

‘Une foule immense de moines’

The Coptic *Life of Aaron* and the Early Bishops of Philae¹

One of the most evocative passages of the Coptic hagiographical work known as *Histories of the Monks in the Egyptian Desert* is the episode of Macedonius and the holy falcon of Philae (fol. 13a-b)². According to the story, Macedonius, just appointed by Athanasius as first bishop of Philae to shepherd the small Christian community on the island³, walks into the area of the temples, where he has seen people worshipping a falcon in what is called in derogatory terms a “demonic cage” (ΜΑΓΚΛΑΝΟΝ, Greek μάγγανον)⁴. He asks the two sons of the high priest, who are in charge of that day’s offerings, to offer a sacrifice to God. They light a fire and burn it down to the coals. Meanwhile Macedonius slips away, takes the bird out of the cage and cuts off its head. He then returns to the place of sacrifice and throws the bird into the fire: the old god is offered to the new one⁵.

Nobody has any doubt about the legendary character of this scene, which may be reminiscent of Jehu’s slaughter of the Baal priests in 2 Kings 10⁶. On the other hand, as we will see, the text comes close to the historical evidence we have for early Christianity at Philae. But what is history, what story? As I presume that the work is not generally known, I will first briefly summarise its contents. Secondly, attention will be paid to the transmission of the text and its *editio princeps* in order to indicate that a new edition of the work is needed. Thirdly, the text is placed in the context of Coptic literature. With this literary framework in mind, we will finally come back to the question of the historical value of the text. It will be shown that the work is of importance, not only for early Christianity at Philae but also for Egyptian early church history at large.

However, before we start with a summary, we first have to say something about the title of the work. As the title page of our only complete manuscript is lost, scholars have invented several names, merely to cover its contents: for example, the first editor, Budge, calls it *Histories of the Monks in the Egyptian Desert*⁷. However, there is good reason to suppose that the name of the work must have been the *Life of Aaron*, for this holy man is mentioned in both the coda and the colophon (fol. 57a and 76a). Furthermore, the text points to Aaron as the central figure⁸. In this paper, I therefore refer to the work as *Life of Aaron* (henceforth: *LA*).

¹ I owe gratitude to comments by and discussions with J. N. Bremmer, A. Hilhorst, P. van Minnen and J. van der Vliet.

² The first edition of the work was published by E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Texts V. Miscellaneous Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, New York 1915, 432–495 (text), 948–1011 (translation). Recently, T. Vivian has translated the work again in *Paphnutius. Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt and the Life of Onnophrius*, Kalamazoo 2000, rev. ed. of 1993, 73–141. I have not seen the Italian translation of A. Campagnano and T. Orlandi, *Vite di monaci copti*, Rome 1984, 71–125.

³ For a similar story, see Athanasius’ appointment of Frumentius as bishop of Axum in Ruf., *HE* 1.10.

⁴ J. H. F. Dijkstra, *Horus on His Throne. The Holy Falcon of Philae in His Demonic Cage*, GM 189 (2002) 7–10. Cf. L. S. B. MacCoull, *Christianity at Syene/Elephantine/Philae*, BASP 27 (1990) 151–162 at 159, n. 40, and D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt. Assimilation and Resistance*, Princeton 1998, 68.

⁵ For a Dutch translation of this passage, see J. F. Borghouts, *Egyptische sagen en verhalen*, Bussum 1974, 184–189.

⁶ A connection with the story of Daniel and Bel, 10–13, as Frankfurter, *Religion* (see n. 4), 110, n. 50 suggests, is unlikely.

⁷ Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), lviii.

⁸ Apa Aaron is introduced in fol. 10b. His name is spelled ⲒⲁⲢⲠⲠ in Coptic, unlike the spelling of the biblical Aaron, ⲁⲁⲢⲠⲠ, who is mentioned in fol. 8b. The story of the first bishops of Philae (section two, fol. 10b–37b) is presented as told by Aaron to Isaac. As we will see, section three (fol. 37b–57a) is entirely dedicated to Apa Aaron.

Contents

The *LA* can be divided into three sections. In the first section (fol. 1a–10b), a certain Paphnutius travels to a monastic community near Syene (modern Aswan) where the monk Apa Pseleusius tells him several stories about holy men in the area and teaches him the way of living in the desert. In the second section (fol. 10b–37b), Paphnutius decides to accompany Pseleusius to an island in the First Cataract, near Philae, to receive a blessing from another monk, Apa Isaac. When they talk about his work, Isaac relates the history of the first bishops of Philae, which he, in turn, heard from his master Apa Aaron. Clearly, this is a literary device to authenticate the story. The rest of section two is dedicated to Macedonius and his successors, the converted sons of the high priest of Philae, Mark and Isaiah, and the monk Psoulousia⁹. Section three (fol. 37b–57a) contains what can be described as a catalogue of miracles performed by Aaron, in which the author's biblical erudition is displayed to an exhaustive, if not exhausting extent. Apa Isaac continues his story on Aaron by relating how he came to Philae. The monk then tells Paphnutius about his life with the holy man. Just as in the first section, the novice finds a master to teach him the life of the desert. The work is concluded with fourteen miracles performed by Aaron, and his death.

Text and Transmission

The *LA* as a whole is transmitted in one tenth-century paper codex¹⁰. Beside the *LA*, the manuscript consists of a series of biblical passages to be read at the festival of Aaron (ΠΩΛ ΝΑΠΑ ΔΑΡΩΝ, fol. 57a–61a)¹¹, the prayer of archbishop Athanasius before he died (fol. 61a–67b)¹², and a discourse on St. Michael the archangel (fol. 67b–75b)¹³. In the one article dedicated to the *LA*, Orlandi thought that these works were collected in connection with the flooding of the Nile¹⁴. Rather, the criterion of selection seems to have been the date: the date of death of Athanasius occurred on 7 Pachons (May 2) and the festival of Apa Aaron falls on 9 Pachons (May 4)¹⁵. The collection formed part of the liturgy of a festival or series of festivals, a common feature of Coptic literature in the ninth and tenth centuries¹⁶. According to the colophon, the manuscript was copied in Esna and given to the shrine (ΤΟΠΟΣ) of Apa Aaron in Edfu¹⁷. A tenth-century wall painting of Aaron from the cathedral of Faras, Nubia, indicates that in that century Apa Aaron was venerated as a saint from Faras to Edfu¹⁸.

⁹ The name (spelled ΠΣΟΥΛΟΥΣΙΑ in fol. 34b, ΣΕΛΛΟΥΣΙΑ in 35b, ΠΣΥΛΟΥΣΙΑ in 36a and b, ΠΣΕΛΛΟΥΣΙΑ in 36b, and ΠΣΕΛΟΥΣΙΑC [2×] in 37a) looks like that of Pseleusius, the narrator of the first section, but probably both names are local. Vivian, *Paphnutius* (see n. 2), 52 adds to the confusion by calling the bishop Pseleusias. Henceforth, I will refer to the bishop as Psoulousia.

¹⁰ British Library Or. 7029 = B. Layton, *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts in the British Library Acquired Since the Year 1906*, London 1987, 196–199 (nr. 163). For another description of the manuscript, see Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), lvi–lix. I examined the manuscript in the British Library in June of 2001.

¹¹ Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), 496–502, 1011. The lectures are Ps. 99. 1–9, Heb. 4. 14–5. 6, Jas. 5. 10–6, Acts 7. 34–43, Ps. 77. 18–20, Mt. 4. 23–5. 16, Mk. 16. 1–20. It can be no coincidence that the biblical Aaron (ΔΑΡΩΝ, cf. n. 8) features prominently in four of the seven lectures.

¹² Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), 503–511 (text), 1012–1020 (translation).

¹³ Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), 512–523 (text), 1021–1032 (translation).

¹⁴ T. Orlandi, *Un testo copto sulle origini del cristianesimo in Nubia*, in: *Études nubiennes. Colloque de Chantilly, 2–6 juillet 1975*, Cairo 1978, 225–230 at 228–229.

¹⁵ The festival of Michael the archangel was celebrated on 12 Pauni (June 6). Cf. Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), 1010–1012, 1021. He provides no date for the death of Aaron, and then talks about ‘the festival of the commemoration of Apa Aaron (May 2, sic)’. He also refers to the date of Athanasius’ death as May 2, which is in itself correct, but further equals 12 Payni of the festival of Michael to May 6. Vivian, *Paphnutius* (see n. 2), 140 mistakenly dates the death of Aaron to May 17.

¹⁶ T. Orlandi, *Literature (Coptic)*, in: S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (= Copt. Enc.) V, New York 1991, 1458–1459. For a parallel, see Layton, *Catalogue* (see n. 10), nr. 119 = British Library Or. 6781, an encomium with lessons for the feast of St. Michael the archangel.

¹⁷ Layton, *Catalogue* (see n. 10), nr. 163 is part of a group of twenty-one parchment and paper codices of the tenth and eleventh centuries, which were mainly copied in Esna and delivered in Edfu (Layton, *Catalogue*, xxvii).

¹⁸ K. Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, Einsiedeln 1967, 126–127 (Fig. 46); A. Łukaszewicz, *En marge d'une image de l'anachorète Aaron dans la cathédrale de Faras*, *Nubia christiana* 1 (1982) 192–211.

When preparing his catalogue of Coptic manuscripts in the British Library, B. Layton discovered that three papyrus fragments, preserved from bindings of later manuscripts from Edfu, belonged to the *LA*¹⁹. He identified them with the corresponding passages of the paper manuscript²⁰. However, the papyri, once part of a papyrus codex, were never published. A closer look at the scraps ascertained that they differ from the paper codex only to a small degree²¹. On palaeographical grounds, the papyri can tentatively be dated to the sixth or seventh century. Interestingly, one of the other unique works in the paper codex, the *Dying Prayer of Athanasius*, is also otherwise preserved only in a few papyrus scraps, viz. at the University of Michigan²². These papyri are dated to the fifth or sixth centuries, but seem to be textually inferior to the paper codex of the British Library. The maxim *recentiores non deteriores* seems also applicable to the *LA*²³.

The complicated narrative structure of the text with many different narrators on different levels accounts for at least part of the scribal errors contained in the transmitted text²⁴. Budge’s edition does not deal with such problems and adds many more errors²⁵. Moreover, since the publication of the *editio princeps*, the *LA* has been severely neglected²⁶. One example will do to illustrate the shortcomings of Budge’s edition. At the beginning of the story of Macedonius, the bishop tells Aaron that he went to Philae (fol. 12a). I give Budge’s text and translation:

ⲁϣⲔⲐⲐⲐ ⲒⲁⲢ [.....]ⲈⲐⲐ ⲛⲁⲢϣⲱⲛ Ⲉⲁⲓⲁⲓ ⲁⲢϣⲬ ⲛⲧ[....]ⲗⲐⲢⲓⲐⲐⲐ ⲁⲒⲓ ⲈⲢⲬⲐⲐ ⲈⲓⲢⲁⲒⲁⲢϣⲬ Ⲉⲁⲛ
ⲛⲈⲓⲢⲐⲗⲓⲐ

“Now he said, ‘When I became governor and took over the rule of [Syene], I came to the South, and I passed through the towns in this district’.”

¹⁹ Layton, *Catalogue* (see n. 10), 172–173 (nr. 150, pl. 21) = British Library Or. 7558/89/93/150.

²⁰ 1. Or. 7558/89/150 v⁰ (error for r⁰) = Or. 7029, fol. 28a; 2. Or. 7558/89/150 r⁰ (error for v⁰) = Or. 7029, fol. 28b; 3. Or. 7558/93 r⁰ = Or. 7029, fol. 30a; 4. Or. 7558/93 v⁰ = Or. 7029, fol. 30b. The readable lines of the papyri correspond to the following lines of the paper manuscript: 11–18, 18–21, 15–18 and 17–20. The similar location of these lines shows that the papyrus codex had the same layout as the paper codex.

²¹ During my stay at the British Library, I counted four minor differences: $\text{NK}\epsilon$ for $\text{PK}\epsilon$ in 2, $\text{AY}\epsilon\text{OOX}\epsilon\text{C}$ for $\text{AY}\epsilon\text{OOX}\bar{\text{C}}$ and $\text{AYN}[\text{OY}\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{C}}]$ for $\text{NTAYNOY}\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{C}}$ in 3, and $\text{COY}\bar{\text{A}}\bar{\text{A}}\text{N}$ for $\text{COY}\bar{\text{A}}\text{N}$ in 4. $\text{COY}\bar{\text{A}}\bar{\text{A}}\text{N}$ is to my knowledge the only instance of this variant in Coptic, cf. S. Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten I*, Wiesbaden 1984–1992, 222–235, but this seems more a local spelling than a mistake. Cf. H. Winlock, W. E. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes I*, New York 1926, 242: “vowel duplication is the most constant characteristic distinguishing the idiom in which the literary texts from Esne-Edfū are written”.

²² P.Mich. Inv. 1289. Cf. E. M. Husselman, *The Martyrdom of Saint Phocas and the Dying Prayer of Athanasius. Fragments from a Coptic Papyrus Codex*, in: *Coptic Studies in Honor of W. E. Crum*, Boston 1950, 319–337.

²³ L. D. Reynolds, N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, Oxford 1991³, 218.

²⁴ As appears e. g. from the frequent interchanging of personal pronouns.

²⁵ He made mistakes in transcription (e. g. $\text{M}\bar{\text{N}}\text{P}\text{M}\epsilon\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{C}}$ for $\text{M}\bar{\text{N}}\text{M}\text{P}\epsilon\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{C}}$ fol. 40a), left out complete words (e. g. $\text{M}\bar{\text{P}}\epsilon\text{I}\text{M}\text{T}\text{O}\text{N}$ $\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{M}}$ $\text{P}\bar{\text{A}}\text{P}\bar{\text{N}}\bar{\text{A}}$ $\epsilon\bar{\text{T}}\text{T}\text{O}\text{C}$ $\text{P}\bar{\text{A}}\text{C}\text{O}\text{N}$ for $\bar{\text{M}}\bar{\text{P}}\epsilon\text{I}\text{M}\text{T}\text{O}\text{N}$ $\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{M}}$ $\text{P}\bar{\text{A}}\bar{\text{N}}\bar{\text{N}}\bar{\text{A}}$ $\bar{\text{A}}[\epsilon\ \bar{\text{E}}\bar{\text{P}}]\bar{\text{C}}\bar{\text{A}}$ $\epsilon\bar{\text{T}}\text{T}\text{O}\text{C}$ $\text{P}\bar{\text{A}}\text{C}\text{O}\text{N}$ “I did not rest in my heart, for I did not find my brother Titus”, 6a), filled in lacunae wrongly (e. g. [.....M]MOOY for $[\text{A}\text{C}\text{T}\bar{\text{A}}]\text{M}\text{O}\text{O}\text{Y}$, 21b, cf. 23a), and left open obvious restorations (e. g. [.....]Y for $[\text{T}\text{O}\text{Y}\text{N}\text{O}]Y$, 15a), not to speak of the problematic ones (e. g. $\bar{\text{A}}\epsilon\ \bar{\text{M}}\bar{\text{P}}\epsilon\text{C}\text{C}\text{O}[\bar{\text{C}}]\text{T}$ for $\bar{\text{A}}\epsilon\ \bar{\text{M}}\bar{\text{P}}\epsilon\text{C}\text{C}\text{O}[\bar{\text{C}}]\text{T}$ “for he did not size”, 1b). Moreover, Budge had overlooked a complete folium of the colophon (fol. 77a), which has since been published by A. van Lantschoot, *Recueil des colophons des manuscrits chrétiens d’Égypte I*, Leuven 1929, 197–200 and II. 79–80. Vivian’s translation (see n. 2), although on some points complementing Budge’s translation and making the text available to a wider audience, essentially follows Budge’s text and is therefore not quite satisfactory.

²⁶ The *LA* is discussed only in passing by e. g. W. Spiegelberg, *Ägyptologische Beiträge III. Der Falkenkultus auf der Insel Philae in christlicher Zeit*, APF 7 (1924) 186–189; J. Kraus, *Die Anfänge des Christentums in Nubien*, Münster 1930, 47–51; L. P. Kirwan, *Studies in the Later History of Nubia*, Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology 24 (1937) 69–105 at 95–96; E. De Lacy O’Leary, *The Saints of Egypt in the Coptic Calendar*, London, New York 1937, 219–220; U. Monneret de Villard, *Storia della Nubia cristiana*, Rome 1938, 44–45; H. Munier, *Le christianisme à Philae*, BSAC 4 (1938) 37–49 at 41–43; Lukaszewicz, *Image* (see n. 18), 200–202; Campagnano and Orlandi, *Vite* (see n. 2), 67–69 (on the internet <http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it~cmcl/papsce.htm>); Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten I* (see n. 21), 392–401; MacCoull, *Christianity* (see n. 4), 159; R. G. Coquin, M. Martin, *Philae*, Copt. Enc. VI, 1955–1956; Vivian, *Paphnutius* (see n. 2), 50–54; S. G. Richter, *Studien zur Christianisierung Nubiens*, Habilitations-Schrift, Münster 2000, 132–135. I kindly thank Dr. Richter for sending me his Habilitation.

This translation is both inaccurate and incorrect. Firstly, the translation of the word ΔΡΧΩΝ is, like other instances in the *LA*, deliberately left vague to denote someone of the upper class²⁷. Secondly, Budge ignores the first lacuna and suggests the totally unjustified Syene for the second one. In fact, the letter “mu” is clearly discernible in the manuscript before the second lacuna, so that the only possibility to fill-in this gap is to read ΤΜ[ΝΤΠ]ΛΟΥΚΙΟC. Taken with ΔΙ and ΔΡΧΗ, for which the translation “taking over rule” is, as far as I know, not attested in Coptic²⁸, but which is rather a rendering of the Greek verb ἄρχομαι, the combination means “I started becoming rich”²⁹. Thirdly, Budge’s translation of ΠΑΓΔΡΧΗ suggests a corruption for ΠΑΡΑΓΕ “to pass” but the use of a Greek noun for a verb is common in Coptic texts, and the combination of ΠΑΡΑΓΕ with ΕΞ̄Ν̄ is impossible³⁰. Accordingly, the correct translation of the passage should be:

ΛΥΧΟΟC ΓΑΡ [ΝᾹΙ ΔΕ ΕΤΙ] ΕΙΟ ΝΔΡΧΩΝ ΕΛΙΔΙ ΔΡΧΗ ΝΤ[ΜΝΤΠ]ΛΟΥΚΙΟC ΔΕΙ ΕΡΗC ΕΙΠΑΓΔΡΧΗ ΕΞ̄Ν̄ ΝΕΙΠΟΛΙC

“For he said to me: ‘When I was still a dignitary, and started to become rich, I went south, because I was pagarch over these cities’”.

Macedonius, then, was a pagarch, not a “governor”.

The *Life of Aaron* and Coptic Literature

For understanding its historical interest, we now turn to the authorship of the *LA*. The main character of the story, Paphnutius, states at the end of the work that he will write down what he has heard (fol. 56b). Interestingly, the narrator of the Coptic *Life of Onnophrius* (henceforth: *LO*)³¹ is also a Paphnutius and monks of Scetis are reported to have written down his words in the coda³². It has therefore been assumed that the author of the *LO* had as most likely candidate Paphnutius ‘Cephalas’³³. This Paphnutius had known Antony the anchorite and was an authoritative person in Scetis as late as the end of the fourth century³⁴. As the *LA* has certain characteristics in common with the *LO* and the *LA* contains historical references dating to the fourth century, it has been postulated that the author of the *LA* is equally none other than Paphnutius Cephalas. However, if this Paphnutius was indeed the author of the *LA* and the work was written in Scetis, it would not have had such a strong local character. A local history of bishops, and explicitly mentioned topographical indications³⁵, are exactly what we do not find in the *LO*. Moreover, last-named work is transmitted in eight languages, whereas, as we have seen, we have only one manuscript of the *LA*, and some

²⁷ Cf. fol. 26a, 31a–b, 49b, 50b.

²⁸ Cf. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 747b–749a.

²⁹ Cf. the *Martyrdom of Mercurius the General*, Budge, *Miscellaneous Texts* (see n. 2), 281 (fol. 24a), in which the same word is mentioned in connection with dignitaries (ΔΡΧΩΝ, ΝΟC).

³⁰ For the use of Greek nouns as verbs in Coptic, see P. E. Kahle, *Bala’izah. Coptic texts from Deir el-Bala’izah in Upper Egypt I*, London 1954, 189–190.

³¹ E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Texts IV. Coptic Martyrdoms*, London 1914, xxi–xxii, 205–224 (text), 455–473 (translation). Although other versions exist in Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic, Latin, Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopian, in this paper I refer to the Sahidic Coptic text edited by Budge. Cf. R.-G. Coquin, *Onophrius, Saint*, *Copt. Enc. VI* 1841–1842.

³² Fol. 21a. About Scetis as a monastic community, see H. G. Evelyn-White, W. Hauser, G. P. G. Sobhy, eds., *The Monasteries of the Wadi Natrûn*, New York 1926–1933 and A. Cody, *Scetis*, *Copt. Enc. VII* 2102–2106.

³³ O’Leary, *Saints* (see n. 26), 219–220; Vivian, *Paphnutius* (see n. 2), 42–50. Cf. R.-G. Coquin, *Paphnutius the Hermit*, *Copt. Enc. VI* 1882–1883 with more caution. A. Guillaumont, *Paphnutius of Scetis*, *Copt. Enc. VI* 1884–1885 suggests a Paphnutius mentioned in *Hist. Mon.* 14 as the author of the *LO*.

³⁴ Paphnutius ‘Cephalas’ is mentioned in *Hist. Laus.* 47 and *Apophth. Patr.*, Antony 28. The identification with a Paphnutius of Scetis, also mentioned in *Apophth. Patr.*, Paphnutius, is probable but cannot be proven. Paphnutius with the surname ‘Bubalis’, in Cassian. 10. 2–3 and 18. 15, must be another Paphnutius. Cf. Evelyn-White, Hauser, Sobhy, *Wadi Natrûn* 2 (see n. 32), 121; E. C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius II*, Cambridge 1898–1904, 224–225, n. 89; Guillaumont, *Paphnutius of Scetis* (see n. 33), 1884–1885.

³⁵ The places mentioned in the *LA* are: Alexandria (ΡΑΚΟΤΕ), fol. 12a, 25a, 30b, 31a, 33a, 35a, 36b; Aswan (CΟΥΑΝ) 6a, 12a-b, 30b, 34a, 45b, 51a-b; Athribis (ΔΘΡΙΒΕ): 35a; Philae (ΠΕΙΛΑΚ, ΠΕΛΑΚ, ΠΙΛΑΚ): 12a, 19b, 31a, 37b, 44b, 49a, 56b, 57a; Scetis (ΩΗ): 38a; Schissa (CΧΙCΑ): 30b, 35a. Monastic communities near Aswan/ Philae: the Corner (ΠΚΟΟ): 7a and the Valley (ΠΙΔ, ΠΕΙΔ): 15a, 38b.

fragments of another one, found in the same region and dedicated to the shrine of Apa Aaron³⁶. Another argument for the local character of the *LA* is the miracle story of Apa Psoulousia, fourth bishop of Philae, when attending the celebration of a new archbishop (fol. 36b–37a). This miracle is a typical expression of local self-identity that has nothing to do with Scetis.

Given the local character of the work, the author of the *LA* probably was a local monk who used the name of one of the great anchorites of the past, thereby lending authority to his work³⁷. This feature is not uncommon in Coptic literature. For example, Apa Pambo was a famous fourth-century anchorite³⁸, but in a work attributed to him (the *Life of Cyrus*) he refers to Shenute and the fifth-century Emperor Zeno, which betrays a later date³⁹. In this way several works, written by different authors, could be attributed to one famous holy man. They are termed “*cicli*” by Orlandi and are quite common from the fifth century onwards⁴⁰. As one of the manuscripts of the *LO* was also found in Edfu, this manuscript may have been part of one of those cycles. What we have here, then, is a literary tradition developing around a local saint, probably from the fifth until the tenth centuries, that has an interesting, but somewhat later, parallel in a continuous literary tradition connected with the cult of holy men around Nagada⁴¹. It is time to concentrate on the historical value of our text.

The *Life of Aaron* and History

In his checklist of Byzantine bishops, K. A. Worp mentions five fourth-century bishops of Philae, of whom four are mentioned in the *LA*⁴². A fifth bishop of Philae, Eusebius, is certainly a corruption for Eusebius of Caesarea⁴³. It was W. Spiegelberg who, on account of the *LA*, first saw that Christianity at Philae started in the fourth century when Athanasius was archbishop⁴⁴. The only indication of the historicity of the bishops was a letter of Athanasius, dated 362, in which a Mark of Philae was mentioned⁴⁵. Recently, in her impressive book on Athanasius, A. Martin has shown that Macedonius, Mark and Isaiah are historical figures⁴⁶. Macedonius signed a list of bishops in 346⁴⁷, Mark is a second time mentioned in 356⁴⁸, and even the succession of Mark by Isaiah is documented in a festal letter of 368, expressed in the same words as

³⁶ The absence of Aaron in Coptic lists of saints (*synaxaria*) is another indication that we are dealing here with a local saint. Cf. O’Leary, *Saints* (see n. 26); R.-G. Coquin, *Le synaxaire des coptes. Un nouveau témoin de la récession de haute Égypte*, Analecta Bollandiana 96 (1978) 351–365. Lukaszewicz, *Image* (see n. 18), 202–203 refers to two other places where an Apa Aaron is mentioned. Yet, these instances are insufficient proof that Aaron of Philae was ever worshipped north of Edfu.

³⁷ Cf. Orlandi, *Literature (Coptic)* (see n. 16), 1458: “It also seems that the prominent authors of this period were not free, and did not feel free, to publish works under their own names, perhaps because they sought to give greater authority to their writings, by attributing them to a venerated author of antiquity”.

³⁸ D. Chitty, *The Desert a City*, Oxford 1966, 31, 33, 46–47; L. Regnault, *Pambo, Saint*, Copt. Enc. VI 1877–1878. Note that both Paphnutius and Pambo are associated with Antony the anchorite, in *Apophth. Patr.*, Antony 6 and 28, and with Scetis, *Apophth. Patr.*, Pambo and Paphnutius.

³⁹ Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms* (see n. 31), 128–136 (text), 381–389 (translation). Zeno (Emperor 474–491) is referred to in f. 23a, Shenute in 28b and 29b.

⁴⁰ T. Orlandi, *Letteratura copta e cristianesimo nazionale egiziano*, in: A. Camplani (ed.), *L’egitto cristiano. Aspetti e problemi in età tardo-antica*, Rome 1997, 39–120 at 111–113. Cf. Orlandi, *Literature (Coptic)* (see n. 16), 1456–1458 in which these cycles are dated to the seventh and eighth centuries.

⁴¹ As C. Décobert recently demonstrated during the *Journée d’études* of the Association francophone de coptologie at Lille. For the cult of local holy men at Nagada and Coptos, see J. Doresse, *Saints coptes de Haute-Egypte*, Journal asiatique 236 (1948) 247–270.

⁴² K. A. Worp, *A Checklist of Bishops in Byzantine Egypt*, ZPE 100 (1994) 283–318 at 305.

⁴³ Eut. Patr. Alex., Ann. 436 (PG 111, col. 1005). Cf. A. Martin, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’Église d’Égypte au IV^e siècle (328–373)*, Rome 1996, 88, n. 240.

⁴⁴ Spiegelberg, *Ägyptologische Beiträge* III (see n. 26), 186–189. Already U. Wilcken in his famous article *Heidnisches und Christliches aus Ägypten*, APF 1 (1901) 396–436 at 403–404 takes into account a fourth-century bishop at Philae, yet he did not have recourse to the *LA* and left it at that: “Ich lasse diese Frage unentschieden”.

⁴⁵ Ath., Tom. 10 (PG 26, col. 808).

⁴⁶ Martin, *Athanase* (see n. 43), 84–89.

⁴⁷ Μακεδόνιος, Ath., *Apol. c. Ar.* 49. 3 (Opitz 2, p. 130, nr. 218).

⁴⁸ Μάρκος, Ath., *Hist. Ar.* 72.2 (Opitz 2, p. 222). Mark is listed with six other bishops of the Thebaid, including the bishop of Syene.

the *LA* (fol. 33a)⁴⁹. It is plausible, as Martin suggests, that the new see was created in 330 during the visit of Athanasius to Upper Egypt but, in any case, it must have been before 339⁵⁰. According to the *LA*, our fourth bishop, Psoulousia, a contemporary of Aaron, attended the succession of archbishop Timothy by Theophilus in 385, when the aforementioned miracle took place. In sum, the first three bishops of Philae are historical figures; for the fourth, this is highly likely (Fig. 1).

Bishops of Philae	Source	Date
Macedonius	<i>Ath., Apol. c. Ar.</i> 49.3	346
Mark	<i>Ath., Hist. Ar.</i> 72.2	356
Mark	<i>Ath., Tom.</i> 10	362
Mark	IFAO Copte 25, fol. 8a	368
Isaiah	IFAO Copte 25, fol. 8a	368
Psoulousia	<i>LA</i> , fol. 36b	385

Fig. 1: List of the first four bishops of Philae

The procedure of episcopal appointment by the archbishop of Alexandria, as described in the *LA*, is likewise attested in other sources. For example, election of bishops by the people and local clergy, as well as visiting the archbishop in Alexandria before appointment is found in sources relating to Hermonthis and Syene. Athanasius himself also refers to last-named feature⁵¹. Yet, never do we find such a specific description as in the *LA*, which makes it our most detailed source on fourth-century episcopal appointment in Egypt.

Let us finally return to bishop Macedonius and the story of the holy falcon of Philae. The passage may contain more historical information than appears on first sight. According to Strabo, the holy falcon, a Nubian bird, was worshipped at Philae in the early first century A.D.⁵². Hieroglyphic texts on the walls of



Fig. 2: Falcon pictures on the outer wall of the temple of Isis at Philae (É. Bernard, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae II. Haut et Bas Empire*, Paris 1969, Pl. 40)

⁴⁹ ΗΣΑΙΔΑΣ ΕΠΙΜΑ ΜΜΑΡΚΟΣ, IFAO Copte 25, fol. 8a. See R.-G. Coquin, *Les lettres festales d'Athanase (CPG 2102). Un nouveau complément: le manuscrit IFAO, Copte 25*, OLP 15 (1984) 133–158 at 146.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Athanase* (see n. 43), 88. Macedonius is not mentioned in the appendix of newly ordained bishops of the Eastern letters of 339 and 346. It is therefore probable that Macedonius was ordained before Athanasius' first exile, that is, before 335.

⁵¹ Martin, *Athanase* (see n. 43), 128–129 with references in n. 43.

⁵² Str. 17. 1. 49.

⁵³ H. Junker, *Der Bericht Strabos über den heiligen Falken von Philae im Lichte der ägyptischen Quellen*, WZKM 26 (1912) 42–62.

⁵⁴ I.Philae 190–192.

the temple of Isis confirm this account⁵³. Now, it is interesting that between the two pylons of the temple of Isis at Philae three inscriptions have been found that accompany pictures of a falcon (Fig. 2)⁵⁴.

The inscriptions, probably incised by local priests, are in Greek and date to the first half of the fifth century. The iconography of the pictures corresponds exactly to the descriptions of the falcon cult of earlier sources⁵⁵. Combining the inscriptions with the pictures, we see that worship of the holy falcon was still in use in the fifth century, and did exist at the time when Macedonius was bishop.

The story of Macedonius and the holy falcon seems to fall in the period of similar stories on actions against paganism by Shenute (written after Shenute’s death, ca. 465) and Moses of Abydos (after ca. 550)⁵⁶. The frequent appearance of Nubians, characterised as pagans, may be taken as evidence to date the work before the definitive Christianisation of Nubia, which took place in the second half of the sixth century⁵⁷. Finally, the information that Macedonius was a pagarch, a function which appears on the administrative scene of Byzantine Egypt only from the end of the fifth century onwards, suggests a date of composition in the first half of the sixth century⁵⁸. Thus, the *LA* offers a unique, local perspective of a sixth-century Christian community on its formative period.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that the *LA* contains important information about early Christianity at Philae. Nevertheless, one should not go too far in this. In his recent book about religion in Roman Egypt, D. Frankfurter refers to a passage in which an old woman denounces Macedonius’ slaughter of the holy falcon in order to prove his thesis of locals defending pagan temples in the fourth and fifth centuries⁵⁹. The old woman’s interference with Christian affairs, however, seems more a literary device illustrating the conversion of pagans than a historical fact. Macedonius curses the woman and makes her dumb, but later heals her *en plein public* after she has confirmed that she believes in God (fol. 14a–b and 22a–23a)⁶⁰. First and foremost, the *LA* is a literary work, an answer to the question posed in its famous predecessor, the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, to quote A.-J. Festugière’s translation: “Que ne pourrait-on dire en effet sur la Haute-Thébaïde dans la région de Syène, où vivent des hommes encore plus admirables et une foule immense de moines?” (Ep. 1)⁶¹.

⁵³ Cf. L. V. Zabkar, *A Hieracocephalous Deity from Naqa, Qustul, and Philae*, ZÄS 102 (1975) 143–153, who mainly argues for an Egyptian origin of the representations at Philae but does not associate these pictures with the falcon cult at Philae.

⁵⁴ R.-G. Coquin, *Moïse d’Abydos*, in: *Deuxième journée d’études coptes*, Leuven 1986 (= Cahiers de bibliothèque copte 3) 1–14 and *Moses of Abydos*, Copt. Enc. VI 1679–1681.

⁵⁵ Fol. 18a (2x), 18b, 19b, 26b, 40b, 41b, 42a, b (4x) 51a. For the Christianisation of Nubia see Richter, *Christianisierung Nubiens* (see n. 26).

⁵⁶ See, most recently, R. Mazza, *Ricerche sul pagarca nell’Egitto tardoantico e bizantino*, Aegyptus 75 (1995) 169–242 with extensive bibliography.

⁵⁷ Frankfurter, *Religion* (see n. 4), 68.

⁵⁸ The story of the old woman has the same structure as the miracle stories of part three of the *LA*, which are often modeled on miracle stories from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (the story of the old woman is possibly modeled on Mk. 7. 33–37).

⁵⁹ Τί γὰρ ἂν τις εἴποι περὶ τῆς ἄνω Θηβαΐδος τῆς κατὰ Σὺνήνην, ἐν ἧ καὶ θαυμασιώτεροι ἄνδρες τυγχάνουσιν καὶ πλῆθος μοναχῶν ἄπειρον; (Festugière). For the translation, A.-J. Festugière, *Enquête sur les moines d’Égypte (Historia monachorum in Aegypto)*, Paris 1964, 130.