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Preface

WHEN THE second edition of this book was about to go out of stock the publisher kindly allowed additions and corrections to be made in a new, revised third edition. Some of these were new grammatical details, while others were matters of classical spelling ($\text{e}\iota$ instead of $\text{e}\bar{\iota}$ etc.). Furthermore, some errors that had come to light in the last six years were also corrected. In revising the grammar my approach has continued to be conservative, so that I have passed over many interesting but not-yet-proven hypotheses advanced by expert scholars who reviewed the work.

The paragraph numbering remains unchanged.

I am grateful to David Brakke, Stephen Emmel, Wolf-Peter Funk, and Ariel Shisha-Halevy for advice on several issues that arose in making these revisions. It remains for me to thank Harrassowitz Verlag not only for their enthusiasm and meticulous care but also for keeping the price of these subsequent editions low enough for scholars and students to purchase their own copy of the book.

Scholars and institutions who supported this project are acknowledged in the Preface to First Edition, which is reprinted below, and I would like to renew my thanks for their great generosity.

Yale University, New Haven (Connecticut)
 January 2011

Bentley Layton

Introduction

The Coptic Language

- 1 COPTIC is the last phase of the Egyptian language, from about A.D. 200 to 1000. Egyptian, the indigenous language of Egypt, had been expressed in writing since before 3000 B.C.; it constituted a language group unto itself but also had affinities with Semitic and various African languages, being classified as a sibling of the Berber, Cushitic, and Semitic language groups. The written attestation of standardized Coptic Egyptian begins with Biblical manuscripts dating to about A.D. 300, shortly after the translation of the Christian Bible into Coptic; and continues well beyond the extinction of Coptic as a spoken daily language (perhaps about A.D. 1000), down to the last faltering letters written by learned Copts in Egypt at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Native literature originally composed in Coptic dates almost exclusively to the early Byzantine period, roughly A.D. 325–800.² After the Arab conquest of Egypt (A.D. 642) there began a period of Arabization and Islamization in which Coptic was gradually replaced by Arabic for most practical purposes. Eventually, the Coptic language was reduced to the status of a mere religious and ethnic relic, cultivated only by learned members of a Christian minority in Egypt. In the thirteenth century we see a burst of interest on the part of Egyptian Christian scholars in the philology of their ancient tongue, but now in the form of Coptic grammars, vocabularies, and textual editions *written in Arabic* and taking account of Arabic grammatical tradition,³ thus signalling the disappearance of spoken Coptic as a language of fluent communication even among the learned. Such works belong to the Arabic Christian literature of the Copts.⁴ This is the only recorded elaboration of grammatical theory among the ancient Copts. The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt today retains a liturgy chanted in Medieval Coptic (Bohairic dialect) with certain passages in Greek; Biblical lections are read in both Coptic and Arabic. But Arabic has

¹ T. Orlandi, "Literature, Coptic," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York 1991) vol. 5, pp. 1450–60; Coptic letter by Athanasius of Abūfīg written in the Bohairic dialect of Coptic ca. A.D. 1800, ed. and trans. W. E. Crum in *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Collection of the John Rylands Library Manchester* (Manchester and London 1909) no. 461, pp. 231–3.

² Surveyed in Orlandi, "Literature."

³ W. Vycichl, "Muqaddimah," in *Coptic Encyclopedia* vol. 8, pp. 166–9; "Sullam," vol. 8, pp. 204–6.

⁴ S. Rubenson, "Translating the Tradition: Some Remarks on the Arabization of the Patristic Heritage in Egypt," in *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996):4–14; G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (Vatican City 1944–53).

long been the practical language of the Egyptian church and its members. Occasional reports of the continuous survival of spoken Coptic into modern times are unsubstantiated and unlikely. A movement to revive the Coptic language existed in Egypt throughout the twentieth century, but with almost no permanent results.

- 2 The modern word *Copt* means a Christian native of Egypt as opposed to a Moslem or Jew. It derives from neo-Latin *coptus* < Middle Arabic *qibṭī*, *qubṭī* < Greek Αἰγύπτιος 'Egyptian'/ἡ Αἴγυπτος 'Egypt'. Ancient Coptic speakers called themselves ⲡⲣⲙⲛⲕⲙⲉ 'the people of Egypt'; their language, ⲧⲙⲛⲧⲣⲙⲛⲕⲙⲉ 'the abstract category associated with people of Egypt'; and their land, ⲕⲙⲉ.
- 3 Coptic comprised a family of regional *dialects* spoken and written from the Mediterranean coast and the Delta all the way south up the Nile Valley into the Sudan (ancient Nubia), and also in the oases of the Western Desert of Egypt. More than a dozen dialects are distinctly represented in ancient literary manuscripts, and Biblical texts are attested in no less than eight of these.⁵ The natural homes of these dialects are a matter of abstract scholarly calculation, in the absence of objective geographical evidence.⁶ A basic contrast probably existed between those of the Delta on the one hand, and those of the extreme southern end of the Nile Valley on the other. At their greatest extremes, the dialects are sufficiently different to have been mutually incomprehensible to their native speakers, while those in closer proximity would have had more features in common.
- 4 The leading dialect in the pre-Islamic period was *Sahidic* (from Arabic *Ṣaʿīd* 'Southern Egypt'); it is thought⁷ to have begun as a regional dialect of the southern Nile Valley, emanating from Šmun/Hermopolis (modern Ashmun) or possibly somewhat south of that town. Sahidic is the dialect that has the most features in common with the other dialects of Coptic, and it has a very small number of peculiarities unto itself. Such a level profile would have made Sahidic easy to understand and use as a nationwide medium of communication; in fact, it came to be written and understood up and down the Nile Valley and (at least later) to some degree in the North. It was roughly about A.D. 300, under historical circumstances now unknown, that Sahidic began to be written in literary form. From the beginning, literary Sahidic was remarkably standardized in alphabet, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, phraseology, and translation technique: this is *Standard Sahidic*, the subject of the present

⁵ The number of dialects that must be reckoned with has increased since the publication of W. E. Crum's authoritative *Coptic Dictionary*; the ongoing discovery of ancient manuscripts in the Nile Valley causes these numbers to rise from time to time.

⁶ W.-P. Funk, "Dialects Wanting Homes: A Numerical Approach to the Early Varieties of Coptic," in *Historical Dialectology, Regional and Social* (ed. Jacek Fisiak; Berlin 1988) pp. 149–92.

⁷ Funk, "Dialects."

grammar. (The earliest manuscripts show variation in spelling and a slight admixture of other dialect forms. A fully standardized spelling was attained perhaps about the sixth century.⁸) Sahidic was an influential language of both Egyptian monasticism and the orthodox Christian power structure more or less throughout Egypt in the early Byzantine period. Almost all native authors in Coptic write in this dialect; their dates range from the fourth to eighth centuries A.D. Sahidic literature continued to be recopied and used in Egypt until somewhat beyond the extinction of Coptic as a living daily language; for example, important Sahidic literary manuscripts were still being copied and collected from the ninth to early eleventh centuries in the Faiyum Oasis, Sohag, Esna, and Edfu. (Late, post-Standard spelling systems are strikingly evident in some of these manuscripts.) But in the end it was the Bohairic dialect, originally centered in the Western Delta and the great monasteries of the Wadi Naṭrun, that outlived Sahidic and the others as the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

5 Unlike the earlier phases of Egyptian, Coptic is written in an *alphabet* of Greek letters supplemented by additional signs taken from the Egyptian Demotic script 8. There are six additional letters in the Sahidic alphabet: ω q 2 x 6 †. Many of the dialects and sub-dialects are written in a special variety of the Coptic alphabet, some having more or fewer additional letters than Sahidic. At present, fourteen Coptic alphabet systems have been recorded. There is no record, even legendary, of the circumstances in which the Coptic alphabet was invented. From the Macedonian capture of Egypt under Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. down to the Arab conquest of A.D. 642, *the Greek language* was an ever-present fact of daily life in Egypt, used increasingly in administrative, religious, literary, and scientific affairs. Greek was retained as the chief administrative language under Roman rule, and to some extent it remained in administrative use even until A.D. 1000. Egypt of the Hellenistic and Roman periods was bilingual, with Alexandria (an influential Greek metropolis) as the main diffusion point of Hellenistic culture, which travelled along a Greek-speaking administrative and cultural network spread throughout the country. In this period, Hellenism had a deep influence on the lexicon of the Egyptian language. A considerable portion of Coptic vocabulary comes from Greek 7, including words from all aspects of life and belonging to most word classes; the Greek word stock seems to occur as frequently in native Coptic authors as in literature translated from Greek and so must be considered a real part of the Coptic literary lexicon.⁹ On the other hand, Coptic shows little influence of Greek syntax.

⁸ Crum's intention in the *Dictionary* is to give in first place the principal standardized spelling in Standard Sahidic, as far as it was known at his time.

⁹ L. Th. Lefort, "Gréco-copte," in *Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewing Crum* (Boston 1950) pp. 65–71.

1 *Fundamental Components: Phonemes, Morphs, Syllables, and Alphabet*

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SOURCES OF THE COPTIC WORD STOCK

- 7 Coptic word stock mainly comes from Egyptian 1 and Greek 5. These two components—'Egyptian Coptic' and 'Greco-Coptic'—belong to very different language structures and to some extent must be described separately. Some 3,308 Egyptian Coptic vocabulary entries are recorded in W. E. Crum's authoritative *Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford 1939), along with many derived forms.

Two-thirds of Crum's Egyptian Coptic entry words can be traced back to an earlier stage of Egyptian; cf. J. Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge 1976). The remainder have no attested Egyptian etymology, including some of the most common vocabulary in Sahidic.

The sizeable *Greco-Coptic* vocabulary 5 is not recorded in our modern Coptic dictionaries; the lexica of classical and Byzantine Greek must be consulted.

Not all meanings of these Greek items came into Coptic nor did all Greek words of the period enter Coptic. Greco-Coptic items are not inflected (formally marked in paradigms) as they are in Greek; for example, Greek substantives and adjectives come into Greco-Coptic in an invariable form, recognizable as the Greek nominative singular. Despite the large amount of Greek vocabulary in Coptic, little influence of Greek syntax is evident.

Most Coptic items expressing general grammatical categories (conjugation bases, auxiliaries, converters, articles, affixes, personal morphs, and adverbial modifiers) are Egyptian in origin.

WRITING, SOUNDS, AND PHONEMES

- 8 *Alphabet*. Since Sahidic Coptic ceased to be a spoken language many centuries ago 1, what now remains is written text, expressed in a system of thirty *alphabetic letters* (table 1) and associated signs. The other expression of the language consisted of *spoken sounds*; these are now lost. Text is written from left to right in an alphabet consisting of the twenty-four Greek capital letters (in lunate i.e. rounded form, thus ϵ ς ω instead of E Σ Ω) supplemented by six additional letters taken from the Egyptian Demotic script and stylized to resemble lunate Greek capitals: ω η ζ α δ \dagger .

TABLE 1
THE SAHIDIC ALPHABET WITH EGYPTIAN COPTIC VALUES
(For illustrations, cf. 10)

	BROAD PRONUNCIATION		MODERN NAME	NOTATION OF UNDERLYING PHONEMES AND ALLOPHONES 9, 20
	Syllabic	Non-syllabic		
α	a		alpha	/a/; also syllabic /ʔ/ (or /y/) Also as allophone of /y/ and /o/
β	$^e b$	b	beta	/b/
γ	$^e g$	g	gamma	Egyptian Coptic allophone of /k/ Occurs mainly in Greco-Coptic morphs
Δ	—	(d)	delta	Occurs only in Greco-Coptic morphs
ϵ	e		epsilon	/e/; under many conditions, non-phonemic Also as allophone of /a/, /y/, and /ʔ/
ζ	—	z	zeta	Egyptian Coptic allophone of /s/, only in $\alpha\mathbf{N}\mathbf{Z}\mathbf{H}\mathbf{B}\mathbf{C}$ Occurs mainly in Greco-Coptic morphs
η	\bar{a}^1		eta	/ē/
Θ	—	th^2	theta	/t/ + /h/ (two distinct phonemes)
$\text{I or } \epsilon\mathbf{I}$	i	y	iota	/y/
κ	$^e k$	k	kappa	/k/
λ	$^e l$	l	lambda	/l/
μ	$^e m$	m	mu	/m/
ν	$^e n$	n	nu	/n/
ξ	—	ks	ksi	Non-phonemic in the syllable $\mathbf{M}\mathbf{N}\mathbf{T}$ /mt/ /k/ + /s/ (two distinct phonemes)
\omicron	o		omicron	/o/
π	$^e p$	p	pi	/p/
ρ	$^e r$	r	rho	/r/
ς	$^e s$	s	sigma	/s/
τ	$^e t$	t	tau	/t/
Υ or $\epsilon\mathbf{Y}$	u	w	upsilon	/w/
ϕ	—	ph^3	phi	Also as allophone of /ō/ /p/ + /h/ (two distinct phonemes)
χ	—	kh^4	khi	/k/ + /h/ (two distinct phonemes)
ψ	$^e ps$	ps	psi	/p/ + /s/ (two distinct phonemes)
ω	\bar{o}		omega	/ō/
\wp	$^e \xi$	ξ	šai	/š/
η	$^e f$	f	fai	/f/
ζ	$^e h$	h	hore(h)	/h/
α	$^e \zeta$	ζ^5	djandja	/č/
δ	$^e k'$	$t\delta$		Also /t/ + /š/ (two distinct phonemes) ⁶
\dagger	ti	k'	kyima	/k'/
		ty	ti	/t/ + /y/ (two distinct phonemes)

NOTE: Broad spoken correspondents in the table follow W. Worrell, *Coptic Sounds* (Ann Arbor, Michigan [USA] 1934).

¹Cf. Engl. "late". ²th Two sounds, cf. Engl. "Hit him!" ³ph Two sounds, cf. Engl. "Slap him!"
⁴kh Two sounds, cf. English "Think hard!" ⁵Cf. Engl. 'church' ⁶Infinitive $\omega\alpha\chi\tau$ 'cut', stative $\omega\epsilon\tau\omega\omega\tau$ /šotšt, šetšöt/, consonantal skeleton $\omega\text{-}\tau\text{-}\omega\text{-}\tau$