

Syriac manuscripts from Turfan: public worship and private devotion.*

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The first decades of the twentieth century saw the ‘great cultural game’ played out by various European powers at Turfan, an oasis located approximately 150 km SE of Urumqi, now in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province, western China. N. N. Krotkov, the Russian Consul-General at Urumqi, sent back 97 Syriac-script fragments that are currently housed in the *Institute for Oriental Studies* at St. Petersburg.¹ The 2nd and 3rd *German Turfan Expeditions*, led by Albert von le Coq and Albert Grünwedel, discovered more than 500 Syriac fragments, as well 550 Sogdian, 1 Middle Persian, 3 New Persian and 52 Old Uighur fragments, all of which were written in the Syriac script.² Most of the Syriac fragments came from the Church of the East monastery site of Bulayiq, on the outskirts of Turfan, but small quantities were also found at other sites in the oasis including Astana, Qocho, Qurutqa and Toyoq. All were transported to Berlin where they were preserved under glass plates and are now housed in three separate repositories: the *Staatsbibliothek*, the headquarters of the *Turfanforschung* in the Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaft and the *Museum für Asiatische Kunst* in Dahlem, Berlin.

A wealth of material, opening new horizons in our knowledge of the Church of the East in Central Asia and China, has been released with the recent publication of 519 Syriac fragments that were found

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¹ For further details see Elena N. Meshcherskaya, “The Syriac Fragments in the N. N. Krotkov Collection” in *Turfan, Khotan und Dunhuang*. Edited by Ronald E. Emmerick *et al.* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996, 221-7.

² For further details about these expeditions see Albert von le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, trans. Anna Barwell (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd: 1928); Mary Boyce, *A Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichaean Script in the German Turfan Collection* (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Institut für Orientforschung, Veröffentlichung Nr. 45), (Berlin Verlag: 1960), ix-xxvii.

The specific mention of Nestorius, the erstwhile patriarch of Constantinople as well as its great theological exponents, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, ‘the Interpreter’, clearly anchors the monastery within the East Syrian theological tradition. Likewise, the citation of Mar Narsai and Mar Abraham (of Kashkar) who were traditionally associated with the renowned School of Nisibis, recall the pedagogic heritage of the Church of the East, whilst the reference to the ‘Great Ephrem’ evokes the golden age of Syriac Christianity prior to the schisms of the 5th century.

A large proportion of the Syriac fragments from Turfan are liturgical and biblical. The Syriac Psalter was well represented at Turfan and its translation into a variety of languages including Sogdian and Middle Persian (Pahlavi) and New Persian highlights its dissemination amongst Iranian speaking populations.⁷ Likewise eight leaves of a Syriac Psalter that were transliterated into Uighur illustrate its dissemination amongst Turkic-speaking peoples in the area.⁸ Contrasting with the linguistic diversity of the Psalter are the large number of liturgical fragments that are written almost exclusively in Syriac. These supply invaluable information about the liturgy of the medieval Church of the East in its far-flung dioceses. Many have been identified as coming from the *Ḥudrā*, the principal liturgical book of the Church of the East that contained “the variable chants of the choir for the divine office and the Mass for the entire cycle of the liturgical year”.⁹ On the basis of palaeography and text-formatting criteria, 21 individual *Ḥudrās* have been identified amongst the Turfan fragments, but none is complete and the fragmentary nature of the texts has not facilitated comparative studies. Despite these limitations, the manuscripts are extremely important for the light that they shed onto the development of the Church of the East’s liturgy. When Eduard Sachau published in 1905 single folios from three exemplars of the *Ḥudrā*, using photographs sent by von le Coq,¹⁰ he dated the manuscripts to the 10th–12th centuries, but suggested that they could be even older.¹¹

⁷ Ernest A.W. Budge, *Histories of Rabban Hormīzād the Persian and Rabban Bar-‘Idtā*. 2 vols. (London: Luzac, 1902) vol. I, 609 records that Magians who were converted were taught “the psalms and hymns”, vol. II: 350 ܡܘܨܝܩܐ ܘܚܝܡܢܝܢ.

⁸ Mark Dickens and Peter Zieme, “Syro-Uigurica I: A Syriac Psalter in Uyghur Script from Turfan” in *Scripts Beyond Borders. A Survey of Allographic Traditions in the Euro-Mediterranean World*, in *Scripts Beyond Borders*. Edited by Johannes den Heijer *et al* 291-328; Mark Dickens, “Syro-Uigurica II: Syriac passages in U338 from Turfan”, *Hugoye* 16:2 (2013), 301-24.

⁹ William Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥudra*”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 36: 1 (1970), 120.

¹⁰ Eduard Sachau, “Litteratur-Bruchstücke aus Chinesisch-Turkistan”, *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Sitzung der philosophisch-historischen Classe von 23. November) XLVII (1905), 964-73.

¹¹ Sachau, *Litteratur-Bruchstücke*, 964.

returned a dating range, 771–884 CE, thus allocating this 61-folio codex to the 8–9th centuries. Although MIK III 45 is incomplete, the quires of 14-16 leaves indicate that original manuscript might be estimated as being originally some 200 folios.¹⁴ The folios are inscribed in black ink, with rubric *lemmata*, in a standard East Syriac script that is derivative of Estrangela. The correct and legible classical text displays only a few non-standard features.¹⁵ Most notable is the usage of the double points or *seyame* (indicating plural nouns) with singular nouns, a trend that occurs quite frequently throughout the text.¹⁶ This idiosyncratic application could denote a provincial pronunciation, but overall the grammar and syntax of the folios conveys the impression that they were written by a scribe (or scribes) who were well-trained in Syriac. Whilst particular mention is made of the saints who were connected with the mission at Marv, the overall contents of MIK III 45 uphold and maintain the liturgical cycle and repertoire of the Church of the East.

Of especial interest is the rubric subscription *ܡܘܨܩܠܐ ܕܩܢܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ* “end of the *fenqitho* (volume) of the orders of service and *qanone* (i.e. liturgical rules, or rubrics) of the *hudra* (cycle) of the whole year” (fol. 21a ll. 12-13). This denotes that MIK III 45 originally consisted of a full cycle of services for the entire ecclesiastical year.¹⁷ The 8th–9th century dating raises the possibility that MIK III 45 is faithful to the *Ḥudrā* which Patriarch Išo‘yabh III (649-659 CE) compiled in the mid-seventh century, but of which no exemplars are now extant. The *Ḥudrā* underwent various revisions in subsequent centuries, but Išo‘yabh’s work is thought to have included early liturgical material, pre-dating the schisms of the 5th–6th centuries. As such, the occurrence of *ܩܘܪܒܐ* *fenqitho* “volume” in MIK III 45 may attest this phenomenon, since the term later assumed a particular significance, becoming synonymous with the West Syriac tradition. The only other 8th century witness to the *Ḥudrā* is a small ostrakon that was found during archaeological excavations in 1989 by the *Japanese Archaeological Expedition to Iraq* at Ain Shaiya, near Najaf.¹⁸ Sebastian Brock’s statement, “the paucity of East Syriac liturgical texts that definitely date from the first millennium renders every scrap of evidence all the

¹⁴ Based on the study of the quiring by James F. Coakley, “Manuscript MIK III 45: introduction and questions”, paper presented at the 2014 Turfan Workshop, Berlin (July 2014). Unpublished.

¹⁵ Hieronymus Engberding, “Fünf Blätter eines alten ostsyrischen Bitt- und Bussgottesdienstes aus Innerasien,” *Ostkirchliche Studien* 14 (1965), 122-3 gives a succinct account of the physical features of MIK III/45.

¹⁶ This phenomenon is noted where ordinary Syriac words are singular but pronounced as plural, especially where the ending is –e. Selected examples from MIK III 45 include *ܩܘܪܒܐ* ‘his house’ (fol. 3 verso: 18), *ܩܘܪܒܐ* ‘Lord of all’ (fol. 41 verso: 4). For further discussion, see Erica C.D. Hunter and James F. Coakley, *A Syriac Service-Book from Turfan. Museum für Asiatische Kunst MS MIK III 45. The text edited, translated and introduced.* (Turnhout, Leuven: Brepols, 2016), 8.

¹⁷ See *Plate 1*: MIK III/45 fol. 21a.

¹⁸ Erica C.D. Hunter, “Syriac Ostraca from Mesopotamia”, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256 (1998), 617-39. See also Sebastian P. Brock, “Some Early Witnesses to the East Syriac Liturgical Tradition”, *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 18:1 (2004), 12-13 for a reconstructed reading of the ostrakon.

amulet is unknown. The larger folio may have deteriorated, but scraps were still deemed to be efficacious. The combined contents of SyrHT 330 and SyrHT 99 show that the erstwhile larger fragment consisted of the prayer of the martyr, Mār Tamsis, who is named in the rubric title of SyrHT 330 l. 1 ܡܢܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܬܡܨܝܫܐ “Anathema of Mār Tamsis, the celebrated martyr”. Due to the trimming process, SyrHT 99 makes no mention of Mār Tamsis, an omission that may have been deliberate. Alternatively, the exclusion of his name may have just been accidental.

The criteria governing the selection of SyrHT 99 as a personal prayer-amulet remain enigmatic. One factor, might have been the quotation of “John 1:1–4.2” (SyrHT 99 ll.1-3) since the opening verses of the Gospel of John were deemed to have a particular efficacy.²⁶ Unlike SyrHT 152 which identifies the recipient as a ‘handmaid’, SyrHT 99 provides no clue as to the identity of the person for whom it was prepared, but the still visible creasemarks which indicate that the fragment was folded into three, suggest a portable personal item. The rudimentary cross of the Church of the East, which has been drawn free-hand in the central panel of the otherwise blank *verso*, may have ‘sealed’ the precious contents as well as being an indicator as to how to carry the prayer-amulet. This might have been a necessary measure if the intended recipient was illiterate or unable to read Syriac, as one might expect of the laity at Turfan who spoke Sogdian or Uighur.²⁷ On the other hand, SyrHT 99 might have been produced by one of the monks at the monastery, for his private devotion.

The subject of SyrHT 330, Mār Tamsis is not mentioned in the liturgical fragments from Turfan, but his commemoration in the Church of the East calendar was on the 8th Wednesday after Epiphany.²⁸ B.L. 14653, a 9th century manuscript from northern Mesopotamia, which details the lives of numerous saints, also includes a prayer to Mār Tamsis,²⁹ that occurs just before the colophon which names the scribe as ‘Saliba’. No other details are supplied. Interestingly, Mār Tamsis was commemorated in

in Central Asia and China. Edited by Dietmar Winkler and Li Tang [Orientalia-patristica-oecumenica v. 5] (Lit. Verlag: Salzburg, 2013), 23-41.

²⁶ These verses and were still used to introduce the handbooks of amulets that were used by the Syriac Christians in the 19th and 20th centuries. See Hermann Gollancz, *The Book of Protection, being a collection of charms* (London: H. Froude, 1912) for examples of this practice.

²⁷ N. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian and Turkish Christians in the Turfan and Tun-huang manuscripts”, *Turfan and Tun-huang: the texts*, Edited by Alfredo Cadonna, (Florence: Olschki, 1992), 43-61.

²⁸ See ܡܢܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܬܡܨܝܫܐ (*Surgada Mbašā*) (Urmī: Press of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Mission, 1894) 8. This commemoration occurs only occasionally since there are usually only seven Wednesdays after Epiphany. The author thanks Rev. Giwargis Malco Khoshaba (Ancient Assyrian Church of the East, London) for this information. For further information about this perpetual calendar, see James F. Coakley, “The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission Press: A Bibliography.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 30:1 (1983) 52-53, which notes that the perpetual calendar consisted of 38 pages, with pp. 5-9 being lists of festivals and saints’ days, ‘taken from a MS 550 years old’. This manuscript which was written in 1443 and is now lost is mentioned by Arthur J. Maclean and William H. Browne, *The Catholicos of the East and his People* (London: SPCK, 1892) 347.

²⁹ See Hunter, *Traversing Time and Location*, 34-35 for the text and translation of this prayer-amulet.

handbooks of amulets dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that were used by the Syriac Christian communities in Hakkari.³⁰ Mingana Ms. Syr 316, whose colophon was written in ‘the year 2088 of the Greeks’ i.e. between October of 1776 and September of 1777, mentions his name in connection with an amulet against lunacy that was entitled **ܘܚܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܐ** “Of the daughter of the moon”.

³¹ Mār Tamsis is named as a celebrated martyr and, in keeping with SyrHT 330, Mingana Ms. Syr 316 notes that the saint dwelt **ܘܚܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܐ** “[on the mountain] forty years”.³²

Mar Cyprian was also commemorated in the 19th century handbooks and at Turfan where he is the subject of two prayer-amulets. n.364-365 now deposited in the *Turfanforschung*, Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaft, Berlin,³³ are dislocated fragments, but derive from the same folio, where the intermediate contents have been lost. The upper half of the *recto* of n.364 has nine lines of an anathema to Mār Cyprian, with a miscellany of later, unrelated texts covering the bottom half of the *recto* and the *verso* side.³⁴ n.365 consists of 6 lines that correspond to ll.1-6 of n.364 and forms the right-hand side of the original folio. Written in East Syriac Estrangela, each word of n.364 ll.1-9 and n.365 ll.1-6 is separated by a red dot. The (right-hand) margin of n.365 has been lost, but a red dot concludes the end of n.364 ll.3-9, producing a justified left-hand margin. Red-black *paragraphii* have been placed at the end of n.364 ll.1-2; with the *paragraphus* of l.1 coming at the end of the anathema’s rubric heading. The application of the rubric dots (very helpful in reading the text) is unique and does not occur in any of the other fragments from Turfan. This demarcation of each word must have imparted a visual, and possibly apotropaic, impact. Additionally, the originally blank *verso* (also a feature of SyrHT 152 and SyrHT 99 & SyrHT 330) points to n.364-365 being specifically prepared as an amulet, with a subsequent re-cycling at a later date.

Text and transliteration: n.364-365

*Recto:*³⁵

³⁰ For details of the other handbooks of amulets, dating from 1779-1817 that include “The anathema of Mar Tamsis which is suitable for the daughter of the moon” see Hunter, *Traversing Time and Location*, 30.

³¹ Mingana Syr. Ms. 316 fol. 61a-64a. Mingana Syr. Ms. 316 folio 61, *verso* for a graphic illustration of the mounted saint lancing a one-eyed demoness.

³² Mingana Syr. Ms. 316 fol. 62a l.2 **ܘܚܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܐ**, “who dwelt” + fol. 62a ll.3-4 **ܘܚܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܐ** “in/on the mountains for forty years”.

³³ *Plate 4* n364-365 with the labels n364 and n365 having been inserted upside down to the text.

³⁴ Aside from the anathema to Mār Cyprian, n364-5 *recto* consists of various contents: (a) two lines of text in Sogdian (written in Syriac script), (b) 4 lines of Syriac, in a different hand. n364-365 *verso* has a Sogdian text, written in Syriac script.

³⁵ **Bold** type indicates rubrics in the Syriac text and the translation.

Both SyrHT 102 and n364-365 begin with the technical term, **ܡܢܥܠܐ** “anathema”, signifying a prayer that was always used in conjunction with a named saint who uttered it at the point of martyrdom.³⁸ Mār Cyprian’s name is spelt variously: n.364-365 **ܡܪܝܢܐ ܥܝܦܪܝܢܐ**, SyrHT 102 **ܡܪܝܢܐ ܥܝܦܪܝܢܐ**, but both texts specify the exact time when that saint **ܡܠܟܐ** “requested” his prayer, **ܡܝܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܡܝܢ ܗܘܢܐ** “when he was celebrated in this world” i.e. at the point of his martyrdom.³⁹ SyrHT 102 and n364-365 specifically state that Mār Cyprian’s wish was granted: **ܘܥܘܕ ܕܗܘ ܡܠܟܐ** “and He gave him his request”,⁴⁰ but the contents of Mār Cyprian’s prayer in SyrHT 102 are much longer than n364-365 (where there are textual lacunae) and notably include several clear references to the dissipation of magic and divination on ll. 5-6 and ll. 8-9. Both n364 and SyrHT 102, in the concluding parts of the prayer, cite the clause, **ܡܝܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܡܝܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܠܟܐ** “he directed <his> mind to God”.⁴¹

The physical format of n.364-365 suggests that it may originally have been prepared as a personal amulet. By contrast, “The anathema of Mār Cyprian” in SyrHT 102 follows immediately after the rubricated concluding formula of the previous section: **ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ**.⁴² This format suggests that SyrHT 102 may have been part of a ‘handbook of prayer-amulets’, which monks used and consulted at Turfan; a tradition that continued as late as the 19th century amongst the Syriac-speaking clergy of Hakkari. The anathema of Mār Cyprian is found in various manuscripts, including the aforementioned Mingana Syr. Ms. 316, where it is listed under the rubricated heading **ܡܢܥܠܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܥܝܦܪܝܢܐ** “the anathema of Mār Cyprian, the celebrated martyr”. The text of Mingana Syr. Ms. 316 is much longer than both n.364-365 and SyrHT 102,⁴³ but it does exhibit substantial textual parallels with the latter, notably including the distinctive clause **ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ** “Mār Cyprian, the saint, directed (his) mind to the Lord of All”.⁴⁴ The colophon

³⁸ SyrHT 102 *recto*, l.2; n364-365 l.1. For a discussion of the ‘anathema’ genre, see Erica C.D. Hunter, “Saints in Syriac Anathemas: A Form-Critical Analysis of Role”, *Journal Semitic Studies*, 37: 1 (1987), 83-104.

³⁹ SyrHT 102 *recto* l.3, n364-365 ll.3-4.

⁴⁰ SyrHT 102 *recto* l.4, n364-365 l.4.

⁴¹ SyrHT 102 *recto* l.8 and n365 l. 8. For **ܡܠܟܐ** see Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Winona Lake, Piscataway: Eisenbrauns, Gorgias, 2009), 863 citing William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., (London: 1865) 223:19, Jessie Payne-Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 314.

⁴² SyrHT 102 *recto* l.1. The contents of the previous section, which was written on the preceding folio to SyrHT 102, have not survived.

⁴³ See Hunter, *Saints in Syriac Anathemas*, 100-3 for the text and translation of this anathema in Mingana Syr. Ms. 316, fol. 21r-26r.

⁴⁴ Hunter, *Saints in Syriac Anathemas*, 100 (text), 102 (translation), with the small change of **ܡܠܟܐ** for **ܡܠܟܐ**.

of Mingana Syr. Ms 316 names the village of Marshanis in the Atel district, in the diocese of Buhtan in the Seert region, as the place of its production.⁴⁵

Concluding Comments:

The selected manuscripts respectively demonstrate the public and private dimensions of faith that took place at Turfan in the medieval period. In this remote outpost, the heritage of the Church of the East was robustly maintained; the public worship i.e. the liturgy looked westwards to Mesopotamia, as did the private devotions, i.e. the prayer-amulets. This trajectory is epitomized by the usage in both public worship and private devotion of Syriac, which would have been largely unfamiliar to the Sogdian and Uighur-speaking laity, but maintained a particular sanctity and efficacy. The dating of MIK III 45 that places it shortly after the mid-7th century compilation of the *Hudrā* by Patriarch Isoyabh III, provides unparalleled insight into the East Syrian liturgy of the first millennium and its dissemination in the far-flung dioceses of the Church of the East. The prayer-amulets are rare vernacular items illuminating the stratum of personal devotion to saints who were inextricably connected with Mesopotamia. Although their dating has not been secured, their presence at Turfan indicates that they predate –by some six or seven centuries– namesake anathemas that were still in usage amongst the Syriac-speaking communities of Hakkari until their tragic demise in the *Sayfo* of 1915. Paradoxically, just a few years prior the *German Turfan Expedition* made spectacular discoveries at Turfan and opened new dimensions in our knowledge of the spread of East Syrian Christianity.

⁴⁵ For further information about Marshanis, see David Wilmshurst, *The ecclesiastical organisation of the Church of the East, 1318-1913* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 90, 98 and Map 2: west of Deh and east of Tal. See also, the on-line entry by Thomas A. Carlson, “Marshanis — مارشانيس” in *The Syriac Gazetteer*, Edited by Thomas A. Carlson and David A. Michelson, entry published May 10, 2014, Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal, Edited by David A. Michelson. Justin Sheil, “Notes on a journey from Tabriz through Kurdistan via Van, Bitlis, Se’ert and Erbil through Suleimaniyeh in July and August 1836”, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 8 (1838) 67 cites the towns of Amadiyeh and Se’ert as the eastern and western boundaries of Buhtan.

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