PROJECT REPORTS

The BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library: A Final Report

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[1]   On June 20, 2001, representatives of The Catholic University of America (CUA), Brigham Young University (BYU), and Beth Mardutho met together to discuss the digital imaging of key holdings in the Semitics/ICOR Library of CUA's Mullen Library. CUA's Semitics/ICOR Library houses one of the largest collections in the world of early and rare books on the Christian East. All parties shared a particular interest in early Syriac printed works, both for their continuing value to contemporary Syriac Christian communities as well as to Syriac scholars. Many early printed catalogs, text editions, grammars, lexica, and other instrumenta and studies have never been superseded. Their rarity and inaccessibility to scholars has long been a serious problem for the field of Syriac studies.

[2]   The faculty and staff of Catholic University recognized this need as well, and generously agreed to work with BYU and Beth Mardutho to provide digital access to their collection. BYU and Beth Mardutho entered into a three-way agreement with CUA to scan a broad selection of their Syriac book holdings, with BYU focusing on titles of primarily academic interest and Beth Mardutho on materials of more broad interest to the Syriac churches. The result of the BYU project with CUA is now almost complete, and Web access to the imaged titles is being provided free of cost as the BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library at http://www.lib.byu.edu/ dlib/cua. A list of the titles included in this collection can be found at the following BYU site: http://cpart.byu.edu/completed/referencelibrary.php.

[3]   The Semitics/ICOR Library houses some 45,000 books and periodicals, 20,000 of which were the bequest of CUA's first great semitist and orientalist, Prof. Henri Hyvernat. Much of the cataloging of these early works has never been migrated to computer, and a number of early Syriac titles had never been cataloged at all. Fr. Matthew Streett, a doctoral candidate in Biblical

Studies at CUA, was appointed Project Bibliographer and compiled a 400 page bibliography of Syriac materials in the CUA collections. With this finding aid in hand, BYU and CUA collaborated with Dr. David Taylor of the University of Oxford to determine which items were of the highest academic value and should be targeted by the project.

[4]   A staff of 14 technicians was assembled from the CUA libraries, the School of Library and Information Science, and from graduate academic departments and programs with an interest in Syriac, with additional assistance from members of the Syriac Christian community. A total of 667 books, articles, and other media were scanned. The images scanned for BYU were returned to BYU's Harold B. Lee library and turned over to specialists in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections imaging lab. There the more than 30,000 images were individually split and cropped, straightened, renamed, resized, sharpened, converted to PDF, and tagged with metadata. Indexing hierarchies were created and the images are being distributed via the Web using CONTENTdm digital collection management software. The images scanned by Beth Mardutho are also being published on the Web by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library at http://www.hmml.org.

[5]   Imaging for BYU was done with a Zeutschel Omniscan 10000 TT color book scanner tethered to a Windows PC, with a second PC used for proofing and data backup on DVD. The Zeutschel book scanner is capable of producing very high resolution scans with high color accuracy, yet with a minimum of stress to a book or manuscript. Images were captured at 600dpi in 24-bit color. While many of the published images have been downsized, to facilitate Web distribution and viewing, the resulting images are still very high resolution and of superb quality.

[6]   The online collection may be navigated in three ways. From the project's home page at http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/cua, a drop-down menu allows the user to browse titles by ancient author, or to simply browse all. A second drop-down menu allows the user to browse by topic, or the user may search by keyword. Each method will return a corresponding browse/search page listing all of the titles that contain the selected keyword or term in any of their metadata fields, and from this page one may then view individual items.

[7]   In the item view, individual volume pages are viewable on the right. On the left is a navigation pane that provides a hot-linked table of contents which allows the user direct page-level navigation. Each page is a separate Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) file which is viewed and manipulated via the Adobe Reader browser plug-in. This allows the rapid download of individual pages and offers the user a large degree of viewing control.

[8]   Also provided at the bottom of the navigation pane is a link to a monolithic Acrobat file of the entire work. For large, multi-volume works this file may be very large (500mb or larger), but some users may wish to download frequently used works for off-line access. The reason for the large file size is the high resolution of the images, but the resulting detail is spectacular. As high-speed internet connections become more and more the norm these large file sizes will become increasingly less consequential, but we have nevertheless adopted here a content delivery system that is usable even with dial-up access.

[9]   From the outset, this collaborative effort has aimed to make a meaningful contribution to the growing body of Syriac materials now freely available in electronic format. We hope this aim has been met, and that the ease with which this particular collection can now be accessed will be a boon to the field of Syriac studies.