



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience in Roman Tebtunis (Egypt)

1. Introduction

The rise of Christianity and the decline of 'paganism' (as Christians call it) have long been subjects of great interest, and not just to historians. Usually these two developments are treated as complementary halves of a single cultural transformation, which marked a major watershed in western and world history, whether for good or bad. Egypt has often been used as a case-study. My prompt to look at religion in Tebtunis came from chapter 5 of Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* (1999). Hopkins attempts an impressionist recreation of the development of Christianity over the first to third centuries AD. His question (not new) is, "What was it like to be there?" Traditional scholarly history, he says, does not answer this because of its preference for 'critical analysis' over 'empathetic imagination'. So Hopkins turns to fictional forms, including imaginary discourses in or with antiquity, presented as recorded dialogue or television script, (imaginary?) letters from colleagues contesting his ideas, and reports from two time-travellers, the imaginary(?) Martha and James.

In chapter 1 of Hopkins' book, his only real attempt at visual imagination, Martha and James frolic in first-century AD Pompeii, where sex rears its head at every corner. Chapter 5 begins with Martha and James in second-century AD Tebtunis. Their remit is to experience "the living variety of pagan religious practices". James duly mouths a brief, superficial and sometimes inaccurate report on the temples, priests and cult rituals of Hellenised Egyptian religion, but the fictional narrative takes over: Martha has been refusing to sleep with James, so he has a priest perform a binding spell, and it seems to work. One reviewer has called the focus on sex "an adolescent silliness", but there is a serious implication: for those who were there, Hopkins hints, the crucial change was that paganism was all for sex, but Christianity against it.

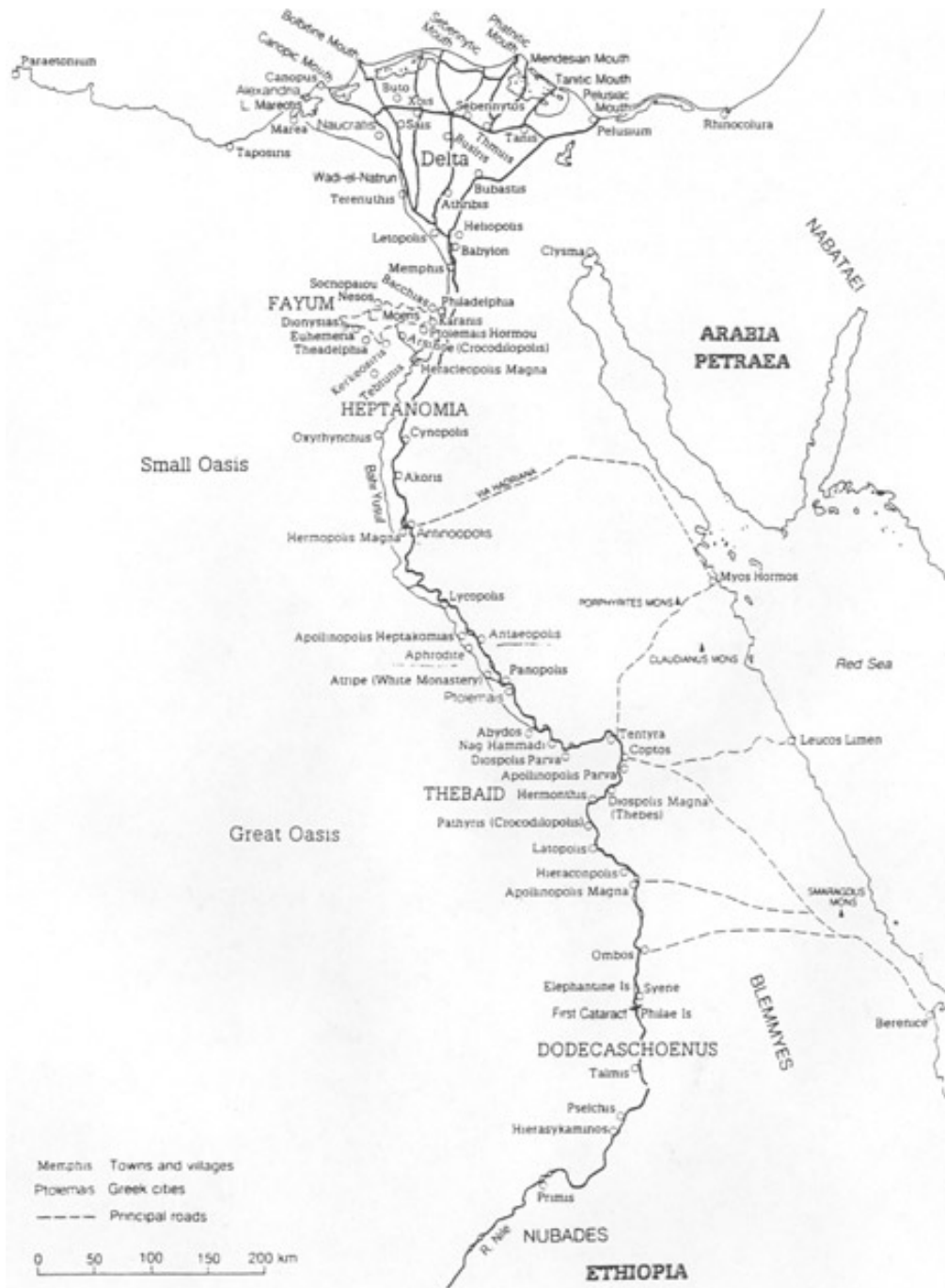
Ancient religion, I confess, is not my normal field of study, but I do know about Tebtunis, and its wealth of texts and archaeology. The challenge is clear: can Tebtunis be used better to imagine the change from paganism to Christianity? And, in particular, to imagine what pagan religious life and thought were like, at least in that locality? In a sense, you will be my time-travellers. I want to try to make you see, as well as hear, something of religious life in Tebtunis of the second to third centuries AD.

2. Tebtunis: site and finds

The abandoned site of ancient Tebtunis, called Umm el-Brigat, lies in the Fayyum, a large triangular depression just west of Nile valley, around 100 kilometres south of Cairo. **[Map of Egypt]** The Fayyum was where pharaohs of the XII Dynasty (1991-1783 BC) had created a great lake, and erected impressive monuments around its edge. The lake was drained under the early Ptolemies, settlers were brought in to populate new villages, and eventually the area became a proper administrative entity, called the Arsinoite nome. Umm el-Brigat occupies roughly 50 hectares (compare the 67 hectares of Pompeii). **[Aerial view of site, 1934]** It is possible that the site began as a XII Dynasty temple-settlement, but so far only some burials of Middle and New Kingdom date have been found. The archaeologically known buildings and other direct traces of occupation date from the fourth century BC to the eleventh century AD, the Fatimid period. **[View across site, to north-east]** The town was then abandoned, and its inhabitants moved a few kilometres north to modern Tutun.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Map of Egypt

(from A. K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs*, Fig. 1)

Alan K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs, 332 BC-AD 642: From Alexander to the Arab Conquest* (London: British Museum, 1986), Fig. 1.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



1. Le kôm de Umm-el-Breigât (photographie aérienne prise en 1934).

Aerial view of site, 1934 Claudio Gallazzi, Tebtunis (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2000), Fig. 1.



View across site to north-east (1996). Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

The first excavations at the site, in 1899/1900, were those of Grenfell and Hunt [**Grenfell and Hunt excavations**]. They kept few records, almost none of which survive. Their primary aim was to find papyri. In cemeteries to the west and south of the site they recovered human mummies with cartonnage, that is papier-mâché wrappings of old papyrus, and crocodiles wrapped in and stuffed with papyrus rolls, all of the later Ptolemaic period. [**Mummified crocodile**] They also dug in the main temple and the town, where they found Roman-period papyri, and cleared a Coptic church to the north. Their expedition was funded by Phoebe Hearst, and hence the bulk of their finds came here to Berkeley - the papyrus texts to the Bancroft Library, the other artefacts to the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology.



Grenfell and Hunt excavations *Courtesy of Egypt Exploration Society*



Mummified crocodile *Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, and the Regents of the University of California; photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

In 1929-1936 a succession of Italian teams cleared much of the south-west corner of the site, including the main temple, and also three churches. The results have never been properly published. The papyri and other finds went to Florence, Milan and (via Rome) Turin, while excavation plans, notes and photographs went to Padua and Milan, and also Trent, Ontario, where one excavator had migrated to raise Hereford cattle. The site was also dug extensively by local inhabitants, who used the *sebakh* (decomposed matter) to fertilise their fields, and sold the antiquities and papyri to dealers, who sold them on to university and other collections. Since 1988 a Franco-Italian mission has been re-excavating the south-west corner of the site, finding yet more papyri and texts on ostraca (potsherds). [South-west corner of site] Over the years, papyri and other finds from Tebtunis have also been acquired by the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



Southwest corner of site *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*

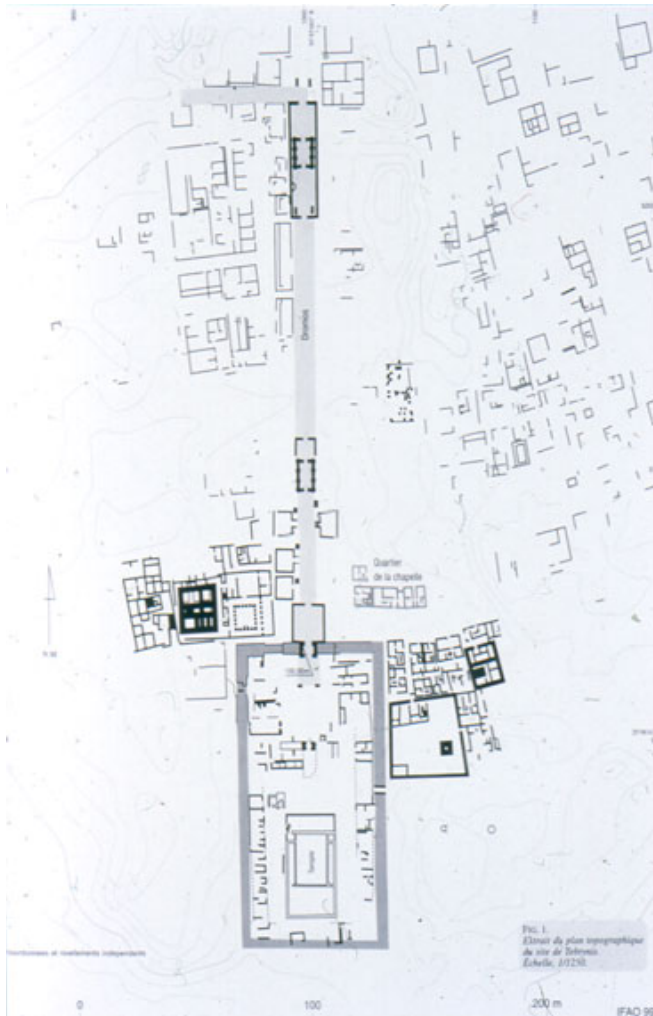
An enormous number of papyri has been found at Tebtunis, at a wild guess some 100,000, or a quarter of all papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt; of these, the Bancroft Library holds over 30,000 fragments. Most of these texts have not yet been published, and many have not even been catalogued. They date from the third century BC to Fatimid times, and are not evenly spread in time or type, but come in groups of various kinds (some examples below). The dispersal of the texts and archaeological data from Tebtunis makes international co-operation in their study essential. My paper today draws on finds from many collections and work by many scholars. For specific help with illustrations I thank Dr Ian Begg at Trent University and Elisabeth O'Connell here at the Bancroft. The collections in the Bancroft Library and the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology are a vital resource for the study of Graeco-Roman Egypt. The formation of the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, with Professor Donald Mastronarde as its Director and Dr Todd Hickey as the Research Papyrologist, helps the University of California, Berkeley, to make a distinctive contribution, exploiting its own rich resources, to international scholarship in the field.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

3. Temples and gods

The declaration of a pagan priest of Tebtunis for the provincial census of AD 201/2 begins: "From Pakebkis also called Zosimos son of Pakebkis . . . [. . . from] the village of Teptunis, a tax-exempt priest [of the famous] temple [in Teptunis] of the great god Sekneptunis also called [the great god Kronos], and Isis and Sarapis and Harpokrates, and the shrine-sharing gods . . ." (*PSIX* 1147). This was the main temple of Tebtunis, located in the south-west corner of the site. [**Plan of temple and dromos**] It stood behind a massive mudbrick enclosure wall (*peribolos*) of 113 x 63 metres, 3 metres thick, and originally 11.3 metres high. The wall was demolished in antiquity, but time-travel also permits switching place to other contemporary Fayyum sites to 'borrow' missing features - here the still standing enclosure wall, over 10 metres high, of the temple at Soknopaiou Nesos. [**Temple enclosure wall at Soknopaiou Nesos**] The temple itself, at some 40 x 20 metres, was quite large for a village. It too was demolished in antiquity (see below), but we can pop across to Dionysias for a contemporary comparison. [**Temple at Dionysias**]



Claudio Gallazzi, *Tebtunis I: la reprise des fouilles et le quartier de la chapelle d'Isis-thermouthis* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2000), 39.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Temple enclosure wall at Soknopaiou Nesos (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



Temple at Dionysias (1989) *Courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*

Soknebtunis means Sobek lord of Tynis (cf. Teb-tynis). [**Soknebtunis and a Ptolemy, from Tebtunis**] He was a local version of Sobek, that is Souchos or Sok- in Greek, the crocodile god of the Ombite nome, and also, since the Old Kingdom, of the Fayyum, whose central city, Arsinoe, was originally called 'Croc-city' (Krokodilonpolis, in Greek). Sobek had different manifestations in different Fayyum villages, which sometimes took the form of a pair of deities. At Tebtunis he was, it seems, single but closely linked with Geb, the primaeval creator god, whom Greeks identified with their Kronos. So villagers of Tebtunis were often named Kronion ('he of Kronos'), or Pa-keb-kis ('he of Geb'), or Pete-souchos ('gift of Souchos'), and so on. The temple of Soknebtunis also hosted other 'shrine-sharing' deities, including the important trinity of Isis, Serapis and Harpocrates, as mentioned in the declaration above, and Ptolemaic kings and Roman emperors too. Whether or not there was a XII Dynasty shrine to Sobek nearby, this



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

temple and its *dromos* (processional way) were a wholly new construction under Ptolemy I, built on top of fourth-century BC houses, and on a new alignment. [Plan of temple and *dromos*-see image above] Building work continued intermittently thereafter. The northern extension to the *dromos*, and the buildings along it, are of Roman date.



Soknebtunis and a Ptolemy Dorothy J. Crawford (now Thompson), *Kerkeosiris: An Egyptian village in the Ptolemaic period* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), frontispiece.

It is often said that the temple of Soknebtunis 'dominated' the town. Certainly it was the main temple, and probably the grandest. The alignment of its *dromos*, an impressive 210 metres long, was followed by new streets of the Roman period. The *dromos* still articulates the modern visit, because it is the focus of the old and new excavations, and even the minaret in the adjacent modern hamlet has been built in line with it. [Main *dromos*, to the north] The *dromos* was a centre for communal festivals and private celebrations (see below). But there were many other religious cults in Tebtunis. Another *dromos* led off west from the main *dromos* into the desert, to the Soucheion, the funerary temple for the cult of Sobek. A third *dromos* led off east into the village to a (undiscovered) temple of Osiris or Min; the cult of both these deities is attested in papyri from Tebtunis. On the corner, where the third *dromos* began, lay a small temple of Isis-Thermouthis, which was re-modelled in the second century AD, with own mini-*dromos*. [Temple of Isis-Thermouthis] In the papyri we find references to other temples (undiscovered, presumably in the town): one of Sokopichonsis, another form of Sobek; one of Thoth, identified by the Greeks with Hermes, where ibises and falcons were mummified and buried as offerings; one of Herakles Kallinikos, 'beautiful in victory', the deity of the Greek-style gymnasium and athletic competitions. And cult-worship of other Egyptian, Greek and hybrid deities is attested. Tebtunis was a town full of temples and a town full of gods. It also had secular public buildings: bath-houses and granaries (some excavated), a record office, a customs office, and a 'High Street'. [Street in the town, to the north] The temple of Soknebtunis was but one element, albeit an important one, of the village fabric.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Main dromos, to the north (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



Temple of Isis Thermouthis (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



Street in the town, to the north (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

4. Priests and learning

One papyrus document from the Bancroft Library (*P.Tebt.* II 298), of AD 107/8, contains the beginning of a declaration of the priests and finances of the temple of Soknebtunis, addressed to the Roman civil administration. Declarations like this had to be made annually. We tend to think of church and state as separate entities, and write histories supposing a constant struggle between secular and religious powers. The traditional view is that the Roman government was hostile to the Egyptian cults, introduced rigid controls and cut their funding. Alternatively, we can view Egyptian temples and priests as an integral part of the state, of value even to the Roman administration, and so protected and supported by it. The declaration starts with a list, now mainly lost, "of the hereditary and examined tax-exempt fifty men". Because this was a top-rank temple, its main priests, notionally fifty in number, were exempt from personal taxation; supposedly, too, they were 'hereditary' and 'examined'. (This set-up, we know, is fairly typical.) Another Bancroft papyrus document (*P.Tebt.* II 291), of AD 162, contains records of the acceptance by the Roman administration of candidates for circumcision and entry into the fifty priests of Tebtunis. One had given proof that his father and mother were both priests, so his claim was hereditary, while another, instead(?), had demonstrated his knowledge of "priestly and Egyptian writing", that is hieroglyphs/hieratic and demotic. Exclusive heredity is demographically implausible; the Egyptian priesthood was not a caste. The Roman administration did charge fees for admission to the priesthood, but these were appointments to remunerative state offices, and the main point of the procedure was positive - to check the suitability of candidates.

The priests of Egyptian cults were marked out in various ways. They were circumcised. When on duty they lived in rooms in the temple enclosure, wore a white linen kilt, shaved their heads, made frequent ritual ablutions, including washing out their mouth with natron(!), and abstained from sex, certain foods and business. The priests of each temple were organised into five 'tribes'; in theory, half of each tribe was on duty for a month. There were various special posts or roles. The system, that is the relation of titles to functions, is not entirely clear to us, partly because the known Egyptian and Greek titles do not always match neatly. The chief priest was called, in Greek, the 'prophet' (*prophetes*). Also of high rank were the *stolistai*, literally those who 'robe' the statues of the gods. There were also the *pterochoroi*, 'feather-wearers', that is sacred scribes who wore an ostrich-plume, and a *horologos*, apparently in charge of the calendar. These 'senior' priests had special vestments, notably a red robe and leopard skin. **[Robed priest in papyrus from Tebtunis (*PSI XIV 1154*)]** They received special shares of the temple revenues, including offerings (compare the system in *Leviticus*), which is why candidates had to make cash bids to be appointed by the state to vacancies. But the declaration of AD 107/8 (*P.Tebt.* II 298) shows that at that time the temple of Soknebtunis had no *prophetes*, and only three *stolistai* and one *pterochoros*. This was probably typical of smaller temples: in practice priestly job specialisation was not necessary for the cult to function.



Robed priest in papyrus from Tebtunis (*PSI XIV 1154*)



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

There was also a separate body, notionally forty in number, of *pastophoroi*, literally 'shrine-carriers' (see below), whose more common function was probably to guard the temple. [**Terracotta model of *pastophoroi***] In Roman Tebtunis their affairs are illustrated for us by the family archive of Kronion, found in a house close to the *dromos* (now at Milan). It is disputed whether *pastophoroi* were 'priests' or not. They were not tax-exempt, but they had access to 'sacred' land, that is state land reserved for leasing by priests. There were other groups too involved in the cult of Soknebtunis, such as the temple 'lamplighters' and cleaners, the workers in the associated cemeteries, and so on. Note that all priests, even the 'senior' priests, worked part-time for the cult, and spent most of their life in normal society, living in the village. Egyptian priests did not form an isolated caste.



Terracotta model of *pastophori* carrying *naos* of Harpocrates *Courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone*

The traditional view that Egyptian priests were the preservers and promoters of native culture, including religious traditions, is splendidly illustrated at Tebtunis, with some surprises. An extraordinary cache of papyri, apparently dumped as rubbish with a few objects (coins, statuettes, etc.), in some priests' rooms along the western side of the enclosure wall, was uncovered in stages, first by Grenfell and Hunt, then perhaps by Rubensohn, then by *sebakhin*, and lastly in 1931, when the Italian expedition cleared out the two underlying cellars. [**Suitcase A of the cellar papyri**] The cache comprised thousands of documents, most of which are still unpublished. The upper layers consisted mainly of private and administrative documents concerning the affairs of the priests and temple (like those cited above), of the first to mid-third centuries AD. The lower layers contained mostly religious, literary, scientific and reference texts in Greek, demotic, hieratic and hieroglyphic, mainly of the same period, but including some 'antique' documents. These texts must have come from the temple library, the 'House of Life', or from the priests' own collections. So far, they are known to include:



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Suitcase A of the cellar papyri (1931) G. Botti, "I papiri ieratici e demotici degli scavi italiani di Tebtynis," in *Atti IV Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Milan, 1936), 219.

1. Practical ritual texts: for example, several copies of liturgies, the prescribed actions and words, for various rituals of the cult of Soknebtunis and of other gods, and for funerary procedures and rituals, written in hieroglyphic and hieratic script; a copy in hieratic, made in September AD 135, of the 'Glorification of Sobek', an account of the Fayyum lake as the epicentre of creation by Sobek (like Geb), probably of XII Dynasty origin and relating to the Fayyum-wide cult of Sobek; demotic hymns to Isis, of a type familiar in Greek translation throughout the Graeco-Roman world.
2. Texts of antiquarian priestly learning: for instance, copies of a compendium consisting of a hieratic dictionary of Middle Egyptian forms of verbs and substantives, followed by a priestly 'encyclopaedia' listing and describing, in separate sections, sacred places, the hierarchy of gods, holy snakes, the sizes of parts of Egypt, and so on, written in hieratic, with subsequent annotations in hieratic, demotic and 'old Coptic' (Egyptian written in a modified Greek alphabet); two copies of hieroglyphic inscriptions on tombs at Assiut of the First Intermediate Period or XII Dynasty (c.2150-1783), probably for use as models of 'proper' traditional Egyptian prose.
3. Literary texts: for example, demotic versions of Egyptian stories, like those about Setna, the magician-son of Ramesses II, and those about the Inaros who led the Egyptians against the Assyrians in 667 BC (or Persians in 525 BC), some written on the back of Roman tax-rolls of the late first / early second century AD; also copies of Homer's *Iliad*, reminding us of the question of its possible influence on the development of Egyptian epic narratives in the Late Period.
4. Texts on modern temple administration: for instance, a table of Roman consuls (the fragment covers AD 149-59); handbooks on how to synchronise the Sothic, Graeco-Egyptian and Roman dating systems; calendars noting days of the imperial cult; copies of edicts by Prefects about temple privileges and finances, and so on.
5. Textbooks for the practical services offered by the priests: for example, a copy of the 'Demotic Lawcode' which had probably been written at Memphis in the first century BC, useful for mediation; handbooks on the interpretation of dreams, casting of horoscopes, and the wording and making of magic, and examples of horoscopes, spells and amulets, variously in hieratic, demotic and Greek; an illustrated herbal in Greek, of which this fragment is in the Bancroft Library (*P.Tebt.* II 679): it contained a botanically accurate coloured picture of each plant with, beneath, a description of its medical uses, and is similar and contemporary to Dioskorides, *De materia medica*, which became the standard herbal, but this is the earliest known manuscript of a scientific herbal of the type.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

My five categories are loose and overlap. The important point is that while many of these texts are exactly what we might expect to find in an Egyptian temple library, there are several surprises. First, I note the extraordinary range of interests covered - history, chronology, literature, myth, ritual, magic, medicine, law. Although the cult of Soknebtunis at Tebtunis was a unique local cult, it was plugged into regional and national networks of culture and learning. Now that the Romans ruled Egypt, the priests informed themselves about Roman dating systems, ruler cult, and so on. This introduces my second point, that this was a developing culture, not a fossilised tradition. It is a myth that Egyptian religion was 'unchanging' and closed to outside influences, part of the political propaganda of changelessness and uniqueness. The myth is maintained today by Egyptologists, who lament developments as 'decadence' of the Late Period. While the Tebtunis priests worried about the 'classical' correctness of their hieroglyphs and hieratic, the Graeco-Roman period also saw a boom in the invention of new hieroglyphs. In Roman Tebtunis the priests offered the sick both traditional 'magical' remedies and more 'scientific' cures based on an Aristotelian-type classification of medicinal plants. The third point to note is the keenness of the priests to explain and promote their ancient and developing traditions. They used, perhaps made, demotic and Greek translations of hieroglyphic and hieratic texts; in the first century AD they gave up demotic in favour of Greek for oracle questions; by the second century they were precociously using a Greek-style alphabet for Egyptian. In this they were typical of their age. The Graeco-Roman period saw a trend to portray cult rituals in public paintings and temple reliefs, as at Dendera, Tebtunis (see below), and, indirectly, in the Praeneste mosaic representing an Isis festival under Ptolemaic patronage. In the first century AD a priest called Chairemon, allegedly a tutor of Nero, wrote a 'Stoic' explanation of Egyptian religion and priests; this does not survive, but passages drawn from it by Plutarch and later authors provide the shaky basis for the standard modern accounts of the Pharaonic priesthood. The cult of Isis swept through the Graeco-Roman world. Egyptian religion of this period was a religion of books (if not 'of the book'); it was structured, self-reflective, inventive, adaptive, proselytising, and expanding.

5. Rituals and festivals

Village temples of the Late Period usually follow a similar basic plan, which had developed from New Kingdom traditions. A monumental processional way (*dromos*), with one or two 'kiosks' on it, led to the temple complex. This was surrounded by a huge mudbrick enclosure wall (*peribolos*), like a fortress, with a central main gateway (*pylon*) in stone. Often the gateway had a stone 'vestibule' in front: the wall of the vestibule at Tebtunis was originally about 2.6 metres high, and was carved in relief with figures one metre high; inside it were found three statues - of Ptolemy XII, another Ptolemy, and a priest. [**Vestibule of temple**] The main gateway opened into the first, outer, courtyard, largely filled with various buildings, and a water supply for ritual ablutions, which the Tebtunis excavators mistook as a pond for the sacred crocodile. Beyond an internal mudbrick wall, through a second stone *pylon*, lay the inner court. [**Second pylon of Tebtunis temple, leading to inner courtyard**] At Tebtunis this contained a small group of trees (a sacred grove) to the left, and to the right a large altar for sacrificial offerings (a novelty of the Late Period); on both sides, built against the enclosure wall, were rows of 'cells' and storerooms to accommodate the priests on duty; set back in the centre stood the temple itself. At Tebtunis the temple was built of stone, and the interior (and exterior?) walls were decorated with carved reliefs depicting the worship of its deities, painted in bold primary colours. The temple was demolished in antiquity (see below); of the seven or so carved blocks which survive, the Phoebe Hearst Museum holds a particularly fine one, with some original colour, which depicts Soknebtunis with Isis and Amun. [**Relief depicting Soknebtunis, Isis and Amun**] Place-hopping allows us to compare the contemporary, though much smaller, temple from Theadelphia, another Fayyum village, which is now preserved in the courtyard of the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria. [**Temple from Theadelphia, with niches for crocodile images**] The Theadelphia temple was painted inside and out. Two ante-rooms with monumental doorways precede the shrine, which in Sobek temples had long slots to accommodate one or two images of the crocodile god, depending whether the local Sobek was single or paired. Tables in the ante-rooms bore statues of the shrine-sharing deities, offerings made to them, and so on. The main rooms were surrounded on either side, above and below, by a warren of small, sealable, rooms and spaces, where the temple treasures, records and the like were kept. There were no windows, keeping the interior cool. Light came from lamps burning castor oil (*kiki*), whose pungent smell mingled with the aromas of smoking incense, perfumes applied to the statues, offerings of meat and fruit, and bats.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Vestibule of temple (1996) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



Second *pylon* of the Tebtunis temple, leading to inner court (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

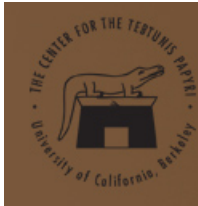


Relief depicting Soknebtunis, Isis and Amun *Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, and the Regents of the University of California; photographed by Joan Knudsen. Inv. 6-20301*



Temple from Theadelphia with niches for crocodile images *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*

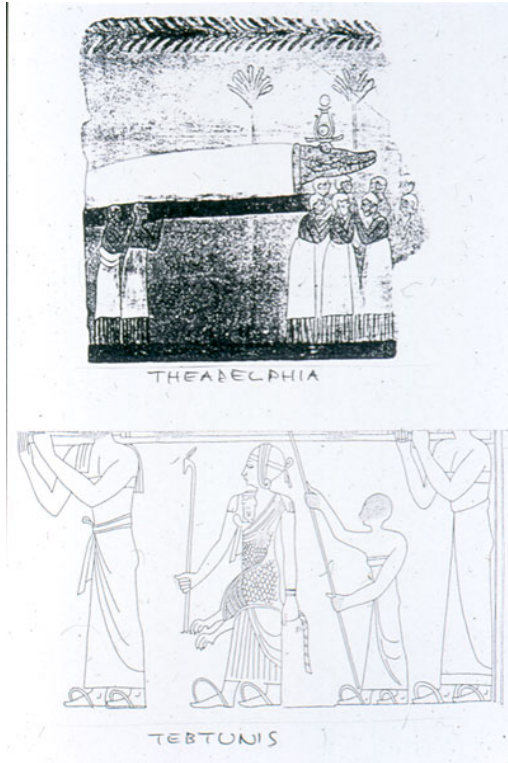
A standard basic daily liturgy had been followed in temples throughout Egypt since the New Kingdom. Texts from Tebtunis preserve the local version. Each morning the priests bring the cult-statue to life in a ritual called 'the opening of the mouth'. At dawn they wash and dress themselves, reciting the formula for putting on the kilt, that for the white sandals, and so on. Accompanied throughout by the appropriate chanting, the priests open the temple, light the lamps, wash and clothe the god, serve him breakfast - that is make offerings. Then, on non-festival days, they place the god where he can be seen (at the temple entrance?), ready to conduct his business (see below). In the evening the priests serve dinner to the god, prepare him for his night's rest, and close up the shrine.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

The common view, shared by Hopkins, is that Egyptian religion was a secret religion, with secret rituals and knowledge. The implicit message of the huge mudbrick walls with single stone gateways is that access was progressively restricted, first into the outer courtyard, then into the inner courtyard, and then into the shrine. But control may have been more symbolic than real, aimed to encourage observance of ritual purity, and to deter theft. In some New Kingdom temples, columns of the outer courtyard bear the lapwing hieroglyph (*rekhyt*), denoting the ordinary people, which implies their access up to that point. In the Ptolemaic period villagers could seek refuge (*asylon*) in temples. Through into the Roman period, people entered temples to consult the priests, for a gift or fee, about their illnesses, dreams, magic, horoscopes, and perhaps to have documents read or written - as the Tebtunis 'library' shows, the priests did not confine their activities to 'religious' subjects or approaches. All this could have been done in the outer courtyard. But other activities imply that worshippers, not just the priests, could be admitted, at least for those purposes, to the inner courtyard: consulting the god himself (see below), including seeking healing by 'incubation', that is sleeping overnight in the temple to receive dreams or cures, perhaps in the sacred grove; making the 'pious offerings' to the god which formed an important part of the temple's revenues, and carrying out sacrifices on the altar. Some inscriptions in other Fayyum temples suggest that traders pitched stalls around the shrine itself, which implies quite a crowd. (Were the side-gates through the enclosure wall to the inner courtyard at Tebtunis just for the priests, or for the flow of visitors to exit?) Only the full priests could perform the rites in the shrine, but even it was not closed to others. The *pastophoroi*, lamplighters, builders and cleaners, must have entered frequently. The doors of the shrine were open in 'business' hours when the god could be consulted. A ceremony or festival called a *stolismos*, the 'robing' of the deity, in addition to or in place of the routine daily robing, is attested in documents. Some special *stolismoi* were held at regular intervals, some were one-off events 'sponsored' by groups or individuals; implicitly the sponsors or the people appropriate to the occasion were allowed to attend these robings. Rituals were also performed outside the temple complex (see below), and were represented publicly, for example in reliefs on the outsides of temple buildings. They were not 'secret' like initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries at Athens, or into the Hellenised 'mystery' form of the cult of Isis. So, people entered temples, witnessed and took part in the cult.

The god, for his part, regularly came out of his temple for a *komasia*, a public ritual procession along the *dromos*, perhaps also through the village; some gods travelled farther by cart or boat to visit other gods in other towns. The so-called 'kiosks' on *dromoi* were perhaps motels for overnight stays by gods. These processions were mounted at major festivals, reckoned by the old Egyptian calendar (which did not have leap years); for example there were two Souchos festivals (*Soucheia*) each year, and one Nile festival (*Nileia*). Most festivals lasted for five or so days; exceptionally, they could last for thirty days. The god is carried on a bier or barque by *pastophoroi* ('shrine-carriers'), sheltered from sun - by a white 'tent' for crocodile deities like Soknebtunis. He is accompanied by priests in full regalia, with incense, flowers and hymns. **[Sobek processions (Theadelphia painting; Tebtunis vestibule relief)]** Frequent and long stops are made, when varied performances are mounted, which might include: recitals of the origins and powers of the deity, dramatic performances with, on imperial occasions, praise of the emperor, 'Homerists' re-enacting famous scenes and fights from Homer, even athletic competitions, altogether a very Hellenised menu. Those attending the festivals dress up in white, wear wreaths, feast and shop; **[Portrait of man in white, with garland, glass of wine(?) and posy of flowers]** indeed the typical *dromos* also functions as a mall. These are good occasions for approaching the god for healing or advice. Gods gave oracular responses in various ways. Commonly it took written form: the petitioner submitted a pair of questions on separate slips of papyrus, for instance 'Shall I marry X?' and 'Shall I not marry X?'; the god returned one slip, making that question the answer. Sometimes petitions and responses were oral; it is not clear how it was done, but the theory that priests hid behind holes in temple walls is dubious. In processions the god could 'nod' to reply to a petition, or to indicate a person or place. These were very ancient practices, still very alive into the third century. In AD 198/9 the governor of Egypt ordered local authorities to suppress divination, on pain of death, and defined what he meant as "to know more than a man should . . . whether through (spoken) oracles or written slips supposedly inspired by the god, or processions of statues, or similar trickery" (*SB XIV 12144*). This was not, incidentally, general Roman policy, but a one-off security measure for the imminent visit of the emperor Septimius Severus, himself an addict of divination. The vast majority of known oracle slips ask about travel and health, and very few are about sex.



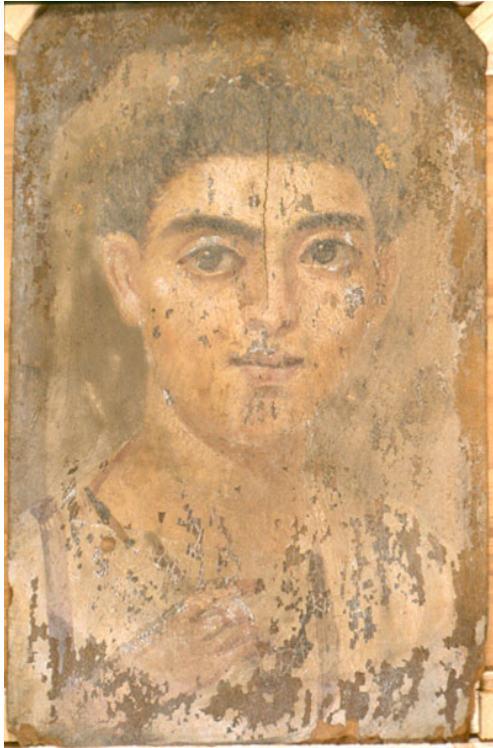
Sobek processions (Theadelphia painting; Tebtunis vestibule relief)

Theadelphia: E. Breccia, *Alexandria ad Ægyptum: A guide to the ancient and modern town and to its Graeco-Roman Museum* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1922), 153.

Tebtunis: V. Rondot, "Le temple de Soknebtynis à Tebtynis," in *Archeologia e papiri nel Fayyum: Storia della ricerca, problemi e prospettive: Atti del convegno internazionale, Siracusa, 24-25 maggio 1996* (Syracuse: Istituto Internazionale del Papiro, 1997), 121.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Portrait of a man in white, with garland, glass of wine(?) and posy of flowers *Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, and the Regents of the University of California; photographed by Joan Knudsen. Inv. 6-21379*

People visited temples to pray, make offerings, consult the oracle or priests, just to have an evening out, or for the shopping. Temples also provided a focus for 'private' social organisations and rituals. In the Roman period 'dining-rooms' (*deipneteria*) were built all along the *dromos*. Some seem to have been clubhouses for male 'associations' (*sunodoi*), with names like 'of Harpocrates', or 'of the cowherds'. Their primary function was social: membership offered a structured non-familial companionship, and conferred prestige and satisfaction; some also functioned as burial clubs, and all sought divine support, and might make special offerings or sponsor a *stolismos*. **[Peristyle building above *dromos* near temple, perhaps clubhouse of *asunodos*]** These dining rooms, some probably owned by the temple, were hired out to families holding dinners to mark social 'rites de passage', such as a son's coming of age (*themallokouria*, the cutting of his Horus-lock), marriage, and birthdays. Invitations on papyrus survive from other sites, but, oddly, no example from Tebtunis is yet known. Party-goers dressed up in white, as for a festival, wore wreaths, ate and drank, and were entertained by various performers. These dinner parties were a habit of the richer Hellenised, or Romanised, inhabitants of Tebtunis. They became all the rage in the Roman period, and showed Roman influence in the celebration of birthdays and consumption of pork and wine. Some of the rich townsmen who commissioned Roman-style portraits for their mummies even chose to be portrayed in party mode. **[Portrait of man in white, with wreath, glass of wine(?) and posy of flowers—see above]**



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Peristyle building above *dromos* near temple, perhaps clubhouse of a *sunodos* (1996) Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone

6. Personal religion and religious change

Egyptologists and papyrologists generally see Egyptian religion as 'unitary', with no separate systems of 'official', or 'public', and 'private' deities or cult or belief. I do not think we can fix neat boundaries between 'public' and 'private' religion in Roman Egypt. As we have seen, individuals attended temples and their 'official' rituals to satisfy individual or familial, as well as communal, needs, and temples depended heavily on private 'pious offerings'; there was a symbiotic relationship. But I think that there were differences of practice and, implicitly, belief, which were more a question of social and economic position, perhaps even class. These, furthermore, are linked to changes across time, and form the background to the spread of Christianity.

Although there was much mutual borrowing between Egyptian, Greek and Roman culture and religion, there are hints of differences linked to status. There were 'Hellenic' cults in villages, for example that of Herakles Kallinikos at Tebtunis, and more in the *metropoleis*, the regional capitals, which were the cultural centre of gravity for the wealthier Hellenised and Romanising families: Arsinoe even had a temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, a striking advertisement of public loyalty to Rome. These civic cults had a 'secular' civic priesthood of standard Graeco-Roman type, illustrated by this mummy portrait of an Arsinoite priest of Serapis, with his Graeco-Roman tunic and beard, and a starred crown (symbol of priesthood). **[Priest of Serapis, mummy portrait from Hawara, II AD]** Conversely, documents of the Roman period sometimes refer to village festivals of Sobek, or of the birth of Isis, as festivals 'of the Egyptians'. At these festivals estate-owners gave gifts to their workers, while lessees gave gifts to their landlords, thus marking and reinforcing social hierarchy. A first-century AD letter from a village near Tebtunis says the priests of Souchos are making a special appeal for 'pious offerings' to Hellenes, Alexandrians and Romans, implicitly not usual supporters of his cult (*P.Merton II 63*). Tension between urban and village cults was perhaps sparked, or transformed, by Septimius Severus 'municipalisation' of the *metropoleis* in AD 201, which gave the new civic councils considerable responsibility for administration of their nomes. The civic councils may have been less inclined than the previous centralised administration to provide support for village cults.



Priest of Serapis, mummy portrait from Hawara, II AD. Susan Walker, *Ancient faces: Mummy portraits from Roman Egypt* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Routledge, 2000), no. 46. Courtesy of British Museum. Inv. EA 74714

An important clue to 'personal' religion in Graeco-Roman Egypt comes from the thousands of terracotta figurines, which were sometimes dedicated by individuals in temples, but were mostly worshipped in house shrines. On the normal view, these form part of 'official' religion, but I have my doubts. Harpokrates and Isis are by far the most popular deities represented, [**Harpokrates on horse, terracotta figurine**] but the main 'public' deities, including Sobek in the Fayyum, are extremely rarely represented. Some types of figurines seem specific to particular social groups: for instance, the protective god Bes in Roman armour looks to be a deity for soldiers; [**Bes as Roman soldier, terracotta figurine**] so too, perhaps, Horus as emperor for loyal officials. [**Horus as emperor, terracotta figurine**] The many figurines which portray beasts of burden and craftsmen are not overtly religious, but perhaps served to place the livelihood they depicted under divine protection. [**Smith, terracotta figurine**] Although female fertility figurines made of wood are known, most terracotta figurines have nothing to do with 'sex'. The naked women in chains, seated and 'praying' (raised arms), look possibly 'sexual', but seem to represent the safe restraint of malign divine powers ('demons'), certainly not part of the 'official' pantheon.



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, and the Regents of the University of California; photographed by Joan Knudsen.
Inv. 6-20324



Bes as Roman soldier, terracotta figurine. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum of Art, photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone.
Inv. L85.17



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Horus as emperor, terracotta figurine I AD. *Courtesy of British Museum, photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone. Inv. EA 51100*



Smith, terracotta figurine I AD. *Courtesy of Universit  de Lille, photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone. Inv. L2423*

'Magic' had always been a big part of mainstream Egyptian religion, and was mainly provided by priests in the temples. In the later Roman period it was increasingly provided outside of temples. 'Do-it-yourself' manuals in Greek become common, and are recovered from the 'domestic' areas of sites. Of the 88 known horoscopes in Greek, most are of the late second to third centuries, and most astrological treatises are of the third century. Most known 'spell-books' are of the third to fourth centuries, as are most magic objects. For example, the 'voodoo' doll for a binding spell, which Hopkins has James order for Martha, is fourth-century (and from Antinoopolis). Most known curse tablets are also fourth-century (as they are in Britain). The old method of acquiring personal divine protection, well attested in Ptolemaic Tebtunis by some fifty 'contracts', was to pledge oneself to serve as a 'slave' of the temple



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

deity, but in the later Roman period people looked elsewhere. The Bancroft Library has a nice example of a third-century protective amulet with spell (*P. Tebt. II 275*): after a repetition of letters in a triangular pattern comes the invocation, "Untiring Kok Kouk Koul, spare Thais whom Tais(?) bore from every shivering fit, whether coming every third day, fourth day, daily, every other day, or coming at night, or of other type(?), for I am the god of your fathers, the untiring Kok Kouk Koul." Kok Kouk Koul, typically, is a deity outside the traditional pantheon (a 'demon'), with a deliberately gibberish name. Again, this magic was primarily about health, then about wealth; the binding spells are striking, but a minority. Note also that from the fourth century onwards, when their choice of names makes it possible to identify them, this magic was as much used by Christians as pagans, and spells and invocations, calling on innumerable different 'demons' with extraordinary names, went on being used through the Byzantine period and after the Arab conquest.

Meanwhile, in the richer houses of Fayyum villages, we find a rather different development. In the Roman period wallpaintings and framed paintings of deities become quite common in the main rooms, not just around the house-shrine. Isis and Harpokrates, and Serapis too, who still functioned as bridges between Egyptian and Hellenic traditions, were especially popular. But the third century saw a strongly revived regional cult of Heron, a Thracian rider-god who had been imported into the Fayyum in the third century BC by Ptolemaic troops from Thrace. He was now transformed to become a divine pair like Sobek, with some elements adopted from Harpokrates, and he was shown with a nimbus around his head, that is as a 'saviour' god. Representations of him have been found at Tebtunis, and almost every other excavated Fayyum village site. [**Framed painting of double Heron; Fayyum, III AD**] This development is a symptom of a general interest of the wealthier Hellenised families in religions with the following characteristics: that salvation is restricted to a select few; that the few qualify through ritual purity (asceticism), and their knowledge of sacred texts; that there is a supportive 'international' network of adherents, exchanging texts and letters. The phenomenon was not entirely novel. Its roots lay in Greek mystery cults, whose features had been adapted to develop, for instance, the Hellenic cult of Isis. This was how Chairemon, and others, had tried to rewrite Egyptian religion to attract the interest and support of the Graeco-Roman imperial élite. Other Roman-period religions with these characteristics include Mithraism, Manichaeism (which had well-off adherents in the fourth-century AD Fayyum), Judaism and Christianity.



Framed painting of Double Heron; Fayyum, III AD. Harco Willems and Willy Clarysse, *Les Empereurs du Nil* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 172. *Les Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels. Inv. E.7409*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

But the most revolutionary change between the third and fourth centuries was the silent end of traditional temple cult, throughout Egypt (despite odd survivals). The south-west corner of Tebtunis, including the temple complex, was abandoned, and then buried by wind-driven sand. The last documentary reference to Soknebtunis is of the late second century, and the last to priests of the temple is of AD 211, although there may well be unpublished references of slightly later date. There may have been some clearing out of the temple, or robbery, and probably this was the time that the 'library' was dumped. But the temple was not emptied of statues, or destroyed; destruction came much later (see below). The abandonment cannot be blamed on a decline of the town, for by the fifth century Tebtunis had become a civic regional capital, renamed Theodosiopolis.

7. Development of Christianity

The spread of Christianity in the Fayyum is extraordinarily difficult to document, as it is elsewhere. The earliest documentary references to Christians there come in the 260s and 270s AD. In the fourth century we find a number of related signs of expansion. First, a growth in the number of 'Christian' personal names (though arguably more a case of the disappearance of pagan theophoric names). Second, references to priests and deacons in villages, although in tiny numbers until the fifth century. Third, the emergence of a Christian literature in Coptic, for instance the fourth-century fragment of Job found at Karanis. Fourth, the beginnings of hermit-type monasticism, as at nearby Naklun. [Hermitage at Naklun] Fifth, the earliest possible archaeological remains of churches, although they are very few, small, and not certainly dated. The slim evidence available suggests that it was mostly the upper classes in the Fayyum who were attracted to the Christianity of the third to fourth centuries. The earliest dateable Christian event in Fayyum is the visit around AD 262 of Dionysios, bishop of Alexandria, and a devoted pupil of Origen, the notoriously extreme ascetic. Dionysios' mission was to refute the all-too-attractive message of the recently deceased local(?) bishop Nepos, a talented and popular hymn-writer, which Nepos had derived from literalist interpretations of the Revelation of St John. Dionysios summoned the 'elders' and 'teachers' from the villages, and any 'brothers' who wished, to a three-day debate. Nepos had said that "there would be a millennium of bodily indulgence on this earth . . . that Christ's kingdom would be on earth . . . (with) unlimited gluttony and lechery at banquets, drinking parties and wedding feasts, which is what he meant when he said festivals, sacrifices and killing animals". That is Dionysios twisting Nepos' words. He says that he persuaded the new bishop and 'some' of the others that Nepos was wrong, in effect an admission of failure (Euseb., *Hist.Eccl.* 7.24). It seems that ascetic Christianity, even the moderate variety of the humane and likeable Dionysios, was not what the locals wanted. They wanted a religion which gave them back their communal festivals.



Hermitage at Naklun (1989) *Photograph courtesy of Dominic W. Rathbone*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis

By the sixth century AD there is no doubt about the Christianisation of Fayyum, presumably the result of growth through the badly documented fifth century. Village churches were still fairly small (compared to pagan temples), but they were numerous and highly decorated, with stone architectural elements, carved woodwork, and paintings. Four churches have been found at Tebtunis. The church dug out by Grenfell and Hunt included re-used Middle Kingdom capitals. [**Church of St George, Tebtunis, excavated by Grenfell & Hunt**] Another, cleared by the Italians in 1933, was part of a large complex, perhaps an organised monastery, and had been built with the carefully dismantled stones of the temple of Soknebtunis, its gateways, vestibule and kiosks. By the ninth century Tebtunis had a famous school of scribes and psalmists, the equivalent of the old temple library and composition of hymns. The big monastic church was redecorated several times with religious paintings, through to a last series in the tenth century (a generation or so before the village was abandoned), of which two scenes of Adam and Eve are preserved in the Coptic Museum, Cairo. [**Wall-painting of Adam and Eve, Tebtunis, X AD**] By the sixth century, the Christian church in Egypt, as elsewhere, had created a hierarchical and remunerated priesthood, owned considerable treasures and church lands, mounted public processions and festivals, sponsored a hugely popular cult of the Virgin and Child which unmistakably re-used the imagery of Isis suckling Harpokrates, and provided oracles (some with pairs of written slips) and, through para-priestly holy men, all kinds of magical services, rebranded as 'miracles'. It all looks very reminiscent of the pagan cults of the temples whose stones the churches had often re-used.



Church of St. George, Tebtunis, excavated by Grenfell and Hunt. *Courtesy of Egypt Exploration Society*



A Town Full of Gods: Imagining Religious Experience at Tebtunis



Wall-painting of Adam and Eve, Tebtunis, X AD. *Courtesy of Coptic Museum, Cairo, photographed by Dominic W. Rathbone. Inv. 3962*

I do not offer an argument, but some observations. Christianity did not kill off the traditional temple-based religion at Tebtunis; that had gone before Christianity started to boom. The real shock in long-fourth-century Tebtunis is the absence of any significant communal religious buildings or rituals, a turning-in on their own religious resources of individuals in the form of salvation cults for the richer, more educated, people, and 'magic' for all. Since pagan religion had been firmly entwined in the political and social structure of the Graeco-Roman state, it is tempting to look for political and social reasons for its decline, such as the effects of the Severan 'municipalisation' of Egypt, perhaps just a local symptom of a growing rift between rich and poor, or administrators and subjects. Conversely, it is conceivable that Christianity became successful as the new state religion not just because it was backed by emperors like Constantine and Theodosius I, but because it re-invented the material structures, communal rituals and services to individuals needed to attract mass support.

Time travel is an awkward business. As Hopkins did to Martha and James, I have selected and shaped what you have heard and seen. Unlike Martha and James, you are independent individuals, you know how we got there, you can react to and question what I said. I hope, in any case, that you have enjoyed the trip. I hope too that I have persuaded you of the fascinating discoveries to be made in the papyri from Tebtunis in the Bancroft Library, and the associated objects in the Phoebe Hearst Museum, and the value of supporting the existence and work of your Center for the Tebtunis Papyri as a major node in an international network of scholarship.

Dominic Rathbone

Berkeley, April 2003