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35. Syriac as the Language of Eastern Christianity

Abstract

Syriac is the cultural language of the Aramaic speaking Christians. It originated in the form of Aramaic used in Edessa (Urfa), a town which played an important role in the Christianization of the Orient. It emerged in two traditions, the Western, in Upper Mesopotamia and North Syria, where it was used by the 'Monophysite' party, and the Eastern, in the Sassanian Empire, where it was used by the 'Nestorian' church (Church of the East). In both cases, the writings preserved are almost all of a religious nature. After the arrival of Islam, Syriac was progressively superseded by Arabic but the use of the Syriac script in certain places and cases to write Arabic shows the extent to which Syriac was considered linked with Christianity.

1. From Edessean to Syriac

The language now commonly known as Syriac originated as the Aramaic dialect of the city of Edessa in Osrhoene.

Edessa (modern Urfa), in Upper Mesopotamia, North of Harran, was founded as a colony during the Seleucid Empire and named Edessa after a city in Macedonia. Soldiers of the Macedonian army were settled there and mixed with the local population. The name Orhai, which is given to the city in Aramaic documents, is most probably derived from an earlier form of the toponym, prior to the Macedonian conquest.

At the beginning of the Christian era, Edessa was the centre of a small kingdom whose rulers bore the Arabic names of Abgar and Ma'nu. This kingdom was to be taken over by Rome in the mid 240s. Inscriptions in Edessean Aramaic, on stone and mosaics, and three texts on parchment, give an insight into the society and culture of this small kingdom. Aramaic speaking and writing, it was situated at the cross-roads of Graeco-Roman, Persian and Arabic influence, with a local Jewish community. Christianity appears to have reached the region quite early on. Although the story of the exchange of letters between king Abgar and Jesus, reported by Eusebius in the 4th century, is clearly a legend (Desreumaux 1993), the narrative of a flood that affected the town in the year 200 AD, which was inserted into the Chronicle of Edessa from the city archives, already mentions the destruction of a 'church of the Christians'. The teaching of the Christian philosopher Bardaisan and the *Acts of Thomas* are but two examples of Syriac literature written in the 2nd century in Edessa. This does not, however, mean that Christianity had any official or prominent position in the city: all the religious inscriptions are in honour of pagan gods, and an analysis of local onomastics also reveals devotion to the old divinities alone (Drijvers/Healey 1999). After the middle of the 3rd century, there is a gap in the documentation preserved in Edessean Aramaic. New written documents emerge only at the beginning of the 5th century − inscriptions as well as manuscripts − and in both cases these are Christian writings.

The earliest dated Syriac manuscript was copied in Edessa, like the majority of the oldest manuscripts, and was completed in 411 AD. It was preserved in the monastery of Deir es-Suryani in the desert of Scete in Egypt, and now belongs to the collection of the British Library in London (Add. 12150; Wright 1870−1871). As for Syriac Christian inscriptions, the oldest one known (406−407 AD) was recently excavated in Syria and commemorates the completion of a mosaic in a martyrion (Ayash, Balty, Briquel Chatonnet et al. 2008). Although the second oldest inscription mentions the bishop Rabbula and probably comes from Edessa (Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Moukarzel 2008), the majority of the other inscriptions of the 5th century have been found in the region of Antioch. This demonstrates the spread of the Syriac language beyond Edessa and Osrhoene in Christian contexts. From this time on, one should speak not of Edessean but of Syriac. In the Aramaic speaking communities of North Syria, it was Syriac, and not the local dialect, which was adopted as the ecclesiastical and cultural language, although it was often used alongside Greek.

The early spread of Christianity in the East is not as well known as that in the Mediterranean area, due to the lack of local texts equivalent to the Acts of the Apostles or the Pauline Epistles. Later tradition does however provide some interesting clues. The *Doctrina Addai* states that Addai, one of the 70 disciples of Christ, was sent to Edessa after Pentecost to convert the king and was instrumental in the foundation

of the church there. According to the *Acts of Mar Mari*, Addai himself sent another disciple from Edessa, Mari, to evangelize the whole region from Upper Mesopotamia to Southern Iraq. The region to the East of this was the territory granted to Thomas, who went as far as India. The links of Thomas with Edessa are also very strong: after his martyrdom in India, his mortal remains are supposed to have been brought back to Edessa. These disparate traditions thus agree on the central role played by Edessa in the process of the Christianization of the Middle East. All this is in accordance with the fact that Syriac, that is, the Edessean Aramaic dialect, was used as the main Christian language in all the communities stretching from modern Iraq into Asia. Even though there existed numerous other local Aramaic dialects along the Tigris valley, as shown for example by the inscriptions of Hatra and Assur (Beyer 1998), the church nevertheless always used Syriac as its own language and not the other local Aramaic dialects.

It is important to note that for all these Christians, Syriac was considered to be a major part of their identity and culture. This is perhaps unsurprising in a civilization which insisted on the importance of script, as opposed to Greek culture which placed greater emphasis on the value of images (Briquel Chatonnet 1991). Until the present day, scribes have continued to produce Syriac manuscripts, and often detail in long colophons the importance this task has in their spiritual life.

2. Different Syriac traditions

Syriac developed as the language of Syriac Christianity in two regions: inside the Roman Empire, in North Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, and the other in the Persian Empire, in Middle and Lower Mesopotamia.

The former was the native region of Syriac, as Edessean was used there before Christianization. Parchments originating from Dura-Europos or the Middle Euphrates region (Teixidor 1990; Teixidor 1993) are witnesses to a form of cursive and everyday script that was to be the origin of the *serto* script (Healey 2000). This script was thus in its origins a regional one and its confessional use was only the consequence of a later evolution (Briquel Chatonnet 2001). The council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which stressed that Christ was one person in two natures, divine and human, was not accepted by a significant portion of the Christians in Syria and elsewhere in the Orient. Although in the beginning this so-called 'monophysite party', which remained faithful to the definition of Cyril of Alexandria 'One nature, after the Incarnation, of God the Word', was composed of Greek-speaking as well as Syriac-speaking people (its most prominent writers in the 6th century were Severus of Antioch, who wrote in Greek, and Philoxenus of Mabbug, who wrote in Syriac), progressively the boundary between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians also developed into a linguistic boundary, and Syriac became the language of the anti-Chalcedonians in Syria. Syriac was also the language of the Maronite party, which was to emerge from an attempted christological compromise between the two parties based on the notion of a unique will in Christ, 'monothelitism' (Suermann 1998). Thus the use of both the Syriac language and the *serto* script are common to the Syrian Orthodox and Maronite churches, as well as to the Syrian Catholic church which was born in the 18th century as a Catholic offshoot of the Syrian Orthodox. When the Chalcedonian 'melkite' party, which followed the emperor (*malka*) in the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, also began to write in Syriac, it developed its own 'melkite' script (Desreumaux 2004).

Although Edessa was the cultural centre of the Syriac Christians, they were dependant, at the institutional level, on the patriarchate of Antioch. That became a problem for the Christians in the Sassanid Empire when the Roman Empire became Christian and the Emperor proclaimed himself to be the protector of all Christians (Brock 1982a). Being dependant on a foreign church leader closely linked with a foreign state was most uncomfortable, especially in times of war between Rome and Persia. That is why the Church of the East, whose centre was in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, developed secessionist trends and affirmed its hierarchical autonomy. As early as 410, the acts of its first known synod affirm this position, without asserting any theological difference. Only later did the Church of the East reject the council of Ephesus and refuse to condemn the christological positions of Theodore of Mopsuestia (Baum and Winkler 2003), and so it is incorrectly labelled as 'Nestorian' by other Christians, with reference to the patriarch Nestorios, whose positions were condemned in Ephesus. The patronage was never emphasized by the Church of the East itself. As Syriac was not the local language of everyday life in this region (Beyer 1998), both language and script preserved more conservative features than in the West: the formal or *estrangela* script was in use for a long time and only slowly developed into the so-called 'Nestorian' script.

3. A Christian literature

As Syriac-speaking Christians never formed a realm or a state, their common identity was focussed in their churches and their common patrimony is their language, and the literature produced through this medium. This literature is large, creative, and as it was copied and preserved over the centuries in monasteries, is now almost exclusively of a religious character (Baumstark 1922; Brock 1997). As early as the 2nd century, the major part of the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Syriac, forming the core of the *Peshitta* (Brock 2006a; Weitzmann 1999). Around key Biblical figures, apocryphal narratives were composed or translated in Syriac (Debié, Desreumaux, Jullien and Jullien 2005). Exegesis was developed by such authors as Ephrem in the 4th century, Dionysios bar Salibi (d. 1171 AD) among the Syrian Orthodox, and Ishodad of Merv (9th century) in the Church of the East. Poetic homilies were greatly appreciated, and composed in various metres. One of the most popular forms was that in lines of 12-syllables, known in the west as the metre of Jacob of Sarug (d. 521 AD), and in Mesopotamia as that of Narsai (d. 502 AD). Ephrem is known as 'the harp of the Holy Spirit', being the author of a numerous hymns for different moments in the liturgical cycle. Although mention should be made of manuscripts containing works of theology, asceticism, hagiography, grammar, and lexicography, the great majority of surviving manuscripts preserve liturgical books intended for the divine service (Brock 2006b).

Syriac literature and tradition was deeply rooted in the Greek heritage. Oriental Christians translated and adapted Greek texts connected with historiography (Debié 2005), philosophy (Hugonnard-Roche 2004), sciences (cosmography and medicine), as well as patristic theology. Greek influence grew more intensive in the 6th and 7th centuries (Brock 1982b) and different revisions or new versions of the Bible were produced, based on the Septuagint. It was by means of such Syriac translations that Muslim Arabic scholars first became acquainted with the classical heritage and Syriac authors played an important role in the transmission of thought from Greek to Arabic.

4. Syriac and Church missions

Christianity entered the Persian Empire by means of the Sassanian deportations of local Syrian populations during their periodic raids on the Roman Empire (Jullien and Jullien 2002). It developed along the overland and maritime trade routes, and from the 5th century on, into the early centuries of Islam, churches are attested along the Arabo-Persian gulf in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and on the island of Kharg. As early as the 6th century, Cosmas Indicopleustes reports the existence of a diocese on the Malabar coast of India (modern Kerala). In the 7th century, Christianity officially reached the capital of the Chinese empire, Xian.

In each case, there is testimony that Syriac was the language of the local church. Several of the most prominent Syriac writers are from Beth Qatraye, the Syriac designation for the Eastern coast of Arabia (Brock 1999–2000). In Kerala, although no Syriac inscription can be securely dated prior to the arrival of the Portuguese (Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Thekeparampil 2008), the Acts of the Synod of Diamper of 1599, which formalized the links with the Roman Catholic church, condemn numerous Syriac texts which were to be found in Kerala (Zacharia 1994), and several Keralan Syriac manuscripts predating the arrival of Latin missionaries are preserved in the Vatican Library. In China, the famous Xian stele which relates the arrival in the 7th century of the Syriac monk Alopen in the imperial capital, and the emperor's authorisation for the establishment of the new religion, is written in Chinese but with Syriac signatures (Pelliot and Forte 1996). Later funerary inscriptions in Syriac, dating to the Mongol period, are found along the Silk Road, from Kyrgyzstan (Klein 2000) to China (Niu, Desreumaux and Marsone 2004). In 1928 Öngut princess, Sara, had a beautiful manuscript copied for her, a Syriac Evangelion, but one which follows a Chinese model (Borbone 2003).

Although Syrian Orthodox missionaries did not travel quite as far, its expansion was also linked with a diffusion of its own particular script. One of the most famous collections of ancient Syriac manuscripts was preserved in Egypt, in the monastery of Deir as-Suryani, in the desert of Scete, which was one of the most prominent monastic institutions of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the 10th century. Syriac manuscripts were also copied in *serto* in outposts such as Palestine and Cyprus, and the script was also in use in Mesopotamia, where 'monophysite' communities were established from the 6th century onwards.

5. Language and script

The development and history of the Syriac script continued even after the use of the Syriac language itself declined among Near Eastern Christians, for the Syriac alphabet was used to transcribe Arabic, a phenomenon given the mysterious name of *garshuni* (Briquel Chatonnet 2005). As the Arabic alphabet has 28 letters and the Syriac only 22, this transcription was not straightforward and involved either some ambiguity in reading or the addition of diacritic points. The aim was not to have a cryptic script, as anyone could learn the Syriac alphabet, nor was it due to an ignorance of the Arabic script, since Christian Arabic manuscripts are known long before the appearance of

garshuni. This transcription was related to the issue of identity: Syriac script was understood as a Christian script and people wanted to use it to declare their Christian faith and to share this cultural heritage within their community.

The oldest *garshuni* manuscripts seem to appear around the 14th century. It was first developed among the Syrian Orthodox and was soon adopted by the Maronites. It became much more frequent from the 17th century onwards. Syro-Oriental copyists did not use it very often, which is probably linked to the fact that they continued to write in the Syriac language much later than other groups. It was used for all types of documents and texts and many manuscripts combine both Syriac and *garshuni*. One can find, for example, parallel versions of the same text, such as the Gospels or Psalms, written in two columns, one in Syriac and the other in Arabic, but both written in the Syriac script. There are also numerous liturgical manuscripts with the prayers and readings in Syriac and the liturgical rubrics and directions in *garshuni*.

This use of the Syriac script to transcribe another language is most commonly used for Arabic, but other varieties of *garshuni* are also found, for the transcription of languages such as Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek, and Persian. In Kerala, a 'Malayalam garshuni' system was created that required the creation of new signs to write the various sounds of Malayalam with no equivalent in Semitic languages (Koonammakkal 1997; 2005). A significant number of manuscripts were produced using this script. In Central Asia, Sogdian texts were written in Syriac script, and in China, in the Mongol era, some inscriptions were written in the Uigur language and Syriac script.

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