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Syriac Manuscripts from the Egyptian Desert

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The birthplace and spiritual heart of Christian monasticism is the Nitrian Desert of Egypt and the long, shallow valley of Scetis (Wadi el-Natrun). It was to here, from the fourth century onwards, that Macarius the Great and others of the sainted desert fathers retreated from the world, devoting their lives to worship and prayer. While some monks chose to live in isolation as hermits, many others banded together to establish the first monasteries, building churches for worship and libraries for study.

These monastic libraries collected many manuscripts and the dry climate of Egypt preserved them well. In fact, most of the premedieval Christian manuscripts we have today come from Egypt. While many texts were written in Greek or Egyptian (Coptic), monks of all nations flocked to Egypt and brought with them books in their own languages. Regrettably, Scetis suffered from violent incursions, and a series of five raids from 407 to 817 repeatedly plundered the monasteries of their few treasures, including books. Each time the monks rebuilt and, as best they might, refilled their libraries.

Notes added to manuscripts often explained their provenance and history. According to certain of these notes, in perhaps the eighth or early ninth century a wealthy and important Christian named Marutha visited one of the monasteries and asked to see monks from his homeland. Marutha's family was from Takrit in Iraq, a center of Syriac Christianity, and was prominent in a Takritan trade community located in Egypt. Marutha was disheartened to hear that the Syriac-speaking monks were scattered over many monasteries. In a pious act, he purchased for 12,000 gold dinars an unused monastery for these monks to have as their own. This became the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir al-Suriani).

If this account of the monastery's founding is correct,[1] Marutha almost certainly would have endowed this monastery with Syriac books. But if he did, none survived the fifth sack of Scetis in 817 by Arab marauders. In fact, so devastating were these raids that almost no Syriac manuscripts brought to Scetis before 817 survive. One exception is a copy of the homilies of Severus, patriarch of Antioch, who was greatly revered by many of the Egyptian monks. This manuscript was purchased by an abbot named Theodore, which "he bought together with others for the study, reading and spiritual progress of all those who shall read it."[2] It dates to AD 576 and is now preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library (Vat. Syr. 142).

This manuscript somehow survived the Arab raids and made its way to the new Monastery of the Syrians. Many others were donated by Takritans like Marutha or brought by monks relocating from other monasteries. But the most ancient and valuable of the manuscripts in the monastery's great library were acquired through one monk's initiative and good fortune.

The abbot Moses of Nisibis was a great pastor and administrator who prospered his monastery. When a Muslim vizier tried to levy an onerous poll tax on bishops, monks, and infirm Christians in Egypt, Moses went to Baghdad to petition the caliph for relief. For five years (927–32) he engaged in this appeal, and while waiting upon the caliph's good pleasure, he also toured extensively the monasteries of Mesopotamia and northern Syria.

Moses was a lover of books, so he used these visits to acquire volumes for his monastery library. When at last he returned to Egypt, his appeal successful, he brought back with him great treasures of learning—250 manuscripts. Many were purchased, while others were gifts. As impressive as this number is, his acquisitions were important also for their antiquity. The great majority of surviving pre-eighth-century Syriac manuscripts, preserving many rare and important works, once belonged to Moses's library. Their value to scholars today is inestimable.

Subsequent abbots continued to acquire manuscripts. The precise number is unknown. One early European visitor to Scetis reported seeing a great library, quite likely that of the Syrians, containing about 8,000 volumes. This is certainly an exaggeration, but even a tenth of that number would have been an impressive collection. A 17th-century inventory reported 403 bound volumes, but many volumes would have contained multiple manuscripts. And this did not include fragments, which accumulated in considerable quantity. In 1837, Robert Curzon visited the monastery and found a neglected, stone-vaulted closet "which was filled to the depth of two feet or more with the loose leaves of the

Syriac manuscripts."[3] While the exact number is not known, more than 1,500 manuscripts have survived to our day from the Monastery of the Syrians.

Western travelers and institutions acquired the majority of the monastery's Syriac manuscripts during the 17th to 19th centuries, at times by way of honest purchase and at times, sadly, by some measure of bribery and fraud. They are preserved today in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, and elsewhere. By far the greatest number are in the British Library. Between 1835 and 1851, almost 550 complete and fragmentary manuscripts were acquired by the British from the Monastery of the Syrians.

But more than a century earlier, in 1707, the Vatican Library sent a young Lebanese Syrian (Maronite) priest named Elias Assemani to the Middle East in search of Syriac manuscripts. He first went to Egypt and succeeded in obtaining a number of manuscripts from the Monastery of the Syrians. The precise number is uncertain, for while transporting them by boat to Cairo, a storm arose that capsized the vessel, sending all the manuscripts to the bottom of the Nile and drowning one monk. Elias hired divers to retrieve his treasures from the muddy river bottom and dried them out as best he might, but our only account of the catastrophe reports that "many folios [pages] of them were lost."[4] One Arabic and 33 Syriac manuscripts later arrived at Rome. Whether just portions of those manuscripts were lost, or some volumes in their entirety, is unknown.

While parts are rendered unreadable by water damage, those 33 manuscripts are some of the most ancient and valuable Syriac manuscripts surviving today. Clearly Elias was permitted to handpick gems from the monastery library. In 1715 his uncle Joseph Simon Assemani returned to the monastery and selected another 100 for purchase. However, negotiations with the monks failed, and he was able to purchase only "a few." Again, precisely how many is unknown, but of the estimated 50 Syriac manuscripts Joseph Simon acquired for the Vatican Library, nine certainly came from the Syrian Monastery. These include the only surviving copy of the earliest Syriac chronicle (ca. 540), among other rarities. Scholars have determined that yet others of the Syrian Monastery's manuscripts were acquired by the Vatican Library, previous to the Assemanis, but precisely how is not always known.

In 2005 the Maxwell Institute's Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts published *Syriac Manuscripts from the Vatican Library, Volume 1*, reproducing 33 Syriac manuscripts from the Vatican collection. These include 16 manuscripts known to be from the Monastery of the Syrians, and at least two others that may be. This DVD is still available for purchase at the BYU Bookstore. Further work on the Vatican Library Syriac collection is now in the initial stages of planning. ◆

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Notes

1. Its historicity was advocated by Evelyn-White, but no corroborating evidence survives, and recent research by Van Rompay and Schmidt have called it seriously into question. See Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrûn*, ed. Walter Hauser (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Egyptian Expedition, 1926–33), 2:312–18; and Lucas Van Rompay and Andrea B. Schmidt, "Takritans in the Egyptian Desert: The Monastery of the Syrians in the Ninth Century," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001): 41–60.

2. As cited in Evelyn-White, *Monasteries*, 2:320.

3. As cited in William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838* (London: British Museum, Dept. of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, 1870–72), 3:ix.

4. This account does not come from Elias himself, but from his uncle Joseph Simon. J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca orientalis Clementino-Vaticana, I* (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719), preface, section VII; S. E. Assemanus and J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus, I, 3* (Rome: Typographia linguarum orientalium, 1759), 77.

Latest *Review* Takes Up Church Media, Promised Land, Teen Religiosity, and More

The latest issue of the *FARMS Review* (volume 22, number 2), which appeared at the end of 2010, features a transcript of last year's Neal A. Maxwell Lecture given by Mark H. Willes, president and CEO of Deseret Management Corporation. Willes illustrates the kind of creative thinking required for the LDS Church's media outlets to eventually reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide. For a full report of this lecture, see *Insights* 30/2 (2010).