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THE END OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION: THE PROHIBITION OF PAGANISM IN EGYPT FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE 4TH TO THE MIDDLE OF THE 6TH CENTURY A.D.

Mladen Tomorad

Article discussed the end of Ancient Egyptian religion, and the prohibition of pagan beliefs in Egypt from the beginning of the 4th century to the middle of the 6th century A.D. according to the relevant historical sources.

The impact of emperors on religious matters in Roman and later Byzantine Empire is enormous, and the consequences of their edicts can be easily observed in the case of Egypt. Since the middle of the 4th century A.D. the Roman Emperors started to proscribed edicts which gradually until the late 4th century A.D. completely prohibited any aspects of the pagan beliefs in the Roman Empire. After the Theodosius I edicts from February 24 and June 16 A.D. 391 traditional Ancient Egyptian cults and beliefs were completely prohibited. Soon after riots had been instigated by the Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, and soon the Christians destroyed the pagan temples (Mithraeum, Serapeum, Iseum) and the scientific centers (the Serapeum library and the parts of the Museum with the Royal library) in Alexandria during their destructive spree in A.D. 391. Intolerance toward paganism was continued during the 5th and the first half of the 6th century. In A.D. 415/416, the extremists stoned the Neoplatonist scientist Hypatia in the St. Michael's church, and in A.D. 529 Emperor Justinian I prohibited the last remains of pagan sciences in the East Roman Empire. Soon after remaining pagans and pagan scientists had been imprisoned and exiled. The last remains of the Ancient Egyptian religion were gradually extinguished after the temple in Kom Ombo had been officially closed in A.D. 552.

Key words: paganism, Egypt, Alexandria, prohibition, imperial edicts, *Codex Theodosianus*, Theodosius I, religious turmoil, Serapeum in Alexandria, Hypatia, Justinian I, Kom Ombo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The period of the Late Antique Egypt had been poorly researched in comparison to the previous Roman period. The addressed questions that historians made so far have been dealing with conflicts inside the early Christian Church and with gradual persecutions of old religious traditions, i.e. paganism. The emphasis has been put mostly on previously known edicts compiled in the first half of the 5th century A.D. in so-called *Codex Theodosianus*. The rare articles and books written by historians¹ have been dealing mostly with the two most famous cases of religious persecution, i.e. Christian intolerance towards the old paganism in Alexandria, the destruction of the pagan temples in Alexandria in A.D. 391 and the murder of a scientist Hypatia in A.D. 415.

The remaining historical sources which dates back to the Late Antiquity and early Medieval period in general do not mention any other events, or they have not been thoroughly studied, although they had been mentioned in certain historical studies written by various historians. The historical synthesis, articles and books about this period, which were written during the last century, rarely debate or give review of these events.

Therefore, I have decided to examine this subject more closely and to re-examine all available sources and the most important scientific reviews and papers. The Late Antiquity sources and scholarly works by historians and archaeologists in last couple of decades had mentioned in various ways the events important for the study of this topic. The results of my own research of these primary and secondary sources will be present in this paper.

2. THE PERSECUTION OF PAGAN BELIEFS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE 4TH CENTURY TO THE END OF THE 6TH CENTURY A.D.

The term paganism had appeared in Roman legislation at the end of the 4th century A.D.² All people that still worshipped the traditional cults had been considered pagans. The causes of the Christian intolerance towards the old divinities and beliefs probably should be sought in persecutions of Christians during the first three centuries of its existence. After the Edicts of Serdica (A.D. 311) and Milano

¹ Gibbon 1776–1788; Jones 1970; Bowman 1986; Saradi-Mendelovici 1990; Drake 1996; Turcan 1997; Chadwich 1998; Frankfurter 1998; Ritner 1998; Westerfeld 2003; Hahn, Emmel, Gotter 2008; Kahlos 2009; McLynn 2009; Capponi 2010; Kristensen 2010.

² *CTh*, XVI.2.18.

(A.D. 313) had established religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire, and later in the second half of the 4th century A.D. Christianity had become the only permitted religion, the Christians probably could not have tolerated the existence of other gods contrary to their beliefs. Therefore, at the end of the 4th century A.D., religious conflicts arose from Christian intolerance to all forms of paganism.³

Religious intolerance to paganism had been additionally kindled by the imperial edicts from the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century A.D., which denied the further possibility of coexistence of two different religious traditions.

2.1. THE HISTORY OF THE OFFICIAL PERSECUTION OF PAGAN BELIEFS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Almost at the same time, the official persecution of pagan beliefs had taken place in the Roman Empire, conducted by Constantine's successors, the emperor Constans I (A.D. 337–350) and his brother Constantius II (A.D. 337–361).

In A.D. 341 Constans I and Constantius II had banished every form of superstition and sacrifice.⁴ At November 1 A.D. 342 or 346,⁵ Constantius II issued a new edict enabling the practice of the pagan temples outside the city walls, but only as the centers of entertainment.⁶ Presumably on December 1 A.D. 346/353/354 or 356,⁷ Constantius II had closed all pagan temples and strictly prohibited with greatest punishment (death or exile) entering them.⁸ Probably during 356/357 A.D.⁹ the new legal decrees had been passed, by which every form of magic was prohibited and punishable by high fines and even death penalties.¹⁰

The last short-termed rise of pagan cults happened during the reign of his successor Julian (A.D. 361–363), named by the Christians „*apostata* – apostate“.¹¹

³ About the issue of the Christian intolerance and what had caused it see studies by Drake 1996 and Kahlos 2009.

⁴ *CTh* XVI.10.2; Jones 1970: 344; Ritner 1998: 28; Salzman 2007: 117.

⁵ The exact year is unclear.

⁶ *CTh* XVI.10.3.

⁷ The exact dating is not possible. Ammianus Marcellinus dates it back to A.D. 353. See: Amm. Marc. XIV.7.7. Ritner as well dates it in A.D. 353. See: Ritner 1998: 28.

⁸ *CTh* XVI.10.4.

⁹ Historians do not agree about the exact dating of these decrees.

¹⁰ *CTh* IX.16.5, IX.16.6

¹¹ Jul. *Ep.* 84, 89. A more detailed historiographic study in: Salzman 2007: 118–119.

Julian's successors Jovian (A.D. 363–364), Valentinian I (A.D. 364–375), Valens (A.D. 364–378) and Gratian (A.D. 367–383) had principally tolerated pagan religions and the use of magic,¹² but they had prohibited teaching of astrology, which was punishable by death for those who opposed this decree.¹³ Valens, Gratian and Valentinian II (375–383) between A.D. 376 and A.D. 380¹⁴ had issued an edict, according to which every altar and other sacred sites of pagan sacrifice had to be impounded, whether their use had been approved by governors of specific provinces or not.¹⁵ At the same time, between A.D. 375 and A.D. 378, they renovated the temple of the goddess Isis in Ostia.¹⁶

Emperors Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I (A.D. 379–395) on February 28, A.D. 380 had issued an imperial edict, by which they revoked the status of a temple or a church to every site of pagan assembly,¹⁷ and on November 30, A.D. 382 they had passed a decree¹⁸, according to which all pagan temples remained open for public as sites of artistic events and festivals, with prohibition of any kind of pagan sacrifice.

In A.D. 386, Theodosius I had issued an edict, by which the local rulers could decide who will serve as a high priest of pagan beliefs.¹⁹ In A.D. 389, an imperial regulation proclaimed the practice of magic an illegal activity and stated that every person caught practicing magic shall be judged with crime against people.²⁰ On February 24, A.D. 391, the emperor Theodosius I issued an edict regarding the prohibition of practice of every pagan religion in the Empire,²¹ and on June 16 A.D. 391 he issued a decree, by which he prohibited pagan rituals and beliefs in temples and other cult sites.²² In A.D. 392, Theodosius passed edicts regarding the prohibition of all burial rites and ceremonies, regardless of their private or public status as manifestations of pagan beliefs.²³ At the same time in a wide area of northern Africa, Christian bishops started to preach against pagans and other heretics.²⁴

¹² *CTh* IX.16.7, IX.16.9., IX.16.10

¹³ *CTh* IX.16.8.

¹⁴ The exact dating has not been confirmed. The date is April 22, but the year of the edict is problematic, so various historians tend to date it differently.

¹⁵ *CTh* XVI.5.4.

¹⁶ *SIRIS* 562.

¹⁷ *CTh* XVI.1.2.

¹⁸ *CTh* XVI.10.8.

¹⁹ *CTh* XII.1.112.

²⁰ *CTh* IX.16.11.

²¹ *CTh* XVI.10.10.

²² *CTh* XVI.10.11.

²³ *CTh* XVI.10.12.

²⁴ Chadwick 1998: 583–586; Salzman 2007: 123.

In A.D. 395, Arcadius and Honorius had passed new decrees, by which pagan festivals lost their status as holidays,²⁵ and everyone was prohibited to present any kind of sacrifice, punishable by death for every offender.²⁶ In A.D. 399, they had passed a new regulation, according to which every pagan temple in rural areas had to be destroyed.²⁷ These edicts soon led to great devastations of pagan centers throughout the former Roman Empire and to gradual persecution of their followers.

In A.D. 415, Honorius and Theodosius II had issued a decree, by which every property or a place formerly dedicated to paganism was given to the Christian Church, and if the traces of paganism and pagan rituals had been found somewhere, they had to be eliminated immediately. Pagan clergy was punishable by death.²⁸ In A.D. 423, the emperors had issued a new regulation by which every pagan had to be exiled, and their property confiscated.²⁹

In A.D. 435, Theodosius II and Valentinian III passed a decree prohibiting every form of paganism. Pagan temples and shrines had to be destroyed and replaced by crosses, as symbols of Christianity. Anybody who had opposed the enforcement of this regulation was a subject to death penalty.³⁰ This imperial regulation presents us with another example of „exorcism“ over old pagan beliefs and sites of pagan assemblies.

2.2. THE DIRECT EMPERIAL INTERFERENCE IN RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS IN EGYPT

Political interference in religious affairs in Egypt began in the fourth decade of the 4th century A.D. On November 6 A.D. 335 the emperor Constantine I interfered the religious disputes of Arians³¹ and their main adversary Athanasius of Alexandria, who was a bishop in Alexandria, by exiling him to Trier.³² Discontent with this imperial decree contributed to certain tensions between Constantinople and the Egyptian Christians, basically up to the end of the Roman and the Byzantine rule over Egypt. After Constantine's death, Athanasius returned to

²⁵ *CTh*, II.8.22.

²⁶ *CTh*, XVI.10.13.

²⁷ *CTh*, XVI.10.16.

²⁸ *CTh* XVI.10.20.

²⁹ *CTh* XVI.10.23.

³⁰ *CTh* XVI.10.25.

³¹ About Arianism in Alexandria see: Hass 1993.

³² Hardy 1946: 87; Ritner 1998: 27.

Egypt, and, in spite of new persecutions, he served as the bishop of Alexandria (A.D. 328–373).³³

In the same time the records show that the last burial of the holy bull in Armant had taken place in A.D. 340, and its tomb was marked by the last preserved royal cartouche.³⁴ After the Constans I and Constantius II edict from A.D. 341 the catacombs in Armant, which had been used for burying sacred bulls up to those days, were almost instantly raided, and sacred stelae were painted with three red crosses with the inscriptions of Jesus Christ's name.³⁵ It was the first symbol of the future Christian exorcism over old pagan symbols and beliefs.

After the oracles of Bes in Abydos had predicted the end of his rule, Constantius II unsuccessfully tried to close all oracles in the Roman Empire.³⁶

In A.D. 362, Julian forgave the Alexandrian pagans the murder of the bishop George who had raided the Serapeum.³⁷ This verdict was reached because of the mitigating circumstances of the Christian extremists' defense of the temple. He had issued a legal regulation that the Christians were not allowed to teach pagan sciences,³⁸ and that they had to pay compensation for the damage they had made in pagan temples.³⁹

Theodosius I edicts from A.D. 391 and A.D. 392 endangered many followers of pagan and ancient Egyptian religious traditions, for rituals of private burial, based on the ancient Egyptian burial rites, had been deep-rooted in Egypt.

Even though the practice of magic had been prohibited by many regulations in the second half of the 4th century A.D., it still remained in Coptic texts up to the end of the 8th century A.D. as a symbol of superstition and paganism in Egypt.⁴⁰ Many Coptic texts took over elements of the ancient Egyptian religious tradition and preserved imagery of underworld, based on the ancient burial texts.⁴¹ Even Coptic texts describing the lives of the Christian martyrs took over many elements of the myth of Osiris and the image of his dismembered body in the Christian tradition as a symbol of a holy relic.

³³ Ritner 1998: 27.

³⁴ Ritner 1998: 28.

³⁵ Grenier 1983: 207–208; Ritner 1998: 28.

³⁶ Ritner 1998: 28.

³⁷ Jul., *Ep.* 387C–80D.

³⁸ Jul., *Ep.* 422A–4A.

³⁹ This decree has not been preserved, but there are indirect sources confirming its existence. Theod., *H.Ecc.* III.7.6–10.

⁴⁰ Frankfurter 2004: 163.

⁴¹ More detail study in: Westerfeld 2003.

3. THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN EGYPT FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE 4TH CENTURY UP TO THE CLOSING OF THE LAST ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TEMPLE IN KOM OMBO IN A.D. 552

The Christians and the followers of the ancient Egyptian pagan tradition had coexisted with smaller conflicts up to Theodosius' prohibition of pagan religions and customs in 391.

Pagan science and religions could have been taught in Alexandrian Serapeum and the Museum up to their destruction. The last description of these structures was written by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus in ca. A.D. 378.⁴² The archeological findings and modern research confirm that there had been a library in Serapeum and in Museum up to their ruination in A.D. 391.⁴³ Museum acted as a scientific institution in the second half of the 4th century A.D., with records of its last head Theon, a famous mathematician and the father of the Neoplatonist scientist Hypatia.⁴⁴

3.1. THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN EGYPT AT THE END OF 4TH CENTURY A.D.

In A.D. 391⁴⁵ the Christians used the imperial edicts of Theodosius I from the same year to raid and destroy the ancient Egyptian temples and finally deal with the followers of pagan beliefs in Egypt. Therefore, with the support of the Alexandrian Patriarch Theophilus (A.D. 385–412), in A.D. 391, Christians destroyed Mithraeum, Serapeum and Iseum and brought great damage to the remains of the famous Alexandrian Library.⁴⁶

⁴² *"Besides this there are many lofty temples, and especially one to Serapis, which, although no words can adequately describe it, we may yet say, from its splendid halls supported by pillars, and its beautiful statues and other embellishments, is so superbly decorated, that next to the Capitol, of which the ever-venerable Rome boasts, the whole world has nothing worthier of admiration. In it were libraries of inestimable value; and the concurrent testimony of ancient records affirm that 70,000 volumes, which had been collected by the anxious care of the Ptolemies, were burnt in the Alexandrian war when the city was sacked in the time of Cæsar the Dictator."* Amm.Marc. XXII.16.12–13.

⁴³ More in: McKenzie, Gibson, Reyes 2004; McKenzie 2011: 244.

⁴⁴ El-Abbadi 1990: 159–160; Deakin 1994: 234; Rodenbeck 2001: 543–544.

⁴⁵ Comes Marcellinus and Gibbon dates these events in 389 AD. Gibbon, XXVIII, 43–52.

⁴⁶ Jones 1970: 345; Bowman 1986: 214; Delia 1992: 1463; Turcan 1996: 126–127; Frankfurter 1998: 281–282; Ritner 1998: 29; Tomorad 2004: 66; McLynn 2009: 578–579; Capponi 2010: 194.

This events are a precedent of the Late Antique history, for there is a large number of preserved sources for its destruction and the following events. The description of the raid and destruction was given by the late antique historians Sozomen⁴⁷, Zosimus⁴⁸, Socrates of Constantinople⁴⁹, Paulus Orosius⁵⁰, Theodoret⁵¹, John of Nikiu⁵², Rufinus⁵³ and Eunapius⁵⁴.

The Byzantine chronicler Zosimus described the Patriarch Theophilus as „the first who had opposed the ancient sacred rites and observances“.⁵⁵ The Greek Christian chronicler Socrates of Constantinople (ca. A.D. 380 – after A.D. 439) in „*The Ecclesiastical History*“ (*Historia Ecclesiastica*) gave a detailed description of the Christian devastation.⁵⁶ According to the Coptic story „Theophilus and three θ “⁵⁷ which dates to the 5th century A.D.⁵⁸ Theophilus intended to build a new Christian sanctuary, i.e. a church, in the beginning of 390s A.D, and used the Theodosius I edicts to destroy all the pagan temples in Alexandria.⁵⁹

⁴⁷ Soz., *Hist. Ecc.* XV.

⁴⁸ Zos., V.150.

⁴⁹ Soc., *Hist. Ecc.* V.16.

⁵⁰ Oros., *Hist. adv. pag.* VI.

⁵¹ Theod., *Hist. Ecc.* V.22.5.

⁵² John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIII.38.

⁵³ Ruf. *Hist. Ecc.* II.29.

⁵⁴ Eun., VS 421.

⁵⁵ Zos., V.150.

⁵⁶ „At the solicitation of Theophilus bishop of Alexandria the emperor issued an order at this time for the demolition of the heathen temples in that city; commanding also that it should be put in execution under the direction of Theophilus. Seizing this opportunity, Theophilus exerted himself to the utmost to expose the pagan mysteries to contempt. And to begin with, he caused the Mithreum to be cleaned out, and exhibited to public view the tokens of its bloody mysteries. Then he destroyed the Serapeum, and the bloody rights of the Mithreum he publicly caricatured; the Serapeum also he showed full of extravagant superstitions, and he had the phalli of Priapus carried through the midst of the forum.“ Soc., *Hist. Ecc.*, V.16.

⁵⁷ A Hungarian Egyptologist L. Kákósy assumes that the letters θ in fact represent the Ancient Egyptian symbols of winged sun-discs that are usually found at the doors of the Ancient Egyptian temples of the Antique period. More detail analysis in: Kákósy 1982: 70–75.

⁵⁸ The publication of the text see in: Zoega 1903: 50–51; De Vis 1990: 162–167.

⁵⁹ According to the Coptic story Theophilus intended to build a new Christian sanctuary, i.e. a church. A voice had spoken to him in dreams and ordered him to build numerous temples with the help of God. Travelling with his apprentice Cyrill he had discovered the pagan temple of Alexander ornated with various hieroglyphics and fantastic paintings. After they had discovered the three Greek letters θ (according to the story, indicating God [Gr. theos], the emperor Theodosius and Theophilus) and had pronounced them, the temple gates opened and the gold started to flow. After sealing the temple once again, he wrote to the Emperor informing him of past events. The Emperor had allowed them to transport

The destruction of pagan temples and libraries had been described by Paulus Orosius in „*History against the Pagans*“ (*Historiae adversum paganos*), where he compared the devastation of that period to those from the Siege of Alexandria in 47 B.C. Orosius points out that in riots „perished that marvelous monument of the literal activity of our ancestors“, but that a large portion of 400 thousand of volumes was preserved.⁶⁰

The followers of pagan religions in Alexandria had been embittered because of the destruction of temples and scientific institutions, therefore they fought back the Christians and thus started great religious riots in Alexandria. Socrates of Constantinople described these events faithfully.⁶¹

Theodoret described the devastation of the pagan statues, whose remains had been burned on a pyre.⁶² To save the statues and art that had been spared during the described devastation, remaining pagans hid them in secret chambers or buried them in special storages below the ground. They had been discovered at several places during the archeological excavations of Alexandria, and its monuments are nowadays exhibited in the *Graeco-Roman Museum* in Alexandria.⁶³

Soon after the end of these religious conflicts, the emperor Theodosius I donated to the Catholic Church a land with ancient pagan temples, as evidenced by

gold to Alexandria under the protection of St. Mark, which caused the dissatisfaction of the local pagan population towards Christians. Theophilus then took advantage of the new events to destroy all the pagan temples in Alexandria.

⁶⁰ Oros., *Hist. adv. pag.* VI.15.32

⁶¹ „*The pagans of Alexandria, and especially the professors of philosophy, were unable to repress their rage at this exposure (...) they rushed impetuously upon the Christians, and murdered every one they could lay hands on. The Christians also made an attempt to resist the assailants, and so the mischief was the more augmented. This desperate affray was prolonged until satiety of bloodshed put an end to it. Then it was discovered that very few of the heathens had been killed, but a great number of Christians; while the number of wounded on each side was almost innumerable. Fear then possessed the pagans on account of what was done, as they considered the emperor's displeasure. For having done what seemed good in their own eyes, and by their bloodshed having quenched their courage, some fled in one direction, some in another, and many quitting Alexandria, dispersed themselves in various cities. Among these were the two grammarians Helladius and Ammonius, whose pupil I was in my youth at Constantinople. Helladius was said to be the priest of Jupiter, and Ammonius of Simius. Thus this disturbance having been terminated, the governor of Alexandria, and the commander-in-chief of the troops in Egypt, assisted Theophilus in demolishing the heathen temples These were therefore razed to the ground, and the images of their gods molten into pots and (...) accordingly broken to pieces.*“ Soc., *Hist. Ecc.*, V.16.

⁶² Theod., *Hist. Ecc.* V.22.5

⁶³ About the use of the pagan statues of the 4th and the 5th century A.D. and efforts for their preservation see in: Kristensen 2010.

the Late Antique authors Socrates⁶⁴ and Libanius⁶⁵. The Patriarch Theophilus built a Christian church of Cosmas and Damian on the place of former Serapeum.⁶⁶

Rufinus had described the conversion of pagans after these events, during which even the priests of Serapis transformed the ancient Egyptian *ankh* to a Christian symbol of salvation.⁶⁷ In his biography of Eustathius, Eunapius gave a very detail description of Alexandria as a place permeated with lots of religions and customs,⁶⁸ whose temples and shrines Christian masses, led by bishop Teophilus, had „scattered to the winds, and not only the ceremonies of the cult but the buildings as well“⁶⁹.

Almost at the same time, the Christian fathers started the demonization of all symbols of pagan religions in a wide area of the Empire. Old pagan statues had been publicly exhibited on city squares, so that they could have been ridiculed by the lot.⁷⁰ The last festivals dedicated to Isis were observed in A.D. 394.⁷¹ At the same time in Egypt, the ancient Egyptian amulets, which had been supposed to protect the wearers, became symbols of paganism and the cause of persecutions of Christians. Holy sites of former cult activities had become places possessed by demons and they were exorcized, and all pagan symbols were destroyed and burned.⁷²

Apa of Macedonia, soon after Theodosianus I edicts from A.D. 391, started its rampage of the ancient Egyptian statues by destroying Horus' statue in the temple complex of Philae. Soon after, Apa Apollo from Hermopolis started its spree by destroying every trace of the ancient Egyptian religious tradition.⁷³ Therefore „the black robes“⁷⁴ of the Egyptian monks became symbols of destruction of the pagan tradition, as evidenced by Eunapius' records⁷⁵ which had been previously mentioned while describing the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum.

Thus, the conflict of orthodox Christianity with the pagan religions assumes the elements of a struggle of „good“ and „evil“, „angels“ and „demons“, so the pagan places of demonic gathering had to be exorcized and consecrated to Christian-

⁶⁴ Soc., *Hist. Ecc.* II.2.

⁶⁵ Lib, *Or.* XVIII.23.

⁶⁶ John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIII.38; Soz., *Hist. Ecc.* VII.15.2–10.

⁶⁷ Ruf. *Hist. Ecc.* II.29.

⁶⁸ Eun., *VS* 421.

⁶⁹ Eun., *VS* 421.

⁷⁰ Theod., *Hist. Ecc.* X.58.

⁷¹ Turcan 1996: 128; Tomorad 2005: 243.

⁷² For the detailed analysis see: Frankfurter 1998: 273–284.

⁷³ Frankfurter 1998: 282–283.

⁷⁴ Monks and hermits usually wore dark robes; hence their name.

⁷⁵ Eun., *VS* 421.

ity by building churches and monasteries. Therefore, the Christian churches were built on the sites of the ancient Egyptian temples, or the old temples from the end of the 4th up to the middle of the 7th century A.D. were gradually transformed into churches and monasteries.⁷⁶ Already treated stone blocks were re-used to build new Christian shrines and churches.⁷⁷ A similar situation will occur after the Arab conquest of Egypt, when many ancient Egyptian temples will have been transformed into mosques, cf. a part of the temple complex in Luxor.

Soon after the Alexandrian destruction in A.D. 394, the temple of Philae in Upper Egypt has preserved the last ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic text, as one of the last symbols of paganism.⁷⁸

3.2. THE ACTS AGAINST THE REMAINS OF PAGANISM IN EGYPT DURING 5TH CENTURY A.D.

Despite the prohibitions, persecutions and murders of the pagan followers, Alexandria stayed an important center of the last remains of pagan Neoplatonists up to the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, even though a part of the followers had escaped into Athens⁷⁹ where they were active in the local Academia until its closure.⁸⁰ Astrology had been put outside the laws and all astrologers were exiled if they had not burned their books in the presence of a bishop and converted to Christianity.⁸¹ At the same time, once an important center of the Egyptian cosmogony and religion, Thebes, lost its importance, and Panopolis, Kom Ombo and Philae took primacy in Upper Egypt. The rest of the Neoplatonists still had cherished the ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic religious traditions until they were completely prohibited in A.D. 529.⁸²

⁷⁶ Frankfurter 2004: 163; Hahn-Emmel-Gotter 2008.

⁷⁷ Saradi-Mendelovici 1990: 52. Many remains of pagan temples discovered in excavations were transported into various museums. A very good study dealing with transformation of the Late Antique pagan temples into Christian sanctuaries was published in 2008. See: Hahn-Emmel-Gotter 2008.

⁷⁸ The last hieroglyphic and Demotic inscription dates back to A.D. 394. It had been written by Esmêtakhom on the walls of the temple of Philae. See the text in: *FHN* III.306. The last Demotic inscription (found in the same temple) dates back to A.D. 452. It was written during the reign of the emperor Marcianus (A.D. 450–457). Ritner 1998: 31.

⁷⁹ Deakin 1994: 235.

⁸⁰ More about the Neoplatonist activity in the 5th and the first half of the 6th century A.D. see in: Athanassiadi 1993.

⁸¹ Honorius' and Theodosius' 2nd decree dates back to February 1, A.D. 409. *CTh*, IX.16.2.

⁸² Bowman 1986: 231.

Parallel to the imperial regulations from the first half of the 5th century A.D., the Byzantine Egypt had been a scene of clashes of Christians with the remains of pagan beliefs. In 415/416,⁸³ intolerant Christian extremists stoned the great pagan Neoplatonist mathematician Hypatia⁸⁴ (ca. A.D. 370–415/416) in St. Michael's church,⁸⁵ because she had refused to convert to Christianity and because she had too much influence on Orestes, the Byzantine prefect of that time. There are several Late Antiquity and Early Medieval sources describing these events: the Egyptian bishop John of Nikiu⁸⁶, Socrates of Constantinople⁸⁷ and Suda,⁸⁸ a Byzantine lexicon from the 10th century A.D.⁸⁹ Socrates and John of Nikiu mentioned the conflict of Orestes, the Alexandrian prefect of that time, with the Alexandrian bishop Cyril as the main reasons of her death. According to the very detailed description of John of Nikiu, from whose text we can observe his intolerance towards Hypatia,⁹⁰ she had been a very beautiful Neoplatonic scientist and a mathematician teaching in Alexandria. She had been on good terms with Orestes, who had often sought her advice, and therefore Christians believed that it was the main reason of his tolerance towards the remains of paganism. In A.D. 415/416, there had been new religious riots between Christians and Jews, after which the Christians tried to banish the last remains of paganism from the city. Since the relations of Cyril, then a Patriarch of Alexandria, and his follower magistrate Peter with the Byzantine prefect Orestes had not been idyllic,⁹¹ the Christians kidnapped Hypatia from her house and took her to the church called Caesarion (later St. Michael's Church), where they stripped her naked and stoned

⁸³ The exact year and circumstances of her death are not yet cleared. Theophan claimed that she had been murdered in A.D. 406. That is certainly incorrect, since Cyril took place as the Alexandrian Patriarch at the end of A.D. 412. *PG*, vol. 108, col. 225–226. Suda claims that the murder occurred during the 4th year of the Cyril's patriarchy, i.e. 416 AD. Suid., *Lex. s.v.* Hypatia. Many historiographies claim it occurred in A.D. 415, citing the information taken from W. A. Meyer. See: Meyer 1886.

⁸⁴ About Hypatia's life and work see: Gibbon 1906, ch. 47; Richeson 1940; Marrou 1963; Rist 1965; Wider 1986: 52–58; Mueller 1987; Deakin 1994.

⁸⁵ Hardy 1946: 90; Bowman 1986: 214; Delia 1992: 1464; Ritner 1998: 31; Capponi 2010: 194–195.

⁸⁶ John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIV.87–103.

⁸⁷ *Soc., Hist. Ecc.* VII.15.

⁸⁸ Suid., *Lex. s.v.* Hypatia.

⁸⁹ Short notes about her murder had also been introduced by Phillistrogios (5th century A.D.), to whom referred Photios (*PG*, vol. 65, col. 563–564) and later Iohannes Malalas (*PG*, vol. 97, col. 535–536).

⁹⁰ „And in those days there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes and instruments of music, and she beguiled many people through (her) Satanic wiles“. John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIV.87.

⁹¹ *Soc., Hist. Ecc.* VII.15.

her to death. After the ritual murder, they dismembered her body using bricks and burned it on a pyre.⁹² Suda mentions Cyril's jealousy as the cause of her murder, because Cyril could not have stood the idea of many Alexandrians worshipping a single woman, who had been a houseowner as well. According to this source, Cyril had incited the angry Christians against Hypatia and they took her from her home to the church, where they killed her and then burned her in public.⁹³ According to John of Nikiu, the gathered religious fanatics proclaimed the Patriarch Cyril as new Theophilus because he had destroyed the last remains of paganism in the city.⁹⁴

Despite the imperial decrees and proclamations, the Egyptian religion managed to survive among the people, who had hidden many statues and imagery of gods in secret chambers of their houses or in underground hiding places.⁹⁵ A part of the pagan statues, whether they had been religious symbols or representations of people, had been publicly ridiculed on city squares, where the Christians often painted the signs of cross.⁹⁶ The proof that the Egyptian religion had been deeply-rooted in Egypt during the first part of the 5th century A.D. is on the stone monuments with imagery of the cult of Isis, the rituals of fertility connected to the Isidian beliefs of resurrection, syncretistically connected to the symbols of Christianity and representations of angels, which were not related to the ancient Egyptian religious tradition.⁹⁷ These were the ways the ancient pagan beliefs managed to stay preserved up to the end of the 5th century A.D.

At the same time, the Christians accepted some ancient Egyptian customs and ceremonies, which had been gradually transformed into Christian symbols and customs. The best example is, of course, the worship of the goddess Isis, in whose honor her followers carried her image on a sacred boat as a part of the habitual rituals during the festival of *Navigium Isidis*, which was held in March every year, according to the Roman calendar. During the 5th century A.D., these ancient religious traditions were incorporated into the Christian festival of *Carnevale*, which was held in Easter time, but it was now related to Jesus' resurrection.⁹⁸ At the same time, some forms of the ancient Egyptian burial customs managed to survive. Photius states that at the end of the 5th century A.D., Heraiscus had been

⁹² Soc., *Hist. Ecc.* VII.15; John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIV.97–102.

⁹³ Suid., *Lex.* s.v. Hypatia.

⁹⁴ John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXXIV.103.

⁹⁵ More about the concealment of pagan statues and other monuments see in: Seradi-Mendelovici 1990; Kristensen 2010.

⁹⁶ E.g. the emperor statue of Marcus Aurelius with the engraved cross is today being kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria.

⁹⁷ A basin with Isis' cult and the scenery of the fertility rites. *Bode Museum*, Berlin, inv. br. MBK 4135.

⁹⁸ Alföldi 1937: 46.

buried according to the traditional custom, after which his body was mummified and wrapped in bandages covered with hieroglyphics.⁹⁹

Despite many turmoil and religious conflicts, throughout the Byzantine period, Alexandria was one of the most important centers of Christianity and religious debates characterizing the period from the end of the 4th up to the middle of the 7th century A.D. During the reign of the emperor Leo I (A.D. 457–474), the Alexandrians killed the notorious bishop Proterius, the successor to the bishop Dioscorus.¹⁰⁰ His murder led to the religious conflict between the imperial authorities, the patriarch of Constantinople and Alexandria, which will continue with shorter intermissions throughout the second half of the 5th century. According to the custom of that day, the patriarchs of Alexandria had been elected in the Egyptian Church among the local monks, completely independently from the capital and the emperor, which was the main cause of disagreements and conflicts of these two religious centers.¹⁰¹

During the reign of the emperor Zeno (A.D. 474–491), there had been further religious conflicts between the Roman pope, the emperor, and the eastern patriarch, which in A.D. 484 led to the excommunication of Zeno by the pope. These new difficulties had led to the Egyptian revolt against the imperial authorities, during which in A.D. 486 the last Egyptian pagan intellectuals had been arrested, interrogated, publicly tortured and killed.¹⁰² The ancient Egyptian philosophy managed to survive in Alexandria and in the temple of Philae, thanks to the work of the scientists Horapollo the Elder (ca. A.D. 408–450), Asclepiades (ca. A.D. 425–490), Heraiscus (ca. A.D. 425–490) and Horapollo the Younger (ca. A.D. 450–500).

3.3. THE LAST REMAINS OF EGYPTIAN RELIGION DURING THE 6TH CENTURY A.D.

The influence of the pagan science in Alexandria vanished only in A.D. 517, when John Philoponus had taken over the leadership over the remains of the old scientific institution.¹⁰³

The Byzantine emperor Anastasius (A.D. 491–518) had ceased to persecute pagans and various prohibited Christian sects for a short period of time, and by that he enabled their short-termed peaceful coexistence.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Phot., *Bibl.* 242, 343a.

¹⁰⁰ Ritner 1998: 32.

¹⁰¹ More in. Ritner 1998: 32.

¹⁰² More in: Ritner 1998: 32.

¹⁰³ More in: Ritner 1998: 31–32.

¹⁰⁴ Consantelos 1964: 373.

His successors Justin I (A.D. 518–527) and Justinian I had tried to renew the orthodox Catholic Church and soon started the new persecutions of their non-supporters and the prohibition of all preserved forms of paganism.

Thus in A.D. 529, Justinian I had banned the activities of the Neoplatonists in the Academia of Athens,¹⁰⁵ and the pagan teachers were prohibited to act publicly or teach.¹⁰⁶

The last official festivals dedicated to the ancient Egyptian gods had been recorded in ca. A.D. 535, when Justinian's troops enslaved the priests of Isis in the temple of Zeus Ammon in the oasis of Augila. The temple which had been built by Alexander the Great, during his stay in Egypt in 331 B.C., was destroyed, and the ancient Egyptian statues and symbols of paganism were sent to Constantinople.¹⁰⁷

In spite of the prohibitions and the continuous conflicts with the intolerant Christians, the ancient Egyptian religions had managed to survive up to A.D. 543, when the emperor Justinian I had issued an imperial edict, by which he closed the temple of Philae¹⁰⁸ and gradually transformed it into a Christian church.¹⁰⁹ Despite the closures of temples and prohibitions, the followers of the ancient Egyptian pagan religion had still tried to preserve their religious tradition up to A.D. 552, when the last attempt of a renewal of the temple in Kom Ombo was recorded.¹¹⁰ In spite of the end of the temple tradition, the ancient Egyptian religion had managed to survive among the people, at least up to the end of the 6th century A.D., and many ancient Egyptian religious symbols have survived in the Coptic Orthodox Church until today.

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¹⁰⁵ Consantelos 1956: 375; Bowman 1986: 231.

¹⁰⁶ Consantelos 1956: 376.

¹⁰⁷ Procop. *Pers.* I. XIX.37.

¹⁰⁸ *FHN* III.324.

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