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

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7. The *Life of Aaron* and the Origins of the Christian Community of Philae

The *Life of Aaron* as Spiritual Communication

The study of Late Antique hagiography has benefited from a series of recent publications following the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of Peter Brown's seminal article 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity' of 1971.¹⁹⁷ In these publications, there seems to be an overall tendency to look at the narrative principally as a discourse between author and public. To quote just one example: 'It is now the author who emerges as full-blooded, and the power of the saint as a fully textual persona is explored. Authors, their social and intellectual milieu, and the communities they seek to influence through their hagiographies now occupy center stage'.¹⁹⁸

In the same vein, one of these articles discusses the use of '*diegesis*' or discourse in hagiographical texts.¹⁹⁹ In this article, the connection between the saint, the hagiographer and his work, and the audience is called 'spiritual communication', that is, the author has heard – whether directly or indirectly – the story from the saint himself, who, through the hagiographer, radiates something of his holiness to the public, a holiness they can imitate or emulate: 'It is something like an event that with its own spiritual force links the saint, the eyewitness/hagiographer and the audience, and transports them to a level of timeless existence where the drama of the saint is played out perpetually and in eternity'.²⁰⁰ In these hagiographical works, the discourse itself is the message.

Some features of spiritual communication in the *Life of Aaron* have already been mentioned. To start with, well-known features of hagiographical works such as the holy men speaking and acting in imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) and the simple and unadorned style are in itself ways of enhancing the trustworthiness of the account.²⁰¹ Moreover, the narrative structure of the *Life of Aaron* embodies the 'message' of the work by presenting it as a travelogue and emphasising its transmission through several holy men. The author is like a modern journalist who actually travels towards the holy men, thus embodying the hearing/seeing dimension even more prominently and involving the public in the story. Another way of emphasising the spiritual communication is to make the discourse plausible to the public. In the *Life of Aaron*, this is done by adding specific topographical information, by accounting historical events and persons, and even by pretending that the work was written by a famous fourth-century anchorite.

Historians sometimes tend to approach these details with the questions: What is fiction, what fact? However, such a clear-cut distinction does not work in hagiographical discourse, for the aim of the hagiographer is not to describe historical events as accurately as possible, but to directly involve his audience in the narrative.²⁰² Nonetheless, although these narratives may contain details, which are distorted or stereotyped in order to fulfil this goal, the spiritual communication with a regional audience, especially in the work under consideration here, may contain specific information on the region, which increases its interest for historians. For what a regional audience has in common is not only the general stock-and-trade of hagiographical works, but also a definite sense of a regional space. To compare once again with the *Life of Onnophrius*, the locations mentioned in that work are three monastic cells in caves and a well in the desert. It is not different for the *Life of Cyrus*, where the locations are two caves, a hut and a well. In contrast, the *Life of Aaron* contains

¹⁹⁷ *J ECS* 6 (1998) 343-539, and J. Howard-Johnston, P.A. Hayward (eds), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1999).

¹⁹⁸ S. Elm, 'Introduction', *J ECS* 6 (1998) 343-51 at 348.

¹⁹⁹ C. Rapp, 'Storytelling as Spiritual Communication in Early Greek Hagiography: The Use of *Diegesis*', *J ECS* 6 (1998) 431-48.

²⁰⁰ Rapp, 'Storytelling', 441.

²⁰¹ See e.g. Cameron, *Rhetoric of Empire*, 112-3.

²⁰² Rapp, 'Storytelling', 444.

much more detailed information on a specific region, the First Cataract area. In view of the wider audience of the *Life of Onnophrius*, it may not have been a coincidence that it has been transmitted in (Sahidic and Bohairic) Coptic, Latin, Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopian. By contrast, the *Life of Aaron* has come down in only one complete (Sahidic) Coptic manuscript.²⁰³

Viewing the *Life of Aaron* as spiritual communication of a local monk with his regional audience not only explains the topographical details in the text, but also another unique feature of the *Life of Aaron*: the incorporation of a history of the first bishops of Philae. Why was this section added to the *Life of Aaron*? Unlike the other *Lives* discussed here, this section of the *Life of Aaron* is well anchored in time and space, which enhances its relevance to the people who are interested in that particular time and space: people from the island. The section explained the origins of the Christian community of Philae, cast in a series of legendary stories about the first bishops of Philae, but it also augmented the sanctity of Apa Aaron, and with him, of the other monks in the region. This unique feature of the *Life of Aaron* suggests that the intended audience of the work was not limited to the local clergy alone, but concerned the Christian community of Philae as a whole. In addition, the stories about the monks of the region would have appealed to a wider, regional audience. It is in this light that we will interpret the history of the first bishops of Philae.²⁰⁴

The First Bishops of Philae

At the start of his eyewitness account of the conversion of Philae to Christianity, Macedonius tells Aaron how he had become the first bishop of the island:

‘When I was still a notable, and started to become rich, I went south, because I was pagarch over these cities.²⁰⁵ I went to Philae and because it was Sabbath, I sought a place where I could celebrate the Eucharist - for I am an orthodox Christian -, because they worshipped idols in that place. Now, the remainder of the orthodox among them did not have freedom of speech because of the multitude of idol worshippers. Therefore I asked a Christian how the Eucharist was celebrated. He said to me: “Truly, my lord the notable, the inhabitants of the city are oppressed by the idol worshippers and, indeed, clergymen of the city of Syene have to come to us to celebrate the Eucharist for us on Sabbath and the Lord’s day”’ (fol. 12a).²⁰⁶

In this passage, the archetype of the Christian community of Philae is presented as a small group of Christians living among a majority of idol worshippers who dominate their acting and speaking. The clergy had to come from nearby Syene to lead the celebrations of the Eucharist each Saturday and Sunday.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Several versions of the *Life of Onnophrius* are still unedited. The main editions in Coptic are: É.C. Amélineau, ‘Voyage d’un moine égyptien dans le désert’, *RecTrav* 6 (1885) 166-94; Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms* 205-24; Till, *Koptische Heiligen- und Märtyrerlegenden* 1, 14-9; L.T. Lefort, ‘Fragments coptes’, *Muséon* 58 (1945) 97-120; T. Orlandi, *Koptische Papyri theologischen Inhalts* (Vienna, 1974) 158-61.

²⁰⁴ For a similar interpretation of such regional hagiographical works, see U. Gotter, ‘Thekla gegen Apoll: Überlegungen zur Transformation regionaler Sakraltopographie in der Spätantike’, *Klio* 85 (2003) 189-211.

²⁰⁵ For a comparison of text and translation of this sentence with Budge’s edition, see Dijkstra, “‘Une foule immense de moines”’, 197-8.

²⁰⁶ ⲉⲧⲓ ⲉⲓⲟ ⲛⲁⲣϣⲟⲛ ⲉⲁⲓⲁ ⲁⲣϣⲏ ⲛⲧⲏⲛⲧⲏⲓⲓⲟⲩ ⲁⲓⲉ ⲉⲣⲏⲥ ⲉⲓⲛⲁⲒⲁⲣϣⲏ ⲉⲗⲓⲛⲏ ⲛⲉⲓⲛⲟⲓⲥ. ⲁⲓⲱⲕ ⲁⲉ ⲉⲓⲟϥⲏ ⲉⲛⲉⲓⲁⲕ ⲁϥⲥⲁⲃⲃⲁⲧⲟⲛ ⲱⲱⲛⲉ ⲁⲓⲱⲛⲉ ⲛⲥⲁⲟϥⲏⲁ ⲕⲉ ⲉⲓⲛⲁⲥϥⲛⲁⲒⲉ ⲕⲉ ⲁⲛⲓⲓ ⲟϥⲟⲣϥⲟⲓⲟⲩⲟⲥ ⲉⲧⲱⲉ ⲕⲉ ⲛⲉϥϣⲏⲱⲉ ⲉⲓⲓⲟⲓⲟⲛ ⲛⲓⲛⲁ ⲉⲧⲓⲛⲁϥ. ⲁϥϣ ⲛⲱⲱⲥⲓⲛ ⲟⲛ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲣϥⲟⲓⲟⲩⲟⲥ ⲉⲧⲛⲓⲑⲏⲧⲟϥ ⲛⲉⲛⲏⲧⲁϥⲛⲁⲣϣⲏⲥⲓⲁ ⲛⲓⲛⲁϥ ⲉⲧⲱⲉ ⲛⲁⲱⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲣⲓⲱⲛⲱⲉ ⲉⲓⲓⲟⲓⲟⲛ. ⲁⲓⲱⲛⲉ ⲟϥⲏ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲓ ⲛⲟϥⲣⲱⲛⲉ ⲛⲕⲣⲓⲥⲓⲁⲛⲟⲥ ⲉⲧⲱⲉ ϥⲉ ⲛⲥϥⲛⲁⲒⲉ. ⲛⲧⲓⲟⲩ ⲁⲉ ⲛⲉϥⲁⲕ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲕⲉ ⲱⲏⲧⲱⲥ ⲕϥⲣⲓ ⲛⲁⲣϣⲟⲛ ⲥⲉϥⲏϥ ⲛⲥⲟⲛⲧⲉ ⲛⲥⲓⲛⲁⲧⲓⲛⲟⲓⲥ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲟϥ ⲛⲓⲛⲣⲓⲱⲛⲱⲉ ⲉⲓⲓⲟⲓⲟⲛ. ⲕⲁⲓ Ⲓⲁⲣ ⲉⲱⲱⲁϥⲓ ⲉⲓⲣⲁⲓ ⲱⲁⲣⲟⲛ ⲛⲥⲓⲣⲉⲛⲕⲁⲏⲏⲣⲓⲕⲟⲥ ⲛⲧⲓⲛⲟⲓⲥ ⲥⲟϥⲁⲛ ⲛⲥⲉⲥϥⲛⲁⲒⲉ ⲛⲓⲛⲟⲛ ϣⲏⲛⲥⲁⲃⲃⲁⲧⲟⲛ ⲏⲓⲧⲕϥⲣⲓⲁⲕⲏ.

²⁰⁷ This remark cannot be taken as evidence for a chorepiscopate at Philae. It rather depicts a remote past, in which the Christian community was still the minority and lacked ecclesiastical organisation. Hence, the dependency of Philae on Syene is not one of a bishop of Philae on the bishop of Syene, but of priests performing the Eucharist in the name of the bishop of Syene, because Philae still lacked a bishop.

When Macedonius was in Alexandria to pay his respects to a military commander (ΣΤΡΑΤΗΛΑΤΗΣ), the pagarch went to Athanasius to inform him about the poor situation of the Christian community of Philae. Macedonius concluded:

“Well then, my lord and father, look for somebody who is worthy to take care of this necessary work, ordain him bishop and send him south with me”. The holy archbishop answered and said to me: “Because you pursue the good thing, who is wiser than you or who equals you in wisdom? You are the one who will be the shepherd over the sheep in that place”. And I said to him: “Forgive me, my holy father, for I am not worthy of such a work”. But he persuaded me with his sweet words and ordained me’ (fol. 12b-13a).²⁰⁸

The legendary story of the creation of the see of Philae has remarkable parallels with the story of the first bishop of Axum, Frumentius, as described by the fourth-century church historian Rufinus of Aquileia.²⁰⁹

In the tenth book of his *Church History*, which is an abridged Latin translation of the tenth book of Eusebius’ *Church History*, Rufinus accounts how Constantine completed the task of the apostles, who had spread the faith to the extremities of the world: Thomas to Parthia, Matthew to Ethiopia and Bartholomew to India (that is, Southern Arabia). Under Constantine, even more remote peoples were evangelised such as the further Indians (Axum), the Iberians (in modern Georgia) and the Saracens.

The first of these accounts is the evangelisation of Axum. Rufinus narrates how the philosopher Metrodorus went to this place to study the geography of the Nile. A Meropius of Tyre followed his example together with two pupils, Edesius and Frumentius. Once, when a truce with the Romans had been broken, the Axumites strangled all foreigners except for the two boys. While Edesius became a cupbearer, Frumentius’ insight and prudence were acknowledged and he was given a favoured position at the royal court. When the king had died and his son was still too young to reign, the queen appointed Frumentius as a regent. In this position he did everything to help the spread of Christianity, as there were already some Christians among the Axumites. After the prince had grown up, Edesius returned to his parents, but Frumentius went to Alexandria where he met Athanasius. He told the archbishop everything he had seen and admonished him to send a bishop to Axum. Athanasius answered:

What other man have we found of such qualities that he possesses the spirit of God like you, who are able to fulfil these tasks in this way?²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ ΤΕΝΟΥ ΔΕ ΠΑΧ(ΘΕΙ)Σ ΝΕΙΩΤ ΑΝΑΥ ΕΟΥΑ ΕΓΜΠΩΑ ΠΔΙΑΚΟΝΕΙ ΕΠΕΙΣΩΒ ΠΑΝΑΓΚΛΙΟΝ ΝΓΧΕΙΡΟΛΟΝΕΙ ΠΜΟΔ ΠΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΠΤΑΧΙΤΓ ΕΡΗΣ ΝΠΜΑΙ. ΠΑΡΧΗΠΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΔΕ ΕΤΟΥΑΑΒ ΑΦΟΥΩΨΒ ΠΕΧΑΔ ΝΑΙ ΧΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΑΚΩΠΗΕ ΠΣΑΠΖΩΒ ΕΤΗΑΝΟΥΔ ΝΙΜ ΠΕΠΣΑΒΕ ΠΖΟΥΟ ΕΡΟΚ Η ΝΙΜ ΠΕΠΡΠΠΖΗΤ ΕΓΤΠΤΩΝ ΕΡΟΚ. ΠΤΟΚ ΠΕΤΗΑΨΠΕ ΠΨΩΣ ΕΧΠ ΝΕΣΟΟΥ ΕΤΖΠΠΝΑ ΕΤΠΝΑΥ. ΑΝΟΚ ΔΕ ΠΕΧΑΙ ΝΑΔ ΧΕ ΚΩ ΝΑΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΠΔΕΙΩΤ [Ε]ΤΟΥΑΑΒ ΠΤΠΠΩΑ ΔΗ ΕΖΩΒ Π[ΤΕΙ]ΠΠΗΕ. ΠΤΟΔ ΔΕ ΑΦΠΘΕ ΠΜ[ΟΙ] ΖΠΠΕΔΨΑΧΕ ΕΤΖΟΛ[Σ ΑΦΧΕΙΡΟΛΟ]ΝΕΙ ΠΜΟΙ.

²⁰⁹ Rufin. *hist.* 10.9-10 (*GCS* 9.2, pp. 971-3), on which are based the accounts by Socr. *h.e.* 1.19 (*GCS* Neue Folge 1, pp. 60-2), Soz. *h.e.* 2.24 (*SC* 306, pp. 329-35), Thdt. *h.e.* 1.23 (*GCS* Neue Folge 5, pp. 73-4) and Gel. Cyz. *h.e.* 3.9 (*GCS* 28, pp. 148-50). On Rufinus see Rohrbacher, *Historians of Late Antiquity*, 93-107. On Frumentius, see I. Engelhardt, *Mission und Politik in Byzanz. Ein Beitrag zur Strukturanalyse byzantinischer Mission zur Zeit Justins und Justinians* (Munich, 1974) 104-27; Thélamon, *Paiens et chrétiens*, 31-83, who also includes a French translation of the passage (pp. 39-41); B.W.W. and F.A. Dombrowski, ‘Frumentius/Abba Salama: Zu den Nachrichten über die Anfänge des Christentums in Äthiopien’, *OC* 68 (1984) 114-69; A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. Band 2/4: Die Kirche von Alexandrien mit Nubien und Äthiopien nach 451* (Freiburg, 1990) 301-7; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 109-16; Brakmann, *Τὸ πὰρὰ τοῖς βαρβάροις ἔργον θεῖον*, 51-67, and ‘Axomis (Aksum)’, 745-7; Rohrbacher, *Historians of Late Antiquity*, 228-9. For an English translation of the passage see P.R. Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia. Books 10 and 11* (New York and Oxford, 1997) 18-20.

²¹⁰ Rufin. *hist.* 10.10 (*GCS* 9.2, p. 973: *Et quem alium invenimus virum talem, in quo sit spiritus dei in ipso sicut in te, qui haec ita possit implere?*). This phrasing probably draws on Gen. 41.38, where the Pharaoh appoints Joseph as his vice-regent (*Num invenimus talem virum, in quo spiritus dei?*). Note that one of the manuscripts of Rufinus’ *Church History* (*O*) has *invenimus* in stead of *invenimus*, and this form has also been preferred by Migne, *PL* 21, col. 480. I am grateful to Z.R.W.M. von Martels for discussing this passage with me.

Athanasius ordained Frumentius bishop of Axum and the new bishop converted a mass of people to Christianity. Rufinus ends his account with the announcement that he has heard the story personally from Edesius, Frumentius' brother.

This story closely resembles that of Macedonius reporting to Athanasius about the situation at Philae. Like Axum, Philae was situated at an extremity, on the southern Egyptian frontier. In both cases, too, the messengers became bishops and caused a mass conversion to Christianity. Thirdly, as in the case of Axum, the see of Philae was created through the intercession of Archbishop Athanasius of Alexandria. The episode on the creation of the see of Philae is therefore probably written in the tradition of Rufinus, and it may even have been inspired by it.

An important aspect of the story on the creation of the see of Philae is that it was sanctified by Athanasius and took place in the patriarchal city of Alexandria. Although banished several times, Athanasius was one of the most important persons in the Egyptian Church, and Alexandria was considered to be the Christian capital of Egypt.²¹¹ By involving Athanasius and his city in the story, the importance of the event is emphasised, and thus the creation of the see of Philae legitimised.

Athanasius not only instigated the creation of the see of Philae, he also ordained the second bishop, Mark (fol. 24b-30b). When the delegation from Philae arrived at Alexandria, the first thing Athanasius said was that he remembered the vision predicting the episcopate of Mark and Isaiah, although no one else than Macedonius knew of it. After having spent three days in Alexandria, Athanasius informed Mark, by referring to the same vision, that his brother Isaiah had to be promoted to priesthood and was going to be the future bishop. Thus, the archbishop not only fulfils the role of ordaining and thus authenticating the new bishops, he also seems to know beforehand the right path the bishops of Philae have to take.

Athanasius' insight is again apparent in the ordination of Isaiah (fol. 33a-b). Athanasius knew that the delegation had arrived and ordered to prepare the church for the consecration of the new bishop before they arrived. The fourth bishop, Psoulousia, is ordained by an unnamed successor of Athanasius (fol. 35a-36a), perhaps Timothy I (380-385), whose death is reported not long after this passage (fol. 36b). As already noted, the vision is again picked up when the delegation has forgotten the episcopal licence and the archbishop sends it after them containing the following statement: 'I saw you being clothed in a robe (CΤΟΛΗ) and given keys in your hands' (fol. 36a).²¹² In this way, the vision about the appointment of Mark and Isaiah also authenticates Psoulousia's appointment.

The appointment of the first bishops of Philae is further authenticated by referring to an historical event and the mention of topographical details about Alexandria. Firstly, the description of the episcopate of Psoulousia contains the miracle story that is linked to the historical event of the celebration of the new Archbishop Theophilus in 385. Beside the glorification of Psoulousia, the miracle of a bishop of Philae in the presence of all other Egyptian bishops helps constructing a self-conscious identity of the local Christian community of Philae.

Secondly, the story contains specific information about the city of Alexandria. When the delegation arrived in order to ordain Mark, a few notables (ΖΕΝΑΡΧΩΝ) wanted to receive a blessing from the archbishop, but the future bishop of Philae was more important:

'Take the trouble to withdraw until tomorrow morning, for some brothers from the south are with us'. When he had talked to them they departed, saying: 'Pray for us, and we will go and pray in the monastery of Apa Menas, and we will return to you' (fol. 26a).²¹³

²¹¹ On Athanasius see e.g. D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford, 1995), and Martin, *Athanasius*. On Alexandria in Late Antiquity see C. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore and London, 1997), and Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 15-120.

²¹² ΑΙΝΑΥ ΕΡΟΚ ΠΤΑΥΣΟΟΛΑ ΠΟΥΣΤΟΛΗ. ΑΥΩ ΑΥ† ΠΖΕΝΨΩΨΤ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΝΕΚΣΙΧ.

²¹³ ΣΚΥΛΛΕΙ ΠΜΩΤ(Π) ΠΤΕΤΠΑΝΑΧΩΡΕΙ ΝΗΤΠ ΨΑΖΤΟΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΣΕΖΑΖΤΗΝ ΠΣΙΖΕΝΣΗΗ ΕΝΑΠΠΑΡΗΣ ΝΕ. ΑΥΩ ΠΤΕΡΨΤΑΜΟΥ ΑΥΒΩΚ ΕΥΧΩΜΗΟΣ ΧΕ ΨΑΝ ΕΧΩΝ ΠΤΩΤΠ ΠΤΠΒΩΚ ΠΤΠΨΑΝΑ ΖΠΠΜΟΠΝΟΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΠΑΠΑΝΗΝΑ ΠΤΠΚΤΟΝ ΨΑΡΟΚ.

Possibly, the pilgrimage site of Apa Menas is meant here, which was situated 45 km southwest of Alexandria and was one of the most popular Christian pilgrimage sites in Late Antique Egypt.²¹⁴ Notables yielded a second time to the delegation when they reached the harbour of Schissa (fol. 30b-32a). On the basis of the description of the harbour, Schissa can probably be identified with Schedia,²¹⁵ a busy grain harbour on the nexus of the canal connecting Alexandria and the Canopus branch of the Nile.²¹⁶ The delegation could not find a boat carrying them to the south but soon a boat from Syene with notables and their families came in, who allowed the delegation to take the ship south. Schissa is mentioned a second time at the arrival of the delegation of Psoulousia in Alexandria (fol. 35a). The delegation took a small boat from Schissa to the city and arrived at the gate where the archbishop was talking to two other bishops. This gate may well be the West or Moon Gate, which is situated not far from one of the routes leading from Schissa into the city.²¹⁷

The detailed description of the election and ordination of the bishops of Philae is another way of legitimising them. Having elected the new bishop, the local community wrote an official document (†ΥΦΙCΜΑ, read †ΗΦΙCΜΑ) to the archbishop (fol. 24b and 26a). In Alexandria, the bishop was ordained in a special ceremony, after which he received an official letter of recommendation from the archbishop that confirmed his appointment (CΥCΤΑΡΗ, CΥCΤΑΔΙΚΗ, read CΥCΤΑΤΙΚΗ; fol. 29b-30b, 33b, 35b-36a). The custom that the local Christian community elects a new bishop, whom the archbishop subsequently ordains in Alexandria, is already known in Egypt since the Council of Nicaea (325).²¹⁸ Several stories about fourth-century bishops in Olbia in the Pentapolis (Libya), Thenessos (in the Delta), Hermonthis (Armant) and Syene witness to this use.²¹⁹ In one of his letters, Athanasius asks the future bishop of Hermoupolis (in the Delta) to hurry to Alexandria to be ordained.²²⁰ The stories on Hermonthis and Syene in the *Synaxarion* correspond closely to the pattern of election, modesty of the holy man, journey to Alexandria and ordination by the archbishop in the *Life of Aaron*. The *Synaxarion* consists of literary traditions around holy men collected for liturgical purposes, and it is possible that the similar pattern in the *Life of Aaron* may indicate that the history of the first bishops of Philae derives from just such a tradition.

All in all, then, authoritative persons and events situated in the landscape of the patriarchal city of Alexandria serve the purpose of legitimising the creation of the see of Philae and the ordination of the first bishops of Philae. The information on Alexandria does not diminish the regional outlook of the *Life of Aaron*, for the events are focused on the holy men from Philae. But besides the ordination of all four bishops, we hear not much more of their lives than their deaths and burials. Although Macedonius continues living in the Valley and Psoulousia on his island, and both bishops were involved in miracles, the ascetic deeds of the other saints in the region are recounted in greater detail and in a recurrent pattern. Apparently, the history of the first bishops of Philae has to be seen not in the first place as a description of the lives of holy men, but as a legitimation of the see of Philae. These aspects conform to the ideal of the monk-bishop which is widespread in Christian literature of Late Antiquity.²²¹ The bishops of Philae performed their duties for the Christian community of Philae, and afterwards went home to their ascetic environment.²²²

²¹⁴ E.g. P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient* (Paris, 1985) 319-22; Haas, *Alexandria*, 38, 213, 345; P. Grossmann, 'The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ', in Frankfurter, *Pilgrimage & Holy Space*, 281-302.

²¹⁵ Timm, *Christlich-koptische Ägypten* 5, 2323-4.

²¹⁶ Haas, *Alexandria*, 25, 28, 348.

²¹⁷ Haas, *Alexandria*, 30, 208-9.

²¹⁸ Martin, *Athanasie*, 129.

²¹⁹ Olbia: Synes. *ep.* 76. Thenessos: Cassian. *conl.* 11.2 (*SC* 54, p. 102). Hermonthis: W.E. Crum, H.G. Evelyn-White, H.E. Winlock (eds), *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, 2 vols (New York, 1926) 1.136-7. Syene: *PO* 3, pp. 276-7 and 430-4. See Bagnall, *Egypt*, 286, and Martin, *Athanasie*, 127-9.

²²⁰ Ath. *ep. Drac.* 7.1 Opitz 2, p. 306.

²²¹ P. Rousseau, 'The Spiritual Authority of the "Monk-Bishop"'. Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries', *JThS* 22 (1971) 380-419; Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 199-202.

²²² For Mark and Isaiah it is not explicitly stated that they were monk-bishops. However, they were buried on the same spot as Macedonius in the Valley, which suggests that they lived there, too. Moreover, in the Coptic Festal

The question remains how historical the description of the first bishops of Philae is. We already saw that three of the four bishops mentioned in the *Life of Aaron* are known from ecclesiastical documents. For example, the *Life of Aaron* uses almost the same formulation in Coptic for the succession of Mark by Isaiah as one of the ecclesiastical documents.²²³ The miracle story of Psoulousia, which is linked to the historical event of the celebration of the new Archbishop Theophilus in Alexandria in 385, probably gives an indication of the episcopate of a fourth bishop of Philae. Thus, the first three bishops of Philae are historical figures, and probably the fourth bishop too (for a complete list of the bishops of Syene and Philae, see Appendix 3).²²⁴

The representation of the bishops in the *Life of Aaron* conforms to what we know of fourth-century Egyptian bishops in the sense that they were recruited predominantly from the elite.²²⁵ A different case is Psoulousia, who already was a monk before his episcopate, but the appointment of bishops from monastic circles was also a well-known policy in the fourth century.²²⁶ Evidently, however, the representation of Macedonius as pagarch 'over these cities' reflects a later audience, since, as we have seen, the term is used in this sense only from the reign of Anastasius (491-518) onwards. Usually, hagiographical works do not indicate a precise function of somebody from the elite and limit themselves to such general terms as ἀρχων or νους 'notable'.²²⁷

The pagarch's main task was to collect taxes and in doing this he could act quite independently, as he was not directly responsible to the provincial governor (*dux*). Mostly, pagarchs were rich local landowners. A rich pagarch could guarantee that the expected amount of tax money reached the government even in times of distress.²²⁸ So when Macedonius states that he 'started to become rich' this could have something to do with the idea that a pagarch should be rich.²²⁹ No pagarchs are known from the region of the First Cataract. However, given the general picture that pagarchies seem to have followed Egypt's division into nomes, it may well be that the pagarchy corresponded to the first nome consisting of Ombi, the *metropolis* and the 'towns' on the southern frontier, Elephantine, Syene and Philae. Like in other pagarchies known from documentary sources, several pagarchs were probably responsible for one pagarchy and Macedonius could have been the pagarch of Elephantine, Syene and Philae.²³⁰

The bishop further remarks that he went to Alexandria to visit a military commander (στρατηλάτης), which suggests that he also had a military function. There are indeed a few cases in which a pagarch combines his office with being a military commander.²³¹ Moreover, in view of the military presence on the southern frontier it may not be surprising that Macedonius combined military and civil functions. Although the historical Macedonius

Letter by Athanasius, several bishops, including Isaiah, are described thus: 'tous ceux-ci sont des ascètes, menant la vie monastique' (tr. Coquin, 'Lettres festales', 155).

²²³ Cf. ἔπιμα ἱεραρχος περὶσον in fol. 33a of the *Life of Aaron* with ἡσαίας ἔπιμα ἱεραρχος, Coquin, 'Lettres festales', 146 (IFAO, Copte 25, fol. 8a).

²²⁴ App. 3 includes a list of the Late Antique bishops of Syene and Philae with their attestations, for which cf. Fedalto, *Hierarchia Ecclesiastica Orientalis* 654; Worp, 'Checklist of Bishops', 305, 307; Martin, *Athanasie* 764-83; Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 123, 137. G. Lefebvre, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques-chrétiennes d'Égypte* (Cairo, 1907) no. 684.3-4, mentions a Bishop Apa Kallinikos in a Greek inscription, which he suggests might come from Philae, but this provenance is far from certain, and the inscription is further left out of consideration here. See Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* 121. Cf. Worp, 'Checklist of Bishops', 305, who has inserted this bishop under Philae with a question mark.

²²⁵ Bagnall, *Egypt*, 285, 292; Martin, *Athanasie*, 653-9.

²²⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius*, 99-110.

²²⁷ See, e.g., the notables yielding to the delegation of Mark in Alexandria in the *Life of Aaron* (fol. 26a and 30b-32a).

²²⁸ Liebeschuetz, *From Diocletian to the Arab Conquest*, Chs. XVII and XVIII; Mazza, 'Ricerche sul pagarca'; Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall*, 188-9.

²²⁹ The Greek loanword πλοῦσιος is not common in Coptic, but cf. *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Mercurius the General*, fol. 24a (ed. Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* 1, 281), where the term ἀρχων is also mentioned in the context of the same word.

²³⁰ Liebeschuetz, *From Diocletian to the Arab Conquest*, Ch. XVII at 38-9; Mazza, 'Ricerche sul pagarca', 184-96.

²³¹ Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall*, 194-5, with references.

cannot have been a pagarch, the name Macedonius is not common in Egypt, and attested only twice in the papyri and once in a Late Antique inscription from Philae itself.²³² In reality, he may therefore well have been a military commander, who came to the southern Egyptian frontier in military service and later became the first bishop of Philae. Although it can therefore not be excluded that there is a core of truth in this story, it seems that the compiler of the *Life of Aaron* used an anachronism to give a meaningful explanation why Macedonius came to Philae.²³³

His successors, Mark and Isaiah, are said to have been the sons of the high priest (fol. 19b) of the temple at Philae, that is, the temple of Isis. Later, they converted to Christianity, were renamed and became ecclesiastical dignitaries, to end up as the second and third bishops of Philae; their father also converted and was renamed. Although we encountered the conversion of the children of temple priests before in the *Life of Moses*, turning children of priests into ecclesiastical dignitaries is a unique motif in Egyptian hagiography, and hence we may try to find an explanation for this remarkable feature.²³⁴ In order to understand the shift, the works about Cyprian of Antioch, which were also widespread in Egypt, are suitable parallels. According to this tradition, Cyprian was a magician and signed a treaty with the devil. When he discovered that the devil was not powerful enough, he converted to Christianity and ended up being martyred as bishop of Antioch.²³⁵ The paradoxical change from magician to bishop emphasises the message of this story that magical practices are worthless and demonic, and makes the martyrdom of the later bishop even more glorious. In the same way, even if it can not entirely be ruled out that Mark and Isaiah were the sons of a temple priest, their shift to becoming the bishops of Philae seems to be deliberately used to contrast it with their 'pagan' backgrounds.

This also appears from the change of Mark's and Isaiah's names. When Macedonius wanted to baptise them, he said:

'What are your names?' The elder said: 'Our names are hard to pronounce, for we are called by the names of gods', and they told them to the bishop. He said: 'You shall not be called by these names from now on'. And he gave a name to the elder one and baptised him. He called him Mark, and the younger one (he called) Isaiah (fol. 17b).²³⁶

It has been suggested that these names were 'hard to pronounce', because they were Nubian names.²³⁷ However, Mark does not hesitate to say the names because they were incomprehensible, but because they were 'the names of gods'. His remark reminds of Egyptian theophoric names such as Esmet and Pakhom, the names of the last priests of Philae. Mark probably refers to just such names, and felt ashamed to tell them in front of the Christian holy man. However, people normally received their names at birth and did not change them after conversion.²³⁸ Moreover, the repudiation of theophoric names was certainly not widely

²³² The name is spelled Μακεδώνιος in *P.Oxy.* VII 1028.2; *PSI* XIV 1421.11, and Μακεδώνιος in a Late Antique inscription from the East Church of Philae, which has recently been published by J.H.F. Dijkstra, 'Late Antique Inscriptions from the First Cataract Area Discovered and Rediscovered', *JJP* 33 (2003) 55-66 at 58 (no. 3.3). Both spellings return in the *Life of Aaron*, fol. 11b (*sic*), 12a, 13a-b (ΜΑΚΕΛΩΝΙΟΣ); 15b, 22b (2x), 23b, 24b, 25b, 26a (*sic*), 32b, 33a, 34b, 56b (ΗΑΚΕΛΩΝΙΟΣ).

²³³ Cf. Aaron, who also was a military official before he became a monk at Scetis, see fol. 37b-38a.

²³⁴ Cf., however, Frankfurter, *Religion*, 262-3, who quotes the example of a son of a temple priest who had become a monk.

²³⁵ L. Krestan, A. Hermann, 'Cyprianus II (Magier)', *RAC* III (1957) 467-77; J. van der Vliet, 'Cypriaan de Tovenaar. Christendom en magie in Koptische literatuur', in M. Schipper, P. Schrijvers (eds), *Bezweren en betoveren. Magie en literatuur wereldwijd* (Baarn, 1995) 84-94.

²³⁶ $\mu\alpha\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\epsilon\ \eta\epsilon\ \eta\epsilon\tau\bar{\iota}\rho\alpha\mu\alpha\ \mu\epsilon\chi\alpha\delta\ \bar{\eta}\delta\iota\pi\acute{\iota}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \chi\epsilon\ \eta\epsilon\mu\bar{\rho}\alpha\mu\ \rho\omicron\varsigma\epsilon\ \bar{\eta}\{\delta\}\bar{\eta}\tau\omicron\gamma\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda\ \chi\epsilon\ \bar{\eta}\rho\alpha\mu\ \bar{\eta}\eta\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon\ \eta\epsilon\ \bar{\eta}\tau\alpha\gamma\eta\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon\ [e]\rho\omicron\mu\ \bar{\eta}\mu\omicron\omicron\gamma\ \lambda\gamma\omega\ \lambda\gamma\chi\omicron\omicron\gamma\ \epsilon\pi\epsilon\tau\iota\varsigma[k]\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma\ \bar{\eta}\tau\omicron\gamma\ \lambda\epsilon\ \mu\epsilon\chi\alpha\delta\ \chi\epsilon\ \bar{\eta}\eta\epsilon\varsigma[w]\omega\pi\epsilon\ \epsilon\tau\tau\epsilon\omicron\gamma\eta\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon\ \epsilon\tau\omega\tau\bar{\iota}\ \bar{\eta}\eta\epsilon\iota[r]\lambda\alpha\eta\ \chi\iota\eta\ \tau\epsilon\mu\omicron\gamma\ \lambda\gamma\omega\ \lambda\gamma\mu\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon\ \epsilon\pi\iota\omicron\varsigma\ \lambda\gamma\upsilon\alpha\pi\tau\zeta\epsilon\ \bar{\eta}\mu\omicron\gamma\ \lambda\gamma\mu\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon\ \epsilon\tau\omicron\gamma\ \chi\epsilon\ \eta\alpha\tau\kappa\omicron\varsigma\ \lambda\gamma\omega\ \pi\eta\epsilon\tau\ \varsigma\eta\lambda\gamma\ \chi\epsilon\ \iota\varsigma\alpha\eta\alpha\varsigma.$

²³⁷ Martin, *Athanase*, 644.

²³⁸ Martin, *Athanase*, 644; Horsley, 'Name Change', 10-1.

accepted in Egypt.²³⁹ It is, then, less likely that the historical Mark and Isaiah changed their names. Although they may have been brothers, for episcopal families did exist in Egypt,²⁴⁰ the change of names more probably was another literary device, which fits the metamorphosis of Philae from a predominantly 'pagan' into a fully Christian community. The representation of this shift in the *Life of Aaron* is the subject of the next section.

The Origins of the Christian Community of Philae

Another aspect of the story of Frumentius, which has not yet been treated in detail, is the mass conversion that resulted from his episcopate. The same allegedly happened at Philae. After Macedonius has returned from Alexandria, he converted the entire population of Philae to Christianity. But the conversion did not happen without a blow. First, Macedonius had to slaughter the holy falcon and to flee the idol worshippers, only to return gloriously after he had told Isaiah to perform the miracle with the camel's leg. In this respect, the story of the conversion of Philae to Christianity looks more like the *Life of Porphyry* by Mark the Deacon.²⁴¹

The Greek *Life of Porphyry*, which is also transmitted in a Georgian version translated from Syriac, was written down after 420 but reworked after 444/445.²⁴² The work contains a detailed description of the battle of Bishop Porphyry against idol worship at Gaza. The events described can be located in time from 395 until 420, and are ascribed to Porphyry's pupil, Mark the Deacon:

I will relate about his wars and oppositions, not only against the leaders and champions of idolomania, but also against a whole people filled with utter foolishness.²⁴³

At the beginning of the *Life*, we learn that the city was still predominantly 'pagan' before Porphyry became bishop of Gaza: 'At that time, the madness of the people concerning the idols flourished at Gaza'.²⁴⁴ After having described how the archbishop of Caesarea promoted Porphyry to bishop of Gaza, from Ch. 17 onwards Mark describes how Porphyry, despite severe resistance from the idol worshippers, converts many people to Christianity in a series of miracle stories. In addition, he receives an imperial edict to destroy all temples at Gaza, including the largest one, the temple of Marnas. With the money of the Empress Eudoxia a church is built on the spot of the Marneion.

There is much common ground in the story of the conversion of Philae to Christianity. Like in the *Life of Porphyry*, a destruction precedes the mass conversion. In the *Life of Aaron*,

²³⁹ Cf. Eus. *m.P.* 11.8, writing about Egyptian Christians who changed their birth names at the beginning of the fourth century: 'instead of the names associated with idols which their parents had given them, they called themselves after prophets' (tr. Horsley, 'Name Change', 1), but this name change is rather a statement of people being martyred in a time of persecutions. See Horsley, 'Name Change', 11.

²⁴⁰ Martin, *Athanase*, 643-4.

²⁴¹ For an elaborate introduction, the Greek text and a translation see H. Grégoire, M.-A. Kugener, *Marc le Diacre Vie de Porphyre, évêque de Gaza* (Paris, 1930). For the Georgian version see P. Peeters, 'La vie géorgienne de Saint Porphyre de Gaza', *AB* 59 (1941) 65-216. See generally, R. Van Dam, 'From Paganism to Christianity at Late Antique Gaza', *Viator* 16 (1985) 1-20; G. Mussies, 'Marnas God of Gaza', *ANRW* II 18.4 (1990) 2412-57 at 2415-8; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 187-245; Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 202-22.

²⁴² Cf. Peeters, 'Vie géorgienne', and Z. Rubin, 'Porphyrius of Gaza and the Conflict between Christianity and Paganism in Southern Palestine', in A. Kofsky, G. Stroumsa (eds), *Sharing the Sacred. Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land: Fourth-Fifth Centuries CE* (Jerusalem, 1998) 31-66, who argue for a Syriac original, with Mussies, 'Marnas', 2455-7, and Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 246-82, who argue that the Greek text is the original one. However, the case is not settled, see J.W. Childers, 'The Georgian *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*', in M.F. Wiles, E.J. Yarnold (eds), *Studia Patristica XXXV* (Leuven, 2001) 374-84, and Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 203 (n. 57).

²⁴³ Marc. Diac. *v. Porph.* 2 (Πολέμους τε αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀντιστάσεις ἱστορήσαμεν οὐ μόνον πρὸς τοὺς τῆς εἰδωλομανίας ἀρχηγούς τε καὶ προμάχους, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς δῆμον ὀλόκληρον πάσης πεπληρωμένον ἀνοίας). Translations are based on Grégoire and Kugener's edition.

²⁴⁴ Marc. Diac. *v. Porph.* 4 (ἤκμαζεν δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ κατ' ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ ἡ περὶ τὰ εἰδωλα τῶν ἀνθρώπων μανία).

the destruction does not consist of the destruction of several temples and their idols, but only of the killing of the holy falcon of Philae, which, as also appeared from the passage by Shenoute at the start of Part II, is regarded as an 'idol':

I saw them going inside the temples to worship a bird they called the falcon, inside some demonic cage (ῥΕΝΗΑΓΚΑΝΟΝ).²⁴⁵ After having stayed a few days inside among them, the priest happened to leave the town for some business.²⁴⁶ However, his two sons stayed behind, in case somebody wanted to sacrifice to the idol. Now I, Macedonius, went up to them and said deceptively: 'I want to offer a sacrifice to God today'.²⁴⁷ They said to me: 'Come and offer it'. After he had went inside, he ordered them to lay wood upon the altar and light the fire beneath it. The two sons of the priest attended the wood until it got charred. Our father, Bishop Apa Macedonius, turned his steps to the place where the demonic cage was. He took out the falcon, cut off its head, threw it upon the burning altar, left the temple and went away (fol. 13a-b).²⁴⁸

Another parallel with the story of the conversion of Gaza is that a miracle, the miracle of the camel's leg, preceded the conversion. After the temple priest has heard of it, he converts, but not without preparing everything for Macedonius' arrival and building a church. Having entered, Macedonius baptised the priest first, changing his name into Jacob, and then the entire population of the island:

Afterwards, (he baptised) the entire population of the city: men, women and little children. There was nobody from among them who was not baptised that day (fol. 21a).²⁴⁹

The *Life of Aaron* resembles the *Life of Porphyry* in that both works describe a stage before the holy man takes action, a time when the city is almost entirely 'pagan'. Afterwards, mass conversion takes place and a church is built. In the case of the *Life of Porphyry*, the conversion of Gaza may not have involved mass conversions, because the number of converts given after each miracle is small in comparison with the supposed total population of the city, even when Porphyry died.²⁵⁰ However, if these numbers mean anything, they rather underscore the gradual growth of the number of Christians.²⁵¹

Thus, in that year about 300 names were added to the flock of Christ, and from that year on, the number of Christians grew every year.²⁵²

Nevertheless, the difference between both works remains that in the *Life of Porphyry* a series of miracle stories illustrates the steady growth of the Christian community of Gaza without converting the entire population.²⁵³ According to the *Life of Aaron*, for Philae one miracle was enough to convert the whole island.

²⁴⁵ The plural is probably a mistake by the copyist.

²⁴⁶ For this meaning of the word ἀποκρισις, see Lampe, *PGL* s.v. ἀπόκρισις 3.

²⁴⁷ Cf. for the motif of deceptively offering to God, the story of Jehu and the Baal priests, 2 Kg. 10.18-29.

²⁴⁸ ΑΙΝΑΥ ΔΕ ΕΡΟΟΥ [ΕΥ]ΒΗΚ ΕΖΟΥΗ ΕΝΕΡΠΗΥΕ ΕΥΦΩ[Ε] ΟΥΖΑΛΗΤ ΕΥΗΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΙ ΧΕ Π[ΒΗΚ] ΠΖΟΥΗ ΖΠΖΕΝΗΑΓΚΑΝΟΝ. ΔΩ[Ω]ΠΕ ΔΕ ΗΠΙΣΑ ΖΕΝΖΟΥΟΥ ΕΙ ΠΖΟΥΗ [ΖΑ]ΤΗΥ ΑΠΟΥΗΗΒ ΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΠΤΠΟΛΙΣ ΔΥΒΩΚ ΠΟΥΑΠΟΚΡΙΣΙΣ. ΠΕΔΩΗΡΕ Δ[Ε] ΣΝΑΥ ΝΕΥΠΡΟΣΚΑΡΤΗΡΕΙ ΕΤΒΕ ΟΥΑ ΕΦΗΔΡΘΥΣΙΑ ΠΠΕΛΟΛΟΝ. ΑΠΟΚ [ΛΕ] ΜΑΚΕΛΟΝΙΟΣ ΔΙΒΩΚ ΨΑΡΟΥ ΔΙΨΑΧΕ ΗΠΙΜΑΥ ΖΠΟΥΚΡΟΔ ΕΙΧΩ ΠΜΟ[Σ] ΧΕ ΨΟΥΩΩ ΕΤΑΛΕ ΘΥΣΙΑ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΠΠΗΟΥΤΕ ΠΠΟΥΟΥ. ΠΤΟΥΟΥ ΔΕ ΠΕΧΑΥ [ΗΑΙ] ΑΜΟΥ ΗΤΑΛΟΣ ΕΖΡΑΙ. ΠΤΕΡΩΒΩΚ ΔΕ ΕΖΟΥΗ ΑΦΟΥΕΖΣΑΖΗΕ ΕΤΡΕΥΤΑΛΕ ΠΨΕ ΕΧΠ ΤΩΗΥΕ ΠΣΕΧΕΡΕ ΠΚ[Ω]ΖΤ ΖΑΡΟΥΟΥ. ΠΕΨΗΡΕ ΔΕ ΣΝΑΥ ΠΠΟ[Υ]ΗΗΒ ΝΕΥΠΡΟΣΚΑΡΤΗΡΕΙ ΕΗΨΕ Ψ[Δ]ΤΟΥΡΧΒΒΣ. [ΠΕΝΕΩΤ] ΠΠΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΑΠΑ ΜΑ[ΚΕΛ]ΟΝΙΟΣ ΑΥΨΠΕΦΟΥΟΙ ΕΠΜΑ ΕΤΕ[Π]ΗΑΓΚΑΝΟΝ ΠΖΗΤΩ. ΔΥΕΗΗΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΠΒΗΚ ΔΥΣΩΛΠ ΠΤΕΔΑΠΕ ΔΥΗΟΥ[Χ]Ε ΕΒΟΛ ΠΜΟΥ ΕΧΠ ΤΩΗΥΕ ΕΤ[ΜΟΥ]Ζ ΔΥΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΠΠΡΠΕ ΔΥΒΩΚ.

²⁴⁹ ΗΠΠΙΣΩΣ ΝΑΤΠΟΛΙΣ ΤΗΡΣ ΠΖΟΥΟΥΤ ΗΠΠΕΖΙΟΜΕ ΠΠΗΩΗΡΕ [Π]ΚΟΥΙ. ΠΠΕΛΑΔΥ ΨΩΧΠ ΕΠΑΖΟΥ ΠΖΗΤΟΥ ΠΠΕΔΥΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΠΠΕΖΟΥΟΥ ΕΤΠΜΑΥ.

²⁵⁰ Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 223-34.

²⁵¹ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 87-8; Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 206.

²⁵² Marc. Diac. v. *Porph.* 74 (Προσετέθησαν οὖν τῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ποιμένῃ ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ ὡσεὶ ὄνόματα τριακόσια, καὶ ἐξ ἐκείνου καθ' ἕκαστον ἔτος αὐξήσιον ἐπεδέχετο τὰ Χριστιανῶν).

²⁵³ Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, 217.

The Late Antique inscriptions from Philae contradict this depiction of an abrupt conversion to Christianity during the episcopate of Macedonius in the second quarter of the fourth century. As we have seen in Chs. 3 and 4, the Ancient Egyptian cults, if languishing, were in use until around 456/457. Moreover, the holy falcon may have remained worshipped until at least the second quarter of the fifth century. As the burning of idols is a *topos* in Coptic saints' lives, the story about the burning of the falcon seems more likely to be legendary.²⁵⁴ There is, then, enough reason to think that the conversion of Philae to Christianity was a more gradual process than that described in the *Life of Aaron*. As has already been said at the start of this chapter, the story has to be seen not as an accurate description of a historical event, but as a story that has a message to convey. The message was that Philae had definitively done away with its 'pagan' past.

In this respect, it may also not have been without meaning that the high priest and his two sons figure so prominently in the conversion story of Philae and are the first to be converted. In the 'invented tradition' of the Christian community of Philae, the priests, who in reality had kept the Isis cult alive until around 456/457 and had been present on the island for such a long time, belonged to the past. The priest and his sons embodied this shift by being baptised and by changing their names into Christian ones. Moreover, the sons even became bishops. We may therefore assume that this aetiological story about the origins of the Christian community of Philae must have been composed at a time when Philae considered itself to be entirely Christian.

Significantly, the last to be converted on the island was the old woman, who had denounced Macedonius' slaughter of the holy falcon to the temple priest:

It happened, after their father had went inside the temple to worship the idol first before he went to his house, as was his custom – after he had gone inside, he did not find his sons. He directed his feet to the innermost part, but did not find them. Now he turned to the demonic cage, but he did not find the falcon inside. He went out in confusion and said: 'What happened? For I did not find my sons nor even the falcon god'. An old woman who lived beside the temple heard the priest. She called him and said: 'Come to me, blessed priest, and I tell you what I have seen today. For I saw this criminal monk, who has led some citizens astray, going inside the temple with your sons. Undoubtedly, he corrupted their minds. They took the falcon god and fled'. The priest listened to the old woman's words and went to town after his sons, saying: 'Not only will I kill my sons, but that monk too. If I find him, I will knock his brains out' (fol. 14a-b).²⁵⁵

Again, not too much should be made of the historicity of the old woman, since, like Mark, Isaiah and their father, she embodies the 'pagan' past of Philae, a time when almost everything was still the other way round.²⁵⁶

This inversion appears from the way she typifies the priest on the one hand ('blessed', ΣΜΑΝΑΔΤ) and Macedonius on the other ('criminal', ΠΑΡΑΒΑΤΗΣ; 'leading people astray', ΠΛΑΝΑ; 'corrupting their souls', ΤΑΚΕ ΠΕΥΖΗΤ). In Christian discourse, we would expect the first term to be used for a Christian and the other ones for a 'pagan'. This inverse idiom is set straight when Macedonius addresses the temple priest who has just arrived after the miracle with the camel's leg took place: 'Aristos, what do you gain by leading astray (ΠΛΑΝΑ) this multitude and causing them to loose their souls?' (fol. 20a).²⁵⁷ Eventually, the woman plays an

²⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. the burning of idols in the *Panegyric on Macarius* 5.11 Johnson.

²⁵⁵ ΔΣΩΠΠΕ ΛΕ ΠΤΕΡΕΠΕΥΕΙΩΤ ΕΙ ΝΤΒΩΚ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΠΡΠΕ ΕΤΡΤΟΥΩΠΤ ΠΠΕΙΛΩΛΟΝ ΠΩΟΡΠ ΚΑΤΑΠΕΦΕΘΟΣ ΠΠΑΤΕΦΒΩΚ ΕΠΕΦΗ. ΠΤΕΡΤΒΩΚ ΛΕ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΠΠΕΦΡΕ ΕΝΕΦΩΗΡΕ ΑΦΠΠΕΦΟΥΟΙ ΕΠΜΑ ΕΤΖΙΖΟΥ(Ν) ΠΠΕΦΡΕ ΕΡΟΟΥ ΑΦΚΩΤΕ ΟΝ ΖΠΠΠ[Δ]ΓΚΑΝΟΝ ΕΤΕΡΕΠΒΗΣ ΠΖΗΤΤ ΠΠΕΦΡΕ ΕΡΟΦ. ΑΦΕΙ ΛΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΕΦΑΠΟΡΕΙ ΕΦΧ[Ω]ΠΠΜΟΣ ΧΕ ΟΥ ΠΕΝΤΑΦΩΠΠΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΠΠΕΙΖΕ ΕΝΑΦΩΗΡΕ ΟΥΛΕ ΠΚΕΝΟΥΤΕ ΠΒΗΣ. ΑΣΣΩΤΠ ΕΡΟΦ ΝΣΙΟΥΖΛΛΟΥ ΠΣΖΠΠΕ ΕΣΟΥΗΗΖ ΖΠΤΟΥΦ ΠΠΡΠΕ ΑΣΗΟΥΤΕ ΟΥΒΗΦ ΕΣΧΩΠΠΜΟΣ ΧΕ ΑΜΟΥ ΦΑΡΟΙ ΠΟΥΗΗΒ ΕΤΣΜΑΝΑΔΤ ΠΤΑΤΑΜΟΚ ΕΠΕΝΤΑΠΝΑΥ ΕΡΟΦ ΠΠΟΟΥ. ΔΠΝΑΥ ΓΑΡ ΕΠΕΠΑΡΑΒΑΤΗΣ ΠΜΟΝΟΧΟΣ ΠΑΙ ΕΤΠΛΑΝΑ ΠΖΟΠΠΕ ΖΠΠΝΑΤΕΠΟΛΙΣ ΑΦΒΩΚ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΠΡΠΠΕ ΠΠΠΕΚΩΗΡΕ. ΟΥΠΑΝΤΩΣ ΠΤΟΦ ΠΕΝ[ΤΑΦ]ΤΑΚΕ ΠΕΥΖΗΤ ΑΥΦ ΠΠΟΥΤΕ [ΠΒΗΣ] ΑΥΠΩΤ. ΠΟΥΗΗΒ ΛΕ [ΠΤΕΡ]ΤΩΤΠ ΠΠΕΠΑΧΕ ΠΤΟΟΤ [Π]ΘΛΛΟΥ ΑΦΜΟΩΦ ΕΦΤΟΥΟΙ ΖΠΠ[Π]ΟΛΙΣ ΠΣΑΝΕΦΩΗΡΕ ΧΕ ΟΥΠΠΟΠΠΟΝ [Π]ΑΦΩΗΡΕ ΦΝΑΖΟΤΒΟΥ ΑΛΛΑ ΠΚΕΜ'Ο[Π]ΟΧΟΣ ΕΙΩΑΗΖΕ ΕΡΟΦ ΦΠΠΑΤΑΦ[Φ]Ε ΠΠΜΟΦ.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Frankfurter, *Religion*, 68.

²⁵⁷ ΑΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΠΤΑΚΤΖΗΥ ΝΟΥ ΧΕ ΑΚΠΛΑΝΑ ΠΠΠΠΠΠΠΠΠΠ ΕΤΡΕΥΤΟΦ ΠΤΕΥΤΥΧΗ.

important part in the conversion story of Philae. When hearing of her words to the temple priest, Macedonius curses her and makes her dumb, but after the whole island has been converted she is the last to be converted after Macedonius himself has healed her (fol. 22a-23a). Moreover, the story of the old woman has the same structure as the miracle stories of section three of the *Life of Aaron*. Like Jesus' healing of a dumb man, Macedonius places his finger in the old woman's mouth and heals her.²⁵⁸ The only difference is that the holy man himself has caused her distress and that he returns to the old woman to heal her.

The conversion of Philae to Christianity as it is described in the *Life of Aaron*, then, is not a historical account. We have seen how the story functions in the section on the first bishops of Philae and in the larger unity of the *Life of Aaron*. It shows us the perspective of a Christian community on its formative period when almost everything was still 'pagan'.²⁵⁹ The legendary first bishop of Philae ended this situation for the glory of himself, his successors and, because he was buried beside three of them, of Apa Aaron. The author enriched his work with legendary stories about the creation of the see of Philae and its conversion, stories which have literary parallels in the mass conversions at Axum and Gaza, as told by Rufinus and Mark the Deacon. Section two of the *Life of Aaron* is in itself unique, but can now be placed in the context of Christian literature. In Ch. 9, it will be shown that the work probably reflects a sixth-century audience. However, that century will be treated in Part III.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Mk. 7.33-37.

²⁵⁹ Independently, J. Hahn, 'Die Zerstörung der Kulte von Philae. Geschichte und Legende', has come to the same conclusion in a paper presented at the symposium 'Zerstörung und Erneuerung lokaler Kulttopographie in der Spätantike', Münster 2002.

