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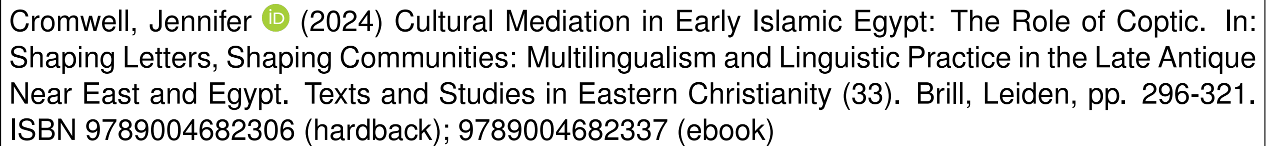

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CHAPTER 10

Cultural Mediation in Early Islamic Egypt: The Role of Coptic

Jennifer Cromwell

Abstract: This chapter explores the use of Coptic as a language of cultural mediation in early Islamic Egypt. Following the Arab conquest of Egypt, 639–642 CE, the linguistic and cultural landscape of Egypt changed, with the new rulers introducing their language, religion, and people to the country. Indications of how this transition was mediated are preserved in the surviving sources, especially textual, from the seventh and eighth centuries. In particular, it is notable how Coptic is used for communication with the new rulers, as well as in other domains, including its first use within the administrative framework of the country, where it existed alongside Arabic and Greek. This study proposes a new framework for understanding how Coptic was used in this period, that of cultural mediation, as one strategy for navigating the new political, social, and linguistic relationships created after the conquest.

Keywords: cultural mediation, Coptic, early Islamic Egypt, communication, administration, interpretation

The Arab invasion and conquest of Egypt between 639–642, led by the general ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, brought an end to Byzantine rule of the land and incorporated Egypt into the nascent early Islamic empire.[1] The conquest not only marked a political change, with the replacement of one foreign ruler with another, but the introduction of a new religion, Islam, and a new

[1] On the conquest of Egypt, see, for example, Philip Booth, "The Muslim Conquest of Egypt Reconsidered," in *Constructing the Seventh Century.* Travaux et mémoires 17, ed. Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2013), which also provides an overview of relevant scholarship.

language, Arabic. In contrast to Alexander's conquest of Egypt a millennium earlier, the Egyptians had very little previous contact and knowledge of their conquerors. By 332 BCE, when Alexander entered Egypt, Greeks had resided in Egypt for at least four centuries, highlighted by the establishment of Naukratis in the western Delta in the seventh century BCE.[2] However, the start of 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ' invasion in 639 took place only seventeen years after Muḥammad's flight (Hegira) to Medina in 622. For Egyptians, the new Arab rulers therefore represented an entirely new entity. How to mediate these new circumstances and relationships was an issue that both conquerors and conquered had to navigate.[3] In order to better understand this situation, this study introduces the framework of cultural mediation, with a particular focus on the role of Coptic – the indigenous Egyptian language – in the first century after the conquest.

1. Culture and Cultural Mediation

Before moving to the question of what constitutes cultural mediation, it is necessary to address what is intended by the terms involved. A single understanding of 'culture' may be difficult to produce, since cultures vary from one group to another. As John Barkai notes, "[c]ulture is both pervasive and largely invisible".[4] A useful definition is "the total accumulation of an identifiable group's beliefs, norms, activities, institutions, and communication patterns".[5] However, such an all-encompassing understanding can make it

[2] For Naukratis, see Astrid Moller, *Naukratis: Trade in Archaic Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[3] Maged S.A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London–New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 265 describes Egyptian society in the period from the conquest to the early ninth century as "a cultural mosaic delineated by linguistic, social, and religious boundaries".
[4] John Barkai, "What's a Cross-Cultural Mediator to Do? A Low-Context Solution for a High-Context Problem," *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 10 (2008), 45.
[5] Carley H. Dodd, *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), 36.

difficult to approach the topic, as it raises the quandary of where even to begin. The anthropologist Geert Hofstede identified four key aspects of culture:[6]

- Symbols: words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning recognized by those who share the culture.
- Heroes: persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized and serve as models for behaviour.
- Rituals: collective activities that are considered essential, including ways of greeting and paying respect to others, as well as social and religious ceremonies.
- Values: broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others.

These aspects can be used to describe and identify culture on a large scale, as pertaining to an ethnic group or a nation. There is no reason, though, why it cannot be used on a smaller scale, to describe a professional or age-defined group.[7] Hence, it is possible to refer to cultures based on gender, age, and profession; for example, scribal cultures or youth cultures. Not all members of a culture will necessarily share all cultural aspects, and some cultural groups may share aspects with other groups, facilitating the integration of new members. Conversely, groups that do not share certain cultural features will find integration more difficult.[8] When such situations arise, cultural mediation can help navigate the differences that arise.

Cultural mediation is a framework drawn primarily from the social sciences, where it is used in an increasing number of disciplines and fields. While it is distinct from "cultural

[6] The following definitions are taken from Geert Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival,* 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 7–9.
[7] Vladimir Žegarac, "Culture and Communication," in *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory,* 2nd ed., ed. Helen Spencer-Oatey (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 51.
[8] Žegarac, "Culture and Communication," 52. See also Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organization*, 18.

intermediation,"[9] there is no overall consensus about what cultural mediation entails, with an often bewildering array of terms being used to refer to the same phenomenon.[10] As a starting point, within translation studies, Franz Pöchhacker's framework distinguishes between (1) linguistic / cultural mediation, which is used synonymously with interpretation; (2) cognitive mediation, which entails the subjectivity of interpreters; and (3) contractual mediation, meaning the facilitation of communication, conflict management, and power relations.[11] Within Pöchhacker's framework, cultural mediation is a linguistic practice, while "contractual mediation" more closely aligns with the range of cultural aspects identified by Dodd, as noted above. Subsequent studies have problematised Pöchhacker's approach, particularly regarding the complex relationship between interpretation and cultural mediation, and the role within this of interpreters.[12] For the purposes of this study, and the first application of this concept to early Islamic Egypt, the question of interpretation and interpreters is problematic, due to the absence of evidence about the individuals involved in this process, as will be discussed below. Instead, I adopt a broad use of cultural mediation that includes Pöchhacker's contractual mediation and combines it with intercultural communication, that is "the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive

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[9] On cultural intermediation and intermediaries – individuals or groups who construct value of goods (including material products as well as services, ideas, and behaviours) – see Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews, "Are We All Cultural Intermediaries Now? An Introduction to Cultural Intermediaries in Context," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15/5 (2012), 551–562.

[10] For example, cultural brokers, language mediator, language/linguistic and cultural mediator, intercultural translator, intercultural mediator, social interpreter, and social translator. This list is taken from Caiwen Wang, "Interpreters = Cultural Mediators?" *TranslatoLogica: A Journal of Translation, Language, and Literature* 1 (2017), 94.

[11] Franz Pöchhacker, "Interpreting as Mediation," in *Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting: Definitions and Dilemmas*, ed. Carmen Valero-Garces and Anne Martin (Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008).

[12] For example, Claudio Baraldi, "An Interactional Perspective on Interpreting as Mediation," *Lingue Culture Mediazioni – Languages Cultures Mediation* 1 (2014), 17–36 and Wang, "Interpreters = Cultural Mediators?"

situation".[13] However, I also propose that the term should go beyond these categories to include zones of contact that are not characterised by language use and encompass the range of cultural aspects identified by Hofsteder. The study of pre-modern cultures necessitates such an approach, to enable the use of as much of the surviving evidence as possible.[14]

The available evidence from the first century of Islamic rule in Egypt includes: textual sources, both literary and non-literary, written in Arabic, Coptic, and Greek; material remains, comprising a range of moveable goods from, for example, domestic, religious, and funerary contexts; the art-historical record; and architectural remains. Together, these sources allow the description and analysis of different cultural contact zones: communication, administration, law, economic practices, belief systems, and religious and secular spaces. On occasion, the names of individuals involved in the mediation processes are known, but more often we can talk about mediators only in more vague and general terms. As the volume of scholarship on written sources exceeds that undertaken to date on non-written sources, this material provides the best starting point for a discussion of cultural mediation at this time. Before moving to the linguistic environment of Egypt and specific examples, a non-textual case serves to highlight how other evidence may be used to explore cultural contact zones, in particular a literal contact zone: the site of Babylon/al-Fusṭāṭ.

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[13] Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: Guildford, 1999), 16–17.

[14] In this move, I adapt the framework of cultural mediation in Paul Hjartarson and Tracy Kulba, "Introduction: 'Borne Across the World': Else Plötz (Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven), Felix Paul Greve (Frederick Philip Grove), and the Politics of Cultural Mediation," in *The Politics of Cultural Mediation: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Felix Paul Greve*, ed. Paul Hjartarson and Tracy Kulba (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), xxii, who use it "to facilitate and complicate analyses of cultural contact zones". Hjartarson and Kulba describe Plötz/Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven and Greve/Grove as "the subjects and objects of mediation in shifting social-institutional contexts" (xx), who "mediated themselves within and were mediated by different social-institutional contexts" (xxi). While referring to individuals in the early twentieth century, who migrated from Germany to the US and Canada, this framing of the movement between places and groups can be applied to other contexts too.

In 300 CE, the Roman emperor Diocletian built the fortress of Babylon around the harbour and Red Sea canal constructed by Trajan in the beginning of the second century, an area of Cairo today known as Old Cairo. The fortress formed a five-sided figure enclosing an area of approximately three hectares, on the western side of which were located two massive round towers standing on either side of the canal that flowed through the centre of the fortress. The form of these towers is unparalleled and must result from their defensive function at the mouth of the canal.[15] Following the conquest, Babylon became the site of the new capital, al-Fusṭāṭ. Egypt's new rulers made fundamental changes to the fortress, including the cutting of a new canal and filling of the original, as well as the removal of the northern wall to create more space for the rapidly growing new city. What buildings remained were adapted for other purposes, whether administrative, domestic, religious, or industrial. These transformations reflect Egypt's changing relationship with the external world, as well as how spaces become cultural contact zones. The new rulers adapted an existing space closely connected with the previous regime, while simultaneously relocating the capital from Alexandria and so away from the Mediterranean world. Power now shifted to the East, and al-Fusṭāṭ provided canal and land links towards the Red Sea. Such changes also necessitated significant administration. Texts in Greek and Coptic from the seventh and eighth centuries attest this point, as well as revealing other forms of cultural mediation.

2. The Linguistic Situation: Trilingual Egypt

For certain periods of history, including early Islamic Egypt, the volume of the surviving textual sources is such that they provide the primary – or perhaps the most obvious – means through

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[15] Peter Sheehan, *Babylon of Egypt: The Archaeology of Old Cairo and the Origins of the City,* revised ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015) provides a detailed overview of the history of the site, including its transformation from Babylon to al-Fusṭāṭ.

which culture can be accessed. As Maged Mikhail states, "[f]ew aspects of culture facilitate immediate access to identity and community, real or imagined, as promptly as language".[16] The trilingual environment of Egypt certainly offers a considerable volume of written sources with which to view different cultural groups. Immediately after the conquest, Arabic, the language of the new rulers, joined Greek (the language of the previous regime and a significant proportion of the population) and Coptic (the Egyptian language and that of the majority of the population).[17] Throughout the rest of the seventh and into the eighth century, Greek continued to be used alongside Arabic for official communication, that is, texts issued from the office of the governor in al-Fusṭāṭ and other officials throughout the land.[18] This period is additionally marked by the increasing use of Coptic in an official capacity, in ways it had never been employed before, especially in connection with the management of the new poll tax and other dues imposed upon the population.

Previously Coptic, the development of which was completed in the mid-third century,[19] was primarily used for what Jean-Luc Fournet refers to as "nonregulated epistolary

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[16] Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, 255.

[17] The earliest attested Arabic documents date to 643, the year 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). Another document, P.Vindob.A.P. 519, may be even earlier, as it mentions year 20 of the Hegira (642). On the earliest Arabic documents, see Ragheb Youssef, "Les premiers documents arabes de l'ère musulmane," in *Constructing the Seventh Century.* Travaux et Mémoires 17, ed. Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2013).

[18] For the declining use of Greek in Islamic Egypt, see Janneke de Jong, "The Changing Position of Greek in the Documentary Culture of Early Islamic Egypt," in *Incorporating Egypt from Constantinople to Baghdad*, ed. Jelle Bruning et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) and Janneke de Jong and Alain Delattre, "Greek as a Minority Language in Early Islamic Egypt," in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2015).

[19] On the development of Coptic (as a script and the last phase of the indigenous Egyptian language), see, for example, Malcolm Choat, "Coptic," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, ed. Christina Riggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Joachim Quack, "How the Coptic Script Came About," in *Greek Influence on Egyptian-Coptic: Contact Induced Change in an Ancient African Language*, ed. Eitan Grossman et al. (Hamburg: Widmaier Verlag, 2017). Specifically on the motivations behind the script changes that occurred during the Roman period, see now Edward O. D. Love, *Script Switching in Roman Egypt: Case Studies in Script Conventions, Domains, Shift, and Obsolescence from Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic, and Old Coptic Manuscripts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

communications," with its use for official communications rare.[20] From the late sixth century, the first legal documents written in Coptic appear, as a result of a series of complex social and political circumstances.[21] Consequently, by the time of the conquest, Coptic was increasingly being used for a range of daily-life (i.e., private, not public) purposes throughout the country, in monastic and secular contexts. After the conquest, this use of Coptic did not halt but increased considerably, both in terms of the number of texts and the types of documents for which it was used. The increase is so remarkable that Fournet declares that "nothing prevented the more visible use of Coptic in society" following the regime change.[22] However, the study of language use and language regulation under the new rulers has not been studied in sufficient detail to permit such a generalisation regarding the use of Coptic. The following discussion aims to contribute to this conversation, suggesting that, rather than being given free rein to be used at large throughout Egypt, the employment of Coptic in at least certain domains was intentional and part of a process of cultural mediation that better enabled the new rulers to rule their new territory.

However, while the language in which the textual sources are written is clear, i.e., Arabic, Coptic, or Greek, other issues are not as transparent and present methodological concerns. Primarily, there is the question of the background of the people named in the

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[20] Jean-Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2020), 20.

[21] The most significant contribution to our understanding of the developments that led to this situation is Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic*; see also Giovanni Ruffini, *Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity: Aphrodito Before and After the Islamic Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), who also discusses the relevant broader political context.

[22] Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic*, 77 and similarly 147 (Coptic "no longer encountered any obstacles to its autonomy in the legal domain"). The use of languages other than Arabic was curtailed in certain domains, following a caliphal decree of 705–6, which prevented the use of Greek within the administration; see references in Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, 81 and 305 n. 3. While this policy took decades to be fully implemented, it is indicative of the existence of language policies across the empire. Although it is not possible to extrapolate from this case to the general situation regarding Coptic (whether for public or private matters), it is also not possible to state that Coptic was simply free to be used in any capacity from this point in time.

relevant sources, in terms of group belonging (for example, Egyptian, Arab, Muslim, Christian – and, within the latter, Chalcedonian or anti-Chalcedonian), as well as the individual context or contexts within which they operated on a daily basis.[23] Onomastic evidence is helpful in distinguishing between cultural groups in the first decades after the conquest, and constitutes one of the key criteria for identifying Muslim Arab officials. Complicating factors, though, include the use of names common to both faiths (e.g., Abraham/Ibrāhīm) and the practice of conversion, which is often difficult to identify, and which impacts our understanding of how language – in this case, Coptic – is used between cultural groups.[24] With these considerations in mind, the following case studies focus on the role of Coptic in intercultural communication between representatives of the new regime (primarily the governor and officials) and Egyptians, mediating different cultural aspects, and the extent to which the mediators involved can be identified.

3. Literary Examples: The Governor, his Staff, and the Patriarchs

A key feature of the history of the Coptic church in the fifty years after the conquest is the record of interactions between the patriarch and the governor, with the latter often intervening in the affairs of the church.[25] These encounters include those between Benjamin

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[23] An overview of the concepts of groups/groupness and the internal plurality of the individual, as proposed by Rogers Brubaker and Bernard Lahire respectively, and their applicability to Late Antiquity (specifically, early Christianity), is provided by Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1–5. In Egypt, geographic factors also need to be taken into consideration (north versus south, urban versus rural), which manifest themselves most clearly in the Coptic written sources through dialectal variation, but the existence of broader cultural differences at a regional level have not been explored. On Coptic dialects, a convenient overview is Anne Boud'hors, "Dialectes et régionalismes: la langue des textes coptes documentaires," in *Written Sources about Africa and Their Study – Le fonti scritte sull'Africa e i loro studi*, ed. Mena Lafkioui and Vermondo Brugnatelli (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2018).

[24] Both points are discussed further in Jennifer Cromwell, "Religious Expression and Relationships between Christians and Muslims in Coptic Letters from Early Islamic Egypt," in *Religious Identifications in Late Antique Papyri*, ed. Mattias Brand and Eline Scheerlinck (London: Routledge, 2022).

[25] Mark Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641–1517)* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 10–11 provides a succinct overview of the evidence.

I and the first governor of Egypt, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, and between John III and Isaac and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. A key consideration here is not the nature of the relationship between those involved, nor the nature of interreligious encounters and apologetics, but the possible identification of the language(s) and interlocutors involved.[26] The principal source for these events is the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* (*HP*).[27] In the case of Isaac, the 41st Patriarch of Alexandria who reigned for a brief period from 689 until his death in November 692, *The Life of Isaac of Alexandria* written by Mena of Nikiou provides further details of these interactions.[28]

Isaac's papacy coincided with the governorship of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān, the son of the Umayyad caliph Marwān I (d. 685) and brother of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 705).[29] As a hagiographic work, the primary purpose of the *Life* is the edification of its subject, Isaac. It is is not, however, restricted to a miraculous account of episodes in the patriarch's life. Much of the content following Isaac's appointment involves his interactions with the governor, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. As such, the *Life* can be used to examine the nature of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's governorship and his relationship with Christians, as well as the role of Christians within his retinue. Following Isaac's appointment as patriarch, the *Life* reports several meetings between Isaac and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, including one in which the governor asks the patriarch

[26] On Coptic reactions to the conquest and attitudes towards the new rulers in the seventh century, see Harald Suermann, "Copts and the Islam of the Seventh Century," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou et al (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
[27] For Benjamin I, John III, and Isaac see Basil Evetts, "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria. II. Peter I to Benjamin I (661)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 1/4 (1904), 487–518 (Benjamin I), and Basil Evetts, "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria. III. Agatho to Michael I (766)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 5/1 (1910), 10–21 (John III) and 21–26 (Isaac).
[28] The *Life* is preserved in a single manuscript in the Bohairic dialect of Coptic, today in the Vatican Library, Codex Vaticanus Copticus 62, Fol. 211–243. The edition followed here is Ernest Porcher (ed.), *Vie d'Isaac, Patriarche d'Alexandrie de 868 à 689. Texte copte édité et traduit en français* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1915; rpt. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974). The most recent translation of the *Life* is David N. Bell, trans. *Mena of Nikiou. The Life of Isaac of Alexandria and the Martyrdom of Saint Macrobius* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988).
[29] ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's served as governor for 20 years (685–705), making him the longest-serving governor of Egypt until the late 9th century. For a brief account of his career, see Khalid Y. Blankinship, "Abd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007; consulted online 22 January 2022).

questions about his faith and keeping his counsel: “He would often call [Isaac] to him so that they could sit together and talk, for the king had seen multitudes of cures at his hands.”[30] On the surface, such interactions could be interpreted as cultural mediation, with the patriarch not only providing the governor with information but encouraging him to build churches and monasteries around the new capital. However, such episodes fall into the standard trope of Coptic literature at this time, as noted above. Furthermore, the narrative potentially obscures the reality of these meetings, implying that the patriarch and governor met in private. In what language would the two confer? We know little about Isaac’s pre-monastic life, except that he served as a notary in a senior administrative office: “After he was filled with knowledge and wisdom, his parents placed him with a relative called Meneson, who was the secretary (*chartoularios*) of George, the *eparchos* of the land of Egypt, so that the youth Isaac would serve as (a) notary (*notarios*) to him”.[31] Does this mean that Isaac was also conversant in Greek and could communicate with ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in either language? Did the governor even know either of the local languages? Such a point was clearly not a concern for the author of the text, and the implication may be that Isaac was miraculously able to understand the governor. More pragmatically, such conversations likely involved the presence of interpreters, the ironically silent party in such narrative encounters.[32] It is therefore difficult to state not

[30] ⲟⲩⲙⲏϣ ⲛⲥⲟⲡ ϣⲁϥⲙⲟⲩϯ ⲛⲁϥ ⲛⲧⲟⲩϩⲉⲙⲥⲓ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲛⲟⲩⲉⲣⲏⲟⲩ ⲛ̀ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲩⲛⲧⲓⲭⲓⲁ ⲉⲑⲃⲉ ϫⲉ ⲁⲡⲓⲟⲩⲣⲟ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲉϩⲁⲛⲙⲏϣ ⲛⲧⲁⲗϭⲟ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϩⲓⲧⲟⲧϥ [Fol. 233v].
[31] ⲉⲧⲁϥⲙⲟϩ ⲇⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ϧⲉⲛ ⲡⲓⲉⲙⲓ ⲛⲉⲙ ϯⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ ⲁⲩⲧⲏⲓϥ ⲛϫⲉ ⲛⲉϥⲓⲟϯ ⲉ̀ⲧⲟⲧϥ ⲛⲟⲩⲥⲩⲅⲅⲉⲛⲏⲥ ⲛ̀ⲧⲱⲟⲩ ⲉ̀ⲡⲉϥⲣⲁⲛ ⲡⲉ ⲙⲉⲛⲉⲥⲱⲛ ⲉϥⲟⲓ ⲛⲭⲁⲗⲧⲱⲗⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ ϧⲁⲣⲁⲧϥ ⲛⲅⲉⲱⲣⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲉϥⲟⲓ ⲛⲉⲡⲁⲣⲭⲟⲍ ⲉ̀ϯⲭⲱⲣⲁ ⲛ̀ⲧⲉ ⲭⲏⲙⲓ ϫⲉ ϩⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲡⲓⲁ̀ⲗⲟⲩ ⲓⲥⲁⲁⲕ ϣⲱⲡⲓ ⲛⲛⲟⲧⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ ϧⲁⲣⲁⲧϥ [Fol. 212r-v].
[32] For the evidence (or lack thereof) and role of translators and interpreters in early medieval Byzantium, see Arietta Papaconstantinou, “Invisible Labour. The Role and Status of Non-Literary Translators in Early Medieval Byzantium,” in *Language Multiplicity in Late Antiquity and Byzantium: Words–Texts–Context*, ed. Emilio Bonfiglio et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, in print). Scholarship on the topic for the early Islamic empire is lacking; see, for example, Ghada Osman, “Translation and Interpreting in the Arabic of the Middle Ages: Lessons in Contextualization,” *IJSL* 207 (2011), which touches briefly on this early period.

only what role the patriarch played in cultural mediation, but even whether Coptic was employed for this purpose.

However, the *Life* also provides other evidence of cultural mediators and mediation within the governor's office: "As secretaries (*chartoularii*) he had two pious men – Athanasius and Isaac, together with their sons – and the *praetorium* was full of Christians."[33] Both men appear elsewhere in the *Life*, although further details regarding their backgrounds are only provided for Isaac. He is described as very pious and from a village called Jebronatheni (ϫⲉⲃⲣⲟⲛⲁⲑⲏⲛⲓ), a village in the Delta.[34] They are also known, however, from other sources. In a Greek fiscal register from the village Aphrodito, *P.Lond*. IV 1447, Athanasius appears several times with the title *chartoularios* (the same title that he holds in *The Life of Isaac*); in another register, *P.Lond*. IV 1412, both men are named thirteen times, appearing with the title "notary".[35] These taxation registers confirm that both men held senior positions within the Egyptian state treasury. However, while Isaac was certainly Egyptian, Athanasius was not. He has been identified as Athanasius bar Gūmōyē from Edessa, whose life is recorded in the Syriac *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, 1166–1199) and the anonymous *Chronicle up to the Year 1234*.[36] Athanasius was a learned man who

[33] ⲉⲛⲁⲩⲟⲓ ⲛⲭⲁⲗⲧⲟⲩⲗⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ ⲛⲁϥ ⲛ̇ϫⲉ ⲣⲱⲙⲓ ⲃ̅ ⲙⲙⲁⲓ ⲛⲟⲩϯ ⲉⲧⲉ ⲁⲑⲁⲛⲁⲥⲓⲟⲥ ⲡⲉ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲓⲥⲁⲁⲕ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲛⲟⲩϣⲏⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲟϩ ⲛⲁⲣⲉ ⲡⲓⲡⲣⲉⲧⲱⲣⲓⲟⲛ ⲧⲏⲣϥ ⲙⲉϩ ⲛⲭⲣⲏⲥⲧⲓⲁⲛⲟⲥ [Fol. 227r–v]. See also Fol. 238r, which describes the governor's entourage as comprising "the most important Saracens and a multitude of Egyptian magistrates" (ⲛⲓⲛⲓϣϯ ⲛ̇ⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲣⲁⲕⲏⲛⲟⲥ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲟⲩⲙⲏϣ ⲛ̇ⲁⲣⲭⲱⲛ ⲛ̇ⲧⲉ ⲭⲏⲙⲓ).

[34] Fol. 222v. It is identified with Šubrā Tanī in the Delta, 5km northeast of Ṣā el-Ḥagar (ancient Sais). See Émile Amélineau, *La Géographie de l'Égypte à l'époque copte* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1893), 149–150 and Stefan Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit. Vol. 5: Q–S* (Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert, 1984), 2409–2410.

[35] Both registers date to slightly later in 'Abd al-Azīz's governorate. Athanasius: *P.Lond*. IV 1447, lines 139, 141, 144, 189, 191, 192. Athanasius and Isaac: *P.Lond.* IV 1412, lines 14–15, 20–21, 26–27, 32–33, 38–39, 42–43, 46–47, 55–56, 61–62, 70–71, 86–87, 101–102, 116–117; they appear in these entries with two tax officials, Isaac with one Theodore and Athanasius with one Thomas.

[36] His career is more broadly discussed in Murial Debié, "Christians in the Service of the Caliph: Through the Looking Glass of Communal Identities," in *Christians and others in the Umayyad State*, ed. Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016). See also Philip Booth, "Debating the Faith in Early Islamic Egypt," *JEH* 70/4 (2019), who identifies this Athanasius as the individual of

became known to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, who summoned him to Damascus and entrusted him with his brother ʿAbd al-Azīz in Egypt. Once again, the issue arises about the role of specific languages in cultural mediation. While Isaac was Egyptian, in order to be able to work in the state treasury he presumably must have been able to communicate in Greek. As for Athanasius, it cannot be assumed that he spoke Coptic. Instead, these individuals may together provide expertise in both Coptic and Greek. Importantly, this case highlights the issues involved in identifying what language – or languages – officials primarily communicated in. It may be possible to infer the role of Coptic in such exchanges, but a more secure line of enquiry lies in documents actually written in Coptic.[37]

4. Non-Literary Texts and Cultural Mediation

Returning to Dodd's definition of culture as including institutions and communication patterns, as well as beliefs, norms, and activities, the non-literary record provides access to a range of cultural practices and how these are mediated through language. Letters provide evidence of how Coptic was used in the communication of institutional structures (especially concerning taxation), as well as how communication strategies were translated between

the same name who occurs in one episode of the *Hodegos* of Anastasius of Sinai (a defence of the Chalcedonian doctrine).

[37] Whatever language they spoke, episodes in the life provide indications of how these two men served as cultural mediators in other respects, as orthodox (i.e., Severan) Christians, providing cultural advice when necessary to the governor. In one particular episode, they advise ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz about Christian eating customs (Fol. 237r–239r; see also Bell, *Mena of Nikiou. The Life of Isaac of Alexandria*, 71–72). The governor invites the patriarch to dine with him, but prohibits him from making the sign of the cross. The two secretaries attempt to inform ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz that such a request is impossible, but the governor is adamant. Ultimately, the patriarch succeeds in making the sign of the cross, but in such a way that astounds rather than infuriates his host. Such episodes also provide indications of the methods of communication, in that both groups can be identified as high-context cultures. As John Barkai states, "the information lies in the context, is not always verbalized, and the talk goes around the points like a circle. The main issues may only be inferred or not discussed at all. A cultural outsider could easily fail to understand the major issues because they are not stated explicitly"; Barkai, "What's a Cross-Cultural Mediator to Do?" 56–57.

languages and cultural groups (for example, through epistolary formulae, titles, honorifics).[38] Even in instances where there are no overtly translated cultural markers within the text, the intentional use of the indigenous language rather than that of the rulers (or the previous rulers) in itself facilitates mediation. In addition to the question about the identity of the individuals named in these texts, already noted above, another methodological issue is the date of the available material. The dates of relevant texts are frequently unknown and sometimes can only be assigned very broad ranges (sometimes as broad as the seventh/eighth century, let alone the late-seventh or early-eighth century). As far as can be determined, the following examples all date to the first century of Islamic rule in Egypt, i.e., the Umayyad caliphate.

4.1 Pagarchal Archives

Egypt's administration was organised through a series of regions called pagarchies, at the head of which sat a pagarch. The paperwork produced from these offices provides one of the best places to examine the use of language across different levels of the administration. For fifty years after the conquest, the pagarchs continued to be drawn from the same groups of local elites as during the previous regime. From the late seventh century, Muslim officials (bearing the title *amīr*[39]) increasingly begin to be appointed to these positions, although this

[38] For the purposes of this study, I do not include features such as loan words that show direct borrowing between languages. On this practice, which also begins after the period in question, see, for example, Tonio Sebastian Richter, "Borrowing into Coptic, the Other Story. Arabic Words in Coptic Texts," in *Greek Influence on Egyptian-Coptic: Contact-Induced Change in an Ancient African Language*, ed. Eitan Grossman et al. (Hamburg: Widmaier Verlag, 2017).

[39] While the origins of this title are military ("commander"), it is adapted as an administrative title, although the precise range of functions it entails and its place within the hierarchy is unclear, as it was not restricted to use by pagarchs; see Federico Morelli, "Duchi ed emiri. Il gioco delle scatole cinesi in *PSI* XII 1266/*P.Apoll*. 9," in *E sì d'amici pieno. Omaggio di studiosi italiani a Guido Bastianini per il suo settantesimo compleanno, I: Papirologia-Egittologia*, ed. Angelo Casanova et al. (Florence: Gonnelli, 2016).

replacement was gradual over the following decades rather than an immediate occurrence.[40] The largest and best known of these pagarchal archives to survive is that belonging to the office of Basileios, a Christian Greek-speaking pagarch of Aphrodito during the governorate of Qurra ibn Sharīk (709–714). Documents including taxation registers, letters, and legal documents were written in the three main languages of Egypt.[41] Despite, or maybe because of, the amount of material available, no general study of the archive has been undertaken and many aspects of the texts – including language use – remain unknown or unclear.[42] Nevertheless, some broad strokes can be drawn. Arabic and Greek were used between the governor and the pagarch, while Greek and Coptic were used between the pagarch and village officials. While these texts at a local level are not written to Muslim officials and so do not reflect intercultural communications, the key factor in terms of cultural mediation is that Coptic is employed for official purposes for matters pertaining to taxation and other dues imposed on the population, in particular concerning the new poll tax payable by all non-Muslim adult men and corvées (including construction work at the new capital and naval duty). Such use of Coptic, for the administration of taxation policies and communication, is evident in other pagarchies too. From the 690s to the 730s, tax demands issued to individual

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[40] On this gradual Islamisation of the administration, see Petra M. Sijpesteijn, "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest," in *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to Saddam Hussein*, ed. Harriet Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194–195.

[41] Some texts were published in large collections (e.g., *P.Lond*. IV) while other documents have been published on a more piecemeal basis. Lists of the relevant editions, organised by language, are available in Tonio Sebastian Richter, "Language Choice in the Qurra Dossier," in *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt from the Ptolemies to the ʿAbbāsids*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[42] Recent studies include Arietta Papaconstantinou, "The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason: Tensions between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharīk," in *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power. Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Research Network Imperium & Officium. Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom, University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010*, ed. Stephan Procházka et al. (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015) and Tonio Sebastian Richter, "«An unseren Herrn, den allberühmten Korra, den herrlichsten Gouverneur, durch Dich, glorreichster Herr Basilios, Pagarch von Djkow mit seinen Gehöften» Verwaltung und Verwaltungssprachen Ägyptens im 8. Jh. Nach den Qurra-Papyri," in *Ägypten und sein Umfeld in der Spätantike. Vo Regierungsantritt Diokletians 284/285 bis zur arabischen Eroberung des Vorderen Orients um 635–636 ; Akten der Tagung vom 7.–9.7.2011 in Münster*, ed. Frank Feder and Angelika Lohwasser (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz Verlag, 2013).

taxpayers in the name of several – predominantly Muslim – pagarchs survive from a number of sites. The main content of these demands is written in Coptic, framed by Greek administrative elements, and they exhibit a range of mediating techniques.[43] As this corpus has been examined elsewhere, and because some of these features are shared with epistolary practices discussed below, I will turn to the opportunities presented by new work on an earlier seventh-century archive, that of Papas, pagarch of Apollonopolis (Magna), modern Edfu.

Excavations undertaken at the pharaonic temple at Edfu a century ago (1921–22) by Henri Henne revealed a large amphora that contained hundreds of papyrus documents. A hundred Greek documents from this group were published in 1953 (*P.Apoll*.), but the Coptic material was largely neglected until a new project dedicated to its study commenced in 2015.[44] Although much work remains to be done, the preliminary observations and publications of new material reveal important insights into the use of Coptic alongside Greek in the operation of a pagarchal office in the 670s – three decades before the better-known Qurra/Basileios archive.[45] As such, they represent the earliest corpus for the examination of the official use of Coptic. Not all documents in the archive are official in nature, however, and one of the current concerns is how to differentiate private from non-private communications. As Anne Boud'hors remarks:

[43] The language of these demands, and the significance of the use of Coptic, is discussed in Jennifer Cromwell, "Scribal Networks, Taxation, and the Role of Coptic in Marwanid Egypt," in *Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean World: From Constantinople to Baghdad, 500–1000 CE*, ed. Jelle Bruning et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[44] Preliminary comments on this project are provided in Anne Boud'hors, "Situating the Figure of Papas, Pagarch of Edfu at the End of the Seventh Century: The Contribution of the Coptic Documents," in *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, ed. Sabine R. Huebner et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), which provides an overview of the limited previous work on the material.
[45] The texts will be published within *BIFAO*, with texts numbered sequentially across the articles. To date, three articles have appeared: Anne Boud'hors and Alain Delattre, "Un nouveau départ pour les archives de Papas: Papyrus coptes et grecs de la jarred d'Edfour," *BIFAO* 117 (2017); Anne Boud'hors and Alain Delattre, "Papyrus coptes et grecs de la jarred d'Edfou (suite)," *BIFAO* 118 (2019); Anne Boud'hors and Jean Gascou, "Un nouveau papyrus de la jarred d'Edfou," *BIFAO* 120 (2020).

> … the dividing line between the two categories is not always clear. The fiscal pressure of the Arab administration had repercussions for the daily lives of Papas' citizens and people. As a pagarch, Papas was responsible, on the one hand, for the organization of the payment of taxes, requisitions, etc., and on the other hand responsible for maintaining a degree of equity in the population and supporting the weakest members of society. The Coptic documents provide a particularly good perspective on this uncomfortable position as an intermediary.[46]

Boud'hors' use of "intermediary" here is particularly relevant to the current study: Papas serves as an intermediary between the residents of his pagarchy and senior officials, and in doing so also mediates between the multiple cultural groups involved. Within this role as intermediary, Papas' networks involved senior officials, colleagues and family members, and lower-ranking officials and local elites. At the first level, Greek was primarily used, with Coptic used by intermediaries (identified by Boud'hors as clerks and secretaries). Among colleagues and family members, both Greek and Coptic was used, while interactions at the third level were conducted in Coptic. The use of Greek and Coptic at the two lower levels is unsurprising. However, in terms of the first level, the question of who issues texts in Coptic is worth further discussion.

A fragmentary letter in the archive is especially of note: P.IFAO Edfou Jarre Inv. 205+218.[47] Despite the loss of the address, and with it the name of both the sender and recipient (an all-too-common situation), it was most likely sent from a Muslim official to Papas,

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[46] Anne Boud'hors, "Situating the Figure of Papas," 67.

[47] These new text editions (listed in n. 45) have not yet received a papyrological siglum, but they have been incorporated into the papyrological database Trismegistos (www.trismegistos.org). This letter, edited by Lajos Berkes in Boud'hors and Delattre, "Un nouveau départ pour les archives de Papas," 90–93 (text #1), has the Trismegistos number TM 874418.

based on its provenance and context. The letter concerns the requisition of items for the Arab fleet (διανομαί), including ropes, nails, and wood, which are repeated in Greek at the end of the letter. Other examples of such letters are written in Greek and sent to pagarchs.[48] The use of Coptic for such communications is therefore of note, and this letter represents potentially the earliest known example of the Egyptian language for this purpose. As for the identity of the sender, several points indicate that it is a Muslim official: 1) the letter's content; 2) reference to an(other) *amīr*; and 3) the use of the formula ⲁⲩⲱ ϯⲣⲏⲛⲏ ⲛⲁⲕ, "and peace be unto you," a translation of the Arabic "*salām*-greeting".[49] This expression (discussed further in the following section) is also translated into Greek in letters issued by Muslim officials, including other letters to Papas: *P.Apoll*. 7.4 (καὶ εἰρήνη ὑμῖν) and 8.5 (καὶ εἰρήνη σοι), both of which were issued by the official Zubayd ibn Ḫudayğ.[50] Returning to Boud'hors' observations concerning the hierarchies of language use, she makes a distinction between the governor and various *amīr* writing in Greek and intermediaries (clerks, and secretaries) writing in Greek and Coptic. However, this implies that the governor and *amīr* were responsible for writing letters, when in practice they were all written by intermediaries. Consequently, the question arises whether language use is the choice of the intermediaries or the officials themselves. I propose that language choice for all communication comes directly from the officials, and thus the use of Coptic reflects official decision-making.[51] As

[48] On examples among the Greek Edfu texts, see Clive Foss, "Egypt under Mu'āwiya, Part I: Flavius Papas and Upper Egypt," *BSOAS* 72/1 (2009). A later example is a letter sent to Basileios of Aphrodito concerning iron for the making of nails, *P.Lond*. IV 1369 (dated 710).
[49] This correlation was first made by Jakob Krall, "Koptische Briefe," *Mitteilungen der Sammlung der Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer* 5 (1892), 25. Other unpublished Coptic fragments in the Edfu archive also contain this phrase, suggesting that there are further Coptic letters from Muslim officials in the archive; see Berkes in Boud'hors and Delattre, "Un nouveau départ pour les archives de Papas," 90 n.12.
[50] See also *P.Apoll*. 5.3, a fragment in which the names of the sender and recipient are both lost.
[51] It should be stressed here that this proposal is based on my preliminary studies of the material, which focus on discreet corpora (e.g., tax demands in Cromwell, "Scribal Networks, Taxation, and the Role of Coptic in Marwanid Egypt", and letters in Cromwell, "Religious Expression and Relationships between Christians and

such, Coptic is used for cultural mediation at an institutional level (as part of administrative practices), as well as for translating religious identities and norms. Boud'hors' schematic representation of Papas' networks can therefore be simplified, with the removal of intermediaries and retention of the governor, who issued documents in Greek, and the *amīr*, who issued documents in Greek and Coptic. This is not to say that these *amīr* necessarily knew Coptic themselves, but that they authorised its use in their official correspondence.

The Edfu papyri represent the earliest known use of Coptic in such a capacity, three decades after the conquest. As the later Qurra/Basileios archive demonstrates, by the early eighth century Coptic had come to be increasingly used for official communication that reflects the two main features highlighted above, institutional use and intercultural communication.[52] Beyond such pagarchal archives, isolated letters also contribute to our understanding of Coptic's role in these areas.

4.2 Letters

While the above archives have fairly well-defined contexts (chronologically and geographically), single letters are more problematic. They often cannot be dated, apart from in the broadest terms (e.g., "eighth century"), frequently lack a provenance, and do not always have sufficient content to determine the nature of the relationship between the parties involved. The absence of firm dates also raises a further issue in terms of the use of

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Muslims"). As such, I make this statement as a provocation for future research, especially after the publication of further documents from the Papas and other archives.

[52] On the use of Coptic for tax demands, see Cromwell, "Scribal Networks, Taxation, and the Role of Coptic in Marwanid Egypt." Language use within the dossier of the *amīr* Rašīd ibn Ḫalīd, stationed at different times in Hermopolis and Heracleopolis in central Egypt, also provides another dossier for examination. In addition to tax demands issued from his office, Coptic documents were also sent to him, including letters and a legal agreement acknowledging that overpaid taxes had been returned (*SB Kopt*. V 2221; see Gesa Schenke, "Rashid ibn Chaled and the Return of Overpayments," *CdÉ* 89 (2014)).

Coptic, namely whether the individuals involved are native Egyptian speakers or not. It is often difficult to determine whether Muslims who appear in Coptic letters are recent converts, Arab-Muslim officials who were appointed to their positions and were temporarily based in Egypt, or the descendants of Arabs who had settled in the country (a situation that is more likely over time). The use of Coptic in letters between Muslims perhaps indicates that the two parties are Egyptian-speaking converts who have not yet learned Arabic, or that one party has not yet learned to communicate in Arabic and the use of Coptic is therefore a pragmatic one. For example, *P.Gascou* 24 (=*CPR* II 228), from al-Fusṭāṭ and dated broadly to the eighth century, is written from a certain Yazīd to his "beloved brother" Abū 'Alī and concerns private matters, mentioning several other individuals who also bear Muslim names.[53] The letter exhibits most of the features that occur in letters between Muslims and Copts.

The small number of known letters between Muslims and Copts, written in both directions, represent official epistolary communications connected with economic (typically fiscal) matters. They reveal intercultural communication techniques that include the adaptation and innovation of formulaic and non-linguistic features, as well as the adoption of (im)politeness strategies.[54] Thus, these letters – as with the documents in the pagarchal archives discussed above – show how Coptic was used for the purposes of cultural mediation pertaining to institutional and communication practices. Three case studies are presented here, which discuss the relevant features and raise methodological concerns in analysing such letters.

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[53] As part of the text's reedition in *P.Gascou* 24, the question of the letter's language is discussed; Anne Boud'hors, "24. Degrés d'arabisation dans l'Égypte du VIIIe siècle : *CPR* II 228 revisité," in *Mélanges Jean Gascou: Textes et études papyrologiques (P.Gascou).* Travaux et Mémoires 20/1, ed. Jean-Luc Fournet and Arietta Papaconstantinou (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d'histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2016), 77.

[54] (Im)politeness strategies are only partly addressed here, as they are treated in more detail in Cromwell, "Religious Expression and Relationships between Christians and Muslims".

4.2.1 *CPR* II 237 (eighth century; unknown findspot): Muslim to Copt[55]

In this short letter, Ṣāliḥ (ⲍⲁⲗⲉϩ) writes to Chael, son of Johannes. Ṣāliḥ's name is not accompanied either by a patronymic or a title, but the letter's content indicates that he is an official. Ṣāliḥ instructs Chael to retrieve money from a certain Simon son of Apa Jule and give it to a cameldriver, Shenoute, who will then deliver it to him. While it can be inferred that the money is intended for taxation purposes, its use is not actually stated. The letter's phrasing is notable for the level of politeness that Ṣāliḥ employs throughout: Chael is his "beloved brother" (ⲡⲁⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛⲥⲟⲛ) and his request is prefixed by politeness markers (ⲁⲣⲓ ⲡⲛⲟⲩϭ ⲡⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟⲩϥ "do the great, good thing," i.e., "please"). Interpreting the reasons for the use of these strategies is difficult, as neither individual is known from other sources. However, of particular note is the opening of the letter, which contains a variation of the *basmalah*, "In the name of God" (ϩⲙ ⲡⲣⲁⲛ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ, which appears in Greek documents as ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ and, from the eighth century, most often as σὺν θεῷ).[56] This expression serves as a neutral monotheistic expression that is appropriate between Muslims and Christians.

4.2.2 *P.Mich.Copt*. 15 (eighth century; the monastery of Apa Apollo, Bawit): Muslim to Copt[57]

[55] An image of this letter is available on the website of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/RZ00008185 [accessed 22 January 2022]).
[56] Federico Morelli notes this fact concerning σὺν θεῷ in his commentary to *CPR* XIX 26.1.
[57] An image of this letter is available on the website of the University of Michigan Papyrus Collection (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-2965/6861r.tif [accessed 22 January 2022]).

In stark contrast to the politeness shown in the previous letter is a letter from Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to one Theodore.[58] The letter again concerns the delivery of money, as an instalment, presumably of a tax payment. However, the letter lacks any phatic framing and politeness markers, as well as both an opening address and a final farewell (the parties are identified only by the address on the verso).[59] Instead, the letter comprises a series of orders communicated through imperatives. Together, these two letters exhibit different strategies for communicating economic institutional processes and indicate that there was no overall approach to how Coptic was used for such means. Apart from its linguistic features, this letter is also notable for its inclusion of non-linguistic features that appear in Coptic documents from this period: a double oblique stroke (//) rather than a cross to mark the beginning of the letter. This feature first appears in tax demands issued from pagarchal offices and was subsequently adopted in epistolary practices, both in letters involving Muslims and also those between Copts. Although its later use no longer serves as an overt indicator of the identities of the parties involved, it is nevertheless a post-conquest scribal innovation that reflects the diverse ways in which cultural mediation is manifested in these letters.[60]

4.2.3 *P.Ryl.Copt*. 285 (710 or 725; Hermopolite nome): Copt to Muslim[61]

[58] For the reading of Ibrāhīm's name, which was not read by the original editor, as well as the letter's Bawit provenance, see Alain Delattre, "Le monastère de Baouît et l'administration arabe," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World*, ed. Alexander T. Schubert and Petra M. Sijpesteijn (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 47.

[59] *P.Ryl.Copt*. 324 is similar in many respects to this letter. It is written from a certain Muḥammad to a certain Victor and concerns official embezzlement and the potential appointment of a new village headman.

[60] The double oblique stroke has been discussed in several contexts. See Tonio Sebastian Richter, "Spätkoptische Rechtsurkunden neu bearbeitet (III): P. Lond. Copt. I 487 – arabische Pacht in koptischem Gewand," *JJP* 33 (2003), 223–230; Lajos Berkes, "Griechisch und Koptisch in der Verwaltung des früharabischen Ägypten: Ein neues ἐντάγιον," in *Byzanz und das Abendland II. Studia Byzantino-Occidentalia*, ed. Erika Juhász (Budapest: Eötvös-József-Collegium, 2014), 192; and, most recently, Cromwell, "Religious Expression and Relationships between Christians and Muslims".

[61] An image of this letter is available on the website of the University of Manchester, John Rylands Library website (https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet [accessed 22 January 2022]).

The third letter is written from a Copt, Zacharias, to a Muslim official, Rašīd, who can be identified as the well-known pagarch of Hermopolis, Rašīd ibn Ḫalīd.[62] The contents concern an issue regarding the poll-tax (*diagraphon*) of certain villagers and its language exhibits the same mediating strategies seen in the first letter above, namely the use of the *basmalah* and politeness strategies, including Zacharias referring to Rašīd as "his sincere friend" (ⲛ̣ⲡ̣ⲉϥⲅⲛⲏⲥⲓⲟⲥ ⲛ̣ⲫⲓⲗⲟⲥ).[63] Additionally, the letter also includes the "*salām*-greeting" ("Peace be unto you"), discussed above in connection with the Edfu Papas archive, following the address and again at the end of the letter, in a modified form that addresses Rašīd by the title "most glorious Lord" (ⲉⲛ[ⲇⲟ]ⲝ(ⲟⲧⲁⲧⲟⲥ) [ⲛϫⲟⲉ]ⲓ̣ⲥ).[64] As with the above epistolary formulae, this phrase initially appeared in letters from Muslim officials and later were used by Copts, including in letters between Copts.[65]

These three short letters exhibit different intercultural communication strategies, especially in terms of their politeness frameworks. The underlying reasons that may account for these

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[62] See n. 52. The letter refers to a location north of Hermopolis and so dates to the period when Rašīd was pagarch of Hermopolis rather than Heracleopolis. Based on the prosopographical information known about Rašīd and the date at the end of the letter (Ph[am]enoth 15, indiction year 8), *P.Ryl.Copt*. 285 dates to 11 March 710 or 725. On Rašīd's dates, see Schenke, "Rashid ibn Chaled and the Return of Overpayments," 204.

[63] The use of ⲫⲓⲗⲟⲥ (Greek φίλος) is also used with respect to a Muslim official in *P.Lond.Copt*. I 1128, in which one John writes to "my esteemed friend Abū Isḥaq". This letter also exhibits features discussed above, including the *basmalah* and the double oblique stroke. However, in this instance John writes with directions for Abū Isḥaq, regarding finding a dealer for various commodities. The seeming nature of their relationship suggests that Abū Isḥaq is an Egyptian-speaking convert with a history of business dealings with John. Regardless of the relationship between the two men, the nature of the epistolary communications is key: the changes introduced to epistolary practice to facilitate cultural mediation between rulers and ruled come to be used as standard features in the communication of the local population.

[64] The letter is very worn at this place and the reading of the entire phrase is not clear. However, both "peace" and the following title are quite certain.

[65] See, for example, *P.Fay.Copt*. 19 (only one party is named, Peter, and it is not possible to determine whether he is the sender or recipient; the letter is written on the back of an Arabic letter and likely dates to the late eighth or ninth century), *P.Lond.Copt*. I 1165 (from Justus to Apa Severus), and *P.Mich.Copt*. III 12 (the parties are not named in the letter itself and the address on the verso has not been edited, so the identity of the parties is unknown at this point; the use of "peace unto you from God" and the double oblique stroke surely dates this letter to the eighth century, not the seventh century as suggested by the original editors, William Worrell and Elinor Husselman). All three letters concern private matters.

differences, beyond the identities of the parties involved, are lost to us – a common issue when dealing with letters. Yet, all three also have several points in common. In each case, Coptic is used for communication by or to Muslim officials for issues relating to fiscal matters. They each also employ formulaic or non-linguistic elements that are the result of the translation of cultural practices, which accommodate both Muslims and Christians. Such features, initially employed within official documents, came to be incorporated in private communications between Egyptians, demonstrating the adoption and dissemination of cultural practices between groups.

5. On Coptic and Cultural Mediation

Following the conquest of Egypt, one of the most notable changes in the surviving record, which is dominated by the written sources, concerns use of language. In addition to the introduction of Arabic, the language of the rulers, the seventh and eighth centuries witness a marked increase in the use of Coptic for a range of purposes, not only private but also official, for which it had not previously been employed. The reasons for this change are not fully understood and have often been explained by the corresponding declining status of Greek. As Maged Mikhail has observed, "questions relating to language and culture have been unanswerable (or divisive) because of conflicting methodologies and academic presuppositions". [66] Rather than being a coincidental beneficiary of the new political landscape, I propose instead that Coptic was intentionally used by the new rulers to facilitate cultural mediation between them and the conquered population.[67] Culture in this respect is

[66] Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, 79.

[67] This proposal reflects not only the brief examples presented in this chapter but my previous studies on the topic; see also Jennifer Cromwell, "Language Policy and the Administrative Framework of Early Islamic Egypt," in *Ancient Egyptian Society: Challenging Assumptions, Exploring Approaches*, ed. Danielle Candelora et al. (London: Routledge, 2022).

not confined to “high culture” (objects of aesthetic or intellectual value), but encompasses all the norms, activities, institutions, and communication patterns of different groups. This broad understanding of the term allows the examination of the entire range of surviving sources from Egypt, which, for the seventh and eighth centuries, includes a considerable body of administrative paperwork. Coptic was adopted in the production of a range of texts connected to taxation: registers, demands, receipts, letters to and from Muslim officials, and legal documents closely connected with taxes and other impositions. The use of Coptic for such purposes was new and facilitated the management of institutional practices. The resulting paperwork reveals how other aspects of culture were mediated within communicative strategies, including the adaptation of formulaic and non-linguistic features that were acceptable to members of different groups, chiefly Muslims and Christians.

However, while this use and development of Coptic can be traced across the available sources, the textual record obscures other underlying practices, including the individuals involved in the process. It is difficult to identify the driving forces behind these changes, as well as who was responsible for enacting them. Pagarchal offices included bilingual and potentially trilingual administrators and scribes with the necessary skills to adapt practices, but only the names of the officials involved are stated. It can only be inferred that the governor or individual pagarchs (*amīr*) lie behind the decision to employ Coptic strategically. What is certain, though, is that it must have been an official policy, as Coptic could not simply have infiltrated the administration by other means.

The literary example of *The Life of Isaac* highlights multiple issues that also relate to who was responsible for the production of administrative paperwork. Written in Coptic, it describes conversations between the patriarch, Isaac, and the governor, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, on topics relating particularly to religious practices. These discussions are presented as private

meetings, but the practicalities of such encounters are left unsaid – Isaac's biographer was not interested in such details, nor was the contemporary audience. It cannot be automatically deduced that Isaac and 'Abd al-'Azīz conversed in Coptic, nor can it be taken at face value that they ever spoke in private. Rather, unmentioned interpreters were surely present. Christians, both Egyptians and individuals from other parts of the empire, within the governor's court served as cultural mediators. Two of 'Abd al-'Azīz's most important secretaries, Athanasius (Syrian) and Isaac (Egyptian), are named in *The Life* and are also attested in the Greek documentary record, as representatives of the fisc. Not only were they involved in the operation of the state treasury, but they are also seen in *The Life* as providing the governor with cultural knowledge in different situations, including, for example, eating customs. However, whether they themselves communicated directly with the governor or through interpreters again cannot be determined. As Isaac's biography is written in Coptic, it lulls the reader into perceiving the court as operating, at least partially, in Coptic. However, the reality of language use was certainly more complex, and any use of Coptic cannot be inferred from this literary work. Instead, this example demonstrates the role of Christians – rather than Coptic specifically – as mediators.

Despite the methodological issues involved in dealing with Egypt's multilingual environment, it is clear that Coptic was integrated into the administrative apparatus of the country at all levels after the Islamic conquest. Even if the language users themselves are difficult to identify, the use of Coptic for official purposes is certain and the extent of its use represents a post-conquest innovation. The volume of evidence and the range of communicative strategies indicate that this use of Coptic was not restricted to a specific event or situation but was widespread. Cultural mediation provides a framework for examining this phenomenon. The above case studies present an initial discussion in how this approach can

contribute to a better understanding of the role of Coptic in early Islamic Egypt and the motivations for its use.[68] As new texts are made available for study, and as texts published a century ago receive new attention, this approach can be developed and refined to accommodate the increased dataset. Language use and writing practices, as preserved in the textual record of Egypt, provide an immediate point of contact between the different groups involved. However, language presents only one route of enquiry in interpreting cultural contact and mediation in this period. Architecture and material remains (textiles, ceramics, metalware, etc.) also represent zones of contact that demonstrate how rulers and ruled, Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Egyptians interacted with each other and mediated their cultural practices within this new environment.

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[68] Note that I am not suggesting that this use of Coptic was intended to ensure positive relations between the groups involved, but rather that it facilitated communication between parties with the aim of increasing the efficacy of institutional practices.

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