

Session 5 – 11/11/2025

Women in Coptic Egypt – from early Christianity to late Antiquity

HPHI5032/6032 Women and Religion

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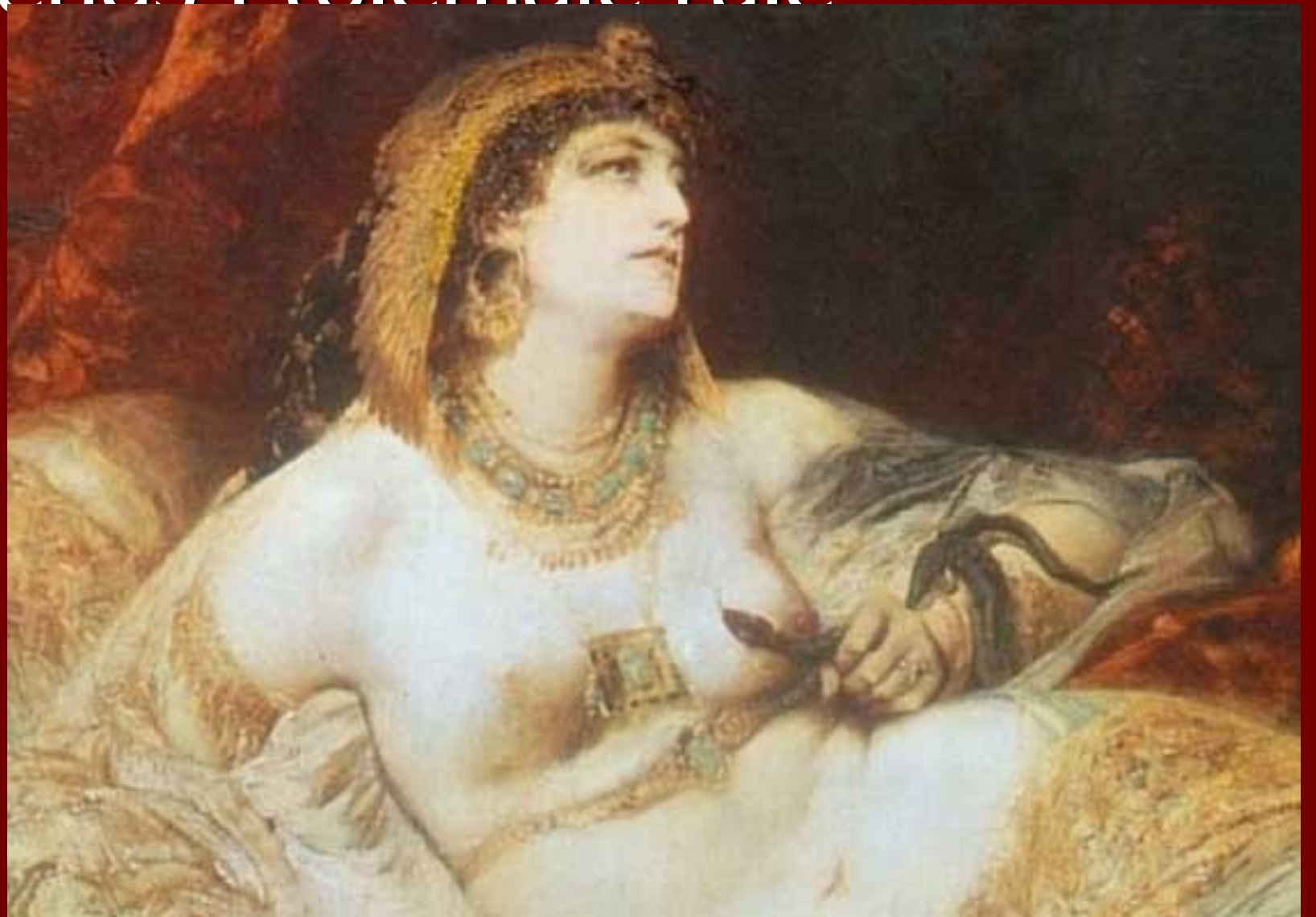
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Coptic Period

- (partially informal) designation for Late Roman Egypt (3rd–4th centuries) and Byzantine Egypt (4th–7th centuries)
- period defined by religious shifts in Egyptian culture and religious system to Coptic Christianity until the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 7th cent. AD

Actium and the end of the Hellenistic World

- Antony loses at Actium
- August 30 Octavian comes to Alexandria and formally ends Ptolemaic rule





Roman Period

- ❑ 31BC: Eg. = province of Roman Empire (Mark Antony + Cleopatra VII defeated at Battle of Actium)
- ❑ No ruling family living in Egypt; members of Rome's élite classes = forbidden to enter Eg. without permission of emperor
- ❑ Romans left religion and culture of Egypt intact: temples completed (followed style of predecessors, represented in Egyptian manner)
- ❑ Important: Temple of Isis at Philae (cult of Isis incorporated into Roman religion as 'mystery cult')



Roman Period

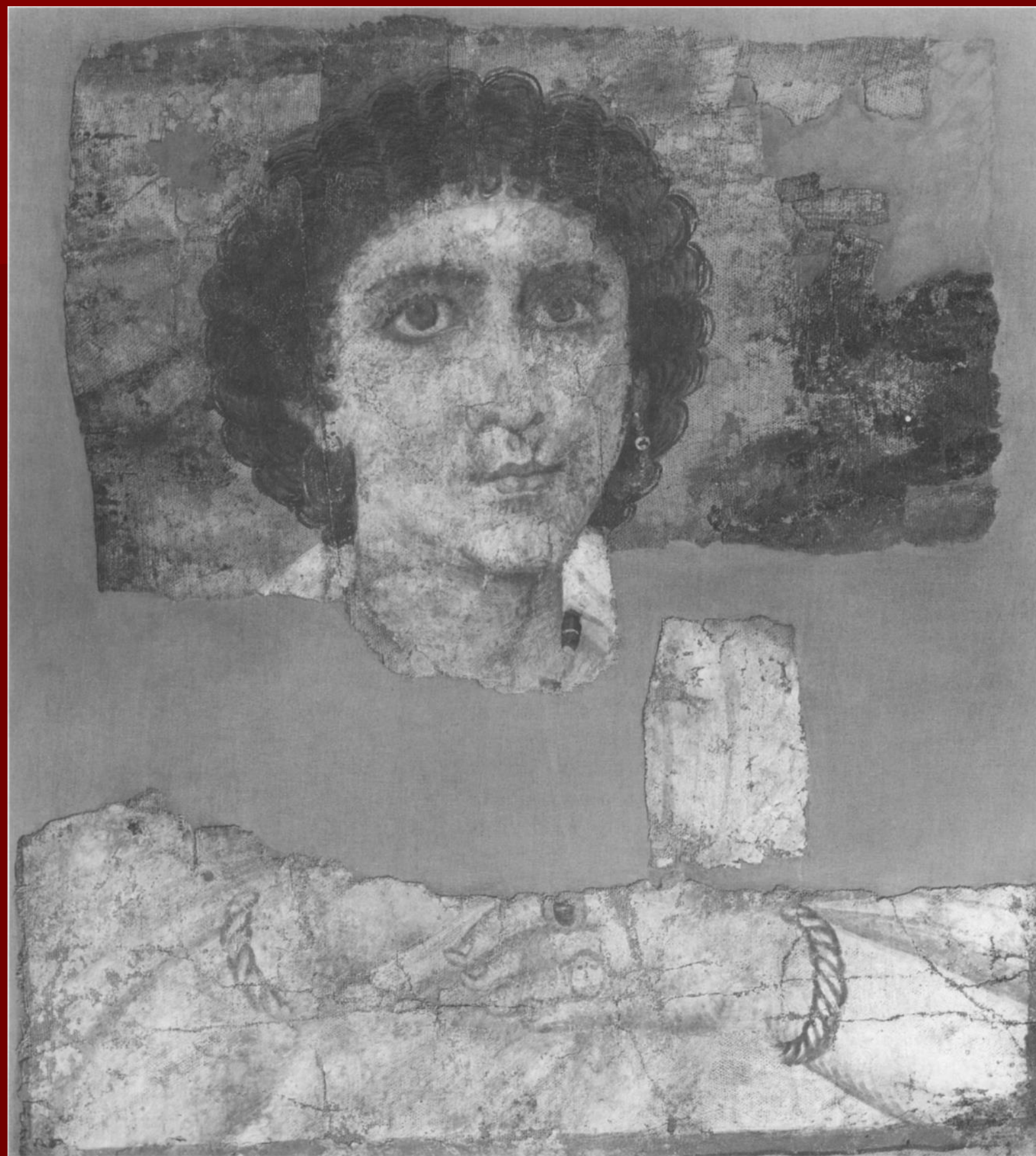
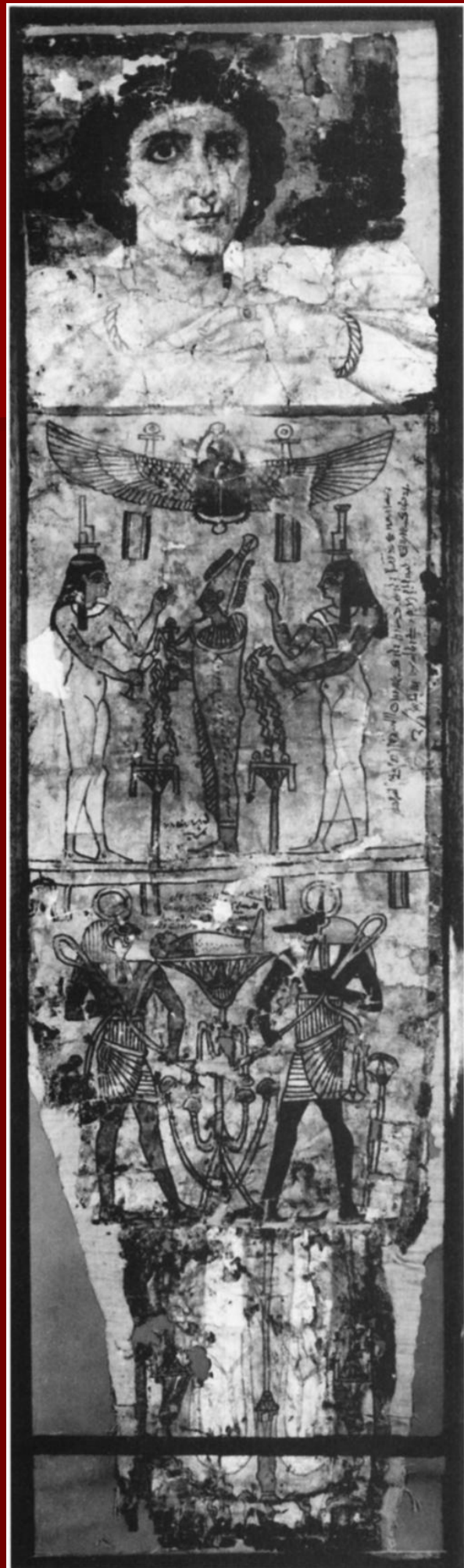
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Roman Period

- Romans installed own administrative system (well documented in papyri)
- greatest changes: in everyday life
 - included the introduction of agricultural implements and practices → Eg. important for grain supply for Rome
 - iron-working
- Egyptian culture gradually became subsumed by that of the Roman empire.

Funerary art

- ❑ Keeps Egyptian identity the longest
- ❑ variation across regions and over, not to mention within, generations
- ❑ between the 2nd cen. B.C. and third cen. A.D. → range of funerary art produced in Egypt:
 - 1. portrait panels from mummies in the Delta, the Fayum
 - 2. commemorative shrines of uncertain provenance
 - 3. painted shrouds from Hawara in the Fayum, as well as Saqqara, Antinoe, Asyut and Thebes



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 - 4. decorated tombs in Alexandria, Tuna el-Gebel, Qau el-Kebir, Akhmim, and the western oases, including Dakhleh Oasis

Dakhla, Qaret el Mouzawaka, Pedoubastis and Petosiris



Mummification



Afterlife: sun barque



Kom el Shuqafa, Alexandria



- Niches: house the statues
- slightly smaller than life size
- wear traditional ancient Egyptian costumes, but heads unmistakably Roman style
- according Roman portrait types: date Flavian period (69-98 AD)
- Statues intentionally embody two cultural traditions

Kom el Shuqafa, Alexandria



- Egyptian jackal-headed god Anubis in military uniform
- sundisk on his head, holding long staff / spear
- dressed as a Roman centurion: standing frontally, weight shifted to left leg, head facing entrance
- pose usually reserved for Hellenistic rulers / Roman emperors
- wears a muscle cuirass = armored breastplate over short chiton or tunic, short sword, lower right hand rests on shield, seen in profile.
- Guides doorway burial chamber

Egyptian mummy portraits

- portrait to show how individual would have looked like = important in Roman art: portraits placed in tombs as memorial of family members
- Mummy portrait appeared in first century AD, popular for 200 years
- placed on the outside of the cartonnage coffin (over head of individual or wrapped into mummy bandages)
- painted on wooden board (lifelike scale)



Painted plaster cartonnage mask of a woman

- covered upper body
- particularly popular in Middle Egypt
- face sometimes made separately in a mould and subsequently attached to the head-dress and torso
- Eg. Symbolic ornaments (collar, winged scarab beetle, protective wings of Isis and Nephthys)
- Roman influence: garland of rosebuds in hair, holds sprig of leaves (myrtle)

Egypt between being a Roman colony and becoming Misr

- **Byzantine Egypt**
- history of Egypt and Cyrenaica

- beginning with the division of the Roman Empire in 395
- ending with the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 640s



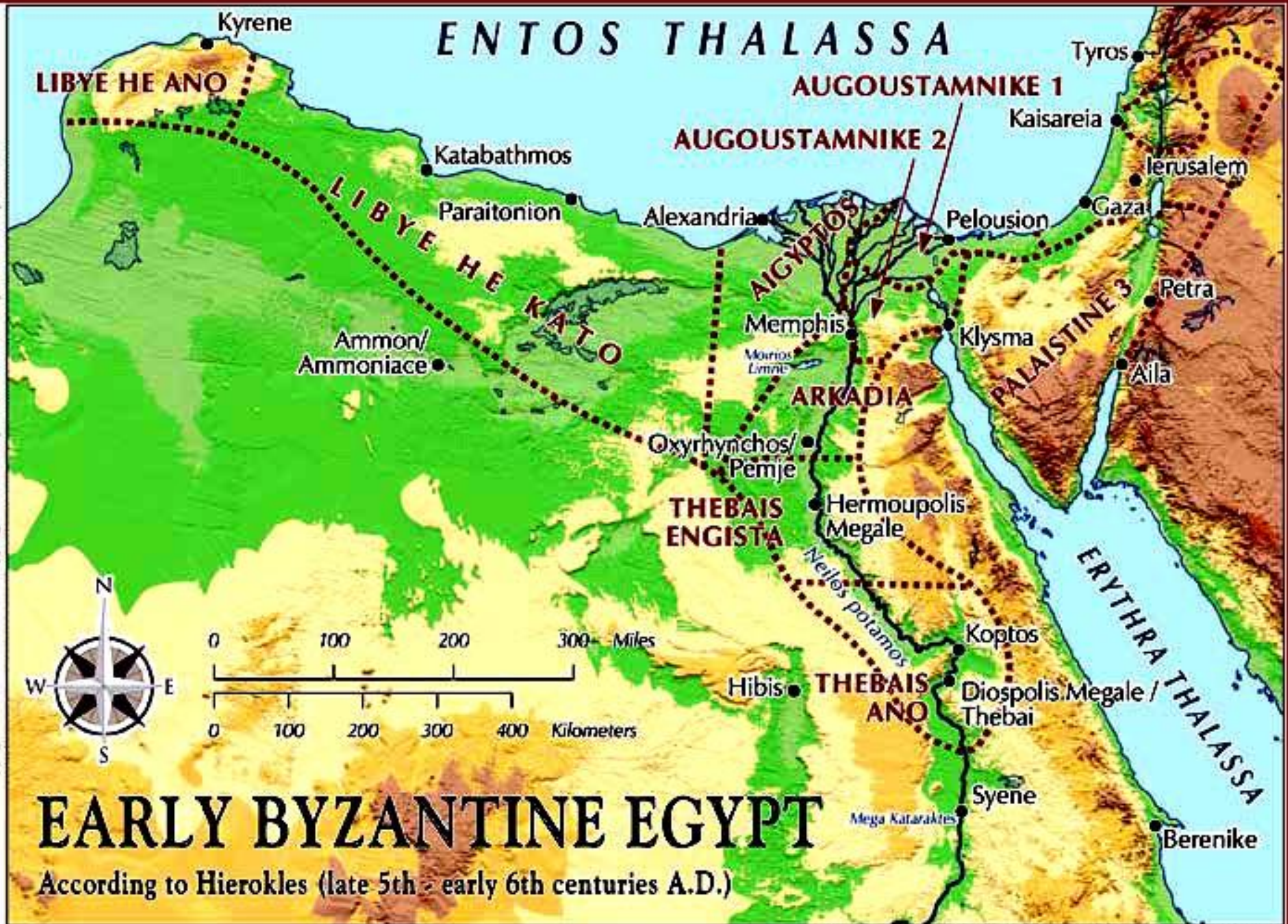
Byzantine Period

- ❑ Diocletian last reigning Roman emperor to visit Egypt, in 302 CE
- ❑ No clear divide between Roman and Byzantine period
- ❑ crucial changes in last decade 3rd cent. + first 3 decades of 4th
- ❑ end of persecution of Christians → restoration of the property of the church



Byzantine Period

- ❑ 313 new system of calculating and collecting taxes
- ❑ other important administrative changes
- ❑ founding of Constantinople (now Istanbul) on May 11, 330 changed role of Egypt
 - Constantinople as imperial capital + eastern counterpart to Rome → undermining Alexandria's traditional position as the first city of the Greek-speaking East
 - diverted the resources of Egypt away from Rome and the West: Egyptian grain supply fed Constantinople → important political and economic link
 - Egypt integrated into structure of B. empire → central role in political history of the Mediterranean world



EARLY BYZANTINE EGYPT

According to Hierokles (late 5th - early 6th centuries A.D.)

*Provincial boundaries are uncertain
and in many places very uncertain.*

Map by Tom Elliott for the Ancient World Mapping Center
University of North Carolina (www.unc.edu/awmc)



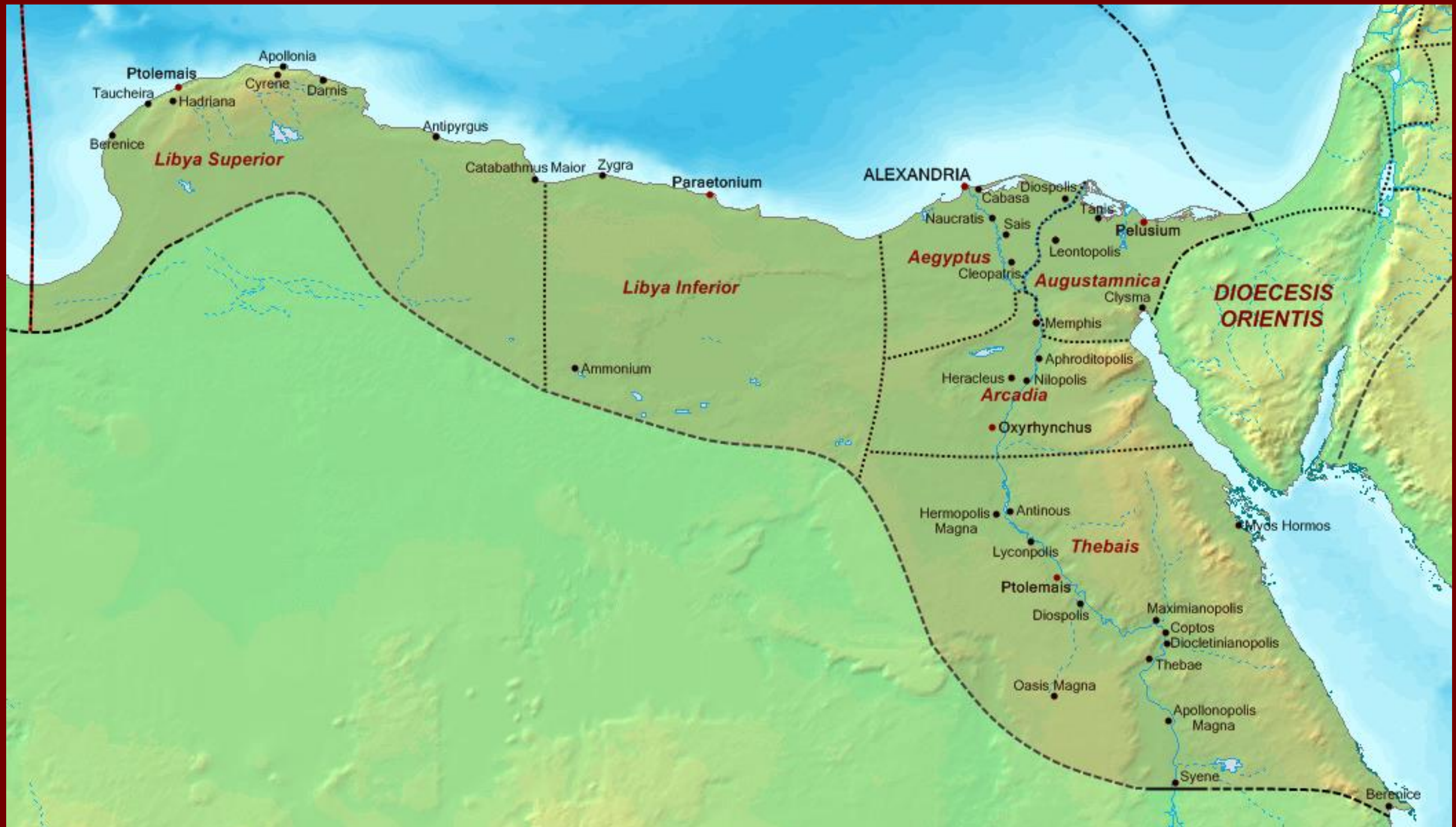
Byzantine Period

- ❑ key understanding the importance of Egypt: Christian church dominates secular as well as religious institutions
→ powerful role in every political issue
- ❑ head of the Egyptian church, the patriarch of Alexandria, became the most influential figure within Egypt + person who could give the Egyptian clergy a powerful voice in the councils of the Eastern church
- ❑ 4th century - Egypt divided for administrative purposes into a number of smaller units but the patriarchy was not,
→ power outweighed that of any local administrative official

The Coptic Orthodox Church – Christianity in Egypt

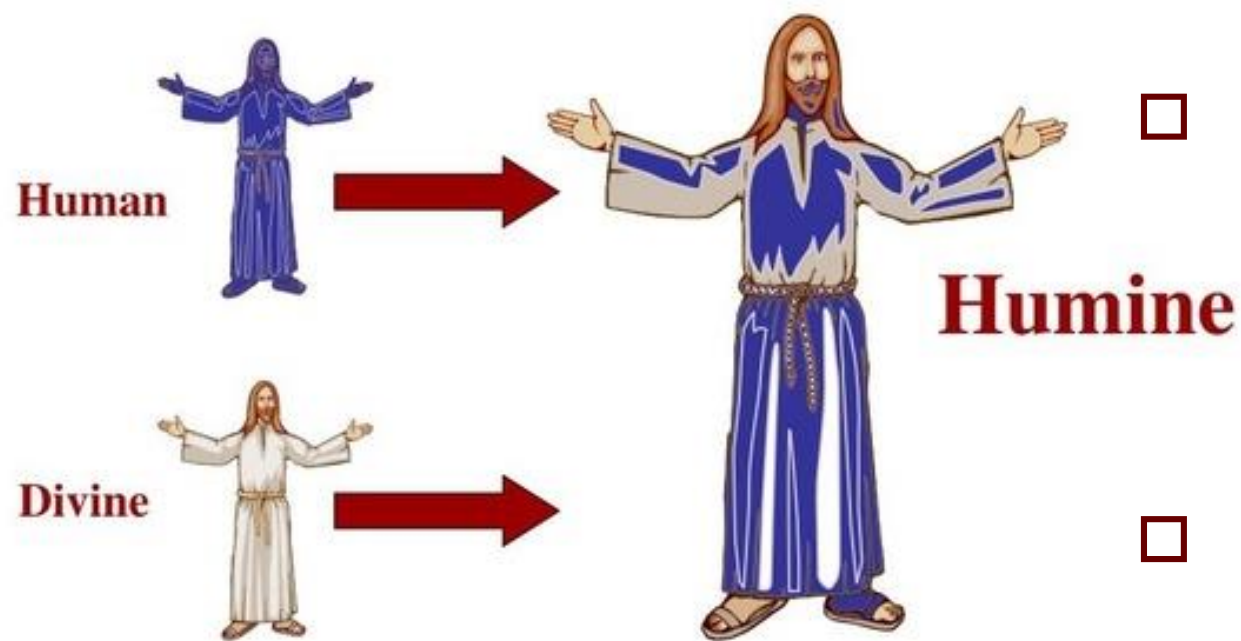
- ❑ established by Saint Mark, an apostle and evangelist, during the middle of the 1st century (c. AD 42)
- ❑ disputes concerning the nature of Christ, the Oriental Orthodox Churches were in schism after the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451

Diocese of Egypt



Byzantine Period

MONOPHYSITISM



- turbulent history to follow: struggles of patriarchs of Alexandria to maintain their position within patriarchy + outside (Constantinople)
- Coptic Christianity stands socially, politically, and culturally between Hellenism and native Egyptian culture
- Not following doctrine of Council of Chalcedon in 451 (Christ exists in two natures, inseparably united) → own path: monophysitism (insistence on the singularity of the nature of Christ)

The Byzantine monastery near Assiut Egypt. Excavated May 2023





Byzantine Period

- ❑ Struggle to defend Egypt against Constantinople
- ❑ Persian invasion: advanced to the Nile delta and captured Alexandria (619 – 628) ended with peace treaty between Persia and Byzantium
 - decade of violent hostility to the Egyptian Coptic Christians
 - refused ordination of bishops
 - massacred hundreds of monks

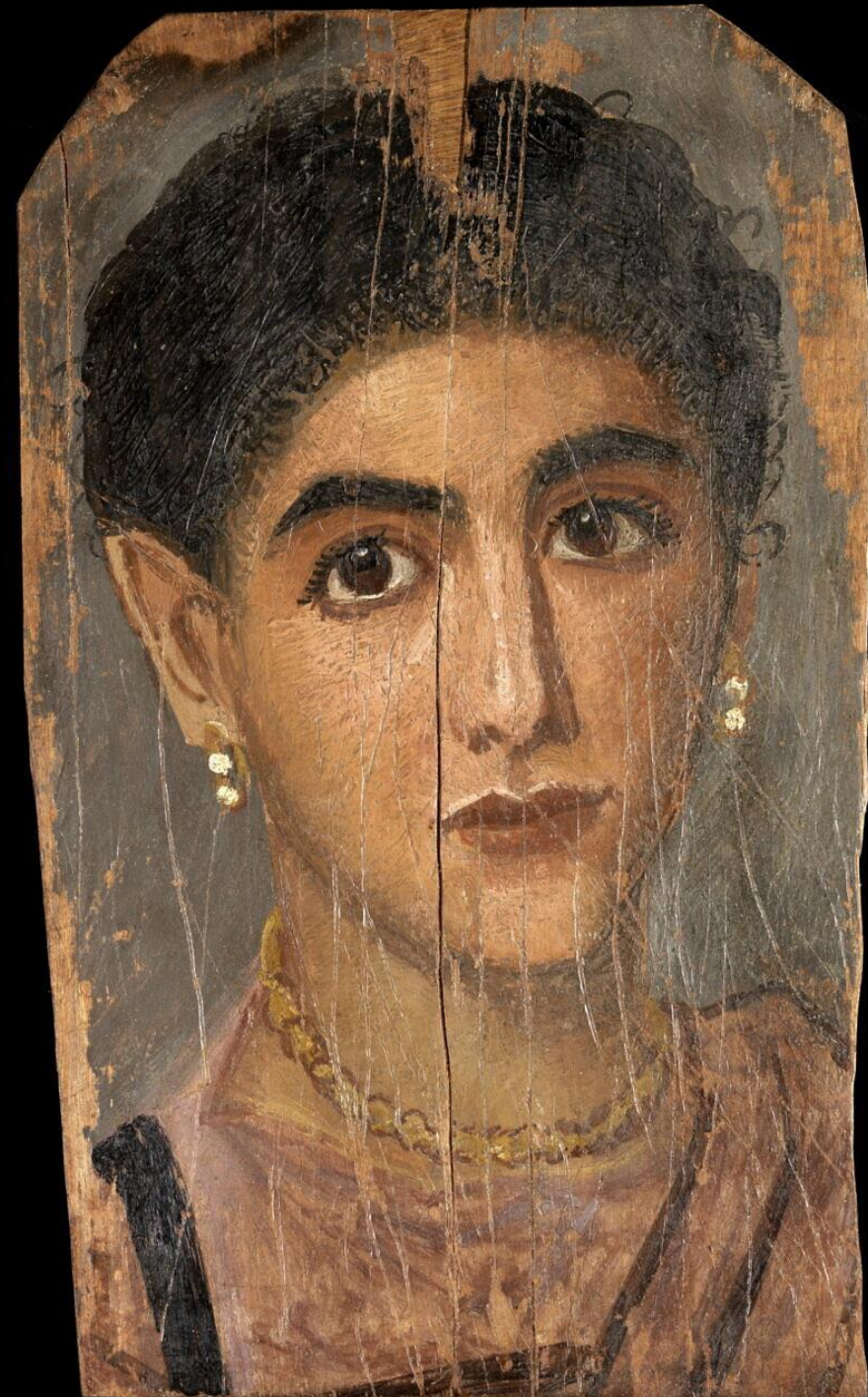
Women in Coptic Egypt

- From 1st cent. A.D.:
Christianity spread through
Egypt
- → Coptic period (comprising
Roman and Byzantine
Period)
- status of women changed
significantly



Women in Coptic art

- Mummy portrait of a woman 150-200 AD
- Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 2733 3 ; P 212



Women in Coptic art

- Funerary figure of a women
- 3rd-4th century AD
- Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund (70.132)





Shifting legal and social status:

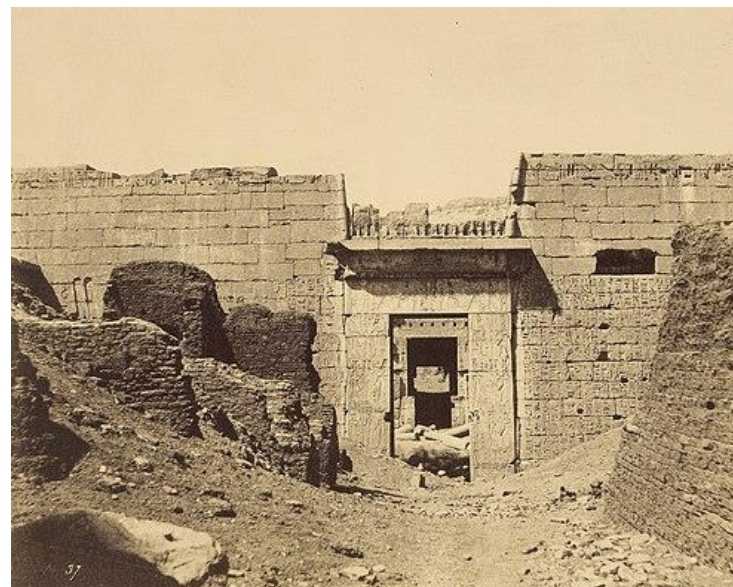
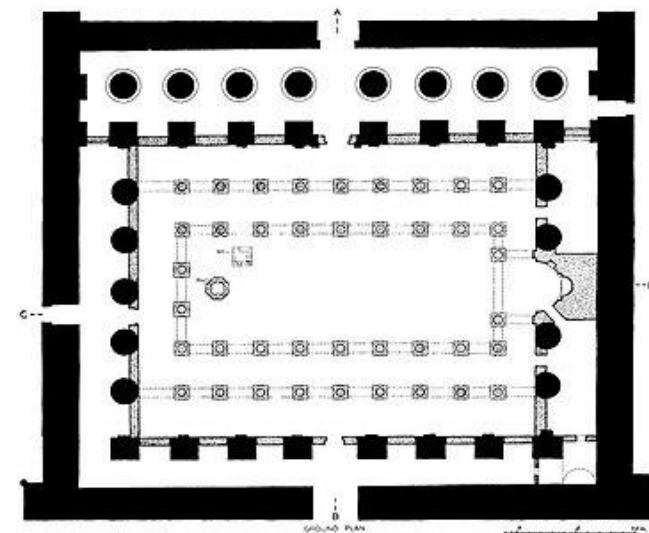
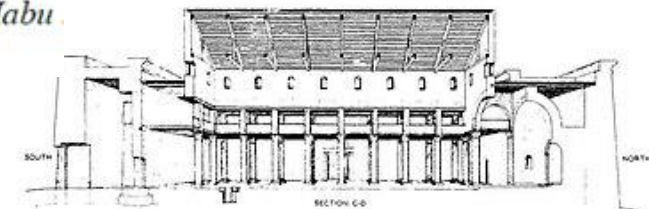
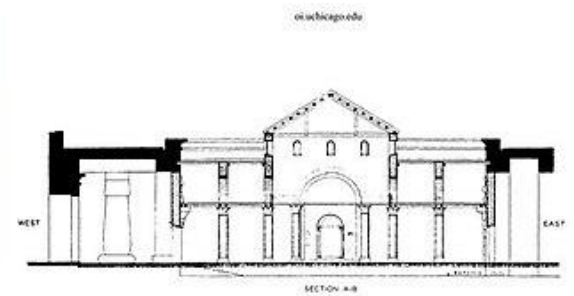
- ❑ increasingly subject to more patriarchal laws – as example: male guardians needed for major legal transactions
- ❑ Higher expectation to primarily fulfil roles as wives, mothers, caregivers
- ❑ Gender-segregated public spaces became more common.
- ❑ BUT: early Coptic period – Egyptian villages as Christian enclaves
 - Djeme / Jeme, showed a continuation of more traditional Egyptian legal practices. Here, Coptic women continued to own and manage property and engage in moneylending, demonstrating the persistence of ancient traditions.

Jeme / Djeme (Medinet Habu)

- Byzantine era: Medinet Habu temple complex populated as Djeme
- adapted for Christian use: construction of a church (dismantled during excavation of site)
- main temple structure used for burials during this period
- some original Egyptian reliefs altered with Christian carvings
- settlement at Djeme abandoned around 800 AD

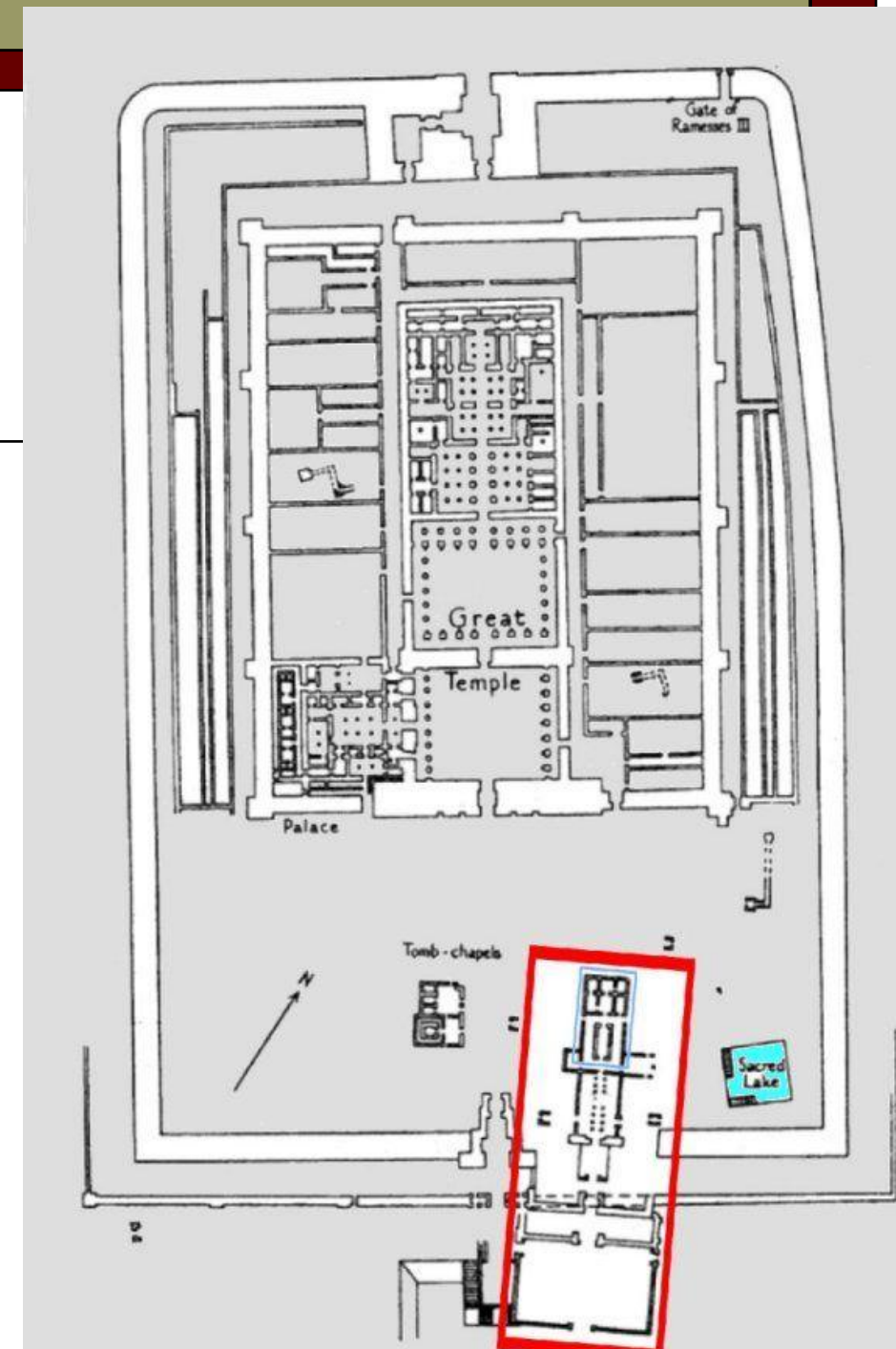


Figure 1. A map to the site of Jeme. The temple of Medinet Habu located in the top left.⁶



Jeme / Djeme (Medinet Habu)

- Coptic settlement: densely populated town (18,860 residents)
- large blocks of houses separated by narrow streets, religious buildings as important focal points of urban texture
- Several churches in different sectors, including five-aisled basilica known as the "Holy Church of Djeme" (second court) – north–south orientation cutting across the original axis of the temple with a font and a well, dated 5th-7th century
- Before clearing/excavation of temple (end of 19th cent.) much of the Coptic town still visible
- religious buildings, including the Holy Church of Djeme, were damaged over time: Ramesside columns on the east side removed to accommodate the apse and the Osiris pillars cut away as inappropriate in a Christian building





Women in ancient Coptic Egypt

- ❑ women active in their communities
- ❑ held roles within the early Christian Coptic Orthodox Church
- ❑ participated in religious life
- ❑ had economic influence
- ❑ often involved in social and legal matters
- ❑ → but compared to pharaonic Egypt: status decreased over time due to external influences + cultural changes



Case study: Money lending in Djeme

- Women could be both borrowers and lenders – are about 1/3 of borrowers in Jeme loan documents
- show that women more likely to borrow from women, and men were more likely to borrow from men
 - 60 percent of women borrowed from women
 - 27 percent of men borrowed from women
- Female money lenders provide 30% of loans
- case of a female money lender (named Koloje) = prime example of womens' involvement in the economy of Jeme
 - Koloje lived in House 34 with husband and fellow moneylender Pecosh (title Ara of Jeme – meaning unclear)
 - House 34 contains around 30 ostraca documenting the business transaction of Koloje and her family in an archive known as the Koloje Archive

Case study: female property in Djeme

- women inheriting land and property
- Case study – Maria and her heirs:
 - 719 CE woman called Maria passed away
 - leaving property owned jointly with her husband
 - inheritance documents from October 6, 719 CE: home was divided between Maria's daughter Elizabeth and her granddaughter Abigaia
 - See Fig.: Elizabeth received part of the roof, a veranda, symposium, and a room under the stairs: Abigaia received other half of the house

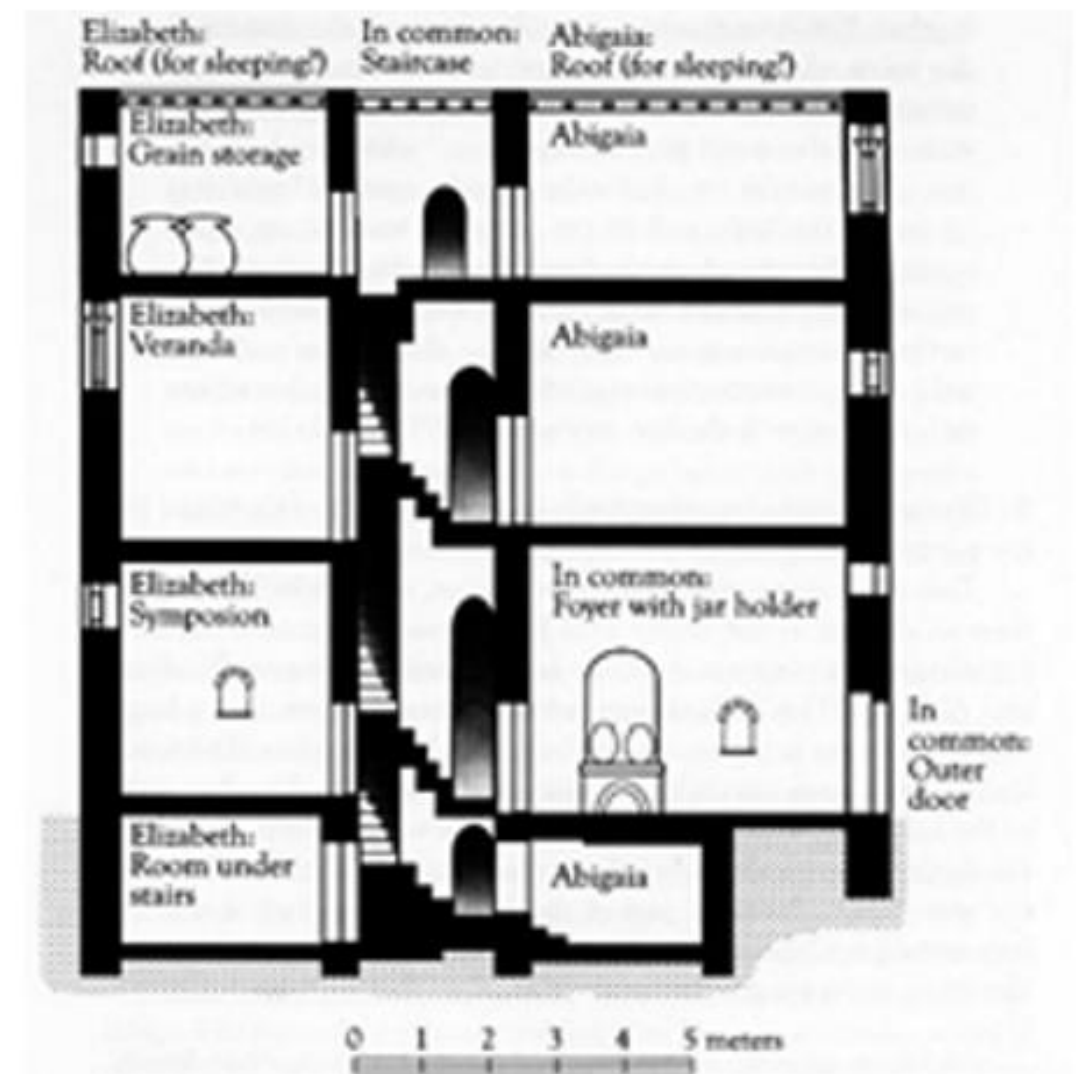
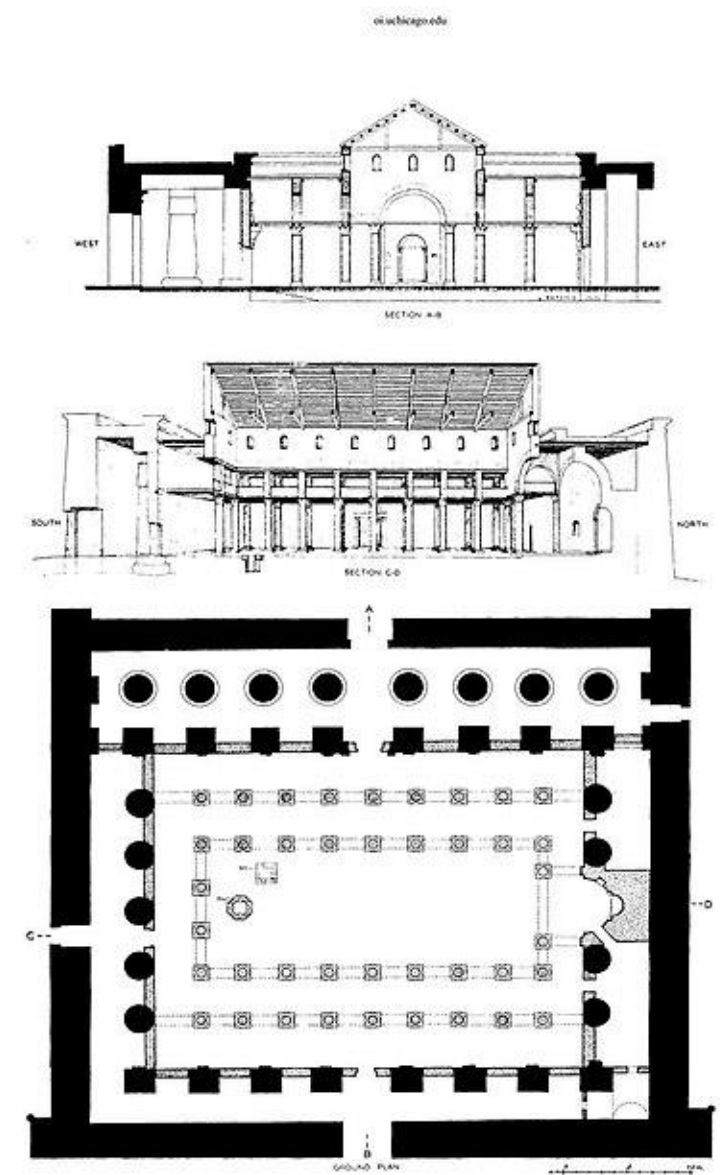


Figure 2. The house of Maria. Like most Coptic homes of the period, ownership of each room was strictly determined by law.

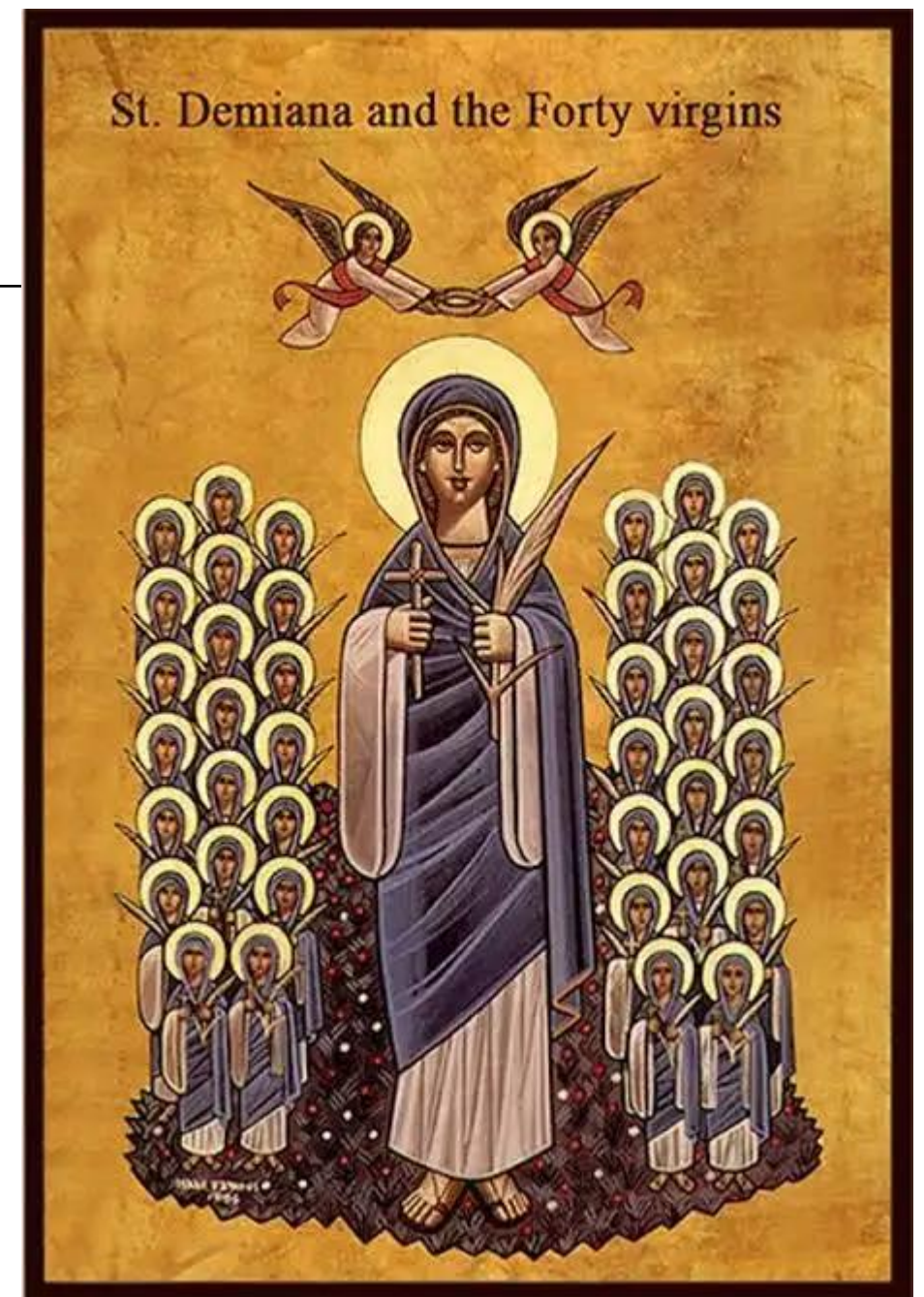
Case study: female church ownership

- churches in Jeme were not owned by a single person; but ownership was divided into shares
- example – case of Susanna
 - refers to “my one-fifth of the church,” = Church of Apa Patermoute
 - one-fifth share = more important than it may appear
 - churches as central pillars of Coptic communities
 - families who controlled shares in church property → great influence and prestige within community
 - Susanna’s church share underscores the central role played by women in Djeme



New religious roles:

- new religious opportunities for women: prominence as martyrs, saints, ascetics
- **Monasticism:** Coptic Christianity originated the tradition of ascetic monasticism, and female monastics were an important part of the church.
- **Saints and martyrs:** Numerous Coptic women are venerated as saints and martyrs, including Saint Demiana, who became a notable figure during periods of persecution



Saint Mary of Egypt

- Highest Coptic female saint
- Coptic: ⲩⲁⲣⲓⲁ Ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲛⲣⲉⲙⲛ̀ⲭⲏⲙⲓ
- venerated as a Desert Mother in the Eastern Orthodox and Coptic Churches
- Desert Mothers
 - = ammas or female Christian ascetics living in the desert of Egypt (4th and 5th centuries AD)
 - typically lived in the monastic communities or as hermits
 - monastic communities acted collectively with limited outside relations with lay people
 - some ascetics chose to venture into isolated locations to restrict relations with others, deepen spiritual connection, and other ascetic purposes
 - other women from that era who influenced the early ascetic or monastic tradition while living outside the desert are also described as Desert Mothers



Head of a dancer (decoration on woolen textile)

- 395 / 641 (époque byzantine)
- AF 6148 ; X 4849 ; B 22 ; TC 747
- Louvre Département des Arts de Byzance et des chrétientés en Orient
- Women's roles in Coptic religious life
 - Priestesses
 - musicians
 - dancers



But diminishing women's role in society

- ❑ Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria - treatise *On Virginity* – urges virgins to wear simple black clothes:
- ❑ *Your cloak should be black—not dyed, but naturally so— or onyx-coloured. The scarf should be the same colour, without tassels. The sleeves should be woollen, covering the arms to the fingers; the hair cut short, with a woollen headband tied round the head, and a hood, and a shoulder covering without tassels [...] let your feet be covered with shoes, for this kind of clothing is suitable for holiness.*



Revival?!

- In the 20th century: a revival of women's roles in the Coptic Orthodox Church began, with more women serving as nuns and deaconesses and teaching in Coptic seminaries