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The Rosetta Stone, Ptolemaic Aetos, and Aida

The nineteenth-century Egyptologist François Auguste Mariette wrote the original story that inspired Giuseppe Verdi's Aida. Mariette's "La fiancée du Nil" (and Antonio Ghislanzoni's subsequent libretto) employs fictional Egyptian characters whose names Mariette filtered through the Greco-Roman tradition. This paper identifies the name Aetos found in the fourth [Greek] line of the Rosetta Stone as the heretofore unidentified source for the name of the opera's titular protagonist.

The passage from Strabo [17.1.31-32] describing an avenue of sphinxes before the Temple of Memphian Serapis directed Mariette to the necropolis of Memphis, one of the most important spiritual centers in ancient Egypt, the chief divinity of which was the powerful creator god Ptah. Mariette soon excavated the Serapeum and its semicircular shrine featuring statues of Greek poets and philosophers. Serapis, too, was not an "ancient" Egyptian god but a Ptolemaic, i.e. Greek, synthesis. Mariette located his story in Memphis, and Act I.ii contains a serene hymn to Ptah. Because the Greeks commonly associated this Memphian creator god with the Greco-Roman craftsman god Hephaestus/Vulcan, Mariette located his final scene in the "Temple of Vulcan."

The names of three of the opera's principals are theophoric fictions. The roots of their names refer to two other important gods, Ra [Radames, Ramfis] and Amun [Amneris], and these divine roots are capped with typical Hellenized suffixes. The most important inscription that groups the three gods Ptah, Ra, and Amun and was very familiar to all Egyptologists of the mid-nineteenth century was the code-breaking Rosetta Stone. Far from being an abandoned relic in 1870, the Rosetta Stone had been revisited, reexamined, re-edited, and re-published three times just in the twenty year period preceding the preparation of Aida. Mariette, whose cousin worked with Champollion, like any linguistically oriented Egyptologist of his day, was certainly thoroughly familiar with the text of the Rosetta Stone.

Issued by the priests of Ptah at Memphis under Ptolemy V Epiphanes (the father of Ptolemy VI Philometor who supervised the construction of the aforementioned shrine of poets and philosophers), the Rosetta Stone offers its text in hieroglyphic Egyptian, Demotic, and Greek. The text of the third and fourth lines of Greek consists of an introductory praise of Ptah, Ra, and Amun, who play such important spiritual roles in the opera, although in Greek they are referred to as their Hellenic counterparts Hephaestus, Helios, and Zeus:

3 ...ON O HFAISTOS EDOKIMASEN VI O HLIOS EDVKEN THN NIKHN,
EIKONOS ZVSHS TOU DIOS, UIOU TOU HLIUOY, PTOLEMAIOY
4 AIVNOBIOY, HGAPEMENOU UPO TOU FYA, ETOUS ENATOU EF IEREVS
AETOU TOU AETOU...

The topmost hieroglyphic rendering of this portion of the text is broken off, but the Demotic rendering in the middle of the stele is intact, and it uses the equivalent names Ptah, Ra, and Amun. The rest of the fourth Greek line praises King Ptolemy IV by listing

the three previous Ptolemaic kings after Alexander the Great, but before it mentions even Alexander's name it lists the name of the priest of Ptah [*sic*], Aetos, and his father, also Aetos. The feminine form of the Greek name Aetus is Aeta, the feminine form of the Demotic name is Aiata, and these may have been Mariette's inspiration for the name Aida.

Mariette discusses the name only in his letter to Du Locle (April 27, 1870).

Don't be alarmed by the title. Aida is an Egyptian name. Normally it would be Aita. But that name would be too harsh, and the singers would irresistibly soften it to Aida.

Neither De Locle, nor Verdi, nor anyone other than an Egyptologist would know if Aita were not an authentic Egyptian name, but a famous Egyptologist trying to please his Egyptian employer would hardly not use an Egyptian name for his titular protagonist. So far as I have been able to discover, nothing like the name Aita is attested in any ancient Egyptian texts, and a contemporary Egyptian Arabic name would hardly qualify. From Mariette's perspective Aeta/Aiata/Aita was an Egyptian name, albeit derived from a Ptolemaic, i.e. Greek-Egyptian name, found on the Rosetta Stone.

In Diodorus Siculus' description of Egypt [1.19], a source Mariette consulted for its passages describing the Serapeum, the name Aetus is equated with the Nile and all of Egypt, which thereby not only gives Aida an additional imprimatur of authenticity but also transforms her into a historical symbol for the entire Nile region. The title of Mariette's original scenario was not "Aida" but "La fiancée du Nil," and the name of the "King of Egypt" was intentionally left historically unspecified, as were the names of Radames, Ramfis, and Amneris, rendering the entire tale without historical specificity and therefore open for a more allegorical interpretation.