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# SYRIAC LITERATURE: A CROSSROADS OF CULTURES<sup>1</sup>

BY  
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## SYRIAC LITERATURE IN A WIDER CONTEXT

When considering the theme of our conference, it is instructive to stand back a little from the particular topics of the many valuable contributions on specific aspects of the subject that we shall be listening to in the next few days, and instead to look at Syriac literature from a much wider perspective. If one does this, then just to state the obvious can come as something of a surprise: of the various Late Aramaic literatures that blossomed during the first millennium AD – Jewish Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Mandaic, it is Syriac literature which is by far the most extensive. Furthermore, if one goes on to think of all the various surviving pre-modern literatures produced in the Middle East during the course of over four millennia, it is evident that, after Arabic and Persian literature, Syriac literature probably comes as the next largest. It is also important to remember that, prior to the spread of Arabic from the seventh century onwards, the most widespread cultural language of the Middle East was Aramaic - of which of course Syriac is a dialect. Furthermore, Aramaic had enjoyed this position for some 1400 years, having begun to replace Akkadian as the international language of the whole region already before the end of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires<sup>2</sup>.

No literature exists in a vacuum, for it is continuously subject to influences from its own past, and from contemporary influences from outside. Such influences are sometimes viewed as negative elements, as a form of external cultural domination and oppression, and of course this can some-

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1) Abbreviations: *Hidden Pearl* = Sebastian P. BROCK, with Ewa BALICKA-WITAKOWSKI, David G.K. TAYLOR and Witold WITAKOWSKI, *The Hidden Pearl. The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage*, I-III, Rome: TransWorld Film Italia, 2001. *Brief Outline* = Sebastian P. BROCK, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (coll. «Moran Etho» 9), Kottayam: SEERI, 1997.

2) For the ancient Aramaic heritage, see *Hidden Pearl*, I.

times be the case. But much more frequently such influences serve as an enrichment and as a stimulus towards a new creativity; and this also applies even in cases where that stimulus is seen more as a challenge. This creative response towards both the past and the present would seem to be a characteristic of all great writers in every literature. Indeed, if any individual writer, or literary movement tries to seal the borders, as it were, against outside influences, on the pretext of preserving some imaginary pristine 'purity', then this is a sure recipe for developing a state of moribund stagnation.

I have entitled this paper 'Syriac literature: a crossroads of cultures'. Let me explain what I envisage: of the two roads which cross one another, one road, the main road of Syriac literature, as it were, is diachronic, leading from the inherited past to the future literature still to be created; the other, the cross-road is synchronic, leading in both directions to and from the main road: this cross road carries a two-way traffic, representing both the influences on Syriac literature from outside, and the influences of Syriac literature on other literatures. In this paper I shall consider first of all the main road, and where it comes from – that is, the main cultural components inherited from the past by the early Syriac writers; and secondly, I shall try to illustrate the nature of this two-way traffic on the road that crosses the main road of Syriac literature. This can most conveniently be done by looking at the pattern of translations from other languages into Syriac, and from Syriac into other languages. Of course there are many other ways of viewing this subject of Syriac literature as a crossroads of cultures, but I hope that the path I have chosen will at least offer some insight on it from one particular perspective.

#### A. THE MAIN ROAD: CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS

The task of identifying the main elements from the past which early Syriac writers inherited is not an easy one, given the very small amount of Syriac literature that survives prior to the two great authors of the fourth century, Aphrahat, writing in the Persian Empire, and Ephrem writing in the Roman Empire. Four main constituent elements, however, of this heritage can be isolated: ancient Aramaic, ancient Mesopotamian, Jewish, and Greek.

Literature in Aramaic goes back at least to the fifth century BC, the date of the papyrus fragments of the Story of Ahiqar, from Elephantine in southern Egypt. From the second half of the first millennium BC three further groups of literary texts in Aramaic survive: the Aramaic chapters of the biblical books Ezra and Daniel; the various fragments of Aramaic literature that have come to light among the Dead Sea Scrolls (the best preserved being the so-called Genesis Apocryphon, with its narratives put in the mouths of the

Patriarchs; and thirdly, the various Aramaic literary texts to be found in a long papyrus scroll written in Egyptian Demotic script (P. Amherst 63). It is also virtually certain that other Aramaic literature from this period once existed, but has totally disappeared. Of the small surviving corpus of early Aramaic literature Syriac has definitely inherited the Story of Ahiqar and the Aramaic texts of the Bible<sup>3</sup>. Although some of the Aramaic fragmentary texts from Qumran, such as Tobit, Enoch, and Jubilees, were known to Syriac in full (Tobit) or in excerpts (Enoch, Jubilees), this was through the intermediary channel of Greek, and not direct from Aramaic.

The elements inherited by Syriac literature from ancient Mesopotamia are more general in character, and take two forms: literary genre and imagery. A clear example of the former is provided by the genre of the precedence dispute. The earliest examples of these disputes are already to be found in Sumerian literature, but they continue to feature as a popular genre in Accadian literature; in due course the genre is taken over, not only in Syriac literature where it is richly developed, but also in Jewish Aramaic and in Middle Persian; subsequently the genre appears in both Persian and Arabic, and indeed in modern times examples of it have been recorded in both Modern Syriac and in Modern Arabic dialects<sup>4</sup>.

The heritage from Judaism is threefold. Most obviously, the Peshitta Old Testament is translated directly from Hebrew (and not from the Greek Septuagint). Then there is a fairly large body of Jewish literature, either written in Greek, or surviving in Greek translation, which gets translated into Syriac. This includes most of the deuterocanonical books (or 'Apocrypha') of the Old Testament (only Ecclesiasticus/Bar Sira is translated directly from Hebrew), and a few further works such as the Apocalypse of Baruch. Finally, a third element of the heritage from Judaism is to be found in some distinctive phraseology taken over from Jewish Aramaic tradition, and in Jewish exegetical traditions that are not to be found in any other early Christian tradition.

By the time of the earliest Syriac literature, Greek had already been around as a distinctive presence in the Middle East for some five hundred years. Thus it is not surprising that its influence can be found even in the earliest Syriac texts, whether in the form of Greek loanwords (a number of which already feature in the Peshitta Old Testament), or in a more profound

3) For this early Aramaic literature, see *Hidden Pearl*, I, ch. 8.

4) In general, see Sebastian BROCK, «The Dispute Poem: from Sumer to Syriac», in *Canadian Society for Syriac Studies Journal* 1 (2001) 3-10.

way, as in the employment of the distinctly Greek genre of the philosophical dialogue in the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, associated with the name of Bardaisan.

Features from these four distinct elements inherited by early Syriac literature are to be found in differing proportions in different individual writings and authors. Even at the same period in time, the proportions can be markedly different: one only has to compare the highly hellenized *Book of the Laws of the Countries* with the *Odes of Solomon*, which breathe a totally different atmosphere. And of course, over the centuries, the proportions will change too, with the Greek element taking an increasingly large share, reaching a climax in the seventh century, which could be said to represent the peak of Syriac philohellenism. Well before this time, however, Syriac literature had developed its own characteristic – and multifaceted – features, and so the philhellenism of many seventh-century Syriac authors should not be seen as a sell-out to Greek cultural values, but as a creative adaptation of elements of the Greek tradition that were considered valuable. One has only to read Severus Sebokht's tirade against Greek cultural chauvinism to understand this<sup>5</sup>.

## B. THE CROSSROADS 1: TRANSLATIONS INTO SYRIAC

I turn now from the main road of our crossroads, and this schematic outline of the principle places from which this main road of Syriac literature originates, and I come to the road that cuts across it, representing the synchronic, or contemporary, contacts between Syriac and other cultures (one could also envisage these as a series of crossroads, meeting the main road of Syriac literature at various points in time). As mentioned earlier, I will illustrate these contacts by using as examples translations into and out of Syriac; or, to put it differently, who in one language is reading what, once it is translated into another language?

Since I intend to pay particular attention to some individual translations out of Syriac into other languages, it will be convenient to begin with translations from other languages into Syriac.

### 1. Hebrew into Syriac

Chronologically, the earliest translations into Syriac were made from Hebrew. These were, of course, the books of the Hebrew Bible, and it now

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5) The passage is translated in *Brief Outline*, pp. 222-223.

seems likely that the Syriac translations of the various books of this rather large corpus of literature were made during the course of the second century, whether by Jews, or by Christians of Jewish background (or both), is unclear. It is interesting that this work of translation from Hebrew also included a book which did not make it into the Hebrew canon, and whose Hebrew original was lost until modern times, when fragments have turned up both in the Cairo Geniza and in the Judaean Desert. I refer, of course, to Bar Sira. Knowledge of Hebrew soon died out in Syriac Christianity, and even in the occasional scholar, such as Jacob of Edessa in the seventh century, who clearly knew some Hebrew, that knowledge does not seem to have been at all extensive<sup>6</sup>. Also, in the late eighth century, when an earlier discovery of 'Dead Seas Scrolls' was made in the vicinity of Jericho, the Syriac translation of some extra Davidic psalms found among them was done by a Jewish convert to Christianity<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. Greek into Syriac

Translations from Greek into Syriac obviously vastly outnumber translations from all other languages into Syriac. During the course of half a millennium, from c.200 to c.700, an enormous number of Greek texts were translated into Syriac. To these were added the many further texts that were translated into Syriac before being put into Arabic during the course of the great Abbasid 'translation movement', sponsored by various of the Caliphs in Baghdad in the late eighth and early ninth century<sup>8</sup>.

The character of the texts translated changed over the course of time. The earliest translations from Greek were, not surprisingly, of the Gospels, probably made in the late second century, but revised on a number of subsequent occasions, notably c.400 when the text of the Peshitta New Testament reached its present form, in 508 with the revision sponsored by Philoxenus of Mabbug, and c.615 with the thorough-going revision by Thomas of Harkel. It is perhaps surprising, given the high esteem in which the Septuagint was held by Philoxenus and others, that the only complete Syriac translation of the Greek Old Testament was the one made by Paul of Tella,

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6) On this, see Alison G. SALVESEN, «Did Jacob of Edessa know Hebrew?», in Ada RAPOPORT-ALBERT and Gillian GREENBERG (eds), *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts*, Sheffield Academic Press, London, 2001, pp. 457-467.

7) Timothy I, Letter 47, translated in *Brief Outline*, pp. 245-250.

8) For this movement, see the contributions to *Patrimoine Syriaque. Colloque IX* (CERO, Antelias), 2005).

working at the same time as Thomas of Harkel. It is true that translations of individual books were also made, one group perhaps sponsored by Philoxenus himself (the so-called 'Syro-Lucianic' version), and another, in the form of a combination of the Peshitta with elements from the Septuagint, made by Jacob of Edessa near the end of his life<sup>9</sup>.

The earliest translations of Greek patristic texts may go back to the fourth century: certainly a number of long texts were circulating in Syriac by 411, when they were copied in Edessa in November of that year in the earliest dated literary Syriac manuscript (British Library Add. 12150). Over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries an impressively large number of translations of the Greek Fathers was made. With only a few exceptions, such as the Letters of Ignatius and the Apology of Aristides, almost all of the Greek writers translated were post-Nicene authors, with the great figures of the fourth and fifth century, like Athanasius and the Cappadocians, and Cyril of Alexandria, well represented. Some of these translations are of very great importance for the study of early Greek Christian literature since they include works lost in Greek. This applies, not only to writers like Evagrius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Severus, whose writings in the original Greek fell out of favour in the Chalcedonian tradition, but also to certain works by well known authors, such as Eusebius, Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria. In the sixth century in the Syrian Orthodox Church contemporary authors, such as Severus, Theodosius and Peter of Kallinikos were also quickly translated. During the seventh century it was more a matter of careful revision of older translations, rather than of new patristic literature being translated, though an exception to this may be found in Chalcedonian Orthodox circles, where Syriac was still an important literary language, alongside Greek: thus Syriac translations survive of a Letter of Sophronios of Jerusalem (otherwise lost), and of John of Sinai's famous spiritual classic, *The Spiritual Ladder*. A new impetus to translation from Greek in Rum Orthodox circles came when their old Antiochene liturgical rite was 'Constantinopolitanized', that is, adapted to the Byzantine rite of Constantinople, in the late ninth and tenth centuries: this must have involved a massive programme of translation of Greek liturgical texts, including works by the famous poets Andrew of Crete and John of Damascus; some of these were subsequently adopted into Syrian Orthodox liturgical tradition as well. This astonishing, but rarely recognized, chapter in the history of Syriac translations still awaits

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9) For the Syriac biblical versions, see *Hidden Pearl III*, ch. 9, and my *The Bible in Syriac Tradition*, SEERI, Kottayam, 1989; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Piscataway, NJ, 2006.

a proper study.

The earliest translations of secular Greek texts probably go back to the fifth century. These consisted primarily of works which had an ethical dimension, such as Plutarch's Discourse *On not getting angry*, or Themistius' *On Virtue* (which happens not to survive in Greek)<sup>10</sup>. These translations are fairly free in character and tend to be lightly adapted for the benefit of a Christian readership. Although these works seem to have been appreciated especially in monastic circles, their impact was far less than that brought about by the translation of the early books of Aristotle's logical works, the *Organon*, or 'tool' without which, in the words of Sergius of Resh'aina, 'neither can the meaning of the writings on medicine be grasped, nor can the opinions of the philosophers be known, nor indeed can the true sense of the divine Scriptures' be discovered<sup>11</sup>. Even though Sergius of Resh'aina may not be the translator of the first Syriac rendering of Porphyry's Introduction and of Aristotle's *Categories*, he was certainly the first person to introduce these works to a Syriac readership, by means of his two Introductions to Aristotelian logic<sup>12</sup>. The impact that Aristotle was subsequently to have on Syriac learned literature was enormous. These first translations probably belong to the early sixth century, that is, to Sergius' lifetime (he died in 536). Sergius is also connected with two other important translations, that of the corpus of writings under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, and that of a considerable number of works by the great authority on medicine in the Greek world, Galen. Here too, Sergius initiated a new field of interest for later Syriac writers, and (as we shall see below) a number of Syriac medical writings came to be translated into other languages.

The seventh century witnessed further translations and/or revisions of books of Aristotle's *Organon*, as well as the production of handbooks (by Athanasius of Balad and Jacob of Edessa) to accompany the study of this subject. Cosmology and astronomy had already been one of Sergius' many

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10) For these, see Sebastian P. BROCK, «Syriac translations of Greek popular philosophy», in Peter BRUNS (ed.), *Von Athen nach Bagdad. Zur Rezeption griechischer Philosophie von der Spätantike bis zum Islam* (coll. «Hereditas» 22), Borengässer, Bonn, 2003, pp. 9-28.

11) The passage is translated in *Brief Outline*, pp. 202-204.

12) For these, see especially Henri HUGONNARD-ROCHE, «Note sur Sergius de Resh'aina, traducteur du grec en syriaque et commentateur d'Aristote», in Gerhard ENDRESS and Remke KRUK (eds.), *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism*, Brill, Leiden, 1997, pp. 121-43. A summary listing of the Syriac translations of Aristotle's *Organon* can be found in my *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity*, Ashgate Variorum, Aldershot, 1999, ch. XIII.



concerns, but it was Severus of Sebokht, in the middle of the seventh century, who seems to have taken a particular interest in this area, in particular astronomy. Among the great many works of translation of Greek scientific literature that have been lost there must have been several which were made in the seventh century, although the greatest period for these translations was undoubtedly the late eighth and early ninth centuries, in the course of the great 'translation movement' initiated by the early Abbasid Caliphs, in their desire to make Greek philosophy and science available to the Arab world. In order to achieve this, at first they had to call upon the services of Syriac scholars, since several of the works in which they were interested were already available in Syriac; furthermore, in the case of those works for which no previous Syriac version was available, the assistance of Syriac scholars was still essential, since there was no tradition yet of translation directly from Greek into Arabic, whereas there had been nearly two centuries of experience of translating this type of literature into Syriac. For this reason all the earlier translations made during this period were made in two stages, first from Greek into Syriac, and then from Syriac into Arabic. This in fact continued to be a widespread practice well into the ninth century, for the most famous of these translators, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, specifically tells us in his *Risala* that he frequently worked in this way. It is interesting to reflect that, without the contribution of these Syriac translators, the translation movement could never have got under way – and that would have altered the entire subsequent development of Arab philosophy, and indeed that of the medieval European tradition as well, since it was translations into Latin of Arabic philosophy, made in twelfth-century Spain, that led to the rise of scholastic philosophy and the development of the first western universities.

### 3. *Middle Persian and Arabic into Syriac*

Another source from which translations into Syriac were made was Middle Persian. Since this is a literature of which hardly anything survives, these Syriac translations, all made in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, have an added interest. From the point of view of comparative literature, the most important of these translations is that made by the Periodeutes Budh of the Indian collection of animal stories, known as *Kalilah and Dimnah*. This sixth-century translation provides the earliest surviving Middle Eastern version of these delightful stories which, through the mediation of later Arabic and Persian versions, reached Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is from Arabic translations that two later Syriac versions of *Kalilah and Dimnah* were made (see below).

A second famous work which may have come into Syriac from Middle Persian is the Alexander Romance. According to the great German Semitist, Theodor Nöldeke, the Syriac version was made, not directly from Greek, but from Middle Persian. This view, however, has recently been challenged<sup>13</sup>, and the matter should be considered as still *sub judice*. Works whose Middle Persian origin is much more certain include a number of fine pieces of hagiography, dealing with some of the martyrs of the Church of the East in the time of the late Sasanian Empire. More surprising is the fact that Severus Sebokht is said to have translated a work on Aristotelian philosophy from Middle Persian into Syriac, though this is usually thought not to be the surviving work on this subject by Paul the Persian, addressed to the Persian Shah, Khosrau I.

Despite the long period of symbiosis between Syriac and Arabic, the number of translations into Syriac from Arabic is rather small. The reason for this is obvious: most people who were literate in Syriac were also literate in Arabic, and so there was little need for such translations. However, some important ones do exist, such as the two further translations of Kalilah and Dimnah, beside the one made from Middle Persian. The first of these was made perhaps in the tenth century from Ibn al-Muqaffa's Arabic translation made from Middle Persian. It is interesting to see that in the course of some four centuries the collection has grown considerably! A second translation, also from Arabic, was made little more than a hundred years ago, in the late nineteenth century by the great Chaldean scholar, Toma Audo. A second work of this popular nature, Sindbad and the Seven Wise Masters, also reached Syriac by way of Arabic. In this case too, the Syriac version has considerable importance for the history of the work's transmission since it was made from a lost Arabic translation of the original Middle Persian (also lost). All the other surviving versions go back to a reworked Arabic version - with one exception, the Greek translation, which derives from the Syriac.

Of specifically Christian texts, one can find a certain number of translations, especially among works which still remain unedited. Of considerably greater importance are the adaptations of Arabic works made by the great thirteenth-century polymath, Bar 'Ebroyo, whose admirable openness to other cultures led him to adapt, in Syriac translation, the works of quite a number of Arabic authors, such as al-Ghazali's *Ihya* in his *Ethiqon*<sup>14</sup>, and Abu Sa'd al-

13) Claudia I. CIACAGLINI, «The Syriac version of the Alexander Romance», in *Le Muséon* 114 (2001), pp. 121-140.

14) See Herman TEULE, *Gregory Barhebraeus, Ethicon, Memra 1* (CSCO Scr. Syri

Abi's *Nathr ad-Durr* in his *Tunoye Mgahkone*, or Amusing Tales<sup>15</sup>.

Translation into Syriac from Arabic has continued into recent times. Here it must suffice to mention the many translations by the late Mar Philoxenos Yuhanon Dolabani (d.1969); these include Patriarch Barsom's invaluable History of Syriac Literature, *Berulle bdire*, Mar Paulos Behnam's play, *Theodora*, and the compendium on theology by the Coptic monk, Fr. Mika'il Mina.

For reasons of time and space, it will be necessary to pass over in silence translations from some other languages, such as Persian and Latin.

### C. THE CROSSROADS 2: TRANSLATIONS OUT OF SYRIAC

Returning to our initial image of the crossroads: so far we have looked at the places from which the main road comes, and we have looked at the traffic coming from either side in the direction of the main road – that is, the translations that come into Syriac from different directions. I now turn to the traffic coming *away* from the main road, that is, translations from Syriac into other languages. These tend to be much less known and appreciated, but as it will be seen, some of these translations have proved extremely influential.

Translations from Syriac were made into a surprisingly large number of languages: Greek, Armenian, Middle and New Persian, Georgian, Arabic, Sogdian and Uighur, quite apart from the much more recent translations into a great variety of modern languages (which include Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish, Malayalam and Japanese). Furthermore, many of the translations from Syriac into Greek then got translated into other languages, in particular, Slavonic and Latin; and those made from Syriac into Arabic often got further translated into Ethiopic.

#### 1. Syriac into Armenian

Before looking at some specific case histories that concern translations from Syriac into Greek and into Arabic, brief mention should be made of the other languages just mentioned. Of these, Armenian is the most important, for a lot of early Syriac literature was translated into that language in the period soon after the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century.

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219), Peeters, Louvain, 1993, pp. xxx-xxxii.

15) See Ulrich MARZOLPH, «Die Quelle der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen des Bar Hebräus», in *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), pp. 81-125.

The works of Aphrahat in fact were first edited in Europe (1756) in their Armenian translation (where the Demonstrations are attributed to Jacob, bishop of Nisibis); it was only a century or so later that the Syriac original became available, when the British Museum purchased a large number of ancient Syriac manuscripts from the (by then) Coptic Orthodox monastery of Deir es-Suryani in Egypt. A large number of Ephrem's works, too, were translated at an early date into Armenian, and some, such as his Commentary on the Pauline Epistles, are only preserved today in Armenian. Until quite recently this was also the case with his Commentary on the Diatessaron, or Harmony of the Four Gospels: in this case parts of the Syriac original surfaced on the antiquities market on two separate occasions, and fortunately these were purchased by the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, whose Trustees invited Dom Louis Leloir, who had recently re-edited the Armenian, to publish this exciting and important discovery. Dom Leloir's edition of the second batch of folios was published in 1990<sup>16</sup>, only shortly before his death and not quite fifty years after his edition of the Armenian text.

A considerable number of other Syriac texts got into Armenian in the early period, probably the first half of the fifth century. These include, not only works originally composed in Syriac, such as a considerable number of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, but also Syriac translations of important Greek authors: thus, for example, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* and Basil's *Commentary on the Six Days of Creation* both reached Armenian by way of a Syriac intermediary.

The relationship between the Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Churches has always been close, and so it is not surprising that there were several subsequent periods when translations from Syrian into Armenian were made. In the case of two Syriac authors on medical subjects, Ishox and Abu Sa'id, their work survives only in Armenian translation<sup>17</sup>. A notable case among works translated in the thirteenth century was Patriarch Michael the Great's Chronicle, of which an adapted Armenian translation survives in two different recensions<sup>18</sup>.

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16) Louis LELOIR, *Saint Éphrem. Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant*. Folios Additionnels (coll. «Chester Beatty Monographs» 8), Peeters, Leuven, 1990.

17) Stella A. VARDANYAN, «Ancient Armenian translations of the works of Syrian Physicians», in *Revue des études arméniennes* 16 (1982), pp. 213-219.

18) See Andrea B. SCHMIDT, «Die zweifache armenische Rezension der syrischen Chronik Michaels des Grossen», in *Le Muséon* 109 (1996), pp. 299-319.

## 2. Syriac into Georgian, Sogdian, Persian etc.

Although a number of Syriac authors got into Georgian, it would seem that only a few of the translations were made directly from Syriac. For the most part they reached Georgian by way of Armenian or Arabic. There was in fact a period, in the late tenth and early eleventh century, when Georgian and Syriac monks were living together in the great Chalcedonian monasteries of Mar Saba in Palestine, and Sinai: this was a time when many translations were being made there into Georgian from Greek and Arabic, and so it is not improbable that some works in Syriac were also included.

Among the New Finds of Georgian manuscripts at St Catherine's Monastery on Sinai is a palimpsest whose under-writing is the sole surviving example of the otherwise totally lost literature in Caucasian Albanian. At present the work of decipherment has not been completed, but it is already clear that the text comes from a Lectionary of the Pauline Epistles. What is interesting from our point of view is that the proper names are given in their Syriac form, and not in the Greek or Armenian form<sup>19</sup>. This at least suggests that the translation may have been made directly from Syriac.

Our knowledge of Syriac translations into Sogdian derives almost entirely from the fragments of the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries found at the East Syriac monastery at Bulayiq, north of Turfan, in Central Asia. These fragments include, besides a bilingual, Syriac-Sogdian, lectionary and some other biblical texts, translations of a surprisingly large number of works: these include works by Evagrius, Babai of Nisibis, and Dadisho<sup>c</sup>, as well as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, and a number of Lives of Saints and Acts of Persian martyrs<sup>20</sup>.

It is clear that there once existed a sizable Christian literature in Middle Persian, produced in the sixth and seventh centuries; As we have already seen, some of this was translated into Syriac, but there were certainly translations made in the other direction as well, though of these nothing remains apart from fragments of a Psalter (also found at Bulayiq).

The history of Christian literature in New Persian was almost entirely

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19) See Zaza ALEXIDZE and Jean-Pierre MAHÉ, «Le déchiffrement de l'écriture des Albaniens du Caucase», in *Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres*, Comptes rendus juillet-octobre 2001, pp. 1239-1257.

20) See especially Nicholas SIMS-WILLIAMS, *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2* (coll. «Berliner Turfantexte» XII), Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1985.

uncharted until the recent publication on the subject by a Russian scholar<sup>21</sup>. Translations from Syriac were certainly made, and those of some biblical books are comparatively well known; thus there is a Gospels manuscript of 1341 which was used for Walton's Polyglot Bible of 1655-7, and the Persian Diatessaron, preserved in a manuscript written by a Syrian Orthodox priest in Hisn Kef in 1547. It might be mentioned here that in recent years a certain number of Syriac writings in Persian translation have been published by the Chaldean Centre S. Jean in Tehran, but these have been made through intermediary French and English translations.

A recently discovered document from Dunhuang in China throws new light on the Church of the East's missionary outreach to east Asia: this is a single folio of a liturgical text where the Syriac has an interlinear translation into Uighur, a Turkic language<sup>22</sup>.

Syriac translations into Turkish constitute another uncharted area. The earliest example I have come across is a piece of trilingual verse, Syriac, Arabic and Turkish, in a manuscript dated 1604/5 (Paris Syr. 371). (The early Turkish version of Ahiqar, preserved in a manuscript of 1575, was translated from an Armenian intermediary).

Yet another task for the future concerns translations from Syriac into Malayalam. These would seem to be very largely of liturgical texts, but a study of the history of these would be interesting and worthwhile.

### 3. Syriac into Greek

To return to translations made from Syriac into Greek. The existence of these is often forgotten or overlooked. This is probably due to that fact that translations from Syriac into Greek are vastly outnumbered by those in the other direction. In fact quite a number of Syriac works did get into Greek, and in some cases they have proved extremely influential.

Already in the early fourth century Eusebius quotes from a Greek translation of Bardaisan's *On Fate*<sup>23</sup>, which is in fact the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*. And in his *Ecclesiastical History* (I.13) he quotes the Correspondence between King Abgar of Edessa and Christ, which he asserts was

21) Anton PRITULA, *Khristianstvo i persidskaja kniznost XIII-XVII vekov* [coll. «Palestinskij Sbornik» 101 (38)], St Petersburg, 2004. (I am most grateful to Gregory Kessel for providing me with the reference).

22) Duan QING, «Bericht über ein neuentdecktes syrisches Document aus Dunhuang / China», in *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2001), pp. 84-93.

23) EUSEBIUS, *Praeparatio Evangelica* VI.10.

translated from a Syriac document in the archives of Edessa. These famous pseudepigraphical documents of course soon gained an immense popularity and were translated from Greek into Latin and thence into many European languages in the Middle Ages.

It is known from a number of sources that Syriac poetry, and especially Ephrem, enjoyed considerable prestige outside Syriac, particularly in the early fifth century. This was probably when a number of Ephrem's works were translated into Greek, where the fame of his name led to the subsequent attribution to him of a great number of writings, most of which were not even translated from Syriac, let alone by Ephrem himself. As is well known, the corpus of Ephrem Graecus is enormous<sup>24</sup>, and only a beginning has so far been made on sorting it out.

Also belonging to the early fifth century are Greek translations of several Syriac hagiographical texts. These include some of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs<sup>25</sup>, brought back (along with a collection of relics) by Marutha of Martyropolis in 410 from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Sasanian winter capital and seat of the Catholicos of the Church of the East. More important, however, in view of their subsequent influence, were two very popular Lives of saints, that of the Man of God, and that of Abraham and his niece Mary. In the first of these, the hero is left anonymous, but once in Greek he is given the name Alexis, and it is in this form that the work was translated into Latin and then into many different languages in the medieval west. It so happens that the oldest monument of Old French literature is the Life of Alexis. The exquisitely told Life of Abraham of Qidun and his niece Mary was sometimes attributed to Ephrem, but probably the work was written a few decades after his death. This too reached the medieval west through a Latin translation of the Greek version, and in the tenth century it was put into a dramatized form by the Saxon nun Hrosthwitha<sup>26</sup>.

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24) In Maurice GEERARD's *Clavis Patrum Graecorum II*, Brepols, Turnhout, 1974, the section on Ephrem Graecus (pp. 366-468) is second only in length to that for the huge corpus of texts ascribed to John Chrysostom. For Ephrem in Latin, see my «The changing faces of St Ephrem as read in the West», in John BEHR, Andrew LOUTH and Dimitri CONOMOS (eds), *Abba. The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West. Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood NY, 2003, pp. 65-80.

25) Published by Hippolyte DELEHAYE in *Patrologia Orientalis* II.4 (1905). The text, along with a Modern Greek translation, has been republished by Demetrios CHRISTOPHAKOPOULOS, *Methe Christou. Martyres sten Persia tou Saboriou*, To Perivoli tes Panagias, Thessalonikin 1989.

26) See especially Margot SCHMIDT, «Influence de saint Éphrem sur la littérature latine et allemande du début du Moyen Âge», in *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973), pp. 325-341.

Lives of Saints continued to be a genre which got translated into Greek. It would appear that the (unpublished)<sup>27</sup> Life of the fifth-century Mar Hanina, by Jacob of Serugh, was translated into Greek, for a condensed form of it is to be found in the Synaxary of Constantinople<sup>28</sup>. In the case of the Life of the sixth-century woman martyr from the Persian Empire, Golinduch, only a Georgian version survives<sup>29</sup>, the Syriac original being lost.

#### D. SOME INFLUENTIAL TRANSLATIONS

##### 1. Syriac into Greek

Two late seventh-century works of very disparate character proved to be extremely influential in their Greek translation. These are the Apocalypse attributed to Methodius, and a collection of the spiritual discourses of Isaac the Syrian. The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in recent years, and excellent editions of the Syriac, Greek and Latin texts have been produced<sup>30</sup>. It is now clear that the work was produced around the year 691/2, in response to Abdulmalik's religious policy. Though it is not possible to identify with any certainty the circles from which the Apocalypse originated, it must have been translated very soon into Greek, and then into Latin, where the oldest manuscript dates from the eighth century. The Greek translation was updated on various occasions, while the Latin provided the basis for a great deal of apocalyptic writing in the Middle Ages.

Isaac the Syrian, or Isaac of Nineveh as he is better known in Syriac, in fact came from Beth Qatraye, that is, the western side of the Gulf, which in the seventh century was an important intellectual centre for the Church of the East, providing a number of notable authors. The opening folios of a collection of Isaac's discourses is preserved in Paris (Syr. 378.IX), and the

27) In British Library, Add. 17174, ff. 145<sup>r</sup>-151<sup>v</sup>.

28) Hippolyte DELEHAYE, *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, Société des Bollandistes, Bruxelles, 1902, cols. 539-544. For a mosaic with a Syriac inscription mentioning him (dated 493), see *Hidden Pearl*, II, p. 33 (with annotation in *Hugoye* 5:1 (2002), p. 80; see further my «St Aninas / Mar Hanina and his monastery», in *Analecta Bollandiana* 124 (2006), pp. 5-10).

29) Edited, with Latin translation, by Gerard GARITTE, «La passion géorgienne de sainte Golinduch», in *Analecta Bollandiana* 74 (1956), pp. 405-440.

30) For the Syriac: Gerrit J. REININK, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO Scr. Syri 220-221; Leuven, 1993); and for the Greek and Latin: Willem J. AERTS and G.A.A. KORTEKAAS, *Die Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius: die ältesten griechischen und lateinischen Übersetzungen* (CSCO Subsidia 97; Leuven, 1998).



specific information is given that this Syriac manuscript was written in the Chalcedonian Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba, south of Jerusalem. It is conceivable, though of course not provable, that this could have been the very manuscript from which the Greek translation of some of his works was made, at this same monastery, by two monks, Abramios and Patrikios, in the late eighth or early ninth century. Once in Greek, these discourses enjoyed a very wide circulation, as is witnessed by the large number of extant manuscripts (the oldest of which dates back to the ninth century), and the number of reprints of the first printed edition, published in Leipzig in 1770. The Greek translation was also the source for the medieval Latin and Slavonic versions, and from these there have been numerous further translations, including (in the early twentieth century) Japanese, by way of Russian<sup>31</sup>.

Isaac was of course a monk of the Church of the East, and among the various authors he quotes are Evagrius and Theodore of Mopsuestia, both of whose writings were condemned in the Byzantine (Chalcedonian) Church. It is evident that the collection of Isaac's writings which got translated into Greek had already been adapted in Syriac to a Chalcedonian readership; this was simply done by substituting the objectionable names by acceptable ones, such as Nilus and John Chrysostom. (It was thanks to this practice that a number of works by Evagrius survived in their Greek original, their true authorship only being revealed by their Syriac and Armenian translations).

It so happened that the Syriac manuscript from which Abramios and Patrikios made their Greek translation included some texts not by Isaac. Since these had already been made anonymous, they came to be attributed to Isaac himself. Their true identity, however, is considerably different. Four discourses are now known to belong to a slightly later East Syriac monastic author, John of Dalyatha, while a further one (described as a Letter) turns out to be an abbreviated form of Philoxenos of Mabbug's Letter to Patrikios. The Greek collection of Isaac's spiritual discourses is thus an admirably ecumenical work: translated and transmitted in Chalcedonian Orthodox circles, the contents are very largely by two monks of the Church of the East,

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31) See especially Sabino CHIALÀ, *Dall'ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Olschki, Firenze, 2002 (Parte quarta: La posterità; Appendice: Le versioni); also my «From Qatar to Tokyo, by way of Mar Saba: the translations of Isaac of Beth Qatraye (Isaac the Syrian)», in *Aram* 11/12 (1999/2000), pp. 275-284, and «Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba: the translation of St Isaac the Syrian», in Joseph PATRICH (ed.), *The Sabaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (coll. «Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta» 98), Peeters, Leuven, 2001, pp. 201-208.

and one discourse is by a Syrian Orthodox monk and bishop<sup>32</sup>. To this one might add that the surviving Syriac manuscripts come from all three ecclesiastical communities, and that an Arabic translation from the Greek was the source of the Ethiopic translation. This is not just a matter of academic curiosity, for it also has considerable relevance today in connection with a very anomalous situation in the Middle Eastern Council of Churches, from which the Church of the East has been excluded on grounds that overlook the fact that a great deal of East Syriac exegetical and spiritual literature, translated into Arabic in the Middle Ages, has been assimilated into Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox tradition<sup>33</sup>.

## 2. *Syriac into Arabic*

The collection of Isaac's spiritual discourses must have been translated into Greek at much the same time that the first translations were being made from Syriac into Arabic. These were of two very different characters. The earliest use of Arabic as a literary language by Christian writers was among the monks of the Palestinian monasteries<sup>34</sup>. It so happened that at this time some of these communities were multilingual. A splendid product of this situation is a fragmentary psalter in three languages, Greek, Syriac, and Arabic<sup>35</sup>. Accordingly it is not so surprising that among the earliest translations of biblical and patristic texts into Arabic, a number were made from Syriac, rather than from Greek.

While this translation activity was going on in the Palestinian monasteries, another, much more extensive and important, process of translation was going on in Baghdad, namely in the 'translation movement' patronised by the Abbasid Caliphs. We have already seen how it was a common practice to translate, first from Greek into Syriac, and only then from Syriac into Ara-

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32) On this aspect, see my «Aspects œcuméniques de s. Isaac le Syrien», in *Patrimoine Syriaque. Colloque VI*, CERO, Antélias, 1999, pp. 121-127; also «Crossing the boundaries: an ecumenical role played by Syriac monastic literature», in Maciej BIELAWSKI and Daniel HOMBERGEN (eds), *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture* (coll. «Studia Anselmiana» 140), Rome, 2004, pp. 221-238.

33) For this matter, see my «'About heresies and the Syllabus Errorum of Pope Shenuda III': some comments on a recent article by Professor Meinardus», in *Coptic Church Review* 23:4 (2002), pp. 98-102.

34) On this see Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «From Aramaic to Arabic: the languages of the monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods», in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), pp. 11-31.

35) For this, see Nina V. PIGULEVSKAYA, «Greco-Siro-Arabskaya rukopis IX veka», in *Palestinskij Sbornik* 1(63) (1954), pp. 59-90.

bic. Translation from Syriac into Arabic thus played an essential role, above all in the early years of the translation movement, before the technique of translating directly from Greek into Arabic had been developed. The vast majority of the Syriac texts from which the Arabic translations were made have been lost<sup>36</sup>. It would be an interesting and worthwhile task for someone to compile a list of those Syriac translations which are known once to have existed: a considerable amount of information on this point is to be found in the Arabic encyclopaedias, especially that of Ibn an-Nadim. But evidence can also be found in quotations from these lost works by subsequent Syriac writers<sup>37</sup>.

It was not, however, only Syriac translations of Greek works that were translated into Arabic. Two handbooks of medicine, composed in Syriac, proved particularly influential in their Arabic, and subsequent Latin translations. The first, by Hunayn ibn Ishaq, survives in all three languages, Syriac, Arabic and Latin (where it became a standard text book in medieval Europe), while the second, by Yohannan bar Serapion is lost in the original Syriac, but survives in three separate Arabic translations, as well as Latin (in two separate translations)<sup>38</sup>.

In order to illustrate the way Syriac literature has served as a crossroads of cultures I have used the example of translations into and out of Syriac. Let me conclude with people, by paying a brief tribute to four individuals who helped to bring an awareness of Syriac and its literature to Europe for the first time, in the sixteenth century, thus initiating a new 'dialogue of cultures': the Maronite sub-deacon Elie who taught Teseo degli Albonesi the elements of Syriac in Rome c.1515; the Syrian Orthodox priest Mushe of Mardin, who made possible the first printed edition of the Peshitta New

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36) Some reasons why this has come about are given in my «Changing fashions in Syriac translation technique: the background to Syriac translations under the Abbasids», in *Canadian Society for Syriac Studies Journal* 4 (2004), pp. 3-14, esp. 10.

37) See, for example, Mauro ZONTA, *Fonti greche e orientali dell'Economia di Barhebraeus nell'opera 'La Crema della scienza'* (coll. «Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Supplementi» 70; 1992); Hidemi TAKAHASHI, «The Greco-Syriac and Arabic sources of Barhebraeus' Mineralogy and Meteorology in Candelabrum Sanctuarii, Base II», in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 56 (2004) = *Symposium Syriacum VIII*, pp. 191-209.

38) For Hunayn: see my *From Ephrem to Romanos*, Ashgate Variorum, Aldershot, 1999, ch. XIII, pp. 157-158 (with Addenda, pp. 6-7); and for Yohannan bar Serapion: Gerard TROUPEAU, «Du syriaque au latin par l'intermédiaire de l'arabe: le Kunnash de Yuhanna ibn Sarabiyun», in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 4 (1994), pp. 267-278., and Peter E. PORMANN, «Yuhanna ibn Sarabiyun: further studies into the transmission of his works», in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004), pp. 233-262.

Testament, edited by Johann Widmanstetter in 1555, and who corresponded with Andreas Masius; the first Chaldean Patriarch, Sulaqa, who spent some seven months in Rome (November 1552 - July 1553), who served as another informant for Masius; and the refugee Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Ni`matallah, whose knowledge of astronomy led to his being appointed a member of the commission that produced the Gregorian Calendar. Without these men, and of course others, many of us might not have been here today.

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