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The Case of the East Syriac Lectionary *Sir. 26*: Improvement or Forgery?¹

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Abstract: Among Syriac manuscripts of the Institute of the Oriental Manuscripts in Saint Petersburg, there is an East Syriac lectionary *Sir. 26*. Being an Evangelary (Evangelion), it is meant for the Gospel lections of the whole liturgical year. The manuscript contains a number of miniatures that were added to it later, as pointed out by Nina V. Pigulevskaia. The additional folia with the miniatures contain also the date of completion and the name of the person involved. Besides, a part of the representations is marked in his hand as ‘a new image’, while the others are called ‘an old image’. Their iconographic features and the data provided by the notes enable us to see in a new light various tendencies that appeared in the manuscript production of the Chaldean (East Syriac Catholic) Church in the 19th — early 20th cc. Besides, the ‘restorer’ wrote quatrains in the miniatures that used to accompany the latter, hence they became an important element of the manuscript illumination.

Key words: East Syriac lectionary, European art market, manuscript miniature, calligraphy, Alphonse Mingana

General characteristics of the manuscript and history of study

The collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Science in St. Petersburg possesses manuscript *Sir. 26*, which is an East Syriac Gospel lectionary (Evangelion) containing readings from the Gospel for the entire church liturgical year. The manuscript has repeatedly attracted attention of the scholars studying artistic decoration of Syriac Church manuscripts.

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period. The author of the note, Abrāḥām Šekwānā (1849–1931), was a Chaldean Church priest, poet, and scribe active in the late 19th — early 20th cc.⁸ This scribe, from the famous Alqosh family of Šekwānā, who were literati and scribes, was active in copying manuscripts, of which about thirty have survived.⁹ Lists of this author’s own works, including poems, are known as well.¹⁰ In their notes, scribes of this family usually mention the name of their ancestor, the prominent poet and scribe Isrāel of Alqosh (early 17th c.), also known as the founder of the poetic tradition in the New Aramaic dialect of Northern Iraq.¹¹

The contemporary scholar Natalia S. Smelova has studied in detail the history of this manuscript’s provenance.¹² The lectionary is one of twelve manuscripts originating from Northern Iraq, acquired in 1910 and now conventionally referred to as the ‘Dietrich Collection’. The formation of this small collection is linked to the personality of Alphonse Mingana (1878–1937), then a teacher at the Chaldean (Syro-Catholic) Seminary in Mosul (until 1913), who was also a manuscript collector.¹³ He insisted on transporting this group of manuscripts to Germany, where it was described by the Berlin theologian and biblical scholar Gustav Dietrich in 1909.¹⁴ Natalia Smelova has suggested that Abrāḥām Šekwānā carried out the ‘improvement’ of the lectionary of *Sir. 26* on behalf of Alphonse Mingana in order to increase the price at the sale. This collector is known to have used Abrāḥām’s services to ‘improve’ manuscripts.¹⁵ In this case, too, according to the researcher, the paper of the inserts with miniatures was also intentionally aged.¹⁶

⁸ SAMIR 1982; KAUFHOLD 1983; KESSEL 2011.

⁹ KESSEL 2011: 40.

¹⁰ Primarily in the collection of the Chaldean Church of Alqosh: DCA 00015 (poems added at the end after the Psalms text), DCA 00033; and also at least one manuscript in the Chaldean Church of Thrissur, India, where it came from Alqosh: APSTCH THRI 00068. They all have been digitized, cataloged, and are fully available online at the vHMML:

DCA 00015: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/128670>.

DCA 00033: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/128688>.

APSTCH THRI 00068: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/138285>.

¹¹ See, e.g., MENGOSZI 2002; MURRE-VAN DEN BERG 2015: 93, 189–192.

¹² SMELOVA 2018a: 121; SMELOVA 2018b: 51.

¹³ KIRAZ 2011: 292–293.

¹⁴ SMELOVA 2018a: 120.

¹⁵ There is an example of their joint work, which was intended to deliberately falsify a manuscript. This is the famous list of the History of Arbela, the forgery of which largely calls into question the authenticity of the text itself. See KESSEL 2013: 40; SAMIR 1982: 217.

¹⁶ SMELOVA 2018b: 51, cat. 15.

These considerations seem correct, especially with regard to the identification of the participants in this process and their relationships. Undoubtedly, the manuscript in question originally did not have any miniatures. This is evident, among other things, from the quire foliation, in which there are and have been no losses, and the new leaves with miniatures that are additional paste-ups between pre-existing leaves with text. In addition, as far as we know, only the lectionaries of a particularly ornate format that were usually written in the monumental *Estrangela* handwriting were typically decorated with miniatures,¹⁷ while *Sir. 26* is scribed in East Syriac (Nestorian) cursive. Such folios frequently feature modest decorative borders, which we observe on the manuscript's main leaves (see, e.g., f. 13r, 20v).¹⁸

Decorative program: forgery or handbook of the manuscript decoration?

A number of ornamental features of the manuscript and the inscriptions accompanying the miniatures raise questions about the decoration program or, more precisely, the renovation of this lectionary. First, some of the images are labeled as 'old image' (ܩܝܡܝܢ ܥܘܠܡܝܢ), some as 'new image' (ܩܝܡܝܢ ܨܕܝܩܝܢ), and some are left unlabeled altogether. In addition, many of the miniatures bear the date: 1908, written by the same hand, i.e., by Abrāhām Šekwānā. Moreover, this date is present both on the miniatures labeled 'new' (see f. 33v) and those labeled 'old' (see ff. 101v, 141v, 150v). If the 'restorer' had intended to make the miniatures older, he would hardly have inscribed the actual date of their completion. Moreover, it is not quite clear how these two markings should be understood, given that both marked groups of images were added later, and simultaneously, to a manuscript that originally contained no miniatures at all, as we noted above. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider in more detail which particular miniatures are accompanied by each of these characteristics, or lack thereof.

Labeled as 'new' are: *a cross with a crucifix (f. 28v; pl. 1)*, *a decorative border with a portal enclosing the text of the Lord's Prayer (f. 33v; pl. 2)*, *a cross with geometric ornamentation (f. 84v)*. First, for the East Syriac tradition the crucifixion is not characteristic, the cross is always depicted

¹⁷ See, for example, PRITULA 2020a.

¹⁸ We discuss these features of the design of the lectionaries in more detail in special articles: PRITULA 2020a; PRITULA 2020b.

without it. It is usually filled with a geometric ornament and is often surrounded by various architectural forms. Therefore, this composition, which is not typical of the decoration of Syriac manuscripts, is obviously a European influence, most likely brought in after the accession of the East Syriac Church (the patriarchal line of the Rabban Hurmizd monastery) to the Catholic Church in 1830. The same applies to the second image, which is a decorative border in the form of a stylized portal enclosing the text of the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is not usually accented by such portals; moreover, it is depicted in three-dimensional perspective, which again is not characteristic of the Syriac manuscript tradition. As far as we know, portals of this shape appear in manuscripts in the 19th c. and are more characteristic of the West Syriac (i.e., Jacobite) tradition.¹⁹

The following miniatures are marked as 'old image': *the frontispiece in the shape of a portal* (f. 1v; see pl. 3), *the scene of the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem* (f. 69v), *the cross with geometric ornament* (f. 96v; see pl. 4), *the cross with two lamps* (f. 141v), and *a finispiece ('carpet-page') in the form of a cross with geometric ornament* (f. 150v; see pl. 5). All these miniatures are executed in accordance with a rigid iconographic canon, which is followed by the extant East Syriac manuscripts from the 16th c. to the beginning of the 20th c., numbering in the dozens, if not hundreds.²⁰

One more example of the cooperation of the same two persons is the manuscript *Syr. 537*, in the collection of Mingana at Birmingham that was evidently commissioned by him. The copyist clearly had no intention of creating a forgery. The colophon gives his name as Abrāhām Šekwānā and the date of the correspondence: 2222 AH/1911 AD (f. 123v).²¹ The manuscript is written in monumental Estrangela and decorated with a set of miniatures standard for lectionaries of this format. The miniatures, clearly executed by the copyist himself, are extremely similar in style and iconography to those of the St. Petersburg manuscript.

The best known East Syriac decorated Gospel lectionary is a unique artifact executed by 'Aṭṭāyā, a prominent 16th c. calligrapher who worked in both Gazarta and Alqoṣh; this manuscript, now in the Vatican Library (Borg.

¹⁹ See, for example, manuscripts from collections digitized by vHMML and available online: Al-Tahira Syrian Orthodox Church, Mosul — SOCTQM 00003 (1910), SOCTQM 00004 (late 19th c.); Saint George Syrian Orthodox Church, Bartella — SGSCCB 00003 (1808); Mor Aksenoyo Church, Midiyat — MACM 00001 (1954).

²⁰ For instance, Borg. Sir. 169, DCA 00096, CCB 00009, CCM 00063, CCM 00059 (PRITULA 2020a).

²¹ MINGANA 1933: 979–984.

Sir. 169), was created by the calligrapher during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1576.²² Its decoration was probably influenced by the West Syrian pictorial tradition.²³ Overall, it remains not entirely clear to what extent the decoration of this piece influenced subsequent manuscript production. In one way or another, all East Syriac Gospel lectionaries decorated with miniatures date from later times and repeat the compositions of this manuscript completely. Such are the ones labeled in the manuscript Sir. 26 as 'old'. The compositions like the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem (f. 69v) are especially characteristic. Its obligatory features are the following: children sitting on trees and people placing their clothes under the feet of a donkey. This iconography appears already in the manuscript production of 'Aṭṭāyā of Gazarta.²⁴ Also traditional and even canonical is a cross filled with geometric ornament (f. 96v), as well as a cross with two hanging lamps on its sides (f. 141v). This composition is also known already in the 16th c.²⁵ Finally, a finispiece (a carpet-page) with a cross filled with geometrical ornamentation occupying the whole folio field. This decorative element, which usually completes the decorative program of manuscripts, is very traditional (see, for example, Borg. Sir. 169, f. 50v). Of course, in all these cases there is no crucifixion, for it is not characteristic of the East Syriac tradition, as mentioned above.

Thus, the mentioned marking probably characterizes the manner and style of the images: traditional or innovative, i.e. Europeanized. The image of St. George on horseback (f. 101r) and the scene of the adoration of the Magi (f. 9v, see pl. 6) are left without any markings at all. Both of these images are unconventional in terms of iconography. As noted above, the second of these compositions attracted the attention of researchers for this very reason. The first of them, the image of St. George, is also quite unusual for the Syriac figurative tradition. The image of this saint, like other miniatures of the manuscript, is an obligatory part of the decoration of a decorated lectionary, but usually this saint is depicted in a flatter, static manner (see, for example, Borg. Sir. 169, f. 87v); in addition, the shape of the saint's headdress and the form of the dragon are unusual. On traditional miniatures of East Syriac lectionaries the saint is depicted without a headdress, with a halo, while the dragon is depicted as a serpent (limbs are absent), with two

²² The manuscript is available in its entirety on the Vatican Library website: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Borg.sir.169.

²³ LEROY 1964: 404–408.

²⁴ PRITULA 2020a; Borg. Sir. 169, f. 64v.

²⁵ PRITULA 2020a; Borg. Sir. 169, ff. 82r, 95r.

kinks in its body.²⁶ Obviously, these two miniatures were made under the influence of images other than those used in East Syriac manuscripts. Whether they were European or Middle Eastern, but of a different style and character, remains unclear. It is also unclear whether the two images were left unmarked ('old' or 'new') by accident or whether this was done intentionally. The latter seems more likely, since these images are not trivial.

Thus, it can be assumed that at the request of the seller, probably Alphonse Mingana, Abrāhām Šekwānā added miniatures to the manuscript to increase its value. He added on pastedown sheets that set of miniatures that was standard for an expensive, decorated lectionary, thus 'upshifting' the manuscript. In doing so, he approached the process thoroughly and creatively: he used the various styles and trends that existed at the time in the manuscript decoration and documented this in detail, providing as much information as possible. Thus, the intention was to accompany the manuscript with a selection of examples of decoration in various styles, which could have been a very valuable addition for a potential buyer in Europe. It is possible that Alphonse Mingana himself had the idea of creating such a manuscript decoration 'manual'.

This is especially evident in the two decorative borders filled with geometric ornamentation, executed by the same hand and located on the same sheet, one below the other (f. 1v). The upper one is characterized as 'old' and the lower one as 'new'. At the same time, they do not differ from each other in technique and color solution; hence, the difference must lie in the ornamental style itself. Thus, the decorator obviously juxtaposed two samples: one of traditional ornamentation, the other of more modern ornamentation, so that they contrasted with each other.

Quatrains inscribed in miniatures of the lectionary of Sir. 26

As noted above, three quatrains are inscribed in the miniatures of the manuscript of Sir. 26, two of them are integrated in a composition with a cross in the center. They contain a prayer for the scribe in poetic form. Such poems became, at least from the 16th c., an important part of the artistic design of manuscripts. They were incorporated into decorative compositions, most often with images of the cross. The earliest manuscript known to us

²⁶ See, for example, manuscript CCB 00009 (f. 80v), in the collection of the Chaldean Church of Batnaya, Iraq; available on the vHMML website: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/135415>.

with such poems is the above-mentioned lectionary of Borg. Sir. 169, written by ‘Attāyā in 1576. Such scribal poems became even more widespread thereafter, with many of them being in use for several centuries, and each scribe inserting his own name into them. We discuss the typology and circulation of such texts in two special articles.²⁷

The two quatrains inscribed in the composition with the cross in *Sir. 26* are among such ‘wandering’ scribal poems. It is quite significant that during this ‘renovation’, Abrāhām Šekwānā felt it necessary to inscribe them in miniatures with the cross, as had been practiced for centuries, certainly inserting his own name in them. Thus this kind of poetry becomes an indispensable element in the decorative program of the traditional Church book manuscripts.

1) The quatrain is inscribed in two compositions: a cross with geometric ornamentation filled with ‘wattle’ (f. 84v) — in Nestorian cursive on both sides of the cross in two lines each, — and in the composition of a cross with two lamps (f. 141v):

ܐܘ ܕܡܫܬܐ ܫܡܬܐ ܕܟܪܫܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ: ܘܕܒܠܕ ܩܚܐ ܡܢ ܒܘܕܝܬܐ.
 ܠܟܪܫܬܐ ܕܒܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ: ܠܚܝܬܐ ܘܠܝܫܐ ܕܟܪܫܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ.

Oh, who bore the Cross of reproach
 and endured the slap of the slave,
 guide your servant Abrāhām
 to Your assembly, and make him rejoice with Your chosen ones!

2) The quatrain is inscribed in the composition of the cross with geometric ornamentation filled with ‘wattle’ (f. 96v) in small Nestorian cursive at the very bottom of the folio, below the decorative border enclosing the composition.

ܫܡܬܐ ܐܘ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ ܫܡܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ: ܘܕܒܠܕ ܩܚܐ ܡܢ ܒܘܕܝܬܐ.
 ܘܕܒܠܕ ܩܚܐ ܡܢ ܒܘܕܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ: ܠܟܪܫܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ ܕܝܫܫܬܐ.

Look, oh brother and beloved one
 and contemplate this Cross,
 and ask mercy from the beneficent one
 about the scribe Abrāhām!

²⁷ PRITULA 2020a; PRITULA 2020b.

One more quatrain inscribed on the sides of the composition of the *Adoration of the Magi* (f. 9v). Unlike the two quatrains above, this one has not occurred in other manuscripts. Since the miniature depicting the *Adoration of the Magi*, as noted above, differs from other known ones and is innovative, it seems reasonable to assume that the poem was written specifically for this pictorial context. This is also indicated by the fact that, unlike other quatrains, this one is written in eight-syllable meter rather than seven-syllable, which is not typical for such scribal poems. It is very likely that it was composed by Abrāhām himself, the ‘restorer’ of this manuscript, also known as the author of poems of various forms.

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ
 ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ
 ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ

In the days of Caesar Augustus.
 The kings of Fars, twelve magi
 presented abundant gifts to Jesus.
 They despised Herod and mocked him.

Thus, new scribal quatrains of this kind appeared, replenishing the already existing quatrains, expanding the repertoire of texts that had already become an important part of the artistic design of manuscripts.

Restoration and renovation of manuscripts in Alqosh in the late 19th–20th cc.

In general, ‘renovation’ of church-book manuscripts was a fairly common activity for Abrāhām Šekwānā and his contemporaries, the Alqosh scribes. At the same time, it was usually related to ecclesiastical needs rather than to the Western market. Many such repaired manuscripts are still in the library of the Chaldean Church of Alqosh. At least one manuscript restored by Abrāhām has survived. This is another copy of the Gospel lectionary (the current source-number is DCA 00096). It was scribed by the aforementioned calligrapher ‘Aṭṭāyā in 1585 in the monumental *Estrangela* handwriting, and contains a number of miniatures.²⁸ On f. 108r, there is a note about the

²⁸ The manuscript has been described and digitized; available at vHMML, permanent link: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/208321>. For more on this manuscript. See PRITULA 2020a.

losses, i.e. repaired; this meaning is not uncommon for the word. Besides, the same chain of the three verbs occurs in similar restoration notes in other manuscripts, which makes us think it is a standard formulary. Among these manuscripts there is a lectionary QACCT 00010 (Qalb al-Aqdas Chaldean Church of Tel Keppe) written by ‘Atṭāyā in 1556 and restored in Alqosh in 1902 (f. 132r).²⁹ One more sample is a Ḥudrā book, ACK 00030 (Chaldean Church of Kirkuk) scribed in 1733 and restored in 1867 in Bēt Slōk, i.e. Kirkuk (f. 251v).³⁰

The ‘restoration’ is also exemplified by a decorated lectionary manuscript in the collection of the Chaldean Church of Alqosh (DCA 00006), written in 1696 by the scribe Hōmō,³¹ that was restored and at least part of the work was done by the schoolboy Joseph (ܝܫܘܥ ܒܢ ܝܫܘܥ) in 1909, who drew the miniatures in the year reported in his postscripts (ff. 2r, 53v). At the same time Joseph also inscribed the above two quatrains in the composition with the cross, where, of course, he inserted his name (f. 105v). This is another confirmation that the above-mentioned scribal verses became an integral part of the decoration program of manuscripts, more precisely, of the Gospel lectionaries.

The restoration of manuscripts belonging to Alqosh churches at the turn of the twentieth century was undoubtedly a widespread phenomenon that requires special study. It remains to study all the notes in the manuscripts of the East Syriac collections, to establish the names of the people involved in this process, as well as the names of the churches in whose libraries it was carried out. However, we can say with reasonable certainty that, unlike the other two examples of ‘renovation’, the St. Petersburg manuscript clearly represents a sample of the art market influence, most likely European. Therefore, one cannot but agree with Natalia Smelova’s assertion that such revision was intended to increase the value of the manuscript.³²

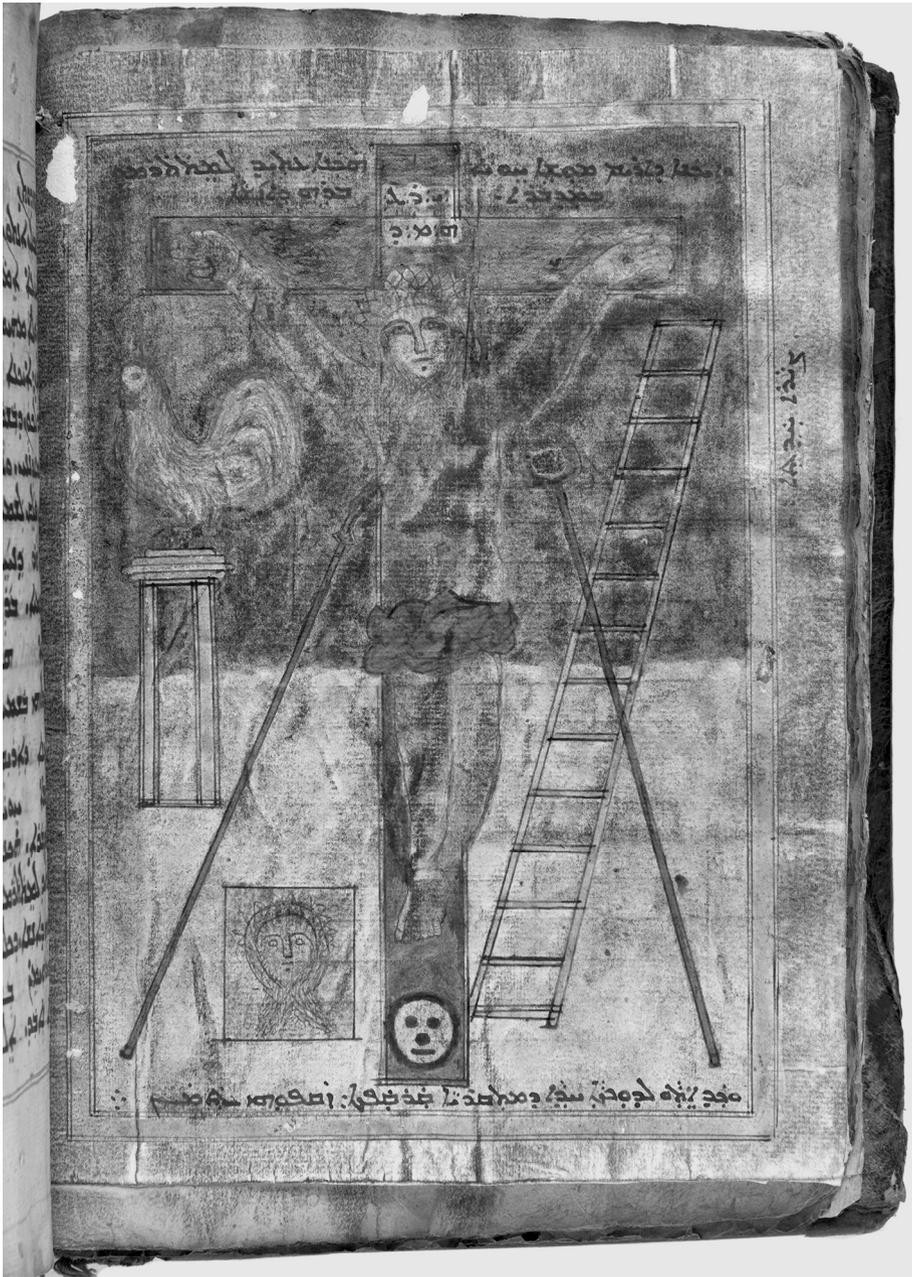
²⁹ The manuscript has been described and digitized; available at vHMML, permanent link: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/135549>.

³⁰ The manuscript has been described and digitized; available at vHMML, permanent link: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/133053>.

Curiously, in this manuscript the last two verbs are reversed: ܩܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ (‘was renewed, joined together and bound’), which seems more correct in terms of the restoration process.

³¹ The manuscript has been described and digitized; available at vHMML, permanent link: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/128661>. On this manuscript. See also PRITULA 2020b.

³² SMELOVA 2018b: 51.



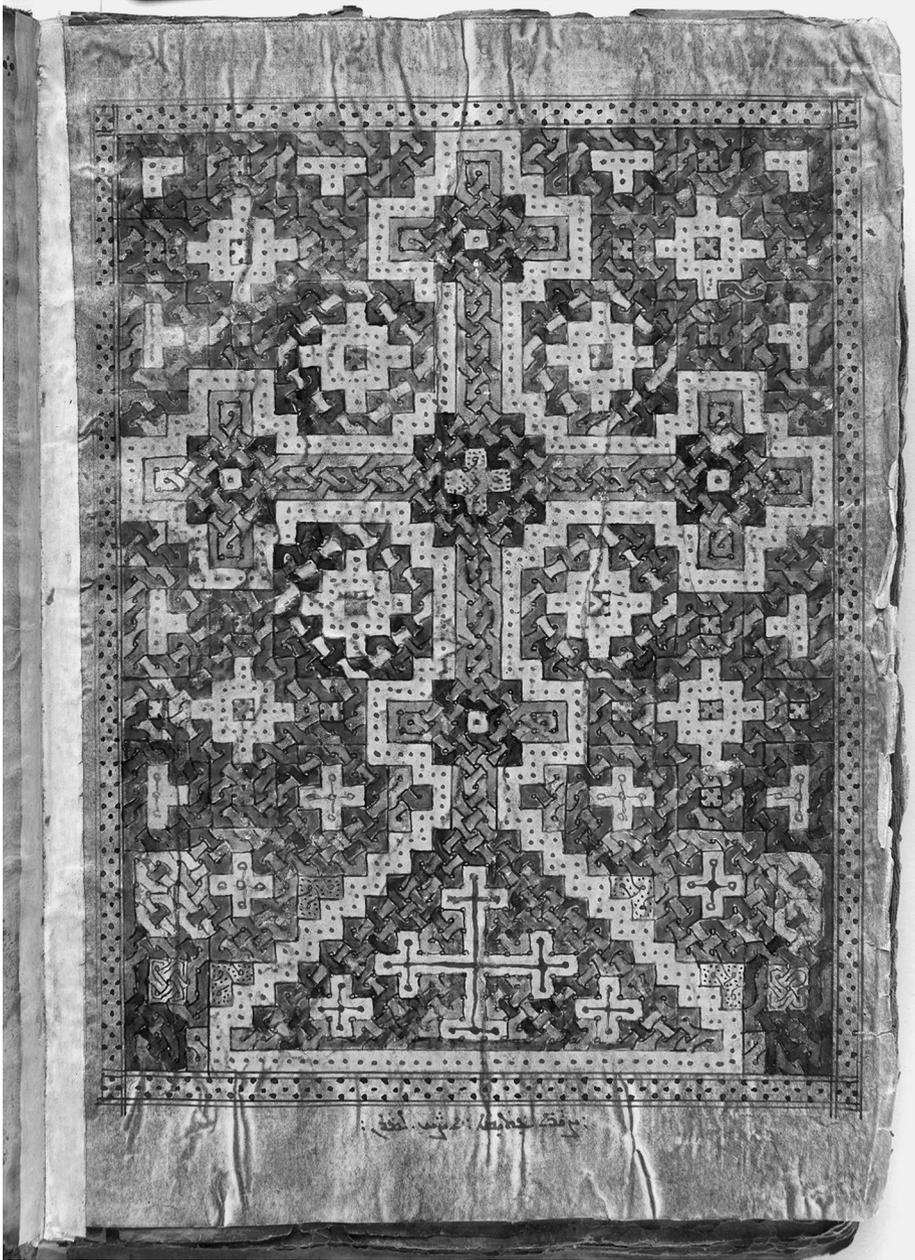
Pl. 1. Syriac collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts
of the Russian Academy of Sciences. MS. Sir. 26, f. 28v



Pl. 2. Syriac collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts
of the Russian Academy of Sciences. MS. Sir. 26, f. 33v



Pl. 3. Syriac collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts
of the Russian Academy of Sciences. MS. Sir. 26, f. 1v



Pl. 5. Syriac collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts
of the Russian Academy of Sciences. MS. Sir. 26, f. 150v



Pl. 6. Syriac collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts
of the Russian Academy of Sciences. MS. Sir. 26, f. 9v

Conclusion

The East Syriac lectionary *Sir. 26* is a valuable sample of East Syriac manuscript production, reflecting the complex phenomena that took place in this tradition in the 19th — early 20th cc. On the one hand, there was a mass restoration of manuscript church books, i.e. an attempt to preserve the heritage of the manuscript tradition. In this process, miniatures were often ‘restored’ (i.e., drawn anew), as well as poems, usually quatrains, containing a call to pray for the scribe. The text of these poems (with the exception of the scribe’s name, which, of course, varied), as well as the iconographic schemes of the miniatures, constituted a certain unchanging canon that persisted at least from the sixteenth century on.

On the other hand, the 19th c. saw the increasing influence of European culture, especially after the incorporation of most of the East Syrian dioceses of Iraq with the Catholic Church in 1830 and the formation of the Babylon Patriarchate of the Chaldean (East Syrian Catholic) Church. This was reflected in the church art, which actively began to copy European iconographic models.

Finally, it was during this period that European interest in the art and manuscript tradition of the East reached its peak. Numerous collections of Oriental manuscripts were formed in Europe, often acquired from resellers who had connections with local scribes. This phenomenon is reflected by the lectionary *Sir. 26*, written in the 17th c. and ‘improved’ in 1908 by the Alqosh priest, poet, and scribe Abrāhām Šekwānā. Apparently at the request of a reseller, he pasted a number of miniatures with inscriptions and verses into this originally undecorated manuscript. It was probably intended to increase its value. This renovation cannot be called a forgery in the exact sense, since their actual year of manufacture and the name of the maker are indicated. What is certain, however, is that in this case the process was related to the requests of the European market, which distinguishes the manuscript in question from many others restored during this period.

Equally important is the fact that Abrāhām Šekwānā supplied the miniatures with scribal quatrains, as had been customary during several centuries. This suggests perception of such poems as an important part of the decorative program of a church book. The ‘restorer’ probably used both old, ‘wandering’ verses and new ones composed by himself.

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