

Can we speak of the ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquests?

Introduction.

The term ‘Coptic’, while also an Egyptian language, refers here to Egypt’s Christian community; ‘Copt’ is itself a westernisation of the Arabic *qipt*, meaning ‘Egyptian’. To speak of the existence of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquests requires a somewhat unanimous acceptance of religious leadership, a shared theology, and shared collective sense of identity. Here we argue that despite ‘Coptic’ trends of miaphysite theology and anti-Chalcedonianism, as well as emerging shared identity markers such as a strong martyrdom tradition in the face of persecution, it would be misleading to speak of post-Chalcedonian (451) and pre-Islamic (642) Egypt as harbouring a ‘Coptic Church’. Internal schisms over theology and leadership were too great to make the historical claim for a united Egyptian church in opposition to the imperially sanctioned Chalcedonian church. Moreover, we will seek to demonstrate that there has been a historiographical tendency to over-emphasise both the extent of anti-Chalcedonianism in Egypt, and existence of a national identity distinct from the rest of eastern Roman empire; Alexandrian bishops often displayed both an ambivalence to doctrinal questions, and a shared goal to receive imperial patronage. Despite our strong rejection of the claim that a ‘Coptic Church’ is discernible before the Islamic conquests, we will consider how this period was vital in providing the foundations for its later emergence, focussing specifically on the impact and extent of imperial persecution, as well as the evidence for the existence of a ‘Coptic’ identity *in nuce*.

Sectarianism.

Not only can we speak of the “radical bifurcation” of the “ancient Egyptian churches”¹ in terms of the contested divide between Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian theology (that is, between diophysite and miaphysite orthodoxies), but from within the miaphysite believers themselves. Indeed, as Stephen Davis argues, the period between 451 and 642 was “sharply contested between (at least) two parties”². This argument is greatly supported by the number of competing candidates for the position of bishop of Alexandria. For example, internal splits can be seen between Severus and Julian of Halicarnassus; a split that led to the division between ‘Severans’ and ‘Julianists’ over the interpretation of the corruptibility of the body of Christ³. Further, the elections of Theodosius (536-566) and Peter IV (575-579) triggered what Phil Booth describes as a period of “social and theological fragmentation”⁴. This is not an overstatement. Indeed, Theodosius, seen as an ally of Timothy III (and therefore Severus) was forced out of Alexandria to be replaced by the Julianist Gaianus (whose adherents became known as the *aposchista* (‘separatists’), or the *akephaloi* (‘headless ones’)). Moreover, the election of Peter IV was contested by “as many as four separate patriarchal claimants”⁵ including the Chalcedonian bishop John (570-581), the Gaianite-Julianist bishop Dorotheus (567-ca.580) and the Severan-Theodosian candidate Theodore. Therefore, while the sectarianism of Egypt, embodied in the bishropic of Alexandria, is often understood in terms of the simple divide between those who rejected,

¹ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ *Millennium* 14, pg. 151

² Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo), pg. 86

³ Importantly, these divisions were heightened by Justin I’s policy to exile anti-Chalcedonians in Syria and Asia Minor to Egypt.

⁴ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 101

⁵ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 107

and those who affirmed Chalcedon, the case was far more complex; not only can we not speak of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquest because of pervading disagreements over Chalcedon, but because of factions that emerged *within* miaphysite groups.

Not only were the Alexandrian bishops in this period diverse in theology, but the *chora*, that is rural landscape of Egypt was itself fractious and varied⁶. The complexity of the Egyptian *chora* in Late Antiquity has long been an observation amongst scholars, with fourth century texts like the Nag Hammadi revealing the variegation of Christian belief in antique Egypt. Egypt appears to have harboured a diversity of Christian beliefs like Manichaeanism, Gnosticism, but also paganism, with Panopolis being a stronghold of Hellenism and classical heritage. Therefore, we argue that no simple dichotomy between Chalcedonian ‘orthodoxy’ and miaphysite belief existed in Egypt before the Islamic conquests; antique Egypt instead represented a panoply of beliefs, and by no means any consensus ‘Coptic Church’.

Persecution.

Not only did sectarianism undermine the existence of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquests, but the lack of sustained miaphysite institutional power limited their influence and growth. Against the arguments of Jean Maspero (1923), Phil Booth notes that the Severan church (the closest to a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquests) declined significantly after the exile of Theodosius in 536⁷. Of course, we should approach hagiographical texts with a degree of suspicion (as we will later argue), but the *Encomium of Apollo 10* does make this claim: “after Theodosius’ exile and Justinian’s persecution, churches were desolate and clerics few, and that most orthodox bishops had died”⁸. However, there is no real reason to doubt this claim, indeed, the Chalcedonian position of Justin I and Justinian, demonstrated by their willingness to impose ecclesiological laws (such as Justinian’s *Novels*⁹) with military force, are likely to have had a significant short-term impact on the strength and influence of the Severan episcopate, thus diminishing their claim of representing Egypt as the ‘Coptic Church’.

However, it is worth pointing out that hagiographical accounts on the persecution of the ‘Melkite’¹⁰ or ‘Imperial’ Church include, at best, over-simplified accounts and exaggerations, and at worst, blatant mischaracterisations. Indeed, if we look more closely at the level of persecution in the 5th and 6th centuries, we uncover that the case is far more complex than hagiographies would have us believe. For example, Paul the Tebennesiote (538-540), often lionised in later, anecdotal hagiographies as an oppressor (an image that contributes to Mespero’s depiction of imperial action in Egypt as “la terruer catholique”¹¹), evidence of this and its pervasiveness is difficult to uncover. Further cause for suspicion wrests on the inconsistencies between hagiographies. Indeed, while Apollinaris (551-570) is a tyrannical persecutor at times¹², elsewhere John of Nikiu portrays him as

⁶ Bernhard Palme (2012), ‘Political Identity versus Religious Distinction? The Case of Egypt in the Later Roman Empire,’ in W. Pohl et al. (eds), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1000* (Farnham), pg. 92

⁷ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ *Millennium 14*, pg. 151

⁸ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 187

⁹ Note *Novel 42* and its specific restrictions on Severanism.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo), pg. 86

¹¹ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 157

¹² History of the Patriarchs (Vulgata Recension) (ed. Everts PO 1 469–472); *Chronicon Orientale* ed. P. L. Cheikho, Petrus Ibn Rahib *Chronicon Orientale*, Paris 1903, 119; Eutychius, Annals (Alexandrian Recension) ed. M. Breydy, *Das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien*, 2 vols, Louvain 1985, vol. 1, 104–105. (From Booth, pg. 158)

“merciful” and an adherent (*dammad*) of the Theodosians¹³. Even Justinian, the archetypal imperial meddler of Late Antiquity with his restrictive *Novels*, is more complex than we might first presume, both momentarily sustaining Theodosius and providing his “tacit assent” to the election of an anti-Chalcedonian Constantinopolitan patriarch, Anthimus¹⁴. Nevertheless, while these hagiographies may include exaggerations and inconsistencies, and bring into question the extent to which a ‘Coptic’ identity was restricted by the Imperial Church (although it undeniably was), they do reveal how the anti-Chalcedonians *saw themselves*. Therefore, we argue that imperial persecution, functioning as a form of “ecclesiastical colonialism”, as Davis suggests, played a significant role in both simultaneously restricting the existence of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Arab invasion, and providing the foundations of its later emergence as ‘martyrdom-narratives’ became significant for ‘Coptic’ identity, evident in the proliferation of martyrdom hagiographies such as the *Life of Samuel of Kalamun*¹⁵. Yet, we mustn’t mistake the later importance of martyrdom narratives of ‘Coptic’ self-identity (produced after the Arab invasion) as evidence that this identity-unity existed at the time of persecution.

Moreover, it is important to recognise, as Phil Booth observes, that a large proportion of martyrdom narratives do not focus on bishops, but on ascetics¹⁶. For example, the hagiographical corpus of Abraham of Farshut indicated not universal persecution, but rather the “ad hoc removal of prominent archimandrites”¹⁷. Similarly, hagiographies such as the *Life of Z'ura* indicate tension between the imperial church and recalcitrant monastic leaders rather than any organised persecution as Maspero’s model of “la terreur catholique” might indicate. This monastic/ascetic narrative of persecution does also appear to be in line the main motivation of the *Novella*: monastic control. From this imperial policy we might presume that it was not the existence of a united ‘Coptic Church’ as such that so concerned the Constantinopolitan emperors, but the diversity of orthodoxies and orthopraxis alien to Chalcedon.

Ambivalence, compromise, and patronage.

Furthermore, we should not ‘read-back’ from the hagiographies to presume that a distinct national identity, separate from the Roman empire had already emerged before the Arab conquest. Indeed, despite anti-Chalcedonianism, separation from the Roman empire does by no means appear to be an inevitability, or even a desire for many of the anti-Chalcedonian bishops in the 5th and 6th century. This is demonstrated by the continued appeal of anti-Chalcedonian bishops for imperial patronage. As Davis observes, both Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian candidates jostled over the issue of episcopal success and the question of who would receive imperial patronage¹⁸ after the death of Timothy Salofaciolus. This demonstrates that there was little sense in which the Alexandrian miaphysites saw themselves as distinctly ‘Coptic’, or outside of the ecclesiological structures of the Roman empire.

Furthermore, we ought to question the assumption that Egypt was dominated by a rabidly anti-Chalcedonian populace. Indeed, a number of Egyptian bishops during the 5th and 6th centuries

¹³ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 158

¹⁴ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy*, pg. 103

¹⁵ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo), pg. 117

¹⁶ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ *Millennium* 14, pg. 157

¹⁷ Phil Booth (2017), ‘Towards the Coptic Church: The Making of the Severan Episcopate,’ pg. 157

¹⁸ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo), pg. 94

demonstrated a willingness to compromise. This included Peter Mongus who, in the hope of maintaining the tangible benefits of imperial patronage, endorsed the *Henoticon* – a document designed in the hope of bridging the schisms that had emerged after Chalcedon. Timothy Salafaciolus similarly tried to ‘play both sides’ in simultaneously seeking to maintain relations with the trans-local imperial power¹⁹ and appeal to the varied indigenous beliefs. Further, as Davis acknowledges, Athanasius II (490–496), John I Hemula (496–505), and Dioscorus II (516–517) were all “reluctant to make Chalcedon an issue with Constantinople” and continued to reap the benefits of imperial patronage²⁰. Finally, it is worth noting that a number of anti-Chalcedonians accepted the imperial attempts at rapprochement. For example, there is evidence that Heraclius’ Charter of Union and theology of monotheletism was signed both by the Theodosians, and by the Melkite patriarch, Cyrus of Alexandria²¹. Moreover, while the Henoticon was rejected by the more radical anti-Chalcedonians, it seems to have been at least partially successful initially. Therefore, we argue that the boundaries between anti-Chalcedonianism and Chalcedonianism ought not to be seen as rigid, but rather more fluid and complex²², both among emperors and their shifting tactics between compromise, apathy, and force, and among the Egyptian anti-Chalcedonian bishops. As such, it is suspect to suppose that a sustained ‘Coptic’ identity, distinct from the ‘Melkites’ existed before the Arab conquest and the later expansion of the Coptic language.

Conclusion.

To conclude, we have argued that we cannot speak of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Islamic conquest. Defining a ‘church’ a collection of people recognising a common leadership, a shared theology, and shared collective identity, there is little evidence of this in Egypt in the 5th and 6th centuries. This is largely due to the significant divisions that emerged between miaphysite groups, heightened by the influx of anti-Chalcedonians to Egypt under Justin I. The non-existence of a ‘Coptic Church’ before the Arab invasion is further evident, as we have argued, both because of weakness of the Severan episcopate after the Chalcedonian impositions of Justinian, and the apparent fluidity, particularly among bishops, between adhering and rejecting both Rome and Chalcedon. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that while unity didn’t exist during this time, the experience, or perceived experience of the Egyptians under the persecution of “ecclesiological colonialism” was vital for the later formation of a more clearly defined and delineated ‘Coptic Church’, held together by the self-perceptions of martyrdom, resistance, and monasticism.

¹⁹ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy*, pg. 97

²⁰ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy*, pg. 97

²¹ Stephen J. Davis (2004), *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo), pg. 116

²² Bernhard Palme (2012), ‘Political Identity versus Religious Distinction? The Case of Egypt in the Later Roman Empire,’ in W. Pohl et al. (eds), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1000* (Farnham), pg. 94

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