GREEKS IN EGYPT

Greek contacts with Egypt had been frequent and varied before Alexander the Great conquered the country in 332 B.C., inaugurating the Hellenistic period of Egyptian history. As early as the times of the Sea Peoples and the Dark Ages of Greece Egypt experienced Greek invaders and raiders, but the country was not accessible to large-scale colonization when Greeks began, in the eighth century B.C., to spread their settlements and trading stations over the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

However, with the consent of the pharaohs of the twenty-sixth Dynasty, Greeks were able to establish, perhaps around 650, a colony at Naucratis in the Delta. Milesians were prominent among the founders of that settlement, which was destined to facilitate and channel commercial activities, but other Greeks also had access to this town and its sanctuaries. Equipped with the typical set of Greek city-state institutions, Naucratis was able to preserve its Hellenic character well down into the Greco-Roman period. It was even selected as a model, partially at least, for ANTINOOPOLIS when that Greek city was founded in Egypt by Hadrian in A.D. 130.

Egyptian relations with Greeks, sometimes tense, more often friendly, were especially strong under the rulers of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (664-525 B.C.), who used Greeks and Carians (the latter from southwestern Asia Minor) as mercenaries, for example, at Pelusium on Egypt’s eastern border. Later, Amasis established these mercenaries at Memphis in quarters of their own (Hellenomemphites, Caromemphites).

Another aspect of these contacts was the lore exercised by Egyptian religion, wisdom, and institutions on Greek philosophy and science. Herodotus, speaking of “Egyptian logos” in book 2, stands out as a unique and intriguing testimony of Greek interest in things Egyptian, and it still is, though limited, a precious contribution of a fifth-century Greek to our
knowledge of Egypt, its history and its life.

The conquest of Egypt by King Cambyses of the Achaemenid Dynasty in 525 B.C. made the country a satrapy of the Persian empire, but that did not end Greek contacts with Egypt, since many Greeks of Asia Minor had become subjects of the Achaemenids and Egypt was still open even to Greeks from outside the Persian realm (witness the visit of Herodotus). The struggle of the Greeks against the Persians in the fifth century led to Greek military cooperation, with Egyptian dynasts revolting against their Achaemenid overlords.

The fight for Egyptian independence was finally successful in the very last years of the fifth century (without Greek military aid, according to Salmon, 1965, p. 239). But in 343, Egypt came again under Persian domination. The Achaemenid restoration was, however, a short-lived affair; in 334, the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, invaded the territories of the Persian Darius III and conquered Egypt in 332 B.C. Though leading to liberation from the Persians, this conquest was also, in a certain sense at least, the start of a new foreign domination.

In Egypt, Alexander posed as pharaoh and was perhaps crowned in Memphis according to the Egyptian ritual. He also sought confirmation of his divinity by consulting the oracle of the god Amon in Siwa Oasis. Nevertheless, he still was a foreigner, ruling Egypt from outside. In 331, he founded ALEXANDRIA to commemorate his name and to open Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea and to his nascent empire. The former Egyptian village of Rhakotis now being one of the quarters of the new town, its local population became inhabitants of Alexandria, but was excluded from the rights of Alexandrian citizens.

After the death of Alexander in 323, the satrapy of Egypt was attributed to the Macedonian general Ptolemy who, after the extinction of Alexander’s family, liberated himself from what remained of the Macedonian imperial authority. After he assumed the title and position of
a king in 305, Egypt was ruled for nearly three hundred years (305-30 B.C.) by the Ptolemies, a “Greek” dynasty (Macedonians then being considered, though somewhat reluctantly in some quarters, as Greeks).

But at least it was a dynasty firmly anchored in Egypt and keeping Egypt at the center of the Ptolemaic empire, which extended, in the third century, over regions of the eastern Mediterranean (Cyprus, Cyrene, parts of the Syro-Phoenician coast, and territories in southern and western Asia Minor). Rather soon after his installation in Egypt, Ptolemy I abandoned Egyptian Memphis and chose Alexandria as his capital. But besides being Hellenistic kings in the Macedonian and Greek traditions, the Ptolemies were viewed and represented as pharaohs by their Egyptian subjects. Whereas Egyptians had still played leading roles under Alexander and Ptolemy I (d. 283-282), Greeks occupied, under Ptolemy II and his successors in the third century, nearly all top-level positions at the court, in the army, and in the civil administration.

Immigration of Greeks and Hellenized inhabitants of Thrace and Asia Minor was particularly substantial in the third century B.C. Alexandria thus became the most populous center of the Mediterranean world. Notwithstanding the Egyptian settlers of Rhakotis and a fast-growing community of Jews, Alexandria was and remained a Greek city, reserving full citizen rights to a core of Greco-Macedonian residents only, but spreading the Greek language to most of its inhabitants (the linguistical Hellenization of Alexandrian Jews prompted the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint).

But Greeks in Egypt were by no means restricted to Alexandria. They settled in large numbers in the Egyptian hinterland, the chora, above all in the Fayyum (Arsinoite nome), as well as in numerous places in the Delta and Upper Egypt. Among the latter, Ptolemais (modern al-Minshah; see PSOI), a foundation of Ptolemy I, stands out as the only Greek city in Upper Egypt provided with the full set of polis institutions. The Egyptian nome capitals—that is, metropoles like Memphis, Arsinoë, Heracleopolis
Magna, etc.—were not organized as Greek cities, but were, in constitutional terms, mere “villages,” though serving as the administrative and religious centers of their respective nomes.

Many of these nome capitals attracted Greek settlers who lived there as soldiers (that is, veterans), artisans, businessmen, and landowners. They brought with them not only their language but also Greek religious, civic, and cultural institutions, among them the gymnasium. They mixed with the local population, many Egyptian women marrying Greek men. The Greek population may have had a surplus of males, partly as a consequence of immigration and also of female infanticide. Contrary to Egyptians and Jews, Greeks, wishing to keep their families small and their property undiminished, were not seldom inclined to neglect their children, especially daughters.

Egyptian women, even while adopting the Greek language and certain elements of the Greek way of life, would not generally have abandoned all Egyptian traditions, and least perhaps their religious convictions. On the other hand, numerous Egyptians, above all in the local administration, had to be acquainted with Greek, however imperfectly, in order to run their offices and to enhance their status. Greek was the dominant official language in Ptolemaic Egypt. Knowing Greek and adopting, in certain respects, a Greek way of life was a prerequisite for taking higher steps up the social ladder, at least as far as the Greek-dominated spheres of life were concerned (especially in government service, military and civilian).

Hence the conviction of former generations of historians and papyrologists that Ptolemaic Egypt was characterized by a mixed civilization where Egyptian and Greek elements were thought to have largely blended. Since the end of the Second World War, this view has been strongly challenged and replaced by an approach stressing the fundamental and often irreconcilable differences between Egyptian and Greek traditions.
It is certainly true that Greeks in Egypt, a small minority convinced of its superiority, strove to maintain the uniqueness of their culture, whereas, on the other side, the mass of Egyptian peasants lacked opportunity and will to forsake their own traditions and to assimilate the ways of foreigners. But the reaction against the concept of mixed civilization, partly prompted by the experience of modern decolonization, may have gone too far. Recent progress in the study of Demotic papyri and of hieroglyphic inscriptions in the Egyptian temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, as well as a new awareness of the performance of Egyptian Late Period art, are creating conditions for a fresh look at the relations between Egyptians and Greeks in Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt. The question of mixed civilization should be reexamined on a larger and more systematic scale including all aspects of life and carefully distinguishing places, periods, social strata, and ethnic groups.

It is evident that there is at least one group of Egyptians, occupying positions in the administration and the army, who tended to become partially Hellenized. The same will apply to many Greeks and Egyptians mingling racially and sharing common values. Not all these cases need to be viewed as examples of unilateral Hellenization, that is, Egyptianization (the latter to a lesser degree), because some people, then as today, belonged at the same time to two cultures, for example, persons serving as Greek-speaking soldiers in the Ptolemaic army and officiating simultaneously as Egyptian-speaking priests in a native cult. This gradually and partially Hellenized group certainly represented a minority only of autochthonous Egyptians, but it was a highly active, fairly propertied, and politically important segment of Ptolemaic society, becoming ever more visible and assertive after the third century B.C. Such persons often bore two names, one Greek, the other Egyptian. That means that names, above all from the second century B.C. onward, cannot be considered anymore as reliable indications of ethnic origin. Anyway, after more than a hundred years of mixed marriages in Ptolemaic Egypt, the question of ethnic origin had ceased to make sense.
in the corresponding milieux. On the other hand, even outside these intermediary groups, Egyptian and Greek traditions were not totally impermeable to each other.

Instead of focusing the debate on ethnicity in terms of “native Egyptians” versus “foreign Greeks,” it seems more rewarding to determine the respective strength of Egyptian and Greek traditions in Hellenistic as well as in Roman and Byzantine Egypt. That approach is of great relevance for a fair appraisal of both Greek civilization in Egypt and the part played in its development by native Egyptians. A comparison with modern colonialism will not do. One seems justified in saying that Greek civilization in Egypt is not only the mark of an occupying force, but also, and not at least, an achievement of hellenized Egyptians. Additionally and simultaneously, the activity of Egyptians is on record in native Egyptian religion, art, and literature in Ptolemaic and Roman times.

Far from being one long intermediate period interrupting the continuity of Egyptian history, the centuries between Alexander and the Arab conquest truly belong to the heritage of Egypt’s people and have made a great, but often underestimated, contribution to both Egyptian and classical civilization. Nevertheless, notwithstanding contacts and common performances, difference, even opposition, between Greeks and Egyptians did not disappear in the course of time, the dividing line being, however, not one of race, but one of culture and social class. As there was cooperation, there also was hostility, clearly evidenced, for instance, in prophecies foretelling, like the Potter’s Oracle, the abandonment of Alexandria and the end of foreign rule in Egypt.

After the conquest of Egypt by the Romans in 30 B.C., the country entered the Roman empire as a province administered by a representative of the emperor, the praefectus Aegypti. Roman citizens, active in the administration and in the army, doing business and owning land, were henceforth the supreme class in Egypt, soon reinforced by Egyptian Greeks, that is, hellenized Egyptians who acquired Roman
citizenship, especially through service in the Roman army. The rest, that is the majority, were “foreigners” (peregrini), at least in Roman juridical construction. In fact, Greek remained the ruling language, never replaced by Latin except in the highest echelons of government service, in legal procedures involving Roman citizens, and partially in official military use.

Analyzing the relevant texts of the Roman period, Montevecchi (1985, pp. 339-53) reached the conclusion that the term Aigyptios had a twofold meaning: (1) in highly official language, it designated both Greeks (including hellenized Egyptians) and nonhellenized natives as opposed to Roman citizens; (2) in everyday life, and even in court, Aigyptios could characterize the nonhellenized natives in contrast to the Greek, that is, hellenized Egyptians. That is not to say that the Romans established no official distinction between the Greek and the “truly” Egyptian inhabitants of the country.

Both groups had to pay the poll tax (laographia), but the gymnasial elite (those “Greeks” whose status had been verified by ascertainment of Greek ancestry on both maternal and paternal sides and who had been given access to the gymnasium) was treated as a privileged class and so were, though to a lesser degree, the other citizens of the nome capitals as opposed to villagers. The members of the gymnasium, as well as the metropolites, paid lower rates of poll tax. These favored groups, partially a blend of “pure” Greeks and hellenized Egyptians already on record in Ptolemaic Egypt, inserted themselves between the Roman citizens and the “true” Egyptians, that is, the peasant mass.

Under the influence of the metropolite “Greeks,” the nome capitals evolved into Greek-style cities. It was a recognition of that development when, in c. 200, the emperor Septimius Severus granted a town council not only to Alexandria but also to the metropoles of the Egyptian chora. His son, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, popularly called Caracalla, went one step further when he accorded, in 212, Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the Roman empire, except to a group designated as
dediticii (literally “the capitulated”), whose precise identification is still debated; they are probably equivalent to peregrini dediticii who were excluded from the benefice of Roman citizenship as defeated rebels or enemies of the Romans. The category of dediticii must have been represented in Egypt and can perhaps be distinguished from the beneficiaries of Caracalla’s grant by the lack of the imperial clan of Aurelius (on a further differentiation between Aurelii and more privileged Marci Aurelii, see Hagedorn, 1979).

The former distinction between Roman citizens and Greeks in Egypt had thus been abolished, but by the same token, the dividing line between the privileged groups and the Egyptian peasant mass had been drawn more sharply. This line, along with other divisions, became brutally visible in an order of the same Caracalla expelling from Alexandria, in 215, “all Egyptians . . . and particularly country folk . . . Among the linen weavers, the true Egyptians can easily be recognized by their speech, which reveals that they are affecting the appearance and dress of others. What is more, in the way they live their manners, the opposite of urbane behavior, reveal them to be Egyptian rustics” (extract from the translation cited by Lewis, 1986, p. 202).

These “Egyptian rustics” had no or only insufficient knowledge of Greek, so when the Christians began to bring them their message, the mission had to operate in the native tongue. The use of Coptic for the diffusion of the scriptures had nothing to do with an opposition to the Greeks, since it was, after all, from Greek that the gospel and liturgical texts had to be translated into Coptic. Thus, in a first phase lasting from the third to the middle of the fifth century, the new belief, far from dividing Greek- and Coptic-speaking Christians, provided common ground that separated them from their combined adversaries, whether they were Greek or Egyptian.

The same is true for MONASTICISM, which was, in the fourth century and beyond, a shared experience of Greek- and Coptic-speaking groups
that held together under the common direction of the Alexandrian patriarch. The drifting apart, amidst the dogmatical and ecclesiastical conflicts of the Byzantine period, of Christian communities in Egypt, above all of Monophysites and Melchites, may not simply be equated to a division between Greeks and Copts. It is well known that not only Copts but also many Greeks, that is, Greek-speakers in Egypt (and elsewhere) adhered to the Monophysite church. But one may surmise that the Melchites had few supporters beyond the ranks of the Greeks in Alexandria and in the chora, the Christian Copts thus forming, together with Greek-speaking Monophysites in Egypt, an opposition to non-Monophysite authorities in Alexandria and Constantinople.

In other respects, too, the cultural diversity of late antique Egypt does not always correspond to a division between Greeks and Copts. This holds true, for instance, for Gnosticism and Manichaeism, both having had Greek- as well as Coptic-speaking adherents. With pagan “Hellenes” in Byzantine Egypt, some dividing lines are perhaps clearer, but again, they reveal no fundamental opposition in terms of Greeks versus Copts. These “Hellenes” still cherished the traditional Greek paideia (education) and were its active heralds.

That is especially true for the astonishing number of Greek, often pagan, poets that Egypt brought forth in the Byzantine period, one of the most famous being, toward the end of the fourth century, the Alexandrian Claudianus, who wrote Greek verse before becoming a celebrated Latin poet (Cameron, 1970). Other Greek poets followed during the fifth century, many of them coming from Panopolis deep in Egypt. Establishing contact with the court at Constantinople and the leading men of the Byzantine empire, these poets bear witness to the profound and long-lasting Hellenization of the Egyptian chora throughout the Greco-Roman period.

But these “Hellenes” were by no means alien to Egyptian culture and religion. One can detect, in the works of these Greek-writing Egyptian
poets, manifestations of an Egyptian patriotism that often tends to be overlooked but has nevertheless a long tradition reaching back to Ptolemaic and Roman times. Some of these poets show an interest in typically Egyptian cults. That is surely natural enough for Greek-speakers who were brought up, as their ancestors had been, in metropoles of the Egyptian chora. But the same interest for Egyptian cults may be conjectured, a fortiori, for “true” Egyptians, that is, for Coptic-speakers.

Egyptian pagan sanctuaries of the chora survived in fairly large numbers the fourth century, some of them still holding out in the fifth and a few, like PHILAE, even lasting well into the sixth century. It may be reasonably assumed that Coptic speakers were numbered among the adherents and the priests of these pagan Egyptian cults. Those Copts still clinging to their native paganism would thus have shared common religious convictions with pagan “Hellenes” still very active in fourth- and fifth-century Egypt and receptive to its traditions.

As already in Ptolemaic times, the phenomenon of Egyptians belonging to two cultures can be observed in the Byzantine period. But now as then it surely will have been limited to a rather small minority. ATHANASIUS’ familiarity with Coptic seems to have been exceptional among Alexandrian patriarchs, but ecclesiastical as well as civil administration must have required bilingual officials. One of them was the sixth-century lawyer and poet Dioscorus of Aphrodito. Interaction of Greek and Coptic traditions is also discernible in Coptic art. The bicultural heritage of Greco-Roman Egypt survived the ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT and so did, for a while, the Greek language in Egypt.

To view the history of Byzantine Egypt in terms of a struggle between Greeks and Copts would be utter simplification. But to say that cooperation prevailed would be a grave error, too, since indifference and even antagonism are evident on many occasions. The problem is one of balanced and informed judgment, but it is, above all, one of clear methodical approaches and of verifiable conceptions. Modern research
has as yet not agreed upon a satisfactory definition of what exactly, other than the language, is to be considered Coptic in Egypt before the Arab conquest. To clarify that basic problem more work has to be done on late antique Egypt, work that would blend, more than was the case in the past, Greek and Coptic studies and would bring together the results of historical, theological, papyrological, and linguistic research. More than any other epoch of Egypt’s ancient history, the Byzantine period is in need of a fresh approach and a thorough treatment.

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