

Connecting the Past to the Future

More than one thousand years ago, deep in the remote desert of the northwestern Nile Delta in Egypt – commonly known at that time to locals and strangers alike as ‘Scetis’ – in the quiet of a secluded Coptic Christian monastic community, two hooded figures started something very special indeed.

Matthew and Abraham, as they were called, were Syrian monks of the famous Monastery of the Mother of God, later renamed the Monastery of the Syrians – one of the many early Christian monastic communities of Scetis. It is to these two simple monks that modern scholarship owes an enormous debt of gratitude; for it was Matthew and Abraham who were responsible for establishing the monastery’s first library of ancient Christian texts. Little did Matthew and Abraham know that the library which they were starting would eventually become one of the oldest and most important surviving collections of ancient Christian manuscripts in the world.

The beginning of the Deir al-Surian Library has been traced back to the 9th century when Matthew and Abraham laid its foundations, and from that period onward, the accessions of ancient Syriac texts became increasingly frequent, with numerous contributions received from the vast region of Syria and Mesopotamia. These manuscripts included Gospels, biblical texts, theological and philosophical writings, homilies, and historiographies of the desert fathers.

In 922, the Christian monasteries in Egypt were faced with a dire crisis: a new Vizier from Caliph al-Muktadir demanded that monks, who had previously been exempt from the poll tax, should now pay. The only way to appeal against this new tax was to go to Baghdad to see the Caliph himself, and it was the abbot of Deir al-Surian who was chosen to undertake this delicate, and as it turned out, extremely lengthy task. Abbot Mushe of Nisbis set out for Baghdad in 927 and returned five years later in 932, having successfully completed his mission. Mushe, however, had not wasted time whilst waiting for the decision about the tax, instead he went about acquiring Syriac manuscripts, as we learn from a note in a manuscript now in the British Library:

To the honour and glory and magnificence of this Syrian Orthodox monastery of the Mother of God in the Desert of Scetis, Mushe, known as “of Nisbis”, an insignificant sinner and abbot strove to acquire this book...together with 250 others, when he went to Baghdad on behalf of this holy desert and monks dwelling in it.

Following an imprecation inveighing anathema threatening some terrible punishment for anyone who would erase the commemorative note or remove the book from the monastery, it continues:

These books arrived with the abovementioned Abbot Mushe in the year 1243 of the Greeks [= AD 932]

Mushe’s gift to the monastery was enormous and it placed the Deir al Surian Library firmly on the list of the most important Christian manuscript collections in the world. The date of Abbot Mushe’s death is uncertain, but he was still alive in 943 when the copyist of a manuscript mentions him as “Mar Mushe...”. The monastery’s library continued to increase after Abbot Mushe’s death, but never again was there a bulk acquisition of ancient manuscripts, such as that made by Mushe. Throughout the following centuries, Coptic and Christian Arabic codices were added to the collection, and Ethiopic manuscripts were brought to the monastery by Ethiopian monks, who lived there until the 19th century.

Although much of the monastery's original collection is today in Rome and London, having been acquired by the Vatican Library in the 18th century, and by the British Museum in the 19th, a respectable quantity of approximately 1,000 bound manuscripts and some 1,500 fragmentary manuscripts in Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic still remain housed in the Deir al-Surian Library. These include the oldest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language (AD 411), the oldest dated biblical manuscript in any language (Isaiah, AD 459/60), and the oldest dated Gospel manuscript in any language (AD 510). For centuries, the collection was stored in the monastery's 9th century keep in one of its chambers, adjacent to the main oil store, where in 1837 Lord Curzon discovered the Coptic and Syriac manuscripts. Collectively, these formed one of the chief treasures of the British Museum, and more recently the British Library.

In the early 1970's, a new tower and new monastic cells were built to the east of the monastery's Holy Virgin Church. It was at this time that the collection was moved from the keep to a newly-built cell, and later transferred to the top floor of the tower.

In the autumn of 2006, mindful of the real need to ensure the permanent survival of the precious collection of manuscripts, The Levantine Foundation and the Deir al-Surian Monastic Council launched a joint initiative to construct a new library building within the ancient walls of the 6th century monastery. Not only would the new library house the collection in a monitored, stable environment, it would also provide conservation facilities enabling the monastery's priceless collection to be properly cared for; public access areas and research facilities for monks, students, and visiting scholars; and an exhibition facility featuring a rotating display of the library's treasures. The building would also be equipped with an advanced temperature and humidity control system for long term preservation.

In January 2007, the site of the new library was allocated by His Grace Bishop Mattaos, Abbot of Deir al-Surian, in the southeast corner of the monastery where a dilapidated 1960's building would be demolished to make space for the library.

July 2007 saw the approval of the planning application by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities; and after fundraising, planning, and completion of the library's design in 2008, building of the new library commenced in early 2009. The firm of Morad Bebawy & Meleka Farah had been appointed by the Monastic Council to oversee the architecture which was designed in harmony with the original monastic buildings and would serve to enhance the timeless spiritual heritage of the monastery. The new building would consist of two storeys above ground, with a basement library and archive area underground. By the end of 2009, the first stage of the building, the skeleton shell, was complete.

In the summer of 2012, the second stage of the library project was finished. It included internal partitions; flooring and wall finishes; electrical and mechanical services; a service lift; security alarms and a telecom installation system. The start of 2013, saw the completion of the final stage of the new library comprising the fitting-out and installation of metal shelving and cabinets; tables and workbenches; and conservation equipment.

The purpose-built Deir al-Surian Library now provides world class storage for the monastery's collection, as well as facilities for all aspects of book conservation, such as education and training to enable unrivalled state-of-the-art care for the library's priceless collection. Biannual conservation field campaigns organised by The Levantine Foundation will give British, European, and Egyptian conservators unique professional development opportunities to acquire broader capability and 'extended professionalism' characterised by independent judgment, involvement in a community of practice, and the demonstration of practical or intellectual leadership.

The Deir al-Surian Library has come a long way from its humble beginnings in the 9th century. It now stands proudly amid the ancient walls of the historic Monastery of the Mother of

God and an elegant tamarind tree, whose survival is as important to the monks of Deir al-Surian as the collection itself.