

КЛАССИЧЕСКИЙ ВОСТОК

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ON THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATIONS
OF JOHN OF NIKIU'S CHRONICLE

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Abstract: *The article examines several linguistic and philological features of the text of John of Nikiu's Chronicle. This Chronicle was written in the late 7th century, then it was translated at least twice: from the original language (Greek or Coptic) into Arabic and from Arabic into Ge'ez. The only surviving version is in Ge'ez, therefore the issue of the original language of this Chronicle has been a debatable question since the beginning of the 20th century. While most modern scholars believe that the original language was Coptic, the authors of the present article question, whether this statement is indisputable.*

In this article the stages of translation of the Chronicle are described and the arguments of previous scholars are systematized. Each stage of translation is estimated as a part of the process of translation that existed in certain historical circumstances and had certain strategies and trends of transmission from one language to another. The research of linguistic features of the text includes arguments related to different directions of linguistics: phonology, morphology & vocabulary, and syntax. All possible stages of translation of the Chronicle are considered, i.e. from Greek to Coptic, from Coptic to Arabic, from Greek to Arabic and from Arabic to Ge'ez. In addition to linguistic features, the authors take into account the historical background of the creation of the Chronicle and philological evidence of the medieval literature. On the basis of the research, the authors draw conclusions regarding the issue of the original language of John of Nikiu's Chronicle.

Keywords: John of Nikiu, original language, Medieval History, Greek, Coptic, Arabic, Ge'ez

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The John of Nikiu's Chronicle is a unique work of early Byzantine historiography, composed by a Coptic bishop in the late 7th century AD, half a century after the Arab conquest of Egypt. The genre of this text can be described as a universal chronicle, starting from Adam and Eve to the early Islamic period. The first part of the text concerns global history, while in the second part the focus shifts to Egypt and the events related to its inhabitants. The last chapters of the Chronicle

made it especially valuable, as it is the only surviving source telling about the conquest of the Byzantine province from the point of view of the conquered.

A significant feature of the Chronicle is that it was translated at least twice: first from the original language into Arabic, and then from Arabic into Ge'ez. Moreover, it was preserved only in the final translation into Ge'ez. There are no traces left of the previous versions of the Chronicle, so one can only guess what they looked like. The language of the original text is still unknown, because a Christian bishop in Egypt in the late 7th century AD could speak and write both Greek and Coptic [Frantsouzzoff, 2010, p. 78–80].

Since the *editio princeps* of the text was published by H. Zotenberg in 1883, there have been a range of different views on which language the original work was written in. Over the past century, researchers were dealing with this issue and put forward arguments in favour of one original language or another. However, a detailed study of the text has not been carried out yet. Furthermore, most scholars were inclined to retell the arguments W. Crum put forward in the early 20th century.

The main objective of this article is to carry out a coherent analysis of the text of the Chronicle in order to identify any possible clues that can shed some light on the problem of the original language of the text. Each stage of the translation is considered separately, from the point of view of its possible influence on the final version of the text. In addition, the study addresses different levels of linguistics:

1. phonology: transmission of proper nouns;
2. morphology: morphemes potentially preserved from previous versions of the text;
3. vocabulary: borrowed lexemes and peculiarities in the final Ge'ez text;
4. syntax: possible influence of the syntax of the original language and preceding lost translations on the syntax of subsequent translations.

Finally, all the arguments made by previous scholars are discussed within our comprehensive approach. It includes non-linguistic arguments related to the cultural and historical context of the Chronicle.

Thus, our article is intended, if not to close the discussion on the issue of the original language of John of Nikiu's Chronicle, but at least to arrange the arguments of predecessors and present a study connected with this problem.

OVERVIEW OF THE OPINIONS

In the course of previous studies of the Chronicle, the question of the original language of the text was dealt with by different scholars and four assumptions were made:

1. The Chronicle was written in Greek.

H. Zotenberg initially held this opinion during his study of this text [Zotenberg, 1877, p. 451]. R. Duval in his review on Zotenberg's publication also favoured Greek [Duval, 1884, p. 6]. In addition, S. Frantsouzzoff, in his previous works, agreed with Zotenberg's initial assumption [Frantsouzzoff, 2010, p. 79].

2. The Chronicle was written partly in Greek, partly in Coptic.

In his edition of the Ge'ez text of the Chronicle with a translation, H. Zotenberg departed from his original view and suggested that some chapters of the Chronicle related to the history of Egypt could have been written in Coptic [Zotenberg, 1877, p. 451, 456–457; 1879, p. 348; 1883, p. 6–7]. The same view was shared by the next translator of the Chronicle, R.H. Charles, who proposed that the Chronicle was probably written in two languages, but the passages written in different languages could not be marked off [Charles, 1916, p. iv].

3. The Chronicle was written in Coptic.

This assumption appeared first in T. Nöldeke's review on Zotenberg's edition [Nöldeke, 1883, p. 1364–1374]. Then, it was elaborated by W. Crum in a review on Charles' translation [Crum,

1917, p. 207–209]. James Howard-Johnson agreed with it in his book on Middle Eastern historical writings of the 7th century [Howard-Johnston, 2010, p. 185]. D. Elagina in her PhD thesis on the Chronicle was also inclined to this opinion, as she considered the arguments in favour of the Coptic origin to be stronger [Elagina, 2018, p. xxxviii].

4. The Chronicle was written in Greek and then translated into Coptic.

This opinion was expressed, apparently independently, by T. Orlandi [Orlandi, 1970, p. 109] and G. Colin who examined some chapters concerning the history of Pharaonic Egypt [Colin, 1995, p. 44]. Both authors did not provide any arguments. Finally, F.-S. Yirga considered this idea to be plausible and found arguments to support it [Yirga, 2020, p. 7].

One can see that most scholars nowadays believe the Coptic language was involved in the history of the creation and existence of John of Nikiu's Chronicle.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before studying the linguistic arguments, it is worth turning to the historical and cultural context of creation of the Chronicle. John of Nikiu was a Coptic bishop living in Egypt after the Arab conquest. It is evident that the relationships between the Miaphysites and the Chalcedonians were hostile. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Miaphysite and Chalcedonian patriarchs replaced each other on the See of Alexandria: both parties elected their own candidates deposing the opponents, and the situation also depended upon the church policy of the emperor. Moreover, the anti-Chalcedonian community in the 6th–7th centuries was far from homogeneous, being represented by a number of factions, in particular, the supporters of Severus, the patriarch of Antioch, who opposed the so-called Julianists [Booth, 2017, p. 154, 172–173]. The latter adhered to apthartism – the doctrine stating the incorruptibility of the Christ's body before resurrection. The opposition increased after the persecutions of Justin I, when Egypt became a safe harbor for different factions which at the same time stood against the Chalcedonian confession [Booth, 2017, p. 154]. In the end, the Severan church was established with the efforts of the patriarchs Peter IV (575–577) and Damian (577 – c. 606).

John of Nikiu belonged to this pro-Severan anti-Chalcedonian episcopate. J. Howard-Johnston considers unlikely that a Miaphysite bishop could write his *opus magnum* in the language of his ideological opponents [Howard-Johnston, 2010, p. 185]. In our opinion, this idea seems not improbable if we pay attention to John's negative attitude towards the Chalcedonian community clearly expressed in the last chapters of the Chronicle. Indeed, the anti-Chalcedonian polemics are reflected in the Coptic written sources of the 6th–7th centuries [Johnson, 1986, p. 220–225] and John of Nikiu's Chronicle seems to accord with this trend. Many churchmen of that period were writing in Coptic. Among them were bishops Constantine of Siout, Rufus of Shotep, John of Shmun, John of Paralos, Pesynthios of Coptos, and most notably John's contemporaries: patriarchs Benjamin, Agathon, John III, and also John of Nikiu's successor, bishop Menas of Nikiu, who compiled an important historical document devoted to the life of the patriarch Isaac (686–689) [Orlandi, 1986, p. 75–78].

In public domain, the spread of Coptic reached its peak during the first two centuries after the Arab conquest: it is from this period that the bulk of documentary texts compiled in Coptic, exceeding in some regions those in Greek, has come down to us [Richter, 2009, p. 405; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 196]. At the same time, Greek was still the main official language of the Church in Egypt well into the 8th century and perhaps even later [Fournet, 2009, p. 433; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 193]. So, John of Nikiu, as a bishop, should have had a good knowledge of Greek. Moreover, he obviously used Greek sources about which there is no evidence that they were translated in Coptic. A case in point is Chronographia of John Malalas which is the principal source for the first part of

John of Nikiu's Chronicle. For these reasons, F.-S. Yirga finds the idea of translation from Greek into Coptic partly justified [Yirga, 2020, p. 7]. Even if the original text had been written in Coptic, in any case the author of the Chronicle translated into Coptic all passages taken from Greek sources. We were guided by the same considerations in our research of the processes that could have occurred with the text of the Chronicle and Greek proper nouns borrowed into further translations.

There is also a number of arguments related to the features of Greek and Coptic literature. H. Zotenberg, expressing his ideas about the Greek origin, was nevertheless surprised that this Chronicle had not been mentioned by subsequent Greek authors and had not become a source for other Greek works [Zotenberg, 1877, p. 451]. Indeed, it is unusual for Greek literature where many texts are known primarily from references in the writings of later generations. It has been cautiously suggested that the passage of the Chronicle concerning the description of the Bulgars could have been used in the 8th century by an unknown Byzantine author whose text was subsequently conveyed in *The Chronicle* by Theophanes the Confessor and in *Historia syntomos, breviarium* by Nikephoros I of Constantinople [Mingazov, 2012, p. 13]. However, this single piece of evidence of the Chronicle's reception in Greek literature is hypothetical and ambiguous.

At the same time, W. Crum claimed that it was hardly plausible to suggest a mixed Greek-Coptic text of the Chronicle, since there is no other example of such a vast text [Crum, 1917, p. 207]. Due to the absence of precedence, one more argument can be noted on behalf of the non-Coptic origin of the text: if the original language of the Chronicle was Coptic, this text can be considered a unique example of a Coptic Chronicle [Emmel, 2007, p. 96].

Thus, there are profound arguments of a historical-social and historical-philological background in support of both Greek and Coptic as the original language of the Chronicle.

STAGES OF TRANSLATION

As stated above, the primary task of this article is to analyze each stage of the translation separately. The following three stages are proposed:

1. The stage of writing the Chronicle in the late 7th century AD. According to the assumptions described above, the following could have happened at this stage:

a. The author wrote in Greek. In this case, at the next stage, the translation was made directly from Greek into Arabic without the mediation of Coptic, with the exception of the very factor of John's biliteracy;

b. The author wrote in Greek, but after some time the Chronicle was translated into Coptic. In this case, the text passed through a recorded Greek-Coptic translation in the 8th century AD or, most probably, later. Inasmuch as the Coptic language is commonly defined as a case of Egyptian-Greek bilingualism that appeared in its developed form in the Egyptian Christian milieu, predominantly to make translations of the Holy Scripture and other Christian literature into vernacular tongue [Reintges, 2004, p. 36; Fournet, 2009, p. 431], this assumption is valid;

c. The author copied and rewrote passages of Greek texts in Coptic. In this case, the translation into Coptic was made simultaneously with the compilation of the Chronicle, so the influence of Greek should have been less.

2. The stage of translation into Arabic. Dating a translation into Arabic, whether from Greek or Coptic, causes difficulties. Until the present, almost no one has attempted to date the beginning of this stage. J. Howard-Johnson, who adhered to the Coptic original of the Chronicle, suggested that the translation took place in the 10th century or soon afterwards, during the period when the Coptic Church was increasingly moving over to Arabic [Howard-Johnston, 2010, p. 184]. S. Frantsouzzoff supposed a later dating based on the existence of a specific term in the text of the Chronicle: 𐩢𐩣𐩬𐩪𐩡𐩣 [ǰəməkəyāt], from Arabic جَمَكِيَّة [ǰamakīya-] or جَامَكِيَّة [ǰāmākīya-] of Persian

origin which means ‘salary of a warrior, reward’. This term was first used in Persian texts in the second half of the 11th century AD, and the earliest Arabic text in which this borrowing can be found is *Kitāb Qawānīn al-Dawāwīn* (*‘The book of rules for the divāns’*) by Ibn Mammātī, dated to the end of the 12th century. For these reasons, S. Frantsouzoff did not consider it possible to date the translation of John of Nikiu’s Chronicle into Arabic earlier than the 12th century AD [Frantsouzoff, 2010, p. 80]. However, this term could have gotten into the text during rewriting.

Considering this stage of translation, the linguistic environment in Egypt cannot be ignored. During the two centuries following the Arab conquest of Egypt, the prominence of Coptic increased, especially in the field of administrative and legal documentation, issued at that time predominantly in the indigenous language rather than Greek. This trend had started even before the final end of the Byzantine rule in Egypt, since the middle of the 6th century [Fournet, 2009, p. 441; Richter, 2009, p. 405; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 197–198]. Still, many of these documents were bilingual (including, for instance, the standard dating and accounting formulae in Greek) or even trilingual [Fournet, 2009, p. 442; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 197–199].

The language shift in public and administrative domains from Greek and Coptic to Arabic was happening in the 9th century, so that by the beginning of the Fatimid rule in Egypt in the second half of the 10th century, the use of Coptic was limited basically to liturgy and the manuscript tradition preserved in churches and monasteries [Emmel, 2007, p. 84; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 201]. In the following 11th century (or perhaps a bit earlier) the Coptic literary heritage began to be translated into Arabic [Rubenson, 1996, p. 6–7; Richter, 2009, p. 404; van der Vliet, 2013, p. 201–202]. Samuel Rubenson distinguished three phases in the process of translations from Coptic into Arabic: early translations (biblical, liturgical, apocryphal and hagiographical texts, the canons of the Church) made until the middle of the 11th century; translations of the above-mentioned types of literature as well as gathering, translation and reworking of Coptic canon law, patristic authors and the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, made in the second half of the 11th – early 13th centuries; revisions of earlier translations and the new ones which include the Synaxarium, biblical, apocryphal and patristic texts, made in the 13th – 14th centuries [Rubenson, 1996, p. 5–13].

If the translation was made from Greek, it is obscure who exactly could have initiated this process, despite that there were enough people well acquainted with the Greek language, especially among the clergy. It should be noted that the skills of translation from Greek into Arabic reached a highly professional level by the 12th century AD. By this point, there were at least two historical periods when a large number of texts was translated from Greek into Arabic. All possible errors and inaccuracies had already been recognized in the 9th century by the authors of the translation movement in Baghdad: they translated a wide range of literature through the mediation of the Syriac language [Brock, 2009, p. 3]. After that, in the 11th century, ecclesiastical literature was translated directly from Greek into Arabic in Antioch [Treiger, 2021, p. 643]. These achievements led to the high quality of translations from Greek into Arabic by the period reviewed.

3. The stage of translation into Ge’ez. This translation extant in the single version of the text was carried out in AD 1601. There were two translators: the Ethiopian royal historiographer Məhərkä Dəngəl and the diacon Gabriel of Coptic origin known for other works [Gusarova, 2023, p. 164]. In addition, there are even more recent retellings of the text in Amharic based on the Ge’ez version [Elagina, 2017], but the Amharic versions are not considered in this article.

PHONOLOGY

Greek => Coptic transmission

In the course of rendering Greek words, the characteristic spelling variations of consonants included the interchanges $\kappa > \Gamma$ and $\Gamma > \kappa$, $\Delta > \tau$ and $\tau > \Delta$ that reflects the absence of phonemic

contrast between voiced and voiceless dental ([d], [t]) and velar ([g], [k]) stops [Reintges, 2004, p. 40].

Above all the ‘copticization’ of proper nouns could also include the introduction of Coptic letters (e.g. $\mathfrak{z}$ [h] to render the Greek *spiritus asper* and occasionally *spiritus lenis*), the replacement of Greek terminations (e.g. -ος by ϵ), and variation of vowels that aligns with the processes in Koine Greek (monophthongization, iotacism) and also refers to the tendency of the Coptic accent system to change vowel qualities along with the apparent ignorance of Greek quantities [Ernsted, 1986, p. 66–68; Reintges, 2004, p. 41–43; Fournet, 2009, p. 444]. The peculiarities of vowel alterations in Greek loanwords transmitted into Coptic can be summarised as following:

$\mathfrak{o} \Leftrightarrow \mathfrak{w}$

$\epsilon \Leftrightarrow \mathfrak{h}$

$\gamma \Leftrightarrow \mathfrak{h}, \mathfrak{i}, \epsilon$ (explained by the absence of [ü] in Coptic)

[e]: ϵ – normal, other options: $\mathfrak{a}\mathfrak{i}$, γ , $\mathfrak{o}\mathfrak{i}$

[i]: $\mathfrak{i}$ – normal, other options: $\mathfrak{h}$, ϵ , $\epsilon\mathfrak{i}$

Coptic $\Rightarrow$ Arabic transmission

The correspondences between Coptic and Arabic consonants were more or less conventional, however due to the diversity of phonemic repertoire in Arabic, one Coptic grapheme could ‘regularly or sporadically encode a range of Arabic phonemes’ as described by Tonio S. Richter who investigated Arabic borrowings in Coptic [Richter, 2017, p. 517]. On the basis of the earlier evidence of Arabic words transcribed in Coptic texts (9th – 11th centuries) and the later source of Copto (Bohairic)-Arabic allography dated to the 13th century (Arabic text transcribed with the Coptic writing system) [Worrell, 1934, p. 134–136; Satzinger, 1972, S. 42; Richter, 2017, p. 513–517], the following multifarious correspondences can be attested:

$\mathfrak{r} \approx \mathfrak{t}$ [t], $\mathfrak{t}$ [t], $\mathfrak{d}$ [d], $\mathfrak{z}$ [d], $\mathfrak{z}$ [d], $\mathfrak{z}$ [t], $\mathfrak{z}$ [z]

$\mathfrak{e} \approx \mathfrak{t}$ [t], $\mathfrak{t}$ [t], $\mathfrak{d}$ [d], $\mathfrak{z}$ [d], $\mathfrak{z}$ [t]

$\mathfrak{k} \approx \mathfrak{q}$ [q], $\mathfrak{k}$ [k]

$\mathfrak{x} \approx \mathfrak{k}$ [k], $\mathfrak{x}$ [h]

Thus, bearing in mind the variations $[\mathfrak{k}] \Leftrightarrow [\mathfrak{g}]$ and $[\mathfrak{t}] \Leftrightarrow [\mathfrak{d}]$ that could occur with the Greek loanwords in Coptic (initially voiceless sounds are interchanged with the voiced ones and vice versa), the following transitions can be noticed on the basis of examples from the Chronicle that will be discussed further in detail: $[\mathfrak{t}] > [\mathfrak{d}]$, $[\mathfrak{d}] > [\mathfrak{t}]^* > [\mathfrak{t}]$, $[\mathfrak{g}] > [\mathfrak{k}]^* > [\mathfrak{q}]$ and $[\mathfrak{g}] > [\mathfrak{k}]^1$.

Greek $\Rightarrow$ Arabic transmission

The principles of phonetic transmission from Greek into Arabic were also predominately conventional. Ancient Greek voiced plosives ([b], [d], [g]), which became fricatives in Byzantine Greek ([v], [d], [ɣ]), [Horrocks, 2010, p. 171], nevertheless, were mainly transmitted into Arabic as plosives ([b], [d]) and affricate ([ʒ]), but other variants were also possible. Voiceless consonants that did not receive fricative pronunciation ([k], [t]) were expressed predominantly by emphatic analogues ([k], [t]).

In this article, because of the peculiarities of Coptic phonology, the most interesting is an opportunity for voiceless Ancient Greek consonants to become voiced in Byzantine Greek and, consequently, to have a voiced rendering in subsequent translations. It concerns only one combination of sounds $\nu\tau$, in which the second sound in Byzantine Greek had a voiced implementation: [nd] [Horrocks, 2010, p. 275–276]. In addition, the common transmission of the Greek π [p] to the Arabic was $\mathfrak{b}$ [b]. In other cases, a voiceless plosive ([t] or [k]) in any Ancient

¹ Here and further an asterisk marks the transitions we reconstruct if we presume that the Chronicle was composed in Coptic, and other hypothetical cases that could have been attested in earlier versions of the text.

Greek word could not become a voiced sound in Arabic. Similarly, a voiced plosive ([d] or [g]) in any Ancient Greek word, which subsequently became a voiced fricative, could not have a voiceless implementation in Arabic.

Arabic => Ge'ez transmission

Considering Arabic and Ge'ez, it is worth paying attention to the correspondences between Arabic and Ge'ez consonants and Proto-Semitic consonants [Weninger, 2011, p. 1127–1128]. Obviously, Ge'ez has a number of other phonetic features, while in the course of rendering proper nouns, titles and terminological vocabulary from Arabic to Ge'ez, natural historical correspondences were not always preserved. First, the labiovelar sounds [k^w], [g^w], [q^w] and [h^w] appeared in the loanwords of the Chronicle's text in accordance with the phonetic laws of Ge'ez. Secondly, in the alleged period of the Chronicle's translation, guttural consonants had lost their original implementation: [ħ], [h], [h] > [h]; [ʕ], [ʔ] > [ʔ] [Butts, 2019, p. 121–122]. Assimilation of gutturals led to numerous discrepancies of proper nouns in the known manuscripts: ከኤኦ [kanaʕan] = ከኣኦ [kanaʕān] ('Canaan'). In addition, the pairs θ [š], ṣ [s] > [s]; ʁ [š], ṣ [s] > [s] merged; only a graphical difference remained between them [Gragg, 1997, p. 173]. As a result of assimilation of sibilants, mostly symbols of higher frequency were used in borrowed words: ṣ [š] and ṣ [s]. Moreover, not all emphatic consonants remained emphatic: [s] => [s]. Thirdly, under the influence of Old Amharic, unusual sounds penetrated into Ge'ez, namely, additional letters for writing palatal consonants, going back to dental and velar sounds [Kogan, 2009, p. 30], were invented. The symbols: ʁ [ž] < [*z], [*g]; ʁ [š] < [*s], [*š] were already used in the text of the Chronicle. However, the use of these signs was irregular and the translator did not regularly use the sign ʁ to convey Arabic ʔ and could replace it by either ʁ [g] or ʁ [z]. Another influence of Old Amharic was the [t] => [s] shift. Next, in common borrowings from the Greek language (especially related to ecclesiastical terminology) ṣ [p] occurred, but it was not used in other words, even of Greek origin.

Another complication at this stage of transmission was the possibility of an erroneous reading of the Arabic manuscript during translation from Arabic into Ge'ez. This manuscript was apparently not of good quality, therefore it caused some absurd distortions. The dots for Arabic graphemes were either carelessly or incorrectly placed, or fully absent at some places, leading to the erroneous reading of a particular letter, since many letters in the Arabic script are distinguished solely by dots [Charles, 1916, p. vi]. Such distortions are easily recognized among others, because they usually involve arbitrary and incorrect replacement of letters:

Instead of the Arabic ف [f], the Arabic ق [q] was read, and instead of the Arabic ي [ī], the Arabic ب [b] was read: فبنكس => ቀበኒከስ [qabniks] ('Phoenics').

Instead of the Arabic ي [yā] the Arabic ت [t] was read: فينيقي => ቶኒኒከ. [futniki] ('Phoenicia').

Arguments on phonology

So far, there has not been any attempt to study the possible influence of the Coptic language on the Chronicle at the level of phonology. If we pay attention to a range of Greek and Latin proper nouns and common vocabulary preserved in the text in Ge'ez, unusual phonetic variations can be noticed: they cannot be explained by a simple transmission from Greek into Arabic and from Arabic into Ge'ez.

The first case refers to the transitions [t] > [d] and [d] > [t]. [t] > [d] is apparently a result of more or less regular transcription of Coptic ʁ [t], or maybe ʁ [t^h] in Bohairic spelling, with Arabic ɗ [d], while [d] > [t] can be regarded as an elaboration of what has been mentioned before concerning the alteration Δ > ʁ in Coptic words borrowed from Greek. Here are some examples:

Τυρώ	ⲧ [t] / Ⲑ [tʰ] (B) > ɿ [d]	ዲሩ	diru	t > d
Τύρος		ደይሩስ	dayrus	
Αττικής		አንዲከ	ʔəndikā	
Καπιτώλιον		ቀባዱልዩን	qabādukyus	
Παλλάντις		(ብ)ላንዲኑስ	(bə)lāndinus	
Βοττία		ፋዱዲያ	fudidyā	
τριομβυράτωρ		አድርዩፋጡን	ʔadəryufaṭun	
Τραϊανός		አንድርያኖስ	ʔəndəryānos	
Turbo		ዱረራን	dirarān	
Μελέτιος		ማልድዮስ	māldəyus	
Ἄρτεμις		አርዴሚስ	ʔardemis	
Γρατιανός		አግረድያኖስ	ʔagradryānos	
Τατιανός		ደድያኖስ	dadyānos	
Τηλέμαχος		አድለማኮስ	ʔadlēmākos	
Ἀττικός		ዐዲኩስ, ዐንዳዲኮስ	ʕadikus, ʕandādikos	

Ποσειδών	Δ > ⲧ (in Coptic)*	ⲧ [t] / Ⲑ [tʰ] (B) > ɿ [t]	ቡሲጥን	busiṭon	d > ɿ
Δίδω			ዲጡ	diṭu	
Δροσίδης			አጥራሲስ	ʔaṭrāsīs	
Ρόδος			ሩጥስ	ruṭos	
Δάφναι			ጥንፋስ	ṭənfās	
Εὐδοκία			አውጣካያ	ʔawṭakyā	

The same concerns the transitions [g] > [q] and [g] > [k], starting from the possible ⲑ > ⲕ variation that was followed by regular ⲕ ≈ ǧ and less regular ⲕ ≈ ǧ, or more frequent x ≈ ǧ (in case of Bohairic), correspondences²:

Γόρτυνα	ⲑ > ⲕ	ⲕ [k] > ǧ [q]	ቅርጢና	kərtinā	g > q
Φρυγία	(in Coptic)*	(in Arabic)*	አፍራቅያ	ʔafraqyā	

Γοργόνα	ⲑ > ⲕ (in Coptic)*	ⲕ [k]/x [kʰ] (B) > ǧ [k]	ኩንኩና	kurkunā	g > k
Ἀγήνωρος (Gen. of Ἀγήνωρ)			አከባኑሩስ	ʔakbānurus	
Ὠγύγη			አውዲከጡን	ʔawdikṭun	
Ἀντίγονος			አንዲኮስ	ʔandikos	
Γέσσιος			ከስሰይስ	kanasyus	

A remarkable case also refers to the transition b > f attested, for example, in the above-mentioned Βοττία > fudidyā. It can be explained by the alteration in Arabic where ف [f] may correspond to both ⲑ [b] and ⲕ [f] in Coptic [Richter, 2017, p. 517–518]. One more peculiarity is

² For ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ correspondences, see the table ‘Coptic transcriptions of Arabic consonantal phonemes’ by Tonio S. Richter [Richter, 2017, p. 518–519].

represented by the name Ἀμφιλόχιος in which χ was transformed into [g] in Ge'ez: ልልሳ [filgos]. Coptic x could have been transcribed as 𐩤 [k] in Arabic being more or less regular phoneme-grapheme correspondence, however, the following transition into [g] in Ge'ez is vague. Of course, there might have been a scribal error at one stage or another when the text was being copied or even translated. An alternative explanation, including the rare interchange x > k (attested in non-literary texts of the 6th – 7th centuries from the Theban region)³ that could have been further transcribed in an irregular way as 𐩤 [ḡ] or 𐩤 [ḡ], seems doubtful.

The observations proposed cannot be verified with certainty because of the lack of any copies of the Chronicle preceding the late Ge'ez translation. Nevertheless, the theoretical basis as well as other textual evidence taken into consideration enable us to figure out specific phonological values that, in turn, may point at the existence of the Chronicle in Coptic.

MORPHOLOGY & VOCABULARY

Greek => Coptic transmission

The Coptic writing system based predominantly on the Greek alphabet as well as borrowings of content and function words from the Greek language⁴ remind us of the influence of the latter. As for the basic morphological features of Greek loanwords in Coptic, the following can be denoted:

1. the nouns remained basically unchanged, with occasional spelling variations;
2. the adjectives with a range of exceptions usually appeared with the ending **OC** (sg. m.);

3. the forms of the majority of borrowed verbs in Sahidic Coptic resemble the Greek *Imperativus praesentis activi* (e.g. **ΒΑΠΤΙΖΕ**, **ΑΙΤΕΙ**, **ΑΠΑΝΤΑ**, **ΧΑΡΙΖΕ**), yet there is an assumption to regard it as uninflected stems with the Greek endings of infinitives **-ειν** and **-εσθαι** contracted [Reintges, 2004, p. 39]. The very forms of infinitives ending with **-IN** and **-ECΘE** appear in the verbs of Greek origin in Bohairic, which should be taken into consideration as it could be the language from which the Chronicle may have been translated into Arabic. One more peculiarity in Bohairic is the addition of the auxiliary **EP-**, for instance, **EP ΦΟΡΙΝ** ('bear'), **EP ΑCΠΑΖΕCΘE** ('embrace, greet') [Shisha-Halevy, 1991, p. 55b].

The arbitrary character of Greek borrowings in Coptic makes it difficult to define, whether a particular lexical item was originally used in Coptic or Greek text. Still, as argued by W.E. Crum [Crum, 1917, p. 207], one cannot deny the fact that the use of Greek vocabulary, which is common for Coptic, cannot be applied as an argument against the existence of the Chronicle in Coptic. It is surprising to expect any alterations when there are special terms and titles already existing in Greek and thus transmitted in Coptic, not to mention common vocabulary and function words.

Coptic => Arabic transmission

Although the lexical influence of Coptic on Egyptian Arabic turned out to be insignificant [Bishai, 1964], quite a number of modern toponyms of Egypt were derived from Coptic. They are widely attested in the Chronicle of John of Nikiu, even implicitly, as it will be discussed further in the section concerning the arguments on morphology and vocabulary.

Greek => Arabic transmission

The main morphological influence that can be noted in the Greek-Arabic translations is the borrowing of some nouns not in Nom. sg., but rather in the form in which this word was found in the text. Since the declension of a Greek noun often revealed its stem consonant, which is not

³ For example, in the name **ΠΟΥΡΚΗΡΙΑ** < Πουλχερία ('Pulcheria') [Worrell, 1934, p. 100].

⁴ In average 20%, according to J.-L. Fournet [Fournet, 2009, p. 431]. Chris H. Reintges estimates though that the borrowings comprise approximately as much as 40% [Reintges, 2004, p. 36].

visible in the form Nom. sg., during such contextual borrowing, the same name can be written in Arabic in completely different ways. Only rare similar discrepancies in the rendering of proper nouns, which could be explained by the peculiarities of Greek morphology, were found in the text of the Chronicle. Indeed, some Greek words may have been borrowed into Arabic during translation, but this primarily concerned very specific terms, for example, medical ones. There are almost no Greek words in the text of the Chronicle except personal names, while the existing borrowings can be mostly explained by the influence of Greek on Ge'ez in general, and do not depend on the hypothetical stage of the Greek-Arabic translation.

Arabic => Ge'ez transmission

The text of the Chronicle includes a number of lexical borrowings from Arabic [Gusarova, 2024, p. 149–152]:

نَسَّاح* ('copyist') => ነሳሕ [nasāh] etc.

Arabic words also appear among proper nouns:

صور* ('Tyre') => ሱር [sur]

شام* ('Syria') => ሻም [šām]

تونس* ('Tunis') => ቱና [tonā] etc.

Arguments on morphology and vocabulary

The Chronicle contains a lot of Greek and Coptic proper nouns as well as some terms. However, there is no substantial argument for any language.

In his 2010 article S. Frantsouzzoff followed H. Zotenberg and stated that the word መስተገብራን: [mastagabrān] ('workers') denoting the Green fraction in the Chronicle is the misunderstanding of 'οἱ Πράσινοι'. According to Frantsouzzoff, instead of this term, an active participle from the verb πράσσειν ('do, work, make') was read [Zotenberg, 1883, p. 410, n. 2; Frantsouzzoff, 2010, p. 79]. In 2011, this argument was rejected in the article on the Blue and Green fractions by P. Booth who argued that the verb πράσσειν could be used in Coptic with the same meaning [Booth, 2011, p. 563]. D. Elagina believes that this mistake could have occurred at the stage of compiling the Chronicle, not necessarily in Greek [Elagina, 2018, p. xxxviii].

Another argument is offered by one of the authors of this article. At the beginning of the text 'The wise men of the heathen' Ovid and Plutarch are attested as scholars who wrote after the Great Flood (chapter II). In Ge'ez Plutarch is called ጸግሰ [ṣəwwəs] 'weak, weakened, feeble'. The mention of Ovid and Plutarch in such a context goes back to the Chronicle of John Malalas [Thurn, 2000, p. 5], but there Plutarch has the usual epithet ὁ Χαλρωνήσιος after his hometown of Chaeronea. It seems that due to a slip of an illiterate copyist, this definition was confused with comp. χείρων 'worse, weaker, less significant'. This error could have occurred in the text of the Chronicle itself, which would indicate a Greek original. However, an alternative explanation is possible: it could be a mistake by John himself, who regularly made inaccuracies working with the sources, alternatively, John could have used an already defective version of the text.

Most of the arguments for Coptic as the language of the original were suggested by W.E. Crum. A case in point is a possible indication of the definite article, presumably in its Bohairic form **ⲙ**- reflected, in particular, in different appellations of Zeus called Bīrūs or Nīrūs (chapters VI–VII, XXIV) [Crum, 1917, p. 208]. S. Frantsouzzoff assumed it could have stemmed from Arabic نيروس > بزيوس [Frantsouzzoff, 2017, p. 327]. The former, in turn, could have been transcribed from Coptic ⲙⲓⲣⲉⲩⲥ (B)⁵ / ⲙⲓⲣⲉⲩⲥ (S) together with the definite article just like some Coptic words borrowed into Egyptian Arabic [Bishai, 1964, p. 40–41]. At the same time, it is possible to explain unusual ⲛ [ba] in Ge'ez as a result of misunderstanding of the Arabic preposition

⁵ Cp. e.g. Acts 14:12 [Horner, 1905, p. 290].

ⲃ [bi], which is appropriate in some corresponding places where one could hardly expect the Coptic article **ⲡ**- behind the Arabic [bi], but instead there should have been another grammatical equivalent.

As for other traces of the Coptic definite article, Crum also pays attention to the word Henoticon transcribed as **ⲡⲏⲗⲉⲩ** [babuniqu] in the Chronicle [Crum, 1917, p. 208]. The scholar designates that it could derive from **ⲡⲓⲛⲟⲩⲧⲓⲕⲟⲛ** referring to the catalogue by Zoega. Yet, there is **ⲡⲓⲁ ⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲓⲕⲟⲛ** in the latter [Zoëga, 1810, p. 98] that represents demonstrative pronoun **ⲡⲓⲁ** ('this') rather than the definite article **ⲡ**- before regularly written **ⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲓⲕⲟⲛ**. In any case, we may presume that the merge of **ⲡⲓⲁ** with **ⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲓⲕⲟⲛ** could have resulted in the augmentation *ba*- first in the Arabic and then in the Ge'ez translation.

One more remarkable case is represented in chapter XXXVI. I mentioning Orpheus who is said to be 'the lyric poet' in the translations by H. Zotenberg and R.H. Charles [Zotenberg, 1883, p. 261; Charles, 1916, p. 31]. Yet, another possible translation of **ⲗⲁⲗⲁⲣⲏⲥ** [ʔənlārikus] [Zotenberg, 1883, p. 41] would be 'of Larcus' (presumably, a place name) which could have been distorted from the initially stated **ⲗⲟⲣⲓⲕⲟⲥ** ('lyricist') as it is attested in the Chronographia of John Malalas [Thurn, 2000, p. 51], one of the principal sources of John of Nikiu. Anyway, the first syllable ending with [n] seems to be odd in both cases despite the meaning of the following word. If we presume that [lārikus] is a result of the corrupted **ⲗⲟⲣⲓⲕⲟⲥ** (which would be more suitable bearing in mind the possible reference to Malalas and the occupation of Orpheus in general, while the attribution of Larcus to Orpheus hardly makes any sense), then the argument of W.E. Crum concerning an 'attributive *en*-' [Crum, 1917, p. 207] can be taken into consideration. In this case, it can be regarded as a possible indication of a Coptic marker **ⲏ**- / **ⲏⲓ**- (with a *djinkim* in Bohairic) attached to the following noun to make an attributive construction composed of the first head noun and the second dependent noun mediated by **ⲏ**- that usually designates an attribute or an adjective [Reintges, 2004, p. 85–87]. Thus, the word meaning 'the lyric poet' following **ⲏ**-[ən] could have served as an attribute concerning the occupation [Layton, 2000, p. 82] of the referent – the preceding person of Orpheus. What is also remarkable is that the example regarding Orpheus as well as some other cases noted by W.E. Crum including possible indications of the articles in their Bohairic forms appear in the passages not related to Egypt and this, in turn, contradicts the suggestion of H. Zotenberg that only specific chapters devoted to Egypt could have been compiled in Coptic [Zotenberg, 1879, p. 348, n. 1].

A similar attributive construction proposed by W.E. Crum [Crum, 1917, p. 207] is related to the canal named after Trajan. Nevertheless, the same **ⲗⲁ** [ʔən] appears before the name Trajan not only in one sentence, but throughout the whole chapter [Zotenberg, 1883, p. 65–67], where **ⲗⲁⲛⲉⲣⲓⲁⲛⲟⲥ** [ʔəndəryānos] is used as a subject and there would have been no need in the linkage marker **ⲏ**-. Still, a possible explanation is to consider the definite article masc. sing. with a *djinkim* (indicates *shwa*) – **ⲏ**- [əp] [Boud'hors, 2020, p. 626], although it is not a widespread practice to mark personal names with a definite article [Layton, 2000, p. 98, § 127]. Anyway, the transmission of Coptic **ⲡ** [p] through Arabic **ⲃ** [b] into Ge'ez [n] aligns with the above mentioned example of **ⲡⲓⲗⲉⲩⲥ** that occurred to be Nīrūs, and there is one more example of that kind: **ⲉⲡⲓⲁⲥⲟⲩⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲛ** > **ⲗⲁⲛⲏⲧⲓⲁⲩⲱⲛ** [ʔəntāstādyun].

As for peculiar lexical features noted by W.E. Crum, an apparent mistranslation of a toponym from Coptic into Arabic and then in Ge'ez refers to the town of Edfu which seems to be implied following Esna (chapter XXX. 13) [Crum, 1917, p. 208]. It was known as **ⲧⲉⲱ/ⲉⲱⲁⲧⲉⲱ** in Coptic deriving from *db3* – the name attested first in the 12th Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom [Gomaà, 1986, S. 47]. Nevertheless, the translator who appeared to come across with **ⲉⲱ** (*B*) or **ⲧⲉⲱ** (*S*) interpreted it as a word 'tree' (**ⲉⲱ**) [Crum, 1939, p. 28a–b] with a definite article fem. sg. instead of Edfu. Since ancient times it was a well-known religious center devoted to Horus and

the ‘building’, which is said in the Chronicle to be worshipped there along with those in other cities, is likely to be the magnificent Ptolemaic temple complex of Edfu.

Finally, one more issue for the translator may have been the word አልማንጥን [ʔəlmantəṭun] (chapter LVI. 11) [Zotenberg, 1883, p. 56] which W. E. Crum quite reasonably assumed to stand for Coptic **ⲙⲁ ⲛⲓⲧⲱⲛ** [Crum, 1917, p. 207] apparently with the Arabic article *al-*, probably added when the text had been translated to Arabic. Literally, it means the ‘place of strife/dispute/contest’ that repeats verbatim the preceding text in Ge’ez: ‘he appointed a place of conflict/strife’ called [ʔəlmantəṭun]. W. E. Crum proposed it was ‘mistaken by the Arab as a place-name and so left untranslated’ [Crum, 1917, p. 207]. Yet, it seems that in the Arabic translation there might have been a kind of a gloss – the Coptic expression transcribed and supplied with an explanatory note in the margin that was later added to the main text by some copyist, or the translator to Ge’ez.

Some of Crum’s ideas may be questioned over time. Bearing in mind the long history of the text, there might have been several copies, probably even redactions of the text in different languages. So, the majority of errors in morphology and phonology could have been made unconsciously in the process of copying the text in one particular language and then those deviations from the original could have been reflected in the following translations.

SYNTAX

Although there is a number of attributes of the influence of Greek syntax on Coptic, as well as Coptic or Greek syntax on Arabic, unfortunately these arguments are not applicable to our research. The syntax of the Chronicle’s text has all features of common Ge’ez syntax influenced by Arabic (as a result of translation from Arabic, quite a lot of complex sentences and analytical verbal constructions with the verb ከነ [kona] (‘to be’) or phase verbs are encountered [Gusarova, 2024, p. 152–153]; similar syntactic constructions appear consistently in the texts translated from Arabic [Butts, 2019, p. 134]). The possibility of influence of the original syntax on Ge’ez was considered, but neither Greek nor Coptic features were found.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it could be stated that previous researchers of the Chronicle often put forward mere assumptions that did not have significant evidence. However, even the proposed research of traces of Greek or Coptic in the Chronicle could not help to answer a non-trivial question concerning the language of the original. Unfortunately, after the multiple translation, very few linguistic traces that could indicate the original language have been preserved. As for the historical and philological background, it also does not provide sufficient clarity, but, on the contrary, complicates the choice between two languages. Whatever the language of the original text could be, both Greek and Coptic were obviously involved in the history of its creation and subsequent existence. At the moment, it seems that there are more arguments, both linguistic and historical, in favour of Coptic, albeit they are not decisive. Moreover, a range of phonological peculiarities along with distinctive grammatical features and the indications of Coptic lexis behind certain words and phrases make it more or less clear that the translation into Arabic was made from the version of the text written in Coptic, more precisely in Bohairic, probably after the 12th century AD. At the same time, we do not agree with the modern tendency to exclude the possibility of Greek origin.

The most likely assumption is that the text could initially have been written in Greek, and soon after translated into Coptic. Nevertheless, we do not want to indulge in unsubstantiated statements, because all positions do not seem convincing enough. Despite the existing evidence has been carefully studied, this issue is still to be resolved waiting for the discovery of new sources.

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