CHRISTIANITY IN NUBIA

The Nubian Church is unique among the Middle Eastern churches in that it started and prospered in an atmosphere of complete political independence. Some scholars believe that Queen Candace of the Ethiopians, who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles 8:27-39, was the Queen of Meroe (ca. 37). However, it was Patriarch Athanasius who ordained a bishop of Philae in Nubia in 362, the first historical evidence of the beginning of the spread of Christianity. According to the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus, a Monophysite priest called Julian obtained a commission from Empress Theodora, wife of Emperor Justinian, to preach Christianity in Nubia. In 543, the Nobatian king and his subjects converted to Christianity.

Theodore, Bishop of Philae, continued to work toward the spread of Christianity there until the year 551. Also, the Nubian kingdom of Makouria converted to Christianity before the end of the sixth century. Another sixth-century missionary in Nubia was Longinus, who succeeded in spreading the Jacobite faith southward to the southern kingdom of ‘Alwa.

Its capital Soba was about 18 kilometers south of the present-day Khartoum. Those Christian kingdoms did not lose their independence until the 13th century, and unlike most of the countries of the Middle East, Christianity continued to be the religion of the majority of the population there as late as the 14th century.

Despite the succession of Muslim rulers in Egypt since the Arab conquest of Egypt, the Coptic patriarch had a considerable spiritual influence in Nubia, where he used to consecrate bishops for Nubian bishoprics; the last one was Timotheos, who was consecrated Bishop of Faras and Qasr Ibrim in 1372. Nubian churches were decorated with wall paintings, the most significant of which were found in Faras, Abdallah Nirqi, and Sonqi.
The earliest paintings are from the seventh century, and by the beginning of the 13th century Nubian Christian art began to decline. Sanctuaries are decorated with Christ Pantocrator and by the Virgin and Child flanked by the Apostles. The Nativity is often depicted in the church’s north aisle. The scene of the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace was popular, as well as many saints. The representation of Nubian kings reflects the political independence of Nubia and the royal association with the Church’s rituals. See also NUBIAN LITURGY.

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