Postcolonial Dendur: Rethinking Egypt as a Paradigm of Periphery

The temple of Dendur was built under the first Roman emperor Augustus near the southern border of Egypt and northern border of Nubia and is now on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Figure 1). Completed approximately fifteen years after Egypt was annexed as a Roman province in 30 BCE, this Egyptian-style temple incorporates ideas of Roman religious practice and deities from the Nubian pantheon. As multiple cultural traditions were combined at the temple after Egypt’s annexation, Dendur is an ideal case study to propose the use of models of postcolonialism to study Egypt as a Roman province. Use of postcolonial models help show that modern studies of Roman imperialism manipulated Greco-Roman literary sources about Egypt in which Egypt became the paradigm of periphery in contrast to the Roman center of the Empire.

The modern trope of Egypt as the paradigm of periphery in contrast to Rome as the exemplar of center stems from ancient ideas about the place of Egypt in the Greco-Roman world. From the poetry of Homer to that of Horace and Ovid, the land at Egypt’s southern border was the edge of the known world – the periphery of peripheries. When second- and third-century-CE authors such as Suetonius and Dio Cassius wrote about Egypt under Augustus, they extended the exoticism earlier associated with the southern border of Egypt to encompass the entire country. Both Suetonius and Dio emphasized Augustus’s supposed hostility towards Cleopatra VII and Egyptian religion. They painted Egypt as unique, backward, home to strange customs,

---

1 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 68.154.
4 Suetonius, *Life of Deified Augustus*, 2.18 and Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 16.5. Even in the work of earlier authors, the worship of gods with zoomorphic characteristics was condemned by first-century-BCE authors from Cicero to Diodorus Siculus. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 5.78 and Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, I.83.6-9
monstrous animal-headed gods, and a licentious woman ruler – in short, the very improper antithesis to proper Rome.

Over the past two decades, a number of scholars have emphasized that these ancient stereotypes existed for complex reasons and cannot be interpreted as actual Greco-Roman beliefs about Egypt. But such arguments have an uphill battle before them; from the Renaissance through the twentieth century, scholars typically treated ancient texts as infallible records of history, and thus classical literary and political tropes about Egypt were taken at their word and understood to be just that – Greco-Roman beliefs about Egypt. This understanding irrevocably shaped the modern Western mindset, and as Edward Said demonstrated, the modern West imagined ancient and modern Egypt (and the East in general) as the exotic Other in order to construct its own identity.

Rather than approach Roman Egypt as a product of the dichotomous opposition of East versus West, I demonstrate how the material remains of the temple at Dendur can help illuminate complicated transcultural interactions occurring shortly after Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire. First, this paper explores Dendur’s religious and political contexts and argues that Roman openness towards local religions within the Empire shows Augustan support of Egyptian belief systems, which can be better appreciated through pluralistic postmodern frameworks. Second, this paper examines Dendur’s architectural and artistic traditions to illustrate that a hybrid tradition was created at Dendur. This new tradition connects it to other sites in the regional landscape in which there was a vibrant religious community that is best

---


understood within a global Roman Empire. Ultimately, I propose a model that incorporates postcolonial ideas of hybridity and globalism illustrating Egypt was not a paradigm of periphery as painted in ancient fiction and modern politics, but instead a vital part of a connected and diverse Roman Empire.

After failed attempts at expansion further into Africa in the first ten years of Egypt’s annexation, Augustus negotiated with the Meroitic kingdom of Kush and established the southern border of Roman Egypt at Maharraqa after the Treaty of Samos in 20 BCE. According to the Treaty of Samos, the Dodekaschoinos – the land between Maharraqa in the south and Philae to the north – was designated a peaceful buffer zone between Roman Egypt and the kingdom of Kush (Figure 2). To support peace in the area, Augustus initiated an impressive building campaign that built or expanded at important sites like Philae, Kalabsha, and Dendur. All these temples were linked in a sacred landscape during the Augustan period in which each local cult shared in a regional festival calendar. Augustan policies toward provincial cults in the Empire show Roman openness towards local religions, like those practiced at Dendur.

The local cult at Dendur originated during the Augustan period and centers on two brothers, Pedesi and Pihor thought to be drowned in the Nile River, and thus deified after death (Figure 3). Pedesi and Pihor may have been the sons of the Nubian chieftain Kuper, appointed as Roman representative of Nubia by the first Prefect of Egypt, Cornelius Gallus. The brothers are associated with the god of the underworld, Osiris, whose body was also lost but found by his

---

7 Although it has been interpreted as a unilateral act by Rome, the discoveries in 1910 of the Hamadab stela and a royal complex in the vicinity of Meroe city, the capital of the Meroitic kingdom, provide the Kushite perspective on the war. See FIJ Griffith, “The Great Stela of Prince Akinizaz,” JEA 4 (1917): 159-173.
sister-wife Isis after death. Pedesi and Pihor are depicted with Osiris’s attributes and therefore have his power. For instance, Pihor wears Osiris’s false beard, and Pedesi wears Osiris’s *atef* crown—a version of the White Crown of Upper Egypt with the addition of ostrich feathers. By assimilating aspects of Osiris, the deified brothers were integrated into the traditional Egyptian pantheon during the Augustan period. They were celebrated with traditional Egyptian rites, and newly conceived rites that evoked Roman religion. One such rite may have involved a permanent display of statuary and stelae at the front of the temple on the cult terrace during the temple’s Festival of Isis. Under Augustus, Roman administrators actively created new religious traditions so that the multicultural population at Dendur worshipped the deified brothers, traditional Egyptian and Nubian gods, and Augustus himself as divine pharaoh.

Augustus is shown in the garb and performing the religious duties of the Egyptian king on the walls of the temple of Dendur (Figure 4). Like millennia of pharaohs before him, Augustus wears a short kilt, bull’s tail, pectoral necklace, false beard, and White Crown of Upper Egypt complete with a *uraeus* at his brow. Images of Augustus as Egyptian pharaoh are accompanied by Roman titles in Egyptian hieroglyphs encircled by the traditional pharaonic cartouche, like Autokrator Kaisaros, meaning Caesar Imperator. There are 86 surviving images of Augustus in the temple complex. The sheer proliferation of Augustus’s image as pharaoh of Egypt in relief scenes at Dendur is echoed in at least seventeen Egyptian temples and in three-dimensional statuary in Egypt, like a statue found at Karnak, and a statue found in the Alexandrian harbor.

---

Images of Augustus as pharaoh are evidence of plural identities for the emperor. These images blur boundaries between Roman emperor and Egyptian pharaoh and illustrate how postmodern plurality more accurately reflects Dendur’s realities than modern ideals of purity and linearity. Moving beyond modern ideals, the use of postcolonial models has vastly broadened our understanding of Roman imperialism. Scholars such as Susan Alcock, Greg Woolf, Jane Webster, and David Mattingly have successfully introduced fresh interpretations of Greek and Roman imperialism through postcolonial critique. These scholars have demonstrated how the monolithic processes of cultural adaptation known as Hellenization and Romanization are inadequate for understanding cultural exchange as Rome created its empire. The success of these applications demonstrates that a similar approach that rejects top-down homogenizing models to explain cultural change in the Roman provinces will be applicable at Dendur after Egypt was annexed into the Roman Empire.

Returning to Dendur’s artistic context, the art and architecture of the temple is evidence of interactions between Nubian, Egyptian, and Roman traditions through which I argue a new hybrid artistic tradition was created that was integral to local and regional communities. Nubian influence can be seen in that the temple functioned as both a mortuary and cult temple for the temple’s main deities Pedesi and Pihor. It is likely that the temple was built on the site where the brothers’ bodies were found, after which a rock-cut shrine was built to mark the sacred space.

---

17 Aylward M. Blackman, The Temple of Dendur (Cairo: L'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1911), 1.
This rock-cut shrine is similar to other temples built in northern Nubia like those at Derr, Gerf Hussein, El-Kab, and the famed mortuary temples at Abu Simbel built in the earlier reign of Ramses II. The similarities between Abu Simbel and Dendur led Robert Bianchi to conclude that the fully rock-cut chapel is an architectural tradition particular to this area in Nubia, and that “Dendur is to be regarded in this Nubian architectural tradition.”

The temple built before the rock-cut shrine is seemingly representative of Egyptian cult temples, the primary function of which was to serve as a home or world for the god. Traditionally, the god inhabited a cult statue in the sanctuary, which was the innermost and most sacred room in the temple. Because it was the most sacred room in the temple, access was restricted, and only the high priest or the king himself could enter. The sanctuary was the darkest room with little natural lighting; it was elevated between the highest level of floor and lowest level of roof. Surfaces were normally decorated with relief scenes from the god’s dominion that illustrated every realm of Egyptian civilization. Relief scenes typically showed the divine celestial realm inhabited by the gods, the meeting place between the celestial and terrestrial realms where the gods met the semi-divine pharaoh, and the earthly realm inhabited by the people of Egypt and represented with Egyptian flora and fauna. From the god’s vantage point looking out from the secret and sacred interior, he or she presided over a united and balanced Egypt as visible in the art and architecture of the temple.

Like traditional Egyptian temples, Dendur has a sanctuary, vestibule, and pronaos fronted by an open courtyard and entrance gateway (Figure 5). However, there are several unusual features at Dendur that I suggest are evidence of a shift in focus from the secretive sanctuary to openly accessible areas at the front like the cult terrace, entrance gateway, courtyard, and pronaos. The cult terrace at Dendur was monumental in size in relation to the temple complex as

18 Bianchi, Unpublished Manuscript, Chapter I, 11.
a whole. Dendur is notable as the temple complex only measures 133 feet long and 83 feet wide, of which the cult terrace occupied an impressive 83 feet wide and 50 feet long. Built overlooking the Nile, it is possible that the terrace functioned as a landing spot for boats, as theorized by Eric Young, former Associate Curator in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Egyptian department. If Young’s conclusion is correct, priests and parishioners would enter the complex from the river via the terrace and then continue through the entrance gateway. The gateway is equally as monumental in size in relation to the temple proper, measuring 21 feet and 8 inches high. The temple’s façade behind the gateway only measures 18 feet high. Once through the gateway, worshippers would view the façade of the temple, complete with two floral columns and screen walls flanking the entrance. During festivals, normally closed temple doors were open, and worshippers could see into the pronaos of the temple while participating in rites occurring in the courtyard (Figure 6). As doors were open, they would also see into the sanctuary where a shrine is carved to the four main deities of the temple: Pedesi and Pihor and Isis and Osiris. From this vantage point at the threshold of the pronaos looking towards the sanctuary, Dendur seems similar to other Egyptian cult temples. There is carving around the entrance to each successive space that ultimately frames the shrine of the gods. If worshippers were to step past this spot in the pronaos, a very different picture comes into view. However, public access would be limited to near the threshold of the pronaos and only ritually pure priests could access the inner parts of the temple.

Looking towards the sanctuary from midway into the pronaos there is no relief decoration beyond borders around successive doorways (Figure 7). Indeed there is no other decoration in

---

19 Ibid., 2.
20 Eric Young, Unpublished Manuscript, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 8.
the vestibule, nor in the sanctuary itself, beyond what was visible to a worshipper looking in from the threshold of the pronaos. Further, there is no spot or base for either a cult statue or a barque shrine for the gods. Instead, the sole relief carving in the sanctuary is the shrine, showing Pihor worshipping Isis in the upper register and Pedesi worshipping Osiris in the lower register. As Pedesi, Pihor, Isis, and Osiris looked out on their dominion from their home in the sanctuary, their view would be much different than traditional Egyptian gods, as they would see completely bare walls, floors, and ceilings (Figure 8).

It is unlikely that the lack of decorative treatment in interior rooms can be attributed to an unfinished state. Traditionally cult temples were built from the interior outwards as the god’s home in the sanctuary was the most important room of the temple, so any unfinished elements were at the front or exterior of the complex. But at Dendur, the exterior and publically visible areas were completely decorated while the interior was not carved. The lack of relief carving in the interior and the monumental emphasis on architectural elements at public entrances, like the gateway and terrace, lead me to conclude that the temple primarily catered towards public participation. I argue that concentration on public participation shows dialogue between traditional Egyptian religious ideas based on secrecy and Roman religious ideas based on accessibility. Architectural emphasis on the front, including the cult terrace that may have been used for a permanent display of statuary, is reminiscent of Roman religion. Additionally, Nubian influence can be seen in the introduction of Nubian deities Pedesi and Pihor into cult festival. Further, the rock-cut shrine in the cliff behind the temple is similar to other temples built in Nubia. This dialogue combined Nubian, Egyptian, and Roman traditions, and therefore I see the temple as evidence of hybrid traditions, in which local audiences and priests created new meaning for the temple of Dendur.
The concept of hybridity was originally brought into mainstream postcolonial critique almost twenty years ago by Homi Bhabha to refer to the creation of cultural identities in contact zones produced by colonization.\textsuperscript{22} Bhabha’s concept can be criticized in that he sees the site of creation in a non-European locale in resistance through ambivalence to the European colonizer. Such emphasis on native reactions to colonization privileges one side of interaction. In contrast, in my study of Dendur, I do not seek to privilege one voice over another, whether “native” Egyptian or Nubian or imperial Roman. Rather, I find Bhabha’s concept that a third space is created when cultures interact helpful in appreciating the importance of past traditions and new innovations in culture contact.\textsuperscript{23} I argue this new third space that we are seeing at Dendur is then connected to other new “local” third spaces in a diverse global environment in which all cultural interaction is equally important.

Hybridity is one of the most widely employed, and yet contested, concepts in postcolonial theory. Although it has gone out of favor in political critique in the last decade, it continues to be used and adapted in art history. For instance, hybridity is a central concept in the 2010 themed volume of \textit{Ars Orientalis}, which theorizes cross-cultural interactions in the ancient and medieval worlds.\textsuperscript{24} Similarly, hybridity is prominent in the 2010 publication of the 2007 Stone Art Theory Institutes series led by James Elkins.\textsuperscript{25} In this group of seminars, entitled \textit{Art and Globalization}, Elkins calls hybridity “ubiquitous in the art world.”\textsuperscript{26} The importance of

\textsuperscript{22} Homi Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{25} James Elkins, Zhivka Vaijavicharska, and Alice Kim, eds. \textit{Art and Globalization} (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), passim.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 52.
hybridity for art history is that it makes the claim to a hierarchical “purity” of cultures untenable.

As Angela Miller states,

we have long framed the study of art history around notions of purity – of national traditions, of aesthetic canons, of formal genealogies. The whole issue of hybridity therefore becomes a central challenge to the way the entire discipline of art history has framed its subject. The discipline implicitly excludes or derogates forms of production involving boundary crossing between formal traditions, appropriation of [so-called] high art forms into [so-called] vernacular expression, or of European into… [non-European] forms.27

As we have seen at Dendur, multiple artistic, social, and religious traditions were combined across boundaries of West and East. This examination of the temple at Dendur demonstrates that hybridity can help illuminate rich and diverse transcultural artistic and religious interactions even within a celebrated origin of the Western art historical canon – the Roman Empire. In order to frame the interconnectedness between local sites that ultimately constituted the Roman Empire, I propose that the concept of hybridity can be nuanced by placing new hybrid local third spaces situated throughout the Empire, such as Dendur, within a connected global framework.28

I conclude that a hybrid global model for the Roman Empire helps illuminate Augustus’s plural roles as pharaoh of Egypt and emperor of the Roman Empire. Further, the negotiations of traditional and new artistic and architectural traditions at the temple of Dendur can be understood as vibrant interactions between multiple invested cultures that relied on the temple for spiritual and secular survival. Moreover, the religious and political importance of the region at Rome’s southern Egyptian border, in which the temple was a vital part, is brought to light by such a model. All of this helps re-paint Egypt not as the exotic Other in contrast to civilized Rome, nor the paradigm of periphery in contrast to the Roman center of the Empire, but as one of many distinct local communities that were each important parts of a diverse global Roman Empire.

27 Ibid., 59.
28 Richard Hingley, Globalizing Roman Culture: Unity, Diversity, and Empire (London: Routledge, 2005), 119-120.
Selected Bibliography


Blackman, Aylward M. *The Temple of Dendûr*. Cairo: L'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1911.


Figures

Figure 1. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 68.154. Author’s photograph.

Figure 2. Map of the Dodekaschoinos. After Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples*, Figure 8.

Figure 3. Pedesi and Pihor. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Author’s Photograph.

Figure 4. Augustus offering to deities. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Author’s Photograph.
Figure 5. Plan. Temple Dendur, c. 15 BCE. After Arnold, *Temples*, Figure 206.

Figure 6. View from the Pronaos. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Author’s Photograph.

Figure 7. View into the Vestibule and Sanctuary. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Author’s Photograph.

Figure 8. View out of the Sanctuary. Temple of Dendur, c. 15 BCE. Author’s Photograph.