

# NEWSLETTER *of* THE LEVANTINE FOUNDATION

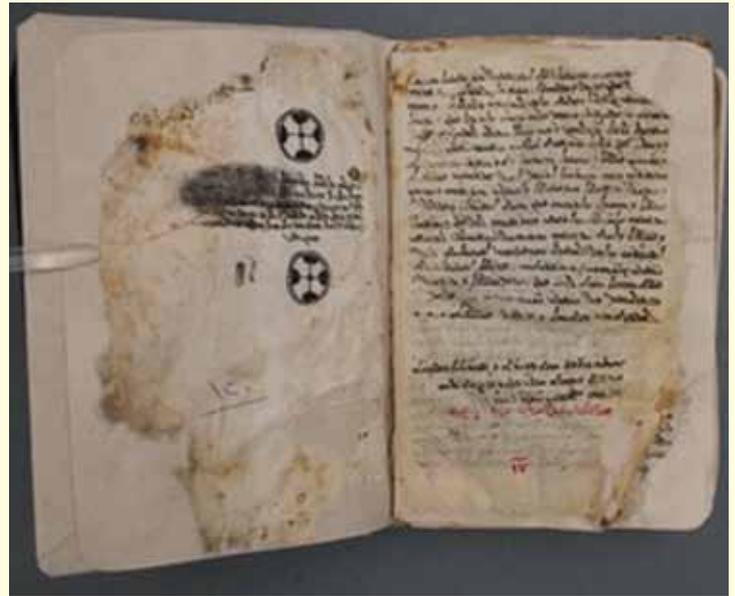
No. 5 October, 2020



## Major British Council Grant Awards for 2019-2021



MS4-148 Syriac 6th Century before....



and after conservation

CEO Elizabeth Sobczynski writes:- After a number of years of fundraising difficulty due to political and social unrest in Egypt, the Foundation is delighted to announce two successful applications to the British Council under its Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media & Sport. A total of over £200,000 has been awarded and covers activity from 2019 to March 2021. Importantly, this acknowledges the value of *written* cultural heritage as well as architectural/monumental heritage. The Fund has broad objectives - not merely physical cultural heritage protection but also more widely to develop social cohesion through skills training, building local collection care capacity as well as developing awareness through outreach and education. We are pleased to report the following achievements by the end of December 2019. We hope that Covid 19 will allow this work to continue into 2021.

### Cultural Heritage Protection – 22 Ancient Manuscripts Conserved

During two campaigns in May and November 2019, conservators preserved 22 of the most vulnerable manuscripts, 30% more than our target. See above pictures of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Syriac Manuscript MS 4-148 before and after conservation. In parallel, the Collection database was updated providing an invaluable digital record for future training, scholarship and outreach activities. The conserved items are now housed in

the controlled environment of the new library built previously with TLF financial help.

### Training

There is also a shortage of local expertise and training in the conservation and preservation of ancient manuscripts on parchment and paper. During both campaigns, on-site training in this specialised knowledge and technical skill was delivered to the Deir al Surian Librarian, monks

from the Western and Red Sea Deserts, and a group of interns. In November, training was also attended by museum professionals from the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Our long term aim is to develop a more diverse local workforce beyond the monastery with the skills to also promote cultural heritage assets to benefit the local community and economy through employment. Plans are in hand during 2021 to expand this training to include

*continued on page 2*



November 2019: Training monks - Giovanni Pagani & left Father Amoun (Librarian)

students at the American University in Cairo as well as museum professionals.

### Outreach: Advocacy & Education

Currently, there remains a general lack of awareness, among both local people and in Egypt as a whole, of the importance of **written** cultural heritage. An important aspect of the grant was to develop an outreach programme to foster greater awareness and to open up a hidden strand of heritage that is fundamental to the beliefs and identity of the community. Outreach included bringing local people into the monastery as well as spreading the word beyond it.

### Monastery Visits: Local Children, Families and Undergraduates

Attended by 43 children and parents, this pilot visit introduced them to the history of the monastery, the significance of the library Collection, also the craft of manuscript writing and illumination, and the making of their own book. The photo shows just how positive their



November 2019: Children & Family pilot - with Alexia Melianou (front 2nd from right)

engagement was. This bodes well for future visits. Groups of academics and scholars are frequent visitors to the library. Of particular mention was an unanticipated and inspiring meeting of minds between 25 mostly Muslim students of Anthropology at the American University in Cairo and the monastery Abbott HG Bishop Mattaas

conservation experts, local museum professionals and funders heard presentations to highlight the significance of the Collection, to view conservation achievements, to share best practice and outline a road map for future preservation. The articles that follow in this newsletter are the scholarly contributions made on that occasion.

during an educational visit. This ground-breaking exchange and discussion produced a great feeling of optimism for future relations across religious and cultural divides.

### Spreading the Word: Symposium at the British Ambassador's residence, 3 December 2019

Hosted by the British Ambassador Sir Geoffrey Adams, 30 participants including scholars,

## A Perfect Circle?

*Trustee Philippa Dodds John reflects on Family, Memory, Times & Places*

I have had the pleasure of being a trustee of the Foundation since its inception in 2002 – a most satisfying personal journey. Ever since Elizabeth Sobczynski introduced me to the treasures that lay in the ancient library at Deir al Surian, I have been bewitched by the thought that the world's intellectual heart lay in this place in Egypt – here were stored the thoughts of people confronting their spirituality and the impact it had on their daily lives. Somehow, I knew we were all connected through this crucible of ideas in the Levant. Little did I know how close to home this sense of linkage would become in my own family.

This was brought into sharper focus by a wonderful lecture given by Dr Michelle Brown in 2004 exploring the evidence for links between Egypt and Britain in the 7th century revealed during her research with the Lindisfarne Gospels.



Angharad Dodds John (1978-1980)

With parents who hailed from Northumberland, my interest was immediately sparked. Was St.Cuthbert embalmed using Egyptian techniques? The Coptic carpet pages in the Gospels themselves echoed those I saw in the manuscripts at Deir al Surian. A shared heritage was revealing itself.

It was a privilege for my family to sponsor the conservation in 2009 of one of the Coptic treasures at Deir al Surian: MS 21 Coptic; Four Gospels, 13th century. This we did in memory of our late daughter Angharad Dodds John (1978-1980) who passed away in early childhood. This vast task took 4-5 conservators 24 weeks to conserve.

Enter Ancestry.com! The family historian revealed further surprises: Angharad's great, great, great, great grandfather, John Smith, a humble fisherman, was born in Lindisfarne in 1805. He

and his wife Sarah (a gypsy) lived and died there and lie today in the parish church cemetery amidst the Priory ruins. It was an emotional moment to see their grave and trace the journey through time: from the time of Bede & St Cuthbert and the glorious Gospels with their Egyptian imprint, to our daughter, a child of Lindisfarne, whose memory is now in the safe embrace of today's Desert Fathers in Deir al Surian – a shared heritage and a perfect circle completed.



Coptic style binding of the Gospel of St John deposited in St Cuthbert's coffin, made at Wearmouth / Jarrow in Northumbria c.698



MS 21 Coptic, fl. 90 verso after conservation

# Syriac Manuscripts of Deir al-Surian: On the Crossroad of Cultures

*Dr Yury Arzhanov, is a member of the Faculty at the Institute of Medieval Research, Byzantine Division at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna.*

*This article is based on a presentation given at the TLF Symposium on 3 December 2019 at the British Embassy residence in Cairo*

The Syriac manuscripts of the monastery Deir al-Surian played, and still play, a unique role in the scholarly study of Syriac Christianity and of the Christian Orient in general. They serve as witnesses to the preservation and transmission of the Ancient science, medicine, and philosophy in Christian schools of Antiquity and early Middle Ages. They have preserved for us ancient texts that otherwise would have remained unknown to modern readers and the scholars who professionally study the history of the Christian Church and specifically the history of Syriac Christianity. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that there would be no history of Syriac Christianity, as we know it nowadays, without the collection at Deir al-Surian. The Syriac collection of manuscripts here has preserved for us witnesses of nearly one and a half thousand years of history. The preservation and conservation of this collection is an important task of our time. That is why modern Syriac scholars are particularly grateful to the Levantine Foundation for taking on this task since 2002. Their work is still far from its end.

## Roads of Cultural Transmission

In this short presentation, I will offer some examples that will make clear how important the manuscript collection of Deir al-Surian is for Syriac studies now. In order to do that, I will talk about three processes of transmission of knowledge that took place in history. These processes went either from East to West, or the other way around, from West to East, thus connecting them and making them share the same cultural heritage, the same intellectual treasures that laid the foundations of modern culture.

For if we try to define the foundation of modern philosophy, it would be Aristotle, Plato and Democritus. If we try to describe the roots of modern medicine, it would be Hippocrates and Galen. The same goes for modern science, where Euclid and Ptolemy still maintain their honorable position. And so on. Modern culture stands on the shoulders of the great thinkers of the past. But how have their ideas and their writings reached us? The Syriac collection at Deir al-Surian allows us to better understand this question, as it stands on the crossroads of cultural development. I will speak about three “roads” that will take us from Egypt to Mesopotamia, from Mesopotamia back to the Egypt, and finally from the Egyptian desert to modern Europe.

## Greek Culture expands Eastwards

I will start with the first process that is usually called the time of Hellenism, i.e. the expansion of the Greek (“Hellenic”) culture to the East. This process starts here in Egypt, about 200 km from the place where we now stand. In 323 before Christ, Alexander the Great died in the city that now bears his name, in Alexandria. In his short life, Alexander conquered a huge territory that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to India.



These territories to the East thus met Greek culture, science and philosophy for the first time.

Syriac-speaking Christians became important actors in this process of transmission of Greek science and philosophy to the Orient. Syriac scholars preserved Greek texts in their libraries, studied them and commented on them, trying to adapt the philosophical ideas of the Ancient authors to the Christian faith. To give just a few examples among many:

- 1) One of the earliest witnesses to Homer’s Iliad has been preserved in the Syriac manuscripts that is a palimpsest, i.e. in the codex where the Syriac text was written above the earlier one.
- 2) Another example is also connected with a palimpsest that was found in Deir al-Surian but is now situated in the Vatican library in Rome. In the lower layer of this codex a large fragment from the Greek comedian Menander was discovered recently. Both examples show that until the time when the parchment was thus “recycled”, the Greek texts of both Homer and Menander were kept in the monastic libraries in Syria.

Syriac scholars were not only diligent readers of Greek scholarly and philosophical works. They also started to translate them into Syriac very early. From the 6th century onwards, the logical works of Aristotle, the medical treatises of Galen and Hippocrates, the philosophical writings of John Philoponus and Alexander of Aphrodisias — all these works found their place in the Christian schools. Thus, Syriac scholars became part of the process of Hellenism: the adaptation of Greek science and philosophy in the Orient.

## “There and back again”: The trip of Moses of Nisibis

The second “road” will lead us not in one direction, but it reflects the time when the

Mediterranean became one cultural area so that people could travel eastwards and westwards. The dissemination of culture went hand in hand with dissemination of knowledge in a world that was, to a large extent, shaped by the previous historical stage: Hellenism and its influence on the large geographical area.

On this road, we will again start here, in Egypt, in the desert of Scetis. Here, probably in the 6th century AD, a group of monks founded the monastery that was first called the monastery of the Virgin Mary, but later on received the name that it still bears nowadays, *Dayru s-Suryāni*, “the Monastery of the Syrians”. The Syriac connections with the monastery go back to the 9th century, when, in the year 818, this place was rebuilt by the Syrians that came here from Tagrit, bringing with them the first books that formed the foundation of the library.

Various people contributed to it, but it is undoubtedly Moses, or Mushe, of Nisibis who most significantly enlarged the Syriac collection of manuscripts at the monastery. Mushe was elected Abbot at the beginning of the tenth century. His office included also dealing with tax officials, the duty which made him set off in 927 for a long journey to Baghdad, in order to clarify some tax issues. Now, as is also the case in the present day, such issues might involve long delays. As a result, Mushe spent about 5 years in the capital of the Abbasid caliphs, but also travelling around in Mesopotamia and collecting manuscripts. When Mushe came back to the monastery in 932, he brought with him 250 codices that formed the core of the monastic library.

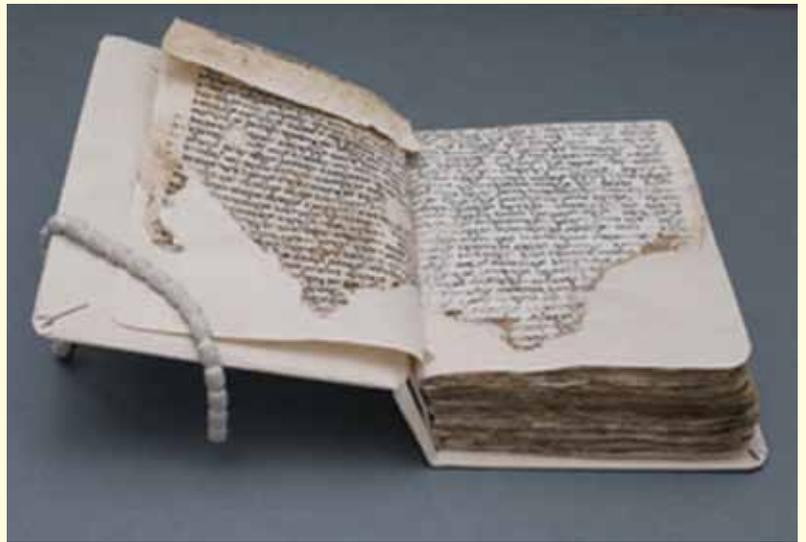
In order to explain the value of the manuscripts that Abbot Mushe brought to Egypt from Mesopotamia, I will quote the title of the article written by probably the most eminent Syriac scholar living now, Sebastian Brock, who worked on the catalogue of the Syriac collection at Deir al-Surian published by the Levantine Foundation. The title of one of his articles runs: “Without Mushe of Nisibis, where would we be?” In this article, Sebastian Brock makes clear how important the journey of Mushe to the East turned out for us now.

## “Without Mushe of Nisibis, where would we be?”

Indeed, the value of Mushe’s journey can hardly be overestimated. Among the manuscripts which he brought to Deir al-Surian for example, was the famous seventh-century *Peshitta Old Testament* that serve as the earliest and best witness to the text of the Syriac Bible. The collection included another famous seventh-century manuscript that contains very early pieces of Syriac literature: the “*Letter of Mara bar Serapion to his son*” and the “*Book of the Laws of the Countries*” by the first Syriac philosopher Bardaisan. These texts have survived in only one codex, and unless Abbot Mushe of Nisibis had purchased it and brought



Ms. Deir al-Surian, Syriac 9, 8th-9th Century before....



and after conservation

it to the Egyptian desert, we would never have known that these texts ever existed.

Neither would we know, to what extent the Syrian scholars in the time before Mushe's trip to the East (and the manuscripts which he collected are dated between the 5th and the 9th centuries!) had an interest in the Greek scholarship and philosophy previously mentioned. The collection of Mushe of Nisibis included translations of *Porphry's Introduction to Aristotle's Categories*, a number of Aristotle's logical works: *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, as well as long commentaries and scholia on these works. This collection also included a number of texts attributed to Plato, another famous Greek philosopher. Though all these texts do not actually belong to Plato, the use of his name in the titles of the Syriac works demonstrate the interest of Syriac scholars in Plato and the idea of the special role of Plato in the history of philosophy.

But it is not only the content of the manuscripts that makes Mushe's collection so valuable, but also the structure of the manuscripts themselves. Mushe's collection mostly contained codices that served as *full anthologies* of individual authors, a practice we seldom find in the manuscripts of later periods. Syriac codices dated from the time after the 10th century usually contain *extracts* from various works that ceased to be copied in full. As an example, we can take the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, or Gregory the Theologian, who was called simply "*the Theologian*" and whose works formed the basis of theological education in the Christian schools of the Middle Ages. Despite this fact, what we find in the codices written after the 10th century, i.e. after the journey of Abbot Mushe to the East, are usually separate homilies of Gregory and extracts from his works. The full collections of Gregory's homilies divided into several volumes are found only among the manuscripts brought by Mushe to Deir al-Surian in 932. Numerous works in Syriac suffered the same fate as the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus. Even the greatest Syrian poet, Ephrem, would not be known to us in that form as we know him now, without the collection of Mushe of Nisibis, for it is due to several early manuscripts from this collection that we now have the full text of Ephrem's *madrashe*, his poems, that in the manuscripts from the later period appear only in scattered and abridged form.

Thus, coming back to the question put by Sebastian Brock in the title of his paper: "Without Mushe of Nisibis, where would we be?" — we now can answer: we would have had only a very limited idea of the Syriac literature if the Abbot of Deir al-Surian had not made his long journey in the 10th century, like the Hobbit, "there and back again": to Mesopotamia and back again to his monastery in the Egyptian desert.

#### From Egypt to Europe

This was not the end of the story of the Syriac collection at Deir al-Surian. There is another, third, "road" that again starts from the Monastery of the Syrians. This road leads us to Europe, again from the East to the West. Although there were probably few visitors from Europe to Deir al-Surian during the Middle Ages, it was not until the seventeenth century when these contacts become regular. As a result of these contacts, some of the Syriac manuscripts reached Milan, where they formed part of Federico *Borromeo's Bibliotheca Ambrosiana*. At the beginning of the 18th century, Pope Clement XI sent the librarian of the Vatican Library, Elias Assemani, to Egypt. Elias brought several manuscripts with him to Rome that formed part of the current Syriac collection of the Vatican. Later on, Elias' cousin Joseph Simon Assemani also visited the monastery, and brought several other manuscripts to Rome. Both Elias and Joseph were Maronites from Lebanon, and they evidently led good negotiations with the Arabic-speaking monks of Egypt. In the first half of the 19th century, a large number of Syriac manuscripts from Deir al-Surian were brought to London by Robert Curzon and are now preserved in the British Library.

The description of the Syriac manuscripts preserved in the Vatican by Elias and Joseph Assemani and the catalogue by William Wright of Syriac manuscripts in London mark the starting points of scholarly interest in Syriac literature in general. In the Syriac manuscripts from Deir al-Surian scholars discovered new sources for the history of the Christian Church, e.g. the previously unknown tract of Eusebius of Caesarea "*Theophania*", the *Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch*, and *Chronicle of John of Ephesus*. The codices also revealed to the scholars a number of Syriac translations from the Greek that are dated to the time from which no Greek manuscripts of these works came down to us. A German scholar

Eduard Sachau published in 1870 an article with the title "Syriac translations of classical non-Aristotelian Greek works", where he praised the role of Syriac Christians as "the main heirs of the legacy of Old Greece after the Alexandrian scholars". In 1930, another German scholar Max Meyerhof published a book under the title "From Alexandria to Baghdad" where he described how Greek science and philosophy became known to the Arab world. He stressed the role of the Syriac Christians who transmitted Ancient philosophy and sciences to the Arab scholars, who, in turn, became the transmitters of the Greek heritage to Europe. This is the cultural migration that is referred to as the first road, the road of Hellenism, on which the Syriac manuscripts from Deir al-Surian stand.

#### Conclusion: Deir al-Surian on the crossroads of cultures

In summary, we can say that the Syriac manuscripts of the monastery Deir al-Surian stand on the crossroads of cultures. They serve as witnesses of the transmission of Classical Greek science and philosophy from the Greek and West to the Orient in Later Antiquity; of the circulation of knowledge in the Middle Ages when the Oriental manuscripts from the East reached the Egyptian desert; and finally, of the acquaintance of modern Western scholars with the rich intellectual tradition of the Christian Orient in Antiquity.

The Syriac manuscripts have saved and preserved for us the textual witnesses of our past — and the keyword here is "preserved". A large collection of Syriac manuscripts still remains in the monastery. The monks of Deir al-Surian have kept these treasures in their cells until the 21st century, and it is now the work of modern scholars to help the monastery with this task. The Levantine Foundation and its director, Elizabeth Sobczynski are eager to complete this task of preservation of the Syriac collection, and I would like to express my sincere respect and gratitude to them for this work.

# DEIR AL SURIAN LIBRARY

## A “password” for the Coptic and Copto – Arabic Treasures

*Father Bigoul was the Librarian at Deir al-Surian until recently. It was at his instigation that Elizabeth Sobczynski was invited to the monastery in 1997 with a view to conserving the ancient manuscripts previously housed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century monastery keep. The Levantine Foundation was established in 2002 to further this aim and to begin the process of preserving the heritage on paper of the Near East.*

*Below is the presentation delivered at the Symposium held by the Levantine Foundation at the British Embassy residence in Cairo on 3 December 2019.*



### **IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY – Literature & Language Shift**

The lives of our human societies are full of discontinuities, of breaks in established patterns and relationships. Despite all the breaks and discontinuities, human beings strive to make sense of it all, to knit together a world in which they can live. Literature played an important role in this knitting together: it creates and preserves memories, and it serves as a resource and tool for the maintenance and reconstruction of identity in each new era.

In the study of Coptic literature, there is a striking discontinuity that rips through the middle of our material: the fact of language shift. Over a relatively short period of time, between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries, the literature of the Coptic Orthodox community changed from being mostly in the Coptic language to being mostly in the Arabic language.

### **COPTIC HERITAGE & ITS IMPACTS**

It is likely that the translation of the Bible into Coptic began during the third century AD, as Antonius the Great, the founder of Coptic Monasticism, who did not know Greek, was influenced by hearing the Gospel during liturgical prayers in the Church in the Coptic language (Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Matt. 19:21). Almost all native Coptic Literature was composed between the fourth century and the end of the eighth century.

The Coptic literature which survives in a number of dialects comprises both original works and

translations from the Greek, and was mostly intended for use in the non-Greek churches and monasteries of Egypt. These Coptic versions, which include several translations of the Bible from Greek texts, are of great importance to modern scholars of Biblical textual criticism.

In Antiquity, the Bible text in Coptic was the foundation on which Coptic literary style was erected, and organized. Coenobitic Christian monasticism which began in Egypt with Pachomius during the fourth century, and the writings of the early monastic founders like Pachomius, Theodore, Horsiese, Shenoute, Besa...etc. (all of them Copts) give us precious and unique documentation of daily life in the monastery. These and the Ideology of Coenobitic asceticism were written in Coptic.

Native Egyptian (pre-Christian) religion continued to find literary expression in Coptic, in a corpus somewhat prejudicially labelled ‘Coptic Magic’. Other ecclesiastical literature includes all the apparatus needed to operate Coptic Orthodox Churches and monasteries e.g. lectionaries, Hymnals, Missals, Books of Hours, Homilies, and Antiphons for the feasts of the saints and martyrs, Canon Law, monastic rules, and biographies, sayings of desert fathers and mothers, etc.

On the other hand, not represented in Coptic is any corpora of systematic theology by the great fathers of the Church, verse by verse Biblical commentary, secular works of science, education, and the like. For these, the Egyptians would have turned to the Greek originals (or even Syriac), and later to their Arabic counterparts.

### **PRESERVING LOST OR FRAGMENTARY COPTIC TEXTS – Importance of Arabic translation**

One contribution that the Copto-Arabic literature makes to the wider field of Coptic studies is that texts that are lost or only partially preserved in Coptic have sometimes been preserved in Arabic. It is often the case, that Coptic texts are in an incomplete and fragmentary form, but then a translation may come to the rescue. Translation into Arabic was a gradual process which began after the Arab arrival in the 7<sup>th</sup> century as Arabic became the new lingua franca.

Of course, many Coptic texts have simply been lost... we know something about them only because of the Arabic translation. (Or, later, the Ethiopic translation from the Arabic version, as these texts continued their journey up the Nile)

Here is an example: Evelyn White mentioned in his book “The Monasteries of Wadi el’Natrún”, (Part Two), when he talked about a joint cooperation between Father John, son

of Makarius, the Abbot of the monastery and Father Moses the Nisibis in the Tenth century, to translate the Coptic Hagiographical works of the Fathers of the Desert into Syriac for the benefit of the Tikritian and the Syrian brothers in the monastery, and interchangeably some of The Syriac heritage has been translated into Coptic. Thus, some of these works translated into Syriac have been lost in their Coptic origin, and we may now read them through another bridge from Syriac into Arabic, either in whole or in fragmentary form. There are many examples, and one of them is the books of Epiphanius Bishop of Cyprus in the fourth century, “The Anchor” and “Panarion”. These books are in our collection in an incomplete Arabic form.

### **PRESERVING RECORDS OF EXPERIENCES – Towards a Unity of Faith**

The Copto-Arabic literature doesn’t only preserve texts, it preserves records of experience of accomplishment and struggle, of how the church prayed and ordered its affairs, of how the Christian Orthodox community in Egypt sought to maintain its faith and its hope in the midst of many challenges. Histories such as *The History of the Patriarchs* and the literary Works of the Popes of the Coptic Orthodox Church are obviously of importance for the preserving of such records of experience.

Also, the Hagiographical literature is a good indicator for the core of the faith and the spiritual life of the Christians. Many of these stories of the church’s saints and martyrs were translated into Arabic, from Greek and Syriac and even Latin as well as from Coptic.

Such records of experience and others have had a direct impact on the preservation of the unity of faith of the Christian peoples of all denominations, and provided much to the field of constructive Christological dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic churches, and the pursuit of the aim of preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace among the Christian peoples, as the Apostle Paul urges in his Epistle to the Ephesians.

### **RICH LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL CREATIVITY –an Arabic flowering**

Among Middle Eastern Christians, it was communities other than the Copts - the (Chalcedonian) Melkites, the Syrian Orthodox, and the Church of the East – that first produced the translations and the original words that demonstrated the possibility of using Arabic as a language of Christian theological and Catechetical expression. This enterprise appears to have had its beginnings in the late eight century and was



DS Coptic-Arabic, Biblical Ms 470, circa 13th century

*Language Shift – a bilingual parallel text as Egyptians moved from Coptic to only Arabic by 14th century*

well under way by the beginning of the ninth. In comparison with these other Christian communities within the Islamic region, the Copts lagged with respect to the creation of Arabic language literature. They finally began to catch up in Arabic language output with figures like Sawirus ibn al Muqaffa during the tenth century. Later, however, it would be the Copts who decisively took the lead. There was an extraordinary flowering of Arabic language theological literature among the Copts in the thirteenth century: not just theological, but apologetic, historical, canonical, grammatical and lexical literature as well. Nor was this cultural flowering confined to literature. The recent restoration project of the wall paintings from the principal Church of the monastery at Deir al-Surian provides glorious evidence of a flowering in art too.

For Copto - Arabic Literature it may be enough to mention some names that enriched the library of the Coptic Orthodox Church with their interesting works: Pope Ghabrial ibn Tureak, Pope Yuhanna al Samanudi, Pope Yuhanna ibn al Masry, Bishop Bulus al Bushi, Bishop Athanasius of Qus, the Priest Butrus ibn al Rahib, the Priest al Safi ibn al Assal and his brothers, the priest Ibn Katib Qaysar, the Priest Butrus al sadamanti .... The list goes on. We can read their works in the Arabic collection in the monastery library. Frankly, the hugely varied work of these authors has been insufficiently studied so far.

#### **THE LIBRARY AT DEIR AL-SURIAN – Scribing, Buying & Gifting**

Coptic monasteries and churches continued to use manuscripts in both phases of Coptic and Copto – Arabic in their various daily liturgical uses, as well as in Bible study, in its Orthodox doctrinal catechisms, and to manage their spiritual and ascetic affairs until the end of the nineteenth century. Each monastery or church had a special library formed through different eras, perhaps by scribing, buying or gifting.

In the same way, the collection of Deir al-Surian was formed through the ages from the sixth to the nineteenth centuries. Some of the manuscripts were produced in the Scriptorium of the monastery at different times, while others joined the library in other different ways.

It is likely that the Arabic Scriptorium of the monastery began its activity in the thirteenth century, while the Coptic one has been around since the monastery was established in the sixth century AD. Unfortunately, most of the Coptic originals have disappeared, some through physical or biological deterioration, and some others transferred to western museums and libraries in the nineteenth century.

Today, the surviving volumes and the conserved items are being preserved through a partnership between the Levantine Foundation and the Monastic Council of the monastery. An international team of scholars from the Yale Monastic Archeological Project is working hard to finalize a catalogue for publication of the Coptic and Arabic manuscripts held at Deir al-Surian.

#### **A Classification by Pope Peter the 7<sup>th</sup>, (1809-1852)**

The content of the collection was classified by Pope Peter the seventh, the 109 (1809 -1852) when His Holiness was staying in the monastery after his enthronement. He classified the collection into nine topical subdivisions: Biblical text, Biblical studies (commentaries, interpretations, exegetics), Canon law, Theology, Ascetic literature, Sermons, Hagiography (saints lives), Liturgy, Coptic language study. This particular classificatory system, with its genre categories, is repeated in the other monastery libraries, the Patriarchate library and also in the library of the Coptic museum as well. As recorded in his biography, Pope Peter the 7th established this classificatory system first in the Patriarchate library, and then in the libraries of Wadi el Natrun.

1. **Biblical Text:** accounts for 96 volumes, thirty-seven (37) of them contain Old Testament or Old Testament Apocryphal texts, and fifty-nine (59) contain New Testament or New Testament Apocryphal texts. Six manuscripts are in Coptic and nine are bilingual, in both Coptic and Arabic, as a parallel text. The oldest one is the 'Book of St. John' in Coptic dated ca. eleventh century.
2. **Biblical studies** comprises forty- eight (48) manuscripts, the oldest one is the Arabic Commentary on the 'Gospel of St. Matthew' dated 1235 AD.

3. **Canon Law** consists of twenty-six (26) manuscripts, the oldest manuscript is 'Arabic Miscellaneous Canons', also 'Assorted Sayings of the Fathers' dated ca. eleventh century.
4. **Theology** contains forty-four (44) manuscripts, the oldest one is the Arabic book of the 'Teacher and the Disciple' dated in 1609 AD.
5. **Ascetic Literature** comprises forty-four (44) volumes, the oldest is the Arabic book of 'Paradise and 'Book of Mar Evaghrius' and other topics, dated ca. eleventh century.
6. **Sermons** contains forty-four (44) volumes, the oldest being the Arabic book of 'Intellectual Paradise', dated in 1234 AD.
7. **Hagiography** contains eighty-six (86) volumes, the oldest one is the Arabic book of 'Biographies of the Apostles', dated 1359 AD.
8. **The Liturgy** includes five subdivisions: The Book of Hours, liturgical prayers, hymns, books of liturgical readings and miscellaneous prayers. The oldest one overall is the Coptic book of the 'Dedication of the New Churches', dated 1181 AD.
9. **Coptic language studies** consists of six (6) volumes, the oldest one is the book "AL-TABSERA" by Ibn Katib Qaysar, dated 1655 AD.

In my view, three particular books demonstrate the huge importance of the collection at Deir al-Surian:-

1. The Coptic Book of St. John, 11<sup>th</sup> century
2. The Coptic Book of the Dedication of the new Churches, 1181
3. The Bilingual Book of Epistles, a parallel text in both Coptic & Arabic 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century

These examples show the ways in which Coptic and Copto – Arabic literature serve to preserve and create elements of a distinctively Coptic Orthodox Identity. Now, we would like to preserve it, to continue its rich role of revealing the pure Catechetical orthodoxy to the Church of Tomorrow and the far future, to preserve the Coptic identity and the Orthodox spirituality.

*... "As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby 1Pet.2:2"*



# Ethiopic Manuscripts of Deir al-Surian: An Overview of the Collection and its Study

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*The article below is based on his presentation to the Symposium at the British Embassy residence in Cairo on 3 December 2019*

## Introduction

The Ethiopic manuscript collection at Deir al-Surian, although a relatively small number of items, is a genuine piece of evidence providing information on the historical relations between Egypt and Ethiopia that have existed for centuries. Ethiopian monks used to bring to Deir al-Surian the books that were indispensable to them to continue their religious life according to the Ethiopian Orthodox rite. Furthermore, they also created various texts in Ethiopic, preparing the manuscripts from materials available in Egypt. Information contained in the manuscripts contributes to our knowledge of the individuals who owned them as well as the historical events in which these people were involved.

## Historical Context

The presence of Ethiopian manuscripts and other historical artefacts in Egypt needs to be considered in the context of the special relations that existed between the Ethiopian Orthodox and Coptic Churches. Over many centuries, the Ethiopian Church was a "daughter church" of the Church of Alexandria, and Coptic monks were appointed metropolitans of Ethiopia and sent hitherto. A small number of Ethiopians, monks in particular, came to Egypt and stayed there in local monastic communities, for a longer or shorter time, frequently on their way to Jerusalem. These contacts were never intensive, but of great cultural importance for remote Ethiopia.

Deir al-Surian is one of the Egyptian monasteries that hosted Ethiopian monks over the centuries, and its Ethiopian connection could have started in early medieval times. According to a recent hypothesis, the creation of the Ethiopic Rite of the Holy Week, a very important liturgical book of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, could have taken place in the milieu of Deir al-Surian as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing is known about the presence of Ethiopians at Deir al-Surian in that and subsequent centuries, but the museum of Deir al-Surian preserves a curious artefact linked to Ethiopian book culture. This is an old Ethiopic lectern, produced most probably before the 17<sup>th</sup> century; that can be used in different ways, for reading and writing. It could indeed be indirect proof of the writing or translating activities that the Ethiopians might have conducted in Deir al-Surian.

## Robert Curzon 1837

The British traveller Robert Curzon visited Deir al-Surian in 1837 and reported the presence of a vivid Ethiopian community there that possessed at least 50 manuscripts. No other narrative sources are known for the moment, but we can be sure that Ethiopian monks regularly passed by Deir al-Surian before and after that year, until recent times.

## Twentieth Century Developments

In 1951 the Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia awarded Anba Tewoflos, the then head of Deir

al-Surian, the Star of Ethiopia. This took place probably in the aftermath of the years that were very difficult for Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, when Italy occupied the country in 1936-41. As we know, the Coptic Church refused to recognize the occupation. In 1959 the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became fully independent of the Coptic Church and installed a Metropolitan of its own. Despite that, relations between the Churches remained amicable and monks from the Horn of Africa stayed at Deir as-Surian now and then. In addition, the image of Ethiopian monasticism gained great respect in Coptic Egypt thanks to the formidable figure of Abd el-Masih al-Habashi, the hermit called Gabra Krestos who dwelt in Wadi al-Natrun over many years, until ca. 1970.

## The Collection: Personal Possessions on Parchment & Paper

Over 20 parchment and paper Ethiopic manuscripts are kept today in the manuscript collection of Deir al-Surian, and we had an opportunity to study and catalogue them (as Mss. DS Ethiop. 1-24) at the invitation of the Levantine Foundation and Monastic Council. The dates of the manuscripts range from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition, some fragments of Ethiopic paper manuscripts were discovered in the bindings of some Arabic manuscripts.

The origin of some of the Ethiopic parchment manuscripts could be established. Some are from northern Ethiopia (a part of which is today Eritrea), some are from western Ethiopia, and all were brought to Deir al-Surian by pilgrim monks. In contrast, nearly all paper manuscripts were manufactured in Egypt. All the manuscripts were the personal private possessions of the Ethiopians. They contain some texts that could be used for the Eucharistic liturgy, and some others for the Liturgy of the Hours, i.e. prayers held for each hour of day and night. Some were used for private prayer and meditation. In its present composition, the collection contains no manuscripts with large texts typical for ecclesiastic libraries in Ethiopia, such as Four Gospels, Synaxarions, or books for baptismal, marriage and funeral rituals.

## Examples of the Ethiopic Manuscripts of Deir al-Surian.

Ms. DS Ethiop. 3, the oldest manuscript of the collection, is a 17<sup>th</sup>-century parchment manuscript, written in crude hand, rebound in Egypt (fig. 1). There are some features betraying its origin from northern Ethiopia. It contains a collection of prayers for Virgin Mary and some other poetic works.



Fig 1. Ms. DS Ethiop. 3, 17<sup>th</sup> century; front board inside, 1<sup>st</sup> text page



Fig 2. Ms. DS Ethiop. 1, mid-18<sup>th</sup>/mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; fol. 118v, explicit of the Song of Songs, drawing depicting St. Mary and St. Ephrem the Syrian

Ms. DS Ethiop. 1 (fig.2) is a small-size parchment Psalter for private use, of the type wide-spread in Ethiopia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its owner was Gabra Maryam from the Ethiopian city of Gondar who dwelt in Deir al-Surian in the 1950s and later became the head of the Ethiopian monastery Dayr as-Sultan in Jerusalem. The manuscript has a mirror inserted in the inner side of the front board, a votive image, and coloured threads inserted in the pages helping to find specific text parts quickly inside the book.

No less interesting, however, are Ethiopic paper manuscripts. It is commonly said that the Ethiopian Christians copied their texts exclusively on parchment, but we have a significant number

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# Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea

## Digital Research: Creating a New On-Line Catalogue



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Our research into the Ethiopic Collection at Deir al-Surian was carried out as a cataloguing project within the larger project “Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea”, funded by the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg and headed by Prof. Dr. Alessandro Bausi. Its main aim is to create an on-line digital research environment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Manuscript tradition. So, we are creating records of all known Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscripts, and all works, places and persons relevant to this manuscript tradition wherever they are. This allows us to easily link these records to each other, opening up new research possibilities.

The main project outcome is a web application, <https://betamasaheft.eu/>, fully accessible to the public and giving complete live access to the current state of the research environment. The web application is completely searchable and can be filtered according to many different points of interest. The central one, manuscripts, the focus of the project, can then be filtered using various criteria.

During our stay at the library at Deir al Surian, we began cataloguing the Ethiopic manuscripts, and since then continued to edit and develop their descriptions. All manuscript descriptions are accessible on Beta maṣāḥəft. The Deir al-Surian page record lists all manuscripts catalogued in Beta maṣāḥəft that are held at its library. It therefore provides an easy entry point into the collection on the web application.

When clicking on any manuscript, its page with a complete description opens. All manuscript records contain *descriptions* of the manuscript's intellectual content and physical features, not the full text. These descriptions have all been carried out in the mark up language TEI XML - an encoding standard widely used in the humanities. TEI or Text Encoding Initiative, provides common encoding guidelines which can then be customised by all projects for their own specifications. This allows us a high degree of flexibility, without having to sacrifice consistency. TEI XML further encourages the *linking* of data within and between projects. One simple way in which we do this is in linking any entities which are also relevant to the Syriac tradition with their IDs in the project *Syriaca*. As far as we know, the description of the Ethiopic collection at Deir al-Surian is the first new cataloguing project of Ethiopic manuscripts originally carried out in TEI XML.

### How does it work? Ethiopic 2: ‘The Gospel of John’ and ‘Miracles of Mary’

This parchment codex is a composite manuscript containing two main textual units very different in layout and script. All persons and places mentioned in the manuscript have been marked up in the XML descriptions, which allows users of the web application to click on these links and to be led to the corresponding persons and places pages.

Various persons are mentioned in both parts of this manuscript as owners, scribes or otherwise in additional marginal notes and supplications at the beginning and end of texts. We therefore know the name of a scribe involved in its production, the place in which it was produced and possibly a commissioner. A later Arabic addition states that ‘Abd al-Masiḥ al-Ḥabaṣī owned the manuscript. A thorough mark up of all these notes in XML makes it possible for all relevant information to be rendered on the website in a very accessible way: personal names are visualised as links.

When clicking on the name of ‘Abd al-Masiḥ al-Ḥabaṣī, we are led to his personal record in Beta maṣāḥəft, which contains all the names under which this person is attested in our manuscripts. Thanks to the consistent mark up in all records mentioning him, the app can automatically draw up a list of all attestations of this person in other records. This shows him mentioned in two manuscripts of the Deir al-Surian collection. Of course, this mark up simply facilitates and enhances our research, it does not do the research for us. Therefore, the question whether this person is indeed the known monk ‘Abd al-Masiḥ al-Ḥabaṣī for now cannot be answered. It is equally possible that these ownership notes are secondary attributions to him.

In summary, the Beta maṣāḥəft digital research environment has provided us with an excellent framework in which the Deir al-Surian collection can be described with modern cataloguing standards and accessed within its broader literary and cultural context. The various search and filter possibilities provided by the web application give researchers of different backgrounds and interests various points of access to this collection. Also, having the complete Ethiopic collection of Deir al-Surian encoded within Beta maṣāḥəft has been an exceptional opportunity and has added considerable value to this digital research environment. We hope this will contribute to a growing awareness of this important collection among persons interested in Ethiopian and Eritrean studies and related fields.

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of Ethiopian Christian paper manuscripts produced by Ethiopians abroad, where access to parchment, leather and other necessary materials was difficult but paper was abundant. A number of Ethiopic manuscripts are made of paper blocks, with extensive texts that were carefully copied and even decorated. Cp. Ms. DS Ethiop. 6, Gospel of John from the late 19<sup>th</sup>/first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, finely bound in leather. Ms. DS Ethiop. 8 is a manuscript containing a collection of liturgical

texts and hymns, datable to 1854-61, copied by several scribes, finely bound and embellished with an European (Czech) votive image. Here, Ethiopian monks were exercising flexibility in order to procure necessary texts and be able to pursue their religious rituals far outside their native country.

The Ethiopic manuscripts from Deir al-Surian have been catalogued and are now studied with new research methods for the “Beta maṣāḥəft” project. (See above)



The newsletter  
is a publication of  
The Levantine Foundation

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Published by The Levantine Foundation  
106 St George's Square  
London SW1V 3QY

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The Levantine Foundation 2020

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Registered in England 4506398

Registered charity number 1094436

Registered in the Arab Republic of Egypt  
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Design and artwork by Lodge Graphics

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