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Firth. E. N° 11 1857

Francis Firth,
The Temple Maharraqa, Nubia, 1857

Firth. Photo. 1857.

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FRANCIS FIRTH

(Chesterfield 1822 – 1898 Cannes)

THE TEMPLE MAHARRAKA, NUBIA, 1857

Title, publisher and dated printed

Albumen print on original mount

16 x 22.5 cm; (6 1/4 x 8 3/4 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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Firth Photo 1857

THE TEMPLE OF MAHARRAKA.

Nubia

LONDON

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Francis Frith's *The Temple Maharraka, Nubia*, dated 1857, belongs to the pioneering body of photographs through which the monuments and landscapes of Egypt and Nubia were first systematically recorded by the camera. Frith's photograph is particularly significant for preserving an image of the Temple of al-Maharraqa in its original landscape, decades before the monument was dismantled and relocated as a consequence of the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Like much of Frith's Egyptian work, the photograph therefore operates simultaneously as archaeological document, topographical record and carefully composed image of the ancient Nile Valley.

The Temple of al-Maharraqa was situated in Lower Nubia, approximately 120 kilometres south of Aswan, close to the southern frontier of the Roman Empire. Dedicated to Isis and Serapis, the sanctuary belongs to the complex religious and political landscape of Roman Egypt, in which Egyptian cult traditions continued to flourish within the structures of Roman rule. Its relatively remote position meant that the temple formed part of the chain of monuments encountered by travellers proceeding southwards along the Nile, while its architecture provided an important visual testimony to the persistence and adaptation of Egyptian religious traditions during the Roman period.

Frith encountered such monuments during three journeys to Egypt and Palestine undertaken between 1856 and 1860. These expeditions represented a decisive stage in his development as a photographer and were undertaken at a moment when photography was still a technically demanding and relatively young medium. Frith's ambition was considerably broader than the production of isolated picturesque views. He sought to construct a comprehensive photographic record of the principal monuments, landscapes and settlements encountered during his travels, producing images that could circulate among an increasingly sophisticated European public interested in archaeology, geography, history and travel.

The technical circumstances of Frith's work were formidable. He employed the wet collodion process, which offered significantly greater clarity and exposure speed than earlier photographic methods but required glass plates to be coated, sensitised, exposed and developed while still wet. Frith therefore travelled with substantial quantities of chemicals, glass plates and darkroom equipment, transporting numerous crates of material along the Nile. The resulting photographs possess an exceptional level of descriptive detail, reflecting both the capabilities of the process and Frith's remarkable control over it.

In the present photograph, the Temple of Maharraqa is treated with the restraint characteristic of Frith's architectural photography. The monument occupies the centre of the composition, while the surrounding Nubian landscape establishes the temple's relationship to its geographical setting. Rather than presenting the building as an isolated antiquity, Frith records it as part of the living topography of the Nile Valley. The subtle tonal gradations of the albumen print allow the architectural surfaces, surrounding terrain and atmospheric distance to be distinguished with

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remarkable delicacy. The absence of excessive picturesque embellishment reinforces the documentary authority of the image.

The albumen process further contributed to the distinctive appearance of Frith's photographs. Prints made from his glass negatives combined fine linear detail with a warm tonal range, making them particularly effective for the representation of ancient masonry and expansive landscapes. The printed title, publisher and date on the original mount indicate that the photograph was intended not simply as a private record but as a commercially disseminated image, part of the developing market for authoritative photographic views of Egypt.

The subsequent history of Maharraqa lends Frith's photograph an additional historical importance. Following the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the temple was dismantled in 1961 by the Egyptian Antiquities Service and reconstructed further north at a new site near the temples of Dakka and Wadi es-Sebua. Frith's 1857 photograph consequently preserves the original architectural and topographical setting of a monument that would later be physically displaced.

Frith's achievement ultimately lies in the union of technological innovation, archaeological observation and commercial vision. His Egyptian photographs established a new mode of encountering antiquity: immediate, reproducible and grounded in direct observation. *The Temple Maharaka, Nubia* is therefore not merely an early photograph of a Roman Egyptian sanctuary, but an important visual document of a vanished landscape and a testament to Frith's pioneering contribution to the photographic representation of the ancient world.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com