

The History Of The Coptic Language

Definition

The Coptic Language is the name used to refer to the last stage of the written Egyptian language. Coptic should more correctly be used to refer to the script rather than the language itself. Even though this script was introduced as far back as the 2nd century BC., it is usually applied to the writing of the Egyptian language from the first century AD. to the present day.

Short History Of The Egyptian Language Before Coptic

The ancient Egyptians devised a writing system to record their spoken language over 60 centuries ago. The first application seems to have been the calendar. The system started by giving each word a symbol, called hieroglyph. This convention was of course doomed because of the tremendous vocabulary it would have generated. Out of such ideas they took some of these hieroglyphs and associated a sound value to them which, when combined together, would spell out the spoken word. The sound values of such characters depended mostly on the pronunciation of the word that it denoted in the early stage. Thus the hieroglyph for mouth, pronounced 'ro' became the sound 'r' in the new system. About 130 hieroglyphs have been identified as voiced characters. Some represented a single sound, others a two-character sound, and some a three-character sound. Many more hieroglyphs were added to represent the idea or to enhance the meaning of the word. These are commonly referred to as 'ideograms' and they brought the number of identified hieroglyphs to over 4,000. This script, popularly called hieroglyphic, was both beautifully drawn as well colorfully painted. It was used for inscription on Egyptian monuments as well as a variety of written texts on papyrus.

In parallel with the development of the hieroglyphic script, a second script came to light. Such script was a mere simplification of the artistic, and sometimes laborious, hieroglyphic. It was originally devised by the priests to record the records of the temples and then became a tool of the government servants, educated by the learned priests, who used it to record the affairs of the state. Due to the priestly origin of the script the name 'hieretic' was popularly affixed to it. This script used the same symbols, drawn in a simplified way. There is no indication that script had as many ideograms as the hieroglyphic had.

With the decline of the state such a cumbersome writing method became impossible to preserve it as is. So in the fifth century BC. a new script was devised that was both simpler to write and included about ten percent of the total number of hieroglyphs used previously. This new script came to be referred to as 'Demotic'. The cursive, and relatively ugly appearance of characters, in comparison to the hieroglyphic, was compensated for by its relative compactness. Many written records were preserved in that script but they dared not inscribe it on temple walls.

Origin Of Coptic Among Egyptian Pagans

In 313 BC. Alexander the Great invaded Egypt. His legacy was carried on by his general Ptolemeus and his successors in Egypt. That legacy, simply stated, was to have a

universal culture. Such culture would of course be the Greek or Hellenistic one. With the culture comes the language, so it became the proper way for the educated classes to learn Greek and encourage their children to learn it for the economical as well as the social advantages. In script, the Greek was far superior to the Demotic, the last surviving Egyptian script at the time. It offered 24 characters all pronounceable as opposed to over 400 symbols that only a small percentage represented sounds and the rest were ideograms.

It is important to note here that the Greeks learned their writing system from the Egyptians through the frequent travelers of the ancient world, the Phoenicians. In the course of their commercial dealings with the Egyptians, the Phoenicians imported the Egyptian script and molded it into an alphabet with a far smaller number of characters, all pronounceable and all consonants.

As they traveled the Mediterranean and traded with the inhabitants of the Greek Isles, they gave their version of the Egyptian writing system to the Greeks. They in turn revised its orthography and added a number of written vowels. A system that eventually became the basis for the new Egyptian script, i.e. the Coptic.

The pagan Egyptian priests, as a result of the invasion of the Greek language, found themselves at a disadvantage. The source of income as well as the power of their temples depended a great deal on the making and the sales of magical amulets. Now these amulets, written in Egyptian, can not be pronounced by those who can afford to pay for them. If they can not use, properly or at all, it is safe to say that they would not buy it. To avert such economic and religious massacre, they reverted to a transliteration system of these amulets. This new system used the Greek characters along with several other characters borrowed from the Demotic to denote sounds not available in Greek. The economic success of such system made them extend its use to other applications such as horoscopes and the like. The number of borrowed Demotic characters eventually were reduced. The resultant script was highly standardized, in the common tradition of the Ancient Egyptians.

Origin Of Coptic Among Christians In Egypt

Christianity in Egypt owes its formal introduction to St. Mark the Evangelist. He most likely came first to Alexandria in the early fifties of the first century AD., accompanying his uncle St. Barnabas. This came as a result of the news of Apollo, who represented an imperfect Christianity that existed in Alexandria at the time. After the repose of St. Barnabas in Cyprus, St. Mark came again by himself and started proclaiming the word of God among the Jews. The legacy that St. Mark left in Egypt was a Christian community made up primarily of converted hellenized Jews.

Christianity remained eclipsed by the powerful Jewish community in Alexandria at the time. After the Jewish Revolt in the first quarter of the second century AD. and subsequent annihilation of the Jews in Alexandria, the Christians of Egypt became visible to the world.

The first visible signs of such presence were rather blemishing to the character of the Church. Two teachers of Gnostic, heterodox repute, traveled abroad at different times during the middle of the second century AD. They were Basilides and Valentinus. The latter became infamous due to his quest to be the bishop of Rome. In any case, these teachers influenced the arrival of Pantanus, the missionary, presumably to introduce the orthodox teachings of Christianity to a seemingly Gnostic community. After his arrival he discovered that this was not exactly the case and there was a strong orthodox community present as a result of the evangelizing work of St. Mark and his successors. Being a renowned Christian teacher he was put in charge of the Christian school of Alexandria, a rather small school that taught those who are willing to serve the Lord the fundamentals of Christianity. Shortly after his arrival, St. Demetrius, the first bishop of Egyptian origin, became the bishop of Alexandria about 189 AD.

The contact between Pantanus, the missionary, and St. Demetrius the representative of the large and mostly non-Christian Egyptians was truly a match made in Heaven. As a result a missionary movement to convert the Egyptian peasants began. The School of Alexandria probably became a school to prepare the missionaries and direct their activities.

The dilemma faced by those responsible for directing such missionary work was the uniformity of the message to be given to the Egyptians. The missionaries knew how to read Greek but not Demotic. The Egyptian peasants did not know how to read either but they understood the sounds of the language written by the Demotic script, i.e. Egyptian. To insure that the Word of God, written in the Scriptures, be preached the same by the different missionaries, it had to be written in a way that the missionaries can read and the Egyptians can understand when it was read to them. So the missionaries translated the Scriptures into the Egyptian tongue but wrote them using the Greek characters they are familiar with. These attempts differed from those of the pagans in that they did not use any Demotic character in the beginning. The shortcomings of that system were eventually realized and more characters, borrowed from the Demotic, were added to bring them to the current six or seven additional characters that survived in the Sahidic and Bohairic dialects respectively.

Dialects

Now we see two independent attempts to write the Egyptian language in new script. Each attempt was unique in its motive, approach, and audience. Due to the distribution of the population along the length of the Nile, many dialects developed. Each was characterized by the use of different vowels in pronouncing the same words as well as some distinct variation in the vocabulary. The pagans attempted from the start to develop a uniform written language in a neutral Dialect, the Sahidic. Because of their early start, they were successful in their efforts and nearly erased any influence that such regional dialects had on their own version of Coptic. The Christians on the other hand put the benefit of the people ahead of proper language development and resurrected all these regional dialects in a written form. Eventually most of these dialects fell into disuse as the uniform Sahidic became the more dominant again. Another factor that affected these the dialects was the fact that the Coptic language was generally weakened by the influence of Arabic.

All the dialects were to a large extent geographically-dependent. They spanned the entire length of the Nile Valley. Based on literary records we have such dialects as the Akhmimic and the Lycopolitan (Asyutic) dialects of Upper Egypt, the Middle Egyptian and the Fayoumic of Middle Egypt, and the Bohairic of the Delta. Then there is the Sahidic dialect that became, from the earliest times, a neutral dialect used throughout Egypt and eventually gained literary dominance with the extensive writings of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite. There is also a host of minor dialects as well as subdialects to the ones mentioned above.

Now Bohairic is the only surviving dialect of Coptic. It was kept alive first by the strength of the monastic communities of Wadi n' Natrun which used it extensively. Then with the move of the Patriarchate from Alexandria to Cairo in the 11th century, Bohairic, the dialect of the District, became the official dialect of the Church replacing the Sahidic.

The Golden Age Of Coptic

Coptic was used from its Christian beginnings in the late second century AD. till the time of the Great persecution of Diocletian in the early 4th century AD. predominantly as a translational tool from Greek to Egyptian. After the persecution, the monastic movement picked up tremendous steam. It was for the Copts the only way they can express their great love for God, that they earlier expressed with the willing sacrifice of their most precious possession, their earthly lives. These monastic communities were large and mostly Egyptian. This generated the need for the abbots of these communities to write their rules in their own language, i.e. Coptic. Also the Fathers of the Coptic Church, who usually wrote in Greek, addressed some of their works to the Egyptian monks in Coptic.

So with monastic fathers like St. Antony, St. Pachomius, and St. Macarius and their respective disciples writing to their monks; and Church Fathers like St. Athanasius, St. Theophilus, and St. Cyril writing also to them in Coptic, the Golden Age of Coptic was about to begin. It was not until St. Shenouda the Archimandrite came on the scene that Coptic really achieved its literary excellence. St. Shenouda who lived from 348 to 466 AD. was able to transform the language from a tool to communicate instructions to the monks to a wide-variety literary language that addressed monks, ecclesiastic authorities, laymen, and even government officials. His charisma, knowledge of Greek language and rhetoric, and his innovative mind gave him the necessary tools to elevate the Coptic language, in content and style, to a literary height never achieved before nor equaled since. The Coptic scholars are constantly astounded by his great writings as more and more of them are being studied and accurately published.

This literary legacy continued to a lesser degree through the writings of his disciple St. Besa in the second half of the fifth century. But such writings were mostly for the edification of the large monastic community in the White Monastery. later in the sixth and seventh centuries other fathers wrote many works in Coptic like Rufus of Shotep, Constantine of Asyut, and Pisentius of Qift.

Coptic During the Early Arabic Period (7th to 10th Century AD)

By the middle of the seventh century, Egypt came under the dominance of Arab rulers that eventually tried to force the Copts to learn Arabic to keep their government jobs. This policy slowly eroded the number of Coptic lay readers who were mostly from the ranks of these government workers and their families. In other words the pressure put on such families to learn Arabic to ensure their continuing service in the government and the inheritance of such work by their offspring, made them slowly neglect educating their children in literary Coptic. Within a few hundred years Bishop Severus of Al-Ashmunain found it necessary to write his 'History of the Patriarchs' in Arabic to address such a drastic decline.

Ecclesiastically, the language continued strong. In fact, a great number of Hagiographic texts were composed during the early parts of this period. Coptic continued to be used in the Church with Greek as the second language, as seen from the texts that survived from the period. However a relatively small number of liturgical manuscripts survived from such period to show how it was being used. This was due to the heavy use that such manuscripts were subjected to, poor preservation during the period of decline in use, and the parchment material they were written on that did not lend itself to such heavy use.

During this period some Arabic loan-words made their way into the language. But there was no indication that the Arabic language was used in the Church. There were no Coptic-Arabic manuscripts that belong to this period or any literary citation to indicate its possible use. Coptic was also the spoken language of the peasants and probably the clergy.

Coptic versus Arabic (from 11th to 14th Century AD)

As the 11th century approached, the excellent relations between the rulers of Egypt and the Church were drastically changed as the Hakem-bi-Amr-Allah became the ruler. His violent mood swings took their toll on the Christians who were periodically subjected to open persecutions, had their churches closed for up to two years at time, and saw their language being prohibited from use. Through God's grace, this period did not last long, but it definitely left open the door for further decline in Coptic use.

During the same period, the European Crusaders waged their wars against the Moslem rulers of the Middle East in an effort to secure the holy places. Their presence in the area generated waves of persecutions and oppressions against the Copts. This was due to the Moslems seeing in the sign of the Cross, displayed by the Crusaders, an implied alliance of the Copts with those invaders and a great threat to the country. Of course there was no chance of such alliance, for the Crusaders considered the Copts as heretics and treated them worse than they treated the Moslems, as sad as it might sound. Introduction of Arabic in the 12th century by Patriarch Gabriel ibn Turaik was probably an attempt to show the Moslems that the Copts are different from real enemy that they were fighting.

Such move may have been considered wise at the time but it actually opened the flood gates. Christian Arabic literature flourished afterward. Later in the period, Arabic invaded the liturgical books, replacing Greek in bilingual texts and intruding on traditionally non-bilingual ones. Even purely Arabic liturgical texts began to appear,

indicating that Arabic moved from a mere reference translation to actual use in the churches. Original composition in Coptic became limited to liturgical hymns and prayers. The only Coptic literary texts composed in the later part of the period were the martyrdom of St. John of Phanidijoit, written as such to shield from the eyes of the Moslems, and compositions, urging the Copts to revive their language.

Further testimony to the gradual decline of the language as a reading tool was supplied by the many lexicographic works that were introduced during the period. They were in the form of Muqadimat (Grammar) and Salalem (Scalae or word lists). Another sign of decline was Arabic texts circulating among the monks but written in Coptic characters, as they could not still read the Arabic script. This eventually was replaced with the writing of Coptic text in Arabic letters that we see nowadays in the Coptic Church.

In summary, this period saw the decline of Coptic literary use in its last stronghold, the Church. Eventually, it led to the weakening of the Church which subsequently weakened the language more, a natural chain reaction. The number of Christians declined due to conversion to Islam. This can probably be attributed to the decline in Coptic which represented a cultural barrier for the Copts from the Arabic-Moslem Culture. But now the increasing use of Arabic bridged that barrier and made it easier for the border-line Christians to cross to seemingly greener grounds!

Coptic Decline as a Spoken Language (to 17th Century)

After the 14th century the Church experienced a decline spiritually and in numbers. The dominance of the Ottoman Empire over Egypt in the early 16th century seemed to accelerate such decline. Production of Coptic Manuscripts slowed down to a trickle. This is an indication that Coptic books were not used as often as before in the Church, so there was no need to produce more. Tradition still mandated that Coptic be used in Church services but in a decaying fashion. Eventually Vansleb, the French traveler, concluded upon seeing an old man speaking in Coptic that with his death (the man's) Coptic will die. Such observation may not have been completely accurate but it gave an indication that Arabic has replaced Coptic as the primary spoken language among the Copts, if not the only one!

Revival of Coptic in the 19th Century AD

God, in His great mercy, did not let that decline goes unchecked. In His usual fashion, He brought forth a gleam of light in the midst of that self-imposed darkness. Such light was St. Cyril IV, Patriarch of Alexandria in the beginning years of the second half of the 19th century. St. Cyril started a Church-sponsored movement to educate the clergy and the new generations. Revival of Coptic seemed to be a necessary tool for such a movement. So Coptic language education was offered in all the schools that he built alongside the other curriculums that was needed to make a new, better, and educated generation.

St. Cyril did not last long on the throne of St. Mark. In fact too short of time for such a great figure in Church history. His death was in part brought upon by opponents of his reforms. But he laid the ground work for such movement to continue. In the last half quarter of that century the movement to revive the Coptic language intensified. The eyes

of those in that movement turned to Greece in an effort to establish a standardized method of pronouncing Coptic. It was felt that Greek preserved the original sound value of many of the characters in Coptic because of its close association with Coptic in its early days. However the Greek tongue underwent some modifications due to the effect of 150 years of Turkish (Ottoman) dominance. Because of the lack of any other available means, a new pronunciation system was established for Coptic that made it sound not as Egyptian as it should have sounded.

In spite of the above shortcoming, those dedicated people spread the language among the masses. They printed many of the Coptic service books for the first time, as they were only extant in manuscript form. Thus reviving the use of Coptic in the Church services. Several works of grammar were produced as a result along with a more comprehensive dictionary that was available before. The establishment of the Clerical College also aided in the propagation of the movement.

Coptic in the 20th Century

Coptic continued its growth in the Church and among the Ecclesiastically-educated groups that were produced in the early parts of the 20th century. Coptic schools, instituted by St. Cyril IV and others that emulated them, continued their valuable work among the Coptic community. The clerical college also continued the tradition of the 19th century revival of Coptic. However, the pronunciation system established seemed to be a hindrance to the spread of the language among the masses. With the advent of the revolution of 1952, Arabic became more prominent in Egypt and eventually it had an influential effect on the new educated classes among the Copts. As members of these groups were called upon to serve the Church, they brought with them a preaching spirit that put Arabic in a new prominent position in the services, i.e. sermons. Unintentionally, and in spite of the good will of such people and their love of the tradition of the Church, they introduced again an element that eventually weakened the revival process. If such process is not wisely put in check and eventually reversed, we are liable to face in the future a Church with a lost identity. May God have mercy on those who would contribute to such a sorry end!