Coptic Studies in Egypt: Where Do We Go From Here?

Dedicated to the Memory of the Founders of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies (HICS)

Aziz Atiya (1898-1988), Ragheb Moftah (1898-2001), Sami Gabra (1892-1979), Murad Kamil (1907–1975)

Founded in 1954

I was immediately very concerned when I learned that the renowned Coptic scholar Stephen Emmel was leaving the AUC and would not be chairing the Coptic Studies Department. I believe that his leaving was an indication of how dubious the future of Coptic Studies in Egypt is. His leadership would have been a unique opportunity to introduce the science of Coptology to a new generation of students by one of the most prominent scholars in the field.

For centuries the Coptic period of Egyptian history was largely ignored and Coptic studies was marginalized. No doubt ignorance or/and religious motives were a main obstruction to building a Coptic Studies department in Egypt. Nevertheless, in the 20th century there were several attempts to revive interest in Coptic Studies, including the establishment of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies (HICS) in 1954. Among its founders were the prominent historian Aziz Suryal Atiya (1898-1988), the 20th century pioneer for the preservation of Coptic music Ragheb Moftah (1898-2001), the prominent Egyptologist Sami Gabra (1892-1979), and the prominent scholar in Semitic, Ethiopian and African Studies Murad Kamil (1907–1975).

Those who taught at this Institution were elite Egyptian and foreign scholars in Coptic Studies and other related fields. Some of the foreign intellects who came to Egypt and taught at the HICS included specialist in Arabic Coptology O.H.E. Burmester (1897-1977), specialist in music and organology of ancient music Hans Hickmann (1908-1969), and prominent Egyptologist Étienne Drioton, (1889-1961). Drioton was closely associated with my uncle Ragheb and ironically enough also dealt with the Nag Hammadi codices, just like Stephen Emmel. Drioton was sent by the Egyptian Government to recover some of the newly discovered Nag Hammadi codices in 1945, which were written in Coptic. 6

Scholars in this field, including those mentioned above, had collegial relationships with one another. Coptic and foreign scholars were cooperatively involved in the discovery of Christian and Coptic antiquities and

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artifacts, and many collaborated with each other on integrated research projects in the field of Coptic studies as evident in their publications and correspondence. For example, Professor John Gillespie was involved with my uncle Ragheb in liturgical music and collaborated with him in the production of the hymnal rendition of the ‘Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil’ that was chanted by the Choir of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in 1967. The Egyptologist Étienne Drioton collaborated with my uncle Ragheb Moftah in some research on the origin of Coptic music. Drioton’s comment on the subject appeared in a letter to my uncle Ragheb Moftah in 1946. It reads as follows:

[La clef du mystere de la musique pharaonique se trouve donc dans une bonne edition de la musique ecclesiastique copte en usage de nos jours].

The key to the mystery of Pharaonic music will be found, then, in a good edition of Coptic ecclesiastical music in use in our days.  

Presently, the possibility that scholarly programs in Coptic Studies will be offered in foreign and Egyptian institutions in Egypt is becoming increasingly remote. What then will be the future of this field of study? A solution to this problem needs to be generated by the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies. This institution was reputed for its outstanding contributions to the field of Coptic studies. The main purpose for establishing this Institution in 1954 was clearly stated in the journal Speculum, which reads as follows:

“The main idea behind this project [establishing the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies] is to give the ‘Coptic humanities’ a home open to international cooperation and support.”

Thus, it would be ideal if this Institution could regain its past glory by adopting Dr. Aziz Atiya and the other founding scholars’ mission statement:

“Though a postgraduate school, the Coptic Institute is primarily intended as a research center. It will conduct scientific expeditions to remote monasteries and microfilm rare manuscripts collections. A number of prominent Coptologists and other scholars from Europe and America have accepted invitation to become Corresponding Members of the Institute. One hundred scholars have already joined this non-religious, non-denominational foundation.”
Therefore, the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies needs to enhance its collaborative relationship with other international institutions which offer Coptic studies. Its principal aim should be essentially to exchange knowledge with other Coptic studies scholars and engage with them in research projects in this very highly specialized field of study. Recognized scholars in Coptic studies need to be invited to offer courses at the Institute. In fact, the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies needs to remember the Coptic and foreign scholars who made outstanding contributions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the past, many renowned scholars were invited to teach at this Coptic institute, such as Hans Hickmann (1908-1968), O.H.E. Burmester (1897-1977), and others. It is an essential commitment on the part of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies to enhance the revival of Coptic studies that has been somewhat neglected and has not always attracted the interest that it deserves.

Thus, the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies contributions to Coptology would be regarded once again as a 'major event in the cultural history of the present Egypt.' It would most certainly be reminiscent of earlier descriptions of its past glory, when the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies was first founded by Dr. Aziz Suryal Atiya and other scholars. The purpose of the institution was described in its inauguration that was announced in the journal *Speculum* in 1954. It stated the following:

"Coptic Studies may be regarded as a major event in the cultural history of modern Egypt. The impact of Coptic Egypt on world progress has been increasingly felt in recent times, and a group of Coptic scholars led by Dr. Aziz Suryal Atiya, finally decided to create a center for Coptic Studies. The idea spread fast among the Copts and received much support from many groups, including Muslims scholars to whom the Christian heritage of Egypt represents a luminous chapter in their national history.  

In 1976, the publication of the Nag Hammadi Codices created international interest in the revival of Coptic Studies, but also raised Coptologists’ concern about its future. Coptologist K.H. Kuhn made the following remark about its future in his review of the work entitled "The Future of Coptic Studies," edited by Professor Emeritus Robert McL. Wilson (1916–2010):  

"Indeed, it is the interest generated by the Nag Hammadi material which has contributed largely to the world-wide revival of the whole range of Coptic studies. In the meantime, the second meeting of the International Association for Coptic Studies..."
has taken place in Rome in September 1980, and the activities of its members continue to "focus attention on the field of studies that has not always attracted the interest which it deserves." 5, 7

Kuhn also points out some of Professor Krause’s recommendations for the enhancement of Coptic Studies, which he suggested when he presided over the first International Association for Coptic Studies in 1976:

"The scope of Coptic studies which Professor Krause outlines certainly justifies such a high claim for the subject, for it includes the language and all aspects of the history of the Copts, of their literature, and all other cultural activities, which extend over many centuries. Professor Krause ends his programmatic essay with a long list of tasks yet to be achieved and by pointing out the desirability of coordinating the efforts of research workers in this field." 5, 7

The literary scholar Hala Halim specifically mentions the historian Donald Reid’s reflections on Coptic Studies in her article entitled: "Thematic Leaps and Bounds," which appeared in al-Ahram Weekly. Reid stated the following in his presentation entitled: "Archaeology and the Construction of National Identity" at the MESA Conference in 2001.

"Coptology fell between different seats: there is no Coptic equivalent to al-Azhar and Coptic is used at Cairo University for introductory purposes in Egyptology." 3

Reid’s remark affirms the opinion of earlier Coptic scholars, including Professor M. Krause, the first president of the International Association for Coptic Studies, who disagreed with Coptic studies being treated as a branch of Egyptology. In his review of the book entitled: The Future of Coptic Studies, Kuhn explains how Professor Krause enumerated on the outstanding contributions made to Coptic studies, however, Krause disapproved of it being regarded as branch of Egyptology.

"He [Krause] describes the place of Coptic as a branch of Egyptology and goes on to argue in favour of the establishment Coptic as a separate subject. Interestingly, he notes that in some German universities Coptic is no longer taught by Egyptologists but by teachers specializing in the study of the Christian Orient, and that at his own university (Munster) Coptic has achieved the status of a main subject in the curriculum. The scope of Coptic studies which Professor Krause outlines
certainly justifies such a high claim for the subject, for it includes the language and all aspects of the history of the Copts, of their literature, and of all other cultural activities, which extend over many centuries.”

No doubt the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies will encounter many challenges as it strives to regain its past reputation and glory as a Coptic center of excellence for academic research. Nevertheless, with the benediction of our inspiring Pope, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, if we ask the international community, institutions and pre-eminent scholars to give us their support, I expect that they would be most willing to cooperate with us and support our Coptic studies endeavor.

It is important to challenge any obstacles that impede the advancement of Coptic studies. I always consider my Uncle Ragheb Moftah’s resilient attitude in the face of adversities. He never gave up and strove forward until the very end of his life.

“He was resilient to challenges and passed away on June 16, 2001, that was a decade ago, but his legacy will survive for generations to come.”

Ragheb Moftah pursued his goals with resolve even when the consequences were not clear. So let us not despair as the Holy Spirit guides us in our daily lives. To conclude my essay, I am quoting Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the great English writer, poet and essayist who was committed to his Christian faith. He stated the following in his essay: ‘The Ramblers:

"It is necessary to act, but impossible to know the consequences of action, or to discuss all the reasons which offer themselves on every part to inquisitiveness and solicitude."
References


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