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New Testament: fragment of 1,750-year-old translation discovered

It is an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle in New Testament history and one of the oldest textual witnesses of the Gospels: a small manuscript fragment of the Syriac translation, written in the 3rd century and copied in the 6th century. A researcher from the Austrian Academy of Sciences discovered the fragment with the help of ultraviolet photography.

About 1,300 years ago a scribe in Palestine took a book of the Gospels inscribed with a Syriac text and erased it. Parchment was scarce in the desert in the Middle Ages, so manuscripts were often erased and reused. A medievalist from the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) has now been able to make the lost words on this layered manuscript, a so-called palimpsest, legible again: Grigory Kessel discovered one of the earliest translations of the Gospels, made in the 3rd century and copied in the 6th century, on individual surviving pages of this manuscript.

One of the oldest fragments that testifies ancient Syrian version

"The tradition of Syriac Christianity knows several translations of the Old and New Testaments," says medievalist Grigory Kessel. "Until recently, only two manuscripts were known to contain the Old Syriac translation of the gospels." While one of these is now kept in the British Library in London, another was discovered as a palimpsest in St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai. The fragments from the third manuscript were recently identified in the course of the "Sinai Palimpsests Project".

The small manuscript fragment, which can now be considered as the fourth textual witness, was identified by Grigory Kessel using ultraviolet photography as the third layer of text, i.e., double palimpsest, in the Vatican Library manuscript. The fragment is so far the only known remnant of the fourth manuscript that attests to the Old Syriac version – and offers a unique gateway to the very early phase in the history of the textual transmission of the Gospels. For example, while the original Greek of Matthew chapter 12, verse 1 says: "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and his disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat," the Syriac translation says: "[...] began to pick the heads of grain, rub them in their hands, and eat them."

Syrian translation before codex sinaiticus

Claudia Rapp, Director of the Institute for Medieval Research at the OeAW, is also pleased: "Grigory Kessel has made a great discovery thanks to his profound knowledge of old Syriac texts and script characteristics," she says. The Syriac translation was written at least a century before the oldest Greek manuscripts that have survived, including the Codex Sinaiticus. The earliest surviving manuscripts with this Syriac translation date from the 6th century and are preserved in the erased layers, so-called palimpsests, of newly written parchment leaves.

"This discovery proves how productive and important the interplay between modern digital technologies and basic research can be when dealing with medieval manuscripts," Claudia Rapp says.

Project info

The Sinai Palimpsests Project aims to make the centuries-old valuable palimpsest manuscripts of St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt readable again and available in digital form. So far, 74 manuscripts have already been deciphered. Claudia Rapp from the University of Vienna and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) is the scientific director of the project.

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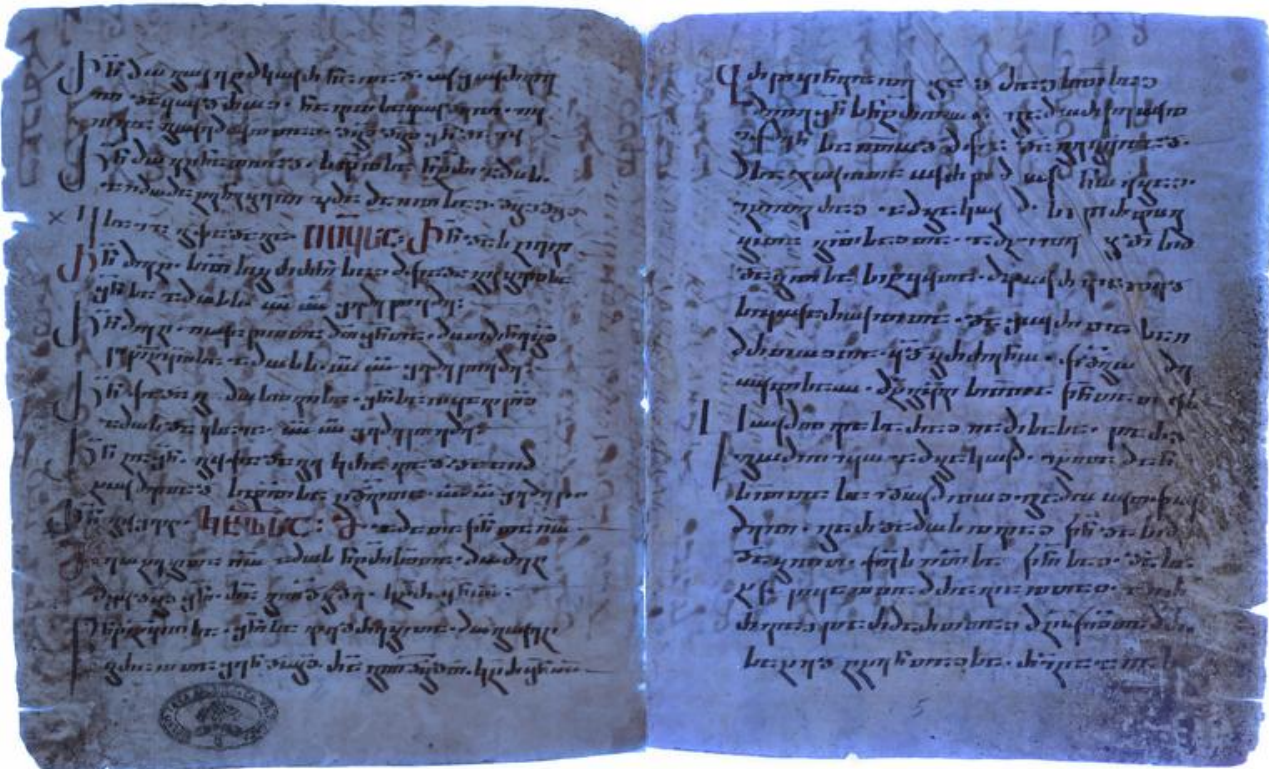
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The fragment of the Syriac translation of the New Testament under UV light
Vatican Library