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A New (Double Palimpsest) Witness to the Old Syriac Gospels (Vat. iber. 4, ff. 1 & 5)

Grigory Kessel 

Abteilung Byzanzforschung, Institut für Mittelalterforschung, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Hollandstrasse 11-13, 1020 Vienna, Austria

Email: grigory.kessel@oeaw.ac.at

Abstract

Vat. iber. 4, a membrum disjectum of the manuscript Sin. geo. 49, contains on two of its folios the Syriac Gospel text as the lowest layer (*scriptio ima*) within a double palimpsest. Comparison with known Syriac versions of the extant text – Matt 11.30–12.26 – shows that the text represents the Old Syriac version, and is particularly akin to the Curetonianus (Sy^c). On palaeographic grounds, the original Gospel manuscript can be dated to the first half of the sixth century. The fragment is so far the only known vestige of the fourth manuscript witness to the Old Syriac version.

Keywords: Old Syriac version; Syriac Gospels; Syriac manuscripts and palimpsests; Curetonianus

1. Introduction

In 1977, Bruce Metzger reported that '[e]xcept for the Sinaitic and Curetonian manuscripts no other copy of the Gospels in the Old Syriac version has been identified with certainty'.¹ The situation changed in 2016 when Sebastian Brock introduced the extant part of a third manuscript, based on multi-spectral images produced by the Sinai Palimpsests Project.² Six folios from a Gospel manuscript are present as undertext in Sin. syr. M37N, and another seventeen and a half folios of the same manuscript were

¹ B.M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 38. Referring to an earlier publication by A. Atiya (A.S. Atiya, 'Codex Arabicus (Sinai Arabic Ms. No. 514)', *Homage to a Bookman: Essays on Manuscripts, Books and Printing Written for Hans P. Kraus on His 60th Birthday, Oct. 12, 1967* (ed. H. Lehmann-Haupt; Berlin: Mann, 1967) 75–85), Metzger cautiously mentions the possible presence of the Old Syriac version as an undertext in Sin. ar. 514 (Metzger, *Early Versions*, 38 n. 4). The opinion was, however, dismissed later by S. Brock, who showed that the Gospel text does in fact represent the Peshitta version (S.P. Brock, 'A Palimpsest Folio of Matt. 20:23–31 (Peshitta) in Sinai Ar. 514 ("Codex Arabicus")', *Orientalia* 61:2 (1992) 102–5). For the identification of the multiple undertexts in Sin. ar. 514, see now G. Kessel, 'A Catacomb of Syriac Texts: Codex Arabicus (Sin. ar. 514) Revisited', *New Light on Old Manuscripts: The Sinai Palimpsest Project and Recent Advances in Palimpsest Studies* (ed. C. Rapp, J. Grusková, G. Rossetto and G. Kessel; Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, forthcoming).

² S.P. Brock, 'Two Hitherto Unattested Passages of the Old Syriac Gospels in Palimpsests from St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai', *Δελτίο Βιβλικών Μελετών* 31.1 (2016) 7–18. An initial identification of the Gospel undertext was made by Mother Philothea of Sinai (Philothée du Sinäi, *Nouveaux manuscrits syriaques du Sinäi* (Athènes: Fondation du Mont Sinäi, 2008) 405–9, 425–35).

identified in Sin. syr. M39N. According to Brock, the Gospel manuscript is datable to the sixth century.³

In the course of my recent study of the Syriac undertexts present in the manuscript Vat. iber. 4, it has been possible to identify the Syriac Gospel text on ff. 1 and 5 as containing Matt 11.30–12.26 in the Old Syriac version.⁴

Vat. iber. 4 was likely acquired by the Vatican library in the mid-20th century.⁵ Although – thanks to a brief note by a Georgian scholar M. Tarchnišvili – scholars were already aware of it in 1953, since then the manuscript has been considered lost.⁶ In 2010 the manuscript was re-discovered and in 2020 it was digitised, and the resulting natural light and UV images were added to the Digital Vatican Library.⁷

The Vatican manuscript is, in fact, only a *membrum disjectum* that originally belonged to a Georgian manuscript kept at the monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, under shelf mark Sin. geo. 49 and containing the *Iadgari* (collection of liturgical hymnography).⁸ This Georgian manuscript is a palimpsest throughout and was produced from multiple parts of originally independent manuscripts in various languages. In its present form, codex Sin. geo. 49 is defective and lacks the first twenty quires, as well as some leaves at the end, including a colophon. Despite the loss of the colophon, analysis of the manuscript's handwriting led specialists to propose that it was copied by a well-known Georgian scribe, Iovane Zosime, who was active during the second half of the tenth century, first at the monastery of St. Sabas in Palestine, and later at the monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai.⁹

The remaining part of the manuscript kept at the monastery does not seem to contain other leaves that belonged to the same Gospel manuscript as the fragment preserved in Vat. iber. 4.¹⁰

³ David G.K. Taylor (Oxford) is preparing a complete edition of the two fragments, as well as a new edition of the Sinaiticus, cf. D.G.K. Taylor, 'New Developments in the Textual Study of the Old Syriac Gospels', *At One Remove: The Text of the New Testament in Early Translations and Quotations. Papers from the Eleventh Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (ed. H.A.G. Houghton and P. Montoro; Texts and Studies 24; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020) 1–42.

⁴ See Figures 1–2 and 3–4. For the identification of other Syriac undertexts in this manuscript, see G. Kessel, 'Membra disjecta sinaitica III: Two (Palimpsest) Fragments of Sin. geo. 49 and Their Four Syriac Undertexts', *The Vatican Library Review* 1:2 (2022) 257–70.

⁵ The manuscript remains uncatalogued. No archival information pertaining to the acquisition of this manuscript has been found so far (personal communication from András Németh), but it is likely that the manuscript belonged to the private collection of Friedrich Grote (cf. Kessel, 'Membra disjecta sinaitica III', 258 n. 11).

⁶ In 1984, Bernard Outtier could only report with regret that Mons. Paul Canart (*scriptor graecus* of the Vatican Library) was unable to trace it in the holdings of the library (B. Outtier, 'Notule sur les versions orientales de l'*Histoire philothée* (CPG 6221)', *ANTIΔΩΡON. Hommage à Maurits Geerard pour célébrer l'achèvement de la Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (ed. J. Noret; Wetteren: Cultura, 1984) 73–80, here 74). For the reference to the note (published in Georgian) of Tarchnišvili see Outtier, 'Notule sur les versions orientales', 74.

⁷ https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.iber.4 (accessed 25 October, 2021).

⁸ On this Georgian type of liturgical book, see S.S.R. Frøyshov, 'The Georgian Witness to the Jerusalem Liturgy: New Sources and Studies,' *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Selected Papers of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy (Rome, 17–21 September 2008)* (ed. B. Groen, S. Hawkes-Teeple, & S. Alexopoulos; Eastern Christian Studies 12; Leuven: Peeters, 2012) 227–67 and S. Kujumdzieva, *The Hymnographic Book of Tropologion: Sources, Liturgy and Chant Repertory* (London: Routledge, 2018) 3–6, 30–53.

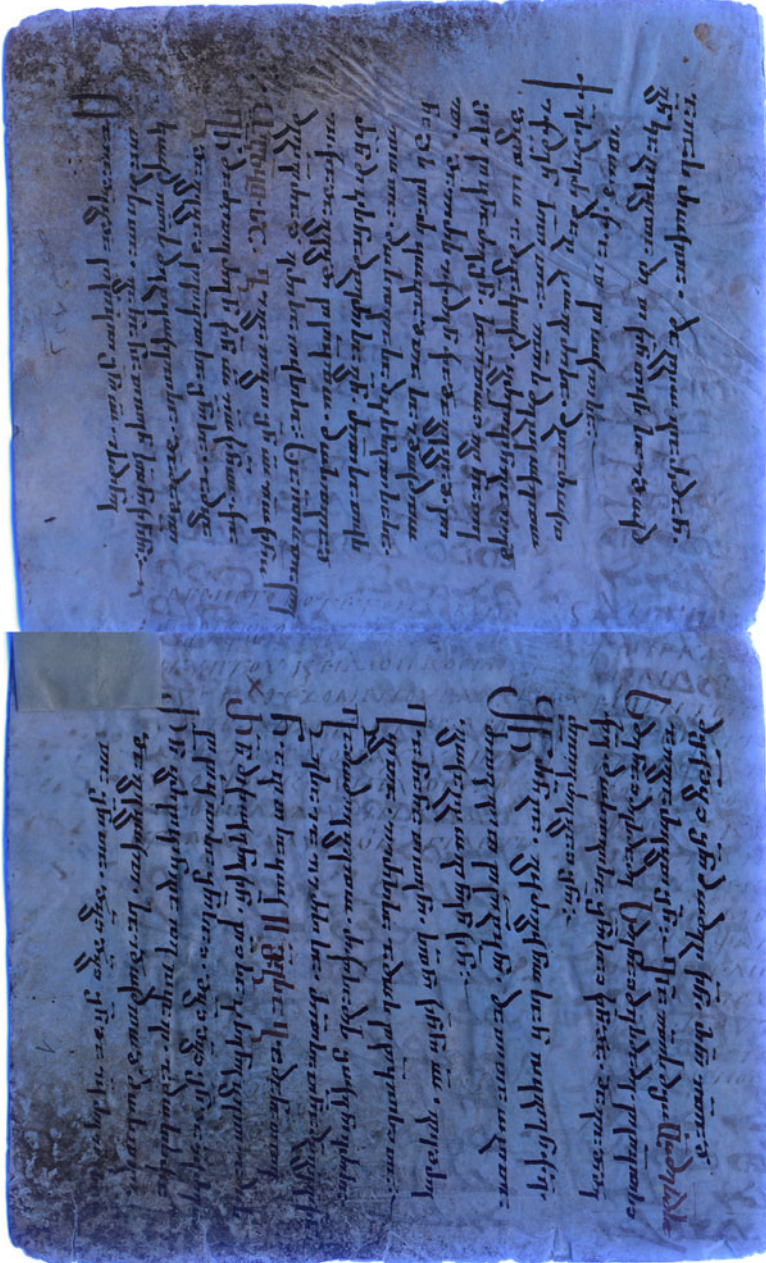
⁹ E. Metreveli, et al., *ქართულ ხელნაწერთა აღწერილობა: სინური კოლექცია* [*Description of Georgian Manuscripts: Sinai collection*], vol. I (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1978), 156–62, here 156–7.

¹⁰ A description of the multiple undertexts of Sin. geo. 49, as well as the multi-spectral images, is available at <https://sinai.library.ucla.edu> (accessed 25 October, 2021). It is worth mentioning, however, that the same Georgian manuscript (Sin. geo. 49) may well preserve the fragments from yet another ancient copy of the Old Syriac Gospels; this part of Sin. geo. 49 is double palimpsest and only a few lines are legible (Kessel, 'Membra disjecta sinaitica III', 259–60 and 262).



Figures 1–2. Vat. Iber. 4, ff. 5r + 1v (= recto)

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Figures 3–4. Vat. Iber. 4, ff. 5v + 1r (= verso)

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The identification of further *membra disjecta* may bring to light additional leaves of the same Gospel manuscript.¹¹

Ff. 1 and 5 of Vat. iber. 4 constitute a bifolium. Within the original Syriac Gospel manuscript, this bifolium was a single leaf, with Gospel text arranged in two columns with 28–30 lines. The recto side of the leaf is today ff. 5r+1v, whereas the verso side is 5v+1r. The presence of two sewing stations on the right-hand side of f. 5r and f. 1v enables us to posit that within the original Gospel manuscript this leaf formed the left-hand side of the bifolium.

Thus, an original bifolium from a Gospel manuscript was cut in two, trimmed, and folded for reuse as a bifolium in the production of the Georgian manuscript. As a result of the trimming, about half of one of the columns was cut off, as well as a side and a lower margin.

In its present form, the size of the trimmed Syriac leaf is 27 × 15.7 cm (the page size of Sin. geo. 49 is 15.7 × 13.5 cm). In its original form – before it was trimmed – a folio must have measured ca. 30 × 23 cm. A Gospel book Vat. sir. 12, dated to 548 CE, is roughly the same size, 30.4 × 23.6 cm. The Curetonianus (British Library, Add. 14451) likewise has similar dimensions, 30 × 24 cm. On the other hand, both the Sinaiticus and the fragmentary manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels studied by Brock are of somewhat smaller size, ca. 22 × 16 and 22 × 17 cm respectively (the folios of both manuscripts were trimmed but only slightly). Hence, the original Gospel manuscript to which the Vatican fragment once belonged, was of significantly larger size than both the Sinaiticus and the fragmentary Gospel manuscript.¹² Consequently, there remains no doubt that the original Gospel manuscript of the Vatican fragment is different from that whose fragments are today preserved in Sin. syr. M37N + M39N.

Given that the text of the Vatican folio represents roughly 0.6% of the complete text of the Four Gospels, the original Gospel manuscript must have occupied some 160 folios, or sixteen quires.¹³ For the sake of comparison, one might mention that the Sinaiticus in its original form consisted of some 164 folios; Curetonianus, 177 folios; and the fragmentary manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels, 150 folios.¹⁴

As far as the dating of the Gospel book is concerned, there can be no doubt that it was produced no later than the sixth century. Despite a limited number of dated manuscripts from this period, comparison with dated Syriac manuscripts allows us to narrow down a possible time frame to the first half of the sixth century.¹⁵

¹¹ At the point of writing, three *membra disjecta* have been identified: BnF géorgien 30 (Outtier, 'Notule sur les versions orientales', 73–5), Sin. geo. N97 (Z. Aleksidze et al., *Κατάλογος γεωργιανών χειρογράφων εὑρεθέντων κατὰ τὸ 1975 εἰς τὴν ἱερὰν μονὴν τῶν Θεοβαδίστου ὄρους Σινᾶ Ἁγίας Αἰκατερίνης* / სინის მთაზე წმ. ეკატერინეს მონასტერში 1975 წელს აღმოჩენილ ქართულ ხელნაწერთა აღწერილობა / *Catalogue of Georgian Manuscripts discovered in 1975 at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai* (Athens: Greek Ministry of Culture / Mt. Sinai Foundation, 2005) 158, 310, 437) and Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Ms. Frag. 32 (Kessel, 'Membra disjecta sinaitica III') – all the fragments are palimpsests but none of the reused folios belonged to the Gospel manuscript under consideration. A study of the two newly found fragments (Vat. iber. 4 and Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Ms. Frag. 32) and their location within Sin. geo. 49 is under preparation by Bernard Outtier.

¹² For a brief examination of different patterns of parchment size see M.M. Mango, 'The Production of Syriac manuscripts, 400–700 AD', *Scrittura, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali di Bisanzio* (Atti del seminario di Erice (Erice, 18–25 settembre 1988), vol. 1 (ed. G. Cavallo, G. De Gregorio and M. Maniaci; Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1991) 161–79, here 175–6.

¹³ The calculations are based on the standard extent of the Peshitta version, and therefore have only an approximate value.

¹⁴ Taylor, 'New Developments', 32.

¹⁵ See, for example, British Library, Add. 14455 (CE 532), as reproduced in W.H.P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston, 1946; repr. with an additional Foreword by L. Van Rompay, Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), plate xiv, British Library, Add. 17107 (CE 540/1), Hatch, *An Album*, plate xix, and Vat. sir. 12 (CE 548), Hatch, *An Album*, plate xx.

The Syriac Gospel manuscript, in its turn – or at least the folio under consideration – was reused for the *Apophthegmata patrum* in Greek.¹⁶

Collation of the Gospel text based on the UV images produced by the Vatican library, enables us to establish that the extant text is identical to the Curetonianus (British Library, Add. 14451). Although in a number of instances the Curetonianus and the Sinaiticus agree against the Peshitta (Matt 12.5, 12.6, 12.7a, 12.7b, 12.8, 12.10a, 12.11b, 12.12, 12.13, 12.19a, 12.24b), there is significant evidence to demonstrate the absolute agreement of the Vatican fragment with the Curetonianus as against the Sinaiticus (Matt 12.1b, 12.2, 12.3, 12.4, 12.9, 12.10b, 12.11a, 12.16, 12.17, 12.19b, 12.21, 12.22, 12.23, 12.24a, 12.25).

It goes without saying that a discovery of a new witness to the Old Syriac version, and specifically its remarkable agreement with the Curetonianus, deserves to be studied in the context of the transmission history of the Gospel text in Syriac.¹⁷ It is particularly worthy of consideration, if this new witness can contribute to the evaluation of the text attested by the Curetonianus as being more widespread and authoritative, as opposed to the text of the Sinaiticus. Before any definitive conclusions are drawn, it is, however, greatly hoped that further leaves of this Syriac Gospel book will be detected among the yet-to-be-found *membra disjecta* of codex Sin. geo. 49.

Collation:¹⁸

Matt 12.1a

ܣܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ S
 ܥܘܪܝܬܐ C P
 ܘܪܝܬܐ V

Matt 12.1b

× S P
 ܥܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ C
 ܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ V

Matt 12.2

ܣܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ S*
 ܥܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ C
 ܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ P
 ܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ (ܕܝܫܘܥܝܫܐ) V

¹⁶ A study of the Greek undertext is under preparation by András Németh (the Vatican Library).
¹⁷ For a recent survey of the Old Syriac version, see J.-Cl. Haelewyck, 'Les Vieilles versions syriaques des Évangiles', *Le Nouveau Testament en syriaque* (ed. J.-Cl. Haelewyck; Études syriaques 14; Paris: Paul Geuthner, 2017) 67–113; J.-Cl. Haelewyck, 'The Old Syriac Versions of the Gospels: A Status Quaestionis (From 1842 to the Present Day)', *Bulletin de l'Académie Belge pour l'Étude des Langues Anciennes et Orientales* 8 (2019) 141–79 and Taylor, 'New Developments'.
¹⁸ The collation includes only those instances in which the Old Syriac version is different from the Peshitta; hence the legible portions of the Vatican palimpsest fragment are not provided if it agrees with both the Old Syriac version and the Peshitta. The Syriac text of the Sinaiticus (S), Curetonianus (C) and that of Peshitta (P) is reproduced based on G.A. Kiraz (ed.), *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshittâ and Harklean Versions* (New Testament Tools and Studies 21.1; Leiden: Brill, 1996), but includes emendations to A.S. Lewis' edition of the Sinaiticus by D.G.K. Taylor in his forthcoming edition of the Sinaiticus that he most kindly shared with me ahead of publication (the verses with textual modifications are marked with an asterisk). It is to be noted that the parallel passage in the Sinaiticus is very difficult to decipher but the availability of the multi-spectral images enabled Taylor to prepare much more reliable text than, as a matter of fact, is significantly different from Lewis' on several occasions. One more caveat is to be added: the diacritical signs are not always visible in the UV images and their absence in the following comparison is to be regarded with caution.

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