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(*Edited by*)

GREECE, ROME,  
BYZANTIUM AND AFRICA

STUDIES PRESENTED  
TO BENJAMIN HENDRICKX  
ON HIS SEVENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY

H Ê R O D O T O S

William Henderson - Effrosyni Zacharopoulou  
(Edited by),  
*Greece, Rome, Byzantium and Africa.*  
*Studies presented to Benjamin Hendrickx*  
*on his seventy-fifth birthday.*

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XXVI.

*Alexandros Tsakos\**

A palaeographic detail from Nubian manuscripts:  
the decoration of the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink

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*Abstract.* — The present paper discusses a palaeographic detail which is diagnostic of high-quality religious manuscripts produced in scriptoria along the Nile Valley, both in Egypt and in Nubia. This detail concerns the decoration of the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink. The identification of this scriptural tradition in time and space provides good grounds for proposing a chronological marker for Nubian documents based on palaeography, as well as a safe basis for elaborating further palaeographic analyses of Nubian texts.

## Introduction

The present paper is inspired by a survey of data conducted in the frame of my doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup>. In the research for my PhD thesis, I studied 109 fragments of parchment with Greek, Coptic and Old Nubian texts that along with 31 fragments of leather with Old Nubian texts were unearthed from a cache behind the apse of a Mediaeval Church on Sur Island (site SR022.A) in Northern Sudan in 2007<sup>2</sup>. Among the 109

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1. TSAKOS (2013), For an abstract of my thesis, see Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0067270X.2013.804982#.UcxOfRxWRX8>

2. The excavations were conducted by the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.) in the frame of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (M.D.A.S.P.). See NÄSER (2008), 73-83. Since the time of the submission of the paper, ongoing research by the author has revealed the existence of more unpublished Nubian manuscripts that present the palaeographic detail under scrutiny here. From a first examina-

parchment fragments, I focused on the manuscripts written in Greek. They numbered in total more than half of all the fragments and thus they constitute the largest find of Greek manuscripts from a single site in Christian Nubia, where it is testified that at least four languages were in use: Old Nubian, Coptic, Greek and Arabic<sup>3</sup>.

All the Greek manuscripts from Sur are of a religious character, but they are neither written by the same person, nor do they seem to derive from the same scriptorium, an observation based on clear palaeographic differences between them. However, there are some groups that can easily be discerned. Actually, the most characteristic are nine fragments, namely nos. 1, 6, 7, 22, 44, 53, 108, 109, 110. These belong to the same group as the largest fragment from the cache (no. 110) that can be collated together with two more (nos. 108 and 109), forming an almost complete leaf preserving parts of the second section of the second homily of John Chrysostom's «On penitence» (CPG 4333.2; MPG 49.286-287)<sup>4</sup>. The other six fragments also belong to a single leaf of parchment preserving a passage from another Chrysostomian work, namely, the first homily «On the title of the 50th Psalm» (CPG 4544; MPG 55, 567). In my thesis, I demonstrated that these two homilies belonged to the same codex that can be dated on palaeographic criteria between the 10th and 11th centuries CE. A crucial role in this dating is played by the custom of decorating the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink.

This scriptorial tradition has been proved to have a wide distribution and particular significance for Nubian literary production and it will constitute the case-study examined in the present contribution.

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tion, they do not contradict the datings and the overall cultural contextualization.

3. For the latest discussion of Multilingualism in Nubia see OCHALA (2014).

4. See NÄSER - TSAKOS (2014).

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### The Nubian finds

In several Nubian manuscripts, the letter «Φ» is decorated in a specific way: its lobes are either filled or touched in their interior with a line of red ink. This decoration is not attested from any region of the Greek-speaking Christian Middle Ages other than the Nile Valley. In fact, earlier editors of Nubian texts had already noted this decoration. Here follow the known examples with the related comments of their editors:

Already from the first publications of Nubian texts by Griffith, and more precisely in the CTAYPOC text from Serra East, the phenomenon is noted: «Φ is written large and the loops are filled with red<sup>5</sup>.» In Griffith's pioneer work this is an isolated instance, difficult to appreciate fully, as is shown by the fact that he oversaw another instance among the rubrications of the Lectionary he and Schäfer identified<sup>6</sup>.

Browne republished this Lectionary and commented upon the single instance that «red ink fills the interior of the letter»<sup>7</sup>.

Browne also republished the CTAYPOC text simply quoting Griffith's comments and adding the detail that in one instance an «Ο» was similarly decorated<sup>8</sup>.

Browne again published the Serra Codex with the Pseudo-Chrysostomian sermon *In Venerabilem Crucem*. There, he described the use of red ink in much detail. In my opinion, he is wrong in regard to a couple of cases on pages 4-7 of the codex, where he does not see red fill in «Φ»<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately, I have not been able to confirm my own impression from his photographs, since, despite all the work I have conducted at the Sudan National Museum, in both the Gallery and the store-rooms, between Autumn 2006 and Spring 2008, the third leaf of the codex containing precisely pages 4-7, was never located.

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5. GRIFFITH (1913), 41 - Plate II.

6. GRIFFITH (1913), 24.

7. BROWNE (1982), 19.

8. BROWNE (1983), 78.

9. BROWNE (1984), 19-20.

Browne published three volumes of *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim*<sup>10</sup>, but he did not mention the various instances of red ink filling of several letters — and not only of «Φ». However seemingly minor for such a publication, the lapsus is important because in such a corpus of texts of various characters (biblical, liturgical, homiletic, documentary) the frequency of the use of the red-filling for individual letters (as well as the accentuation/embellishment of punctuation marks and actually all rubrications in general) becomes very meaningful: as can be seen from the published photographs, it only appears in ecclesiastical contexts (all texts of volume 1 — except perhaps text 2 — and text 16 from volume 2; but none of the letters and administrative or financial texts of the rest of volume 2 and the entire volume 3).

The last reference in the works on Old Nubian by Browne comes from his publication of the «Old Nubian Martyrdom of Saint George from Kulubnarti», where he also noted the red-ink filling of the lobes of «Φ»<sup>11</sup>.

Earlier, a Greek version of the «Acta S. Georgii» found at Qasr Ibrim was published by W.H.C. Frend<sup>12</sup>. The quite original text is written in «large Nubian style characters... [t]he name of the saint is written in red ink, and the spaces in the letters Φ and Β in red and green»<sup>13</sup>. In conclusion, Frend dated the manuscript around the year 1000 CE<sup>14</sup>, but followed the trend of identifying the Greek material at Qasr Ibrim as survivals of much earlier periods: «The cathedral library was something of a museum»<sup>15</sup>.

In that «museum», the Egypt Exploration Society discovered a series of other manuscripts in Greek, among which the following are of interest for the present topic:

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10. PLUMLEY - BROWNE (1988), BROWNE (1989) and (1991).

11. BROWNE (1998), 1.

12. FREND (1989), 89-104, Plates 1-2.

13. FREND (1989), 92.

14. FREND (1989), 103.

15. FREND (1989), 104.



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1. The «Fragments of an Acta Martyrum from Qasr Ibrim»<sup>16</sup>, where «[t]he letter  $\Phi$  is enlarged and part of the spaces each side of the bar are etched in red ink»<sup>17</sup>;

2. the liturgical fragment III a, b, c and d, where «[t]he letter  $\Phi$  is written throughout slightly larger than the other letters and illuminated in red»<sup>18</sup>;

3. all liturgical fragments identified by Frend, Dragas, and Kontoyannis<sup>19</sup>, as I could see from the photographs. The only reference to the phenomenon made by the editors concerns the letters « $\Phi$ » and «O» (Ibid.: 122)<sup>20</sup>;

Moreover, there are three instances of the letter « $\Phi$ » with the decoration under scrutiny in a Coptic manuscript from Nubia, namely from the complete codex of the monastery at Qasr el Wizz<sup>21</sup>. These three instances occur on pages 16, 28 and 33 and constitute, in fact, all the appearances of that letter in the codex. Different is the case of the letter «O», which is also touched with red ink, but only in five of the many more instances where the letter is used, namely on pages 27, 29, 30 and 32 (twice). Hubai, the first editor of the text, provided his readers with a complete palaeographic analysis of the manuscript<sup>22</sup>. He noted, of course, the particularity of the decorated letters, but he — logically, in my opinion — did not see an obvious reason for the choice of decorating the letter «O» in precisely these five instances. Moreover, he suggested that the shape of the letter « $\Phi$ » is closer to scriptorial traditions of the 7th/8th centuries<sup>23</sup>. He subsequently dated the whole work to

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16. FREND (1986), 66-70, Plates 2-3.

17. FREND (1986), 66.

18. FREND - DRAGAS (1987), 90-98, Plates 2-3, especially p. 90.

19. e.g. FREND - DRAGAS - KONTOYANNIS (1992), 119-134, Plates 1-4.

20. FREND - DRAGAS - KONTOYANNIS (1992), 122, text QI 1964/4.4; 124, text QI 1964/6b; 126, fragment 4/15b; 128, text QI 1964, 4/12; 129, text QI 1964/8; 130, Fragment XIVb; moreover, I disagree with the negative suggestion for text QI 1964/6a, p. 123, as can be seen in Pl. 1c.

21. HUBAI (2009).

22. HUBAI (2009), 25-36.

23. HUBAI (2009), 31.

the 9th century CE<sup>24</sup>. However, later research tends to date the work around the turn of the 2nd millennium CE, based on the palaeographical similarities of the codex with the so-called «Esna/Edfu collection», about which see below<sup>25</sup>.

Finally, the letter «Φ» touched with orange ink has been noted in a codex from Serra East (British Library Or. 6799), which was found during the campaigns for the raising of the height of the first Aswan dam at the beginning of the 20th century. The manuscript contains a pseudepigraphic sermon On the Cross attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, written in Coptic and dated to 1053 or 1056 CE<sup>26</sup>. The codex belongs to the «Esna/Edfu collection» too, housed in the British Library.

The last two finds from this list raise the question of the relation of the Nubian finds to specimens from Coptic Egypt, as well as of the possible influences coming to Nubia from downstream. It is time to turn to the Coptic finds preserving decoration of the lobes of letter «Φ» with red(ish) ink.

### Coptic finds from Egypt

The corpus of texts from Late Antique and Mediaeval Egypt, in Coptic, Greek, Arabic or Nubian is far from being registered and published fully. The closest attempt is the *Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari*, which started as a project aiming to reconstruct the codices from the White Monastery, but now has the ambition to include all Coptic works<sup>27</sup>. Consequently, it is generally accepted that there is a lack of a comprehensive study of Coptic palaeography<sup>28</sup>.

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24. HUBAI (2009), 36.

25. See SUCIU (2013), 24 and n. 8.

26. BRAKMANN (2006), 291 and n. 23.

27. For the state of the project, see: <http://cmcl.let.uniroma1.it/storia.htm> and <http://alinsuciu.com/2012/04/22/the-corpus-dei-manoscritti-copti-letterari-project-has-moved-to-hamburg/>

28. Cf. LAYTON (1985), 152: «It may be fairly said that Coptic palaeography, in the narrow sense of the precise science of dating Coptic manu-

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Therefore, it would be impossible to trace in the vast corpus of Coptic literature all examples of the phenomenon under examination here.

However, a palaeographic phenomenon, like the tradition of decorating the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink, can also be delimited in the frame of a comprehensive catalogue of a representative collection that therefore provides valuable statistics for the given phenomenon, and offers insights into its literary and cultural significance<sup>29</sup>. Such a work is the *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts* in the British Library published by Layton in 1987<sup>30</sup>. Seventy-nine different instances of the specific phenomenon under discussion here are recorded by Layton in his catalogue; in most cases the ink is defined as orange, but also red and dark brown are noted. The spatial and temporal distribution of these samples is very eloquent in my opinion:

(i) Among the 79 examples, 51 concern manuscripts in the Bohairic dialect (nos. 194-210, 212-14, 216-24, 226-30, 232-41, 243-44, 248, 251-55). Actually, there are only 10 manuscripts in Bohairic that do not contain this type of decoration (nos. 211, 215, 225, 231, 242, 245-47, 249-50), while in most of the cases it is not only «Φ» that is decorated but also «ϣ», «ϥ» and the abbreviation stroke, as well as occasionally «ϣ», «ϣ», «Y» and punctuation marks. Of the 51 manuscripts, 50 are written on paper. The one written on parchment was copied at the Syrian monastery at Wadi'n Natrun and is dated 1198/1199 CE (no. 252). It is the oldest of the Bohairic manuscripts with the decoration under discussion. In fact, it is the second oldest of all the dated Bohairic manuscripts in the British Library, the oldest being no. 249, dated 888/889 CE, also copied at Natrun. Interestingly, that manuscript does not contain the palaeographic detail under scrutiny.

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scripts according to the form of their script, does not yet exist.»; KASSER (1991), 8.176: «... this science is still far from reaching the maturity needed to satisfy the most demanding among specialized users.»

29. See comments by LAYTON (1985), 150-152, 154.

30. LAYTON (1987).

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This gives a plausible terminus post quem for the appearance of the palaeographic detail under scrutiny in the 10th-11th centuries CE. Of the remaining 50, two are dated to before the 14th century (nos. 233 and 251) and the rest are much later, mainly from the 18th century.

(ii) The 28 remaining manuscripts are written in the Sahidic dialect (nos. 4, 13, 48, 56, 58, 59, 70, 80, 83, 97, 116, 117, 119, 121, 122, 129, 130, 132, 133, 136, 143, 144, 151, 156, 157, 160, 162, 173). With the exception of nos. 70, 122 and 160, which are written on paper, all the rest are parchment manuscripts. Very few carry a date<sup>31</sup>, but most can be dated in relation to the few dated ones. The dated ones are: one manuscript copied at Fayum (no. 151 from 989/990 CE), six copied at Esna/Edfu (no. 162 from 974 CE, nos. 121 and 144 from 981 CE, no. 143 from 994 CE, no. 130 between 99 and 1004 CE, no. 160 from 1005 CE), and one of unknown provenance (no. 119 from before 983 CE) but probably linked with the Esna/Edfu group. Two more of unknown provenance (nos. 117 and 173) and one possibly from Qift (no. 133) should also be linked with the same group, and thus be dated to the 10th-11th centuries CE. The same date can be assigned on palaeographic grounds to the group of eleven manuscripts found at the White Monastery at Sohag, but not necessarily copied there (nos. 56, 58, 59, 70, 116, 122, 129, 132, 136, 156, 157). A twelfth manuscript from Sohag (no. 4) may also belong to the same period. It is more difficult to assign a date to three manuscripts with a vague provenance from Upper Egypt (nos. 13, 48, 97). The group of these 28 manuscripts is completed by two Nubian codices: the one from Serra East dated 1053/1056 CE (no. 83) and one from a locality called Nillarti (no. 80). They both seem to belong to the group of manuscripts that is supposed to have been copied at Esna/Edfu. In 24 of these 28 samples, the decoration concerns only the letter «Φ». The four exceptions are: no. 119, where apart from «Φ», sometimes «Θ» and «Χ» are also dec-

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31. See LAYTON (1987), xxiv-xxv and Index II.

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orated; no. 143, where «M» is also sometimes touched; no. 160, in which «A» and «Θ» are also touched; and no. 162, in which «Θ» and vocative «Ω» are also touched. Occasionally the extended letters at the beginning and the end of a page, as well as strokes and punctuation marks are also touched.

The above-listed data show that the touching of letters with red ink is a Coptic creation of the end of the 1st millennium CE, with the most plausible sources of inspiration being either Esna/Edfu or the White Monastery of Sohag. From there, a decorative tendency of touching some letters, first and foremost «Φ», becomes a palaeographic custom that spreads to areas linked ecclesiastically, spiritually and scripturally with these centres, like Nubia. In the course of time, it became a sort of trend that was adopted by the Coptic Church as a whole later in its history when the Bohairic dialect had become the predominant linguistic vehicle in Christian Egypt aside Arabic, and the one characterised by traditionalist tendencies in its formal expressions (like, perhaps, the presently examined palaeographic detail).

It remains to be investigated how this scriptorial custom was introduced to Nubia.

### *The link between Egypt and Nubia*

In Nubia, this palaeographic custom must have been introduced through Greek and Coptic texts that arrived from Egyptian centres of literacy around 1000 CE. The connection between Esna/Edfu and Serra is one option. The proximity of Esna to Nubia is naturally a good explanation for the propagation of textual and palaeographic customs in Nubia from that locality, as in the case of the above-mentioned Serra East Coptic codex. It has also been argued that<sup>32</sup>: «Nubian Sahidic, not surprisingly, shares certain characteristics with the Sahidic of southernmost Egypt, in particular the Theban and

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32. VAN DER VLIET (2010), 766.

the Esna-Edfu regions.» However, given the propagation of the palaeographic phenomenon under examination in the «Bohairic era» of the Coptic Church, it would be surprising if the scriptorium of Esna/Edfu was the one responsible for the wide success of this tradition in Egypt.

I am more inclined to see the White Monastery at Sohag as being responsible for the spreading of this scriptorial custom among the Copts. In fact, most of the related finds have been found at Sohag<sup>33</sup>. There, the tradition of Shenoute had formed a primal centre of learning and literacy in the Coptic world<sup>34</sup>. So, even if the idea of touching some letters with a red, orange or brown colour could have been initially conceived at Esna, its propagation in the «Bohairic era» of the Coptic Church should rather be accounted for on the basis of the finds from Sohag. But what about Nubia?

In a manuscript found at Qasr Ibrim and presently kept at Cambridge, Hagen identified a *Homily on Repentance* that discusses a confrontation between Shenoute and Chrysostom in Heaven. In the end, this confrontation brings a reconciliation between the two Fathers and the introduction of the writings of both to the Egyptian Church on days of fasting and festivals<sup>35</sup>. The only version of this text has been found at Qasr Ibrim, and since Hagen only briefly describes the content without insisting on its palaeographical details, it is impossible at the moment to define its precise origin and dating. How-

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33. It should be added that further instances of this decorative element have been identified in five more codices from the White Monastery, as can be gleaned from Emmel 2004 (all references are from volume 1):

1. p. 221: Codex FM (Canon 9), see also AMELINEAU (1907-1914), 2, pl. 11.

2. p. 231: Codex BV (Canon 9), see also AMELINEAU (1907-1914), 1, pl. 2 and YOUNG (1993b), pl. 16.

3. p. 260: Codex GF (Discourses 5), see also AMELINEAU (1907-1914), 1, pl. 9.

4. p. 334: Codex XI (Varia), see also YOUNG (1993b); pl. 63.

5. p. 377: Codex ZT (concerning John the Baptist?), no published facsimiles.

34. e.g. WIPSZYCKA (2009), 61-65.

35. HAGEN (2009), 52.

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ever, this constitutes, in my opinion, the most eloquent testimony of the primal role that Chrysostom played in both Egypt and Nubia, and in the same milieu in which Shenoute occupied the leading spiritual position. In the context of multilingual Christian Nubia, Shenoute and Chrysostom were emblematic figures of tendencies that possibly went beyond language and touched cultic practice and dogma.

What is crucial here, though, is that the Chrysostomian manuscripts found at Sur Island preserve many examples of the decoration of the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink (in fact, all instances but one). If this phenomenon appeared in Nubia between the 10th and 11th centuries, then the manuscripts from Sur should also be dated then. Moreover, they would seem in that framework to be tokens of a spiritual world that linked the White Monastery with Christian Nubia, through Esna/Edfu and until the upstream peripheries of the Makuritan kingdom ruling the Middle Nile Valley from Old Dongola.

Given the absence of other Makuritan manuscripts than those from Sur preserving the decoration of the lobes of the letter «Φ» with red ink, it is logical to wonder as to the actual position of these manuscripts in the Makuritan literary society. This will bring us, however, far beyond the scope of the present paper and into the question of the origins of the Old Nubian script and the agents of the literary production in Old Nubian.

### Concluding remarks

Suffice it to conclude here with the following working hypothesis. As we saw in the manuscripts published from the very rich archive of Qasr Ibrim, this particular decoration, especially of the letter «Φ», became diagnostic of Nubian manuscripts with ecclesiastical texts. The reasons for choosing this letter for applying this decoration might be linked with the cross-shape of the letter form — reminiscent in fact of the Ankh and the Coptic Cross. Therefore, it can plausibly be

suggested that the letter «Φ» was the one first decorated in this manner. Consequently, the decoration in Nubian manuscripts of other letters besides «Φ», like the touching of the empty spaces in the lobes or between the bars of the letters «B»<sup>36</sup>, «O»<sup>37</sup>, «□»<sup>38</sup>, and «Ω»<sup>39</sup>, should be considered as an internal evolution of customary uses in the Nubian scriptoria.

If this is indeed the case, then the present paper has provided a marker for identifying developments in the scriptorial traditions of Nubia; a basis for initiating palaeographic surveys of the corpus of texts in Old Nubian; and a possible range of (Egyptian and Nubian) texts that can be considered prototypes for the development of the palaeographic customs and rules of Old Nubian literacy.

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36. Cf. FREND (1989), 92.

37. Cf. BROWNE (1983), 78.

38. Cf. BROWNE (1988), 40-47 and Plate 10.

39. Cf. BROWNE (1988), 22-25 and Plate 1.



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