CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324 brought him control of Egypt along with other provinces previously controlled by his rival. After the foundation of Constantinople in 330, Constantine directed Egypt's wheat taxes to the 'New Rome' rather than the Old, and Egypt thereafter was for more than three centuries a part of the early Byzantine world. For most of that time, from 324 until 617, Egypt was largely free from external threats and internal revolts; except for its role in Heraclius' successful usurpation from Phocas, the dramas of imperial succession were played out elsewhere. Internal political turbulence, however, was common, often in connection with religious developments. Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, describes violence in Alexandria during Julian's reign, when pagans felt freer to attack Christians, but the destruction of the Serapeum by a Christian mob three decades later (391) was not much different in kind. The murder of the philosopher Hypatia in 415, although hardly a momentous political event, was emblematic.

Byzantine rule over Egypt was temporarily ended in 617–19 by a Persian invasion, leading to a decade of Persian rule before the restoration of Roman government in 629. This invasion is said to have been accompanied by widespread massacres and devastation, of which there are echoes in the documentary sources, but detailed knowledge of the decade of Persian rule is scanty. Only ten years later the Arab commander 'Amr led a small force into Egypt in late 639. Although he initially made rapid headway, it was only after substantial reinforcements that he was able to defeat the Romans in a pitched battle at Heliopolis (July 640), take the fortress at Babylon (Old Cairo) by siege, and finally negotiate the surrender of Alexandria by the (Chalcedonian) patriarch Cyrus (late 641, effective in September 642). Apparently a substantial exodus of officials and the upper classes followed, although the Byzantine general Manuel recaptured the city briefly in 645 before the final Arab takeover in 646.

Far more prominent in our Christian sources than any of this political history is the long series of struggles over doctrine and power in the church, both engaging Egypt deeply in the ecclesial life of the empire and eventually marginalizing the province to a considerable degree. The first of these conflicts to have important international repercussions was that between the Alexandrian bishops and the followers of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, a struggle that intersected with imperial politics throughout the fourth century and forms the main action of Athanasius' long (328–73) reign as bishop of Alexandria. That reign included five periods of exile, two abroad (335–7 and 339–46) and three largely in hiding in Egypt (356–62, 362–4, and 365–6). Although mainly successful in moulding the Egyptian church into a united and centrally controlled body, he fared poorly for the most part on the larger political scene, and his weak successors did no better.

The high water mark of Alexandrian influence in the larger church came with the patriarchate of Cyril (412–44), who used the first Council of Ephesos in 431 to depose Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople (428–31). The council was fought on the field of the use of the term *theotokos* (God-bearer) for the Virgin Mary, which Nestorius opposed. Apart from the emotional evocation of devotion to the Virgin, the controversy involved important Christological differences, with Cyril's position stressing Christ's identity as God, his divinity. This position was characteristic of the long Platonist tendency of Alexandrian theology to stress the divine Logos against the humanity of Christ, but the term *theotokos* was used by both sides in the dispute for divergent purposes.

Cyril's successor Dioskoros I (444–58) tried a similar coup at the second Council of Ephesos (449), removing bishops Flavianus of Constantinople and Domnus of Antioch from office; this time, however, the papal delegates were left unheard and unhappy, and Pope Leo denounced the council as a 'Robber Synod', as it has been known ever since. The new emperor, Marcian, convened a new council at Chalcedon in 451, and this time Dioskoros was not in control. Leo's *Tome* held the day doctrinally, and Constantinople gained politically by achieving virtual parity with Rome. Dioskoros was condemned both for his refusal to accept the Chalcedonian formula of the hypostatic union of two natures in one person and for the arbitrariness of his exercise of power in his own see. From this point on, there were usually two contending bishops of Alexandria, one supporting the Chalcedonian formulations, most typically with imperial support, and the other maintaining Dioskoros' miaphysite position.

The period from Chalcedon to the accession of Damianus in 578 was formative for the ultimate character of the Egyptian church. Some emperors

(especially Anastasius, 491–518) were of miaphysite sympathies or at least neutral, but at other periods there was severe pressure for conformity to Chalcedonian views. One result was Egyptian closeness to the Syrian miaphysite church, which was more consistently pressed by the emperors, but another was a much diminished likelihood that theological works in Greek written elsewhere would circulate in Egypt or be translated into Coptic. The long and complex relationship of the Egyptian church with that of Syria led at times to the flight of Syrian clergy to Egypt. Severus of Antioch (*c.* 465–538), for example, spent the last twenty years of his life in Egypt and had substantial influence. A generation later, Jacob Baradaios built an alternative, anti-Chalcedonian, hierarchy for the church after the reign of Justinian.

The last Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria before the Arab conquest, Cyrus, led a concerted effort to enforce conformity to the imperial, pro-Chalcedonian, will. The memory of Cyrus was correspondingly execrated in the post-conquest miaphysite church.

The place of Egypt in the Byzantine world is thus an old and contested theme. It was already an important issue in Egypt itself in the wake of the Arab conquest. The various Christian factions and the Arab government all had reasons to portray Egypt as alien to the empire, whether – in the case of the Christians – to position themselves as loyal subjects with no wish to find themselves once again under Roman rule or – in the case of the Arabs – to claim the high ground as liberators who had rescued the Egyptian Christians from persecutions. The emergent Coptic church staked out its claim to possess an innate character as oppressed, resistant, and made up of martyrs, at all times and under any regime.[1] This self-portrayal was taken all the way back to Roman persecution, and even for the period after the peace of the church it could be supported with such episodes as the imperial mistreatment of the archbishop Athanasius during his struggles against the Arians, not to speak of the ouster of the patriarch Dioskoros at Chalcedon and all that followed.[2] Periods like the ascendancy of Cyril, in particular his victory at the first Council of Ephesos, could be seen as exceptions to the pattern. Most historiography rooted in the Coptic tradition has swallowed this view whole: the 'Copts', we are told, were hostile to Roman rule and thus alien to its culture.[3]

Indeed, the stakes were raised in the aftermath of the conquest by the beginning of what has become the perennial debate over whether the 'Copts'

[1] See Papaconstantinou (forthcoming). [2] Davis 2004.
[3] *Coptic Encyclopedia* III: 682–3 (Atiya on Cyrus) and II: 375–7 (C. D. G. Müller on Benjamin I) for some typical formulations.

aided the Arab invaders against the Byzantine government because of the popularity of anti-Roman views among the Egyptian population. Whatever the trustworthiness of the sources that suggest such collaboration[4] as an explanation of the conquest, this hypothesis is unneeded. The weakening of the Byzantine empire by the struggle with Persia during the preceding several decades, the small size and poor quality of the Roman garrison, a divided command structure, shaky military financing, and loss of control of the lines of supply and communication by land through Syria and Palestine to the Arabs in the years immediately before the invasion of Egypt provide sufficient explanations.[5] But the hypothesis is still alive even outside sectarian circles and in a different context, as we can see in Jairus Banaji's recent materialist variant. Banaji suggests that the increasing stratification of the distribution of wealth in the fifth to seventh centuries left the lower classes with little stake in the established order, and thus every reason to prefer the invaders.[6] Whether this assessment of attitudes, reminiscent of the Rostovtzeff of the *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, is correct, we have little way of knowing. But it was not the collaboration of the landless labourers that the invaders would have valued; rather, they needed, and to a large degree got, the help of the governing classes.

Certainly Egypt and the Byzantine centre were not disconnected from one another in the last two centuries of Roman rule, as we can see from a host of details about the traffic back and forth between them visible in the papyrus documents. Constantinople needed Egypt and kept a close eye on its administration (chapter 12 below). Imperial officials were formally welcomed by locals who were not Chalcedonian in confession, using poems written by people like Dioskoros.[7] Wealthy Egyptians – and not just the consular Apions – sometimes lived in Constantinople.[8] Monks travelled to take care of property transactions in the capital, just as villagers sent embassies to defend their rights.[9] Little of this connectivity is visible in the literary sources, but the documents bring this web of small-scale links back into view.

It is a striking fact that in modern scholarship the term 'Coptic' has tended to dominate work in some areas, above all art; by contrast, 'Byzantine' has dominated the more classically oriented disciplines of papyrology

[4] Rejected by Butler in the first edition of his *Arab Conquest of Egypt*; P. M. Fraser, in the supplement to the reprint edition (Butler 1978), rather seems to prefer the collaborationist view. See chapter 21 below for discussion of this issue.
[5] Kaegi 1992. [6] Banaji 2001. [7] Fournet 1999. [8] *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4397.
[9] *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4397 is also evidence for monastic agents in Constantinople. The archive of Dioskoros of Aphrodite is our best evidence for village delegations in the capital.

and history, the term being taken back even to 284, the accession of Diocletian, in typical papyrological usage. The church becomes 'Coptic' even in works dealing largely with events before Chalcedon and with a string of Hellenophone archbishops.[10] 'Late antiquity' has been a useful concept in bridging the chasm and in emphasizing the connection of this Egypt to the ancient world, but the problem has not gone away.[11] In presenting a volume on Egypt in the Byzantine world, what do we mean, and how is such a phrase to be construed in the face of the making of a Coptic Egypt?

The reality of both the sources and what we can recover of the underlying society and culture is naturally more complicated than any of these labels would indicate, neither tidily arranged nor obliging to those who are intent on such position-taking. This volume explores that complexity. Although religious affiliation (mostly, but not exclusively, along the Chalcedonian divide) is one critical axis and particularly in the period after Justinian helps to elucidate many things, we must resist any call to adopt such affiliations as the universal lens to explain things, especially before 641. We always have to ask if Christology is relevant and what other factors may be equally or more so. Uniformity is also not to be assumed, either across Egypt or within particular groups. Certainly it is absent from the positions taken in this book by the various authors. On some questions it seems to me that we can see the beginnings of something like a consensus, but there are many points that remain controversial within these covers, let alone in the rest of the scholarship. Partly for this reason, and partly because so many of the methodological trends visible in the volume are still only partly developed, it is doubtful that the subject is yet ripe for a full-scale synthesis. In this introductory essay, I speak for myself and not for the other authors, although it will be obvious (and emphasized by internal references) how much of what I have to say depends on the scholarship in their chapters.

It is perhaps in the nature of a multi-author volume of finite size that it will neither cover all subjects nor offer a unified description of the source material, however useful this might be to some readers. Many of the individual chapters devote much of their attention to the source materials available and the critical problems they raise. Indeed, such explorations are a recurring theme. Certainly Byzantine Egypt offers an enormous quantity of source material, perhaps more, and more varied, than for any other ancient society. The range includes many types of manuscript evidence, from letters, school exercises, accounts, lists, contracts, official documents,

[10] Davis 2004.

[11] There is of course the problem of how late we take 'late antiquity' to go. In Bagnall 1993 I used it specifically for the first part of the period treated here.

and much else on what was intended to be ephemeral material supports of writing with very limited audiences. It also embraces much originally destined for a rather wider public, sometimes in autograph form, more often in later but still ancient copies: sermons, Paschal letters, chronicles, proclamations, saints' lives, martyrdoms, theological treatises, the Bible, graffiti on monastery walls or auditorium seats, public inscriptions. There is a substantial body of artistic and archaeological material also, much of it 'Christian' but hardly all.

The sources present two sets of problems. One comes from the inherent difficulty of evaluating their significance, of understanding the circumstances in which they were created and which must govern our use of them as evidence; that theme runs through many of the chapters in this book, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in Arietta Papaconstantinou's consideration of the different chronological strata of hagiography and the interests they represent (chapter 17 below). There are also of course many deficiencies, some apparently irremediable, in the evidence. One of the most notable is the near-lack of papyrological documentation from villages once one passes the middle of the fourth century, flagged by both James Keenan (chapter 11 below) and Raffaella Cribiore (chapter 3 below) as a limiting factor in their studies. And there are deep and seemingly intractable problems in the publication of the sources, many still not available in usable printed editions, and above all in the handling of the information from archaeological excavations, many (perhaps most) of which remain either unpublished or only very partially reported. Still, we find significant progress in many areas to be possible by confronting types of sources generally kept separate; here again Papaconstantinou's chapter offers a salient instance, in this case bringing together hagiography and documentary evidence.

There are other respects in which the seeming limitations of the sources have been not so much inherent in the evidence as rooted in defects of scholarly training and perspectives, problems more amenable to solution. Two of these seem to me central. The first is the historic tendency for disciplines to be language-based and relatively insulated from evidence in other languages. One striking feature of this book is the extent to which the boundaries between Greek and Coptic, and even between Greek and Arabic or Coptic and Arabic, are no longer allowed to stand in the way of an integrated picture. Similarly, documentary and literary evidence is increasingly being treated together. The second is the introduction of conceptual frameworks now commonplace in historical scholarship but slow to enter the mainstream of philological disciplines. To cite just one instance, gender studies (see Terry Wilfong's chapter 15 below) allow new and illuminating approaches to evidence that otherwise has seemed unrewarding.

The cultural world of late antique Egypt emerges from the studies presented here as a distinctive place, but one with salient characteristics that fit into an integrated cultural system extending throughout the East and even, to some degree, the West. Rhetoric, philosophy, theology, law, and medicine were all areas in which Egypt was important to some degree at varying times, and it attracted students of these subjects from outside Egypt down to the end of Roman rule and beyond (see Cribiore's chapter 3 below). Archaeology, in the form of recent excavations at Kom el-Dikka, and texts both show that Alexandria's schools continued to operate for a half-century or so after the Arab conquest; the cultural unity of the eastern Mediterranean was not solely dependent on political unity. The Egyptians' special preference for poetry was recognized externally both by those who approved of it – and the fans of the Egyptian poets were obviously numerous enough for works like Nonnus' *Dionysiaka* to survive (Alan Cameron, chapter 2 below) – and by those who did not.

It was by no means only at these international levels and the upper social stratum that constituted them that elite culture was linked to the broader cultural, religious, and political character of the society. Even philosophy, the highest of subjects in at least its own estimation and certainly the most abstract, is in some cases to be read against the day-to-day background of a bilingual and religiously divided society, as Leslie MacCoull argues with respect particularly to John Philoponus in chapter 4 below. Imperial politics, of course, had a strong impact on most of the establishments of higher education, in some cases to the point of closing them (chapter 3 below).

For all that Coptic literature (Stephen Emmel, chapter 5 below) is sometimes presented as a counterweight to elite Greek culture, its considerable development through the period from the fourth to seventh century left it heavily dependent on Greek literature and the Greek educational systems for its highest forms. It is hard to imagine even Shenoute, the emblematic and original writer whose works survive to us in fragmentary condition, separately from his skills in a rhetorical tradition owed to a culture he spent considerable effort in denouncing. The strong sense of connectedness that we cannot avoid in the case of Shenoute occurs at many levels, at least down to that of people like Dioskoros of Aphrodite, where the bilingual character of his work and its tight interlock with the imperial law courts and imperial officials make the connections obvious.[12]

If we move from the realm of the word, where transmission of culture within a regional zone where Greek was a common language was at

[12] Fournet 1999.

its easiest, to the visual and tangible, a comparable blend of provincial individuality and incorporation into metropolitan culture can be found. Architecture, with its regional variations, has many links to the Byzantine world elsewhere; these are most marked in the North, but that is probably true in other domains as well (Peter Grossmann, chapter 6 below). How far such differences can be linked to confessional positions remains a matter of controversy, but Grossmann has maintained that such a distinction is visible at Abu Mina, with a miaphysite church outside the walls drawing on architectural vocabulary found in Upper Egypt but not in other eastern Mediterranean lands.

Textiles have long been the prisoner of a historiography that classifies them as 'Coptic', with all of the political, confessional, and social ramifications often attached to the term. In Thelma Thomas' work (chapter 7 below), they are restored to their position in the larger picture of late antique art in the Byzantine world, although the work of integrating them fully into that picture and discerning local particularities still leaves a substantial agenda ahead.

The visual vocabulary of Egyptian monasticism, in contrast, seems to offer a more difficult conundrum. Cell decoration of the kind attested in many places in Egypt, particularly in oratories, is not well known elsewhere in the Byzantine world. This, however, could be mainly the result of the fact that painted plaster does not usually survive in most places (see Elizabeth Bolman, chapter 20 below). On the other hand, it is also possible that specifically Egyptian theological positions may likewise play a role, as in the Egyptian monastic world after Theophilus and the Origenist controversy there was no substantial audience for an anti-anthropomorphite view. Here we have a sign of how the emerging distinctive character of Christianity in Egypt could have come to shape other cultural patterns. The difficulty of assigning a firm chronology to painting, however, makes it hard to pin this down with any precision; and it remains true that Origen was condemned much more broadly than in Egypt, making a purely Egyptian theological connection doubtful.

As Wipszycka remarks, there is nothing of consequence in Coptic literature that comes directly from pharaonic Egyptian literature; any reminiscences of an Egyptian past have been filtered through Greek literature. One would not make such absolute statement for visual and physical culture, but even there the axis of analysis is clearly across the early Byzantine world rather than back to Egyptian past. If one had to think of a single distinctively Egyptian cultural practice that might offer that sort of continuity in popular use, however, it would surely have been mummification.

Françoise Dunand (chapter 8 below) shows how even here there is change and reconceptualization, with even the seemingly most conservative of habits responding to an altered society. But change is inherently harder to recognize in most of our sources than continuity, in part because of their discontinuities.

As a place, of course, Egypt was distinctive. That is in some sense a truism, but Egypt's individuality was, as the ancients themselves recognized from early times, on a different level from that of other lands. It had from the Ptolemies onwards its single vast metropolis, the leading city of the East until it was eventually overtaken by Constantinople, although it is not easy to know quite when that happened in each domain beyond politics (see Zsolt Kiss, chapter 9 below). Despite its stature, however, Alexandria lost ground also to Antioch (as a regional political centre), and its subordination to Constantinople in political terms is of course evident already from the fourth-century founding of New Rome onwards. The existence of the praetorian prefect of Oriens must have to some extent limited Alexandrian direct access to the emperor, previously unimpeded by intermediate officials. The enormous and noisy prominence of the Alexandrian patriarchs in the Christological disputes of this period[13] should not obscure their inability to prevail over Constantinople when the latter had Rome backing it. Cyril won at Ephesos I, but Dioskoros' victory at Ephesos II was obtained by less subtle means and was readily undone with the next shift in imperial politics.

This megalopolis dominated the very numerous other cities, above all in the structure of the church (chapter 16 below), but in other respects as well. These cities (for which see Peter van Minnen, chapter 10 below), numbering something like fifty in this period, likely had a significant share of the population of their districts, the old nomes, by any pre-modern standard. Partly because of a lack of archaeological work, the picture of these cities depends disproportionately on the papyrological evidence, which is not unequivocal. These cities, in the Roman period and at least the first part of late antiquity, dominated the vast number of surrounding villages, the small agricultural settlements for which Egypt was traditionally much better known (see James Keenan, chapter 11 below). But there are signs that the late Roman structure, with all its centralization, may have started to break down in the sixth century. There are many candidates for destabilizing elements, ranging from the importance of the Great Houses to general economic decline or a poorly understood redistribution of resources, or even

[13] See now Wessel 2004.

to the increasing tendency of miaphysite bishops to reside outside the cities (chapter 16 below). The cities seem, however, to have remained prosperous and productive down to at least Justinian and (as it increasingly seems) to the Persians. The invasion of the latter was an important watershed, still poorly known in archaeology and the documents, and with a poverty-stricken literary tradition. How far the cities themselves really lost ground before the Persian invasion remains hard to say.

The villages certainly still had much life in them, even if they were not entirely viable as economic and social units apart from the specialized goods and services provided to them by the cities. As Keenan notes (chapter 11 below), it is hard to get a clear idea of their day-to-day existence except in the probably atypical case of Aphrodite, a former nome capital probably larger, more independent, and more diverse than most villages. But it is clear that the number of villages remained large, even with estate-linked subunits growing up in their periphery, and in all likelihood the growing role of the monasteries as rural centres transformed the geography of the countryside as time went on, creating new poles of activity.

This world of habitation resists generalization in various ways. At one level there is an impressive uniformity. This is the level at which the cities and villages were most tied into the imperial system. The government and military structures we find in the papyri and inscriptions are fairly uniform, although not entirely so (Bernhard Palme, chapter 12 below). Imperial law was, contrary to the view forcefully argued a generation ago by Arthur Schiller, widely known and deeply embedded in legal practice throughout Egypt, at least down to the level of notaries in the provincial cities and even villages, as one sees from Dioskoros and other cases (Joëlle Beaucamp, chapter 13 below). The penetration of imperial law was such that it involved even the manipulation or misuse of imperial legislation in local practice. And of course some areas of law were far more effective than others, especially in cases where enactments ran counter to deeply rooted social habits. There is no particular reason to believe that things were different in other parts of the empire, and there is absolutely no basis for imagining a storyline about 'Coptic' resistance to imperial law.

Much of this imperial framework survived the Arab conquest (discussed by Petra Sijpesteijn, chapter 21 below), including the mandated use of Christian invocations and years according to the fifteen-year indiction cycle in the openings of legal documents, even after the consulates and regnal years (also decreed by Justinian) had disappeared.[14] Equally striking is the

[14] See Bagnall and Worp 2004.