New Light on Old Manuscripts, VB 45, 39–53

https://doi.org/10.1553/978OEAW91575s39

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A Cache of Palimpsests and Christian Manuscript Culture across the Medieval Mediterranean: First Results of the Sinai Palimpsests Project

The Holy Monastery of St. Catherine is home to one of the largest collections of parchment manuscripts from the Middle Ages, preserving a precious record of Christianity especially in the first millennium. In the Old Collection and in the New Finds that were (re-)discovered in 1975, it contains a total of more than 4,500 manuscripts in 14 languages. This wide spread, which will concern us again below, reflects the history of the Monastery.[1] Founded under the Emperor Justinian between 548 and 565, it has until the present day been home to Greek-speaking, or at least Greek-praying, monks in doctrinal unity with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, while traditionally the election of the *hegoumenos* (abbot) is confirmed by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Throughout its long history, the Monastery has attracted visitors, pilgrims and monks from all the corners of the world.[2]

This is reflected in the rich and linguistically varied manuscript holdings in the Monastery's library, as people brought manuscripts with them which they left as pious gifts or bequests—or, in some instances, copied new manuscripts on site. The number of manuscripts associated with the Sinai is even larger once we take into account also those manuscripts that once belonged to the Monastery and are now dispersed in collections across the globe, from St. Petersburg to Los Angeles. The oldest manuscript with a Sinai connection is a case in point: the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which once contained the full text of the Septuagint and the New Testament, was most likely copied in the 380s in Alexandria. The exact date when it reached the Monastery is unknown, but since the late 19th century, the bulk of it has made its way through appropriation, donation, and sale, to the British Library in London, while only one bifolio that was discovered among the New Finds remains in the Monastery.[3] St. Catherine thus joins a small handful of monasteries—other examples in the Latin West are St. Peter in Salzburg or St. Gallen in Switzerland—that can look back on an unbroken tradition of augmenting and preserving its manuscript collection through the centuries.[4]

St. Catherine's is further distinguished by its possession of the largest number of palimpsested objects to be preserved in one place. We are currently aware of 172 items, both from the Old Collection and especially from the New Finds—the discarded fragments, folios, bifolios, and quires that came to light in an abandoned room in 1975. This means that ca. 3.7% of items in the entire collection are known to contain palimpsested material—and that percentage is increasing as research on the collection and especially on the New Finds progresses and new palimpsests are identified. By comparison, the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence has 29 palimpsests, the Austrian National Library in Vienna 23.[5]

The Sinai Palimpests Project (SPP), as described by Michael Phelps in this volume, has so far made 74 palimpsested objects accessible online, 54 of them from the New Finds.[6] With some justification, this may be called a 'cache', i.e. a deliberate assemblage of valuable objects that were kept in a safe place. The parchment material in the New Finds survived in a storage room precisely because of its poor condition. It consists of

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[1] This article has benefited from the scholarly input and research assistance of Giulia Rossetto and Cosimo Paravano, as well as Michael Phelps. I am also grateful to Kathryn Morgan for her comments on an earlier version. The research for this article was undertaken in the context of the FWF Wittgenstein-Award Project 'Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency' (Z288-G25).

[2] The long tradition of monastic life at the foot of Jebel Mousa and of the monks' activities as authors and scribes, and as readers and owners of books, is discussed by Father Justin Sinaites in his contribution to this volume.

[3] BL Add. 43,725 (*Diktyon* 39225). See the British Library website: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/codex-sinaiticus (accessed 01.07.2023).

[4] See Nievergelt and Dora (eds.), *Fenster zur Ewigkeit*.

[5] Grusková, *Untersuchungen*; Martin and Grusková, Scythica Vindobonensia.

[6] The website http://sinaipalimpsests.org (accessed 01.07.2023) gives access to the Research Site where, after registration, the processed images and short catalogue descriptions for the erased undertexts are accessible.

fragments, individual folios, bifolios and quires. These have been catalogued individually, resulting in a high numerical count of palimpsested items. Further research into the *membra disiecta* may well prove (and has in some instances already done so) that some of these individually catalogued items were part of the same original codex whose components are now scattered across the New Finds, the Old Collection, or even manuscript libraries and other collections further afield.

Already at this stage, the material assembled in the Sinai Palimpsests Project represents the largest sample of palimpsested material from the same location ever to have been studied as a group. In the following, I will present some preliminary results that may well be subject to refinement and revision as the study of the Sinai palimpsests continues. The focus will be on the corpus of palimpsests as a whole, rather than on individual manuscripts and text discoveries, as the latter in particular will be made public by the scholars who participated in the project.

The manuscripts studied so far in the Sinai Palimpsests Project can help shed light on three sets of questions that will be the focus here: palimpsests and their production and use; the interaction of language groups in the Christian Middle Ages; and the interaction of religious groups across the medieval Levant.

By way of introduction, it is important to recall a few insights from the study of Byzantine manuscript culture in general:

1. The date of authorship of a text is rarely identical with the date of copying of a surviving manuscript. Indeed, most of the manuscripts that survive from the Byzantine period contain texts that were composed many centuries earlier, often in Classical Antiquity. The gap between date of authorship and date of copying narrows in the 12th/14th centuries with the increase in literary production combined with higher survival rates of manuscripts, but even in this instance a gap of several decades remains. Autographs, i.e. manuscripts whose text was written out by the author himself, are exceedingly rare.

2. The place of copying of a manuscript is rarely the place where it is later preserved. This is true even at St. Catherine's, a monastic library in a remote location, as shall be seen below.

3. We know next to nothing about the origin of the writing support—in this instance, the parchment—used by copyists. While there are ample references by Byzantine *litterati* to the difficulty of obtaining parchment, it is not at all clear where parchment was produced or over what distances it was traded. Even less is known about the production, trade, and use of palimpsested material.[7]

PALIMPSESTS, THEIR PRODUCTION AND USE

What Kind of Parchment Sheets Were Palimpsested?

1. Palimpsests include discards that were generated in the process of manuscript production, for example original folios where the ruling was imperfect when the lines were not at right angles, or spaced too close or too far from one another.[8]

2. Palimpsests include discards that were created when a manuscript was left incomplete, for example when the text was produced but a large inner space was left out for the work of an illuminator.

3. Manuscripts were reused in two different ways: either the original bifolios were left intact after disassembling the quire, with the overtext running parallel to the undertext, resulting in a large-size codex; or bifolios were cut in half, turned on their side and folded in order to create a new bifolio at half size, with the overtext running at 90 or 270 degrees to the undertext. Accordingly, many of the manuscripts in Sinai Palimpsests Project can be classified as small or medium size.

This practice means that palimpsested parchment was often used for the creation of manuscripts of utilitarian character for which a handy size was important or at least no hindrance. Indeed, of the 74 Sinai palimpsests studied so far, 41 have liturgical texts in the *scriptio superior*.

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[7] The most recent comprehensive treatment of palimpsests and their study is Lucà (ed.), *Libri palinsesti greci*. See also Kotzabassi, Codicology and Palaeography. For a similar approach to the present article, with a wider geographical scope, see Kohlbacher, Palimpseste als Geschichtsquelle. Rossetto, "Library" and "Scriptorium", shows that the Georgian scribe Iovane Zosime, who was active in the late 10th century, used palimpsested sheets from the same source (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, in CPA) for the creation of three manuscripts over a period of 11 years, first at Mar Saba and later in the Sinai.

[8] For example, Sin. gr. 212 (*Diktyon* 58587), f. 98rv.

4. In rare cases, we encounter what might be dubbed 'extreme palimpsestation': bifolios sewn together from a patchwork of small pieces of palimpsested parchment. Sin. ar. NF 8 (also discussed elsewhere in this volume for its important undertexts) is a case in point: up to five pieces of different origin were stitched together to make up one folio.[9]

5. These are well-established observations that have been made in other contexts of palimpsest studies. In addition, Sinai Palimpsests Project has brought to the fore a lesser-known feature: palimpsests were also created from original objects whose format had become obsolete. Among the Greek undertexts, there is a significant number of scrolls that were cut up for later reuse, as Pasquale Orsini's work for Sinai Palimpsests Project has shown.[10] It is worth noting that the erased texts on the original scrolls are often of a rather late date and in Greek minuscule, thus suggesting that the reason for erasure was not that the script had become obsolete (as would have been the case with majuscule writing), but that it was the format (and perhaps the text) that was considered recyclable. Once all this material has been properly studied, it may shed new light on the persistence of the use of scrolls as a book form in Byzantium long after the adoption of the codex, which increased in popularity in the course of the 4th century.

How Were Palimpsested Sheets Used?

First, it must be noted that entire codices made up of palimpsest are relatively rare. Much more frequent is the case where individual quires in a codex are copied on palimpsested material. This was often done at the time when a new codex was created, but it could also happen that a quire of palimpsested folios was inserted later, with overtext written in a different ink and/or scribal hand than the remainder of the codex. Scholars who created library catalogues have often overlooked individual quires copied on palimpsest. On a few occasions in the course of Sinai Palimpsests Project, palimpsested quires in intact codices of the Old Collection were discovered by chance and happenstance.[11]

Second, we can be reasonably certain that the people who reused palimpsested parchment sheets were not aware of what had been written underneath. Today, the presence of erased ink is sometimes discernible to the naked eye, in more or less faint traces. This is most easily visible in the margins of a folio, where there is no overtext. Other indications for the presence of palimpsest are: a rough surface of the parchment, suggesting that original text has been scraped off; faint smudges of ink that indicate its removal by the application of liquid; prickings for the ruling scheme of the erased text that do not correspond to the text on the page; and horizontal creases along the top or bottom margin that constituted the centrefold of an original bifolio which was cut up for reuse at 90 or 270 degrees.[12] Whatever traces of undertext are discernible today to the naked eye have probably emerged from the pages over time, although the exact process by which this happens remains to be studied.

We have to imagine that at the time of reuse, palimpsested sheets of different provenance, often even in different languages, were simply piled up in random order. As a result, palimpsested folios from the same original manuscript were placed out of sequence in the creation of a new manuscript, or even dispersed across several different new codices that are now found in different libraries.[13] Scholars have begun the painstaking work of reconstructing the original sequence of the erased undertext. A special viewing tool on the Sinai Palimpsests Project website facilitates the import of images from other sources to allow the recreation of the original sequence of the *Mutterhandschrift* (i.e. the original manuscript) on the basis of the undertext.

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[9] Sin. ar. NF 8, f. 52rv, f. 116 rv.

[10] For example the erased texts in the following manuscripts: Sin. ar. NF 8 (Arabic sales deed, dated 841); Sin. gr. 2053 (*Diktyon* 60428, Greek *Anthology of Psalms*, 9th-century majuscule); Sin. geo. 49 (Greek Liturgy of St. James, 9th-century minuscule); Sin. gr. 446 (*Diktyon* 58821, Greek *Collection of Liturgical Hymns*, 9th-century minuscule).

[11] An example is Sin. gr. 962 (*Diktyon* 59337), which contains one quire (three bifolios) written on palimpsest. One of them is double palimpsest.

[12] Examples are: Sin. gr. NF MG 2 (*Diktyon* 61040), f. 27v (scraping), Sin. gr. 925 (*Diktyon* 59300), f. 80v (washing), Sin. gr. 212 (*Diktyon* 58587), f. 46r (prickings).

[13] A good example is Sin. gr. NF MG 14 (*Diktyon* 61052), where Greek and CPA undertext appear in random order. As the work of Christa Müller-Kessler has shown, the translation into Christian Palestinian Aramaic of the *Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem, which were previously known only in Greek, is now dispersed in the undertext of five manuscripts, in St. Catherine's, in St. Petersburg, and in Norway: Sin. geo. NF 19, Sin. geo. NF 71, Petropol. syr. 16, Oslo Schøyen 35, Oslo Schøyen 37.

What is the Date of the Undertexts?

Of course, firm dates for copying are rare enough in regular manuscripts. For the erased layers, we only have two cases of dated material: in Sin. ar. 514, the erased Syriac text containing the Letter to the Hebrews is accompanied by a colophon with the date of 561/562 CE.[14] In Sin. ar. NF 8, among the many erased texts in multiple languages are 10 folios written in Arabic, perhaps originally from a scroll, that contain a deed for the sale of land in Ramla, with the date of 841 CE. In a few instances, the erased text reveals a colophon with the name of the copyist. One example is the Georgian scribe Gabriel who was active in the late 10th century and whose colophon is preserved in one of two erased layers of a folio that has no overtext (Sin. CPA NF frg. 16, f. 2v).[15]

To establish the date of copying of the undertexts and of the overtexts, we depend entirely on palaeographical criteria, such as script styles. Here, too, Sinai Palimpsests Project can yield important new insights. For the Greek texts, a large number of the erased scripts date from the 6th century. This was the century dominated by the long reign of the Emperor Justinian, who was also responsible for building the basilica and the walls around the Monastery in the Sinai. A second spike in erased scripts dates from the 9th century, the period of the *metacharakterismos*, when the Greek script changed from majuscule (capital letters) to minuscule (lower case letters). The Sinai Palimpsests Project is thus generating significant new amounts of documentation for the development of Greek majuscule writing. Indeed, in the undertext of Sin. gr. NF MG 99 (*Diktyon* 61137), Guglielmo Cavallo has identified erased New Testament writings in a Biblical majuscule of the mid-5th century, i.e. only two generations after the famous *Codex Sinaiticus* was copied. Until now, it had been thought that the earliest erased Greek was majuscule writing of the 6th century in Sin. syr. 30.[16] This pushes the earliest date of erased Greek in the Sinai collection back by one century.

What is the Time Span that Elapsed between the Application of the Undertext and the Application of the Overtext?

The time of erasure is impossible to know, although it is usually assumed that it was shortly before the folios were reused. This is an issue familiar from dendrochronology (where the freshly cut wood may be seasoned for up to ten years before use in a panel painting) and from the study of watermarks (where moulds with their distinctive designs were in use for about two years, and paper was used within three to five years of its production). In all these cases, including palimpsest production, the duration of stockpiling represents a significant and mostly unknown factor.

It is possible, however, to date the erased text and the overtext on the basis of palaeographical criteria, and thus to establish the time that elapsed between them. A detailed analysis that also takes into account any double and triple palimpsests (*bis rescripti*, *ter rescripti*) will have to wait until the entire Sinai collection of palimpsests has been imaged. For the time being, two extremes, demonstrating either very long or very short time spans between the date of the erased text and the date of the overtext, can be noted.

The first of these extremes is the Georgian *Menaion* in Sin. geo. 49, copied in the 13th century, on erased folios with original text in Arabic, Coptic, Georgian, Greek, and Syriac. Several of them are double or even triple palimpsest. The oldest erased scripts are 6th-century Greek majuscule with the Gospels of John and Mark (as the lowest layer of a double palimpsest) and 5th- to 6th-century Syriac Estrangela with the Gospel of Mark.[17] This means that the elapsed time between the application of scripts can be as long as seven or eight centuries. These are important insights for the history of book culture in general and of libraries in particular, where manuscripts must have been preserved over many centuries.

The opposite case, of a very short time span between the erased and the upper writing, is represented in Sin. gr. NF MG 2 (*Diktyon* 61040), where the Pauline Epistles in the upper text were copied in the 9th century, and two of the erased texts have been dated to the second half of the 9th century: the *Pandects* of Antiochus the Monk and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus. In this case, only a few decades could have have elapsed between the two layers of writing.

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[14] This manuscript is discussed by Grigory Kessel in this volume.
[15] This manuscript is discussed by Bernard Outtier in this volume.
[16] Hunger, *Schreiben und Lesen*, 20.
[17] Sin. geo. 49, ff. 25rv, 26rv, 28rv, 29rv, 30rv, 42rv (Greek); f. 33rv (Syriac).

Of particular interest are double palimpsests (*bis rescripti*), which seem to be remarkably frequent in the Sinai collection: the Sinai Palimpsests Project has encountered folios with double palimpsest in 11 manuscripts out of 74. One example is Sin. ar. 514, which contains hagiographical texts copied in Arabic in the 9th century in the visible upper layer. Underneath are two layers of Syriac, one containing a treatise on medicinal plants, copied in the 8th or 9th century, while the lowest layer contains passages from the First Letter to Timothy, copied in the 6th century.[18] This means that New Testament text was erased after two or three centuries to make space for a work of medical use, but that this text in turn was very quickly removed and replaced with saints' *Lives*. A similar pattern occurs in the *Euchologion* manuscript Sin. gr. 962 (*Diktyon* 59337). This manuscript was copied in the late 11th century, but one quire of this manuscript was replaced at a later stage, probably because it was damaged, using palimpsested parchment. One bifolio of this quire (ff. 183rv+186rv) contains a double layer of palimpsest: the upper script, copied around the 13th century, is an *Euchologion*. Below that is an unknown *Kanon on St. Nicholas*, copied in the 12th century, and below that fragments from a kanon on the saints and martyrs Peter, Andrew, Dionysius, Paul, Christina, Heraclius, Paulinus, and Benedimus by Joseph the Hymnographer, copied after the mid-9th century. Here again, we observe the periodic reuse of parchment sheets, for the first time after three centuries, but the second time only after a very short period had elapsed.[19]

When scholars are reasonably certain about the date of the overtext, this has consequences for the relative date of the erased undertext which must come before it, thus providing a *terminus ante quem*. In the course of the Sinai Palimpsests Project, participating scholar Steve Delamarter has been confronted with the need to re-evaluate aspects of the history of the liturgy in Ethiopic on the basis of Sin. gr. NF M 90 (*Diktyon* 60917). The upper text is a Greek *Horologion*, copied in the 13th century. Several folios in this manuscript contain in the erased layer a funerary rite in Ethiopic that had previously been assumed to be of a later date.

What Can the Sinai Palimpsests Tell Us about the Textual Preferences of the Time? What Texts Are Erased and what Texts Substitute Them?

We have noted earlier that the people who used palimpsested sheets did not know what had been erased underneath. But they did know that they were using second-grade writing material. Hence, palimpsested folios are most common in manuscripts for frequent use, and in the medieval societies of Byzantium and the Christian Orient that meant liturgical texts, first and foremost, or theological, edifying, and hagiographical writing. We know that 22% of the extant *Euchologia* currently at St. Catherine's contain a certain amount of palimpsested folios. The figures are even higher for the *Euchologia* now in the Vatican (33%) and in Grottaferrata (39%).[20]

It should be noted that it is not only texts that were removed; sometimes erased pictorial material has also come to light in the course of Sinai Palimpsests Project. The erased undertext in Sin. ar. NF 8, ff. 16rv, 17rv, contains a text on medicinal plants, perhaps by Crateuas, copied in a 5th- to 6th-century majuscule, with drawings reminiscent of (but independent from) the *Vienna Dioscorides* of the 6th century (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vind. med. gr. 1, *Diktyon* 71026).[21] In the double palimpsest Sin. slav. NF 5, whose overtext was applied in the second quarter of the 11th century, Heinz Miklas has detected in the lowest erased layer, written in Glagolica, a few faint traces of a figural drawing of a religious nature.[22] The erased texts also include very early musical annotation in a *Sticherarion* of the second half of the 11th century, under an *Euchologion* that was copied in the 13th or 14th century (Sin. gr. 960, *Diktyon* 59335).[23] The most spectacular find is the fragment of a line drawing that illustrates the *Novel of Apollonius of Tyre* in an erased layer of Sin. ar. NF 8, f. 18v, because it represents a rarity in several ways. It is a Latin work which tells a story set in pagan antiquity that continued to be an inspiration to virtue for Christians. Moreover, copied in an early majuscule prior to 650, the Sinai erased layer represents the earliest known non-Christian pictorial representation in a parchment manuscript.[24]

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[18] On this manuscript, see also the contributions by Grigory Kessel and by Giulia Rossetto in this volume.
[19] For a detailed discussion of this manuscript, see Rossetto, *Greek Palimpsests at Saint Catherine's Monastery*.
[20] Rossetto, *Three Euchologia*, 9.
[21] See the contributions of Damianos Kasotakis and of Giulia Rossetto in this volume.
[22] See the contribution of Heinz Miklas in this volume.
[23] For a detailed discussion of this manuscript, see Rossetto, *Greek Palimpsests at Saint Catherine's Monastery*.
[24] See the contributions of Michelle Brown and of Giulia Rossetto in this volume.

What Patterns Emerge with Regard to the Texts that Were Abandoned to Erasure?

Here again, we must assume that ease of access to parchment material combined with lack of interest in the texts they contained determined the selection of folios that were subjected to erasure. This could affect popular texts of a religious nature as these would have been available in multiple copies, or rare texts from pagan antiquity which were no longer deemed relevant, or indeed texts written in languages that were no longer in use or copied in scripts that were no longer fashionable.

Among the previously-unknown Christian works in Greek discovered in the erased layers are a *Kanon on St. Nicholas*, an *Anthology of Psalms*, and a version of the *Ladder of John Climacus*, a treasured work of monastic spirituality, then as now, and of special relevance in the Sinai where the author is believed to have lived, first as a member and later as the leader of the monastic community.[25]

The erased material from pagan antiquity, though not plenteous, holds a few important surprises that are discussed in detail by Giulia Rossetto in this volume: the Greek undertexts contain a previously-unknown text from classical mythology that was perhaps an Orphic rhapsody, as well as ancient medical texts, including new texts from the Hippocratic corpus. One of the Latin undertexts contains, as has been noted, the ancient *Novel of Apollonius of Tyre* accompanied by a line drawing.

LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES IN THE CHRISTIAN MIDDLE AGES THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SINAI PALIMPSESTS

In many instances, it is only thanks to modern technologies of multispectral imaging that it becomes possible to recover the lost written heritage of some language communities. In 1990, Zaza Alexidze discovered in the Monastery's Library (Sin. geo. NF 13, Sin. geo. NF 55) fragments of a Lectionary and parts of the Gospel of John written in Caucasian Albanian and copied probably as early as the 7th century. Until then, this language, which is related to the language spoken today by the Udi people in the Eastern Caucasus, had only been known from inscriptions on stone and from a manuscript glossary. Sinai Palimpsests Project has rendered many folios of Caucasian Albanian more legible. These are now being studied by Jost Gippert. Moreover, a very large number of erased texts are in Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA), the language of the theology and of the liturgy of the Melkite Christians in Palestine from the 5th to the 13th century, after which it fell into disuse. Sinai Palimpsests Project has significantly enlarged the known corpus of writing in this language, adding 19 manuscripts with Christian Palestinian Aramaic in the erased layer, some of them with previously-unknown texts of a Biblical or liturgical nature. These are now being studied by Christa Müller-Kessler.

What Can the Sinai Manuscript Collection Tell Us about Language Use?

Thanks to the Sinai Palimpsests Project, it is possible to compare the distribution of languages in three different layers, as it were, of the Monastery's library: the Old Collection, the New Finds, and the erased *scriptio inferior* of palimpsests.[26] This allows for some speculation about the different language communities of the Christian Orient whose members came to the Monastery in the Sinai through the ages and left their books in the library, as a bequest or a pious gift.[27]

It is often assumed that a monastery with such an old and important library must have had a scriptorium, but concrete evidence for scribal activity at the Sinai—let alone collaborative book production on a larger scale as implied by the term 'scriptorium'—is rather slim once the colophons are considered and contextualized. It is instructive to compare the Greek, Syriac, and Georgian manuscripts in the Old Collection, which is the best preserved. The scribal habits differ significantly according to language group and depending on the location of

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[25] *Kanon on St. Nicholas* (Sin. gr. 962, *Diktyon* 59337, ff. 183rv, 186rv), *Anthology of Psalms* (Sin. gr. 2053, *Diktyon* 60428), *Ladder of John Climacus* (Sin. gr. NF M 130, *Diktyon* 60957, f. 1rv).

[26] A more detailed discussion of the following material is found in Rapp, Secluded Place. The numbers presented here represent an updated count. Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East* also engages with issues of Christian manuscript-producing communities in the Levant under Arab rule.

[27] The most recent and complete treatment of the Monastery's library and its history is Rossetto, *Three Euchologia*, 17–50, where further bibliography can be found.

copying. The Syriac scribes left the largest number of colophons that mention the place of copying (in 28% of the Syriac manuscripts currently in the Sinai), followed by the Georgians (17%) and the Greeks (8%). The Sinai as a place of copying is mentioned in 87% of the Georgian colophons, but only in 49% of the Syriac and 18% of the Greek colophons. In other words, Georgian and, to a significantly lesser extent, Syriac scribes made a point of noting the fact that they were working in the Sinai. These figures need to be seen in relation to the total number of manuscripts that survive from each of these three language groups. The result is rather slim: 15% of all Georgian manuscripts and 14% of all Syriac manuscripts in the Sinai collection were copied on site. For the Greek manuscripts, that number is minuscule: 1.5% only.

Old Collection	**Greek**	**Syriac**	**Georgian**
Total number of mss	2,319	266	86
Colophons with place of copying	189	75	15
Colophons, % of total number of mss	8%	28%	17%
Colophons with Sinai as place of copying	34	37	13
Colophons with Sinai, % of colophons	18%	49%	87%
Colophons with Sinai, % of mss	1.5%	14%	15%

Tab. 1: Frequency of annotations in Greek, Syriac and Georgian, and frequency of indications of Sinaitic provenance in the parchment manuscripts of the Old Collection of the library of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine

The Old Collection contains manuscripts that have been collected and treasured continuously to the present day. As Father Justin Sinaites points out in his contribution to this volume, ever since the days of Egeria's visit in the late 4th century, the presence of codices with Biblical or liturgical content has been part of the history of the Monastery and of the experience of pilgrimage to the site.

Old Collection (Parchment)	**Codices and Scrolls**	**Percentage**
Arabic	601	18.05%
Armenian	1	0.03%
Caucasian Albanian	0	0.00%
Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA)	3	0.09%
Coptic	1	0.03%
Ethiopic	6	0.18%
Georgian	86	2.58%
Greek	2,319	69.66%
Hebrew	0	0.00%
Latin	1	0.03%
Ottoman	1	0.03%
Persian	1	0.03%
Slavonic	43	1.29%
Syriac	266	7.99%
Totals:	**3,329**	**100%**

Tab. 2: Distribution of languages in parchment objects (manuscripts, quires, fragments) in the Old Collection of the library of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine

In the Old Collection, the largest language group is manuscripts in Greek (69.66%). It has been estimated that at least 70% of them contain liturgical texts. Following by a large margin, the next largest language representation is manuscripts in Arabic (18.05%), showing that over its long history the Monastery catered to the liturgical needs of people who were steeped in what became the local language from the 7th century. Next in importance is Syriac (7.99%), the language of Melkite Christians from Egypt to the Euphrates. Manuscripts in Georgian constitute 2.58% of the total.

The New Finds contain discarded and neglected manuscript materials that became known in 1975. This depository was probably started in 1734, when Archbishop Marthales moved the book collection to a newly designated library space. Those manuscripts that were no longer in use were left behind and apparently forgotten in the Tower of St. George. They were (re-)discovered in 1975 when debris was cleaned up four years after a fire in St. George's chapel. The New Finds largely consist of manuscript material in less than pristine condition, often well worn by frequent use, which may have been the reason for its deposition in this location. Entire codices are rare. More frequent are quires, bifolios, folios, and a large number of fragments. As a result of the discovery of the New Finds, the library holdings were increased by more than 30%, especially in the languages of Oriental Christianity. There were some 1200 manuscripts, parts of manuscripts, and fragments, including 423 manuscript items in Greek (often of early date and thus preserving precious evidence of different styles of majuscule writing), a very large number of items in Georgian (99), closely followed in number by those in Syriac (91), with Arabic following at some distance (70), and a significant number of items in Latin (39).

	Old Collection (Parchment)	**Percent of codices and scrolls**	**New Finds** (Parchment)	**Percent of mss. objects, incl. fragments**[28]
Arabic	601	18.05%	70	8.93%
Armenian	1	0.03%	0	0.00%
Caucasian Albanian	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA)	3	0.09%	18	2.30%
Coptic	1	0.03%	0	0.00%
Ethiopic	6	0.18%	2	0.26%
Georgian	86	2.58%	99	12.63%
Greek	2,319	69.66%	423	53.95%
Hebrew	0	0.00%	1	0.13%
Latin	1	0.03%	39	4.97%
Ottoman	1	0.03%	0	0.00%
Persian	1	0.03%	0	0.00%
Slavonic	43	1.29%	41	5.23%
Syriac	266	7.99%	91	11.61%
Totals:	**3,229**	**100%**	**784**	**100%**

Tab. 3: Distribution of languages in parchment objects (manuscripts, quires, fragments) in the Old Collection and the New Finds of the library of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine

The absolute numbers for the New Finds given here should be used with caution, as the objects that are being counted are no longer entire codices, but objects in various degrees of completeness.[29] Intact codices are rare among the New Finds. Much more frequent are codices without binding, individual quires or several quires stitched together, bifolia and individual folia or even fragments of folia. The noticeable presence of Latin, for example, is partially due to the fact that Latin parchment folios were cut up for use as binding strips, in which form they are now preserved.[30] Still, the percentages give some impression of the relative language

[28] It must be noted that all 18 CPA items, and 76 of the Syriac items in the New Finds, are fragments.

[29] Within the context of the Sinai Palimpsests Project, we have adopted the term 'manuscript object' to denote a distinct codicological unit that carries a catalogue number. This may be an entire codex, but can also be one or several quires, or a number of fragmented parchment pieces preserved in an envelope.

[30] At present, the Monastery's holdings include two codices and about 50 objects (including fragments and binding strips) written in Latin, many of them, as Michelle Brown has written, copied very early, in the 6th to 7th century, by scribes trained in the traditions of Rome, Ireland, and Britain. See most recently Brown, Imagining, Imaging; Brown, Bridge in the Desert; Brown, Early Medieval Picture Cycles; and Brown's contribution in the present volume.

frequency within the New Finds. The largest language representation after Greek is no longer Arabic, but Syriac. This figure may simply be due to the large number of fragments in that language.

Arabic discards, by contrast, are exceedingly rare, suggesting that texts and manuscripts in that language continued to be used and valued, rather than being discarded. Compared to the Old Collection, there is a significantly higher percentage of manuscript objects in Georgian. Does this mean that manuscripts carrying text in Georgian became so disheveled by frequent use over time that they were given an honorable discharge? Also striking is the high percentage of manuscript objects in Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Their presence in this depository can be explained by the fact that CPA ceased to be used in the 13th century. The New Finds thus offer a different perspective, from a different block of time, on the languages represented in the Monastery through its manuscripts. It is safe to assume that the people who brought these books or made use of them in the preceding centuries were conversant in these languages.

Palimpsested material represents the earliest layer in our investigation of language use. Table 4 below illustrates the languages present in the erased texts of the 74 manuscript objects from the Old Collection and the New Finds that have been imaged by the Sinai Palimpsests Project so far. In order to facilitate comparisons with the Old Collection and the New Finds, two different counting methods are applied here to the different languages. First, the absolute number of manuscript objects and their percentage containing erased languages is given. Second, to account for the varying state of preservation and fragmentation, the more significant numbers are the folio counts of undertext languages, both in absolute numbers and by percentage.[31]

	Old Collection (Parchment)	**Percent of codices and scrolls**	**New Finds** (Parchment)	**Percent of mss. objects, incl. fragments**	**Palimpsests** (74 objects, SPP March 2017)	**Percent of mss. objects**	**Erased sides** (rectos, versos)	**Percent of erased sides**
Arabic	601	18.05%	70	8.93%	8	7.55%	436	6.29%
Armenian	1	0.03%	0	0.00%	6	5.7%	118	1.70%
Caucasian Albanian	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	1.9%	276	3.98%
Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA)	3	0.09%	18	2.30%	20	18.9%	479	6.91%
Coptic	1	0.03%	0	0.00%	1	0.9%	2	0.03%
Ethiopic	6	0.18%	2	0.26%	1	0.9%	34	0.49%
Georgian	86	2.58%	99	12.63%	10	9.4%	710	10.25%
Greek	2,319	69.66%	423	53.95%	32	30.2%	3,058	44.14%
Hebrew	0	0.00%	1	0.13%	0	0.0%	0	0.00%
Latin	1	0.03%	39	4.97%	3	2.8%	83	1.20%
Ottoman	1	0.03%	0	0.00%	0	0.0%	0	0.00%
Persian	1	0.03%	0	0.00%	0	0.0%	0	0.00%
Slavonic	43	1.29%	41	5.23%	2	1.9%	115	1.66%
Syriac	266	7.99%	91	11.61%	21	19.8%	1,617	23.34%
Totals:	**3,229**	**100%**	**784**	**100%**	**Note**[32]	**100%**	**6,928**	**100%**

Tab. 4: Distribution of languages in parchment objects (manuscripts, quires, fragments) in the Old Collection, the New Finds and in the erased undertext of the library of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine

[31] Coptic appears to such a small degree that it is not considered further here.

[32] The sum of the languages attested in the erased undertexts of the 74 mss. imaged during the Sinai Palimpsests Project is higher than 74 because in several cases one manuscript object preserves undertexts written in more than one language. However, the occurrence of a given language in the erased layers is indicated only once even if, for instance, one manuscript object preserves five or six undertexts written in the same language.

Greek remains the dominant language. In the Old Collection and in the New Finds, this is obvious from the survival rate of Greek manuscripts (69.66 % and 53.95%, respectively). That Greek material was widely available emerges from the fact that erased Greek undertext appears in 32 different manuscript objects. Still, there is a certain reluctance (compared to the later layers) to erase Greek text which would still have been considered valuable (44.14%). Also targeted for erasure during the Middle Ages were texts in Syriac (23.34%) and Georgian (10.25%), probably due to the availability of material in that language. Christian Palestinian Aramaic (6.91%) as well as Caucasian Albanian (3.98%) were erased, as has been noted above, due to the fact that these languages were becoming obsolete.[33] The importance of Arabic as a language of Christian theology and worship is evident here from the reluctance to erase it (6.29%). What remains unknown is the origin of the erased writing material. Equally uncertain in most cases is the location where it was reused for the copying of a new manuscript. In view of the observations illustrated in Table 1 above, we must refrain from automatically assuming that the ample manuscript material preserved in the Sinai was also copied there. One possible clue regarding the locations where writing material was erased and where it was reused may come from the relation of overtext language to undertext languages in any given manuscript object.

What is the Correlation of Erased Language and Overtext Language? What Might this Tell Us about Language Communities?

The answer to this question may allow us to see which language groups were in closest interaction with each other. Or, to be more precise, who shared palimpsested parchment leaves with whom.[34] The figures given in Table 5 should be treated with caution, as they may be overly generous. The count of languages is based on the Text Layer Groupings indicated in KatIkon, and does not distinguish between full manuscript sides and stubs, nor does it take into account double or triple palimpsest layers.[35] Still, it gives some impression of the languages in the erased layer and the overtext that tend to cluster together.

Erased Language	**Number of manuscript objects (recto and verso sides) with erased language**	**Overtext language: number of manuscript objects**	
Arabic	8 (436 sides)	Arabic	3
		Georgian	2
		Greek	3
Armenian	6 (118 sides)	Georgian	2
		Syriac	4
Caucasian Albanian	2 (276 sides)	Georgian	2
CPA	20 (479 sides)	Arabic	2
		CPA	7
		Georgian	4
		Greek	3
		Syriac	4
Ethiopic	1 (34 sides)	Greek	1
Georgian	10 (710 sides)	CPA	1
		Georgian	9

[33] Brock, Sinai notes the frequent appearance in Georgian manuscripts of the last decades of the 9th and the 10th century of reused material in Syriac and CPA. This suggests that during this period Georgian and Syriac monks lived side by side at Mar Saba, in Jerusalem and its environs, and in the Sinai.

[34] The following section is based on Rapp, Secluded Place, with updates.

[35] For an explanation of KatIkon and the terminology developed for it, see the contribution of Doug Emery in this volume.

Erased Language	Number of manuscript objects (recto and verso sides) with erased language	Overtext language: number of manuscript objects	
Greek	32 (3,058 sides)	Arabic	4
		Georgian	5
		Greek	19
		Syriac	4
Latin	3 (83 sides)	Arabic	1
		Greek	1
		Slavonic	1
Slavonic	2 (115 sides)	Slavonic	2
Syriac	21 (1,617 sides)	Arabic	4[36]
		Georgian	1
		Syriac	16

Tab. 5: Erased languages in relation to overtext languages

As is to be expected, the overtext and the undertext languages are often the same, suggesting that language communities actually used the material they had at hand in the largest quantities.

But more can be said. Some language communities seem to have been rather closed. Taking the undertext-to-overtext relation first: Slavonic appears only under Slavonic; Caucasian Albanian appears only under Georgian; Ethiopic appears only under Greek. But Latin, rather surprisingly, appears under Arabic, Greek, and Slavonic.

We can also invert that relationship and look at the textual and scribal communities that used palimpsested sheets. The overtext-to-undertext relationship offers some insights into the community that applied the *scriptio superior*, revealing its multilingual character through the manuscript material available at hand for reuse. The greatest language variety of palimpsested material is found among the Georgians. Under Georgian overtext, no fewer than seven languages are represented: Arabic, Armenian, Caucasian Albanian, CPA, Georgian, Greek, and Syriac. The Armenians by contrast, Georgia's neighbours in the Caucasus, do not seem to have left any palimpsested material at all among the Armenian manuscript holdings in the Monastery's library.

Greek and Arabic scribes in Christian contexts may have been working under similar conditions as regards their access to writing material: five different undertext languages are found under Greek and also under Arabic overtexts—they both write on top of Greek, Arabic, CPA, Syriac, and Latin. In addition, we have a rare instance of Greek text over Ethiopic. This similarity in access to palimpsested material may suggest that Greek and Arabic manuscript production occurred in the same cultural and linguistic environment.

The Syriac scribes used recycled sheets from four languages, i.e. Armenian, CPA, Greek, and Syriac. Only two different languages are represented under Slavonic (Slavonic and Latin). Christian Palaestinian Aramaic scribes wrote only over texts in their own language.

These observations offer interesting new material for the numerous interactions between people from the different linguistic and cultural traditions of the Christian world. There must have been hotspots for such interaction, not just at the Monastery in the Sinai, but also at Mar Saba and the Holy Land in general, which was a magnet for pilgrims from far and wide, and home to many monasteries.[37] Could these be the places of origin for at least some of the palimpsest manuscripts that are now in the Sinai? Even if we take into account that the majority of manuscripts, including the palimpsests, were not copied at the Monastery itself, but brought there by pilgrims and other pious visitors, these observations offer ample evidence for the frequent interactions between people from different languages and cultures across the Christian world.

[36] Sin. ar. 514, ff. 47r and 52v are double palimpsest, the upper erased layer is Greek, the lowest erased layer Syriac. This, along with the other cases of double and triple palimpsest (which are not considered here), deserves further in-depth study.

[37] See the forthcoming volume edited by Daniel Galadza and Joseph Verheyden, *The Lavra of St. Sabas: Liturgy and Literature in Communities and Contexts*, including Binggeli, Writing in Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic at Mar Saba.

Many questions about the dissemination of palimpsested sheets can only be answered speculatively. Was there a wide market for such second-grade writing material, as will be suggested again below on the basis of the circulation of erased parchment across religious boundaries? What was the distance over which it was traded? Or should we assume that the erasure of undertext occurred in the same region as the application of overtext? Giulia Rossetto has assembled some evidence for the West-East movement of liturgical manuscript material, as Greek texts of Southern Italian origin were later over-written in the region of Syria-Palestine, but it remains unclear in what location the erasure of the undertexts occurred. If the Italo-Greek material was already removed when the sheets reached the Levant, this would indicate a wide geographical range for the trade in recycled parchment. Alternatively, the Italo-Greek manuscripts may have been preserved in the possession of individuals or monastic libraries in the East, and only later turned into second-grade writing material.[38]

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND THEIR USE OF PALIMPSESTS: A COMPARISON

Texts that are non-Christian are exceedingly rare in the Sinai undertexts, and non-existent in the overtexts included in the Sinai Palimpsests Project. The erased pagan texts in Greek and Latin from classical antiquity have already been mentioned. One of the erased texts in Sin. ar. NF 8 is a sales deed from Ramla of the year 841, written in Arabic. It contains the Muslim dating system and an invocation. There is a single instance of a Jewish text that has an intriguing history: under a Greek liturgical text copied in the 14th century (Sin. gr. 930, *Diktyon* 59305), Alexander Treiger has identified an Arabic version of Genesis and Exodus, copied in the 10th or 11th century. This was probably a translation from Hebrew into Arabic made for an Arab-speaking Jewish community in North Africa. This is a very rare presence of Old Testament text from the Jewish tradition that owes its survival to a Christian context. How, where, and when did these parchment folios from a different religious tradition and a far-away region end up on the recycling pile so that three centuries later a Greek liturgical text, now preserved in the Sinai, could be written on top?

This raises a final question, that of religious preferences in the practices of parchment recycling. As has been shown above, the reuse of parchment followed distinctive patterns depending on language communities. Some had access to material with a very wide range of erased languages, while others had rather limited choices. To gain a better understanding of the patterns of circulation of erased parchment according to religious affiliation, it is possible to draw upon manuscript depositories of Jewish and Muslim communities that include palimpsested materials: the Cairo Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue, and the Qubbat al-Khazna of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, as discussed by Ronny Vollandt in this volume.[39] The Sinai New Finds represent an analogous Christian cache of manuscripts that were piled up and neglected in one place over a long period of time. The table below offers a comparison between the palimpsests contained in these Jewish, Christian and Muslim depositories.[40]

The first feature to be noted in Table 6 when comparing the undertexts to the overtexts is a significant narrowing in the diversity of languages over time: in the Jewish case, from eight erased languages to two overtext languages; in the Christian case from ten to six; and in the Muslim case from five to three. But this is not the whole picture. It must also be noted that the Jewish and Muslim communities tended to use erased texts from outside their religion. Indeed, all three religious communities used largely parchment with Christian texts for erasure. Perhaps parchment with Christian text was the most widely available? It is unlikely that the Jews who generated the materials deposited in Cairo, or the Muslims whose recycled parchments ended up in Damascus, had manuscripts with Christian texts ready at hand in their own libraries for recycling. We must assume instead that they received the palimpsested sheets already prepared for reuse. This would be a strong indication for the circulation of palimpsests as a commodity. It must have been Christians who made the parchment folios available for erasure, and Christians who offered the second-grade writing material for sale and reuse by their Jewish and Muslim contemporaries.

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[38] Rossetto, *Three Euchologia*, 345–386, discussing the erased texts of Sin. gr. 966 (*Diktyon* 59341).

[39] See now also D'Ottone Rambach *et al*., *The Damascus Fragments*.

[40] The information on the Cairo and Damascus material is based on the contribution by Ronny Vollandt in this volume. The information on the Sinai New Finds was kindly provided by Giulia Rossetto, building on work by Damianos Kasotakis.

	Cairo, Ben Ezra Synagogue, Genizah	**Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai New Finds (studied so far in SPP)**	**Damascus, Umayyad Mosque, Qubbat al-Khazna**
Total number of objects with palimpsest	105	54	36
Religion of erased texts	Non-Jewish (85%)	Christian (83%)	Non-Muslim (100%)
Erased languages	CPA (58%) Hebrew/Judeao-Arabic and Hebrew/ Greek and Hebrew (15%) Greek (14%) Syriac (6%) Georgian (4%) Arabic (3%) Coptic (2%) Latin (2%)	Greek (23%) Georgian (10%) Syriac (21%) CPA (26%) Caucasian Albanian (3%) Armenian (7%) Slavonic (3%) Latin (4%) Arabic (3%) Ethiopic (1%)	CPA (56%) Greek (33%) Syriac (6%) Coptic (3%) Hebrew (3%)
Date of erased script	Mostly 5th–6th c.	Mostly 5th–6th c., 9th–12th c.	--
Date of application of overtext	Mostly prior to 1000	9th c. and later	--
Religion of upper texts (most prevalent content in %)	Jewish (100%, Palaestinian, of which Talmud 36%)	Christian (100%, of which liturgical 52%)	Muslim (92%, of which Quran 28%) Christian (8%)
Upper text languages	Hebrew/Hebrew and Aramaic (96%) Judaeo-Arabic/Judaeo-Arabic and Hebrew (4%)	Georgian (22%) Syriac (35%) Greek (18%) Slavonic (4%) Arabic (7%) CPA (15%)	Arabic (86%) Greek (8%) Syriac (6%)

Tab. 6: Caches of palimpsested parchment and religious distribution of erased texts

The next question to be asked is that of the radius of such trade. This is a question for which an answer can be attempted with regard to the Sinai. As our comparison shows, the large urban centres and trading hubs of Cairo and Damascus show less diversity in undertext languages than the desert monastery at the tip of the Sinai peninsula. This can only mean that the removal of the original texts that are now preserved in the erased layers of the Sinai New Finds must have occurred in locations where this kind of material was widely available, namely monasteries and other Christian centres which were frequented by people from these different language groups. The first place that comes to mind is the Holy Land with its many monasteries that attracted pilgrims and monks from all areas of Christendom. Indeed, it has been shown for the 9th to the 14th centuries that there was a regular flow of monks and manuscripts from the Holy Land to the Sinai.[41] It might also be argued that the palimpsests were created in the Sinai itself, for reuse on the spot. This is doubtful, however, in view of the fact that only a relatively small proportion of manuscripts that are now in the library at St. Catherine's show clear evidence of having been copied on site, as has been noted above. We are thus left with the conclusion, tentative and provisional as it might be, that the trading of recycled parchment occurred within regional networks. In the case of the Jewish and Muslim communities, it also took place across religious boundaries.

The library of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine reflects in its holdings the many people who came there to experience for themselves the mountaintop where Moses had stood, the Burning Bush where Moses heard the voice of God, and the relics of St. Catherine of Alexandria. These people came as pilgrims and as monks from all over the Christian world. The closest connections were with the Holy Land and the many monasteries there, which were part of the pilgrimage route. In the Sinai, in Jerusalem, and also at the Monastery of Mar Saba, which is less than a day's journey from the Holy City, not all monks had Greek as their native language.

[41] Rapp, From the Holy City.

Some monks came from different cultures and language groups and worshipped either together or side by side. Thanks to the Sinai Palimpsests Project, we have been able to dig deeper into the history of these multilingual monastic communities. We have been able to travel back in time beyond the moment when the manuscripts they most recently used were created, by looking at the history of the recycled sheets on which these were written. In the process, we have found a treasure trove of new texts, new languages, new scripts, and new insights into the use of palimpsests, that give us a deeper appreciation of the Monastery's rich cultural and religious role through the ages.

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