

# Egypt, crossroad of translations and literary interweavings (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries). A reconsideration of earlier Coptic literature\*

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## Premise

In the last decade, increasing attention has been devoted to the Greek-Coptic bilingualism of Egypt in Late Antiquity<sup>1</sup>—as well as to the Coptic-Arabic bilingualism of the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup>—which has shed light on the difficulty of tracing precise boundaries in the use, competences and finalities of the two idioms.<sup>3</sup>

If it has been clearly ascertained that until the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Greek represented the *high* language normally used on any occasion outside

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<sup>1</sup> The following are the most interesting readings on this matter: BAGNALL 2005, pp. 11-19; TORALLAS TOVAR 2005; MACCOULL 2006; SIDARUS 2008, pp. 183-202; BAGNALL 2009a; RICHTER 2009, pp. 401-446; FOURNET 2009a, pp. 418-451; PAPAConstantinou 2010; TORALLAS TOVAR 2013, pp. 109-119; PAPAConstantinou 2014, pp. 15-21; CAMPLANI 2015a, 129-153. See also FOURNET 2009a and FOURNET 2014, II, pp. 599-607.

<sup>2</sup> PAPAConstantinou 2007, pp. 273-299; PAPAConstantinou 2012, pp. 58-76.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, only very few late antique booklists and inventories of the assets of monasteries and churches have survived, most of which date from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, they are sufficient to confirm the frequent presence of bilingual books in book collections. OTRANTO 1997, pp. 123-144. See also DOSTÁLOVÁ 1994, pp. 5-19; SALMONS 1996, no. 49.

communication within a local Egyptian community—whether secular, ecclesiastic, or ‘monastic’<sup>4</sup>—, several aspects of this linguistic cohabitation still deserve careful analysis.

Numerous provocative and stimulating questions have thus been posed by scholars, among which:<sup>5</sup> At what level of the structure and hierarchy of the Egyptian Church was Coptic used, over time, as an alternative to Greek, at times even supplanting it?<sup>6</sup> How was this role played when Alexandria, slowly but progressively, lost its cultural and religious hegemony in favour of Constantinople? What was the relationship between the first use of Coptic, as a written linguistic medium, and the Egyptian language, which was still spoken by the autochthonous people?<sup>7</sup> Was Coptic originally used by uneducated people or was it rather a linguistic medium of local élites fluent in both Greek and Egyptian?<sup>8</sup> How should we evaluate the first Coptic literary and documentary texts that were produced from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century?<sup>9</sup> What was the role of Coptic in education?<sup>10</sup> And, lastly, what was its place in the (semi)literary production of early monastic communities?<sup>11</sup>

In a recent article, Alberto Camplani<sup>12</sup> has effectively summarized the issue and at the same time made significant progress in reflecting on all these aspects.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘monastic’ in the widest sense.

<sup>5</sup> As for the content of this premise, I owe much to Alberto Camplani, whom I thank for his stimulating conversations and fruitful suggestions.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance the complex case of Bishop Calosiris who seems to have spoken in Coptic during the Council of Ephesus in 449, but at the same time is also known for sending official letters in Greek. CAMPLANI 2006, pp. 389-413. See also CAMPLANI 2015a, pp.129-153.

<sup>7</sup> BAGNALL 1993. It is important to stress that Egypt had already experienced in pharaonic times a huge gap between the *high* written language and the *low* spoken language. At this regard Sergio Donadoni observes: «Ma a guardar più da vicino e dando alle parole un senso più concreto e meno convenzionale, proprio con una esperienza di bilinguismo è connessa inscindibilmente tutta la cultura egizia. Il centralismo amministrativo che così precisamente vi si manifesta e che così pervicacemente vi ha prosperato, vuol dire anche la creazione di una lingua ufficiale che serve a trasmettere documentazione e cultura e che si oppone a quella che si parla ogni giorno. Di tale lingua, attraverso una pratica di testi e di incartamenti, si impadronisce il futuro scriba nella sua esperienza scolastica, e padroneggiarla è uno dei suoi vanti. Il fenomeno risale probabilmente all’età più antica: ma diviene macroscopico quando al medio egiziano si sostituisce il neoegiziano, e nelle scuole si deve curare l’insegnamento delle due lingue: prima quella classica, poi quella moderna, con lo studio delle relative forme grafiche». DONADONI 1980, pp. 1-14: 13; BAGNALL 2011, pp. 75-93.

<sup>8</sup> Extremely interesting are in this respect the observations of Ewa Zakrzewska. See ZAKRZEWSKA 2014, pp. 79-89 and 2015, ZAKRZEWSKA 2017, pp. 115-161.

<sup>9</sup> For Greek-Coptic bilingualism in documentary sources see CLACKSON 2010, pp. 73-104.

<sup>10</sup> CRIBIORE 1999, pp. 279-286; BUCKING 2012, pp. 225-264; TORALLAS TOVAR 2013, pp. 109-119.

<sup>11</sup> LUCCHESI 1988, pp. 201-210. I consider the monastic rules semi-literary products.

<sup>12</sup> CAMPLANI 2015a, pp. 129-153.

Although it is highly probable—and desirable—that the discussion on these crucial aspects will continue in the near future, the following pages will not be dedicated strictly to the bilingualism of Coptic Egypt, but rather to the consequences that the Coptic language had on the cultural formation of Late Antique Egypt (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, with some digressions beyond this chronological and linguistic limit) and, more concretely, on the creation of book collections and more or less structured libraries, whose literary patrimony mainly comprised works in translation.

Despite the undeniable fact that Coptic Egypt produced a literature that, with very few exceptions, was Christian,<sup>13</sup> above all in its early production there is a sporadic reemergence of the 'classical' tradition, although sometimes unconscious and invariably revisited in the new Christian perspective.

In fact, in dealing with Coptic literature one should not make the mistake of using the manuscript funds of the White Monastery and the Monastery of the Archangel Michael in Hamuli, Fayyūm (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries) as a magnifying glass to interpret the whole literary development in the Coptic language. Such a distortion would fail to take into account the dramatic changes that Christian Egypt underwent in its first millennium. Moreover, it is important to remember that the works written in Coptic represent only a minor part of the literary production of the period taken into account here, since in those same centuries, for literary purposes, concurrent use was also made of Greek.

The 4<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, was characterized by an extreme variety of ideological orientations destined to influence the early production of Coptic literature, but also by a drastic selection of forms and literary genres, probably due to the opinion that some texts—romances, poetry, philosophical treatises, and technical literature—could remain in Greek, at least for the moment. If the Nag Hammadi codices may be connected to a monastic milieu—at least according to the theories of some scholars—<sup>14</sup> this is certainly not the case of the Manichean codices from Kellis, which without doubt were found in an archaeologically well documented sectarian context.

Making use of the few but important clues at our disposal, we will therefore try to reconstruct the multiform cultural profile of the educated people of Late

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<sup>13</sup> For the development, the contents and the literary genres of Coptic literature, see above all ORLANDI 1997, pp. 39-120 and BOUD'HORS 2012, pp. 224-246. For a briefer description of Coptic literature see also EMMEL 2007, pp. 83-102.

A complete and satisfactory 'history of Coptic literature' remains however a *desideratum*.

<sup>14</sup> For a monastic (Pachomian) origin of the Nag Hammadi codices see now LUNDHAUG-JENOTT 2015, where a complete survey of the different opinions is made. See also LUNDHAUG 2016, pp. 1177-1192. For an opposite position, see WIPSYZKA 2000, pp. 179-191. See also BUZI 2016, pp. 95-100. A review article of the volume of LUNDHAUG – JENOTT 2015 by E. Wipszycka and P. Piwowarczyk will appear in Adamantius 2017.

Antique Egypt, by identifying the place that classical literature, but also possible survivals of (pharaonic) Egyptian literary genres and themes had<sup>15</sup>—outside the contexts of magic and Hermetism, whose borrowings from Egyptian culture have been largely explored<sup>16</sup> and for which I do not feel competent enough to study—not only in their education and moral training, but also in the textual choices that guided the creation of their libraries and selection of their readings until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which represented a sort of turning point for the history of Christian Egyptian culture and for Coptic literature in particular.

The influence of classical *paideia* on early Christian culture, on the other hand, is an indisputable fact, to the point that still in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries classical texts were copied and classical philosophy was studied in the schools of Alexandria.<sup>17</sup>

In this perspective, it will be useful to remember that Guglielmo Cavallo identified some manuscripts containing classical authors written by professional Christian scribes,<sup>18</sup> while Roger Bagnall observed that «Antinoopolis maintained

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<sup>15</sup> On the danger of forcedly identifying too many influences of pharaonic literature and religion in the Coptic tradition see WIPSYZKA 1992, pp. 83-128 and FRANKFURTER 2012, pp. 83-102.

<sup>16</sup> «Even those writers who deny substantial conceptual borrowings see Egyptian influences in the more popular Gnostic writings such as the *Pistis Sophia*, consisting mainly of eschatological and cosmological motifs: the bark of the sun and the moon, other figures of Egyptian divinities, Amente as personification of Hell, the primeval abyss (Nun), from which Sophia emerges, who then form the sky by arching her body like the Egyptian goddess Nut, the creation of mankind through the tears of the Archons». BEHLMER 1996, p. 575. Less studied is the influence of Egyptian religion on Old Testament Apocrypha. See LOPRIENO 1986, pp. 205-232; LOPRIENO 1981, pp. 289-320. See also BEHLMER 1996, p. 572: «The opposition of Faith vs. Knowledge, the adoption of the Egyptian bidimensionality of time, the concept of a Salvation which has already been realized on an eschatological level and which only needs to be revealed to mankind, by a mediator modelled on Pharaoh's role. Borrowings have been identified not only on a conceptual level, but for single topoi as well, such as the West as a place of reception of the Dead in the Book of the Watchers from *1 Enoch* or the prolongation of a solar calendar in the *Astronomical Book*». See also HAMMERSCHMIDT 1957, pp. 233-250; KÁKOSY 1990, pp. 175-177; PARROTT 1987, pp. 73-93; SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH 1981, pp. 71-85. For the influence of Egyptian culture on Hermetism, I give here a selected bibliography: see MAHÉ 1986, pp. 3-53 and MAHÉ 1996, pp. 353-363 (among his other contributions); DAUMAS 1982, pp. 2-25; PODEMANN SØRENSEN 1989, pp. 41-57; WALDSTEIN 1997, pp. 154-187; CAMPLANI 2000; CAMPLANI 2003, pp. 31-42; VAN DEN KERCHOVE 2012; TRIPALDI 2012, p. 107. The above-mentioned bibliographical references represent just a selection. A detailed analysis of the pharaonic and Greek influence on Coptic hermetism is dealt with by Alberto Camplani in this volume. New interesting insights, however, are also to be found in the theme section of the forthcoming issue of «SMSR», which will contain the proceedings of the conference “Hermetic texts in Antiquity: Creation, Spread, Reworking, and Interpretation in the Writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos in Greco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt”, organized by Alberto Camplani (Sapienza University, 15 April 2015). The papers by Jørgen Podemann Sørensen and by Christian Hervik Bull are particularly interesting in this respect.

<sup>17</sup> See also the results of the project lead by Samuel Rubenson denominated “Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia”, <http://mopai.lu.se/rubenson.html>

<sup>18</sup> CAVALLO 1974, pp. 69-81: 75-76. See also TREU 1986, pp. 1-7 and CRIBIORE 1999, II, pp. 279-286: 282.

in the fourth century its active intellectual life, with instruction in rhetoric and law, medicine and the sciences» and the institution of the *gymnasium* «remained in use in the later fourth century and into the fifth–and perhaps later...».<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, however, Jean-Luc Fournet brilliantly described the change of attitude of the Coptic literature towards ‘pagan’ culture, and Homer in particular, after the 6<sup>th</sup> century, taking into account in particular the *Encomium of Macarius of Tkow* attributed to Dioscorus of Alexandria, while the previous period was still characterized, at least as far as the Greek literature produced in Egypt was concerned, by tolerance and mutual exchange, as the *Paraphrasis of the Gospel of John*, by Nonnus of Panopolis, and the *Metaphrasis of the Psalms*, by Pseudo-Apollinarius, both epopees of Christian content in Homeric metre, demonstrate.<sup>20</sup>

In brief, in the following pages, new reflections will be based on a reconsideration of well-known witnesses, in order to shed light on some almost unexplored aspects of the book culture of Egypt in Late Antiquity and to demonstrate that early Christian book production was not a watertight compartment, that resisted the influence of tradition and that the dynamics of the formation of a Coptic literature were a much more fluid phenomenon than one would normally think.

### **The libraries of Late Antique Egypt: (just) collections of translations or (also) laboratories of selection and (re)interpretation?**

It is a matter of fact that until the 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian Egypt made use of Coptic almost exclusively as a medium of translation from Greek.<sup>21</sup> Translations were the texts transmitted by the Nag Hammadi codices, although this did not exclude a certain freedom in the redaction of the Coptic version of the texts. The Manichean texts found in the Fayyūm and in Kellis were also translations, not to mention the more obvious great number of biblical texts contained in codices that are among the oldest examples of manuscripts ever found.

Many of the translations of the first phase of Coptic literature, however, belong to the patristic genre, an important witness to the complex relationship between Greek and Egyptian literary cultures.

It has been observed by Tito Orlandi that in appropriating and translating the works of the early Church Fathers, the Copts made a targeted choice, thus

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<sup>19</sup> BAGNALL 1993, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> FOURNET 2011, pp. 19-31.

<sup>21</sup> ORLANDI 1984, pp. 181-203; ORLANDI 1990, pp. 93-104.

excluding works characterized by a more marked theological and exegetical character, normally extraneous to the interest of the Coptic Church. For instance, among the other works by Athanasius of Alexandria, we have in Coptic his *Life of Antony* and the *Festal Letters*, but not his autobiographical, historical and anti-Arian works. Likewise, Cyril of Alexandria's biblical commentaries and polemical works against the Nestorians are missing, while only a selection of the works of John Chrysostom were translated into Coptic.<sup>22</sup>

If this assertion still appears generally sustainable, it must also be observed, along with Enzo Lucchesi, that we have some examples of translation into Coptic of sophisticated theological and dogmatic Greek patristic works, such as Gregory of Nyssa's *Encomium of Stephen Protomartyr* and Cyril of Alexandria's *Scholia de incarnatione Unigeniti*.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the fragments of Greek patristic works translated into Coptic, recently identified by Alin Suciu, show that a complete knowledge of the quantity and quality of Greek works translated into Coptic in the early centuries of Christianity is still far from achieved.<sup>24</sup>

The Nag Hammadi codices and the Manichean texts, on the other hand, demonstrate that, at least initially, Coptic literature incorporated diverse high-level works and was even open to including philosophical texts, suggesting that these exclusions occurred only at a later stage.

In brief, if it can no longer be said that Coptic literature was made up mostly of texts of a moral character, since the new identifications made in the last decades have identified examples of complex theological, historiographical, epistolographical and exegetical translations from Greek into Coptic, at the same time it must be stressed that several aspects of the historical-dogmatic Greek production does not seem to have been included in Coptic literature. This is so of a certain kind of 'local historiography', but also of Christian poetry, professional philosophy, romance, etc.

The consensus is that most of the translations from Greek into Coptic were done by the 5<sup>th</sup> century—in two phases: 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> centuries and 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively—, while later works, probably written directly in Coptic, were falsely attributed to the Church Fathers (from the end of 5<sup>th</sup>-beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> centu-

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<sup>22</sup> ORLANDI 1973, pp. 327-341. For a recent and accurate *status quaestionis* of the works associated to John Chrysostom in Coptic see VOICU 2011, pp. 575-610.

<sup>23</sup> LUCCHESI 2006, pp. 11-13 and LUCCHESI 2011, pp. 376-378, 382-388. See also BEHLMER 2016, pp. 310-311.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, the identification of a fragment of the *On Baptism* of Melito of Sardes, recently announced by Alin Suciu during the 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Coptic Studies, Claremont (CA), 25-30 July 2016, within the panel dedicated to "Early Christian Literature Preserved in Coptic" (title of the paper: "Recovering a Hitherto Lost Patristic Text: Greek and Coptic Vestiges of Melito of Sardes' De Baptismo").

ries). Unfortunately, an accurate analysis of this complex phenomenon, which sees in parallel the translation of patristic works from Greek into Coptic on the one hand, and the production of the original works pseudo-epigraphically attributed to the same authors on the other, is still missing.

A clear example of how complex and controversial this phase of Coptic literature is, are the homilies *On the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* of Rufus of Shotep, which, according to Philippe Luisier, were written by an earlier Greek-speaking author because of their affinities with the Alexandrian exegetical tradition found in these works, and only later translated and attributed to a Bishop Rufus.<sup>25</sup>

While much still has to be understood about the relationship between translated works and original works written directly in Coptic, it is certain that a great deal of Greek literature was never translated into Coptic.

This may be due to two apparently opposite reasons: in part because it was not close enough to the interests of the intellectual milieu responsible for the creation of Coptic literature,<sup>26</sup> and in part because the hierarchy of the Egyptian Church—and not only—for some reason preferred to continue to read certain texts directly in Greek. This is the case, for instance, of Epiphanius of Salamis, whose *Ancoratus* and *De gemmis* were translated into Coptic, although with differences from the original, while the *Panarion*, much longer and probably more difficult, was not, until proven otherwise.

We should consider, however, that even the apparently simple act of including or excluding some works from the process of translation—and therefore of the creation of a literature in Coptic—is to be considered a creative activity.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, in most instances we are completely ignorant of the modalities and circumstances in which these translations were done, although, as is obvious, any translation presupposes a patron and a performer (the two figures sometimes coinciding)—the latter able to manage (at least) two languages (in our case mainly Greek and Coptic) –, and implies a specific finality and a physical space in which it is carried out.

In fact, before the almost total absence of information related to the Coptic writing activities of the Alexandrian episcopate—although it is reasonable to imagine that it was, at least at the beginning, one of the main centres of production of Christian written culture, also in Coptic—and of the several other ‘cultural centres’ of Late Antiquity that must have been present in the Egyptian capital (philosophical circles, religious centres, etc.), we can at least reasonably specu-

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<sup>25</sup> LUISIER 1998, pp. 471-473. For a defence of his own opinion see SHERIDAN 2016, pp. 1005-1012.

<sup>26</sup> For the problems related to the translation of Greek patristic literature into Coptic see ORLANDI 1990, pp. 93-104.

<sup>27</sup> MORENZ 1968, pp. 11-16; RICHTER S.G. 2009, p. 43.



late that one very plausible translation context of Late Antique Egypt, where the finalities, if not the modalities, may be clear, is the White Monastery at the time of Shenoute's leadership. It is very likely that the archimandrite of Sohag promoted a systematic program of translation (from Greek) of biblical and homiletic works, the latter destined to forge its own literary style.<sup>28</sup>

However, if we have a clear idea of the extent of the White Monastery library in the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>29</sup> that is the period to which the famous inscriptions/shelf-marks found in the so-called «chambrette»<sup>30</sup> located on the first floor of the room left of the apse of the main church, seem to date back,<sup>31</sup> as well as the numerous colophons found in the manuscripts, we have very faint clues about its early stages, just as with all the other monastic libraries of Late Antique Egypt.<sup>32</sup>

The «library of the White Monastery existed however before the time when copies upon parchment had replaced the earlier papyrus volumes. Shenoute's frequent citations of the 'papyri' (χάρτης) existing in his and his predecessors' time, refer to that earlier state of things, little if any remnants of which however have survived. The papyri in the archaic Aḥmîm dialect, spoken presumably in the surrounding district until Shenoute made the Sa'idic fashionable, are said upon good authority to have come from this monastery; but no others have been traced to it».<sup>33</sup>

What did the library of Shenoute contain exactly? What was the extent and makeup of the White Monastery library in the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries? Did it comprise only Christian texts or also 'classical'/'pagan' literature, albeit reinterpreted in a Christian perspective? Where did Shenoute and his successors obtain the codices used as models for the translations? Were they a temporary loan from other monastic or private book collections or did they already belong to the library?

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<sup>28</sup> This is more than a theory, for Johannes Leipoldt and Tito Orlandi, who accepted his opinion. LEIPOLDT 1909, p. 154; ORLANDI 2002, p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> On the library of the White Monastery see also TAKLA 2005, pp. 43-51 and EMMEL-RÖMER 2008, pp. 5-24. I think that the term 'classical' used by Stephen Emmel (p. 7: «For this library turned out to be an extraordinarily rich source of manuscripts of classical Coptic literature of all sorts») to describe the works contained in the White Monastery Library in mediaeval times is a little ambiguous, since what was 'classical' in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was not anymore in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>30</sup> LEFEBVRE 1920, cols. 459-502: 499-501; CRUM 1904, pp. 552-569; LOUIS 2007, pp. 99-114; LOUIS 2008, pp. 83-90. We do not know precisely where the main oldest library of the White Monastery was located.

<sup>31</sup> CRUM 2002, pp. 211-219.

<sup>32</sup> For a realistic reconstruction and description of the different phases of the Library of the White Monastery and for an *excursus* of the theories concerning the loss of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>-century codices in Akhmimic (C. Schmidt, C. Wessely, W.E. Crum, G. Steindorff, V. Stegemann) see TAKLA 2005, pp. 43-51: 47-49.

<sup>33</sup> CRUM 1905, pp. xi-xii.



And what happened to these ancient codices (4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries)? Did they deteriorate to the point of requiring complete replacement by new (parchment) codices? Was this gradual replacement the cause of a text selection, which led to the progressive disappearance of possible remnants of 'classical' literature, if this was originally present in the library?<sup>34</sup>

Intuitive answers to these questions may come from other book collections of early Egyptian Christianity.

In (re)analyzing this material, it is important to remember that, at least until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but also later, monastic and urban contexts were much more tangential than one might think, since monks were often involved in civil matters<sup>35</sup> and were sometimes even «landed gentry».<sup>36</sup> This is what also emerges, for instance, from Roger Bagnall's observations concerning

an undertaking on oath from Arsinoe, dated 349, directed to the *praepositus* of the *pagus*, stating that the declarant will produce a priest of the village of Tristomos upon demand. The surety making the declaration, Aurelius Akammon, is a deacon from another Arsinoite village. Because the deacon is illiterate, a monk who is the son of a former *prytanis* signs on his behalf. Both the illiteracy of the deacon and the fact that the subscriber on his behalf is the son of a member of the bouletic class who has become a monk are noteworthy. It appears that at least in this case antecedent social and economic background plays a larger role in the distribution of the knowledge of writing than does the ecclesiastical status of the writer. Sons of privilege who became monks had been given upper-class educations; village peasants who became deacons had not. It is possible that as time went on and the church became increasingly institutionalized such differences were blurred, but that remains to be proven... Monks were found both in the cities and in the villages, as well as in separate monastic establishments, and it seems fair to say that their abilities to read and write depended on background more than on monastic vocation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On these last two aspects see ORLANDI 2002, p. 220: «it is possible that the scribes, when producing new codices, made also a reworking of some of the texts, obtaining new texts from pieces of existing ones».

<sup>35</sup> MARTIN 1979, pp. 3-26: 14-15; WIPSYCKA 1996, pp. 281-336; WIPSYCKA 2009. A meaningful case of interrelation between civil and monastic contexts is that of the well-known figure of Flavius Apollos, father of Dioscorus, village headman of Aphrodito and founder of a monastery at Pharou. Apollos, although a monk, continued to serve the village in many offices, maintaining his role as headman. KEENAN 1984a, pp. 51-63; KEENAN 1984b, III, pp. 957-63; MACCOULL 1993, pp. 21-63; MACCOULL 1989, pp. 499-500. See also KOTSIFOU 2013, pp. 530-540.

<sup>36</sup> BROWN 2016, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> BAGNALL 1993, pp. 249-250.

## The Bodmer Papyri as a possible example of a ‘typical’ Egyptian library of the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries?

Normally the so-called Bodmer Papyri,<sup>38</sup> with their combination of Greek, Coptic and Latin languages and their co-presence of biblical, homiletic and classical texts<sup>39</sup>—translated and original—, are evaluated by scholars as an eccentric bibliographical and textual phenomenon compared to the ‘normal’ book production of Late Antique Christian Egypt. If the Bodmer Papyri constituted a real library,<sup>40</sup> however, albeit a library formed by the merging of several older originally independent libraries, it is plausible to reverse the perspective of the analysis and to speculate that also other Egyptian book collections might have had more or less the same combination of languages, works, and genres, the early White Monastery library included.

One could object that the nature of the owners of the Bodmer Papyri is unclear and in fact not all scholars agree that they belonged to a monastic community, but it is a fact that book owners in the period between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries must have had more or less the same cultural training, being the monastic identity of organized communities, as we know it from the majority of Coptic works, but also from documentary sources, a later achievement. Only from the 6<sup>th</sup> century in fact, as a reaction to the post-Chalcedonian controversies and the consequent co-presence in Egypt of two *episkopoi*—one Melkite and one ‘Monophysite’—, monasteries become the main—and progressively almost exclusive—cultural centres of Christian Egypt, their religious and cultural choices influencing the literature that was to be produced from then onwards. At that time, the «Chalcedonian church

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<sup>38</sup> The expression ‘Bodmer Papyri’ is here referred to the group of manuscripts—not only made of papyrus and not exclusively preserved in the Fondation Bodmer, Coligny—whose common origin from a unique library is more or less widely shared by scholars.

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that numerous manuscripts of classical works have survived from Late Antiquity, they never appear in booklists. For a census of pagan books found in Late Antique Egypt see MAEHLER 1997, pp. 125-128. Despite the extreme interest of the observations made by Chrysi Kotsifou on the Egyptian book production, I do not agree with the statements that «The lack of evidence for pagan scriptoria in Byzantine Egypt also suggests that a large number of the six hundred copies of pagan books that have survived from that period were copied by monks» and «In late antiquity, centers of book production were primarily if not exclusively in monasteries» (KOTSIFOU 2007, pp. 55, 50), since our knowledge of monastic settlements is much better than that of urban settlements; the latter, much more numerous than monasteries, have undergone several transformations and stratifications over time, to the point to make unrecognizable specific typologies of buildings and often even the general topography of a site.

<sup>40</sup> On the Bodmer Papyri see above all the thematic section dedicated to them in «Adamantius» 21 (2015), pp. 6-172. For a ‘census’ of the works transmitted by the codices see in particular the essays by Jean-Luc Fournet (*Anatomie d’une bibliothèque de l’Antiquité tardive : L’inventaire, le faciès et la provenance de la «Bibliothèque Bodmer»*) and Paul Schubert (*Les papyrus Bodmer: contribution à une tentative de délimitation*).

had, for over a century, been actively backed by the imperial power structure, often forcing the non-Chalcedonian hierarchy to leave the city centres and retreat to monasteries from where they managed their communities». <sup>41</sup>

Before that phase, however, the influence of the schools located in the 'towns'<sup>42</sup> must still have been strong even on the education of a monk. <sup>43</sup> There are tenuous but not ignorable traces that lead into this direction. This is the case of the well-known, although probably unwitting, quotation of *The Birds* of Aristophanes by Shenoute, which is clearly the product of a residual 'classical' education that the archimandrite of the White Monastery had gained in the Panopolitan milieu. <sup>44</sup>

...ce sont vos poètes imbéciles, qui ont appris des choses oiseuses et des chansons qui ne sont pas utiles et des enseignements démoniaques qui nous font errer loin de la vérité, et non seulement ceux-ci, mais encore ceux qui font la voix oiseaux, ayant rempli le livre, pour eux et vous, des parole oiseuses, à savoir : *tigs tigs et kouax kouax*, disant: " Nous faisons la voix des oiseaux !". C'est pourquoi ils ont nommé ce livre *Les Oiseaux*. <sup>45</sup>

Moreover, it is now a consolidated and shared opinion that «Shenoute had an excellent education, particularly in rhetoric». <sup>46</sup>

The fluid cultural interaction between Panopolis and the environment of the White Monastery, on the other hand, was efficaciously described by Gianfranco Agosti, who, on the occasion of a recent conference held in Warsaw, <sup>47</sup> formulated the hypothesis that the rhetorics of Nonnus of Panopolis was influenced by the style and themes of the sermons and hagiographies of the Shenoutean milieu. Agosti observes that, being a Christian born in Panopolis, Nonnus must have had, since his childhood, the opportunity of being in contact with members of the monastic movement and in particular with Shenoute and his disciples, whose works

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<sup>41</sup> PAPAConstantinou 2009, p. 448. On this matter see above all WIPSYCKA 2007, pp. 331-349; WIPSYCKA 2015, pp. 108-125.

<sup>42</sup> With this term I refer to the capitals of the ancient *nomoi*.

<sup>43</sup> This is also the opinion of Claudia Rapp, who, dealing with the scribal training, states: «there is no indication in the sources to suggest that it was provided within the monasteries». RAPP 1991, pp. 127-148: 134.

<sup>44</sup> Tito Orlandi is convinced of the existence of a «school of high level at the White Monastery», that is highly probable. ORLANDI 2002, p. 224. This does not exclude, however, that some of the monks, and Shenoute himself, could have had contacts with the 'schools' of Panopolis.

<sup>45</sup> AMÉLINEAU 1907, I, p. 386; ERMAN 1894, pp. 134-135; CHUVIN 2012; SPANOUDAKIS 2010, pp. 31-53; BUZI 2017, pp. 131-151. For the reuse of classical texts in Christian literature see also FOURNET 2011, pp. 19-31.

<sup>46</sup> BAGNALL 2008, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> G. AGOSTI, "Nonnus and Coptic literature" at "Nonnus of Panopolis in Context III: Old questions and new perspectives", Institute of Classical Philology and Culture Studies Faculty of Humanities Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, 15-17 September 2015.

continuously struggled against any religious opponents by means of a vehement literary production:

Although he [Nonnus] received a traditional Greek education based on classical *paideia*, he did not live in his small protected world. We cannot know to what extent Nonnus knew Sahidic, nor if he had direct contact with the White Monastery, of course. Moreover, since no systematic exploration of Coptic literature has been done by any Nonnian scholar, it is impossible at present to speak in terms of sources and intertextual links. Notwithstanding these objective difficulties, I think that we should not overlook the possible influence Coptic literature might have had on the poet, at the level of shared images, common ideas and cultural attitudes. 'Influence' is to be taken in the largest sense of the word, especially when we consider homiletic and liturgic texts, easily subject to oral diffusion and 'transmission' also beyond the original occasion of their performance. In short, relations between Coptic literature and Nonnian poems are to be studied in terms not of direct derivation, but rather of a common 'cultural imagination'. This is evident in descriptions of violence, in which Nonnus is clearly influenced by the tensions of contemporary society. (...) Nonnus probably had first-hand knowledge of such episodes, which were particularly violent in the Panopolitan area because of Shenoute's activity. (...) Coptic hagiographic texts can be helpful in understanding the ideological attitude behind Nonnian lines. It seems to me that king Blemys' submission reflects a wish rather than an historical fact. In the perfect world of Dionysus the warlike and dreadful Blemmyes do not behave like the irreducible Indians and are immediately prompt to recognize the light of justice and peace. Let me compare Nonnian lines with a passage from the *Life of Shenute* traditionally attributed to Besa (fl. 465 – after 474). The powerful archimandrite does not hesitate to face a group of aggressive Blemmyes, whom he miraculously defeats receiving obedience from their king.<sup>48</sup>

Going back to the Bodmer Papyri, the presence of Latin in the works transmitted by these manuscripts shows us that the use of this language—and consequently of its cultural background—should not be regarded as a linguistic phenomenon, which concerned mainly (although not only) the law and army milieux.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that still in the 5<sup>th</sup> century there were groups of educated people able to use this language in order to read (and copy) Latin works.

This is clearly demonstrated above all by the *Alcestis*, a late Latin poem, of originally at least 124 hexameters (122 of which have survived), preserved in the famous *codex miscellaneus Barcinonensis* (now in fact in the abbey of

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<sup>48</sup> I thank Gianfranco Agosti for sharing with me the text of his paper before its publication.

<sup>49</sup> On the use and role of Latin in Late Antique and Christian Egypt see the following selected references: CAVENAILE 1949; CAVENAILE 1987, pp. 103-110; CRIBIORE 2003-2004, pp. 111-118; DUMMER 1969-1970, pp. 43-52; FOURNET, 2009, pp. 418-451; PAPAConstantinou 2010; WIPSYZYCKA 1984, pp. 279-296; WOUTERS 1988. For the school context see CARLIG 2013, pp. 55-98.

Montserrat)<sup>50</sup> and dealing with the heroic death of Alcestis while saving the life of her husband Admetus.<sup>51</sup>

Most of the specialists who have studied the *Alcestis* agree in affirming that the scribe who copied the text did not understand it completely. He probably knew oral Latin, but was much less adept to its written form; this notwithstanding, he was not always averse to taking on the role of a *redactor*, correcting and integrating the text.

At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century this anonymous Latin poem was circulated in a community that also produced and read biblical and original Christian works (above all poems). The *Alcestis* itself is part of a codex that also includes Christian texts and it was probably perceived itself as a moral example perfectly matching the Christian values.

The *miscellaneous codex* is indeed extremely surprising, including an apparently heterogeneous and incompatible series of texts: Cicero, *In Catilinam*, I 6-9, 13-33, II (in Latin); the so-called *Psalmus responsorius* (in Latin); a drawing of a mythological subject (Hercules or Perseus); a series of prayers (in Greek), the already described *Alcestis* (in Latin), a composition modernly defined as *Hadrianus* (in Latin); a list of words probably extrapolated from a stenographic manual (in Greek).<sup>52</sup> It is therefore a multiple-text and multiple-language codex «à la croisée de la tradition profane gréco-romaine et du christianisme, ou se côtoyaient, sans pourtant avoir le même statut, le grec, le latin et le copte», as Gabriel Nocchi Macedo observes.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, the owners—be they members of a more or less organized monastic community, of a Christian school or of a philosophical-religious circle<sup>54</sup>—considered all the texts included in the manuscript as appropriate for their readings and training. Even the list of words at the end of the codex, which also includes names of classical Greek authors (Homer, Hesiod, Thucydides) and the titles of fifteen comedies of Menander,<sup>55</sup> is coherent with the rest, very likely constituting an aid to learning the stenographic technique, a choice which was compatible with the writing activities of a monastic commu-

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<sup>50</sup> For a description of the codex see TORALLAS TOVAR – WORP 2013, pp. 139-167.

<sup>51</sup> ROCA-PUIG 1982; LEBEK 1983, pp. 1-29; PARSONS – NISBET – HUTCHINSON 1983, pp. 31-36; SCHWARTZ 1983, pp. 37-39; MARCOVICH 1984, pp. 111-134; TANDOI 1984, pp. 233-245; TANDOI 1984, pp. 3-11; SCHÄUBLIN 1984, pp. 174-181; HARRISON – OBBINK 1986, pp. 75-81; MARCOVICH 1986, pp. 39-57; LEBEK 1987, pp. 39-48; MARCOVICH 1988; HORSFALL 1989, pp. 25-26; LEBEK 1989, pp. 19-26; NOSARTI 1992; MANTZILAS 2011, pp. 61-90; NOCCHI MACEDO 2010; NOCCHI MACEDO 2011; NOCCHI MACEDO 2014.

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed and commented list of the works contained in the *codex miscellaneus Barcinonensis* see NOCCHI MACEDO 2013, pp. 143-156.

<sup>53</sup> NOCCHI MACEDO 2013, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> See CAMPLANI 2015b, pp. 98-135.

<sup>55</sup> On Menander in Late Antiquity see VAN MINNEN 1992, pp. 87-98.

nity, since «on sait que les moines égyptiens apprenaient la sténographie, puisqu'ils s'en servaient, à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des communautés religieuses, pour la copie de livres». <sup>56</sup>

One should not forget, however, that the Bodmer Papyri, besides the *codex miscellaneus* and the so-called *codex visionum*, containing the most interesting and at the same time challenging works of the fund, and consisting of Greek original poems of Christian subjects,<sup>57</sup> also include several biblical codices in Coptic: P.Bodmer VI (*Proverbs*); P.Bodmer XVI (*Exodus*); P.Bodmer XXII + Mississippi Coptic Codex II (*Jeremiah, Lamentations of Jeremiah, Epistles of Jeremiah, Baruch*); Bodmer XIX (*Gospel of Matthew*); P.Palau Ribes 181-183 (*Gospels of Luke, John and Mark*), to which one should probably add Codex Glazier (*Acts*), preserved in the Pierpont Morgan Library, and Codex Scheide MS 144 (*Gospel of Matthew*), preserved in the Princeton University Library. All together, these manuscripts are among the oldest translations of the Bible from Greek into Coptic and represent manuscripts that it would not be surprising to find in any monastic library.

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that also more 'traditional' and structured monastic communities of the same period—like the ones directed by Pachomius and Shenoute—shared the same cultural choices and tastes initially.

On the other hand, some previously unknown documents, published by Juan Gil and Sofía Torallas Tovar in their edition of the *Hadrianus*<sup>58</sup>—a letter and a receipt of the purchase of the *miscellaneus codex* by Ramón Roca-Puig—shed new light on the possible provenance of the codex, whose bookbinding in fact—according to the same documentation—also included a Greek manuscript, so far not identified: on the basis of what Sylvestre Chaleur, who was director of the Institut Copte in Cairo, at the time of the acquisition, reported to Ramón Roca-Puig, the *miscellaneus codex* would come from the monastery of Pachomius. Such declaration is not corroborated by any other evidence to date and should therefore be evaluated with extreme caution, but, if true, it would go in the direction of the theory of James Robinson, according to whom the Bodmer Papyri are in fact part of the Dishna Papers, and therefore of Pachomian origin.<sup>59</sup> A theory that

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<sup>56</sup> NOCCHI MACEDO 2013, p. 156. «La manufacture imparfaite, les petites dimensions (il s'agit de l'équivalent antique du livre de poche), les dispositifs de lecture simplifiés et les écritures à caractère informel montrent qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une copie de luxe, mais plutôt d'un livre destiné à l'usage quotidien, à la consultation et à l'étude. En ce sens, notre codex peut-être mis en rapport avec de nombreux autres « livres instruments » de provenance égyptienne, à commencer par les autres *codices miscellanei* et les papyrus scolaires, y compris les bilingues». NOCCHI MACEDO 2013, p. 162.

<sup>57</sup> See now above all AGOSTI 2015, pp. 86-97, where a wide bibliography on the subject is listed.

<sup>58</sup> GIL - TORALLAS TOVAR 2010, pp. 25-27.

<sup>59</sup> ROBINSON 1990-1991, pp. 26-40; ROBINSON 2013.

does not exclude, in my opinion, that the library had originally been formed in another context, becoming ‘Pachomian’ only later, by legacy or acquisition.

What is certain—or at least very reasonable—is to conclude that the presence of liturgical works (all of them representing *unica*, and therefore highly valuable both from a textual and religious point of view) suggests an immediate use of the *miscellaneus codex* by the group that produced it,<sup>60</sup> which was without doubt a Christian group.

The mistakes in the Latin texts—although less frequent in the *In Catilinam*, a sign of the superior quality of the model used by the copyist to transcribe this work—also suggest that the scribe was certainly not Latinophone, but rather Graecophone, in a bibliological context however that—it must be stressed again—also includes several biblical Coptic manuscripts.

It is precisely this combination of languages and cultures that makes the Bodmer Papyri an extremely interesting case: Did they reflect a wide cultural-linguistic situation in Late Antique Egypt? Is it possible to think that also other libraries had a similar combination of works and languages?

What cannot be denied is that the spread of the use of Latin—and its contiguity with the use of Greek and Coptic—is confirmed by an interesting text that has been defined as a handbook of conversation in Greek, Latin and Coptic, transmitted by a papyrus fragment, dated to 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, preserved in the Staatliche Museen of Berlin (P.Berol. inv. 10582). Although recently re-edited, it has strangely not attracted all the attention it deserves.<sup>61</sup> The document in question consists of a list of short sentences in Latin (transliterated into the Greek alphabet), translated into Greek and into Coptic, the latter translation directly depending upon the Greek version.

The transcription of the Latin version makes clear the colloquial and practical character of the text and suggests that, although certainly residual if compared to Greek and Coptic, Latin was not used only as a medium of communication among (former) soldiers (and their relatives) or as an essential tool for lawyers, but had a larger range of users, in part still to be explored.

The text is in fact composed of two parts. The first, preserved only in its final section, regards the art of receiving guests, while the second is the dialogue between a *frater* and a *dominus*, who receive a letter by a *puer*. Because of its high interest, I think it is useful to reproduce here the edition of Robert Cavenaile:

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<sup>60</sup> This is also the opinion of Gabriel Nocchi Macedo. NOCCHI MACEDO 2013, p. 150.

<sup>61</sup> SCHUBART 1913, pp. 27-38; CAVENAILE 1958, pp. 394-398 (no. 281); KRAMER 1983, pp. 97-108; KRAMER 2010, pp. 557-566.



*A ... omnibus accumbentibus. Si omnes biberint, terge mensam, adponite in medium candelabra et accendite lucernas....; date nobis bellaria, unguentum. B Dicite omnes: feliciter! Bene nos accepisti et regaliter, ut tibi docet. A Ne quid vultis hic dormire, quod sero est? B Et in hoc gratias habemus ; ut iussisti A Quod vos vultis, ego meum fecit. Accendite lucernas et prosequamini omnes.*

*A Quid facimus, frater ? B... A et ego te, domine (et nos vos). Nescio, quis ostium pulsat. Exito cito foras et disce quis est. B... ab Aurelio venit, nuntium tulit. A Clama illum hic ; quid est puer ? quid nuntias ? P(uer) Omnia bene. Maximus te vult salutare. A Ubi est ? P Foras stat. A Veniat intro Bene venisti M(aximus) Salutant te infantes et parentes istorum, miserunt tibi autem hanc epistulam per puerum.*

*Lettre: Signatus ( ?) et valde consternatus sum, frater, quod multo tempore litteras a te non accepi post multum....[mitte mihi] epistulam ut hilaris f[iam. Saluta] omnes tuos. A Veniat intro ..... sicut peregrini ..... vigilas. B Necessitas fecit me vigilare. [Prode] mus [in .....] curre in domum.<sup>62</sup>*

It is difficult to evaluate the exact purpose for which this text was elaborated and by whom, but it clearly demonstrates that the linguistic and cultural composition of Late Antique Egypt was more multiform and complex than one would think.

Another example of the combination of traditional and Christian works and languages—Greek and Coptic, in this case—that may be compared to the Bodmer Papyri, at least to a certain extent, is in fact represented by the well-known 6<sup>th</sup> century library of Dioscorus of Aphrodito, where the autograph compositions of the son of Apollos were preserved along with Homeric and Menander works, testifying to the classical education of this exponent of an Upper Egyptian well-to-do family.<sup>63</sup>

The case of Dioscorus, who united «in his person the Greek poet and the Coptic lawyer»<sup>64</sup> has so deeply and brilliantly investigated that it is useless to re-analyze it in detail here, but it must be reminded that it should be located in the wider multiform landscape of Late Antique Egypt and not evaluated as an inexplicable exception of surviving classical culture.

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<sup>62</sup> CAVENAILE 1958, pp. 394-398 (no. 281).

<sup>63</sup> MASPERO 1911, pp. 426-481; MACCOULL 1981, pp. 185-193; MACCOULL 1988; KUEHN 1995; FOURNET 1995, pp. 301-315; FOURNET 1997, I, pp. 297-304; FOURNET 1998, pp. 65-82; FOURNET 1999; FOURNET 2001, pp. 475-485; FOURNET 2003, pp. 101-114; CAMERON 2007, pp. 21-46; PAPAConstantinou 2008, pp. 77-88; FOURNET 2012, pp. 97-106; FOURNET 2013, pp. 2141-2142. See also CAVERO 2008.

<sup>64</sup> BEHLMER 1996, p. 584.

## Gnomic literature and culture: sayings of classical origin and fables of pharaonic inspiration<sup>65</sup>

One of the most appreciated literary genres of Late Antique Egypt is without doubt that of the *Apophthegmata*, that is edifying sayings and precepts attributed to the moral authority of the desert fathers, whose function was essentially that of providing an ethical and behavioral model to monastic, but also non-monastic, communities.<sup>66</sup>

Besides the famous *dicta patrum*, however, there is important evidence that Coptic Egypt made also use of other texts that, although probably not considered to have the same dignity as the 'real' literature, had quite a widespread circulation.

This is the case of *chreiai*, gnomic anthologies and similar kinds of moral works translated from Greek and transmitted in the form of collections of sayings and sometimes later re-used to be incorporated in hagiographic works, a literary genre whose fortune was to increase from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>67</sup>

An extremely interesting example of this cultural phenomenon is represented by the *Menandri Monostichoï* or *Menandri Sententiae* (CC 0022),<sup>68</sup> which are collections of one-verse sayings and moral precepts, ordered according to the first letter, that started to circulate in Greek from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD at the latest, under the name of Menander, although only a few of them may be directly referred to the authorship of the comedy writer. Their contents, in fact, draw material in almost equal proportion both from Greek philosophy, tragedy and comedy and from the Old Testament.

The *Menandri Sententiae* represent an 'open work'—potentially expandable to infinity—whose wide circulation—they are known in several languages of oriental Christianity and were transmitted by papyrus and parchment codices, *ostraca* and wooden tablets—made possible a constant insertion of textual material of different types and the formation of several variants of the 'original'. Because of this extremely complex and fluid tradition, which did not have a linear development but rather came into being through accumulations, juxtapositions, convergences and linkages, it has not been possible to identify an archetype of

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<sup>65</sup> Part of this sub-chapter was already published, in a different form, in BUZI 2017, pp. 131-151.

<sup>66</sup> On the contiguity of the literary genres of *chreiai* and *apophthegmata* cf. MORGAN 1988; McVEY 1998, pp. 245-255. On the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and their literary and moral role see LARSEN 2001, pp. 26-35; LARSEN 2006; LARSEN 2007, pp. 409-416; LARSEN 2008, pp. 21-30; LARSEN 2013a, pp. 1-34; LARSEN 2013b, pp. 59-78.

<sup>67</sup> This is the case of the *Life of John Colobus*, showing the «fluidity between *vitae* and *apophthegmata*», as Claudia Rapp observes. Cf. RAPP 2010, pp. 119-130.

<sup>68</sup> The *siglum* CC stands for *Clavis Patrum Coptiorum* or *Clavis Coptica*. See <<http://www.cmcl.it/>>.

the collection of sayings, but only to attempt to describe the different *recensiones* of the same typology of text, as Carlo Pernigotti observes.<sup>69</sup>

Eight witnesses of the *Menandri Sententiae*, all dated between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, come from Late Antique Egypt: four of them are bilingual,<sup>70</sup> in Greek and Coptic, four are in Greek.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, only some of these witnesses have a known provenance: the first is the *ostrakon* O.EdfouIFA0 11 (7<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>72</sup> in Greek and Coptic, from Bawit, whose contents, recently identified by Alain Delattre and Jean-Luc Fournet, unfortunately consist only of seven lines; the second is the *ostrakon* P.Mon.Epiph. II 615 (7<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>73</sup> in Greek, from the Monastery of Epiphanius in Western Thebes; the third is the *ostrakon* O.Frange 7, in Greek, found in the New Kingdom tomb TT 29, later reused as a cell by the monk Frange;<sup>74</sup> lastly, the fourth witness is an epigraphic text, in Greek, found in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, located not far from Dongola.<sup>75</sup> It is interesting to stress the monastic context of the findings of all these four examples.

Were these texts used only for the educational training of the monks, representing therefore a para-literary production, or did they also find a more formal place, in the form of codices, in the monastic libraries, like the collections of *apophthegmata*? It is hard to say, but the existence of two examples of the same sequence of sayings, in Greek and Coptic (P.Copt. I and P. Copt. II),<sup>76</sup> both transmitted by fragments of codices, suggests the circulation of a rather stable tradition of the *Menandri Sententiae* in Egypt, which could have represented, at least in the earlier phase of Egyptian Christianity, a respectable form of literature.

Another example of gnomic anthology of classical origin inherited by Christian Egypt and translated into Coptic is represented by the *Sexti Sententiae* (CC 0690), a unique example of which has survived in a religious and bibliolog-

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<sup>69</sup> PERNIGOTTI 2008, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> They are: 1) P.Vat.inv. g 17 + P.Rain.UnterrichtKopt. 269.1 = P.Copt. I (= MS 37); 2) P.Lond. inv. Pap. 8 = P.Copt. II (= MS 38); 3) O.Vindob. K 674 (= MS 40); 4) O.EdfouIFA0 11 (= MS 39). The first three manuscripts are of unknown provenance.

<sup>71</sup> These are: 1) P.Mon.Epiph. II 615 (= MS 20); 2) O.Frange 751 (= MS 11); 3) inscription from Dongola (= MS 568); 4) P.Ryl. i 41 (= MS 28), this last containing on the verso seven lines of writing in Coptic. A new edition and study of the entire Egyptian *corpus* of the *Menandri Sententiae* is a project undertaken by Carlo Pernigotti and myself: BUZI 2015, pp. 269-286, BUZI – PERNIGOTTI 2015, pp. 287-320. I owe to Serena Funghi my involvement in such a stimulating project.

<sup>72</sup> BACOT 2009, pp. 32-33 and DELATTRE – FOURNET 2011, pp. 79-98: 81-82.

<sup>73</sup> WINLOCK – CRUM 1926, pp. 41-44; JÄKEL 1964, pp. 16-18 (no. 13); BUCKING 1997, pp. 132-138: 134; DELATTRE, 201), pp. 301-302.

<sup>74</sup> BOUD'HORS – HEURTEL 2010, p. 396.

<sup>75</sup> ŁAJTAR 2009, pp. 19-24. I owe this information to Ewa Wipszycka, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

<sup>76</sup> P.Copt. II is however more lacunose than P.Copt. I.

ical context that is *per se* problematic: the Nag Hammadi 'library'. Whatever the reason for the copyist of the Nag Hammadi Codex XII deciding to include the *Sexti Sententiae*<sup>77</sup> in the manuscript, however, it is clear that they were perceived as appropriate for that context. Unfortunately, we do not know if this collection of sayings was translated into Coptic on that occasion or if it was already in circulation in Egypt in that form.

As is well known, the *Sexti Sententiae* are a collection of more than four hundred maxims traditionally attributed to the philosopher Quintus Sextus<sup>78</sup> and have been transmitted in Latin—through the translation by Rufinus—in Syriac, in Armenian and in Arabic. The work does not present a consistent and well-definable philosophical doctrine, but rather, like the *Menandri Sententiae*, proposes pearls of wisdom, which are arranged in small thematic units.<sup>79</sup> The *Sexti Sententiae* are therefore an 'open work', exactly like the *Menandri Sententiae*.

The origin of this work has long been debated: if it is generally accepted that the collection was formed mainly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, in Greek, there is no consensus on the milieu responsible for its creation,<sup>80</sup> although Chadwick's thesis still appears to be the most convincing: «a Christian compiler has edited, carefully revised and modified a previous pagan collection (or perhaps collections)».<sup>81</sup>

Concerning the identity of Sextus, as in the case of Menander, he is probably just a name used to give more credibility and authority to the sentences, not certainly a credible author.

The Nag Hammadi version of the *Sexti Sententiae* is at the moment the only extant Coptic witness (but the Greek tradition is in its turn represented by only two manuscripts: *Codex Patmiensis* 263, 10<sup>th</sup> century, and *Codex Vaticanus Graecus* 742, 14<sup>th</sup> century). Only 10 pages out of the 49 originally destined to contain the work have survived, but they are enough to confirm that among the sayings there are a few unique variants that are peculiar to the Coptic tradition. We have therefore once again a demonstration of freedom, interpolation and originality in the process of translation and acquisition of classical literature by the Christian Egyptian milieu.

It is very likely that, like the *Menandri Sententiae*, the *Sexti Sententiae* must have been perceived as a compendium of basic moral and ethical *praxis*, since the

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<sup>77</sup> PAINCHAUD 1983, pp. 7-28; WISSE 1988, pp. 503-508.

<sup>78</sup> On the Greek tradition of the *Sexti Sententiae* see CHADWICK 1959; WILKEN 1975, pp. 143-168; CARLINI 1985, pp. 5-26; CARLINI 2004, pp. 97-110.

<sup>79</sup> WILKEN 1975, p. 145.

<sup>80</sup> DOMACH 2013, p. 30.

<sup>81</sup> CHADWICK 1959, p. 138.

asceticism, silence, and seclusion proposed therein were values held in common with the Nag Hammadi community.<sup>82</sup>

To the already described gnostic collections of classical origin, it is also necessary to add the so-called *Dicta philosophorum* (CC 0844),<sup>83</sup> a selection of sayings preserved by a fragmentary miscellaneous codex from the White Monastery,<sup>84</sup> datable to the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries and containing *excerpta*, which are certainly much earlier than the manuscript which transmit them. On the *recto* of a leaf now preserved in Vienna (Nationalbibliothek, K 944),<sup>85</sup> we find the final title of what is presented as a collection of philosophical sentences: «Sayings of some philosophers».

The text starts with a series of six sentences attributed to Diogenes—preceded by a maxim of Anacharsis (misspelt as Narchaosis, in the Coptic text)—, in some of which, although they were strongly manipulated, Serena Funghi was able to identify the original version of the sayings of the Cynic philosopher (Nationalbibliothek, K 944r).<sup>86</sup> A small *corpus* of anonymous sentences the sense of which is often obscure (Nationalbibliothek, K 944v-946r),<sup>87</sup> all characterized by a similar *incipit* («another philosopher said...»), and a moral story concerning three friends follows the sayings of Diogenes. The last section, very fragmentary, consists of an explanation of the subdivision of peoples and nations according to their origin from Noah's sons.

What makes the *Dicta philosophorum* particularly interesting is clearly the place they come from: the shelves of one of the most important libraries and cul-

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<sup>82</sup> CAMPLANI 1997, p. 143. Another expression of 'Christian Hellenism' is represented by *The Teachings of Silvanus* (NH VII). Cf. PEEL –ZANDEE 1988, pp. 379-385. Recently, as already said, Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jennott have reposed the hypothesis that the Nag Hammadi codices are to be referred to a monastic community. Cf. LUNDHAUG – JENOTT 2015; BUZI 2016, pp. 95-100.

<sup>83</sup> TILL 1934-1937, II, pp. 165-175; CRUM 1905, pp. 97-98, n. 217 [Or. 3581 A (45)]; FUNGHI 2004, pp. 360-401. For more details on the *Dicta philosophorum* and their reuse in hagiography see again BUZI 2017, pp. 131-151.

<sup>84</sup> MONB.BE contains the following works: Horsiesi, *Logoi de Pascha*, Life of Barthanouba; *Dicta philosophorum aut dicta monachorum*; Carur, *Prophetiae*; Severus of Antioch (?), *excerptum*; Costantine of Siout, *excerptum*; Atanasius of Alexandria, *excerptum*; Demetrius of Antioch, *excerptum*; Archelaus of Neapolis, *excerptum*; Basil of Caesarea, *excerptum*; Rufus of Shotep, *excerptum* (from a catechesis on the *Gospel of Matthew*); prayer. The classification of the Coptic codices from the White Monastery is based on the researches of the *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*. For the content of the codex see above all LUCCHESI 2010, pp. 119-141.

<sup>85</sup> For a detailed description of the section on Diogenes and for the value of the sentence attributed to Anacharsis, cf. FUNGHI 2004, pp. 369-401: 375-380, with a partial new edition of the *Dicta philosophorum* by Alberto Camplani. On the role of the *sententiae* of Diogenes in the school education, cf. CRIBIORE 1996, p. 46. For the Arabic tradition of the sayings of Diogenes see GUTAS 1993, pp. 475-518 and OVERWIEN 2005.

<sup>86</sup> FUNGHI 2004, pp. 360-401.

<sup>87</sup> The fragment Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, K 945 is almost unreadable.

tural centres of mediaeval Coptic Egypt. Of no less importance, on the other hand, is the book form. They are transmitted by a codex, also containing *excerpta* of homilies. In this case, therefore, we are certainly dealing with a literary manuscript.

It is plausible to speculate that the surviving codex is a copy of an older model and that the *Dicta philosophorum* had occupied the shelves of the White Monastery library for a long time.

All these collections must have represented for Christian Egypt one of the expressions of a wisdom literature comparable to the *Apophthegmata patrum*, useful in forming the virtuous man who does nothing unworthy of God,<sup>88</sup> and, on the other, the endurance of scholarly classical models in use for centuries.<sup>89</sup> In this respect it is difficult not to agree with the words of Teresa Morgan: «What pupils learnt was a collection of ideas and instructions whose literary derivation guaranteed their greekness and cultural authority, while they were diverse enough and imprecise enough in content to apply to almost any social situation» and «All the same *gnomai* appear in monasteries in the fifth and sixth centuries as appeared in Greek and Graeco-Roman villages in the pre-Christian era».<sup>90</sup>

It is in the perspective of the moral training that the famous wall painting found in a room of the female section of the Monastery of Bawit, representing three mice walking on their hindlegs and approaching a cat should also be (re)-considered.<sup>91</sup> «Using their forepaws like hands, one mouse carries a banner while another has a vial in one paw and a funnel in the other. The oblong object carried by the third mouse might be a papyrus roll; a staff lies against its shoulder».<sup>92</sup> It has been suggested that the associated (and problematic) Coptic inscription reads «cat of (the Delta town) Buto», employing the Arabic word for cat written in Coptic script (Drioton, Maspero) or, alternatively, that the caption simply gives the personal name of the animal (Schall).

Several scholars have suggested that the painting might represent an episode of the *War of mice and cats*, and more precisely the culmination of hostilities and the definitive capitulation of the mice to the arrogant cat. Numerous variants of the story are known through the mediaeval Greek tradition, being the

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<sup>88</sup> A good example in this respect is offered by P. Palau Rib. inv. 225v (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent.) edited by CARLINI 1985, pp. 5-26: 10-12. Aphorisms, in Greek, were found also among the manuscripts of Bala'izah. KAHLE 1954, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> CAMERON 2007, pp. 21-46: 29. New researches, however, seem to demonstrate that the situation was probably more veiled. The forthcoming proceedings of the conference "Pratiche didattiche tra centro e periferia nel Mediterraneo tardoantico" (Rome, 13-15 May 2015), edited by G. Agosti and D. Bianconi, will certainly shed more light on these aspects.

<sup>90</sup> MORGAN 1988, pp. 123-124.

<sup>91</sup> Cairo, Coptic Museum, Inv. No. 8441. DRIOTON 1931, pp. 43-45, pl. lii-liii; SCHALL 1955, pp. 69-70; DEL FRANCIA 1985, pp. 31-58.

<sup>92</sup> GABRA – EATON-KRAUSS 2006, p. 93.

*Galeomachia* by Theodoros Prodromos (12<sup>th</sup> century), who has probably rearranged previous literary material, in turn clearly inspired by the pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia*, the most famous of them.<sup>93</sup> There are however several other Greek narrations in which cats and mice—and their ancestral rivalry—are protagonists, and despite the fact that all the manuscripts that transmit them are late (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) it is reasonable to think that they are late witnesses and re-elaborations of ancient narratives.

This is case of the *Physiologus*, a sort of fantastic encyclopaedia on the behaviour of different species of animals, of Ὁ κᾶτης καὶ οἱ ποντικοί, a parodistic and didactical work in which a cat attempts to win the trust of a group of mice, proposing a pact to them, which is inevitably destined to fail, and of the so-called Σχέδη τοῦ μύος, consisting of models for school composition, whose date of creation is unknown, where a mouse is caught by a female cat and, trying to regain his freedom, pretends to be an abbot and that his monks will pray for her. This last work is particularly interesting since it represents a polemic regarding the behaviour of some monks and their attitude in serving and adulating powerful figures.<sup>94</sup>

It is difficult to establish which of these stories—or a variant of them—inspired the wall painting of Bawit, but one should not forget that pharaonic Egypt provides many examples, both literary and iconographic, of similar narrative threads, which are parodistic and moralistic at the same time.

The numerous Egyptian *ostraca* and papyri portraying animals acting as humans have been interpreted by some Egyptologists as a visual parody of society and its hierarchy, where often things are the reverse of what they should be.<sup>95</sup> Mice and cats are frequently represented in these *ostraca*, most of which date back to the New Kingdom, and to the Ramessid Period in particular. This is the case of an *ostrakon* found by Ernesto Schiaparelli in Deir el-Medina, in 1905, representing a religious procession where four jackals transport a tabernacle on which three deities are standing: a monkey, a mouse—that seems to be the most important—and a fantastic bird. A mouse-priest reads a ritual from a tablet, while another jackal burns incense.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> HUNGER 1968; AHLBORN 1968; ROMANO 1999, pp. 230-283.

<sup>94</sup> For a very accurate and exhaustive description of the mediaeval fortune of these works and their contents, and a wide bibliography on the theme, see CARPINATO 2005, pp. 175-192. See also BĂNESCU 1935, pp. 393-397; PAPADEMETRIU 1969, pp. 210-222; LUCIANI 2001-2002, pp. 195-230.

<sup>95</sup> BEAUREGARD 1936; CURTO 1965; BRUNNER-TRAUT 2001; MESKELL 2004, pp. 154-157; FLORES 2004, pp. 232-255. Emma Brunner-Traut has noted that «literary texts suggest that storytellers made sketches on ostraca during story recitals». BRUNNER-TRAUT 1979a, p. 9; BRUNNER-TRAUT 2000.

<sup>96</sup> CURTO 1965, fig. 4.



It is possible that some of these Egyptian stories merged with others of Greek origin, becoming a compendium of humorous morality and generic condemnation of the abuses of power, suitable for the education of any wise man. The scene depicted on the walls of the cell at Bawit—where the tragedy of the mice, continuously threatened by the cat, might be a representation of the catastrophic consequences of a battle against powerful enemies (the Arabs? the Persians? religious antagonists?)—also suggests that monks enjoyed such stories and, whatever the source of this specific painting, it shows yet again how traditional culture—classical, pharaonic, or a mixture of the two—could be ‘translated’ into a ‘Christian language’.

### **The so-called *Alexander Romance* and *Cambyses Romance*: secular or Christian(ized) literature?**

Composed in different periods and originally with different purposes, the *Alexander Romance* and the *Cambyses Romance* to a certain extent share a similar destiny: although sometimes classified as rare examples of secular works within a literature which is otherwise completely Christian,<sup>97</sup> and despite their undeniable classical ‘taste’ and inspiration, the two ‘romances’, in different ways and by diverse means, perfectly fit into the phenomenon of re-use of classical themes, characters and narratives with a Christian purpose, a phenomenon that, as we have seen, is very well represented also by the fortune of the *Menandri Sententiae* and other collections of sayings and by the works preserved in *codex miscellaneus Barcinonensis*.<sup>98</sup>

Defined as the «supreme fiction»<sup>99</sup> and «antiquity’s most successful novel»<sup>100</sup>, the *Alexander Romance*, being at the same time a perfect heir of the tradition of the ancient novel,<sup>101</sup> which sees in the *Life of Aḥīqar* a sort of prototype,<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> For Stephen Emmel, for instance, «While some religious poetry is known apart from hymns and other specifically liturgical compositions, novels or anything vaguely resembling secular literature are effectively non-existent (although the hagiographical literature sometimes makes extensive and clever use of novelistic style); the only two works worth mentioning in this regard are the so-called *Alexander Romance* and *Cambyses Romance*». EMMEL 2007, p. 88. C.D.G. Müller manifests a more rigid opinion: «Those who treat some Coptic literature as being ‘profane’ err; Coptic literature is Christian. As a tool of God, Alexander could be considered a prophet; as a martyr, he foreshadowed Christ». MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061.

<sup>98</sup> CIZEK 1978, pp. 593-607.

<sup>99</sup> SELDEN 2012, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> REARDON 1989, p. 650.

<sup>101</sup> SCHMELING 2003; PERRY 1967.

<sup>102</sup> MEYER 1912; CONTINI – GROTTANELLI 2005; BETRÒ 2005, pp. 177-191; SELDEN 2013, pp. 2-9.

and a model for future narrative, had indeed an unparalleled success worldwide.<sup>103</sup>

Exactly like the *Menandri Sententiae*, the *Alexander Romance* represents a fluid tradition: the more than one hundred extant versions (in Greek, Latin,<sup>104</sup> Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Slavonic, among others),<sup>105</sup> make it clear that it is impossible to reconstruct an archetype of this *Königsnovelle*,<sup>106</sup> in which Hellenistic, Jewish<sup>107</sup> and Egyptian/Demotic traditional layers are identifiable<sup>108</sup> and where the 'real' Alexander is completely substituted by a 'mythical' Alexander, with the consequent insertion of continuous chronological overthrows and fictitious characters.<sup>109</sup> «Greek novels in Egypt—whatever their significance for audiences elsewhere in the Empire—served both to insert Egyptian literate in Greek within a transimperial community of readers, and, at the same time, through their construction of a phantasmatic Greek identity and promotion of 'Hellenic' values, to estrange them», as David Selden observes.<sup>110</sup>

If the Alexandrian origin of the work is clearly perceptible in the most ancient Greek recension (denominated  $\alpha$ , and probably to be dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries), in which the redactor demonstrates a good knowledge of the topography of Alexandria and the temporal scansion is made by means of the Egyptian months, in the later Greek versions the Egyptian *substratum* of the work appears more attenuated.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the fact that only very few fragments, belonging to two manuscripts—the remains of a paper codex from the White Monastery and a papy-

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<sup>103</sup> BARNES 1956, pp. 29-36.

<sup>104</sup> CRACCO RUGGINI 1965, pp. 3-80; FRUGONI 1995, pp. 161-173. See also STONEMAN 2007b; STONEMAN 2007c; STONEMAN – GARGIULO 2012.

<sup>105</sup> For a census of the manuscripts belonging to the Greek tradition see FRASER 1996, pp. 203-226 and JOUANNO 2002; STONEMAN 2007; STONEMAN 2007; MCINERNY 2007, pp. 424-430. See also STONEMAN 2003, pp. 601-612; PASCHALIS 2007, pp. 70-102. See also GERO 1992, pp. 83-87. See now MATTHEY 2017, pp. 47-72.

<sup>106</sup> HERMANN 1938; HOFMAN 2005; LOPRIENO 1996, pp. 277-295.

<sup>107</sup> HOFFMEIER 1997.

<sup>108</sup> JASNOW 1997, pp. 95-103.

<sup>109</sup> In one of the most remarkable cases of re-interpretations of history, Alexander is presented as the son of Olympiades and Nectabebo, the last indigenous pharaoh, and is described struggling with Darius I, a much more glorious sovereign than the obscure and pusillanimous—in the Greek-Egyptian perspective, of course—Darius III. In the Serbian tradition Alexander is even presented as a contemporary of Tarquin the Great. CHRISTIANS 1991, pp. 32-34; SELDEN, 2012, p. 36. In the Persian tradition the *Alexander Romance* is attributed to Aristotles. SOUTHGATE 1978. For the Arabic tradition see ZUWIYYA 2001; DOUFIKAR-AERTS 2010.

<sup>110</sup> SELDEN 2013, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> LUSINI 1994, pp. 95-118; 96-97. On the relation between the *Alexander Romance* and Egypt see BRAUN 1938, pp. 13-43; PFISTER 1946, pp. 35-52; MACUCH 1989, pp. 503-511.

rus fragment—, have survived in Coptic (CC 0468), it is possible to observe the enlargement, re-elaboration and re-interpretation of the narrative plot,<sup>112</sup> that reveals the insertion of at least three episodes that do not appear in any of the known Greek versions.<sup>113</sup>

Notwithstanding the attention that the *Alexander Romance* has enjoyed, the most important and stimulating questions remain unanswered: To which period do its translation and adaptation into Coptic date back?<sup>114</sup> Who was responsible for it? A monk or a lay redactor?<sup>115</sup> Which was the place of the *Alexander Romance* in the library of the White Monastery and therefore in the culture and educational training of the monks?<sup>116</sup> Was it perceived to have the same dignity of the other works preserved on the shelves of the same library? Did an older codex transmitting the same work also exist at Shenoute's time or was the *Romance* a later acquisition for the library? What kind of reception and circulation did it have outside the White Monastery?<sup>117</sup> Was the Coptic version of the *Romance*—as we have it, with its additional episodes—written directly in Coptic or was it translated from another local but lost Greek version?

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<sup>112</sup> BOURIANT 1887a, pp. 1-38; BOURIANT 1887b, pp. 340-49; MASPERO 1889, pp. 321-338; CRUM 1892, pp. 473-482; VON LEMM 1903; PIETSCHMANN 1903, pp. 304-312; CRAMER 1959, pp. 50-51, 53, 119-20; KHOSROYEV 1982, N. 4, cc. 125-130; KHOSROYEV 1983, pp. 52-55; KHOSROYEV 1986, c. 153-157; MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061; LUSINI 1992, pp. 259-270; SELDEN 2011, pp. 133-155; MACCOULL 2012, pp. 255-260. An efficacious summary and description of the narrative thread in MASPERO 2002, pp. 243-253.

<sup>113</sup> The Coptic version of the *Romance* is mainly based on the Greek recension  $\alpha$ , but there are also some elements that are present in recension  $\beta$ . Therefore, it is deducible that the Coptic version made use of a third version which included variants of two recensions,  $\alpha$  e  $\beta$ . Leslie MacCougll summarizes the new episodes as follows (p. 256): «addition of a moralising biblical verse to at least one chapter-heading», addition of the «three companions of Alexander who are unique to this version and its treatment of the 'Land of Darkness'»; «the literary 'will' of one of those companions as a reflection of known documentary practice». MACCOULL 2012, p. 256. On the same matter, see LUSINI 1992, pp. 262-269, who identifies four new episodes in the Coptic *Romance*. See also LUSINI 2007, pp. 41-45.

<sup>114</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> century for MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061; 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century for MACCOULL 2012, pp. 255-260.

<sup>115</sup> This is the opinion of Gianfrancesco Lusini, but, although very fascinating, it is hard to be demonstrated. See LUSINI 1994, p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> It is not sharable the assertion according to which «The Coptic *Romance* which portrays Alexander as a Christian prophet has its origin in the White Monastery near Sohag in Upper Egypt». VAN DONZEL – SCHMIDT 2010. Clearly, the fact that the extant fragments come from the White Monastery does not necessarily mean that the work was created by that cultural centre. Moreover, the manuscript in question is a very late witness of an older literary tradition.

<sup>117</sup> Leslie MacCougll is the only one, as far as we know, to have posed the problem, although without reaching a conclusion: «What was the audience for the *Romance* in Coptic Egypt, and how did it reach its audience?». MACCOULL 2012, p. 259.

Partial answers to these questions may come from the few elements at our disposal: the nine fragmentary thin paper leaves (18 x 12,5 cm ca.) from the White Monastery transmitting the work belonged to a paper manuscript (MONB. FC,<sup>118</sup> according to the classification of the *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*) whose manufacture is certainly not tidy and accurate: the margins, although seriously compromised, were not wide, the lines are extremely compressed, the «writing is scratchy, small, and rapid, the letters badly formed, the spelling corrupt, and the grammar faulty at times»,<sup>119</sup> the ruling is totally missing. In his description of the manuscript Gaston Maspero affirms «It seems to me improbable that the writing is earlier than the thirteenth century, but the redaction of the work may go back as far as the tenth or eleventh century A.D.».<sup>120</sup>

Although Maspero's considerations about the date of the manuscript and also of the Coptic redaction of the work are not sharable, being very likely both earlier than he thought, all these elements together seem to suggest a semi-peripheral role of the *Alexander Romance* compared to the rest of the book collection of the White Monastery, at least in the last phase of its existence. A role that had probably to do with the moral training of the monks, based also on 'classical' *paideia*. Once more, the comparison with the use of the *Menandri Sententiae* appear very strict.

The use of the *Romance* for a high 'school' education, on the other hand, is confirmed also by the only other extant fragment, of unknown provenance, transmitting the text in Coptic. It is a very small opistograph papyrus fragment (4 x 4 cm ca.) preserved in the Puškin Museum. The fragment has remnants of 5 and 6 lines on the two sides respectively. «The front page (fibres vertical) has the names of the three protagonists of *Alexander Romance* (Menander, Selpharios, Diatrophē)<sup>121</sup> and two lines of text (remnants). On the back the Coptic alphabet is written».<sup>122</sup> The presence of some Arabic letters is an important element, although it is hard to confirm the date («10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> cent.») attributed by A.I. Elanskaya to the fragment.

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<sup>118</sup> Leslie MacCoull affirms: «Though this text, in Sahidic with Bohairic influences, seems to have been copied in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century, the version of the Romance it transmits was probably made by a bilingual, Greek- and Coptic-speaking Egyptian redactor much earlier, possibly in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. However, there is far from being a consensus on these matters». MACCOULL 2012, p. 256.

<sup>119</sup> MASPERO 2002, pp. 243-244.

<sup>120</sup> MASPERO 2002, p. 244.

<sup>121</sup> In the Greek tradition the companions of Alexander are Antiochus, Seleucus, Philip and Philo or Ptolemy, Seleucus, Antigonus and Antipater.

<sup>122</sup> ELANSKAYA 1994, p. 163, no. 19. For the papyrus evidence of the use of the (Greek) *Alexander Romance* in the schools, see CRIBIORE 1996, nos. 347, 348, 349, 350; CRIBIORE 2001, pp. 235-236.

The presence of a Menander among Alexander's companions may constitute another link with the *Menandri Sententiae*: both Oscar von Lemm and Gaston Maspero explained the presence of this character in the Coptic version of the *Alexander Romance* with the fortune of the Greek author—although 'revisited' to the point of having nothing in common with the historical Menander—in Christian Egypt. In this respect Maspero affirms:

It appears to me that Menander is the comic poet of that name, whose moral maxims, taken from his comedies, acquired so great a reputation in the Christian world; the title borne by him, First of Philosophers or First of Friends, shows us that tradition assigned him a high rank among the crowd of learned men and scribes that accompanied Alexander to the East.<sup>123</sup>

It is interesting to note that there are other paper fragments from the White Monastery, that—regarding dimensions, layout, general appearance—are comparable to those of the *Alexander Romance*. These are mainly liturgical fragments and prayers. Particularly interesting is the case of Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. or. oct. 409 ff. 44 and 45 that for paleographical features, layout and general appearance reminds us closely of the fragments of the *Alexander Romance*.<sup>124</sup>

If the *Alexander Romance* still found place on the shelves of the White Monastery when its book collection included mainly liturgical manuscripts, this should not be underestimated, probably being due to the traditional respect enjoyed by this work, which in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries was still perceived as respectful, as is also demonstrated by its later Copto-Arabic versions.<sup>125</sup>

The fortune of the *Romance* till such a late period in such a conservative monastic context is explainable with its apocalyptic character. Alexander condemned being thrown in a dark pit called Chaos, but saved by Antiochus, who, although not disinterestedly, substitutes his body with a big stone and feeds him with bread and wine, is one of the episodes which appear only in the Coptic version, condensing traditional Egyptian apocalyptic motives and very clear references to the New Testament and Christ's vicissitudes. Two other episodes typical of the Coptic version are also of the same tone: The first sees Menander having a

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<sup>123</sup> MASPERO 2002, p. 249. «If the Menander mentioned by the Coptic version is historical»—Leslie MacCougll observes—«would have been one of the Alexander's companions mentioned in both Arrian and Ps.-Callisthenes. Von Lemm thought the character had been conflated by the Christian redactor with the later Menander, author of the popular school text the *Sententiae*, but this makes little sense». MACCOULL 2012, p. 257.

<sup>124</sup> BUZI 2014, pp. 184-213.

<sup>125</sup> For the Copto-Arabic tradition of the *Romance* see SIDARUS 2012a, pp. 441-448; SIDARUS 2012b, pp. 137-176 and SIDARUS 2013, pp. 477-495. See also SETTIS FRUGONI 1973, pp. 150-154. For the Arabo-Islamic tradition see GRAF 1944, pp. 545-546; GRAF 1947, p. 433. See also PIEMONTESE 1995, pp. 177-183.

dream in which a lion falls down in a hollow, losing its purple mantle; the lion is rescued by Menander himself. In the second episode Alexander, believed dead, appears to his companions disguised as a soldier, inciting them to drink and to eat despite their mourning. Chased away for his disrespectful attitude, he reappears to them the day after in a sort of revisited resurrection.

At this point, the transformation of Alexander from a historical sovereign into a Christian hero is complete,<sup>126</sup> also by means of the important contribution of religious themes and mythological constructions of pharaonic Egypt.

The *Cambyses Romance* (CC 0519)<sup>127</sup> represents in a way a symmetrical case—although different in formation and tradition—compared to the *Alexander Romance*.

One copy, acephalous and mutilated, has survived, consisting of only six fragments.<sup>128</sup> We will not enter into the details of the different opinions concerning the language in which the *Cambyses Romance* was written—although the opinion that it was composed directly in Coptic is almost totally shared—,<sup>129</sup> the period in which it was produced,<sup>130</sup> and the milieu responsible for its creation,<sup>131</sup> all aspects that have been widely discussed in the last twenty years, without producing a shared theory.

What is of greater interest is the nature of the work, which has been synthetically but efficaciously described by Philip F. Venticinque as follows: «in the end, what we have in the *Cambyses Romance* is a fantastic account of pagan Egypt and the invasion of Cambyses told presumably through Coptic Christian eyes».<sup>132</sup>

The text is written in Sahidic, and was originally part of a larger manuscript of unknown provenance. The story deals with the Persian king Cambyses II (529-522 BC) and his epistle to the «inhabitants of the East», a people subject to the authority of the Egyptians, by which he attempts, without success, to incite

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<sup>126</sup> Chapter 36 of the Coptic version of the *Alexander Romance* is introduced by a Scripture quotation (Syr. 40,29). The lacunose state of the manuscript does not let us know if all the chapters were introduced in the same way.

<sup>127</sup> SCHÄFER 1899, pp. 727-744; MÖLLER – SCHÄFER 1901, pp. 1-95; JANSEN 1950.

<sup>128</sup> Berlin, Staatliche Museen P 9009.1-6.

<sup>129</sup> TAIT 1994, pp. 203-222: 215: «probably composed in Coptic»; BELTZ 1997, pp. 43-47: 43: «So scheint es klar zu sein, daß der Kambysesroman ein genuin koptisches Werk gewesen ist». For a different opinion, see RICHTER 1997-1998, pp. 55-66.

<sup>130</sup> For the problems of dating see CRUZ-URIBE 2006, pp. 51-56. Müller affirms: «The romance was probably composed before the fifth or sixth century, or perhaps even as late as the eighth or ninth century, in response to the pressure of an Arabian invader». MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061.

<sup>131</sup> According to Müller: «The Coptic author seems to have been a monk of Upper Egypt who probably revised an older original for his own purposes. Biblical and Greek authors (including Herodotus) are the sources for the text». MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061.

<sup>132</sup> VENTICINQUE 2006, p. 155.

them against the pharaoh. Supported by the wise words of Bothros, the «inhabitants of the East» remain faithful to the Egyptians and to the cult of the holy bull Apis.<sup>133</sup> The Egyptians do not hesitate to express their animosity towards Cambyses to the point that at times in the narrative his name meaningfully changes into that of the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BC).

Later in the narration, one of the mentors of Cambyses/Nebuchadnezzar suggests sending false messengers to the Egyptians and inviting them to a feast dedicated to the god Apis. The Egyptians, however, perceived the deception and the pharaoh Apries (588-568 BC)<sup>134</sup> ordered the army to prepare to face the enemy. Unfortunately, the text stops here and we do not know if the narrative had a happy ending.<sup>135</sup>

It has been correctly observed that more than with Herodotus' account,<sup>136</sup> the *Cambyses Romance*, with its non-fortuitous overlapping of Cambyses' and Nabuchadnezzar's figures, has several points in common with Josephus' narration and, above all, with the *Book of Judith*,<sup>137</sup> the *Apocalypse of Elijah*<sup>138</sup> and the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu.<sup>139</sup>

One should not forget, however, that the Demotic literary tradition<sup>140</sup> is also very perceptible: as is well known, Assyrians and Persians are also associated,<sup>141</sup> for instance, in the *Oracle of the Potter*<sup>142</sup> and in the *Prophecy of the*

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<sup>133</sup> It is interesting to note that Bothros, in refusing Cambyses' proposal of betrayal of the Egyptians, mentions, as allies of the latter, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Idumeneans.

<sup>134</sup> Apries substitutes here clearly the pharaoh who historically ruled during Cambyses' invasion, Psammetichus III.

<sup>135</sup> Numerous articles have been dedicated to the different aspects of the *Cambyses Romance*. I mention here the most useful to reconstruct the nature of this anomalous work: VON LEMM 1900, pp. 64-115; MÖLLER – SCHÄFER 1901, pp. 113-116; SPIEGELBERG 1908-1909), pp. 83-84; VON LEMM 1910, pp. 77-79; BILABEL 1923, pp. 401-403; GRAPOW 1938, pp. 55-68; CRAMER 1959, pp. 51-52, 118-119; KAMMERZELL 1987, pp. 31-39; YAMAUCHI 1996, p. 391; RICHTER 1997-1998, pp. 55-68; SELDEN 1999, pp. 33-63; DÖPP 2003, pp. 1-17; SUERMANN 2006, p.101; SELDEN 2013, pp. 1-40.

<sup>136</sup> KLASSENS 1944-1948, pp. 339-349; HOFMANN – VORBICHLER 1980, pp. 86-105; BROWN 1982, pp. 387-403; DEPUYDT 1995, pp. 119-126; KAHN 2007, pp. 103-112.

<sup>137</sup> In the *Book of Judith* Nabuchadnezzar is called «king of Assyrians». RICHTER 1996), pp. 145-149. For the relationship between the *Cambyses Romance* and the *Book of Judith* (II 5) see SELDEN 2013, p. 25.

<sup>138</sup> In the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, a Coptic text originally thought to have been written in Greek, we also find the associations Assyrians/Chaos and «King of peace»/Order. PIETERSMA – COMSTOCK – ATTRIDGE 1979; FRANKFURTER, 1993. CAVT 167.

<sup>139</sup> FIACCADORI 2009, pp. 209-218; MÜLLER 1991, pp. 2059-2061; WENINGER 2007, pp. 298-299.

<sup>140</sup> TAIT 1996, pp. 175-187.

<sup>141</sup> ALTHEIM-STIEHL 1992, pp. 87-97; ALTHEIM-STIEHL 1998, VIII, pp. 252-254; BRESCIANI 1993, pp. 502-528; DIGNAS – WINTER 2007.

<sup>142</sup> KOENEN 2002 pp. 139-187; RYHOLT 2011, p. 718; BETRÒ 2012, pp. 80-82.



*Lamb*,<sup>143</sup> both works generally classified as apocalyptic.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the tone of the *Romance* reminds us in general that of the 'Poem' of *Qadesh*, where Ramses II, exactly like Apries, acts under a sort of divine investiture.

The *Cambyses Romance* is therefore the result of multiform inspirations, not devoid, once more, of a moral finality. Venticinque correctly observes that what appears as «misidentifications may not be mistakes at all, but powerful rhetorical devices. The author of the *Cambyses Romance* has tapped into Greek, Biblical and Egyptian traditions to create an image of Cambyses that is all three: at once a classical conqueror, a Biblical archenemy of God's chosen people, and a symbolic force of disruption in the land, a typhonic figure associated with other famous forces of disruption, namely Nabuchadnezzar and the Assyrians»,<sup>145</sup> creating a rhetorical and therefore powerful moral connection between Egypt and Jerusalem, «his spiritual homeland».<sup>146</sup>

Despite the apparent novelty of the *Cambyses Romance* and the apparently secular character of its narrative thread, this work is part of a long Egyptian religious tradition, which sees the forces of Chaos (the Persians/Assyrians, Cambyses) opposed to those of the Order (Apries, the "King of Peace", a reincarnated form of *Maat*). Cambyses is humiliated, but at the same time he represents the necessary instrument for the redemption of the Egyptians.

It is the well known religious mechanism that Jan Assmann defines as *Chaosbeschreibung*,<sup>147</sup> in which the disorder, generated by a subversion of the *status quo*, is defeated by the eventual return of a native ruler,<sup>148</sup> and whose fortune goes beyond the limits of the Coptic literature, giving birth to the Copto-Arabic apocalypses.

The chronological distance of the hero from the actual religious-political vicissitudes that produced the narrative—be they the post-Chalcedonian controversies or the invasion of the Arabs—locating him in a timeless dimension, assigns a mythological value to a historical event.

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<sup>143</sup> BRESCIANI 1990, pp. 803-814; BETRÒ 2012, pp. 79-80.

<sup>144</sup> For the contacts between this apocalyptic genre and the *Asclepius* see FOWDEN 1993, pp. 32-34. See also MAHÉ 1982, pp. 68-112. The authors of the *Romance* may have inherited the themes of the Demotic tradition through Greek, since both the *Oracle of the Potter* and the *Profecy of the Lamb* knew a Greek phase.

<sup>145</sup> VENTICINQUE 2006, p. 156.

<sup>146</sup> VENTICINQUE 2006, p. 142.

<sup>147</sup> ASSMANN 2002, pp. 106-114; DILLERY 2005, pp. 387-406. For David Selden «the novel returns to recuperate retrospectively the principal traumatic turning point in the millennial trajectory that secured Egypt's subordination within the Levantine-Mediterranean world system [...] situating Kambysēs' incursion within a series of historical assailants—Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Gauls—that the Egyptians had either defeated or successfully repulsed». SELDEN 2013, p. 22.

<sup>148</sup> DILLERY 2005, pp. 387-406.

## Tentative conclusions

I am aware that the questions posed by these pages are more than the answers. My purpose, however, was exactly that of stimulating a new reflection on old data, going beyond some classifications that are too often taken for granted: secular ‘urban’ milieus as the only bastions of preservation of classical culture (and pagan values), as opposed to (organized) monasticism as a patron of a new idea of culture, where the Bible, hagiography and canons are the new classics, the only works that should be considered a reading suitable for the good Christian.

The reality, at least until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was much more complex, as we have seen. Through direct and, more often, through karstic educational paths, classical literature and culture permeate early Egyptian Christianity, re-emerging in the form of sporadic unconscious quotations (Shenoute), re-readings of classical and post-classical works (*In Catilinam* and *Alcestis* in the Bodmer Papyri), re-elaboration, manipulation and translations of classical works and collections of sayings (*Menandri Sententiae*, *Sexti Sententiae*, *Dicta philosophorum*, but also Plato’s *Respublica* in the Nag Hammadi ‘library’).

But neither Coptic Egypt forgot the pharaonic literature and religion,<sup>149</sup> although mediated through Hellenism. In an interesting but rather neglected article, Louis-Theophile Lefort pointed out that the *Rules* of Pachomius contain a quotation of the so-called “Negative Confession” (*Book of the Dead*, 125), and identified a series of textual relations—sometimes *ad textum*, more often *ad sensum*—between ancient Egyptian literature, above all of gnomic character, such as the *Teaching of Ani* and the *Instructions of Amenemope*, and the Pachomian work.<sup>150</sup> Such a fact may be explained with the school training of the founder of the coenobitic monasticism, who in his *Vita* is said to have learnt the “Egyptian letters”, whatever this means.<sup>151</sup>

The best result of this appropriation and re-visitation, however, is that of the *Alexander Romance*, where the Hellenistic sovereign becomes a Christian incarnation of *Maat*, and the *Cambyses Romance*, a late (surely post-6<sup>th</sup> century) narrative creation, which makes use of the well-known polemics against past enemies to hide the real, contemporary religious and political target.

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<sup>149</sup> On this aspect see BEHLMER 1996, pp. 567-590. See also ZANDEE 1971, pp. 211-219; LICHTHEIM 1983, pp. 184-196. For the influence of Egyptian literature on the *Apophthegmata* see BRUNNER-TRAUT 1979b, pp. 173-216. On the incorruption of the body of martyrs, as a form of legacy of the pharaonic mummification and cult of the dead, see BAUMEISTER 1972, pp. 73-86. See also BRUNNER 1961, pp. 145-147.

<sup>150</sup> LEFORT 1927, pp. 65-74.

<sup>151</sup> Against the hypothesis of forms of conservation of pharaonic literary models in Coptic literature is Adolf Erman. ERMAN 1906, pp. 28-38.

The fact that we have lost entire pages of the history of Late Antique culture of Egypt, and therefore of the tastes and choices which marked and oriented libraries and book collections, is after all confirmed by one of the rare extant book-lists: P.L.Bat. 25,13, datable to the 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>152</sup> The list is preserved in 19 fragments of a papyrus roll, at least 2 m long and 9 cm high, which, in addition to several other items, numbers 45 books, probably belonging to a monastery. It is interesting to note that the list is compiled in Greek and that it mentions the presence of two bilingual books (*Psalms* and *Acts*), i.e. in Greek and Coptic. The fact that the list is written in Greek may suggest that this was the main language of the library. On the other hand, since the scribe erases the adjective ἑλληνικός originally associated with one of the volumes, that he had clearly added by mistake, leads us to believe that the language of all the other books was Coptic. Interestingly enough in the list a *Life of Galla Placidia* is also mentioned,<sup>153</sup> otherwise unknown. A fact that suggests the enormous number of works circulating in Late Antique Egypt whose existence we totally ignore.<sup>154</sup>

It will not be superfluous to conclude these pages stressing the importance of the textual discoveries made in Kellis, at Dakhleh Oasis, in the 1990's.<sup>155</sup> Although a 'heterodox' context, and therefore only partially comparable to what we have described here, it may represent a helpful *tessera* to reconstruct the complex cultural mosaic of Late Antique Egypt. It is extremely interesting to take into consideration that in a precisely delimited archaeological area the *Epistles of Mani* (in Coptic) have been found along with some other Manichaean literary texts (in Greek), a fragment of Homer, some fragments of the New Testament (in Coptic), some other semi-literary texts in Syriac and Coptic, and above all three previously lost orations by Isocrates, contained in a well-preserved wooden polyptych: the *Ad Demonium*, the *Ad Nicoclem*, and the *Nicocles*.<sup>156</sup>

Late Antique Egyptian Christianity, at least until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was not a monolithic reality, but rather a complex stratification of layers of literary and religious traditions, in which the mutual influence of classic (but also pharaonic) and Christian beliefs is undeniable—as also the well-known classic iconographic motives of Coptic textiles clearly attest—although such a delicate balance is des-

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<sup>152</sup> HOOGENDIJ – VAN MINNEN 1991; OTRANTO 1997, pp. 123-144: 135-137.

<sup>153</sup> Against the opinion of Peter van Minnen (edition of P.Leid.Inst. 13), Chrysi Kotsifou correctly observes that the *Life of Galla Placidia* cannot be considered a pagan work. KOTSIFOU 2007, pp. 48-66: 53.

<sup>154</sup> On the contrary, the booklist of the Monastery of St. Elijah of the Rock (Ostrakon IFAO 13315), in Greek, contains more expectable works. COQUIN 1975, pp. 207-239.

<sup>155</sup> BAGNALL 2011, pp. 75-93.

<sup>156</sup> GARDNER 1996; WÖRPER – RIJKSBARON 1997; GARDNER 2007. Very interesting is also the famous agricultural account: BAGNALL 1997. See also GARDNER – ALCOCK – FUNK 1999.

tined to be replaced soon by a new literary phase: a Coptic literature in which there is no space for works that are not fully Christian. This is the Coptic literature we know better—that precisely for this reason risks overshadowing the previous one—in which, however, the phenomenon of the translations continues to have a central role.

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