

Manichaeism and Gnosticism in the Panopolitan Region between Lykopolis and Nag Hammadi

TO DEAL WITH the religious movements of Manichaeism and Gnosticism in the area of Sohag presents a good many problems and raises several questions that will perhaps never be answered. This fact depends on our lack of evidence concerning these two strong ‘enemies’ of the Christian ‘orthodox’ faith, a faith that was defended by officials of the Church and of Monasticism like Shenoute, the famous abbot of Sohag. I am not able to enlarge our knowledge of this topic, but I try in this article to mention several aspects and to restrict the field of information.

In scholarly [literature](#) the city of Panopolis “has often been taken as a test case for the religious situation in Egypt in Late Antiquity.”^[1] This depends on the fact that a lot of sources tell of several philosophical and religious activities and also of conflicts, especially in this area. In general one could say that in the early fourth century, paganism was still strong. Approximately at the same time a kind of competition between [Gnostic](#) groups, the Manichaean religion, several Christian tendencies, and a developing institutional Christian Church, formed by men like Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, reached a culmination point.^[2] At the very end of this century pagan religions lost their dominance.

Nevertheless, a well-educated pagan elite was still active and famous in the fifth century, demonstrated also by their activities in the area of Panopolis. Famous, for example, was Horapollon, who wrote the well-known [interpretation](#) of more than one hundred hieroglyphic signs.^[3] Stories like the struggle between Shenoute and Gessios led to the conclusion that Panopolis was a kind of castle (or *qasr*) against Christian influence.^[4] However, the view of the past as a kind of permanent struggle between paganism and Christianity does not reflect reality at all. In general, the conversion of a society to another religion, as living together in daily life between different religious groups, is marked by a diversity of factors. In the case of Panopolis, the information we have

should not lead to the conclusion of a fierce battle between opposing forces or a religious war.”[5]

Beside ‘the pagans,’ Gnosticism and Manichaeism also played an important role as counterparts of institutional Christianity. However, in the case of the region of Panopolis it is difficult to find strong historical facts for these two groups. One has to keep in mind that the borderline between several religious beliefs is often fluttering and porous and depends on ancient and modern definitions, which are changeable.[6]

An early witness may be the alchemist Zosimus, who was suspected to be involved in [Gnostic](#) circles. He must have been active in about 300 and in several ancient sources is connected to the city of Panopolis. Michele Mertens listed a considerable quantity of relations to Gnostic texts, but concluded: “However, the question of how Zosimus came into contact with hermetism and gnosticism remains open,” and two lines later: “It is very likely, but in the texts that have come down to us from Zosimus, there is not a scrap of evidence allowing us to claim that he frequented this kind of circles.”[7]

From Lykopolis to Nag Hammadi

In some ways it is remarkable that one of the most important abbots of Egyptian monasticism, a man who has been described as a kind of pragmatic warrior for the [orthodox](#) faith, is to be centered in the middle of two places that for historians are famous for their non-Christian and heretical activities.

About seventy miles to the north lies the city of Lykopolis, often mentioned as the center of Manichaean activities. The Coptic Manichaean library of Madinat Madi in Fayoum and the texts of Kellis, found in the house of a Manichaean community, were written in the Lykopolitan dialect. This dialect also plays an important role in the most famous find of Coptic manuscripts, the find of Nag Hammadi, which marks the counter-

pole in the south. For this reason the dialect and the city of Lykopolis were often connected with the Manichaeans or other 'heretics.'

About fifty miles away from Sohag in the area of Nag Hammadi thirteen papyrus-codices were found in December 1945. This so-called '[Gnostic Library](#)' includes several non-Gnostic texts, for instance Christian philosophical writings or [hermetic](#) tractates. From this point of view, the different religious texts could be read by various readers of different religious faiths, involved in different official or non-official groups. So the readership has to be imagined as a very complex one. It was not possible to clarify the archaeological context of the finding of the library.

For this reason, the context of the texts could only be reconstructed by the contents of the codices, observations in the order of the scriptures, mysterious colophons, and certain facts such as several versions of the same texts, duplicates, and some documents used for the book-binding. The thesis of a relationship to the nearby Pachomian monasteries was discussed in several works but could not be proved.[\[8\]](#)

The lack of basic historical information

We do not know all of the texts created in the 'Age of Spirituality,' as so often called and we are not able to estimate the original number of copies that exist. In fact, however, we know some. In contrast to this we have a much poorer knowledge about archaeological remains or names of normal people who belonged to [Gnostic](#) or Manichaean groups. We do not possess information on their number and their spread in villages and towns.

Moreover, even the biographical data of some famous persons are poor. In Manichaean studies the name of Lykopolis is associated with the neo-Platonist Alexander of Lykopolis. His antimanichaean tractate was written about 300 and was transmitted through the centuries because of its importance in the debates with the sect of the Paulicans in the ninth

century. Photius (c. Manich. 1,11) tells of him that he converted to Christianity and became bishop of Lykopolis (as predecessor of Meletius)—a piece of information that is unreliable. We do not know anything more about Alexander, and to my knowledge it is not absolutely sure where he was in touch with the Manichaeans: whether in Lykopolis or in Alexandria.^[9] His statements about Manichaean missionary work concern the whole of Egypt.

For several reasons the theory was developed that the Cologne Mani Codex, the smallest codex preserved from antiquity, was translated from an East Aramaic dialect to Greek in this area. ^[10] The thesis of such a translation is based on certain particularities in Greek. The localization of such a scribal activity to this area is possible, but since the codex was bought in the antiquity trade, there exists no certain evidence for its origin. In spite of the sources we have, the gaps in our view of 'heretic' history are frustrating and no one can say how far from historical reality it might be.

What about Shenoute and the Manichaeans?

But what about the area of Sohag? Do we have any evidence that Shenoute himself was in touch with Manichaeans? D.W. Johnson collected the available data of "Coptic Reactions to Gnosticism and Manichaeism," including some reflections on the Manichaean religion in the *Corpus Sinuthianum*.^[11] Besides a so-called gray area, where he listed some polemics against Gnostics and Manichaeans, he listed—if I count right—six passages that argue directly against Mani or the Manichaeans. In fact, it is not an argumentation but a blaming of forbidden thoughts from a Christian point of view: the rejection of the Old Testament and the prophets, and the Manichaean belief that Jesus was not born of a woman. It is no surprise that these two points especially are mentioned in the works of Shenoute.

From the very beginning of conflict in the Church, or between different

theologians, schools and so on, the neglect of the Old Testament was not tolerated. Different opinions concerning questions of Christology were the main reason for struggle and schisms in the Church itself and in the fight against Gnostics or Manichaeans.

It is proved that Shenoute was a well-known person in his area, and that many non-Christians visited him and debated with him.[\[12\]](#) As far as I know, however, it is not recorded whether he personally met any believers of the Manichaean faith.

That there existed Manichaeans in Middle and Upper Egypt even a long time after Shenoute is verified by a certain other Shenoute, who functioned as dux in the seventh century. It is told that he burnt two Manichaean priests in the year 643.[\[13\]](#)

Back to our Shenoute: two sources have a little more quality in their argument against Manichaeans.

References to the Acta Archelai

The fragment BN Copte 130³ fol. 39f., assigned to volume 8 of the Discourses of Shenoute (codex GP), bears a small Antimanichaicon.[\[14\]](#) However, although the *Acta Archelai*, which were composed some years after 325 and contain a fictitious debate between a certain Bishop Archelaios and Mani, are mentioned, almost nothing can be found about Manichaeism itself. The text, however, shows that Shenoute—possibly because of this region—was estimated to know something about Manichaeans and that he dealt with this subject. Shenoute stated that a presbyter of Side, a city in Asia Minor, wanted to know something about the Manichaeans. We do not know any other facts about this presbyter and his relationship to the famous abbot. However, it is possible that they met personally during Shenoute's journey through Asia Minor on his way to the Council of Ephesus or on other occasions.

Already at the beginning Shenoute refers to the *Acta Archelai*: “Archelaios, the bishop of Carchar in Mesopotamia, also made a few remarks while opposing Mani, the root of Manichaeism.” [15] Although the acts contain various statements on the history of the Manichaeans and details of their theological system, the homily of Shenoute offers no further information. After the short introduction, he cited the gospels and inveighed against the Pharisees. In fact there are no further relations to the *Acta Archelai* or excerpts in this text.

We can only conclude that the use of the term ‘Manichaeon’ for Shenoute and for the audience was common.

Further references to the *Acta Archelai* shows BN Copte 131⁴ fol. 158 recto col. B, which belongs to codex ZM of the White Monastery and contains varia. [16] In the fragment some pagan opinions about the fate of the soul after death are mentioned. This is a kind of brief list without profound information, but written in a neutral way. Such lists in the form “some say . . . others say” are also known in Manichaean literature. The unpublished *Kephalaia* of Dublin contain a chapter about different Christological thoughts written in the same form. [17]

In the section on Manichaean thought, which follows the foregoing pagan part, the author cites sentences from the *Acta Archelai*. [18] It is told that a soul that murders will be transferred into the body of a leper. The next statement that the air is the soul of animals, men and so on could be a misunderstanding or false [interpretation](#) of some Manichaean doctrines. Normally the air is only one of the five elements. Further on, however, our author is right to point out that in the Manichaean view the body does not belong to God but to dark matter and that the prophets are neglected.

Although the statements show a certain knowledge of the Manichaean doctrine, they are very general. On the one hand it depends on the focus of the text, namely to register imaginings of the afterlife of the soul. On the other hand, it is normal in a certain sense that polemics against the

Manichaeans describe the myth with so many details. In the texts of Sohag we have not so far found such descriptions. There is a large difference between the poor information about the Manichaean doctrine we find in these texts and the theological discourses of Augustine for example, who himself had been a Manichean for several years. It seems that Shenoute had no interest in such details. Augustine tried to prove it wrong; Shenoute already knew that it was wrong.

Worshipping the Sun and Magical texts

In the works of Shenoute one can find several statements against the worship of stars or of the sun and the moon, in other words polemics against astrological ideas. In the famous struggle with Gessios he wrote: “Could I have hidden the sun in the sky and the moon and the stars, which you worship? Or could I there, where the sun sets, build walls to hinder your praying to the West?”^[19] In another place we read: “Woe to him who puts his hand on the mouth, gives them kisses and says: ‘Hail, sun,’ or, ‘Be strong, moon,’ thanking the creatures and worshipping them more than the creator himself.”^[20]

First of all, this is a tirade against pagan traditions. Jaques van der Vliet remarked that this precise formula could be in common use in the environment of the White Monastery.^[21] It is possible that Shenoute also observed this custom among Manichaeans, who were known even in Rome as busy admirers of the sun. Even in the fifth century, the popes of Rome lamented the Manichaean custom of praying to the sun before entering a church.

The same words Shenoute used can be proved in the Coptic Manichaean Psalm Book of Madinat Madi. In a group of sun hymns—testimonies in several languages are preserved from the East, or Middle Asia, to the West—one psalm starts with the words: “Hail, sun,” the same wording mentioned by Shenoute. Since this salutation was iterated after each strophe of the Coptic psalm, one could say that it was a well-known

expression.[\[22\]](#)

Traces of Gnosticism

Among the descriptions by Shenoute of the objects in a pagan sanctuary some “books full of all manner of magic” are mentioned. It is possible that scriptures like the Books of Jeu, which are counted as [Gnostic](#) but have a lot of connections to magical works, were characterized in this way.[\[23\]](#) In these two books the way of the soul through the spheres of heaven is described. Beneath a dialogue between Jesus and the apostles, magical spells, diagrams and descriptions of the localities should enable the soul to pass through.

D.W. Johnson in his article mentioned above, and D.W. Young in a contribution about the background to the Nag Hammadi codices, collected several possible relations of Coptic literature to [Gnostic](#) works.[\[24\]](#) Among these sources an allusion to Eve and Cain in the *Life of Pachomius* could be the “most unambiguous reference to a [Gnostic](#) doctrine.”[\[25\]](#) Some allusions to the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas are in discussion. H. Behlmer showed that some terms in the scriptures of Shenoute such as “kingless,” a term found in Sethian texts, or “the illuminator” are not necessarily linked to [Gnostic](#) texts as previously thought.[\[26\]](#) In his sermon “De iudicio,” Shenoute argues against a group of heretics who could be influenced by [Gnostic](#) thoughts.[\[27\]](#) These heretics, so Shenoute said, dismissed material property and wealth. Furthermore—that is the important point—material wealth would belong to the devil or to the sphere of the devil, a formulation near to the [Gnostic](#) thought that all matter is evil.

In this brief overview there is no opportunity to mention all details, but it is obvious that the traits of Manichaeism and Gnosticism in this area depend only on textual references, often with a limited historical value.

This lack of sources has several causes. Here I want to deal with one of

them and raise the simple question: How visible or invisible was a believer of [Gnostic](#) thought or a member of the Manichaean religion? It is very likely that in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries non-Christians and non-[orthodox](#) Christian believers went further and further underground.[\[28\]](#)

For pagan religions the official temple cult, and also several kinds of sanctuaries and idols—paintings and sculptures—were characteristic and visible. This type of religious practice was castigated not only in Christian but also in Manichaean literature. Instead of worshiping idols the ‘heretics’ (all non-institutional Christians, [Gnostic](#) groups and the Manichaean communities) read the Gospels, the epistles of Paul and what are called today the apocryphal texts. It is true that they read with their own eyes and established their own interpretations. Many scriptures that were created in an uncontrolled Christian religious area followed the favored interpretation.

In other words, several [Gnostic](#) groups, Manichaeans, and [orthodox](#) Christians would meet in the same bookshop. We can assume that the appearance of a member of a Gnostic or Manichaean community did not differ much from other Christian believers. This is despite some reports in anti-heretical Christian texts that Manichaeans were pale in complexion because of fasting too much. Fasting (and giving alms) was also a Christian practice, and the tendency to exaggerate the practice was a known problem.

Comparing the evidence of various sacraments we find similar observances, for example, in the Gospel of Philip and in Christian [orthodox](#) ritual.[\[29\]](#) Most differences can be found on the level of [interpretation](#) or in details of practice. To speak about [Gnostic](#) cultic behavior in general raises several difficulties because of the ambiguous source material. By contrast, the rituals of the Manichaeans are much better documented. Most rituals could be celebrated in normal houses: Worshipers sang psalms and listened to homilies or readings of their holy books. Even

special assemblies such as vigils or gatherings of the Electi did not require a special building. An essential custom like the *Seelenmesse*, celebrated for the soul to find its way through the stars, was noted only for praying, singing psalms and giving alms[30] and could be carried out in a familiar environment. As far as we know the so-called Manichaean monasteries were located in ordinary houses.

There was only one exception: the feast of the Bema, which ran over two days. A raised chair was built and it was celebrated in the open air.[31]

Except for some Church Fathers who speak about this feast in general, there are no local reports—for example, in the scriptures of Shenoute—about such a representative feast, which was celebrated, as we assume, by everyone in the wider neighborhood. Perhaps it is only an accident of transmission ('Zufall der Überlieferung'), but perhaps the Manichaean communities were so small in number in Panopolis that the individuals had to travel to other villages or towns to celebrate their main feast days.

These few remarks may show the difference between the struggles of Shenoute against pagans on the one hand and [Gnostic](#) or Manichaean groups on the other. In spite of the historically transmitted sources, the evidence for these two religious phenomena is noted for its gaps in our knowledge.

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[1] Van Minnen 2002: 180 with references.

[2] Drawing a distinction between the mentioned religious directions has been the focus of scholarly studies up to today. See the outline of the state of research by Logan (2006) and Marjanen (2005) and the newest attempts for definitions of Gnosticism by King (2003) and Layton (1995).

[3] Thissen 2001: esp. XII-XIII.

[4] Van der Vliet 1993; cf. to the conflict between Shenute and Gessios Thissen 1993; see the new [interpretation](#) of Gessios as a kind of *crypto-pagan* by Emmel 2002: 108-109.

[5] Van Minnen 2002: 181.

[6] This phenomenon is described well by Khosroyev (1995).

[7] Mertens 2002: 175.

[8] See Logan 2006: 15-17 and the detailed discussion in Khosroyev 1995: 77103; see also Rousseau 2007.

[9] Cf. Khosroyev 1995: 105 f. n. 303; to the work of Alexander see Van der Horst and Mansfeld 1974; Villey 1985.

[10] Koenen 1973 and Koenen 1983: 95 with references (cf. Khosroyev 1995: 106 note 305).

[11] Johnson 1987.

[12] Behlmer 1998.

[13] Klein 1992: 373.

[14] Klein 1992; Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 281; 2004b, vol. 2: 660.

[15] Translation by Johnson 1987: 207.

[16] Lefort 1929; Van der Vliet 1993: 124; Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 353.

[17] Funk 1990: 528.

[18] Polotsky 1932.

[19] Leipoldt 1906-1913, Vol. 3: 81-82.

[20] Zoega 1810: 456 f.

[21] Van der Vliet 1993: 118.

[22] Richter 2000 esp. 484 f.

[23] Johnson 1983: 202.

[24] Ibid.; Young 1970.

[25] Johnson 1983: 201.

[26] Behlmer 1996: XC f.; concerning “kingless” see Painchaud and Janz 1997, who raised the question of a link on p. 460.

[27] Behlmer 1996: LXXXVIII f., 267 n. 593.

[28] Vinzent 1998: 46 f.

[29] See Schenke 2001 with bibliography. In general see Logan 2006: 76-82.

[30] Richter 1997.

[31] See the study of the feast of the Bema by Wurst 1995.

Tags: [Heritage](#), [History](#)