# A Study in the Coptic Calendar The Week

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The Coptic calendar uses a seven-day week<sup>1</sup>, which was adopted following the introduction of Christianity into Egypt (Cody, 1991). The first mention of the seven-day week in Egyptian papyri occurs in the early third century (Bagnall, 1993: 327-329). For thousands of years before, Egyptians had divided the thirty days of the Egyptian month into three equal periods called decades (Spalinger, 2001)<sup>2</sup>. This tenday period was similar to the concept of the week we know today, but was not considered an independent and parallel cycle to the calendar<sup>3</sup>.

The seven-day week that was introduced into the Coptic calendar has two points of origin. The first was the Judeo-Christian week, the ancient Jewish cycle of six working days followed by a day of rest, or *Shabbath*, based on the Jewish story of Creation in the Old Testament (Zerubavel, 1989: 6-11). The other was the planetary week, which originated among the astrologers of Ptolomaic Egypt. They held that each of the twenty-four hours of the day was controlled by one of the seven known 'planets' in descending order of distance from Earth (Saturn h, Jupiter 4, Mars  $\stackrel{\circ}{\circ}$ , the Sun  $\odot$ , Venus  $\bigcirc$ , Mercury  $\bigvee$ , and the Moon  $\Im$ ), and that each day was subject to the planet that controlled its first hour (Table 1). This scheme of cycling the seven planets through the twenty-four hours of the day resulted in a repeating seven-day cycle, which named each day after the planet reigning over it: Saturn, the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>. This astrological seven-day cycle developed independently of the Judeo-Christian week, and spread across the Greek and Roman World (Blackburn & Holford-Strevens, 1999: 566-568). The seven-day week we use today is essentially a combination of these two traditions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> There are three terms in Coptic for the week – one of Hebrew origin, one of Greek origin, and one of Coptic origin. The first is BTICABBATON STICABBATON (or STICABBATON, in the plural), which is the Hebrew word *Shabbath* (in English, Sabbath) meaning "to cease from labour", and applied to both the Jewish day of rest and the week itself, through the Greek rendering  $\sigma\dot{\alpha}\beta\beta\alpha\tau\sigma\nu$  (Hirsch, 1906; Layton, 2000: 101; Förster, 2002: 713-714). The second is B†GBAOMAC ST2GBAOMAC, which is the Greek word for week  $\dot{c}\beta\deltao\mu\dot{\alpha}c$ , literally "seventh" (Mallon, 1907: 81-82; Förster, 2002: 218). The final term for the week is the Coptic construction BTILANDADQ STANCADQ (often shortened in Bohairic to TILANZ), which means "the collection of seven, the sevens". In Bohairic the prefix of collective numerals AN- (Crum 10b) is reduplicated to form the plural: BNIANANDADQ (or NIANANZ) "the weeks" (Steindorf, 1951: 87).

 $<sup>^{2}</sup>$  I do not know for how long after the introduction of the seven-day week the system of the decades was used in Egypt, or indeed if it was still in use at that time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The ancient Egyptian civil calendar was strictly speaking 360 days long, consisting of twelve months of thirty days with an additional intercalary period of 5 days known as the epagomenal days (or "the days above the year" by the Egyptians). The epagomenal days were considered to be outside the year proper, and so the decades were not counted during this period but started afresh at the beginning of first month of the following year (Spalinger, 1995). Thus, they were not independent of the calendar, as the seven-day week is, but subordinate to it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Hence in English: Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. See Blackburn & Holford-Strevens (1999: 566-568) for more on the etymology of these terms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The first day of the planetary week (Saturday) originally coincided with the last day of the Jewish week (*Shabbath*). However, by about the second century AD, ancient astrologers began to appoint Sunday the first day of the planetary week owing to the rise in importance of the solar cults in the Roman Empire (Blackburn & Holford-Strevens, 1999: 567). This had the effect of synchronising the beginning of both seven-day weeks.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	 23	24	Reigning planet
1	þ	2	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	ğ	٦	þ	2	8	2	8	Saturday
2	0	4	Ý	٦	þ	2	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	Ă	Ŷ	¥	Sun
3	٦	þ	2[	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	Ą	٦	þ	2	þ	2	Moon
4	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	Ă	٦	þ	2	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	$\odot$	Ŷ	Mars
5	ğ	٦	þ	2	8	$\odot$	Ŷ	Ă	٦	þ	٦	þ	Mercury
6	2	3	$\odot$	Ŷ	Ą	٦	þ	2	8	$\odot$	8	$\odot$	Jupiter
7	4	Ý	٦	þ	2	8	$\odot$	4	Ý	٦	¥	٦	Venus

**Table 1.** The assignment of planets to the hours of the day.

The ancient Greeks initially named the days of the week after their gods, according to the scheme of the planetary week (Table 2). However, by the middle of the fifth century, the first instance of a weekday being named by number is found in Greek inscriptions (Worp, 1991: 224) <sup>6</sup>; see Table 3. The convention of giving the weekdays Greek theophoric names never became common in Coptic (Worp, 2002: 121 n. 1), but under the influence of Christianity, the system of naming them according to their ordinal position within the week became standard practice.

	Ancient Greek	Translation
Sunday	ἡμέρα Ἡλίου	Day of Helios (or the Sun)
Monday	ἡμέρα Σελήνης	Day of Selene (or the Moon)
Tuesday	ἡμέρα Ἄρεως	Day of Aries (or Mars)
Wednesday	ἡμέρα Έρμοῦ	Day of Hermes (or Mercury)
Thursday	ἡμέρα Διός	Day of Zeus (or Jupiter)
Friday	ἡμέρα Ἀφροδίτης	Day of Aphrodite (or Venus)
Saturday	ἡμέρα Κρόνου	Day of Kronos (or Saturn)

Table 2. The ancient Greek weekday names; taken from Worp (1991: 224).

The Christian system of weekday nomenclature eventually prevailed over the pagan system in the Greekspeaking half of the Roman Empire. This was in turn borrowed from the Jews, with one significant adaptation (Blackburn & Holford-Strevents, 1999: 567). The Jewish days of the week were designated by ordinal numbers, except for the seventh day – the *Shabbath*. In later Hebrew literature, Friday became known as *Ereb Shabbath* "eve of the Sabbath" (Hirsch, 1906). The Greek-speaking Christians simply named Saturday by its Hebrew name  $\Sigma \dot{\alpha} \beta \beta \alpha \tau \circ v$  "(the day) of the Sabbath", and translated *Ereb Shabbath* to  $\Pi \alpha \rho \alpha \sigma \varkappa \upsilon \eta$  "(the day) of preparation" and  $\Pi \rho \sigma \sigma \dot{\alpha} \beta \beta \alpha \tau \circ v$  "(the day) before the Sabbath". The only important change they made was to assign Sunday the name Kuριακή "(the day) of the Lord", in celebration of Jesus' resurrection (Blackburn & Holford-Strevents, 1999: 566)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> This was probably a result of the spread of Christianity and the desire to abandon the pagan associations of the week, although the planetary designations were in use by some of the early church fathers (Zerubavel, 1989: 23-24). <sup>7</sup> In AD 321, the Christian emperor Constantine established Sunday as the day of rest and prayer for all the Roman Empire, although he did not call it the Lord's Day but "the day on which its sun is venerated" (Holford-Strevens, 1999: 567).

	Modern Greek	Bohairic	Sahidic
Sunday	Κυριακή	†κγριδκη	ткнрідкн
Monday	Δευτέρα	ΠΙΟΝΑΥ	ΠΘΟΝΑΥ
Tuesday	Τρίτη	ΠΙΨΟΜΤ	ПФОМИ́Т
Wednesday	Τετάρτη	ΠΙϤΤΨΟΥ	пецтооү
Thursday	Πέμπτη	ΠΙ‡ΟΥ	Π†ΟΥ
Friday	Παρασκευή	†параскбүн	тпараскбүн
Saturday	Σάββατο	ΠΙCΔΒΒΔΤΟΝ	Πርλββλτον

It is likely that the Copts simply adopted the Greek Christian nomenclature<sup>8</sup>, although they used cardinal numbers where the Greeks used ordinal numbers (Table 3)<sup>9</sup>.

Table 3. The weekday names in Modern Greek, Bohairic (Ishak, 1991) and Sahidic (Layton, 2000: 101).

The weekday names shown in Table 3 are the most common designations, used by the Coptic Church<sup>10</sup>. However, there were several other ways of naming the weekdays based on this scheme.

- 1. The religious designations of the days of the week<sup>11</sup> can be replaced by numerical designations, in the same way as the other weekdays (Ishak, 1991; Layton, 2000: 101):
  - †κγριλκη <sup>β</sup>πιογλι <sup>S</sup>πογλ
  - $\dagger \Pi A P A C K \in \Upsilon H {}^{B} \Pi I C O O \Upsilon {}^{S} \Pi C O O \Upsilon$
  - $\Pi C \land B B \land T O N {}^{B} \Pi C \land \Psi Q {}^{S} \Pi C \land \Psi Q {}^{12}$
- 2. The Coptic numerals can also be used in the numerical designations in the Greek style, although this was rare in Sahidic:  $\Pi \overline{\lambda}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{B}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{\Gamma}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{L}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{B}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{\Gamma}$ ,  $\Pi \overline{L}$ ,
- 3. The Coptic weekday names in Bohairic can also be preceded by <sup>B</sup>E2OOY "day": <sup>B</sup>ΠIE2OOY NKYPIAKON, <sup>B</sup>ΠIE2OOY MΠB, etc. In the Theotokia the numerical weekdays are designated as ordinals: <sup>B</sup>ΠIE2OOY MMA2B, <sup>B</sup>ΠIE2OOY MMA2F, etc (Mallon, 1907: 81-82). It is likely that these systems were also used in Sahidic.

In addition to the weekday names above, Coptic letters from Thebes at about 600 AD show that there was also another system in use for naming some of the weekdays, at least in that locale and at that time. This nomenclature was based around the Wednesday and Friday fasts, the former remembering the day Jesus was condemned to be crucified, and the latter being the day of his crucifixion (Basilios, 1991: 1096). The other two days, Saturday and Sunday, were feast days. Accordingly, Wednesday and Friday were

<sup>10</sup> As with most Coptic words there are some variations in spelling, but the standard spellings are given.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Although the convention of naming units of the calendar by their ordinal position within larger units was familiar to the Egyptians, who originally named the months within the seasons as such (Spalinger, 2001). It is possible that the Copts had similarly already independently named the days of the seven-day week (of the planetary week) by number, with the Greek Christian ecclesiastical names for Sunday, Friday and Saturday being incorporated only later.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Except, that is, for the use of προσάββατον for Thursday, which in Mark 15:42 is translated literally into <sup>B</sup>SAXOQ MTCABBATON <sup>S</sup>2ATE2H MTCABBATON "before the Sabbath", while in the same verse παρασχευή is found in both Bohairic and Sahidic.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> These may be rendered in Bohairic: ΠΙĖ2ΟΟΥ ΝΤΘ ΠΔΟΙΟ "the day of the Lord", ΠΙĖ2ΟΟΥ ΝΤΘ ΠΙCOB† "the day of preparation", and ΠΙĖ2ΟΟΥ ΝΤΘ ΠΘΜΤΟΝ "the day of rest", respectively (Ishak, 1991).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> It seems that Sahidic was more reluctant to substitute the numeric designation  $\square C \land U \overline{Q}$  for  $\square C \land B B \land T O N$  (Layton, 2000: 101).

known as fast days, while Monday, Tuesday and Thursday were known as interval days (Till, 1947; Till, 1950; Layton, 2000: 101)<sup>13</sup>; see Table 4.

	Sahidic	Translation
Monday	ΠΨΟΡΠ Ν2ΟΟΥ ΝΟΥΨΨ	The first interval day
Tuesday	ΠΜΘ2CNAY Ν2ΟΟΥ ΝΟΥΦΦ	The second interval day
Wednesday	ΤΚΟΥΪ ΝΝΗΟΤΙΑ   ΤΝΗΟΤΙΑ ΦΗΜ	The little fast
Thursday	ΠΟΥΨΨ (ΝΤΜΗΤΘ)	The (intermediate) interval
Friday	TNOS $\overline{N}$ NHCTIA   TNHCTIA U	The big fast

Table 4. The weekdays named according to the ecclesiastical week; taken from Layton (2000: 101).

There remains one more curious term of purely Egyptian origin to discuss: <sup>B</sup>ABIT, which is found in the heading of Monday's Theotokia among other places (Crum 2b)<sup>14</sup>. The origin of this term is found in the ancient Egyptian lunar calendar, which predated the civil calendar that eventually gave rise to the Coptic calendar. The lunar calendar was composed of months based on the lunar cycle, and so the Egyptians assigned names relating to the activities of the moon to each day of the month (Spalinger, 2001). The name of the second day of the lunar month was given the name (*tp*) *3bd*, meaning "new crescent (day)" (Parker, 1950: 11). It appears that at some stage the meaning of this appellation changed from the second day of the week – Monday (Depuydt, 2009). It is not clear whether this usage was common practice, and whether at one time other weekdays bore similar names, although it is perhaps not coincidence that Monday was also the day of the Moon according to the planetary week<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> These expressions have not been found in any literary text, and only in Sahidic, the dialect of the vicinity of Thebes (Till, 1950).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> This word is found in Jaroslav Černý's *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge 1976) under the list of Coptic words with no known etymology (p. 359).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> It is also possible that this term for Monday, written  $\phi OOY \dot{N} \& BIT$  in the Theotokia (Crum 2b), was a translation of the Greek theophoric name  $\dot{\eta}\mu\dot{\epsilon}\rho\alpha \Sigma\epsilon\lambda\dot{\eta}\nu\eta\varsigma$ , or directly inspired by the scheme of the planetary week. However, to my knowledge, nowhere else are the Egyptian names of the other celestial bodies found to represent the weekdays in Coptic.

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