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Another Athanasius : four Sahidic homilies attributed to St. Athanasius of Alexandria. Introduction, editions, translations

Saweros, I.K.I.

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Cover Page



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Author: Saweros, I.K.I.

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Authorship, Date and Place of the Homilies

In this part of my research, I will focus on those elements in the homilies, both in the stories and in the paraenetic parts, that might help us to situate them in date and place. This internal evidence may include details of daily life, titles, proper names as well as geographical and historical information. I prefer to examine each homily on its own, since they do not share many of such elements and are each different in a way. I will also briefly discuss the question of their original language. The chapter opens with a prologue that deals with Athanasius of Alexandria as the pretended author of these homilies.

Athanasius or pseudo-Athanasius?

Quite a lot is known about Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296/298-2 May 373),¹ the twentieth archbishop of the Church of Alexandria.² His life, his writings and his theology are studied by scholars till today.³ Through the ages, many legends got attached to his person and many homiletic works came to circulate under his name, in particular in the languages of the Christian East.

The massive number of works attributed to Athanasius can be divided into three categories: authentic works, inauthentic works and doubtful works.⁴ In 1994, David Brakke provided seven criteria, that scholars may use to judge whether an ascetic work attributed to Athanasius is authentic or not. These seven criteria take both internal and external evidence into consideration. They are: the textual witnesses, the ancient testimonia, the

¹ A massive bibliography about his life and writings is provided in Ch. Butterweck, *Athanasius von Alexandria: Bibliographie*, Opladen, 1995; more recent bibliography is to be found in J. Leemans, "Thirteen Years of Athanasius Research (1985-1998). A Survey Bibliography", *Sacris Erudiri* 39, 2000, p. 105-217.

² For the history of the church of Alexandria in his age, see A. Martin, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'Église d'Égypte au IV^e siècle (328-373)*, Rome, 1996.

³ For the most recent work, see D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, Oxford, 2012.

⁴ For a recent list of his works, editions and translations, see P. Gemeinhardt (ed.), *Athanasius Handbuch*, Tübingen, 2011, p. 166-281.

evidence of a Greek original, the ancient title, the nature of the work, the internal evidence for the author's milieu and the relationship with other genuine works of Athanasius.⁵ In the following paragraphs, I will make use of Brakke's criteria in examining the authenticity of the four homilies edited here.

First of all, there are no ancient testimonia showing that Athanasius took the themes of these homilies into consideration, let alone wrote about them. No Greek originals of these homilies have been discovered till now.⁶ Although the titles used in these four homilies are most likely later additions, yet they are of a totally different type than the titles that are usually attached to Athanasius' genuine works. The contents of the four homilies do not provide really reliable information about the milieu of fourth century Alexandria where Athanasius lived and wrote.

Athanasius' style of writing, which is marked by his own way of providing arguments in support of his views, arranging his arguments in an order that goes from weaker to stronger, his play with words, the sources that he quotes and his deep knowledge of the politics of his age are totally absent from these homilies.⁷ The theological debate of the fourth century, to which Athanasius devoted most of his life, is represented in the third homily by the story of the heretic Carpocratius. This story describes the debate during the Council of Nicaea in such a weird way that no contemporaneous historian could ever have written it down. By no means, therefore, could the author of the third homily (or the story) have been an eyewitness of the actual events.

To sum up, it is a matter of certainty that Athanasius did not write these homilies. In no way do they fit our knowledge of his historical personality. The question, who the real author of these homilies may have

⁵ D. Brakke, "The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana", *Orientalia* 63, 1994, p. 17.

⁶ Note that J. van Haelst, *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens*, Paris, 1976, p. 627, nr. 625, records only one genuine work of Athanasius in Greek found Egypt, an inscription in the Theban Monastery of Epiphanius (*CPG* III, nr. 2108).

⁷ G. Ch. Stead, "Rhetorical Method in Athanasius", *Vigiliae Christianae* 30, 1976, p. 121-137.

been is very difficult to answer. The homilies themselves, that are intentionally pseudepigraphic, do not offer reliable clues to the identity of their authors. At best, a very general profile of the person(-s) behind them can be obtained.

On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels.

The first homily, *On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels*, as well as the two following ones, are composite didactic homilies, made up of both direct paraenetic speech and stories that support, illustrate and enliven the paraenetic argument. The stories may represent traditional material that was older than the remainder of the homilies in their present late form. Yet the stories contain most of the elements that can be more or less approximately dated and situated. It should be remembered, however, that these elements may not be representative for the homily as a whole. They could merely say something about the date and place of the individual stories in which they appear.

In *On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels* a story is related about a young pagan boy who wished very much to see Jesus. In this story, the homilist tells his audience twice that the young boy looked at the walls of the church and saw Christ depicted in the lap of his virgin mother (§26 and 29). Since wall paintings started to appear in the churches of Egypt only around the sixth century,⁸ this may take the date of composition of at least this part of the homily to sometime in or after the sixth century.

In the same story, the title *επαρχος* is used for the prefect of Alexandria (§29). This title dates back to period of the Roman conquest of Egypt. It denotes a high Roman rank, in particular in the military field, but was later used for the Roman governor of a country.⁹ It was most probably in

⁸ I. Melniciuc-Puică, "Biblical Elements in Coptic Icon", *European Journal of Science and Theology* 2, 2006, p. 39-40.

⁹ P. A. Brunt, "The Administrators of Roman Egypt", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 65, 1975, p. 127-128; A. K. Bowman and D. Rathbone, "Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 82, 1992, p. 114-119.

use till shortly after the Arab conquest.¹⁰ In a general sense, also various other elements of the stories in this homily, such as the coins that are used (the *ρολοκοτινος* in §16 and the *νομισμα* in §28), the way of concluding a loan agreement, as narrated in the story of the young boy from Pentapolis (§16-20), the use of oaths as security for the creditor¹¹ and the use of *εγλογισον*, 'bless us/me', Greek *εὐλόγησον*, as a greeting formula¹² somehow suggest familiarity with the *realia* of late-antique Egyptian life, even though they are not conclusive in themselves. Also the absence of any Islamic influence might point in the same direction.

In the story about the Arian George, the author situates the events 'in this city', i.e. Alexandria (§13). In the story about the son of the rich man from Pentapolis, the author uses expressions like 'the sanctuaries of our city', 'the Episcopal see' (§16), 'the whole city' (§17) and notes that the young man is a stranger in that city (§18). Also the young pagan boy who wished to see Christ was a Syrian who came to study in that city (§27). All these details add local colour and suggest, at least for the stories, a connection with Alexandria.

Looking for details in this homily that may inform us about the personality of the homilist, we find that he advises his listeners to abstain from intercourse with their wives for four days a week in addition to the public festivals (§12). He is apparently addressing a male audience and his aversion against sexual intercourse for most of the year could have a monastic background. It must be noted that the homilist's advice is part of a direct paraenetic address, not of one of his stories.

In his stories, the homilist of this first encomium shows familiarity with many aspects of ecclesiastical life. He knows about 'the pontifical mass' (§25), 'the evening service' (§26 and 34) and a particular type of deacons, 'the guardian deacon' (§27). He supports the authority of the clergy when emphasising that healing of illness is connected with confession to a

¹⁰ It was used by John of Nikiu, R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John*, London, 1916, p. 200.

¹¹ See, for example, *Corpus Papyrorum Raineri* IV, 77, 80 and 85.

¹² Discussed above, in the presentation of the manuscript and its language.

priest and that there is no forgiveness without confession (§35). Although these details come from the stories, they seem to express the knowledge and concern of their author who was most likely a man from inside the church.

Summing up the rather feeble evidence, we may cautiously suggest that at least the stories in this homily had an Alexandrian background. If this applies to the entire homily, which is far more uncertain, it is likely that this encomium was written originally in Greek, since Greek was the first language of Egypt and in particular Alexandria till well after the Arab conquest. It may have been composed somewhere between the sixth century and the time when Islamic rule became manifest also in the daily life of the Egyptians, around the eighth century. The homilist was most likely a clergy man, perhaps a monk.

On Murder and Greed and on Michael, the Archangel

From the very beginning of the second homily, *On Murder and Greed and on Michael, the Archangel*, there is a clear connection with the Pachomian *koinonia*. According to the title, the homily was even delivered 'in the presence of our holy father Apa Pachomius, the archimandrite, at the time he went north to visit the archbishop', i.e. Athanasius. This, however, may be a mistaken interpretation of the story of the murderous deacon of (§15-32), as read carelessly by the author of the probably secondary title. Yet there can be no doubt about the strong Pachomian interest of the homily.

The relations between Athanasius and Pachomian monasticism date back to shortly after the election of Athanasius as archbishop of Alexandria. Athanasius visited the Pachomian communities around the year 329-330. Pachomius and his monks welcomed him from the Nile to their monastery where he prayed in their cells.¹³ The relations continued after the death of Pachomius in the year 346. Athanasius wrote letters to

¹³ It is attested in both the First Greek and the Bohairic Lives of Pachomius, see A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, Kalamazoo, 1980, p. 51, 317.

Horsiesius, one of the successors of Pachomius, in which he praised Pachomius, shortly after the latter's death.¹⁴

The homily *On Murder and Greed and on Michael, the Archangel* elaborates the scant historical information. The way in which Pachomius is welcomed in Alexandria, the story of the murderous deacon (§16) echoes the reception of Athanasius himself in the south, as described in the Lives of Pachomius, quoted above. In fact, the largest part of the homily is devoted to two visions of Pachomius. One is about the murderous deacon (§15-32) and the other is about the punishment of Christians in Hell (§33-36; the White Monastery version of the homily even adds a third vision, about the fruitless tree). Both revelations depend on the gift of clairvoyance, for which Pachomius was called to account in a local synod in Latopolis (Esna).¹⁵ The story of the murderous deacon is aware of the fact that Pachomius was not a priest (§17). The same is attested in the Bohairic Life of Pachomius and it is known that Pachomius was, in general, against the ordination of monks as priests.¹⁶

Since the majority of the writings attributed to Pachomius and his successors, and in particular the *Vitae*, were composed several decades after the death of Pachomius, the various traditions recorded in the homily must be of a later date. The second vision attributed to Pachomius, about the punishment of Christians in Hell, was certainly influenced by the genre of the so-called 'Tours of Hell/Heaven', in particular the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Moreover, the dependence on the *Apocalypse of Paul* is not only evident in this vision but also in the paraenetic parts of the homily.¹⁷ This may suggest that the composition

¹⁴ CPG II, 2103-2104; Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II 4, p. 569-57. For the authenticity and dates of the Pachomian sources in general, see J. E. Goehring, "New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies," in B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring (eds.), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 237-238.

¹⁵ Attested in the First Greek Life, see F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii vitae graecae*, Bruxelles, 1932, p. 72-73; É. Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne au IV^e siècle: histoire de Saint Pakhôme et de ses communautés*, Paris, 1889, p. 591-595 (edition of the Arabic parallels).

¹⁶ A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, p. 51.

¹⁷ For more discussions, see my chapter on 'Literary Analysis'.

of the homily as a whole goes back to at least some time after the early fifth century.

The story of the murderous deacon (§15-32) uses the title ἀγρογστᾶριος (*augustalis*) to refer to the governor of Alexandria (§22). It is clear that this Augustalis is a Christian since he came to receive blessings from Pachomius and Athanasius asked his escort to seize the murderous deacon (§23). The title Augustalis refers to the highest administrative rank in Alexandria since Byzantine period. He had both military and civil powers. When the Arabs took over Alexandria, they left the civil power in the hands of the Alexandrian nobility but gave the military power to a Muslim official.¹⁸ According to J. Bruning, the title went out of use around the year 710.¹⁹ Again, in this homily we notice no Islamic influence of any kind. One may therefore suggest that this homily, or at least the story of the murderous deacon, was composed at some time between the fifth century and the early eighth century.

About places, the stories give conflicting information. The story of the murderous deacon (§15-32) again bears a clear Alexandrian stamp. All the nice and rich details of the story suggest familiarity with late-antique life in that city. On the other hand, the story about Athanasius' exile, his stay with an anonymous dyer and his vision of the archangel Michael (§43-49) is situated at Panopolis. The choice for Panopolis may reflect a local tradition, but it is also in line with the Pachomian interest of the homily. According to the Lives, Panopolis was an early centre of Pachomian monasticism.²⁰ It was also a lively centre of literary production, as was the nearby White Monastery. Summing up, I suggest that whereas the story of the murderous deacon may have been composed by an Alexandrian clergyman, the entire homily was put together in Upper Egypt, perhaps indeed in or around Panopolis, incorporating

¹⁸ J. Bruning, *The Rise of a Capital: On the Development of al-Fusṭāṭ's Relationship with its Hinterland, 18/639-132/750*, PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2014, p. 46-49, 165-170.

¹⁹ J. Bruning, *The Rise of a Capital*, p. 47.

²⁰ A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, p. 352-354.

material of various origins, including the Lives of Pachomius and the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Its composite character would also explain its meagre substance, apart from the stories and visions that are related. As for its milieu of origin, the strong Pachomian link would situate its redaction in a monastic environment.

On Luke 11: 5-9

In the third homily, *On Luke 11: 5-9*, we are facing a somewhat different situation as its various textual parts have quite obviously no strong interrelationship. Its first part consists of a well organised and well written piece of Biblical exegesis whereas the remainder is about different subjects that have neither anything to do with the text from the Gospel of Luke nor with each other. Embedded in this second part are two long stories, one about Pachomius and the rich man Phoibamon, the other about the heretic Carpocratius (Carpocrates) and the Council of Nicaea. To some elements in this patchwork, in an imprecise way dates can be assigned as a *terminus-post-quem*.

Other episodes from *On Luke 11: 5-9* allow some further precision. In his exegesis of the Gospel text, the author followed a traditional type of the Alexandrian exegesis.²¹ In his allegorical interpretation of the pericope, he interpreted the three loaves as prayer, tears and fasting. As was noted above, this interpretation is also found in the Bohairic *Catena*, where it is attributed to 'the Patriarch', probably Severus of Antioch, who was a popular author in Egypt from the middle of the sixth century onwards. If Severus would be the source of this interpretation, which of course is far from certain, the first part of our homily should be dated to sometime after the death of Severus of Antioch in 538.

The first of the longer stories, about Pachomius and the rich man Phoibamon (§22-29), is again aimed at exalting Pachomian monasticism, (see in particular §29), associating Athanasius with the Pachomian *koinonia* and Upper-Egypt. Through a miracle that happened in the

²¹ See above, my chapter 'Literary Analysis'.

church of one of the Pachomian monasteries, apparently at Tabennese, the merciless Phoibamon turned into a monk, then into a pious anchorite, to be finally ordained a bishop of Koptos in Upper Egypt. There he became renowned in the whole district for his humility and his charitable works (§27).

There was at least one bishop of the city of Koptos called Phoibamon.²² He attended the Council of Ephesus in 431. His presence in Ephesus is well attested in both the Greek²³ and the Coptic²⁴ acts of the council. In spite of the chronological difficulty, the Pachomian story could refer to this Phoibamon, which supposes that the fifth-century bishop would have become a figure in local hagiographic traditions. If this would be the case, the present story must have grown up well after his death in the fifth century.

The second story is about the heretic Carpocratius (Carpocrates) and the Council of Nicaea. The most interesting feature of this story is certainly the motif of the abbreviated pregnancy of the Virgin. The homilist relates that Carpocratius believed that Christ spent only seven months in the womb of his mother. As we saw above,²⁵ the debate about the short (i.e. unnatural) pregnancy of the Virgin Mary is attested also in Shenoute, who, in his homily *I am Amazed*, claimed that Nestorius (c. 368-450) said that Christ spent only three months in the womb of the Virgin. Now Shenoute's polemic is clearly an echo of the debates during the Council of Ephesus, which Shenoute himself attended.²⁶ This allows us to situate the source of the theme of the short pregnancy in the aftermath of the

²² K. A. Worp, "A Checklist of Bishops in Byzantine Egypt (A.D. 325-c. 750)." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100, 1994, p. 301.

²³ E. Gerland and V. Laurent, *Corpus notitiarum episcopatum Ecclesiae orientalis graecae*, Istanbul, 1936, Nr. 249.

²⁴ U. Bouriant, *Actes coptes du Concile d'Éphèse*, Paris, 1892, p. 39, 176; H. Munier, *Recueil des listes épiscopales de l'Église copte*, Le Caire, 1943, p. 14.

²⁵ See the chapter 'Literary Analysis' for more extensive discussions.

²⁶ É. Amélineau, *Oeuvres de Schenoudi: texte copte et traduction française*, vol. 1, Paris, 1907, p. 215, 387; J. Leipoldt, *Sinuthii archimandritae vita et opera omnia*, vol. 3, Paris, 1908, p. 218-219. Cf. J. van der Vliet, "Une vierge de Daphné. Notes sur un thème apocalyptique", *Byzantion* 64, 1995, p. 381-384.

Council of Ephesus (431). From then onwards, the theme became a popular cipher for dangerous heresy. This dates the whole story of Carpocratius to sometime well after the mid-fifth century.

The homily does not contain sufficient element to identify its author (or better, authors) or its original milieu. If my analysis of the Phoibamon story can be accepted, this story at least would originate from a monastic milieu in the very south of Egypt, where Koptos was an important centre in late antiquity. The traces of traditional Alexandrian exegesis (§1-21) and anthropology (§32) would make a Greek original likely for at least these parts of the text.

On Pentecost

The fourth homily edited in this dissertation, *On Pentecost*, is of an entirely different type. It is a pure piece of paraenesis. The homilist does not provide us with details that may help to set a date and a place for its composition. Storytelling is absent in *On Pentecost* and as a result also geographical and historical information is.

On Pentecost is certainly a well composed didactic homily that gives a strong sense of unity. Its title and epilogue (§79) may have been added later to fit the purpose of delivering the homily on the feast of Pentecost. The feast itself is not discussed at all in the homily, except in the last few sentences. The homilist addresses many kinds of people in *On Pentecost*, men and women, the poor and the rich as well as bishops, and he switches freely from one type of audience to another.

In the title, it is said that the homily was delivered in a church where many bishops were gathered. Indeed, a monastic background is totally absent in this homily. To the contrary, the last part of the homily (on behaviour in church) clearly addresses a secular upper-class audience, apart from a very brief warning to 'who is without wife and the virgin of God' (§78). Throughout this homily, we rather seem to be in a city than in a monastic milieu. And this upper-class urban environment, with its

theatres and social gatherings (§70), seems unaffected by the advent of Islam.

The homilist speaks about himself in first person singular (§37), without claiming that he is Athanasius. The name of Athanasius may have been inserted in the title, instead of a less prestigious name, only to give *On Pentecost* more authority. The homilist himself is certainly a clergyman, however, since he speaks in detail about how people should be seated in the church (§68) and he shows very good knowledge of Holy Scripture. As he addresses bishops, he may have been one himself.

As was discussed above, *On Pentecost* and the homily *On Riches and on St. Michael, the Archangel* attributed to Peter of Alexandria²⁷ have a striking number of features in common, in particular where they are addressing the theme of wealth and poverty. The two homilies even share rare expressions.²⁸ Birger Pearson and Tim Vivian, the editors of the homily *On Riches*, consider the possibility that the part on wealth and poverty, the core of the homily, could date back to fourth-century Alexandria and even to Archbishop Peter himself.²⁹ The evidence of the homily *On Pentecost*, calls this hypothesis into question. On the contrary of *On Riches*, the unity of the homily *On Pentecost* is clear. Do both homilies derive their discussion of riches and poverty from a common source or could *On Pentecost* have served as a model for (part of) *On Riches*? For lack of further information, it is difficult to answer these questions. Even if it is unlikely that *On Pentecost* can be attributed to a fourth-century archbishop of Alexandria, as Pearson and Vivian suppose for the core of *On Riches*, it is nevertheless a respectable piece of paraenetic preaching from a late-antique urban background. As such it was most likely composed originally in Greek.

²⁷ See B. Pearson et al., *Two Coptic Homilies Attributed to Saint Peter of Alexandria: On Riches, on the Epiphany*, Rome, 1993, p. 41-67 (Sahidic text), 68-93 (Bohairic text), 95-144 (English translation).

²⁸ For more details, see my chapter 'Literary Analysis'.

²⁹ B. Pearson et al., *Two Coptic Homilies*, p. 25-31.

General conclusions

The conclusions that can be drawn from the discussion above are both limited and hypothetical. They are merely based upon a close reading of the texts and hardly on external evidence, apart from the ninth-tenth century date of the manuscripts.

To be sure, Athanasius of Alexandria was not the author of any of the four homilies. In the first three homilies, the author or a later editor poses as Athanasius for the sake of propaganda for the personality of Athanasius himself and to give authority to a fanciful composition. In addition to being their pretended author, Athanasius is also an indirect theme, since part of the narrated events are connected with his fictional personage. In the fourth one, Athanasius is entirely absent. His name is added to the title merely to give the homily greater prestige and authority, probably in replacement of another, less famous name.

These first three homilies, in varying degrees, give a strong sense of disunity. For all we know, they could be late compositions, perhaps even from the period of Tito Orlandi's 'synaxarial systematization', incorporating earlier elements. Those earlier elements, exegetic, paraenetic or simply stories, could have different local backgrounds (Alexandria, Panopolis, Tabennesse, Koptos), but are basically used here to give a heroic Athanasius, the martyr of Orthodoxy and the advocate of monasticism, the chance to shine in the liturgy. In as far as a monastic milieu shaped the texts, this seems to be a Pachomian milieu (Pachomius plays a prominent role in the stories of *On Murder and Greed* and *On Luke 11: 5-9*). Saint Antony, whose biographer Athanasius was, is never even mentioned. Of the great theological controversies of the fourth century, only vague echoes remain, just enough to install in much later audiences a feeling of shared Orthodoxy.

As for the question of the original language of each of these four homilies, a Greek original can be postulated for each of them, since Greek was the first language of state and Church till well in the eighth

century, but not proven. Rare Greek loanwords occur in all of them, but these are no linguistically valid evidence. As suggested above, a Greek original is very likely for the homily *On Pentecost* and for parts of the other homilies, in particular *On Luke 11: 5-9* and the 'Alexandrian' stories in the others. Yet, here again, we lack external evidence that would allow us to decide the question in one way or another.

