

SYRIAC MANUSCRIPT PROJECT

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The goal of the Syriac Manuscript Project is the creation of an electronic archive of digital images of manuscripts written in the Syriac language, a variety of Aramaic that has been spoken in Middle Eastern communities for nearly 2,000 years, and the Project is focusing on two primary tasks in its efforts to reach this goal. The first task is to scan and to catalog the Professor Arthur Vööbus Collection of Syriac Manuscripts on Film, a photographic archive consisting of approximately 70,000 images found on nearly 2,600 segments of black and white 35 mm film and stored in approximately 2,000 boxes in the library of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, the institution at which Arthur Vööbus served as Professor of New Testament and Early Church History prior to his death in 1988. Pictured in these images are portions of 695 different manuscripts found at twenty-three different locations in the countries of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, India, and Israel. The second task of the Project is to supplement the Vööbus Collection by taking digital photographs of additional manuscripts located in the Middle East. Because of the generous support of several members of the Assyrian-American community, the Syriac Manuscript Project was able to take a number of preliminary, but important, steps toward its goal during the past year.

One important step was the physical inventory of the film. At the time that the Oriental Institute acquired the rights to the Vööbus Collection in the summer of 2005, the only inventory of the film that existed was a preliminary description and count of the various segments of film based on what Professor Vööbus had written on the outside of the numerous boxes in which the film is stored. No accurate count of the total number of segments of film existed, much less an accurate count of the number of frames on each segment of film. Prior to scanning any segment of film, a precise count must be made of the number of frames on that segment, so that each frame can be given a unique identifying number and all the scanning and cataloging information about that frame can be recorded according to that number. During the past year, all the frames were counted on all the segments of film from seventeen of the twenty-three locations where Professor Vööbus photographed manuscripts. (Counts have not yet been made for the segments from Mardin, Damascus, Sharfeh, Mosul, Baghdad, and Midyat, the six locations where Vööbus took the greatest number of photographs.) One result of this count was that the estimate of the total number of images in the collection was revised downward from 80,000 to 70,000 images.

Another important step that was taken was the testing of the scanning equipment (and the software that operates the scanning equipment) using film of varying quality in order to determine the combination of settings for each type of film that would produce the best possible scan, and following that, the training of students to scan the film in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible. This task occupied most of the year, but by April 2007, two students (Ben Thomas and Sam Boyd) had been trained, and scanning was able to proceed at a rate of approximately ten

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images per hour. Financial limitations dictated that scanning could only be performed between ten and fifteen hours a week; nevertheless, by June 30, 2007, Ben and Sam were able to scan 2,006 images on eighty-five segments of film depicting portions of twenty-seven manuscripts from ten different locations. The following table breaks down these numbers by location.

<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of Manuscripts</i>	<i>Number of Film Segments</i>	<i>Number of Images</i>
Bartelli	1	1	10
Pampakuda	1	3	94
Qaraqosh	1	4	104
Mar Behnam	3	7	143
Bote	2	5	153
Kerkuk	3	11	203
Tel Keph	2	8	259
Hah	1	8	278
Atshaneh	9	17	371
Mardin	4	21	391

A third step that was taken was the cataloging of the scanned images. This step is always performed after scanning, and so the number of images cataloged will always be fewer than the number of images scanned. Of the 2,006 images that had been scanned by June 30, 796 of them had also been cataloged (all the scanned images from Bartelli, Qaraqosh, Kerkuk, and Mardin, and eighty-eight of the scanned images from Atshaneh). Among the texts found on these 796 images are several poems by Narsai (a very important eastern Syriac poet), a copy of the Harklean version of the Bible with commentaries in the margins, the story of Mart (“Lady”) Shmoni (a version of which is also found in the Book of Maccabees), and the story of Mar (“Lord”) Gabriel (an early Syriac saint who founded the Mar Gabriel monastery, one of the places where Professor Vööbus photographed manuscripts).

In addition to these important steps, progress was also made in two other areas, though more remains to be done. These are the development of the project database, in which all the information generated by the scanning and cataloging of the images will be stored and made accessible, and the development of the project Web site, where anyone interested in the project can go to learn about its progress.

Finally, during May and June 2007, Abdul-Massih Saadi, Ph.D., Research Associate and Co-director of the Syriac Manuscript Project, traveled to Mardin, Turkey, and photographed three manuscripts, totaling 500 images, bringing the total number of images photographed over the past four years by Dr. Saadi to 4,700, representing portions of twenty-nine manuscripts.