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A Greek Gospel of Luke for the Arabophone: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. gr. 911

Abstract: This New Testament manuscript is written in Greek and Arabic, with colophons, annotations and other paratexts in Arabic. It bears witness to the fluid relationships between disparate cultures, languages and identities that characterised Norman-ruled Sicily and Southern Italy in the eleventh century.

In the year 1043 CE – the date of our manuscript – and for most of the eleventh century, Southern Italy and Sicily were going through chaotic times.[1] The area had, at least since the Byzantine emperor Constantine VIII recalled his *katepano* Boioannes in 1027, been under no clear sovereignty and was in fact a border zone contested by local barons and representatives of neighbouring empires. Arabs, coming mainly from Aghlabid Tunisia and Fatimid Egypt, had during the ninth and tenth centuries become rulers of most of Sicily. The Holy Roman Emperor Conrad II, who (legally speaking) was lord of Southern Italy, had ventured south only hesitantly in 1038, in order to restore the monastery of Monte Cassino and install Gaimar as prince of Capua; after that he instantly returned to Germany. The cause of the Byzantines, who had for a long time been losing ground in the region, in reality failed when their most brilliant general, George Maniakes, was pressurized into revolting against the throne in 1042 and was thereby diverted from his successful campaigns in Sicily. This Byzantine downfall in the region was to find its final completion with the loss of Bari in 1071 to the Norman commander, soon duke and finally count, Robert Guiscard. Since their arrival at the beginning of the eleventh century in Southern Italy, Norman mercenaries had been testing Lombard control over the region, and by a lucky strike a branch of these rose to become lords over all Sicily. With all these contestants, warfare in the area consisted mainly of quick raids and loosely founded alliances. And whoever was in possession of bands of loyal men came out the stronger, while old structures – whether local lords or representatives of the

1 The best account of this is (still) in Norwich 1967, chapters 1–3, on which the following account is based.

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distant empires – lost out. Our sources speak almost exclusively of wars, shifting alliances and, in the distant centres, incompetent leadership.

1 A manuscript attesting to a flourishing multilingual culture

Such conditions would not seem to be the obvious backdrop for a literary culture to flourish: and yet, as we see in the later Norman kingdom of Sicily, it was under such circumstances that these competitors would together contribute to the creation of a new climate for the development of learning. Norman Sicily became famous in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for nurturing, at least for a hundred years or so, a culture in which Latin, Greek and Arabic were all in use as literary languages at the same court and in various sections of society.[2] And, as we shall see, even before Norman control gradually settled on the island from 1060 and onwards, Greek and Arabic were already finding common ground. This we find clearly witnessed in a manuscript produced in 1043 by a certain Euphemios or Ophima (the Greek and the Arabic version of his name, respectively) and containing the Gospel of Luke in Greek, with accompanying introductions and translation of the complete gospel in Arabic (see Fig. 1). The manuscript, which today is at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris,[3] is in itself a wonderful document of a world in which what for us is an uncommon mingling of written (and probably spoken) languages was a perfectly mainstream phenomenon. For the producer of the manuscript, both languages and both literary worlds – the Greek/Byzantine and the Arabic – were familiar and cherished. Let us take a closer look at how this worked.

The manuscript is a small approximately square book (*c.* 172 × 140 mm), consisting of parchment quires (sets of interlaid folded sheets), held together by a later binding, almost certainly from Palestine, where the manuscript later came into the possession of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[4] Considered as a book, it looks quite Byzantine. Both the use of parchment (which in the Arab

2 On the literary culture, see Mallette 2005. On the surprisingly rich use of all three languages (Latin, Greek and Arabic) in various administrative areas of the island, see Metcalfe 2003.

3 Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 911 (Diktyon 53595), apart from a bifolio taken from it, today in St Petersburg, in the Russian National Library, Ф. № 906 (Gr.) 290 (Granstrem 199) (Diktyon 57362).

4 Devreesse, Astruc, and Concasty 1960, III.9–10, numéros 901–1371. The manuscript has been studied in Géhin 1997, who addresses its late medieval history, 171–173. There is a recent discussion of the manuscript in Degni 2018, 183–185.

world had already by the eleventh century to a large degree been replaced by paper) and the pattern of alternation between flesh-side and grain-side (the light and darker sides, respectively, of the treated animal skins of parchment) reflects common procedures in Byzantium.[5] And, not least, the way one turns the pages – to the left, as in any Greek (or Latin) manuscript, and not to the right, as in any Arabic manuscript – points to the fundamentally Greek-Byzantine nature of this book. The way the dating of the manuscript is done is also typically Byzantine. A colophon text on fol. 315^{r}, stated in both Greek and Arabic on the last page of the manuscript, gives us the name and position of the producer, the name of the commissioner, and the year of production: Euphemios/Ophima, cleric/*šammās* and reader, produced, for a certain Ioannes, in the year 1043, or, more precisely, in the year 6551 after the Creation, thus indicated in the Byzantine manner (see Fig. 2c).[6] Also the Greek writing offers us the final clue to the place of production. The Arabic handwriting is what specialists characterize as 'transitional late-*kūfi-nasḫī*'; a specific use of dots for the letters *fa* and *qaf* points loosely to the area of Andalus and Maghreb.[7] But more specific observations can be made concerning the Greek handwriting: the so-called 'as de pique' ('ace of spades') ligature in the writing of the letters *epsilon* and *rho* may indicate Sicily or Southern Italy as the place of origin.[8] And since these are the areas were Arabic and Greek literary cultures met, it seems reasonable to assume that Euphemios/Ophima must have been working somewhere in those areas.

The double signature that Euphemios/Ophima left in the final colophon is visible all through the book, although this bilingual configuration is not always present. He clearly knew both languages well, had intimate knowledge of book production with both scripts,[9] and a careful look at the book reveals a conscious wish to produce a completely Greco-Arabic integration. The book displays a neat solution for the balance of the two types of writing, each having their own direction (one written from the left, the other from the right), and it reflects a balanced blending, with reading aids and introductions mostly in Arabic, whereas title indications and the book as such are Greek. But why go to these complicated measures? Why did Euphemios/Ophima and/or Ioannes insist on

5 See Géhin 1997, 163.

6 Géhin 1997, 164 gives a full translation of both the Arabic and Greek colophon text into French.

7 See Géhin 1997, 167–169, and Monferrer-Sala and Urbán 2012, 121–122.

8 Géhin 1997, 167–168. Concerning the 'as de pique' ligature, see the bibliography quoted by Géhin 1996, 167 n. 14. The ligature alone cannot be used to locate a manuscript but must be considered alongside other criteria. Cf. De Vocht 1981.

9 Even if some modern scholars have found the decoration 'barbaric'; see Géhin 1997, 170.

having two languages just about equally represented in a book that would then double in size and in costs, at a time when manuscripts were immensely expensive? Let us delve further into the description of the book.

2 The parts of the book, and the status of the languages

The book essentially consists of three parts. In the first part, a short prayer in Arabic is followed by a long index, listing the 83 chapters (κεφάλαια *kefalaia* / Arabic not legible) into which Luke's text is here subdivided (fols 1–4^{v}). Such indexing was customary in most medieval biblical manuscripts, but here it is bilingual, with the Greek text on the left side of every page and facing Arabic on the right side of the page. This layout, which naturally and beautifully produces straight left and right margins, is utilized throughout the manuscript for pages presenting both Greek and Arabic text.[10] In the second part (fols 5^{r}–314^{v}), we have the complete Gospel of Luke (though some pages and even quires have gone missing in the course of time). The neat placing of the Greek text, in short lines with equal distance on the left side of the page, is balanced on the right by the Arabic, which closely follows the Greek, verse for verse, but often leaves more space between lines and verses, since the Arabic (at least in this writing) takes up lesser space. The third part (fols 314^{v}–315^{r}, Fig. 2a) begins with a short historical explanation as to who Luke was and where he wrote his gospel (fol. 314^{v}, Fig. 2b). This text is given in Arabic only, but with a heading in Greek. This is followed by the colophon, mentioned above, a single page (fol. 315^{r}, Fig. 2c) that – again bilingually – gives us information on the producer, commissioner, and date of the manuscript.

As we see, a fine balance between the languages is not only visible but stands out as clearly intentional on the part of the manuscript's creator. Apart from the small text giving historical facts about Luke and his gospel (in Arabic, but with a Greek heading), which gives a slight imbalance, only the initial prayer (solely in Arabic) seems to be additional to this pattern. Unfortunately, however, due to the fragile and worn state of the manuscript, we are not in a position to make a clear evaluation here. It seems – though we cannot know –

10 This distribution of Greek and Arabic text is thus unlike that of the manuscript Sinaiticus arab. 116, which offers Gospel readings in Arabic on the outer rim of the book and in Greek on either side of the middle; this manuscripts dates from 995–996 CE: see Géhin 1997, 162–164.

that the very first page of the manuscript (fol. 1^{r}, now glued to a modern paper page) originally contained no text. Instead, the reader of the book was meant to turn the page and find the first double page (fols 1^{v}–2^{r}) (see Fig. 3a).

On this double page, the reader would find the short prayer on the left and the beginning of the index on the right page. Both pages seem to have had an ornamental band on the top, with lots of green (or possibly gold) colouring.[11] Unfortunately, wherever this green colour was applied, rust or some similar process has decomposed the parchment and produced holes or, as in the case of the first open pages, has removed almost all of the stuffy material in the parchment, leaving only a thin and transparent film with little or no colour. For this reason, the translucent quadrangles left on these first pages do not reveal their original content to us. They may have been ornamental blocks (though not traditional Byzantine *pylai*, which were shaped as the Greek letter *pi*), but some writing here may also have announced the contents of the book (though also stated right above the index). On fol. 5 a similar block, also partly decomposed, announces in Greek capital letters ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ, 'gospel', with the name of Luke having probably withered away. We cannot draw a final conclusion concerning the opening pages; as they stand, however, Arabic is given slightly more space, as is also the case with the final historical text on Luke. On the other hand, Greek is more often used in headings.

This prompts us to wonder why Arabic is more prominently represented in the textual configuration than might have been expected. Despite the scholarly attention given to this manuscript, the initial prayer has never been edited or even commented upon.[12] The text starts with what is graphically placed as a heading (with central rather than right alignment): 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit' in Arabic. This is obviously a well-known Christian formula, but its use as heading or initial formula is not markedly common. When found in an Arabic context, it resembles very much the almost universally-used initial formula in the Muslim world, the *bismillah*.[13] The formula here starts with exactly the same words in Arabic, but of course characterises itself as non-Muslim by naming the Trinity. This resemblance with standardized Muslim language is found again later in the (unfortunately fragmentary) text. The beginning of the

11 Images on Gallica are only available in black and white, and so unfortunately the colouring is not visible on the figures provided.

12 The only mention of the text is Géhin 1997, 170, who calls it an 'Arabic preface' with no further comments on its content or form. It is translated and discussed in the next section below.

13 For a discussion of the status and intention behind the common use of the formula in Christian Arabic texts, see Cicade 2015.

very last line in the prayer reads *jalla jalāluhu* 'May His glory be glorified', again common in Muslim parlance, but here used in a Christian context. There can be no doubt about Euphemios/Ophima and Ioannes being Christians, but their literary and/or religious language certainly owes something to the Arabic and Muslim world. From this prayer and the short historical introduction to Luke and his gospel at the end of the manuscript, we may surmise at the very least that Ioannes, the recipient of the book, was more comfortable with reading Arabic. Had Greek been his primary language, he would hardly have wanted introductions and background information in Arabic; in fact, he would not have needed the support of Arabic (most importantly given in the running and complete translation of the gospel). The Greek text is, however, not without significance. The authority of Greek as a medium lay not alone in the obvious fact that it was the original medium of the Gospels, but also in its status as the liturgical language of all of Orthodox Sicily (even after Latin arrived with the Normans). Its importance is highlighted by the title given in Greek alone, above the beginning of the gospel text and even above the historical introduction in Arabic. It is as if only a Greek heading could truly introduce the text. In the historical introduction, it is furthermore stated that 'the whole Gospel of Luke was written in Greek [*bi-l-yūnāniyat*], in Alexandria'. This does not conform to the usual ascription of Luke as originating from the city of Antioch, but it does – once again – insist on the importance of the Greek world.[14] Even through Arabic, a Greek allegiance is stressed.

3 The initial prayer and the persons involved

The question, of course, is whether this points to Euphemios/Ophima and/or Ioannes merely insisting upon being Christian/Orthodox, or whether he/they also wished to display some sort of loyalty to Byzantium in particular. The first, complete lines of the initial prayer go as follows (fol. 1^{v} l. 1–5, Fig. 3b):

باسم الاب والابن وروح القدس
bismi-'l-abi wa-'l-ibni wa-rūḥi 'l-qudsi
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

14 The short historical introduction on Luke resembles the later and common introduction by al-Asʿad Ibn al-ʿAssāl (13th-c. Coptic scholar), but only shares the standard information on language and city of production; see Wadi 2006, 79-80.

الاله الواحد
al-illāhi 'l-wāhidu
the one God

الذي هدانا بتوفيقة بعد الضلالة والعمى
allaḏī hadānā bitaufiqihi buʿda 'l-ḍalālah wa-al-ʿamā
who guided us by His assistance away from the error and blindness

وبصرنا رشدنا بعد الهلكة والردى. وانار
wa baṣṣaranā rashshdanā baʿda al-halukah wa 'l-radan. wa anāra
and showed us guided us after (or away from?) the death and apostasy. And He enlightened

عقولنا بهكمته الباليغه ونوا ...
ʿuqūlanā bi-ḥikmatihi al-bālighati wa-nawā[...]
our minds by His deep wisdom...

It would be an over-interpretation to claim that the grievance expressed here is concerned with the fate of Maniakes or the desperate state of Byzantine power in the region. But the acknowledgment of 'error' (*al-ḍalālah*), followed by a reference to destruction and ruin, do seem to point to the lamentable state of affairs brought about by constant warfare. And, once again, we find that the word for 'error', here in a Christian lamentation, echoes Muslim religious language, from the end of surah 1 in the Qur'an (*al-ḍāllīn*).

From the colophon (fol. 315^{r}, Fig. 2c) we understand that both producer and commissioner were men of the church. Euphemios/Ophima had titles of cleric[15] and reader (ἀναγνώστης *anagnōstēs* / قاري *qāri'*), whereas Ioannes, the commissioner, was also *šammās*, his title not given in the Greek. At least Ioannes, if not also Euphemios/Ophima, must have been in need of a Greek Luke with Arabic support, and must have liked the idea of a Byzantine-looking manuscript with Arabic literary/religious features. Depending on his financial situation, it is quite possible that he commissioned similar copies of the three other gospels or of other biblical books. The Bible was hardly ever produced in one book in these centuries,[16] so it is no surprise to find a single gospel taking up a whole book.

Being a manuscript containing the full Gospel text rather than a lectionary, the manuscript was hardly meant for liturgical use. What the bilingual text offered was primarily a study tool, a support for exegesis. As Ioannes or some-

15 κλήρικον *klērikon* in Greek, which is probably equivalent to the stated Arabic شمّاس *šammās*; see Géhin 1997, 165.

16 What was customary for the Latin Bible holds true also for the Greek: see van Liere 2014, chapter 2.

body else read the text, he or she would at the same time be able to enjoy the fine page layout and the simple but meticulously executed ornamentation. Every verse initial letter was coloured in alternating red or green. And when a verse started with a red letter, the final stop of that verse would be in green (and the same colour as the following initial). This rule is followed throughout the manuscript. When we find *haplai* (i.e. Byzantine quotation marks, placed only on the left side of every line of a quotation), these are again in the colour contrasting with that used for the initial.[17] Similar red-green alternation continues into the title of the historical introduction (fol. 314^{v}, Fig. 2b). Only the colophon lacks this colour feature and is thereby marked out as paratext, as being particular to this book. From time to time Ioannes would have noticed that the Arabic, though generally following the Greek closely, incorporated minor divergences from it. Whether this is a sign of a different translator, or of a different practice by one close to or even identical with our main producer, is hard to tell.[18]

In any case, a thoroughly Arabicized Orthodox readership, and perhaps even a whole community, must be imagined behind the production of this manuscript. We may think of Orthodox Christians of Sicily having gradually become Arabophone and finding it progressively harder to follow the word and meaning of the Greek text. Nonetheless, a thoroughly Arabic literary culture would go hand in hand with complete familiarity with Byzantine customs in book production. Given that the work was completed the year after the sudden disappearance of the general George Maniakes, and with him the hope of Byzantine sovereignty, it is difficult not to take the lamentations of the initial prayer as a reflection – if no more – of continuous warfare that had brought no good to this community. Clearly, however, these people could a few decades later be part of the strong Arabic presence that met the new Norman lords and induced them to include this too among the learned languages in vogue at their court. As for Greek, its strength continued, with liturgy being performed in Greek throughout the Norman domination even after the introduction of the Western rite. Few centres were so multilingual or displayed the simultaneous use of so many learned languages, as did Sicily. To find anything approaching this in other political centres, we would have to go to Castile (though little Arabic was there

17 And will therefore change colour if continued into a new verse, as we see e.g. in fol. 32^{r} (alternating red-green-red: νῦν ἀπολύεις τὸν δοῦλόν σου … καὶ δόξαν λαοῦ σου Ἰσραήλ; fol. 40^{r} (alternating red-green-red: φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ανδ ἔσται τὰ σκολιὰ εἰς εὐθείαν). The Greek text has been normalised in the citations provided.

18 Both interpretations are offered by Urbán 2007, 95, and Monferrer-Sala and Urbán, 2012, 120–121. Géhin, 167 states that the Arabic text was translated directly a Greek text version, though not the one given in our manuscript.

produced at court) or Antioch (politically a much smaller unit). In this way, Euphemios/Ophima and Ioannes made their contribution – small in scale, but culturally rich – to a unique historical phenomenon.

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Fig. 1: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. gr. 911, fols 37^{v}–38^{r}, with facing Greek-Arabic text. Golden/green capitals have corroded the parchment, leaving holes. © Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b110040650/f44.item>.

Fig. 2a: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. gr. 911, fols 314^{v}–315^{r}. Top left shows the ending of the Gospel of Luke, with Greek text to the left and Arabic to the right. Bottom left gives the short historical account of the life of Luke, in Arabic but with a Greek title. On the page to the right is Euphimios/Ophima's signature, in Greek and Arabic. © Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b110040650/f334.item>.

Fig. 2b: Fol. 314^{v} (detail).

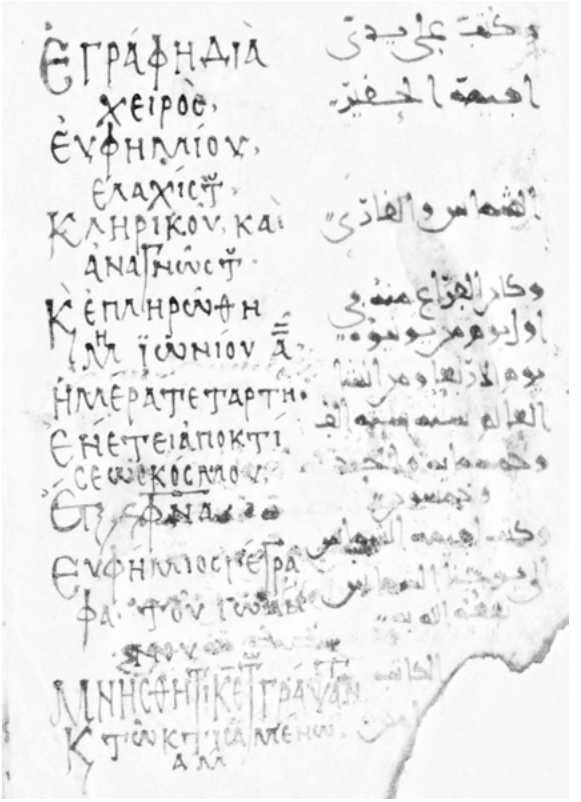

Fig. 2c: Fol. 315^{r} (detail).

Fig. 3a: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. gr. 911, fols 1ᵛ–2ʳ. On the left the initial prayer, to the right the beginning of the index of contents. © Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b110040650/f4.item>.

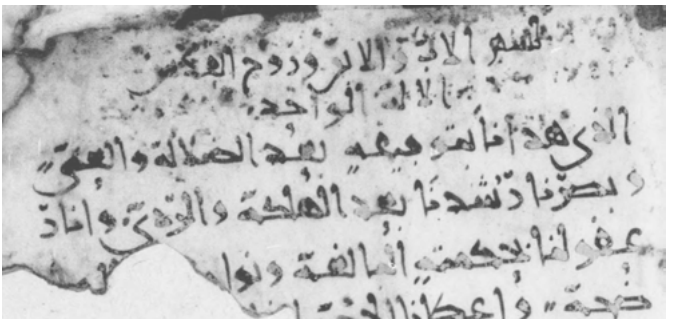

Fig. 3b: Fol. 1ᵛ (detail).