

extract

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Jean–Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press 2020, 206 pages.

The monography discussed below does not only provide an important contribution to the problem of the gradual diffusion of written Coptic in Roman Egypt in the context of a centuries-long process, but it also serves as a useful introduction for anyone interested in the still relatively uncertain history of this process.

Chapter 1 discusses the origins of Coptic and the nature of its usage in the first centuries of its history. Coptic was the last stage of the Egyptian language, and, from the 3rd century BC to the 5th century BC, it was used in the domain of literature, primarily in epistolography. That stands in contrast with the surviving documentary literature from Egypt in the same period, which is exclusively in Greek, following the norm set in the first century of Roman rule over Egypt. It is emphasized, that the known documentary papyri from other Roman territories, mainly from the region of the Middle Euphrates, contain numerous sources written in the local language, a legal practice under Roman law, which points to an Egyptian ‘exceptionalism’ in this respect.

Chapter 2 deals with the factors contributing to the long dominant position of Greek. As it is pointed out, Coptic had numerous dialects: Bohairic, Fayyumic, Mesokemic, the dialects from the Lycopolitan area, Akhmimic and Sahidic, the last of them being the standardised dialect of the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt. The level of mutual intelligibility between these dialects is still hotly debated, due to the characteristics of the language and the limited scope of the surviving sources. However, some of its surviving examples support the thesis of mutual intelligibility being limited between geographically distant dialects. The administrative use of Coptic was probably hindered by these internal divisions, while (Koine) Greek was helped by its role as the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean, its substantial prestige and the tradition of it being the administrative language of Egypt. Furthermore, the predecessor of Coptic, that is, Demotic, was

marginalised in the first century of Roman rule, leading to a break in continuity between Demotic and Coptic. These factors were only compounded by the strong preference of the early Egyptian Church for Greek, and the circumstance that literary Coptic was most probably developed by thoroughly Hellenized local elites, created to complement Greek in the private sphere, not to supplant it.

In Chapter 3, the proliferation of written Coptic in the 6th and early 7th centuries is examined through selected sources. The first surviving examples of Coptic outside the realms of epistolography, and translated Christian religious literature, were created in rural milieus in Upper Egypt, that is, the least Hellenized territories of Byzantine Egypt. From the 6th century, as legal settlements were more and more preferred instead of the long and costly *libellus* processes, Coptic successfully entered the legal sphere, as the documentation of settlements was not required to be in Greek. As state proceedings, for unknown reasons, became less formal from the end of the same century, appeals in Coptic became permissible, legitimizing Coptic in the context of state.

Chapter 4, the final chapter of the book, discusses the relationship between church and monasticism, and the diffusion of Coptic, once again making extensive use of selected sources. All texts in question are legal documents, created in a church milieu, by priests and deacons fulfilling the function of ‘notary-cleric’, which was necessitated by the inadequate number of bilingual state notaries. Although these sources were not recognised as legally binding, their informal ‘validity’ in local society and their role as tools to acquire legally binding documents should not be underestimated. Their proliferation was accompanied by a profound development in Coptic language practice itself, which was strongly influenced by the Church. It is emphasized, that the sources resoundingly disprove the thesis of a Coptic-dominated Anti-Calcedonian, and a Greek-dominated Calcedonian church in Byzantine Egypt, as both languages were strongly represented in both religious communities.

The book also contains three appendices (Coptic Endorsements in Greek legal Texts; Five Samples of Fourth-Century Coptic Letters; and The First Legal Documents in Coptic before the Arab Conquest), a bibliography, a general index, and an index of ancient sources. It is an example of high quality scholarly work, which is equally useful for Coptologists, scholars of other fields interested in its subject, and nonprofessional audiences.

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