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978-0-521-87581-3 - From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East

Edited by Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price and David J. Wasserstein

Excerpt

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*Introduction: documentary evidence, social realities
and the history of language*

Fergus Millar

Few collections of papers could claim to represent more emphatically than this one does a whole series of changes of focus which mark the evolution of ancient history over the last few decades. First, it is based almost entirely on documents, whether preserved on perishable materials or on stone; the literary texts transmitted in manuscript, and printed since the early modern period, on which our conceptions of the ancient world were previously based, have receded into the background. Second, its focus is on the eastern Mediterranean, taking the 'Near East' in a relatively broad sense, including both Anatolia and Egypt. Third, while not exploring Hellenism in the sense of the period between Alexander and Actium, it takes as its starting point the dominant Greek culture of the eastern Mediterranean under the Roman Empire. Fourth, its essential focus is on language – or co-existing or competing languages. That is to say both, on the one hand, that it explores the potential of original documents to represent for us the realities of the societies by and from which they were generated, and that, at the same time, it accepts always that a 'document' is, just like a literary text, a construct following rules and conventions – or obeying a 'rhetoric' of genre – and is not, and cannot be, a simple mirror of 'how it really was'. But the focus on language also means something more complex still, namely the situations which evolve when more than one language is (in some sense) current within a particular society. To take only the crudest of alternatives, if only one language is actually represented in the documentation available from a particular place and time, should we follow the principles of empiricism, and (at the weakest) adopt the working hypothesis that only that language was current? Or are we entitled to 'read' the available documents in the light of a presumption that some other language was normally spoken, but not written, or at least not used for the production of official public texts?

Finally, this volume is characterised above all, after two contrasting initial explorations of the role of Latin in the Greek East, by its focus

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on the interplay of Greek with Semitic languages, whether Hebrew or various branches of Aramaic (Nabataean, Palmyrene, Jewish Aramaic, Syriac, Samaritan Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic), with Egyptian (hieroglyphic, demotic or Coptic), with the languages and scripts of pre-Islamic Arabia, and finally with Arabic. This is therefore, obviously enough, to say that, beginning in the Greek world of the first three centuries CE, the volume is representative also of contemporary ancient history in incorporating late antiquity, and in taking this term as embracing the first couple of centuries of Islamic rule, both in Syria–Palestine and in Egypt.

It is entirely appropriate that this ambitious project should have been generated in Jerusalem, taking its origin from a conference at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in 2003, and is edited by Hannah Cotton of the Hebrew University, Jonathan Price of Tel Aviv University, David Wasserstein, then of Tel Aviv and now of Vanderbilt University, and Robert Hoyland (St Andrews). In responding, more than willingly, to the invitation to contribute an introduction, I can claim absolutely no credit for the design or contents of the volume, but am happy to offer a response, or loose series of responses, to it, bringing in some related themes, referring to some relevant modern literature, and discussing a few of the many profound and difficult methodological issues which are raised. It will not be necessary here to rehearse the content of each of the papers, which speak powerfully for themselves (or even indeed to refer explicitly to all of them).

Given the significant emphasis throughout on relations between languages, where the methodological problems are explored most fully in Chapter 17 by Tonio Sebastian Richter, I would want to suggest that ‘bilingualism’, as found in the titles of two important recent works,¹ is not always an adequate concept to describe various aspects of the ‘language contact’ involved. *Individual* bilingualism is one thing, that is when an individual is in a position to ‘code-switch’ from one language to another, depending on the context. But even at the individual level, a person may be able to speak two (or more) languages, but be able to write none, or only one. Further, two languages may be current in a society, which necessarily involves the presence and activity of some individuals who are themselves bilingual. But this situation allows precisely for the *absence* of individual bilingualism in a large proportion of the population. For them to access the ‘other’ language, or to be accessed in their turn (say) by

¹ See Adams *Bilingualism*; Adams, Janse and Swain *Bilingualism*.

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official pronouncements originally composed in it, a role of intermediaries or translators is required. I have suggested tentatively, in relation to the fifth-century 'Roman' Empire based in Constantinople, that 'dual-lingualism' might be a more appropriate term.² But even that does not cover situations where more than two languages are in use, or where there is an extensive importation of words and concepts from one language into another, or into more than one language.

Let us take for instance Latin in the Near East, treated in great detail, and in contrasting styles, in this volume by Werner Eck and Benjamin Isaac, with conflicting views as to whether the ever-increasing evidence for the public use of Latin in Caesarea does or does not show that there had been an initial settlement of Latin speakers when the city was re-founded by Vespasian as a *colonia*. Whatever language was actually spoken in a Near Eastern *colonia*, one side-effect was the seepage of Latin terms and concepts not only into Greek, but also (as similarly in Edessa) into Semitic languages. We see this in the case of a citizen of the *colonia* of Berytus (where there unquestionably had been veteran settlement) who is commemorated on an inscription in Palmyra:³

Μάρκος Ἰούλιος Μάξιμος Ἀριστείδης, κόλων Βηρύτιος

MRQWS YWLYWS MKSMWS 'RSTYDS QWLWN BRTY'

But perhaps the most complex case of linguistic history, and the one which is particularly relevant to the most significant of all the historical questions raised in this volume, namely the background and effects of the Islamic conquests, is Petra, which comes into Benjamin Isaac's chapter as a nominal *colonia*, and into Hannah Cotton's as regards the question of whether elements of a local Nabataean law can still be found in the Petra papyri of the sixth century. Had the spoken language of the Nabataeans always been a Semitic language which can be identified as the ancestor of classical Arabic? That would mean that both the Nabataean Aramaic found not only in inscriptions from (above all) Petra itself and from Medain Saleh,⁴ but also in perishable legal documents from the later regal period (and from just after the Roman conquest), but also the Greek of sixth-century Petra papyri themselves, discovered in 1993 and now in the course of publication, has to be seen as an official language deployed in public contexts, into which the intentions of the (hypothetically) Arabic-speaking inhabitants had to be translated.

² See Millar 2006: esp. 85.

³ *CIS* II 3, no. 4401 = Hillers and Cussini *Palmyrene*: 131, no. 0761.

⁴ Healey *Tomb Inscriptions*.

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There are issues here which are far beyond my capacity to deal with, but I will begin by noting that new evidence, from the Petra papyri and other material, shows that there was also a further intrusive element in the public language of Petra, namely Latin. Petra, which is found with the Greek title *metropolis* from the beginning of the Roman period, evidently became a *colonia* early in the third century. Coins give it the title *COLONIA PETRA* or *PETLA COLONI(A)*, and the hybrid Greek–Latin term *metrocolonia* appears on inscriptions.⁵ Now, furthermore, newly published clay *bullae* from Petra record the titles of the city as follows: *COLONIA PETRA METR(OPOLIS)*; *ANTONIANAE COL(ONIAE) HADR(IANA)*; *MET(ROPOLIS) PETRA ANTONIN(IANA)*.⁶ Confirmation of the continued currency of this mixed Greek–Latin status terminology is offered by the first of the Petra papyri,⁷ an agreement relating to family property dated to May, 537: ἐν Αὐγουστοκολωνία [Ἄ]ντωνιανῆ . . . Ἀδριανῆ Πέτρα μητροπόλει τῆς Τρίτης Παλαιστίνης Σαλουτ[αρίας] (ll. 3–4), with a revised text and translation by Hannah Cotton in Chapter 6 of this volume. Papyrus 2, from the following year, confirms that Gaza also continued to enjoy this title: [ἐ]ν κ[ο]λωνία Γάζη (l. 6).

We can surely treat these elements of Latin public vocabulary as formal features, with no implication that Latin was the, or even a, current language of everyday speech in either place. But the demonstration, whose full force will of course depend on publication of the whole archive, that perishable legal documents were still written in Greek in Petra in the sixth century, while the Nessana papyri show that documents, petitions and letters were written in Greek in Nessana, Elousa (no. 29) and Aila (no. 51), between the early sixth and the late seventh centuries, is of a quite different order of significance.⁸ The linguistic situation might have been quite otherwise; these relatively minor cities in semi-desert environments might have sunk to the level of village settlements where no literate or scribal activity still took place. Or Nabataean Aramaic might have come back into use for documents. Or official texts in Greek might have been authenticated by individual written ‘subscriptions’ on the part of witnesses, using whatever Semitic language they were literate in (such Semitic language subscriptions to Greek documents are a common feature of the texts of the Bar Kokhba period from the Judaean Desert, and are a very significant aspect – which deserves further study – of the Euphrates

⁵ See Fiema 2003. ⁶ Gitler 2005. ⁷ Frosén, Arjava and Lehtinen 2002: no. 1.

⁸ See Kraemer 1958 and Cotton, Cockle, Millar ‘Papyrology’: nos. 427–570.

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papyri of the mid-third century).⁹ Or, Arabic might, as (by now) the normal language of the population, have assumed the role of the official language used in Petra even before the Islamic conquests. But as it is, there is no Arabic writing in the Petra papyri, or in the Nessana papyri dating from before the Islamic conquest. As for those from Nessana from after the conquest, there are occasional elements in the Arabic script and language, and occasional reflections of Arabic in Greek transliteration, for instance, in nos. 92–3, the name of the current Caliph, Ἀβδελμαλεχ. At least on a superficial view, both of these extremely important archives of perishable documents fully confirm the evidence offered by Leah Di Segni in a major contribution to this volume, ‘Greek inscriptions in transition from the Byzantine to the early Islamic period’. For, as she shows, in particular contexts Greek building inscriptions continue into the eighth century. Particularly noteworthy, in view of the discussion above of Greek as a ‘vehicular’ language capable of incorporating both Latin and Semitic elements, is the inscription which Leah di Segni quotes from her own publication, in a volume edited by the much-regretted Yizhar Hirschfeld, of the Greek inscriptions from the bath complex of Hammat Gader:¹⁰ ‘By order of Abdallah Mu‘awiya, ἀμήρα αλουμενήν [‘commander of the faithful’], the hot-water system here was cleared and renewed . . . on Monday, December 5, of the 6th indiction, in the year 726 of the κολ-ωνία, year 42 according to the Arabs’ (so 662 CE).

Amazingly, therefore, the status of Gadara as a *colonia* is still recorded, while the current Arab ruler is named in Greek transliteration. However, if we go back to Petra, the continued use of Greek in official documents cannot be the whole story. The economic, social and linguistic context in which the sixth-century documents in Greek were produced cannot be explored fully until they are all published. Nevertheless, advance notices of their content indicate (as we would expect) the presence of numerous Semitic place names and personal names, as well as Semitic terms for plots of land or parts of houses.¹¹

It is at this point that we encounter serious logical problems, without any claim on my part to be able to solve them. First, what, if any, is the social, cultural, legal (as above) or linguistic connection between the Nabataean perishable documents of the later first and early second centuries CE, and the Petra papyri of the sixth? It should be stressed that the

⁹ Feissel and Gascou ‘Documents I’; Feissel, Gascou and Teixidor ‘Documents II’; Feissel and Gascou ‘Documents III’. Syriac subscriptions are found on nos. 1; 3–4; 6–7 (from Marcopolis; eight different individuals); 9; 10 (from Carrhae); 12. See Cotton 2003: 54–5.

¹⁰ Hirschfeld 1997: no. 54. ¹¹ See, e.g., Koenen 1996; Fiema 2002.

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volume of perishable documents in Nabataean Aramaic, though small, is not insignificant. Six such documents (*P.Yadin* 1–4; 6; 9) were published together in 2002,¹² while in Chapter 6 in this volume Hannah Cotton notes there are five or six more, of which only two have been published to date. Given that, by comparison, there are only three perishable documents, all belonging to the third century (as opposed to a long list of literary manuscripts of the early fifth century onwards), in Syriac,¹³ and effectively no intelligible perishable documents in Palmyrene, this is a significant corpus, deserving of detailed study. So (again) what continuity is there between them and the sixth-century papyri? Second, and in historical terms extremely important, can we find in either corpus of material distinct elements which can properly be identified as ‘Arabic’, or elements of vocabulary, or consistent grammatical forms, which might properly be understood as indicating the origins of classical Arabic? It is very probable, obviously enough, that the classical Arabic language as it eventually emerged will have been strongly influenced by the established written Semitic languages of the Roman frontier zone. Furthermore, there seems to be agreement that the Arabic script, first scantily attested in the border zone of the Roman Near East in the sixth century, owes much to Nabataean script. But, as M. C. A. Macdonald has repeatedly warned, script and language are not the same thing, and neither of them is an unambiguous marker of ethnic identity.¹⁴ Robert Hoyland’s ‘Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy’ boldly suggests that the emergence of ‘Arab’ (or ‘Saracen’) political/military formations, under kings or other individual leaders, was a function of the search for support in the frontier zones by the competing Roman and Sasanid Empires; and also that there is genuine plausibility in the picture given in later Islamic sources of various groups having migrated north from southern Arabia to play roles in the frontier zone on the side either of Rome or of Persia. On this view pre-Islamic (or ‘Old’) Arabic derives from south-central Arabia, and came only subsequently to be written in a variant of Nabataean script, as a result of movements north into the Roman/Nabataean sphere. This impressive study, however, still leaves us with major problems concerning the origins of Islam itself. First, the few brief sixth-century inscriptions written in what we can identify as both the language and the script of

¹² See Yadin, Greenfield, Yardeni and Levine *Documents*: 169–277. See also Yardeni *Textbook*.

¹³ See Drijvers and Healey *Old Syriac*: 213–48 (Appendix).

¹⁴ See esp. Macdonald 1998; Macdonald 2000; Macdonald 2003.

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classical Arabic hardly do anything to prepare us for the composition of a vast and complex new religious text in Arabic, the Koran. Second, this text is suffused throughout with allusions to the Bible. In what contexts will the community from which it emerged have encountered the Bible, and in what language or languages? Hebrew? Greek? Jewish Aramaic (the Targums)? Syriac?

We will not find the answers to these problems among the chapters in this volume, or indeed anywhere else. What we will find is a further series of important studies confronting questions of society, culture and language in the Near East: Ted Kaizer on religion and language in Dura, a masterly demonstration of method; Nicole Belayche on language and religion in Palestine of the second to fourth centuries (a scholar whose work stresses that Palestine was only partly Jewish, and was largely inhabited by gentiles in transition from paganism to Christianity); Dan Barag on significant new evidence for the Samaritans, their distinctive Hebrew script and its place in the epigraphic record;¹⁵ Jonathan Price and Shlomo Naeh, contributing important methodological approaches, as well as comparative material on the transcription of languages into different scripts, to their focus on Talmudic attitudes to the language and scripts permissible for the Torah. This study is highly relevant to the question raised above, of the relation of nascent Islam to the Bible. There would eventually be a version of the Bible in the Arabic script and language, though there is no concrete evidence for it until the ninth century.

For the same reasons, as well as many others, there is great value in Sebastian Brock's apparently effortless survey (and handlist) of Syriac inscriptions in late antique Syria, which we may see as matching Marlia Mango's study of the extraordinarily rich harvest of late antique Syriac manuscripts,¹⁶ or alternatively as being accompanied by his own recently published guide to the Bible in Syriac.¹⁷ The significant advances that there have been in recent decades, both in the range of material and in its digestion and organisation, still leave open the challenge of a social history of Syriac in relation to Greek, to Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic and to the 'Arabs' or Saracens of the frontier zones of the Near East.

Related questions of language contact arise also in Walter Ameling's valuable survey of the epigraphy of the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor and Syria, based on the relevant volumes of *Inscriptiones Iudaicae Orientis*

¹⁵ It may be worth noting that Jerome, with his exceptional capacity for noting details about his environment, comments on the Samaritan script, *Praef. In Samuelem et Malachim* (PL XXVIII, cols. 547f.); *Comm. in Ezechielem* 9: 4–6 (CCL LXXV 106).

¹⁶ Mango 1991. ¹⁷ Brock 2006.

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(2004) I–III, in which he himself edited the second volume on Asia Minor. Here too, first as regards Asia Minor, there have been significant new contributions: Harland's book on Jewish communities in relation to pagan associations and (less convincingly) to Christian congregations – not represented in epigraphy before Constantine;¹⁸ or his very important study of the Jewish inscriptions of Hierapolis, which among other things presents an example of a man who must himself be Jewish leaving a fund to the local association of purple-dyers for the annual celebration of the festivals of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost.¹⁹ Even more significant is the powerful demonstration by Jodi Magness that the archaeological evidence – in essence the coins found under the mosaic floor – indicates that the Sardis 'synagogue' (or public building converted for Jewish religious use) should date to the sixth century.²⁰ This late date, if confirmed, must give an extra significance to the presence of a group of Hebrew inscriptions, paralleling the emergence of Hebrew in the late antique/early medieval Jewish inscriptions of the western Mediterranean. In previous centuries in Asia Minor, the image which Jewish inscriptions presented had been monolingually Greek.

Ameling observes that that had not been the case in the Syrian region, as the example of Dura shows (also discussed by Kaizer, see above). The epigraphic evidence for Jewish communities in the Syrian region is relatively slight compared to that from Asia Minor (in line with the contrasting strength of the 'epigraphic habit' in the two regions). But it is enough to suggest that, unlike Asia Minor, there was a real bilinguality (or trilinguality in Dura, with Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew in evidence). But the question of language as against script comes in again. The square Hebrew script is used for Jewish Aramaic in Dura, and appears also in Edessa – but for writing Jewish Aramaic or the local Syriac? Again, there is a bilingual Jewish epitaph from Palmyra, with the Semitic component written in Palmyrene script. So what version of Aramaic language or script did Jews living in Palmyra use for everyday life?

It is widely believed among Syriac specialists that the Old Testament was translated into Syriac directly from Hebrew, and very probably in Osrhoene. What forms of social and linguistic interaction are implied by that? The question of the language used by Jews in the Syrian region, helpfully raised by Ameling, needs to be pursued further, and linked up (once again) with that of the Jewish presence or influence in the province of Arabia (now roughly northern Jordan), which is where in the eyes of

¹⁸ Harland 2003. ¹⁹ Harland 2006. ²⁰ Magness 2005.

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late antique writers in Greek or Latin ‘Arabs’ lived (see Hoyland’s chapter, along with a survey of my own).²¹ Here, the mosaic floor of the synagogue at Gerasa portrays the story of Noah, and is bilingual in Greek and Jewish Aramaic.²² But the enquiry should be pursued also further south, to the borders of the Empire and beyond: to the Northern Hejaz, Himyar (the Yemen) and the Hadramaut, all of which (quite apart from narrative sources) produce scattered epigraphic evidence of a Jewish presence in late antiquity.²³ Once again, we come back (potentially and speculatively) to the origins of Islam and its relation to the Bible.

Returning for a moment to the heart of the Greek world, in Greece and Asia Minor, we have in Chapter 4 Marijana Riel’s classic study of *threptoi* as they appear in the literary and epigraphic evidence, a demonstration of how we can go beyond the words we read, and reconstruct a significant element of social history. The same is true of the following Chapter 5, by Angelos Chaniotis, on ‘Ritual performances of divine justice: the epigraphy of confession, atonement, and exaltation in Roman Asia Minor’, with the important additional element that many of the inscriptions reflecting varieties of pagan individual piety in Asia Minor (the territory first fully explored by Stephen Mitchell in *Anatolia II*) put on record the actual words spoken, by way of confession or of reverence for the gods, by individuals. In these texts we thus pass beyond narrative or allusion to what is (at least) represented as verbatim recording. Papyrus records of proceedings may do the same of course, but not (so far as I know) in religious contexts, as opposed to juridical ones. It is worth stressing how close the epigraphic records discussed by Chaniotis are to the remarkable series of (apparently) verbatim confessions of heresy by former Tessareskaidekatitai and Novatians in the same area (Lydia), which were laid before the First Council of Ephesus in 431 CE.²⁴ More generally, the Acts of the late antique Church Councils represent a remarkable, and largely neglected, storehouse of material which is preserved, like the vast majority of our literary texts, in medieval manuscripts, but goes back directly to contemporary record-taking, and hence could be seen as a form of documentary evidence.

Finally, there are the two concluding papers on Egypt, surely the richest field of exploration for the ‘clash of civilisations’ (or co-existence of civilisations, in historical tradition, literary forms, art and architecture, social relations, law and language) that the ancient world has to offer. The

²¹ Millar 2005.²² See Piccirillo 1992: 290–1.²³ See Bowersock 2004.²⁴ See Millar 2004.

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effort required to master Egyptian in its three distinct forms of script, hieroglyphic, demotic and Coptic, is no excuse for the failure of modern scholarship to do more than pick at a few aspects.²⁵ If significant further steps in exploring the social and linguistic history of Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period are to be taken, the chapter by Tonio Sebastian Richter, ‘Greek, Coptic and the “language of the Hijra”: the rise and decline of the Coptic language in late antique and medieval Egypt’, should be an essential point of reference, both (as mentioned above) as an introduction to modern literature on the methodology of language history, and as providing paired case studies of the emergence of Coptic as a language (and script) of Christian culture on the one hand, and of its decline in the face of Arabic on the other. What this already very substantial chapter does not cover is what it in effect takes for granted, namely the established role of Coptic, along with Greek, in Christian Egypt of the fourth to seventh centuries. Were there separate communities of Greek and of Coptic speakers, or was individual bilingualism common? Did the use of Coptic equate to a sense of Egyptian ethnic, or national, identity? How (if at all) did the currency of these two Christian languages relate to divisions between Chalcedonians on the one hand and the predominant anti-Chalcedonians, or Monophysites, on the other? It will be observed that a closely comparable set of questions could be posed about the respective roles of Greek and Syriac in the Near Eastern provinces proper. But what difference did it make that Coptic was the inheritor of an unbroken tradition, in written language, literature, art and architecture, stretching back over three millennia? Or, on the other hand, that Syriac-using Christians were to be found also beyond the Roman frontiers, in the Sasanid Empire?

The division between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians, as it was at the moment of the Islamic occupation of Egypt in 641 CE, is the starting point of Arietta Papaconstantinou’s chapter ‘“What remains behind”: Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab conquest’, with which this volume concludes. Again if ‘ordinary life’ papyrus documents are deployed, rather than the partisan views expressed in competing Christian works, the picture that emerges is of a persistence of Greek elements, for instance, in language, scribal practice, onomastics or toponymy, as well as continuing allusions to the emperors and to imperial legislation, all of which conflicts totally with any simplistic notion of a ‘nationalist’ rejection of all things Greek by Coptic-speaking

²⁵ The major recent work by Clarysse and Thompson 2006, using both Greek and Demotic documents, is an important step forward.