

Notes Concerning Some Coptic Fragments Related to Mary the Mother of Jesus

I remember with pleasure the days in which I had the opportunity to spend time with Antti Marjanen transcribing and translating different Coptic manuscripts. I should like to say that during our working sessions, the sharpness of his ideas was rivaled only by his personal modesty. His presence was one of the main reasons that I enjoyed the years that I spent in Helsinki as a visiting researcher at the Department of Biblical Studies. In fact, I presume to state that I accumulated not only scholarly experience during my meetings with Antti, but, at the same time, I gained a friend.

We all know how important Antti's contributions are to the understanding of early Christian beliefs concerning the different characters who bear the name "Mary" in the New Testament. He was among the first to argue systematically that the "Mary" who features in the Gnostic texts is indeed the Magdalene and not the mother of Christ,¹ as some scholars believed.² Hereby, I would like to honour my esteemed colleague with a contribution on some Coptic texts related to Mary the mother.

In 2006, Hans Förster published a volume that brings together three different Coptic texts on the Dormition of the Virgin.³ In addition to the edition and the German translation of the material, Förster has prepared an erudite commentary on each individual text. The fragments come from the ancient library of the White Monastery in Upper Egypt and can be approximately dated to the 10th or 11th century AD:⁴

The three texts survived in the following fragmentary Sahidic manuscripts:

- 1) a folio from the collection of Archduke Rainer, now to be found in the Austrian National Library in Vienna;
- 2) a small scrap of parchment kept in the Cambridge University Library;
- 3) two leaves from the National Library in Paris.

Black-and-white photographic plates of each item can be consulted at the end of the volume.

In the following lines, I shall first talk briefly about the two Paris leaves and I will comment on their identification. Secondly, I will deal with the Vienna fragment, indicating that there are two other leaves which belong to the one and the same text about the Virgin. I hope this brief report will be of use to those interested in the Eastern traditions concerning the Dormition of Mary and that they will be properly studied in the future.

THE PARIS FRAGMENTS

The two Paris fragments edited by Hans Förster bear the inventory numbers BnF Copte 129¹⁷, ff. 28–29. A French translation of these leaves was already published in 1903 by Eugène Revillout in an issue of the *Journal Asiatique*.⁵ However, Revillout's translation is of little use today. It is not only that it is defective on many points, but also that he did not even indicate the call numbers of the fragments he translated.⁶ Förster's edition has been therefore necessary and is most welcomed.

The two fragments are consecutive and the scribe paginated them only on the verso, with even numbering. It appears thus that they were pages [41]–[44] of the codex from which they had been torn. The text describes a scene in which Jesus, the apostles and Mary's accompanying maidens gather around her death-bed. Christ sits by his mother's bedside; he kisses her and then blesses different parts of her body. Mary's death is said to occur on 21 Tobe, the normal date of the *dormitio* in the Coptic sources.

Förster had not remarked, however, that the fragments which he edited had already been identified by Enzo Lucchesi as belonging to a homily on the Dormition of Mary attributed to Evodius of Rome (CANT 133; *clavis coptica* 0151).⁷ According to some Christian writers, Evodius was a disciple of the apostle Peter and his immediate successor to the episcopal see of Antioch. It is interesting, however, that in the Coptic tradition, Evodius is said to be the bishop of Rome (most probably the transfer of the bishopric had something to do with Peter's connection with the imperial city). Evodius is portrayed as an eye-witness to the apostolic times as well as being keeper of certain words of the Savior and of

his disciples which are not recorded otherwise.⁸ A "short" version of the homily on the Dormition of the Virgin by pseudo-Evodius has been translated by Stephen Shoemaker in *Analecta Bollandiana*,⁹ but the Paris fragments do not parallel it. The reason is that they seem to belong to a different, i.e., "long" version of the text, which is still unpublished, but which can be recovered from various fragments of Coptic manuscripts, again mostly unpublished.¹⁰ A full directory of the Coptic (both Sahidic and Bohairic) fragments of pseudo-Evodius sermon on the Dormition has still to be made.

THE VIENNA FRAGMENT

The Vienna fragment published by Förster is recorded under the inventory number K 7589 in the collection of the Austrian National Library. Although Förster did not supply the original pagination because this is partially damaged, I think that the number 100 is still relatively visible on the upper left corner of the verso. Thus, on the recto it seems safe to restore the page number to 9[9].

The text narrates events which supposedly took place on the night between Tobe 20 and 21, i.e. on the eve of Mary's death according to the Coptic tradition. The text begins by enumerating the major events of Mary's life: she was 13 when she gave birth to Jesus, 48 when he died on the Cross, and 60 at the moment of her own death. After Christ's Ascension, she accompanied the apostles to preach the Gospel. When her death is approaching, the apostles are all around her bed. Mary begins to pray and, suddenly, Christ descends from heaven accompanied by an army of angels. The text breaks off at this point.

1 See Marjanen 1996; 1998; 2002.

2 Cf., e.g., Lucchesi 1985; Shoemaker 2002.

3 Förster 2006.

4 On the White Monastery library see Orlandi 2002.

5 Revillout 1903.

6 The fragments edited by Revillout are not mentioned in Lucchesi 1981, 47.

7 Lucchesi 1997, 174–175, n. 9.

8 On pseudo-Evodius, see Orlandi 1991.

9 Shoemaker 1999.

10 On the different recensions of pseudo-Evodius' homily, see Sheridan 2004.

Förster has remarked in his accompanying study that the text does not ennumerate the miracles which are common in other texts on the Dormition of the Virgin, that the idea of Mary's preaching is an original feature of our text, and that the text's Christology betrays Monarchianist traces. In Förster's view, these characteristics would suggest that the text must be dated back to the second century A.D. and that it belongs to a lost *Apocalypse of Mary* which was written in a non-Gnostic community. I will not insist here on Förster's hypotheses. Enrico Norelli has already expressed his doubts regarding their validity.¹¹

Through a fortuitous coincidence, I discovered that another fragment of the same codex, and text, is part of the Coptic collection of the State Library in Berlin. This collection is currently in Hamburg, where it was moved for cataloguing approximately 30 years ago. The new manuscript witness has the shelf mark MS orient. fol. 1350, f. 3 and was published almost 100 years ago by Gerhard Hoehne.¹² The paleographic inspection indicated that the Berlin/Hamburg fragment published by Hoehne and the Vienna leaf published by Förster indubitably belong to one and the same codex. As the Berlin fragment is paginated 103–104, it is evident that they were separated by only one leaf (paginated 101–102), which is either lost for good, or not as yet identified.

Moreover, it seems that an unpublished fragment from Vienna, i.e. K 9220, belonged in its turn to the same writing and manuscript. Unfortunately, the third piece is damaged in the upper part so that the pagination did not survive. It is thus impossible to say whether it preceded the previous two fragments, or whether it came after them.

Be that as it may, the content of the new fragments does not seem to confirm Förster's hypothesis that Vienna K 7589 might belong to an *Apocalypse of Mary* dating from the second century. It suggests, rather, that the leaves came from a still unidentified sermon of the Dormition. Whatever its identity may have been, it still remains to be investigated.

11 Norelli 2009, 249ff.

12 Hoehne 1915, 126–128.

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