

EDITING COPTIC LITERATURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A REJOINDER

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In the last two issues of this journal, Matthias Müller used his reviews of recent text editions as a platform for some general reflections on current editorial practices in the domain of Coptic literature.¹ As his remarks were explicitly meant to be a “Diskussionsbeitrag”, an incentive to discussion, he will not be offended when I take up the gauntlet. My urge to do so is the same as his: a sense of dissatisfaction with current practices. Editions of Coptic literary texts are supposed to open them up to a modern readership, including students of patristics or ancient history, for whom Coptic is an important subject. A series such as *Sources chrétiennes* fulfills this task in an exemplary way for Greek and Latin patristic literature. Coptic sources are no less relevant and worthwhile as a field of study than similar Greek ones, yet they are till today often edited in a way that seriously limits their impact. This fact invites us to rethink our editorial habits critically.

The following brief rejoinder is not a point-by-point discussion of Müller’s reflections. Instead, it starts from general principles, most of them well known, concerning the relationship between text and manuscript. From there, I move on to a number of practical recommendations, geared towards optimal disclosure and ease of consultation. My argument inevitably has a slight polemical slant, but is hopefully free from any personal bias. It certainly nowhere aims to detract from the merits of the admirable work done by so many colleagues in past and present.

Why Text Editions?

Living in a century of digital miracles, we are entitled to dream of a time when all manuscript collections have made their treasures accessible online. In a near future, we may be able to leaf through a manuscript at our

¹ First in German, Müller, “Editionsphilologische Überlegungen” in part. 166-167; then in English, Müller, “Coptic Text Editions” 335-337.

desk at home as comfortably as if we were sitting in the reading room of a library. So why do we need text editions at all? The texts will soon be available to us exactly as they were written by the Coptic scribes some thousand or fifteen-hundred years ago. What more could we wish?

The answer is provided by the traditional philological method and is as valid now as it was in the past.² Its point of departure is the basic assumption that text and manuscript are two different things. In the best Platonic tradition, a manuscript is the tangible materialization of a more abstract entity, to wit, the text as it was once conceived by its author. It is the task of the editor to make this text accessible to a modern audience in a form that comes as close as possible to the author's original. Textual criticism allows the editor to reconstruct the development of the text over time and, in a final instance, the original work, the "Urtext", as intended by its author. Materiality studies and New Philology have in recent years come to enrich this traditional approach, but by no means invalidate it as the basis of all sound philological work.³ However interesting manuscripts may be as artifacts, the reader of a text edition will as a rule be primarily interested in what Plato taught or Shenoute preached, rather than in the scribal errors of the medieval monks who copied their works. The editor has a double responsibility here, towards the ancient author and towards the modern reader.

Such a position, as an in-between, is never easy. Readers may have different needs and expectations. More importantly, the concepts of "author" and "Urtext" are inherently problematic. We may assume (or imagine) that there is an authorial voice behind the surviving texts of Plato and Shenoute and that a text-critical effort allows us to get closer to the *vox viva* of these masters. But much of the literature preserved in Coptic had anonymous or pseudonymous authors and was subject to considerable redactional revision, in addition to the normal incidents of transmission. As a result, Coptic hagiographical texts, for instance, usually lack a stable form. Textual engineering altered the text over time.⁴ In addition, in the

² The classic reference is Maas, *Textual Criticism*. I have been much inspired by the thoughtful and lucid essay by Waszink, "De filologische methode" (in Dutch). Jan Hendrik Waszink (1908-1990) was a prominent patristic scholar, one of the founders of the journal *Vigiliae Christianae*.

³ For a balanced discussion of traditional textual criticism and New Philology in the study of ancient texts, see Klooster, "New Philology."

⁴ To describe this phenomenon, the term "textual fluidity" recently became popular; see for instance Lundhaug & Lied, "Studying Snapshots" 9-10. In my opinion, the term is infelicitous. It is suggestive of a property inherent to the texts themselves (a mechanical "growth") and tends to gloss over the agency of ancient and medieval scribes and redactors.

case of Coptic, diverging versions may reflect different translations from a Greek-language original. Here, traditional textual criticism does not seem to work.

The dilemma created by unstable textual forms is not easily solved. The history of an “engineered” text can only be very imperfectly captured in a critical apparatus.⁵ The alternative, a side-by-side presentation of all forms of the text, is technically and esthetically, but also conceptually unattractive. It leaves the text-critical work to the readers, who are faced with a blurred picture of which they somehow have to make sense themselves. Moreover, the fact that multiple redactions of a text exist does not make text-critical questions redundant. Precisely the way in which a text developed over time helps us to define what makes up the core of that text and assures its identity as a distinct composition. It is in the final instance the wisdom of the individual editor to show how and why a specific text was preserved and adapted to the needs of later generations.

From Manuscript to Text

For a reconstruction of the vicissitudes of a text over time, we are dependent on its manuscript transmission. The manuscript assures our access to the ancient text. Yet it bears the text, but is not itself the text. Hence, the photographic reproduction of a manuscript is not a text edition. Editing a text is an active intervention from the part of the editor. As most interventions, the editor’s has a violent side. It divorces the more abstract entity of the text from its material bearer. The manuscript as an artifact has a story of its own to tell, about the history of a text, but also about its social and cultural function, for instance — in the case of many Coptic literary works — in a liturgical setting. It can be fruitfully studied from various angles, codicological, paleographical, art-historical and so on, but editing a text is something fundamentally different from publishing a manuscript.

Editing a text implies a choice for an approach that focuses on the text as distinct from its bearer or bearers. It does so, as we saw above, with the clear aim of making a particular “ideal” text available to a modern audience. Editors of a text should have a precise idea of the nature and

For the more attractive concept of “textual engineering”, coined by Ewa D. Zakrzewska after the model of “linguistic engineering”, see Dijkstra & van der Vliet, “Earliest Manuscript” 385-388.

⁵ Cf. Müller, “Editionsphilologische Überlegungen” 166. Possibly, digital editions may provide a solution, but pursuing this option is beyond my expertise.

purpose of their intervention. An editor, like a surgeon, can be either too violent or too cautious. The second error is no less harmful than the first. The first produces unreliable or misleading editions; the second, hermetic editions. An extreme example of such a hermetic edition is Chassinat's publication of the Shenoute codex Ifao copte 1, of 1911.⁶ Émile Chassinat (1868-1948) transcribed the text as he found it in the manuscript in the two columns of its pages with all diacritical signs reproduced as far as possible, with its scarce word separation and without a translation. With all respect due to Chassinat's conscientious work, it goes without saying that this is not by any standards an edition of the text. A photographic reproduction of the complete manuscript would have done the job far better, as Chassinat himself was the first to admit.⁷

Publications like Chassinat's fail to observe the fundamental distinction between text and manuscript and consequently do justice to neither. They present an opaque text that nowhere helps the reader in understanding the intentions of the author. At the same time, printed in black-and-white in a standard letter font, they can hardly claim to offer a satisfactory basis for the study of the manuscript as a material object. Regrettably, this lack of conceptual clarity has profoundly shaped current editorial practices in Coptic philology. Even when publishing a text from a single manuscript, an editor needs to decide whether he or she will be editing a text or a manuscript. Failure to confront this choice has produced far too often hermetic editions that seem to be destined for the initiate and accumulate obstacles for a wider readership. The potential users of Coptic text editions are still today faced with so-called semi-diplomatic editions that may not even mark wordbreaks by hyphens or resolve abbreviations. As was argued above, the editor of a text has a double responsibility, to the ancient author as well as the modern reader.

All this is not to say that no attention should be paid to the manuscript. A manuscript is much more than the bearer of a text. It contains vital information about the scribal world of copyists and clients, their way of perceiving the text and, not least, the evolution of the language and form of the text. One may wonder, however, whether the edition of a text always offers the best medium for the study of a manuscript in all its aspects.⁸

⁶ Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*; the manuscript is Emmel's codex XH; see Emmel, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus* 1: 244-249; 465-467. Even Müller, "Coptic Text Editions" 336, underlines the disadvantages of Chassinat's editorial method.

⁷ Chassinat, *Quatrième livre* 6.

⁸ Thus, punctuation and the rise of clause and word-group separation are best studied on the level of scriptoria, such as those of Esna or Touton.

New Philology may have changed and enriched our perception of the text as an evolving entity, yet it does not do away with the notion of text.⁹

From Text to Reader

The double responsibility of the editor of a text, as distinct from a manuscript, dictates several practical decisions. What finally a text edition wants to achieve is that the text in question can be read in its proper, presumably original form and understood as a witness to the literary and intellectual culture that produced it, by those who have an interest in that culture. It is the editor's task to make the author's text accessible not merely technically, but also conceptually. Therefore, maximum disclosure and easy processing should be key-values in any edition, no less than reliability. Not only the translation, preferably printed facing the Coptic text, but also the presentation of the text itself in chapters and paragraphs should show how the editor understands the text. The editor owes this to both the ancient author and his modern readers.

Instead, Coptic editors overcautiously tend to cling to the semi-diplomatic format, which mimics the page layout and the punctuation of the manuscript. This procedure may be justified when one wants to edit a manuscript, in itself a perfectly legitimate endeavor, but it is definitely not when one wants to edit a text. Moreover, as was argued above, it offers only a poor surrogate for a set of good photos. Adopting the semi-diplomatic format is obviously defensible for fragmentary or ruinous text-bearers, when the provisional publication of a manuscript serves as a tool for the future reconstruction of a text or a codex. As is well known, in the study of Coptic literary sources we are frequently dealing with dispersed and incomplete manuscripts or dependent on a single, more or less damaged copy. Yet claiming a kind of special status for Coptic literary works on the basis of the fragmentary state of (part of) the documentation is about the worst thing we can do. It isolates our wonderful discipline from the wider landscape of early-Christian studies.

It cannot be emphasized enough that a so-called semi-diplomatic text edition is a *pis aller*. Unless demanded by the state of the manuscript, it simply suggests that the editor shies away from one of his or her core tasks. It is to be regretted that some of the most widely used editions of the Nag

⁹ Also the ancients had a notion of text as such, as is argued by Klooster, "New Philology" 245-260, for the work of Homer and Sappho. For Coptic texts, paratextual elements, such as titles, colophons and marginal corrections, amply attest to such a consciousness.

Hammadi texts adhere to the semi-diplomatic format, setting a standard that does not merit that status. Instead, following the example of what is current in the edition of Greek works of literature, Coptic editions should offer a text parsed in words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and numbered chapters, using a modern punctuation that clearly shows the text's structure and intentions. Rendering a manuscript's page layout, its often haphazard punctuation and capitalization and its abbreviations is in no way a service to the reader who is looking for a clear and well-presented text. The word-group or clause division, the punctuation system and the accents of the manuscripts all demand the attention of the editor, as they are an important part of the history of the text. Yet, unless the manuscript happens to be an author's autograph, reproducing them in a critical edition reflects an incorrect understanding of the relationship between text and manuscript. Once again, manuscript is not text.

The same criteria of clarity and legibility should govern the system of word separation. The sensible guidelines advocated by Walter C. Till (1894-1963) deserve to be universally followed, which is regrettably not yet the case. Till had the undeniable merit of at least reflecting on the matter, even though in my opinion his proposals are still slightly too conservative. The most important thing here is again to realize what the purpose of any modern word separation is. It is a practical means to allow easy processing of the text by a reader who is used to modern ways of parsing a text during silent reading. It is not, for instance, a means to illustrate theories about what constitutes a prosodic word in Coptic.¹⁰

Still widespread habits, such as the refusal to introduce a modern punctuation system or spell out abbreviated *nomina sacra*, are unnecessarily throwing up fences for the non-initiate. The same holds for practices concerned with indexation. One wonders what colonial prejudice is at the roots of the separate or even exclusive indexing of Greek loanwords in Coptic texts. As a temporary concession to the lack of proper lexicographical tools, this habit may be tolerated, but it will hopefully soon become obsolete. Loanwords and vernacular words together make up the lexicon of Coptic, as of any other language, and there is no reason to treat them differently. Text editions should be fully indexed, here I agree with Matthias Müller, and preferably in a normal alphabetical order, not in the needlessly confusing order of Walter E. Crum's thesaurus.¹¹

¹⁰ Till saw this very clearly: "La division d'un texte en mots ne peut avoir d'autre but que de rendre le texte transparent et faire qu'il soit vite et sûrement compris. Il ne saurait y en avoir un autre et aucune autre considération ne doit intervenir" ("La séparation des mots" 152).

¹¹ The arrangement by consonantal roots, adopted by nineteenth-century dictionaries, and followed by Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, is the result of an Egyptological bias and makes

Conclusion

Copticum est, non legitur, “it is in Coptic, so not read”, Gérard Garitte observed in 1952 about a historically important letter of Severus of Antioch.¹² Thanks to the efforts of many, the situation has considerably improved since. Yet, there is room for further improvement. Part of the problem signaled by Garitte is in our editorial habits that still today tend to turn Coptic texts into an exotic curiosum. There are no valid reasons why editions of Coptic patristic or hagiographical texts should look different from those of similar Greek texts.

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hardly more sense for Coptic than for English. The index of Layton, *Coptic Grammar* 501-520, sets a salutary example here.

¹² Garitte, “Fragments coptes” 186; for this letter, see more recently Dijkstra & Greatrex, “Patriarchs and Politics” in part. 240-246.

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