

Symposium Syriacum VIII  
Sydney, Australia, June 26 – July 1, 2000

**UTE POSSEKEL, ST. JOHN'S SEMINARY, BRIGHTON, MA**

- [1] The Eighth International Congress for Syriac Studies, Symposium Syriacum VIII, convened from Monday, June 26 to Saturday, July 1, 2000 at the University of Sydney in Australia. The Symposium Syriacum was followed by the Sixth International Conference on Christian Arabic Studies, which convened at the same place from July 2–5, 2000.
- [2] Participants from around the world came together in the beautiful and hospitable city of Sydney, which will be the site of the Olympic Games in September of 2000. More than sixty scholars from five continents and fifteen different countries attended one or both congresses. Slightly more than half of the participants came from European countries (England, Germany, France, The Netherlands, Sweden, France, Hungary, Austria, Poland); the remainder of the participants came from Australia and New Zealand, Lebanon, India, Egypt, the United States, and Canada. Among the participants were several ecclesiastical dignitaries. The conference also drew interest among the members of local Syriac Christian communities.
- [3] The Symposium Syriacum VIII was opened by the convenor, Professor Rifaat Ebied, on Monday afternoon. His kind words of welcome were followed by greetings by representatives of the government of New South Wales and the University of Sydney. A reception followed, which provided the first of many occasions for stimulating conversation.
- [4] At the Symposium Syriacum, twenty-nine sessions with 57 papers were held from Tuesday through Friday. There were always two parallel sessions, each lasting 90 minutes and consisting of two papers. The time allotted to each paper was thus longer than at many conferences, and it provided the opportunity to explore themes in more detail. There were no plenary lectures. The papers will be published in the Conference Proceedings.
- [5] The papers presented at the Symposium Syriacum covered a broad chronological, geographic, and thematic range. Since it would be impossible to summarize all of the papers, I will confine myself to a brief presentation of the themes addressed. The subsequent overview is based on my own attendance of sessions

and personal conversations, and I apologize for any oversights and misrepresentations.

- [6] Among presentations with a theological emphasis were the following: Both J. Tubach and J. Ferreira addressed aspects of the Hymn of the Pearl. Th. Hainthaler examined the christological controversy on Proba and John Barbur. Two papers, by A. Sauma and H. Takahashi, focused on Bar Hebraeus. H. Gauke's presentation discussed Abdiso de Soba's writings, and Isho bar Nun's exegesis was the topic of J. Hofstra's paper. B. Colless examined the *Liber graduum*, and Ch. Lange the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* ascribed to Ephrem.

- [7] Papers in the area of history included those of J. van Ginkel on Jacob of Edessa in Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle*, and of W. Witakowski on Ps.-Zachariah of Mitylene. J. Coakley addressed the *History of the Eastern Patriarchs* by Elia of Alqosh, and E. Khalife-Hachem discussed Syrian monasticism. L. Wickham spoke on the preparation of the edition of Peter of Callinicus' *Contra Damianum*. J. Sanders introduced the audience to his recent publication on *Assyrian-Chaldean Christians in Eastern Turkey and Iran*.

- [8] Three papers focused on archeology, namely the presentations by Y. Sader on fifth-century sarcophagi in Lebanon, by A. Badwi on mediaeval Syriac mural paintings in Mount Lebanon, and by W. Klein on Christianity in Krygyzstan.

- [9] The history of mission stood in the center of the papers by E. Hunter on the conversion of the Turkic tribes, and by A. Vallavanthara on the mediaeval East Syrian mission as reflected in the writings of Cosmas Indicopleustes.

- [10] Several papers addressed the relation between Syriac Christians and other sects, religions, or cultures: A. Harrak discussed anti-Manichaean propaganda in Syriac sources, M. Hutter the polemics against Zoroastrianism, R. Hoyland the early Syriac writings on Muhammed, and U. Possek on Ephrem's polemics against astrologers. S. Edris examined the authenticity of Syriac polemical and apologetic writings. M. Franzmann studied the Manichaean Syriac pieces from the Dakhleh Oasis, and Mother Philothea of Sinai spoke on the Sian-Fu stone in the context of the relations between the Syriac and the Asian world. R. Gabriel focused on the relation between Syriac Christians and the crusaders in the 12–13th centuries. T. Saed addressed Mandaean baptismal practices.

- [11] Various papers focused on spirituality. J. Thekeparampil addressed the image of “gardener” in the Syriac liturgical and patristic tradition; W. Parker focused on the image of “fiery flame” in Ephrem’s writings. C. Horn discussed John Rufus’ view of Peter the Iberian’s pilgrimages; A. Makhlof studied the spirituality of the 18th-century mystic Umm Hindiyya Ajaymi; and J. Wozniak examined aspects of Syriac demonology. Asceticism was the subject of two papers, namely those by J. Sanders on the sermons of Mar Bishoi, and by N. Ricklefs on the *vita angelica*. R. Mouawad spoke on the Maronites in the 12–15th centuries.
- [12] The liturgy was the theme of the presentation by Metropolitan Bishoy, who spoke on the relation between the Syrian and Alexandrian hymns. Mar Aprem spoke on the fast of the Ninevites, and J. Kallarangatt on the Feast of the Twelve Apostles in the East Syrian tradition. J. Vellian addressed the monastic liturgy of the hours in the East Syrian church, and B. Varghese the West Syrian commentaries on the Eucharist.
- [13] Papers that focused on the Syriac Biblical versions included those by A. Juckel and B. Romeney on the Peshitta, P. Hill on the Harklean marginalia, and D. Taylor on the Diamper translation of the Latin canon.
- [14] Several presentations emphasized the transmission or translation of texts. Into this category fall the papers of S. Brock on Mushe of Nisibis (*in absentia* read by J. Coakley), of M. Qaschnig-Kirsch on the Syriac reception of Gregory of Nazianzus, and of M. van Esbroeck on the Syriac Life of Gregory the Wonderworker. H. Teule’s presentation offered a comprehensive overview of translations from Arabic into Syriac.
- [15] Three scholars introduced the audience to various collections of manuscripts: I. Perczel presented the joint Indian-Hungarian-French project to produce on CD-ROM the Syriac manuscripts of Kerala. A.M. Saadi introduced the microfilm-holdings of the Vööbus collection at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and E. Thelliyil introduced the Syriac manuscripts of the Mannanam collection. Several of these scholars addressed the need for both financial and scholarly support for the continuation of these projects.
- [16] Four other scholars addressed lexicographical concerns. G. Yonan introduced Theodor Nöldeke’s unpublished materials, E. Odisho spoke on the transliteration of loanwords, and T. Falla

presented general lexicographical considerations. G. Kiraz gave a progress report on the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, to which scholars are invited to contribute.

[17] As this overview shows, the conference program was diverse, and attention was given to all important aspects of Syriac studies. An emphasis was put on the medieval and modern periods, which may mark a general shift in the field. At previous conferences, more attention had been given to the study of the patristic period.

[18] In the evenings, the conference guests could experience the warm hospitality of local Syriac Christian communities and could get to know other parts of Sydney. One night, the participants were invited to attend a service at St. Gabriel's Syriac Orthodox church, followed by a wonderful reception which provided the opportunity to hear about the contemporary concerns of the Syriac-speaking churches. Later during the evening, G. Kiraz showed a video of a recent visit to the Tur Abdin, which he had undertaken together with S. P. Brock and A. Juckel. On another evening, the conference dinner was held at Edessa Hall of the Assyrian Church of the East. At another occasion, conference participants had the opportunity to listen to Syriac hymns, sung by the choir of the Assyrian Church of the East. During one evening, the participants were invited to visit the Manichaean Documentation Centre at Macquarie University, where S. Lieu and his colleagues welcomed us with a reception, and S. Lieu gave an informal lecture on "Nestorian Angels and Syro-Turkish Inscriptions from the South China Coast." Finally, there was the opportunity to visit a concert at the Sydney Opera House. The Symposium Syriacum ended on Saturday with a cruise on the Sydney Harbor.

[19] During the business meeting on Friday afternoon, the conference participants approved the establishment of an Interim Executive Committee, consisting of eleven scholars chosen by R. Ebied. The Committee's task will be to offer administrative help and to draft a constitution. At the next Syriac Symposium, a vote will be taken whether or not to establish a Society for Syriac Studies. The participants voted to establish a conference website. Concerning the location of the next symposium, the majority of those present voted for the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik and St. Joseph University, near Beirut, Lebanon.

[20] Overall, the Eighth Symposium Syriacum was a wonderful, stimulating, and interesting gathering that was well worth the long

journey. Many thanks should be expressed to Prof. Ebied, who organized this international gathering so well and welcomed all of us so warmly. Thanks are due also to his colleagues and assistants, and especially to Mar Meelis Zaia. The interest and hospitality of the local Syriac Christians demonstrated that Syriac studies have contemporary relevance and are not merely an academic undertaking.