

Introduction

Syriac was a major cultural language in Syro-Mesopotamia from approximately the 2nd to the 13th century AD. Although it stretched from the Mediterranean to East Asia, it was never the language of a state or a particular people in a national or ethnic sense; instead, it was a language of encounter and cultural contact. Its legacy is primarily religious: it was the process of Christianization that has made this particular dialect of Aramaic last up to the present day, and it is still the classical literary and religious language of the members of the Oriental churches and their Catholic and Protestant offshoots in the Middle East, India, and, increasingly, in the diaspora.

Next to Latin and Greek, Syriac is the third most important branch of ancient Christianity. As the heir to Greco-Latin antiquity, the Western world is largely unaware of this Christian tradition, which is anchored in Hellenism but also descended from a Near Eastern and Semitic past. In parallel with the Greco-Latin tradition in the West, it spread to the East in the first centuries of Christianity, eventually reaching as far as India and China. Compared with other branches of Christianity, Syriac Christianity has also undoubtedly had the greatest contact with Islam, with which it continues to coexist.

It is in Edessa, to use its Greek name, or Urhay, to use its Aramaic name (today Urfa or Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey)—“the mother

of all the cities of Mesopotamia,” as it styled itself on its coins—that the story of Syriac begins. Syriac was originally the dialect of Aramaic that was spoken and written in Edessa, the capital of the vassal kingdom of Osrhoene, which was situated on the frontiers of the Roman Empire in the 2nd century AD after briefly becoming part of the Parthian Empire. If it had not been for the Christianization of Edessa, Syriac would have stayed a local language, used largely for funerary inscriptions and administration like other dialects of Aramaic in other cities. Instead, after becoming the written language of Aramaic-speaking Christians, it spilled over the borders of Osrhoene and spread to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Arabia, and East Asia.

Syriac Christianity is unique because of its Semitic roots, its close proximity to Judaism, and especially its theology, which diverged from the Greek-speaking “Orthodox” church following the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon in the 5th century. These two councils crystallized the relationship between Syriac Christianity and the other denominations, and marked the point when the Syriac churches slowly started separating into their own bodies, each with their own patriarch (such churches are known as “autocephalic”). They include an eastern church (meaning east of the Tigris River), known as the Church of the East or the Church of Persia, which was sometimes called by others by the pejorative name Nestorian (now called the Assyrian Church of the East or—for the Roman Catholic branch—the Chaldean Church), and three western churches (west of the Tigris): the Miaphysite or Syriac Orthodox Church (sometimes called Jacobite; the Roman Catholic branch is called Syriac Catholic), the Maronite Church (a Chalcedonian branch, also in communion with the Roman Catholic Church), and the Melkite Church, which is also Chalcedonian and uses both Greek and Arabic in worship. Religious membership, together with language, still plays a major role in defining Syriac identity. Even today in Iraq, for example, the Assyro-Chaldean-Syriacs, as they call themselves, have not been able to come to a single unified name that would include the membership of all the churches—whether Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox, or Catholic—even as they claim to be freed from ecclesiastical power.

After the first two centuries of the Christian era, Syriac was never the official language of a state, and perhaps it is precisely that fact that

allowed it to become a universal Christian language and permitted its expansion across political borders into Asia. Syriac missionaries traveled along the Silk Road and established monasteries and churches at the same time that Manichaeans and Buddhists were spreading their own messages, centuries before the first Latin missionaries arrived in East Asia. In the 7th century, Syriac Christians had set up a “pope” in Tibet and spread the Syriac language as far as the famous Xi’an stele in northern China and to the edge of the deserts of Central Asia, where Syriac manuscripts have been recovered. Syriac Christianity also established a foothold along the sea routes in the Persian Gulf and India, where communities known as “St. Thomas Christians” still live and where there are still seven churches of the Syriac tradition.

Syriac Christianity should also be understood as being in dialogue not only with other churches and Christian traditions in the southern and western Mediterranean but also with other religions of the Middle East and Asia: paganism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, and to a lesser extent with Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism in their respective forms. It owes a great deal to the interpretations of Judaism in northern Mesopotamia where it developed, and in its turn, it played a major role in the beginnings of Islam. Through the clergy and the literary and liturgical connections that it maintained with the Arab Christian communities in Yemen, on the periphery of the Persian Gulf, and in northeastern Arabia, it created a religious and theological foundation for the Qur’an that is just now beginning to attract more attention. Syriac writers, who continued to read, translate, and comment on Greek philosophical and scientific works, transmitted Hellenic and Sasanian culture into Muslim thought, especially in 9th-century Baghdad. Syriac doctors, astronomers, philosophers, and secretaries were an essential part of Muslim courts until the medieval period.

Syriac can perhaps primarily be characterized as a culture of intermixture from the beginning: the heir, despite the ruptures, of Mesopotamian culture and the ancient Aramean world; steeped in Greek language and culture that had predominated following the founding of the Hellenistic kingdom of the Seleucids after the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC; a participant in the political and military culture of the Roman Empire that replaced the Seleucids; imbued

with Iranian culture, Parthian, and then Sasanian, and marked by that of the Arabs who lived throughout the region. The birth of Syriac in Osrhoene, the kingdom of which Edessa was the capital, contributed to the creation of a distinct (As)Syrian and Aramaic identity that continued to evolve through its contact with Roman, Persian, and Arab Muslim religions and powers, as well as with the Franks, Mongols, and Turks who would come later. Syriac Christians were always a religious and political minority in states where the official religion was different from their own, even if demographically they were not always a minority, and these various powers were the ones who created the cultural, religious, and civic categories in the vast geographical territory in which Syriac Christianity developed, evolved, and spread. This is partly why Syriac developed as a language of intercultural exchanges; translations first in Greek, and subsequently in Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Middle Persian, Arabic, Sogdian, Uighur, Turkish, and Malayalam (a language from the south of India) bear witness to the centrifugal force of Syriac culture.

These encounters were not always a matter of peaceful commercial, religious, or intellectual exchange. As the populations of borderlands almost by definition—situated between the two great Roman and Persian Empires until the seventh century, then different Muslim powers, and today between countries of the Near and Middle East, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as southeastern India—Syriac-speaking communities underwent countless massacres, invasions, sieges, destructions, and occupations, culminating in a genocide in Turkey in 1915. This litany of catastrophes has left its mark on their philosophy and their theology of their history. This story of loss coincided with the disappearance of local archives, the destruction of buildings, and the irreparable loss of manuscripts. Texts, which were the major product of Syriac culture, are thus nearly the only means by which their history can be written (along with, to a lesser extent, archaeology). Syriac culture is especially unique in its written culture; its material culture is similar to others of various languages and religions in the environment where it developed. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it was transmitted and in great part carried on by clerics of a high rank.

Heirs of Mesopotamian poetry and archival practices, of Jewish interpretation, of both Christian and secular Greek literature, Syriac writers blended their Greek and Semitic roots to create a unique Christian literature based on typological, symbolic, and literary imagery. If one had to choose a few key points of this tradition, the role of poetry, the place given to women, and the religious dimension and importance of writing and teaching deserve to be highlighted.

Poetry is the quintessential form of Syriac writing. Everything can be said in *memre* (metrical discourses), *madrashe* (strophic poems), and *sogyata* (dialogue poems): theology, exegesis, lives of saints, history, grammar, and even astronomy. Symbolic interpretation and images constitute their own form of language alongside the discursive dimension. Sung in church with alternating male and female choirs, *madrashe* and *sogyata* are meant to be beautiful forms of worship as well as a catechetical tool; they also play a major role in internal distinctions between Christian denominations and between the Greek and Syriac traditions, as well as external distinctions, such as with Jews, Manichaeans, and Zoroastrians, or later Muslims. The *memre* spoken during the liturgy are also both a literary medium for theological ideas and a way to frame biblical references in poetic imagery for ordinary believers.

Another notable distinction of the Syriac Christian tradition is the place given to women: poems give words to women who are silent in the Bible, and Syriac Bibles themselves are rearranged in such a way as to give greater prominence to the “books of women” (Ruth, Suzanne, Esther, and Judith, along with in some manuscripts the story of Thecla, the disciple of Paul). Theologians experimented with feminine imagery of the divine. The “Daughters of the Covenant,” who were consecrated for service in the divine liturgy, received a basic education, an almost unknown phenomenon in the ancient world, and it was specifically for women that the greatest Syriac poet, Ephrem, composed his *madrashe* in the fourth century.

Syriac literature is made up for the most part of Christian literary genres: exegesis, homiletics, patristic commentary, and hagiography. Religion is the lens by which Syriac authors read the world and the relationship between humanity and God. At the same time, an intense

interest in asceticism and mysticism did not prevent a similar enthusiasm for magic, astrology, history, philosophy, logic, or science, especially medicine and astronomy. But all of these are nearly entirely the domain of monks and clergy, including bishops and patriarchs, who formed these disciplines, practiced them, translated them, and wrote them down.

Another characteristic of Syriac culture is the valorization of teaching and the role of (religious) schools, including the codification of grammar and orthography—which created an overarching homogeneity in academic culture despite differences between West and East Syriac (west and east in relation to the Tigris, as always), and a standardization of language over the *longue durée*. The importance of written culture is notable, tied to the tradition of written culture in the Edessan chancellery and the tradition of Christian theology developed in Antioch that depicted God as the ultimate teacher of humanity.

This book invites you into the discovery of this unique language and culture.