



Treasures in the Archives : hidden fragment of a Syriac manuscript!



WGL9/4 Synaxarium of the Coptic Church
Images by Westminster College, Cambridge



WGL9/4 Detail of the binding

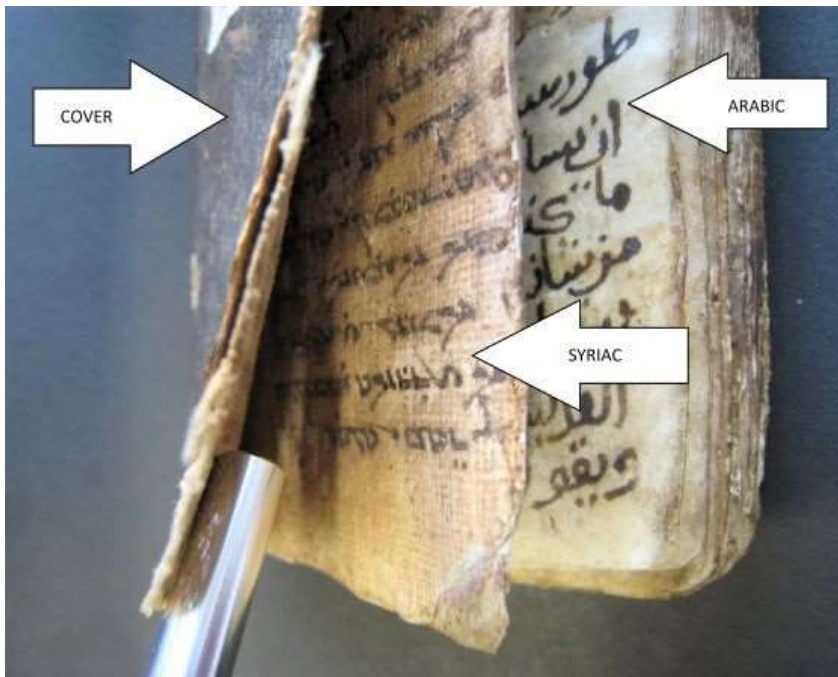
WGL9/4 is a small volume in the Westminster Archives, measuring just over 15cm x 10cm. It's a synaxarium of the Coptic Church – a compilation of hagiographies, or lives of the saints – handwritten in Arabic. But within the layers of the book's binding, a previously hidden fragment of a manuscript in Syriac has been found!

The volume was purchased over 100 years ago, from a book dealer in Cairo, by Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson. These ladies, 'the Sisters of Sinai', were travellers, authors, and Biblical scholars who specialised in the study of Syriac and Arabic manuscripts, and were benefactors of Westminster College. In fact, the book contains a note on paper in one of the Sisters' handwriting, saying "Bought from J Ackaz if I remember rightly. 1901."

The date of the Arabic manuscript is unknown, but the use of vellum suggests that the manuscript was produced before 1200. The binding is later, and probably dates from the 16th–17th centuries. The end-board – only one survives – is composed of three layers of vellum, covered in canvas, which is in turn covered in dark leather.

However, the binding has begun to deteriorate and the layers are separating. When the volume was catalogued in 2018, we noticed two of the layers of vellum in the binding were blank, but the third piece was found to be part of an older, unrelated manuscript in Syriac.

The photo shows the leather and canvas layer of the cover on the left; part of the main Arabic text, in black ink, on the right; and in the centre, the page of the vellum layer of the binding, with Syriac text. Presumably, the binder used old sheets of vellum which were to hand – and one of them just happened to be something which had already been used!



WGL9/4 Detail of the binding

Dating from the 6th-7th century and written in Estrangela hand – the oldest type of Syriac – the previously hidden fragment has been identified by Dr Chip Coakley as being part of a Biblical manuscript, showing the text of 2 Samuel 22:38-45, which begins “I pursued my enemies and crushed them”.

Dr Coakley reviewed all Westminster’s Syriac manuscripts for his recently-completed [Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in Cambridge acquired since 1901](#),

(Jericho Press, 2018) – a volume which lists and describes Syriac manuscripts across all Cambridge institutions – so we’re really pleased to be able to add this small but previously hidden text to the listing!

Helen Weller, Archivist
November 2019