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Report about the panel on Syriac Manuscripts that took place during the international conference ‘Symposium Syriacum XI’ (Malta, July 16-18, 2012).

On July 16-18 I attended a panel on Syriac manuscripts organized within a framework of an international conference on Syriac studies ‘Symposium Syriacum’ that took place on Malta. The aim of my visit was to attend the panel and to present a paper.

The panel on Syriac manuscripts was organized by Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié.

First of all, let me overview the content of the panel that took place on 16th and 17th of July. The panel covered thirteen papers divided into three groups: codicology, manuscripts and texts, collections and cataloguing.

Three papers dealt with different aspects of codicology and manuscript production:

1. Y. Degham, F. Vinourd, “Les reliures syriaques conservées à Charfet. Comparaison des techniques avec celles des autres reliures orientales: byzantines, arméniennes, islamiques”.

It is worth stressing that such aspect of Syriac codicology as the book bindings have never been a direct subject of a research. It is all the more pleasant that this first attempt was implemented by a specialist in bindings who has an experience of work with manuscripts of different traditions.

The material that was used in the study is limited to the Syrian Orthodox manuscripts that were produced between 15th and 19th c. and which are now held in the Patriarchal library of the Syriac Catholic Church in Sharfeh (Lebanon). While comparing the traits of the Syriac bindings with those of Byzantine, Armenian and Islamic, F. Vinourd was able to distinguish some characteristics that are pertinent to the Syriac manuscripts. For example, in the Syriac bindings there was used not one layer of textile (as in Byzantine manuscripts, for example) but more. We find goat and sheep skins used for book covers. Again, contrary to the Byzantine tradition, carton was used

for book covers. In general, the Syriac bindings are more different from the Byzantine ones, but much more similar to the Armenian

The question was raised by the end of that informative paper whether the traits distinguished can be observed on the Syriac manuscripts produced in other periods and in other milieux.

2. A. Desreumaux, "Les encres dans les manuscrits syriaques".

In his paper A. Desreumaux approached one more neglected till the present day topic, namely the use and production of inks in the Syriac tradition. A. Desreumaux made an important distinction that one can study the issue of the inks used in the Syriac manuscripts from two perspectives. Firstly, one can apply modern technologies to analyze the ingredients used for production of the inks. Secondly, we can take into account the recipes that describe production of the inks. One example of such recipes was presented and it turned out that its description is so meticulous and precise that one can even try to follow it. Undoubtedly, a thorough investigation of the inks will be an important contribution to a general study of the book production in the Middle East.

3. F. Briquel Chatonnet, "Le passage du parchemin au papier dans les manuscrits syriaques : premières constatations ».

The paper of F. Briquel Chatonnet dealt with an introduction of paper in the Syriac manuscript tradition. At the beginning, there was made an overview of different materials used for book production in the Syriac tradition (first documents are from the 3th c.). Then were presented the earliest specimens of Syriac manuscripts on paper (the very first known dated Syriac manuscript produced on paper comes from the year 932). What was especially important in the paper is that it presented an attempted to reveal the particular traits of adaptation and usage of paper in every tradition of Syriac Christianity. Every tradition (Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East and Melkite) had its own history and underwent different influences, all that had its impact on book production. From that point of view a study of book production can be seen as a complementary field of historical research that can bring new insight for our

understanding of the development of Christian cultures in the Middle East. F. Briquel is one of the leading experts in Syriac manuscripts and it is wonderful that she has decided to approach systematically the problem of different material supports used for production of Syriac manuscripts.

4. E. Balicka-Witakowska, "Syriac Illuminated Manuscripts: a Codicological approach".

E. Balicka-Witakowska is a permanent participant of the COMSt workshops on codicology of Oriental manuscripts and one of a few fine experts in Syriac manuscripts and in Syriac illustrations. It was underlined by E. Balicka-Witakowska that a corpus of illuminated manuscripts is very limited (in comparison with Byzantine manuscripts, for example). Nevertheless, the extant examples are very interesting from the point of view of a local assimilation of Classical canons. Furthermore, the Syriac manuscripts are quite often very richly decorated using different inks. This latter aspect may reflect an influence of a surrounding Islamic culture.

Two papers were devoted to a study of textual traditions and one current enterprise that aims to make the content of the Syriac manuscripts more widely known.

5. E. Villey and F. Ruani, "Traditions manuscrites syro-occidentale et syro-orientale de l'Histoire de l'apôtre et évangéliste Philippe"

The joint paper presented a work on a critical edition in progress. The text of the apocryphal "Acts of Apostle Philip" is represented by two different recensions, the one (more ancient) was circulating in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the other (more recent) in the East Syrian tradition. Each recension has its own peculiarities which clearly show that the text was very popular and was extensively copied. Researchers do well trying to investigate as deeply as possible each of the recensions. As an outcome they are able not only to reconstruct as full as possible a history of the text but also to prepare more accurate and precise critical edition. Furthermore, importance of such study of two recensions lies also in the fact that many other (especially) hagiographical texts are attested by both traditions, but a proper study of their interdependence as well as of a

historical circumstance that led to such migration of text is lacking. It is hoped that this project will shed more light on that important aspect of the history of texts in the Middle East.

6. F. Briquel Chatonnet, M. Debié, A. Desreuamaux, «An electronic database for Syriac manuscripts ».

The paper presented already running on-line resource (<http://www.mss-syriaques.org>) that is intended to become a digital and fully searchable tool that should enable all interested researchers to find the texts that they are after. Right from the inception, the project was not only limited to copying available (sometimes old and outdated) catalogue descriptions but tried, firstly, to produce more precise descriptions with a direct examination of the manuscript and secondly to integrate available descriptions for not easily accessible collection in the Middle East. As of today the projects hosts records for 117 Syriac manuscripts preserved in France, England, Germany as well as in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and India. Already now one is able to pursue different kinds of research selecting a type of content, material support, layout, binding and historical details. When completed, the portal will be a most efficient tool for exploration of the treasures of the Syriac literary heritage.

Other papers were predominantly dealing with cataloguing projects as well as with history of particular collections.

7. K. Heal, "Report on the Syriac Projects of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts".

A paper of K. Heal provided a presentation of current activities of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (<http://www.cpart.byu.edu>) based at the Brigham Young University (USA). Among a wide range of most important projects carried out by the Center I would like to mention only those that deal with Syriac manuscripts:

a. the Center is going to continue its successful initiative of making a digital library of Syriac manuscripts preserved in the Vatican library. Thanks to a support from the side of the Vatican library, the Center is planning to produce nine more volumes (CDs and DVDs) with most precious manuscripts from the Vatican library. When completed, the digital library will provide a more easily accessible way to consult the treasures of the Vatican holdings. It will undoubtedly foster a progress in Syriac studies in general and in editing a great number of unpublished texts in particular.

b. the Center is working on a Catalogue of a few dozens of Syriac manuscripts in the Vatican library that remain so far uncatalogued and therefore are absolutely unknown to scholars. A special interest of that group of manuscripts lies in the fact that it comes from the Monastery of St.Catherine on Sinai that is well known for its magnificent collection of manuscripts.

8. A. Kaplan, "La paléographie syriaque à l'âge digital".

In her paper A. Kaplan made a presentation of, firstly, new classification of various Syriac scripts (traditionally divided into Serto, East Syriac and Melkite) and, secondly, of a new approach to a study of Syriac palaeography with application of digital techniques that have been introduced recently into the study of Classical palaeography. This new approach was developed as a Doctoral thesis of A. Kaplan but so far it has not become available for a proper acquaintance. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see how the methods and approaches invented in totally different fields of study enable to change dramatically our understanding of such seemingly fixed structures as the scripts.

9. C. Stewart, A. McCollum, N. Michael, "Manuscript digitization and cataloguing work in the Middle East and India".

The joint paper provided an update account on the activities of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, a renowned center for digitalization of the manuscripts in the Middle East. Since 2003 HMML has been involved in several digitization and cataloguing projects related to Syriac and Christian Arabic manuscripts in Lebanon,

Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Jerusalem, and India. The result has been the digital preservation of more than 8000 Syriac and Garshuni manuscripts, and almost 6000 in Christian Arabic. Now thanks to an established collaboration with Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux based in Mosul the HMML is planning to extend its activities in Northern Iraq. One can only admire at the ambitious projects carried out by HMML but all that is certainly worthwhile especially at the present turbulent time in the Middle East.

10. F. Briquel Chatonnet, M. Debié, "Cataloguing Syriac manuscripts in Charfeh (Lebanon)"

The paper presented the results of a cataloguing project of a very important library collection housed in the Patriarchal library in Sharfeh (Lebanon). The Catalogue is already in print and, taking into consideration an exemplary description of the Syriac manuscripts in Paris (made by F. Briquel Chatonnet) one should expect a meticulous description that will form a new standard for future catalogues.

11. G. Kessel, « Manuscript Collection of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Meryem Ana in Diyarbakir ».

My paper presented the results of the cataloguing project and aimed to highlight the outstanding importance of recently digitized collection for Syriac and Arabic Christian studies. The library of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Meryem Ana (also known as the Church of Mar Jacob) in Diyarbakir (Turkey) belongs to a limited number of Middle Eastern collections that remain scarcely known to scholars (mainly due to a lack of catalogue descriptions). The case of the collection of the Church of Meryem Ana is especially lamentable for among its nearly four hundred manuscripts one can find a broad variety of highly important texts. Fortunately, thanks to a successful campaign of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (Collegeville, Minnesota) the entire library was digitized for the purpose of making it accessible for research. Ranging from ancient parchment (including illuminated) codices to mid 20th c. century paper manuscripts the collection represents the texts of almost all genres of Syriac and Arabic Christian literary traditions. Although predominant part of manuscripts is of Syrian Orthodox

provenance, the collection includes also a kind of a sub collection of Rum Orthodox (i.e. Melkite) manuscripts that originally belonged to the library of the Rum Orthodox Church in Diyarbakir. The descriptions of the manuscripts are freely available online at: http://www.hmml.org/research2010/catalog/mss_search.asp.

12. K. Heal, "Notes on the acquisition History of the Mingana Sinai fragments and other Syriac manuscripts between 1931-38 (Mingana Syriac 627-662)"

A second paper of K. Heal provided a fascinating insight on the origin of a part of the so-called Mingana collection of Syriac manuscripts (pat present housed in the Birmingham University Library). Particularly, as becomes clear from his correspondence a group of very important manuscripts comes ultimately from the monastery of St. Cathreine on Sinai. Today, when there is a growing interest in the history of that monastic library this new finding may shed a new light on the acquisition (sometimes not always legal) of the manuscripts in the 19th and 20th c.

13. E. Hunter, « Syriac manuscripts from Turfan".

The paper of E. Hunter focused on the palaeography of the Syriac manuscript discoveries from Turfan. Between 1902 and 1914, more than 500 Syriac manuscripts were discovered in the Turfan oasis (China). These manuscripts were brought back to Berlin where they are housed in various repositories (Staatsbibliothek, the Turfanforschung and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Dahlem). They provide a unique snapshot of Eastern Christianity in western China, and specifically at Turfan, during the ninth-thirteenth/fourteenth centuries.

Regrettably no colophon material is extant, but one of the most important questions concerns their provenance: were the manuscripts written at Turfan or were they brought from the homeland? Palaeographic studies on select fragments, comparing them with dated manuscripts, may shed light onto this important question, one that would provide insight into the transmission trajectories of written materials in the dioceses of the Church of the East.

As one can see from a wide range of presented topics there is an increasing interest in various aspects of Syriac manuscript culture. We see papers on palaeography, codicology, textual criticism, history of the texts and collections, reports about ongoing digitizing and cataloguing projects. All that, compound with the fact that all the papers were attended by a significant number of scholars (in fact, the room was too small to accommodate all those willing to listen), clearly demonstrates that today we experience a resurgent demand in thorough studies of manuscript production, history of the collections and in making previously inaccessible collection available for scholars. Perhaps such interest in the Syriac manuscripts is partially related to the fact that Syriac literary tradition is one of the richest (in number of texts produced) among other Eastn Christian traditions. It stood between the Byzantium and Islamic World being open to influences and projecting accommodated tradition further.

By way of digression, I would like to stress that a progress of a study of Syriac manuscripts has become real to a considerable extent thanks to an interest of local Churches present in the Middle East in preservation and a study of their cultural heritage. Some decades ago one could hardly imagine that local libraries would allow any foreigner to consult a manuscript. Consequently, many important manuscripts were not accessible and, in turn, the libraries suffered from such negligent attitude of their guardians and quite often reached a critical point with an outcome that many manuscripts went lost or become barely legible. It is therefore a matter of great rejoice to see how the capacities of European and US institutes match to the needs of the local libraries. Moreover, it seems to be a view shared by both sides that the heritage should not only be preserved but must also be explored.

Concluding the report, it won't be an exaggeration to make the following remark. The field of Oriental Studies in general and of Oriental manuscripts in particular has attracted much less attention in comparison with Classical (Greek and Latin) traditions. The outcome of such negligence can be felt especially sharp today when the accumulated resources of Classical studies become integrated into numerous digital

projects that offer new perspective of further research. Although the results of exploration of Oriental traditions are certainly not so impressive, it evokes no doubts today that a study of the Classical heritage can not be done properly without taking into account the evidence of the Oriental traditions. Thus, there is an urgent need to promote a study of the Oriental traditions while trying to employ all the modern approaches that have been invented so far.

Putting what was just said into the context of Syriac studies, one can argue that there is a growing interest to the evidence that a study of Syriac manuscript tradition can offer. And it is not only due to the fact that the Syriac manuscript tradition is manifold and experienced different kinds of influences (what makes it so attractive for research) but also because of its antiquity. One should not to forget that it the Syriac book culture has preserved the oldest known dated manuscript (dated 411 AD and written in Edessa) and there a considerable number of dated manuscripts from each century before the first millennium. This trait of the Syriac manuscript tradition, given a proper scholarly and financial support, clearly demonstrates an urgent need to promote a research of Syriac manuscripts. It will undoubtedly contribute to a proper and a fuller comprehension of the origins of the European tradition.

Finally, one practical aspect of the panel should not be overlooked. Namely, it was decided to compile a special volume with the papers presented at the panel. This is all the more pleasant, for it will certainly assist in promoting further a study of Syriac manuscripts while presenting the present state of art and forming new standards for further research. Activities of COMSt play an indispensable role in that as well.