

COPTIC LITERATURE

National literatures are defined not only by the language in which they are written but also by ethnic and cultural affinities that bind their authors. That is why we may distinguish an American literature in English from British literature or a Latin-American literature in Spanish from Spanish literature. The literature in the Coptic language is unusual because it should be considered as part of a wider literature that includes patristic Greek literature and [Christian](#) Arabic literature written in Egypt. This article will examine Christian literature written in the Coptic language from the second century till the eleventh century, by which time Coptic had been virtually superseded by Arabic. We shall exclude magical and medical texts, though the most ancient of them may be considered the first examples of Coptic writing.

The Beginnings

The origins of Coptic literature are problematic because the documentation is scant. Nevertheless, since the Greek language predominated in Egypt for some time before and after the beginning of the [Christian](#) era, we can assume that Greek literature was at the base of Coptic literature, affecting its development in both content and style. In fact, at the beginning, Coptic texts, particularly biblical and Gnostic texts, were merely translations of Greek originals. Since the [Bible](#) and Gnostic texts are treated in separate articles, we will deal with them here only to place them in relation to the general development of Coptic literature.

For some time, many scholars assumed that the first people to accept the necessity and convenience of making translations into Coptic were the Gnostics and that Alexandria was the place for their production. This assumption was made because the most ancient Coptic manuscripts contain either biblical or Gnostic(izing) texts. But neither of these ideas is supported by documented proof.

Other scholars have indicated monastic groups as the place for the translating and missionary activity as their purpose. According to this view, it seemed necessary to make the texts of the new [Christian](#) religion spreading through Egypt comprehensible to those who did not understand Greek.

This view may be partially true, but the formation and use of the Coptic language appear so complicated, given the acceptance of an enormous number of Greek words and the importance of Greek syntax, that the “practical” purpose of translation does not seem to hold. Other purposes should be considered, namely, the effort to revive a national Egyptian culture long since in decline though never completely dead and a wish to interpolate the content of the new religious spirit into the ancient Egyptian tradition.

It is generally inferred from some passages in the Life of Antony by [Saint ATHANASIUS](#) I and in the rules of Saint PACHOMIUS that the Coptic translation of at least some books of the Bible (above all the Psalms and the New Testament) was used in the official church at least by the beginning of the fourth century. In fact, we possess many biblical codices from that period. The biblical translations had a continuous tradition until the end of the Coptic culture. The texts found in later codices, though sometimes different, are often very close to those found in the ancient ones. This similarity indicates that already by the fourth century translation was done at a high level and probably was the work of learned and responsible people. The fact that we also find manuscripts of “wild” translations, especially in dialects other than Sahidic, is only natural and in no way contradicts the preceding statement. All these problems remain open for further study.

Gnosticizing texts, however, and those of generally moral character accompanying them (see NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY) are no longer found in later manuscripts and are written in a less accurate language, possibly indicating that they were produced and read in different religious groups

(also Christian) that later disappeared or changed their mind, probably under constraint.

The same groups that produced biblical translations seem also to have produced translations of a small number of “patristic” texts, such as some homilies by MELITO OF SARDIS, and some [apocryphal](#) works such as *Apocalypsis Heliae*, *Visio Isaiae*, *Acts of Paul*, and *Epistula Apostolorum*. They might point to contacts with Asiatic circles, rather than the Alexandrian school, and therefore to an origin in the Nile Valley rather than Alexandria.

The first person who might have written (or rather dictated) originally in Coptic was Saint ANTONY, a [hermit](#) in the desert in the second century. We have a collection of his seven letters, existing in Latin (from a lost Greek original), in Georgian, and in Coptic (some fragments). But whether the Coptic text as we now have it is the original one or a translation from the Greek is not known.

Another person who might have written in Coptic is HIERACAS OF LEONTOPOPOLIS, a fascinating figure in the beginning of Egyptian monasticism and [Christian](#) culture. According to Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 67. 1 and 3), he was well acquainted with both Egyptian and Greek science and wrote a biblical exegesis and nine Psalms in both Coptic and Greek. He was a professional scribe and therefore may have been a central figure in the formation of the Coptic language, script, and literature. He was probably a follower of ORIGEN in his exegetical (allegorical) methods, which he expanded into Gnostic ideas. All this fits into the frame of the beginning of Coptic literature, but nothing more than this can be said at present.

The first original author of whom we are well informed by historical documents and some extant works is Saint PACHOMIUS, a fourth-century abbot. Until a few years ago, we could speak of the literary achievements of the [Pachomian](#) communities only on the basis of general deductions

rather than with much concrete evidence. From Pachomius himself in the Coptic language, we had but a few fragments of his rule and other texts of doubtful authenticity. This situation was radically changed in 1972 by the identification of the Coptic text of some of Pachomius' letters and of letters of his successors Saint THEODORUS OF TABENNESE and Saint HORSIESIOS.

The fundamental questions about the authenticity of the text of Pachomius' letters and its original language are not yet completely clarified, but we may make three observations. First, such an ancient text, attributed with precision to only one particularly noted author, may well be considered genuine, at least until some other documentation is found that proves the contrary. Second, the peculiar form of transmission of the text (scrolls were often used, rather than the usual codex) points to something special in the Coptic tradition. Third, as to the original language, everything leads us to believe that the letters were indeed written in Coptic.

The works of Pachomius and his immediate successors, therefore, represent the oldest original Coptic texts with true literary characteristics. Their content and form (especially in the letters of Pachomius) are rather problematic, mainly because of the alphabet used. Also, there is difficulty in understanding the general meaning, because the text was formed of a sequence of biblical quotations and short connecting sentences, without a real structure.

In fact, it is possible that, though Pachomius and his successors accepted the function of some kind of writing in [Christian](#) monastic spirituality, they rejected the rules of literature formed in the Greek rhetorical tradition and accepted by other Christian authors writing in Greek or Latin.

Shenute

The initial step toward accepting the common rules of literature when producing Coptic texts was taken by Saint SHENUTE, fifth-century abbot of Atrib, later known as the famous Dayr Anba Shinudah (the White Monastery) of Upper Egypt. He has rightly gained wide renown among both his contemporaries and modern scholars as the most important author of Coptic literature. But the documented evaluation of his works apart from a generic appreciation is very difficult for many reasons.

The manuscripts containing his works were conserved almost exclusively in the library of his monastery, from which they were sorted only in fragments, and it was as fragments that they became known as, through the years, they reached various parts of Europe and America.

The first portions arrived in Italy in the eighteenth century (Borgia and Nani collections, now in Rome, Naples, and Venice). In 1888 came the important discovery of the remains of the White Monastery library. Most of the find was taken to Paris, while smaller portions went to Leiden, London, Vienna, and elsewhere. The work of editing began rather quickly, and the extensive publication of texts began in 1903, by E.C. AMÉLINEAU, C. F. J. WESSELY, and J. LEIPOLDT, and W.E. CRUM.

The manner in which Shenute's work was edited is not satisfactory, though it was justified by the poverty of technical and practical means available at the time. The scholars worked mainly on one collection, rarely trying to put together fragments of the same work from different collections. So Amelineau limited himself to the Borgia fragments, merely transcribing and translating them in haste without indicating any internal structure or the general meaning of the pieces. Wessely limited himself to transcribing the fragments at Vienna, with no translation or critical work.

Leipoldt, whose research dates from 1908-1913, concentrated on the Paris collection. Unlike Amélineau, Leipoldt (working with the help of

Crum) sought out fragments in which a title or some other indication permitted him to characterize and thereby organize them. But he was unable to achieve much beyond a collection of excerpts that are generally brief and all in all among the least significant examples of Shenute's thinking. Also, although he did seek out parallel codices in other collections, he omitted the essential task of putting these fragments in the original order of the codex from which they were taken. So it happens that he published, under different numbers and titles, fragments from the same work.

In the meantime, P. LADEUZE, who worked in the University of Louvain, published a fundamental monograph on Shenute. His research was the result of historical criticism by Catholic scholars; it was sound in [philology](#) but somewhat lacking in a more liberal approach. Unfortunately, he could not avail himself of the texts published by Amélineau and by Leipoldt and Crum. So his work was severely criticized by liberal Protestants, especially A. Harnack and his collaborators.

The basic monograph about Shenute remains the one published by Leipoldt, who proposed the first historic evaluation of Shenute's works. Although he was too severe in his judgment of Shenute as writer, theologian, and ecclesiastical leader, he did try to reconstruct the figure of Shenute in the frame of the Egyptian church and monasticism of his times. However, owing to a lack of sympathy toward monastic life in general, and toward that of Shenute and Egypt in particular, his evaluation of the man and writer remained unkind and hardly objective.

In attempting any analysis of Shenute, we must admit that there are still very few codices, either complete or partially complete, that give a satisfactory idea of the transmission of his works. But we may mention at least three: one at the Louvre, the other two at the Institut français d'Archéologie orientale in Cairo. They demonstrate that the works of Shenute were gathered into *corpora*, with titles and remarks, which are useful in placing them in some historical context.

The remaining work to be done on the remnants of the Shenute codices depends on the basic task of reconstituting the White Monastery library. This work is beginning to yield some results that add to the theory that places the Gnosticizing codices discovered at Nag Hammadi (see NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY) in a monastic setting of Upper Egypt and that have reawakened an interest in Shenute, which had become somewhat dormant.

About the historical figure of Shenute, one of the first problems to be examined is that of his relation to [Pachomian](#) monasticism. The common belief was that Shenute and his community remained basically Pachomian, except for some reforms of the rules. Four facts, however, seem to contradict this idea. First, there are two different traditions about the participation of Copts at the first [Council of EPHESUS](#) as helpers of the patriarch CYRIL I: the Pachomian tradition centered on the monk VICTOR OF TABENNESE and the Shenutean centered on Shenute himself. Second, at the time of the Chalcedonian crisis, the Pachomians remained faithful to the imperial authority, even at the cost of losing some of their archimandrites, while the followers of Shenute persisted in their loyalty to the anti-Chalcedonian patriarchs descending from DIOSCORUS I and thus held to a more genuinely Egyptian culture. Third, although Shenute's works (and those of BESA, his successor) were in a sense introduced into a literary tradition created by Pachomius, Shenute followed Pachomius only insofar as they both wrote in Coptic. As to the content, form, style, and quantity, there is great divergence in their writings. While Pachomius did not especially want to be a literary figure, Shenute sought not only to use the language per se but also wished to make it a means of literary expression completely individual and highly developed. Fourth, although the documentation today is yet anything but abundant, we find differences in theology also. Whereas Shenute shows clear examples of an anti-Origenist stand (with all that this implies also for Gnosticizing texts), there is no such evidence for the Pachomians, because the evidence in the various Lives of Pachomius should be

considered suspect. From what appears in the dossier of AGATHONICUS OF TARSUS, we have reason to believe that even the Origenist doctrines of EVAGRIUS PONTICUS might have been accepted by some of the first Pachomian communities.

This fourth point leads to the question of Shenute's theological background. Although Leipoldt harshly denied it, we can now read at least two works in which Shenute showed that he was not only abreast of the doctrinal currents of his own time but also knew how to discuss them in an original way, securely and ably. First, we have a work published by L. T. Lefort that treats the well-known issues of the Incarnation and transubstantiation, especially against the Nestorian heresy. We also have a text, recently reconstructed from many fragments, that discusses problems pertaining to the Origenist controversy of the beginning of the fifth century, as well as some popular Gnostic ideas—found in the codices from Nag Hammadi— about the creation, the preexistence of the soul, [apocryphal](#) literature, Christology, prayer, and angels.

We know today that Shenute was a highly educated person. He knew the Greek language and Greek literature, not only ecclesiastical but also classical; he knew theology and was interested in many subtle questions of ethics and physics, which he treated in a manner characteristic of his times. His influence on Coptic literature is due not only to his vast production but also to the work of translation that he fostered and supervised, as it seems, in his monastery. It is very probable that much of the material to be examined in the next section was produced there.

Translations of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

Apart from the works of Shenute, and possibly of some unfamiliar authors such as Saint PAUL OF TAMMA, Coptic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries consists mostly of translations. Except for the language, this literature is not in itself very interesting for scholars, who would prefer to analyze the authors' original thought and style; this is one of the reasons

why the study of Coptic literature is generally neglected. In fact, we shall see that there are many original texts that are disguised as translations and that therefore did not attract the attention of scholars. They belong in any case to the later period (of the CYCLES).

What is interesting about the translations of the fourth and fifth centuries is the peculiar choice of material made by the Coptic translators. Whereas we generally possess systematic translations of *corpora* of the most important Greek authors in Syriac, Armenian, Georgian (and later in Arabic and Ethiopic), in Coptic the situation is entirely different. In vain we look for basic texts such as the Armenian translation of Irenaeus, or the Syriac translation of the works of SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH, not to mention the most important homiletical, theological, and historical works of the church fathers of the time.

The Coptic preference was rather for the minor production of those fathers such as individual Homilies preserved in Greek (if at all) in secondary collections, often changing their attribution for accidental reasons—such as errors in manuscript transmission or the interests of some collector.

In fact, it seems evident that during this period the Copts chose texts for translation without considering the name of the author very seriously. It is even possible that in the beginning texts circulated anonymously, only to have an author assigned to them later on. An example is the homily on the Canaanitish woman, by Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, whose attribution in Coptic to EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, “the historiographer,” is explicable only by its initial allusion to the church and his history.

Another reason leading us to think that the author per se was of little importance to the Copts is the fact that the Egyptian writers—including the venerated bishops of Alexandria—were quite unfairly treated when it came to the choice of material for translation. So for the homilies treating the problem of the Nestorian heresy, PROCLUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE

was chosen rather than Cyril himself. A large place was reserved for JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, because of the great literary fame that spread his texts into Egypt, notwithstanding the bad relations between him and the patriarch THEOPHILUS OF ALEXANDRIA.

The material selected for translation seems to have been chosen chiefly according to the requirements of a special section of Egyptian society, the monastic groups. Many of the translations treated spiritual problems peculiar to Egyptian MONASTICISM. Apart from that, the criterion for selection seems to have been whatever the “normal” market was offering, a market geared more for popular consumption than for the demands of any “official” level. Accordingly, the needs of pleasing simply educated people were also considered.

As to literary genre, the texts chosen for translation may be divided into two basic groups: the homilies of the church fathers and the martyrdoms (or lives) of saints. For most of these texts we have the Greek original (though, as we have said, the attribution may vary in Greek and in Coptic); others have no corresponding Greek text, but their style and content make it sufficiently evident that they were translated from the Greek. All relevant information about the translations of individual authors or hagiographical works is found in their respective entries. Therefore we shall simply mention now the names of the church fathers: ATHANASIUS I, BASIL THE GREAT, CYRIL I of Alexandria, CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, EPHRAEM SYRUS, EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, Jerome the Presbyter, JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, GREGORY OF NYSSA, PALLADIUS, Proclus of Constantinople, SEVERIAN OF GABALA, SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH, THEODOSIUS I, THEOPHILUS OF ALEXANDRIA.

There are also the APOCRYPHA (others than those mentioned above), the APOPHTHEGMATA PATRUM, and the canonical literature, which are treated in their particular articles.

In order to determine an approximate date of the translations, we can set as a limit after which the translation must have been produced the date of the original in Greek, but never a useful limit before which it must have been produced: no Coptic or Greek text contains any data about this question. Information might be inferred from the date of the manuscripts, if they were not too late (from the ninth century on) to be of any use. We would set these translations around the fifth century, because it is logical to assume that they were made of works of contemporary interest and not too ancient. From this viewpoint it is significant that most of the authors translated fit into a span of time between Athanasius and Saint JEROME (c. 330 to 420); later authors of the fifth century, such as Theodosius I and Severus of Antioch, are justifiable exceptions.

The Sixth Century

The vicissitudes and final decisions of the Council of CHALCEDON (451) determined at once an ecclesiastical crisis and the detachment of most of the Egyptian church from the “international” Christianity supported by the emperors of Byzantium. This crisis also produced cultural effects, but they were not felt until the beginning of the sixth century, when the events following the exile of Theodosius I from Alexandria put an end to hopes not only for a reconciliation between the patriarchates but also for developing a normal ecclesiastical life in Egypt, maintaining beliefs and hierarchy different from those officially approved by the imperial (pro-Chalcedonian) crown. This is probably the moment when Greek began to be perceived as the language of the oppressors and the patristic Greek (“international”) culture was looked upon with suspicion as the vehicle of false dogmas and misleading historical information. It was at this time that Egypt really sensed the need to build a historical and spiritual culture, one typically Egyptian (therefore Coptic), in opposition to that of the imperial, Greek-speaking church.

However, we must not think that the question of language became a central problem all at once. The change was probably quite a slow

process, which began with a determination to be different from the Byzantine culture, proceeded to a rejection of anything coming from Byzantium—and therefore in Greek—and eventually brought about a refusal even to use the Greek language at all.

Nevertheless, it is clear that during this lengthy period Greek was still used, for traditional reasons and in relations with [Christian](#) sects having beliefs similar to those of Egypt, especially the church in Syria. In fact, for the texts under discussion, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between those translated into Coptic from Greek and those originally conceived in Coptic. The literature of the “international” Christian culture of this period, using the Greek language, is enormously rich in theological treatises written by both Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian writers in defense of their confessions. The names of John the Grammarian of Caesarea and Leontius of Byzantium are prominent on the Chalcedonian side, and those of Severus of Antioch and Julian of Halicarnassus on the other. This kind of literature was not translated into Coptic, probably because interested people preferred to read such works directly in the original language.

We mention here the most important sixth-century works that we have in Coptic, whether original or translations; more information will be provided in articles on these works. First is the *History of the Church* in two parts. The first is a translation, with some changes, of Books 1 through 7 of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius. The second part recounts the events from PETER I of Alexandria down to TIMOTHY II AELURUS (early fourth to late fifth century); this is an original composition, compiled from many different sources ranging from internal chronicles of the Alexandrian see to historical or literary narrations and simple hagiographical legends.

Another interesting work is the Panegyric of Macarius of Tkow (see DIOSCORUS I), in which the events surrounding the Council of Chalcedon and the life of Dioscorus are narrated. In fact, it is actually a

compilation of at least three different texts of historical or autobiographical nature. An anonymous Life of Athanasius, written on the basis of semihistorical documents, also belongs to this period. Its tendentious and hagiographical aims prevail over the facts.

The same mixture of history and legend is to be found in many other texts recounting the lives of such figures as Severus of Antioch, the famous monk JOHN OF LYCOPOLIS, and DIOSCORUS (different from the text cited above). Of a more polemic character were the “plerophories,” a series of little stories collected by JOHN OF MAYUMA to prove the thesis of the anti- Chalcedonians.

In this period the collections of the “acts” of the three great ecumenical councils were probably also redacted; in Coptic they differ somewhat from the Greek and Latin texts. The material related to Nicaea went in Coptic under the title “Canons of Hippolytus,” and comprised the *credo*, the *gnomai*, the DIDASCALIA, and other minor texts. The acts of Ephesus were centered around the monk Victor of Tabennese, who does not appear in the Greek and Latin collections.

Finally, a number of texts relate the lives of the great monks (mainly archimandrites) of this period, in which history, legend, facts, and miracles are all mixed together. Among these are accounts of ABRAHAM OF FARSHUT, MATTHEW THE POOR, Moses of Balyana, and many others of importance and interest. Similar hagiographies appeared later in such works as the Panegyric of [Apollo](#) of Pbow by STEPHEN OF HNES and the Life of Samu’il of Qalamun by [ISAAC](#) OF QALAMUN.

Late Sixth Century and Early Arab Period

We have one example of the literary activity of Saint DAMIAN, patriarch of Alexandria, a homily on Christmas, fragments of which are preserved in two papyrus codices of the seventh and eighth centuries. This indicates that, though probably preached in Greek (it is difficult to conceive the

Syrian Damian speaking Coptic), the homily was immediately translated into Coptic. The same was done for his well-known *Synodicon* and for a partially lost work entitled *Kerygmata* (Proclamations), of uncertain character.

Other Egyptian writers of this age surely wrote directly in Coptic, although they all depended on the tradition of rhetoric and faith of the Greek-speaking ancient church of the fourth century.

These were the bishops of the most important towns of the Nile Valley, a fact that confirms the continued vitality of these communities as cultural and ecclesiastical centers. It is quite probable that a town such as Shmun, the ancient center of the Thoth- Hermes cult, had never completely lost the memory of its earlier importance.

The author whose life is best affirmed is Saint PISENTIUS, bishop of Coptos (Qift). We have not only two different lives of him—one written by Moses of Qift, his successor, and the other by JOHN THE PRESBYTER (in the style of the previous “plerophoric” lives of monks)—but we have also part of his personal archives, found in the monastery of DAYR EPIPHANIUS at Luxor. His only complete work to be preserved is an encomium of Onophrius.

CONSTANTINE, bishop of Asyut, specialized in panegyrics. He wrote two for Athanasius, two for the martyr Claudius, and another for the martyr George. We have an account of his life from the Arabic Synaxarion, but it is fragmentary and does not say much concerning his activities. From his works we understand that he tried to help Bishop Damian in his efforts to reform the organization of the Egyptian church and to improve the morals of the people, which had deteriorated through the long difficulties of the previous century. Constantine was also one of the strong champions of Egypt, which he saw as the nation destined to preserve the true church, with its own dogma and ethics, despite the often denounced tendency of the people toward sin.

JOHN OF SHMUN was another author with strong nationalistic feelings. His two main works are panegyrics of the two figures representing for him the most important phases of Egyptian Christianity: Saint MARK the Evangelist and founder of the Egyptian church, and Saint Antony, the founder of the anchoritic life. Egypt is always foremost in his thoughts, and, as many passages in these homilies testify, he skillfully defends the right, his own and that of his fellow men of letters, to produce works in Coptic.

John, bishop of Parallos in the Delta region, wrote a special treatise against the [apocryphal](#) and heretical books still surviving in the Egyptian church. And RUFUS OF SHOTEP, who seems to have been a close friend of Constantine of Asyut, wrote the last preserved example of exegetical activity before the Arab invasion of 642 in a commentary on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

These authors may have witnessed the Persian invasion of the years 619-627, and some probably lived to see the Arab invasion. In any event, at the beginning of the Arab era the most important personalities in the Egyptian church were still able to produce works more or less openly. Thus, from the patriarch BENJAMIN I we possess a long homily on the miracle of Cana and a short passage of the panegyric of Shenute. Benjamin's successor, the patriarch AGATHON, wrote a homily in which he narrated episodes about Benjamin's consecration of a church in honor of MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN. He probably also [composed](#) a panegyric of Benjamin. Another patriarch, JOHN III, wrote a panegyric of MENAS (whose sanctuary in the Mareotis desert was still attracting masses of pilgrims), and composed a theological treatise in the form of *erotapokrisis* ("questions and answers"), which seems to have been finally redacted by one of his priests. At the same time, Saint Menas of Pshati, bishop of Nikiou, described the life of the patriarch ISAAC (686-689) and wrote a panegyric of the martyr MACROBIUS of Pshati. ZACHARIAS, bishop of Sakha, left two homilies of exegetical content, and possibly a Life of Saint JOHN COLOBOS. The twelfth-century patriarch MARK III wrote the last

Coptic homily to have a known author (which was merely an adaptation of a homily by Epiphanius of Salamis).

The style of all these writers is rather similar, reminiscent of the typical canons of that Greek literary movement of the second to fourth centuries known as the “second sophistic,” a movement that influenced all the great preachers of the [Christian](#) church. What we most appreciate is the ability of all these men to write and speak a Coptic language that is perfectly capable of expressing any concept desired. This is the first time that this occurred, for neither the translations of the [Bible](#) nor those of the homilies and martyrdoms of the fourth and fifth centuries reflect a language that has at last become so independent and sufficient in its syntactical and stylistic elements. Only Shenute (and Besa after him) approached this level.

The Seventh and Eighth Centuries: The Period of the Cycles

The attribution of the many texts mentioned below to this later period of Coptic literature will undoubtedly arouse both surprise and suspicion: surprise because the works we will treat are generally ascribed—according to the manuscripts’ *inscriptiones*—to authors of the fourth and fifth centuries, and they describe events and problems of this earlier period; suspicion, that we might have used such a simple expedient merely to collect texts of doubtful origin and attribute them to a single late period and one homogenous literary school.

Our reasoning can be explained. First, the writings examined below have already been recognized for the most part as having false titles. Furthermore, the real problem of their chronology has never been posed because scholars somehow believed them to be translations from Greek. We have observed, however, that many pseudepigraphous texts of Coptic literature can be collected and reassembled by noting certain historic episodes and personages that appear in diverse works; these works constitute a pseudo-historic substratum that sustains the narration of the

various events. It is evident that the episodes they describe are historically false and could not have been invented in the earlier period. Whoever compiled these texts and whoever read or listened to them might have had a vague memory of events from this previous period, but they really understood neither the mentality of the time nor its normal, everyday affairs.

The basic train of the narrations and the accompanying considerations correspond to objectives entirely different from those appropriate to the earlier era. These aims were, first of all, propagandist and addressed to different segments of the populace. For those within the church, the purpose was to strengthen the people's faith in the Coptic church tradition and to reinforce and elevate their moral sentiments and behavior. For those outside the church, the purpose was to affirm the existence, antiquity, and orthodoxy of the doctrine of the Coptic church in comparison with those [Christian](#) sects separated from it. A second *raison d'être* for these works was the need to defend Christian doctrine in the face of the rival Jewish and Islamic religions. Third, we can perceive a motive of providing spiritual entertainment, for these texts are filled with descriptions of the most attractive, wondrous, and grim events imaginable, all related in a most pompous and lavish style.

In codices that transmit these works to us in a unified form, the possibility of such combination and assembly of these diverse texts does indeed exist. Thus, we have concluded that these works were conceived at once by single authors or groups of authors adhering to similar criteria in a period very much later than that to which the texts have been assigned. We feel justified in grouping these problematic texts according to various predominant events or personages that form a unifying theme and we have called these groups CYCLES.

Often these cycles were produced by using preexisting works, modified to fit the aim of the redactor and assembled, when necessary, with other original extracts written for the purpose. This is why, within the homilies

assigned to this period, there appear extracts from old translations of genuine texts of the church fathers dating from the fourth and fifth centuries. The critical work in this regard is, for the most part, yet to be done and, we believe, rich in possibilities.

The redaction of each cycle presents its own special problems as to the various personages, events, and texts involved. All the Cycles, however, had as a point of departure one or more authentic works or else certain episodes already famous in the tradition of the Coptic church. But, despite what was said earlier about the chronology and the production of these Cycles, there remain, nevertheless, two major problems: that of their literary basis and that of the causes for their “creation.” That such a phenomenon should happen sporadically in a given literature may be natural and also serve some purpose, but that it should occur on such a grand scale with so few “honest” examples demands an explanation.

The tradition behind this production is not difficult to trace. We can call attention to the previous hagiographers’ school of the fourth century (mentioned above), whose task was precisely to produce texts that would appear to come from the hand of another (perhaps that of a secretary or some other witness present at the trials and deaths of the martyrs). After all, it is logical to think that the Copts writing in the seventh century might have remembered some of these bygone authentic texts. Also, many works written during the period following Chalcedon furnished excellent precedents whose doubtful historical authenticity would not have passed completely unnoticed after one century.

More difficult is the investigation into the causes that might have determined or suggested such a literary posture. In fact, a number of different causes probably coalesced to produce these Cycles, causes that we will seek out while limiting ourselves to objective proofs.

The first evidence is that these writers extracted from the literary tradition names of great authors along with accompanying memoirs. At

the same time, they avoided the genuine works, which, in our opinion, the Egyptians of the seventh and eighth centuries must have still been able to obtain in Greek. In fact, it seems that these writers actually tended not only to replace but also to demolish the authentic texts.

This phenomenon may be explained by seeing it in the perspective of the theological situation of the post-Chalcedonian period. “Coptic” theology was basically simple (at least so it seems in the theological excerpts of the homilies) and sought to assume a distinctly popular character. Seen from this point of view, all the homilies of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries became suspect because they contained a trinitarian and above all Christological theology that could have seemed confusing to Coptic listeners (and probably even to the more educated clergy). Clearly diophysite phrases were easy to identify in these early texts, but by subtle arguments they could be reduced to “orthodoxy,” and thus be put in accord with Monophysite Coptic thinking. Such activity seemed to occur specifically in the monastic societies, which, after the long period of the post-Chalcedonian crises, were fashioning the fundamentals of Coptic culture, and thus substituted more acceptable texts for the old patristic ones.

It also seems that the prominent authors of this period were not free, and did not feel free, to publish works under their own names, perhaps because they sought to give greater authority to their writings by attributing them to a venerated author of antiquity. Then, too, at the beginning of the seventh century particularly, a contrary movement was born: authors strained to produce “in first person” more modern works, meant especially as substitutions for the writings of the ancient church fathers. In fact, had these two opposing movements been free to express themselves openly, the situation might have been quite different and the number of both kinds of texts would be more or less equal, rather than a predominance of pseudepigraphical texts.

Another cause for this kind of literary production may have been the

changed taste of the public. Although the liturgical traditions of the church were maintained nearly intact, the social climate was changed. First of all, the triumph of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world had driven the masses away from such forms of popular entertainment as the circus and theater and had pushed them to seek substitutes within the church. Thus there arose, among other things, mass pilgrimages to the major sanctuaries and the propagation of miraculous stories, which contained various trimmings. Second, the Arab invasion forced the faithful to restrict themselves to ecclesiastical matters, making the church the very fulcrum of life in a broad sense that included all occasions for entertainment. Therefore, the homilies—whether delivered for the general liturgy or for the feasts of particular saints—had to satisfy this need and expectation for diversion.

The Ninth to the Eleventh Centuries: The Period of Decline

After the anonymous and even clandestine flourishing of the cycles, the final decline for Coptic literature began during the ninth to the eleventh centuries. There was literary activity in this period, for old material still useful for some special purposes was reassembled and rearranged, but no original production has been discovered. The Arabic language was slowly but surely submerging Coptic, both as the administrative and everyday language and as the vehicle for the transmission of Christian culture. Further, continued political troubles and increasingly difficult relations between the Coptic and Islamic communities recommended the use of a single, common language to avoid an isolation that could only damage the conquered community.

In the Egyptian Middle Ages, the center of Christian life was the monasteries, which tended to arrange all extant, valid, and vital texts according to their specific use and rationale. Since the texts were to be read during the *synaxeis* (part of the liturgy preceding the Eucharist), they had to be copied in books set aside for that purpose, with clear titles to identify them and the proper occasion for their delivery. These were

the homilies or the so-called Synaxaria (to use the terminology of the Eastern church), in which all kinds of old texts assumed a similar shape: that of a homily, or at most, the life of a saint. Even texts that originally had been treatises were recast as Homilies by this school. The feasts of the saints were the occasion for a more extensive collection of texts, which consisted of (1) the martyrdom or *vita*, more often in the enlarged form of the seventh and eighth centuries' redaction than in the original fifth-century or sixth-century one; (2) an encomium, which could again contain a homiletic form of the martyrdom or *vita*; and (3) a series of miracles, with references to the grace that could be obtained in the sanctuaries of the saints involved.

Texts that originally differed from these genres were simply and often naively rearranged in order to fit them. A new title and a few lines of introduction sufficed to accomplish this purpose; the titles usually mentioned the author (not necessarily the true one), the relevant parts of the contents (i.e., relevant for that epoch—generally there was no reflection of the actual subject), and the supposed liturgical occasion for pronouncing the text.

Indeed, with the exception of the oldest Coptic texts (fourth and fifth centuries), in the Nag Hammadi Library, BODMER PAPYRI, or MADINAT MADI, most of the texts from which we derive our knowledge of Coptic literature were compiled or copied in the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The codices, although used for practical, liturgical purposes, were also venerated as luxury objects and a means to obtain divine grace. They were produced not for the individual but rather for the community and thus depended on the common taste of the time. In summary, their shape derives from the school of this period, which provided the final liturgical systematization of Coptic literature.

Of course, the important monasteries were depositories of the manuscripts so arranged. One thinks above all of the White Monastery in the south and DAYR ANBA MAQAR (Monastery of Saint Macarius) in the

north. From them radiated the culture on which all Coptic ecclesiastical life was based. This situation continued for the next few centuries, though in the Arabic language. Soon Coptic almost disappeared, first as the language for sermons, then also as the language for the rest of the liturgy. The manuscripts remained in half-forgotten rooms or caves, deteriorating little by little from dust, humidity, animals, and age until Western travelers and manuscript hunters rediscovered them, and renewed interest led to the removal of many from the native monasteries to libraries around the world.

In conclusion, we should bear in mind that this last systematization in the ninth to the eleventh centuries was the principal cause for the very low esteem hitherto accorded to the texts of Coptic literature, for they have appeared at first glance as something boringly uniform, without those differentiations in character and age that can offer guidelines for the historical appreciation of a given literature. Therefore, the historian should first recognize in this final stage of Coptic literature the last activity of Coptic writers—an activity of redaction, choice, and systematization, not creation. Then, by means of these late texts, the historian may trace stratifications to recover the older stages of the literature. For, if it is true that Coptic writing is consistent in quality and subject matter, being almost exclusively religious, its products are in fact diverse in character, content, and style.

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