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CHAPTER 3

Why did Coptic fail where Aramaic succeeded? *Linguistic developments in Egypt and the Near East after the Arab conquest*

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In 2003 David Wasserstein published in *Scripta Classica Israelica* an article entitled 'Why did Arabic succeed where Greek failed? Language change in the Near East after Muhammad', wherein he addressed the very intriguing question of why Arabic, within a relatively short period after its arrival in the area as a language of power, succeeded in penetrating all levels of society, reaching much deeper than Greek ever had, despite its uninterrupted more-than-millenary presence in the region. A year later, the same journal published an article by Robert Hoyland with the title 'Language and identity: the twin histories of Arabic and Aramaic (and: Why did Aramaic succeed where Greek failed?)'. Engaging directly with Wasserstein's article, Hoyland questions the rapidity and totality of the success of Arabic, noting in particular that although Greek was indeed ousted from the Near East, Aramaic firmly held its ground. He thus shifts the focus to the reasons why Greek was less fortunate than Aramaic in the area.

Strikingly, even though the two authors have different views on a number of points, there is one on which they agree: Greek *failed*. For both, this failure is understood in comparative terms, in relation to another language considered as having similar sociolinguistic characteristics or similar claims to 'success'. Wasserstein's pair of languages is probably the most pertinent, since in many parts of the Near East the two languages had very similar functions. Indeed, like Greek, Arabic was imposed in the area through conquest, and it was established as a *Reichssprache*, spoken by rulers and by those who associated with them, as well as by administrators; but unlike Greek, Arabic 'filtered down to virtually all sectors of the population', eventually becoming the exclusive language of speech and reducing the local languages to the margins at best.[1] On the face of it, the parallel with

[1] Wasserstein 2003: 265–267.

Aramaic is more slippery, especially as Greek is precisely presented here as a lingua franca rather than the equivalent of Aramaic in any way. Greek was not, we are told, 'felt to be the particular language of any cohesive social group'.[2]

In this view, one of the reasons for the failure of Greek is that, during its long and distinguished presence in the Near East, it was all at once a language of culture, a language of power and a lingua franca, but never a widespread mother tongue, and never a language conveying a sense of ethnicity. It failed to achieve low status and failed to become the first language of a group by replacing the language that group had previously spoken. In other words, Greek remained a High language in a world of pervasive extended diglossia. This verdict, unsurprisingly, comes from Semiticists.[3] One suspects that some Classicists might interpret this as the *success* of Greek, not its failure, as it is precisely the lack of specific affiliation with a given ethnic or religious group that has sustained its continued universality beyond immediate political contingencies.

Other Classicists, however, will contest this fact altogether. Thus, according to Glen Bowersock and Fergus Millar, Greek was well embedded at all levels of society, and was the exclusive or first language of a number of groups in Roman cities of the Near East.[4] What for the Near East remains difficult to establish because of the nature of the evidence – learned texts and inscriptions do not give straightforward access to what was actually spoken – can be argued more convincingly for Egypt, whose papyri come from a much wider range of linguistic contexts, some very relevant to everyday situations. Roger Bagnall has insisted on its ubiquity in Egypt, where low-quality Greek is regularly found in written form even in rural contexts, indicating that it had gone down well below the level of 'language of culture'.[5] Raffaella Cribiore's studies of Greek education in Egypt also involve individuals who are not affluent, Hellenised city-dwellers.[6]

Greek did indeed drastically diminish on the Near Eastern and Egyptian scenes after the Arab conquest, and this is generally seen as corroborating the hypothesis that it functioned mainly as a second language and a *Reichssprache*, and was rendered useless in both cases through its replacement by Arabic. However, Greek did not entirely disappear, and certainly

[2] Hoyland 2004: 191–192.

[3] Donner expresses the same idea in his account of the Arab conquest: 'Among the great masses in Syria who could neither read nor write, Hellenism had sent down only very shallow roots before striking the solid Semitic bedrock' (1981: 94).

[4] See especially Bowersock 1990; Millar 2008.

[5] Bagnall 1993: 240–260, 2011: 75–94; see also Fournet 1999; Sidarus 2007.

[6] Cribiore 1996, 1999, 2001.

not as a High language, which according to that hypothesis is all it ever was in the first place. Averil Cameron's survey of its presence in the area after the Arab conquest makes this abundantly clear.[7] Greek remained present in the Melkite Churches of Jerusalem and Alexandria throughout the Middle Ages, and was even used by members of the non-Melkite Church in some cases, especially when they needed to communicate outside the boundaries of their own flocks.[8] Trilingual Greek–Coptic–Arabic lexica were still produced in Egypt in the fifteenth century.[9] Presumably it was also in use among merchants dealing with Byzantium, for example those whose documents were found in the Cairo Geniza.

Saying that Greek failed is a rhetorical way to make a slightly provocative statement. Greek did not *fail*: its use in the Near East receded, for reasons that are still not entirely understood, and are beyond the scope of this chapter. If one language *did* fail in the area, it is Egyptian – or Coptic. The epigone of an extremely ancient and highly prestigious royal language, it started slowly but steadily to be abandoned by its speakers in favour of Arabic from the tenth century onwards, and became totally extinct at some point in the later Middle Ages.[10] How could a language which was so powerful a vector of cultural identity become entirely obsolete, especially within an imperial framework that tended to favour the formation of relatively autonomous self-governing communities? The two articles with which I began each address aspects of this question, insofar as the success of Arabic is directly linked to the demise of Coptic, and the success of Aramaic is a foil against which the failure of Coptic might be better understood, by helping us bring to the fore the distinctive features of the Egyptian case.

At the outset, the situation of Aramaic and Coptic was similar: they were the local spoken languages of the area's Christian population, were used by ecclesiastical authors in their writings, and as time went by, especially from the late fifth century onwards, they were also more and more present in epigraphy and in documents. Geographically, the areas where they were most prevalent were also the two strongholds of resistance to the Council of Chalcedon, and thus both Aramaic (especially its northern dialect Syriac) and Coptic have been generally considered to be languages of the non-Chalcedonian Churches. Even though a one-to-one correspondence between a given Church and a given language is not only questionable but totally inaccurate, the relation between the non-Chalcedonian Church and Syriac or Coptic was symbolically important among the speakers of both languages. Despite those points of convergence, however, after the arrival

[7] Cameron 1997. [8] MacCoull 1990.
[9] These are the as yet little-studied 'scalae'; see Sidarus 1978 and 2000, with references.
[10] See Zaborowski 2008; Richter 2009.

of the Arabs the two languages knew very different trajectories. Aramaic continued to expand, participated in the intellectual life of the Caliphate, and in derived forms continues to be spoken to this day. At the same time, Christians in the Near East had begun using Arabic from the end of the eighth century, and Arabic speakers had been present even before the conquests. Coptic, on the contrary, remained the sole written language of Egyptian Christians until the tenth century, while Arabic was only used in administrative and some legal dealings. In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, however, Coptic was abandoned as a learned/literary language, a few antiquarian exceptions notwithstanding.[11] When it fell into disuse as a spoken language is more difficult to assess, but there are, as we shall see, clear signs that in the tenth century the shift had already started.[12]

Attempts have of course been made to explain the demise of Coptic. Some remain unsatisfactory because ultimately they are more concerned with why Arabic was adopted than why Coptic was abandoned. Yet even though Arabic was successful everywhere as Wasserstein shows, only in Egypt did it entirely replace the local language. Most often the languages that came into contact with it continued to be used, as Egyptian had been used for a thousand years alongside Greek. It is important in this matter to distinguish between two different, if interrelated, questions. One, generally well analysed, is that of the success of Arabic among the conquered populations; the other is why one of the languages spoken previously by the conquered populations, Coptic, was eventually totally abandoned by its native speakers, contrary to Aramaic, Berber or Persian.

This distinction has not hitherto been made. The only two articles devoted entirely to the question were written more than twenty years ago by the Copticist Leslie MacCoull.[13] Her approach is very passionate and emotional and she essentially presents us with an indictment of Muslim domination over Eastern Christians. Even so, she sees the disuse of Coptic as the result both of a forced shift and of an internal lack of vitality, thus combining one external and one internal factor. In strong language, especially in the second article, MacCoull claims that Coptic culture 'lost touch with [its] past' because of its 'anti-intellectual stance' and its 'devaluation of learning'.[14] Despite some important insights, MacCoull's approach to the subject was not analytical and systematic. Perhaps the most problematic point is the fact that she directly equates language and culture. Thus instead of investigating why the culture of Egyptian Christians found in Arabic a

[11] See Richter 2009: 419–421. [12] Papaconstantinou 2007: 295–297, and below, pp. 66–70.
[13] MacCoull 1985, 1989. [14] MacCoull 1989: 35.

better vehicle of expression than it did in Coptic, she simply declares that 'Coptic culture . . . self-destructed'.[15]

The shift to Arabic in the territories of the Islamic Empire is usually associated with conversion to Islam. This is of course true to a large extent, but not entirely, since in Iran, for instance, conversion did not entail Arabicisation. The question investigated here, however, is the shift to Arabic of populations that did *not* convert to Islam. Even in the very subtle analysis by Christian Décobert, who distinguishes carefully between the two phenomena of Islamisation and Arabicisation, the link between the two is maintained, as the author concludes that the latter is the first step to the former.[16]

Recently Tonio Sebastian Richter gave a survey of the main evidence for the last phases of Coptic, including material on the influx of Arabic loanwords in some written texts. From the analysis of those loanwords he suggests that it was the prestige of Arabic material and scientific culture that attracted the Egyptians and incited them to abandon their language.[17]

All in all, one remains dissatisfied with the state of research to date on the extinction of Coptic, even though many important points have been raised. Interestingly, although most accounts of language extinction today put emphasis on economic interpretations, such hypotheses have never been advanced for the Coptic language. Neither has the phenomenon of its extinction been set against the wider background of the Islamic Empire and of similar situations elsewhere in that Empire.[18] In this chapter I would like to suggest some new avenues for the study of this question, and highlight the importance, firstly, of a comparative approach and, secondly, of a larger historical understanding of the society wherein language change takes place. A full study cannot be undertaken here, but an initial approach will be attempted.

Considering the similarities outlined above between Coptic and Aramaic, it is surprising that their fates have never been compared. To a large extent, this is, as often, the result of academic specialities that do not meet, since Aramaic is studied in departments of Semitic Studies, and Coptic in departments of Egyptology, so that their common aspects as vectors of Eastern Christian cultures are not brought out. I shall begin by reviewing the reasons given by Hoyland for the persistence of Aramaic under Arab rule, and discuss how they do or do not apply to Coptic, and shall then suggest a number of other factors that must be taken into account.

[15] MacCoull 1989: 35. [16] Décobert 1992. [17] Richter 2009.

[18] See Clackson, this volume, for a study of shift and maintenance across the Mediterranean in the Roman Empire.

The first point made by Hoyland concerns the relation between Aramaic and Greek. Contrary to Greek, Aramaic was a language that was identified with a given social group and understood as its mother tongue. It was the spoken language of a great part of the population, while Greek was probably a lingua franca more than anything else, albeit with a very strong presence. The fact that there were so many translations from Greek into Oriental languages speaks for this hypothesis, as does the swift abandonment of Greek after the conquest.[19] The situation described by Hoyland can also be observed in Egypt, although it is not necessarily accurate as far as Greek is concerned for either of the two countries. In Egypt at least, Greek seems to have been widely spoken, and there clearly were Greek monolinguals, who did, however, identify themselves as Egyptians and remained in the country after the Arab conquest. It is much more difficult to demonstrate the presence of such speakers in Syria, where there are no papyri to document them, but it seems difficult to believe they did not exist. If indeed they did not (which I do not think was the case), it would point to an important difference between Egypt and Syria as it would mean that societal bilingualism was better rooted in the former than in the latter.

Another reason given for the steadfastness of Aramaic in relation to Greek is that the Syrian Church 'came to terms with Islamic rule more easily than did the Greek Church',[20] presumably in this way reinforcing the use of their language as the main Christian language in Syria. The role of the Church was certainly essential in shaping the way Christian communities evolved in the Caliphate. Yet such a statement raises a number of questions, for example, why it is that of the two Churches in Syria, it was the one that was closest to the new rulers that should be the one that retained its own language, while the Chalcedonian Church, even though doctrinally and politically attached to Byzantium, should have been the first to switch to Arabic. The answer lies partly in the fact that this view is largely a later construct. In Syria, like in Egypt, the historiography of the non-Chalcedonian Church strives *ex post facto* to claim that they were the favoured interlocutors of the Arabs, as opposed to the Romans/Chalcedonians, who were also political enemies of the Caliphate and thus not to be trusted. In practice both non-Chalcedonians and Chalcedonians were trying to secure this favoured place in the initial phases of Arab rule. It seems that in Egypt, like in Syria, the Chalcedonians were the first to adopt Arabic as their official language: the earliest Christian work in Arabic in Egypt is indeed a long *Chronicle* by Saʿīd ibn Baṭrīq (877–940), otherwise known as Eutychios,

[19] Hoyland 2004: 192. See also, for this view, Brock 1994 and Taylor 2002. [20] Hoyland 2004: 193.

the Melkite (Chalcedonian) Patriarch of Alexandria in the ninth century. This was perhaps a way to mark their proximity to the ruling power, or simply to avoid irritating them by continuing to use Greek, the language of their political enemy.

This is also where the parallel between Egypt and Syria ends. I have argued recently that the official switch to Arabic by the Coptic Church happened with the move of the Patriarchate from Alexandria to Cairo in the early eleventh century.[21] This was very soon after the foundation of Cairo and the establishment there of the Fāṭimids in 973. As the ʿAbbāsids had done – and were still doing – in Baghdad, the Fāṭimids built a sparkling new capital, began sponsoring interreligious court debates and strove to imitate the prestigious scholarly and cosmopolitan environment of the ʿAbbāsid capital. This attracted Christian theologians from the very start, most notably the famous Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, who is considered one of the most brilliant controversialists of the Eastern Christian world. His written Arabic was of very high quality, and he presumably also spoke it well too, as he seems to have spent much more of his time at court than in the city of al-Ashmūnayn (ancient Hermoupolis), whose bishop he was.[22]

During the period of fifty-odd years between the foundation of Cairo and the establishment there of the Fāṭimid Caliphate in the late tenth century, and the move of the Coptic Patriarchate to the capital in the early eleventh, there was some internal resistance to the Arabicisation of the Church, mainly centred in the very traditionalist monasteries of the Wadi Natrūn and the Fayyūm. Works against assimilation to the Muslims and the adoption of Arabic were composed there, and allow us to see that the process was not entirely uncontroversial.[23] Eventually the very monarchical structure of the Egyptian Church, where the Patriarch had direct unmediated authority over local ecclesiastical structures, allowed the Patriarch's choice to prevail within the Church. That choice – to move to Cairo and adopt Arabic – was internal and political, designed to counter the rising power of the bishop of Miṣr, the Christian part of the new capital, who was too close to the Fāṭimid court for the comfort of the Patriarch.

Whatever the value of this reconstruction, it highlights an important difference with what was happening in Syria in the tenth century. While Egypt was now home to a caliph and his capital, Syria had lost the caliphal capital in 750 and thus remained a province, however prestigious. The court of the ʿAbbāsids was in Baghdad, further afield from the great centres

[21] Papaconstantinou 2007. [22] For a very useful introduction to Severus, see Griffith 1996.
[23] Décobert 1992; Papaconstantinou 2007.

of Syriac learning and of Aramaic speakers than when the court was in Damascus. Although Syriac was present in Baghdad because it served as an intermediate step in the translations from Greek into Arabic, it was not the population's spoken language. Baghdad, like Cairo, was a newly founded Arabic-speaking capital with an inclusive caliphal court, and both seem to have had an impressive linguistic effect on the populations they attracted.

This brings me to another point made to explain the persistence of Aramaic. According to Hoyland, who follows a generally accepted view, the fact that Aramaic's Edessan dialect, Syriac, by that time a prestigious learned Christian language, participated in the translation movement sponsored by the ʿAbbāsids, was instrumental in allowing Syrian Christians in general to participate in the intellectual life of the Caliphate and to interact with Muslims 'in a variety of ways'.[24] This is indeed an important difference with Coptic, which did not partake in the translation movement from Greek to Arabic, nor in any intercultural intellectual exchange, at least none that scholars today deem historically important. In fact Coptic did provide an essential link in the transmission of Christian texts to Ethiopia, and however unimportant that may seem, it does mean that Coptic texts were being used, and that there must have been some demand for them, even if it cannot compare in any way to that emanating from the ʿAbbāsid capital.

These last two points are very important, but they have one vital drawback: they remain within the domain of learned writing and official, or at least urban, use of language. What could have been the impact of the translation movement on the population of the Empire? To what extent do such texts inform us on what was actually spoken in Syria and Egypt? Translators and readers of those texts put together probably represented a very small proportion of the total population, even though they did have power, money and political support. How biased an image of the linguistic map of seventeenth-century Europe we would have today if the overwhelming majority of surviving sources were the Latin texts produced by the members of the Republic of Letters! And as the early modern European example makes patent, the absence of a language from the intellectual scene does not mean it will become obsolete, and its presence on the intellectual scene does not necessarily keep it alive as a language of spoken communication. So it is probably safe to consider that being part of the translation movement helped the maintenance of a written form of Aramaic, although this

[24] Hoyland 2004: 194–198 (quotation at 196).

does not explain the maintenance of the widely spoken forms; and that not being part of it had little to do with the eventual extinction of Coptic.

The final aspect that is brought up to explain Aramaic's success vis-à-vis Greek is that 'for the first few centuries of Islam the Aramaic language and Syrian Christianity continued to spread'.[25] It expanded geographically, reaching as far as China, India and, according to Kosmas Indikopleustes, Ceylon.[26] Like the previous point, this is a factor that can play positively, but its absence will not necessarily play negatively. If the Greek language has made it through the centuries, and arguably more securely than Aramaic, it is certainly not because of its geographical expansion in Hellenistic times, much larger than that of Aramaic. On the other hand, a number of local languages in the Islamic world never reached India and Ceylon, but did not become extinct either: Coptic's neighbour Berber is a case in point.

The above discussions show how difficult it is to approach language shift when one needs to rely on texts written mostly, if not exclusively, in institutional contexts. These can be analysed linguistically for evidence of language contact,[27] they can be read directly for straightforward pieces of information, and indirectly, in the hope of assessing the authorial or institutional intentions underlying them; but they cannot inform us about the majority of the population and they cannot capture orality – not even for the high-status individuals who produced them. In the case of Coptic, although there is no doubt that there was a clear institutional language shift within the Church, it remains unclear whether that shift was actually following the evolution of the linguistic situation in the country, or whether, with time, its influence filtered down into domains of communication where Coptic was still in use.

It is very difficult to assess the sociolinguistic map of tenth-century Egypt, although with papyri we do have more evidence than we do for Syria, where our access to the language spoken outside religious or urban centres is much more limited. Even the domains in which Coptic was in use in the tenth century are unclear. Predictably, administration was the domain that Arabic penetrated first. From the early eighth century onwards, as part of a general move to Arabicise the chancellery of the Caliphate under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd, Muslims began being appointed on such local administrative positions as that of pagarch. These had until then remained in the hands of Christians, even though Muslims had held the higher

[25] Hoyland 2004: 198. [26] *Christian Topography* 3.65.1 (ed. Wolska-Conus 1968: 503).
[27] Taylor 2002, for instance.

positions early on.[28] The shift did not happen overnight, and one still finds bilingual and even trilingual documents in the eighth century, indicating that the transition was under way. It is not always possible to know whether the new Muslim officials were Arabs or converted Christian Egyptians, but in some cases the patronyms make clear that they were converts, such as the eighth-century *amīr* of al-Ashmūnayn, Abū Sahl 'the son of the blessed Shenute'.[29] This implies that his first language was Coptic, even though he now needed Arabic to get on with his work. While Qurra ibn Sharīk was governor of Egypt (709–715), letters from his headquarters in Fusṭāṭ to local officials were still sent in Arabic *and* in Greek,[30] but this was probably less and less the case as time went by.

The gradual Arabicisation of the local administration made it necessary for the representatives of Christian communities and other local worthies to be able to communicate in Arabic, and for the rest of the population to have at least some access to Arabic, if only through interpreters. It also meant that members of those communities with administrative ambitions would learn Arabic as a strategy of upward social mobility. Some seem to have converted to obtain such positions, although this tells us nothing about the language they used. However, in the tenth century, elite Christians who had good Arabic could do very well, finding themselves in the enviable position of *kātib* (secretary) in government service. The above-mentioned Severus (p. 64) is one of many examples of this.[31] Some educated Christians were even vizirs under the Fāṭimids, such as Abū al-Yumn Quzmān ibn Mīnā (971–995) and 'Īsā ibn Nasṭūrus (995–996).[32]

Arabic also seems to have gradually imposed itself as the dominant language of economic activity in the broadest sense. From as early as the first half of the eighth century, Arabs, who had lived until then mainly as soldiers in the camp-city of Fusṭāṭ, started settling in the countryside and becoming involved in agriculture. The first attested Arab landowner is known from an Arabic papyrus dated 735, a letter he sent to his estate manager while on business in Alexandria. He had travelled on the Nile and overland from the Fayyūm to Alexandria accompanying goods to the

[28] On the administrative structures of early Islamic Egypt, see Sijpesteijn 2007a, 2007b.

[29] *P.Ryl.Copt.* 199.

[30] Richter 2010. As the complete archive is not preserved, it is impossible to know whether for every Arabic letter there was a Greek copy, but this seems highly probable. A few documents are bilingual, with two texts repeating the same order but written according to two different documentary traditions.

[31] Griffith 1996: 16. The tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasī notes that the Christians were the best secretaries in Syria because their mastery of Arabic was superior to that of most Muslims: Miquel 1963: 224–225.

[32] See Samir 1996, with several other examples.

Alexandrian market. The instructions he gives to the manager reveal a large, diversified production on what was clearly a large estate, only part of which was under that manager's responsibility. Among other things, the letter mentions two neighbouring Christian landowners, whose names are Arabicised in the letter, and also the use of Christian agricultural labourers.[33] Thus from very early on, the area between Cairo and Alexandria started being settled by Arabs who worked the land and employed lower-status Christians, but also transacted with Christians of similar status. This must have made knowing Arabic necessary for a much larger portion of the population than did its prevalence in the administration.

In the papyri of the transitional period, the prevalence of Arabic in economic life appears mostly through transaction documents of various sorts, generally deeds of sale, transfer, guarantee etc., but also marriage contracts or wills. Until the Arab conquest, documents of private transaction and private law were made out either in Coptic or in Greek. Coptic prevailed very quickly after the conquest and was used exclusively in private transaction documents until the end of the eighth century. The latest group of such documents in Coptic is the mid eleventh-century archive of a family living in Teshlot, near al-Ashmūnayn.[34] The archive also contains documents in Arabic, indicating on the one hand that Coptic was indeed still used as a vernacular in the area, and on the other that within the same family there were at least some individuals who used Arabic. The Teshlot Archive, however, is an exception. From the tenth century onwards most private transaction documents between Christians were made out in Arabic,[35] presumably because it was easier to produce them before a Muslim court as well a Christian one in case of litigation, a very common practice, it seems.[36] Moreover, once the Egyptian Church itself had adopted Arabic, any disputes arising among Christians and brought before a bishop were probably also dealt with in Arabic. This shows that Christians active in some areas needed at least a working knowledge of Arabic. That a complete language shift had not yet taken place is indicated by a number of tenth-century sale contracts in Arabic wherein the final clause, stating that the document was read out to the parties and witnesses before they added their signatures, mentions that this was done in Arabic and 'in the foreign language' (*bi-l-'ajamiyya*).[37]

[33] Sijpesteijn 2004. [34] Richter 2000.
[35] For one such group of tenth-century documents, see Abbott 1941.
[36] See Simonsohn 2009, 2011.
[37] Frantz-Murphy 1981: 209/212 (text 1 of 962, ll. 14–15) and 216/218 (text 2 of 963, ll. 13–14); Abbott 1937: 7/14 (text 1 of 946, ll. 19–20).

The domain of religious life is somewhat of a puzzle. As in the period that preceded the conquest, it certainly continued under the Arabs to include practices of a private nature that symbolically extended the domestic sphere into the shrines or cemeteries, rather than being exclusively public or institutional[38] – in other words, practices one would expect to have taken place in Coptic. However, these are scarcely documented in a direct manner except through graffiti in some monastic sites, and a fair amount of monastic correspondence from the late seventh and the eighth century, but very little in later material. Unsurprisingly, these are all in Coptic, although this might tell us more about collection and publication than it does about what was happening on the ground. Graffiti are notoriously difficult to date, and Arabic Christian graffiti from monastic sites have never, to my knowledge, been collected and published. Arabic papyri are largely underexploited, and their publication to date has privileged the texts that throw light on the formation of the Islamic state and society, so that Christian texts have been largely, if not entirely, neglected. It is thus very difficult to know what the effect of the Church's language shift was on local religious life. Liturgical manuscripts were still copied in Coptic in the eleventh century and contained homilies, sermons and saints' lives which were, in principle, read out to the assembly as part of the liturgy. Many manuscripts from the tenth century onwards, however, have a parallel Arabic translation,[39] and it is unclear which language was actually read out during the service. Their disposition in parallel vertically on the page suggests that only one of the two languages was used, otherwise it would have meant regularly turning the pages back and forth. Bilingual manuscripts designed for readings in both languages are usually arranged sequentially, with each reading in the second language following the same reading in the first language.[40] It seems plausible that the Coptic text, usually more beautifully and imposingly written, was there symbolically, and that what was read out was the Arabic, often copied in a less calligraphic manner and giving the impression that it is there for practical reasons and not decorative or ceremonial ones. This is also suggested by a late tenth-century papyrus from al-Ashmūnayn that contains an open letter by the bishop to his congregation about a matter of sorcery, and this letter is in Arabic.[41] This is at a time when the Church had not yet officially adopted Arabic, but even so a bishop could use Arabic to communicate with the people

[38] Frankfurter 2009.

[39] A large number of Coptic literary texts had been translated into Arabic by the late eleventh century; see Rubenson 1996.

[40] See Boud'hors 2010: 187–188.

[41] Reinhardt 1897.

on a matter that was not administrative or official, but related to a local pastoral affair. The identity of this bishop is unknown, and the letter is not precisely dated, but it is noteworthy that the aforementioned Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 987), a champion of Arabic, had been appointed bishop of al-Ashmūnayn in the 950s by Patriarch Theophanes (953–956).[42]

Least accessible to us is the domain of private communication, largely because of the paucity of Christian letters among the published papyri of the period. Monastic correspondence until the end of the eighth century in Coptic is available in several publications of Coptic papyri and ostraca, but for the lack of published evidence we know next to nothing about private correspondence between Christians in later periods. As with private religious practice, it is unclear whether this lack of evidence reflects a lack of interest in editing such texts or the dearth of such texts in the record. The Teshlot Archive mentioned earlier contains some private letters from the mid eleventh century, some of which are in Coptic and some in Arabic. One of the Coptic letters has an unrelated Arabic letter on the back, and both are addressed to the same person.[43] This points to a balanced bilingual group whose members were not necessarily bi-literate; some felt more at ease writing in one language, some in the other, but they understood both.

This short survey shows that between the eighth and the tenth century Arabicisation had progressed considerably among the Christian population. That the liturgy remained in Coptic and that in the thirteenth century some members of the clergy could still compose a hagiographical text in Coptic do little to undermine this conclusion.[44] This does not mean that Coptic was no longer understood, however, despite the alarmist claims by several medieval authors that Christians no longer understood 'their language'.[45] The Teshlot Archive, which dates precisely from the period when the Patriarchate was moving to Cairo and beginning to use Arabic, shows that Coptic was still understood by part of the population. Some fifty years earlier, the Palestinian geographer al-Muqaddasī had visited Egypt and found the 'protected subjects' speaking Coptic and the country's Arabic 'uncertain and sluggish'.[46]

These slightly contradictory indications partly reflect the fact that such a process of language shift cannot be entirely straightforward and will on the contrary tend to be very fluid and unstable, despite a steady overall

[42] Griffith 1996: 17. [43] Thung 1996.
[44] I.e. the martyrdom of John of Phanijoit, set in the Crusader period; see Zaborowski 2005. On the currency of Arabic in the tenth century, see also Björnesjö 1996.
[45] Papaconstantinou 2007. [46] Miquel 1972: 124.

movement in a given direction. They also reflect a high degree of regional variation. The general consensus is that, like Greek, Arabic penetrated much more quickly and deeply in the North than in the South. The texts complaining about the loss of Coptic were all produced in the North, and the tenth-century *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Samuel even mentions those 'in the Ṣa'īd' (the South) who still speak Coptic'.[47] As we have seen, in the area around Fusṭāṭ and between Alexandria and the Fayyūm, Arabic was well implanted even in the countryside from the early eighth century. The evidence suggests however that by the tenth century it was dominant at least as far south as al-Ashmūnayn.

Assessing the balance of the two languages in the period during which the language shift took place is but one side of the problem. Arabic progressed everywhere in the Islamic world, creating bilingual situations among the conquered populations, but its degree of dominance was different in different places. It is important to discern what was specific to the Egyptian case that resulted in the local language dying out.

Sociolinguistic literature on the extinction of languages in the modern world has insisted heavily on the economic factor, more precisely on the economic advantages offered by the abandonment of a traditional language in order to adopt the dominant lingua franca that allows participation in the prevailing globalised economic system and the prosperity it offers. Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, for example, introduce an opposition between *metropolitan* (M) and *peripheral* (P) languages.[48] The M-language is associated with the dominant economic and social class (usually the urban elites), while the P-language is used for a smaller range of economic roles and functions, and is usually spoken in areas that are less developed economically.

Taken at this simple level, this is of course something that can apply to Egypt and Syria. In order to compare the two and understand their differences, however, we should be able to compare what the prevailing economic system might have been, both at the level of each province, and at the 'globalised' level of the Empire itself. The difficulty here is that one cannot compare the two provinces on equal terms because of the nature of the evidence we have, or the lack thereof. Papyri can tell us what language a rural settler wrote, but archaeology cannot. Archaeological work in the Levant has brought revisions to many earlier assumptions about the economic situation and activity in the first Islamic centuries. Unfortunately,

[47] Papaconstantinou 2007: 276, and on the date 292, and *passim*.
[48] Nettle and Romaine 2000: 128ff. and *passim*.

for Egypt this sort of archaeological work still remains to be done, and for Syria we have no papyri.

Research to date could be deceptively misleading. Following the lead of the available sources, new work on Syria and the Levant has insisted on the continuing prosperity of the area under the Umayyads,[49] while scholars working on early Islamic Egypt have highlighted the systematic extraction of resources organised by the Arabs, and the additional tax burden represented by the introduction of a capitation. These are phenomena that certainly also touched Syria. On the other hand, there has been no study of the effect on the internal economy of Egypt of the end of the *annona* system with the Arab conquest, and the relief this most certainly brought in the short term to its agricultural structures. This could have been followed by a transfer of the productive potential to other commodities, or to abandonment of part of the cultivable areas, or a combination of the two. In any case, one imagines that to some extent it will have counterbalanced the new extractive demands of the Arabs.

Related to this question is that of the size of the country's population, also left largely unstudied. Egypt was one of the most densely inhabited areas of the Roman Empire,[50] but we have no study about the effect of the sixth-century plague on its inhabitants. The question is relevant for language use insofar as one important criterion of ethnolinguistic vitality is the number of speakers (see Table 1.2). We know that Syria certainly was struck by the plague, while this is not entirely established for Egypt. The sixth-century papyri, for example, preserve absolutely no mention of the plague. The systematic levy of *corvée* workers from Egypt in the late seventh and early eighth centuries for works in Jerusalem and Damascus would seem to indicate that there was a reservoir to draw from which did not exist locally.[51] Such movement of rural inhabitants between provinces would also have precipitated the acquisition of Arabic by individuals who in different circumstances would have had less incentive to learn it.

That Egypt's local population should have been larger than that of Syria, however, presents us with a paradox in terms of ethnolinguistic vitality, since it would have been a factor in favour of the maintenance of the language. On the other hand, it is true that for over two centuries, Coptic did not fare any worse than other local languages in the Caliphate, and only after the late tenth century do we see any important signs of regression – and

[49] See Walmsley 2007, with further references.
[50] Bowman 2011, with further references.
[51] Bell 1908: 116–117.

that is a time when the country underwent some very important changes with the establishment of the Fāṭimid Caliphate.

Most contemporary research on language loss focuses on the indigenous languages of the areas colonised by Europeans and on the minority languages of Europe itself. In recent decades, the role of economic globalisation on world languages has come to the fore, and an overall consensus has emerged that the need to learn English as a quasi-universal second language along with the national language in many countries is killing off the minority languages in many modern nation states. This has given the impression that we are dealing with a recent phenomenon, and consequently has prevented testing the various interpretative models against earlier cases of political and economic hegemony and their effects on languages. In this respect, Coptic is interesting as one of the best documented, major historical languages that became totally extinct (as opposed to transformed into derived languages).

One such model was suggested by Salikoko Mufwene, who analysed a series of modern colonial situations rather than contemporary cases.[52] These are interesting for the present purpose because, both with the Roman Empire and with the Islamic Empire, we have a pattern that is in many ways reminiscent of European colonialism. Mufwene distinguishes two different scenarios in modern European colonies as far as language is concerned. He notes that 'the impact has been more disastrous to indigenous languages in former settlement colonies than to those in exploitation colonies'.[53] In settlement colonies assimilation of the local population was strongest and the drive towards social homogenisation most powerful. The colonisers' language eventually became everyone's vernacular by gradually penetrating all functional domains, including private life. Exploitation colonies, on the other hand, had a relatively small number of settlers with little interest in sharing their language, and they exhibit a much higher index of maintenance of the local languages.

Mufwene goes on to discuss the Roman Empire, suggesting that the maintenance of local languages in its European provinces fits in well with the observation that the Roman mode of occupation was that of an exploitation rather than of a settlement colony. Mufwene's treatment of the Roman example leaves much to be desired (see p. 28 above), largely because he relies on general secondary literature which does not reflect the new insights, questions and interpretations advanced by recent research. His main point on colony types, however, could indeed be applied to the

[52] Mufwene 2004. [53] Mufwene 2004: 209.

socio-economic status of Roman provinces. The notion of 'exploitation colony' would apply to Egypt better than to any other Roman province, and it can be argued that this did not change under the Umayyads and the ʿAbbāsids. The settlement of Arabs in the Valley – as opposed to the Delta area and the Fayyūm – does not seem to have been very important under their rule. Still in the tenth century, al-Muqaddasī states that 'the majority of the population of the Valley are, in fact, Copts'.[54] Much of the administration was in the hands of local elites, who must have been bilingual, and in some cases converted in order to assimilate even further with the ruling class, much as they had earlier adopted Roman citizenship and Greek–Christian *paideia*. Most of this administration was geared towards the extraction of the country's resources and its systematic exploitation for the benefit of a centre from which it was remote, whether this centre was Rome, Constantinople, Damascus, Jerusalem or Baghdad.

Considering Egypt as the equivalent of an exploitation colony is consistent with the country's initial linguistic resilience and even the rather strong vitality of Coptic during the eighth century. This period, when the Arabs took over the local administration more vigorously and began organising the fiscal system more methodically, is also the period of the greatest boom of the Coptic language in terms of literary creation and text production in general.[55] This situation changed radically with the arrival of the Fāṭimids, who arguably transformed Egypt into something much more akin to a settlement colony. To quote Mufwene, in settlement colonies the 'colonists sought to create new Europes outside their metropoles' (Mufwene 2004: 209). This is precisely what the Fāṭimids were doing when they established their capital in Cairo, a prestigious newly founded city with all the trappings of power and culture designed to turn it into a second Baghdad. For the Egyptians the centre of power was no longer 'out there', it was once again 'right here': all of a sudden, and for the first time since the Ptolemies, Egypt was no longer a marginal, if rich, province, but the centre of an Empire and the seat of a prestigious court.

The arrival of the Fāṭimids was important in another way. From the very start they strove to make Egypt the exclusive and obligatory passage of the very lucrative eastern trade, through a route that initially went up the Nile to Aswān and across the Wadi ʾAllaqi to the Red Sea port of ʿAydhab, which was already used for the *ḥajj*, the exploitation of the gold mines and the slave trade. From the eleventh century, almost reproducing

[54] Miquel 1972: 112; al-Muqaddasī probably means Christians, but this does not tell us what language they spoke.

[55] Papaconstantinou 2011.

the Roman route from Berenikē to Koptos, the route went from ʿAydhab to the bend of the Nile, where the city of Qūṣ gradually developed as a major centre. The boom of the eastern trade under the Fāṭimids is reflected in the documents of the Cairo Geniza, which record a number of Jewish merchants with connections in Aden and India. The control of the trade was facilitated by the Fāṭimids' Isma'ilī affiliation, which was also dominant in the Yemen. Customs stations were established along the Nile, at Qūṣ, Akhmīm and Fusṭāṭ, cities where merchant communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims settled and controlled the passage of their respective products and the corresponding levies. A commercial postal service from Fusṭāṭ was even organised at regular intervals so as to bring south news about markets and prices.[56]

These developments seem to have had far-reaching consequences. Participation in the prevailing system and the prosperity it brought with it could ring much more true when its centre was within reach. Arabic was no longer only the language of local officialdom and faraway caliphs, or more or less popular soldiers and governors; it was the language of a prestigious court located in the very middle of the country, and that of a new class of merchants who had their hands on some lucrative forms of commerce transiting through Valley cities. This trade was not religiously exclusive or determined, so participation did not require conversion, but it did make Arabic the language of everyday communication.

The new situation not only enhanced the prestige and usefulness of Arabic, it also had some bearing on the very important question of group identity. If language is a vehicle through which a group can express its affiliation to an ideal community, or its indigenous roots as opposed to the foreignness of other groups, one cannot avoid the inference that this function was now filled by Arabic, and that this was partly the result of the Fāṭimid system. Here was a dynasty that could be identified as distinctly Egyptian, thus quite plausibly filling the need for Egyptian self-identification, pride and symbolic capital. This might have combined with the fact that Coptic never seems to have attained a very high level of social and cultural prestige. In the fourth century, Egyptian was clearly associated with peasants and illiteracy; in the sixth and early seventh century, Coptic reached its high point, being used publicly by local elites;[57] and it remained the language of private transaction and communication after the Arab conquest, when a large amount of homiletic and hagiographical literature was produced. However, not a single major work of literature or theology

[56] Garcin 1976, 1978: 308–309; Power 2008. [57] Papaconstantinou 2008.

with sufficient prestige to circulate outside the country was written in Coptic, and it was never in any circumstances a language of power. Such factors would have lessened its value in the eyes of its speakers and thus reduced the language's vitality and capacity for resilience. After all, Arabic, like Greek before it, allowed Egyptian scholarship to be read widely outside Egypt and contributed to the country's Empire-wide prestige in a way Coptic could not. In this respect, Aramaic had a much greater advantage, being the language of a number of famous authors, of the administration of several kingdoms, and of missionaries going beyond all frontiers to spread it to China and India.

Let us now return to my initial question once again: why did Coptic fail? A number of factors have been suggested that can combine to make up a plausible answer. Above all, however, what has been said indicates that perhaps the question itself is not framed in the right terms. Seeing the abandonment of Coptic as a failure is to adopt a language-centred perspective that does not take into consideration its human dimension. One might argue that the wholesale adoption of Arabic by the Copts was not only the sign of a newly found prosperity and confidence of the community within its country: it also marked the emergence of Egypt as a major independent player in the medieval Mediterranean, and the choice of the Egyptian Christians to participate fully in that phenomenon.