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The J. P. Morgan Collection of Coptic Manuscripts

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MR. J. P. MORGAN has just received from Paris what must be called the most complete, and from the point of view of ancient Christian art and literature, the most valuable collection of Coptic manuscripts as yet known.

It consists of fifty volumes, some of which contain as many as nine or ten different treatises. Nine or ten of them are still in their original bindings of the ninth or tenth century, and a dozen of them are adorned with full-page miniatures representing the Virgin with Her Divine Son at Her breast or sitting in Her lap, angels, martyrs, anchorites, and other saints. A wealth of decorations from the vegetable and animal realms runs along the margins and around the titles of the individual treatises. The bindings consist of boards made of layers of papyrus leaves taken from older manuscripts: the boards, almost half an inch thick, are covered in leather enriched with exquisite designs. One of these bindings covering a magnificent copy of the Four Gospels, is richly and tastefully decorated in red and gold, and shows on the inside the name of the Convent of the Archangel Michael, to which the collection belonged.

Many of the manuscripts are dated from the first half of the ninth to the latter half of the tenth century. They are the oldest dated Coptic manuscripts yet found, even as the miniatures and bindings, just referred to, are the earliest examples of the art of book-binding and decorating manuscripts among the Christians of Egypt.

The collection is rich in biblical manuscripts. It contains six complete books of the Old Testament, of which so far we

had but few fragments, viz., the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the First and Second Books of Samuel, and the book of Isaiah. The New Testament is represented by three complete Gospels, viz., Matthew, Mark, and John (Luke is unfortunately incomplete), the fourteen Epistles of St. Paul, the two of St. Peter, and the three of St. John, for all of which books heretofore we were dependent on fragments from many manuscripts of various, and, as a rule, of uncertain ages and provenances. There are only three liturgical manuscripts, a Lectionary, a Breviary, and an Antiphonary, but all three are absolutely unique and of the greatest importance for the history of the ancient Egyptian liturgies.

The apocryphal literature holds also a prominent place in Mr. Morgan's collection, either in the form of special treatises, as the life of St. John the Evangelist by Prochorus, and the Investiture of the Archangel Michael as chief of the heavenly hosts, or more commonly in the shape of homilies or discourses attributed to St. Cyril of Jerusalem or some other prominent Father of the Church. There are also numerous biographies of famous anchorites and cenobites, such as St. Anthony and St. Pacomius, and quite a number of interesting acts of martyrdom.

Most of those documents are couched in the Sahidic dialect, the home of which seems to have been Upper Egypt, but evidently it had spread in the Fayum, as a literary language, as early as the eighth or ninth century. For this wonderful collection was discovered by Arabs in the ruins of a monastery on the southwestern border of that region. Many of the colophons to be found at the end of the manuscripts make it clear beyond the possibility of a doubt that the manuscripts were all written in that province, and many of them in the convent itself, in the ruins of which they were found some twenty months ago, hidden away in a stone vat, with the writing outfits of the scribes: three ink-wells combined with calami cases, and two of the calami themselves, the latter consisting of reed stems sharpened into pens at both ends. The wells proper were of lead and contained

once a sponge imbibed with ink, exactly as customary nowadays in Egypt and other parts of the Orient.

Two other manuscripts, as also all the colophons, are written in the local Fayumic dialect. There is also a Bohairic manuscript, a copy of the Four Gospels. It contains unfortunately many lacunæ, but it has nevertheless a great critical value, as it is the oldest copy of the Four Gospels in that dialect.

What makes the extraordinary importance of the new Morgan collection is the fact that these documents are as a rule complete, while other collections, yet reputed so valuable, of Rome, Paris, and London, to name the principal ones only, generally consist of fragments. For the past two hundred years the Arabs have been wont to tear the manuscripts they discover, so as to give to each member of the tribe his share of the spoils, and also in the hope of securing higher prices by selling the manuscripts piecemeal to individual tourists, or explorers, who often pay as much as eighty dollars for a single leaf of volume, while they would hesitate to buy a whole volume at that rate.

We need not say that this method has proved fatal to the interest of science, as many of the scattered leaves will meet destruction by some cause or another before they find a purchaser, or they will remain indefinitely hidden away by the individual owners.

The most of the manuscripts of this new collection, the finest that was ever discovered, had already been divided into small bundles of leaves and distributed among a number of Arabs, and it would have gone the way of the former finds, but for the energy of Mr. Chussinat, head of the French institute of archeology at Cairo, who persuaded an antiquarian to hunt up the precious relics and buy them at whatever price the Arabs wanted for them.

America may well feel proud that one of her sons has endowed her with such a treasure of art and ancient literature. Thanks to Mr. J. P. Morgan, our country is coming gradually to the point where it will have nothing to envy the European countries for. Mr. Morgan has made up his

mind not to keep this magnificent collection hidden away among his priceless treasures, but with a truly liberal and scholarly spirit, he will see that the whole scientific world be given the benefit of it, and is now considering the means to that end.