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BRIEF ARTICLES

SYRIAC PAPYRUS FRAGMENTS RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN DEIR AL-SURIAN (EGYPT)

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ABSTRACT

A first description is given of a bunch of papyrus fragments that came to light in the Monastery of the Syrians in 1998. They are the remnants of a papyrus codex containing ascetical-monastic texts. On the basis of their writing, a date in the ninth century is plausible. It may be assumed that the codex belonged to the library of the Monastery, whose history can be traced back to the beginning of the ninth century. The new discovery would constitute the first evidence that papyrus codices were in use in that library.

[1] The papyrus fragments briefly presented here have come to light during reconstruction work in the keep, or *qasr*, of the Monastery of the Syrians in the course of 1998. They were found in a hall on the first floor that is known as the "oil cellar." From here a doorway gives direct access to the place that in earlier days very likely served as the library, while the "oil cellar" itself contained a number of fragments of Syriac manuscripts when Evelyn White visited the Monastery in 1920 and 1921 (Evelyn White, III, 1933, 176–7 and Plate LI).

[2] At the moment of their discovery, the fragments were stuck together and had the appearance of a wooden block of c. 11 cm. height, 8/9 cm. breadth (writing direction) and less than one cm. of thickness. The shape of the block was very irregular. Along the horizontal middle line so much damage had occurred and so much material had disappeared that the block was divided into an upper and a lower part, held together in the centre only by a few fibres of papyrus.

[3] In the months following the discovery, Father Bigoul El-Souriany and Dr. Wafika Noshy, of the Faculty of Antiquity of the University of Cairo, were able to detach the fragments one from another. In this process, however, the upper part of each leaf became unavoidably disconnected from the lower part. Moreover, only twelve fragments (representing either the upper or the lower part) remained intact; the others were broken into two or more pieces. All fragments turned out to contain Syriac text on both sides.

[4] In April 2000, Father Bigoul showed the fragments to David Jacobs (British Library, London) and Lucas Van Rompay (then University of Leiden). The latter was allowed to transcribe and study the Syriac text of six of the bigger fragments. To prevent further damage and loss, it was decided to place all fragments between glass plates, work which was meticulously carried out by David Jacobs. The fragments are presently between thirty double glass plates. Twelve plates have only one fragment (see the examples in Figs. 1–2, 4, and 5); nine have two fragments; the others have three or more (up to fourteen tiny) fragments. All plates have been photographed on both sides by Lucas Van Rompay. It should be noted that the original order of the fragments is not known and that the fragments brought together under one glass plate do not necessarily belong to the same leaf. At

present the 83 papyrus fragments are like many pieces of a double-sided jigsaw puzzle. It is only the study of the content of the text which might eventually allow us to restore the pieces to their original order.

[5] We most likely are dealing with the remnants of a papyrus codex rather than of a roll. On all edges damage has occurred: nowhere can the margins be seen and not a single line of text is preserved in its entirety. Since all the edges of the leaves have disappeared and no bifolio has survived, we have no information on the make-up of the quires. We obviously can distinguish between writing surfaces with horizontally and vertically running fibres, but this distinction does not help us to establish what the original "recto" and "verso" sides were.

[6] The papyrus seems to be of very good quality and the ink has mostly remained black and clearly visible. In a few cases fibres have become detached and have taken with them part of the text, as can be seen in Fig. 3.

[7] The writing of the fragments is a rather cursive, informal and slightly irregular *Serto*. Although the fragments exhibit some differences in the writing style and in the shape of the letters, we are inclined to think that the same hand wrote all the text. The left end and upper strokes of many letters are often very high (not only *lomad* and *mim*, but also *pe* and *yud*) and so is the final unattached *nun*, which hangs in the air. These extended letters, pointing upwards to the left, contrast and often intersect with the *'olaf* or *taw*, which mostly incline to the right. See e.g. Fig. 4, line 3: *mawtar* (*mim* and *taw*). Such criss-cross intersections give the writing a somewhat irregular appearance. The *shin*, hastily written in three strokes (right, top, and left), often has a rectangular rather than a triangular (inverted pyramid) shape, and in some instances its base is open.

[8] Although no exact parallels to this writing can be found, many of its characteristics appear in manuscripts of the second half of the ninth century, cf. the plates CIV (ms. British Library, Add. 14,580, AD 866) and CX (ms. British Library, Add. 17,194, AD 885/86) in Paine Hatch's *Album* (Paine Hatch 1946). Some similarities may even be found in manuscripts of the early tenth century, cf. the plates CXIII (ms. British Library, Or. 5021, AD 902/3), CXIV (ms. British Library, Add. 17,111, AD 927), and CXV (British Library, Add. 17,174, AD 929), the latter three

manuscripts having been written in Egypt (on ms. Or. 5021, see Brock 1995a, 74–6). Konrad Jenner drew our attention to the similarity which the fragments exhibit with the writing of the biblical manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali 58, a manuscript of unknown place and date which is dated by most scholars to the ninth century, although an earlier date cannot be ruled out (Jenner 1993, 262–4). The general appearance of the writing in this manuscript and the shape of many individual letters indeed closely resemble the writing of the fragments.

[9] On the basis of these data, one would be inclined to date the new fragments to the ninth century. However, some caution should be called for. Paine Hatch already pointed to the existence from the sixth century onwards of "a minuscule hand, more rapidly and less carefully written," which had its impact on the development of the *Serto* script and there is reason to believe that *Serto* even has much older origins (Healey 2000; cf. Jenner 1993, 264). Given the cursive and rather informal character of the writing of the new fragments, the possibility of a date (slightly) earlier than the ninth century should be left open.

[10] It should be noted that Syriac papyrus fragments recently studied by Sauget and Brock have been attributed, on the basis of their writing, to the 9th/10th and to the 10th century—although with some hesitation (Sauget 1985, 2–3; Brock 1995b, 10–1 and 18). There can be no doubt that papyrus was still available at such a late date, as can be seen from the many preserved Arabic fragments (cf., e.g., Harrauer—Horak 1993). On the other hand, the study of Syriac papyri is only in its beginning (Brashear 1998; Brock 1999) and more precise dating criteria still need to be worked out.

[11] The text contained in our papyrus fragments has not yet been identified. We are obviously dealing with an ascetical text, which speaks about God and virtuous life and which has references and allusions to the Bible. The names of Jesus, Isaiah (probably the Old Testament prophet), and John (the evangelist) occur in it. The terminology of one fragment is reminiscent of the Preface to the Gospel of John. The use of the standard vocabulary and imagery of Syriac ascetical literature would lead us to the writings of such authors as Isaiah of Scetis, Nilus, John the Solitary or Evagrius of Pontus, but other, less well-known authors are possible candidates as well. It cannot be ascertained whether we are dealing with one

work or with a collection of different works. Whatever the case may be, there are indications that there is a division into sections. One fragment has the following phrase: "now and always and for eternity. Amen" (Fig. 5, line 7), which seems to indicate the end of a section, identical to the ending of Logos XII in Draguet's edition of Abba Isaiah's *Asceticon* (Draguet 1968, I, text: 174,9; translation: 215). Another fragment has "to you is the glory for eternity of eternity …", which is very similar to the end of Logos XVIII in the same work (Draguet 1968 II, text: 287,7–9; translation: 356). One piece of ornamentation, preserved on a tiny isolated fragment, may have served to indicate the end of a chapter or book (Fig. 6). In some places there seem to be references to other sections or treatises of the same (?) work; letters are written with their numerical value, with a horizontal line on top of them. The clearest example is in a fragment which has: *men mimro d-L*… (the rest is missing), "from *mimro* 3[..]." Other examples involve the numbers 26 and 22 (Fig. 7, line 6: *men haw d-KB*).

[12] Much more work remains to be done in order to ascertain whether these fragments present a text that is also known from other sources or whether we are dealing with a unique—albeit very incomplete—witness. Whatever the result of these future investigations may be, the new fragments constitute an important addition to the fairly modest corpus of Syriac papyri. Moreover, on the basis of this new discovery one may venture the supposition that the library of Deir al-Surian, whose history can be traced back to the beginning of the ninth century (Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 182–4, with further references) contained books not only of parchment and paper, but also of papyrus.

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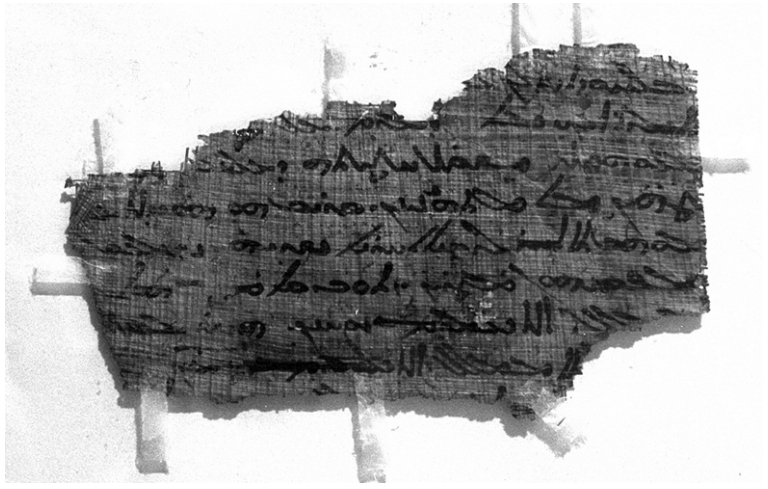
ILLUSTRATIONS:

Fig. 1 and 2: One of the bigger fragments photographed on both sides.



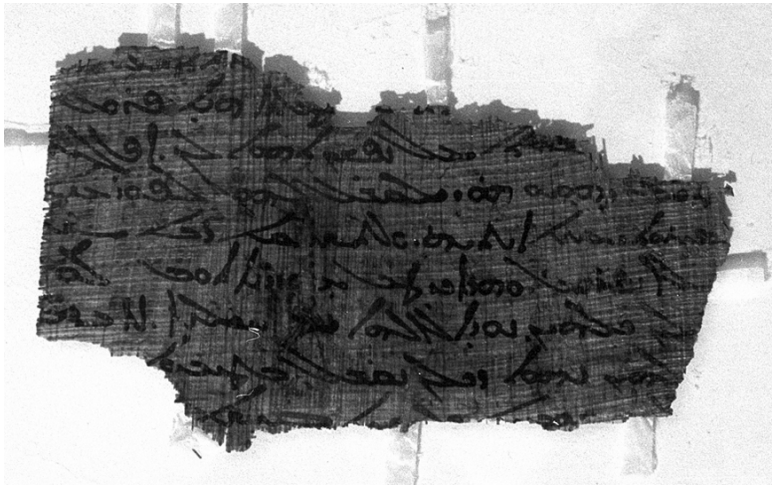


Fig. 3: Fragment on which the loss of fibre (in line 4) has caused the disappearance of text.

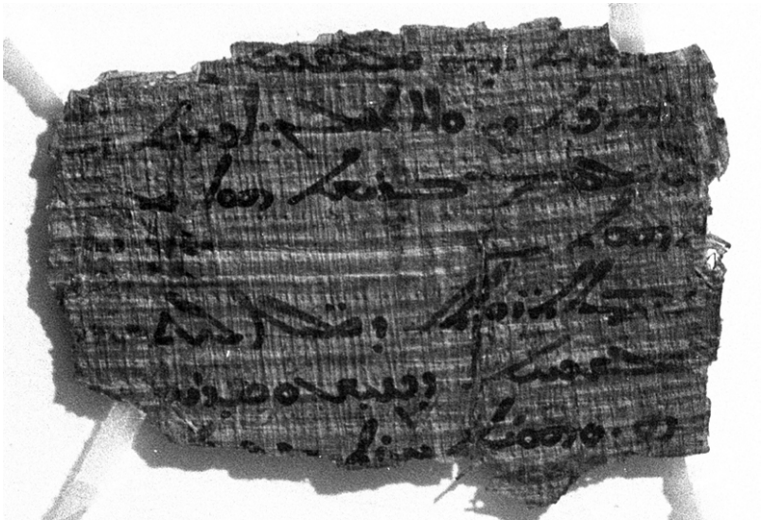


Fig. 4: One of the bigger fragments, showing the script.

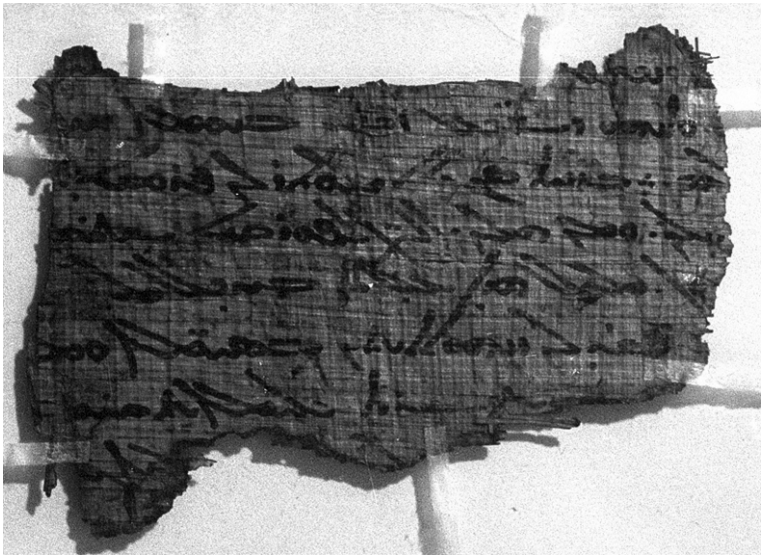


Fig. 5: Fragment showing the end of a section (?) in line 7.

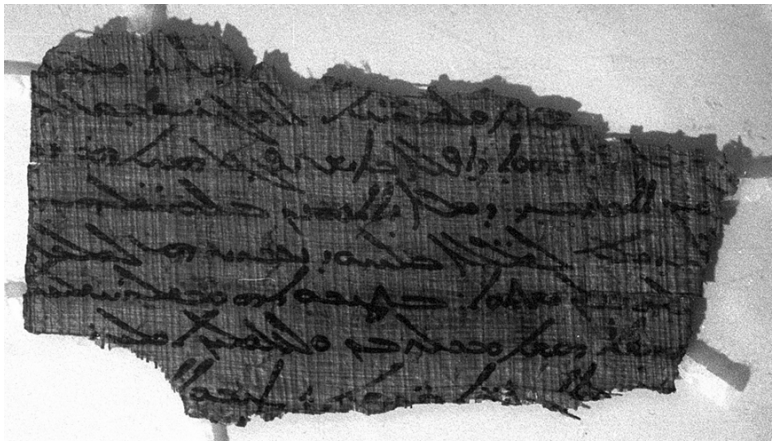


Fig. 6: Fragment with ornamentation.

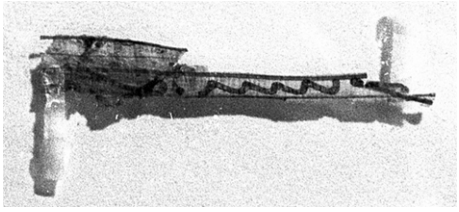


Fig. 7: Fragment showing a reference to another (part of the) work, containing the number 22 (in line 6).