A NOTE ON THE TERMINOLOGY

This book discusses some aspects of Egyptian art in the period between the AD mid-third and late seventh centuries. This period is roughly identical with what the modern literature defines as Late Antiquity, extending from around AD 250 to around AD 800, “a distinctive and quite decisive period of history that stands on its own”.

Its end is adapted here, however, to a special historical time limit, namely, the Arab Conquest of Egypt in 639–646 (see Chapter IV.2.5) which caused, with some delay, profound changes in artistic orientation as well as in the social/functional background and structure of artistic production.

In order to take into account the outcome of earlier processes in the arts, this time limit is extended to about AD 700.

Referring to the art of Egypt in this period as a whole, I shall use the general term “late antique”. When dealing more concretely with individual monuments or groups of monuments placed in the context of a historical period, the term “late antique” covers the period between the mid-third and the mid-fifth centuries, the term “early Byzantine” the period between the mid-fifth century and the Arab Conquest.

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2 The editors of Vol. XIV of The Cambridge Ancient History. Late Antiquity (xviii f.) opted for AD 600 as a concluding date for the history of the late antique east arguing that the Persian wars and the Arab conquests of the earlier 7th cent. brought about irreversible changes in power relations and political geography as well as in religion and culture. Curiously, this argument does not take into account the date of Egypt’s conquest.—Some scholars continue to argue for a shorter Late Antiquity between Diocletian/Constantine and Justinian suggesting that the longer Late Antiquity lacks a distinct political, economic, and cultural structure. From the particular aspect of Egyptian art, however, things seem different, as I shall try to show. For the debate on the limits of Late Antiquity, see A. Giardina: Esplosione di tardantico. Studi Storici 40 (1999) 157–180; A. Marcone: La tarda antichità e le sue periodizzazioni. Rivista Storica Italiana 112 (2000) 318–334; Cameron, Averil: The “Long” Late Antiquity: A Late Twentieth-Century Model. in: T.P. Wiseman (ed.): Classics in Progress. Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome. Oxford 2002 165–191 and cf. G. Fowden’s review of CAH XIV, JRS 15 (2002) 681–686.
3 For the periodisation of the late Roman and the Byzantine Empire cf. the survey in Schreiner 1994 120 f. The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, ed. A.P. Kazhdan,
Egyptian culture between the mid-third century and the Arab Conquest and the culture of the Egyptian Christians after the Conquest is frequently termed “Coptic”. The word “Copt” derives from Arabic ǧibt, an abbreviation of Greek ἐγυπτιος, “Egyptian”. In turn, Greek Aigyptios derives from the ancient Egyptian name of the city of Memphis, Ḥwt-kꜣ-Pḥ. Coptic is the last written form of the ancient Egyptian language, written in Greek alphabetic characters to which seven signs were added. These derived from the Demotic writing and covered Egyptian phonemes not present in Greek. The Coptic writing system was developed in the AD third century. Initially, it was used for biblical texts. By the middle of the fourth century it was also used for Christian literary works and private letters. The first legal texts occur in the sixth century, and, besides its literary use, the increasing non-literary use of the Coptic also continues after the Arab Conquest. In Arab usage ǧibt referred to non-Muslims and, before the ninth century, to non-Arabic speakers; accordingly, the term “Copt” traditionally denotes the Christian descendants of the ancient Egyptian population.

“Coptic” is also used to denote the Monophysite church of Egypt (from the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, October 451) and, in a far less precise manner, a period of Egyptian art history whose upper and lower time limits (and frequently also contents) greatly vary with different authors. On account of its vagueness and the scholarly prejudices attached to it, the term “Coptic art” will be

New York 1991 includes the period stretching from the fourth to the fifteenth century.—Bagnall 1993 ix speaks about “late antiquity” beginning with “the emergence of Egypt from the difficulties of the third century” and ending in the middle of the 5th century and about “Byzantine” Egypt after the middle of the 5th century.—Cf. also A. Giardina: Egitto bizantino o tardoantico? Problemi della terminologia e della periodizzazione. in: Criscuolo–Geraci (eds) 1989 89–103; CAH XIV 974 ff. According to Heinen 1998a 39 the late antique period starts with the tetrarchic reforms of 284 and ends with the Arab Conquest in 639–646. In his view the Coptic period starts only with the Conquest.—For the 20th-century trends in the art historical periodisation of late antique and early Christian art cf. also Cormack 2000a 884 ff.

For the connections between the uses of the term and the modern search for Coptic identity in Egypt recently, see J. Kamil: Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs. The Coptic Orthodox Church. London-New York 2002.

H. Satzinger: Old Coptic. CE VIII 169–175.

used in this book mainly in the discussion of the art historical perspectives of the earlier half of the twentieth century. If used occasionally in other contexts, it will refer to the art of the late antique-early Byzantine periods as a whole without any ethnic, religious, or confessional distinctions and restrictions. Some of the more recent literature uses the term “Coptic art” in this sense. In contrast, the earlier literature on the arts of Egypt in the late antique period and on the Christian Egyptian arts of the Middle Ages (i.e., the arts of the Christians in Islamic—Omayyad, Abbasid, Tulunid, Fatimid, and Ayyubid—Egypt) used it either undefined or in the sense of a particular historical/art historical hypothesis and connected it exclusively with the Monophysite Egyptians (see Chapter II.3, 4).

Unless otherwise indicated, all dates are AD.

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