

Gab es eine Spätantike?

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The birth of 'Late Antiquity'

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Periodizing when you don't have to: the concept of Late Antiquity in Egypt

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In any discussion of historical periodization, questions of the purpose of the exercise, its beneficiaries, and its controllers cannot be avoided. There is no possibility anymore of innocence in these matters, nor shall I claim any for myself. But I shall postpone an explicit consideration of this aspect of the subject until after I have sketched the main outlines of how historians and papyrologists have looked at the periodization of Egyptian history more generally, how late antiquity in particular fits into this picture, and how approaches to this question have changed in recent decades.

The modern periodization of Egyptian history has always rested on the framework of dynasties known to us from the work of Manetho, an Egyptian priest writing in Greek in the Ptolemaic period, who is said to have composed his work at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphos. For Manetho, it was possible to identify thirty dynasties down to the conquest of Egypt by Alexander. It is most unlikely that Manetho invented the concept of dynasties himself, for he certainly relied in part on older Egyptian chronicles and king-lists, of which we have fragmentary remains preserved independently of Manetho, for much of his source material. On the foundation of the dynasties was erected in modern times a superstructure of three "kingdoms" (as we call them in English; "Reich" in German, "Empire" in French), each with a so-called "Intermediate period" following it. This, despite its modern origin in the form we know it, also seems likely to be an Egyptian conception of long standing, for it reflects Egyptian royal propaganda as we know it now from contemporary texts, contrasting the disorder of periods lacking in centralized authority with the supposedly beneficial order of centralized power. Most strikingly, at the Ramesseum a procession of kings shows Menes (Dyn. 1), Mentuhotep (Dyn. 11) and Ahmose (Dyn. 18) following the New Kingdom pharaohs: the founders of the Old Kingdom (with Early Dynastic not differentiated from it), Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom, respectively.

Manetho's work was by no means a simple matter of antiquarianism, as one can see immediately from the fact that his client was the Macedonian king of Egypt. His work helped to provide a context for Ptolemaic rule, even though in the process dynasties not regarded with favor - the Persians, for example, who had been

dislodged by Alexander, from whose conquest the Ptolemies in turn derived their legitimacy - had to be included.

Although Manetho was later epitomized - it is from quotations of such works that we know him - he was not continued. But when Octavian put an end to Ptolemaic rule in Egypt and added the valley of the Nile to the possessions of the Roman people, he was certainly in no doubt that he was ending a period of history and beginning another. There is even an attested era dating from his gaining control of Alexandria, the era of the *Kaisaros kratesis*, which emphasizes discontinuity. No one since that time has doubted that the death of Cleopatra was in effect the end of one post-Manethonian dynasty after not quite three hundred years of rule and the beginning of yet another dynasty. Modern scholarly division of the history of Egypt in 30 BC is thus in a sense so obvious as to require little comment.

At all events, the framework I have described so far, marking out Ptolemaic from Roman Egypt, has never been questioned. Indeed, the trend of historiography in my working lifetime has been to emphasize the changes in government, law, administration, society, and economy that mark off Roman Egypt from Ptolemaic Egypt. A milestone in this discussion was Naphtali Lewis's after-dinner address at the papyrological congress of 1968 at Ann Arbor, in which he denounced the tendency to use the phrase "Graeco-Roman Egypt" for the entire period from Alexander to the Arab conquest, the period sometimes referred to by Greek papyrologists as the papyrological millennium. Lewis argued, both then and at the Naples congress of 1983, for seeing Roman Egypt as distinctive in many ways; in other words, the periodization imposed by political events could be seen to be reflected in a wide variety of other spheres and thus achieve an even greater legitimization. This view has gained canonical status now, and specific scholarly work emphasizing the changes brought by Roman rule has continued, perhaps most notably in the article on cities and administration in Roman Egypt by Bowman and Rathbone in the *Journal of Roman Studies* for 1992.

In any case, the division of the history of Egypt in 30 BC has never been seriously questioned. It embeds the assumption that political history and royal structures are the natural basis for the definition of periods, a view that would probably be widespread even if we did not have Manetho's example to hand. Even foreign dynasties ruling Egypt were assigned periods of their own in Manetho's description. It is not hard to see that this political periodization, taken broadly, has other advantages that have led to its dominance. It does to a large degree correspond also to the succession of languages used by the dominant political power. The rise of papyrology, organized around scholarly communities with particular language training, thus left the concept of periodization largely unchanged, although the continued dominance of Greek in the documentation helped give rise to the tendency attacked by Lewis, to lump Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt together into a single entity. It would not be impossible to propose alternative histories, with different assumptions, for the period from the second century BC to the first century

AD, but any serious rethinking of this question is beyond the possibilities of my time today, and some of you may already be wondering when I am going to get to late antiquity.

Roman Egypt posed and poses serious problems in the context of the kind of political periodization so readily applicable down to Octavian's succession to Cleopatra. The 670 years from that date to the Arab conquest of Egypt form a period even longer than the multi-dynasty Third Intermediate Period, but internal subdivision of this time is difficult. It has indeed been thought of on occasion as a single block of time, and in fact sometimes the term "Graeco-Roman Egypt" refers not to the usage Lewis attacked - combining Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt into a single mass - but to the fact that "Roman" Egypt was also Greek in the sense that the language and culture of the dominant class that gave us almost all of the documentation preserved in both the papyri and the literary sources was Greek. In other words, "Roman" and "Graeco-Roman" sometimes refer to the same period and society.

But 670 years has generally been perceived as a long time, too long to be a convenient period. One has only to say this to recognize the subjectivity of such a thought and an underlying assumption that beyond a certain size periods are not much use. Convenient for what or for whom? Such an assumption rests on the view, not always articulated, that the purpose of periodization is to allow the making of distinctions and to encode in short form a concept or set of concepts of historical change.

If, by contrast, we want periods to be long in order to emphasize an essential unity in which we believe, there is an opposing temptation to make periods long. This is the direction in which the editors of *Late Antiquity* (the Guide) have gone in treating 250-800 as a single period. They want their readers to have "fewer artificial barriers" between periods and regions "which have proved, in the light of modern research, to be more continuous with each other than we had once thought." That is, their one regret is clearly having to impose any boundaries at all. Continuity is in, and distinctions are stigmatized as boundaries.

It is in this context that my title is to be understood: We do not have to subdivide "Roman" Egypt; nothing external forces it on us in the same way that the death of Cleopatra definitively terminates Ptolemaic Egypt. Roman Egypt does not end until 642. If we bother with any concept, whether late antiquity or another, that divides the two-thirds of a millennium of Roman Egypt, we are going to do so in the service of our own conceptions of the value of periodization and the nature of the history that we study.

It was clear from an early date that Roman dynasties were not going to be useful in a Manethonian fashion as major markers allowing the compartmentalization of Roman imperial time in Egypt. For one thing, they were too short-lived, none subsequently achieving the 87 years of the Julio-Claudians. Perhaps even more importantly, it was hard to draw any direct connection between dynastic change at

Rome and significant, observable change in Egypt- again, a very different situation from that visible in the Augustan period. Nor did any intervention of linguistic change help to distinguish periods. Only the rise of Coptic would come into consideration, and that was too gradual an affair to be useful in such a question. When would we begin a "Coptic Egypt"? (Don't even try to answer that rhetorical question. I'm going to come back to it later.)

Historians of Roman Egypt thus found themselves without a framework based on dynastic history that had any visible meaning for Egypt. It will be evident to you that the way was thus clear for the only obvious candidate, namely the controlling schema of Roman history in use in the late 19th century and for nearly all of the twentieth century, the division into principate and dominate, with the dividing line coming at the accession of Diocletian. As many writers in more recent years have pointed out, this schematization was accompanied by value judgments denigrating the period of the late empire, neatly encoded in the French distinction between "high" and "low" empires. Papyrologists accepted this division from an early date, but they introduced into it the habit of calling the late empire "Byzantine"⁹ even with reference to the first tetrarchy. This is of course rather bizarre, since it depends on the foundation of Constantinople as New Rome some forty years after the accession of Diocletian. But the testimony of one of the pioneers in "Byzantine" papyrology, Sir Harold Bell, may give a sense of how this came about. "I must frankly confess," he said in 1933, "that when by the mere accident of fortune, I began to specialize in papyri of the Byzantine and Arab periods rather than in those of the Ptolemaic period, which I should myself have preferred, my chief qualification for the task was a comprehensive ignorance of all that the word Byzantium stands for."

Even then, Bell's enthusiasm remained limited, as he spoke of "a certain shrinkage of interest, a contraction of the mental horizon" as one passed from the Roman to the Byzantine period. The editors of *Late Antiquity* perhaps had such remarks in mind when they described the usage of "Byzantine" as "what we call, by a modern misnomer redolent of ill-informed contempt, the "Byzantine" empire." This empire, of course, continued to refer to itself as "Roman" throughout its history. All in all, however, the struggle over the term "Byzantine" does not seem to me of much significance. Byzantine studies are not going to give up the term simply because it rests on weak foundations or none at all; conventional names have value mainly from common adoption and common attribution of significance, not justified origins. A more interesting question is whether 284 as a conventional date is useful. It is unlikely that anyone will claim quite the sharp, clear functional role for this date that 30 BC plays in the division between Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, but certainly Diocletian saw himself as a watershed figure, whose reorganization of the empire could be compared to the Augustan settlement in its far-reaching consequences. In Egypt, Diocletian marks the end of a period in which the quantity of available documentation dips markedly and the start of the fourth-century

recovery. How far this is simply the product of the peculiar characteristics of the archaeology of the Fayyum may be debated, but it has helped make 284 a respectable chronological boundary in the study of Roman Egypt. (I will add, perhaps unnecessarily, that no serious historian should find the precision of any date of this kind either meaningful or particularly troublesome.) The tidy tripartite division of the papyrological millennium has suffered some degree of destabilization in the last thirty years, although for the most part the old terminology remains undisturbed- in, for example, the heading of a section in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri called "Documents of the Byzantine Period" in which the texts range from Diocletian to the seventh century. Here and there one can detect signs of consciousness that something has changed, as in the title of the most recent volume of Berlin documentary papyri, titled "Griechische Papyrusurkunden spätrömischer und byzantinischer Zeit aus Hermupolis Magna," with texts ranging from 283 to 616.

There are several strands of influence in the destabilization of the old habits: (1) the general rise of late antique studies from the mid-1960s on, and a far more positive valuation of the importance and interest of late antiquity, a phenomenon fostered by the efforts of a whole generation of scholars now mostly in their sixties, including the editors of *Late Antiquity* (Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar), Alan Cameron, and Averil Cameron, although the scholarly foundations of study of the period were largely laid on the continent earlier; (2) the great growth in the availability of published papyrus documents dating to the period from Diocletian to Theodosius, including the Karanis archives of Aurelius Isidores and the following generation, the Panopolite material from the early fourth century, much more of the Hermopolitan aristocratic documentation, the documents from the Nag Hammadi bindings, the finds from Kellis in Greek and Coptic, the archive of Nephros, and many other texts; and (3) the more sophisticated and positive study of "Byzantium" itself, which has made it much harder nowadays to use the term "Byzantine" in the kind of negative fashion decried by the editors of the Guide.

All of these developments have helped give rise to a widespread sense that there is such a thing as late antique Egypt, and that it may in some sense be distinguished from Byzantine Egypt, although just how to do so remains to be seen. Before I go farther with this, my central concern, however, we must take another very relevant side road, one that I mentioned earlier. That is the concept of "Coptic" or "Christian" Egypt. These are live categorizations today, although, as you will see, I believe them to be very problematic. The modern word Copt(ic) comes from an Arabic truncated borrowing of the Greek Aigyptios to describe the inhabitants of Egypt. It had originally no specifically religious or linguistic reference, nor did it refer to any subdivision within the Egyptian population. It is because the post-conquest population of Egypt was largely non-Chalcedonian (or "monophysite" as it is usually called, although the term is problematic) Christian that Renaissance and later writers were led to apply the term Coptic to the surviving minority Christian

church in early modern Egypt and to the language that by that time was essentially a liturgical rather than a living tongue. From this usage has come the application of the term by modern writers to other domains. But there are difficulties with this practice, whether we are speaking of literature (much that survives in Coptic was translated from other languages (especially Greek), and much that was written in Coptic or once existed in it now survives only in translation into some other language (particularly Arabic) or culture more broadly, where the extension of the term Coptic to art, archaeology, history, and even the church in the period before the Arab conquest create great problems. Egypt in the Roman period, after all, was a largely bilingual society (with minority use of other languages), with a complex culture strongly imprinted with the metropolitan culture of the eastern (Greek) Roman world, and most of those objects or phenomena called "Coptic" are in fact simply characteristic of this bicultural local version of an international society.

The entire concept of Coptic studies is thus in my view problematic, particularly because it draws its strength in part from confessional interests. It owes its tenacity in academic circles in considerable part to the enormous rise in the study of religion as an academic field in the postwar period, particularly in the United States from the 1960s on. Of particular importance has been the impact of the Nag Hammadi codices on religious studies. Since religion was undeniably central both to ancient society and to the record surviving today of that society, whether we think of archaeological, artistic, or literary remains, the religious characterization of the period has had a widespread appeal.

There is some sense of the problematic nature of the term "Coptic" within the field, I think. One can see this from the title given to the proceedings of the 6th international congress of Coptologists: *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit*. Even more striking is the title of a multiauthor manual: *Ägypten in spätantik-christlicher Zeit: Einführung in die koptische Kultur*. The contents of the latter are almost entirely written from a Coptic—in the sense of non-Greek—perspective, except for chapters by Heinz Heinen on the history of late antique Egypt and Alexandria. Or consider *L'Egitto cristiano: aspetti e problemi in età tardo-antica*. Signs of uneasy scholarly consciences, perhaps. In my view, terms like "Coptic" and "Christian", when applied to the entire period from the fourth to the seventh or eighth century, are seriously misleading and truncate the social, religious, and cultural realities of this society.

The term "Coptic" does, however, offer a useful point of transition into the problem I raised at the outset, that of the interests served by periodization. It is in some respects a crude example of the phenomenon, for it serves to annex the church of antiquity as an ally of a particular ecclesiastical body of the present day and its membership. This usage is thus the modern descendant of the polemical debates at the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, in which the heritage of Athanasius - controversial in his own day but the unquestionable champion of orthodoxy in the eyes of posterity - was an object of contention; Athanasius in turn would be

followed by Cyril, a center of controversy in his own time but the object of an ownership struggle after his death. It is dangerous for scholarship to adopt terms that open it to the risk of appearing to be dragged into the modern successors of the ancient christological debates.

Nor is the end of the story. "Coptic" has in the contemporary organization of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt become a definitional term for a broad range of ancient remains. In the SCA, "Roman" remains are included with Pharaonic in a single division (Ptolemaic is part of the same division but never specifically mentioned in its description), while Coptic and Islamic are put together. Government interests in appearing not to discriminate against the Copts are thus served by apparently putting Coptic on a level with Islamic. In practice, however, these boundaries are as murky as their conceptual weakness would lead one to fear. Remains of the period from the third to seventh centuries can be claimed for either inspectorate, and it is not unheard-of for competing inspectors to assert claims over monuments under excavation, giving conflicting orders. One can see how such competing claims may be reasonable, in a world where "Coptic" is allowed to stand for "late antique" because things may well be both Roman and late antique. Egypt was, after all, not severed from the Roman empire in the period of Christianization, as this kind of boundary-setting would tend to suggest.

This is an extreme example, chosen to demonstrate that periodization is neither innocent nor always free of practical consequences. The craziness to which such categories can lead is evident. But we are not entitled to be smug about this discovery. If we turn the lens around, we can see that all approaches to periodization that are based on Roman imperial history serve a particular view of Egypt's participation in the Roman world and integration with it, whether they are conscious of doing so or not. Now I emphasize that I myself take a fairly strong view of Egypt's integration into the late antique Mediterranean world that Rome ruled and that had a metropolitan elite culture. That is, a Roman-based periodization serves my interests and is in agreement with my overall concept of the subject. Indeed, in my view it is precisely in the fourth to sixth centuries that Egypt's degree of integration in the larger world reaches its maximum degree; thus here more than in any other period it is appropriate for structures of periodization to reflect the larger world. It is partly for this reason that I advocate the use of the terminology "late antiquity" in referring to this period in Egypt. All the same, the fact that I hold these views does not mean that they are value-free or that a Roman-centered periodization is neutral.

Three significant questions will occupy me for the remainder of my time. First, to the extent that we can agree that a Roman-based periodization is our starting point, what are the most rewarding dates to adopt? Second, does such a periodization in fact work for Egypt- and by "work" I mean does it converge with events or trends in Egypt? Third, and this is a challenge that emerges from reading *Late Antiquity*,

should our answers be changed by the concept of a late antiquity not limited to the Roman world but embracing also the Sassanid and then Muslim empires?

First, the Roman aspect of the beginning of late antiquity. There cannot be a great deal of disagreement that the Roman world underwent substantial change in the third century, even at the most superficial level of political history. One may want to put the dividing point after Severus Alexander, or (the highly rounded date used by the Guide) at mid-century, instead of with Aurelian or Diocletian. That is, the probable range within which one would put the boundary is about a half-century. The difficulty of defining the years from 235 to 285 lies at the heart of the problem: the old order has largely passed away but the new is not yet in place. It may be a matter of taste how to handle such a situation. The recent volume by Jean-Michel Carrie and Aline Rousselle, *L'Empire remain en mutation*, covers the years from 192 to 337; Carrie endorses the third quarter of the third century as a rough beginning for late antiquity.

But the beginning is easy compared to the end. The Guide's editors set their terminus in 800 and, starting as they do with 250, assert that late antiquity lasted more than five hundred years. Others' usage differs; the dustjacket description on Judith Herrin's *Formation of Christendom* speaks of the book covering the period "from the end of late antiquity to the coronation of Charlemagne" - an event that occurred, you will recall, on Christmas Day, 800. In other words, the entirety of Herrin's substantial work concerns an early medieval period between late antiquity and the coronation, but all of this territory has been annexed for late antiquity by the Guide.

Once again, that these definitions do not exist in a vacuum is obvious. The Guide's definition is not explicitly defended, but it rests on the strongly asserted view of the essential unity, even across political change, of the world it describes. Carrie argues for the Arab sweep across the Near East and North Africa as a breaking point, seeing this transformation as far more important than the Guide does.

As to Egypt, I find it hard to find strong internal arguments for the beginning of a well-defined late antiquity. Severus's grant of municipal status to the metropoleis of the nomes, in 200, is certainly a defining moment, one that turns loose the defining forces of the cities of the third and fourth centuries. But on the one hand, as Bowman and Rathbone showed, this event was the culmination of a process begun already under Augustus; and on the other, it took a few decades (which included the Antonine Constitution and its slowly-unfolding consequences for law) before the new cities took shape entirely. The municipalization of Egypt is in some sense just a matter of catching up with much of the eastern empire, but it is worth noting that some other areas reached this point still later in the third century, including some parts of Palestine. There is also the Palmyrene interlude in Egypt, which had very destructive consequences for Alexandria, to be thought of.

When all is said and done, Diocletian may have as good a claim as anyone. The recovery of papyrological documentation in his time may even be a reflection of a real recovery of productive capacity in some areas and the reoccupation of villages.

Once again the closing date is even more problematic. For *Egypt in Late Antiquity* I adopted a mid-fifth century boundary, arguing that it made sense to prefer to maintain an analytic distinction between late antique and Byzantine Egypt. Is this defensible, or should we sweep it all together into a half-millennium of late antiquity that I was unwilling to treat in a book of seven hundred pages? It is certainly hard to find political events constituting a defensible period boundary affecting Egypt until the Arab conquest (or at least the Persian domination shortly before this), and no one familiar with the difficulty of telling Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian allegiances apart in the documents is likely to want to make the council of 451 into a strong line. But I do think we can point to internal realities that help to divide the period. These include the shift from the city council-oriented governance structures familiar in the third and fourth centuries to the dominance of the great houses visible in the sixth, with all its economic and administrative implications. The councils lose out to the imperial administration and the church as the privileged locus of elite competition.

The fifth century also is probably the period when most of the Christian infrastructure of the sixth century comes into being, including charitable institutions, the cult of the saints, and the well-developed church calendar. Education is far less classical in the sixth century than the fourth, despite the survival of some parts of the classical curriculum. The relative weakness of the documentation for the fifth century makes it hard, or perhaps one should say useless, to offer a precise date for such changes, which in themselves could not be tied readily to particular years even if our evidence were better, and Jean Gascou, in an as-yet unpublished discussion, expresses concern that the entire sense of the fifth century as a dividing point may be an artifact of the character of the papyrus documentation (he himself avoids any division of what he continues to call Byzantine Egypt). But the middle decades of the fifth century seem to me a good guess at the approximate period of the most obvious transformations.

It will be obvious that I have not abandoned the preference for the making of distinctions that tends to underlie periodization. In important senses, the Egypts of 150, 350, and 550 naturally have continuities on many fronts. But I do not think that recognizing also the differences between the societies we see in those years in any way weakens the recognition of the continuities and similarities. If someone prefers to call these Roman, Late Antique I and Late Antique II rather than Roman, Late Antique, and Byzantine, I have no quarrel with that; but it reminds me more of prehistoric reckoning than historic and seems of comparatively little importance next to a sense that there is a real change part of the way through these 550 years that the Guide treats in a single unit.

The last boundary of that large swathe of time is also problematic in Egypt, where the conquest of 640-642 really does mark a dramatic change, and where administrative changes in the early eighth century to a considerable degree bring us to a society again recognizably separated by a gulf from that of 550. In Egypt, 800 is not particularly meaningful, nor is any date near it.

The third question is whether all of the above is too Rome-centered, or at least too Romans-centered. Does expansion of the view to include the Sassanid empire and the Arab caliphate impel us to think differently about periodization of a particular part of the Near Eastern world? In my view this question cannot be separated from the issue I have repeatedly come back to, the purpose of periodization. If one sees the definition of periods as a matter of creating barriers between fields, then ipso facto the longer a period can be, the better; the same would be true of geographical areas. Then the Arab conquest of Egypt is a small matter, easily ignored in defining periods.

Despite the attractions of this sort of view, in the end I do not find it truly persuasive. The objections of the Guide are really against the abuse of periods, the elevation of analytic frameworks into objective realities that really can serve to block perception of connections and continuities. Is anyone today really in favor of such abuses? If so, they do not belong to the circle of my acquaintances.

A large part of the Guide's vision of what distinguishes late antiquity from the period before 250 is the formation of the Christian and Islamic religious communities spanning large geographical expanses and in many cases crossing the lines of political allegiance or of Romanity or Hellenism. This must in an important sense be correct. And yet it does not really justify a closing date, nor does it really support the opening one very firmly. For Christianity, the embryonic network of bishops across the world existed before 250 and helped to define the religion compared to the traditional religions of the Greek and Roman world; but not even someone who sees the pace of fourth-century Christianization as being as rapid as I think it was can claim that there was a common catholic Christianity throughout the population much before the end of the fourth century. And of course Islam does not figure at all until the seventh century; a late antiquity that closes off before the Prophet would be missing entirely that part of the definition. For these reasons I do not find the Guide's definition entirely persuasive.

To my mind, then, there is a real value in continuing to assert that within this long continuity, which is even longer than the 550-year span the Guide allows it—I remind you that one of its editors, Peter Brown, begins the formation of late antiquity with Marcus Aurelius in his earlier writing, following a view expressed earlier by Roger Rémondon—there is room for analytic distinctions that help us to see that there was enormous, astonishing change: the upending of the Roman and Persian empires, the rise to majority status and power of a once-persecuted minority religion, the conquest of much of the settled world of the Mediterranean by Muslim Arabs, the transformation of the cultural heritage of antiquity in the service of new

purposes, and much more. It is worth while looking for periodization that helps us to understand these developments without suggesting that periods were airtight compartments. My own preferences remain for placing the transition points roughly in the third quarter of the third century, the middle of the fifth century, and the first quarter of the seventh century, at least as far as Egypt is concerned and perhaps even more broadly. I am not prepared to insist on any particular names for these; no one owns "late antiquity" as a trademark. But the periods do in my view help to formulate both conclusions and questions about the information of the classical world in late antiquity and beyond.