

## The Birth Date of The Coptic Script

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I tried to contact Dr. Gessman so as to ask permission to copy and post this fine essay. However, I was not able to locate him. He was born in 1916, so perhaps he no longer walks amongst us. I hope that I will not have to remove this copy!

This is a very sound essay, several statements made by Dr. Gessman may need revising, but his overall linguistic argument is quite sound. Coptic (be it Sahidic or Bohairic or any other of the dialects) is simple ancient Egyptian as it evolved over time. Instead of Hieroglyphics, the language moved to Hieratic, then Demotic, then began using Greek characters with some added/needed glyphs/phonemes.

The change from one script to another was gradual, overlapping. It is not unreasonable to view the origins of the Coptic script as stemming from the second century BC! In fact we do know that in the second century BC, that "the Nubian kinglet" Urganaphor, while visiting in Abydos, wrote a graffito—in the Egyptian language—but in Greek characters<sup>1</sup>.  
That is fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Posener, George. *A Dictionary of Egyptian Civilization*. London. Methuen and Co., 1959. Page 52.

The term "Coptic" (a derivation from the Arabic 'qibt' = "Egypt", derived in turn from Greek 'Αἴγυπτος') is customarily applied to a language and to a script. By 'Coptic language' we understand the latest stage of evolution of the native language of ancient Egypt as appearing, since the later part of the second century of our era, in the mostly translational literature of the Egyptian Christian Church. By 'Coptic script' or 'Coptic alphabet' we mean the writing system in which this literature was transcribed. This system is based on the Greek alphabet in its contemporary "uncial" style with inclusion of six (in the Bohairic dialect, seven) letters from the demotic script for sounds with no equivalent in Greek. (Demotic is the preceding latest development of native Egyptian written from the ancient hieroglyphics.)

It is the virtually unanimous contention, based on incontestable documentary evidence, of both linguistic and literary specialists and experts in the history of writing that the beginning of the Coptic script must be placed late in the second, or early in the third, century of our era. Typical examples are statements of Sir Alan Gardiner who defines Coptic as:

the old Egyptian language in its latest developments, AS WRITTEN IN THE COPTIC SCRIPT, from about THE THIRD CENTURY A.D. ONWARDS...<sup>1</sup>

or of Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, who says,

The [Coptic] dialect dates from THE SECOND CENTURY OF OUR ERA, and the literature written in it is chiefly Christian. Curiously enough, Coptic is written with the letters of the Greek alphabet, to which were added six characters...;<sup>2</sup>

or among students of the history of writing, David Diringer says, in keeping with facts, but implying a very late birth date of the Coptic script,

The earliest Coptic documents and inscriptions may be attributed to the fourth, perhaps even to the third century A.D....;<sup>3</sup>

and Čeněk Loukotka states that

...[egyptští křesťané] asi ke konci 2. nebo na začátku 3. stol. po. Kr. zavedly pro svou řeč novou abecedu, zvanou koptickou. (The Egyptian Christians about the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. introduced for their language A NEW ALPHABET known as Coptic.)<sup>4</sup>

A rather lonely dissenter from the chorus of expert voices is Hans Jensen; though, on page 187 of his work,<sup>5</sup> he places, according to documentary evidence, the earliest use of the Coptic alphabet in the second and third centuries of our era, in an earlier passage of the same work he senses the truth by saying:

Da auch die demotische, vor allem wegen der mangelhaften Bezeichnung der Vokale, immer noch eine verhältnismäßig unvollkommene Schrift war, so ist es kein Wunder, dass man bereits im 2. Jahrhundert v. chr. anfang, die ägyptische Sprache mit griechischen Buchstaben zu schreiben. (As also Demotic, especially on account of the lacking denotation of vowels, was still a relatively imperfect writing system, one must not be astonished that people began, AS EARLY AS THE SECOND CENTURY B.C., to write the Egyptian language with Greek characters.)<sup>6</sup>

While Jensen, for this use of Greek characters, does not use the term 'Coptic script', the matter is one of semantics. As we cannot obviously term this hypothetical script 'demotic', we have the choice of coining a new term for it or simply consider it as 'Early Coptic'. There is no need to define the Coptic script as the use of Greek uncial characters for writing the Egyptian language; we can well define it simply as the use of Greek characters, with the addition of a few demotic ones, for writing Egyptian (after all, the Romans also developed, parallel to the Greeks, an uncial style and yet we do not refuse to give the pre-uncial Roman characters the name of 'Roman' (or 'Latin') script). Once the use of the Greek alphabet in Egypt had

become established, the evolution of style went along with the Greek prototype.

It is regrettable that Jensen does not give us his reasons for placing the emergence of the Coptic script as early as he does in the absence of documentary evidence; or, if he got the idea from elsewhere, that he does not indicate his source. In any case, he is undoubtedly right in placing the origin of the Coptic script in the pre-Christian era. He errs, however, we think, in naming that late a date. The origin of the script must go back at least to the beginning of the third century if not the time of Alexander. This seems to be a daring assumption as not a shred of documentary evidence can be cited in its support. But let us remember that in case of Coptic script we are obviously in the same boat as with the ancient hieroglyphics: the earliest inscriptions display a highly perfect and sophisticated writing system that absolutely implies a long evolution — yet no documentary evidence whatsoever has yet been found to prove the existence of earlier stages — but that is nothing but bad luck. The evidence for the early birth date of the Coptic script is of a linguistic nature and it is absolutely compelling.

Before discussing the linguistic evidence, however, it is necessary to review the principles by which borrowed scripts are adapted by the borrowers. Though, of course, in this area there is nothing comparable to the regularity of phonetic laws, a comparison of borrowings shows a number of virtually universal tendencies, mostly based on simple logic.<sup>7</sup> The principles in question are these:

(1) The graphemes of the source alphabet representing identical or closely similar phonemes of the borrowing language are retained by the latter with the same phonemic value. Examples are found in comparing the bulk of the graphemes of Canaanite: Archaic Greek: Doric Greek: Etruscan and Archaic Latin, Byzantine Greek: Cyrillic, Latin: Anglo-Saxon, etc.

(2) Graphemes of the source alphabet corresponding to none of the phonemes of the borrowing language are either discarded as superfluous (*e.g.*, Greek ‘B’, ‘Δ’, ‘O’ in later Etruscan; Latin ‘K’, ‘Q’, ‘Y’, ‘Z’ in Irish; etc.) or used as graphic variants with or without rationale (*e.g.*, Lat. ‘C’/‘K’ in Anglo-Saxon, Greek ‘O’/‘Ω’ in Cyrillic [eccles. style], Canaan. ‘Ç’ [çade]/‘S’ [sin] in Arch. Greek; etc.). Often ‘superfluous’ graphemes are put to some other use: Canaan. ‘ ’ ’ (‘áleph), ‘h’ (hê), ‘y’ (yôd), ‘ ’ ’ (‘ayin) became Greek vowels (‘A’, ‘E’, ‘I’, ‘O’); ‘S’ (sâmek) became ‘X’ (ksî), and

‘T’ (tēt), ‘TH’ (thēta); ‘Q’ was eventually relegated to the role of a number-letter ( 90 ). Similarly, the Western Greek letters ‘PH’ ( Φ ), ‘TH’ ( Θ ), ‘KH’ ( Ψ ) became number letters (for 1,000, 100, and 50 respectively) in Archaic Latin writing and were later changed into the familiar ‘M’, ‘C’, and ‘L’.

(3) If the borrowing language contained phonemes foreign to the language furnishing the source alphabet (so that the latter contained no graphemes for them), and superfluous letters of the latter could not, or were not chosen to, be used, or were unavailable, various methods could be resorted to in order to represent such phonemes, among others:

(a) polysemic use of available letters ( *e.g.*, Greek and Latin long and short vowels written by the same letters [note that Greek η and ω are relatively late additions]); (b) use of polygraphs, *i.e.*, combination of letters (*e.g.*, ‘FH’ for /f/ in Arch. Latin, ‘VV’ for /w/ in Anglo-Saxon); (c) use of diacritic marks (*e.g.*, ‘ċ’, ‘p̄’ for /x/, / φ / in Irish, ‘f’, ‘v’ for /e/, /o/ in Oscan); (d) loans from other alphabets (*e.g.*, A.–Sax. ‘ƿ’ from Runic, Old Slav. ‘š’, (ω), ‘č’ (ⵛ) from Aramaic Square ‘šīn), ‘č’ (çādē), Etruscan ‘f’ (8) from Lydian; (e) free invention of characters (*e.g.*, ‘ñ’ (𐌶) in Lydian, ‘ě/ä’ (ѣ) in Cyrillic).

With these principles in mind, we shall now compare the Coptic alphabet with its source, the Classical Greek alphabet — for it was obviously the Classical alphabet, not any of the older Eastern forms nor the Western form with “X” = /ks/ and “H” = /h/, on which Coptic writing is based. It is important, for our purpose to note that, while the spelling of Greek words did not change significantly between the 5th century B.C.E. and the 3rd century C.E., rather substantial phonetic/phonemic changes took place in the language. The rough dating (with an accuracy of about half a century) of each of these changes is possible on the basis of spelling mistakes in datable inscriptions and papyri. It is these changes hidden behind an unchanging orthography that force us to revise the birth date of the Coptic script.

In recording their language by means of the Greek alphabet, the Egyptians adhered to principles (1), 3, a) and (3, d). Principle (2) was not applicable as all the 24 Greek letters corresponded to Egyptian phonemes or phoneme clusters either exactly or approximately, so that none had to be discarded or put to extraneous use; the letters Δ, Γ and Ζ, however, occurred only in loan words from Greek

(of which there was a veritable flood). The following usages are of utmost importance.

I. THE GREEK ASPIRATES. Greek originally possessed three (voiceless) aspirate occlusives which in the Classical alphabet were denoted by the letters 'Φ', 'Θ', and 'Χ' (= /p<sup>h</sup>/, /t<sup>h</sup>/, and /k<sup>h</sup>/ respectively). Eventually, though probably not simultaneously, and at different times in different dialects, they had changed into the constrictives (fricatives) /f/, /θ/, and /x/. The process was completed at the end of the 3rd. c. B.C.E. with the last change /k<sup>h</sup>/ > /x/<sup>8</sup>. In the Christian Era, there was nowhere a trace of the old aspirates.

Yet the Egyptians used the three aspirate-occlusive letters to denote (in the absence of such phonemes in their own language) their phoneme clusters /p-h/, /t-h/, /k-h/. Thus, nouns beginning with Eg. /h/, when receiving the prefixed definitizer (/p-/ for masc., /t-/ for fem.) were most often spelled with Greek 'phi' and 'thēta': 'ρε' /he/ "manner" 'ρηε' for 'τρηε' "the manner"; 'εωβ' /hob/ "the thing" - 'φωβ' for 'πωβ' "the thing". Conversely, in loan words from Greek, initial 'φ' or 'θ' was misunderstood as the Eg. definitizer plus initial /h-/, and thus, e.g. 'θάλασσα' /t<sup>h</sup>alassa/, misunderstood as /t-halassa/, forms the Eg. plural 'N̄'αλασσα'/an-halassa/, ('N̄') being the plural definitizer for both genders.

It goes without saying that this use of the Greek aspirate occlusives, and especially the misunderstanding in cases such as 'thalassa', is only thinkable, if the letters in question actually denoted aspirate occlusives. Constrictives could never have been misunderstood in this way. A further circumstance pointing in the same direction is the borrowing of the letter 'ϕ' = /f/ (ultimately going back to the hieroglyph 'ϕ') from the demotic script. Had the Greek phi been pronounced as /f/, as it later actually was, it could have been, and certainly would have been used to denote the Eg. /f/ and a separate letter would have been superfluous. The only possible conclusion from this usage of the Greek phi, thēta and khī by the Egyptians is that the beginning of the use of the Greek alphabet for writing Egyptian antedates the phonetic change of the aspirate occlusives into voiceless constrictives, i.e., it must have begun before about 300 B.C.E. at the latest.

II. THE USE OF THE GREEK 'H' (ETA). Another usage points exactly in the same direction: that of the Greek letter 'H' (η) to denote the Egyptian lone /ē/. We know that the pronunciation of this letter as /i/ (thus falling together with the original long 'i' and the

older diphthong ‘ei’), the so called ‘itacism’, developed relatively late, though at different times in different area. For much of mainland Greece itacism seems to have become the rule during the fourth century B.C.E. (with the notable exception of Attica).<sup>9</sup> The Greek Koine as spoken in the Middle East seems to have held up on the change for some time. The Septuagint, written in Alexandria in the reign of Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.E.), still consistently transcribes the Hebrew /ē/ with ‘H’, *cf.* ‘Ēliyyāhū (אֱלִיָּהוּ) - Gk. ‘Ēliās (‘Ηλίας), *etc.* Only about 150 B.C.E. do misspellings of ‘ι’ for ‘η’ begin to appear in the papyri.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, though this criterion does not necessitate as high a date as the one the aspirate occlusives demand, it places the use of the Greek script for writing Egyptian at 150 B.C.E. at the latest, and thus squarely in the pre-Christian era.

**III. THE GREEK VOICED-STOP LETTER.** Greek possessed three voiced stops: a bilabial ‘β’, an apico-dental ‘δ’, and a dorsal (palatal or velar ‘γ’. Toward the end of the pre-Christian era, they had changed into voiced constrictives — a process beginning in the fourth century B.C.E. and not proceeding simultaneously. In the Greek spoken in Egypt, judging by misspellings, the first stop to change into a constrictive was the ‘γ’.<sup>11</sup> This is relatively easy to trace because alternative spelling possibilities existed, *e.g.*, ‘ι’ between front vowels or suppression of the letter. The dating of the other two changes is much more difficult because even after the change no alternative spellings existed (except the confusion of ‘β’ and ‘F’ in dialects where the latter had been preserved — but this hardly affects Egypt).

The Egyptians used ‘B’ both in Greek borrowed words (where it may have represented [b], *i.e.*, the bilabial constrictive, already) as well as for representing their native /b/ (while their native /w/ was represented, evidently in imitation of the Greek custom of denoting a foreign /w/, by the digraph ‘ου’ which also represented the Greek and Egyptian vowel /u/). The ‘δ’, now denoting [ð], occurred only in loans from Greek, as Egyptian had lost this phoneme in the New Kingdom already. Interesting is the treatment of ‘γ’. Except a few instances where the letter is used in native words as an alternative spelling for ‘κ’ (a rather surprising and inexplicable practice), it is limited to loan words from Greek while the (Neo-) Egyptian /g/ is denoted by the letter ‘Ϝ’, taken from the demotic script and eventually going back to the hieroglyph ‘𓆎’. This indicates that the phonetic value of the Greek ‘γ’ was sufficiently different from the

Egyptian value of /g/ to justify the introduction of a demotic letter for the latter.

The utilization of the Greek voiced-stop letters in this way provides a terminus a quo for the Egyptian use of the Greek alphabet; it would have begun no earlier than the early fourth century before our era.

IV. *THE USE OF MONOPHTHONGIZED 'EI'*. Another usage furnishing us with a terminus a quo is the Egyptian use of 'EI' for long /i/, based on the fact that the Greek 'ει' (use for both the middle-high monophthong [ē] and the diphthong [ei]) generally changed to [ī] in the fourth century B.C.E. Misspellings in Graeco-Egyptian papyri become frequent in the third century.<sup>12</sup> The separate denotation of [ī] and [ĩ] was evidently encouraged by the fact that the contemporary Greek spelling and pronunciation provided an opportunity to do so ('ι' : 'ει') and the distinction of ε : η and ο : ω was already built into the Greek alphabet. The terminus a quo provided by the criterium could be around 350 B.C.E.

V. *THE SPIRITUS ASPER*. Of less proving force but still a valid consideration in connection with the other criteria is the Egyptian writing of 'ϑ' (which replaces the spiritus asper which was not regularly written at that time) in loan words from Greek. Under the assumption — which is not compelling but highly logical and likely — that the influx of loan words from Greek into Egyptian and the Egyptians' acquaintance with Greek writing occurred simultaneously, the writing of /h/ in such words, e.g. /hoplon/, Gr. ὄπλον → Coptic ροπλον, etc., proves that the spiritus asper, i.e., the /h/ sound, was still heard at that time. Psilosis, i.e., the 'dropping of the aitches' can be traced in the papyri since the third century B.C.E. from spellings such as, και' εκαστον for καϑ' εκαστον, etc.<sup>13</sup> The introduction of the Greek alphabet, according to this criterion, would also antedate the third century.

We may then say in conclusion that the use of the Greek alphabet for writing Egyptian, in other words, the beginnings of the Coptic script, must be placed between 350 and 300 B.C.E. There is no difficulty in assuming a date even before Alexander's conquest. A very powerful and influential island of Greek settlement had existed in the Delta since the days of Amasis (569-525): the city of Naucratis; there is thus no necessity to assume the presence of a pervading Greek cultural influence in Egypt only after the coming of Alexander. After all, the Greek colonial cities in southern Italy and



southern Gaul likewise caused the adaptation of Greek letters for the writing of Oscan and Celtic respectively.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sir Alan Gardiner EGYPTIAN GRAMMAR, 3d ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE 9th impr. (New York: Dover Publ., 1966), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> D. Diringer, THE ALPHABET, 3d. ed. (Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), Vol. I, p. 369.

<sup>4</sup> C. Loukotka, VVOJ PISMA ("Evolution of Writing"), (Prague: Orbis, 1946), p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jensen, GESCHICHTE DER SCHRIF (Hannover: Heinz Lafaire, 1925).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

<sup>7</sup> We are speaking of BORROWED alphabets here. The principles outlined below are not applicable to instances where an alphabet has only been inspired by another. Such a relation exists between Egyptian and Meroitic, Greek, and Armenian, or Punic and Numidic.

<sup>8</sup> W. Brandenstein, GRIECHISCHE SPRACHWISSENSCHAFT (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1954), Vol, I, pp. 42 - 44.

<sup>9</sup> Brandenstein, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> A. Debrunner, GESCHICHTE DER GRIECHISCHEN SPRACHE (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1954), vol. II, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Debrunner, *op. cit.* , p. 103; and E. Schwyzler, GRIECHISCHE GRAMMATIK (München, 1939), Vol. I, pp. 191 - 194.

<sup>13</sup> Debrunner, *op. cit.*, p. 108.