

# The Importance of Coptic Language and Literature

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## *The History of the Coptic Language*

The ancient Egyptian language had been abandoned totally between the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. The Coptic language was used side by side with this language up to the fifth century A.D. However, Coptic continued in use until the Arab invasion in the seventh century, after which its usage dwindled because of the spread of Arabic. "In 705/706 A.D. the Umayyad Viceroy 'Abd-Allah ibn Abd-al-Malik issued the hazardous and untimely decree substituting Arabic for Coptic in all state affairs."<sup>1</sup> By the seventeenth century A.D., Coptic had become a "dead" language although it is still used as the language of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt and, along with Arabic, is employed in some Coptic communities scattered in Upper Egypt. Through usage by Egyptian Christians and in the writing of the fathers of the church, the Coptic language was refined to its final form.

We do not know exactly when the Egyptian started to use the Greek alphabet plus the seven letters borrowed from Demotic to write spoken Coptic. "The reason for using this alphabet would have been to give the correct pronunciation of sacred pagan formulae of which the Egyptian script only gave consonants."<sup>2</sup> This language, which we call Coptic, is the same ancient Egyptian language, but what is certain is that "in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. the Nubian kinglet, Urganaphor, visiting Abydos, wrote there a graffito in the Egyptian language but in Greek characters. He obviously knew very little of either language! Later, some Egyptian rituals were written out in Greek."<sup>3</sup>

"It is interesting to note that the Coptic language reflected the old Egyptian local dialects."<sup>4</sup> Thus, philologists divided in the Coptic dialects into the following groups, according to the differences in pronunciation: Bohairic, Saidic, Fioumic, Akhmimic, Memphitic, Bashmoric, and Oasis.

In the third century A.D. the Coptic language took final shape and the Christian School of Alexandria translated the books of the Old Testament; this was the first writing that appeared in Coptic.<sup>5</sup> The Copts used their language with its dialects in their religious texts, in the translation of the Bible, for letters, stories, legal documents, and the history of the Coptic church.

## *The Importance of the Coptic Language*

The importance of Coptic became apparent as Champollion attempted to decipher the Rosetta Stone. In preparation, he had studied the Coptic language as a tool. In 1822 Champollion had seen copies of texts from Egyptian temples in Nubia that contained the cartouches of Thutmose III and Ramses II. Knowing of the possible meaning of the royal names from Coptic as well as the knowledge of Thutmose and Ramses from ancient Greek authors, he realized the dual principle within the Egyptian hieroglyphics script via the specific writing of these two names. "Ramses" clearly illustrates the dual principle: "Ra" means "sun" in Coptic, and in the cartouche the sun disk represented the idea or concept of the sun, with the sound value "ra" in Egyptian. On the Rosetta Stone, the sign at the end of the cartouche was used to write the letter "s" in the name Ptolemy (Ptolemaios in Greek), enabling Champollion to read ra?\_s\_s. With a guess that the middle sign should read "m," he had the name Ramses, which he could explain further from his knowledge of Coptic as "ra-mise" or "Ra is the one who give birth to him."

In the case of Thutmose he was able to read similarly the ibis at the start of the cartouche as the god Thoth and the ending -mes in the same way as for Ramses. In other words some signs represented ideas (ibis or the ibis-god Toth, sun for the sun-god Ra) while others within the same name represented sounds (the values discovered by Young for individual signs in the writing for foreign names, notably p, n. s).<sup>6</sup>

Champollion went on to delineate the importance of Coptic grammar when he published *Précis du système hieroglyphique* in 1824, "in which he laid out not only the script but also, using Coptic, the grammar of ancient Egyptian."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, a knowledge of Coptic grammar proved valuable to the early Egyptologists in their study of the ancient Egyptian language. Moreover, scholars turned as well to the Coptic vocabulary to recognize the vocabulary of ancient Egyptian and in its transliteration.

In addition, because Coptic was written in the Greek and Demotic alphabets, it supported scholars' research into the Nubian Christian language, because "The Old Nubian alphabet is essentially the Coptic, reinforced by a few extra letters (for the peculiar sounds of the language) which may be derived from the earlier pagan writing of Nubia, the so-called Meroitic."<sup>7</sup>

Coptic served as one of the languages that assisted researchers in discovering the correct pronunciation of certain ancient Egyptian words. Several examples will be useful. The word P wns in hieroglyphics means "the wolf," in the Aramaic of Elephantine it is Pwns, in Coptic  $\pi\omega\nu\varsigma$ ,  $\phi\omega\nu\varsigma$ , and in Greek  $\phi\omega\nu\varsigma$ . One can say that the pronunciation of this word between the fifth century B.C. and its writing in the third century A.D. was  $\pi\omega\nu\varsigma$  or  $\phi\omega\nu\varsigma$ .

Another example is the Egyptian name that was written  $\text{P}_3 - d_j - \omega s j y$  in hieroglyphics, in the Aramaic of Elephantine as  $\text{P} + \omega s y \text{P}$  or  $\text{P} + \omega s \text{P}$ ,  $\text{P} i s w y$ , and Ptsry, in Demotic as  $\text{P} - a - t e - \omega s y$ , in Coptic as  $\pi\delta\tau\omega\varsigma i p e$ , and in Greek as  $\pi\epsilon\tau\omega\varsigma i p i s$ ,  $\pi\epsilon\tau\omega\varsigma i p i s$ , and  $\pi\epsilon\tau\omega\varsigma i p i s$ , meaning "whom Osiris has given." From the above, we can say that the pronunciation of this name would be  $\text{P} + \omega s y \text{P}$  as in Aramaic, or as  $\pi\delta\tau\omega\varsigma i p e$  in Coptic, or as  $\pi\epsilon\tau\omega\varsigma i p i$  in Greek.

Further, the ancient Egyptian name, meaning "the (man) of (the god) Amun", written in hieroglyphics as  $\text{P}_3 - m - i m n$ , would be  $\text{P} a - i m n$  in Demotic,  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$ ,  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$ ,  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$  in Coptic, and  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$ ,  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$ , and  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$  in Greek. Using the Coptic, the pronunciation of this name could be  $\pi\delta\mu\omega n$  or  $\pi\mu\omega n$  for it is the closest to the Aramaic  $\text{P} a m w n$  and the Greek.

A fourth example is the hieroglyphic word htm (khtm), meaning "seal." The Aramaic of Elephantine in the fifth century B.C. would be hwtm or htm and in Coptic  $\text{hwtm}$ . The pronunciation of the word before the writing of the Coptic language in the third century A.D. was  $\text{hwtm}$  or  $\text{khtm}$ .<sup>9</sup>

For those researching the spoken Arabic of Egypt, it is valuable to study many of the Coptic loan words, such as those that follow.<sup>10</sup>

bersim	= clover
ghos	= small donkey; Arabic: gahsh
halak	= earring

halom	= cheese
herman	= pomegranate; Arabic: roman
kaake	= cake
kash	= straw
kot (+ article pi = pikot)	= straw basket; Arabic: beqoti
koh	= cough
koyke	= owl; Arabic: qowayq
lebsh	= bundle; in Arabic, usually of sugar canes

"The Coptic calendar is still used in Egyptian, especially by the Fellahs: the names of Coptic months have thus been introduced into the Arabic Language."<sup>11</sup>

Murad Kamil has pointed out that many Coptic verbs have been adopted by Arabic, such as

beshbosh	= to wet through
fot	= to jump up
fotfet	= to break into small pieces
kelka	= to clot; Arabic kalka'
loklek	= to mix
sha	= to rise (sun), shine; Arabic: sha sha
tota	= to step (when said to children); Arabic: tata. <sup>12</sup>

He asserts that "The use of the interrogation instrument (adverb or suffix) at the end of a sentence or of a work in spoken Arabic is also the result of Coptic influence."<sup>13</sup>

After the Arab conquest, the original Coptic names of Egyptian cities appeared again after "nine centuries of prevalence of the Greek Language in Egypt . . . , a fact proving that the common folk had preserved these names in their daily use."<sup>14</sup>

<u>Coptic</u>	<u>Arabic</u>
Koos	Qos
Shmunein	El-Ashmunein
Hnis	Ahnâs
Ushim	Usim
Siout	Assiout
Pemshe	Bahnassa
Khmim	Akhmim

The Influence of Coptic Outside Egypt: While the Coptic language was used by all Egyptians at one time, it also has had an influence on some European languages during the classical period and Middle Ages. For example, the English word "oasis" originate from the Coptic word "owahe" and "gum" is derived from the Coptic "komi" or "komme." To the Coptic word "tobe," ("brick"), the definite article al was added later in Arabic and became "at-tobe." The Arabs carried the word with them to Andalusia, where it became the Spanish "el-adobe." Later the word moved with the Spanish to the America, "and thus the English vocabulary contains now the Adobe."<sup>15</sup>

Murad Kamil offered yet another example of the influence of Coptic with the two brothers, Saints Cyril and Methodius of the Russian (Eastern) Orthodox faith, "who established the Cyrillic alphabet in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., adopted therein two Coptic letters borrowed from Demotic: tshai and fai."<sup>16</sup>

### *The Importance of Coptic Literature*

Coptic literature is varied: the sayings of the Church Fathers, theological writings, monastic rules, biographies of the saints and martyrs that have been included in the Coptic *Synaxarium* and other books, stories, contracts, letters, funeral and religious texts borrowed from the Old and New Testaments, grammatical studies, Gnostic writings, and even magical and medical texts. Coptic literature has close links to both ancient Egyptian and Greek literature and is used by scholars in comparative linguistic studies.

The impact of the Coptic language and literature expanded with the spread of Christianity throughout the classical world in the first five centuries A.D. During that period, there was an "international" aspect to Christian literature because it was shared among the Coptic and Syriac churches and those in Armenia, Ethiopia, Greece, Russia, and even to the Western Roman Empire and Roman Catholicism.

Monasticism arose in Egypt. Among the monks and hermits living in communities or solitude in the Egyptian deserts, time was spent in copying the sayings of the Church Fathers and their sermons against paganism, along with magical writings and other forms of literature. Because the monks in Egypt at that time were not always originally Egyptian, the copying could be done in a variety of languages—Greek, Latin, and Syriac—depending on the copyist's primary tongue and anticipated audience and usage. This movement of the literature aided in the spread of monasticism both to the East and the West.

After the Arab conquest of much of the Middle East in the seventh century, the Egyptian Copts and other Christian Arabs began to translate texts from their original languages into Arabic as well as using Arabic for their contemporary writing. This is the reason George Graf believes another Arabic dialect (aside from the well-known classical, spoken, and modern forms) exists based on such writings and translation: Arabic Christian literature.<sup>17</sup>

The Copts left thousands of manuscripts, papyri, ostraca, and stelae. These manuscript and papyri, which were originally written in or translated into Coptic, were very important from the political, social, religious, and cultural facets revealing the situation in Egypt during the Greco-Roman and Byzantine ages. For these reasons, a number of amateurs, tourists, and scholars began collecting Coptic manuscripts and papyri from the monasteries; most such manuscripts and papyri now reside in different museums, universities, and private collections in Europe and the United States. However, a substantial number remain in the Coptic Patriarchic Library of Egypt, the Coptic Museum in Cairo, and libraries of monasteries and churches in Egypt.

Societies and scholars have published indexes for these Coptic manuscripts, while others have published the manuscripts themselves along with interpretation and commentary in a variety of languages: English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Arabic.<sup>18</sup>

The Relationship between the Ethiopic and Coptic Literature: The Ethiopian Church has strong connections with the Coptic Church since the last part of the fourth century A.D. Thus, "The Ethiopic literature is a religious literature [that] depended totally on the Coptic literature in all its different periods, and most of the Ethiopic literature has been borrowed from the Coptic literature."<sup>19</sup>

The Ethiopians became believers in Christianity from the time of Frumntios in the fourth century. In the fifth century, nine Egyptian monks arrived in Ethiopia for the

purpose of spreading Christianity among the Ethiopians. This led to the translation into Ethiopian of books of the Bible as well as other volumes used in the Coptic Church or related to the Coptic creed. Coptic literature flourished in Ethiopia during the fifth century. Ethiopic literature was religious, heavily depend on Coptic literature throughout all periods.

Scholars divided the phases of these translations into two periods. The first began from the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia (fourth century A.D.) until the thirteenth century. Throughout this span, Ethiopic literature was dependent on the Coptic literature through translation. Many parts of the Coptic literature itself had been borrowed from the Greek or Syriac Christian writings. The second period started from the mid-thirteenth century to the present and depended on Coptic literature that was written in Arabic.

Murad Kamil wrote in great detail about the periods of weakness and strength in Ethiopic literature and linked that literature to the political situations of Ethiopia and Egypt. He pointed to another important aspect of the dependence of Ethiopic literature on the Coptic literature: the Ethiopians did not have a written independent literature even though they did have an oral literature in poems and stories. This was due, he asserted, to the fact that the Ethiopians considered it undignified to write down popular literature. The lack of written literature also could be traced possibly to the high cost of parchment and the wages of scribes, who usually were priests. As priests, they concentrated their writings on religious, not secular matters. The priests were the only people who specialized in writing. As a result, little is recorded of Ethiopian history except that which has been written in the religious literature.<sup>20</sup>

The Ethiopic literature did preserve some Coptic books that disappeared from the Coptic and Christian body of literature. Additionally, the Ethiopian Church still uses fourteen liturgies, while the Coptic Church uses only three of the fourteen.

The influence of Ethiopic on Coptic literature was very limited. Yet, the Copts borrowed the biography of Saint Takla Himanut, which was translated from Ethiopian into Arabic by the Ethiopian monks who lived in the Egyptian monasteries and knew both Coptic and Arabic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 18. For a discussion of the Coptic Church and culture, see Boulos Ayad Ayad, "The Coptic Orthodox Church," *Coptic Church Review*, winter 2000 (vol. 21, no. 4), pp. 115-16

<sup>2</sup>George Posener, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Civilization* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1959), p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Murad Kamil, *Coptic Egypt* (Cairo: Scribe Egyptien, 1968), p. 24. See also Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer, editors, *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 129.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. George Posener, op. cit., p. 52, who believed that such translation was accomplished by the Jewish communities living in Upper Egypt.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>F. Ll. Griffith, *The Nubian Texts of the Christian Period* (Berlin: Abhanal. Der Berl. Akad., 1913), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup>Boulos Ayad Ayad, "The Jewish-Aramaean Civilization and Its Relationship to the Ancient Egyptian Civilization," *Occasional Publications in Classical Studies (OPCS)* (Greeley, Colorado: University of Northern Colorado, Museum of Anthropology, 1983), pp. 88-89, 90, and 102.

<sup>10</sup>Murad Kamil, "Coptic Loan Words in the Spoken Arabic of Egypt," Cairo, self-published, 1967, p. 4, and George Sabhy, *Common Words in the Spoken Arabic of Egypt, of Greek or Coptic Origin* (Cairo, La Société d'Archeologie Copte, 1950), pp. 4-18.

<sup>11</sup>Murad Kamil, "Coptic Loan Words in the Spoken Arabic of Egypt," pp. 4-5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>See Boulos Ayad Ayad, "Dr. Murad Kamil and the Coptic Biographies," *Occasional Publications in Classical Studies (OPCS)* (Greeley, Colorado: University of Northern Colorado, Museum of Anthropology, 1979), pp. 9-20.

<sup>18</sup>Labib Habashi, "The Coptic Manuscripts," *Resalet Mar Min fi 'Aid al-Nirwz, Twt 1664* (September 1947), Alexandria, Egypt, Society of St. Mina the Meraculos.

<sup>19</sup>Murad Kamil, "The Relationship between the Ethiopic Literature and the Coptic Literature," *Resalet Mar Min fi 'Aid al-Nirwz, Twt 1664* (September 1947), Alexandria, Egypt, Society of St. Mina the Meraculos, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-8.