Religious encounters on the southern Egyptian frontier in Late Antiquity (AD 298-642)
Dijkstra, Jitse Harm Fokke

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Part III. Religion Transformed

The Christian Society of the Sixth Century
Introduction

Modern visitors to the temple of Isis at Philae are often impressed by the striking signs of the reuse of the temple as a church in Christian times (Fig. 5). Large crosses have been incised next to the doorways, Ancient Egyptian reliefs have been hacked away and inscriptions commemorate what seems to have been the greatest deed of the sixth-century Bishop Theodore of Philae: the building of a church to St Stephen inside the temple of Isis.¹ Let us walk through the building and take a closer look at what happened to the former temple of Isis by reading through the inscriptions.

When a visitor enters the temple, either through the second pylon or the Porch of Tiberius, he first encounters the foundation inscription of the church of St Stephen on the right-hand side of the entrance to the second pylon:

+ This topos (τόπος) became, in the name of the holy and consubstantial Trinity, the house (οἶκος) of St Stephen under our most Godloving father, Bishop Apa Theodore. May God preserve him for a very long time.²

On walking inside, the visitor has to imagine, again on his right-hand side, a painting of St Stephen, which has now vanished but was still visible to nineteenth and early twentieth-century visitors. What remains is the following inscription:

+ After the most Godloving Bishop Apa Theodore, through the philanthropy of our Master Christ, has transformed (μετασχηματισάμενος) this sanctuary (ἱερόν, read ἱερόν) into a topos of St Stephen, (this was accomplished) for the good in the power of Christ + under the most pious Posios, deacon and president.³ +

Since the main verb of the sentence is missing, and there was once a painting of St Stephen on the wall, it could well be that the inscription refers to that lost painting and we have to add a phrase such as ‘this painting was dedicated’.⁴

The visitor now walks through a hall with columns, the pronaos, and he may be amazed that on one column the ankh sign has been replaced by the cross. Three more inscriptions were incised by the entrance to the holiest part of the temple, the naos, an inscription on each side of the door, and one inside on the right-hand side. The one on the left-hand side of the door reads as follows:

+ Also this good work was done under our most holy father, Bishop Apa Theodore. May God preserve him for a very long time.⁵

Turning towards the right, the visitor can read the self-confident words:

+ The cross has conquered. It always conquers.⁶ +++

Finally, in the doorway to the naos on the right-hand side, an inscription can be found which is almost the same but slightly shorter than the one on the left-hand side of the door:

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³I.Philae II 203.
⁵I.Philae II 202.
⁶I.Philae II 201.
This work was done under our most Godloving father, the Bishop Apa Theodore.7

Thus, under Bishop Theodore the interior of the temple was radically transformed.

What kind of church was it that was built inside the ancient temple? In the dedicatory inscriptions, the renovated building is not called ἐκκλησία, the specific Greek term used for a regular church, but τόπος and οἶκος.8 The term τόπος is a general term for sanctuaries dedicated to saints.9 However, the term is sometimes used, alternating with οἶκος, for martyr shrines.10 As the church was modest and dedicated to the saint Stephen, who is undoubtedly St Stephen the Protomartyr,11 the church was probably a martyr’s shrine or martyrium, but not a regular church attended on regular days of worship.12 It would be more accurate, then, to speak of a topos of St Stephen, rather than of the church of St Stephen, if with ‘church’ a regular church is meant. Although the exact status of the shrine remains obscure, it is clear that this topos was not the main church of Philae.13

Yet it has been ascribed the greatest importance in modern scholarship. Since the closure of the temple and the first imperial mission to Nubia were thought to have taken place at about the same time in the episcopate of Theodore, these events have been associated with each other, and the act of turning the temple into a church has been seen as the definitive ‘triumph’ of Christianity over ‘paganism’ at Philae. The idea behind this argumentation is that, although there was a Christian community on the island from the fourth century onwards, the Ancient Egyptian cults remained relatively strong until their end as reported by Procopius. However, in Part I it has been suggested that the late cults on Philae were not as lively as it has been supposed and Procopius’ account reflects imperial propaganda about what could not have been more than a symbolic closure. In Part III, it will therefore be argued that the connection between the three events is not as straightforward as has been assumed.

In Ch. 8, we will turn to the accounts of the missions to Nubia by the Monophysite church historian John of Ephesus. In the sixth century, the Church was disrupted by disputes over doctrine. In 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, it had been proclaimed that Christ had two natures, a human and a divine one. By contrast, adherents to the Monophysite doctrine, also called the ‘Monophysite movement’, stressed that Christ had but one, divine nature. Most champions of Monophysitism lived in Syria and Egypt, and the clashes became more severe in the sixth century, when emperors such as Justinian (527-565) openly supported Chalcedon and persecuted the Monophysites. However, Monophysitism never became a separatist movement and maintained its loyalty to the emperor. It simply had another understanding of what was the right faith, the literal meaning of the Greek word ‘orthodox’ (ὀρθοδόξος).14 It is against this background that we have to see the imperial missions to Nubia. After the Western Roman Empire had fallen apart in 476, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to survive for 1000 years, and these missions

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7 I.Philae II 204.
8 τόπος: I.Philae II 200.1, 203.4. οἶκος: I.Philae II 200.3.
10 Papaconstantinou, Culte des saints, 270.
11 For St Stephen the Protomartyr, see, generally, G.W. Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome (Cambridge, 1995) 75-6.
12 Nautin, ‘Conversion’, 20; I.Philae II, pp. 266-7; Papaconstantinou, Culte des saints, 274-5.
13 Papaconstantinou, Culte des saints, 304.
can now truly be called ‘Byzantine’. They will be compared with the account of the
closure of the temples at Philae by Procopius. Were these events related? And if so,
how? These questions can be answered by evaluating Philae’s role in the missionary
activities.

In Ch. 9 we will concentrate on the transformation of the temple of Isis into a
church. By looking at what happened to the other buildings on the island, we will
situate this ‘temple conversion’ in a local context rather than regard it as the first act in
the conversion of Nubia to Christianity. Why did Theodore transform the temple into
a church? And how does the transformation of the temple fit into his episcopate?

Ch. 10 will continue the survey of the reuse of temples in the First Cataract
region by comparing Philae with Syene and Elephantine. How was the sacred
landscape of the First Cataract area transformed into a Christian one? This brings us to
the final chapter (Ch. 11), which discusses the position of the Church in a society that
had become Christian. Papyri and ostraka from Syene and Elephantine demonstrate
that by the sixth century the Church had definitively become part of everyday life.
Contrary to the preceding parts, the sixth-century, Christian society therefore provides
us with a few striking examples of how people appropriated Christianity.