

Conference reports

Syriac Intellectual Culture in Late Antiquity: Translation, Transmission, and Influence Oxford, 30–31 January 2015

In Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Syriac was spoken across a region extending from its heartland in modern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq to the Iranian plateau and even China and India in the east, and as far as Egypt to the south and west. Not only did native Syriac speakers extend across this region, but the language also served as a *lingua franca* for trade and as the liturgical language for several Christian traditions. As a result, Syriac literature offers a valuable lens for viewing the development of Christianity in the (comparatively neglected) regions outside the Roman Empire. Bridging empires and cultures, Syriac played a key role in the intellectual world of Late Antiquity as it appropriated and engaged texts and traditions from both east and west, and then in turn served as a conduit for transmitting these onward.

Bringing together advanced graduate students and early career academics from nine countries and three continents, the conference ‘Syriac Intellectual Culture in Late Antiquity: Translation, Transmission, and Influence’ provided an opportunity for robust interdisciplinary discussion. The conference was organized by Walter Beers (Princeton) and Jeremiah Coogan (Oxford, now Notre Dame) and took place at Ertegun House, University of Oxford, on 30–31 January 2015.

Drawing on the riches of both the Bodleian Libraries and the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, the conference engaged questions of intellectual culture in the context of material culture—the physicality of both texts themselves and of the broader Syriac intellectual world. In addition to juxtaposing textual *realia* and diverse Syriaca from the Ashmolean with manuscripts from the Bodleian through viewing sessions, a number of papers within the conference sought to engage an ‘embodied’ text by drawing on the physical and historical realities of individual manuscripts and their texts, paratexts, and illustrations.

The fourteen conference papers offered careful studies of translation, transmission, and influence in Syriac literature, while also engaging the methodological challenges inherent in such an academic exercise. In his keynote lecture *Samuel of Edessa, Mattai of Aleppo, and Wapha the Aramean Phi-*

losopher: Some Thoughts on Syriac Literature as a Distorting Mirror, Jack Tannous (Princeton) brought valuable perspective to the subsequent discussions. Given the state of the preserved evidence from the Late Antique world in which this literature was situated, can we indeed identify an ‘intellectual culture’ at any point in time, much less across several centuries and ten-thousands of square kilometres? With the keynote ‘*Christ has subjected us to the harsh yoke of the Arabs*’: *The Syriac Exegesis of Jacob of Edessa in the New World Order*, Alison Salvesen (Oxford) provided several close readings of Jacob that situate ‘intellectual culture’ within a broader social and political context.

A number of papers focused on translation and textual transmission. Joshua Falconer (Catholic University of America) discussed the *Syriac Vorlage and Translation Technique of the Arabic Version of Acts in Sinai Ar. 154*. Falconer argued that a thorough analysis of selected passages suggests textual affinity to a western-type Peshitta version with possible traces of revisionism in the Philoxenian-Harklean tradition. Peter Gurry (Cambridge) presented on the *Harklean Syriac, the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method & the Development of the Byzantine Text*. In a case study applying the coherence-based genealogical method (CBGM) to a seventh-century Syriac translation of the New Testament Catholic Epistles, Gurry demonstrated how Syriac studies can inform studies of the Greek New Testament text. Studies of translation were not limited to biblical texts. Carla Noce (Roma Tre) presented on *Eusebius’ Historia Ecclesiastica in Syriac and Latin: A First Comparison*, focusing on the theological, ideological and cultural identities of the Latin and Syriac contexts that called for these translations.

Other papers focused on ‘influence’ and the development of traditions. Walter Beers (Princeton) discussed *The Sources of the Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel*, focusing on a rare seventh-century text surviving in a single fifteenth-century manuscript, Harvard Syr. 142. Beers argued that while the *Syriac Apocalypse* may demonstrate the reception of the Revelation of John in Syriac, older apocalyptic texts such as 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch must also be considered. In a paper on *The Biblical Odes in the Syriac Manuscript Tradition*, Jeremiah Coogan (Oxford) argued that both the three-ode collection preserved in the East Syriac liturgy and an early odes tradition found in paratextual headings of Syriac biblical manuscripts provide valuable and hitherto overlooked witnesses to an early Christian exegetical tradition based on a sequence of biblical songs. These Syriac witnesses attest early elements of the odes tradition otherwise extant only in the parallel rabbinic midrash on the ten songs. Jonathon Wright (Oxford) provided another study of reception in *The Syriac Nachleben of Jewish Apocrypha: The Case of Joseph and Aseneth*,

in which he traced the variation of the text *Joseph and Aseneth* throughout its Syriac manuscript tradition. In his paper *The Old Testament and Invention of Holy Places in Syria-Mesopotamia during Late Antiquity*, Sergey Minov (Oxford) focused on one particular aspect of the reception of biblical material in Syria-Mesopotamia during Late Antiquity, namely the identification of particular locations with events and figures from the Old Testament. He asked how the Bible contributed to the formation of cultural memory among Christians of Syria-Mesopotamia and whether continuity exists between these Christian traditions and Jewish apocrypha concerning biblical figures. Luise Marion Frenkel (São Paulo) highlighted her research on the *Dialogues in Syriac Translation: Theodotus of Ancyra Contra Nestorium*. Frenkel argued that analyzing the work of Theodotus illuminates connections between Christological polemics and the reception of other genres in Late Antique theological debate. Valentina Duca (Oxford), in her paper on *Human Weakness: Isaac of Nineveh and the Syriac Macarian Corpus*, demonstrated Isaac's dependence on the specifically Syriac form of the Macarian corpus illuminates its role in Isaac's thought.

Other studies focused on biblical commentary. In his paper *Resolving Genealogical Ambiguity: Eusebius and (ps-)Ephrem on Luke 1:36*, Matthew Crawford (Durham) argued that the Syriac commentary provides evidence of contact with the Greek world, suggesting that already at the earliest recoverable stage of Syriac biblical commentary, this exegetical milieu was a mixture of both Syriac traditions and ideas imported from the West. Yifat Monnickendam (Hebrew University) offered another look at Ephrem through her paper 'A shevet Shall Not Cease from Judah: On Translation, Polemic and Theology in Syriac and Greek. She maintained that a key example from Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* illuminates the influence of Greek Christian traditions on Ephrem. Vittorio Berti (Roma Tre) wove together analyses of ancient commentary and manuscript illuminations in his paper *The Exegetical Activity of Mar Aba I (d. 552): A First Glimpse from the East Syrian Commentary Tradition*.

Peer-reviewed publication of selected conference papers is anticipated in the Autumn 2016 issue of the journal *Aramaic Studies*.

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