

Beyond Conflicts

Cultural and Religious Cohabitations
in Alexandria and Egypt between the 1st
and the 6th Century CE

edited by

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Remains of Gnostic Anthologies and Pagan Wisdom Literature in the Coptic Tradition*

Paola Buzi

1. Premise

It is well known that a complete and satisfying “history of Coptic literature” is still a *desideratum*. Among the other causes contributing to the difficulty of such an enterprise are the fragmentary status of the codices which preserve the texts and the fact that a great part of the surviving literary manuscripts date from the 9th to the 11th cent.¹ This means that we have only relics of the early Coptic literary production, and therefore of the tastes, orientations and cultural formation of those groups which, between the 4th and the 5th century, were creating a new literature in the Coptic language.

Despite these difficulties, however, it is clear that the Coptic literary tradition was, from its inception, with very few exceptions, mostly of religious content.

Documentary sources, on the other hand, show that even up to the 6th–7th cent. classical studies played a great part in the scholastic education of Christian Egypt and, consequently, – although this may appear less obvious – in the literary production and in the creation of private and institutional libraries.

We will leave aside here the famous cases of the so-called Bodmer Papyri (2nd–6th cent.), with all the problems and interrogatives related to them,² and of the library of Dioscorus of Aphrodito (6th cent.),³ the latter defined as an ex-

* I would like to thank Gianfranco Agosti, Alberto Camplani, Tito Orlandi and Carlo Pernigotti for their valuable suggestions.

¹ Boud’hors 2012: 224–228.

² For an account – not shared by all the specialists – of the manuscripts belonging to the ancient library of the so-called “Bodmer Papyri,” see Robinson 1987; Robinson 1990; Robinson 2013. See also Kasser 1991. Moreover, a detailed *status quaestionis* of the manuscripts which should be attributed to the (original) library is dealt with in the theme section of *Adamantius* 21 (2015): “I Papyri Bodmer. Biblioteche, comunità di asceti e cultura letteraria in greco, latino e copto nell’Egitto tardoantico.” Cf. above all the articles of Jean-Luc Fournet (“Anatomie d’une bibliothèque de l’Antiquité tardive,” 8–40) and Paul Schubert (“Les Papyrus Bodmer: contribution à une tentative de délimitation,” 41–46).

³ MacCoull 1988; Fournet 1999 and 2003. On the importance of the finding of the Homeric works (and the related *scholia*) in Dioscorus’ library see Fournet 1995 and 1999: 673–674. These are preserved in codices datable to 4th–5th cent., therefore already ancient at Dioscorus’ time.

ample of “Hellenism in Late Antiquity.”⁴ They represent two book collections, in which classical texts are consciously preserved alongside religious ones, but where Coptic is used only to transmit Christian works and never to preserve classical texts.

2. Classical works in the Coptic language

The few cases of classical works translated into Coptic, which are known so far, represent a different phenomenon. Among them mention should certainly be made of the short reference to the Aristophanes’ *The birds* included by Shenoute in one of his homilies,⁵ a probable echo – we do not know how conscious – of his scholastic formation, and a quotation, partially manipulated but still clearly recognisable, of *Od.* 4.261–263, inserted in the *Exegesis de anima* in the Nag Hammadi Codex II.⁶

Still remaining in the context of Nag Hammadi an extremely interesting but at the same time thorny case is the famous fragment of Plato’s *Respublica* preserved in the Nag Hammadi Codex VI,⁷ studied by Peter Brashler,⁸ Tito Orlandi⁹ and Louis Painchaud,¹⁰ the latter having recently devoted new atten-

⁴ Bowersock 1990: 63–64. See, moreover, Fournet 1999: 1.1–4: “Dioscore n’est pas un bon poète au sens normative où l’on entend ce mot [...] il peut être considéré comme représentative de la culture grecque de la période protobyzantine mise en pratique, non par quelques figures d’exception, mais par l’homme de lettre moyen. Mieux encore: les influences littéraires que dénote son œuvre et qui n’ont jamais fait l’objet d’un relevé systématique permettent d’esquisser le profil littéraire d’un petit notable de province se piquant de poésie et, à travers lui, le choix littéraires opérés par une époque.” On the supposed mediocrity of his poetry: Baldwin 1984. Dioscorus’ poems were edited for the first time by Maspero 1906–1910. For Dioscorus’ life cf. Maspero 1911; Bell 1944. See also van Minnen 1992.

⁵ Erman 1894: 134–135; Amélineau 1907: 1.386; Orlandi 1990; Chuvin 2012. For a different interpretation of the reference see Spanoudakis 2010.

⁶ Orlandi 1984a; Orlandi 1990; Pernigotti 2003.

⁷ Brashler, Jackson, Parrot 1988: 318–320. See also Krause, Labib 1971: 166–169; Poirier, Painchaud 1983 and Matsagouras 1976.

⁸ Brashler 1979. Brashler hypothesises that “this succinct statement of a main theme in Plato’s Republic was taken from a collection of edifying quotations (δοξογραφαί) said to have circulated in late antiquity as handbooks for students and others with intellectual aspirations but little philosophical sophistication.” Brashler 1979: 325.

⁹ Orlandi 1977. Cf. also Mayer 2007. Orlandi observes: “Risulta chiara, a nostro avviso, la diversità concettuale del contenuto dei due brani. C’è stato un intervento molto deciso da parte non di un traduttore, ma di un *redattore* che ha preso il brano platonico come puro pretesto per scrivere un vero e proprio brano gnostico” (Orlandi 1977: 54).

¹⁰ Painchaud 1983. See also Painchaud 2017, a paper originally entitled “From Plato, *Republic* (NH,5) to the *Gospel of Judas* (CT 3): Some Reflexions on Translation, Rewriting, and Interpolations.”

tion to it. We have no idea if this text was part of a longer – and maybe even complete – Coptic version of the Plato’s work. What we have, however, is not a faithful translation but rather a targeted and forced re-reading of the original, in a heterodox sense. Despite this, however, it shows how deep the influence of a classical education and pagan literature was, even in an unorthodox milieu such as that of the Nag Hammadi community and in its composite library, in which, by the way, Hermetic works are another example of the appropriation of pagan literature, sometimes not devoid of a moral character, although much less classical. We certainly have to take into consideration, however, that the Nag Hammadi library is the product of a fluid tradition. Not only have the texts undergone some changes during their translation into Coptic, but several elements lead us to believe that the copyists enjoyed ample freedom of action. In brief, the works found in the Nag Hammadi Codices do not testify to a stable literary tradition.

If these examples constitute sporadic incursions of classical antiquity into Christian Egypt, sometimes merely occasional borrowings from a distant cultural past, the *Cambyses Romance*¹¹ – a Coptic original creation based on classical material – and above all the *Alexander Romance*¹² seem to have had a larger and more generally widespread circulation, although the tradition of both works would require a complete census of the Coptic manuscripts which transmit them.

In this paper, we will focus our attention on a case of the reuse of the classical textual heritage, which till now has not received the attention it deserves – at least among Coptologists –, dealing not with a single classical text translated into Coptic, but rather with a literary genre in its own right: gnostic anthologies.

We will endeavour to understand through which *itineraria* and with what aims Christian Egypt preserved examples of a pagan wisdom literature and to delineate the environments that were responsible for its circulation.

3. The *Menandri sententiae*

Among the examples of *gnomai* transmitted in Coptic, the *Menandri sententiae* (CC 0022)¹³ certainly deserve special attention.¹⁴

¹¹ Ludin Jansen 1950; MacCoull 1993.

¹² See von Lemm 1903; Selden 2011a; Selden 2011b; MacCoull 2012. On the Copto-Arabic tradition of the *Alexander Romance* see Doufikar-Aerts 2016; see also Doufikar-Aerts 2012: 61–79.

¹³ The attribution of the CC is based on the classification operated by the CMCL.

¹⁴ For a detailed description of the collections of philosophical and moral sentences which circulated in Syria see Bettiolo 2003 and 2004. Although far from the geographical limits of

As is well known, the *Menandri monostichoi* or *Menandri sententiae* are collections of one-verse sayings and moral precepts, ordered according to the first letter, that started to circulate, in Greek, from at least the 3rd cent. CE, under the name of Menander, although only a few of them may be directly referred to the authorship of the comedy writer. Their contents, in fact, draw material in almost equal proportion both from Greek philosophy, tragedy and comedy and from the Old Testament.

Their nature of an “open work”¹⁵ – potentially expandable to infinity – and their wide circulation – they are known also in Syriac, Arabic, and Slavonic and were transmitted by papyrus and parchment codices, *ostraka* and wooden tablets – made possible a constant insertion of textual material of different types and the formation of several variants of the “original.” Because of this extremely complex and fluid tradition, which did not have a linear development but rather came into being through accumulations, juxtapositions, convergences and linkages, it has not been possible to identify an archetype of the collection of sayings, but only to attempt to describe the different recensions of the same typology of text.

The *Menandri sententiae* lie outside the forms in which Coptic literature is normally expressed: they do not appear in booklists¹⁶ – themselves not very numerous – and there is no trace of them in the book properties of the most important Coptic libraries. Despite this, eight witnesses of the *Menandri sententiae*, all dated between the 5th and the 7th cent., come from late antique Egypt: four of them are bilingual,¹⁷ in Greek and Coptic, four are in Greek.¹⁸ A new edition and study of the entire “Egyptian” *corpus* of the *Menandri sententiae* has just been published by Carlo Pernigotti and myself.¹⁹

Unfortunately only four of these witnesses have a known provenance: the first is the *ostrakon* O.EdfouFAO 11 (7th cent.),²⁰ in Greek and Coptic, from

this study, it is worth mentioning the case of the preservation of the Greek wisdom literature in the medieval Castilian literary production, through the Arabic literary tradition. See Rodríguez Adrados 2009.

¹⁵ Pernigotti 2008: 11.

¹⁶ For examples of lists of Christian books on papyrus, both in ecclesiastic and private libraries, see Otranto 1997 and Maehler 2008.

¹⁷ They are: 1) P.Vat. inv.G. 17 + P.Rain.UnterrichtKopt. 269.1 = P.Copt. 1 (= MS 37); 2) P.Lond. inv. 8 = P.Copt. 2 (= MS 38); 3) O.Vindob. K 674 (= MS 40); 4) O.EdfouFAO 11 (= MS 39). The first three are of unknown provenance.

¹⁸ These are: 1) P.Mon.Epiph. 2.615 (= MS 20); 2) O.Frange 751 (= MS 11); 3) inscription from Dongola (= MS 568); 4) P.Ryl. 1.41 (= MS 28), this last containing on the verso seven lines of writing in Coptic.

¹⁹ The edition of the Graeco-Coptic *Menandri sententiae* is now published in the *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*. Parte II.2–3: *Sentenze di autori noti e “Chreiai”* (ed. by M.S. Funghi). I owe to Maria Serena Funghi my involvement in such a stimulating project.

²⁰ Bacot 2009: 32–33 and Delattre, Fournet 2011: 81–82. “[...] très probablement dans

Bawit, whose contents, recently identified by Alain Delattre and Jean-Luc Fournet, unfortunately consist only of seven lines; the second is the *ostrakon* P.Mon.Epiph. 2.615 (7th cent.),²¹ in Greek, from the Monastery of Epiphanius in Western Thebes; the third is the *ostrakon* O.Frange 7, in Greek, found in New Kingdom tomb TT 29, later reused as a cell by the monk Frange;²² lastly, the fourth witness is an epigraphic text, in Greek, found in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, located not far from Dongola.²³

Of particular interest, however, although of unknown provenance, is P.Copt. 1 (P.Vat. inv.G. 17 + P.Rain.UnterrichKopt. 269.1), consisting of eight papyrus leaves, each of them containing 18–19 lines of text. The manuscript presents a regular sequence of 64 Greek sentences followed by a Coptic translation.

The Greek text is very incorrect, with frequent phonetic mistakes and, above all, the syntax of several sentences appearing extremely simplified compared with the other Greek *Menandri sententiae* recensions that contain the same sayings. The Coptic version, on the other hand, presents far fewer orthographic, grammatical and syntactical mistakes compared to the Greek version, but at the same time shows frequent misunderstandings in the translating process.

All these elements suggest that the copyist of the manuscript had much more familiarity with Coptic than with Greek. The book in question was probably one of the tools he and other possible users made use of to improve their knowledge of Greek (but also of Coptic).

Interestingly enough, P.Copt. 1 is not an *unicum*, since P.Copt. 2 (P.Lond. inv. 8), again in Greek and Coptic, seems to be an exact copy of it, although only 23 sentences have survived. This fact suggests the existence in Egypt of a fairly stable tradition of this specific variant of the Menandrian collection of sayings. Moreover, although most of the *sententiae* included in P.Copt. 1 are known from other collections, about 20 of them represent an original insertion, showing the capacity of the Egyptian milieu to create texts similar to those transmitted by the tradition.

Among these new verses there are, for instance, a series of sentences created on the theme of *grammata*, a fact that supports the hypothesis that such works are to be referred to the context of cultural formation. These manuscripts, however, do not represent a typical example of a scholastic exercise, since the

un contexte scolaire.” Delattre, Fournet 2011: 81. The Greek texts from Tell Edfu had been already published by Bruyère et al. 1937; Michałowski et al. 1938–1939 and Michałowski et al. 1950. For a report of the excavation works at Tell Edfu cf. Rutschowskaya, Bénazeth 1999: 55–58.

²¹ Winlock, Crum 1926: 41–44; Jäkel 1964: 16–18 (no. 13); Bucking 1997: 134; Delattre 2012: 301–302.

²² Boud’hors, Heurtel 2010: 396.

²³ Łajtar 2009. I owe this information to Ewa Wipszycka.

script, both in Greek and Coptic, is skilful.²⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that Raffaella Cribiore, while supporting the hypothesis that they “may have been used in schools,”²⁵ does not include P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 among the real school exercises, specifying that “they are proficiently written and are alike to have been professionally produced books.”

The term “book” is crucial: in evaluating the function of P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 one should not forget that they are fragments of papyrus codices, therefore of real books. Like every other book, for instance, they could be commissioned, purchased and borrowed.²⁶ Moreover, the fact that P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 transmit exactly the same sequence of sentences permit the conjecture that they were copies of the same model, that circulated in the context of high education and that must have reached a certain textual fixity, as is also suggested by the fact that the two witnesses share the same mistakes.²⁷

More than as exercises P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 should be therefore intended as handbooks instrumental in providing a moral orientation, a superficial philosophical formation and, at the same time, to favour an in-depth comprehension of Coptic and Greek grammars.

The structure of the bilingual witnesses of the *Menandri sententiae* – brief sentences with text-to-face – could in fact facilitate the learning of grammatical and syntactical rules in a land where Greek and Coptic normally co-existed, sometimes with the marginal contribution of Latin.²⁸ It is the same didactic and cultural scenario suggested by other tools for cultural education, such as the bilingual late Roman and late antique Greek–Coptic dictionaries²⁹ and the so-

²⁴ It should not be forgotten that very few are the direct references to the schools of Graeco-Roman Egypt – term to be intended here *lato sensu* – and that there is no exercise mentioning the place where it has been written (see Cribiore 1996b: 18–19; 169, n. 22). In this perspective, a sure archaeological context, although not well preserved, has a great value. On the school education in Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt see also Cribiore 1999; Cribiore 1996a; Cribiore 2007b; Cribiore, Davoli 2010.

²⁵ Cribiore 1996a: 45 and n. 74. It is important to stress that the palaeographic observations elaborated by Dieter Hagedorn e Manfred Weber, and the consequent chronological attribution of P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 – accepted also by Monika Hasitzka –, although plausible, should be evaluated with extreme caution, due to the still unsatisfactory study of Coptic palaeography, cf. Hagedorn, Weber 1968: 23–25; Hasitzka 1990: 201–210.

²⁶ As we know, the loan was an effective method of texts dissemination, considering the high costs of book manufacture. On the diffusion of book loan see Kotsifou 2007: 54.

²⁷ Morani 1996: 133.

²⁸ Cavenaile 1987; Rochette 1997; Buzi 2005. See also Carlig 2013.

²⁹ C.Gloss.Biling. 1–2. See in particular the six papyrus leaves belonging to a Latin-Greek/Greek-Latin glossary dated to the 6th cent. (Göttingen, App. Dipl. 8 C/D + Edition Th. Chr. Tychsen + Köln, Hist. Archiv, inv. W *351; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.4); the list of months in Latin and Greek (in which Latin is transliterated in Greek) from *Euemeria*/Qasr el-Banāt, dated to the 4th cent. (P.Fay. 135v.; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.11); the Greek–Latin glossary (in which Latin is transliterated in Greek) with *lemmata* referring to daily life, dated to the 4th cent.

called “conversation manual” in Greek, Coptic and Latin dated to the 5th–6th cent. (P.Berol. inv. 10582; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.15)³⁰ collected and edited by Johannes Kramer.³¹

In brief, P.Copt. 1 and P. Copt. 2 represent an extremely interesting case of formation of a *corpusculum* of *Menandri sententiae* among tradition, simplification, contamination and innovation, this last aspect being represented by some original *sententiae* fabricated *ad hoc* and not attested to elsewhere. The following are some of the most meaningful examples: “without beating none learns the letters” (P.Copt. 1.25–30), “the reasoning of those who know the letters is sure” (P.Copt. 1.37–40), “learn the letters and you will have beautiful hopes,” “you will have a life without troubles if you do not talk to a woman” (P.Copt. 1.49–51), “be correct till your old age, since you are a man” (P.Copt. 1.92–95), “the most beautiful hope is for those who know the letters” (P.Copt. 1.126–129), “an inappropriate word is like a song of mourning” (P.Copt. 1.201–204). The theme of *grammata* is dominant, these original sentences being added to those on the same subject known from other collections: “the character of a man is known by the word” (P.Copt. 1.9–12), “the good beginning of life is letters” (P.Copt. 1.22–25), to give but two examples.

The other evident *leitmotiv* is misogyny, well represented in P.Copt. 1 both by original and traditional sentences. Examples of these last are the well-known “the beginning of sin is in the woman” (P.Copt. 1.1–3), “an old man in love is the worst misfortune” (P.Copt. 1.55–57), “do not touch a woman and you will not open a tomb” (P.Copt. 1.72–74), and the famous “do not entrust your life to a woman” (P.Copt. 1.70–72), to mention again but a few examples. But what kind of circulation did these kinds of texts have in Egypt? A partial answer may come from O.EdfouIFA0 11 (in Greek and Coptic) and from P.Mon.Epiph. 2.615 (in Greek), both witnesses of certain provenance and from monastic settlements.

It is well known how widespread the re-use of the pharaonic monuments of Western Thebes was in Late Antiquity:³² while anchorites and small mon-

(P.Lond. 2.481; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.13); the curious Latin–Greek glossary (in which Greek is transliterated in Latin) containing terms related to hospitality and food, dated to the 7th cent. (P.Louvre Eg. inv. 2329; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.14).

³⁰ P.Berol. inv. 10582; C.Gloss.Biling. 1.15. Even examples of calligraphic exercises show that a copyist had to acquire familiarity both with Greek and Coptic glyphs. Fournet 2012.

³¹ Kramer 1983 and 2001.

³² Lecuyot, Thirard 2008: 137–144. See also Wipszycka 2009. For a geography of the Theban temples and tombs in dynastic period see Strudwick, Strudwick 1999. In the Monastery of Phoibammon, built on the remains of the funerary temple of the queen Hatshepsut, several school exercises and a painting with an alphabet and a hexameter verse, both in Greek – today disappeared – have been found. Bachatly 1965; Bachatly 1981; Godlewski 1986; Godlewski 1991: 780–781. For the most recent discoveries of monuments and texts in the Theban region, and in particular on the West Bank, see Gabra, Takla 2010 and Wilfong 1989: 89–147. For the discovery of some Coptic codices by Tomasz Górecki and his team in the

astic groups preferably found shelter in hypogeous tombs that could easily be adapted as cells or hermitages, more articulated urban settlements found lodging space in the abandoned temples. This is the case, for instance, of the village of Djeme, built inside the *temenos* of the mortuary temple of Ramses III.³³ The Monastery of Epiphanius, in particular, re-used the structures of the 11th-dynasty tomb of Daga (TT 103),³⁴ whose exploration was carried out from 1911 by a team of the Metropolitan Museum Egypt Expedition. It is in the area denominated “Lower East Buildings,” and in particular in “Cell A,” that the *ostrakon* from Epiphanius was found,³⁵ as part of a group of texts that Walter E. Crum defined “devotional extracts.” There is enough material to deduce that the learning of Greek had an important role in the cultural formation of Epiphanius’ monks. But, as we have already noted, this is in no way surprising in a bilingual society like that of late antique Egypt.³⁶ On the other hand, the literary works found in the monastery are also in both Greek and Coptic,³⁷ although the former is much less present. Interestingly enough, among the Coptic homiletic materials (nos. 50–83),³⁸ there were some texts that Crum described as “a series of maxims without apparent mutual connection” (no. 76).

The common wisdom and ethics represented by the *Menandri sententiae* were clearly perceived as appropriate for the formation of monks – at least for those of the monasteries of Epiphanius and of Bawit –, who, in copying, reading and maybe reciting these kinds of texts contributed to the formation of their spiritual perfection, not to mention their education. But it would be an error to circumscribe the area of diffusion of gnomic anthologies only to monasteries. Moreover, the *Menandri sententiae* are not the only example of classical wisdom literature preserved in Coptic, another stimulating case being represented by the *Sexti sententiae*.

necropolis of Sheikh Abd-el-Gourna, and more precisely in a Middle Kingdom tomb (“pit 1152”) reused as a cell see Górecki 2007. An example of Coptic documentation from a New Kingdom tomb, reused as hermitage, is the dossier of Frange: Boud’hors, Heurtel 2010.

³³ For the town of Djeme see cfr. Hölscher 1954. See also Crum 1912. Numerous are the Theban monasteries in which forms of school education are documented. Cf. Criore 2001: 24.

³⁴ Winlock, Crum 1926; Crum, Evelyn-White 1926.

³⁵ Winlock, Crum 1926: 41–44. The monastery was part of a wider Christian settlement, the general structure of which can be partially deduced thanks to a description contained in the will of Jacob to Eliah (Crum, Evelyn-White 1926, Part ii, Appendix iii). In Cell A more letters than in other rooms have been found. Part of these letters refers to book products. Cf. Crum, Evelyn-White 1926, Part ii, nos. 374, 382, 394, 395 (?), 555 (?). On Cell A see Bucking 2007.

³⁶ For Greek–Coptic bilingualism see Bucking 2012.

³⁷ Crum, Evelyn-White 2006 (Part ii).

³⁸ These are extracts from the works of Shenoute, fragments of episcopal letters, and incomplete homilies, mostly from Cell A.

4. The *Sexti sententiae*

Whatever the reason why the copyist of the Nag Hammadi Codex XII decided to include the *Sexti sententiae* (CC 0690)³⁹ in the manuscript, it is clear that they were perceived as appropriate for that context.

As is known, the *Sexti sententiae* are a collection of 451 maxims traditionally attributed to the philosopher Quintus Sextus.⁴⁰ They are transmitted in Latin – through the translation by Rufinus – in Syriac, in Armenian and in Arabic. A confirmation of their widespread popularity and consideration is given by Origen, who in his *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei* states: “But Sextus says in the *Sentences*, a book referred to by many as trustworthy...,”⁴¹ while in the *Contra Celsum* he defines the gnostic anthology as a book “which even the multitude of Christians have read.”⁴²

The work does not present a consistent and well definable philosophical doctrine, but rather, like the *Menandri sententiae*, proposes pills of wisdom, which are arranged in small thematic units. It represents a “wisdom tradition formed over time which expanded as new verses were added.”⁴³ In this respect the *Sexti sententiae* are an “open work,” exactly like the *Menandri sententiae*.

The origin of this work has long been debated: if it is generally accepted that the collection was formed mainly in the 2nd cent. CE, in Greek, there is no consensus on the milieu responsible for its creation.⁴⁴ Chadwick’s thesis, however, appears still the most convincing: “a Christian compiler has edited, carefully revised and modified a previous pagan collection (or perhaps collections).”⁴⁵

Concerning the identity of Sextus, as in the case of Menander, he is probably just a name used to give more credibility and authority to the sentences, not certainly a credible author. The practice of associating anonymous wisdom material from the oral tradition with well-known figures was common in ancient literature.

The Nag Hammadi version of the *Sexti sententiae* is at the moment the only extant Coptic witness (but the Greek tradition is in its turn represented by only two manuscripts: Codex Patmiensis 263, 10th cent., and Codex Vaticanus Grae-

³⁹ Poirier, Painchaud 1983: 7–28; Wisse 1988.

⁴⁰ On the Greek tradition of the *Sexti sententiae* see Chadwick 1959; Wilken 1975: 143–168; Carlini 1985; Carlini 2004; Peverello 2013. On the Syriac tradition see Lagarde 1858: 1–31; Ryssel 1895; Ryssel 1896; Ryssel 1897; Bettiolo 2004. See also de Paola 1937; Turner 1996. The fortune of the work is clearly demonstrated by the 16th-cent. edition by Ludwig Hillesheim: Hillesheim 1574.

⁴¹ Orig. *Comm. Matt.* 15.3 (PG 13:1257–1260).

⁴² Orig. *Cels.* 8.30 (PG 11:1560).

⁴³ Wilken 1975: 145.

⁴⁴ Domach 2013: 30.

⁴⁵ Chadwick 1959: 138

cus 742, 14th cent.). Only 10 pages out of the 49 originally destined to contain the work have survived, but they are enough to confirm that among the sayings there are eight unique variants that are peculiar to the Coptic tradition. We have therefore once again a demonstration of freedom, interpolation and originality in the Christian Egyptian milieu.

Like the *Menandri sententiae*, the *Sexti sententiae* must have been perceived as a compendium of basic moral and ethical *praxis*, since the ascetism, silence, and seclusion proposed therein were values held in common with the Nag Hammadi community.⁴⁶ Of great interest in this respect is saying 164b, – “[While it is] a skill [to speak], it is also [a] skill [to be silent]” – which closely recalls Menander’s sayings 258 and 455. But the *Sexti sententiae* also have another value: they attest to the fact that gnomic anthologies of classical origin did not circulate only in school circles – although, as we have seen, P.Copt. 1 and P.Copt. 2 cannot be considered school exercises *stricto sensu* – but found space also in book collections, whatever the nature of the Nag Hammadi library is.

5. The *Dicta philosophorum*

The literary dignity of these kinds of texts is testified to also by the third example that we will take into consideration here.

A fragmentary miscellaneous codex from the White Monastery of Shenoute (MONB.BE),⁴⁷ dated from the 10th–11th cent. and containing *excerpta*, preserves a text that Walter Till appropriately defined as *Dicta philosophorum*.⁴⁸ We include it in this analysis, despite the fact that it is later than the 6th cent., because it clearly makes use of older textual material.

MONB.BE is one of the less careful manuscripts from the Shenoute library. Its layout is characterised by one column, where the *excerpta* are introduced by

⁴⁶ Camplani 1997: 143. Another expression of “Christian Hellenism” is represented by the *The Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII). Cf. Peel, Zandee 1988. Recently Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott have re-proposed the hypothesis that the Nag Hammadi Codices are to be referred to a monastic community. Cf. Lundhaug, Jenott 2015.

⁴⁷ MONB.BE contains the following works: Horsiesi, *Logoi de Pascha, Life of Barthanouba; Dicta philosophorum aut dicta monachorum*; Carur, *Prophetiae*; Severus of Antioch (?), *excerptum*; Costantine of Siout, *excerptum*; Atanasius of Alexandria, *excerptum*; Demetrius of Antioch, *excerptum*; Archelaus of Neapolis, *excerptum*; Basil of Caesarea, *excerptum*; Rufus of Shotep, *excerptum* (from a catechesis on *Matthew*); prayer. The classification of the Coptic codices from the White Monastery is based on the researches of the *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*. See also Orlandi 1972 and 1984b. For the content of the codex see Lucchesi 2010.

⁴⁸ Till 1934–1937: II.165–175; Crum 1905: 97–98, no. 217 [*Or.* 3581 A (45)]. The *Dicta philosophorum* are transmitted by some parchment fragments preserved in Vienna, Nationalbibliothek: K 943, K 944, K 945 and K 946.

extremely brief titles, very unusual for this period, all of which are located at the end of the work they refer to, a characteristic which is typical of much older manuscripts.⁴⁹

On the *recto* of a leaf now preserved in Vienna (Nationalbibliothek, K 944),⁵⁰ we find the final title of what is presented as a collection of philosophical sentences (CC 0844):

ΣΕΝ ΣΥΝΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΠΤΕ ΣΗΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΣ

Sayings of some philosophers.

The text starts with a series of six sentences attributed to Diogenes – preceded by a maxim of Anacharsis, (misspelt as Narchaosis, in the Coptic text) –, in some of which, although they were strongly manipulated, Serena Funghi was able to identify the original version of the sayings of the Cynic philosopher (Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, K 944r.).⁵¹

A small *corpus* of anonymous sentences the sense of which is often obscure (Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, K 944v.–K 946r.),⁵² all characterised by a similar *incipit* (“another philosopher said [...]”), and the so-called story of the three friends follow the sayings of Diogenes. The last section, very fragmentary, consists of an explanation of the subdivision of peoples and nations according to their origin in Noah’s sons.

What makes the *Dicta philosophorum* particularly interesting is clearly the place they come from: the shelves of one of the most important libraries and cultural centres of Coptic Egypt. Of no less importance, on the other hand, is the book form. They are transmitted by a codex, also containing *excerpta* of homilies. In this case, therefore, we are certainly dealing with a literary manuscript.

It could be objected, however, that this is the only evidence of gnostic anthologies coming from a sure “orthodox” literary context, and that it is therefore insufficient to demonstrate the fortune of this literary genre and its role in Coptic literature.

Some time ago, however, while working on a completely different topic – the perception of Judaism in Coptic literary tradition⁵³ – and re-reading for this purpose the *De passione* attributed to Evodius of Rome (CC 0149; BHO 0149),⁵⁴

⁴⁹ On this subject see Buzi 2011.

⁵⁰ For a detailed description of the section on Diogenes and for the value of the sentence attributed to Anacharsis, cf. Funghi 2004: 375–380, with a partial new edition of the *Dicta philosophorum* by Alberto Camplani. On the role of the *sententiae* of Diogenes in the school education, cf. Criboire 1996b: 46. For the Arabic tradition of the sayings of Diogenes see Gutas 1993 and Overwien 2005.

⁵¹ Funghi 2004.

⁵² The fragment of the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna K 945 is almost unreadable.

⁵³ Buzi 2014.

⁵⁴ For the edition of the *De passione*, see Rossi 1891 and Chapman 1991.

I made what I consider to be an interesting discovery. In the first part of the homily, Evodius, or the fictitious author of the homily, in denigrating the “ungrateful attitude” of the Hebrews towards God, makes use of two of the maxims contained in the White Monastery codex:

One of the wise men said: “It is better to do good for a dog and a lion than to spoil an ungrateful man. As for the dog, if they (*sic*) are genuine in keeping the friendship of the one who nourishes them, the ignorant one, on his part, not only fails to keep friendship, but you find that you do good for him while he is seeking to rob your house and place you in the hands of your enemies.”

and also

Another of the wise men also said: “Just as teeth of human being are gnashing because of sour grapes, so tongue of human being affects his friend when he is not with him and dries up in his throat.”

Then the narration moves again to the facts of the passion of Jesus Christ.

This is a clear demonstration, I think, that such material, probably learned during a high stage of educational training, represented a cultural fund that an author of the 6th–7th cent. – the period to which probably the work in question should be ascribed – was still considered appropriate to use.

Codices such as MONB.BE were anthologies or collections of selected texts, assembled through the copying of brief passages, probably to be read on specific occasions of the liturgical calendar, as is suggested by the frequent mention of the date in the final titles. The presence of the *Dicta philosophorum* shows that, on occasion, even material of classical origin, but by then completely Christianised, could be used for the same purpose and to contribute to the rhetoric of the narrative thread of a new work.

Despite the undeniable classical origin of these kinds of gnomic collections, very likely, at least from the end of the 5th cent., they were not perceived any longer as “pagan,” but rather as another expression of the appreciated genre of the *apophthegmata*: edifying sayings and precepts, whose function was essentially that of providing an ethical and behavioral model to monastic, but also non-monastic, communities.⁵⁵ The contiguity of the literary genres of *chreiai*, sayings and *apophthegmata* has already been analysed convincingly by Teresa Morgan and Kathleen McVey, while the relationship between *apophthegmata* (the *Apophthegmata patrum*, in particular) and *gnomai* has been explored, still very recently, by Lillian Larsen.⁵⁶ Moreover, Claudia Rapp has observed that *gnomai* and sayings were occasionally used as material to construct hagio-

⁵⁵ On the contiguity of the literary genres of *chreiai* and *apophthegmata* cf. Morgan 1988; McVey 1998. On the *Apophthegmata patrum* and their literary and moral role see Larsen 2001; Larsen 2006; Larsen 2007; Larsen 2008; Larsen 2013a; Larsen 2013b.

⁵⁶ See Larsen 2017; this paper was originally entitled “‘Know Thyself’: Nag Hammadi Gnostic Sentences in Conversation.”

graphic works, such as the *Life of John Colobus*, showing the “fluidity between *vitae* and *apophthegmata*.”⁵⁷ She has also stressed that in the preface to the alphabetical collection of the *Apophthegmata patrum* “the desert fathers are cast as teachers (*didaskaloi*), automatically transforming their audience into disciples.”

It is very likely, therefore, that the *Menandri sententiae*, the *Sexti sententiae* and the *Dicta philosophorum* were for Christian Egypt, on the one hand, one of the expressions of a wisdom literature comparable also to the *apophthegmata*, useful in forming the virtuous man who does nothing unworthy of God,⁵⁸ and, on the other, the endurance of scholarly models in use for centuries, if it is true that

Christian community of late antiquity never developed or even contemplated an alternative Christian educational system, whether at the primary or secondary level

as Cameron observes.⁵⁹

The emphasis assigned to the importance of learning – “learn to write and you will earn a good perspective;” “by what you have learnt of them you will preserve for yourself their intelligence” (P.Copt. 1.61–64), etc. – does not necessarily implicate an organised monastic environment, where however, as is well known, illiteracy was certainly scarcely tolerated.⁶⁰ The value of the learning is not an exclusive prerogative of more or less organised and institutionalised communities: the wooden tablet, found in Antinoupolis, on which the students of Flavius Kollouthos arduously strove to copy the maxim “letters

⁵⁷ Rapp 2010.

⁵⁸ A good example in this respect is offered by P.PalauRib. inv. 225v. (4th–5th cent.) edited by Carlini 1985: 10–12.

⁵⁹ Cameron 2007: 29. New researches, however, are demonstrating that the situation was probably more veiled. The forthcoming proceedings of the conference “Pratiche didattiche tra centro e periferia nel Mediterraneo tardoantico” (Rome, 13–15 May 2015, edited by G. Agosti and D. Bianconi) will certainly shed more light on these aspects. See also Morgan 1988: 123–124: “What pupils learnt was a collection of ideas and instructions whose literary derivation guaranteed their greekness and cultural authority, while they were diverse enough and imprecise enough in content to apply to almost any social situation [...]. All the same *gnomai* appear in monasteries in the fifth and sixth centuries as appeared in Greek and Graeco-Roman villages in the pre-Christian era. *Gnomai* are a more Greek than a Roman phenomenon.”

⁶⁰ It is interesting to notice how the aspect of the learning of *grammata* is much less present in the Syriac “Menander,” being documented only by one saying (“And, if your son will come out from his childhood humble and wise, teach him the letters. Because it is good to teach him the letters [...]”). More developed, on the other hand, with three occurrences is the theme of silence (“Nothing is more beautiful than silence,” “it is beautiful being always silent,” “even a foolish, when is silent, is believed a wise person”). I am grateful to Paolo Bettio for having let me consult his unpublished translation of the Syriac Menandrian sentences.

are the best beginning of knowledge” – a saying which by the way sounds very similar to *Menandri Sententia* “the good beginning of life are the letters”) – demonstrates the widespread fortune of this kind of text.⁶¹

Whatever the spread of this successful textual production – a matter which still needs to be fully explored – we have the impression that its ethical value and educational function took precedence over any interest in a true and thorough comprehension of the text, and above all in its original authors. On the contrary, Coptic Egypt seems not to have been at all concerned with transmitting and preserving the classical “pagan” textual heritage through copying and quoting this kind of literature.⁶²

To conclude, the classical gnostic anthologies and pagan wisdom literature documented in Coptic go a long way back. Along karstic paths they travelled from milieu to milieu, from context to context, from faith to faith, but, thanks to their format as manuals of universal ethics, they acquired a new life, being used as chrestomathies to improve reading and writing skills, but also as anthologies of moral teachings that, both in theme and structure, drew upon the classic tradition.

“Gnostic sentences, sayings and stories were routinely drafted into the service of scribal, grammatical and rhetorical training.”⁶³ They were easily memorised, recited and re-used, even as a literary work such as the *De passione* of Evodius of Rome demonstrates.

Personally, I would not be surprised to discover other examples of *gnomai* inserted in narrative threads of other Coptic literary works. In my opinion, research in this direction would be very stimulating.

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⁶¹ Cribiore 1996b: n. 160.

⁶² “Habits of rather pedantic attention to specific points in a text at the expense of context, and of writing compositions centred on literary texts with few personal contributions and little creativity, are as pronounced in this as in previous periods.” Cribiore 2007a: 49.

⁶³ Larsen 2013a: 2.

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