

## Who speaks Egyptian in Greek, Roman and Late Antique Egypt?

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*After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander, Greek was gradually imposed as the language of power and prestige, and Egyptian as that of the individuals of lower status. Under the Romans this continued and was even reinforced by the fact that the Egyptian language gradually ceased to be written except in the very closed circles of temple scribes. It thus acquired the image of the language of the illiterate, especially as all education was given in Greek. Without changing the association with illiteracy, the monastic movement gave it a very different social value and thus raised the prestige of the language once again. Even though from the fourth century onwards, the development of Egyptian ('Coptic') is generally associated with the rise of Christianity, the re-evaluation of the language and its qualities seems to have been a much wider phenomenon in the fourth century.*

*Apart from the last text, which has come down to us in Arabic but was probably first written in Coptic, all the other texts below are in Greek.*

### ***Social value of the language***

#### **1. Letter, 3rd cent. BC**

[P.Cair.Goodsp. 3]

Ptolemy to Achilles, greetings.

After you wrote, it I though I should also tell you about my dream, in order that you understand how the gods know you. I have written it below in Egyptian so that you understand it clearly. [... then different subject...]

#### **2. Letter by a mother to her son (or husband?), a doctor, 2nd cent. BC.**

[UPZ I 148]

Discovering that you were learning Egyptian letters I rejoiced for you and for myself, because now when you come to the city you will teach the slave boys in the establishment of Phalou... the enema doctor, and you will have a means of support for old age.

#### **3. Description of a runaway slave, 3rd. cent. AD**

[P.Oxy. LI 3617]

[...beginning missing...]rus, an Egyptian, from the village of Chenres in the Athribite nome, ignorant of Greek, tall, lean, smooth-shorn, with a slight wound on the left side of the head, honey-complexioned, somewhat pale, with a scanty beard - or rather, with no hair at all to his beard, smooth-skinned, narrow in the jaws, long-nosed. By trade a weaver, he walks around as if he were somebody important, chattering in a shrill voice. He is about 32 years old. He wears undyed and ragged clothes. He has on the [...text breaks off...]

#### **4. Sayings of a desert father, 4th cent. AD**

[*Apophthegmata Patrum*, Alphabetical Collection, Arsenios 5-6, PG 65.88-89]

(5) Someone asked Abba Arsenios, 'Why do we not make much out of such education and wisdom, while these Egyptian peasants acquire so many virtues?' Abba Arsenios answered him, 'We make nothing out of our earthly knowledge; but these Egyptian peasants have acquired their virtues through their own labour'.

(6) When Abba Arsenios once asked an Egyptian ascetic about his own thoughts, another man recognised him and asked, 'Abba Arsenios, why do you, who have so good a Roman and Greek education, ask this peasant about your own thoughts?' And Arsenios answered, 'I have a good Roman and Greek education, but I have not even learnt the alphabet of this peasant.'

5. An anecdote about piety and ethnicity, 4th cent. AD

[Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 21.8-9, G.J.M. Bartelink, *Palladio. La storia Lausiaca* (Verona 1974)]

Whenever [Anthony] came to their monastery, he would call out and ask: 'Brother Makarios, have any brethren come here?' He answered 'Yes'. 'Are they Egyptians or from Jerusalem?' And he had given him instructions: 'If you see them free from trouble, say Egyptians; but when they are more pious and learned, say from Jerusalem'. [9] So he asked him as usual: 'Are the brethren Egyptians or from Jerusalem?' Macarius answered and said to him: 'They are a mixture'. Now when he said to him 'They are Egyptians', the holy Antony would say to him: 'Prepare some lentils and offer them to eat', and he would utter a prayer for them and see them off. But when he said 'they are from Jerusalem', he would sit up all night, talking to them about salvation.

6. Anecdote on languages in the monastery of Pachomius, 4th/5th cent?

[*Sancti Pachomii vita altera* 85, ed. F. Halkin (Brussels 1932) 262-64]

Another time, as the blessed one was visiting the cells of the brothers and correcting the thoughts of each of them, he fell upon a Roman of high office, who also knew the Greek language well. The great man came close to him so as to instruct him in the things that would be good for him and to find out his heart's emotions, and he spoke to him in Egyptian. The brother did not understand what the great man was telling him, and the great man did not understand what the Roman was saying, because the blessed one could not speak Greek. So the great man was obliged to call a brother who could translate what the two were saying. When the brother came to do the translating, the Roman did not want to tell the sins of his heart to the great man through somebody else. And he said, 'Only you do I want, after God, to have knowledge of my heart's evils. And I don't want to tell you these things through somebody else, nor do I want somebody else to hear these things, except you'. When the great man heard this, he sent away the brother who had come to translate. But as he could not say the words necessary for his improvement and salvation because he didn't know any Greek at all, having made a sign of the hand to him that he should wait until he came to him, the blessed one left him alone and went away to pray privately. Stretching his arms out to heaven, he prayed to God, saying, 'Lord Almighty, if I can not help the people you send me from the end of the earth because I do not know their language, what is the point in their coming? If you want to save them here through me, give me oh Lord Almighty, for the sake of curing their souls, the knowledge of their speech'. He prayed for three hours, and he greatly beseeched God about this, and when he finished praying, suddenly something like a small letter was sent into his hand from heaven, and upon reading it he immediately learned to speak all the languages. And having given glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, with great joy he came back to that brother. And he started speaking to him flawlessly both in Greek and in Latin.

***Intrinsic value of the language***

7. Superiority of Egyptian sounds, 4th cent.

[*Corpus hermeticum* 16.1-2, ed. A.D. Nock, vol. 2 (Paris 1945) 231-2; transl. G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton 1993) 37]

Hermes my teacher often used to say to me... that those who read my books will think that they are very simply and clearly written, when in fact, quite on the contrary, they are unclear and hide the meaning of the words, and will become completely obscure when later on the Greeks will want to translate our language into their own, which will bring about a complete distortion and obfuscation of the text. Expressed in the original language, the discourse conveys its meaning clearly, for the very quality of the sounds and the [intonation] of the Egyptian words contains in itself the force of the things said... Preserve this discourse untranslated, in order that such mysteries may be kept from the Greeks, and that their insolent, insipid and meretricious manner of speech may not reduce to impotence the dignity and strength [of our language], and the cogent force of the words. For all

the Greeks have ... is empty speech, good for showing off; and the philosophy of the Greeks is just noisy talk. For our part, we use not words, but sounds full of energy.

**8. Superiority of the Egyptian script, 4th cent.**

[Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8.6, transl. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb (1984)]

The wise men of Egypt, I think, also understood this, either by scientific or innate knowledge, and when they wished to signify something wisely did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciation of philosophical statements, but by drawing images and inscribing in their temples one particular image of each particular thing they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world that is that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements all together in one, and not discourse or deliberation.

***Longevity of the themes***

**9. Lament on the prevalence of Arabic over Coptic (extract), 10th cent.**

[Apocalypse of pseudo-Samuel, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 20 (1915-17) 379-80]

Those that are strong in the knowledge of God, whose Coptic language equalled in their mouths the sweetness of honey and spread around them like the smell of perfumes because of their beautiful pronunciation of the Coptic language, and all of them, at that time, shall all of them abandon it and speak the Arabic language and take pride in it, to the point that it will be impossible to recognize them as Christians; on the contrary, they will be taken for barbarians. And the remnant remaining in the South who will know the Coptic language and speak in it will be abused and mocked by their brothers the Christians who speak in the Arabic language.