

The Seventh North American Syriac Symposium (NASS VII)

Washington, DC, 21–24 June 2015

Held every four years, the North American Syriac Symposium brings together university professors, graduate students, and scholars from the United States and Canada as well as from Europe, the Middle East, and India, in particular from the State of Kerala. The Symposium offers a unique opportunity for exchange and discussion on a wide variety of topics related to the language, literature, and cultural history of Syriac Christianity, which extends chronologically from the first centuries CE to the present day and geographically from Syriac Christianity's homeland in the Middle East to South India, China, and the worldwide diaspora. The first North American Syriac Symposium met at Brown University in 1991. It was followed by symposia at the Catholic University of America (1995), the University of Notre Dame (1999), Princeton Theological Seminary (2003), the University of Toronto (2007), and Duke University (2011).¹ The Seventh North American Syriac Symposium (NASS VII) was convened at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 21–24 June, 2015. The Catholic University of America thus became the first university to host this prestigious event for a second time.

NASS VII boasted over sixty academic papers.² The papers covered a wide array of topics in Syriac studies. There were papers dedicated to most major Syriac authors, including Aphrahat, Ephrem, Isaac of Antioch, John the Solitary, Jacob of Serugh, Narsai, Gabriel Qaṭraya, Jacob of Edessa, Isaac of Nineveh, Dadišo' Qaṭraya, John of Dalyatha, George bishop of the Arab tribes, Muše bar Kipho, Barhebraeus, and Khamis bar Qardaḥe. Papers also dealt with, *inter alia*, the Bible, liturgy, theology, and hagiography. In addition, no less than a dozen papers discussed topics related to the Islamic context of Syriac Christianity, including the Qur'ān, historiography under Islam, and contacts and conflicts with Islam. A selection of the papers presented at NASS VII will be published by CUA Press in a volume edited by Aaron M. Butts and Robin Darling Young.

- 1 For the history of the North American Syriac Symposium, see S.P. Brock and A.M. Butts, 'Syriac Conferences', in S.P. Brock, A.M. Butts, G.A. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay (eds), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 389–390.
- 2 The full program is available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/NASS-Program-Final.pdf>>, last accessed 10 October 2015. The abstracts for the papers are available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/NASS-7-abstracts-1-.pdf>>, last accessed 10 October 2015.

In addition to the regular papers, there were four plenary lectures, each providing a broad, far-reaching perspective by a leading expert in the field: Bas ter Haar Romeny (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), ‘How Greek was Syriac Christianity?’; Dorothea Weltecke (University of Konstanz), ‘On sources for the social and cultural history of Christians during the Syriac Renaissance’; Adam Becker (New York University), ‘The Invention of the Persian Martyr Acts’; and Joseph Amar (University of Notre Dame), ‘Making Ephrem One of Us’.³

A number of papers dealt with Syriac manuscripts. Most relevant is the paper by Grigory Kessel (Philipps Universität, Marburg) on ‘Cataloguing of Syriac manuscripts in the United States: status quaestionis’. Noting how little work has been done since Clemons’ ‘A Checklist of Syriac manuscripts in the United States and Canada’,⁴ Kessel provided an overview of a number of important Syriac manuscripts in the United States that have not yet been catalogued properly or in some cases at all. This paper served as a call for action for the indispensable work of cataloguing. Manuscripts also played a significant role in the plenary address by Adam Becker (New York University) on the ‘The Invention of the *Persian Martyr Acts*’. Becker provided a detailed analysis of the manuscript transmission of the various *Persian Martyr Acts* in order to show how these texts were compiled and categorized over time. This marks a major step forward in the study of this corpus. In his paper on ‘Copying the Alexander Romance. Formulaic and non-Formulaic Elements in East Syrian Colophons of the 18th and 19th Century’, Jan van Ginkel (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) analysed a small but yet very important part of a manuscript: the colophon. Finally, a number of papers at the symposium also presented studies of Syriac texts that currently only exist in manuscripts, including the following: Sharbel Iskandar Bcheiry (Lutheran School of Theology), ‘The unpublished *Discourse* on the life of Severus of Antioch, Composed by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, Kyriakos of Takrit (793–817)’; J. F. Coakley (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London), ‘An early *Hudra* from Turfan’; Adam McCollum (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library), ‘A Survey of Syriac-New Persian Textual Contacts’; Lucas Van Rompay (Duke University), ‘Lazarus of Beth Qandasa’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (9th cent.) and the reception of early Syriac tradition’; Erin Walsh (Duke University), ‘Comparing Narsai and Jacob of Serug on the Canaanite Woman: Ephrem’s Influence between East and West’.

3 More information about these speakers is available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/key-notespeakers.cfm>>, last accessed 10 October 2015.

4 J.T. Clemons, ‘A Checklist of Syriac manuscripts in the United States and Canada,’ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 32 (1966), 224–251, 478–522.

Throughout NASS VII, there was an exhibit of manuscripts, objects, and photographs related to Syriac studies in the May Gallery of the John K. Mullen of Denver Memorial Library.⁵ It was curated by Monica Blanchard (The Catholic University of America) and Michelle Datiles (The Catholic University of America). The items in the exhibit are all permanently housed in the Institute of Christian Oriental Research Library (ICOR) and derive ultimately from the collection of Rev. Dr. Henri Hyvernât (1858–1941), who was the first professor appointed to the faculty of the new Catholic University of America.

The Eighth North American Syriac Symposium will be organized by Kristian Heal at Brigham Young University in the summer of 2019.

Aaron Michael Butts
The Catholic University of America

5 A guide is available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/TravelsExhibittiny1.pdf>>, last accessed 10 October 2015.