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

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9. Philae in the Age of Bishop Theodore

In the preceding chapter, we saw that the closure of the temples at Philae and the missions to Nubia did not have a direct relationship in the sense that the events were part of a deliberate 'anti-pagan' policy, which marked the way to the 'Christianisation' of Nubia. In this rather simplified image of the conversion of Nubia to Christianity, first Philae had to become Christian before Christianity could finally reach Nubia. To this combination of events has been added another event, which has already been introduced at the start of Part III, that is, the transformation of the temple of Isis into a *topos* of St Stephen. According to this image, Bishop Theodore built a church inside the temple shortly after its closure, and this final 'triumph' of Christianity over 'paganism' stimulated the king of the Noubades, who had formerly worshipped Isis at Philae, to convert to Christianity. Thus, the turning of the temple into a church becomes of the utmost importance for the missions to Nubia.

However, we have seen that this development was far more complex and that Christianity had already reached Nubia well before the sixth century. Moreover, the closure of the temples at Philae and the missions to Nubia need to be seen more generally in the context of the imperial policy concerning the southern Egyptian frontier and the peoples living immediately to its south. Consequently, we have interpreted the closure of the temples at Philae as a symbolic deed, which confirmed that Philae was ripe for Christianity rather than that it was a 'Christian triumph' over 'paganism'. Without this import attached to the closure of the temple of Isis, we also may wonder why the transformation into a church should be so important for Nubian Christianity. Surely, the decision to turn an empty building into a church would have more likely been determined by local circumstances than that it had a direct bearing on the missions sent to Nubia.

In this chapter, it will therefore be argued that the temple of Isis stood empty for several years before it was turned into a church. The transformation of the temple into a church will be looked at against the background of the churches and other cases of reuse of temples on the island. In other words, this approach will place the transformation of the island's most important temple in a local context. But before we turn to the temples and churches of Philae, we must first examine the term usually given to the reuse of a temple as a church, 'temple conversion', and to what we know of the reuse of temples in Egypt in general.

'Temple Conversion' in Late Antique Egypt

The building of a church inside a temple or the destruction of a temple, or parts of the temple, and construction of a church in its place has generally been referred to by the term 'temple conversion'.¹⁶⁹ In a seminal article from 1939, Friedrich Deichmann (1909-1993) collected a wide variety of examples of the building of churches in ancient places of worship, from which he extracts the following pattern.¹⁷⁰ Although the earliest instance of a temple conversion, the church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, dates to the reign of Constantine, the most violent temple conversions took place after Julian the Apostate (360-363) had briefly reverted to the old religion: 'Especially after Julian a new and violent movement begins, which suddenly and

¹⁶⁹ Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 108.

¹⁷⁰ F.W. Deichmann, *Rom, Ravenna, Konstantinopel, Naher Osten. Gesammelte Studien zur spätantiken Architektur, Kunst und Geschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1982) 56-94 ('Frühchristliche Kirchen in antiken Heiligtümern', 1939¹, with addenda), to be supplemented by his 'Christianisierung II (der Monumente)', *RAC* II (1954) 1228-41, and *Gesammelte Studien*, 27-34 ('Von Tempel zur Kirche', 1964'). For an update see J. Vaes, 'Christliche Wiederverwendung antiker Bauten: ein Forschungsbericht', *AncSoc* 15-7 (1984-6) 305-443 (tr. in abridged version in Italian and English in *Lotus International* 65 (1990) 16-39.

unexpectedly bursts forth time and again well into the sixth century'.¹⁷¹ Deichmann reinforced this impression with references to the imperial laws, which seem to point to increasing legislature against temples and to several literary sources about violent temple conversions, a well-known example being the already mentioned destruction of the Marneion at Gaza as described by Mark the Deacon in the *Life of Porphyry*. Only later, from the fifth century onwards, were the less conspicuous temples which had survived the actions of Christian zealots reused for more practical purposes.¹⁷²

Recent studies have tried to nuance this perspective. It is now held that the image given in the literary sources is a fragmentary picture of a much more complex development. In reality, violent actions against temples undertaken by Christian zealots were rather the exception than the rule. Temples were actually held in high regard and were seen as monuments that could be completely torn down only with special permission. Moreover, in most cases where the stories mention a 'destruction' of a temple, in fact only a closure took place.¹⁷³

In the same way, the building of a church need not always directly follow the closure of a temple. In Greece, temples were generally converted into churches in a later period and thus were left alone for a considerable time.¹⁷⁴ Violent temple conversions were, then, only part of reality. However, the impact these incidental temple conversions might have had cannot be ignored. The motifs of destruction and the purification of temples pervaded literature, especially Christian literature, and became one of the main paradigms of Christian ideology.¹⁷⁵

Matters were not different in Egypt. The closure of the Serapea at Alexandria and Canopus in 392, and that of a temple at Menouthis about a century later have already been mentioned. Moreover, there are several Coptic saints' lives dating to the fifth century and later which describe the destruction of a temple by a holy man and his companions. These sources have given Frankfurter the impression that 'the gutting and conversion of traditional Egyptian temples, often still functioning, was a widespread phenomenon in Egypt during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries'.¹⁷⁶ Part of the success of Christianity in the Egyptian countryside was, according to him, the creation of the opposition of demons versus holy men. This 'demonisation' called for action by the ideologically inspired against temples, for temples were represented as the homes of demons.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ Deichmann, *Gesammelte Studien*, 59.

¹⁷² Deichmann, *Gesammelte Studien*, 64. See also G. Fowden, 'Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320-435', *JThS* 29 (1978) 53-78; R.P.C. Hanson, *Studies in Christian Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1985) 347-58 ('The Transformation of Pagan Temples into Churches in the Early Christian Centuries', 1978¹); R. Klein, 'Spätantike Tempelzerstörungen im Widerspruch christlicher Urteile', in E.A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica XXIV* (1993) 135-42; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 108-47; Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 149-50.

¹⁷³ E.g. H. Saradi-Mendelovici, 'Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries', *DOP* 44 (1990) 47-61; J.-P. Caillet, 'La transformation en église d'édifices publics et de temples à la fin de l'antiquité', in C. Lepelley (ed.), *La fin de la cité antique et le début de la cité médiévale* (Bari, 1996) 191-211; B. Ward-Perkins, 'Re-using the Architectural Legacy of the Past, *entre idéologie et pragmatisme*', in G.P. Brogiolo, B. Ward-Perkins (eds), *The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 1999) 225-44 at 233-40; J. Hahn, 'Tempelzerstörung und Tempelreinigung in der Spätantike', in R. Albertz (ed.), *Kult, Konflikt und Versöhnung* (Münster, 2001) 269-86; B. Ward-Perkins, 'Reconfiguring Sacred Space: From Pagan Shrines to Christian Churches', in G. Brands, H.-G. Severin (eds), *Die spätantike Stadt und ihre Christianisierung* (Wiesbaden, 2003) 285-90.

¹⁷⁴ J.-M. Spieser, *Urban and Religious Spaces in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2001) Ch. VI ('The Christianisation of Pagan Sanctuaries in Greece', tr. of 'La christianisation des sanctuaires païens en Grèce', 1976¹, with addenda and corrigenda pp. 5-8), nuanced at some points by T.E. Gregory, 'The Survival of Paganism in Christian Greece: A Critical Essay', *AJPh* 107 (1986) 229-42.

¹⁷⁵ Hahn, 'Tempelzerstörung', 279-82.

¹⁷⁶ Frankfurter, *Religion*, 265.

¹⁷⁷ Frankfurter, *Religion*, 265-84. Cf. the papers presented by D. Brakke, 'From Temple to Cell, from Gods to Demons: Pagan Temples in the Monastic Topography', and Frankfurter, 'Iconoclasm and

However, it is doubtful whether this representation of temple conversions is not as influenced by literary sources as the idea that violent temple conversions dominated fourth and fifth-century society in the Mediterranean Basin. It is therefore better to have a look first at what archaeological traces remain of the reuse of temples as churches. In a recent study, Peter Grossmann gives an overview of several cases of the reuse of temples in Egypt.¹⁷⁸ Although he also emphasises that violent temple conversions took place in the initial period, he admits that most temples were not destroyed by force but were reused for different purposes, mainly for building material, or even remained untouched.¹⁷⁹

It is therefore less accurate to refer to the reuse of temples as 'temple conversions'; after all, that term implies that the temple was reused as a church, whereas various other possibilities also existed. Moreover, the reuse of ancient temples developed over time, in a certain socio-political context, with its own regional characteristics.¹⁸⁰ A regional approach has been rarely taken, and in this chapter and the next we will give an example of the benefits such an approach could have for the discussion on the reuse of temples in Late Antiquity.¹⁸¹

The Transformation of the Temple of Isis at Philae into a Church

Let us first compare the Christian discourse on temple destructions with the account of the closure of the temples at Philae, and therewith of the temple of Isis, by Procopius, who writes that, probably between 535 and 537, Justinian sent his general Narses to Philae to 'destroy' them. As has been said previously, this statement need not be taken too literally as it is part of the discourse of temple destructions.¹⁸² Procopius further remarks that the priests were arrested and the statues sent to Constantinople. The latter phenomenon is widely attested throughout the Mediterranean, and it is perfectly possible that this is what really happened.¹⁸³ Whether any priests still officiated in the temple of Isis has been questioned before due to the lack of epigraphical evidence for this period. In other cases, temples were merely closed and their statues sent to the capital. In fact, Procopius does not mention the temple of Isis at all, let alone the building of a church within its precincts. A priori, then, it is unlikely that the building of a church inside the temple of Isis directly followed its closure, for if that were the case Procopius would have mentioned it.

In an article from 1967, which scholars still generally regard as the standard study on the subject, the French scholar Pierre Nautin (1914-1997) argued that the transformation of the temple of Isis into a church did take place directly after its closure in 535-537.¹⁸⁴ It is therefore necessary to closely follow his train of thought. For Nautin, Justinian's decision to close the temple of Isis would have been a political

Christianization in Late Antique Egypt: Christian Treatments of Space and Image', at the symposium 'Zerstörung und Erneuerung lokaler Kulttopographie in der Spätantike', Münster 2002.

¹⁷⁸ P. Grossmann, 'Tempel als Ort des Konflikts in christlicher Zeit', in Borgeaud *et al.*, *Le temple*, 181-201, see also his *Christliche Architektur*, 43-8.

¹⁷⁹ Grossmann, 'Tempel', 191-2, and *Christliche Architektur*, 45. As examples of the former ways of reuse, he mentions Elephantine and Syene, and, of the latter, Philae.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Saradi-Mendelovici, 'Christian Attitudes', 47; Hahn, 'Tempelzerstörung', 283.

¹⁸¹ See, for a preliminary publication, J.H.F. Dijkstra, 'Het hergebruik van Oudegyptische tempels in de late Oudheid. Een regionale studie', *Tijdschrift voor Mediterrane Archeologie* 30 (2003) 21-8. There are some recent examples of such regional studies, e.g. R. Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia and the Archaeology of Temple Conversion* (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁸² Nautin, 'Conversion', 7.

¹⁸³ E.g. Saradi-Mendelovici, 'Christian Attitudes', 50-1; C. Lepelley, 'Le musée des statues divines. La volonté de sauvegarder le patrimoine artistique païen à l'époque théodosienne', *CArch* 42 (1994) 5-15; Hahn, 'Tempelzerstörung', 277.

¹⁸⁴ Nautin, 'Conversion'. See also e.g. Maspero, 'Théodore', 304; Kraus, *Anfänge*, 116; *I.Philae* II, pp. 253-4; Deichmann, *Gesammelte Studien*, 61-2; Grossmann, 'Kirche', 108; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 238; *FHN* III, pp. 1179-81; Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 101.

error if it had not been in a situation of war. That such a context of war existed has been argued by Roger Rémondon (1923-1971), though on the basis of little evidence, in an otherwise extremely well-documented article written earlier in the 1960s, where he re-edits a sixth-century papyrus text from Edfu that contained a list of payments for soldiers.¹⁸⁵

Rémondon suggested that Egypt was involved in three 'Blemmyan Wars', wars between the Blemmyes and the Byzantine Empire. The first period of war was dated to the reign of the Emperor Anastasius (491-518), the second from 540 until 543 and the third from 563 until 568. The closure of the temple of Isis would have been part of a military action against the Blemmyes during the second 'Blemmyan War' of 540-543. Although Nautin criticised this dating of the closure of the temple of Isis, and more accurately placed it between 535 and 537, he agreed that the closure had to be connected to a military campaign against the Blemmyes, whom he perceived as the main worshippers at Philae.¹⁸⁶

Justinian therefore sent one of his main generals to close the main temple of Philae and made him commander of the frontier troops. Nautin compares the official closure of the temple to other temples closed with the help of imperial troops, most notably the temples at Gaza as described by Mark the Deacon. According to Nautin, it would have been impossible to destroy the temples at Philae, as Procopius relates, and therefore Justinian asked Bishop Theodore, who participated in the first mission to Nubia not much later, to build a church inside the temple through the erection of the cross: 'Theodore's gesture of erecting the cross in the sanctuary of Isis between 535 and 537 was not only a local event; it went down in the history of the Church as the first act of the evangelisation of Nubia'.¹⁸⁷ In short, Nautin sees the erection of the cross inside the temple of Isis as the decisive moment in the deliberate, imperial 'anti-pagan' campaign that caused the conversion of Nubia to Christianity.¹⁸⁸

Nautin proceeds by discussing the visible traces of the conversion in the interior of the temple. In Nautin's view, the Christian community on the island, annoyed by the continuation of 'pagan' cults, must have felt a sense of triumph when they finally entered the holiest part of the former temple.¹⁸⁹ Their feelings were embodied in the inscription of the conquering cross.¹⁹⁰ According to Nautin, this inscription has to be taken literally: just as would have happened at Dendur, in a pious ceremony Theodore would have brought a cross inside the naos and erected it there to replace the cult image of Isis: 'from then on, the whole island was for the Christians'.¹⁹¹ The crosses and inscriptions, for which the prominent position near the doors presumes an ordered plan, were not only there to witness the glorious victory over paganism but also served apotropaic purposes.¹⁹² Furthermore, the gutting of Ancient Egyptian reliefs must have been a large project which, Nautin suggests, would have been carried out by Narses' troops, because they were there on the spot. Their help cannot have lasted for a long time, however, since the job was left unfinished.¹⁹³

Finally, Nautin differentiates two phases of Christian occupation of the sacred space. In the first phase, the church would have consisted of the entire space of the former temple, including the naos, and would have been oriented to the north, the direction to which the inscriptions point. The altar of red Aswan granite still standing today in the pronaos, which has been incised with a cross and faces eastward, would

¹⁸⁵ *P.Edfou* IX = *SB* VI 9613, on which see Rémondon, 'Soldats'. Cf. Demicheli, *Rapporti*, 192-6. The 'terreur blemmye' already occurs in Rémondon's earlier article 'Suprême résistance', 72-8.

¹⁸⁶ Nautin, 'Conversion', 4-6. Cf. Rémondon, 'Soldats', 70.

¹⁸⁷ Nautin, 'Conversion', 8.

¹⁸⁸ Nautin, 'Conversion', 6-8.

¹⁸⁹ See Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 238, for the same idea.

¹⁹⁰ *J.Philae* II 201.

¹⁹¹ Nautin, 'Conversion', 14-6.

¹⁹² Nautin, 'Conversion', 21-4.

¹⁹³ Nautin, 'Conversion', 25-7.

have first stood in the naos and later been transferred to the pronaos. This part of the temple belonged to the second phase of Christian occupation of the interior of the temple. In Nautin's opinion, such a small part of the former temple could only have been used in a later period, say the eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth century, when the Christian community on the island had become so small that it only needed part of the temple previously occupied in its entirety.¹⁹⁴

We can thus summarise Nautin's arguments in four main theses:

1. the closure of the temple of Isis was part of a military campaign against the Blemmyes
2. the closure of the temple was directly followed by the building of the *topos* of St Stephen, in which the frontier troops under Narses assisted
3. the Christian occupation of the sacred space consisted of two periods, the first period in which the whole temple was covered (shortly after 535-537) and the second one in which only the pronaos was occupied and the church became orientated eastward (perhaps between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries)
4. the erection of the cross by Theodore inside the naos of the former temple was the first act in the conversion of Nubia to Christianity.

However ingenious Nautin's arguments may have been, they cannot be maintained in the light of scholarship carried out since 1967. Firstly, Nautin's sketch of the situation at Philae was distorted to a large extent by the view of a strong 'people of the Blemmyes' still worshipping Isis at Philae and launching three wars into Egypt at the end of the fifth and in the course of the sixth century. As we have seen, the influence of the Blemmyes in the Nile valley declined in the course of the fifth century, and, although there are some examples of raids by Blemmyan tribes into Egypt during the sixth century, examples to which we will return in the next section, these raids were incidental and can certainly not be regarded as 'wars'.

Secondly, Grossmann's meticulous analysis of the reuse of the temple of Isis as a church reveals that first the main changes in the interior were carried out, such as removing superfluous elements that would disturb the interior of the church, attaching curtains and hacking out niches. Only later were walls which had remained within sight and were still covered with reliefs cut away or plastered. The soldiers of Narses could not therefore have assisted in hacking away the reliefs directly after the closure of the temple, for they first had to wait until these adjustments had been made. Neither was the job left unfinished, as the spots that were interpreted as such by Nautin can be shown to have been covered in the newly built church. It seems more likely that local workmen under the guidance of the bishop of Philae carried out the building project for the *topos* of St Stephen.¹⁹⁵

Thirdly, Grossmann also demonstrates that Nautin wrongly interpreted a modern restoration in the pronaos as part of the first phase of the reuse of the temple of Isis.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, there is nothing to support Nautin's suggestion that the first church was oriented northward and extended into the naos. The orientation and darkness of this room would have been useless for the interior of a church and no other Egyptian churches are known which use the naos.¹⁹⁷ He further convincingly

¹⁹⁴ Nautin, 'Conversion', 27-9, 34-43.

¹⁹⁵ P. Grossmann, 'Die Kirche des Bischofs Theodoros im Isistempel von Philae. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion', *RSO* 58 (1984) 107-17 at 109-10.

¹⁹⁶ As reported by A. Barsanti in G. Maspero, *Rapports relatifs à la consolidation des temples*, 2 vols (Cairo, 1911) 1.177-95 at 181-2 ('La protection de Philae pendant l'hiver de 1902 et l'été de 1903', 1903'). See Grossmann, 'Kirche', 109 (n. 12), 115-7.

¹⁹⁷ See the nice parallel of the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha, in which special adaptations were made to construct a church in the pronaos facing eastward, on which see P. Grossmann, 'Christliche Einbauten im Tempel des Mandulis von Kalabša', *MDAIK* 47 (1991) 143-50, 'Tempel', 194, and

argues that the pronaos was used as a church from the start.¹⁹⁸ As the columns in the pronaos were ideal for a three-aisled church, the main axis of the sanctuary was changed from a south-north to a west-east orientation.¹⁹⁹

However, the main entrance to the church remained in the south, the door of the second pylon. The screens between the southern row of columns, which originally belonged to the temple interior, were removed to ground level to serve as benches for laymen. The altar room and side rooms of the clergy were closed off with a screen between the eastern pair of columns in the pronaos, and curtains divided the side rooms. The doors to the naos and the eastern side-entrance were probably blocked off, and the southeastern part of the pronaos served as a baptistery (Fig. 5).²⁰⁰ This reconstruction shows that the two phases Nautin discerns for the Christian occupation of the interior of the temple were actually one: the *topos* of St Stephen built by Theodore of Philae.

Fourthly, the reconstruction is at the same time a counterargument for the idea that Theodore triumphantly erected a cross on the place in the naos where the cult statue of Isis had been. Nautin assumed that the erection of the cross was the culmination of Christian struggles with 'paganism' on the island. However, we have seen that there is no evidence to support this. Christianity and the Ancient Egyptian cults had coexisted on the island from the fourth century onwards. By the sixth century, Ancient Egyptian religion was probably more dead than alive, and it is likely that the inscription mentioning the conquering cross had merely a symbolic meaning.

Variants of the inscription are not uncommon in the eastern half of the Mediterranean.²⁰¹ These inscriptions go back to the Roman period when they commemorated victories, especially in connection with sports. In Late Antiquity, they became strongly ideological. From then on, they commemorated Christian 'victories' like, as in the case of Philae, the dedication of a church inside a temple.²⁰² In the language of temple conversions, the temple had to be purified from demons, and crosses were fixed to commemorate this purification.²⁰³ As the worship of Christ in the form of a cross is well known in Nubia, the cross symbolised the divine presence of Christ, which protected the building against demons.²⁰⁴

To return once more to the Eirpanome inscription at Dendur, this inscription commemorates that the priest Abraham received the cross from Theodore of Philae and erected it at the start of the building activities inside the temple. A similar, probably contemporary, inscription exists at Kalabsha.²⁰⁵ These inscriptions concerning the erection of the cross have to be seen in the same context as the

Christliche Architektur, 47-8. Cf. the temple of Biga, in which a church was built on the forecourt between the pylon and the pronaos, see Grossmann, 'Kirche im Tempel von Biga'. As a sole exception, Grossmann, 'Tempel', 194, mentions the temple of Isis at Aswan, but the church was probably not built inside the naos. See Ch. 10.

¹⁹⁸ As Wilcken, 'Heidnisches und Christliches', 403, already presumed.

¹⁹⁹ Grossmann, 'Kirche', 117, and *Christliche Architektur*, 47.

²⁰⁰ Grossmann, 'Kirche', 109-15, 'Tempel', 194, and *Christliche Architektur*, 47.

²⁰¹ E.g. D. Feissel, *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédoine* (Paris, 1983) no. 212 (+ 'Εν τούτῳ οἱ πιστοὶ νικοῦσιν, Amphipolis, fourth/fifth century); *IGLS* III 746a (Σταυρὸς (...) νίκ(η) πι[στ]οῖς, near Antioch); *IGLS* VI 2835 (Χριστὸς τούτῳ † νικᾷ, Baalbek). See E. Dinkler and E. Dinkler-Von Schubert, 'Kreuz I', in K. Wessel, M. Restle (eds), *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* (Stuttgart, 1963-) 5.1-219 at 135-8.

²⁰² Nautin, 'Conversion', 16-8; *I Philae* II, pp. 257-9.

²⁰³ Grossmann, 'Tempel', 189; Hahn, 'Tempelzerstörung'. In *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.25, dated to 435, it is ordered to purify temples 'by fixing the cross' (*conlocatione crucis*).

²⁰⁴ P.P.V. van Moorsel, 'Une théophanie nubienne', *RAC* 42 (1966) 297-316; A.J. Vanderjagt, 'Een mogelijke bron voor de kruis-devotie van de Nubiërs', in A. Hilhorst (ed.), *De heiligenverering in de eerste eeuwen van het Christendom* (Nijmegen, 1988) 53-62; Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus*, 292-5; P.P.V. van Moorsel, *Called to Egypt. Collected Studies on Painting in Christian Egypt* (Leiden, 2000) 63-80 ('Die Nubier und das glorreiche Kreuz', 1972').

²⁰⁵ Kraus, *Anfänge*, 109-11; Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 162-3.

conversion of the temple of Isis at Philae. They primarily had an apotropaic function, although a kind of ritual with an actual cross may have been involved in the dedication of the church.²⁰⁶ However, such a ritual is something other than the commemoration of an actual victory of Christianity over ‘paganism’, promoted by the emperor, and with enormous consequences for the conversion of Nubia.

There thus remains no decisive argument for a direct sequence between the closure of the temple of Isis and the building of a church inside it. The inscriptions are not dated, and could well belong to a later date in the long episcopate of Theodore, who was bishop from c. 525 until at least 577. Moreover, several examples could be given of other temples that were not directly converted into churches.²⁰⁷ We should therefore not reduce the conversion of Philae to Christianity to an inscription testifying to the triumph of the cross. Although the inscription, together with the other inscriptions and the Christian signs, may have evoked a sense of triumph amongst the visitors to the shrine, its primary function was to purify the demonic space and to ward off evil. As Bishop Theodore oversaw the building of the shrine, he would have taken the decision. And this decision apparently had nothing to do with imperial policy, as Nautin suggests, for Procopius following imperial propaganda does not mention it. More probably, the decision to turn the empty temple into a *topos* of St Stephen was ruled by local circumstances. There may even be evidence that it took a while for the bishop to come to his decision.

Isis Once More? The ‘Blemmyan Incident’ of c. 567

In 1911, Maspero published the first in a series of three volumes of Byzantine papyri from Aphrodite, modern Kom Ishqaw,²⁰⁸ situated 45 km south of Asyut, which were discovered there in 1905-1907.²⁰⁹ They belong to the family archive owned by Dioscorus, a wealthy landowner of Aphrodite, who was trained as a lawyer and was a notary at the governor’s court in Antinoopolis from around 565 to 573, where he wrote the bulk of the documents preserved in the archive, but also composed several poems. These poems, the only ones in the author’s own hand preserved from Antiquity, have given Dioscorus the dubious nickname of the ‘worst poet of Antiquity’.²¹⁰

This is another illustration of how academic discourse has been dominated by Gibbon’s ‘decline and fall’: Dioscorus was compared with classical literature and did not meet the requirements.²¹¹ Modern research, however, has seen in Dioscorus a lawyer typically representing the cultural change that took place in Late Antiquity.²¹²

²⁰⁶ Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 167-8.

²⁰⁷ To add an example from Egypt, the Serapeum at Alexandria was ‘destroyed’ in 392 and transformed into a church under the Emperor Arcadius (395-408), that is, at least three years later. See Grossmann, ‘Modalitäten’, forthcoming.

²⁰⁸ This village is often called Aphrodito, a name which is used in the later papyri from the Arab period, but in the sixth century its name was Aphrodite, see J.-L. Fournet, ‘Appendice sur le nom d’Aφροδίτης κώμη’, *REG* 105 (1992) 235-6.

²⁰⁹ *P.Cair.Masp.* I-III. For an account of their discovery, see G. Lefebvre, *Fragments d’un manuscrit de Ménandre* (Cairo, 1907) viii-ix. The last volume was published after Maspero had died on the French front in 1915, for which see *P.Cair.Masp.* III, pp. vii-xxxvi. Maspero published several preliminary studies on the archive, ‘Études sur les papyrus d’Aphrodité’, *BIFAO* 6 (1908) 75-120, ‘Études sur les papyrus d’Aphrodité II’, *BIFAO* 7 (1910) 97-152, ‘Un dernier poète grec de l’Égypte: Dioscore, fils d’Apollôs’, *REG* 24 (1911) 426-81, ‘Les papyrus Beaugé’, *BIFAO* 10 (1912) 131-57, and ‘Horapollon et la fin du paganisme égyptien’, *BIFAO* 11 (1914) 163-95.

²¹⁰ B. Baldwin, ‘Dioscorus of Aphrodito: The Worst Poet of Antiquity?’, in *PapCongr.* XVII, 3 vols (Naples, 1984) 2.327-31.

²¹¹ E.g. Maspero, ‘Dernier poète grec’, 427; H.I. Bell, ‘An Egyptian Village in the Age of Justinian’, *JHS* 64 (1944) 21-36 at 27; Cameron, *Literature and Society*, Ch. I at 483, 490, 508-9.

²¹² E.g. L.S.B. MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphrodito. His Work and His World* (Berkeley, 1988); T. Gagos, P. van Minnen, *Settling a Dispute. Toward a Legal Anthropology of Late Antique Egypt* (Ann Arbor, 1994).

An excellent study of the literary side of the archive has shown that Dioscorus' poems can be placed in a tradition of classicising Egyptian poets like Olympiodorus of Thebes, but that they also relate to the documents in the archive. Thus, for example, some of the poems probably accompanied petitions when handed over to the governor of the province.²¹³

One of these petitions published by Maspero in 1911 merits more attention than it has received because it contains interesting information on local Egyptian religion in the second half of the sixth century. Presumably, this neglect has been caused by the few concise notes and the lack of a translation in the first edition. Moreover, the text is damaged and misses about 28 letters at the end of each line, which makes the contents hard to reconstruct. The text is a petition from the councillors (βουλευταί) of Omboi to the governor of the Thebaid (*dux et augustalis Thebaidis*) Athanasius, in his second year in office, that is, in 567.²¹⁴ Although damaged, it is one of the few petitions from the total of thirty-five of this type of document preserved in the Dioscorus archive that includes all parts of the petition, and can therefore give a good idea of its contents.

Recently, the petition has been re-edited with a detailed commentary, translation and interpretation of the text.²¹⁵ Simultaneously, a French 'Habilitationsschrift' was published on the petitions in the Dioscorus archive with re-editions, translations and a lavish commentary, including some new readings and corrections of the re-edition.²¹⁶ We will concentrate here on what the text has to say about sixth-century local Egyptian religion; but the updated Greek text with a translation is included in Appendix 4.²¹⁷

The councillors of Omboi complain about a man whose name is not mentioned in the transmitted text, but who is nicknamed 'Eater of Raw Meat' (ὠμοφάγος).²¹⁸ Basically, they charge the accused with 'paganism' (lines 6-10) and disturbance of the tax collection (ll. 10-6), followed by some additional crimes (ll. 16-8).²¹⁹ Firstly, the person in question is charged with 'making his own life and deeds evil, setting aside the taught Christian worship and religion, and consecrating shrines with demons and wooden statues'.²²⁰ The accused is therefore a person who did not behave in the way a Christian was supposed to. Instead, he appealed to 'the barbarians, that is,

²¹³ *P.Aphrodit.Lit.* See also the recent contributions by J.-L. Fournet, 'Between Literary Tradition and Cultural Change. The Poetic and Documentary Production of Dioscorus of Aphrodite', P. van Minnen, 'Dioscorus and the Law', and J.H.F. Dijkstra, 'A World Full of the Word. The Biblical Learning of Dioscorus', in A.A. MacDonald, M.W. Twomey, G.J. Reinink (eds), *Learned Antiquity: Scholarship and Society in the Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and the Early Medieval West* (Leuven, 2003) 101-14, 115-33, and 135-46, respectively.

²¹⁴ The date of the petition is connected to a discussion regarding the date of the second year of Athanasius' governorship, to which several of the petitions are dated, and which Maspero, 'Papyrus Beaugé', 137-43, already dated between 567 and 570. *P.Aphrodit.Lit.*, pp. 330-6, demonstrates that Athanasius had been succeeded between May and July of 567 and that, consequently, the texts have to be dated before that date. Cf. Gelzer, *Studien*, 24-5, and 'Altes und Neues aus der byzantinisch-ägyptischen Verwaltungsmisere, vornehmlich im Zeitalter Justinians', *AfP* 5 (1913) 346-77 at 371, who dates the text to 552-3, U. Wilcken, 'Papyrus Urkunden XV', *AfP* 5 (1913) 442-9 at 443, who dates it to c. 552 and, most recently, Weber, 'Blemmyer', 26, who dates it to 548-53.

²¹⁵ J.H.F. Dijkstra, 'A Cult of Isis at Philae after Justinian? Reconsidering *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004', *ZPE* 146 (2004) 137-54. Cf. Dijkstra, 'World Full of the Word'.

²¹⁶ J.-L. Fournet, *Entre document et littérature: les pétitions de Dioscore d'Aphrodité* (Habilitation Strasbourg, 2004) 192-216 (no. 9).

²¹⁷ I warmly thank J.-L. Fournet for sending me the relevant part of his Habilitation and discussing the translation in the appendix with me.

²¹⁸ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.14.

²¹⁹ Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 194-5. Cf. Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 138-9.

²²⁰ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.8.

Blemmyes' (τοῖς βαρβάροις ἦτοι Βλέμυσι),²²¹ and renewed 'the sanctuaries' (τὰ ἱερά) for them.²²²

Secondly, in exchange for helping them to renew their old places of worship, the person is charged with 'having concluded an evil agreement' with these Blemmyes.²²³ He plundered and destroyed houses with his gang. Moreover, together they collected and appropriated the taxes of ordinary taxpayers, spent them on themselves and stripped the vineyards of their produce. Here we come to the actual accusation in the petition, to which the charge of 'paganism' is only an additional crime: that the behaviour of the accused is 'to the detriment of the public treasury'.²²⁴ The accused is also charged with other crimes like sleeping with his own daughter and melting 'the imperial standards' (τὰ ἱερά σίκνα, read σίγνα) into gold to turn them into a bracelet for a barbarian slave girl.²²⁵

Apparently, then, some powerful person was doing everything that was forbidden in the eyes of the Christian society of sixth-century Egypt. He dedicated shrines for the old gods, renovated 'the sanctuaries' and in this way persuaded the Blemmyes to lapse. This accusation is made even worse because it is stated that these people had converted to Christianity. Perhaps we should not take this last statement too literally as, for example, evidence for a mass conversion among 'the Blemmyes' during this period, for Dioscorus could well have included it for rhetorical effect.²²⁶ On the other hand, the accusation of apparently renovating Ancient Egyptian cult sites for these people seems too specific to reject out of hand.

Perhaps it is to this incident that Dioscorus refers later on in the petition where he mentions a certain Kollouthos.²²⁷ In the *editio princeps* this person has been taken to be the accused, but this cannot be true.²²⁸ The Kollouthos mentioned can probably be identified with a pagarch known from other texts in the Dioscorus archive.²²⁹ Although the exact meaning of the sentence is difficult to establish, Kollouthos apparently had tried to take steps against the accused, 'because of the lawlessness of that which was built by him'.²³⁰ In return for renovating the Blemmyes' old places of worship, they raided the lands around Omboi together with the accused.

Who are the Blemmyes with whom the accused schemed? We have seen that Blemmyan influence in the Nile valley south of Egypt faded away with the growing organisation of the Noubades in the course of the fifth century. However, this does not mean, as was previously thought, that 'the Kingdom of the Blemmyes' was conquered and 'the Blemmyes' chased into the desert. On the contrary, it is perfectly possible that Blemmyan tribes continued to settle in Lower Nubia. There is no evidence for this,

²²¹ The same phrase in Olympiodorus, F 35.2 Blockley = *FHN* III 309.

²²² *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.9.

²²³ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.11.

²²⁴ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.16.

²²⁵ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.17.

²²⁶ Even more so because several allusions are made to 2 Pet. 2, which exactly concerns 'false prophets', leading people from the right path to lawlessness. See Dijkstra, 'World Full of the Word', 143-4, and 'Cult of Isis', 149; Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 206-7. Cf. Kirwan, *Studies*, XXV at 89-90, followed by Demicheli, *Rapporti*, 194, and Weber, 'Blemmyer', 26, who concludes from the passage that 'the Blemmyes' had converted to Christianity.

²²⁷ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.12.

²²⁸ Wilcken, 'Papyrus Urkunden XV', 444; Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 139 (n. 20); Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 193. The persistence of the idea, however, is evident in recent studies like R. Alston, *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt* (London, 2002) 90, and A. Laniado, *Recherches sur les notables municipaux dans l'empire protobyzantin* (Paris, 2002) 83, 111.

²²⁹ *P.Aphrodit.Lit.* IV 14, 28; *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67005.19. See Wilcken, 'Papyrus Urkunden XV', 444; *PLRE* III s.v. 'Colluthus 3'; *P.Aphrodit.Lit.*, pp. 556-7; Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 194.

²³⁰ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.12. On the different possibilities of translating this sentence, perhaps reading ἔχων in stead of ἐκόν, the latter reading of which has been preferred in App. 4, see Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 208-9. Cf. Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 139, 153.

though, and the sixth-century sources on the Blemmyes are even scantier than those of the previous century.

Hints of their whereabouts are given only occasionally, for example in a letter from Justin I to King Elesbas of Axum in the Martyrdom of St Arethas dated to before April 525. In an account of the same conflict between Axum and the Himyarites as described by Procopius, the emperor urged Elesbas (Ella Asbeha, whom Procopius calls Hellesthaeus) to take action against the Jewish king of the Homerites. The Jew had behaved badly towards the Christians in his kingdom and the emperor threatened the Axumite king to send an army of Noubades and Blemmyes to his country if he would not act as the emperor wished.²³¹ Furthermore, although the land registry of Aphrodite dating to the beginning of the sixth century a 'place of the Blemmyes' (τόπος τῶν Βλεμμύων) is mentioned, this topographical name does not necessarily say anything about the permanent settlement of Blemmyes in the area.²³²

Another glimpse of the Blemmyes in the sixth century is provided by a dossier of thirteen documents found at Gebelein, 40 km south of Thebes, and written on leather in both Greek and Coptic.²³³ On palaeographical grounds they can be dated to the last quarter of the sixth century, although this dating is not decisive.²³⁴ As the texts mention the island of Temsir, also called Tanare, the provenance of these texts has been equated with the island on which they were found, Gebelein.²³⁵ Again, we cannot be sure if this is true.

One of the texts mentions a 'kinglet' (βασιλίσκος) of the Blemmyes, the same title the Noubadian chief Silko bore, who handed over the administration (*curatoria*) of the island to his children.²³⁶ As appears from the text, the administration included the levying of taxes, also among the 'Romans', that is, Egyptians who were Roman citizens, living on the island.²³⁷ The use of Byzantine titles (*domesticus*), but also the typical tribal titles 'phylarch' (φύλαρχος) and 'sub-despot' (ὑποτύραννος), suggests that these Blemmyes lived in Upper Egypt and had attained a special status.²³⁸ It seems that the tribe had come to an agreement with the Byzantine government to collect taxes in exchange for the right to live on the island.²³⁹

Probably on account of the growing organisation on Egypt's southern frontier, Blemmyan tribes were thus pushed to the margins of society. But that did not mean they had vanished into thin air; small-scale raids into Egypt seem to have continued into the sixth century. This situation is reflected in the Dioscorus archive. 'Fear of barbarians' (βαρβάρων δέος) is a common *topos* in the petitions and poems written by Dioscorus.²⁴⁰ In the petitions, the evil deeds of the pagarch Menas are several times compared to the behaviour of 'barbarians', and this comparison also returns in our text, with the implication that the governor put an end to such 'barbarian'

²³¹ *FHN* III 327, on which see Fournet, 'Coptos', 200, Brakmann, "'Axomis (Aksum)'", 755-6, and J.-L. Fournet, 'Coptos gréco-romaine à travers ses noms', in Boussac, *Autour de Coptos*, 47-60 at 59-60.

²³² *P.Freer* 08.45a-b 205, re-edited by J. Gascou, L.S.B. MacCoull, 'Le cadastre d'Aphroditô', *T&MByz* 10 (1987) 103-58 = *SB* XX 14669.

²³³ *BGU* III 795-7; *BKU* III 350, 359-61; *P.KölnÄgypt.* 13; *SB* III 6257-9, X 10552-3 = *FHN* III 331-43. In addition to the bibliography given there see Weber, 'Blemmyer', 34-5.

²³⁴ H. Harrauer in H. Satzinger, 'Anmerkungen zu einiger Blemmyer-Texten', in E. Plöckinger *et al.* (eds), *Lebendige Altertumswissenschaft* (= Fs. Vettors; Vienna, 1985) 327-32 at 330-1. Cf. *FHN* III, p. 1201.

²³⁵ *SB* III 6257.4, 6258.2.

²³⁶ *SB* III 6257, cf. 6258.

²³⁷ *FHN* III, p. 1199.

²³⁸ *Domesticus* *SB* III 6257.11. Phylarch: *BGU* III 795.1, 796.1, 797.2; *BKU* III 350.13; *P.KölnÄgypt.* 13.10, 12; *SB* III 6257.7. Sub-despot: *BKU* III 350.13; *P.KölnÄgypt.* 13.10; *SB* III 6257.7. King/kinglet: *P.KölnÄgypt.* 13.1, 10, 14; *SB* III 6257.1, 6258.1.

²³⁹ Török, 'Contribution', 236-41, and 'Notes', 406-8; *FHN* III, p. 1202; Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 151.

²⁴⁰ The same expression is used on some second-century ostraka from the Eastern Desert, see Cuvigny, 'Fonctionnement', 351-2.

behaviour.²⁴¹ The theme is adequately summarised at the start of one of Dioscorus' poems:

Thebes, dance altogether, receive peace:
for no longer will you see malicious deeds,
nor fear of barbarians, nor arbitrariness of the greedy;
for everywhere flows a god-inspired Peace'.²⁴²

Further on in the poem, 'barbarians' are equated with 'the race of the Blemmyes and that of the Saracens'.²⁴³ In another poem, the governor is asked to put an end to 'the race of the Blemmyes, that is, the *adiutores*'.²⁴⁴ Evidently, just as in the petition in question these local officials, the *adiutores*, are being reproached for their 'barbarian' behaviour. In short, in the poems 'the race of the Blemmyes' is synonymous with 'the barbarians'.²⁴⁵

There are, however, two cases in which this metaphorical use of 'the Blemmyes' seems to have been abandoned and reference is made to actual Blemmyan tribes raiding into Egypt. These are precisely those cases where Blemmyes are mentioned in the petitions. The first case is when in a petition of around 567 the inhabitants of Antaeopolis (Qaw el-Kebir, on the other side of the Nile at Kom Ishqaw) look back on their past:

when the abominable barbarians, Blemmyes, at the time of our parents in those days had taken our city and plundered it horribly.²⁴⁶

When interpreting 'the time of our parents' as one generation back, the inhabitants of Antaeopolis must be referring to a raid in around 547.²⁴⁷ This phrase has been interpreted by Rémondon as referring to a more distant past, the reign of Anastasius (491-518), in which a first 'Blemmyan War' took place. Even if this dating is correct, however, the reference cannot be taken as proof for a war on the scale that has been imagined.²⁴⁸

The second case in which Blemmyes are mentioned in the petitions is in our text. They are introduced in connection with the incident of 'the sanctuaries' as 'the barbarians', with the explanation that they are (ἤτοι) 'Blemmyes'.²⁴⁹ Due to the specificity of the incident, there is no need to interpret this word in the metaphorical sense of 'the barbarians',²⁵⁰ as in the poems, although the idea returns in the same petition. Thus Dioscorus creates a subtle play on the uses of the term 'barbarian', sometimes referring to its metaphorical sense, sometimes to the specific group of Blemmyes.²⁵¹ To give an example, in one line Dioscorus describes the behaviour of the

²⁴¹ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67002.ii 24, iii 3, 22, 67004.11, 12, 67021 v° 12. Cf. *P.Cair.Masp.* III 67283.i 5, *P.Lond.* V 1674.22, 1677 v° 36.

²⁴² *P.Aphrodit.Lit.* IV 10.1-4 (Θήβη, πᾶσα χόρευσον, εἰρήνην δέχου· Ιοῦ γὰρ θεωρήσει κακουργικὴν ἔτι, ἰοὺ βαρβάρων δέος, φιλοπραγμόνων κρίσιν· ἰ πάντη γὰρ Εἰρήνη θεόπνευστος ῥέει. Tr. Dijkstra, 'World Full of the Word', 141 (n. 35).

²⁴³ *P.Aphrodit.Lit.* IV 10.23.

²⁴⁴ *P.Aphrodit.Lit.* IV 11.82, cf. 83.

²⁴⁵ Fournet, 'Between Literary Tradition and Cultural Change', 110.

²⁴⁶ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67009 v° 17-9 (τῶν ἀλιτηρ(ῶν) Βλεμύων βαρβάρων ἐπὶ τῶν πάλαι ἡμῶν γονέων παρειληφότων (ant. corr. παραλαβ[όντων]) [τὴν ἡμετέραν πόλιν] καὶ πα' ὀρθησάντων δεινῶς. Tr. Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 153).

²⁴⁷ Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 153-4, taking, however, 30 years for a generation. Cf. Rémondon, 'Soldats', 69; Demicheli, *Rapporti*, 189; *P.Aphrodit.Lit.*, p. 511; Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 196 (n. 21).

²⁴⁸ *P.Aphrodit.Lit.*, pp. 510-1.

²⁴⁹ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.9. For the meaning of ἤτοι, see P.J. Sijpesteijn, 'The Meanings of ἤτοι in the Papyri', *ZPE* 90 (1992) 241-50.

²⁵⁰ As suggested by *P.Aphrodit.Lit.*, p. 511, and Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 196.

²⁵¹ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.11, 16, 17.

accused and his gang of Blemmyes as ‘worse than barbarians (do)’, but in the same line he refers to the Blemmyes, with whom he came to an agreement, as ‘these said barbarians’.²⁵² Significantly, due to his involvement in the affairs of the Blemmyes and especially in the incident with the sanctuaries, the accused has turned partly into a ‘barbarian’ himself and is characterised as ‘half barbarian and half pagan’ (μιξοβάρβαρο[ς] καὶ μιξ[έ]λ[λη]ν).²⁵³ An incident therefore occurred in the first Upper Egyptian nome where a powerful person renovated ‘the sanctuaries’ for a group of Blemmyes.

Now, when taking a closer look at the incident it is tempting to identify ‘the sanctuaries’ with the temples of Philae.²⁵⁴ After having described generally in the preceding line that the accused person has decorated shrines, using three generic plurals without the article (δαίμοσι, ξοάνοις, σηκούς), the line in question explicitly states that the accused ‘renovated the sanctuaries’ (τὰ ἱερά (...)) ἄ[ν]ακαινίσασθαι).²⁵⁵ The noun is here articulated and ‘the sanctuaries’ seem to be well known to the persons at the governor’s court in Antinoopolis for whom the petition was intended, for no location has been added.²⁵⁶

For the year 452/453, we know from Priscus that the Blemmyes, together with the Noubades, still had access to the temple of Isis at Philae ‘according to the ancient right’.²⁵⁷ Procopius, again referring to both the Noubades and the Blemmyes recounts that ‘these barbarians retained the sanctuaries on Philae (τὰ ἐν Φίλαις ἱερά) right down to my day’.²⁵⁸ The accounts support the suggestion that the sanctuaries in which the Blemmyes were interested at this late stage could well be those of Philae. Moreover, Procopius uses the same plural for the temples at Philae as used in our petition. The plural also appears in Coptic in the *Life of Aaron* (fol. 13a), where Macedonius penetrates ‘the temples’ (ⲛⲉⲣⲡⲏⲏⲉ) in order to slaughter the holy falcon.²⁵⁹ In both cases, a general term is used to describe the island with all its temples, and the temple of Isis in particular.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, the remark that the sanctuaries were renewed for the Blemmyes is reminiscent of the Isis temple at Philae, which had been closed in around 535-537, and had therefore to be reopened before the old cults could be continued. These elements in the ‘Blemmyan incident’, then, point to Philae as the place where it all happened.

A powerful argument in favour of this circumstantial evidence is the occupation of the main person in the petition. It would not have been surprising if this person was a powerful local official like the pagarch Menas, as the incident reported at the end of the *narratio* suggests: ‘(he) melted the imperial standards into gold to make a bracelet for a barbarian favourite slave girl’.²⁶¹ Although different proposals have been made for reading this phrase, the accused apparently violated the

²⁵² *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.11.

²⁵³ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.14. It is hardly convincing in a context in which the accused is charged with ‘paganism’ to doubt that the word μιξ[έ]λ[λη]ν does not have the meaning of ‘half pagan’, as Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 210, does. See Dijkstra, ‘World Full of the Word’, 145-6, and ‘Cult of Isis’, 141, 146.

²⁵⁴ Dijkstra, ‘Cult of Isis’, 149-54. Cf. Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 196-7.

²⁵⁵ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.8-9.

²⁵⁶ Cf., however, Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 197 (n. 27).

²⁵⁷ Priscus F 27 Blockley (= *FHN* III 318).

²⁵⁸ Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.36 = *FHN* III 328. Cf. Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.37 (τὰ (...) ἱερά).

²⁵⁹ *Life of Aaron*, fol. 13a.

²⁶⁰ As is evident from the end of the passage from the *Life of Aaron*, in which Macedonius leaves ‘the temple’ (ⲛⲉⲣⲏⲉ, fol. 13b), which must be the temple of Isis. Cf. the singular τὸ ἱερόν τῆς Ἰσιδος and ἐν τῷ Φίλαις ἱερῶ used by Priscus and referring explicitly to the temple of Isis. On ἱερόν Ἰσιδος, see also Locher, *Nilkatarakt*, 141-53.

²⁶¹ *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.18.

imperial standards that were usually kept in a legionary camp.²⁶² Such an incident probably took place in one of the legionary camps stationed in the First Cataract area rather than at Omboi, where a modest military detachment was garrisoned at this time.²⁶³ Moreover, no involvement of the Blemmyes in Omboi is known and there is no indication of the persistence of cults there.²⁶⁴ The accused, then, would have been a high official on the southern Egyptian frontier who helped the local Blemmyes to regain their ancient places of worship. In exchange, he made use of them to carry out raids into Egypt, more specifically into the fertile region around Omboi, where the councillors had their estates.²⁶⁵ The councillors, who were responsible for the tax collection in the first Upper Egyptian nome, were disturbed in their work and thereupon charged the official at the governor's court in Antinoopolis.²⁶⁶

Once again, this petition has been brought into connection with a 'Blemmyan War', this time the third one, which Rémondon dated to between 563 and 568. This dating is already doubtful as Rémondon thought that the list of payments to soldiers at Edfu belonged to this period, but it has recently been argued that this date must be later.²⁶⁷ The incident mentioned in our text was described thus: 'There were not only raids by nomads, there was also a religious war, because wherever the Blemmyes passed through, Egyptians frequently renounced the Christian faith; the temples were reopened, new shrines dedicated'.²⁶⁸ Again, it goes too far to make a war, let alone a 'religious war', out of the incident described in the petition.²⁶⁹

Nevertheless, these views influenced Nautin. Because the incident was situated in Omboi, he did not have to think of a use for the sanctuaries at Philae after the temple of Isis had been converted into a church, which he placed shortly after 535-537.²⁷⁰ However, our text seems to suggest the continuation of a religious tradition of some sort at Philae after that date. This suggestion has already been made in previous scholarship, but without paying attention to its historical implications.²⁷¹ If our interpretation is correct, the temple of Isis at Philae did not become a church shortly after 535-537, but was left alone for at least three more decades.

How should we imagine this Blemmyan cult at Philae? Evidently, the petition is highly rhetorical and so much of the context has been lost that it is hard to understand what exactly happened. It would seem impossible, however, that the Blemmyes could have restored the cult of Isis in the great temple to its former glory. From Priscus, we know of only one cult of the Blemmyes at Philae: the one in which they took a wooden statue (ξύανον) of Isis to their country and consulted it.²⁷²

²⁶² Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 212-3. Cf. the reading by Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 146-7: 'having treated scornfully the place where the imperial standards were kept by taking in hand (its) gold for bracelets for a barbarian slave girl' (τὰ ἱερά σίκνα χλευάσας χρυσᾶ εἰς κλα[νία] ἄβρας βαρβάρω[ν ἐγ?]χειρῶν). For τὰ ἱερά σίγνα as 'imperial standards', see P. van Minnen, 'Une nouvelle liste des toponymes du nome Hermopolite', *ZPE* 101 (1994) 83-6 at 85 (n. 13). For standards and legions, see C. Robert Philips III, 'Standards, Cult of', *OCD*³ (1996) 1437-8.

²⁶³ J. Gascou, 'Deux inscriptions Byzantines de Haute Égypte (Réédition de *I. Thèbes-Syène* 196 r^o et v^o)', *T&MByz* 12 (1994) 323-42 at 326.

²⁶⁴ For Omboi in Late Antiquity, see Timm, *Christlich-koptische Ägypten* 3, 1468-70.

²⁶⁵ Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 152; Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 195.

²⁶⁶ Note the remarkably similar story of the 'rebel' Azarias, who in the reign of Heraclius mustered a large number of 'Ethiopian' slaves and brigands, and seized the imperial taxes without the knowledge of the officers of the province of Panopolis (Joh.Nik. 97.30).

²⁶⁷ J.-L. Fournet, J. Gascou, 'Papyrus inédits d'Edfou de la collection de l'Ifao', *BIFAO* 98 (1998) 171-96 at 186-91.

²⁶⁸ Rémondon, 'Soldats', 71.

²⁶⁹ Dijkstra, 'Cult of Isis', 153-4; Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 195-6.

²⁷⁰ Rémondon, 'Soldats', 71; Demicheli, *Rapport*, 192-5; Updegraff, *Study*, 150.

²⁷¹ Wilcken, 'Papyrus Urkunden V', 443-4; Kirwan, *Studies*, Ch. XXV at 89; Demicheli, *Rapport*, 193-4.

²⁷² Priscus F 27 Blockley (= *FHN* III 318). Cf. the use of the same word in our text, *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.8. Fournet, *Entre document et littérature*, 197, suggests that 'wooden statues' is something other than the wooden statue of Isis at Philae, but this can hardly be taken as a counterargument if the plural is generic.

Perhaps Blemmyan tribes kept alive this bark transport until the sixth century, and the incident described in our text may involve with such a tradition. In any case, the 'Blemmyan incident', which had apparently reached the governor's court, will have caused a scandal in the see of Philae. Bishop Theodore may well have reacted to this incident by announcing the construction of a shrine, modest though it was, inside the ancient temple of Isis. Such a background seems more likely to have caused the dedication of the *topos* of St Stephen than a deliberate anti-'pagan' policy vis-à-vis Nubia.

The Churches and Temples of Philae

The fate of the material remains of Christian Philae has been a tragic one. From the *Description de l'gypte* and travel stories of the nineteenth century, we know that the entire island, including its temples, was once completely covered with mudbrick houses dating to the Late Antique and Arab periods.²⁷³ In 1895, when plans were made to build the first Aswan Dam, which would submerge the temples of Philae if not entirely then for most of the year, the Egyptian Antiquities Service requested the engineer Captain Henry Lyons (1864-1944) to find out what damage the submersions would do to the temples and to do what was needed to keep these buildings from destruction. Moreover, the temples were to be cleared of the mudbrick houses and rubble which had accumulated over the years. Lyons was assisted in his work by the famous German Egyptologist and founder of the Swiss Institute at Cairo, Ludwig Borchardt (1863-1938). The renovation and clearing of the island lasted from 1895 to 1896, leading to a final report published by Lyons in 1896.²⁷⁴ Meanwhile several preliminary reports about the monuments of Philae were published.²⁷⁵ Some years later, Lyons wrote another report about the state of the monuments.²⁷⁶

Although Lyons made a valuable description of the state of the temples in his day and managed to make a still authoritative map of the island (Fig. 3), his carelessness about the fate of the mudbrick houses pervades both reports and no attempt was made to preserve them for posterity. The sole documentation left is the map, in which the ground plans of the houses are indicated, a brief description of some of their features and several photos in which the finds, ranging from Late Antique reliefs to columns, other stone ornamentation and pottery, are heaped up without providing any information on the archaeological context in which they were found.²⁷⁷ We are left entirely in the dark about the other finds. If properly excavated, these houses could have formed an invaluable source for the study of Late Antique (and later) Philae. However, they are lost forever.²⁷⁸

Philae also possessed two freestanding churches, which are generally referred to as the West and East Church (P and Q in Fig. 3). Their foundations were still standing several stones high until the 1960s, although they were under water for most of the year and were covered with mud. In 1970, Grossmann published an architectural study of the East Church, for which he necessarily had to rely on the

²⁷³ Haeny, 'Architectural History', 218.

²⁷⁴ H.G. Lyons, *A Report on the Island and Temples of Philae* (London, 1896).

²⁷⁵ H.G. Lyons and L. Borchardt, 'Eine trilingue Inschrift von Philae', *SPAW* 1896, no. 20, 469-82; L. Borchardt, 'Bericht über den baulichen Zustand der Tempelbauten auf Philae', *SPAW* 1896, no. 45, 1199-1215; L. Borchardt, 'Bericht über die Corrosion des Sandsteinmaterials der Tempelbauten auf Philae', *SPAW* 1898, no. 23, 291-303; L. Borchardt, 'Der Augustustempel auf Philae', *JDAI* 18 (1903) 73-90; O. Rubensohn and L. Borchardt, 'Griechische Bauinschriften ptolemäischer Zeit auf Philae', *AIP* 3 (1906) 356-66.

²⁷⁶ H.G. Lyons, *A Report on the Temples of Philae* (Cairo, 1908).

²⁷⁷ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 13-5, Pls. 46-50, 58-61, 66-7 (see also Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 2, Pls. 2-5), plan I.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 8-10, who criticises Lyon's report because no context is provided, nor any clue as to the dating of the houses, e.g. by analysing the ceramics.

previously published maps.²⁷⁹ However, when the temples of Philae were moved to Agilkia in the 1970s, the churches were entirely neglected, and left under the waters of the Nile.²⁸⁰ To sum up, for a survey of Late Antique Philae we have to rely on the scanty remarks by Lyons and Borchardt, including the latter's diaries and other personal documents, which are kept at the Swiss Institute in Cairo, as well as on reports by previous visitors to the island. Moreover, there exist detailed architectural studies for the East Church and the *topos* of St Stephen. We have to reconstruct what is known about Late Antique Philae from these bits and pieces.

To start with the East and West Churches, both were built on the northern part of the island where no temples had been erected. This gave Wilcken the impression that the island had been divided between Christians in the north and 'pagans' in the south: 'In this way, the small island disintegrated into a pagan south and a Christian north'.²⁸¹ Thus, Wilcken presumed, the religious tension between 'pagan' and Christian was reflected in the separation of the two communities on the island. However, a more practical reason can be adduced for this separation. Presumably around 330, when a bishopric was created at Philae, the newly created see would soon have needed an episcopal church; in fact, a church may already have existed before that date.²⁸² On the island, which was covered with temples, the only area left was the northern part. It is therefore more probable that both churches were built in the northern part because of lack of space than because of religious tension.

In the Appion petition dated to 425-450, it is stated that the soldiers of Philae served 'God's holy churches on Philae' (ταῖς ἐν Φιλῶ(ν) ἁγίαις τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐκκλησίαις).²⁸³ This could be a rhetorical exaggeration, but on the other hand it seems likely that in the second quarter of the fifth century before temples were transformed into churches.²⁸⁴ Presumably, this also happened at Philae and a number of churches were built before the second quarter of the fifth century. As two churches have been preserved to us, it seems likely that these two could be the earliest churches on Philae. Although what survives of them suggests a later date, this does not preclude the possibility that they rest on earlier constructions, since the churches could have been rebuilt or renovated.

Which of the two churches was the episcopal church? A comparison of the ground plans of the churches shows that the East Church was once the most imposing church on the island (Q in Fig. 3).²⁸⁵ Grossmann has studied this church in detail, and it is from this study that the following reconstruction is distilled (Fig. 6).²⁸⁶ The ground plan of the East Church has a strange, trapezium-like shape, which can be explained

²⁷⁹ P. Grossmann, 'Überlegungen zum Grundriss der Ostkirche von Philae', *JbAC* 13 (1970) 29-41.

²⁸⁰ T. Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples and Tombs of Ancient Nubia. The International Rescue Campaign at Abu Simbel, Philae and Other Sites* (London, 1987) 151-86. Cf. Grossmann, 'Überlegungen', 41, who comments at the end of his article: 'Doch besteht die Hoffnung, daß im Zusammenhang mit der geplanten Versetzung des Isistempels, die eine vorübergehende Trockenlegung der Insel notwendig macht, auch einige Nachuntersuchungen in der Kirche selbst durchgeführt werden können'. Unfortunately, this never happened.

²⁸¹ Wilcken, 'Heidnisches und Christliches', 403.

²⁸² In the *Life of Aaron*, the first bishop of Philae, Macedonius, orders the temple priest Aristos to build a church on the island (fol. 21b). However, an inhabitant of Philae had already told Macedonius (fol. 12a) that before his arrival celebrations were led by priests from Syene. Hence there must have been some kind of place where the Christian community of Philae gathered. Just how far we can trust this information, however, is a matter of debate.

²⁸³ *P.Leid.* Z 10 = *FHN* III 314.

²⁸⁴ Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 43. Cf. Adams, 'Architectural Evolution', 102-3.

²⁸⁵ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 32-3; A.E.P. Weigall, *A Report on the Antiquities of Lower Nubia* (Oxford, 1907) 54; Somers Clarke, *Christian Antiquities*, 89-90; Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 7.

²⁸⁶ Grossmann, 'Überlegungen'. See this study for more details on the architecture of the building and add Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 461-4.

by the limited space available on the island.²⁸⁷ The church consisted of four aisles and the main entrance was probably in the south, as is normal in Egyptian churches. The visitors would have used the fourth, extra aisle as a kind of entrance hall. Unlike other Egyptian churches, another entrance was situated on the northwestern side. Although the altar room cannot be exactly reconstructed, part of it has been preserved and probably projected into the middle aisle.²⁸⁸

Lyons included two photographs of an assemblage of stone carvings from the East Church.²⁸⁹ Among these are some stone ‘Transennen’, which were used in churches as screens to mark off the *presbyterium*, the room where the main altar stood and in which only the clergy was allowed.²⁹⁰ One of these contains the following inscription: ‘Theodoros’ († Θεοδωρο[...]).²⁹¹ This name has been identified as that of Theodore of Philae, and thus Nautin connected it with the inscription of the *topos* of St Stephen which begins as follows: ‘Also (καί) this good work was done...’.²⁹² Accordingly, Nautin thought that Theodore had built the East Church before the *topos* of St Stephen, and placed the dedication of the East Church around 530.²⁹³

Grossmann doubted whether the inscription in the *topos* of St Stephen necessarily referred to the building of the East Church, or whether the identification with Theodore would fix the dating of the church, for this stone carving could well have been added later. Yet, despite these doubts, he agreed with Nautin that the transformation of the temple of Isis into a church, which he also placed in 535-537, was of the greatest significance. Hence, he came with an architectural argument for dating the construction of the church before 535-537, since no significant material from other temples on the island was found reused in the East Church.²⁹⁴ According to Grossmann, *spolia* from other temples could have been reused only after the building of the *topos* of St Stephen. On the assumption that the church was built in the episcopate of Theodore all the same, he therefore dated the church between 525 and 535.²⁹⁵

Although Grossmann is right to doubt the connection between the inscription from the *topos* of St Stephen and the East Church, for the work done could refer to any work done by Theodore, even in the church itself, his only argument rests on the assumption that the other temples on the island could not have been reused before 535-537, and since the East Church does not contain reused material of temples, it must date to after 535-537. However, as we have seen, it can be doubted whether the closure of the temple was indeed such an important event. Moreover, if it is accepted that the *topos* of St Stephen was built later in Theodore’s episcopate, it is difficult to keep to such a precise dating for the work done in the East Church. It is then possible, but far from certain, that Theodore contributed to the building of the East Church. Significantly, in a recent book, Grossmann no longer mentions the sixth-century dating and, on the basis of the stonework, seems to be in favour of a later date, namely

²⁸⁷ Grossmann, ‘Überlegungen’, 33-5.

²⁸⁸ Grossmann, ‘Überlegungen’, 36-8.

²⁸⁹ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, Pls. 58-9.

²⁹⁰ Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 123. See also S. Schaten in Arnold, *Elephantine XXX*, 211-2.

²⁹¹ For a photo see Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, Pl. 58, and Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 2, Pl. 5.

²⁹² *I.Philae* II 202.1. Cf. the similar use of καί in the inscriptions of Bishop Daniel(ios), *I.Philae* II 194.9, 195.5.

²⁹³ Nautin, ‘Conversion’, 42. As Grossmann, ‘Überlegungen’, 29 (n. 3), observes, Nautin has interchanged the names of the East and West Church.

²⁹⁴ Although some reused, if rather insignificant, fragments were found in the foundations, as noted by Borchardt, ‘Bericht über den baulichen Zustand’, 1204. The groundwork of the church consisted of prefabricated stone blocks; the rest of the church would have consisted of mudbrick.

²⁹⁵ Grossmann, ‘Überlegungen’, 40-1. If the closure of the temple of Isis took place somewhere between 535 and 537, Grossmann should have dated the construction of the East Church between 525 and 537, as Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 127, does.

not before 600.²⁹⁶ Whether the church was rebuilt or renovated in the sixth century or later cannot be determined.

The other, now lost, church on Philae is the West Church (P in Fig. 3).²⁹⁷ This church was of a simple, three-aisled plan and was about the same size as the *topos* of St Stephen. Before the campaigns of Lyons and Borchardt in 1895-1896, granite stands and the platform on which the altar once stood could still be seen, as well as three pairs of feet on the floor with inscriptions.²⁹⁸ Of an unknown height, the church was constructed of reused blocks from the nearby temple of Harendotes (O in Fig. 3). A Coptic building inscription was found in the street to the west of the church, which Richter has recently re-edited.²⁹⁹ The inscription was incised on the back of an Ancient Egyptian block with a solar disk,³⁰⁰ and runs as follows:

+ In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,
in the month Choiak the 21st, the 6th indiction, Diocletian year 469 (17 December
752).

- By the will of God, and through the care
and zeal of the god-loving brother, the lord
5. Joseph, son of the blessed Dios, this workplace
was established.³⁰¹ He donated it to the *topos*³⁰²
of the Lady of us all, St Mary Theotokos,
on Philae, in the second year of the
episcopate of our father, the god-honoured Apa Severos. May God bless him, his
children,
10. and his whole house. And may he have mercy upon his blessed
wife Nymphe. Amen, so be it! +³⁰³

Although the inscription dates to after the Arab conquest of Egypt, Richter interprets it as evidence for a cult adoption of the Isis cult at Philae.³⁰⁴ This interpretation was based on the epithets used for Mary, 'Our Lady' (ΤΕΝΧΟΕΙΣ, l. 7) and 'Theotokos' (ΘΕΟΤΩΚΟΣ, l. 7), which he equates with epithets frequently used for Isis in Greek (κυρία, 'lady') and hieroglyphics (*mwt-ntr*, 'mother of god', that is, mother of her son, the god Horus).³⁰⁵ The extension 'of Philae' (ΜΗΠΑΛΑΚ, l. 8), furthermore, reminds him of the Greek equivalent used for Isis (Ἰσις Φιλῶν). Finally, the inscription was dedicated in the month of Choiak, in which traditionally the most important festival

²⁹⁶ Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 464.

²⁹⁷ Borchardt, 'Bericht über den baulichen Zustand', 1204-5; Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 32; Weigall, *Report*, 54; Somers Clarke, *Christian Antiquities*, 89; Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 7-8; Adams, 'Architectural Evolution', 105-6; P. Grossmann, *Mittelalterliche Langhauskuppelkirchen und verwandte Typen in Oberägypten* (Glückstadt, 1982) 105. See Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 464-5, for architectural details.

²⁹⁸ G.J. Chester, 'The Early Christian Church at Philae', *The Academy. A Weekly Review of Literature, Science, and Art* 21 (1882) 107-8.

²⁹⁹ Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 127-35 (= *SB Kopt.* I 302). For bibliography, see S. Schaten, 'Griechische und koptische Bauinschriften', in S. Emmel *et al.* (eds), *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit*, 2 vols (Wiesbaden, 1999) 2.305-14 at 312-3.

³⁰⁰ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 32.

³⁰¹ The same word, ΕΡΑΚΤΗΡΙΟΝ, but with a different meaning, is found in the Greek petition discussed above, *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67004.8.

³⁰² Rather than Richter's translation 'Er gab sie in den Topos'. For the meaning of † ΕΡΩΥΝ, see Crum, *Dict.* s.v. Cf. Van Lantschoot, *Recueil des colophons* who gives several examples of this phrase, e.g. no. 94.10-1.

³⁰³ Tr. after Richter. In addition to Richter's text, I read ΕΠΙΣΚ^ο, instead of ΕΠΙΣΚ_υ in l. 9, as did L. Borchardt in his diary of 1895-1896, 2 March 1896, and which is also clearly visible on the photo in A. Mallon, 'Nouvelle inscription copte de Philae', *ASAE* 6 (1905) 107-11 at 108.

³⁰⁴ Followed by Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 465. However, this interpretation is not new, see T. Baumeister, 'Das Stephanuspatrozinium der Kirche im ehemaligen Isis-Tempel von Philä', *RQA* 81 (1986) 187-94 at 187-8.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 158, for the same idea.

of the cult of Isis, the Choiak festival, was held. He concludes that the titles of Mary were deliberately chosen to encompass the cult of Isis, and Mary took over Isis' dominant position as 'Lady of Philae'. Two building inscriptions from the island, which mention 'the holy Virgin Mary Theotokos', are adduced to emphasise Mary's importance for Christian Philae.³⁰⁶ According to Richter, the cult adoption must have taken place before the conversion of the temple of Isis, placed in 535-537, for otherwise the temple would have been dedicated to Mary instead of Stephen.³⁰⁷

Although the idea of a cult adoption is a tempting one, the argumentation is hardly convincing.³⁰⁸ In the first place, the equations of epithets are arbitrary and inaccurate. For example, the epithet translated with 'Lady' is also commonly used for Isis in demotic.³⁰⁹ It may further be wondered why the Coptic word $\chi\omicron\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ has to represent the Greek word $\kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$, the more so because the Coptic does not say 'Lady' but 'Our Lady' ($\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\chi\omicron\epsilon\iota\varsigma$), and this combination is attested for Mary in Coptic.³¹⁰ Moreover, if the Coptic phrase was equated with a Greek word, the equivalent would have been $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\pi\omicron\iota\nu\alpha\ \eta\mu\omega\nu$, a combination attested for Mary in documents dating to the seventh and eighth centuries.³¹¹ Finally, the Egyptian concept of the 'mother of god' is different from the Christian doctrine of Mary who has given birth to her son.³¹²

Secondly, the combination of 'Lady' with 'of Philae' does not convey the meaning of the Coptic, which combines $\pi\tau\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma$ and $\pi\bar{\iota}\pi\lambda\alpha\kappa$, 'the *topos* on Philae'.³¹³ The phrase 'Our Lady' is a separate epithet for Mary, like 'Saint' and 'Theotokos', and therefore not limited to Philae in particular.³¹⁴ The two other inscriptions in Greek that mention Mary and may date to before the eighth century have another epithet, 'Virgin' ($\pi\alpha\rho\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$), an epithet which is not used for Isis at all. There is thus no evidence to support the conclusion that 'on the basis of this title adoption, the *topos* of the Lady Mary of Philae certainly goes back to the time of the confrontation with paganism'.³¹⁵

This brings us to the third point, namely that a highly questionable cult adoption, entirely based on an eighth-century inscription, is retrojected into a sixth century or even earlier situation. This cult adoption seems to have been inspired by the idea that Christian cults deliberately adopted 'pagan' cults to illustrate their 'triumph'. Several studies, however, show that more often than not the Christian cult was disconnected with the past.³¹⁶ To mention only one example, a sanctuary of the martyrs Cyrus and John was built near the temple of Isis at Menouthis.³¹⁷ Although there may have been continuity in the type of cult, for both sanctuaries were oracle cults, Richter suggests that the name Cyrus might have reminded the devotees of the epithet 'lady' ($\kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$) of Isis, but this is hardly convincing.³¹⁸ Although it need not

³⁰⁶ *I.Philae* II 220.5-6, 221.4-5 (restored). Not included in a recent survey of documents mentioning Mary, A. Papaconstantinou, 'Les sanctuaires de la Vierge dans l'Égypte Byzantine et Omeyyade', *JJP* 30 (2000) 81-94.

³⁰⁷ Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 125-6, 133-6. Cf. Baumeister, 'Stephanuspatrozinium', 188.

³⁰⁸ See Dijkstra and Van Ginkel, review Richter, 236; Van der Vliet, review Richter, forthcoming.

³⁰⁹ E.g. T.M. Dousa, 'Imagining Isis: On Some Continuities and Discontinuities in the Image of Isis in Greek Isis Hymns and Demotic Texts', in K. Ryholt (ed.), *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies* (Copenhagen, 2002) 149-84 at 161-4.

³¹⁰ As Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 134 (n. 90), himself admits.

³¹¹ Papaconstantinou, 'Sanctuaires de la Vierge', 83-4.

³¹² Cf. the discussion by T. Klauser, 'Gottesgebäerin (Θεοτόκος)', *RAC* XI (1981) 1071-1103 at 1099.

³¹³ Cf. Richter's translation 'er gab sie in den Topos unser aller Herrin, der heiligen Gottesgebäerin Maria von Philae'. For the correct translation, see Papaconstantinou, 'Sanctuaires de la Vierge', 90-1.

³¹⁴ Cf. Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 134, following *I.Philae*I, pp. 60-3.

³¹⁵ Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 135.

³¹⁶ E.g. Hanson, *Studies* 357-8; Deichmann, *Gesammelte Studien*, 65; Saradi-Mendelovici, 'Christian Attitudes', 54. Cf. Merkelbach, *Isis Regina*, 317-8.

³¹⁷ Athanassiadi, 'Persecution', 15; Montserrat, 'Pilgrimage', 259.

³¹⁸ Richter here follows Merkelbach, *Isis Regina*, 327-8, but see Baumeister, 'Stephanuspatrozinium', 187-8. Furthermore, Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 135 (n. 98), contradicts himself by reproaching

have been a coincidence that a church for St Mary Theotokos was dedicated on the island of Isis, the eighth-century inscription does not support such an assumption.

What we do know is that in the eighth century there was a church of St Mary Theotokos on Philae, and if the inscription indeed refers to the West Church, which is admittedly not certain, this church could have been dedicated to Mary before 752. Since the doctrine of St Mary Theotokos was promulgated at the Council of Ephesus in 431, the church will have been dedicated after this date.³¹⁹ The dedication took place when the temple of Harendotes had fallen out of use and the islanders decided to reuse the temple for building material. As we know that around 434 the falcon cult was still in use, and the cult of Isis probably until 456/457, the West Church in the state it has come down to us most likely dates to the second half of the fifth century or later. If the West Church indeed goes back on a fourth or fifth-century predecessor, the church may well have been rebuilt with blocks from the temple of Harendotes.

The other temples on Philae were similarly plundered. Between the temple of Augustus (L on Fig. 3) and the Gateway of Diocletian (R), to the east of the East Church, a quadratic church (of the 'Umgangsvierstützenbau' type) was built. On architectural grounds, the church can be dated to the seventh or eighth century.³²⁰ It has been assumed that two earthquakes damaged the temple of Augustus in different periods. The first one happened when the temple was still in use, resulting in the attachment of several dove tails to its walls. The second earthquake took place when the temple was already in ruins, after which several houses were built inside.³²¹ Building material from the temple was also used for houses in other parts of the island.³²²

Similarly, blocks from the eastern portion of the temple of Hathor (G) were found reused in some of the houses, and its forecourt was demolished, according to Lyons 'to form a Coptic chapel', but without any indication why this should be so.³²³ In the southern part of the island, reused blocks from the temple of Arensnuphis (B) were also found in houses.³²⁴ An apse of a church was built on the foundations of the temple, that is, when the temple was already in ruins, and Lyons informs us that crosses had been incised on the wall, as well as the name of a Christian saint.³²⁵ Finally, in the inner room of the small temple of Imhotep, also known as the temple of Asclepius (F), doors were hacked out in the east and west walls to facilitate housing. A *dipinto* was written on the wall and figures of saints painted on the plaster.³²⁶

Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 238-9, for equating 'Our Master' Jesus with the same epithet for Osiris on the grounds that the epithet 'Master' was too commonly used a term for Jesus. The same could be said of the epithet 'Lady' used for Mary.

³¹⁹ E.g. Cameron, *Christianity and Rhetoric*, 165.

³²⁰ P. Grossmann in W. Kaiser *et al.*, 'Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine. Erster Grabungsbericht', *MDAIK* 26 (1970) 87-139 at 106, *Elephantine II*, 101-3, and *Christliche Architektur*, 38. Cf. Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 126, with 136, where the question mark behind the dating has disappeared.

³²¹ Lyons and Borhardt, 'Trilingue Inschrift', 469; Borhardt, 'Bericht über den baulichen Zustand', 1201, 1204, and 'Augustustempel', 85.

³²² Borhardt, 'Augustustempel', 78-9.

³²³ Lyons and Borhardt, 'Trilingue Inschrift', 469; Borhardt, 'Bericht über den baulichen Zustand', 1205; Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 27 (quote). Cf. Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 7, and Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 125, who identify this 'chapel' as a church.

³²⁴ Borhardt, 'Bericht über den baulichen Zustand', 1209; Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 23-5; Rubensohn and Borhardt, 'Griechische Bauinschriften', 364.

³²⁵ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 23; Weigall, *Report*, 42; Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 5-6; Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur*, 47; Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 125.

³²⁶ L. Borhardt, Diary 1895-1896, 1 January 1896: 'Eine Kammer enthielt früher koptische Inschriften und Malereien, überschmiert'; Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples*, 26. Cf. Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 6, and Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens*, 126, who suggest that the room might have been a small chapel. However, see M. Rodziewicz, *Alexandrie III. Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie à la lumière des fouilles polonaises à Kôm el-Dikka* (Warsaw, 1984) 194-208, 332, who discusses paintings found in a Late Antique residential quarter. See also Haas, *Alexandria*, 201-4.

All in all, then, Christian Philae consisted of at least five churches, two freestanding ones (the East and the West Churches) and three or more churches built in or nearby an Ancient Egyptian temple (temples of Isis, Augustus and Arensnuphis). Of these churches, the freestanding ones were probably the first to be erected on the northern part of the island. Presumably, if it was the episcopal church, the East Church may be the successor of the oldest sanctuary on the island, a fourth-century church. This church was possibly renovated under Bishop Theodore in the sixth century, but architectural features rather suggest a seventh-century (or later) date. The West Church was also rebuilt or renovated at a late stage, at least after the last Ancient Egyptian cult activities had ceased (around 456/457), for it was built of blocks from the nearby temple of Harendotes.

If the temple of Isis was turned into a church under Theodore, probably shortly after the 'Blemmyan incident' of around 567, both of the other churches built in or near other temples seem to have been of a later date. Meanwhile, the remaining temples had fallen out of use and became ruins. We have seen different ways in which they were reused: they were either completely dismantled and reused for other building activities (temple of Harendotes), used as building material for houses (temples of Augustus, Hathor and Arensnuphis) or actually as homes to live in (temples of Augustus and Imhotep (?)).

After the Ancient Egyptian cults had ceased, houses which had until then been built outside of the temenos wall of the temple of Isis now moved closer and closer until the temples too became part of the village.³²⁷ The process of destroying and rebuilding mudbrick houses must have raised the level of the village considerably through the ages. This feature has been observed for the level of the houses around the East Church, which at the end of the nineteenth century was considerably higher in comparison with the level of the church.³²⁸ The houses were small and fairly simple, but one house, which was found near the temple of Hathor, formed an exception because of its size and its use of columns.³²⁹ Stray finds of ostraka indicate that much more could have been expected if the houses had been properly excavated, but except for the photos published by Lyons, nothing more is left of the village.³³⁰

The picture emerging from the material remains of Christian Philae thus puts the chronology of the reuse of temples in a different light. Thus far, it has been assumed that the temples could only have been reused after the conversion of the most important temple, that of Isis, into a church, an event which was dated to 535-537.³³¹ However, as the examples of the East and West Churches show, it is inaccurate to use this date as a turningpoint in the dates of the reuse of the other temples. From around 456/457 onwards, the role of the cult of Isis had been reduced to a passive one, and it could well have been that from this time onwards empty buildings were reused. However, even this date is not fixed as the cults were longer in decline and buildings other than the temple of Isis could have been reused already before that date.

The reuse was therefore not determined by the closure of the temple of Isis, but rather depended on the local circumstances, circumstances which are hard to

³²⁷ Haeny, 'Short Architectural History', 218.

³²⁸ L. Borchardt, Diary 1895-1896, 29 December 1895: 'Die koptische Kirche liegt ganz tief in den Häuserruinen, das Dorf war also koptisch oder später. Für das letztere spricht das Vorkommen von angemalten Pilgerschiffen p.p. im östlichen Theilen der ersten Colonnade'.

³²⁹ L. Borchardt, Diary 1895-1896, 9 January 1896: 'Dicht beim Hathortempel grosses koptisches Haus mit bemerkenswerther Säule, die zwischen Fenstern stand. Ähnliche Säulen, nur einfacher, finden sich auch in anderen Häusern, aber nie in Situ, wohl aus einem oberen Stockwerk'.

³³⁰ L. Borchardt, Diary 1895-1896, 1 January 1896 (Coptic ostrakon, found in the temple of Imhotep), 7 January 1896 (two Arabic ostraka), and 18 January 1896 (Greek ostrakon, found behind the 'Unfinished Chapel' (E)). These ostraka are also mentioned by Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples* 12.

³³¹ For the most recent reconstruction of the chronology of temple conversions at Philae in this manner, see Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 124-36. In the same way, Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 149-93, tries to demonstrate that the conversion of Nubian temples into churches dates to after 535-7, on which see, however, Dijkstra and Van Ginkel, review Richter, 236.

reconstruct: it had more to do with finding new purposes for buildings that had fallen out of use, and the temple of Isis was just one of these. At the same time, the two churches, which had been erected on the northern part of the island and the predecessors of which may have been there already when Appion composed his petition in the second quarter of the fifth century, provided the island with a new religious focus, that of Christian Philae. It is to the ways in which the Christian identity was emphasised under Theodore of Philae that we now turn.

Constructing a Christian Identity under Bishop Theodore

In 575, when Bishop Longinus visited Theodore, 'the old bishop of Philae' could look back on a distinguished career of fifty years on the episcopal throne. Theodore had been involved in the first mission to Nubia and had helped to organise Christianity on the other side of the Roman frontier, as is testified in the inscription from Dendur. He had become a man of renown, who was actively involved in important matters concerning the Egyptian Church such as the ordination of a new archbishop of Alexandria.

Theodore had also achieved much on his small island. He had witnessed the closure of the temple of Isis on imperial orders, and as this building probably stood empty for several years, the question may have risen about what to do with the ancient temple. Perhaps in response to some incident with Blemmyan tribes still visiting the site around 567, the bishop decided to build a *topos* of St Stephen inside the temple in order to definitively break with the past. With this deed, Bishop Theodore would have contributed considerably to the construction of a Christian identity on Philae. This also appears from the other activities this bishop engaged in.

In an inscription from the *topos* of St Stephen mentioned in the introduction to Part III, it is said that Theodore transformed the sanctuary into a *topos* of St Stephen, 'under the most pious Posios, deacon and leader'.³³² It is not clear what role Posios had in the building project, but as this inscription was incised near a painting of St Stephen, it is possible that Posios was responsible for it. In any case, a 'leader' (προεστώς) in an ecclesiastical context most often denotes an abbot of a monastery.³³³ Richter suggests that this Posios be identified with a certain Abba Pousi, mentioned on a Coptic tombstone said to come from Philae. Pousi is here mentioned as 'the bishop of Philae and the first father of this monastery' (ΠΕΠΙΣΚ(ΟΠΟΣ) ΜΠΙΛΑΚ ΔΥΩ ΠΩΡΠ̄ ΝΕΙΩΤ ΜΠΕΙΜΟΝΔ(ΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ)).³³⁴ Thus Richter thinks that Posios climbed the ecclesiastical ladder at Philae and, besides being the first abbot of 'this monastery', he later became bishop of Philae, perhaps as the successor of Apa Theodore. He identifies the monastery with that of St Hatre, which would mean that this monastery was founded in the sixth century.³³⁵

However tempting this interpretation may be, it cannot be proven. Richter assumes that Posios and Pousi are the same names and that the monastery referred to is that of St Hatre. Yet, there is no support for the identification of Posios with Pousi, and Posios may just as easily have been a 'leader' of another monastic community on Philae or in its vicinity.³³⁶ The community was probably not situated on the island, although in 1895-1896 a building north of the temple of Augustus was identified as a monastery.³³⁷ Posios may therefore have been the 'leader' of one of the monastic

³³² *J.Philae* II 203.6-7.

³³³ G. Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger im spätantiken Ägypten* (Leipzig, 2002) 36.

³³⁴ I follow the reading by Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 119, based on a recently published photo by W. Brunsch, 'Koptische und griechische Inschriften aus Alexandria', *WZKM* 84 (1994) 9-33 (inv. A 11806). Cf. *SB Kopt.* I 789.

³³⁵ Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 119-21.

³³⁶ Cf. for a similar combination of monastic and ecclesiastical titles, Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger*, 36 (πρεσβύτερος καὶ προεστώς).

³³⁷ Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples* 14-5, but without indicating it on his map or describing it.

communities in the neighbourhood of Philae.³³⁸ If so, the inscription in which he is mentioned seems to indicate the co-operation between the see of Philae and a monastic community in the area.

In addition to the building of the *topos* of St Stephen and possibly the renovation of the East Church, the activities of Theodore also appear from local secular building. On 14 December 577, the construction of a quay wall in the southeastern part of the island was commemorated:

- By means of the providence of the Lord God and the fate of
our most pious masters Flavius Justinus
and Aelia Sophia, eternal *augusti* and emperors
and of the protégé of God, Caesar Tiberius,
5. the New Constantine, and by means of the philanthropy of Theodore
the renowned *decurio* and *dux et augustalis*
of the Thebaid for the first year, this wall has been constructed
thanks to prayers of the holy martyrs and the most holy Bishop Apa Theodore,
through the zeal and goodness of Menas, the most illustrious *singularis*
10. of the Ducal Office, in the month Choiak, the 18th, 11th indiction, for the good.³³⁹ +

This official inscription is reminiscent of the two inscriptions of Bishop Daniel(ios) who, more than a century earlier, in 449-450 or 464-465 had taken the initiative to renovate part of a wall at Philae, and paid for it, under the aegis of the governor of the Thebaid. In this case, it seems that the governor had ordered a minor administrator, Menas, to oversee the strengthening of the wall. Apparently, however, the building work could not pass by the bishop of Philae, as it is said that he prayed for the project to be brought to a good end.

The inscription of 577 forms part of a group of inscriptions mentioning repair works to the quay walls of the temple island, which are dated to the sixth century on the basis of this single inscription.³⁴⁰ However, in the fifth century Bishop Daniel(ios) was already involved in repair works, which shows that these inscriptions have to be dated more broadly to 'Late Antiquity'.³⁴¹ It seems, then, that in this period, the quay walls that surrounded the island needed extensive rebuilding, sometimes at the instigation of officials,³⁴² sometimes at that of the bishops of Philae.³⁴³ According to the *Description de l'Égypte*, the French army visiting Philae at the beginning of the nineteenth century could still see a large part of the surrounding wall of Philae and observed its irregular shape, which may have been caused by different renovation projects.³⁴⁴

It has been suggested that these renovations of the surrounding walls were the consequence of 'barbarian' invasions and hence that the walls were defensive walls, but it seems hardly likely that tribes of the Noubades and Blemmyes would have wanted to destroy their sacred island.³⁴⁵ This is confirmed by a similar building inscription that has been found near the temple of Isis at Syene. Presumably, this inscription commemorates the building of the town wall by the councillors (πολιτευόμενοι) of

³³⁸ Only a few monasteries have survived in the area but this does not mean that they were not there, as the *Life of Aaron* amply demonstrates. Cf. Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 120.

³³⁹ *I.Philae* II 216.

³⁴⁰ *I.Philae* II 218-28.

³⁴¹ *I.Philae* II 194-5.

³⁴² *I.Philae* II 216, 219, 224-6.

³⁴³ *I.Philae* II 194-5, 220-1 (restored), 227. This does not mean that officials were not involved in these building activities.

³⁴⁴ *Description de l'Égypte* 1, 34: 'D'ailleurs, il est probable que toutes les parties de ce mur n'ont pas été bâties dans le même temps, et qu'elles ont dû, à différentes époques, exiger des réparations: c'en est assez pour expliquer leurs contours irréguliers'.

³⁴⁵ *I.Philae* II, p. 13. Cf. Lyons, *Report on the Island and Temples* 41-2; Monneret de Villard, *Nubia medioevale* 1, 2-5.

Latopolis (Esna) and a local official (*epimeletes*) under the aegis of some military officials.³⁴⁶ The building of the quay walls therefore more probably had practical reasons, for example caused by the level of the Nile, which had risen considerably over the centuries.³⁴⁷

While the inscription of 577 demonstrates that the co-operation between bishop and secular authorities continued, it is also a testimony to the reputation that Bishop Theodore had attained. Line 8 of the inscription says that the work happened through prayers of the martyrs as well as of Theodore of Philae. It could be suggested that Theodore, like the martyrs, had died before this inscription was carved. This is unlikely, however, for if Theodore was indeed dead, he would have been referred to as 'blessed' (μακάριος). Moreover, the phrase 'thanks to prayers of' (εὐχαῖς) is attested in an inscription from Baalbek (Lebanon), possibly dating to the second half of the fourth century, in which the same phrase is used for 'the holy bishop Theodotos'.³⁴⁸ Apparently, Bishop Theodore was already held in high regard during his lifetime and was regarded as equal to the saints. This is the last testimony to Theodore and, as he was already very old in December 577, he probably died shortly afterwards.³⁴⁹

The mentioning of the martyrs may have been connected to the newly dedicated *topos* of St Stephen the Protomartyr, which, as has been suggested above, could have taken place under Theodore not long after 567.³⁵⁰ As regards the choice of St Stephen, Theofried Baumeister goes even further with Nautin's hypothesis that the erection of the cross at Philae was the beginning of the conversion of Nubia.³⁵¹ Theodore thus deliberately chose Stephen the Protomartyr as the saint of the church: 'Thereby he regards missionary activities as a continuation of the Christian universal mission, which goes back to the death of Stephen'.³⁵² In the light of what has been said above, it is questionable whether such importance can be attributed to the dedication of this modest church. Since the Christian community may not have had martyrs to worship, it is more likely that Theodore decided to dedicate part of the closed temple to the first and best-known martyr.³⁵³

As an argument for a connection with the mission to Nubia, Baumeister further suggests that 'nowhere can be discerned a particular Egyptian predilection for the worship of Stephen'.³⁵⁴ This argument cannot be maintained. Although St Stephen was certainly not the most popular saint in Egypt, recent surveys show that the martyr was included on different dates in the *Synaxarion*, while the documentary evidence for St Stephen seems to have concentrated on the area between Thebes and Philae, and to

³⁴⁶ *IThSy* 236, cf. 235, 237, on which see Laniado, *Recherches* 84. On the title πολιτευόμενος, see K.A. Worp, 'Ἄρξαντες and πολιτευόμενοι in Papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt', *ZPE* 115 (1997) 201-20, and A. Laniado, 'Βουλευταὶ et πολιτευόμενοι', *CdE* 72 (1997) 130-44, on which see K.A. Worp, 'Bouleutai and Politeuomenoi in Later Byzantine Egypt Again', *CdE* 74 (1999) 124-32. See also Laniado, *Recherches passim*.

³⁴⁷ S.J. Seidlmayer, *Historische und moderne Nilstände* (Berlin, 2001).

³⁴⁸ *IGLS* VI 2830.5 (εὐχαῖς Θεοδότου τοῦ ὀσίου ἐπισκόπου), with the comment: 'La formule εὐχαῖς est de style pour toute intervention des saints et des hauts dignitaires ecclésiastiques'. Cf. e.g. *SB* IV 7496.1 (εὐχαῖς τῶν ἁγίων; Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes), and Feissel, *Recueil*, no. 15.4-6 (εὐχαῖς π[άντων τῶν] ἁγ[ί]ων ... μαρτύρων; Edessa, fifth/sixth century).

³⁴⁹ Maspero, 'Théodore', 312.

³⁵⁰ Perhaps a fragmentary building inscription from Philae (*IThSy* 331.1) once mentioned an ecclesiastical dignitary associated with the *topos* of St Stephen: τοῦ ἁγίου Στεφάνου. See the *editio princeps* by A. Roccati, 'Alcune iscrizioni greche da File di età imperiale', in J. Vercoutter (ed.), *Bulletin du Centenaire. Supplément au BIFAO, T. 81* (Cairo, 1981) 437-42 at 439-40, but cf. *IThSy*, pp. 313-4.

³⁵¹ Baumeister, 'Stephanuspatrozinium'.

³⁵² Baumeister, 'Stephanuspatrozinium', 192.

³⁵³ Cf. the remarks by Cyril about the need to build a martyr shrine at Menouthis where there was a cult of Isis (quoted by Montserrat, 'Pilgrimage', 262).

³⁵⁴ Baumeister, 'Stephanuspatrozinium', 188. Cf. his *Martyr Invictus. Der Märtyrer als Sinnbild der Erlösung in der Legende und im Kult der frühen koptischen Kirche* (Münster, 1972) 90.

have postdated the sixth century.³⁵⁵ Consequently, these dedications could have been inspired by the dedication of the *topos* of St Stephen at Philae.³⁵⁶ On the other hand, the amount of evidence is limited, and the churches dedicated to St Stephen outside this area, for example at Arsinoe, speak against such an interpretation.³⁵⁷ In any case, it seems that no connection can be established between St Stephen and the missions to Nubia, and that Theodore decided to create a *martyrium* on the island, simply because there were no martyrs yet.³⁵⁸

What the Christian community also needed was a cult of local saints. In Chs. 6 and 7 we have seen that the *Life of Aaron* reflects the fulfilment of this need. It contains a series of stories on saints from the region, especially Apa Aaron. In addition, there are the legendary stories of the first bishops of Philae, which have led to the suggestion that this part of the hagiographical work was intended to explain the origins of the Christian community of Philae. As Aaron was buried next to the first three bishops of Philae, a cult of this saint may therefore have existed on Philae as early as the first half of the fifth century, or even earlier. It certainly existed when the *Life of Aaron* was composed.

When did this happen? If the story of the first bishops of Philae reflects the perspective of a Christian audience on its origins, it must have been at a time when the Isis temple was still physically present but not yet converted into a church. Significantly, Macedonius does not end the Isis cult by destroying its temple and building a church instead, as in the case of Gaza, but kills only the falcon. Additionally, then, it would have been a time when the cult of the holy falcon was still remembered. With the Isis temple still standing, it described the symbolic end to one of the most conspicuous cults in the collective memory of Christian Philae.³⁵⁹ The *Life of Aaron* could therefore be tentatively dated to the period before around 567, when the *topos* of St Stephen may have been dedicated. As Theodore was bishop of Philae at this time and his activities helped to construct a Christian identity on Philae, a work in which the creation of the see of Philae was legitimised and the origins of its Christian community explained would fit neatly in his episcopate. If it was indeed written during the episcopate of Theodore of Philae, the work has to be dated between around 525 and 567. A sixth-century audience also appears from other internal evidence.

When Mark was in Alexandria to be ordained he said to Athanasius:

‘One thing worries me that I want to tell you about, my holy father’. The archbishop said: ‘Go ahead’. Mark said: ‘There lives a people to the east and south-west of our city that is called Nubians who are very poor, for it regularly happens that they ask us: ‘Give us a piece of bread’. My mind is inclined to refuse it to them, because they are a people (that does not know ?) God (fol. 26b).³⁶⁰

It may well be that this remark reflects sixth-century sentiments. The Nubians are located to the east and south-west of Philae, where Nubia was supposed to start in that century. The first village of Nubia was situated one or two miles south of Philae on the

³⁵⁵ J. Horn, ‘Hinweise zu Kult und Literatur des Protomärtyrers Stephanus in der Kirche Ägyptens’, in G. Koch (ed.), *Studien zur spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst und Kultur des Orients* (Wiesbaden, 1982) 46-55; G.A. Pérez, ‘Stephen, Saint’, *Copt.Enc.* VII (1991) 2153-4; Papaconstantinou, *Culte des saints*, 193-5. There was also a local martyr called Stephen of Lenaios in a village in the Antinoite Nome. See Van Minnen, ‘Earliest Account’.

³⁵⁶ Papaconstantinou, *Culte des saints*, 195.

³⁵⁷ Cf. also the literary attestations in Horn, ‘Hinweise’.

³⁵⁸ Another martyr venerated on the island may have been Menas, mentioned on the fragment of a stela, on which see the next section.

³⁵⁹ See Dijkstra, ‘Horus on His Throne’, 9.

³⁶⁰ ΟΥΝ ΟΥΨΑΧΕ ΟΝ ΧΡΟΠ ΕΡΟΙ ΕΙΟΥΨΩ ΕΤΑΜΟΚ ΕΡΟΨ ΠΑΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΟΥΑΔΒ. ΠΕΧΕ ΠΑΡΧΗΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΧΕ ΑΧΙϞ. ΠΕΧΕ ΝΑΡΚΟΣ ΧΕ ΟΥΝ ΟΥΖΕΘΗΟΣ ΠΣΑΕΙΕΒΤ ΠΝΟΝ ΑΥΩ ΖΠΠΕΠΙΝΤΠΡΗΣ ΠΤΠΠΟΛΙΣ ΕΥΗΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΨ ΧΕ ΑΝΟΥΒΑ ΕϞΡΡΩΖ ΕΝΑΔΑΤΕ. ΨΑΣΨΩΠΠΕ ΓΑΡ ΠΣΕΝΟΥΤΕ ΕΖΟΥΗ ΕΡΟΝ ΧΕ ΤΟΥΟΕΙΚ ΝΑΗ ΨΑΡΕΠΑΛΟΓΙΣΗΟΣ ΚΙΗ ΕΡΟΙ ΕΤΠΤΨ ΝΑΥ ΕΒ[ΟΛ] ΧΕ ΟΥΖΕΘΗΟΣ Π[± 13] ΝΟΥΤΕ.

east bank. It is known from Arabic sources as el-Qasr, and a Greek papyrus from the sixth or seventh century mentioning ‘the camp of the Moors (that is, Nubians) near Philae’ (τὸ κάστρον τῶν Μαύρων τὸ πλησίον Φιλῶν) can probably be identified with this site.³⁶¹ Other Nubian settlements started south of the First Cataract region on the west bank, that is, to the south-west of Philae. Moreover, in the miracle story of the camel’s leg, two Nubians quarrel who ‘lived in that place’ (fol. 18a), namely the Valley, the wadi where first Macedonius dwelled and later Apa Aaron.³⁶²

Nubians not only figure prominently in the history of the first bishops of Philae, they reappear in section three of the *Life of Aaron*. When Aaron had left Isaac to be alone in the desert for a couple of days, his pupil sought his master because he was threatened by Nubian demons:

And he said to me: ‘Why have you come here my son?’ I said to him: ‘The Nubians have been tormenting me, and I have come to tell you’. He smiled and said: ‘Truly, these are invisible Nubians, my son’ (fol. 40b).³⁶³

Nubians also appear in a miracle story belonging to the catalogue of miracles of Apa Aaron: ‘A certain Nubian came out from the desert with his son to drink water from the river’ (fol. 41b).³⁶⁴ The son is caught by a crocodile and in despair the father cut himself on some rocks. Apa Aaron wanted to talk to him but could not communicate with him because ‘he could not understand what he was saying to him’ (fol. 42b).³⁶⁵ Aaron then asked Isaac to go to the road to find someone who spoke the language. He met a man who was travelling on a donkey from Philae to Syene and asked him: ‘Do you understand the language of the Nubians?’ (fol. 42a).³⁶⁶ He answered positively and translated the Nubian’s words. Apa Aaron gave a piece of wood to the Nubian, who threw it into the water. As a consequence, the crocodile released his son.

Another miracle story recounts the conversation between two Nubian men about Aaron’s greatness (fol. 51a-b). One of them was blind in one eye and speculated that Aaron could have to cure him if he really was a great man. Immediately, his one eye was cured, but now the other eye was blind. They went to Apa Aaron who already knew of what had happened and cured the blind man, ‘who was not a believer’ (fol. 51a).³⁶⁷

These stories about Nubians give the *Life of Aaron* its distinct *couleur locale* and confirm the picture of a mixed population in the First Cataract region. The Nubians are portrayed as poor and ‘pagan’. If this characterisation reflects a sixth-century situation, the work may be dated to before the official missions to Nubia, that is, to before 536, when the Kingdom of Noubadia officially adopted Christianity. But, since the image of a ‘pagan’ Nubia would have lived on for a while, and not all Nubians would have converted to Christianity right away, we should be careful not to pinpoint the work too precisely.³⁶⁸

³⁶¹ *P.Haun.* II 26, on which see A. Łajtar, ‘Τὸ κάστρον τῶν Μαύρων τὸ πλησίον Φιλῶν - Der dritte Adam über *P.Haun.* II 26’, *JJP* 27 (1997) 43-54. Interestingly, the letter mentions the meeting between the writer of the letter and a hermit (ἔγκλειστος) who had arrived at the camp. Łajtar (pp. 53-4) suggests that there may have been a connection with the missionary activities in Nubia, but too much of the context is missing.

³⁶² ΔΥΣΟΙΕ ΕΠΗΑ ΕΤΉΜΑΥ.

³⁶³ ΠΤΟΙ ΔΕ [ΠΕ]ΧΑ[Ι] ΝΑΙ ΧΕ ΠΤΑΚΕΙ ΕΠΑΙ]ΝΑ ΕΤΒΕΟΥ Ω ΠΑΦΗΡΕ. Π[ΕΧΑΙ ΝΑΙ] ΧΕ ΑΝΑΝΟΥΒΑ †ΡΙΣΕ ΝΑΙ ΔΙΕΙ ΕΤΑΜΟΚ. ΔΙΗΕΤΒ ΡΩΙ ΠΣΩΒΕ ΠΕΧΑΙ ΧΕ ΔΙΗΘΩΣ ΠΑΝΟΥΒΑ ΕΤΘΗΒ ΝΕ Ω ΠΑΦΗΡΕ. Nubian demons are a common motif in Egyptian hagiography, see, most recently, D. Brakke, ‘Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self’, *JHSex* 10 (2001) 501-35.

³⁶⁴ ΔΧΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΉΠΤΤΟΟΥ ΠΣΙΟΥΑΝΟΥΒΑ ΠΗ ΠΕΦΗΡΕ ΧΕ ΕΓΗΑΣΕΜΟΟΥ ΖΉΠΕΙΕΡ’Ο.

³⁶⁵ ΠΠΕΦΕΙΜΕ ΕΠΕΤΤΩ ΠΗΟΙ ΝΑΙ.

³⁶⁶ ΔΡ[Α ΚΗΟΙ ΠΤΑΣΠΕ ΠΗΑ]ΝΟΥΒΑ.

³⁶⁷ ΠΤΑΙΡΑΤΝΑΖΤΕ.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Dijkstra, “‘Une foule immense de moines’”, 201.

It would also be going too far to claim that all stories in the *Life of Aaron* necessarily reflect life in the First Cataract region during the sixth century. The catalogue of miracles serves primarily to confirm the holiness of Apa Aaron. All these miracle stories have the same structure and Aaron's miracles are part and parcel for every Late Antique holy man in his role as a patron: he settles disputes, rebukes the rich, helps the poor, heals the sick and mediates in taxation business.³⁶⁹ On the other hand, the miracle stories are all placed in the landscape of the First Cataract area: the clientele is formed by Nubians as well as by other people living in the region. Consequently, it can be expected that these problems were not strange to the audience for the *Life of Aaron*. It may not be a coincidence that at the end of the catalogue of miracles, two miracles are incorporated in which Apa Aaron took care that the lands were flooded with Nile water.³⁷⁰ This remarkable work thus not only reflects the perspective of a sixth-century Christian community on its origins, it also reflects some of the daily needs and problems of the local population of the First Cataract area.³⁷¹

Admittedly, Theodore's work at Philae was not new. Except perhaps for the cult of martyrs, which Theodore may have initiated with the *topos* of St Stephen, the involvement of the bishop in secular and ecclesiastical building, a cult of local saints, and the co-operation with monastic communities probably built on a long tradition. What is so remarkable about Theodore's episcopate is that all these elements together become visible in his episcopate, and they would have added to the construction of a 'Christian' Philae. This had perhaps not so much to do with Theodore's charisma, though it may have contributed to it. It had all the more to do with the transformation that had taken place and which is so brilliantly embodied in the *Life of Aaron*. By inventing the tradition of a Christian Philae from the first bishop of Philae onwards, a definitive end was made to Philae's 'pagan' past. The building of the *topos* of St Stephen inside the former temple of Isis was therefore the culmination of this development: the event was not the definitive end of Ancient Egypt cults at Philae, but rather a confirmation that the island had become fully Christian.³⁷²

Visitors to Christian Philae

Evidence that visitors from the region and perhaps from further away came to Philae to participate in the cults of Christian Philae has been found on Elephantine. During the campaign of 1910-1911, French excavators found a house that appeared to be an atelier containing moulds for terracotta figurines, flasks and lamps. The house was situated to the south of the portico of the Khnum temple and can be dated from the second half of the fifth century onwards.³⁷³ Some of the moulds were published in the 1980s, and have been dated broadly between the fifth and seventh centuries.³⁷⁴

The moulds have a parallel in the terracottas produced at the famous pilgrimage site of Abu Mina near Alexandria, which suggests that the moulds from Elephantine were equally intended for the pilgrimage industry. Some of the moulds contain the names of saints, like Onnophris and Stephen.³⁷⁵ Onnophris is a well

³⁶⁹ Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 116-8.

³⁷⁰ Frankfurter, *Religion*, 45-6, and 'Syncretism', 371.

³⁷¹ Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 126: 'Far from being bizarre fragments of folk-lore, such incidents have a social context'.

³⁷² The construction of a Christian identity seems to have become increasingly important in the sixth century, see G. Greatrex, 'Roman Identity in the Sixth Century', in S. Mitchell, G. Greatrex (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000) 267-92 at 277-8.

³⁷³ Arnold, *Elephantine XXX*, 35-7.

³⁷⁴ P. Ballet, F. Mahmoud, 'Moules en terre cuite d'Éléphantine (Musée Copte). Nouvelles données sur les ateliers de la région d'Assouan, à l'époque byzantine et aux premiers temps de l'occupation arabe', *BIFAO* 87 (1987) 53-72 (nos. 1-16). For the date see pp. 61-2.

³⁷⁵ Stephen: Ballet and Mahmoud, 'Moules', 65-6 (nos. 2-3) = *SEG* XXXVII 1625-6. Onnophris: Ballet and Mahmoud, 'Moules', no. 10 = *SEG* XXXVII 1632. Ballet and Mahmoud, 'Moules', no. 8 = *SEG* XXXVII 1630, contained the name of a now lost saint.

known Egyptian saint, as appears from the *Life of Onnophrius*, which, like the *Life of Aaron*, is attributed to Paphnutius. The other saint, Stephen, can be none other than the saint who was venerated in the former temple of Isis at Philae.³⁷⁶ Two other inscriptions also point in the direction of Philae. Firstly, one mould contains the name of Theodore, who might well be the bishop of Philae.³⁷⁷ Another inscription is reminiscent of the inscription of the conquering cross in the *topos* of St Stephen: 'The cross always conquers'.³⁷⁸ These inscriptions indicate that the moulds have to be dated to the time after the dedication of the *topos* of St Stephen, for which we have argued a date after 567. Moreover, if Theodore of Philae is mentioned in the moulds, they must postdate 577, a year in which Theodore was still alive. The inscriptions on the moulds therefore suggest a date at the very end of the sixth, or more probably in the seventh century, when a cult of martyrs had definitively been established at Philae and their worship may have attracted pilgrims from near and far.

In addition to the official inscriptions already discussed, several other inscriptions have been preserved which tell us about the visitors to Christian Philae. The thirty-one inscriptions in Greek from the Christian period are almost equal the number of inscriptions in demotic and Greek (thirty-six), mainly pilgrimage inscriptions from the fourth and fifth centuries associated with the ancient cults. Often, the 'Christian' inscriptions contain the names of visitors, and thus continue the practice of leaving one's name on a sacred building. Seldom is the place of origin or ethnicity of the person specified, and therefore we do not usually know where these visitors came from. The inscriptions are also undated, which makes it hard to see patterns in them and leaves apart the possibility that inscriptions that are conveniently dated to 'Late Antiquity' may postdate the Arab conquest.

The inscriptions can be divided into three groups according to their location. The first group of inscriptions was incised after the *topos* of St Stephen had been built. Most of these can be found on the southern wall of the pronaos, to the west of the entrance through the second pylon, except for one on a column opposite the entrance (Fig. 5).³⁷⁹ All inscriptions begin with the word 'I' (ἐγώ), followed by the name of the visitor.³⁸⁰ Sometimes a cross is added to the inscription.³⁸¹ Some of the visitors explicitly added that they were of Nubian descent (Νοῦβια).³⁸² Five of eight names are Christian, three persons bear non-Christian names.³⁸³ According to Nautin, it is no coincidence that two of these non-Christian names, Dioskoros and Theodosios, are the names of the patriarchs who were exiled because of their anti-Chalcedonianism.³⁸⁴ However, both names are common in Late Antique Egypt, and it is impossible to be sure about such an identification, the more so because the third non-Christian name, which cannot be identified with a famous person, is left out of consideration.³⁸⁵

³⁷⁶ For another Egyptian mould containing the name 'St Stephen', see M.-C. Hellmann, C. Trost, *Lampes antiques de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 2 vols (Paris, 1985-7) 1, no. 61. As the mould was said to have been found in 1902 and is dated to the sixth or seventh century, it could well have come from Elephantine.

³⁷⁷ Ballet and Mahmoud, 'Moules', no. 9 = *SEG* XXXVII 1631 (..]αϛ ἐνδοξον Θεόδωρ[ον ..]).

³⁷⁸ Ballet and Mahmoud, 'Moules', no. 7 = *SEG* XXXVII 1629 (.. σ]ταῦρος ἀεὶ νικᾷ).

³⁷⁹ *I.Philae* II 205-14. *I.Philae* II 215, the inscription on the column, contains only the word ἐγώ. Cf. Nautin, 'Conversion', 29-33.

³⁸⁰ *I.Philae* II 205-15. *I.Philae* II 209-10 probably belong together.

³⁸¹ *I.Philae* II 206, 212-4.

³⁸² *I.Philae* II 205, 208, 210, 213.

³⁸³ The Christian names are Ioseas, Iohannes (written in Coptic: ⲓⲱⲗⲁⲛⲛⲏⲥ), Ioseph, Aaron and Simeon.

³⁸⁴ Theodosios: *I.Philae* II 205 = *FHN* III 325. Dioskoros: *I.Philae* II 207.

³⁸⁵ *I.Philae* II 209-10 (Sophonias). See Nautin, 'Conversion', 32-3; *I.Philae* II, pp. 269, 272. Cf. *FHN* III, pp. 1181-2, in which it is mistakenly remarked that the Patriarch Theodosius had ordained Theodore of Philae.

A few other inscriptions in the temple of Isis can also be dated to the time after the turning of the temple of Isis into a church.³⁸⁶ A certain Ioseph and Anais incised inscriptions near the cross on the west side of the porch of the second pylon, that is, beside the entrance to the church,³⁸⁷ and a certain Viktor scratched his name in the roof of the Isis temple.³⁸⁸ Here the alpha and the omega were also incised twice, referring to the famous words of Christ: 'I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Rev. 22.13).³⁸⁹ In the inner staircase of the second pylon was found an isopsephistic inscription. In isopsephistic inscriptions the sum of the words mentioned (in this case, θεός, ἄγιος, ἄγαθός) comes to the same amount (in this case, 284).³⁹⁰ The inscriptions by Strophion and Kyriakos, who incised their names on the back of the temple and on the first pylon, can probably also be dated to this period.³⁹¹

The second group of inscriptions comes from the East Church (Fig. 6). Recently a sketch map of the East Church has been discovered in the documents of Borchardt, to which he added in the margin several Greek inscriptions and their position within the church (see Appendix 5, nos. 1-4, for text and translation).³⁹² Unfortunately, the inscriptions and their position within the church can no longer be checked since the East Church is now under water, and we have to rely entirely on the notes left by Borchardt. However, he did mention the inscriptions in his diary: 'In the great Coptic Church, which is situated between four streets, (are) inscriptions, only names, but well cut and painted in with red paint'.³⁹³ Although in a letter Borchardt mentioned that the names had been found 'on some pillars', on the sketch map inscriptions are indicated on one pillar only, situated in the back row of pillars (nos. 3-4).³⁹⁴ Other inscriptions were found on the western wall at the back of the church (no. 1) and on the southern wall in the fourth, extra aisle of the church, directly left of the main entrance (no. 2). These inscriptions were thus incised on quite conspicuous places in the church, and they must date to the period in which the church was being renovated or rebuilt, that is, the sixth or seventh century, or later.³⁹⁵

Remarkably, of the nine readable names, four are the names of bishops of Philae: Markos (no. 1), Makedonios (no. 3), Theodoros and Severos (no. 4). The name Macedonius, which is rather rare in Egypt, particularly attracts the eye, and we might consider whether the names are part of a list of bishops. Nevertheless, except for Macedonius these names are quite common, and there is no indication of them being bishops.³⁹⁶ On the contrary, the only occupation mentioned is that of a deacon (no. 3). Just as with the stone carving containing the name of Theodoros, it is therefore better to be careful when identifying important persons on the basis of single names and assume that they belong to visitors to the church. An explanation for the rare name Macedonius would be that people from the region might have been willing to give the name of the legendary first bishop of Philae to their children.³⁹⁷

³⁸⁶ *L.Philae* II 229-33, 240-2.

³⁸⁷ *L.Philae* II 230 (with cross). *L.Philae* II, p. 306, mistakenly locates this inscription on the 'pylône sud'. Cf. Nautin, 'Conversion', 29, for the correct location ('pylône nord').

³⁸⁸ *L.Philae* II 233 (with cross).

³⁸⁹ *L.Philae* II 241-2.

³⁹⁰ *L.Philae* II 240. On isopsephism, see F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig, 1925²) 96-104.

³⁹¹ *L.Philae* II 229 (Kyriakos), 231-2 (by the same person: Strophion; the inscription has the 'T' form also used in the inscriptions from the *topos* of St Stephen).

³⁹² Dijkstra, 'Late Antique Inscriptions', 56-9.

³⁹³ L. Borchardt, Diary 1895-1896, 4 March 1896.

³⁹⁴ L. Borchardt, Letter to A. Erman, 20 March 1896.

³⁹⁵ Dijkstra, 'Late Antique Inscriptions', 55-7.

³⁹⁶ Cf. the bishop's list from Faras, published by S. Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishphric of Pachoras* (Warsaw, 1972) 190-201.

³⁹⁷ Dijkstra, 'Late Antique Inscriptions', 58-9.

There remains a group of inscriptions which although clearly Christian is hard to date.³⁹⁸ On the southern part of the island, inside the West Colonnade, one inscription complies entirely with the pattern known from Greek pilgrimage inscriptions: 'The *proskynema* of Kalasiris Patenoue + Panachatis (being) the father of Kalasiris'.³⁹⁹ The only difference with formulae of earlier times is that a cross has been added after the name Patenoue.⁴⁰⁰ Hence, it seems that this inscription belongs to a time when Christianity was still coexistent with the Ancient Egyptian cults, and that it has to be dated to before the sixth century. Outside the East Colonnade was a fragment of an inscription with a cross.⁴⁰¹ In the nearby temple of Arensnuphis, a Christian inscription has been found mentioning a certain Viktor, son of Paulos, and in the temple of Imhotep is one for the deacon Peteesis.⁴⁰² In front of the temple of Arensnuphis, amidst a heap of stelae and fragments of stelae, a piece was found with an acclamation to Jesus: 'Jesus Christ. Lord, remember Menas, the martyr'.⁴⁰³ Was Menas one of the martyrs venerated with St Stephen on the island, who were addressed in the building inscription of 577? Another alpha and omega have been incised in the west porch of the 'Kiosk of Trajan'.⁴⁰⁴ Finally, on a stone near the temple of Hathor was found the inscription 'Presbiteros +'. Whether a name is mentioned here, or a title, is unclear.⁴⁰⁵

On the northern part of the island, two Christian inscriptions have been found on the Gateway of Diocletian. The first mentions 'Apa Makarios and Petros, son(s?) of Iasios, of Philae', the only person or persons who certainly belonged to the Christian community of Philae.⁴⁰⁶ The other inscription has a cross, a crown and a palm branch, and reads 'Pachot the priest (?), son of Epiphanius'.⁴⁰⁷ The last Christian inscription to be mentioned here is from the West Church. It is an inscription similar to those in the *topos* of St Stephen and was incised on the outside wall: 'I + Zacharias, slave'.⁴⁰⁸ The inscriptions discussed here may have continued the practice of inscribing names on sacred buildings, and in the case of the Kalasiris inscription even the *proskynema* formula has been preserved; they also show that by the sixth century, the ways of expressing pilgrimage had attained a distinctively Christian shape.

³⁹⁸ *I.Philae* II 234-9, 243-4.

³⁹⁹ *I.Philae* II 234 (Τὸ προσκύνημα Καλασιρις (read Καλάσιρις) Πατενουε + Παναχάτις ὁ πατήρ Καλάσιρις).

⁴⁰⁰ *I.Philae* II 234.

⁴⁰¹ *I.ThSy* 340.

⁴⁰² *I.Philae* II 235 (Πετεῆσις διάκ(ονος), 236 (Βίκ(τωρ) Παῦλος; for a similar abbreviation of the name Viktor, cf. *I.Philae* II 233).

⁴⁰³ *I.Philae* II 244 (the name Menas is partly reconstructed).

⁴⁰⁴ *I.Philae* II 243.

⁴⁰⁵ *I.ThSy* 332 (Πρεσβίτερος †).

⁴⁰⁶ *I.Philae* II 237 (Απα Μακάριος καὶ Πέτρος Ἰασίου Φιλῶν).

⁴⁰⁷ *I.Philae* II 238 (Παχώτ πρης Ἐπιφάνιος, in which read πρεσ(βύτερος). Or is πρης a nickname?).

⁴⁰⁸ *I.Philae* II 239 (Ἐγὼ + Ζαχαρίας δοῦλος).