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Tito Orlandi

Nag Hammadi Texts and the Coptic Literature

The study of the so-called Nag Hammadi (= NH) codices has always been directed, from one side, to each individual text,¹ and from the other, to the general significance of the collection for our knowledge of the religious doctrines and literary history of Late Antiquity.² So peculiar was even at a first glance the character of the texts, so unexpected was their discovery, that it was soon evident that at least part of the conventional wisdom on gnosticism and early Christianity had to be adjusted to cope with these new documents. This situation encouraged the vision of the codices, at least for certain purposes, as an homogeneous entity.

In this paper I shall assume that this vision is reasonable, in spite of the otherwise right opinion, which is now generally accepted, that technically the codices, and consequently the texts that they contain, cannot be considered as homogeneous, and I shall explain the sense and motivation of this assumption. This presupposes that I briefly recapitulate the main issues at stake. Let me remind first, that James Robinson in his paper which introduced the celebration of the fifty years from the discovery³ has indicated the three main novelties brought by the texts in the field of religious studies: the importance of the sect that can be called of “the Sethians”, and the possibility to understand its doctrinal character with sufficient precision; the renovated attention for the *apocrypha*, with the possibility to better investigate the intertestamental literature; the new perspectives introduced by the *Gospel of Thomas* in the study of the *logia* and the sources and formation of the canonical Gospels. To this it should be added the study of the linguistic features of the texts, carried on mainly by Nagel, Kasser, and Funk: it is well known how the landscape of the Coptic dialects and the opinions on the birth of the Coptic language have been radically changed⁴ as a consequence of the new documents. In this regard some observations of Bentley Layton⁵ on the socio-linguistic aspect of the question are possibly more important than the scarce reaction from other scholars might imply: “It is the kind of Coptic that might have been written by a speaker of A2 (Subachmimic) attempting to conform to the emergent ‘neutral’ or common dialect of the southern Nile Valley, Sahidic.” The intention by the authors to conform to certain social (in the broad sense) attitudes may have influenced the “natural” linguistic habits, which are the only ones generally taken into consideration.

On the other hand, the question whether the NH codices may be taken as an individual collection, perhaps even as a library, or part of one library, rather than a fortuitous gathering of disparate entities, is still open. Alberto Camplani has recently written a lucid synthesis of the many studies.⁶ He explains the various elements brought into discussion: the evidence given by the *cartonnage*, the subsets recognized by means of palaeographic and codicological study, the colophons; and he lists the different hypotheses deduced from them, namely that the NH codices constituted a Sethian library, or an heresiological collection, or a monastic, or more specially a Pachomian library, etc. The best recent contributions on this subject are those by Clemens Scholten⁷ (a monastic library; but his conclusions are not convincing) and Alexander Khosroyev,⁸ who is totally sceptic of all the solutions, but does not propose a new one. In any case both contain a detailed list of the studies done so far.

The possibility to consider the codices as forming an individual collection seems to me the central question for the assessment of the general value of the codices as a whole. We want to propose, if not a different answer from those proposed so far, though in fact it *is* a different answer, at least a different approach to the problem. First of all I shall remark that indeed we have one sure, objective piece of evidence which would enable us to view the texts as a whole, i.e. that the codices have been found together, buried in a sealed jar, as it is well known. Unfortunately this is no clue to any kind of deduction, and all the hypotheses made by the scholars on the reasons why the codices have been put in the jar, and whether they were together also before, have been based on subjective bibliological or historical considerations. But there exists a second element, admittedly of a more abstract kind, but no less certain and objective: those texts have been for the scholars a unitarian problem, just because they were something new in the panorama both of gnostic studies and of Coptic studies. For what concerns the gnostic studies the novelty consisted mainly in the fact that scholars were not used to rely on original texts; but the content was in a certain sense already familiar, and therefore it was easier to insert the new texts in the frame of already ongoing discussions.

For the Coptic studies the situation was different, for many reasons. There was a linguistic side, with which I shall deal later. Then there was the literary side, for which the NH texts represented a somewhat revolutionary evidence. Though a few Coptic gnostic texts were known after a long time, they had never received any serious attention, in spite of the books by Amélineau⁹ and Mead.¹⁰ In the general sketches of the Coptic literature available, say, in 1955, admittedly few, one can follow the evolution in the consideration of gnostic texts, but they had always remained an extraneous body. Leipoldt (1907)¹¹ simply wrote: “Am ältesten sind jedenfalls die Übersetzungen *gnostischer Schriften*, der sogenannten Pistis Sophia, der Bücher Jeu usw. Nach ihrer Sprache zu urteilen, sind diese etwa in derselben Zeit entstanden wie die saïdische Bibel. Wie die Seltenheit der Handschriften lehrt, erfreuten sie sich nie größerer Verbreitung. Ihr Inhalt mußte ja gerade die Kopten fremd anmuten.” O’Leary (1930):¹² “XXII. Les livres gnostiques. -- (...) Pistis Sophia ... c’est une production tardive et inintelligente du gnosticisme grec-égyptien ... Il y a deux traités gnostiques à Oxford, du Ve ou VIe siècle”. Morenz (1952)¹³ had some information about the NH fund, which he thought important, but in any case outside the Coptic literature proper.

The model of Coptic literature that had emerged was not prepared to accept the texts from NH somewhere into its structure. It is a classical case of the famous theory of Thomas Kuhn on the progress of scientific knowledge, where the new evidence should produce a revolution in the “paradigm” utilized so far. Unfortunately, this did not happen, at least not for a long time, and another phenomenon appeared, namely that a new field of studies was created, that of “Nag Hammadi studies”, almost totally independent from the “normal” Coptic literature. The fact that a NH bibliography was produced, the separate congresses on that subject, the special series dedicated to the NH texts and studies, are specially meaningful. And generally it may be observed that the scholars interested in NH texts tend to neglect Coptic literature.

So it happened that, as the study of the Coptic literature had more or less ignored the Gnostic texts, almost as a retaliation the study of the gnostic texts ignored the Coptic literature. This situation is specially evident in an excellent article by Bentley Layton,¹⁴ which in the part interesting for us addresses the question of what is Nag Hammadi philology. The author, rightly assuming that philology “has for an object of study (in the words of Meillet) *un système ou tout se tient*” then concludes that “the Nag Hammadi philologist must above all make it his business to be an expert on systems in antiquity: doctrine, diction, syntax, spelling, rhetoric, technology, *et alia multa*”. The knowledge of the literary attitudes inside the Coptic environment is at best comprised

among the *alia multa*, and not mentioned as a principal task. In fact, the Coptic literature as such is never mentioned in the article.

One is of course entitled to ask whether the NH texts are part of the Coptic literature, a question which immediately arises another one: what is Coptic literature? It cannot consist in the mere collection of texts in Coptic language, each of them (or groups of them) to be studied as a separate entity. I may note that unfortunately, like the NH texts, other groups, monastic texts, hagiography, or *apocrypha*, have been generally considered separately, with the consequence that a general view of the Coptic literature, on the basis e.g. of style, rhetorical choices, relationship of literary genres, transmission of texts, has been neglected. A literature should mean the historical development of a textual activity, where each product, though possessing some characters and problems of itself, is part of a common historical process, which must be evaluated in order to understand the individual texts, together with their peculiar characters.

The texts of NH have been submitted to detailed enquiries, concerning their origin, the reason why at a certain moment the codices were put together, and why they have been disposed of in a sealed jar; who may have transcribed and read them; who translated them, and for what reason; and which were the criteria according to which the texts were assembled in one codex; what they reveal of the late gnostic movement of the IVth century, and also of the origin of gnosticism in general. Many solutions have been proposed, but only with the view of the “gnostic” (or non-gnostic) environment which might have used them as authoritative texts. This is especially evident in the great book of Bentley Layton,¹⁵ which unifies most of the NH texts and other documents under the title of *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Such solutions are still far from being satisfactory, though they may be partially valid or in any case acceptable.

Above all, they have never been tested against the general development of the Coptic literature. It is true that until recently a model of such development did not exist, or it was inadequate, but things have changed. Four issues, emerging in recent studies, seem to me particularly important for the NH texts:

1. The birth of the Coptic literary language and consequently of the Coptic literature is due not so much to the desire to provide comprehensible text for those who did know Greek, as to a conscious cultural process which involved the Egyptian and Greek languages and cultures.¹⁶
2. The main feature in the development of the Coptic literature in the IVth century was the existence of two opposed doctrinal tendencies, one dependent from the “Asiatic” tradition, the other from the Alexandrian origenistic platonistic revolution. This situation had consequences in the production of texts, which may be summarized in the existence of the Meliton texts from one side, and of the *corpus* of Agathonicus and the *Historia Hirsiesi* on the other.¹⁷
3. The clarification of the content and organization of the *corpus* of Shenute has illuminated his doctrinal position related to the Origenistic controversy, and also his very interesting attitude related to the Hellenistic literary traditions.¹⁸
4. The new attention given to the magic texts has also illuminated a kind of literary activity with regard to religious practices at a minor level. What seems particularly relevant here, is the production of magic manuals, which were composed by practicing magicians, presumably visiting the places and persons possessing the most important religious and

magic texts (viz. temples and priests) and copying into their books the parts of the texts which could be particularly useful for them.¹⁹

In view of the new model of Coptic literature, it is possible to see the NH texts under a different light, and to try and insert them into that model. First of all, the question of their peculiar language, which on the whole cannot be reduced to certain grammatical and orthographic rules, can be explained differently from before. The conventional wisdom is that the NH texts were produced in a period when Coptic was not yet standardized, or also that the translators knew Greek but little Coptic. On the contrary it seems now more reasonable to suppose that the NH translators accepted from the ecclesiastical (cultural) authorities the idea to bring important Greek texts inside a traditional Egyptian environment, but did not bother to fully conform to the standard proposed by those authorities. It is interesting to note that the Manichaens instead were very careful in this respect. The production of “gnostic” texts was, according to this hypothesis, a sort of imitation of what was being done in the official Church, or in any case the acceptance of the idea of introducing new doctrines in a conservative Egyptian environment, preserving the part of the Egyptian cultural heritage which did not contrast with those doctrines. This rather conforms to what one might expect in a monastic milieu, the “Egyptianity” of which is generally admitted, but then neglected as an active cultural factor. And this might encourage a different interpretation of the aims and circumstances of production of the texts.

Before exposing our views on the relationship of the NH texts with the contemporary currents of the Coptic literature, we would still propose two “cases in point”, which may illustrate the complicate literary process at the origin of the texts, studied only from internal evidence.

The *Gospel of the Egyptian*²⁰ is present in two codices (III:40-69 and IV:50-81) rather well preserved, where the text is not completely identical, but the comparison helps to clarify its genesis and complicated composition. In its fuller form (cod. III) it appears to be constituted of three main parts, an editorial preface, two editorial conclusions, a scribal declaration, and a title in the form of subscription²¹ (“The holy book of the great invisible Pnuma”). From the form of the editorial preface, and a duplication present in it and in the beginning of the first main part (“from the Father emanated three powers...”) it is possible to deduce that the editorial preface was meant to present the work chosen to be copied, in fact the title properly reported in the subscription (“the holy book of the great invisible Pnuma”), and to summarize its content, the emanation of the three ogdoad-powers from the first Father. This is the content only of the first main part, which is concluded with an *amen* (III:55,16 = IV:67,1). The second main part deals with the history of the seed of Seth, which is interrupted by the third main part, constituted by a hymn and a prayer or also a hymn (Layton²² p. 117 considers it all a “baptismal service”). The two editorial conclusions (III:68,1-9 = IV:80,15-25; and III:68,10-26 = IV:80,26-lac.) are composed to attribute the text to Seth himself, and are very similar, but for the fact that the second one adds some details, like the name (Charaxio) of the desert-mountain where the book was deposited. The scribal declaration adds a title of the book (Gospel of the Egyptians) to that already mentioned (Divine holy secret book), and mentions the name (of the scribe?) Gongessos, possibly a spelling of latin Concessus, possibly qualified as Eugnostos (the Coptic here is very obscure).

What can we make of this complicated construction is of course difficult to say, and subject to speculation; but at least one thing is certain, viz. that the text written in the two codices is the result of a complicated process. Our opinion is that the first two main parts may be considered as “original” in the sense that they were contained in one or more works containing the “sethian” mythology. One first step was done by someone, who excerpted those parts, added the hymn(s) of the third part, and presented with some explanations this new work as “the holy book of the

invisible Pneuma” (first part of the editorial preface), title which was duly put also as subscription. He also described the circumstances of the composition, by Seth himself, in the first editorial conclusion. Another person, possibly our Concessus-Eugnostos, resumed the work, refreshing it with the addition of some details in the editorial preface (second part) and in a new editorial conclusion. The subscription remained the same, because this was the work that he wanted to share with his “shbrouoein” – whatever is the meaning of the word. We shall also remark that Eugnostos is the author (real or not) of the well known *Epistula*, which was also expanded as *Sophia Iesu Christi*.

Another interesting case is that of the untitled text of codex VI.²³ It has neither subscription nor inscription, that is, it has no title. It was Hans Martin Schenke²⁴ who noted a substantial coincidence with a passage in Plato, *Resp.* IX. From then it has been considered as the very bad translation of that passage, but the fact is, that it is not a translation at all, but the redactional (gnosticizing) transformation of the passage, where (in the words of Jackson;²⁵ cf. Orlandi and Matsaguras) “what Socrates makes the activity of the unjust man has been transformed by the Gnostic redactor into a recommendation to rid oneself of the lion and the beast [i.e. the irrational part of the soul], and the recommendation is couched in terms and circumstances suspiciously reminiscent of the Gnostic traditions encountered in the *Pistis Sophia* and the Coptic Manichaica.”

We can understand from these cases, and from other examples that could be made, that the NH texts were subjected to multifarious literary treatment just before and after the moment of their translation, presumably, from Greek into Coptic. It is evident that it is the interest both of the scholars dealing with Coptic literature, and those dealing with Egyptian gnosticism, to see them as productions relating to their respective fields, being careful not to separate the fields. It is not my purpose to go into details of what the progress in the study of Coptic literature can contribute; only I want to submit, just as a suggestion, how I see the situation.

After an initial period when the idea of recreating an Egyptian literary language won acceptance inside the Christian Church, and the translation of many or all the sacred books was produced, the development of the Coptic literature was mainly determined by the doctrinal controversy which opposed the Alexandrian exegesis and the traditional theology and philosophy, more or less common everywhere else in the Christian communities, which may be put under the name of “Asiatic school”. It is evident from recent studies, that the Alexandrian exegesis, even apart from some highly controversial theories of Origen himself, was not accepted in some parts of Egypt. We know that from what Eusebius reports that Dionysius of Alexandria (247-264) had to impose the allegorical exegesis to some groups around Arsinoe (Fayum) who cherished the millenaristic (typically “Asiatic”) exegesis of the Apocalypse. This helps in collocating in Middle Egypt (between the Fayum and Hermupolis) the resistance to Origenistic doctrines, but it is above all from the great fortune of Meliton of Sardis, whose homilies *De Pascha* and *De anima et corpore* (under the name of Athanasius) had a wide circulation in the Coptic literature, that we can understand the influence of the Asiatic exegesis in Egypt.

When, just a few decennies after the Dionysius-Nepos controversy, monasticism began its pervasive expansion in Egypt, it was inevitable that it was influenced by the exegetic situation mentioned above. In fact we notice that we duly find Alexandrian oriented communities, in the Delta region (Sketis, Nitria, Kellia) and in the far South (Pachomian communities around Hou-Diospolis Parva); but we find communities of different orientation in Middle Egypt. What is particularly interesting in this division of the monastic communities, is that it seems to correspond to different literary approaches. Both in fact adopt the relatively recent standardization of the Coptic literary language and produce literary works, be they originals or translations, e.g. the *Letters* of

Pachomius, the tractates attributed to Agathonicus, or homilies like those of Meliton or the anonymous *De templo Salomonis*.²⁶ But while the Middle Egyptian current adopts also the more general Hellenistic literary convention (literary genres as discourse or oration, like the Cappadocian fathers) and the Hellenistic rhetoric of the time, the “second sophistic”, the Northern and Southern currents limit themselves to more esoteric literary activity.

We know from a homily of Shenute²⁷ that as late as ca. 440 the anti-Origenistic monks accused some other monks to read, and have in great esteem, some books which contained ideas and myths similar to those found in the NH texts. In this milieu, or rather in that of their ancestors of less than one century earlier, we should collocate the gatherers and readers of the NH codices. But it is not only a question of dispute around Origenism. In this period the cultural revolution brought by Christianity was accompanied by a social revolution well described by Roger Bagnall²⁸, in which from one side, also the cultivated part of Egyptians, i.e. the priests, were converted to Christianity, but on the other side the new religion had to provide the comforts for the daily diseases and mishappenings that were so large a part in the traditional religion.

It was a multiform activity in which what we call medicine, magic, and also philosophy, were bound together, because the remedies to most of the inconveniences of life required supernatural intervention, and to obtain supernatural intervention it was necessary to know the complicated hierarchies of the demonic entities, their names, their functions, their modes of acting. And of course the Christian attitudes on these problems varied, both in theology and in personal behaviour, in Egypt as in the rest of the medieval world, as it is well known. The same Shenute who opposed the reading of *apocrypha*, also denounced the practice of magic, even by monks, and the situation was probably much more vague one century earlier.

According to this view of the situation, we can figure Christian groups of different lifestyles and cultural levels, each one playing a role in the production and diffusion of texts that we now call gnostic. There certainly were small groups, perhaps monastic groups, whose interest, beginning in the Origenistic theory of divine entity, creation, and salvation, continued at the level of the more detailed (and practically useful) information on the origin of the demons, their names, their individual tasks and duties. The NH texts in fact either deal with such realities, or with more banal problems of spiritual life, as in the case of the *Sentences of Sextus* or the *Acts of Peter and the XII apostles*, or, possibly, the *Gospel of Thomas* seen from this point of view.

According to this historical and literary model, the libraries, or rather the repositories of “authoritative” texts, often pseudepigraphic works built from documents existing in Judaic, Egyptian, or Hellenistic milieus, and attributed to mythic persons, resided with important “philosophers”. These philosophers could well have been monks, belonging to the Origenistic currents, like those in the North, which soon recognized in Evagrius their main representant, or also in the South among the Pachomians. They surely were also interested in the traditional Egyptian culture. To their libraries the interested people, or their envoys, went, to excerpt what was particularly interesting for them, sometimes giving the status of “original works” to the excerpts or collections of excerpts, adding new titles, authors, and also opportune prefaces and conclusions. Most of this material was probably in Greek, and sometime in the course of the dealings was translated into Coptic, as an imitation of what was being done for the “normal” Christian literature.

This is the provocative view that emerges from the new model of the Coptic literature, and I am conscious that it is not without challenge. I hope above all to arise a discussion, but especially that the discussion will not be limited to this or that particular point, and the critics will propose a different general explanation of what happened in the Coptic literature in the crucial IV century.

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- ² Cf. below.
- ³ James M. Robinson, *Nag Hammadi. The First Fifty Years*, in: John Turner & Anne McGuire, *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, Leiden, Brill, 1997 (= NHMS 44), p. 3-33.
- ⁴ Peter Nagel, *Die Bedeutung der Nag Hammadi Texte für die koptische Dialektgeschichte*, in P. Nagel (ed.), *Von Nag Hammadi bis Zypern. Eine Aufsatzsammlung*, (BBA 43) p. 16-27, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1972
- ⁵ *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, ed. by B. Layton, p. 7.
- ⁶ A. Camplani, *Sulla trasmissione dei testi gnostici in copto*, in A. Camplani (ed.), *L'Egitto cristiano*, Roma, Augustinianum, 1997, p. 121-176.
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- ⁸ Alexandr Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi. Einige Probleme des Christentums in Ägypten, während der ersten Jahrhunderte*, Altenberge, Oros Verlag, 1995 = *Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten*, 7.
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- ¹⁶ Tito Orlandi, *Egyptian Monasticism and the Beginnings of the Coptic Literature*, in P. Nagel (ed.), *Carl-Schmidt-Kolloquium an der Martin-Luther-Universität 1988*, p. 129-142, Halle, Martin-Luther-Universität, 1990; Id., *History of Literature, Part 1, The Biblical Versions*, in CMCL database, <http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it>.
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- ²² *Gnostic Scriptures*, cit.
- ²³ Louis Painchaud, *Fragment de la République de Platon (NH VI.5)*, Quebec, Univ. Laval, 1983 (BCNH, Textes 11), p. 109-164
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²⁸ Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, Univ. Press, 1993, chap. 7 e 8.