

Frontier Wanderings. Church Decoration in the Aswan Region and in Lower Nubia (6th-15th century).

In the 4th century, Christianity was already well established in the Aswan region, the most southern part of Egypt. Churches and monasteries were built and monastic and solitary life thrived in the city and its environs. The Christian faith spread south, to the Kingdom of Nobadia in Lower Nubia. By the 6th century Nobadia was a Christian kingdom with Pachoras (Faras) as capital. The adjacent southern kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa followed shortly after. Nubian kings and elite had established close commercial and diplomatic ties with the Byzantine world, which included Egypt at that time.

The ties with Egypt were shaken but not severed in the following centuries. The 7th century was a time of political turmoil: the invading Islamic army which conquered Egypt was stopped in Nubia and a peace treaty was signed in 652, setting the border of then Islamic Egypt at Aswan. In the meantime, the Nubian kingdoms of Nobadia and Makuria merged into one state while the Nubian church came under leadership of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Under the Mamluk sultans, who reigned Egypt from the end of the 12th century, Islamic influence grew and in the 13th century, the Egyptian army conquered parts of Makuria. Internal struggles further weakened Makuria and the kingdom collapsed at the beginning of the 15th century.

Even up till modern times, the border between Egypt and Nubia was never very clear. This area formed a frontier region in which different tribes and nationalities moved and different languages were spoken. Trade, conflict and exchange made it an area where ideas and images could easily travel. Even after the Islamic peace treaty with a formal border at Aswan, communication between people on either side in this region continued.

Against this background, the proposed project will examine the painted church decoration in region of Aswan and Lower Nubia. When the first churches in Nubia were built and decorated, church leaders had to look for examples to their Christian neighbours, the Byzantine world of which Egypt was part at that time. In literature, an “Egyptian” influence on Nubia is repeatedly mentioned. But was this the case? Did they draw from other sources? And how did these sources travel? Which themes or programmes can be seen as an indigenous development? Can the latter themes also be found up north, in Egypt, as an opposite movement of influence?

Since the 1960s, a lot of research on wall painting in Nubian churches has taken place. Development of style, subjects of paintings, and decorative programmes have been discussed. However, these studies centre on specific monuments and themes, and are discussed in a Nubian context. Similarly, wall painting in Christian Egypt is mainly discussed from an Egyptian point of view.

Especially in a frontier zone such as Aswan and Lower Nubia, where traffic of people, goods, ideas, ideologies and images was common practice for centuries, a one-sided outlook distorts the picture. Therefore, we do it differently: we look at the region from two angles, from the Egyptian and from the Nubian tradition. From these viewpoints we investigate the characteristics of church decoration in this region and the processes that have fashioned these unique and colourful murals. The project is a case-study of the larger theme of cultural and religious influence and exchange.