EBETHARKÉ: THE SYRIAC DIGITAL LIBRARY FIRST REPORT

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[1]   In June 2000, Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute launched Project **eBeth Arké: The Syriac Digital Library**. The project aims to bring 3,000 out-of-copyright books, journal articles, pictures, and audio recordings to the Internet in an eLibrary form. This is the first report on this project.

[2]   The project, lead by Beth Mardutho, is carried out in partnership with a number of university libraries, including Brigham Young University, The Catholic University of America, Brown University, Dumbarton Oaks Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, and others. Associated with the project is a Library Partnership program that gives public and private libraries the opportunity to complete their collections, or start a collection from the ground up. Interested libraries are encouraged to contact George Kiraz.

[3]   In parallel to the eBethArké project, Brigham Young University will be working with Beth Mardutho to produce a *Syriac Reference Library* on CDs, to contain resources of use to Syriac scholars. The editor of the *Syriac Reference Library* is Dr. David Taylor.

MOTIVATION

[4]   The main objective of this project is to gather in one place as much as possible of Syriac material that is out-of-copyright. Most

traditional libraries, even the major American and European ones, have considerable lacunae in their Syriac collections.

[5]   This is due to historical reasons. Until the 1970s, Syriac research was a minor field, practiced by scholars belonging to various disciplines including philology, history, theology and philosophy. As a result, the major works in the field, which still constitute the major reference and monographic works for today's research, are scattered and are difficult to access. Since the 1970s, the field has matured, and is now considered one of the main fields of Middle Eastern studies. Today, there are at least five international conferences that are held periodically, in addition to topic-specific specialized symposia. The importance of the field is coupled by the interest of native Syriac-speakers who look to their literary history for an identity, especially in the Diaspora. Syriac Christians in the Middle East and India have no access to Western libraries, but are now connected to the Internet, and will benefit from an on-line eLibrary available globally. As a result of the history of the field, early works on Syriac studies, sometimes as early as the 18th century, are still used as main references in the field.

[6]   As most of these works are out-of-copyright, it is impossible today for a university that is witnessing an increased interest in Syriac to expand its collection, let alone build a new collection. Additionally, there is a substantial amount of literature published in the Middle East and India that cannot be found in the best western universities.

PROJECT STATUS

[7]   Beth Mardutho and the Library Partners have been busy building the infrastructure for the project. Currently, each Partner Library is compiling a list of its Syriac holdings. All the lists will be consolidated in a central database. It is expected that the database will be populated by the end of the summer.

[8]   Meanwhile, Beth Mardutho has been researching the technical aspects of the project. The project makes use of the latest in eBook technology. Books are digitized using high quality digitization equipment. The images are then converted into eBook form, and when possible Optical-Character Recognition (OCR) is applied in order to allow readers to search the text. Links are added from the table of contents and indices to pages, making navigation a click

away. A Web version is created to allow readers borrow (i.e., download) eBooks from any place around the world. Sample eBooks are now available on the Institute's web page http://www.bethmardutho.org.

[9]   We expect digitization of volumes to begin in the fourth quarter of 2001, with the first version of the eLibrary released in 2002.

CALL FOR SPONSORSHIP

[10]   It is estimated that an average volume will cost Beth Mardutho ca. $250. This covers the cost of digitizing, converting and post-processing files, cleaning up the images, turning the images into an eBook, performing OCR that allows searching the text, adding links from contents and indices to pages, producing a web downloadable version of the eBook, and maintaining the library.

[11]   Beth Mardutho calls upon individual scholars, readers, and institutions to support this project by adopting one or more books. The donor's name will be acknowledged. The completion of this project depends entirely on sponsorship. An on-line secure sponsorship page can be used to send donations at http://bethmardutho.org/eBethArke/financial.html.