From Textual to Ritual Practice: Written Media and Authority in Shenoute's *Canons*

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The writings of Shenoute, head of the White Monastery federation between c. 385 and 465 CE, are one of the most important sources for late antique monasticism. In particular, his nine volumes of *Canons* offer a fascinating perspective on the internal life of coenobitic groups, as they address, both directly and obliquely, the various concerns and disputes of the monastic federation Shenoute directed over eight decades. The *Canons* were copied and preserved through the medieval period in the library of his community, along with numerous other works of Coptic literature. As these parchment codices slowly made their way to Europe, usually in fragments, the White Monastery library became well-known among scholars, and its ongoing reconstruction is still the most important area of research for the study of medieval Coptic manuscripts.

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* Parts of this chapter were presented in a lecture entitled “Writing in Monastic Culture”, delivered at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina on May 12, 2013, and in the subsequent workshops on Monastic Epigraphy, May 13–15, 2013; I would like to thank Ahmed Mansour, John Hosny, and the rest of the staff of the Calligraphy Center for their invitation and hospitality.


3 See, in particular, the reconstruction of Shenoute’s literary oeuvre, using mostly White Monastery manuscripts, in S. Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 2004).
Although no late antique manuscripts of Shenoute’s works survive, his writings offer important, even unparalleled, evidence for the rich and varied textual culture of an ancient Christian community. One important source is at the very margins of the Canons: Shenoute’s occasional scribal notes, which offer important clues about the federation’s textual practice, especially the context in which they were produced, copied, circulated, and read, as well as the various media on which they were written. Indeed, soon after he became the leader of the White Monastery federation, Shenoute transcribed several letters that he had circulated during the preceding crisis, and perhaps other papyrus documents, into a manuscript. This process of remediation is described in an extensive scribal note preserved at the end of the first volume of Canons:4 “In the twenty-sixth year of our first father who has fallen asleep, which is also the sixteenth year of our other father who has fallen asleep after him, we transcribed all of the things written in the papyrus (χαρτής) which were established at this time, into this book (χοδή).” Shenoute further asserts that this new book is intimately connected to previous manuscripts “written for us”.5 He orders that the leader of the community keep the manuscript and ensure that it is read at the four annual meetings, serving as a “witness”.6 The purpose of reading the volume is to provoke repentance in the audience, and thus ensure their salvation.7

Shenoute left other paratextual reflections during the course of his career, as he continued to collect his writings into additional volumes. Almost fifty

5 “Let he who has not understood everything written in it [this book] know them from all the words in the books that are written for us” (H. Munier, Manuscrits Coptes, pp. 115–116).
6 “So let this book, in which are written things that are a witness to all the other words and deeds which are a witness to all the words and deeds which are in this book, be in the hand of the leader of these congregations, at all times, so that he might consider it, in order not to forget it and be neglectful that he read them in the four times of the year [established]” (H. Munier, Manuscrits Coptes, p. 116). Note that I use “book” informally to refer to the codex format. The term χοδή is ambiguous and might refer to either a codex or a roll (cf. χόδος, s.v.). The latter meaning, however, may require the additional modification of τὸς κυριοκλάματος, τὸς κυριοκλάματος. I assume that Shenoute uses χοδή as codex, at least in these passages, which specifically mention the cross-referencing characteristic of that format.
7 “Those who do not want to repent of their evil deeds after they listen to all the words which are in this book will be ashamed in front of those who are able to go down from heaven onto earth, and also to go back up to heaven; but the fire of Gehenna will inherit them” (H. Munier, Manuscrits Coptes, pp. 115–116).