

# A MELKITE ARABIC LITERARY *LINGUA FRANCA* FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

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1. After the Islamic conquest, the Greek Orthodox, so-called Melkite (= Royalist), church fairly early adopted Arabic as its literary language. Their intellectual centres in Syria/Palestine were Jerusalem, along with the monasteries of Mar Sabas and Mar Chariton in Judea, Edessa and Damascus.<sup>1</sup> A great many Arabic manuscripts stemming from the first millennium, some of them dated, copied at the monastery of Mar Chariton and especially at that of Mar Saba, have been discovered in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, the only monastery that has not been pillaged and set on fire by the bedouin. These manuscripts are of great importance for the history of the Arabic language. Because Christians were less devoted to the ideal of the *'arabiyya* than their Muslim contemporaries, their writings contain a great many deviations from classical Arabic, thus enabling us to reconstruct early Neo-Arabic, the predecessor of the modern Arabic dialects, and bridge a gap of over one thousand years in the history of the Arabic language.<sup>2</sup>

2. The original contribution of these manuscripts to intellectual history is less evident. Most of the texts are translations from Greek and Syriac. Therefore, all the greater importance is to be attached to the few original works found among them, not more than about seven so far,<sup>3</sup> although some, if not all, give the impression of being, in the main, adaptations and compilations.<sup>4</sup>

3. *Prima facie*, it stands to reason that these manuscripts, copied in the monasteries of Judea, reflect a South Palestinian dialect. The linguistic phenomena discovered in the manuscripts do not contradict this assumption, with the possible exception of one feature: in some of these texts imperfect forms terminating in long vowel + *n* prevail, in contradistinction to Judeo-Arabic texts of Palestinian extraction and modern Palestinian dialects, which invariably exhibit the prevalence of forms without *n*.<sup>5</sup> Yet even this apparent contradiction can easily be accounted for by the assumption that forms without *n* reflect either the declining influence of Aramaic or analogy with forms without *n* preceding pronominal suffixes (such as *yqtlūk*, influenced by *yqtlū[na]nā*) or with forms following perfect with *ū*-ending (which influenced the imperfect).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, one must not forget that although early Neo-Arabic reflects the same elements as modern Arabic dialects, their distribution was quite different.

4. I should like, however, to offer a different explanation: it can be demonstrated (see below §§5, 6) that two of the seven original Melkite works so far found were written not in Palestine but to the east of it. The fact that the

<sup>1</sup> See S. H. Griffith, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam*, 13, 1990, 226.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Blau, *A grammar of Christian Arabic based mainly on South-Palestinian texts from the first millennium* (Louvain, 1966–67).

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, 21–3.

<sup>4</sup> M. Breydy, *Etudes sur Sa'id ibn Baṭrīq et ses sources* (Louvain, 1983), 88 ff. has strongly asserted for The Book of the Demonstration (*Eutychius of Alexandria, The Book of the Demonstration [Kitāb al-burhān]*, ed. P. Cachia, Louvain, 1960–61) the possibility that it is an adaptation and a compilation. He has indeed proved the special status of its fourth part which treats the refutation of the Jews.

<sup>5</sup> See Blau, *Grammar*, §171.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 57.

language of these two is not distinct from that of the others would suggest that the Arabic utilized in these manuscripts was a literary language, some sort of *lingua franca*, used not only in Palestine but at least also by the Melkites to the east. Therefore, deviations occurring in these texts need not reflect Palestinian features, but may also exhibit eastern ones, and the prevalence of imperfect forms with final *n* may ultimately stem from eastern dialects.<sup>7</sup>

5. Elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> I have called attention to the margin of fol. 102 of MS Sinai ar. 75, the most important and most ancient<sup>9</sup> manuscript of *The Book of the Demonstration* (see n. 4), written of course by a later hand, according to which (Pt. I, p. 1, n. 3) *waḍa'ahū buṭrus ash-shammās ibn naštās al-bayt ra'sī* 'it was written by Butrus, the deacon, the son of Anastasios, from Capitolias (northern Transjordan)'. It is difficult to imagine that anyone would be interested in attributing the Book of the Demonstration to an unknown deacon. Therefore, for want of evidence to the contrary, I shall regard this note as genuine and assume that it was composed by Butrus the deacon in northern Transjordan. G. Graf, who did not have MS Sinai ar. 75 at his disposal, attributed the Book of the Demonstration to Euty chius,<sup>10</sup> and his view did not alter even after MS Sinai ar. 75 had been discovered (as happens all too often in scholarship). Nor did those of P. Cachia, the editor of *The Book of Demonstration* (Pt I, p. iii, 9 ff.) and its translator, W. Montgomery Watt.<sup>11</sup>

5.1. The attribution to the unknown deacon Butrus, son of Anastasios, from Capitolias is, in my opinion, buttressed by the colophon of MS Vatican ar. 491 of *The Book of the Demonstration* (*The Book of the Demonstration*, Pt. I, p. 216, n. 8): *hādha 'l-kitāb al-jalīl al-ma'rūf bi'l-burhān li-'abīna 'l-mu'azzam fī'l-qiddīsīn Buṭrus 'usquf bayt ra's 'axu 'l-'aẓīm Fāsiliyūs wa-Grīgūryūs 'usquf nīsan wa-huwa 'axūhum li'l-akbar(!) ṣalātuḥū ma'anā* 'this is the honourable book, known as the Demonstration, composed by our Father the venerated saint Butrus the Bishop of Capitolias, the brother of the venerated Basilius and Gregorius the Bishop of Nyssa(?) and he is their oldest brother, may he pray for us' (cf. also Breydy, *Etudes*, 88, 1.8). I am inclined to regard this attribution to Butrus, Bishop of Capitolias, to be a late development of what I consider to be the original wording, viz. that the work was written by the deacon Butrus from Capitolia, the known Butrus Bishop of Capitolia<sup>12</sup> being substituted for the unknown deacon Butrus from Capitolia.

<sup>7</sup> In Iraq, for instance, *-n*-imperfects prevail.

<sup>8</sup> In *Studies in Islamic history and civilization in honour of D. Ayalon* (Jerusalem-Leiden, 1991), 448–55.

<sup>9</sup> According to its colophon (*The Book of the Demonstration*, Pt. II, 134, 7), which is written in a late, very cursive hand, it was copied in 372 A.H. (*ithnayn wa-sab'in wa-thalātha mi'a* = A.D. 983). It is true that the colophon follows the fourth part of *The Book of the Demonstration*, a polemic against the Jews which may well be an addition to the original book (see n. 4 above), but the wording of the colophon refers to the book as a whole, even though it may have originally been compiled from disparate parts. Although the numbers are not very clear, nevertheless, in my opinion, there is no doubt that *ithnayn wa-sab'in wa-thalātha mi'a* is the correct reading. It is impossible to substitute for it, with Breydy, *Etudes*, 91, *ithnayn wa-sittīn wa-xams mi'a* (562 A.H. = A.D. 1166/67). Moreover, this reading is totally out of the question, not only because the dates of the eclipse of the moon and the sun mentioned in the colophon are confirmed by astronomical calculations (see also *The Book of the Demonstration*, Pt. I, p. ii, 4 ff.), but since MS Sinai ar. 75 is written in a half-Kufic hand, which is clearly characteristic of the eighth and ninth centuries and had already in the tenth century fallen into desuetude. This latter argument is quite decisive.

<sup>10</sup> See *Oriens Christianus*, N.S., I, 1911; 227–44; *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (Vatican, 1944 ff.), II, 35–38.

<sup>11</sup> *Euty chius of Alexandria, The Book of the Demonstration* [*Kitāb al-burhān*], tr. W. Montgomery Watt (Louvain, 1960–61), Pt. I, p. i, 15 ff.—Breydy, *Etudes*, 88 ff., has adduced other convincing reasons for Euty chius not being the author/compiler of *The Book of the Demonstration*; he did not take into consideration the ascription of MS Sinai ar. 75.

<sup>12</sup> If, indeed, Peter, the brother of St. Basilius and St. Gregorius of Nyssa is intended, this postscript contains several cases of oversight: not only was Peter bishop of Sebaste, rather than of Capitolia, but the eldest brother was Basilius.

6. One of the most important Melkite works found so far is MS British Library Or. 4950, 1, copied in the monastery of St. Chariton,<sup>13</sup> and called by S.H. Griffith 'Summa Theologiae Arabica'.<sup>14</sup> Another very early manuscript closely related to BL Or. 4950.1, which contains some chapters of the Summa, is MS Sinai ar. 431.<sup>15</sup> Now I have found in the Summa a passage dealing with Jesus's burial, which clearly demonstrates that it was composed to the east of Palestine:<sup>16</sup>

*wa-dhālika 'anna 'l-qubūr fī 'arḍ al-maghrib maghāyir (!) wa-buyūt min hijāra yulqā fī 'l-bayti 'l-wāhid wa'l-maghāra 'l-wāhida bashar kathīr* 'and that is because tombs in the Western land (consist of) caverns and burial caves (made) of stones, and many persons are put in one burial cave and cavern'. It is, of course, only in the region to the east of Palestine that Palestine could have been dubbed 'Western land'.

7. As we have seen, out of some seven original works known from the monasteries of Judea two at least were composed to the east of Palestine, thus indicating that among the Melkites a literary *koinè* obtained. The existence of such a literary *lingua franca* need not surprise: the Melkites in Palestine had close connexion with their co-religionists in the east, as is suggested for instance by the history of the life of Theodore Abu Qurra, who came from Edessa, served as monk at Mar Saba and as bishop at Harran, and besides travelled widely in his capacity as a preacher.

Nevertheless the *evidence* of the existence of a Melkite common language is of obvious importance, both culturally and linguistically. Culturally because it unmistakably proves how closely knit the various Melkite communities in Palestine and the East were; linguistically because it adds a *caveat* whenever one attempts to analyse Neo-Arabic deviations from classical Arabic occurring in Melkite texts copied in Judea. Up till now we have simply attributed them to the Palestinian Arabic dialect(s). Now we must take into account the possibility that they reflect eastern features.

<sup>13</sup> See Blau, *Grammar*, §1.4.1.2.

<sup>14</sup> See Griffith, *Jerusalem studies*, 225 ff.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Blau, *Le Muséon*, 76, 1963, 369–70.

<sup>16</sup> I am citing MS British Library fol. 39a, lines 11–13 = MS Sinai fol. 116b, lines 12–15. This passage was published by L. Malouf in *al-Mashriq*, 6, 1903, 1023, lines 4–5. I quote the passage according to the manuscripts (which are identical); the places where Malouf's reading differs (because Malouf had a tendency to change vulgar forms into classical ones) are marked by (!). Q. Bāsā, *Mayāmīr th. Abī Qurra* . . . (Beirut, 1904), 187–90, is, of course, wrong in inferring from this passage that the work is of Nestorian origin.