CHAPTER ONE

Greek

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Greek in late antiquity is not easily categorized. It was a language of empire, a language of philosophy and theology, a marker of identity, a language of routine daily life and commerce, and, above all, a language with symbolic power for both the literate and illiterate in the language. Greek in late antiquity was a heritage language due the literary legacy which characterized it in the period, but it was also, in linguistics terms, a "prestige" language, a status signaled by the innumerable translations made out of Greek into all the early Christian languages, such as Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, and Old Church Slavonic. As such, Greek held an innate value for speakers of other languages, who, over the course of late antiquity, developed their own claim on the language and, in certain cases, their own distinctive brands of Greek literacy and pedagogy. Thus, Greek in late antiquity took on a sociocultural role distinct from the literature written in it. This chapter investigates that sociocultural role and draws attention to the symbolic value of the language as a marker of identity in the period.

This sociocultural role was never divorced from the literature written in Greek both before and during late antiquity. The relationship between the two categories was perpetuated by the premium placed on Greek in the Roman educational system, especially in the eastern Mediterranean (Marrou 1956; Cribiore 1999, 2001; Too 2001; Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen 2015; Kaster 1983, 1988; Watts 2006). In other words, Greek was valued for the intellectual and literary riches to which it offered its readers access, in a similar manner to how it is still taught in university Classics departments today. Education allowed for advancement in society and participation in a much

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larger intellectual and social world than merely the local, where the quotidian language was often not Greek. The rhetorical training embedded in late Roman education was especially valuable, as in earlier centuries, for gaining public office and engaging literate society (Brown 1992; Quiroga Puertas 2013; Webb 2009).

The many Greek letter collections from the period, moreover, attest to Greek – paralleled, of course, by Latin – as a medium of intellectual communication across the late Roman Mediterranean (Neil and Allen 2015; Gillett 2012). Late antiquity is justly famous as a period of self-reflective correspondence, and many letter collections seem to have been drawn up by the authors themselves or at least by their immediate circles. This was the case for the Christian monastic founder Pachomius (Choat 2015) and the bishop Isidore of Pelusium (Evieux 1997), for example, as much as it was for the pagan orator Libanius (Bradbury 2004). Libanius's collection reveals not just a skilled letter writer but also how his voluminous correspondence coincided with the real-world movement of Greek students and teachers throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Libanius's letters thus reflect the evolution of Roman patronage networks within the late antique school system. One letter (*Ep.* 1098), to the Jewish patriarch Gamaliel in Jerusalem, concerns Gamaliel's son, who studied Greek rhetoric with Libanius at Antioch after having studied with Libanius's former pupil Argeios at Caesarea or Berytus (Beirut) (Stemberger 2014, p. 32).

At the same time, levels of Greek literacy varied considerably, and the language was often used as a blunt instrument at the barest functional level (Bagnall 2011). The key difference between the late antique role of Greek and our modern pedagogy of "classical Greek" is that these low-level exchanges in late antiquity were very much still Greek-in-use, even if they are formulaic and unsophisticated by comparison to the literary Greek we teach and prize today. This has certainly always been the case in the history of Greek – it was and remains a living language, after all – but for late antiquity we are privileged to have a marvelous record of these low-level exchanges, a record that does not survive for, say, classical Athens in the fifth century BCE (Horrocks 2010). Mountains of papyri from late Roman and early Byzantine Egypt attest voluminously to quotidian Greek.

The Egyptian papyri similarly attest to the near constant interaction between Greek and Coptic (Bagnall 2011, pp. 75–111). As its own medium of literature and exchange, Coptic developed alongside and in relation to Greek. Sociolinguistics of late antique Egypt is a vibrant field, and none of its researchers today would allow for one of the languages, on a cultural level, to be divorced from the other (Cribiore 2007; Papaconstantinou 2007, 2008, 2010; Bagnall 2009; MacCoull 1988, 2013). To put it differently,

"the Greek of Egypt" is not a real category for cultural study; instead, we should think about Greek in terms of what roles it was used for in tandem with the roles Coptic played at the same time (and these roles shifted over the course of late antiquity). This axiom is true for all of the many varied linguistic contexts in which Greek was taught and used (Johnson 2015a), yet it does not preclude the delineation of characteristic features of Greek in a given locale, such as Egypt (Gignac 1976; Fournet 1999).

Because Greek was the medium of theological exchange, it held a special value for the highest-stakes debates in late antiquity. There was a venerable legacy of Greek among Christians since, as everyone knew in the period, the New Testament was written in Greek and the first churches were all Greek-speaking (Porter and Pitts 2013a, 2013b; Karrer and Vries 2013). The same was largely true for the Old Testament, since the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made by Jews in the Hellenistic period, was the dominant version of the Old Testament in earliest Christianity (Aitken and Paget 2014; Rajak 2009). All the indigenous early Christian communities translated the Bible into their own languages early in their history; such translations were, indeed, markers of their own Christian identity. But it was never forgotten that these were translations, and knowledge of the original Greek of the Bible, where available, was prized.

There has been a vibrant discussion in recent scholarship over why exactly Greek became the language of theological debate. Was it because Greek was venerated as the language of the Bible? Or was it a practical question, because Greek was the medium of power and law (the *Rechtssprache*) in the eastern Mediterranean under Rome (Millar 2006b; cf. Johnson 2015a, esp. pp. 8–17)? The technical terminology of Christian doctrine that developed over the course of the seven ecumenical councils, from Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787), and in the numerous theological treatises emerging around and fueling these councils was hard won and could not be relinquished easily. But was institutional inertia the main driving force? I return to this question below, though suffice it to say that the relationship between this Greek technical terminology and Greek as the language of empire is complex.

Of course, theologians were not the first to coin technical terms and formulae in Greek. Philosophy had a long history of working out its logical and argumentative apparatus in Greek. Systematization of philosophy – Neoplatonism, in particular, but also Aristotelianism – was a trend characteristic of late antiquity across many genres and in several centers of intellectual endeavor. (See the "Ancient Commentators on Aristotle" series, ed. Richard Sorabji [http://www.ancientcommentators.org.uk]; Sorabji 2004; Gerson 2010; Falcon 2016.) The overlap of philosophical, legal, and rhetorical schools in the East – in Alexandria (Watts 2006), Gaza (Johnson 2015a,

pp. 31–35; Downey 1958; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2004, 2006), Berytus (Hall 2004), Athens (Cameron 1969; Watts 2006), and Constantinople (Wilson 1996, pp. 28–60) – reinforced the above-mentioned value of Greek for social advancement through education while at the same time encouraging the attachment of value to the charisma of specific philosophical teachers and schools at these centers. Porphyry's important output, not least the editing and publication of Plotinus's *Enneads*, provided an indispensable educational tool in Greek, which was subsequently translated into Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and other languages (Johnson 2013; Magny 2014; Brock 1988, 1989b). Greek became, over the course of late antiquity, a type of holy language for Greek philosophy because of the canonical works expressed in it, such as Plotinus, Aristotle, and, of course, Plato himself, especially his later "cosmological" dialogues (the *Timaeus* above all) (Baltussen 2008; Tarrant 2007–2013). Translations by scholars like Calcidius (fourth century) into Latin and Jacob of Edessa (seventh century) into Syriac became standard in their own milieux but never existed wholly without reference to Greek (Magee 2016; Romeny 2008). Indeed, the eagerness with which Syriac Christian scholars repeatedly went back to the Greek originals for their Syriac and Arabic translations of philosophical and medical treatises shows the continued notional value of the language, even after the texts were readily available in other (albeit less accurate) translations (Brock 1983, 1991, esp. 2004). In the Latin West this direct access to Greek for philosophical work seems to have been lost after John Scotus Eriugena and even well before him in some quarters (Jeauneau 1987, pp. 85–132; Herren and Brown 1988).

Bringing these two strands together, I would emphasize that Greek was also the medium of disputation between Christians and Neoplatonic philosophers. This was already in evidence at the time of Origen's *Contra Celsum* (248 CE), but in the sixth century, in the context of the vibrant commentary movement on Plato and Aristotle, many different thinkers engaged one another at a highly technical level in the medium of Greek. The literary debates between Simplicius, John Philoponos, and Cosmas Indicopleustes in Justinianic Alexandria are perhaps a high water mark of this type of engagement (Baltussen 2008; Anastos 1946, 1953; Pearson 1999; MacCoull 2006). It is clear that formal public debates also occurred regularly, sometimes modeled on the literary debates but also providing inspiration for literature that created imagined disputations from whole cloth (Cameron 2014). Connected to this technical literature are the many magical/theurgic (Burnett 1996; Noegel, Walker, and Wheeler 2003; Lewy 1978), numerological (Kalvesmaki 2013), and astrological (Hegedus 2007; Magdalino 2006) treatises produced by both Christians and Neoplatonists

(and others) in the period and shared across religious affiliation. These are evidenced by surviving treatises on such subjects but also in many papyri and casual inscriptions in Greek, often on moveable objects like incantation bowls, from throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Many of the Greek incantations are paired with other languages. A trilingual anti-demonic amulet in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford, UK) dating to the fifth century contains inscriptions in Greek (the nonsensical "magic words"), Aramaic (anti-demonic incantation), and Hebrew (prophylactic psalm attributed to David), all apparently written by the same scribe (Bohak 2014, pp. 249–50). Thus, like other languages, Greek sometimes possessed magical properties, even if it never rose to the level of being a mystical divine tongue bearing a metaphysical code in its very structure, as did Hebrew, Arabic, and in some cases Latin.

Certain genres thrived in Greek during late antiquity, while others fell into disuse (Cameron 1992, 2006). Poetry became an area of vibrant experimentation (Agosti 2012). Nonnos of Panopolis (fl. ca. 430) was the author of the longest epic poem to survive from antiquity, the *Dionysiaca*, and he also wrote a fascinating paraphrase of the Gospel of John in epic verse (Accorinti 2016). Nonnos's style was very influential and was imitated by a number of poets, some of whom wrote on classical themes and others on Christian (Whitby 1994; Agosti 2001). Poets such as Synesius of Cyrene wrote in a more hymnic or lyrical mode, mixing classical and religious material (Bregman 1982), while George of Pisidia in the seventh century employed verse for varied genres, including panegyric and biblical commentary (Whitby 1995, 2014). Eventually, classicizing, quantitative verse fell out of fashion, and in its place came liturgical poetry. Romanos the Melode, originally from Emesa in Syria, produced dozens of *kontakia* in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian (Maas 1906; Grosdidier de Matons 1977). These poems served as verse homilies, mostly on biblical subjects, and are written in complicated syllabic meters. Romanos's style was itself developed from Syriac verse models, and Romanos shares many interpretative strategies with Ephrem the Syrian (Maas 1910; Brock 1989a).

Like poetry, historiography was an area of innovation and expansion. Histories in the classical mode continued to be written in Greek throughout the fourth to sixth centuries and into the seventh, though several texts survive only in fragments (Blockley 1981). The sixth century, with major histories by Procopius and Agathias, was the apex of this tradition (Cameron 1970, 1985). Contemporary with late classicizing history came a new genre of ecclesiastical history, inaugurated by Eusebius of Caesarea (Johnson and Schott 2013). Eusebius had many continuators: Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret in the fifth century and Evagrius Scholasticus in the sixth (Allen

1981; Whitby 2000). While these were narrative church histories, they followed chronology very closely. Building on the work of Julius Africanus, Eusebius also demonstrated an interest in the chronicle, another popular historical genre in late antiquity (Mosshammer 1979). Later texts such as John Malalas's *Chronicle* (Jeffreys, Jeffreys, and Scott 1986), the *Chronicon Paschale* (Whitby and Whitby 1989) and the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor (surviving in Syriac; Greatrex, Phenix, and Horn 2011) demonstrate the continued interest in literary models established in the fourth century. In the course of the seventh century Greek historiography slowed to a trickle, even as Syriac historiography, based partly on Greek models, thrived outside of the empire (Debié 2015).

Biography was another rich area of Greek literature in late antiquity (Hägg and Rousseau 2000; Williams 2008). Biographical texts were written about holy men and women, bishops, emperors, and other worthy subjects (Efthymiadis 2011–2014). Perhaps more than any other literary mode, biography in late antiquity intersects with fictional writing (or the modes of "fictionality" and "fictiveness," in the terms of De Temmerman 2016). Much work has been done to show how the influence of the Greek novel and the early Christian Apocryphal Acts stimulated the writing of biography in a hagiographical mode (Johnson 2006), and it has been argued that the longest and most complex Greek novel, Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, is indeed from the fourth century (Bowersock 1994). The lines between narrative fiction, biography, hagiography, and panegyric were frequently blurred in experimental literary texts throughout late antiquity (Cameron 2000). Formal, public panegyric has survived less in Greek than in Latin, but evidence exists that it was vibrant (Whitby 1998), and the corpus of Procopius offers competing examples of both panegyric and invective in connection with the life and deeds of Justinian (Cameron 1985). Certain related genres, such as miracle collections and apocalypses, took on a major role in shaping the Greek imagination around the supernatural and the end of the world (Talbot and Johnson 2012; Garstad 2012).

The recognized late antique modes and genres, such as poetry, historiography, and biography, are familiar from literary histories of the period. Less well known are the instances of Greek language and literary culture outside of the Roman sphere. Beginning before and continuing into late antiquity, Greek inscriptions in Bactria and Central Asia show the continued influence of Alexander's conquests in those regions (Millar 2006a). The "Throne of Adulis" in the Axumite Kingdom of Ethiopia, meanwhile, described by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century, retained a lengthy Greek inscription; it is one of numerous multilingual inscriptions on Ethiopian *stelai* from late antiquity (Bowersock 2013). At the end of our period, Theodore of

Tarsus (ca. 602–690), a native Greek speaker, became Archbishop of Canterbury and established the study of Greek among English clergy (Lapidge 1995). Despite the clear value of Greek for multilingual exchange throughout the Roman Empire and, indeed, far beyond it, no comprehensive study of Greek in multilingual environments has been produced that would complement the important work done on Latin for the whole of the classical and medieval worlds (Adams 2003, 2007, 2013; Adams, Janse, and Swain 2002; Mullen and James 2012; Mullen 2013).

Indeed, it is through the interactions between languages that one can glimpse the social role of Greek, a role which shifted over time in different communities. This role was often linked to translation, as noted above. Greek into Syriac is one well-studied vector that provides ample evidence over many centuries for gauging the place of Greek (Brock 1982, 1983). In general, the trend in Syriac in late antiquity was toward greater Hellenization in translation. This is notable because Syriac continued to thrive as a literary language throughout the medieval period and was never in danger of losing its role in the liturgies and thought of the Syriac churches. The movement toward Hellenization provides an indication that Greek theological terms held their own value after the fifth century and that the post-Chalcedonian theological arguments were often taking place with Greek as the lingua franca (Brock 1989a).

To take the example of the Bible, the Old Testament Peshitta had been translated very early (second century) into Syriac directly from Hebrew, perhaps with the Jews of Edessa doing some or most of the translating (Weitzmann 1999). In very few places does it show any interference from the Septuagint (Brock 1995, pp. 34–36). However, from the late fifth century on, the trend among Syriac (especially Syrian Orthodox) translators was to ape the Greek version: thus, the so-called Philoxenian (ca. 507/508) and Harklean/Syro-Hexaplan translations (ca. 616), made by Syrian Orthodox scholars, follow the Greek very closely, even to the point of imitating its word order and producing awkward Syriac in the process. This was a revisionist project, which feared that the standard, idiomatic translation of the Peshitta was being misused or misunderstood (by dyophysites, either "Nestorian" or Chalcedonian). This occurred even though, for the Old Testament, the Peshitta translation was very early and had been made from the original Hebrew. The desire to return *ad fontes* to the Septuagint, itself a translation, demonstrates the value of Greek for theological argument among non-Greek communities well into the seventh century.

Many ante-Nicene and Nicene-era Greek church fathers were translated into Syriac, and the availability of Greek theological and monastic texts in Syriac compares closely with what was available in Latin in late antiquity

(Brock 1995, p. 37). The habit of revising earlier translations for the sake of accuracy to the Greek occurred also for theological texts: the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius was translated first by Sergius of Reshaina (d. 536), within a few decades of its composition in Greek, and this translation was revised by Phokas of Edessa at the end of the seventh century (Brock 1995, pp. 39–40). Philosophical and medical literature in Greek was highly prized by Syriac translators, and the "translation-movement" project at the court of Abbasid Baghdad was almost completely the work of Church of the East (aka "Nestorian") translators (Troupeau 1991). Thus, translations of Aristotle, Porphyry, and Galen were translated from Greek into Syriac before being translated from Syriac into Arabic (Brock 1989b; Brock 2004). The *Categories*, for example, were translated multiple times into Syriac: the earliest in the sixth century, then revised in the early eighth century by Jacob of Edessa, and then again in the ninth century by Hunayn ibn Ishaq, one of the premier translators under the Abbasids. Therefore, in a period when the philosophical commentary tradition had ceased in Constantinople – the seventh and eighth centuries – the Greek tradition was being actively cultivated by Syrian Orthodox and Church of the East translators outside the Byzantine Empire.

This brings us back to the question of what forces promoted the value of Greek in late antiquity. By 700 the Byzantine Empire had seemingly given up its hopes of returning the eastern provinces to its fold (Haldon 2016). Yet the interest in Greek remained strong, and even intensified, in areas under Islamic dominion, where Arabic was increasingly the language of commerce and administration (Hoyland 2004). Indeed, some of the most prominent Greek writers of early Byzantium, such as John of Damascus and Cosmas the Melode, came from outside of the Byzantine Empire, but are today firmly considered Byzantine writers who contributed substantially to the development of late antique Greek literature. Was the motivating factor imperial, i.e. that these writers wanted their works read by Greek readers within the empire?

The answer depends on a combination of factors. Throughout late antiquity, both before and after Chalcedon, and before and after the Arab Conquests, Greek remained a prestige language for theological, philosophical, and literary (e.g. verse) writing. There was never a time, however, when it was not surrounded by writing in other languages. The church of Jerusalem in John of Damascus's day, for example, was producing texts in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Arabic, and Georgian at the same time John was writing his massive corpus in Greek (Johnson 2015a, pp. 58–88). Most scholars think John himself was fluent in Arabic and may have known a dialect of Aramaic as well, which only further emphasizes that John's choice of Greek

was intentional (Griffith 2011). I would suggest the affiliation of the Palestinian monasteries with the Chalcedonian faith was one primary factor. For comparison, St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai, also Chalcedonian and thus under the Patriarch of Constantinople, retains one of the finest libraries of early Byzantine Greek manuscripts in the world (Mango 2011). At the same time, all the other early Christian languages are present there too, in great numbers, and the colophons of these manuscripts make it clear than several of them originated in Mar Sabas monastery near Jerusalem (according to tradition, the home of John of Damascus). Greek thus retained a prestige for certain writers even when other languages were flourishing in the same locations at the same times and, importantly, when Greek was not the language of daily life. Coptic largely replaced Greek in Egypt in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Conquests, a transition that occurred earlier and more completely than it would in Aramaic and Arabic contexts (Papaconstantinou 2012, Johnson 2015a, pp. 36–58).

I return, therefore, to the pedigree of Greek as a language for the communication of ideas. That is not to say that Syriac or Armenian, for instance, were not also vehicles for conceptual writing: they certainly were, and their literary histories are remarkable on their own terms, quite apart from Greek. However, the affiliation of Byzantium with Greek, from the time of Justinian on, provided a touchstone for Christian writers of all stripes, both within and outside the empire itself, and often under a different (Arabic-speaking) imperial power. This was the imperial influence, even if clearly not related to the borders of the Byzantine Empire. Entangled with the imperial influence is the fact that a rich Christian literary corpus, since the beginning, had been produced in Greek and had, importantly, provided the toolkit of concepts and terminology that allowed the writers of late antiquity the ability to interact with a heritage that went back to the New Testament. The association of the church with the Roman Empire from the time of Constantine further solidified the authority of this corpus. Additionally, the apparatus of argument in late antiquity, for the Christians as much as for the Platonists, was founded on received and accepted philosophical and logical writings in Greek from pre-Christian times. And likewise, on top of all this, the characteristic conservatism of liturgy and the increasing value of biblical translations from the Greek, especially in monastic and school contexts, reinforced the primacy of the language. Thus, the circles that perpetuated the use of Greek in late antiquity were in many ways strikingly different from those of the earlier Roman world yet nevertheless remained just as pivotal for the emergence of new forms of thought and new vectors of exchange in late antiquity.

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