

The Syriac Life of Shenoute¹

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The Syriac text² (Paris syr. 236 ff. 33-39) translated below contains most episodes of the Coptic Life of Shenoute, of which there are Sahidic, Bohairic and Arabic versions, published by É. Amélineau *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e et V^e siècles* (1888) pp. 1-91 (Sahidic) and pp. 289-478 (Arabic) and J. Leipoldt *Vita Sinuthii Bohairice* (1960). The text was written in 1194 in Mosul by a monk named Behnam. There is also a Syriac text in London, but it is short and deals only with the end of Shenoute's life. For comparison Nau used the Sahidic and Arabic texts published by Amélineau. As a student I read the Bohairic text and still have a copy, so I refer to that from time to time in the notes.

Leipoldt comments (p. iii) that the Syriac versions seem to have compiled (*conscriptisse*) the briefest epitome (*brevissimam vitae epitomam*) of the Coptic and the entire version of the Arabic text. They contain no new material, so for Leipoldt they are of almost no importance (*nullius fere momenti*). The most intriguing aspects of the Syriac text are its very existence and the place of its origin: why was anybody who lived so far away from Egypt prepared to spend time copying a text in the late 12th cent. about a monk who is, one might say, so quintessentially Egyptian?³

Shenoute was the head of a monastic complex near Sohag c. 347 to 465. He assumed control of the monastery not long after the death of the founder, his uncle Pgol, in about 385. Just opposite Sohag is the city of Shmin (ϣⲙⲓⲛ), known to Greek speakers as Panopolis and Arabic speakers as Akhmim. While Shenoute was abbot, Panopolis was a 'centre' of classical learning and the home of various poets,⁴ and it is easy to imagine that Shenoute was hostile to this enclave of pagan intellectuals. Some

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- 1 It came to my attention towards the end of my work that Roger Pearse had already translated the French translation of Nau for his website The Tertullian Project. I decided nevertheless to finish what I had started on the grounds that my treatment is slightly different from his.
 - 2 F. Nau *Une version inédite de la vie de Schenoudi* (1900) pp. 1-25. The Sahidic Coptic and Arabic versions were published by É. Amélineau *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e et V^e siècles* (1888) pp. 1-91 (Sahidic) and pp. 289-478 (Arabic) and the Bohairic by J. Leipoldt *Vita Sinuthii Bohairice* (1960)
 - 3 Unlike, for example, Anthony, of whose Life there is a Syriac version, possibly made from a Greek version, and his disciple Ammonas, whose letters in Syriac were published by M. Kmosko 'Ammonii eremitae epistolae' *Patrologia Orientalis* 10 (1913) pp. 551 ff. Shenoute wrote a considerable amount but there is no evidence that it was written in any language other than Coptic. Indeed, his language is a topic of language study, as evidenced by the work of A. Shisha-Halevy *Coptic Grammatical Categories: Structural Studies in the Study of Shenoutean Syntax* (1986). He went outside Egypt once: to Ephesus for reasons of religious politics. However hard one might try to draw him into the world of the late classical period, he remains fundamentally Egyptian, and one might say he was in that world but not of it.
 - 4 L.-M. Cavero *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Thebaid 200-600* (2008)

of his encounters with 'pagans' are related in his works, but there is no mention of these in the Syriac epitome.

Translation

Now⁵ we write the glorious deeds of our holy father Shenoute, man of God.

1. My brothers, let us give glory to the Lord of all glory, to the one who has chosen the holy vessels⁶ necessary for his service and placed them in his church⁷ like torches to illuminate creation so that all those who ask to enter the kingdom of God imitate the holy vessels and receive the crown of victory. One of those chosen by the Saviour was Saint Shenoute, whose story we propose to tell you today so that you may glorify the one whose glorious deeds have shone forth over the whole world for the glory of God who chose him.

I have heard, it is true, that God⁸ said to his apostles: 'Do not reveal this vision which you have seen before my resurrection among the dead', but I will nevertheless reveal his holy actions (12) after his departure.⁹ I have also heard him say: "Whoever keeps my commandments and obeys them will perform more miracles than I have performed." And now, we will start, my brothers, and place the lamp not under the bushel but on the lampstand so that it might shine on all those in the house of this world.

2. To begin, we will speak as is fitting of his homeland and the work of Shenoute's parents. He was from a village in Upper Egypt, the Thebaid.¹⁰ His father was a farmer and kept sheep, which he handed over to the care of a shepherd. As the flock grew, the

5 The Syriac adverb is similar to Coptic **ON**: **ܐܢܝܢ**, suggesting perhaps no more than a continuation of the labour of copying.

6 **ܕܘܪܝܢܐ**

7 **ܕܘܪܝܢܐ**

8 I take this to mean Jesus, an unusual way to refer to him.

9 **ܕܘܪܝܢܐ**

10 The writer, not surprisingly is not familiar with details or is not interested in them: **ϣΕΝΑΛΛΟΕΤ** **ϣΕΝΠΘΩϣ** **ϣΜΙΝ** 'Shenalolet in the district of Shmin'

to us."¹⁷ They did so, and when he saw the young Shenoute, he took his hand, placed it on his head and asked Shenoute to pray for him. He led him to his cell with those present. Now, one of them had a demon, and when Shenoute saw him, he took a stick and struck him, and the demon cried out: "I am coming out of him, because from the moment I saw you, I have been burning with fire", and he came out in full view of all those present. The ascetic suggested to Shenoute's father that the boy stay with him for a few days, so he left him there. Shenoute's mother was the sister of this holy man.

4. That night Shenoute slept on one side of the cell, while the holy man stood on the other side praying. He saw an angel of the Lord standing over the boy, protecting him. The angel said: "In the morning, take the garment¹⁸ (15) you find by the side of his head and put it on the young Shenoute, for it is the garment of Elijah sent to him by Christ, and know that his name will rise so rapidly and become so great he will be unequalled in stature among Christians, for he will found a great monastery and bring to it a great number of saints.

In the morning, the ascetic, Pgol his uncle, found the garments beside his, as the angel had said, and woke Shenoute and clothed him while at the same time praying, and Shenoute became a monk. The following day he was walking around the cell with another monk when they heard a voice from heaven: "Shenoute has become head of all the monks." They wondered if they had heard this voice, and their reply was that they had heard it. They asked Shenoute if he had heard the voice. They were full of admiration and said to themselves: "This child has reached the highest degree straightaway",¹⁹ and they praised God for his unending gifts to man.²⁰ (16)

5. So, after having clothed himself with the garments sent by God, he went to one side and made a profession of the cenobitic life with continual fasting and frequent prayers. For his food, he ate only bread and salt in the evening to the point where his body began

17 Coptic: **ΜΑΡΟΝ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΖΗ ΜΠΑΡΧΗΜΑΝΔΡΙΤΗΣ** 'Let us go out and meet the archimandrite'.

18 Coptic always uses the Greek word **σχῆμα** for the monastic habit. Syriac: **ܠܘܒܘܫܐ**

19 **ܠܘܒܘܫܐ**

20 Among the differences between the Syriac and Coptic is that the latter specifies Pgol's companion in this episode as Apa Pshoi.

to wither and only the skin remained on his bones. His cenobitic life was like that of Elijah and John the Baptist. He became very learned and wrote books on preaching and monastic behaviour.²¹ He instructed monks and lay people, the old and young, each according to what was right and expedient.²² They listened to his words and instructions, which were sweeter to the taste²³ than honey. His writings were received by everybody. He gave precepts to the monks to be observed constantly. It is said that these precepts were not his but had been in his mouth by Christ. He made much progress with his disciples in the monastic life, praying twelve times every day and during each prayer twenty-four prostrations.²⁴ He did not sleep at night but rested his eyes for only an hour because of (17) the weakness of his body. He used to fast for weeks at a time and not eat except from Sabbath to Sabbath²⁵ During Lent he ate only a small cooked meal. He gave up fasting only when his flesh had totally desiccated and his eyes had sunk deep into their sockets because of all the tears he had shed, which were sweeter to his mouth than honey. He lived alone in the monastery and received revelation²⁶ about what has happening in the world. He discovered from each one who came to him how they behaved and what they thought. He reprimanded each according to his thoughts and measure²⁷ and interceded with God on their behalf to forgive them and have mercy on them.

6. A very old man²⁸ once came and asked to see Shenoute to be blessed and to be remembered by him in his prayers so that God might forgive him his sins. Shenoute sent his messenger to tell him: "If you are willing to obey, come (18). If not, you will not see my face."²⁹ He replied: "I will do everything you say." Our father bade him come in. In

21 Coptic: 'He became a teacher' (ⲁⲓⲩⲱⲛⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲣⲉⲓⲧⲥⲉⲱ)

22 No such phrase in Coptic

23 Coptic 'in his mouth' (ⲡⲉⲛⲣⲱⲓ)

24 Coptic uses Gk *μετάνοια*. Syriac may reflect the genitive sing. or acc. plural: ܡܬܢܘܝܐ

25 Coptic: 'he would eat not from Sabbath to Sabbath' (ⲙⲡⲓⲁⲓⲩⲱⲛⲓ ⲓⲭⲉⲛⲡⲓⲥⲁⲅⲃⲁⲃⲁⲧⲐⲛ ⲱⲡⲓⲥⲁⲅⲃⲁⲃⲁⲧⲐⲛ). I do not understand the Syriac ܪܘܚܘܢܐ , which Nau renders 'si ce n'est de . . .

26 ܘܢܘܒܘܢܐ

27 Coptic ' . . . and all the things they had done' (ⲛⲉⲙⲛⲏ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲓⲧⲟⲩ ⲧⲏⲣⲟⲩ). I do not understand what the Syriac word refers to: ܕܘܢܘܒܘܢܐ

28 Coptic: 'man of the village of Psenhōout in the district of the city of Psoi.'


29 πρόσωπον. Syriac form: ܡܢ ܦܨܘܝܐ

the presence of our father, he prostrated himself at Shenoute's feet. Our father said to him: "Confess your sin and tell everyone here what it was if you wish to live and get to the place where we all finish." The man said to him: "One day I was sitting next to my house³⁰ when I saw a man on horseback carrying a purse in a shoulderstrap. I took a sword and joined him on the road and struck him dead. I seized the purse, thinking I would find a lot of money in it, but I found only a third of a dinar. I dug a grave and buried the man.³¹ Now, I have told you everything, father, that you may advise me what I have to do to be absolved." Our holy father Shenoute said to him: "Go to Akhmim and you will find the governor³² and the soldiers at the gate where the thieves caught stealing are brought in, and join them (19) and tell them you are one of them. When they ask you, tell them that you are one of them and that you were with them so that you may be killed at the same time and that the blood you have shed may be forgiven you and you may gain life to come." He obeyed our father, went with them, was killed and attained to the kingdom of heaven. Let us all say: "Glory to the name of the only true God and praise to him."³³

7. On another occasion³⁴ one of the earliest disciples of Shenoute, named Besa, came to see him. He heard him speaking with someone else. He knocked and was invited to come in, he found no-one with Shenoute, who was alone. He begged to know who Shenoute had been speaking to. When I³⁵ pressed him, he said to me: "It was Our Lord Jesus Christ, and when you came in, he left." I said that I wanted to see him so that he would bless me. He said: "You cannot see him because you are not strong enough." I bowed to him and begged him to pray for me that I might be worthy of this blessing. Our father replied (20) to me: "That depends on the Saviour and not me. Come back tomorrow at six, because in his mercy he comes, talks to me and gives me instructions. Be careful not to say anything."

30 Coptic 'threshing floor of my village' (ΠΙΘΝΩΟΥ ΝΤΕΠΑΤΜΕ). Other details of the story are different.

31 In Coptic 'it/him'.

32 

33 Not in the Coptic

34 Nau cites a Coptic and Arabic source for the episode that follows, but it does not coincide with the order followed in the Bohairic text.

35 Besa moves seamlessly from 3rd to 1st p. narrator

As instructed by our father I came at six and knocked as usual on his door but as I tried to enter, Christ ascended. When I saw this, I wept profusely. Our father had pity on me and said: "Do not be upset. I will work with you. I will ask him to let you hear our conversation." I later returned to our father and heard Christ speaking to him and telling him about the future. I praised him and thanked him for his great kindness to me, but I was not worthy to see him in the flesh.

8. One day Shenoute was sitting on a rock at his monastery gate when Our Lord appeared to him and spoke to him, and our father replied: "I wish to see a boat sailing on this desert." Christ left and returned an hour later, and the area had become a lake on which a boat was sailing. Christ was the captain and the crew and oarsmen were angels. (21) The boat sailed on and it was brought to the place where Shenoute was standing praying. Christ said to Shenoute: "Stretch forth your hand and take the tow line of the boat to hold it steady." He took the line but was not able to hold the boat steady. He went up to a nearby rock, made holes in it with his thumb and put the line through it, and these holes can still be seen today.³⁶

9. A stranger³⁷ came to our father and asked him to pray for him. Shenoute said: "How can I pray for you when you are burdened with such a great sin?" The man replied: "I will not return.³⁸ I am Christian. I have worshipped the one true God, the Trinity, since I reached the age of reason." Our father said to him: "Do you remember the day when you ate, drank, went to sleep, and the during the night took your sword, went out, found a woman on the road and struck her dead?" The stranger replied: "Yes. I remember that, but is there no pardon for one who returns and repents?" Our father said: "Indeed, there is forgiveness for the one who returns and repents. Provided that you³⁹ listen to my

³⁶ §§24-35 of the Coptic are not in the Syriac text.

³⁷ He is described in the Coptic as someone from the 'country outside' (εφατχωρα μβολπτε) and the name of his town is ΚΟΜΕΝΤΙΟΣ, cf. É. Amélineau *Géographie Copte* (1893) p.229. who talks about it but is unable to identify it.

³⁸ The Syriac reading needs to be emended as Nau (p. 34 note 4). Instead of ܕܒܘܢܐ read ܕܒܘܢܐ Coptic: 'I do not know any sin I have committed' (†ܦܘܘܢ ܐܢ ܢܘܘܢܒܝ ܥܐܝܐܩ).

³⁹ Once again an abrupt shift of person.

advice, I am confident that you will be forgiven, for God does not want the death of a sinner but wants him to repent." He advised the man to become a monk and cut his hair and clothed him (22) in monastic garments.

Three days later our father took him by the hand and gave him a jug of water, led him to a distant ⁴⁰ hill, where he took him into a cave which was his size and had a window through which the light came in.⁴¹ He made him sit down and close the cave. From Sabbath to Sabbath our father went to visit him to ask him if all was well him. He said: "Two nights ago something happened that troubled me: my limbs and my hands became weak and the hair on my skin stood on end, I was stupefied and full of pain. I thought that my spirit was leaving me because of the anxiety that was oppressing me. My hands gave off a smell of corruption like that of a dead body, which then formed itself into a cloud that rose and disappeared from the cave. I fell on my face like a drunkard and was like this until you arrived," Our father said to him: "Courage, my son, for today God has forgiven your sins." Our father brought him out of the cave to a place near our monastery. When I saw him, I Besa disciple of Shenoute asked him about the man: "Is not this the stranger who came to see you ? Where has he been all this time ?" Our father said to me: "He was afflicted with a very serious wound by the wicked Satan⁴² the lion.⁴³ I took him to the doctor, who healed him." He stayed with them for some time and returned (23) to his cave and became perfect in all things and remained that way until he died.

10. A wealthy man from Shamûn⁴⁴ came to visit our father and told him that thieves had entered his house and taken ... (*the rest is missing*)

40 Coptic 'thirteen miles'

41 Coptic: 'the door of the cave was open in the upper part like a window' (ΠΙΡΟ ΔΕ ΝΤΕΠΙΣΠΗΛΕΟΝ ΟΥΗΝ ΣΑΠΩΩΙ ΜΜΟQ ΜΦΡΗ† ΝΟΥΦΟΥΩΤ)

42 The Syriac word used here can also mean 'adversary'. English expresses the distinction as 'an adversary' or 'the Adversary'.

43 Ⲛⲓⲕ Coptic: 'wild beast',

44 Coptic Shmin, on the other side of the river from the monastery. He is described in the Coptic as 'businessman'. The Syriac translator has correctly identified Shmin as Akhmim elsewhere, so why the confusion here ? Shmoun (ϠΜΟΥΝ) would be the large town in Middle Egypt re-named Hermopolis by Greek speakers.

11. Monks from the monastery of the illustrious Macarius⁴⁵ came to visit Shenoute to ask for his blessing and important people from Akhmim to hear his teaching and asked him: "Is there a monk alive who can be compared with Anthony the Great?" Shenoute replied: "Not even all the great monks of this time together would equal Anthony." All were full of admiration, believed his word, were blessed by him and made their way home.

12. We were told the following by father Shenoute:⁴⁶ *While Christ was with him and they were conversing, the Bishop of Akhmim came to his monastery and asked to speak with him and accompany him to Alexandria to see Cyril the Patriarch and told him to come with him. The old man⁴⁷ said that he could not. The Bishop replied (24): "Come to me, it is urgent." The old man replied: "I do not have time at the moment." The Bishop angrily said to put him to shame: "I will excommunicate you, and there will be no forgiveness if you disobey me."⁴⁸ When I heard this, I rejoiced internally:⁴⁹ "Look at this man of flesh and blood, asking me to attend him when I am with the Lord of all creation." The Lord then said to me: "Arise and go to your Bishop so that he does not excommunicate you. I will not free you from the anathema⁵⁰ because of the power I gave to the disciple Peter, to all the apostles and priests who are ordained:⁵¹ 'Those whom you condemn will be condemned etc.'⁵² When I heard this Christ, I adored him and went immediately to the Bishop, whom I greeted and by whom I was blessed. I listened to his words and he blessed me and departed on his journey.*

13. A monk of the monastery of Pachomius⁵³ was on his way to the imperial city to see

45 Coptic: 'the famous monasteries of Shiêt'.

46 The Coptic narrative is simply part of the 'biography', but here it is in the form that the author (probably Besa) would have received before incorporating it into his narrative. The Coptic passage occupies §§ 70ff. in Leipoldt's text. The Coptic phrase for excommunication: 'you are out' (ⲕⲬⲬ ⲄⲀⲐⲐⲔ)

47 Ⲅⲉⲛⲟⲩⲉ

48 The second part of the sentence is not in the Coptic.

49 Coptic: 'he smiled graciously' (ⲁⲒⲚⲈⲦⲒⲠⲠⲟⲒ ⲚⲄⲐⲐⲓ ⲛⲈⲚⲐⲟⲩⲩⲙⲟⲦ). It sounds somewhat patronising.

50 Coptic: 'I will not let you in' (ⲧⲚⲁⲬⲁⲕ ⲈⲒⲐⲩⲚ ⲁⲚ)

51 These last two members of the group are not specified in the Coptic text.

52 Matth. 18, 18

53 Coptic names him as Martyrios and the site of the monastery as ⲠⲈⲐⲟⲩⲩ, where Pachomius had founded his second monastery after Tabennese. The various Pachomian monasteries, perhaps as many as eight, must have constituted a sort of federation, of which Pachomius was the president.

the Emperor on a certain matter. As he approached the monastery of Shenoute,⁵⁴ he wanted to enter to be blessed by him (25). His disciple⁵⁵ said: "Let us continue our journey. He does not even know what he has eaten here." Martyrius ignored this and continued on his way to the monastery. Our father came out and said: "Which of you is John, the secretary of this old man?" The disciple replied: "I am." Shenoute said: "You are right, my son. Shenoute does not know what he has eaten here. My body is weak and dessicated. I hope that the Lord will grant me a place with the apostles on the day of judgement. so that you may have faith in the servants of Christ, even when they feeble." He then prostrated himself before our father that he might pray for him, forgive him and have mercy on him. His master also asked him to pray for them that they might continue their journey.

14. God⁵⁶ did all of this through our holy father. He performed miracles even greater than the ones we have written, and we have written only some of them⁵⁷ for the glory of the saint and his master. For our part let us praise and exalt the one who continued to strengthen him, and let us all say: Glory to his name. May the prayer of our father Shenoute be with us. Amen.

54 Sohag, the site of Shenoute's monastic complex, is approx. 70 miles north of the Pachomius foundations.

55 Coptic is more detailed: the young man is a **ΝΟΤΑΡΙΟΣ**, named John. Martyrius expresses his wish to talk to the 'prophet' and John asks Martyrius **ϣΕΝΟΥΜΕΤΝΑΩΤΝΑΖΒΙ** (lit. 'stiff-neckedness' but probably meaning something 'impudent', rather like the colloquial English 'hard-faced') which prophet does he mean and ventures his opinion that Shenoute does not even know what he has eaten in the evening.

56 The only passage in the Bohairic Life to which the Syriac may be compared is in §172, but the resemblance is faint.

57 Coptic. **ΑΠΟΜΕΡΟΣ**.

