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Recommended Citation

McCollum, Adam C., "He loves drinking old wine from the jug": Some Remarks on Alcoholic Beverages in Syriac Literature Based on Secular and Religious Texts" (2012). *HMML Lectures*. 2.

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“He loves drinking old wine from the jug”: Some Remarks on Alcoholic Beverages in Syriac Literature Based on Secular and Religious Texts^{*}

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Abstract

The history of alcoholic beverages in various cultures, including our own, has often been written. These investigations have looked at viticulture, brewing, distillation, and the economic and religious uses and effects of alcoholic beverages. Syriac literature, being somewhat of an arcane area of interest, has rarely—if ever!—entered into any of the discussions. It is, nevertheless, a corpus with a breadth wide both in size and subject matter, and there is no dearth of references to alcoholic beverages, their preparation, and use. This paper, based on both secular and religious texts in Syriac, most of them composed in a Muslim-majority culture, will touch on questions of what kinds of alcohol were drunk, how these drinks were made, who did the drinking and what was thought of their drinks (including acknowledgement of its detriments), and finally we will ask what Syriac literature contributes to the history of drinking.

^{*}This is the draft of a paper prepared for a public lecture at Saint John’s University on Jan 26, 2011. A longer study will follow.

I Introduction

Dipsologists, those interested in the history and characteristics of alcoholic drinks, find themselves in the enviable position of having at hand a number of recent books on the subject: to name only a few, Max Nelson's *The Barbrian's Beverage: A History of Beer in Ancient Europe* (2005), Iain Gatley's *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol* (2009), Patrick McGovern's *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (2010); specifically for the American history of alcohol, Garrett Peck's *Prohibition Hangover: Alcohol in America from Demon Rum to Cult Cabernet* (2009) and Daniel Okrent's *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (2011). Two recent video documentaries, too, have focused on alcohol: Ken Burns' *Prohibition* that aired on PBS just a few months ago, and the Discovery Channel's more tongue-in-cheek *How Beer Saved the World*. The history and social phenomenon of alcohol, then, both in antiquity and in more recent times, is apparently of special interest to the public these days. To get at the knowledge of how beer, wine, and other drinks were made, used, and thought about at any time period and in any place, access to sources and the ability to understand them is, of course, the chief prerequisite. It is not surprising, then, that sources in European languages, from classical to medieval to modern, have perhaps met with the most use, but scholars of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt have spent no small amount of effort in the aim of clarifying especially beer in those societies.¹ This kind of work is especially valuable since knowledge of Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian, along with much knowledge of the cultures that documents in those languages grew out of and contributed to, can hardly be considered standard tools in the average educated person's intellectual toolbox. Similarly, it is no surprise that Syriac literature has contributed nothing, as far as I know, to any discussion of alcohol drinking in the middle east in late antiquity and later. Nevertheless, no one can say that there is a dearth of references to alcohol in various kinds of texts in this language. The object of this paper is to make a first wide-angle view of the subject.

Before continuing, the title deserves some explanation. The quoted line "He loves drinking old wine from the jug" is actually not from a Syriac source at all, but is a paraphrase of an Arabic line of poetry quoted by Al-Šābuštī in the tenth century, followed by the thirteenth-century scholar Yāqūt in his *Geographical Dic-*

¹Some of these studies have reached (semi-)popular audiences: a synopsis of the late Peter Damerow's paper on the main Sumerian fermented beverage cited below appeared very recently, January 17, 2012, appeared at <http://www.physorg.com/news/2012-01-fermented-cereal-beverage-sumerians-beer.html>.

tionary for his entry on the Syriac Orthodox monastery of Dayr Al-Za‘farān,² the present-day collection of which is available for study here at HMML. We are perhaps sometimes fooled into thinking that because alcohol is officially prohibited in Islam, the Middle East has not much of a history of drinking. The sources, pre-Islamic, Islamic, and otherwise, all tell us quite differently, not least because Muslims have never been the sole inhabitants of these regions, and Muslims themselves have found appropriate uses for alcoholic beverages and their pleasures. I will briefly introduce Syriac language and literature, then turn with a quick glance to some of these other near eastern sources to set the stage and proper context for Syriac culture, and then the Syriac sources themselves comes to the fore.

So, now a few words about Syriac as a language and its literature are in order. Syriac is an Afroasiatic language, and within that group belongs to the Semitic family; with the Semitic languages further divided, Syriac is situated among Aramaic dialects. Aramaic stretches back to the beginning of the first millennium BCE with inscriptions (known as Old Aramaic). It was used for various kinds of documents around the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and also in the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and it served as the *lingua franca* of the Achaemenid Empire (Official Aramaic). About ten chapters of the “Hebrew” Bible are preserved in Aramaic, rather than in Hebrew. Later, there are inscriptions in the related dialects of Palmyrene, Hatran, and Nabatean. Syriac is attested almost exclusively in use by Christians, and its surviving literary corpus is by far larger than any other Aramaic dialect. The earliest survivals of Syriac are non-Christian tomb inscriptions of the third-sixth centuries CE, but it very early became the language of Christians in the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, taking one of its designations from the city of Edessa, which is now the city of Urfa in Turkey. Partly contemporaneous Aramaic dialects include Jewish Babylonian, Jewish Palestinian, Christian Palestinian, and Mandaic. The heyday of Syriac language use and literature stretches from the fourth to the eighth or ninth centuries, at which time the use of Arabic had begun to take hold in the wake of Islamic ascendancy, but there was a revival of Syriac writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Let no one assume, however, that when this renaissance subsided classical Syriac ceased to be written: there are Syriac compositions, formal and informal, in prose and in verse, even into the twenty-first century. While a number of spoken Aramaic dialects had their final words spoken in the twentieth century, due especially to the ethnic migrations and genocides of the time, there are still pockets of Aramaic speakers both in the middle east and among migrated communities elsewhere in the world, but they

²Vol. 4, p. 512, in the Beirut edition. The original line reads: *wa-yahwá šurba ʿātiqati ʾl-dināni*.

are nevertheless quickly dying out and linguists have been in a rush to document these dialects before they are no more.

Turning to Syriac literature, we find that, while a great deal has been published in printed editions since the birth of western Syriac studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is still a hefty burden extant only in manuscripts. Syriac is written in three slightly different scripts, two having eventually differentiated themselves from the earliest variety of the script in the communities that formed following the christological controversies of the fifth century. In terms of genre, Syriac literature comprises—in addition to the kinds of texts customary in literate Christian communities such as theology, commentary, liturgy, hagiography, hymnography, and homiletics—the genres of history, philosophy, science, and belles-lettres, often inspired by Greek and, later, Persian and Arabic literatures, and both prose and poetry are very well represented.

As stated in the title, this study is based on both secular and religious genres of Syriac literature. The subject has to my knowledge never been looked into on so comprehensive a scope, and this is but a first step into the question. The state of Syriac textual scholarship being what it is at this point, a study of this kind requires at least two methods, in addition to knowledge of the literature as gained through everyday reading. First, it is by using the indices provided with editions and translations of texts. Second, it is by combing the available dictionaries, some of which fortunately include the means to locate a given Syriac word based on a particular word in the target language (in these cases, Latin or English). The first method is for the most part terribly inadequate, because very few text editions are supplied with complete indices or concordances, and few translations have thorough subject indices. All this is to say that this study is very preliminary and most assuredly does *not* cover all of the evidence that is available in printed editions of Syriac texts, not to mention the mountain of texts that remain only in manuscripts.

2 Alcohol in the ancient near east before the time of Syriac witnesses

As mentioned above, classical scholars have taken advantage of Greek and Latin texts to learn more about wine and beer, which is mentioned less frequently in use among the Mediterranean population, in these societies. Worth mentioning especially among classical texts are Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis*, Columella's *De re rustica*, and Palladius' *Opus agriculturae* in Latin, and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*

in Greek. It must be remembered, that although these texts are in Greek and Latin, especially in certain periods writers who used Greek or Latin had opportunities for contact with western Asiatic lands and cultures, which bring us immediately to the geographical region where Syriac was used.

Generally speaking, the region here under consideration is that from present-day central Turkey to western Iran, and in terms of north and south covering most of the Middle East, that is, regions where Syriac was spoken or written. But before turning to Syriac witnesses themselves, it makes good sense to look at drinking in these places before Syriac actually became a full-fledged literary vehicle in the first-second centuries CE. This means that we have to turn to earlier sources in Sumerian and Akkadian and in prior Aramaic dialects. We are fortunate that Assyriologists have apparently found the subject of alcohol to be of suitable interest for scholarly inquiry and have made the results of their investigations known in a number of articles. So, too, have biblical scholars applied their energies to studying the numerous references to wine and other drinks in the Hebrew Bible. Both beer and grape-wine of more than one kind was known and consumed in all these lands, and in Egypt,³ but dates and honey were also used in preparing alcoholic beverages.⁴ Beer, or something like it, at least, although probably much lower in alcohol content⁵ than the common 4-7 or 8% ABV of today's beers, shows up commonly in Sumerian documents, but especially in administrative documents of

³In Egyptian, beer is *ḥnkt* > Coptic Ⲛⲏⲕⲉ, and wine is *irp* > Coptic ⲏⲣⲡ. For an idea of how often beer and wine factored into daily Egyptian life, see the index (s.vv. "beer" and "wine") of Edward Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt* (Atlanta, 1990). See also W. Helck, *Das Bier im alten Ägypten* (Berlin, 1971). In Greek texts, a Greek word for beer, ζῦθος (which also appears in Syriac), is sometimes associated with Egypt. For medieval Cairo, see Paulina B. Lewicka, "Restaurants, Inns and Taverns that Never Were: Some Reflections on Public Consumption in Medieval Cairo," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48 (2005): 40-91.

⁴A.L. Oppenheim and L.F. Hartman, *On Beer and Brewing Techniques in Ancient Mesopotamia*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society Supplement* 10 (1950); Miguel Civil, "A Hymn to the Beer Goddess and a Drinking Song," in *Studies Presented to A.L. Oppenheim* (Chicago, 1964) 67-89; Benno Landsberger, *The Date-Palm and its By-products according to the Cuneiform Sources* (Graz, 1967); W. Röllig, *Das Bier im alten Mesopotamien* (Berlin, 1970); Marten Stol, "Zur altmesopotamischen Bierbereitung," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 28 (1971): 167-171; idem, "Beer in Neo-Babylonian Times," in Lucio Milano, ed., *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East. Papers of a Symposium held in Rome, May 17-19 1990*, *History of the Ancient Near East / Studies - VI* (Padua, 1994) 155-183; and most recently, Peter Damerow, "Sumerian Beer: The Origins of Brewing Technology in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal* 2012.2, http://www.cdli.ucla.edu/pubs/cdlj/2012/cdlj2012_002.html. All of these works refer to a number of other relevant studies.

⁵See Damerow §6.14.

the Neo-Sumerian period at the turn of the second millennium BCE. Of the probably over 100,000 such documents that survive, “[s]everal thousands of individual entries ...document that ‘beer’ (kaš) or its ingredients were delivered or received.”⁶ A Sumerian proverb reads “He who drinks beer drinks water,” which either refers to the fact that the water is itself an ingredient of beer, or that one gets used to beer the more of it one drinks, so that it can be drunk like water.⁷ The French Assyriologist Jean Bottéro opines,

...beer, through its existence, its consolations, and its delights, might have offered the ancient Mesopotamian population, beginning in the most distant times, a kind of gustative ideal, a source of pure pleasure, one within the reach of (almost) everyone, and good for counterbalancing many of the worries of existence.⁸

While barley beer of some kind⁹ held apparent sway into the second millennium BCE, an alcoholic drink made from the date palm grew in popularity in the first millennium.¹⁰ As we will see, dates were also used in alcoholic fermentation in this region many centuries later.

Women were especially associated with brewing. We may note the Sumerian hymn to Ninkasi, a brewer-goddess, and the fact that a major character in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (especially in Tablet X) is the “ale-wife” (*sābītu*) Šiduri.¹¹ In addition, statements in the *Code of Hammurabi* point to female brew-

⁶Damerow §5.3.

⁷kaš nag-nag-e a ba-nag-nag; see Bendt Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer: The World's Earliest Proverb Collections*, vol. 1, p. 24 (no. 1.102), with the commentary in vol. 2, p. 352.

⁸*The Oldest Cuisine in the World: Cooking in Mesopotamia*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago and London, 2004) 91. See further on beer and wine pp. 89-96.

⁹Damerow (§§7.1-7.3) is hesitant to even call the drink referred to in Sumerian sources “beer” due to the uncertainty as to how much this drink really is like our beer.

¹⁰Of the date palm and its drink, noted Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim relates,

The date palm as one of the earliest domesticated plants of southern Babylonia—no wild-growing species has been discovered—requires the services of the horticulturist in pollination if a substantial crop of dates is to be harvested. Its fruit can be easily preserved and represents an essential source of the calories needed in the diet of a working population. In the first millennium an alcoholic beverage was prepared from dates, replacing the barley malt beer of the periods up to the middle of the second millennium.

Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization, rev. by Erica Reiner, (Chicago and London, 1977) 44; see also 315. The study in English by Stol cited above is also very relevant here.

¹¹On Šiduri, see A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and*

ers (e.g. §§ 108-109, cf. § 110). I have looked in vain for an analogous situation in Syriac culture.

References to alcohol in the literary remains of the ancient near east show that it was an everyday part of life and also a mark of blessing. A Phoenician inscription reads, “And may this city be(come) the possessor of abundant food and wine, and may the people who dwell in it become the possessors of oxen and sheep and abundant food and wine.”¹² The fourth-century BCE Aramaic Papyrus Luparensis (= CIS II 146) mentions both Egyptian and Sidonian wine,¹³ and we find wine mentioned in the inscriptions of the Middle Aramaic dialects Palmyrene, Hatran, and Nabatean.¹⁴ A Hatran inscription dated 237/8 CE reads, “The likeness of Qayyāmay, daughter of ʿAbdsemayā, the wine-merchant.”¹⁵ A Palmyrene inscription dated 243 CE has the words, “He brought old wine to the priests the whole year from his house, and wine in skins.”¹⁶

I have been silent about the Bible so far, and here I will only underscore the fact that the Bible itself does not present a monolithic view on alcohol: it is seen as both a blessing and something that can be dangerous. Nazirites (Num 6), of course, are not to touch it, and we will find what may be a reflection of this in the

Cuneiform Texts, vol. 1 (Oxford, 2003) 148-149.

¹²*wkn hqrt z bʿlt šbʿ wtrš wʿm z ʿš yšb bn ykn bʿl ʿlpm wbʿl ʿn wbʿl šbʿ wtrš*, KAI 26 A III.7-9, cf. K; cf. C. Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary* 499 s.v. *TRŠ I*. Also in Phoenician on a fragment of an amphora is, “red wine of Gitt-Kirmil,” Krahmalkov 188 s.v. *HMR* and 211, s.v. *YN*: *hmr yn gt kr[m]*.

¹³Text in Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions: Moabite, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Jewish* (Oxford, 1903), 210-211; see also 213.

¹⁴E.g. Cooke, p. 303 (text 140 B, l. 5), with commentary on 305. One may also do a concordance search of these dialects at the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. On the sometime ban on wine in Nabataean society and its subsequent relaxation, see Nelson Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins: The Story of the Nabataeans* (New York, 1965) 4. Cf. Joseph Patrich, “Was Dionysos, the Wine God, Venerated by the Nabataeans?” *Aram* 17 (2005): 95-113 and Zeyad Al-Salameen, “Nabataean Winepresses from Bayda, Southern Jordan,” *Aram* 17 (2005): 115-127.

¹⁵Text, ed. H. Ingholt, in *An Aramaic Handbook*, pt. I/1, text 12, ll. 1-2 (pp. 46; = KAI II 300): *šlmtʿ dy qymy brt ʿbdsmyʿ hmrʿ*. The last word may also mean “wine-maker”, and perhaps, quite differently, “donkey driver”. The text has also recently appeared in John F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Period*, Textbook of Syriac Semitic Inscriptions IV (Oxford, 2009) 298-299. For pictorial representation of wine-drinking at Hatra, see Lucinda Dirven, “Banquet Scenes from Hatra,” *Aram* 17 (2005): 61-82.

¹⁶Text, ed. H. Ingholt, in *An Aramaic Handbook*, pt. I/1, text 13, ll. 4-5 (pp. 42-43): *ʿsq hmrʿ ʿtyqʿ lkmryʿ štʿ klh mn byth wʿhmr bzqyn*. On this last word (> Arb *ziqq*), see Fraenkel 171, where only the Syriac and JBA words are mentioned; it is notable that the word has the clear and relatively early connection with wine in another Aramaic dialect. Akkadian *ziqqu* (Neo-Assyrian), with the same meaning, is perhaps an Aramaic loanword into Akkadian (CAD Z 129).

Syriac monastic rules forbidding monks, at certain times at least, from drinking wine. The Wedding at Cana, with the miracle of Jesus' turning the water into wine (Jn 2), known alliteratively in German as the *Weinwunder*, shows, however, an apparent blessing of the fermented fruit of the vine, and Paul famously counseled his disciple Timothy, "No longer drink just water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Tim 5:23).¹⁷ We will find below that this verse is cited in approval of wine-drinking in such instances for monks, and its medicinal use appears in even broader contexts. In the Hebrew Bible, in contrast to Akkadian and Egyptian literature, the principle drink seems to have been wine, but another drink (Hebrew *šēkār*) is also mentioned, which is perhaps the same or similar to the beer of Mesopotamia.¹⁸ The Bible was very well known to most Syriac writers: it was read and commented upon, and its language formed a basis of Syriac liturgy. It will already have been seen that some of the biblical remarks on alcohol will have made their influence known in Syriac literature, and more will be said on this below, but I have not thoroughly studied the voluminous Syriac commentary tradition on relevant biblical verses for statements of opinion on alcohol; this is certainly an avenue for fruitful study in the future.

S. Fraenkel remarked, "Wine is so often thought of in pre-Islamic poetry, that one might come to the assumption that it was a rather widespread means of pleasure among the ancient Arabs."¹⁹ In Arabic sources, there is "wine" from dates, wheat, barley, honey, grapes, and even rice.²⁰ Wine from grapes not being made in Arabia, the wine-trade that brought the drink into Arabia was especially associated with Aramaic-speaking Christians,²¹ and this association is well supported by

¹⁷Μηκέτι ὑδροπότει, ἀλλὰ οἶνον ὀλίγον χρῶ διὰ τὸν στόμαχον καὶ τὰς πυκνάς σου ἀσθενείας.

¹⁸See generally Jack M. Sasson, "The Blood of Grapes: Viticulture and Intoxication in the Hebrew Bible," in Lucio Milano, ed., *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East. Papers of a Symposium held in Rome, May 17-19 1990*, History of the Ancient Near East / Studies - VI (Padua, 1994) 399-419. Sasson mentions "the enormous secondary literature" on the subject (399 n. 1). See, with more detail, Carey Ellen Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine: Viticulture in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, 2000).

¹⁹"In den vormuhammedanischen Gedichten wird des Weines so häufig gedacht, dass man auf den Gedanken kommen könnte, er wäre unter den alten Arabern ein recht verbreitetes Genussmittel gewesen," 154.

²⁰Georg Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben nach der Quellen geschildert* (Berlin, 1897) 96-109, esp. 96-97; for *mā' al-zabīb*, "raisin-water", a (not necessarily alcoholic) infusion (*naqī'*) of raisins in water, see 98-99. For a modern instance of making this "raisin-water" in Iraq, see Farida Abu-Haidar, *Christian Arabic of Baghdad* (Wiesbaden, 1991) 172-175 (text 14).

²¹Fraenkel 156-157, 159-160; G. Jacob 97-98; and Jeffery 21-22. More recently, note P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987), 105; Muhammad Maraqtan, "Wine Drinking and Wine Prohibition in Arabia before Islam," in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*

the linguistic evidence. The commonest Arabic word, in prose, at least, for wine (*ḥamr*) is itself almost certainly a loanword from Syriac.²² The Arabic word for merchant (*tājir*) ultimately derives from an Aramaic root, and in its early usage it most commonly has the specific meaning of wine-merchant.²³ Arabic *sakar*, “intoxicating drink”, may also derive from Syriac or another Aramaic dialect, but it is perhaps a proper Arabic word of Semitic heritage. Other terms related to alcoholic beverages that have a Syriac, or at least general Aramaic connection, include:

- absinthe (?) *isfint* < Syr *apsentyon* < Grk ἀψίνθιον (Fraenkel 162, SL 88)²⁴
- old wine: *ʿatīq* < Aram *ʿattiq*²⁵ (Fraenkel 171-172)
- spiced wine: *qindīd* < Syr *qonditon* < Grk κονδῖτον < Lat *conditum* (Fraenkel 162-163, SL 1336; cf. BB 1633.18)
- rose-wine *rusātūn* < *ros[t]āton* < ῥόσατον < *rosatum* (Fraenkel 163, PS 3868, [cf. Pers. *gulāb*, Steingass 1093a])²⁶
- The root *mzj* (verb *mazaja*, noun *mizāj*, for mixing or diluting wine [opp. *širf*]), probably has this usage from Syriac (Fraenkel 172).
- It requires further investigation to determine which Aramaic dialect was the source of *ḥānūt*, “tavern, wine-shop” (Fraenkel 172-173).²⁷

As for receptacles,²⁸ note especially:

23 (1993): 95-115; and a few remarks by Mikhail Bukharin in his “Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity,” in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx, eds., *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Brill, 2010), 115-134 esp. 129-131

²²Fraenkel 160-161, Jeffery 125-126.

²³Jeffery 90-91 and 126 n. 1, following Fraenkel (in which see also 158-159) and D.H. Müller.

²⁴See also Löw, *Aramaäische Pflanzennamen* 80-81.

²⁵The word is used to describe wine various Aramaic dialects: see, e.g., the Palmyrene inscription above, the Syriac references below, and DJBA 885.

²⁶Fraenkel (164) is right to deny, despite appearances, a connection between the common word for wine in old Arabic *qarqaf* and Aramaic (Syr, JBA, Mand) *qarqaptā*. The etymology proposed by Fraenkel (171) and followed by Jeffery (141-142) for *rahīq*, namely Syr *rḥiq*, has recently been challenged with a new proposal, Hebrew *reqab* or a kindred word: Ailin Qian, “Spice, Spiced Wine, and Pure Wine,” *JAOS* 128 (2008): 311-316.

²⁷PS 1318-1319, SL 471, DJBA 473 (also MD 124). See also G. Jacob 99-100. Fraenkel seems to opt for JBA as the origin. The word was also adopted in Gəʿəz (*ḥanot*): Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge* 45; cf. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez* 238.

²⁸In addition to these words, also see above on the Palmyrene inscription for *ziqq*.

- clay jar: *ḥazaf* (Fraenkel 169) < Syr *ḥeṣbā* (SL 483)²⁹ or *ḥezbā* (SL 436) < Akk *ḥaṣbu* (AIOA 54)
- wine-jug: *dann* (Fraenkel 169)³⁰ < Aram (Syr, JBA, Mand) *dannā* (PS 924, SL 311) < Akk *dannu* (AIOA 46)³¹
- drinking cup, goblet: *nājūd* (Fraenkel 167-168)³² < Syr *ngudā* (SL 888)

Finally, I must highlight that monasteries, and as it happens, monasteries that were inhabited with Syriac-speaking monks, were known in Arabic literature as places where wine flowed freely and where one, even a Muslim, might enjoy the pleasure of wine.³³ The most well-known sources that supply this information are the *Book of Monasteries* of Al-Šābuṣṭī (10th century) and the *Geographical Dictionary* of Yāqūt, mentioned above, who freely made use of Al-Šābuṣṭī's earlier work.

3 The kinds of texts

It will already be clear that this study is based on *texts*, and not other kinds of potential evidence, such as that available through archaeology or art history. This decision is merely one based on competence and personal interest, both of which in my case are decidedly on the side of text and not on that of the other two fields.

What genres of texts give us a glimpse into how alcohol was used and thought about in Syriac culture? In short, virtually every genre that exists in Syriac. These include:

- the Bible

I made a few remarks on the Bible and alcohol above. Here I will just give a simplified picture of the Bible as available in Syriac. Parts of the Bible,

²⁹Cf. the poetic lines cited at PS 564 s.v. *ḥḥ*.

³⁰See also G. Jacob, 100-101.

³¹The Akkadian word was also noted at G. Jacob 100 n. 2.

³²See also G. Jacob 102.

³³See H. Kirkpatrick, "Representations of Social Intercourse between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Some Medieval *Adab* Works," in J.J. Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* 218-220; cf. in the same volume, J. Christoph Bürgel, "Zoroastrians as Viewed in Medieval Islamic Sources" 209.

notably the Old Testament and the Gospels,³⁴ were translated as early as the second century, but a revision and augmentation to include the remainder of the Bible was later undertaken so that by the early fifth century there was a complete Bible in Syriac, though its canon was not exactly the same as that of the Greek or Latin churches; the standard version of the Syriac Bible, made up of the Old Testament translation and the revised New Testament translation is known as the Pəšīttā. The Old Testament translation, uniquely among early biblical versions, was based on the Hebrew text and not the Greek Septuagint, although a Syriac translation based on Origen's *Hexapla*³⁵ appeared in the seventh century. Parallel to this Greco-centric Syriac version of the Old Testament is the Ḥarqlean revision of the New Testament, made in the same century.³⁶ I relate these basic details on Syriac textual scholarship on the Bible to make it very clear that the Bible was studied carefully and closely in ways analogous to the Origenian ideal in Greek and certain Latin patristic scholarship, and so scrutiny of relevant biblical passages such as Noah's planting of a vineyard and subsequent drunkenness,³⁷ "wine that gladdens the human heart" (Ps 104:15),³⁸ the falsely accused drunkenness of the Christians at Pentecost (Acts 2:13-15),³⁹ and wine as a symbol of judgement in Revelation,⁴⁰ among many others, could

³⁴The earliest form of the Gospels that came into Syriac was the *Diatessaron*, but there are two recensions of a translation, probably of the next century, of the "separate" Gospels, known as the Curetonianus and Sinaiticus.

³⁵Specifically, the fifth column of the *Hexapla*, containing the edited Septuagint, together with readings from the later Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion.

³⁶The Syro-Hexapla dates to 613-617, made by Paul of Tella, and the Ḥarqlean, made by Thomas of Ḥarqel, to 615/6. The latter, and perhaps parts of the former, are a revision of the previous revision known as the Philoxenian, undertaken by a certain Polykarpos for the famous Philoxenos of Mabbug in 507/8. The Philoxenian is essentially lost, unless a surviving sixth-century translation of the Minor Catholic Epistles and Revelation belongs to this revision.

³⁷See my "An Arabic Scholion to Genesis 9:18-21 (Noah's Drunkenness) attributed to Philoxenos of Mabbug," *Hugoye* 13 (2010): 125-148.

³⁸*ḥamrā mḥadde lebbēh d-barnāšā*. A similar phrase is repeated by Aphraḥ and applied to Jesus; see below. Note also the similar language of Jdg 9:13, where a vine in a parable says "my fruit that gladdens the heart of gods and men," *ādaš(y) da-mḥadde lebbā d-alāhē wa-d-(?)nāšā*. The word *ādaš(y)* here stands for Hebrew *tīrōš*.

³⁹See Sebastian Brock, "Sobria Ebrietas according to Some Syriac Texts," *Aram* 17 (2005): 185-191, p. 187 in particular, for an example of this passage as standing in east Syriac liturgy for spiritual drunkenness

⁴⁰While Revelation was not part of the standard Syriac biblical canon, there was a version from the sixth century—see the note just above—and was included together with other biblical books in some manuscripts. Dionysios bar Ṣalibi also penned a commentary on the book.

not have escaped the attention of Syriac hearers, readers, and authors.

- biblical commentary

As I said above, this is one genre of text I have not thoroughly looked through from the perspective of the present topic, but the surviving commentaries of authors such as Ephrem, Moše bar Kēfā, Dionysios bar Šalibi, and Bar ʿEbrāyā would almost certainly shed light on the question when they deal with biblical passages where alcohol plays a role.

- history or chronicles

Alcoholic beverages are referred to at certain points in the narratives of histories and chronicles and thus these kinds of texts by chance offer details about drinks in everyday life. Without reliable concordances or at least indices, however, a systematic reading through these works, some of them quite long, is necessary. Just in one work, the *Chronicon* of Bar ʿEbrāyā, which reaches to the thirteenth century, I have found seven references to wine, and there are certainly more, both in that text and in others. Bar ʿEbrāyā tells us, for example, that the blight of 848 AG (= 536/7 CE) caused the fruit never to ripen and the wine to taste like urine.⁴¹ We learn of a winter five hundred years later (1238 AG = 926/7 CE) in Baghdad so cold that the “vinegar of the wine” itself froze,⁴² and not long thereafter (329 AH = 940 CE) an Arab ruler, sick with both illness and grief, ordered “that four hundred jars of priceless old wine should be emptied into the Tigris” and then he died.⁴³ Bar ʿEbrāyā in this work also repeats alcohol protocols associated with Enoch, the Nazirites, and Muḥammad.⁴⁴

- lexical material

Syriac lexical material, which survives especially in a Syriac-Arabic format, includes works in the format of one word to one word correspondence lists and also in the format of having longer descriptive definitions for each word. The best known such works, all of which originated in the Church of the East and all of which provide us some otherwise unknown information about alcoholic beverages in Syriac, are the following:

⁴¹Bedjan 79-80; Budge ET 74-75.

⁴²Bedjan 171; Budge ET 155.

⁴³Bedjan 179; Budge ET 162.

⁴⁴Bedjan 5, 98, 166; Budge ET 5, 91, 151. Note also the mention of wine-presses, apparently near Gargar, perhaps at a monastery at Bedjan 315.22, Budge ET 276.

- the lexicon of Išo^s bar ʿAli (second half of the ninth century)
- the lexicon of Ḥasan bar Bahlul (mid-tenth century)
- *The Book of the Translator, for Instruction in the Syriac Language*, by Eliya of Nisibis (975-1046)

Naturally, while these texts provide Arabic terms for Syriac designations of alcoholic beverages and related terms, the meaning is nevertheless not always clear.

- medical texts

As is becoming better known, Syriac translations of Greek medical works played a monumental role in the transmission of Greek scientific knowledge into Arabic. A number of these texts in Syriac are now lost, but from the evidence that remains, it is clear that alcoholic beverages were sometimes mentioned, both beer (using a Greek loanword)⁴⁵ and wine. One work in which wine, both as a medicine and as the cause of hangovers, is mentioned is the so-called *Syriac Book of Medicines*, a late collection of a variety of texts, some very loosely connected to medicine indeed.

- metrical homilies and other poetry⁴⁶

The metrical homily, or *mēmṛā*, is a variety of poetry made of couplets most commonly in lines of seven or twelve syllables, and it is especially associated with the authors Ephrem, Isaac, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai, but a great many of these texts are also anonymous or pseudepigraphical. Other kinds of poetry in more complex meters based on stanzas, especially by Ephrem, are known as *madrāšē*. Almost every subject of a religious nature is met with in these poems, and, as we will see below, there are two homilies by Jacob of Sarug specifically dedicated to the question of alcohol.

- monastic rules or canons

With the growth of Syriac monastic communities in the fourth and fifth centuries, collections of guidelines for proper monastic behavior appear, and

⁴⁵See Galen, *De simp. med.*, ed. Merx in ZDMG 39 (1885) 258.1. Cf. the Greek ed. of Kühn, v. 11, 882.5; similar information on ζῦθος in Greek appears in Aëtios of Amida 1.154.1, Oribasios 15.1.6.6.1, and Paul of Aegina, *Epitom. med.* 7.3.6.9.

⁴⁶For a general introduction, see Sebastian P. Brock, “Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac,” in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford, 2008) 657-671.

there are several references to whether and how monks should use wine. Much later, Bar ʿEbrāyā would bring together in his *Nomocanon* some remarks about wine in the Eucharist.

- saints' lives

As in the other eastern Christian communities, hagiography is very well attested in Syriac, both for saints of Greek and Coptic origin, and for native Syriac saints. These texts, as in other traditions, range from possible historical reality to absolute fiction or legend, but in every case across this spectrum, they provide us with the opportunity to see how the authors and the readers saw their world, including alcoholic beverages as an object of consumption and as part of the eucharistic mystery. Unfortunately, even though Syriac editions of a great many hagiographical texts are available, researchers are at the present time plagued by a lack of concordances, studies, and translations of these texts, so that their sheer number becomes an almost immovable burden for anyone looking at a particular topic across this genre.

- scientific, namely, natural history

While medical texts, mentioned above, are also scientific literature, I reserve this heading here specifically for a text known as the *Geoponica*, which survives in a ninth-century manuscript and goes back to a Greek original.⁴⁷ This agricultural text, which is not always easy to understand, has a wealth of information, both viticultural and lexical, on wine and the care of vines, but it has never been translated. I offer a single selection of the work below.

- wisdom literature and belles-lettres

I have two works in mind here. First is *The Story of Aḥiqar*, a text set in the reigns of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. There is a much earlier Aramaic witness to the text than Syriac in the form of a papyrus fragment from Elephantine (in Aswan in southern Egypt) dated to the fifth century BCE. The text is composed of two parts, a narrative and

⁴⁷The textual lineage is as follows: the Greek original is the, mostly lost, fourth century work by Vindanius Anatolius of Beirut; this was translated into Syriac and thence into Arabic, some of which made its way into Ibn Waḥṣīyya's *Nabatean Agriculture*. Later authors—Cassianus Bassus (sixth century) and the compiler of the later *Geoponica*—used Vindanius' work and so provide other Greek witnesses.

a set of maxims, and “wine” is mentioned in both parts of the Syriac version.⁴⁸ The second text is yet another from the hand of Bar ʿEbrāyā, namely his *Laughable Stories*, a collection of short sayings and stories supposedly from various nations. This Syriac work, which was twice translated into Arabic, takes some initial inspiration from the much larger similar work of the eleventh-century Arabic author Al-Ābī called *Naṭr al-durr*.

4 The kinds of drinks and what they were called

Let us begin our closer look into Syriac literature with the names of various alcoholic beverages that are known. Not surprisingly, the lexical texts mentioned above are especially valuable here. Syriac literature is so vast and varied, that I am often amazed at what we know how to say in Syriac. In connection with the topic under discussion, for example, we know the names of various containers for wine, both for storage and drinking (ʿoparā,⁴⁹ bāṭitā, dannā, ḥesbā, kāsā, lginā, snarqā, peṭqā, ṣepdā), the wine-siphon (mulā), two words for dregs (teṭrā and speqli), wine storehouse (bēt qarnē), two words for tavern (ḥānutā and bēt qappēlē) and two words for tavern-keeper (ḥānwāyā and qappēlā),⁵⁰ wine-press (maṣartā), at least two words for drunk as an adjective (rwe, mṣaddar), one for the noun (rawwāyā), and even a corresponding adverb (mṣaddrāʿit). The regular term for wine is ḥamrā and it is so common that an examination of every occurrence of the word would prove a prodigious undertaking. While this word is most often used for grape-wine, it is also used for other alcoholic drinks not derived from grapes.⁵¹ Bar Bahlul (761) defines “wine” generally as

Something liquid possessing heat⁵² and strength of taste [or influence]⁵³ that is mingled with pleasantness, according to [?] the variety that is in the upright vine, most often red in color, with a joy-giving

⁴⁸The story is also extant in Armenian and Arabic, and traces survive in Greek and Gəʿəz.

⁴⁹Presumably from Greek ἀμφορέα or Latin *amphora*, but the phonology is not clear. The vocalization above is from Bedjan, AMS 7 302. It is defined in his note as *quqā*, “pitcher”.

⁵⁰Greek κάπηλος is the source of *qappēlā*.

⁵¹We sometimes do the same thing in English, e.g. barley-wine and honey-wine.

⁵²Cf. Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* ii.1.52, “A cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in ’t,” and note that a 1746 reference to whisk(e)y in the OED calls it “a hot Malt Spirit.”

⁵³The Syriac word *taʿmā* can mean “taste”, but it can also refer to the inebriating influence of alcohol as in Aḥiqar (Harris et al.) 53.19-20: *wa-qām(w) ba-ṭʿam ḥmarhon wa-qatlu(h)y*, “They arose under the influence of their wine and killed him.” The Aramaic expression is older than Syriac, however, since it occurs in Biblical Aramaic, too: Daniel 5:2.

and refreshing effect, and it may possess a varying degree of relief and sweetness.

As mentioned above, the Syriac work known as the *Geoponica* contains a wealth of information on wine and viticulture. The work merits a dedicated study of its own in light of the comparative study of ancient viticulture; here I give only one excerpt from the book:

How to make one year old wine seem like it is many years old: [Take] one ounce of melilot, three ounces of licorice root, the same amount of celtic nard,⁵⁴ and two ounces of hepatica; crush it, strain it, put fifty-six spoonfuls in a pitcher [of wine], and heat it in a tripod, and you will think it is many years old.⁵⁵

Based mostly on the lexical material, some varieties of alcoholic drinks for which there is evidence include:

- new wine: *mēritā* (E § 12.2).⁵⁶ “New wine” may, if very new, not be very alcoholic, but that the term in Syriac may refer to a noticeably alcoholic drink is evident from a passage in one of Gewargis Warda’s poems, where drunkenness is implied.⁵⁷
- wine from unripe grapes: *gōrg apšārag* (?) and *gorqā* (both Persian words)
- sweet wine: *ḥulyā*⁵⁸ or *ḥamrā ḥalyā* (BB 761)
- boiled wine: *maypuktā* (Persian word)
- spiced wine apéritif: *parpoma* (i.e. *πρόπομα*)⁵⁹ (BB 1633). The drink was prepared from various wines, honey, and spices (*heromē*), and was taken before a meal “to warm and strengthen the stomach.”
- beer: *zutos* or *zutin* (BB 684; E § 12.2)

⁵⁴Cf. Galen in PS 3628 s.v. *لعل*.

⁵⁵§8.12 (p. 48 in Lagarde’s ed.)

⁵⁶Eliya of Nisibis is cited, not according to Lagarde’s edition, but Syr. Orth. Archdiocese of Aleppo ms. 123(L), the earliest dated (1523/4 CE) copy of the work.

⁵⁷In Hilgenfeld’s ed., p. 39, sts. 31-32.

⁵⁸The word *qulḥā* also occurs at SyrBkMed 236.3, but it is perhaps an error for *ḥulyā* (cf. SL 1329).

⁵⁹The vocalization is not precisely certain. Cf. Lampe 1162 for the Greek word.

- barley-wine, beer: *ḥamrā d-men s'ārē* (E § 12.2)
- honey-wine: *ḥmar debšā* (BB 761 [2x]) or *ḥmar debboryātā* (BB 761; E § 12.2)
- honey-wine, prepared with leaves and fruits of the chaste-tree: *peqdā* (BA [rec. 2] Gotth 275.9-13)
- rose-wine: *ḥmar wardā* (BB 761 [2x]). Perhaps non-alcoholic; cf. Persian *gulāb*.
- an intoxicating beverage not made from grapes: *šakrā* (BB 1977; E § 12.2). Bar Bahlul says, “Everything pressed but not from the vine is called *šakrā*, such as the [fermented] juices of dates, barley, and figs.”
- an intoxicating beverage (always from dates?): *nbidā*⁶⁰
- date-wine: Bar Bahlul (1516) defines the Greek words *puniqitos awnos* (i.e. *φοινικίτης οἶνος*)⁶¹ with Syriac *ḥamrā d-tamrē*, and the Arabic part of the definition adds the description “joy-giving” (*al-musarrir*) and also supplies the apparent synonym *'araq*.
- myrtle-berry wine: *ḥamrā da-bnāt āsā* (Geop §8.41). The drink is said to have medicinal uses.
- (fermented) juice: *teryānā* (BA Gotth 491.1; E § 12.2)
- raisin-wine: *teryānā d-aḥšātā* (BA Gotth 491.1; E § 12.2)⁶²

Qualities or descriptive terms, probably applied mostly to wine, are the following:

- unmixed: *aqraṭon* (i.e. *ἄκρατον*) or *lā mzigā* (E § 12.2)
- white: *š'otānāyā* (BB 761; E § 12.2)
- pure, clear: *šapyā* (E § 12.2)
- shining: *zārgā* (BB 761)

⁶⁰Cf. Bedjan’s variant in his ed. of Bar ‘Ebrāyā’s *Nomocanon*, p. 35 n. 7, where *nbidā* is explained simply with *šakrā*.

⁶¹LSJ 1948 cites only Dioscorides.

⁶²These last two are not patently alcoholic but in Eliya’s lexicon they are included under the section *fī l-ḥamr wa-l-nabīd*. Cf. the raisin drink recipe mentioned above from Iraq.

- old: ʿattiq
- purified (of dregs): mṣallālā (E § 12.2)
- impure (with dregs): tṭirā (E § 12.2)

4.1 Excursus: Hangovers and avoiding them

Human nature being what it is, we cannot, of course, talk about alcohol, as Kingsley Amis, who penned some notable thoughts on the subject, knew well, without talking about hangovers, and we have in the work known as the *Syriac Book of Medicines* both a description of the condition and some possible cures.⁶³ The author introduces the topic of “the headache caused by drinking wine” with these words: “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.” The severity of the hangover is, he tells us, dependent on “the amount and the kind of the wine that was drunk,” and further, “We can enquire whether the wine injured the patient due to its strength or its quantity.” The author of this endlessly interesting text even delineates for us

the symptoms of a hangover: drunkenness, puking,⁶⁴ absence of mind, silence, sleep accompanied by drowsiness, extended pain in the head, great heaviness, urine that is white and not fluid, but sometimes thick, and the full pulsating in the veins that is called rotary.⁶⁵

There you have it: a fine, if brief, description of a hangover, but I can’t say that Kingsley Amis says anything about urine in his treatments of the topic! This passage continues with a proposed cure for the hangover,⁶⁶ and elsewhere in the work there is a cure for the loss of appetite from drunkenness (567.2-4, ET 673), and even a supposed way to avoid drunkenness while drinking (587.11-14, ET 700), but we have too little time to touch on these places.

⁶³The work was edited and translated by Budge. The translations below are adapted, sometimes extensively, from Budge’s.

⁶⁴The word may also mean “staggering” here; see SL 352 s.v. ܡܫܠܠܐ mng. 3, but I have opted for the translation (ibid. mng. 4) above because it seems to fit the headache and hangover stage better.

⁶⁵SyrBkMed 41.1-24, ET 39-40.

⁶⁶In addition, *ḥumār lebbā* at 566.7 probably means hangover: Budge’s “heart disease” (ET 672) is almost certainly wrong, since the first word in this expression is apparently a loanword from Arabic, namely *ḥumār*, “hangover”. Thus there is perhaps another cure listed.

5 Who was drinking?

In Greek literature, we sometimes find it stated that wine is the regular drink, but beer the drink of barbarians and poor people. I have not found beer referred to this way, in Syriac, but according to the fourth century writer Aphraḥaṭ, some kinds of drinkers were associated or dissociated with certain drinks. In one place,⁶⁷ he remarks, “The drink of the poor is water, but the rich man drinks wine and desire more.” Probably not much can be drawn from this, since it has the ring merely of exalting the poor and debasing the rich for religious or other reasons; in other words, it is probably not a statement of sociological fact. In another place, Aphraḥaṭ claims that Jews do not drink any wine made by non-Jews.⁶⁸ Beyond this, I have not come across any other such distinction in Syriac references to alcohol. It does seem to be the case, though, that virtually everyone drank, and that wine was most common. The most obvious restrictions against drinking are those in ascetic texts, including monastic rules, works going back to the fourth and fifth centuries.

Aphraḥaṭ counsels the solitaries not to attend drinking sessions (*meštawātā*), drink wine, or get drunk.⁶⁹ *The Book of Steps* twice urges circumspection and moderation with wine, but allows for some in sickness, thanks to Paul’s aforementioned counsel to Timothy to “use a little wine.” The author addresses his audience with the words, “We who teach others are not teaching ourselves, but we eat meat and drink wine inappropriately [*d-lā b-wālitā*].”⁷⁰ The wine allowance is couched in these terms:

Therefore, we, too, when we have pains from much fasting, our knees hurt from asceticism, and our bodies are dead with sin like Timothy’s was with evil thoughts, then let us drink a little [wine], as it is written, for our pains.

And finally, we turn to the monastic rules themselves. Rabbula’s *Admonitions for the Monks* (*zuhārē meṭṭol dayrāyē*) includes the rule: “The monks shall not drink wine, lest they blaspheme; let them especially take care neither to buy it or drink it.”⁷¹ Another rule attributed to Rabbula in a different text tells various church

⁶⁷Dem. XIV col. 632 (= Wr 268.6).

⁶⁸Dem. XV, col. 733. Cf. *Avoda Zara* 5 in the Mishna and Talmud.

⁶⁹Parisot, ed., *Dem.* 6, col. 273. On the meaning of *ʿal ḥamrā ʿbar*, see SL 1065 s.v. ܐܠ ܡܝܪܗܘܬܐ p^ʿal mng. 12.

⁷⁰Kmosko, ed., in *Pat. Syr.* 3, col. 820.

⁷¹Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*

functionaries⁷² to avoid wine and meat, but, as in *The Book of Steps*, that “a little [wine], as it is written” is permitted for the weak or sick (*nsis b-gušmēh*).⁷³ These rules of prohibition for monks, but occasional allowance for illness or special occasion, might be multiplied, but our time is too brief to quote more.⁷⁴

An accepted class of alcohol-drinkers are those who find in alcohol a remedy for pain and sadness, an idea that goes back to the Bible itself: Prov 31:6 says, “Alcohol is given to the mourning, and wine to those of bitter soul.”⁷⁵ Bar ʿE-brāyā, in his *Laughable Stories* repeated the idea in Syriac from a reputed Persian source: “Khosraw said, ‘Wine cleanses the heart of sorrows’” (no. 100). I ran across an acrostic wine song in two manuscripts from the collections available here at HMML with the words,

The distressed find joy in wine and forget old pains, (st. *bēt*)

and later

He who is oppressed by suffering, weak and shaking from the cold
If he drinks seven [times?] in the evening, he will be free from strife.

(st. *waw*)

6 Thinking about alcohol in Syriac

In many references to alcohol in Syriac literature, the drinks and their consumption are simply there, part of the context of the narrative or setting of some event. Here there is no reference to what happens when someone drinks a large amount of alcohol. In other places, it is said that if someone does drink a lot, he or she simply goes to sleep, and the author gives no judgement of any kind on the activity: it is simply a physical and psychical reality.

(Stockholm, 1960) 27, rule 4; cf. 80, rule 3. This translation from Vööbus has been slightly adapted here.

⁷²Namely, priests, deacons, and the *bnay* and *bnāt qyāmā*.

⁷³Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* 42, rule 23.

⁷⁴See Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* 47, rule 46; 72, rule 8; 73, rule 12; 143, rule 25; and 180, rule 10 (this one in Arabic); see also Vööbus, *Canons Ascribed to Mārūtā of Maipherqat*, CSCO 439/SS 191, pp. 97.17-18 and 99.17-18 (with which cf. p. 143 in the previous volume), and the ET in CSCO 440/SS 192, pp. 81 and 83.

⁷⁵Syriac, *metyheb šakrā l-abilē wa-ḥamrā l-mariray napšā*. I have translated *šakrā* simply as “alcohol” because anything more specific requires several words and would thus destroy the translation; in any case, it is not absolutely sure what the word means here other than an intoxicating beverage other than wine.

There is no evidence that alcoholic distillation was known in classical or even later Syriac literature, so there was no such proverb as “Wine is fine, but whiskey’s quicker”. Beverages of eighty or one hundred proof, however, are hardly required to get drunk, and so, drunkenness was, nevertheless, well known, as we saw above in the passage from the *Syriac Book of Medicines*.⁷⁶ Warnings about alcohol in Syriac culture certainly go back to previous Mesopotamian wisdom traditions; some such examples are found in *The Story of Ahiqar*, mentioned above:

- “My son, it is better to overturn stones with a wise man than to drink wine with a fool.”⁷⁷
- “My son, pour out your wine on the graves of the righteous, and do not drink it with iniquitous people.”⁷⁸
- “My son, stop after the first stage of the banquet,⁷⁹ and do not remain for the perfumed anointings, lest they become for you wounds on your head.”⁸⁰

In a much later text, the *Laughable Stories* again, we find a warning of supposed Indian provenance against letting alcohol take you too far:

An Indian sage said, “Wine makes those who drink it possess four qualities. In the beginning, the quality of a peacock: augmenting the beauty of its color and movements. Then the quality of an ape: beginning to play around with everyone. Then the quality of a lion: relying upon its strength and exalted. Then, finally, the quality of pigs, when drunk beyond measure: defiled with mud, puking, and sordidly rejoicing. (no. 113)

One of the most unique texts I have come across in this study is Jacob of Sarug’s metrical homily “On Drinkers” (or even “On Drunks”); while the Syriac text has been published, I know of no translation of it into any language, nor any published study of it. It is, nevertheless, a very interesting witness to Syriac thinking about alcohol from the late fifth or early sixth century. In this 362-line poem, Jacob goes through biblical history with reference to those characters who have gotten drunk and he intersperses advice on alcohol and how one ought to think of it and use it. Jacob first notes dangers inherent in alcohol:

⁷⁶Cf. BB 1886 on derivatives of the verb *rwā* “get drunk”.

⁷⁷Harris et al., 41, maxim 9. The translations are my own.

⁷⁸Harris et al., 41, maxim 10.

⁷⁹Syriac, *men meštōtā qadmāyā p̄tar*.

⁸⁰Harris et al., 44, maxim 43.

The mind is darkened when it profligately drinks [wine],
And changes good thoughts to empty ones. (ll. 51-52)⁸¹

Yet it is notable that Jacob has a problem with *much* drinking, not drinking merely (l. 124 and elsewhere).⁸² Not surprisingly, he also allots wine as a divine gift of comfort for those in sorrow, as we saw above:

The Lord gave wine for the mourner to drink
And thereby be comforted, and for suffering to pass from his mind.
(ll. 177-178)

This whole section, in fact, deals with the proper application of wine, that is, why God gave it to humankind. I note lastly that Jacob makes a memorable comparison of wine with fire, which can be both useful and painfully destructive:

Not for us to get burned did God give the world fire,
Nor for us to get drunk did God give humankind wine. (ll. 191-192)

Another relevant *mēm̄rā* by Jacob of Sarug is that on the miracle at the wedding in Cana, where, he says,

The wise one wanted to perform a wondrous miracle with wine. (l. 111)

In this homily, Jacob stresses the superiority of the wine that Jesus, with his authority as both son of God and creator,⁸³ made instantly and miraculously out of water in the story, and he contrasts this supernatural wine with the regular wine his audience was familiar with.⁸⁴

⁸¹Cf. ll. 106, 116, 186, 196.

⁸²Cf. from the acrostic wine-poem mentioned above,

Excess in wine is a loss, but drinking it mindfully a gain;
A lot of it is pleurisy [?], but a little is a delight. (st. *rēš*)

The word translated as “pleurisy” is clearly written in both manuscripts as *bur̄sm*, an unknown word. The very hesitantly proffered meaning here is from a Persian expression (*bar sām*, see Steingass 174) that exists as a word in JBA and Mandaic (see DJBA 247a and MD 51).

⁸³Note in ll. 220-221,

As long as my Father works as creator,
So I work, too, just as he.

⁸⁴Cf. l. 178: “good wine not from vines,” with l. 201 similar; “good wine” occurs again at ll. 203, 205, 241, vines again at ll. 212, 257, 264, 272; and grapes at 214, 266. Lines 224-229 show Jesus circumventing nature.

That natural wine⁸⁵ was missing that does not benefit,
 That it might give place to the wine of Jesus, which is helpful.
 The common kind that grapes bear was missing,
 That the son of the maker might show the power of his creativity. (ll.
 115-118)

Finally, as in some other religious literature, Syriac authors turn to wine and drunkenness as vehicles to articulate the mind-(and body-)affecting influence of the divine when fully tasted and ingested. Aphrahaṭ at least twice calls Jesus “the joy-giving wine.”⁸⁶ The little studied late fourth-century poet Qurillona takes full advantage of the Syriac terminology of wine and the vine in a short poem on Jesus’ advent and incarnation.⁸⁷ Some other passages have been studied by Sebastian Brock in his look at *sobria ebrietas*, “sober drunkenness”, in Syriac literature, and more recently David Taylor has looked at texts in this vein along with other poems that seem to be more straightforward wine songs.⁸⁸ An early example from Ephrem is

Wine greatly hates the person who likes it,
 making him drunk and crazed, thus mocking him.

...

By the (same) wine that crazes us, we are made sober.⁸⁹

A remark by Isaac of Nineveh harks back to an aforementioned accepted use of alcohol along with a metaphorical application of this same use to spiritual drunkenness:

As someone who drinks wine at the time of mourning and gets drunk,
 thus forgetting all the suffering of his sorrow, so it is with the person
 who, having got drunk with the love of God in this world, which is a
 place of lamentation, forgets his sorrow and all his distress; through
 his drunkenness he becomes impassible to all the affections of sin.⁹⁰

⁸⁵Cf. ll. 210, 229.

⁸⁶Parisot, ed., *Dem.* 14, col. 681 and, in the context of Jn 7:37 and Isa 55:1, *Dem.* 23, col. 24.

⁸⁷His works survive in only one manuscript (BL Add. 14591), which is probably of the sixth century; see Wright, *Catal.*, vol. 2, pp. 669-673. The Syriac text was edited by G. Bickell in ZDMG 27 (1873), with this poem on pp. 580-581.

⁸⁸Serafim Seppälä’s dissertation should also be noted: “*In Speechless Ecstasy*”: *Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature* (Helsinki University, 2002).

⁸⁹Ephrem, *H. de nativitate* IV.104-110; translation from Brock 186-187.

⁹⁰*Hom.* 79, Wensinck’s trans., p. 364; quoted in Brock 189.

7 What does Syriac literature contribute to the history of drinking?

Here at the end of this all too quick and brief survey of a variety of Syriac texts dealing with alcoholic beverages, what can we take away? Our sources are remarkable for coming from a great variety of genres, some religious, but many not. We find alcoholic beverages to have been a part of everyday life in Syriac culture, and this is something that does not change even under Islamic rule, and it is worth reiterating that the Syriac language and its speakers, certainly before the advent of Islam and probably afterwards, too, contributed both lexically and materially to Arabic and to Islamic culture. Members of Syriac society inherited, with alcohol as with other traditions, strains both Mesopotamian and Hellenistic, and thus they show a continuity with their forebears of the regions in which Syriac culture was situated. While they, along with the drinkers of late antiquity generally, lacked alcoholic distillation, and so had no very strong drinks, their menu of beverages was at least potentially quite varied. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, they did not eschew drinks other than wine, but were aware of, and seem not to have disdained, fermented drinks of barley, honey, spices, dates, figs, and myrtle-berries. Their wine from grapes was of various ages, both red and white, dry and sweet. In short, there was a vibrant and varied culture of alcohol in Syriac, one that encompassed the delights of drinking along with an honest awareness of its pitfalls and also exploited its possibility of metaphoric depiction of the divine. This preliminary look across Syriac literature as a whole shows that anyone studying the history of alcohol, whether generally or specifically for this region, would be remiss to turn down the fermented vintage of this and subsequent such studies.