

Zitierhinweis

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Jean-Luc Fournet: *The Rise of Coptic. Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity*. Princeton, NJ / Oxford: Princeton University Press 2020 (The Rostovtzeff Lectures). X, 224 S. £ 35.00/\$ 45.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-19834-7.

The book under review is based on the author's four Rostovtzeff lectures held in 2017 at New York University as well as on his lecture series at the Collège de France "Babel on the Nile" (2015–2018, available online at the website of the Collège de France). Though its title promises a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Greek and Coptic in late antique Egypt, the first paragraphs make it clear that the scope of the book is limited to examining the rise of Coptic as an official language through administrative and legal papyri. Other areas of language use, which are explored in Jean-Luc Fournet's "Babel on the Nile" lectures in detail, are only discussed in passing here. Despite its limitations, this book is an essential and original contribution on multilingualism in late antique Egypt, and it will serve as inspiration for future research.

Chapter 1 ("An Egyptian Exception?", pp. 1–39) starts with an account of the birth of Coptic through a detailed presentation of the earliest sources (literary and documentary papyri) and a discussion of fourth-century bilingual archives. Fournet notes that Coptic was used earlier for literary than for non-literary purposes, and that the latter use is attested first in villages and monastic communities. The earliest documentary papyri are private letters; documents from the official sphere are absent from the first two centuries of writing Coptic. To explain this situation Fournet examines the Egyptian case in the broader context of the Roman world: he reviews the Roman legal commentators' opinion on language as well as the actual practice in the Near East as reflected in papyri, epigraphy, and the acts of ecumenical councils. He concludes that in other Eastern provinces the vernacular language was used in the official sphere without hesitation in this period, therefore the Egyptian situation must be considered an exception.

In the second chapter ("Why Was Greek Preferred to Coptic?", pp. 40–75) Fournet sets out to explore the reasons for the absence of Coptic from the public sphere in the first centuries of its use. He proposes various explanations: the multidialectal nature of Coptic, which implied that Coptophones had to resort to a learnt standard language variant (Sahidic) even if they opted for Coptic instead of Greek; the advantages of Greek, which had been

in legal use for centuries, had adapted itself fully to Roman law and developed considerable prestige and authority; the preference of the Church for Greek; the gradual marginalization of written Egyptian in the preceding centuries; and the handicaps that derive from the origins of Coptic, which was, as Fournet convincingly argues, developed by urban Hellenophones, who designed a writing and a language that “owed almost everything to Greek” (p. 74) – for them Coptic was not a replacement, only a supplement to Greek. It was only later, as Coptic was taken into use by predominantly Coptophone milieus that it could be developed into a vehicle for legal and administrative texts.

The third chapter (“The Rise of Legal Coptic and the Byzantine State”, pp. 76–111) examines the evidence for the emergence of legal Coptic in the second half of the sixth century. The chapter starts with an overview of the pre-conquest Coptic legal documents, altogether fifteen items. As Fournet observes, most were modelled on Greek notarial documents and related to minor and temporary transactions. Their digraph scribes, equally fluent in Greek as in Coptic, played an important role in reinventing Coptic as a legal language. All of them come from the less Hellenized South of Egypt. Their number increases at the beginning of the seventh century, likely encouraged by the instability of the Byzantine rule in the decades preceding the Arab conquest. Among the reasons for the emergence of legal Coptic in this period, Fournet notes the contemporaneous decline of Greek and rise of Coptic literary culture. He furthermore discusses if the appearance of legal Coptic could be prompted by changes in the judiciary system, which directed the plaintiffs away from the traditional court procedures and towards more informal alternatives. This could encourage the use of Coptic, first in private settlements, then in official correspondence concerning legal cases, and eventually in appeals and resolutions.

The last chapter (“The Role of the Church and Monasticism in the Growth of Legal Coptic”, pp. 112–148) explores three dossiers. The first comprises of a codex of wooden tablets with Greek and Coptic receipts and a set of related ostraca, which likely come from the monastic federation once led by Shenoute of Atripe. This dossier proves that in monastic tax administration, Greek and Coptic were used side by side in the sixth century. The second dossier consists of the abbots’ wills from the monastery of Phoibammon from the seventh century; these attest to the shift from Greek to Coptic in

legal documents in the monastic milieu prior the conquest. They also exemplify the creation of Coptic diplomatic models based on Greek documents that had themselves moved away from the ideal types of Roman law. The third dossier is bishop Abraham's archive from the same monastery and period, where Coptic legal documents abounded. Fournet argues that despite their relevance for ecclesiastic cases these had legal value before the civil administration, since the justice provided by the state and by the bishop were closely interrelated. The Church, which had become a "coauthority of the state" (p. 145), and her Coptic-speaking cleric-notaries and bishops had the liberty to replace Greek with Coptic, first for internal documents, then for others, thereby becoming a chief promoter of legal Coptic as well as its stronghold after the conquest.

This short volume showcases an exemplary combination of papyrological accuracy, attention to detail, and an eye for the broader context. The author took care to check the papyrological editions against the originals, and his footnotes are replete with corrections, proposals for new dates, or new interpretations. The most significant sources are cited in translation, and frequently also in the original; in several cases the images of papyri are included as well. Fournet argues his opinion convincingly in a wide range of scholarly debates, including the relationship between Coptic dialects and standard variants (pp. 42–48), the cultural milieus in which Coptic was formed (pp. 65–75), or the decline of the courts in late antique Egypt (pp. 99–104). Nonetheless, the papyrologist's predilection for detail does not weigh down his argument, and the book is a profitable and enjoyable reading also for scholars from other disciplines. Fournet presents a thoughtful and reflexive synthesis of the abundant literature in the field as well as several original observations. He reaches well-founded and convincing conclusions on this complex phenomenon through combining insight from a variety of research fields (papyrology, Coptic linguistics, legal history etc.). The book will become standard on the subject and indispensable for anyone interested in the history of late antique Egypt or multilingualism in the Roman world.

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