

LATE ANTIQUITY

العصر القديم المتأخر

Giovanni Ruffini

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Giovanni Ruffini

Spätantike
Antiquité tardive

Late antique Egypt ran from the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE) to the Arab conquest of Egypt (641 CE). During this period, Egypt was part of the eastern Roman Empire and was ruled from Constantinople from the founding of that city in the 320s CE. Culturally, Egypt's elite were part of the wider Roman world, sharing in its classical education. However, several developments marked Egypt's distinctiveness in this period. These developments included the flourishing of literature in Coptic, the final written form of the native language, and the creation and rapid growth of several forms of monastic Christianity. These developments accompanied the expansion of Christianity throughout the countryside and a parallel decline in the public role of native religious practices. This expansion of Christianity also led to its expansion in Nubia and Ethiopia, Egypt's closest international neighbors, as a result of travel and trade from the Roman world. Documentary and archaeological evidence suggests a decline in Egyptian village and small town life in some places in this period, but the picture is mixed. The documents reveal large aristocratic estates in some regions and small-scale middle-class enterprises in others, but debate on how to interpret this data continues.

يمتد العصر القديم المتأخر (العصر الكلاسيكي) في مصر من عهد الإمبراطور الروماني دقلديانوس (284-305 م) إلى الفتح العربي لمصر (641 م). خلال هذه الفترة، كانت مصر جزءاً من الإمبراطورية الرومانية الشرقية وحُكمت من القسطنطينية منذ تأسيسها خلال الفترة 320م. من الناحية الثقافية، كانت النخبة في مصر جزءاً من العالم الروماني الأوسع، حيث تقاسمت تعليمها الكلاسيكي. ومع ذلك، فإن العديد من التطورات ميزت مصر بوضوح خلال تلك الفترة. شملت هذه التطورات ازدهار الأدب في اللغة القبطية، وهي الشكل النهائي المكتوب للغة الأم، بالإضافة إلى خلق العديد من أشكال الرهبنة المسيحية بالإضافة إلى تطورها السريع. هذا التطور صاحبه إنتشار المسيحية في جميع أنحاء الريف وانخفاض مواز في الدور العام للممارسات الدينية المحلية. هذا الإنتشار للمسيحية أدى أيضاً لإنتشارها في النوبة وإثيوبيا، أقرب جيران مصر من الدول المجاورة، كنتيجة للسفر والتجارة خلال العالم الروماني. وتشير الأدلة الوثائقية والأثرية إلى انخفاض القرية المصرية والمدن الصغيرة في بعض الأماكن خلال هذه الفترة، ولكن الصورة مختلطة. وتكشف الوثائق عن وجود مقاطعات أرسقراطية كبيرة في بعض المناطق بالإضافة إلى عدد محدود

من تجمعات الطبقة الوسطى في مناطق اخرى، غير أن النقاش حول كيفية تفسير هذه البيانات مستمر.

T

he late Roman Period of Egypt has a clearly defined endpoint, but its starting point is less obvious. Depending on scholarly preference, one might say that the late Roman Period in Egypt began in 284 CE, with the reign of Diocletian, who reunited the Roman Empire after the crises of the third century CE; in 298, when Diocletian withdrew Egypt's southern frontier to the region around modern Aswan; in the 320s and 330s CE, with the sole rule of Constantine and the foundation of his new capital at Constantinople; or, for the Roman Empire more generally, if not Egypt specifically, in 395 CE, with the death of Theodosius and the permanent division of the Roman Empire into eastern and western halves. Throughout all of these phases, Egypt was governed from the eastern half of the Roman Empire. This situation was maintained until the Romans lost Egypt in 641 CE to the Arab invaders.

Egyptologists once tended to regard Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt as a vestige of Egypt's former greatness. Similarly, Romanists tended to perceive a severe cultural decline in Roman civilization in late antiquity. For this reason, research into Egypt's late Roman Period was long an afterthought for specialists. With the scholarly evolution in attitudes towards late antiquity, this has begun to change. Late antique or Byzantine Egypt has become a field of study in its own right. While the first term is chronological, the second term recognizes a geographic and administrative fact, that in the late Roman Empire, Egypt was fundamentally part of that empire's eastern half from the reign of Diocletian. As Diocletian dealt with an Egyptian revolt in 297/298 CE, he visited the province, reorganized its internal administrative structure, and reordered its border, abandoning the territory of the Dodekaschoinos to the south of Egypt (Bowman 2005: 316-317). From 330 CE on, Egypt fell under the rule of the new eastern capital, Constantinople.

Literary Culture

Throughout the late Roman Period, Alexandria remained Egypt's most important city, as it had been through the Ptolemaic and early Roman Periods. But it also remained, in the older formulation, Alexandria ad Aegyptum, Alexandria by Egypt. Although papyrological evidence documents extensive links between the city and its countryside, in many ways, Alexandria was more a part of the Mediterranean than the Egyptian world. It remained, with Athens, one of the central places for philosophical education in late antiquity. Alexandria's intellectual elite had closer social ties to Athens than it did to contemporary philosophers of Upper Egypt (Ruffini 2004: 256).

Modern scholarship has typically—if inaccurately—seen the late fourth century CE as a period of pagan revival throughout the Roman imperial aristocracy, culminating in a pagan “last stand” in the 390s (Cameron 2011: 3-13). This narrative provides a natural larger context for apparent intellectual tension between Christians and pagans in Alexandria, which reached a climax with the murder of Hypatia in 415 CE. However, Alexandria's vibrant Neoplatonic scene provided an intellectual inheritance common to both Christians and pagans from the third century CE on. An ongoing détente among Alexandria's leading educators allowed religiously neutral education to survive there into the sixth century CE (Watts 2006: 22-23).

The educational picture throughout the rest of Egypt is less clear. Egypt's elite continued to pursue the ideal of *paideia*, an education grounded in the study of Greek grammar and rhetoric (Cribiore 2010: 49). This education gave Egypt's provincial elite a mechanism for interaction with the wider Roman world. However, the fourth through the seventh centuries CE show a steady decline in classical literary texts from Egypt, with only certain sites—Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis, and Antinoopolis in particular—retaining a thriving literary culture. Students followed the

classical educational sequence, with the Homeric epics retaining their central place in a student's education. Students practiced paraphrasing ancient texts and generating preliminary exercises in verse. One product of this educational system was a literary movement of wandering poets, typically southern Egyptian, who established Egypt's reputation as a center for poetry throughout the Roman Empire (Cameron 1965: 470-472).

This educational milieu was home to the Hellenized elite. Evidence for the wider population is more scarce. Since the Edict of Caracalla in 212 CE, all Egyptians had been Roman citizens. There is, however, little evidence that any sense of Roman or Hellenistic identity shaped the lives of the farmers of the Egyptian countryside. Only rarely, in military and official contexts, does the use of Latin appear in Roman Egypt, and Greek education did not reach below the elite. This left the majority of Egypt's population, its native Egyptian speakers, without an easily accessible vehicle for the dissemination of its own language. While Demotic Egyptian continued to appear in graffiti into the fifth century, its use as an administrative language, and thus its widespread appeal, had ended in the early Roman Period.

The decision to write the Egyptian language in the Greek alphabet can be seen as an indication of increased Hellenization in Egypt. The creators of Coptic were presumably bilingual in both Egyptian and Greek. Some of the earliest Coptic texts are themselves bilingual, including a Greek-Coptic glossary to Hosea and Amos, a Theban school tablet with portions of Psalm 46 in Akhminic and Greek paraphrases of the Iliad, and a codex of various books of the Bible in both languages (Smith 1998: 722-723). Significant parts of the Greek magical papyri are in fact in Coptic, including the Great Magical Papyrus, which dates to the early fourth century CE. This papyrus's love-spell focuses on the story of Isis and Osiris, told in Coptic (Meyer 1980: 196-197). Thus the creation of Coptic, so crucial to the growth of Christian literature in late Roman Egypt, also contributed to the survival of certain aspects of Pharaonic traditions.

This adaptation of the Greek alphabet as a vehicle for writing the latest stages of the indigenous Egyptian language has its origins in the early Roman Period. However, it is not until the late Roman Period that we see a true flowering of Coptic literature. In the fourth and fifth centuries we see translations from Greek into Coptic of some Christian patristic literature. The best known source of activity for Coptic literature in this period was the White Monastery of Shenoute (fig. 1). Shenoute himself wrote actively from the 380s to the 460s CE. His sermons and letters make him a founder of Coptic literature (Emmel 2010: 90-92). In his work we find vivid denunciations of stalwart pagans still stubbornly practicing ancestral rites, and also of rich landowners whose corrupt lifestyles thrive on the backs of the rural poor (Behlmer 1993: 11-14).



Figure 1. The White Monastery of Shenoute.

The History of Christianity

This literary growth paralleled developments in the church. The late Roman Period of Egypt was a period of rapid growth for Christianity. Some debate about the rate and chronology of that growth remains. Christianity becomes visible in Egyptian evidence in the third century CE, particularly under the harsh light of persecution by Roman authorities. Coptic Christianity later adopted a calendar, the Era of the Martyrs, which counted from 284 CE, the start of the reign of Diocletian, closely associated in historical memory with the second wave of these persecutions. Studies of naming patterns in late Roman Egypt have argued that nearly half of the population was

Christian by the sole rule of Constantine in the 320s (Bagnall 1982: 122). This argument has not been accepted without resistance, but it seems clear that the fourth century saw rapid Christianization throughout Egypt. Egypt in the fifth and sixth centuries is likely to have been a nearly universal Christian society. The occasional literary references to pagan temples, particularly in the fifth-century works of Shenoute and Cyril of Alexandria, do not alter this general picture.

One of the most important accompanying cultural developments in late Roman Egypt is the birth of Christian monasticism. Anthony was one of the seminal figures of this development. Born to wealthy landowning parents, he spent decades in ascetic isolation in the Egyptian desert, his reputation for spiritual strength resulting in imitators coming to the desert to follow his lifestyle. This trend grew throughout the fourth century. Thanks to a Greek biography of Anthony attributed to Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, and a later Latin translation by Evagrius of Antioch, Anthony's monasticism influenced the history of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world.

Egypt's monastic movement itself soon grew in two divergent directions. Followers of a semi-hermetic monasticism were particularly common at Scetis, a desert monastic center in the Nile's northwest delta. The monks there ranged from rural Egyptian farmers to members of the Roman Empire's educated elite. This monastic milieu was the origin of a collection of monastic wisdom literature, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or "Sayings of the Desert Fathers," a fifth-century CE work widely read throughout the Christian world. In Upper Egypt in the first half of the fourth century, Pachomius established a series of organized monastic communities. This cenobitic form of monasticism was influential throughout western Europe, and Pachomius's rule or blueprint for monastic communal living inspired monastic rules in both the eastern and western Mediterranean.

Late Roman Egypt played another important role in the history of Christianity, namely in the debate over Christology. Long-

time patriarch Cyril of Alexandria (bishop from 412-444 CE) taught that the divine and human natures of Jesus were united into one nature, a teaching which has since been labeled Monophysitism. Dioscorus of Alexandria presided over the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 CE, which declared support for Cyril's teachings. However, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE expressed support for the belief of two natures in Jesus. A group of Egyptian bishops present refused to endorse the decision, ultimately setting the stage for a break between the church in Egypt and churches adhering to the victorious position throughout the empire.

The Council of Chalcedon led to schism in Alexandria itself, with the city frequently home to two competing patriarchs. Later, over the course of the sixth century, this split at the top of the hierarchy led to the emergence of two parallel church structures, so-called Monophysite and pro-Chalcedonian, side by side throughout Egypt (Wipszycka 2010: 344). The Monophysite bishops of Alexandria in essence created a parallel church hierarchy. This rapid change was possible in part because the hierarchical structure of the Egyptian church was unusual from the beginning. The bishop of Alexandria had a high degree of power throughout the Egyptian church, which lacked local metropolitan bishops. This arrangement mirrored Alexandria's unusual role in relation to Egypt as a whole, sitting as it did apart from the cities of the Nile, rather than being one of them.

The late Roman Period saw an explosion in the number of churches in Egypt throughout the towns and villages of the countryside. One sixth-century papyrus records fifteen churches within the city of Oxyrhynchus alone. In a parallel development, the church's role as a landowner grew tremendously, in large part through pious donations from the faithful. A similar expansion attended the cult of the saints. Papyri and inscriptions attest to hundreds of saint-shrines in late Roman Egypt, a trend starting in the middle of the fifth century and reaching full form in the sixth. Saints, the majority of them martyrs, were seen as holy patrons of the cities, town,

and villages claiming them. Their shrines in turn came to hold a major place in the economic lives and liturgical rhythms of their communities (Papaconstantinou 2010: 354-355).

Traditional Egyptian Religion

Meanwhile, the crucial transformation in Egypt's traditional religion had taken place in the early Roman Period, with the decline of Egyptian temples in the late third century CE and their widespread abandonment in the fourth century. Most scholars attribute this decline to the loss of revenue from state sponsorship. One consequence of this decline was a change in the location of practice. Traditional Egyptian religion migrated from the temple to the local shrine and ultimately to the home. Priests transitioned from temple leaders to local or itinerant experts in ritual and magic. At the same time, religious practice passed into private hands. We see for instance the guild of ironworkers at Hermonthis practicing ritual sacrifice at Deir el-Bahri in the 330s CE (Łajtar 2006: 94-104), or Gesios, an opponent of Shenoute in the fifth century CE, acting as a patron for local rituals and maintaining his own domestic shrine (Frankfurter 1998: 77-82).

In only a few exceptional cases do we see traditional Egyptian religious sites continue to thrive. The temple of Isis at Philae (fig. 2) was important for the religious practices of people south of the Egyptian border, and the Isis festival survived there into the fifth century CE, with Nubian priests preserving ancient Egyptian traditions (Cruz-Urbe 2010: 503-504). Philae itself is the site of the last known inscription in hieroglyphs, from the reign of Theodosius I in 394 CE, and the site of the last known appearance of Egyptian in Demotic script, from the reign of Marcian in 452 CE. Recent scholarship has challenged the notion that Philae's Isis temple faced a dramatic closure in 537 CE under the orders of the emperor Justinian. It seems more likely that no such definitive break took place, and that indigenous religion at Egypt's southern border gradually assimilated into the Christian world (Dijkstra 2008: 340-344).



Figure 2. View of the Temple of Isis at Philae.

The Economy

Considerable debate revolves around the nature of the economy of late Roman Egypt. Central to that debate is the role of the large estates or houses, vast landed holdings in the hands of a few elite families whose rise we can trace from the fifth through the seventh centuries CE. The papyrological consensus in recent years has seen these large estates as participants in a form of shared governance. The central government, unwilling to extend its tax-collecting bureaucracy throughout Egypt, relied on the large estates to divide territory into fiscal shares. The large estates would collect a rent-tax from their own holdings and the taxes owed from holdings outside of their property but technically part of their notional share of the tax burden (Gascou 1985: 60).

One consequence of this division of labor is that in certain parts of Egypt, particularly the Oxyrhynchite nome, the bureaucracy of the large estates appears to have dominated the economic landscape. But proponents of the "fiscal shares" model implicitly maintain that this dominance is to some degree an illusion of the sources. The large estates under this model were not profitable ventures absorbing all of the countryside's economic resources. The accounts of the house of Apion in Oxyrhynchus appear to indicate that wine alone, and not wheat or barley, provided the Apion estates any significant cash income. That income in turn was lower than the estate incomes from rent, suggesting that these large estates favored low-risk investments in

preference to focusing on riskier sources of cash profit (Hickey 2012: 5-8).

Recently, some scholars have challenged this understanding of Egypt's large estates, preferring to see them as profit-seeking, in sharp conflict with the central authorities (Banaji 2002: 216-219; Sarris 2006: 5). According to these scholars, estates such as those of the house of Apion were highly monetized growth vehicles relying on the exploitation of wage labor by a class of farmers reliant on the favor of the estates. The estates in turn were so omnipotent that they obstructed effective central tax collection and effectively starved the imperial government of its fair share of the revenue from Egypt. One new scholarly model proposes a controversial division in the large estates, in which houses such as the Apions divided their estates into rental properties which funded the operations of more profitable self-run properties generating cash income (Sarris 2006: 228).

The argument about the role of large estates in the Egyptian economy centers on Oxyrhynchus, in central Egypt. A different picture emerges when we move south and consider the evidence from Aphrodito, the papyri from which make it perhaps the best documented town in the Roman world. Aphrodito is famous for the literary and documentary corpus of Dioskoros (Fournet 1999: 317-343), a notary/poet whose literary production has both been condemned for the low quality of its Greek and praised as an example of the vibrancy of late antique creative culture (MacCoull 1988: 150-157), a disagreement encapsulating the larger evolution in attitudes towards late antiquity.

The Aphrodito papyri show little evidence of a rural economy dominated by large estates. Studies of Aphrodito have found relatively small landholdings, punctuated by small-scale rental and credit markets indicative of middle-class agricultural entrepreneurship (Keenan 1980: 152-154). Similarly, studies of Aphrodito's social networks have shown a relatively decentralized society, devoid of the patrons and hierarchies dominating typical models of late Roman society (Ruffini 2008: 242-243). How to reconcile the disagreements

over Oxyrhynchus with the apparently divergent evidence of Aphrodito is not clear on present evidence, and we must look to other regions in Egypt for more answers.

Amheida, known as Trimithis in antiquity, is an intriguing example of urban life in late Roman Egypt (Bagnall and Ruffini 2012: 42-48). Hundreds of kilometers from the Nile Valley in the Dakhla Oasis of the Western Desert, Trimithis shows remarkable connections to the wider Roman world. Elevated to the legal status of a *polis* or "city" in the early 300s, it appears to have had its own city council, much like cities throughout the Roman Empire. The so-called "villa of Serenos," a fourth-century house from an elite neighborhood in Trimithis, included Greek mythological wall paintings so far unique in Roman Egypt (fig. 3). Some local housing styles appear to have been heavily influenced by Mediterranean architectural models. Much of Trimithis saw construction activity in the third and early fourth centuries, but the site would not last. The city as a whole appears to have been abandoned by the fifth century, but remains a testament to late Roman Egypt's cultural ties to the wider Roman world.



Figure 3. Villa of Serenos. View of a painted interior wall in room 1, building B1, Area 2.

Elsewhere, in the Fayum, we see a wave of villages abandoned in the late Roman Period,

from the third to the fifth centuries (van Minnen 1995: 41). At Karanis, evidence shows a collapse in land under cultivation by the fourth century. After a brief recovery, occupation ended in the fifth century (van Minnen 1995: 46). Papyri indicate that the village had difficulty maintaining its water supply, a problem apparently common in the region. At the same time, we see a decline in the number of surviving papyri from villages throughout Egypt in the fourth century. The view provided from the documentary evidence is almost strictly urban. City institutions survive to some degree in the late Roman Period, but many of the traditional civic offices we see in the early Roman Period disappear in the fourth century. At the same time, Rome's imperial government integrated more closely with the cities, the latter becoming less independent and more organs of the central government (van Minnen 2010: 220).

Administration

These changes are part of a profound transformation in Egypt's administrative structure in the late Roman Period (Bagnall 1995: 54-67; Keenan 2001: 612-615; Palme 2010: 245-249). These transformations took place at both the local and the imperial levels, and saw the administrative apparatus of both levels begin to converge. At the local level, the Romans had allowed the creation of city councils in Egypt in the early third century, as part of an ongoing attempt to co-opt local landowners into the collection of taxes for the central government. The *boulentai* or city councilors appear most frequently in the documentary record precisely in the context of tax collection, but their importance—and that of other local officials, particularly those related to management of the market and the gymnasium—appears to decline dramatically over the course of the fourth century. In their place, the *curator civitates* or *logistes*, chosen from the ranks of the councilor class, appears to run the local city and nome governments.

At the imperial level, we see a long-term trend towards creating smaller units of authority. The reforms of Diocletian divide Egypt, originally a single province in the early

Roman Empire, into three. These three—Aegyptus, Thebaid, and Libya—were all subordinate to the prefect in Alexandria. Later in the fourth century, Libya was further divided into two smaller provinces and the province of Augustamnica created out of a portion of the province of Aegyptus. By the end of the century, portions of Augustamnica formed the bulk of a new, sixth province, Arcadia. This arrangement held until the reign of Justinian in the sixth century CE. Some of six provinces—Aegyptus, Augustamnica, and Thebaid—were further divided into two parts. While the situation does not appear to have been uniform across every province in Egypt, it seems that the governors of Aegyptus and Thebaid had both military and civil authority, but that their subordinate governors retained civil authority alone in their respective subdivisions. These structures of imperial government did not extend down to the local level, where the Roman Empire relied on local officials such as the *logistes* to handle tax collection and other requirements of the central government. This reliance on locals allowed the Roman state to govern Egypt without the creation of a standing civil service.

The Archaeological Remains

Archaeological work continues to teach us more about Egypt's late Roman Period (Bagnall and Davoli 2011: 110-145). Excavations at Kom el-Dikka (fig. 4) in Alexandria have revealed the contours of a late Roman residential neighborhood, lecture halls, a theater, a bath, and more (Haas 1997: 190-206). Less than 50 kilometers from Alexandria to the southwest, the archaeological remains at Abu Mena include a basilica and a church housing the remains of Saint Menas, which were a major pilgrimage destination in late antiquity. South, in the Nile Valley, late Roman sites are often lost or remain hidden under later occupation. The most famous sites are Christian: the monastery and necropolis at Bawit, the churches at Antinoopolis, the Red and White Monasteries famous from the career of Shenoute, and the various fifth- to seventh-century monasteries on the West Bank at Thebes.



Figure 4. Kom el-Dikka.

Away from the Nile Valley, a number of late Roman archaeological sites can be found in the Fayum. Ongoing Italian excavations at Dimai, ancient Soknopaiou Nesos, have uncovered late Roman amphorae and Coptic texts. The University of Michigan excavations at Karanis (fig. 5) near modern Kom Aushim in the 1920s and 1930s, while still largely unpublished, produced extensive documentary evidence through the late fourth century CE and considerable material remains detailing daily life in late Roman Egypt. The possibility for coordinated study of these two bodies of evidence has produced calls for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of such sites (van Minnen 1994: 249), an approach taken recently by the University of California, Los Angeles (Barnard et al. 2015).



Figure 5. Karanis.

The eastern and western deserts are also home to several important late Roman sites. Excavations at the Red Sea port of Berenike reveal evidence for a resurgence in the Indian Ocean trade in the fourth and fifth centuries. Excavations at Ismant el-Kharab in the western desert's Dakhla Oasis have produced substantial evidence for the Roman-Period village of Kellis, including third- and fourth-century graves and housing complexes and a striking series of Coptic literary texts produced by the local Manichaean community in the fourth century. Excavations nearby in Dakhla at Amheida, the ancient town of Trimithis, have uncovered large houses belonging to the local political elite and decorated with complex wall paintings, also dating to the fourth century. Elsewhere, in the Kharga Oasis, Douch, the site of ancient Kysis, includes remains of a necropolis and a Christian church both active in the fourth century.

Egypt in International Affairs

Egypt played an ongoing role in Rome's foreign relations in this period. With the retreat of Egypt's southern border under Diocletian in the third century and the collapse of centralized Meroitic state power in the fourth century, the international situation to the south of Egypt remained unsettled (Eide et al. 1998: 1052-1072; Welsby 2002: 15-24). A papyrus dating from 425 to 450 CE contains a petition from the Christian bishop of Aswan asking the Roman emperor for help against attacks from the Blemmyes and Nobades (Eide et al. 1998: 1138-1141). Besa's biography of Shenoute reports Blemmyan raids in Upper Egypt resulting in captive-taking and the seizure of cities in the mid-fifth century (Eide et al. 1998: 1107-1109). Surviving fragments of a Greek epic poem describing a Roman war against the Blemmyes are sometimes dated to the fifth century (Eide et al. 1998: 1182-1185). The historian Priscus records a war against the Blemmyes and Nobades in the 450s, ending with an agreement by the Romans that these people to the south of Egypt should be allowed to continue crossing unhindered into Egypt to visit the temple of Isis at Philae (Blockley 1983: 322-323).

This sporadic conflict continued against the backdrop of much longer-lasting and more peaceful international developments. While evidence for international travel and trade south to Nubia is relatively thin, it seems clear that some level of Christianization had begun in Nubia by the fifth century, presumably as a result of contacts with Egypt. Similarly, travel in the Red Sea designed to capitalize on the monsoon routes to India resulted in closer contacts between Roman Egypt and Axumite Ethiopia. These contacts resulted in the creation of an Ethiopian Christian church hierarchy subordinate to that of Egypt, with Ethiopia's first bishop appointed by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in the middle of the fourth century CE.

Egypt's place in the international community changed dramatically in the 640s,

with the fall of Roman Egypt to Arab invaders. That change had been foreshadowed by the brief period, 619 to 629 CE, during which the Sassanid Persians seized Egypt during their war with the eastern Roman Empire in the early seventh century. When a small Arab army arrived in late 639 or early 640 CE, it took advantage of disorganized Roman defenses and seized control of Alexandria by 641 CE. An attempt by Roman forces to reconquer the province in 645 was unsuccessful. For some time, however, certain aspects of Roman Egypt remained unchanged under Arab rule (Sijpesteijn 2010: 444). Provincial administrative structures, Coptic literary culture, and the profound role of Christianity throughout the country continued intact throughout the early years of Islamic Egypt.

Bibliographic Notes

For Egypt in the fourth century CE, Bagnall (1995) remains standard. For the period as a whole, Bagnall (2010) collects the latest work of leading experts. Many of the individual citations in this entry, particularly those on Christianity, come from that collected volume. For indigenous religion in this period, see Dijkstra (2008) and Frankfurter (1998). For economic history, the works of Banaji (2002), Sarris (2006), and Hickey (2012) are crucial. For social and cultural history, see Criboire (2010), MacCoull (1988), Ruffini (2008), and Watts (2006 and 2010). For Roman Egypt more generally, see Riggs (2012).

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