

CONFERENCE REPORTS

“Writing Syriac: From Stone to Bytes”

The Syriac Panel at the American Oriental Society

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[1] On March 31st, 2001, at the 211th meeting of the American Oriental Society, Syriac scholarship reached a milestone. For the first time in the long history of the Society, a Syriac panel was included in the proceedings of the annual conference. Organized and chaired by Professor Amir Harrak, professor of Aramaic and Syriac at the University of Toronto, and president of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies, the panel was titled “Writing Syriac: From Stone to Bytes.” A wide range of topics was encompassed within this general theme, which included epigraphical, literary, and archaeological material. As well, the focus of these papers ranged in date from the early establishment of the Syriac church through to the modern era. Most importantly, all of these papers looked to the future, and the continued preservation and study of both the Syriac language and culture. As the following brief descriptions indicate, these papers stand in testament to the enduring importance of the field, and in support of its continued inclusion in the general field of Near Eastern studies.

[2] The Syriac session began with a paper by Marica Cassis, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto, entitled “The Bema in the West and East Syriac Churches.” The speaker first discussed the origins of the bema, and then introduced the archaeological evidence for the presence or absence of the bema in Syriac churches. It became very clear that there are marked differences between the Western and Eastern traditions. The West Syriac Church abandoned the use of the bema in the eighth century, while the East Syriac Church preserved its use, as can be seen in the written liturgy. Despite this fact, the actual physical remains of the structure are almost completely absent in the archaeological remains from Babylonia and the Persian Gulf. This fact calls for a further definition of regional differences within the East Syriac Church. Ms. Cassis’ use of archaeological material relating to the Syriac church was a welcome addition to the panel.

[3] The second paper of the session was delivered by the chair of the session, Dr. Amir Harrak. The presentation, "Patriarchal Tombstones at the Monastery of Rabban Hormizd: Types and Origins," described nine funerary inscriptions dating from the end of the fifteenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. Located originally in a corridor leading to the cell of Rabban Hormizd, they mark the burial place of nine patriarchs. These beautifully preserved inscriptions were incorporated directly into the walls of the monastery and served as epitaphs for these nine patriarchs of the Church of the East. These unique inscriptions are written in the first person, and follow a common literary pattern. They begin with the patriarch introducing himself to the reader, and continue with a profession of faith. The inscriptions conclude with the date of death and burial of the patriarch, and a statement about the hope for a fair judgment on the day of Resurrection. Dr. Harrak demonstrated how important these inscriptions are to our understanding of both the literature and culture of the Syriac Church of this period.

[4] Dr. Wolfhart Heinrichs of Harvard University presented the third paper in the session, entitled "Turkish Karshuni." He began by explaining that the term karshuni generally refers to Arabic texts written in Syriac script, but that its use has been generalized to include any language written in a Syriac script by the Christian communities who employed Syriac in liturgical settings. The speaker then presented the case of Turkish Karshuni, a language used by Syriac Orthodox writers in the late Ottoman Empire. An examination of the texts written in Turkish Karshuni followed, accompanied by a discussion of the spelling conventions that had to be created to adapt the Syriac script to the Turkish language. The paper also concluded with an analysis of the origins of Turkish Karshuni, and its implications for the Syriac community in general. Professor Heinrichs paper clearly indicated the importance of this technique to the Syriac Orthodox community in the late Ottoman period.

[5] The fourth paper of the day discussed a modern problem—the development of a computer script as a tool for the continued preservation and study of Syriac. Professor George Kiraz of the Syriac Computing Institute discussed the history—and the future—of Syriac type, focusing on the development of accessible and clear Syriac fonts in his lecture "From Parchment to Open Type: The

Development of Syriac Digital Types.” Since the study of Syriac language, literature, and script rests on the ability to continue and preserve the transmission of knowledge, there has been a concerted effort to establish a clear Syriac font for the modern computer. Since the 1980’s, a variety of fonts have been developed, mostly based on the printing press models of earlier times. Over the years, a number of problems unique to the Syriac script have made the process of conversion to the computer difficult. However, the newest Syriac font, developed by Dr. Kiraz and his colleagues, overcomes many of the issues, including, for example, the joining of particular letters. Beyond this, its accessibility has been widened, through its inclusion in the Microsoft Office Package for 2001. Overall, while the evolution of these fonts points to the history of Syriac studies, the development of this new font looks to continued work in this field.

- [6] For the next talk, the panel turned back to the medieval period. Dr. Wassilios Klein of Bonn University spoke about a collection of Syriac tombstones in his lecture, “Writing Syriac and Speaking Turkic in Light of Central Asian Tombstone Inscriptions.” While on one level these tombstones are important for historical context, providing evidence for the continuation of the Syriac community in this region into the thirteenth/fourteenth century, Professor Klein stressed that they were also important for their linguistic value. Not only is the Turkic influence on the Syriac language evident, but the interaction between the two languages can be seen where Syriac was used to write Turkic. This indicates the separation of the liturgical language from the spoken Turkic. While Professor Klein’s paper is a valuable contribution to the field, it also highlighted the need for further research into these linguistic and geographical areas if we are to understand the evolution, and the eventual disappearance of Syriac culture in some geographical areas.

- [7] The panel was concluded by a paper on the modern period by Professor Eden Naby from Harvard University, entitled “The Cultural Context for Writing Syriac During the 19th and 20th Centuries.” Dr. Naby discussed the initial impetus for the preservation of Syriac language and culture in the years leading up to the Diaspora. Among other factors, the arrival of missionaries from the West, a series of turn of the century governments centered in nationalism, and genocide led to many of the difficulties the Syriac communities (both East and West) faced in

preserving their spoken language particularly. Through a series of rare documents, Professor Naby discussed the attempts made to preserve this language and culture both before the Diaspora, and afterwards, in exile. Certainly, the destruction of the Syriac communities had a high cost in terms of both language and culture. While this paper discussed an important, and disturbing, past set of events, it also had ramifications for the retention of the Syriac language and community in the future.

- [8] As the summary above demonstrates, the Syriac panel was a valuable addition to the proceedings of the American Oriental Society—one that will hopefully be repeated in the years to come. The diversity of the above papers indicates the present and future state of Syriac scholarship, and the epigraphical, literary, and archaeological material included in these papers illustrates the continued need for interdisciplinary research into Syriac culture as a whole. Thus, while this panel, “Writing Syriac: From Stones to Bytes” illuminated the general theme of written Syriac, it also provided the impetus for further connected discussions.