9

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPt RECONSIDERED

The cases of Alexandria, Panopolis, and Philae

Jitse H. F. Dijkstra

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
DOI: 10.4324/9781315387666-13

The OA chapter is funded by: Australian Research Council
RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT RECONSIDERED

The cases of Alexandria, Panopolis, and Philae*

Jitse H. F. Dijkstra

Introduction: towards a new narrative of religious violence in late antique Egypt

Among the splendid Raphael rooms in the Vatican is the Hall of Constantine, which depicts four scenes from the life of Constantine illustrating the triumph of the Church. On the ceiling in the middle of this room is the famous painting *Triumph of the Cross*, completed in 1585 by Tommaso Laureti. We see a statue of a “pagan” god smashed to pieces on the ground and replaced with the cross (Figure 9.1):1

This captivating image of a violent clash between “pagans” and Christians from which the new religion rapidly emerged triumphant has long characterised studies of the religious transformation from the ancient religions to Christianity in late antiquity, the period from the fourth to seventh centuries C.E.2 Inspired by the work of Peter Brown, however, since the 1980s scholars have abandoned the monolithic view of a period dominated by a stark Christian-“pagan” conflict and a rapid transition to Christianity in favour of a more intricate web of religious interactions in a world that only gradually became Christian.3 Nevertheless, the idea that religious violence was endemic in the late antique world has remained influential. Our sources are full of book burnings, temple and statue destructions, and inter- and intra-religious violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a world where religious violence is so on our minds, the topic has received much attention in the last ten years and is currently one of the most hotly debated issues in Late Antique Studies.4

Despite a growing awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon, all of these studies have “violence” and/or “religion” (or similar words) in their titles without defining or even discussing the terms. This is surprising since both terms are highly complex and problematic, as demonstrated in a stream of recent publications in Religious Studies analysing cases of religious violence in their modern contexts. If we concentrate on violence alone, for example, it can encompass a...
diversity of actions, from verbal abuse to actual physical violence. Moreover, these studies show that – despite the recent arguments proposed by Egyptologist and cultural historian, Jan Assmann, that religious violence is rooted in monotheism – the phenomenon exists in all places and times and even where violence is cast in religious terms, other factors (political, psychological, social, economic) are almost always involved. Consequently, religious violence needs to be analysed on a case-by-case basis and in the context of the particular local and historical circumstances in which it arises, a theoretical premise that has now also been applied to late antiquity.

Such a nuanced understanding of religious violence fits in well with two recent trends within the field. First of all, scholars of Late Antique Studies are becoming increasingly critical of the (mostly Christian) literary accounts that describe violence between Christians and “pagans.” For example, one of the most detailed texts describing a temple destruction, the *Life of Porphyry*, by Mark the Deacon – while purporting to describe events in Gaza ca. 400 – has now been shown to date to the sixth century, which strongly diminishes its trustworthiness. The deconstruction of the literary evidence goes hand in hand with the increasing availability of large amounts of archaeological data. Until not too long ago, the picture of what happened to the temples in late antiquity was strongly influenced by a
seminal study of Friedrich Deichmann who collected 89 cases of temple conversion and laid down a historical narrative in which violence against temples and their conversion into churches was a widespread phenomenon in the fourth and fifth centuries. The archaeological evidence that has now been collected for most parts of the Roman Empire, however, shows overwhelmingly that the destruction of temples and their reuse as churches were exceptional rather than routine events, and merely two aspects of the changing sacred landscape in late antiquity.

I am currently working on a project that will build on these recent trends by conducting the first book-length study of religious violence in late antique Egypt. Thus far the idea that violence, in particular against temples and statues, was widespread in late antique Egypt has been persistent. To quote the much-discussed study Religion in Roman Egypt by David Frankfurter: “the gutting and conversion of traditional Egyptian temples, often still functioning, was a widespread phenomenon in Egypt during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.” My regional study of the process of religious transformation from the Ancient Egyptian religion to Christianity in the First Cataract region in southern Egypt, which exhaustively studies all sources from Philae and the two other towns in the region, Aswan and Elephantine, is a strong counter-argument against such views. It argues that the religious transformation in the whole region, including Philae, consisted of a gradual and complex process that was essentially peaceful. The present project extends the picture of a complex and gradual process of religious transformation, in which religious violence only occasionally occurred in specific local or regional circumstances, to Egypt as a whole.

Focusing on Egypt has the advantage that a wealth and variety of sources can be taken into account not found elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In addition to literary works, there is an abundance of inscriptions and extremely well-preserved archaeological material as well as papyri, a category of evidence preserved almost exclusively in Egypt. The project aims to bridge the gap between the ideological story of the literature and the evidence from other sources, in particular the archaeology. Part of the evidence is already presented in my study of the fate of the temples in late antique Egypt, in which I demonstrate, by confronting the literary works with the other sources available, that what happened to Egyptian temples conforms entirely to the complex picture that is now well established for the rest of the late antique world. By placing the incidents in a regional context of religious transformation as opposed to a context of violence, I hope to challenge the still pervasive view in current scholarship that religious violence was widespread in late antiquity. In the end, this project will not result in a dramatic picture of religious violence in late antique Egypt, such as now popularised in the Hollywood movie Agora (2009), but it will lead to an infinitely more accurate understanding of the complexity and diversity of this fascinating phenomenon.

In this chapter I shall take a closer look at three iconic events that have been well documented in literature and at first sight might seem to confirm the impression that violence was widespread in late antique Egypt: the destruction of the
Serapeum at Alexandria in 391/392, the anti-“pagan” crusade of Abbot Shenoute in the region of Panopolis ca. 400, and the closure of the Isis temple at Philae in 535–537. In fact, these events have often been quoted as perfectly illustrating the pervasive nature of religious violence in the late antique world. As I shall argue, when we take away the emphasis on violence and a stark Christian vs. “pagan” conflict that is so characteristic of the literary works and include the other sources available, and when we place the events in their regional contexts, a more nuanced picture arises, which shows that the representation of religious violence in the literary sources is based more on “wishful thinking” than reality.

The “destruction” of the Serapeum at Alexandria

The first case that I wish to discuss, that of the Serapeum, in many ways constitutes an exception among the cases of religious violence to be discussed from elsewhere in Egypt. This is because Alexandria, with its huge, multi-ethnic population – one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire – had a long history of urban violence, a setting that is decidedly different from the Egyptian countryside, the *chora*, where violence was not present to the same extent. One only has to think of the tensions between the Jews and Greeks in the years 38–41, which the Emperor Claudius tried to ease in his famous letter to the Alexandrians.\(^7\) In his important study, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*, Johannes Hahn has convincingly demonstrated that outbreaks of religious violence in late antique Alexandria should not be seen in exclusively religious terms, as many of our literary sources do, but rather as a socio-political phenomenon arising from deep-seated social tensions. For example, he sees the disturbances in the capital during the episcopate of George of Cappadocia (357–361), including an earlier plundering of the Serapeum and eventually the lynching of George himself, not so much as a Christian-“pagan” conflict but rather as a direct result of the rift caused by the imperial appointment of this controversial Arian bishop.\(^18\)

The so-called destruction of the Serapeum, about thirty years later, is perhaps the best-documented case of religious violence in the late antique world. We have no fewer than four accounts by the church historians Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret, and even a non-Christian account, by the sophist Eunapius, which were all written within slightly over half a century of the incident.\(^19\) Yet these accounts offer a far from consistent reconstruction of the events and contradict each other on numerous points. As we shall shortly see, not even its exact date is known. Hahn has done an admirable job in teasing out the evidence and placing the incident within its socio-political context.\(^20\) In two respects, however, I think his analysis can still be improved on.

First of all, unlike previous scholarship, in particular the excellent study by Françoise Thelamon, who relied heavily on the earliest Christian account by Rufinus in 401/402,\(^21\) Hahn is highly critical of Rufinus and places great weight instead on Socrates (writing between 439 and 443).\(^22\) Whereas Hahn is right that we have to take into account the triumphal overtones in Rufinus, Socrates’ version is even
more problematic in that it starts with an alleged edict by the Emperor Theodosius I giving *carte blanche* to Bishop Theophilus to destroy the temples in Alexandria. It is only after the destruction of the Serapeum that riots break out with the “pagans.” If one looks at imperial legislation regarding temples during the fourth century as preserved in book 16 of the *Codex Theodosianus*, however, it is clear that such an edict could never have been promulgated. Imperial policy before 435 was not aimed at the destruction of temples and the emperor would certainly not have given powers to act against temples to a local bishop. On 16 June 391, an edict was indeed promulgated at Alexandria, forbidding sacrifice and the access to temples and this law has often been directly connected to the Serapeum incident. However, this law does not, and could not, call for the destruction of temples and should merely be taken as a *terminus post quem* for the Serapeum incident, which makes Socrates’ version of the events highly suspect.

The second point is that Hahn, while giving pride of place to Socrates, adds elements from the other accounts in order to provide a coherent picture of the events. However, a sounder historical method would be to discuss the accounts in chronological sequence, starting with the earliest preserved account, the one by Eunapius in 399, and paying detailed attention to the interrelations between the sources. While we have to leave such a close literary analysis to another occasion, it can be said in general that the order of events as described by Rufinus seems the most plausible: an incident involving the Christian reuse of a former temple leads to riots, which soon centre on the Serapeum complex, where the violence gets out of hand and is directed against the temple, leading to the end of its cults. The involvement of the highest imperial authorities in Egypt, the governor (*praefectus augustalis*) Evagrius and the highest military commander (*comes Aegypti*) Romanus, and an imperial rescript sent in response to the riots, seem in line with how the state would respond to such a situation and, although it cannot have taken the form Rufinus gives it — that the Christians who died are to be considered martyrs and should not be avenged, and that the “cause of the trouble” should be taken away (which is clearly interpreted here as an order to destroy the Serapeum) — a more neutral imperial order to make an end to the public disorder is likely.

Concerning the other accounts, it is clear that Socrates’ account is a condensed version of Rufinus, reversing the events (Rufinus: riots — rescript — destruction; Socrates: edict — destruction — riots). No doubt he does this in an effort to provide a clearer cause for the destruction of the Serapeum, in which he could have interpreted the edict of 391 in hindsight as providing the trigger for the incident by making imperial involvement into an outright imperial order to destroy the temples. He does add an eyewitness account from two of his teachers in Constantinople, Helladius and Ammonius, who had fled after the incident, showing the impact that the event had on the Alexandrian philosophical schools. Sozomen relies mostly on Rufinus for the chronology but replaces the rescript with Socrates’ imperial call for the destruction of all Alexandrian temples. Finally, Theodoret’s version, which starts from an Empire-wide edict to destroy temples, focuses entirely on Theophilus and embellishes Rufinus’ scene of the striking of
the statue of Serapis by adding that mice came out of it, is so concocted that it is hardly useful for reconstructing the events.

What we are left with after a close reading of the sources is disappointingly little: a general sense of how the events unfolded, in which the chain of events as described by Rufinus is the most likely, with the Alexandrian church under Bishop Theophilus and some Greek philosophers in opposing camps, and the imperial authorities trying to do something about the situation. Because of the literary colouring of the events, which are presented, even in Eunapius, in clear Christian-“pagan” terms, precise details are forever lost to us and we can only speculate about what is the most plausible scenario.

There are two sources that have the potential to shed further light on these literary accounts, however. The first of these is the archaeological evidence studied in recent years by the Oxford team under Judith McKenzie. On the basis of previous excavations and their own observations of what little is left of the foundations, it has been possible to reconstruct both the Ptolemaic- and Roman-phase temple and to refine its building history.29 The work of McKenzie and her team has also led to some clarifications regarding the fate of the Serapeum in the fourth century.30 No new structures were added to the temple precinct at this time, which argues against the account of Sozomen who states that under Arcadius (395–408) a church was built inside the temple.31 Moreover, architecturally it would have been difficult to turn the Serapis temple into a church. Remains of Christian buildings, including a church, have been found west of the temple terrain, which seems in line with Rufinus’ remark that churches were built on either side of the Serapeum, though where the other church was located remains unclear.32 The extent to which the Serapeum was destroyed will probably remain an unresolved question. In any case, in the Arab period the colonnade surrounding the temple was still intact and it seems most probable that the temple was not immediately destroyed but – having been deprived of its primary function – only gradually dismantled over time.33

The second source to be considered is the “Alexandrian World Chronicle.” This fragmentary illustrated papyrus codex is best known for its leaf (fol. VI) containing a list of consuls of 383–392 C.E. with occasional historical entries. It includes, on its back side, an entry on the destruction of the Serapeum listed under the year 392, with in the left margin a famous depiction of the victorious Bishop Theophilus on top of the Serapeum, and another illustration of the temple in the lower right corner (Figure 9.2).

In his 2006 article, Hahn has argued at length that the entry proves that the incident took place in 392.34 His arguments are based on the assumption that this is the last leaf of the manuscript and that the work dates to shortly after 412, that is, fairly close to the events. As this was the last entry of the work, it formed a “grand finale,” highlighting the triumph of the Alexandrian church. Therefore the scribe could not possibly have made an error in the date, which must be 392, more specifically before April of that year when Evagrius, who as we have seen was involved in the event and is also mentioned as the governor of Egypt for this year in the papyrus, was out of office.35
A detailed study of the text undertaken with my colleague Richard Burgess, however, has revealed that this text cannot be used for dating the event, first and foremost because the papyrus dates to the second half of the sixth century, not shortly after 412, and is thus significantly removed in time from the event it is recording. Furthermore, the work would almost certainly not have ended with the 392 entry but rather continued until the time of compilation in the sixth century, as we know is the case with such chronicle texts. Finally, the other historical entries in the same text are full of mistakes, increasing the likelihood that this date, too, is incorrect. Thus, the date has been opened up again to between 16 June 391,
the date of the edict of Theodosius I, and 8 April 392, the latest possible date of Evagrius being in office. The illustration does provide us with an interesting, sixth-century Christian perspective on the event, which already developed at an early stage, of Theophilus making a definitive end to the “pagan” cults in the city.

**Shenoute of Atripe’s anti-“pagan” crusade**

Our second case is that of Shenoute (ca. 385–465), the main author of Coptic literature and abbot of the homonymous monastery situated on the west bank of the Nile at Panopolis (modern Akhmim), commonly referred to as the White Monastery. In his classic study of Shenoute, the German Coptologist Johannes Leipoldt made Shenoute into a religious fanatic, roaming the countryside on the lookout to destroy temples: “The Copts of his time had only one passion: this was the hatred against the ‘Greeks’, the pagans. And this hatred restlessly stirred up Shenoute and aroused in him the blazing flame to reduce one temple after the other to ashes.”

His view has been extremely persistent, witness for example the words of David Bell, the translator of the Bohairic Life of Shenoute into English, who – parroting an earlier characterization of Shenoute by Émile Amélineau – describes him as “an erupting volcano: an impressive sight, though not necessarily a pretty one.”

Meanwhile, however, the lifelong work of Stephen Emmel on the dispersed and ruined works of Shenoute has placed the study of his literary corpus on a new footing and an international effort led by Emmel is underway of making it systematically available to the scholarly world. While definitive conclusions must await further study of Shenoute’s works, Emmel has conducted a meticulous analysis of all available passages on religious violence in the Shenoutian corpus. His study shows that there is only one secure case of a temple destruction in Shenoute’s works, that of the temple of Atripe, in which idols were destroyed and the temple was set on fire. Shenoute was also, albeit rather indirectly, involved in the “destruction” of another temple, that of Pneueit, in which he defended in court at Antinoopolis some Christians who had been accused of the demolition. Shenoute is most well known, however, for his actions against the local aristocrat Gessios, whom he singles out as a “pagan.” According to his own version of the events, Shenoute stole into his house at night, robbed him of his house statues and threw them into the Nile.

It has been assumed since Leipoldt, without any good grounds, that following its “destruction” Shenoute dismantled the temple of Atripe (Greek Athribis) and reused the blocks in his monastery, where reused materials are still visible today (Figure 9.3). A recent archaeological investigation of the temple of Athribis demonstrates, however, that Shenoute could not have completely dismantled the temple. This picture is confirmed by a study of the spolia reused in the Shenoute Monastery, which derive not from one but various different monuments that were probably no longer functioning by the mid-fifth century. Among the reused materials some slabs from the temple of Atripe have indeed been detected, but they only come from its roof and certainly do not provide evidence for extensive reuse of building material from this site. In fact, the temple was largely left intact and
gradually incorporated into the adjacent nunnery, also part of the monastic network of Shenoute, from the early fifth century onwards, which suggests that – as we might expect at this time – this temple, too, was no longer in use for Ancient Egyptian cults and practices.42

As with the “destruction” of the Serapeum, we should therefore be cautious in assuming wholesale destruction of temple buildings and idols out of religious frenzy. While the incidents described in Shenoute’s works no doubt go back to actual events, the image of Shenoute as an anti-“pagan” crusader does not hold and is clearly more rhetoric than reality. In this case too, more was at stake than purely religious motivations. In fact, as a recent study by Ariel López shows, the anti-“pagan” measures of Shenoute can be placed in the context of his power struggle with the local elite at Panopolis on the other side of the Nile, as embodied especially in Gessios.43 That Shenoute’s actions were not always uncontroversial appears from the indignant reactions to the nightly raid on Gessios’ house, after which Shenoute had to write an open letter to the citizens of Panopolis to defend his deed.44

**The closure of the temple of Isis at Philae**

The last case that we shall consider is that of the Isis temple at Philae. The famous temple island has often been considered as an exceptional story.45 Due to its location on the southern Egyptian frontier, Philae retained its traditional attraction to the southern peoples from the other side of the frontier, the Blemmyes and Nobades, and managed to stay open for much longer than any other major Egyptian

---

*Figure 9.3* The church of the Shenoute Monastery, showing reused columns.  
*Source:* McKenzie, *Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, Fig. 453.
temple. It is here that we find the last inscriptions in the Ancient Egyptian scripts hieroglyphic and demotic, dating to 394 and 452, respectively. It is interesting to observe, however, that despite these special circumstances it has been presupposed that the end of the cults at Philae also occurred in a context of religious violence—a situation that is usually more associated with the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, the time of the Serapeum incident and Shenoute. According to this picture, the “last bastion of pagan worship” remained open until 535–537 when the Emperor Justinian himself had to intervene to close it. This picture is based on the account by the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius, who writes:

These barbarians retained the temples on Philae right down to my day, but the Emperor Justinian decided to destroy them. Accordingly, Narses, . . . destroyed the temples on the emperor’s orders, held the priests under guard, and sent the statues to Byzantium.46

In an influential article published in 1967, the Patristics scholar Pierre Nautin connected this incident to the dedicatory inscriptions of a church of St. Stephen inside the temple, especially the one next to the door leading towards the main sanctuary or naos, which says: “The cross has conquered, it always conquers!” (Figure 9.4).47

Figure 9.4 I.Phila II 201.
Source: photo J.H.F. Dijkstra.
In Nautin’s view the Christian community on the island, annoyed by the con-
tinuation of the “pagan” cults until such a late date, must have felt a sense of
triumph when they finally entered the holiest part of the temple, the naos. Their
feelings were embodied in the inscription of the conquering cross. According
to Nautin, this inscription therefore has to be taken quite literally: in a pious
ceremony the bishop of Philae, Theodore, would have brought a cross inside
the naos and erected it there to replace the cult image of Isis: “from then on,
the whole island was for the Christians.” 48 The circle is complete: we are back
at the evocative image of the Triumph of the Cross with which we started this
chapter.

My study of the religious transformation in the region of Aswan, based on all
available sources from the region, has disentangled many presuppositions that
have contributed to this triumphalist image, which has made the reuse of the tem-
ple of Isis into perhaps the most famous case of a temple conversion in Egypt.49
First of all, Procopius’ account is not unproblematic. As everyone can still see
today, the Isis temple is among the best-preserved temples in Egypt. It could not
therefore have been “destroyed,” as Procopius says, although most scholars have
recognised this and speak only of a “closure” of the temple. 50 The historian also
gives the impression that the southern peoples continued to worship Isis undis-
turbed until the sixth century, but this completely ignores the impact that Chris-
tianity must have had on the island. Philae probably had a see from as early as
330 onwards and a cathedral church, known as the East Church, was situated on
the northern part of the island. This means that Christians and worshippers of Isis
lived peacefully side by side for over a century. At the same time, the expansion
of Christianity at Philae conforms entirely to similar developments in the rest of
the region or, for that matter, in Egypt as a whole.

Moreover, my analysis of the no less than thirty-five inscriptions in demotic
and Greek from the last priests of Isis indicate that the Ancient Egyptian cults
already show signs of contraction and isolation from the early fourth century
onwards. When the last inscription was incised, significantly written in Greek
in 456/457, a continuous recording by these priests from time immemorial came
to an end, so that it is highly likely that cultic practice stopped soon after, if not
in the same year.51 As a result, the closure that Procopius describes, some eighty
years later, cannot have been more than a symbolic closure – we know that Justin-
ian closed other temples for show – which was no doubt fuelled by the imperial
propaganda machine. In this context, the dedication of the church of St Stephen
need not directly have followed the temple closure, as the inscriptions that record
the dedication are undated and mention Theodore, who was bishop of Philae until
after 577. Probably, then, the decision to turn the temple into a church was made
by the bishop, in which a new purpose had to be found for an abandoned building.
Viewing the reuse of the temple in more practical terms also ties in better with
the architectural reconstruction by Peter Grossman, which indicates that rather
than the naos, as was assumed by Nautin, the pronaoi was turned into a three-
aisled church.52 We have therewith placed the reuse of the temple of Isis in a local
context rather than regarding it as a triumph of Christianity over still thriving Ancient Egyptian cults.53

A second, even less reliable literary source on the end of the cults at Philae exists in the form of the Coptic Life of Aaron. The Life, which describes events taking place in the fourth and early fifth century but was written down in the sixth century, contains an entertaining story of the first bishop of Philae, Macedonius (ca. 343). Having been freshly appointed by Bishop Athanasius in Alexandria, he travels south and enters the island, which is still dominated by idol worshippers, incognito. He approaches the altar where sacrifices are made and ambiguously asks the sons of the temple priest, who happens to be away on some business, to sacrifice to “God.” As the sons are preparing the fire, he goes to the cage where the sacred falcon is kept, takes it out, cuts off its head and throws the bird into the fire: thus the old god is sacrificed to the new God. At first, Macedonius has to flee but eventually a miracle results in the conversion of the entire island to Christianity. Since we know that the falcon cult was still practiced into the fifth century and the island only became Christian gradually, this story is purely legendary. On the other hand, it does have historical value as the perspective of a later, sixth-century audience on how its community had become Christian.54

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed three cases that have been taken as exemplary for widespread religious violence in late antique Egypt or even for the pervasive nature of religious violence in the late antique world. Each of these three cases is well documented in Christian literature, and even secular literature (Eunapius, Procopius), which describes the violence in dramatic terms as a direct consequence of Christian – “pagan” conflict, thus seemingly confirming the picture that the fourth and fifth centuries saw a struggle between the old and the new religion, leading to Christian triumph.

As it now becomes more and more accepted in Late Antique Studies to discard the triumphalist overtones of our Christian sources and to view religious transformation as a gradual and complex process, in which violence only rarely erupted, these cases have been re-evaluated. It has been argued that, if we take away the emphasis on violence and take proper account of the other sources available (inscriptions, papyri, and material remains), it becomes clear that all three incidents occurred in specific local, socio-political circumstances: the Serapeum incident arose from the explosive situation in the capital, perhaps induced but not necessarily directly related to the imperial edict of June 391, the anti-“pagan” rhetoric of Shenoute needs to be seen in the context of his power struggle with the local elite and the closure of the Isis temple at Philae was probably no more than a propaganda stunt of Justinian’s that would have had a minimal effect on a local level. We have also seen that in each case, the literary sources speak of a “destruction” of temples and idols, whereas in reality the violence was something less extreme. At Philae there are no signs at all of destruction, whereas in Atripe
the “destruction” by Shenoute could have consisted at most of starting a fire in an abandoned building. Finally, the Serapeum was not as thoroughly destroyed as suggested in the sources, although it is impossible to evaluate the extent to which initial damage was done. The impact of the event cannot be underestimated, however, and was soon perceived as the total triumph of the Alexandrian church.

All in all, I hope that my project – by bridging the gap between the ideological discourse in the literature and the other sources, especially material remains, and by placing the incidents against a wider background of religious transformation – will put these and other events into their proper contexts. Rather than assuming widespread violence from the start, it will address the question why religious violence broke out at all and under what special circumstances. The resulting picture will not be one of a particularly violent society but it will provide clearer insights into why ancient authors used a violent discourse and what factors led to this rhetoric spilling over into reality. The powerful image of Agora can thus be discarded, but the much more complex reality behind it makes religious violence an all the more interesting phenomenon to study.

Notes


1 This painting is also briefly mentioned by T. Myrup Kristensen, Making and Breaking the Gods: Christian Responses to Pagan Sculpture in Late Antiquity, Aarhus Studies in Medieval Antiquity 12 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013), 16.


8 E.g. S. Emmel, U. Gotter, and J. Hahn, ‘‘From Temple to Church’: Analysing a Late Antique Phenomenon of Transformation,’’ in Hahn, Emmel and Gotter, From Temple to Church, 1–22; R.S. Bagnall, “Models and Evidence in the Study of Religion in Late Antique Egypt,’’ in Hahn, Emmel and Gotter, From Temple to Church, 25–32; L. Lavan, “The End of the Temples: Towards a New Narrative?’’ in The Archaeology of Late Antique “Paganism,’’ ed. L. Lavan and M. Mulryan, Late Antique Archaeology 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), xv–lxv.


The project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. As the examples mentioned thus far show, I shall clearly limit my topic to religious violence against the Ancient Egyptian religion, in particular temples, statues, and “pagans,” and not venture into intra-religious, Christian violence, which would require a separate project. For now, see e.g. Isele, Kampf um Kirchen, 113–92 on Alexandria.


13 Frankfurter, Religion in Roman Egypt, 265.


15 J.H.F. Dijkstra, “The Fate of the Temples in Late Antique Egypt,” in Lavan and Mulryan, Archaeology of Late Antique “Paganism,” 389–436, a shortened and adapted


24 See the balanced overview of imperial policy on temples by J. Hahn, “Gesetze als Waffen? Die kaiserliche Religionspolitik und die Zerstörung von Tempel,” the concluding chapter (pp. 201–20) of the edited volume *Staat und religiöser Konflikt*, on which see the review by J.H.F. Dijkstra, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6 (2013): 191–4. The first decree to advocate the destruction of temples is the one by Theodosius II in 435 (*C.Th.* 16.10.25).


31 Sozomen, Hist. eccl. 7.15.10 (GCS NF 4.321.19–20).

32 Rufinus, Hist. eccl. 11.27 (GCS NF 6.1033.16–17).

33 Dijkstra, “Fate of the Temples,” 399.

34 Hahn, “Wann wurde das Sarapeion.”

35 Evagrius is mentioned in the accounts of Eunapius, V. Soph. 6.108 (Goulet, 40.5) and Sozomen, Hist. eccl. 7.15.5 (GCS NF 4.320.16) and was succeeded by Hypatius on 9 April 392, as appears from C.Th. 11.36.1 = C.J. 1.4.6. See PLRE I s.v. Evagrius 7 (p. 286) and Hypatius 3 (p. 448).


41 Leipoldt, Schenute von Atripe, 92–3, with n. 1. This view is still found e.g. in P. Grossmann, “Tempel als Ort des Konflikts in christlicher Zeit,” in Le temple, lieu de conflit, ed. P. Borgeaud et al., Les Cahiers du Centre d’étude du Proche-Orient ancien 7 (Leuven: 227


44 For text and translation of this work, known by its incipit as *Let Our Eyes*, see Emmel, “Schenoute of Atripe and the Christian Destruction of Temples in Egypt,” 182–97. For a discussion of Shenoute’s raids on Gessios’ house, see the same article, pp. 166–81.


47 *I.Philae II* 200–204; quoted here is no. 201.


49 Emmel, Gotter and Hahn, “‘From Temple to Church.’” 12: “possibly Philae represents the only completely unambiguous case of an immediate take-over in cultic use from an active pagan temple to a regular church.”


51 *I.Philae II* 199.


54 I am currently preparing a new critical edition of this work, together with J. van der Vliet, for the announcement of which, see J.H.F. Dijkstra, “Monasticism on the Southern Egyptian Frontier in Late Antiquity: Towards a New Critical Edition of the Coptic *Life of Aaron*,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 5 (2013): 31–47. For the passage of Macedonius and the holy falcon of Philae, see now Dijkstra, “‘I Wish to Offer a Sacrifice to God Today,’” which also places it in the context of other stories of idol destruction in Egyptian hagiographical literature.

Bibliography


Bell, D.N. *Besa, the Life of Shenoute*. Cistercian Studies 73. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983.


Emmel, S., U. Gotter, and J. Hahn. “‘From Temple to Church’: Analysing a Late Antique Phenomenon of Transformation.” Pages 1–22 in From Temple to Church.


Lavan, L. and M. Mulryan, eds. The Archaeology of Late Antique “Paganism.” Late Antique Archaeology 7. Leiden: Brill, 2011.


