THE FATE OF THE TEMPLES
IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

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Abstract

As elsewhere the fate of the temples in late antique Egypt has often been perceived through the lens of the (Christian) literary works, which tell dramatic stories of the destruction of temples and their conversion into churches. When one looks at the other types of sources available from Egypt—inscriptions, papyri and archaeological remains—however, it becomes abundantly clear that the story of what happened to the temples was usually much less dramatic. This article argues that, in order to get a more reliable and complex picture of the fate of the temples, it is best to study them within a local or regional context and from a variety of sources, especially material remains since they can provide the most detailed picture of a whole range of methods of reuse, if the building was reused at all. A case study (of the First Cataract region, Southern Egypt) confirms that violence against temples and their reuse as churches were indeed exceptional and but two aspects in the complex process of the changing sacred landscape of Late Antiquity.

INTRODUCTION: FROM TEMPLE TO CHURCH?

In his seminal article on the phenomenon of ‘temple conversion’, Friedrich Deichmann wrote seventy years ago about the fate of the temples in Egypt:

Similar conditions prevailed in Egypt. Already under Constantius, a mithraeum was handed over to the Christians of Alexandria. The mob plundered it and desecrated the mysteries, surely not without the silent approval of the priesthood. Under Theodosius followed the destruction of the famous Serapeum, during which the cult image was particularly attacked. In Upper Egypt temple destructions were still in full swing in the 5th c.1

This passage is typical of the way in which Deichmann tried to sketch a historical background to his catalogue of 89 cases of temple conversion in the preceding narrative part of his article. By basing himself almost entirely on literary sources such as the law codes, Deichmann was under the impression that violence against temples and their subsequent conversion into churches was a widespread phenomenon throughout the Mediterranean in the 4th and 5th c.—and Egypt formed no exception to that trend.²

There are few scholars today who would subscribe to a monolithic development from temple to church in a context of religious violence. Thanks to a massive number of archaeological studies published over the last few decades, which to be fair to Deichmann were not yet available when he was writing, we know that temples, if they were indeed reused, were often reused for a variety of other, less ideological and more practical purposes as secular buildings or for retrieving building material. Only in exceptional cases, and mostly at a later time, from the second half of the 5th c. onwards, were temples reused as churches. This means that in those cases in which temples were turned into churches, the buildings had usually already been abandoned for a considerable time or had been reused for other purposes.³ Thus the fate of the temples is significantly more complex than a generalisation ‘from temple to church’ would allow: reuse as a church was just one of the options.⁴

The new archaeological data has also encouraged scholars to re-evaluate the literary sources on temple destruction and conversion. When the emphasis on violence is taken away, it becomes clear that there is also evidence in the sources for the appreciation of these buildings as monuments, and that they could not be dismantled without special permission.⁵ Moreover, good progress has been made in studying temple destruction as a literary construct. In a similar way as monastic literature gives the impression that Egyptian monks lived

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² The last statement of the quotation above, for instance, is based entirely on Leipoldt’s (1903) 175–82 interpretation of several passages from Shenoute’s works; recently, however, it has been shown by Emmel (2008) 165–66 (n.15) that there remains only one secure case of a temple destruction from these works in which Shenoute was involved.

³ This has been particularly well-illustrated by Bayliss (2004) 58–64 (chapt. 5), who is also the first to distinguish several different types of temple to church conversions (pp. 32–49 (chapt. 3)), and includes many more important observations on the practicalities involved in temple reuse.

⁴ My criticism (Dijkstra (2005)) of Bayliss’ (2004) 67–106 case study of temple conversions in Cilicia was that it deals only with temple to church conversions.