

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-κωρϣ, which often translates σφραγίς, πάεσθαι, or, less probably, τ-τοοβес, expressing rather the material imprint

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1 Flügel 1855, 357.

of a seal.² The Greek loanword τ-χρηγογραφη 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:³

εταχεναι τηρου ετετεναγαπη ω πιδος μηαιχρς ογορ νιωηρι ντετκαθολικη
νεκκλησια εωβενν ετωωπ νηιχωμ νωω εγτ μηωου εβορν επι νηφτ καν ογκογχι
πε καν ογνιωτ πε ογωε νερφμεγι φανεε πε ενατκην ηενπη νηφτ. τχω δε νμοσ
νωτεν ω πιδος μηαιχρς χερωνι νιβεν εωαφωωπ νογχωμ ντεετηνι εβορν επι
νηφτ ιχενπηναγ ετογναωω νητηγ ηεντεκκλησια εωωπ πρωμι ετεμμαγ οη
ηεντογνογ φαγχα νπεφραν επιχωμ ηπωη νσετ ναγ ντεεπροςφορα νζ κωβ
νσοπ ηενογμογ. εωωπ δε οη πρωμι εταφωωπιχωμ αφι εβολ ηενσωμα εωωπ
αφιρ νογκογχι ννωβι ογορ αγιτη ενικολασις ιχενπηναγ ετογναωω ηπιχωμ
ηεντεκκλησια σεναενφ επωωι ηεναηεντ (λβ) ηεννικολασις ετεφωωπ νηητογ
σεναηαι ναγ ηεντογνογ.

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 *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.

‘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, 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’ (ὁ γοῦν συλήσας μὴ γραφῆ ζωῆς βίβλω),⁹ 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’ (νεφι ἡπεμερος εβολ ρῖπωμη ἡπωνη).¹⁰

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.¹¹

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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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