

CONFERENCE REPORTS

“THE ORIGINS OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY”: FIRST SYMPOSIUM OF THE CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR SYRIAC STUDIES

- [1] On November 24, 2001, the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies held its first symposium. The conference was organized by the president of the Society, Dr. Amir Harrak, professor of Aramaic and Syriac at the University of Toronto, and partially financed by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The symposium was chaired by Dr. Grant Frame, Associate Professor of Akkadian Language at the University of Toronto and Assistant Director/Editor of the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia project. The program of the day-long conference ranged from an examination of the spread of Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia to a review of modern scholarship on the subject of Syriac Christianity, demonstrating the scope of scholarship in this field.
- [2] After a word of greeting from the Chair of the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto, Professor James Reilly, the symposium began with a paper by the host, Professor Amir Harrak. His lecture, entitled “Trade Routes and the Christianization of the Near East” began with two of the most important Syriac sources, the Teaching of Addai and the Acts of Mari. These two documents suggest that the spread of Christianity in the Near East was due primarily to a programmed apostolic mission. Prof. Harrak presented an alternative analysis of these texts, proposing that Christianity was transmitted throughout Syria and Mesopotamia along trade routes and with the help of merchants. Other religions and sects, including Judaism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Islam, spread in this same manner, thus it is not difficult to imagine Syriac Christianity following the same pattern.
- [3] The second paper of the day, presented by Professor Paul-Hubert Poirier of the Université de Laval, was entitled “Faith and Persuasion: On Bardaisan of Edessa’s Epistemology.” Prof. Poirier presented the Syriac Book of the Laws of Countries, a dialogue

between Bardaisan and Awida, and then focused his attention on the main theme of the text, that it is impossible to arrive at a firm conviction without faith. He reconstructed the philosophical background of this belief, and concluded by situating it within a broader scope, that of the Coptic Gnostic treatise *The Interpretation of Knowledge* and Augustine's aphorism "Crede ut intellegas."

- [4] Dr. Robert A. Kitchen offered the third lecture of the symposium entitled "Becoming Perfect: The Maturing of Asceticism in the Syriac Book of Steps." The speaker presented the mid-fourth century document, which is a collection of thirty discourses on the spiritual life by an anonymous author, and then proceeded to decipher it by focusing on the variety of literary genres employed and what function these different forms play in the development of an ascetic community. The Syriac Book of Steps is an exceptional work because it provides a seemingly accurate picture of asceticism, with all its inadequacies and accomplishments.

- [5] The fourth speaker of the day was Professor Sydney H. Griffith of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He delivered a paper entitled "Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-Speaking World: A Review of Past Scholarship and a Proposal for the Future." Prof. Griffith presented an overview of the scholarship surrounding the question of the beginning of Christianity in the Syriac-speaking world, on the frontier of the Roman and Persian Empires in Late Antiquity. A new paradigm for the assessment of the role of the various sects in the Syriac Christian communities was proposed, with a particular focus on the works of Ephrem the Syrian. He then used this paradigm to help interpret early Christian history in the Syriac-speaking world.

- [6] After this fourth scholarly lecture, the audience was treated to a performance by the Choir of the Assyrian Church of the East, Toronto Parish. The choir sang a Syriac poem by Saint Ephrem the Syrian entitled *In Praise of Learning*. This recital provided the spectators with a tangible portrayal of the Syriac Church and its rituals.

- [7] The fifth paper of the symposium was presented by Ms. Marica Cassis, a graduate student in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto. Her paper, entitled "The Archaeology of Christian Kokhe: A Comparative

Study,” examined Christian remains from this very important site in southern Iraq. Kokhe embodies the permanent presence of the early Christian church in the Sassanian world. The speaker surveyed the archaeological material from the nearby site of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, with a special focus on the Christian remains, and then compared these findings to the existing information on ancient Kokhe in order to develop a better understanding of the Eastern Church in the 3rd century.

- [8] The symposium concluded with a presentation by Dr. George A. Kiraz of the Syriac Computing Institute and Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute. Dr. Kiraz introduced a new project that he has been involved with, The Syriac Digital Library. This project endeavors to make a large body of material available on the Internet in an eLibrary. Various kinds of material will be digitized, including Bible editions, liturgies, grammars, dictionaries, patristic writings, journals and magazines, historical works, and much more. Pictures and maps will also be incorporated into the eLibrary, and a database will be established to allow searching these documents. The Syriac Digital Library has partnered with Brigham Young University, Brown University, Princeton Theological Institute, The Catholic University of America, and several other libraries, providing access to an extraordinary amount of material to enrich the collection.

- [9] This symposium represents the first event of this type for the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies. It was without a doubt a resounding success. This conference provided a wide array of papers, covering a range of topics. One can only hope that this was the beginning of a long tradition of scholarly symposia for the Society.

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FOURTH WOODBROOKE-MINGANA SYMPOSIUM ON ARAB CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

- [1] The Fourth Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam was held from 12 to 16 September 2001. Like its three predecessors, it was organised at Woodbrooke