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THE PRONUNCIATION OF COPTIC

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THE pronunciation of Coptic is, in the words of Stern¹ "streitig und schwankend". This has been felt to be unfortunate, if only for philological reasons: one cannot discuss sound-changes without supposing certain sounds.

But with the study of Greek papyri another reason has appeared for knowing more about the pronunciation of Coptic: The phonetic values of Greek letters used for writing Coptic were probably the same as the phonetic values of these letters when used by Copts for writing Greek. A bilingual population usually has but one set of sounds. Greek letters were taken over with their local Egyptian values.

From the beginning of Coptic scholarship the sounds, and particularly certain sounds, of that language have been discussed extensively, in grammars, in text publications, and in special articles. But the writers usually are unacquainted with their predecessors; and the results are usually inconclusive.

Stern based his system upon what he heard at Thebes. It is essentially that of his predecessors, Kircher, Petraeus, and Tuki; and Stern suspects it of being strongly influenced by Arabic. He made good use of the previous work of Lepsius.²

In 1891, eleven years later, de Rochemonteix³ published a very important article which, if taken to heart, would have prevented the publication of several later articles by different writers on Coptic sounds.

Prince⁴ in 1902 attempted to show that genuine dialectic traditions survive in modern Egypt. His careful records from various localities are interesting and valuable; but his article shows, I think, only that the modern tradition is extremely confused.

The second edition of Steindorff⁵ shows no advance upon Stern.

¹ *Koptische Grammatik*, 1880, pp. 16 ff.

² *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 1867.

³ *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris*, 1891.

⁴ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1902.

⁵ *Koptische Grammatik*, 1904.

It deals with letters rather than sounds. Incidentally and quite unintentionally it shows by contradiction that European pronunciation is really Boheiric forced upon Sahidic.

Mallon⁶ lacks phonetic objectivity, and adds nothing to the solution of the problem.

Sobhy⁷ in 1915 conducted an investigation similar to that of Prince, and based upon the same theory; and like Prince he shows only that the modern tradition is extremely confused. What little evidence there is to the contrary had already been presented by de Rochemonteix⁸.

An admirable summation of his predecessors, and some advance, was made by Chassinat in 1921.⁹

Sobhy,⁹ writing again in 1926, fails to bring any order out of the confusion of his facts.

Crum's painstaking notes on dialectic variations within non-literary documents from the Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes¹⁰ furnish new material which has not yet been analyzed. Superficially there is great confusion of sounds; but closer study undoubtedly will show that each dialect is guilty of certain confusions only.

Till,¹¹ writing in 1928, realizes that traditional pronunciation is at best merely Boheiric: not Sahidic or Achmimic. He does not attempt, however, to establish the actual phonetic values of Coptic letters; he establishes rather the historical values,¹² quite a different thing. But Till makes a remarkable observation which he refers to certain still unpublished investigations of Junker: "If one compares the development of the gutturals and the dentals in the Coptic dialects, one sees that the Upper Egyptian dialects have kept the distinction between gutturals and dentals among the palatalized sounds, yet have dropped the distinction between voiced and voiceless. But Boheiric follows the opposite principle, dis-

⁶ *Grammaire Copte*, 1907.

⁷ *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 1915.

⁸ *Mémoires . . . de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire*, 1921.

⁹ *New Coptic Texts from the Monastery of Saint Macarius* by H. G. E. White, 1926.

¹⁰ *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes* by Winlock and Crum, 1926.

¹¹ *Achmimisch-Koptische Grammatik*, 1928.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

tinguishing between voiced and voiceless, though not between guttural and dental".¹³

A year later, 1929, the present writer, in ignorance of this statement of Till, published an article on the evolution of velar, palatal, and dental stops in Coptic.¹⁴ That article presented a theory of the evolution of these sounds from Old Egyptian, the most important part of which is the fact (already said to have been observed by Junker): "The outstanding feature of Boheiric is confusion between palatalized velars and palatals; of Sahidic, confusion between voiced and voiceless".

Not all the literature cited by Chassinat has been accessible to me.

For the pronunciation of Sahidic Coptic a number of things have become fairly well established: 1. The native tradition is uncertain, self-contradictory, often inherently improbable, and certainly arabized. Even with the same individual, letters are given various values. The elaborate vowel system of Coptic is reduced to the three cardinal vowels of Arabic; and these are relatively unimportant, depending upon neighboring consonants, as they do in Arabic. The only characteristically Coptic elements preserved are precisely those of colloquial Arabic: the glottal stop and the palatal stops. 2. The native tradition is Boheiric, does not show the influence of Middle Egyptian or Upper Egyptian dialects, and is inapplicable to Sahidic. 3. Modern Greek pronunciation is not properly applicable to Coptic without some investigation. Erasmian Greek pronunciation is perhaps not directly applicable to anything.

We cannot tell how the seven vowels were pronounced. Evidently each had a different sound; and **h** was not the same as **i** when Coptic was first written down, for these are never interchanged in Coptic words. Nothing can be said of the consonants **z a m n p c w q b z**; except that **z** in Sahidic was very weak, to judge by its frequent omission or misplacement. The **λ m n p** often serve in Sahidic as vowels, if we may suppose the superlinear stroke to indicate a syllabic nucleus. Of course **z t t** are merely digraphs. There remain then only eleven, **β γ Δ Θ κ π τ φ χ ξ δ**, whose values may be inferred by their behavior.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴ *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Oct., 1929.

In both Sahidic and Boheiric the characters $\chi\phi\theta$ are at times employed as digraphs for $\kappa\tau$ $\pi\tau$ $\tau\tau$. From this we know that they still had their most ancient Greek values, *k*, *p* and *t* followed by an *h*. These are the ordinary *k*, *p* and *t* sounds heard in English strong syllables.¹⁵

In Boheiric $\chi\phi\theta$ arise out of $\kappa\pi\tau$ in strong syllables. This confirms the conclusion that they are *k*, *p* and *t* aspirated (followed by *h*), the ordinary English *k*, *p* and *t* of strong syllables. Furthermore, it shows that $\kappa\pi\tau$ represent *k*, *p* and *t* unaspirated (not followed by *h*), the English *k*, *p* and *t* of weak syllables,¹⁵ the *mediae* commonly heard in French and in southern German, something half-way between voiced and voiceless.

In Boheiric δ arises out of χ in strong syllables. This shows that δ is the aspirated and χ the unaspirated form of one and the same sound. That sound is in Boheiric a palatal stop which has arisen out of either a dental or a velar.

In Sahidic $\chi\phi\theta$ never arise out of $\kappa\pi\tau$ in strong syllables. There are no aspirated stops. $\kappa\pi\tau$ may therefore represent *k*, *p* and *t* unaspirated (not followed by *h*), as they do in Boheiric. But Sahidic, unlike Boheiric, employs $\kappa\pi\tau$ in strong as well as in weak syllables.

In Sahidic δ never arises out of χ in strong syllables. There are no aspirated stops. $\chi\delta$ may therefore represent two unaspirated stops. But, since there would not be two characters unless there were two different sounds, and since the difference is not one of aspiration, the difference must be organic. χ is in Sahidic a palatalized stop which has arisen out of a dental, and δ a palatalized stop which has arisen out of a velar.

Γ interchanges with κ in Greek words quite commonly, in Coptic words less commonly. Γ stands for κ (suffix of second person singular masculine) after \mathbf{N} , when subject quite regularly, when object very rarely.¹⁶ Since Coptic had aspirated and unaspirated voiceless stops, but no voiced stops, Γ could find no employment in Coptic except as another symbol for κ . Its employment in Greek words was therefore a matter of indifference, and in Coptic words a matter of convention.

¹⁵ See Jones, *English Phonetics*, 1914, §§ 112-114, 124-126.

¹⁶ See Stern, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

ϸ interchanges with κ in both Greek and Coptic words in Sahidic. This is easily explained as due to the local dialect of the scribe of a particular manuscript. His dialect palatalizes all *k* sounds.

Α interchanges with τ in Greek words quite commonly, in Coptic words very rarely. Since Coptic had aspirated and unaspirated voiceless stops, but no voiced stops, Α could find no employment in Coptic except as another symbol for τ. Its employment in Greek words was therefore a matter of indifference, and in Coptic words something to be avoided. Α did not have the value of a fricative, as in modern Greek.

Β interchanges with ϸ in Coptic words quite frequently, in Greek words never. Β interchanges with οϣ in Coptic words rarely. Β never interchanges with π. This shows that Β was probably a bi-labial fricative, often weakly voiced, rarely becoming relaxed into *u* / *w*, but never a *b*.

Coptic-Arabic correspondences on the whole confirm these conclusions, but at the same time show that the native modern tradition is confused. The following list is not exhaustive:

π is invariably ب. But Arabic has no *p*.

τ † are د

Α is د except when influenced by Modern Greek.

τ is however ط or ض because both are unaspirated.

κ is ق because unaspirated.

κ is ج because ج in Cairo is like *g* in *go*.

κ is ك because inadvertently aspirated.

Γ is غ perhaps under influence of Modern Greek.

χ is ك because aspirated.

χ is خ because it has developed into a velar fricative.

χ is ش because it has developed into a palatal or dental fricative, perhaps before front vowels.

ϸ is ت or ث because both stand for ordinary aspirated *t* in vulgar Arabic.

Β is ف because it has become voiceless.

Β is و because it has become relaxed.

ϕ is ف because it has developed into a bi-labial fricative.

ϑ is ف.

Βϕϑ become ب (at the end of a syllable?)

Β is strongly influenced by other sounds, and sometimes disappears.

Χ is ج.

ϛ is generally ش because its Boheiric value has developed into a dental fricative under Arabic influence.