

From Obscurity to Sole Inhabitant

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Abstract:

The history of Alexandria is one which is often wanting of archeological evidence, so chronicles become the main source of our understanding of Alexandria's past. This article will provide a narrative of the first Christians in Alexandria and in so doing, give some insight into the topography of the ancient city may be entertained through further research. At the heart of this paper is the relationship between Christians, Jews, and Pagans, and how a diverse city became a homogeneous one.¹

Key words: Alexandria, Persecution, Evangelization, Paganism, Judaism

By what means Christianity came command the religious inclinations of the inhabitants of the great city of Alexandria may never adequately be covered in a single article. The various schisms which existed within Alexandria before pervading across all churches in the Roman Empire are too great to be covered in this article, even though they relate to what form of Christianity ultimately came to predominate in Alexandria. Instead of attempting to cover a subject which deserves more attention than this article may provide, I have decided to focus on how Christianity began in obscurity in the Jewish quarter of Alexandria and was held at bay from expanding outside that quarter by a stable series of emperors whose persecutions curbed its spread in the city and how Christianity dealt with the enclaves of pagans once religious zeal dictated the spread of Christianity rather than a roadblock imposed by imperial decree. The paper will con-

¹ The period where only Christians inhabited the city is brief though it is a critical point in the city's history and is the point at which this paper's narrative concludes.

clude with Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, expelling the Jews from the city, leaving only Christians in the city of Alexandria.

Beginnings In Jewish Quarters

Whilst there exists a myriad of chronicles which describe the circumstances and events which brought about the dominance of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean, they each provide different anecdotes which together provide a more comprehensive history. When endeavoring to ascertain where in Alexandria Christianity first took root, we may look to the chronicles of Severus of Al'Ashmunein². In his history, we are told that Mark the Evangelist journeyed to Alexandria from Rome and upon entering the city' gates, a strap on his sandal broke. Realizing that his sandal was broken, he sought out a cobbler to fix his sandals. As the cobbler fixed the sandal, he made statements referring to one God. The cobbler's name was Annianus and would be the first Alexandrian Mark converted to Christianity in addition to appointing him to be his successor to the Patriarchy of Alexandria, an office established and inaugural held by the apostle Mark.

The story of the apostle Mark and Annianus by Severus of Al'Ashmunein is composed long after the fact and from a purely historical interpretation may be considered dubious at best. However, this narrative does provide the basis for establishing that the origin of Christianity in Alexandria was set in the Jewish quarter.

Prior to the apostle Mark's arrival in Alexandria, the only monotheists in the city would be the Jewish people residing in the Delta quarter of the city (located east of the royal quarters). If the apostle Mark did indeed enter through a gate and not the harbor, he would have journeyed clockwise around the Mediterranean from Rome and entered Alexandria by means of gates situated on its eastern periphery. This is the sensible way to arrive at Alexandria by foot or mount and would have the apostle Mark encountering the residents of the Jewish Quarter before anyone else in the city, being that the Jewish quarter was the eastern part of the city. Annianus holding convictions of there being but one God is further indication that the apostle Mark's first convert

² Severus lived in Egypt in the 10th century and was a prolific Coptic writer

was a Jew. The significance of this alone is not momentous until we continue with the chronicles to the point of the apostle Mark's martyrdom.

The success of the apostle Mark's evangelizing is not adequately relayed in any chronicle to deliberate on the number of Christians at the time of the apostle Mark's martyrdom, but it is said that the growing number of converts perturbed the city's officials who sought means to deter the apostles' ambition to rid people of the worship of idols. The apostle Mark was seized on Easter whilst he was in a sanctuary. It was not long before the apostle would be executed and his body burned. However, his followers retrieved the body which was miraculously unscathed and was enshrined in a place called Baucalis. Baucalis is mentioned by many chronicles and is described as being in the eastern part of the city, along the coast near the crags. It is most probable that the shrine to the apostle Mark was in the Jewish quarters, where he preached the gospel and converted the first Alexandrian's to Christianity. The significance of this is that no chronicle names any churches being consecrated or established by any other means in Alexandria until the middle of the third century, when the church of Dionysius, which may be attributed to the Patriarch of that same name (holding office of bishop of Alexandria from 247-264), is first mentioned. Between the period of the apostle Mark's martyrdom and the first references made to the church of Dionysius many callous persecutions of Christians were carried out by imperial edicts throughout the Roman Empire. These persecutions have furnished the stories of many martyrs, though prior to the persecution of Decius, the esteemed ecclesiastical historian Eusebius documents no martyrs in Alexandria.

Eusebius devotes his passages to the "school for believers", where students of theology assiduously examined the gospels. The locations of these schools not given in any chronicle, although they can be inferred to be somewhere in the city. Therefore, being that neither a named church nor notable martyrdom are recorded in the city of Alexandria, the weight of imperial authority in carrying out persecutions evidently kept the physical presence of Christianity in Alexandria to a minimum. It would be foolhardy to speculate why there exists a paucity of references to direct violence against the Christians of Alexandria prior to the persecution of Decius, beyond the conclusion that Christianity was kept at bay while imperial authority was strong and able to carry out persecutions in a prosperous empire and that so long as the Christians of

Alexandria were confined to the Jewish quarter, where the apostle Mark preached, their presence was obscure enough to not attract the ire of zealous persecutors.

How Christian Alexandria Came To Be

How Christianity came to be the prevailing religion in Alexandria will retain an enigmatic aura, for the pages of the historical record turn from a narrative of obscure theological schools³ to the fate of the bishop of Alexandria providing a prince's justifications for civil war. The period of time just discussed, the period of Christianity remaining dormant in the Jewish quarter, was followed by the Crisis of the Third century. During the Crisis of the Third Century imperial power was pursued by any ambitious soldier and the sense of a stable regime was lost. It was during this period, in which even a common soldier could become cloaked in the imperial purple, that the obscure Christian population of Alexandria pervaded the greater pagan population, who saw their gods not prevent the onslaught of civil war which defined the Crisis of the Third century.

Despite the tumult of the Crisis of the Third Century, a notable persecution was nonetheless carried out by the short-reigning emperor Decius. Eusebius recounts the list of martyrs given by Dionysius. These martyrs included Metras, who was skewered then stoned; Quinta, who was dragged over rough streets before being stoned after refusing to worship at a pagan temple; Appolonia, who was burned alive; Serapion, who had all his bones broken before being thrown to his death; Julian and Cronion, who were publicly tortured then burned with quicklime. These are not even half of the martyrs Dionysius mentions, but one additional martyr by the name of Besas is worth pointing out. Besas was a soldier and was present at the martyrdom of Julian and Cronion and viewed these events as so repulsive and disturbing that he incited the passions of the people to revolt against these perceived injustices. Besas was soon after arrested and for his actions was made a martyr of a faith to which he actually had no attested connection. It is individuals such as Besas a nonbeliever who was moved to take up the cause of Christian martyrs which caused much of the general population of Alexandria to be sympathetic to the plight of Christians subjected to unjust persecution.

³ from the viewpoint of an emperor

The persecution of Decius was brought on by paranoia that the cause of the empire's woes were rooted in the conversion of some pagans to Christianity. The gradual growing popularity of Christianity in Alexandria was viewed as a factor that posed a risk to the security of the empire, along with barbarian incursions, silver inflation, large armies being loyal to provincial generals, and of course the praetorian guard. This naturally was an erroneous error by Decius and when his life and persecution ended, the empire was no closer to its former prosperity, and the citizens of Alexandria were given an incentive to join in prayer with their fellow Alexandrians in a time of great tumult. The first named church in Alexandria was the Church of Dionysius, probably constructed after Decius paid his debt to nature but before Dionysius paid his own 13 years later; the timing of the church' construction⁴ exemplifying how with the backlash to the emperor's persecutions led to popular support for the Christian cause, and how the end of the persecution marked the beginning of Christianity's outward expansion from the Jewish quarters and into the rest of the city.

Expulsion of pagans

The gradual expansion of Christian churches in Alexandria was not necessarily marred by a the unjust conversion of pagan temples to churches, though the passions of a newly enlightened and evangelized populous did incite a fury which brought about the destruction of the city' numerous pagan temples and while only four churches are known to have been consecrated upon or within pagan sites, there are certainly many more as the chronicles do suggest.

When Theophilus was patriarch of Alexandria, he had the Mithraeum stripped of its odious mysteries and after some vain attempts by the pagans to preserve their rituals through means of violent recourse, the former pagan temple was converted into a church. According to Socrates Scholasticus, it was during these scenes of violence following the clearing of the Mithraeum that the pagans of the city fled to the Serapium and fortified it. Another source, a monk named Rufinus, who predates Socrates and provides a more contemporary source for these events, notes that

⁴ based on it being named for the bishop of that time and mentioned in chronicles describing that general period

the Serapium was occupied by the pagans after Theophilus petitioned the emperor to convert the dilapidated basilica into a church. These sources differ slightly in their account of what prompted the pagans to retreat to their once illustrious temple, but the events which followed are not debated and the discrepancies do not significantly alter the impact of the outcome.

With the pagans entrenched in the Serapium, the emperor issued a proclamation of clemency to any pagan who abandoned their sedition, this being done in hope that it might bring many to Christianity by a display of mercy. It is not known how many pagans accepted offer and returned to their abodes in the city, but what is known is that the clemency did not extend to the other temples across the city. Instead, the emperor declared, simultaneously with his extension of mercy, the destruction of all pagan temples in Alexandria. When this destruction had been carried out, the remaining pagans ensconced in the Serapium fled from Alexandria, and thus the last of the pagan worshipers left the city of Alexandria.

The number of temples destroyed is not supplied in the chronicles, though it does seem to be a fairly large quantity. Since the advent of Alexandria's splendor, which was made yet grander by the Ptolemies who ruled Egypt, Alexandria was adorned with majestic temples to pagan gods. The flight of pagans during the bishopric of Theophilus is the final chapter in some 700 years of worship in the city, the final 100 of which were during a period in which Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire, and yet the ancient pagan practices continued in some capacity until Christian zeal gave way to violent ambition.

The historical sources do not provide clear evidence whether the ruins created by the dismantling of pagan temples by Theophilus became churches. However, an anecdote is provided by Severus of Al'Ashmunein in which Theophilus reminisces upon something Athanasius said while he was serving as his scribe. I will provide here the excerpt from that chronicler:

Then the Father Theophilus, the patriarch, remembered the words of Athanasius, which he uttered when he was eating with Theophilus, while he was his scribe. Athanasius said that it was his desire to clear away the mounds of rubbish which he saw, and to build on their site a church to the names of the Baptist and the prophet Eliseus. And at that time, a woman, who had two sons, cleared away the

mounds, as his letter testifies, and a stone slab was discovered, upon which three thetas were inscribed; and her history is related in that letter, besides a story of Theophilus and the Angel Raphael, which is not written in this biography. And when Theophilus removed the slab, he found beneath it the money which he required; so he built the churches with it. He built in a certain spot beside the garden a church to which he translated the body of John the Baptist, and the body of the prophet Eliseus; and many miracles were performed by them both on that day, and a number of people who had been sick were healed. (Chapter XI Al' Ashmunein)

Severus of Al' Ashmunein excludes the events which occurred during the bishopric of Theophilus which extinguished the remnants of paganism in the city, therefore it is ambiguous whether the story relayed by Severus of Al' Ashmunein occurred prior to, or after, the demolition of temples. It should be deemed a respectable supposition that the rubbish he refers to belonged to a temple that was leveled during the eradication of pagan temples in Alexandria. The basis for such a claim relies on the prevailing practice of treasuries being ubiquitous in Greek temples. The story Al' Ashmunein writes is one that is not present in other histories, so far as Theophilus recalling Athanasius wishing to build a church on a rubble pile.

As with all histories which rely upon earlier sources, anecdotes conveyed in chronicles may not be altogether true, but within each is a kernel of truth. In this case, it is unclear what rubble pile might be both a desirable place for erecting a church and which possesses a pre-existing treasury during the bishopric of Athanasius. So, if it is reconsidered as a concoction of Theophilus to conceal his intention to construct a church upon the former site of a temple and to fund this effort with the treasury of the razed temple, a more plausible basis for the anecdote emerges. Employing the memory of Athanasius to provide justification for using the riches of the last pagan temples to construct at least one church seems necessary to avoid aggravating the populous when we consider what most of the spoils went towards.

The ecclesiastical history compiled by Socrates Scholasticus, who as previously mentioned, provides an account of the quelling of the last pagan dissents and the destruction of their temples, tells of the fate of the statues of the gods that were housed in these temples. The statues

were all destroyed and melted to be recast into plates, bowls, and utensils which were to be given to churches for distribution to the poor. This was the fate which befell every statue, except for one - that of Jupiter. Being set up in a public place, the statue of Jupiter served as a reminder to all of the false idols that were previously worshiped.

Expulsion of the Jews

The statue of Jupiter served as an instrument to mock the former pagan religion, though it soon was soon to be the cause of violence between Christians and Jews.

In the Universal History by Agapius, we are informed that many Jews who had recently been baptized took a statue and made a display of crucifying it while proclaiming it to be the Messiah. The resulting calamity saw the deaths of many Christians and presumably, Jews who were killed by Christians that took offense to this practice by the newly converted. These events are provided by Agapius as having taken place between the third and sixth year of the reign of Theodosius. This indicates that the event here described occurred shortly after the death of Theophilus and therefore not long after the statue of Jupiter was set in a public place as a form of mockery of pagans. While there is no indication given as to which statue the newly baptized Jews used which offended the Christians so greatly, it suggest the possibility that the statues were of the pagan god Jupiter, for such a display of a pagan god in the role of the Christ would stir the indignation of the Christians. This slight against Christian sensibility occurred during the bishopric of Cyril, during whose terms in the office of Bishop of Alexandria the Jews would be expelled. The causes for their expulsion are given by Socrates Schoolasticus. The prefect of Alexandria was Orestes who was assiduous in carrying out his duties but grew jealous of the bishops who continued to encroach on what was the prerogative of the prefect appointed by the emperor. This jealousy resulted in the torture and execution of Hierax, who was an astute listener of Cyril. Hierax was sent to the theatre on the occasion of the publication of an edict by the prefect which regulated theatrical performances, which the Jewish people had become developed a great appetite for. When Hierax was seen by the Jews in the theatre they admonished him and accused him of attempting to stir up tensions. Orestes disregarded the veracity of these acclama-

tions and was guided by his envy to execute a devoted follower of the bishop. Upon learning of the calumniations which caused the death of Hierax, he instructed the Jews to cease their callous attacks upon Christians, the bishop's warnings fell on deaf ears. The Jews fabricated a false claim which they shouted throughout the streets one night soon after that the church named after Alexander was on fire. When the Christians rushed to extinguish the fire, they were met by the Jewish people who cut them down in front of the church, which was not actually on fire. According to this story, the Jewish people, having previously agreed to each wear a ring constructed from bark and a palm branch, were able to seek out only the Christians in the darkness of night. Sunrise revealed the crime committed by the Jewish people and Cyril then marched with escorts to the synagogue and plundered it and expelled all Jewish people from the city. Alexandria was left with one religion - Christianity - which prevailed without challenge until Amr entered Alexandria and sparked the rise of Islam in the city.

Such were the pivotal events that kept Christianity confined and which spurred it to the forefront of dominance in Alexandria. The accounts which have been provided are an indication of what likely occurred, but also illustrate a clear prejudice against Jewish people. The accuracy of the accounts of the Jewish people by Christian sources is hard to determine centuries later on, however, it will always be interesting to consider how the first century of Christianity in Alexandria was spent in incubation in the Jewish quarter.

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