

COPTIC LITERARY POPYRI

The Coptic literary papyri are written, depending on their age, on papyrus, parchment, or paper. P. E. Kahle (1954, pp. 269-78) has published a list of earlier Coptic literary manuscripts, known down to 1954, with information on the writing material (papyrus or parchment) and the writing format (one or two columns). It comprises manuscripts from the third to the fifth century, arranged according to the Coptic dialects. To these must be added the early papyrus codices published since 1954, above all the Sahidic manuscripts of books of the Old Testament and [New Testament](#) from the Bodmer collection, [edited](#) by R. Kasser (see BODMER POPYRI).

From the Chester Beatty collection the manuscript of Joshua, dated to the fourth century and [edited](#) by A. F. Shore, should be mentioned. The second part of it is in the Bodmer collection (Bodmer XXI). Among [New Testament](#) manuscripts, reference should be made to the three parchment manuscripts of the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, written in the first half of the fifth century (P. Palau Rib. 181-83, published by H. Quecke), as well as the Berlin Acts published by F. Hintze and H. M. Schenke. Papyrus Bodmer VI, a manuscript of Proverbs written in the Proto-Sahidic dialect and published in 1960 by Kasser, also belongs to the Sahidic.

In the Middle Egyptian dialect four Bible manuscripts have been found: three of the New Testament (Matthew, Acts, and letters of Paul) and one of the Old Testament (Psalter). Of these, two have been published: the Gospel of Matthew (Schenke) and the letters of Paul (Quecke and Orlandi).

An early Bohairic manuscript is Papyrus Bodmer III, published by Kasser in 1971. Not mentioned by Kahle is a manuscript of the Gospel of John from the University of Michigan collection (P. Mich 3521), which was

published in 1962 by Husselman.

So far there is no such list of the manuscripts from the sixth century on. Only some of the Sahidic manuscripts of this period are included in van Lantschoot's work (1929) on the colophons of Coptic manuscripts.

While the early manuscripts have for the most part preserved writings of the Old and New Testaments, intertestamental literature, apocryphal writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the apostolic fathers, apologists, and original writings of the Gnostics and Manichaeans, the later manuscripts contain, in addition to the biblical literature, especially hagiographical and homiletic works (see LITERATURE, COPTIC), as well as [profane](#) literature (see POPYRI, COPTIC MEDICAL).

The state of preservation of the manuscripts is varied. The dry climate of Egypt is favorable to their preservation, so far as the manuscripts were found in the dry desert soil, whether in the ruins of Coptic monasteries or in graves. Actually, many manuscripts have survived in very good condition, such as the Papyrus Palau biblical manuscripts mentioned above. Others, such as the Manichaean papyri (see POPYRUS DISCOVERIES), are more poorly preserved. Despite the large number of extant manuscripts from Egypt in comparison with those from other countries, the number is small in comparison with the number of the literary manuscripts written in Egypt. Many [Christian](#) manuscripts were destroyed in the PERSECUTIONS, or in the attacks by nomads on the Coptic monasteries situated on the edge of the desert (e.g., in the Wadi al- Natrun). The Egyptian state church attempted to destroy manuscripts of Christian sects or non-Christian religious communities (e.g., Manichaeans and Gnostics), or those of Christian authors whose [orthodoxy](#) came under suspicion (e.g., ORIGEN and DIDYMUS THE BLIND).

Even after their discovery in modern times the manuscripts—so far as

they were not found in a scientific undertaking—were threatened by further danger. Finders, who generally did not know the value of their discovery, to some extent heedlessly destroyed them, or destroyed parts in the [division](#) of the find into several lots. Through the antiquities trade these passed into various collections. Relatively few of the manuscripts [recognized](#) as belonging together have been reassembled through exchange between the collections (see PAPYRUS COLLECTIONS). In most cases it remains a matter of knowing which pages in different collections once belonged to a single codex. This work, which belongs to the realm of codicology, is the presupposition for the publication of literary manuscripts. In the case of biblical manuscripts (Schmitz and Mink, 1986, pp. 29ff.), such reconstruction of codices is still relatively easy but time-consuming; and since there are concordances for these texts, it demands good knowledge of the literature for other groups of texts. [Indexes](#) of works of literature preserved complete are also important.

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