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Athanasius of Alexandria

In this chapter, I will present a brief outline of the biography of Athanasius of Alexandria and refer to his most influential writings, following the Greek ecclesiastical historians and other sources. I will compare this with what the Coptic sources, but in particular the four homilies edited in this dissertation, tell about the personality and career of Athanasius.¹

Outlines of Athanasius' life and major writings.

Athanasius (ca. 296/298-2 May 373) was the twentieth archbishop of Alexandria.² His episcopate lasted forty-five years (c. 8 June 328-2 May 373) of which almost seventeen years were spent in five exiles. He was a Church Father, a prominent Christian theologian and a polemist against Arianism. He started to make his name during the first Council of Nicaea. This council was gathered by Constantine the Great in May-July 325 to discuss Arius' teachings. Athanasius was a young man, a deacon and personal secretary of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria at that time.

Three years later, Athanasius was elected archbishop of Alexandria, and he had to continue struggling with the successors of Arius. At the same time, he was involved in theological and political conflicts with the Emperor Constantine and then with Constantius II. Athanasius is one of the few Church Fathers that is respected and considered a holy man

¹ For a general perspective, see D. M. Gwynn, "Athanasius in Oriental Historical Tradition", in Ch. Kelly et al (eds.), *Unclassical Traditions*, vol. II: *Perspectives from East and West in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 43-58.

² The best bibliography on his life and writings in all languages is Ch. Butterweck, *Athanasius von Alexandrien: Bibliographie*, Opladen, 1995. More is found in J. Leemans, "Thirteen Years of Athanasius Research (1985-1998). A Survey Bibliography", *Sacris Erudiri* 39, 2000, p. 105-217. The best work on his life so far is M. Tetz, "Zur Biographie des Athanasius von Alexandrien", *ZKG* 70, 1979, p. 158-192. The most comprehensive work on Athanasius, including the works attributed to him in Coptic is: P. Gemeinhardt, *Athanasius Handbuch*, Tübingen, 2011. The most recent monograph on Athanasius is D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, Oxford, 2012.

throughout the history of the Church both in the East and in the West. In the East he is considered the founder of Orthodoxy and its defender against heresy. In the West, he is considered one of the doctors of the Catholic Church.³

About Athanasius' early life little is known. It seems that he was born in Alexandria from a rich family, which enabled him to receive an excellent secular education. This education is apparent in his quotations of Plato, Aristotle, Homer and others. He knew Greek very well and perhaps even Coptic.⁴ His knowledge of the Septuagint Bible was very deep, which enabled him to quote it from memory without the use of a written text. Athanasius' skills were remarkable from when he was a young man.⁵

The first major problem which Athanasius had to face was with the followers of Melitius of Lycopolis. According to a decision of the Council of Nicaea, these were supposed to be reunited with the church.⁶ Athanasius was accused of persecuting the Melitians and the Arians in the Council of Tyre in 335.⁷ Worse, Athanasius was accused of cutting the supply of grain which used to be transferred from Egypt to Rome. Eusebius of Nicomedia and other supporters of Arius deposed Athanasius. Constantine ordered Athanasius to be exiled to Trier.⁸

After the death of Constantine, his son Constantius II renewed the decree against Athanasius. He managed to flee to Rome to be under the protection of Constans, the emperor of the western part of the empire. In

³ D. Gwynn, *Athanasius*, p. 5-9.

⁴ According to L. Th. Lefort, "St. Athanase écrivain copte", in *Le Muséon* 46, 1933, p. 1-33.

⁵ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, II. 17, refers to Athanasius' fitness for the priesthood and to his talents in studying grammar, rhetorics and philosophy. It is almost sure that he was trained to use classical rhetorical techniques; see Ch. Stead, "Rhetorical Method in Athanasius," *Vigiliae Christianae* 30, 1976, p. 121-137.

⁶ A. Martin, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'église d'Égypte au VI^e siècle (328-373)*, Rome, 1996, p. 286-290.

⁷ Kh. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, London, 2004, p. 10-11.

⁸ T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, Cambridge, 1993, 23-27.

the meanwhile, George of Cappadocia was named bishop of Alexandria. Two more synods were held about Athanasius, in Rome in 341 and in Sardica in 343. Both recognized him as the legitimate bishop of Alexandria and Constans ordered Athanasius to return to his diocese in 341.⁹ He was welcomed by the majority of population of Alexandria as a national hero. Athanasius spent a decade in peace in which he found time to write and to solve many issues within the church. In 350, Constans died and Constantius II returned to his policy of favouring the Arians. An attempt to arrest Athanasius took place during a vigil service, but he managed to flee to Upper Egypt.

In 361 Athanasius returned to Alexandria after the death of both Constantius II and the bishop George. He invited the bishops to assemble in Alexandria for a council about the Orthodox belief on the Holy Trinity. In the next year, the Emperor Julian ordered him again to leave Alexandria, where he returned in 363, after Julian's death. Finally, he was exiled once more by the Emperor Valens just for a few months, after which the local authorities persuaded Valens to let him return to his see.¹⁰

Among his many writings, his two works *Against the Heathen*¹¹ and *The Incarnation of the Word of God*¹² stand out as classics of Orthodox theology, written early in his life before becoming a bishop.¹³ Here, Athanasius, in debate with pagan practices and beliefs, outlines the principle of redemption in Christ. He demonstrates how God created the world through his Word and how He entered the world in a human form

⁹ For details, see L. W. Barnard, *Studies in Athanasius' Apologia Secunda*, Bern, 1992, p. 75-82.

¹⁰ D. Gwynn, *Athanasius*, p. 49-53.

¹¹ CPG 2090; PG 25, 4-96; Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 4, p. 4-30; for a Greek text of both works, with facing English translation, see R. W. Thomson, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Oxford, 1971.

¹² CPG 2091; PG 25, 96-197; Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 4, p. 36-67; see the previous note.

¹³ For more discussions, see C. Stead, "Athanasius' Earliest Written Works", *JThS* 39, 1988, p. 76-91; A. M. Slusser, "Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione: Place and Date of Composition", *JThS* 37, 1986, p.114-115.

in order to restore humanity to its original nature.¹⁴ In his *Letter to Serapion*, Athanasius discussed the divinity of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Many works against the Arians are attributed to him, including the *Defence against the Arians*, *Orations against the Arians* and a *History of the Arians*.¹⁶ The number of works ascribed to him in various languages is very big and many of these are either of doubtful authenticity or inauthentic.¹⁷

Athanasius and the sources of his time.

From the fourth century till today, Athanasius is a controversial figure. His character, history and writings are the subject of discussion ever since the time of the early ecclesiastical historians. In his own writings, Athanasius presents himself as a persecuted shepherd who is fighting the betrayers of Christ for the sake of the Orthodox faith and the salvation of his flock.¹⁸ The defence of the full divinity of the Word is the main issue in his career and his writings.

The first known work about Athanasius was written by Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 239-390). In his 21st Oration, Gregory delivered a long eulogy of Athanasius in which a few biographical details are mentioned.¹⁹ Gregory says that Athanasius was born into a Christian family,²⁰ contradicting the story of being baptized by Alexander of Alexandria.²¹ Athanasius was taught philosophy and theology in Alexandria and he was the author of the *vita* of St. Antony. Gregory also

¹⁴ Kh. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, New York, 2005, p. 27-29.

¹⁵ CPG 2094; PG 26, 529-648.

¹⁶ CPG 2093, 2123 and 2127.

¹⁷ For the whole set of his writings, see CPG II, p. 12-60.

¹⁸ Festal letter XIII, 6; PG 26, p. 1447-1448.

¹⁹ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 21: 5*, CPG 3010. For the Coptic version of this oration, see T. Orlandi, "La traduzione copta dell'encomio di Atanasio di Gregorio Nazianzeno." *Le Muséon* 83, 1970, p. 351-366.

²⁰ Cf. Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, X. 15.

²¹ Cf. B. Evetts, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, PO I, Paris, 1907, p. 406-406.

praises Athanasius' knowledge of the Holy Scripture²² and refers to Athanasius as a hero of the Church who faced Arianism, not only in the verbal debate, but also when Arius' followers used violence against him. Gregory was the first to attribute an important role to Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea.²³ He depicts Athanasius as the canonical bishop of Alexandria, in spite of the fact that some local councils had condemned him.²⁴

The document known as *Historia Acephala*,²⁵ mostly dated to early 386, provides data for Athanasius' exiles and festal letters. The text provides a detailed chronology of the life of Athanasius, in particular for the years 346-373, on the basis of official documents. This document was one of the sources of the ecclesiastical histories of Sozomen and Theodoret.²⁶

In the beginning of the fourth century, Eusebius, known as the father of Church history, was the first to write a history of the Church since the beginning up to his own days. He succeeded in creating a standard scholarly work which was continued by the three famous historians Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret.²⁷ The three of them contributed to continuing the history of the Church from the point where Eusebius had stopped, the reign of Constantine, up to the first half of the fifth century. There are many points of overlap between these three historians and each has his own way of writing and his own interests. In all of them, Athanasius appears as a major figure in the Church of his time.

Socrates' Ecclesiastical History is the oldest. It was finished on 440 at Constantinople. It covers the years 306-439 and his main source is the

²² Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 21*. 6.

²³ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 21*. 14.

²⁴ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 21*. 22.

²⁵ Ph. Schaff, *NPNF*, II. 4, p. XII-XIII; *CPG* 2119.

²⁶ A. Martin, *Histoire "acéphale" et index syriaque des lettres festales d'Athanase d'Alexandrie*, Sources chrétiennes 317, Paris, 1985, p. 11-17.

²⁷ For an introduction to all of them, see G. F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, Macon, 1986.

Latin Church historian Rufinus of Aquileia.²⁸ The latter proved not always reliable, so Socrates later needed to revise his history to correct Rufinus' mistakes.

The work of Sozomen is spanning the years 323-425. It was written in Constantinople. Sozomen used Socrates as his source but he also used the original writings of Athanasius. The third book by Theodoret covers the years 324-429 and Socrates was his main source. Theodoret, unlike his predecessors, was a bishop, not a layman, thus he was involved in the theological debate, where he showed himself a follower of Athanasius.²⁹

These three historians rely on Athanasius' own writings as a reliable source. Much praise for Athanasius as a bishop is found throughout their writings. For example, when Athanasius was exiled, after being accused of mistreating the Meletians and the Arians during the Council of Tyre in 335, and restored to his throne in 337, he himself related the story in his *Apologia contra Arianos* (§87).³⁰ More or less the same version of the events is found in the histories of Socrates (II, 3), Sozomen (III, 2) and Theodoret (II,1). Through the centuries the importance of their histories became immense. They were and still are the major sources for what can be called the standard narrative of the Church in the fourth and the fifth centuries.³¹

²⁸ M. Vessey, "Jerome and Rufinus", in F. Young, L. Ayres and A. Louth (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 324-327.

²⁹ H. Wace and W. Piercy, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies*, London, 1911, p. 958-963.

³⁰ Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 4, p. 100-147; *CPG* 2123. H. G. Opitz, *Athanasius' Werke II*, Berlin, 1941, p. 87-168.

³¹ D. M. Gwynn, "Athanasius in Oriental Historical Tradition", in Ch. Kelly et al (eds.), *Unclassical Traditions*, vol. II: *Perspectives from East and West in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 46.

Egyptian sources

The specifically Egyptian historiographical tradition about Athanasius is preserved in two main sources. The first is known as the *History of the Church of Alexandria*³² which reached us in a very fragmentary state in Sahidic Coptic. The author and date of composition of the text are unknown. Some parts of it depend heavily on Eusebius' Church history. It found its way later into the famous Arabic *History of the Patriarchs*, edited in the early eleventh century.³³ The latter is partly composed with the help of various earlier Greek and Coptic sources, partly written directly in Arabic. The second source is the *Chronicle of John of Nikiu* from the seventh century. It was probably written in Greek or Coptic originally, but survives only in a late Ethiopic translation.³⁴

The childhood of Athanasius is represented in the *History of the Patriarchs* much different than in Socrates (II, 17) and Sozomen (X, 15). The *History of the Patriarchs* narrates that Athanasius was the son of a pagan family. His mother did her best to get him married, but Athanasius refused and dedicated himself to learning. His mother took him to Alexander of Alexandria who foretold her Athanasius' brilliant future. Thus he baptized both of them and helped Athanasius to learn the Holy Scriptures. The *History of the Patriarchs* attributes an important role to Athanasius during the Council of Nicaea and afterwards. After Constantine's death, so it says, Arius won his son Constantius over to his side. Constantius summoned Alexander to come to Constantinople to

³² T. Orlandi, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria*, Milan, 2 Vols., 1968-1970; D. Johnson, *Coptic Sources of the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, PhD Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1974; T. Orlandi, "The Coptic Ecclesiastical History: A Survey," in J. Goehring and J. Timbie (eds.), *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context*, Washington D.C., 2007, p. 3-24.

³³ For a discussion of suggested authors, see J. den Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Mansūr Ibn Mufarrig et l'historiographie copto-arabe: étude sur la composition de "l'histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie"*, Louvain, 1989; S. Moawad, "Coptic Historiography," in G. Gabra (ed.), *Coptic Civilization: Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Egypt*, Cairo, 2014, p. 11-13.

³⁴ English translation in R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, London, 1916.

accept Arius in the Church of Alexandria. Alexander accompanied Athanasius on his journey to Constantinople. According to the *History of the Patriarchs*, Alexander called Athanasius 'my tongue' and added that he was not able to speak when Athanasius was not beside him. The Arians noticed Athanasius' extraordinary gifts and paid money to the guards to prevent him of attending the meeting with the emperor. It then appeared that Alexander could not speak and he asked the king to admit Athanasius.³⁵

David Gwynn noticed that this episode is impossible chronologically, for Alexander died in 328 and Constantius succeeded his father in 337. Gwynn thinks that the reason for this intended mistake is to protect the reputation of Constantine the Great who was responsible for Arius' return from exile after 325. Constantine is seen in the *History of the Patriarchs* as the protector of Nicaea and venerated as a saint in the Coptic Church. Apparently, the author wanted to save his reputation among its audience.³⁶ Also John of Nikiu in his *Chronicle* (§77-78) is entirely positive about Constantine.

The Greek historians present a much more detailed and richer life of Athanasius than the Egyptian sources. The latter were composed for more local audiences. Detailed theological debates are missing in the Egyptian sources. While the Greek historians derived their knowledge from Athanasius' polemical and apologetic writings such as the *Historia Arianorum* (CPG 2127), the *Apologia contra Arianos* (CPG 2123), the *Apologia Constantinum* (CPG 2129) and the *Apologia de fuga* (CPG 2122), the Egyptian sources had a very limited interest in them and did not even collect Coptic translations of these works into corpora. Also the writings of Athanasius which survive in Coptic sources are either not attested in Greek or were ignored by the Greek ecclesiastical historians.³⁷

³⁵ Ch. F. Seybold, *Alexandrinische Patriarchengeschichte von S. Marcus bis Michael I 61-767: nach der ältesten 1266 geschriebenen Hamburger Handschrift*, Hamburg, 1912, p. 67.

³⁶ D. M. Gwynn, "Athanasius in Oriental Historical Tradition", p. 50.

³⁷ D. M. Gwynn, *Athanasius*, p. 54-55.

Yet, the Egyptian sources did not ignore the entire corpus of Athanasius' writings. The author of the *History of the Patriarchs* refers to the festal letters, the Life of Antony and a genuine work on virginity which are all preserved in Coptic.³⁸ Such writings highlight the pastoral side of Athanasius. The polemical details provided by the Greek historians were not a matter of interest for later Egyptian authors who mainly focused on presenting 'the founder of Orthodoxy' to their community as a good shepherd.

The Coptic corpus attributed to Athanasius.

In Coptic, a fairly large corpus of homilies is attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria.³⁹ Most of them are attested only in Coptic. It is certain that almost all of them are pseudepigraphic. For example, a homily on *Love and Discord*, attributed to Athanasius in its Coptic version,⁴⁰ is attributed to Basil the Great in its Greek version.⁴¹ The apocryphal *Testaments of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* are attributed to him in the Bohairic versions,⁴² but not in the Sahidic (CPG 2183).⁴³ The corpus of Coptic homilies attributed to Athanasius can be divided into two major parts, homilies to be read at a certain time of the liturgical year and homilies related to monasticism.

³⁸ Ch. F. Seybold, *Alexandrinische Patriarchengeschichte*, p. 64-65.

³⁹ T. Orlandi, *Elementi di lingua e letteratura copta: corso di lezioni universitarie*, Milan, 1970, p. 75-78.

⁴⁰ E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Homilies in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, London, 1910, 58-65 (text) and 204-211 (translation).

⁴¹ CPG 2929; PG 31, 1705-1714.

⁴² I. Guidi, "Il Testamento di Isacco e il Testamento di Giacobbe", *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Rome, 1900, p. 157-180.

⁴³ K. H. Kuhn, "The Sahidic Version of the Testament of Isaac," *JThS* 8, 1957, p. 225-239; "An English Translation of the Sahidic Version of the Testament of Isaac," *JThS* 18, 1967, p. 325-336.

Several exhortations for the Holy Week are attributed to him,⁴⁴ as well as homilies on the *Passion of the Lord*,⁴⁵ *Ascension*,⁴⁶ *Pentecost*,⁴⁷ as well as a single *Apocalypse*.⁴⁸ This group of texts presents Athanasius as a pastor and a good shepherd who is preaching his congregation at various moments in the liturgical year about various points of Christian ethics.

The second group of texts comprises a *Speech to the Monks*⁴⁹ and two *Letters to Orsisius*.⁵⁰ This group shows Athanasius as a supporter of monasticism and an ascetic himself.

Only three genuine works of Athanasius survive in Coptic: the *Festal Letters*,⁵¹ the *Life of Antony*⁵² and a *Letter to the Virgins*.⁵³ The selection of these works is not random. They fit the picture of Athanasius as a great and careful pastor. He insists to write to his people on every feast even during the years when he was exiled and tortured, totally dedicated to the sake of his people, not only in Alexandria but all over Egypt and Libya. At his time, monasticism started to gain its honourable stature in the Egyptian mentality. Athanasius, the hero of the Church, should fit in with this development. If he was not a monk himself, he should appear as a

⁴⁴ O. H. E. Burmester, "The Homilies or Exhortations of the Holy Week Lectionary", *Le Muséon* 45, 1932, p. 44-48, 65-67.

⁴⁵ J. B. Bernardin, "A Coptic Sermon attributed to St. Athanasius", *JThS* 38, 1937, p. 113-129.

⁴⁶ Still unpublished, see *CPG* 2198.

⁴⁷ Edited as the fourth homily in this dissertation.

⁴⁸ T. Orlandi, *Elementi*, p. 77.

⁴⁹ A. van Lantschoot, "Une allocution à des moines en visite chez S. Athanase," *Angelicum* 20, 1943, p. 249-253.

⁵⁰ Ph. Schaff, *NPNF*, II: 4, p. 569-570.

⁵¹ L. Th. Lefort, *S. Athanase. Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*, CSCO 150 (text) and CSCO 151 (translation), Louvain, 1955.

⁵² G. Garitte, *S. Antonii Vitae versio sahidica*, CSCO 117 (text) and 118 (translation), Louvain, 1949.

⁵³ The original Greek text is missing, yet David Brakke presented convincing evidence for its authenticity; see D. Brakke, "The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana," *Orientalia* 63, 1994, p. 19-25. Shenoute of Atripe quoted it in one of his homilies known as A17; see L. Th. Lefort (ed.), *S. Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*, CSCO 150-151, Louvain, 1955, vol. 1, p. 73-99 (text); 106-108 (quotation by Shenoute); vol. 2, p. 55-80 (translation).

supporter of monasticism. As the archbishop of Alexandria, he took the trouble to write the *Life of Antony*, the first hermit. Antony started to gather fame at that time and his followers all over Egypt were going to play an important role in the history of Egyptian Christianity and Christianity in general. Through these works, Athanasius appears as part of the monastic movement.

A few works *about* Athanasius, preserved in Coptic, deserve to be mentioned here. There are some encomiums, written in praise of Athanasius, edited by Tito Orlandi. One of these connects him to Isauria in Asia Minor, the region mentioned in the title of the third homily edited in the current work, *On Luke 11: 5-9*.⁵⁴ Two more encomiums on Athanasius, from the Hamuli find, are attributed to Constantine of Asyut, who was in office around the year 600. Constantine was a well educated bishop and several texts in both Coptic and Arabic are attributed to him.⁵⁵ In his first encomium on Athanasius, Constantine develops the image of Athanasius as a miracle worker. These miracles happen to him during the time of his exiles, as a consolation from above.⁵⁶ In the second encomium, Constantine praises Athanasius as a hero who faces all kinds of oppression and persecution.⁵⁷

Many *Lives of Athanasius* have reached us in Arabic. G. Graf referred to one attributed to Amphilochius of Iconium⁵⁸ and to another one translated from Arabic into Latin by E. Renaudot.⁵⁹ Both lives have

⁵⁴ T. Orlandi, *Testi copti: 1. Encomio di Atanasio, 2. Vita di Atanasio*, Milan, 1968, p. 27-28 (edition of Sahidic text), 61-62 (Italian translation).

⁵⁵ For more about Constantine of Asyut, see R-G. Coquin, "Saint Constantin, évêque d'Asyūt!", *Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea* 16, 1981, p. 151-170.

⁵⁶ T. Orlandi, *Constantini episcopi urbis Siout: encomia in Athanasium duo*, CSCO 349-350, Louvain, 1974, vol. 1, p. 14-15 (text), vol. 2, p. 10 (translation).

⁵⁷ T. Orlandi, *Constantini episcopi urbis Siout*, vol. 1, p. 24, 28 (text), vol. 2, p. 15, 22 (translation).

⁵⁸ G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, vol. 1, Vatican City, 1944, p. 315.

⁵⁹ PG 25, 216-251.

Syriac origins.⁶⁰ Their authors depended on the works of the Greek historians, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, which have been translated into Syriac.⁶¹ This group of Lives of Athanasius show many parallels with the Life of Athanasius preserved in the *History of the Patriarchs*.

A little known Arabic Life of Athanasius of Alexandria was published recently by Wadi Awad.⁶² This life is known from several manuscripts kept at St. Antony Monastery, St. Bishoi Monastery and the Franciscan Cultural Centre in Cairo. It contains many details unattested in any other life of Athanasius. His original name is said to be Herma, which was changed after baptism into Athanasius. Likewise, his mother's name was Vidalos first and after her baptism she became Sofia. This life tells how Athanasius was able to perform miracles already when he was very young, shortly after his baptism. According to this source, an Arian called Lucias opposed the ordination of Athanasius. Therefore, a council was held in Rome to condemn the man and support Athanasius' consecration. It also describes one of Athanasius' exiles to Upper Egypt, where he hid in Akhmim and destroyed one of the pagan temples just by the touch of his finger. Athanasius during a next exile left to Thebes where he met Pachomius.

In general, this Arabic life belongs to the genre of the encomium, but it is so long that it would need three hours to be read. It is characterised by the huge number of miracles performed by Athanasius, ever since he became a Christian until his death. By an anachronism which is common in Arabic lives of saints, a very long dialogue between Athanasius and St. Peter, the apostle, is reported, which took place when the first was exiled in Rome. This life gives a good picture of Athanasius according to the Coptic mentality: the man, who is a good shepherd and an important

⁶⁰ A. Vööbus, "Entdeckung einer unbekanntenen Biographie des Athanasius von Alexandrien", *BZ* 71, 1978, p. 36-40.

⁶¹ M. J. Hollerich, "The Sources of ps.-Amphilochius' Vita Athanasii Syriaca (Ms. *Mard. Orth.* 269)", *OCA* 236, 1988, p. 273-283.

⁶² W. Awad, "St. Athanasius' Biography as Preserved in an Unknown Arabic Recension," *Priest's Friend* 4, 1996, p. 264-271 (in Arabic).

figure for monasticism, is also a miracle worker, able to destroy a complete temple with one finger, whom an angel helps to leave for Rome in seconds. Such kind of miraculous stories are common in the Copto-Arabic tradition.

Another Athanasius

It is time now to return to the homilies that are the subject of this dissertation. In three of these four homilies, Athanasius is indirectly the subject of the texts purportedly pronounced by himself. Below I will briefly discuss the most important aspects of his personality and his career as they are depicted in the three homilies in order to see how they fit into the broad stream of historical or pseudo-historical sources briefly discussed above. To do so, I will focus on four aspects of his personality or his career which play a more or less important role in the homilies. I am aware that in each case many more intertextual relationships than the ones mentioned here could be quoted, but this is rather a task for future research.⁶³

The Council of Nicaea (325)

Although Gregory of Nazianzus, followed by later historians, attributed an important role to Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea,⁶⁴ this is not much in evidence in our homilies. Only the homily *On Luke 11: 5-9*, (§34-39,) presents Athanasius as an eyewitness of the council of Nicaea, but in a modest role. Athanasius is made to say: "I followed my holy father Apa Alexander, the archbishop, as I was a deacon at that time" (§34). The protagonists of the story are not Athanasius, but Bishop Alexander (of Constantinople or of Alexandria? - the text is ambiguous

⁶³ See, provisionally, I. Saweros, "The Perception of St. Athanasius of Alexandria in Later Coptic Literature", in G. Gabra and H. Takla (eds.), *Christianity and Monasticism in Beni Souef, Giza and the Delta* (forthcoming).

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21*, 14.

as both are mentioned) and a heretic called Carpocrates.⁶⁵ Arius is not even mentioned and the whole council seems to revolve around the question of the length of the pregnancy of the Holy Virgin. The theological dispute is settled by divine intervention, by the miracle of the burning cloaks, and then the bishops are sent home. As I argued above, the dispute may contain a remote echo of the Council of Ephesus of 431 and the whole story merely serves to assure the audience that by listening to the homilist they are as a community on the safe side of the borderline between Orthodoxy and heresy.

Athanasius and the Arian George.

At various places in the three homilies, Athanasius describes himself as a victim of Arian persecution. In the encomium *On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels*, he says in a general way: "I, O my beloved sons, I had much to suffer from the schismatic Arians, yet I prayed to God and He heard me and saved me from all my trials" (§32). In the homily, *On Murder and Greed and on Michael, the Archangel*, he describes how he had to hide in Panopolis "at the time that the emperor pursued me and I was fleeing from place to place because of the accursed Arians" (§44). Only after three years, he is allowed to return to Alexandria as the result of the intercession of the archangel Michael, who appears to him in a vision (§48-49). The exile in Panopolis/Akhmim is also mentioned, with further miraculous details, in an Arabic Life of Athanasius of Alexandria, cited above.⁶⁶

The homily *On Luke 11: 5-9*, (§22), refers in general terms to "what happened to me through the envy of the sons of the devil, the filthy Arians". This time, he fled to the south, to the Theban region, where he met Pachomius at Tabennesse (see below).

⁶⁵ About this person and for further discussion of this episode, see the chapter 'Literary analysis' above.

⁶⁶ W. Awad, "St. Athanasius' Biography", p. 270-271.

In the encomium *On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels*, the author focuses on the black character the Arian George in (§13-15), but only to relate his violent death. George was, of course, a real historical figure. In his *Epistula encyclica*, Athanasius describes his outrageous behaviour in Alexandria in detail.⁶⁷ Athanasius wrote the *Epistula encyclica* for the clergy of both East and West to explain his personal situation as the true bishop of Alexandria and to proclaim his legitimacy.⁶⁸ Judging from the contents of the letter and the episodes mentioned in it, one can imagine how popular the letter was. Consequently, George was defamed and his name was used through the ages to evoke a striking picture of Arian violence.

The story of George can be found in other treatises of Athanasius as well. For instance in his *Historia Arianorum*,⁶⁹ Athanasius accused Constantius of providing George with a military force (§10). Theodoret did not miss the story in his ecclesiastical history and called George "the wolf that was appointed over Alexandria".⁷⁰ He thus confirmed what Athanasius narrated, saying that "George surpassed the wild beasts in his deeds".

The episode found an echo in the Coptic historical sources. From the *History of the church of Alexandria* we may quote: "After Arius had died in this terrible manner, the emperor (Constantius) did not desist from his madness, for he had the followers of Arius, who were worse than him, namely George and Loukios and others with them. These kept attacking the Church of Alexandria. George gave lots of money to the emperor and the latter gave him five-hundred soldiers so that they would establish him over the Church of Alexandria, for he wanted to kill Athanasius. But God snatched him away from their midst".⁷¹ The same source tells how

⁶⁷ CPG 2124; PG 25, p. 221-40; Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 4, p. 92-96; H. G. Opitz, *Athanasius' Werke*, vol. II, p. 46-67.

⁶⁸ D. M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'*, Oxford, 2007, p. 51.

⁶⁹ CPG 2127; PG 25, p. 696-796; Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 4, p. 270-302; H. G. Opitz, *Athanasius' Werke*, vol. II, p. 183-230.

⁷⁰ Ph. Schaff, *NPNF* II. 3, p. 67.

⁷¹ T. Orlandi, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria*, vol. 1, Milan, 1967, p. 30.

George sent messengers to spread his own faith all over Egypt and how the followers of Athanasius had to celebrate the Holy Mass in caves and fields until the end of the persecutions.⁷² Only after six years, Athanasius returned and George was expelled from the Alexandrian church.⁷³ The same story was later translated into Arabic as part of Athanasius' biography in the famous *History of Patriarchs of Alexandria*.⁷⁴

The brief passage in the encomium *On Michael and Gabriel, the Archangels*, focuses on the supernatural death of George (§13-15). Only (§13) mentions briefly his ideas, as it quotes him saying: "If God had not allowed these demons to fight against us, we all together would become righteous". Here, instead of defending typically Arian ideas, George is rather denying human *autexousia* facing the demons, which was a theme in monastic demonology,⁷⁵ but not - as far as I know - in the debate about Arianism. George is contradicted by a *protector*, a member of the guard (of the governor of Alexandria?), and has himself protected by "the standard-bearers (*signophoroi*)".⁷⁶ This rather obscure episode may contain a reminiscence of the military support that George enjoyed, according to the sources quoted above, but the focus is on his violent death which occurred in the night immediately after, on the eve of the feast of Saint Michael, celebrated on the twelfth of each month. After a nocturnal dispute with the devil, George is killed by angels Michael and Gabriel, who thus execute "the judgment of God" (§15; compare §25, where Athanasius says: "at the time God took revenge on George the Arian, I returned to Alexandria").

The story about the death of George the Arian has only remotely to do with the historical George or with the Arian conflict. It attacks in passing

⁷² T.Orlandi, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria*, vol. 1, p. 30-32.

⁷³ T.Orlandi, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria*, vol. 1, p. 32.

⁷⁴ C. F. Seybold, *Severus ben el-Moqaffa: Historia patriarcharum Alexandrinorum*, vol. I:1, (CSCO 25), Louvain, 1905, p. 69.

⁷⁵ See J. van der Vliet, "Chenouté et les démons", in M. Rassart-Debergh and J. Ries (eds.), *Actes du IVe congrès copte*, Louvain, 1992, vol. 2, p. 41-49.

⁷⁶ For the military titles, see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961, 1189b and 1232b.

wrong ideas about the power of the demons, who - according to George - were able to prevent man from being righteous. Its main interest, however, is in exalting the archangels Michael and Gabriel and their power to punish the sinner.

The Isaurians.

The homily *On Luke 11: 5-9* deals with various unrelated subjects.⁷⁷ These are held together by a fictitious device that is introduced in the title of the homily, which - it says - was delivered "at the time when the clergy and the great of the land of Isauria came to him and asked him: 'Let us hear from you a word of consolation, for we are thirst after your sweet words (etc.)'".

Quite likely, it was the final editor of the homily who invented the visit of the Isaurians to Athanasius. Yet Isauria did play a role in Athanasius' long career. In the year 359, dual councils were held in Seleucia in the region of Isauria in Asia Minor for the eastern bishops and in Ariminum in Italy for the western ones. The councils were convened at the orders of Emperor Constantius and the aim was to agree upon a single creed for the universal Church. The result was a big divide and both of the councils reached opposing conclusions.⁷⁸ Athanasius was unable to attend either of the councils. In response, he wrote his book *De Synodis* shortly after the end of the councils, in which he criticised the whole set-up and defended the Nicene creed.⁷⁹ It is not attested in any historical source that people from Isauria ever came to visit Athanasius. Only much later, fictitious stories were compiled around this episode, for example in the Sahidic *Encomium on Athanasius*, edited by Tito Orlandi, which represents Isauria as a place where Athanasius was exiled, trying to

⁷⁷ See the chapter 'Literary Analysis' above.

⁷⁸ D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, p. 14-15; T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, London, 1993, p. 144-148, 161-162.

⁷⁹ D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, p. 15. For *De Synodis*, see *CPG II*, 2128.

convert its inhabitants to Christianity.⁸⁰ The final editor of *On Luke 11: 5-9* must have known such traditions, as is shown by the somewhat cryptic eulogy that Athanasius addresses to his Isaurian guests (§1-2). He used them for two purposes: first, to embed the homily in the career of the historical Athanasius and present him as a good shepherd, even of the people of Isauria, and, second, to use the questions of the Isaurian clergy to give the homily a semblance of unity.

Saint Athanasius and Saint Pachomius

As was observed earlier, Pachomius plays a prominent role in the homilies *On Murder and Greed* and *On Luke 11: 5-9*. Both homilies contain elaborate stories that record meetings between Athanasius and "the blessed man and prophet Pachomius, the archimandrite of Tabennese" (*On Luke 11: 5-9*, §22). The meetings take place both in Alexandria and in Tabennese. The stories highlight the friendship between the two men and their mutual respect as well as Pachomius' extraordinary gift of clairvoyance. Similar stories occur also in other Coptic homilies.⁸¹ In the historical sources about Athanasius no meeting between Athanasius and Pachomius is ever mentioned.

The stories clearly build upon the well known fact of Athanasius' vivid and active interest in Egyptian monasticism. Contacts between Athanasius and the monastic communities of Upper Egypt are attested by the Pachomian lives and other sources including genuine works of Athanasius himself.⁸² Monks of these communities travelled to Alexandria for various purposes, as is shown by the Bohairic Life (69, 124) and the First Greek Life (111, 120).

⁸⁰ T. Orlandi, *Testi copti: 1. Encomio di Atanasio, 2. Vita di Atanasio*, Milano, 1968, p. 27-28 (Sahidic text), 61-62 (Italian translation).

⁸¹ For an example, see J. van der Vliet, "S. Pachome et S. Athanase: un entretien apocryphe", *AB* 110, 1992, p. 21-27.

⁸² L. W. Barnard, "Athanasius and the Pachomians," *Studia Patristica* 32, 1997, p. 5-11.

Interestingly, the hagiographical texts related to Pachomius know only about a meeting between Athanasius and Pachomius that did *not* take place. The Bohairic Life⁸³ and the First Greek Life⁸⁴ are the only texts to mention Athanasius. Both lives present the narrative of a journey to Upper Egypt, undertaken by Athanasius directly after his ordination as archbishop of Alexandria (c. 328-330). The Bohairic Life tells a longer story as compared to the Greek. The narrative starts by describing the great importance of the visit of the archbishop to Upper Egypt and how he is welcomed by an escort of bishops and a large number of deacons and monks who surround him and chant psalms in front of him until he reaches their monastery and prays in their assembly and in the cells, (Bohairic Life 28, First Greek Life 30). The author of the story about the murderous deacon in the homily on *Murder and Greed and on Michael, the Archangel* may have known this description, for - as I observed earlier - his description of the reception of Pachomius in Alexandria in (§15) is very much alike. Then Apa Sarapion, the bishop of Dendera, approaches Athanasius, praises Pachomius in his presence and asks the archbishop to ordain him a priest to serve the monastery and the monks. When Pachomius hears this, he runs away and hides. Athanasius notices that Pachomius has disappeared and then turns to the young monks and praises Pachomius humbly by saying: "If by God's will, we come back to you, may we deserve to see your honourable piety".⁸⁵ The stories in our homilies fill in the void left by the humble remark of Athanasius.

General conclusions

Athanasius of Alexandria was and still is a very controversial historical figure. His life and works were known and studied during his lifetime as today. Authentic information about his life is to be found in his own

⁸³ L. Th. Lefort, *S. Pachomii vita bohairice scripta*, 2 vols., (CSCO 89, 107), Louvain, 1925-1952, vol. 1, p. 28-30.

⁸⁴ F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii vitae graecae*, Subsidia hagiographica 19, Bruxelles, 1932, p. 72-73.

⁸⁵ A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1: *The Life of Saint Pachomius and his Disciples*, Kalamazoo, 1980, p. 51-52.

works as well as in the Greek ecclesiastical histories. It is clear that the four Coptic homilies edited in this dissertation, adopt a different image of Athanasius. They do so intentionally, in a period in the history of Egyptian Christianity when Athanasius the theologian was not in demand anymore. Instead of the well educated theologian, we have the narrator of miraculous stories. Instead of the strong Athanasius who fought against the Arianism, we have the persecuted Athanasius, a martyr of Orthodoxy. Memories of councils and heretics are distorted so as to make them hardly recognizable.

As most of the literature preserved in Coptic was produced and reproduced in monastic milieus, the relationship between Athanasius and monasticism, in particular Pachomian monasticism is further developed. The authors made him a very close friend of Pachomius, whom he probably never met. For their picture of Athanasius, they may have started from the same Athanasius as narrated by the Greek historians, a towering figure from the past, yet in the end they produced 'another Athanasius'.