

A Coptic Proverb

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Source: *Aegyptus*, Anno 58, No. 1/2 (GENNAIO-DICEMBRE 1978), pp. 174-176

Published by: Vita e Pensiero — Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41216972>

Accessed: 13-10-2016 08:41 UTC

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A Coptic Proverb

In the Bohairic *Acta Martyrum* (1) (I, 234.19 ff.) we read the following proverbial saying of Apa Anoub: « ⲙⲁⲣⲉⲟⲩⲥⲁⲛⲓ ⲣⲁⲩⲟⲩⲥⲁⲃⲉ ⲡⲓⲥⲟⲭ ⲗⲉ ⲡⲉⲟⲩ ⲙⲁⲕⲓⲥⲃⲱ ⲡⲁⲩ ⲉⲕⲧⲟⲙⲃⲉⲗⲭ ⲉⲃⲉⲗⲭ ».

« A word is enough (for (2)) a clever person; but the fool, for his part, you teach joining one potsherd to another » (3).

The first part of the proverb is of course well known in many western languages (4); its use can be traced to mediaeval variations and paraphrases (5) of the classic form, « *Dictum sapienti sat est* », occurring in Plautus, *Persa* 729, and Terence, *Phormio* 541 (6): its Greek source, the existence of which is almost certain, is unknown to me (7).

(1) *Edd.* BALESTRY-HYVERNAT, *CSCO* 43/*copt.* 3 (1907).

(2) Reading ⲉⲩⲥⲁⲃⲉ

(3) Note 1 in p. 143 of the *versio* reads: « Ita ad litteram. Est per modum proverbii dictum, significans oleum (so!) et operam perdere eum qui erudit stultum? ».

(4) For the distribution of « a word to the wise » in some modern and ancient languages see GLUSKI, *Proverbs* (1971) 11/4. The English version is attested, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*³, from the thirteenth century (Proverbs of Alfred). Its immediate origin may be the modern form of the Latin proverb, « *verbum sat sapienti* », quoted in the eighteenth cent. but probably much earlier.

(5) S. SINGER, *Sprichwörter des Mittelalters* (1944), I pp. 174-5 (*ad V* 677): it occurs in moralistic literature and similar; Alcuin seems to have been especially fond of it (*Ep.* 82, 136, 143, 144, 154, 155).

(6) See A. OTTO, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten der Römer* (1890) p. 112 (v. *Formul. Aev. Merov.*, ed. ZEUMER, 279.6 « ad sapientem semel sufficit loqui »); MARGALITS, *Florilegium Proverbiorum Universae Latinitatis* (1895) p. 525; WALTHER, *Lat. Sprichwörter u. Sentenzen des Mittelalters* (1963-7), esp. No. 322231 d, « unum sapienti verbum dictum sufficit », also quoting « dictum sapienti sat est » and « sapienti sat », with references to the smaller and earlier collections. « Sapienti sat » is included in BINDER, *Novum Thesaurus Adagiorum Latinorum*², No. 3021.

(7) I could not find it in any form in the *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* nor in the smaller collections I was able to consult; It does not occur

A Latin version could be the stereotype of the Coptic proverb; but both the very early date of its original attestation (2-3 centuries B.C.) and the fact that we do not find the *second half* of the Coptic form in a Latin version, make this improbable.

We do, however, have a proverb similarly contrasting the clever and the fool in Aramaic, in one of the Midrashim (M. Mishlê (*Proverbs*)), to 22:6

לְחַכְמָא בְּרִמְיָא לְשִׁטָּא בְּכִרְמְיָא

It is usually rendered «To the wise with a hint, to the fool with a fist» (1). This is a very late Midrash, not earlier than the 5-6 cent. A.D. (although some of its constituent elements, especially of a proverbial nature, may be earlier); thus, it is chronologically nearer to the Coptic (not earlier, and probably later, than the fourth century A.D.)

The Aramaic proverb naturally calls to mind a parallel in the apocryphal Wisdom of Jesu Sirach (Ben-Sira, Ecclesiasticus), for which we have an incomplete Hebrew original, a Greek version, and later Latin and Syriac, as well as *Coptic*, translations of the Greek: and here we find what is beyond doubt the source of the *second half* of the Coptic proverb (2): Sir. 22.7, Sahidic Coptic (ed. Lagarde in *Aegyptiaca*: «ερεπετςβω λογσοσ ο λθε απεττεσβλχε εβλχε αγω λθε απεττογλος απετλκοτκ ελογγληνβ εεγορϣ»; Boh. Coptic (ed. Burmester, *Biblica* 16, 1935, 41) φη ετςβω γαρ

in the scanty fragments of Apollodorus of Carystus' ἐπιδικαζόμενος, the New Comedy play said (in the Didascalia) to be the source for the Phormio; nor in the fragments of Menander (EDMONDS, *Fr. of the Attic Comedy*, vols. II-III). However, it may yet be discovered.

(1) The similarity of the second half of the Aramaic and Coptic proverbs would be even more striking if we note that **כְּרִמְיָא** does not really signify «a fist», but rather *κερμαδιον* or *κερμάς* (whence it is derived?) «a (mis-)stone»: see LEWY, *Chald. Wörterbuch* p. 389, and his references; there is also a possible connection of **כְּרִמְיָא** with *κεραμής* «tile», bringing the Aramaic quite near the Coptic **βλχε** «potsherd»: see the commentary on Midrash Mishle (ed. S. BUBER, 1893, p. 91), **כְּרִמְיָא** on : «A Greek word meaning a stone for hurling; or (alternatively) tiles: the fool has need of arguments as strong as tiles».

(2) See A. A. T. EHRHARDT, *Greek Proverbs in the Gospel*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (1953) 59-77, for some Sirach-New Testament-Hellenistic (Greek and Latin) proverbs and similes.

ⲡⲟⲧⲥⲟⲭ ⲉⲣⲟⲓ ⲙⲫⲣⲡⲓ ⲙⲫⲏ ⲉⲧⲧⲉⲙⲃⲉⲗⲭ ⲉⲃⲉⲗⲭ ⲡⲉⲙ ⲙⲫⲣⲏⲧ
ⲙⲫⲏ ⲉⲧⲧⲟⲧⲡⲉⲥⲫⲏ ⲉⲧⲉⲗⲕⲟⲧ ⲡⲉⲗⲟⲧⲡⲓⲙⲙ ⲉⲣⲡⲟⲣⲱ.

« Who teaches a fool is like him who glues (joins) one potsherd to another, and like him who arouses one who is deeply asleep »: cfr. the Greek: συνκολλῶν ὄστρακον (*v.l.* ὀστράκων) ὁ διδάσκων μωρόν and Vetus Latina: « *qui docet fatuum quasi qui conglutinet testam, qui narrat verbum non adtendendi* ». So too the Syriac version (reading ὀστράκων). However, the *first half* of the proverb, attested by the Bohairic saying (and in the New Comedy) is not given in Sirach.

There are, then, two possibilities with regard to the origin of the Coptic proverb: either it was made up in Coptic, combining secular (Greek?) and Scriptural (Septuagint-Greek) elements; or it is a more or less literal translation of an early, unattested, Hebrew or Greek proverb, contrasting the clever, for whom a word or a hint is enough, with the fool, teaching whom (version (a)) has to be done by means of stones (potsherds, see note 1), or (version (b)) is an endless, impractical task, comparable to joining and gluing potsherds together.

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