How Literatures Begin

A GLOBAL HISTORY

EDITED BY

JOEL B. LANDE & DENIS FEENEY

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Princeton University Press 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

press.princeton.edu

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lande, Joel B., editor. | Feeney, D. C., editor.

Title: How literatures begin: a global history / edited by Joel B. Lande and Denis Feeney. Description: Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020044596 (print) | LCCN 2020044597 (ebook) | ISBN 9780691186528 (paperback) | ISBN 9780691186535 (hardback) | ISBN 9780691219844 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Literature—History and criticism.

Classification: LCC PN523 .H69 2021 (print) | LCC PN523 (ebook) | DDC 809-dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020044596 LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020044597

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Anne Savarese and James Collier Production Editorial: Sara Lerner Text and Cover Design: Chris Ferrante Production: Erin Suydam

Publicity: Alyssa Sanford and Amy Stewart

Copyeditor: Kathleen Kageff

Cover images (top left to bottom right): Rubbing of the inscription from the Shi Qiang basin (ca. 900 BCE), Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–771 BCE); leaf from *The Record of So Hyŏnsŏng*, undated. Manuscript. Image courtesy of the Kyujanggak Archive; manuscript leaf from one of the oldest copies of the Koran (Sanaa/Yemen; seventh to eight century CE); detail of manuscript BnF fonds français 854 (Occitan chansonnier I), f. 142v. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

This book has been composed in Adobe Text, Futura PT, and Lydian BT

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

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Syriac

ALBERTO RIGOLIO

When the sixteenth-century linguist Johannes Goropius argued that the primordial language spoken in Paradise was Brabantic (the Dutch dialect used in his hometown of Antwerp), there is no doubt that several of his contemporaries found this argument ridiculously chauvinistic. When, however, fifthcentury Christian Greek scholars made a case for Syriac, the Aramaic dialect originating in the ancient city Edessa (modern Urfa in Turkey), as the language from which all others had derived, they initiated a tradition that found eminent followers over the centuries. For instance, in ninth-century Spain, a case for Arabic as the primordial language was made by reinterpreting Syriac as a corrupted version of the Arabic that Adam truly spoke when he left the garden of Eden. The emergence of a literature in the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa and its remarkable growth over few centuries was an extraordinary historical development; the present chapter addresses the question of how a local variety of Middle Aramaic became the vehicle of one of the richest and most prestigious literatures of late antiquity.

The surviving body of Syriac literature is monumental and diverse and is especially notable for its poetry, its historiography, its hagiography, and its theological writings, but also for a huge corpus of Syriac translations from Greek that made Syriac a fundamental intermediary language in the transmission to the Arabic-speaking world of Greek philosophy and science, as well as Christian theology. Here, I will focus on how Syriac literature began, and I will address four major moments: the development of a distinctive Syriac script, the standardization of the language as classical Syriac, Syriac's attainment of literary status, and the emergence of Syriac versification. I argue that it is possible to understand the emergence of Syriac literature in terms of vernacularization, and it can be helpful to make use of the concepts of "literization," namely the introduction and use of a vernacular language in written form in everyday contexts, and subsequently "literarization," the process connected with the creation of a written literature.²

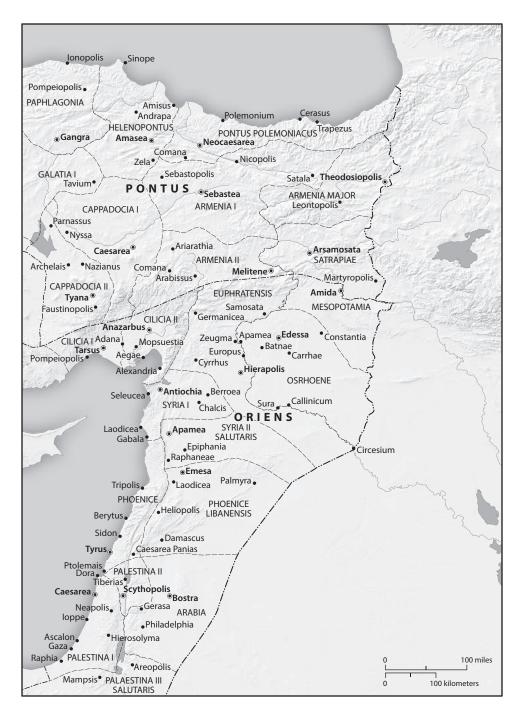
"Literization"

The process by which spoken Syriac was recorded in written form and was used in the composition of literature can be linked to major historical developments. The origins of the Syriac language, and in turn its literature, are inextricably connected with the ancient history of the city of Edessa and its surrounding region, Osrhoene (delimited by the river Euphrates in the west and by one of its tributaries, the Khabur, in the east), in the broader context of the Greco-Roman, Parthian, and Arab Near East (see figure 8.1).

The region of Osrhoene (a territory currently divided between Turkey and Syria) had been part of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire, where Aramaic had gained the status of a lingua franca. After Alexander the Great's conquest of the Achaemenids and his death, however, Osrhoene came to be ruled by the Greek dynasty of the Seleucids, who instead promoted the use of the Greek language in the public sphere and the spread of Greek culture. The city of Edessa was in fact a Seleucid foundation, established by Seleucus I Nicator in 303/2 BCE on an older settlement, Adme, which was renamed Edessa after the ancient capital city of Macedonia, Seleucus's homeland.

Between the second and first centuries BCE, however, the fragmentation of the Seleucid Empire gave rise to independent kingdoms ruled by dynasts under whom Hellenism and Near Eastern customs and traditions could acquire new meanings. Perhaps the most well-known example of these new dynasts was the Hasmonaean dynasty, which asserted to have repossessed a region unduly occupied by the Seleucids that originally belonged to Judean ancestors.3 Similarly, from around 140-30 BCE, the Abgarid dynasty took power in Osrhoene. The Abgarids eventually ruled over Osrhoene for three and a half centuries, skillfully safeguarding their power from the Parthians and the Romans almost without interruption until the eventual annexation of their territory by the Roman Empire in the third century CE.4 It was as a response to the administrative and cultural needs of this new independent Kingdom of Osrhoene that the local dialect of Aramaic (later known as "Syriac," from the Greek adjective syriakos, "Syrian") was first put into writing, using a distinctive script adapted for this purpose; this enterprise, which entailed the end of the use of Greek language in the Edessene public sphere, was part of a broader effort of differentiation from Greek culture, which had flourished under the Seleucids. Modern historians are not aware of any foundation story for the origin of the Syriac script (in fact derived from a late version of the Achaemenid Aramaic cursive script) that would link its introduction to the administration of the small kingdom; by contrast, there is an early Armenian foundational myth that identifies Mesrop Mashtots (d. 440), the inventor of

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8.1. The Roman province of Osrhoene at the end of the fourth century CE.

—-1 —0 the Armenian alphabet, as a bureaucrat and administrator employed by the local Armenian king.⁵

Like other Aramaic dialects in the Near and Middle East, such as Palmyrene (used in Palmyra), Nabataean (used in the Nabataean kingdom), and Hatran (used in Hatra), in Osrhoene Syriac was commonly employed in inscriptions and official documents, of which more than a hundred survive. Surprisingly, Syriac did not cease to be written after the Roman conquest but instead continued to flourish, alongside Greek and later Arabic. Several early Syriac inscriptions (such as the earliest dated one, possibly from the year 6 CE) are funerary, commemorating the burial place of members of the Edessene elites and often emphasizing their bonds with the royal family. Others have a marked religious and votive character and reflect a local variety of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon. At the same time, the royal status of the Syriac language can be gauged from its use on coins and from official dedicatory inscriptions, such as the one identifying the statue of an Edessene queen or princess on a column still standing on the citadel of Edessa. The city also possessed an important royal archive managed by trained officials and scribes, which contained not only private documents such as the copy of the Syriac deed of sale found in Dura Europos (P.Dura.28), but also annalistic records on the Abgarid dynasty, such as those later used in the compilation of the Syriac Chronicle of Edessa (sixth century).6

Arguably, the earliest known instance of Syriac outside a documentary setting comes from around the middle of the second century CE, with the translation of books of the Hebrew Bible into Syriac (later known as the "Peshitta"), an important development that paved the way for the use of Syriac as a literary language. It was in the aftermath, or, perhaps, even at the same time as the translation of the Bible, that Syriac literature began to be produced, at first in Osrhoene, then also spreading throughout the Middle East, and eventually arriving, in later centuries, in central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The earliest dated manuscript, written in 411 CE in Edessa (and now at the British Library, Add. 12150), is an extremely fine artifact that reveals a long-standing and well-developed tradition of calligraphy and manuscript production certainly dating back centuries.

The transformation of Syriac from a local dialect used for inscriptions and documents into a successful literary language was an extraordinary development. From the fourth century onward, both Greek and Syriac sources offered accounts of how Syriac poetry, and Syriac culture more broadly, had come to the fore, but unfortunately very little survives of the earliest Syriac literature for us to test and accept these often fictional narratives, such as those found in the *Doctrina Addai*, which predated the conversion of Edessa to Christianity to the time of Jesus, and in the *Vita* tradition of Ephrem, which presented the

emergence of Syriac poetry as a spinoff of Greek versification and music. In the words of Sebastian Brock, "all that can be said with certainty is that by the end of the second century Christianity was well established in Edessa (probably in various forms) . . . ; with the fourth century one particular form of Christianity emerges as 'orthodox' and from that date on we become much better informed, since later generations were only concerned to transmit literature of this particular provenance."

The acquisition of a literary status was not an obvious development for Syriac, which, like Palmyrene, Nabatean, and Hatran, had until then been used, in written form, as a documentary language; in particular, the emergence of Syriac as a literary language was improbable because of the enduring cultural hegemony of Greek in the region. Although Syriac was not the only Aramaic dialect to acquire a literary status, and other Aramaic dialects also produced literatures within specific religious communities (most notably Jewish, Samaritan, Mandaean, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic), it is necessary not to take this development for granted; one must recognize that only under rather specific historical circumstances did Aramaic dialects give birth to literatures. Second-century speakers of Aramaic could indeed write literature in Greek, as is exemplified by the rhetorician and satirist Lucian (born in ca. 125 CE just north of Edessa), the Christian apologist Tatian (ca. 120 CE-after 172 CE), and, although with less certainty, the novelist Iamblichus (fl. 165-80 CE). While these authors no doubt received the best Greek education available at the time and could have accessed Greek literature in the original language, epigraphic evidence as well as recent linguistic analysis of early Syriac texts show that language contact between Greek and Syriac was widespread, and that a degree of bilingualism, not limited to the upper classes and with considerable geographical variation, can be assumed.9

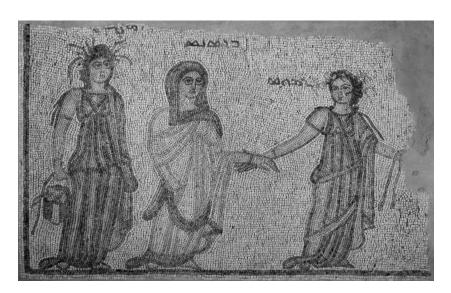
In many of the instances that we can study today, the use of Syriac must have been the result of deliberate choices. Archeological evidence in particular, largely in the form of mosaics, confirms that in the second and third centuries CE Syriac speakers from the Edessa region were familiar with aspects of Greek literature and culture more broadly. Syriac mosaics depicting Greek mythological scenes reveal not only the circulation of Greco-Roman figurative motifs and techniques but also some knowledge of Greek literature. Especially remarkable in this respect are the following examples: a mosaic representing the mythological creation of humankind by Prometheus, funerary mosaics representing Orpheus playing the lyre, and an impressive circle of mosaics representing selected scenes from the *Iliad*, all of them labelled in Syriac despite the fact that no known Syriac translation of the *Iliad* (or of any other piece of Greek classical literature for that matter) was available at the time (see figures 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, and 8.6).¹⁰

8.2.
Mosaic representing
Prometheus and
the creation of
humankind, second
or third century CE.
Private collection.



8.3.
Funerary mosaic representing
Orpheus playing the lyre, 194 CE.
Haleplibahçe Mosaic Museum, Urfa.
Image courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art.





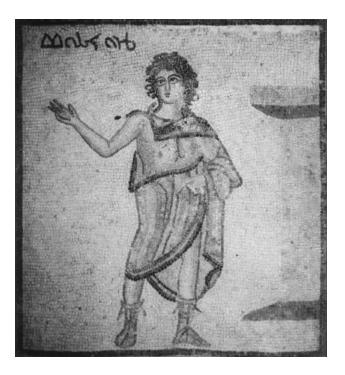
8.4. Mosaic representing Briseis as in *Iliad* 1.318–38, second or third century CE. Courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem. Photo: M. Amar and M. Greyevsky.



 $\textbf{8.5.}\ Mosaic\ representing\ Achilles\ and\ Patroclus\ as\ in\ \emph{Iliad}\ 9.182-98, second\ or\ third\ century\ CE.\ Courtesy\ of\ the\ Bible\ Lands\ Museum\ Jerusalem.\ Photo:\ M.\ Amar\ and\ M.\ Greyevsky.$

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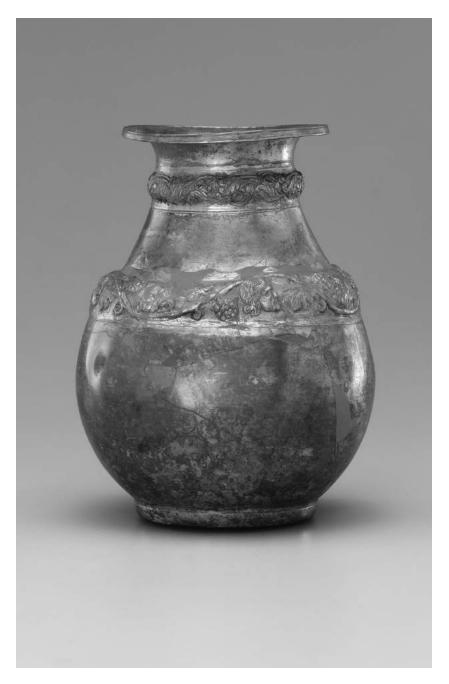
8.6.
Mosaic representing
Troilus, second or
third century CE.
Photo: Françoise
Briquel Chatonnet.



A silver jug with a grapevine decoration found in Dura Europos, not far from Edessa, was in all likelihood used for symposiastic practices and, as the Syriac inscription on its bottom rim makes clear, belonged to a person who could read Syriac. Its rich decoration with bunches of grapes indicates that the vessel was used to pour wine: like similar items manufactured in third-century Syria, this jug instantiates the local adoption of the Greco-Roman custom of the symposium, a customary setting for the performance of literature (see figures 8.7 and 8.8).¹¹

"Literarization"

A necessary step for the emergence of a literature *in Syriac*, and therefore the use of Syriac, in written form, outside documentary and epigraphic settings, was the acquisition of a literary status by the Syriac language, the kind of transformation that Sheldon Pollock refers to as "literarization." A tangible change that was concurrent with this transformation may be historically reflected in the differentiation between the language used for early Syriac inscriptions and documents, known as "Old Syriac," and the increasingly standardized type of Syriac used in



 $\textbf{8.7.} \ Silver jug from \ Dura \ Europos, second \ or third \ century \ CE. \ Yale \ University \ Art \ Gallery. \ Dura-Europos \ Collection.$

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8.8. Silver jug from Dura Europos, bottom, showing a Syriac inscription on the rim, created by punching the metal, second or third century CE. Yale University Art Gallery. Dura-Europos Collection.

the production of literature, known as "Classical Syriac." Important linguistic features set the two languages apart, both orthographically (most notably in the rendering of the proto-Semitic *\$\forall \text{ and morphologically (most notably in the use of different prefixes to mark the masculine third-person singular imperfect), even if a moderate degree of internal variation should be recognized within both languages. Scholars are divided on the origins of the linguistic peculiarities of Classical Syriac, which they explain either as a chronological development of Old Syriac or as a reflection of a different register or variety in the spoken language; nonetheless, this variation could be exploited in order to mark off the use of Classical Syriac as a new cultural enterprise.

The emergence of Classical Syriac may well have taken place gradually, and earlier texts could easily be updated at a later stage, but it is generally accepted that the translation of the Bible into Syriac played a vital role in the standardization of Classical Syriac. From about the middle of the second century CE, books from the Hebrew Bible began to be translated into Syriac from the Hebrew, rather than the Greek, a project presumably supported by the religious interests of the Jewish community in Edessa. Inscriptions marking burial sites just outside the city of Edessa give good reason to believe that Jews adopted Syriac in a way comparable to the use of Greek by the Jewish community in Alexandria that produced the Septuagint (the language of the inscriptions was in all likelihood Syriac, rather than any other dialect of Aramaic, even if such inscriptions may be too scant to allow for certainty). Similarly, the earliest translation of the Gospels in circa 170 CE, from Greek and at times associated with the name of Tatian, responded to Christian religious interests. The text took the form of a narrative merging the four Gospels, a "harmony" that became widely used as a liturgical text until it fell in disuse in the fifth century and was replaced by a translation of the individual Gospels, carried out during the third century. These translations were integrated into instructional and liturgical settings and had important repercussions for the standardization of Classical Syriac.14

In addition to the emergence of a standardized language, however, the impact of the translation of the Bible on later Syriac literature can hardly be overestimated. In the same decades as the translation was being carried out, there circulated a collection of forty-two odes attributed to the biblical king Solomon (known as Odes of Solomon) and Christian in subject matter and themes; they were either translated from Greek or originally composed in Syriac. The *Odes* do not follow the conventions of later Syriac versification (more on this below), and, as Sebastian Brock writes, they were not "in any recognizable Syriac poetic form, yet they are clearly intended as poetry." Another text, the Acts of Thomas (ca. early third century), is an instance of Acts of the Apostles composed in Syriac and narrating the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas to India, at the same time offering important glimpses into the Edessenes' perceptions of Roman and Parthian imperial powers. Biblical themes were also recurrent in later Syriac poetry; for instance, the imagery of the siege and fall of a city, common in Syriac historical poetry from the fourth century onward, owed much to biblical models of the siege of Jerusalem. Another peculiar strand of Syriac poetry from the fourth century, the dialogue and dispute poems, in which two protagonists speak in alternating verse (e.g., the Death and Satan; body and soul; Cain and Abel), drew from ancient Mesopotamian literary forms repurposed to include biblical and theological characters and themes. 15

In later Syriac historiography, not only was the Bible mined for historiographical and chronographical material, but it could also be used for the presentation of the Syriac people as one ethnic entity characterized by a common language (Aramaic) and a shared geography as described in the Biblical text. As will be discussed below, an early attempt to write the Syriac past in biblical terms comes from one of the most influential Syriac poets, Ephrem the Syrian, living in the fourth century. Not unlike later Syriac historians, Ephrem used the Old Testament to support the case for the cultural superiority not only of the Jews over the Greeks, but also, and especially, of the Syrians over the Jews, on account of the greater antiquity of Aram over Abraham and his descendants, a cultural exercise that Eviatar Zerubavel would describe as "outpasting." In addition, the book of Daniel (with its articulation of world history as a succession of empires) offered a suitable model for Syriac historians writing on the post-Roman succession of the Sasanians, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks in the Middle East and Asia. 16

There is, however, also a trace of another strand of literature that circulated during the second century that was not obviously related to the Bible or to the religious interests of the Jewish and Christian communities in Osrhoene. This literature was likely to cater primarily to the interests of the class of scribes, administrators, and diplomats of the kingdom of Edessa, and it is best attested in the Story of Ahigar, a long-lived piece of ancient Aramaic literature that was received into Syriac and then was considerably expanded. This fictional narrative centered on the legendary career of Ahiqar, an Aramaean minister working at the court of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who, although long distinguished for his wisdom and royal service, was slandered by his own adoptive son and apprentice Nādin and consequently sentenced to death. The official in charge of carrying out the sentence, however, secretly spared such a respected colleague and helped Aḥīqar go into hiding. When the king eventually discovered the slanderous plot and wished Aḥīqar were still alive to help in a delicate diplomatic mission with the Egyptian pharaoh, Ahīqar was "rediscovered" and reinstated at court, whereas his adoptive son received a miraculous death as a just retribution for his offence. The narrative stands as an important reminder of the potential connections between Syriac and ancient Aramaic literature; and in its expanded Syriac version, it includes much moralizing and instructional material that reveals a strong interest on part of the Syriac-speaking elite in moral education and etiquette. This instructional drive was a recurring aspect of the earliest Syriac literature; at the same time, teaching and instruction became a basic part of the Syrians's religious imagery in their pedagogical understanding of Christianity.¹⁷

The Emergence of Syriac Versification

Classical Syriac presents a peculiar and well-developed system of versification that sets it apart from other Semitic lyric traditions such as those of Hebrew and Arabic. Syriac versification is based on meter and is usually described as "isosyllabic," in that each verse or stanza is constituted by a fixed number of syllables, while rhyme occurs rarely and is not a necessary feature. More problematic is the question of whether any additional rhythmic device (such as stress, caesurae, or accompanying music) played a role in versification—an especially pressing question given that the Syriac language cannot effectively create a rhythmic sequence by alternating long and short syllables (in Classical Syriac, short vowels are seldom retained in an open syllable, thus largely resulting in sequences of syllables that are all long). In the past, scholars have made a case for stress as an additional rhythmic device, and so a Syriac verse was such only if it conformed to particular accentual patterns (it has also been suggested that either the appearance of Greek accentual poetry received an impulse from Syriac models, or vice versa); however, our poor knowledge of the functioning of the accent in early Syriac has complicated this line of analysis. Unfortunately, the earliest surviving Syriac treatise on meter was written considerably later, by Antony of Tagrit, probably in the ninth century (and published only recently); Antony took the occurrence of the divisions between words within a verse, which he described in terms of "segments of verse," as the fundamental rhythmic feature in Syriac versification, in addition to syllable count. 18

The origin of Syriac versification has been the subject of heated academic debate, and it is best to concentrate here on those points where near consensus currently exists. The earliest known stages of Syriac versification roughly coincide with the decades of the translation of the Bible into Syriac, during the second half of the second century, but how Syriac versification looked before this time (if, indeed, there was any Syriac versification) remains the subject of speculation. An important role in the development of Syriac poetry is usually credited to a man named Bardaisan, a philosopher and polymath who lived at the court of Edessa (ca. 154-ca. 222 CE), and who was singled out as an important player in the development of early Syriac poetry by one of the most influential Syriac poets, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE), himself well informed about earlier traditions. It is of course not possible to rule out that others before Bardaisan wrote Syriac verse and that, at the same time, Ephrem had a particular agenda in dealing at length with Bardaisan, who was one of his doctrinal opponents. In fact, anonymous poems that can be dated to this early period survive (notably two poems included in the Acts of Thomas: the Hymn of the

Pearl and the *Hymn of the Bride*), but their uncertain chronology makes their assessment in the emergence of Syriac versification especially problematic. None of them can be dated earlier than Bardaisan with certainty, and we do not have names of any other poet before him.

At any rate, Ephrem's engagement with Bardaisan's poetry attests to a search for etiology in Syriac versification and implies Ephrem's awareness that Syriac poetry was a new literary phenomenon in need of explanation. By singling out Bardaisan, Ephrem seems to imply a link between the origins of Syriac poetry and the courtly culture of Edessa, with which Bardaisan was affiliated: Bardaisan, whose name means "son of the Daisan," the river by Edessa, was an Edessene nobleman born from a pagan family who certainly received the best education available in town; he was well informed about post-Hellenistic Roman philosophy and early Christianity, but he also had astrological interests that linked him to Mesopotamian and Parthian intellectual traditions. Bardaisan's other interests, such as archery and horse riding, attest to his full participation in the aristocratic circles of the city. Anecdotes about him were narrated by his contemporary Sextus Africanus, an erudite scholar writing in Greek who was at the time attached to the court of Edessa, possibly in the position of a royal tutor. Unfortunately, posthumous accusations of heresy (because of the philosophical form of Christianity to which Bardaisan adhered) and the eventual disappearance of the Bardaisanite community resulted in the loss of most of his works and those of his followers, and only quotations now survive; there is no other option than to rely only on secondary sources, which were written later and are mostly polemic.¹⁹

As the fourth-century Greek historian Eusebius of Caesarea reports, that Bardaisan wrote original texts in Syriac was well known outside Syriac circles, but the best source for his verse is Ephrem the Syrian, who, in one of his hymns, first described the metrical character of Bardaisan's poetry, in a polemical passage that has been much discussed:

He [Bardaisan] wrote hymns (*madrāšē*) and mixed them with music; he composed songs and put them into metrical form; by means of measures and balances he distributed the words; he offered to the guileless bitter things in sweet guise, in order that, though feeble, they might not choose the food that heals.²⁰

According to Ephrem, Bardaisan composed *madrāšē*, often translated as "hymns" but in fact a form of stanzaic poem in which each stanza follows the same syllabic pattern. The *madrāšā* (pl. *madrāšē*) was soon to become one of the two main forms of Syriac poetry, the other one being the *memrā*, the

"narrative poem," or "homiletic poem." The name *madrāšā*—derived from a root with meanings such as "to teach, to explain, to thrash out, to argue"—may imply an originally didactic and potentially polemic purpose for this form, although the ways and the settings in which it was initially performed remain the subject of speculation, and we are much better informed of its later use in Christian liturgy. This passage by Ephrem has also been used to argue that the introduction of music in the madrāšā was itself Bardaisan's innovation, a fact that may help explain not only the longevity of Bardaisan's own poetry (which was still performed in the fifth century, if we trust later sources), but also the fact that later manuscripts contain ancient indications of the particular melody according to which each madrāšā had to be sung. ²³

A crucial issue of discussion has been whether Ephrem intended to say that Bardaisan arranged his own material according to existing Syriac meters, or whether he played the more important role of introducing syllabic meter into Syriac poetry. Too little is known of Syriac versification before Bardaisan to corroborate either scenario (and very few lines survive even from Bardaisan's own poetry, quoted by later authors); it is nevertheless generally agreed that Bardaisan did indeed write madrāšē in isosyllabic meter as Ephrem would have understood this poetic form, and it is accepted that this form, in isosyllabic meter, may have already been in use at this time despite the lack of evidence. Conversely, a different account of the introduction of meter into Syriac comes from a Greek source, the fifth-century historian Sozomen of Constantinople, who similarly connected the emergence of Syriac versification with the circle of Bardaisan but who singled out a son of Bardaisan, who wrote under the name of Harmonius, as the author who "was the first to subdue his native tongue to meters and musical laws." Sozomen also implied that the influence of Greek versification and music shaped the emergence of Syriac meter and poetry more broadly; yet, his account, repeated in later sources such the *Ecclesiasti*cal History by Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the Syriac Vita tradition of Ephrem, is usually taken as nothing more than an exercise in Greek chauvinism (perhaps evidenced by the implausible Greek name of Bardaisan's son). Be it as it may, Sozomen's account may ultimately originate from a factual notion, since Ephrem did indeed quote from a madrāšā composed by a son of Bardaisan.²⁴

The fact that, through the figure of Bardaisan and his son, both Ephrem and Sozomen linked the origins of Syriac versification, or at the very least an important moment in its emergence, to the court of Edessa may indeed imply that this setting played a role not only in the development of the Syriac language as shown above, but also in the emergence of Syriac versification, and, more broadly, in the acquisition of a literary status for Classical Syriac. It may be a useful exercise to compare the birth of Syriac literature with the model of

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"vernacularization"—in the words of Sheldon Pollock, "the historical process" of choosing to create a written literature, along with its complement, a political discourse, in local languages according to models supplied by a superordinate, usually cosmopolitan, literary culture." The absence of early Syriac texts that would help study the political rhetoric of the Edessene court, however, makes us reliant on the archeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence. Local coinage in particular provides a taste of Edessene royal rhetoric in the late second and early third centuries; here, the Edessene king's association with the Roman emperor stands out as a badge of political legitimacy, as in the bronze coins portraying the king of Edessa and the Roman emperor on opposite faces without any apparent attempt to distinguish between obverse or reverse, therefore associating the two figures; or in the remarkable "presentation coinage," in which the local king is represented as being received by the seated Roman emperor in a similar way as other "investiture" scenes, with the notable difference that the king of Edessa does not adopt a pose of submission and rather stands in a position of power, his height equal to or even exceeding that of the emperor, augmented by an exaggeratedly tall tiara—at the same time, these portraits of Edessene kings show their clear debt to Parthian iconography and stand as a problematic reminder of the eastward-looking political and cultural allegiances by the earlier Abgarids (see figures 8.9 and 8.10).²⁵

Unfortunately, there survive no dictionaries, lexica, and grammars, which often accompany the process of vernacularization, with the exception of a curious interest in etymology and Aramaic "linguistics" found in an indirect account of Bardaisan's doctrine. ²⁶ The composition of vernacular works of literature emulating the cosmopolitan tradition (in this case the Greek), as is common in the early stages of vernacularization, is perhaps instantiated in the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, a dialogue on free will composed by a follower of Bardaisan and clearly aware of Platonic models, in which Bardaisan plays the role of a teacher of philosophy in conversation with his students. ²⁷

Most surviving Syriac poetry has a Christian religious character, and the same consideration applies to Syriac literature as a whole, but it is necessary to emphasize that what survives of the earliest Syriac literature was selected and transmitted according to the interests of Syriac Christianity as it became institutionalized from the fourth century onward, and it is possible that there existed other strands of Syriac poetry that instead left little trace. For instance, a case was made for a strand of Syriac poetry, possibly in rhymed seven-syllable verse, that was secular in character, as is instantiated by a mournful quotation within an early text, the *Letter of Mara Bar Serapion*, and by a quotation from the mouth of a "secular (or lay) poet," as reported by the poet Isaac of Antioch in the fifth century. A rhymed verse epigram included in a third-century fu-

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8.9. Bronze coin from Edessa. Laureate head of Septimius Severus (193–211) and diademed and draped bust of Abgar VIII (177–212) wearing tiara decorated with stars and crescent. Leu Numismatik AG Web Auction 3, 25 February 2018, 749.



8.10. Bronze coin from Edessa. Obverse: Gordian III (238–44). Reverse: Gordian III, sitting, receiving Abgar X (239–42), standing and wearing a tiara, in the act of offering Victory with his right hand to Gordian. Photo: Nomos AG.

nerary mosaic inscription laments the mortal condition of humans and might also be added to these. A close study of the earliest phases of Syriac poetry that would do justice to the role of Bardaisan and to the recently studied fragmentary material does complicate any teleological narrative of the emergence of Syriac poetry; it becomes therefore necessary to reconsider, or at least to further qualify, the inherited view of a purely ecclesiastical origin of Syriac poetry, as famously expressed by Rubens Duval in his 1907 history of Syriac literature: "Syriac poetry, purely ecclesiastic, was born and developed among

the clergy; it was the best suited instrument to instruct the people in religion and to endow the liturgy with the solemnity that is fitting to it."²⁹

The continuation of Syriac poetry after Bardaisan and before the major authors of the fourth century, Ephrem and Aphrahat, reveals in full some of the peculiarities that accompanied the emergence of Syriac literature. The Roman annexation of the Kingdom of Osrhoene did not result in the demise of written Syriac (as was the case for the Aramaic dialects of Nabataea, Palmyra, and Hatra); this is evidence for the special status Syriac had attained by this period. Syriac documents continued to be written in Edessa in the third century; and Syriac was also still used in works of literature, even if the Syriac poetry written during the third century (presumably influenced by Bardesanism and certainly by Manichaeism) did not survive the institutionalization of Nicene Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. During the third century, followers of Bardaisan kept this tradition alive by performing poetry with music;³⁰ but the most spectacular and unforeseeable development took place in Mesopotamia, thanks to the activity of Mani (216-77), a singularly successful religious leader who soon had followers stretching from the western Mediterranean to central Asia. Perhaps unexpectedly, Mani, emerging in Sasanian Iraq, chose Syriac as the main language in which to record his teaching; and he thus became the first known author to write madrāšē after Bardaisan (at least according to our best source, once again Ephrem the Syrian).³¹ These works are mostly lost; yet a passage quoted by Ephrem appears to be written in six-syllable verse (as the ancient Hymn of the Pearl was) and likely indicates that Mani's poetry was also isosyllabic in nature.³²

The fact that Mani, born in southern Babylonia, chose Syriac as the language in which to record his teaching (although he also wrote in Middle Persian) attests to the literary status and the prestige that Syriac had gained by this time, as it was recognized outside Osrhoene. Unlike what might have been the foreseeable course of events, Mani and his followers did not write in any known Aramaic dialect used in southern Mesopotamia, such as Mandaean or Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. As far as it is possible to reconstruct, they adopted the orthography and morphology of Classical Syriac, although at the same time allowing for occasional idiosyncratic features, perhaps under the influence of local spoken Aramaic (and possibly ancient Aramaic literature as well). Their choice attests to the status of Syriac after the turn of the third century, at a time when it was increasingly adopted as a language of culture by Aramaic-speaking Christians throughout the Middle East. Mani's choice must have been dictated by the strong proselytizing drive of Manichaeism, the texts of which were intended for—and eventually enjoyed—wide circulation from the western Mediterranean to central Asia, and were translated into several languages including Latin, Greek, Coptic, and Sogdian. The use of Syriac by the Manichaeans shows that, by the third century, Syriac had acquired a literary status and could be used for the production of literature outside the local context of the kingdom of Edessa; the peculiar features of Manichaean language and its characteristic script may even be read as an effort to establish a Manichaean Syriac in opposition to (Edessene) Classical Syriac. While Syriac was emerging as a Christian language of culture in the third-century Middle East, Mani's religion was intended to incorporate and supersede Christianity.³³

Given the almost complete loss of Manichaean poetry, however, it is difficult to take stock of it and, more importantly, to assess its impact on Syriac literature more broadly.³⁴ It seems unlikely that Manichaean poetry was simply dismissed without leaving any trace in subsequent Syriac literature: although this must of course remain a speculative exercise, aspects of Manichaean poetry that might have affected later Syriac literature (or, at the very least, paralleled its developments) are its universal, or at least "supranational," ambitions (as shown, for instance, by a Syriac-Coptic dictionary found in Egypt); the role of religious teaching as the fundamental component of Manichaean literature; and, last but not least, a strong argumentative drive in matters of religious doctrine.³⁵ After Mani, Aphrahat, a Syriac author flourishing in the first decades of the fourth century, provides excellent evidence for an enduring tradition of Syriac literature in Sasanian Mesopotamia.

Ephrem and the Fourth-Century "Clash" of Madrāšē

As will have become clear by now, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE) is our most important source for the beginnings of Syriac literature, but we should not ignore the fact that he was also a fundamental player in the emergence of this literature. In fact, Ephrem's poetry—Christian in content and pro-Nicene in theological orientation—was in direct competition with at least two other established strands of Syriac literature, the Bardaisanite and the Manichaean. Like Bardaisan and Mani, Ephrem (who lived entirely under the Roman Empire, first in Nisibis and then in Edessa) chose to write in the Syriac language and to use the madrāšā form for many of his literary texts. Yet his stance in favor of Nicene theology, which built on the first ecumenical council of the church held in Nicaea in 325 CE, gave his poetry an edge in its later transmission and, coupled with Ephrem's extraordinary poetic talent, marked a radical turn in Syriac literature (if not even a new beginning, as Ephrem might even have wanted to argue). Ephrem eventually succeeded in

eclipsing his non-Nicene competitors; he replaced Bardaisan's and Mani's madrāšē with his own compositions in the memory of his audience. His eventual success, however, was all but certain at the time he was writing, and he deployed a wide range of strategies in his competition with Bardesanite and Manichaean literatures—an authentic "clash of madrāšē" to use the words of Sidney Griffith.³⁶

As a by-product of this engagement with earlier literature, Ephrem's poetry reached a level of self-consciousness that was yet to be seen in Syriac; in addition, as mentioned above, the biblical text played a fundamental role in the development of this new consciousness. First and foremost, Ephrem set up a geographical framework for this (theological as much as literary) clash with earlier literature: this territory was, quite simply, "our country, our land," 'ar'an in Syriac, understood as the land of Aram of biblical memory-most importantly, the region connected to the origin of the Aramaic language. This was therefore a competition on an epic scale for the hearts of all Aramaic speakers beyond their current religious differences; for instance, they included those "brothers of ours" who still followed Bardaisan. With the help of biblical material, Ephrem defined "our country" as the region "in which Abraham and his son Jacob walked, / Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel too, / even the eleven chiefs of the tribes." Ephrem pointed out that Old Testament patriarchs originated in the land of Aram, which, for this reason, was culturally and religiously superior to the land of the Jews.³⁷

An element of competition with Judaism (and, in turn, with Hellenism) was intrinsic to Syriac identity as this was articulated in Ephrem. The poet wrote that "our country's name [i.e., Aram] is greater than her companion's name [i.e., the Holy Land], / for in her Levi, the chief of the priests, was born; / Judah too, the chief of the royals, / and Joseph, the child who went on to become / the lord of Egypt." The biblical narrative provided Ephrem with not only a geography, but also with a convincing ground for the historical precedence (and therefore the cultural superiority) of Aram over the land of Israel, and, in turn, over the land of the Greeks. The scope of Ephrem's poetry had clearly moved beyond the philosophically oriented aristocratic circles of the court of Edessa that Bardaisan frequented and, in his hands, had grown considerably in scale and ambition; Ephrem was later celebrated as "the crown of the Syrian nation," "the master orator of the Syrians," and "a divine philosopher who vanquished the Greeks in his speech" by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521; Homily on Ephrem 65). At the same time, Ephrem's use of the biblical text as a source for his historical understanding of Syriac opened up the possibility of exploiting ancient Mesopotamian and biblical literature as suitable literary models, as instantiated, for instance, by Ephrem's introduction into Syriac of the dispute

poem, shaped on the ancient Mesopotamian precedence dispute and enriched with the introduction of biblical themes.³⁸

As a Christian teacher serving local bishops (first in Nisibis and later in Edessa), Ephrem also exploited the instructional and apologetic facets of the madrāšā, possibly two of its original features indicated by its etymology; he employed this form as a tool for religious teaching as much as for theological controversy. At the same time, Ephrem's criticism of Bardaisan's madrāšē ended up producing a range of unprecedented second-order observations on this literary genre. Ephrem used sexual imagery to denounce the deceiving seduction emanating from Bardaisan's poetry, which, although it "outwardly displays chastity[,] inwardly it is perverted into the very emblem of blasphemy. It is a stealthy woman; she commits adultery in the inner room." Ephrem went further in critiquing and deconstructing Bardaisan's poetry, for instance when he countered Bardaisan's view that "the senses of the soul do not have the capacity to attain anything that pertains to 'existence'" by arguing instead that the human soul indeed had the capacity to deconstruct Bardaisan's madrāšē, "to unravel their composition, to pull down their structure, to reveal their secrets, and to reprove their teaching." Here, the critique of Bardaisan's poetry seems to reflect the sort of textual work that Ephrem would have wanted to carry out with his theologically minded students, for he soon moved on to argue that the artificial and affected character of Bardaisan's poetry was an inescapable consequence of the concocted and made-up nature of his entire philosophical system. 40 Elsewhere, Ephrem brought to the fore the contrast between the form of Bardaisan's poetry and its contents: in Ephrem's view, Bardaisan's poetry aimed at emulating the beauty of the Psalms, but its contents ultimately revealed his tacit acceptance of paganism. 41 Obviously, none of these shortcomings affected Ephrem's own poetry, either in form or content; the audience would come away with the sense that there had been a genuine clash with earlier non-Orthodox poetry, a clash that had been comfortably won. The almost complete disappearance of Bardaisan's and Mani's poetry, and the immense popularity of Ephrem's poetry in both Syriac original and Greek translation, speak for the success of this narrative.

The facts that Ephrem was a teacher and that the madrāšā, a form that he used for instruction and controversy, dominated his production stand as a reminder of the important and long-standing connections between teaching practice and the emergence of Syriac literature (and some of Ephrem's own pupils were later known as successful Syriac authors). From the earliest stages, Syriac language and literature developed against the backdrop of a lively educational system in the Syriac language, which, unfortunately, can be reconstructed only indirectly. The adoption of Syriac as an administrative language in the Kingdom

—-1 —0 —+1 of Edessa could be feasible only by suitably training aspiring Edessene bureaucrats and administrators, and such training, or some form of it, was unlikely to have subsided with the Roman conquest of the kingdom, given the abiding vitality of the archive of Edessa and the production of Syriac legal documents well into the third century. Early Syriac manuscripts (dated from the early fifth century onward) also reveal a long-standing and well-developed scribal tradition that was intertwined with existing administrative practices; these archival, administrative, and scribal habits kept on developing in the Greco-Roman context and could even be used to express, in Syriac, integration and membership in a larger Roman "commonwealth." ⁴² In addition, the interest in etiquette and moral education by the Edessene elites, as is revealed in the *Story of Ahīqar*, seems to imply a sort of education that was not limited to scribes, but rather catered to the demands of a broader social group at the same time, the use of Old Syriac as a religious and royal language could be successful only by assuming some degree of alphabetization by the broader population. The Edessene aristocracy, of which Bardaisan was a representative, had absorbed aspects of Greco-Roman culture but was also engaged in the development of a philosophical and intellectual tradition in the Syriac language. In the only Bardesanite text that survives extensively, the dialogue known as The Book of the Laws of the Countries, Bardaisan is depicted as instructing philosophically minded students, and later accusations against him condemn the grip of his doctrine on the minds of young nobles in Edessa. 43 In the religious sphere, the Syriac translation of the Bible, and therefore the use of Syriac as a religious language possibly within the Jewish but certainly within the Christian communities, must have gone hand in hand with the instruction of the clergy: the instruction of the clergy, and, in turn, of the broader Christian community, was the sort of activity, sponsored by the local bishops, that Ephrem was involved in during the fourth century.

Ephrem attacked Bardaisan's poetry as deceiving the minds of the young, 44 but Bardaisan was not alone in catering to the instructional demands of younger generations in Edessa. There survives an especially rich, and still understudied, strand of early Syriac literature consisting of instructional texts such as wisdom and moralizing literature that reflect an educational drive that was not limited to instruction in the Christian religion such as that represented by Ephrem's poetry. These texts include Syriac translations of the early Christian apologists Pseudo–Justin Martyr (*Exhortation to the Greeks*) and Aristides (*Apology*), which effectively provided an elementary introduction to Greek philosophy and Greek mythology respectively from a safe Christian perspective; but they also included non-Christian literature, such as moralizing and philosophical texts by Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius, and wisdom collections containing

material circulating under the name of Plato or ancient Greek philosophers. The *Letter of Mara Bar Serapion* was written by a self-styled philosopher who collected moral precepts for his son, possibly in a similar way to Isocrates collecting a series of precepts for his nephew in the speech *To Demonicus* (this was in fact a pseudepigraphic instructional text that circulated widely in Greek schools during the Roman imperial period and was soon translated into Syriac). Whether or not members of the Christian clergy were the teachers who used these texts in classroom settings, these instructional materials reveal the interests of a lively culture endorsing, through translation and on its own terms, Greco-Roman educational traditions.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The present chapter has sketched the emergence of Syriac literature by tracking the transformation of the Syriac language from a local dialect of Middle Aramaic in the region of Edessa into the primary literary language of the Aramaicspeaking Christian communities throughout the Middle East, ultimately becoming the vehicle for one of the most prestigious literatures of late antiquity. I have attempted to understand the beginnings of Syriac literature in terms of vernacularization, on account of the complex and fertile connections between indigenous culture and a superordinate culture, here the Greco-Roman, and in consideration of the extraordinary cultural efforts that went into the development of a new literary, political, and religious discourse in the Syriac language. Key stages in this process were (i) the development of a distinctive Syriac script, designed to respond to the practical and ideological needs of the local Kingdom of Edessa; (ii) the orthographic and morphologic standardization as Classical Syriac, which likely resulted from efforts connected to biblical translations and their use by local communities; (iii) and Syriac's attainment of literary status, particularly owing to the efforts of authors such as Bardaisan, possibly Mani, and certainly Ephrem. With the last of them, Syriac poetry reached a degree of literary self-awareness that had not yet been seen in this tradition. 46

Further Reading

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- 4. See, for example, Carr 2005 and van der Toorn 2007. For discussion of this kind of comparative approach, see Quick (2014), who cautions that the differences in the political and social development of Egypt and Mesopotamia with Israel and Judah must be taken into account.
- 5. See Lord 1965. In biblical studies, this approach was popularized in particular by Niditch (1996), who herself draws on the so-called Scandinavian school of biblical scholarship and its preoccupation with oral tradition and folkloristic studies. See Nyberg 1935; Nielsen 1954.
- 6. The emergence of the "first" alphabetic script is surely not directly documented, and consequently the date for the period of its emergence is obscure and has been subject to a range of diverse suggestions.
- 7. Sanders 2009, 49.
- 8. Pardee 2007.
- 9. Only a few very examples of the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabetic writing system derive from outside of the kingdom of Ugarit: seven from across the Levant (found at Beth Shemesh, Tabor, Tell Taanak, Sarepta, Tell Nebi Mend, and two from Kamid el-Loz) and one from Cyprus (Hula Sultan Teke). See Bordreuil and Pardee 1989, 362–82.
- 10. See Smith 2008, 47-48.
- 11. This suggestion comes from Laura Quick, personal communication.
- 12. The inscriptions of Kulamuwa (KAI 24), Zakkur (KAI 202), Barrakib (KAI 216), the inscription from Tell Fakhariyah (KAI 309), and the Kutamuwa stele from Zincirli feature written descriptions of the speaker's lifetime accomplishments in their own voice alongside images of their face and/or body.
- 13. Translation from COS 2:147-49.
- 14. Translation of this inscription has been excerpted from Pardee 2009, 53-54.
- 15. Weinfeld 1991, 262.
- 16. Greenstein 2014.
- 17. KAI 308 I:1.

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- 1. Moss 2010.
- 2. Pollock 2009.
- 3. Berthelot 2018; Kosmin 2014, 254-55.
- 4. Debié 2018.
- $5. \ \ Healey\ 2017;\ Gzella\ 2015;\ Drijvers\ and\ Healey\ 1999;\ Debi\'e\ 2015,\ 167;\ Traina\ 1996;\ Beyer\ 1986,\ 31-32.$
- 6. Healey 2008.
- 7. Van Rompay 2008.
- 8. Brock 1992; Wood 2012.
- 9. Butts 2016, 199-201; Johnson 2015; Healey 2007; Taylor 2002; Brock 1994.
- 10. Balty and Briquel-Chatonnet 2000; Healey 2006.
- 11. Drijvers and Healey 1999, Bo1.
- 12. Van Rompay 1994; Healey 2012.
- 13. Gzella 2019; Healey 2008; Van Rompay 1994; Boyarin 1981.
- 14. Ter Haar Romeny 2005a and 2005b; Healey 2012 and 2008; Joosten 2013, 12–16, and Joosten 2017; Beyer 1986, 43–44; for Jewish Syriac inscriptions, see Noy and Bloedhorn 2004 128–32; for some caution on Edessa as the main center of Christianity in Roman Mesopotamia, see Taylor 2018.
- 15. Brock 2004, 167; Andrade 2020; Mengozzi and Ricossa 2013.
- 16. Debié 2015, 460-61 and 467-68; Zerubavel 2003.
- 17. Contini and Grottanelli 2005, esp. 193-95 for chronology; Lindenberger 1985; Becker 2006, esp. chap. 1.
- Brock 1985; Sprengling 1916; Watt 1985 and 1986; Nieten 2013; another important treatment of Syriac meter is considerably later, by the Syriac scholar Severus Bar Shakko (d. 1242 CE).
- 19. Camplani 1998; Drijvers 1966. For Sextus Africanus, see Adler 2004 and Brock 1992, esp. 222.
- Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns against Heresies 53.5 (ed. Beck 1957); I follow the translation in Sprengling 1916.
- 21. Griffith 2017.

- 22. Baumstark 1922, 39; for one of the earliest attestations of this root in Syriac with the meaning of "to dispute," see Aphrahat 6.8 (118.2 ed. Wright 1869 = 276.15 ed. Parisot 1894–1907).
- 23. McVey 1999; a view downplaying this innovation by Bardaisan is in Griffith 2006; see also Wickes 2018.
- 24. Ephrem the Syrian, Prose Refutations 2.223 l. 14 (ed. Mitchell 1912-21; translation 2, cv).
- 25. Pollock 2009, 23; Ross 2001, 145-62; Winkelmann 2007.
- 26. Ephrem the Syrian, Prose Refutations 2.221-23 (ed. Mitchell 1912-21).
- 27. Pollock 2009, 23; Beecroft 2015.
- 28. Baumstark 1933; Drijvers and Healey 1999, Am5.
- 29. Duval 1907, 10.
- 30. Life of Rabbula 40 (ed. Phenix and Horn 2017); Drijvers 1966, 162.
- 31. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns against Heresies 1.16 (ed. Beck 1957).
- 32. Mitchell 1912-21, 2:clxxxiii and 1:162 and cix; Reeves 1997.
- 33. Pedersen and Larsen 2013, 123–26; Gardner 1996, 101–3; Contini 1995; Lim 1992; an early Manichaean text, the *Cologne Mani Codex*, contains a passage from a letter to Edessa by Mani (Cameron and Dewey 1979, 50–51).
- 34. Manichaean poetry survives in Coptic; see Allberry 1938; Wurst 1996; Säve-Söderbergh 1950.
- 35. Gardner 1996.
- 36. Griffith 2006; Fiano 2015; the later Vita tradition of Ephrem, chap. 31, presents the view that Ephrem's choice to write madrāšē was meant to counteract the influence of Bardaisan. Conversely, for the development of Syriac prose, a most influential author was Aphrahat: see, e.g., Murray 1983.
- 37. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Julian Saba, 4.8-10 (ed. Beck 1972; trans. Griffith 2006).
- 38. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Julian Saba, 4.8–10 (ed. Beck 1972; trans. Griffith 2006); Jacob of Serugh, Homily on Ephrem, 65 (Amar 1995); Wood 2012; Mengozzi and Ricossa 2013; Brock 2008; Jiménez 2017.
- 39. Ephrem the Syrian, $\it Hymns \ against \ Here sies$, 1.11 (ed. Beck 1957; trans. Griffith 2006).
- 40. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns against Heresies, 54 (ed. Beck 1957; trans. Griffith 2006).
- 41. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns against Heresies, 55 (ed. Beck 1957).
- 42. Debié 2015, 167-72; Andrade 2015.
- 43. Life of Rabbula 40 (ed. Phenix and Horn 2017).
- 44. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies* 1.17 (ed. Beck 1957): "Bardaisan . . . , seeing that the youth longs for sweetness, through the harmony of his songs excited the passions of the youthful."
- 45. Brock 2003; Rigolio 2013; Arzhanov 2018.
- 46. For substantial improvements to this chapter, I would like to thank the organizers, speakers, and participants in the Princeton workshop, in addition to Adam Becker, Averil Cameron, Emanuel Fiano, Anthony Gelston, Simcha Gross, Sandra Keating, Yitz Landes, Barry McCrea, Alessandro Mengozzi, Michael Pifer, Ute Possekel, David Taylor, Lucas Van Rompay, and stimulating audiences in Durham, Princeton, and Oxford.

Chapter 9. Arabic

- 1. Cf. Schoeler and Toorawa 2009, 1.
- 2. [Bloch] 2002, esp. 744.
- 3. Cf. Pellat 1991, 603. For a detailed study on the poetry of lamentation, see Borg 1997.
- 4. For the following, cf. [Bloch] 2002, 745-56, 763-64.
- 5. For the qaṣīda, see Jacobi 1971 and Bauer 1992.
- 6. Bauer 1992, 268.
- 7. For the onager episode see Bauer 1992 and Jacobi 1971, 57.
- 8. For the following, see Schoeler 2006, 87-110; contrary to Zwettler 1978.
- 9. Bauer 1993, 135.
- 10. Serjeant 1983, 134.
- 11. Besides incorporating generally acknowledged research (outlined, e.g., in Watt 1977 and Paret 1983), this and the next three paragraphs are based on the seminal new investigations of Angelika Neuwirth in her book *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (The Koran as a text of late antiquity) and

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