

A Report on the Workshop “Manuscripts from Eastern Christian Traditions” at the SBL Annual Meeting in San Francisco, Nov 2011

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In addition to the sessions dedicated specifically to Syriac at this year’s annual meeting, a new program unit was inaugurated that deals with manuscripts emanating from eastern Christian communities. To clearly explain the scope and purpose of the workshop, I can do no better than cite some lines from its description:

The study of any culture or tradition with a textual component relies heavily, in the first instance, on manuscripts that bear witness to those texts. This is no less true of the various traditions of Christianity in the east. While at least a basic initiation to manuscript studies within the context of biblical studies and in terms of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts and within classical studies is not hard to come by, students and scholars of eastern Christianity have not been so fortunate. Manuscript catalogs exist, but the basics of finding, obtaining, reading, using, describing, and cataloging manuscripts are skills that interested individuals are often simply forced to figure out on their own. The field as a whole will profit from any encouragement toward manuscript studies.

This workshop will bring together scholars from several different areas of eastern Christianity, here defined minimally to include those communities who used (and use) the following languages in their literature and liturgy: Arabic (including Garshuni), Armenian, Coptic, Gəʿəz, Georgian, Syriac, and perhaps others (e.g., Old Church Slavonic, Sogdian, Syro-Ottoman). (While Greek is often included among the languages of eastern Christianity, it is here deemed a field enough unto itself to be excluded from this corpus.) The papers and tutorials will not be strictly of a linguistic nature, while knowing any of the languages will naturally prove beneficial; students and

scholars who have a more general interest in the study and use of manuscripts are also encouraged to attend.

The main goal of the workshop is to educate and familiarize both students and scholars, particularly those who have not worked with manuscripts before, about manuscript studies within the broader fields of eastern Christianity. Some presentations will be instructive and informative, that is, they will include relevant teaching points—some general, some language- or genre-specific—and others may highlight current work or resources in the field, and still others may call for new approaches. The papers and tutorials of the workshop may cover topics such as codicology, paleography, cataloging (descriptive criteria), dating, genre-specific issues, digitization (advantages and disadvantages), present (cataloged and uncataloged) collections, critical editions, *Instrumenta studiorum*, the history of studying eastern Christian manuscripts, the scribe's practice, and others.

These two initial sessions were blessed with a majority of talks dedicated to Syriac matters. Kristian Heal (Brigham Young University) read a fascinating paper on a hitherto still somewhat neglected area of Syriac scholarship: its history and personalia. With the title "The Growth of Syriac Manuscript collections in Europe and North America," his presentation served as an historical introduction to the major collections of Syriac manuscripts in Europe. (There was not enough time to treat North American collections.) An especially strong point was his survey of the major periods of European acquisition of Syriac manuscripts. Next, George Kiraz (Beth Mardutho, Gorgias Press) spoke about an as yet uncompleted project to digitize archival material onsite in eastern libraries. He described the project and shared several images. These two papers were part of the first session; the second session began with Columba Stewart's (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library) "The Rabbula Corpus and its Manuscript Transmission," in which he gave examples of what can be learned about a text by close inspection of the manuscript tradition and the way that a text is arranged therein instead of merely by studying a printed edition. He also briefly discussed the practical aspects, with some concomitant advantages and disadvantages, of the possible ways of

actually laying eyes on manuscripts, whether in autopsy, bitonal microfilm, or high-quality color images. Finally, Jonathan Loopstra (Capital University) in his contribution “‘A Net of Points’: The Challenge of Working with Syriac Educational Manuscripts,” turned our attention to BL Add. 12138, a handbook to the pronunciation and accentuation for reading the Syriac bible that dates to 899 CE and in which the compiler claimed to have preserved the traditions of the *maqryānē* (“teachers of reading”) passed down in East Syriac schools from the time of Narsai. Loopstra, who included several high-quality images of the manuscript, gave examples of how this complex manuscript served as a learning text for generations, with its glosses, erasures, and other markings, as well as the critique and commentary on the traditional readings by the later East Syriac scribe Rabban Ramišo’.

The other two papers in the workshop were devoted to Gəʿəz and Arabic. Aaron Butts, of Yale University, spoke about the genre and particular cataloging challenges of Ethiopian prayer scrolls. As part of his instructive talk, he presented several images of prayer scrolls from Duke University’s collection of Gəʿəz manuscripts, for which he and Lucas Van Rompay are now preparing a catalog. Stephen Davis, also at Yale, gave a presentation on an eighteenth-century Arabic manuscript of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* from Egypt. In addition to a review of scholarship on this famous hagiographic text, Davis focused on the question of how a male monastic community adopted a female saint as a model for the ascetic life, while negotiating boundaries of canon and gender identity.

The workshop is set to continue for two more years, at least, and submissions for the coming years in accord with the intentions of the workshop outlined above are encouraged, not only submissions dealing with Syriac manuscripts, but those from scholars working on Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Gəʿəz, Georgian, and the other languages mentioned above.