

SYRIAC MANUSCRIPT INITIATIVE

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During the past year, two important projects were undertaken by the Syriac Manuscript Initiative. The first was a trip by Dr. Abdul-Massih Saadi to the city of Qamishli, Syria, in August of 2004 in order to photograph several manuscripts from a private collection. This collection was previously unknown to western scholarship, though some of the contents of these manuscripts are found in other collections. A sampling of the contents of this collection includes translations of biblical texts (both canonical and apocryphal texts), a historical work dealing with the city of Dara, as well as works by major Syriac authors. One lengthy manuscript (498 pages) is entirely devoted to works that deal with the apocalypse, and two others contain exorcisms, charms, and horoscopes.

The total number of manuscripts photographed by Dr. Saadi during this trip was nine, totaling 1,202 digital images and comprising approximately 2,400 pages of text. With the addition of these 1,202 images, the total number of digital images taken by Dr. Saadi during the past two years stands at approximately 4,200, each image in two formats: TIFF and JPEG.

The second project was the successful completion of negotiations with the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), which resulted in a contract signed between the two parties on June 30, 2005. This contract was the culmination of a five-year effort on the part of Stuart Creason and others (most notably, Gil Stein) that began with informal discussions in the spring of 2000 and continued with formal negotiations beginning in July 2002. The subject of this contract is the Arthur Vööbus Syriac Manuscript Collection on Film, a collection of rolls and strips of 35 mm film currently housed at LSTC. These pieces of film are the life's work of the late Dr. Arthur Vööbus, former professor of New Testament and Early Church History at LSTC, who took these images during regular trips to the countries of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq beginning in the 1930s and continuing until the 1970s. The total number of images contained in this archive is approximately 100,000 (though no exact count exists), representing nearly a quarter-million pages of Syriac manuscripts. This collection is one of the largest photographic collections of Syriac manuscripts in the United States, is almost entirely unpublished, and contains between 5,000 and 10,000 photographs of manuscripts that have since been destroyed. Its importance to the study of the culture and the literature of the Syriac-speaking communities of the Near East is considerable.

Under the terms of the contract, the Oriental Institute has acquired all rights to this archive, including rights of access, reproduction, and publication, but not actual ownership, which is retained by LSTC. In return for these rights, the Oriental Institute has agreed to take on two primary responsibilities: (1) scanning the archive, thereby reproducing the images in a digital format, which will make them easier to preserve over time, and (2) cataloging the archive, thereby making it accessible for the first time to scholars throughout the world. These two tasks, and the fundraising necessary to perform them, will be started in the coming year, and it is anticipated that it will take five to seven years to complete them.
