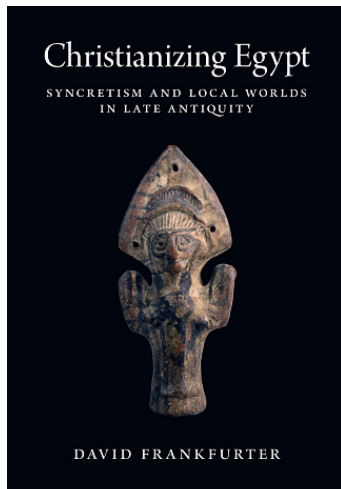


CHRISTIANIZING EGYPT



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WHO MAKES HISTORY? FOR MANY YEARS, THE ANSWER to that question was assumed to be obvious: the great rulers, generals, prelates, and thinkers who determined the course of human events. This “Great Man” view of history (and most of those identified as ‘great’ tended by definition to be men) began to fall out of favor in the mid-20th century, as historians began to attach more weight to large-scale environmental, economic, and social factors. The trend accelerated with the advent of new critical approaches such as feminism and post-colonialism, which did much to broaden the range of the individuals and groups that historians might consider as active participants in, rather than simply the passive recipients of, major historical developments. The Christianization of the ancient Mediterranean world is of course a classic example of a major historical development, and David Frankfurter, in this compelling volume, takes a fresh look at it in the specific context of Egypt. Older accounts of the spread of Christianity in Egypt typically focus on Great Men as the key agents in the process: Clement, Origen, Dionysius, Antony, Athanasius, and so forth. Frankfurter

presents to us a very different cast of characters, many of them obscure and not a few anonymous: the ill woman who, when refused a blessing by the holy man Apa Pisentius, collected some dust from his footprints and shared it with her even sicker friend (p. 64); the holy man Aaron, who “dispensed holy substances to ensure good vineyard production and a fishing harvest” (p. 90); the weaver who created the tunic depicting a cross below the figure of a nude, dancing man (p. 157 with figure 10); Epimachus of Oxyrhynchus, who commissioned an amulet containing the text of the legendary letter of Abgar to Jesus (p. 199). When Great Men such as the formidable abbot Shenoute of Atripe make their appearance in Frankfurter’s account, as inevitably they do, they are often shown not so much acting as reacting, responding to the actions of the Little People over whose worlds they supposedly exerted such great influence. It is through this steady focus on these humble actors and their everyday actions that Frankfurter is able to make his case that Christianization was not primarily an intellectual or even spiritual process nor yet a societal transformation wrought by elites, but a gradual development that consisted in a multiplicity of choices made by specific individuals operating in specific social contexts in response to specific personal needs. For him, “Christianity in Egypt of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries amounted to a framework within which mothers and scribes, artisans and holy men, priests and herdsmen experimented with diverse kinds of religious materials and traditions, both to make sense of the institution and its teachings and to conceptualize efficacy—the magic without which life couldn’t proceed” (p. 3).

The book is divided into seven chapters, followed by a brief afterward. Chapter 1, “Remodeling the Christianization of Egypt”, serves to introduce the book’s theoretical framework. It opens with a short case study: a papyrus dating to about the 7th century AD inscribed with two brief stories, one featuring Jesus and a doe in labor and another, on the opposite side, featuring Jesus Horus, the son of Isis, which together frame a healing charm (pp. 1-3). This text raises questions of classification that have long had a prominent place in discussions of Christianization. The answer that has perhaps most commonly been given is to classify artefacts like this as “pagan survivals”. Frankfurter’s first crucial step in this chapter is to problematize this concept (pp. 7-15). The problem lies not only in the qualifier “pagan”, a descriptor that, like many other scholars of recent decades, Frankfurter finds inherently distorting: “it always signified Christianity’s invented foil – a polemical category with little relationship to the many local cults, traditions, and religious expressions that existed around the Mediterranean world. ‘Paganism’ implies its own insufficiency and replacement” (p. 9). The problem lies equally in the very notion of “survivals”, which implies some sort of fixed entity, a system of which every element can exist only as a signifier of the whole. But if “paganism” was not in fact a fixed and systematic entity, then a given cultural practice such as inscribing a story about Horus and Isis on a piece of papyrus

did not necessarily signify it. In short, labeling practices like these as “pagan survivals” does nothing to explain or even describe them. What we need instead, Frankfurter argues, is “an approach to these materials and reports that both acknowledges their context in Christianized environments, and even the Christian identity of their subjects, and at the same time recognizes that a Christianizing culture depends on traditional forms of religious expression in order to make sense... Here is the theoretical question that motivates this book. How do we draw on notions of folk agency, ritual fixity, *habitus*, and socially inscribed gesture to talk about, not survivals of some putative old religion, but, rather, the very construction of Christianity in local worlds through traditional practices and expressions?” (pp. 14-15).

In the remainder of the introduction Frankfurter explicates the key analytical categories that he believes can help us provide more precise and effective answers to this question. I will focus on four of these, which I found to be the most salient: syncretism, agency, gesture, and social site. As Frankfurter notes, the term “syncretism” has in recent decades come under attack for its colonialist presuppositions and has been widely abandoned in favor of alternatives such as “hybridity” and “acculturation”. He himself, however, makes a strong case for reclaiming it. The key point is to conceptualize the cultural context within which syncretism occurs not as that of a few pure and monolithic traditions but rather a system characterized by fluidity and mixture. “Used in this way, not as a static assumption of pure sources, but as a dynamic *process* in religious transformation and historical perpetuation, syncretism can serve as a productive theoretical model for examining the materials and reports of religious mixture” (p. 20; all italics original). This understanding of syncretism in turn directs our attention to those settings of day-to-day life in which this process took place and thus to the notions of agency, gesture, and social site. Agency is the most crucial of these. “In its most basic sense, agency comprises *self-determination* and *creativity*, demonstrated by real historical individuals in real historical communities proposing different media and different places for imagining a new religious system” (p. 20). Throughout the book Frankfurter insists that individuals actively make their own decisions about how to address their needs and desires. At the same time, he regularly emphasizes that agency is shaped by established conventions of social practice, what he describes as “gestures”. “I refer here to the deep sense of ‘gesture’ as a medium of social affiliation, embodied communication, and memory developed by Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu under the term *habitus*” (p. 22). It is primarily through gestures that individuals participate, no doubt to some extent unwittingly, in the larger systems of knowledge and power in which they are enmeshed. Lastly, through the notion of social sites he highlights the actual real-world contexts in which individuals exercised agency and employed gestures. “In this way the locus of religious syncretism and Christianization shifts by necessity from the

total culture – Egypt writ large – to individual social worlds that might have differed considerably in their agency and media of syncretism, their range of practices, and their sense of Christianity as a system of ideas” (p. 25).

If I have lingered over the first chapter, it is because that is where Frankfurter does the intellectual labor of formulating the terms of his project, which he then executes in the remainder of the book. The bulk of it consists of chapters that investigate in detail particular social sites and their characteristic actors: the domestic sphere (Chapter 2), the holy man (Chapter 3), the saint’s shrine (Chapter 4), the workshop (Chapter 5), and the scriptorium and scribe (Chapter 6). The domestic sphere comes first because it is to some extent the primary social site. The concerns that most tend to motivate the largest number of people are domestic ones: health, familial relationships, economic security. In addressing these concerns, many people rely on tried-and-true methods, the practices that they inherited from their forebears. Although their reliance on such traditional gestures has in the past been interpreted as deliberate resistance to cultural transformation, Frankfurter stresses that these same agents were likewise responsible for choosing to incorporate elements of Christian tradition. The motivations behind their syncretism were consistent: to employ any available source of power as a means of coping with the vicissitudes of life. Seen in this way, the domestic sphere becomes central to the process of Christianization. On the one hand, it was often in reaction to the syncretism taking place within the private context of the home that Christian leaders attempted to assert their own authority and define with precision what did and did not count as idolatry. On the other hand, domestic concerns were often what motivated people to seek aid in social sites outside the home: from holy men, saint’s shrines, artisans, and scribes.

Although the narratives that form our chief source of information about holy men (Chapter 3) tend to emphasize their eradication of the old pagan world in favor of the new Christian one, Frankfurter argues that they functioned instead as “veritable workshops of syncretism, alternately translating new ideas, asserting traditional ways in new guises, violently opposing older practices, and innovating hybrid worldviews” (p. 70). He proposes that such figures, whom he prefers to describe in cross-cultural terms as regional prophets, were engaged not so much in replacement as reordering. For example, their persistent attacks did much to help keep the old gods alive in their new guise as demons. We can thus “see holy men in cultural memory reorienting traditional concepts of ritual speech, action, and even demonology for the promotion of Christianity” (p. 78). Closely connected to holy men are saints’ shrines (Chapter 4), sites associated with the holy men of the past, which allowed people proximity to their holiness in a permanent, material form. The chapter focuses on the range of social practices or gestures that took place at saints’ shrines: processions, ritual slaughter and associated meals, the deposition of votives, divinatory

practices such as dream incubation and ticket oracles, and spirit possession, most of which drew in one way or another on long-established practices. “The syncretism of the saint’s shrine is thus not a ‘balance’ of religious heritages or a haphazard conglomeration of two religions but the steering of local gesture and agency to the Christian saint” (p. 144). Frankfurter turns next to workshops, whose artisans produced the objects that people purchased at saints’ shrines either as votive offerings or as souvenirs that served to transfer some of the shrine’s holiness to their own homes; for similar reasons and in similar ways they also intersected with households, temples, and monasteries. Like the clientele they served, such artisans (stone-carvers, potters, painters, weavers, mortuary workers) drew on both long-standing local traditions and local impressions of Christianity in order to create efficacious objects, objects that would “convey power, authority, prestige, protection, or presence” (p. 150). The various strategies they employed “did not serve theology or reflect mythology but mediated the presence of gods according to immediate contexts like festivals, desires for fecundity, or the aspirations of local shrines” (p. 155). In this way, again like their clients, artisans also functioned as agents of a practical syncretism.

If both artisans and their clients were primarily interested in the efficacy of the objects they produced, the same is even more true of one particular type of craftsperson, the literate scribe (Chapter 6). In a world where literacy was much more limited than it is in our own, mastery over the power of the written word had long endowed the scribe with a distinctive social position, a status that was now reinforced by the spread of the characteristically Christian veneration of scripture. It is not a surprise that “most of our documents suggest that the scribe had some affiliation with a monastic or ecclesiastical institution, broadly conceived” (p. 185). But while these figures had some investment in orthodoxy, that is, “the language of ecclesiastical authority” (p. 187), they too were effective agents of syncretism. “The sheer variety of books held in monastery libraries, bound in codices, complained about by reformers, and invoked as sources of magical texts shows the rich field from which monastic scribes could draw biblical legends, Christian theological ideas, and local traditions” (p. 190). Nor was the world of the monastery separate from the world outside. We must imagine both ordinary people coming to the monk/scribe for help with their needs and the monk/scribe himself as an itinerant specialist moving from place to place. Through such interactions monastic scribes “conveyed the practices, ideas, and lore of the monastic and shrine worlds for active use and recombination in the everyday world of the laity”, along with ancient Egyptian traditions such as “ticket oracles at saints’ shrines, songs about Egyptian gods in magical texts, the ancient literary form of the Land of Egypt oracle, and a preoccupation in many texts with the demons of the underworld and the transition of the postmortem soul (p. 230). Frankfurter argues strongly that this was not a matter of consciously redeploying these

ancient traditions but rather of “engaging recollections of earlier literary traditions through the act of writing itself”, recollections “that pertained to how one ought to express one’s craft in a particular medium” (p. 231).

As even this brief overview suggests, Frankfurter makes it clear that his treatment of these social sites in separate chapters is more a heuristic device than a reflection of contemporary social reality: in practice, the sites that he studies were not sharply distinct from one another, but instead intersected in a variety of ways. The final chapter complements the preceding ones by placing this intersection of different agents and social settings front and center, through its focus on the Egyptian landscape (Chapter 7). Frankfurter examines “four dimensions of the Christianization of the Egyptian religious landscape that stress the agency of the actors on the ground – bishops, townspeople, villagers, monks – in *constructing* an Egyptian Christianity” (p. 237): building churches in response to temples, negotiating the power of spirits associated with particular locations, instituting processions that integrated topography with Christian identity, and sacralizing the landscape by enshrining within it stories of (often invented) martyrs.

This is a rich and rewarding book. It is not, however, a quick read, in part because of its very richness. Frankfurter’s learning is wide and deep. The bibliography of modern works contains some 1,000 items in a number of languages, and the primary materials that he uses to document his analysis are impressively wide-ranging: figurines, amulets, textiles, murals, building complexes, apocalypses, hagiographies, letters, charms, and incantations. To allow the reader to follow his analysis of material objects more easily, the book includes nine color plates, a map, and fourteen black-and-white figures (one plan, but otherwise crisply legible photographs). In all cases Frankfurter is sensitive to the distinctive nature of the different types of evidence that he employs. When he draws on hagiographic narratives, for example, he treats them first and foremost as constructed textual artefacts, not as simple accounts of events. Frankfurter’s points are rarely if ever obscure or difficult to comprehend, and his writing is consistently lucid. Yet he is so constantly attuned to the complexity and nuance of the material that he is studying that I felt a constant pull towards reflection, a need to stop and ponder. Indeed, despite the wealth of often highly vivid detail, the book strikes me as most compelling on the analytical level; his formulations are so precise and wide-ranging that to some extent they overshadow the data that he uses to support them.

As Frankfurter himself notes (p. 3), this book is a sequel to his earlier book on religion in Egypt (*Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*; Princeton University Press, 1998). Indeed, that book ended with a brief chapter whose subtitle is “A Prolegomenon to the Conversion of Egypt”, almost as if he were already contemplating a follow-up study. Insofar as the earlier volume focused on the continuity

of traditional religious practices within the cultural changes brought about by Egypt's incorporation into the Roman empire, the present book complements it by shifting the focus from the Roman empire to the Christian *oikoumene*. Frankfurter's overall approach to religion remains much the same: he is interested in a "bottom up" view, one that focuses on the local and quotidian rather than on the large-scale and abstract. But his thinking about the process of Christianization has clearly evolved. Whereas he concluded his earlier book with thoughts about conversion, he has in the present volume replaced the whole notion of "conversion" with that of "syncretism", which strikes me as a suppler framework for thinking about the issues of continuity and change that feature so largely in both books.

Also new is the current book's firm focus on the agency of individual actors, which in my view is its most exciting aspect. The chief component of Frankfurter's analytical framework in the earlier book was the anthropologist Robert Redfield's distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition, which he employed to very good effect (and which makes a guest appearance in the afterward of the current volume). By contrast, in the book under review Frankfurter steadfastly resists the temptation to think in terms of abstractions, even such benign ones, and instead insists that the large patterns that we scholars can perceive from such a distance in fact emerge from the countless and varied choices made by a multitude of often very humble actors. In this respect he is to some extent going against the trend of critical theory from Marx to Foucault, which gained much of its revolutionary force by treating individuals not as the free and informed agents imagined by earlier thinkers but rather as subject to broader forces outside their control and often beyond their awareness. As I hope my discussion has made clear, however, Frankfurter's analysis does not involve a return to simplistic notions of the autonomous individual. The crucial complement to his emphasis on agency is his insistence on the dense networks of social power and cultural traditions within which individual agents acted. It is the nuanced and subtle analysis that this combination allows, and the richness of the material with which he supports it, that makes this book such a rewarding contribution to our understanding of religious change in the late ancient Mediterranean world.