The Coptic Cambyses Narrative
Reconsidered

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A PART FROM A FEW individual encounters with particular philological problems,¹ no serious attempt at reevaluation of the text known as the ‘Coptic Cambyses romance’ (‘narrative’ would be a preferable term) has been made in more than thirty years.² Research in late antique social history has made scholars more aware of the communal, and especially historiographical, ambiguities of the non-Chalcedonian Eastern Mediterranean in what are viewed as the troubled years of Justinian’s successors. Attention has recently been drawn to the divided Heraclian world as it faced the Islamic threat;³ and, by implication, to special qualities in the literatures (and Fachliteratur) composed either for the Heraclian court or in the awareness of the imperial struggles. It is worth while to look at BUK 1 31 in this context.

The transmission of an unicum in a ms. without known provenance must, without further evidence, remain dark. But a few notes on points already noticed by earlier scholars may help us to see our way better to new conclusions.

First of all, be it agreed that Cambyses’ problematic nickname canoĕ, “‘cowardly’, in our language,” is of Syriac origin (Jansen 33): this will provide an important lead toward placing the story and its probable redactor.⁴ A Semitic background is also invoked for the use of €ıpHnh in the opening formula of (quoted) letters.⁵ In point of

² H. LUDIN JANSEN, The Coptic Story of Cambyses’ Invasion of Egypt: A Critical Analysis (AvhOslo 1950.2), remains the standard, and about the only, work (cited hereafter by author’s name alone).
⁵ Since the work of L. Dinneen, Titles of Address in Christian Greek Epistolography to 527 A.D. (Washington 1929), we have the excellent studies of H. Zilliacus, Unter-
fact, a look at Coptic documents of both pre- and post-conquest date will provide a picture of how frequently, and where, such usage is found alongside the more usual ἀλήθεια, ἀστυνομία-plus-epithets formulae. Apart from biblical quotations, ‘peace’ is found just as often at the close of a letter as in the greeting (KOW 300.21; VC 114.16, 22; 116.11). Crum noticed in 1939 (VC 100.1) that as a greeting it is found more often in texts (e.g. BM 546.1, 606.1, 1128.4, 1164.1, all greetings) from Ashmunein and the Fayum (this latter is borne out by Krall in MPER V 25, 35), not from the Thebaid. (Kahle attributed the instances in Bal. 256.5, 262.1 to Muslim writers!) Dating in these documents is often not explicit; but we cannot infer a post-conquest date just from the ‘neutral’ opening ἐν ονοματὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ.

To reflect on Egyptian-Syrian contact in the period after the setting up of a separate, parallel non-Chalcedonian clerical structure is to be led to the Syrian presence most visibly embodied in the later period in the Monastery of the Syrians, still extant today in the Wadi Natrun, and its relations with its country of origin and the outside world. What is now ‘Deir-es-Suriani’ originated as the doublet or ‘Theotokos’ monastery of St Bishoi’s in the Gaianite controversies of the sixth century, and was restored in Benjamin I’s patriarchate after ca 620. There were monks in Scetis with Syriac educations in the troubled first half of the seventh century: troubled above all by a Persian invasion. Hence the Syriac nickname of Cambyses, and the preoccupation with ‘Persian invaders’.

In such a late antique context we may perhaps explain the hitherto puzzling occurrence in the Cambyses narrative of the name Ῥάλλικος (ἡρῴων Ῥάλλικος, “the kings of the Gauls,” 6.15). Byz-
antique relations with the Merovingians in the late sixth and early seventh centuries had been warmly complex since Justin II’s truce with Sigibert of Austrasia (a.d. 571–3: see Dölger, Regesten I no. 24). Such a man as the poet Venantius Fortunatus moved easily about between both worlds. ‘The kings of the Gauls’ (not the ‘Gallatians’ of Asia Minor, as Jansen 16) were hardly unknown figures to an Egyptian public, and most especially so since Heraclius’ treaty with Dagobert in about 630 (Dölger, Regesten I no. 202).9

I would accordingly suggest an alternative set of hypotheses to explain the why and wherefore of this still-puzzling text. (By now it must be clear that the notion that the tale and/or its redactor cannot be Christian must be set aside.)10 The redactor, I propose, was a Syrian monastic settler in Scetis during the patriarchate of Benjamin I, working in about the decade 630–640. Out of reminiscences of Herodotus (in very old school curricula), ‘popular epic’, and the Bible, and out of very real memories of the trauma of the Persian occupation of 617–627,11 he stitched together a tale of warning for the Monophysite population, casting the character of ‘Cambyses’ as the villain to represent the real present threat, the Caliph ‘Umar (died a.d. 634). (Syria fell to the Arabs in 637;12 night was about to fall, albeit slowly, over what was left of late antique Egyptian polite culture.) No more frightening figure could be used than that of the traditional wicked Nebuchadnezzar/Cambyses fused with the all-too-recent apparition of Khosro II Aparvez.13 The fable was a call to


10 Jansen 49 and 56 assigns the work to a second-century B.C. Jewish author. I believe the points raised in the present article will help to demonstrate the unlikeliness of this thesis.


13 We know a good deal about relations between Egypt and other regions occupied by the Sassanian invaders, specifically John the Almoner’s poor-relief for Palestine, as witnessed by the so-called ετμογιαν ostraca: K. Galling, “Datum und Sinn der graeco-koptischen Mühlenostraka im Lichte neuer Belege aus Jerusalem,” ZDPV 82 (1966) 46–56 and 239; cf. Frend (supra n.7) 339–40; and, earlier, G. R. Monks, “The Church of Alexandria and the City’s Economic Life in the Sixth Century,” Speculum 28 (1953) 353.
THE COPTIC CAMBYSES NARRATIVE

Egyptians, and in its wide appeal could have been heard even by Chalcedonians as well as their non-Chalcedonian countrymen.¹⁴

There is no ‘Matter of Egypt’. Yet out of the epic material of the Bible and the classical curriculum of the schools, the unknown author of the Cambyses narrative constructed a cry of warning in the face of an unprecedented kind of invasion. But perhaps not quite unprecedented: the historical Cambyses had both invaded Egypt and cut it off from contact with Greek culture until the coming of Alexander. This writer of the Heraclian age was well aware that a second such break would be deadly. “Constantinople . . . and Alexandria spoke the same religious language . . . their chroniclers continued to live in a Byzantine world, as though . . . the Arab conquest was an interlude.¹⁵ . . . key Christological terms . . . existed only in Greek.”¹⁶ Without the fruitful atmosphere of debate, the eloquence of the schools that was the very fabric of the late antique mind, the excellence in word that mapped out an excellence of spirit, survival alone awaited the later copyist and readers of the tale of Cambyses and ‘the brave Egyptians’ (8.23).¹⁷

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¹⁵ Compare the oath-formula “by the health (ο Ἰ Χ) of our rulers” (ονέχεικ/τελεογία/ηπρωγ [who rule over us] κατα Καιρος, “for the time being”; E. Seidl, Der Eid im römisch-ägyptischen Provinzialrecht II (MünchBeitr 24 [1935]) 141–43.
¹⁶ Frend (supra n.7) 357–58.
¹⁷ I should like to thank the libraries of the German and French Archaeological Institutes at Cairo for help in preparing this paper; and, as always, Mirrit Boutros Ghali (cf. Haydn, The Creation, no. 24).