

## **ROMAN AND BYZANTINE RULE IN EGYPT**

The victory of Octavian (Augustus since 27 B.C.) over Cleopatra VII, the last sovereign of Ptolemaic Egypt, and her protector Mark Antony first in Actium (2 September 31 B.C.), then in Alexandria (1 August 30 B.C.) brought Egypt under Roman rule. This new epoch, conveniently subdivided into the Roman and the Byzantine periods (respectively from Augustus to DIOCLETIAN [30 B.C.-A.D. 284/5] and from Diocletian to the Arab conquest in 641), lasted nearly seven hundred years and came to an end only in A.D. 646, when the last Byzantine soldiers left the soil of Egypt.

Often depicted as a period of misery and decline and as a further step downward in the long decay of late-period Egypt, the centuries of Roman and Byzantine rule deserve fairer consideration: Egypt was not only one of the economically most productive provinces of the Roman and Byzantine realm, it was also a domain of great intellectual fertility for pagan as well as for Jewish and Christian culture. Late antique Egypt not only produced a towering church leader like ATHANASIUS but also inspiring figures of monasticism such as ANTONY, PACHOMIUS, and SHENUTE.

The spiritual influence of Egypt was probably never greater than in the Byzantine period, when the fathers of the desert and the Egyptian monasteries attracted visitors from all over the Mediterranean world, from the Gallic West to the Greek East. At the end of the fourth century, Alexandria, though predominantly Greek and already largely Christian, still produced an outstanding pagan poet, Claudius Claudianus, writing Greek verses but famous above all for his great works in Latin. The Egyptian *chora* (countryside) of the fifth century was home not only to a mass of toiling peasants but also to Greek poets like NONNOS OF PANOPOLIS, author of poems drawing their inspiration from both pagan and Christian traditions.

By that time and under the influence of Christian teaching, the popular culture of Egypt had already asserted itself firmly, elevating the Coptic language to a literary level and thus enabling Christian thought and liturgy to survive after the departure of the Greeks. Late antiquity in Egypt is not predominantly the last phase of a long decline but in many respects a brilliant, engaging period, witnessing metamorphoses and generating new developments of long-ranging impact.

## **Political History**

The second half of the third century A.D. was a period of crisis that brought Egypt, among other things, foreign invasion by the Palmyrenes (270-272) and a string of civil wars. Other provinces of the East and of the West, especially along the Rhine and the Danube, also witnessed inroads by “barbarians,” economic disruption, and social unrest. This generalized state of disorder led to a series of usurpations by pretenders to the empire, one of the last and most successful being DIOCLETIAN (284-305).

Drawing on the lessons of the past, he inaugurated a set of reforms that were to affect the empire as a whole and created new conditions especially for Egypt. These reforms were partially continued by CONSTANTINE I THE GREAT (306-337), but with some important changes, the most profound being toleration (313) and soon privileges for the Christian church. After victory over Licinius, his last rival, in 324, Constantine refounded [Byzantium](#) as a town bearing his name, Constantinople, and made it his favored residence. Constantinople rapidly became a new, a second Rome and the capital of the eastern half of the empire, displacing both Alexandria and Syrian Antioch, which had been until then the leading metropolises of the Roman East, politically, economically, and not least ecclesiastically, in the hierarchy of episcopal sees.

Notwithstanding the constant drifting apart of the two halves of the

Roman empire, its unity was upheld in theory and in programmatic declarations. But East and West each had their own emperors (*imperator*, *autokrator*) who, though forming a *collegium* (colleagueship), operated separately in their respective residences and defended their own, not seldom different or even conflicting, interests. Progressively the cohesion of the empire dissolved, the decisive [blow](#) being dealt by the Germanic invasions of the West. Rome having come under the dominance of the Teutons in 476 and the last West Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, having been deposed, the center of gravity and imperial authority shifted completely to the East.

The Roman empire had in fact become the Byzantine empire. Constantinople was now the undisputed center of what was left of the Greco-Roman world, but that did not stop rivalry and conflict with the two other metropolises of the Orient, Alexandria and Antioch. Especially in the case of Alexandria, relations with Constantinople were tense and often acrimonious. Political as well as ecclesiastical dissent continued and grew even stronger after the Council of CHALCEDON (451), until the Arabs conquered both Antioch and Alexandria in the first half of the seventh century.

In strictly technical terms, the Byzantine period could begin only with the refoundation of [Byzantium](#) as Constantinople (starting in 324) and its establishment as the privileged imperial residence in the East. But frequently, and not least in PAPHYROLOGY, the Byzantine period is reckoned retroactively from the reign of Diocletian, beginning in 284. Indeed, many of the features considered typical of the Byzantine state were created through the reforms of Diocletian and his colleagues in the tetrarchy established in 293, Galerius (with Diocletian) in the East, Maximianus and Constantius in the West.

Egypt had had its own share of the many rebellions and usurpations of the third century. In 293, Galerius had reduced a revolt that resulted in the destruction of Coptos (Qift). Still more far-reaching were the

consequences, some years later, of the usurpation of Lucius Domitius Domitianus, proclaimed emperor in 297. Diocletian in person reconquered Egypt and took Alexandria after a siege of eight months. He afterward proceeded to Upper Egypt, affirming his control of the situation and establishing the southern border of Egypt at Philae, which meant that Lower Nubia (Dodekaschoenus) was left to the Nobatians. As in the rest of the empire, Diocletian split the old provinces in order to establish stricter control and to marshal more efficiently economic and military resources.

The *provincia Aegyptus* was thus divided into three provinces: *Aegyptus Iovia* (Alexandria and western Delta), *Aegyptus Herculia* (eastern Delta and Middle Egypt), and *Thebais*, the names of the former two provinces echoing the tutelary deities of the tetrarchical college, Jupiter and Hercules. New administrative structures, the dioceses and the prefectures, were created above the level of the provinces. Each of the latter was headed by a *praefectus praetorio* (pretorian prefect) attached to the person of one of the emperors, the *praefectus praetorio Orientis* (pretorian [prefect](#) of the East) thus being established at Constantinople. This prefecture evolved in the fourth century as the administrative headquarters of the Roman East. Each prefecture included a number of dioceses, which in turn were made up of several provinces (see PROVINCIAL [ORGANIZATION](#) OF EGYPT).

At first, and probably until about 381, the provinces of Egypt were part of the *dioecesis Oriens* (eastern diocese), whose regent (*vicarius*) resided at Antioch. As a consequence of Diocletian's reforms, Egypt had thus lost its former special status. It was subdivided into several provinces and firmly inserted into the restructured administrative network of the Roman Near East. Above all, Egypt had been put into line behind Constantinople and Antioch. The arrangement of provincial territories in Egypt as conceived by Diocletian did not prove definitive and was revised several times during the fourth century.

Another important consequence of the administrative resettlement of Egypt concerned the position of the *praefectus Aegypti* ([prefect](#) of Egypt). The latter had been, during the past centuries, the direct representative of the Roman emperor and the highest ranking official in Egypt. His competence was now confined to *Aegyptus Iovia* and he lost his military attributions, as did the provincial governors (*praesides*). Military command rested now with the dukes (*duces*), whose area was not always confined to a single province.

A set of Latin inscriptions in Luxor records one Aurelius Maximinus who, in 308, held the position of *dux Aegypti et Thebaidos utrarumque Libyarum* (duke of Egypt and Thebais and both Libyas). This single military command was later split, but the principle of separating civil and military authority was observed during the next two centuries until it was abrogated by Justinian (see ARMY, ROMAN). Diocletian took one further step to put an end to the special status of Egypt: the mint of Alexandria lost the right to strike its own currency and started to produce standard imperial coinage.

Before Diocletian's reforms, administrative documents in Egypt had been dated by regnal years of the emperors, but from now on they adopted the consular dating practiced in all the other provinces of the empire. The transfer of the imperial residence to Constantinople, the development of a new and strengthened bureaucracy both there and on the levels of dioceses and provinces, and a revived determination to unify the composite empire and to reaffirm Roman *disciplina* and *mos maiorum* (ancestral custom): all this gave a fresh impetus to the use of Latin in the Greek East.

The army had already been, and still was, a vehicle of Latin and romanization, but much less so in the Greek East than in the Roman West. Nevertheless, Latin military terms infiltrated the Greek language and survived in Arabic. For example, the Latin *fossatum* (ditch) became the Greek *fossaton* and the Arab *fustat*, and the Latin *castra* (camp), the

Greek *kastra* and the Arab *qasr*.

There was, in the beginning of the fourth century, a further disruption of old traditions when the *nomes* were replaced by city- territories (*civitates*, *politeiai*, *poleis*), which put them on the same footing with administrative subdivisions elsewhere in the Roman empire. Many of these changes took place or were at least initiated under Diocletian, Galerius, or Licinius, that is, before Constantine the Great established himself at [Byzantium](#)/Constantinople, thus inaugurating what is traditionally called the Byzantine age. For the reasons surveyed above, it seems legitimate and even appropriate to date the beginning of the Byzantine period of Egyptian history with Diocletian.

### **Ecclesiastical History**

These developments, though not without consequence for the everyday life of people, were mostly confined to the realm of politics and administration. But at the same time, other changes were going on that left a much deeper and lasting mark on men and society. Christian belief and church were already well entrenched in Egypt and had survived the ordeal of several persecutions during the third century. The victory of Constantine was perceived and heralded as a triumph of Christ and a new epoch for the church by such writers as Lactantius and EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA. But it was a triumph beset with numerous difficulties, many of them arising from the very privileges now bestowed upon the Christian communities.

Theological debate, hierarchical dispute, and schismatic movements were henceforth freer to develop and they often involved the imperial authority and political institutions. As head of the Egyptian church, the patriarch of Alexandria faced an extremely difficult task. On the one hand, he was expected to defend the unity of his church, which proved nearly impossible in face of opposition from Arians, Melitians, and other Christian factions both in his own country and abroad. On the other hand,

the patriarch had to secure the position of his church versus the pretensions of Constantinople, though he had no intention of breaking away from the Byzantine state and from the emperor in Constantinople.

The tensions and compromises of this complex relationship form an important chapter not only of the ecclesiastical but also of the political history of Egypt in late antiquity. The situation was further aggravated when Alexandria was humiliated and [monophysitism](#) banned by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

This new development and the [clashes](#) between Melchites and Monophysites in Alexandria and Egypt have been held chiefly responsible for the alienation between Egypt and the Byzantine state and thus for the easy conquest of Egypt by the Arabs. Matters, however, were much more complicated and delineations not so clearcut. The Egyptian Monophysites had at some times strong support in Constantinople, the best-known example being Justinian's empress, Theodora.

On their side, the Byzantine emperors, trying to keep together the Catholic and Monophysite parts of the empire and to maintain good relations with Italy and the bishop of Rome, were sometimes anxious not to offend Egyptian sensibilities. This proves true at least for some emperors, for instance, Justinian (529-565). The estrangement between Egypt and the Byzantine state was a slow and sometimes violent process, but serious though it was, it never led to complete disruption and separatism.

Besides the prevailing political and dogmatic issues opposing Alexandria and Constantinople, there were other frictions often involving the relation between church and state. So the judicial functions once conceded to the bishops by Constantine the Great (see AUDENTIA EPISCOPALIS) were later sharply curtailed by a series of imperial decisions. To uphold the running of towns and to secure the implementation of fiscal obligations, the state had an interest in the continuous functioning of the municipal

class and would not readily allow *curiales* (municipal officers) to enter the orders or the monasteries without due safeguards regarding curial property and obligations. When political or economic pressures boiled over, functionaries of the Byzantine state in Alexandria often had to bear the brunt of popular discontent. One famous example is the death of Theodosius (Augustan prefect) killed by the people when Dioscorus was consecrated bishop in 516.

## **Economy and Society**

The state of Egyptian economy and society during late antiquity has often been described by modern authorities as a most desolate one and has been held partly responsible for the little prestige of the Byzantine state in Egypt and thus for the apparent ease of the Arab conquest of that country. There have been, in the past, reservations about this view of things (Johnson, 1951), and opposition to it has been growing (Winkelmann, 1979).

Notwithstanding a plethora of source materials, it is extremely difficult to pass a well-documented overall judgment on the degree of disaffection with the state of social and economic conditions in Egypt. Papyri, numerous as they are, mostly give a fragmentary picture and are not without risk submitted to generalization. Laws, regulations, and other official statements are precious insofar as they give information on the sectors in which state authorities perceived difficulties and on the means applied to remedy them. But these are normative texts, whereas the papyri often give a very different picture, showing the difference between ideal and reality. Important questions therefore remain frequently without answer.

For instance, was the common Egyptian of late antiquity better off than his ancestors in the preceding centuries? One cannot, of course, give a simple, undifferentiated answer, but the long-prevailing view of a constant deterioration from Roman to Byzantine times has been seriously

challenged (Bowman, 1986). Did the Byzantine state effect strict rigidity, confining people to their status, making trades and professions hereditary, rendering economy and society essentially immobile? This was once the consensus of opinion, but it is no longer taken for granted (Keenan, 1975). Economic plight and the raids of the “barbarians” have often been considered as having seriously contributed to the reduction of the number of inhabitants; the depopulation observed in the fourth-century Fayyum has frequently been adduced as proof.

But gradual, not necessarily man-made desertification might also, and at least partly, offer a valid explanation. Other regions of Egypt, with the exception of Oxyrhynchus and its territory, are not nearly as well known as the Fayyum. We are ignorant of the total number of the inhabitants of late antique Egypt. It is therefore extremely difficult to assess the effects of the social and economic conditions on the overall evolution of the population through the Byzantine age.

The [taxation](#) system introduced by Diocletian, hard as it may have been, was nonetheless meant to be fair and to reduce inequality. It evolved in a way that took account of both personnel and land. As a rule, local magnates and big landowners held at the same time state positions and were charged with tax collection; hence fraud, collusion, and strong influence was exerted on minor landholders. The latter often sought an end to their tribulations, selling their land to big possessors and becoming tenant farmers in the hope of finding protection as clients of their patrons. Whole villages and communities thus became dependent on big landowners, as, for instance, the Apions.

The latter were often viewed as some sort of feudal landlords, recruiting their own troops, building private prisons to defend their authority, and challenging the interests of a declining central state. This interpretation has been nuanced or contested (Carrié, 1984; Fikhman, 1965; Gascou, 1985). Among other things, the position of big landowners has been reexamined in the light of their state obligations, which they performed,

according to this new approach, well within the framework of the central administration.

## Religion

The end of the persecutions of the Christians and the triumph of Constantine in 324 did not mean the end of paganism, not even the end of conflicts between pagans and Christians (cf. surveys by Maspero, 1923; Hardy, 1952; Rémondon, 1960; new approaches by Pearson and Goehring, 1986). Both coexisted, often very uncomfortably, in the society at large as well as in the army. Controversies in the Christian camp, especially between Catholics (Orthodox) and Arians during the fourth century, made it sometimes easier for pagans to survive, and the attempted restoration of paganism by the emperor Julian (361-363) showed that the cause of paganism was not yet entirely lost.

In Alexandria, pagans had a strong following throughout the fourth century, as shown, for example, in the pagan vendetta in 362 and the riots preceding the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum in 391-392 (cf. Thelamon, 1981). Notwithstanding these pagan attempts at resistance, Christianity conquered a majority of Egyptians in the course of the fourth century. But the pace and size of this progress, and its regional differentiation, are still debated (Bagnall, 1982; Martin, 1979; Wipszycka, 1986). Even less do we know the exact and respective strength of the various conflicting Christian communities in fourth-century Egypt: Catholics, Arians, Melitians, not to speak of Gnostics and Manichaeans.

It may have been opportune to become a Christian, conforming oneself to official policy and imperial preferences, be they Arian (Constans II) or Catholic (Theodosius I). But many men and women in Egypt went far beyond a formal affiliation to the church and flocked to the hardships and promises of monastic life. Social care for the poor, the sick, and the captive gave fresh impulse to new forms of community life, ruled by the

love and fear of God and by strict obedience to the superiors of the monasteries (Bacht, 1984; Rousseau, 1985).

Greek civilization had certainly proved very attractive to many native Egyptians, but it never achieved in depth and extent the success of Christianity. There was a real identification of the popular masses with the new religion and an awakening of spiritual activity in the various manifestations of Coptic culture. In the fourth century, this Egyptian revival occurred under [Greek-speaking](#) Christian leadership. (For a qualification of this view and the complexities of the relationship between Alexandria and Egypt, see Krause, 1981; regarding the authenticity and interpretation of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, see Dörries, 1966; Barnes, 1986; and Louth, 1988).

Throughout the Byzantine period, Greek continued to be spoken and written not only in Alexandria but also in the higher strata of the population of the *chora*. Even after the Arab conquest, Greek was still used, besides Coptic and Arabic, for administrative purposes and it disappeared only in the tenth century. But Coptic was on the rise since the fourth century, evidenced first in religious writings and in private correspondence. While the Greek language maintained itself in the face of Coptic progress, Hellenic culture in the sense of pagan conviction was in decline. The *gymnasium* as the traditional focus of typically Greek formation and communal activities did not survive the crucial changes of the fourth century, nor did the famous Serapeum in Alexandria.

But there held out, throughout the fifth century, some strongholds of pagan culture even deep down in the Egyptian *chora*, for example, in Panopolis, home to a succession of Greek poets such as Pamprepius, Nonnos, and Cyrus (cf. Cameron, 1965). The position of these literates between paganism and Christianity is not always easy to determine. They lived in an age of transition and each case should be examined individually. That also lesser figures could be Christian without abandoning classical Greek culture and poetry is demonstrated by the

sixth-century official DIOSCORUS OF APHRODITO (MacCoull, 1989).

One also can observe Greek-educated aristocrats turning away not only from paganism but also from Byzantine [orthodoxy](#) and entering the ranks of Monophysites, thereby pulling down one more barrier that could have separated them from the mainstream of the population in the *chora*. Among the victims of Coptic fervor were not only the Greek pagan cults but also the old Egyptian deities and their time-honored sanctuaries. These were abandoned, burned down, or turned into Christian churches. The temple of Isis in Philae, first closed, later became a church, and so did many venerable sanctuaries in Thebes and all over Egypt, ceding the place to Christian cults (Krause, 1966, cols. 72-78).

### **The End of Byzantine Rule**

During the last decades of Byzantine rule (cf. Butler, 1978; Winkelmann, 1979), Egypt, while continuing to be the theater of serious internal dissensions, was also caught up in the turmoil of Byzantine and international politics. Alexandria, though being torn between Melchite and Monophysite patriarchs, was nonetheless instrumental in bringing down the emperor Phocas (602-610) and contributed much to the success of Heraclius' general, Nicetas. In 619, the Persian invasion of Egypt effectively separated the country from the Byzantine realm. But when they had to leave ten years later, the Persians had not made many friends in Egypt. At least there are good reasons to believe that the occupiers did not accord special favors to the Monophysite church.

Nor did the emperor Heraclius (610-641) when he installed the "Caucasian" Cyrus as patriarch in Alexandria (the tradition that Cyrus was also appointed *augustalis* must probably be rejected; Winkelmann, 1984, pp. 21-26). Being of Melchite observance, the new representative of the Byzantine emperor met with fierce resistance in Monophysite quarters, above all from their patriarch, [BENJAMIN I](#), who finally had to flee from Alexandria.

In the wake of the Arab conquest, the country was thus in a state of utter confusion and agitation. Such a situation was in fact nothing new to Egypt, but under the prevailing circumstances, it surely must have facilitated the task of the invading Arabs. Nonetheless, the conquest of Egypt was not easy. The Copts were not a monolithic group welcoming wholeheartedly the Arab armies. After the fall of Pelusium in 639, the troops of 'Amr ibn al-'As met strong resistance in the towns of the Delta, whereas the countryside was no match for the conquerors. The military stronghold of Babylon (Old Cairo) fell only on 6 April 641 and Alexandria even later, on 29 September 642, after the Byzantine troops had left the town.

Dynastic strife in Constantinople after the death of [Heraclius](#) on 11 February 641 and the resulting confusion had greatly helped the Arab cause. When, on the other hand, dissensions in the [Islamic](#) camp led to the demise of 'Amr, the Byzantine general Manuel availed himself of the opportunity and recovered Alexandria in 645. This in turn provoked the reinstallation of 'Amr and the definitive occupation of Alexandria by the Arabs in 646. It was the end of an epoch that had begun, nearly a millennium before, with the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.

But the termination of Greco-Roman rule did not bring about total disruption. Continuity can be observed in many important fields, such as the Coptic language and the Coptic church. In short, the Copts as a social and cultural group survived, as did, for a time at least, the Greek language and late Roman administration. Notwithstanding these links with the past, Egypt was now set on an entirely new course and prepared to take its place within an Arab-dominated world.

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