

Arabic and Greek New Testament Manuscripts: Identities and Digital Cultures

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Prof. Claire Clivaz (University of Lausanne), Fund director

Prof. Herman Teule (Radboud University of Nijmegen), PhD co-director

Prof. David Bouvier (University of Lausanne), Fund co-director

Sara Schulthess (University of Lausanne), PhD student grant

Overview

The project aims at a better understanding of the general indifference of the Western scholars for the study of Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament (NT) since 1945. It is only recently that some researchers, both from the West and the Middle East, have taken up a renewed interest in this field of study. Moreover, some Islamic groups also seem to develop an awareness of the importance of Greek and Arabic NT manuscripts. To study the evolution of this field, it is necessary to transcend the classical philological approaches. Digital culture will allow Western and non-Western scholars to study these ancient objects – particularly the Arabic text of the NT as well as the relevant manuscripts – in a cross-disciplinary manner, using sociology, history, philology and epistemology.

Approaches and Results

A first step is to enlighten the history of research of this field, using a cultural studies approach, with the objective to better understand the disinterest in the Arabic manuscripts.

A second step is to help understanding this tradition by setting up and studying a list of the Pauline Arabic manuscripts. The importance of context and language for the text will also be investigated by editing the First Corinthians Epistle in manuscript Vat. Ar. 13.

A third step is the analysis of the impact of digital culture on our object. The renewed interest for these neglected manuscripts is linked to the digital revolution in the discipline of the NT textual criticism: digitalization of manuscripts, digital editions, collaborative work.

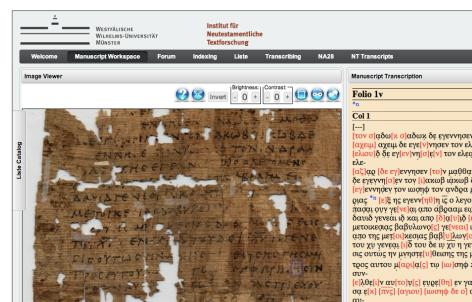


Fig. 1. Digital critical edition and collaborative work: Virtual Room of NT manuscripts: <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/manuscript-workspace>

We also investigate the phenomenon that Christian and Muslim websites use Greek and Arabic NT manuscripts to affirm their identities, notably by actualizing a classical polemical topic: the falsification of the Bible (*tahrif*).

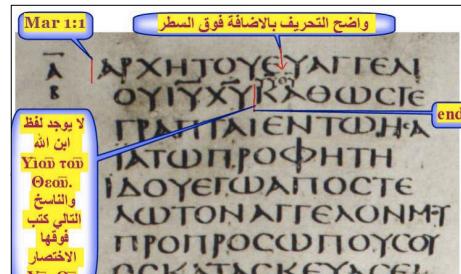


Fig. 2. Codex Sinaiticus (Mk 1.1) on a Salafist Muslim website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/textualcriticism/>

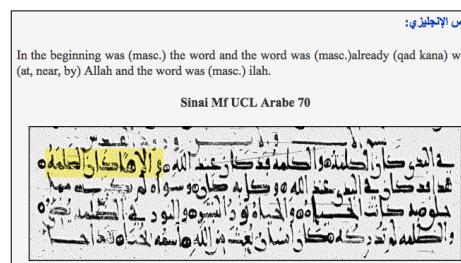


Fig.3. Islamic website questioning the use of *ilâh* ('[a] god') or *allâh* ('God') in Arabic NT manuscripts. Here a 9th c. Arabic manuscript (Jn 1.1): <http://alta3b.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/jn-1-arabic-mss/>

But this new interest for manuscripts leads also to a rediscovering of an Arabic common heritage, which were neglected for too long by the Western research, as expressed on one of these initially polemical websites: "We, Arabs, Muslims or Christians, should have an interest in our heritage, as the Latins are interested in their Latin heritage, the Syriacs in their Syriac heritage, etc. We must take care of this heritage written in Arabic to give it to the world rather than they provide us our heritage."

4- يجب علينا نحن العرب مسلمين او مسيحيين الاهتمام بالتراث المتعلق بنا فيما ان الآتين مهتمين بترايهم اللاتيني والسريان بترايهم السرياني..الخ. فيجب علينا ان نهتم بالتراث المكتوب باللغة العربية حتى تقدمه للعالم بدلا من ان نجدهم هم من يقدمون لنا ترايهم !

Fig. 4. <http://www.hurras.org/vb/showthread.php?t=14868>

Furthermore, the interactions of these groups with NT scholars on specialized forums or scientific websites generate a new kind of academic discursive hybridization.

Discussion

Beyond printed culture, the digital support of writing manages by itself to reconfigure the boundaries of knowledge: In such a project, not only the knowledge of diverse ancient languages is required (Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Latin) as well as classical codicology and philology, but also deep epistemological inquiries, with the help of sociology (network analysis), pedagogy (multiliteracies), and other disciplines.

With this emergence of an interdisciplinary *terra incognita*, the hybrid cross-cultural scholarship, new concepts and approaches will have to be created and applied.



Fig. 5. Islamic Website on Greek NT manuscripts: www.sheekh-3arb.net/bible/

This project also contributes to the debate about new models of digital critical edition: Are we ready to renounce a stabilized text in favour of open-ended texts on websites, which allow to insert comments, diverse languages and images of manuscripts? The digital edition of Homer is carried out as a history of reading, rather than to offer a 'definitive' text (<http://www.homermultitext.org>). The example of the present research project underlines the fact that the notion of text is more and more replaced by the 'document' in a digital cultural perspective.

Finally, it wishes to demonstrate that we are going from a knowledge based on the general subject-object relation to an intersubjective knowledge, developed through networks; for example: How can new forms of academic production such as blogs and internet forums be integrated in our analysis?

In this spirit, we want to enhance the complexity of our project with a website offering the possibility of going above the limits of the printed media: www.unil.ch/nt-arabe.

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