



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

Egypt Under Rome and Byzantium, 30 B.C. - A.D. 640

With the establishment of Roman rule by Emperor Augustus in 30 B.C., more than six centuries of Roman and Byzantine control began. Egypt again became the province of an empire, as it had been under the Persians and briefly under Alexander. As the principal source of the grain supply for Rome, it came under the direct control of the emperor in his capacity as supreme military chief, and a strong force was garrisoned there. Gradually, Latin replaced Greek as the language of higher administration. In 212 Rome gave the Egyptians citizenship in the empire.

The emperor ruled as successor to the Ptolemies with the title of "Pharaoh, Lord of the Two Lands," and the conventional divine attributes assigned to Egyptian kings were attributed to him. Rome was careful, however, to bring the native priesthood under its control, although guaranteeing traditional priestly rights and privileges.

Augustus and his successors continued the tradition of building temples to the local gods on which the rulers and the gods were depicted in the Egyptian manner. The Romans completed the construction of an architectural jewel, the Temple of Isis on Philae Island (Jazirat Filah), which was begun under the Ptolemies. A new artistic development during this period was the painting of portraits on wood, an art that originated in the Fayyum region. These portraits were placed on the coffins of mummies.

The general pattern of Roman Egypt included a strong, centralized administration supported by a military force large enough to guarantee internal order and to provide security against marauding nomads. There was an elaborate bureaucracy with an extended system of registers and controls, and a social hierarchy based on caste and privilege with preferred treatment for the Hellenized population of the towns over the rural and native Egyptian population. The best land continued to form the royal domain.

The empire that Rome established was wider, more enduring, and better administered than any the Mediterranean world had known. For centuries, it provided an ease of communication and a unity of culture throughout the empire that would not be seen again until modern times. In Western Europe, Rome founded a tradition of public order and municipal government that outlasted the empire itself. In the East, however, where Rome came into contact with older and more advanced civilizations, Roman rule was less successful.

The story of Roman Egypt is a sad record of shortsighted exploitation leading to economic and social decline. Like the Ptolemies, Rome treated Egypt as a mere estate to be exploited for the benefit of the rulers. But however incompetently some of the later

Ptolemies managed their estate, much of the wealth they derived from it remained in the country itself. Rome, however, was an absentee landlord, and a large part of the grain delivered as rent by the royal tenants or as tax by the landowners as well as the numerous money-taxes were sent to Rome and represented a complete loss to Egypt.

The history of Egypt in this period cannot be separated from the history of the Roman Empire. Thus, Egypt was affected by the spread of Christianity in the empire in the first century A.D. and by the decline of the empire during the third century A.D. Christianity arrived early in Egypt, and the new religion quickly spread from Alexandria into the hinterland, reaching Upper Egypt by the second century. According to some Christian traditions, St. Mark brought Christianity to Egypt in A.D. 37, and the church in Alexandria was founded in A.D. 40. The Egyptian Christians are called Copts, a word derived from the Greek word for the country, *Aegyptos*. In the Coptic language, the Copts also called themselves "people of Egypt." Thus the word *Copt* originally implied nationality rather than religion.

In the third century A.D., the decay of the empire gradually affected the Roman administration of Egypt. Roman bureaucracy became over-centralized and poorly managed. The number of qualified applicants for administrative positions was seriously reduced by Roman civil war, pestilence, and conflict among claimants to imperial power.

A renaissance of imperial authority and effectiveness took place under Emperor Diocletian. During his reign (284-305), the partition of the Roman Empire into eastern and western segments began. Diocletian inaugurated drastic political and fiscal reforms and sought to simplify imperial administration. Under Diocletian, the administrative unity of Egypt was destroyed by transforming Egypt from one province into three. Seeing Christianity as a threat to Roman state religion and thus to the unity of the empire, Diocletian launched a violent persecution of Christians.

The Egyptian church was particularly affected by the Roman persecutions, beginning with Septimius Severus's edict of 202 dissolving the influential Christian School of Alexandria and forbidding future conversions to Christianity. In 303 Emperor Diocletian issued a decree ordering all churches demolished, all sacred books burned, and all Christians who were not officials made slaves. The decree was carried out for three years, a period known as the "Era of Martyrs." The lives of many Egyptian Christians were spared only because more workers were needed in the porphyry quarries and emerald mines that were worked by Egyptian Christians as "convict labor."

Emperor Constantine I (324-337) ruled both the eastern and western parts of the empire. In 330 he established his capital at Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). Egypt was governed from Constantinople as part of the Byzantine Empire. In 312 Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the empire, and his Edict of Milan of 313 established freedom of worship.

By the middle of the fourth century, Egypt was largely a Christian country. In 324 the ecumenical Council of Nicea established the patriarchate of Alexandria as second only

to that of Rome; its jurisdiction extended over Egypt and Libya. The patriarchate had a profound influence on the early development of the Christian church because it helped to clarify belief and to formulate dogmas. In 333 the number of Egyptian bishops was estimated at nearly 100.

After the fall of Rome, the Byzantine Empire became the center of both political and religious power. The political and religious conflict between the Copts of Egypt and the rulers of Byzantium began when the patriarchate of Constantinople began to rival that of Alexandria. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 initiated the great schism that separated the Egyptian Church from Catholic Christendom. The schism had momentous consequences for the future of Christianity in the East and for Byzantine power. Ostensibly, the council was called to decide on the nature of Christ. If Christ were both God and man, had he two natures? The Arians had already been declared heretics for denying or minimizing the divinity of Christ; the opposite was to ignore or minimize his humanity. Coptic Christians were Monophysites who believed that after the incarnation Christ had but one nature with dual aspects. The council, however, declared that Christ had two natures and that he was equally human and equally divine. The Coptic Church refused to accept the council's decree and rejected the bishop sent to Egypt. Henceforth, the Coptic Church was in schism from the Catholic Church as represented by the Byzantine Empire and the Byzantine Church.

For nearly two centuries, Monophysitism in Egypt became the symbol of national and religious resistance to Byzantium's political and religious authority. The Egyptian Church was severely persecuted by Byzantium. Churches were closed, and Coptic Christians were killed, tortured, and exiled in an effort to force the Egyptian Church to accept Byzantine orthodoxy. The Coptic Church continued to appoint its own patriarchs, refusing to accept those chosen by Constantinople and attempting to depose them. The break with Catholicism in the fifth century converted the Coptic Church to a national church with deeply rooted traditions that have remained unchanged to this day.

By the seventh century, the religious persecutions and the growing pressure of taxation had engendered great hatred of the Byzantines. As a result, the Egyptians offered little resistance to the conquering armies of Islam.

Source: *U.S. Library of Congress*