

Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié, eds., *Manuscripta Syriaca. Des sources de première main*, Cahiers d'études syriaques 4 (Paris: Geuthner, 2015). Pp. 448; €50.

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With some exceptions, such as William Hatch's 1946 *Album of Syriac Dated Manuscripts*, it is easy to be involved in Syriac Studies and get by without hitting upon much codicology, and Hatch's book is primarily concerned with paleography. Jules Leroy's *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient* (1964) is often cited but its focus is on manuscript illustration, less the material medium of manuscripts themselves. Furthermore, Syriac scholars have enough critical editions and Syriac Studies enjoys sufficient connections to early Christianity and Late Antiquity, among other fields, that in the US and Canada one can work in Syriac Studies without engagement with the materiality of our textual sources. This fact is understandably a likely outrage for our European colleagues, who have done the bulk of text critical work, and perhaps even a shock to hear put in such a matter-of-fact way.

I was intrigued by the idea of reviewing *Manuscripta Syriaca* not because I am an expert in the area it covers, but because sometimes there are topics about which we are curious and in the process of writing a review we hope to learn something about them. My own knowledge of manuscripts is one acquired by inference and scholarly osmosis, as it is for many others in Syriac Studies, especially in North America. I am therefore grateful because this volume provides an excellent introduction to where the field is, while individual contributions make specific interventions concerning a number of specialized questions pertaining to the study of Syriac manuscripts.

The papers in the volume derive from a session organized at the Eleventh Symposium Syriacum held on Malta, July 16–18, 2012. The volume's focus on the materiality of manuscripts reflects the contributors' ongoing work cataloging several collections (the Rahmani collection at the Syrian-Catholic patriarchate at Charfet, the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, and the Meryemana collection in Diyarbakır). Most of the contributors are experienced scholars of manuscripts and several form the core group of the

Société d'études syriaques in Paris (who also produce the important *Études syriaques* series published by Geuthner).

The volume begins with a brief essay integrating a basic summary of its contents. The editors note that the Latin of the book's title and its section headings is a gesture to the international language commonly used in many catalogs and critical editions. This is significant of the volume's purpose: it aims to bring the field of Syriac manuscripts up to date with the broader field of manuscript studies. The table of contents of the volume can be found online¹ and so I will not repeat it. The volume is divided into four sections, with some chapters in English but most in French.

The first section, "*Manuscripta descripta*: collections et catalogue," provides updates on recent efforts in cataloging, with contributions running from shorter, more informal notes to Kristian Heal's examination of the history of Alphonse Mingana's method of acquiring and organizing the Birmingham collection and Grigory Kessel's thorough investigative account of the relatively unknown yet significant collection of manuscripts in Diyarbakır. Catalogs are becoming more systematic with improved, more transparent systems of manuscript description. As the material interest in manuscripts themselves develops, catalog entries offer greater detail, moving beyond simple lists of the works contained in a given manuscript and a few possible notes on the colophon (although of course some older catalogs provide significant detail, for example, William Wright's magisterial catalog of the British Library collections [1870–2]). Furthermore, new websites such as that of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) are providing not only descriptions of manuscripts but also access to them. The organization that digital technology facilitates, combined with the ease of communication it offers, creates new tools for dealing with the messiness of the past and the present. Current work is not only clarifying the distant past but also clearing up the confusion caused by the chaos of WWI and the genocide. The disruptions of the present make this work all the more significant and poignant. Columba Stewart's account of HMML's work in the Middle East, in particular in those areas affected by ISIS, is moving, while Najeeb Michael gives a brief, harrowing account of

¹http://www.orient-mediterranee.com/IMG/pdf/Manuscripta_TDM.pdf

work under what are truly the worst conditions for digitizing manuscripts.

The next two sections, "*Manuscripti materia: le livre comme objet*" and "*Scribere manuscripta: le travail du copiste*," are part of an effort by those working within Syriac Studies to catch up with scholars in related fields. The former section concerns the material production of manuscripts, including the shift from parchment to paper, the production and use of different inks, and the composition of bindings. Syriac Studies lags behind the study of other manuscript traditions in these areas, even though in other ways Syriac Studies is far more advanced than, for example, Armenian Studies. This is due to the specific and local histories of each field and the nature of the sources.

In the first chapter of this section, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet provides a survey of Syriac writing material from ostraca to parchment and paper. Paper spread earlier among the Syrian Orthodox and apparently had a faster development in Egypt (149). She points to the ostensible oddity of the six centuries of overlap between the two media (152) and yet her circumspect approach leaves her wary of drawing broad conclusions about the shift between the two. However, she does note how a better sense of the long-term changes helps us to recognize what look like attempts to traditionalize in manuscript production (153, 156).

Alain Desreumaux's discussion of inks, specifically polychromy and its function, and then his setting of the composition of inks by Syriac scribes within the larger history of ink production, serve as an introduction to the chapters that follow, the one treating the recipes for ink (which includes an index of relevant Syriac and Garshuni terms) and the other offering a lexicon of the vegetables, animals, and minerals employed in ink recipes. As Philippe Boutrolle and Jimmy Daccache note, some of the ingredients were common, whereas others must have derived from commerce (268). The material detail of these chapters was intriguing but at the same time it would be difficult for me to assess the technical work in them. This section ends with a comparative study of bindings and their decoration: Syriac manuscripts tend to be less decorative in general, probably because they were primarily functional, in contrast to Byzantine Greek and Armenian ones (270, 293). (This more developed decoration may have in fact contributed to the greater interest the latter have long drawn among art historians.)

The next section, “*Scribere manuscripta*: le travail du copiste,” consists of chapters on the contents of manuscripts: Offering a *précis* of her 2008 doctoral thesis written for the Catholic University in Louvain, Ayda Kaplan describes her approach to paleography, which employs greater technical specification for analyzing scripts than previous approaches. She also lays out a schematic of her system of script categorization, which attempts to break out of the blunt tripartite typology of Estrangelo, Serto, and Nestorian. Whereas the older categorization relies too heavily on denominational boundaries, hers adds nuance and helps us to understand better the transition between scripts, in particular the shift to Serto. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska’s piece on the decoration and illumination of Syriac manuscripts is exemplary of many of the articles in sections two and three: She sets Syriac manuscript production next to other cultures of manuscript production and then is able to articulate the distinctive features of Syriac ornamentation (339). This is important because often Syriac manuscripts are treated as uninteresting and even derivative. The last chapter in this section, Lucas Van Rompay’s examination and edition of the colophons—broadly defined—of manuscripts from Deir as-Surian at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, contributes to the ongoing study of the monastery where most early Syriac manuscripts were preserved.

The last section of the book, “*Textus et manuscripta*: contenants et contenus,” is in a sense a step on the way back to Syriac literature, the focus of most scholars in the field. Each chapter gives an example of a more codicologically aware approach to the retrieval of Syriac literature, whether a lost piece of the Syro-Hexapla in a manuscript binding or the systematic survey of manuscripts for future critical editions.

The volume itself is well organized and produced. Aside from a few infelicities in the English, I did not come across many errors in it, but I was not reading the technical parts closely enough to find mistakes in citation. Such a large collection, especially one with so much detail, inevitably will have a few minor errors (e.g., Isaac of Antioch, not Isaac of Nineveh, is the author in BL Add. 14591 [163]), but I did not find many. What I certainly did find, at least for myself, is a new appreciation for the material construction of manuscripts and in turn I acquired a new optimism about an important trend in our field.