Some thirty years ago, in a series of articles which drew on a century of prior research in the field of Christian Arabic Studies, Sidney Griffith laid out the general setting within which the first movement of translation of Christian literature from Greek into Arabic took place in Palestine.\(^1\) In these articles, Griffith highlighted the role of three famous monasteries—Mar Saba, Mar Chariton, and Mount Sinai—as the main centres from which came the initial impetus for this movement. He also put this movement of translation in its proper historical context—the process of Arabization and Islamization among the Christians of Syria and Palestine (including Sinai), more particularly in the Melkite communities—and outlined the framework for the progressive adoption of Arabic by these communities during the first three centuries after the Arab conquests.\(^2\)

One of the figures to whom Griffith devoted one of his seminal articles is Stephen of Ramla (Iṣṭāfanī ibn Ḥakam al-Ramlī), a scribe working in the monastery of Mar Chariton (also known as the Old Laura or Souka), in the Judean desert, in the last decades of the 9th century. He is one of the earliest known scribes who copied manuscripts in Arabic with specifically Christian content.\(^3\) These manuscripts, which contain both translations of biblical and ecclesiastical writings, made from Greek, and original apologetic works composed in Arabic, for example those of Theodore Abū Qurra, reflect how intimately related are the movement of translation and the birth of an original

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\(^1\) I am deeply grateful to Alexander Treiger for his helpful comments on this article.

\(^2\) Most of these articles, published between 1985 and 1989, were reprinted in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*.

\(^3\) Griffith, “Stephen of Ramla.”
literature in Arabic in this Christian context. The Melkite manuscript production of the 9th and 10th centuries thus appears as an outcome and a tangible expression of a century or more of literary activity in Arabic by the monks and clerics of Syria and Palestine. Because it is inseparable from and practically contemporaneous with the activity of translation itself, this manuscript production offers a fascinating opportunity to study conjointly and almost “on the spot” the development and reception, within the same milieu, of the first translations of Christian literature from Greek into Arabic.

The main repository of these early Melkite manuscripts today is the Library of Saint Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai. However, parts of this collection were dispersed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and are now to be found elsewhere, mainly in European and North American holdings. Because of its importance for the understanding of the early translation movement in Palestine, the Sinaitic collection has been the main focus of scholarly research ever since it was discovered, catalogued, and first studied at the end of the 19th century by the sisters Margaret Gibson and Agnes Lewis. However, the overall assessment of this corpus was profoundly transformed by the accidental discovery in 1975 of a cache of manuscript leaves and fragments, in what was apparently a forgotten cell that had served as a storehouse for the library in earlier centuries, in the tower of the northern wall of the Monastery of Saint Catherine.

I Manuscripts

In 1985, the same year when Griffith wrote his article on Stephen of Ramla, Ioannēs Meimarēs published his *Catalogue of the Arabic New Finds at Mount Sinai*. It was the first of a series of catalogues to be published on the manuscripts in different languages within the New Finds. Whereas the publication of catalogues of the Greek, Syriac, and Georgian fragments put the scholarly world immediately at work, the catalogue of Meimarēs did not receive the interest

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4 See, for example, Géhin, “La bibliothèque de Sainte-Catherine,” p. 162; Brock, “The Syriac, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Arabic Manuscripts.”
5 Gibson, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts*. Most of the editions based on Arabic manuscripts from Sinai prepared by Margaret Dunlop Gibson were published in the series *Studia Sinaitica* (London: C.J. Clays and Sons) between 1894 and 1901. On the two sisters’ life and discoveries, see now Soskice, *The Sisters of Sinai*.
7 Meimarēs, *Katalogos*. 