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Towards a History of Syriac Rhetoric in Late Antiquity

Abstract: This article presents the first comprehensive study of Syriac rhetoric in late antiquity. It builds on existing scholarship on the Syrians' engagement with Graeco-Roman *paideia* and Christian rhetoric, but it also goes further in that it draws attention to the Syrians' participation in Near Eastern rhetorical traditions (mainly transmitted through Aramaic) and in the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible, which was translated into Syriac without Greek intermediaries. At the same time, this article demonstrates that Syriac rhetoric flourished in distinctive and original ways: It developed its own literary genres (with a strong predilection for poetry and a sensibility for gendered voices), performative settings (including the liturgy and the school), and thematic domains (notably Scriptural exegesis and religious controversy). It is especially remarkable that an elaborate "meta-rhetorical" reflection flourished in Syriac, as it first emerged in the work by Antony of Tagrit in the ninth century and in the broader context of late antique and Byzantine Aristotelianism. This comprehensive survey and its conceptual systematisation are designed to facilitate further research on Syriac rhetoric both during late antiquity and in later centuries, when the Syrians' interaction with Arabic rhetoric came to play an increasingly influential role.[1]

The earliest known traces of Syriac literature originated in about the second century CE in the region of Edessa (modern Şanlıurfa, in Turkey). Syriac literature soon developed into one of the most prestigious literatures of late antiquity, flourishing in the Middle East and Asia in its classical form to at least the fifteenth century. This tradition is most notable for its poetry, historiography, theological writings, and a vast corpus of translations from Greek that made Syriac a crucial intermediary in the transmission of Graeco-Roman and Christian thought to the Arab-speaking world. While the study of Syriac literature is burgeoning, less attention has been paid to the subject of Syriac rhetoric, both in its participation in existing rhetorical

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[1] Syriac words are given in a simplified transcription. For consonants, the standard system in use for Semitic languages is followed; spirantisation of *b g k p t* is marked by *v gh kh f th* respectively. East Syrian vocalisation is generally adopted unless the words are quoted from a West Syrian author; vowel length is not marked, with the exception of *a/ā* and *e/ē* in Eastern Syriac.

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traditions and in its distinctive features. The present article aims to trace the history of Syriac rhetoric during late antiquity.

Syriac rhetoric is a rich field of study. It will be necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers the Syrians' participation in existing traditions, but that also makes justice to the most distinctive features that Syriac rhetoric developed. Syriac emerged in the context of traditions such as the Near Eastern (mainly transmitted through Aramaic), the Biblical Hebrew, and the Graeco Roman (and later Christian), and it developed with considerable originality its literary genres, performative settings, and thematic domains. In Syriac, the prose homily and the letter (both well attested in Greek and Latin) were accompanied by the learned "cause" genre (*ʿellthā*) and by a flourishing of performative genres in isosyllabic verse, such as the "stanzaic poem" (*madrāšā*) and the "verse homily" (*mēmrā*), both at times taking the form of a dialogue. In addition, philosophical rhetoric, building on Aristotle and the Graeco-Roman tradition more broadly, is well attested. Remarkably, Syriac rhetoric also developed a sophisticated "meta-rhetorical" reflection, as it first emerged in the work of Antony of Tagrit in the ninth century. Antony of Tagrit raises essential questions about the teaching of rhetoric in Syriac during late antiquity and its articulation as an academic discipline.[2]

1 Ancient Near-Eastern traditions

The Syriac afterlife of a notable piece of ancient Aramaic literature, the *Story of Ahiqar*, raises questions about the endurance of ancient Aramaic rhetorical traditions in Syriac literature and culture, the Syriac language itself being a variety of Middle Aramaic.[3] This Aramaic text (first attested in the fifth century BCE) is likely to have been transmitted in Syriac from the second century CE onwards and it was considerably expanded in this new context.[4] The *Story of Ahiqar*, named after a legendary Aramaean minister and diplomat working at the court of the Neo-Assyrian kings Sennacherib (BCE 705–681) and Esarhaddon (BCE 681–69), includes a collection of gnomic utterances of a moralising character; these utterances also concern themselves with the practice of speaking as it was understood within the broader context of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian rhetoric.

Ahiqar's teaching shares the main "canons" of Egyptian rhetoric: He recommends keeping silent (2.3), restraining oneself from words full of passion (2.2, 2.8,

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2 The chronological scope of the present article means that the Syrians' engagement with Arabic rhetoric and the common developments in the two traditions cannot be discussed here; see e.g. F. Woerther (ed), *Literary and Philosophical Rhetoric in the Greek, Roman, Syriac, and Arabic Worlds* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2009).

3 H. Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), ch. 5.4.2 and 7.4.

4 For a recent discussion of chronology, see R. Contini and C. Grottanelli (eds), *Il saggio Ahiqar* (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2005).

2.54), speaking fluently but with deliberation (2.38, 2.40), and keeping the tongue at one with the soul so as to speak the truth (2.25, 2.31, 2.32, 2.53); Ahiqar also emphasises the importance of elegant speech (2.38, 2.69). The moralising contents of these instructions bring together the domain of speech with that of ethics in a way that was common to ancient Near-Eastern rhetoric. It is also remarkable that, in the Syriac *Story of Ahiqar*, the wise minister's sudden inability to speak, on account of an uncontrolled overflow of emotions, is the cause of his unexpected downfall.[5]

What can the circulation of the *Story of Ahiqar* tell us about Syriac rhetorical practice and about the expectations that instructional texts such as this would have generated among its Syriac readers? The *Story of Ahiqar* is not an isolated example: A notable aspect of early Syriac literature is its abundance of gnomic and instructional material that only offers us enough information about its context and use on rare occasions. Future studies will have to investigate further the participation of Syriac culture in broader Near Eastern and Mediterranean rhetorical traditions, and the use of this material in performative settings.[6] In the ninth century, Antony of Tagrit instructed his students to use aphorisms within a speech – a similar piece of advice is found in a letter by Gregory of Nazianzus, whom Antony described as "the greatest of rhetors and prince of sophists."[7]

The most striking aspect of the Syriac participation in ancient Mesopotamian rhetoric appears in one of the earliest and most successful poetic genres in Syriac literature, the Syriac dialogue poem, which often took the form of a "stanzaic poem" (*madrāšā*). This genre reproduced disputes between two speakers competing for primacy, such as Reason and Love, Soul and Body, Death and Satan, Church and Synagogue, Cain and Abel, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and John the Baptist, etc., or more rarely among several speakers, as in the *Dispute of the Months*. The origins of this literary form can be traced back to Sumerian and Akkadian literature, where literary disputes featured personified speakers competing for precedence in their utility for

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5 Syriac *Story of Ahiqar*, ed. and trans. F. C. Conybeare, J. Rendel Harris, and A. Smith Lewis (eds), *The Story of Aḥiḳar,* second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), see 112 for Ahiqar's inability to speak; an English translation is also available in J. M. Lindenberger, 'Ahiqar', in J. H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1985), 479 – 507; F. Briquel Chatonnet, "L'histoire et la sagesse d'Ahiqar: fortune littéraire de l'histoire d'un dignitaire araméen à la cour assyrienne", in J.-L. Bacqué-Grammont, A. Pino, and S. Khoury (eds), *D'un Orient l'autre* (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 17– 40.

6 Y. Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019).

7 Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric* 5, ed. and trans. J. W. Watt, *The Fifth Book of the Rhetoric of Antony of Tagrit* (Leuven: Peeters, 1986, *CSCO* 480 – 1), *68 with XV–XVII, and *73 on Gregory of Nazianzus; see Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.* 51.5 on the use of sentences in letter writing; J. W. Watt, "Rhetorical education and florilegia in Syriac", in M. Farina (ed), *Les auteurs syriaques et leur langue* (Paris: Geuthner, 2018), 95 – 110.

humankind in front of a judge (e.g., Ox and Horse, Winter and Summer, Copper and Silver).[8]

Arguably, Sumerian and Akkadian disputes continued in Imperial Aramaic before emerging transformed in fourth-century Syriac, where the Bible and Christianity provided new subjects and themes for the disputes. The Syriac dispute poems were likely performed in liturgical or paraliturgical settings (the two speakers presumably being impersonated by two soloists or choirs); they followed specific prosodical structures and literary conventions that set them apart from other forms of Syriac persuasive speech. The authors of Syriac dialogue poems engaged in the sophisticated exercise of expanding the voices of Biblical characters in fictional but plausible ways. At the same time, these texts often emphasise the human flaws and doubts of the speakers so as to provide room for the dialogue proper to develop and for the speakers to advance opposing arguments based on the Biblical narrative.[9]

Particularly noteworthy in Syriac dialogue poems is the role played by female speakers, such as Mary and the Angel, Queen Helen and the Jews, or the Sinful Woman and Satan: They provide important instances of gendered speech. Female speech is positively employed to demonstrate virtuous behaviour, intelligent reflection, and Christian faith; it opposes male speech, which conversely projects restrictive traditions, normative conventions, and disbelief in God. Female speech, which carries the moral lesson, tends to be problematic and disruptive, and is confined to permissible topics or acceptable spaces; at the same time, female speech may have been enhanced by the fact that it was performed by female choirs as part of the Syriac liturgy, as it has been argued.[10]

The rhetoric of the Syriac dialogue poems combined ancient Mesopotamian traditions, Graeco-Roman rhetoric, and Syriac liturgical practice and exegetical traditions. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, who expands her analysis to include reported dialogues within Syriac verse homilies, links the voices of Biblical characters in Syriac dialogue poems with the prosopopoietic exercises of Graeco-Roman rhetorical schools. Scholastic *prosopopoiai* had mythological subjects, but we also have an instance built on Biblical material ("On the words that Cain would say having killed Abel," from the Bodmer collection). Similarly, Sebastian Brock links imagined

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8 E. Jiménez, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1.5.c and 1.6.b; C. Mittermayer and E. Jiménez (eds), *Disputation Literature in the Near East and Beyond* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020).
9 A. Mengozzi, *L'invenzione del dialogo* (Torino: Paideia, 2020); S. P. Brock, *The people & the peoples* (Oxford: Journal of Jewish Studies, 2019) S. P. Brock, "Syriac Dispute Poems: The Various Types", in G. J. Reinink, and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (eds), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), 109–19.
10 S. Ashbrook Harvey, "2000 NAPS Presidential Address. Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition", *JECS* 9.1 (2001), 105–31; K. Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns", *Hugoye* 9.2 (2018), online publication.

speech of the form "what N might have said … but did not" to textual forms characteristic of Greek rhetorical education.[11]

To sum up, the Syrians participated in Aramaic culture, and traces of ancient Near Eastern rhetoric can be identified in their literature. The Syriac afterlife of the ancient Aramaic *Story of Ahiqar* instantiates this link to the Aramaic past; while its chronology and actual impact on Syriac are still to be fully assessed, this text shares notable features with ancient Near Eastern rhetoric. More noticeable is the influence of ancient Near Eastern rhetoric on one of the earliest and most successful poetic genres in Syriac literature, the Syriac dialogue poem. Emerging in the fourth century and widely used by Ephrem, the Syriac dialogue poem drew from ancient Mesopotamian literary forms and rhetoric but was largely repurposed to include biblical characters and themes – and it is to the Bible that we should now turn.

2 Syriac rhetoric and the Hebrew Bible

Books from the Hebrew Bible began to be translated into Syriac, without Greek intermediary, from about the middle of the second century CE; their translators incorporated into the Syriac Old Testament (later known as "Peshitta") Jewish exegetical traditions and phraseology similar to that found in the Targum Onkelos.[12] Through its use in Syriac exegesis, liturgy, preaching, religious scholarship, and literature more broadly, the Syriac Old Testament never ceased to exert a fundamental influence on Syriac religious and intellectual culture. For instance, as late as the ninth century, Antony of Tagrit advised students of rhetoric to use the Syriac Old Testament as a source for vocabulary in the composition of their speeches.[13] By modelling argumentative speech and shaping the expectations of Syriac audiences, the Old Testament influenced Syriac rhetoric in complex ways.

The text of the Hebrew Bible often takes the form of persuasive speech, and this can shed light on the nature of Biblical rhetoric in an indirect way (the Torah can be understood as a set of parenetic speeches; prophets try to persuade the Israelites to change their practices; Job's friends try to convince him that his misfortune must be due to sin). These speeches are not recordings of actual conversations, but are likely

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11 Ashbrook Harvey, "2000 NAPS Presidential Address"; J. L. Fournet, "Une éthopée de Caïn dans le Codex des Visions de la Fondation Bodmer", *ZPE* 92 (1992), 253–66; S. P. Brock, "Dramatic Narrative Poems on Biblical Topics in Syriac", *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010), 183–96, and "Later Syriac Poetry", in D. King (ed), *The Syriac World* (London: Routledge, 2018), 327–38, 330.

12 L. Van Rompay, "The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation", in M. Sæbø (ed), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 612–41.

13 Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric* 1.26; for discussion see J. W. Watt, "Guarding the Syriac language in an Arabic environment: Antony of Tagrit on the use of grammar in rhetoric", in W. J. van Bekkum, J. W. Drijvers, and A. C. Klugkist (eds), *Syriac Polemics. Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 133–50, 142–3, reprint in J. W. Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

to reflect aspects of actual practice, and arguably modelled persuasive speech among Jewish and Christian readerships.[14] The *Book of Proverbs* contains some remarks of a meta-rhetorical character. It shows a debt to Egyptian wisdom literature, and, significantly, it took divine inspiration as a credible source for eloquent speech – a concept that George Kennedy takes as a characteristic of Jewish (and later Christian) rhetoric.[15]

Can one find, in Syriac, persuasive modes, arguments, and strategies that are characteristic of Biblical rhetoric? These devices could affect the form of Syriac persuasive speech at various levels:

(i)   they could shape its language and style;
(ii) they could be more substantial – for instance shaping the argumentative methods that Syriac persuasive speech employs;
(iii) or they could reveal a comparable understanding of how persuasion functions at a "meta-rhetorical" level.

At the level of style and textual form (*i*), we can ask whether "parallelism" or chiastic patterns typical in the Biblical text also appear in Syriac persuasive speech, as it might emerge in the "ring structures" of Syriac verse homilies. Other stylistic features of persuasive speech in the Old Testament, such as the peculiar use of negations, pseudo-quotations, and vocative forms, would similarly deserve systematic study.[16] A related issue, and at the same time linked to Aramaic rhetoric, is that of Syriac "artistic prose," or *Kunstprosa*, which is characterised by frequent use of isocola, anaphora, chiasmus, rhyme, and assonance; notable examples are found in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* and Ephrem's *Homily on our Lord* and *Letter to Publius*. This particular mode has been linked either to Greek models or to earlier traditions of Aramaic prose, which we know from early inscriptions and Jewish sources such as Biblical Aramaic, and the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran.[17]

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14 J. Vayntrub, "Hebrew", in J. B. Lande and D. Feeney (eds), *How Literatures Begin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 149–66.

15 G. A. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115–40.

16 R. Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); M. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles. An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); for gnomic structures in the Syriac Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius, see A. Rigolio, "Syriac Translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius: a Gnomic Format for an Instructional Purpose?", in P. Gemeinhardt, L. Van Hoof, and P. Van Nuffelen (eds), *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 73–85; Griffith, "The Poetics", 19; for other textual features see J. Joosten, "Prophetic Discourse and Popular Rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible", *RBib* 118.4 (2011), 481–95.

17 Ephrem, *Homily on our Lord*, ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro* (Louvain: CSCO, 1966), trans. E. G. Mathews and J. P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994); S. P. Brock, "Syriac Culture, 337–425", in A. Cameron and P. Garnsey (eds), *CAH* 13 (1998), 708–19, 712; S. P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius", *Mus* 89 (1986), 261–305, reprint in S. P. Brock, *Singer of the Word of God* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020).

Robert Murray recognised modes of argumentation characteristic of the Hebrew Bible (*ii*) in one of the earliest Syriac authors, Aphrahat, who flourished in the Persian empire in the fourth century. His work, in the form of 23 prose *Demonstrations* (a title possibly linked with the Greek *epideixis*), is one of the earliest Syriac literary achievements, and one that states clearly that its aim was persuasion (Syr. *pyāsā*, in fact an ancient loanword from the Greek *peisai*: 10.9; 12.12; 22.26). The *Demonstrations* are of great importance for the light they shed on the character of early Syriac Christianity in the Persian empire, its ascetic developments, its relationship with Judaism, and its links to Jewish rhetoric and literature. Murray identified in Aphrahat "patterns of prayer or discourse in which early Syriac writers still reveal a background shared with Judaism," at the same time allowing for the influence of Aramaic and Graeco-Roman rhetoric in Aphrahat. Murray singled out the "practice of listing exemplary figures or events, mainly from the Old Testament, in sequences which are often rhythmical and may involve repetitive, litany-like, formulas"; these sequences, by their content and order, may suggest established traditions attested in the *Psalms* and prophetic books, and, in a more formalised way, in *Sirach* (or *Ben Sira*) and the *Wisdom of Solomon*. These argumentative forms, which should be understood in the broader context of Mesopotamian and Hellenistic aretalogies, may imply links with the Hellenistic Jewish homily.[18]

More fundamentally (*iii*), the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible has been described as "relational rhetoric," on account of a "cooperative principle" that may be implied between the speaker and the audience. Biblical speakers may omit a crucial element of their argumentation and rely instead on the audience (or interlocutor) to supply the missing part or implied request. This strategy, identified as "eloquent reticence" and unusual in classical rhetoric, may be motivated by the assumption that an audience may embrace an idea more willingly when they can infer it for themselves. Concurrently, Biblical speeches tend to articulate a relationship of cooperation between speaker and audience; at times, they underscore this relationship by introducing into the speech "a significant third" to whom both speaker and audience are connected, such as a common acquaintance, a relative, or God. Biblical speeches also tend to adopt an openly familiar or intimate language; this is another marker of the difference from the institutional nature of Graeco-Roman rhetoric, which traditionally

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18 R. Murray, "Hellenistic-Jewish Rhetoric in Aphrahat", in R. Lavenant (ed), *IIIº Symposium Syriacum 1980* (Rome: PIO, 1983), 79–85; R. Murray, "Some Rhetorical Patterns in Early Syriac Literature", in R. H. Fisher (ed), *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and its Environment* (Chicago: The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1977); M.-J. Pierre, *Aphraate le sage person. Les Exposés* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), vol. 1, 65–70; L. Haefeli, *Stilmittel bei Aphrahat dem persischen Weisen* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1932); a complete English translation of Aphrahat's work is A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010); see also J. E. Walters, "Reconsidering the Compositional Unity of Aphrahaṭ's Demonstrations", in A. M. Butts and R. A. Darling Young (eds), *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 50–65.

took place in courts, assemblies, and schools. The framework of Biblical rhetoric is not the one of the *polis* and its institutions, but that of a *'am* "people," which can be understood as an enlarged family.[19]

The Syriac verse homily (*mēmrā*), which a soloist arguably performed in front of the Christian congregation, offers rich ground for studying how the relationship between speaker and audience is articulated in Syriac contexts, and for exploring any potential similarity with the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible. This strongly rhetorical and popular genre, which dealt largely with Biblical exegesis, emerged in the fourth century and flourished in the context of rivalry among the church communities shaped by the Christological controversies of the fifth century (see below).[20] Syriac authors of verse homilies such as Jacob of Sarug and Narsai of Nisibis exploited the full rhetorical potential of the *mēmrā*;[21] they did not hesitate to expand the Biblical text, and with greater freedom than Greek exegetes, through the introduction of fictive speeches pronounced by Biblical characters, or through the expansion of existing speeches. Syriac speech expansions on the Biblical text may also reveal a common ground with Jewish exegetical traditions.[22]

Susan Ashbrook Harvey shows that Jacob of Sarug (d. CE 521) established a "four-part relationship" between God, the speaker, the speech, and the audience. In the opening of his homilies, this author characteristically expresses his inadequacy and unworthiness to speak on such a sublime topic (i.e. the divine); he then moves on to ask God to supply the speech, both words and content, following a trope common in Old Testament (and subsequently Christian) rhetoric, but also attested in Mediterranean literatures more broadly.[23] Jacob constructs his audience as made up of people who accept that God now inspires the poet (see, e.g., the frequent invocation "O discerning ones") and that the poet's words are, in fact, God's words. In Jacob's *Homily on the Tower of Babel*, the speaker goes as far as to summon the listeners to an active role, and the relationship between listener and speaker is

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19 J. Joosten, "Biblical Rhetoric as Illustrated by Judah's Speech in Genesis 44.18 – 34", *J. Study Old Testam.* 41.1 (2016): 15 – 30, and "La persuasion coopérative dans le discours sur la loi: pour une analyse de la rhétorique du Code de Sainteté", in A. Lemaire (ed), *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 381 – 98.

20 S. H. Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Mêmrê* at Work", *StP* 78 (2017): 5 – 23.

21 P. M. Forness, "The Construction of Metrical Poetry in the Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Serugh", in A. M. Butts, K. H. Heal, and R. A. Kitchen (eds), *Narsai. Rethinking his Work and his World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 93 – 115; M. Papoutsakis, "Formulaic Language in the Metrical Homilies of Jacob of Serugh", in R. Lavenant (ed), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (Rome: PIO, 1998), 445 – 51; J. G. Blum, "Zum Bau von Abschnitten in Memre von Jacob von Sarug", in R. Lavenant (ed), *IIIº Symposium Syriacum 1980* (Rome: PIO, 1983), 307 – 21.

22 J. B. Glenthøj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek Writers (4ᵗʰ – 6ᵗʰ centuries)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), ch. 4 – 6.

23 S. Ashbrook Harvey, "The Poet's Prayer: Invocational Prayers in the *Mêmrê* of Jacob of Sarug", *StP* 78 (2017), 51 – 9; E. Riad, *Studies in the Syriac Preface* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988), 197 – 202; D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), ch. 5 for this trope in Greek hagiography.

expressed as one of cooperation; this cooperation occurs in a liturgical setting and at a spiritual level, with God acting as significant third.[24] More broadly, the close relationship of cooperation between speaker and hearer is often articulated through a direct address to the audience or the use of the first person plural "us" referring to both speaker and audience; it can express a joint effort in interpreting a Biblical passage or a call for moral support, as in George of the Arabs' *Homily on Severus of Antioch* ("Come, hearers, comfort me and console me").[25]

To sum up, it would be difficult to underestimate the influence of Scripture on Syriac literature and culture more broadly. While the Syrians' engagement with Biblical rhetoric still necessitates a comprehensive assessment, it has been shown here that such engagement can be sought in Syriac texts on at least three levels. Biblical rhetoric had an impact on the language and style of Syriac texts (for instance, Antony of Tagrit prescribed the use of the Syriac Old Testament as a source for vocabulary), on the argumentative strategies that Syriac persuasive speech employs (as Robert Murray studied in the work of Aphrahat), and on the Syrians' understanding of the functioning of persuasion at the "meta-rhetorical" level (Susan Ashbrook Harvey identifies a relationship of cooperation between speaker and hearers in Jacob of Sarug).

3 Graeco-Roman and Christian rhetoric

Engagement with Graeco-Roman rhetoric began very early on. From its earliest phase, Syriac literature adopted forms and conventions that we usually understand as typical of Graeco-Roman rhetoric. The region of Edessa participated in Hellenistic culture from as early as the Seleucid period; at the same time, cultural exchange with the West was facilitated by widespread Graeco-Syriac bilingualism and, during the first half of the fourth century, by the unique role of Nisibis (East of Edessa) as the commercial and military centre of the eastern part of Roman Mesopotamia. Han Drijvers draws attention to the considerable extent of Greek learning in Edessa during the Roman period, and Sebastian Brock reminds us that no fourth-century Syriac writer "is going to be purely Semitic in character or totally unhellenised. [...] It is simply a matter of degree." Despite ancient claims that a particular Syriac author could be untouched (or, better, "untainted") by Greek culture and religion, to maintain a divide between "Semitic" and "Hellenistic" in Syriac rhetoric, and in Syriac culture more broadly, can be problematic.[26]

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24 S. Ashbrook Harvey, "The Poet's Prayer"; Jacob of Sarug, *Hom.* 33.69–74, trans. A. M. Butts, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on the Tower of Babel* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

25 K. E. McVey, *George, Bishops of the Arabs, A Homily on Blessed Mar Severus, Patriarch of Antioch* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993, *CSCO* 530–31), 887.

26 S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 143; H. J. W. Drijvers, "The School of Edessa: Greek Learning and Local Culture", in H. J. W. Drijvers and A. A. MacDonald

3.1 The earliest Syriac literature (from the origins to the fourth century)

The earliest Syriac literature demonstrates an awareness of aspects of Graeco-Roman rhetoric. The *Book of the Laws of the Countries* takes the form of a dialogue on the issue of human free will, clearly building on Greek literary and philosophical traditions but engaging with a Marcionite objection to Christianity. The discussion features the Edessene philosopher Bardaisan (d. c. CE 222) in conversation with his pupils, one of whom, Philip – the only speaker with a Greek name – intervenes in the first person and, in good Platonic fashion, records the dialogue. In the opening section of the text, which may echo Plato's *Republic*, Bardaisan declares that his goal is to seek the truth and to avoid a merely eristic context, possibly drawing on Plato's hostility to eristic dialogues (as much as Aristotle's); eristic dialogues took the form of questions and answers and were linked to dialectic and rhetorical training.[27]

Another early text, the *Letter of Mara bar Serapion to his Son* (c. late second or third century CE), contains moral advice by a self-styled philosopher, Mara; this advice is inserted in a factually dubious and possibly fictional historical setting. As shown by Kathleen McVey, through its careful rhetorical construction, the *Letter* aims to persuade its audience in an emotionally engaging and aesthetically satisfying manner; it makes extensive use of devices such as direct questions, enthymemes, and Greek anecdotes (about Achilles, Agamemnon, Socrates, Palamedes, etc.). McVey suggests that the *Letter* might be "a school exercise preserved by chance" and should be understood in the context of the Second Sophistic. Similarly, C. Michael Chin makes a case for the *Letter* taking the form of a standard exercise from Graeco-Roman rhetorical schools, the *chreia* elaboration – a brief narrative about a known figure that ends in a witty remark, as is articulated in Theon's *Progymnasmata* (second century CE).[28]

Texts such as the *Book of the Laws of the Countries* and the *Letter of Mara bar Serapion* arguably indicate that educational curricula in the region of Edessa shared elements with Graeco-Roman schools from at least as early as the second half of the second century CE. This thesis may find some corroboration in the Greek mythological scenes that are common in Syriac mosaics. In H. J. W. Drijvers' reconstruction, schooling in Edessa was comparable to that of other major cities of the Roman Em-

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(eds), *Centres of Learning* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 49–59; A. M. Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016); B. Dignas and E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 129 on Nisibis; J. P. Amar, "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug", *PO* 47.1 (1995), 14–5.

27 A. Rigolio, *Christians in Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17 and 52.

28 K. E. McVey, "The *Letter of Mara Bar Serapion to his Son* and the Second Sophistic: Palamedes and the 'Wise King of the Jews'", in M. E. Doerfler *et al.* (eds), *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 305–26; C. M. Chin, "Rhetorical Practice in the Chreia Elaboration of Mara bar Serapion", *Hugoye* 9.2 (2006), published online.

pire, and comprised training in Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy; however, we still know little about the nature of the school curricula, teaching practices, and the institutional settings in Edessa.[29]

The question of the engagement with Graeco-Roman rhetoric is pressing for Ephrem, possibly the most influential Syriac author of all times, born and raised in Nisibis (d. 373 in Edessa), whom Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) described as "an amazing orator (*rhiṭro*) who surpassed the Greeks in his manner of speech" and "the master orator (*rhiṭro*) among the Syrians." Ephrem's vast literary output offers abundant material for studying Syriac rhetoric, which this author most notably employed in the context of religious controversy, liturgy, and Biblical exegesis. Ephrem was aware of contemporary religious debates within Graeco-Roman Christianity; his work features anti-Arian and anti-Jewish rhetoric with a pro-Nicene orientation that Ephrem shared with Greek authors such as Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocians.[30]

It is possible that Ephrem knew Greek and attended Greek primary and secondary education in Nisibis, but the evidence in this respect is not decisive. Ephrem's own trumpeted refusal to take up "the weapons of philosophers and rhetoricians, whose weapon is their logical teaching" in his strongly rhetorical *Letter to Hypatius* has been understood precisely as a rhetorical trope common among Greek patristic authors.[31] As Flavia Ruani shows, Ephrem praised debate (*'aghonā*) as a necessary tool to defeat theological error and adopted tropes shared with judicial rhetoric. Andrew Palmer went as far as to suggest that Ephrem himself may have acted as a teacher in a school of rhetoric in Nisibis, given the extraordinary rhetorical accomplishment of Ephrem's works. At the same time, Ephrem's choice of genres and metres reveals his engagement with established literary and rhetorical traditions in Syriac, and a close analysis of his rhetorical devices demonstrates his participation in Aramaic traditions.[32]

3.2 The fifth and sixth centuries

A case has been made that the verse homilies (*mēmrē*) on the Biblical patriarch Joseph attributed to Balai of Qenneshrin (fl. fifth century) should be understood as

29 H. J. W. Drijvers, "The School of Edessa"; J. Balty and F. Briquel-Chatonnet, "Nouvelles mosaïques inscrites d'Osrhoène", *MMFEPiot* 79 (2000), 31–72.

30 Jacob of Sarug, *On Ephrem* 32 and 156 (ed. and trans. Amar); C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

31 U. Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 48–54, esp. 53.

32 F. Ruani, *Éphrem de Nisibe. Hymne contre les Hérésies* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018), xxvii–xlii; A. Palmer, "A Single Human Being Divided in Himself: Ephraim the Syrian, the Man in the Middle", *Hugoye* 1.2 (1998), 119–63, esp. 140 and 158; P. J. Botha, "The poetic face of rhetoric: Ephrem's polemics against the Jews and heretics in *Contra Haereses* XXV", *APB* 2 (1991), 16–36.

"the earliest Syriac work composed according to the canons of Greek rhetoric." Robert Phenix argues that their author was familiar with Graeco-Roman rhetoric: He incorporated elements of style, rhetorical figures, arrangement of speech, prefaces and conclusions that are discussed in rhetorical handbooks such as the Hermogenic corpus and Aphthonius. The author adapted these devices to the conventions of Syriac poetry (most notably stylistic parallelism and dialogue) and the plot of the Joseph story from Genesis; at the same time, Phenix does not exclude the influence of Jewish exegetical traditions and their rhetoric.[33] Similarly, the late-fourth- or early-fifth-century *Book of Steps* is a collection of speeches on the spiritual life that reveals an awareness of the canons of deliberative rhetoric.[34] Conversely, an explicit condemnation of rhetorical embellishments can be found in a passage from the corpus of Isaac of Antioch (c. fifth century).[35]

We have no evidence for the composition of rhetorical handbooks from this early phase of Syriac literature, nor do we have any attestation of a fully-fledged meta-rhetorical reflection. There might, nonetheless, survive texts that were used in the context of Syriac rhetorical studies at this time. Daniel King makes a case that the peculiar collection of texts included in a seventh-century manuscript (BL Add. 14,658) may stand as a trace of the curriculum of Syriac rhetorical studies in Edessa. King describes this assemblage as a "textbook of rhetoric," since its materials, mainly in the form of speeches or wisdom literature and translated from Greek, could be used as models in the context of rhetorical training. These texts include Ps.-Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum* (a popular text in Greek schools), speeches by early Christian apologists such as Ps.-Justin and Ps.-Melito (Aristides survives in a different Syriac manuscript), the above-mentioned *Letter of Mara Bar Serapion*, and collections of wisdom literature attributed to ancient Greek thinkers such as Menander, Pythagoras, Theano, and Plato.[36]

Other Greek texts translated into Syriac around the fifth century are representative of the Syrians' participation in the *paideia* of the Roman imperial period, such as the translations of Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius. As Maria Conterno shows, the translators had an interest in the faithful rendering of the rhetorical devices of the Greek originals; the circulation of Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius in Syriac manu-

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33 R. R. Phenix, Jr., *The Sermons on Joseph of Balai of Qenneshrin* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 153 and 153–229.

34 A. Böhlig, "Zur Rhetorik im Liber Graduum", in H. J. W. Drijvers *et al.* (eds), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Rome: PIO, 1987), 297–305; R. A. Kitchen and M. F. G. Parmentier, *The Book of Steps: the Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2004).

35 Isaac of Antioch, *Hom.* 66 (ed. Bedjan, 821–23): I owe this reference to Adam Becker.

36 D. King, "Origenism in Sixth Century Syria: The Case of a Syriac Manuscript of Pagan Philosophy", in A. Fürst (ed), *Origenes und sein Erbe in Orient und Okzident* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2010), 179–212; A. Camplani, "Les discours de la philosophie dans les milieux chrétiens syriaques (IIᵉ–IVᵉ s.)", in E. Fiori, and H. Hugonnard-Roche (eds), *La philosophie en syrique* (Paris: Geuthner, 2019), 11–63; for an overview of Syriac wisdom literature under the name of Greek philosophers see Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings*.

scripts, together with Christian instructional material, reveals an endorsement, by the Syrians, of moral tenets that were central to Graeco-Roman *paideia*. A close reading of Antony of Tagrit's ninth-century work on rhetoric shows the continuing relevance of these texts in Syriac culture over the centuries, but it also demonstrates that these traditions need to be understood in an integrated fashion: Antony quotes both from the Syriac translation of Plutarch and from Pythagorean gnomic material – the latter is used to illustrate the use of aphorisms within a speech.[37]

Fifth-century translations from Greek included some of the most accomplished pieces of Christian rhetoric of the time, such as homilies by Basil of Caesarea and Theodore of Mopsuestia, and a few decades later by Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom. These authors were trained in fourth-century Athens or Antioch at the best Greek schools of rhetoric, and their work, often addressed to urban audiences, illustrates virtually every rhetorical device: Their rhetorical practice goes well beyond what their criticism of classical rhetoric seemed willing to tolerate. The effort that went into translating these texts into Syriac, and their impact on Syriac rhetorical studies and Syriac culture more broadly, awaits a full assessment. Kathleen McVey shows that George, bishop of the Arabs (d. 724), made direct use of Gregory's *Oration on Basil* and its scholia (both available in Syriac translation) in the composition of a verse homily on Severus of Antioch that is especially rich in rhetorical devices and discusses Severus's speech delivery. McVey's work shows that the impact of Greek homiletics in Syriac translation is an essential chapter in the history of Syriac rhetoric.[38]

The potential for religious teaching and the deliberative mode of the Christian sermon must have been well known in Syriac circles by the fifth century, as shown by the *Teaching of Addai*, a legendary narrative about the missionary travel of Jesus' apostle Addai to Edessa and the subsequent conversion of the Edessene king, the nobles, and the local populace to Christianity. In this text, religious conversion into Christianity takes place as a result of the speeches that the apostle Addai delivers in Edessa; the *Teaching of Addai* ultimately reveals the Syrians' awareness of established practices of speech delivery in front of a civic audience, demonstrates the effectiveness of speech to achieve persuasion, and shows an understanding of

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37 M. Conterno, "Retorica pagana e cristianesimo orientale: la traduzione siriaca dell'orazione Περὶ φιλίας di Temistio", *ASR* 3 (2010), 161–88; A. Rigolio, "Some Syriac Monastic Encounters with Greek Literature", in Doerfler, *et al.* (eds), *Syriac Encounters*, 295–304; Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric* 5, *3 and *68 respectively, trans. Watt, *The Fifth Book*, with XV–XVII.

38 G. A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 163–7; S. Brock, *The Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Nonnos Mythological Scholia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); K. E. McVey, *George*; A. Schmidt and D. Gonnet (eds), *Les Péres grecs dans la tradition syriaque* (Paris: Geuthner, 2007).

the formal conventions of a public performance of this sort (such as direct addresses to the audience, direct questions, and a reference to the "present speech").[39]

The *Teaching of Addai* is a composite work that did not reach its current form before the early fifth century; parts of it are earlier, such as the letter exchange between Jesus and Abgar, king of Edessa, which was quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea (*HE* 1.13). Effective letter writing (in addition to speech delivery) had long been among the aims of traditional rhetorical education in the Graeco-Roman world and was a valued skill in Syriac. Letters play a fundamental role in advancing the plot in other pieces of early Syriac literature, such as the *Story of Ahiqar*, the *Hymn of the Pearl*, and the *Acts of Thomas*. Syriac letters survived by two among the earliest Syriac authors, Ephrem and Aphrahat, and continued to be written throughout the centuries – the only known systematic handbook on Syriac letter writing is considerably later, by Jacob bar Shakko (d. 1241).[40]

In the late fifth and sixth centuries, a venue for engagement with the conventions of Graeco-Roman rhetoric was provided by the Greek schools in the region. The *Life of Rabbula* (bishop of Edessa, d. CE 436), which was likely written in Edessa in the mid-fifth century, reports that Rabbula had been educated "in the literature of the Greeks, as a member of the wealthy nobles of their city, Qenneshrin" (ch. 2), i.e., Chalcis-on-Belus; this may indicate the availability of Greek education in northern Syria: Rabbula was later able to deliver a speech in Greek on occasion of a visit to Constantinople. On another level, the *Life of Rabbula* has been described as an instance of epidictic rhetoric that draws upon the conventions of the *encomium* form; it is one instance of the abundant Syriac biographical literature that shows an awareness of the conventions of this genre.[41] From the *Life of John Bar Aphthonia*, which itself takes the form of a panegyrical speech, we learn that John's father was involved in the administration of Edessa and was trained in rhetoric (ʾumonutho d-rhiṭrutho); similarly, John's mother made sure that her sons would attend school to learn rhetoric and law (ḥekhmtho d-mimre w-nomuse), even if the location is not specified. John (d. CE 537) later established the Monastery of Qenneshre, an influential centre of higher education that was instrumental in transmitting Greek learning

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39 G. Howard, *The teaching of Addai* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981): see 39–63 for the main speech delivered in front of the Edessene populace; A. Camplani, "Traditions of Christian Foundation in Edessa between Myth and History", *SMSR* 75.1 (2009), 251–78.

40 J. Tannous, "Syriac Epistolography", in A. Riehle (ed), *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 68–91; Jacob bar Shakko, *Dialogues* 1.2.23–6 (unedited).

41 R. R. Phenix and C. B. Horn, *The Rabbula Corpus* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), xxvii–xlvi; M. Debié, "Syriac Biography", in K. De Temmermann (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 401–16, esp. 403–4 and 409 on the agency of the Edessene aristocracy in the composition of biographies of local heroes. A later instance of a Syriac *encomium* showing awareness of epideictic rhetoric is by Eli of Qartamin (thirteenth century): J. W. Watt, "Syriac panegyric in theory and practice. Antony of Tagrit and Eli of Qartamin", *Mus* 102 (1989), 271–98, reprint in Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*.

into Syriac (see below).[42] In the earlier part of the fifth century, John the Solitary was also linked to Edessa and educated in both Greek and Syriac; his dialogues and letters remain in need of rhetorical analysis.[43]

Syriac scholars could alternatively travel and study in the Greek world. The most notable example is Sergius (d. CE 536), known for his training in philosophy and medicine in Alexandria, who went on to be priest and *archiatros* ("chief doctor") in Reshʿayna in Osrhoene.[44] Sergius played a significant role in introducing, into Syriac, Aristotelian logic and science, which he understood in the context of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic curriculum but re-oriented towards a new and ambitious Syriac philosophical curriculum. Sergius' large literary output includes translations from Greek (medical works by Galen and Gesius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Ps.-Aristotle's *De Mundo*, and the *Ps.-Dionysian Corpus*), as well as original works and commentaries on Aristotelian logic and Christian theology that encouraged philosophical studies in Syriac. At least seven of Sergius' works have authorial prefaces that follow a conventional structure and display Sergius' familiarity with the etiquette and *topoi* of Graeco-Roman rhetoric, such as praise of the addressee and the display of humility. Henri Hugonnard-Roche concludes that Sergius had been trained in Greek rhetoric before delving into the study of philosophy and medicine in Alexandria. In fact, Syriac prefaces display standard conventions and can be found in diverse genres of Syriac literature written between the sixth and the eighth centuries.[45]

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42 J. W. Watt, "A Portrait of John Bar Aphthonia, Founder of the Monastery of Qenneshre", in J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Watt (eds), *Portraits of Spiritual Authority* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 155–69, reprint in Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*; F. Nau, "Histoire de Jean bar Aphtonia", *ROC* 7 (1902), 97–135; another instance of availability of Greek education in Osrhoene (Callinicum) at this time comes from the *Life of John of Tella*, available in E. W. Brooks, *Vitae virorum apud monophysitas celeberrimorum* (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1907), ch. IV. For the role of these schools in the transmission of rhetorical knowledge, including panegyric, to the Islamic world see J. W. Watt, "Syriac Rhetorical Theory and the Syriac Tradition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*", in W. W. Fortenbaugh and D. C. Mirhady (eds), *Peripatetic Rhetoric after Aristotle* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 243–60, 244–5, reprint in Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*.

43 *GEDSH* Yoḥannan Iḥidaya; Rigolio, *Christians*, 160–7.

44 For other sixth-century examples see J. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 209 n. 41.

45 H. Hugonnard-Roche, "Comme la cigogne au désert. Un prologue de Sergius de Rešʿainâ à l'étude de la philosophie aristotélicienne en syriaque", in A. de Libera, A. Elamrani-Jamal, and A. Galonnier (eds), *Langages et philosophie. Hommage à Jean Jolivet* (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 79–97, reprint in H. Hugonnard-Roche, *La logique d'Aristote du grec au syriaque* (Paris: Vrin, 2004); E. Fiori, "Un intellectuel alexandrin en Mésopotamie. Essai d'une interprétation d'ensemble de l'œuvre de Sergius de Rēšʿaynā", in E. Coda and C. Martini Bonadeo (eds), *De l'Antiquité Tardive au Moyen Age* (Paris: Vrin, 2014), 59–90; S. Aydin, *Sergius of Reshaina. Introduction to Aristotle and his Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 26–36; Riad, *Studies*.

3.3 The Syriac schools and their institutionalisation

The religious debate around Christological controversies of the fifth century was another important domain for Syriac rhetoric. These controversies resulted in the emergence of the East Syrian Church (not involved in the Council of Ephesus of 431) and the West Syrian Miaphysite Church (not accepting the Council of Chalcedon of 451). We lack a comprehensive study of the large body of apologetic literature produced around these controversies, but there has been excellent work on the two most important academic institutions within either of these Churches: the School of Nisibis – and later Seleucia – (East Syrian), and the Monastery of Qenneshre (Miaphysite). These institutions played the fundamental role of training the community leaders and preparing them to engage dialectically with their religious opponents. It is especially remarkable that the curricula of both institutions, the former in the Sasanian territory and the latter in the Roman Empire, had a rhetorical inclination, as shown by the literature of controversy written by many of their graduates and their engagement in religious debate (a notable example is a verse homily delivered by Narsai in c. 489, which reveals familiarity with Graeco-Roman judicial rhetoric).[46] The curricula of both institutions also included the fundamentals of Aristotelian logic.[47]

The curriculum of the School of Nisibis (established in the city in 489 and flourishing until the early seventh century) centred on the Antiochene exegesis and theology and, from at least the mid-sixth century, was accompanied by the study of Aristotelian logic (Porphyry's *Isagoge* and the *Organon*, probably only up to *Prior Analytics* 1.7, with Neoplatonic commentaries). An important literary genre associated with the School that had a strongly rhetorical character was the *'ellthā* ("cause"): This genre took the form of an academic speech with etiological content and a protreptic nature that links it to the Greek sermon and Greek rhetoric more broadly. The preface of Thomas of Edessa' *Cause* on the Nativity (530s) shows that the performance of "cause" speeches was an essential part of the school curriculum. The author's self-presentation in Barḥadbeshabbā's *Cause* (not lacking hints of a virtuoso performance) and his emphasis on the rhetorical skills of past teachers in the School have been linked to Greek rhetorical practice. One of the teachers at the School, John of Beth Rabban, is also reported to have delivered a eulogistic speech in verse, presumably of a secular character, at the court of the Persian king, Khusrau I Anushirvan, upon his conquest of Najran in the late sixth century.[48]

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46 K. E. McVey, "The *Mēmrā* of Narsai on the Three Nestorian Doctors as an Example of Forensic Rhetoric", in R. Lavenant (ed), *III° Symposium Syriacum, 1980* (Rome: PIO, 1983), 87–96.

47 M. Edwards, *Aristotle and Early Christian Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); J. W. Watt, "Greek thought and Syriac controversies", in J. W. Watt (ed), *The Aristotelian Tradition in Syriac* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 163–86.

48 A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. ch. 4–5 and 87–97 for the curriculum; *idem, Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), esp. 86–7 and 154–5 on John of Beth Rabban;

Some form of rhetorical training arguably endured in the School of Seleucia, which was closely associated with the School of Nisibis and flourished from the mid-sixth century until the ninth in the Sasanian capital. This institution had the support of the Catholicos of the East Syrian Church and possibly of the shah; its alumni and associates included high-ranking members of the clergy, who were at times involved in religious debate, particularly with Zoroastrianism and Islam. Their known works reveal strong rhetorical interests, such as instances of the ʿellthā genre, commentaries on dialectics (presumably on the Aristotelian *Organon*), and exegetical prose homilies in a sophisticated style that reveals the influence of Greek homiletics (particularly Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom).[49] On a fundamental level, work awaits to be done on the intersections of Greek rhetoric and Antiochene exegesis, particularly the East Syrian exegetical literature that adopts and develops the Antiochene tradition. Frances Young and Christoph Schäublin highlight the debt of Antiochene exegesis to Greek rhetorical education, and Lewis Ayres studies the engagement of early Christian exegetes with literary-critical analysis, the traditional domain of grammarians and teachers of rhetoric.[50]

The Monastery of Qenneshre (founded in c. 530 near modern Jirbas and flourishing until the early ninth century) was a Graeco-Syriac bilingual foundation by monks from Seleucia-Pieria near Antioch, including John bar Aphthonia (mentioned above). As shown by Jack Tannous, the strong educational and academic drive of Qenneshre and the network of schools and monasteries that surrounded it was at the very core of the Miaphysite Church's mission, which operated in an environment characterised by confessional competition and needed a class of leaders able to defend their theological positions against the attacks of rivals. The *Homily on Severus* by George, bishop of the Arabs (d. 741) and an associate to Qenneshre, demonstrates familiarity with the conventions of the Greek funeral speech (*epitaphios logos*) and epideictic rhetor-

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idem, "Mār Addai Scher and the Recovery of East Syrian Scholastic Culture", in M. Perkams and A. M. Schilling (eds), *Griechische Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei den Ostsyrern* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 13–28; U. Possekel, "'Go and Set Up for Yourselves Beautiful Laws…" The School of Nisibis and Institutional Autonomy in Late Antique Education", in M. Perkams and A. M. Schilling (eds), *Griechische Philosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020) 29–47; M. Conterno, "Rhetoric and History at the School of Nisibis", in L. Van Hoof and M. Conterno (eds), *Rhetoric and Historiography in Late Antiquity* (forthcoming); U. Possekel and J. F. Coakley, *Thomas of Edessa's Explanations of the Nativity and Epiphany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

49 Becker, *Fear*, 157–9; *GESDH* Aba I and Aba II; G. J. Reinink, "The School of Seleucia and the Heritage of Nisibis, the 'Mother of the Sciences'", in C. Noce *et al.* (eds), *Le vie del sapere in ambito siro-mesopotamico dal II al IX secolo* (Rome: PIO, 2013), 115–32.

50 C. Schäublin, *Untersuchungen zu Methode und Herkunft der antiochenischen Exegese* (Cologne: Hanstein, 1974); F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169–85; R. B. ter Haar Romeny, "Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis and the Origins of the Antiochene School", in J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (eds), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation* (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 125–42; L. Ayres, "Irenaeus vs. the Valentinians: Toward a Rethinking of Patristic Exegetical Origins", *JECS* 23.2 (2015), 153–87.

ic, and may attest to the study of Greek rhetoric in this setting. Qenneshre provided education in the Greek language, and its scholars translated Greek patristic texts (mainly in the form of homilies, by Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Severus of Antioch) and Aristotelian logic, represented by Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aristotle's entire six-volume *Organon* (*Categories* to *Sophistical Refutations*) – even if the philosophical curriculum at Qenneshre was likely more ambitious and included forays into metaphysics.[51] An enthusiastic proponent of Greek studies in Syriac was Jacob, trained in Qenneshre and later bishop of Edessa (d. 708): His works, such as homilies, the *Hexaemeron*, and letters offer ample ground for the study of Syriac rhetoric, and included the first systematic Syriac grammar, which reveals an engagement with Greek linguistic traditions.[52]

To sum up, Syriac literature and rhetoric reveal participation in Graeco-Roman and Christian rhetorical traditions. Texts from the earliest phase of Syriac literature (up to the fourth century) reveal some awareness of the curricula of Greek rhetorical schools and Graeco-Roman rhetorical culture more broadly, even if some Syrians saw such connection as problematic given its association with Graeco-Roman paganism. While we are not aware of Syriac translations of the rhetorical handbooks that characterised Graeco-Roman rhetoric in the imperial period, the Syriac translations of texts such as Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius nonetheless attests to the Syrians' participation in Roman *paideia*. From the fifth century onwards, Syriac translations included some of the most accomplished pieces of Christian rhetoric, such as Basil of Caesarea, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom.

Knowledge of Greek was common among Syriac scholars, who continued to benefit from the Greek schools that were active in the region, but also had the opportunity to receive academic training in the major centres of the Graeco-Roman world, as in the case of Sergius of Resh'ayna and his training in Alexandria. Gradually, however, Syriac institutions of higher learning began to emerge, such as the School of Nisibis and Monastery of Qenneshre, which flourished in the aftermath of the Christological controversies of the fifth century and catered for the theologians and high-ranking members of the clergy of the Syriac churches. The curricula of both institutions included elements of Aristotelian logic and Christian Greek rhetoric; the literature composed by their affiliates showed a strong rhetorical drive and an important degree of originality, as in the case of the "cause" genre.

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51 Tannous, *The Making*, 160 – 221; J. W. Watt, "Syriac Philosophy", in King (ed), *The Syriac World*, 422 – 37; K. E. McVey, *George*.

52 B. ter Haar Romeny (ed), *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac culture of his time* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

4 Syriac "meta-rhetoric"

A fundamental aspect of Syriac rhetoric (and one that should not be taken for granted) was the emergence of a fully-fledged "meta-rhetorical" reflection. This reflection is first attested in the work of Antony of Tagrit in the ninth century, but his work, an extensive treatise on rhetoric in five books, builds on existing traditions of rhetorical studies in Syriac that are not otherwise known, and displays links to aspects of Graeco-Roman rhetoric and philosophy. Antony declares that he engaged with "predecessors and old masters, philosophers and upholders of speech, [...] either from our own ranks or from another religion" (1.1); he was likely able to access Greek rhetorical materials that are no longer available to us, whether in the Greek original or through Syriac intermediaries. For "rhetoric", Antony used the Syriac substantive *rhiṭrutho*, a derivative from the loanword *rhiṭro* (Greek *rhētōr*) that was in use in Syriac from at least the fifth century.[53] Antony gives us the earliest Syriac definition of "rhetoric":

> Rhetoric (*rhiṭrutho*)[54] is the faculty of persuasive speech (*melltho mpisonitho*), possessing proper sequence (*akolouthia*), on any subject it wishes, either theoretical or practical, having the power and the ability to persuade the multitude, and to bring hearers to attention and assent to what is said.[55]

In Antony's view, "rhetoric" is the faculty of persuasive speech, of the kind that an "orator" (*rhiṭro*) uses to convince an audience of hearers; below in the same chapter, a distinction is drawn from dialectics, which instead "is concerned with questions and answers." Antony openly acknowledges his familiarity with Graeco-Roman rhetoric, and his definition has been linked with that of Dionysus of Halicarnassus (first century BCE).[56]

 Antony's participation in Graeco-Roman meta-rhetorical reflection is instantiated by his understanding of three "species" (*'odše*) of rhetoric (judicial, deliberative,

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53 The earliest attestations of *rhiṭrutho* include Ambrose, *Hypomnemata* 1, ed. W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (London: Rivington, 1855), and Narsai, ed. A. Mingana, *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina* (Mosul: Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905), 2.344 (in adverbial form); R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879), *s.v.*; M. Nicosia, "From Antony of Tagrit to the Arabic Version: The Syriac Technical Vocabulary of Rhetoric and the Migration of Words", *Hugoye* 23.1 (2020), 61–97.

54 The manuscripts present some variation between *rhiṭrutho* and the more recent loanword *rhiṭuriqi* (Gr. *rhētorikē technē*).

55 Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric* 1.2, trans. from Watt, "Syriac Rhetorical Theory", 249, and P. E. Eskenasy, "Antony of Tagrit's *Rhetoric* Book One: Introduction, Partial Translation, and Commentary", unpublished PhD. thesis, Harvard University (1991), 92–3; see 126 for the format of the text.

56 J. W. Watt, "Eastward and Westward Transmission of Classics Rhetoric", in J. W. Drijvers and A. A. MacDonald (eds), *Centres of Learning* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 63–75, 65–6, reprint in Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*; Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric* 5, *7–*10 for an acknowledgement of the Graeco-Roman tradition (trans. Watt, *The Fifth Book*, 5–7).

epideictic; 1.3), which was common from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* onwards; similarly, their curious association with the three Platonic parts of the soul (rational, passionate, and appetitive) is attested in a Greek Neoplatonic commentary on Hermogenes' *On Staseis*. Antony's more practical prescriptions for the composition of an *encomium* recall Menander Rhetor (c. third century CE), but with an additional emphasis on the imagery of the "philosopher-king" that may ultimately go back to the Platonic tradition and Themistius: This imagery raises broader questions about the role of Syriac in the transmission of Platonic political thought to al-Fārābī and the Arab-speaking world. Antony's treatment of style follows a tripartite classification of subject matter, arrangement, and elaboration that can be compared with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (3.1), but with a distinctive focus on elaboration (including poetry and versification) that occupies the entirety of the fifth book of his treatise. Here, Antony discusses devices such as fable, aphorism, (possibly) *chreia*, prosopopoeia, and metaphor in a way that demonstrates familiarity with the Graeco-Roman tradition of *progymnasmata*. He frequently quotes from Greek and Syriac sources, both Christian, such as Gregory of Nazianzus and Ephrem, and non-Christian, such as Plutarch and the *Iliad* (which he might have read in the translation by Theophilus of Edessa, d. 785).[57]

At times, Antony's treatise takes the form of lectures delivered in front of students, not without hints of a teacher's virtuosity when the author provides sample speeches to illustrate his arguments, and when he gives practical advice on speech delivery, for instance on how to deal with the fear of speaking in public (1.29): This allows for wide speculation about the instructional setting that the treatise seems to imply.[58] Antony's emphasis on poetry fits well with the Syriac rhetorical tradition, but his advice about the orator's use of poetry may be reminiscent of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (3.2 and 3.38); further, he exemplifies such uses by excerpting verses from Gregory of Nazianzus, the *Iliad*, and Ephrem (1.25). There is no decisive evidence in favor of Antony's direct access to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, whether in Greek or Syriac translation. He never quotes from it, and his knowledge may well derive from intermediary texts that are now lost.[59]

No Syriac translation of the *Rhetoric* survives, but was Aristotle's *Rhetoric* ever available to Syriac scholars? A first important consideration is that, whenever explicitly mentioned in Syriac, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was in the context of Aristotelian logic, as part of the expanded *Organon* of the Neoplatonic Alexandrian tradition. These mentions of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* are in Sergius of Reshʿayna and in a letter by Timo-

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57 Watt, "Syriac Rhetorical Theory"; G. A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 217–24, esp. 220–1; Watt, "Eastward", 65–6; J. W. Watt, "The Philosopher-King in the 'Rhetoric' of Antony of Tagrit", in R. Lavenant (ed), *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992* (Rome: PIO, 1994), 245–58, reprint in Watt, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*.

58 Eskenasy, "Antony", 126.

59 Nicosia, "From Antony"; M. Nicosia, "Tradition and Technical Vocabulary of Syriac Rhetoric between the Greek World and Arabic Reinterpretation", unpublished PhD. thesis, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" (2020).

thy I, patriarch of the East-Syrian Church (CE 780–823); similarly, Gregory Barhe-braeus's *Cream of Wisdom* (d. 1286) includes a commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the context of the expanded *Organon*. The understanding of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a work of logic emerged again in Arabic, where the manuscript *Parisinus Arabus* 2346 (tenth or eleventh century) contains the Arabic translations of the extended *Organon*; here, marginal notes record that the Arabic editor could indeed access a Syriac translation.[60]

There is good reason to believe that a Syriac translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was compiled no later than the middle of the ninth century, and that this translation played the role of intermediary in the transmission of the *Rhetoric* into Arabic. John Watt shows that Barhebraeus had a Syriac translation of the *Rhetoric* at his disposal, as is evident from a close analysis of his commentary in the *Cream of Wisdom* and a quotation from the *Rhetoric* in the *Book of Splendours* (on grammar). Conversely, Jacob bar Shakko's *Book of Dialogues*, in the form of questions and answers and including a section on rhetoric, appears to depend on Antony's treatise rather than on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Therefore, the Syriac translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* may be compared with that of the *Poetics*, which was understood as a text of logic within the extended *Organon* and was transmitted into Arabic through a Syriac intermediary (only one excerpt survives).[61]

To sum up, it is possible to identify, in Syriac, a meta-rhetorical reflection, and, more broadly, the study of rhetoric as an academic discipline. This development is first instantiated in Antony of Tagrit during the ninth century, even though his work is likely to build on pre-existing Syriac traditions of rhetorical studies that are unknown from other sources. Antony's work shows participation in Graeco-Roman and Christian scholarly traditions; at the same time, his treatise was used by later scholars such as bar Shakko and Barhebraeus in the thirteenth century. Antony's "meta-rhetoric" did not directly build on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, whose text Antony may not even have ever read; despite this, however, a Syriac translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was likely in existence by the mid-ninth century.

5 Conclusions

It has been argued that Syriac rhetoric can be studied in relation to its participation in several traditions, most notably the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian heritage,

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60 J. W. Watt, "Sergius of Reshaina on the Prolegomena to Aristotle's Logic: The Commentary on the *Categories*", in Coda and Martini Bonadeo (eds), *De l'Antiquité Tardive*, 31–57, 35, reprint in Watt, *The Aristotelian Tradition*; for Timothy I, *Ep.* 43 (c. 782/3), see S. P. Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek", *Arab. Sci. Philos.* 9 (1999), 233–46; J. W. Watt, *Aristotelian Rhetoric in Syriac. Barhebraeus, Butyrum Sapientiae, Book of Rhetoric* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 20–9.
61 *DPhA* Suppl. 219.

Aramaic literary traditions shared with Jews and other religious groups (such as Manichaeans, Mandaeans, and Samaritans), the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible, and Graeco-Roman and Christian rhetoric. Past work has primarily focused on the Syrians' engagement with Graeco-Roman rhetoric, which remained a constant feature of Syriac rhetoric throughout late antiquity. While the links with Graeco-Roman paganism appeared problematic to some early authors (such as Ephrem in the fourth century), contacts with the Greek-speaking world continued in the post-Seleucid world, and, if anything, appear to increase over the centuries, ultimately resulting in a marked Hellenisation of Syriac culture during the eighth and ninth centuries.

A distinctive feature of Syriac rhetoric is the sophisticated meta-rhetorical reflection that the work by Antony of Tagrit shows in the ninth century. His treatise brings together Syriac traditions and Graeco-Roman (and Christian) literary and philosophical rhetoric but remains in need of systematic scholarly study. Antony may not have read the original text of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; still, this text was arguably translated into Syriac no later than the mid-ninth century in the context of Aristotelian logic and the philosophical curriculum of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic tradition. Aspects of meta-rhetorical reflection attested in Antony, as well as in the Syriac translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, had a continuation in the Arab-speaking world.

More awaits to be done on how Syriac rhetoric developed in distinctive and new ways. Syriac rhetoric expressed itself through literary genres shared with the Graeco-Roman and Mediterranean world, such as the sermon, the letter, and the prose dialogue, but it also developed in original ways, for instance through the introduction of new literary genres. The ʿ*ellthā* genre, the "cause speech," was a notable innovation linked to the School of Nisibis. Other strongly rhetorical genres, such as the *madrāšā* and the *mēmrā*, displayed the Syrians' peculiar predilection for persuasive speech in isosyllabic verse; similarly, Antony of Tagrit dedicates a substantial part of his treatise on rhetoric to versification. An especially notable strand of Syriac literature, the dialogue poem, can be linked to the Mesopotamian heritage, but it developed in distinctive ways, notably by adopting Biblical themes, specific metres, and a propensity for gendered voices. An important domain of Syriac rhetoric was Scriptural exegesis, which in Syriac had deep-rooted links with Jewish exegetical traditions. Religious controversy was another domain of Syriac rhetoric, in the broader context of religious debate among different Christian communities and with Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. Institutions of higher learning such as the School of Nisibis and the Monastery of Qenneshre could provide suitable scholarly training in preparation for such debates.[62]