

Peter R. L. Brown

Philip and Beulah Rollins Professor of History at Princeton University

2011 Balzan Prize for Ancient History (The Graeco-Roman World)

For his exceptional contributions to the historical interpretation of late antiquity through highly original studies of strong impact and extraordinary influence, with works on the cult of the saints, the body and sexuality, the emergence of Christianity, and poverty and power.

Institution Administering Research Funds: Princeton University

Adviser for the Balzan General Prize Committee: Paolo Matthiae

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

The International Balzan Prize Foundation Figures in a Landscape project is engaged in new research on texts written in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. Syriac was one of the predominant languages of early Christianity in the Middle East and Asia and flourished until the late Middle Ages. As many as 10,000 manuscripts and fragments in Syriac survive to the present. Moreover, new discoveries of Syriac texts continue to be made regularly, such as the new finds at Deir Al-Surian in Egypt or little known works brought to light through the fieldwork of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. 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 centers 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 series of translations of these lives, texts in both Syriac and in Christian Arabic, which are awaiting discovery.

Research Team

Research and data collection for *Figures in a Landscape* is being undertaken by scholars and graduate students affiliated with the The Syriac Reference Portal (www.syriaca.org). Professors David Michelson (Vanderbilt University) and Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent (Marquette University) have successfully assembled an international team who have been meeting weekly over the internet to consult and evaluate research.

As of January 2014, active research staff in addition to Profs. Michelson and Saint-Laurent include:

- 1 undergraduate research assistant (Adam Kane);
- 5 graduate research assistants (Justin Arnwine, Anthony Davis, Daniel Greeson, Tucker Hannah and Erin Johnson);
- 1 postdoctoral research assistant (Dr. Thomas Carlson);
- 4 technical development staff (Dr. Thomas Elliott at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University; Winona Selesky, an independent XML and Web developer who has developed similar online applications for Princeton University and The University of Vermont; Dr. George Kiraz of Beth Mardutho, The Syriac Institute; and James Bennett, independent software programmer and linguist).

These researchers are assisted by an international editorial board of scholars.

Data Collection

Since 2012, there has been collected, collated or revised information concerning:

- Over 2400 places (including over 5000 variant toponyms in Syriac, Arabic and English);
- Over 700 saints (including over 2000 variant names in Syriac, English and French);
- Over 1800 Syriac texts containing lives of saints;
- Over 100 Syriac manuscripts from the British Library.

Work on the project is occurring in five areas: Publication of Hagiographic Data, Publication of Geographic Data, Data Preservation, Technical Tools, and Publication of Editions and Translations.

Publication of Hagiographic Data

Team Members: Dr. Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent (lead), Adam Kane, David Michelson, and advising from Dr. Daniel Schwartz (Texas A&M University)

Progress: Prof. Saint-Laurent has created or revised several data sets:

- *Biblioteca Hagiographica Syriaca* (a large unpublished bibliography on saints' lives created by Ugo Zanetti and Claude Detienne)
- J.M. Fiey, *Saints syriaques* (2004)
- *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (2011)

Next steps: During the spring 2014 semester as visiting fellow at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, Prof. Saint-Laurent and her team planned to accomplish the following: finalize the XML data format for publishing the data; build the website and database that will make this data publically accessible; begin to build links between the hagiographic and geographic data.

Publication of Geographic Data

Team Members: Thomas Carlson (lead), David Michelson, Winona Salesky, Thomas Elliott, Anthony Davis

Progress: Dr. Carlson has collated and revised several geographic data sets:

- Data from the Syriac, Arabic and English versions of Ignatius Aphram Barsoum, *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences* (1943 & 2003)
- David Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation of the Church of the East 1318-1913* (2000)
- *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*
- *Comprehensive Bibliography on Syriac Christianity*
- *Pleiades* online gazetteer of the ancient world
- *Wikipedia* (for reference and contemporary usage).

This part of the project has now been published as *The Syriac Gazetteer* (home page: <http://syriaca.org/geo/>).

Next Steps: to begin building links between *The Syriac Gazetteer* and the Hagiography Database; to make public presentations of the research to encourage academic use of *The Syriac Gazetteer*.

Technical Development: Data Architecture and Preservation

Team Members: David Michelson (lead), Thomas Elliott, Winona Salesky

Progress: Prof. Michelson has directed the development of electronic tools for preserving and disseminating the data through the Syriac Reference Portal. This part of

the project experienced a temporary setback in August, when lead developer Hugh Cayless was hired away by Duke University as the senior programmer for the Duke Collaboratory for Classics Computing. Fortunately, it was possible to hire a new programmer, Winona Salesky, who has completed similar projects for Princeton University and the University of Vermont. Salesky has built the eXist XML database for the *The Syriac Gazetteer*. This same database will be used to publish the Hagiography Database as well. Salesky has built the software with cross-compatibility in mind for that purpose.

Progress: A complete working publication of a database and website for the *The Syriac Gazetteer* can be found at <http://syriaca.org/geo>. Prior to publication all data is being made publically available online at <https://github.com/srophe/>. A draft white paper with technical guidelines for the project can be consulted at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MfCym6M4KWyhwyv-m-zpF8T3IGc6m9g7v1Bomwt-a_Y, with an XML schemata for marking up the data at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_V_Ju1wuArSaKaR59bECTP-SKqA7Aw2dhvtHPLNfo8Y/edit?usp=sharing.

Next Steps: finalize the XML data format for publishing hagiographic data; build the Hagiography website and database; begin to build links between the hagiographic and geographic data.

Technical Tools

Team Members: George Kiraz (lead), James Bennett, David Michelson

Progress: David Michelson is collaborating with the Beth Mardutho Research Library to develop two digital tools of immediate use to the Figures in a Landscape project.

- New Syriac Unicode Encodings, Glyphs, and Fonts: There are several historical Syriac characters not currently represented in existing fonts or in the Syriac Unicode range. Beth Mardutho has completed an initial draft of a new font based on the existing Serto Jerusalem font.
- The SEDRA Parser for Text Analysis: The SEDRA parser is a text analysis tool that will be able to parse and translate any Syriac text displayed on a website or in an electronic document. The first draft of the parser is now functional and was demonstrated for a private group of scholars in November 2013 in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Next Steps: continue to collect glyphs for the Unicode revision; submit these glyphs to the Unicode consortium for revision; submit a revision of the Syriac language codes to the ISO governing body; continue work on the parser; collaborate with the <http://alpheios.net/> project to implement the Syriac parser through their web framework.

Publication of Editions and Translations

Team Members: David Michelson (lead), Adam Becker (NYU), George Kiraz

Progress: In July of 2013, Prof. Michelson met with Adam Becker in New York to discuss the future of this component of the project. Due to a variety of scheduling and logistical reasons, there was not as much progress as was hoped for. The project team is in the process of determining whether to shift the funding for this portion of the project into creating additional digital instead of printed publications.

Next Steps: discuss the future of this part of the project with Peter Brown and the project team; revise budget and/or project timeline.

Further Funding

Vanderbilt University has secured additional funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (project title: “The Syriac Reference Portal: New Access to Sources for the History of the Middle East”, undertaken from 5/16/12-5/16/14). This funding has allowed the hiring of additional research staff and software consultants.

Project Publicity

Team members have made 17 public presentations about the Balzan Foundation’s Figures in a Landscape project. These presentations included demonstrations of the dataset and the solicitation of editorial comment from scholars in the field.

In addition to public presentations, Dr. Thomas Carlson’s geographic work led to a research prize, the Second Prize in the Global Digital Humanities Essay competition sponsored by the University of Lethbridge, Global Outlook::Digital Humanities, and the journal *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*. The prize was awarded for Dr. Carlson’s research proposal “Digital Maps are still not territory: Challenges raised by Syriaca.org’s Middle Eastern places over two millenia”. For further information on the prize, see <http://www.globaloutlookdh.org/global-outlookdigital-humanities-essay-prize-winners-announced/>.

In addition to the presentations below, Drs. Michelson, Saint-Laurent and Schwartz have organized an entire conference panel on their work at the 2014 annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society in Chicago (<http://patristics.org/annual-meeting/>).

Presentations by David Michelson, project director:

- Geographic Imagination and the Spatial Humanities Seminar, Vanderbilt University, 2013

- Digital Humanities Seminar, Vanderbilt University, 2013
- Informal Presentation, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD, 2013
- Cultures of the Late Antique Mediterranean Workshop, University of Tennessee, 2013
- Digital Latin Library Consultation, ISAW, NYU, 2013
- Virtual International Authority File Council (Representing National Libraries), 2013
- Informal Presentation to Students at Gordon College, MA, 2013
- Digital Humanities Seminar, Vanderbilt University, 2013
- Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Chicago, 2012
- Linked Ancient World Data Institute, ISAW, NYU, 2012
- Ancient Religion/Modern Technology Workshop, Brown University, 2012

Presentations by Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent, assistant director:

- Department of Theology, Fordham University, 2013
- Informal Presentation, St. Michael's College, VT, 2012
- XI Symposium Syriacum, University of Malta, 2012
- Consultation with Specialists, Société d'études Syriaques, Paris, 2011

Presentations by Thomas Carlson, postdoctoral fellow:

- Religion and Digital Technologies Workshop, Princeton University, 2014
- Research Group on Manuscript Evidence, Princeton, NJ, 2013