

A Codicological Description: Coptic Psalter

I. Physical Description of the Psalter

The Psalter, found within the “Coptic Manuscripts Collection” of the Burke Library, could also be labeled “A Liturgical Handbook.”¹ Coptic Psalters are traditionally a collection of one hundred and fifty-one psalms.² The existing information regarding this specific book is sparse. Filed under the call number “Coptic 1 (and Arabic),” the worn, brown leather binding of the Coptic Liturgical Handbook is as non-descript as present codicological information. The cover of the manuscript measures 6.5” x 4.25”. The hand-laid paper on the inside spans 6.25” x 4.25” with a depth of 1.75”.³ Exposed end-bands hold the manuscript. The blue spring found within the end-bands appears intentionally visible.⁴ To conclude this description of the external physical features of the Psalter, a hole on the back cover should be noted. An examination of other bound Coptic Manuscripts supports the assumption that the hole once functioned to tie the book to a table.⁵

The writing inside the Psalter is marked by its multiplicity. It seems the same person handwrites the text throughout the book. Red and orange ink complement the primary black script. Unlike the common two-column format found in earlier Coptic manuscripts, the text in

¹ For the sake of this codicological description, I will employ the titles “A Psalter” and “Liturgical Handbook” interchangeably. The final determination between the two titles will be left to a person with a superior grasp on Bohairic Coptic.

² An additional psalm is contained in the Coptic tradition written specific for David when he combated Goliath. Daoud, Nabih Kamel. *Illustrations from Coptic Manuscripts*. (Cairo: Lehnert & Landrock), 205.

³ A much earlier Psalter from the Freer Collection, dated 700 – 900 ce, contains similar measurements of 5.88” x 4”. This Psalter was found in the Castle of the Monastery of Syrians. William H. Worrell. *The Coptic Manuscripts in the Freer Collection*. (New York: The Macmillian Company), xi.

⁴ Elizabeth Miraglia, who has studied the development of Bibles in Near East, stated that this feature was common for later manuscripts. Elizabeth Miraglia, “Consultation with the Burke Staff,” March 16, 2015.

⁵ Kamel. *Illustration*, 7.

this Psalter forms a single column.⁶ Although the Coptic appears in three colors, the Arabic notations are most often orange. Similar multi-lingual manuscripts are referred to elsewhere as Copto-Arabic Manuscripts. Compared other Coptic Manuscripts, mostly composed and preserved in monasteries, the handwriting is sloppy (see figure one)⁷. The manuscript employs no punctuation. Finally, a coronis, the mark to indicate the first line of the psalm, is enlarged.⁸ The exaggerated first letter of the Coptic word also functions to hold the margins. Striking markings flourish the writing. The dots that hang over certain words are called tremas in the Coptic language. Additionally, the term for the horizontal line that runs across the top of certain words is a superlinear stroke. The full purpose for these notations remains only partially defined. Coptologists have observed, however, that superlinear strokes are situated most regularly above words with an exalted or divine connotation.⁹ These marks do not only catch the eye of the reader, but also offer helpful clues for those, like myself, with a minimal grasp of Coptic.

II. The Date and Origin of the Psalter

The earliest Copto-Arabic manuscripts date back to the late 7th century after the Muslim conquest of Egypt. As more Egyptians converted to Islam, notations in Arabic became more common, especially within documents for personal use.¹⁰ When I first spoke to Matthew Baker at the Burke Library, he said a Coptic student attending Union Theological Seminary had dated the Psalter as a 19th century document. I would like to challenge this hypothesis. I have not encountered texts developed by copyists complete with miniatures and elaborate illuminations,

⁶ Bentley Layton. *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts In the British Library Acquired Since the Year 1906*. (London: The British Library), LXIII.

⁷ Please see pictures on the bibliographical page of the codicological description.

⁸ Worrell, Freer, xviii.

⁹ Deirdre Good, "Coptic Language Lecture," (General Seminary: January 29th, 2015).

¹⁰ Kamel, *Illustrations*, 4.

like the drawings featured in the Burke Library's Psalter, that were produced after the late 18th century. At the beginning of the 19th century this art began to wane. When Pope Cyril IV of Alexandria (1854 -1861) imported a printing machine, he ushered in a new era in Coptic manuscripts.¹¹

The hand-laid paper appears to be a combination of parchment and paper inspired by the European style. Bentley Layton, a leading Coptologist, states that European copyists' paper took over the Egyptian market after the 14th century. The vertical lines on the second page also parallel the Mastara Ruling Pattern found in other Coptic-Arabic manuscripts.¹² The ends of the pages reveal where the two paper forms were pasted together.

The process of translating the Psalter led to less knowledge about the documents content, but indicated further clues regarding the Psalter's origins. With my *A Simplified Coptic Dictionary (Sahidic Dialect)* in hand, I attempted to decode the title page (figure one). Two unfamiliar letters, however, halted this process. By combing other resources I found these letters, an alpha and gamma, in the Bohairic dialect. Bohairic Coptic is known as the Memphitic dialect. These letters do not appear in the same form in the Sahidic dialect and thus this finding altered my method. Upon further investigation, I found out that Bohairic Coptic had replaced the Sahidic dialect as the official liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church since the 11th century.¹³ The world around the text began to expand.

The realization that the Psalter is written in Bohairic Coptic inspired further inquiry regarding the manuscript's origin. Since the Memphitic dialect derives from the western Nile Delta, I posit this region could be the document's source. Furthermore, there are a number of

¹¹ Ibid, 5.

¹² The other alternative would be "Oriental Style" as Layton names it, which does not include these particular vertical lines. Layton, *Coptic*, LX.

¹³ E.A. Wallis Budge, *Coptic Biblical Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, (London: Oxford University Press), xiv.

watermarks sprinkled throughout the pages. The damp conditions of the western Nile Delta have hindered the preservation of the area's earlier texts, but later documents—like this one--survive.¹⁴ Finally, while interest Sahidic Coptic has increased due to the discovery of early Gnostic Christian texts Nag Hammadi, the Bohairic dialect proves more valuable for later texts.

III. Analysis of the Document's Content

Although the Psalter appears hastily copied, it is furnished with striking illuminations nonetheless. Drawings of animals are hidden within the large letters that seem to begin of each new section. Birds are particularly popular within Coptic manuscripts. Within the Psalter in the Burke library, a bird is drawn within the alpha. The bird concealed within the alpha also appears in a Copto-Arabic collection of Psalms and Odes from 1392 ce.¹⁵ Doodles of birds, pinwheels, trees, and lizards are interspersed throughout the book (figure two). The large collections of Coptic manuscripts at Cairo University indicate that birds were a most popular marginal decoration in addition to hiding within the capital letters. I have not found a definitive meaning behind this common symbol, however.

The decorations found within the Psalter support the theory that this text was once owned by a layperson. A beautiful geometric pattern is situated within the top half of each title page (figure one). Within these decorations are often the equilateral Coptic cross. The pattern closely mirrors the arabesque patterns found in Islamic art.¹⁶ In reviewing the fine arabesque patterns located in other Copto-Arabic documents, usually stored in monasteries, the attention to detail is strikingly different. I would propose that the Psalter found in the Burke Library was

¹⁴ Daoud, *Illustrations*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 205.

¹⁶ The 1340 ce Copto-Arabic manuscript of the Consecration of the Patriarch displays the great attention to detail and creativity found in the manuscripts produced for the larger monasteries. *Ibid.*, 131.

commissioned for personal use. The observations that the Psalter is not particularly large and includes Arabic notations support the theory that this book was likely owned by a layperson.

Possibly the most noteworthy page in the Psalter features a large interlaced cross found in the center of the book (figure three). These standard decorative crosses are featured not only in Coptic manuscripts, where they span an entire page, but also in wall paintings. They have appeared in both forms since the 5th century. According to Dr. S. Okasha, they are styled after the works of the early monks from the time of Saint Antony the Great (251 – 356 A.D). The interlaced pattern is meant to evoke the interlaced baskets the monks produced using palm-leaves and palm-branches.¹⁷ There is a great deal of the continuity between one of the later handwritten Psalters, featured in the Burke library, and the early Coptic manuscripts produced in the 5th century. The clearly traced conventions make Coptic manuscripts particularly challenging to date.

Finally, the markings that frame the cross symbolize the unique tradition captured in the Psalter (figure three). The bird perched on the top of the cross contains the alpha, the first letter in the Greek-derived Coptic alphabet. The omega is at the bottom of the cross signifying the expanse of the Divine. An equilateral Coptic cross resides in the center. Finally, in the top-left section, the letters “IHC” appear with a superlinear stroke dashed on top. “IHC” is an abbreviation for IHCOUC meaning “Jesus” in both Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic. Symbols of the rich decorative style, two languages, and the last traces of the handwritten liturgical copyist tradition are present on one page within this Psalter. For the layperson possessing this manuscript in the western Nile Delta, both the continuity and the transformation of the region and the religion were in their grasp

¹⁷ Ibid, 128.

Figure One

Figure Two

Figure Three



Bibliography

Budge, E.A. Wallis. *Coptic Biblical Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*. London: Oxford University Press, 1912.

Good, Deirdre. "Coptic Language Lecture," General Seminary: January 29th, 2015.

Kamel, Daoud Nabih. *Illustrations from Coptic Manuscripts*. (Cairo: Lehnert & Landrock), 1991.

Layton, Bentley. *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts In the British Library Acquired Since the Year 1906*. London: The British Library, 1987.

Worrell, William H. *The Coptic Manuscripts in the Freer Collection*. New York: The Macmillian Company, 1972.

