CHAPTER 8

Syriac Sources

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The present chapter offers an overview of the Syriac sources available for the study of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. The criterion for inclusion is, quite simply, the use of the Syriac language; the material is therefore arranged by type and is organized into "inscriptions and mosaics," "coins," "parchments and papyri," "historiography," and "other literature."

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic originally spoken in Edessa (modern Urfa, in Turkey) and its surrounding region, Osrhoene, which is enclosed by the Euphrates on the West and by one of its tributaries, the Khabur, on the East. After almost two centuries of Seleucid rule, Osrhoene became independent in 133 BCE, when a dynasty of "lords" (and later "kings") took control of it and held this region for more than three centuries until its eventual annexation to the Roman Empire (Chapter 27). It was in the context of this independent kingdom of Edessa that the local dialect of Aramaic was first put into writing, and, for this purpose, a characteristic Syriac script was developed, drawing from a late version of the Achaemenid Aramaic script. This enterprise responded to the administrative and cultural needs of the kingdom of Edessa, and it may therefore be understood as part of a broader effort to elevate non-Greek identity; the Syriac record, however, offers abundant evidence for the study of the fertile and complex interactions between Greco-Roman and Near Eastern cultures. The use of Syriac was not limited to epigraphic and documentary settings: this language was also employed in a flourishing literature that continued to be produced both within and outside Osrhoene after Osrhoene was integrated into the Roman Empire and its dynasty of rulers permanently overthrown in the middle of the third century CE. Syriac literature, which includes a particularly rich strand of historiographical writing, continued to flourish for more than a millennium, and offers rich and fascinating material for the study of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.

Inscriptions and Mosaics

Like other Aramaic dialects in the Near East, such as Palmyrene, Nabataean, and Hatrene, Syriac was commonly employed in inscriptions and official documents, which were produced in the kingdom of Edessa. About one hundred and fifty such inscriptions and documents survive, the

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vast majority of which are chance finds; the continuous settlement of Edessa up to modern times has precluded systematic excavations, and many more inscriptions are certainly still to be recovered. Most of the known inscriptions are helpfully collected, published, and translated in one volume (Drijvers and Healey 1999; its numeration is followed here), with recent additions of new finds (notably Healey 2006; Önal 2017: 132–141); they all come from Osrhoene, with the only known exception being three short graffiti on sherds found in Krefeld, in Germany, that may suggest a link with merchants from Edessa (Luther 2009). Several inscriptions are on mosaics and are often accompanied by a rich iconography; they demonstrate a link to so-called Parthian art (for which see Chapter 12), but their technique and geometric ornamentation are Roman (Chapter 16). The language of these inscriptions is known as "Old Syriac," thus differentiating it from "Classical Syriac," the language used in the manuscripts and employed for literature, from which it differs in some important orthographic and morphologic features (most notably in the rendering of the proto-Semitic *ś and the use of different prefixes to mark the masculine third person singular imperfect). Scholars are still divided on the origins of the linguistic peculiarities of Classical Syriac, and possible explanations include a chronological development of Old Syriac or a reflection of a different register or variety in the spoken language (Van Rompay 1994; Healey 2008a, 2017; Gzella 2019).

A considerable group of Old Syriac inscriptions are funerary in nature and mark the burial sites of members of the Edessene elites during the first three centuries CE. A representative of this material is the earliest surviving dated inscription, which was likely put up in the year 6 CE to mark the tomb of the governor of Birtha (now Birecik), a strategically placed settlement on the Euphrates (As 55). As frequently occurs in Old Syriac inscriptions, the text is reported in the first person by the dedicatee; his name was Zarbiyan and, in the inscription, he declares: "I made this tomb for myself and for Ḥalwiya, lady of my household, and for my children." References to the family of the deceased are a common feature of Syriac funerary inscriptions, which often include portraits of the deceased together with family members, either in stone relief or in mosaic. Family ties are emphasized in these inscriptions, but especially important was any eventual connection of the deceased with members of the royal family. In the inscription of Zarbiyan, the deceased introduces himself not just as the "governor of Birtha," but also as the "tutor of ʿAwidallat son of Maʿnu son of Maʿnu," who can arguably be identified as the son of the king of Edessa Maʿnu IV (d. 13 CE). Zarbiyan's role of "tutor" (*mrabbyōnō*) is probably best understood as a special guardianship position that he had for a member of the royal family; this role may have equivalents in the Hatrene Aramaic *mrabbyana*, as is attested in a dedicatory inscription put up in the first half of the third century (H203:2; Vattioni 1981; Aggoula 1991; Beyer 1998), and in the Nabataean cognate *rbw*, used for the tutor of a third-century king Gadimat, "king of the Thanouēnoi," in the context of a Greek bilingual inscription in which the word is translated as *tropheus* in Greek (*RES* 1097). According to Millar, this title indicates the extension of Hellenistic courtly culture into these kingdoms (Sartre 1979; Millar 1993: 431–434).

The question of possible links with Hellenistic court life arises with another funerary inscription in mosaic, found in the northern cemetery of Edessa and part of the so-called Abgar mosaic (Am 10), which decorated the family tomb of a local notable, a certain Barsimya. This mosaic includes Barsimya's portrait together with individual portraits of his grandfather, mother, brother, and son, but also, and most importantly, a prominent portrait of the king of Edessa, Abgar VIII (176–211), who occupies the central portion of the composition and is addressed as "my Lord and benefactor" in the inscription. Here, both iconography and text express the strong allegiance of Barsimya to the king, and there is a possibility that the Syriac terminology should be understood as a calque of the Greek *euergetēs* (Healey 2009: 243–245).

Several other inscribed mosaics from Osrhoene survive (mostly dating back to the second and third centuries CE) that similarly portray the deceased together with family members. Am 2, Am 3, and the Gadya family mosaic (Önal 2017: 132–134) represent 6, 13, and 4 individual portraits

respectively; here, each person is represented individually, enclosed by a quadrangular frame, and is identified by Syriac labels. Conversely, other funerary family mosaics represent the figures standing as in a family portrait (Am 4, Am 5, Am 11, Cm 14), or, in one case, as an entire family taking part in a funerary banquet (Am 8). In this last mosaic, the deceased is depicted reclining on a couch, surrounded by his wife and members of his family; other inscribed scenes of funerary banquets survive also in stone (As 16/17, As 12, As 14; Drijvers 1977: 899 about possible links with the iconography in Palmyra). Conversely, a trace of rather more earthly banquets is represented by the fine silver jug that was found in a private house in Dura-Europos, inscribed, in Syriac, with the name of the owner and the weight of the silver (Bo 1): its decorative motifs, enriched by bunches of grapes and satyrs' masks, indicate that the vessel was used to pour wine and likely attests to the adoption of the practice of the symposium among Syriac speakers (Baur et al. 1933: 178–181, 229–231, pl.XII). Other funerary inscriptions in stone (rather than in mosaic) include portraits of the deceased in relief, following a custom that might be compared with practices in Palmyra and Zeugma (As 6, As 26, As 40, As 43 possibly representing three women, As 50, As 60; Chapter 12); another link to burial practices in Palmyra comes from the remains of a tower-tomb south of Edessa, which is inscribed in Greek and Syriac and perhaps belonged to a member of the Edessene royal family (As 62; Healey 2017: 8–9).

In addition to being used in funerary settings, Old Syriac had an important royal status within the kingdom of Edessa, as can be gauged from its use on coins (see below) and from official dedicatory inscriptions. Not unlike Palmyra and Hatra, Edessa was rich in monuments and sculptures that celebrated the royal family and members of the local elites; an important trace of dedicatory statuary survives in the form of a column that still stands on Edessa's citadel. As its inscription makes clear, the column once held a statue of the Edessene queen (or princess) Shalmat, daughter of the crown prince Maʿnu, and was set up in the first half of the third century CE by a high-ranking official in the kingdom (As 1). The inscription also attests to the use, in Edessa, of the Middle-Persian title *paşgriba*, usually understood as "crown prince," which can be compared to the same title in Hatra (Gnoli 2002; Mosig-Walburg 2018; see also *CIL* IV 1797, the Latin funerary inscription, set up in Rome, of the Edessene "crown prince," *filius rex*, Abgar Phraates); at the same time, this inscription demonstrates the continuing importance of the royal family after Edessa was made a Roman *colonia* in the early third century (Millar 1993: 476–477).

Other inscriptions have a religious or votive character and demonstrate the interaction between Semitic and Mesopotamian cults and Greco-Roman religion. A group of inscriptions from a site about 60 kilometers southeast of Edessa, Sumatar Harabesi, attest to the continuation of the cult of Sin (the Mesopotamian god of the moon, also venerated in nearby Harran) and are part of a sanctuary area where altars, reliefs (As 27/28), and betyls were erected in honor of the god; no trace of the cult of Sin, however, survives in inscriptions from Edessa itself (Healey 2019). Other inscriptions make reference to Maralahe, the "Lord of the gods," in a funerary setting (As 20), or to record the erection of votive pillars, thanks to the involvement of local governors and cultic personnel (As 36, As 37). Hints about concepts of an afterlife might come from funerary inscriptions that use the term "house of eternity" for a tomb (As 7, As 9, As 59, Am 1, Am 2, Am 3, Am 5, Am 6, Am 7, Am 10), or from curses upon anyone removing the bones of the deceased (As 20, Bs 2). A religious character, possibly also related to the afterlife, has been suggested for some funerary mosaics with Greco-Roman mythological subjects, such as two mosaics representing Orpheus playing the lyre (Am 7; Healey 2006), which have been connected to the cult of Orpheus, and a mosaic representing a phoenix standing on a funerary stele beside an (empty?) sarcophagus (Am 6; Healey 2017: 5–6, 2019: 60–62).

There survive also inscribed mosaics from the second and third centuries CE that raise important questions about the familiarity of Syriac speakers with Greco-Roman culture, mythology, and even literature, despite the language barrier between Greek and Syriac. The Euphrates Mosaic (228/229 CE) is inscribed in both Greek and Syriac and represents a personification of

the river-god Euphrates surrounded by two symbolic female figures; they might represent Fecundity and an *interpretatio graeca* of the Syrian goddess Atargatis (Bm 1; see also Chapter 16). Another especially remarkable inscribed mosaic depicts a Greek mythological scene, the creation of mankind by Prometheus, where Zeus, overseeing the scene, is identified as "Maralahe" (Cm 11, Bowersock 2001). Furthermore, an especially impressive circle of mosaics reproduces selected scenes from the *Iliad*, with characters labeled in Syriac; the mosaics were produced at a time when no Syriac translation of this text is known to have circulated (or of any other piece of Greek classical literature for that matter), and Syriac speakers must have been aware of this text from Greek sources. The mosaics depict specific scenes from the *Iliad*, including 1.318–338, when Briseis is led away from Achilles, and 9.182–198, when Achilles and Patroclus receive the embassy of the Greeks in Achilles's tent (Cm 3, Cm 4, Balty and Briquel-Chatonnet 2000). The mosaics with Syriac inscriptions from a villa recently discovered SW of Edessa and dating back to the first half of the third century CE include the representation of the myth of Achilles on Scyros (in the *triclinium*, together with other mythological scenes of dubious identification) and playful naked Erotes picking grapes from vines that develop out of craters; the scenes can be compared with iconography from Zeugma and Palmyra (Abdallah et al. 2020).

Coins

Coinage from the kingdom of Edessa was arguably first produced under King Wael son of Sahru (r. 163–165), at a time when Wael had strong Parthian support in the context of Lucius Verus's Parthian war of 161–166; these coins have Syriac inscriptions, while later coinage was inscribed in either Syriac or (more commonly) Greek. In fact, most coinage from Edessa has inscriptions in Greek and post-dates the deposition of the philo-Parthian Wael, when his successor Ma'nu VIII Philoromaios (165–176) was allowed to mint silver *denarii* for Marcus Aurelius, Faustina the Younger, Lucilla, and Lucius Verus. Arguably, however, Roman coins were in use at Edessa before local coins were minted, as is indicated by Syriac countermarks with the names of Edessene kings (Howgego 1985: no.26, 695, 696; Ross 2001: 167 n.6; Luther 2009). The present chapter focuses on Syriac coinage alone (for an overview of Greek coinage, see Ross 2001: 145–162, and Edessene coinage in *BMC Arabia* xciv–cvii, 91–118, with pl.XIII–XVII): the only known coins with Syriac inscriptions were minted in bronze during the second half of the second century, under the reigns of the kings Wael (r. 163–165), Ma'nu VIII (165–176), and Abgar VIII (176–211).

The Syriac coinage by Wael includes an issue representing the bust of King Wael, on the reverse, and the head of the Parthian king, Vologases IV, on the obverse, arguably celebrating Parthian friendship before the end of the Roman–Parthian war (161–166), as a result of which Osrhoene became a satellite kingdom of Rome (see Chapter 27); the only Syriac inscription on these coins indicates the identity of the sovereign with the label "King Wael" (Co1). Another issue by Wael presents his bust similarly identified in Syriac as "King Wael," and, on the reverse, a temple accompanied by the inscription "the God Naḥay" (this god is also mentioned in Bs 2, a funerary monument for a religious functionary, a *budar*, of Naḥay; Healey 2019: 53–54). In the best-preserved examples of this issue, the temple is seen in three-quarters perspective, with a star depicted on the pediment, and with a cube-shaped betyl lying on a pedestal beneath the doorway (Co 2). The only other known coins with Syriac inscriptions, by the kings Ma'nu VIII and Abgar VIII, have a simpler iconography; they all represent the bearded bust of the king on the obverse, wearing a tall tiara, and, on the reverse, the Syriac legend "King Ma'nu," or "King Abgar," encircled by a wreath (Co 3 and Co 4). The representations in coins of Edessene kings shows a clear debt to Parthian royal iconography (Winkelmann 2007).

Parchments and Papyri

Among the Syriac sources for the study of the Roman Near East, parchments and papyri occupy a prominent position. While only few instances survive from the period covered by the present volume, it should be emphasized that these documents are only a small remnant of the lively scribal and legal traditions of Edessa and Osrhoene (Chapters 11 and 35). In addition to these documents, a glimpse of the administrative and scribal activities in the kingdom of Edessa during the third century derives from a historiographical source, the *Chronicle of Edessa*, a composite annalistic compilation that took its current form during the sixth century but that includes earlier material (more on this below). The text makes reference to the official "scribes," or perhaps "clerks of Edessa" (3.12: *sōprē d-'ūrhōy*), and to "prefects (or commissioners) of the city" (*šarrīrē da-mdītō*), who were in charge of the official archive of Edessa (*'arkeyōn d-'ūrhōy* from the Greek *archeion*; 3.13–16); the recent discovery of the tomb of a scribe, Gadya, demonstrates the wealth that qualified administrative personnel could own (Önal 2017: 132–134). The royal archive of Edessa was still functioning in 243 CE (as attested by *P. Dura* 28) and was also known to Eusebius of Caesarea (*Hist. eccl.* 1.13.5 and 10; Segal 1970: 20–21); it contained not only private documents such as the copy of a Syriac deed of sale found in Dura-Europos (*P. Dura* 28), but, arguably, also annalistic records of the Abgarid dynasty, later used in the compilation of the *Chronicle of Edessa*. The surviving documents, all of which postdate Caracalla's *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 CE, attest to the intersections of Roman law and local legal traditions; but they also offer evidence of the use of Syriac and Roman proper names within legal documents in relation to each individual's social status: perhaps unexpectedly, high-ranking individuals and public officials chose to bear Semitic names in the documents, while low-ranking officials, scribes, and private individuals from local contexts and without office opted for Roman names, ultimately revealing the complexities of cultural divisions running through Edessene society (Sommer 2018: 259–271).

P. Dura 28 is a complete Syriac document written on parchment and found in Dura-Europos, recording the sale of a female slave; it was redacted in Edessa in 243 CE (the date is given according to the Seleucid era), and it provides us with rich chronological information that has added to our knowledge of the status of Edessa under Rome in the third century (Millar 1993: 478–479). The long preamble in the text also demonstrates that Edessene civic authorities asserted peer status with Greek *metropoleis* and Roman *coloniae*; the Edessenes were organized into a citizen community that was consistent with other Greek cities and Roman colonies in Syria. The document therefore demonstrates that the use of the Syriac language cannot be merely understood as antagonistic to mainstream Roman imperial culture, but, rather, Syriac enabled the Osrhoenians to shift their allegiances within the context of a broader and complex dialogue on how Romanness was understood in a Roman provincial setting (Drijvers and Healey 1999; Andrade 2015: P1; see also Chapters 11 and 35).

Two additional Syriac documents on parchment emerged more recently from the antiquities market; they originate from Batnae in Osrhoene and date back to 240 and 242 CE respectively (*P. Euphr.* 19 and 20; ed. Drijvers and Healey 1999: P2 and P3). They record a transfer of debt and a lease of repossessed property respectively, and they have been used in the study of how Osrhoenians represented their sociopolitical context and interacted with it (Millar 1993: 478–479; Andrade 2015). Traces of the complexity of this relationship come from similar documents that use both Greek and Syriac languages: *P. Euphr.* 6 (with its duplicate *P. Euphr.* 7, dated to 249 CE) contains a Greek bill of sale of a slave, which, however, is accompanied by a Syriac summary and a Syriac list of witnesses and guarantors (Feissel et al. 1997). Syriac subscriptions are also found on the Greek *P. Euphr.* 3 (together with its duplicate *P. Euphr.* 4; Feissel and Gascou 1995), which also qualifies as the earliest known instance of Syriac on papyrus, written before 256 CE (see Chapter 11; Feissel and Gascou 1989; Butts 2011b).

Additional Syriac materials come rather from a village in upper Egypt, Kellis, and circulated among the Manichaean community there. Two documents, written on wooden tablets, contain Syriac–Coptic glossaries of religious and liturgical terms (*T. Kell. Syr./Copt.* 1) and of terms and phrases from Manichaean cosmological and eschatological texts (*T. Kell. Syr./Copt.* 2); they stand as evidence for the effort that went into the translation of Manichaean scriptures from Syriac into Coptic. There survive also Manichaean religious texts in Syriac on fragments of papyrus (*P. Kell. Syr.* 1, and possibly also *P. Kell. Syr.* 2), and in both Syriac and Greek on a fragment from a parchment codex (*P. Kell. Syr./Gr.* 1; Gardner 1996–2007). In addition, we have a mid-fourth-century Greek private letter from Kellis about a member of the Manichaean community who "has become a user of Greek and a Syriac reader"; the author of the letter, although writing in Greek, signs his name in Syriac (*P. Kell. Gr.* 67; Gardner 1996–2007). Other fragments of Manichaean Syriac survive on parchment (Cambridge University Library, Or. 2552–2553; British Library, Or. 6201 C (1); Berlin Papyrus Collection, P. 22364; *P. Heid. Syr.* 1) and on papyrus (Bodleian Library, Mss. Syr. D.13 (P) and D.14 (P)); they are all edited and translated in Pedersen and Larsen 2013. One of the most striking instances of Manichaean Syriac, however, comes from a rock-crystal stamp seal, now at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, with the inscription "Mani, the Apostle of Jesus Christ" and perhaps made for the use of Mani himself (216–276 CE) (Gulácsi 2013).

Historiography

Unlike in the cases of Palmyrene or Hatrene Aramaic, there survives in Syriac an extremely rich historiographical tradition. One of the oldest and most important texts is the already mentioned *Chronicle of Edessa*, a sixth-century historiographical compilation covering the period from 133 BCE to 540 CE, which is made up of more than a hundred annalistic entries, some of which are likely based on the archival records of the kingdom of Edessa (ed. and Latin translation in Guidi 1903; English translation in Cowper 1864). One of the most elaborate of these entries is a vivid narrative of a destructive flood that hit Edessa in 201 CE; the text reports the reactions and the response of the king, Abgar VIII (176–211), the noblemen associated with him, the administrative personnel of Edessa, and its surveyors and architects on the occasion of this tragic event. Among the buildings destroyed by the flood, the *Chronicle* mentions a "church of the Christians": the text therefore implies the existence of a Christian church, presumably a house church of the sort known from Dura-Europos, and of a Christian community at Edessa at this time.

According to the *Chronicle of Edessa*, in the aftermath of the flood, districts of the city were redesigned and rebuilt, and a five-year remission of taxes was granted. Mention is made of a neighborhood of Edessa, presumably on the citadel mount, which was the location of the houses of individuals involved in the administration of the kingdom (1.9–10; for maps of Edessa, see Burkitt 1913; Drijvers 1977: 865); these individuals included surveyors and trained architects who played an advisory role to the king during the emergency caused by the flood (1.10; 2.12–13). Two new royal palaces were planned and built, and a neighborhood was erected to contain new dwellings for nobles close to the king (3.3–4; the summer palace of Abgar was later described by the pilgrim Egeria, in 384 CE, in *Peregrinatio Egeriae* 19.6 and 19.14–18). The close relation between King Abgar and his nobles is emphasized by the text and may recall Hellenistic court life, according to which the king's extended family dwelt with a number of high-ranking *philoi*, in addition to people staying at court for a limited amount of time, such as intellectuals, politicians, or exiles, and a number of specialist assistants catering to the administrative needs of the kingdom and of the court such as clerks, scribes, and physicians (Herman 1997; Savalli-Lestrade 1998; Erskine et al. 2017); at the same time, the emphasis on kinship that emerges from the text as well as from the Syriac epigraphic material should be understood in relation to the tribal structures that were part of Edessene society (Sommer 2018: 252–258).

An account of the same flood can be found in another historiographical source, the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, also known as *Chronicle of Ps.-Dionysius of Tell Mahre*, under the year 2232 of Abraham (ed. Chabot 1927a; see Chabot 1927b; Witakowski 1996; Harrak 1999 and 2017 for English translation). This is a universal chronicle, beginning with the creation of the world and covering the period until 775 CE, the time of its composition, and is a very rich source for the study of the Roman Near East. For instance, it describes an ancient pagan, and possibly orgiastic, cult in Edessa (Chabot 1927a: 256–257 and 259; English translation in Trombley and Watt 2000: 28 and 32 with notes; Harrak 2017). Its sources include Eusebius of Caesarea and Socrates of Constantinople, but also various Syriac texts otherwise lost, including the *Ecclesiastical History* by John of Ephesus (sixth century). Other historiographical sources that have been used in the study of the history of the kingdom of Edessa and the Roman Near East are the *Chronography* by Elia of Nisibis (eleventh century), which covers the period 25–1018 CE and brings together ecclesiastical and political events (ed. Brooks and Chabot 1910, with Latin translation; French translation in Delaporte 1910), and the monumental world chronicle by Michael the Syrian (twelfth century), which covers the period from the origin of the world to 1195 CE and relies on a range of historiographical and documentary sources that are now lost (Syriac text and French translation are in Chabot 1899).

The corpus of Syriac historiographical writing, however, is extensive and is yet to be exploited in full. Given that several Syriac sources cover the Hellenistic and Roman period, researchers in this field will find it helpful to consult the work in Debié 2015, which surveys the material and includes a comprehensive repertoire of texts, and is accompanied by an updated bibliography (Brock 1979: 29 includes a helpful table on what period each one of the main historiographical texts covers). There also survive Syriac translations of Greek historiographical works, including Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* and *Chronicon*, Socrates Scholasticus's *Ecclesiastical History*, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *Ecclesiastical History* and *Religious History*, and Zacharias Rhetor's *Ecclesiastical History*, which is lost in the Greek original.

Other Literature

In addition to historiography proper, other Syriac texts can be useful for the study of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, not only on account of the material they contain about the emergence of Christianity in relation to enduring pre-Christian cults and traditions (Chapter 38), but also, and more broadly, about the interactions between local and Greco-Roman cultures in the context of the Roman provincial world. One of the earliest surviving Syriac pieces of literature is also a most extraordinary Syriac text: it takes the form of a prose dialogue featuring the Edessene nobleman and philosopher Bardaisan (154–222) conversing with his philosophically minded pupils on the issue of human free will. This dialogue, composed in the early third century, shows awareness of Platonic models, and includes an ethnographic excursus that lists some of the curious customs of different peoples; these customs include the ancient (and reportedly no-longer-in-use) religious practice of self-emasculation in honor of Atargatis in Edessa of which Bardaisan was likely well-informed (English translation in Drijvers 1965; Millar 1993: 474–475; Healey 2019). Additional information about pre-Christian cults in Edessa, and the Near East more broadly, can be found in the *Apology* of Ps.-Meliton (Chapter 5). Despite being configured as Christian texts opposing non-Christian cults and practices, Christian apologies such as that by Ps.-Meliton can be helpful sources for the study of pre-Christian religion and cults, and, more broadly, of the continuity of Greco-Roman culture among Syriac speakers; the Syriac translations of the early apologists Ps.-Justin Martyr (*Exhortation to the Greeks*) and Aristides (*Apology*) effectively provided an elementary introduction, in Syriac, to Greek philosophy and Greek mythology.

The *Teaching of Addai* is a composite Syriac narrative of the fifth century that backdates the Christianization of Edessa to the time of Jesus, at the same time making a case for an apostolic

pedigree for Edessene Christianity; nonetheless, the text contains important information about Edessene society during the monarchic period (Sommer 2018: 254–255). The narrative includes (*i*) a legendary exchange of letters between King Abgar of Edessa and Jesus, (*ii*) a narrative about the ensuing mission of Jesus's apostle Addai (Thaddeus) to Edessa, and (*iii*) an account of the conversion to Christianity of Abgar and all the citizens of Edessa (Syriac text and English translation are published in Howard 1981; an earlier version of the legend is found in Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 1.13; with Corke-Webster 2017). The *Teaching of Addai* articulates Christian doctrine and promotes a paradigm of correct Christian behavior, but it also attacks Near Eastern pagan cults, against which Addai makes an important speech (18); interestingly, such cults are presented as ultimately belonging to Aramaic-speaking communities other than Edessa, such as those at Hatra, at Hierapolis, and among the Arabs, while Edessa is singled out as preeminently a Christian community on account of its orthodox faith and Christian ascetic practices (Wood 2012: 175–177; Healey 2019). Another early Syriac text that, conversely, demonstrates a more cosmopolitan dimension is the fourth-century *Acts of Thomas*, which narrate the travel and missionary activity of the apostle Thomas in India (English translation in Klijn 2003). This text should be understood in the context of the lively commercial and cultural exchanges between the Syriac-speaking region and Asia, as is also instantiated by an *Account of India* authored by Bardaisan and surviving only fragmentarily in Porphyry (*De abstin*. 4.16.9–18.3 and 376 F Smith); in one passage, the Edessene philosopher writes of his personal encounter with an embassy from India. At another level, both works offer important glimpses into the Edessenes's perceptions and experiences of Roman and Parthian imperial powers (Andrade 2020).

An early Syriac document for which it has proved especially difficult to find a precise historical context is the *Letter of Mara bar Serapion* (text and English translation in Cureton 1855; see now the contributions in Merz and Tieleman 2012). It is unclear whether or not a Greek original underlies this Syriac text, and hypotheses of chronology have also varied considerably, ranging from the second to the fourth centuries CE. The text takes the form of a letter by a self-styled philosopher to his son and offers pieces of moral advice perhaps inspired by Stoic ethics. Especially problematic is the reference that the text makes to the Romans' occupation of Samosata, and to the ensuing exile of the author; this passage might be a reference to the Roman takeover of Commagene in the early 70s CE. Some scholars, however, emphasizing the overall lack of historical detail in the text, have argued that its moral contents and format suggest instead strong links with higher rhetorical education and, in particular, with the school exercise of the *chreia elaboration* (McVey 1990; Millar 1993: 460–462; Chin 2006). In fact, the text contains references and anecdotes about Greek historical figures such as Achilles, Socrates, and Pythagoras, and does indeed attest to the endurance of Greek *paideia* ("education") in Syriac. The *Letter of Mara bar Serapion* should be understood within the context of the large strand of early Syriac instructional literature that demonstrates the continuity of Greco-Roman educational traditions in Syriac, such as the translations of works by Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius, and wisdom literature attributed to ancient Greek philosophers (Brock 2003; Rigolio 2013; Arzhanov 2019).

Unlike much of the later Syriac literature, the Christian character of these instructional texts is rather lukewarm, and they stand as a reminder of the diversity that characterized early Syriac literature; it is necessary to emphasize that what survives was selected and transmitted according to the interests of Syriac Christianity as it became institutionalized from the fourth century onwards. A trace of another strand of literature that circulated in Syriac from the second century onwards, and was not obviously related to the religious interests of the Christian communities in Osrhoene, is the *Story of Ahiqar*, a long-lived piece of ancient Aramaic literature that was received into Syriac and here considerably expanded. Arguably, this text catered to the intellectual interests of the class of scribes, administrators, and diplomats of the kingdom of Edessa. It is a fictional narrative centered on the legendary career of Aḥīqar, an Aramaean minister working at the court of the Neo-Assyrian kings Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) and Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE), 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 *Story of Ahiqar* stands as an important reminder of the potential connections between Syriac and ancient Aramaic literature; in its expanded Syriac version, however, it includes much moralizing and instructional material that reveals a strong interest on the part of the Syriac-speaking elites in moral education and etiquette (English translation in Lindenberger 1985; Contini and Grottanelli 2005).

Greco-Roman themes did not disappear from the Syriac literature of the following centuries; here, they often intersected the patterns in which Syriac speakers wrote and re-wrote their own past (Wood 2010, 2012). In the aftermath of Emperor Julian's defeat in 363 CE, Ephrem the Syrian composed four hymns (*madrashe*) *Against Julian*; they describe, in condemnatory terms, the reign of Julian and the Roman surrender of Nisibis (Ephrem's own homeland) as part of the peace deal with the Sasanians; as a result of this event Ephrem emigrated to Edessa, which remained under Roman control. The hymns are often described as vivid invectives written by somebody who had direct experience of the events narrated and contain important historical information (for instance on Julian's bull coinage). Perhaps paradoxically, however, in these hymns Ephrem presents Nisibis as a bulwark of paganism, a city that, under Julian's government, opted to set up idolatrous cults within its walls; in Ephrem's view, the eventual surrender of Nisibis to the Sasanians was just retribution for its own paganism (Griffith 1987). Another especially notable text dealing with Julian, and known as the *Julian Romance*, is a composite narrative about the reigns of Emperors Julian (361–363) and Jovian (363–364) that strongly condemns Julian and his persecution of Christians. The *Julian Romance* was likely redacted in early sixth-century Edessa, whose cultural and religious concerns it reflects; it shares some of the aims of the *Teaching of Addai* in presenting Edessa as an orthodox stronghold standing in stark contrast to the cities of Harran, Antioch, and Constantinople. The pagan emperor Julian is depicted as an enemy to Christianity, aligned with his Jewish allies, and characterized as the Chalcedonian Justinian in Constantinople (Wood 2010); themes found in the *Julian Romance* emerged again in later Syriac literature, including an important strand of apocalyptic literature represented by the late seventh-century Ps.-Methodius (Butts 2011a).

The homily *On the Fall of the Idols*, by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), takes a different stance and denounces some specific (if ancient) cultic connections of Edessa with Nebo and Bel, in addition to condemning the paganism of Harran, and ultimately raising questions about the longevity of these cults in the region (Syriac text and French translation in Martin 1875; Schwartz 2016; Healey 2019). In his five metrical homilies *On the Spectacles of the Theatre* the same author instead points the finger at theater and its dances as an enduring bastion of ancient paganism and raises a question about the continuity of these practices (text and English translation in Moss 1935; Hall and Wyles 2008: 412–419). Syriac martyr acts have also been used in the study of the early history of Edessa, such as the *Martyrdom of Shmona and Gurya*, which makes reference to the worship of the Sun in Edessa (Syriac text and English translation in Burkitt 1913; Healey 2019: 58), the *Martyrdom of Ḥabbib* (in Millar 1993: 486–487; Burkitt 1913), the *Martyrdom of Sharbil and Barsamya* (Cureton 1864; Millar 1993: 486–487), and the Syriac *Martyrdom of the Mimes*, which implies a degree of familiarity with pantomime among Syriac speakers (Horn 2011). Later in the sixth century, the Syriac historian and bishop John of Ephesus (d. 586) claimed to have converted as many as 80,000 pagans to Christianity in the mountains of Lydia and Caria, although it remains difficult to corroborate his claim (Ashbrook Harvey 1990: 99 with n.22–23).[1]

NOTE

1 I am grateful to Ted Kaizer, Kathryn Stevens, and David Taylor for conversations on subjects related to this chapter.

FURTHER READING

Excellent introductions to Syriac studies are Briquel Chatonnet and Debié 2017 and King 2019; see also Healey 2019 on the religions of Syriac speakers before Christianity. Fundamental reading for research on early Syriac epigraphy and papyrology are Drijvers and Healey 1999 and Healey 2017, which deal with Old Syriac stone inscriptions, inscribed mosaics, documentary material, and coins; while Gardner 1996–2007 and Pedersen and Larsen 2013 are crucial for the Manichaean material. Debié 2015 is fundamental for historiography, together with Brock 1979. Millar 1993: 472–481 and Sommer 2018: 227–271 offer excellent introductions to the history of the kingdom of Osrhoene; while Ross 2001 and Segal 1970 are monographs entirely dedicated to Edessa. For early Syriac literature, see Brock 1997, 2004; Witakowski 2017, and the relevant chapters in King 2019. An important source when working with Syriac texts is the online portal syri.ac, which includes a comprehensive annotated bibliography of open-access resources (inclusive of references to editions and translations) related to Syriac studies; and Brock et al. 2011 is an excellent encyclopedic dictionary for Syriac studies, now also available online at gedsh.bethmardutho.org. A comprehensive bibliography of publications on Syriac Christianity is available at http://www.csc.org.il/db/db.aspx?db=SB; and syriaca.org is a growing collection of digital resources for Syriac studies, including a geographical reference tool, a biographical dictionary, a new handbook of Syriac literature, and a database of hagiographical texts.