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Cross Palaeographic Traditions. Some Examples from Old Christian Arabic Sources

Abstract: This chapter deals with early Palestinian Arabic manuscripts from South Palestinian monastic collections now kept in the library of St Catherine's Monastery, Egypt. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that in the early Arabisation process of the Melkite Palestinian Church (8th–9th century), it is possible to find palaeographic, linguistic and layout features testifying to inter-faith interaction. Accordingly, the text of the holy book of Islam might have played an important role for the Arabised Melkite communities of Palestine. The early activity of translating the Bible and the Patristic and ascetic heritage into Arabic proved to be an important stage in the acquisition of the Arabic writing technique by Melkite monks living in the Caliphate. By comparing Islamic and Christian sources, I try to cross the all too narrow confessional boundaries in which 'Christian Arabic studies' have been confined for the last two centuries.

1 Historical introduction

The Melkite Church was the first eastern Christian church living in the Arab world that adopted Arabic as its liturgical language.[1] After the Arabic conquests, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem became part of the caliphate's territory; subsequently within the increasing 'Arabic-speaking Melkite community, Jerusalem and its monasteries effectively became the centre of a doctrinal development' (Griffith 2006, 185). Actually, even though Greek was the language that symbolically preserved the links with Byzantine orthodoxy beyond the borders of the caliphate, Palestinian monks had carried on the enterprise of translating the Bible into local tongues since pre-Islamic times (Griffith 1997; Briquel-Chatonnet and Le Moigne 2008). This means that Palestinian monasteries such as St Saba and St Kariton in the Judean desert had always preserved their local identity against the Greek culture of Constantinople. Accordingly, the Arabisation of the church of Jerusalem after the rise of Islam had a double function: to build an Arab Orthodox identity,

1 For a short history of the Arabic-speaking Melkite Orthodox Church see Griffith 2006, who clarifies why from the 8th century onward this church decided to translate its religious heritage from Greek into Arabic.

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sociologically and culturally, albeit not doctrinally, distinguishable from their Greek Orthodox co-religionists on the one hand, and to be able to produce an apologetic literature in Arabic to cope with the new religious challenge of Islam, on the other. These are the reasons why, within the Melkite Jerusalem Patriarchate, South Palestinian monasteries were the cradle where Christian Arabic literature had its origins. The manuscripts that were once in their libraries, are now collected and preserved in St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula (Samir 1990, 1990–1991; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1996; Géhin 1998; Mouton 2000, 105–124; La Spisa 2008; 2012, 210–213).

In what follows I will examine some palaeographic features in manuscripts belonging to the St Catherine Library and directly originating from the South Palestinian monastic milieu. After having very briefly outlined the cultural framework in which they were produced, I will try to show to what extent the standardisation of the orthography, script and layout has been influenced by the orthography and language of the Qur'an even in the Christian Arabic manuscripts of the first millennium coming from the Arabic Melkite Church. Subsequently I will try to assess to what extent it is possible to speak of Christian Arabic features within a Muslim religious and cultural environment.

2 Qur'anic orthography and early Arabic manuscript tradition

The early Arabisation of the Greek Orthodox Church in Palestine led the monks to carry out the very first translations of the Bible into Arabic, so we have evidence of Palestinian Arabic translations dating back to the second half of the 8th century.[2] In this context it is legitimate to pose the following question: what kind

2 Opinions about the existence of a pre-Islamic Arabic translation of the Bible diverge: Baumstark (1929–1931) and Shahid (1995–2009) assumed that even though no material evidence is available, it is reasonable to think that such work had been accomplished at least during Muḥammad's lifetime. The issue of the existence of such translations received attention once again thanks to a recent study by Sidney Griffith, who concludes (2013, 41–42): 'no conclusive documentary or clear textual evidence of a pre-Islamic, written Bible in Arabic translation has yet come to light'. Nevertheless, the several Qur'anic references to biblical, hagiographical and homiletic literary traditions are undeniable. Griffith explains this phenomenon by stating that in pre-Islamic time and during Muḥammad's lifetime there was an oral transmission of the Jewish and Christian scriptural and homiletic traditions which were directly and spontaneously translated into Arabic for an Arabic-speaking audience. However, this does not exclude the existence

of Arabic did the scribes adopt for their translations, since the Arabic language before the 9th–10th centuries had not yet been normalised by the Iraqi philologists of Baṣra and Kūfa (Fleisch 1990, 1–15, Ferrando 2001, 117–133)? The first evidence of Arabic manuscripts surviving up to the present comes from a few copies of the Qur'an reportedly dating back to the 7th century (Déroche 2004, 16). So is it legitimate to suppose that the holy book of Islam had influenced even the Arabised Christian copyists?

If we have a look at some Qur'anic *Sūra*s, it is possible to single out some linguistic and palaeographic phenomena that western scholars have described as Middle/Mixed Arabic features (Lentin 1997, 2008, 2012). In the *Sūrat al-naḥl* (Q.16: 72) we read: *wa-bi-niʿmati-llāhi hum yakfurūn* 'do they repudiate the divine grace?' where the word *niʿmati* is written with a *tāʾ mabsūṭa* instead of *tāʾ marbūṭa*, the same phenomenon can be found in medieval Christian Arabic texts (Blau 1966, 115–116). However, in the *Sūrat al-shuʿarāʾ* (Q.26: 22) one can find the same word written with *tāʾ marbūṭa*: *wa-tilka niʿmat-un* 'is it a favour...?'. Both orthographic variants are well attested. One can suppose that the *tāʾ mabsūṭa* is used only in annexations, but in the *Sūrat al-ḍūḥā* (93: 11) we can read: *wa-ʾammā bi-niʿmati Rabbika fa-ḥaddiṯ!* 'but as for the favour of your Lord, report [it]!', where the same word in annexation is written with *tāʾ marbūṭa*.

The second example is taken from the *sūrat al-ʾisrāʾ*(17: 1) where we read: *subḥāna llaḏī ʾasrā bi-ʿabdihi layl-an mina-l-masǧidi-l-ḥarāmi ʾilā-l-masǧidi-l-ʾaqṣā* 'Exalted is He who took His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque'. The last word *al-ʾaqṣā* is an elative form of the adjective *qaṣiyy* 'faraway', which literally means 'the farthest'; however instead of *alif maqṣūra* at the end of the word as found in current Arabic orthography, there is an *alif ṭawīla* (cfr. Blau 1966, 81–82).

Finally, as far as syntax is concerned, in the *Sūrat al-māʾida* (Q. 5: 69) we read: *ʾinna llaḏīna ʾāmanū wa-llaḏīna hādū wa-l-ṣābiʾūna wa-l-naṣārā* 'Indeed, those who have believed and those who are Jews or Sabaeans or Christians'. Following the Classical and Modern Standard Arabic grammatical rule, one should expect to find the name 'Sabaean' to be in the oblique case since it is governed by *ʾinna*

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of Arabic written notes by Christian literate monks and priests as *aides de mémoire*, as Schoeler 2002 has suggested. About the early Arabic translations of the Gospel see Guidi 1888, Arbache 2007, Griffith 1985, 2008, 2013, Schulthess 2018. The earliest Arabic Gospel has been recently identified by Kachouh (2012) in the *Vatican Arabic 13* which was copied in the Judean desert monastery of St Saba around the year 800 CE. The earliest New Testament Arabic version known so far is *Sinai Arabic 154*, whose second section contains the earliest Christian Arabic apologetic treatise, of 788 CE. Samir 1994; Swanson 1993; La Spisa 2014.

(cfr. Blau 1967, 326).[3] Another example could be taken from the *sūrat al-nisāʾ* (Q. 4: 162) where one can read: *wa-l-muʾminūna yuʾminūna bi-mā ʾunzila ʾilayka wa mā ʾunzila min qablika wa-l-muqīmīna al-ṣalāta wa-l-muʾtūna al-zakāta*... 'But the believers believe in what has been sent down to you and what was sent down before you, and those who perform the prayer and give alms [...]'. According to the Standard Arabic rules as well as to the context and the meaning of this verse, one should expect to find *wa-l-muqīmūna*, in the nominative case of the regular masculine plural (*al-marfūʿ bi-l-wāw wa-l-nūn*) as it is the case of the other nouns of the verse which have the same syntactical function (*wa-l-muʾminūna*, *wa-l-muʾtūna*). As we shall see from the following examples, all these variant forms are also frequent in written Middle Arabic of the pre-modern era.

Concerning the orthographic issue of the *tāʾ marbūṭa*, also in Christian Arabic texts, *tāʾ mabsūṭa* instead of *tāʾ marbūṭa* and also vice versa, is found: بقوت روح القدس 'by the strength of the Holy Spirit'; حيات يسوع 'the life of Jesus' (cfr. Blau 1966, 115).

Alif maqṣūra instead of *alif ṭawīla*: والثكلا اذا حزنت لبست السواد 'when the woman who lost her son is sad, she dresses black clothes'; as is well known, according to the standard orthographic rules, the feminine form of ثكلان is ثكلى with *alif maqṣūra*.

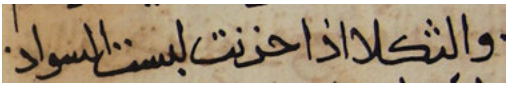

Fig. 1: *Dayr al-Muḫalliṣ 1807* (1643–44 CE) - Ǧūn (Lebanon), fol. 387v l. 7.

In the 10th–11th centuries Melkite bishop of Gaza Sulaymān al-Ġazzī's treatise on the holy Cross, one can read the following *incipit*: *iʿlamū ayyuhā l-mutaqallidīna nāmūs ṣalīb al-Masīḥ*... 'Know, you who abide by the Law of the Cross of Christ...' (La Spisa 2013, 1) where one should have expected to read *ayyuhā l-mutaqallidūna*.[4]

3 This verse should be compared with two others, which are very similar to each other: that of the *Surat al-baqara* (Q. 2, 62): *ʾinna-llaḏīna ʾāmanū wa-llaḏīna hādū wa-naṣārā wa-ṣābiʾīna, and that of the Surat al-ḥaǧǧ* (Q. 22, 17): *ʾinna-llaḏīna ʾāmanū wa-llaḏīna hādū wa-ṣābiʾīna wa-naṣārā*, where the word *ṣābiʾīna* is written according to the rule of *ʾinna*. For further details on these verses and their interpretation, see Burton 1988, 188–196 and Abdel Haleem 1992, 425–427.

4 All grammars of Classical and Standard Arabic agree by stating that ʾأَيُّها and يا أَيُّهَا require after them a noun, singular, dual or plural, defined by the article, and in the *nominative* case.' (Wright 1962, 92–93, emphasis mine), see also Veccia Vaglieri (1937 [1996⁷], I, 135; II, 173). For having an idea on the discussions about the *nidāʾ* among Arab grammarians, see al-ʾAnbārī (1997, 128). For further examples in addition to the essential work in the field of Middle Arabic by Joshua Blau 1966–1967, 2002, see also Hopkins 1984; Lentin 1997, 2008, 2012; Grand'Henry 2006, which are

In 8th–9th century Arabic manuscripts nowadays kept in St Catherine's Monastery, it is possible to find all these aforementioned orthographic and linguistic features that lead us to think that, at the very beginning of Arabisation, the written language was the same for all religious communities (den Heijer 2012). This statement can be demonstrated by comparing sources dating back to the same period but emerging from different confessional and cultural backgrounds. The same conclusions could be formulated also for Arabic palaeography. In what follows I demonstrate that sources belonging to different religious milieus actually share the same palaeographic features.

In the first Abbasid era, the most widespread kind of Arabic script was the so-called *kūfī*, or, as Déroche (1987–1989, 353–354) has labelled it, *écritures abbassides anciennes* 'early Abbasid scripts' (Gacek 2009, 97–98), whose most relevant peculiarities are:

1. the isolated or final *alif* with a more or less developed extension below the line,
2. *dāl* with two parallel and horizontal rods,
3. the median *ʿayn* whose head is constituted by two antennas,
4. final *mīm* with a horizontal tail.[5]

In Christian Arabic manuscripts of St Catherine dating back to the same period, it is possible to find many examples of codices written in what scholars have called Sinaitic *kūfī* or Sinaitic-Palestinian *kūfī*. Some scholars have supposed that this kind of script was originated or directly influenced by the Syriac *estrangelo* script that was also used in Palestinian monastic *scriptoria*.[6] Nevertheless, by comparing different sources as Déroche has done, a great similarity between the 'Islamic' and 'Christian' variants of the so-called early Abbasid script comes to the fore. I will examine in detail some orthographic features in order to show this similarity.

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only a few examples selected from the extended literature which developed in these last decades.

5 See also Déroche 2000, 234, Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012, 164–167.

6 Gacek (2009, 1) supposes that 'the origin of these scripts [Abbasid bookhand] are most likely traceable to the first century of Islam and some of them appear to have been influenced by the Syriac *sertā* script'. Many scholars tackled the issue of the origin of the Arabic script in the last century. Two hypotheses have been formulated: the first one identifies in the Nabatean inscriptions the origin of the Arabic letters (Cantineau 1930–32; Abbott 1939; Gruendler 2006); the second hypothesis says that the early Kūfī scripts are derived from the *estrangelo* Syriac script (de Sacy 1810; Starcky 1966; Troupeau 1991; Briquel-Chatonnet 1997; Noja Noseda 2006), without making any distinction between Christian or Islamic Arabic sources.

3 The case of the *qāf* and *fāʾ* diacritical points

Father Khalil Samir (1991) described for the first time some palaeographic features of early Christian Arabic apology as attested in the *Sinai Arabic 154*.[7] The two most important phenomena that struck him were the way of writing *qāf* and *fāʾ* and the presence of split words, elsewhere unusual in Arabic.

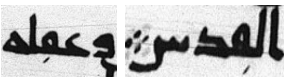

Fig. 2: Sin. Ar. 154 (fol. 101r ll. 1 and 7).

Samir remarked that, in this 8th century parchment codex, the *qāf* is always written with a dot below the line, while the *fāʾ* is written in the regular way (a dot above the letter). Samir (1994, 60) concluded that: 'The way the *qaf* is written seems to be absolutely unique in the Arabic script'. However, Monferrer Sala (2010, 197) carried out a little inquiry about this palaeographic feature within the same manuscript and pointed out the same phenomenon in at least two other Sinai codices: the parchment *Sinai Arabic NF perg. 17* belonging to the new finds of the St Catherine Monastery (Meimaris 1985, 27 [Greek] and 25 [Arabic]), and *Sinai Arabic 1* which is a translation into Arabic of some books of the Old Testament. Both codices date back to the 9th century. Within the same St Catherine manuscript collection, we can also add as an example the *Sinai Arabic 36*, which is a bilingual (Greek-Arabic) Psalter copied in the 8th–9th centuries having the same palaeographic features. Unfortunately reproductions of this precious codex are not available. Thanks to the *specimen* of fol. 10r published in Lafontaine-Dosogne (1996, 110), I could identify the same way of writing *qāf* and *fāʾ*. Monferrer Sala (2010, 197) concluded that this way of marking the *qāf* is a 'feature characteristic of early South Palestinian texts'.[8] Nonetheless it is noteworthy to remark that the same feature has also been found in Islamic sources and documents. Nabia Abbott (1967) has published some Islamic papyri dealing with Islamic traditional

7 For the edition of the Apology see Gibson (1899), with an English translation entitled 'Treatise of the Triune Nature of God'. On this Apology and its historical and religious context, see in particular Griffith 1985.

8 The conclusions which Monferrer Sala reached could induce one to think that this feature belongs exclusively to the Christian Arabic writing tradition (cfr. D'Ottone 2015, 271). Actually, this phenomenon seems to be cross-confessional.

literature nowadays kept at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. The papyrus nr. 17.630, dating back to the 9th century, is a fragment of Islamic traditions (*ḥadīṯ*). Abbott (1967, 208) underlines the following palaeographic feature: 'Once each, *fa* and *qaf* have a dot above and below respectively'. Other non-Christian examples can be found in several other manuscripts kept in the National Library of Paris, in Istanbul and in Saint-Petersburg (Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012, 181).

It is interesting to remind that the *qāf* with the subscribed point can be also compared with the so-called *maghribī* way of writing *fāʾ* (with a point below) and *qāf* (with a point above). If we consider the history of the *maghribī* script and its origins, it is not astonishing to find several examples of the same typology even in eastern manuscripts, belonging both to Christian and Muslim traditions. It is noteworthy to mention an example of this script in what is considered a very old translation of the Gospel into Arabic, now kept at the Vatican Library: the *Vaticanus Borgianus 95*. Despite the relevance of this witness, an in-depth codicological description of the manuscript is still lacking.

This codex[9] is a parchment dating back to the 8th or the beginning of the 9th century. At the end of the 19th century Guidi (1888, 10) argued that it had probably been copied in the St Saba Monastery, in the Judaean Desert of Palestine. Belonging originally to the 'Collegio de Propaganda Fide', it was at a later stage part of the Borgian Museum taking the catalogue number *K. II. 31* before having the present number *95*. It is folded *in-quarto*, its dimensions are about 215 × 160 mm., the written area varies between 170 × 125 and 190 × 135 mm. with about 16–17 lines per page. Nowadays the codex contains 171 folia. I found 23 quires, all of which are quaternions.

Regarding the palaeographic features, it is possible to say that the codex presents a *maghribī* 'look'. Its script is an early Palestinian *naskhī*:[10] the *fāʾ* is written with a point below and *qāf* with a point above. As an example, see fol. 16v. line 4: *wa-yašfū*, line 8: *Yaʿqūb*, line 13: *qāyilīn* / *qāʾilīn*;[11] but the *qāf* is also written with two points above. The final *alif* is marked with a rod below the writing line. If one compared this witness with the western copies of the Qur'an, it should not be difficult to recognise many strong similarities with the script of the Arabic

9 Because of the antiquity of this manuscript, many scholars have discussed it: see as an example Guidi 1876–1877, 1888; Tisserant 1914, 55; 1924; Graf 1944, 142, 148; Metzger 1977, 262–263; Griffith 1985, 154–155; Orsatti 1996, 153.

10 Another example of the same kind of *naskhī* is in the *British Museum Or. 5019* (10th cent.).

11 For a sample of this very folio see Tisserant 1914, 55.

Gospel of the *Borgianus 95*.[12] Accordingly, as Déroche has clearly illustrated, it is possible to suppose that the script called *maghribī* today actually had an oriental origin. Afterwards the Maghreb preserved it with some minor regional changes.[13]

By way of some final considerations about this question, it should be mentioned that the diacritical points are randomly used in most of the quoted manuscripts. However, as regards the case of the *qāf*, it is possible to find it without points, with two points above and with a point below in the same document, if not in the same folio, as it is the case for the *Sinai Arabic 1*. As Monferrer Sala has rightly pointed out, in this manuscript the verb *qāla* is regularly written with a subscribed point, however in fol. 1r one can find the following words where the *qāf* is written with two points above: fol. 1r line 4: *ḫalaqa* 'he created'; fol. 1v line -4: *al-sarrāq* 'the thief'; fol. 2r line -1: *fawqa* 'above'. The same alternation can be found in the *Borgian 95*.

From what precedes it is possible to argue for the following hypothesis. Between the 7th and 9th centuries, the standardisation of diacritical points was not yet established. This explains why in manuscripts dating back to this period one can find at least four different ways of writing the letter *qāf* which alternate quite frequently: 1) without points, 2) with one point above (the so-called *maghribī* variant), 3) with one point below, 4) with two points above (which became the standard form). This alternation and fluctuation can exist even within the same document.[14] As Déroche (2004, 73) pointed out, in this very period there were constant movements of scribes between East and West. This may explain the eastern origin of the graphic variant to write the *qāf* which afterwards became characteristic of the *maghribī* script. On the other hand, in the East the standardisation of the language by Iraqi philologists stabilised the spelling of the *qāf* with two dots above, causing the disappearance of the other ways of writing this letter.[15] If this hypothesis is right, it is noteworthy that, within the Arabic written tradition up to the first millennium, there is no confessional difference and distinction.

12 See an example in Déroche 2004, 49. As for a Christian Arabic manuscript coming from the West and having the very same palaeographic peculiarities, see the bilingual (Greek-Arabic) parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Suppl. Grec 911 (Géhin 1998, 166, 171).

13 Sijpesteijn (2008, 515a) came to the same conclusions based on papyrus documents dating back to 7th–8th centuries.

14 Although one cannot exclude *a priori* the possibility of the intervention of a second or later hand in order to explain this alternation — as Monferrer Sala supposed (2010, 197) — one could wonder why the later hand would not systematically intervene in every *qāf*.

15 It is also noteworthy to remark that, like in linguistics and textual criticism, the study of the early Arabic written tradition shows that peripheries are more conservative, as for the so-called *maghribī* script.

4 Early developments of the layout

As mentioned above, the presence of split words at the end of lines is another peculiar feature of 'early Abbasid script'. This feature seems to be characteristic only of codices dating back to the second half of the 8th century up to the beginning of the 9th. One can suppose that this special layout is due to the typical tendency of the early Abbasid era to fill the entire written area. In *Sinai Arabic 154*, whenever the text does not fill all the available space, it is possible to distinguish a stroke at the end of some lines: for instance in the following fols: 99v line 10; 109v -1; 110r line 5; 110v lines 3 and 8.

Fig. 3: *Sinai Arabic 154* (end of 8th c.), fols 110r line 5; 110v lines 3 and 8.

I think the copyist might have used this technique only when he was unable to stretch the last letter of the line (the so-called *mašq* technique), which however is widely used in the whole manuscript (Déroche 2000, 187; Gacek 2001, 135). The lack of space between words is another consequence of the tendency to fill all the available written area. In the case of the *Sinai Arabic 154* fol. 17v line 19 one finds a critical point which caused some problems of interpretation to philologists and editors. Samir rightly supposed that the words *wa-fakka riqābanā* 'and he untied our napes' were connected to each other due to an error of the copyist (Samir 1990–1991, 88–89; La Spisa 2014, 37).[16]

Vaticanus Borgianus 95 also shows several cases of words split at the end of lines. See for instance the following examples in fol. 16v. lines 2–3: *talā—mīḏahu* 'his disciples'; lines 4–5: *istir—ḫā* 'weakness'; lines 10–11: *wa-'a—marahum* 'and he ordered them'.

This very feature is widespread also in Islamic documents dating back to the same period; this confirms what we have already shown in the examples quoted above.[17]

16 It may be not by chance that this error occurred with a word whose first letter does not attach on its left as *rā'*; see Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012, 193.

17 See for instance the following documents: Oriental Institute of Chicago n. 14046, 17629, 17631, 17636, 17637, Vienna, Nationalbibliothek. Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer n. 734 (Abbott 1957, 32, 57, 80; 1967, 199, 207, 235).

Another point that should be highlighted is that when the script changes, as for instance in the passage from the 'early Abbasid script' to the longer-lasting *naskhī* script, the whole structure of the page changes consequently too. This change is probably strictly related to that of the material support of manuscripts. For instance, with the spread of paper in the Arab world and the progressive disappearance of parchment, layout techniques too were refined and improved. While we do not have any clear indication of the technique used for the justification of text before the introduction of paper, 'the progressive introduction of the *misṭara* led to a relative standardization of ruling types' (Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012, 123, Sagaria Rossi 2015, 102). The upside-down trapezoid or triangle form of the colophons at the end of the epistles, treatises and prose works in general (Déroche and Sagaria Rossi 2012, 207) denotes not only a greater availability of paper from the economic point of view, but also the development of the art of *mise en page*.

The technique of the trapezoid/triangle form at the end of the text (used not only for colophons) can be found in Christian Arabic texts too, as for example in the case of the Karšūnī-Arabic *Vatican Syrian 202* (17th cent.) and the *Šwayr 323 (123)* (18th cent.). So it is not difficult to conclude that only after the introduction of the paper in the Arab world did Muslim and Christian scribes alike feel that they could organise the layout of the page more freely.

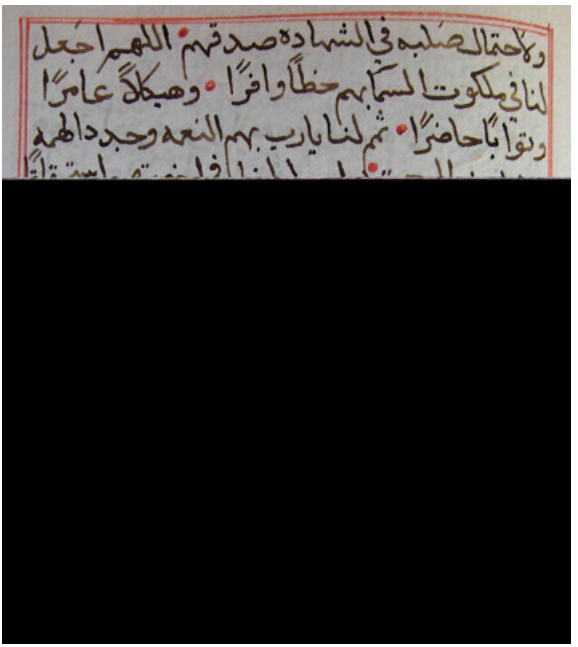

Fig. 4: Mār Yuḥannā al-Ṣābiġ Monastery (Lebanon) - *Šwayr* 323 (18th c.), fol. 87r.

5 A confessional Middle Arabic feature?

Islamic and Christian manuscripts share all the linguistic and palaeographic features mentioned so far. I now would like to deal with an orthographic peculiarity which I have found so far only in manuscripts belonging to the Christian Melkite milieu: the way of writing the prepositional group من أجل (*min ʾağli*) 'for the sake of' in Arabic, with disappearance of the consonant *hamza* (glottal stop) and the resulting coalescence between preposition and name (منجل *minağli*). Joshua Blau was the first who pointed out this feature in his *Grammar of Christian Arabic* (1966).[18] Blau described this phenomenon as an elision of the *hamza* (the glottal stop consonant) when it 'occurs at the beginning of a word governed by a preposition' (Blau 1966, 101–102). Another example is the case of *min ʾayna* which often becomes *minēn*. However, while this last change is also frequent in Modern Arabic dialects, the use of *minağli* such as attested in eastern Middle Arabic texts, might implies a hybrid register between *min ʾağli* and *mənšān* ('for, to, in order that') which is extensively used in modern Syrian dialect (Barthélemy 1936, 374; Cowell 1964, 491). Since the omission of the *hamza* is a typical Middle Arabic feature, we are facing here a classical example of mixed Arabic between *fuṣḥā* and *ʿāmmiyya*.[19] The same orthographic phenomenon occurs also in two other manuscripts belonging to the same Melkite monastic milieu: the *dayr al-Muḫalliṣ 1807* (Ğūn - Lebanon) and the *Balamand 135* (Tripoli - Lebanon) both coming from ancient Arabic-speaking Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox monasteries respectively, of the 17th century (La Spisa 2012, 213). In conclusion it is noteworthy to remark that an orthographic phenomenon such as *minağli* for *min ʾağli*, which is typical for manuscripts coming from southern Palestinian monasteries, is shared also by texts written within the wide area that goes under the name of *Bilād al-Šām*.[20]

18 See also Blau 2002, 35 §26 and La Spisa 2012, 213.

19 In order to clarify this point it would be useful to remember that '[i]t would be wrong to suppose that every deviation in a written text is colloquial. Since people know that there is a difference between written and spoken language, they make a conscious attempt to write correctly but in doing so sometimes overreact using forms that are neither colloquial nor standard' Versteegh 2001, 115.

20 The sharing of this kind of linguistic phenomena within the Melkite Arabic tradition, led Joshua Blau to spoke about the Melkite Arabic literary *lingua franca* (Blau 1994; 2002, 72), on the same topic see also La Spisa 2012.

6 Concluding remarks

From all the data listed above it is possible to infer some considerations about the interactions between the early Arabised Christian communities in the monasteries of South Palestine and their Islamic religious environment. The first question I would like to pose is: is it possible to speak of new standards in the early Christian Arabic texts as compared with the Islamic standards (starting from the Qur'an and onward)? Just one century after the Arab conquests the Arabic spelling and grammar were almost the same for Christians and Muslims. Scholars having analysed the language of Christian Arabic manuscripts often concluded that there existed a so-called Christian Middle Arabic (Blau 1966–67, 1994, 2002, Grand'Henry 2006). Nevertheless Samir Arbache (2008), who studied the morphological verbal system in the *Sinai Arabic 72* codex, which dates back to the 9th century, drew the following conclusions:

> Les textes en moyen arabe ont existé depuis les origines, c'est-à-dire depuis le début de la littérature arabe écrite. [...] Si tel est le cas, le moyen arabe ne peut plus être envisagé comme une transformation ou une régression de l'arabe classique. Il sera plutôt objet d'analyse comme un état de la langue écrite au même titre que le dialecte ou la langue classique.[21]

Only after the normalisation process carried out by the Iraqi philologists of the 9th–10th centuries is it possible to speak of specific palaeographic and linguistic choices due to the need to build and consolidate a confessional identity. At the very beginning of the Arabisation, the 'Melkite Arabic' church distinguished itself by choosing the Arabic language, as it was spoken and written by all the Arabic speakers in that time, as the official language of the church. It stands to reason to believe that in Christian milieus *al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣḥā* did not have any liturgical function or any specific religious meaning as it has in Islam. For this reason, Middle Arabic is much more pervasive even in liturgical, theological and patristic works of the 'Melkite Arabic' church.

On the other hand, some centuries after the Melkite Church, the other oriental churches living in Egypt and in the *Bilād al-Šām*, started to produce their literary, theological and patristic heritage directly in Arabic because their liturgi-

21 Arbache (2008, 19): 'Texts written in middle Arabic have existed since the origins, i.e. since the very beginning of written Arabic literature. [...] If this is the case, the Middle Arabic should no longer be considered as a sort of transformation or corruption of Classical Arabic. It is rather a special variety of the written language which has the same importance as the dialect and the Classical language' (my translation); for further reflections on the same question, see also Bettini and La Spisa (2012, viii–xii).

cal languages had become incomprehensible to Christian believers. The kind of Arabic they used is also called Middle Arabic, but in-depth studies trying to point out differences and similarities with the Melkite texts are still lacking.

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