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

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Epilogue

When Mark was in Alexandria to be ordained as second bishop of Philae, he told Athanasius about a dilemma concerning whether or not to give bread to Nubians back home because they were not Christians. With several examples from the Bible and a story about two monks, the archbishop taught Mark that it was his duty to be charitable and told him that he did not need to worry about the religious background of these Nubians:

As regards this people, they are destined to believe in God after a while. That is why I have said all these things to you, for I found them to be like 'a grape in the bunch', as Isaiah (65.8) said, 'do not destroy them, for in them is a blessing of the Lord' (fol. 29b).¹

Although this passage from the *Life of Aaron* aims to be a Christian lesson in charity and certainly does not refer to the large period of time described in this book, the remarks of Athanasius may be taken as illustrative of the expansion of Christianity on Egypt's southern frontier in Late Antiquity. As this study has argued, the expansion was a gradual one, in which Christianity had already organised itself before becoming fully integrated into society. Rather than through a policy of conversion by coercion, the Christians laid a more peaceful framework in which different possibilities of appropriating the new religion were presented. And so, in the end the new religion prevailed, even in a region where the old religion had long held such a prominent position.

This view is different from the views proposed in modern scholarship, where the main focus has been on Philae, in particular on Procopius' account of the destruction of its temples. The temple island has been seen as a 'bastion of pagan worship', which was simply replaced by Christianity in the sixth century. This picture, which is still largely indebted to Gibbon's 'decline and fall' and 'Christian triumph', can be divided into four, interrelated elements. The first element consists of the idea that Christianity steadily progressed southward and that Philae, the southernmost Egyptian settlement, was the last station on the 'roadmap' to a Christian Egypt.

The second element that has remained particularly persistent is that the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae continued undisturbed until the sixth century, an exceptional situation that was kept alive by the continuous worship of the peoples from the south, the Blemmyes and Noubades. This idea is based on the account by Procopius, in which he describes the peoples as having access to the temples until they were destroyed on imperial orders around 535-537. Although it has long been known that a Christian community lived on the island from the fourth century onwards, Philae was thought to have consisted of a 'Christian' north and a 'pagan' south, which lived in constant tension with each other, as if they were divided by a Berlin Wall, until Justinian ended the not so peaceful co-existence by force.

A strong 'pagan bastion' until the sixth century brings us to the third element, namely that the closure of the temples on Philae was a glorious victory of Christianity over 'paganism'. The conversion of the temple of Isis into a church by Bishop Theodore (c. 525-after 577) fits this picture well. In particular, a series of Greek inscriptions from the temple's walls have been adduced which use ideological language such as: 'The cross has conquered. It always conquers'.

Since the first imperial mission was sent to Nubia around this time, a fourth and final element has been assumed, that is, that the 'victory' at Philae was the direct cause of the conversion of Nubia to Christianity. This idea is related to the one of a steady spread of Christianity southward: first Philae had to be converted before Nubia experienced the same fate. Therefore, the closure of the temples at Philae has been seen as the first act in the conversion of Nubia to Christianity. As Justinian was thought to have instigated this series of

¹ ΠΡΕΘΗΝΟΣ ΕΤΙΜΑΥ ΖΑΠΤ ΠΕ ΕΤΡΩΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ ΕΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΜΗΝΣΑ ΟΥΘΕΩ. ΕΤΒΕ ΠΑΙ ΠΤΑΙΧΩ ΕΡΟΚ ΠΗΝΑΙ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΧΕ ΔΙΖΕ ΕΡΟΚ (read ΕΡΟΚ) ΠΘΕ ΠΟΥΒΙΑΒΙΑΕ ΖΗΠΕΣΗΔΖ ΚΑΤΑ ΘΕ ΠΤΑΙΧΟΟΣ ΠΙΝΣΑΙΑΣ ΧΕ ΠΠΡΤΑΚΟΖ ΧΕ ΟΥΝ ΟΥΣΜΟΥ ΠΤΕΠΧΟΕΙΣ ΠΖΗΤΩ. See Crum, *Dict.* s.v. ΒΛΒΙΑΕ, and *Theological Texts* 41, for the same quotation.

events, including the conversion of the temple of Isis into a church, the measures concerning the southern frontier were interpreted as part of a deliberate, 'anti-pagan' policy by the emperor.

This general picture has influenced various interpretations of the sources from Philae. For example, as the last dated demotic graffiti from Egypt are among the inscriptions from Philae, it has been suggested that the demotic script remained in use until the closure of the Isis temple around 535-537, and that pilgrimage also continued until this late date. Similarly, the reuse of the other temples at Philae has been dated to after the closure of the Isis temple. Thus a picture is conjured up of a monolithic process from 'paganism' to Christianity, in which the new religion won a glorious victory over the old religion, and at once replaced it.

Against this all too static picture of the religious transformation at Philae, this study takes a different perspective. Let us briefly recapitulate the arguments that have been produced by deconstructing the monolithic development as described in previous studies.

Firstly, the idea that Philae was reached at the last stage of the conversion of Egypt to Christianity has been proven untenable. Not much later than in the rest of Egypt, probably around AD 330, sees were created at Syene and Philae, and from several ecclesiastical documents their bishops are known to have been involved in the affairs of the Egyptian Church during the fourth century. Thus, the Church became organised in the First Cataract area as early as during the reign of Constantine, and from this period onwards, Christianity gradually integrated into society. Although the fourth and fifth-century sources are scanty, several factors, such as the increasing use of Christian names, formulae and symbols, and the presence of clergymen and monks in daily life, illustrate this development. Two sources in particular indicate that the bishops of the region became increasingly important: the Appion petition (425-450), which shows that the bishops of Syene and Philae co-operated with the local garrisons to protect the churches in their sees against raids from the southern tribes, and two inscriptions from Philae, which mention the involvement of Bishop Daniel(ios) in a local building project in 449-450 or 464-465.

Secondly, against this background, it is an inescapable conclusion that the Ancient Egyptian cults on Philae contracted considerably after 298. In this respect, Procopius' account can be shown to follow imperial propaganda rather than accurately describing the position of the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae in Late Antiquity. Two elements in the historical account in particular have been distorted. In the first place, Procopius, presumably drawing on Priscus, makes an artificial ethnic distinction between 'the Blemmyes' and 'the Noubades'. Although there is no evidence that the Blemmyes were the main supporters of the cults, as previous scholars have suggested, undoubtedly the southern peoples were in large part responsible for their persistence after 298. Yet, the question rather is whether the image of both peoples living clearly separated south of the frontier is correct. A comparison of the sources from and about the Dodekaschoinos in the fourth and fifth centuries with anthropological parallels from modern societies has shown that the situation south of the frontier was more complicated. After Diocletian had withdrawn the Roman frontier to Elephantine in 298, the Dodekaschoinos became an instable and multi-ethnic, tribal society. The instable situation resulted in frequent raids by southern tribes into Egypt. The Romans tried to prevent these by paying the tribes money and keeping access to the temple of Isis at Philae open to them. It was therefore Roman policy to tolerate the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae in the fourth and fifth centuries, and tribes from the region rather than whole peoples kept coming to the sacred island in this period.

Procopius also suggests that the worship of 'the Blemmyes and Noubades' at the temples of Philae remained the same as it had been until their closure around 535-537, but this supposition is not supported by the evidence from the island. An analysis of the inscriptions from Philae indicates that the Ancient Egyptian cults contracted considerably after 298: their number decreased, their location became ever closer to the temple of Isis and the priests themselves dedicated most of them. Although the inscriptions show continuity in formulation, and festivals, rituals and religious associations continued to exist, the knowledge and learning of the priests, and the circumstance that they kept the highest offices in a small

circle of priests unmistakably point to an increasingly isolated position of the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae. Even if in 452 or 453 Priscus states that 'according to the ancient right' access to the temples was renewed in a treaty of the Roman official Maximinus with 'the Blemmyes and the Noubades', the inscriptions suggest that by 456/457, when the last dated inscription was incised, the Ancient Egyptian cults were probably more dead than alive. Thus the picture given by Procopius of still lively cults in 535-537 can be discarded and has to be seen as a propagandistic account of a merely symbolic act.

Thirdly, after 80 years of oblivion, a glorious victory over 'paganism' can therefore hardly be an accurate description of the closure of the temple of Isis. Since Procopius follows imperial propaganda but does not mention the building of a church inside the temple of Isis, and there is no evidence that the transformation directly followed suit, these events have now been disentangled. The assumption by previous scholars that there was a direct sequel of events was probably connected to the idea that temples were violently and on a large scale converted into churches throughout the Mediterranean in the fourth and fifth centuries, Philae being one of the latest and most conspicuous examples of this phenomenon.

Yet, the archaeological evidence from Philae, supported by that from Elephantine and Syene, has shown that a linear development from temple to church was rather the exception than the rule. In most cases, temples were reused for more secular purposes such as for building material. Moreover, in those cases where temples were indeed turned into churches, this took place only at a later stage, in the sixth century or later, when the buildings that had not already been reused, or those parts that were suitable for that purpose, could be turned into churches. The fixed chronology of the reuse of the temples on Philae, that is, that they could have been reused only after the closure of the Isis temple, can therefore also be rejected. The temples could have been reused after the Ancient Egyptian cults had stopped functioning, and this could have been any time after, say, the middle of the fifth century. On the same grounds, the dates of the two freestanding churches in the northern part of the island, the East and West Churches, the former one to before and the latter to after 535-537, are less certain than has always been believed. The transformation of the temple of Isis into a church has therefore been placed in a local context, in which the empty spaces available on the small island were reused as economically as possible. Rather than that it formed part of an imperial, 'anti-pagan' policy, a local incident such as that with a Blemmyan tribe mentioned in a petition to the governor of the Thebaid and dated to 567, if it indeed refers to Philae, may have caused the building of the church.

Fourthly, if the building of a church inside the empty temple was a local affair, and may not have been connected to the closure of the temple of Isis, the idea that the closure directly caused the conversion of Nubia to Christianity as part of a deliberate 'anti-pagan' policy also becomes less likely. On the other hand, both events can be seen in the general context of imperial policy towards the southern Egyptian frontier. The missions to Nubia probably continued the diplomatic ties with the Noubades of the previous century, and the involvement of Philae in the missions was only practical as it was the see closest to Nubia.

All in all, then, the process of religious transformation described here is of a multifaceted nature that is more complex than has hitherto been thought. On the one hand, Philae can still hold the claim that it was the last place in Egypt where Ancient Egyptian religion as an institution was practised consisting of a priesthood, rituals and festivals. Moreover, unlike in the rest of Egypt, the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae were openly tolerated by the Roman emperor in this period. However, the cults had already started to lose their importance after 298, and there was probably not much left of them by the middle of the fifth century. After this date, the cults could only have continued at a low level, although small groups from the region, such as the Blemmyes mentioned in the papyrus text dated to 567, may still have been attracted to the site long after it had ceased to be in regular use. Thus, the commonly held view that connects the end of Ancient Egyptian religion to the closure of the Isis temple at Philae in 535-537 is too simple. On the other hand, Christianity expanded in the First Cataract area during the fourth and fifth centuries. In this respect, the situation at Philae was similar to that of Syene and Elephantine. Although the case of Philae is therefore a unique

one, it has now been placed in its regional context, and this context may not have been so different from the rest of Egypt.

By the sixth century, even Philae had become Christian. This Christian identity appears from the activities Bishop Theodore undertook. He was an important figure in the Egyptian Church of the sixth century. On the island itself, Theodore was closely involved in the building of the *topos* of St Stephen inside the temple of Isis, by which he probably initiated a cult of martyrs, in the co-operation with monastic communities in the region and in secular and other ecclesiastical building projects. These activities together probably contributed considerably to the construction of a Christian identity on Philae. This is why it has been suggested that the hagiographical work entitled the *Life of Aaron* was composed during his episcopate. The work not only testifies to monastic communities in the region and the existence of a cult of local saints at least from the fifth century onwards, it also provides a picture of Philae becoming entirely Christian under its first bishop, Macedonius. Consequently, the work was written at a time when the population of Philae was considered to be Christian, and the story of the first bishops of Philae served to explain the origins of this Christian community. The building of a church inside the temple of Isis thus needs to be seen as the ultimate confirmation of this break with the past. The success of Theodore's work appears from the moulds found at Elephantine, in which the bishop and St Stephen are mentioned, testifying to Christian pilgrimage to Philae at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century.

At Syene and Elephantine, the construction of a Christian identity was probably not that different from that of Philae, but here it is not as visible in the sources. Syene and Elephantine also had a 'pagan' past, which needed to be explained with stories. Perhaps the need on Philae with its ancient precincts, which now stood empty but could not be ignored, was stronger and required a more explicit break with the past. In any case, at Syene the Church had become fully integrated into society from the end of the fifth century onwards, as is evidenced by the Paternosters archive. These documents frequently mention clergymen who had important functions in public life, such as private notaries, subscribers of documents and settlers of disputes. Clergymen are also well attested as private persons in these documents. Finally, at Elephantine, the ostraka give the impression that the situation was not so different there, and also show that Monasticism had become part of everyday life.

In reconstructing religious transformation in Late Antiquity, some final words of caution are needed because, as a recent reviewer of a book on Alexandria in Late Antiquity remarked: 'Ancient historians often seem to forget that three hundred years is a very long time'.² This book covers an even longer period, 344 years, and, as already noted in the General Introduction, although the sources from the region are plentiful and various, they do not, and cannot, cover all aspects of religious life in the period under consideration, even if more finds, especially of ostraka and archaeological material, are expected to be published in the future. Besides describing the picture that arises from the sources, we therefore also have to account for what is missing.

For example, we have interpreted the lack of inscriptions regarding the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae after 456/457 as an indication that they could only have been practiced on a low level after this date. Although some sources seem to point to a continuation into the second half of the fifth century, this evidence is inconclusive. The inscriptions dated to the fourth and fifth centuries show a marked decline compared with the preceding period, and the cults could therefore hardly have been as alive as before by 456/457.

On the other hand, there is almost no epigraphical evidence for members of the Christian community on Philae during the fourth and fifth centuries. There are the two inscriptions mentioning Bishop Daniel(ios) of Philae, and perhaps the inscription of Kalasiris also dates to this period. The other inscriptions left by Christian visitors are plentiful, but the dated ones belong to the sixth century or later. This does not mean that a Christian community did not exist or was insignificant before that time. As has been said, Philae had its own see from the fourth century onwards, and several ecclesiastical documents suggest that

² A. Papaconstantinou, review of Haas, *Alexandria*, in *JEA* 89 (2003) 295-7 at 295.

the bishops of Philae were involved in the affairs of the Egyptian Church. Moreover, the Appion petition and the inscriptions of Bishop Daniel(ios) inform us that Philae closely cooperated with secular authorities.

Finally, the lack of evidence has also made it hard to answer the question of how Christianity was appropriated in this regional context. The regional developments have already made it clear that Christianity laid a framework for people to appropriate the new religion in various ways. The Patermouthis archive is a good illustration of how clergymen had become part of everyday life from the end of the fifth century onwards. They were persons of standing who could be asked to write, sign or subscribe documents and to settle disputes. From the archive it also appears that it was generally accepted to give children Christian names. Finally, a specific Christian idiom with crosses and formulae had become common practice in the writing of documents. Although these examples provide a context for how people appropriated Christianity, they do not tell us how people, or groups of people, decoded the message of Christianity and gave meaning to it.

At first sight, the section of the *Life of Aaron* on the first bishops of Philae seems to describe how people from the island appropriated Christianity, because it shows some of them resisting or assimilating it. However, this is a literary work that is coloured by Christian ideology. Accordingly, the work gives a black-and-white picture of how people at first resistant to Christianity were persuaded to become Christian. In reality, people's reactions to Christianity can be expected to have been much more diverse. While they would increasingly have accepted Christianity as the religion of public life, at the same time they may have remained attached to traditional ways of communicating with the divine. We will therefore close by giving some examples in which these religious encounters are present in the ways people appropriated Christianity.

To start with, the moulds from Elephantine show that there was a Christian pilgrimage to the *topos* of St Stephen at Philae at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century. This means that Christian pilgrims still came to the place that had once been one of the most important and well-known pilgrimage sites in Egypt. The inscriptions from the island itself are most illuminating in this respect, for while they use Christian formulae like the 'I' clause and crosses, they continue the practice of leaving their names on a sacred building since time immemorial. One of the inscriptions even completely follows the *proskynema* formula used for Greek pilgrimage inscriptions until the fifth century. However, a cross has been added, which shows that the pilgrim, Kalasiris, was a Christian. Similarly, there were Christian people among the visitors to the *topos* of St Stephen who specified that they were Nubian, the same people who had come to worship Isis on the island for so long. As regards names, people may have chosen not only Christian names for their children but also the names of people who were associated with the local Christian community. For example, Makedonios, whose name was inscribed on a pillar in the East Church, was possibly named after the first bishop of Philae.

Secondly, an inscription was discovered during the recent excavations of a sixth-century quay wall at Elephantine, together with many other inscriptions and figurative graffiti. At first sight the inscription looked like the inscriptions commemorating a high Nile level that are widely attested before the Christian period. Yet, in the second part of the inscription it becomes clear that the level is measured according to a cross depicted below the inscription. As also appears from the Nilometers of Elephantine and Philae, Nile cults therefore continued, albeit transformed into a distinctively Christian shape. Finally, the construction of a church on top of the quay wall continued a practice going back to the pharaonic period, in which Ancient Egyptian temples were built on terraces towering high above the Nile, and in which graffiti were incised by the visitors on the quay walls below.

Such examples occasionally give us glimpses of how people from the First Cataract area appropriated Christianity. The story was more complicated than that described in Christian, literary sources, which is exemplified by one such work about the region, the *Life of Aaron*. Christianity was not always violently imposed on them, after which they willingly accepted the new religion. It took at least two centuries before traditional local religion had become

transformed, and this complex process resulted in a Christian society in which some elements of the old religion can still be detected. This merging of elements, which at first sight may look like a paradox, is typical of periods of cultural change, as the Mayan example of Canek mentioned at the start of this book illustrates for a different period of religious transformation.

Other regional studies of religious transformation in Late Antique Egypt may add more dimensions to one of the most profound, if highly complex, periods of cultural change in history. After all, the statement in the inscription from Philae, 'the cross has conquered', is perhaps not that inaccurate a summary of this process, as long as it is taken metaphorically to refer to the result of a gradual and complex process. Whether the second part of the inscription, that 'it always conquers', still has any value is for the believer to decide.