One of the most eye-catching, or rather ear-catching features when listening to what is generally called “Egyptian Arabic”, is the voiced velar plosive /g/ [g]. This sound corresponds to /ǧ/ in Classical Arabic, and, respectively, in other Arabic dialects to a variety of other palatalized or affricated prepalatals, dentals or sibilants such as [ʤ], [gj], [d], [ʒ], [z], [j], [ʧ], [ʦ], to mention only the most common of them; for more details see Zaborski (2007), Kaye (1970), Cantineau (1960:56ff). Within contemporary Egypt we find /g/ in the standard variety as spoken by urbanized persons, which is based on the dialect of the capital Cairo and its surroundings, as well as in modern Alexandria, the central parts of the Delta, in the north-eastern Delta in a corridor stretching along the Damietta branch of the River Nile, and south of Cairo in the Provinces of Fayyûm and Bani Swêf. Other rural areas show one of the other allophones indicated above. The distribution of /g/ ~ /ǧ/ parallels within Egyptian territory that of /'/ ~ /g/ (Old Arabic *q), in the sense that the two phonemes show an implicational relationship: /g/ (< *g) implies /'/ or /q/ (< *q), and a dialect with /ǧ/ ~ /ž/ (< *g) will have /g/ (< *q).

Classical /ǧ/ and Egyptian /g/ both hark back to Semitic /g/, a fact which immediately begs the question whether this Egyptian /g/ derives directly from an older variety of Arabic which had kept the old Semitic /g/ and which did not, like the variety which we call “Classical Arabic”, take part in the palatalization and affrication of /g/, or whether this Egyptian /g/ is a newly developed sound, i.e. a de-affrication of /ǧ/ or something like it.

---

2. Exceptions are the oases of Farafra and, partly, Dakhla and Kharga with /q/ and /ž/ or /ǧ/. For contact situations see Behnstedt and Woidich I (1985:70).
This question has been answered by Blanc (1969:23, 27), and above all Blanc (1981), who resolves the issue in favour of the idea that Egyptian [g] for ג is an innovation. This position is upheld by Hary (1996) in an article which aptly adduces all the arguments in favour of this opinion. Both assume the depalatalization/back-shifting of the /ǧ/, referring to Bergsträßer’s (1928:157) remark “ǧ ist in Ägypten in das altsemitische g zurückverschoben” [ǧ has back-shifted in Egypt to the old Semitic g]. According to them, this depalatalization dates back to quite recent times and was only completed in the first half of the 19th century. Hary (1996:153) describes the subsequent stages in the following way:

\[
g \Rightarrow g \text{-} g \text{-} ḡ \Rightarrow ḡ \Rightarrow ḡ \text{-} g \Rightarrow g
\]


ราชการ has to be seen here as a slightly palatalized /g/ [g] and ḡ as a [ʤ]. As Zaborski (2007:495b) rightly remarks, this supposed phonetic shift ġ > g, i.e. from a dental affricate back to a full velar stop contradicts the normal development we know from other language families such as Romance or Germanic languages, all of which show the reverse, i.e. a shift from stop to affricate. In view of this “idiosyncracy of Arabic”, as Zaborski loc.cit. puts it—and which, to his astonishment, is advocated by some Arabists —, the arguments put forward in favour of this back-shift deserve a critical investigation.

The purpose of this paper is to review part of the evidence on which Blanc (1981) and Hary (1996) base their assumptions and, then, to adduce further evidence for a far more common and earlier presence of /g/ in Lower Egypt than hitherto suggested. This leads to

---

3 In contrast to Fischer (2002:18 §30 Anm.4, and so already in the first edition 1970): “Die ursprüngliche Aussprache des g ist heute noch in Unterägypten (Kairo) erhalten”. [The original pronunciation of g is preserved till today in Lower Egypt (Cairo)], cf. as well Spitta (1880:X).

4 With palatalization we mean a modification of the /g/ by shifting of “the front edge of the area of tongue-velum contact slightly forwards” (Catford 1988:108) which gives the characteristic [⟨⟩]-off-glide when the contact is released (Schubiger 1977:78). This is a secondary articulatory gesture (Ladefoged 2006:229) which does not change the primary dorso-velar articulation point of the /g/, and remains sub-phonemic.

5 There seems to be a phonetic reason for this apparent asymmetry, as in lab based experiments, the sequence /ki/ is often misinterpreted as /ti/ by listeners, but hardly ever the reverse happens, see Ohala (2005:421). We thank R. de Jong for having brought this to our attention.