

Material Culture in Late Antique Egypt: Between Pagan Tradition and Christian Assimilation

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***Abstract:** This paper will deal with the survival of pagan material culture in Late Antique Egypt, focusing on the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The main issues considered relate to the various objects at our disposal, which in some instances have been hard to date. Moreover, even when items have been ordered into temporal categories, it has been difficult to distinguish between “religious” and “neutral” usage of material culture. The starting point of this examination will be the state of fourth-century pagan Egyptian religion, arguing that, as a lack of epigraphical material indicates a steady decline of public cult, a particular phenomenon was taking place: the “privatisation” of pagan cults, as demonstrated by the case study of Karanis. In addition, I shall focus on both apotropaic and “neutral” usage, as attested by the development of amuletic objects from the fourth to the fifth century AD. Objects of personal adornment will be analysed in relation to magical practices to verify what role decorative paraphernalia played in the survival of pagan material culture. Finally, I shall examine the syncretic process between paganism and Christianity. In particular, through the influences paganism had on Christianity, it may be possible to infer that pagan objects were still in use in late fifth-century Egypt, though with a different purpose.*

Late Antiquity witnessed Egyptian paganism diminish as a consequence of the growing popularity of Christianity. However, the pagan world was not completely supplanted, as demonstrated by the presence of pagan material culture in the fourth and fifth century AD, both from urban centres and the countryside. The aim of this essay is to establish the degree to which the material world of paganism survived into fifth-century Egypt. In order to do so, four main areas will be explored: (1) issues relating to datability and usage of objects; (2) development of pagan public practices into a “privatised” form; (3) the development of magical objects and their “neutral” usage; (4) the relationship between paganism and Christianity between the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

Firstly, I will survey the main problematics related to the study of the pagan material world in Late Antique Egypt. These issues relate to the various objects at our disposal, which in some instances have been hard to date. Moreover, even when items have been ordered into temporal categories, it has been difficult to distinguish between “religious” and “neutral” usage of material culture. Secondly, I will examine the state of fourth-century pagan Egyptian religion, arguing that, as a lack of epigraphical material indicates a steady decline of public cult, a particular phenomenon was taking place: the “privatisation” of pagan cults, as shown by the case study of Karanis. Thirdly, I shall focus on both apotropaic and “neutral” usage, as attested by the development of amuletic objects from the fourth to the fifth century AD. Objects of personal adornment will be analysed in relation to magical practices to verify what role decorative paraphernalia played in the survival of pagan material culture. Finally, I shall examine the syncretic process between paganism and Christianity. In particular, through the influences paganism had on Christianity, it may be possible to infer that pagan objects were still in use in late fifth-century Egypt, though with a different purpose.

One of the main problems surrounding pagan material culture relates to the datability of Late Egyptian findings. It can be noticed how archaeologists have tried to interpret the temporal background through mainly stylistic features. This is particularly true for those

instances in which an archaeological context has not been provided, causing difficulties in agreeing on datability.¹

Apart from accurately dated sites, such as Karanis, datability of material culture in Late Antique Egypt provides only a broad time frame.² A motivation for this can be found in the array of artistic syncretic processes, present in Egypt from the third century BC. For instance, the influences of Hellenism are often used in Egyptian art as a means of datability according to artistic trends.³ The continuous presence of Hellenistic features, however, may further highlight the difficulty of dating objects because of the time frame in which those specific artistic forms are found. Nevertheless, at times it is also possible to distinguish between traditional Egyptian and imported Greek artistic forms, which are not only perceivable in monumental art, but also in household material culture.⁴ In fact, pagan themes can also be seen in statuettes, lamps and architectural artistry of the Egyptian rural background. In terms of stylistic datability, the Late Antique syncretic process between Christianity and paganism, in which an overlapping set of themes common to both beliefs can be identified, renders a further complication.⁵

Within this context, the problems of datability identify the importance of defining the use of material culture. It is opportune to note that objects' original functions might have changed from the fourth to the fifth century AD because of the interaction between diverse beliefs (pagan, Christian, and even Jewish).⁶ For the purpose of this essay two main uses can be highlighted: religious and "neutral." On one side, a religious purpose might be the use for which objects with pagan motives were employed, thus underpinning the existence of popular piety. An example for this can be provided by the statuettes of Bes, Isis and Harpokrates often found in households within private shrines. On the other hand, a "neutral" aspect can establish the use or even reuse of certain items. At this point, the meaning of "neutral" needs to be defined within the field of material culture. Items might be used "neutrally" if they are deprived of any particular religious purpose, but utilised for secular purposes (decorative, for instance), as exemplified by some pieces of jewellery, despite retaining affiliations to religious motives.⁷

The importance of datability and usage of material culture represent the main issues connected to the scholarship of the pagan material world's survival into the fifth century AD.⁸ The examination of the condition of Egyptian pagan practices between the fourth and the fifth century AD will be our starting point to answer this question.

The study of the survival of pagan material culture in Egypt needs to be considered in relation to the condition of public religion between the fourth and fifth century AD. The most striking aspect concerning monumental architecture is linked to the decline of temples from the third century AD: at Karnak, for example, the latest inscription is from the Domitianic Era; Caracalla is the last cartouche in Lower and Middle Egypt; at Esna, the final emperor

¹ J. McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt: 300 BC to AD 700*. (New Haven and London, 2007), 262.

² R. Bagnall & D. Rathbone, *Egypt; From Alexander to the Copts*. (London, 2004) 129.

³ D. Frankfurter, 'Religion in Society: Graeco-Roman,' in ed. A. Lloyd, *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* (London, 2010), 542.

⁴ A. Badawy, *Coptic Art and Archaeology*. (Massachusetts, 1978). 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶ A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*. (New York, 2011), 705.

⁷ R. David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt*. (London, 2002), 175.

⁸ L. Nevett, 'Family and Household, Ancient History and Archaeology: A Case Study from Roman Egypt,' in ed. B. Rawson, *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (London, 2011), 30.

recorded is Decius.⁹ It is useful, at this point, to identify the main alternative use for temples fallen in disuse: civic purpose. This function for templar *loci* is supported by the Theodosian Code, according to which temples were to become secular places.¹⁰ In fact, this legal *codex* states that “temples situated in cities, towns or outside towns shall be vindicated to public use.” (*C. Th.*, 16.10.19)¹¹ Although this law was promulgated in the early fifth century, secular usage of temples reveals some antecedents. An example is offered by the temple of Luxor (Karnak), which, after falling into decay, was taken over as a military fortress in the late third century AD. Apart from a few temples still being active until the sixth century, such as the temple of Isis in Alexandria, it is possible to notice that, as public religion was diminishing, popular piety was shifting into a more private environment.¹² In fact, the lack of use of temples cannot be linked to an absence of devotion or faith, since it is hard to determine the level of religiosity within the examination of material culture.

In order to understand this phenomenon, the study of Karanis will prove of the utmost importance. Since the town was excavated, varied items were found, enhancing the comprehension of both paganism in the private sphere and of the survival of pagan material culture. In particular, many households have been found containing private shrines or niches dating back to the fifth century AD, period in which the town was abandoned.¹³ Through the study of the motives on the niche’s architectural features and the contents of the shrines, it can be said that paganism was still strong in the Fayum throughout the fourth and early fifth centuries AD.¹⁴ From the examination of semi-domes for niches, many pagan themes have been discovered depicting several divinities, such as Dionysus or representations of the rivers.¹⁵

Of great interest is also the content of the shrines, which generally consisted of statuettes and lamps. The most favourite statuary representations depicted the gods Isis, Bes and Harpokrates. Portrayal of the gods might have been employed to encourage prayerful dialogue between gods and humans.¹⁶ Like public cults, even private religion had a component of reciprocity, according to which offers were to be repaid with the god’s favour, as attested by the statuettes of the god Bes, perceived as protective tools in Egyptian households.¹⁷ Through the study of Hellenistic influences, furthermore, it can be inferred that there was an ideological differentiation between public and private practices, arguing for a more intimate relationship with the gods than in the past.¹⁸ However, statuettes were not the only objects found in private shrines. If terracotta items are broadly considered, lamps were part of the private cults within households.¹⁹ Although pagan themes might not be present on lamps, it is their use that provides an insight into the survival of pagan material culture into the fifth century AD. As mentioned above, since temples did not completely fall in disuse, lamps played a major role in the public cults, both by lighting the *naos* of the temple, but also

⁹ R. Bagnall, ‘Combat ou Vide: Christianisme et Paganisme dans l’Egypte Romaine Tardive,’ *Ktema*, 13 (1988), 286-287.

¹⁰ Public is intended as secular.

¹¹ *Codex Theodosii*, ed. and transl. C Pharr, (New York 1952). Henceforth, all references to this work are to this translation.

¹² D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. (Princeton, 1998), 30.

¹³ E.K. Gazda, Karanis: an Egyptian Town in Roman Times.

<http://www.umich.edu/~kelseydb/Exhibits/Karanis83/KaranisExcavation/KaranisExcavation.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, <http://www.umich.edu/~kelseydb/Exhibits/Karanis83/KaranisExcavation/KaranisExcavation.html>

¹⁵ McKenzie, *op. cit.*, 266.

¹⁶ T. Thomas, ‘Egyptian Art of Late Antiquity,’ in ed. A. Lloyd, *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* (London, 2010), 1059.

¹⁷ Frankfurter, *op. cit.* (3), 541.

¹⁸ H. Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt*. (Liverpool, 1957), 65.

¹⁹ Frankfurter, *op.cit.* (12), 63-64.

by being used in the major festivals.²⁰ The best documented recalls the story of Isis, who ran along the Nile finding her husband's limbs, which she collected and, finally, returned back to life.²¹ Thus, the presence and use of lamps between the fourth and the fifth century AD reveals an intermediate stage in the "privatisation" process of pagan religion in the rural areas. In fact, public religiosity was firstly transferred from the temples to the village, with its shrines and local festivals and, then, into the household sphere.²² In this setting, although lamps did not lose their religious function, the problem of usage could still be present because pagan religious themes, when they are present, do not necessarily underpin a religious function in the transition from the fourth to the fifth century AD. There might have been a "neutral" use of lamps which did not take in consideration religious practices, but focused on the practical utility of lighting environments.²³ However, the combination of pagan statuettes and lamps in private shrines - with a clear pagan religious meaning - might be relevant in comprehending how those items survived into the fifth century AD.

Within the private environment, objects of personal adornment with pagan themes occupy a significant role, especially in relation to their use. In particular, the development of their usage, from magical to "neutral," might be revealing of the survival of pagan material culture and might indicate a shifting attitude from traditional pagan customs. Although magic clearly required the use of physical objects with specific ideological features, the presence of pagan motives might not be typically revealing of an apotropaic function.²⁴ Therefore, when analysing items connected to magical practices, it is important to verify whether a "neutral" aspect had supplanted the apotropaic one. In order to describe this process, amulets will be taken into consideration, paying attention to the development of amulets from the early fourth century AD to the early fifth century AD. In particular, pagan themes on these paraphernalia can be broadly grouped into two categories: language and imagery.

The more primitive forms of amulets contain spells written on papyri and rolled into cylindrical metallic containers. Although there is often no real meaning in the words, it is possible to trace those magic formulas to pre-existing Egyptian roots and cultic practices. For instance, the *arpon chnouphi* spells, present in many spell-books, are often thought to derive from the Egyptian "Hor(us)- Khnoum."²⁵ Despite the lack of meaning, these *formulae*'s main feature is the constant alliteration, which might reproduce the cultic *formulae* of the Ancient Egyptian and Greek religions.²⁶ Thus, amulet-fashioners tried to reproduce the sound of those ancient spells, which had the purpose of providing the object with magical authoritativeness.

The second characteristic of amulets from Karanis both from the late fourth and the early fifth century AD is linked to iconography, which was based upon a pagan religious background. Although images of the common gods are not often present, there are numerous references to local gods, such as the *Ouroboros* (the cock-headed, snake-legged god).²⁷ An explanation for this typology of images might be connected to the rural nature of the amulets. In addition to this, these figures were often represented together with commoner Egyptian symbols, such as the *ankh* (cross) or *was* (sceptre), deeply rooted in the public cults.²⁸

²⁰ Badawy, *op. cit.*, 345.

²¹ A. Bownman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs*. (California, 1989), 175-176.

²² Frankfurter, *op. cit.* (12), 30.

²³ B. Johnson, *Pottery from Karanis*. (Michigan, 1981), 5.

²⁴ R. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*. (Princeton, 1993), 273.

²⁵ G. Bohak, Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity. <http://www.lib.umich.edu/traditions-magic-late-antiquity/def1.html>

²⁶ G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*. (Cambridge, 1986), 79.

²⁷ Bohak, *op. cit.*, <http://www.lib.umich.edu/traditions-magic-late-antiquity/def1.html>

²⁸ *Ibid.*, <http://www.lib.umich.edu/traditions-magic-late-antiquity/def1.html>

Since most of the amulets were based on the symbolism of the ancient religion, it can be affirmed that ancient, rural symbolism was paramount in the fashioning of amulets with a pagan apotropaic function.²⁹ Even pagan rituals reveal a great amount of amulets introduced into the bandages of deceased people as objects of good luck, demonstrating that pagan practices were still performed until the sixth century AD.³⁰ However, as mentioned above, amuletic objects might not have been used with the same purpose, particularly in the fifth century AD, since the original meaning might have shifted or changed with time. When those objects were being reused, the bearers might have not been aware of the initial apotropaic purpose, thus considered them as simple decorative items. Notwithstanding pagan popular piety's strong presence in rural areas throughout the fourth and even the fifth century AD, the date of amulets might be revealing of this phenomenon. Because some of the magical amulets in use in the fourth century AD have been dated back to the first century AD, it can be stated that the temporal distance did not allow the apotropaic use to survive. Thus, the object itself remained a simple object deprived of any supernatural feature. With the approach of the fifth century AD and the rising influence of Christianity in the countryside, the primeval pagan apotropaic function not only diminished, but was also gradually perceived as evil³¹. In this context, the contact between the system of Christian and pagan practices needs to be surveyed to highlight the development and survival of pagan material culture in Egypt and its ideological evolution.

Late Antique Egypt witnessed both pagan and Christian beliefs coexisting with each other in a relationship that did not mutually exclude one from the other. Although the existence of a syncretic process between Christianity and Egyptian paganism cannot be doubted, it is often thought that the absorption and adaption of pagan symbols was the demonstration of the victory of Christianity.³² Nevertheless, the analysis of pagan material culture in relation to Christianity can be interpreted as a shifting perception of items' use into the fifth century AD, which is strictly related to the survival and adaption of the pagan material world. The case study for this examination will be provided by the cities of Herakleopolis Magna and Oxyrinchos, in which workshops reveal important information about the use of pagan motives on both pagan and Christian carvings. Through the analysis of the material availability (marble) and stylistic feature (carving of eyes), workshops were providing the same services to both pagans and Christians.³³ This is supported by comparing the carving technique of Dionysus from Herakleopolis Magna with the angels in the wreath surrounding Christ's monogram, on a Christian semi-dome.³⁴ The most interesting aspect of this example relates to the choice of themes carved by those workshops. In fact, although motives belonging to the specific religion could have been used, it can be noted that pagan motives were employed to decorate both pagan shrines and Christian places of cult.³⁵ The most recurrent themes in Christian Churches not only relate to Dionysus and major divinities, but also to the personification of the Nile and other minor gods.³⁶ At this point, the different use of these images has to be examined to identify the reason of Christian use of pagan culture. The most sensible approach is to study the interpretation of those representations.

²⁹ David, *op. cit.*, 175.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

³¹ D. Frankfurter, 'The Perils of Love: Magic and Countermagic in Coptic Egypt,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 10, (2001), 482.

³² Bagnall, *op.cit.* (24), 285.

³³ McKenzie, *op. cit.*, 263.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

Whereas in the pagan tradition those stories were interpreted in a religious prospective, Christianity employed them with an allegorical meaning.³⁷ An illustration for this might be provided by the classical iconography of Orpheus playing to the lion, which in the niche heads in the Small Church at Herakleopolis Magna might have been intended as king David playing his lyre.³⁸

This phenomenon, though, is not only valid for architectural features, but also for commoner objects. It would be useful, then, to highlight the importance of a series of coins, dating from the early fifth century, whose original use might have been amuletic. The use of amulets in a Christian environment is supported by Chrysostom's view, according to which those who "tie bronze coins of Alexander the Great around their head and feet" for amuletic purposes are condemned. (John Chrysostom, *Ad Illuminandos Catechesis II*, 5, 49, col. 240)³⁹ Despite the theological remark, Chrysostom demonstrates how pagan practices, represented by amulets, were being adopted into Christian popular piety. The interesting aspect of this phenomenon relates to the mixture of symbols struck on them. Firstly, since they are coins, they present the image of the Emperor. The choice of using a coin with the imperial image might be underpinned by an apotropaic view, according to which the Emperor was perceived as a divine entity. Moreover, the presence of the Holy Knight killing the dragon, or King Solomon, instead, refers to Christian or Judaic iconography.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, although the carving around the image of the emperor states "Christ protect the bearer," Christ might have been perceived as an additional divinity to invoke.⁴¹ By analysing coins in the fifth century, an interesting aspect might be found in the carvings of words, which could offer a possible interpretation for the use of those objects. The presence of carvings invoking Christ, in fact, could reveal a possible Christian apotropaic function. On the contrary, coins found without invocations, but with the imperial figure, might demonstrate that they were utilised as simple objects of adornment.⁴²

Even the aforementioned terracotta figurines partook of this process of adaption: namely, the transition from the Isis *orans* to that of the Virgin Mary. In the early fifth century, it can be stated that terracotta images of Isis *orans* were being made at the same time of the Virgin.⁴³ Apart from the different religious interpretation, the main similarities between the two types of *orans* statuettes relate to the same Hellenistic-Egyptian stylistic features.⁴⁴ Therefore, there was a transition period in the fourth century from Isis holding Harpocrates to the Virgin holding Christ as a child. As with amulets, even in these cases it is possible to affirm that there was a considerable amount of craftsmanship involved in fashioning these objects, thus indicating that both Christian and pagan clients were being provided with the same services. The importance of the interpretation of these items, then, is revealing of the process and reuse of pagan symbols and objects in a Christian light, hinting at the reuse of similar set of ideas in a different interpretational system.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, *Ad Illuminandos Catechesis II*, ed. and transl. P. Harkins, (London, 1963). Henceforth, all references to this work are to this translation.

⁴⁰ M.M. Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets in Late Antiquity' in eds. Sulochana R. Asirvatham, Corinne Ondine Pache, and John Watrous, *Between Magic and Religion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society*, (New York, 2001), 142.

⁴¹ Bagnall, *op. cit.* (24), 274.

⁴² Fulghum, *op.cit.*, 141.

⁴³ L. Torok, *Coptic Antiquities I*. (Rome, 1993), 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

Through the study and analysis of the survival of pagan material culture, two main issues have been considered: datability and usage. In fact, the time period in which a specific object is assigned determines the usage for the object itself since an evolutionary process might be identified governing both usage and ideology. In terms of Egyptian material culture two main uses have been highlighted: religious and “neutral.” In this setting, the starting point for this study needs to consider the decline of public cults, drawing attention to a piety situated in the private sphere, in particular the household. The study of the private shrines and their contents demonstrate a different approach to early fifth-century religious practices, which focus on a more individualistic relationship to divinity. If the household is broadly considered, other objects with pagan themes or purposes might be found. Among these, magical amulets occupy a special position, which allows us to examine the development of use from a religious to a “neutral” perspective. From this point, the contacts between paganism and Christianity have presented a similar evolutionary process. In addition, the coexistence of the two beliefs has demonstrated that pagan objects and themes have been used with different interpretations in a different environment into the fifth century AD.

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