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LE CAIRE
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GREEK LOAN WORDS IN COPTIC

BY

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(IN RELIGION ABBE PACHOMIUS AL-MOHABATI)

What invariably attracts the attention of the reader of a Coptic text, especially if it is written in the Ṣa‘ā’dic dialect, is the very liberal use which is made of Greek loan words, of which so few, indeed, are to be found in the Ancient Egyptian language. These Greek loan words occur everywhere in Coptic literature, be it Biblical, liturgical, theological, or non-literary, i.e. legal documents and personal letters. Though nouns and verbs naturally predominate, the Greek loan words may come from any other part of speech except pronouns.

So extensive is this use of Greek loan words in Coptic that, in the past, certain scholars have been inclined to express their doubts as to whether Coptic was ever really a colloquial language and not merely a literary dialect [2]. As a matter of fact, it is just the contrary, for it is now generally recognized that Coptic is the direct heir to the spoken form of the Ancient Egyptian Language. All living languages have a tendency to borrow convenient terms from other languages, some to

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[1] This study forms part of a thesis which I presented to the University of Manchester for a Ph. D. Degree. I take this opportunity to express once again my great indebtedness to Prof. Dr. W. C. Till who undertook to supervise my work. His invaluable advice and constructive criticism were of very great assistance to me in my research work.

[2] In his article 'Pitris Sophia and the Coptic Language', F. C. Burkitt remarked: 'I am raising the question whether in the full sense of the word, it ever was alive ....... I do think that it was artificial, that it was the language of the school and not of the people ....... It seems to me a literary dialect elaborated by a society whose members learned to read and write after having more or less cut themselves off from the world', cf. J.T.S., vol. xxxvii, pp. 148, 153, 157. Also S. Gasdeck in B.Z., xxx, p. 224 ff.
a greater, others to a lesser extent. For example, in the colloquial Arabic of Egypt loan words from foreign languages are very numerous. This tendency to borrowing is likewise noticeable in European languages, one of the latest additions being the Russian word «Sputnik».

If the Greek loan words in Coptic retain more or less their original form, this is largely due to the fact that Coptic uses the Greek alphabet. In spite of this, however, there are numerous instances of vowel changes in these loan words which, where not due to mere carelessness on the part of the scribe, may be accounted for if the word was taken over from speech rather than from writing.

With regard to the extent of this borrowing of Greek loan words in Coptic, LeFort estimated the number of such words at more than nine hundred in the Śa'īdīc New Testament (1), and at more than fifty in the Rule of St. Pachomius (2). In the writings of St. Shenouti their number is estimated at more than fifty, and in the Instructions of St. Pachomius (3) there are seven hundred and sixty-six Greek words in nine hundred and fifty lines, which makes one Greek word per line and a quarter. Gaselee gives the number of Greek words in the Śa'īdīc version of the Nicene Creed at not less than fifteen, excluding proper names (4). In the Śa'īdīc version of the Ἀποφθεγματα Πατριας there are, according to Hopfinger, four hundred and forty-four Greek loan words: two hundred and fifty-five verbs, thirty-seven adjectives, nineteen adverbs, ninety-five particles, five prepositions and thirty-three conjuncts (5).

In the Śa'īdīc text of the Questions of Theodore Arn. van Lantschoot lists two hundred and sixty-five Greek words (6), and in the Bohairic text of the Rite of Consecration of the Patriarch of Alexandria O.H.E. K.H.S.-Burmeister gives the number of Greek loan words at three hundred and twenty-five (7).

Several reasons may be advanced as to why so many Greek words passed into the spoken language of Egypt. In the first place, we must remember that Egypt was to a certain extent a bilingual country, where Greek and Egyptian were spoken side by side. Who can imagine the status of the Egyptian language without being influenced by Greek? (8)

For a period of some eleven centuries, i.e. from the IVth century B.C. to the VIIIth century A.D., Greek was the language of the rulers, government officials and magistrates. It was likewise the language of official decrees and legislation. It was used in the courts of justice and in administrative business and communications during the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods. Even after the Arab Conquest of Egypt, Greek continued for a time to be the official language of the government in its administrative capacity. The Aphrodito Greek Papyri provide good evidence of the state of affairs of the city of Aphroditopolis in the VIIIth century A.D. It is only with the Abbassides in the Xth century A.D. that Arabic began to replace Greek and to become the predominating language in government administration (9).

In the second place, it should be recalled that Greek was the language of schools and of scholars in the various centres of higher culture, as, for example, Alexandria, Naucratis, Ptolemais, etc. As Greek was widely used in Egypt by the educated classes, scholars naturally wrote their works in this language. Even Manetho the priest, an Egyptian by birth, Charchmen and others used Greek so as to attract as large a circle of readers

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(2) L. Th. LeFort, ‘La règle de S. Pacha’me’ in Pachomiana Latina, Louvain, 1932, pp. 155-162.
(3) E. A. W. Bier, Coptic Apocrypha, 1913, pp. 146-176.
(9) A. Malloz, ‘Copte’ in Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne, t. III (2), col. 2820.
as possible\textsuperscript{[1]}. At this period, it must have been the ambition of the Egyptian student to learn Greek so as to share in Hellenistic culture.

In the third place, Greek was not restricted to the educated Egyptians only, since, for several centuries, Greeks and Egyptians had mixed together in the towns and the country, had intermarried, and had shared together in the social life of the country.

In consequence of this, we find Greek words or Latin words in Greek dress borrowed from all spheres of life. Among official titles we have the following: ἀπεσταπτόντος, ἀργον, αὐγουστάς, διοικής, διακόθος, ἀκαθάρτωρ, ἀπακροχ, ἀπειρότης, ἄγαμος, καταγ. κόμης, κυκλιονάριος, μελέτωρ, πάγιοιος, πολιτικόνων, πραξιστός, περικόπιος, περιοικάς, περιπτώσεις, στράτης, στρατιά, σώματος, τρίβωνας. Among military terms we have such words as: λεγέω ‘legion’, πανοπλία ‘panoply’, στόλομος ‘war’, πολεμίζω ‘war’, στόλος ‘town’, σάλπιγξ ‘trumpet’, στράτη ‘band’. The law-courts and legal affairs are represented by such terms as: βία ‘triumphal’, ἁγών ‘royalty’, ἐξονέλα ‘authority’, ἐρμαντόριον ‘whipping post’, κρατὸς ‘judge’, λόγος ‘sacred law’, μαραθνός ‘witness’, ὁμολογία ‘declaration’, σφιχτός ‘salvage’, ὑπογραφοῖς ‘to sign’.

Then we have the names of weights and measures, such as: δόρας, δίπλωμα, κοινώνιον, κοινός, κύριος, λέξης, ἄργος, ἄργος; of coins: νόμισμα, ἀποστάσιον, συναίσθησις, τράχαιμον; of taxes: ἀνάρισμα, θέσμος, ἀγγελία, ἀργαλεία, τέλος; and, finally, words connected with the gymnasion: ἀγών ‘strife’, ἀθλιτή ‘athlete’, βραχεῖον ‘prize’, ἄρος ‘course’, ‘race’, etc. Some words were adopted from the Greek because they referred to some natural phenomenon which was foreign to Egyptian life\textsuperscript{[2]}, such as: κρατάλλος ‘ioin’, χείραρχος ‘hand’, χιόν ‘snow’, etc.

Other Greek words referred to animals or objects which were known to the Egyptians only through the Greeks or their language, e.g. ἀλέκτωρ ‘cock’, ἄλεξ ‘bear’, λαμπά ‘lamp-stand’, μαρμάριον ‘marble’, σάββα ‘shab’, 'plate', τραπέζα ‘table’, πάντα ‘torches’, λιθο ‘reservoir, bowl’, χλαμύς ‘mantle’.

Many religious terms in Greek entered the Egyptian language through the Jewish Diaspora in Egypt. It was precisely for the Jewish community in Egypt that the Septuagint or Greek Version of the Old Testament was made in the 3rd century B.C. Such religious words would certainly have been used in theological and philosophical discussions between Jews and Egyptians, and, in this way, they would have entered the spoken language of Egypt. Furthermore, when the Old Testament (Septuagint) came to be considered in Christian Egypt as an integral part of the Holy Scriptures, the borrowing of such religious terms would naturally have increased. Among such terms we have, for example: δαγκέλλος ‘angel’, ἀνάμνεσις ‘memory’, ἁγιασμός ‘calm’, ὅρας ‘commandment’, ἀναφέρθει ‘sacrifice’, οἰκονομία ‘allusion’, καταπέτασμα ‘veil’, κυρήτον ‘ark’, κομματία ‘shroud’, ἱματία ‘sack’, κορεβία ‘the sacred treasury’, κορεβία ‘law’, παράδοσις ‘tradition’, προφετεία ‘elders’, ‘member of the Jewish Sanhedrin’, ἀπει ‘my master’, ἀπει ‘our master’, and others.

With the establishment of Christianity in Egypt, Greek loan words became very numerous, and this was natural seeing that the Holy Scriptures and the Church Services were, to commence with, in Greek only\textsuperscript{[3]}. Furthermore, the doctrines and practices of the Christian Church were attacked by the pagan philosophers and thinkers, and, in their turn, the Christian theologians wrote to defend their tenets and to prove the superiority of Christianity over paganism, and their apologists were written in Greek. In order to explain Christian doctrines concerning the Blessed Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, the resurrection of the body and other problems which were raised later on respecting the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, the Non-beginning of the Son, the Nature of Christ, such terms as: τριάς, ὀσία, ὑποσίας, ἄνωσις, κόσμος.
tendency towards purism made its appearance\(^{(1)}\). This tendency is particularly remarked in the Psalms, where, as La Croze and Woide have pointed out\(^{(2)}\), we find some psalms written in pure Coptic without the addition of any Greek loan words. Indeed, the psalms often prefer the native word, even if the Greek equivalent is used in other parts of the Old Testament. This purism is also to be remarked in the Bohairic Old and New Testaments which clearly show a preference for Coptic words rather than Greek loan words\(^{(3)}\). Instances of this process of purism are so numerous that a comparison of the Bohairic and Sahidic Versions would fill many pages. It will suffice to give a few examples of Greek words which, although used in the Sahidic New Testament, are always rendered in the Bohairic Version by their Coptic equivalents\(^{(4)}\).

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(1) *in micr.* 'to deny' > (āl)ΑΡΧΗ (S), ΧΩΔ (B); άρχασι 'to begin' > ΑΡΧΗ, ΑΡΧΧΟΛΟΙ (S), ΧΩΔΕΣ, ΧΩΔΙ (B); βαπτίζειν 'to baptize' > ΒΑΠΤΙΖΗΣ (S), ΟΜΙΣ (B); βαπτίσιμον 'baptism' > ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΟΣ (S), ΟΜΙΣ (B); εἴπερ 'to make glad' > ΕΥΦΡΑΝ (S), ΕΥΜΟΣ, ΕΥΠΟΡΙ (B); καρπός 'fruit' > ΚΑΡΠΟΣ (S), ΟΥΤΑΣ (B); κόσμον 'to adorn' > ΚΟΣΜΟΣ (S), ΤΟΥ (B); λυπησία 'to grieve' > ΛΥΠΗΣΙ (S), ΣΚΛΗΡΗ (and var.); ιόν 'infection' > ΙΟΝ (S), ΙΩΝ (B); πηγή 'source' > ΠΗΓΗ (S), ΝΟΥΜΙ (B); ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ 'to crucify'

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(1) *e.g.* ΠΡΟΧΟς ΕΠΙΧΟΥ (τε) 'Spirit of God', (Mémoires de la Mission archéologique française au Caire, 4, p. 743, 12 S.).

(2) In addition to ζωομένης (ζωομένης) of Hebrew origin.


(1) *e.g.* in PMich. 136 (19th cent.), Kropp A and B (19th-19th cent.), the gloss of Isaiah in the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri (middle of the 19th cent.), the Greek-Coptic glossary on Hosea and Amos, the semi-Akhmimic fragment, the
That many Greek words had thus become naturalized and assimilated to the body of the Coptic language is evident from the following examples:

1° In texts translated from Greek, some Greek words are replaced by other naturalized Greek words, e.g., ἄγνωστος > γιαγιά (Ib. VII, 3. 5.); ἀνέθεμα > ανυμοσ (II Pet. II, 7; III, 17. 7.); ἄδειος > άλικος (Mr. XXVIII, 4. 15.); ἄημι > κατοπ (Ios XIII, 3 A.); ηλεημος > οιομοιος (Ps. LXXV, 12. 12.); καταδιακόνιος > λοικς (Ps. LVIII, 26. 12.); αλικς (Ps. XXXII, 3. 3.); μελε > μοσις (Ac. XIV, 18; XVII, 7. 8. 16. S.B.); Rom. V, 7. 7B.; I Pet. IV. 18. S.) ; ἐπαργάς > λακακιν (Ih. XIII, 5. SB.); σπειρωταιμος > καρίονομα (Ps. CXXXIV, 4. B.); ακομία > γνηγιαγιας (Ps. LVII, 22. B.); ἄρπος > γυναικοφίνα (Ac. II, 45. S.B.).

2° Sometimes, a Greek word was explained by another Greek word which was more familiar, e.g., μελε > μοσις (Judges XIV, 8. S. (= ἐκ αὐτῶν τοῦ λέγωνος) 'the carcass or the body of the lion'.

3° The number of Greek words in a text translated from a Greek original is usually less than that in a text written originally in Coptic. The reason for this is that the translator from the Greek knew Greek and Coptic, and he had the tendency to purism (9), while the Coptic writer who was ignorant of Greek, was unconscious of the foreign origin of the Greek words he used.

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4° Greek words loaned in Coptic were treated on the same level as Coptic words. Hybrid formations were constructed from a Greek word together with a Coptic element. κατὰ and ἡπά were used in the pronominal form like Coptic prepositions. Some Greek substantives took a Coptic plural ending.

5° Such Coptic forms of Greek words as deviate from the standard Greek form and spelling, are an indication that such words had become thoroughly naturalized, and, consequently, their orthography was according to the current Coptic pronunciation. All this clearly goes to prove that the loaned Greek words in Coptic are not due merely to the whim of the translators of the Coptic Old and New Testaments, or an indication that these were too lazy to find the Coptic equivalent of the Greek word, or who doubted the sufficiency of the Coptic word to translate accurately the meaning implied in the Greek word in the Holy Scriptures.

Christian works, it should be noted, are not the only writings which adopted Greek loan words (1), for other schools and sects such as the Manichaeans and the Gnostics, used many Greek loan words in their literature. Indeed, the borrowing of Greek words had started centuries before the Holy Scriptures were translated into Coptic. This was the reason why the Coptic translators used such words as had already become part of the Coptic vocabulary. As we have pointed out already, the Coptic translators, especially those of the Bohairic Version of the Holy Scriptures, favoured rather a Coptic word than a Greek one, but, nevertheless, they did use the Greek loan word, when it was familiar. It is true that Greek loan words were very rare, if not almost non-existent, in the Demotic writings of the Ptolemaic period (2), but this does not mean that Greek words were not in use in everyday conversation. It simply indicates that they had not yet been allowed to appear in the written language, according to the old Egyptian tradition. Such an attitude has always been the same in every language towards foreign words used in the vulgar tongue before they were admitted to literature.

In conclusion, I should like to mention what may be called the psychological factor in the adoption of Greek loan words in Coptic. Thus, a number of Greek words were taken over into Coptic not because their native equivalents failed to convey the right meaning, but simply because the writer preferred a word which may have sounded nicer to his ear, or because he did not wish to use a common-place expression, or simply in order to avoid repeating a word, when he had to use the same expression in a subsequent passage. The Greek loan word would, in this case, have served as a synonym with the Coptic one (3). The following are examples of this type of Greek loan word: σωθήσεως 'to help' = ἁτομέπτας ἐκατόμι (F); ἱερός 'to hope' = ἱερός, ἱερός, ἱερός, ἱερός, ἱερός, ἱερός, ἱερός, 'to repent' = μετανοείν, 'to regard' = ᾶτι, 'to love' = ἱνάσκω, or 'to bow to' = ἱνάσκω ἤ; ἱερός, 'frankness', 'openness' = οὐράς ἱερός; νεώθερος 'to try', 'test' = ἕως etc.

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(2) P. E. Kahle, Theologische Literaturzeitung, LXXIX, 1954, Nr. 7/8, col. 484.

(3) W. E. Crum, A Coptic Dictionary, s.v.