

Multilingual Manuscripts in Middle Eastern Manuscript Traditions: An Introduction

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That the ancient and medieval Middle East was a plurilingual space is, on reflection, unsurprising. Sarah Thomason's observation that 'the idea that monolingualism is the human norm is a myth'¹ should require no special defending. Yet the manuscript record, and the scholarship built upon it, has too often been organized as though each tradition—Sumerian, Akkadian, Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, to name a few—unfolded in isolation, touching its neighbors only at moments of translation, conquest, or crisis. In such accounts, multilingualism becomes the exception that a text must be made to justify, while monolingualism is quietly treated as the default that requires no comment at all.

This issue originates in the workshop 'Multilingual Manuscripts in Middle Eastern Manuscript Traditions', held at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, on 4–5 May 2023, and convened by Sabine Schmidtke and George A. Kiraz. The call for papers had asked contributors to set aside the monolingual literary text of a given manuscript and to attend instead to its bi- or multilingualism as such—contact, translation, code-switching, and the coexistence of scripts and registers on a single page—and it explicitly welcomed comparative work across traditions. Over two days, papers were grouped, in sessions styled as *majālis*, into shifting constellations of languages—Armenian, Hebrew, and Persian; Sumerian, Assyrian, Armenian, and Syriac; Arabic, Armenian, Syriac, and Turkish—with contributors drawing on Ancient Near Eastern, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic manuscript traditions alike. Three of the studies that emerged from those two days are gathered in the present selection; they argue—each from a different corpus, a different millennium, a different linguistic family—for the opposite default. They suggest that plurilingualism, not monolingualism, was the ordinary condition of Middle Eastern scribal culture, and that a text's monolingual surface is more often an artifact of genre, of scribal choice, or of modern editorial habit than a faithful report of the linguistic world that produced it.

Sören Krömer and Szilvia Sövegjártó open the issue in Neo-Assyrian Assur, examining the bilingual lexical composition *igi-du₈-a* = *tāmartu*. By the first millennium BCE, Sumerian had been all but a dead language for cen-

1 Thomason 2001, 31, cited in Mullen and James 2012, 5.

turies; no scribe compiling this list could have needed it for daily speech. Yet, the Sumerian–Akkadian bilingual format persisted as a curricular and identity-bearing convention, training scribes to ‘access, navigate, and interpret inherited lexical knowledge’ rather than to speak a living tongue.² Multilingualism here survives the disappearance of one of its two languages as speech, continuing to structure pedagogy and prestige long after the practical rationale for bilingualism had vanished.

Ali B. Langroudi moves the story forward some two thousand years, to fourteenth-century Tabriz and to a translator who copied his own Gospel translation from Syriac into Arabic and Persian in parallel columns—annotated here and there in Latin by a European user, and inflected throughout with Turkic and Mongolian vocabulary. Plurilingualism here is actively negotiated: Arabic carries ‘inherited scholarly authority,’ Persian is adapted for ‘local, non-specialist’ readers,³ and the translator visibly code-switches between the two, apparently working from his own earlier bilingual draft rather than from the Syriac *Vorlage* alone. The manuscript stages the layered, hierarchical multilingualism of the wider Ilkhanid Turco-Mongol world.

Georg Leube closes the issue by turning to fifteenth-century Armenian texts composed within the Qaraqyunlu and Aqqyunlu ‘Turkmen’ realms. Leube shows how a historiographical paradigm inherited from Hübschmann has obscured a supralinguistic administrative vocabulary shared across Armenian and Persophone chancery culture, the *ad hoc* creativity of individual authors negotiating two or more registers at once, and, in the poetry of the Armenian bishop and poet Mkrtič‘ Nalaš, a deliberate self-positioning within a Persophone *mundus significans*. Leube ends by questioning whether ‘code-switching,’ a term drawn from the study of oral speech, is even the right tool for describing what written plurilingualism does; script, he suggests, following von Falkenhausen, may matter more than language to how these texts constructed identity.⁴

None of these three papers shares a period, region, or language family with the others—Sumero-Akkadian Assyria, Syro-Arabo-Persian Ilkhanid Iran, and Armeno-Islamic Anatolia are not an obviously natural set. That is the point. The recurrence, across such different settings, of scribes and translators moving easily between two, three, or four linguistic registers—sometimes within a single line—suggests three local instances of a single, underlying condition of Middle Eastern manuscript culture, not three unrelated anomalies. The Aramaic-Arabic interface of pre-Abbasid Syria and Mesopotamia

2 Krömer and Sövegjártó 2026, 237.

3 Langroudi 2026, 274.

4 Leube 2026, 285, 295, 300.

offers a fourth data point from the rich poetry in *Maqāmāt al-Hamadhānī*, when one Abū al-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī declares, ‘In the evening, I am a Nabīṭ [i.e., Aramaic speaker]... in the morning, I am an Arab.’ The same plurilingual reflex runs through Assur’s classrooms, Tabriz’s scriptorium, and the Armenian sees of Turkmen Anatolia. If monolingualism is the myth, the manuscript—not the language—is the more honest unit of study: a page mixing Sumerian and Akkadian, or Arabic and Persian, or Armenian and Persianate vocabulary, is a faithful record of how its scribe thought and wrote. It is this record that the following three papers, each in its own idiom, ask us to take seriously.

References

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