

Love of Coptic Manuscripts in the Time of Covid¹



The Newsletter of the Academy project Complete Digital Edition and Translation of the Coptic Sahidic Old Testament, Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities

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Introduction

In spring 2020, when the first Newsletter appeared, nobody could have foretold that we now, more than one year later, still live under the restrictions and conditions imposed by the Covid-19 Virus pandemic. As almost everyone else in the world, also the Coptic Old Testament team has to cope with a situation where personal meetings, collection visits, conference trips etc. had to be cancelled completely. Everything and everyone became a virtual being. Of course, it was an advantage that our online based collaborative workspace, database, manuscript repository, and publication platform, The [Virtual Manuscript Room \(VMR\)](#) enabled us to continue our work basically without major interruptions. But, personal communication, the exploration of the manuscript material in collections, and, not the least, the use of a library as indispensable components of daily project work became rare resources difficult to access. Even the ordering of manuscript surrogates from libraries, collections, or museums, which we hoped to continue doing from a home-office computer were not possible because these institutions were closed and stopped their services. Thus, this Newsletter is a behind schedule, and in many respects a special issue.

As if these times are not sad enough, we lost, in November and in February respectively, two dear friends, colleagues, and outstanding scholars, Jürgen Horn (1943–2020) and Wolf-Peter Funk (1943–2021). Both have always supported our project with unflagging enthusiasm and offered valuable help and advice. We miss them a lot.

Reconstruction and Edition of the Coptic Biblical manuscripts in the Virtual Manuscript Room (VMR)

In spite of all difficulties, the [Manuscript Catalogue](#) reflects the progress made in the growing number of manuscripts which are available in complete diplomatic edition. The entries in the Manuscript Catalogue show the manuscript numbers of the List of Coptic Biblical Manuscripts (LCBM), a [common and integral numbering system for the Coptic Biblical manuscripts of the Old and New Testament](#). LCBM is now the authoritative and standardized naming system for the Coptic Bible codices. It is compiled, maintained, and regularly updated in close collaboration between the Coptic Old Testament project in Göttingen and the Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster (INTF) and mirrors the actual state of reconstruction for the individual manuscripts. The first issue of 2021 is already [available on our website](#), and an updated version will be published on an annual basis.

Since the focus of the work in Münster is necessarily on the inclusion of the variant readings of the Coptic version in the apparatus of the [Editio Critica Maior \(ECM\) of the Greek New Testament](#) in most cases the numbers from sa 1–1999 (the number range reserved for the NT and for liturgical manuscripts) will have only a link to the [SMR-Database](#) – which in its turn provides all metadata for the NT manuscript in question.

As our project explicitly focuses on the reconstruction and edition of the manuscripts, the numbers from sa 2000 onwards (reserved for the OT manuscripts) will show a regularly growing number of manuscripts available in a full diplomatic edition and with a description of the meta data. For example, the famous and – unusually – complete manuscripts [sa 2006](#) (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), [sa 2007](#) (1–2 Kingdoms), and [sa 2008](#) (Isaiah) from the Archangel Michael Monastery in the Fayyum can now be fully consulted in diplomatic editions. This is especially important since sa 2006 and sa 2008 have not been published before.² However, being intact, these manuscripts are unusual cases within the transmission history of the Coptic Biblical manuscripts. The ‘normal’ situation, of course, are incomplete manuscripts with leaves and fragments scattered over several collections (see, for example, [sa 2033](#)). Moreover, due to the generosity of the [Morgan Library & Museum New York](#), where the three manuscripts are kept today, we have received a full set of digital color images to use in the edition in the VMR. Without the help and cooperation of the holding institutions even a mere virtual reconstruction and digital edition of the Coptic Bible would be difficult or impossible.

¹ Thanks are due to Gabriel García Márquez for the inspiration.

² The famous Facsimile Edition of the Morgan Manuscripts, H. HYVERNAT, *Codices coptici photographice expressi: Bibliothecae Pierpont Morgan* (56 vols; Rome: 1922), was only available in a handful of libraries in the world.

Though, for obvious reasons, the main focus of the project work must be still on the reconstruction and transcription of the manuscripts, the critical edition of the individual books is already being prepared. The digital tool, the [Collation Editor](#), used in the VMR and [successfully tested in the ECM online edition](#), is already available. It runs an automatic collation of the individual manuscript witnesses for each biblical book, and creates the basic data for the critical apparatus of the edition. How this will look like can be consulted in the model editions which we created for [Psalm 90](#) and [chapter 53 of Isaiah](#). The Psalms and Isaiah are particularly interesting and instructive for such a model edition as they are broadly attested both geographically and chronologically, while for most other books of the Sahidic Old Testament this is much less the case. Thus, the collation of these chapters includes all available Sahidic witnesses, as well as the secondary transmission (liturgical manuscripts, ostraca, amulets, quotations), and early dialectal parallel witnesses (like the Mesokemic version of Psalms). In this way, we can test the functionality and practicability of the components for a digital critical edition. The model editions are already accompanied by a translation in order to test this component as well, although a systematic translation will be the task of a later project phase.

Services, Dissemination and Publication Activities

In addition to the services already presented in the previous Newsletter the *Digital Resources* section on our website now include a new and absolutely innovative tool: The [Manuscript Speculation Tool](#). It allows to calculate with a high degree of probability how many letters, lines and pages are lost in the lacunas which are frequent in frag-

mentary Coptic manuscripts. How and when this amazing tool can be applied is explained in detail in two subsequent blogposts ([Part I](#), [Part II](#)).

The *Digital Resources* also include the possibility to apply an important service provided by our cooperation partner [Coptic Scriptorium](#): the NLP (natural language processing) pipeline. If you are a linguist interested in the Coptic Biblical text as a form of the (Later) Egyptian language, the service provides an analytical view of the syntactic-morphological structure (for an example using the first chapter of Deuteronomy see [here](#)). At the basis of the morphological segmentation by Scriptorium's NLP service is our project's reconstructed Sahidic biblical text. Likewise, a choice of New Testament, literary, and documentary Coptic texts is available. Clicking on a word of the Sahidic text in [chapter view](#) leads you directly to the corresponding entry in the [Coptic Dictionary Online](#). In this way, both a linguistic and lexical analysis is available for the Sahidic Biblical text.

The blogpost section on our website is intended to provide important short contributions related to the project work such as recent discoveries and advances, as well as informative blogs on recent developments and new publications in the field. To stay in touch with colleagues and friends of Coptic Studies all over the world in pandemic times the project organized, together with the Institute for Egyptology and Coptic Studies, an Online Lecture Series "[Material and Written Culture of Christian Egypt](#)". The series started in October 2020 and has attracted a large audience of Coptologists, colleagues and students from different fields, and members of the public. Past lectures continue to be available on our project's [YouTube Channel](#).

While the project and its work are 'born digital', the project members, of course, contribute also to print periodicals and handbooks. This publication activity can be followed via the regularly updated publication list on our website. The contributions of project members to Brill's *Textual History of the Bible*, the most comprehensive and up-to-date handbook of its kind, are especially significant since they offer the most recent overview on the Coptic versions of the Old Testament and their text-historical value as translations of the Septuagint. Six individual volumes have already appeared ([1A](#), [1B](#), and [1C](#), and [2A](#), [2B](#), and [2C](#)). For example, vol. 2A (2020) offers, for the first time, a consistent and comprehensive survey on the History of the Biblical canon in the Coptic versions.



In December 2020, a new volume in the project's monograph series *Texte und Studien zur Koptischen Bibel* (TSKB 2) appeared: [Peter Nagel's Das Deuteronomium sahidisch](#). This is the edition of the Deuteronomy text in the fourth century papyrus London, BL Or. 7594 (see [sa 17](#)). The edition was begun in the predecessor project in Halle and could now be completed, with technical support from our project members. It marks an important intermediate step on the way to the complete digital edition of the Sahidic Deuteronomy in the VMR.

We are hopeful that the situation will improve rapidly and we will see progress still in this year so that we can report more about new discoveries in the next issue of this Newsletter.

