



## EXTRACTS FROM PETER OF ALEXANDRIA (D.311) AND THE ORIGINAL COPY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

In the 10th century one or more scribes created what is now a parchment manuscript with the shelfmark Vatican gr. 1941 (scanned microfilm online [here](#)). The majority of the pages today (folios 19r-290v) are occupied by an anonymous chronicle of the 7th century, written, as it tells us, by a contemporary of Heraclius. This world chronicle is known today as the *Chronicon Paschale*, because the manuscript starts with a long preface dedicated to discussing differing methods of calculating Easter. The only copies known to us of the work are three of the 16th century – Munich 557 (written 1573), “Holmensis e. 30. I. 21, and Upsala 2; and there are some extracts in two manuscripts of the 15th and 18th century, Ambrosian 814 f.1-14, and Athos mon. Lavra 1866, f. 265-279.<sup>[1]</sup> But largely the work was ignored.<sup>[2]</sup>

The text, including the prefatory material about Easter, was edited by L. Dindorf under the title “*Chronicon Paschale*” in the *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (=CSHB) series in Bonn in 1832, with the Latin translation of Du Cange. Vol. 1 is online [here](#). Dindorf basically reprinted Du Cange’s Paris edition of 1688 (reprinted in Venice in 1729), and made corrections from the Vatican manuscript.<sup>[3]</sup> This is most noticeable in the page of Greek text at the start, where there is no Latin translation.

But the start of the work contains something else altogether. The horrible microfilm is too poor for me to make out what is actually in the Vatican manuscript. The work starts with an extract from Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, book 3. Then it says, “So much for Philo”, and tells us that after the fall of Jerusalem under Vespasian, various church writers discussed the question of the date of Easter, including Peter of Alexandria, an unknown Tricentius, the great Athanasius, and Epiphanius. (p.4, ll.1-5). We then pass into material on the subject itself, which Du Cange headed as being by Peter of Alexandria from his lost work on Easter. This has all been translated in the ANF 6, where [it appears as fragment 5](#), ending in the CSHB on p.12, line 7. What follows seems to be editorial, and then there is material from Hippolytus and then Apollinaris.

Nothing in the text actually identifies this material as being by Peter of Alexandria, but it is a reasonable inference – by Du Cange? – from the list of names just before it.

One portion of the text, however, is very interesting, on [page 11](#), lines 5-10:

πρωία, - καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐκ εἰσῆλθον εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον, ἵνα μὴ μιαν-  
 θῶσιν, ἀλλ' ἵνα φάγωσι τὸ πάσχα.“ καὶ μετ' ὀλίγα, „ὁ οὖν  
 Πιλάτος ἀκούσας τοῦτον τὸν λόγον ἤγαγεν ἔξω τὸν Ἰησοῦν, καὶ  
 ἐκάθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον Λιθόστρωτον, ἑβραϊ-  
 5 στί δὲ Γαββαθᾶ. ἦν δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα· ὥρα ἦν ὥσεὶ B  
 τρίτη“· καθὼς τὰ ἀκριβῆ βιβλία περιέχει, αὐτό τε τὸ ἰδιόχειρον  
 τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ, ὅπερ μέχρι τοῦ νῦν πεφύλακται χάριτι Θεοῦ  
 ἐν τῇ Ἐφεσίων ἀγιωτάτῃ ἐκκλησίᾳ, καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν πιστῶν ἐκεῖσε  
 προσκυνεῖται. καὶ πάλιν ὁ αὐτὸς εὐαγγελιστὴς φησιν, „οἱ οὖν  
 10 Ἰουδαῖοι, ἵνα μὴ μείνῃ ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ τὰ σώματα ἐν τῷ σαβ-  
 βάτῳ, ἐπεὶ παρασκευὴ ἦν· ἦν γὰρ μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνου τοῦ  
 σαββάτου· ἠρώτησαν τὸν Πιλάτον ἵνα κατεαῶσιν αὐτῶν τὰ  
 σκέλη καὶ ἀρθῶσιν.“ ἐν αὐτῇ οὖν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, ἐν ᾗ ἤμελλον οἱ  
 Ἰουδαῖοι πρὸς ἐσπέραν ἐσθίειν τὸ πάσχα, ἐσταυρώθη ὁ κύριος  
 15 ἡμῶν καὶ σωτὴρ ὁ Χριστός, θῦμα γενόμενος τοῖς μέλλουσι μετα- C  
 λήψεσθαι τῆς πίστεως τοῦ κατ' αὐτὸν μυστηρίου κατὰ τὸ γε-

ἡ δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα· ὥρα ἦν ὥσεὶ τρίτη“· καθὼς τὰ ἀκριβῆ βιβλία περιέχει, αὐτό τε τὸ ἰδιόχειρον τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ, ὅπερ μέχρι νῦν πεφύλακται χάριτι Θεοῦ ἐν τῇ Ἐφεσίων ἀγιωτάτῃ ἐκκλησίᾳ, καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν πιστῶν ἐκεῖσε προσκυνεῖται.

And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the third hour,” as the correct books render it, and **the copy itself that was written by the hand of the evangelist**, which, by the divine grace, has been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful.<sup>[4]</sup>

The evangelist here is John. This is a claim that the autograph copy of John's gospel was preserved at Ephesus at the time of the writer.

The context is the discrepancy between [Mark 15:25](#), which says that Jesus was crucified at the third hour; and [John 19:14](#), which says that Pilate sentenced Jesus to death at the sixth hour. <sup>[5]</sup>

Peter is saying that the text of John 19:14 is corrupt, and should read “third hour”, rather than “sixth hour”; and he is appealing to the original copy of John's gospel. This is extraordinary!

This passage was mentioned in a controversial article by Craig Evans, “How Long were Late Antique Books in Use?”, in: Bulletin of Biblical Research (BBR) 25.1 (2015), 25-37. I have no access to this, but it drew excited responses such as [this](#) by G.W. Schwendner<sup>[6]</sup> and [this](#) by Brice C. Jones. Evans suggested, I believe that this was evidence that the autographs of the NT were accessible for centuries and were used to correct the text.

In a way, the statement of Peter of Alexandria is inscrutable. It says what it says. What can we make of it?

Firstly, Peter does not say that he has seen the autograph. Rather he says that it is the treasured possession of the church of Ephesus.

There is nothing at all improbable about this. Indeed modern cathedrals across Europe preserve a great many relics of the apostles, such as their heads, and other body parts. The authenticity of many of these may be doubtful – and indeed should be subject to DNA testing – but they do boast of holding such relics. No doubt the church of Ephesus did indeed boast of such a thing.

Did they actually have the autograph, in the late 3rd century? The autograph would have been a papyrus roll, perhaps; and by that date would have been rather fragile. But it could be. If it did exist, possibly it perished during the persecution of Diocletian, when such things were sought out.

But does the testimony of Peter actually suppose that this item existed in his time? I think of Tertullian referring to the *Acts of Pilate*, probably copying Justin Martyr. Peter may simply be using the testimony of a now lost earlier writer, such as a lost work of Origen. He's not saying he saw it himself. Likewise his testimony as to what the reading of this passage was may be derived from his source. But if we suppose that his source was around 200 AD – picking a random date – there is nothing at all impossible about supposing that the autograph existed at that date.

Was this reading really to be found in it? Who can now tell? But let us guess that the volume existed. If so, it would be treasured, and it would be frail. Anybody with any experience of dealing with “treasures” will know how the keepers would respond to requests to see it; with hostility. In such a situation I would imagine that an “authorised” copy of the original might be made available in the church, to save wear and tear on the frail original. Such a copy, “guaranteed” to be an “exact copy”, is what visitors would have access to. The actual accuracy of the copy might be less than perfect.

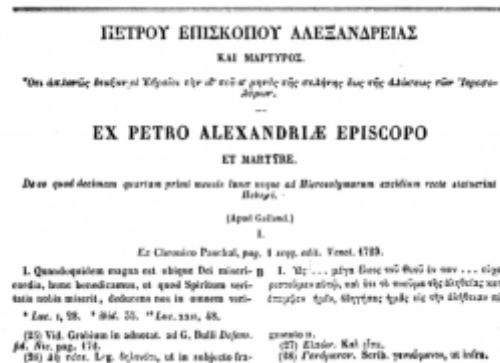
In the end it is all speculation. But it is certainly interesting to reflect on the longevity of ancient books.

1. <sup>[1]</sup>Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica* (Berlin 1958) i. 241-2.↩

2. <sup>[2]</sup>Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale: 284-628 AD*, TTH7 (1989), p.xiv.↩

3. <sup>[3]</sup>As indeed he states on p.4.↩

4. <sup>[4]</sup>**ANF 6 p.280** translation. The references given in the ANF are very strange. They read, “5 Apud Galland, Ex Chronico Paschal., p. 1, seqq., edit. Venet., 1729.” and “31 Apud Galland, Ex Chronico Paschal., p. 175, D.” The introduction, on the other hand, says “(4) A passage from the *Sermo in Sanctum Pascha*, or from some other work of Peter's on the same subject, is given in the *Diatriba de Paschate*, prefixed to the *Chronicon Alexandrinum S. Paschale*, and published separately in the *Uranologion* of Petavius, fol. Paris, 1630, p. 396.” P.396 of the *Uranologion* can be found [here](#), but only contains a Greek text. No work of Galland entitled “Ex Chronico Paschal.” exists, and the truth is that the translator was actually working from the *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 18, col. **512**,



where the following screen shot explains all: The  
 actual source used by the translator is the PG; the 1729 edition mention in it is not by Galland, but simply the reprint of Du Cange's edition of the *Chronicon Paschale* that we saw earlier. This error has confused others; the same mistake is found on [p.67](#) in Sacha, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, 2nd Century BCE to 10th Century CE*, Clarendon, 2001, p.67, in the otherwise excellent footnote 261: "261. This letter, preserved in the preface of the *Chronicon Paschale*, was published separately by Migne, PG 18. 512 b—520 b, following Galland, *Ex Chron. Pasch.* (Venice, 1729), which itself follows Du Cange's first edition of the *Chronikon Paschale* (Paris, 1688), and on which was based the English translation by Hawkins (1869: 325-32). However, a better edition of this text, based on MS Vat. gr. 1941, was published by Dindorf (1832) and followed by Migne, PG 92. 73 b-c."↩

5. <sup>[5]</sup>Stephan Witetschek, "The hour of the Lamb? Some remarks on John 19:14 and the hour of Jesus's condemnation and crucifixion", in: P. N. Anderson &c, *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 3: Glimpses of Jesus through the Johannine Lens*, SBL Press, 2016, p. 95f. Preview [here](#).↩

6. <sup>[6]</sup>This also repeats the "Galland" mistake. It is terrifying to consider just how many publications must have trusted that lazy editor from the ANF06!↩