

Conclusions

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The four essays gathered together in this volume look at Egypt from different perspectives both as a crucial crossroad of translations and cultural interweavings and as a vehicle for the formation of literary culture. However, they have one fundamental aspect in common: an interpretation of Egyptian multilingualism and multiculturalism (and therefore of the translations from one language to another) as a nuanced phenomenon that cannot be explained by means of a simplistic interpretation.

From the phase of the transcription of Egyptian texts in Greek characters to that of the translation of Coptic works into Arabic and eventually into Ethiopic, one should always have in mind that Egyptian society was, at least since the Saitic period, complex and multicultural. This fundamental fact exerted a strong influence on any and every linguistic and textual choice of all the communities active both along the Nile Valley and in the deserts.

In his article, Franco Crevatin, for instance, clearly sets forth the apparent paradox that lies behind the phenomenon of the use of pre-Old Coptic in Roman Egypt. He affirms that, in principle, Greek and Demotic writings had the same domains of use (public and private, religious and profane, scientific and literary) and contributed to identify, linguistically and culturally, those who controlled

them. Profoundly different, however, were the functional domains of their respective languages, because Greek was the dominant language of a linguistic minority and Egyptian was the minority language of a majority. Since this Egyptian/Greek digraph system did not envisage overlaps or competition, it would have seemed out of place to think of writing the Egyptian language with Greek characters. For whom would it be written? Yet this is exactly what gradually took place—Franco Crevatin stresses—, to the point that the question should be reformulated. For what reason could one decide to write the Egyptian language in Greek scripture? Crevatin states that this practice was created in milieu of educated Egyptians who were fluent in or at least possessed a standard mastery of the Greek language. Already in Roman Egypt, Greek is clearly perceived by the cultural autochthonous élite as a language to be exhibited as part of a status. Contrary to what one might think, this happens even in the milieu of the temples. On this aspect Crevatin reminds us the case of Narmouthis, whose main temple is dedicated to the cobra goddess Isis-Renenutet. At the entrance of the temple four hymns in Greek hexameters (1st century BC)—the so-called hymns of Isidorus—are engraved and celebrate Isis and ‘Porramanres’ (= Amenemhat III). Crevatin stresses how, in a bilingual environment like Narmouthis, these compositions have *per se* a greater importance than their questionable literary merit, because it is hard to believe that they could be placed in such a visible place without the explicit approval of the high priesthood of the temple. It is highly likely that even Isidorus belonged to the local priesthood. He also proposes the suggestive hypothesis that Ἴσιδῶρος was the Greek equivalent of the Egyptian *p3dj-3s.t*, Πετεῖσις (Coptic ΠΑΤΗΣΙΣ) “the one that Isis has donated”.

In brief, in Greek and Roman times, more and more educated Egyptians used Greek language and its potentialities, without perceiving that in this way they were losing their original identity. Rather, they thought of what they were doing as adopting a second, equally significant, identity.

Crevatin goes beyond this, mentioning the recent edition of the so-called “Book of Thot”, which contains a dialogue between a *magister* and his disciple, who is defined as “the one who loves knowledge” (*mr-rh*), making the fascinating hypothesis the Egyptian epithet may correspond to the Greek term φιλόσοφος.

This is a crucial point, and it bears repeating. Making use of the linguistic and stylistic tools of another (literary) culture does not imply at all the abandonment of one’s own identity. On the contrary, this reliance upon another culture may contribute to an enrichment and more solid consciousness and valorization of the values and cultural roots of the culture of provenance.

This axiom is even more valid in the case of the translations from Greek into Coptic. Concerning this aspect, Franco Crevatin stresses the strong cultural continuity between the two linguistic worlds and correctly states that it is not plausi-

ble to explain the translations from Greek into Coptic as a mere 'nationalistic' appropriation of a corpus of writing, but rather as an initiative of bilingual Egyptian élites that are an active part of two socially interconnected worlds. In this respect, he also observes how Apion, the famous Hellenized Egyptian grammarian and commentator on Homer, born in Siwa oasis, displayed pride in his native language. This sense of identity could offset the progressive impoverishment of Egyptian culture, which was increasingly restricted to the temples' activities. A writing use that was originally limited to practical purposes could, gradually, be transformed from a specific professional competence into a communicative tool.

It is interesting to stress how Crevatin's words find an echo in the view expressed by Alberto Camplani, who observes that in Egypt in the 1st-4th centuries (i.e. during the phase in which we must assume that written Coptic was elaborated in a number of forms and in a variety of centres and then unified in a few forms of wider diffusion), archaeological excavations suggest that Egyptian and Greek were the two dominant oral languages, with a probable numerical predominance of those who spoke Egyptian. As regards the languages utilised for written communication, documentary sources are even more explicit, showing that the prevailing linguistic tools in the Ptolemaic age and at the beginning of the Roman domination are Greek and Demotic, with a tendency of the latter to perpetuate itself as a language of culture within the temples, but to be used less and less for written communication and correspondence.

As we have seen, Franco Crevatin and Alberto Camplani are in perfect agreement in affirming that there is more than one answer to the question of what were the reasons behind the translations from Greek into Coptic. Alberto Camplani, however, goes beyond these considerations and draws readers' attention to the fact that, in order to try to understand the reasons for the birth of the first Coptic translations, it is necessary to combine the expertise of different specialists: linguists, historians, Orientalists, and archaeologists. Moreover, he stresses that the use of Coptic in documentary texts, already at the end of the 4th century, show us how this 'new' language quickly becomes a practical and 'immediate' linguistic tool. In brief, understanding for what purposes, in what social contexts and in relation to which texts the first translations from Greek (and possibly from other languages) into Coptic were made, must be based on the findings recorded in the reports written by archaeologists, linguists, and historians of literature.

He also observes that a few decades after the appearance of the first Coptic manuscripts (in the '30s of the 4th century) the first papyrus archives appear. These *also* include Coptic letters and documents, from receipts to lists of objects, to messages of greetings, to letters in which a teacher gives moral advice to a disciple or disciple tries to mend his troubled relationship with the teacher more or less convincingly. Since these documents represent obvious evidence of the

use of Coptic for immediate communication, one must wonder how long back we can trace this use. In this case, it is impossible to re-propose the hypothetical chronological reasoning that has been applied to the biblical manuscripts: the Coptic documents do not have a textual prehistory, of course, and there is no space for a retrograde projection. On the other hand, since there is some agreement among scholars that the earliest biblical manuscripts preceded the '30s of the 4th century—they are often placed in the second half of the 3rd century—, we can therefore argue that literary Coptic preceded the form of Coptic used for daily communication.

One of the most problematic aspects of the progressive emergence of Coptic is the question of whether this was exclusively connected to religious—not necessarily Christian—contexts, or if this was already in use in 'traditional' environments.

Once more, we owe to Alberto Camplani a lucid analysis of a possible 'prehistory of Coptic language' linked to pagan tradition and regarding the groups that developed and transmitted the Coptic language:

[I]s the use of Coptic linked only to Jewish-Christian-Gnostic-Manichean religious contexts, that is, to a context that in the variety of its outcomes has a (positive or negative) relationship with Biblical culture? This peculiar context seems to be suggested by our documentation, which either offers literary texts characterized by these religious orientations, or, at a documentary level, is linked to Christian monastic circles, less often to groups of faithful Manicheans, rarely to secular Christian families. However, we can assume that the situation we are today trying to describe is the product of a process of marginalization of pagan production that took place in the prehistory of Coptic textual transmission. We still need to ask: did the Hermetic texts attested in NH VI or some magical spells undergo a translation process within pagan or "traditional" settings before finding their way in Gnostic or Christian communities? [...] This process is theoretically possible (although it cannot be proven), but the papyrological documentation, though later than the first Coptic manuscripts, seems to point in the opposite direction. We are not allowed to think that examples of "pagan" Coptic documents have been systematically deleted from documentary archives (taking into account that documents written in Greek in the same years still attest to the vitality of traditional religions even between the III and IV Century. Therefore, the problem is linguistic).

The problem of the relationship between documentary archives and monasticism is still open to debate. Could the idea to make Coptic not only a tool of literary expression (*viz.* translation and creation of original texts) but also a tool of daily written communication be attributed to monasticism? This was the belief that prevailed among papyrologists until two or three decades ago. However, the discoveries made in Kellis, consisting of archives of families of Manichaean orientation, and the examination of another non-monastic archive (Kysis *ostraca*) suggest that the situation was much more nuanced. Monasticism was certainly one of the protagonists of the emerging of

Coptic already in the first half of the 4th century, but not the only one and probably not the original one.¹

It is a matter of fact that, at a certain point, Coptic became for the Church of Alexandria a fundamental vehicle of dissemination of its official documents—such as the festal letters—and for liturgical purposes. The problem was acutely felt when, from the second decade of the 3rd century, the bishopric of Alexandria began to spread the pattern of the monarchic episcopate in the various cities along the Nile Valley and in the oases. We can attribute to that period the formation of personnel, probably belonging to Egyptian sociolinguistic milieus (but, perhaps in minority, even of Greek origin), available to Christian communities, with the function of orally translating from Greek into Egyptian at least biblical readings, preaching, and perhaps liturgy. This is an attractive and plausible idea, and it should not be ruled out even though there is no evidence that preaching was mainly done directly in Egyptian or that that was the occasion used by the preacher to provide the Egyptian translation of the biblical text read in Greek during the liturgical rite.

It remains to be clarified which groups were responsible for the emergence of Coptic and therefore for the translations from Greek. As is well known, this crucial point is still widely debated. Alberto Camplani's opinion is rather nuanced, but once more he clearly states that the traditional explanation according to which Coptic was adopted for a mere reason of nationalistic cultural appropriation is not satisfactory:

I have suggested in another paper that this transformation of transcription experiments into a literary language useful for cultural and daily communication was experienced in a cultural milieu with two roots: (1) intellectual circles, both Greek and Egyptians who, while writing in Greek, had already discussed the problem of translating and interpreting the culture of the country in Greek language and Greek categories of thought; (2) a social class of Egyptian language, possibly the heir to the circles just mentioned, which, assuming a social significance, had an interest in having at its disposal a prestigious language that, with its full acceptance of Greek vocabulary, was consciously manifesting the irreversibility of the process of Hellenisation of culture and public life. In other words, Coptic would have appeared not as a nationalistic awakening of an Egyptian substratum but as an expression of the growing socio-cultural vitality of a class of Egyptian language completely open to Greek culture (in different degrees depending on the socio-cultural environments in which it was articulated). Such an emergence of Coptic would have met with religious phenomena practicing proselytism in the Nile Valley, which had the interest in converting the new emerging classes.²

¹ Free paraphrases of some passages of Alberto Camplani's essay.

² Free paraphrase of a passage of Alberto Camplani's essay.

The most original contribution of Camplani's article, however, is the comparison between the process of translation from Greek into Coptic and that of the translations from Latin into Greek during the first centuries of the Roman Empire, in order to better understand the complex phenomena that are behind the choice of translating texts from one language into another.

Despite the fact that the proposed comparison deals with a highly educated and very elitist cultural group—which is not (always) the case of the groups of Late Antique Egypt, which is at home with Greek and Coptic—Camplani's arguments provide new and interesting elements to be added to the well-known theories elaborated, among others, by Tito Orlandi, Enzo Lucchesi, and Stephen Emmel.

Summarizing his thesis, we can say that, differently both from 1) the hypothesis of those scholars who deem Coptic translations as a way of cultural appropriation of the Greek literary heritage done for people who could read the same texts in Greek, and from 2) the traditional thesis—recently defended with new arguments by Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott—according to whom Coptic translations were done for Coptophones unable to understand texts in their original Greek language, Camplani maintains that Coptic translations were done for a plurality of purposes, varying according to text typology. These can be distinguished as follows: a) some translations, especially messages and prescriptions of the Church or the monastic hierarchy, were compiled for people who had difficult relations to the Greek language, either due to their ignorance or because of their psychological distance from it, as the language of the high classes; b) other translations, such as the translations of the Bible, were done for religious motifs, without taking into account the comprehensibility of the final product; c) lastly, some other translations were created either as a kind of appropriation of texts in a language which was perceived as a social and regional identifier of a new élite, or as an exercise in cultural transformation of texts, according to the real meaning of the word *vertere*.

In my article, I have tried to demonstrate that the same caution should be used also in evaluating the Coptic literary production and its literary genres, lying outside of traditional classifications and long-lasting preconceptions. Making use of the few but important clues at our disposal, I have tried to reconstruct the multiform cultural profile of the educated people of Late Antique Egypt, by identifying the place that classical literature held, but also survivals of pharaonic Egyptian literary genres and themes:

Despite the undeniable fact that Coptic Egypt produced a literature that, with very few exceptions, was Christian, above all in its early production there is a sporadic reemergence of the 'classical' tradition, although sometimes unconscious and invariably re-

visited in the new Christian perspective, above all in its early production there is a sporadic reemergence of 'classical' tradition, although sometimes unconscious and invariably revisited in the new Christian perspective.

In fact, in dealing with Coptic literature one should not make the mistake of using the manuscript funds of the White Monastery and the Monastery of the Archangel Michael in Hamuli, Fayyūm (9th-10th/11th centuries) as a magnifying glass to interpret the whole literary development in the Coptic language. Such a distortion would fail to take into account the dramatic changes that Christian Egypt underwent in its first millennium. ... The 4th century, for instance, was characterized by an extreme variety of ideological orientations destined to influence the early production of Coptic literature, but also by a drastic selection of forms and literary genres, probably due to the opinion that some texts—romances, poetry, philosophical treatises, and technical literature—could remain in Greek, at least for the moment. If the Nag Hammadi codices may be connected to a monastic milieu—at least according to the theories of some scholars—this is certainly not the case of the Manichean codices from Kellis, which without doubt were found in an archaeologically well documented sectarian context.

It is a fact that even of the famous library of Shenoute we do not know anything about the Late Antique period:

What did the library of Shenoute contain exactly? What was the extent and makeup of the White Monastery library in the 4th-5th centuries? Did it comprise only Christian texts or also 'classical'/'pagan' literature, albeit reinterpreted in a Christian perspective? Where did Shenoute and his successors obtain the codices used as models for the translations? Were they a temporary loan from other monastic or private book collections or did they already belong to the library? And what happened to these ancient codices (4th/5th-7th centuries)? Did they deteriorate to the point of requiring complete replacement by new (parchment) codices? Was this gradual replacement the cause of a text selection, which led to the progressive disappearance of possible remnants of 'classical' literature, if this was originally present in the library?

Intuitive answers to these questions may come from other book collections of early Egyptian Christianity.

I strongly believe that 'libraries' that are normally evaluated by scholars as eccentric bibliological and textual phenomena compared to the 'normal' book production of Late Antique Christian Egypt—such as the Bodmer Papyri—are instead representative of a complex cultural situation and in all likelihood reflect what was a widespread phenomenon typical of monastic libraries, with the White Monastery included. We should not forget that only from the 6th century monasteries became the main (and almost exclusive?) cultural centres and, therefore, centres of production and copying, of Christian Egypt.

If the Bodmer Papyri constituted a real library, however, albeit a library formed by the merging of several older originally independent libraries, it is plausible to reverse the perspective of the analysis and to speculate that also other Egyptian book collections

might have had more or less the same combination of languages, works, and genres, the early White Monastery library included.

Only from the 6th century in fact, as a reaction to the post-Chalcedonian controversies and the consequent co-presence in Egypt of two *episkopoi*—one Melkite and one ‘Monophysite’—, monasteries become the main—and progressively almost exclusive—cultural centres of Christian Egypt, their religious and cultural choices influencing the literature that was to be produced from then onwards. At that time, the «Chalcedonian church had, for over a century, been actively backed by the imperial power structure, often forcing the non-Chalcedonian hierarchy to leave the city centres and retreat to monasteries from where they managed their communities».

Before that phase, however, the influence of the schools located in the ‘towns’ must still have been strong even on the education of a monk. There are tenuous but not ignorable traces that lead into this direction.

Alessandro Bausi’s essay allows us to follow what remains of the Christian Egyptian culture as subsequently transmitted by the Coptic tradition, following the traces of what was inherited by the Ethiopic manuscript tradition. We therefore learn that, unlike Egypt, where not only was Coptic never a dominant language, but it was also quickly substituted by Arabic,

Christian Ethiopia maintained always during its history its own language. The impact of the Coptic-Arabic literature in Ethiopia was strong, but it was a literary phenomenon and took place through the merging of different layers depending from different linguistics models (*Vorlagen*), both at a textual level, obviously involving linguistic aspects; and at a manuscript level, with the juxtaposition of materials of different origin and the creation of new types of manuscripts. In fact, this happened without any real substitution of a language with another, being already Gə‘əz not a spoken, but a literary language.

If the question concerning the translations in Coptic Egypt is therefore that of determining the nature of the Greek-Egyptian (Coptic) contact, which developed into a Coptic-Arabic one later on, in Ethiopia we have evidence of direct translations from Greek into Gə‘əz, at a time when Greek had already been for quite a long time (several centuries, if we trust the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* that Greek was mastered already in the first century CE) an established language of prestige, used in royal inscriptions as well as for legends of coins destined to international circulation.

Another extremely striking aspect emphasized by Alessandro Bausi is the different modality with which literary texts are transmitted within Egyptian and Ethiopic manuscript cultures. Whereas the first (the Coptic tradition) was much more selective—it is enough to mention here how many literary works were ‘abandoned’ or completely re-shaped in the crucial passage from papyrus codices to parchment codices, because they were not considered any longer representative of the Coptic identity—, the second (the Ethiopic tradition) was more conservative:

The coming of a new wave of translations carried out upon different models in medieval times, however, had also its consequences upon Gəʻəz. While in the Coptic tradition the linguistic passage determined a sort of massive filter that occasioned a substantial refurbishing of the literary tradition, this was not the case in the Ethiopian literary tradition, where, for texts already translated in the earlier Aksumite period, the process was at times more capillary, at the level of slighter linguistic revision, or at times radical, with the consequence of adopting new translations which completely replaced the existing ones, yet substantially within the same language.

Moreover, in Ethiopia there seem to be no traces of an original literary production in Greek language and, what is more important, there is no evidence for direct translation from Coptic into Gəʻəz. This means that the Coptic literary tradition has reached the Ethiopic cultural centres through Arabic:

In comparison with Coptic Christianity, it is clearly evident that aside from the production of royal inscriptions, which remain the only original Aksumite texts attested by contemporary artefacts known to date, there is absolutely no evidence of any literary activity in Ethiopia consisting in the original production of Greek works. Greek models were definitely used, but there is no evidence of a parallel local production.

... we can also conclude that there is not at present any convincing evidence for any Gəʻəz translation based directly on a Coptic text.

This state of affairs, however, should not discourage the effort to better clarify the cultural continuity from Late Antique—but, I would say, also Roman—Egypt and Mediaeval Ethiopia. In fact, as Alessandro Bausi stresses:

... an extremely promising field of research appears to be the study of the presence of Ethiopians in Egypt as the most likely way of understanding how translations from Arabic—or even Coptic?—into Gəʻəz were executed. The evidence that has recently emerged confirms that at a previously undocumented early stage the presence of Ethiopian monks in Egyptian monasteries could not have been disjoined from the carrying out of a specific literary activity.

At the end of this sort of ‘dialogue at a distance’, which has widely taken into account the international debate active in the different disciplines involved in the four articles—from linguistics to history of religions, from Egyptology to Coptic studies, and from the history of Early Christianity to archaeology and philology—we hope to have at least contributed to highlighting the several aspects that deserve to be explored at greater length and in depth in the future and, at the same time, to have attenuated some theories that are too often taken for granted.