Part I. The Old Religion

The Contraction of Ancient Egyptian Religion in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries
Introduction

In AD 248 or 249, Myron, acting high priest of Alexandria and all Egypt (διαδεχομένος τῆς ἄρχεισθέων), received a worrying note from as far south as Talmis (modern Kalabsha). The priests of the Nubian god Mandulis, who could apparently appeal directly to Alexandria, stated that pigs, regarded by Egyptians as the most impure of animals, had entered the temple without being removed. Myron ordered the responsible official, the strategos of Omboi and Elephantine, Aurelius Besarian, also known as Ammonios, to clear the temple. In an inscription on the temple’s walls, the strategos orders the owners to drive off all pigs within a fortnight, ‘so that the holy rites may take place in the customary way’. Apparently, turned into a pigsty, the temple could no longer perform its customary rites and the priests of Mandulis had to call in their superior’s help.

This document is a sign of the times, for the Ancient Egyptian temple had lost most of its millennia-old splendour by the third century. By the end of that century, temple building was reduced to a minimum and the sacred scripts were virtually extinct. These were by no means phenomena exclusive to the third century, as we have seen, since the ‘decline’ of the temple can be traced back to the beginning of the Roman period. But it seems that the emperors had decided to reduce and, eventually, cease their financial support of the temples in the course of the third century, which is known for its empire-wide instability and crisis. This perhaps explains why priests figure so prominently as private persons in third and fourth-century documents, for they had to find other ways of income than those deriving from the temple.

In some cases, cults had even ended by the third century, as for example in the famous temple complex of Luxor (Thebes) where Diocletian built a military camp. In other cases, however, the Ancient Egyptian cults continued, although temples now had to rely completely on their own resources. In the end, this development could hardly have missed its effect. The following examples illustrate well that from the fourth century onwards, the temples were in trouble.

The remote temples in the Dakhleh oasis seem to have been abandoned in the course of the fourth century, the last evidence for the presence of priesthood being a
papyrus of 335 that mentions the priest Aurelius Stonios, son of Tepnachtos. In 340, the last stele dedicated to the Buchis bull was erected at Hermonthis (Armant), and some of the other steleae written in hieroglyphic and hieratic belong to the last dated attestations of these scripts in Egypt. Nineteen years later, a remarkable incident occurred, which is reported by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. When the Emperor Constantius II (337-361) heard about the contents of petitions that several prominent men had handed in to the oracle cult of Bes in the mortuary temple of Seti I at Abydos, the ‘Memonion’, he sent one of his officials to investigate the case, and several of them were brought to trial. Whether the temple was closed afterwards, however, is unknown.

Other examples come from Christian sources that recount the violent end of Ancient Egyptian cults. Undoubtedly the most famous of these accounts is the destruction of the Serapeum at Alexandria in 392, which is reported by several church historians. After riots had broken out, the temple was stormed and plundered with the help of the Archbishop of Alexandria, Theophilus (385-412). In the aftermath of this event, the temple of Serapis at Canopus, east of Alexandria, was also destroyed.

One of the few fifth-century witnesses to the end of a temple cult is a passage from the Life of Severus, written in Syriac by Zachariah Scholasticus in the sixth century. It includes an incident in which a professor of Greek philosophy at Alexandria was involved. The professor, Asclepiodotus, visited the temple of Isis at Menouthis, near Canopus, because his wife was barren. When she became pregnant, this was perceived as a miracle. In response, one of the Christian students, supported by the Archbishop

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15 Rufin. hist. 11.22-3 (GSC 9.2, pp. 1025-30); Socr. h.e. 5.16-7 (GCS Neue Folge 1, pp. 289-91); Soz. h.e. 7.15 (GCS 50, pp. 319-21); Thdt. h.e. 5.22 (GCS Neue Folge 5, pp. 320-1).

Peter Mongus of Alexandria (480-488), went to Menouthis together with a group of monks, set fire to a shrine there and burnt the idols hidden inside. In the course of the fourth century, then, it had become increasingly difficult to maintain Ancient Egyptian cults, and Christianity may have been a less contributing factor to this development than the Christian sources suggest. The same tendency can be discerned in the First Cataract region. The great temple of Khnum at Elephantine had fallen out of use in the fourth century or earlier, for the houses within its temenos wall intended for temple personnel had been abandoned by that time. Thus, it seems that, as in Egypt as a whole, most cultic activity in the First Cataract area had ceased by the end of the fourth century.

Although Philae has, as we have seen, always been regarded as an exception to these developments, as in the rest of Egypt, building activity at the temples of Philae ceased after the third century. Nonetheless, several inscriptions in Greek and the Ancient Egyptian scripts, hieroglyphic and demotic, testify to the continuity of the temple cult in Late Antiquity. It is at Philae that we find the last hieroglyphic (394) and demotic (452) inscriptions in Egypt. Apparently, Philae had its own means of income to support its cults. The passage written by Procopius is often adduced to explain that the Blemmyes and Noubades were responsible for this exceptional situation. The same text states that the temples of Philae were destroyed in the reign of Justinian, an event that is usually dated between 535 and 537.

Part I examines the state of the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae during the fourth and fifth centuries. In an introductory chapter (Ch. 1), we will briefly pay attention to the Roman perspective of this situation on the basis of the passages by Procopius and Priscus. But do these sources accurately describe the relations Philae had with the Blemmyes and Noubades? In Ch. 2 we will discuss the sources concerning the Dodekaschoinos in this period, and compare them with the Roman historians.

In the next two chapters, the demotic and Greek inscriptions from the island itself will be analysed. What was the character of the Late Antique cults? (Ch. 3). What do we know of the priests and their cultic activities? And what was left of the Ancient Egyptian cults by 535-537? (Ch. 4).

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20 Life of Severus Kugener (PO 2, pp. 14-44). See Herzog, 'Kampf'; Thélamon, Païens et chrétiens, 259; C. Haas, 'Patriarch and People: Peter Mongus of Alexandria and Episcopal Leadership in the Late Fifth Century', JCECS 1 (1993) 297-316 at 312-5; Trombley, Hellenic Religion 2, 219-25; Wipszycka, Études, 80-4; P. Athanassiad, Damascus. The Philosophical History (Athens, 1999) 27-9; Hahn, Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt, 105; Grossmann, 'Modalitäten', and 'Zur Gründung'. Cf. Frankfurter, Religion, 40-1, 164-5, who dates this event to 484 and later to 'around 484', with D. Montserrat, 'Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Ss Cyrus and John at Menouthis in Late Antiquity', in Frankfurter, Pilgrimage & Holy Space, 257-79 at 261-6, who dates it to c 489. 21 Cf. the remark by H.J.W. Drijvers, East of Antioch. Studies in Early Syriac Christianity (London, 1984) Ch. XVI at 35 ('The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria', 1982), that Christian polemical sources are hardly informative on what happened in temples. This point is also made by Wipszycka, Études, 90. 22 Arnold, Elephantine XXX, 19-20. 23 This seems to be the general tendency, which does not mean that all cultic activity had ceased by the fourth century. For example, directly against the wall of Khnum temple, excavators found a house (M 22), in which they unearthed an undisturbed level of hardened clay, containing an offering table and a water vessel. Apparently, this room was used for ceremonial practices. The layer on top contained pottery dated to the second quarter of the sixth century. Apparently, this room was still in use as a domestic shrine even though the temple of Khnum had long been out of use (personal communication from M. Rodziolwicz, cf. H. Jartiz in W. Kaiser et al., 'Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine. 23./24. Grabungsbericht', MDAIK 53 (1997) 117-93 at 188).