

Language Policy and the Administrative Framework of Early Islamic Egypt

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Abstract: *Documents from the first century of Islamic rule in Egypt provide a detailed view of administrative practices, especially concerning management of the taxation system. Early scholarship on the nature of post-conquest rule emphasized continuity with the previous Byzantine regime, attributing it primarily to the inexperience of the new rulers. In contrast, recent scholarship has stressed that Arabic documents appear in Egypt from soon after the conquest and that Arabic was used increasingly over this century, as part of the Arabization of the administration. These two interpretations present only a partial image of a more complicated system, as they overlook the role of Coptic. For the first time, Coptic was employed as an official administrative language, used for a range of document-types connected with taxation. This article challenges previous scholarship on language use within Egypt's administration, arguing that a third language policy existed in which indigenous languages were incorporated into the imperial machinery when it was pragmatic to do so.*

Keywords: Coptic, Arabic, Greek, Islamic Empire, Administration

Introduction

“Always language was the companion of empire.” So wrote Antonio de Nebrija in the introduction to his 1492 Grammar of the Castilian Language.¹ The dissemination of the language of conquerors has been a feature of imperial histories since antiquity. It is part of the history of Greek, Latin, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, French, Russian, and English, among others. The following study examines the use of language in early imperial policies by focusing on the situation in Egypt following the Arab conquest of 642 CE. The previous millennium was witness to a changing linguistic landscape in Egypt. While Egyptian remained the spoken language of the majority of the country's population, Greek and Latin were introduced following the conquests of Alexander and Octavian respectively.² By the seventh century, Coptic and Greek were the two dominant languages used in Egypt, and the issue at hand is their relationship with the language of Egypt's new rulers, Arabic. Specifically, this study focuses on the role of Coptic within the administration of post-conquest Egypt and what this use contributes to our knowledge of imperial language policy.

Assumption

The Arab conquest brought Egypt under the control of the fledgling Muslim empire. It took place only twenty years after the prophet Muḥammad's *hegira* (“flight”) from Mecca to Medina, and by the early eighth century, the empire spread from the new province of al-Andalus in the west (the Iberian Peninsula) to Sindh in the east (now southeast Pakistan). Within the empire, Egypt holds a particularly privileged position with respect to how many written sources survives: over 2,500 texts have been published for the century after the conquest.³ As a result, we are afforded a more detailed picture for the day-to-day running of this province than for any other.

Early scholarship on the nature of Arab rule in Egypt was largely negative. For Harold Bell, especially in his earlier studies, the Arabs adopted the pre-existing Byzantine framework as a result of their administrative inexperience:

“The Arabs, a people of relatively primitive organization and with no experience of empire, naturally took over much of the machinery of government which they found in the more advanced provinces which they conquered.” (Bell 1929, 279)

The opposition of “primitive” and “advanced” is especially marked, establishing a pejorative interpretation of the character of the Arab administration. Two decades later, Bell’s tone softened, losing the more polemic elements in his discourse, still highlighting their inexperience but acknowledging improvements that they did make:

“...the Arabs, a people unused to the management of an empire, adopted much of the administrative machinery which they found in the provinces acquired by them; we also know that they showed considerable skill in adapting this machinery to suit their own needs or, as in the rather excessive centralization introduced by them in Egypt, to avoid defects which had contributed to the Byzantine collapse.” (Bell 1945, 533)

For Egypt, the bulk of the available sources comes from the late seventh and eighth centuries, a period starting fifty years after the conquest. While Bell did not rely solely on Greek papyri, a large number of texts – including significant corpora – have now been published that were unavailable to him. His observations therefore reflect both trends in scholarship in the early twentieth century and the available dataset; nevertheless, these trends recurred in various studies until the end of the last century. For example, Fraser (1991, 189) stresses both that “the Arab authorities did little more than adapt the existing bureaucratic system to a more efficient standard of administration” and that Greek “remained the main vehicle of intercourse between governor and governed until the ninth century.”

Recently, Petra Sijpesteijn advanced a more positive interpretation of Arab rule. Sijpesteijn’s approach takes into consideration broader historical context, i.e., the needs of the new rulers not only in Egypt but elsewhere in the empire, and importantly acknowledges that the situation was not static but adapted to changing circumstances and intentions.

“Both continuity and change were part of the Muslim plan for Egypt after the conquest...The twin priorities were maintaining institutional stability while simultaneously aligning the system with Islamic precepts...For the first fifty years of their rule the most effective way to do this was to eschew involvement in the daily administration and work through local elites, exploiting their long-established prestige and networks of control. The goal was to diminish the conditions for conflict which might destabilize the Arab hold on the country until such time that the conquerors could exercise their rule openly and forcefully.” (Sijpesteijn 2007, 198)

It was not inexperience that led to the use of local institutions and personnel, but rather a recognition of the pragmatic benefits of this strategy. Under this new approach, two processes are key: the increasing use of Arabic in the administration (Arabization), and the replacement of local, Christian officials with Muslims (Islamization). Sijpesteijn’s framework reflects developments in the study of early Arab rule over the past century, as well as the increased body of textual evidence for the decades after the conquest.

However, while these processes importantly give credit to the new rulers and their intentional modifications of the administration of their provinces, they conceal the long nature of these processes, which see rapid increase only in the eighth century. In terms of language policy, Arabization also obscures other practices at play. Here, my intention is to challenge this current state of affairs to reflect the more complex use of language that existed in Egypt, especially in the late seventh and first half of the eighth century.

New Direction

The linguistic component of modern colonialism has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, highlighting the important function of language as an element of communication and control in colonial territories. For example, on the use of Shaba Swahili by the Belgian colonialists in Congo, Fabian (1986, 13–14) discusses the early adoption of the indigenous language across different spheres of use, and the domestication of Swahili for Western purposes: “it became a matter of policy and a subject of regulations (and sanctions) in the hierarchy of organizations...which carried out colonization.” Swahili was an important medium of communication – and control – both with and among the African labor force. As Mir (2006, 396) stresses, in a study on linguistic policy in nineteenth century India, “If language is an important arena of colonial power, then an examination of colonial language policy – that is, what languages colonial states adopt for administration – can help elucidate key aspects of colonialism.” While nineteenth and early twentieth century situations provide a different methodological framework to the seventh and eighth century material (e.g., a greater wealth of written evidence coupled with that of the spoken use of language), the same principle can be applied: how can we better understand the early Islamic Empire and its relationship with Egypt through an examination of the use of Coptic, as well as Greek, within the administration? In a broader context, can the situation within Egypt be contextualized within language use elsewhere in the Empire? Situating the use of Coptic within this framework introduces a new perspective and new direction of study into the examination of language use in early Islamic Egypt.

The Role of Coptic in Early Islamic Egypt

At the time of the conquest, Greek was the official language of law and administration in Egypt. Coptic – the last phase of the indigenous Egyptian language, written in a modified Greek alphabet – was used primarily for less formal, quotidian purposes, mainly letters, accounts, lists, receipts, etc. From the late sixth century, it also started to be used for drawing up legal documents (Fournet 2010; 2020, 162–171) and for the administration of private institutions, principally, monasteries.⁴ After the conquest, Coptic began to be used on a wider scale, albeit in a private context, for reasons that still remain to be elucidated; I will return to this point below. What happened for the first time under Arab rule is the adoption of Coptic as part of Egypt’s administration, the evidence for which is first attested at the end of the seventh century.⁵ During the century after the conquest, the situation was therefore one in which three languages were employed for administrative purposes: Arabic, the language of the new rulers; Greek, the language of the previous regime, as well as the first language of a considerable number of Egyptians; and Coptic, the language of the majority of the Nile’s inhabitants.⁶ Arabization does not account for the entirety of this state of affairs, which instead indicates an intentional use of local and indigenous languages.

While an obvious statement, it needs to be stressed that the following discussion relies on the available dataset to track changes in language use, and herein lies the principal methodological issue in tackling the question of language policy. Greek texts have always dominated papyrological studies, and while this trend is changing – with increasing focus on Coptic and Arabic papyri – it is difficult to determine the extent to which the current body of published texts is representative of the relative proportion of documents once circulating in Egypt in these three languages. Apart from the linguistic distribution of the evidence, some sites are certainly disproportionately represented in the scholarship. For example, the early eighth century archives from Aphrodito (Kom Isqaw), published for the most part in 1910 in the volume *P.Lond.* IV,⁷ provide our most detailed information about local administration and the relationship and interaction between the center and periphery.⁸ In contrast, texts from the more important center, Hermopolis (el-Ashmunein) that

cover a wider range of dates, have been published in a more piecemeal and incomplete fashion. Meanwhile, the minor village of Djeme (Medinet Habu) in western Thebes and its surrounding monastic communities are overrepresented. A further problem that has hindered research on this period is the lack of translation and commentary for much of this material.

Yet, despite these issues, enough evidence is available with which to identify patterns and developments in language use. The oldest Arabic documents from Egypt date to 643 CE, very soon after the conquest: a bilingual Arabic-Greek receipt from Heracleopolis dated to 25 April (*SB VI 9576*), and one from November (P.Berl.inv. P. 15002). It is possible that another document is even earlier: P.Vindob.A.P. 519 mentions year 20 of the Hegira.⁹ If this year also reflects the document's date, it would signify that Arabic was already being used for documentary purposes in Egypt during the conquest itself. Of particular note with these bilingual documents is that the Arabic is not simply a translation of the Greek, but conforms with its own linguistic and formulaic traditions (Sijpesteijn 2007, 193).

Including these three texts, 26 Arabic (or bilingual Arabic-Greek / Arabic-Coptic) documents are known from the sixty-year period between 640 to 700.¹⁰ Over the next fifty-years, until the start of the Abbasid caliphate (750), we see a sharp increase in the number of Arabic documents, with 199 known texts. Therefore, while the written evidence indicates the presence of a developed and organized administration at Fustāt from its earliest days (Tillier and Vanthieghem 2019), it is not until after the Second Fitna (Islamic Civil War) in 692 that the use of Arabic begins to accelerate.

The 690s are not only significant for the increase in the number of Arabic documents, but also because it is from this time that the first Coptic administrative texts appear. The earliest such dated Coptic texts are tax demands (*entagia*) from the Hermopolite nome. These demands are part of a heavily centralized bureaucracy concerning taxation and the management of other dues and services. Much of this machinery concerned the newly introduced poll tax, payable in gold and by all non-Muslim adult men (i.e., men over the age of 14¹¹). A number of other taxes were also collected (in gold and in kind), and other impositions included the naval duty and labor on building works in both Egypt and the caliphal center, Damascus.

Even though the Coptic *entagia* cannot be dated absolutely, the earliest certainly date either to the 690s or 700s on prosopographic grounds. The rest of this group, which amounts to almost thirty *entagia* in total, dates to the eighth century, but the lack of dates prevents the establishment of a relative – let alone precise – chronology of the corpus (on their dates, see Cromwell 2013). Together, these *entagia* do not form a homogenous group. Even demands from the same location exhibit variation, particularly formulaically, resulting from individual scribal practices. However, they do share several features: the use of the *bismillah*, the initial address, bilingual administrative practice (e.g., recording the amount of tax due in Coptic and Greek), and biscriptality (i.e., the use of visually distinct scripts for writing Coptic and Greek components). Overall, the Coptic *entagia* were produced using a common framework, indicating the transmission of scribal practices in this new documentary category – Coptic administrative texts – throughout Egypt. One of the striking features of these tax demands is the high proportion of Greek words and sections. In terms of the number of words in each language, one could describe these demands as bilingual. However, these demands should be understood as Coptic texts for the following reasons:

1. The main content of the document is in Coptic.
2. The use of Greek is entirely formulaic and consistent across the corpus of Coptic *entagia* (Cromwell 2013, 284–85); furthermore, the same elements, i.e., repetition

of the price and the date, occur in other categories of Coptic document, from tax receipts (Cromwell 2017, 100–102) to legal documents.

3. In bilingual Greek-Arabic *entagia* (see below), the same text is written in full in each language, rather than one single text that has Greek and Arabic sections.

These are Coptic documents that employ standard Greek administrative features, features that reflect the bilingual environment within which they were first produced. New document types do not develop in a vacuum. Rather, personnel with specific administrative training, as well as the ability to translate documentary practice from one language to another, are required. In this respect, it is notable that the earliest relevant Coptic texts are from Hermopolis, the seat of a pagarch and administrative center. The scribes working in this environment would have the technical and linguistic capability to create this new form of tax demand. Unfortunately, the scribes who wrote tax demands did not record their own names (only the name of the pagarch), meaning that it is not possible to identify the individuals pivotal in this development of Coptic.

This is not, however, to say that this new use of the autochthonous language is indicative of a Coptization of Egypt's administration. Its introduction was an innovation, but its use was restricted to the lowest rung of the administrative ladder. Once the tax-quota of each pagarchy and its villages had been determined, *entagia* were issued in the name of the governor in Fustāṭ to the collective inhabitants of each locality.¹² *Entagia* written at this highest level were never issued in Coptic, but in bilingual Arabic-Greek texts. The best-known examples of the latter are the group of demands dated 709/710 and issued by the governor Qurra b. Sharīk to Aphrodito (*Chr. Wilck* 256, *SB* I 5638, 5644–5654). In each document, the Arabic text is written first, followed by the Greek.

It is at the local level, from the pagarch to the individual taxpayer, that Coptic was used (alongside Greek, which continued to be utilized at this level). A linguistic hierarchy was therefore at play, with Arabic at the top and Coptic at the bottom. Greek, the language of the previous regime, could be used at both levels: its use along with Arabic reflects its continued prestige, as well as reflecting its long-standing role within the country. This situation is true until the end of the Umayyad caliphate in 750. After this time, the situation changes. In 752, the first Arabic tax demand was issued to an individual Christian tax-payer: *P. Cair. Arab.* III 169.¹³ The following year, the only known example of a bilingual Arabic-Coptic *entagion* was issued by the pagarch Hishām b. Ziyād to Johannes son of Isidoros of Bawit (*P. Clackson* 45). As with the Arabic-Greek demands, this text comprises an Arabic text followed by the Coptic text, with the latter adhering to the framework discussed above. This example on one hand epitomizes the important role of Coptic at a local level, but its use alongside Arabic is part of a later system that incorporates changes introduced by the Abbasids (on which, see the commentary to *P. Clackson* 45).

Taxation at a local level was also carried out in Greek and Coptic. The village Djeme (Medinet Habu) provides the best evidence for this practice. Approximately 500 tax receipts have been published from this village, dating from 710–730, and primarily for the poll tax. As with the tax demands, these receipts are written in Coptic, but framed by Greek elements – using exactly the same Greek phrases as in the *entagia*, with the exception of the address. Also as in the case of the demands, the receipts are not an entirely homogenous group, but exhibit a level of variation, which at Djeme can be attributed to chronological developments (Cromwell 2017, 102–7). While the overall construction of the Coptic tax demands and tax receipts are not the same, the key features are: the main content is in Coptic; Greek is used to repeat the amount of tax paid and the date. One major difference between the demands and the receipts is that the latter are signed by officials and the scribe who wrote them, whereas the demands are not (as mentioned above). The

reason for this difference is because the authority of the demands comes from the pagarch, in whose name they are issued, whereas the receipts are signed by local officials responsible for collecting the taxes, as a surety for the taxpayers and others involved in this stage in the tax system.

Finally, in direct connection with taxation, a small number of Coptic tax registers survive from Aphrodito: *P.Lond.* IV 1552–1563. These registers comprise two parts: an account in Greek of taxpayers, divided by locality (ἐποίκιον; *epoikion*), and the assent of the local officials, written in Coptic. The first two texts (1552 and 1553) are the most complete, and may have belonged to the same original register. In 1552, the names of forty taxpayers survive, while eight individuals altogether give their assent, confirming that no individual taxpayer has been assigned anything beyond their means, and no wealthy person has been alleviated from their due. In terms of their language use, the split between Greek accounts and Coptic text would suggest that these registers are bilingual compositions. However, the Greek sections conform with the type of administrative use of Greek within other Coptic texts: names with amounts of money. As a comparison, *P.Lond.* IV 1518 (also from Aphrodito) is a declaration concerning tax fugitives. The majority of the document is written in Coptic, apart from six lines of text written in Greek: a list of the families caught in other territories, including the number of individuals involved. A similar practice, from western Thebes, is found in *P.CLT* 3, a request written in Coptic to an official for a travel permit for three monks, whose descriptions are presented in Greek in list-form. In the wider context of language use, therefore, these registers are Coptic texts with Greek administrative components.¹⁴

Beyond their language composition, these registers indicate how Coptic was used in this administrative context. As noted, the account parts of the registers provide information for individual localities, consisting of villages and monasteries. The total amount of tax due per locality is stated, and this sum is divided between the listed individuals.¹⁵ This tax division is at the lowest level: following the distribution of taxes to each pagarchy, the amount was then distributed among the villages (*epoikia*), at which point it was assigned to individual taxpayers, according to what they could pay. Tax demands would then be issued to each individual. What we therefore see is Coptic used for all aspects of the management of taxes across the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy.

In addition to these administrative texts connected directly with the process of taxation, Coptic was used in other areas of written communication between Muslim officials and Egyptian-speaking residents of the Nile Valley, including letters and legal documents. While belonging to different textual categories, much of this material is connected by the topic of taxation, as the following examples demonstrate. In an undated eighth-century letter from a Muslim official, Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, to the Hermopolite village Titkooh, Ibrāhīm threatens violence should the villagers not pay their taxes (*P.Mich.Copt.* 15). Tax non-payment is also the topic of another Hermopolite letter, *P.Ryl.Copt.* 324. Following a report that the village headman had been embezzling the village’s taxes, the official Muḥammad b. NN wrote with recommended actions to recuperate the funds, including the potential appointment of a new headman. Both of these brief, succinct letters demonstrate that, despite all the paperwork, tax collection did not always run smoothly. Muslim officials appointed local officials to ensure their policies were carried out, and Coptic was used to inform communities about the decisions of senior Arab officials. Coptic could also be used to communicate with such senior officials. A legal document, *SB Kopt.* V 2221, again from Hermopolis and dated 731, records the overpayment of taxes. The representative of a northern district of the town, the priest Johannes son of Victor, overpaid their taxes by half a gold *holokottinos* (Greek *nomisma*). After the money was repaid to him, he had a declaration drawn up to record this fact. The declaration protects both Victor and the state treasury (represented here by

the Muslim pagarch Rašid) from any accusations of fraud. It was perfectly acceptable to write such an important document in Coptic.

Imperial Language Policy?

Coptic in early Islamic Egypt was employed for new purposes, in terms of both the range of document-types for which it was used and their topic. The question is whether this use of Coptic is indicative of an intentional – imperial – language policy by the new rulers, or if the prominence of Coptic in the seventh and eighth century is the result of other processes. During the sixth century, Coptic had already begun to be used for new purposes, moving beyond the world of letters to that of legal documents and judiciary procedures. Most recently, Fournet (2020) has explored this development and the reasons for it. One significant factor in the sixth century was the weakening of Byzantine state control in Egypt. Ruffini (2018) examines various aspects of this situation and the resulting devolution of various powers to the provinces, through his focus on Aphrodito, the site also of our earliest Coptic legal texts. Such weakening of central control also meant a “reduction in the pressure that it could exert on the population in terms of linguistic constraints in the domain of legal writing” (Fournet 2020, 96). By the time of the Arab conquest, Coptic had started to extend its reach into previously inaccessible domains. I do not believe, however, that the use of Coptic within the fiscal bureaucracy of early Islamic Egypt is a natural progression of this development. The status of Coptic was such that it could be adapted easily for new purposes, but its new roles did not come about by accident. Rather, the body of paperwork that survives reflects intentional decisions to employ Egypt’s indigenous language in this manner.

The uses of Coptic outlined above served a pragmatic function, extending the reach of the administration to the predominantly monolingual population of the Nile Valley. Employing Coptic in this environment, either alongside or instead of Greek, was surely also intended to increase the efficiency of the taxation system. The timing of this administrative change, together with the simultaneous increase in the use of Arabic, reflects the wider imperial situation. The Second Fitna has already been mentioned. Following his victory, the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik introduced major reforms, regarding administrative practices, coinage, and the taxing of subject populations (Robinson 2005). Increasing systematization in financial policies was essential, to bankroll the continuing expansion of the Muslim empire. The early eighth century witnessed further conquests, resulting in the geographic zenith of the empire. At the same time, major building works were also taking place, including the Dome of the Rock and, under ‘Abd al-Malik’s successor, al-Walīd I, the Great Mosque of Damascus. In Egypt, documents – including some written in Coptic – provide evidence for corvées for building works at Fustāṭ (Papaconstantinou 2010, 67–68).

Within this wider context, the adoption of Coptic in the offices of Muslim officials can be understood as part of a strategic expansion of the administration, to manage the collection of taxes and other dues. Coptic enabled greater reach to villages throughout Egypt’s hinterland, facilitating the dissemination of information and bureaucratic processes. In practice, these linguistic measures did not result directly in improved efficiency in tax management. As the letters mentioned above attest, issues with tax collection included payment in arrears and official corruption. These problems are especially well-documented in the Aphrodito archive. Dating mainly to 709/710, letters between the local pagarch, Basileios, and the governor, Qurra b. Sharīk, attest to widespread issues, revealing both local resistance and central inability to effectively enforce their fiscal policies; a situation discussed by Papaconstantinou (2015). As *P.Lond.* IV 1394.3–7 (dated 708/9) reveals: “We seem to have written to you many times concerning the collection of the public gold taxes of the seventh indiction, and to this day you have not roused yourself to attend to this matter nor yet sent anything at all, but have been disobedient and neglectful”. However, regardless of the

ultimate success of its use, the main point here is that Coptic was intentionally employed as a strategy of control by Egypt's new rulers.

However, can the decision to incorporate Coptic into the bureaucratic machinery be identified as part of a broader, intentional language policy? Is it even possible to talk about language policy at the imperial level? Egypt is unusual with respect to the sheer volume of material that survives, resulting in a privileged position in the study of Muslim rule of its provinces in the seventh and eighth centuries. The primary evidence from other regions is either considerably more limited or of a completely different type, and it becomes a question of whether we are comparing like with like. Nessana, in the Negev desert near the current Israeli-Egyptian border, has produced the largest body of papyri outside Egypt and seems to offer one parallel case. During the Byzantine period, the town functioned as the center of the province of Palestine III, a status that it maintained following the Arab conquest.¹⁶ Greek, Latin, Arabic, Nabataean, and Syriac all occur in the textual and epigraphic record from the town, but Greek and Arabic dominate the post-conquest sources. In the public documents, namely those recording taxation, the use of Greek and Arabic closely parallels their use in Egypt, including the issuing of bilingual Greek-Arabic *entagia*.¹⁷ There is no evidence, though, for the use of indigenous languages, with Greek continuing to fulfil its pre-conquest purpose, conveying “connotations of power and authority” (Stroumsa 2014: 148). But, this situation may only reflect towns of Nessana's status; we simply lack the material from the equivalent of a village such as Djeme that could reveal local practices.

Moving away from fiscal documents to money itself, inscriptions on coins from several parts of the empire provide indications of language use from areas from which textual sources do not survive. Coins from al-Andalus show a transition from the language of the conquered, Latin, to that of the conquerors, Arabic. Three distinct phases are identifiable: (1) Latin-only legends (711–716); (2) bilingual Arabic-Latin legends, with each language written on one side only (717–721); and, after 721, Arabic-only legends.¹⁸ How should this transition be understood? Are the initial Latin-only coins, which exhibit an inconsistency in mint-production, indicative of a post-conquest period of instability, during which time regulation of the mint was not a high priority (Bates 1992, 279–80)? Alternatively, is it possible to understand this use of Latin as an intentional policy to use local language and generate an air of continuity with the previous regime, even if the design of the coins themselves were different? Rather than simply being a reflection of initial chaos, the use of Latin in the Iberian Peninsula echoes the continued use of Greek in Egypt and Palestine, as markers of control and authority. In this light, the exploitation of the local language, Latin, can be interpreted not simply as convenient, but possibly as an intentional means of securing the success of the conquest.

Discussion

Do these brief examples from other provinces help shed light on the situation in Egypt regarding Coptic, as well as language-use across the empire? At Nessana, there is no evidence of indigenous languages being used for administrative purposes, with Greek being the only pre-conquest language used in this capacity. Elsewhere, it is clear that local languages continued to be used alongside Arabic, whether on coins as in al-Andalus or other document types (e.g., the continued use of Bactrian for legal purposes in Khurasan, a point beyond the scope of this discussion). In light of the available evidence concerning administrative documents, Coptic seems to hold a unique position in terms of how indigenous languages were employed by the Arab rulers. Therefore, rather than being indicative of imperial policy, the use of Coptic in early Islamic Egypt marks at the very least a strategic reaction to the local situation. As such, it is possible to describe

the roles of Arabic, Greek, *and* Coptic as part of an intentional language policy employed throughout Egypt's administrative framework.

Several factors explain why Coptic enjoyed this position. Practically, it was easy to adapt Greek administrative practice to Coptic. Not only had the two languages experienced over a millennium of contact, but Coptic was written using a modified Greek alphabet and included a large volume of Greek loanwords. While it had not served in an official capacity before the conquest, Coptic had fulfilled administrative functions in private contexts since the late sixth century. It was therefore a relatively straightforward measure to adapt Coptic for the range of document-types connected with taxation that we find from the 690s: registers, demands, and receipts. The dates of the Coptic *entagia* show a dispersal throughout the country starting with major centers (Hermopolis), to large villages / towns (Aphrodito), and finally to minor villages (Djeme); a progression discussed by Cromwell (2017, 175–77). Hermopolis was the perfect environment for the development of an official administrative application of Coptic, enabling it to enter the bureaucratic realm. Bilingual scribes within the pagarch's office in the late seventh century were essential in transmitting professional knowledge from one linguistic domain (Greek) to another (Coptic). Such bilingual individuals played a pivotal role elsewhere in the transmission of Greek scribal training (as well as, e.g., legal training) to Coptic. The best-known example in this respect is Dioscorus son of Apollo from sixth century Aphrodito, who worked as a lawyer and among whose large dossier are the earliest known Coptic legal documents (for which, see Fournet 2010; 2020, 162–164).¹⁹

It is not, however, only a case of writing in Coptic. The majority of the Coptic taxation paperwork shares features beyond language and formulae. Examination of the actual papyri reveals that *entagia* written in different offices throughout the Nile Valley and across a 20-to-30-year period were written in a similar paleographic style. Or, more accurately, the same two paleographic styles, as the Coptic and Greek elements are written in different scripts. The Coptic script is that of common, daily use in the early eighth century (a predominantly bilinear hand, often highly ligatured), while the Greek script is that used for administrative purposes from the late seventh century (a smaller, cursive quadrilinear hand with miniscule letter forms). These features, as discussed by Cromwell (2013, 285–87; 2017, 68–70), further support the argument for an intentional language policy in Egypt, in which Coptic is utilized and scribes are trained in the same current chancery practice. The document types and writing practices are together indicative of a highly centralized administrative system.

This language policy is, however, only relevant in the short term. Coptic as a cog within the administrative machine is only attested for a period of approximately 70-years, from the 690s to the 750s. For the rest of the eighth century and into the ninth century, Coptic continued to be used in a private capacity, but decreased in number until it stopped being used for non-literary purposes in the eleventh century (the best-known late corpus comes from Teshlot, near Hermopolis; for which see, most recently, Richter 2000). The decline in the use of Greek in Egypt was much more rapid. Its use for day-to-day purposes decreased during the seventh century, and, while it was used for official correspondence in the decades after the conquest,²⁰ by the eighth century its use was restricted to fiscal and administrative matters, primarily in conjunction with Arabic or Coptic (De Jong and Delattre 2015). In the century after the conquest, Greek continued to be an important vehicle for conveying authority and prestige, as well as a convenient tool for establishing continuity with the previous regime. Yet, throughout the country, its presence was increasingly absent. In contrast, Coptic increased in importance: it worked alongside Greek to manage fiscal policies in the Nile Valley and enjoyed its greatest peak for non-literary usages,

especially in terms of legal texts. This is not to say, however, that Coptic directly benefited from the decrease in the use of Greek – the reality of language use among Egypt’s population is more complex and requires further study. Nevertheless, for approximately a century, Coptic held a position that it had never previously experienced, and never would again.

Conclusion

After the eighth century, Coptic’s gradual decline stands against the rise in Arabic, both as a written and spoken language throughout Egypt, at all levels of society. This changing status of language is not particular to Egypt, and scholarship in the past two decades has addressed the changing position of various languages across the Empire. Wasserstein (2003) examines the question concerning why Arabic was able to attain such a dominant position when Greek did not, describing the relative situations of the two languages as ‘success’ (Arabic) and ‘failure’ (Greek). In response, Hoyland (2004) added Aramaic to the discussion, emphasizing that it, in contrast to Greek, remained, and therefore also ‘succeeded’. Papaconstantinou (2012) brought the discussion to Coptic, questioning why it did not enjoy the same ‘success’ as Aramaic. Ultimately, Papaconstantinou raises a number of points concerning the status of Coptic in the long term that are also relevant to the question of language policy in the post-conquest period. What is key is to recognize that the same factors are not in play across the provinces of the empire: political, economic, and religious situations all reflect local circumstances. Thus, while later developments resulted in the diminishment of Coptic as both a written and spoken language, its utilization in the late seventh and early eighth century as a third, official language of the administration reflects a perfect storm specific to Egypt.

The written sources from the first century of Arab rule in Egypt reveal a constantly transforming linguistic landscape. The prevailing situation is one of the gradual rise of Arabic – the language of the new rulers – against the decrease in status and use of that of the previous regime, Greek. The initial retention of Greek led early scholars to assume that the new rulers were not able to affect administrative change. However, more recent work reflects intentional decisions behind the use of the previous prestige language and its replacement by Arabic. However, one component of Egypt’s administration has heretofore been largely overlooked, mentioned typically only in passing: the situation with Coptic. Focus on either the use of Greek or the use of Arabic obscures a more complex policy in which Egypt’s indigenous language was employed – for the first time – in an official capacity. Tax demands issued in the names of pagarchs, from their offices, were written in Coptic, as were letters between officials and Egyptian villagers. Employing Coptic within the bureaucratic machinery extended the state’s reach, with the aim of disseminating fiscal policies and increasing administrative efficiency. In this respect, Egypt seems to be unique among the provinces of the Muslim empire, as far as can be determined from the surviving material. Even if the tax system in Egypt never operated as smoothly as its rulers may have wished, what is key is that the Egyptian evidence reveals an intentional language policy. It is not a case just of understanding how Greek and Arabic were used, but how Egypt’s indigenous language also played into the post-conquest framework. Its elevation within the administrative hierarchy was intentional, reflecting a policy of limited-Coptization that existed alongside Arabization.

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¹ Grammatica de la lengua castellana (originally published in Latin: Grammatica Antonii Nebrissensis). On de Nebrija's oft-cited proclamation, see the comments in Harrison (2014, 89–90).

² As a general overview of the multilingual environment of Egypt during Ptolemaic and Roman rule, see Torallas Tovar (2010). For the use of Latin in Egypt, see Adams (2003, 527–641). These were not, however, the only languages spoken in Egypt during these centuries; e.g., the textual material from Elephantine also includes Aramaic texts (see Porten 1996).

³ This number is derived from the papyrological database, Trismegistos, for texts from Egypt dated 640–750 (trismegistos.org; consulted 01.10.2019). Note that this material includes all non-literary document types, not just those concerning the administration, and some of it is broadly dated to the seventh or eighth century. However, while the resulting figure of ca. 2,500 texts may be slightly too high, the number still gives an indication of how much is available for study.

⁴ Sijpesteijn (2007, 192) refers to Coptic together with Greek as “the languages of the pre-Islamic administration”, while Sijpesteijn and Clackson, in their commentary to *P.Clackson* 45 note that Coptic in the pre-Islamic period was “most important in the administration at the village level.” There is very limited evidence of the use of Coptic in such a capacity.

⁵ There are rare examples of sixth century letters issued from representatives of the administration to villages (see Fournet 2020, 105–7), but there are no examples of the types of fiscal documents that I discuss here, i.e., tax demands, receipts, and registers.

⁶ I do not use language as a marker of ethnicity or identity; the interplay of languages in late antique Egypt is more complex than simply reflecting the ethnic backgrounds of its users. I use ‘Egyptian’ to refer to all residents of Egypt at the time of the conquest, regardless of whether they were Coptic or Greek speakers. In so doing, I hope to avoid any confusion concerning language use. Contrast, e.g., Bell (1951), the edition of a Greek requisitioning order for taxes in kind, in which he refers to the document as “addressed by a Copt to Copts”. The ‘Copt’ in question is the pagarch, Flavius Pettedios, and this situation should be described as a local Egyptian official writing in Greek.

⁷ All papyrological sigla conform with the Checklist of Editions, available at papyri.info/docs/checklist.

⁸ Another advantage of the Aphrodito archive is that the role of Arabic, Greek, and Coptic at this level can be examined; see Richter (2010).

⁹ On the earliest Arabic documents, see, e.g., Ragheb (2013).

¹⁰ These figures are taken from the Arabic Papyrology Database and do not include protocols, i.e., labels attached to the beginning of papyrus rolls (<https://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/project.jsp>).

¹¹ *P.Lond.Copt.* I 1079 A and B describe liable men as being from the age of 14. While it is not explicitly stated that the assessment is for the poll tax, and it could be for other impositions (Papaconstantinou 2010: 61–62), it is nevertheless likely that 14 marks the legal age at which boys were considered to be men.

¹² On this process, see, e.g., Morimoto (1981, 91–113).

¹³ See the emendations to the original text in the commentary to *P.Clackson* 45.

¹⁴ Perhaps some fragments of “Greek” tax accounts (i.e., names plus amounts of tax) actually belong to Coptic tax registers. Without the main text, it is impossible to determine whether such small pieces belong to Greek or Coptic registers.

¹⁵ See, e.g., *P.Lond.* IV 1553 verso 11–14, the account for the monastery of St Pinoutionos, in which the total tax allocation is divided between seven individuals.

¹⁶ Ruffini (2011) provides a convenient recent introduction to Nessana, particularly in the Byzantine period.

¹⁷ The *entagia* from Egypt and Palestine are remarkably similar, indicating a high degree of centralization in tax administration. Bell (1945, 535) explains this similarity by suggesting an otherwise unattested pre-conquest Byzantine parallel, probably from Palestine, without considering the possibility of Arab innovation in forms.

¹⁸ The province of Ifriqiya (North Africa) shows similar use of Latin and Arabic on its coins. For a succinct overview of the coinage of post-conquest Ifriqiya, see Fenwick (2020, 43–45). However, the coins from each province do differ in some respects (Bates 1992, 282), and such differences raise further questions about regional variation across the empire.

¹⁹ On Dioscorus, see, e.g., Fournet (1999; 2009) and MacCoull (1988).

²⁰ The most important archive of post-conquest correspondence comes from Edfu and dates to the 660s/670s. The Greek texts within the group were published in 1953 (*P.Apoll.*), but the Coptic documents are only now being prepared for publication. The Coptic texts within this archive may help further nuance the use of the language in the

early Islamic period; Boud'hors (2020) demonstrates how the Coptic documents are contributing to our existing knowledge of the corpus.