CHAPTER NINE

THE NILE VALLEY FROM CANOPUS TO PHILAE

The first stages of Christianization in Egypt followed a course similar to that elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean areas. The new religion took root at the great metropolis of Alexandria by the end of the first century and gradually spread to the smaller cities of the Nile basin. It must be remembered that the catechetical school of Alexandria, where Clement and Origen gave shape to the Christian sophistic as a definitive movement, was oriented to an urban population and had no influence whatsoever on the spread of Christianity to the territória of the cities.¹ The evidence for its presence in the Nilotic towns before 324 lies largely in the appearance of papyrus fragments of New Testament codices, although the provenance of these texts is often unknown. The earliest of these is P. Rylands 457 (perhaps as early as the last decade of the first century), along with other texts of third-century date.²

A critical turning point was reached with the closure of the Serapeum of Alexandria in 391, for from that time onward the Christian patriarch, his clergy, and the monks pursued a systematic campaign against the rural temples of the Nile basin. From this time onward, the Christianization of rural Egypt followed a chronologically similar course to that in most of the other districts of the Roman East. Roger Rémondon has summed all this up with brevity:³

It is quite difficult, and impossible without a degree of doubt, to estimate the real force of Christianity in the Nile valley at the beginning of the fifth century. It was assuredly considerable, nor can we deny that in the second century Christianity had already become manifest in Egypt with some force, nor that there were at this time active groups of Christians. But even late in the third century these groups did not make up more than a weak minority: the new religion

¹ The earliest history of the Alexandrian see is conveniently reported in Bigg, Christian Platonists of Alexandria, 63–73. On the origins of the catechetical school, see for example: Francesco Pericoli-Ridolfini, “Le origini della scuola di Alessandria,” Rivisti degli studi orientali 37 (1962), 211–230.
spread slowly in the countryside. In the epoch of Constantine, paganism probably kept its numerical superiority. It does not thus seem permissible to argue that Christians were dominant in Egypt and that their religion was "triumphant": for it is dangerous to put one's trust in the negative testimony of the papyri to assess the decline of paganism in a time when discretion was a rule of prudence. It was hardly until the end of the fourth century that Christianity became manifest as a powerful phenomenon. . . . In Egypt, the first affirmation of the force of Christianity may well have been the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in 391; it was the signal, in any case, for the harsh struggle of the fifth century from which the new religion emerged triumphant, but in which paganism also survived.

Rémordon goes on to show that the critical years in the religious transition were 400–450.4

This is not to say that the new religion failed to penetrate the countryside at all before 391. Seemingly crypto-Christian documents are always turning up, as for example a recently published letter of unknown provenance (3rd–4th c.).5 It is nevertheless clear that the examples of rural paganism discussed below are not exceptions to some arbitrary rule. For every group that abandoned its village and migrated into the desert with its idols, there were others that stayed and resisted persecution.6 Several striking examples of resistance to Christianization emerge in the sources from the period c. 450–489, and these speak for many otherwise unknown local contexts submerged by want of evidence from the eye of historical inquiry. It is unfortunately not feasible to give rural Egypt the detailed demographic and chronological interpretation done for northern Syria and the Provincia Arabia because of an almost complete lack of datable inscriptions.

The evidence for Egypt suggests conditions in the countryside parallel to those in Asia Minor and Syria-Palestine. Although the indigenous population of the Nile valley generally spoke Coptic, the population of the towns and the educated elements in the villages were all Hellenized to a great degree, as the tax records, wills, and letters in the papyrological collections indicate.7 The Christianization of the countryside in Egypt too fell to the monks, who appealed to the rustics' sense of outrage at their economic exploitation by the landed magnates and possibly to their sense of ethnic differentia-

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4 Rémordon, "Résistance au christianisme" 68f.
5 G.H. Horsley, Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 2 (Maclearie 1982), no. 103.
6 Rémordon, "Résistance au christianisme" 74.