

## The Sinaitic Palimpsest of Graz University Library (Ms. 2058/2)

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### 1. Introduction

The Library of the University of Graz houses a small number of manuscripts in Georgian and Armenian which are known to have been derived from St Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai. They are inventoried under the number 2058 in our manuscript collection<sup>1</sup> and include four codices (ms. 2058/1–4), one rotulus (ms. 2058/5), three Georgian fragments (ms. 2058/6, a–c), and one folium with Armenian text (ms. 2058/7). All these objects are said to predate the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The codex under discussion here is ms. 2058/2 – an Armenian palimpsest.<sup>2</sup> The first text layer was effaced and rewritten in Georgian script. The underlying text contains a book of “oracles” added to verses of the Gospel of John (cf. the ms. Yerevan, Matenadaran, arm. 9650). This now underlying text was overwritten in Georgian with the text of the Book of Psalms and some Georgian liturgical hymns (cf. the ms. Tbilisi, Korneli Kekelidze National Centre of Manuscripts [KKNCM], A-38). The codex comprises 282 folios, all of which are palimpsested except for the first four.

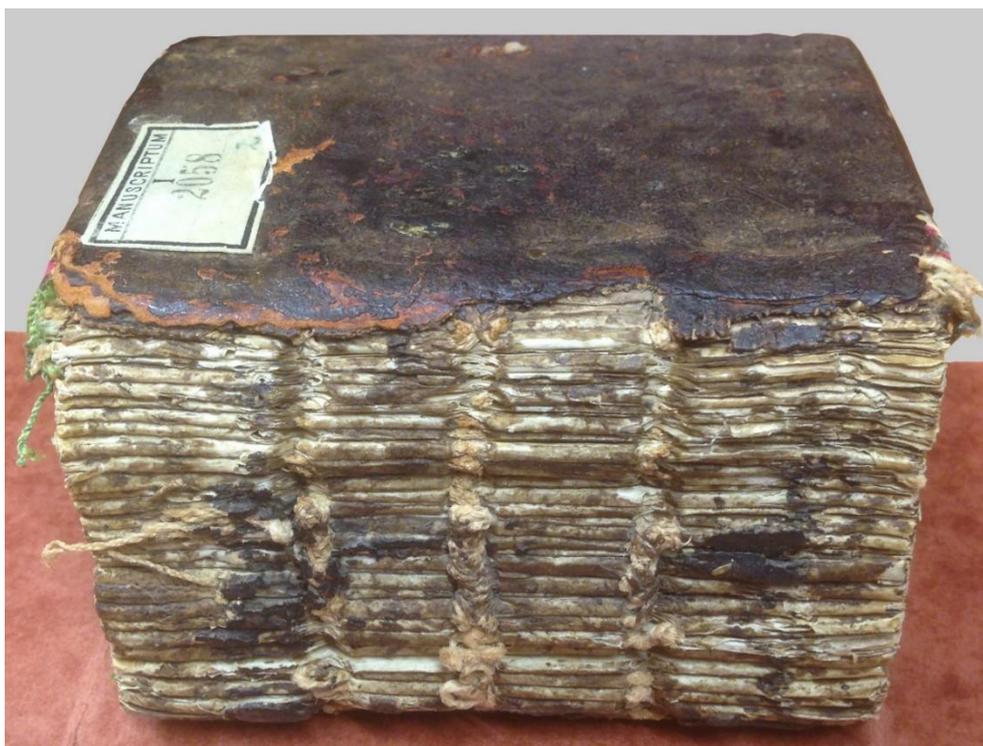


Fig. 1: University Library Graz, ms. 2058/2 (140 × 107 mm)

<sup>1</sup> <http://sosa2.uni-graz.at/sosa/katalog/index.php>. A previous version of the present article was presented during the workshop ‘Removed and Rewritten: Palimpsests and Related Phenomena from a Cross-Cultural Perspective’ at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg, on 8 October, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The scarce entry of the catalogue—within the context “Georgian manuscripts”—reads: “Parchment 274 a[nd] 8 detached fol[ios]. 14:10 cm. Between VIII a[nd] X c[entury]. Possibly contemporary binding in leather from Mt Sinai. Psalm Book. Codex rescriptus. Underneath a well readable Armenian text.”

We have clear bibliographic evidence that this manuscript was present in the shelves of St Catharine's Monastery in 1888.<sup>3</sup> Ten years later it was sold on an antique market in Cairo, where the Austrian painter Alfons Leopold Mielich (d. 1929) acquired it. There is no information about how these manuscripts were up for sale. Finally, Hugo Schuchardt,<sup>4</sup> a well-known linguist from Graz University, bought the collection of Sinaitic manuscripts from the painter. After Schuchardt's death in 1927 the manuscripts were added to the collection of our university library.

Though we know the provenance of ms. 2058/2 – the codex was still in the monastery when A. Tsagareli prepared his catalogue and described it<sup>5</sup> – we may have some doubts about the Sinaitic monastery as being the place of its origin, since St Catherine's Monastery has never had a tradition as being the place where a great number of Armenian manuscripts were kept. It shall however be assumed that this is the place where the palimpsestation of the original Armenian text occurred.

## 2. The process of palimpsestation

The first text was written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and is Armenian. It is quite clear how they went ahead to produce the palimpsest. The procedure might be considered as an archetype and offers no surprises. The process is outlined in six steps.

*Step 1:* The binding of the previous book – if there has been any – is removed into what makes a pile of detached bifolia.



*Step 2:* The text is effaced from every single bifolium. Possibly, after soaking the parchment leaves in some kind of solvent, the text was eliminated with the help of a sponge or the like. With the exception of one folium no traces are visible, which could hint at the scraping off of the Armenian text rather than cleaning by soaking it. From the result of cleaning, it appears that the workshop must have had some experience in the procedure of palimpsestation.



*Step 3:* The bifolium is cut into halves on the line of the fold. Any reused folium would be half the size of the original one – possibly a little bit less, since there is evidence that some of the folios were slightly trimmed at a later date.

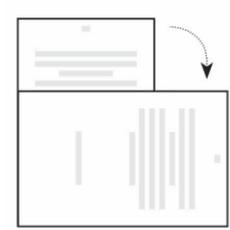


<sup>3</sup> Imnaischwili (1977: 186–189); Imnaischwili (2004); Imnaischwili (2008a); Imnaischwili (2008b).

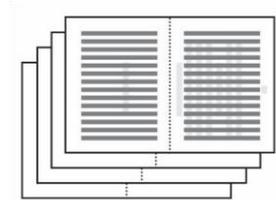
<sup>4</sup> <http://schuchardt.uni-graz.at/>.

<sup>5</sup> Tsagareli (1888, p. 196, no. 2); Imnaischwili (2004: 70). The Georgian manuscript must have been kept at St Catherine's Monastery for a considerable period of time. On fol. 23r and fol. 23v we find the vestiges of historical book repairs: Two fragments are pasted over a tear in the parchment. These pieces show some Greek uncial letters which are characteristic of the Sinaitic scriptorium. We do not know when this was carried out. The restorer, however, has taken "waste material" from that place to fix the problem.

*Step 4:* The new demi-sized folios are rotated at 90° and folded accordingly. This explains the fact that the second text appears perpendicular to the underlying first text.



*Step 5:* The palimpsested leaves are rewritten, now including the text of the Book of Psalms in Georgian.



*Step 6:* The rescribed folios are rearranged and assembled to form a new textblock.

The new book only reused material from the palimpsested book. As mentioned before, the first four folios of our present manuscript, Graz University Library nr 2058/2, are not palimpsest. Additionally, it can be observed that fol. 1 to 4 show a completely different and irregular layout. The hand is also very different from the rest of the Georgian text as is the ink that was used. Above all, these folios are written in minuscules, which is not the case for the bulk of the main text.<sup>6</sup> These leaves were joined to our codex at a much later date to replace the first quire of the new book which had gone lost, or so.<sup>7</sup>

There are twenty and a half folios missing from the Armenian manuscript.<sup>8</sup> The folios of the first text are totally jumbled in the new Georgian manuscript and this would be understandable since it was recycled material. It was probably in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century that the palimpsestation and the reassembling of the folios took place.

### 3. Reconstructing the first book

Once having conceived the process of palimpsestation, the reconstruction of the entire original codex was not a too difficult affair. It was discovered quite soon, that every single page consisted of three textual elements:

- a number placed somewhere in the centre of the upper margin (= section number, see below),
- a text block in the upper half which sometimes runs down to the lower half of the page (= Gospel of John), and
- one to three lines after some space following the main text (= oracle, see below).

<sup>6</sup> With some probability it was the Georgian monk Ioane Zosime, a scribe and a bookbinder working in the monastery in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote and added fol. 1 to 4 to the codex. At that time, apparently, the book had been wanting its first quire.

<sup>7</sup> A codicological description may be found in Renhart (2015: 14–38). The Georgian book is composed of quaternions [= 8 folios, or four bifolios], except of the first quire, fol. 1–4. See Gippert (2015, 175–186, esp. 180).

<sup>8</sup> The sections nos 13/14, 91/92 (lower half), 133/134, 135/136, 163/164, 165/166, 167/168, 169/170, 175/176, 189/190, 213/214, 215/216, 227/228, 229/230, 231/232, 233/234, 245/246, 247/248, 303/304, 317/318, and the possibly empty folio of the very last quire.

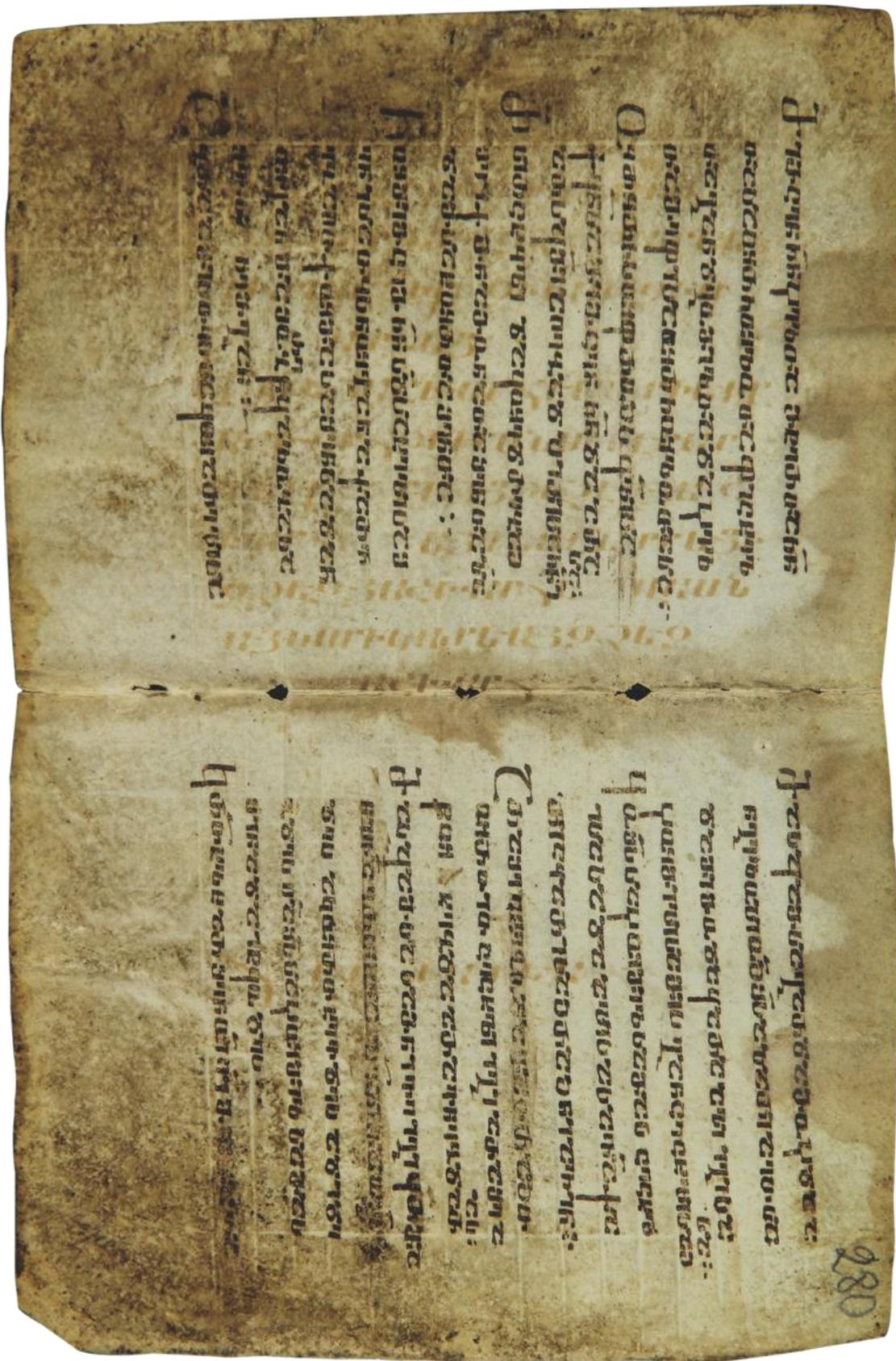


Fig. 2: Sample page, the Armenian text effaced and overwritten by the Georgian text

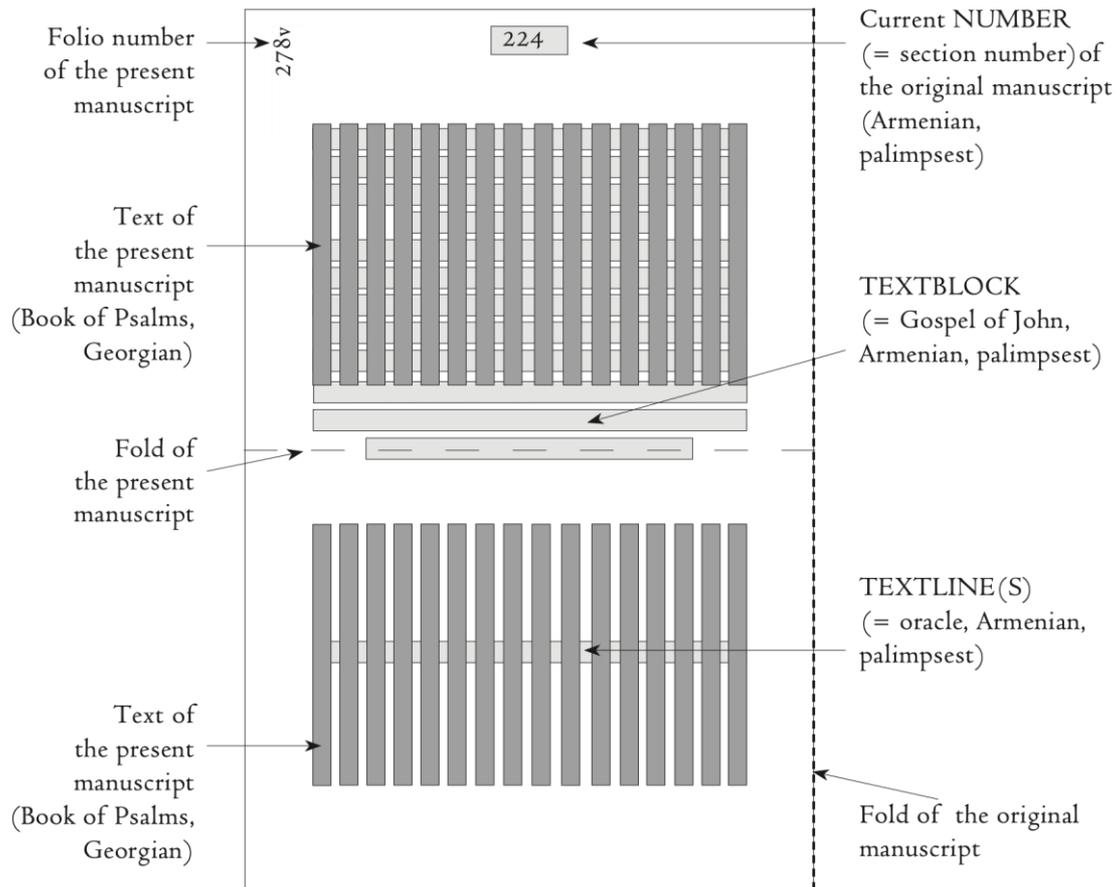
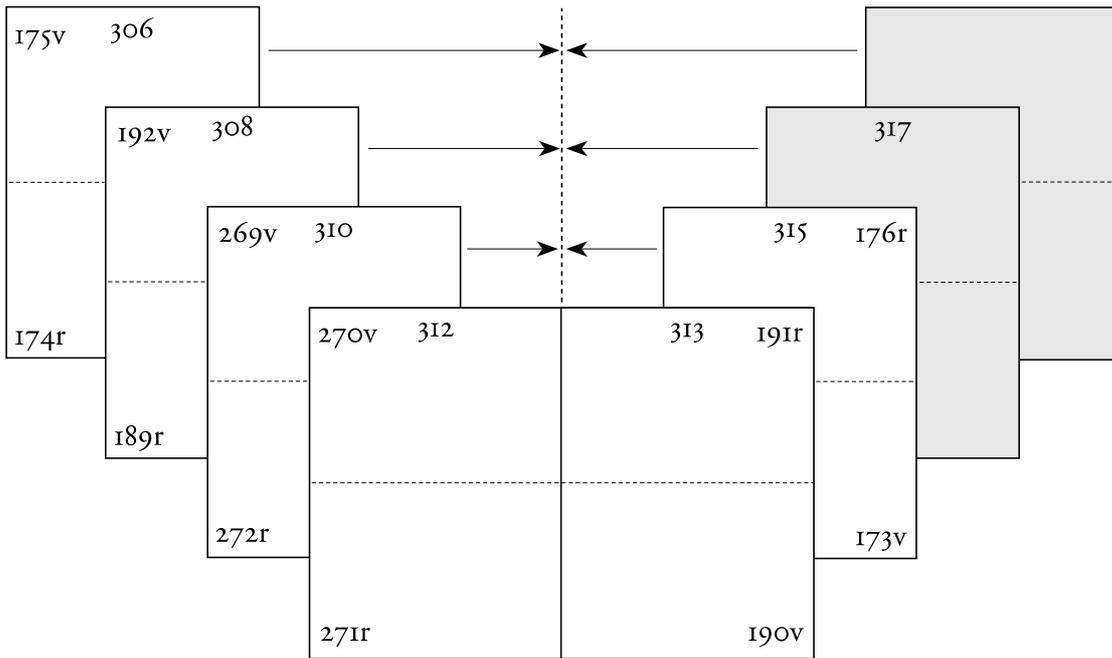


Fig. 3: Stereotypic layout of a page in ms. 2058/2

This is a stereotypical pattern which has been applied without exception throughout our manuscript. Very soon it became clear that the numbers were in ascending order. These ascending numbers correspond with the progression of the text, that is the Gospel of St John from chapter 1 to chapter 21. The biblical text is cut into 318 sections.<sup>9</sup> For every single unit the scribe reserved one page with a corresponding number. Thus, we have help in a twofold manner to virtually reconstruct the previous manuscript: the numbers and the contents of the biblical text.

Most probably the Armenian codex comprised twenty quires, with eight folios or four bifolios each (*quaternions*): In the left upper margin of the last recto page of each quire, we find a tiny cross indicating the end of the quire. Seventeen out of twenty of these signs are still recognisable. The last folios are lost from quires no XI, XIX, and XX.

<sup>9</sup> Though the last folio of the Armenian palimpsest, which is preserved, has the section numbers 315 and 316 (= ms. 2058/2, fol. 176r/176v), we may assume that two missing sections must have followed, as there are two verses left out from the Gospel of John: 21.24–25. With these two sections, the last quire would have been complete. – The method with which they cut the Gospel text into small text units, is still in discussion. Even within the Armenian tradition we do not find uniformity as to the number and the volume of sections. For comparison see Yerevan, Matenadaran, ms. 9650, cf. Renhart (2015: 143–149). However, the pericopation is in no way similar to the Ammonian/Eusebian system.



**Fig. 4: Schematic visualisation of quire XX, supposedly the last one of the palimpsested book. The last two folios (in grey) of the Armenian manuscript were not re-used for the Georgian Gospel book. They are missing.<sup>10</sup>**

#### 4. The contents of the effaced text

What makes the Graz palimpsest so interesting are the distinctly small text portions on the lower half of the pages that form the oracles. They sometimes consist of just one word,<sup>11</sup> but sometimes there are sentences with three or four lines as well.<sup>12</sup> Characteristically, oracles are totally abstract, and in reading them they conveniently provide the reader with the answer they are wishing to get. The answers may be compared with formulations which we find in the horoscopes of nowadays.

There are only a few instances where it is possible to see a clear connection of the oracle to the biblical text above it. It is quite certain that these scarce text lines do not comment on the passages of the Gospel text in the upper half of the folio, but are definitely oracles that are used for divination.

The process of divination requires all the three elements that are found in our palimpsested book:

- The number that provides the way to select a section in the book. Though we do not know the algorithm according to how a number was activated, we take it for granted that this activation was the function of the number.
- The biblical text that provides aspects of spiritual guidance. The Gospel text was undoubtedly part of the interpretative dialogue between the practitioner who used the

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive representation of the quire structure see Renhart (2015, 49-58).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. section no. 238: հրաժարեա (*hrazareā* – “Renounce!”).

<sup>12</sup> The oracle section no 12, is by far the longest one.

book, and the client who was seeking an answer or for comfort of various kinds. Above all, the biblical text gives the highest authorisation to the whole of the divinatory process.

- The oracle, finally, offers an answer. It is very often extremely vague, so that any client may find an answer or a perspective to any of their concerns (see below the samples from the beginning of the book).

Such divinatory books and practices were repeatedly challenged and even forbidden by ecclesial institutions. This might have been one of the reasons for effacing the text of the first book and for reusing the parchment to make a new codex. Another argument for effacing the Armenian text could be seen by the fact that many pages did not have much text. So, the text quantities to eliminate were not that large. Among other aspects to be considered, is the fact that the Armenian manuscript ended up in a non-Armenian ambience without much use for anybody. These ideas are, however, more or less speculative.

#### 4.1 The numbers

As already mentioned, the scribe placed numbers in the upper margin of every single page. It is quite evident that these numbers were put to parchment by the same hand as the rest of the text. They would definitely not be considered as page numbers or used as a way for counting pages.<sup>13</sup> Foliation and pagination of manuscripts was not yet established as a standard feature when this manuscript was produced (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> c.). The numbers were formally labelled as “section numbers”, which undoubtedly play a crucial role in the selection of an appropriate oracle, though we do not yet know the process of how one would choose a number with its corresponding oracle.<sup>14</sup>

The vast majority of these numbers are still identifiable.<sup>15</sup> The lowest readable number is “3” (fol. 96r) and the highest “316” (fol. 176v).

#### 4.2 The Gospel text

As for the Georgian layer, Ms 2058/2 provides the full text of the Gospel of John. The biblical text forms the main body of our manuscript in terms of the text volume. The layout of the Gospel text testifies to a thorough plan and a much-experienced hand. The script, which is slightly slanted in direction, is carried out carefully throughout. Some of the letters have a long and fine tail which gives the impression of elegance and levity.<sup>16</sup> Some of the initial letters of the verses are highlighted by their size because they are larger than those of the main text. The pericopation does not correspond with the later tradition which we are used to having until now. The last line of most paragraphs is frequently centred. These features together with other observations such as the generosity of space which was left unwritten, make it clear that the book was a precious object and of high esteem with no room for cheapness.

Due to the age of the palimpsested manuscript the text of the Gospel of John is of considerable weight for the Armenian tradition especially when it comes to establishing a critical edition of the biblical books.

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<sup>13</sup> The palimpsested Armenian manuscript does not show quire numbers. Instead, we find a small quire sign in form of a “+” on the last folium of the quire.

<sup>14</sup> Childers (2020: esp. 165–172: “6.4 The Divining Gospel in Practice”).

<sup>15</sup> For a full list and a concordance with the present manuscript see Renhart (2015: 89–92).

<sup>16</sup> For the paleography see Renhart (2015, 82-87).

Section number 25		[ԻԵ]	
Fol. 15r	1	*ՉԱՅՍ ԱՐԱՐ [սկիզբն նշա]	John 2,11
	2	ՆԱՅ ՅՍ Ի ԿԱ ՆԱ ԳԱՂ ԻՂ ԵԱ	
	3	ՅԻՈՅ ԵԻ ՅԱՅՏ ՆԵԱՅ ԶՓ	
	4	ԱՌՍ ԻԻՐ ԵԻ ՀԱ ԻԱՏԱՅԻՆ	
	5	Ի ՆԱ ԱՇԱ ԿԵՐՏՔ ՆՈՐԱ	
	6	*ՅԵՏ ԱՅՍՈՐԻԿ Է[չ յս Ի Կ]Ա	John 2,12
	7	ՓԱՌ ՆԱ ՀՈՒՄ · ԻՆՔՆ ԵԻ	
	8	ՄԱՅՐ ԻԻՐ ԵԻ ԵՂ ԲԱՐՔ ԻԻՐ	
	9	ԵԻ Ա ՆԴ Լ ԻՆԷՐ ՈՉ ԲԱՉՈՒՄ	
	10	ԻՆՉ Ա ԻՈՒՐՍ	
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Fol. 18v	11	ՍԿԻԶԲՆ ԻՐԱՅԴ ՀԱ ՆԴԵՐՉ	
	12	ՓԱՌԱԻՔ	

Fig. 5: Transcription of a manuscript page. The asterisks are added to facilitate identifying the beginning of a verse. The outlined initial letters depict the large-sized letters in the manuscript. The brackets indicate non-readable text. Text in minuscules is supplied by the “Echmiadsin Gospel” (Yerevan, Matenadaran, arm. 2374, anno 989).<sup>17</sup>

Although the Gospel text is not always readable, in several places there is sufficient evidence that ms. 2058/2 gives testimony to interesting variants. Comparing our palimpsested text with the *Codex Echmiadsin* we get a first impression of the instability of the text at the time when the Armenian manuscript was made.

<sup>17</sup> Codex Etschmiadzin (2001). See also Macler’s edition (1920) which is available online at <https://digitale-sammlungen.ulb.uni-bonn.de/urn/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-74111>.

John	Graz Echmiadsin	Text	Fol.
1,32	G	ՈՐՊԷՍ ՉԱՂԱԲՆԻ	60v   65r
	E	իբրևի գաղաւնի	178r
1,50	G	ՊԱՏԱՍԽԱՆԻ ԵՏ ՅԻՍԻՍ ԵՒ ԱՍԷ ՅՆԱ	16v   17r
	E	պատասխանի ետ նմա յիսուս եւ ասէ	179v
2,15	G	ՉԱՐԱՉՐՄՆ ԵՒ ՉՈՉԽԱՐՄՆ	15v   18r
	E	գոչխարսն եւ գարջառս	180r
5,13	G	Ի ՏԵՂՈՉԷՆ	36r   41v
	E	ի տեղոջէ անտի	186r
7,35	G	ԱՍԵԻՆ	37r   40v
	E	ասեն	194r
7,36	G	ՈՉ ԿԱՐԷՔ ԳԱԼ	37r   40v
	E	ոչ կարիցէք գալ	194r
11,31	G	ՈՐ ԵՒՆ Ի ՏԱՆ ԱՆԴ	211v 218r
	E	որ եին ընդ նմա ի տան անդ	203v
11,31	G	ՄԽԻԹԱՐԵԻՆ ՉՆՈՍԱ	211v 218r
	E	մխիթարեին գնա	203v
11,32	G	ԵՒ ԱՍԷ ԵԹԵ	212r 217v
	E	եւ ասէ տէր եթե	203v
14,7	G	ՉՃԱՆԱՊԱՀՆ	278v 279r
	E	զճանապարհն	210v
17,19	G	ՉԱՆՁՆ	216r 213v
	E	զանձն իմ	216v

Fig. 6: Samples of text variants juxtaposing passages from Graz, University Library, ms. 2058/2 (= G) and Yerevan, Matenadaran, arm. 2374 (= E).

This might be sufficient to illustrate the importance of the biblical text in our manuscript for the transmission history of the Armenian Gospel text within the first millennium CE. The full edition of the Gospel text would be a desideratum.

### 4.3 The oracles

Possibly the most curious feature in our manuscript is found in the short remarks which are always positioned in the lower section of the page. In the original book there must have been a total of 318 sections and the same for the corresponding number of oracles. Due to the loss of 20 folios, only 278 oracles are preserved. From these there are 229 which were fully readable, dozens from the rest that could only be partially identified, and others not at all.<sup>18</sup> Surprisingly, we could see that almost all of the oracles in the second half of the book are readable.

No	Folio	Text	Translation	John
1	66v	թարգմանութիւն թող մի ջանար	Interpretation: Leave it, do not make efforts!	I,1-5
2	66r	թ[արգման]ութիւն որ[...] ի կատարու մն գայ	Interpretation: What [...], will come to ful- fillment.	I,6-11
3	93v	թարգմանութիւն նչ հ[...]	Interpretation: Not [...]	I,10-[11]
4	93r	ի կատարումն գան իրքդ	Things will come to fulfillment.	I,12-14
5	21v	վկայութիւն ճշմարիտ	True testimony.	I,15
6	21r	եթե հաւատաս, ին դասցես	If you believe, you will rejoice.	I,16-17
7	21*v	յայտնի լինի գոր ոչ զի սէին	It will become evident, what they did not know.	I,18-20
8	21*r	գոր ասեն վկայքն ճշմա րիտ են	What the witnesses say, is true.	I,21-22
9	94v	յաջողեցին ճանա պարհք քո	May your ways be successful!	I,23

**Fig. 7: Sample of oracles, taken from the beginning of the book. The hint “Interpretation” (Թարգմանութիւն, *t’argmanowt iwn*) is given only in the first three oracles of the book.**

Generally speaking, it is difficult to translate these “Interpretations”, since they lack a context. This could be different if the Gospel quote from the same page is its reference, and if it provides a meaning to it. It is rare to find a direct corresponding catchword or an idea which would link the two entities *Gospel text* and *oracle* coercively together. The precise character of such a link remains a matter of discussion.<sup>19</sup> One can observe discontinuities even in the genre of the oracles: some of them seem to be applied for very specific situations (e. g. in some legal action), others have an imperative or adhortative character, and others still give the impression they

<sup>18</sup> The whole corpus of oracles is edited in Renhart (2015: 119–139).

<sup>19</sup> For a resumé and development of this discussion see Childers (2020: 177–202, ch. 7: “Oracles of Biblical Interpretation: Examining the Relationship between Divination, John’s Gospel, and the User”).

were headers of some thematic oracular units without answers to be given to a person seeking them (e. g., no 5 in Fig. 7 above).<sup>20</sup>

It is quite clear that the oracles as found in our manuscript, bear the traces of history. This can be deduced by comparing our comparatively late Armenian divinatory source with much older traditions from Greek, Coptic, Latin, and Syriac traditions. The parameters for the comparative study would be: wording and syntax, the sequence of the oracles, and their allocation to the biblical units.

To conclude, the edition of the oracles in Graz, University Library, ms. 2058/2, has for the first time made accessible to the scientific community, a vast corpus of more than two hundred oracles of any of the ancient Eastern traditions. This has been topped recently by Childers's study, when he edited the Syriac oracles from an even much older manuscript (6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> c).

## 5. Further steps of research

Though we published a study on this manuscript in 2015, there is still much work to be done. The said book focused on the codicological description of the manuscript, it elaborated on the comprehensive reconstruction of the original Armenian manuscript, it provided the full edition of the oracles with having close to 80% of the effaced text being readable, it paradigmatically offered the biblical text of one of the twenty quires (gathering no II, from sections 17 to 31), and it tried to describe how the book was used. All this was presented in German.

At present we are taking multispectral images of all the folios. This will provide a basis for the full edition of the Armenian text which probably was effaced by the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This final edition will be presented in English to make the results accessible to a wider audience.

The comprehensive edition of the biblical text, i. e., the Gospel of St John, has turned out to be of some interest too since a critical text edition of the Gospel book in Armenian does not seem to exist. Even though in some places our text is rather rudimentarily readable due to its thorough palimpsestation process, it is likely to bear witness to an ancient version.

Apart from the full-text-edition we need answers to questions concerning the materials used:

- Can we better fix the date of the original manuscript by carrying out investigations on the parchments used, and on the inks?
- We are missing 20 folios of the earlier book. Is it thinkable to find pieces of them in other Sinaitic manuscripts or elsewhere?
- What we do not have is any knowledge of the place of origin of the Armenian manuscript. Where was it manufactured?
- In view of the contents, we are in a fortunate position to be able to compare our oracles with other traditions. I want to highlight here the publication of Jeff Childers from Abilene University, Texas/USA. In 2020 he edited the oracles taken from the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century Syriac manuscript London, British Library, Add. 17,119.<sup>21</sup> These oracles too, are connected with the Gospel of John. But their layout is completely different from our

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<sup>20</sup> Childers (2020: 161–163) convincingly argues in favour of such headings. He concludes: “It appears that headings had been incorporated into the Greek source material at a very early stage before finding their way into the other versions.”

<sup>21</sup> Renhart (2022) [forthcoming].

manuscript. The oracle texts are sometimes nearly congruent, to the extent that some of the sequences of oracles are identical.

The biblical sections of the Syriac and the Armenian traditions are by no means identical. That means that the pericopation of the biblical text follows different principles. Thus, we see congruence and deviation in terms of textual and formal criteria between the traditions which also means that the understanding of this text is becoming more and more complex.

Finally, what we do not know at all is the algorithm according to which a certain number was drawn or came into use.

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## გრაცის უნივერსიტეტის სინური პალიმფსესტი (Ms. 2058/2)

### ერიხ რენჰარტი (გრაცი)

გრაცის უნივერსიტეტის ბიბლიოთეკაში დაცულია ერთი სინური ხელნაწერი, რომელიც თავიდან ბოლომდე პალიმფსესტურია (282 ფურცლიდან მხოლოდ ოთხი, 1–4 ფურცლები არ წარმოადგენს პალიმფსესტს). პალიმფსესტის ქვედა ფენის ტექსტი, რომელიც სომხური ასოებით არის შესრულებული, ზემოდან ქართულად არის გადაწერილი ქართული ტექსტით, კერძოდ ფსალმუნების წიგნისა და ბიბლიური კანტიკის ტექსტით. თავდაპირველი ხელნაწერის ხელახალი მომზადება ახალი ხელნაწერის შესაქმნელად (ხელნაწერის გაპალიმფსესტება), სავარაუდოდ, სინას მთაზე წმინდა ეკატერინეს მონასტერში უნდა განხორციელებულიყო VIII–IX საუკუნეების ზღვარზე. ის ოთხი ფურცელი, რომლებიც არ არის პალიმფსესტური, წიგნს, სავარაუდოდ, X საუკუნის მეორე ნახევარში დაურთო იოანე ზოსიმემ.

წინამდებარე სტატია აჯამებს იმ კვლევას, რომელიც 2015 წელს გერმანულად გამოაქვეყნა ავტორმა პალიმფსესტის ქვედა, გადაშლილი ფენის სომხური ტექსტის შესახებ. სტატიაში შეჯამებულია თავდაპირველი ხელნაწერის (“პირველადი” წიგნის) კოდიკოლოგია, ნაჩვენებია ხელნაწერის გაპალიმფსესტებისას გამოყენებულ პროცედურა და განხილულია ქვედა ფენის ტექსტის ყველაზე საინტერესო ნაწილები შინაარსობრივი თვალსაზრისით.