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## **What is Greek and what is Coptic?**

### **School Texts as a window into the perception of Greek loanwords in Coptic**

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A recent paper by Ariel Shisha-Halevy<sup>1</sup> points to the high proportion of Greek words appearing in Coptic texts, especially in Shenoute, and asks what level of (at least lexical) Greek the Coptic speaking reader of these texts needed in order to understand them.<sup>2</sup> Shisha-Halevy suggests that we need to study the function of these Greek words within the structure of the Coptic language, rather than focusing on comparison to their Greek origin, the evolution of the semantics, etc. We should consider, he suggests, how the status of each loan word is variable depending precisely on the role they play in the text, as part of the Coptic lexical system. In his words,<sup>3</sup> “My view however is that we are here up against a gradient, not dichotomic (loan words vs foreign words) phenomenon of assimilation. The assimilation scale can be established in terms of productivity, of integration in the Coptic semasiological system, and (sometimes) in terms of phonological structure and properties – all three criteria presupposing in-depth monographic investigation, in addition to the procedure in vogue, viz. the collection of Greek-origin items”.

In my view, we have much to learn from the varying lexical positions of these Greek terms (or Copto-Greek, as Shisha-Halevy prefers to name them). Indeed, these terms can provide evidence for the difficulties that readers had in following the

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1 “A structural-interferential view of Greek elements in Shenoute”, which will appear in DILS et al., *Language Contact*.

2 The book mentioned in the previous footnote on language contact provides an excellent group of studies on the matter of Greek loanwords in Coptic from different perspectives. Also the recent PhD dissertation by Matthew ALMOND, supervised by Malcolm Choat (Macquarie University), *A Comparative Study of Loanword Integration in Fourth Century Coptic Literature*, has to be cited here as an outstanding monograph on the question. I refer to these two for complete bibliography. Up until now the work performed on this was much focused on cataloguing the evidence, rather than analyzing the contexts, as Ariel Shisha-Halevy already deplors.

3 SHISHA-HALEVY, *Coptic Grammatical Categories*, 52.

translation into Coptic of the Bible, and of other commonly read patristic texts.<sup>4</sup> In the pages that follow, I will discuss how the treatment of Greek terms in these texts gives us some (albeit admittedly few) indications of these difficulties, and I will also suggest that these same texts demonstrate some of the solutions that the readers gave to the problem.

A few Greek terms did not pose significant problems since they had entered early enough to acquire an Egyptian garb, both phonetically and morphologically.<sup>5</sup> But many others were adopted into Coptic later, in order to convey Christian concepts, which were typically expressed in the Greek language. Indeed Greek words were frequently retained even when the translators had vernacular equivalents available. Perhaps such usage served the purpose of Hellenizing the text. Often enough one finds these Greek words inserted side by side with their native counterpart: ΠΑΛΙΝ ΟΗ, ‘again’; ὅτινα ἕθε, ‘in order that’; ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθὸ ἐναγαθὸς, ‘good and good’. This suggests that often Greek words were used not so much out of lexical necessity, but rather in order to lend a “Greek colouring” to the text. One even finds a few cases where the Coptic translator has chosen a Greek synonym to render another Greek word, probably because it would be more familiar to the Coptic reader.<sup>6</sup> And here we may begin to wonder how often the reader – or listener – of a Coptic text, be it the Bible or Shenoute, or any other patristic text, reached the limit of comprehension.

In the case of translations, which is the basis for our knowledge of the earliest Coptic texts, the strong influence of the Vorlage often has the effect of introducing in the target language terms that are not necessarily adapted or naturalized loanwords, but which remained in the text and were transmitted, and thus had to be understood somehow by the reader. Since the Bible was the main reading in Christian circles, these terms often passed on to vernacular literary production. An interesting case suggesting that Greek terms were often unfamiliar to the reader is

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- 4 On bilingualism and the linguistic composition of the Egyptian population, KAPSOMENOS, *Das Griechische in Ägypten*; PEREMANS, *Über die Zweisprachigkeit*; DERS., *Le bilinguisme*; DERS., *Les hermeneis*; RÉMONDON, *Problèmes du bilinguisme*; ROCHETTE, *Traducteurs et traductions*; DERS., *Grecs et Latins*; DERS., *Sur le bilinguisme*; DERS., *Parce que je ne connais pas*; DERS., *Le bilinguisme gréco-latin*; CLARYSSE, *Egyptian Scribes*, DERS., *Ethnic diversity and dialect*; ORÉAL, *Contact Linguistique*; HUSSON, *Quelques aspects de la diffusion*; FEWSTER, *Bilingualism in Roman Egypt*; THOMPSON, *The Multilingual Environment*; FOURNET, *The Multilingual Environment*; TORALLAS TOVAR, *Identidad lingüística*; DIES., *Linguistic Identity*; DIES., *Greek in Egypt*.
- 5 Such are S ὅτινα ἕθε from Gr. ἄγκυρα, or B ἕθε from Gr. πῖναξ, ΚΕΛΑΘΕΒΙΝ from Gr. πέλκευς. See BÖHLIG, *Die griechischen Lehnwörter*, 80. On the productivity of the plural suffix in loan words, see EGEDI, *Greek loanwords*.
- 6 ALMOND, *A Comparative Study of Loanwords*, 234-239: Some Greek terms, like ἄφρων or ὑπίπτηρ, translated resp. as ΔΟΕΒΗΘ and ΛΘΚΔΜΗ, were never borrowed into Coptic. This may prove how some Greek terms were better known than others and used thus to render those not as natural to the Coptic speaker. More examples in WESSELY, *Die griechischen Lehnwörter*, 4, and GIRGIS, *Greek loan words*, 71.

that of glosses inserted in the translation. These are found in Coptic translations of Greek texts for words which are uncommon, sometimes even in Greek, and which probably made the translator unsure about the meaning and consequently unaware of any Coptic equivalent. The policy of the translator would then be to leave the Greek term as it is, at the risk, of course, of the term's remaining obscure to the reader.<sup>7</sup> At this point, one of the options of the translator is to add a gloss explaining it as a specialised term. This is a strategy of translation found in other cases in Antiquity.<sup>8</sup> Some examples in Biblical texts are:

*Judges* 15, 8: Gr. τὸ πτώμα τοῦ λέοντος, in Coptic ΠΕΠΤΩΜΑ Η̅ ΕΠΣΩΜΑ ΜΠΜΟΥΙ. "The corpse, i.e. the body, of the lion".

*I Sam.* 28, 3: ἑγγαστρίμυθος, rendered in Coptic as ΝΗΕΚΔΑΤΡΙΜΙΝΘΟΣ · ΕΤΕ ΝΡΕΦΕΝΚΩΩC ΕΖΟΥΝ ΝΕ. "Ventriloquists, i. e. the bringers of dead bodies".<sup>9</sup>

This mechanism is an extreme case, where it is obvious that the need of glossing means the word is perceived as alien. In this situation where the Vorlage exerts such strong influence we infer that translations are producing texts containing a high proportion of lexicon unfamiliar to the Coptic-speaker. This raises two questions. First, how much knowledge of Greek was necessary to follow the Sunday service in a Coptic church or the compulsory Biblical readings in monastic environments? And second, what kinds of linguistic support were available for monolingual Coptic-speakers.<sup>10</sup>

7 There are examples of imperfect translation, where the translator, unsure about the counterpart of a word, be it for imperfect knowledge of the target language, or for the word being too specialized to have a corresponding term, leaves the original term as it is. Biblical translations are performed carefully enough to avoid these kinds of phenomena. Examples in translations into Greek from Demotic where the priestly titulatures remained untranslated can be found in a sale contract, CPR XV 2 (Arsinoites, Soknopaiou Nesos 21. Nov. AD 11). Cf. also *SB* 1 5231 (*Jur. Pap.* 28), parallel to this text, also from the same year. These documents feature the expression Ἑλληνιστὶ μεθρημηνευμένης κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, "translated into Greek insofar as possible." See MAIRS, κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν.

8 If the assumption that the text of the *Dream of Nektanebos* (*P. Leiden* I 396; for the Greek and the Demotic version of *Nektanebos Dream* see: GAUGER, J.-D., Der "Traum des Nerktanebos" - die griechische Fassung; RYHOLT, K., Nektanebos Dream or the Prophecy of Petesis, in: Blasius & Schipper, *Apokalyptik und Ägypten*, OLA 107 (2002), 189-219 (Gauger), 221-241 (Ryholt)) is a translation from a Demotic text is correct, we have the case of ἔδοξεν κατ' ἐνύπν<ι>ον πλοῖον παπύριον ὃ καλεῖται Αἰγυπτιστὶ Ῥω<μ>ψ προσορμηῆσαι εἰς Μέμφιν, where the lost Demotic Vorlage probably had only the word *rms* for a special kind of boat, which needs explanation in Greek, due to the lack of a corresponding word in this language. Edition by KOENEN, *The Dream of Nektanebos*.

9 On this see TORALLAS TOVAR, *Translation and beliefs*.

10 In order to illustrate the situation of a semi-bilingual reader who needs an explanation on specific words, there is the case of Coptic words in Greek texts where there is a need to specify to make sure that the term would be understood in both languages: In the examples I present, the words appear in Greek and are then explained with their Coptic correspondents: *P. Vat. Aphrod.* 25 (sixth cent.) τοῦ

Christian school texts provide one approach to both these questions, since their task was to provide assistance with the Greek vocabulary in biblical readings. It was a common practice in Christian school texts to copy words or names from the Bible.<sup>11</sup> While it is true that the Christians adopted Classical education and progressively retooled it to meet their needs, in some circles, such as monasteries, education was limited to the reading of the Scriptures.<sup>12</sup> Given that focus, the teaching of the biblical vocabulary – in our case, the teaching of Greek vocabulary to speakers of Coptic – must have been essential. At least two Coptic school texts, or school texts from a Coptic environment, illustrate our case.

*OBrit.Mus.* XXXII 1<sup>13</sup> is an ostrakon dated to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, containing a list of Greek words, which can be partially grouped, some taken from the *Acta Apostolorum*, chapters 1-4 (recto cols. 2 and 3) and 20.4-10 (col. 1, 10-11); of surgery or torture instruments (verso col. 1, 1-5);<sup>14</sup> of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste (verso col. 1, 9 - col. 2) (see text 1 in the Appendix).

The words of this list are all Greek, although the instruction itself was in Coptic. It is often difficult to ascertain, depending on the kind of exercise, whether the instruction was in Greek or Coptic, but in this case, in spite of the fact that all words are Greek, two aspects reveal that the basic language is Coptic:<sup>15</sup> on the one hand, the typical Coptic spellings of the words, like col. 1, 4 ΠΖΥΠΔΤΙΚΟΣ, col. 3, 29 ΖΥΠΟΠΟΔΙΟΝ, or the use of the Coptic article, col. 1, 7 ΠΣΥΓΚΛΘΘΕΔΡΟΣ, col. 2,

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λάκκου ἦτοι τνευπε, “the deposit or *tneupe*”; *P.Lond.* V 1722 (AD 530); καὶ τὸ ὑποπέσσιον ἦτοι τχρορη, “the space under the stairs or *tchrire*”; cf. COLIN, F., *Atti di XXII congresso int. di Papirologia* (2001), 259-268. This is a case where the writer explains carefully certain terms in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding. It is a contract, thus a legal document, and needs to be very specific in terms of definition.

- 11 Inherited of course from the common practice in pre-Christian schools. For these kinds of exercises, see MORGAN, *Literate Education*, 101-104, and CLARYSSE/WOUTERS, *Un exercice de syllabification* (*P.Bingen* 17), 86, n. 9; CRIBIÖRE, *Writing, teachers, and students*, 42-43. See also NODAR, *Christianity at School*. Among some of the features differentiating school texts as Christian are words included in a word-list, typically proposed for copying, originating from the Bible or, in the case of names, of a clearly Christian origin. On the differentiation between Classical and Christian school practice, see CRIBIÖRE, *Greek and Coptic Education*.
- 12 See MARROU, *Histoire de l'Éducation*, 472-474. See also the Pachomian Rule, 139-140, where we find an early systematization of literacy and Bible reading in the monasteries.
- 13 London, British Library ostr. 26210 + 26211 + 26215, LDAB 2889, first edited by HALL, *Coptic and Greek Texts*, 39, pl. 32., reedited by HASITZKA, *Neue Texte*, 174-177, no. 248. CRIBIÖRE, *Writing, teachers, and students*, 203, no. 127. See also NIKLAS, *Vom Umgang mit der Schrift*. Also mentioned as an example by MARROU, *Histoire de l'Éducation*, 474.
- 14 Although some of them appear in the AT, mostly in the fourth book of Maccabees. For example ἀρθρέμβολα and τροχαντήρας appear together in a list of βασιανιστήρια in Macc. IV 8, 13.
- 15 Other texts could illustrate our case, but do not present such spelling or any other argument to consider the texts Coptic in their language. Such are SELDESLECHTS/WOUTERS, *A Christian word-list*, where the list features mostly proper names from the Bible or patristic texts, and CLARYSSE/WOUTERS, *Un exercice de syllabification*.

15 ΠΠΕΝΤΕΚΟCTH. On the other hand, although most of the words are proper names, the few verbs appear in the same form they do in the Coptic translation,<sup>16</sup> as col. 2, 14 ΔΝΔΛΔΜΒΔΝΘ for Gk Ap. 1.2 ἀνελήμφθη; or col. 3, 31-32 ΠΡΟΚΑΡΤΕΡΕΙ for the Gk Ap. 2.42 προσκαρτεροῦντες.

It is thus clear that this ostrakon is a didactic support to, among other texts, that of the Coptic *Acta Apostolorum*,<sup>17</sup> and focused basically on the Greek vocabulary of those texts. This ostrakon is the most relevant document as an example for this kind of exercise<sup>18</sup> and illustrates the perception of foreign words in the text of the Coptic Bible. This practice is however not exclusive to Coptic. The recent PhD dissertation by J. A. LOOPSTRA<sup>19</sup> revises the *šmāhē* manuscripts (Vat.Syr. 152), which are lists of words and readings of the Syriac Bible and patristic texts, where over 60 percent of word selections were Greek words, showing that a real knowledge of Greek was required to read the Scriptural translations. Many of these words were place names and proper names, as in our ostrakon, but common words of Greek basic vocabulary are also included.<sup>20</sup>

Other texts may be brought up as examples, none of them as illustrative as the British Museum ostrakon. For example, we have a 7<sup>th</sup> century text from the Coptic museum, a school text written on a wooden tablet, edited by J.-L. FOURNET.<sup>21</sup> Following a series of multiplication exercises, there are two lists of trisyllabic words, starting with the letters Μ and Ν, followed by the vowels almost in alphabetical order Δ, Ε, Η, Ι, Ο, Υ, Ω, otherwise a common exercise (see text 2 in Appendix). Again the words of this list, almost all Greek, featuring Coptic spelling and even articles, can be also traced back to the Bible, mostly to the Gospels. Used as a school exercise, they presumably represent words difficult for the reader, that needed to be studied through a variety of exercises. In this case, the exercise is one of syllabification combined with alphabetization (all words start with Μ, and then with Ν).<sup>22</sup>

16 Checked in Horner's edition.

17 Here we could compare the 9<sup>th</sup> century Vienna parchment P.Vindob. K9152 (SPP XII 154 b,c), HASITZKA, *Neue Texte*, 171-172, no. 246, which contains a school exercise on the Coptic text of the *Acta Apostolorum*.

18 Already mentioned by MARROU in 1965, see above, but also by BUCKING, *Christian Educational Texts*, esp. 138.

19 LOOPSTRA, *Patristic selections*.

20 LOOPSTRA, *Patristic selections*, 343-344, offers a comparison with precisely this ostrakon and suggests that the comparative study of parallel materials in Jewish, Arabic and Byzantine learning communities and translation movements would be very enlightening.

21 FOURNET, *Nouveaux textes scolaires grecs et coptes*, 173-175, no. 6.

22 A similar exercise is found in P.Vindob. K 8308 (HASITZKA, *Neue Texte*, 244), a much later (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> cent.) school text on paper which features words beginning with Ζ, Λ, Μ, Π, with the same vocalic pattern following, most of them Biblical, but already mixed up with Coptic words too.

This evidence increases our confidence in the assumption that Coptic-speaking readers of or listeners to the Scriptural texts often had difficulties in understanding the Greek vocabulary appearing in those texts.<sup>23</sup> The nature of the translation process and the strong influence of the Vorlage in this case allowed a prominent percentage of Greek vocabulary transpire into the Coptic text. This vocabulary was not always easy to follow for a non-Greek-speaker, especially in the case of vocabulary not naturally transferred into the Coptic language as a result of linguistic contact. Some kind of support or aid was needed. Already in the Biblical translations into Coptic, we find several strategies to provide that support, including glosses of difficult Greek terms, and the choice of Greek loanwords better known to the Coptic reader to render other Greek terms in the Vorlage.

Finally, school texts, as fragmentary and complex as their interpretation may be, also provide an important window into the learning-process of Coptic Christians. Following the Classical varieties of school exercise, in Christian schooling the vocabulary used for dictation, syllabification, alphabetization was primarily drawn from the Bible, both OT and NT, and often also from patristic texts. Especially in monastic circles, the students practised exclusively on religious texts, their aim being the basic one of learning to read the Scriptures. Among the things these students needed to learn was the Biblical vocabulary, especially difficult terms, proper names that identify the peoples and places of the Scriptures, and “foreign” vocabulary. With school texts, however, we face an important limitation: We cannot establish to what degree they can serve as evidence for the linguistic situation of the adult population, since the age of the student is difficult to infer from the school-texts we have. Nevertheless, their testimony is valuable, especially as we all know from sad experience that difficulties in comprehending the language of texts can persist years after schooling is over.

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23 In the case of texts such as Shenoute, mentioned above, the difficulty was in general in understanding not only the Greek but also the Coptic vocabulary, and the syntax, difficulties inherent of Rhetorical texts.

**Appendix***OBrit.Mus.* XXXII 1Based on the photos available at <http://www.britishmuseum.org>

I have adjusted a few readings as compared to HASITZKA, 248.

*Recto*

Col. 1		col. 2	col. 3
1 [.....]	εα π	13 θεοφιλε (Ap. 1.1)	
2 [.....]	ene	14 διλλαμβανει (Ap. 1.2)	25 τλιβυ[α] (Ap. 2.10)
3 ]οτμε [...]	πα	15 ππενθηκοστη (Ap. 1.5)	26 τηρητη (Ap. 2.10)
4 πζυπατικ[οc]	ξειc	16 ακελλαμαχ (Ap. 1.9)	27 ηερητης (Ap. 2.11)
5 ακαλμα		17 ιωχc (Ap. 1.23)	28 αραβοc (Ap. 2.11)
6 πεc ....		18 βαρραββαc (Ap. 1.23)	29 ζυποποδιον (Ap. 2.35)
7 πcυγκαθεδροc		19 ιογcτοc (Ap. 1.23)	30 δωρεα (Ap. 2.38)
8 ππολυγανδριον		20 παρθοc (Ap. 2.9)	31 προκαρ- (Ap. 2.42)
9 ππαcτοφορεc		21 μηλοc (Ap. 2.9)	32 τηρει
10 σεκογδο[c μη] γαιοc (Ap.20.9)		22 διαμιτης (Ap. 2.9)	33 cτρωτη- (Ap. 4.1)
11 cυμπερια[...].εττι[α] (Ap.20.10)		23 τηcεcοποταμια (Ap. 2.9)	34 γοc
12 τ ρχη[		24 [...].π.[...]	35 διηc (Ap. 4.6)
			36 κλιφαc (Ap. 4.6)
			37 αλεξαν- (Ap. 4.6)
			38 δροc

Col. 1, 7: cf. συγκαθήμενοι in Ap. 26.30 and συγκαθίσαι in Jer. 16.8, as in following entry

Col. 1, 8: in Jer. 19.6.

Col. 1, 10: stands for Σεκοῦνδος in Ap. 20.4, perhaps followed by ΜΗ ΓΑΙΟC, as in the Coptic text.

Col. 1, 11: CΥΜΠΕΡΚ[ in Hasitzka should be read CΥΜΠΕΡΙΛ[ and probably refers to Ap. 20.10.2 συμπεριλαβών, although this Greek word does not appear as such in the Sahidic translation, cf. HORNER, *The Coptic version*, vol. VI, 474, like all other Greek words in the document do.

Col. 1, 12: I was not able to find a convincing reading for the following entry, which should refer to some term in Ap. 20.

Col. 2, 24: Must be a word comprised between Μεσοποταμίαν and Λιβύης in Ap. 2.9-10, that is Ἰουδαίαν τε καὶ Καππαδοκίαν, Πόντον καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν, Φρυγίαν τε καὶ Παμφυλίαν, Αἴγυπτον. I think the traces fit best with Φρυγία, if the trace can be read as a γ, or Αἴγυπτον, if the trace can be read as a π.

*Verso*

Col. 1	col. 2
39 [Τ]ΡΟΧΑΝΤΗΡΑϸ (Macc. IV 8.13)	52 ΗΛΙΟϸ
40 [.]ΗΜΟΛΗΤΑϸ	53 ΘΚΔΙΚΙ[Οϸ]
41 ΝΗΜΟΛΥΤΑϸ	54 ϷΗΡΑϷ[ΛΙΟϸ]
42 ΔΗΔΚΛΑϸΤΑϸ (Macc. IV 11.10)	55 ΜΕΛΙΤΙ[Οϸ]
43 ΔΡΘΡΕΜΒΟΥΛΑΚΟΥϸ (Macc. IV 8.13)	56 ΘΕΟΔΟΥ[ΛΟϸ]
44 [Ε]ΠΕϸΚΟΥΒΑϸΧΟϸ	57 ΟΥΑΛΗ[...]
45 ΛΥΔΟϸ ΛΙΒΥΚΟϸ (Ez. 27.10)	58 ΔΧΙΛΕΥϸ
46 ΠΕΡΕΚΑΙΦΑΛΛΟ <sup>ΔΙΟΝ</sup> ΤΗϸ[.] (Eph. 6.17)	59 ΗϸΥΧΙΟ[ϸ]
47 [ΔΩΜ]ΕΤΙΑΝΟϸ	60 ΘΕΟΦΙΑ[Οϸ]
48 [ΚΥΡ]ΙΩΝ	61 ϷΑΝΘΙϸ[ϸ]
49 [Κ]ΔΗΔΙΔΟϸ	62 ΠΡΙϸΚΟϸ
50 [ΔΟΜ]Ηϸ[ϸ]	63 [ΗΛΙΑ]ΛΗϸ
51 [ΚΥΡ]Ι[ΛΛ]Οϸ	

Col. 1, 45: Perhaps Λυδοὶ καὶ Λίβυες in Ez. 27.10 and Ez. 30.5.

Col. 1, 46: I wonder if one may read here ΠΕΡΕΚΑΙΦΑΛΛΟΤΗϸ with the correction above the line -ΔΙΟΝ, making this word correspond to περικεφαλαίαν in Eph. 6.17, appearing as ΠΕΡΙΕΦΑΛΛΑΙΑ in the Coptic text (cf. Horner V 258).

Entries 47-63 correspond to names of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste, in almost the same order as they appear in BKU I 19 (LDAB 4218), but not as in Testamentum XL Martyrum, 3.4.

*OFournet 6*

Face A, col. 5	Face B, col.5
42 ΜΑΡ ΜΑ ΡΟΝ	91 ΗΔ ΡΑ ΒΟϸ
43 ΜΑ ΗΔ ΧΗ	92 ΗΔ ΧΑ ΤΗϸ
44 ΜΕΛ ΧΕΙ	93 ΗΘΗ ΦΥ ΡΟϸ
45 ΜΗ ΟΙ Δϸ	94 ΗΗϸ ΤΙ Δ
46 ΜΟ ΝΟ ΧΟϸ	95 ΗΙ ΚΑ ΝΩΡ
47 ΜΥ ΧΑ ΝΗ	96 ΗΟ ΜΟϸ ΝΗΗ
48 ΜΩ Υ ΧΗϸ	97 ΗΥ ΛΔΙ ΚΟϸ
	98 ΗΩ ϷΕ ΠΗΟϸ

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