

A Brief History of the Coptic Church and its Books

By Éowyn Amberdrake

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This paper provides a brief summary of what is, for most people, a less familiar area of history: that of the Coptic Christian Church. It provides a context of history as background for the discussion of Coptic knotwork that follows in separate articles.

The Copts clearly used the dots method to create knotted panels of ornament. The dots method appears to have spread throughout Europe and the near East with the books that these knotwork designs decorated. The books that have directly survived from the early parts of the First Millennium are versions of the Bible and the Diatessaron, though the very early books do not have any surviving knotwork panels. The Bibles and related books from the mid to late parts of the First Millennium, and later, do have such decoration. Thus, this article introduces the Coptic Christians and their books, before other articles examine the knotwork in detail.

In the Beginning

“Coptic” is the Greek word for “Egyptian,” via Arabic. That is, the Greek word *Aigyptioi* became *Qibt* in Arabic, which was Latinized to *Copt*. Egypt was ruled by the Roman Empire centered in Rome from about 30 BCE to 330 CE.

Christianity in Egypt dates back to the time of the Apostles. Tradition has it that St. Mark the Evangelist converted the Egyptians, thus founding the Coptic Christian Church. He was the first bishop of Alexandria, and in the year 66 CE, was martyred there. From the founding of the Coptic Church until the second ecumenical council in the year 381, the Patriarch of Alexandria ranked next to the Bishop of Rome.

From the mid-second to the fifth century, Alexandria was one of the leading intellectual centers of the Christian Church. Great Christian scholars such as Clement (d. 215 CE) and Origen (d. 253 CE) taught there. Intellectuals debated the philosophy of the religion, paving the way for later Medieval theological debates. Branches of thought, such as Arianism and Gnosticism were developed there. Though later declared heretical, they grew alongside the branch that later became Christian orthodoxy. One source explains,

Gnosticism continues to this day in Egypt; it held that the world was actually a mistake created by the Demiurge, son of the true God and Sophia, who was the Jehovah of the old Testament; God pitied humanity and sent Christ to help humanity reunite with Himself. Some held that Jesus had been a man, and the Christ His spirit after death. The Ophites, an offshoot of the Gnostics with Cretan influences, carried the religion a step further, worshipping snakes and the divine mother Sophia, who had actually sent the serpent of Eden to warn Eve

and Adam that Jehovah was the Demiurge and that they should seek wisdom or knowledge to link with the true God. [1]

Alexandria was not always peaceful in the first years of Christianity, and riots were almost common. The reign of Diocletian was the beginning of a particularly oppressive era, marked by many martyrdoms. This is memorialized by Coptic and Assyrian Christians by dating their calendar from 254 CE. That is the start of Diocletian's reign. This calendar is known as the "Era of the Martyrs."

In the third century, a new written form of the Egyptian language, also called Coptic, facilitated the spread of Christian literature.[2] The Coptic alphabet is a variation on the Greek alphabet, with extra letters from the Demotic form of the Egyptian script, to express sounds that do not exist in Greek.

Coptic Bibles

The Copts were well known for the Bibles they produced. There are four distinct varieties of Coptic Bibles, independently based on slightly different original Greek texts. The Bohairic and the Fayumic versions appeared after the 9th c. and are not considered further for the moment.

The older two varieties are the Sahidic and the Akhimimic codices. Some surviving (partial) copies of these are as old as the 4th or 5th centuries CE. Some scholars have sought to prove that some Coptic version of the Bible must have been in existence by the end of the 2nd c. Other scholars feel that no pre-4th c. copies were written.

Date wrangling aside, there was certainly a Sahidic version of the Bible by the year 350. Note that we are speaking of a book of which no complete copy survives. One scholar, G. Horner [3], has reconstructed most of the contents of such a Bible from fragments of over 150 different manuscripts that now reside in museums all over Europe.

These Coptic Bibles were widely distributed, and predate the Latin Vulgate Bible, which was not finally collected together until the 6th c. The Vulgate Bible is based on St. Jerome's (c. 347 – c. 420) translation of the Old Testament into Latin and his New Testament commentaries.

The Diatessaron

In addition to the canonical Gospels, there is a document written by Tatian the Assyrian prior to the year 173. It is known as the *Diatessaron*, a Greek musical term for "according to four." The name means a "harmony of the gospels," because it is the four Gospels harmonized into a single story. Tatian's work may be based on an earlier harmony of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) written by his teacher, Justin Martyr. These harmonies appear to be as early, or nearly as early, as the individual Gospels. Tatian became Christian in Rome and taught for some time in Alexandria, before later returning to Syria.

The earliest manuscript we have of this was found in Syria and was written in Greek, but evidence points to an even earlier Syriac version. The *Diatessaron*, based as it was on some of the very earliest versions of the Gospels, influenced

early translations of the Gospels into Syriac, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, and Old German. [4]

Coptic Church Follows the Empire

In the year 306, Constantine the Great proclaimed the toleration of the Christian religion in the Empire. In 330, Constantine moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople. Egypt from then on was part of what we now call the Byzantine Empire. The Greek-speaking Christian Church in the eastern part of the Empire developed its own liturgical traditions and patriarchal government somewhat differently than the Latin-speaking western Church.

The office of Patriarch of Alexandria became quite powerful, backed by a virtual army of Gnostic monks. In the 4th century, Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria ordained Frumentius as the first *abuna* (bishop) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of Alexandria provided all abunas for the Ethiopian Christian until the 20th century.

There were still ties between the Coptic Church and Rome. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE), writer and theologian, was the most prominent of the Church's Latin Fathers. His early years were spent in Carthage, North Africa. He was baptized in 387 in Milan, ordained in 391, and became bishop of Hippo (again in North Africa) in 396.

Unrest in Alexandria

Cyril (later sainted) became Patriarch of Alexandria in the year 412, as conflicts between religious and secular authority became more intense. Cyril ordered the expulsion of the Jews in 415. When the Roman prefect Orestes, nominally still in charge, objected, he was murdered by monks loyal to Cyril.

One of Prefect Orestes's friends was Hypatia, a woman renowned as a mathematician, philosopher, and teacher. She was the head of the Platonist school in Alexandria, and a teacher of Neoplatonism. She was described as a charismatic teacher. She and her father, Theon, recast Euclid's *Elements* into a teaching edition that was used for centuries.

Hypatia came to symbolize the learning and science that many early Christians identified with paganism, even though many of her pupils were prominent Christians. One of the most famous of her pupils was Synesius of Cyrene, later Bishop of Ptolemais. Many of his letters survive, filled with admiration for Hypatia's learning and scientific abilities.

One night in March 415 or 416CE, this early female philosopher and mathematician was murdered by a mob as she drove home alone from a lecture. Some sources say the mob was composed of Nitrian monks, who were fanatical supporters of Cyril. Some say it was an Alexandrian mob led by Peter the Lector. Whichever is true, it is clear that the mob was composed of Christians, and her crime was that she was a pagan intellectual. One description says she was stripped, flayed, and burned alive in the library of Caesareum as a witch.

This murder marked the beginning of the decline of Alexandria as a major center of learning, though not of faith.

Breaks With the Roman Church

The Copts broke from the Roman church in the year 451 when the Council of Chalcedon rejected their doctrine of Monophysitism. Monophysitism (from the Greek = “one Nature”) holds that in the Person of Christ there is but one nature, and that nature is divine.

The Coptic Church later allied itself with other Monophysite churches, such as the Armenian and Jacobite Churches, who split from Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries, respectively.

The Great Schism in 1054 formalized the division of the Western and Eastern Christian Churches, and the Monophysitic churches were part of the family of Eastern Christian Churches, which includes the Nestorians and the various Orthodox Churches (so-called because they accepted the first seven ecumenical councils). The ancient Orthodox patriarchies were in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. More recent ones are in Russia, Serbia, Romania, Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and others.

Muslim Invasion

The Muslim invasion of Egypt in 642 CE nearly destroyed the Coptic Christian church, and most Copts became Muslim. Arabic replaced Coptic as the common language in Egypt about 1100. Modern Coptic Christians use the Coptic language in their liturgy, but speak Arabic in their daily lives. The 7th c. converts to Islam presumably changed their decorative focus from illustrating Christian Gospels to illustrating the Koran for the greater glory of Allah and the words of His Prophet, Mohammed. This dots-based method of creating knotwork panels appears in many illuminated copies of the Koran, and in later Persian manuscripts. It is said that the last books and scrolls of the great pagan Library of Alexandria were burned as fuel in the bath-houses of the city in 686.

The surviving Coptic Christian churches continued to copy the Bible and the Gospels, well past the invention of the printing press. They decorated them with many ornamental motifs, among which are the distinctive knotwork panels based on a dotted grid.

Conclusion

Coptic knotwork, Arabic knotwork, and Insular knotwork are all based on a dotted grid. They look very similar, with dots and break patterns. Is it any wonder that some scholars have not only noted the similarities, but also postulated a common origin? And the earliest of these three appears to be the Coptic examples. ❖

Endnotes

[1] Ellen Brundige, *The Decline of the Library and Museum of Alexandria*, December 10, 1991, at <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/alex.htm> (last accessed

May 2014)

- [2] Much of the information was from the Met Timeline project at <<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm> (not found May 2014)>, and the online *Catholic Encyclopedia*, < www.newadvent.org/cathen> (accessed May 2014)
- [3] George Horner, author of the seminal works *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect, otherwise Called Memphitic and Bohairic* (4 vols.; Oxford 1898-1905), and *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect, otherwise Called Sahidic and Thebaic* (7 vols.; Oxford, 1911-24).
- [4] Based on a Rutgers University web site accessed in May 3, 2003, which has since disappeared (<http://religion.rutgers.edu/nt/primer/diatess.html>) Similar information was found in April 2005 and May 2014 on the wikipedia site, among others, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatian> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diatessaron>

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