

THE NAQLUN JOHN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Jacques van der Vliet*)

The manuscript is a complete paper codex of 72 leaves (144 pages), measuring 19.2 x 12.8 cm. It is contained in a dark brown leather binding (19.5 x 13 cm) with a blind tooled decoration of a big cross within a frame on both front and back (cf. *Fig. 6* on p. 169 above).¹⁾ The binding is closed by an equally decorated envelope flap departing from the lower board and kept in place by an intricate cross-form leather strap pulled over a toggle.

The paper is beige to light-brown owing to discoloring. It is not watermarked and no wires or chains are visible. The codex is made up of seven quires composed of five folded double leaves (20 pages), except for the last two quires. The sixth quire consists of six double leaves (24 pages), whereas the composition of the seventh quire is as yet unclear and needs autoptic collation. The quires are stitched together by a thread that is still preserved in most places.

The codex is essentially complete, even though not a single page is free from damage. The first and last leaves of the codex, which bear respectively a frontispiece and colophons, are much ruined. There is marginal damage throughout, affecting the upper margins in particular, but this leaves most of the text intact. Only

the outer upper corners of the pages are lacking throughout. The loss of text, however, is usually negligible, apart from the very last pages where the top lines are seriously damaged.

The text is written in a single column of 23-26 lines. The written area occupies about 15.2 x 12.8 cm, leaving broad outer margins. No ruling is visible. Textual units are marked off by enlarged and thickened capitals protruding into the left-hand margins, but no other marginal signs or ornaments have been used. Owing to the loss of the outer upper corners of the pages, no folio or page numbers have been preserved. Each quire, on the other hand, is numbered on its first and last leaf in a decorated head-piece.

Decoration is sober but attractive and makes ample use of colored interlace patterns. The frontispiece (page 2) is occupied by a large cross (*Fig. 1*).²⁾ The first text page (page 3) bears the name of Saint John the Evangelist, contained within a frame strongly reminiscent of a *tabula ansata* and also the colophon on page 142 is framed by two lines of interlace decoration. The first and last page of each quire bears a head-piece (lost in the last quire), combining lettering (quire numbers, monograms) with modest decorative

*) University of Leiden

1) Cf. similar bindings in L. Depuydt, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library. Corpus van verluchte handschriften*, (Louvain 1993), vol. 2, pl. 447 ff., mostly also from the Fayoum.

2) Cf. the crosses from Hamouli codices in Depuydt, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pl. 24 ff.



Fig. 1. Frontispiece of the Coptic codex, AD 1099/1100 (Nd.02.239)
(Photo W. Godlewski)

elements (crosses, knots). Furthermore, the capitals in the left hand margins are doubled in color and the same procedure is followed for most of the high points that are used, as well as for the abbreviation strokes put over the *nomina sacra*.

For the text black ink is used throughout, with the occasional use of color for highlighting the elements specified above. The script is not the well known upright Sahidic uncial, characteristic, for example, of the numerous literary parchment codices from the nearby scriptorium of Toutoun (Stegemann's "schmaler Stil"), but the neat slightly right-sloping semi-uncial, typical of most colophons from the same source (Stegemann's "Subskriptionsschrift").³⁾

This clear and straightforward script is also frequently found in late (10th-11th century) documents from the region, as well as in liturgical manuscripts.⁴⁾ However, the copyist was well acquainted with the literary upright uncial, for both the headlines of the first text page and the colophon on page 142 are written in this style. Also in the main body of the text, the copyist from time to time lapses from the sloping colophon style into the upright literary style (e.g. page 5, line 17). This would show that he was habitually working rather in the latter style or, perhaps, that he copied a model in that style.

The main text looks like the work of a single hand, clearly that of a practiced professional. Letters are neat and clearly drawn. There are very few corrections; merely once or twice a forgotten syllable was added by the same hand. Punctuation consists mainly of single high points, frequently thickened with color into a dot.

These points and dots are placed regularly and logically, dividing the text into syntactic units; they may be followed by a blank space. Paragraphs, generally quite short, are marked off by enlarged capitals in the left-hand margins and sometimes start on a new line. Occasionally, an obelos-like sign (colon plus long stroke) replaces the high point at the end of a paragraph, leaving the rest of the line blank. No additional paragraph-signs or marginal ornaments occur and there is no trace of any other subdivision of the text (e.g. in *kephalaia*). Supralineation is regular. Both single syllabic consonants and clusters can bear a short stroke, often shortened into a point. Occasionally also vowels in open syllables are marked in this way (e.g. page 68, line 10: $\bar{\text{N}}\text{O}\bar{\text{Y}}\bar{\text{Z}}\text{O}\bar{\text{Y}}\bar{\text{O}}$). Consonantic $\bar{\text{I}}$ usually bears a diaeresis. *Nomina sacra* are abbreviated in the conventional way by long strokes that are doubled in color and thereby clearly distinguished from the short and swift strokes marking a schwa.

The codex contains the Gospel of Saint John in Sahidic followed by three colophons. The first colophon occupies the lower half of page 142. Distinct from the gospel text itself, it is written in upright uncials; it is, moreover, framed between two lines of colored interlace decoration. It is an anonymous prayer for the purchaser of the codex and most probably shows that it was bought ready-made. Below the second line of decoration, the year of production is stated in big letters: AH 493, which corresponds to AD November 1099-October 1100.⁵⁾ The other colophons are on the much ruined final leaf of the codex (page 143). The upper half of the leaf is

3) See V. Stegemann, *Koptische Paläographie* (Heidelberg 1936).

4) E.g. the Hamouli "typika", Depuydt, op. cit., nos. 58 and 59, or a late Sahidic-Arabic lectionary like K. Schüssler, *Biblia Coptica: Die koptischen Bibeltexte* (Wiesbaden 1995), vol. 1, fasc 3, sa 74^l (with Tafel 7).

5) For a similar arrangement, see Depuydt, op. cit., vol. 2, pl. 212 (Hamouli, 9th century).

now lost, whereas the lower half contains a damaged prayer for a deacon Shenoute. Judging from the surviving textual formulae, one is tempted to consider him as the copyist. If that is the case, then the loose layout and writing, the mediocre spelling and the illogically placed colons of this colophon are quite remarkable. The lower margin of this leaf is occupied by a four line inscription in very carelessly written and blotchy Arabic. This may be an owner's entry or a reader's note. The latter text, which is clearly secondary, may indicate that the codex was not buried with its first owner; on the other hand, the lack of marginal notes and secondary corrections in the text itself suggests that it cannot have circulated for a very long period after its production.

Undoubtedly the most important feature of the codex is that it contains an overall complete copy of the Gospel of Saint John in Sahidic Coptic. Because of their supposed early date, the Coptic translations of the New Testament occupy a privileged position in the field of NT textual criticism. This holds in particular for the Sahidic translation or translations of John.⁶⁾ However, although fragments of Sahidic NT texts abound, completely transmitted

units are rare, owing mainly to the decline and disappearance of Sahidic after about 1000. Actually, the Gospel of John is relatively well represented, but even then only four complete Sahidic manuscripts were available until now, ranging in date from the 5th to the 9th century.⁷⁾ The Naqlun find adds a fifth one that, though late, is of considerable interest.

Although Sahidic was at the time of copying not the written vernacular of the Naqlun region (this was rather a kind of Sf, characterised by a strong fayumizing accent in the vowel system), the present copyist writes a very correct Sahidic which seems to lack the local tainting sometimes discernible in the older Sahidic John from nearby Hamouli (Quecke's M, from the 9th or early 10th century).⁸⁾ This does not necessarily imply, however, that the Naqlun John was written outside the Fayoum.

The text itself clearly adheres to the Sahidic standard text of John (Kasser's "classic" Sahidic version), sharing a number of well known peculiar readings with other Sahidic manuscripts⁹⁾ and lacking, of course, the pericope of the adulterous woman (7:53-8:11).¹⁰⁾ On account of geographical and chronological proximity, one could perhaps expect the Naqlun John

6) See the monographs: R. Kasser, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean et les version coptes de la Bible*. Bibliothèque théologique (Neuchâtel 1966) and R.L. Moretz, *The Textual Affinity of the Earliest Coptic Manuscripts of the Gospel of John*. PhD thesis (Duke University 1968). I did not see Manal Yousri Gabr, *Philological Studies in the Coptic Versions of the Gospel of John*, PhD thesis (University of Liverpool 1990).

7) See H. Quecke, *Das Johannesevangelium säidisch*. Papyrologica Castroctaviana, Studia et Textus 11 (Rome-Barcelona 1984), who gives the text of the oldest of them (P) and the variant readings of the other three (A, B, M; respectively nos. sa 1, 4, 5 and 9 in F.-J. Schmitz, G. Minke, *Liste der koptischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments. I: Die sahidischen Handschriften der Evangelien*. Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung, Bd. 8, 13 and 15 (Berlin 1986-1991). A fifth one, also from Hamouli (Schmitz, Minke, *op. cit.*, sa 10; Schüssler, *op. cit.*, sa 507), can only be called complete in a restricted sense and is, owing to extensive damage, practically worthless for text-critical purposes. Note that Horner's well known edition (G.W. Horner, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect*, vol. III: *The Gospel of St. John* (Oxford 1911)) offers a *textus mixtus* based on fragments only.

8) A codex of the four gospels, Schmitz, Minke, *op. cit.*, sa 9; see now Depuydt, *op. cit.*, no. 13. For the *sigla* used here (after Quecke), see the preceding note.

9) For which see Quecke, *op. cit.*, 57-58.

10) Cf. Kasser, *op. cit.*, 60-61.

(here provisionally designated as N) to be a mere late and faulty derivative of the version embodied in the Hamouli manuscript M. A sample taken from chapter 1, however, belies this expectation. Whereas, predictably, N most often shares its readings with A, B and, of course, M, this is certainly not always the case. Sometimes, it even appears to side with the early ms. P against A, B and M. Thus, in 1:31, N has the order $\alpha\iota\epsilon\iota \lambda\eta\omicron\kappa$ with P against the other three and the circumstantial $\epsilon\iota\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\zeta\epsilon$ with the older manuscripts P, A and B against M.

In spite of its extremely late date, therefore, the Naqlun John is certainly not a slavish copy of one or another of the four

complete witnesses known to date. Moreover, even though the manuscript has its usual share of small copyist's errors, omissions and *ad sensum* additions, it appears to represent on the whole a carefully transcribed and well preserved text. N is therefore not only a welcome addition to the small number of complete Sahidic manuscripts of John, it also deserves to take its place in the textual history of the Sahidic NT as an independent witness on a par with A, B or M. In order to make it available to the scholarly world without much delay, the rapid publication of an *editio minor*, more or less along the lines of H. Quecke's "Johannesevangelium", is envisioned.