

Christianity on Thoth's Hill

Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore

The Roman city of Amheida stood on a terrace wrapped around a hill (Plate 1). On this hill once stood the Temple of Thoth, which we can trace back to 800 BCE with certainty, to the New Kingdom with probability, and perhaps even earlier. We must confess that as scholars interested in late antiquity we had great hopes for this temple when we began to excavate it in 2005. We thought that carefully excavated it might tell us about just when it ceased to be a working temple and what, if anything, happened to it after that. Everyone interested in late antiquity would like a few well-stratified and well-documented examples of such temples, because few Egyptian temples have had the kind of histories that would give us solid information on these questions. Their ancient fates and the character of their modern excavation, particularly when they were excavated a century or more ago, typically conspire to deprive us of information of this kind. It was not so long ago that late antique remains in and on Egyptian temples were considered encumbrances to be removed without ceremony and, often, without record.

Our hopes to see the full life cycle of the temple were not to be realized. We were not really surprised to find that the temple site was disturbed, because blocks, and even an entire doorway, from the temple, now built into houses in El-Qasr, had long suggested that stone-robbing must have been extensive. Paola Davoli had also observed, before we started work on the hill, many evident pits clearly visible on the satellite imagery of the site, indicating that there had been digging; and indeed many pits large and small have been found. Actually, pits might well be said to be the most noteworthy feature of the area, with many dozens excavated so far. They have different shapes and measures; sometimes they are round or elongated. In the deepest one, a rough staircase was organized by the treasure hunters to reach its bottom.

In fact, no in situ remains of the temple itself were found, only partly because the area has been severely disturbed by this later human activity, both stone-robbing and treasure-hunting. These have also been abetted by a fierce north wind that has removed something like a meter and a half of deposit, including the entirety of the foundations of the temple. Our excavations have, however, now uncovered hundreds of decorated or inscribed temple blocks, when fragments are included. They come mostly from temple decoration under Titus and Domitian, but reused blocks of the Saite and Persian periods have been found, and a few stones from even earlier eras. Paola Davoli and Olaf Kaper have described many of these finds.¹ Although not one stone of the temple was left upon another, those that were not carried away were left in the pits that I have mentioned. In the unstratified mess that remained, we have found a few traces of interest, which show that Christianity was not absent from the hill in the fourth century. It is these that form our subject here.

Although we cannot yet claim with any confidence to have found a church at Amheida, there is adequate evidence for Christianity there, including the titles of members of the clergy and a number of Christian personal names. Priests, *presbyteroi*, occur in two ostraka, and deacons in five.² Christian names include Martyrios, Makarios, Paulos, Timotheos, Psenpnouthes, and also no doubt Moses, Ephrem, Jonas, and Joseph. Most of these are not common, however, and the direct evidence for Christianity from the ostraka would best be described as modest rather than abundant.

¹ See provisionally Davoli and Kaper 2006; there are further discoveries not yet published.

² Deacons: *O.Trim.* I 26.10; 76.4; 269.3; 272.1; 383.2 (?); *presbyteroi*: *O.Trim.* I 27.5; 44 conv. 1.

One striking find is an ostrakon (inv. 13253) found in the temple area in 2008, with a list of names including Jacob and Abraham, and headed with \square πατ \square ρ, “the father” (or “our father”). The other names, however, are not distinctively Christian, and if this was an account, fading or breakage has taken away any amounts that may have stood at the right side.

A graffito of Horigenes son of Ioannes on one stone (inv. 3271, Plate 2) is also probably Christian. Even though Horigenes is a common theophoric name derived from Horos, found in hundreds of papyri, it was also the name of the famous early third-century Alexandrian theologian and scholar Origen; more importantly, Ioannes is distinctively Christian. So Horigenes son of Ioannes is likely to be a third-generation Christian.

But most striking of all is a block, inv. 3053 (Plate 3), in the middle of which someone had written a Greek verse. This comes either from an altar (as Paola Davoli has suggested) or from the base of a statue (as Olaf Kaper thinks). The gouging on the block was made by pilgrims to remove powdered stone for amuletic or medicinal reasons. The ink is quite faded in parts and demands persistent and prolonged autopsy, because natural color photographs are almost illegible. (Plates 4, 5, and 6.) These processed infrared images³ may give you an idea of how difficult this was to make out. The text reads (first in diplomatic transcription, then with accents):

ανθρωπων βιοτοιο κυβερνητης μεγας Αμμων
 ἄνθρώπων βιότοιο κυβερνήτης μέγας Ἄμμων

“Great Ammon is the pilot of the life of men.”

This is a perfect hexameter verse with an Epic ring that shows various literary reminiscences. It is in a way a kind of pastiche that represents well the religious and cultural syncretism of Egypt. The phrase \square νθρ \square πων βι \square τοιο appears in Hesiod, *Works and Days* 167, while once in the same work the genitive βι \square τοιο is attested in line 499. This epic form in any case is typically Homeric, e.g., *Iliad* 6.14. The further occurrences of this phrase in literature derive presumably from Hesiod, e.g., in the tragic writer Critias and Stobaeus.

The concept of steering oneself through life occurs once in a Ptolemaic letter, *P.Lond.* I 42 (*UPZ* I 59), where the verb διακυβερν \square ω was used. The metaphorical use of the verb “to pilot” and the noun “pilot” becomes more frequent in literary

attestations of the Roman period. In the second century it is noteworthy that Dio Chrysostom in *Or.* 63.7.8 writes that “Tyche governs a man’s life,” using the verb with a sense very similar to the line on the block. What makes Dio’s attestation notable is the fact that he refers to a deity as the pilot of mortal life. Generally, in fact, man is presented as his own pilot, while life and troubles are regarded as the waves of a tempest. Thus the Cappadocian fathers, who frequently employ the phrase, encourage man to overcome the waves of trouble, becoming safe pilots of their life, e.g. Basil, *Hom. in principium proverbiorum* or Gregory of Nyssa, in his *On Virginity (De virginitate* 23.6.8), who says that the good man “like a good pilot with his boat, looks only up to heaven in guiding his life.” Like Dio, however, John Chrysostom, in his *On Genesis (In Genesim* 53.118.16), regards God as the pilot: “We navigate through the sea of our present life, led by the great pilot, God.”

Ammon is a Greek form of the Egyptian god Amun, who had a great temple in Luxor and was the dominant traditional god of the oases (*SB* V 8440, Wagner 1987, 329-34). The hellenized Ammon had his main sanctuary in the Siwa Oasis, where he was an oracular divinity widely recognized in the Greek world and with strong ties to Cyrene. Herodotus 2.42 says that Ammon is the Egyptian name for Zeus and thus explains why the Egyptian images of Zeus have a ram’s head. Alexander the Great famously visited the Siwa Oasis in early 331; from this visit originated the claim that Alexander was Ammon’s son. Ammon appears as the μ \square γας θε \square ς, the great god, in the *Historia Alexandri Magni* (recensio byzantina) I. 1261.

If the concept that the gods and one god in particular give life to men is uncommon in Greek literature, it is a commonplace in Egypt from as early as the Old Kingdom. Amun was regularly seen as the source of life, but more interesting are the remarkably direct invocations of Amun as the pilot of life found in New Kingdom prayers, cited by Jan Assmann. One describes him as “Pilot who knows the water, rudder that does not lead astray.”⁴ “You are Amun who comes to him, who calls unto him, the pilot who knows the water, the rudder that does not lead astray” says another.⁵ “If a man’s tongue is the boat’s rudder, the Lord of All is its

³ We are deeply indebted to Bruno Bazzani for his help in taking and improving these images.

⁴ See Assmann 1995, 175-85 on Amun as the source of life; 193-95 on Amun as pilot. This passage is quoted by Assmann 1994, 194 from Assmann 1975/1999, no. 177, from P.Anastasi II, 9.2.

⁵ Assmann 1995, 194, citing Assmann 1975/1999, no. 188.

pilot,” says still a third.⁶ If the expression here is Greek, then, the sentiment is deeply rooted in Egyptian religion. Although Amun was not the god to whom the temple of Amheida was dedicated, he was certainly the principal god of the western oases. Olaf Kaper has kindly told us that there is an image of Amun-Re of Hibis (Amenebis) on the gateway of Ain Birbiyeh, decorated under Augustus, which gives the following titles: "Amun-Re Lord of Hibis, the Great God, strong of might, King of the Gods, who gives [this verb is uncertain – OEK] the breath of life, who lets the constricted throat breathe, who causes all that exists to live."

A nice pagan hexameter verse, then, written on a cavetto cornice block, the original use of which is not clear. It is, to judge from the presence of the graffiti and other writing on it, likely to have been in a public place in the temple of Thoth, probably in the courtyard. Now, above this line of writing there are some rather faint traces of additional writing in a much smaller hand. We believe that at the top right it is possible to make out *ete pnoute*, which we take to be a Coptic gloss on the whole, putting forward the view that it is God, *pnoute*, who is the governor of life, not Ammon.⁷ A bit of not entirely friendly religious dialogue in late antiquity, it appears.

These graffiti certainly indicate that in the last period of occupation of Amheida, which on present evidence appears to be the last quarter of the fourth century, the temple was no longer in use as such, but was accessible to Christians who wished to leave a mark of their own religion on the structure and its contents. That is hardly surprising, and we have no means of saying at what date that became possible. It is to be observed that the excavations in the temple area also found a considerable number of well tags of the type found in Area 2.1, the large fourth-century house which we have designated B1. The bulk of these date from relatively low-numbered years, with 8 of the 9 coming from years 1-10, which are mostly likely to be assigned to the regnal years of Diocletian and Maximian, if not to an earlier ruler. The lone exception is *O.Trim.* 127, of year 33, which is to be assigned to Constantius II, thus 356/7. There are two other indications that activity on the hill was continuing in the fourth century, the occurrence of Psais the deacon (known from two other ostraka of that period) in *O.Trim.* 383 and the co-occurrence of Nikokles and Philippos in *O.Trim.* 286. Both of these are well known from the final phase of occupation of House

B1, in the 350s and 360s. We cannot, however, be certain from these ostraka whether the activity in question consisted simply of dumping trash from House B1 and its outbuildings on an abandoned hill, or if there was habitation on the hill itself. Nor do the graffiti tell us the answer to that question, as their presence is consistent with either hypothesis.

A slight hint might be drawn from the list or account that I mentioned earlier, headed by “the father” (or “our father”). A similar text was found in 2008 in the excavations of Deir Abu Matta. The meaning of “father” in both cases is not transparent, but we do not know of similar texts of this period in which it refers to any secular office in local or imperial government; the institution of the $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\pi\alpha\lambda\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ (“father of the city”) does not occur in Egypt before the second half of the fifth century. If the reference is to some kind of religious community, this would certainly be consonant with the excavators’ hypothesis at Deir Abu Matta that that church was attached to a community of some kind, with the adjacent building perhaps a monastic keep.

There is nothing found at Amheida so far to indicate the presence there of any monastic establishment, or indeed any other type of religious community. But given the condition of the top of the hill today, it is impossible to exclude any hypothesis—and that includes the hypothesis that it was merely a dump for debris from adjacent areas of the city that were still in full activity. Still, the fact that even the extremely extensive topographic survey of Amheida carried out so far has not turned up any building remains that look like a church, one might well wonder if the temple compound was an early example of a temple turned into a church. We say that, of course, knowing well that the now rather numerous churches of the Dakhla Oasis are all either retrofits of domestic structures or purpose-built in this period, and that the one case we know of where a temple was to our knowledge repurposed, at Ain el-Gedida, it was turned into a pottery workshop, as Nicola Aravecchia has established (Aravecchia, this volume).

Institute for the Study of the Ancient World
New York University
roger.bagnall@nyu.edu

Department of Classics
New York University
rc119@nyu.edu

⁶ Assmann 1995, 194, citing Assmann 1975/1999, 190, from Tab. BM 5656.

⁷ We would expect a *pe* at the end; it is impossible to say if it stood there or not.

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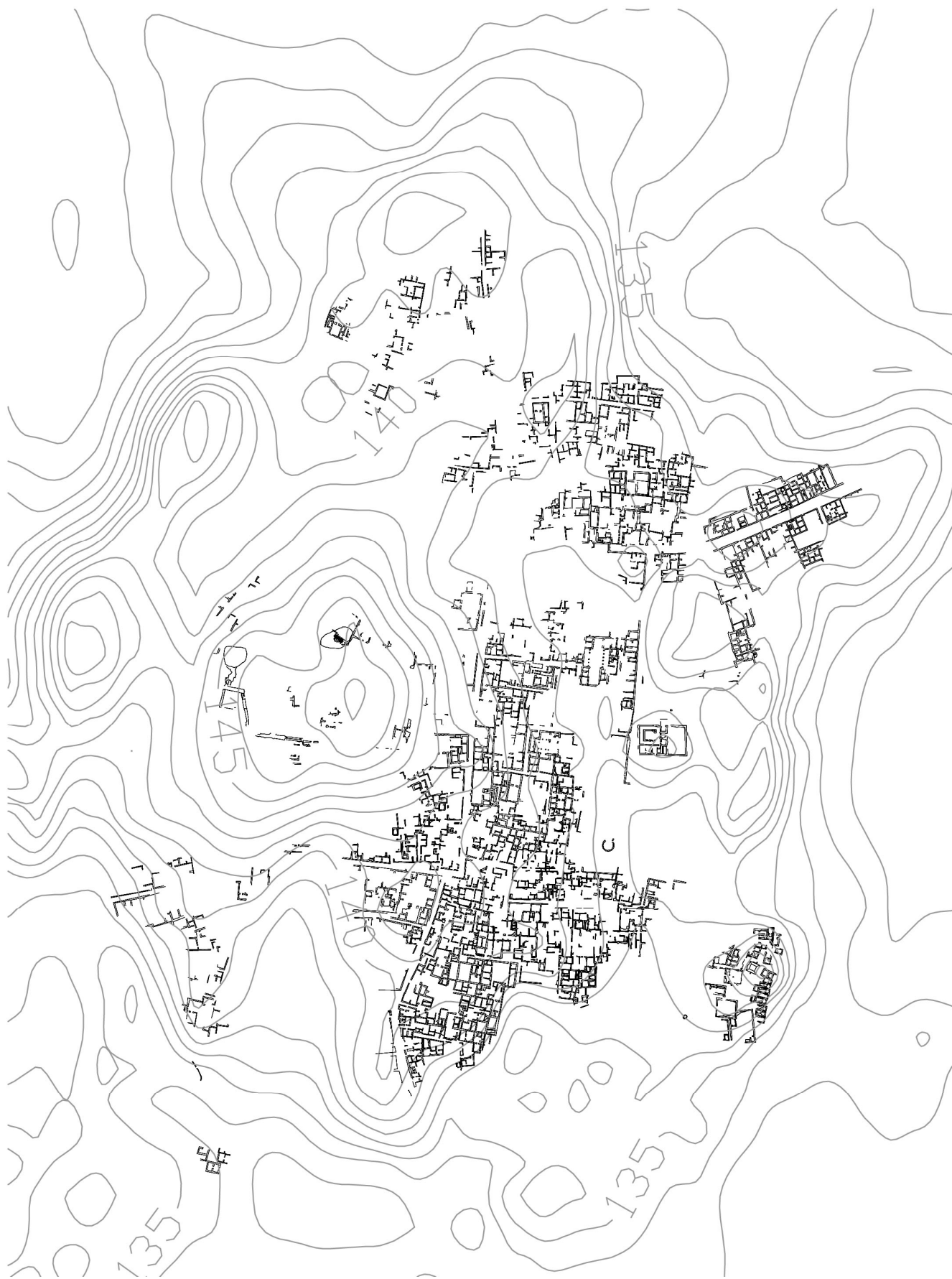


Plate 1: Topographic visualization of Roman Trimithis.



Plate 2: Graffito of Horigenes, Amheida inv. 3271.



Plate 3: Graffito from temple area at Amheida, inv. 3053.



Plate 4: Graffito from temple area at Amheida, inv. 3053, infrared photo, left.



Plate 5: Graffito from temple area at Amheida, inv. 3053, infrared photo, center.



Plate 6: Graffito from temple area at Amheida, inv. 3053, infrared photo, right.