





*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Chiara Barbati, *The Christian Sogdian Gospel Lectionary E5 in Context*  
(Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik 81), Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der  
Wissenschaften, 2015.—357pp.

*Adam Benkato*

Numerous major editions of Sogdian texts, especially Christian Sogdian texts, as well as dictionaries have become available in recent years, with several more editions on the way. These are the basic tools of any type of medieval textual studies, and the study of Sogdian is on the surest footing it has had since its discovery and decipherment more than one hundred years ago. But now, if we intend to go beyond basic tools to a “spirit of theoretical and methodological questing”, then Middle Iranian philology must become a material philology.

Material philology is a philological practice that privileges the material artifacts which convey medieval literature to us. It builds on text editing and textual studies, but refocuses on the historical context in which those texts were produced; a manuscript is not (only) the bearer of a text or version of a text, but is also a material historical document, a *product*, and therefore also a witness to the material culture in which it was produced. Material philology shifts, as Stephen Nichols, one of its foremost theorists,

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1- S. G. Nichols. “Why Material Philology? Some Thoughts.” In *Philologie als Textwissenschaft. Alte und neue Horizonte*, eds. H. Tervooren, H. Wenzel (*Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 116, Sonderheft, 1997), 10–30, p. 10.

put it, to “focus on the dynamics of the expressive systems within the manuscript viewed as cultural artifact”.<sup>2</sup> As an artifact, the manuscript’s study demands the involvement of disciplines such as linguistics, paleography, codicology, social history, and/or literary history, depending on its features. This shift reinscribes the manuscript into its historical context, bringing better insight, practitioners of material philology would argue, into both the *text* as an abstract and the *manuscript* as an artifact.

Naturally, no philological discipline exists in a vacuum. Text editions are produced within a scholarly tradition, and must also not only reckon with the unique features of the manuscript tradition under study, but also the physical condition of the manuscripts themselves. Middle Iranian manuscripts from the Turfan oasis being located towards one extreme of that spectrum, their study involves a great deal more reconstruction and comparison than other, more well-preserved manuscript traditions—and hence, I would argue, a material philological approach is all the more merited.

Chiara Barbati’s recent book *The Christian Sogdian Gospel Lectionary E5 in Context* is on the face of it an edition of *E5*, a Sogdian text intriguing in a number of ways. The text is the only Gospel lectionary preserved in Sogdian (and moreover in a unique variety of the language). It soon becomes clear that Barbati means to bring a spirit of methodological questing to Sogdian, and indeed Middle Iranian, philology: “text and context” are the very first words of the book and two ideas which return again throughout her edition and commentary. Barbati takes up a number of different perspectives with which to explore *text* and *context*, making it clear each time, as in the two chapters on the historical context and codicology of the manuscript which begin the study, that the various perspectives are not there only to give the basic information needed to understand the manuscript, but rather to be starting points from which to explore the manuscript’s broader context. Following these two chapters, Barbati gives an analysis of the manuscript’s language. *E5* has a rather unique variety of Sogdian, one that differs from other types of Christian Sogdian. This of course is interesting in terms of Sogdian historical linguistics, but cannot either, as Barbati shows, be separated from the fact that *E5* is a direct translation from Syriac—essentially all Christian Sogdian texts are translations of Syriac ones. Its language must therefore be also considered in terms of how it renders Syriac syntax and lexicon. Specific features of Syriac to Sogdian translation, as they concern *E5*, are dealt with in two sections (“Syntax” and “Terminology”).

Besides these chapters, whose value I think will primarily be felt in subsequent work on Sogdian language and manuscript studies, the text edition itself also shows Barbati’s spirit of methodological questing. At first glance, the edition seems traditional, containing the text, followed by a translation and commentary on linguistic or literary issues. Looking closer, one realizes that Barbati makes the unusual choice of displaying the transliterated Sogdian text together with the corresponding (transliterated) Syriac text. Although this means that the resulting edition is longer, and is more cluttered in presentation, it is an explicit choice of Barbati’s in order to emphasize the character of the Sogdian text as translation literature.<sup>3</sup> One aspect of text editing with which I think we do not often grapple is that any modern edition of a medieval text is itself a reproduction of that text; it follows then that as

2- S. G. Nichols. “Philology and its Discontents.” In *The Future of the Middle Ages: Medieval Literature in the 1990s*, ed. W. D. Paden. Gainesville: University of Florida Press (1994), 112–141, p. 118.

3- See also Chiara Barbati. “Syriac into Middle Iranian: A Translation Studies Approach to Sogdian and Pahlavi Manuscripts within the Church of the East,” *Open Linguistics* 1 (2016), 444–457.

text editors we have a choice in how we reproduce the text, and that choice should be consistent with our editorial and methodological aims. In this regard, Barbati's presentation of the Sogdian and Syriac text together reflects her emphasis on the *manuscript context* and allows us to view the text in a new and different way. Though some might critique that choice as not being a literal representation of the original manuscript, Barbati rightly emphasizes throughout that *E5* is not an original manuscript, but a collection of fragments which modern scholars attribute to a single original object. Editing the text of such manuscript pieces is not only an exercise in the reconstruction of words and sentences, but in the analysis of a reconstruction of a material object. What Barbati is doing is asking us to interrogate the notion of 'manuscript' in the first place: who are we anyways, as modern scholars, to determine which aspects of a cultural artifact were and are relevant? Rather, it is well worth exploring the manuscript context in new and varied ways, even, or especially, if it means revisiting aspects of our approaches.