

### III. THE CONSERVATION OF MANUSCRIPTS IN THE LIBRARY OF DEIR AL-SURIAN: FIRST NOTES

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[51] Whilst working on the excavation and conservation of frescos and wall-texts in the Church of al-'Adra', art-historians and conservators were approached with a request for assistance and expertise in conserving and preserving a collection of ancient manuscripts housed in the library of Deir al-Surian.

[52] In 1997, I was presented with an opportunity to carry out the first inspection of the manuscripts. The collection consists of approximately 900 manuscripts and all but some one hundred are being stored on wooden shelves in modern glass-fronted book cases. Thirty six manuscripts from the "Syriac collection" together with an unidentified number of manuscripts of unknown origin are housed in an area undisclosed to me.<sup>7</sup> Environmental conditions in the Library are very unsatisfactory, with temperature and relative humidity fluctuating from very low to extremely high levels.

[53] The main collection consists of manuscripts written in Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic and Arabic on cotton paper, parchment and vellum. Centuries of mistreatment and bad handling together with adverse environmental conditions have contributed greatly to the poor condition of the manuscripts. The substrates suffer from embrittlement, discoloration and mechanical damage. Pages are stuck together and have become pitifully distorted. The use of iron-gall ink has also caused damage to the substrate, and there are many instances of ink suffering from flaking and lifting. Exposure to moisture has resulted in corrosive activity and caused very serious perforations and damage to the parchment and paper substrate. Carbon ink, which is the predominant writing medium, is

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<sup>7</sup> All facts in this article have been based on a preliminary survey and information supplied by a third party, and will be confirmed at a later date.

also showing signs of ageing and deterioration. Lead-based pigments have blackened and assumed a dark grey appearance. Light and UV radiation has weakened the paper and faded the writing and painting media. In addition to this, silverfish, mice and other pests have made their harmful contributions.

[54] Father Bigoul, the monk who has been caring for the manuscripts as best he can, has been working in a state of isolation from methods and techniques which are common knowledge amongst the international fraternity of conservators. Education is then of primary importance in maintaining the collection. Although the process of sharing knowledge with Father Bigoul was started in 1997, there is still much that needs to be taught to him so that he can personally take care of these works which the monks revere so solemnly.

[55] In January 1999, I visited the Monastery for the second time. On this occasion my attention was focussed on what is known as the "Syriac Collection" and a list describing in some detail the physical condition was compiled in order to identify the scale of the conservation problem. With the exception of a few Syriac pieces and isolated folios kept in the main library, the "Syriac collection" is stored in a separate room.

[56] Executed predominantly on parchment, the majority of the manuscripts are in a very poor condition. The damage to the parchment is both mechanical and physico-chemical in nature. With only few remaining leather bindings and wooden boards the most obvious damages are mechanical, the face of the surviving leather being worn away due to dryness and flaking. However, there is in existence an unprecedented amount of original structural evidence of the sewing of the block, with only very few repairs carried out by a monk in the nineteenth century. Chemical damage and changes are mostly evident on the writing ink, with some pages where the text has been almost entirely destroyed.

[57] A tentative description of the Syriac manuscripts was made some time ago by Murad Kamil. Typed in the Arabic and English languages (*Catalogue of the Syrian Manuscripts Newly Found in the Monastery of St. Mary Deipara in the Nitrian Desert*, no date), this catalogue is still in existence and has remained in circulation among Syriac scholars as the main source of reference for the collection.

[58] As a result of the technical examination in January, five manuscripts from the Syriac Collection were selected for

immediate attention, on the basis of their physical condition. In addition, three manuscripts from the main collection were also prioritised on the same basis. The selected Syriac manuscripts include library number 2, 12, 15, 17 and 18 of Murad Kamil's inventory, spanning a period from the sixth to the eighth centuries.

[59] A conservation plan was drawn up for their treatment, and a selection was made of conservation products and further investigative methods into the techniques and the technology used in making these manuscripts. The historical significance and the unique value of this collection necessitates a very careful and considered approach to the decisions to be taken concerning their conservation.

[60] The objectives will be to conserve the collection, to ensure its survival with the minimum physical intervention, and to retain and preserve its structural and artistic integrity. Measures to be taken will also include the encasing of unbound volumes in conservation boxes to limit further damage and to create proper storage conditions, especially with respect to the highly damaging levels of humidity.

[61] As an intermediate measure all the examined manuscripts were wrapped in an acid-free tissue paper. Leaves suffering from ink and pigment transfer were interleaved with acid-free tissue. A method of making acid-free manila phase boxes was shown to Father Bigoul in order to provide a secure temporary housing for the most vulnerable manuscripts. The material used came from donations given towards this project by conservation materials suppliers in England.<sup>8</sup> Some eight phase-boxes were made during my stay in the Monastery and manuscripts placed inside. Father Bigoul has been instructed to continue this task during my absence.

[62] Decaying leather binding on one of the manuscripts was surface cleaned and consolidated. A broken wooden board was cleaned and secured with a suitable Japanese tissue to prevent further damage. Preliminary tests on individual manuscripts were carried out and methods of treatment considered and discussed.

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<sup>8</sup> Conservation by Design Ltd. Time Works, 60 Park Road, West Bedford MK41 7SL; Falkiner Fine Papers, 76 Southampton Row, London WC1B 4AR; General Scientific, Unit2, 72-86 Garlands Rd, Redhill, Surrey RH1 6NT. Chris Laver-Gibbs of Griffen Mill, The Old Mill, Croscombe Nr. Wells, Somerset BA5 3QN, has offered to donate specially made paper for the repairs of the manuscripts.

[63] Inks and pigments were carefully examined and where appropriate samples taken for analysis and identification, to be carried out in London. Stabilising of the powdering ink and painting areas and arresting the deterioration is of a paramount importance. Samples of paper and parchment were taken for research purposes and to enable purchase of the most suitable repair material. To help with future selection of a method and materials for parchment and paper repair, and the choice of adhesive, an endurance evaluation test has been set up. Father Bigoul is to monitor and record changes in strength, flexibility, any dimensional changes, discoloration and reversibility over the next six months.

[64] It should be noted that the mission of the conservators is quite separate from any academic understanding of the texts. After centuries of unfortunate experiences with Western visitors, the bishop and the monks are reluctant to share information about their treasures with the scholarly world. Indeed, understanding and close co-operation is needed to rebuild confidence and trust. In the meantime, it is the conservators' responsibility to preserve this priceless legacy of the past irrespective of any other considerations and to protect it for future generations as a living testimony of Christian culture in the Wadi al-Natrun.

[65] The monks of Deir al-Surian can expect no financial help from the Egyptian Government, whose financial resources are hard pressed. In order to ensure the survival of the manuscript collection funding is now being sought. Offers of support—whether in terms of equipment, human help or financial donations—would be gratefully received and should be directed to the address below.

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