

**A Review of: Ivan Miroshnikov,
Antti Marjanen, and Francesca
Iacono, *The Coptic Versions of the
Martyrdom of Saint George: A
Study of the Coptic Transmission
of the George Legend, with an
Edition of Eight Fragmentary
Manuscripts in Sahidic, Bohairic,
and Fayyumic. Corpus Scriptorum
Christianorum Orientalium 710.
Peeters : Leuven — Paris —
Bristol, CT 2024, pp. lxxiv + 176.***

Alexandros Tsakos

The 57th volume of *Scriptores Coptici* is the 710th volume of the series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, surely the most important multilingual collection of Eastern Christian texts that is being published since 1903 by the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and the Catholic University of America in Washington DC. The prestigious series has hosted volumes in series devoted to *Scriptores Aethiopici*, *Arabici*, *Armeniacy*, *Coptici*, *Iberici*, and *Syri*, as well as a series called *Subsidia*, where, among other rarities, Old Nubian has had four entries, all by the ubiquitous Gerald Michael Browne:

1. CSCO 547, Subisdia 87: *Bibliorum Sacrorum Versio Palaeonubiana* (1994)
2. CSCO 556, Subisdia 90: *Old Nubian Dictionary* (1996)
3. CSCO 562, Subisdia 92: *Old Nubian Dictionary. Appendices* (1997)
4. CSCO 575, Subisdia 101: *The Old Nubian Martyrdom of Saint George* (1998)

Thus, the Old Nubian version of the work whose Coptic versions are published in the study reviewed here may constitute a good basis for comparison between Mart. George (as the editors abbreviated the work, and hence in this review) and the focus of Dotawo, a Nubiological journal. Moreover, works preserved in other languages, especially Coptic — as well as in Greek of course — are very important for situating Christian Nubian literacy in the wider context of Eastern Christianity.

The Coptic Versions of the Martyrdom of Saint George by Miroschnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono is the result of a team effort that lasted for five years, since a group of Coptologists in Helsinki started reading Coptic works related to Saint George and until the book appeared in 2024. The span of time for this project guaranteed that the three scholars signing the final product had the time to investigate all the known Coptic witnesses to produce an excellent study of *The Coptic Versions of the Martyrdom of Saint George*. They examined the extant Sahidic, Bohairic, and Fayyumic fragments, both those edited, and those that had remained unedited. They also provided revised editions when needed. The literary relationships of these witnesses are analyzed, offering a history of the literary development of Mart. George. The book is divided into three sections: an introduction; the edition of the texts with translations, commentaries, and indices; and the plates.

To begin with the Introduction: After a well written resume of “The Contents of the Martyrdom of George” (pp. xx-xxiii), the editors discuss “The place of Origin of the George Legend” (pp. xxiii-xxvii) concluding that an Egyptian milieu should be considered the backstage for the production of the original Martyrdom in Greek. In the ensuing chapter on “The Date and Literary History of the George Legend” (pp. xxvii-xxxi), they demonstrate that the earliest Greek version cannot predate the late fourth century, while the earliest Sahidic witnesses can be dated as early as the late seventh century. Their masterly presentation of the “Coptic Witnesses” (pp. xxxi-lxvii) corrects the erroneous assumption that there was one Coptic version of Mart. George, separating the six Sahidic manuscripts, the two Bohairic codices, and two fragmentarily preserved witnesses in Bohairic and Fayyumic, in two versions: *Copt1* containing the Sahidic witnesses; and *Copt2* consisting of the Bohairic and Fayyumic ones.

Therefore, the date proposed in the late seventh century concerns *Copt1*. A further credit to the work by Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono is that they demonstrate that *Copt2* must predate *Copt1*. Here it should be noted that the editors include into their discussion of the “Coptic Witnesses” the only surviving manuscript of the “Encomium on George” (pp. lvii-lxv), which is in Bohairic and shows the interdependence of the various Coptic works on Saint George, while also helping establish the relation between *Copt1* and *Copt2*.

This lengthy and erudite introduction contains also eight very informative tables illustrating the relationship between the witnesses of Mart. George examined, as well as between Mart. George and Enc. George. Notably, the introduction makes smooth reading for the interested researcher and is the necessary (and sufficient) background for appreciating the faultless edition of *Copt1* as well as of the unedited Bohairic fragment and the revised edition of the single Fayyumic fragment from *Copt2* that occupy pages 1-55 in the volume. Fifteen pages of “Critical Notes” intervene between the “Texts” and the “Translations” (pp. 77-103). The textual part of the book is concluded by the indispensable “Indices” (pp. 107-146) that present “Words of Egyptian Origin”, “Words Borrowed from Greek”, “Proper Names”, and “Grammatical Forms” for each of the edited texts (i.e. the Sahidic fragments of *Copt1* as well as the Bohairic and Fayyumic fragments of *Copt2*). Given the length and complexity of the introduction, a General Index could have been a welcome addition.

The only other desiderata in this publication are the lack of an explanation of the editorial practices and the absence of a system for marking paleographic details like enlarged or decorated initials, paratextual features, and coloring. While the former is just a formal matter, the latter is perhaps more important: it creates discrepancies between the transcriptions of the manuscript witnesses and their excellent photographic reproductions. Given the considerable effort devoted to both the editorial work and the preparation of 29 color plates — an onerous undertaking that must have posed significant challenges for both the editors and the publisher — it is somewhat regrettable that such shortcomings prevent the publication from attaining the level of perfection that it otherwise so evidently merits.

Such excellent scholarly work finds its recognition in the way it can inspire similar studies and to the degree that it can be useful for advancing the research results in sister disciplines, as is the case for Coptology and Nubiology. So, turning to the significance of this publication for Nubian Studies, it should be stated that in the opening paragraph of their introduction (p. xix), Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono also list all the languages in which the

work they scrutinized has been written, i.e. Greek, Syriac, Latin, Armenian, Arabic, Ethiopic, Slavonic, Georgian, Sogdian, Uighur, Chinese, and Old Nubian. Nubian Christians had also produced versions of the Martyrdom of Saint George in Greek, but these were naturally considered part of the Greek versions.

To date, we know of five fragments in Greek discovered at Qasr Ibrim and initially edited by W.H.C. Frend in the 1980s.¹ Recently, a project aiming at completing the publication of all the manuscripts in Greek from Qasr Ibrim has begun at the University of Warsaw, a collaboration of Adam Łajtar and Agata Deptuła. They have already identified three more fragments from Mart. George than those published after the initial discoveries. Two of these fragments seem to confirm the impression that the texts preserved therein represent variants of the Greek versions already known. The third and smallest fragment, however, defies identification: it contains the word ΜΑΡΟΣ preceded by what is apparently a genitive singular of the masculine article, i.e. ΤΟΥ, following a most probably verbal ending -ΕΙ. This combination is not displayed in any of the known manuscripts. On the other side of the fragment the letters -ΡΙΕ in red color should mark the vocative of the name George in Greek, i.e. ΓΕΩΡΓΙΕ, which appears more than a hundred times in Mart. George. Could the publication by Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono help us elucidate this mystery?

Following the indices compiled by Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono, we glean the following instances where the word ΜΑΡΟΣ can be found (underlined in the text) followed by the vocative ΓΕΩΡΓΙΕ:

*Sa*², 10.ii.19 (p. 28 for the text in Coptic and p. 79 for the translation):

As for the king, he sat and wrote a letter of this kind: "It is King Dadianus who writes to those who dwell in the whole universe: greetings. If there should be any capable *sorcerer* among you who might nullify the sorcery of the Christians, let him come to me, that I might give him three pounds..."

This phrasing in Greek would demand indeed a nominative form of the noun "sorcerer". Moreover, on the previous page (p. 27, that is on the recto of the original folio of *Sa*²), the Lord speaks to George and says:

"Strengthen yourself, O George!"

¹ Frend, "A fragment of the Acta Sancti Georgii from Q'asr Ibrim (Egyptian Nubia)"; Frend, "Fragments of a Version of the Acta S. Georgii from Q'asr Ibrim."

This in Greek would have been a vocative ΓΕΩΡΓΙΕ nicely fitting with the -ΓΙΕ that can be seen on the other side of the small fragment from Qasr Ibrim.

However, it is difficult to propose a variant of the wording -ΕΙ ΤΟΥ.

Sa², 13.ii.12-13 & 23 (p. 29 for the text in Coptic and p. 81 for the translation):

George took it from the sorcerer and sealed it three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Immediately, he drank it in front of the king and the sorcerer but no evil happened to him.

And the text continues:

Athanasius was amazed at him and said to him, “O George, honored one, O lamp of truth...”

Here, the distance between the two phrases is too small, while the phrase “from the sorcerer” would not have the noun ΜΑΓΟΣ in nominative.

Bo³.[n].16 (p. 52 for the text in Coptic and p. 82 for the translation):

When Dadianus saw what had happened, he was filled with great anger and commanded that the sorcerer be taken outside of the city and killed with the blade of a sword.

This phrase would indeed have the noun ΜΑΓΟΣ in nominative.

The continuation of the Coptic text is attested in the Sahidic version where George speaks to himself saying (pp. 31-2 for the text in Coptic and p. 84 for the translation):

George, why are you in pain like this? Perceive the lot that has befallen you, for even Christ himself was hanged in the midst of two robbers.

The name “George” opening this phrase is indeed in the vocative.

Now, the phrase -ΕΙ ΤΟΥ does not seem to find parallel in the Greek version, which reads:

ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς τὸ γενόμενον καὶ μάλλον πλησθεὶς ἀνοίας καὶ θυμοῦ: μάγος ἐστὶν ὁ Γεώργιος καὶ πνεῦμα ἀνήνεγκεν πρὸς πλάνη ἡμῶν.

It is striking though that this phrase lacks the verb “commanded” which in Coptic introduces the indirect clauses containing the reference to the sorcerer. It would consequently be possible to improve the Greek text by adding (in italics):

ιδὼν δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς τὸ γενόμενον *λέγει τούτῳ* μᾶλλον πλησθεὶς
 ἀνοίας καὶ θυμοῦ: μάγος ἐστὶν ὁ Γεώργιος καὶ πνεῦμα ἀνήνεγκεν
 πρὸς πλάνη ἡμῶν.

This variant would satisfy the missing element in the unidentified Greek fragment.

Finally, some words are at place concerning the Old Nubian Martyrdom of Saint George (discovered at the site of Kulubnarti in Lower Nubia). The editor of the manuscript, G.M. Browne, has shown that the Old Nubian version depended directly on Greek *Vorlagen* and Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono refer to at least once to this in a very revelatory manner: a passage that is preserved in the Fayyumic fragment is absent from both *Copt1* and the Bohairic texts of *Copt2* with which the Fayyumic fragment seems otherwise to conform. This passage appears, however, in the Greek version, as well as in the Greek, Latin, Armenian, Arabic, and Old Nubian versions. Since the Fayyumic fragment seems to be the oldest of all the known Coptic witnesses of Mart. George, this passage absent from the other Coptic witnesses may indeed belong to the earliest versions of Mart. George. This detail seems to corroborate the idea expressed by W.H.C. Frend, the first editor of the Nubian witnesses in Greek of hagiographic and liturgical works found at Qasr Ibrim, i.e.: “The cathedral library was something of a museum.”² Now, this statement can be expanded to describe also the rest of the material that was used for the translation of Christian literacy in Old Nubian.³

This attempt to test the Nubian material against the erudite study by Miroshnikov, Marjanen, and Iacono, shows the potential that lies therein. More work is of course needed both on the edition of the Qasr Ibrim fragments and in order to understand their relation to *Copt1*, *Copt2*, or the Greek text that is hidden behind the two Coptic versions. But The Coptic Versions of the Martyrdom of Saint George will surely prove useful for scrutinizing both the Nubian witnesses and other versions of Mart. George that were circulating in Early and Medieval milieus of Christian literacy.

² Frend, “Fragments of a Version of the Acta S. Georgii from Q’asr Ibrim,” p. 104.

³ For similar conclusions, see Van Gerven Oei and Tsakos 2020 and 2023.

References

- Frend, W.H.C., "A fragment of the Acta Sancti Georgii from Q'asr Ibrim (Egyptian Nubia)." *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982): pp. 79-86.
- Frend, W.H.C., "Fragments of a Version of the Acta S. Georgii from Q'asr Ibrim." *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 32 (1989): pp. 89-104 and Plates 1 & 2.
- Van Gerven Oei, V.W.J. and A. Tsakos, "Translating Greek to Old Nubian: Reading between the Lines of Ps.-Chrysostom In Venerabilem Crucem Sermo." In *Caught in Translation: Studies of Versions of Late-Antique Christian Literature*, edited by Madalina Toca and Dan Batovici, pp. 204-40. Leiden — Boston: Brill 2020.
- Van Gerven Oei, V.W.J. and A. Tsakos, "Apostolic Memoirs in Old Nubian." In *Parabiblica Coptica*, edited by Ivan Miroshnikov, pp. 191-224. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2023.

