Coptic is the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language. By the fourth century CE, a significant portion of indigenous Egyptians adopted the Christian faith, and a resultant monastic tradition precipitated a literary revolution. The new Coptic writing system was far simpler to learn than any of the earlier Egyptian scripts. Coptic borrowed all the traditional letters of the Greek alphabet as well as six or seven letters from the Egyptian Demotic script to represent additional phonemes (\( /\text{ti}/, /\text{s}/, /\text{h}/, /\text{f}/, /\text{c}/, /\text{y}/\)). In 642, Muslim armies secured Egypt, and the subsequent decline of Byzantine influence allowed Coptic literature to flourish. By the ninth century, however, the last of a series of Coptic revolts was crushed, and the Arabization of Egypt began in earnest. The four-thousand-year-old Egyptian language was no longer in popular use in the fourteenth century. Coptic still functions as a liturgical language for the approximately nine percent of Egyptians affiliated with the modern Coptic Orthodox Church. Coptic was expressed in a variety of “dialects” including Achmimic, Bohairic, Fayumic, Lycopolitan, Middle Egyptian, and Sahidic.

1. The Coptic Dialects

Paul Eric Kahle’s watershed 1954 text, *Bala’izah*, identified five distinct Coptic “sub-dialects” and argued that all coexisted in the earliest period of the written Coptic language. Concurrently, Sahidic existed as a superdialect at least across the whole of upper (Southern) Egypt. Kahle hypothesized the following geographic diffusion of dialects:¹

- **Achmimic** Thebes
- **Lycopolitan** Abydos to Ashmunein

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Middle Egyptian  Wadi Sarga to Oxyrhynchus
Fayumic  Fayum Oasis
Bohairic  Nile Delta

Since Kahle’s publication, coptologists have recognized dozens of distinct orthographies among the earliest Coptic manuscripts, resulting in a proliferation of dialectal subcategories. For instance, the Lycopolitan John manuscript (codex Qau) has been classified as L₅, the Lycopolitan Manichaean codices found in Medinet Madi as L₄, and the various Lycopolitan Manichaean texts from Kellis as L* or L₉. Rodolphe Kasser and Wolf-Peter Funk have developed this typology by comparing graphemic-phonological and morphological components of texts. Consequently, some of the distinguishing features of the Funk-Kasser typology may have been purely orthographic and not spoken, and the different systems would therefore represent different conventions of orthography (i.e., spelling) and not distinct dialects.²

Because the spoken language is not reconstructable, the maximalist inclusivity of the Funk-Kasser approach is a necessity. For practical purposes, scholars still refer to the five dialects presented by Kahle and outlined here.

_Achmimic (ac)_ texts are immediately identifiable by the additional letter ㅈ (khei), which signifies the guttural [h] sound, and also by the rendering ḳもらえる for Sahidic ḳもらえる, “and.” Because the European libraries had recently acquired a large number of Coptic manuscripts from the White Monastery near ancient Achmim, early twentieth-century scholars initially postulated that Achmimic was an early stage of Coptic that had been situated in this region.

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