## Some Remarks about Coptic Colophons and Their Relationship with Manuscripts: Typology, Function, and Structure

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The brief article offers some remarks about the devotional requirement, the main formal features, and the historical relevance of the colophons often preserved by Coptic manuscripts.

In a seminal contribution on the contrived system of dating by way of a cluster of arithmetical fractions that many Arabic, Persian, and Turkish copyists put in place in the so called *zusammengesetzte Unterschriften*, Gustav Leberecht Flügel observed that, among the areas of Islamic book production, Egypt is the one where the habit of concluding the copy of a manuscript with a dated subscription is most widespread and enduring.<sup>1</sup> The permanence of such a habit might be explained by the existence of another local scribal tradition, which preceded and accompanied the beginnings of Arabic book production, namely the Coptic one. Coptic manuscripts offer us some of the earliest instances of scribal subscriptions within the written cultures of the Christian Orient, which probably even predate those found in the earliest Greek book production.

Before we approach colophons, a feature attested in all manuscript cultures, some clarification on terminology is necessary. Rather than resorting to the supercilious Grecism 'colophon', often deplored for its *in vitro* origin dating back to Renaissance proto-typography, one may be tempted to label the ending paratexts of a manuscript with the original ancient term that roughly corresponds to 'colophon' in each written tradition. In this sense, it would be natural to use ὑπογραφή, *subscriptio*, and Ė, for the closings of a Greek, Latin, or Arabic manuscript, respectively. Yet, it would not be equally straightforward to find an appropriate synonym for Coptic, based on what we know so far about its technical vocabulary of book production. In the absence of direct attestations of this specific meaning in Coptic, the most likely term for designating 'colophon' should perhaps be π-κωpq, which often translates σφραγίς, παύεσθαι, or, less probably, т-тоовес, expressing rather the material imprint

<sup>\*</sup> The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 687567, PI: Paola Buzi, Sapienza Università di Roma), <a href="http://paths.uniroma1.it">http://paths.uniroma1.it</a>>.

<sup>1</sup> Flügel 1855, 357.

of a seal.<sup>2</sup> The Greek loanword т-гүүпографн may also have been used in such sense.

Beyond their more or less elaborate structure, the main feature of Coptic colophons consists in their obvious significance as *Schenkungsurkunden*, namely sorts of documents witnessing a peculiar typology of not altogether material transaction, by which a donee religious institution acquired the property of a book and its donor obtained forgiveness for all the sins committed during his life as well as blessing for the afterlife, thanks to the diuturnal use of his gift for devotional or liturgical purposes. The terms of such a fideistic deal, even including a special intercession and indulgence for a soul expiating in hell all faults committed in life, are eloquently expressed in a passage of Cyril of Alexandria, *De hora mortis*, 188 Amélineau, with a wording definitely frequent in lots of colophons:<sup>3</sup>

етаlizenai тироү ететенагапи  $\varpi$  пілаос миаіхрс огог ніфирі нте†кафоліки некклисіа ефвени етффп инідфи нфф ерфиері фаенер пе енаткин бенгіні нфт кан очкоуді пе кан очніф† пе очфе нерфиері фаенер пе енаткин бенгіні нфт. †дф де миос нфтен  $\varpi$  пілаос миаіхрс дерфні нівен ефафффп ноудфи нтефтиц єбочн епні нфт ісденпінау еточнафф нбри бенфекклисіа єффп пірфні етеннау онб бен†очноу фаусбаі мпефран епідфи итффп ноусфора ні икфв носп беноусноу. єффп де он пірфні етаффогіпідфи аці евол бенсфна єффп ацірі ноукоуді ннові очог аубітц еніколасіс ісденпінау еточнафф инідфи бен†екклисіа сенаенц єпіфш бенанен† ( $\lambda\beta$ ) бенніколасіс етеффогі ньнтоу сенанаі нац бен†очноу.

I said all such things for charity (ἀγάπη) toward you, o Christ-loving laymen (λαός) and sons of the catholic (καθολική) church (ἐκκλησία), for those who buy books for reading and donate them to the house of God, whether (κάν) they are of small size or big, there shall be an eternal and unceasing memory in the house of God. Thus, I say to you that, o Christ-loving laymen, if any man buys a book and donates it to the house of God, from the moment it is read in the church, if that man is alive, immediately his name is written on the book of life and his offering (προσφορά) will be rendered back to him in blessing multiplied by seven. But if the man who bought the book has left his body (σῶμα), if he committed a little sin and was brought toward the punishments (κόλασις), from the moment the book is read in the church, he will be lifted from hell, from the punishments he will have suffered there, and he will obtain mercy immediately.

In this perspective, the sometimes confusing list of living and deceased persons inserted in the text of colophons may assume a quite clearer relevance to the main goal of these texts. In the earliest instances, namely in the subscriptions in the recently discovered Theban codex of Pseudo-Basilian *Canons* and in the two single leaves kept in Turin (P.Tor. Copt. Inv. Provv. 6266

2 Crum 1939, 398b.

3 Amélineau 1888, 186–187.

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and 8548),<sup>4</sup> all likely to be attributed to the seventh century, the colophons appear in their simplest structure. In these *incunabula*, both fundamental elements of the *Schenkungsurkunde* occur: the mention of the church to which each book is offered and the name of its donor, on whose behalf the reader is asked to beseech God. The fact that in one of the Turinese leaves the name of the female donor of the manuscript is withheld does not prevent the reader from beseeching God to have mercy on her and on her relatives, whether dead or alive, in grace of the explicitly referred to divine omniscience.

The classical shape of the Coptic colophon was achieved, in the following century, in the *scriptorium* of Toutōn. There, we record the earliest instances of the normative phrasing that constitutes the bulk and the framework of each Coptic scribal subscription up until the end of the Coptic *Schrifttum*. This model begins with a zealous and polite request of prayer (aptraram---  $uy\lambda h\lambda$ ) addressed to any user of the book (oyon NIM etnacuy) on behalf of the one who, literally, took care of the book at his own expenses (aqunpooyo)  $\bar{u}\pieixcoome envelope e$ 

In most cases, the mention of the copyist and the dating formulas (encompassing in their most complete layout, day, month, indiction, *annus Martyrum* and *annus Hegirae*) are written in a more or less accurate minuscule hand in vulgar Greek (the proper name in nominative precedes a passive aorist έγράφη or an odd καλιωγράψατε<sup>5</sup>). In some instances the copyist offers, besides the Greek ὑπογραφή, some information about his work, apart from accustomed expressions of Christian self-effacement (unworthiness to take even his own name, <code>atwingawungwnwaytawayfe</code> acknowledgement of his own unsuitableness, <code>winatwowwaytawayfe</code> acknowledgement of his own unsuitableness, <code>winatwowwaytawayfe</code> acknowledgement of the literary work reproduced (<code>aicgai katamatiripaфow ergapois</code>). This apparently ancillary statement could have been actually included in the text in pursuance of a straightforward *Beschwörung* similar to the one we read in Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* V 20,2. As it is well known, there the author makes the 'one who will transcribe' (μεταγραψόμενος) swear

- 4 Both republished in van Lantschoot 1929, CV-CVI.
- 5 About such odd verbal form see Soldati 2017, 26, n. 8.
- 6 E.g. van Lantschoot 1929, 40-41, n° XXII, 6-8.
- 7 E.g. van Lantschoot 1929, 216–218, n° CXXI, B11–13.
- 8 E.g. van Lantschoot 1929, 10–12, n° V, 29–30.

'that (he) will collate what (he) will have transcribed, ad (he) will amend it according to (a specific) copy, wherefrom (he) will have transcribed (it) carefully' (ἴνα ἀντιλάβῃς, ὃ μετεγράψω, καὶ κατορθώσῃς αὐτὸ πρὸς τὸ ἀντίγραφον τοῦτο, ὅθεν μετεγράψω, ἐπιμελῶς).

The salvation ensured to the donor is not the only feature which could closely associate colophons with texts of Christian magic. Another relevant element is the curse, sometimes attached to the colophon, against those who would dare to steal the book. The Coptic wording is akin to the coeval Greek one. As the curses in Greek codices anathematize that 'the one who has profaned will not be enrolled in the book of life' (o yoûv συλήσας μὴ γραφậ ζωậς βίβλω),<sup>9</sup> in a similar vein the Coptic copyist echoes, somehow in a more poetic way, 'might he not take his share from the tree of life' (Neqqu ӣлеqмерос євох gӣладни мпана).<sup>10</sup>

Beyond their interest for *Urkundenlehre* and religious studies, Coptic colophons, as actual documentary texts, offer plenty of data about medieval Egypt. Moreover, whilst the goods which are the object of many Coptic deeds preserved in papyrus collections are irretrievably lost, preventing us from a full comprehension of the very terms of the transaction they register, colophons are a peculiar documentary category that, in the majority of cases, comes along with the object they sanction the gift of. Usually they disclose to us copious evidence of the cultural, economic and social *milieus* where the books were produced, sold, acquired, preserved and used. Notwithstanding the rich amount of information the colophons offer about the routes manuscripts often embarked on, they also bear witness to the inexorable withdrawal of Coptic culture against the relentless advance of linguistic and cultural Arabization.<sup>11</sup>

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- 9 MS London, British Library, Add. 19387, f. 235.
- 10 E.g. van Lantschoot 1929, 169-170, n° C, 37-38.
- 11 See the instance of the long Fayyūmic paratext preserved by Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. copt. 68, f. 162v, about which cp. lastly Soldati 2017, 23–24.

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