

Images of the past

2.- Travellers, scholars and tomb raiders

The year 1812 in Egypt marked the beginning of a period of development that captured the imagination of many Europeans. The area became a frequent destination for explorers, travellers and adventurers. Some of them had a scientific purpose or were attracted by ancient objects, but others simply tried to make a fortune with the illegal trade of antiquities. Nubia was still an unknown region, but it soon started to be explored by many of these travellers whose descriptions and sketches of Debod provide valuable information about the parts of the temple that have since been lost.

Seventy five years after Norden's expedition in Nubia, a curious character that went by the name of Sheik Ibrahim ibn Abdullah started a trip up the Nile that would eventually take him to Dongola, in present-day Sudan. He was in fact the Swiss scholar and traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, who discovered Petra in Jordan and became the first European to visit the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Arabia. Burckhardt, who also discovered the Abu Simbel temples along the way, visited Debod on March 30, 1813. The result of this visit was the first detailed description of the monument, as well as a plan of the complex.



Johann L. Burckhardt

Burckhardt was followed by other travellers eager for discoveries and ancient treasures, like Giovanni Battista Belzoni and Jean Jacques Rifaud, who worked as antiquity hunters for the British and French consuls, respectively. Rifaud visited Debod in 1816 and copied some of the reliefs at the vestibule. He also left a graffiti in the naos chapel.



Belzoni drawings



Gau drawings

The German-born French archaeologist François C. Gau began his exploration of Nubia on January 24, 1819 with a visit to Debod, where he took several sketches. He made drawings of the reliefs at the Adijalamani chapel, the front façade and some at the north wall of the vestibule. Gau also painted the naos of Ptolemy VIII, which appears again in a later sketch taken during Bankes' expedition in 1822. This naos was removed from the temple to be sent to some European collector around 1826.