

Sofia Torallas Tovar, *Identidad lingüística e identidad religiosa en el Egipto grecorromano*, Barcelona: Reial Acadèmia de Bones Lletres, Series Minor 11, 2005. 116 pages. ISBN 8-493-32845-6.

Over the past decade, the fields of linguistics and classical philology have seen a surge of research in the sociolinguistics of 'dead' languages. The focal point of this research has often been bilingualism or 'languages in contact' phenomena in their structural and socio-historical aspects. Egypt, from the Hellenistic period onward, has played a special role in bringing new materials and questions to the fore, due to the wealth of evidence in Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic, preserved in papyri and ostraca.

Sofia Torallas Tovar's recent monograph is a welcome addition to the current discussion of the cultural aspects of multilingualism in the ancient Mediterranean. Torallas Tovar's point of departure is the primary axiom of sociolinguistics, namely 'In a multilingual society, the use of a given language is a choice loaded with meaning' (12). Much like Fewster,¹ Torallas Tovar focuses almost exclusively on the interaction between Greek and Egyptian, pointing out that Latin, even in the Roman period, was of less importance in Egypt. However, while it is true that in Egypt Latin was ever marginal when statistically compared to Greek, the sociolinguistic importance of Latin should not be underestimated (see, for example, Adams on Latin as a 'language of power' and as a 'super-high political language' with regard to Greek in Egypt).²

The monograph comprises eight 'chapters,' the first seven of which constitute an up-to-date introduction to the methods and materials of the study of the sociolinguistics of multilingualism in Greco-Roman Egypt, and provide the necessary background for the last and most extensive section, 'Christianity in Egypt' (71-100).

The author begins her discussion of the history of Greek in Egypt in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, with the founding of Naukratis and the introduction of Greeks (the 'Hellenomemphites') to Egypt. The latter group is of special interest, as they were thoroughly 'Egyptianized', culturally and linguistically, by the time Alexander reached Egypt. However, up until the fourth century BCE, this process of 'Egyptianization' was less a matter of total assimilation than one of gradual interference, resulting in a unique 'Hellenomemphitic' cultural repertoire, which included, *inter alia*, typically 'Greek' forms of mummification. While these Greeks constituted the historical and cultural backdrop for the later Greeks, from a historiographical point of view, Torallas Tovar concludes that they were unlikely to have played a significant role in the formation of the new Greek community of the third century BCE, and as such, in the confrontation between the Greek and Egyptian languages and cultures in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

This confrontation and its consequences occupy the majority of this monograph. The author assembles an impressive array of evidence from literary and documentary texts for Greek and native Egyptian attitudes towards their own and each other's languages. In general, one finds the expected contempt for the language of a dominated population, resentment of the social price paid for not knowing the language of the politically dominant population, and so on. These attitudes are themselves crucial data for any sociolinguistic study.

In her account of the sources for the study of linguistic identity in Greco-Roman Egypt (§4), Torallas Tovar's command of Greek and Coptic texts, both literary and documentary, is in full evidence. Also noteworthy is her discussion of languages and scripts (§5). The cultural valorization of the various writing systems in Egypt is yet another sociolinguistic problem whose limits are currently being questioned and expanded (see, e.g., Dieleman, *Priests, Rites and Tongues*, 2005). The author discusses in some detail the gradual restriction of writing the Egyptian language in the Demotic script during the first centuries, eventually being limited almost entirely to

¹ Penelope Fewster, 'Bilingualism in Roman Egypt', in: *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text*, J.N. Adams, M. Janse and S. Swain (eds.), Oxford, 2002.

² J.N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*, Cambridge, 2003.

literature, on the one hand, and priestly writing, on the other. However, as she notes, the marginal and exceptional uses of native writing systems in the Christian era are of no small value for observing tendencies of linguistic and ethnic identity. Even after the pagan elite lost all understanding of the Egyptian script as a method for writing the Egyptian language, the religious and/or magical value remained, well into the sixth century CE. Egyptian monks, most notably Shenoute of Atripe, took this religious value seriously, and attacks on native Egyptian writing systems were part of the war on paganism in Egypt.

The question of the use of the Greek alphabet for writing Egyptian is of special significance for the sociolinguistics of Greco-Roman Egypt. The origins of this development are unknown, although the first steps in this direction antedate the Christian Coptic script by several centuries. Again, Torallas Tovar stresses that religious identity is at the heart of this problem. The Coptic script is essentially a Christian phenomenon, and was one of the primary vehicles for the Christianization of Egypt. Nevertheless, some of the earliest texts in the Coptic script ('Old Coptic') are magical and non-Christian in character. This has always been the basis of the most commonly accepted explanation for the adoption of Greek writing for the Egyptian language — given that magical texts must be pronounced correctly, it has been considered obvious that a writing system that is phonologically-based is preferable to one that is not. Torallas Tovar points out, correctly in my opinion, that this cannot be the sole factor, as there were also socio-political reasons for the decline of non-alphabetical writing systems in Egypt. One might also observe that magical and ritual texts, written in the hieratic and hieroglyphic scripts, are attested in Egypt from the Old Kingdom, and as such, a claim based solely on the inherent superiority of alphabetical writing systems for performative texts is untenable. However, I must express my reservations regarding the inherent Christianity of the Coptic script (and language). There can be no doubt that Coptic was the language of some Manichaeans, as is well attested in the fourth century CE community at Kellis, and probably of other non-orthodox communities.

In her discussion of bilingualism and the rise of literacy (§6), the author gives an account of the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious intricacies involved, noting the ever-present difficulties of sociolinguistic research on languages attested solely in writing. Most glaring is the problem of literacy; not only are our only data written, but they are also written by that small portion of the population that was literate. We are, therefore, deprived of a great mass of data which is of vital interest to the sociolinguist. Moreover, much of the corpus examined is formulaic in nature (although see now Choat, 2006, for what can be done with formulaic language).³ Finally, we have almost no access to the pragmatic situations obtaining in the actual writing of many of the texts (whether or not an interpreter was used, to what extent the speaker himself [as opposed to the scribe] was bilingual, etc.). Despite these difficulties, Torallas Tovar demonstrates to what extent the extant evidence can indeed illuminate the categories of ethnicity and religious and linguistic identity. Often, these categories are shown to be fuzzy at best.

The author's presentation of bilingualism, which owes much to Fewster, 2002, is nuanced, focusing on the existence of different levels of bilingualism, and on the question to what extent these levels are attested in Greco-Roman Egypt. Equally instructive is the section on language learning (§7), which treats the ways in which Greek and Egyptian were taught and learned, the textual evidence for Greek and Egyptian as second languages, and the evidence for code-switching. Especially interesting is the case of Egyptian as an acquired language, which, unlike Greek, was learned in adulthood and carried with it social and *economic* advantages such as the ability to teach medicine. Furthermore, the practice of certain forms of magic was tied to the knowledge of Egyptian, demonstrating the extent to which the 'limitation' of written Egyptian to the religious sphere was not necessarily as limiting as one might suppose.

³ Reviewed in this volume, 248-252.

Torallas Tovar's exposition of linguistic identity and Christianity (§8) is one of the highlights of the monograph. Here one finds the clearest statement of the valorization of the Egyptian language not only as a vehicle for Christianization, but also, increasingly, as 'a crystal-clear sign of identity' (74), a specifically *Egyptian* Christian identity. This is nowhere clearer than in the monasteries of Upper Egypt, where Coptic Egyptian was the principal, if not the only, language, and where it was not only spoken, but also taught.

The rest of the monograph deals with Egyptian monasticism, dwelling first on Pachomius and Shenoute, and on the flow of visitors who came from abroad, at times translating (and thereby disseminating) the texts produced in the monasteries. This is adduced as an introduction to the question of the linguistic situation within the monasteries themselves. The author notes the dearth of information available from the Coptic documents of the fourth century and turns to the literary record for evidence. She finds that bilingualism among monks was a known phenomenon, but was considered rare and even remarkable. She considers this as the reason for the beginning of Scriptural translation from Greek to Coptic. Any assumption of monolingualism must be qualified, as there must have been some means of communicating with the numerous visitors to the monasteries. This is further corroborated by the existence of multilingual 'conversation manuals'. It is also known that there were interpreters who served not only visitors from abroad but also Egyptians whose knowledge of Greek was insufficient to allow them to interact with the administration. In general, however, the author concludes that there can be no doubt that Coptic was the principal language of the Christian institutions and foremost among them the monasteries of Upper Egypt.

This study is a valuable introduction to the understanding of the interaction between Greek and Egyptian in Greco-Roman Egypt, and it provides a wide (if not exhaustive) account of the sources for such bilingualism from literary records. It will be of interest to students of Egyptian Christianity, Late Antiquity, and especially to those concerned with problems of bilingualism and language contact in ancient societies. For such readers, the materials found in this book should be supplemented by a new research on linguistic and religious identity from the contemporary documentary records, on one hand, and on the interaction between Demotic and other languages, especially Greek, on the other hand. Moreover, the theoretical and methodological models for the analysis of language contact in ancient societies are rapidly evolving, and already some of the data and approaches found in this book will be considered as dated. This does not, however, detract from the scholarly excellence of Torallas Tovar's monograph; it is rather a sign of the vitality of the discourse in which it is embedded.

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Malcolm Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri*, *Studia Antiqua Australiensia* 1, Brepols: Turnhout, 2006. xiv + 217 pages. ISBN 978-2-5035-1327-0.

This volume is Malcolm Choat's first book-length contribution to papyrology, and one can hardly imagine a more impressive introduction to his scholarly work. The goal of *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* is to examine the ways in which the language of personal documents reflects a particular society's beliefs. The author takes nothing for granted, questioning accepted modern categories such as 'Christian', 'pagan', 'private letter', and 'religion', leaving no concept unscrutinized. This is a welcome departure from the positivism often found in such studies, and gives Choat's work an importance well beyond his specific findings.

Chapters One through Three delimit the scope of the work and its terms of analysis. Chapter Two provides a nuanced discussion of the corpus itself, both assessing the extent to which Egypt can be taken as representative of the experience of the provincial Roman Empire, and delicately establishing the temporal boundaries of the corpus. In the latter case, the author justly opts for inclusiveness, due to the state of palaeographical dating and, more importantly, out of the need to