

**Title: Late Antique Christianity in Kharga Oasis (Egypt). An Archaeological Examination**

Kharga Oasis is the southernmost of the five oases of Egypt's Western Desert, and it is home to an archaeological record of paramount importance for the history of Christianity. The material in question is concentrated in the fourth century, though the chronological extremes of the study span from the third through to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. That the bulk of this corpus can be attributed to the fourth century is a remarkable fact, with material evidence of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire typically emerging from the fifth century onward. This is largely due to the time it took for adherents of this relatively new religious movement to develop distinctive material expressions. This development was closely tied to the status and popularity of Christianity which, at the end of the fourth century, became the religion of the Empire after having grown exponentially the preceding decades.

As a result of the aridity for which Egypt is renowned, the history of occupation in the region, and the activities of early archaeologists, Kharga contains one of the largest corpora of fourth-century Christian material culture in the world. This includes hundreds of documentary texts from 19 sites, four monastic complexes, 17 church buildings, dozens of funerary contexts, and a handful of anepigraphic artefacts. This material offers unique insight into the lived realities of some of the first adherents of Christianity in Egypt, with all their diversity. This is in contrast to the idealised image of early Egyptian Christianity provided by the literary sources which often form the basis of popular understandings.

The study uses this corpus to both illuminate and reassess key aspects of early Egyptian Christianity. The range of topics examined in the work are particularly focused on aspects of practice and include developments in the liturgy and corresponding changes in church architecture, the diversity of monastic expression, approaches to death and burial, and religiously motivated visitation. This is in addition to topics pertaining to the region more broadly, namely the history of occupation which allowed for the archaeological corpus to be so well preserved. Efforts were also dedicated to examining the methodological limits of using material culture to study religious phenomena.

Despite the extent and quality of the oasean corpus, it has never before been studied as a cohesive whole. This is in part due to the fact that a large amount of the relevant material has not yet been published, but it can also be understood in light of the broader tendency for archaeologists working on Christian materiality to focus on other regions of the Empire, namely Rome. As a member of the ERC-funded DEChriM project, I have been in the privileged position of having access to unpublished documentation and collaborating closely with other members of the team working on related material. DEChriM thus offered an integral framework with which it was possible to examine this extensive body of evidence.

The PhD thesis is the first large-scale study dedicated to the Christian archaeology of Kharga Oasis. While the breadth of material has necessitated only preliminary treatment of some topics, and many avenues remain unexplored, the study is intended to introduce this underutilised corpus to the wider scholarly community. Hopefully it will function as a foundation for future research into the materiality of late antique Christianity.