

NILOMETER

A number gauge for measuring the rise in the waters of the Nile at its [annual](#) flood. In Coptic times it had the shape of a graduated column divided into cubits. It is built of stone in the middle of a well [alongside](#) the river. On Coptic textiles the Nilometer is represented surmounted by a cone with a child, symbol of the cubit in Greco-Roman and Coptic statuary, standing near the column. On Alexandrian coins, the child pointed out the favorable number of cubits. In Coptic art, his gesture is amplified. Holding a chisel in his left hand and a mallet in his right, he carves the proper number of cubits for the place where the Nilometer is located.

A good example is a medallion in the Louvre (fifth-sixth century), worked in two colors, with a blue-green staircase and a red column. The blue-green color recalls the green waters of the initial rise (June), and red the flood itself (July-September). The two Greek and Coptic figures indicate the best flood level at Hermopolis.

In visual form, this conjunction of symbolism and realism presents the pharaonic significance of the Nilometer as an instrument of economic foresight and a witness to divine benevolence toward Egypt. [Greek papyri](#) of the Coptic period (sixth century) tell us that the Nile flood rises by the power of Christ, and that the Nilometer depends on the church. The Nilometer is part of the Egyptian landscape, like the lotus and the thickets of water plants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonneau, D. "Le Nilometre: aspect architectural." *Archeologia* (Warsaw) 27 (1976):1-11.
- Bourguet, P. du. *Catalogue des étoffes coptes*, Vol. 1, no. D36. Musée National du Louvre. Paris, 1964.



DANIELLE BONNEAU

Tags: [Culture](#)