

SYRIAC MANUSCRIPT INITIATIVE

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The Syriac Manuscript Initiative is a new project at the Oriental Institute being undertaken by Stuart Creason, Ph.D. and Abdul-Massih Saadi, Ph.D. The goal of the Initiative is to create a large digital photographic archive of manuscripts that are currently located in churches and monasteries in eastern Syria and southeastern Turkey. The amount of material found in this region is astonishingly large, numbering in excess of 10,000,000 pages in more than 100,000 manuscripts. These manuscripts range in date from the seventh to the twentieth century and include works of history, theology, biblical interpretation, law, philosophy, medicine, etc. Many of these manuscripts have never been studied by any Western scholar and some of them contain texts found in no other manuscript in the world. Since the number of manuscripts found in this region is far too large to be photographed by a single project, the Initiative intends to focus on those materials that are unique, especially valuable to scholarship, or especially at risk. If successful, the Syriac Manuscript Initiative would produce several important outcomes: it would make these materials more easily accessible to Western scholars, it would provide a record of these materials in the event of their future loss or destruction, and it would establish the Oriental Institute as an important center for Syriac studies in the United States.

The preliminary planning and fund raising for the Initiative was completed in late spring and early summer of 2003. During that time, initial funding was secured from the Women's Board of the University of Chicago, the necessary equipment was purchased, and plans were made for Saadi to travel to southeastern Turkey in August 2003. The focus of this trip was the monastery of Mar Gabriel, located near the modern city of Mardin, Turkey. This sight was chosen because Saadi is well acquainted with the members of that monastery, having trained there prior to coming to the United States in 1990 to pursue doctoral studies. The goals of the trip were to photograph several of the manuscripts found in the monastery's library, to field test the equipment, and to obtain permission to publish the manuscripts.

The trip was successful in every way. The equipment worked as expected, eliminating any question as to the technical feasibility of the project, and the officials at the monastery gladly gave Saadi permission to photograph and to publish several manuscripts. In only two days of work, Saadi was able to photograph three complete manuscripts consisting of approximately 600 pages of text. These three manuscripts are Mardin 102, an eleventh century manuscript that contains the Commentary on the Book of Luke by Moshe Bar Kephah, a ninth century Syrian author and bishop of Mosul, Iraq; Mardin 384, a manuscript that contains the history of a religious group called the Azidi and compares Azidi religious beliefs to those of Jews, Christians, and Muslims; and Mardin 404, a manuscript that contains a collection of philosophical tracts and theological debates, authored by, among others, Aristotle (translated into Syriac), Moshe bar Kephah, and Bar Hebraeus, a prolific thirteenth century Syriac writer.

Because of the knowledge gained on the first trip, Saadi was able to make a second trip to the region during May and June of 2004. This trip was successful beyond imagining. Saadi was able to go to four locations in addition to the monastery of Mar Gabriel: the city of Qamishli, Syria; the city of Diyarbakir, Turkey; the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin, Turkey; and the monastery of Mar Hannanya (*az-Zafaran*), near Mardin, Turkey. In each location, he spoke to members of the Syriac-speaking community and was allowed to see manuscripts found in their libraries. Through his efforts, he was able to locate a previously unknown collection of twenty manuscripts in Qamishli, and took sixty-five photographs sampling this material. In Diyarbakir,

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he was able to see manuscripts that no one outside that small community had been allowed to see for over fifty years. He was not permitted to photograph them, but hopes to return at some future time to record this valuable material.

The main focus of Saadi's trip was the Church of the Forty Martyrs. Over the course of two weeks, he photographed thirteen manuscripts, a total of 2,700 photographs comprising 5,400 pages of text. These manuscripts include: Mardin 101, a thirteenth century manuscript that contains the Commentary of Moshe Bar Kepha on the Book of Matthew, as well as a collection of writings by Bar Hebraeus; Mardin 107, which contains a commentary by the twelfth century writer Jacob Bar Salibi on the Books of Revelation, the Acts of the Apostles, the Letter of James, the First and Second Letters of Peter in accordance with the Harklean version, the three Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, and the Letters of Paul; Mardin 253, an eleventh century manuscript that contains stories of forty-four early Syrian holy fathers and mothers, as well as stories of biblical figures; and Mardin 257, a fourteenth century manuscript that contains, among other writings, a Syriac translation of the writings of the Greek church father Clement of Alexandria.

As of the end of June 2004, approximately 3,000 photographs of Syriac manuscripts are stored in two different formats (TIFF and JPEG) on a 200 GB external hard drive dedicated solely to the Initiative. In accordance with the wishes of the monasteries and churches, these photographs will only be made available to scholars by request. A catalog of the manuscripts contained in the photographs will, however, be made available without restriction on the Oriental Institute Web site. This catalog is still in development. As for the publication of these materials, decisions are still being made as to the best format in which publication should occur, print or electronic.
