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THE PRONUNCIATION OF COPTIC IN THE CHURCH OF EGYPT

By Dr G. P. G. SOBHY

In the following article I do not wish to be dogmatic in the least, but I base my personal opinions on deductions which I shall explain hereafter. My two guiding criteria are the way the present Copts pronounce their own language, and also the Arabic language—for they do not pronounce the latter as the Arabs do—and the second is the actual variations in the spelling of words as found in different MSS.

There is no doubt that the Copts had rules for the pronunciation of their language, and, although they were never recorded, I believe these rules must have been so selfobvious as to make such recording unnecessary.

All modern books written on Coptic by native authors adopt more or less a mutilated form of Greek pronunciation and apply it entirely to their language. Unfortunately none of our native authors here knows sufficient Greek to realise the outstanding mistakes he is trying to form into rules applicable to the Coptic language. I believe that an ordinary uneducated priest in reciting any Coptic prayer in Church, pronounces the language much more correctly, and naturally too, than if he followed those erroneous rules set down in the modern Coptic books-for he has the inherent power of forming the sounds of the different characters in the language of his forefathers. Indeed he pronounces the Arabic language itself as if it were Coptic. Often and often this fact struck me while I was at Church, standing at a distance from the officiating priest, when it was impossible for me-and I believe for many others-to decide whether he was chanting in Arabic or in Coptic. I must not however be too generalising in my statements. All the priests who have not adopted the modern artificial method of Contic pronunciation utter most of their words as if they were spelt according to the Sahidic dialect. It must be remembered also that the Church pronunciation of Coptic is the same all over Egypt as I have verified it myself; except in the case of Girga where local characteristics of pronunciation are alluded to (see below). In Alexandria the pronunciation is certainly contaminated with modern innovations. It is only in Upper Egypt and some places of Lower Egypt where old priests are still officiating that one hears the Church pronunciation in its purest form. It was the Patriarch, the Bishop of Fayyum and the late Bishop of Khartum, who dictated to me the pronunciation of the Lord's Prayer appended at the end of this article. Each one of them dictated it separately and by comparison I found the three versions absolutely the same.

The following is a table showing the names and values of the Coptic alphabet according to Church pronunciation.

	1		
A	Alpha	1	-a- short as in English am ; \hat{a} long in English Father.
B	Ûîda	و ,ب	-u-; when final = b .
Г	Ghamma		Before a , o , $\omega = \dot{\boldsymbol{s}}$; otherwise hard g .
λ	Dalda	C S	English -d
6	Eiy	إى	Pronounced exactly as A above.
۴	So-ou	- ;	Only in numerals.
ζ	Zita	ز	z in the English word zeal.
н	Hida		Generally pronounced as i or the sound of English \underline{ee} in queen; occasionally as long a as in English (<i>bath</i>).
θ	Tida	ت	= t invariably.
I	Iôda	ى	i in the English word pick, or the sound of ee in queen.
K	Kabba	ك	English k.
λ	Lôla	J	", <i>l</i> .
n	Miy	هر	", <i>m</i> .
Н	Niy	ن ن	,, <i>n</i> .
z	Exi	ڪس	$,, \qquad x = ks.$
0	Ow	آو	o in the English word <i>not</i> ; or δ in the English word <i>pope</i> .
п	Biy	ب	English b.
Р	Ro	ر	,, <i>r</i> .
С	Sima	س	,, s in the English word sun.
Т	Dau	د	,, d.
r	Hey		i as in English pick, or j=English ow in how e.g. nar is pronounced ndu armacq=aumasf; but grunoc=himnoc.
$\mathbf{\Phi}$	Biy, Fiy	ب, ف	=b; occasionally ph as in Philip.
x	Chiy	ك , تش	in all Coptic words=ch in English choir; in Greek words=ch in Scotch $loch=\not\leftarrow$ before a, o, ω , e.g. χ opoc, χ apic, but=ch as in English
			chair before с, н, 1, and r, e.g. херс, херотым.
Ф	Ebsy	بس	=bs.
ա	Ôo	او	δ as in the English word <i>bone</i> .
Щ	Shay	ش	=sh in the English sheep.
વ	Faiy	ف	= <i>f</i> .
b	Khâi		Arabic $\doteq kh$ guttural.
ŝ	Hôry	۵	h in English here.
x	Ganga		Soft as in English George ; hard as in English good.
б	Chîma	ج تش	Ch in English word chair.
ተ	Dy	U -	=di.
_	- 5		

Note.—The accent (`) which is placed on consonants and sometimes on vowels represents always the sound e in the English word *ebony*. Thus the definite articles \hat{n} , $\hat{\phi}$, $\hat{\tau}$, \hat{n} , $\hat{\phi}$ are always pronounced *eb-*, *-et-*, etc.; also in regular words whether Coptic or Greek. Thus all such words as $\hat{\tau}$ corns, \hat{n} pwas, \hat{n} thus, \hat{n} thus,

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A, **G**. Generally speaking there is no difference in the Church pronunciation of these two letters. The interchange between these two letters is common in the different dialects of Coptic. The word ϵ_{POR} is pronounced as if it were written apon and so forth wherever the letters appear. There is no difference also between μ and ι , but in some words even μ is pronounced as if it were a, e.g. numbers is always pronounced *nifdwi*.

The combinations от, шот, нот, к, ст, н. With the first two combinations the accent is usually employed and their pronunciation resembles exactly the Arabic أو أو doubled; thus nuor is pronounced أو ebôu; the syllable нот is always uttered dwi— أرى جه , ст are pronounced du and ни is dy.

The letter **B** may have been pronounced in ancient times, particularly in the Northern Dialects, as the English v. The ancient Egyptian letter $\int \int which must have$ been the original of the letter**A**in value does not appear to have been pronouncedlike <math>v. In names of Roman emperors, where the letter v figured, it was always transliterated by the letters $\langle , \rangle \rangle$. The Church pronounces it to-day invariably as vwhen it figures in the beginning or middle of words; but it is pronounced as b when it is final. Thus $\partial A = \partial v l$, number = $niw\bar{a}n$; but coors A = atvab, orn A = vab. This rule is quite invariable.

The letter Γ only figures in Greek words and occasionally in some Sahidic words where it may represent either κ or the sound g as in English gun.

The modern Church pronounces it exactly like the Arabic $\dot{\xi}$ before the letters a, ω , o, and consonants. In words where it is followed by $\dot{\epsilon}$, μ , or i, it takes the sound of hard g as in gun. Thus they say **Георчос** = Gawargios, but **тача** = $\dot{4}\dot{\epsilon}\dot{\epsilon}$ taghma. When it is followed by another τ it is pronounced as in Greek = n. Thus **arrefoc** = angelos.

 $\boldsymbol{\Delta}$ is always pronounced as d.

3. Very rarely does this letter stand for c in Coptic words such as it does in the word anzma, "school," from $\Delta \omega$, "to learn," and even then it is pronounced more like an s than z. Ordinarily it only figures in Greek words.

H. Sometimes pronounced as an \bullet short or long, see above. Ordinarily as an *s*, in English *tip* or *i* long as in Italian *vita*.

Θ. The modern Church pronunciation is invariably like the English letter t. In certain words it appeared to be the representative of two letters $\tau \rho$, pronounced as th in the English word through, e.g. $\omega \lambda c$ Bohairic for $\tau \rho \omega \lambda c$ in Sahidic.

Sometimes it stands for a simple τ , e.g. Boh. nook, Sah. ntk, ntok. At any rate it is always pronounced as t in the Church.

R stands for the simple letter k.

 λ stands for *l*. In Ancient Egyptian apparently the letters *l* and *r* interchanged frequently. In Fayyûmish the letter λ stands for **p** so often that it becomes one of the characteristics of the dialect.

II, **H** stand for the simple sounds of m, n.

Z, a compound of R and c, is always pronounced as such.

O is pronounced like the English o in pope or o in not.

It is now pronounced as b. It interchanges with Φ , but the latter then is also Journ. of Egypt. Arch. II. 3

pronounced as b. Thus we have φ_{ai} and π_{ai} , which are both pronounced $b\hat{a}y$ just as we have τ_{ai} and φ_{ai} which are both pronounced $t\hat{a}y$.

P. See under λ .

C represents the sound of s as in English sister.

T is always given the value of d. Thus $\operatorname{torko} = d\hat{u}o$, $\operatorname{tus} = d\hat{u}mi$, $\operatorname{Tausa} = Dami\hat{a}di$. In certain words, however, for which the reason cannot be given, it is pronounced as English t, as in $\overline{n} \operatorname{tork} = ent\hat{o}k$ (unless because the letter stands here for \bullet), $\operatorname{cuoort} = si\hat{o}\hat{u}t$, etc.

In modern colloquial Arabic the letter d is always pronounced like t at Manşûrah and in almost all the towns on the eastern branch of the Delta, up to Damietta. In Upper Egypt, however, especially round about Akhmîm and Girgah, the sound d often stands for g. The people there say 'Dordy' for Giorgy, and 'Damian' for Gamian, and 'Dirdis' for Girgis. This however does not mean that they cannot pronounce the letter g when it occurs in words; but to some people it is sometimes very difficult to pronounce the hard g. Priests of these localities often say 'Dawardios' for Gawargios and the name *Daward* is very common amongst them.

Y. In Coptic words it stands for the sound of u in the English word *mule*. It is never, however, pronounced as v aspirated in combinations as $x\tau$, $c\tau$, etc. They are always pronounced dal. In words as $2\pi\sigma\tau$ Boh. and $2\pi\tau$ Sah. both are pronounced as the English word how.

Φ. This letter is pronounced in the Church (1) as A; they say $\phi_{\Delta I} = bdy$, $\mu\phi_{OOT} = embod$. (2) as an ordinary f, as in $\Phi_I\lambda_{OII} = Filopatir$. This happens in proper names. It is never pronounced as the English v.

X. This letter occurs sometimes in Coptic words when it stands for **R**, the second personal pronoun affixed to verbs of the present tense, indicative mood, e.g. χ nake $\lambda = eknail; \chi$ orwpn = ekiorb. Sometimes it stands for σ as in χ wpen for σ wpen. Here too it is pronounced as **R**. Otherwise it has two values in Greek words, (1) English ch in chair, as in χ epe = cheré, before ϵ , s, μ ; or ch = Arabic $\dot{\epsilon}$, as in χ opoc = χ opoc = χ olor on = χ opoc = χ opoc = χ opoc = χ .

T is pronounced as bs.

W. There is not much difference between it and \circ except in certain positions, when ω always receives the tonic accent in words.

W. This is always pronounced as sh in the English word sheep.

b = Arabic $\dot{r} = ch$ in the Scotch word loch.

 $\widetilde{\mathbf{H}} = f.$

3, as the English h in here.

X. This letter is invariably pronounced in the Churches of Upper Egypt as soft g in *George*. In the Churches of the North it has the softened sound of g only before the vowels π , i, when pronounced as i in Italian. It follows that because the letters ϵ and π usually are pronounced as a, it retains the hard value before them, e.g. $\pi\epsilon = pegdi$ and $\pi\epsilon = ga$ (hard); but $\pi i \epsilon = jismis$ (soft) and $\pi \pi = ji$ (soft). See also under Γ .

 $\boldsymbol{\sigma}$. This is always pronounced as ch in English *chair*. Mistakenly it is pronounced as sh in English *she*.

 $\mathbf{T} = di.$

Now for the pronunciation of words as a whole. In Coptic as in other languages the exact pronunciation depends on the different situation of the tonic accent on the

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different syllables of the word and the exact quantity one would give to the vowels. Fortunately Egyptians in adopting the Greek characters to write their language with, in the formation of Coptic, did not copy their old mode of not writing the vowels but have written each word completely and thus Coptic has come to be read and pronounced exactly as it is written. Of the exact position of the accent on the different syllables of a word nothing but hearing avails, and in this I may seem rather absurd, for the Coptic language has ceased to be spoken: but in my opinion it has never done so. Its unbroken use in the Church has undoubtedly preserved its pronunciation, for it has been thus handed down from one generation of priests to another until our days; and in my own belief a priest who has learned to pronounce this language from his predecessor without the use of the modern sophisticated rules of pronunciation exhibited by Coptic authors in their writings does inherently pronounce it more rightly than any other man.

I append here the Lord's Prayer with a full transliteration according to the indigenous priest's pronunciation. Before doing so, I should like to draw the attention of the reader to the short but succinct rules given by Mallon in his Grammaire Copte on p. 10 et seq.

οτιμεπόμοτ αε : Πεπιωτ і тонфіл μεμμωσή etsen Аритен)0xn Sen ga : Baniôt nifâûi ûshabehmôt adyan Aridân enemebsha engos χan текметотро петерпак марецщющ уфри4 маречтотво йже пекрап марес) йже badahnak marafshôbi emebrâdi dakmadûro marafdûo enga bakrân marasî enga tre pact μφοοτ οτος χα τΦe пем 912еп пябр **NER**(0JR лап рінм ъeп enda rasdi nan emboû ûôh ka nam higan ebkahi banôik maif γ an etba Кодэ́ плп подэ́тэнп Гнафи́ ήτεηχω έβολ ήπηετοτοη ήταπ έρωστ στος 9ωπ âûl emebrâdi hôn endankô âûl enniadûon endân ârôû ûôh niadarôn nan улерептеп έσοτη επιραςμος αλλα παρμεη έβολ γα πιπετρωοτ Sen nrc embarendan âγûn abirasmôs alla nahman âûl ha bibathôû χan bixristos IHC nendc. A.MHII. Îsûs banchois. Amîn.

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Very few authors have taken up this subject. The following are amongst the best known. I must however state that I have not consulted any of them nor have even seen their writings.

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