PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS OF THE EAST
IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF RUSSIA

The history of the formation of oriental manuscript funds starts with the first days of the existence of the National Library of Russia (NLR, formerly the Imperial Public Library — IPL, and the M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library), which was founded in 1795 by the decree of Catherine the Great [1]. At that time the IPL had 15 manuscripts in oriental languages, previously belonging to the library of the brothers Zaleski, which was taken from Warsaw by A. V. Suvorov, at the Em- press's order. In 1923, all books and manuscripts of this library were returned to Poland, including the only Christian manuscript in Syrian, the contents of which we can only judge by its description given in French in the first printed catalogue of the IPL oriental fund in 1852 [2]. It follows from the description that the manuscript was "La Messe des Apôtres" with Latin translation.

By the same time "Manuscript Depot" was created in 1805, the IPL held, along with the 15 mentioned manuscripts, more than 140 oriental items from the collection of P. P. Dubrovskii, the secretary of the Russian embassy in France. Among them were also several Christian manuscripts: seven Coptic, eight Ethiopian, two Persian, one Armenian, one Georgian, one Syrian and one Arabic, and also four Chinese block-prints with works by Catholic authors. Thirty oriental manuscripts were acquired by Dubrovskii from the library of Saint-German Abbey. Dubrovskii's collection also contains 900 Western European, 50-old Russian and 20 Greek codices, and a huge amount of archive materials: documents and autographs by historical figures [3]. Dubrovskii did not know oriental languages, and probably did not collect oriental manuscripts specially. The question "Why do around 15% of the codes in his collection materials consist of materials in oriental languages?" should probably be answered as follows. In France at the end of the

18th century, there were a large number of manuscripts of oriental origin in circulation, and Dubrovskii's collection reflected the nature of the book market.

Evidently, we can say the same thing about the Russian book market in the early 19th century. In Russia there are also many manuscripts available from the East (mainly in Arabic script, and also Chinese and Indian). Thus, the collection of the director of the Kolyvan-Voskresenskii factories in Burnaul (Altai), P. K. Frolov bought in 1817 consists of 160 Slavonic-Russian manuscripts, together with four Greek and 65 manuscripts in oriental languages, of which eleven were Christian: five Georgian, two Armenian, two Arabic and two in Tatar [4].

An active role in compiling the library collections was taken by church figures. In 1831, archimandrite Petr (Karemskii), the head of the 18th Russian Orthodox mission in China, was presented with 48 Chinese, Manchurian and Mongolian manuscripts and block-prints. The majority of them contain translations of works by Christian authors, both Orthodox and Catholic.

The IPL funds demonstrate a significant rise of interest in Biblical studies as well as a wide range of issues relating to a thorough investigation of ancient manuscripts. In 1857, German Byzantine expert Professor K. Tischendorf proposed for the library to buy manuscripts that he acquired during travels through the Middle East in 1844 and 1853. By request of the director of the library M. A. Korf, Alexander II allocated funds to buy this collection and finance a third archaeological expedition by Tischendorf in 1859. In total, Tische- dorf's collection contains over 200 (often fragmentary) old handwritten books, including palimpsests, in Greek (78), Coptic (39), Syrian (26), Ethiopian (12), Hebrew (59), Arabic (2), Georgian and Slavonic languages [5].

*This text is a revised version of the article published in Pervye Dmitrievskie chtenia (First Readings from Dmitrov) (St. Petersburg, 1997), pp. 147–63; Rossiia i Khristianskii vostok (Russia and the Christian East) II—III (Moscow, 2004), pp. 524—37, pp. 369—83 in Russian.

© O. Vasilieva, 2007
In 1883, the collection of the Bishop Porfirii (Uspenski) of Chigirin was received. From 1843 to 1861 Bishop Porfirii visited the Middle East three times: Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Sinai, and also the Balkan peninsula. From 1848—1854 he was the head of the First Russian Orthodox mission in Jerusalem. Porfirii devoted his last trip to studying cultural monuments and written records in Athens [6]. Although Athens is geographically situated in Greece, i.e. in Europe, it is an integral part of the concept of the Christian East, as on the one hand it was located on the territory of an oriental state—the Ottoman Empire, and on the other hand, it was the centre of Eastern Christianity. In his 18 years of visiting the countries of the Middle East, Father Porfirii collected 455 codices and fragments, 288 Greek, 198 Slavonic, 21 Arabic (mainly Christian works), four Syrian, four Georgian (two of them on papyrus), two Ethiopian, one Coptic and one Turkish, and also materials in Latin and French [7].

Archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin) was the head of the Russian Orthodox mission in Jerusalem for almost three decades, and was involved in biblical archaeology and collecting ancient manuscripts, which were bequeathed by him to the IPL in exchange of 5,000 rubles in 1899. This sum was intended to be sent to the Russian embassy in Constantinople to build a church in the name of the martyr Antonin in Ankira (Ankara). The collection includes 47 Greek manuscripts, 21 Slavonic, 50 Arabic (39 of them Christian), four Armenian, two Ethiopian, a fragment of the Syrian codex of 945 and over 1,000 ancient Hebrew and Samaritan codices and fragments [8].

The last three collections are similar in their content, and can be seen as a whole, given that their owners compiled their collections at approximately the same time (in the mid-19th century) and in the same places (in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, in Sinai and Athos) and were moved by similar interests (a study of biblical texts and palaeography) [9]. Unfortunately, in accordance with a language principle of organisation, the manuscripts of these collections were categorized in different funds.

Special mention should be made of the way the Georgian and Armenian funds were formed. In 1880, from Prince I. G. Grunzinski (the grandson of Tsarvich Ioann Bagrationi [10]) the “Collection of Tsarvich Ioann” was purchased, which contained 361 codices (178 of them were transferred to Georgia in 1923 [11]) and 76 autographs from the time that Georgia joined Russia [12]. In 1892, 17 Georgian manuscripts and one Armenian manuscript were purchased from lecturer at the Kiev University A. N. Gren [13], and in 1899, 25 Georgian manuscripts and two collections of documents belonging to Tsarvich Ioann [14] were purchased from historian M. P. Sabini. In 1891, 44 Armenian codices were transferred from the Armenian church in Karachets-Podolsk to the Public Library [15]. These collections were preserved as independent funds, and from the single acquisitions made after 1852 (the year of publication of the printed catalogue edited by B. A. Dorn, which recorded the state of the oriental fund at this time, see note 2) “new series” were formed.

After 1917, additions to the Christian manuscripts of the East significantly decreased. In 1919, 25 Ethiopian and 10 Syrian manuscripts were received from the St. Petersburg Ecclesiastical Academy. In the collection of the Society of Lovers of Ancient Writing, which was acquired in 1932, there is one Ethiopian manuscript, three parchment fragments and 35 small fragments of papyrus leaves with excerpts of Coptic texts of unidentified contents. In 1971—1974, the collection of I. Ju. Krachkovskii was received; it contains one Ethiopian manuscript of the 19th century (the Gospel according to St. John — Kr. 78), and an Orthodox prayer-book in Arabic (Kr. 19). Although recent years have been marked by a significant increase in collection of oriental materials, there are very few Christian manuscripts among them. In 1993, the library was given two parchment leaves from a Georgian family chronicle, copied and beautifully decorated in the first half of the 19th century (Gruz.n.s. 37). In 1998—2005, five Ethiopian manuscripts of the 19th and 20th century were purchased (Etn.n.s. 25—29), and in 1999, the Armenian collection of Hymns of the 14th century, decorated with four headings and 70 initial capital letters (Arm.n.s. 60) (fig. 1).
St. Luke of 1043 with a parallel Arabic translation (a part of this copy is held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France), and works by church fathers — John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian and John Damascene.

The predominance of theological, liturgical and hagiographic literature is not just characteristic for the Byzantine Greek heritage — the funds of manuscripts of the Christian East mainly contain works that are close in their themes.

Of the 40 Syriac manuscripts in the NLK, 15 come from the first millennium. The most ancient of them is the Syriac translation of the “Church History” by the Greek author Eusebius of Caesarea, copied by “Sinful Inkle” in 462 (Sir. n.s. 1) (fig. 2) [22]. This remarkable manuscript was purchased in 1822 along with three valuable Syriac codices of the 5th—6th century from the “Sardanian subject” August Pachot. All four manuscripts were copied in Mesopotamia on white rough parchment; only on some of the folios one can see the traces of vertical ruling of column with lead (?), while there is no horizontal ruling. In the 10th century these manuscripts belonged to a Syriac monastery (Qayar al-Surya) in the Nitrán desert (Wadi Nitrán, Egypt) [23]. All four codices have traces of early restoration, and they were given semi-leather binding at the PL.

The fragment (2 folios) “Sayings of Wisdom” by Saldona Martirus, a writer of the 7th century (Sir. n.s. 13) is dated at 837. This fragment, which was received in 1826 with the first collection of Jewish manuscripts by A.S. Firkovich in 1862, contains the ending of the only known manuscript, the remaining part of which is held at the Strasbourg University.

The majority of Syriac manuscripts in our collection contain Biblical texts. There are palimpsests among them: Syriac-Syrian and Syrian-Georgian (figns. 3—4). In the 19th century, to read the lower, erased layer of the palimpsest, chemically were used, the traces of which have remained on many folios.

The Syriac texts were translated, published and studied by F.F. C. Tischendorf, W. Wright, J.P. N. Land, E. Nestle, P. K. Kokovstov and N. V. Pugilevskaia, who prepared a catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts of Lenin-grad [24].

The NLK collection contains 65 Coptic manuscript items from the 5th—18th centuries written in three dialects: Sa`id Fuya and Bobayr. Many of these items consist of tiny pieces of papyrus (5th—6th centuries) and parchment. The oldest dated Coptic manuscript is a parchment fragment with a text of a legend of saints and a date of 952 (Kopt. n.s. 43) (fig. 5). In late Coptic codices there are colourful headings and paragraph marks (fig. 6).

H. Brugshch and H. Lenn worked on Coptic manuscripts of the Library; V.I. Evgenova compiled a description of the Coptic new series, and A.I. Elanskaia published a catalogue, the text of the martyrdom of St. Victor and St. Stathina (Kopt. n.s. 21—42), chapters of the Gospel according to St. Mark (Kopt. n.s. 53) and Bulayr poetic works (Kopt. n.s. 8, 11) [25].

Epiotican manuscripts of the NLK (34 items) in Gezz and Amharic, dated to the 16th—19th centuries, have also been put into scholarly circulation. B. A. Dorn and P. K. Kokovstov worked on their description, and in 1906 the catalogue “Ethiopian Manuscripts in the NLK” was published by B. A. Turev. A continuation of this catalogue was published by V. M. Platonov in 1996 [26].

Some Ethiopian manuscripts are decorated with headings (fig. 7), and many have wooden bindings covered in embossed leather [27]. Of special interest are the leather cases, which were evidently designed for carrying the book. The unique miniature in the Gospel of 1426 is also of interest (Dorn 612) (fig. 8).

Exquisite miniatures and headings decorate many Armenian and Georgian prayer books and Gospels. Among the 238 Georgian codices of the “Their Geog. V. 61” of 995, named after the place of copying — Tbei (Sobr. ts. Ioanna 212) (figs. 9—10). In the 1060s, the fourth bishop Samuel decorated a, ordering from Constantinople fosios with tables of canons and miniatures of the Byzantine school with depictions of the Apostles Luke and Mark [28]. Later, the manuscript was given a wooden binding covered in brown leather. We would also mention the Gospel of the 12th century with two Georgian miniatures and the remains of wooden binding covers (Sobr. ts. Ioanna 210) (fig. 11), and the separate miniatures “Matthew” and “The Transfiguration” from the manuscript of the 13th century (Gruz. n.s. 10) (fig. 12). The Georgian-Greek collection of miniatures and small texts composed in Athens at the Iverian monastery (Raznoyaz. O.58) is startlingly abundant and unusual. There is no common opinion about the time of its creation: the opinion of L. M. Evseeva (ca. 1500) is the best argued [29]. The collection contains an apocryphal tale about the earthly life of Christ, texts of Evangelical readings, selected troparions, full monologium, and apocryphal correspondence between Jesus Christ and Avgar of Edessa. A small oblong book in a late wooden binding is held in a silver case. On both sides of the 88 folios, there are 417 miniatures by Georgian artists, and on 10 folios there are Greek miniatures. All 146 folios of the manuscript are made of a very thin glossy laid paper, evidently of oriental origin (there are no watermarks from the paper manufacturer).

The repertoire of Georgian manuscript books is very wide. Secular literature is widely represented at the NLK: historical, mathematical, medical and astronomical works, textbooks and dictionaries, and fiction. We note the Georgian translation of the Persian epic poem by Ferdawsi “Shah-nama” in the copy of 1671. The manuscript is decorated with 105 miniatures in imitation of the Shirazi school (Sobr. ts. Ioanna 15). The collection of fairy tales by S. Orbeliani “Wisdom of Falsehood” with a watercolour portrait of the artist is signed by Prince Bagrat in 1814 (Satuni 13).

Of the 106 Armenian manuscripts we note several full copies and fragments of the Gospels from the 11th—13th centuries (Arm. n.s. 11 (fig. 15) and 194, “Fastal Menata” in two volumes, copied in 1349 in Sudak in Crimea (Arm. os. f. 1); and several illuminated prayer-books. Deserving of special attention is the wonderfully preserved hymnal book copied in 1645 in Kafa
(Theodosia, Crimėa) on thin white parchment by master Nikolaiu [30]. As it is known that Nikolaou himself designed and bound the books he copied, we can assume that our Hymnal was also decorated by him. In the manuscript there are several miniatures and numerous ornamental headings; it is bound in wooden covers over with stamped brown leather; it has also a flap and two clasps (Dom 631) (fig. 16). The decoration and the binding of the book are very similar with ones of the Gospel which was copied in 1635 in Bitlis (Turkey) (Arm n.s. 51). On some Armenian manuscripts, the old bindings have been preserved. The geography of places where the Armenian books were made is impressive. They are Echmiadzin, Nakhichevan, Constantinople, Lviv, Kamenets-Podolsk, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Ispahan.

Unfortunately, catalogues of Armenian and Georgian manuscripts have not yet been published. At various times, a description of the Georgian manuscripts was worked on by M.-F. Brosset, N.Ia. Marr, L.L. Mepariashvili, R. Orbeli, and a group of scholars from the Institute of Manuscripts of the Georgian Academy of Sciences under the leadership of M. N. Kavtaria. The Armenian manuscripts were described by Brosset, Marr and K. N. Izobashian.

Yet to be published is a systematic catalogue of Arabic manuscripts where descriptions of Christian works are presented, mainly in the section "Christian-Arabic literature", with 90 items. Furthermore, several manuscripts containing poetic works and writings on the history of the Christian church and Byzantium, are divided into thematic sections. Among the Arabic Christian manuscripts, the total number of which is over 100, copies of various parts of the New Testament stand out: the Gospel with miniatures (1036 — Dom 1 (fig. 13); 17th—19th centuries — Dom 2 (fig. 10); 1860 — A.n.s. 230 (fig. 17)), "Epistle of the Apostle Paul" 892 with the miniature "Paul and Timothy" (A.n.s. 327) (plate 2) and also the last Holy from the collection by Ephraim the Syrian was bound by I. Ia. Krachkovski (A.n.s. 263) [31]. In 885—886,

"this copy was written down by Avva Antonian of Bagdad in the monastery of St. Sava, and Avva Isaac of Mount Sinai asked him to write it."

Worthy of attention are six folios of the Graeco-Arabic pulpitims, the upper layer of which contains a fragment of the life of St. Euphrimion, written down in Kufic script in the ninth century (Grec 26). For the sample of exquisite micrography see figs. 10—19.

Of the four Persian Christian manuscripts, two are translations of the New Testament (Dom 248, P.n.s. 123) and two are works by Europeans of the 17th—19th centuries (Dom 249, P.n.s. 360) [32]. Turkish Christian manuscripts are represented by two volumes of a Turan translation of a work by the metropolitan of Tobol and Siberia Antonil Stakhowski, "Conversion of the Saracens to the Christian Faith" (Dom 504), two copies of a work on the recognition of the Orthodox church by Islam in Tatar (Dom 503 and 505), and also a collection of prayers in Turkish and Polish copied in Lviv in 1711 (Dom 596) [33].

Besides books originated from the Christian environment, there is an extensive missionary literature in the East, including translations of Holy Writ, prayer books, etc., and also original polemic and popularizing works, which were intended to convert local peoples to the Christian faith. These works were copied or published as block-prints by both Catholic and Orthodox missionaries in the language of the local population, usually in the form that was customary in the country. For China, this was a traditional form of block-print: in one folder several copy-books are placed, each consists of a long thin paper sheet concertinaed and stitched from one end and covered with two protective coloured folios of thicker paper. At the NLR, in the manuscript division and the division of literatures of the countries of Asia and Africa, there are 84 Chinese Christian block-prints and manuscripts and seven Manchean block-prints — the result of the large-scale publishing activity of Europeans in China [34]. Naturally, they can only be examined from the viewpoint of the Chinese book tradition.

All four above-mentioned Persian Christian manuscripts in the NLR, at first glance, were also made according to local traditions. However, one of them — the Four Gospels, which was copied in the late 17th—early 18th century by the Armenian Sargsi Lach, b. Amir Malik (Dom 248) [35], although it has Persian leather binding with embossing, has a feature which is not common for Islamic book art: the damaged binding makes it possible to see that the spine is stitched with "bands" — a method which is characteristic for the Christian book tradition.

"Christian book tradition" — is the use of the term justified? Is there a "confessional" unity of the handwritten book of the Christian East, or is it just a sum total of ethno-linguistic book traditions? To attempt to find an answer to these questions, we must look at this problem from the viewpoint of comparative codicology. Codicology is the study of a manuscript book-codex as an item of material culture. The subject of comparative codicology is a code as a manifestation, a material embodiment of a specific text tradition in comparison with another book tradition, both genetically close and very remote. In this comparison, individual features are shown more obviously and understood more clearly, along with the typological similarity and "blood relationship".

Such concepts as "manuscript book of Islam" and "Hebrew manuscript" have long been established in scholarship. Indeed, Islamic books, no matter where they were written or in what language, constitute a whole which has arisen on the basis of the use of common Arabic script with the acceptance of Islam and the Qurʾān as