The Cultural Manifestations
of Religious Experience

Studies in Honour of Boyo G. Ockinga

Edited by Camilla Di Biase-Dyson
and Leonie Donovan

in cooperation with
Heike Behlmer, Julien Cooper, Brenan Dew,
Alice McClymont, Kim McCorquodale and Ellen Ryan
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Herausgegeben von Stefan Jakob Wimmer und Wolfgang Zwickel
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THE CULTURAL MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE


**OTHER ABBREVIATIONS**

*ÄM* Prefix for registration number, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin

*AR* Altes Reich

*Abb.* Abbildung

*BM* Prefix for registration, British Museum, London

*bes.* besonders

*bzw.* beziehungsweise

*c.* *circa*, about, approximately

*cf.* confer, compare

*DeM* Deir el-Medina

*d. h.* das heißt

*Diam.* diameter

*DZA* Digitalisiertes Zettelarchiv

*ed.* editor, edition

*eds* editors

*EK* El-Kab

*et al.* *et alii*, and others

*evtl.* eventuell

*fig.* figure

*figs* figures

*H.* height

*Hrsg.* Herausgeber

*JdE, JE* Journal d’Entrée, Egyptian Museum, Cairo

*Kol.* Kolumne

*KV* Kings’ Valley

*L.* length

*M.a.W.* Mit anderen Worten

*MFA* Prefix for registration number, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*MR* Mittleres Reich

*n.* note

*n.d.* no date

*NR* Neues Reich

*O.* Ostracon

*o. ä.* oder ähnliches

*OIM* Prefix for registration number, Oriental Institute Museum, Univ. of Chicago

*P.* Papyrus

*pl.* plate

*pls* plates

*PN* Personenname, personal name
THE CULTURAL MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

QV Queens’ Valley
rto recto
s. siehe
s. a. siehe auch
s. o. siehe oben
s. v. sub voce
Sp. Spalte
Taf. Tafel
TLA Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae
TT Theban Tomb
u. a. und andere, unter anderem
u. ä. und ähnlich
UC Prefix for registration number, University College, London
var. variant
vgl. vergleiche
vso verso
W. width
Z. Zeile
z. B. zum Beispiel
z. T. zum Teil
ZwZt Zwischenzeit
Christianity at Mut al-Kharab (ancient Mothis), Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt

Gillian Bowen, Monash University, Melbourne

The Christianisation of Dakhleh Oasis was well underway in the early fourth century. This is attested by the architectural remains of seven churches that can be confidently dated to that time,1 numerous papyri from Ismant al-Kharab, ancient Kellis, which indicate a Christian presence in the village by 319,2 as well as a three Christian cemeteries, one estimated to have between 3,500 and 4,000 graves that ceramic evidence indicates spans the late third and fourth centuries.3 The abandonment of Kellis at the end of the fourth century provides a terminus ante quem for the use of the cemetery.4 There are scant remains of a Christian presence at Mothis, the capital of the oasis in the period under discussion. This is primarily because the modern city, and present-day capital, Mut, has been built upon the ancient remains. There is one area of Mut with the visible remains of ancient structures that, along with its surrounding ancient cemeteries, was safeguarded by the Supreme Council of Antiquities, but which was appropriated as the city’s rubbish dump. Consequently, many of the late structures are in a bad state of preservation. The site, which is within the temple enclosure walls, is known as Mut al-Kharab, Mut the Ruined, and it is here that traces of a Christian presence can be found.

Monash University excavations under the direction of Colin Hope have been underway at Mut al-Kharab since 2000. The site was occupied from the Early Dynastic period and from the Eighteenth Dynasty through Ptolemaic and Roman times it was the location of the Temple of Seth.5 At some unknown point the worship of Seth within his temple ceased to function and the site was reused for other purposes. The buildings from Late Antiquity and beyond have mostly gone, or have not as yet been identified; the existence of a church within the temple temenos, however, is confirmed by a number of architectural elements that have been retrieved.6

In 1980 the site was investigated by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) as part of the survey and in his report the director, Anthony Mills, wrote:

A number of heavy architectural pieces of stone were also noted on the surface. These include several capitals and other blocks. As they are all in the same yellow limestone and all are finished in the same hammer dressing, it is presumed that they belong to a single building.7

Amongst the stone architectural fragments mentioned by Mills was a substantial section of architrave with a Greek inscription above a six-branch cross (FIGURE 1). The architrave had been noted and recorded in the 1970s and was subsequently published by Guy Wagner.8 The inscription, which is incomplete and damaged, was translated by Wagner to read ‘Dieu garde notre seigneur...’; which he

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1 Bowen (2002: 65–85); (2003: 153–165); Aravecchia (2012: 391–408); Bagnall and Cribiore (2012: 409–415). Three churches have been found at Kellis, one at ‘Ain al-Sebil and one at each ‘Ain al-Gedida, Amhida (ancient Trimithis) and Dayr Abu Matta.
4 Hope (2001a).
6 The exploration of the Christian monuments at Mut al-Kharab is funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant awarded to C.A. Hope, G.E. Bowen (Monash University) and I. Gardner (University of Sydney).
8 Wagner (1976: 288).
suggests alludes to God’s protection of an unknown Byzantine emperor;9 Andrew Connor, working only from the image herein, concurs with Wagner’s translation: ‘God will protect/watch over the lord…’.10

The current location of the architrave is unknown but several sections from stone column shafts, two complete with bases, were still to be found on the surface of the site when the current excavations began;11 these have since been recorded in full. A section from a pedestal was recovered during the 2011 field season; there is an inscription on the base that reads ΧΡΗΣΤΙΑΝΕ or ΧΡΗΣΤΙΑΝΣ (FIGURES 2 and 3). Once again the translation is uncertain as the final letter is damaged but it clearly relates to Christians.

As Mills noted, the fragments are cut from a dense, fossil-rich limestone that contrasts significantly with the soft local sandstone used in the construction of the Temple of Seth. According to a local inspector, the source of the stone is Hindhaw, a village located a few kilometers to the north of Mut. The use of limestone elements is characteristic of some Egyptian churches dated to the fourth and fifth centuries. McKenzie has noted the extensive use of limestone and/or marble for columns, capitals and certain decorative elements in major purpose-built churches in the Nile valley and the Delta. These include the Small Church at Herakleopolis Magna, the surviving elements from Christian monuments at Oxyrhynchus and the columns of the White Monastery. Red granite was used for columns at the Red Monastery and the church at Hermopolis Magna, the latter with limestone capitals, whereas the remaining decoration, including some capitals, friezes and niche heads, were carved in local sandstone. The late fourth century South Church at Bawit had granite columns and high quality carved limestone decoration, while the column shafts and capitals of the Main Church at Apa Jeremiah monastery, Saqqara, were of local limestone, as well as reused architectural elements of marble and granite. The churches at Pelusium and Abu Menia in the Delta also had marble capitals.12 The presence of stone columns and decoration at Mothis suggests that at least one church at the site followed the tradition of using limestone elements that is well established in Egypt. The use of limestone is not found in the other churches that have been excavated or surveyed in Dakhleh, all of which were constructed in mud brick, including their colonnades.

A number of carved architectural elements in sandstone have also been retrieved from the excavations at Mut al-Kharab. Their decoration indicates that they belong to the Late Antique period and were presumably from a church. They include a fragment with a small cross enclosed within a circle, two fragments with carved four-petal rosettes probably within a vine motif (FIGURE 4), found in Trench 25, and part of a frieze retrieved from the neighbouring Trench 26 (FIGURES 5 and 6).

Rosettes/flowers are a common decorative element in Christian sculpture but are usually represented with more than four petals. Other representation of four-petalled flowers are to be found in the church in the Temple of Hathor at Dendera and on blocks from one of the churches within the Luxor temple complex.13 The carved element from the frieze is unusual in that it represents an olive and stylised palm. The stylised palm is well attested in Christian art but the vegetative elements that were used in the major churches are the vine and acanthus leaf; these are found in profusion in sculpture and also appear in paintings and on textiles. Olive branches do occur on marble capitals from Alexandria, generally dated to the early sixth century, where they replace the acanthus leaves; McKenzie notes that these are common in Egypt.14 Olives, along with dates, were a major crop of the oasis and their representation is a valid addition to the artistic repertoire of the region.15

The location of the church within the temple temenos at Mut al-Kharab is not known. It should be east-west oriented with the apse in the east but the site is heavily deflated and the church walls have not

10 I am extremely grateful to Andrew Connor who was kind enough to look at a very poor photograph of the inscription and offer this possible translation.
11 Hope (2001b: 36).
necessarily survived. Although column fragments were scattered throughout the site, several were from the central area within the vicinity of the current excavations, where the temple itself was located. The small decorative blocks were found in a large robbers’ pit along with those that had pharaonic decoration, and it could be argued that the numerous blocks found in that pit had not been moved far from their original location.

The few decorative elements retrieved do not allow us to state for certain whether or not they derived from a single church, although this is likely. Multiple churches are attested in both villages and cities in Egypt and Mothis would be no exception. Three churches were built in the village of Kellis in the fourth century and Oxyrhynchus is recorded to have had at least 30 in the sixth century. Churches are known to have been built by private individuals although elaborate churches, such as the one whence these elements derived, would presumably have been commissioned by the authorities.

The importance of Mothis as the Christian centre in the oasis

There was a variety of Christianities in Egypt of the second and third centuries, including a Manichaean community at Kellis during the fourth, but by the mid-fourth century the so-called institutional church had expanded its control appreciably and it is assumed that this included the Mothite nome. During the third century, probably under the patriarch Demetrius (189–231), a monarchic episcopate was imposed on the clergy in the *chora*, which required that all bishops were ordained, and therefore chosen, by the patriarch in Alexandria. By around 320 there were an estimated ninety to one hundred bishoprics in Egypt, Libya and the Pentapolis of Cyrene; the latter fell under the authority of the Alexandrian see. There were no intermediaries between the provincial bishops and the Alexandrian Church and consequently the former were rendered weak and easily controlled by the patriarch who could locate them to frontier areas as he wished.

Nothing is known of the episcopal sees in the Mothite nome but the Kellis texts attest a bishop in the late fourth century; such an office-holder is recorded twice in the Kellis Agricultural Account Book, where he was the recipient of wheat and jujubes for the church. Bagnall states ‘There is no indication that the bishop or his church was located somewhere other than Kellis, which one might expect if the bishop in question had his church in (as one might suppose) Mothis’. Kellis may well have had a bishop but Mothis, as the nome capital, was presumably a major centre, if not the major centre for the institutional church in the oasis and the seat of a bishopric. The limestone architectural elements from the Mothis church are the only ones of their kind to be found in any of the eight churches in Dakhleh that have been either excavated or surveyed and attest both its importance and that of the see.

The Christianisation of Dakhleh Oasis

That the population of Dakhleh Oasis was predominantly Christian by the end of the fourth century is beyond dispute. The temples throughout the oasis from Deir al-'Haggar in the west to ‘Ain Birbiyeh in the east had presumably closed for formal cult practice and several churches had been founded. The number of sites surveyed by the DOP where Hope has identified fourth-century ceramics far exceeds those of other periods; numerous cemeteries with east-west oriented pit graves, which are a characteristic of Christian burial practice, have also been recorded. A cemetery with an estimated

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4,000+ graves is located at Teneida in the extreme east of the oasis and one of the many cemeteries that surround Mut al-Kharab also comprises east-west oriented pit graves.26

The date by which the church at Mothis with stone elements was founded cannot be established but there can be no doubt that, as with its dependent villages and hamlets, the city supported at least one church by the early fourth century. There is every reason to expect that churches continued to be built in the following centuries. The church at Dayr Abu Matta has now been shown to have been built at the very end of the fourth century but was still in use in the sixth century. The nine-roomed church at Dayr al-Malak, in close proximity to Mut, appears to post-date the fourth century.27 Although some villages in Dakhleh appear to have been abandoned by the fifth century, major sites continued to be occupied; these include Mothis, Trimithis, al-Qasr and an unidentified site called Erbis.28 Both Mothis and Trimithis were important centres; in a list of taxes imposed on oases towns in 368/69, Mothis was ranked first followed by Hibis, the capital of Kharga Oasis, and finally by Trimithis.29 The Roman garrison the Ala prima Quadorum was located either at Trimithis or nearby al-Qasr, and Trimithis may have been the seat of a bishop named Therenoutis.30 Mothis and Trimithis were mentioned by George of Cyprus, a geographer writing in the first decade of the seventh century who compiled lists of the administrative divisions of the Roman East: cities, towns, villages, forts, as well as metropolitan sees and bishoprics;31 this suggests that both cities were functioning at the time. Although the ceramics of the seventh and eighth century for the oasis are poorly understood, the assemblage from Mut al-Kharab contains late forms similar to those found at Kellia in the Delta suggesting that the site was occupied continuously into the eighth century;32 there are some sherds of Fatimid glazed ware (AD 969–1171), but thereafter, the surviving diagnostic ceramics date to the Mamluk period (AD 1250–1517).33

Christianity in Dakhleh following the Arab conquest

It is not known how the Arab conquest of 642 affected the Christians of the oasis and whether the churches were forcibly closed. There are scant sources for the early Arab period and these contain a good deal of bias. According to John of Nikiou, the Coptic bishop who wrote in the late seventh century, ‘Amr ibn al-Āṣ the commander in 645/46, ‘took none of the property from the Churches…and preserved them throughout all his days’.34 Surviving documents indicate that shortly after the conquest Muslim soldiers were stationed throughout the chora in order to requisition provisions and Arab officials moved around the country supervising the collection of taxes;35 there is no reason to assume that the agriculturally-rich oases were excluded. In the seventh century the central administration imposed a poll tax on non-Muslims, a religious tax that reinforced the inferior social status of Christians, and presumably encouraged many to convert; John of Nikiou admonished those who took this step.36

There is no information on the Islamisation of the oases, either Dakhleh or Kharga. The most obvious evidence for such is to be found in onomastics; converts to Islam adopted Muslim names. No papyrus documents survive in the damp environments of Mut al-Kharab and no ostraca have as yet been found at the site or at al-Qasr that preserve such names. Limited excavation has been undertaken at al-Qasr but numerous ostraca written in Coptic have been retrieved, and in the 2004 field season walls

26 Hope (forthcoming).
27 Mills (1981: 184–185), listed under the name Deir el-Molouk. See Bowen et al. (forthcoming).
30 Wagner (1987: 191 and n.5). The spelling of the name given is contentious and no such name appears in the Checklist of Bishops published by Worp (1994).
32 Personal communication, C.A. Hope.
33 Personal communication, C.A. Hope.
34 Sijpesteijn (2007: 441–442); John of Nikiou 121.3.
36 Sijpesteijn (2007: 446).
dated to the Fatimid period were exposed and a glass weight used as a measure against gold coins was retrieved; it bears the name of the Fatimid caliph Al-Mustansir Billah (AD 1036–1094).\textsuperscript{37} Excavations to determine the date of the old mosque indicate that it was built in the late Mamluk or early Ottoman period and there is no evidence to suggest that it was originally a church, as had been speculated upon.\textsuperscript{38} The excavations at Mut al-Kharab have yielded large quantities of ostraca from the Late Period, Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine times, including many written in Coptic, and there is every reason to suppose that further such texts of later periods await discovery. It is anticipated that radiocarbon dates, which will enable the surviving structures to be dated, will permit targeted excavation in areas where further information on the late Christian and Islamic periods can be accessed and thereby enlighten our knowledge of Christianity in post-fourth-century Dakhleh, a period in the history of the oasis of which we are largely ignorant.

\textbf{Bibliography}


**Websites**

Figure 1. The inscribed architrave. © Colin A. Hope.

Figure 2. The pedestal with the Christian inscription. © Colin A. Hope.

Figure 3. Line drawing of the base. Drawing by James Gill. © Colin A Hope
**Figure 4.** Carved sandstone elements.
Drawing by Bruce Parr, © Colin A. Hope.

**Figure 5.** Carved sandstone section of frieze.
Drawing by Irena Odynat, © Colin A. Hope.

**Figure 6.** Carved sandstone section of frieze.
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