PAVONe: Platform of the Arabic Versions of the New Testament

Elie Dannaoui, University of Balamand

On 18 May 2017, the Digital Humanities Center at the University of Bala-mand launched *PAVONe*, the Platform of the Arabic Versions of the New Tes-tament.[1] *PAVONe* is a database dedicated to the Arabic manuscripts of the Gospels copied between the ninth and nineteenth centuries. The project aims to contribute to the scholarly quest for the early translations of the Gospels into Arabic and to highlight their richness and diversity and their relations with the communities that have produced and used them. To reach these goals, the centre has engaged, since 2012, in developing a digital corpus, which ac-commodates a huge number of digitized and transcribed Arabic manuscripts containing the four Gospels and the lectionaries.[2] The corpus includes the verses of the Gospels transmitted to us in the manuscript tradition (continuous text, lectionaries, etc.) and as citations in other writings (writings of Church Fathers, liturgical texts, Arabic and Islamic literature, etc.). The corpus also includes all the allusions to Gospels in different types of writings (Arabic poetry, apologetic literature, etc.). Practically, *PAVONe* provides scholars and researchers with a toolset to find, read, compare and analyse the transcriptions of the Arabic Gospels.[3]

Corpus of Arabic translations of the Gospels
Historically, many attempts have been made to study the text of the Arabic Gospels. Early attempts included critical editions of the Gospels in the nine-teenth century and continued to involve the work of Orientalists in identifying the various textual families of the Arabic translations. Lately, the study of the text of the Arabic Gospels is considering the work of scholars interested in the Arabic Christian heritage. Although these efforts have not yet covered every aspect of this issue, they have succeeded in drawing attention to the rich-ness of this tradition and to its potential contribution to Biblical studies and researches related to Church history, linguistics, Muslim-Christian relations, and other topics. Undoubtedly, the value of the Arabic translations of the Gos-

---

1   The small *e* in *PAVONe* is the initial of 'electronic' and reflects the digital aspect of the database. The *PAVONe* database is freely accessible at <http://pavone.uob-dh.org/>.
2   A lectionary is a book containing Scripture readings called pericopes or lessons that are appointed to be read in Church services according to the cycles of the liturgical year. More details about the Greek lectionaries are available in Jordan 2010.
3   For a presentation of the project in Arabic, see Dannaoui 2017a.

pels exceeds the value of what we already know about this huge corpus. Its importance is reflected in the following properties:

1 Volume of conserved textual heritage: The manuscripts of the Gospels are among the most translated and copied works in the Arabic Christian heritage. For example, all churches and monasteries in the East have lectionaries, which exist in numerous copies as a result of their usage on daily basis. This wide dissemination of lectionaries reflects a massive volume of conserved textual heritage. Unfortunately, the catalogues of oriental manuscripts do not give the real number of Gospels manuscripts, mainly because they do not include the manuscripts used in parishes. Also, the catalogues do not always include precise and detailed information about the identity of the text. This is due to the lack of tools and resources needed by scholars and librarians in the task of describing the content of Gospels manuscripts.

2 Wide variety of formats: The Arabic text of the Gospels exists in different formats. One format is the continuous text, which includes the complete verses of the four Gospels following the canonical sequence (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Another format is represented by the lectionaries, which include selected lessons from the Gospels read on a specific date or liturgical service, or ecclesiastical event. In addition, we have extensive Gospels citations in other writings. For example, the text of the Gospels can be found in the writings of Church Fathers, liturgical texts, Arabic and Islamic literature, Arabic poetry, etc.

3 Broad span of time covered: The oldest dated Arabic copy from the New Testament is MS Sinai, St Catherine, Arabic 151, produced in Damascus in 867 CE. The manuscript contains the Arabic translation from the Syriac of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's epistles, and the Catholic epistles. The oldest dated witness of the Gospels in Arabic is MS Sinai, St Catherine, Arabic 72, a lectionary based on the calendar of Jerusalem church dating to 897 CE. Conversely, there is a general agreement that MS Vatican, BAV, arabo 13 includes the oldest Gospel text dating to the ninth century.[4] The manuscripts testify to the existence of diverse translations between the ninth century and the prevalence of printed editions in the East. The relation between those translations and various printings remains subject to research.[5] A recent study[6] has showed that there are commonalities between the 1865 Vandyke's edition and that of Debbas 1703.

---

4   Yet the manuscript contains no clear indicator of the transcription date or translation. See Monferrer-Sala 2015 for a study of the Syriac *Vorlage* of this manuscript.

5   A detailed *status quaestionis* of the early printing projects of the Gospels in the East is dealt with in Dannaoui 2017b, Walbiner 2012, and Kilpatrick 2012.

6   Hanna 2016.

4 Vast geographic scope: The Gospels were translated into Arabic, particularly from Greek and Syriac, in known centres (St. Catherine monastery in Egypt, Saint Saba monastery in Palestine, monasteries around Antioch, Damascus, Baghdad, etc.). The translated copies subsequently spread out and began to be deliberated in the Christian milieu elsewhere. Each translation reflects the characteristics of its community in regard to its language, culture, and the attitude towards other religions.

5 Wide variety of *Vorlagen*: The Gospel was written in Greek. The oldest translation is the Syriac *Peshitta*, which dates to the second century. Starting from the second century, the Bible was gradually translated into Coptic. In the last quarter of the fourth century, Jerome translated the Four Gospels into Latin, creating the widely diffused version that was later identified as *Vulgata*. The manuscripts testify that the Arabic translations of the Gospels did not depend only on the Greek, but relied on all the above-mentioned languages.

6 Theological richness and diversity: All Arabic speaking (fully or partially) churches translated the Gospels into Arabic for particular and various uses. Theological approaches and ways of expressing the faith held by each church are reflected in these translations. Accordingly, we believe that the Arabic translations of the Gospels form a treasure in Arabic Christian theology that researchers have not yet fully discovered. Nestorians, Chalcedonians, and non-Chalcedonians intersect in these translations in terms of how they expressed their faith.

Objectives and methodology

Despite the importance of the Arabic corpus of the Gospels, Father Sydney Griffith states in 2013 that: 'the study of the bible in Arabic is still in its infancy stage'.[7] His statement summarizes the current state of research in a field that is still under-developed and under-explored despite the few valuable studies that have been done so far,[8] all made on the basis of only few texts selected from a large number of manuscripts. Our project intends to continue these efforts by extending the study to include a larger number of texts and manuscripts and by using new automated methods.[9] In order to continue previous efforts, PAVONe adopted the following approaches:

1 Working on the whole text and not only on samples: Previous studies relied on short samples from the texts to generate conclusions and release provisions that were sometime closer to generalization, knowing that one manuscript sometimes represents more than one tradition or type. In order

---

7   Griffith 2013, 1.
8   Many attempts have been made to classify the textual traditions of the Arabic Gospels, including Guidi 1888, Samir 1994, Valentin 2003, Kashouh 2012.
9   The digital aspect of the project was described in Dannaoui 2013.

to close this gap, we decided to create a corpus, which aims at collecting all the copies which we have identified in national and international libraries and collections.

2 Including the lectionary in the study: Lectionaries were generally excluded from previous studies and projects despite their importance and available number that exceeds the other formats, mainly the continuous or canonical text.[10] Therefore, it is impossible to draw conclusions from the study of the Four Gospel manuscripts and generalize them on the whole history of the text without taking into account the richness, sometimes the uniqueness, of the lectionaries. To solve this problem, we gave special importance to the lectionary in this project. A section was dedicated to present the structure of this book type and to transcribe the pericopes from various lectionary manuscripts.[11]

3 Covering the period from which no manuscripts were obtained: Previous studies omitted the period from which no written texts were obtained, particularly the period before Islam until mid-eighth century. Consequently, the absence of manuscript copies was assumed to correspond to the absence of translations of the Gospels.[12] *PAVONe* has worked on collecting, identifying and transcribing all the Gospel verses cited in Christian and Muslim writings from the above-mentioned period, to fill this gap.

4 Developing a methodology: In order to study the relations between various versions of the translated texts of the Gospels, previous studies typically used one technique, known as verbal agreement. According to this technique, the translations of the same verse coming from different manuscripts are collated and compared in order to identify the differences and similarities between texts. The main disadvantage of the application of this technique is its incapability of handling the syntax of the translations. It is obvious that the syntax represents a crucial element in identifying the *Vorlage* of translated texts. *PAVONe* adopted the approach and tools of computational linguistics, which enable the researcher to analyse the annotated text through its metadata. Transcribed texts are subject to a morphosyntactic annotation. Lexical, grammatical and inflectional properties (tense, grammatical mood, grammatical voice, aspect, person, number, gender and case) are associated with the annotated text. These linguistic properties allow the system to perform complex searches based on abstract representations of a specific word, sentence, paragraph, syntax and occurence.[13]

---

10 Dannaoui 2012.
11 Dannoui 2015.
12 For a discussion of this issue see Griffith 2013, ch. III.
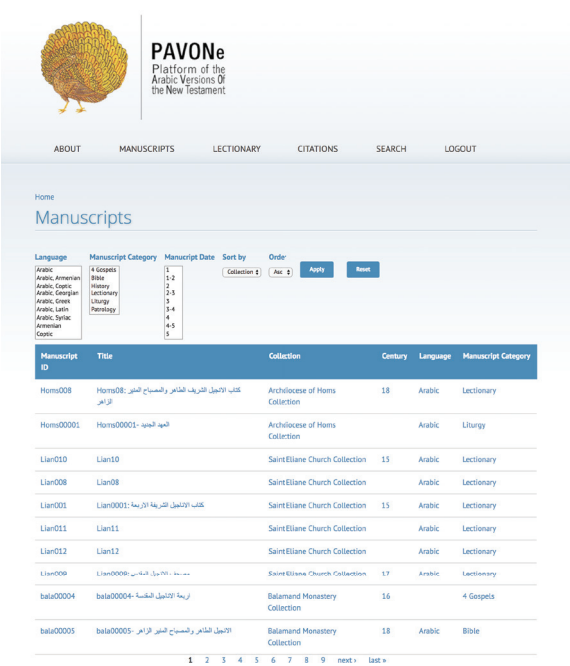13 Dannaoui 2013, 68–71.

Fig. 1. Manuscripts section: Map view.

Fig. 2. Manuscripts section: filtering.

Fig. 3. Lectionaries.
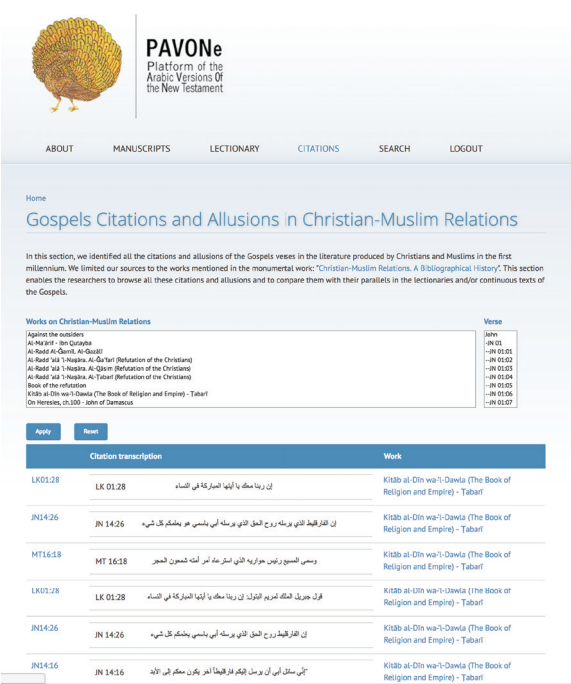

Fig. 4. Transcription vs image.

Fig. 5. Citations and allusions.

PAVONe database features

The database contains the following sections/services:

About: The section includes a presentation of the project and the methodology used.

Manuscripts: The section allows the user to browse the Gospels manuscripts transcribed in the database. Two browsing modes are offered: the first one allows the scholar to visualize the manuscripts in their geographical location using a geotagging feature (fig. 1); the second one allows the filtration of the manuscripts by a variety of parameters (date, language, etc., fig. 2). Both modes lead to the same resources and give the researcher the possibility of displaying some codicological and palaeographical properties of the manuscripts and their content as well.

Lectionary: It gives the liturgical structure of the lectionary as used by the Rum Orthodox Church and allows the researcher to browse the corresponding pericopes in the lectionary manuscripts (fig. 3). All the transcribed texts are published with a copy of the manuscript containing the reading. This allows the scholar to examine the original digital photo of the text and to compare it with our reading (fig. 4).

Citations: In this section, we identified all the citations and allusions of the Gospels verses in the literature produced by Christians and Muslims in the first millennium.[14] It enables the researchers to browse all these citations and allusions and to compare them with their parallels in the lectionaries and/or continuous texts of the Gospels. These allusions are witnesses of a certain version of the Gospels' translation and may contribute in identifying this tradition if they were formally presented and integrated in the corpus (fig. 5).

Search: This module allows the researcher to look for a specific verse in all the contents of the database regardless of the type of the source. The user can search, for example, for a verse in the 'Muslim-Christian citations' and lectionaries at the same time.

References

Dannaoui, E. 2012. *The Arabic Lectionary between Orientalism and Textual Criticism*: *Unanswered Questions*, paper presented at the Public research seminar of the Orient Institut Beirut, 12 June 2012.

— 2013. 'Digital Arabic Gospels Corpus', in C. Clivaz, A. Gregory, D. Hamidovic, eds, *Digital Humanities in Biblical, Early Jewish and Early Christian Studies*, Scholarly Communication, 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 61–70.

— 2015. *La tradition manuscrite du lectionnaire dans l'Église Orthodoxe Antiochienne*, paper presented at the *IIIum Symposium Syro-Arabicum*, L'Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK), 7 February 2015.

— 2017a. 'قاعدة بيانات ترجمات العهد الجديد إلى العربيّة: مشروع بلمندي طموح (*Qāʿidat Bayānāt Tarǧamāt al-ʿahd al-ǧadīd ilā al-ʿarabiyya*: *Mašrūʿ balamandī ṭamūḥ*)', *Al-našra al-baṭriyarkiyya*, 26/3 (2017), 57–61.

— 2017b. 'أضواء على دور المطران ملاتيوس كرمة في ترجمة الكتاب المقدّس إلى اللّغة العربيّة (*Aḍwāʾ ʿalā dawr al-muṭrān Malātios Karma fī tarǧamat al-kitāb al-muqaddas ilā al-luġa al-ʿarabiyya*)', *Al-našra al-baṭriyarkiyya*, 26/2 (2017), 42–45.

Griffith, S. H. 2013. *The Bible in Arabic*: *The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Guidi, I. 1888. 'Le traduzioni degli Evangelii in arabo e in etiopico', *Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei, cl. di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, Memorie*, ser. 4ᵃ, 4 (1888), 5–37 (repr. Roma: Accademia dei Lincei, 1888).

Hanna, L. 2016. 'The Famous Smith-Van Dyck Bible of 1860: Nothing Else but a Polished Re-edition of the Orthodox Gospels?', *Parole de l'Orient*, 42 (2016), 255–270.

---

14 We limited our sources to the works mentioned in Thomas et al. 2009.

Jordan, C. R. D. 2010. *The Textual Tradition of the Gospel of John in Greek Gospel Lectionaries from the Middle Byzantine Period*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010 (<http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/578/>, last access 27 October 2017).

Kashouh, H. 2012. *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels*: *The Manuscripts and their Families*, Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Texforschung, 42 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012).

Kilpatrick, H. 2012. 'Meletius Karmah's Specimen Translation of Genesis 1–5', in S. Binay and S. Leder, eds, *Translating the Bible Into Arabic*: *Historical, Text-Critical and Literary Aspects*, Beiruter Texte und Studien, 131 (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2012), 63–74.

Monferrer-Sala, J. P. 2015. 'Translating the Gospels into Arabic from Syriac: Vatican Arabic 13 Restored Section, Strategies and Goals', *Arabica*, 62/4 (2015), 435–458.

Samir, S. K. 1994. 'La version arabe des Évangiles d'al-As'ad Ibn al-'Assāl. Étude des manuscrits et spécimens', *Parole de l'Orient*, 19 (1994), 441–551.

Thomas, D.R., B. Roggema, B., and J.P.M. Sala, 2009. *Christian-Muslim Relations*: *A Bibliographical History* (*600-900*), I (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Valentin, J. 2003. 'Les évangéliaires arabes de la bibliothèque du Monastère Sainte-Catherine (Mont Sinaï): essai de classification d'après l'étude d'un chapitre (Matth. 28)', *Le Muséon*, 116, 3 (2003), 415–478.

Walbiner, C. 2012. 'Melkite (Greek Orthodox) Approaches to the Bible at the Time of the Community's Cultural Reawakening in the Early Modern Period (17th–Early 18th Centuries', in S. Binay and S. Leder, eds, *Translating the Bible into Arabic*: *Historical, Text-Critical and Literary Aspects*, Beiruter Texte und Studien, 131 (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2012), 53–61.