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## The Coptic *Triadon* and the Ethiopic *Physiologus*

The fourteenth-century Coptic religious didactic poem *Triadon* is the cenotaph of a dead civilisation. It was composed in a period when Coptic had long been a dead language in Egypt, no longer understood even by the scribes who attempted to copy Coptic manuscripts, with only a few phrases being fossilised in the liturgy of the Orthodox (Monophysite) church. Four hundred and twenty-three of an original numbered 732 four-line stanzas of the poem are preserved in a unique bilingual manuscript, of the Coptic poem with an Arabic translation, in parallel columns, kept in the National Library at Naples (Zoega 312). The text was originally published by Oskar von Lemm in St. Petersburg in 1903<sup>1</sup>; the poem is now available in German translation with explanatory introduction and copious notes by Peter Nagel (Halle 1983)<sup>2</sup>. This latter modern work has begun to make scholars and readers aware of the striking literary qualities of the poem, of its religious thought, and of the many elements of Late Antique *Gedankengut* it still preserves. Study of this long poem will tell us much about the sensibility and the thought-world of a devout Egyptian Christian of the fourteenth century, one who was painfully aware that the language he had, it seems, taught himself to write in, the language of his old tradition, had been killed by the language of his alien political masters.

The *Triadon* is a Biblical didactic poem. In its overall structure, which Nagel has discerned follows a journey by the first-person narrator down the Nile from Upper to Lower Egypt, many Bible stories are considered in turn, with lessons being drawn from them for the pious conduct of the poem's listeners or readers. The poet treats the Prodigal Son, Noah's Ark, Balaam's ass, Abraham and the angels at Mamre, Jonah, Daniel, and of course many scenes, parables and miracles from the life of Christ. In the process of making a complete English translation of the *Triadon* (forthcoming; up to now there has been none), the present writer was struck by the frequency of nature, animal, and bird images in the poet's language and their echoes of earlier images that we associate with the "Bestiary" type of literature. "Consider the

1 O. von Lemm, *Das Triadon* (St. Petersburg 1903).

2 P. Nagel, *Das Triadon: ein sahidisches Lehrgedicht des 14. Jhdts.* (Halle 1983).



falcon", says the poet, "the eagle ... the lion ... the antelope ... the dove ... the heron ... the sycamore ... the phoenix". This would immediately lead one to that perennial repertoire of Alexandrian Late Antique Christianised animal lore, the so-called *Physiologus*. This work is thought to go back to a pagan Hellenistic compilation of the third to second centuries B.C., and to have been reworked by an Alexandrian Christian in perhaps the late fourth or fifth century A.D. Its translations into Christian Oriental languages, Armenian, the fragmentary Coptic, and especially the classical Ethiopic or Ge'ez<sup>3</sup>, clearly go back to a Greek *Vorlage* earlier than the Greek recensions as we now have them. It is with the Ethiopic version of the *Physiologus*, possibly made by an Abyssinian monk in Scetis, that the *Triadon's* animal and bird parallels are particularly close.

The fifth of the *Triadon's* preserved stanzas in the text that we have, no. 142, runs: "Come with me in haste / and I will let you into the garden / so you can spread out your net / and catch this great eagle". It is a commonplace of criticism that this eagle, which is a metamorphosis of the solar falcon of Horus (see below)<sup>4</sup>, is Christ. And indeed the poet returns later to the Eucharistic image of Christ's body, in stanza 714: "If, my beloved brothers, we very much wish / for great strength and boldness, / let us catch the eagles in their nests, / for they gather in the place of the ΛΕΙΨΑΝΟΝ" (the remains, i.e. the body of Christ nourishing and sustaining the universe). This is of course the traditional patristic interpretation of Mt 24:28, "Where the body is, there the eagles are gathered together". The Ethiopic *Physiologus* likens the solar eagle to the believing Christian, who renews his youth as on the Psalmist's eagle wings as he flies upward ever nearer to Christ, the Sun of Justice<sup>5</sup>. It may be further remarked that a double pun may underlie the Coptic image: "eagle" in Coptic is ⲁⲓⲱⲙ, and the name ⲡⲁⲓⲱⲙ, Pachomius, means "the eagle". The fourteenth-century poet, who often emphasises the virtues of the monastic saints and the desert way of ascetic life, may also be recalling for his listeners or readers the legacy of Pachomius the monastic founder, which lived on in its country-wide network of self-sufficient houses ("gardens") that perpetuated the Christian presence and sacraments in Moslem-ruled Egypt.

Another solar bird image occurs in stanza 638: "Beloved, come to gather beautiful precious / stones and delicate perfumes, / and take from the eighty eggs / to catch the falcon and the crane". Critics attuned to the echoes of Ancient Egyptian mythology as they are thought to survive in Egyptian

3 F. Hommel, ed., *Die äthiopische Übersetzung des Physiologos* (Leipzig 1877); C. Sumner, *The Fisalg'os* (Addis Ababa 1982).

4 P. Houlihan, *The birds of ancient Egypt* (Warminster 1986) 46-49, 140, 149.

5 Sumner, *Fisalg'os*, 16-17.



Christianity see in the falcon here of course again the solar Horus bird, symbolic of Osirian resurrection and so transferred to being a type of Christ. About the crane, matters are less clear. In the papyrus poem *Vision of Dorotheos* (ed. A. Hurst et al., Geneva 1984), preserved in one of the Bodmer papyrus codices, and surely by an Egyptian Late Antique poet, Christ speaks "with the voice of cranes" (line 295). But this is of course a Homeric simile, compare *Iliad* 3.3, the sound of the Trojan army being likened to the cry of a flock of cranes. The *Physiologus* text here affords us no Ancient Egyptian or Christian parallel stated as such. About the symbolism of the eighty eggs, I leave that to wiser heads.

In the very next stanza (no. 639) we find: "Then let us catch the great antelope / and smell the fragrance spread out / over us now, and level out / our threshing-floors and put wheat into our granaries". The Ethiopic *Physiologus* gives us the key to the Christological antelope, citing Song of Songs 2:8, "My beloved is like a hart upon the mountains of spices". The *derqodas*, gazelle or perhaps hartebeeste of § 41, is said to know the intent of whoever approaches it, a figure of Christ foreknowing Judas' kiss<sup>6</sup>. The wheat and sweet scent in the Coptic poet's discourse are probably Eucharistic. Also comparable is the Ethiopic *endrap'os* of § 36, probably the oryx, whose two horns are likened to the Old and New Testaments, the twin weapons with which the Christian combats evil<sup>7</sup>. According to Damascius' Life of Isidore, the oryx responds to the rising of Sirius, the Sothic star (Photius *Bibl. cod.* 242, sec. 102), also an image later Christianised by Egyptian poets and exegetes.

In a context expressing his desire to be purified and find the solution to "mysteries" that are perplexing him, the *Triadon* narrator says, in stanza 707, "I will raise myself up to the house of the heron, / high exalted, and will not weaken / with those whose heart is weak / and do not endure in temptation". What can be signified by this striking image? The Ethiopic *Physiologus* says of the heron, the *erodios/-on* (§ 47): "It is the wisest of all the birds. It does not fly to many places; it has but one lodging. Do not look around for the multiple dwelling places of the impious, but let your cove be one and this is the holy church"<sup>8</sup>. The heron is the Ancient Egyptian mythological *benu* bird<sup>9</sup>, later assimilated to the phoenix (see below). Now the context of the whole *Triadon* passage is the narrator's visit to the monks of Scetis, as in stanzas 701-702: "Blessed is the one who went to the place near the desert / and saw the ascetics in the wilderness. / Some of them uttered a saying from

6 *Ibid.*, 56-57.

7 *Ibid.*, 51-52.

8 *Ibid.*, 63. On the heron cf. D'Arcy Thompson, *A glossary of Greek birds* (Oxford 1936) 102-103, and J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek life and myth* (London 1977) 68-69.

9 Houlihan, *Birds of ancient Egypt*, 13-16.



Jeremiah, / while others read from Chronicles. / Still others enquired about the great oven, / and some asked questions about the great winepress. / But I said to them, 'Why, O great men, / do you think about these great mysteries?'” The poet is testifying to a still living tradition and practice of Biblical exegesis by the monks of the desert. In the context of the fourteenth century in Egypt, he is surely exhorting his hearers and readers to remain true to their traditional Christianity and not waver when they are exposed to Moslem counter-interpretations of scripture and accusations that the Christians have tampered with the Biblical texts.

One plant image is worth mentioning. When the *Triadon* poet mentions the sycamore in stanza 719, he of course refers to Lk 19:4, the sycamore tree climbed by Zacchaeus in his eagerness to see Christ: “From then on, my fathers, I must shake off / the old garment, and seek to climb the sycamore / and act like Zacchaeus, of the seed of Shem, son of Noah, / whose craft is that of *τελωνιον* (tax-collector)”. Compare also stanza 474: “I am eager to climb up into the sycamore / and see the one who saved our father Noah<sup>10</sup>. / Again he said to his disciples: / ‘Shake the dust of your feet upon the city of the lawless’”. Throughout Coptic folklore the sycamore symbolises the Coptic people<sup>11</sup>: this folk symbolism is usually thought to derive from the Ancient Egyptian sycamore as the tree of the goddess Nut, whose body overarches the night sky. Here too the Ethiopic *Physiologus* in Christianising the image gives us a clue to its perennial force (§48): “The sycamore, once it has ripened, on the third day, becomes the food for all: likewise our Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead on the third day, gave His life and forgiveness, and became the food for all”<sup>12</sup>.

In a short study one cannot give a resume of the totality of current scholarship on the phoenix as a Christian symbol<sup>13</sup>. Suffice it to say that a consensus posits an origin in Ancient Egyptian mythology for this miraculous bird. Here I shall simply juxtapose the *Triadon*’s image of the Phoenix with the legend given in the Ethiopic *Physiologus*<sup>14</sup>. The Coptic poet, after a section describing Lenten penitence, speaks of preparing his soul for Easter (stanzas 613-614): “... I shall rejoice in my good works / and be glad, when I see my abundant harvest, / and I shall be happy in this field of mine, which

10 This is Cyrillian exegesis. Christ is the truer Noah; the ark is the Church, surely constructed; the flood prefigures Christian baptism (*Glaph. in Gen. 5* = PG 69.65B).

11 A recent book about the accomplishments of 1930s Coptic cultural figures was entitled *Les sycamores* (Cairo 1978).

12 Sumner, *Fisalgos*, 64-65.

13 Cf. R. van den Broek, *The myth of the Phoenix according to classical and early Christian traditions* (Leiden 1972); E. Brunner-Traut, “Altägyptische Mythen im Physiologus”, *Antaios* 10 (1969) 184-198.

14 Noticed by Nagel, *Das Triadon*, p. 101 n. (citing the Greek).



will be left / after it was cultivated and bore spiritual fruit. / But when I shall see that my field is prepared, / I shall spread my net and hunt / the Phoenix, the great bird who remains ever existing, / who hides in himself the mystery of the true Resurrection". So too the *Physiologus* writer, associating the bird with the "priest of the city of the Sun (Heliopolis)" and the spring months of Phamenoth and Pharmouthi (roughly March and April), says: "the Phoenix is an image of our Redeemer"<sup>15</sup>. In a local touch, the Ethiopic translator has misrendered the Greek διὰ ἀγαθῶν πολιτειῶν, in speaking of how we are to pray and receive spiritual graces, as "in our beautiful homeland" rather than "by good conduct".

It is noticeable that a continuing thread tying these images together is the metaphor of catching them in a net ("Let us spread out our nets and catch the (X)" is the poet's formula), clearly a further image of intellectual and especially spiritual comprehension. The poet continually reminds his hearers and readers to hunt for and grasp the edifying Christian meaning of these types in nature. This image from hunting may reflect the difficulty of comprehension involved for those trying to grasp the import of a text in Coptic at a time when Coptic was no longer understood.

How can a Christian religious writer in fourteenth-century Arabophone Moslem-ruled Egypt, who had to go to the trouble (by a process we cannot really reconstruct), not only to learn the dead Coptic language in its classical Sahidic dialect, but to learn it complete with embeddings of rare classical Greek and even Latin words — how, one asks, could such an *érudit*, steeped in the Bible and in the local Christian traditions that ranged up and down the Nile Valley, have had access to a Christian "Bestiary" to weave its stories into his text? What line of descent can be postulated from Ancient Egyptian bird and animal symbolism, through a Christian Greek compilation from Late Antique Alexandria, to a fourteenth-century Coptic writer, the last of his kind? All that has been established is that the Greek text of the *Physiologus* from which the Ethiopic translator worked, probably in the fifth century, was older than and contained matter not found in the Greek recensions of the *Physiologus* as we now know it. It was fuller and contained more things relevant to how the *Triadon* poet treated the creatures he uses in his imagery. The line of descent one might posit goes back to the well-documented presence of Ethiopian monks in Scetis, the later Wadi Natrun, from the fifth century right down to the Ottoman period. The early Greek text the Ethiopian translator worked from is essentially the same as that translated into Coptic, which latter version has come down to us only in fragments but must have been extant in its full length and scope throughout the Egyptian



middle ages, later with an Arabic version attached, most particularly in a monastic library or libraries. From the Ethiopic as it was later copied and transmitted we can form an idea of the Coptic *Physiologus* as it would have been read by Egyptian Christians as long as they could read Coptic. This in turn would have been what was rendered into Arabic, to give an Arabic version again fuller than the one we have now. Thus Christianised Ancient Egyptian nature stories would have remained part of people's mental furniture even in a period when people were more and more losing touch with their Christian past.

This has been a short survey of one aspect of source research in a long and interesting text that has only begun to be read and to be excavated, as it were, for what it might contain. A fitting closing would be to review the poet's own plea for his own intention, a purpose devoted to a dead cause: "Brothers, come, hear these sweet words / and understand these comforting thoughts, / as I have begun and have taught you / the usefulness of this language, Coptic. ... Do you not know the number of ideas I have gathered together in this *Triadon*? ... Brother, do not tell me that these words need explanation, / but look rightly, for I have not taken them from outside, / and know, man of good sense, that without God's / providence I would not have been able to set aright this *Triadon*." (stanzas 413, 683, 441)<sup>16</sup>. It is to be hoped that people other than just specialists in Coptic philology — Byzantinists, Biblical scholars and historians of religion, students of other areas of the Christian Orient, social historians — will read this long and rich text, and find in it much food for thought<sup>17</sup>.

16 Also for the most part noticed by Nagel, *Das Triadon*, pp. 26-27.

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