The Genesis of the Coptic Identity: An Inquiry into the Awakening of Coptic Ethnic Consciousness

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Abstract

In this article I intend to examine and refute the theory that the Egyptian population was rigidly divided into two isolated and antagonistic groups, the so-called autochthons (indigenous population) and foreigners (Greeks, succeeded by Romans and Byzantines). This supposed dichotomy was said to have begun during early Ptolemaic times (3rd c. B.C.) and lasted through the Arab conquest of Egypt in 645 and beyond. I focus my attention mainly on the Byzantine period (4th c. A.D. until 645) and I challenge and reject the view that the Monophysite (Coptic) Christian community of Byzantine Egypt represented the indigenous population, which had a common ethnic origin, in contrast to the foreign oppressors. Finally, I express the view that only after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 645 can we discern a latent ethnic differentiation between the Monophysite Copts and Dyophysite Melkites, which reached its peak at the time of the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria Cosmas I (ca. 727–768) and marked the final break of the two religious communities of Egypt.

Keywords: Coptic identity; Coptic ethnic consciousness; ancient Egyptian populations; Christianity in Byzantine Egypt

The Roots of the Copts in Ptolemaic Times

While numerous studies have been written by modern scholars about the Copts and their civilisation, they have provided no concrete evidence that traces and explains their unique identity, which is an extremely difficult task (Orlandi 1980; Wilfong 1998, 175n1, 189nn49–50; Mikhail 2014). In order to understand the emergence of the Coptic identity it is necessary to take into consideration the development of Egyptian society from the early Ptolemaic period (3rd–2nd c. B.C.) until the Arab conquest.

The first step in this process is the examination of the frequently expressed view that, from the Ptolemaic dominance until the Arab conquest of Egypt, Egyptian society suffered from a perennial rigid dichotomy between the local, frequently called "indigenous part" (or "part of the autochthons"),[1] and the Greek community.

The aim of this article is to trace the interaction of the above-mentioned two factions of the Egyptian population which originated in Ptolemaic Egypt, reached its peak in Byzantine times, acquired a special form after the Arab conquest of Egypt (645 A.D.), and caused the genesis of a distinct offshoot known as the Coptic community and culture. It should be noted that the interaction between the Greek conquerors of Egypt and the local population was not easy but that a modus vivendi was gradually established.

Ptolemaic Egypt (Late 4th c. B.C.–30 B.C.)

As correctly suggested by Goudriaan (2000, 43) and Bell (1948, 61), we should not try to interpret the difficult times of the Ptolemaic administration of Egypt solely from the perspective of the antagonism between the Greek settlers and the natives.

The widely circulated view in the past and in recent times that, from the time of the Greek dominance in Egypt (late 4th c. B.C.), a fierce hatred developed between the native citizens and the so-called foreign Greek oppressors cannot be accepted (Skreslet 1987). It is worth mentioning that even at the time of the early Ptolemies, whose rule was harsh, generally the Greek rulers in Egypt did not manifest any systematic discrimination based on race and physical appearance, and it is anachronistic to try to trace it in Antiquity (Vercoutter et al. 1976). The local people of Egypt, often called "indigenous" (Kanazawa 1987, 480), "natives" (Downey 1958, 121) and more frequently in recent times, "autochthons," (Goudriaan 2000, 43) were mixed with the Greeks living in the same locale from early times and the two groups began to acculturate.

We notice that, from the early Ptolemaic period onwards, acculturation between natives and Greeks proceeded rapidly and in the interior of Egypt (η χώρα) the Greeks assimilated more easily to the local people than the natives to the Greeks (Kanazawa 1987, 475). In Alexandria the situation was different and a cosmopolitan spirit prevailed. Naturally, the symbiosis between the native inhabitants of Egypt, a country famous for its glorious past, and the Greek settlers, carriers of a well developed civilisation, was not unhindered and caused various unpleasant reactions which are not always easy to detect. The study by Noshy (1992), which is based on extensive use of the relevant papyri, is worth mentioning here. He points out a number of passages reflecting certain harsh attitudes of the Ptolemies towards the local Egyptian population.

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[1]   The term "autochthon," which is based on the Greek word χθών (earth), seems rather inappropriate.

Nevertheless, he does not take into consideration the early evidence of the positive attitude of the Ptolemies and their decision to allow the inhabitants of Egypt to choose between indigenous or Greek jurisprudence. More importantly, he failed to take into consideration the mutual acculturation that took place between the local people and the Greek settlers.

Pagan Religion as a Unifying Link

Surprisingly, while in the Christian period the dominant feature, as will be seen, was conflict and separatism, in earlier times religion acted as a unifying bond between the native Egyptians and the Greek settlers. Both Egyptians and Greeks were polytheists and although most of their rituals were different, the ease with which they had accepted each other's gods into their pantheons facilitated the mutual acceptance of their religions (Kanazawa 1987, 480). The Greek and Egyptian gods were simply placed next to each other as "σύναοι" (jointly sharing a temple) because of some vague resemblance in their nature. In reality, with the exception of the new hybrid divinity Serapis, which incorporated elements of the Greek gods Zeus, Hades, Dionysus on the one hand, and the Egyptian Osiris and Apis on the other (Goudriaan 2000, 45), the union of the rest of the gods was superficial. In contrast, in Mesopotamia the fusion between the Greek and the local gods was a conglomeration based on actual similarities (Christides 1982). Of particular interest is that the Greeks detested the Egyptians' excessive veneration of irrational animals (Ndubokwu 2005, 54–55), although certain animals were attached to the Greek divinities, e.g. the serpent of Athena.

While the religious differences between Egyptians and Greeks seem not to have disturbed the social order, their diametrically opposed attitude towards the institution of priesthood could have been troubling. While in Greece a simple priest was in charge of a temple, in Egypt each god had a number of priests and the power of the priesthood, which possessed large estates, was enormous (Ndubokwu 2005). Priesthood in Egypt was also a closed profession solely inherited by certain families (Goudriaan, 47n49; Kanazawa 1987, 483n29). Nevertheless, the Ptolemies left the priesthood's privileges untouched (Kanazawa 1987, 481). Likewise they left the local jurisprudence untouched and all the inhabitants of Egypt were free to choose whichever system they wanted, i.e. the local (ὁ τῆς χώρας νόμος) or the Greek (Wolff 1962, 4; Peremans 1975, 444–445; Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1988).

The Creation of the Coptic Language and Its Impact: Continuation and Ethnicity

The term "Copt," as Pierre du Bourguet characteristically reports, "is not an easy matter," and "gratuitous applications of the term in many circumstances have come together under the Coptic umbrella, resulting in a surprising mixture of connotations" (Bourguet 1991, 599). According to Bourguet, "Copts are the native inhabitants of Egypt, initially mostly pagan, then pagan and Christian and finally Christian" (Bourguet

1991, 599). Thus, the characteristics of this term have a national (ethnic) and religious (mainly Christian) meaning. To this we can add, after the synod of 451 A.D., the term "Monophysite" Christians in contradistinction to the "Dyophysites." In the early Arabic sources, the corresponding Arab term "Qibṭ" is frequently used in contradistinction to the term "Rūm," the Melkite Egyptians who were Dyophysites and pro-Byzantine. Since the word "Rūm" was also used for the Byzantines, occasionally there was confusion between these two terms (Christides, Høgel and Monferrer-Sala 2012, 65nn228–229).

In any case, while the term "Copt" remains elusive, the term "Coptic language" undoubtedly reveals the existence of a script which Bell dates to the third century, "delivered from the ancient Demotic writing in which the Greek alphabet was used with the addition of six [Egyptian] characters" (Bell 1948, 115), which represented sounds not existing in Greek.

However, Bell's additional remark that the creation of the Coptic language was an action of a strongly nationalistic character of the indigenous Egyptian population through which "for the first time since the 3rd century B.C. the very soul of Egypt found unfettered expression" cannot be sustained (Bell 1948, 115). Even if, as Parker assumes, the Coptic language was a distinctive symbol of Coptic identity in the tenth century in contrast to the Arabic (Parker 2013, 233), it is anachronistic to try to trace it to the early Christian period as opposed to the Greek language which was the language of the non-Egyptians. Mikhail (2007, 7–8) has persuasively argued that the Greek language was wrongly considered as the language of the [so-called] oppressors; he rejects the theory that the Copts had been distrustful of it. He has pointed out that even some of the most fanatic Coptic theologians wrote their polemic treatises against the Dyophysite pro-Byzantines in Greek (Mikhail 2007, 7–8).

To Mikhail's arguments we can add the evidence of the texts written in Greek and/or Coptic languages by the Christian inhabitants of Nubia (Tsakos 2016; Hägg 1991). The use of the Greek language in these texts, which are dated as late as the tenth century, is parallel to the use of the Nubian and Coptic languages and there is no direct indication of an ethnic connotation.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Greek language continued to be used in the daily life of the local people in southern Egypt as a living language as late as the early 8th c. A.D., as is clearly shown in the Greek inscriptions of Apollonopolis.[2] Thus, an unhappy inhabitant of Apollonopolis used Greek to express his frustration about his loneliness, complaining that nobody cared whether he was alive or dead and that people

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[2]   For the dating of these inscriptions see Gascou and Worp (1982); for an extensive discussion of the hitherto little-used inscriptions see Christides (2016, Appendix, p. 760–765).

kept telling him that "nobody on earth cares about you."[3] In another Greek inscription, an inhabitant of Apollonopolis sent an invitation to the pagarch (local administrator) to his daughter's wedding.[4]

To conclude, during the Ptolemaic period we discern that there was no strong racial discrimination by the Greek authorities towards the native Egyptians, with a few exceptions. Actually, we gradually notice a mutual acculturation between the Greeks and Egyptians, as expressed in mixed marriages, which was more noticeable in the interior of the country and much less so in Alexandria, Ptolemais and Naukratis (Lewis 1986; Kanazawa 1987, 475). On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Coptic script derived from the ancient Egyptian language, which indicates that the native Egyptians did not abandon their connection with their ancestors. Unfortunately, there is little evidence about the extent of the use of Coptic as a living language. Downey's (1958, 124) theory that the native Egyptians spoke their Coptic language at home and used Greek in their everyday dealings seems plausible, at least during the early Ptolemaic times.

No doubt, the use of the written and oral Coptic language evinces the adherence of the native Egyptians to certain ties with their past, but this was not strong enough to alienate them from the rest of the Hellenic or Hellenised Egyptians. Language frequently becomes an important element of collective identity and simultaneously of separatism from others, as is the case of the Muslim Kurds of Turkey whose Kurdish language has isolated them from the coreligionist Sunni Muslims of Turkey.[5] In contrast, there is no concrete evidence that any such separatist tendencies were created in Ptolemaic Egypt by the so-called indigenous Egyptians based on the language continuity.

It should be repeated that a great number of Egyptologists have contended that the separatist movement of the "autochthons" (indigenous Egyptians) from the Ptolemaic period was a reaction to the so-called oppressive Greeks and created the Coptic language and later, in the Byzantine period, the separatist Coptic Monophysite Church, both for the sole purpose of resisting the Hellenic tyrants. A characteristic case is Griffiths (1984), who insists in his works that the Coptic culture was created as a nationalistic reaction of the Egyptians who suffered under the Greek oppressors who had interrupted their ties with their ancestors, the Pharaonic people.

Wipszycka (1992, 84–90), in an exhaustive and well-documented study, pointed out the nationalistic exaggerations of Griffiths and of a number of other Egyptologists, who

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[3]   Rémondon (1953), inscr. no. 70, "Lettre privée," line 4, p. 149 : "ζῶ ἢ ἀποθνήσκω"; lines 8–9: "οὐκ ἔχεις τινὰ ἄνθρωπον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς."
[4]   Rémondon (1953), inscr. 72, "Invitation à un mariage," p. 161.
[5]   The continuity of the Greek language was used for the establishment of the Greek ethnic identity in 19th-century Greece by a number of Greek scholars; see Sansaridou-Hendrickx (2005, 134–135).

embraced what she calls "interprétation nationaliste." There is no need to repeat here Wipszycka's persuasive arguments against those modern scholars who suffer, as she calls it, from "coptomanie." Suffice it to say here that Papaconstantinou (2006) repeated Griffith's theory without any new persuasive arguments.

Papaconstantinou correctly emphasises the survival of certain ancient Egyptian cultural elements, which were transmitted from Pharaonic times to later periods, e.g. mummification, although one wonders whether such funeral rites were transmitted solely to the Copts, as she assumes, but not also to the rest of the Egyptian population (Papaconstantinou 2006, 67). Obviously such rituals did not express actual beliefs but simply continued traditional funeral rites which had been preserved for centuries without any religious connotations. Less persuasive is Papaconstantinou's effort to show the attitude of the Egyptians during the Arab conquest (completed in 645 A.D.). According to her view, from the two most important relevant historical sources, i.e. the *Chronicon of John Nikiu* and the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, the latter usually wrongly labelled as the work of Severus (Sawīrus) bn. al-Muqaffaʿ, it is understood that the Coptic Christian community, representing the indigenous population, had a common ethnic origin in contrast to the foreigner Roman-Byzantine oppressors, as manifested during the Arab invasion.

Papaconstantinou's view of ʿAmr bn. al-ʿĀṣ's invasion of Egypt lacks any proper attention to the military aspect[6] as described in John of Nikiu's text, which is the best account we possess, although it has survived after numerous misreadings and misallocations through the centuries (Christides 2016, 749). The most significant information we can glean is that throughout all the activities of ʿAmr there is no reference to any separatist approach by the Copts concerning the Arab invaders. Copts and Melkites demonstrated a unified attitude towards ʿAmr. The Byzantine army of Egypt was composed mainly of Egyptians[7]and fought courageously defending every fortress from ʿArīsh to Um-Dunayn, near the gate of Babylon, in spite of the lack of competent Byzantine leadership. It should be noted that the soldiers who guarded the castles were soldier-cultivators who received a hereditary plot of land in exchange for military service (Soto Chica 2015, 27; Haldon 2016, 250; Whitby 2000, 302–303).

Neither John of Nikiu nor any Arabic source describes a separatist movement by the Copts during the early stage of the Arab invasion. Actually, in the early period of the Arab conquest of Egypt, all the civilian inhabitants of Egypt, the Monophysite Copts

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[6]   There are no references in Papaconstantinou's article about ʿAmr's expedition to any proper passages in the Arabic sources or to any relevant modern works, save one casual reference (2006, 69n15).

[7]   Jördens (2012). It is only in the attempted Byzantine reconquest of Egypt in 645 that an army of non-Egyptians was organised (Christides 2012, 388). For foreigners serving on the Egyptian borders see Hendrickx (2012, 101); Leontsini (2006, 212–218). It is worth mentioning that the recruitment of native Egyptian soldiers had already started in Hellenistic times (Clarysse 1985).

and the Dyophysite, pro-Byzantine Melkites, waited to see which army would win. It was only after the defeat of the Byzantine army in Babylon (641 A.D.) that all the inhabitants of Egypt panicked and sided with the Arabs (Christides 2016, 752; Christides, forthcoming).

There is no doubt that the Egyptian author John, Bishop of Nikiu, a uniquely valuable eyewitness, correctly reports, as Papaconstantinou emphasises (2006, 72), that Heraclius's ill-advised policy creating a superficial unification of Melkites and Copts inspired Patriarch Cyrus's cruel practices against the Copts which facilitated the Arab conquest of Egypt. But this is a common topos, an exaggeration obviously only partly true (John, Bishop of Nikiu 1916, 200). Regrettably, Papaconstantinou's statement that after the withdrawal of the Byzantines from Egypt following their defeat "the Christian community that remained in Egypt [the indigenous population as she calls it] had a common ethnic origin and a common history of suffering at the hands of foreigners" cannot be sustained (Papaconstantinou 2006, 72). Neither John's *Chronicon* nor the *History of the Patriarchs*, the two relevant sources, report that the remaining Egyptian community was solely "Coptic and/or ethnic."

Unfortunately, we do not know the number of the Melkites and Copts who remained in Egypt after the Byzantines' withdrawal following their final defeat in 645. Maqrīzi ([H. 1270] 1853, 309) mentions that 30 000 Byzantine soldiers left in 100 ships and 600 000 inhabitants remained, but neither of these probably inflated figures can be verified. However, the constant rivalry between the Copts and Melkites for the possession of the churches reveals that a considerable number of Melkites had also remained (Frenkel 2014, 30; Christides 2017, 6). It should be noted that in the sober narration of John of Nikiu there is no reference to any of the legends concerning the supposedly treacherous behaviour of the Coptic patriarch Benjamin, according to which he betrayed the Byzantines and had secretly communicated with ʿAmr bn. al-ʿĀṣ before his expedition to Egypt. Thus, the Syriac author Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē reports that Patriarch Benjamin contacted ʿAmr before his expedition and promised to deliver the whole of Egypt over to the Arabs on condition that all churches occupied by the Melkites be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Monophysites (Palmer 1993, 159).

Of course, such legends can be easily refuted since Benjamin had not actually returned from exile until a few years after the Arab conquest of Egypt (ca. 645) (Müller 1991, 378; Christides 2017, 3). In the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, it is reported that Benjamin was actually brought to the Arab general ʿAmr bn. al-ʿĀṣ by Sanutius (Shenuti), one of the first Egyptian collaborators with the Arabs, a few years after the Arab conquest of Egypt (Evetts 1907, 496 [232]).

Finally, it should be noted that although Patriarch Benjamin was a man of unshaken courage and patience, his meeting with ʿAmr bn. al-ʿĀṣ, in which the latter was said to have exclaimed "I have never seen a man of God like this man," is probably fictitious

(Evetts 1907, 496 [232].There is no doubt that 'Amr recognised him as the head of the Coptic Church, but not as "the head of all Egyptians" as wrongly suggested by Müller (1991, 376), since the Arabs also recognised the Melkite patriarchate (Christides 2017, 5). Regardless of the above shortcomings, the *History of the Patriarchs* is of considerable use. Significantly, it mentions that the family of the Monophysite patriarch Benjamin possessed great wealth (Evetts 1907, 487 [223]).

The most striking point to appear in the *History of the Patriarchs* is the brief mention of a monastery where Benjamin found refuge during his persecution by the Melkite patriarch Cyrus, in which "the inmates … being Egyptians [by race] and all of them [natives], without a stranger among them" (*Miṣriyūn laysa baynahum gharīb*) (Evetts 1907, 498 [234]). The Arabic text of the *History of the Patriarchs* reports solely "*Miṣriyūn*" (=being Egyptians), but the English translation "by race," as well as the term "natives," does not exist in the text; both were added by Evetts. One gets the impression that perhaps the author of the *History of the Patriarchs* reveals in the above statement an element which goes beyond the religious antagonism and may be considered a latent reference to the existence of an Egyptian ethnicity. As has been noted, certain passages of the *History of the Patriarchs* were additions from later times (Den Heijer 2000, 232–233) and one wonders whether this passage was a later interpolation. In any case, the question which is raised and is difficult to answer is whether ethnic rivalry was involved in the religious antagonism as well, as is obliquely suggested in the *History of the Patriarchs*.

Racism: Personal and Family Names, Inefficient Indications of Racial Differentiation

Already from Ptolemaic times, ethnicity could by no means be revealed by family names. A large number of the Greek settlers intermarried with the local Egyptians and acquired Egyptian names (Bell 1948, 38; Goudriaan 2000, 54–55). The intermingling of Greek and Egyptian family names became common (Swiderek 1954, 259). We notice that in the Greek papyri written in the late 7th and early 8th century from Apollonopolis (Rémondon 1953), Greek family names are intermingled with Egyptian and/or biblical names. There are abundant personal names of Greek heroes, e.g. Achilles along with Patermouthios (pap. 80, p. 173); philosophers, e.g. Plato, among others (pap. 39, p. 93), mixed with Egyptian or biblical names, e.g. Samson.

As a result of the mixture of the population in Egypt we do not discern any collective belief in the Coptic community in a common origin and racial bond, frequently considered common characteristics of what is usually understood as "nationalism" (Whitton 1972, 749). Likewise, as has been shown, any common bond based on linguistic grounds is absent since the Greek and Coptic languages could be used interchangeably. No doubt after the spread of Christianity into Egypt, religion, which served as a unifying bond in the early Ptolemaic times, caused the separation of the

Egyptian people into two rival religious communities, the Monophysite Copts and the Dyophysite Melkites.

The view that religious rivalry was simply an instrument used by the Copts to express their separatist, ethnic tendencies needs further inquiry. Dogmatic differences in early Christianity usually express actual ideological differences. The Monophysite beliefs simply reflect the ideological inclination of the Copts. The policy of the Byzantine emperors Justinian (527–565) and Heraclius (610–641), inspired by imperial interests to impose from above a solution to religious differences, which was applied ruthlessly by Patriarch Cyrus of Alexandria, caused a breach in Egyptian society (Boumis 2007).

Conclusion

In general, the following points are noteworthy:

a. The Egyptian society was not strictly divided into two blocks, the natives and the foreigners. The settlement of the Greeks in Egypt should not be understood within the frame of a perennial struggle between the so-called "autochthons" and "foreigners." The "autochthons" could not be distinguished either by means of Coptic as a mother tongue and symbol of identity or by personal names. A person whose name was Plato or Achilles could simply be a descendant of an Egyptian ancestor, while a Monophysite Egyptian could write a polemic against the Melkite Dyophysites in Greek.

   It is true, however, as the evidence of the papyri indicates, that in Ptolemaic times there are references to certain cases of racial discrimination by both parties. Thus, a native complained that he was discriminated against concerning his wages (Peremans 1975, 447) while a Greek complained about racial mistreatment on account of his Greek origin (Peremans 1975, 450), but such cases were rare. In any case, in the later Roman and Byzantine periods, such examples of discrimination are absent. Bilingualism that prevailed not only in every level of the administration but also in everyday life seems to have facilitated communication. Downey's (1958, 124) remark that the native inhabitants may have spoken Greek in their work places but their native tongue at home seems plausible. One would question whether this practice could be applicable in the early period of Greek settlement but it is not known whether it continued in the later generations.

b. It is a fallacy to believe that the Melkites (Dyophysites, pro-Byzantine inhabitants of Egypt) possessed the wealth of the country while the Monophysite Copts (supposedly the indigenous population of Egypt) were exploited victims. The family of Benjamin, the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria,

possessed immense wealth, and rich land owners could be of any dogmatic preference.[8]

    c.   The Byzantine army defending Egypt mainly comprised Hellenised Egyptians. Special troops protected the castles, especially from 'Arīsh to Um Dunayn. These troops were composed of Egyptian farmer-soldiers who were the first to fight against the invading army of 'Amr bn. al-'Āṣ.

    d.   As the most reliable source, John of Nikiu's *Chronicon*, reports, the civilian inhabitants of Egypt did not differ in their attitude towards the Arab invaders. No part of the population welcomed the Arabs as liberators from the Byzantines, as some modern scholars assume (Hitti 2002, 165; Ostrogorsky 1969, 115). The Egyptian civilians, both Copts and Melkites, simply waited to see the outcome of the Arab invasion. It was only after the Byzantines' defeat in Babylon (641) that they openly assisted the invaders in their military encounters.

    e.   There is only limited information concerning any ethnic elements of the Monophysite Copts which would reveal the roots of their distinctive Coptic identity. It is extremely difficult to trace any indirect separatist evidence in the discussion of the dogmatic differences between the two churches as it appears mainly in the *History of the Patriarchs* and/or other relevant sources. This difficulty reflects the complex factors interwoven in their religion disputes, which were perhaps fanned by the emerging national awareness.

Unity and Separation in Egyptian Society from Ptolemaic Times until the Arab Conquest of Egypt (ca. 645) and until the Time of the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, Cosmas I (ca. 727–768)

Our sources, focusing on the perennial religious dogmatic issues between the two rivalling religious communities, magnified their importance and only gave scant information concerning other relevant social differences among them. There has been new research of vital significance adding to our knowledge of the multifaceted Egyptian society and, in particular, of the relations between the Greek settlers and the local population, which challenges the theory of their harmonious acculturation (Colin 1994). Peremans's theory (1975), which examines the various cultural reactions of the different Egyptian social strata to the influence of Hellenic culture, remains unchallenged. Peremans argued that while the lower class of local inhabitants of Egypt easily intermingled with the Greek settlers and their culture, those of the middle and especially of the upper class retained most of their traditional institutions. While certain points of his argument seem valid, such as the continuation of the use of Egyptian medicine and science by the Egyptian aristocracy instead of their Greek counterparts, his conclusion

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[8]   For the frequently repeated incorrect theory of exploitation of the indigenous-autochthon population by rich foreigner landlords, see Wipszycka (1992, 88). According to Bell (1948, 150n33), even the wealthy Apiôn family were originally Monophysite Copts.

that there was an almost complete separation of this class from the Greeks is grossly overstated.[9]

The Arab conquerors demonstrated an initial impartiality towards Copts and Melkites. In the final treaty between the Byzantines and the Arabs, the Arabs considered both of them as one religious community of Egypt in contrast to the Nubians, who were treated as foreigners residing in Egypt (Juynboll 1989, 171; Christides 1980, 137; Christides 1993, 155). One would expect that since a major handicap, the servility of the Melkites towards the imperial Byzantine policies, had been removed, their perennial discord would be greatly reduced. However, after the Arab conquest there was a long period of continuous quarrelling between the two rival religious communities over the possession of the many disputed churches abandoned by an unknown number of the pro-Byzantine Melkites who had fled Egypt along with the defeated Byzantine army (Christides, 2017, 5–6). It is only in this later period that we can discern preferential treatment of the Monophysite Coptic Egyptians by the Muslim Arabs, as mentioned by Carrasco Martínez (2017, 489).

The extreme paucity of the sources does not permit us to understand the actual causes of the continuation of the rivalry of the two churches. There is no direct evidence in the sources that the real cause was the resentment of the indigenous autochthon Egyptians towards the foreign intruders and their culture, as supported by a number of modern scholars (Ostrogorsky 1969, 115). Such clear awareness of an Egyptian ethnic identity seems rather improbable for this historical period in which nationalism would have been obviously premature. However, it cannot be denied that the Egyptian society, side by side with the prevailing spirit of reconciliation and acculturation, gradually also developed new separatist tendencies. The Coptic language, mainly written, continued to develop, not as an instrument to challenge Greek, but rather as a natural parallel growth.

Simultaneously, the Copts' stubborn insistence on Monophysitism reflects strong feelings of separatism. Their unbending reaction to their dogmatic differences with the Melkites exceeds their religious antagonism since there was no longer any reason for the resentment of the Melkites' connection to the Byzantine imperial power. As a result, we can assume that a "latent nationalism" emerged following the Arab conquest of Egypt, a term which is presently considered as a prelude to the later nationalism, now called "incipient nationalism."[10]

A careful reading of the text of the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church*, which describes the attempts of Cosmas I, the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria, to

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[9] Peremans (1975, 451): "La séparation entre indigènes et Grecs est quasi complète."
[10] For "nationalism" see *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1981); for "latent nationalism" or "incipient nationalism" see Sansaridou-Hendrickx (2005, 130n17).

establish the unification of the two rival churches of Egypt, may illuminate the situation that existed at his time (ca. 727–768). In spite of his rivalry with his contemporary Coptic patriarch of Alexandria, Khā'īl (744–767) (Labib 1991) for the disputed possession of the Great Church of Caesarion (Christides 2017, 6), Cosmas undertook a desperate struggle for the reunion of the two rival churches of Egypt.

Looking closely at the narrative of the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church*, we understand Cosmas's dramatic underestimation of the spirit of the Copts. After a lengthy but fruitless discussion of dogmatic differences with Cosmas's deputy, Bishop Constantine, the Copts scornfully rejected any compromise and attempted to kill him (Evetts 1910, 129–130). This violent reaction clearly indicates that, beyond any religious differences, the emerging Coptic identity was becoming consolidated. Cosmas's time may be considered the turning point of the final breach between the two churches. It should, nevertheless, be pointed out that even at this most crucial time of the final separation, there is no direct reference in our sources to a clearly ethnic Coptic identity but only a subtle indication.

To sum up, based on the limited evidence, we notice that the most common characteristics usually attributed to nationalism, i.e. glorification of the ancestors, continuation of an ancestral literature,[11] and attachment exclusively to a special language, are absent in Egyptian society from the Byzantine times until the Arab conquest in 645. On the other hand, the creation of the Coptic language and the stubborn resistance of the Monophysite Copts to unite with the Melkite Church demonstrate a strong separatist movement, unrelenting even after freedom from the Byzantine patronage, revealing a nascent but rising ethnocentrism. This separatism, rooted in Ptolemaic times, culminated after the Arab conquest in 645 A.D. Finally, the rivalry of the two churches, the Monophysite Coptic and Dyophysite Melkite Church, which appear in all relevant sources as separated solely because of dogmatic differences, shows a latent ethnic differentiation whose turning point was reached during the time of the Melkite patriarch Cosmas I (ca. 727–768).

Thereafter, new historical events in Egypt enhanced the development of the Coptic identity, but this development lies beyond the scope of the present study.

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[11] Zandee's (1971) efforts to show the existence of certain Coptic literary motives resembling the Pharaonic are actually rather casual. Concerning a discussion on possible influences of Pharaonic art on the Coptic, see E. Wipzycka (1992, 101n50).

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