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SYRIAC ENCOUNTERS

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SOME SYRIAC MONASTIC ENCOUNTERS WITH GREEK LITERATURE

Alberto RIGOLIO

The mosaics from Osrhoene (c. third century AD) represent a most fascinating trace of cultural life in the region during the late Roman period.¹ The contents of the compositions have raised important questions on the character of early Edessene culture, not least because as many as six among the surviving mosaics depict Greek mythological scenes.² One can now contemplate mosaics representing Prometheus,³ Briseis, (possibly) Polyxena, Hecuba with Priam, Troilus, and Achilles with Patroclus, all of whom are identified by Syriac inscriptions. It is especially remarkable that one of the subjects corresponds to a particular scene of the *Iliad*, the *presbeia*, representing the moment when Achilles and Patroclus are about to receive the embassy of the Achaeans.⁴

Between the c. third century and the later philhellenic phase of Syriac culture (seventh to ninth centuries),⁵ the surviving traces of Syriac encounters with Greek mythology and secular literature are at first sight less magnificent. The fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries were characterized by intense translation activity from Greek into Syriac, but mainly of Christian texts. Among the Christian works that were translated, however, some contained Greek mythological material and references to Greek secular literature, such as the *Apology* by Aristides,⁶ the *Oratio ad Graecos*

¹ H.J.W. Drijvers and J.H. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene. Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); G.W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

² J. Balty and F. Briquel Chatonnet, "Nouvelles Mosaïques inscrites d'Osrhoène," *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 79 (2000): 31-72.

³ G.W. Bowersock, "Notes on the New Edessene Mosaic of Prometheus," *Hyperbore* 7 (2001): 411-16.

⁴ *Il.* ix 185-91.

⁵ A striking example is represented by Jacob of Edessa's *Hexaemeron* (seventh century), in which the author shows familiarity with Greek secular literature; J.-B. Chabot and A.A. Vaschalde, *Iacobi Edesseni Hexaemeron: seu, In opus creationis libri septem*, CSCO 92 and 97 (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1928-32).

⁶ The Syriac translation dates back to the fourth or fifth century and was edited by B. Pouderon *et al.*, *Aristide, Apologie*, SC 450 (Paris: Cerf, 2003).

attributed to Justin⁷ (two Christian apologies that openly condemn pagan religion and mythology), and Pseudo-Nonnus' *Mythological Scholia*, which aim to explain the mythological references of four sermons by Gregory of Nazianzus.⁸

There also survive, however, a few early translations of Greek secular literature. The present paper focuses on six texts by Lucian, Plutarch, and Themistius that were most likely translated during the fifth or sixth century.⁹ The works are, in fact, treatises with moral content, and, in Syriac, they are transmitted within anthologies of ascetic literature. By providing a preliminary overview of such anthologies,¹⁰ the present paper argues that the moralizing nature of these pieces played an important role in their translation as well as in their transmission within Syriac manuscripts. Indeed, despite the references to pagan religion and mythology, which necessitated conspicuous intervention in the texts,¹¹ the works are mainly based on pieces of moral advice, which they elaborate through series of *exempla* and maxims. The translations of Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius share these features with other pieces of monastic literature contained in the same anthologies.

The manuscripts, on parchment, date from the seventh through tenth centuries — a remarkably early chronology by Greek standards. A most interesting case is that of codex *Sinaiticus Syr. 16*, which is preserved in Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai and dates to the seventh century.

⁷ The Syriac translation, which is entitled *Ambrosios's Hypomnemata*, dates back to the fourth or fifth century and was edited by B. Pouderon *et al.*, *Ouvrages apologétiques. Pseudo-Justin*, SC 528 (Paris: Cerf, 2009).

⁸ The earlier Syriac translation dates back to the early sixth century and was edited by S. Brock, *The Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Nonnos Mythological Scholia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). A translation of the Greek text is available in J. Nimmo Smith, *A Christian's Guide to Greek culture: The Pseudo-Nonnus Commentaries on Sermons 4, 5, 39 and 43 by Gregory of Nazianzus* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001).

⁹ A. Baumstark, "Lucubrations Syro-Graecae," *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie*, Suppl. 21 (1894): 353-524, 413-22; and S. Brock, "Syriac translations of Greek popular philosophy," in P. Bruns, ed., *Von Athen nach Bagdad. Zur Rezeption griechischer Philosophie von der Spätantike bis zum Islam* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2003), 9-28, 16.

¹⁰ An analysis of the translations is the object of my doctoral research.

¹¹ The phenomenon appears from the contrast between the Greek originals and the translations, where the Syriac texts present frequent omissions and significant changes affecting passages referring to pagan religion and mythology. An overview of such omissions and changes is available in: A. Rigolio, "From 'sacrifice to the gods' to the 'fear of God': omissions, additions and changes in the Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius," *SP64* (2013): 133-43.

The anthology, which survives in its entirety, contains monastic literature as well as the translations of Plutarch and Lucian:¹²

- a. f. 1^v Palladius's *Lausiac History* (trans. from Greek)¹³
- b. f. 27^r Nilus's *On monastic life* (trans. from Greek)¹⁴
- c. f. 56^r Aristides's *Apology* (trans. from Greek)¹⁵
- d. f. 68^r Plutarch's *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* (trans. from Greek)
- e. f. 75^r Ps.-Plutarch's *De exercitatione* (trans. from Greek)
- f. f. 84^v *Discourse of Pythagoras*
- g. f. 89^r Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira* (trans. from Greek)
- h. f. 95^v Lucian's *De calumnia* (trans. from Greek)
- i. f. 103^r *Discourse by a philosopher on the soul*
- j. f. 105^r *Counsels of Theano*
- k. f. 108^v *Definitions of Plato*
- l. f. 109^r *Instruction to a pupil by Plato*
- m. f. 109^v *Short definitions, on faith etc.*
- n. f. 109^v *Sayings of the philosophers*
- o. f. 114^v John the Solitary's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*
- p. f. 177^v John Chrysostom's *On the Canaanite Woman* and excerpts from *Homilies on Matthew* (trans. from Greek)¹⁶
- q. f. 200^v Excerpts from Jacob of Edessa, Ephrem, Mar John, and Mar Jacob

The anthology opens with Palladius's *Lausiac History*, to which a piece by Nilus of Sinai is attached.¹⁷ The collection continues with the Syriac translation of Aristides' *Apology*, before the works by Plutarch and Lucian. In between one finds the *Discourse of Pythagoras*. There follows a work on the soul structured as questions and answers, before *Counsels* attributed to Theano and to other philosophers. The treatise *On Ecclesiastes* was authored by John the Solitary, an influential monastic figure of the fifth century, who was educated in both Greek and Syriac.¹⁸ The manuscript

¹² The following list is based on S. Brock, "The genealogy of the Virgin Mary in Sinai Syr. 16," *Scrinium* 2 (2006): 58-71, 69-71, which includes the references to the editions of the texts; A. Smith Lewis, *Catalogue of the Syriac mss. in the Convent of S. Catharine on Mount Sinai* (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1894), 18.

¹³ CPG 6063.

¹⁴ CPG 6060.

¹⁵ CPG 1062.

¹⁶ Respectively CPG 4529 and CPG 4424.

¹⁷ One wonders whether the presence of John Chrysostom in the collection should be put in relation with the inclusion of the piece by Nilus.

¹⁸ S. Brock, "John the Solitary, *On prayer*," *JTS* 30.1 (1979): 84-101.

mostly contains pieces of monastic literature that were presumably addressed to a monastic readership. An interest in the moral advice contained in the pieces by Plutarch and Lucian seems to have been one of the reasons for their presence here, and the morally edifying *exempla* they report parallel those of Palladius's *Lausiaca History*.

It is particularly regrettable that two-thirds of the sole other Syriac manuscript of Plutarch and Lucian has been lost. The numbering makes it clear that the last five quires out of seventeen survive. Codex BL Add. 17209 dates to the ninth century and contains:¹⁹

- a. f. 1^r Ps.-Plutarch's *De exercitatione* (the beginning is lost)
- b. f. 8^r Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira*
- c. f. 15^v Lucian's *De calumnia*
- d. f. 23^v Themistius's *De virtute*
- e. f. 39^r Themistius's *De amicitia*
- f. f. 47^v Gregory of Nazianzus's (Excerpts from the) *Epistles*²⁰

Since the two works by Plutarch are presented in the same order as codex *Sinaiticus Syr.* 16, although without the insertion of the *Discourse of Pythagoras*, it seems likely that both manuscripts ultimately derive from the same collection. This proto-collection may have included Lucian, too, since the piece follows in both manuscripts. Manuscript BL Add. 17209 proceeds with the only two works by Themistius that survive in Syriac, and it closes with the translation of select letters by Gregory of Nazianzus. In total, the thirty-two letters²¹ with respective titles occupy fewer than five folios, since they are, in fact, short exhortations with moral contents and maxims. As a result, the last part of the manuscript is not remarkably different from a (Christian) *gnomologium*.

The works by Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius are entirely structured around pieces of moral advice, which they elaborate through series of *exempla* about the exemplary or, conversely, deplorable behavior of figures mostly belonging to the Graeco-Roman world. Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira* shows how important it is to constrain anger and it offers recommendations on how to defeat it;²² Plutarch's *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*

¹⁹ W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838*, (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1870-72 = Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), III 1185-1187 (mii).

²⁰ CPG 3032.

²¹ Although the author of the subscription that closes the manuscript counted thirty of them.

²² *Mor.* 29; edition in Paul de Lagarde, *Analecta Syriaca*, (Leipzig: B.G. Teubnerus, 1858), 186-95 from BM Add. 17209.

reminds the reader that reproaches coming from enemies should be taken as exhortations to adopt and stick to morally sound behavior;²³ Ps.-Plutarch's *De exercitatione* (lost in Greek) shows that exercise and ascetic practice are necessary both to gain and to preserve any good;²⁴ Lucian's *De calumnia* describes the functioning of slander and it offers tips on how to avoid succumbing to it;²⁵ Themistius's *De amicitia* is concerned with upright conduct towards friends, who are always vulnerable to becoming victims of slander;²⁶ and Themistius's *De virtute* (lost in Greek) praises the practice of philosophy as showed by the conduct of the Cynic philosophers Antisthenes, Diogenes, and Crates, which, according to Themistius, was characterised by a marked asceticism.²⁷

Similar themes are not uncommon in monastic literature.²⁸ The fact that the transmission of our pagan pieces within Syriac monastic anthologies may have been the result of an interest in the moral advice they contained may find further support when one looks into the only other manuscript

²³ *Mor.* 6; edition and English translation in E. Nestle, *A Tract of Plutarch on the Advantage to be Derived from one's Enemies* (*De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*), *the Syriac Version edited from a Ms. on Mount Sinai*, (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1894); German translation in V. Ryssel, "Zwei neu aufgefundenene Schriften der graeco-syrischen Literatur," *RhM* 51 (1896): 1-20.

²⁴ English translation in A. Rigolio, "The Syriac *De exercitatione*: a lost edifying piece attributed to Plutarch," in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* Suppl. (2015): forthcoming. Edition in de Lagarde, *Analecta Syriaca*, 177-186, from BM Add. 17209. For the beginning of the piece, with German translation, see W. Rohlf, ed., "Pseudo-Plutarch, *Peri askeseos*," in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. H. Dörries (Göttingen: Lagarde-Haus, 1968), 176-84; an introduction, which includes a discussion on authorship, and a German translation of de Lagarde's edition are available in J. Gildemeister and F. Bücheler, "Pseudo-Plutarchos, *Peri askeseos*," *RhM* 27 (1872): 520-38.

²⁵ Edition in E. Sachau, *Inedita syriaca. Eine Sammlung syrischer Übersetzungen von Schriften griechischer Profanliteratur* (Halle: K.K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1870 = Hildesheim: G. Holms, 1968), 1-16, from BM Add. 17209.

²⁶ *Or.* 22; ed., Sachau 1870, 48-65.

²⁷ Italian translation in M. Conterno, *Themistio orientale. Orazioni temi stiane nella traduzione siriana eol araba* (Brescia: Paideia 2014). Edition in Sachau, *Inedita Syriaca*, 17-47, reprint with Latin translation (from the German of J. Gildemeister and F. Bücheler, "Themistios, *Peri aretes*," *RhM* 27 (1872): 438-62) in *Themistii orationes quae supersunt*, ed. G. Downey and A.F. Norman (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft., 1974), v. III 7-71.

²⁸ On defeating anger see e.g. Evagrius, *Vices* 5 and 8, *Eight thoughts* 4, *Praktikos* 11, *Thoughts* 5 and *Prayer* 12-27, in R.E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); on ways of benefiting from enemies see A. Fürst, "Was nützt ein Feind? Eine kynische Maxime in der antiken christlichen Literatur," *VC* 51.1 (1997): 40-50, and John the Solitary, *Letter to Hesychius* 50, trans. S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 93; on slander see e.g. G. Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 121-23.

of the Syriac Themistius. Codex *Sinaiticus* Syr. 14, written on parchment during the tenth century, contains four excerpts from the *De virtute*. Three are *exempla* of the impeccable conduct of the philosophers Heraclitus, Socrates, and Lysimachus, while another is a piece of moral advice given by Plato. The selection of the passages, then, responds to an interest in the moral anecdotes reported in the *De virtute*.

Codex *Sinaiticus* Syr. 14 contains a monastic anthology. Unfortunately, the manuscript has not been thoroughly studied yet, and the available catalogue does not describe it in detail.²⁹ The anthology includes excerpts from the homilies by Macarius the Great (trans. from Greek), a passage by Nilus (trans. from Greek), excerpts from Isaac of Nineveh, a hymn by Isaac of Antioch, the *History of the holy Dionysius* (the Aeropagite), a passage from Mark the hermit, excerpts about Ephrem, and much more. It concludes with excerpts from Anastasius's *Narrationes* on the fathers of Sinai (trans. from Greek). The portion containing extracts from Themistius's *De virtute* is composed as follows:

- a. f. 128^r l. 22 (*Excerpts*) from the philosopher Plato³⁰
- b. f. 128^v l. 23 *On the philosopher Dandamis*
- c. f. 129^v l. 9 *On the philosopher Secundus*
- d. f. 129^v l. 16 *On Pythagorean philosophers*
- e. f. 130^r l. 11 (*Excerpts*) from the philosopher Themistius (i.e. *De virtute*)
 - i. f. 130^r l. 11 Heraclitus³¹
 - ii. f. 130^r l. 27 Socrates³²
 - iii. f. 130^v l. 11 Plato³³
 - iv. f. 130^v l. 22 Lysimachus³⁴

The excerpts consist of anecdotes on the life of different “philosophers.” The piece on Didymus (b) is, in fact, an anecdote about the encounter

²⁹ Smith Lewis, *Catalogue*, 3; S. Brock, “Stomathalassa, Dandamis and Secundus in a Syriac monastic anthology,” in *After Bardaisan. Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers*, ed. G.J. Reinink and A.C. Klugkist (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 35-50. I am grateful to Sebastian Brock who allowed me to see the preliminary results of his analysis of the manuscript.

³⁰ The text is edited and translated in S. Brock, “Some Syriac Pseudo-Platonic Curiosities,” in *Medieval Arabic Thought: Essays in Honour of Fritz Zimmermann*, ed. R. Hansberger, M.A. al-Akiti, and C. Burnett, Warburg Institute Studies and Texts 4 (London: Warburg Institute/Turin: Nino Aragno, 2012), 19-26.

³¹ 40.21-41.16.

³² 34.11-14; 35.3-9; 35.20-23.

³³ 44.7-21.

³⁴ 45.9-46.5.

between Alexander and the Brahmin Dandamis, who, according to the story, used to live naked in the wilderness. The maxim he pronounced in front of Alexander, “learn this from me, that you shall not desire anything, and then everything will be yours; for desire is the mother of poverty,” gained for Dandamis Alexander’s highest respect, together with lots of precious presents that, with the exception of the oil, the Brahmin, following his own advice, returned to the sender. The Syriac text seems an abbreviated version of the Greek of Palladius’s *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*.³⁵

The philosopher Secundus is the main character of the next excerpt (c). According to the legend, Secundus — sometimes a Cynic, sometimes a Pythagorean, and sometimes a martyr — did not give up his vow of silence even under threat of death by the emperor Hadrian, and his narrative had wide diffusion in Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, and Ethiopic literatures.³⁶ Similarly, the following passage (d) elaborates on the conduct of a group of Pythagorean philosophers who opted for a silent lifestyle.

The excerpts from Themistius’s *De virtute* begin with an anecdote about Heraclitus (e.i), who, through his example of a particularly modest diet, taught the Ephesians to lead a simpler lifestyle than they were used to. Socrates follows (e.ii), who, being questioned about the happiness of the king of Persia, answered negatively, since the king did not have consideration for wisdom — it is in wisdom, according to Socrates, that the perfection of man lies. In the next excerpt (e.iii), Plato compares the behaviour of dogs with that of the philosophers: as the dogs, who love those whom they know and bark towards those whom they do not know, so also the philosophers, through their wisdom, recognise those who possess virtue. The last passage from the *De virtute* is about Lysimachus (e.iv), who, thanks to the courage that characterises a philosopher, entered a battlefield, walked calmly and unarmed between the two armies and, with a sign of the hand, succeeded in avoiding a bloody battle. The four anecdotes from the *De virtute*, then, elaborate on the behavior of the philosophers, as is the case for the preceding Dandamis, Secundus, and the Pythagorean philosophers.

³⁵ Palladius, *De gentibus* II 13-40 (CPG 6038); Brock 1999, ii. The attribution to Palladius is disputed. Brock, “Stomathalassa,” 40, has shown that the closest textual similarities are with the three surviving fragments of the second century Cynic papyrus P. Geneva inv. 271.

³⁶ B.E. Perry, *Secundus the Silent Philosopher: The Greek life of Secundus, critically edited and restored so far as possible, together with translations of the Greek and oriental versions, the Latin and oriental texts, and a study of the tradition* (Chapel Hill: American Philological Association, 1964); Brock, “Stomathalassa,” iii; G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 118-19.

To conclude, the pieces by Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius that survive in Syriac are characterised by a moralizing nature as well as a common structure, in that they present the moral advice with the support of series of *exempla*. The two features are compatible with those of other moralizing material contained in the same Syriac monastic anthologies, such as Palladius's *Lausiaca History*, Anastasius's *Narrationes* and excerpts reported in the anthology of codex *Sinaiticus Syr.* 14. The appreciation of the moral advice proposed in our pagan pieces must have played an important role in their translation into Syriac as well as in their transmission within monastic literature. The Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius result from the endorsement, by certain Syriac readers with ascetic interests, of pieces of moral advice originating, in fact, from a non-Syrian and non-Christian tradition.³⁷

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³⁷ For pre-existing and indigenous ascetic traditions see S.H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. V.L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-45.

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