

# A bird's eye view of the Syriac language and literature

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## The Syriac Language

Syriac belongs to the Semitic family of languages, and is a dialect of Aramaic. The history of Aramaic goes back to the second millennium B.C. It was "first attested in written form in inscriptions of the tenth century B.C., it still continues to be spoken and written in the late twentieth century A.D. by a variety of communities in the Middle East and elsewhere. At various times over the course of these three thousand or so years of its known history, Aramaic has been spoken or written by peoples of many different faiths, by pagans, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Manicheans, Jews, Samaritans, Mandeans, Christians and Muslims".<sup>1</sup>

The closest immediate predecessors of Syriac, were the languages used in Palmyra (in modern Syria) and Hatra (in modern Iraq) around the time of Jesus. Aramaic continued to be in use among the Aramean populations of Syria and Mesopotamia despite being dominated by Greek and Parthian/Persian rulers. The majority of these Arameans later embraced the Christian faith and, although there are a number of short pagan inscriptions,<sup>2</sup> and a few relics of pagan literature,<sup>3</sup> Syriac is, for the most part a Christian language, a medium for Christian literature and liturgy. Syriac started as the local dialect of Edessa (whose modern name Urfa is derived from Syriac *Urhoy*) the cultural centre of Syriac literature. The early writers refer to the Syriac language as *Urhoyo* or *Edessene* because it started as a local Aramaic dialect of Edessa. The reason that Syriac "came to be adopted as the literary language of Aramaic speaking Christians all over Mesopotamia may in part be due to the prestige enjoyed by Edessa as a result of its claim to possess a letter written by Jesus to its king (of Arab stock) named Abgar the Black".<sup>4</sup> However, Syriac gradually expanded and was carried eastwards along the silk road by merchants and Syriac missionaries to South India and China. A noteworthy witness to the presence of Syriac in Western China in the eighth century A.D. is provided by the bilingual Syriac and Chinese stone inscriptions dated A.D. 781, found at Hsi-an fu (modern Xi'an).<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest texts of the Syriac language which provides a foretaste of its beauty and splendour is to be found in the beautiful lyric Odes of Solomon. We quote here ode 40 in English translation:

"As honey drips from a honeycomb, and as milk flows from a woman full of love for her children, so is my hope upon you, my God. As a fountain gushes forth its water, So does my heart gush forth the praise of the Lord and my lips pour out praise to him; my tongue is sweet from converse with him, my limbs grow strong with singing of him, my face exults in the jubilation he brings, my spirit is jubilant at his love and by him my soul is illumined. He who holds the Lord in awe may have confidence, for his salvation is assured: he will gain immortal life, and those who receive this are incorruptible. Halleluia!"<sup>6</sup>

## Eastern and Western Pronunciation

Written Syriac today is almost the same in morphology as the classical Syriac of the fourth century. While the language remained the same, there emerged two dialectical pronunciations of Syriac, usually known as the *Eastern* and the *Western*. The Eastern, which is more archaic, is used by the members of the Church of the East. The Western on the other hand, is mainly used by Syrian Orthodox and the Maronites. A clear difference between the Eastern and the Western consists in the pronunciation of original a: the Eastern pronunciation preserves it (e.g. *bayta* 'house'), while the Western alters it to o (*bayto*).

## Syriac Scripts

The Syriac language also developed different scripts. The earliest Syriac inscriptions of the first and second centuries A.D. (all pagan) use a script similar to Palmyrene cursive writing. By the time of our earliest manuscripts (early fifth century A.D.) however, this script has taken on a more formalised character, known as *Estrangelo* (derived from Greek *strongulos* 'rounded'). The Estrangelo script continued to be used well into the middle ages. Furthermore, it enjoyed a dramatic local revival in Tur'Abdin in the twelve century. During the course of the eighth century there emerged, side by side with Estrangelo, a new and more compact script developed from Estrangelo correctly known as *Serto* (literally 'a scratch, character'). This is normally used by the West Syrians and the Maronites. A few centuries later, among the East Syrians, we see the gradual emergence from Estrangelo of the other distinctive script known as *Eastern* but generally called *Nestorian* or *Chaldean* script by European writers.

## Vocalization

In the early centuries of Arab rule there emerged various vocalization systems to assist the reading and pronunciation of the unvowelled Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac scripts. What finally emerged for Syriac, were two different systems, one used by West Syrians and Maronites (the so-called Jacobite vowel signs); and the other employed by East Syrians (the so-called Nestorian vowel signs); the former consist of symbols derived from Greek letters, the latter of different combinations of dots.

## The scope of Syriac literature

Syriac literature covers a wide area both in time and in space, and provides by far the largest body of Aramaic literature that spans from the second to the twentieth century. Dr. Brock divides this main body of Syriac literature into four distinctive periods. Here I closely follow Brock's own division and classification of Syriac literature.

(i) The beginnings, in the second and third centuries A.D. Only a few works have survived from this period. They include the following: *The Book of the Laws of Countries* by a pupil of Bardaisan 'The Aramean Philosopher' (died 222); a collection of lyric poems known as *Odes of Solomon* ; and the *Acts of the Apostle Thomas* together with a few other texts including among them the earliest translation of the Bible (Old Testament and Gospels).<sup>7</sup>

(ii) The fourth to seventh centuries (the golden age of Syriac literature). In this period many great writers and outstanding poets of literary merit emerged, (and to use Dr. Brock's words) and "it can be fairly said that it is in Syriac that the best Aramaic literature, *qua* literature, can be found."

In the fourth century two great writers appear: Aphrahat, "the Persian Sage" who has an elegant style and carefully balanced phrases as well as other technical devices to highlight significant passages. Many examples of this very sophisticated prose style can already be found in his 23 *Demonstrations* covering a variety of special topics, and often touching on Jewish-Christian relations. Along with Aphrahat, we have the genius Ephrem of Nisibis (died 373) who is undoubtedly the best representative of early Syriac Christianity and finest of all Syriac poets. He combines in a unique way the roles of both poet and theologian. Ephrem, produced a massive collection of poems, and there survive over 500 religious lyrics of great beauty and profound spiritual insight. Besides being an outstanding poet, Ephrem also wrote a number of prose commentaries on the Bible and several narrative poems.

By no means all Syriac literature is religious in character. Prose literature of this period covers a very wide range of subjects, history, geography, law, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, as well as hagiography, theology, liturgy and biblical interpretation. During this period there were many translations into Syriac, mostly from Greek but also a few from middle Persian (e.g. the earlier version of *Kalilah and Dimnah*, a famous collection of tales of Indian origin). After the Semitic creativity until the fourth century, Greek influence becomes much more noticeable in the fifth and sixth centuries; in prose, both style and thought patterns are affected, but in poetry much less so. The place of poetry has always been very prominent within Syriac literature as a whole; and notable among the poets of this era is Jacob of Serugh (as a pupil) and Narsai (as a teacher) who were both associated with the famous 'Persian School' at Edessa. In 489, the emperor Zeno had closed the school, which was forced to move to safety within the Persian Empire to the town of Nisibis. Both authors, Jacob and Narsai produced large collections of fine verse homilies mainly on biblical themes. Jacob however, at times writes with a mystical intensity, whereas Narsai is largely a didactic poet. Amongst the excellent poetry of this golden age of Syriac literature many delightful dialogue poems are sadly anonymous. In these, personifications of two biblical characters conduct a lively argument in alternating stanzas. The origins of this genre can be traced back to the very beginnings of Mesopotamian literature and it remains popular to the present day.

In the field of the theological literature two authors are strikingly original. Philoxenus of Mabbug (died 523) in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, and Babai the Great (died 628) in that of the Church of the East. The former, was one of the outstanding theologians of his time, and a leading figure in the Syrian Orthodox opposition to the Council of Chalcedon (whose wording he considered to obscure the full reality of the incarnation). The latter on the other hand, was an Abbot of one of the most important monasteries on mount Izla (in Southeastern Turkey); and also a leading and profound theologian of the Church of the East. Philoxenus and Babai also have fine treatises on the spiritual life as well. Philoxenus in his theological as well as spiritual writings offers a remarkable fusion of Syriac and Greek tradition. The Syrian mystic, Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century), whose writings were translated into Greek at the monastery of St Saba in Palestine in the ninth century, is a well-known figure among many. In Egypt the inspiration provided by Isaac lies behind the contemporary

monastic revival in the Coptic Church. Historically, his writings were very popular and accepted despite their origin in the Church of the East, and have continued to be widely read in monasteries of all traditions. What influence the Syrian mystics had on early Sufism is a question which still requires proper investigation.<sup>8</sup>

(iii) The period running from the beginning of the Arab rule in the seventh century to that of the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is described by Brock as "one of scholarly consolidation and encyclopedic effort as far as Syriac literature is concerned". The Arab invasions prevented close contacts with the Greek-speaking world just when Syriac culture was at the most hellenophile stage of its history. The most important consequences of this, for both Arab and western European civilizations, was that through scholars of the Syriac churches, such as Hunain ibn Ishaq (died 873) working at Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, Greek philosophy, medicine and science were transmitted to the Arab world.<sup>9</sup>

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries can be described as a *renaissance* within Syriac literature. The most famous writers of this period of revival are the patriarch Michael the Great, author of the most important of all Syriac chronicles (comparing ecclesiastical, secular and contemporary events up to his time) and the Syriac polymath Gregory Abu'l Faraj better known as Barhebraeus (died 1286). Gregory wrote on every aspect of human knowledge of his time, such as philosophy, medicine, grammar, theology, spirituality, wisdom and wit, history and other subjects. (Some of his works are available in English translation and his book on the chronology of the world was translated into Turkish as well).

(iv) Many western histories of Syriac literature leave their readers with the impression that Syriac literature virtually culminated in the fourteenth century. Factors such as the Black Death contributed to a low point in the history of the Syriac literature in the fourteenth century. However, it did not die out, but continues in an unbroken chain of Syriac writers in prose and poetry, to the present day. The Syriac literature of this period contains a different genre of plays, novels and poetry. Since, however, very little of the literature of this period has been published (although 'Hujada' in Sweden and Mor Ephrem Monastery in Holland are preparing a number of works for publication every year), no proper assessment of its quality can yet be made.<sup>10</sup>

## Modern Dialects

On the colloquial level, dialects of Syriac have always been in use. *Turoyo*, the mountain language is still very much used in the area to the south east of Diyarbakir known as *Tur'Abdin*. The majority of the speakers are Syrian Orthodox. In recent years many of this community have migrated to Istanbul and western Europe. Although *Turoyo* has its own oral literature, it is very rarely written (except by or for western scholars).<sup>11</sup> Recently, it has been used in some elementary school books and dictionaries produced in Sweden for the use of the children of immigrant *Turoyo* speakers.

The other dialect which is flourishing today, is called *Modern Syriac*, or *Swadaya* which is usually based on either the *Urmi* or *Alqosh* dialect. *Swadaya* is extensively spoken and written by the Assyrian and Chaldean communities in Iran, Iraq

(especially since April 1972, when Syriac was proclaimed as an official cultural language of the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syrian Orthodox citizens who are Syriac speakers). Swadaya is also used in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan where the Cyrillic script is employed in writing rather than the Syriac. In modern day, Turoyo and Swadaya are used in broadcasting, magazines, literature as well as liturgy.

## Conclusion

Syriac language and literature, besides playing a momentous role in the history of the Christian world, has also constituted an essential dimension within the cultural history of the Middle East as a whole. The historical significance of Syriac lies in providing a cultural bridge between the civilization of Antiquity (Greek as well as Mesopotamian) and that of the Asian world today.

## Notes

<sup>2</sup> This article has been translated into Turkish and published in *Varlik, a periodical of literature and art* (Istanbul, Turkey), 1075 (April, 1997), pp. 28-32.

<sup>1</sup> S.P. Brock, "Three Thousand Years of Aramaic literature", in *Aram*,1:1 (1989), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> H.J.W. Drijvers, (Ed.) "Old Syriac Inscriptions", *Semitic Studies Series* (Leiden) No. III (1972). This work provides a full account of the pagan inscriptions found in Edessa and its vicinity.

<sup>3</sup> Amongst these is a letter of advice from a certain philosopher Mara to his son Serapion and a prophecy attributed to the prophet Baba of Harran. An English translation of Mara's Letter is found in W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (London, 1855), pp.70-76; of Baba's prophecy in S.P. Brock, "A Syriac collection of prophecies of pagan philosophers", in *Orientalia Loveniensia Periodica* (Leuven) 14 (1983), pp. 233-6.

<sup>4</sup> S.P. Brock, "An Introduction to Syriac Studies", in J.H. Eaton (Ed.), *Horizons in Semitic Studies* (1980), p .13.

<sup>5</sup> See P.Y. Saeki, "The Nestorian Monument in China" (1916).

<sup>6</sup> S.P.Brock,"Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition", *Moran 'Etho Series* No. 2 (Kerala, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> English translations: H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of Countries. Dialogue on Fate of Bardisan of Edessa* (Assen,1965); J.H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon* (Oxford,1973; reprinted Missoula, 1977) and in his *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. II (Garden City and London, 1985), pp. 735-71; A.F.J Klijn, *Acts of Thomas* (Leiden,1962).

<sup>8</sup> English translations of a selection of Syriac literature of this period include: J. Gwynn (Ed.), "Selections from...Ephrem the Syrian and Aphrahat.." in *A Select Library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. 13

Oxford/New York, 1898; and reprints); S.P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 Poems of St Ephrem* (2nd edition, London, 1983); F.C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth* (London, 1913); E.A.W. Budge, *The Discourses of Philoxenus* (London, 1894); E.A.W. Budge, *The History of the Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1889 repr. 1976); S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, 1978); F.J. Hamilton and E.W. Brooks, *The Syriac Chronicle known as that of Zechariah of Mytilene* (London 1899) For Ephrem, Besides the translations mentioned above, and a further collection by K. McVey in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series, many excerpts can be found in R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975) and in S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World of St Ephrem* (Rome, 1985; Kalamazoo, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> English translations of some literature of this period include: A.J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam, 1923; reprinted Wiesbaden, 1969); A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* (Cambridge, 1934); S.P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, 1987); A. Mingana, *Job of Edessa's Book of Treasures* (Cambridge, 1935); I.G.N. Keith-Falkner, *Kalilah and Dimnah, or the Fables of Bidpai* (London, 1885); E.A.W. Budge, *The Chronography of Barhebraeus* (Oxford, 1932); E.A.W. Budge, *Oriental Wit and Wisdom, or the Laughable Stories collected by Mar Gregory John Barhebraeus* (London 1899); E.A.W. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China* (London, 1928).

<sup>10</sup> For the history of twentieth century Syriac literature see R. Macuch, *Geschichte der spät - und neusyrischen Literatur* (Berlin 1976); Patriarch E. Barsawm, *Al lu' lu Al manthur fi Tarikh al `ulum wal Adab Al Suryaniya* (in Arabic, Homs 1943 and reprints; Syriac translation Qamishli 1967; reprinted Holland 1991; partial English translation by M. Moosa, 1978); A. Abuna, *Adab Al-lugha Al-Aramiya* (in Arabic, Beirut 1970); P. Sarmas, *Tash `ita d-Seprayuta Atorayta*, I-III (in Modern Syriac, Tehran 1963/70); Cp also S.P. Brock, "Classical Syriac in the Twentieth Century", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989), 363-75.

<sup>11</sup> There is a teaching tool of Turoyo by Otto Jastrow, *Lehrbuch der Turoyo-Sprache* (Wiesbaden 1992).