Translating Esotericism: Coptic

Burns, D.M.

Publication date
2023
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism

Research Article *Correspondences* 11, no. 1 (2023): 51–57

Translating Esotericism: Coptic

Dylan M. Burns

d.m.burns@uva.nl

Coptic, the final stage of the Egyptian language, appeared sometime in the late third century CE in conditions of deep (Greek and Egyptian) bilingualism. Following the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 640s CE, Arabic became (slowly, at first) the vernacular of the land; the turn of Egyptian Christians to Arabic accelerated in the eleventh century, and the last known active literary productions in Coptic date from the fourteenth century CE. It continues to be employed in the liturgies of the Egyptian Orthodox (Monophysite) Church. The word "Copt" derives from Arabic *qubṭy*, which means "Egyptian" and itself goes back to the Greek word for the same, Αἰγύπτιος; the Copts' word for their own language is simply "Egyptian" — ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲙⲛⲕⲏⲙⲉ [mntrmnkême] "that which is peculiar to the people of Egypt."

Although the grammar and lexicon of Coptic are fundamentally Egyptian (belonging to the Afro-Asiatic language family), one of the distinctive features of the language is the presence of many loanwords from Greek. Moreover, the Coptic script employs the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, supplemented by six (occasionally, seven) additional letters derived from Demotic (an Egyptian script senior to Coptic) used to render phonemes foreign to Greek. This script emerged out of a flurry of attempts in the second and third centuries CE by Egyptians to write out their vernacular tongue using the vehicle of the Greek alphabet. However, both the Coptic language and script are inextricable from Egyptian Christianity. There is no Coptic that is not related in some way to Christianity, and there are no known "pagan" Coptic literature

Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

or manuscripts. Indeed, the very decision to use Coptic signals an identification with some variety — including unorthodox or "heretical" varieties — of Egyptian Christianity.

If one takes esotericism to denote "rejected knowledge" or countercultural traditions offering alternatives to religion and science, then the language of Egyptian Christians may appear to have little to do with esotericism. Yet the interface of ancient and medieval Coptic sources with currents that can be fruitfully related to the history of esotericism is wide and deep, and is of considerable importance for understanding the development of many terms commonly employed in discussing words and ideas that are often associated with "esotericism." The vast bulk of our surviving Gnostic and Manichaean sources are found in Coptic manuscripts of late antiquity. Coptic Hermetica provide our sole evidence of Hermes Trismegistus's teachings as rendered in an actual Egyptian language. The occult sciences of astrology, alchemy, and above all, magic are represented in Coptic. There is a plenitude of Coptic apocrypha, some of which include pseudo-Pagan, theosophical oracles, and an important Byzantine lettrist treatise is preserved in several Coptic manuscripts. The first European Coptic grammar was devised by a scholar of deeply esoteric inclinations, Athanasius Kircher (whose ingenuity should not be confused with acumen in things Coptic).

Two characteristics of the Coptic lexicon mentioned above should be kept in mind when examining the various terms relevant to the study of esotericism: first, that the Coptic lexicon is enriched by Greek (and Arabic) loanwords, often of a technical nature; and second, that the primary religious thought-world of Coptic literature is Christian. For example, when we look at Coptic words employed to describe secrecy and revelation of divine matters, we find a Greek loanword, ⲙⲩⲥⲧⲏⲣⲓⲟⲛ [mustêrion] ("mystery," a term common to early Christian descriptions of divine mysteries), as well as native Egyptian formulations for secrecy, ⲡⲉⲑⲛⲡ/ⲛⲉⲑⲛⲡ [pet-hêp/net-hêp] ("the secret/secrets") and ⲡⲁⲧϣⲁϧⲉ ⲉⲣⲟϥ [patšače erof] ("the ineffable, unsayable"). Important terms

for revelation include ⲟⲩⲱⲛϩ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ [ouônh ebol] ("manifestation"), ϭⲱⲗⲡ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ [côlp ebol] ("revelation"); prophetic visions may be denoted by the Greek words ⲑⲉⲱⲣⲓⲁ [theôria] and ϩⲟⲣⲁⲥⲓⲥ [horama], as well as the native Egyptian morph ⲉⲓⲱⲣϩ [eiôrh]; specifically revelatory visions can be referred to as ϭⲱⲗⲡ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ [côlp ebol], and ϩⲟⲣⲟⲙⲁ [horasis]; the Greek loanword ⲟⲡⲧⲁⲥⲓⲥ [optasis] denotes a theophany.

Conversely, the notion of divine, saving knowledge, often referred to in the study of religion by way of the Greek word γνῶσις [gnōsis] ("gnosis"), is rendered through a variety of terms in Coptic. The Greek loanword ⲅⲛⲱⲥⲓⲥ is used for divine knowledge throughout Coptic literature, particularly in Gnostic, Hermetic, and Manichaean texts. The protestations of ancient heresiologists notwithstanding (cf. further 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Timothy 6:20), there is no evidence in our Coptic sources that "gnosis" is opposed to or juxtaposed with ⲡⲓⲥⲧⲓⲥ [pistis] ("faith"). Rather, the two terms appear side by side in Coptic Gnostic literature, which is no surprise given the Christian valence of Coptic sources in general, but provides important counterevidence to modern theories about esotericism that frame "gnosis" as a "third component" of Western culture, opposed to "faith" and "science."

Moreover, a number of other Coptic lexemes also refer to divine knowledge. Of chief importance is the autochthonous Egyptian word for "knowledge" (ⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛ) [sooun], which is often used to describe a special, divine knowledge. Other formulations that refer to saving or ultimate knowledge include a Northern Egyptian word for "knowledge" (ⲕⲁϯ) [kati], as well as ϣⲟⲣⲡ ⲟⲩⲱⲛϩ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ [šorp ouônh ebol] ("primary revelation") and even ⲁⲓⲥⲑⲏⲥⲓⲥ [aisthêsis] ("perception"), reminding us that "Gnostic" language was diverse: to wit, there are a variety of both Greek and Egyptian words and phrases that Coptic sources use for saving knowledge. Here, too, the modern notion of "gnosis" as foundational in esotericism presents problems to the translator. If one translates these various, multiple terms and phrases for saving knowledge with the single term "gnosis," then one paints over the variety of the actual Coptic "gnostic" terminology used. Conversely, not every deployment of the term ⲅⲛⲱⲥⲓⲥ, even in a "Gnostic" text,

refers to saving knowledge (rather than knowledge in general). Finally, if one chooses to render Coptic ⲅⲛⲱⲥⲓⲥ with "gnosis" rather than simply "knowledge," then the translator implies, misleadingly, that ancient Coptic writers used the term ⲅⲛⲱⲥⲓⲥ to denote a special, esoteric knowledge *in contrast to* the sorts of (allegedly "non-Gnostic"?) divine knowledge to which ⲡⲓⲥⲧⲓⲥ, ϣⲟⲣⲡ ⲟⲩⲱⲛϩ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ, etc. refer. When translating Coptic words for divine knowledge, then, the modern notion of "gnosis" as the defining characteristic of "Gnostic religion," "Gnostic spirituality," or "(Western) Esotericism" is best avoided in the target language. Call ⲅⲛⲱⲥⲓⲥ what it is — "knowledge" — and context will provide the rest.

We are in a similar spot with Coptic anthropological categories. Greek words used in the Septuagint and Greek New Testament for the "soul" and "spirit" (ψυχή, πνεῦμα) are loaned into Coptic (thus ⲯⲩⲭⲏ, ⲡⲛⲉⲩⲙⲁ; [psukhe, pneuma, respectively]), as are various cognitive categories, such as ⲫⲁⲛⲧⲁⲥⲓⲁ [phantasia], "imagination." The term νοῦς, notoriously difficult to translate ("mind, intellect, consciousness"), poses particular problems: naturally there is the Greek loanword ⲛⲟⲩⲥ [nous], but Coptic translators of Greek biblical texts also used a variety of autochthonous Egyptian morphs to render νοῦς in Coptic, such as ϩⲏⲧ, ⲙⲉⲉⲩⲉ, ⲕⲁϯ [hêt, meeue, and kati], words often rendered as "heart," "thought/thinking," and "knowledge, understanding," respectively. Some texts even appear to freely switch between using the words ⲛⲟⲩⲥ, ϩⲏⲧ, and ⲙⲉⲉⲩⲉ when describing the selfsame νοῦς. Thus, Coptic evidence regarding νοῦς includes not only texts and passages dealing with ⲛⲟⲩⲥ, but also ϩⲏⲧ, ⲙⲉⲉⲩⲉ, and ⲕⲁϯ.

The semantics of religion, gods, and other divine beings in Coptic is Christian. Human relationships with superhumans may be denoted by ⲡⲓⲥⲧⲓⲥ ("faith"), ϭⲓⲛϣⲙϣⲉ [cinšmše] ("worship"), and ⲙⲛⲧⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ [mntnoute] (literally, "divinity"). Even languages rich in loanwords prefer autochthonous lexemes for "basic vocabulary": just as the Coptic word for the sun is Egyptian ⲣⲏ [rê] (with the Greek loanword ϩⲏⲗⲓⲟⲥ appearing in very rare circumstances), the word for God is native Egyptian ⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ [noute], not ⲑⲉⲟⲥ [theos]. However, Greek

loanwords dominate the lexicon of Coptic demonology (ⲇⲁⲓⲙⲱⲛ, ⲇⲁⲓⲙⲟⲛⲓⲟⲛ, [daimôn, daimonion] "demon"; also ⲡⲛⲉⲩⲙⲁ, "spirit"); one also occasionally reads of wicked or hostile angels (ⲁⲅⲅⲉⲗⲟⲥ, ⲁⲣⲭⲁⲅⲅⲉⲗⲟⲥ [aggelos, arkhaggelos]), even in non-Gnostic contexts (cf. e.g. Matthew 25:41).

The Gnostic and Manichaean corpora have their own distinctive nomenclature for malevolent superhuman beings, the "archons" (ⲁⲣⲭⲱⲛ [arkhôn]), evil world-rulers. While we often speak of the evil "demiurge" (per Greek δημιουργός, "craftsman") of Gnostic myth, this word in Coptic usage always refers to a benevolent divine being, such as God, or a tool of God, as in Valentinian Gnostic literature. Rather, Coptic Gnostic texts name the arrogant (ⲁⲩⲑⲁⲇⲏⲥ [authadês]) leader of the archons ⲁⲣⲭⲓⲅⲉⲛⲉⲧⲱⲣ [arkhigenetôr] ("prime begetter"), ⲡⲁⲛⲧⲟⲕⲣⲁⲧⲱⲣ [pantokratôr] ("almighty" – a Septuagintism, perhaps used sarcastically), or simply ⲁⲣⲭⲱⲛ. The Devil, on the other hand, is known in Coptic by Greek titles common to Mediterranean Christianity: "slanderer, dragon, accuser" (ⲇⲓⲁⲃⲟⲗⲟⲥ, ⲇⲣⲁⲕⲱⲛ, ⲕⲁⲧⲏⲅⲟⲣⲟⲥ [diabolos, drakôn, katêgoros], respectively). The adjective ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲕⲉⲓⲙⲉⲛⲟⲥ [antikeimenos] ("adversary, opposing") enjoys semantic overlap here, used for a malicious cosmic spirit in Gnostic texts as well as the Devil in "orthodox" contexts. A ghost is simply a "phantom" (ⲫⲁⲛⲧⲁⲥⲙⲁ [phantasma] – e.g., Matthew 14:26).

Coptic knows the occult sciences. Like the native Egyptian locutions ϩⲉⲕ [hek; cf. ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲉϥⲣ ϩⲓⲕⲛⲉ, mntrefr hikne] and ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲉϥϫⲉ ⲙⲧⲁⲩ [mntrefče mtau], the Greek loanword ⲙⲁⲅⲉⲓⲁ [mageia; cf. ⲙⲛⲧⲙⲁⲅⲟⲥ, mntmagos] (thus English "magic") is almost always used to refer to negatively inflected practices, and may be rendered as "(black) magic, wizardry, sorcery." However, one medieval grimoire clearly employs ⲙⲁⲅⲉⲓⲁ to refer to a healing exorcism that drives out demons of sickness, an attestation so unusual that a modern editor proposed emending the text to read that it is the magic, not the spirits, that the formula drives out! Another apotropaic phrase is ϣⲱⲗ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ, "to nullify, annul the influence of magic or demons." There is a strong semantic parallel between the

autochthonous Egyptian word ⲡⲁϩⲣⲉ [pahre] ("medicine, drug") and Greek φάρμακον, which means much the same: just as φαρμακία can refer to the manufacture of poison and thus witchery (also in Coptic use: ⲫⲁⲣⲙⲁⲕⲉⲓⲁ [pharmakeia]), the abstract noun ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲉϥⲣ ⲡⲁϩⲣⲉ [mntrefr-pahre] ("sorcery") appears in lists of sinful activities, such as idolatry (ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲉϥⲱⲙϣⲉ ⲉⲓⲇⲱⲗⲟⲛ [mntrefšmše-eidôlon]) and enmity, as in Galatians 5:19–21. The Greek loanword ⲁⲥⲧⲣⲟⲛⲟⲙⲓⲁ [astronomia] refers to the occult science taught by Satan to a magician ("astronomy" may have this connotation in Greek as well); another term for astrology (and negatively-inflected divinatory arts more generally) is ⲙⲛⲧⲣⲉϥⲕⲁⲩⲛⲟⲩ [mntrefkaunou]. A sign (of the zodiac) is a ϫⲱⲇⲓⲟⲛ [zôdion]. Finally, there is a small Coptic alchemical corpus, where the Arabic loanword ⲁⲗⲭⲓⲙⲓⲉ [alkhimie] (per Arabic كيمياء) refers to an "elixir, philosopher's stone" used in alchemical operations. Remarkably, a medieval lettrist treatise refers to the art of lettrism as a "divine wisdom" (ⲑⲉⲟⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ [theosophia] — literally, "theosophy").

Coptic spiritual and ethnic topography includes a number of terms of interest to students of esotericism. Heaven is of course the sky, ⲡⲉ [pe], but also may be denoted with the Greek loanword ⲟⲩⲣⲁⲛⲓⲟⲥ [ouranios]. Gnostic literature is renowned for its heaven of aeons (ⲁⲓⲱⲛ [aiôn], per Greek αἰών), "eternities," which sometimes appear to be divine thoughts or characteristics of God's mind, sometimes heavenly spaces or places, and occasionally entities capable of feelings or even action. The divine realm inhabited by the aeon is often called the "fullness" (ⲡⲗⲏⲣⲱⲙⲁ [plêrôma], per Greek πλήρωμα), a word that may also be used as a collective noun to indicate the aeons themselves. Here on earth, Egypt is of course the *axis mundi* in Coptic literature. Nonetheless, many Coptic texts reflect the ancient Greek opposition of the Hellene (ϩⲉⲗⲗⲏⲛ [hellên]) to the barbarian (ⲃⲁⲣⲃⲁⲣⲟⲥ [barbaros]), i.e., non-Greek speaker, often of eastern origin. With notable exceptions (such as the poem *Thunder: Perfect Mind*), the Egyptian authors of Coptic texts do not, as a rule, identify with the barbarians or the "east" (ⲁⲛⲁⲧⲟⲗⲏ, ⲉⲓⲉⲃⲧ [anatolê, eiebt]) writ large, however Egypt may

have been construed in the colonial or post-colonial eras. Meanwhile, in Coptic, the "west" (ⲉⲙⲛⲧ [emnt]) is a desert hell, the realm of the dead (ⲁⲙⲛⲧⲉ [amnte]), or simply where the sun sets (ⲙⲁ ⲛϩⲱⲧⲡ [ma nhôtp]). Neither east nor west, "Egypt is an image of heaven" (Nag Hammadi Codex VI 70.4–5).

Bibliography

Bull, Christian, Liv Ingeborg Lied & John D. Turner, eds. *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices. Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.

Burns, Dylan M. "Non γνωστικός sed ⲡⲣⲉϥⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛⲉ: Positive and Self-Designations Involving Knowledge and Knowers in the Nag Hammadi Codices." In *Sortieren – Edieren – Kreieren: Zwischen Handschriftenfunden und Universitätsalltag. Stephen L. Emmel zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet*, eds. Frank Feder, Angelika Lohwasser and Gesa Schenke, 161–200. Aachen: Shaker, 2022.

——. "ⲛⲟⲩⲥ in Coptic Gnostica and Hermetica." In *Human and Divine Nous from Ancient to Byzantine and Renaissance Philosophy and Religion: Key Themes, Intersections, and Developments*, edited by Ilaria Ramelli (forthcoming).

Fournet, Jean-Luc. *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian Versus Greek in Late Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2020.

Richter, Tonio Sebastian. "Greek, Coptic and the 'Language of the Hijra': The Rise and Decline of the Coptic Language in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt." In *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, edited by Hanna M. Cotton et al., 401–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.