

Sifir Yūḥanna al-rā'i, The Book of Revelation (Apocalypse of John)

In Bohairic Coptic and Arabic, decorated manuscript on paper

Jerusalem, April 9, 1579

i (paper) + 108 + i (paper) on paper, laid paper with chain lines c. 30-31 mm wide, running horizontally with the text, unidentified watermarks buried in the gutter and split in half including a small cross, made with two lines in a circle, another perhaps two deer (a visualization of Psalm 42:1 "As the deer (hart) pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God"?), deckle edges, modern foliation in pencil top outer corner recto, Coptic foliation with errors, incomplete, lacking one folio after f. 107v (collation i⁸ [original structure uncertain, text is complete but out of order, 5-6, now the center bifolium, should follow 2] ii-x¹⁰ xi¹⁰ [-10, one leaf following f. 107v] xii¹ [f. 108, concludes text in previous quire, original structure uncertain, perhaps a single leaf at the end of quire xi, or the first leaf of a quire that included additional liturgical texts, now lacking]), signatures, top inner margin on the first and last pages of each quire, with numbers in Coptic used to number the quires, decorative ornaments on the first and last pages of each quire accompanied by abbreviated pious phrases such as 'Jesus Christ' or 'Son of God', with the same decorative ornament on the last page of the folio and the first page of the consecutive quire (i.e. functioning like catchwords), ruled using a ruling board with four vertical lines forming one wide column in the middle flanked by two narrower columns, one to the right and one to the left, with the Arabic text in narrow third column (outer column on the recto, inner column on verso), while the Coptic text fills the first two columns (a narrow column and the wide middle column), in a single wide column of text, (justification 170-160 x 110-100 mm.), copied in black ink by a single scribe with the Coptic copied 17-18 lines per column, and the Arabic in 14-18, title is written by another hand (likely added later), Coptic scribal practice is modelled on Greek practice, including the repertoires of punctuation marks, abbreviations (Christian nomina sacra), devices for adjusting the length of a line, and paragraphing, includes punctuation to delimit paragraphs and sentences, chapter numbers in Coptic highlighted in red, drop caps used as border decoration and as letter decoration at the beginning of chapters, decorated in red, or red and green, f. 2, large decorated headpiece panel with repeated geometrical patterns in red and green, FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATION OF THE HOLY CROSS on f. 1v, infilled with geometric patterns in red and green surrounded by four Coptic abbreviated words (Jesus Christ son of God). The same sentence is found in Arabic (يسوع المسيح ابن الله), decoration on f. 2 slightly smudged, on f. 39 is a correction copied on later paper glued to the page, damp-stains on the outer edges of pages at the beginning and end, some light finger-soiling, three holes in the inner margin throughout from an earlier provisional binding, overall in very good condition. Bound in a later leather-backed red patterned cloth over pasteboard, pages cut flush with the book block, smooth spine, braided cloth head and tail bands, some scuffs to the spine, two small holes in the cloth, front cover, but in very good condition. Dimensions 232 x 170 mm.

A bilingual manuscript of the Book of Revelation (or the Apocalypse), the final book of the Christian New Testament, in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic, in a two-column layout that reminds us of glossed Bibles in the Latin tradition. Manuscripts in Coptic of Revelation are relatively uncommon, since unlike the other New Testament books, this book is not included in the lectionary of the Arabic-speaking eastern Byzantine churches. Bilingual manuscripts in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic of the Apocalypse, like this one, are exceptionally rare. Dated and with a colophon, this handsome manuscript was made at a Coptic church in Jerusalem, said to be the ancient site of the Last Supper. Its beautiful script and full-page image of the Cross are notable features.

PROVENANCE

1. A colophon in Arabic is found at the beginning of the manuscript, signed by the scribe, ḡibrāʾīl bin yūšaʿ, a monk (the attribute *faqīr* or poor is used by monks when they talk about themselves) at the Coptic church of saint Mark in the Holy City of Jerusalem on April 9, 1579. According to the colophon, the manuscript was copied in the *Murqusiyyah* (مرقسية) of the Coptic monastery in the Holy City of Jerusalem. *Murqusiyyah* is an Arabic word that refers to a church dedicated to Saint Mark. The manuscript's codicological and paleographical properties confirm that it was copied in the sixteenth century. (We thank Professor Elie Dannaoui of the University of Balamand, Lebanon, for his description of this manuscript).

The monastery of Saint Mark is now a Syriac Orthodox monastery and church in Jerusalem's Old City, which was formerly owned by the Coptic church. The Coptic community in the Holy City was traditionally under the jurisdiction of the Syriac Orthodox bishops, who used this monastery as their official residence (they are both non-Chalcedonians churches). It is said to have been built on the ancient site of the house of Mary, mother of St. Mark the Evangelist (Acts 12:12), and, according to some traditions, the location of Christ's Last Supper with his disciples. In 1237, a Coptic bishop was ordained, and the monastery was expanded, and a new church added, where they continued to venerate Saint Mark. This manuscript probably once belonged to this community.

2. Marginal notes by the scribe ff. 13, 31, 33v, 66v repeat parts of the text for liturgical purposes; f. 39 is a correction copied on later paper glued to the page with the chapter number is inscribed in Coptic letters in the margin
3. Sold at Bloomsbury, London, October 30, 2020, lot 38.

TEXT

f. 1, Colophon (see Provenance, above); f. 1v, Full-page Cross;

ff. 2-108v, Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse), in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic.

The text is complete, beginning with chapter 1 and continuing through chapter 22, apart from one missing leaf following f. 107v with chapter 22:14b-17b. Ff. 5rv and 6rv are now bound out of order, and should instead be between ff. 2v and 3 as follows: f. 2v, Revelation 1:2a-4, f. 5, Revelation 1:5-7a, f. 6v, Revelation 1:11b-14a, f. 3r, Revelation 1:14b-17a.

The manuscript contains the 22 chapters of the book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse, the final book of the Christian New Testament. Unlike the other New Testament books, the book of Revelation is not included in the lectionary of the Arabic speaking eastern Byzantine churches. This explains why there are so few surviving manuscripts of this book of the Bible. In the Coptic church, Revelation is read on Bright Saturday or Apocalypse Night (the day before Easter known as Holy Saturday in the Western tradition) to commemorate Christ's resurrection. This unique liturgical usage explains why this text was transmitted as a

separate book rather than being included in New Testament compilations (cf. Metzger, 1977, p. 123).

The Arabic translation of Revelation contained in this manuscript is not necessarily a translation of the Coptic text contained in the same manuscript. This was a popular practice in bilingual manuscripts. While the Coptic text had been standardized by the tenth century, the Coptic church continued to utilize multiple Arabic translations until the sixteenth century. A comparison of the Arabic version preserved here with the ones used in the commentaries on the book of Revelation by Anba (Bishop) Būlus al-Būshi (c. 1170-1250) and Ibn Kātib Qayṣar (perhaps late twelfth century - possibly 1267) reveals that the three versions are not identical. Moreover, although our manuscript is in many ways strikingly similar to Paris, BnF, MS copte 91 (Online Resources), with the same decorative features, including the cross, the headpiece, and the marginal cross next to the Coptic text, each includes a different Arabic translation.

If Coptic-Arabic manuscripts of Revelation are not common, Bohairic Coptic-Arabic manuscripts are especially rare. One can refer for comparison to the world's largest database of New Testament manuscripts in all ancient languages: The New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room (NTvmr), at the Muenster-based Institute for New Testament Textual Research (Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung–INTF). This database includes 303 manuscripts containing texts from the book of Revelation, of which twenty-three are Coptic-Arabic. Of these, only one is written in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic; the remaining manuscripts are all in Shahidic-Arabic.

This bilingual manuscript is a witness to the political and religious history of Egypt and the Coptic Orthodox church. The Coptic language is the final stage of Ancient Egyptian. Christianity in Egypt dates to the very early Church, and there were biblical translations in Bohairic Coptic, the dialogue of Northern or Lower Egypt, that date as early as the fourth century, including important witnesses to the text of the New Testament. After the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, Arabic and Coptic coexisted for a long time, with Arabic replacing Coptic gradually as the official written language of Egypt, and, eventually, as the dominant spoken language. Bohairic Coptic, however, has a continuous history and survives down to the present day as the liturgical language of the modern Coptic Orthodox Church.

LITERATURE

Funk, W.-P. "The Translation of the Bible into Coptic," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume one, From the Beginnings to 600*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Joachim Schaper, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 536-546.

Homer, G. *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialects*, vol. 4, London, 1898.

Metzger, B. M. *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations*, Oxford 1977.

Schmitz, F.-J., and Mink, G. *Liste der koptischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, Berlin, 1986.

Sigismund, M. and Müller, D., eds. *Studien zum Text der Apokalypse II, Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Textforschung*, Berlin and Boston, 2017.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Paris, BnF, MS copte 91

<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc1086171>

Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung — INTF

http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index_en.shtml

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