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.¹ 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 ختم, 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-καρφ, which often translates σφραγίς, παύεσθαι, or, less probably, τ-τοοβες, expressing rather the material imprint

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¹ Flügel 1855, 357.
of a seal.\(^2\) The Greek loanword τ-ψυπόγραφη 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, \textit{De hora mortis}, 188 Amélineau, with a wording definitely frequent in lots of colophons:\(^3\)

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 (κἄν) 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 \textit{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.
and 8548), 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 (ἂρταγαν --- μηλι) addressed to any user of the book (ὀγον ην έτασκωμ) on behalf of the one who, literally, took care of the book at his own expenses (αρμηπροσογ οπελαξωμε γινεψις ηιν ημοι) and donated it to ( ApiService ερουν ε-) a religious foundation, whose eponymous saint or angel is asked to intercede (παρακαλει) before God. Eulogies, scriptural direct quotations, Christian *historiolae* paradigmatic for the desired divine intervention enrich that preset canvas in various ways, so that texts often reach a sizeable extent. This main part is always written in a typical sloping uncial.

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 ἐγράφη or an odd καλιωγράψατε). 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, ἀτιμως ἡπραν ὑταγαλο εξαοι; acknowledgement of his own unsuitableness, ἤπαξου κακος ἀλλα εξεκοβοι / ἀλλα αινοι ουσβοι etc.).

The main detail is that the text would have been copied in accordance with a certified exemplar of the literary work reproduced (αιγαν καταπλαγραφον εταρων). 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’ (μεταγραψομνος) 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.
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’ (ἵνα ἀντιλάβῃς, ὃ μετεγράψω, καὶ κατορθώσῃς αὐτὸ πρὸς τὸ ἀντίγραφον τοῦτο, ὃθεν 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’ (ὁ γοῦν συλήσας μὴ γραφῇ ζωῆς βιβλίῳ), in a similar vein the Coptic copyist echoes, somehow in a more poetical way, ‘might he not take his share from the tree of life’ (ⲛⲉϥⲓ ⲙ̄ⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲟⲥ ⲉⲃⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲱⲛϩ̄).

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.

References
11 See the instance of the long Fayyūmic paratext preserved by Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. cpt. 68, f. 162v, about which cp. lastly Soldati 2017, 23–24.
