The CMCL *Clavis Coptica.*
On Producing a Standardized List of (Coptic) Works and Manuscripts

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Traditional ways of referring to literary works and manuscripts of the Coptic tradition often lack reliability. A new formalized approach is necessary to create objective and stable repertories. The paper presents some preliminary conclusions reached during the work on the *Clavis Coptica.*

1. Works and their identification

The necessity to establish a complete and reliable catalogue of all Coptic literary works has long been acknowledged. It was among the initial aims of the CMCL (*Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*) project.[1] The digital philology project, launched in the 1970s, offers editions of Coptic texts, catalogues of manuscripts, bibliography, and grammar help for the study of Egyptian Christian culture from the first to the twelfth century CE. Among other contents, the project's rich database currently includes the so-called *Clavis Patrum Copticorum*: a freely retrievable list of the authors and works of the Coptic literature with information on manuscripts, content, and critical problems.[2] This preliminary repertory has already been widely used by the research community to identify Coptic literary works. Yet, the recent development in the discussions on 'Textual Fluidity' (on which more below, §1.2) has not only fueled my interest in the theoretical and methodological aspect of these problems, but also evidenced the necessity to refine the definitions of the works and consequently update the repertory. In the following, I would like to expose synthetically the relevant methodological reflections, as they may also be useful outside the restricted scope of the Coptic *Clavis*.

In the course of my research, it has become clear that the principles according to which texts of the ancient Christian tradition are identified and classified (what is generally referred to as Patristics) derive from centuries-old practice of certain ecclesiastical 'schools', with their particular interests. In this context, the 'school' means any culturally organized identification and presentation of texts and of their respective historical setting, including the attribution, the use in different environments, the reshaping according to different literary genres, etc. The result of this continuous work of systematization, carried on since the very beginning of the Christian literary activity, is a general assessment of the texts guided by religious, and not by properly

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1   <http://cmcl.it>.

2   <http://cmcl.it/~cmcl/chiam_clavis.html>.

historical concerns. The principles and the results therefore clash with modern requirements of historical systematization, calling for a change in paradigm, away from the traditional model.

1.1. The 'schools'

I would like to begin by giving a general synthetic survey of the work of the 'schools', as I see it, in the three most significant periods of their development, (a) the Late Antiquity, (b) the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and, finally, (c) the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century.

(a) Late Antiquity

The late antique period is characterized by the systematization in view of ecclesiastic-liturgical use. This use has many manifestations, each with a different influence on the presentation but also the modification of the texts. The four main manifestations (just to give an example, there are many more) are homiletic, canonical, hagiographic, and polemic (or apologetic). In each case, a text can be submitted to changes to meet the demands, which change with time and depend on ecclesiastic and cultural conditions. Those changes are in turn of different types. Finally (for us), the texts are classified and ordered (typical work of a 'school') in a way that tends to conceal the preceding process. Moreover, the texts are arranged in a relative order of importance, which does not correspond to their real meaning and impact in various environments in preceding times and situations. As a notable example, one may mention the monastic literature, such as the Lives of St Basil, Isaiah of Sketis, or Paul of Tamma. Many texts fall into oblivion, others are revised to be useful in new conditions, and still others are produced and spuriously attributed. Even more striking but less important cases include the Lives of St Pachomius and St Anthony, not to speak of the so-called *apocrypha*.

(b) Renaissance and Erudition

The Renaissance period is characterized by the recovery of Greek patristic texts in the Latin world. They were seen as very authoritative testimonies of a so far lost theological and rhetorical wisdom, therefore were preserved in the same arrangement and textual conditions as they were found. This deference was not without some philological criticism, as it is only to be expected in the period when modern philology was born: the denunciation of the Chrysostomic *spuria* is an obvious example. But, on the whole, the scant quantity and quality of the documents (what survived of the monastic libraries of the eleventh-twelfth centuries and was brought to Europe) led the scholars to adhere to the situation that they represented, without going in search of a more ancient and, in some respect, more genuine situation. In this period of erudite rather than historical studies, the cultural treatment of the texts consisted

above all in submitting them to the recent invention of printing. In fact, our knowledge of the texts and their systematization is still based on the seventeenth and eighteenth-century editions through the collection of Migne.

(c) 1850-1920

Through contacts with the Near Eastern territories and other modern industrial improvements, the quantity and the quality of available documents significantly increased by the mid-nineteenth century. The best example here are the papyrological discoveries. The second half of the nineteenth century was also the period of the scientific classification, and of the birth of Patristics as discipline, inspired by the new sense of history and of a rational critique. The attention was devoted to reconstructing historical (including, as in our case, literary and cultural) phenomena, and their development, through an accurate analysis of the documents, going beyond the earlier assessments and evaluation.

This was at least the theory, and, as such, it would be valid even today. In practice, however, research was (and has since been) carried out under the assumption of a conventional, and an undiscussed idea of *text*, shaped under the influence of the needs of the printing process. This is actually a well-known fact, yet the scholars of Patristics have not drawn any consequences.

Besides, with the advent of printing, diffusion of identical copies became possible, and this imposed the concept of a 'text' as original, invariable, and unique.[3] The accompanying concepts of author, title, layout, chapters, and paragraphs (i.e. internal subdivisions) also assumed a role and a meaning that earlier had been different. There is yet another aspect to keep in mind. The modern history-driven perspective, which was so essential to the progress of the *Altertumswissenschaften*, in the case of Patristics was vitiated by prejudices of religious beliefs and by interests of ecclesiastical confessions. This could happen because, in the organization of the academic studies, the history and literature of Christianity, and of the Churches, was considered of minor or secondary impact, and in any case a prerogative of religious people. As a consequence, patrologists have been inclined to preserve the traditional definition of texts, focusing the discussion on the evaluation of contents—and by doing so charging that same tradition with some modern assumptions that were extraneous to it.

Actually, it was the relatively recent awareness of Christian Oriental literatures, with documents often antedating their Greek and Latin counterparts, and often exhibiting a different character, that has contributed to the new understanding of how a text should be viewed. In fact, I believe that the scholars

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3   Cf. Eisenstein 1983, and relative discussions, e.g. De Franceschi 2012.

of oriental traditions enjoy a privileged vision, which they should promote in the face of the traditional (in substance only Greek and Latin) Patrology.

1.2. New approaches

The consequences that can be drawn from the above observations have much in common with some theories dealing with a renewed, post-modern, understanding of the composition and transmission of texts, theories that have recently assumed an identity of their own. In recent times, a special sensibility emerged concerning the difficulty of identifying with certainty and precision *one* literary work, above all in the field of religious studies, particularly the early Jewish and early Christian production. This set of problems has also taken an official name, 'Textual Fluidity'—and also, less appropriately, 'New Philology'. In the field of Coptic studies, one could mention in this regard Batovici for the Greek Canon[4] and Lundhaug for the Nag Hammadi manuscripts.[5] This does not mean that I agree with the latter's proposal about the origin of the Nag Hammadi material. The scholars of Coptic literature have been long conscious of the related problems, not only because the texts were easily and frequently submitted to linguistic rearrangements of many kinds; but also because their transmission has been very tormented, so that often the identification is problematic.

In fact, the ideas proposed by the 'New Philology' theory are far from being new, they have existed in philology from the very beginning, but in 'New Philology' they assume a sort of operating functionality which previously they had not. When trying to establish a list of the Coptic works, it is not sufficient any more for an identification of a specific work to see the similarity of the text in different manuscripts or its mention or quotation in other works. The same applies to fragments, or to selections transmitted as parts of other works. In fact it may seem reasonable to consider 'works' as living creatures, each with an autonomy of its own, which could grow, shrink, change shape, split, yet preserving their original identity.

While I do not want to decline this assumption altogether, it is worth emphasizing that it should be the result of a literary and historical analysis of each work, and not an initial presupposition. I would like to argue that when organizing a reliable repertory (clavis), one should avoid acquiescence to a more or less conventional tradition, in particular when it has been showing itself as more and more problematic. We must therefore follow another kind of formal scientific perspective to overcome the errors of the past.

First, it is necessary to avoid a number of confusing issues. One of them is the use of the same term 'text' to indicate both an individual work and the

4   Batovici 2016.
5   Lundhaug and Lied 2017.

content of the work in a given document. Another grave error that has been made in the conception and planning of past repertories consists in seeing them as related to, and in a sense accompanying, the historical assessment of the works. Instead, they should be completely independent from the attributed features, like authorship, chronology, or environment. The ordinal number attributed to a work, and consequently the sequence in which they appear, should be fully conventional (in the semiotic sense). It should depend on the documents (manuscripts), in whatever casual order—or better disorder—the author of the repertory considers them. As for the classifications (that can be more than one), these should be left to separate annotations relating to the content (attribution, title, subject, theories), accompanying information on manuscripts and editions, by means of indices—or, in the preferable case of digital treatment, by links that can be retrieved by the users. Good examples here could be the cases of Isaiah of Sketis[6] or of Pachomius[7] and their extremely complicated tradition in Greek and Oriental languages, which cannot be assumed under 'comprehensive' numbers. Another example is the case of the Coptic anthology of John Chrysostom *In Hebraeos* (CC 0169, MONB. CR etc.) which is a work by itself and also a collection of excerpta not always matching the Greek text.

1.3. Clavis Coptica

For the reasons mentioned above, the *Clavis Coptica*—which I have produced, and which is being constantly improved and augmented (and which of course will never be complete)—is conceived for the digital presentation, and especially according to the principles of the relational system.

The starting point is the content of the manuscripts, according to the divisions of what the scribes wanted to present as individual texts, normally on the basis of their models, and only when two or more individual texts are exactly[8] the same they may be subsumed under the same number. The accompanying tables of the related textual units in the sense of the history of literature (i.e. Patrology), authors, titles, literary genres, etc. provide information through cross-references in the relational tables.

The other instruments available for a systematic list of patristic and hagiographic works are the CPG (*Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, with the annexes), BHG (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*), BHL (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*), and the BHO (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis*). While it

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6   Cf. Suciu 2012.
7   Cf. Veilleux 1980-1982.
8   The value of this 'exactly' is uncertain. Of course, much is left to the subjective judgment of the philologist. But due to the great flexibility of the organization that I propose this is not too important.

may seem reasonable to take them as a privileged example, in my opinion it is better to build something new and more formally consistent.

2. The manuscripts and their identification

Similar observations to those made for the identification of the works are valid (*mutatis mutandis*) for the identification of the manuscripts.

Here we start from a relatively simple classification going back to the Renaissance (e.g. *Laurentianus Plut.* LXXXI, 35; *Parisiensis Graecus* 54), when manuscripts were few and well known, down to the situation of today, especially for the Oriental manuscripts, when shelf marks, or call numbers, are subject to frequent changes, and the real arrangement of the manuscripts is difficult to know, unless visiting the places. It also happens that previously independent fragments are put together under a new number; that pieces move to another collection; that printed catalogues give obsolete or unreliable information on the numbers; that some pieces are dismembered, or put together, etc.

All this leads to the conclusion that if we want to constitute a stable and reliable list of manuscripts we cannot use the current official call numbers, or rather we can refer to them only in a second instance. For a stable reference, we must produce a standard list with its own numbers, from which and to which it will be possible to establish a relation to the shelf marks of libraries, museums, and collections.

At the same time, recent astonishing advances in digital reproduction and storage have resulted in the possibility of forming virtual collections, which may be at the same time much more flexible and to a certain degree more stable than their material counterparts do. Such collections may be manipulated in a countless number of ways, while each item may still keep an unaltered identification number, whichever changes the item or its collection undergo. Therefore, in order to preserve an operative stability, independent of the variations of the items, I maintain that the repertories that aspire to provide standards for the identification of the manuscripts should base on sufficiently international, reliable, and stable collections of digital reproductions.

To obtain this, it is necessary (a) on the theoretical side, to establish a satisfactory ontological definition of the objects, i.e. the manuscripts, which may be made of many different materials; (b) on the operational side, to take advantage in the most rational way of the digital tools available today.

(a) The theory should first establish the basic, minimal entities to which an identity number is assigned. In the case of what are generally called codices, or of fragments thereof,[9] these entities should not be the codices in their

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9   In this field, the terminology is of the greatest importance. I have made elsewhere some proposals, see Orlandi 2013.

entirety, even if so preserved in one collection, but single leaves[10] which make them up (or used to make them up). This is necessary because the leaves may have been displaced, extracted, recomposed, and we should be able to show this through proper models. The identity number of these entities is bound in the first instance to a digital reproduction, which directly shows their appearance, and then to the call numbers through which they are (or were) identified in the collections.

(b) The praxis is based on the possibility, well established today, to create, maintain, share, and retrieve archives of digital images at a very low cost.[11] One number identifies every folio (in two images, for recto and verso), and all the numbers with the address of the respective images constitute the first table of a relational database. The other tables list the attributes of the folios (numeration, script, layout, etc.), the codices of which they are or were part, the collections to which they belong or belonged, layout, publications, studies, etc., always by means of tables of entities and tables of relations. In this way, the call numbers themselves are a piece of information added to the entities, and not their primary identification, and may be more than one, following the whimsical history of the manuscripts.

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10 The leaves will be the minimal entity, even if they are part of a bifolium, as it is generally the case. The information on the reconstruction of bifolia, quires, codices, etc. is contained in the relevant tables of the database (cf. below).

11 I mean here the cost of the software; that of the production of the images is responsibility of the authorities of the collections.

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