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Philosophy, Science, and Belles-lettres in Syriac and Christian Arabic Literature: A Gentle Introduction and Survey^{*}

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Abstract

It might be assumed that the genres of Syriac and Christian Arabic literature are made up exclusively (or almost so) of sacred topics (Bible, commentary, liturgy, asceticism, hagiography, theology, etc.), the writers, scribes, and readers in these communities often being monks, presbyters, deacons, and bishops. A broad look at the surviving evidence of this literature, however, shows an immense interest in subjects not directly connected to the church, monastery, or Christian life at all, among them philosophy, science, and belles-lettres. This paper offers a basic overview of these subjects as Syriac and Christian Arabic authors dealt with them, especially from manuscript collections in eastern Turkey.

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^{*}This is a draft of a paper from which I gave a lecture at Saint John's University on april 7, 2011.

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1 Introduction

The course of philosophy, science, and entertainment literature written in Arabic, principally by Muslims, has often been the subject of scholarly investigation. Researchers have sometimes even highlighted the contribution of Christians, sometimes writing in Syriac, sometimes in Arabic, to these literary genres. An assumption about these subjects and communities, at least popularly, still persists, however, that I hope further to dispel in this talk: that Christian authors and scribes were generally disinterested in non-religious subjects. To be sure, much of the content of the survey I will present is not freshly hewn from an untouched slab of stone, but I hope to illustrate it more precisely, especially with the help of some details on texts from manuscript collections available for study at HMML, chiefly from collections in eastern Turkey.

Concerning the title of this lecture, I would like to point out that the phrase “gentle introduction” was also used by the thirteenth century polymath Gregory Barhebraeus for his metrical grammar of Syriac (TITLE), of which there are several copies in HMML’s collections.

Before going further, let us clarify the linguistic situation a bit. Both Syriac and Arabic belong to the Semitic language family, which also includes, among others, Akkadian, Hebrew, Gəʿəz, and among spoken Semitic languages, certain Aramaic dialects, modern Hebrew, Arabic dialects, Amharic, Tigre, Tigrinya, Mehri, Soqotri, and Jibbali. Attested from the first century, Syriac is by far the most attested dialect of the Aramaic language family, other dialects including Old, Imperial, Jewish Babylonian, Mandaic, Jewish Palestinian, Samaritan, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. The amount of textual remains from none of these dialects comes close to matching those of Syriac, which have been a subject of European

interest since the earliest days of the printing press. Syriac became the chief language of Christianity in the Levant and Mesopotamia until the rise of Islam, but there are a few early non-Christian inscriptions, too. Aside from the prodigious amount of printed editions of Syriac texts, there is, of course, a great deal more in manuscripts awaiting editors. The student of Syriac is relatively well served by a number of available grammars and, in addition to smaller hand dictionaries, two major Syriac-Latin lexica, one of which has recently been updated and translated into English, not to mention single language dictionaries or Syriac-Arabic dictionaries. While there are early non-Christian witnesses to Syriac, it is primarily as a Christian language that Syriac is known. With a “golden age” generally assigned to the 4th-7th centuries, the language grew from the city of Edessa, now Urfa in Turkey, to become a major literary and liturgical language of Christianity in the middle east, but as I will point out today, though, it is hardly a literature confined to specifically Christian themes. Syriac is represented by two linguistic traditions, an eastern and a western, the differences mainly confined to phonology and orthography, and particular denominations that use Syriac adhere to one or the other of these branches of Syriac.

Arabic is, of course, mostly known as the language of the Qur’ān and Islam. From the seventh century Arabic became not only the major literary language of the new religion, but it was also carried to the lands of Islamic conquest as a spoken language and supplanted indigenous languages of those regions. Christian communities that had formerly used Aramaic in the Levant and Mesopotamia and Coptic in Egypt for their daily speech soon came to use Arabic for those purposes; Arabic also found its way at least partly into the liturgies of these churches, and Arabic Bible translations from various sources also began to appear, our earliest examples of these being from the ninth century. So what is Christian Arabic? First, denominational variety must be pointed out. There is no single Christian Arabic denomination. Christians writing in Arabic may be Rūm Orthodox, Maronite, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, or others. “Christian Arabic” merely refers to the language of texts in Arabic composed, translated, or even copied by Christians. Second, literary Christian Arabic is not a dialect greatly distinct from Arabic as written by other groups. In general, Christian Arabic is simply what is known as Middle Arabic, just written by a Christian. One more aspect of Christian Arabic needs to be mentioned: the phenomenon of Garšūnī (or Karšūnī). The term is used to describe the writing of Arabic using Syriac letters. This has a parallel in Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew letters), among others; in my work at HMML I have come across Armenian, Persian, and Turkish texts, all written in Syriac script. The smaller Syriac inventory of letters adequately makes up for the

greater number of letters in Arabic script by means of extra dots placed within, above, or below the letters. As to the ratio of manuscripts in Garšūnī to those in Arabic script, there are no definite figures readily available, and it varies from collection to collection, but the Garšūnī group, attested in both west Syriac and east Syriac collections, is quite formidable. Finally, being in Garšūnī, it should be said, is a quality of manuscripts, not texts. That is, just because one manuscript of this or that work is in Garšūnī does not mean that all the rest will also be; the others may simply be written in Arabic script just like an Islamic text.

While the Christian provenance is at least in some sense given with respect to Syriac literature of this sort—since, except for the very earliest period, only Christians really wrote in Syriac—the same may not be said so flatly for Arabic literature. If we aim to speak strictly with respect to the literature in view here in Arabic as having a Christian provenance, we must be sure that this or that author was in fact part of a Christian community. We know this in many cases from biographical encyclopedias, such as the *Fihrišt* or *Catalog* of Al-Nadīm and the *Sources of Information on the Classes of Physicians* by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, generally written by Muslim authors, who were not at all afraid to single out scholars, even those highly thought of, as non-Muslims. In addition, though, some of the sciences we will discuss, especially logic, were also used by Christians in polemic treatises against other Christian groups, against Muslims, and against Jews. But what about anonymous works? Again, in Syriac this is not so much of an issue, since there a Christian translator and audience may be readily assumed, but an anonymous belletristic, scientific, or philosophical work that exists in Arabic is not so easy to peg as Christian or to mark as having been studied and copied by Christians. There are, however, some clues we can readily rely on. If a work exists in any Garšūnī manuscripts, that is an essential proof at least of Christians having used the text. In addition, the trinitarian Christian *bismillāh*—بِسْمِ الْاَبِ وَالْاَبْنِ وَرُوحِ الْقُدْسِ الْوَاحِدِ or the like, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God”—over against the Islamic بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ, “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,” both of which typically begin any text in manuscripts of the respective religious traditions, is an obvious identifying factor. Finally, information in colophons (notes at the end of texts or manuscripts describing their copying), including the method of dating, Christian or Islamic, can indicate a text’s provenance. Christian manuscripts do, on occasion, however, employ the Islamic dating of the *hijra* year. (By the way, Googling “Christian dating” or “Islamic dating” always results in additional information to that you were intending to find!)

Before getting into the meat of this talk, it bears emphasizing that every genre to be mentioned later has some counterpart in Islamic literature, and many of them are also represented in earlier literature in Akkadian, though this latter corpus, while similar, is distinct especially for its being prior to Greek investigations and literature in these subjects. Scientific enquiry of some kind and the recording of it has a long history in the near east.¹ Severus Sebokht traces Syriac science back to the Babylonians, whom he identifies as Syrians themselves, rather than the Greeks (Nau 1929/30: 332-333). As much as local tradition may have abided in areas where Syriac writers flourished, the infusion of Greek literary culture, including philosophy taken in its broadest sense, ignited again this interest in the natural world and in explaining it.² A perusal of middle eastern intellectual history shows a notable continuity in themes of interest across these and neighboring regions by people using Akkadian, Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. To eschew any oversimplification, we may mark differences in religion, scribal culture, access to sources, and means of dissemination, but these differences fail to mask the streams of interest that flow among all these literatures and time periods.

It almost goes without saying that this is not any kind of comprehensive treatment of any of the types of texts that will be discussed below. My aim is simply to shed at least a little light on what are sometimes darkened corners of literary and intellectual history. The Christian communities that studied, translated, copied, adapted, etc. these texts deserve to be considered genuinely in terms of these genres and not just as churchmen who sometimes dabbled in other matters less directly religious. Their Christianity may not often completely disappear, but the amount, depth, and enthusiasm of their interest in nonreligious subjects, even based merely on the surviving remnant of what was once greater, is too great to ignore by treating this literature as a handmaid of theology.

2 Astronomy, cosmology, and geography

Aristotle's pupil, Theophrastus, composed a work on Meteorology, but it is no longer extant in Greek. Fortunately, however, it was translated into Syriac and Arabic and so there remains a considerable witness to the work in these languages. The Syriac portion was first described and partially published with En-

¹Oppenheim 1977: 228-331, von Soden 1994: 145-172, Bottéro 1992: 125-137, Horowitz 1998, Veldhuis 1997

²This Greek scientific impetus reached Islamic scholars as well (see especially chapters three and five-eight of Rosenthal 1994), in great part through Syriac authors.

glish translation in 1955 (Drossaart Lulofs) and then in 1964 two other scholars (Ewald Wagner and Peter Steinmetz) gave the entire fragment with German translation and some commentary. Hans Daiber has superseded these earlier editions more recently (1992) by presenting the Syriac text along with two Arabic versions, an abridged one by Bar Bahlul (cf. Bergsträsser 1918), whose name will be mentioned again below, and one by his contemporary Ibn al-Khammār, this latter version agreeing more closely with the extant Syriac fragment.

Next, the Augustan age writer Nicolaus of Damascus drew up a *Compendium* of Aristotle's philosophy, which does not survive in Greek but which was translated into Syriac,³ perhaps (if Barhebraeus is correct) by Hunayn (Takahashi 2004: 38). There is an edition of the text with introduction, English translation, and notes from 1965.⁴ Not surprisingly, there are Theophrastean elements in Nicolaus' *Compendium* (see Takahashi 2002b).

The Greek work entitled *Περὶ κόσμου* and attributed to Aristotle has attracted the attention of philosophy students for almost two millennia. It was translated into Latin in the second century (and again in the thirteenth), Armenian sometime after the fifth, and Syriac in the first half of the sixth, whence into Arabic on three separate occasions thereafter. Most scholars consider the work to be spurious, but it has long been associated with Aristotle's name. As for the content of the work, it divides neatly into three sections: an exhortation to philosophical study (taken in its broadest sense) that serves as an introduction to the work, certain scientific descriptions of the world and space, and finally, a theological section, wherein the author displays God's excellent administration of the universe. The fact that translations were made into Latin, Armenian, Syriac, and Arabic testifies to the wide appeal of the work. In the present connection it is this second section, the scientific descriptions, that is most relevant. The author discusses:

- the place of the world in the universe among the other planets
- meteors, comets, and other phenomena in space
- weather descriptions from clouds, rain, snow, frost, whirlwind, thunder, and lightning
- lists of lands, islands, seas, and oceans

³"In Syria for several centuries the *Organon* alone was often translated and much studied, but the rest of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* was almost unknown. Since Nic.'s *Compendium* was concerned with the physical treatises, it must have been welcomed as a convenient summary of a long series of books, translations of which were slow to appear" (Drossaart Lulofs 1969: 7).

⁴Ed. Drossaart Lulofs, with additions and corrections, 1969.

- and then returns to a further listing of meteorological phenomena.

The work was translated by a Syriac Orthodox physician and scholar who had studied Greek literature and medicine in Alexandria by the name of Sergius of Reš 'Aynā, who died in 536. His name will come up again below.

The very brief fragment, “The Names of the Zodiac according to the School of Bardaišan” (Sachau 1870: 126, Nau 1907: 513), who was famous in Greek and Latin as well as Syriac circles,⁵ gives early evidence of astronomical and astrological discussion in Syriac, which is continued by a remarkable figure in the history of Syriac science, Severus Sebokht,⁶ whose *On the Constellations* (Nau 1929/30)⁷ and *Description of the Astrolabe* (Nau 1899)⁸ go a long way toward painting the picture of Syriac cosmography about a century after Sergius of Reš 'Aynā. HMMML has a copy (CFMM 553) of the work on the astrolabe perhaps of the 16th or 17th century. Three other fragments indicative of Severus Sebokht's scholarship are known: “On the Inhabited and Uninhabited World” (E. Sachau, *Inedita Syriaca* (1870), pp. 127-132), “On the Measurement of the Heavens and the Earth and the Space between” (ibid, pp. 132-133), and a section (title missing) covering the movements of the sun and moon (ibid, pp. 133-134). Related to these astronomical works, the second section of the *Syriac Book of Medicines*, which is discussed below, is also a witness to this interest among Syriac scholars.

It is now appropriate to mention a genre known as Hexaameron commentaries. These are explanations of the six days of creation, and thus are a kind of biblical commentary. While such works are naturally religious and thus outside the boundary of the current subject, because Hexaameron commentaries typically include a great deal scientific observation and speculation, their inclusion in our discussion is fitting. Basil the Great authored one such work in Greek, and it was subsequently translated into both Syriac and Armenian, and it was also the formative influence on the Hexaameron of Ambrose in Latin. Turning to Syriac

⁵See the testimonia and discussions in Nau 1907: 492-535 and Drijvers 1966.

⁶Sachau 1870: ix-x, Wright 1894: 137-139, Ruska 1897: 10-11, Baumstark 1922: 246-247, Nau 1910, and Nau 1929/30: 328-329

⁷Nau gives a French translation of the whole, but only chapters four-six in Syriac, the fourth especially because of the citations from Aratus' *Phainomena* and the sixth for its catalog of constellation names, some Greek, some Syriac. A semi-popular discussion of Severus' work may be found in Montgomery 2000: 74-77.

⁸This comprehensive treatise covers the construction of the astrolabe, how to tell if a part of it is well made, the use of it, etc. For the astrolabe more generally, with some notes on Severus Sebokht's work, see Neugebauer 1949 and, including a look at both ancient and more recent astrolabes, Evans 1998: 141-158.

the form of *responsa*. Part of one of these letters (I.4)¹⁹ has been identified as an adaptation of a section of Paulus Alexandrinus' *Eisagogeka*.²⁰

A broader kind of work is Job of Edessa's (c. 769-835) impressive *Book of Treasures* (Daiber 1992: 173-174, G. Panicker 1995/6), to which the editor gave the descriptive subtitle *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Natural Sciences as Taught in Baghdad about A.D. 817*.²¹ Job was known as a translator of Galen²² and he may in fact have been the translator of Theophrastus' *Meteorology*.²³ Job names several of his own compositions (see Mingana 1935: xxii-xxiii) but only one besides the *Book of Treasures* has survived, *On Canine Hydrophobia*, which is discussed below. A perusal of the contents of the *Book of Treasures* will quickly impress on the reader the genuinely encyclopedic, at least from a philosophical-scientific perspective, breadth of the volume; that is, a number of subjects beyond astronomy and geography are covered.

Jacob (Severus) b. Šakkō's († 1240/1)²⁴ identically titled *Book of Treasures*, still unpublished in a full edition, covers much of the same scientific ground and owes much to the *Hexaemera* of Jacob of Edessa and Muše b. Kifo (Nau 1896: 290 and *passim*). Another noteworthy text by the same author is *The Book of Dialogues*.²⁵ Among others there are sections on geometry²⁶ (eighth question, Ruska 1896: 18-

the day (11-12), I.4 On reckoning the sun's longitude from Virgo rather than Aries (13-15), I.5 On incongruities between the sun and zodiacal signs (16-17), I.6 On there being 360 degrees but 365 days in the year (17-19), I.7 On the anaphorai of the zodiacal signs (19-20), I.8 Whether there is a place that always has equal days and nights (20-23). II.1 On the new year at the appearance of Sirius (24-31), II.2 On the sun, moon, and five wandering stars (31-34), II.3 Whether moist substances (ܠܘܩܘܡܐ) and animate bodies (ܘܚܝܘܬܐ) increase and decrease with the increase and decrease of the moon (34-37).

¹⁹G. Saliba 1995: 444-447.

²⁰Saliba (1995: 446) also noted that Ryssel's translation of the portion in question was hardly faithful to the Syriac. A perusal of Ryssel's translation of the other parts of letter one and also letter two show that his criticism is valid there too; he abridges as he translates. The letters, therefore, merit a new translation.

²¹Habbi (1987: 234-5) says of Job of Edessa, "Il écrivit, il est vrai, dans une langue difficile, mais il se distingue par son originalité et l'ampleur de sa culture."

²²He is mentioned numerous times in Ḥunayn b. Ishāq's *Risāla* (on which see below). Mingana (1935: xx-xxi) lists the thirty-six works of Galen that Job is credited with having translated.

²³Daiber 1992: 174.

²⁴Also called Jacob of Bartela, after his birthplace near Mosul. See also Barhebraeus, *ChronEccl* 2: 409, 411; Nau 1896: 286-288; BO 2: 237-242; Baumstark 1922: 311, Brock 1997: 74-75.

²⁵J. Ruska 1896, and a subsequent study of the book in 1897.

²⁶The geometric element becomes more pronounced in later Syriac treatments of geography and astronomy, as the work of b. Šakkō and Barhebraeus bears witness.

27) and astronomy (ninth question, Ruska 1896: 27-32), as well as an apology for philosophy, which begins the second book (Ruska 1897: 146-147), and the third section of the second book (152-160), on natural philosophy.²⁷

Finally, the famous and industrious Barhebraeus,²⁸ who lived a generation (1226-1286) after b. Šakkō, may serve as the last author in this brief survey of these texts. In his enormous work known as the *Butyrum Sapientiae* are contained meteorological and mineralogical sections,²⁹ which have recently been masterfully edited, translated, and explained,³⁰ and the second “base” of another work, his *Candelabrum Sanctuarii* (Bakoš 1930-33), is also full of scientific doctrine (Takahashi 2002). Somewhat differently, we mention Barhebraeus’ *Book of Intellectual Ascent* (Nau 1899/1900), a well-arranged astronomy textbook treating the subject in relatively clear language; he is, for example, careful to provide intelligible definitions of the technical terms of mathematical astronomy used in the book.

3 Medicine

As is the case with Islamic literature, so too in Syriac and Christian Arabic, medicine was a subject of serious interest, and we are fortunate to have a number of texts relating to the science of medicine. Medieval scholars in the east looked particularly to previous Greek masters of the subject, especially Galen and his predecessor Hippocrates, whose *Aphorisms*, which were translated into Syriac, are worth perusal by those interested in medicine but also more generally in philosophy.³¹ The term “Galenism” has been used to describe the intense following of the famous physician in late antiquity, and this fervor held sway in

²⁷ܦܘܣܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ, “Physiology, or the study of nature.” These last two parts have not been published in full. Ruska gives some of the Syriac text and discusses the content.

²⁸BO 2 244-321, Wright 1894: 265-281, Baumstark 1922: 312-320, Barsoum 2003: 463-481, Takahashi 2005

²⁹See Takahashi 2003 for Barhebraeus’ marine geography.

³⁰H. Takahashi (2004).

³¹See especially A. Merx, “Proben der syrischen Übersetzung von Galenus’ Schrift über die einfachen Heilmittel,” *ZDMG* 39 (1885): 237-305; M. Meyerhof, “Les verions syriaques et arabes des écrits galéniques,” *Byzantion* 3 (1927): 33-51; R. Degen, “A Further Note on Some Syriac Manuscripts in the Mingana Collection,” *JSS* 17 (1972): 213-217; *ibid.*, “Zur syrischen Übersetzung der Aphorismen des Hippokrates,” *OC* 62 (1978): 36-52; and *ibid.*, “Galen im Syrischen: Eine Übersicht über die syrische Überlieferung der Werke Galens,” in V. Nutton, ed., *Galen: Problems and Prospects* (1981), pp. 131-166. The Syriac *Aphorisms* were edited and translated into French by Henri Pognon.

the east as in the west.³² The line of continuity here was not lost upon the thirteenth century Islamic historian and physician Ibn Abī Uṣaibi‘a, who composed a long work treating chronological and geographical classes of physicians; he includes a (short) chapter specifically devoted to Christian physicians and translators. Among these translator-physicians, the first noteworthy one was Sergius of Reš‘aynā, mentioned above in connection with the *De Mundo*, but later writers mostly considered him inferior in the shadow of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, a Christian savant of the Church of the East whose notoriety as a translator has probably caused scholars to attribute to him more Syriac and Arabic translations of unknown provenance than are in fact his.³³ He was, nevertheless, a prolific translator, as is evident in his *Risāla*, a work composed for a friend that details the available Syriac and Arabic translations of the works of Galen.³⁴ The translator Ḥunayn was also a physician and author himself. His *Questions on Medicine for Students*, which was actually completed by his nephew Ḥubayš, is an especially noteworthy composition and one well used by subsequent students and scholars; it is extant both in Syriac and Arabic.³⁵ Another Christian witness to practical medicine is a work by Yoḥannan b. Sarapion (in Arabic, Yūḥannā ibn Sārabiyyūn), originally written in Syriac, now lost, but surviving in Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew. With respect to translation, it should be noted that, while a number of medical (and other) works were translated from Greek to Syriac to Arabic, some went first into Arabic and from there into Syriac.³⁶ Among original Arabic works that made their way to Syriac may especially be mentioned Ibn Sina’s *Medical Canon*, whose translator was possibly by Barhebraeus.

The *Syriac Book of Medicines*,³⁷ of unknown date, was mentioned above, but now I want to describe it a little further. At least the first part was translated from

³²See O. Temkin, *Galenism* (1973).

³³The same thing happened in earlier scholarship with Sergius. To him were formerly attributed, for example, all the works in BL Add. 14658.

³⁴First edited and translated into German by G. Bergsträsser, and soon to be available in a forthcoming new edition and English translation by John Lamoreaux.

³⁵E. Jan Wilson and Samuel Dinkha, *Hunain ibn Ishaq’s “Questions on Medicine for Students”: Transcription and Translation of the Oldest Extant Syriac Version* (Vat. Syr. 192), Studi e Testi 459 (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2010).

³⁶See GEDSH, “Arabic, Syriac translations from”.

³⁷Ed. Budge, 2 vols. (London, 1913). See in addition the important articles by J. Schleiffer: “Zum syrischen Medizinbuch,” *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebeite* 4 (1926): 70-122, 161-195; 5 (1927) 195-237; 6 (1928): 154-177, 275-299; “Zum syrischen Medizinbuch II. Der therapeutische Teil,” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 18 (1940): 341-372; 20 (1942/3): 1-32, 162-210, 383-398; 21 (1946): 157-182.

Greek, but neither a Syriac author nor translator are named. This first part of the lengthy work is a collection of medical instruction based especially on Galen's *On the Affected Parts* and *On the Composition of Drugs according to Places in the Body*, while the second part is rather astrological; the last part is a large collection, four hundred in number, of prescriptions.

The subjects treated in the book and the information it supplies are truly multifarious, and often not a little entertaining for some modern readers. In what follows, I give a few examples from the parts of the book, and I have left the Victorian English of the translator unchanged for its quaint ability to amuse. First, "On the headache which is caused by the drinking of wine": "Now for this kind of headache it is unnecessary for definitions to be laid down, for the drinkers of wine are found at all times, and in every place, and among people of all ages and conditions. ...And in respect of wine we can enquire whether it is strength (or, newness) which hath injured the patient, or its excessive quantity." As for the cure,

For this sickness quietness and sleep are necessary until the patient hath got rid of his drunkenness, and then it is proper to make him take a bath. He must be fed on foods which contain good juices, and are light and do not inflame [the head], such as soup made of barley flour, and dainty broths cooked with sweet chick-peas, and leeks, and anise, and on tender vegetables and endive. And on his head must be poured an infusion of chamomile flowers and oil of roses or violets. And thou must take very great care to clear out his whole body, and to wash out from his head the fumes of the wine, and to have him washed and anointed with oil, and to make arrangements for him to have quietness and sleep.³⁸

Later in the book, a prescription for a person suffering from a hangover and exhibiting a lack of appetite shows that "the hair of the dog" was thought to be a remedy then and there as it is now: the patient is to drink boiled rose leaves and walnut oil mixed with wine or licorice root in wine.³⁹

As an example of the second section, containing astrological and magical prescriptions often unrelated to medicine or health, I give the following:

For him that wisheth to betroth a woman to him. Reckon up the numerical values of the letters in the name of the man, and those of the

³⁸P. 39 / Syr. 41.

³⁹P. 673 / Syr. 567.

letters in the name of the woman, and divide each of them by eight. If the remainders be odd numbers the woman will belong to him, and if they be even numbers she will not.⁴⁰

Following this, another more complicated means of divining the same thing offers several possible outcomes, including whether or not the man and woman will have sex, love each other, get divorced, have children, etc.⁴¹

In the third section, containing the prescriptions, for some ailments, there are several remedies given, as in the case of cracked lips:

Pound yellow raisins, and reduce to a powder, and work up into a paste with terebinth gum and a little honey and oil, and smear the lips therewith. Or rub down yellow raisins and arsenic in oil, and smear the lips therewith. Or pound hyssop and work up into a paste with honey and smear the lips. Or treat the lips with the inner rind of the date, or with the inner skin of an egg. Or with the rind of a sweet onion. Or take one *dirham* of caryophyllus aromaticus and one *dirham* of alum, and pour on them one cup of vinegar, and boil them until they are dry and nothing but a powder remaineth. Take some of the powder, and rub thy lips therewith.⁴²

Children receive in some cases their own remedies for their particular health problems, as in this prescription:

For childrens' [sic] cough. Mix fifty coriander seeds with fifty seeds of pomegranates, and put them in three figs and let the patient chew them. Or pound two drachms of licorice root and myrtle, and let the patient swallow it in dates.⁴³

Elsewhere in this section we learn that peppercorns in different recipes are useful in getting rid of gas.⁴⁴ In passing, we may note that the prescriptions in the last part of the book, as in the second, are not solely dedicated to bodily ailments. There are, for example, remedies for eradicating reptiles, beetles, crickets, and ants from one's home, and a recipe for a concoction to kill fleas.

⁴⁰P. 622 / Syr. 519.

⁴¹Pp. 622-624 / Syr. 520-521.

⁴²Pp. 668-669 / Syr. 563.

⁴³P. 671 / Syr. 565.

⁴⁴See two prescriptions on p. 676 / Syr. 568.

which survives only fragmentarily in the original, although some of it made its way into the later and larger Greek agricultural collection known as the *Geoponika*.⁴⁹ The Syriac version was also translated into Arabic by the 9th or 10th century and was employed in the *Nabatean Agriculture* (*Al-filāḥa al-nabaṭīya*) of Ibn Waḥṣīya.⁵⁰ The Syriac text of the *Geoponica* was edited in 1860 from a 9th century manuscript by Paul de Lagarde. The work has garnered the attention of lexicographers more than other kinds of scholars of eastern languages, and it has not been translated or studied to any degree, aside from Lagarde's own initial remarks that appeared prior to his edition and some more recent studies concerned with the complex textual relationships among the various versions of the work, but its vocabulary has fortunately made its way into the Syriac lexica. It merits, however, a serious comparative study beside the Greek in terms of arrangement, textual basis, and translation technique.

Barhebraeus' work called *Butyrum Sapientiae* was mentioned above, in particular its book of meteorology. The same edition and translation of that part of the work also includes the book of mineralogy. This title, "Book of Mineralogy", should be understood broadly, for while the author does discuss particular minerals, this segment of the work also includes discussions of the earth taken as a whole, such as mountains, springs, seas, and earthquakes; it is the earthly counterpart to the section of the *Butyrum Sapientiae* that deals with things happening in the air, "The Book of Meteorology."

5 Grammar and lexicography

The earliest witness to Syriac lexicographical work is two 4th-century Manichean Syriac-Coptic glossaries found in Egypt's Dakhla Oasis. These glossaries were part of a translation effort for a Syriac text into Coptic and thus the order of the Syriac words is not alphabetical or topical but according to the order of the source text. Among the more conventional dictionaries, most of which are Syriac-Garšūnī, those of Išo' b. 'Ali from the second half of the 9th century and Ḥasan

traductions littérales des premiers siècles, comme celles de Sergius Reschaina."

⁴⁹For an (out of date) ET of the last work, see, Thomas Owen, *Geoponica: Agricultural Pursuits* (London, 1805), with further bibliography in GEDSH. For some remarks on this text in Arabic, see C.A. Nallino, "Tracce di opere greche giunte agli arabi per trafilā pehlevica," in T.W. Arnold and Reynold A. Nicholson, eds., *A Volume of Oriental Studies presented to Edward G. Browne* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 345-363, esp. 346-351.

⁵⁰See Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshīyā and his Nabatean Agriculture* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006).

b. Bahlul from the mid 10th-century are the most important. Both are arranged alphabetically and both have accrued new entries in the process of transmission. The practice of glossarial addition is an old one. Probably no early lexicon has been transmitted without scribal additions, and Bar ‘Ali even encourages his successors in the practice.⁵¹ For Bar ‘Ali’s lexicon there are at least four recensions (or distinct versions), with manuscripts of both ES and WS provenance. We know from Bar ‘Ali’s preface that Ḥunayn b. Iṣḥāq also compiled a lexicon, and Bar ‘Ali was in fact a student of Ḥunayn.⁵² Among the materials so far cataloged at HMML, six manuscripts are known.⁵³ Bar Bahlul’s lexicon, slightly later than Bar ‘Ali’s, is of greater length and bears witness to earlier lexicographical efforts that do not otherwise survive.

I now turn to a somewhat understudied, but nevertheless very important, vocabulary testimony, one that is of a different kind than those mentioned so far. Eliya of Nisibis (975-1046), Patriarch of the Church of the East, has earned a noteworthy position among both Syriac and Arabic writers for his works in grammar, lexicography, historiography, and theology.⁵⁴ His *Kitāb Al-Turjumān*, a topically classified (i.e. non-alphabetic) Syriac-Arabic (Garšūnī) glossary, serves as an important monument to both Syriac and Arabic in a Christian and philosophical setting at an important juncture for both of these languages. In this work, Eliya lists vocabulary in both languages for general, everyday topics, as well as theological and philosophico-scientific terms, and at the end he offers a long list of colors, verbs, and various phrases. Eliya’s book is relatively well-attested in manuscripts from both the western and eastern Syriac traditions. In 1636 a version of the work was printed at Rome along with a Latin translation,⁵⁵ but without naming Eliya at all, and in 1879 the industrious Paul de Lagarde published the first real edition of the *Kitāb*,⁵⁶ but the Syriac was printed in Hebrew script, presumably due to printing difficulties,⁵⁷ and the Garšūnī in Arabic script, instead of the whole work being in Syriac script as Eliya almost certainly composed it and as it

⁵¹Cf. Butts, “Bar ‘Ali,” pp. 62-63.

⁵²The identification has been (re-)established in Aaron Michael Butts, “The Biography of the Lexicographer Isho‘ bar ‘Ali (‘Īsā n. ‘Alī),” *OC* 93 (2009): 59-70. For other lexicographical works attributed to Ḥunayn, see *ibid.*, p. 60, n. 9.

⁵³(CFMM 466, 467, 470, 471; ZFRN 194 (20th c.); NEST S8.

⁵⁴This paragraph is essentially part of the abstract of my forthcoming paper on the *Kitāb*, first to be read at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in San Francisco, November 2011.

⁵⁵Tommaso Obicini, *Thesaurus Arabico-Syro-Latinus*.

⁵⁶*Praetermissorum libri duo* (Göttingen, 1879).

⁵⁷Cf. Ludwig Schemann, Paul de Lagarde. Ein Lebens- und Erinnerungsbild, 3d ed. (Leipzig and Hartenstein-Sachsen: Erich Matthes, 1919), p. 109.

is found in all manuscripts. The work sometimes shows up without an author in the manuscripts, and recent discoveries unknown to Lagarde include four that I have identified among collections available at HMML:

- SOAA 123(L) (dated 1835 AG = 1523/4 CE), oldest dated ms.
- CFMM 489 (16th cent.)
- CFMM 490 (16th cent.?)
- CFMM 492 (20th cent), with a third column in Syro-Turkish (i.e. Turkish written in Syriac script) for many words.

The oldest undated manuscript, perhaps 11th century, resides at St. Catherine's Monastery. Obviously, a new edition is called for, both due to the new manuscripts available and due to the unsatisfactory typographical results of Lagarde's edition.

While the direction of these lexica is usually Syriac-Garšūnī, we have at least one manuscript witness to a dictionary that goes the other direction (CFMM 472, dated 1907, Dayr al-Za'farān), entitled simply *Arabic-Syriac Dictionary (Qāmūs min al-'arabī ila al-suryānī)*.

In terms of grammar, it may be well-known that there is a very great tradition of Arabic grammar among Muslims reaching back to the eighth century, but Syriac writers, too, engaged in this endeavor. There are extant at least fragments from both east and west Syriac collections by Jacob of Edessa, Eliya of Nisibis, John b. Zu'bi, and Barhebraeus, along with several more in more recent periods. Barhebraeus was in fact the author of two Syriac grammars, a shorter and a longer, the former of which was composed in meter. HMML has a number of copies of both of these works. It bears emphasizing that, as in Greek, Latin, and especially Sanskrit grammatical traditions, these investigations were hardly those of unsophisticated neophytes, but in fact reached quite of pitch of both detail and clarity.

Islamic grammatical works have just been referred to, but what about Christian authors using Arabic? While they made no small contribution to Syriac and Arabic lexicography from the ninth century on, Christian Arabic work on grammar pales somewhat in comparison, but this situation changes as time progresses. An 18th century manuscript from Dayr al-Za'farān (ZFRN 198, dated 1763/4), for example, presents an anonymous Arabic grammar in Garšūnī, and there are other examples. For both Arabic grammar and lexicography, we may mention the Maronite Metropolitan Jibrā'il (his monastic name) Jarmānūs Farḥāt (1670-1732)⁵⁸

⁵⁸On whom see the article by I. Kratschkowsky in *EI*, 2d ed., vol. 2, pp. 795-796.

Especially noteworthy are his dictionary (*Iḥkām bāb al-i'rāb min luġat al-a'rāb*)⁵⁹ and grammar (*Baḥṭ al-maṭālib*). We have a copy dated 1857 (OLM 514) based on the original manuscript corrected by the author himself.⁶⁰ The work was written in 1705 and then printed in 1836 at the American press in Malta. It is divided into *buhūt* (sg. *baḥṭ*), “examinations,” and then *maṭālib* (sg. *maṭlab*), “problems”, with each “problem” being a short paragraph on a particular grammatical topic.

6 Logic and rhetoric

This will be the briefest section of my talk today, mainly, I confess, because of a personal lack of interest and experience in texts of this genre. Especially among Maronite and Greek-Catholic collections⁶¹ there are a number of manuscripts touching these fields. The study and explanation of both logic and rhetoric is equally popular among both Islamic and Christian scholars⁶²

One manuscript among many I may point out is an 18th century Garšūnī manuscript, in which, after a short Christian polemical text in another hand, there is a work entitled *Isagoge, or Introduction to Logic (Al-muqaddima fī ta'rīf al-manṭiq w-ajzā'ihī)*. There are several illustrative diagrams (for example, ff. 53v, 56r-57v), including a Porphyrian tree (f. 29v). According to the colophon (f. 93r), the manuscript was copied by a scribe named Iṣṭifānūs (Stephen), a monk of the St. Antony Monastery, completed on the 11th of Nisan (= April), 1737, in Rome. The work is a composition of the monk Yuwāṣaf (Joasaph, 1690-1737) of the village of Baskinta in Lebanon, attached to the Monastery of Saints Peter and Marcellinus in Rome.⁶³ The manuscript concludes with a short Syriac-Garšūnī glossary.

⁵⁹Printed under the editorship of Ruṣayd al-Daḥdāḥ (Rochaid de Dahdah) as *Dictionnaire arabe par Germanos Farhat, maronite, évêque d'Alep. Revu, corrigé et considérablement augmenté sur le manuscrit de l'auteur* (Marseille, 1849).

⁶⁰وذلك عن النسخة الاصلية المصلحة بقلم مولفه السعيد الذكر المطران جبرائيل فرحات (p. 269).

⁶¹See, for example, the subject indices under “Logique” and “Rhétorique” for GCAA and GAMS.

⁶²The latter in its Syriac form has especially been studied by John Watt: see the collected volume of his essays, *Rhetoric and Philosophy from Greek into Syriac* (Ashgate Variorum, 2010), as well as his *Aristotelian Rhetoric in Syriac. Barhebraeus, Butyrum Sapientiae, Book of Rhetoric*, with assistance of Daniel Isaac, Julian Faultless and Ayman Shihadeh (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁶³This same monk copied OLM 573 in 1733.

7 Secular History

Among works of history not specifically devoted to activities and goings-on most pertinent for the church is Barhebraeus' *Chronography*, the first part of an historical opus, the second part of which is an *Ecclesiastical History*; in his *Chronography* he casts his net wide and touches on the earliest history known to him until well up to his own time.⁶⁴ Barhebraeus himself adapted his Syriac *Chronography* into Arabic near the end of his life.⁶⁵ In his work on world history, Barhebraeus was consciously following in the footsteps of Michael the Great, who had not long before Barhebraeus composed a lengthy history of the world, now extant in Syriac, Garshuni, and Armenian, all of which have recently been published in facsimile, partly as a joint effort between HMML and Gorgias Press. As to the purpose of Barhebraeus' secular historical writing, he remarks in the preface to the work, "...as this our rational being ...profiteth through practical (i.e. actual) hearings, the calling to remembrance of the things, both good and bad, which have happened in each and every generation conferreth no small benefit on all those who care greatly to acquire what is good, and who take pains to hate what is bad."⁶⁶ He later specifically mentions having made use of the library at Marāğa in Azer-

⁶⁴For the first part: E.A.W. Budge, *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l Faraj, the Son of Aaron, the Hebrew Physician, commonly known as Bar Hebraeus, being the first part of his political history of the world. Translated from the Syriac*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932); vol. 1 is an English translation (based on Bedjan's Syriac edition; see below) and the Syriac part, vol. 2, contains a facsimile of Bodleian Hunt. 52. See vol. 1, pp. 429-431 for an English translation of the Syriac part corresponding to the Arabic text presented here. The Syriac text had also been edited previously by Paul Bedjan, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon syriacum* (Paris, 1890). For the second part of Barhebraeus' work, the ecclesiastical history, see T.J. Lamy and J.B. Abbeloos, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, 3 vols. (Paris and Louvain, 1872-1878; these volumes contain parallel Syriac and Latin texts, along with annotations.

⁶⁵See Takahashi, *Bio-Bibliography*, pp. 301-313, which includes a full listing of editions, translations, studies, and manuscripts. First edited and translated by the noted Oxfordian Arabist Edward Pococke (1604-1691): *Historia compendiosa Dynastiarum authore Gregorio Abul-Pharajio, Malatiensi Medico, Historiam complectens universalem, a mundo condito, usque ad Tempora Authoris, res Orientalium accuratissime describens. Arabice edita, & Latine versa*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1663), it subsequently appeared under the care of Anṭūn Ṣālḥānī, *تاريخ مختصر الدول للعلامة غريغوريوس أبي الفرج بن ابراهيم الطيب الملقب المعروف بأبن العبري* (Beirut, 1890). The *tā'riḥ* has not been translated into English, but there is a German translation (Georg Lorenz Bauer, 1783-1785), (partial) Turkish (Şerafeddin Yaltkaya, 1941), and two in Farsi (Muḥammad 'Alī Tāj Pūr and Hišmat Allāh Riyāḏī, 1985; 'Abd Al-Muḥammad Ayati, 1998).

⁶⁶Budge, vol. 1, p. 1.

baijan⁶⁷ to fill the book “with narratives which are worthy of remembrance from many volumes of the Syrians, Saracens (Arabs), and Persians.”⁶⁸

8 Entertainment literature

By “entertainment literature” I mean something along the lines of what is in Arabic literature called *adab*. This kind of writing at the high point of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate in the ninth century has been described as follows: “...the great literature of *adab*, with its varied and pleasing erudition, which is not pure scholarship although it often also touches on, and handles scientific subjects, but which is centred above all on man, his qualities and his passions, the environment in which he lives, and the material and spiritual culture created by him.”⁶⁹ I want to mention two works connected with Syriac and Christian Arabic writers and readers that fit at least loosely into this genre: *Kalila wa-Dimna*, of Indian origin, and Barhebraeus’ *Laughable Stories*.

From a Sanskrit original now lost a Persian physician named Burzoy at the court of Khusrau I (531-579) translated into Pahlavi an Indian collection of stories, many with animal characters. This Pahlavi version was turned into Syriac in the 7th century⁷⁰ and into Arabic in the 8th century by ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Muqaffa’, the version that would be the parent of all subsequent eastern translations and thus the grandparent of versions in western languages. A second Syriac translation was made from the Arabic of Ibn al-Muqaffa’ in the 10th or 11th c.⁷¹ and yet a

⁶⁷On the city see V. Minorsky in *El*, 2d ed., vol. 6, pp. 498-503, esp. p. 502.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁹F. Gabrieli in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), s.v. “Adab,” pp. 175-176, this quote from 176.

⁷⁰Edited in 1876 (Leipzig) by Gustav Bickell (1838-1906), together with a German translation and a long introduction by Sanskrit scholar Theodor Benfey (1809-1881). See further Th. Nöldeke, Rev. of Bickell, *ZDMG* 30 (YEAR): pp. 752-???, idem, “Zu Kalilah waDimnah,” *ZDMG* NO. and YEAR, pp. 794-806; Immanuel Löw, “Bemerkungen zu Nöldeke’s Anzeige von Bickell, Kalilag un Damnag,” *ZDMG* NO. and YEAR, pp. 535-539; L. Blumenthal, “Kritische Emendationen zu Gustav Bickell’s Kalilag und Damnag,” *ZDMG* NO. and YEAR, pp. 267-320. Not long after Bickell’s edition of the first Syriac version, two advances prompted Schulthess to re-edit the text: discoveries and studies bearing on the Indian predecessors to the Syriac, and copies of a Mardin manuscript of the text that were better executed than the one available to Bickell. Schulthess’ edition is accompanied by copious critical notes and a German translation with numerous annotations given as endnotes; the introduction to the translation also includes a bibliography (obviously out-of-date) for Kalilah and Dimnah.

⁷¹W. Wright, ed., *The Book of Kalilah and Dimnah translated from Arabic into Syriac* (1884). The

have made a revised Arabic version of his own Syriac Chronicle, and the *Laughable Stories* were translated into Arabic after the author's death.⁷⁶ Before taking leave of this work and the subject as a whole, I cannot refrain from pointing out that the 19th century editor and translator of the work caused twenty-five of the 727 stories to appear in Latin rather than English because he considered them too risqué or offensive to Victorian sensibilities. These twenty-five stories have yet to be published in a modern language, but I have translated them and am currently finishing up an article on them, perhaps to be published by next year.

Thus far, two copies of the *Laughable Stories* are known among HMML's collections, both from Mardin. The oldest (CFMM 441) is from the early 17th century. According to the colophon (f. 117r), the manuscript was begun in the city of Gargar in 1914 AG (1602/3) and completed in Amid in 1917 AG (1605/6 CE). The other manuscript (CFMM 461) is late, having been completed only in 1960 in Mardin, but is still not without interest, especially for the information the scribe, Philoxenos Dolabani, provides. This copy is based on two manuscripts: one copied by Michael bar Barṣum at the beginning of the seventeenth century and another copied at Dayr al-Za'farān in 1908. Both of these have lacunae, Dolabani says.⁷⁷ The former of the two manuscripts is none other than the 17th century manuscript I have just pointed out, part of the colophon of which is quoted in Dolabani's introduction to his manuscript. In this preface he also specifically mentions the printed edition of the work,⁷⁸ so we have a case of a printed work—based, of course, on manuscripts—being subsequently indicated in a manuscript.

turwissenschaftliche Reihe, Band 21.1-2; Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), with vol. 1, pp. 38-45 on Al-Abi, and idem, "al-Ābī," in Julie Scott Meisami, Paul Starkey, eds., *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 21-22. Available editions of Al-Abi's work include: Khaled 'Abd al-Ghani, ed., (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2004), and M.ʿA. Qarna et al., eds, 7 vols. (Cairo, 1980-1991).

⁷⁶Translated by Yuḥannā bin al-Ġurayr al-Zurbābī, bishop (from 1668) of Damascus, in 1656 at the Church of Mar Behnam, and entitled *كتات الاحاديث المطربة والنقط المستغربة*. The manuscript (Garšūnī) is in Paris. This version is now being studied by Jean Fathi, from whom I have gratefully received some information on it.

⁷⁷All this on f. 2v.

⁷⁸He also names a partial edition by Isaac Armalet (? not mentioned by Takahashi) and two manuscripts of the work available at Charfet, and one at Paris (no. 274, dated 1670).

9 Conclusion

We have named or otherwise indicated a number of Syriac and Christian Arabic scholars active as students, translators, copyists, and authors of texts in genres not directly connected with their Christian faith. While they may have been monks, bishops, deacons, maphrians, or even patriarchs, that is hardly all they were, as the evidence of their scholarly and literary activities bear out. Theirs was a Christianity able to take in a broad field of vision with depth and to seek to satisfy their intellectual curiosity with alacrity, both surely habits worth fostering among all of us, irrespective of our religious identities.

Very few, perhaps none, of the individuals mentioned here can be thought of purely as secularists or philosophers divorced from their Christian faith. I have highlighted the nonreligious work, but we have evidence of religious activity for most of the authors and translators named here. Sergius of Reš ‘Aynā, for example, composed a treatise *On the Spiritual Life*, and a catalog of the theological and monastic works of Barhebraeus would require more time than we have to enumerate. What I have attempted to do here is shed light on a sliver of Syriac and Christian Arabic literature in the hope that we might have a more accurate picture of them: like many of their religious successors in various denominations, they often operated in several fields, only one of which was the religious one. Their interests and activities very probably all influenced each other, but that is an enquiry for another day. For now, let us remember these scribes, translators, and authors as the philosophers, scientists and literary entertainers we have seen them to be.