

The Coptic Cambyses Narrative Reconsidered

Leslie S. B. MacCoull

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 *BKU* I 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 $\sigma\alpha\nu\omicron\upsilon\theta\epsilon$, “‘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 $\epsilon\iota\rho\eta\eta\eta$ in the opening formula of (quoted) letters.⁵ In point of

¹ E.g. W. Vycichl, “Was bedeutet ‘Sanuth’ im koptischen Kambyses-Roman? Ein weiteres Beispiel des *nomen agentis* qattāl im Koptischen,” *Aegyptus* 36 (1956) 25–27.

² H. LUDIN JANSEN, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses’ Invasion of Egypt: A Critical Analysis* (AfhOslo 1950.2), remains the standard, and about the only, work (cited hereafter by author’s name alone).

³ H. A. Drake, “A Coptic Version of the Discovery of the Holy Sepulchre,” *GRBS* 20 (1979) 381–92, esp. 389–90, and in T. Orlandi, B. A. Pearson, H. A. Drake, *Eudoxia and the Holy Sepulchre: A Constantinian Legend in Coptic* (*Testi e Doc. Stud. Antich.* 67 [Milan 1980]) 162–66, 173–77.

⁴ Not cited by Jansen is J. Schwartz, “Les conquérants perses et la littérature égyptienne,” *BIFAO* 48 (1949) 65–80, esp. 75–78.

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. Zilliaccus, *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 $\text{†}\omega\text{ν}\eta\epsilon$, $\text{†}\alpha\sigma\text{π}\alpha\text{ζ}\epsilon$ -plus-epithets formulae.⁶ 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 $\epsilon\text{ν}\ \omicron\text{νο}\mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\gamma$.

To reflect on Egyptian-Syrian contact in the period after the setting up of a separate, parallel non-Chalcedonian clerical structure⁷ 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 620.⁸ 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 $\gamma\alpha\lambda\lambda\iota\kappa\omicron\varsigma$ ($\text{Ν}\epsilon\text{ρ}\rho\omega\gamma\ \text{Ν}\gamma\alpha\lambda\lambda\iota\kappa\omicron\varsigma$, "the kings of the Gauls," 6.15). Byz-

suchungen zu den abstrakten Anredeformen und Höflichkeitstiteln im Griechischen (Helsinki 1949), and "Zum Stil und Wortschatz der byzantinischen Urkunden und Briefen," in *Akten VIII. Int. Congr. Papyrologie* (Vienna 1956) 157–65. From the New Testament point of view see J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*² (Missoula 1972) and *The Form and Structure of the Official Petition* (Missoula 1972), with C. H. Kim, *The Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (Missoula 1972).

⁶ Still awaited is A. Biedenkopf-Zaehner, *Der koptische Brief* (to appear). Note that not every writer whose style, especially in a letter, contains biblical echoes is Semitic by background.

⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge 1979) 274–76, 283–95; D. D. Bundy, "Jacob Baradaeus," *Muséon* 91 (1978) 45–86. P. Gray, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East* (Leiden 1979), unfortunately stops at A.D. 553.

⁸ H. G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n-Natrun II* (New York 1932) 316–18, 319–21. It is well to remember that the famous patriarch Damian (A.D. 578–607), in whose patriarchate so much Coptic literature was produced, was a Syrian by extraction.

antine 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 'Galatians' 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

⁹ Cf. H. St L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1935) 198; J. Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London 1980) 212–16; *Chron. Fredegar* 4.62–65 (*MGH SS.Rer.Merov.* II 151–53).

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 unlikelihood of this thesis.

¹¹ Cf. E. K. Chrysos, "The Date of Papyrus SB 4483 and the Persian Occupation of Egypt," *Dodona* 4 (1975) 343–48. It is a matter of great regret that there is no text volume to accompany the plates in J. de Menasce, *Ostraca and Papyri (CIInscrIran III.4–5* [London 1957]). On the whole question of invocations and their absence or presence under different regimes, see now R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp, "Christian Invocations in the Papyri," *Cd'E* 56 (1981) 112–33.

¹² M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History I (600–750)* (Cambridge 1977) 31; cf. P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge 1977) 88–91, with a highly controversial stress on 'ethnicity'.

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 *ετμογλον* 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.

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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¹⁴ Cf. Drake (*supra* n.3) 391–92. For a much-needed corrective to earlier views of 'collaborationist Copts', see now J. Moorhead, "The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions," *Byzantion* 51 (1981) 579–91.

¹⁵ Compare the oath-formula "by the health (ΟΥΧΑΙ) of our rulers" (ΝΕΝΧΟΕΙΣ/ ΤΕΧΟΥΣΙΑ / ΝΕΡΡΩΟΥ [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).