

The Fate of the White Monastery Library

THE LIBRARY OF the White Monastery, founded during the fourth century by Apa Pegol, an uncle of Shenoute, went through an outstanding period in the centuries that followed its creation. During the fourteenth century, however, the Arab occupation and the Mamluk attacks sounded the death knell for this bastion of Christian culture in Egypt. The manuscripts it contained were stored, under circumstances that still remain obscure, in hidden rooms from which they were only rescued after several centuries.

In 1778 Cardinal Borgia purchased, without knowing their exact origin, a portion of more than 2,300 pages and fragments, today preserved in the libraries of Naples and Rome. For about fifty years a number of libraries of the world were able to purchase important collections of manuscripts without being able to determine their origin. This source seemed to have dried up until Gaston Maspero, in 1882, purchased from a dealer of Cairo, probably Marius Tano, some very beautiful pages that he bought for the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO). Tano informed him that these pages "had been found in the Deir Amba-Chenoudah by a monk"[\[1\]](#) who had sold them to him. However, among these pages were some whose writing was clearly evocative of those bought in the past by Cardinal Borgia. As a result, the origin of all these manuscripts acquired earlier was established.

Up to now we know very little about Maspero's purchase of the Coptic manuscripts from the White Monastery. However, while preparing the catalogue of Coptic manuscripts kept in the IFAO, my interest in the [history](#) of this deposit led me to consult the letters received by Gaston Maspero, currently preserved in the Institut de France in Paris.[\[2\]](#) Now, these letters throw quite a new light on the circumstances that surrounded the discovery of these manuscripts by Maspero, and in particular their acquisition by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BN). I am going to try therefore to summarize this [history](#) as it is described in this

correspondence.[\[3\]](#) However, before starting this narration, I would like to add that a third hidden room was discovered, in 1906, at the time of the works of restoration undertaken in the monastery. This room contained the last pages that the monastery revealed.[\[4\]](#)

In 1882, Maspero learned of the existence of a hidden room concealed somewhere inside the White Monastery that contained a large number of pages of Coptic manuscripts. Having arrived there, he made acquaintance with a French expatriate in Egypt named Auguste Frenay, director of the French mill at Akhmim.[\[5\]](#) Conscious of the importance of his discovery, Maspero arranged, with the help of Frenay, whom he made his correspondent and his spokesman with the monks, for the entirety to be bought by the BN. As this discovery was still little known, the [price](#) of the pages was very low. It was therefore important that it remain thus, so that Maspero could buy them all for an affordable price. This necessitated total secrecy concerning this fabulous find of several thousands of pages in order to avoid the antiquities [dealers](#) driving up prices through arguing about their purchase. Frenay then started [negotiations](#) with the superior of the White Monastery, but the latter hesitated and only accepted the sale center the end of 1884.

At this time Eugene Grebaut had just been named as director of the IFAO. A letter that he sent to Maspero on 14 December 1884 states:

“I have the intention to send M. Amelineau and Virey to join you in Thebes to attend your excavations M. Amelineau informed me of a project of which he will already have spoken you and that you would approve, he has told me. What should one think about this purchase of Coptic papyri? Perhaps our budget would be sufficient; but should we risk the deal? I lack information.”[\[6\]](#)

Thanks to this letter, we learn, on the one hand, that the secret Maspero wanted to keep had been discovered, since Amelineau had been informed and had spoken of it to Eugene Grebaut. One can suppose that the

informant could be Xavier Charmes, who was then Minister of the Public Instruction in France, and also the protector and the friend of Amelineau, but there is no proof at the present time that this information came from him. However, we know from a letter sent on 17 December 1884 by Grebaut to Maspero that Xavier Charmes had promised Amelineau he would finance a part of his purchase.^[7] On the other hand, Grebaut seems to have only very little information about this discovery: he still ignores the fact that the manuscripts are essentially composed of fragments of parchment and are not papyri. What seems strange in this letter is the fact that Amelineau asserts that he has already raised the question of the White Monastery manuscripts with Maspero. However, this affirmation seems very doubtful. Indeed, Grebaut, having no answer from Maspero on 10 January 1885, wrote to Maspero that he had just allowed Amelineau to make these purchases, and that he was financially sustained by Xavier Charmes. A few days later, Grebaut wrote again to Maspero to inform him that he had news from Amelineau:

A letter from M. Amelineau warns me that he has finished his research and that he is going to depart to Luxor (where he was supposed to join Maspero). He will give you the details. His success would be satisfactory: the manuscripts will be in Cairo towards the beginning of February. Aly Bahgat^[8] will bring them to me, according to the [instructions](#) of M. Charmes M. Amelineau wanted to bring you his loot to Luxor, but I received from the ministry . . . special instructions that compelled me to ensure that the manuscripts were brought immediately to the Mission in Cairo.^[9]

Thus Amelineau went to the White Monastery where he would have made the acquisition of Coptic manuscripts. Immediately after this he had to join Maspero in Luxor, and then things began to get complicated because it seems that Maspero took a long time before writing to Grebaut what he

thought about this expedition. But here is the letter that Grebaut wrote to Maspero on 2nd March, 1885:

Dear M. Maspero,

From the moment I received your last letter but one—the one that concerned Amelineau—I was intending to write you. Your letter stopped me, and made me so puzzled that I wanted, before answering you and writing to Amelineau, to collect if it was possible, some information. I don't want to cause the Mission some trouble!

Aly Bahgat questioned by me time and again said nothing to me: either he knows nothing or he doesn't want to say anything.

Artin Pasha,[\[10\]](#) seen four times in fifteen days, either at home, or at the mission, did not show me anything. Nevertheless we talked about Amelineau and Aly Bahgat. He had asked the latter for a report. Aly Bahgat showed me a project written for him by Amelineau. Amelineau committed the very serious mistake of taking Artin for a very simple child. The report was puerile, but I could not see anything compromising there. However, with prudence—you had so scared me—I cut and [abridged](#) without mercy. . . . To redo.

Aly Bahgat re-did his work in Arabic; he read me a translation of it. I found his report interesting, but not compromising. *Amelineau is not named there*. Aly Bahgat, the hero of the journey, counts the monks, their mills, their maronites; he copied in [Arabic](#) Joanne's guide that he had borrowed from me! *Of Coptic manuscripts, no mention*. Artin was delighted, he wants the report to be read in the Institut

As for the object of the Amelineau mission, I swear to you that I believed you to be better informed about it than me. . . . On my arrival, I understood that he was about, in advance of you, to execute a project that you had not only approved, but conceived yourself. I wrote of it to you

only as a matter of form. . . . Amelineau assured me that all was agreed with you, that you had sent him to me to settle this matter immediately once and for all; that I could speak in your name to Artin Pasha. I wrote to M. Charmes to commend Amelineau to him M. Charmes invited me by telegram to 'advance' 4,000 fr. to Amelineau. . . . Amelineau had asked for a minister's commission . . .

The result is sparse enough so far. Amelineau did not give me any report.

The entire information he wrote to me is that I would receive from Aly Bahgat a case of manuscripts (I had asked him, in accordance with the instructions of M. Charmes, to send it as soon as possible to Cairo). Amelineau added that his mission was not finished, that he would go again to a convent where several important manuscripts were being copied for him. Aly Bahgat confirmed this good news to me. . . .

The manuscripts contained in the famous case are of little importance. Most of them are copies, more or less complete, more or less damaged, of the remnants from a Coptic Mass book. In them I can see prayers, epistles, and gospels for all the feasts of the year. Half of these texts are in Arabic.

The result is up to this point sparse. . . .

However I am inviting Amelineau, by a letter that will leave at the same time as this one: 1 to keep silent, 2 to behave with the utmost prudence. I will let him believe—which is not exact, but you made me understand the necessity to make him very prudent—that the patriarch has some fears. Let Amelineau finish his mission as well as he can, but without creating trouble for us.[\[11\]](#)

Here is how I believe one should interpret this letter: Amelineau, having learned that a very important collection of Coptic manuscripts were kept inside the walls of the White Monastery, applies to Xavier Charmes to

obtain funds from the French Government, of which he receives 4,000 francs; he then asks Grebaut for other funds, of which he receives 2,000 more francs, while affirming to him that Maspero himself has put him in charge of going to buy the set of the White Monastery manuscripts for him. Then, Grebaut writes to Maspero to inform him of it and to tell him that Amelineau, once his purchases are done, will join him directly at Luxor. Maspero, from then on aware of the situation, does not immediately answer Grebaut about Amelineau; probably he is expecting Amelineau to join him in Luxor in order to explain himself directly to him.

The letter from Grebaut I have just quoted shows that, in fact, Maspero did not know anything of the projects of Amelineau before he had been warned by Grebaut, since theoretically Maspero had charged Frenay, not Amelineau, to negotiate the purchases. The great sum of money (6,000 francs) that Amelineau had obtained was supposed to be used to buy the entire contents of the cell, that is to say perhaps about four or five thousand leaves and fragments. However, the manuscripts brought back by Amelineau were very few and of very little value; they are kept today to the Bibliotheque nationale de France (BN) under the numbers 112 to 128.^[12] These are liturgical manuscripts written on paper in Bohairic and Arabic, the oldest of them dating to the fifteenth century—that is to say that they were far from being worth the sum that Amelineau spent to acquire them.

His insistence on obtaining the manuscripts from the White Monastery and the fact that he was willing to pay a great deal for manuscripts that, all things considered, were of little value, had the effect of inflating the prices. Maspero, who hoped to acquire the whole collection for a moderate sum, had to give up this project; and, as was foreseeable, when the matter became known antiquities [dealers](#) and collectors hurried in large number to buy, almost leaf by leaf, the contents of the room. As we know, this resulted in the scattering of its contents among several libraries in the world.

Maspero and Frenay therefore had to find more substantial financing, but the prices had become so elevated that it was henceforth impossible to hope to acquire the entirety of the collection for the BN. In the month of December 1885, Xavier Charmes finally officially granted 5,000 francs to Maspero[13] so that he could finance a significant purchase. Frenay had already been able to acquire some pages on several occasions, which he often had to pay for himself, while waiting for financing by the French Government. But he was thus able to acquire, between March 1885 and January 1886 and through five successive purchases, a batch consisting of about 1,700 pages and fragments that were deposited in the [BN](#) on 19 March 1886.

However, the antiquities dealers, who did not stop searching for manuscripts, made the prices rise again as a letter sent in January 1886 by Frenay to Maspero shows us.[14] Also, institutions such as the [British Museum](#) had sent their own purchasers there, and Frenay had to let go more and more manuscripts.[15] In spite of everything, Frenay succeeded in acquiring about 1,500 pages for Maspero and sent them to him in June 1886, whereas the latter, having given up his work at the [Museum](#) of Boulaq, had gone back to France. However, the case, which had stayed somewhere in the museum for two months, arrived at the [BN](#) only on 17 February 1887, that is to say eight months later. Moreover, while opening it, Maspero noted with alarm that of the 1,500 pages he expected there remained only 828. What had happened to the other half? He asked Frenay for an explanation, who answered him in these words:

I'm terribly annoyed because of the problems that this unhappy consignment of fragments has caused you and I regret not having sent them through the Consulate. Someone has certainly, during the two months that they remained in Boulaq, checked them, browsed through them, and, during this period, Arabs, who knew their value, could have diverted part of them All I can say is that I wrote your letter only after having filled the

case, that is to say that my account was correct[\[16\]](#)

During the same period, Amelineau had acquired funds from Emile Guimet in order to buy new Coptic manuscripts; he found some that came from the White Monastery at Tano, and this collection was then offered by Guimet to the BN, where it arrived on 20 May 1887.[\[17\]](#)

As for Maspero's purchases, after the misadventures undergone by the second collection that he had obtained it seems that the French Government grew reticent, and it became difficult for Maspero to obtain the necessary funds. This is how a fragment of St. John's Gospel that Frenay offered to Maspero was finally bought by Golenischev toward the beginning of the year 1889.[\[18\]](#) Maspero succeeded, however, in obtaining, not without difficulty, a last collection of about one hundred pages and a box of fragments, that arrived at the Bibliotheque nationale de France on 14 October 1887.

This succession of purchases, therefore, with its attendant difficulties, ends on a somewhat depressing note. In spite of it, about 3,500 [sheets](#) and fragments of parchment could join the Coptic fund of the [BN](#) between March 1886 and October 1887, making this library "the most important in the world from this point of view."[\[19\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Maspero 1907: 322-23. For a summary of what we know so far about the discovery of these manuscripts, see Louis 2005: 7-12.

[\[2\]](#) Later abbreviated IdF.

[\[3\]](#) More detailed versions of this research can be found in Louis 2005: 7-39, and Louis 2007.

[\[4\]](#) According to Maspero 1907: 323: "J'ajouterai qu'en 1906, des

reparations ayant ete faites au Deir [par](#) les soins de l'administration des Wakfs, une chambre de debarras nouvelle fut exploitee par les ouvriers, et qu'il en sortit, outre des cuivres super- bes, une masse considerable de manuscrits. Le service des Antiquites saisit quelques centaines de feuillets qu'il remit au patriarcat copte [jacobite](#) du Caire, puis, quand la surveillance archeologique des travaux lui fut retiree, des livres entiers et des cen- taines de fragments parurent sur le marche"

[5] Here is how Maspero describes this cell and the circumstances of its discovery : "C'est en 1882 qu'ayant vu entre les mains d'un marchand du Caire de tres beaux fragments de manuscrits coptes, je les fis acheter [par](#) l'Institut franfais ; je m'inquietai en meme temps d'en rechercher la provenance, et il ne me fut pas difficile d'apprendre qu'ils avaient ete trouves au Deir Amba-Chenoudah par un moine qui les avait ven- dus a mon marchand. Je tachai donc de nouer des relations directes avec le couvent, et grace a l'obligeance de M. Frenay, directeur du moulin franfais d'Akhmim, je sus bientot qu'on avait decouvert dans une partie des batiments a laquelle on accede par un couloir cache, une chambre pleine de vieux livres. Comme les musulmans, les [coptes](#) repugnent a penser qu'un papier sur lequel le nom de Dieu est ecrit peut etre foule aux pieds ou souille d'une maniere abominable : ils enferment ceux de leurs livres qui deviennent hors d'usage dans des chambres secretes ou ils les oublient. Le depot que M. Frenay me signalait devait donc contenir les debris de la bibliotheque du Monastere, et comme les manuscrits des collections du XVIIIe siecle, notamment ceux de la collection Borgia, avaient ete acquis au Deir [par](#) les Franciscains de la mission d'Akhmim, je pensai que nous avions grand chance de trouver la des portions manquantes de ces manuscrits. Une premiere tentative pour se les procurer que fit l'Institut fran^ais, echoua par la faute de celui qui fut charge de l'operation, et nous n'aurions rien eu si M. Frenay n'etait de nouveau venu a notre secours. Il acheta au moins, pour une somme minime, une caisse qui contenait les plus beaux specimens de la cachette, des volumes presque entiers, ou des feuillets charges de miniatures,

comme ceux qui furent arrachés à un exemplaire illustre des Épîtres de S. Jean ; puis, à différentes reprises, il réussit à obtenir des lots moins importants. Cependant, le bruit s'en étant répandu, les marchands et les voyageurs se mirent en campagne, et le premier résultat de leur intervention fut de relever les prix : les feuillets, qui valaient d'abord cinquante centimes ou un franc monterent rapidement à deux francs, puis à cinq, puis à vingt. La prompt action de M. Xavier Charmes et la libéralité de M. Leopold Delisle me permirent d'assurer à la Bibliothèque la moitié au moins de ce trésor : le reste s'est dispersé dans les différentes bibliothèques de l'Europe" (Maspero 1907: 322-23).

[6] IdF, ms. 4020, fol. 540.

[7] See IdF, ms. 4020, fol. 544-45.

[8] Archeologue.

[9] IdF, ms. 4020, fol. 548.

[10] An Egyptian statesman who contributed to the organization of the journey.

[11] IdF, ms. 4020, fol. 549-50.

[12] According to a note actually preserved in the Archives Nationales in Paris, under the ref. F/17/2931.

[13] According to a letter written by Charmes to Maspero : IdF, ms. 4010, fol. 470-71.

[14] IdF, ms. 4018, fol. 481-82.

[15] IdF, ms. 4018, fol. 483-84.

[16] IdF, ms. 4018, fol. 501-502.

[17] See Amelineau 1907-14, vol. 2.

[18] This fragment has been published by Elanskaya 1994, nr. 15: 451-454 and pl. CLXXV-CLXXVI.

[19] Quotation from Maspero. Cf. David 2003: 237.

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