

Syriac as a Vehicle for Transmission of Knowledge across Borders of Empires

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Languages that have played key roles in the transmission and dissemination of scientific knowledge over wide areas of the world have usually been the languages of major political powers, or “empires,” with some exceptions, such as Pali and Syriac. This essay attempts to sketch how the Syriac language, originally a dialect of Aramaic used mainly by the Christians in Mesopotamia, transmitted the sciences mainly of Greek origin across the boundaries of empires to the far eastern end of the Eurasian continent. This somewhat simplified description of the journey of knowledge across the continent zooms in on some of the major actors involved in the transmission, namely, Sergius of Rēsh-‘Aynā, Severus Sēbōkht, and Catholicos Timothy I, to highlight noteworthy features of this transfer of knowledge.

Languages that have become major vehicles for transmission and dissemination of scientific knowledge in the world have tended to do so with the rise in the political power of the peoples speaking these languages. Most of the languages that have played major roles in spreading knowledge beyond the confines of the region where they originated have been the languages of the rulers of empires, even if the areas to which they transmitted knowledge were not necessarily confined within the boundaries of the empires in question. This was certainly the case with Latin as the language of the Roman Empire, with Chinese as the language of the Chinese Empire, and with English as the language of the British Empire and later of the American “Empire.”

There are, however, exceptions. A case might be made for Pali, which, although never the language of a major political power, became the

vehicle for the spread of knowledge in large areas of Southeast Asia, mainly through the work of Buddhist missionaries. Another exception is Syriac, which was never the language of the rulers of an empire, yet played a major role in the transmission of knowledge from the western end of the Asian continent across borders of empires to its eastern end. This essay provides a rough sketch of how Syriac functioned as a vehicle of scientific knowledge in this vast area, focusing on some personalities who played key roles in this journey of knowledge across the continent.¹

The Syriac Language and the Earliest Translations from Greek into Syriac

Syriac originated as a dialect of Aramaic spoken in the Kingdom of Osrhoene centered on the city of Edessa in Upper Mesopotamia. The oldest specimens of the language are found in inscriptions from the area dating from the first century CE. Due to the fact that the people of Osrhoene were among the first in the region to accept Christianity and to translate the Bible into their language, Syriac became the common literary language of the Aramaic-speaking Christians in the Fertile Crescent and the vehicle for the spread of Christianity in vast areas of Asia to the east, including India and China. Although their numbers have dwindled under the rule of Islam, groups of Christians who use Syriac as their liturgical language remain to this day in many parts of the Middle East, as well as in India and in diaspora communities in Europe, the Americas, and Australasia.

Although the vast majority of the surviving literature in Syriac was composed by Christians, it should not be forgotten that Syriac, or a dialect of Aramaic very close to it, was also the original language of the scriptures of another world religion, namely, Manichaeism. Another group of people who used Syriac as their literary language were the inhabitants of Ḥarrān, a city not far from Edessa, who long resisted conversion to Christianity and Islam, and who later came to be known as the Ṣābians. Although Thābit ibn Qurrah (826–901), the Ṣābian scholar who worked in Abbasid Baghdad, wrote most of his works in Arabic, he is said to have been more

¹ A large part of what follows consists of a revised and somewhat shortened version of a paper recently published by the author in Japanese; see Takahashi 2014a.

fluent in Syriac and is known to have written a number of works in that language.²

Syriac was exposed from the earliest stages of its development to the influence of Greek as the predominant language of the Eastern Mediterranean region, so that loanwords from Greek are found in the earliest specimens of Syriac literature. Beginning in the second century, the Bible was translated into Syriac—the Old Testament from Hebrew, and the New Testament from Greek—with the result that the teachings of Jesus Christ, who originally preached in Aramaic, were rendered back from Greek into Syriac-Aramaic, and then from Syriac into the different languages of the Asian continent. Beginning, then, around the fourth century, other Christian literature began to be translated from Greek into Syriac.

Probably in the fifth century, non-Christian Greek works began to be translated into Syriac. The earliest Syriac translations of this kind include those which have, at least since Baumstark, been grouped under the heading of “popular philosophy,” namely, the translations of ethical works of Plutarch (*De cohibenda ira*, *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*), Ps.-Plutarch (*De exercitatione*), (Ps.)-Isocrates (*Ad Demonicum*), Lucian of Samosata (*De non facile credendo calumniae*), and Themistius (*De amicitia*, *De virtute*), as well as collections of sayings such as those attributed to Secundus the Silent Philosopher, Menander, Pythagoras, Plato, and Theano.³ Some, at least, of the materials in the domain of popular science, such as the translations, or paraphrases, of the *Physiologus* and the *Geoponica*, as well as some of the alchemical literature that has survived in Syriac, probably also date from this period.

Translations of the works of a more highly scientific nature, such as the medical works of Galen and Aristotle’s works on logic, do not appear until a little later. This can be explained in part by the fact that the

² Qiftī, *Ta’riḫ al-ḥukamā’*, in Lippert 1903, 120; Barhebraeus, *Chronicon*, in Bedjan 1890, 168–69.

³ For overviews of these translations, see Duval 1907, 258–69; Baumstark 1922, 169–70; Zeegers-van der Vorst 1978 (especially for the gnomologia); Brock 2003; Hugonnard-Roche 2007, 279–82. As recent studies on the translations of Plutarch and Themistius, see Rigolio 2013a and 2013b. On the Syriac sentences of Menander, see Monaco 2013, who considers these sentences to be original productions in Syriac rather than translations from Greek. In connection with Secundus, see also the forthcoming book Heide 2014.

Syriac-speaking élite living within the Roman Empire were bilingual and could read and study such works in the original Greek.⁴ Following the controversies in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Christians on the eastern periphery of the empire who rejected the decision of that council began to form their own church hierarchies in the sixth century, and it was in this period, when the Syriac-speaking and other non-Hellenophone peoples were gaining their religious autonomy from the Imperial Church, that we begin to see the production of Syriac translations of what can properly be called scientific literature.

Medicine and Philosophy: Sergius of Rēsh-ʿAynā

The most important figure in the reception of the Greek sciences in Syriac in the sixth century is Sergius of Rēsh-ʿAynā (d. 536), who is reported to have received his education in Alexandria in Egypt, and who later worked as the chief physician (*archiatros*) in the city of Rēsh-ʿAynā in northern Syria (Ra's al-ʿAyn/Ceylanpınar, today on the Syrian-Turkish border). According to Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808–73), who used Sergius' translations to produce his own revised Syriac translations and Arabic translations of Galen, Sergius translated into Syriac some thirty works of Galen, including those works that served as the standard medical textbooks in Alexandria at the time. Sergius' interests, however, were not limited to medicine. Sergius translated into Syriac the mystical works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and one of the two Syriac translations of Evagrius Ponticus' *Kephalaia gnostica* was also probably done by Sergius. In the field of philosophy, Sergius has left us, besides some short works relating to Aristotelian logic, two commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* addressed, respectively, to a certain Philotheos and to a Theodore, as well as Syriac translations of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* and of Alexander of Aphrodisias' *On the Principles of the Universe*.⁵

⁴ Cf. Taylor 2002.

⁵ On Sergius and his works, see the papers gathered together in Hugonnard-Roche 2004, and Fiori 2014 (with thanks to Emiliano Fiori for allowing me access to this excellent paper prior to publication). On the translation of Alexander's treatise, see Fiori 2010 and King 2010; and on the translation of the *De mundo*, McCollum 2009 and Takahashi 2014b.

In the introduction to his commentary addressed to Theodore, Sergius begins by mentioning how the stork is said to find joy and gain strength when it retreats to a deserted place, and how we, too, must leave the world and reject our carnal desires in order to understand the teachings of the Ancients and penetrate the secrets of their books. He goes on to reminisce about how, when he and Theodore were translating the books of Galen, with Sergius translating from the Greek and Theodore writing down Sergius' words while correcting his Syriac style, Theodore had noticed the excellent way Galen had arranged the discourse and had asked where Galen had found the principle of knowledge. Sergius had answered that the origin of all such knowledge was Aristotle and that Aristotle had, like a wise physician assembling the materials for his medicaments, gathered together and arranged the disparate pieces of knowledge to create the remedy for the disease of ignorance. This had led to Theodore asking Sergius to explain to him in detail the philosophy of Aristotle. At the time Sergius had excused himself, saying that he had already written a short work on the topic, but because Theodore insisted, Sergius tells us, he is now writing this commentary.⁶

This introduction is of interest for a number of reasons, including the information it provides on how the work of translation was conducted, and the linkage between knowledge and asceticism as exemplified in the image of the stork (which accords with Sergius' interest in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Evagrius), as well as the role given to Aristotle in the systematization of knowledge. The introduction also suggests a linkage between philosophy and medicine. According to Sergius, it was through reading Galen's works and noticing how knowledge was systematized there that Theodore became interested in Aristotle. One imagines that this was also the route followed by Sergius himself.

Between Greek and Syriac: Severus Sēbōkht

In the century following Sergius, the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of Qenneshrē on the Euphrates, in what is now northern Syria, emerged as

⁶ See the French translation of the introduction at Hugonnard-Roche 1997, 81–83 (= Hugonnard-Roche 2004, 167–70).

an important center of learning in Syriac. Among the scholars who studied and taught there, Severus Sēbōkht (d. 666/7) is known in particular for his work in the field of astronomy. Besides minor works on Aristotelian logic, he has left us substantial treatises “on the astrolabe” and “on the constellations,” as well as a series of letters dealing with astronomical and related matters.⁷ Although most of these letters remain unpublished, one of them, written in 661/2 and probably addressed to the periodeutes Basil of Cyprus, the addressee of several other letters by Severus, has been known for some time as containing the earliest reference to the Indian system of numerals.⁸ This letter is also of note for its attack on those Greeks who considered the sciences to be their preserve and for its claim that the sciences are universal property:

Concerning the fact that some of the Greek who are with you, as you wrote, say that the Syrians can know nothing at all of such things, I mean, the computation of the stars and the eclipse of the sun and the moon, believing that all knowledge belongs to the Greeks alone because they speak Greek, they ought to know, since there are the wise Babylonians, that the Babylonians were the first inventors of knowledge, and not the Greeks, as all the writings of the Greeks themselves testify; and after the Babylonians [came] the Egyptians, and then the Greeks.—I do not think anyone will dispute that the Babylonians were Syrians.—Those who say, therefore, that the Syrians can know nothing at all are in great error, seeing that the Syrians were the first inventors and teachers of these things. . . . For science does not belong to language [*lexis*], or word, but word belongs to science; and language is not the cause of wisdom, but the latter of the former. . . . I have said these things not because I despise the wisdom of the Greek in such matters as these and other similar matters—for I am not altogether unfamiliar with it—but because I want to show that knowledge is the common property of anyone who wishes to be diligent, regardless of whether he is Greek or non-Greek.⁹

⁷ On Severus Sēbōkht in general, see Reinink 2011, with the literature cited there; cf. Takahashi 2011, 479–81, Claude-Villey 2012.

⁸ Nau 1910.

⁹ Reich 2000, 479–81; cf. Takahashi 2010, 21–24. The letter is also discussed at Tannous 2010, 353–56. Claude-Villey rightly points out that neither the author nor the addressee of this letter is explicitly stated in the manuscript, and that its attribution to Severus, although taken for granted since Nau and still likely to be correct, needs to be investigated afresh (Claude-Villey 2012, 47 n154; 139–40).

There had always been a certain feeling of ambivalence among the Syriac Christians toward the Greeks and Greek learning as something that was foreign to them and was of pagan origin.¹⁰ Just after the time of Severus, we have the interesting story that Jacob of Edessa (ca. 630–703), who studied under Severus and with whom the reception of Greek learning in Syriac may be said to have reached its peak, was chased out of the Monastery of Eusebona, where he taught “the reading of the scriptures in Greek,” by those “brothers who hated the Greeks.”¹¹ With Severus, however, the teacher of Jacob, we are dealing with someone who was just as well versed in the Greek sciences as Jacob was. The astronomical knowledge that we find in Severus’ works is derived from the works of Greek astronomers such as Ptolemy and Theon of Alexandria, while his discussions of logic are concerned with Aristotelian logic. This makes the criticism of the Greeks in the letter quoted above all the more remarkable. Part of the explanation for Severus’ attitude is perhaps to be found in the historical circumstances in which he lived, for it was during his lifetime that the areas inhabited by the Syriacs were conquered from the Greek-speaking Byzantines by the Arabs, and this would have given cause to scholars like Severus to disown any allegiance to the Greeks. Even if we allow for such political considerations, however, the letter stands as a remarkable expression of the universalist view that scientific knowledge is something that is to be shared by all peoples, as well as of the confidence in the ability of the Syriac language to function as a medium of such scientific knowledge.

Syriac in the Transmission of Knowledge to the Persian Empire

Severus Sēbōkht lived at a time when the Islamic conquests removed the border that had for centuries divided the eastern and western parts of what today constitutes the Middle East, but even before the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Syriac had for some time been functioning as a common language spoken on either side of that border between the Roman and Persian empires. While the majority of the Syriac-speaking

¹⁰ Brock 1982.

¹¹ Chabot 1899–1924, IV.446 (text); II.472 (trans.).

Christians within the Roman Empire followed a Miaphysite understanding of Christology and came to form an ecclesiastical community known today as the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Christians living under the Sasanians, referred to below as the “East Syrians,” followed the teaching associated with Nestorius and formed what is known today as the Assyrian Church of the East. Although the two communities were thus separated in their ecclesiastical allegiance, Syriac as the common language facilitated the transmission of knowledge between the two communities and across the border between the two empires.

The Theodore who is mentioned in Sergius of Rēsh-‘Aynā’s commentary on the *Categories* is also the addressee of a number of translations of Galen by Sergius. A later record tells us that this Theodore was bishop of Karkh Juddān, a town located on the Diyālā River near the present border between Iraq and Iran.¹² If this is correct, we have an instance from the first part of the sixth century where knowledge of Galenic medicine and Aristotelian logic crossed the border into Persia in a Syriac guise.

It is from the middle of the sixth century that we begin to see evidence of formal training in logic in the writings also of the East Syrians. It has been suggested that the key figure in the introduction of the study of Aristotelian logic into the East Syrian Church was the future catholicos Mar Ābā I (540–52), whose travels, probably in the 520s, took him to Alexandria and Constantinople, among other places, and who is to be remembered also for the influence he had on Cosmas Indicopleustes (i.e., an instance where learning traveled from east to west).¹³ We have fewer

¹² Theodore is mentioned as “bishop of Karkh Juddān” in one of the two manuscripts of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s letter on the translations of Galen (Bergsträsser 1932, 80 [12, 21f.]; cf. *ibid.*, 51), but simply as “bishop of al-Karkh” in the other (Bergsträsser 1925, 12.21f. and 10). On the location of Karkh Juddān, see Fiey 1968, 71–74. It is probably the same person who is later transformed into “*Thādirī*, bishop of al-Karkh in Baghdad” in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a’s *‘Uyūn al-anbā’* (in Müller 1882, I.206.2–4; cf. Graf 1944–53, II.131; Sezgin 1970, 268). One problem, as noted by Bettolo 2005, 94 n106, with the identification of Theodore as “bishop of Karkh Juddān” is that this town is not otherwise known to have had its own bishop, although it is mentioned among the titles of the metropolitan of Bēt Garmai in a list of dioceses drawn up in 1007/8 (Fiey 1993, 100; the principal town of Bēt Garmai was, of course, another “Karkh,” Karkā d-Bēt Slök/Kirkuk). It may be that Theodore was originally styled “of Karkh Juddān” with reference to the place of his origin or residence, which was then later misinterpreted (by Ḥunayn?) as an episcopal title.

¹³ Brock 1982, 21–22; cf. Izdebski 2014. On Mar Aba and Cosmas Indicopleustes, see Wolska 1962, 63–85; cf. Wolska 1968, 39–40; Becker 2006, 113–14.

extant works devoted to the secular sciences from the hands of the East Syrians than the West Syrians, partly because of how such sciences were studied in East Syrian circles¹⁴ and partly because a larger proportion of early East Syrian literature is lost. One sixth-century East Syrian author whose work on Aristotelian logic has survived is Paul the Persian, or Paul the Philosopher, the author of a commentary on the *De interpretatione* and an introductory treatise on Aristotelian logic dedicated to King Khusrau, no doubt to be identified with Khusrau I Anūshirwān (531–78/9).¹⁵ A number of East Syrian works dating from the seventh and eighth centuries also indicate knowledge of at least the basics of Aristotelian logic among the Christians living within the region originally under Persian rule in this period, which saw the Arabs become the new rulers of the area.¹⁶

Reception of the Greek Sciences in the Church of the East: Timothy I

The Umayyads, the first dynasty to establish itself in the newly born Islamic Empire, ruled from Damascus in Syria, an area where Greek rather than Syriac was the principal literary language. The takeover of power, however, by the Abbasids in 750 resulted in the eastward shift of the center of power to Iraq, with its large population of Syriac speakers affiliated mainly with the Church of the East, and this led to the large-scale participation of the Syriac Christians in the flowering of scientific knowledge in the Islamic World centered on the newly founded capital city of Baghdad. As a personality illustrating the state of the sciences among the East Syrians in the early Abbasid period, we might turn to Catholicos Timothy I (ca. 728–823), who stood at the helm of the Church of the East during the period when that church reached its greatest geographical extent. Born in the village of Ḥazza to the southeast of Arbil and educated in a number of monasteries in the area, after serving as bishop of Bet Bgash in the mountains of northern Iraq, he was elected catholicos, or head, of

¹⁴ Cf. Becker 2006, 13.

¹⁵ On Paul the Persian, see Van Rompay 2011, with the literature cited there, along with Bruns 2010 and, most recently, Hugonnard-Roche 2013.

¹⁶ Brock 1993, Daiber 2012, 47–51.

the Church of the East in 780, and guided his church over a period of forty-two years spanning the reigns of five Abbasid caliphs, from al-Mahdī (775–85) to al-Ma'mūn (813–33). Until his time, the catholicoses of the Church of the East had resided in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the former winter capital of the Sasanian Empire, but Timothy moved his residence to Baghdad and maintained close contact with the rulers of the Abbasid Empire.¹⁷

Later authors tell us that Timothy I composed a “Book of the Stars.”¹⁸ This work is now lost, so that we have no way of knowing whether it was a book on astronomy, on astrology, or, as has been suggested, against astrology.¹⁹ What we do have from the pen of Timothy I are his letters. We are told by ‘Abdishō’ bar Brikhā (d. 1318) that there was once a collection containing some two hundred letters written by Timothy. Fifty-nine of these letters survive today and constitute a rich source of information about the activities of the catholicos himself, as well as the state of Church of the East during his reign.

Among Timothy’s letters that are of particular interest for the information they provide on his scientific activities is Letter 43, written in 781/2, just after his accession to the catholicate, and addressed to his former teacher Petion. In it, he tells us that, together with his old school friend Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī, he has just completed a translation of Aristotle’s *Topica* into Arabic as he had been commanded to do by Caliph al-Mahdī. He goes on to ask Petion to search for him for commentaries on Aristotle’s *Topica*, *Sophistical Refutations*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*, as well as for the Syriac translations of the works of Gregory of Nazianzus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Nemesius of Emesa’s *De natura hominis*, and certain “treatises on the natural principles of bodies, written by someone of the Platonic school.”²⁰ The last of these remains unidentified, but from the description of it given by Timothy, it, too, must have been a work of philosophical nature.

The reason Timothy wanted the commentaries on Aristotle’s *Sophistical*

¹⁷ As a recent comprehensive study of the life and works of Timothy I, see Berti 2009.

¹⁸ Mārī b. Sulaymān, in Gismondi 1896–99: I.74 (text), 65 (trans.); Barhebraeus, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, in Abbeloos and Lamy 1872–77: II.179; ‘Abdishō’ bar Brikhā, apud Assemanus 1719–28: III/1.162.

¹⁹ See Berti 2009, 279–80; cf. Tisserant 1946, 1127–28, Takahashi 2011, 481.

²⁰ Heimgartner 2012a, 65–68 (text), 47–52 (trans.); English translation in Brock 1999, 235–37.

Refutations, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics* in addition to those on the *Topica* may have been because he was planning to translate these works, too, into Arabic. We do not know whether he ever succeeded in obtaining copies of these commentaries, but the fact that he was asking for them indicates that such works may have existed in Syriac at the time. We also find Timothy making references to Aristotle's logical works elsewhere in his letters. In Letter 48, in his answer to a question from his old friend Sergius, the metropolitan of Elam, Timothy goes into a detailed discussion of the term "*aulētrides*," which occurs in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*,²¹ and in another letter addressed to Sergius (Letter 46), he jokingly uses a syllogistic argument to prove that what Sergius had said was a "gift of the land of Elam" was in fact a "gift from Sergius," indicating that such familiarity with Aristotelian logic was something the two men shared.²² In his Letter 42, addressed to the students at the Monastery of Mar Gabriel in Mosul, we find Timothy giving detailed answers to questions he had received from the students about certain passages of Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*. He also answers questions on the works of the Fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, and near the beginning of the letter we find him commending the students for their interest in such subjects and for having become inheritors of "logic and orthodox teaching," suggesting that equal weight was being placed on the study of logic and the study of Christian doctrine in the schools of his time.²³

We find Timothy asking his correspondents to send him books in other letters as well. It is not difficult to imagine that it was the books on the Greek sciences, gathered in the new capital city of Baghdad by such scholarly figures as Timothy I, that formed the basis for the large-scale translation of scientific works into Arabic in what has become known as the Abbasid Translation Movement. In most cases members of the Syriac-rite churches served as the translators in this movement, and these Syriac Christians also formed a large portion of the intellectual class under the early Abbasids, serving in particular as physicians and bureaucrats. Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī, who worked with Timothy on the translation of the *Topica*, is reported also to have translated Aristotle's *Categories*, *On Interpretation*,

²¹ Heimgartner 2012a, 89–92 (text), 74–77 (trans.); Brock 1999, 238–39.

²² Heimgartner 2012a, 76–78 (text), 60–62 (trans.).

²³ Heimgartner 2012a, 3–64 (text), 3–46 (trans.).

and *Prior Analytics* into Arabic, and his descendants are known to have served as secretaries for at least three more generations under the Abbasids.²⁴

Besides the translations made from Greek and Syriac, and occasionally from Persian, a number of scientific works, especially in the field of astronomy, are known to have been translated into Arabic from Sanskrit. It has recently been suggested that the influence of the Barmakids, a family of Buddhist origin from Balkh in Bactria that rose to a position of high power under the early Abbasids, may have been behind such translation from Sanskrit.²⁵ If this is correct, and if the Barmakids had not fallen from power under Hārūn al-Rashīd in 803, the sciences of Indian origin might have gone on to play a larger role in the development of the sciences under the Abbasids and in subsequent ages. That, however, was not to be, and it was the sciences of Greek origin that came to occupy center stage in Baghdad. This is due in part to the high standard of the knowledge that had been made available in Greek. A more important factor, perhaps, was the fact that the bulk of the intellectual class in Baghdad was made up of the Syriac Christians, who had acquired and familiarized themselves with the Greek sciences in the preceding centuries. A large part of the population of Baghdad must have been made up of those Syriac Christians who had moved there from their traditional centers, such as Karkā d-Bēt Slōk (Kirkūk), Kashkar (al-Wāsit), and Ḥirtā (al-Ḥīra), as well as Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the former Sasanian capital and seat of the Church of the East catholicos. Among the scholars who worked in both Syriac and Arabic around the time of Timothy I, we can count Job of Edessa (Ayyūb al-Ruhāwī, ca. 760–ca. 835) and ‘Abdishō’ bar Bahriz (fl. ca. 830). The majority of those who worked as translators in the main period of the Abbasid Translation Movement—including the most famous of them, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (807–73), from al-Ḥīra—were members of the Church of the East. In the following period, it was the so-called Baghdad Peripatetics, beginning with Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. 940), from Dayr Qunnā near al-Wāsit, who by revising the earlier Arabic translations of Aristotle and producing detailed commentaries on them made it possible for Arabic

²⁴ Cabrol 2002, and more generally on the Syriac Christians as secretaries, Cabrol 2010 and 2012.

²⁵ Van Bladel 2011.

speakers to understand these difficult texts and thus prepared the way for further development and flowering of philosophy in Arabic at the hands of al-Fārābī (d. 950/1) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037).

Syriac in the Transmission of Knowledge on the Silk Road

The reign of Timothy I was also the period in which the Church of the East reached its greatest geographical extent on the Eurasian continent. In Timothy's Letter 41, written around 793 and addressed to the monks of the Monastery of Mar Maron, which is believed to stand at the origin of what is today the Maronite Church, we find the following passage:

For in all the regions of Babylonia, Persia and Assyria, and in all the regions of the East, that is to say, in the lands of the Indians, of the Chinese, of the Tibetans and of the Turks, in all the polities that stand under this throne, whose servant and minister God has commanded us to be, this prayer has been recited without the addition of the words "who was crucified for us," in other words, in every region, among all races, in all the different and diverse languages.²⁶

Of the regions mentioned here, Babylonia, Assyria, and Persia, corresponding to today's Iraq and southeastern Iran, constituted the heartland of the Church of the East. Of the eastern lands, India had a Christian community under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East from early on, and a large community of Syriac-rite Christians remains to this day in the southern Indian state of Kerala. It is uncertain whether Syriac Christianity ever reached the core regions of Tibet in any organized form, but it was around the time this letter was written that the Tibetan Empire reached the height of its power and competed with the Turkic Uighurs to the north for control of the areas traversed by the main routes of the Silk Road, so that there is likely to have been a significant Christian population within its boundaries. In his Letter 48, probably written around 800, Timothy tells his correspondent that he has just ordained a metropolitan for the Turks and is intending to ordain another for Tibet.²⁷

²⁶ Letter 41; Bidawid 1956, 36 (text), 117 (trans.).

²⁷ Heimgartner 2012a, 86 (text), 71 (trans.); on the date of the letter, see *ibid.*, lxxv–

According to Chinese records, Christianity, in the form later known in China under the name of Jingjiao (景教, “the luminous religion”), made its official entry into the land with the arrival of Aluoben 阿羅本 in Chang’an in 635. It was just after Timothy I was elected catholicos that the most famous monument of early Christianity in China, the Xi’an Stele (Daqin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei 大秦景教流行中國碑) was erected in 781. In a letter probably from the late 790s (Letter 13), Timothy I talks about the death of the metropolitan of China,²⁸ and in a quotation by Thomas of Margā from a lost letter of Timothy we hear of him appointing and dispatching a monk called David from the Monastery of Bēt Abē in northern Iraq as the new metropolitan of China.²⁹

It has often been suggested that the Jingjiao Christians played a role in transmitting medical knowledge to Tang-dynasty China, although concrete evidence for this is hard to come by.³⁰ One instance where botanical knowledge can be shown to have been transmitted to China in Syriac, along with Persian, as its medium occurs in the *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎, an encyclopedic work compiled by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803–63). The latter half of Book 18 of that work contains a list of plants produced in Western Asia with their properties and their names in the languages of Bosi 波斯 (Persia) and Fulin 拂林 (the transliteration of the Iranian Hrōm/Frōm, “Rome”), information probably conveyed to the compiler by the Fulin monk Wan (拂林國僧鸞).³¹ Most of the Fulin names given there can easily

lxxvi. On these and other references to and traces of Christianity in Tibet in this period, see Uray 1983; Hunter 1996, 135–36; Yoeli-Tlalim 2012, 360–62.

²⁸ Braun 1914–15, 72 (text), 109 (trans.).

²⁹ Budge 1893, 238 (text), 499 (trans.).

³⁰ As recent instances of such suggestions, see Huang 2002, upholding the view that Qin Minghe 秦鳴鶴, who treated Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (649–83) on his deathbed, was a Jingjiao Christian physician (cf. Nicolini-Zani 2006, 108; against this view, Xiao 2011), and Nie 2008, suggesting that the chorepiscopus Yazdbōzid/Yisi 伊斯, who was responsible for the erection of the Xi’an Stele, was also a physician. Jingjiao clerics may also have played a role in the transmission of astronomical knowledge to China, if the two clerics (*sēng* 僧) Wenzhen 文貞 and Jingfu 景福 mentioned on the Xi’an Stele can be identified, respectively, as Li Wenzhen 李文貞 (Li Su 李素, 744–817), who served at the Chinese imperial observatory and whose epitaph was discovered in Xi’an in 1980, and his second son Jingfu 景伏 (called Jingfu 景復 in the epitaph of Li Su’s wife), who was likewise active in the imperial service (see Rong 2001, 238–57; cf. Nicolini-Zani 2006, 77, 103, 110; Lai 2003).

³¹ *Youyang zazu*, Book 18, in Cao 2012: 697–98, cf. Santos 2010.

be recognized as transliterations of the Syriac names. Examples include those for the “olive,” *zhāitī* 齊虛³² (Late Middle Chinese [LMC]³³ *tšaj-tjiaj*, Syriac [S] *zaytā*, plural *zaytē*); “galbanum,” *hānbólítā* 預勃梨他 (LMC *xan-pfua-li-ta*, S *halbānītā*); and the “balm of Gilead” (resin of *commiphora opobalsamum*), *ēbóshēn* 阿勃參 (LMC *?a-pfiut-sam*, S *āppursamā*). In the case of the name for “fig,” the Syriac equivalent *tēnā* (plural *tēnē*) allows us to identify the variant reading *dīnī* 底欄 (LMC *tiaj'-niaj'*) as the likely correct reading, against the accepted reading *dīchēng* 底稱 (LMC *tiaj'-tš^hiŋ*).

The way the plants of Persian and Fulin origin are described differs from the description of the native Chinese plants in the earlier part of Book 18 of the *Youyang zazu*, in that the properties of these plants, including their medical properties, are often mentioned in a way that is reminiscent of the descriptions we find in pharmacological works such as those of the Greek physician Dioscorides (40–90 CE). The information that the monk Wan conveyed was no doubt based on his knowledge of such pharmacological and medical literature.

The role of Syriac monks in conveying medical knowledge along the Silk Road is witnessed to also by the fragments of documents discovered at the Christian sites in the Turfan Oasis. These fragments, dating mostly from the ninth and tenth centuries, include pieces in Syriac, as well as in other languages—such as Sogdian, Turkic (Old Uighur), and Middle and New Persian—written mostly in Syriac characters. Most of the documents are religious in nature, but the small number of nonreligious fragments that have been identified include medical and pharmacological pieces in Syriac, Sogdian, New Persian, and Turkic.³⁴

Syriac-rite Christians continued to be known and prized for their medical expertise in the later period in Central and East Asia, especially under the Mongols. The most famous example of such men is Aixue/Aixie 愛薛 (ca. 1227–1308), who entered the service of the Mongols under Güyük Khan (1246–48) at the recommendation of his compatriot Rabban Ata, and went on to found the Medical Bureau in the imperial capital

³² On the pronunciation of 虛 as *tī* rather than *xū*, see Santos 2010, 226 n47.

³³ The reconstructed pronunciation given here is that of Pulleyblank 1991.

³⁴ For an overview of the Syriac-script material from Turfan, see Dickens 2013; for the Syriac, Sogdian, Persian, and Turkic medical/pharmacological pieces, see, respectively, Maróth 1984; Sims-Williams 2012, 187; Sims-Williams 2011 (cf. Sims-Williams 2012, 186); and Ölmez 1999 (cf. Zieme 2007, 309).

(Jingshi yiyao yuan 京師醫藥院, later Guanghui si 廣惠司) under Qubilai Khan (1260–94). He was sent on a mission to the West around 1285, and appears in Persian records as ‘Īsā the translator (*kelemchi*).³⁵ We do not know where exactly Aixue hailed from, but the Chinese records tell us that he was from Fulin and that he was posthumously awarded the title Prince of Fulin (拂林忠獻王). We also do not know what language the knowledge that Aixue conveyed to China was couched in; given the state of medical studies in the Near East by this time, it is perhaps more likely to have been Arabic than Syriac. That Aixue was a Syriac-rite Christian, however, we can be certain from the name of his wife Sala 撒刺, as well as the names of five of his six sons, Yeliya 也里牙, Tianhe 腆合, Kuolijisi 闊里吉思, Luha 魯哈, and Yaonan 咬難, which can easily be recognized as transliterations of the common Syriac names Sarā (Sarah), Eliyā (Elijah), Denḥā (“Epiphany”), Gīwargīs (George), Lūqā (Luke), and Yawnan (Jonah), although the name of his third son, Heisi (黑廝), presents somewhat more difficulty.

Another prominent Syriac-rite Christian with medical connections in the Mongol period is Mār Sargīs (Ma Xuelijisi 馬薛里吉思), who was known to Marco Polo and who, after being appointed assistant overseer (*darughachi*) of the General Supervision Office of Zhengjiang Province around 1277, went on to found six Christian monasteries (*hūmùlá* 忽木刺, from Syriac ‘*umrā*) in the area. From a record preserved in the ninth volume of the *Zhishun Zhenjiang zhi* 至順鎮江志, we learn that he stemmed from a family of physicians from Samarkand who had been hired into the Mongol imperial service after Mār Sargīs’ maternal grandfather successfully treated Chinggis Khan’s fourth son and successor, Tolui.³⁶

³⁵ Chinese records relating to Aixue are found in *Yuan shi* 元史, vol. 134 (愛薛伝); Cheng Wenhai 程文海 (1249–1318), *Xuelou ji* 雪樓集, vol. 5 (拂林忠獻王神道碑); and *Xu tongzhi* 續通志 (completed in 1785), vol. 472, where the name is written Axiye 阿錫頁. See Pelliot 1914, 638–41; Han 1982, 93–108 (= “Aixue zhi zai tantao” 愛薛之再探討, originally published in 1941); Allsen 2001, 149–51; Dmitriev 2005; Buell 2007, 298; Yoeli-Tlalim 2012, 362; Yin 2012, 53–56, 117; Schottenhammer 2013, 77, 79. The identification made by Allsen and others of Rabban Ata with Rabban Simeon of Rūm Qal’a involves some chronological difficulty (cf. Takahashi 2001, 51), as does, it would seem, the identification of Aixue/‘Īsā with ‘Īsā of Edessa.

³⁶ Text of *Zhishun Zhenjiang zhi* in Saeki 1935, 145–46; cf. Allsen 2001, 155; Yin 2009; Yin 2012, 117, 122–44; Tang 2011, 133–38; Vogel 2012, 357–58.

Concluding Remarks

An attempt has been made here to provide a rough sketch of how Syriac served as the vehicle for the transmission of scientific knowledge mainly of Greek origin from its original home within the Roman Empire into Persia and farther eastward to China. This transmission of knowledge from one empire to another using the Syriac language took place in various ways at different times under different circumstances. What prepared the way for Syriac to act in this capacity was the reception in the first place of Greek learning in Syriac, which took place while the Syriac speakers were still under the rule of the Greek speakers within the Roman Empire, but at a time when they were establishing their own separate ecclesiastical hierarchies independent of the Imperial Church. It is from the latter part of this period of reception that we have the remarkable universalist claim, made by Severus Sēbōkht, considering knowledge to be the common property of all, regardless of the language in which it is expressed.

The transfer, then, of this knowledge into Persia was facilitated by the fact that Syriac was the common language used by the Christians of Mesopotamia on both sides of the Roman-Persian border. After the conquest of the area by the Arabs and the disappearance of the border dividing the Middle East into two halves, Syriac intellectuals were able to exercise considerable influence on their less well-educated conquerors, thanks to the store of knowledge that had been rendered into and accumulated in Syriac in the preceding centuries, a process that has been compared to the way Greek culture and learning came to inform the culture of the Roman Empire, captured in the famous lines of Horace, “*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio.*”³⁷

Under the Abbasids, the Syriac Christians were known above all for their medical expertise, and knowledge of medicine also features largely among the scientific knowledge conveyed by Syriac Christians farther east along the Silk Road, toward China. The facts that the informant for the botanical data in the *Youyang zazu* is designated a “monk” (僧) and that medical fragments were discovered among monastic documents from the Turfan Oasis suggest that the bearers of this kind of knowledge

³⁷ Strohmaier 2003, 93 (Horace, *Epist.* 2.1, l. 156f.).

that reached China in the earlier period were often monks, so that this transmission of scientific knowledge may be seen as a by-product of Christian monastic and missionary activities. For the Chinese imperial authorities, these monks were useful for the knowledge they brought with them, and it was no doubt largely for that reason that they were allowed to engage in their religious activities within China, a pattern that repeated itself a millennium later with the Western Christian missionaries.

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