CHAPTER 1

Codex History

Codicology and the History of Codex Alexandrinus

When manuscripts are studied only for the texts they contain, a wealth of knowledge about the history of those manuscripts is ignored. The “textual setting” reveals to the careful observer much about the purpose and use of the manuscript, both from the time of its creation and from its later utilization. Much like an archaeological exploration, the study of the physical setting of a manuscript reveals an accumulation of historical strata that speak to its cultural and intellectual history. As Boyle observes, to handle a text rightly is to learn the tradition of the text:

For it is an inescapable fact that the only way in which we know of the text we are editing—even when it has had many editions—is through the codices that carry it. And unless these carriers are examined as thoroughly as possible, one is never going to be in a position to subject that text as it is carried by the codices to anything approaching a critical analysis... Codicology is a history of the fortunes not of a text as text, but of a text as it is carried by codices. It is a simple and necessary recognition of the fact that texts have survived because of codices, and that each codex in turn carries text in its own unique fashion.

As with many biblical manuscripts, the history of Alexandrinus as revealed by codicological examination has been largely ignored, to the detriment of its students. A number of inscriptions in the pages of Alexandrinus were made after its creation, and these interventions speak of the travels, ownership, and use of the codex through the centuries. The history of the codex after 1627, when

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1 Boyle’s phrase seems most agreeable, for “‘physical setting’ is probably a more useful term than ‘physical description’” because it is more comprehensive than a mere description of dimensions, binding, and materials (Leonard E. Boyle, “‘Epistulae venerunt parum dulces’: The Place of Codicology in the Editing of Medieval Latin Texts,” in Editing and Editors: a Retrospect, ed. Richard Landon [New York: AMS, 1988], 35).
2 This useful word picture is borrowed from Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, Introduction to Manuscript Studies (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 48.
3 Boyle, “‘Epistulae venerunt parum dulces,’” 33, 46.
it was made a gift to England, is relatively well known; this is summarized in
the following section. In the subsequent section, several of the interventions
made in the manuscript are examined to construct some of its history prior to
1627. Other miscellaneous interventions that support this constructed history
(such as the Arabic folio numeration) are discussed in detail in later chapters.

1627 to Present

The earliest certain placement of Alexandrinus is in 1627, when the codex was
given as a gift to King Charles I of England by the Patriarch of Constantinople
(1621–1638), Cyril Lucar. The English adventurer and ambassador Sir Thomas
Roe fostered a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship with the patriarch
by aiding him against the machinations of the Latin Church at a time when the
ecclesiastical system of the Orthodox Church suffered from corruption under
the Ottoman Empire; in return for Roe’s aid, the patriarch was pressured to
supply England with ancient books and works of art.4 As a result, among the
ancient works delivered to England, Alexandrinus was to be given as a gift to
King James I in 1625. But, for reasons not revealed by Roe’s letters, the trans-
fer of the codex to England was delayed until it was finally presented to King
Charles I on New Year’s Day, 1627.

The codex is presumed to have been in the possession of Cyril Lucar dur-
ing his years as Patriarch of Alexandria (1602–1621),5 later residing with him
in Constantinople (the popular name of the codex derives from its supposed

4 Matthew Spinka, “Acquisition of the Codex Alexandrinus by England,” JR 16, no. 1 (January
1936): 12. Just eleven years later Lucar met his untimely death after a bashaw (a high-ranking
Turkish officer) named Bairam persuaded the sultan Morad to have Lucar killed as an enemy
of the state; on June 27 (1638), a group of Janizaries (the sultan’s household soldiers) took
Lucar out onto the Bosphorus, strangled him with a bowstring, stripped him, and dumped
his body in the water. Lucar’s body washed ashore and was buried by his friends, at which
point his enemies dug up the corpse and dumped it back into the water; however, his body
washed ashore a second time and was again buried (James Townley, Illustrations of Biblical
Literature Exhibiting the History and Fate of the Sacred Writings from the Earliest Period to the
Present Century, vol. 1 [New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1856], 63; Philip Schaff, The Creeds of