

## **NUBIAN CHURCH ORGANIZATION**

The three Nubian kingdoms of NOBATIA, MAKOURIA, and 'ALWA were converted to Christianity at various times in the sixth century. There seems to have been rival missionary activity of Monophysites and Melchites in all three kingdoms, with differing results. Nobatia and 'Alwa were both converted by the Monophysites from the beginning, while Makouria may initially have favored the Melchites. After the seventh century, however, the Monophysite Coptic [church](#) was clearly ascendant throughout NUBIA, although the Melchites continued their efforts to win over the southern countries.

An eighth-century Egyptian commentator reported that the Nubian [church](#) was headed by a metropolitan appointed by the [patriarch](#) of Alexandria, and that he had the responsibility of ordaining priests and bishops throughout the Nubian kingdoms. However, this testimony does not accord well with other textual or with archaeological evidence. In their funerary stelae, none of the Nubian bishops claims primacy over the whole region, and we can recognize no ecclesiastical title comparable with that of the Abyssinian ABUN.

The evidence tends, rather, to suggest that the Nubian [church](#) was treated as integral with that of Egypt, under the direct governance of the Coptic patriarch. The appointment of bishops directly by the [patriarch](#) is attested in a number of documents. Notwithstanding this organizational unity, [Greek](#) rather than Coptic was always the preferred liturgical language in Nubia (see NUBIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE), and NUBIAN CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE developed its own distinctive traditions.

A late medieval source, of obscure origin, lists thirteen [episcopal](#) sees in Nubia: seven in the kingdom of Makouria, and six in the kingdom of 'Alwa. The existence of sees at TAFI, Qurta, QASR IBRIM, FARAS, [SAI ISLAND](#), and DONGOLA has been independently confirmed by textual or

archaeological evidence. Of the six reported sees in 'Alwa, only that at [SOBA](#) can now be located.

Some information about the Nubian bishops has been gained from the study of [mural](#) representations and funerary inscriptions found in the cathedral at Faras. The bishops are shown richly attired in an inner gown and an outer chasuble, with an ornamental sash of office hanging from the shoulders. They either are bareheaded or have a fine white cloth draped over the head and shoulders. None is shown wearing a pectoral cross or carrying a staff, although both these [items](#) have been found in the bishops' tombs. In the Faras [paintings](#) the bishops are always shown holding the Bible in the left hand and making the sign of blessing with the right.

There are no representations of lesser clergy in the Nubian churches. From their tombstones it appears that they bore the title *presbyteros*. There are also many references to deacons, and a few to archdeacons, "epideacons," and "hypodeacons." The monastic orders apparently consisted of monks and archimandrites.

Linguistic evidence suggests that many of the bishops and monks in Nubia were Egyptians, although other bishops, as well as most of the lower clergy, were Nubians. The Egyptian prelates and monks used the Coptic language in funerary and [mural](#) inscriptions, and quite possibly also in the liturgy, while the indigenous clergy used Greek, later increasingly supplemented by Old Nubian. IBN SALIM AL-ASWANI reported of the kingdom of 'Alwa: "Their [sacred] books are in the [Greek](#) tongue, which they translate into their own language."

Bishop Timotheos of Ibrim and Faras was consecrated at Cairo in 1372. He apparently died shortly after reaching his see in Nubia. His consecration documents, which were found buried beside him, provide the last definite evidence of a link between the Nubian [church](#) and the Coptic patriarch. Some Egyptian writers flatly assert that contact

between the Nubian and Egyptian churches was broken at this time, and that the [patriarch](#) refused to send bishops into Nubia because of the disturbed state of the country.

Bishops are still mentioned in a number of legal documents from the late medieval kingdom of DOTAWO, but there is a suggestion that they were appointed by the Nubian king himself and not by the [patriarch](#) in Alexandria. There is not, in fact, a clear distinction between civil and ecclesiastical offices in the late Dotawo documents. The last of these to mention a bishop bears the date 1484.

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