

The Arabic Psalter, facsimile edition of Manuscript A 187, The Petersburg Arabic Illuminated Psalter from the collections of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg Branch), prepared by Val. V. Polosin, N. I. Serikoff, S. A. Fransouzoff, edited by N. I. Serikoff, Saint Petersburg-Voronezh, "Kvarta", 2005, 254 pp., with *A Supplement*, 216 p.

One of the gems preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies attached to the Russian Academy of Sciences – St. Petersburg Branch – has been made available to the public in the form of a splendid facsimile. Together with a detailed Russian/English commentary, they are presented in an elegant leather-bound case. An art object in itself, this limited edition (printed in 500 copies) opens a new path for similar endeavours that would bring the works of Christian Arab masters closer to the scholarly public.

The facsimile provides a complete photocopy of a manuscript dating from the 17th century, recorded as 'A 187' in the library catalogue of the Institute of Oriental Studies. A Melkite codex, this liturgical *Psalter* presents the Arabic translation of 'Abdallāh ibn al-Faḍl al-Antākī (not mentioned in the text), illustrated with 33 coloured miniatures. These are the work of Yūsuf (Joseph) al-Muṣawwir, born Yūsuf ibn Anṭūniyūs ibn Suwaydān al-Ḥalabī in the second half of the 16th century, who died a priest, between 1660 and 1667. In his family, members of the next three generations also became icon-painters.¹

Yūsuf al-Muṣawwir was of Greek descent and most probably a native of Aleppo, one of Syria's largest cultural centres in Ottoman times. His excellent knowledge of Greek and his attachment to Patriarchs Euthymius II (1634–1647) and Macarius Ibn al-Za'im (1648–1672) allowed him to contribute to Christian Arabic literature by translating, adapting and illustrating a large number of religious works. Thus, Yūsuf worked together with Patriarch Macarius's son, Archdeacon Paul ("of Aleppo"), on a number of Greek texts. Among the translations of Patriarch Macarius's "spiritual son" (as he called Yūsuf) was Νέα σύννοψις διαφόρων ιστοριῶν, the *Cronograph* of Matthew Cigalas, Bishop of Cyprus, relating world history from the Creation to the 1640's (reign of the Ottoman sultan Murad IV). Matthew Cigalas's main source was the *Chronicle* of Dorotheus of Monemvasia, also partially translated into Arabic by Patriarch Macarius, who finished his version in 1667.² Macarius became acquainted with this

¹ See Sylvia Agémian, *Ne'meh al-Muṣawwir, peintre Melkite, 1666/1724*, in "Berytus. Archaeological Studies", Vol. XXXIX, 1991, The American University of Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 189–242.

² For the Romanian version see D. Russo, *Studii istorice greco-române*, București, 1939, I.

and other major Greek works during his first journey to the Romanian Principalities, Ukraine and Russia (1652–1658). The Arabic version of 1648, *Al-Durr al-manzūr fī tāriḥ mulūk al-Rūm* (“The Stranded Pearls of the Byzantine Emperors’ History”), preserved at the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies in a copy in Yūsuf’s hand that once belonged to Paul of Aleppo, contains 94 exquisite miniatures of all the Byzantine emperors from Constantine the Great and the Ottoman sultans up to Murad IV³.

As presented here, MS. A 187, *Kitāb Zabūr Dāwūd al-Nabī* (‘The Book of Psalms of David the Prophet’), contains 127 fol. measuring 180x132 mm, with a text coverage of 147 × 94 mm. While the text is written in black ink, in clear calligraphic *naskh*, red ink was used for dividers and gold ink for Psalm 136 and miniature elements. The manuscript comprises 33 miniatures which, complementing the written text, represent a range of themes, observing the tradition of Byzantine book-illustration. Naturally, the highest number of figurative occurrences is granted to the King and Prophet David – 8 illustrations⁴. Depictions of Moses are present thrice, while Jesus Christ is represented twice alone and once together with Basil of Caesarea, John of Damascus, Gregory of Nyssa and St. Nicholas. Other Byzantine patterns include the Mother of God – Hodegitria, the Annunciation, John the Baptist, and Solomon the Wise. As Vladimir Polosin noted in an earlier description of the manuscript⁵, “the depiction of the well-known characters of the Bible in our *Psalter* are touched by the spirit of melancholy and calm dignity”. Less conventional, images of animals and birds accompany those of prophets and saints: two cocks on the frontispiece of the opening page (1v), birds on trees (1v–2r), sheep (61v), etc. The background (caves, fields, trees), attitudes, garments, furniture, colours, all artistic elements evoke the Byzantine tradition to which this Christian Arab miniaturist was strongly attached.

Yūsuf al-Muṣawwir was also an icon-painter: in her article published in “Revue Roumaine d’Histoire de l’Art” (1976, nr. 13, pp. 125–135), Sylvia Agémian stated that at least 15 icons painted by him have been identified. Yūsuf was much more prolific in book-illustrating: over 200 miniatures are included in the manuscripts that he produced. Undeniably, when studying the works of a master of miniature one would naturally research literature that focuses on the Eastern

³ See A. I. Mikhaylova, *An Illustrated Arabic Manuscript of a Translation of a Seventeenth-Century Greek Chronograph*, in “Manuscripta Orientalia”, Vol. IV, No. 1, March 1998, pp. 58–62, with illustrations. One could only wish that this other gem, showing Paul of Aleppo’s marginal notes, is soon presented to the public in a similarly beautiful facsimile.

⁴ The illustration of King David in an Arabic *Psalter* makes this manuscript as interesting as the similar items presented in the recent exhibition SACRED at the British Library (27 April – 23 September 2007): *David playing the harp, David and Goliath in a Psalter* from France (Paris ?), last quarter of the 13th century.

⁵ See Vladimir V. Polosin, *A Seventeenth-Century Manuscript of an Illustrated Psalter*, in “Manuscripta Orientalia”, Vol. 4, No. 4, Dec. 1998, pp. 60–66 (with miniatures). Previously, this manuscript was briefly described by V. Rosen, I. I. Kratchkovsky and G. Graf.

Christians' religious art, and first of all the so-called 'Melkite icons'. Having studied the catalogues of exhibitions of Christian icons and the works of icon experts – Sylvia Agémian, Neophitos Edelby, André Grabar, Virgil Cândea, the editors of the *Arabic Psalter* acknowledge the relevance of the art of the icon for book-illustration, a familiar feature for all the heirs of Byzantine culture. As known, Christian Arab icons were revealed to the Western public forty years ago, when an exhibition organized by Musée Nicolas Sursock in Beirut, Lebanon (May 16 – June 15, 1969) drew attention to these neglected treasures of the Near East. The volume prepared by the organizing committee, *Icônes Melkites, Catalogue publié sous la direction de Virgil Cândea* (Beyrouth, 1969, 337 pp., 65 illustrations), rich with comments written by Camille Aboussouan, André Grabar, Jules Leroy, Joseph Nasrallah, Rachid Haddad, Sylvia Agémian, etc., became an indispensable reference book. Unsurprisingly, it is often quoted by the editors of the present edition of the *Arabic Psalter*, alongside the catalogues of the ensuing exhibitions: *Icônes Grecques, Melkites, Russes. Collection Abou Adal*, Paris, 1993, and *Icônes arabes: Art chrétien du Levant, Exposition à l'Institut du Monde Arabe*, Paris, 2003.

The present edition is completed by an extensive *Supplement* that provides several commentaries in two versions – Russian and English – which prove to be equally important in the overall design of the work. To avoid repetition, I am presenting herewith the English version.

The *Preface* (p. 109) provides essential data about MS A 187, as mentioned above, including the journey of the copy from its original owner, Paul of Aleppo, to the French diplomat and Orientalist Jean-Baptiste Louis Jacques Rousseau, from whom the Asiatic Museum, the forerunner of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy, acquired it. We learn here that the publication of the *Arabic Psalter* was sponsored by a Russian finance and construction company, *MostGeoTSentr*, while The Wellcome Library in London and many other institutions and scholars supported the editors' efforts.

After *Acknowledgments* (p. 110) that testify to the collective effort made for the present edition, several chapters explain in detail the story and the features of this rare work: *The History of the Acquisition of the [St.] Petersburg Arabic Illuminated Psalter* (pp. 111–116); *A Description of Manuscript A 187* (pp. 117–121), which includes *Incipit*, *Explicit* and *Colophon*; *The Recipient of Manuscript A 187* (pp. 123–124), debating the time when the copy was presented to Patriarch Macarius; *The Copyist of Manuscript A 187 and his Times* (pp. 125–132), a chapter devoted to the life and works of Yūsuf al-Muṣawwir. This allows a brief survey of the historical circumstances in Ottoman Syria, focusing on the situation of the Christian Orthodox community, also providing information on the Arabic translation of the *Psalms*.

The following chapter, *A Description of the Illustrations in Manuscript A 187* (pp. 133–158), encloses comments on each and every miniature based on comparisons with the imagery of traditional Byzantine iconography and book

adornment. By far the most fascinating part of the commentary, this chapter gives a clear picture of the Christian Arabs' religious art and ability. Having studied the varieties of *Psalter* illustration, the authors conclude that the present manuscript falls into the category of 'monastic' *Psalters*. Vladimir Polosin's opinion in the above-mentioned article also leads to the conclusion that this is not an 'aristocratic' *Psalter*: "Rather the Psalter was executed for a person who stood high in the Syrian Church hierarchy, and it seems that the book was intended to be used in personal worshipping" (*ibidem*, p. 60). This may well be the case, considering that there are liturgical books used for public service, at church, and others kept for private worship, either by monks in their cells or by lay people, at home.

The English version ends with *Notes* to the text (pp. 159–166, while the Russian version continues with *The Psalter and the History of Christian Culture* (pp. 57–67) and *The Psalter and Christian Arabs* (pp. 68–74). The last part of the chapter comprises a linguistic study of the Arabic translation and a discussion of connections between MS A 187 and others preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg. Richer than the English version by nearly 140 notes, the Russian commentary deserved to be translated into English in its entirety.

The volume is completed by a *Bibliography* (pp. 167–178), *Index* (pp. 179–186) and a list of *Quotations from the Bible and the Koran* (pp. 187–188), while closing pages display some of the most exquisite illustrations in MS A 187, pages from other relevant volumes, *Psalter* book-covers and, on p. 213, a map of the pashalyks of Bagdad, Urfa and Aleppo drawn by J.-B. Rousseau.

The editors of the St. Petersburg Arabic *Psalter* are well-known researchers who have devoted all their efforts to the Arab culture, either Muslim or Christian. Inspired by their great forerunner I. I. Kratchkovsky (1883–1951), their works have focused on the description of Arabic manuscripts, textual comments, the edition and translation of Arabic manuscripts, codicology and catalogue methodology.⁶ Serghei Frantsouzoff, an expert in South-Arabian inscriptions, has also devoted his attention to the extensive collection of Christian Arabic manuscripts of St. Petersburg. One of Nikolaj Serikoff's latest works is the *Arabic Medical Manuscripts of the Wellcome Library. A Descriptive Catalogue of the Ḥaddād Collection (WMS Arabic 401–487)*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2005, consisting of a state-of-the-art codicological description of these important texts.⁷

The library of the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Studies holds one of the richest collections of Arabic manuscripts, among them an overwhelming number of exceptional Christian Arabic texts – which accounts for the eagerness of researchers waiting for the publication of the projected *Catalogue of the Christian Arabic Manuscripts Preserved at the St Petersburg Branch of the Institute of*

⁶ E. g., one of Valery V. Polosin's articles, published in "Manuscripta Orientalia", Vol. 1, No. 2, Oct. 1995, pp. 16–21, bears the title *To the method of describing illuminated Arabic manuscripts*.

⁷ See Ioana Feodorov, *A New Standard in Arabic Manuscript Cataloguing*, in "Revue des études sud-est européennes", Bucharest, XLIV, 2006(1–4), pp. 207–223.

Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Compiled by Val. V. Polosin, VI. V. Polosin, N. I. Serikoff, S. Frantsouzoff, and edited by N. I. Serikoff with the assistance of H. Teule, C.-M. Walbiner, H. Kilpatrick, this work is still in progress.⁸ Sidney H. Griffith mentions several other *Psalter* manuscripts of utmost interest which are preserved in St. Petersburg: a bilingual fragment of Psalm 78 in Greek and Arabic, with the Arabic text appearing in Greek script (Damascus, end of the 8th c.), and a collection of fragments of a trilingual *Psalter* in Greek, Syriac and Arabic (Mar Sabas monastery, Palestine, 9th c.)⁹.

The benefits of having free access to this rare manuscript of the Arabic *Psalter* are countless. Researchers may now reach valuable results by comparing the St. Petersburg text with the similar ones in the Alphonse Mingana collection, now preserved at the library of the University of Birmingham, that are described in the *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts*, vol. II (Cambridge, 1936), such as items 4 (p. 8), 114 (p. 159), etc. Considering that in 2005 the Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam (held regularly by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the University of Birmingham) focused on *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, I am certain that the facsimile presented here will draw the attention of some of the habitual contributors.

The facsimile of the St. Petersburg Arabic *Psalter* can certainly provide new language material to researchers of the Biblical terminology, such as Monica Broșteanu (University of Bucharest, Arabic Dept.) who has devoted considerable attention to comparative studies of the Scriptural vocabulary.¹⁰ This version of the Psalms also holds considerable interest for scholars who focus on the Arabic printed Bible. Thus, they may research its relevance for the basic text used for *Books of Psalms*, such as the edition that Athanasios Dabbās printed in 1706 in Aleppo using Arabic types that had been carved by Antim Ivireanu, the Wallachian printer and scholar.

The facsimile is also significant for specialists in the *Pseudo-Psalter of David*, the Muslim version of King David's words preserved in a cluster of texts that illustrate a distinct literary *genre* (13th to 19th centuries). Based on several manuscripts of *Zabūr Dā'ūd*, including an exceptional one at the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg, Serghei Frantsouzoff pointed out the common elements and the connections between the Biblical Psalms and the Muslim Pseudo-Psalter.¹¹

⁸ See the announcement posted at www.brediusstichting.nl.

⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic*, in "The Muslim World", 78(1988), pp. 1–28.

¹⁰ See her article *Solutions offertes pour trois versets difficiles du Psaume XVI par quelques traductions arabes*, in "Romano-Arabica IV", 2004, University of Bucharest, pp. 21–27, and her book *Numele lui Dumnezeu în Coran și în Biblie*, Iași, Polirom, 2005.

¹¹ See S. A. Frantsouzoff, *Le pseudo-Psautier de David dans la traduction musulmane (L'historique de son étude et la caractéristique générale du genre*, in "Khristiansky vostok", tom 3(IX), Novaia seria, St. Petersburg-Moscow, 2002, pp. 269–296 (in Russian, with a French abstract).

Arabic Psalms are not a topic that would exclusively interest the scholarly public. Visiting the Aleppo Room at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, which was commissioned by a Christian trader of Aleppo in 1600-1601, one can only marvel at the exquisite wall panels displaying Psalms (Ps. 1, 27, 117) and scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The Russian commentary to the facsimile presented here ends in a comparison of the text with other Arabic versions of the *Psalms*, including sections painted on the wooden panelling in the Aleppo room. Incidentally, awareness as to the value of the old Arabic Bible is high nowadays: e. g., a *Liber Psalmorum Davidis Regis et Prophetarum* – the Latin translation and edition of the Psalms by Victorio Scialac and Gabriele Sionita printed with the types of Savary de Brèves (Rome, 1614) – was listed in the Oct. 1999 catalogue of Het Oosters Antiquarium (Smitskamp Oriental Antiquarium, the Netherlands) for the price of 1,818 €.

One could only hope that a higher visibility of treasures such as this Arabic Illuminated *Psalter* will allow all researchers to have access to them for the purpose of establishing manuscript editions, preparing translations and researching the spiritual wealth of the Christian Arabs and their European connections. For the time being, the brilliant work of the editors of MS A 187 preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg adds a key element to the limited bibliography of Christian Arab iconography, literature and book-art mastery.

Ioana Feodorov