

MEMPHITIC

What was formerly called the Memphitic dialect (an appellation now abandoned) was one that Egyptologists and Coptologists long sought to identify and get to know, thinking that it must have been one of the principal dialects of Coptic Egypt. It was in fact known that Memphis had been one of the two very great metropolises of pharaonic Egypt; it was therefore natural that, soon after the beginnings of the science which was to become Coptology and which was at first considered essentially an auxiliary of Egyptology, attempts were made to discover the idiom of ancient Memphis and that scholars endeavored to identify this dialect with one of the dialects found in those texts believed to have been found at Memphis, or at least in a region not too distant from it.

ATHANASIUS OF QUS, a grammarian of the fourteenth century, in listing the Coptic dialects known in his time, spoke of “Sahidic,” “Bohairic,” and “Bashmuric” (Kasser, 1973, pp. 76-77). Since the first Coptologists were above all Egyptologists, they naturally sought to find in the Coptic [idioms](#) attested by the documents at their disposal a reflection of Egyptian “dialects,” which corresponded to the two (or three) centers of the political and cultural life of pharaonic Egypt: Upper Egypt (Thebes) and Lower Egypt (Memphis), with sometimes the intermediate region of Middle Egypt.

In trying to superimpose these two triads, scholars had no difficulty in understanding the “Coptic of Misr” or “Sahidic” as *S*, and they soon located it in the upper third of Upper Egypt (the upper Nile Valley; cf. GEOGRAPHY, DIALECTAL), in the region of Thebes. Likewise, “Bohairic” was evidently *B*, and if the center of this dialect was the western Delta, it was conjectured that its region could be practically identified with the whole of the Delta; to meet the needs of the case, Lower Egypt could even annex to itself lower Middle Egypt (the region of Memphis).

Along the same lines, “Bashmuric” was identified with *F*. The first of

these identifications still has its defenders today, for it is certain that *S* was spoken at Thebes, if not probably at the origins of this dialect, at least in the period of its greatest extension (classical Coptic; see DIALECT, IMMIGRANT). The third identification quickly encountered great difficulty and was already rejected by Quatremère (1808, pp. 147-228).

Since the second identification (of *B* as “Memphitic”) is more probable, although also erroneous, it endured for a little more than a century (1777-1908). It was proposed for the first time by Woide in 1777 (according to Stern, 1880, p. 12, n. 1) and Tuki in 1778, after whom we may mention Mingarelli (1785), Quatremère (1808), Zoega (1810), Engelbreth (1811), Peyron (1835 and 1841), Schwartze (1850), Tattam (1852), Uhlemann (1853), Abel (1876), Rossi (1878), and finally Stern. (Stern, however, expressly rejected it (1880, p. 12): “Earlier scholars called Lower Egyptian ‘Coptic’ *kat*™ *χoc*»*n* and when Upper Egyptian gained in significance for scholarship Woide 1777 proposed for it the name Memphitic.

This name is not appropriate, because the language of Memphis, which is preserved, e.g., in the papyri from the monastery of Abba Jeremias and the Bible translation of which Tuki still knew and cited as *Memphiticus alter*, is rather ‘Middle Egyptian.’ I would have no objection to the description of the Lower Egyptian dialect as Bohairic, since it bears this name in Arabic, while the Coptic texts themselves call it *jacpi nremn,/mi* ‘the northern language.’”

Moreover, he required the siglum *M* for “Middle Egyptian,” which is Fayyumic in the widest sense of the term; Fayyumic in the strict sense (with regular lambdacism, etc.) was for him “*F* (fayyumisch).” But it took a dozen years before other Coptologists (Krall, 1892) followed Stern’s example, so that one finds Maspero (1886) and Ciasca (1889), among others, still calling *B* “Memphitic.”

It was apparently Steindorff (1894) who succeeded in persuading the majority of Coptologists to give up calling Bohairic pure and simple “Memphitic,” no doubt by presenting to them a siglum *M* corresponding to a “Memphitic” that was certainly the language of Memphis but quite different from *B*, and in fact an idiom that corresponds rather well with Stern’s “Middle Egyptian” *M*, either *Fs* in modern terminology or *Fb* (?) or even *Sf*. After him, the use of the term “Memphitic” in Wessely (1908, p. 185) appears as no more than an isolated survival.

The siglum *M* is used today for the MESOKEMIC dialect, at least by those who have not been put off by the recollection of the diverse significance formerly given to this siglum in Coptic dialectology and who distrust the identification, still disputed, of Mesokemic and the autochthonous speech of Oxyrhynchus.

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RODOLPHE [KASSER](#)

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