History of the Mingana Collection

The uniquely rich Mingana Collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts was brought together during the 1920s by Iraqi priest, Alphonse Mingana, who had settled in England. The collection came to be cared for by the University of Birmingham Special Collections when the Selly Oak Colleges merged with the University.

The core of the collection

The core of the Mingana collection was built up between 1924 and 1929 through the interest and energy of Dr Edward Cadbury and Alphonse Mingana. Alphonse Mingana, born Hurmiz Mingana in 1878 at Sharansh, a village near Zakho in the Ottoman Empire (now in modern Iraq), was an Assyrian theologian, historian, orientalist and a former priest. Like the majority of Assyrians in Zakho, his family belonged to the Chaldean Catholic Church. Alphonse was born to Paolus Mingana and Maryam Nano, and had seven siblings. He changed his given name after becoming a Chaldean priest.

Coming to England

In 1913 Mingana came to England at the invitation of J. Rendel Harris, Director of Studies at Woodbooke, during the period when Edward Cadbury was the chairman of the Selly Oak Colleges' Central Council. Mingana remained at Woodbrooke for two years where he met his future wife, Emma Sophie Floor, a Norwegian student – the couple were married in 1915. In that same year Mingana was appointed to the staff of the John Rylands Library in Manchester to catalogue the library's collection of Arabic manuscripts. He lived in Manchester until 1932 during which time his two children, John and Marie, were born. By the time Mingana left John Rylands he had risen to the post of Keeper of the Oriental Manuscripts.

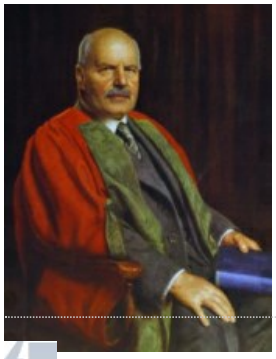
During the time Mingana was in Manchester, Edward Cadbury sponsored him to undertake three journeys to the Middle East to collect manuscripts. In the spring of 1924 in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq Mingana acquired 22 Arabic and some Syriac manuscripts for the Rylands Library and other Syriac manuscripts for Cadbury. A visit in the autumn of 1925 to Syria, Iraq and South Kurdistan yielded mostly Syriac manuscripts with some Arabic. A final visit in 1929 to the Sinai Peninsula (St Catherine's Monastery) and Upper Egypt produced mostly Arabic manuscripts, with some Coptic and Greek.

The thrill of the chase

An ecstatic letter sent from Syria on 24 October 1925 from Mingana to Edward Cadbury gives some of the flavour of the thrill of the chase in searching for manuscripts, as well as Mingana's zeal in acquiring any he could lay his hands on, and his extravagant claims of his success:

> "Last week … I had acquired 100 Syriac MSS. Today I am in a position to report that I have about 250 manuscripts. This is more than my expectations could dream of. Hallelujah! And many thanks to those friends who, I feel confident, have prayed God every day for my safety and success. Please excuse the enthusiasm of these short lines as I am writing them surrounded by manuscripts. Something is now certain: Woodbrooke will be after the British Museum the richest in manuscripts of all the Libraries of Europe, richer than Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Berlin and even Rome. A thousand thanks to God! I shall have much to tell you when we meet. It is truly magnificent!"

The role of Dr Edward Cadbury



The role of Dr Edward Cadbury in the collection is less well known, largely because, unlike many gift-givers, he discreetly endowed the collection without giving his name to it. Cadbury's involvement was certainly that of a philanthropist rather than a collector-connoisseur and bibliophile.

He wasn't concerned with the manuscripts for their intrinsic qualities as collector's items, nor had he any special knowledge of Oriental languages. He had visited the Middle East in 1892, at the age of 19, after completing his studies in London and Germany, at which time his interest in Quaker mission work was awakened. As a successful and enlightened Quaker, Cadbury was a facilitator, a benefactor.

He desired that the manuscripts be acquired as part of the theological program of the Selly Oak Colleges and as part of its mission work in particular: Related to this was his desire to raise the intellectual status of the Colleges, and Woodbrooke in particular, with the manuscripts as a magnet to attract prominent theological scholars. He wrote to his cousin Rufus Jones in 1927:

> "Woodbrooke at the moment is carrying out the idea that I am very anxious to see realized of being the intellectual centre of the Society of Quakers in England and thus raising I hope the whole intellectual outlook of the Society; it is also I believe the spiritual centre. If we can only combine these two sides – both equally important to my mind for the Society here, which in the past has been content to be very weak on the intellectual side – we shall profoundly, one hopes, affect the work of the Society in this country."

Cataloguing the collection

Mingana's next job was to catalogue the immense quantity of manuscripts he had collected. Throughout, the relationship between Cadbury and Mingana was a professional one: Cadbury recognized Mingana's energy and talents and employed him on this basis. He helped Mingana personally, giving financial help and was both executor of his will and his children's guardian, but they were never close friends.

In 1932 the Library built in Selly Oak to house the collection was opened. Mingana moved back to Birmingham as its Curator and worked on cataloguing the collection until his death in 1937. Other manuscripts, including the additional Syriac ones, were acquired after 1933.

Related manuscripts

Less information is available to show how the Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Ethiopic (and Latin) manuscripts came to be acquired, as well as those manuscripts from other collections which are now stored with the central Mingana collection. Several probably came from Mingana's contacts. As to the Persian manuscripts, several of which are Indian, it is most likely that they were given to Edward Cadbury, or acquired on his behalf by those involved in missionary work in Iran and India.

There are also lavishly illustrated secular Persian manuscripts that don't fit in with the theological basis of Cadbury. Their acquisition may have been influenced by his wife Dorothy Cadbury or by Cadbury's enthusiasm for gaining greater insight into the culture of the Muslim people with whom Quaker missionary work was concerned. Some manuscripts also appear to have been bought in Britain as they are marked in pencil with a price in pounds sterling. Other Woodbrooke fellows, including Lootfy Levonian,

an Armenian born in Turkey who was a fellow of Woodbrooke, may also have acquired manuscripts for Cadbury. Finally Cadbury used dealers and also received gifts from prominent Quaker families.

The University and the Mingana Collection

After the University assumed responsibility for the Selly Oak Colleges' collections, MLA Designation was sought and achieved, and a full preservation survey was carried out. This revealed that an alarmingly high percentage of the collection was a matter for concern, with 71% of items urgently requiring boxing. A comprehensive programme of preservation and storage was started, which continues today, with valuable assistance from the Birmingham Central Library Conservation Unit and funding from the University and the Edward Cadbury Trust.

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