

A ‘Spiritual Treasure in Five Languages’: Pentaglot Biblical Manuscripts from Egypt in a Global and Transregional Perspective

Abstract: This essay examines a set of pentaglot manuscripts originating in the diverse monastic communities of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, Egypt, probably dating from the thirteenth century. These substantial paper codices feature biblical texts on parallel columns in five key languages of the non-Chalcedonian churches: Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian. Despite their importance for understanding Christian multi-ethnic communities in Muslim-era Egypt, these manuscripts have been largely overlooked. This article explores the pentaglot manuscripts through a multidisciplinary and transcultural lens, integrating philology, history and cultural studies. It aims to shed new light on the origins, purposes and uses of these manuscripts, which reflect the cultural hybridity and communal life of Ethiopian, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian monks in Islamic Egypt, by investigating the migration and diaspora communities in the region.

1 Introduction

A Jesuit mission from Goa arrived at the court of the powerful Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) in 1580. Hoping to convert the great potentate to Christianity, the Jesuits presented him with a dizzyingly expensive copy of the Plantin Polyglot Bible, which they deemed a milestone in Christian scholarship. The Plantin Bible – which emerged from the presses in Antwerp between 1568 and 1573 – was financed by the Spanish king Philip II (r. 1556–1598) and published by one of the most famous printers of the time, Christopher Plantin (c. 1520–1589), with the assistance of many scholars, including kabbalists.

Indeed, the emergence of printed polyglot Bibles in the sixteenth century is widely viewed as one of the most salient accomplishments of European humanism. These publishing ventures are not mere scholarly triumphs; concomitantly, they stand paramount as marks of cultural encounters and interchanges. Agostino Giustiniani’s *Psalterium Hebraeum, Graecum, Arabicum, et Chaldaeum, cum tribus Latinis interpretationibus et glossis*, for instance, printed in Genoa in 1516, features the Psalms in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Syriac, accompanied by Latin translations. The so-called Bomberg Bible, which appeared off the press at Venice in

1516–1517, contains the Hebrew scriptures and the Onkelos Aramaic Targum surrounded by supplementary Rabbinical commentaries. The text was edited by a Christian convert from Judaism, Felix Pratensis (d. 1539), and, in addition to the Jewish scholars, it was addressed to the nascent group of Christian Hebraists. In a similar vein, the celebrated Complutensian Polyglot, printed between 1514 and 1517, but published only in 1522, constitutes the fruit of cross-pollination between Christian and Jewish learning.

But the roots of the polyglot Bibles extend far beyond the chronological and geographical confines of the European Renaissance. A small number of trilingual psalter manuscripts, which were copied hundreds of years before the arrival of the printing press in the fifteenth century, have survived from the Latin West. As the Psalms have a long history in daily prayers, both in Judaism and Christianity, the evident proclivity for this biblical book – in both printed and manuscript form – is hardly surprising. One of the earliest examples is the Harley Trilingual Psalter, a manuscript executed in Norman Sicily during the reign of Roger II (r. 1130–1154), containing the Psalms in Greek, Latin and Arabic.¹ As Muslims, Byzantines and Normans claimed authority over the south Italian island between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, the Harley Trilingual is a gateway to Sicily's cultural and political history, recording the major linguistic shifts on the island throughout this period. Another twelfth-century manuscript, the Leiden Trilingual Psalter, attests to a different selection of languages and versions: Hebrew, Greek, the *Vulgata* and the Latin Gallican translation. It has been suggested that this codex was produced in south-western France, probably in Aquitaine. Scholarly engagements with the Hebrew language were quite solid in England during the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, and it is permissible to believe that the influence of English Hebraists reverberated further south, reaching continental Europe after the marriage of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152.² This would offer a plausible justification for the somewhat unexpected occurrence of Hebrew in the Leiden Trilingual Psalter. Last but not least, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. lat. 9 provides a glowing example of not only *scriptura illuminata* but also the inquisitive concern for the multilingual versions of the Bible in Renaissance Italy. This handsome parchment manuscript – copied for the voracious Florentine book collector Federico da Montefeltro (1422–1482) in 1473, duke of Urbino – displays the Psalms in Latin, Greek and Hebrew in parallel columns.

The fertile soil of the eastern Mediterranean, a melting pot of different peoples and cultures for millennia, also engendered polyglot Bibles many centuries

1 O'Hogan 2022.

2 Olszowy-Schlanger and Stirnemann 2008.

before the European Renaissance. Just like their Western counterparts, these Bibles are not merely monuments of scholarship and ingenuity, but also testimonies to how people of quite distinct cultural backgrounds intersected, managed a shared space and found common ground by negotiating their differences.

The present essay is concerned with a group of pentaglot manuscripts that came from the multi-ethnic monastic colonies in the desert of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, Egypt.³ Probably hailing from the thirteenth century, they are large paper codices containing biblical texts in separate columns in the five main languages of the non-Chalcedonian churches: Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian. Notwithstanding their weighty significance for the study of Christian mixed-ethnic communities in Egypt during the Muslim period, these manuscripts have received scant consideration until now. Adopting a prismatic approach, this article avers that the pentaglot manuscripts from Wādī al-Naṭrūn can be constructively surveyed from a multidisciplinary and transcultural perspective that encompasses philology, history and cultural studies. Further light on the origins of these manuscripts will be shed by the investigation of migration and diaspora communities in Egypt. I shall begin with a survey of all presently known pentaglot manuscripts from Egypt and their subsequent transfer to Europe in the modern era. After this, I will propose a date for their production and address the question of the purpose for which they were assembled. What is the nature of these manuscripts and how do we understand their relationship to the environment in which they had sprung? Were they executed as scholarly tools for the study of different versions of the Bible? Or were they rather intended for liturgical use in the multi-ethnic Christian communities living in Muslim Egypt? Whatever the case, these pentaglot biblical manuscripts provide unvarnished evidence that the Ethiopian, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian monks who lived in Egypt under Islamic rule were exposed to cultural hybridity, worked and lived communally, and produced culturally mixed artefacts.

3 During the Arabic period, this was the name of the monastic hinterland situated west of the Nile Delta, known in ancient times as Sketis in Greek and Shihet in Coptic. This area features prominently in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* of the fourth and fifth centuries CE. One of the earliest reports on the pentaglot manuscripts from Egypt can be found in Nau 1914.

2 The content of the Barberini Pentaglot Psalter (Barb. or. 2)

Codex Barberinianus Orientalis 2 can surely be counted among the hallmarks of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana's vast collection of Eastern manuscripts. What makes this codex remarkable is the fact that it comprises the Book of Psalms (fols 3^r–197^v) and the biblical Odes (fols 197^v–224^v) in no less than five languages, each using a specific alphabet: Ethiopic (Gə'əz), Syriac (in the *serto* script), Bohairic Coptic, Arabic and Armenian (in the *bolorgir* script).⁴ These are the languages of the Miaphysite churches, which reject the decisions taken at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Unlike the Chalcedonian Christians, who define Christ as having two natures united in one person and hypostasis, the Miaphysites propose instead a single nature, fully divine and fully human at the same time.

This imposing paper codex consists of 236 leaves measuring approximately 35 cm in height and 26 cm in width. The manuscript is mainly formed of quinions, i.e. bundles of five pairs of leaves.⁵ The gatherings are usually numbered with Coptic, Syriac and Armenian numerals at the bottom of the first and last page. The manuscript is foliated – not paginated – in Coptic epact (i.e. cursive) on the upper outer corner of the verso pages.

The five versions of the Psalms are organised in parallel columns in the following order from left to right: Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian. The order of the languages is reversed on the verso pages, running from Armenian to Ethiopic. Since each language uses a distinct script, this configuration lends order and a sense of visual consonance to the pages when the manuscript is opened in front of the viewer. Thus, the Armenian text always occupies the farthestmost columns and the Ethiopic the two innermost ones on two facing pages. Yet, the observers' attention is seemingly intended to concentrate on the Coptic columns, which invariably occur in the central position on the pages. The appealing physical outlook of the manuscript dovetails with a more resonant meaning that seems to lie behind the arrangement of the five columns. Thus, Coptic entertains the place of honour, positioned in the middle and flanked by Syriac and Arabic, which come right after it in distinction, and, finally, Ethiopic and Armenian at the edges,

⁴ Description of the Armenian text in Tisserant 1927, 343; description of the Ethiopic text in Grébaut and Tisserant 1935, 859–861; description of the Coptic text in van Lantschoot 1947, 1–4; description of the Syriac text in van Lantschoot 1965, 165. A full set of digital photos of the manuscript is available at <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Barb.or.2> (accessed on 13 August 2024).

⁵ For the codicological structure of the manuscript, see Proverbio 2012.

languages that were surely of portentous significance to the manuscript's target audience, and yet, subordinate to Arabic and Syriac. It is meaningful to remember that the role of Coptic is virtually symbolic. When the manuscript was assembled, this language had vanished irrevocably from current speech, evolving into a relic of a bygone era, which persisted in fossilised form only for liturgical use.

The Vatican manuscript includes some additional texts besides the Psalms and Odes, predominantly in Syriac and Arabic, to which we will now shift our attention. A Syriac scribe reproduced tables for the Psalms on the verso of folio 1, which serves as a flyleaf, extracted from the commentary on this biblical book by Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428). The presence of a work by the leading light of the East Syriac Church in a Miaphysite environment is nothing short of extraordinary and definitely deserves more comprehensive investigation.⁶

Another Syriac text in *serto* script had been written as glosses in the outer, and not infrequently also in the upper, margins of the pages on fols 1^r–21^r. Although it is copied in a conspicuously distinct hand from the one that inscribed the Syriac columns with the Psalms, the two scripts are palaeographically akin; it is, therefore, quite plausible to assume that they hail from the same period. As the folio numbers are accommodated in the vacant spaces left by the Syriac marginal glosses in the upper margins, it is permissible to speculate that either the glosses are coeval with the execution of the manuscript, or the folio numbers were added later. The former case seems more feasible, as a codex devoid of pagination would be quite unusual.

The Syriac marginal text derives from the commentary on the Psalms written by the twelfth-century metropolitan of Amida, Dionysius Bar Šalibi (d. 1171).⁷ This massive commentary incorporates an alternative series of spiritual and literal interpretations of each psalm. The Barberini pentaglot, however, indiscriminately mixes separate portions of the two sets of interpretations. The commentary commences from the beginning, but abruptly breaks off *in medias res* with the spiritual commentary on Psalm 17, (18):23, ܡܠܟܐ ܕܐܝܬܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ (‘we are pleasing to him. “And I shall be blameless”).⁸ Notably, a portion of the text is missing between these two sentences: the Barberinianus manuscript omits from Bar Šalibi’s com-

⁶ I owe this information to David Taylor (University of Oxford), who identified Theodore of Mopsuestia’s text and is currently working on its publication.

⁷ The identification of the text has also been privately suggested to me by the same colleague, David Taylor, to whom I am most grateful.

⁸ Syriac text from Simpkin 1974, vol. 2, 380.

troduction to the Psalms described in the foregoing analysis, while the verso accommodates a scribal colophon in Arabic. The colophon reports that since the manuscript had suffered severe deterioration, 'our father, Anba Yū'annis, presently bishop and abbot of the monastery of St Macarius the Great in Wādī al-Aṭrūn [sic]',¹⁴ had arranged for it to be repaired and refurbished. The colophon was written on the day when the restoration was completed, i.e. the 1st of Kiyahk, the year 1343 of the Martyrs, 1036 Era of the Hegira, which corresponds to 7 December 1626 CE, according to the Julian calendar. It is tempting to identify the Anba Yū'annis cited in the colophon with the then Coptic patriarch John XV, who occupied the throne of St Mark between 1619 and 1629 CE.¹⁵

The content of the Barberini Psalter is, thus, eclectic, in both its linguistic and confessional aspects. Not only is the manuscript written in five languages and alphabets, but, although it originates from Miaphysite monastic communities, it also incorporates a text by Theodore of Mopsuestia, a distinguished author of the Antiochian School, who later became a luminary of the East Syrian Church, and an Arabic translation from Greek prepared in the Chalcedonian milieu of Palestine.

3 Spies, pirates and knights: The acquisition of the Barberini Pentaglot Psalter

Barberinianus Orientalis 2 is not only a paragon of erudition owing to its multilingual character and ponderous contents, but it also stands out on account of its gripping acquisition story, 'a romantic history' whose cinematic details will be recapitulated here.¹⁶ The manuscript was acquired in the year 1635 at the monastery of St Macarius, Wādī al-Naṭrūn, by a French Capuchin missionary, Fr Agathange de Vendôme (1598–1638). He purchased it on behalf of Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), a French polymath from Aix-en-Provence, who was on the frontline of Coptic studies in Europe and had an insatiable thirst for manuscripts written in languages mastered only by a handful of enthusiasts.

¹⁴ Barb. or. 2, fol. 234^r: ابينا انبا يونس المطران والرئيس الان بدير القديس العظيم ابو مقار بوادي الاطرون.

¹⁵ This suggestion has been made by Soldati 2022, 73. However, the year of John XV's death is wrongly indicated there as 1634 instead of 1629.

¹⁶ The formula 'romantic history' belongs to Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 1, xxxviii. A thumbnail sketch of the acquisition story was traced by François Nau, based on the notes compiled by Eugène Tisserant, in Nau 1913, 217–222 [53]–[58]. A detailed account, based on more voluminous sources, is available in Miller 2015, 301–311; see also Volkoff 1970, 36–42 and Soldati 2022.

Before proceeding further with the particulars of the story, it is worthwhile considering the acquisition of the pentaglot psalter by Fr Agathange in a global historical setting, for the study of this manuscript cannot be relegated to its geographical origin. Fr Agathange was serving as head of the Franciscan mission in Cairo in 1635, the year the codex was purchased. This mission had been founded only a few years earlier, in 1630, by French Capuchin friars. The French Capuchins were able to settle in Egypt because of an alliance forged by France with the Ottoman Empire a century before. The diplomatic ties between France and the Sublime Porte were launched in 1525, when the French regent, Louise of Savoy (1476–1531), signed a treaty with Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566) against the Spanish Habsburg monarchy. Through this unholy alliance, Louise hoped to gain the sultan's support in rescuing her son, the French monarch Francis I (r. 1515–1547), who was captured and flung into jail by Charles V (1500–1558), king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor.

As an immediate political gain of this pact, France became the first European power to have a permanent ambassador in Constantinople in 1534. But the presence of a foreign diplomatic mission in the Ottoman Empire posed problems, as *shari'a* law was silent on the status of foreign residents in Islamic lands. Therefore, the Sublime Porte and France subsequently hammered out a series of peace agreements, called 'capitulations' because they were tabulated in separate *capitula* (Latin for 'chapters'), which regulated the activities of French citizens living under Ottoman jurisdiction. Inter alia, these capitulations stipulated that French merchants could operate in the Ottoman Empire without paying customs duties. Merchants from France were also authorised to worship freely in Ottoman territory, which signified that Catholic priests could be deployed to serve their spiritual needs.¹⁷

The fact that the French friars could move unhindered across the borders of the Ottoman Empire stimulated, shortly thereafter, the interest of the Roman pontiffs, who perceived this as a prospect of expanding the Catholic jurisdiction zone in the East. A first step towards this objective was the foundation of the Greek College in Rome in 1576 by Pope Gregory XIII (*sedes* 1572–1585), with the aim of training Catholic missionaries who would bring the Levantine Christians under papal authority. But the crucial enterprise was the organisation of the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide by Pope Gregory XV (*sedes* 1621–1623) in 1622, which was tasked with spearheading the eastward expansion of the Catholic Church.¹⁸

17 On the capitulations and their significance for the early Catholic missions in the Ottoman Empire, see Frazee 1983, 67–69.

18 On the foundation of the Greek College and the Propaganda Fide, see Frazee 1983, 88–102.

The choreography of the Catholic missions in the Levant and Egypt was essentially the work of François Leclerc du Tremblay (1577–1638), a French Capuchin known as Père Joseph. A realist mystic deeply immersed in political manoeuvring, he was called the 'Grey Eminence' of Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) by his adversaries. In 1616, Père Joseph besought Pope Paul V (*sedes* 1605–1621) and Charles de Gonzague, duke of Nevers (1580–1637), to organise a military confederation of Catholic and Protestant nobles, called the Militia Christiana, to carry out a crusade against the Turks. However, the Militia disbanded before the embers were cold in 1618 with the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, which engulfed Europe in a long and bloody conflict. Père Joseph's further efforts to advocate a crusade failed again when the pope's army and the French became entangled in the War of Valtellina (1620–1626).¹⁹ Even if Père Joseph's dreams of a crusade hit one snag after another, his anti-Turkish machinations were in no way dampened. In the succeeding years, he was the prime mover in the formation of French Capuchin missions, whose prerogative was to convert the vast swathes of Christians in the Levant and Egypt to Catholicism, hoping in this way to weaken the Ottoman Empire from within.

As Père Joseph's missionaries crawled over the East, Capuchin outposts were established in Cairo and Akhmim in 1630.²⁰ The Capuchin friars sternly observed the Franciscan tradition of simplicity and poverty. But their destitute appearance could be misleading because, as Victor Tapié aptly observed, the Capuchins 'were often employed, far away from their monasteries, on difficult and ambitious missions [...] as if their humble habit, which made their passage unnoticed, concealed their secrets more easily'.²¹ While the pretext for the presence of the French Capuchins in Egypt was the conversion of the heretical Copts, by virtue of their citizenship, they stalwartly served the political interests of the French monarchy, which evolved into an increasingly solid global player after Richelieu's ascent to power. In brief, the transfer of missionaries to Egypt by Père Joseph was not intended solely for the sake of converting the indigenous Christian population, but also to expand French colonial influence. As agents of the king of France, the Capuchins' sphere of action was never confined to Egypt; in effect, their ambition was to infiltrate further south to Ethiopia and Sudan,²² from where they hoped to open a commercial route for the French Crown to West and west-central Africa, with its

¹⁹ Malcolm 2019, 256–257.

²⁰ On the Capuchin mission in Egypt, see Frazee 1983, 85–87; Meinardus 1987.

²¹ My translation from Tapié 1967, 85.

²² Aufrère 1990, 108–109.

rich gold resources and endless reservoir of slaves. France saw Ethiopia as a gateway to Sahel and Senegambia, because the other routes were blocked. The Barbary Coast of North Africa was dominated by Muslim fiefdoms semi-detached from the Ottoman Empire, while the Portuguese had controlled the Atlantic routes of West Africa since the late fifteenth century.

When Fr Agathange obtained the pentaglot psalter in 1635, Portuguese influence was waning, but the West African commercial sea routes were gradually enfolded by Dutch, English and Spanish merchants, complicating a French intrusion. The fort of Elmina in Ghana, a stronghold of Portuguese domination in the area, was captured firstly by the Dutch in 1637 and then by the English in the 1640s, who dispatched ships along the Gold Coast to access the slave trade routes. During this period, the French Capuchins based in Egypt attempted to penetrate sub-Saharan Africa by descending along the east coast of the continent. However, even here they were seriously challenged by the Portuguese Catholics and Dutch Protestants,²³ although a small group of Breton Capuchin recruits led by Fr Colombin de Nantes successfully insinuated themselves into Guinea in 1637. Nonetheless, the mission succumbed after less than a decade without any notable accomplishments, as most of the friars died of malaria and the survivors were chased out by the natives.²⁴ It was not until 1640 that the Portuguese lost their influence in Africa. Missionaries were then able to venture further south, primarily to Kongo, where, although the royal family had already embraced Christianity in 1491, conversion was still only skin deep in the early seventeenth century. But when these events occurred, the French missionaries had to deal with shifting circumstances, for they were no longer the only friars engaging sub-Saharan Africa. In 1640, for example, the Propaganda Fide entrusted the missionary activity in Kongo to the Italian Capuchins. Four years later, the mission in Sierra Leone and the Guinea Coast was assigned to the Spanish Capuchins; in 1647 the Capuchins from Aragon anchored in Benin.²⁵

It was in this context of the struggle for African trade routes between the European powers that Fr Agathange was designated superior of the Cairo Franciscan mission in 1633. He succeeded Fr Gilles de Loches, an eminent scholar who knew all the Semitic languages pertinent to the study of the Bible, from Hebrew and Syriac to Ethiopic and Arabic.²⁶ The Capuchins had an *haut en bas* approach to

²³ See Hastings 1994, 95.

²⁴ Miller 2006, 682–689; Planté 2012–2013, 38; Valsecchi 2016, 81.

²⁵ Green 2019, 170–171, 175–177.

²⁶ See Aufrère 1990, 112–113.

missionary work, judging that the conversion of Coptic plutocracy, clergy and monks to Catholicism would expedite the baptism of more ample swathes of the indigenous Christian population. Therefore, they frequently visited the Coptic monasteries in order to make converts among the monks. Under these circumstances, Gilles de Loches and the other Capuchin friars had the opportunity to observe that monasteries such as that of St Antony at the Red Sea or the monastic complexes of Wādī al-Naṭrūn possessed inestimable libraries.²⁷

On the opposite side of the Mediterranean, in Aix-en-Provence, one of the most illustrious citizens of the Republic of Letters, a savant and arduous antiquary of all things Eastern was tirelessly chasing up manuscripts in bizarre languages. His name was Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc. For scholars such as he, the presence of the French Capuchins in the Ottoman Empire was a unique chance to obtain intensely desirable antiquities and manuscripts. Peiresc was an armchair scholar who never journeyed to the Middle East himself. But he made up for it by cultivating an outstanding Mediterranean network of merchants, diplomats and missionaries through which he secured manuscripts, antiquities and rare artefacts for his *cabinet de curiosités* in Aix.

Among Peiresc's countless agents and book hunters were also the Capuchin monks residing in Egypt. The surviving correspondence between Peiresc and Fr de Loches shows that the Provençal savant had endeavoured to approach the Capuchin friar in order to obtain manuscripts in 1630, the same year that the Cairo mission was inaugurated. In a letter to Peiresc, Fr de Loches voluntarily offered his services, informing him that 'there are in this country Egyptian, Ethiopic, and Armenian books, without counting the Arabic and the Turkish. [...] if you desire any of them, order me, and I will do my best to satisfy you'.²⁸

²⁷ Meinardus 1987, 199.

²⁸ 'Il se trouve en ce país des livres Ægyptiens, Æthiopiens, Arméniens, sans compter les Arabes, Turcz. [...] Si toutefois vous desirés des uns et des aultres, commandés moy, et je m'efforceray de vous satisfaire', in de Valence 1892, 1. The letter is dated 3 September 1631, but Fr de Loches begins by apologising that although Peiresc wrote to him a year earlier, he could not answer because he did not receive the missive in good time. All translations from French on the following pages are mine.

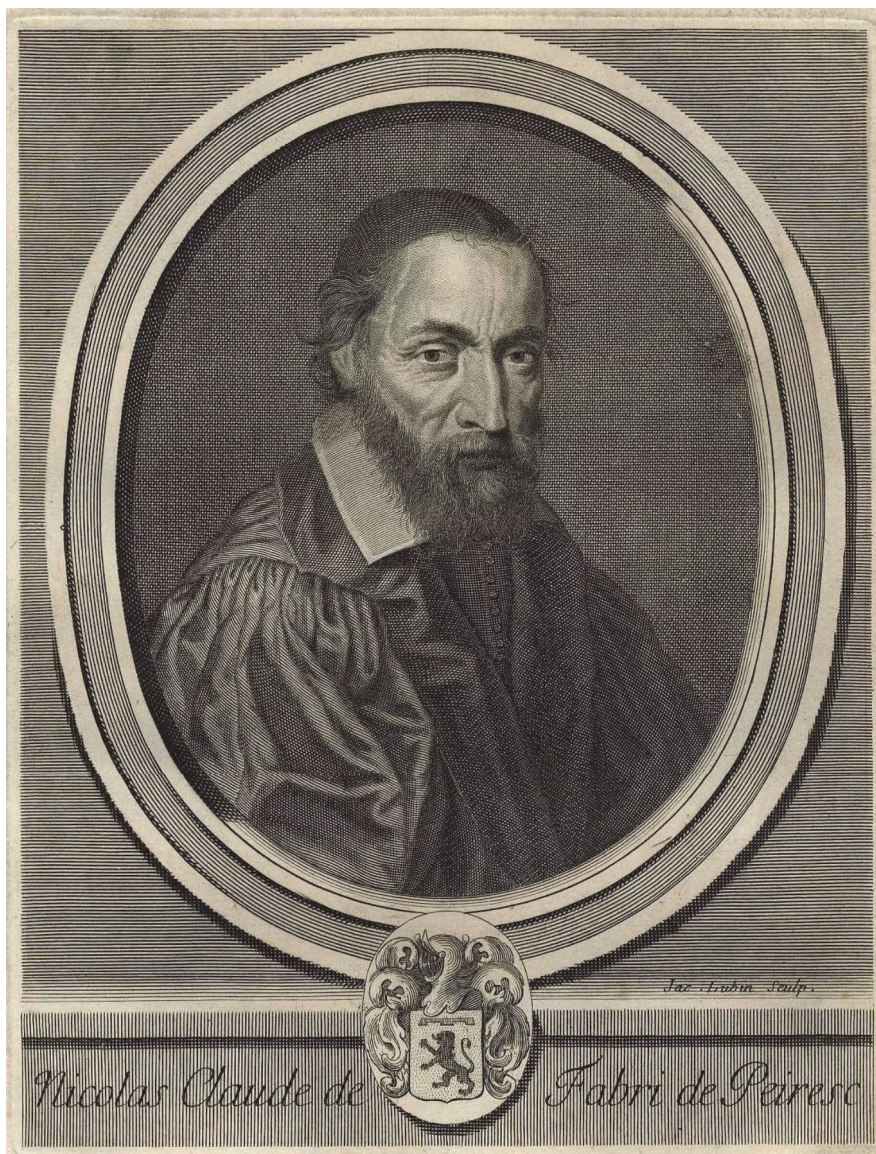


Fig. 1: Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc; late-seventeenth-century engraving by Jacques Lubin; Alin Suci's personal collection

After Gilles de Loches was recalled and had left Cairo in 1633, two Capuchins of similar calibre, Frs Agathange de Vendôme and Cassien de Nantes, became the

most prominent liaisons between Peiresc and Egypt. Among other things, the two Capuchins complied with Peiresc's requests to compute the latitude of Cairo,²⁹ monitor a lunar eclipse through a telescope from the top of the Great Pyramid of Giza,³⁰ convert the old weights and measures used in Egypt,³¹ and, above all, obtain Coptic and Arabic manuscripts for his private collection.³²

Fr Agathange spoke for the first time of the polyglot psalter that he was about to fetch from the monastery of St Macarius in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn in a letter to Peiresc of 18 March 1634. However, he erred in holding that it was written in six languages instead of five: Coptic, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, Ethiopic and Syriac.³³ The superior of the monastery, Agathange explained further, was not willing to sell the manuscript, but was inclined to swap it for a silver Eucharistic paten and chalice that the monastic community desperately needed. As I already mentioned, the psalter had been restored and refurbished less than eight years earlier, in December 1626. From this, we can surmise that the Coptic monks still attached value to it and the transaction must have seemed fair to both parties. This indicates that the French were not in a position of strength, but that Agathange and the Coptic archimandrite of the monastery of St Macarius perceived each other as equals. It was only the weakening of Ottoman political control over the provinces in the early eighteenth century and the advent of the colonial age that conferred freer play on European travellers and missionaries to mercilessly plunder Egypt in order to satisfy their gluttony for antiquities.³⁴

In another letter addressed to Peiresc, dated 25 July 1635, Fr Agathange notified him that, 'I am sending you, through Captain Baille, a Coptic, Armenian, Abyssinian, Arabic and Chaldean psalter that we have obtained from one of the monasteries of St Macarius'.³⁵ In his turn, Peiresc apprised Fr Agathange that he had ordered the silver chalice and the paten according to the instructions of the Coptic

²⁹ See the letters in de Valence 1892, 188, 211–212, 217–219.

³⁰ See the letters in de Valence 1892, 6, 137–139, 141, 154, 168, 170, 188–189, 213–215, 216–217, 239–240, 243, 246–247.

³¹ See the letters in de Valence 1892, 134–135, 157–158.

³² See the letters in de Valence 1892, 22, 24–25, 52–53, 57–58, 62–63, 60–70, 71–72, 104–106, 107–108, 111–112, 123, 133, 154–156, 160–165, 210, 224–225, 237–239, 241–242, 244–246, 254, 269–270, 271–273.

³³ 'Je suis après à avoir un livre des Pseaumes de David en six langues: en cophte, arabe, grec, arménien, abyssin et syriaque', in de Valence 1892, 24.

³⁴ Exemplarily, Raphael Tuki, a Copt who converted to Catholicism, criticised in the 1730s the removal of manuscripts from Egypt by missionaries, see Hamilton 2006, 97.

³⁵ 'Je vous envoie par le capitaine Baile un psautier cophte, armenien, abyssin, arabe et chaldaïque, que nous avons eu d'un des convents de S. Machaire', in de Valence 1892, 154.

monks. Furthermore, he was anxious to receive ‘this Psalter in six languages’ that the Capuchin friar dispatched with Captain Baille’s boat.³⁶

But sailing in the Mediterranean during the first half of the seventeenth century was a perilous journey because the sea was infested with many pirates, both Muslim and Christian. The curious adventures of the pentaglot psalter after it had left Egypt reveal some of the complex interplay between the various forces engaged in seventeenth-century global history, for the problem of endemic piracy, to which the manuscript was suddenly exposed, did not lie in the Mediterranean Sea, but rather onshore. The European powers funnelled most of their trade through the colonial ports of the New World in the aftermath of the Battle of Lepanto (1571), while the Ottomans were preoccupied with securing their borders against the Habsburgs in the Balkans and the Safavids in the East. These commercial and political circumstances created a power vacuum in the Mediterranean, which ushered in the Golden Age of piracy during the seventeenth century.

It was in this era of rampant piracy that Captain Baille’s ship, carrying Peiresc’s psalter, set sail from the Egyptian littoral in the summer of 1635. However, the corsairs of the Barbary Coast ambushed the ship en route. Fearing for their lives, the captain and the sailors fled, abandoning the entire cargo, including the prized pentaglot manuscript. Peiresc lamented the loss of the polyglot psalter in a letter sent to Fr Agathange a couple of months after the incident, dated 29 September 1635, pointing the finger at Captain Baille for his pusillanimity,

you loaded the volume of Psalms in so many languages on the ship of Patron Baille, which we now know was lost because of the great cowardice of the owner, who, seeing the corsairs approaching, abandoned his ship and fled on the skiff, not even being aware who had taken his cargo. One can imagine that he did not think to put the coffer in the skiff in order to save his papers, in which case my poor book might have escaped.³⁷

Peiresc was greatly vexed because the loss of the multilingual psalter confirmed his darkest fears. Less than two months earlier, he had warned Fr Agathange not to dispatch the psalter on a French ship, but rather to find an English one, because in the event of a pirate attack, ‘our Provençaux let themselves be taken like sitting

³⁶ See Peiresc’s letter to Fr Agathange, dated 10 August 1635, in de Valence 1892, 160–165.

³⁷ ‘[V]ous aviez chargé le volume des pseaulmes en tant de langues sur la barque de patron Baille, que nous sçavions desja estre perdue par la grande lascheté du patron, qui, voyant approcher les corsaires, abbandona sa barque et se sauva dans l’esquif, sans avoir seulement sceu qui c’est qui avoit prins ses moyens. Croyant bien qu’il n’aura pas songé de mettre la caisse dans l’esquif pour sauver ses papiers, auquel cas mon pauvre livre auroit peu se sauver’, in de Valence 1892, 184–185.

ducks; but catching the others would not be an easy matter, as they say'.³⁸ In a letter to Jean-Baptiste Magy, a French merchant from Cairo, Peiresc mournfully observed: 'we already knew that this Captain Baille has so little courage, and instead of getting ready to fight when he met the corsairs, he abandoned his ship near Malta'.³⁹

But Peiresc had no time to spare and was determined to identify the culprits who went off with his polyglot psalter. He eventually learned that the pirates of Tripoli had stolen the manuscript. Moreover, a rumour that reached his ears appalled him: one of the pirates, who had been an apothecary in Algiers, retained all the books that were on Captain Baille's ship in order to wrap spices with their leaves!⁴⁰ Peiresc mobilised hard and, in the ensuing month, through an efficient exchange of letters with various key people, was able to trace the erratic trajectory of the psalter after it was snatched by the pirates. He determined that the manuscript had passed through several hands, ending up in the possession of Mehmed Bey (r. 1632–1649), the pasha of Tripoli and implicitly the pirates' patron. Mehmed was a Greek convert to Islam from Chios, known for his tolerance toward Christians, and, therefore, Peiresc hoped to persuade him to return his much-treasured psalter. However, his repeated plans to regain the manuscript were encumbered by insuperable obstacles. It was not until the beginning of 1637 that Peiresc succeeded in ransoming the psalter from the pasha, with the help of the Bayon brothers, two merchants living in Marseilles and Tripoli. In a letter that he sent to Fr Gilles de Loches in January 1637, Peiresc triumphantly wrote,

I am expecting any moment the volume of the hexaplaric Psalter in columns [...] I think I told you about the misfortune that caused it to fall into the hands of the corsairs. I had followed its trail with so much care that it has finally been found in Tripoli of Barbary, given over for ransom and recovered by an honest man who took it upon himself to bring it to me through his brother. It will not be too long before I get it.⁴¹

38 '[N]os provençaulx se laissent prendre comme des canes sans deffence; mais ces autres là ne se prennent pas sans gantelet, comme l'on dict', in de Valence 1892, 164.

39 Miller 2015, 302–303 and 574, n. 32 (transcription of the French text).

40 Letter of Peiresc to Antoine Bayon, dated 30 September 1635, 'un de ces corsairs, qui avoit été apothicaire à Alger, avoir retenu tous les livres et papiers qui pouvoient servir à plier des épices', in Tamizey de Larroque 1898, 515.

41 'J'attends d'heure à autre le volume du Psaultier hexaple par colonnes [...] Je pense que je vous avois mandé le malheur qui l'avoit faict tomber ez mains des corsaires. Je l'ay faict suyvre à la piste avec tant de soing, qu'enfin il a esté retrouvé à Tripoly de Barbarie, et remis à rançon, et recouvré par un honneste homme qui s'est chargé de me le faire tenir par son frere. Il me tardera bien de l'avoir', in de Valence 1892, 308.

In April 1637, the parcel conveyed by Monsieur Antoine Bayon from Tripoli finally arrived in Aix. But Peiresc had a bad feeling when he realised that, unlike the large volume described by Fr Agathange in his letters, the book nestled inside the package seemed rather small and too light to hold. He hurriedly unwrapped it, and instead of his long-awaited pentaglot psalter, he held in his hands an ordinary Arabic-Latin dictionary, printed in Leiden at the beginning of the seventeenth century! Someone back in Tripoli – Bayon, the pasha or one of his acolytes – must be either a total *ignoramus*, incapable of distinguishing a printed book from a manuscript in multiple languages, or a scammer, he thought. For Peiresc, it was an unmitigated catastrophe, the last in a chain of unfortunate events: he died two months later, on 24 June 1637, without ever seeing the polyglot psalter that Fr Agathange de Vendôme bought on his behalf from the monastery of St Macarius.

Fr Agathange did not fare too well either, for he outlived Peiresc by slightly more than a year. It all began when a German Lutheran preacher sternly threatened the Capuchin monopoly over the Egyptian mission's field. Peter Heyling, born in Lübeck and educated in Paris, arrived in Egypt in 1633 with the bold ambition of evangelising the Copts all by himself.⁴² In order to achieve proficiency in Arabic, a crucial step in his missionary endeavour, the Lutheran pastor asked for lodging from the monks at St Macarius. But during his stay at the Coptic monastery, he became embroiled in a bitter doctrinal tussle with the Capuchin friars, who, under the leadership of Fr Agathange, were already trying to convert the monks to Catholicism. The prompt outcome of the dissension was Heyling's expulsion from Wādī al-Naṭrūn.

Shortly after the incident, in 1634, the head of the Ethiopian Church passed away. Traditionally, the Ethiopian Abuna was an Egyptian metropolitan bishop appointed by the Coptic patriarch. The Egyptian pope, Matthew III (*sedit* 1631–1646), consecrated the superior of the monastery of St Antony at the Red Sea as the new metropolitan of the Abyssinian Church under the name of Marqos. Heyling, who was a friend of Marqos, accompanied the freshly-consecrated Abuna on his journey to Ethiopia, animated by the hope to harvest souls by converting this Christian country to the Protestant faith, a sure short cut to his own salvation.

Peiresc and the Capuchins had also long fermented a plan for a mission to Ethiopia, which was seen as a stepping stone towards a broader French colonial venture into Africa. After several unfruitful attempts, Frs Agathange and Cassien de Nantes were finally able to punch into Ethiopia in 1638, disguised as Coptic monks. But their arrival coincided with a drastic shift in Ethiopian religious policy, which led to the harsh persecution of the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries. The

42 On Peter Heyling, see Meinardus 1969; Grafton 2009, 69–74.

new religious leader, Abuna Marqos, and Emperor Fasilides (r. 1632–1667) were probably incited to persecute the Catholics by Heyling, who achieved proximity to the Ethiopian monarch and was even rewarded with one of his daughters in marriage. When the two Capuchins – who had openly confronted Heyling a few years before in Egypt – arrived in Ethiopia, their fate was sealed. Frs Agathange and Cassien were convicted to death by Emperor Fasilides and were killed in Gondar in August 1638, hanged by the girdles of their Franciscan habit.⁴³

But back in Europe, Peiresc was not the only scholar awaiting the arrival of the pentaglot manuscript. Because Fr Agathange had erroneously described the psalter in his early correspondence with Peiresc as being in six columns instead of five, rumours spread among European biblical scholars that the manuscript looted by the Barbary pirates was a copy of the Hexapla.⁴⁴ This was a philological tool compiled by the early Christian author Origen (c. 185–c. 253) during the third century, which comprised six versions of the Hebrew scriptures arranged in parallel columns.⁴⁵ Origen's work was long lost and, since the sixteenth century, European humanists attempted to reconstruct it from bits and pieces. The French classical philologist Claude Saumaise (1588–1653) wrote enthusiastically in a letter sent to Peiresc from Leiden on 2 March 1637:

I am very glad that you have taken the psalter in six languages from the hands of the corsairs, and I very much look forward to seeing it, for I imagine that it is a Hexapla of Origen. If this is the case, it would be a priceless thing.⁴⁶

Thus, the prospect of recovering Peiresc's manuscript surely struck chords among the coterie of biblical scholars in the Republic of Letters.

At this point in the story, the Knights of Malta enter the stage. Initially called the Knights Hospitallers, they were protectors of a hospice for Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Crusades. However, after the defeat of the Outremer states by Saladin (c. 1137–1193), the purpose for which the order was created faltered, and the knights committed themselves fully to corsairing activities. They

⁴³ Agathange de Vendôme and Cassien de Nantes are considered martyrs of the Catholic Church and were beatified in 1905. Their lives are narrated in a hagiographical manner by de Vannes 1905.

⁴⁴ See Mandelbrote 2010, 105–109.

⁴⁵ These were the Hebrew text, its transliteration in Greek letters, the Greek version of Aquila, the Greek version of Symmachus, the Septuagint version and the Greek version of Theodotion.

⁴⁶ 'Je suis bien aise que vous ayés retiré de la main des corsaires le psautier en six langues, et me tarde infiniment que je le puisse voir, car je me suis imaginé que c'est un Hexaple d'Origène. Si cela estoit, ce seroit une chose inestimable', in Tamizey de Larroque 1882, 86; see also Mandelbrote 2010, 107.

became the Christian counterparts of the Barbary pirates, marauding Muslim ships and selling the captives as slaves. The knights moved their headquarters onto the island of Rhodes in 1310, but in 1522, they were expelled by Suleiman the Magnificent. Charles V bestowed Malta upon them in 1530, which remained their outpost until the end of the eighteenth century; the knights converted the rocky and unhospitable island into one of the splendours of Europe.

In 1637, shortly after Peiresc's death, the Knights of Malta finally ransomed the manuscript from the pasha of Tripoli, although the circumstances of the transaction remain largely obscure. In one of those intriguing quirks of history, that same year, two eminent scholars and protégées of Peiresc, Lucas Holstenius (1596–1661) and Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), were escorting Frederick, landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt (1616–1682), on a trip to Sicily and Malta.⁴⁷ Frederick belonged to a prominent German Protestant family, but the young landgrave converted to Catholicism shortly before the voyage in Italy and eventually became a cardinal. During their stopover at Valletta, the psalter was shown to Holstenius, who persuaded the Grand Master of the Maltese Knights, Jean-Paul Lascaris de Castellar (1560–1657), to present it as a gift to the protector of the order, Cardinal Francesco Barberini (1597–1679).⁴⁸ The cardinal, a nephew of Pope Urban VIII (*sedit* 1623–1644), was a well-educated man who became a cultural patron and exemplary exponent of the Counter-Reformation.

Thus ended the strange adventures of Peiresc's psalter. Pope Leo XIII (*sedit* 1878–1903) incorporated Cardinal Barberini's manuscript collection into the Vatican Library in 1902, where the pentaglot psalter still resides today. The codex was refurbished after the Grand Master of the Maltese Knights ceded it to Cardinal Barberini. It is now bound in vermillion leather, having the Barberini family coat of arms and the flag with the black cross of the Knights of Malta on the front cover. On each corner of the cover, a bee in gold can be observed, the symbol of the Barberini house, which still adorns many monuments commissioned by the members of this family in the Eternal City. This is how the prosperous Barberinis saw themselves: tireless bees gathering the sweet nectar of learning from all corners of the world.

To conclude the foregoing survey: the acquisition of the codex must be situated within the larger global and complex context of the seventeenth century. We

⁴⁷ Nau 1913, 221 [57], thinks that the landgrave of Hesse was Philip, but this is certainly a mistake. The same error occurs in Miller 2015, 309.

⁴⁸ Nau 1913, 221 [57].

have seen that the stage for its acquisition was set by macro-forces competing for dominance in Africa and the colonies of the New World. In particular, the Ottoman capitulations stimulated contacts between the French and the Christians living under Islamic rule, thus, inaugurating new avenues for missionaries and travellers to acquire manuscripts. The 'barbarian' state formations and piracy also played a significant role in the story of the Barberini manuscript. The fact that the Knights of Malta ransomed the psalter from the Barbary corsairs bolsters recent scholarship arguing that early modern Muslim and Christian piracy should not be regarded as merely a religious conflict but also as a form of trade.⁴⁹ Lastly, to highlight the role of individuals in the story, the manuscript would not have become known to the West without the intrepid curiosity of an armchair scholar such as Peiresc or the bravery of the stoical monk and French agent Agathange de Vendôme.

4 The companion volume: The Ambrosiana Praxapostolos

A companion volume of manuscript Barb. or. 2, featuring the Pauline corpus, the Catholic Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles in five columns, is held in the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. Today, the manuscript is bound as two separate volumes kept under the inventory numbers B 20/A inf. and B 20/B inf. respectively.⁵⁰ The first volume, containing the Letters of Paul, is formed of 275 leaves, whereas the second, comprising the Catholic Epistles and the Acts, is composed of 186 leaves. However, the fact that the pagination and the quire signatures do not start anew with the second volume, but are numbered consecutively in relation to the first, suggests that they originally formed a single opulent book of over 460 leaves, that is double the thickness of the Barberini codex.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See e.g. Colás 2016.

⁵⁰ Description of the manuscript in Horner 1898–1905, vol. 3, xvii–xx. See also Chabot 1947; Löfgren and Traini 1975, 3–4; Uluhogian 2008. Digital photos of B 20/A inf. are available at <<https://digital.library.unicatt.it/veneranda/0b02da82801083c5>> (accessed on 13 August 2024); photos of B 20/B inf. at <<https://digitallibrary.unicatt.it/veneranda/0b02da82801083c6>> (accessed on 13 August 2024).

⁵¹ The last quire signature, 47, is written in Coptic and Syriac numerals on the recto of B 20/B inf., fol. 180.

Yet, the Ambrosiana manuscript is precisely the same size as the Vatican psalter, 35 cm in height and 26 cm in width. Furthermore, the Milan polyglot Praxapostolos retains the sequence of the languages found in the Barb. or. 2: Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian on the recto pages and the reverse order on the versos. However, the Armenian breaks off on the verso of folio 175, at the end of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, and does not resume again. Nevertheless, the presence of an empty column through to the end of the manuscript clearly indicates that the initial choice was to offer a complete Armenian text, but the plan was aborted for some reason. The unknown vagary that brought the Armenian copyist's work to an abrupt end is just another of the many riddles that the Egyptian pentaglot manuscripts throw in front of us.

The Ambrosiana polyglot Praxapostolos also comes from the monastic milieu of Wādī al-Naṭrūn. Thus, one of its Arabic colophons specifically mentions that the codex belonged to the monastery of the Holy Virgin, better known as the monastery of the Syrians.⁵² While this manuscript has a less intriguing story than the Barberini Psalter, it is also true that little knowledge of its acquisition can be gleaned from the sources available. Enrico Galbiati has convincingly argued that the manuscript was purchased in the early seventeenth century.⁵³ In 1609, Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631) inaugurated the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, which was meant to serve as a vehicle for learning both about Western Europe and the distant cultures of the East. On that occasion, Borromeo had written to the authorities of the Maronite College in Rome to find a scholar versed in Arabic and Syriac, who could travel to the Levant to acquire precious manuscripts for the newly founded library. The one recommended to him was Michele Maronita, a Lebanese Catholic who was at that time teaching Turkish slaves on the island of Malta.

Michele embarked on a one-way trip to the Levant in July 1611 that would ultimately lead to his death. He perished at Aleppo during 1613 from an unknown disease contracted in Syria. Before his death, Michele visited Corfu, Crete, Syria, Jerusalem and Constantinople, delivering a number of manuscripts to Milan that he had acquired on Cardinal Borromeo's behalf during his sojourn in the Middle East. Among these, there are three manuscripts of Egyptian provenance: the famous Codex Ambrosianus, containing the Peshitta version of the Hebrew scriptures (Milan, Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, B 21 inf.), the only copy of the

⁵² This colophon appears on fol. 160^r, at the end of Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

⁵³ Galbiati 1992.

Syro-Hexaplaric translation of the Septuagint (Milan, Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C 313 inf.) and the pentaglot Praxapostolos.

Although all three manuscripts appear to stem from the monastery of the Syrians in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, the circumstances under which they came into the possession of Michele Maronita remain largely obscure. Little evidence has been uncovered to date concerning his trip to Egypt; all we know is that, shortly prior to his death, the Lebanese traveller was in Rosetta, an Egyptian port situated a short distance east of Alexandria.⁵⁴ Perhaps, on this occasion, he travelled further south to the desert of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, where he purchased the two Syriac manuscripts and the pentaglot Praxapostolos. If this was the case, the Ambrosiana manuscript was acquired in 1613, more than two decades before Fr Agathange bought the Barberini Psalter on Peiresc's behalf.

5 The leftovers: Pentaglot gospel fragments

Two paper fragments of the gospels in Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian probably both derive from a similar multilingual manuscript. The first of them is kept in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, as Copt. c. 2.⁵⁵ This Oxonian fragment retains only the upper part of a leaf, featuring Luke 7:37–39 on the recto and Luke 7:42–44 on the verso. Since this *membrum disiectum* preserves the original width of the leaf, which measures 26 cm, it can be estimated that the manuscript was probably of the same size as the Barberini and Ambrosiana codices.

Furthermore, similar to the two pentaglot manuscripts presented in the previous sections, this one also comes from the desert monasteries at Wādī al-Naṭrūn. The fragment was reportedly obtained at the monastery of Baramous by the famed English church historian Alfred J. Butler (1850–1936), who donated it to the Bodleian Library in January 1884.⁵⁶ Indeed, Butler had visited Egypt between December 1883 and January 1884 as one of the official envoys of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Coptic pope, Cyril V (*sedes* 1874–1924), and the Greek patriarch

⁵⁴ Pasini 2005, 27.

⁵⁵ Description in Horner 1898–1905, vol. 1, cxxvi; Baronian and Conybeare 1918, 5–6 (= no. 4), but the writing support is wrongly indicated there as vellum instead of paper.

⁵⁶ Baronian and Conybeare 1918, 6; Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 1, xxxviii.

of Alexandria, Sophronios (*sedit* 1870–1899).⁵⁷ With the consent of Pope Cyril, the Anglican delegates visited the Wādī al-Naṭrūn monastic communities. A pamphlet published upon the envoys' return to England specifically mentions the visit to the monastery of Baramous, during which the fragment was probably obtained.⁵⁸

The British Library currently houses the second pentaglot fragment of the gospels under the call number Or. 1240a.⁵⁹

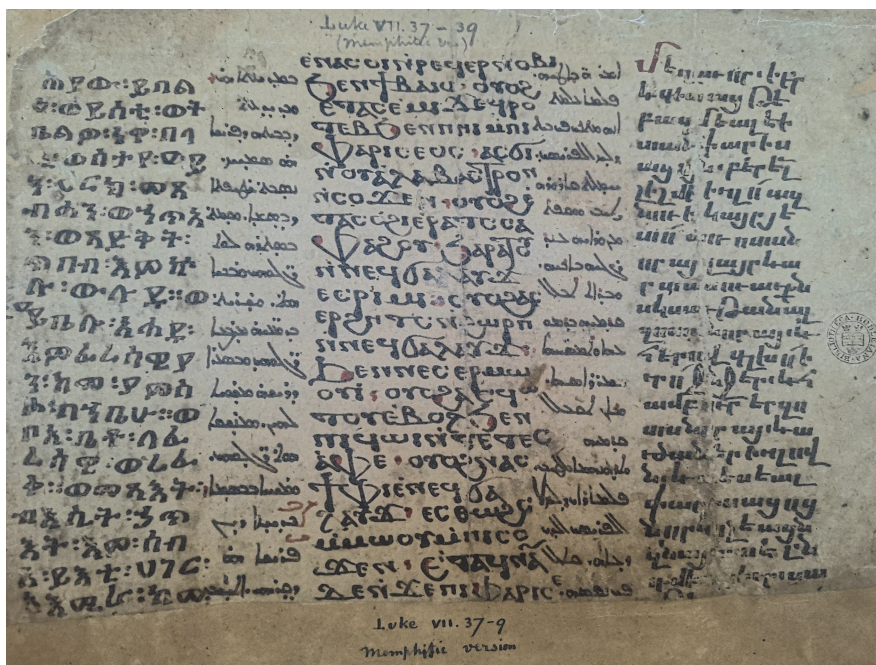


Fig. 2: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Copt. c. 2f. © Bodleian Library.

57 This was the first mission of the Association for the Furtherance of Christianity in Egypt, founded by the Anglican Church in 1883 with the declared aim to educate the Coptic clergy. The report of the visit to Egypt is available in Marsh, Chapman and Butler 1884.

58 Marsh, Chapman and Butler 1884, 10 and 14–15 (Appendix C).

59 Description in Margoliouth 1899, 1; Crum 1905, 328–329 (= no. 757).

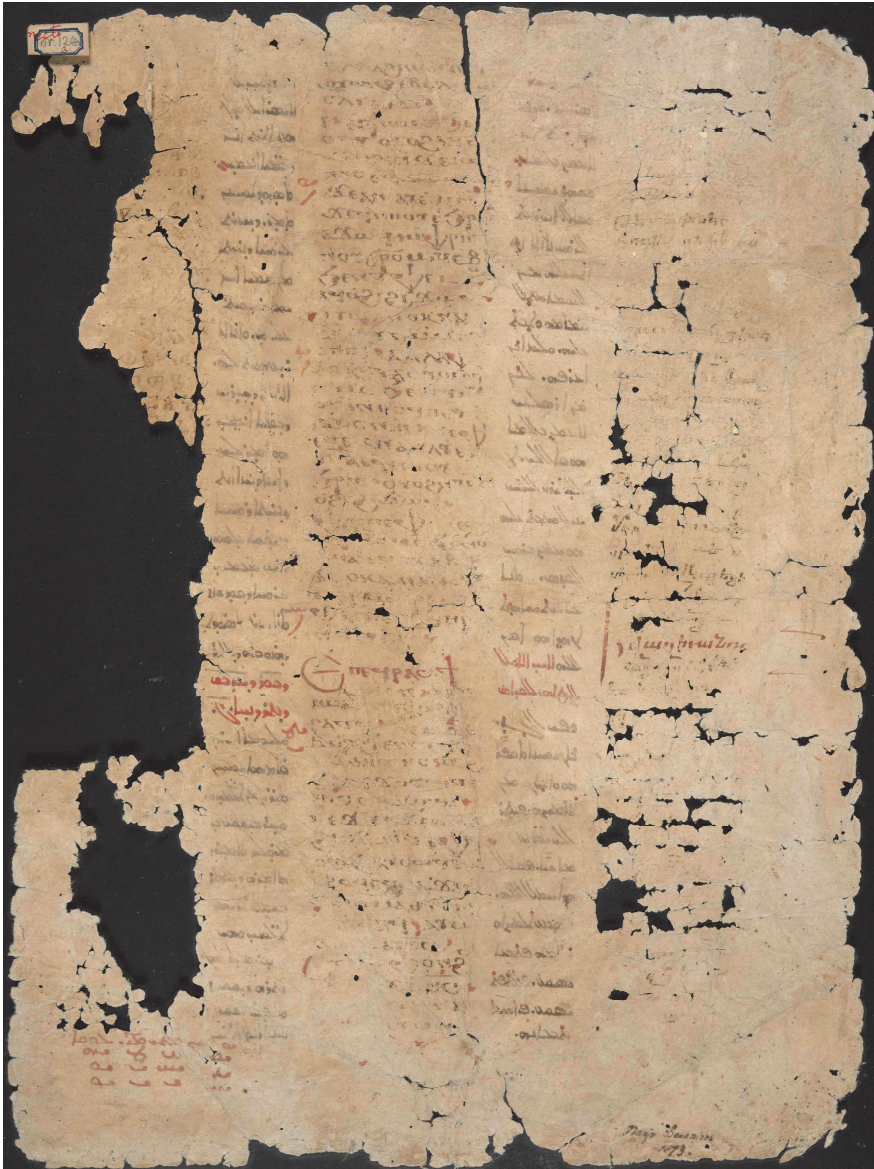


Fig. 3: London, British Library, Or. 1240a'. © British Library.

The London leaf (35 × 26 cm) contains a portion of the Gospel of John (1:31–45). The fragment was acquired by Greville J. Chester (1830–1892) in January 1873 at the

same monastic complex where Butler would receive the fragment of Luke a decade later. During that year, Chester visited the monasteries of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, publishing a report on their state of preservation.⁶⁰ Describing the fortified tower of the monastery of Baramous, Chester notes that he saw ‘a considerable collection of MSS. on cotton paper in excellent preservation, but of no great antiquity, and an adjoining room full of fragments of loose leaves’.⁶¹ In all likelihood, the John pentaglot fragment was removed from this room during Chester’s visit.

While the Luke and John fragments maintain the same order of the languages as the Barberinianus and the Ambrosianus, a notable difference is that their columns with Arabic text are in Garšūnī, i.e. Arabic written in Syriac script. Besides the common provenance, the occurrence of Garšūnī in both gospel fragments constitutes further evidence that they are *membra dispersa* cannibalised from the same manuscript, which probably included all four gospels in Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian. Such a large Tetraevangelion in five languages is not inconceivable, roughly requiring the same amount of space as the Milan Praxapostolos.

6 Troubling days in Jerusalem: Scribes, patron and date of the pentaglot manuscripts

The Egyptian pentaglot manuscripts described in this paper illustrate that monks in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn monasteries endeavoured to transcribe extensive portions of the Bible into the languages of the non-Chalcedonian churches. Perhaps the intention was not to create a complete multilingual Bible, since it is hard to imagine that the scribes had the entire set of biblical books available in all five languages, but rather to copy the most significant parts of the Christian scriptures, above all the Psalms, the gospels and the Praxapostolos.⁶² Perhaps when this ambitious scribal undertaking was completed, the manuscripts were distributed among the monastic settlements in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn. For this reason, each of the three pentaglot manuscripts identified to date comes from a different locale.

⁶⁰ Chester 1873.

⁶¹ Chester 1873, 110.

⁶² Not even the entire Bohairic Bible is attested in manuscripts. Books such as Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Canticles, Esther and others are either completely absent in this Coptic dialect or preserved only fragmentarily in lectionaries. On the preservation of the Bohairic Bible, see Feder 2020, 236–237.

The careful arrangement of the five-column page layout captures the minutiae of the scribal endeavour. Such a monumental undertaking peremptorily involved more than one scribe for each language. In effect, multiple changes of hands and writing styles are discernible even within the same manuscript. The scribes who copied the Barberinianus and Ambrosianus pentaglot codices added many mementos and notes, chiefly in Syriac and Arabic, in the margins of the columns.⁶³ Unfortunately, scant information can be garnered from these paratextual elements about the names and origins of the copyists who participated in the production of the manuscripts, as most of them preferred to remain unnamed.

The anonymous prayer petitions written in a highly formulaic style are prevalent: ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ (‘Pray for the sinner who wrote in the love of Christ’) reads one such Syriac note in the Ambrosianus.⁶⁴ Another unknown Syriac scribe promises divine rewards to the readers who will pray for him:

‘O God-loving readers, pray for the sinner who scribbled (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ), and may the Lord have mercy upon everyone who prays for me and for my Fathers, and may the Lord repay you many times over, Amen!’⁶⁵

An Armenian scribe left the following curt souvenir on the last page of the same manuscript, at the end of the Acts of the Apostles: Ես մեղաւոր ծառայս (‘I, the sinful servant’).⁶⁶ Yet another anonymous Syrian scribe penned a prayer request in the Ambrosiana Praxapostolos, in which he described the manuscript as a ‘spiritual treasure in five languages’:

ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ [ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ]

I ask everyone who will read to pray for me, and for my Fathers, and for the one who took care of this spiritual treasure in five languages.⁶⁷

Occasionally, some scribes shared their names, thus, preserving their memory over the centuries. The Syrian monks Baršūma and Abba, for example, left humble prayer requests: ‘Pray in Christian love for me, the poor little-Baršūma’ (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ) and ‘Pray for me, the poor Abba’ (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ).⁶⁸ A brief ‘forget-me-

⁶³ Many of the Syriac scribal notes have been conveniently gathered by Vergani 2016, 275–279, and plate 6.

⁶⁴ B 20/A inf., fol. 176^r; Vergani 2016, 276.

⁶⁵ B 20/A inf., fol. 29^v.

⁶⁶ B 20/B inf., fol. 186^v.

⁶⁷ B 20/A inf., fol. 99^r; see Vergani 2016, 279, n. 67.

⁶⁸ B 20/A inf., fol. 199^r, and B 20/A inf., fol. 258^v. See Vergani 2016, 276, n. 56.

not' inscription in Armenian in the Barberini Psalter reads: զՄանուէլ անարժան էրեց յիշեցէք ի տէր ('Remember to the Lord the unworthy priest Manuel').⁶⁹ A more detailed Arabic note provides information about the origin of a Syrian copyist, who appears to be from Amida, a city situated on the Tigris in Mesopotamia:

الله يرحم لمن قرا في هذه النسخة المباركة ويدعي للمتهم وللناسخ للضعيف ويوحنا السرياني من المدينة امد المحروسة وليعزه على الله امين

May God have mercy upon the one who reads this blessed copy and prays for the one who provided, and for the scribe, the weak Yūḥannā the Syrian from the city of Amida⁷⁰ the guarded, and may God bless him, Amen!⁷¹

Such inscriptions, expressly written to serve as tokens of remembrance, capture names of long-forgotten scribes who lived in the Egyptian desert. Perhaps even more significantly, several annotations in the two complete pentaglot manuscripts divulge the name of their commissioner, who appears to be one Ṣalīb, a priest of Syrian extraction. The Ethiopic colophon in the Barberini Psalter, for instance, states:

ዛቲ ፡ መ[ጽ]ሐፍ ፡ ይ[አቲ ፡] ለቀሲስ[፡ ጳ]ሊብ ፡ ሶር[ያዊ ፡] ትኩሮ ፡ [ለሕይወት ፡ ወለ[መ]ድኅኒ
ት ፡ አሜን ፡ ይኩን ፡] ወሀሎ ፡ ው[ስቲ]ታ ፡ ፪ ፡ ወ፻ ፡ ዳዊት ፡ ወማ[ሳሌ]ት ፡ ነቢዮት ፡ ፲፭ ፡]
ወተጽሕፈ ፡] ከመዝ ፡ ወቀዳሚ ፡ ኢ[ትዮ]ጵያዊ ፡ [ወዳ]ግም ፡ ሶር[ያዊ ፡] ወሳልስ[፡ ቅብጣ]ዊ ፡
ወራ[ብዕ ፡ አ]ረምይ ፡ [ወጋ]ምስ ፡ አር[ማኒ ፡] አሜን ፡ ሀ[ሎ ፡ በ]ዝንቲ ፡ [መጽሐፍ ፡ ይ[ሰባሕ ፡]
እግዚአብሔር ፡]

This is the book of the priest [Ṣ]alīb the Syr[ian.] May it be [for li]fe and salvation, [Ame]n! So be it! It comprises the 150 (Psalms of) [Da]vid and [the 15] songs of the prophets, and it is written thus: first the [E]thiopic, second the Syr[iac], third the [Copti]c, fourth the language of the infidel,⁷² [and] fifth the Ar[menian]. Truly is [in] this book. May the Lord be glorified!⁷³

Similarly, a scribe wrote the following note at the end of Paul's Letter to the Galatians in the Ambrosiana Praxapostolos:

اهتم بها القس صليب المهتم بدير السريان المعروف بستنا السيدة العذرى الرب يعوضه بشفاعها امين

⁶⁹ Barb. or. 2, fol. 193^v; see Uluhogian 2008, 254, n. 12.

⁷⁰ Hugely frustratingly, the name of the city is not easy to decipher in the manuscript. The reading المدينة امد ('the city of Amida') was proposed by Horner 1898–1905, vol. 3, xviii, but it is by no means certain.

⁷¹ B 20/A inf., fol. 150^v.

⁷² አረምይ ፣ which is probably a corruption of አረማይ ፣ literally means the pagan language.

⁷³ Barb. or. 2, fol. 224^v; see Grébaut and Tisserant 1935, 861.

and the Wādī al-Naṣrūn communities were no exception. The Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 1441), for instance, offers a grim account of the severe decline of the monastic population in the Wādī al-Naṣrūn in the aftermath of the Black Death. According to Maqrīzī, only three monks remained in the monastery of John the Little, while other locations were completely empty and ruined in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁷⁷ A traveller from Tur Abdin found only one inmate in the monastery of the Syrians in 1413.⁷⁸ Thus, it is highly unlikely that such a colossal project as the production of the pentaglot manuscripts, which involved several scribes for each language, could have been accomplished after the outbreak of the Black Death.

Furthermore, the Armenian community is conspicuously absent from various reports on the condition of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn monastic colonies in the first half of the fourteenth century.⁷⁹ Thus, the accounts of the visit made by the Coptic pope Benjamin II (*sedī* 1327–1339) in 1330 and by the Western pilgrim Ludolf von Sudheim around the year 1340 mention only the presence of Coptic, Syrian and Ethiopian monks. This suggests that the Armenian monastic community was already extinct, thus, setting a relative *terminus ante quem* for the production of the pentaglot manuscripts at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

An illuminating detail for dating purposes may be provided by a laconic Syriac note inserted at the end of the Epistles of Paul in the Ambrosianus manuscript, which reads:

[illegible]

Do not blame me, my brothers, for my writing that is unpolished, because my mind is disturbed and I have been concerned on the account of Jerusalem.⁸⁰

While the reference to Jerusalem is lapidary, the concern of the scribe should give us pause because we have no significant turbulence in the Holy City during the first decades of the fourteenth century. In fact, the last major event in Jerusalem prior to this date that may have prompted the anxiety of the scribe was the complete destruction of the city by the Khwarazmian army in 1244. In 1229, the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, al-Kāmil (r. 1218–1238), made a truce with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (r. 1220–1250), by which he peacefully ceded Jerusalem to

77 Evetts and Butler 1895, 321–322.

78 Leroy 1967, 4; Innemée and Van Rompay 1998, 190.

79 Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 394–400.

80 B 20/A inf., fol. 275^v; see Vergani 2016, 278, n. 64.

the Franks for ten years.⁸¹ The main purpose of the treaty was probably to create a buffer state between the two rival houses of the Ayyubid dynasty, which were engaged in a fratricidal war: one led by Sultan al-Kāmil, who ruled Egypt, and the other by his brother, al-Mu'azzam (r. 1218–1127), who controlled Syria and Palestine from his capital in Damascus. But by the time the truce expired a decade later, the Franks had established a foothold in Jerusalem and could not be easily expelled. To liberate the Holy City again, the new sultan of Egypt, al-Salih (r. 1240–1249), summoned the Khwarazmians, a terrifying army of Turkish nomads from Central Asia who had recently been dislocated and pushed westwards by the irruption of the Mongols. July and August 1244 saw the Holy Land drift into chaos as the ferocious Khwarazmian warriors besieged and eventually conquered Jerusalem, slaughtering all the male Christian inhabitants and taking the women and children into slavery. No one was spared; such a brutal massacre had not been seen in Jerusalem since 614, when the Persian army devastated the city. Furthermore, the Khwarazmians destroyed most of the buildings inside the walls, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, leaving behind a shattered city. The skyline of Jerusalem was made a *tabula rasa*. Three years later, in 1247, Sultan al-Salih ordered the reconstruction of the ramparts,⁸² but the annihilation after the Khwarazmian siege was so total that the Holy City had to be rebuilt from scratch, a process that dragged on for the next century under the Mamluks.

This dramatic event of the mid thirteenth century could constitute the motivation for the alarming note about Jerusalem left by the Syrian scribe in the Barberini Psalter. Therefore, I would place the manufacture of the pentaglot biblical manuscripts around the destruction of Jerusalem in 1244, i.e. in the last decade of the Ayyubid era, shortly before the Mamluks came to power in 1250.

7 Entangled communities in Egypt

The Syrian, Armenian and Ethiopian diasporas were well-established in Egypt in the thirteenth century when these stunning codices were presumably copied. The ties between Syrian and Egyptian Christians have a lengthy history; their churches have shared a communion of faith since the Council of Chalcedon in 451.⁸³ After

⁸¹ On the historical background of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Khwarazmians in 1244, see the recent updates in Hillenbrand 2018, 224–229; Hosler 2022, 176–213.

⁸² Lemire 2016, 257.

⁸³ On the history of the relationships between the Coptic and Syrian Church, see e.g. Fiey 1972–1973.

the repudiation of the Chalcedonian creed, the Syrians and Egyptians were confronted with the ruthless religious policies of the Byzantine emperors. The intensity of imperial persecution was unprecedented in Syria and Palestine particularly beginning with the reigns of Justin I (518–527) and his nephew, Justinian I (527–565). The escalation of violence was motivated primarily by geopolitical considerations; Byzantine emperors felt that dissent near the border with their Persian foes made them vulnerable because it increased the risk of treason.

A massive exodus of non-Chalcedonian monks from Syria and Palestine to Egypt followed the successive waves of Byzantine persecution. Among the Syrian monks who came to Egypt were some of the most prominent detractors of the fourth ecumenical council. The monastery of Enaton, located nine leagues from Alexandria, sheltered Peter the Iberian (411–491) and his retinue of Syrian monks, who emigrated from Gaza because of the persecution dictated by Emperor Marcian (r. 450–457) and Empress Pulcheria (399–453) immediately after the Council of Chalcedon. When Justin I came to power in 518, the famous Miaphysite theologian and polemicist, Severus (465–538), bishop of Antioch, was expelled from the patriarchal see and took refuge in Egypt.⁸⁴

Owing to the large inflow of Syriac-speaking monks, some of the most significant translations of the Bible into this language were produced in Egypt. They were the work of two scholars active at the same time in the monastery of Enaton near Alexandria. In this monastic complex, the so-called Ḥarqlean version of the New Testament was completed in the year 615/616 by the Syrian monk Thomas of Ḥarqel. Thomas had apparently fled to Egypt to escape the persecution of non-Chalcedonians by Domitian, bishop of Melitene and nephew of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602). The Syro-Hexaplaric translation of the Septuagint was made in the same monastery by another Syrian monk, Paul of Tellā, around 616/617.⁸⁵ Paul was probably forced to move to Egypt by the Persian advance in Mesopotamia and northern Syria in 614.

The migration of Syrian monks during the eighth century was so sizeable that they occupied several Egyptian monastic settlements, including the monastery of the Holy Virgin at Wādī al-Naṭrūn, which, for this reason, became known as the monastery of the Syrians.⁸⁶ Besides this, the same desert area was honeycombed with several Coptic monastic clusters, the most significant of which were the monastery of St Macarius (Dayr Anbā Maqār), the monastery of the Romans (Dayr

⁸⁴ Maspero 1923, 69–70.

⁸⁵ On this translation, see Vööbus 1971, 33–88; Brock 2006, 27–29.

⁸⁶ According to Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 317–318, the Syrians bought the monastery of the Holy Virgin in the year 710.

al-Baramūs), the monastery of John the Little (Dayr Yuḥanis al-Qaṣīr), and the monastery of Anba Bishoy (Dayr Anbā Biṣāy). The proximity of the Syriac and Coptic monastic communities transformed Wādī al-Naṭrūn into a fertile ground for religious dialogue and continuous cultural exchange between the two non-Chalcedonian churches until the Late Mamluk Period. The monasteries of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn constituted veritable junctions of intellectual interchange between Syrian and Coptic Christians for many centuries. The monastery of the Syrians, for instance, was the nodal point that facilitated the circulation of monks and books from Syria to Egypt.

The Armenian diaspora also grew deep roots in Egypt at the time of the production of the pentaglot manuscripts. Latecomers to the non-Chalcedonian family of churches, the Armenians officially rejected the Christological definition of Chalcedon only at the second Council of Dvin in 555. Byzantine emperors and Muslim rulers frequently dislocated the unruly Armenians from their territories and resettled them elsewhere; this social engineering forced them to become one of the most mobile populations in ancient and medieval times. The Armenians were also renowned for their military prowess and were routinely deployed to shield the borders of the empire and caliphate from the blade of the advancing enemies. The oldest known Armenian manuscript, and the only one written on papyrus – discovered in Middle Egypt, at the Fayyum oasis – probably derives from such a military environment. The papyrus, currently held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris as arménien 332, dates back to the Byzantine period, perhaps no later than the first half of the seventh century.⁸⁷ What is really peculiar about this document is that it is actually written in Greek, but using Armenian script. It contains a glossary of words, phrases and verb conjugations, obviously intended for Armenians living in Egypt who wished to learn Greek.

But it was not until the eleventh century, the glorious era of the Fatimid caliphs, that a more sizeable migration of Armenians from the Caucasus to Egypt took place. This exodus was induced by the successive Byzantine and Turkish conquests of Bagratid Armenia, culminating in the destruction of the capital, Ani, by the Seljuk Turks in 1064. After settling in Egypt, the Armenian diaspora played a decisive role in the history of the country. This heralded the so-called 'Armenian period' in Egypt, during which the position of vizier was held by Armenians for more than half a century.⁸⁸ The influence of the Armenians in a region as distant from their country as Egypt after the conquest of their country by the Seljuks

87 Brief description of the papyrus in Kevorkian and Ter-Stépanian 1998, 937; edition, translation, and commentary in Clackson 2000.

88 On this period, see Canard 1955; Dadoyan 1997.

illustrates well the entangled contexts and interconnected nature of global history. It is an example of how a historical event, in this case, the fall of Bagratid Armenia, could profoundly affect the inhabitants of far-off regions.

Although the Armenian Fatimid viziers were usually converts who embraced Islam, their compatriots remained Christians. The immigrants were so numerous that, under the first Armenian vizier, Badr al-Jamālī (*sedīt* 1074–1094), Catholicos Grigor II the Martyrophile (Գրիգոր Կրթիչ) (1065–1105) travelled to Egypt to appoint his nephew, Grigoris, as patriarch of his co-religionists there. The last Armenian Fatimid vizier was Bahram (*sedīt* 1135–1137), a nephew of Grigor the Martyrophile and brother of Patriarch Grigoris. Since Bahram did not become a Muslim but kept his Christian faith, the Armenians enjoyed even greater privileges under his vizierate. But sliding steadily out of favour with the Fatimid caliph, Bahram was disgraced in 1137 and forced to retire to the White Monastery in Upper Egypt, where he was immured until 1139, shortly before his death.⁸⁹ Bahram's downfall marked the collapse of Armenian political influence in Egypt.

An Armenian monastery existed for some time at Wādī al-Naṭrūn, but the exact date of its foundation is irrecoverable. The *Chronicle* of Matthew of Edessa records that, when Catholicos Grigor the Martyrophile came to Egypt around 1077–1078, շրջեալ ընդ ամենայն անապատսն առաջին սրբոց հարցն ('he travelled through the whole desert of the ancient holy Fathers'), by which is meant the wilderness of Wādī al-Naṭrūn.⁹⁰ However, we do not know if he encountered an Armenian monastic community there. Furthermore, no Armenian monastery is mentioned by the Coptic historian Mawhūb ibn Maṣṣūr ibn Mufarrij, who visited Wādī al-Naṭrūn in 1088 and made a census of the monks in the area.⁹¹ Mawhūb records only one Armenian monk, who was resident in the monastery of John of Kame. It, therefore, seems likely that the Armenian monastery was founded after Mawhūb had visited Wādī al-Naṭrūn in the 1088.⁹² Scholars are also dimly aware of the monastery's demise, although it must probably be placed before 1330, because, as I have already said, in that year, the Coptic pope Benjamin II travelled to Wādī al-Naṭrūn, and the Armenian monks are not mentioned in the report of his visit.

The Armenian monastic settlement was located within the environs of the monastery of John the Little, albeit the exact location is not known. A team of

⁸⁹ On Bahram, see Canard 1954, 1955.

⁹⁰ My translation of the Armenian text in Matteos Urhayetsi 1869, 254. For the context of this passage, see the English translation in Dostourian 1993, 140.

⁹¹ Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 360–361.

⁹² Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 365–368.

Egyptian archaeologists excavated what is believed to be its foundation in 1989 and 1990, but unfortunately the results have not been systematically published.⁹³ Lacking archaeological data, we need to look for other types of evidence in order to verify the presence of the Armenians in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn. The pentaglot manuscripts undoubtedly demonstrate that the Armenian monastic colony had grown large enough by the middle of the thirteenth century to employ several professional scribes. Moreover, other hitherto overlooked sources confirm the presence of the Armenians at Wādī al-Naṭrūn around the time of the production of the pentaglot codices.

Among the manuscript fragments brought from the Wādī al-Naṭrūn monasteries that are currently held in the British Library under the call number Add. 14740, for example, one finds three parchment leaves with portions of the Gospel of Luke in Armenian.⁹⁴ Notably, although the scribe used the round uncial script (*erkat'agir*), found in the most ancient Armenian manuscripts and inscriptions, the characters are square and blocky in appearance, foreshadowing the later minuscule (*bolorigir*). The intriguing palaeographical features suggest a c. twelfth-century transitional script from uncial to minuscule. Another manuscript evoking the presence of Armenian monks in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn is Göttingen, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Arab. 103, a paper codex containing the Arabic version of an exegetical Catena of the four gospels.⁹⁵ The Göttingen manuscript comes from the monastery of Anba Bishoy in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, hailing from the thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Remarkably, although this manuscript is written in Arabic, it contains some features and marginal notes in Syriac and Armenian. The page numbers, for example, are typically written not only in Coptic epact numbers in the upper outer corner of the pages, but also in Syriac numerals in the lower margin. In addition, the tables of chapter titles (*kephalaia*) of the Gospel of Mark (fols 143^v–144^r) are numbered with Coptic epact numerals and also with Armenian numbers. An inscription in Armenian in the upper margin of folio 144^r featuring the *kephalaia* of Mark reads *hwaṭuṣṣ Լ–ՕԴ* ('Numbers 30–54').⁹⁶ Such

93 Brooks Hedstrom et al. 2010, 219. Some partial results of the excavations have been published in Grossmann 2012. However, Peter Grossmann is skeptical concerning the identification of the site as the monastery of the Armenians.

94 The three Armenian leaves currently stand as fols 90–92 in London, British Library, Add. 14740A, a volume bound in modern times that contains exclusively fragments of different Coptic Bohairic manuscripts from Wādī al-Naṭrūn. Description of the Armenian fragments in Conybeare 1913, 14–15 (= no. 90).

95 Description of the codex in Meyer 1894, 359–361. Another useful description of the same manuscript is available in Caubet Iturbe 1969, xxx–xxxii.

96 Other similar notes in Armenian appear on fol. 192^v (*hwaṭuṣṣ Ժ*) and fol. 303^r (*hwaṭuṣṣ Ժ Խ*).

scribal interventions are evidence that the Arabic Catena manuscript was designed for the needs of the multilingual Christian communities in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn. Similar to the pentaglot biblical manuscripts, the Göttingen Catena illustrates the encounter of Coptic, Syriac and Armenian traditions on Egyptian soil.

Finally, the Ethiopians also had close ties to Christian Egypt. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church embraced the Miaphysite Christology professed by its northern neighbour, Egypt, as early as the Aksumite Period. In addition, the Ethiopian Church was under the jurisdiction of the Alexandrian patriarchate, the metropolitan of Ethiopia being appointed by the Coptic pope.

After the conquest of the Holy Land by the Crusaders in 1099 and the subsequent establishment of the Frankish states, Jerusalem was transformed into a Christian city. As pilgrimage took on a new momentum, Ethiopians soon became some of the most intrepid pilgrims to Jerusalem.⁹⁷ On their long and arduous journey from the Ethiopian plateau to Palestine, the Ethiopians established several stations for pilgrims in Egypt, which included not only the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, but also the White Monastery near Sohag, Dayr al-Muḥarraḡ (Qosqām), the monastery of St Antony at the Red Sea and Ḥārat Zuwaylah (Cairo).⁹⁸

In the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, which they called ‘the desert of Scetis’ (ገዳማ ፡ አስቂጢስ ፡), the Ethiopian monks congregated in several premises, including the Cell of Bāhat and a monastery dedicated to the Prophet Elijah. Both sites were located near the monastic complex of John the Little, where we have seen that Coptic and Armenian monks also lived, and barely 3 km away from the monastery of the Syrians.

To sum up, the evidence reviewed in the foregoing pages points to the fact that the Wādī al-Naṭrūn was a space of entangled communities, non-Chalcedonian Christians who spoke different languages sharing the desert with Arabic-speaking Copts. By the time the multilingual manuscripts were assembled, Wādī al-Naṭrūn was a genuinely Mediterranean transregional territory.

8 Concluding remarks: The use of the pentaglot manuscripts

As the study of the Egyptian pentaglot codices amply shows, manuscripts furnish a scholarly pursuit with all the excitement of a gold prospector’s life. It should be

⁹⁷ The best treatment of the Ethiopian pilgrimages to the Holy Land remains Cerulli 1943–1947.

⁹⁸ On the presence of Ethiopians in Egypt, see Meinardus 2005.

kept in mind that a manuscript is not simply an artefact produced in a certain area and period but, as Michel Foucault once wrote, it is 'a node in a network' that transcends its internal configuration.⁹⁹ The Egyptian pentaglot manuscripts defy conventional wisdom, according to which the multilingual Bible is an invention of Western European humanism, which had an interest in the academic approach to the Christian scriptures. These manuscripts bring us closer to the decolonisation of knowledge by showing that Eastern Christians also produced similar artefacts long before the European Renaissance.

Furthermore, the Egyptian polyglot codices challenge the simplistic approach to manuscripts. How do we categorise such a codex? Is it a Coptic manuscript, since the monasteries in which it was produced are situated in Egypt? Or is it rather Arabic, the *lingua franca* of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn monks, in which many of the marginal notes are written? Or should we actually call it a Syriac manuscript, according to the origin of its patron, Rabban Ṣalībā? Notably, in this regard, the Barberini Psalter had benefited from an entry in no less than four catalogues dedicated to the Vatican manuscript collections: the Ethiopic, Armenian, Coptic and Syriac. However, a distinction between the five languages used in these manuscripts proves to be artificial, since, as the previous analysis hopefully shows, there are fluid linguistic and cultural boundaries between the communities who used these books. Like colours on a painting palette, languages mix in our manuscripts, transcending ethnic borders. They are quintessential transregional artefacts.

To conclude the present essay, I would like to address the question of the purpose of these manuscripts. Why did non-Chalcedonian Christians decide to create such splendid, yet somewhat trivial, multilingual artefacts, long before the appearance of printed polyglot Bibles in Europe during the Renaissance? The possibility that these polyglots were philological tools used for comparing different versions of the Bible can be eliminated at the outset, since they have no critical notes to suggest such a use. Nevertheless, multilingual manuscripts meant for philological purposes, probably mimicking Origen's Hexapla, did exist among Eastern Christians. One such example is the polyglot psalter in Cambridge (University Library, Or. 929), which contains the Psalms and Odes in four languages: Arabic, Syriac (the Syro-Hexaplaric version), Greek and Hebrew.¹⁰⁰ The scholarly purpose of this manuscript is evidenced by the copious interlinear and marginal glosses in Syriac. Yet, no such philological annotations are detectable in the Egyptian pentaglot manuscripts.

⁹⁹ Foucault 1969, 34.

¹⁰⁰ See Brock 1982.

Scholars have speculated that it can be surmised from some marginal lectionary inscriptions in Arabic that the manuscripts were envisioned for liturgical services.¹⁰¹ Hugh G. Evelyn White even proposed that they were used when foreign monks attended the liturgy at the monastery of the Syrians. This suggestion is not very palatable, however, because a single large manuscript would be more difficult to manipulate than separate smaller books in each language. Moreover, the liturgical notations are rather sporadic and probably secondary. They appear to have been added later and do not represent the original intention for which the manuscripts were created.

If these manuscripts were neither scholarly tools nor liturgical books, what were they meant to accomplish? In my view, they were designed to invest the communities who used them with authority and prestige. It is no accident that they are all biblical in character, for these artefacts construct community by appealing to a higher authority, the divinely inspired text of the Bible. The choice of languages includes and excludes at the same time: on the one hand, they contain biblical texts in the tongues of the non-Chalcedonian churches; on the other hand, Greek and Hebrew have no place in the Egyptian polyglot manuscripts, indicating that the communities using these languages – the Chalcedonians and the Jews – did not belong to the imagined community of kinship. The books are, thus, objects of differentiation, conferring power and status on their owners. But there is something more to it. With their intertwined languages, the manuscripts may hark back to a small archive of the Tower of Babel, yet, this is deceptive; in fact, those who could read at least one column – though most monks undoubtedly also understood Arabic – were supposed to know with whom they shared a common faith. Simply put, these manuscripts provided their owners with an unmistakable marker of their identity.

Coptic clearly holds pride of place in this extended community of believers, occupying the central position on the pages in all three manuscripts. Yet, the role of Coptic is purely honorary. When the manuscripts were produced in the thirteenth century, the Egyptian language was no longer used in current speech, but was already a vestige of the past. However, its presence in the middle of the pages points to Egypt as a crucible of non-Chalcedonian Christianity.

Ethiopians, Syrians, Copts and Armenians were, thus, united by a common non-Chalcedonian cultural identity. But the strategies of identity formation are complex processes. Identity is, in fact, an unstable cultural construction, being permanently rearranged in relation to sameness and otherness. While there is no denying that identity is based on a number of constitutive attributes, these are

101 Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 369; Brock 1982, 3.

filtered through various mechanisms of selection. A group may be bound by specific attributes at one point in time, but those same attributes may later lose their relevance and appeal, because identity is forged by cultural and political coercion. Rogers Brubaker challenged the essentialist view of a 'thick' identity, by showing that groups generate a fluid self-representation, which constantly evolves in dialogue and dispute with other groups.¹⁰² In this light, 'non-Chalcedonism' as an identity marker is not an objectively existing fact, but rather a framework that satisfies certain political demands. The emergence of a cohesive multi-ethnic group self-defined by this identity marker is possible only when various political, social and cultural aspects converge. The pentaglot manuscripts from Egypt show how people from different cultural backgrounds managed their shared space and found common ground by negotiating their differences.

These manuscripts indicate that something must have fostered a sense of religious unity among the non-Chalcedonian groups living in Egypt at the end of Ayyubid rule because the relations between them were not always agreeable. Just a few years before the manuscripts were copied, for example, Copts, Syrians and Ethiopians experienced a major crisis when the Coptic pope Cyril ibn Laqlaq (*sedī* 1235–1243) appointed an Egyptian as bishop of the Christians in Jerusalem. His machinations infuriated the Syrian Orthodox patriarch Ignatius III of Antioch (*sedī* 1222–1252), under whose jurisdiction Jerusalem lay, and who wished to nominate the Ethiopian Abuna instead.¹⁰³ Similarly, when Grigoris, the newly-appointed patriarch of the Armenians arrived in Egypt, he met with the vizier Badr al-Jamālī and the Coptic pope Cyril II (*sedī* 1078–1092), signing an agreement between Armenians and the other non-Chalcedonians in Egypt: Copts, Syrians, Ethiopians and Nubians. But after the fall of Vizier Bahram in 1137, serious frictions arose between Copts and Armenians over the churches and monasteries they occupied. These disruptions are indicative that the mere non-Chalcedonian identity had not always been a strong enough social glue to hold the multi-ethnic communities from Egypt together.

It remains a desideratum for further research to explore the cohesion and division of such diverse languages and cultures in thirteenth-century Islamic Egypt. Be that as it may, a profitable way to conclude these thoughts is to say that cultures are not isolated monads, but they are, instead, a matrix of entangled neurons forming synapses that allow them to communicate with each other. The Egyptian polyglot manuscripts have played and will continue to play their part in

¹⁰² See especially his essay 'Beyond "Identity"', in Brubaker 2004, 28–63.

¹⁰³ On the frictions between Cyril ibn Laqlaq and Ignatius III, see Werthmüller 2010.

our knowledge of entangled cultures. Thanks to them, the voices of Eastern Christians from the desert of Egypt can be heard again many centuries later.

Abbreviations

CPG = Mauritius Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, 5 vols (Corpus Christianorum), Turnhout: Brepols, 1974–1987; Mauritius Geerard and Jacques Noret, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum: Supplementum* (Corpus Christianorum), Turnhout: Brepols, 1998.

PG = Jean-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca*, 161 vols, Paris: Imprimerie catholique, 1857–1866.

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