

**Absorption, Not Conquest: Symbolic Continuity and Its
Limits
Across Five Political Regimes at Tell el-Deir, New Damietta**

**استيعاب لا غزو: الاستمرارية الرمزية وحدودها
عبر خمسة أنظمة سياسية في تل الدير، دمياط الجديدة**

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<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.33155963>

Anthony Vondoom
Independent Researcher, Cognitive Archaeology

Abstract

This paper tests a claim advanced in a prior peer-reviewed study — that symbolically saturated cultural systems tend to absorb successive political regimes rather than being replaced by them — against the funerary record of Tell el-Deir, a provincial necropolis in the eastern Nile Delta. Drawing on published site-specific scholarship and official excavation announcements spanning five documented seasons (2018-2026), the paper traces the recurrence of hybrid Egyptian-Greco-Roman iconography — the Agathodaemon serpent, Isis-Thermouthis, and the griffin form of Nemesis — across the Late Period, Ptolemaic, Roman, and early Byzantine occupation of the site. The evidence supports the absorption thesis through the Roman period but identifies its apparent limit at the site's Byzantine, monastic-era reuse, where no comparable hybrid iconography has yet been reported. The paper treats this as an open evidentiary question rather than a resolved one, and distinguishes the site's non-elite, provincial character from the temple- and court-level evidence on which the original thesis was based.

Keywords: Tell el-Deir; symbolic absorption; syncretism; Agathodaemon; Isis-Thermouthis; funerary archaeology; Nile Delta; Byzantine Egypt

الملخص

تختبر هذه الورقة البحثية فرضية سبق طرحها في دراسة محكمة سابقة، مفادها أن الأنظمة الرمزية الثقافية التي تصل إلى درجة كافية من التشبع البنيوي تميل إلى استيعاب الأنظمة السياسية المتعاقبة بدلاً من أن تحل محلها، وذلك من خلال دراسة السجل الجنائزي لموقع تل الدير، وهي جبانة إقليمية تقع في شرق الدلتا. وتعتمد الورقة على الدراسات المتخصصة المنشورة عن الموقع وعلى البيانات الرسمية لمواسم الحفائر الخمسة الموثقة، لتتبع تكرار الرموز الهجينة المصرية اليونانية الرومانية، (2018-2026) وأبرزها ثعبان الأجاثوداميون، وإيزيس ثرموتيس، ومعبودة نمسيس في هيئة الجريفون، عبر العصر المتأخر والعصرين البطلمي والروماني وبداية العصر البيزنطي. وتؤكد الأدلة صحة فرضية الاستيعاب حتى نهاية العصر الروماني، بينما تشير إلى أن هذا النمط ربما توقف مع إعادة استخدام الموقع في العصر البيزنطي كمركز رهباني، دون العثور حتى الآن على رموز هجينة مماثلة لتلك الفترة. وتتعامل الورقة مع هذه النقطة باعتبارها مسألة بحثية مفتوحة لا نتيجة حاسمة، مع التمييز بين الطابع الشعبي لهذا الموقع الإقليمي ومستوى الأدلة المعبدية والملكية التي استندت إليها الفرضية الأصلية.

الكلمات الدالة: تل الدير؛ الاستيعاب الرمزي؛ التوفيقية الدينية؛ الأجاثوداميون؛ إيزيس ثرموتيس؛ الآثار الجنائزية؛ دلتا النيل؛ مصر البيزنطية

1. Introduction

A prior study of Egyptian civilizational stabilization argued that symbolic systems which achieve sufficient structural saturation exhibit a distinctive property under political disruption: rather than being displaced by a conquering regime, they absorb it. The clearest documented instance of this dynamic is the Ptolemaic period, in which a Macedonian ruling house governed through temple architecture, mortuary grammar, and divine kingship cosmology that predated its own dynasty by more than two thousand years, and in which the deliberate synthesis of Osiris, Apis, Zeus, and Hades into the cult of Serapis exemplifies the mechanism as conscious state policy rather than passive continuity.¹

That argument was developed primarily from evidence at the level of temple religion, royal ideology, and deliberate state synthesis: pharaonic and Ptolemaic monumental architecture, dynastic cult, and centrally engineered deities such as Serapis. It has not, to date, been tested against the ordinary funerary record of a non-elite, provincial population — the graves of merchants, minor officials, and their families rather than kings and priests. This distinction matters, because a state can engineer symbolic synthesis deliberately, as Ptolemy I did with Serapis, without that synthesis necessarily reflecting anything about how ordinary people actually buried their dead. If the absorption dynamic is a genuine structural property of the symbolic system rather than an artifact of royal propaganda, it should also be visible in ordinary commemorative practice, at sites with no direct connection to the royal court.

This paper undertakes that test using Tell el-Deir, a necropolis in New Damietta, in the eastern Nile Delta, whose documented occupation history spans five distinct political regimes across more than a millennium: the Late Period (26th Dynasty), the Persian and Ptolemaic periods, Roman rule, and the early Byzantine era. Unlike the temple and palace evidence underlying the original thesis, Tell el-Deir is a working

¹Vondoom, A. (2026), 34-41.

provincial cemetery — its stelae, coffins, and grave goods belonging to residents of Damietta rather than to a royal or priestly elite.

The paper does not apply the quantitative Field Companion Protocol used elsewhere in this research program to score the strength of the evidence. The material available for the most recent excavation season consists of official ministry and Supreme Council of Antiquities announcements reported through press channels, not a published excavation report; applying a stratigraphy-dependent evidence-strength score to secondary press synthesis would overstate the precision of the underlying data. This paper is accordingly interpretive: it organizes and reads the published and reported evidence against the absorption thesis, rather than scoring it numerically.

The empirical foundation for the site's syncretic funerary material was established by Dalia M. Goda, whose site-specific studies of Tell el-Deir's funerary stelae and, with Ebrahim Ezat Ghonaim, its Byzantine-period coinage, form the primary evidentiary basis for the analysis below.² This paper's contribution is the theoretical framework applied to that material and to the subsequent, more recently announced excavation seasons — not the underlying archaeological documentation, dating, or object-level analysis, which belongs to Goda, Ghonaim, and the Egyptian mission working the site.

2. Site Background

Tell el-Deir lies south of the city of New Damietta, in the eastern Nile Delta, on an archaeological mound of approximately seven acres that rises some fifteen meters above the surrounding land. The site is bordered by agricultural land to the east, the Arab Contractors Company to the west, the residential areas of New Damietta to the north, and an industrial zone to the south, and is registered under code 050109 in the Supreme Council of Antiquities' atlas of archaeological sites for the Damietta governorate.³

²Goda, D. M. (2024), 70.

³Goda, D. M. & Ghonaim, E. E. (2025), 473.

Systematic excavation resumed at the site in 2007 under the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and the mission has remained one of the more active in the eastern Delta since, recovering, according to the Council's own account, thousands of objects associated principally with the 26th Dynasty — the last native royal line before the Persian conquest of 525 BCE — as well as Ptolemaic tombs and material from later periods.⁴

The site's occupation sequence begins in the Late Period, specifically during the reign of Wahibre (Apries) of the 26th Dynasty, and continues in the same funerary function through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. It was then reused, in a substantially different form, during the Byzantine era, when it functioned as a place of worship and monastic habitation rather than as an active burial ground.⁵

This occupation history gives Tell el-Deir an unusually long and continuous documentary record for a provincial site, spanning roughly the mid-first millennium BCE through the mid-first millennium CE, and across at least five distinguishable political regimes: Late Period Egyptian rule, Persian rule, the Ptolemaic kingdom, Roman provincial administration, and Byzantine rule. It is this continuity, rather than any single spectacular find, that makes the site useful as a test case for a thesis concerned with symbolic persistence across political rupture.

No site-specific material from the Persian occupation (the 27th Dynasty, 525-404 BCE) has yet been identified or published for Tell el-Deir itself, and this paper does not claim otherwise. The site's total occupation span is documented to include this interval, but the interval is not, at present, evidenced by any excavated object. What follows is accordingly a note on the general historical record for Persian rule in Egypt, offered as background rather than as site-specific evidence, and its inclusion here should not be read as filling that gap.

That general record is itself contested rather than settled. The clearest surviving Egyptian account, the autobiographical inscription of the priest and physician Udjahorresnet, describes Cambyses II being crowned with full pharaonic titlature, participating in religious ceremonies at the

⁴La Brújula Verde. (2026, July 30).

⁵Goda, D. M. & Ghonaim, E. E. (2025), 473, note 1.

temple of Neith in Sais, and being guided by Udjahorresnet himself in adopting Egyptian religious custom — a picture of a conquering regime governing through, rather than against, existing symbolic structure.⁶ Classical sources, chiefly Herodotus, describe the same reign in starkly different terms, alleging temple pillaging and the killing of the sacred Apis bull, although the contemporary Egyptian epitaph for the Apis bull that died during Cambyses' reign records a conventional burial commissioned by the king himself, complicating the Herodotean account.⁷

The Persian period thus presents, at the level of general Egyptological debate, a genuinely open question about whether the absorption dynamic held at the level of state religion — closer to contested than confirmed. This paper does not resolve that question and does not extend its site-specific findings to the Persian interval. It is noted here only so that the site's documented occupation history is presented completely, and so that the absence of Persian-period material from Tell el-Deir's own excavation record is stated plainly rather than passed over.

3. Evidentiary Base

The following season-by-season summary draws on published scholarship where available and on official excavation announcements, reported through Egyptian and international press, where a formal publication does not yet exist. Seasons are presented in excavation order rather than by the period of the material recovered, since several seasons produced material from more than one historical phase.

3.1 2018 Season

Excavation recovered a group of cylindrical mudbrick sarcophagi painted red and dated to the Roman period, some with lids bearing the facial features of the deceased and others engraved with geometric line decoration, along with more than seven hundred amulets in the shapes of Isis, Horus, and Taweret, and five gold rings, three of them decorated

⁶Weiss, D. (2023), archaeology.org.

⁷Encyclopaedia Iranica. (n.d.), "Cambyses."

with grape and dolphin motifs. The mission also noted the earlier recovery, in the same area, of stone sarcophagi, amulets, scarabs, and ushabti figurines bearing the name of King Psamtik II, subsequently transferred to the Grand Egyptian Museum.⁸

3.2 2019-2020 Season

Byzantine-era material was recovered from the site's surface layer, including a group of seven gold solidi bearing the emperors Phocas (r. 602-610 CE) and Heraclius with his son Heraclius Constantine (r. 610-641 CE), subsequently studied in full by Goda and Ghonaim.⁹

All seven coins were struck at the Constantinople mint, across four different mint workshops identified by their Greek letter markings, and range in weight between approximately 4.22 and 4.46 grams — consistent with the standard solidus weight of the period. Their obverse types show the standard late-sixth and early-seventh century convention of frontal imperial portraiture, in some cases depicting Heraclius alongside his young son as co-emperor, with reverse types showing either a standing angel (on the Phocas issue) or, more commonly, a cross mounted on steps — the latter a design convention introduced under Tiberius II and revived by Heraclius after a brief interruption under Phocas.¹⁰

Goda and Ghonaim conclude that the coins most plausibly belonged to a merchant traveling toward Constantinople for trade, whose currency became unusable following the political rupture of the Arab conquest in the following decades, rather than evidence of local monetary circulation at the site itself; Byzantine and Roman coinage circulated regionally rather than empire-wide, meaning currency minted at Constantinople would not ordinarily have functioned as local Egyptian tender.

3.3 2022 Season

⁸Ahram Online. (2022, December 20).

⁹Goda, D. M. & Ghonaim, E. E. (2025), 473.

¹⁰Goda, D. M. & Ghonaim, E. E. (2025), 494-495.

Twenty tombs dated to the Late Period, some lined with mudbrick and others simple pit burials, were recovered along with gold foil fragments depicting Isis, Bastet, and a falcon-form Horus, funerary amulets of varying shapes including a headrest amulet, canopic jar models representing the four sons of Horus, and statuary depicting Isis, Nephthys, and Thoth. Council officials dated the mudbrick tombs to the Saite period of the 26th Dynasty, roughly 664-525 BCE, on the basis of architectural design and associated pottery.¹¹

3.4 2024 Season

Sixty-three mudbrick tombs and simple burials were uncovered, together with gold foil objects depicting Isis, Bastet, and Horus and shaped as protective symbols and tongue-amulets — the latter believed to have enabled the deceased to speak before the tribunal of Osiris in the afterlife — as well as funerary amulets, ushabti figurines, and a ceramic vessel containing thirty-eight bronze coins of the Ptolemaic period bearing the head of Zeus-Ammon, a fusion of the Greek Zeus with the Egyptian Amun, dated to the late third century BCE.¹²

3.5 Museum Study: Three Roman Funerary Stelae (Goda, 2024)

Three previously unpublished Roman-period funerary stelae from Tell el-Deir, recovered in 1994 and held in the museum storeroom at Tell al-Rub in Dakahlia governorate, were formally studied and published by Goda. Each stele is a rectangular limestone slab with a rounded or vaulted upper section (a form the excavation literature describes as a mishkat, or niche), within which a full standing figure is carved in raised relief.¹³

The first stele (128 cm high, 49.5 cm wide, in good condition) depicts a man standing frontally, weight on the left leg, right leg relaxed and advanced, wearing a long cloak reaching the ankles. His right arm is bent across his chest, holding the cloak; his left arm hangs at his side, holding a serpent. The feet are bare. Facial features are largely preserved, though

¹¹HeritageDaily. (2022, December 20).

¹²Archaeology Magazine. (2024, July 25).

¹³Goda, D. M. (2024), 71.

the nose, mouth, and chin are lost; strands of a beard remain visible below the right ear, and the hair is rendered in visible locks at the crown of the head.¹⁴

The second stele (122 cm high, 50 cm wide, incomplete, its upper section lost) shows a comparable standing figure, with more finely carved drapery folds and a V-shaped rather than round neckline on the inner garment. The right arm is again bent to the chest, gripping the drapery, while the left arm — wrapped in a fold of the cloak at the wrist — is missing its hand detail. Both stelae carry a raised depiction of a coiled Agathodaemon serpent on each side, and, on the reverse of both, a raised depiction of the goddess Nemesis in her animal form.¹⁵

The third stele (115 cm high, 50 cm wide, incomplete) is more fragmentary still, preserving an adult figure and, to its left, a smaller, similarly incomplete figure interpreted as a child, both frontal and both wearing long cloaks; the sides and reverse of this stele are entirely uncarved.¹⁶

3.6 2026 Season

The Supreme Council of Antiquities announced the discovery of approximately twenty carved limestone tombstones, several sarcophagi, and a collection of amulets, incense burners, decorated oil lamps, and barrel-shaped anthropoid pottery coffins. Mohamed Abdel Badie, head of the Council's Egyptian Antiquities Sector, described the tombstones as bearing the griffin, the Agathodaemon, and Isis-Thermouthis, and stated that the imagery reflected an interaction between Egyptian religious tradition and Greco-Roman influence, as well as pointing to the elevated social status of those buried there.¹⁷

Secretary General Hisham El-Leithy characterized the site as a fully developed funerary center with its own social, cultural, and religious

¹⁴Goda, D. M. (2024), 71.

¹⁵Goda, D. M. (2024), 73-74.

¹⁶Goda, D. M. (2024), 74.

¹⁷Xinhua. (2026, July 30).

identity, rather than a burial ground alone, and noted that its archaeological layers document continuous activity from the Late Period through the end of Roman rule. He further stated that the find opens new avenues for understanding the development of Delta necropolises and may contribute to a revised settlement map for the Damietta region in antiquity.¹⁸

This season's material has not, at the time of writing, appeared in a peer-reviewed excavation report. The description above is drawn from official ministry statements as reported by Egyptian and international press and should be treated as provisional pending formal publication. Its iconographic vocabulary — griffin, Agathodaemon, Isis-Thermouthis — is nonetheless directly continuous with the material Goda published from the same site's earlier finds, a point developed in the following section.

4. Analysis: Where the Absorption Pattern Holds

Read across five excavation seasons, Tell el-Deir's funerary material shows a consistent pattern of hybridized iconography sustained across three distinct polytheistic regimes — Late Period Egyptian, Ptolemaic, and Roman — expressed through three recurring figures.

4.1 The Agathodaemon

The Agathodaemon, literally the "good spirit," is a serpent-form protective deity whose cult was established in Ptolemaic Alexandria rather than inherited from earlier pharaonic tradition; foundation legends associate the deity directly with the city's establishment, and it was subsequently venerated as one of Alexandria's two patron protective powers, alongside its consort Agatha Tyche.¹⁹

On the two better-preserved Tell el-Deir stelae, the Agathodaemon appears coiled and upright on one side of the niche, distinguished from its paired counterpart by conventionally male attributes; in the funerary art of the Roman period more broadly, paired serpent figures of this kind are consistently rendered as a male-female couple. The male serpent form

¹⁸Xinhua. (2026, July 30).

¹⁹Goda, D. M. (2024), 75.

carries an additional layer of Egyptian theological association: it has been linked, on grounds of shared function, with the indigenous deity Shai, who determined individual fate and destiny and whose consort, the harvest goddess Renenutet, assisted him in this role from a person's birth to their death.²⁰

The presence of a deity invented under Ptolemaic rule, absorbed so thoroughly into local funerary custom that it is paired with an indigenous fate-deity's mythological role, and still being carved on limestone tombstones at a provincial Delta cemetery in the Roman period and, on the evidence of the 2026 announcement, apparently again in the material from the most recent season, is direct evidence of a foreign theological invention doing sustained, ordinary Egyptian funerary work rather than remaining an elite or purely urban Alexandrian phenomenon.

4.2 Isis-Thermouthis

The counterpart female serpent, Isis-Thermouthis, represents the reverse absorption movement: an indigenous Egyptian goddess, Isis, merged with Renenutet — herself sometimes rendered under the Hellenized name Thermouthis — and exported under a Greek-legible compound name. On the Tell el-Deir stelae, the serpent's coiled tail rests against an indistinct plant form, plausibly a sheaf of wheat, which would connect the figure to Demeter, the Greek harvest goddess with whom Isis was widely identified on the basis of their shared agricultural and maternal functions.²¹

Where the Agathodaemon shows a foreign form absorbed into an Egyptian funerary role, Isis-Thermouthis shows the same mechanism running in the other direction: an Egyptian goddess re-exported in a form legible to a Greek-speaking population, without loss of her original Egyptian identity or function as a protector of the dead. The two figures appear consistently paired, facing one another across the niche, on every stele in Goda's study where both sides are preserved.

²⁰Goda, D. M. (2024), 75-76.

²¹Goda, D. M. (2024), 76.

4.3 *Nemesis in Griffin Form*

The reverse of both better-preserved stelae carries a raised depiction of Nemesis, the Greek and Roman goddess of retributive fate, rendered here not in her fully anthropomorphic winged form but as a griffin — a composite creature with a lion's body and an eagle's head and wings — treading the wheel of fate. Nemesis' cult, which originated at Smyrna in the sixth century BCE, spread widely across the Hellenistic world and was incorporated into Roman-period Egyptian funerary religion from at least the first century CE onward as a guardian figure for the dead.²²

Comparable depictions of Nemesis-as-griffin are documented on the walls of Roman-period Alexandrian tomb complexes, including the Stagni tomb facade and the Nebengrab chamber at the Kom al-Shoqafa catacombs, and on funerary stelae recovered from Kom Abou Belou — including one example, a soldier's grave stele, now held at the Brooklyn Museum, and another held at the Louvre under inventory number E11763 and dated to the third century CE.²³

The consistent placement of Nemesis on the reverse of the stele, opposite the paired serpents on the sides and the standing figure on the front, indicates a deliberate four-sided protective program rather than an isolated decorative choice — the deceased is, in effect, surrounded on every visible face of the monument by a different register of Egyptian-Greco-Roman protective iconography.

4.4 *Dress, Hairstyle, and Chronology*

The clothing worn by the standing figures — an inner tunic beneath a long, heavy cloak wrapped around the body and gathered at one shoulder, known in the scholarship as the "arm-sling" himation or pallium style — became popular at the end of the Hellenistic period and spread widely under Roman rule, worn across the empire by philosophers, clergy, and ordinary citizens alike. The hairstyle on the best-preserved stele — short

²²Goda, D. M. (2024), 76-77.

²³Goda, D. M. (2024), 77.

curls plastered close to the head and falling toward the forehead, with visible beard remnants — is consistent with Roman-period fashion of the second century CE, when elegant Roman men favored longer, more elaborately curled hair and cultivated beards.²⁴

Goda dates the group to the second century CE on this combined basis, supported by comparison to a statue in the Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria (inventory 25780) showing the same drape and pose, and to a stele held in the Ashmunein museum storeroom (inventory 678), dated to the late second or early third century CE, which shows the same clothing type, stance, and arm position.²⁵

5. Analysis: Where the Pattern Appears to End

The site's Byzantine-era material presents a different picture. Goda and Ghonaim describe the necropolis as having been reused, in a changed form, as a place of worship and monastic habitation during the Byzantine period — a functional transformation of the site rather than a continuation of its funerary use.²⁶

No hybrid theological iconography comparable to the Agathodaemon-Isis-Thermouthis-Nemesis grouping has been reported for this phase of the site, in either Goda's published work or the excavation announcements available at the time of writing. The Byzantine-phase material recovered so far — the seven gold solidi discussed above — is numismatic and economic in character, bearing standard imperial and Christian iconography of the Constantinopolitan mint, and was, on Goda and Ghonaim's own reading, likely deposited by a traveler passing through rather than by a resident of the site. It offers no evidence, one way or the other, about local religious practice. What is documented instead, in the site's own occupation history, is a change of use: burial ground becomes monastic space.

²⁴Goda, D. M. (2024), 78-79.

²⁵Goda, D. M. (2024), 79-80.

²⁶Goda, D. M. & Ghonaim, E. E. (2025), 495.

This is broadly consistent with the theoretical expectation that traditions organized around an exclusive claim to revealed truth do not produce merged deities in the way polytheistic systems characteristically do — a heretic is not a rival god to be assimilated, but an error to be corrected, and the category of translatable divinity that made Serapis, Isis-Thermouthis, and Zeus-Ammon possible does not have an equivalent under such a theology.²⁷ On that view, Tell el-Deir's Byzantine phase is not a counter-example to the absorption thesis but rather the point at which the thesis's own preconditions cease to hold.²⁸

This claim should be held to a precise scope. What the evidence shows is the absence of merged-deity iconography at this specific site's Christian-era phase, alongside a documented change in the site's function. It does not show, and this paper does not claim, that Christianity in Egypt more broadly absorbed nothing from earlier Egyptian religious and funerary tradition. Coptic Christianity's visual and ritual continuities with pharaonic practice — including, elsewhere in Egypt, the visual continuity between the ankh and the cross, and the persistence of certain mortuary customs — are well documented and are a separate question from the specific claim being tested here, which concerns theological fusion of the kind visible in the site's earlier phases: a named, worshipped, hybrid deity, rather than a visual or practical echo of an earlier tradition.

6. Limitations

Two limitations bear directly on the strength of the conclusions above.

First, the 2026 season — the most recent addition to the evidentiary base, and the source of the most explicit official statement directly linking the site's iconography to Egyptian-Greco-Roman fusion — has not yet been published as a formal excavation report. The description used here rests on Supreme Council of Antiquities statements as relayed through

²⁷Vondoom, A. (2026), 38.

²⁸Vondoom, A. (2026), 39.

Egyptian and international press, and should be revisited once a peer-reviewed site publication becomes available.²⁹

Second, no site-specific Christian-phase material culture — church structures, crosses, or other explicitly Christian religious objects — has been identified in the published scholarship or excavation announcements consulted for this paper. The absence of hybrid iconography at this phase of the site could reflect a genuine absence of such material, incomplete excavation of the relevant layer, or simply the absence of a published report covering it; the sources available do not allow these possibilities to be distinguished. This paper treats the apparent termination of the absorption pattern as an open evidentiary finding, not a resolved one, pending further excavation or publication specifically addressing the site's Byzantine phase.

A note on toponymy is also warranted: the Arabic term commonly rendered "Deir" ("monastery") occurs at multiple unrelated Egyptian archaeological sites. The Tell el-Deir treated in this paper, in the Damietta governorate of the Nile Delta, is unrelated to the similarly named Byzantine monastic complex reported at Al-Deir in the Sohag governorate of Upper Egypt, several hundred kilometers to the south, and the two should not be conflated.

7. Discussion

The Tell el-Deir case extends a claim previously argued at the level of temple religion and royal ideology to a provincial cemetery serving an ordinary population. The extension matters because it tests whether the absorption dynamic is a property specific to state-level religious engineering, of the kind Ptolemy I undertook with Serapis, or whether it also characterizes the funerary practice of people with no evident connection to royal cult. The recurrence of the Agathodaemon, Isis-Thermouthis, and Nemesis-as-griffin across amulets, coins, gold foil, and carved stelae over several centuries and at least three changes of regime — and the structural elaboration visible in the stelae themselves, where the deceased is enclosed on all four sides by different registers of hybrid

²⁹Archaeology News Online Magazine. (2026, July 31).

protective iconography — suggests the latter: symbolic absorption at Tell el-Deir was not confined to court religion but was embedded in the ordinary commemorative practice of a Delta community with no evident royal or temple connection.

The site's apparent Byzantine-phase discontinuity is, on the reading offered here, consistent with rather than damaging to the underlying model, since the model itself predicts that exclusive-truth-claim traditions should not generate the same kind of theological fusion that characterized the site's earlier phases. Whether that discontinuity reflects a genuine cessation of symbolic absorption, or simply a gap in what has been excavated and published, remains an open question that only further fieldwork at the site can resolve. Future excavation reports covering the site's monastic-period structures specifically would allow this question to be tested directly.

8. Relevance to Sustainable Development Goals

This research bears most directly on SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), Target 11.4, which calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. Tell el-Deir sits within an active industrial and residential expansion zone on the edge of New Damietta — bordered directly by an industrial area and the city's own growing residential footprint — making its documentation a live heritage-protection concern rather than an abstract one. A site whose funerary record spans more than a millennium of continuous, datable occupation is precisely the kind of resource Target 11.4 identifies as at risk from urban encroachment, and precisely the kind that depends on timely scholarly documentation, including of preliminary excavation seasons, to remain legible before further construction activity in the surrounding area affects it.

The research also bears on SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), particularly Target 17.6 on knowledge-sharing and collaborative research. This paper's evidentiary foundation rests entirely on scholarship produced by researchers working directly with the excavating mission and Egyptian antiquities institutions — principally Goda and Ghonaim's site-specific publications and the Supreme Council of Antiquities' own

excavation announcements.³⁰ The paper's contribution is deliberately structured as an extension of, and a credit to, that existing body of local scholarship rather than as an independent or parallel account of the site — a model of engagement in which theoretical work is built explicitly on, and in dialogue with, site-holder research rather than displacing it.

9. Conclusion

Tell el-Deir's excavation record, read across five seasons, supports the claim that Egypt's symbolic systems characteristically absorbed successive political regimes rather than being displaced by them, and does so at a level — ordinary provincial funerary practice — not previously examined against this specific thesis. The pattern holds cleanly from the Late Period through Roman rule, expressed in the recurring pairing of the Agathodaemon and Isis-Thermouthis, in the griffin form of Nemesis, and in the four-sided protective program of the site's published Roman stelae, across multiple media and at least three changes of political regime. It appears, on current evidence, to end at the site's Byzantine phase, where a change in the site's function is documented but no comparable hybrid iconography has yet been reported. That apparent limit is treated here as a genuine and unresolved feature of the evidence, consistent with the theoretical expectation that exclusive-truth-claim traditions do not reproduce the same absorptive mechanism — but not yet confirmed by site-specific Christian-phase material culture, which remains to be identified or published.

Acknowledgments

The empirical foundation for this paper's central case rests on the published scholarship of Dalia M. Goda and, for the site's Byzantine-period coinage, Goda and Ebrahim Ezat Ghonaim, whose site-specific studies of Tell el-Deir's funerary stelae and coinage made the analysis presented here possible. This paper's contribution is limited to the

³⁰Goda, D. M. (2024), 70.

theoretical framework applied to that material and to the subsequent, as yet unpublished, 2026 excavation season.³¹

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Competing Interests

The author declares none.

Generative AI Use Declaration

Claude (Anthropic) was used for literature synthesis, drafting assistance, and argument stress-testing in the preparation of this manuscript. All interpretive claims, conclusions, and the underlying theoretical framework are the author's own.

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