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The Third Dimension of Coptic Books: Sacrality in Materiality

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Abstract: Books are complex objects. They have an undeniable material dimension, because they are artifacts characterized by a refined technology that has evolved over the centuries, and at the same time, they are vectors of intellectual products, consisting of the work(s) that they convey. However, books may also have a third dimension, since they embody the sacrality of a cult, belong to a performing rite, are offered to god(s) for the salvation of a soul, etc. Therefore, they incorporate an intrinsic sacredness for the simple reasons that they contain certain texts and are used on certain occasions to perform a certain rite. This paper explores the sacred aspect of Coptic codices and their third dimension, analyzing in particular the special case of books buried with a deceased person.

Keywords: Christian Egypt; Coptic manuscripts; codices buried with deceased persons; material sacredness; eschatology

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1. The Three Dimensions of Coptic Books

The interest in ancient books, including those from Christian Egypt, has long resided almost entirely in their content alone, with practically no attention to the materiality of manuscripts and their writing supports (papyrus, parchment, pottery, etc.). The text was what counted for scholars (mainly philologists, but also historians of Christianity, patrologists, etc.), to the point that single texts of multiple-text codices have often been published separately from one another, sometimes without mentioning the manuscript that conveyed them, even without referring to the other texts contained in the same manuscript.[1] It was the intellectual dimension of books that prevailed: the text itself over any other aspect.

Since the 1980s, an opposite but at times no less extreme approach has emerged; to wit, the study of a manuscript as an object, which aims to analyze in detail the materiality of the writing supports, book forms, writing tools, etc., reserving only marginal attention to the textual aspects (Bozzolo and Ornato 1980; Lemaire 1989). Measures of margins, statistics on the number of columns or characters per line, and analyses of the inks used are some of the aspects of the codicological approach, which despite several undeniable merits, mirroring the philological one, limited it to focusing exclusively on one facet of book production (Gumbert 2004; Andrist et al. 2013; Maniaci 2021).[2] As a consequence, the material dimension of books has come to overshadow their intellectual dimension to the point of reducing the book to a mere physical object.

Such a substantial and at times drastic nondialogue between philologists on the one side and codicologists on the other—with few, but important recent exceptions—[3] has often not only led to a parceled study of ancient books, but by rejecting or at least neglecting a global approach, has resulted in completely overlooking the third dimension of codices.

Although books are undeniably material objects, artifacts characterized by a refined technology that has evolved over the centuries—an aspect that has an intellectual dimension in itself—they are also vectors of intellectual products, consisting of the work(s) that they convey. However, we too often forget that books may have a third dimension, since they also embody the sacrality of a cult, belong to a performing rite, are offered to god(s) for the salvation of a soul, etc.[4] Therefore, they embody an intrinsic sacredness by virtue of

the simple fact that they contain certain texts and are used on certain occasions to perform a certain rite.[5] In this respect, they are not «passive and inert recipients of human action» (Barrett 2016). Rather, they actively shape human religious behavior, molding new rites and customs.[6] In this respect, the author of these pages considers the status of "being sacred" as the result of a social and religious process: an item is not sacred in itself, but it becomes sacred in specific conditions as a consequence of a rite.[7]

Even beyond Egypt, in different cultural contexts and periods, books have been used as tangible supports for rites,[8] e.g., for touching, handling, and even kissing them during different rituals. As Ioanna Patera writes «Besides rituals that involve an oral performance (utterances) and gestures, a number of ritual practices are enacted with the help of objects, or material supports» (Patera 2012). For instance, swearing on Gospels or kissing the Bible or missals during a coronation or other celebrations (Rudy 2023, p. 62) was a common and ritualized act in the Western Middle Ages. On such occasions, due to a specific rite, a book was perceived as the shell of sacredness, as its material manifestation. By virtue of its authority and divine inspiration, it was a sacred object, but also much more than that. In particular, osculation or «the gesture of the kiss became embedded in the practice of Christianity, a religion that drew its authority from the written word» (Rudy 2023, p. 83). Sacrality—a material sacrality—is therefore the possible third dimension of books, and Coptic books are no exception. Specific ritual contexts and repeatable and symbolizable actions may activate their function of mediation between human beings and the holy,[9] transforming them into a sort of "bridge". They are books, but at the same time much more than that, mutating from passive and inert recipients into a *materia sacra*, an agent of divine action.[10]

The following pages contain some examples of how, in certain circumstances, Coptic books became *materia sacra*, having a role in the Egyptian miaphysite religious belief that was neither entirely functional nor entirely symbolic. By simply possessing them, using them in a specific context, locating them in a particular placement, and making them a material support for the faith granted their owner/user a special privilege, becoming *symbola* of the presence of Christ.

In particular, we will analyze the case of books buried with a deceased person.

2. Death and Books

The custom of depositing funerary texts along with the body of a deceased individual has been widely studied in the context of pharaonic Egypt.[11] As is well known, the Book of the Dead (or better, Book of Coming Forth by the Day)—which is one of the three funerary *corpora* of spells and instructions of ancient Egypt, with the other ones being the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts— in particular, served the purpose of accompanying and facilitating the passage of the dead person into an afterlife that was fraught with many dangers and trials.[12]

On the contrary, research on the act of depositing books with the deceased in Christian Egypt has been largely neglected.

Unfortunately, the scarce attention given to comprehensive investigations of late antique funerary contexts has resulted in a paucity of documentation on Christian mummies buried with books. As a consequence, the phenomenon has never been systematically studied, or its significance has been underestimated.

While the definition of "Christian Book of the Dead"[13] that has sometimes been used is understandably considered inappropriate and too suggestive due to the particular technical features that make the formulas and vignettes of the Book of the Dead basically a magical tool, a sort of guidebook providing the spells and enchantments necessary for the risky trials faced to earn eternal life, the practice of taking a book—normally of biblical content—along on the journey into the Christian afterlife not only is undeniable but also appears to have been a socioreligious practice that should greatly interest scholars and require an explanation.

Brent Nongbri, in listing the few full-blown cases, has pointed out that «there is very little credible evidence for the burial of Christian books in tombs with corpses in Egypt»,

stating that aside from three cases, he was not aware of other credible reports of early Christian books being found in tombs in Egypt (Nongbri 2018, pp. 91–92).

However, even if one swallow does not make a summer, the small number of such cases in no way limits the importance of the phenomenon. On the contrary, it suggests the need for a comprehensive review of other book finds from necropolises.

Archeological reports[14] often mention the discovery of late antique manuscripts, in Greek or in Coptic—or more often, fragments of manuscripts—in necropolises, without being more precise about their original location, since they were mostly found in secondary depositions. It is evident that these remnants of manuscripts could have even been originally located inside the chapels that were often present in cemeteries or in tombs, together with the deceased. For the sake of completeness, it should be added that in some cases, the reports mention discoveries of manuscripts found buried in cemetery contexts, but (apparently) not in direct connection with a burial.[15]

This is the case with the recovery of the papyrus codex containing the Gospel of John in the village of el-Hamāmyah, just south of Asyūṭ, of which Petrie provides a fairly accurate account without, however, comprehending the relationship between this discovery and the surrounding architectural complexes, namely the tombs and the church:

> «Near the village of Hamamieh, close to a large wady or ravine, one of these spurs, covered with limestone detritus, has been used as a cemetery in Predynastic, early Dynastic and Roman times. When Mr. Guy Brunton was clearing this in March 1923 for the British School of Archaeology, a broken crock was found, buried 18 inches under the surface, in the neighbourhood of the Roman or early Coptic graves. The pot is of red pottery painted pale buff, with a decoration in black of bands and spots, which cannot unfortunately be closely dated. Mr. Brunton's assistant, Mr. Starkey, in emptying the dust from the pot found that it contained a little package of papyrus wrapped in rag, and tied with thread. It was very fragile; the outer parts were dark brown, and partly decayed. It was therefore brought to England in the original wrapping as it was found, to minimise risks in transport. The clearance of the ground was completed by Mr. Brunton in December 1923, and brought to light traces of crude brick walls in the immediate neighbourhood, with one carved limestone capital of Byzantine style. . .». (Petrie 1924, pp. ix–x)

It is also worth mentioning here AnneMarie Luijendijk's experience:

> «Surveying the archaeological provenance of early Christian manuscripts, I found that a good number of them had been buried, alone, with other writings, or with deceased people. Such burial practices indicate the value—religious, economic, personal—associated with these manuscripts. The burial of used-up sacred manuscripts evokes a practice reflected upon more systematically in rabbinic Jewish circles regarding the *genizah*, or storage room». (Luijendijk 2010, pp. 238–39)

In analyzing the most trustworthy examples in which the deposition of a book together with the remains of a deceased person is documented with certainty or with a high plausibility, it is worth starting from the most striking case—and at the same time, surprisingly, one of the least known—i.e., a manuscript book used as funerary equipment:[16] the so-called Gospel of John of Dayr al-Naqlūn (Godlewski 1986).[17]

It was discovered in 2002, when the mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, active in the archaeological area of the monastery of the Archangel Gabriel in southern Fayyūm, investigated the eastern part of the cemetery used by the civilian population that gravitated around the monastery (the so-called site A; Godlewski 2002, pp. 163–71).

As part of these burials, inside what has been identified as a small family mausoleum, three bodies were found, two of which—a man and a woman—shared the same bed and appeared richly dressed in civilian clothes.[18] The manuscript was found next to the man's

head. The funerary equipment was completed with two glass bottles, two *calami*, and a wooden case with metal decorations.

The codex was made up of 73 rather small sheets of paper (mm 128 × 193) on which the text was arranged in a single column of about 23–26 lines per page.[19] The text was preceded by a sheet filled with a full-page decoration representing a cross with flat intertwined ribbons.[20]

The manuscript provides a sure *terminus post quem* compared to the operation of copying, since the text of the Gospel of John is followed by three scribal notes (Delattre and Vanthieghem 2016, pp. 61–71), the first of which, in Coptic—which we can consider the only true colophon (f. 71v)— mentions the year 493 of the *hijra*, i.e., the year 1099/1100. The second subscription, written by another hand once more in Coptic, is very incomplete and mentions the deacon Shenoute, the son of John (f. 72r), whom the editors of the text believe to be the owner of the codex as well as the author of the prayer contained in the subscription. Lastly, the third subscription (f. 72r), in Arabic and dated 16 September 1107, again mentions Shenoute (Šanoūda son of Yuḥanna), but this time as the author of the short text, qualifying him as a scribe as well as a priest. This note also seems to have the purpose of commemorating the entry into the monastic community of a third person (Walīd son Ǧurayǧ).

Despite such a wealth of paratexts, it cannot be taken for granted that the deceased with whom the codex was found is Shenoute. Moreover, as for his identity, the cemetery has been identified as created for the civilian population,[21] and it should not be forgotten that he was found next to a woman. However, the authors of the *editio* of the scribal notes seem to refer to a monastic context, although the deceased is defined by the second Coptic "colophon" as a deacon and not as a monk.

Whether or not the dead person should be identified as Shenoute, the son of John, who exactly was the man with the codex? Was the codex with the Gospel of John written for him from the beginning? Can the *calami* be considered as unequivocally referable to his presumed activity as a copyist? We are greatly tempted to answer yes to the last two questions, but caution is never enough in these cases. The only certainty is that the codex was placed in the tomb as funerary equipment of a rather opulent burial. This evident wealth, in a Fayyūm whose inhabitants by then were in majority Islamic, has been appropriately stressed.[22]

What has gone unnoticed, however, is the extraordinary continuity in using books as funerary equipment until at least the first half of the 12th century. Not to mention the fact that the discoveries of manuscripts in situ and in primary deposit, as in this case, even outside the funerary contexts are very rare.

If the discovery of the Gospel of John from Dayr al-Naqlūn illustrates how such a funerary practice was still in use even during the Middle Ages, the custom of placing books in Christian burials is also documented by more ancient examples.

In the fall of 1984,[23] an Egyptian team directed by inspector Ibrahim Ali Gad found in a cemetery of late antiquity located near the village of al-Mudil (about 45 km north of Oxyrhynchus) a female deposition, whose body had been embalmed, and under (or near) whose head there was a parchment codex containing the Psalter. Three days after its discovery, the precious artefact was moved to a laboratory to be analyzed by Nasry Iskander, who observed its progressive deterioration without really being able to stop it.

The discovery, exceptional in itself because of both the discovery of a book in situ—and in primary deposit, which as already observed, is a very rare event—and the condition of the artefact, appeared all the more astonishing on account of the apparent modesty of the remaining burials, some of which were collective tombs.

Unfortunately, all we know about the discovery of the Psalter from al-Mudil derives from Gawdat Gabra's observations and research based on unpublished excavation diaries, since the mission members never published either any official report or any photo or drawing of the tomb (Gabra 2004, p. 1070).

As for its content, the codex (today kept at the Coptic Museum in Cairo, with call number Ms. 6614, inv. 12488) is the oldest complete example of the Psalter, datable—on the basis of paleographic and codicological aspects—from the end of the fourth to the beginning of the fifth century.[24]

It is a small-format manuscript (mm 122 × 167) made up of 249 leaves, tied by a binding made of wooden plates (mm 175–178 × 125–128) covered by decorated leather. The codex still preserves the leather rope that was supposed to tie and close it, held in place by a «bone peg carved in the shape of a looped cross».[25] The text, written in a single column of about 21 lines per page in Oxyrinchite dialect, differs from any other known Psalter and thus, also poses the question of its tradition and transmission.

Although very little is known about the exact circumstances and location of its discovery, another interesting case of codex buried with a deceased person is that of a manuscript found, in 1911, in al-Ašmūnayn by some local collaborators of Wallis Budge.[26] It is a papyrus codex written in Coptic, datable to the 4th-5th century, containing Deuteronomy, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, and an extract from the Apocalypse of Elijah, the latter added in the free space left at the end of the codex.[27]

The codex, which consists of 109 sheets with maximum dimensions of mm 291 × 165, was purchased by the British Museum, where the leaves were immediately separated from the binding and placed under glass (Budge 1912, pp. x–xi). The binding, which has traces of ancient restorations, consisted of plates made of overlapping papyrus sheets covered with painted leather.[28]

The codex has a very interesting combination of biblical texts, which provides an accurate picture of the ongoing evolution of Coptic books and the literature of that period. The restoration carried out in antiquity also documents a long-lasting use of the codex.

At the time of its discovery, the manuscript was still wrapped in a fabric. Budge reports having personally inspected the sarcophagus and the male body, who bore an iron chain around his waist[29] and with whom the codex was buried. Unfortunately, this happened after the removal of the codex from its original location.

In any case, Budge's deductions—according to which the deceased would have been «a "solitary" or anchorite of especial holiness» who «had copied it with his own hands, and valued it highly, and always had it with him or near him during his lifetime», and who «had been buried by his disciples, who either found the coffin empty—which was most probably the case—or had turned out its occupant to make room for their master»—appear particularly naïve; hence the just prudence that Brent Nongbri has expressed in evaluating this kind of discovery narration (Nongbri 2018, p. 94).

In the progressive scarcity of narratives on the discovery of books in burials, we note a frequent tendency for over-interpretation in identifying the deceased person with a monk, even when the clues are weak or completely lacking. This is, for instance, what has happened in the cases of the Gospel of John of Dayr al-Naqlūn (fragile clues and in contradiction with the interpretation of the vocation of cemetery A, identified as a place of secular burials) and the multitextual codex of Panopolis (no clues whatsoever). Peter van Minnen writes about this last find, stating that «monks are certainly not the only candidates for the ownership of early Christian texts. Any Greek-speaking inhabitant of Panopolis with a penchant for apocalyptic literature may have been buried in cemetery A» (van Minnen 2003, p. 18).

This overinterpretation is not accidental, but rather depends on the distortion of the historical perspective that has long tainted the studies on the Coptic manuscript tradition, a distortion caused by the survival, above all, of late codices (post eighth century) produced and/or preserved in monasteries. However, it should be recalled that in the 4th-6th centuries, monastic libraries were by no means the only places that produced and disseminated culture, and that highly educated cultural circles were active in many urban areas. Consequently, the use of burials with books also supersedes the monastic world.

3. Books as Ritual Objects

Even if we take into account all the necessary precautions, we should not be too skeptical in evaluating the phenomenon of books found with deceased persons. The discovery of codices inside burial sites is in itself so striking, that it could have very well been "spent" to obtain a greater profit in the sale of ancient books, especially in the golden age of manuscript quests between the late 19th and early 20th century, which led to the formation of the main museum and library collections. It is precisely the small number of such cases that makes credible the few data at our disposal.

No one today disputes that Christians practiced mummification.[30] Therefore, why should it seem so unlikely that the use of books as funerary equipment continued, above all since recent, well-documented archaeological excavations tend to confirm it?

But how to explain such a practice? What was the real purpose of burying a book in a tomb and in strict contact with the body? Did the content of the codices play a role in this custom?

Another discovery of a book inside a burial site is the parchment codex, in Greek, datable to the 6th-7th century, found in Panopolis in the winter of 1886/1887,[31] which contains the Gospel of Peter, the Apocalypse of Peter, the first part of the Book of Enoch, as well as an anonymous martyrology of Julian of Anazarbus.[32] The codex, written by different hands,[33] was discovered «about 200 m north-east from the top of a cemetery at Akhmim» (van Minnen 2003, p. 17), which is unfortunately an ambiguous and imprecise expression. The cemetery in question, called A, one of the three identified in the area, was used more or less continuously from the dynastic period to the Late Antiquity.

It has been stressed how the descriptions of the afterlife contained in the Apocalypse of Peter are comparable to some formulas in the Book of the Dead, a fact that would strengthen the hypothesis of the continuation of an ancient funerary ritual use for salvific purposes. The act of depositing a book in a Christian burial, however, is just a pale memory of the original rite. The practice is apparently the same (and in this respect, it is comparable to the prolonged use of mummification), but the purpose owes a new eschatological function that has nothing to do with the performative technical dimension of the Book of the Dead, which is basically a manual of magical spells.

Eternal life is notoriously also one of the main themes of the Gospel of John, as are also, in this case, the salvific elements of the work (Cook 1988). The (biblical) content, therefore, plays an important role in the custom of depositing books in Christian tombs.

Books at burial sites are *ritual objects* not because they have in themselves a sacral property, but because in that specific ritual context and due their displacement in strict contact with the body, they act as a mediator with God.[34] Being imbued with the living Word, they activate the salvific presence of Christ, becoming a *viaticum* for eternal life.

Not all books acquire such a status: only some, selected on the basis of the content and the value that they had for their owners. The rite of locating them in burials assigns to them a bodily, affective, religious, and intellectual function, making the book a divine agent.[35]

In brief, if most of the books potentially might become ritual objects, only some of them, in their specific function become *materia sacra*. «In other words, they stand for something else» (Patera 2012), Christian talismans that contain the salvific presence of Christ.

After all, inter alia, standing for something else is also the condition and purpose of another category of codices, namely the so-called polyglot manuscripts. This exiguous bibliological group of codices comprises the following extant examples:[36]

- Milano, Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, B 20 inf. A + inf. B (the manuscript is now bound as two separate volumes):[37] a pentaglot paper codex (mm 360 × 265) that contains the Pauline corpus, the Catholic Epistles, and the Acts of the Apostles in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), Syriac, Coptic (Bohairic), Arabic, and Armenian.[38]
- Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Orientale 2:[39] a pentaglot paper codex (mm 355 × 270) that contains the Psalter in Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and Armenian.[40] A note in Arabic at the end of the manuscript attests to the fact that it

was restored in the year 1626 CE (Monday 1st of Koiahk 1343 *Anno Martyrum*) at the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn.

Both codices are from «the multi-ethnic monastic colonies in the desert of Wādī al-Naṭrūn» (Suciu 2023), and are datable, on codicological bases and other considerations, from the end of the 13th to the mid-14th century. Their quality (despite the alternation of several hands, because different scribes were needed for the different languages), the paleography (which reveals a certain rigidity, at least in the Coptic text), the large size of the books, and the fact that we can hardly imagine an official liturgical occasion in which the religious texts were read in all the languages present in the manuscripts[41] suggests that they were not created for a practical, contingent purpose but rather for a symbolic one, i.e., representing the unity of the Oriental (miaphysite) churches, separated by political events but strictly united by the same faith.[42] The creation of these codices enabled religious identity to become material and tangible.[43] In brief, polyglot codices embodied the religious character of a church in search of internal stability, in contrast—at least symbolically—to a variety of external conflicts.

4. Conclusions

The sacrality of codices found in tombs is even more evident. The act of burying a codex united the subject—the deceased—with the object—the book—[44] in a relationship that made sense only in Egypt, by virtue of a long-lasting but reinterpreted ritual custom, even if in Late Antiquity this was reinterpreted in a Christian perspective.

The object—the manuscript—coincided with its meaning—the protection of Christ on the owner in his/her passage to the afterlife. The book, in its physical dimension and with its eschatological value, embodied the role of a salvific tool: a material aid in facing the fears inherent in death.[45]

It is probably not by chance that the books found in funerary contexts are normally of a small size, thus suggesting that they originally belonged to the personal property of the deceased. They were "familiar" luxury objects, with a deep symbolic meaning which, however, was not detached from the materiality of the object.

Much remains to be investigated regarding this religious and ritual practice,[46] but the third dimension of Coptic books is emerging more and more as an undoubted manifestation of sacred material identity.[47] This suggests the need to pay more attention to the archaeological contexts and the specific vocations of some manuscripts, which are often much more than just books.

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Notes

1 This is the case, for instance, of the edition by Francesco Rossi of the Coptic texts conveyed by the papyrus codices preserved in the Museo Egizio, Turin. On this matters, see (Orlandi 2023, pp. 30–36).

2 All the codicological publications listed here undeniably represent an extremely valuable contribution to the new attention reserved to the materiality of the manuscript, but at the same time they show the more and more divergent approach to the study of codices by the different categories of scholars.

3 For a global approach to the study of manuscripts, in all their aspects, see (Bausi et al. 2015). Within Coptic studies, for a combined attention to the philological and material aspects of a manuscript and the practice of editing and studying texts in the form in which they are attested by a specific witness see (Lied and Lundhaug 2017) (in particular the chapter "An Illusion of Textual

Stability. Textual Fluidity, New Philology and the Nag Hammadi Codices", by Hugo Lundhaug). More in general, the scientific products of the ERC-funded project NEWCONT (New Contexts for Old Texts: Unorthodox Texts and Monastic Manuscript Culture in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Egypt), directed by Lundhaug at the University of Oslo, embody the desidered approach that assigns the same dignity to text and material support. See (Lundhaug 2019).

4 The bibliography related to the debate regarding the concept of "sacred"/"sacrality"/"sacredness" is immense and impossible to be summarized here. Cf. (Idinopulos and Yonan 1996, p. 1): «It is difficult to see how one could study religions without some working notion of the holy or sacred; it is equally difficult to fix on one, universally agreed upon definition of the sacred». See (Borgeaud 1994) for a critical overview of the meaning of "sacred" in sociology and history of religion, and its sometimes ambiguous meaning. On "sacred", see also (Santi 2004), opposed to (Merkur 1996), who partially reevaluates the positions of the phenomenological school of history of religions. The author of these pages considers the status of "being sacred" as the result of a social and religious process: an item is not sacred in itself, but it becomes sacred in specific conditions, as a consequence of a rite.

5 For a sceptical view of the concept "sacred"/"holy" («the concept has been over-burdened») see (Guthrie 1996, pp. 124–38).

6 See the collection of articles edited by (Barrowclought and Malone 2007).

7 Mary Farag, in analyzing the concept of "ecclesial property" in the broadest sense (therefore including the so-called *res sacrae* of a church), stresses the social construction of the category "sacred": «ecclesial property was socially constructed as sacred in late antiquity» (Farag 2021, p. 4). Going to the roots of the legal aspects of the matter, Farag adds: «Laws and canons restricted the process by which a thing could become sacred and which things could be legally recognized as sacred» (Farag 2021, p. 11) and «the condition of being sacred did included not only the church building and liturgical vessels, but also associated properties, such as revenue-producing lands or even slaves. To use legal parlance, it was not only immovable property (e.g., the church building) that counted as *res sacrae*, but also movable (e.g., the vessels) and self-moving (e.g., the slaves) property. "Ecclesial property" refers to the whole set» (Farag 2021, p. 15).

8 For Tibet, see the chapter "Holy Books as Ritual Objects and Vessels of Teachings in the Era of the 'Further Spread of the Doctrine' (Bstan pa yang dar)" in (Diemberger 2012).

9 «L'adjectif "sacré", qui répond au latin *sacratus* (et non à *sacer*), désigne donc ce qui a fait l'objet d'une consécration, d'un "sacre"». (Borgeaud 1994, p. 390).

10 For a case of manuscripts that, in addition to philological and material aspects, embody an extra function, see (Dilley 2017), where the author explores "the material dynamics and ritual context behind the writing, circulation, copying and reading of Shenoute's *Canons*" (p. 75). In this case, manuscripts containing Shenoute's *praecepta* become "ongoing calls for collective repetance" (p. 76).

11 Part of this section has been published, in a different form, in (Buzi 2020).

12 (Faulkner 1985; Taylor 2010). The phenomenon of burying books with the deceased is also known in other cultures. In ancient China, for instance, it is attested by several examples, one of the most famous of which is the *Chu Silk* manuscript of astrological and astronomical text. It was discovered in a Warring States period tomb, dating back to *c*. 300 BCE. (Barnard 1973). Another case of Chinese manuscript found in a tomb is the *Ernian lüling* manuscript that, according to a recent study, was compiled in the second year of Empress Lü (186 BCE) nearing the death of the owner, and was not produced for practical use, but specifically for burial in the tomb. (Jingrong 2019, pp. 143–58). See also (Loewe 1977, pp. 99–136).

13 (Tutty 2018). Particularly implausible is the theory that the Nag Hammadi codices should be interpreted as a multiple of the Christian Book of the Dead. See (Denzey and Blunt 2014, pp. 398–99): «Rather than parts of a Pachomian library that had been intentionally hidden by monks to avoid persecution by the emerging Alexandrian orthodoxy, we suggest that the Nag Hammadi codices could just as plausibly have been private productions commissioned by late ancient Egyptian Christians with antiquarian interests. The books were later deposited in graves, following a late antique modification of a custom known in Egypt for hundreds of years. Furthermore, we contend that their eventual placement in graves may not have been coincidental; the arrangement of certain volumes reflects eschatological as well as antiquarian interests, meaning that at least some volumes may have been intentionally crafted as funerary deposits, Christian "Books of the Dead" that only made sense in the context of late antique Egypt».

14 See, for instance, the case of Panopolis: (Geens 2007, p. 74): «A lot of these manuscripts are likely to come from cemetery A, where Coptic burials were found, but hardly any reliable information is available for these finds».

15 Despite the title, (Roberts 1963) is not so useful. On the possible function of viaticum of some *ostraca* containing passages of the gospels, of uncertain archaeological context, see (Lefebvre 1904, p. 2) and (Gallazzi 2004, p. 3, fn. 6).

16 This finding does not appear in the list denominated "Christian Books found with Bodies" from (Nongbri 2018, p. 91).

17 Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature, CLM 6474 [https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/6474] (accessed on 1 December 2023; van der Vliet 2003, pp. 172–76).

18 R. Engelbach, like many other scholars at that time, thought that the use of being buried with tunics and dresses lasted only until the sixth century CE: «The next change, at about the middle of the IIIrd Century, was to clothe the bodies in their own garments ornamented with elaborately woven textiles which often depict classical subjects. This fashion seems to have lasted until the VIth Century». (Engelbach 1946, p. 243).

[19] The codex is manufactured as follows: quires one to five and seven are quinions, quire six is a senion. Moreovers, quires one to five are numbered from the first to the last page, while quire six is numbered only in the first page, quire seven is not numbered.

[20] For a description of the cover, see (Boudalis 2018, pp. 144–45, Fig. 120).

[21] (Godlewski 2002, p. 168): «To date, over 340 burials of men, women and children, belonging to a Christian community connected with the monastery, have been uncovered in the cemetery at Naqlun. Not one can be identified as a monk's burial. The majority of the graves are dated to the 12th and 13th centuries, but the oldest could possibly go back as far as the late 11th. The most recent burials on the site could be of the 14th century, perhaps even later, especially the burials made in the abandoned church interior. Studies of the textiles and the Arabic inscriptions ornamenting many of the pieces should provide a more specific chronology for particular graves. Also the glass and pottery furnishings should be helpful in this respect, as well as objects obviously connected with the deceased's profession, such as weaving implements, pen cases etc.». The underline is of the author of these pages.

[22] (Godlewski 2002, p. 171): «The cemetery in Naqlun with its well preserved graves, the numerous textiles of documented function in the burial rites (coffin shrouds, body shrouds, pillows, robes), equally numerous well-preserved mats and fair quantities of vessels and personal belongings, including jewelry, contributes to a study of the burial rites current in a Christian community of the 11th through the 13th century, a time when the community was becoming a minority group in the Fayum».

[23] Different publications mention different months for the discovery of the Psalter: October or November.

[24] For the specific features of this version of the Psalter, see (Gabra 1995; Emmenegger 2007; Brown 2006, p. 74).

[25] (Gabra and Eaton-Krauss 2006, pp. 120–21, Fig. 78; Gabra 2014, pp. 108–9). For a description of the binding, elaborated by Eliana Dal Sasso on the basis of the description by Gawdat Gabra and on the examination of the available photographic reproduction of the codex, see: [https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/1125] (accessed on 1 December 2023). See also (Gabra 1995, pp. 26–41, Abb. 2–8, Tafel 5b, 6a-6b, 7a-7b e 8a-8b).

[26] (Budge 1920, II, pp. 372–74): «[I] urged the natives to search for more unopened graves in ancient Coptic cemeteries, and to try and find me more texts. In January, 1911, one of them discovered near Ashmunen a group of tombs which had escaped his notice in former years. When he and his friend cleared them out they found many bodies wrapped in coarse yellow linen cloth, and several very ancient iron Coptic crosses, which seemed to have been attached to them. At one end of the group of graves they opened a two-chambered tomb, part of which had been hewn in the lower slope of the hill. In the larger chamber they found several mummies of the Roman Period and a long rectangular wooden coffin, the sides of which were decorated with paintings of serpents and figures of gods in the style of the second or third century A.D. In this coffin was the body of a man wrapped in coarse Akhmim linen, with an iron chain round his waist. Between his feet was a linen-covered bundle, which, when untied, was found to contain a papyrus book. When the finder of this MS. brought it to me it was still in the linen wrappings in which he discovered it».

[27] (Budge 1912, pp. ix–xv). LDAB/TM 107763; Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature, CLM 1371 [https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/1371] (accessed on 1 December 2023). The record includes a description of the binding by Eliana Dal Sasso. For an accurate description of the structure of the codex, see (Schüssler 1995, pp. 84–88 (sa 15); (Layton 1987, p. 3–5 (no. 1)). For the colophon: (Schmidt 1925, pp. 312–21); for the role played by the codex in the transmission of the Gospel of John in Coptic, see (Bosson 2014, pp. 1–46). Among the papyri reused for making the *cartonnage* of the binding (now preserved in the Dept. of Western MSS, under the shelf mark Papyri 2020–2036) there is a passage from the Book of Daniel (1, 17–18), in Greek.

[28] For a description of the binding see (Pedersen 1954, pp. 41–64: 53 (n. 18); Budge 1912, p. xi).

[29] (Budge 1920, II, pp. 372–74): «I questioned the finder of the MS. very closely, and then went at once with him to look at the tomb and the coffin in which he had found the MS., and I was convinced that the coffin was made in the Roman Period».

[30] On mummification in Christian Egypt see (Castel 1979; Krause 1983; Horak 1995; Prominska 1986; Fischhaber 1997; Dunand 2006; Dunand 2007; Förster 2008).

[31] For the several versions of the brief report about the finding, see (Nongbri 2018, p. 92).

[32] LDAB 1088. The manuscript is partially preserved in Alexandria, at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (binding, plus one leaf: inv. 10759) and partially in Cairo, at the Coptic Museum (ff. 1–33, CG 10759). Not surprisingly, due to the interest in the text, the bibliography is rich. See above all (Bouriant 1892, p. 93; van Minnen 2003, pp. 15–39; Kraus and Nicklas 2004; Foster 2010).

[33] For a detailed description of the composition of the codex, of its quires and the hands which wrote it, see (van Minnen 2003, pp. 19–23).

[34] On the the Syriac *Tetraevangelia* perceived as not mere textual containers, but as powerful ritualizing objects, "ritual foci" that embodied the physical presence and agency of Christ, see (Eastman 2019). See in particular the following paragraph: « A substantial number of prescriptive and descriptive sources testify to the powers and tasks ascribed to Gospel books, and the contexts in which they played a part. In all these contexts, the *tetraevangelion* acts as the physical presence of Christ, but it does so in different ways, tied to the different roles of Christ» (p. 312)

[35] For other examples of agency embodied by books see (Eastman 2019, pp. 312–16). In this respect, see also the case, which occurred during the Council of Ephesus (381), of the Gospel removed from its seat and put on the floor by the impious Nestorius so that he coud sit, an act that caused the reaction of Shenoute, who declared unacceptable that the «Son of God sits on the ground». Besa, *Life of Shenoute* 128–129, (Crum and Leipoldt 1906, p. 58).

[36] Polyglot Coptic manuscripts are the object of a long and very informative article by Alin Suciu, who efficaiously explains the symbolic meaning of them. (Suciu 2023). In addition to the two codices listed here, Suciu also mentions some fragments preserved in the Bodleian Library (Bodleian Library as Ms. Copt. C. 2) and in the British Library (Or. 1240a), which were part of another polyglot codicological unit.

[37] Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature, CLM 6723 [https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/6723]; [https://ambrosiana.comperio.it/opac/detail/view/ambro:catalog:28058] (accessed on 1 December 2023).

[38] (Löfgren and Traini 1975, p. 5; Vergani 2016, pp. 262–63, 275–79) and related bibliographical references. The Armenian version of the text disappears from f. 176. For details about the manuscript's content see (Suciu 2023).

[39] Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature, CLM 2652 [https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/2652]; [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Barb.or.2] (accessed on 1 December 2023). On the life of this codex, see also (Soldati 2022).

[40] (Proverbio 2012, pp. 163–74; Tisserant 1914, XLVII (n° 80) [Tab. 80 (= f. 39v)]). For the incredible life of the codex before entering the Vatican Library, see (Soldati 2022, pp. 71–78).

[41] To this consideration, Suciu adds «Perhaps the intention was not to create a complete multilingual Bible, since it is hard to imagine that the scribes had the entire set of biblical books available in all five languages, but rather to copy the most significant parts of the Christian scriptures, above all the Psalms, the gospels, and the *Praxapostolos*». (Suciu 2023).

[42] «The possibility that these polyglots were philological tools used for comparing different versions of the Bible can be eliminated at the outset, since they have no critical notes to suggest such a use. [. . .] If these manuscripts were neither scholarly tools nor liturgical books, what were they meant to accomplish? In my view, they were designed to invest with authority and prestige the communities who used them. It is no accident that they are all biblical in character, for these artifacts construct community by appealing to a higher authority, the divinely inspired text of the Bible. The choice of languages includes and excludes at the same time: on the one hand, they contain biblical texts in the tongues of the non-Chalcedonian Miaphysite churches; on the other hand, Greek and Hebrew have no place in the Egyptian polyglot manuscripts, indicating that the communities using these languages—the Chalcedonians and the Jews—do not belong to the imagined community of kinship». (Suciu 2023).

[43] The longlasting devotional, religious and symbolic value of Barberini orientale 2 is also demonstrated by the fact that the codex was not sold to Fr. Agathange de Vendôme, the agent of the French savant Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc in Egypt, but instead was exchanged with other sacred objects: « Ils nous ont domendé quelcque autre chose don't ils ayent besoin pour l'église. Ils nou ont domendé un calice d'argent, avec un petit plat d'argent, don't ils se servent au lieu de patane». (de Valence 1892, pp. 24–25) (Lettre XV. Agathange de Vendôme à Peiresc, 14 Mars 1634).

[44] On this concepts see also (Rowlands 2004).

[45] For the objects, which become sacred objects, and almost fetishes, due to their function, in ancient religions, see Fabietti (2014). In particular on holy book "sacro per sé", see (Fabietti 2014, p. 210).

[46] On the importance of archaeology in the study of religion, see (Rowan 2012) (in particular, the section "Materializing the Spiritual", whose collection of articles tries to answer the question "How might archaeology reveal the spiritual?". See also (Insoll 2009; Keane 2008; Barrowclought and Malone 2007; Bieh and Bertemes 2001).

[47] On books as scared and symbolic objects, not only in antiquity, see (Smith 2023) (in particular, the chapter "Talismanic books"). I thank Alin Suciu for suggesting this reading.

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