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ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS
IN THE COPTIC MUSEUM

Language and History¹

BY

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1) I should like to thank Dr Lucy-Anne HUNT of the University of Birmingham for inviting me to collaborate with her on this project; and the Coptic Museum authorities for their permission. I am also grateful to Elie KIOUMGI, Robert BETTS, and, as always, Mirrit BOUTROS GHALI (Cant. 8: 6).

Coptic manuscripts have suffered greater destruction than those of any other community of the Christian East. Even so far as published material is concerned, a glance at the short shelf-width of the *Scriptores Coptici* as compared with the other language categories of the CSCO shows the paucity of preserved Coptic manuscripts. And after the language shift from Coptic to Arabic even for ecclesiastical texts had taken place, fewer Arabic-language manuscripts from Christian Egypt and the Coptic Orthodox church have survived and are known to scholarship than those from other areas .

It is therefore fortunate that by 1926 Marcus SIMAIKA had gathered manuscripts from churches, monasteries, and the lumber-rooms of Coptic magnates' family houses into what became the Coptic Museum collection. Of those with illustrations, Dr. HUNT has already spoken as regards their art-historical aspects . Their nonpictorial elements -language, script, annotations- also convey a wealth of information about the history and culture of Christian Egypt in the Middle Ages and up to the early modern period. Since nearly all of these manuscripts containing Coptic use the Bohairic dialect, their colophons are especially valuable to the historian, since no compilation of Bohairic colophons has yet been made .

Handwritten books were expensive luxuries, and illustrated ones even more so: hence they were commissioned by and presented to rich institutions and well-to-do individual patrons. Such book commissions reflect times of comparative calm and prosperity for the Coptic community

2) Cf. Leslie S. B. MACCOULL, «Coptic sources: a problem in the sociology of knowledge», in BSAC 26 (1984) 1-7.

3) Cf. Khalil SAMIR, «Arabic sources for early Egyptian Christianity», in Birger A. PEARSON & James E. GOEHRING (eds.), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1986) 82-97.

4) Previous (partial) treatments have been in Jules LEROY, *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés* (Paris 1974) and the flawed work by Maria CRAMER, *Koptische Buchmalerei* (Recklinghausen, 1964).

5) To be a companion to Arnold van LANTSCHOOT, *Recueil des colophons des mss. chrétiens d'Égypte, les Manuscrits sahidiques* (Louvain, 1929). Some Bohairic colophons were recorded in Horner's prefaces to his edition of the Bohairic New Testament (Oxford-London, 1898-1905), before the mss. were housed in the Coptic Museum. A few colophons were noticed in GRAF's (Vatican City, 1934) and SIMAIKA's (Cairo, 1936) catalogues, but both missed a number of the Coptic ones. For citation systems see Khalil SAMIR, *Tables de concordances des manuscrits arabes chrétiens du Caire et du Sinai* (CSCO 482, Subs. 75; Leuven, 1986) 41-65.

under Moslem rule. Since every church and monastery needed books for the services, the better-off of these foundations could commission biblical codices, lectionaries, and texts of the liturgy embellished with illustrations, and patrons could order such books made for institutions connected with them in benefaction and piety. As the manuscripts in the Coptic Museum collection span the centuries from the thirteenth to the eighteenth, we can follow the changing fortunes and cultural trends of Coptic foundations and families from Mamlouk to Ottoman times.

A. TIME OF BOOK PRODUCTION

The colophons of these manuscripts tell the story of their copying, and sometimes even of how long the work took and how much it cost.

For example, from fols. 130^r and 217^v-218^f of Ms. **Bibl. 94**, a Bohairic Epistles and Acts, we learn that the copying of Acts by the priest and monk GABRIEL (later GABRIEL III, patriarch of ALEXANDRIA)⁶ took forty-six days, from 6 December 1249 to 21 January 1250 (Choiak 10 to Tybi 26 of Martyrs year 966).

In Ms. **Lit. 312**, a deluxe Holy Week lectionary made for the Church of the Virgin in ḤARAT ZUWAYLA, about every ten folios the scribe gives a date, allowing us to see how long it took to complete these large, lavish pages⁷. For example, fols. 90-100 took twelve days; the hundred leaves from fol. 240 to fol. 340 took five months, from April through August of 1625; from fol. 390 took two months, late August to late October; up to fol. 410, another two months, to late December⁸.

In Ms. **Lit. 24**, a Bohairic Lenten lectionary dated Choiak 16, Martyrs 1435 = 12 December A.D. 1718, we see from a previous note dated Hathyr

6) See Leslie S. B. MACCOULL, «A note on the career of Gabriel III, scribe and patriarch», forthcoming in *Arabica*. For more on Gabriel see below. See also SAMIR, *Al-Ṣafi Ibn al-ʿAssāl* [below note 9], pp. 625-631.

7) See Leslie S. B. MACCOULL, «Ms. Coptic Museum Lit. 312 revisited», forthcoming in *Le Muséon*.

8) The name of the scribe of this opulent work has been discovered and read by Dr. HUNT on fol. 331v: «There wrote this the poor sinner whose name is JOSEPH, the priest. I shall hope for mercy from God» [in Bohairic]. The volume is stamped in numerous places with the Bohairic-Arabic seal of the «Church of our Lady Mary which is in the place of ZABILE [ZUWAYLA] the great».

29 (25 November) that it took the anonymous scribe 17 days to write 45 pages, from fol. 34 to fol. 79.

B. PATRONAGE : 13TH CENTURY

Colophons tell us who the copyists and the patrons were, often including information on their origins, families, and social position.

For example, we see the thirteenth century dominated by the patronage of the AL-^cASSĀL family, a dynasty of rich and influential Coptic savants who traded with Syria, promoted Coptic scholarship and translation activity, and commissioned books⁹: they even promoted a scribe who worked for them, the above-mentioned GABRIEL, to the patriarchate of ALEXANDRIA.

After he copied Ms. **Bibl. 94**, Epistles and Acts, in 1249-50 for Ibn AR-**RĀHIB**, the teacher of the ^cASSĀL brothers¹⁰, GABRIEL continued working for the archon AL-AMĠAD IBN AL-^cASSĀL in 1256-57 by copying Ms. **Bibl. 93**, the Four Gospels, in which he signed his name in a Coptic cryptogram¹¹. He also included fully dated colophons in both Coptic and Arabic stating that the book was completed in June 1257. Between 1268 and 1271 he was Patriarch of ALEXANDRIA, succeeding JOHN VII who in turn, under the patronage of some rival notables, replaced him for a second reign during 1271-93.

Then, dating from 29 April A.D. 1272, Ms. **Bibl. 92**, a Bohairic Four Gospels with colophons in both Coptic and Arabic written by the scribe SIMEON, was commissioned by the archon AL-FADĪL¹², for presentation to the MU^cALLAQA church.

9) See Khalil SAMIR, *Al-Ṣafī Ibn al-ʿAssāl. Brefs chapitres sur la Trinité et l'Incarnation*. Introduction, texte arabe et traduction, avec un index-lexique exhaustif, in P.O. 42/3, N° 192 (Turnhout, Brepols, 1985), esp. 627-632. See also Wadīf ABULLIF, O.F.M., «Vita e opera del pensatore copto al-Ṣafī Ibn al-ʿAssāl», in *Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea* 20 (1987) 119-161.

10) The other half of this NT is Paris Institut Catholique 1, also of 1249-50 and copied by GABRIEL. Cf. above, note 6.

11) First published by F. WISSE in *Enchoria* 8 (1979) 113, following an early (1899) decipherment by HORNER: see MACCOULL, «Gabriel» [above note 6], n. 3.

12) Perhaps the same as AL-ṢAFĪ ABŪ AL-FADĀʾIL IBN AL-ʿASSĀL, recently deceased: see ABULLIF, «Vita e opera» [above note 1], 145, 151. The Arabic colophon was translated by HORNER (1898: vol. 1, pp. CIII-CIV).

Patriarch JOHN VII was the dedicatee of Coptic Museum Ms. **Lit. 309**, a Bohairic lectionary which bears a long and elaborate Bohairic colophon by the scribe ABU 'L -FARAĠ (ΕΠΟΥΛΦΑΡΑΧ), beginning with the formula «In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial and undivided Trinity in one divinity and one nature: for this is our God, we, the Christians». The book was commissioned by the deacon FARAĠ IBN ṢALĪB (ΦΟΡΑΙΔ ΠΥ(ΙΟ)C NCAΛΠΠ) for the church of the Virgin «in the midst of the dunghheap (ΚΟΠΡΙΑ)» outside of OLD CAIRO (ΤΙΠΙΑΛ(ΑΙΟC) ΧΗΜΙ). It is dated Diocletian year 1006, Saracen year 689, = A.D. 1290, during JOHN's second patriarchate¹³.

C. PATRONAGE : 14TH CENTURY

In the fourteenth century we can trace the career of a scribe, the *hegoumenos* ABRAHAM son of JACOB¹⁴, who copied two codices of the Coptic/Arabic *akolouthia* for the blessing of the water-basin (*lakane*) for the church at ḤARAT ZUWAYLA, forty-four years apart. The first, Ms. **Lit. 311**, is dated Mesore 26, Martyrs year 1043, = 19 August A.D. 1326; the second, **Lit. 359**, is dated Epeiph 28, Martyrs year 1087 = 22 July A.D. 1371. Both colophons are in Bohairic, and end with the traditional formula «In the peace of God, Amen».

In the earlier codex, it took over nine months, from 4 November to the following 19 August, to get from fol. 35^v to fol. 52^r: doubtless something interrupted the work, perhaps the effects of the anti-Christian riots of the 1320s. (A later portion was added to the earlier codex in 1574 by the copyist

13) From a year later, also in John's second reign, comes Ms. Coptic Patriarchate Bibl. 196 (GRAF n. 574; LEROY, *Mss. coptes* [above note 4], pp. 178-180, with evangelist portraits), commissioned by AL-AMĠAD IBN AL-^cASSĀL. (See HORNER 1898, vol. I, pp. LXXVII-LXXIX). Also the patriarch John mentioned on fol. 147^v of Ms. Vat. Ar. 75 (see Joseph-Marie SAUGET, «Un homélieaire copte pour le Carême et la Semaine Sainte: le *Vatican arabe 75*» in ANTIΔΩΡON *Hommage à Maurits Geerard* [Wetteren, Cultura, 1984] pp. 201-240, esp. 205) must be the same JOHN VII. The counterpart of this Vatican Ms. is Coptic Museum Lit. 82 (GRAF, p. 33), copied by the deacon BISHĀRA. Not the same ABRAHAM as the copyist of Ms. Bibl. 96, dating to either A.D. 1394 or 1414.

14) Not the same ABRAHAM as the copyist of Ms. Bibl. 96, dating to either A.D. 1394 or 1414.

FAḌLALLĀH IBN TĀDROS at the behest of the patron AL-AS^ĀAD IBRĀHĪM, deacon and archon)¹⁵.

In the fourteenth century the Arabic biblical version established by the ^ĀASSĀL brothers was still authoritative: it was followed by the copyist of Ms. **Bibl. 90**, a deluxe Arabic Four Gospels written in DAMASCUS in 1340. This codex has had Russian Orthodox religious pictures printed in JERUSALEM pasted on to its early folios; it was signed (in neo-Bohairic) and sealed by Patriarch CYRIL V in 1915¹⁶.

D. INSTITUTIONS AND HISTORICAL DATA

In colophons and annotations we find information on the churches and monasteries that formerly owned the manuscripts, sometimes down to the early twentieth century : some of these institutions still exist, while others do not. The churches of al-MU^ĀALLAQA and ABŪ SAYFAYN in OLD CAIRO and of the Virgin in ḤARAT ZUWAYLA still stand and continue to be studied; the church of St. Sophronius (mentioned in the Arabic colophon to Ms. **Lit. 299** of A.D. 1705) has not been traced.

Notes written in the manuscripts by later readers, in the margins or on blank portions of leaves, can tell us about the families and careers of the owners, and about the later histories of the institutions where the books were kept. For example, Ms. **Lit. 312** preserves on fols. 434^v-435^r short summaries of the history of the preparation of the holy chrism (myron) at the ḤARAT ZUWAYLA church.

They also contain historical information on wars, disasters, harvests, prices and so on. For example, a note on fol. 278^r of Ms. **Bibl. 95**, an Arabic Four Gospels (originally dated A.D. 1226) dated Sunday, Payni 1, year «of the innocent martyrs» 1394 (= 26 May A.D. 1678), states that «because of their sins» the Christians employed by the state had to pay 16.000 dinars in additional taxes, over and above the 65.000 dinars already paid.

15) GRAF, n. 163, fols. 35^v - 36^r. Could he be the same FAḌLALLĀH as the copyist of Ms. **Bibl. 75**, dated 1329 = A.D. 1614, forty years later ?

16) His signature reads «The poor KYRIL(LOS), the 112th (patriarch of Alexandria)», p. 12^v.

Annotations in the manuscripts sometimes preserve curses laid on those who remove the books from their rightful place, or otherwise tamper with them. For example, a note on fol. 108^r of the same Ms. **Bibl. 95** forbids removing the book from the Church of ST. MERCURIUS in OLD CAIRO (DARB AL-AḤMAR)¹⁷.

E. LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

It is noteworthy that, even in manuscripts the text of which is entirely in Arabic (and even in those comparatively late in date), the principal colophon is usually in Bohairic Coptic. Although by the thirteenth century Coptic was a dead language no longer understood in everyday life, prompting Arabophone churchmen to compose grammars (*muqaddimāt*, «introduc-tions») and lexical lists (*sullam*, «scalae») of Coptic, sufficient command of the standardised formulas used to put together a colophon and the ability to generate them and assemble them into expected phrases and constructions did still exist.

Scribes who spoke Arabic could still produce the Coptic for «O Lord, have mercy on and remember the poor sinner X who wrote this», a dating clause, and so on, even on occasion quite long and elaborate compositions.

We can also gain insight into what degree of comprehension of Coptic, such as there was, remained, at least in church scribal milieux and for stereotyped phrases. In Ms. **Bibl. 98** of the Bohairic Gospels of LUKE and JOHN (the other half of **Bibl. 103**, MATTHEW and MARK), dated Phaophi 22, Martyrs year 1047 (= 19 October A.D. 1331), on fol. 129^r we find an Arabic note on the translation technique, mentioning that certain words are not found in the Greek text or, for Arabic readers using the version they were used to next to this codex, in the Coptic exemplar. This speaks for a certain degree of linguistic sophistication even this late¹⁸.

17) Since books were precious, repairs were made and are often visible : missing pages were recopied and replaced at a later date. For example, in the fifteenth-century Ms. **Lit. 33** (Bohairic-Arabic Psalmody for Choiak), leaves 37-40 are missing, and the lack has been noticed by the scribe who has written the numerals λϙ, λϙ, λϙ, λϙ, M̄ on one leaf. Fols. 4-7, 92, 117 and 121 of Ms. **Bibl. 103** (Bohairic Gospels) are modern replacements.

18) The twin codices' colophons are dated two weeks apart, 5 to 19 October of the same year, which probably does not in this case reflect the actual time of copying. Only two weeks for two entire Gospels would have been very fast work.

F. COPTIC IN THE LATE PERIOD

In Ms. **Lit. 312**, the seventeenth-century Bohairic-Arabic Holy Week lectionary, very often above Coptic *nomina sacra* we find their pronunciation written in Arabic letters in red ink: for example *abšois* = ⲡⲟⲩⲟⲩ, *abnumā* = ⲡⲏⲛⲁ; Ⲧ written as *šmt*, i.e. the Coptic Ⲭⲟⲙⲛⲧ «shomnt», «three».

Ms. **Lit. 411**, the Psalmody for Choiak dated A.D. 1542 (Martyrs year 1258) (fols. 204, 333)¹⁹, presents the Bohairic Coptic liturgical texts transliterated into the Arabic alphabet, a phenomenon known from as early as the twelfth century²⁰.

At the very end of **Lit. 312** we even find a translation part of the colophon into Ottoman Turkish.

Even as late as A.D. 1705 the scribe of Ms. **Lit. 299** (a Bohairic Holy Week lectionary commissioned for the Church of the Virgin in ḤARAT AL-BATRAQ), the deacon Abraham son of BIŠARA son of JOSEPH from MAḤALLA AL-KUBR, in the Delta, was able to compose a long Bohairic colophon (fol. 330^v) in which he quotes the liturgy for the deceased, asking God to give his parents' souls rest «in the bosom of our holy fathers, Father ABRAHAM and ISAAC and JACOB, in a place of green grass upon the waters, ... in the paradise of joy and light with your saints». The copyist worked from an exemplar belonging to the church of the Virgin at ANBA RUWAYS, and he paid for the present book himself, states an Arabic colophon on fol. 331^r, dated Mesore 20, Martyrs year 1421 = 13 August 1705.

And also in the eighteenth century the copyist of a lectionary (Ms. **Lit. 27**), the *hegoumenos* ABRAHAM son of SOLOMON, could twice compose a short colophon in Coptic asking God to remember him «in your kingdom, the city of JERUSALEM in the heavens» (fols. 113^v, 123^v). Formulary colophon-Coptic must have been something like learned Latin, memorized tags brought out for special occasions.

19) The colophon on fol. 204 is in Arabic, that on fol. 333 in Coptic (in Coptic letters!).

20) Cf. Leslie s. b. MACCOULL, «The strange death of Coptic culture», in *Coptic Church Review* 10 (1989) 40 with the references there cited.

G. LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION AND PALAEOGRAPHY

It is interesting to watch the progression of Coptic script as comprehension of the language becomes more and more restricted from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century (an aspect not covered in the standard surveys of Coptic literary palaeography such as HYVERNAT or STEGEMANN). When scribes still understood and could construe what they were writing, they wrote with ease, making natural forms. When they no longer understood the language they were trying to write, they stiffly copied shapes, just shapes, like an English-speaking person trying to copy Chinese characters or cuneiform, unaware of the ductus that flows from comprehension.

On the flyleaf and fol. 1^{r-v} of Ms. **Lit. 229**, an eighteenth-century Bohairic-Arabic horologion, a very late shaky hand has tried to transcribe Greek versicles in Coptic letters (e.g. **πρoχοyμeν**), followed by neo-Bohairic efforts at translation. On the upper left of fol. 121^r of Ms. **Lit. 253** (a ritual, dated A.D. 1364) a modern hand has tried to draw neo-Bohairic letter shapes that make no sense, perhaps at the time the book was given as a waqf to the AL-MU^cALLAQA church in 1911²¹.

H. CONCLUSION

These manuscripts in the Coptic Museum collection are a unique witness to the cultural history of a people. Both in their visual art and in their language they narrate the changing fortunes of EGYPT's Coptic community, which furnished the society its administrators, accountants, merchants, and occasionally saints. Since for the last sixty-six years they have been regarded as marginal curiosities at best, it is our objective to bring them into the mainstream of scholarship.

Leslie S. B. MACCOULL

21) SIMAIKA, n. 142, p. 72.