Figures in a Landscape: Topography and Hagiography in the World of Syriac Christianity

Peter R. L. Brown

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Balzan GPC Adviser: Paolo Matthiae

Project Directors and Researchers: David Michelson, Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent (heads of research team); Adam Kane (undergraduate research assistant); Justin Arnwine, Aram Bar Schabo, Anthony Davis, Nathan Gibson, Daniel Greeson, Tucker Hannah, Erin Johnson (graduate research assistants); Thomas Carlson (postdoctoral research assistant); Thomas Elliott, Winona Salesky, George Kiraz, James Bennett (technical development staff)

Affiliated Institution: Princeton University

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Website: www.syriaca.org

Peter R. L. Brown is Philip and Beulah Rollins Professor of History at Princeton University. His Figures in a Landscape project is engaged in new research on texts written in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. In the past two decades, scholarly interest in Syriac has increased dramatically as scholars have realized that these sources offer different perspectives from better known historical sources in Greek, Latin or Arabic. In spite of this high level of interest, scholarly use of Syriac texts has been limited due to the lack of appropriate tools, such as an index of notable persons or a reference work for the geography of the Near East in Late Antiquity. Figures in a Landscape has begun to address this problem by collecting and identifying the locations of Syriac monasteries and Syriac centres of culture alongside the names of the figures associated with these places. The aim is to establish the topography of the activities of holy men of the varied Syriac traditions, across an area which once extended from modern eastern Turkey, through Syria and northern Iraq to the borders of Iran. Figures in a Landscape will also bring this vivid world to the attention of scholars and educated readers through a reference guide to these lives, with texts in both Syriac and in Christian Arabic,

which are awaiting discovery. Since 2012, the team has collected, collated, or revised information concerning: over 2,400 places (including over 5,000 variant toponyms in Syriac, Arabic, and English); over 700 saints (including over 2,000 variant names in Syriac, English and French); over 1,800 Syriac texts containing lives of saints; over 100 Syriac manuscripts from the British Library.

Work on the project is occurring in four areas: publication of geographic data, publication of hagiographic data, data preservation, and development of technical tools.

David Michelson headed the geographic data team comprised of Thomas Carlson, Winona Salesky, Thomas Elliott and Anthony Davis. This part of the project is complete and has been published as *The Syriac Gazetteer,* an open access online resource available at http://syriaca.org/geo/.

Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent is leading the team involved in the publication of hagiographic data, which consists of David Michelson, Adam Kane, Aram Bar Schabo, Nathan Gibson, and advising from Dr. Daniel Schwartz of Texas A&M University and Dr. Ugo Zanetti. This part of the project, *Qadishe: A Digital Catalogue of Saints in the Syriac Tradition* and *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica*, is available at http://syriaca.org/q/index.html and http://syriaca.org/bhse/index.html, respectively.

As for data preservation, the team consists of David Michelson (head), Thomas Elliott and Winona Salesky. Michelson has directed the development of electronic tools for preserving and disseminating the data through the Syriac Reference Portal. Salesky has built the eXist XML database for the *The Syriac Gazetteer*, and the same database is used to publish the Hagiography Database as well.

George Kiraz heads the team concerned with technical tools, which also had James Bennett and David Michelson as members. David Michelson is collaborating with the Beth Mardutho Research Library to develop digital tools of immediate use to the Figures in a Landscape project. The most important of these tools is The SEDRA Parser for Text Analysis, a Syriac digital lexicon and grammatical analysis tool. It is available online in a draft form at: https://sedra.tara-lu.com/. Team members have made twenty-five public presentations about Peter Brown's Figures in a Landscape project. These presentations included demonstrations of the dataset and the solicitation of editorial comment from scholars in the field. They are listed at http://syriaca.org/blog/.

Two important publications associated with this project, the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica* and *Qadishe: A Guide to Syriac Saints*, were publicly released at the XII Symposium Syriacum held at the Pontificio Istituto Orientale in Rome (19-24 August 2016). Both reference works are major steps forward in the field as the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca* is the first work of its kind, describing over 1,800 texts, and the *Guide to Syriac Saints* contains three times as many entries as former works on Syriac hagiography.

As the project nears its conclusion, the project team is in the process of determining the most cost-efficient ways to enhance its digital publications to ensure their long term utility to Syriac studies, especially in light of the catastrophic destruction of Syriac culture which is currently occurring as a result of the violent conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Among its remaining objectives is firstly the publication of an online edition (free and open access) of the Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage, with over 600 entries on topics related to our existing reference databases. The publisher of the print edition (2011) has granted free reuse of the text so that it will be fully integrated with the project's previous publications, thus enhancing its overall usefulness to scholars. Dr. Ute Possekel, a lecturer in Syriac at Harvard University, has agreed to act as a researcher to assist with this publication.

Secondly, work on the online Syriac grammatical parser will be continued, so that Syriac texts can be uploaded to the project's partner site and returned in a fully lemmatized text with parsing information and definitions. This will greatly enhance the ability of non-Syriac scholars to use Syriac texts in research, and will be fully integrated into existing publications.

Finally, an agreement has been reached with two partner projects, Qatar University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to contribute data to this research.

Publications

Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica (New Handbook of Syriac Literature, Volume 1), available at http://syriaca.org/bhse/index.html.
Qadishe: A Guide to Syriac Saints (Syriac Biographical Dictionary, Volume 1), available at http://syriaca.org/q/index.html.