

Foreword

I began to conceive the present work in the first year of pursuing my master's degree, as I was learning Syriac. Among the texts proposed as exercise to the student in the chrestomathy of Healey's *Leshono Suryoyo*, the book we employed in the Syriac course, there was a passage from Ephrem's *Carmina Nisibena* (CN) 17, praising the bishop Abraham¹. When the class firstly translated the text, it caught my attention. I had already read some studies on late antiquity in the line inaugurated by Peter Brown, and I thought that such a text, praising one of the rising powers of the time, could be very productive in that line of studies. My thoughts were confirmed also by one of my professors, Prof. Dr. G. Agosti, who also suggested that I look into Gregory of Nazianzus's poems on bishops. I set the idea aside at the time, so that I could complete my master's degree with a thesis on another fundamental author of late antiquity, Origen. With a better understanding of early Christianity thanks to Origen and more experience with the Syriac language, I could take up the idea again and decided to present it as a doctoral project to my *Doktorvater*, Prof. Dr. A. Schwab, and to the Cusanuswerk for financing. The present book is a revised edition of my doctoral thesis, presented to the philosophical faculty of the Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel in September 2022 and discussed at the same faculty in January 2023.

Among the many people who deserve thanks for this work of mine, my *Doktorvater*, Prof. Dr. A. Schwab (CAU–Kiel), counts as first. Working with me, he has been able to find that balance between experienced steering and generous allowance which alone can nourish responsible and fruitful freedom of research. Moreover, with remarkable kindness and bounty, he has also helped me learn to live (academically and otherwise) in Germany.

This work would not have been possible without the support of Cusanuswerk, which not only provided the financial grant that allowed me to research during the doctorate but also offers an all-round program of formation, covering the material and intellectual needs of a young academic as well as the spiritual ones. Furthermore, through their numerous initiatives I had the opportunity to know and interact with other, mostly German, graduate students, furthering my integration in the country. Thanks to them, I have felt warmly and generously welcomed.

I owe many thanks also to Prof. Dr. H. Leppin (GU–Frankfurt am Main), who kindly agreed to help me with my work and to confer with Prof. Dr. Schwab as needed, especially concerning the Syriac half of my research. His feedback and critiques have been very useful in improving my arguments. In addition, he has invited me to take part, both as listener and speaker, in the Kolloquium of the Leibniz-Projekt “Polyphonie des spätantiken Christentums.”

1 Healey 2005, 176–177.

Various individuals and groups have discussed with me, critiqued, or otherwise commented on the whole or parts of my dissertation. For this valuable input I gratefully acknowledge Prof. Dr. G. Agosti (Università di Pisa), Prof. Dr. Haensch (LMU-München), the participants in the already mentioned Leibniz-Kolloquium in the summer semester of 2021, those in the Kolloquium zur Gräzistik und Wissensforschung der Antike in the winter semester of 2022, and those in the Internationales Kolloquium zur Gräzistik und Wissensforschung der Antike und ihrer Rezeption in the summer semester of 2022. During all of these Kolloquia I publicly presented parts of my work. Special thanks go to Prof. P. G. Borbone (Università di Pisa) and Dr. A. Varela Expósito (SNSF, Università di Pisa) for organising the research expedition of the Università di Pisa in Tur Abdin, Turkey, in September 2020 and letting me take part in it, although formally no longer enrolled in that university. I could thus visit Nisibis (today Nusaybin) in person and present my hypotheses on the church of Mor Yakup (§4.3) in front of the building itself. I would like to thank the other participants in the expedition, too, for discussion and feedback. I thank also Prof. Dr. C. O. Tommasi for help during the initial phases of the competition for the Cusanus grant and my friend Leonida Vanni (Università di Pisa) for bibliographical advice on late antique spectacles and Christianity. My gratitude goes also to the Sankt Matthias Gymnasium in Waldram, where I currently teach, for the encouragement and the freedom granted to me to prepare this work for publication. It goes without saying that any error and all responsibility for what is here written is mine.

Finally, I am grateful for the support and encouragement from my family: my parents and grandparents, whose perhaps exaggerated notion of my abilities is a continuous source of optimism and hope, and my brothers and sister, who through an adequate amount of teasing and irony help me remain sane and grounded. Last, but not least, I thank my wife Lara, who encouraged me and accompanied me in this journey, going so far as to share the tedious work of revision to turn the dissertation into a book: without her, this publication would have been impossible.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Maria Antonietta Sali, who saw its beginning and could not see its end: may she share the joy of its protagonists.