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COPTS, term commonly used for the Egyptian people in Late Antiquity and for the Christian population of Egypt from the Arab conquest of 640–641 CE to the present. The adjective Coptic is variously applied, not without controversy, to a language and its literature, a church, a historical period, and an entire culture.

Terminology. The modern words *Copt* and *Coptic*, to describe the inhabitants of Egypt, come from an Arabic truncated borrowing (*qubt/qibt*) of the Greek for "Egyptian," *Aigyptios* (usually said to be itself derived from the Egyptian name of Memphis, *Ht-k3-Pth*). There is no connection to the place name Coptos. Originally, no specifically religious or linguistic reference was implied, nor was reference made to any subdivision within the Egyptian population. The people of Egypt at the time of the Arab conquest referred to the language that we call "Coptic" simply as "Egyptian," in both the Greek and Egyptian languages. Because the postconquest population of Egypt was largely monophysite Christian, Renaissance and later writers were led to apply the term *Coptic* to the surviving minority Christian church in early modern Egypt, as well as to the language that by that time was essentially a liturgical rather than a living tongue. From that usage has come the application of the term by modern writers to other domains, which include literature, art, religion, and the whole range of studies concerning that culture in history.

Language and script are the least problematic of the extended uses, for there is no other suitable term to distinguish the Coptic writing system (which was used as early as the third century CE) from other, earlier, means of representing the Egyptian language. Moreover, Coptic is as deliberately shaped a writing system as any other in Egyptian history, and it represents a conscious attempt to create a language and script that would give Egyptian as

much power and flexibility as Greek. A separate name for it is thus well justified.

Difficulties arise in moving from language to literature, for 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 (particularly Arabic). Nonetheless, practicality suggests that Coptic literature, as a concept, is unobjectionable, as long as its close ties to the eastern Mediterranean literature of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages are kept in perspective.

Many scholars find it difficult to accept the widely found extension of the term *Coptic* to art, archaeology, history, and even to the church in the period before the Arab conquest; the reason is that Egypt was a largely bilingual society (with minority use of other languages). Moreover, Egypt was a complex society that had been strongly imprinted with the metropolitan culture of the Eastern (Greek) Roman world. Hence, most of those objects or phenomena now called "Coptic" are in fact simply characteristic of that bicultural local version of an international society (even the concept "bicultural" is difficult to apply, since it tends to suggest a clearer division than actually existed). Unfortunately, no other terminology has so far found universal acceptance, although Late Roman, Late Antique, and Early Byzantine have all found adherents—but not with consistently used meanings. Despite the consequent ambiguity, however, they are better descriptions for both history and art than is "Coptic." (Part of what is usually considered Late Roman or Late Antique [284–395 CE] is treated in the article Roman Occupation; however, this article will, with partial overlap, cover the period from the Roman emperor Constantine [who ruled Egypt from 324 to 337 CE] to the Arab conquest of 641 CE. Consequently, for its purposes, Late Antique is used here to cover the period from 284 to 641 CE.)

The use of the term *Copts* to refer to the people of Egypt in preconquest times is also common but misleading, particularly because they are usually contrasted with Greeks or Romans. To the population of Late Antique Egypt, however, Greek and Egyptian were not opposites; a Greek-speaking resident of Egypt was as likely to display pride in Egyptian origin as an Egyptian-speaking person. Although many writers have claimed that the monophysite church of the period, after the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), represented an Egyptian (i.e., "Coptic") nationalistic movement, the evidence supports the contrary view: both Chalcedonian and monophysite churches operated in the Greek language at the highest levels and contained speakers of both the Greek and Egyptian languages, and there is no significant evidence of hostility to the use of Greek in either body until quite late in the period. Although there is a sense of the mono-

physite church being beleaguered by the outside world, Egypt nonetheless remained connected to Christian currents in other parts of the Roman Empire, especially Syria, until after the Arab conquest.

Political History. Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324 CE gave him control of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, including Egypt. After the foundation of Constantinople (330 CE, now Istanbul, Turkey), Constantine directed Egypt's wheat taxes to the "new Rome," rather than to the old, and Egypt's fate thereafter lay firmly and unsurprisingly with the Greek part of the empire. The effective split of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western after 395 CE reduced further Egypt's connection to the West, although in ecclesiastical politics Alexandrian connections to Rome remained strong until the middle of the fifth century. From 324 until 617 CE, Egypt enjoyed three centuries largely free from external threat and internal revolt. The dramas of imperial succession were played out elsewhere. Internal political turbulence, however, was common and was often closely connected with religious developments. The volatility of the Alexandrian population, often commented on in Hellenistic and Roman times, continued to be widely remarked.

In the fourth century and into the fifth, both pagan-Christian strife and the conflict between Christian groups were frequently recorded. For example, one of the accusations against Athanasius by his enemies was his violent handling of Meletian and Arian clergy, and his exiles and returns to Alexandria were sometimes accompanied by turmoil. Ammianus Marcellinus described violence in Alexandria during the emperor Julian's reign, when pagans felt free to attack Christians, but the destruction of the Serapeum by a Christian mob three decades later, in 391 CE, was not much different in kind. The murder of the philosopher Hypatia in 415 CE, although hardly a momentous political event, was emblematic.

Byzantine Roman rule over Egypt was temporarily ended in 617–619 CE by a Persian invasion, leading to a decade of Persian rule before the restoration of Roman government in 629. That invasion was said to have been accompanied by widespread massacres and devastation, but only scanty details of the decade of Persian rule are known. A decade 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), to take the fortress at Babylon (Old Cairo) by siege, and finally to negotiate the surrender of Alexandria by the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus (late 641, effective in September 642). 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.

Religious History. Egyptian Christianity included diverse strains of thought and practice from relatively early in its history, but not until the fourth century was there a growth of major divisions and considerable conflict. The earliest history of Christianity in Egypt is poorly known, despite the traditional claim of Saint Mark as its founder. Ironically, the destruction of Egypt's Jewish population in Trajan's regime (r. 98–117 CE) wiped out an important matrix for the church's growth. Only in the third century do the bishops of Alexandria start to be more than names. Theologically, Egypt was marked from the beginning by a strongly Platonist strain, which owed much to the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria; it also surfaced in Christian authors, such as Valentinus, Clement, Origen, and Didymus. Although Clement and Origen polemicized against the so-called Gnostics, both men shared much of their intellectual background. At the same time, however, the more materialistic and less *logos*-centered "Asiatic" (Near Eastern) theology also had its supporters. The city of Alexandria included much theological diversity in the third century, and the bishop was not yet invested with as dominant a role as was later the case; nonetheless, Origen's activity was centered in the catechetical school, not in an independent institution.

"Gnostics" have been a major center of scholarly interest since the late 1940s, owing above all to the discovery of the so-called Nag Hammadi library, a group of thirteen fourth-century codices that have a large number of compositions not belonging to the Christian biblical canon. Of diverse origin and contents, but consistently distant in outlook from the main lines of the organized church, its texts—translated from Greek into Coptic—have evoked an equally wide variety of views. It remains unclear whether the codices point to the existence of any organized body for whom they were important or whether they were simply part of the library of Christians who saw themselves as members of the catholic church.

A somewhat different situation obtained with the Manichaeans, whose dualistic philosophy ultimately resulted in a definitive break with Christianity. Yet many groups in the fourth century seem to have regarded themselves as true Christian churches, using much of the same vocabulary for institutions and offices. Recent finds at Kellis (today's Ismant el-Kharab, Dakhleh Oasis), coupled with earlier discoveries in the Faiyum, as well as the Cologne Mani Codex, have greatly expanded the body of fourth-century Manichaean textual material.

The last major imperial persecution of Egyptian Christians was that under Diocletian (r. 284–305 CE). During it, a group of bishops led by Meletius of Lykopolis broke with the authority of the bishop of Alexandria, Peter. This split is often ascribed to diverging views over the appropriate treatment of those who had denied the Christian

faith during the persecution, but it has also been argued that it focused rather on the Alexandrian bishop's claims to universal power over the Egyptian church. The Meletian movement had a long afterlife, although probably with small numbers in later centuries. Athanasius tried, with considerable success, to treat the Meletians as heretics along with the Arians, but there is no evidence that they were doctrinally distinct from the orthodox church in any way. The conflict with the Arians, which intersected with imperial politics throughout the century, formed the main action of Athanasius's long (328–373 CE) reign as bishop of Alexandria. He suffered five periods of exile, two abroad (335–337 and 339–346) and three largely in hiding in Egypt (356–362, 362–364, and 365–366). Although mainly successful in molding 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. It was not until under the emperor Theodosius (r. 379–395 CE) that an orthodox successor was able to get a firm grip on the see of Alexandria. Yet throughout this period, Egypt remained a major force in the church at large, despite feeling a beleaguered bastion of Athanasian orthodoxy much of the time.

A major crisis at the start of the fifth century brought to a head a controversy over doctrines called Origenist, more by acknowledgment of their theological ancestry than because they were all drawn directly from the third-century theologian Origen. The bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, who has been described as a purely political man, first supported an Origenist, anti-anthropomorphic view. Soon, pressure from monks produced an about-face in 402, entailing the exile of the four Origenist monks called the Tall Brothers, and thereafter he had a determinedly anti-Origenist stance.

The highwater mark of Alexandrian influence in the church came with the patriarchate of Cyril (412–444), who used the first Council of Ephesus in 431 to depose Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople (428–431). The council was fought on 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. That 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 Dioscorus I (444–458) tried a similar coup at the second Council of Ephesus in 449, removing bishops Flavianus of Constantinople and Domnus of Antioch from office; that 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, convoked a new council at Chalcedon in 451, and at that time Dioscorus was not in control. Leo's *Tome* held the day doctrinally, and Constantinople gained politically by achieving virtual parity with Rome. Dioscorus was condemned, both for his refusal to accept the Chalcedonian formula of the hypostatic union of two natures in one and for the arbitrariness of his exercise of power in his own see. From that point on, there were usually two contending bishops of Alexandria, one supporting the Chalcedonian formulations, most typically with imperial support, and the other maintaining Dioscorus's monophysite 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, r. 491–518) were of monophysite 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 monophysite church, which was more consistently pressed by the emperors; another was a much diminished likelihood that theological works in Greek but 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 (particularly when the Syrian monophysites were themselves under imperial pressure to conform to Chalcedon) 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 Baradaïos rebuilt the hierarchy of the church after the reign of Justinian (r. 527–565). The monophysite patriarch Damianus (in office 578–605) was also of Syrian origin; his period saw a substantial renewal of the Egyptian church.

The last Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria before the Arab conquest, Cyrus, led a concerted effort to enforce conformity to the imperial, pro-Chalcedonian, will. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was shown to be false that claims that the Egyptians, as a result of his persecution, welcomed the Arabs. If anything, it was Cyprus's weak conduct of the defense of Egypt that led to its fall—but the memory of Cyrus unquestionably was exalted in the monophysite church, perhaps beyond his actual deserts.

By the start of the fourth century, the structure of the Egyptian church was already largely formed, but how much earlier it is hard to say. Egypt had by that time some seventy-two bishops, and by 357 CE the total, including the Libyan coast as far as Cyrenaica, amounted to about one hundred. The earliest bishops were largely members of the higher socioeconomic strata, and the increased tendency over time to draw bishops from the ranks of monks

did not eliminate the bias in favor of those with an education and those of prosperous background. The clergy seemed on the whole to have been largely part-time practitioners, earning much of its keep from secular property holdings or occupations. Many were ordained only in mature years, the office passing down family lines, and no training process is known to have existed.

There were no archbishops other than that of Alexandria, and thus no intermediate regional centers of official power; neither did episcopal synods play a significant role in Egypt. The absolute dominance of bishops within their sees was thus repeated in the control of the bishop of Alexandria over the entire country, cemented firmly by Athanasius and administered by a curia about which little is known. The church of Egypt was by the standards of the period unusually hierarchical. Its other distinctive characteristic, which plays a determinative role in Coptic literature, is the importance of monasticism. Monasticism was the invention of Egyptian Christianity, and Egypt provided the fundamental exemplars of both eremitic asceticism, in Antony, and of cenobitic monasticism, in Pachomius. The literature about the Egyptian monks, much of it written by admiring travelers, was widely diffused throughout the Mediterranean and had an enormous impact. Within Egypt itself, the prestige of the ascetic life was great, and monks acquired influence and patronage, to some extent in competition with bishops; but as more bishops were drawn from the monasteries, the two spheres became closely intertwined. Shenoute, who is discussed as a writer in the section below, was important as a mentor of the clergy and the laity, not only as an abbot and writer.

Language, Literature, and Texts. Coptic Egyptian is a product of a bilingual society, using Greek characters and a large quantity of Greek vocabulary, along with new Egyptian formations consciously designed to provide equivalents for Greek words. Puristic features and learned terms in the Greek testify to the high educational level of those responsible for the formation of Coptic into a literary instrument. Not surprisingly, Coptic literature is closely linked to the wider world of Christian writing in other languages and, even when (as in Shenoute's works) displaying hostility to Hellenic (i.e., pagan) culture, bears the marks of Greek education. In fact, the major figures of Egyptian Christianity, who were discussed above, wrote mainly in Greek, not in Coptic.

The earliest true Coptic writing (third century) was apparently the translation of the Bible, and other Christian theological works were also translated relatively early, including some from non-Egyptian authors, such as Meliton of Sardis, John Chrysostom, and the Cappadocian fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus). The known works from those authors in Coptic

translation are, in the main, sermons and ascetic works, reflecting the interests of the monasteries; most of their major standard works are not known to have been translated into Coptic. A vast amount of post-conquest manuscripts of literature in Coptic is purported to be translations from the major patristic authors—but in fact it is late composition and falsely ascribed to them.

When the first original (i.e., not translated from Greek) literary work in Coptic was written is not known; even whether Antony's letters were originally written in Greek or Coptic is unknown. The earliest documented Coptic literature is the body of letters and rules from Pachomius and his successors, although these were perhaps not seen as literature by their authors. In Egypt, the monasteries always played an important role in Coptic literature and what survives today may offer a distorted picture of the ancient reality, because most of it survived in monasteries. If part of a library belonging to a cultivated urban layman of the sixth century came to light, it might give a different picture. As things stand, we do not even know if there was any secular literature in Coptic. Large numbers of private letters in Coptic that deal extensively with worldly matters have been preserved on papyrus and clay, but those, too, come disproportionately from monastic sites. The importance of the monasteries to the survival of Christianity in Egypt after the Arab conquest no doubt reflected, in part, the significance of monastic institutions before the Arabs, but this may also have led to a distorted image of pre-conquest culture.

Original writing in Coptic reached maturity with Shenoute (c.348–454), the abbot of the White Monastery at Atri (Sohag; across from Akhmim, the ancient Panopolis) and Coptic's greatest author. He was the first to try to place Coptic on the same level as the other major theological languages, but he did so drawing on the rhetorical modes and genres of Greek culture. His writing, much of it sermons and other moral discourses, is generally regarded as difficult, no doubt because of its ambitious nature.

The split between the Chalcedonian and monophysite parts of the Egyptian church after 451 CE had substantial consequences for literature. Shenoute's successor Besa wrote a life of his great predecessor, in a style (sometimes called "plerophoric") composed of a series of vignettes combining miraculous episodes and dogmatic position-taking, aimed at validating an anti-Chalcedonian view and in general a depreciation of theological subtlety. Besa also composed letters and catecheses. The genre of plerophoric works flourished during this period in Egypt and Syria, the great monophysite bastions. Also from this period comes the composition of the *Ecclesiastical History*, part of which (books 1–7, down to Diocletian) was drawn from Eusebius of Caesarea's great fourth-century work on



COPTS. *Coptic textile*. Bottom of woolen skirt with elaborate angle band and knee roundels, from the Faiyum. (University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia. Neg. # S8-31706)

the subject. The remaining five books, running from the Diocletianic persecutions down to the time of writing, presented an Egyptian view of controversies over the nearly two hundred years in question. Like Eusebius, this work lists the writings of the major figures in its drama (Athanasius, Theophilus, Cyril, John Chrysostom, and Timothy Aelurus).

In the last part of the sixth century, the renewal of Damianus' period also had a significant impact on Coptic literature. Although no one author of that period stands out in the way Shenoute did in his time, the expressiveness of the language fostered by Shenoute's legacy was joined to a straightforward style, to produce many works of quality. The single most important author was perhaps Constantine of Siut, whose encomia and homilies drew on the Athanasian tradition but also reflected a knowledge of Syrian thought.

Art and Archaeology. Of all the areas of Late Antique Egyptian culture commonly called "Coptic," art has posed the most severe problems, in considerable part because the historical context of many of the surviving works was

unknown. Neither artists nor patrons were known, and chronology has been controversial at best. Some of this art is earlier than previously thought; some does not come from Christian contexts; in general, the art is the product of commissions from the multilayered culture of the bilingual upper classes of late antique Egypt. As with literature, our information comes disproportionately from the monasteries, many of which have survived to some degree either through preservation in use (although with constant alteration) or through burial by the sand and then modern excavation. Both cenobitic monasteries (like Bawit, Phoibammon at Thebes, and Saqqara) and laura-type ascetic settlements (like Kellia, Esna, and Naqlun) have been excavated—the first group showing, as one would expect, a centralized and organized form with many communal facilities, the second consisting largely of individual hermitages. These latter are, however, often relatively spacious, with separate rooms for prayer, and they reflect the prosperous social background of many of the ascetics.

Urban settlements are, by comparison, scarcely known,

although there have been a few excavations. Cemeteries, which were wherever possible located in the desert, have survived better; an outstanding example is that at Baga-wat (near Kharga, ancient Hibis, in the Great Oasis), where the decoration has survived in many tombs. It was mainly painting over plastered mud brick, a medium widely used even in major buildings, such as churches, where stone was scarce or expensive. Sculpture in stone was, however, used in many important places, as (for example) in the extensive remains from the monastery of Apollo at Bawit. Carved stone grave stelae were also in continuous use in large numbers. Painting was of great importance, for scenes from the Bible and of the saints, both on the walls of churches and for icons. Perhaps the best-known aspect of Coptic art, however, is the textiles—mainly in wool and linen—which drew on long Egyptian traditions and often used old artistic motifs, although with new significance. Most of the textiles—of a stylized and intricate design, have come into museums and collections through the antiquities trade, and they thus lack archaeological contexts.

Generally, the artists of Byzantine-era Egypt worked with stylistic means and figural repertoires inherited from earlier periods; even mythological scenes and decorative programs retained the pagan gods until quite late in antiquity, sometimes reusing motifs for new purposes to suit Christianity; most famous is the transformation of Isis nursing Horus into the Virgin Mary nursing Jesus. Because classical culture remained part of the heritage of educated people in Late Antique Egypt distinguishing “Christian” art from “pagan” is difficult or impossible, except where explicitly religious uses are involved. The patrons who paid for most of the buildings and art during the Byzantine era were mainly Greek-speaking or bilingual; even the monasteries contained mainly bilingual communities. Moreover, until the seventh century, Egypt remained linked to artistic and architectural currents in the rest of the empire. Once again, therefore, the use of the term Coptic is inappropriate for Egypt’s broader cultural phenomena in late antiquity. Until some new discoveries yield a better understanding of the cities and villages of those times—especially of the last two centuries of Roman rule, it will be impossible to say how far the dominant imprint of the monasteries on the Christian, Egyptian-speaking culture of those centuries results from the pattern of text and artifact survival, as opposed to how far it represents the actual character of the larger society.

[See also Coptic Literature; Grammar, *article on Coptic*; Roman Occupation; and Scripts, *article on Coptic*.]

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COREGENCY. Occasionally throughout the history of ancient Egypt it became politically expedient to recognize two persons simultaneously as pharaoh. Usually this arrangement conformed to the Egyptian ideal of the “staff of old age,” whereby an elder functionary was assisted by a younger man whom he trained to succeed him in office.