

Roman Empire, as well as its eminent “teachability,” makes *Children and Family* an essential resource for all students of early Christianity.

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***The Cross in the Visual Culture of Late Antique Egypt.* By Gillian Spalding-Stracey. Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 19. Leiden: Brill, 2020. xxiii + 241 pp. \$197.00 cloth.**

Egypt has long offered a panoply of appropriations of the cross, from the famous *crux ansata*, or *ankh*-cross, to the various *apotropaic* uses of the cross: “Where the sign of the cross occurs,” declared Antony of the Desert, “*mageia* is weakened and sorcery has no effect” (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 78 [my translation]). Spalding-Stracey’s published Macquarie dissertation in art history covers the range, not so much of uses, functions, or conceptualizations of the cross as of its specific shapes and where (especially among monastic sites) they could be found. In this regard, the title is somewhat misleading, since “the visual culture of late antique Egypt” would properly comprise popular images of saints (like the Menas ampulles), figurines, and the remains of statuary and temples—contexts never broached in this book. The methodology, S.-S. claims, is “art-historical” (xiii, 10), which here means design-centered, only rarely venturing into religious context.

Chapter 1 gives a brief summary of Christianity and cross veneration in Egypt, illustrating the importance of the cross as an object of study with a long quotation from an anaphora hymn. Chapter 2 explains that crosses in scribal or graffiti contexts are excluded from the study (again limiting the meaning of “visual culture”) before turning to a survey of those crosses S.-S. will address: those in monastic archaeological sites, like Kellia, Naqlun, Kellis, and the Shenoute monasteries of Atripe. S.-S. notes the predominant cross designs in each place, as well as some associated artifacts bearing crosses (amulets, book covers, lamps, etc.). Chapter 3 reviews the types of materials used for crosses, from paint pigments to wood to textiles. Since crosses, their manufacture and use, remain the center of discussion, there is little attention to different kinds of workshops as sites of reimagining the cross or of carving crosses alongside other objects.

Chapter 4 covers “The Design and Symbolism of Egypt’s Crosses” and attempts to correlate cross-types with particular functions, as well as with a tendency toward what S.-S. calls “personal expression”—any sort of elaboration of a received type (although most interpreters of material culture would attribute such elaborations to artisanal or even regional innovation). Here S.-S. attributes the distinctively Egyptian *crux ansata* not to regional iconographic traditions but rather to wreathed crosses on early Roman sarcophagi (94–95), a derivation that would make this design’s uniqueness to and increasing popularity across Egypt more difficult to explain. Clearly there must have been something “indigenous” about the *ankh*-like design. S.-S. then covers the simple Greek and Latin crosses and the flared *pattée* cross, with brief reviews of their backgrounds, before noting their ceremonial implications. The chapter then turns to crosses’ occasional decoration or juxtaposition with animals, plants, and other symbols. S.-S. sees in these motifs simply “a great freedom of expression” (123); and yet, as many Coptic art

historians have noted, these iconographic strategies belong to the broader culture of Egyptian Hellenism and its workshops (see especially László Török, *Transfigurations of Hellenism* [Leiden: Brill, 2005], a central book that the author should have known).

Chapter 5 endeavors to correlate cross types with specific find-sites and periods. The ansate cross is the earliest and most widespread, while promulgation of the other cross types might have been stimulated by Empress Helena's pilgrimage to Jerusalem (143) or even a cross-appearance in Jerusalem (144)! Then S.-S. turns to a variety of cross depictions, from "ceremonial types" (stepped, draped), to "faunal" (with animals), to those decorated with other symbols, noting which monastic archaeological sites contain each type. But one wonders how turning the individual expressions of the cross into a series of design types helps us understand their geographical occurrence or distribution. There is, furthermore, very little attention to the precise interior context of the crosses: individual cell, tomb, or refectory? How would a cross project itself separately in each space? (This regional review also misses the explicitly iconoclastic use of *patée* crosses in the precinct of the Philae Isis temple during the creation of liturgical spaces there).

Chapter 6, "Design in Context," does not pursue these questions of context but rather the theological functions of the cross "as marker of Christian faith and hope" (165). S.-S. includes here a discussion of "secular" objects and settings—that is, ceramicware, bread stamps, lamps, book covers, and amulets (none justifying the term "secular"). But her primary attention is to the monastic cell itself and which crosses might be inside it, "both as a reminder of Christ's Resurrection as well as the holy nature of monastic endeavor" (184). Crosses, then, are basically holy symbols, guides to spiritual development and theological truths. The material efficacy of crosses to expel heathen gods, vanquish demons, protect corpses, cultivate ritual powers, or project prestige is largely set aside as "superstition" (197).

A concluding chapter 7 brings together some of S.-S.'s main contentions: "that the cross was a vital symbol to the Christian believer in Egypt" (198), which explains the "impetus to adorn it with decorative motifs" (198); and that the cross was "a demonstration of communal belief, but it was also ultimately a personal expression of faith" (201). What we do not learn is the larger materiality of crosses in monasteries, churches, and domestic life; the development of cross designs in workshop environments; or the relationship of cross designs to apotropaic and ritual functions, both within and beyond liturgy.

One of the great contributions of Robin Jensen's recent book *The Cross* (Harvard University Press, 2017) was her absolute refusal to distill the cross into a simple core message or symbolism—that from its inception the thing was reinvented and reprogrammed in innumerable ways. A close study of crosses in early Christian Egypt is ill-served by simple (and rather modern Christian) notions of what the cross should mean. But as a review of what sorts of crosses appear in a range of archaeological sites, S.-S.'s book will hopefully stimulate more imaginative and interdisciplinary studies.

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