

The Coptic language is described by Professor Rodolphe Kasser of the University of Geneva, Switzerland as “one of the most beautiful, most cleverly structured and most musical in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

**The origin of the words Coptic and Egypt (Figure 1)**

The words copt, coptic, Egypt, and Egyptian have the same origin. They are derived from one of the old names of Egypt “E-KA-Ptah” meaning *the House of the Spirit of Ptah* (E means *House*; Ka means *Spirit*; and Ptah is *one of the famous Gods of Old Egypt*).

**Development of the Egyptian Spoken Language**

According to most coptologists, the Egyptian language, as a spoken language, went through various stages starting with Old Egyptian, followed by Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic then Coptic. Coptic represents the final stage of the development of the Egyptian language which was the language spoken by the Egyptians until the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Northern Egypt and the 17<sup>th</sup> century in southern Egypt<sup>2</sup> when it was gradually replaced by Arabic. In the words of Cyrus Gordon,<sup>3</sup> we have “an unbroken tradition of Egyptian texts spanning about 5000 years.

**Development of the Egyptian Language Scripts (Figure 2)**

The Egyptians developed the Hieroglyphic writing system around 3000 B.C.<sup>4</sup> It consisted originally of signs that stood for words or ideas, but gradually each sign began to represent a syllable or sound. Hieratic, which is a simplified cursive form of hieroglyphics, was soon developed by Egyptian scribes who used it for both religious and nonreligious purposes.<sup>5</sup> Around 700 B.C., demotic writing was developed. This was simpler and faster to write than hieratic. The scribes used it for correspondence and record keeping.<sup>5</sup>

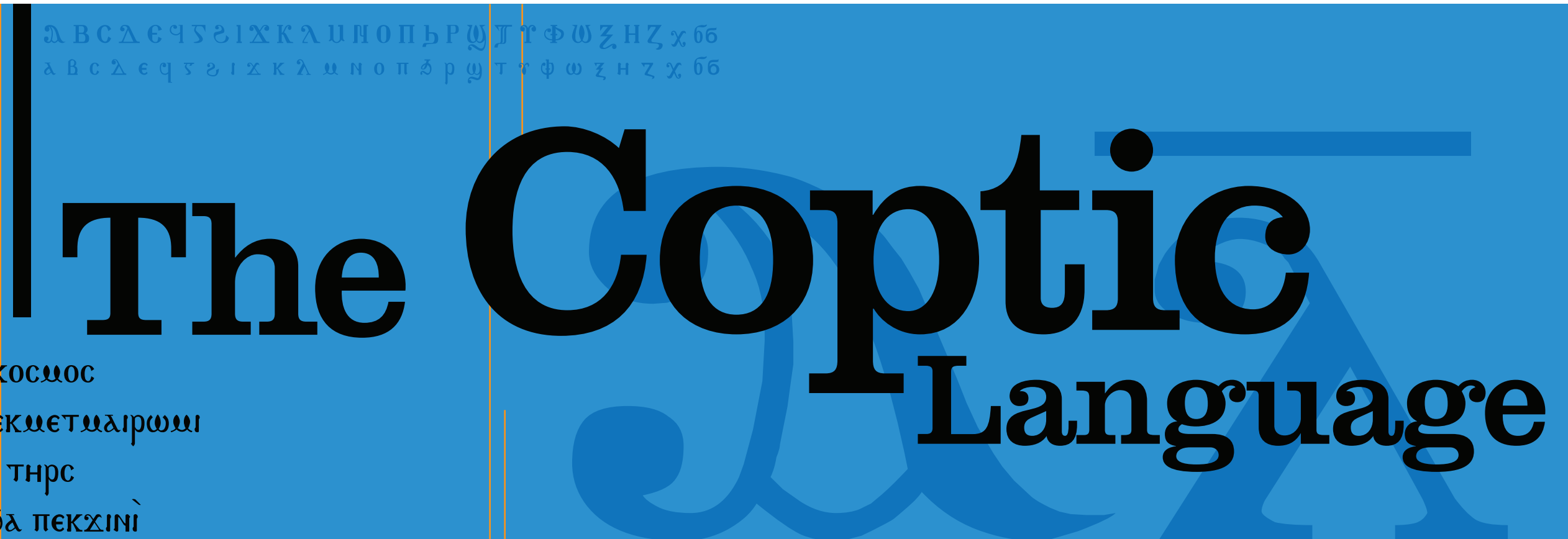
Around 1500 B.C., the Semites developed an alphabet which is based on the Egyptian hieroglyphic system.<sup>4,6,7</sup> The Phoenicians, one of the Semitic peoples, perfected an alphabet around 1000 B.C. The Greek alphabet, which is the progenitor of Roman (Latin) letters,<sup>4,6</sup> was directly derived from the Phoenician alphabet.<sup>4,6,7</sup> The Greeks not only took the forms of letters, they also used some Phoenician names for the letters. The first letter of the Phoenician alphabet “aleph”, meaning ox, became “alpha” in Greek. The second letter “beth”, meaning house, became “beta” in Greek.<sup>4</sup>

**The contribution of the Coptic Alphabet to the Russian Alphabet**

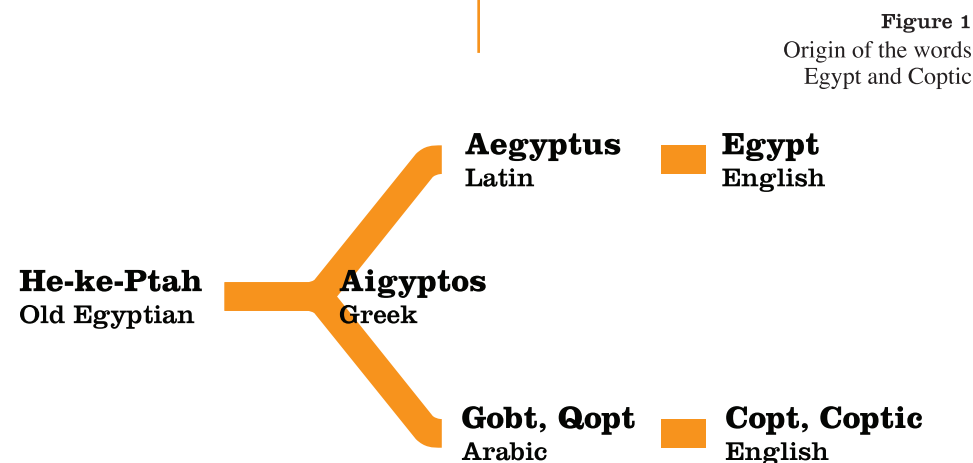
The current alphabet of the Russian language is known as the Cyrillic Alphabet. It was invented by Saint Cyril (826 - 869 A.D.) and Saint Methodius (815 - 884 A.D.), two Greek brothers who were missionaries in Russia during the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. They included in the Russian alphabet a letter derived from Coptic, which is the Shai, one of the 7 Coptic letters derived from Demotic.<sup>12</sup>

**The Use of Greek Words in the Coptic Language**

In the first few centuries of Christianity, the Greek language was the cultural language of the world, in much the same way as the English language is today. Greek was the language used in international councils (e.g. Ecumenical councils). The New Testament was written in Greek so it would be accessible to everybody in the known world at that time. The religious and theological terms that developed, on an international scale, were usually in Greek. Churches in all countries, including the Coptic church, borrowed the same Greek terms, such as anathema, angel, apostle, archangel, baptism, catholic, choir, cosmos, deacon, demon, evangelist, icon, logos, martyr, orthodox, patriarch, prophet, psalm, zeal, etc...



**Figure 2**  
Development of several alphabets from the Egyptian Hieroglyphic Script



**Figure 1**  
Origin of the words Egypt and Coptic

The Coptic script, which is considered the last stage of the development of the Egyptian scripts, is derived from two sources. The first 25 letters of the alphabet are modified from the Greek alphabet (however, the origin of these Greek letters can be traced back to the old Egyptian Hieroglyphic script<sup>4</sup>) whereas the last 7 letters are a modification from Egyptian Demotic letters. (Figure 3)<sup>9</sup>

Based on the history of the development of the Coptic alphabet, as shown in Figure 2, it is interesting to note that the English alphabet of today can be traced back to the sign writing of ancient Egypt. In this regard, Barbara Mertz stated, “The birds and the bees of the ancient Egyptian script may have a more direct relationship to our own alphabet than we realize.”<sup>10</sup> Davies<sup>11</sup> cites a quote by Gardiner describing this observation: “The hieroglyphs live on, though in transmuted form, within our own alphabet.”

