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TERMINOLOGY FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF COPTIC LITERARY DOCUMENTS

This paper and the proposals it contains[1] is built upon the persuasion that the Coptic textual tradition is very peculiar, in comparison with that of the classical texts, and that it is advisable to adopt a special terminology for its phaenomena, in order to make them more comprehensible for the scholars in parallel fields, like Greek and Latin Christianity, who do not understand the substantial difference between the two traditions, and are prone to see the Coptic situation as similar to the one they are accustomed to.

In fact, what really matters is the overall systematization of the Coptic textual tradition, which is itself connected with the systematization of our view of the Coptic literature; but the problem of a formal agreement for a convenient terminology follows implicitly: *rem tene, verba sequentur*, to be understood in this case that the words should be tailored to the subject. This is why, although I am aware that proposals for new terminologies are not advisable in themselves, and generally not accepted, I think that this case represents an exception, and I shall try and explain their rationale.

The works which constitute the Coptic literature, and their relative manuscripts, are not easily classified according to a general and consistent critical and historical arrangement. The main obstacles which have determined this situation are well known, and easily appreciated, but also hard to cope with. First is to be mentioned the fragmentary condition of most documents, due to the vicissitudes of the manuscripts after the death of Coptic as a spoken language, and later on their disordered transportation outside of Egypt;[2] secondly, to the peculiar instability which characterizes the text of the literary (patristic) works as they have been transmitted in Coptic.

It may seem that the general character of the Coptic literature is

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1. Cf. also Orlandi, T., Coptic Texts, p. 7-11.
2. Cf. Orlandi, T., La documentation patristique copte.

rather like that of the Greek and, to a lesser extent, Latin patristic literature, and many of the texts have a parallel or at least a counterpart in those literatures; but the problems of the Coptic literature are quite peculiar, a fact which is usually overlooked, thereby producing much misunderstanding. For instance, double attributions or false attributions of authorship are much more widespread than in other literatures,[3] and depend on a range of different reasons, such as the scarce interest of the readers in who actually was the author, or conversely the love for popular authors like Basil of Caesarea or John Chrysostom, or (later) the necessities dictated by a clandestine production under the Islamic domination.

Such being the situation, the attention of the scholars has been focused on the problems of the reconstruction of the codices from the sheets sparsely distributed among many collections in the world. Less or no attention has instead been devoted to the peculiar essence of what I shall call the *codicological units* and the *textual units* (see below), and the distorted kind of relationship occurring between them.

I am proposing the use of a new kind of terminology for the description both of the manuscript tradition and of the literary tradition, because the usual terminology is too prone to misunderstanding in such a camplicated situation as that of the Coptic manuscripts and texts. Too frequently, when we speak of a "codex", we do not mean something that we really have in our hands, but a number of sheets once belonging to a complete codex, but now dispersed in several collections. And when we speak of a work, we do not mean an established text with one consistent tradition, but something that was often reshaped by scribes or clerks more or less competent, in order to accommodate the text to new exigencies; or even fragments of such a text.

The terminology that I am proposing concerns the description of the Coptic handwritten literary documents, and with it also the formally correct indication of their content, viz. the works and authors of the Coptic literature. It differs from the normal or conventional one, which

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3. Cf. Speyer, W., Die literarische Fälschung.

otherwise has never been explicitly formalized and standardized, because the latter is not appropriate for the peculiar features of the Coptic literary documents in many ways. The conventional terminology is shaped on and by mental habits developed after the Renaissance in the study of the Greek and Latin, classical and Christian, literatures. They are only partially adaptable to the Coptic situation, beacause of its peculiarities, which I shall briefly outline as follows. Admittedly they are found also in the other traditions, but only in ''negligible quantities'', so that they have not generated the necessary recognized terminology, which should also alert the scholars in related disciplines of the Coptic specificity. What I mean may be more clear if we imagine that we had to reconstruct the classical literatures only from the remains found in the sands of Egypt, without the help of the medieval manuscripts.

In the Coptic tradition the dramatic vicissitudes of the manuscripts make it difficult for the scholar to get a satisfactory appreciation of their value, and the value of their content. It is not superfluous to mention the subjects included in those vicissitudes, and their interactive relationship, because information on them is essential for that end. I cannot go into details, but the allusions will be sufficient to those who study the Coptic manuscripts.

There are elements connected with the exterior history of the manuscripts, viz. their acquisition[4] and their treatment. The sources of the acquisition of manuscripts have been: monks, whose relations with the Europeans in search of manuscript were difficult and diversified; antiquarians/dealers, whose interest often clashed with that of the scholars; and excavators: in this case we generally know the origin of the finding, but not that of the manuscripts themselves. The acquirers were: travelers from Europe (missionaries or explorers), interested in providing manuscripts to European institutions; buyers at various titles; collectionists. This produced the dismembering and dispersion of the manuscripts, the uncertainty of the Sitz im Leben of the individual fragments, and later the instability of the collections.

The various persons in charge of the arrangement of the Coptic

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4. Cf. Volkoff, O., À la recherche de manuscrits.

manuscripts in the libraries and museums. The treatment of the manuscripts in the collections viz. classification (storage, call numbers) and catalogues, often make it difficult the appreciation of the exact extension of a collection [sheets, groups of sheets, codices more or less complete or composed] and their significance. The real, material collocation of the manuscripts is often unknown to the scholars. The call numbers appearing in the printed catalogues are deceptive; it is necessary to ascertain the situation on the place.

Coming to the interior elements for the knowledge of the manuscripts, they depend on the historical vicissitudes which have determined the structure and the form of the works contained in them. They are to be taken in their abstract, mental meaning, and also in the strictly related physical layout meaning, because the development of the composition of the Coptic texts, from the classical or conventional translations (III-VI cent.) to the conventional original compositions (IV-V cent.), to the age of Damianus (580-650), the early Arabic age, the cycles (650-750), and the synaxarial standardization (750-900); all these changements have a counterpart in the changement of how the codices were composed.

We cannot understand this, without having an idea of the development of the Coptic literature, something like a model.[5] It may be wrong in some parts, but it is essential in order to understand the environment which produced the manuscripts, and if necessary it will be corrected in the course of the researches. If the Coptic literature had stopped at the age of Damianus, our proposal would have no sense. The situation would be similar to the Greek, Latin, but also Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, etc., literatures and literary documents. Such is not the case. In the age of Damianus the Copts began to reshape their literature in order to produce works fit for the consumption in their now independent, anti-chalcedonian Church, and its ceremonial (liturgical) necessities. The Arabic invasion brought other new necessities, namely to hide the modern production under the cover of the tradition. The names and personalities of the traditional Fathers were invoked to ve-

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5. Cf. Orlandi, T., Coptic Literature; Id., Letteratura copta.

hiculate stories and theological doctrines issued to cope withe the life of contemporary Copts and also with their changed literary tastes. In the last period of the Coptic literature, from the IX cent. onwards, all the material was arranged and conveniently labeled, with a special way of providing titles, in order to be functional to the liturgical use of the time.

The consequences for the works copied and for the person of the authors will be treated below, with the proposals.

This is why it seems necessary to adequate the terminology to the complicated situation described above. I shall now list and explain the individual terms which I propose to constitute the semantic environment which makes it possible to form the statements about manuscripts and works. They are:

Codicological units

Bibliological units, ancient or modern, with their *scriptoria*

Textual units, with their literary genres

Author units

Narrative units

The *codicological units* correspond to what in the more fortunate traditions are simply and rightly called "the codices". In the Coptic environment I propose to use a different terminology, because in most cases we are confronted with sparse groups of sheets, which through the research of the scholars are presented as having been part of an original codicological unit, with all the uncertainties which accompany such operations. The criteria are intuitive rather than scientific[6] and also we have to take into account the interruptions (lacunae) which make the reconstruction not sure; the existence of fragments not yet recognized; even the existence of "twin codices", for which it is uncertain the attribution of the sheets. In any case, dealing with each of those testimonies, or with them as a whole, it is important to bear in mind, and convey to the reader, that they once belonged to an individual entity, in fact the "codex".

The *bibliological units - ancient* correspond to the ancient li-

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6. Cf. the wise statements in Emmel, S., Shenoute's Literary Corpus.

braries from which we know that coptic codices have been removed and normally brought inside modern collections (museums, libraries, private); but the new terminology[7] should make more evident the fact that often the ancient libraries do not exist any more, and the attribution to them of the *codicological units* or fragments is often uncertain. The *bibliological units - ancient* may or may not coincide with the *scriptoria*, which are important because they point to peculiar characters of the codices produced, but normally transported in different libraries.[8]

The *bibliological units - modern* correspond to the modern libraries or collections, but we propose this new terminology because they too may not exist any more (e.g. the Borgia or the Curzon collections), and the codices may have passed from one to another. Their history is useful for the appreciation of the manuscripts, and therefore also of the development of the Coptic literature.

The *textual units* correspond to what is generally called "the works" (*opus, oeuvre, Werk, opera*). They are identified in modern scholarship by means of author and title (on which cf. below), but also specifying the *literary genre*: homily or sermon, exegesis, catechesis, etc., utilizing a terminology derived from the Greek and Latin scholarship. The Coptic tradition also derives from it, but a kind of homogeneization has been introduced before the X century, and it is not advisable to reproduce the terminology found in the titles of late manuscripts. From what we can see, the Copts, say, of the X century, mainly recognized the following literary genres:

- Homily (to be pronounced in the course of the *synaxis*), for which the names used are: ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ, ⲉⲝⲏⲅⲏⲥⲓⲥ, ⲕⲁⲧⲉⲭⲏⲥⲓⲥ, ⲕⲁⲑⲏⲅⲏⲥⲓⲥ, ϩⲟⲙⲓⲗⲓⲁ, with their orthographic variations, all with the same meaning.
- Martyrdom, for which the names used are ⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲓⲟⲛ, ⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲓⲁ, ⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲟⲗⲟⲅⲓⲟⲛ.

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7. Cf. Orlandi, T., The Study of Coptic Literature, see p. 215-6. Emmel, S., Recent Progress, see p. 41-44.
8. Cf. the fundamental van Lantschoot, A. Recueil des colophons.

- Life (of a saint): ⲃⲓⲟⲥ.
- Apocrypha (in most cases not labeled as such), for which there were no special names, except for the ⲡⲣⲁϫⲉⲓⲥ and ⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲓⲟⲛ of the Apostles, and the ⲧⲁ2ⲟ ⲉⲣⲁⲧϥ (inthronization) of the Archangels.
- Panegyric (of an Archangel or saint): ⲉⲅⲕⲟⲙⲓⲟⲛ.
- Miracles: ϣⲡⲏⲣⲉ, or designed through the terminology of the homilies.

Also we note that in the Greek and Latin patrology the individual works are rather well identified, by means of an author and title,[9] and may be considered fixed documents. In Coptic they are not so easily determined. It must be said, first, that, though the texts may be either of ancient origin (around the IVth cent.), or more recent (around the VIIIth cent.), or also a combination of parts of different origin, like their counterparts in other patristic traditions, the particular history of the Coptic textual manuscript tradition[10] has inserted them, with appropriate transformations, into a system of liturgical utilizations and celebrations, which must be reckoned with, before beginning the historical and literary analysis of each textual unit.

So it happens that the textual units are mostly arranged in the form of homilies (with their synonimic equivalents, cf. above) to be read at the appropriate moment in the celebration of the appropriate festivities; but it is possible, by means of internal elements, to assign them to an eventual original form, e.g. a life of a Saint, a series of miracles, a narration, an apocryphal composition, etc. The occasions for which they were originally composed may have been changed, to suit a new arrangement of the liturgical festivities, so what is said in the title must not be taken for granted.

Author units. The same is true for the authors to whom the textual units are attributed in the different codicological units. The Coptic

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9. Cf. Buzi, P., Titoli e autori.
10.The main repositories from which come the Coptic codicological units are the convents of apa Shenute (Atripe) and apa Makarios (Sketis), and they represent the situation of the IX-XI century Coptic literary competence.

manuscript tradition has never been much interested, except for special cases, e.g. the Shenoutean tradition (Shenoute, Besa, John the archimandrite), in the faithful registration of the name of the author; but in the arrangement of the VIII-IX cent. (what I call the synaxarial arrangement) those names appear to have received a systematic changement, as a result of which, the fact that one textual unit preserves its real author is to be considered simply casual. Therefore names like Athanasius or John Chrysostom are better thought of as generic ''units'' than historical writers.

Narrative units. When a textual unit is more or less complete, it is relatively easy to perform its analysis in view of a literary and historical evaluation, keeping in mind the considerations done so far; or at least reasonable hypotheses may be presented. But, as we observed, this is not usually the case. When they are in a fragmentary condition, the identification of the textual unit depends on the reconstruction of one or more codicological units, each of which has problems of its own (cf. above). Even after a reasonable certainty is reached from this point of view, the fragments may represent different textual units referring to one or more older units, similar to each other, but passed through revisions producing similar but not identic redactions of something that at this point it is not easy even to conceive and define. Something like this happens in the case of the so called ''archetypes'' of blessed classical-philology memory, about which much debate has been done, and continues to be done; but in the case of Coptic the situation is even more fluid. For this reason it seems advisable to take into consideration narrative units, considered in some sense independent from the textual units to which they belong.

I believe that if the scholarly publications treating the Coptic manuscripts and the Coptic literature would use the terminology described so far, the non specialist readers would better understand the peculiar situation of those subjects, and also the real meaning of the contributions.

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