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Introduction

Throughout the Latin States founded by the Crusaders in the Levant, Old French was the sociolect of a ruling class of aristocrats who were either born in the East or had recently arrived there from the Oil-speaking countries of Western Europe.¹ Old French may also have functioned as a *lingua franca* (لسان الفرنج *lisān al faranġ*)² in both meanings of this term: 1. a common appellation for all Western language spoken in the Levant at the time of the Crusades (both Romance as well as Germanic³ languages); 2. a single language, understandable to all Westerners. There is, however, rather scant information about the particular kind of mediaeval French that was spoken at the time in this geographical area. The evidence provided by certain literary texts composed in the Levant, like an episode of the anonymous epic *Chanson des Chétifs*⁴ or Philippe

- 1 Jacoby, “La littérature française dans les États latins de la Méditerranée orientale”, 619; “Society, Culture, and the Arts in Crusader Acre”, pp. 98–101.
- 2 The assumption according to which the term *lingua franca* is the translation of the Arabic term لسان الفرنج *lisān al-faranġ* has been expressed by Tagliavini, *Le origini delle lingue neolatine*, 151.
- 3 The ethnonym Φράγγου is a Byzantine Greek adaptation of Latin *Francus*. Originally intended to refer to a subject of the Carolingian Empire, it seems to have sometimes preserved this general meaning, as shown by the use of ФРЯГИ as an appellation for the Crusaders who ransacked Constantinople in 1204 in the Old Russian *Chronicle of Nestor*. Later on, in the seventeenth century, we find that the same Russian word has been extended to all Westerners, especially Germans. See Lotman and Uspenskij, “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eighteenth Century)”, 49.
- 4 Although Hatem, *Les poèmes épiques des croisades*, 253–257, assumes the

de Novare's *Estoire de la guerre des Ibelins contre les Impériaux*, does not necessarily reflect the particular colouring of Levantine French, since most of the texts were recopied in places other than the Crusader States. And yet, some of the manuscripts containing texts written in the East are of definite Levantine origin, while other manuscripts of Levantine origin contain texts that were not written in the Levant but only copied there.⁵ Thus the evidence provided by the manuscripts as to the specific character of Levantine Old French is by no means univocal. It needs to be appraised in conjunction with other kinds of evidence.

In addition to these literary sources, there are a number of extant documentary texts of Levantine origin, particularly texts of a juridical nature.⁶ However, the juristic texts were not *unica*, inasmuch as they were often recopied by later transmitters (especially Cypriot) and handed down to later generations, as genuine literary texts would have been.

Thus we have to resort to a third kind of source for additional information about the specific Levantine colour of the Old French spoken in the Crusader states. This third category of evidence is made up by the indirect attestations of Old French found in texts that were written in the various languages of the Orient: Arabic, Greek, Armenian and Coptic. Sometimes, these texts contain Old French personal names or place names, sometimes lexical items or

Levantine origin of the *Chanson des Chétifs*, more recent researches have criticized this view, ascribing a Levantine origin to only one episode of this Old French epic. See Myers, "*Les Chétifs: étude sur le développement de la chanson*"; "*Le développement des Chétifs: la version fécampoise?*"

5 See for instance the studies on the transmission of the *Eracles*: Morgan, *La Continuation de Guillaume de Tyr (1184-1197)*, 13; Edbury, "The Lyons *Eracles* and the Old French Continuations of William of Tyre", 139. On the literary activity of the Latin East, see Laura Minervini's recent studies, "Outremer"; "Modelli culturali e attività letteraria nell'Oriente latino".

6 A list of the most important of them appears in Prætor's *Histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem*, I, 25-27.

transliterations of whole sequences in the various alphabets used in the area: Greek, Arabic, Armenian or Coptic.

One of these Oriental sources is a document of the highest importance for our knowledge of Levantine Francophony in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷ It is an Arabic-Old French phrase book found in the last 13 pages of a Coptic lexicographic treatise entitled السلم الحاوي *al-sullam al-ḥāwī*, ‘the comprehensive ladder’.⁸ In the context of mediaeval Egypt, the *sullam* is a kind of dictionary that reflects a situation of Arabic-Coptic bilingualism.⁹ From a lexicographic viewpoint, it pertains to the category of the

- 7 It was Prof. Benjamin Z. Kedar of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who drew my attention to this Arabic-Old French phrase book written by Copts.
- 8 The MS. Paris BnF Copte 43 was first mentioned by Champollion-Figeac, *Charte de Commune en langue romane*; Delaporte, “Catalogue sommaire des manuscrits coptes de la Bibliothèque Nationale”, 384–385; Maspero, “Le Vocabulaire français d’un Copte du XIIIème siècle”. The present study aims to be an implementation and sometimes an emendation of this last article, which reflects an insufficient knowledge of Old French. A more accurate study has been devoted to this text by Roquet, “Vieux-français et copte: contacts lexicaux”, but it focuses on only a few words. Brief mentions of the glossary is found in Minervini’s study “La lingua franca mediterranea: Plurilinguismo, mistilinguismo, pidginizzazione sulle coste del Mediterraneo tra tardo medioevo e prima età moderna”, 239–240; Kramer, “Verschriftungsarten und –tendenzen in der Romania”, 595–596. Recently, Kedar has dealt with the Coptic phrase book from a historical point of view: See his “Latins and Orientals in the Frankish Levant, 1099–1291”. Lastly, an article of mine partly devoted to this data has been entitled “Languages in Contact in the Latin East: Acre and Cyprus”, 157–175.
- 9 According to Kasser, this state of Coptic (Bohairic)-Arabic bilingualism lasted at least until the seventeenth century. See Kasser, “Les dialectes coptes”, 88. On the genre of the *scala*, see Sidarus, “Coptic Lexicography in the Middle Ages: The Coptic Arabic *Scalae*”; Vycichl, “*Sullam*”. On the composition of bilingual phrase books during the Middle Ages, Bischoff, “The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages”.

onomasiological or topical dictionaries in which the lemmata are classified thematically and not alphabetically.¹⁰

On each page, the Coptic or the Greek words are located in the left column with their Arabic counterpart in the right one. Such a disposition is quite natural, since both Coptic and Greek are written from left to right, while Arabic is written from right to left. It is interesting to compare this lexicographic device with that of earlier Coptic phrase-books (Latin-Greek-Coptic)¹¹ written at a time when Coptic was still the *explicans* (fifth/ sixth centuries). There, the Latin is on the left, the Greek in the middle and the Coptic on the right, the position natural for the *explicans* in a left-to-right writing system. Moreover, it is worth noting that whereas in this late antique trilingual phrase-book, both Greek and Latin are written with Greek letters, in its mediaeval counterpart, both Greek and Old French words are written in Coptic letters. Lastly, the Latin seems to be transliterated rather than transcribed, as shown by such notations as $\mu\epsilon\nu\sigma\alpha\mu$ or $\alpha\delta\pi\omega\nu\iota\tau\epsilon$ for *mensam* ‘table’ or *adponite* ‘put’. At such a late period, these words would have been pronounced as *mesa(m)* and *apponite*. The only concession to what could be called a transcription is the use of the digram <ϛδ> in order to represent the dental stop [d]. As for the notation of Old French by means of Coptic letters, it seems to be a real transcription with little interference from the Old French writing system. This essential difference in the notation devices is illustrative of the gap between Latin, a written language knowledge of which was reserved to administrators and jurists in the early Byzantine Empire, and Old French, a vulgar idiom the notation of which was in its early stages.

In other Coptic books, it is possible to find Arabic written by

10 On this genre of dictionaries, see Hüllen, “Onomasiological Dictionaries (900–1700): Their Tradition and their Linguistic Status”.

11 Hasitzka, *Neue Texte und Dokumentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht (Textband)*, 210–213.

means of Coptic letters¹² and vice versa.¹³ In the case of the Arabic-Old French glossary, however, it is the Bohairic writing system of the thirteenth century that has been used in order to represent the Old French phonemes, so that the French lemmata are located in the same left column that was occupied by the Coptic or Greek lemmata in the preceding pages of the manuscript. As for the words of the Arabic column, they are supposed to gloss the meaning of the Coptic, Greek and Old French words located in the left column. This situation is the reverse of that prevailing in Judeo-French context, where the French glosses were the explicans and the Hebrew lemmata the explicandum.

This transcription of Old French by means of Coptic letters has adopted the *scriptio continua* characteristic of the texts originally written in Coptic.¹⁴ Thus the French articles are not separated from the substantive. Likewise, the words of the same syntagma appear as a compact accumulation, which makes the deciphering all the more complicated.

The use of Coptic letters to represent Old French phonemes in no way facilitates the task of the Romanists. However, the use of the Bohairic writing system for the notation of Arabic and the use of the Arabic writing system in order to note Coptic have permitted to reconstruct the values of the Coptic alphabet in the Late Bohairic writing system.¹⁵ If one relies on the conclusion of modern Coptology as to the phonemic values of Coptic graphemes in this system, it is possible to understand the nature of the Old French phonemes that have been represented in such an unusual way.

12 Casanova, “Un texte arabe transcrit en caractères coptes”, 1–20 ; Sobhy, “Fragments of an Arabic MS. in Coptic Script”; Burmester, “Further Leaves from the Arabic MS. in Coptic Script of the Apophthegmata Patrum”, 51–64; Blau, “Some Observations on a Middle Arabic Egyptian Text in Coptic Characters”.

13 Galtier, “Un manuscrit copte en caractères arabes”, 91–111.

14 Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, 19–20 (§19).

15 Satzinger, “Pronunciation of Late Bohairic”; Shisha-Halevy, “Bohairic”.

The first three pages of the Old French part of the manuscript are repeated by the same copyist's hand on the fourth page with very slight differences, probably because the scribe was dissatisfied with the first sequence. Since the items are almost identical, the reason for this dissatisfaction may be the position of the items on the page. Furthermore, the Arabic glosses of the first sequence are quite faint, whereas they are well traced in the second sequence. The poor quality of the first sequence may have induced the scribe to restart his work. The first sequence comprises 49 items, the second 228 of which 49 overlap with the first sequence.

In the above-mentioned study devoted to this phrase book, Maspero proposes to consider the manuscript anterior to the very beginning of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ As for the composition of the glossary, the same scholar proposes the thirteenth century as a *terminus ante quem*, for the very existence of such a conversation guide seems to be related with the presence of a Frankish settlement in the Near East. If we exclude the special case of Cyprus, the Crusader States did not survive the loss of Acre in 1291. An even more precise *terminus ante quem* is provided by the fact that the only toponym we find among the 228 items is "Acre" (item 227) and the only western ethnonym is "Genoese" (item 226), aside from the term "Saracen" (item 228) that corresponds to the Arabic word *غريب الجنس* *gharīb al-ġins* "foreigner". Note that an alternative Arabic gloss identifies this rather subjective and interchangeable appellation with the Moslems. No other ethnonym than Moslem/Saracen or Genoese appears in the phrase book, as if the multiethnic diversity of Frankish Levant had been restricted to a confrontation between Genoeses and Moslems. The asymmetry of this opposition between a global appellation for the whole Islamic community and an ethnonym restricted to a particular category of Italians suggests that Genoese is a synecdoche for other Franks found at that time in the city of Acre. Therefore, the phrase-book probably reflects the time before 1258, the date when the Genoese were expelled

16 Maspero, "Le vocabulaire", 482.

from the city after their defeat by the Venetians in the war of St. Sava.¹⁷ The Genoese subsequently returned to Acre, but not as the foremost Italian community they had earlier been. The figures for Genoese trade in the years after 1258 show a vertiginous decrease of Levantine seafaring.¹⁸ In the following years, Genoese were much more present in Tyre or in Antioch than in Acre. Thus the fact that no other western ethnonym except for ‘Genoese’ has been used in the manuscript allows us to regard the material compiled by the Coptic transmitters as prior to 1258.

This leaves unanswered the question of the *terminus a quo*. Due to the relative heterogeneity of the Old French forms found in the manuscript, it is tempting to assume that the phrase book is the result of a compilation. Some of the words could represent a stage of language earlier than the thirteenth century. Since the Coptic writing system was not commonly used for the writing of French, there are a lot of ambiguities in the identification of many Old French lemmata. However, the use of an unusual spelling system instead of the Latin one, may add to the knowledge of the Old French that was in use in the Levant, for unlike the Latin writing, this spelling can hardly be suspected of being etymological. The interest of these lemmata is comparable to that of the Judeo-French glosses, in which the Hebrew writing system has preserved some data that may not be reflected by Latin spelling (with the above mentioned restriction that in the Coptic phrase-book, French is the source-language, not the target-language). The value of the testimony is double: we are not only confronted with the French of the Crusaders, very little of which has been preserved, but with a specimen of Old French that can hardly be suspected of literary influence. As shown by Anthonij Dees’ researches on the beginning of the scripta, there was no unified

17 Norwich, *Venice: The Rise to Empire*, 184–185.

18 Balard, “Les Génois en Romanie entre 1204 et 1261: Recherches dans les minutiers notariaux Génois”, 488–489; Balletto, “Fonti notarili genovesi del secondo duecento per la storia del Regno latino di Gerusalemme”, 183.

Old French scripta before 1300.¹⁹ In any case, the topics evoked by the items are quite rudimentary. While some of them are related to a Christian religious context, most of them deal with everyday concerns, like food, animals, garments, tools and key-sentences for a very basic communication.

Despite the problems involved in the origin of the lemmata (the language was foreign to the author of the dictionary and even more foreign to the copyist of the manuscript), it provides us with a fascinating echo of the vernacular French heard in the Crusader settlements of the Latin East.

The fact that the data contained in the manuscript have been recopied from previous sources may explain the frequent discrepancies between the Arabic items and their French-counterparts as well as the lack of homogeneity within the French itself. It seems that there are different layers of French involved, as frequently happens when material is compiled from other sources. Lastly, the list of numerals contains very strange lemmata in a still unidentified language.

After a reconsideration of Maspero's readings, we will attempt a description of the language represented here. The value of this linguistic document is worthwhile not only for historians of Latin East. The specialists of Old French and of the history of the French language may also find here a vivid confirmation of their reconstructions. Sometimes, however, the data shed a new light on the diachrony of French and question some accepted truths.

An interesting parallel to the use of an oriental alphabet to commit Old French to writing is found in Cilician Armenian, where the frequent lexical borrowings from Old French are written in Armenian letters.²⁰ However, in the latter case, the discrepancy

19 Dees, "Dialectes et scriptae à l'époque de l'ancien français"; "Propositions for the Study of Old French and Its Dialects", 139–148 ; Pfister, "Scripta et koinè en ancien français au XIIème et XIIIème siècles", 17–41.

20 Karst, *Historische Grammatik des Kilikisch-Armenischen*, 36–40 (§§25–33).

between the original form of the Old French words and their Armenized form can be ascribed to the process of lexical borrowing, whereas in the case of the Coptic *sullam*, we deal with genuine French words and sometimes with short sentences.

Although the representations of the Old French phonemes appears at times to be approximate, there is a certain amount of systematism in the correspondence between the Late Bohairic writing system used here and the phonemic system of Old French. I shall discuss the spelling patterns whenever this is useful to an understanding of my reconstructions. However, the whole system will be taken up again in Chapter Two. It should be noted, that in some cases, I could not reconstruct the lemma, either because it was deeply corrupted or because the language represented by the lemma (in items 27–28; 34–50 and 61–63) was not Old French nor any language known to me. If these indecipherable lemmata are the corruption of an otherwise known language, the error seems to come back to the first copies of this glossary of which the MS. Paris BnF Copte 53 is a reproduction, for they appear exactly in the same form in the two overlapping sequences.

We hope that this reconsideration of MS. Paris BnF Copte 43 from the viewpoint of Old French historical linguistics will help determine the question whether the French language used in the four Frankish states of the Levant (the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the County of Edessa, the County of Tripoli and the Principality of Antioch) underwent the same process of gradual provincialization that can be observed in the case of the Anglo-Norman dialect. Was this trend towards provincialization balanced by the continuous influx of newcomers from Western Europe? Was there a specific dialect or a blend of several dialects brought from different speech areas of mediaeval France?