The Syriac Book

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Abstract
From the earliest times, ancient churches of the Middle East have preserved their traditions of worship, literature, architecture and art. Traditions in bookbinding techniques have been passed from generation to generation, century to century.

Very little codicological information on Syriac manuscripts and book production has been published (Hack 2002, Merson 1999). The study of techniques and materials used to construct early books can perhaps reveal cultural links not evident by other means, and can provide the conservator with the necessary tools to preserve books in their care.

The information provided in this paper is based on the results of fifteen years of study and conservation of early Christian manuscripts, with particular reference to the Syriac book. This article will describe the features of the Syriac book, including sewing, board preparation, text block attachment, binding, endbands, covering and decoration as observed by the author. It will also make suggestions regarding long term preservation by highlighting the inherent weaknesses of this particular structure.

Figure I: Bhunth Library Syriac Or. 4053.

Introduction
Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, spoken in the principality of Edessa, which corresponds to present day northern Syria and Iraq, and southern Turkey. It was the language spoken by Jesus. Modern Aramaic is spoken today as a first language by a number of scattered communities, and is an official language of Iraq. Early Christianity spread eastwards largely in the language of Syriac, much in the same way as it spread west through Greek and Latin.

Why is the preservation of Syriac books important? Significant centres for book production were established in these areas. Sebastian Brock, Syriac scholar, states that early collections like those at Deir al-Surian, are important not just for those concerned with Syriac literature, but for everyone with an interest in Biblical studies, the writings of the Church fathers, the history in general of late Antiquity, and the transmission of Greek philosophy, medicine and science in the Arab world (Brock 2007). Some Syriac translations of Greek texts preserve writings of Greek text now lost. It is also accepted that the study of techniques and materials used to construct early books can perhaps reveal cultural links not evident by other means.

This paper is an introduction to the Syriac book, using Or 4053 at the British Library to illustrate the key areas. It forms part of a larger body of research by the author which aims to compare the bindings in different collections from different periods and hopes to answer questions surrounding the cultural influences on book production as a whole. The exhibition entitled Sacred previously an display in the British Library aims to show how at the heart of all three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam there is a book of divine revelation which identifies God, provides moral teaching and spiritual guidance. It may be worth investigating what role Syriac books played in the development of the sacred books.

The lands
Syria is situated with the Mediterranean on one side, the desert and the Euphrates on the other and is often called the meeting place of the east and the west. Syria was both a frontier and battleground, with Crusader castles and Mameluke mosques built by Byzantine churches. Damascus, its capital city, is one of the great caravan cities and religious centres in the Middle East, with its mosques, Saladin’s tomb and the magnificent Umayyad Mosque. The mountain villages of Syria make it a truly remarkable place to visit. In at least one of these, Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, is still spoken.

In ancient times Antioch was the third city of the Roman Empire, and it was here that the Disciples were first called Christians. From the fourth century onwards, Antioch came after Rome and Alexandria as the third patriarchal See. As Constantinople rose in power, so the influence of Antioch began to wane, and this was further weakened by the Nestorian and Monophysite schisms. Antioch was one of the leading places in the early development of Christian theology.
The collections

There are large collections of early Syriac manuscripts in many important institutions in Europe and the United States as well as a number still in use today in the Middle East. 1

Language and script

As previously mentioned, Syriac is the dialect of Eastern Aramaic, the one spoken in the early centuries of the Christian era in Edessa, corresponding to present-day northern Syria and Iraq and southern Turkey. The earliest known is Estrangela, which continued to be used until the thirteenth century. The Jacobite script came into use in the eighth century and was extensively used until the sixteenth century. From the sixteenth century a cursive form of the Estrangela was used and is in use today.

The Syriac Book structure

Text block preparation

In most western and near eastern bookmaking traditions, the writing substrate, as well as leaves, pigments and pens had to be manufactured. There is an account of these processes in Hatch (2002). Here he discusses recipes for ink found in colophons in Syriac manuscripts, and also techniques for pen making. These issues will not be covered in this paper as the main body of research was based around the bindings.

Sewing

All Syriac manuscripts are multi quire codices and are of either parchment or paper. They are sewn on a line stitch. A line stitch is described by Szirmai (2001), the thread, proceeding in the centrefold, exits through a sewing hole at a given sewing station where it drops in order to make a link under the sewing thread of the previous quire (actually it links under the sewing thread connecting the previous two quires) it then climbs and re-entries through the same hole and makes a long stitch to the next sewing station. He also says that the “arrow” of the line stitch sewing can determine the direction in which the book was sewn. As very few of the studied samples were without bindings it was difficult to see if there were variations in the link, but it is assumed there are. Many of the samples observed over the years had between two and four sewing stations. It is assumed that it was sewn on one needle as only one thread is observed in the sections, unlike Ethiopic manuscripts, which have two threads in the section and are sewn on two separate needles.

Line stitch sewing if exposed is often damaged. Having no support the books structure is dependent on strong thread and also subsequent linings and coverings. If this is not the case, the book is free to move in many directions when opened and can result in breakage of the sewing thread. As it is lined, if any link becomes damaged the overall sewing structure is at risk.

Endleaves

Where endleaves are evident, these seem to be the first and last sheet of the text block. There are examples where manuscripts fragments are used to line the boards. In both cases they are pasted under the leather turn ins. Examples with the bare board have been seen and also the use of coloured fabrics have been used.

Spine lining

Following book block attachment to the covers, a lining of heavy cotton or linen fabric is pasted onto the spine. The author has observed up to three layers but five layers have been noted by Merian (1999). This extends over the face of the boards by between approximately a half and one third. Whilst investigating the endband cores it was evident that this could be the rolled excesses of the spine lining that had extended at head and tail. This is rolled and formed into a slight round.

Endbanding

In Syriac endbanding, it forms an important structural function and is not purely decorative. The endband is woven rather than sewn. The core, as described above, is sewn onto the book block and coloured threads are woven through the sewn on endband. There are good descriptions in Bibliothèque Nationale (1886), Greenfield (1886) and Jacobs and Rodgers (1900). Starting on the inner face of the boards the endband is worked by passing through each hole on the board and over the core between three and five times. This acts as the tie downs. The number of times it is passed depends on the thickness of the sections as an overall regularity of pattern is required. Carrying on towards the book block, the primary thread is passed through the centre of each quire, through the spine lining and over the rolled core to the adjacent quire, acting as a wrap. It is then carried onto the second board through the holes as in the first cover. They are usually woven in two colours. The first thread is passed under alternative tie downs as in a web with the second colour crossing the first. The size of the chevron can be varied by the numbers of tie downs that are gone under.

Figure 3 Detail showing board lining with manuscript waste.

Figure 4 Route of thread for bridging straight line board attachment. Numbers indicating route.

Figure 5 Detail of ties downs and chevron endband.

Covering

The most obvious feature of the cover, especially evident when the book is open is that the leather is neither adhered onto the spine, nor the third part of the cover closest to the spine, on the front and back boards. Of the many examples investigated this seems to be the norm and so it is unlikely that this is due to the breakdown of the structure or adhesive.
Decoration

The cover decoration is varied on the manuscripts observed and is plain, blind-tooled or pointed. The decoration is often in the shape of a cross or intricate letterwork and writing has been observed in gold and black. Images of Ms 702 Syriac from the 8th or 9th century at the Chester Beatty Library seem to have pins extending from two sides. (Van Regemorter 1983)

Preservation

Preservation was an obvious concern for the early monastic as it is for us today. ‘May God, for whose glory, and for the benefit of those who read these books, grant forgiveness to him and to his departed ones, and to everyone who has shared them with him. By the living word of God, no one is permitted to cause harm to any of them in any way, nor to appropriate them to himself nor should anyone devote this commemorative notice, or make any prayers, or cut anything out or order anyone to do so, nor may anyone be given away from the monastery if anyone dates do so’ let him realize that he is under anathema.” (From a translation by Sebastian Brock of a note by Abbé Mushe 10th century in a manuscript in the Coptic Monastery of Deir al Surian 2007).

The history of the Syrian Church and its manuscripts is characterised by adversity. The fact that any manuscripts have survived at all is something hard to believe, and most probably down to the monks who had them in their care, such as Abbé Mushe. Understanding the structures and their weaknesses can help lessen the damage to the manuscripts. ‘If left undisturbed, a text block and its binding are of considerable value to the development of bibliographical studies, while any encroachment by the restorer tends to lose such value’ (Clarke 1985). He goes on to say, “certain conservation and restoration activities often have to be carried out to ensure an objects stability and continued preservation”. As the conservator continues to study book structures and work alongside book historians it is hoped that any ‘blissers’ might be minimised and historical evidence preserved. (Foote 1984)

Good handling guidelines such as restricting the angle of opening and the use of lecetons, or book supports is an obvious starting point. (National Preservation Office 2003)

References

2. Antioch was an ancient city on the Eastern side (left bank) of the Orontes River, located on the site of the modern city of Antakya, Turkey.
3. Nestorianism is the doctrine that Jesus exists as two persons, the man Jesus and the divine Son of God, rather than as a united person. Monophysite (from the Greek monos meaning ‘one’, ‘alone’ and phye meaning ‘nature’) is the Christological position that Christ has only one nature
4. Large collections of early Syriac manuscripts are held in the Vatican Library in Rome, The British Library in London, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg, the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana in Milan, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and some in collections in India. Fortunately a small number still exist in monasteries such as St Catherine’s at Mount Sinai and the Coptic Monastery of Deir Al Surian in Egypt among others.
5. E-mail correspondence with Sebastian Brock, Sept 2007.

Notes

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Figure 6 Diagram indicating where leather is cut before turning in.

Figure 7 Detail showing where spine and board area are not adhered.

Figure 8 Detail of blind tooling pattern.

Corners

Evidence suggests that a variety in the order in which the head and tail foreedges were turned in was used, as seen by the various styles of corner construction. These are described by Nicholas Pickwood in the survey on manuscripts for the St. Catherine's Survey at Mount Sinai and include:

* Lapped For over - Where the turn-ins overlap on the corners, with the head and tail turn-in lying on top of the foredge turn in

* Lapped For over - The turn-ins overlap on the corners, with the head and tail turn-ins lying on top of the foredge turn in

* Butt in - The turn-ins are mitered in such a way that the two cut edges meet edge to edge with no overlap.

* Open in - The turn-ins are mitered in such a way that there is a gap between the two cut edges.
Characterisation and analysis of early Qur’ân fragments at the Library of Congress

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Abstract
During the late 1920s, early 1930s and 1990s, the Library of Congress African and Middle Eastern Division acquired a large collection of Arabic script calligraphy sheets, ranging from the 8th to the 10th centuries. More recently, a subgroup on parchment dated from the 8th through to the 12th century was identified as comprising part of the ‘treasures’ of the Library of Congress and, required greater bibliographic and security controls. An art historian was contracted by the Conservation Division to identify the calligraphy style and texts, and place them in their historical milieu. After the initial art historical research was done, the Conservation Division was asked to characterize the materials used to produce the now identified Qur’ân fragments.

The main aim of the project was to identify colours used on the parchment sheets. Microscopic samples of pigment, ink and parchment were removed for analysis with a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) and X-ray microanalaysis was used to determine the composition of the pigments. The inks were observed under the microscope and with a Multi-Spectral camera. Digital images of the parchments fragments were shot in various modes: under infrared (IR), light, false colour infrared 2 and ultra violet (UV) fluorescence. Observations were made of the staining of inks through the absorption of UV energy by metallic pigments, the fading of iron inks in IR2, and structure of the parchment through scattering of energy in UV fluorescence. Further analytical work continues on this project with the potential use of XRF and parchment DNA analysis. The information that has already been gathered has provided insights into differences in methods of calligraphy. And the aim of the project has expanded as the Library of Congress hopes to create a baseline characterization of the Qur’ân parchment fragments and open an area of comparison for other fragments of similar date, script and region scattered in repositories around the US.

Introduction
During the late 1920s, early 1930s and 1990s, the Library of Congress’ African and Middle Eastern Division acquired a large collection of Arabic script calligraphy sheets. The collection included 355 calligraphy sheets, ranging from the 8th to the 10th centuries. Most, if not all the early sheets were acquired from the New York and Paris-based firm of Kudroll Mississian. The majority of these calligraphy sheets were written on paper with a smaller group of Qur’anic leaves executed on parchment. Though the value of individual sheets was acknowledged at the time of acquisition, little bibliographic work had been done on the collection. By the mid-seventies the early parchment Qur’ân leaves or fragments had undergone conservation treatment and were tension mounted into mats by the Restoration Office conservators under the direction of Christopher Clarkson and Peter Waters.

In 2002, the Library of Congress (LC) decided to mount the Calligraphy Collection on their website and hired Dr. Christine Gruber, an Assistant Professor of Art History at Indiana University to do a bibliographic and calligraphic description of all the calligraphy sheets as a preliminary step. In her larger descriptive work on the collection, Dr. Gruber singled out some of the Qur’ân parchment leaves as being amongst the earliest extant Islamic material in the Library of Congress as they dated from the 8th to 10th centuries.

It is axiomatic in conservation that the better the understanding of the art historical aspects of an object, the more nuanced and contextualized the interpretation of the materials that comprise the artwork. When the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) expressed interest in discovering more about the pigments in their now well-described collection of Qur’anic verses, the Conservation Division was able to develop a methodology to answer some of the curatorial concerns. AMED curators were interested in knowing if the media could be characterized so as to open an area of comparison with calligraphy sheets of similar date, script, and region within the collection, and in other cultural repositories. To this end, AMED was willing to allow microscopic sampling of pigments, ink and parchment from the original leaves. A representative sample group of eleven parchment leaves from the 8th through 12th centuries C.E. was chosen for this research project.

Most of the eleven parchment leaves are from 8th to 10th century Qur’âns or collections of Qur’anic verses and have been individually identified according to the classification system developed by Francois Dorothée. Eight of the fragments are written in various iterations of the Kufic script. One sheet, dating from the 8th century is written in Hijazi 1 and has no original decorative elements. Two leaves 18 and 19 (left/right (lr) actually three leaves) apparently pertaining to the same manuscript are in Maghribi script common to Morocco and Moorish Spain and have been dated to 1250-1330 C.E. Aside from the latter group, all of the calligraphy leaves pertain to the Middle East but have not been localized to a narrow geographical area.