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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hel/5995>

DOI: 10.4000/12v6a

ISSN: 1638-1580

Publisher

Société d'histoire et d'épistémologie des sciences du langage (SHESL)

Printed version

Date of publication: December 6, 2024

Number of pages: 135-158

ISBN: 979-10-91587-25-9

ISSN: 0750-8069

Electronic reference

Mara Nicosia, "Antony of Tagrit and the Progymnasmata: Towards a Syriac Rhetorical Theory in the Abbasid Era", *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* [Online], 46-2 | 2024, Online since 06 December 2024, connection on 07 December 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hel/5995> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/12v6a>



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ANTONY OF TAGRIT AND THE PROGYMNASMATA: TOWARDS A SYRIAC RHETORICAL THEORY IN THE ABBASID ERA

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Abstract — This paper investigates the engagement with Greek progymnasmata exercises shown by the first rhetorical handbook in Syriac: Antony of Tagrit's *On Rhetoric* (ninth century). Despite lacking any specific reference to progymnastic authors or texts and having its own peculiarities and foundations, the rhetorical theory presented in Antony's treatise bears many connections to the progymnasmata, which will be presented here. Moreover, the paper positions Antony within the Abbasid world and, while keeping a specific focus on the Greco-Syriac connections within Syriac rhetoric, explores the impact of the "Abbasid factor" on this tradition.

Keywords — Syriac rhetoric, Antony of Tagrit, Progymnasmata, Syriac rhetoric under the Abbassids

Résumé — Cet article étudie la pratique des exercices grecs connus sous le nom de progymnasmata dont témoigne le *Sur la rhétorique d'Antoine de Tagrit*, premier manuel de rhétorique composé en syriaque (IX^e siècle). En dépit du fait que ce manuel manque de références spécifiques aux textes progymnastiques et à leurs auteurs, et qu'il se présente comme un ouvrage tout à fait original et proprement « syriaque », la théorie rhétorique du traité d'Antoine tisse de nombreux liens avec les progymnasmata. Ce sont ces liens que nous nous proposons d'étudier ici. En outre, l'article vise à situer Antoine dans le monde abbasside et, en accordant une attention toute particulière aux connexions gréco-syriaques dans la rhétorique syriaque, à explorer l'impact du « facteur abbasside » sur cette tradition.

Mots-clés — rhétorique syriaque, Antoine de Tagrit, Progymnasmata, rhétorique syriaque à l'époque abbasside

The so-called golden age of Syriac literature spans from the fourth to the seventh century, a timeframe identified as the period throughout which the most important and highest number of original works have been produced in Syriac. This does not mean that before and, more importantly, after no meaningful literature has been produced in Syriac.¹ This paper² will not delve into the pre-fourth-century body of material,³ but will rather investigate the cultural situation post-seventh century, once the Arab conquests had determined the end of the Roman and Persian control

1 For a recent overview of Syriac literature and genres, see Rigolio 2021.

2 This paper was written within the project NIF22\220071, *The Syriac Rhetorical Tradition between Greco-Roman paideia and Arabic Aristotelianism*, funded by the British Academy.

3 For an overview of these documents, see Drijvers & Healey 1999.

over the different portions of Syriac-speaking regions, in favour of the establishment of Arabic as the official *lingua franca* of the Middle East.⁴

Together with the production of an imposing body of original literature, Syriac authors are responsible for centuries of translating activity, especially from Greek into Syriac and, during Abbasid times, into Arabic. The studies published by Sebastian Brock have identified three main groups of works translated from Greek into Syriac – biblical, patristic and secular works – alongside at least as many translating attitudes and techniques.⁵ On the other hand, the “Abbasid factor” has been evaluated by scholars in both Syriac and Arabic studies – often with opposite conclusions – to determine whether the coming of the caliphs impacted the literate world to the point of causing an increase in the production of Syriac translations from Greek and, if so, to what extent.⁶ Admittedly, without undermining the accomplishments made by the Syrians before the Arab conquests, this increase can be easily spotted. A good case study is Aristotle’s *Organon*: even though we have various translations and re-translations into Syriac of the first works composing the logical corpus – according to its Alexandrian Neoplatonic reinterpretation, which started with Porphyry’s *Eisagogē* and ended with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* –, translations of the rest of the corpus seem to have been completed only in Abbasid times. This could have happened because of a general decrease in the students’ competence in Greek from the eighth century on, when the connections to Byzantium and the Greek-speaking world had been severed by the Arab conquests. Before that, only the initial treatises of the *Organon* – Porphyry’s *Eisagogē*, *Categories*, *De Interpretatione* and *Prior Analytics* – needed to be translated and thoroughly commented upon, as they were studied by young students with less of a steady command of Greek, whereas *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* seem to have been tackled directly in Greek by more advanced students.⁷ Regardless of the different takes on the intellectual revolution prompted by the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, their sponsorship of Syriac Christian intellectuals and their ability to foster a lively intellectual community cannot be denied. Having clarified this, it remains to be established how this intellectual climate impacted those Syriac authors who were not connected to the Abbasid court and did not work under the caliphal aegis.

4 For a handful of eminent discussions on the history of the Middle East during Roman and Arab times, see, among others, Millar 1993; Sartre 2005; Fowden 2014; Tannous 2018; Hoyland 2019.

5 See Brock 1979, 1982 and 2004.

6 The most noteworthy contribution to the history of the so-called “Greek-to-Arabic Translation Movement” has been published by Gutas 1998. See, among others, Watt 2004, King 2014 and the remarks in Berti 2019 and Watt 2019b.

7 See the discussion in Berti 2019: 251-252. On the Syriac interpretation of Aristotelian logic, see Hugonnard-Roche 1991, 2004 and 2019; King 2010, 2013 and 2019.

This paper explores a rhetorical handbook composed by a Syriac author who lived in (late) ninth-century Iraq, known as Antony of Tagrit.⁸ Almost nothing is known about this author and his life, although an oral tradition about him has been transmitted by Barhebraeus' (1225/6-1286) *Ecclesiastical History*. Here, the famous polymath says that "teachers and elders" reported that Antony was a contemporary of Patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre, but he finds it surprising that the Patriarch never mentioned him.⁹ Antony offers a privileged position to explore the impact of what I earlier called the "Abbasid factor" on a Syriac author living under Arab rulers, who taught a subject that had indissoluble ties to the Greco-Roman world: rhetoric. Antony's opinions on the role of Syrians in the cultural panorama of his time, expressed particularly in the introduction of Book Five of his treatise, are quite critical of the Arabs and try to insist on the independence of Syriac intellectuals and their long-established literary and cultural tradition.¹⁰ My analysis will be focused on the entanglements between the Greek and the Syriac rhetorical traditions during Abbasid times, by analysing the reception of Greek progymnasmata exercises in Antony of Tagrit's treatise *On Rhetoric*.

1. SYRIAC RHETORIC AND EDUCATION UNTIL ABBASID TIMES:

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The history of Syriac education and teaching has been the subject of a handful of important studies in recent times.¹¹ And yet, we still lack a firm consensus on what the teaching curriculum looked like and how Syriac teachers taught most subjects in practice. Even though we have authoritative accounts on some prominent East Syrian institutions, such as the School of Nisibis,¹² and many famous intellectuals are connected to the prestigious West Syrian school hosted in the monastery of Qennešre,¹³ many gaps are left for us to fill. For instance, who was the teacher in charge of teaching rhetoric and what did he teach, precisely? This is not a trivial question, as rhetorical strategies have been employed in Syriac literature from its early days. If, on the one hand, in the first centuries of the Common Era, Syriac authors learnt rhetoric by attending Greek schools (in Alexandria, Athens,

8 On Antony's date, see Nicosia 2021.

9 See the excerpt in Watt 1986: V. *The Ecclesiastical History* is edited and translated into Latin in Abbeloos & Lamy 1872. Some notes on this excerpt in Nicosia 2021: 67-68.

10 I will come back to this aspect later in the paper. See, for instance, the remarks in Watt 2007: 138 and Nicosia 2021: 71-72.

11 See, for instance, Watt 1993, King 2016, Rigolio 2016 and the remarks in Debié 2014.

12 Becker 2006 and 2008; Possekkel 2020.

13 Tannous 2018: 160-80; Hugonnard-Roche 2019.

Antioch,¹⁴ etc.) where they were sent to complete their training, we cannot settle for this explanation for later periods. However, for the earlier phase, we have notable testimonies of the students' mobility, such as that provided in Libanius' (313-393) – orator, rhetoric teacher and author of a collection of progymnasmata – *Oration 62*, called “Against the Critics of his Educational System”, where he mentions the provenance of his students and says:

(27) [...] I will not bluster or exaggerate at all, and say that I have filled the three continents and all the islands as far as the Pillars of Heracles with orators. [...] (28) In the cities of Galatia, however, you would see many, and no less a number in Armenia. Again, the Cilicians outnumber them, and these too are far outnumbered by the Syrians. And if you go to the Euphrates, and cross the river and go to the cities beyond, you will come across some of my pupils, and perhaps not bad ones, either. Both Phoenicia and Palestine are under some obligation to me, together with Arabia, Isauria, Pisidia and Phrygia.¹⁵

Recently, Rigolio has skilfully summarized the participation of Syriac authors in existing rhetorical traditions, from Mesopotamian to Biblical models to the most obvious Greco-Roman and Christian connections.¹⁶ Such engagement can be inferred from works such as the anonymous *Letter of Mara bar Serapion to his Son* (late second or early third century *ca*), which seems to have been composed as a *chreia*, following Theon's progymnasmata.¹⁷ An even clearer connection to classical rhetoric is shown by Balai's *Sermons on Joseph* (early fifth century) which, in Phenix's opinion, are the first Syriac “work to be composed according to the canons of Greek rhetoric”.¹⁸ Similarly, Narsai's (d. *ca* 500) discourse *On the Three Nestorian Doctors* has been interpreted by McVey as an example of forensic rhetoric, whereas deliberative rhetoric has been identified in the anonymous *Book of Steps* (fourth/fifth century).¹⁹ Epideictic rhetoric can be spotted in many discourses in praise composed in Syriac, such as George bishop of the Arabs' (d. 724) *Homely on the Blessed Mar Severos*.²⁰

From the fifth century on, we have Syriac translations of some orations, such as Themistius' *De amicitia* and *De virtute*,²¹ Lucian's *De calumnia*, Plutarch's

14 Where the author of a collection of progymnasmata, Libanius, was a teacher of rhetoric in the fourth century. It must be mentioned here that within Libanius' collection, we find some exercises that were probably composed by someone else; see Gibson 2009: xxiii, with bibliography.

15 Translation from Norman 2000: 96-97. For some further remarks on the provenance of Libanius' students, see Filipczak 2018. For a discussion on the geographical width of the rhetorical teaching network at this stage in history, see Goulet 2014: 257-273.

16 Rigolio 2022.

17 McVey 2015; Chin 2006.

18 Phenix 2008: 153.

19 McVey 1983; Kitchen & Parmentier 2004. See also the discussion in Rigolio 2022: 207-208.

20 McVey 1993.

21 Lost in Greek.

De cohibenda ira and *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*, alongside another text, attributed to Plutarch, which is lost in Greek and extant exclusively in Syriac, called *De exercitatione*.²² This engagement with texts that were the product of Greco-Roman *paideia* seems to indicate a longstanding Syriac interest in Greco-Roman rhetoric. For this reason, it may appear striking to find the first Syriac handbook on rhetoric in the ninth century – whether previous handbooks existed but did not reach us is difficult to say.²³ Before that, even though rhetoric must have been taught in Syriac schools – given that many authors connected to prestigious institutions such as the aforementioned School of Nisibis and the monastery of Qennešre employed rhetoric quite intensely –,²⁴ almost nothing is known about the exact contents of the rhetorical teaching.²⁵ Even though the sons of wealthy Syriac families, after receiving a basic literacy in village churches,²⁶ used to be sent to study in Greek centres of learning where they trained under rhetors,²⁷ Syriac schools were offering high levels of education from at least the sixth century, with a distinctive Syriac perspective. If, on the one hand, we can rely on direct accounts about the schools and their members,²⁸ which allow us to hypothesise a teaching curriculum, the contents of the teaching imparted in Syriac schools and monasteries after the Abbasid conquest can only be imagined on the basis of the list of works and readings included by Barhebraeus in his *Nomocanon*.²⁹

Assuming that no other Syriac handbook on rhetoric was actually produced before the ninth century, it is not easy to identify the exact reasons why such a tool had to wait for the Abbasid era to be produced,³⁰ but several factors might have contributed. First, as we have already said, first-hand knowledge of Greek among Syriac people was decreasing since their direct ties to Byzantium had been severed by the Arab conquests, when Greek ceased to be the *lingua franca* of the

22 On these texts, see Conterno 2014; Rigolio 2016 and 2018.

23 At any rate, no such handbook is referred to or mentioned by any Syriac author.

24 Rigolio 2022: 211–214.

25 On these institutions, see respectively Becker 2006 and 2008; Possekkel 2020; Tannous 2011 and 2018: 160–180. See also Rigolio 2022: 211–214.

26 See Tannous 2018: 181–185 for a discussion on the age at which boys were sent to monastic schools from the sixth century. See also Tannous 2013: 96.

27 A good example of this is John bar Aphthonia, founder of the monastery of Qennešre, who is said to have received a thorough rhetorical education, in line with that received by his father. See Watt 1999. On Syriac education, see King 2016.

28 Such as the works of Barḥabdešabba ‘Arbaya, recently translated in Becker 2008.

29 Interestingly, this list includes Antony of Tagrit’s handbook *On Rhetoric*. For the *Nomocanon*, see Bedjan 1898 and the discussion in Tannous 2018: 188–192.

30 An interesting comparison is the production of handbooks from the classical period, as the first such works are Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and the *Rhetoric for Alexander* (which, however, are quite different from one another, as the first one instantiates philosophical rhetoric while the other one literary rhetoric). What kinds of handbooks were used by the Sophists in classical Athens is therefore very difficult to say and Kennedy (1994: 33–35) suggested that they could have been mostly made of examples. I am grateful to Alberto Rigolio for drawing my attention to this aspect and for his comments on this paper.

Syriac-speaking areas.³¹ Second, the Arab conquests seem to have increased the religious controversies among Christian groups, as testified by the number of polemical texts showing this acute rivalry.³² However, even though rhetorical strategies are largely employed in polemical literature, the teaching offered in Antony of Tagrit's rhetorical handbook is not exclusively connected to this literary genre. Third, as explained by Antony in the introduction of Book Five, he composed his handbook (or at least the part dealing with poetry and metrics in rhetoric) to "remove reproach from my people".³³ This proclamation is further expanded later in this introduction, by claiming the worthiness of Syrians and their language in intellectual matters.³⁴ This topic was at the centre of much controversy once the Arabs took over the cultural and intellectual panorama, establishing Arabic as a language worthy of a rightful spot in the field of literature, science and philosophy.³⁵ Such discussions are not exclusive to the ninth century and were carried out also later: for instance, in the eleventh century, Elias of Nisibis praised the qualities of the Syriac language in the field of science, in which he claimed that it should be considered clearer than Arabic.³⁶ Therefore, considering that Antony either lived or operated in Tagrit – a city which produced various intellectuals around the ninth and the tenth century, who wrote both in Syriac and Arabic, and which was largely Arabised by the ninth century –,³⁷ the intellectual tension between Syrians and Arabs might have been a contributing factor pushing Antony to finally put into writing those rhetorical teachings which were imparted in Syriac schools. Before moving to analyse the similarities between Antony's handbook and the collections of progymnasmata, it is useful to briefly discuss the content, components and themes of the treatise *On Rhetoric*.

2. ANTONY'S TREATISE *ON RHETORIC*

Despite his importance and relevance from the point of view of both rhetorical teaching and poetical contributions, we have scanty information about Antony of Tagrit. His life has been placed in the ninth century based on later oral traditions

31 For an in-depth discussion on the contacts between Greek and Syriac, see Butts 2016.

32 Tannous 2018: 162-167.

33 Antony of Tagrit I (tr.). See the remarks in Watt 2007: 138. This introduction is, in fact, an excellent piece of rhetorical speech, possibly a speech of defence, which fits quite well the genre of controversy. Recently, Voigt (2022) has suggested that the introduction has been composed with a very specific metrical pattern.

34 See Antony of Tagrit I-11/1-10 (tr.).

35 For a historical overview of the first centuries of Islamic domination in the Near East, see Hoyland 2019: 9-25.

36 See Debié 2014: 11-12; Bertaina 2011: 201.

37 Fiey 1963: 316-321. On this point, see also the remarks in Nicosia 2021: 71-73.

and palaeographical grounds.³⁸ A West Syrian, Antony is described in the various manuscripts bearing his works both as a monk and a priest. In the British Library manuscript Add. 14,726 he is associated with Beth Gūrgin, which could be both a place of origin and a possible family name.³⁹ Together with his handbook in five books *On Rhetoric*, Antony authored a treatise *On the Good Providence of God*, another one *On the Myron*, four rhymed prayers and a handful of metrical compositions.⁴⁰ His most famous and most copied work is undoubtedly *On Rhetoric*. The text was seemingly used for teaching purposes, and it constantly addresses the students, endearingly called ‘lovers of toil’ (ܐܬܝܪܝܐ ܕܥܡܠܐ). The handbook encompasses all the relevant aspects of the employment of rhetoric, mostly in writing, and includes a section on poetry.

Where did Antony find the rhetorical material included in his handbook? This aspect is crucial to understanding where he could have operated and studied. Regardless of whether the reference to Tagrit embedded in the name under which Antony’s works are transmitted has to be intended as a place of origin or activity, I think we can safely suggest an Iraqi training for him. In the ninth century, the West Syrian monasteries that were most active in the area were probably Mar Mattai and Mar Gabriel.⁴¹ Even if the connection with Mar Mattai would be extremely convenient to justify the fact that the only two later Syriac authors to know and quote from Antony – Barhebraeus and Bar Šakko⁴² – are both connected to this monastery, there does not seem to be, in my opinion, enough evidence in this respect.⁴³ At any rate, Tagrit was not far from the Abbasid capital Baghdad, and Antony could have received at least a part of his education there from one of the famous Christians who thrived under the Abbasids during the Translation Movement.⁴⁴ If Antony had been trained by Baghdadi intellectuals, his choice of using Syriac as a language of communication would have been even more meaningful and “political” in the

38 Particularly, it is thanks to the account given by Barhebraeus in his *Ecclesiastical History*. See Abbeloos and Lamy 1872: cols. 361-363; Watt 1986: V. As for the palaeographical grounds, I refer here to the date that has been attributed to the earliest manuscript containing Antony’s *Rhetoric*, which is today partly in the British Library (BL Add. 17,208) and partly in the library of Deir al-Surian (DS Syr. 32). For the catalogues, see Wright 1871, II: 613-17; Brock & Van Rompay 2014: 244-48.

39 Watt (2011) seems to prefer the second option.

40 On the two treatises, see Drijvers 1990 and Meßling 1968. Emanuele Zimbardi is currently preparing an edition and translation of both. For the rhymed prayers, see Bäss 1968. On the metrical compositions, see the remarks in Baršoum 2003: 385-386 and Nicosia 2021: 83-84.

41 See the brief overviews in Kiraz 2011 and Palmer 2011.

42 Bar Šakko (d. 1241) is the author of a *Dialogue on Rhetoric* and a *Dialogue on Poetry* which paraphrase Antony’s Book One and Five respectively.

43 At any rate, the West Syrian monastery was a prominent intellectual hub and, as testified by the enquiries made by the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I about translations and commentaries on the last volumes of Aristotle’s *Organon*, this institution must have had a specialised library on Greek knowledge. See the remarks in Watt 2004: 18-19 and Tannous 2013: 96-102. On the monastery of Mar Mattai, see Jacob 2012.

44 The most eminent examples are Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808-873) and his circle.

framework of the aforementioned polemics, and would go hand in hand with the topic he selected, so profoundly rooted in Syriac education. This latter aspect is one of the main reasons in favour of a proper Syriac monastic education. Moreover, based on our current knowledge of Antony's handbook, it does not seem like he had a prominent interest in Aristotelian philosophy, which was the main centre of interest of the so-called Baghdadi Aristotelians.⁴⁵ If Antony had indeed received philosophical training in the capital, he did not deem it worth it to flash it in his handbook.

Each of the five books of Antony's handbook is devoted to a different aspect of the matter: Book One – the longest and most prescriptive of all, subdivided into thirty chapters – defines rhetoric and discusses rhetorical speeches, tools, devices and strategies; Book Two discusses the benefits of praise; Book Three – which is the shortest – deals with subject-matter, disposition and ornamentation; Book Four addresses the praises of friendship. Book Five, which could be interpreted as a treatise on its own, even though strictly connected to the previous ones and meant to be studied alongside the other four, tackles Syriac poetry from the point of view of metre, rhetorical figures and what Antony calls “assonant letters”, largely referring to rhyming strategies.⁴⁶ Despite being the only treatise on Syriac rhetoric – whether other treatises of this kind have simply not reached us is impossible to argue –, its contents are largely unknown to modern scholars, due to a lack of translations and editions. Book One has been partly translated and commented upon in Pauline Eskenasy's PhD dissertation, whereas Book Five has been edited and translated by John Watt in 1986.⁴⁷ In 2000, Eliah Sewan attempted an edition of the entire treatise, which is based on some extremely recent manuscripts and, for Book Five, on John Watt's edition.⁴⁸ Recently, three of the oldest manuscripts preserving Antony's work have resurfaced, which calls for a partial revision of the existing translations and editions.⁴⁹

If we take a closer look at Antony's sources and models, we realise that his teaching is imbued with Greco-Roman rhetorical models, as well as Christian and Jewish rhetoric, all with a distinctive Syriac touch.⁵⁰ A notable absence from Antony's sources is that of Aristotle, whose *Technē Rhetorikē* does not seem to have been consulted during the composition of the handbook. It is possible to spot Aristotelian aspects nonetheless, but there is not enough for a definitive

45 On the Baghdadi Aristotelians, see Endress 2012 and Zimmermann 1991: cv-cxxxix. The remarks in Watt 2008: 759-761 are connected to this aspect.

46 See Nicosia 2021.

47 Watt 1986; Eskenasy 1991.

48 Sewan d-Beth Qermez 2000.

49 A case has been made in Nicosia 2024a, based on the quotations from Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*.

50 Nicosia forthcoming a and b.

identification.⁵¹ Antony's work raises many important questions, including some about the abundance of quotations that are embedded in Antony's teaching, particularly those coming from Greek non-Christian literature, such as those from Homer, Heliodorus, Pseudo-Callisthenes and others.⁵² Antony excerpts quite frequently from the Scriptures, the Greek Fathers and Syriac authors like Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh, but there is more: at a deeper level, we can see traces of many previous works from the Greek rhetorical past that Antony does not mention directly, but from which his teaching seems to be strictly dependent.⁵³ This is the case of the group of exercises known under the name 'progymnasmata'. Whether Antony had first-hand knowledge of these texts or, rather, they had entered the Syriac rhetorical teaching at an earlier stage and later reached Antony, will be addressed in the next section.

3. ANTONY AND THE PROGYMNASMATA

In the introduction to his translations of progymnastic collections, George Kennedy explains that the progymnasmata are "'preliminary exercises', preliminary that is to the practice of declamation in the schools of rhetoric, which boys usually began between the age of twelve and fifteen".⁵⁴ These exercises were assigned by Greek grammarians and rhetors so that students could familiarise themselves with rhetorical practises and put them to good use in the production of their discourses. The most important progymnasmata to have reached us are attributed to Aelius Theon (first century CE *ca*) – preserved also in Armenian translation –,⁵⁵ Hermogenes of Tarsus (second century CE), Libanius (d. 393), Aphthonius (second half of the fourth century CE), Nicolaus the Sophist (fifth century CE) and, later in time, John of Sardis (ninth century CE).⁵⁶ The progymnasmata aimed to introduce the students to exercises such as fable, narrative, *chreia*, *ecphrasis*, comparison, speech in character, and various other features for the creation of epics and other literary forms.⁵⁷ These collections do not seem to have received Syriac or Arabic

51 Some notes on this point in Watt 1994a: 249-252 and Nicosia forthcoming a.

52 See Nicosia 2024a and forthcoming b.

53 For an introduction to this topic, see Watt 1994a: 249-252.

54 Kennedy 2003: x. See Criboire 2001: 220-244. For the most recent bibliographical tool on progymnasmata, see Chiron 2017.

55 See the discussion in Heath 2002, esp. 141-143. As for the date given to Theon's progymnasmata, which is debated, I used here the one provided in Heath 2002: 129. See also Patillon 1997: viii-xvi.

56 Aelius Theon, 1997 edition; Hermogenes of Tarsus, 2008 edition; Libanius, 2009 edition; Aphthonius, 2008 edition; Nicolaus the Sophist, 1913 edition; John of Sardis, 1928 edition. I will not address the collections of progymnasmata composed after the ninth century, such as those by Nikephoros Basilakes and Nikephoros Chrysoberges.

57 Kennedy 2003: ix.

way, as we will see shortly –, in practice he seems to be more concerned with laudatory speeches, to the study of which he dedicates more space than the rest.⁶³ This is already a big difference from the Greek classical past, where rhetoric was largely employed to win arguments in court. Epideictic rhetoric was given bigger prominence by the Second Sophistic and later in the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, where epideictic was used to prove one's competence in the production of written and spoken discourses, on public and domestic occasions equally.⁶⁴ Highly practised genres were *enkomion* (ἐγκώμιον) and *psogos* (ψόγος), *basilikos logos* (βασιλικὸς λόγος), *ēthopoieia* (ἠθοποιία), *epitaphios logos* (ἐπιτάφιος λόγος) and *ekphrasis* (ἔκφρασις).⁶⁵

Quite certainly, Syriac rhetorical teachings could have been employed in religious debates, which, as we said, were not unusual in Syriac schools or at the Abbasid court – as famously testified by the (maybe fictional?) dialogues between the caliph al-Madhi and the Catholicos Timothy I,⁶⁶ or by the dialogues instantiated in the many *soghyatha* composed in Syriac.⁶⁷ Whatever its use was, Antony distinguishes between three couples of rhetorical discourses: praise and blame (ܡܠܝܟܬܐ ܕܡܠܝܟܬܐ), encouraging and discouraging battles (ܡܠܝܟܬܐ ܕܡܠܝܟܬܐ ܕܡܠܝܟܬܐ ܕܡܠܝܟܬܐ), which can be understood as persuasion and dissuasion) and accusation and defence (ܡܠܝܟܬܐ ܕܡܠܝܟܬܐ).⁶⁸ Although these three couples are technically in line with the Aristotelian tripartite division into epideictic, deliberative and judicial rhetoric, the Aristotelian terminology is completely absent.⁶⁹ Moreover, instead of connecting each couple of discourses to listener,

63 Book Two is entirely dedicated to the “benefits of praise”. On the contacts between Antony's epideictic teachings and Menander's, see Watt 2019a: 222. Menander's work, just like the progymnasmata, was never translated into Syriac, and yet Menander appears so clearly in Antony's rhetorical prescriptions. Knowledge of Menander's work and its transmission is a bit of a conundrum in the Byzantine rhetorical tradition as well, as described in Jeffreys 2007: 171. On the Syriac reception of Menander, see Arzhanov 2017. On Antony's prescriptions about the *basilikos logos*, see Watt 1994b and the comments in Watt 2019a: 223 on Antony's conceptualisation of the philosopher king as opposed to Menander's.

64 Cameron 1991: 84 and Jeffreys 2007: 172.

65 See the discussion in Jeffreys 2007: 170-177.

66 Mingana 1928; Kuhlmann 1995; Samir & Nasry 2018.

67 Among the studies on Syriac *soghyatha*, see, for instance, Brock 1991, 1999, 2011, 2019 and Mengozzi 2020.

68 In chapter 2, Antony mentions five discourses, which will turn into six from chapter 3. Praise can be prompted by the interior (soul and body) or exterior (origin, possessions, native city) characteristics. All these can cause blame as well. As for the types of battles, they could be 1) concerning speeches or 2) concerning actions, either sense-perceptible (i. against the city, ii. against the family, iii. against one's person) or immaterial (cf. ch. 6). Species of prosecution, on the other hand, are the following: 1) laying the charges before the judge; 2) refutation by opponents; 3) attacks of insult-blame. Species of defence are: 1) plead upon one's internal characteristic or 2) upon external evidence. The accusation is said to be 1) untrue; 2) true but either harmless or done by someone else. See the translation of chapters 4-7 in Eskenasy 1991: 99-125. See some notes on this in Nicosia forthcoming a.

69 This terminology can be found only in the thirteenth-century *Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric* composed by Barhebraeus. See Nicosia 2024b. Edition and translation of the text in Watt 2005.

time and end according to Aristotle's organisation, Antony connects them to the parts of the soul according to Plato – appetitive, passionate and rational –, an association already made in the Neoplatonic prolegomena to Aphthonius and Hermogenes.⁷⁰

In 1994, Watt kicked off the discussion on the Syriac rhetorical theory and its connections to the Greco-Roman counterpart, focusing on the rhetorical figures discussed in Antony's Book Five and the entanglements shown by Antony's definition of rhetoric and rhetorical discourses.⁷¹ It was the first time someone hypothesised the existence of a rhetorical theory exclusive to the Syrians, that was not necessarily defined by its similarities to the previous traditions, but rather a system of its own. And yet, this tradition came together with elements belonging to a handful of previous traditions, not just the Greco-Roman, but also Biblical and Christian rhetoric, with some Arabic superstratum that can be spotted, for instance, in Antony's prescriptions on the use of rhyme.⁷² Components of all these traditions, mixed and craftily reshaped, all contributed to the creation of the discipline that we now call Syriac rhetoric.⁷³ In these final pages, I would like to devote my attention to the connection that this discipline, instantiated in Antony's treatise, shows to the *progymnasmata*.

Earlier, we said that Antony divides between three couples of rhetorical discourses. The texts in which we find rhetorical discourses in couples are indeed the *progymnasmata*. For instance, in Libanius we find exercises on encomium (ἐγκώμιον) and invective (ψόγος) and refutation (ἀνασκευή) and confirmation (κατασκευή). Encomium and invective are separate exercises in Aphthonius, and a single exercise in Theon and Nicolaus; refutation and confirmation are two separate exercises in Aphthonius, while they are one in Nicolaus and a skill to be applied to exercises in Theon.⁷⁴ Even though the *progymnasmata* are not a perfect match for Antony's division, it is not unlikely that they were the ones who prompted it, at an earlier stage in the shaping of the Syriac rhetorical theory. Moreover, the idea of deriving blame from the same aspects that cause praise discussed in Book One, chapter 5, could very well have its roots in the *progymnasmata*, which apply this strategy. Similarly, the fact that Antony refers to Demosthenes – whose works were not translated into Syriac – as “the most eminent orator” and mentions him frequently could have a *progymnastic* origin as well, given the prominence that

70 See, for example, the discussion in Watt 1994a: 248-252 and Watt 2019a: 222.

71 Watt 1994a: 248-252.

72 A full discussion in Nicosia 2021: 75-84. On the use of glosses derived from Arabic in chapter 26, Book One, see Watt 2007: 146-148.

73 The first seeds for this line of reasoning have been planted in Watt 1994a: 253-256.

74 See Kennedy 2003 and Gibson 2009.

Another aspect in which Antony's treatise resembles the progymnasmata is the discussion on figures in chapter 2 of Book Five,⁹² as Antony's rhetorical figures have parallels in the exercises hosted in progymnastic collections. The figures in Book Five are fable – which encompasses both the progymnastic μῦθος and διήγημα –, aphorism – both γνώμη and χρεία –, bare figure – which covers προσωποποιία, ἥθοποιία and εἰδωλοποιία –, metaphor – which encompasses what we recognise as metaphor, aphorism, simile and allegory – and 'comedy'.⁹³ κωμικόν, 'comedy', has been translated with *ridicule* and compared to the exercise in invective known as ψόγος. The examples of comedy provided in Book Five come from the *Iliad* and the Syriac version of the *Alexander Romance* and are paired with two other unattributed excerpts (both speeches in character) which could have easily been crafted by Antony himself.⁹⁴ Antony identifies 'comedy' as a rhetorical figure in Book Five, but he had already discussed 'comedy' in Book One, chapter 27. Here, he says that comedy has many parts, among which there is mockery – which is "when the adversaries are accused through words (that are) not in agreement with (what) one should say"⁹⁵ – and festivity and cheerfulness – which seem to refer to sarcasm or irony. Therefore, based on my understanding of chapter 27, I wonder whether 'comedy' here is when a person says something different from what they intended with the aim of insulting, tricking or diminishing someone.⁹⁶ This use of the word 'comedy' seems to be something different from the progymnastic ψόγος, which is described as derived from the same aspects that generate praise and which corresponds more closely to Antony's 'blame' (κωμ).⁹⁷

92 Antony of Tagrit (66/54 tr.) defines figure (حجوة) as follows: “It is named for (the fact) that <something> is made and fashioned, either like clay or like flour, from which comes paste or dough. It is evident that when there is matter, that through it there may come *gbūlyā*, (a word) which (has) two or many senses; but any poetic form is that which comes into being with art and craft when one says some things for other things, and one sees (what is intended) hiddenly rather than openly”. For an in-depth discussion on Antony’s figures, see Watt 1987.

93 Progymnasmata usually feature the following fourteen exercises, generally organised from the simplest to the most complicated ones: fable (μῦθος), narration (διήγημα), anecdote (χρεία), maxim (γνώμη), refutation (ἀνασκευή), confirmation (κατασκευή), common topics (κοινός τόπος), encomium (ἐγκώμιον), invective (ψόγος), comparison (σύγκρισις), speech in character (ἡθοποιία), description (ἐκφρασις), thesis (θέσις) and introduction of a law (εἰσφορά τοῦ νόμου). See Gibson 2014: 128. On Antony's figures and the progymnasmata, see the discussion in Watt 1987 and 1986: xv–xx.

94 Antony of Tagrit, 80-81/68-69 (tr.).

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96 In this respect, one might wonder whether Antony was somehow familiar with the theory of ἐσηματισμένος λόγος portrayed, for instance, in Apsines' *Art of Rhetoric* (2.17-18, edition Dilt & Kennedy 1997: 121). However, this would require an in-depth, targeted study which surpasses the aim of this paper.

97 In the Arabic tradition, the Greek categories of ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ are usually translated as ‘invective’ and ‘encomium’. This has been interpreted by the scholarship as being the consequence of the lack of understanding of the categories of Greek theatre. See Serra 2002 and the discussion in Nicosia 2019: 276–277.

Another striking similarity between progymnasmata collections and Antony's handbook is the large use they both make of Homer's epic. To quote from Watt, "the poets, and Homer in particular, were widely used in the Greek schools of the grammarians and rhetors, especially as source of figures",⁹⁸ but Syriac translations from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have not reached us.⁹⁹ Moreover, the excerpts hosted throughout Antony's text do not seem to derive directly from an original Greek or a genuine translation of it, but they rather look like being derived either from scholia or a florilegium of some sort.¹⁰⁰ Given the prominence and popularity of Homer's epic – especially the *Iliad* – in classical teaching and the progymnastic tradition,¹⁰¹ it is not impossible that this was the channel through which many of the quotations and references reached Antony, particularly if they did not travel as part of a complete translation but as collections of excerpts. In Arzhanov's words,

The most important setting for the florilegia was the classroom. Excerpts from famous poets (Homer, Hesiod) and playwrights (Menander) were used as exemplary for copying and memorizing. Moral sayings were often transmitted in form of chreias (i.e. short anecdotes including a witty saying) and used in writing exercises and elementary rhetorical education, forming the basis of the so-called *progymnasmata*.

Thus, Syriac Christians became familiar with moral sayings attributed to famous Greek authors. Some of them may be regarded as translations from the Greek, like the Syriac version of the Pythagorean sentences, while others differ considerably from the Greek versions.¹⁰²

The quotations from Homer in Antony's treatise come from various books of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The absence of steady evidence on the existence of a complete translation of both further supports the hypothesis of their provenance from progymnasmata and florilegia. Interestingly, some of the quotations that we find in Antony's handbook are referred to in Libanius' progymnasmata: *Iliad* I, 223-244; 407-412; II, 244-264; XII, 230-250; XIX, 1-27; XXII, 214-366; XXIII, 287-538.¹⁰³ This does not mean that they were derived directly from Libanius, as Homeric quotations were found in a variety of sources and widely quoted by

⁹⁸ Watt 1994a: 254.

⁹⁹ I will not delve into the reception of Homer in Syriac here. For relevant discussions and bibliography, see Raguse 1968; Debié 2005; Hilken 2013; Niccolai 2019; Nicosia forthcoming b.

¹⁰⁰ I am currently preparing a paper on this topic: 'Homer, Heliodorus and Pseudo-Callisthenes in Antony of Tagrit's *Rhetoric*'.

¹⁰¹ To get a rough idea of the number of quotations that can be found, for instance, in Libanius' collection, it will suffice to check the index of cited passages in Gibson 2014: 556-561.

¹⁰² Arzhanov 2019a: 70.

¹⁰³ The quotations in Antony's handbook are located as follows: *Il.* I, 225 in Book One, ch. 5; *Il.* I 225-228 in Book Five, ch. 2; *Il.* I, 407 in Book Five, ch. 2; *Il.* II, 257-260 in Book I, ch. 27; *Il.* XII, 230 in Book One, ch. 26; *Il.* XIX, 1-2 in Book One, ch. 25; *Il.* XXII, 311 in Book One, ch. 26; *Il.* XXIII, 315-317 in Book Five, Introduction. See Raguse 1968. An in-depth study will be hosted in the second chapter of my monograph.

classical and Byzantine authors. However, it means that Homeric material was perceived as being a fundamental part of Syriac rhetorical training for centuries. Homeric quotations, just like progymnastic material, must have entered Syriac rhetorical collections way before Antony, at a stage in which Greek was still widely read and understood. In the ninth century, Antony shows us that Syriac rhetorical teaching still employed Homer's epic just like it was done in the classical world. We even know how Homeric epic was explained to Syriac students, as Antony writes that his teacher explained to him how Greek gods were connected to physical elements, vices and virtues, in a fashion that echoes the explanations transmitted in the Homeric scholia in Greek.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, it seems to me that there is enough evidence to posit a connection between Greek progymnasmata and Antony's *On Rhetoric*. All the aspects highlighted so far, from Antony's teaching methodology based on exemplifications of the contents presented to the students to the figures of speech he proposes, the types of discourses he crafts (both within the main text of the treatise and in the metrical compositions in BL Add 17,208), to the use of Homer's epic, the references to Demosthenes and even the division of rhetorical discourses into couples, point in the direction of a progymnastic provenance. If Antony did not read directly from progymnasmata collections, which seems to be the case to me, these must have entered the Syriac rhetorical teaching tradition at an earlier phase and, in time, have been integrated to the point of no longer being recognizable as "external" to it.

CONCLUSION

Antony's handbook is our main source to understand how the Syriac rhetorical tradition came to be and how this subject was taught in Syriac schools. Moreover, it testifies to the fact that, by the ninth century, there had been a full academic reflection on the topic, which led to the creation of teaching supports. Antony's *Rhetoric* had strong ties to the Greco-Roman tradition, but it also engaged with both non-Christian and Christian authors, thus revealing its multifaceted and "syncretic" nature. Antony seems to represent the point of culmination of a tradition that had shaped itself for centuries and was finally put into writing during the reign of the Abbasids.

Antony's handbook proposes rhetorical teachings that are not exclusively meant for religious use or audience. Unlike the Byzantine rhetorical production, which did not consider ecclesiastical genres such as hymnography or the composition of

104 See Antony of Tagrit 78-79/67 (tr.). Watt 1993: 60-61 and 2007: 137.

prayers and homilies,¹⁰⁵ Syriac rhetoric is interested in both secular and religious aspects of the Syriac literary production. Antony's handbook seems to host two different strands of rhetoric: that instantiated by Late Antique rhetoricians and progymnasmata collections, and that of the "Fear of God" sponsored by Severus of Antioch (according to his *Life* composed by Zacharias Scholasticus), based on the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea.¹⁰⁶ A similar Christianisation of the rhetorical teachings can be witnessed in the Byzantine commentaries to progymnasmata and treatises on figures, particularly in the 10th and 11th centuries,¹⁰⁷ but Antony's use of Syriac classics makes him unlike any other intellectual before and the recipient of a rhetorical tradition that grew and evolved for a long time before him. Interestingly, this tradition was recorded in writing under the Abbasid, for reasons that are still not entirely clear.

Syriac rhetoric has been studied and analysed mostly in connection to its past and possible models. However, even though the circumstances that brought the only handbook on the subject into being are completely unknown to us, it is useful to start asking questions about the possible synchronic factors that might have influenced it. Whether the handbook should be interpreted as an attempt to preserve the Syriac tradition or a response to the Arabs' increasing intellectual domain over literature and sciences, the intellectual climate created by the Abbasid caliphs must have contributed to the birth of such a tool, dealing with a subject which is so entangled and strictly connected with the Syriac past.

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¹⁰⁵ Jeffreys 2019: 101.

¹⁰⁶ Arzhanov 2019a: 153-154 and 172. For the *Life of Severus*, see Ambjörn 2008 and Kugener 1904.

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy 1983: 125, 308 and 317 and Watt 1987: 323. See the recent discussion in Bady 2010 on the use of Gregory of Nazianzus' *Orations* in rhetorical handbooks on figures.

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