

There and Back again – From Manuscripts to Editions and Back

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

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With Newsletter No. 3 at the end of 2022, we were hopeful that the Covid-19 pandemic would finally leave us. Well, the pandemic is still here, and the world has become even less peaceful since then. At least there were no more travel restrictions and visits to collections were generally possible. However, the collections of Coptic manuscripts in Moscow and St. Petersburg will be inaccessible for an indefinite period of time, *inter armas silent Musae*.

Our team members were able to visit the manuscript collections of the Vatican Library in Rome, Catholic University and the Freer Collection in Washington and the British Museum in London.

An important event took place in early February 2023 at the Logos Papal Center (Wadi al-Natrun) in Egypt, the 10th International Symposium of the St Mark Foundation for Coptic Heritage, dedicated to the Coptic Bible. Three of our team members (Chrysi Kotsifou, Julien Delhez and Frank Feder) actively participated in the symposium, which was attended by scholars from all over the world.

The Interdependence of the Reconstruction and Edition of the Coptic Biblical and Liturgical Manuscripts and the Edition of the Biblical Books

While the number of diplomatic editions in our [manuscript catalogue](#) is constantly growing, the focus of our

project work – in accordance with the planned work schedule – is on the digital and critical editions of the biblical books of the Pentateuch and the Prophets. Progress can be followed on our website under the heading “[Publications](#)”. Although the creation of a digital critical edition is technically much easier than the handwritten collations and witness synopses of earlier times, it still means a lot of work for the editor. The *Collation and Apparatus Editor*¹ (a tool built on top of [CollateX](#)) helps to collate the transcribed texts from the individual manuscript witnesses into a text edition with an apparatus of variant readings. As most of our editions are currently in progress, the potential of the digital edition can be adequately illustrated by the [test edition of Ps 90](#), which shows the complexity of the transmission of this outstandingly important book of the Coptic Bible. The collation of Ps 90 includes all available Sahidic witnesses, as well as the secondary tradition (liturgical manuscripts, ostraca, amulets, quotations) and early dialectal parallel witnesses (such as the Mesokemic version of the Psalms).

In addition to the interactive text and the apparatus menu, there is: a translation window (English and German) – with a systematic translation being the task of a later phase of the project –, a link to biblical quotations in Sahidic patristic literature and to the crosswire.org portal, where the Sahidic version can be compared with other biblical versions in parallel view. The most difficult part of the editor’s job is to decide which is the oldest attainable Sahidic text of a book and

which variant readings need to be included in the apparatus. This must be done by careful comparison with the Greek text of the Septuagint. Whenever the Sahidic text shows a deviation from the Greek text, this is noted in the apparatus.

The general observation that the Sahidic Standard Translation – which was very probably produced in the late fourth century – was handed down until the Middle Ages almost without any changes to the text can be confirmed for the books of the Pentateuch and the Major Prophets. The first digital edition of a biblical book that can be consulted online is [Leviticus](#). Since the editor menu of the critical editions contains abbreviations, links and services that are not always obvious to users, we are currently working on a manual or user guide for the critical edition.

Since we are dealing with a very fragmentary and incomplete manuscript tradition, the project work, even if the digital critical edition of a book has already begun, will always have to be reorientated towards the reconstruction of the manuscripts. The new discoveries include not only previously unknown witnesses and texts, the current research of our project team consists above all in joining together formerly separate leaves and fragments in order to complete already known manuscripts or to reconstruct new ones.

¹ See [here](#). It has been successfully tested in the [ECM online edition](#).

A few examples may illustrate this. Significant progress in our understanding of the manuscript tradition in the classical period of Coptic-Sahidic literature (sixth to eighth centuries) in one of its most important centres, the White Monastery in Upper Egypt (opposite Panopolis), has been achieved through our research on the codex structure of sa 2044. 55 leaves and fragments belonging to this codex have currently been identified. They are presently held in eight different collections (Rome, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna, London, Cairo, New York and Ann Arbor). Although these are mainly isolated leaves, the *Manuscript Speculation Tool*² developed by our project has made it possible to [reconstruct the overall structure of the codex](#) of this marvellous manuscript. The codex originally comprised 225 leaves (450 pages), which were organised into 28 quires. It turned out to be a one-volume Pentateuch codex, with page numbering starting anew at the beginning of each new book. It appears that no fragment from the book of Genesis has survived, yet there can be no doubt that it began with Genesis. While the evidence available so far suggests that larger volumes comprising more than one book were the exception in Sahidic manuscript culture before the Middle Ages (9th–10th century), the [reconstruction of the codex structure of sa 2044](#) proves that at

least in the seventh century large volumes were produced that could, for example, comprise the entire Mosaic corpus. Detailed information on this manuscript can be found [here](#).

Another example is provided by sa 2178L. Only recently have eight surviving pages (kept in Paris and Cambridge) of this Lent Lectionary been reassembled into a codex. It is very likely that other dislocated parts of this manuscript could reappear. Until now, the leaves were considered to be isolated fragments. Karlheinz Schüssler assigned them to three different manuscripts (sa 190L, sa 217L and sa 244L) in his manuscript catalogue *Biblia Coptica*. Our team not only found further fragments belonging to this codex, but was also able to identify the scribe of the manuscript, who is known to have written other manuscripts for the White Monastery in which colophons have been preserved. The colophons mention the archimandrite Apa Chael, during whose tenure the scribe was active. This means that the production of the lectionary can be dated fairly precisely to the time between 927/28 and 939/940. As the last page of our Lent Lectionary with the colophon has been preserved, we also learn that it belonged to the main church of the White Monastery. The details of this manuscript can be found [online](#).



Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1) fol. 62 recto (Leviticus 24:9–23) from manuscript sa 2044 . Source: gallica.bnf.fr

Consequently, even if the collation process for the critical digital edition of a biblical book has already begun, new discoveries may force us to redo it if essential parts of the text can be added to the edition. Of course, every critical edition, even a digital one, must come to an end. Therefore, new discoveries made after the digital edition of a book has been finalised will be included in a second edition.

- 2 This important [tool](#) is introduced in two blog entries, see [here](#) (Part I) and [here](#) (Part II).

20th Quire		Quaternion	Gregory's			Shelfmark
Regular	Actual		Rule	Actual	Content	
306/307	51/52		F/H	F/H	Lev 21:5-21 / Lev 21:21-22:9	Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1), f. 59
308/309			H/F		Lev 22:9 / Lev 23:3	
310/311	55/56		F/H	F/H	Lev 23:3-16 / Lev 23:16-27	Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1), f. 60
312/313	57/58		H/F	H/F	Lev 23:27-39 / Lev 23:39-24:9	Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1), f. 61
314/315	59/60		F/H	F/H	Lev 24:9-23 / Lev 24:23-25:11	Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1), f. 62
316/317	61/62		H/F	H/F	Lev 25:11-26 / Lev 25:26-38	Paris, BnF, Copte 129(1), f. 63
318/319	[63]/[64]		F/H	F/H	Lev 25:46-47 / Lev 25:53-55	Vienna, ÖNB, K 2861
320/321	[65]/[66]		H/F	H/F	Lev 26:12-14; Lev 26:18-20 / Lev 26:25-26; Lev 26:32-34	Cairo, IFAO, Inv. no. 215A

Codex structure for the 20th quire of manuscript sa 2044 in the [Coptic Old Testament Virtual Manuscript Room](#).

The core of the project work, the reconstruction and transcription of the individual manuscripts, is obviously an ongoing task. It is the *conditio sine qua non* for the critical editions of the individual books. When we are about to complete a digital critical edition, we will most likely have to return to the reconstruction of the manuscripts of a once flourishing book culture that has been fragmented and scattered by the greed of art traffickers. Therefore, our scholarly practice will most likely continue to be a case of "There and Back Again" for the foreseeable future.

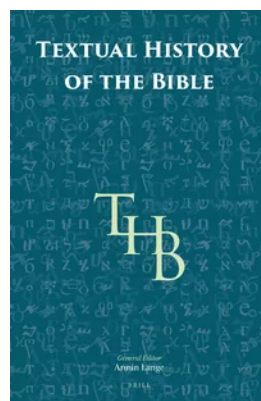
Services, Dissemination and Publication Activities

In addition to the services already presented in the previous newsletters and the regularly updated [Select Bibliography on the Coptic Bible](#), a new service has recently been added to the Digital Resources. To honour Peter Nagel's outstanding contribution to the study of the Coptic Bible, his important contributions to the subject are made available online under the heading: [Peter Nagel – Collected Biblica](#). In addition, the project manual for the transcription of manuscripts in the VMR, the Transcription Guidelines, was published in its June 2023 version. As we are currently working on these guidelines to improve and expand them, an updated version will be uploaded once a year in pdf format to serve as a guide for the digital processing of Coptic manuscripts for other projects in Coptic Studies and in manuscript research in general.

We encourage our readers, as always, to visit the blogpost section of our website, where they can follow new events, and find important short articles on project work, such as recent discoveries and advances, as well as informative [blogs on recent developments and new publications in the field](#).

Although the project and its work are 'born digital,' the project members naturally also contribute to print journals and handbooks. Our publication activities can be followed via the regularly updated publication list on our [website](#). This service provides links to downloadable pdf files (or abstracts), provided they are not subject to copyright restrictions.

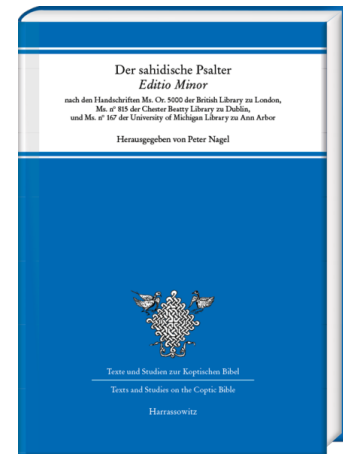
The contributions of the project members to Brill's handbook series *Textual History of the Bible*, the most comprehensive and up-to-date handbook of its kind, are of particular importance as they provide the most recent overview of the Coptic versions of the Old Testament and their text-historical value as translations of the Septuagint. Eight individual volumes have already been [published](#) (1A, 1B, 1C; 2A, 2B, 2C; 3A and 3D). Volume 2A (2020) includes the first to offer a consistent and comprehensive overview of the history of the biblical canon in the Coptic versions, and volume 3A (2023) the first comprehensive overview of the history of research on the Coptic tradition.



In December 2022 and December 2023, two new volumes were published in the project's own monograph series *Texte und Studien zur Koptischen Bibel* (TSKB):

TSKB 3: Peter Nagel [Der sahidische Psalter. Editio Minor](#). This is nothing

less than the new standard edition of the Sahidic Psalter based on the three best-preserved manuscripts. The edition was begun in the preceding project in Halle and has now been completed, with technical support from our project members. It offers a reliable reference text and marks an important intermediate step on the way to the complete digital edition of the Sahidic Psalter in the VMR.



TSKB 4: Diliaana Atanassova, Frank Feder, Heike Sternberg el-Hotabi. [Pharaonen, Mönche und Gelehrte. Auf dem Pilgerweg durch 5000 Jahre ägyptische Geschichte über drei Kontinente: Heike Behlmer zum 65. Geburtstag](#). All the scholars involved in our project contributed to this Festschrift for Heike Behlmer with articles on Coptic biblical and liturgical manuscripts.

