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## Religious encounters on the southern Egyptian frontier in Late Antiquity (AD 298-642)

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## 1. Between Peace and War: Procopius and Priscus on Philae

Roman politics concerning Late Antique Philae can best be elucidated by analysing passages in two historical sources, Procopius and Priscus, which are often quoted by scholars (for the text and translation of these passages, see Appendix 1). The events as described in these texts serve as a chronological framework and *pièce de résistance* for sources to be analysed later.

In his *Persian Wars*, written around 550/551, Procopius describes the withdrawal of the Roman frontier in 298.<sup>23</sup> At that time, Diocletian was in Egypt to personally resolve a crisis after the revolt of Domitius Domitianus, which took place in 297/298.<sup>24</sup> Possibly as part of this campaign, the emperor marched against the 'Ethiopians'.<sup>25</sup> Another source mentions a Roman victory won over 'Ethiopians' between 296 and 298.<sup>26</sup> According to Procopius, Diocletian travelled to the area, probably in the autumn of 298, and conducted a peace treaty with the Blemmyes and Noubades.<sup>27</sup> It was agreed that the Romans would give up the Dodekaschoinos, annually pay a fixed amount of money to these peoples, and allow their priests to perform religious duties, alongside the 'Roman' priests, in the sanctuaries at Philae.<sup>28</sup>

Although Procopius is the only source to inform us about the withdrawal of the Roman frontier, and there is no doubt that his account draws on a historical event, the historian is clearly writing from a Roman point of view, and as such conforms to imperial propaganda vis-à-vis 'barbarians'.<sup>29</sup> He presents Diocletian as making an independent, well-considered decision concerning the frontier, and sums up the reasons why the emperor came to this decision. However, Diocletian's considerations contrast with the concessions he had to make, and indicate that it is more likely that the emperor was forced to this decision through pressure from the peoples of the south.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Procopius states that 'Diocletian persuaded those barbarians (that is, the Noubades) to migrate from their own haunts and to settle on either side of the Nile'.<sup>31</sup> The archaeological remains that reflect the society that inhabited Lower Nubia from the fourth to the sixth centuries show that there was never a complete break with the preceding period. It is therefore improbable that these Nubian tribes immigrated en masse to the Dodekaschoinos at the end of the third century.<sup>32</sup> The Noubades probably already formed part of the indigenous population of the Nile valley, in which case Diocletian could not have instigated their settlement.

<sup>23</sup> For Procopius, see Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> J.D. Thomas, 'The Date of the Revolt of L. Domitius Domitianus', *ZPE* 22 (1976) 253-79, and 'A Family Dispute from Karanis and the Revolt of Domitius Domitianus', *ZPE* 24 (1977) 233-40. See now R.S. Bagnall, K.A. Worp, *Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt* (Leiden, 2004<sup>2</sup>) 241-2. I do not follow the attempts by J. Schwartz, *L. Domitius Domitianus (étude numismatique et papyrologique)* (Brussels, 1975), and F. Kolb, 'Die Datierung des ägyptischen Aufstands unter L. Domitius Domitianus und Aurelius Achilleus', *Eos* 76 (1988) 325-43, to date the event to 296/7.

<sup>25</sup> Zonar. 12.31 B-C = *FHN* III 281.

<sup>26</sup> Paneg. 8.5.2 = *FHN* III 280.

<sup>27</sup> The date of Diocletian's journey is derived from *P.Panop.Beatty* 1, on which see A.K. Bowman, 'Papyri and Roman Imperial History, 1960-75', *JRS* 66 (1976) 153-73 at 158-60. For the events culminating in Diocletian's visit, see Brennan, 'Diocletian and Elephantine'.

<sup>28</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.27-37 = *FHN* III 328.

<sup>29</sup> Török, 'Contribution', 217-8. See in general for imperial propaganda with regard to peace treaties with 'barbarians', P.J. Heather, 'Foedera and Foederati of the Fourth Century', in W. Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 1997) 57-74.

<sup>30</sup> L. Török, *Late Antique Nubia* (Budapest, 1988) 30-1; G. Greatrex, *Procopius and the Persian Wars* (Diss. Oxford, 1994) 243; L.P. Kirwan, *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2002) Ch. XV ('The X-Group Problem', 1982<sup>1</sup>) 194.

<sup>31</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.29.

<sup>32</sup> Adams, *Nubia*, 345-8, 419-22. Cf. Demicheli, *Rapporti*, 155-6; Török, 'Contribution', 236; *FHN* III, p. 1192; Edwards, *Nubian Past*, 159.

Procopius also pictures the Blemmyes and Noubades as barbarians in the traditional Graeco-Roman manner.<sup>33</sup> After he has mentioned the annual payment to these peoples, Procopius states:

Although they have been receiving this (right) down to my day, none the less they continue to overrun the places in those parts. Thus, it seems, with regard to all barbarians, it is simply not possible for them to keep faith with the Romans unless through fear of active defence forces.<sup>34</sup>

Typically, the Blemmyes and Noubades are portrayed here as untrustworthy barbarians, who can be subdued by violence only. Another example is Procopius' description of the religion of the peoples:

Both these peoples, the Blemmyes and the Nobatai (Noubades), revere all the other gods in which pagans (Ἕλληνας) believe, as well as Isis and Osiris, and not least Priapus. But the Blemmyes even have the custom of sacrificing human beings to the sun.<sup>35</sup>

In the first place, it is mentioned in particular that the Blemmyes and Noubades worship Priapus, the ithyphallic god of sex and fertility, who was, to say the least, not a 'normal' deity.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, throughout Antiquity, human sacrifice was regarded as a typical feature of barbarians.<sup>37</sup> This angle from which Roman sources are written should be kept in mind when we discuss the other sources concerning the southern frontier in Late Antiquity.

What does Procopius say about Philae? Diocletian 'chose an island in the river Nile somewhere very near (ἄγχιστὰ πη) the city of Elephantine'.<sup>38</sup> Apparently, the historian was not too well informed about the location of Philae, as he also remarks that the emperor 'constructed a really strong fortification' there. As we have seen, this 'fortification' probably consisted of a reorganisation of the troops, which were not stationed on Philae but on the riverbank facing the island. Procopius continues:

... and in that place he founded some shrines and altars for the Romans and for these very barbarians in common and settled in this fortification priests of both (parties), in the expectation that their friendship would be secure for the Romans because they shared the sanctuaries with them.<sup>39</sup>

According to Procopius, priests at Philae were allowed to come from both the 'Romans' (that is, Egyptians who were Roman citizens), and from the Blemmyes and

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<sup>33</sup> See P.S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak. How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton, 1999) 99-104, on the Graeco-Roman perception of barbarians, and Y.A. Dauge, *Le barbare. Recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation* (Brussels, 1981) 620-6; B.D. Shaw, *Rulers, Nomads, and Christians in Roman North Africa* (Aldershot and Brookfield, 1995) Ch. VI ('"Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk": The Ancient Mediterranean Ideology of the Pastoral Nomad', 1982/3<sup>1</sup>), and Ch. VII ('Fear and Loathing: The Nomad Menace and Roman Africa', 1982<sup>1</sup>), on the Graeco-Roman 'ideology' towards nomads. Cf. D.F. Graf, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: From the Nabataeans to the Saracens* (Aldershot and Brookfield, 1997) Ch. X ('Rome and the Saracens: Reassessing the Nomadic Menace', 1989<sup>1</sup>), for the Roman view of the Saracens.

<sup>34</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.33 (slightly adapted).

<sup>35</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.35-6. This statement may be connected to the solar god Mandulis, whom the Blemmyes worshipped in fifth-century Talmis. Cf. Nock, *Essays on Religion* 1, 357-400 ('A Vision of Mandulis Aion', 1934<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>36</sup> Bremmer, *Greek Religion*, 41; T. Heinze, 'Priapus', *DNPX* (2001) 308-9.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. D.D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London, 1991); J. Rives, 'Human Sacrifice among Pagans and Christians', *JRS* 85 (1995) 65-85.

<sup>38</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.34.

<sup>39</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.34 (adapted). The translation of ἱερεῖς ἐκάστων with 'priests of both peoples' in *FHN* III, p. 1191, is inaccurate because on the one hand the Romans, and on the other hand the Blemmyes and Noubades are meant. The translation 'because they shared the sanctuaries with them' is preferable to 'because of their participation in the rites' (τῶ μετέχειν τῶν ἱερῶν), for ἱερῶν refers to νεῶς τε καὶ βωμούς 'shrines and altars'. Cf. ἱερά 'sanctuaries' in Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.36.

Noubades. However, the remark that Diocletian decided to have priests of both parties in the temple to keep the peace seems to illustrate the etymology of Philae that follows in the next sentence, which Procopius relates to the Greek word '(female) friends' (φίλοι), and which the historian seems to have adopted from earlier, Roman sources.<sup>40</sup> The permission to have access to the sanctuaries of Philae continued until Procopius' own day:

These barbarians retained the sanctuaries on Philae right down to my day, but the Emperor Justinian decided to destroy them.<sup>41</sup>

The second, equally important source for the history of Late Antique Philae is a fragment by the historian Priscus, which is preserved in a tenth-century encyclopaedic work compiled by the Byzantine Emperor Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, the *Excerpta de legationibus*.<sup>42</sup> The passage was written in the last quarter of the fifth century, and describes a treaty after the Romans had defeated the Blemmyes and Noubades. These peoples twice sued for peace, the first time for as long as the Roman leader of the delegation, Maximinus, was in the Thebaid, the second time for as long as he lived. But Maximinus only wanted to accept a treaty that lasted for a hundred years.<sup>43</sup>

According to the treaty, the peoples had to release Roman prisoners, they had to return animals, and they had to give young, well-born men as hostages. However, they could continue a long-standing tradition:

...and that, in accordance with the ancient right (νόμος), their crossing to the temple of Isis be unhindered, Egyptians having charge of the river boat in which the statue (ἄγαλμα) of the goddess is placed and ferried across the river. For at a stated time the barbarians bring the wooden statue (ξύονον) to their own country and, after having consulted it, return it safely to the island.

In this passage, the phrase 'in accordance with the ancient right' is contrasted with the ordinances of the present treaty between the Romans, and the Blemmyes and Noubades. This appears from the word 'ancient' (παλαιός), but the position of the adjective between the article and the noun, which in Greek indicates that the adjective is the most salient part of the noun phrase, is also clearly contrastive.<sup>44</sup> The 'ancient right' therefore seems to refer to an ancient tradition, perhaps ratified in a formal treaty or treaties, in which these peoples were allowed to have access to Philae.<sup>45</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.35 (adapted). Although the Greek word φιλία, 'friendship', is mentioned in the preceding sentence, the Greek has an accusative plural of φίλη, '(female) friend', here, and should be translated accordingly (*pace FHN* III, p. 1191). For both etymologies, see I. Lévy, 'Sur deux contes étymologiques relatifs à Philae', *Latomus* 5 (1946) 127-30.

<sup>41</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.36.

<sup>42</sup> Prisc. F 27 Blockley (= *FHN* III 318). On Priscus, see R.C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, 2 vols (Liverpool, 1981-3) 1.48-70; B. Baldwin, *Studies on Late Roman and Byzantine History, Literature and Language* (Amsterdam, 1984) 255-98 ('Priscus of Panium', 1980); D. Rohrbacher, *The Historians of Late Antiquity* (London and New York, 2002) 82-92; R.C. Blockley, 'The Development of Greek Historiography: Priscus, Malchus, Candidus', in G. Marasco (ed.), *Greek & Roman Historiography in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2003) 289-315 at 289-312.

<sup>43</sup> On the different proposals as to his function, cf. *PLRE* II s.v. 'Maximinus' 10-1, with Török, 'Contribution', 228-9, and *FHN* III, p. 1157.

<sup>44</sup> H. Dik, 'Interpreting Adjective Position in Herodotus', in E.J. Bakker (ed.), *Grammar as Interpretation. Greek Literature in Its Linguistic Contexts* (Leiden, 1997) 55-76. I owe this reference to S.J. Bakker.

<sup>45</sup> Normally, νόμος should be translated with either 'law' or 'custom', but both translations are not entirely satisfactory in this context. If we translate 'law' (*FHN* III, p. 1155), the access seems to be based on a formal treaty such as the treaty with Diocletian of 298, but the question is whether the word refers to a specific 'law' or, more generally, to the 'custom' of the southern peoples having access to the temple. Against the translation 'custom' (Blockley, *Classicising Historians* 2, 323) it can be argued that

connection with the second, explanatory sentence is harder to account for, but probably explains why the statue is ferried from Philae across the Nile in connection with the Blemmyes and Noubades: in order to be taken to their country every now and again. Interestingly, unlike Procopius, Priscus remarks that Egyptian priests were in charge.

Because of the connection of the Blemmyes and Noubades with Philae, the treaty 'of a hundred years' was concluded on the island. However, soon afterwards Maximinus suddenly died, and the peoples responded, ironically, by holding the Romans to their second proposal:

When the barbarians learned of Maximinus' death, they took away their hostages by force and overran the country.

This event, which can be dated to shortly before the end of 453 (452/453), indicates that the Romans tolerated Blemmyan and Noubadian worship at Philae well into the fifth century, even after a victory.<sup>46</sup> Although interpretation is difficult because the immediate context has not been transmitted, the treaty is seen through Roman eyes, for the text underlines the unreliability of the 'barbarians', who, as soon as Maximinus had died, started raiding again.<sup>47</sup>

These passages by Procopius and Priscus show that Roman policy was aimed at keeping the peace on the southern frontier, which was apparently frequently disturbed by raids of the Blemmyes and Noubades.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, they paid these peoples and granted them access to the temples of Philae 'according to the ancient right'. This brings us to the question to be answered in the next section: when Priscus states that the Blemmyes and Noubades took a statue of Isis from Philae to their country, where did they go to?

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this translation does not indicate a contrast with the treaty of 452/3. With Winter, 'Philae', 1026, the translation 'right' seems therefore more appropriate here. Cf. E. Winter in A.M. Blackman, *The Temple of Dendûr* (Cairo, 1911; repr. with supplement, Cairo, 1981) 373-83 at 382.

<sup>46</sup> Rutherford, 'Island', 235.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. e.g. Prisc. F 6.1 Blockley, for a similar story about the unreliability of 'barbarians' concerning a treaty.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. on the Roman attitude towards the Saracens in the reign of Justinian, Mayerson, *Monks* 313-21 at 319 ('Saracens and Romans: Micro-Macro Relationships', 1989): 'It is quite clear that the Romans were never able, or committed, to control the movement of Arab tribes'.