Materiality and Physicality of Medieval Manuscripts from Christian Nubia

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Materiality and Physicality of Medieval Manuscripts from Christian Nubia*

The study of the textual record from past societies has preoccupied humans from Antiquity. By the Hellenistic era, philologists had been scrutinizing older texts on topics relating mainly to their content and style. We know much less of their preoccupations with what was later called “paleography,” that is, the study of letter forms as they materialize through scribal practice within a writing system; and “codicology,” that is, the study of the material carriers of texts. Clearly, these two disciplines are concerned with the material manifestation of a text, but in order to apprehend this statement in light of the two terms that set the framework of the present paper, namely “materiality” and “physicality,” it is useful to see up close how the fields of paleography and codicology are defined.

Although, etymologically, “paleography” means (the study of) “old script,” it initially encompassed studies of writing on soft carriers in general. Gradually, paleography came to embrace all graphical monuments, but through its coexistence with other disciplines—first and foremost papyrology—it seemed that its formal and analytical methods should be linked with writing, *i.e.*, the study of letter-shapes, their ductus, etc. However, when the term paleography was introduced in the work by Bernard de Montfaucon (1708) entitled *Palaeographia graeca*, it had a focus on philological analysis, textual criticism and the history of texts (Bianconi 2015: 268). Inevitably, this historical dimension was related to the social context in which the texts scrutinized were produced, and thence paleography also became a tool for a social interpretation of written documents (see references to the works of Petrucci in Bianconi 2015: 267). Despite fears that in this way paleography risked losing its formal and analytical disciplinary character and being transformed into a “sociology of writing” (Pratesi 1979),

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it seems that “paleography now lives on the dialectic between writing, texts and society” (Bianconi 2015: 268). Paleographic research today has expanded to include research on scribal practices and, more generally, on the economy of the manuscript, and its socio-political significance.

The term “codicology” is more recent, having been coined by the twentieth-century French scholar Alphonse Dain (1949: 76-93). Nominally, codicology is occupied with the study of the codex, *i.e.*, the most recent technical innovation in the crafts related to the production of text carriers. The codex is the precursor of what is today called a “book,” and it is linked with the development of Christian literacy (Turner 1977). However, it has influenced the form that the transmission of texts takes across religious, linguistic, and other cultural varieties, leading to the recognition of the existence of a “grammar” and a “syntax” of the codicological expression (Andrist *et al.* 2013: 9). Thus, the way a “book” can be studied encompasses, according to modern handbooks (Maniaci 2015: 69-88):

- the analysis of materials and tools (papyrus, parchment, paper, inks, pigments and dyes, writing instruments) used for its construction;
- the forms that the final product takes (the codex, the roll and the *rotulus*, or miscellaneous forms);
- the process of making the codex (beginning with the creation and composition of quires, continuing through pricking, ruling, and ordering systems, until the examination of the codex as a complex object);
- the layout of the page (from the numbers of columns, lines per page and letters per line, to the sizes and proportions thereof, and their relation to the content of the codex);
- the description of text structure and readability (examining writing and decoration);
- the presentation of the scribe, the painter, and the illuminator at work (as they appear in colophons, dating systems, or the estimation of the duration of copying); and finally,
- bookbinding.

Most of these aspects are characteristic of both handwritten codices and printed books, but in the present paper the focus is on handwritten codices—or fragments thereof—which will be described hereafter as “manuscripts.”

This manner of defining these two disciplines as the study of the “material manifestation” of a text leaves room for debate. To what degree does surpassing the analysis of textual content indeed indicate a contemplation of its material properties? Philological analysis, textual criticism, or the study of the socio-economic context of the production of a text are, arguably, no less

theoretical in their approach to a manuscript than the analysis of its content. There is, of course, always the issue of scribal practices, such as the choice of inks, but these research topics seem to have been subsumed by codicology. Perhaps paleography's "materiality" remains most notably its study of the letter-form, a manifestation in "matter" of the written text unless, that is, that "materiality" is defined in its broader, "cultural" sense of how the materials which make up an "object" are manifested and perceived in a given culture (Ingold 2007). However, I am more inclined to adopt such a definition only partially. Instead of theorizing about the cultural identity of a material object, it is preferable to focus on the materials of which this object was made and thence examine how these affect the properties of the material object in its cultural context, as well as the identity of the members of this cultural context who are the potential users of this object. "Stories" link these users to the studied object and reveal its "materiality" (*ibid.*: 14). Indeed, such stories ensue from the presentation of the "materials" that characterize a Nubian manuscript, our case study.

What do these stories really tell us? Do they (only) speak about the engagement with "matter" (e.g., animal skin) in order to produce "form" (e.g., parchment) based on an "idea" (e.g., codex leaf) that is the aim of the entire production chain? Or do they narrate the "embodiment" of the human action required in order to extract the materials from nature, turn them into tools, use them to record a "text" in writing and enclose it in a new "body" through the art of bookbinding? Do they attempt to picture the "agency" of humans in these processes, or, alternatively, the "agencies" of the materials which are never as passive as some might tend to think? Just consider the limitations set by the physical properties of the materials used themselves, for example, the ways that ink can be applied on a given surface depending on its constituent elements and the writing tools used; the plausible maximum sizes of a parchment page or of a codex quire depending on types of skins and technologies available. The stories that bespeak the materiality of manuscripts can definitely do all that and even more; but they can also specifically speak of these physical properties that the materials possess and how these interact with the physical properties of the humans that use them. Moreover, if the stories that we wish to look at are the liaison between the two bodies, the human-user and the object-matter, then this in-between space where this liaison is "materialized" is not just "thin air," but rather something quite concrete that makes this liaison possible, something that, although it does not immediately appear as part of "materiality," is perhaps the most "material" of all "things": the senses.

A book is read because humans *see* the letter forms written with a variety of inks on appropriately prepared surfaces. The text contained therein is

listened to by an audience, when someone performs the act of reading. More often than not, the carrier of this text will be held by someone who will *touch* the pages, following the writing along the lines with their fingertips. All these sensorial acts can be informed with different sorts of feelings, ranging from the love one feels when reading a letter from someone dear to heart; the joy of listening to a fairy-tale as a child; the anxiety of holding the paper with the topics of a school examination; the pride of receiving the university diploma; the anger against the news on a crime as it is read in the newspaper over a coffee break with colleagues; the sense of community with these colleagues when on a Sabbath all enter a synagogue and with awe follow the stories read from the holy scriptures by the persons with the authority to do that. From this variety of experience from the sensorium, it is the last variant that this paper wishes to explore. How are the senses involved in the use of written texts in a religious context? And then, how is that involvement accentuated when the senses approach sacred texts? Finally, do *all* the senses participate in this religious experience? Apart from seeing, hearing, and touching, is there also room for eating and smelling involved in the use of sacred texts?

It is this engagement through the senses that is called the “physicality of manuscripts” in the present paper. The physical experience of the use of manuscripts in religious contexts has been variously and richly discussed (for example, Harvey & Mullett 2017). In the present paper, paleography will only appear in the ensuing discussion as a complement to our main focus, *i.e.*, codicology. From the latter, emphasis will be given to the materials used for the creation of manuscripts and the complexity of the final product. This complexity will also be untangled through the study of the physicality of the manuscripts under scrutiny. These manuscripts derive from my specialized field of study: the Christian culture of Medieval Nubia, *i.e.*, the Christian kingdoms that flourished along the Middle Nile region between *ca.* 5th-15th century CE. Since this region was part of Eastern Christianity and the Byzantine *ecumene*, the ensuing discussion will therefore be inspired primarily by empirical and theoretical *comparanda* from the world of Oriental manuscripts and African and Sudanese archaeology and ethnoarchaeology.

Codicology of Texts from Nubia

Manuscripts found in Christian Nubia were produced on four non-durable carriers: papyrus, parchment, leather, and paper. The best quantitative overview of the patterns of their use can be gained through the online Database

of Medieval Nubian Texts (DBMNT).¹ Its creator, Grzegorz Ochała (2014), has authored a paper in which he extracts useful qualitative remarks from the quantitative observations offered in the DBMNT, including, of course, codicological matters (*ibid.*: 13-14):

The use of leather [...] is restricted to documentary texts, but only those of legal character [...] Parchment on the other hand, was used almost exclusively for the production of religious texts, both literary and liturgical [...] as for paper, it is the only material found in similar proportions throughout most of the categories. This may be linked to its popularisation in the late period (13th-14th century) [...] Papyrus is lacking [...] because only 3 instances of its use have so far been registered.²

Recent work on the economy of Christian Nubia (Ruffini 2012) as well as the textual record from the late medieval site of Attiri (Van Gerven Oei *et al.* 2016), the church on the Island of Sur, with dates spanning from the 10th to the 15th century (Tsakos 2018), and the rather earlier (6th/7th-12th century) monastic site of Qasr el-Wizz in Lower Nubia (Tsakos forthcoming a) have confirmed Ochała's observations, but have also pointed to three rather meaningful particularities.

First, more than one hundred papyrus fragments in Sahidic Coptic were found at Qasr el-Wizz (*ibid.*). Based on the clear links of the Nubian monastery with the monastic centers of Upper Egypt, these papyrus fragments can be safely considered early imports from Coptic Egypt. It is, moreover, very probable that the abandonment of papyrus for the benefit of parchment in Egypt changed the tradition of the preferred material for manuscripts serving religious purposes in Nubia too. More than two hundred parchment fragments of various sizes, written in their vast majority in Sahidic Coptic (only four parchment fragments were written in Greek and none in Old Nubian), were found at Qasr el-Wizz. In other words, the choice of material carriers for texts used during the first centuries of Christian literacy in Nubia shows a dependence on the market conditions in Egypt.

Second, the only manuscript in Old Nubian from Qasr el-Wizz is a letter written on paper and assigned a date in the 12th century, which makes this manuscript the most recent text in the record from the monastery. This find confirms the predominance of paper for this type of literacy in Late Christian Nubia, as suggested by Ochała (2014: 14, Graph 1). Moreover, Ruffini (2012: 233) has observed that much of the paper circulating in Nubia was, in fact, imported scraps of paper first used in Egypt and written on in

1. <<http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl>>.

2. However, see OCHAŁA (2014: 14, n. 58).

Arabic. This observation points to the direction that, after paper gradually substituted parchment in Egypt, it also did so in Nubia. Thus, for the later medieval period as well, Christian literacy in Nubia seems dependent on the market conditions in Egypt.

Third, both the Attiri and Sur sites have produced finds of leather manuscripts used to write letters. These finds obviously expand the limits of standard practices in the choice of carrier for such texts in the later periods of medieval Nubia. The late dates of these two examples securely place their production in the period during which paper had dominated the scribal market in both Egypt and Nubia. Given the use of leather sheets as carriers of very important texts for Nubian society including royal decrees, land sales, and other legal documents (Ochala 2014: 13-14, Graph 1), it is therefore tempting to propose that, on the one hand, the technique of producing leather sheets fit for writing was traditional know-how of the Nubians who had recourse to it when needed; and that, on the other hand, the technique of producing parchment was either unknown to the Nubians or forgotten in later centuries. Undoubtedly, these two points remain working hypotheses.

Nevertheless, one could nuance further on the particular experience of making and using these surfaces. For example, the major difference between making parchment and leather sheets is that the latter are only deepened in tannins, while the former also received tension in steadily increasing degrees. The technology of parchment is not particularly demanding, but the safeguarding of some craft was quite often the case in the ancient and medieval worlds (for an example from iron working in Africa, see the Introduction in Herbert 1993). In other words, this working hypothesis recognizes a sort of “protectionism” of the codicological product by those Egyptian monasteries that had achieved a high status in the regional market of Christians living along the Nile during the Middle Ages.

Conversely, the Nubians should not be reduced to passive consumers of imported objects, but seen rather as agents in this market, for two very good reasons.

Firstly, the paleographic style preferred among Nubians and which became diagnostic of the Nubian scribal product throughout the history of Old Nubian literacy, namely the so-called “Nubian-type majuscule” tradition, in turn influenced Sahidic paleography in its later phases. This topic has been discussed elsewhere and goes far beyond the limits of the present paper.³

3. Here, reference is made to three lectures given: a) at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in July 2016; b) at the workshop on Coptic Studies at the Norwegian Institute of Athens, December 2016; c) at the annual meeting of the Nordic Coptic Network in Helsinki

Secondly, among the existing codicological material from Christian Nubia, it is possible to identify at least two types of codices that can be characterized as “Nubian”: rather large collections of works in Old Nubian dedicated to the Archangel Michael (Tsakos 2014a) and small codices containing two works, one homiletic and one hymnical, dedicated to the Cross and written in either Coptic or Old Nubian (Tsakos forthcoming b). The first type has only been reconstructed on the basis of fragments and paratextual features in the margins of these fragments. The second type has been preserved in three of the six complete manuscripts which constitute the total number of complete manuscripts from Christian Nubia known to date.

The Codicological Experience in Nubia

Ochała (2014: 13-14) attempts another statement about the codicological experience of the Nubians: “The fact that the vast majority of literary and liturgical texts are most probably loose pages from codices makes parchment the main material for the production of books.” However, manuscripts of literary and liturgical character written on paper have also been found and, given the explanations offered above about the time span of the use of each material in Christian Nubian contexts as well as the absence to date of any known palimpsestic use of text carriers in these contexts, we can surmise the following about the circulation of paper and parchment texts.

The circulation of texts with religious content did not stop with the gradual abandonment of parchment in favor of paper, but there circulated in Late Christian Nubia manuscripts of religious character on paper, although in the DBMNT there are only 31 out of 127 manuscripts on paper that are of non-documentary character. Twenty of those are of literary or liturgical character and are written in Old Nubian or Greek or a combination of these two languages, which were in fact those used in the liturgy after the 11th century (Tsakos 2018: 228-230).

This small number of literary and liturgical manuscripts may indicate different conditions related to the archaeological record. For example, it may just be the result of chance finds, in which case more complete manuscripts of the later periods of Christian Nubia could be unearthed in the future. However, the degree of archaeological research in Nubia—one of the most intensely investigated archaeological regions of the world mainly due to the building of the Aswan and Merowe Dams—does not corroborate this scenario.

in June 2017. These lectures are unpublished, but a longer study on the paleography of Nubian manuscripts is under preparation.

Conversely, thanks to the archaeological work conducted in Nubia, most of the manuscripts with religious texts written on both parchment and paper come from securely identified Late Christian archaeological contexts (post-11th century), *e.g.*, Serra East and Sur Island (1000–1500 CE), Gebel Adda and Attiri Island (post-1300s), as well as parts of the most important library of Nubia known to date at Qasr Ibrim (albeit covering the entire medieval era). Nevertheless, a large group of the manuscripts from these sites are dated rather on the basis of paleographical criteria to the end of the first millennium CE or to the first two centuries of the second (900–1200 CE).

These observations mean that the manuscripts discovered in medieval Nubian sites were used for several centuries. However, it remains uncertain whether they were discarded or kept in use after they were fragmented. Moreover, it can neither be confirmed nor denied that they were found in the original place of production or that, if this was the case, these places had retained their original function.⁴ Nevertheless, it can be argued that a manuscript is an object with a biography, which is best apprehended by discerning the changes of its function in its systemic *vs.* archaeological context. The systemic context pertains to a manuscript's original use, whereas the archaeological context concerns its deposition and the conditions in which it was found. The manuscripts found at sites like Attiri (from an archaeological standpoint, entirely postdating the medieval era, as per van Gerven Oei *et al.* 2016: 14) and Sur (manuscripts found in the loose sand covering the medieval church used in post-medieval centuries [Tsakos 2018: 330–332]), constitute good examples of this situation in Nubia. It is similarly impossible to ascertain whether these sites were the same as the sites for which these manuscripts were originally destined or whether the manuscripts found there were used in the same manner as that for which their creators had originally made them.

A homiletic work used in its systemic context during Mass on the day prescribed by *typika*⁵ followed across Eastern Christianity⁶ can serve as an example. If we trace its life down to the fragmentary state in which it is discovered by archaeologists in the context of a church ruin, as was the case for a group of manuscripts unearthed at the church on the island of Sur (Tsakos 2018: chap. 4), then the continuity of this manuscript's use as a church sermon cannot be taken for granted, but rather, it must be examined within its archaeological context. The archaeological context of the Sur find provides no

4. These ideas have been analyzed in the author's doctoral thesis (TSAKOS 2018).

5. A *typikon* is a book used in the Liturgy containing instructions about the order of the Byzantine Rite.

6. It should be noted that although there was enormous variation in the *typika* used, they were always created in the context of a liturgical calendar prescribed by a church hierarchy.

evidence for a change in the original use of the site as a church, even though at some point in time, the character of the site was no longer remembered as a church, since its building materials were reused, which was similarly the fate of at least parts of the manuscript collection deposited therein (*ibid.*: 30-33). Consequently, it can be suggested that the building was never abandoned and sealed by archaeological depositions—in which case the manuscripts might have never changed uses—but that for some time in the post-medieval centuries (*i.e.*, the era after the disintegration of the Christian kingdoms of medieval Nubia), it continued to function as a base for at least a local religious authority until it fell into disuse and a new organized religion, namely Islam, took over the cultic agenda of the local population. Although the use of the original sermon would still have been within a religious framework in these pre-Islamic post-medieval centuries in Nubia, the cult practices that it served must have been different than those that it served as part of a complete codex, at the same locality, during the Middle Ages when the church was part of a hierarchy protected by the Christian Nubian kingdoms.

In order to identify the function of manuscripts in such archaeological contexts, a key may be found by identifying the character of those individuals who were using them. These individuals can be pictured keeping alive the knowledge of the manuscripts' language, content, and significance. They must have played a special role in the local communities of the early post-medieval centuries in northern Sudan—a role that was no longer that of a Christian priest, since even for the case of the church site on the island of Sur, it is impossible to imagine that they could have been ordained by a Church hierarchy outside the state formation which guaranteed the Nubian Church's survival during the medieval era. It should be noted here that the Middle Nile region was hardly under the control of any state authority between the disintegration of the Christian kingdoms and the appearance of the first Islamic states until the arrival of Mohamed Ali, the Egyptian-British condominium, Mahdiya, and then later modern Sudan.⁷ In this situation, itinerant Sufi sheikhs, tremendously influential in the formation of Sudanese Islam (Yusuf Fadl 2012: 177-181), gradually assumed the role of the spiritual guides for the local population. Thus, we can assume that before that time, during the end of the medieval era and the first post-medieval centuries, the individuals using manuscripts of the Christian faith were no longer “priests” and not yet “sheikhs.”

7. Exceptions were a short period in the 16th century, when the Ottoman Empire gained a weak foothold in the far North of what is today Sudan (MÉNAGE 1988; ALEXANDER 1995), and the domination of the Funj sultanate, which from its base at Sennar (south of modern-day Khartoum) never really subjugated the local strongmen who were ruling Nubia (O'FAHEY & SPAULDING 1974).

It can therefore be argued that the manuscripts were kept at sites like Sur and Attiri, even if they were only bits and pieces of the original codices, because they were considered sacred, inalienable objects that could be used in cultic activities officiated by those individuals who represented the old faith, but practiced it in innovative manners, as compared with more standard forms of Christian practices. These manners are, of course, almost impossible to trace in the archaeological record, but it is possible to discern them through the use of ethno-archaeological *comparanda*. We can turn, for example, to attested cultic practices in ethnographical sources in order to identify such practices. We can picture these practices in the context in which these fragmentary manuscripts were used at sites like Sur or Attiri inside a large palette of cultic activities that ranged from displaying and reading to healing and empowering. Written sources and/or archaeological evidence can project these uses also to the heart of the medieval era, when more “conventional” forms of Christian cultic practice would be expected.

Moreover, through both ethnography and archaeology, a large spectrum of beliefs focusing on the ritual power of the written word and its manifestation in the material properties of its carrier can be apprehended. The uses of writing in such contexts do not focus exclusively on the recognizable form of the codex but recognize the Holy Writ and venerate it variably and more freely on various surfaces, such as fragments of old manuscripts or scraps of newly inscribed paper. Thus, the materiality of the manuscripts—wherever they are still discernible as such—is no longer linked with their codicological form, but rather with their physical properties. As already stated, in the present paper, physical properties are understood as all sorts of manifestations based on the sensorial experience of a given object. For example, it has eloquently been shown that the sensorium of Byzantine art spans all five senses.⁸ Beside physical properties, one can speak of the “physicality” of art, and by this term, one should understand the way objects formed and/or contributed to the sensorial experience of religion by Christians, in general, or by Christian Nubians of the medieval and early post-medieval centuries, more particularly.

The question then arises as to how this understanding of the “physicality” of an (art) object is applicable to manuscripts. Although it can easily be argued that a manuscript is very much linked with the senses of seeing and hearing in the act, for example, of reading or chanting, or with the sense of touch, in the simple act of holding a book or turning its pages, it might be more difficult to identify how a manuscript can have an olfactory dimension linked to its religious properties or how a manuscript can be tasted and retain the sacred character of the holy script it carried at the moment of its consumption.

8. HARVEY (2006: 197): “sensorily engaging experience of the late antique liturgy.”

Beginning with the ethno-archaeological record, we will try first to answer these questions and then trace our way back to such experiences of Christian Nubians during the medieval centuries.

Graphophagia-Bibliophagia

As a starting point in the investigation of the ethnoarchaeological and anthropological evidence for the importance given in the physical dimension of the power of religious texts, we will use the photographs taken in West Sudan, especially Kordofan, by the Romanian-German social pedagogue Enikő Nagy, published in a book entitled *Sand in My Eyes* (2014). These will provide evidence for widespread traditions in Sudan, which can be linked with evidence pertaining to medieval Christian Nubia. Three related case studies can be gleaned from the pages of Nagy's book:

1. Among the Dar Hamid tribe of Kordofan, Nagy witnessed the writing of "Quranic verses with healing power [...] on a loah [*sic*], a wooden tablet" (*ibid.*: 662-663) used precisely in order to write Quranic verses by students of Quranic schools. The healing power of these verses is linked with a rite that has been called "erasure" (el-Tom 1985). After the writing of the verses, the ink is washed away from the wooden surface and those seeking healing drink the inky water. This rite has been recorded in various parts of Islamic Africa (also in Kenya, for example, see Grillo *et al.* 2019: 186); but particularly in Sudan where it has been known since anthropological fieldwork conducted in the 1960s by leading figures of the School of Anthropology at the University of Bergen (Barth 1967; Haaland 1969). "Erasure" is connected to the authority conferred to those who successfully graduate from the Quranic schools and have learned the Quran by heart. These persons, called *fakis*, act as religious leaders of individual village communities among several tribes (el-Tom 1985: 415). Their ritual power is based on their possession of the appropriate texts, as well as knowledge of signs and names, which they inscribe on a *loh*, then wash away, and offer as a beverage to those who ask for their intervention. "Erasure" constitutes an eloquent example of physical consumption of texts in a religious context.

2. A sequence of five photos (Nagy 2014: 752-757) records the activities of Sheik Jumaa Ragd al-Harr ("Sheikh Jumaa who Dwells in Heat"). The sheikh has not risen from his bed for the past twenty-five years; he is visited there by the locals who ask him to prepare healing charms for them. Using a reed, he writes Quranic invocations in ink on the interior surface of bowls, which he subsequently washes away into a pan with water from where the

believers drink. This rite finds a plausible parallel in a particular type of epigraphic practice attested to in the archaeological record from Christian Nubia. This practice relates to a group of inscribed vessels—"incantation bowls"—as they are called in popular culture, which have mainly been discovered as foundation deposits under private dwellings of Christian Nubians and interpreted as protective charms for the stability of the houses (Zurawski 1992: 91-100). The ritual power of these bowls would derive from the listing of the names of venerable figures of the Christian faith entirely covering their inside surfaces. Their form resembles very much the vessels produced by Sheik Jumaa Ragd al-Harr, and it should not be ruled out that such objects had a similar function in Christian Nubia.

Confirmation of such practices among Christians of the medieval era can be found in Byzantine incantations, among which one that was used to teach a child the letters of the alphabet (Vassiliev 1893: 342). The text bespeaks the practice of *graphophagia* (the act of eating script):

Write the names of the twenty-four Elders who are in the presence of God/both inside and outside a glass vessel, and pour water and wine [in it],/and place it under the altar until the Liturgy./Then take it and water the child/through the intercessions of the Theotokos [Mother Mary] and all the saints."⁹

A list of eighteen of the names of the twenty-four Elders follows. In Nubia, references to the twenty-four presbyters are very common and complete lists have been found in the Crypt of Archbishop Georgios of Old Dongola (Łajtar & van der Vliet 2017: 152-153, 181-190). The inscriptions on the walls of this crypt have been shown to function as a "phylactery" (that is, a protective amulet or charm) for the deceased. Very interestingly, in the first instance where the list of the names of the twenty-four Elders appears in the Dongola crypt, this follows an *epiclesis* (or invocation) over a pot of water and its contents (*ibid.*: 151-152), which will function as a cure for the person who will be blessed by the *epiclesis*. There is an interesting similitude between the functions of the Nubian invocations and the Byzantine incantations for healing and learning respectively, with those of the Quranic verses on *loh* as learning apparatus and on bowls inscribed by a sheikh to heal the believers. The common denominator can very well be considered a cultic act of non-canonical character, like *graphophagia*.

3. In Nagy's book, there are two more photos of interest here. They show the writing of Quranic verses on paper that were subsequently cut into small

9. Translation by the author. For the original text, see <<https://archive.org/details/anecdotaagraecob00vasigoog/page/n425>>.

bits (*bakhra*) and burned so that the fumes would be inhaled as a healing agent (Nagy 2014: 665-666). To this testimony, the author can add an encounter from the Friday *ziqr* (alias *dhikr*, devotional acts) at the *quba* (domed tomb) of Sheikh Hamad al Nil in Omdurman. Several sheikhs and *fakis* gather around the central area where the *ziqr* is expected to be performed and sell their paraphernalia. Some produce small bits of paper that one can buy and eat, even on the spot, clearly in expectation of some bodily or psychosomatic healing.

Here, we encounter the meeting of scribal and ritual cultures as recently described in “*Sortes, Scribality and Syncretism*” by David Frankfurter (2018). In this work, several “ritual experts by virtue of their textual knowledge and their writing ability” (Frankfurter 2018: 215) appear. One example of “local literate agents of the ‘great’ religious tradition” (*ibid.*: 214) are precisely the *fakis*, who illustrate in Frankfurter’s work the enduring tradition that he tries to date back to the Late Antique Egypt (or Byzantine Egypt). From the rich variety of African Christianities, he selects another example of “this model of the scribal ritual expert,” namely “the Ethiopian *dābtāra*, a rank of church cantor responsible for the elaborate exorcistic scrolls found in many museums, each inscribed for specific clients on the basis of extensive demonological manuals” (*ibid.*: 221). Although in Nubia such ranks in church have not been recognized, there seems to be a special role in the scribal culture assigned to deacons.¹⁰ Moreover, despite the difficulties of tracing the links between Christian Ethiopia and Christian Nubia in the archaeological record, the two traditions share this interest in demonology, which constitutes the core of the textual knowledge upon which both Ethiopian *dābtāras* and Christian Nubian deacons, as well as Sufi sheikhs and *fakis*, would be basing their ritual performance.

There is one more step to be taken in order to link these individuals working inside scribal traditions of ritual power with the specific ritual traditions investigated here. In order to corroborate the hypothesis that practices of *graphophagia* or *bibliophagia* (the act of eating written words or books) existed in Christian Nubia, proof of some more canonical traditions in Christianity must be found which speak of such practices more or less directly and explicitly.

Indeed, such traditions can be found in the Old and New Testaments¹¹, although not necessarily linked with healing practices. In the Apocalypse of John (10: 8-11), an angel feeds John with a scroll so that he can prophesize unlimitedly:

10. Some initial ideas along these same lines have been traced by DEPTULA (2015: 131-132).

11. Citations from the Old and New Testament are from the 2011 version of the *Common English Bible*.

Then the voice I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, “Go, take the opened scroll from the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and told him to give me the scroll. He said to me, “Take it and eat it. It will make you sick to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” So I took the scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. And it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I swallowed it, it made my stomach churn. I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.”

It should be stressed that this passage is inspired by Ezekiel (2:8-3:3) where the prophet is fed a scroll by Yahve in order to go out to the House of Israel and speak with God’s words unto them:

“As for you, human one, listen to what I say to you. Don’t become rebellious like that household of rebels. Open your mouth and eat what I give you.” Then I looked, and there in a hand stretched out to me was a scroll. He spread it open in front of me, and it was filled with writing on both sides, songs of mourning, lamentation, and doom. Then he said to me: “Human one, eat this thing that you’ve found. Eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he fed me the scroll. He said to me: “Human one, feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you.” So I ate it, and in my mouth it became as sweet as honey.

There are more references to eating the words of God from the Bible, such as in Psalm 118:103: “Your word is so pleasing to my taste buds—it’s sweeter than honey in my mouth!”

One may wonder whether a passage like the last one from Psalm 118 is not simply a poetic metaphor. There is proof, however, that Christians of the Middle Ages understood such references literally. The passage quoted above from Ezekiel is the topic of the illumination on folio 81r of a Latin Bible from the second half of the 12th century CE, now kept at the National Library of France (BNF) with register number Latin 16744.¹² In the renowned *Menologion* of Basil II (*Vaticus graecus* 1613), such a literal interpretation of *graphophagia* appears in the poetic investiture of Romanos Melodos by the Virgin Mary who feeds him a scroll, on October 1, the day of Romanos’ commemoration.¹³

Although no direct evidence of the use of such iconography has been discovered in Nubia, there is ample evidence that the textual reference to

12. The Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) has digitized the entire manuscript, available online: <<http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc68153s/cd0e296>>. The folio with the illumination is available on: <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85100225/f169.item>>.

13. The entire manuscript has been digitized and can be consulted online: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613/>.

the physical act of consuming a manuscript was known to Nubians. The Apocalypse of John has been identified in the corpus of biblical texts in Old Nubian, albeit only other passages are preserved (Browne 1994: 52-62, 87). Moreover, the Psalms were very popular in Nubia (Ruffini 2009). In addition, the book of Ezekiel inspired some of the most popular iconographic themes in Nubian art, namely the depiction of the four creatures in the form of angel, eagle, bull, and lion (Ezekiel 1: 5-12), which were later used as symbols of the four Evangelists (Tsakos 2014b). This last observation underlines the importance of the teaching of such mystical speculation to Christians in medieval Nubia, as it appears in the book of Ezekiel. There is, however, a difference between knowledge of a mystical act in the Bible and its actual practice by those who read about it. The idea that *graphophagia* and/or *bibliophagia* was practiced in Christian Nubia remains for the time being a hypothesis supported by ethno-archaeology and indirect evidence in both the archaeological record and the written sources of (Eastern) Christianity.

It is also worth pondering upon whether the Nubians, just like other Christians, would consider at the moment of partaking of the Holy Communion that the transformation of the blood and body of Christ to the wine and bread of the Eucharist and vice versa equally affected other means by which “the word became flesh” (John 1:14), namely the recording of the Holy Scripture on parchment (*i.e.* treated leather) manuscripts. This way of perceiving the physical properties of the parchment sheets has been investigated by Sarah Kay and I have been able to identify traces of similar practices in Christian literature from Nubia and Upper Egypt (see Tsakos in this volume).

The Olfactory Experience of the Physicality of Manuscripts

Another sense, which is difficult to pinpoint, as regards the physicality of manuscripts, is the olfactory experience of texts and their carriers. Nagy’s photographs of the burning of *bakhra* in order to inhale the fumes and thus receive healing can serve as a starting point to discuss that experience. One may, of course, contest whether this ritual burning is linked with the sense of smell, as an experience of a fragrance rather than as a nasal consumption of the essence of the word itself. Alternatively, one may question whether this ritual burning aims at producing a smell or at transforming the word into something that can be consumed. It is difficult to argue for or against either of these options, but there is much to say about the olfactory dimension of physically experiencing a text.

Perhaps the commonest experience of that sort is the tendency of many people to smell the pages of books, both new and old. The two main explanations are related to chemistry and memory. The chemical components of a book (paper, ink, adhesive) degrade and emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs) which, in this case, have been identified as reminiscent of vanilla and almond.¹⁴ To these, one should add odors to which the book has been exposed during its use, *e.g.*, smoke, water, or plants pressed between the pages. Thus, old books smell stronger than new ones, although other olfactory treasures may be revealed to the nose of those lucky to open a book fresh from the press. The range of this olfactory experience is not the issue here; rather, it is important that the odor of books resembles the odor of things that humans have experienced and tend to consider as pleasant. This remark would suffice to illustrate the role of memory in the olfactory experience, but there is more.

Every time an odor reaches the olfactory receptors, a record of this experience is made, whereby olfaction is encoded in the brain, including the context of this experience, *i.e.*, the cause of the odor, the place it happened, the people present, or the name of the odor. The inverse is also true: when the conditions of the olfactory experience are repeated, the brain “feels” as if the odor was again part of the experience even if this was not the case. Characteristically, in “The Senses in Language and Culture” Majid and Levinson (2011: 8) write:

Consider odor. Subjects exposed to a manufactured odor and told that it was “cheddar cheese” showed activation of a specific area of the brain that processes olfactory information; now told that it was “body odor” other areas were activated; and when presented with clean air and told it was “cheddar cheese,” again the same “cheese area” was activated, although to a lesser extent.

In our case, one moves away from the odor of the pages themselves and rather deals with the words written in a printed book or in a handwritten codex. If reference is made in a text to an olfactory experience, according to cognitive studies on olfactory memory elicited by language, the experience derived from the given odor should be felt again by the reader or the audience.

The sense of smell, however, has not always been treated on par with the other senses. It is elusive and most difficult to describe and often associated to sensual pleasures not accepted in all social contexts, especially the moralizing ones of several Christian denominations. This has placed the olfactory experience in a disadvantaged position in the social life of the senses, as studied by a group of scholars around Constance Classen (Classen 1993, 1998; Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994). Restricting the variety of odors,

14. <<http://www.compoundchem.com/2014/06/01/newoldbooksmell/>>.

prohibiting their appraisal, shaming their sensual effect, and reprimanding humans for exposing odors threatens the multiplicity of the human experience. However, it is not possible to eradicate smell either from the sensual panel or from the palette of human expression, including religious literature, and more particularly Christian writings.

In the New Testament, there are several occasions where the use of perfume is evidenced, one of the most renowned instances being the anointment of Jesus' feet by an unnamed woman in Mark 14:3; a sinful woman in Luke 7:37; and Mary, the sister of Lazarus, in John 12:3. These descriptions attest to a continuation of the ancient custom of using perfume. Similarly inspired from the ancient world and its pagan religious customs are two more references from Paul (Ephesians 5:2 and Philippians 4:18), where the Christian sacrifice (either of Jesus or of his disciples) is compared to an ancient sacrifice, the difference being that the scent reaching God is pleasant—implying the contrary for the odor of the bloody sacrifices.

There are other references that are more particular to the Christian mentality.¹⁵ Most come from the Pauline Epistles again. For example, in his second Epistle to the Corinthians (2:14), Paul says: "Now thanks be to God, who always causes us to triumph in Christ, and makes manifest the aroma of his knowledge by us in every place."

"The aroma of his knowledge" is not an obvious metaphor for how the teaching of Paul appeals to the communities he visited with his companions. Once again, the work of C. Classen (1998: 57-60) has clarified how the olfactory significance of "Spirit and Essence" can be apprehended as evidence for sanctity. Classen underscores the constant association of odor with the supernatural, beyond superstitious beliefs, concluding (*ibid.*: 60):

The nature of odor renders smell an apt vehicle for expressing concepts about knowledge and divinity. Odor, emanating from the interior of objects, can readily be understood as conveying inner truth and intrinsic worth. The common association of odor with the breath and with the life-force makes smell the source of elemental power, and therefore an appropriate symbol and medium for divine life and power [...]

Indeed, in many cases, sanctity has been confirmed by the miracle of corpses smelling good despite an extended period of time in the grave (Harvey 2006: 227-229). Similarly, while God breathed the breath of life upon the face

15. For an overview of the path that Christianity followed from its appearance when it was opposing the sensorial practices of the ancient world, through the discovery of means of its co-existence with the past, and until the appropriation of older traditions, determining a Christian olfactory experience, see HARVEY (2006).

of Adam (Genesis 2:7), in several manuscript traditions the act took place “into his nostrils.” Such beliefs show that the alienation of modern society from the olfactory experience was not the case in Early Christianity and the Middle Ages. The single reference to the sense of smell (ὄσφρησις) in the New Testament is quite eloquent. In his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul (12:17) says: “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?”

The point here is that a body needs all its constituent members, and this should be compared with the people who are all the members of the body of Christ; and just like no person could ever be excluded from the body of Christ, no sense can lose its place in the entity and unity that is the human body. How did the Nubians experience this Christian idea of the senses, and particularly the sense of smell?

Smelling in Old Nubia(n)

In the opening lines of *Worlds of Sense*, Constance Classen introduces us to the Ongee of the Andaman Islands in the South Pacific who “live in a world ordered by smell [...] The primary concern of the Ongee culture is to maintain a proper state of olfactory equilibrium within individuals and within the cosmos” (Classen 1993: 1). Nubians are not like the Ongees, but their culture is rich in olfactory experiences, the tradition of perfume production, and a respect for scent and its efficacy.

There is a long tradition of producing aromatic essences in the region that is today Sudan.¹⁶ Sudan is among the largest producers of frankincense and has engaged in its trade possibly from prehistory, as Hatshepsut’s expedition to the land of Punt indicates (Kitchen 1990: 174-177; Boivin & Fuller 2009: 140; Manzo 2010). An increase in the use of aromatics during the Meroitic period (ca 3rd century BCE- 4th century CE), both as body perfumes and as scents for use in the domestic, sacred, or funerary spheres, has been documented (Baldi 2014). In the medieval period, however, significant changes occurred.

Given that the organic material from olfactory uses is rarely preserved, archaeological artifacts, especially containers or censers, provide the best evidence for the use of perfumes and scents in the past. Beginning with the ceramic evidence, it is striking that *lekythoi*, miniature jugs used mainly as oil containers in the Meroitic period, disappear in the Middle Ages. Other oil bottles and ointment jars appear only rarely in Early and Late medieval contexts. Censers appear exclusively in the Terminal Christian phases and in

16. <<http://africanaromatics.com/sudans-aromatic-culture/>>.

post-medieval contexts (Adams 1986, vol. I: 103-104). This evidence bespeaks a limited interest in the aromatic experience for Nubian Christians during most of the medieval centuries, especially during the bulk of the Christian centuries in the Middle Nile region (*ca.* 700-1300 CE). The appearance of ceramic censers at the end of the era is particularly significant in a twofold manner. First, the similarity of shapes with specimens found even today in Sudanese homesteads¹⁷ indicates that such customs were introduced by a foreign culture and, in this context, it is legitimate to consider traditions introduced with the increase of Muslim populations and/or influences.¹⁸ Second, if any tradition of incense burning existed in the Christian period, then this was performed either by means lost in the archaeological record¹⁹ or with other types of vessels than pottery. Indeed, metal censers have been evidenced in the archaeological record from Christian Nubia, both as objects (SNM 18552, an iron censer from Semna) and as iconographic details (a priest holding book and censer from Royal Church on the Citadel of Old Dongola, see Zielińska 2015: 108 and fig. 8-6). The word for “censer” also appears in the textual record from Christian Nubia in the form of the loan-word from Greek, namely τῦμιᾶτῖ.

Returning to the texts, a lexicographic survey is in place. Although our knowledge of Old Nubian vocabulary is constantly increasing with new texts being discovered and new understandings forged, the main lexicographic tool for the student of Old Nubian has remained the *Old Nubian Dictionary* (OND) compiled by G. M. Browne (1996). Based on the lemmas assembled in OND, it is very interesting to observe that there are three different verbs describing the sense of sight (ἑλεεᾱ and ለጥጤ, meaning “to look,” and ሮላ፣ meaning “to see”), two verbs for the sense of hearing (ሳግረ፣ meaning “to hear” and ጥሳፍጥ, meaning “to listen”), another two describing eating (ፋፋ፣ and ፋፋ፣), and one for touch (ፋፋ፣). Although the modern Nubian languages have a separate verb for smelling (*gatakir*: “to perfume” [Khalil 1996: 32]; *irisko*:

17. Compare the types of censers used in modern *zīkr* ceremonies at Hamad el-Nil in Omdurman, as illustrated, for example, on <<http://brownbook.tv/before-sunset/>>, with the censers reproduced in ADAMS (1986, vol. I: 157).
18. It is again worth including another testimony from the *zīkr* at Hamad el-Nil in Omdurman, where a very powerful moment takes place when a man brings to the gathered audience incense burning on a censer, trans-fuming to all the *baraka* (spiritual power and/or blessing) of the sheikh (<<http://brownbook.tv/before-sunset/>>).
19. In support of the former option, one may be reminded of Nagy’s description of the burning of *bakhra* or of the tradition of *dukhan*, “an erotic ritual provided for women vaginal fumigations before sexual relations with their own husbands. In the absence of written and iconographical sources, ethno-archaeological comparisons have allowed us to attribute this function to pot wares put inside a hole in the floor. The woman squats over the hole, naked under a blanket which traps the fragrant smoke” (BALDI 2014: 82). Fumigations may also be performed directly on the ground or hanging from the ceiling.

And let a man remember this: if he sends forth the good odor of one who has taken and rubbed on perfume (ἡγρον), just as he does not cease being comforted himself, he also fills those who stand near with the good odor of that. Therefore, I beg you, pay attention to me.

This passage compares the impression created by the words of the homily with the impression left by the odor of a man who is perfumed and whose scent attracts the attention of those around him—but not necessarily only at the time of delivering the sermon, or of applying the perfume. The homilist, who also asks his congregation to be reminded of his teachings after they leave the church, emphasizes here the role of memory. The moralizing character of the Chrysostomian sermons is clear; but how does it fit with the olfactory metaphor used in this passage, especially in the context of medieval Nubia?

As discussed, olfactory memory is elicited by language in very concrete terms and therefore when the Nubians heard—or read—this passage of the homily, their mental image of the experience must have been directly related to the context in which myrrh was used in Nubia. This would have been the one represented in the archaeological record by a censer used in Mass, rather than by a perfume container, which people seem to have possessed, either privately or in public, south of Egypt only in pre-Christian times. Moreover, the word ἡγρον was not chosen by the translator of the pseudo-Chrysostomian homily because no other word existed in the local language for something so widespread as the use of incense and perfume. It can be argued that it was rather a choice aiming to moralize the content of the texts heard by Nubians at church, in coordination with Chrysostomian morals and in collaboration with the Christian Nubian state, which may have prohibited the import of carriers of oil and perfume or burners of incense in the Middle Nile region during the medieval era.

This paper has investigated the potential that exists in the study of various levels of materiality of manuscripts discovered at Nubian sites of the Christian Middle Ages. Statistical and codicological analyses provided a firm basis for exploring a *terra incognita* of the codicological experience in Christian Nubia. The originality of this approach lies with the application upon Nubian material of ideas about the ways in which texts interact with the senses, both as content and as the tangible object that the carrier of each text is. The tactile dimension has not been privileged in the discussion in this paper; nor have the senses of seeing and hearing. All three are much more “visible” in

the sources and easier to apprehend logically. The emphasis in the last part of the paper is on the senses of taste and smell, which are harder to trace in the archaeological record and to perceive mentally as related with the use of manuscripts in Christian cultic contexts. However, through ethnoarchaeology and text parallels from central areas of Late Antique and medieval Christianity, it was seen how we can trace practices like *graphophagia* or *bibliophagia* in the Christian societies of medieval Nubia; or how we can identify the olfactory dimension of the physicality of Nubian manuscripts through a lexicographical analysis or the careful reading of important witnesses of literature in Old Nubian. Nevertheless, this paper does not claim to have made an exhaustive scrutinization of data, methods, theories, and ideas, but merely to pave the way for further investigations along the same lines—even beyond the same sense or senses.

Special Collection, University Library of Bergen, Norway.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper offers an updated discussion on the codicological experience among Christian Nubians of the Middle Ages, dealing first with the materiality and then with the physicality of Nubian manuscripts. After defining the terms of materiality and physicality in an introductory part, the paper briefly deals with what we know about codices from Nubia and what sort of material was used as carriers of texts in Christian Nubia. Thence, light is shed on the differences observed between the systemic and archaeological contexts of Nubian codicological material and how the study of these contexts can advance our understanding of the use of manuscripts in Christian Nubia during the different phases of its cultural history. In the last part, the paper aims at opening new paths of understanding how the physical properties of the manuscripts carrying religious texts were experienced by Nubians through an understanding of these physical properties with their senses: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting—with a focus on the last two senses.

Keywords: Christian Nubia, codicology, materiality, medieval manuscripts, Old Nubian, physicality, senses.

RÉSUMÉ

Matérialité et physicalité des manuscrits médiévaux de Nubie chrétienne. — La présente contribution offre une analyse actualisée de l'expérience codicologique parmi les chrétiens de Nubie au Moyen Âge, abordant d'abord la matérialité et puis la physicalité des manuscrits nubiens. Après une introduction sur les notions de matérialité et physicalité, cet article présente brièvement nos connaissances sur les codices de Nubie et le type de matériel qui était utilisé comme porteurs de texte en Nubie chrétienne. De là, sont mises en lumière les différences observées entre les contextes systémiques et archéologiques du matériel codicologique nubien, ainsi que la manière dont l'étude de ces contextes peut faire progresser notre compréhension de l'utilisation des manuscrits en Nubie chrétienne à travers les différentes phases de son histoire culturelle. Dans la dernière partie, cet article vise à ouvrir de nouveaux chemins de compréhension sur la manière dont les propriétés physiques des manuscrits portant des textes religieux étaient expérimentées par les Nubiens à travers l'appréhension de ces propriétés physiques par leurs sens : la vue, l'ouïe, le toucher, l'odorat et le goût — avec un focus sur ces deux derniers sens.

Mots-clés: Nubie chrétienne, codicologie, manuscrits médiévaux, matérialité, physicalité, sens, Vieux nubien.