

Adamantius

Rivista del Gruppo Italiano di Ricerca su
“Origene e la tradizione alessandrina”

*

Journal of the Italian Research Group on
“Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition”

19

(2013)



Per Maria Ignazia Danieli

The Revelation of the Seraphic Gregory found in two Indian Manuscripts

by
Istvan Perczel

I. DISCOVERY OF TWO INDIAN SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS OF THE REVELATION OF THE SERAPHIC GREGORY

The present study aims at announcing the discovery of an odd but beautiful text of some historical importance, found recently in India in two Syriac manuscripts, namely *The Revelation of the Seraphic (or Fiery) Gregory (Gregorios Nuroño)*¹. With all probability, this text was originally written in Syriac, translated into Arabic, but subsequently its Syriac text was lost; finally the Arabic was translated into Syriac in 1689, in India, by Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah, the Antiochian Syrian Orthodox missionary bishop who, de facto, had introduced the Syrian Orthodox faith to India². The transmission of the text is also quite interesting, given that the second manuscript found was copied by another important bishop, Mar Abdisho Thondanattu, the one who, after a long strife lasting for several centuries for maintaining against the will of all the European colonisers a Catholic Chaldaean allegiance within the Malabar Church, decided to join the Nestorian patriarchate in 1862.

In the year 2005, in the Syrian Orthodox monastery of Gethsemane Dayro in Piramadam, near Pampakuda in Kottayam District, Kerala, in the memorial room of the late Catholicos Mor Baselios Paulos II (1914-1996)³ venerated as a saint, I found 35 manuscripts, which our team, working for the University of Tübingen in a project financed by the German Research Foundation, was able to digitise⁴. Before this discovery the library was unknown in the West.

Piramadam MS Syr 25 is a manuscript written in the East Syriac script used in Kerala but with some contamination from West Syriac script. It is written on Italian paper with the watermark Giovanni Magnani and, although it is not dated, I would date it to the late 18th, early 19th century.

Its beginning is lost and the first text it contains (foll. 1-42) is the *Revelation of the Seraphic Gregory*, of which, as it has turned out later, it contains something like two thirds. The text is closed by a colophon stating that the text of the Revelation was translated from Arabic into

¹ See on this text G. GRAF, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur 1: Die Übersetzungen* (StT 118), Rome 1944, 273-276.

² The first Syrian Orthodox bishop active in India was Mor Gregorios Abd al-Jaleel, who came to India in 1665 and stayed in North Paravur until his death in 1671. However, he came, upon the invitation of Mar Thoma I, only out of a kind of Syrian solidarity, without the intention to convert the Malabar Christians to the Syrian Orthodox faith. According to the testimony of seventeenth-century Indian Syriac manuscripts, in his time, the Mar Thoma faction and even Mor Gregorios' pupils continued to commemorate the Chaldaean patriarchs of Babylon. I intend to publish the new evidence for this fact, which was briefly mentioned in I. PERCZEL, *Some New Documents on the Struggle of the Saint Thomas Christians to Maintain the Chaldaean Rite and Jurisdiction*, in *Orientalia Christiana: Festschrift für Hubert Kaufhold zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. P. BRUNS – H.O. LUTHE, Wiesbaden 2013, 415-436, here 427, n. 23.

³ About Mor Baselios Paolos, see <http://sor.cua.edu/Personage/Malankara/CPaolos2.html>.

⁴ The project lasting from 2004 to 2009 was headed by Professor Stephen Gerö, who should be specially thanked here. About the Piramadam manuscript library now see my short description: "Piramadam, Gethsemane Dayro"/"Manuscript Archives and Collections"/Project for Preserving the Manuscripts of the Syrian Christians in India at www.srite.de.

Syriac by Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah, bishop of Niniveh, in the church of St George in Kadamattam, in 1689⁵.

The second text (foll. 44v-54v) is written on a different paper by a different scribe and is entitled the *Revelation seen by Abba Macarius the Great on what happens to the souls of men when they depart from the flesh*. This is a text of another Revelation, of which we have found several copies in India. It was copied later to be inserted in this manuscript⁶ which originally contained also the following items.

The third text (foll. 54r-92v) is the *Life of John the Calybite*, most probably translated from the Greek.

The fourth text (foll. 93r-97v) is entitled *From the miracles of St George*.

Returning to the Revelation of St Gregory, Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah, the translator, was Bishop of Niniveh and Antiochian Patriarchal delegate in India, who came to India in 1685, together with Mor Baselios Yaldo. According to local Kerala Syrian Orthodox tradition, this was the third mission of the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox in India after that of Mor Gregorios Abd al-Jaleel in 1665, and the one of Mor Andrayos, who came in 1678 and died in Kallada in 1692⁷. However, there were only two real Antiochian missions in the seventeenth century because, in reality, the alleged second mission, that of Mor Andrayos, had a very problematic character⁸. The mission of Mor Baselios Yaldo and Mor Iyovannis confirmed the Antiochian Orthodox presence in India. Mor Baselios Yaldo and Mor Iyovannis are both saints of the Syrian Orthodox churches of Kerala. Mor Baselios Yaldo died soon after arriving in India and is buried in the Saint Thomas Church in Kothamangalam but Mor Iyovannis remained active for another eight years, until his death in 1693.

Apparently, Mor Iyovannis was a great *malfono*, whose activity, all deployed in Syriac, is well attested in the manuscript tradition found in Kerala. The Konat library in Pampakuda preserves a magnificent collection of the *mimrē* of Jacob of Sarug and other authors, copied by Mor Iyovannis in 1673, in the monastery of Mor Yaqub near Mardin and in a monastery near Mosul. The colophon also says that this was the fiftieth book restored by the scribe⁹. A handwritten Qurbono text that he copied in his beautiful West Syriac handwriting, was also found in the

⁵ *MS Piramadam Syr.* 25, f. 41r-42r.

⁶ While the text is in a later hand on a different paper, its written surface corresponds to that of the manuscript, which fact seems to indicate that it was copied in order to serve as a complement to the content of the manuscript.

⁷ On Mor Andrayos Bawa, his antagonism with Mor Iyovannis and his relationship to the Thulassery-Manappurath family, which received him in their family church at Kallada, see ARUN BABU ZACHARIAH, *Judeo-Christian Diaspora in Kerala: An Endeavour in Racial Integration and Resource Sharing*, *Journal of Kerala Studies* 34 (2007) 41-62, here 54-56.

⁸ According to a letter of the Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Aleppo, Ignatius Peter VI Khaahbadine (1677-1702), found in *MS Mannanam Syr* 51, ff. 74r-75r, Andrayos was not even a bishop, nor a Syrian Orthodox, but a Syrian Catholic priest who temporarily even converted to Islam. He came to India as an adventurer, claiming that he was a Jacobite Patriarch. I published an English translation of the letter in I. PERCZEL, *Classical Syriac as a modern lingua franca in South India between 1600 and 2006*, in *Modern Syriac Literature*, *ARAM Periodical* 21 (2009) 289-321, here 315-317.

⁹ This is *MS Konat Syr* 62. J.P.M. VAN DER PLOEG, OP, *The Christians of St. Thomas in South India and Their Syriac Manuscripts*, Rome/Bangalore 1983, 165-166, analyses the colophons, but misreads the name of the scribe in the colophon on f. 387v, which the scribe himself gives as *Hdayat bar Shamsho Bokhudayoyo* (Hedayat, son of Shamsho, from Bohudaydo [= Beth Hudaydo, that is, Qaraqosh near Mosul]). On the Garshuni ways of writing Arabic and the meaning of the Arabic words I owe all information to Professor Hubert Kaufhold.

same Gethsemane Dayro; he copied it in the same year 1689, in the same church of Kadamattam, for the usage of a certain Priest Jacob of Mulanthuruthy and this is the oldest attested West Syriac liturgical manuscript in India¹⁰; eight of Mor Iyovannis' letters, together with a short confession of faith, are preserved in two late nineteenth-century letter books in the Carmelite St. Joseph Monastery in Mannanam¹¹. His relics are venerated in the Jacobite Church of Mulanthuruthy, where he stayed in the last years of his life.

Later, when I was preparing the new checklist of the collection of the Church of the East in Thrissur, I realised that MS 86 of the collection contained the entire version of the same text, including the beginning missing from the Piramadam manuscript. In fact, the Thrissur manuscript was already described in detail by Metropolitan Mar Aprem in the third edition of his checklist *Syriac Manuscripts in Thrissur*¹², where he understood the name Gregorios Nurono as meaning «Gregory the Illuminator»¹³.

MS Thrissur Syr 86 was copied by Antony Thondanattu who, under the name of Mar Abdisho, was a Chaldaean Metropolitan bishop of the Malabar Christians consecrated by the Nestorian Patriarch Mar Ruwel Shim'on, first from 1864 to 1874 and, then, from 1882 to 1900, the year of his death. However, between 1874 and 1882 he returned to the Catholic fold, was bereft of his rank as metropolitan bishop and was a simple parish priest in Ellamthotham¹⁴.

The Revelation of Gregory is on foll. 5r-18v of MS Thrissur Syr 86. According to the colophon, the copying of the text was completed on 11 September 1880, that is, during Mar Abdisho's temporary degrading to the rank of a simple priest and his return to Catholicism, two years before he resumed his metropolitanate. The rest of the manuscript contains historical letters copied by Mar Abdisho. It also contains the description, in Malayalam, of a vision that Mar Abdisho saw in Mosul about the Latins overpowering the Syrians in India¹⁵. Apparently, even when he temporarily moved back to the Catholic fold, Mar Abdisho remained a rebel. This manuscript contains the entire text of the Revelation, including the colophon. This story of a text translated from Arabic into Syriac in India by a Syrian Orthodox missionary bishop and copied by an Indian Syrian Catholic priest who became a dissident Chaldaean bishop having been consecrated by a Nestorian patriarch shows, as so many other texts do, the unity of the life and culture of the St. Thomas Christians, independently of their ecclesiastic allegiance. It should be added to this fact that the translated text is of Chalcedonian Melkite origin, in order to illustrate how insignificant the doctrinal differences become if we enter the daily life of the oriental Christians.

¹⁰ This is *MS Piramadam Syr 27*.

¹¹ These are *MSS Mannanam Syr 5* and *5r*.

¹² MAR APREM, *Syriac Manuscripts in Thrissur*, in *Advances in Arts and Ideas*, vol. 1, Thrissur 2005, 22–36; a detailed description of the manuscript at 32–36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴ On Mar Abdisho Thondanattu see MAR APREM, *Mar Abdisho Thondanat: A Biography* Thrissur 1987.

¹⁵ See MAR APREM, *Syriac Manuscripts*, cit., 32: «Malayalam writing about a dream seen by Thondanata during a journey in the Bahrein Sea. It was a time when Thoma Rocos Metropolitan was in Cochin (1861–62). The dream is about the Latinites overpowering the Syrians. The companion of Father Anthony Thondanata in this journey was Deacon Thoma Srampikel of the Pulinkunnu parish».

2. A SUMMARY OF THE INDIAN VERSION OF THE REVELATION
 COMPARED TO THE CAIRO EDITION

2.1 *The text of the Cairo edition as summarised by Georg Graf*

Georg Graf lists 12 manuscripts corresponding to the text edited in Cairo and 10 other manuscripts containing a different version. The only edition, by Ğirġis Bek Yaġūb, of the Arabic text published in Cairo and mentioned by Graf proved unavailable¹⁶. I was able to find only a shortened version, also published in Cairo¹⁷. So what I can give here is only a preliminary comparison between the description of the text by Graf and the Syriac version of Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah as transmitted by the two Indian manuscripts.

According to Graf, the Arabic work goes back to a Syriac original written in or around Edessa and – falsely – attributed to the monk Gregorios from Edessa, a Persian Nestorian monk who lived at the turn of the sixth and the seventh century and to whom visions have been attributed¹⁸. Some of the extant Syriac works of this author were edited by I. Hausherr¹⁹. Graf also notes that the text or its Arabic reworking must be of Melkite, that is, Syrian Chalcedonian, origin, because among the saints in the Heavenly Jerusalem it lists John the Almsgiver, Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria. Abdisho of Nisibis (d. 1318) mentions that Joseph Hazzaya wrote a commentary on a *Vision of the Monk Gregorios*, which J. S. Assemani believed to be identical to this Arabic book²⁰. So Graf wonders about the question how it could be that Joseph Hazzaya, a Nestorian, could comment upon a Melkite work. According to Graf, either the *Vision of Gregory* mentioned by Abdisho is another work, or the inclusion of John the Almsgiver is a later addition, perhaps by the Arabic translator, or Abdisho is wrong when attributing the commentary to Joseph²¹.

The text edited by Ğirġis Bek Yaġūb and the majority of the manuscripts attributes the Revelation to Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus). However, the author presents himself as a hermit from Edessa who sees the vision in his cave, somewhere in the mountains around Edessa. He sees a vision showing him the places where the blessed are dwelling after death as well as those where the damned are punished. The trip lasts for 21 days and Gregory's guide for this is an angel called Yunaniel, or Yuwā'il. In the first heaven Gregory sees the guardian angels of men, some of them in joy and others in sadness according to the deeds of their protégés. This is followed by a visit to Paradise, where there is a temple and an altar, around which the angels perform the heavenly liturgy. They are bringing in patens and chalices the «offerings», «which were consecrated in the world and are agreeable to God»; then come the Holy Virgin Mary and David, prostrate themselves before the offerings, say a prayer over them, «complete their consecration» and only then are these brought to God who is three in one.

¹⁶ *Rasā'il dīniya qadīma*, ed. ĞIRĜIS BEK YAĢŪB, Cairo 1925, 3-39, mentioned by GRAF, *Geschichte*, cit., 275. According to B. Witte, the edition cannot be found even in Egypt and the copies in the West can be counted on one hand's fingers: B. WITTE, *Die Sünden der Priester und Mönche. Koptische Eschatologie des 8. Jahrhunderts nach Kodex M 602 pp. 104-154 der Pierpont Morgan Library der sogenannten Apokalypse des Pseudo-Athanasius, Teil 2: Kommentar*, Altenberge 2009, 28. A world-wide search through the Karlsruhe Virtual Catalogue gave no result.

¹⁷ *Nūr al-anwār fī man ār al-abrār*, Cairo 1922, 63-92. GRAF mentions the second edition from 1926 (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 274 n. 2.

¹⁹ *Gregorii Monachi Cyprii de theoria sancta quae syriace interpretata dicitur visio divina*, ed. I. HAUSHERR SJ (OCA 110), Rome 1937.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 274 n. 1 (Graf refers to *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 3/1, 103).

²¹ *Ibid.*

At the entrance to the second heaven, identified with the Heavenly Jerusalem, there is an inscription in Syriac. Here live all the classes of the saints, beginning with the martyrs. Gregory meets namely the following: Saint Steven the First Martyr, Saint George, «Mercurius (that is, according to Graf, Macarius), the hermit in the inner desert whose story has been written by Abba Serapion», Antony, «whom God himself called a star», «Mary the Sinner and Penitent», that is, Saint Mary of Egypt, «John the Apostle, Patriarch of Alexandria, who has given away all his wealth», as well as Symeon from the land of Aleppo, «who made great and God-pleasing things and was mourning over those that displeased God» (according to Graf, this should be Symeon the Stylite). Then, there follows the description of the places of the just and holy clerics, the poor, the widows and the orphans, the kings and the rich as well as of those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. According to Graf, a third heaven is not described in the printed text but can be found in several manuscripts.

The second part of the text describes in 12 groups the torments of the different classes of the sinners, namely 1) the apostates, 2) the merciless kings and rich, 3) the magicians and the astrologers, 4) Annas, Caiaphas, the priests of the Jews, King Herod, 5) the slanderers, 6) the blasphemers, 7) the cheaters, such as those who during their pilgrimage to Jerusalem fall into sins and those who steal the holy oil, 8) the hypocrites, 9) the unjust policemen, 10) the sinful monks and 11) clerics and 12) the usurers.

According to Graf, «the colours depicting the heavenly joys and the hellish torments, but mainly the otherworldly places, are borrowed from the well-known apocalyptic speech- and stylistic forms but the images are denser, often repeated; in comparison with the Apocalypse of Paul they are better ordered and even more fantastic»²². Thus far goes Graf's description of the text.

2.2 *The Indian Syriac version*

The version found in India is not attributed to Gregory the Theologian. Instead, its title attributes it to Gregorios *Nurono*, that is, the Seraphic, or Fiery, Gregory, evidently a name given to the Edessan hermit. The vision lasts 21 days here as well but the guiding angel has no name in this text. It is indeed in his cave that Gregory sees the vision and this, as everything in this interesting text, has a symbolic meaning: the cave is a Platonic metaphor for our world²³, which is closed from the light of the world on high [10].

2.2.1 *The three heavens*

When he enters the first heaven, «which is the firmament above us» [2], Gregory indeed sees the guardian angels as described by Graf, after which he enters Paradise, which is as large as the inhabited world [9]. Although this Paradise contains trees and flowers, it is described as the heavenly Jerusalem in Rev, with the difference that everything is more monumental. «Its structures» are higher than «the distance between the earth and the heaven»²⁴, «it has thousands

²² *Ibid.*, 275.

²³ See Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514a-520a. See also *The Revelation of the Seraphic Gregory*, 6: «And again, he» – the angel – «told me: “Look *into the cave* and you will see a wonder!” I looked *upon the earth* and saw thousands of thousands of angels from heaven down to the earth...». Here, the cave is the world under the firmament, which covers it. The numbers are those of a section in my English translation and forthcoming edition of the text. In the following, when I cite a part of the text I give in square brackets the section number without any other indication.

²⁴ See Rev 21:12: «and had a wall great and high», *ibid.* 17: «and he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel».

of gates»²⁵ from pearls²⁶. While in Rev there is no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem, because «the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it» (Rev 21:22), not only in Gregory's Paradise there is a temple but there is also another in his heavenly Jerusalem, which is the second heaven [10, 16]. This is an important difference from Rev, because the theological and spiritual message of the Gregorian Revelation is contained in the following description of the heavenly liturgy that is going on in the two temples [10-16].

The temple in the first heaven, that is, in Paradise, is one «that has been built in God's name, the holy temple of the Virgin Mary» [10]. Mary's role is paramount here, because she is dwelling in the temple as another Shekinah, representing the divine presence. Although according to Graf's summary, in the Arabic version published by Ğirġis Bek Yaqūb there is an altar in the temple, here the altar, or a sanctuary (*madbħo*), is conspicuously absent. The worship in this first temple is focussed on the icons:

«Its icons (*šūrotō*) are from all kinds of beryl and precious stones forming varied forms, its names are from red hyacinths and there is in it an icon of the archangels, made of all the spiritual colours. And these are the angels who do not cease day and night from hallowing and glorifying in voices that are stupefying the minds. If a window as large as the hole of a needle were opened from this temple, it would hide the light of the sun and would illuminate all the ends of the world».

There seems to be a parallelism here between the images/icons of the temple and its – apparently written – names. The “names” seem to indicate the inscriptions on the icons. Thus, their formation in red hyacinth would correspond to the Byzantine habit of writing the inscriptions of the icons in red. In the centre of the icon veneration in the first temple is an icon of Christ:

«In this temple there is an icon of our Lord Jesus Christ, our God, from precious stones framed²⁷ in pure gold. It is not like the gold of our places but spiritual gold. On his head there is a green crown in which are embedded²⁸ in three rows white crystals that are flashing with rays that are blinding the light of the eyes. The icon is carried by four angels made of all kinds of various precious stones and they are glorifying his oneness».

Also:

«There are in [the temple] various crosses made of pearls and of precious stones in beautiful colours». [10]

The absence of an altar or a sanctuary in this temple/church²⁹ is conspicuous. When the angels are bringing in the offerings (that is, particles of bread: *qūrbone*) and wine collected from all those churches where the offering is «accepted by the Exalted God» [15], that is, from the orthodox churches, they are «placing them upon the temple» and not upon «the altar of the temple». «The Mother of God and the prophet David» are «venerating them». «Then the angels» are «praying over those offerings and, again, they» are bringing «them up to their Lord». According to the explanation of the angel:

²⁵ *Ibid.*: «and had twelve gates».

²⁶ Rev. 21:21: «and the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl».

²⁷ The meaning of the verb used here: *فحل* is, in fact, “melted”. However, it seems to me that the author means precious stones *framed* in pure gold.

²⁸ Here also the verb used: *فحل*, means «melted».

²⁹ This place of worship is once called *'i[d]to*, «church», but in all the other cases it is called *ħayklo*, «temple».

«[The offerings] are lifted here, so that the Lady Mother of the Light and the prophet David may complete their consecration. Thereafter they mount and ascend to the secret places (*šimozo*) of the Lord». [15]

In the second temple in the second heaven there are no icons but there is an altar and a large cross. It is described in the following way:

«And the angel led me into a white temple. Its structures are from colourful lights and there is a many-coloured courtyard, which is very large. There are in the temple candles from light, which are giving light night and day and there are also in it fountains of pure water, which have no likeness whatsoever either in heaven or on the earth. There are also in it streams of shining water from light that are running night and day. Above the streams there are shining stars that are blinding the light of the vision. There is also in it a very large cross that illuminates everything with its light. There is in it an altar whose beauty no man can comprehend». [16]

This second temple is the Heavenly Jerusalem. Above its gate there is an inscription in Syriac:

«I asked: “What is this house?” He responded: “Read what is written above its gate!”. It was written in green light, the writing was in Syriac, and read as follows: “This is the heavenly Jerusalem. For those who renounce to themselves and dwell in the desert and in the mountains, for those who suffer martyrdom for my name, this is their dwelling place forever”. [17]

Thus, this is the abode for the saints, although not for all of them. Those girls who have become sanctified through their virginity live in the first heaven, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is living in the lowest heaven because she is the intercessor between those on earth and the transcendent Christ, who is only represented through his icon in the first heaven and through his cross and altar in the second, and also together with King David, who is dwelling there because he is the choir leader of the heavenly liturgy of the angels, performed in the first temple with the semi-consecrated offerings collected from the earth.

In the heavenly Jerusalem Gregory indeed meets a number of named saints. These saints are riding horses of light and come to greet Gregory one by one. Their list does not perfectly coincide with the one given by Graf on the basis of Ğirĝis Bek Yaqūb’s edition. The first two introduce themselves in the following way: «I am Steven. I am the first of the martyrs. I was slain for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ» and: «I am George who was tormented with all the torments», so they correspond to Graf’s list. However, the third is not introducing himself as «Mercurius (Macarius), the hermit in the inner desert whose story has been written by Abba Serapion» but as: «I am Mark who was roaming in the desert», which words might refer to St Mark the Ascetic (5th cent.); the fourth is indeed «Antony, whom the Lord called the star of the desert» and the fifth, «Mary the Penitent», that is, St Mary of Egypt (527-565?). The sixth is indeed «John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria» (c. 552-c. 620, Patriarch between 606-616), who says the following to Gregory: «O, Gregory, I am wondering about those to whom God has given much benefit and are retaining it from the servants of God. You should command to the faithful and, first of all, to the heads of the Church» [18], that is, he should command them not to act so. With this, the list of the named saints comes to an end and, unlike in the Cairo version, this text does not mention any Symeon from the land of Aleppo. It is to be noted that, with the exception of the martyrs Steven and George, the other saints mentioned here are all connected, in one way or another, to Egypt and the Judean desert. Although Mark the Ascetic is now believed to have lived near Ancyra before becoming a hermit in the Judean Desert, the Byzantine Menaion (for 1 March) identifies him with the Egyptian Mark the Ascetic mentioned in Palladius’ *Lausiaca History* 18. Saint Mary of Egypt came from Alexandria and led her solitary life in the Judean desert, beyond the Jordan. John the Almsgiver is obviously an Egyptian saint.

«Symeon from Aleppo», obviously Symeon the Stylite (390-459), who had spent his life on a column near Aleppo, would be an exception here.

After this, Mor Iyovannis' version lists, under different chapter headings, the categories of saints who are dwelling in the second heaven. These are: 1) the righteous «priests and deacons» [19], 2) «the poor, the orphans and the widows» [20], 3) «those kings and rich men who did not oppress others and did not take bribes but showed much compassion» [21], 4) «the righteous who had righteously worked and eaten and confessed God either in times of necessity, or in well-being» [22-23], 5) «those in jail and those who bear difficulties for the confession of Christ». Their place is:

«a city with two gates, in which there are crosses from radiant light and there are fountains and streams that are overflowing and the whole city is of spiritual green colour; there are in it all kinds of spiritual birds that are singing Syriac and Greek chants». [24]

The next place is that of 6) «those oppressed and those unjustly accused although they are upright» [25], 7) «those who are doing good and beautiful things» – this expression, inspired by the Greek term *kalokagathia*, designates those who «feel compassion for the poor, help the oppressed, who attend his burial (!) and who do good to the foreigners» [26], 8) «the blind and the paralytic» [27], 9) «Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the children» who had been baptised and died before growing up – here Abraham explains to Gregory why he is there in the second heaven:

«I am Abraham. I had not been an ascetic but had been innocent, merciful and generous. This is why the Lord has placed me and my sons at this place, so that we take care of these children on whom the Holy Spirit has descended in the baptism». [28]

This is a list much fuller than the one given by Graf, so that it seems that the text edited in Cairo is considerably shorter at this place. From the latter is also missing the description of the third heaven, extant in Mor Iyovannis' version, without whose role the entire construction of the structure of the heavens would remain incomprehensible.

In the third heaven there is a large tower, which is called the Kingdom of Heaven. According to the words of the angel «it is many times more beautiful than anything» Gregory has seen until then and in it are living the «twelve disciples of our Lord Jesus» but the angel also says that he has no order to show the place to Gregory [30]. He also tells Gregory that that place is «three times as large as the earth» [31]. So there is no description of the third heaven, or the Kingdom of Heaven, and so one understands that its transcendence and invisibility is the counterpart of the visions seen in the first two heavens. It is not said but should be understood that this is the place where the transcendent Christ, represented by his icon and his Mother in the first heaven and by the cross and the altar in the second, lives and, also, that the «the secret places of the Lord», to which the offerings are being lifted by the angels, are to be found here. Yet, there is no entry for Gregory, and so also for us, into this enclosure.

However, some of its inhabitants come out to greet Gregory and to teach him. These are John the Baptist and the Apostles Peter and Paul; the latter are telling Gregory the following:

«We pray that no believer may sin on earth. You should warn those baptised³⁰ that they should abstain from all evil in order they may not separate themselves from these holy places that you have seen; for many will repent because of your words». [31]

The part on the visit of the heavens is closed by these words:

³⁰ Literally: «the sons of baptism».

«Then he [the angel] took me and led me to a high mountain. Let us ask from our Lord Jesus Christ that he might save us from all the torments through the intercessions of his Mother, the pure Mary, our exalted Lady. Amen».

The next chapter heading, written in red in the Píramadam manuscript, is the following:

«Until here is the description of the pleasures. Now I would let you know about the torments and tortures of the sinners». [32]

2.2.2 *The torments of the Gehenna*

The next chapter describes in very vivid terms the torments of the Gehenna and the various people tormented in it. First, Gregory is standing on the high mountain but does not see anything. Then, the angel orders to the darkness that it should reveal its contents to Gregory, and so it does. Then, in this first, quite long, chapter dedicated to Hell, the visionary sees the horrible torments of the following groups of sinners: 1) first «the rich of the world» who had no compassion for the poor [33-35], followed by 2) the fornicators [36], 3) the tyrants who have killed innocent Christians (evidently Muslim rulers) [37], 4) those who were using false balances and measures [38], 5) those mocking other people [39], 6) those who were slandering the priests and blaming the priesthood [40], 7) those who were singing Satanic chants instead of glorifying God [41], 8) «women who had made their faces red, painted their eyes, shaved their eyebrows, uncovered their faces» (that is bodies) «and showed them to the youngsters so that they may fall into sin» [42], 9) whoremongers [43], 10) those who were Christian only in deceit [44], 11) those who did not observe the fasts [45], 12) those who did not attend the church services on Sundays [46], 13) «those who loved evil and did not return from their transgressions» [47], 14) «those who were dancing because they had no fear of God and fainted because of this dance» [48], 15) «old men who, following the habits of the youngsters, found pleasure in error and pains» [49], 16) «those who have sent away their lawful wives and divorced them without good reason under false pretext» [50], 17) «those who have left their lawful marriage and lived in lawlessness» [51], 18) «those who had repented and then returned to their sins» [52], 19) «those who hated their brothers and fathers» [53], 20) «those who had changed their created nature and assimilated themselves to women and so became an evil stumbling block for the young people» [54], 21) «those who were crying when they died (?)» [55] and, finally, 22) «priests who had left their priesthood and became lay persons» [56].

After this general overview of the torments there come some specific categories in separate chapters, which are the following³¹:

1) «tyrannic kings of the earth and their followers» [57]; 2) magicians [58]; 3) «women who drink drugs so that they may not conceive, or that they may abort the foetus from their wombs» [59]; 4) «those who are leaving the Christian religion for the religion of those who are rejecting God», that is, who become Muslim – a word play between *d-maslen* (those who reject) and *muslim* – «because they have become scandalised by it», that is, the Christian faith [60]; 5) Annas, Caiaphas and those who were involved in sentencing Jesus to crucifixion as well as Herod who had killed the infants of Bethlehem and John the Baptist [61-62]; 6) the powerful and the murderers [63]; 7) «the monks and nuns who do not serve in their monastic vocation as they should» [64]; 8) «the patriarchs, bishops, priests and deacons who do not stand fast in the service

³¹ I am citing the text rather than the chapter headings, which are, apparently, secondary and often improper.

of the Exalted God as they should but defile the priesthood» [65-66]; 9) «Christians who have become Hagarenes» (that is, Muslims) [67].

This list is different from the one given by Graf – even for those few elements that coincide, the order is different. Mor Iyovannis' list is much more exhaustive and its ordering reveals a plan: deeper in hell and in greater torment than the Jewish high priests who had delivered Christ to death, and Herod who allegedly killed the infants of Bethlehem and John the Baptist – in fact, this is an error, because it was Herod the Great who killed the infants, and his son, Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist – are placed 1) the unworthy monks and nuns, 2) the unworthy clerics up to the level of the patriarchs and 3) the apostates yielding to the new Muslim push to conversion.

The visions end in the following way:

«Again, the angel told me: “O, Gregory, know from this place where you have descended the journey of seven hours!” And behold, I saw my spirit in heaven. Then, my soul came to rest from all that is there. Again, I looked down just below myself and saw something small. I asked the angel: “What is this small thing?” He responded: “That is the inhabited land. Look at it, what is it like?” I answered: “I cannot compare it to anything”. He told me: “Like a small boat in a large sea”. Then, I glorified the Creator God for all that I have seen. Again, the angel told me: “O Gregory, you have seen everything that God commanded you to see. You were roaming with me for twenty-one days. Now return and announce what you have seen in Eden and in the Gehenna, the pleasures and the tortures!” I lost my conscience and found myself standing in my cell and felt sadness because I was separated from the pleasures. Then I wrote all these good spiritual things and sent it to all the inhabited land, so that there may come [from them] benefit for the Christians. [68]

2.2.3 *Final doxology and colophons*

The text ends with a doxology and a colophon, obviously from the translator, Mor Iyovannis, which reads as follows:

«And let us glorify the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the mighty, wise, kind, loving and great Creator and ask him that he might save us from the fire of the Gehenna and deem us worthy of the pleasure together with the saints, through the intercession of our Lady, the pure and spotless Virgin, the Mother of the Light, Mary the Bearer of God, and of Mor Barsaumo, the head of the mourners, and Mor Jacob, Mor Ephrem and of Mor Gregory himself, who has seen this miraculous Revelation, and of all the holy men and women. The grace of God be on those who listen to this [story], on those who read it, on those present and on those far away, and on the scribe, Mor Ivannios, the foreigner, Bishop of Niniveh, who translated it from the Arabic into Syriac in the church of St. George in Kōramattham, in the year 2000 of the Greeks, in the month of Nisan, on the 24th day. May God have mercy on the departed of the scribe for the ages of ages. Amen. Amen. End». [69]

Kōramattham is today Kadamattam and the 24th of April in the year 2000 of the Greeks corresponds to the year 1689 AD, while Mor Ivannios is the local pronunciation of the name of this bishop who, in a manuscript copied by his own hand spells his name as Iyovannis³², which has become Ivannios in the Kerala tradition. Iyovannis is the Hellenising version of Yūḥannon.

The Piramadam manuscript ends here but the Thrissur manuscript contains two more elements, the first being an odd piece of dating:

³² In *Piramadam Syr* 27, fol. 25r. This manuscript was copied in the same year 1689, in Kadamattam: For a photo of the colophon and its translation, see I. PERCZEL, “Piramadam, Gethsemane Dayro”/ “Manuscript Archives and Collections” at www.srite.de.

«Three hundred and seventeen to be added to what is read in the dating: thousand and thirty and six. End of the Revelation of Mor Gregorios the Seraphic one». [70]

As this dating comes after Mor Iyovannis' colophon and before that of Mar Abdisho (Antony) Thondanattu, one may suppose that it is from the pen of either one of them and not part of the original text. However, as Mor Iyovannis' doxology and colophon immediately follow the text and there is no earlier rubric saying «End of the Revelation», I would propose that this note also belongs to Mor Iyovannis and not to Mar Abdisho. I would return to this piece later when discussing the possible dating of the original text.

The second element is the colophon of the scribe, Mar Abdisho:

«In the handwriting of the priest Antony Thondanattu, the foreigner, feeble and wretched, in the year 1880 of our Lord, on the 11th of the month of Iyor (September), a Tuesday». [71]

2.2.4 *A preliminary comparison of the two versions*

The above summary shows quite clearly that the Indian version is considerably different from the one published by Ġirġis Bek Yaqūb and described by Graf. First of all it lacks the misleading attribution to Gregory the Theologian. Instead, the author is called the Seraphic, or Fiery Gregory, a designation befitting the Edessan hermit to whom the visions are attributed. The pseudonym “Gregory the Theologian” must have resulted from a later effort to link this unknown Gregory to another, better known, one. Contrary to the Cairo version, here the angel bears no name. Once again, the angel's name, Yuwā'il, in the Cairo version must have come from an effort to name the unnamed in this text.

A notable difference occurs in the description of the first heaven. According to Graf, there is an altar in the temple of the first heaven. In the Indian version, there is no altar mentioned. Here is what we read in this version:

Then, the gates of the temple opened from all sides and there emanated a fragrance that is sweeter than all the fragrances. If that were to blow upon the dead they would rise. There came thousands of thousands and myriads of myriads of angels and they were carrying patens and chalices in which there were offerings and wine, while they were glorifying and singing hallelujah; they placed them upon the temple and the Mother of God and the prophet David were venerating them. Then, the angels were praying over those offerings and, again, they brought them up to their Lord. Then, I asked the angel: «What are these offerings?» He answered: «These are the offerings that are being offered in the created world and are being accepted by the Exalted God. They are lifted here, so that the Lady Mother of the Light and the prophet David may complete their consecration. Thereafter they mount and ascend to the secret places³³ of the Lord. O, Gregory, blessed is the one who receives them³⁴ in pure heart and in true faith». [15]

The Syriac text reads here: ܘܗܘܘܢ ܗܘܘܘ ܕܘܢܘܢ ܕܘܢܘܢ ܕܘܢܘܢ, which means: «and they placed them upon the temple». One might be tempted to correct this to ܘܗܘܘܢ ܗܘܘܘ ܕܘܢܘܢ ܕܘܢܘܢ ܕܘܢܘܢ ܕܘܢܘܢ: «and they placed them upon <the altar of> the temple» but there is no evidence suggesting such a correction, nor has any altar been mentioned in the previous description of the temple. Rather, it is quite plausible that the absence of an altar in this temple as opposed to its presence in the temple of the second heaven has a symbolic meaning.

Somewhat different is the list of the named saints in the second heaven. In the Indian text instead of Mercurius/Macarius we have Mark the Ascetic and there is no Symeon (the Stylite)

³³ This is a tentative translation for ܘܗܘܘܢ ܗܘܘܘ ܕܘܢܘܢ. «They» refers here to the offerings.

³⁴ Again, «them» refers to the offerings.

mentioned after John the Almsgiver. Moreover, in the Cairo edition the description of the third heaven is missing, while it is there with all the symbolic connotation of an invisible place in the Indian version.

Finally, the list of the sins punished in hell is different and more complete in the Indian version than in the Cairo edition. All this seems to indicate that the version that Mor Iyovannis translated into Syriac is more original and complete than the one edited in Cairo, which seems to be secondary. One will be able to say more about this question only after a survey and study of the available Arabic versions. In what follows I will treat the Syriac text as a witness to the original text, notwithstanding the many possible modifications that may have occurred during the transmission process. I will notice the secondary elements only where their presence is obvious.

Such secondary elements are, for example, the chapter headings. They are placed inconsistently, certain parts of the text lacking such headings while others having it and, often, the titles are not perfectly corresponding to the content of the chapters. There are also a couple of expressions that one might possibly attribute to the translator, Mor Iyovannis but these could be eliminated only if the Arabic original of his text were to be found.

3. DATING AND AUTHORSHIP

3.1 *Dating*

There are a number of elements permitting to date the text within a more or less well delimited time period. An obvious *terminus post quem* is the presence of John the Almsgiver, Melkite patriarch of Alexandria, who died around 620 AD and whose life, written by Leontius of Neapolis, can be dated to 641³⁵. He is the youngest saint mentioned here. The Revelation was written under Islamic rule in the region of Edessa, which was conquered in 638. As the author is most obviously a Melkite Chalcedonian and as he complains that the Christians around him are changing their faith passing from one confession to another [13], this might refer to a massive conversion of the Melkite community of the region to Jacobite Miaphysite faith in order to dissociate themselves from the Roman empire of Chalcedonian faith. Other references to massive apostasy to Islam [60 and 67] do not contribute to the dating very much but can be easily harmonised with dating the text to the early period of the Muslim conquest.

A particular evidence for dating the text is the picturesque combination of iconic and aniconic worship that one finds in the description of the first and second heaven. While the Revelation testifies to a developed habit and even theology of the veneration of icons among the Melkite community of Edessa, this does not correspond to the Iconophile tradition developed during the Iconoclast controversies (8th-9th centuries). Rather, it testifies to the coexistence of iconic and aniconic worship, the second being considered as a higher form, the icons corresponding to a lower level of spirituality. There is not the slightest sign of hostility toward those who might be against the use and the veneration of icons – such people, kings or emperors, are not within the perspective of the author. Moreover, the icons described have a very archaic character. So this

³⁵ See C. MANGO, *A Byzantine Hagiographer at Work: Leontios of Neapolis*, in *Byzanz und der Westen: Studien zur Kunst des europäischen Mittelalters*, ed. I. HUTTER, Vienna 1984, 33 and D. KRUEGER, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*, Berkeley 1996, accessed online at: <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6k4007sx&chunk.id=st.1.1&toc.depth=1&toc.id=c11&brand=eschol>.

would give the first half of the eighth century as the latest possible period for the composition of the text.

A further tentative refinement is perhaps made possible by the odd dating found in the Thrissur manuscript but missing from the Piramadam manuscript. Apparently, the translator, Mor Iyovannis, found the dating 1036 in his original in a form that was, for him, difficult to interpret. So he proposed that one should add 317 to this number in order to get the real date. As in all his colophons he was using the Seleucid era (*Anno Graecorum*), apparently he thought that the date he found was according to the Christian era (*Anno Domini*), so that, to calculate the date according to the Seleucid era, one had to add 317 to the number. Although according to present, more precise, knowledge the Seleucid era, as used by the Syrian Christians, begins on 1 October 312 BC, the Syrian Christians themselves were using different conversion numbers, ranging from 309 to 319³⁶. 317, proposed here by Mor Iyovannis, falls within this range. However, the dating 1036 according to the Christian era, while possible, is improbable. Khalil Samir has studied the occurrences of the Christian era in Christian Arabic manuscripts and has found that, before the 17th century, only the Melkites used the Christian era, but such dating, with one exception from 1015, can be found only between 1243 and 1388³⁷. In his study on the use of the Christian era in Syriac manuscripts, Hubert Kaufhold gives another such early example, *Sinai arab. NF pap. 51bis*, which is dated to the year 407 of the Hijra and, additionally, indicates the Christian dating as being 1025³⁸. However, this is a unique manuscript, the next in chronological order being dated to 1235/1229 (*Anno Mundi* 6737). The dating 1036 mentioned by Mor Iyovannis, if indeed given according to the Christian era, would be another such exception. This would not be impossible and, if such were to be the case, one should suppose that Mor Iyovannis was working from a manuscript containing in its colophon the date 1036 AD. However, we might also suppose that, for some unknown reason, Mor Iyovannis found the dating 1036 without the indication of the era used and thought it was the Christian era, while it was in fact the Seleucid era. If such were to be the case the year would correspond to AD 724/25, which, then, could be the terminus ante quem of the composition of the Revelation of Gregory. However, such a hypothesis would remain inconclusive and not verifiable.

Independently of this hypothesis I would propose that the original version of the Revelation was composed sometime between the second half of the seventh and the first half of the eighth century, before the Iconoclast controversy in the Byzantine Empire.

3.2 Authorship

About the author of the Revelation very little can be said. It is attributed to a certain Gregory, the Fiery or Seraphic one, who cannot be identical to Gregory of Cyprus whose work *On the holy contemplation* was published by Hausherr³⁹. The latter is a classical treatise on contemplation, using terminology inherited from Evagrius and John of Apamea, by an author of Nestorian confession who lived around the beginning of the seventh century, while the Revelation is definitively of Chalcedonian Melkite origin, written after 641, possibly in the early

³⁶ See H. KAUFHOLD, *Zur Datierung nach christlicher Ära in den syrischen Kirchen*, in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honour of Sebastian P. Brock*, ed. G.A. KIRAZ, Piscataway 2008, 283-337, published also separately as *Analecta Gorgiana* 125, Piscataway 2009.

³⁷ Kh. SAMIR, *L'ère de l'Incarnation dans les manuscrits arabes melkites du 11^e au 14^e siècle*, OCP 53 (1987) 193-201, here 194.

³⁸ Erroneously, since 407 *Anno Hegirae* corresponds to 1017. See KAUFHOLD, *Zur Datierung*, p. 306.

³⁹ See above, note II.

eighth century. So, contrary to Graf's suggestion, I find it improbable that the name Gregorios Nurono would contain any allusion to Gregory of Cyprus either.

In fact, it is not only the presence of John the Almsgiver that testifies to a Melkite origin but also the very idea of a journey to heaven and hell during which the visionary sees the souls of the blessed and the damned. This would be meaningless in the Nestorian Church, which had made the doctrine that the souls fall asleep after death and wake up only at the general resurrection its official theology. The Greek/Byzantine connection is also shown by the fact that in the second heaven, in the «city» of those imprisoned and persecuted for the Christian faith, the «spiritual birds», that is, the angels, are singing Syriac and Greek chants [24] and also by the description of iconic worship in the temple of the first heaven evoking early Byzantine iconography [10].

Conspicuous is also a kind of Egyptian sympathy in the text, represented by the list of the named saints in the second heaven, the prominence of St John the Almsgiver between them and also an unexpected parallelism between the icon of Christ seen by Gregory in the temple of Paradise and a similar vision of St Pachomius, described in his Bohairic Life⁴⁰.

4. THE MESSAGE AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE REVELATION

4.1 *The moral message*

About this text, written in the genre of the Apocalypse of Paul and prefiguring Dante's Divine Comedy, one might say precisely what Dante had said about his own poetic work:

«O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,
mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
sotto 'l velame de li versi strani».⁴¹
(«Ye of intellect
Sound and entire, mark well the lore conceal'd
Under close texture of the mystic strain!»)⁴²

The Revelation is there to convey a message. In our case the moral message is that, first, the Orthodox (Melkite) Christians living under Arab domination should persevere in their faith and should not change it to another Christian confession – apparently the Miaphysite Anti-Chalcedonian faith more favourable to their Muslim overlords because separated from the Chalcedonian faith of the Roman Empire. This message is conveyed by the Virgin Mary, whom the text calls «the Mother of the Light» [15] and who says to Gregory the following:

«O, Gregory, how are the Christians who do not know their confession⁴³ and are following others? Why do they not restrain themselves and repent from their sins, so that they may inherit the places on high of the pleasures that have no end to the ages of ages? O, Gregory, they resemble the evil maidservants when they change from one confession⁴⁴ to another and are quarrelling with each other. All of them are becoming alien from this place on high because of their controversies with each other and they are walking in the ways of the creature. Were it not for my prayer that intercedes for them, my Son would have destroyed them in a blink of the eye. But blessed are you, o, Gregory, and blessed are all those who are like you and, when you return to them, tell them that they should not change their faith in which their fathers were walking, since the Exalted God has arranged everything

⁴⁰ *Bohairic Life of St Pachomius* 73, see the analysis of this parallelism below in paragraph 4.2.2.

⁴¹ Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, Inferno, Canto IX, 61-63.

⁴² Translation by H.F. CARY.

⁴³ Or. "religion". The word used here: ܩܪܝܢܐ may mean both.

⁴⁴ Or: "religion" - ܩܪܝܢܐ.

according to its proper order. Tell them with reproach what you have seen, so that they may return from their sins!» [13]

Second, the greatest sin, punished in the deepest pocket of the Gehenna, is to apostatise for Islam [60, 67]. Thirdly, the clergy should observe their duty [64-66] and, fourthly, the Christians should live in good conduct. There is a great emphasis on generosity represented by the examples of John the Almsgiver [18] and Abraham [28].

4.2 *The theology of the Revelation*

Besides these obvious moral injunctions the text presents theological features that are quite difficult to link to any known trend. Perhaps this is due to the fact that it emanates from a seventh, eighth-century Syriac-speaking Melkite, that is, Byzantine Chalcedonian Orthodox, community outside the Byzantine Empire, a community whose religious history is not very well known.

4.2.1 Christology

First of all, the Christology of the Revelation is quite unusual. Christ himself does not appear in the entire text. Obviously he dwells in the third heaven, identified with the Kingdom of Heaven, where the visionary is not allowed to enter. Throughout the entire Revelation he remains invisible. He is represented, first, by his voice, which is, invariably, that of the Supreme Judge rewarding the just and punishing the sinners [2, 6, 8]. Second, he is represented by his icon in the first heaven [10] and, third, by the altar and the cross in the second heaven [16], as well as by the Eucharist brought by the angels from the earth, consecrated by the Holy Virgin and David in the first heaven and ascending to the «secret places of the Lord» – obviously to the third heaven where Christ is dwelling [15]. In all this, Christ is the transcendent and fearful Lord, about whom her Mother says that, «were it not for» her «prayer that intercedes for» the sinful Christians, her «Son would have destroyed them in a blink of the eye» [13]. In the entire Revelation, Christ stands for transcendence, while her Mother dwells in the temple of the first heaven as another Shekinah in the temple of Jerusalem, being the main mediator between the earthly world of the human creatures and that of divine transcendence. This placement of the Holy Virgin is also unusual if we consider that in Byzantium and the Chalcedonian Orthodox tradition she is venerated as «more venerable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim»⁴⁵, that is, above all the angelic orders, being the closest to Christ himself. Here she is dwelling in the first heaven, while other saints are in the second and the Apostles, together with Christ, in the third. She is called «our Lady, the pure Virgin Mary» [9], «the pure Lady Mary the Virgin, who is the intercessor for the salvation of the world» [13], «the Virgin Lady» [14], «the Lady Mother of the Light» [15], «the pure Mary our exalted Lady» [32]. Quite atypically, once she is called «the Mother of God» [15]. This Cyrillian expression may or may not come from the translator, for whom this was the most usual way of calling the Virgin Mary.

⁴⁵ The prayer *Axion estin*, which is the most frequently used prayer to the Holy Virgin in the Byzantine Church, being even more important than the *Ave Maria*.

4.2.2 *Iconic and aniconic worship*

Particularly interesting is the icon theology of the text, which seems to be very archaic. Apparently displaying features of pre-Iconoclasm worship and theology, the Revelation presents a particular combination of iconic and aniconic worship. There are icons (*ἑἱκόντες*) only in the temple of the first heaven, that is, at the lowest level of the celestial world; at the second level/heaven the worship becomes aniconic, only the altar and a large cross being used there as indicators of the divine presence, just like, later, in the Iconoclast churches. Finally, Christ dwells in the third heaven, which remains completely invisible for the visionary. In this way there is an *anagoge* starting from the iconic worship and passing through the more abstract symbols toward God, who remains invisible.

The description of the temples in the first and second heaven is also remarkable. Not being an art historian, I had asked for the opinion of the distinguished Byzantine art historian, the deeply regretted Anna Christidou, who has given the following preliminary principles for their interpretation:

«Most probably the descriptions of Paradise and the temple therein, as well as that of the second temple in the Heavenly Jerusalem, can be understood as corresponding to descriptions of church iconography. In the first case, namely that of the temple in Paradise, the combination of angels in the heavenly liturgy, of the Holy Virgin, King David and the enthroned Christ brings strongly to mind the iconography of the Byzantine domes. As for the “icons” described, it might be possible to recognise the iconographic types, taking into account the following:

- a) The described churches/icons are presumably quite early, in which case, their descriptions may not necessarily correspond to subsequently established visual codes of Byzantine church iconography – which is what we mostly have in mind.
- b) One should also be extremely cautious with the information provided by the descriptions and the literary exaggerations these may involve.

In my understanding, these texts constitute very early *ekphraseis*. Although they can be reliable enough regarding the iconographic type described, one should be very careful not to take every given detail for granted»⁴⁶.

Taking this into consideration and bearing in mind that any interpretation of these data necessarily remains hypothetical, I would suggest the following.

The Revelation presents a combination of iconic and aniconic worship. As there is no altar in the first temple in Paradise but there is one in the second temple in the Heavenly Jerusalem, it seems to me that the former functions as the nave and the latter as the sanctuary with the altar. The large cross in the second temple seems to decorate the apse behind the altar, while the icons seem to be restricted to the nave. In the Syrian (and the Armenian) tradition the sanctuary is elevated above the nave, which seems to be echoed in the Revelation by the image that the second, aniconic, temple is in the next heaven. This might echo a church tradition, in which only the nave was decorated by icons and the sanctuary remained aniconic but it is also possible – taking into consideration Anna Christidou’s warning – that there is only a theological message here, this construction not corresponding to any real church iconography.

In the first temple there are several icons and the author even says that their inscriptions are in red (hyacinth) according to the Byzantine custom of writing the inscriptions in red. Two from among these icons are mentioned in particular detail.

⁴⁶ E-mail message of Dr. Anna CHRISTIDOU dated 10 May 2013. Anna Christidou died in a car accident on 17 September 2013. This is a terrible loss

There is, first, «an icon of the archangels, made of spiritual colours». The archangels are not simply represented here but are, in fact, living angels «who do not cease day and night from hallowing and glorifying in voices that are stupefying the minds» [10]. Thus, the iconic form is just one of those shapes in which the visionary sees the angels. At other levels he is seeing them otherwise, for example, in one of the regions of the second heaven they are in the form of birds in general [24], in another in that of peacocks, eagles, doves and titmice in particular [28], while in the third heaven they have two, three, four, five or six eyes each (the latter seem to be the “many-eyed” Cherubim) [30]. These forms in which the angels appear can be related to the Areopagitic idea of a multileveled revelation of the angelic substances, the form changing at different levels of reality. In this way, the iconic form of the angels corresponds to a relatively lower celestial reality, that of the first heaven (or earthly Paradise).

The same holds for the central icon of the temple in Paradise, that of Christ. It is a lower manifestation of Christ’s being, the latter appearing in the form of the cross and the altar in the Heavenly Jerusalem and being totally invisible in the Kingdom of Heaven (that is, the third heaven). Thus, just like in later Iconophile theology, the icon plays the role of a symbol destined to lift up the mind and direct the veneration to the invisible and unrepresentable prototype. The human representation of Christ corresponds to Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council held in 692 in Constantinople, which may be roughly contemporary or slightly anterior to the Revelation of Gregory⁴⁷. However, unlike in the Iconophile theology, it is not as much the presence of Christ in his icon that is indicated here as his absence and transcendence, which may be one of the reasons why he is represented as an emperor wearing a crown on his head. This «icon is carried by four angels made of all kinds of various precious stones» who «are glorifying his», that is, Christ’s, «oneness» – once again, these are living angels appearing in iconic form⁴⁸.

Christ in the midst of the four living beings or angels is a well-known early iconographic type⁴⁹ as is also Christ enthroned between two angels⁵⁰. The icon described here seems to be a combination of the two. The fact that here Christ bears a crown, while reinforcing the image of the fearful emperor, is astonishing as no early Christian icon of Christ bearing a crown is extant. According to the suggestion of Thomas F. Mathews⁵¹ and Anna Christidou⁵², one might think that the traditional halo around Christ’s head is interpreted here as a crown; yet the entire vision of the icon of Christ in Paradise has a very strong literary parallel from the

⁴⁷ For the Greek text of the canon and its standard interpretation in the Orthodox Church see Agapios and Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain, Πηδάλιον τῆς νοητῆς νῆος τῆς μίας ἀγίας καθολικῆς καὶ ἀποστολικῆς τῶν Ὁρθοδόξων Ἐκκλησίας, ἥτοι Ἄπαντες οἱ ἱεροὶ καὶ θεῖοι κανόνες (new edition: Athens: Astir, 1993), 292.

⁴⁸ Although the commentary of the canon in the *Pedalion* dates from the late 18th century, it represents the general Byzantine orthodox trend of interpreting the injunction to prefer the human form of Christ to the symbol of the Lamb as also implying that the Evangelists should be represented in human and not symbolic animal form (ibid.).

⁴⁹Such is, for example, the apse mosaic in the church of Hosios David in Thessaloniki, dated to the early fifth century.

⁵⁰Such is, for example, the apse mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna.

⁵¹ In a personal e-mail message dated 30 April 2013.

⁵² Oral communication.

Bohairic Life of St Pachomius, datable to sometime in the fourth century⁵³. The parallelism is so conspicuous that it is worth citing this text here in its entirety:

«This is the revelation that our father Pachomius saw in his prayer. Looking toward the east wall of the sanctuary, [he saw the wall] become all golden; and on it there was a large icon, like a large picture [of someone] wearing a crown on [his] head. That crown was glorious in the extreme; all around its sides were multicolored images which resembled precious stones and which are the fruits of the Holy Spirit: faith, goodness, fear, mercy, purity, humility, righteousness, patience, kindness, gentleness, temperance, joy, hope and perfect charity. Before the icon were two great and very august archangels, motionless and contemplating the Lord's image that had appeared in the assembly room. While watching that great revelation, our father Pachomius went on praying and imploring [God] in these terms: "Lord, may your fear descend on us all forever, so that we may not sin against you all our life long". And he went on repeating that same prayer. Then the angels said him, "You cannot endure the fear of the Lord as you request". He answered, "Yes, I can, by God's grace". And at once the ray of fear, after the manner of the sun rising on the entire world, and without leaving its place, moved gradually forward him. That shining ray was very green and its sight wonderfully terrifying. When fear touched him, it pinched all his members, his heart, his marrow, and his whole body; and at once he fell to the ground and began to writhe like a living fish. His soul grew very sad and he fainted away toward death. The angels were watching him with part of their faces without in the least averting their eyes from the image of the Lord that was appearing to our father Pachomius. They said to him, "Did we not tell you that you could not stand the full shock of the Lord?" He cried out, "Have mercy on me, my Lord Jesus Christ!" At once, the ray of fear retreated gradually until it returned to its place. Then, the sheen of mercy moved toward him like a rich holy chrism. When mercy reached him, he was comforted»⁵⁴.

Although Pachomius' vision is much more detailed, the parallelisms are very close: such are the vision of an icon of the crowned Christ upon a golden background, the presence of the angels worshipping the icon, the embedded crystals in Gregory's vision corresponding to the precious stones in Pachomius' vision, which represent the fruits of the Spirit, the unbearable rays emanating from the image as well as the green colour, which, in Gregory's vision, is the colour of the crown and, in general, that of the spiritual light, while in Pachomius' vision it is the colour of the ray of fear emanating from the icon. Finally another parallelism is that, in both cases, the icon represents the fearful, transcendent Christ, the sacred awe at whose transcendent vision is counterbalanced by the coming of mercy, which is like holy oil in Pachomius' vision, while it is personified in the Virgin Mary in Gregory's vision, who is dwelling in the temple of Paradise as the Shekinah. Less specific is the motif of Pachomius' fainting toward death, yet the same motif also appears in the Revelation. When Gregory visits the places of the righteous priests and deacons he sees «palaces of light» from where there emanate the sweet fragrances of the Holy Spirit. When he smells these, he immediately faints unto death but the angel who accompanies him raises him in the name of Christ [19]. Also the motif of the green colour of the spiritual light occurs several times in the Revelation [see 10, 17, 24]. Yet, it is true that the green colour of the spiritual light is not something unknown in early Christian iconography. So also, Christ is appearing in an aureole of green light on a

⁵³ On the intricacies of the text transmission of the Coptic, Greek and Arabic Lives of St Pachomius, see A. VEILLEUX, *Pachomian Koinonia. Volume One: The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* (CistSS 45), Kalamazoo/MI 1980, 1-21.

⁵⁴ *Bohairic Life of St Pachomius* 73, trad. VEILLEUX, cit., 95-96.

mosaic in the Catacomb of Saint Domitilla in Rome, datable to the time of Pope Damasus (366-384)⁵⁵.

Such a close parallelism is indicative of a relationship but of what kind? The easiest would be to suppose that a version of the *Life of Pachomius* was among the sources of the Revelation and that its author used this source in a free manner just as he used the other sources that can be detected in the Revelation. Definitively, he must have been bilingual, Syriac and Greek-speaking. His bilingualism could be interrelated with his Melkite Chalcedonian confession. In the Introduction to the Revelation he writes that he «had spent» his «time with spiritual books and was reading the stories of the saints and of the chosen Fathers» [1]. Among these spiritual readings must have been the Life of Saint Mary of Egypt and the Life of Saint John the Almsgiver and also, most probably, the writings of Mark the Ascetic. He might have read these texts in Greek. The importance of the Greek language for the author is also indicated by the fact that, in the city of those persecuted for the Christian faith, the «spiritual birds», that is, the angels, are singing in Syriac and in Greek [24]. The difficulty with the vision of Pachomius is that it can only be found in the Bohairic Life but is missing from all the Greek versions. However, the text tradition of the different versions of the Life is very complicated and I think it can be asserted in quite good probability that the vision originally could have existed in the Greek Life, too, but was cut out later due to the Origenist / Anthropomorphite controversy at the end of the fourth century⁵⁶. In fact, such a description of an anthropomorphic vision of Christ could have attracted the accusation of anthropomorphism upon the Pachomian community. So I would propose that, if the author of the Revelation knew about the vision of Pachomius, he had read its narrative in a Greek text that later got lost.

5. CONCLUSIONS

I think the text analysed in this study has got at least a triple significance. First, it is a precious witness to a number of events in Indian Christian intellectual history, testifying to the fact that whatever we encounter in India defies all our preconceived notions of what Christianity and its well-known branches and texts should look like. Second, it is also interesting for itself: among others it seems to be a precious document about the theology of icon veneration before the Iconoclast strifes, east of the Byzantine Empire, namely a theology that combined iconic to aniconic worship. Thirdly, for people who, like me, know Syriac but do not know Arabic, this early modern translation of Mor Iyovannis has made this, otherwise inaccessible, text accessible, showing by this an important morale to the story: namely that Classical Syriac is still a general lingua franca, the knowledge of which opens for us a large cultural and intellectual landscape whose time limits are between the fourth and the twenty-first century and whose traditional geography extends from Egypt through the Middle East to as far as India and China⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ See Plate 92 in T.F. MATHEWS, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1993, 122 and its interpretation at 117-118. I thank Thomas Mathews for indicating this reference to me.

⁵⁶ In fact, in the Greek Pachomian material there are some loose ends indicating that the scene had been mentioned there but was cut later. Also, in the Bohairic text there is a word play between mercy (in Greek ἔλεος) and oil, chrism (ἐλαῖον), which is only understandable in Greek. This is not the place to analyse these subtle philological issues.

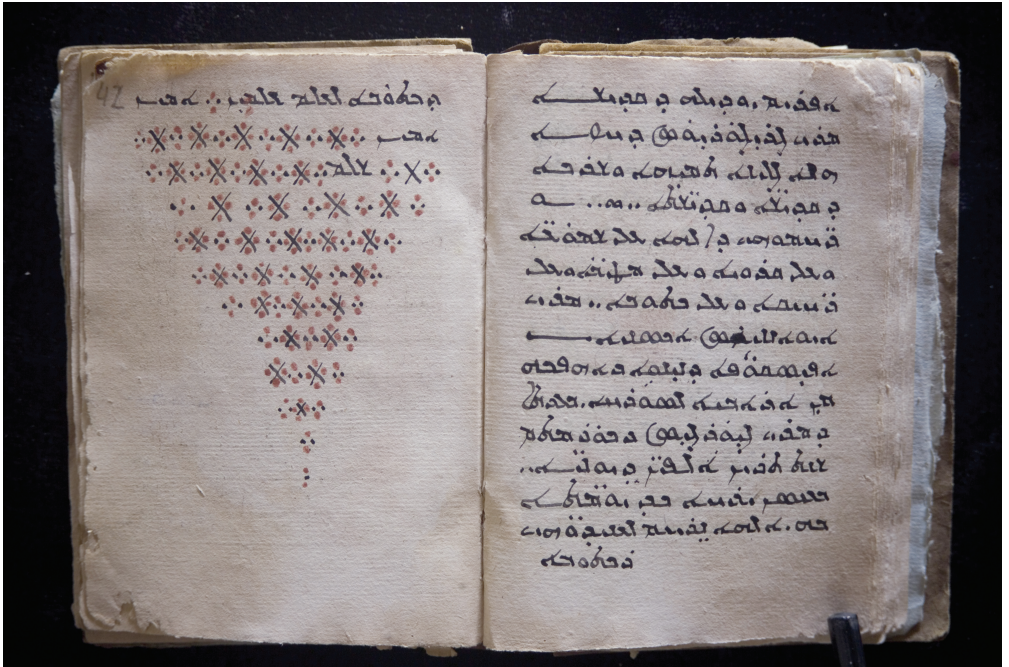
⁵⁷ On the role of Classical Syriac as a *lingua franca* in early modern South India see I. PERCZEL, *Classical Syriac as a modern lingua franca in South India between 1600 and 2006*, cit.

Naturally, much of the interpretation proposed here, including my attempt at dating the text, is tentative and hypothetical. Only a thorough analysis of the Arabic manuscripts would permit a more conclusive exegesis and a more precise distinction between the possible redactional layers of the text. Yet, I thought I should give this preliminary report on this text that testifies to the vivacity and the longevity of late antique-early medieval oriental Christian thought and literature as well as to the unity of the eastern Christian *oikumene*, in which neither linguistic, nor doctrinal differences have constituted insurmountable boundaries in the communication between communities and generations. Also the Revelation seems to be an important, hitherto not used, source for understanding the situation of the Syriac-speaking Melkite Chalcedonian community in the period following the Muslim conquest as well as the doctrinal history of iconic and aniconic worship before Iconoclasm. Finally, the text has definitive literary value, which must have been one of the reasons for its popularity among Arabic-speaking Christians and, later, due to Mor Iyovannis' scholarship and zeal, among Syriacising Malayalees. Definitively, the Revelation of the Seraphic Gregory has the merit of existing and is waiting to be exploited for various scholarly purposes.

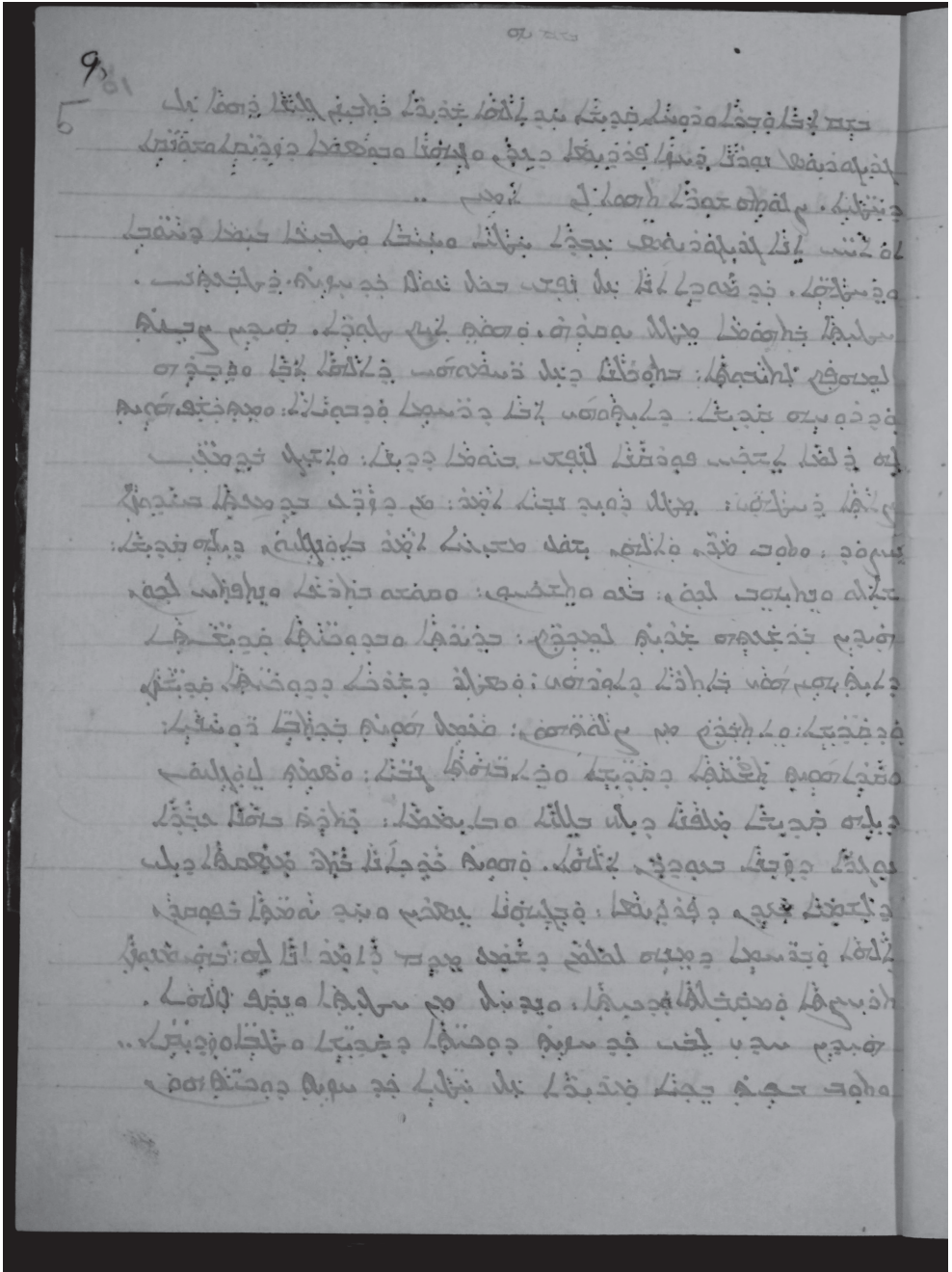
Istvan Perczel
Central European University, Budapest
perczei@hotmail.com

Abstract

The *Revelation of the Seraphic Gregory* – a text of Melkite origin, which could be dated to the late seventh, early eighth century – was originally written in Syriac and translated into Arabic; its Syriac original was then lost. Finally, the Arabic was in turn translated into Syriac in 1689, in India, by Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah, the Antiochian Syrian Orthodox missionary bishop who, *de facto*, introduced the Syrian Orthodox faith to India. This text, constructed on the model of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, describes a visionary journey through the three heavens and the diverse pockets of hell, the judgment of the souls, the heavenly liturgy, the abodes of the saints and the torments of Gehenna. It is a valuable document on the worship and the *imaginaire* of a Melkite community living around Edessa under Arab rule. In addition, it sheds some new light on iconic and aniconic worship in the Chalcedonian Church before the iconoclast strife.



The last two pages, containing the end of Mor Iyovannis' colophon, of the *Revelation* in MS Piramadam Syr 25



Title page of the *Revelation* in MS Thrissur Syr 86.