

**Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths:  
An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature.  
Literary Texts in their Geographical Context.  
Production, Copying, Usage, Dissemination and Storage**

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On 1 November 2016, the project 'PATHs: Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature. Literary Texts in their Geographical Context. Production, Copying, Usage, Dissemination and Storage' was inaugurated. PATHs received an Advanced Grant (2015) from the European Research Council.<sup>1</sup> In the five-year term (2016–2021), the project aims to provide an in-depth diachronical understanding and effective representation of the geography of Coptic literary production<sup>2</sup> and in particular of the corpus of literary writings, almost exclusively of religious content, produced in Egypt between the third and the eleventh centuries in the Coptic language.

***Methodology and objectives***

PATHs takes an original and pluridisciplinary approach, combining for the first time in Coptic Studies philology, codicology, archaeology and digital humanities, in order to explore the process of production, copying, usage, dissemination, and storage of Coptic literary works in relation to the geographical contexts of origin of both the texts themselves and their related writing supports.

- 1 Grant no. 687567, <<http://paths.uniroma1.it/>>. Currently, the staff of the project is composed of Paola Buzi (Principal Investigator, Coptologist), Angela Bernardo (Project Coordinator), Julian Bogdani (Archaeologist and specialist of Digital Humanities and Web GIS), Nathan Carlig (Codicologist), Maria Chiara Giorda (Historian and specialist of Early Christianity and Egyptian Monasticism), Agostino Soldati (Philologist). PATHs is not a project that emerges *ex nihilo*, but it takes advantage of some successful initiatives whose results will constitute one of the bases of the research work, although they do not overlap with the goals of this new project. The *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari* (CMCL) is the most important of these projects and PATHs will work in strict relation with it. For a list of the current partner projects of PATHs see <<http://paths.uniroma1.it/cooperation/>>.
- 2 Despite the fact that the Bible is a fully-fledged part of Coptic literature, PATHs will take into consideration biblical manuscripts only to quantify and qualify the nature of the books owned by single libraries. A detailed codicological description of them is not part the research activities of PATHs, since this is the main goal of the well-known project *Digital Edition and Translation of Coptic Old Testament*, based in Göttingen <<http://coptot.manuscriptroom.com/>>.

By analysing texts and contents, paratexts (titles and scribal subscriptions) and linguistic layers (style and dialects), the literary products will be strictly related not only to the places where they have been copied, but also to the single intellectual milieu responsible for their creation. Cultural orientations and literary tastes in specific areas of Egypt will be singled out, while changes in the manufacture of codices will emerge, in a manuscript tradition that offers the oldest witnesses for the emergence and use of the codex book form.

An exhaustive digital Atlas of late antique and early mediaeval Egypt—a versatile tool that will allow detailed and focused research and correlation of chronological, regional and thematic data – will illustrate the relationship between settlements, as revealed by the archaeological investigations, and intellectual production, as revealed by manuscripts, and will provide a new comprehensive perspective on the spread and development of Coptic literature and manuscript culture.

Moreover, PATHs will integrate into its portal the just described archaeological atlas of Coptic literature (main product) with several relational databases (by-products), all of them in keeping with the finality of creating a concrete link between literary production and related geographical and archaeological context:

- A complete classification of Coptic literature, by means of the attribution of a *Clavis Coptica* (CC) entry to each work and each title,<sup>3</sup> and of a stable identifier to each colophon.
- A complete census, edition, and translation of all the extant Coptic colophons and scribal subscriptions. Particular attention will be devoted to terminological aspects and structural elements of colophons and subscriptions.
- A complete classification of the Coptic manuscript tradition, by means of the attribution of stable identifiers to each manuscript ('production unit'), in order to have univocal coordinates of reference to the entire Coptic book production. Such a classification is progressively expandable as soon as new manuscripts are discovered.
- A complete census of the relevant sites which are known as places where single manuscripts (for instance codices buried with a body, as a funerary kit) or entire 'collections' (for example a monastery library, such as the codices found in the monastery of the Virgin Mary in Deir el-Hammam) have

3 As is well-known this is a process initiated by Tito Orlandi, within the research activities of the *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*, but it needs to be revised and expanded. Despite the fact that they are real micro-texts, titles, for instance, did not receive a CC until now.

been found. Drawings, photos, maps, and 3D reconstructions of the most relevant sites will be provided.

- A tentative identification of places and geographical areas where specific works and literary genres have been conceived.
- A complete archive of names of copyists, commissioners, donors, institutions and places involved in the production of manuscripts.
- A classification of the book formats, writing supports and other relevant codicological features of the manuscripts, in relation to the texts that they transmit.<sup>4</sup>
- All the databases just described—with their interrelated data—will constitute the invisible substructure of the Atlas of Coptic literature.

It is useless to specify that each step of the work of PATHs is based on an accurate and sometimes pioneering—at least for Coptic Studies—theoretical and methodological reflection. To make but a few examples, PATHs will try to answer questions such as the following: is the author of a work originally written in Greek and later translated into Coptic, with some manipulations of the original text, a ‘Coptic author’? What is the place of Plato in Coptic literature, since an *excerptum* of the *Republic* is preserved in one of the Nag Hammadi codices, although it is distorted to the point of being almost not recognisable? Are the final colophon—that is located at end of a codex—and the scribal subscription that concludes a single work the same cultural and functional phenomenon? Do we need a different terminology to describe their role and function? How can we define a scribal subscription that, copy by copy, was incorporated in the text of the work losing its original function?

In brief, PATHs represents an opportunity to re-think and re-define the entire corpus of literary works preserved in Coptic, going beyond the traditional narrow subdivision of disciplines, so that literature will no longer be considered a cultural phenomenon totally separated from the material culture. For the first time Coptic literature will not be studied *per se*, but as an intellectual product of groups whose identity is marked by regional and environmental features, ideological tendencies, religious peculiarities, architectural devices, and bibliological models and patterns.

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4 A detailed protocol of description of the codicological aspects of Coptic manuscripts has already been elaborated and will be published soon.