Dendera (Fig. 5b, d-j).\textsuperscript{16}

The discovery of fragments from the temple of Osiris Nesmeti on Elephantine has not only permitted a reconstruction of successive phases in the decoration of the building and enabled foremost the identification of its patron, but has also given a broader perspective on Nero’s debated presence in Aswan and on Elephantine.

Establishing the existence of an official cult of the youthful Osiris Nesmeti in the Elephantine pantheon, hitherto not confirmed in material from temples raised in the Ptolemaic and Graeco-Roman period on the island, was an important scientific contribution.\textsuperscript{17} A potential relation between this figure and earlier folk worship of a deified mortal could explain the chronological and topographical limitations of the new cult.\textsuperscript{18} At the same time the presumed roots of the cult of Osiris Nesmeti oblige one to view this new divine personality as a propa-

\textsuperscript{16} Assuming the correctness of the reading of Nero’s name in the material from the temples of Osiris Nesmeti in Elephantine and Domitian in Aswan, one can also suggest a discussion about the reading of Nerva’s names in the \textit{Ésna n°} 311. Its extraordinary form had already been noted by S. Sauneron, Le temple d’Ésna, \textit{Ésna} III, Le Caire 1968, p. 226.

\textsuperscript{17} Studies on the remains of sacral buildings on Elephantine from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, the first stage of which was completed with the publication by Laskowska-Kusztal, \textit{Elephantine} XV, are part of an ongoing project recording new material recovered from excavations being carried out on the island by the German Archaeological Institute and the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research on Ancient Egypt.

\textsuperscript{18} Laskowska-Kusztal, \textit{MDAIK} 61, 2005, pp. 80–81.
ganda creation of the priests from Elephantine, serving to promote the cult of a specific form of Osiris, which could compete with Osiris from the Philae and Abaton circle.\textsuperscript{19}

This propaganda aspect must have been connected with the organization of an official cult of this deity concentrated around special buildings serving the purposes of this cult. This would suggest a concentration of building activity within a given period.

Granting this suggestion, one should note that the cult of Osiris Nesmeti has been confirmed by fragments of decoration executed in the reign of Tiberius, discovered during salvage excavations in Aswan.\textsuperscript{20} This supports the premise that the official cult of Osiris Nesmeti was either created or developed in the reign of this ruler. Attestations of this cult can be found in all the buildings raised by this ruler in Aswan, not excluding the temple, remains of which have continued to be found in the town and which was located to the east of the temple of Isis.\textsuperscript{21}

Attention falls on another presumed attestation of the Aswan cult of Osiris Nesmeti. It is the said lintel from the façade of the naos of the temple of Domitian, the decoration of which, according to Champollion’s documentation, included among others a representation of Osiris with the epithet $\text{Osiris} \text{Amon-Khnum}$, who is a child of Khnum.\textsuperscript{22} The uncommonness of this epithet, which already J. Locher attempted to revise,\textsuperscript{23} leads one to surmise that we are dealing with an improperly read name of a local deity called Osiris Nesmeti $\text{Osiris} \text{Nesmeti}$, which Champollion did not have the opportunity to encounter in other temple buildings. It should be noted that in the decoration of the lintel from Aswan Osiris Nesmeti was incorporated in a group of divinities worshipped in Elephantine and Aswan, as the main beneficiary of the offerings.\textsuperscript{24}

The presence of Osiris Nesmeti in the decoration of the lintel suggests a connection between the worship of this new deity and the propaganda of the early years of Roman rule. It can be theorized that Tiberius was the builder of the so-called temple of Domitian and the decoration may have even started to be executed in his reign;\textsuperscript{25} it may have been

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 80. One should keep in mind Aswan’s subordination to the Elephantine theological school, which makes it difficult to identify the provenience of spolia found in Aswan. They could have originated from buildings erected in Aswan as well as those from Elephantine.

\textsuperscript{20} This material is still unpublished and is constantly being supplemented with new discoveries. On the extent of the excavations, cf. C. \textsc{von Pilgrim et al.}, The Town of Syene. Preliminary Report on the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Season in Aswan, \textit{MDAIK} 60, 2004, pp. 119–148; Id., The Town of Syene. Report on the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} Season in Aswan, \textit{MDAIK} 62, 2006, pp. 215–277; Id., The Town of Syene. Report on the 5\textsuperscript{th} and 6\textsuperscript{th} Season in Aswan, \textit{MDAIK} 64, 2008, pp. 305–358. I would like to thank Dr. Cornelius von Pilgrim and Dr. Wolfgang Müller for making it possible for me to compare the spolia from Aswan with the material from Elephantine.

\textsuperscript{21} Hofbauer, Altägypten im Römischen Reich II, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. supra, nn. 1, 2.

\textsuperscript{23} He translated the epithet as ‘king of the gods’ (\textit{nswt nTrw}), cf. Locher, \textit{Topographie}, p. 344.

\textsuperscript{24} Laskowska-Kusztal, \textit{MDAIK} 61, 2005, Figs 22–24.

\textsuperscript{25} Osiris Nesmeti appears on the lintel of the portal on Elephantine as the fourth figure in a row of deities accompanying Khnum, Satet and Anuket. On Osiris Nesmeti in the program of the decoration of this temple, cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{26} The large set of decoration attributed to Tiberius and found in Aswan has not been analyzed in terms of whether it came from one or more temples. Analyzing Champollion’s lintel description, one should note the absence of decoration in the room opening off the portal, that is, the second temple hall. This recalls the case of
Nero, whose accomplishments in the decorative sphere would have been limited to the decoration of the portal, similarly as on Elephantine. The temple could have maintained religious relations with the temple dedicated to Osiris Nesmeti on Elephantine, raised by Nero and decorated by Vespasian, Domitian, Titus and Trajan.

The suggestion that the name of Osiris Nesmeti could be read in the inscription from the lintel in question and the search for links between the so-called temple of Domitian and the cult of Osiris Nesmeti lead us to take note of a similar mistaken reading of the name of Osiris in a scene (already from the decoration of Domitian) from inside the portal in the facade of this temple. The proper reading of the name indicates that also this figure from the portal should be interpreted as the youthful god Osiris Nesmeti, who undoubtedly played a prominent role in the decoration program of this building.

The attribution to Nero, instead of Nerva, of the discussed parts of the temple of Osiris Nesmeti on Elephantine and the so-called temple of Domitian in Aswan can be validated even further by a consideration of the length of the reign of these two emperors and the resultant building and decoration activities, which would have been possible these periods of time. Relatively extensive building activity, also in provincial centers, has been recorded for Nero’s rule, which lasted several years. He has also been noted as responsible for executing the decoration of building projects.

Nero’s interest in the region of the first cataract is also well justified in view of its importance in connection with the annual Nile flood. It was also reflected in the expedition Nero mounted in search of the sources of the Nile. In this context, it is justified to attribute to Nero the extensive building and decoration program on Elephantine and in

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27 An abacus with a cartouche of Titus was included in the temple reconstruction project by Christian Ubertini. In this situation, when the internal decoration program of the temple was left unfinished, the presence of a cartouche of Titus on the abacus of a column situated in the facade of the pronaos of this temple can be perceived as evident proof of royal propaganda.

28 Cf. C. DE WIT, Les inscriptions du temple de Domitien à Assouan, CdE 35, 1960, inscr. D, Fig. 24 and p. 113. The publication inspired J. Locher’s reading of the text from the lintel.

29 Cesaretti, Aegyptus LXIV, 1984, pp. 3–25. Temples in Deir el-Hagar (Bull, Appendix, pp. 29–31; G. Höbl, Altägypten im Römischen Reich. Der römische Pharaon und seine Tempel, III. Heiligtümer und religiöses Leben in den ägyptischen Wüsten und Oasen, Mainz a/Rhein 2005, pp. 81–88), Karanis (V.B. Schuman, A Greek inscription from Karanis, Cde XXXVII, 1962, pp. 163–166), Tehne-Akoris (G. Lefebvre, L. Barry, Rapports sur les fouilles exécutés à Tehnéh, AsAE VI, 1905, pp. 141–148) exemplify imperial building activities combined with a temple decoration program initiated by this ruler. Nero’s interest in Egypt, which is remarked on in the literature on the subject, should be emphasized, including his unrealized plans to visit this Roman province, cf. Höbl, Altägypten im Römischen Reich I, pp. 29–33.


Aswan, serving the cult of a youthful god Osiris Nesmeti son of Khnum, identified with the Nile flood. It would be simultaneously a continuation of imperial religious policy which accorded special worship to the Nile deity in the wake of a repeated irregular Nile floods in the reign of Claudius. This policy was expressed also, among others, by granting Nero the epithet of Agathodaimon to emphasize his instrumental role with regard to the Nile flood. In this context one should also mention the Alexandrian coin issues of this ruler with images of Egyptian deities, including Nile and Sarapis, on the reverse; this coinage is in chronological connection with Nero’s Nubian expedition described by Seneca.

Attributing the decoration of the portals of the temple of Osiris Nesmeti on Elephantine and the temple of Domitian in Aswan to the reign of Nerva, disproved by the present considerations, would imply that the work would have had to be done within the 16 months of the emperor’s reign. It means that they would have had to be initiated upon the new emperor taking power. It should also be emphasized that there is no evident motivation for the rapidness of the execution of the decoration situated inside already functioning temples, had they not been intended to serve the purposes of imperial or religious propaganda.

In Nero’s case, conclusions drawing from an analysis of the epigraphical material are further supported by historical and religious reality. The broad spectrum of Ptolemaic rulers and Roman emperors who developed the religious center on Elephantine in view of its multi-aspect associations with the Nile flood, permits one to look for similar motivation governing activities in this region during Nero’s relatively long reign.

(Translation: Iwona Zych)

Ewa Laskowska-Kusztal
Instytut Kultur Śródziemnomorskich
i Orientalnych PAN, Warszawa
emlaskow@gmail.com

32 On this aspect of the personality of Osiris Nesmeti cf. LASKOWSKA-KUSZTAL, MDAIK 61, 2005, p. 79.
34 They are linked to imperial propaganda emphasizing power in Egypt, perceived through the context of relations with Meroe and the Nubian expedition, see M. ZACH, Nero und Meroe. Die alexandrinische Münzprägung als historische Quelle, BzS 5, 1992, pp. 167–169.