

1-1-2016

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Published version. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016): 183-204.

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Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture (JRMDC)

<http://jrmdc.com>

Gateway to the Syriac Saints: A Database Project

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Keywords: Syriac; hagiography; late antiquity; saints; manuscripts; digital humanities; theology; religious studies; history

Abstract:

This article describes *The Gateway to the Syriac Saints*, a database project developed by the Syriac Reference Portal (www.syriaca.org). It is a research tool for the study of Syriac saints and hagiographic texts. The *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* is a two-volume database: 1) *Qadishe* and 2) *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica (BHSE)*.

Hagiography, the lives of the saints, is a multiform genre. It contains elements of myth, history, biblical exegesis, romance, and theology. The production of saints' lives blossomed in late antiquity alongside the growth of the cult of the saints. Scholars have attended to hagiographic traditions in Greek and Latin, but many scholars have yet to

discover the richness of Syriac hagiographic literature: the stories, homilies, and hymns on the saints that Christians of the Middle East told and preserved. It is our hope that our database will give scholars and students increased access to these traditions to generate new scholarship.

The first volume, *Qadishe* or “saints” in Syriac, is a digital catalogue of saints or holy persons venerated in the Syriac tradition. Some saints are native to the Syriac-speaking milieu, whereas others come from other linguistic or cultural traditions. Through the translation of their hagiographies and the diffusion of saints’ cults in the late antique world, saints were adopted, “imported,” and appropriated into Syriac religious memory.

The second volume, the *BHSE*, focuses on Syriac hagiographic texts. The *BHSE* contains the titles of over 1000 Syriac stories, hymns, and homilies on saints. It also includes authors’ or hagiographers’ names, the first and last lines of the texts (in Syriac, English, and French), bibliographic information, and the names of the manuscripts containing these hagiographic works. We have also listed modern and ancient translations of these works.

All of the data in the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* has been encoded in TEI, and it is fully searchable, linkable, and open.

About the Author:

Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent is an Asst. Prof. of Theology at Marquette University. She is the author of *Missionary Stories and the Formation of the Syriac Churches*, published by the University of California Press. She is also an Asst. Director of Syriaca.org, an on-line research portal for Syriac studies. She holds a PhD in Religious Studies from Brown University (2009).

To Cite This Article:

Saint-Laurent, J.N., 2016. Gateway to the Syriac Saints: A Database Project. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 5(1), pp. 183-204. Online. Available at: <<http://www.jrmdc.com/journal/issue/view/9>>.

Introduction: Syriac Language and Hagiography¹

Syriac is a dialect of late Aramaic that was spoken around Edessa (modern-day Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Turkey). Syriac became the language of the Christians of the Syrian Orient and was spoken widely throughout the Middle East until the beginnings of Islam, when Arabic gradually replaced it. Syriac, in classical and modern varieties, has persisted into the modern period as a language of the churches of the Syriac heritage² (Saint-Laurent 2016; Butts 2011; Healey 2005). Syriac texts express Christian theology, poetry, and exegesis in a Semitic idiom. Late antique Syriac literature comprised many genres including poetry, hymnography, homilies, prose, historiography, and hagiography.

Hagiography is the genre of the lives of the saints (Hinterberger 2014; Harvey 2008). It emerged in the late antique period as a literary form to commemorate Christians whose lives were seen and promoted as models of sanctity. The study of Syriac hagiography offers scholars an important window into the cultural and religious history of the Middle East, and it brings together a wide array of literary forms, including prose and poetry (Insley and Saint-Laurent forthcoming 2017). Broadly defined, Syriac hagiographic literature includes 1) apocryphal *Acts*, 2) metrical homilies and liturgical hymns on saints, 3) extended *Lives* or *Vitae*, 4) shorter episodic vignettes, sayings material, or miracle stories contained in larger collections, and 5) martyr romances or passions.

Over 1,200 works of hagiographic literature are extant in the Syriac language. The corpus of Syriac hagiography comprises texts that were composed originally in Syriac as well as translations from other languages of the late antique world, including Greek (Brock, 2008; Brakke, 1994; Draguet, 1980). Syriac hagiography developed in the context of the liturgy and alongside cults to local saints, and vignettes of holy persons would be read on their feast days (Taylor, 2012).

Syrian monks produced and translated many of the texts that survive today, and an interest in monasticism and asceticism is an outstanding feature of Syriac hagiography. Many Syriac hagiographic texts honor monastic saints and connect these heroes to the foundations of particular monasteries (Debié 2012). The monasteries of Tur

Abdin (a region in South-east Turkey and center of the Syrian Orthodox world) produced important hagiographic cycles on their founders (Palmer, 1990), and later hagiography that comes from this region also gives us important evidence about the encounters of Christians and Muslims in the early days of Islam. For example, the Life of Theodute of Amida (d. 698), a seventh-century Miaphysite bishop of Amid, vividly describes the saint's interactions with Muslims and Muslim authorities (Tannous 2012 and Penn 2015).

Syriac hagiography has a rich manuscript tradition, with major collections now in Berlin, London, Paris, and the Vatican (Bingelli 2012b). The oldest extant Christian manuscript, BL Add. 12150, is dated to 411 CE and was produced in Edessa (Bingelli 2012b; Wright 1871, II). It contains a list of names and dates for the commemoration of western martyrs, together with a list of Persian martyrs and their feast days.

The critical study of Syriac hagiography began when Assemani published the *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum orientalium et occidentalium* in 1748, a collection of Syriac hagiographic texts from the Vatican library (Bingelli, 2012a). Paul Bedjan (d. 1920), a Chaldean Catholic from Iran, later published a seven-volume series of saints' lives in the Syriac language, titled *Acta Martyrum et sanctorum syriace (AMS)*. Through the efforts of orientalist François Nau in the 1910s and E. W. Brooks in the 1920s, many Syriac saints' lives were published in *Patrologia Orientalis* and *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*. Paul Peeters produced the *Bibliotheca hagiographica orientalis (BHO)* in 1910, which contained an annotated index of saints' lives and manuscripts from the Oriental linguistic traditions.

J.-M. Fiey wrote an important guide to the Syriac saints, *Saints syriaques*, published posthumously (Fiey 2004). His book lists about 400 saints from the West and East Syriac traditions, including modern saints. *Saints syriaques* is organized according to holy person rather than hagiographic text, and Fiey provides a brief description of each saint along with pertinent primary and secondary material. It is therefore a natural starting point for scholars interested in Syriac hagiography.

Many hagiographic texts that have been edited and translated are available in non-encoded PDF-form through a website (<http://syri.ac/>) hosted at the University of Oklahoma: *Syri.ac: An Annotated Bibliography of Syriac Resources Online* (Johnson and Tannous 2015). Sergey Minov of Oxford University and Hebrew University has also

built an important on-line bibliography for Syriac studies: *A Comprehensive Bibliography on Syriac Christianity* (<http://www.csc.huji.ac.il> (Minov, 2015)).

The Syriac Reference Portal (Syriaca.org) has created a two-volume database entitled *The Gateway to the Syriac Saints*, an open-access digital research portal for the study of Syriac saints and hagiographic texts. Before turning to discuss this project, we will examine different types of Syriac texts that describe, commemorate, or memorialize saints for communal veneration. Through analyzing a few of these texts in more detail, we will show the necessity of creating research tools to advance research on this genre. Readers already familiar with hagiography and Syriac literature may choose to pass over the next section.

Saints and their Lives in the Syriac Tradition

Syriac hagiographic literature teaches us a great deal about the culture, ideals, religious beliefs, and practices of Christians in the ancient Middle East. Its literary roots are found in the apostolic *Acts* narratives: apocryphal legends about the followers of Jesus. These texts were mirrored on the structure of the canonical *Acts of the Apostles*. The themes and patterns for depicting holy people that are found in these “Christian novels” reappear in hagiography.

The *Acts of Thomas* is an apostolic narrative that describes the conversion of kingdoms in northern India through the preaching and miracle-working of the apostle Thomas (Klijn 1962; Bremmer 2001; Saint-Laurent 2015), and it was an important text of early Syriac literature. Thomas is commissioned to travel and convert the kingdoms of India, and after travelling with merchants he becomes an apostle not just for the Christians of India but also for many of the Syriac-speaking communities east of the Euphrates. The story reads like an adventure novel, with cities overturned by the introduction of the Christian religion. Although the *Acts of Thomas* was probably originally written in Greek (Drijvers, 1963), it was immediately translated into Syriac, and it became a popular text among varieties of Syriac Christian communities. The story elevates the role of ascetic practice (sexual renunciation, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, care of the poor), healing miracles, imprisonment, and martyrdom, and these motifs become

symbols of holiness in many later Syriac hagiographies, like those of Simeon the Stylite, the *Man of God*, and *Behnam and Sara*.

Hagiography is an important source for understanding how communities understood themselves and idealized their past. The mythologization of the origins of Syriac Christianity can be better understood, for example, through studying the missionary hagiographies. Many of these stories included figures of kings and emperors, queens and empresses, both Christian and non-Christian, and the introduction of these characters let hagiographers imaginatively rethink and rewrite their community's posture vis-à-vis the ruler of the land (Debié 2012; Saint-Laurent 2015). Conversion of cities began with the conversion of the monarch.

The apostolic narrative that describes the conversion of Edessa (urban center of the Syriac-speaking world), the *Teaching of Addai*, was compiled in the fifth century by Orthodox Christians to show the purity of their city's Christian lineage, which stretched back to the time of Jesus through the apostle Addai, missionary to Edessa (Phillips 1876; Howard 1981). Addai, in turn, sent the apostle Mari to convert Persia, and Sasanian Christians crafted a story about Mar (Saint) Mari, the *Acts of Mari*, to show their orthodox heritage (Harrak 2005). Later Sasanian Christian and Manichean traditions even imagined that the Zoroastrian shah himself converted to Christianity (Schilling 2008) or Manichaeism (Dilley 2014).

Syrians wrote not just prose but also verse to commemorate saints, and hagiographic verse enriches the portraits of the saints as found in their *Lives*. There are two main categories of verse in Syriac literature: metrical verse homilies called *memre* (*memra*, sing.) and liturgical hymns known as *madrashé* (*madrasha*, sing.). *Memre* and *madrashé* show how stories about saints were retold in new literary forms for liturgical purposes.

Sebastian Brock has written an important article in which he expounds on the various types of hagiographic *memre* in Syriac literature (Brock 2012). He explains that the genre of Syriac hagiographic *memre* comprises several forms, ranging from verse homilies rich in narrative details to those that are largely panegyric. They are important sources for the creation and diffusion of saints' portraits in Syriac religious memory. Different stories and hymns on the saints can offer a variety of images of the same

person, as the author or community exaggerates and embellishes his hagiographic portrait according to his agenda.

Jacob of Serugh, an important Syriac theologian-poet from the sixth century, wrote many hagiographic *memre*. One example is his *memra* on St. Ephrem the Syrian (PO 47), the celebrated theologian-poet of the Syriac tradition. Jacob praises Ephrem for his ministry, particularly in leading women's choirs. The portrait of Ephrem that Jacob presents in his homily contrasts with the one presented in the hagiographic *Life* or *Vita* of Ephrem. In his *Vita* tradition, Ephrem is clothed in the garb of a Byzantine monk, although he was a Syriac-speaking homilist and hymnist in the service of the urban church (Amar 2011).

Memre are also imaginative expansions (or exegeses) on earlier hagiographic texts (Brock 2012). Jacob of Serugh, for example, composed a verse homily on the forty martyrs of Sebaste (*AMS* VI, 663-673), and it is clear that he used a Syriac translation of the Greek hagiography on these saints to compose his verse (Brock 2012). Jacob also wrote hagiographic *memre* with the characteristics of panegyric, as exemplified in his *memra* on Sts. Sergius and Bacchus (*AMS* VI, 650-661 (Brock 2012)). In these the narrative element is not as strong. Instead, the homily contains general praise for the virtues of the saint or saints. Other panegyric *memre* in Syriac borrow rhetorical elements and schema from the Greek encomium (Brock 2012).

Madrashé, in contrast to *memre*, are poetic hymns sung antiphonally in the context of the Syriac liturgy. Hagiographic *madrashé* are found in the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox or Maronite) *Fenquitho*, a collection hymns for Sundays and feast days (Brock 2012). Ephrem the Syrian perfected the Syriac *madrashé*. Many of Ephrem's *madrashé* commemorate saints, as demonstrated in his cycle of hymns known as the *Hymns on Nisibis*. This collection contains *madrashé* on Sts. Abraham Qidunaya and Julian Saba (Griffith 1994; Brock 2012).

Syriac poets also composed a type of *madrasha* called the dialogue poem or *sogita*, which features disputes between characters, sometimes saints, who antiphonally debate matters with each other. These debate poems show the intersection of hagiography and exegesis. Sebastian Brock has edited and translated a *sogita* that featured a debate between Saint Marina - an ascetic who lived in a monastery disguised as a male monk -

and Satan (Brock 2008a). Many other such hagiographic dialogue poems have yet to be published.

The majority of hagiographic materials, however, are saints' *Lives* and short episodic vignettes contained within larger hagiographic collections. In 360, Athanasius of Alexandria composed the first extended hagiographic narrative in Greek, *The Life of Antony of Egypt* (*βίος καὶ πολιτεία*; PG 26: 835-936). This text became a "best-seller" in the late antique world, and its form was canonized as the literary exemplar for describing the life of a saint. It was translated into several ancient languages, including Syriac. Subsequent late antique hagiographers imitated Athanasius' narrative structure, which depicted: 1) the saint's childhood; 2) conversion; 3) asceticism; 4) miracles; 5) extraordinary death; 6) communal commemoration (Insley and Saint-Laurent forthcoming 2017).

Syriac hagiography is an important source for shedding light on the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries. In the sixth century, Syriac-speaking Miaphysites (dissidents from the Council of Chalcedon) composed hagiography about those who became leaders of the nascent Syrian Orthodox church. One of the most important collections of Syriac hagiographic texts is John of Ephesus's *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (John of Ephesus, trans. Brooks 1923-25; Harvey 1990; Saint-Laurent 2015). His stories commemorate ascetics who lived in northern Mesopotamia, in monasteries near the city of Amida.³ John's collection of hagiography is also an important source for understanding the relationships between Chalcedonians and their opponents.

Like Greek and Latin hagiography, the Syriac hagiographic corpus contains a large number of stories about martyrs: men and women who are commemorated for dying for the Christian faith. Syriac martyr *Passions* comprise an important part of the corpus of Syriac hagiography. These stories feature an account of the saint's virtue, arrest, dialogue with a judge, torture, death, burial and distribution or enshrining of relics. Some Syriac martyr texts describe events that happened within the Roman Empire, and many of these stories are set during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. Examples of Syriac martyr passions include the *Life of Febronia of Nisibis* and the stories of the Edessan martyrs.

The *Life of Febronia* (AMS V, 573-615; Brock and Harvey 1998; Saint-Laurent 2012) is a hagiography that describes the life of a monastic scholar, Febronia. She lives in community with her fellow nuns in the city of Nisibis (modern-day Nusaybin, Turkey). Her beauty attracts the attention of Roman guards, who have come to persecute Christians and convince them to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Febronia refuses the sexual advances of the Roman senators, and she is tortured and killed. A cult to Febronia develops and spreads from Nisibis to Constantinople and even to Sicily. The city of Edessa also promoted local martyr traditions around which cultic devotions grew. These Edessan martyr stories include the *Martyrdom of Shmona, Guria, and Habib* and the *Acts of Sharbel, Babai, and Barsamya* (Burkitt 1913; rep. 2007). Syriac martyr passions identified martyrdom as betrothal to Christ (Brock and Harvey 1998, 9).

The Acts of the Persian Martyrs is a body of largely understudied hagiographic texts from the East Syriac tradition that flourished in modern-day Iran and Iraq (Brock 2009; Smith 2014). These texts are important literary artifacts from Christians living under Sasanian rule, and they make up a large section of the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* database of Syriac hagiographic literature. The account of the martyrdom of Simeon bar Shabba, for example, is one of the longest late antique Christian narratives in any language (Smith 2014). More than two thirds of the Persian martyr *Acts* were set in the reign of Shah Shapur II (d. 379), remembered as a time of great trial and conflict (Smith 2014). Many of the Persian martyr texts, although set in the fourth century, were written several centuries later. The story of the *Martyrs of Mount Ber'ain*, for example, was written in the seventh century, but situated in 318/9, at the start of Shapur II's reign (Smith 2014; Brock and Dilley 2015). Some stories, although vital to East Syrian Christian memory, might have been purely fictive (Smith 2012), as is true of hagiographical literature from other linguistic traditions.

Syriac-speaking Christians shaped their hagiographic tales according to models and ideals of holiness that were particular to their own anxieties, theological and political values, and even geography. Scholars of late antiquity can discover features and idioms particular to Syriac hagiography by comparing Syriac sacred stories to their counterparts from the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds. Much can also be learned by studying and contrasting different versions of a single saint's life that circulated in different eras.

Often, later versions of a saint's life will reflect the community's higher elevation of the saint described in the text. The hagiographic traditions of Jacob Baradaeus (an important sixth-century missionary bishop of the Syrian Orthodox tradition) reflect this phenomenon: his later *Vita* transforms Jacob into a superhuman hero with divine powers (Saint-Laurent 2015).

Literary similarities among hagiographic texts are apparent even to a casual reader, and they are not coincidental. Hagiographers imitated the motifs, themes, and narrative structure found in biblical stories, other hagiographies, and even stories and myths from non-Christian precedents (Greek, Latin, Mesopotamian, or Iranian). Conventions for depicting different types of saints and motifs for demonstrating their divine authority were transmitted and canonized. Hagiographers took these patterns and reshaped them according to their individual interests, impressing their stories with the marks of their own culture, community, and ideological agendas. In this way, they crafted new stories adorned with literary relics or *spolia* from earlier texts. Late antique hagiography is therefore a fertile ground to study ancient translation history and theory. For instance, the Syriac version of Athanasius's *Life* of St. Antony shares many features with the Greek account, but the symbols of holiness that the story used to describe St. Antony are distinctly Syrian.

Some hagiographies also contain historical tidbits to teach us about daily life or religious practices of a particular region or era. Hagiographic tales from the Syriac milieu are vital literary artifacts that speak of a Semitic culture at the crossroads between East and West, between Byzantium and Persia. The corpus of Syriac hagiography, therefore, offers important insights into the literary and religious history of Christianity in the Middle East.

New Digital Resources: Gateway to the Syriac Saints

At this juncture, it should be apparent that Syriac hagiography represents a dynamic sub-field within late antique literature. In the past twenty years, scholars have shown a greater interest in producing critical editions and translations of Syriac hagiographic texts, but many remain unknown or unavailable to non-specialists. While print guides

and bibliographies provide a starting point for study, they do not reveal connections and relationships among saints and their lives. It is our claim that digital tools can be an immeasurable help in illuminating these links among texts, authors, and communities.

Syriaca.org has created a two-volume database on persons and hagiographic texts entitled the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* (Saint-Laurent and Michelson, forthcoming 2015). Through linking data on saints, hagiographers, and the locations and texts associated with them, our database can generate new knowledge for scholars and show both the interconnected similarities as well as the unique traits of these saints. Each volume is organized around a different element, with the first focusing on persons (saints) and the second on works (texts about them). Both volumes are also part of larger databases within Syriaca.org, on “Syriac Persons” and “Syriac Works” respectively. We have not created two data models for each of these volumes, but rather we are using two existing data models. For persons, we are using our own adaptation of TEI module 13 (Names, Dates, People, Places). For works, we are using an adaptation by LAWDI (Linked Ancient World Data Institute) of FRBR (<http://www.loc.gov/cds/downloads/FRBR.PDF>).

We have encoded our data in TEI-XML (Text Encoding Initiative, <http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml>). The TEI is a consortium in the field of digital humanities that has developed standards for encoding texts. The hierarchical nature of TEI has its limits when it comes to encoding data from pre-modern texts, but we have found that TEI-XML works well for translating our text-based data into a machine-readable form that can be accessed by other databases and institutions. We have used TEI for both our data and metadata, and we have created our own schema for this data. One can find this here: <https://github.com/srophe/srophe-eXist-app/tree/master/srophe-app>.

We have released our data under a Creative Commons license (CC-BY, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This allows for the copying and redistributing of data, metadata, and schemas in any format, and it also permits our users to adapt, reuse, and build upon our material. That is especially important to us, since the reuse and development of our data by other projects ensures that our work will have an afterlife beyond our individual project. The only thing required of the user is to give appropriate credit to our work and to specify if he or she makes changes to the data. CC-

BY thus allows for the free use of and access to our data, while requiring users to attribute our data citation back to us, since citation and provenance are key foundations to good scholarship and the production of new knowledge.

The *Gateway* database that we have created constitutes a linked social network of Syriac saints and their stories, joining the persons commemorated in Syriac tradition with the lives that described them, the communities and locations that venerated them, and the manuscript traditions that preserved and transmitted them. Entries in the database have been issued Uniform Resource Identifiers (URIs) so that other libraries or databases can interact with our data and link their databases to ours. Such sharing and open-access is vital to our project. We have created our own URIs based on the best practices developed by New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in their Linked Ancient World Data Institute (Elliot, Heath, and Muccigrosso 2014, eds.).

In order to solve the issue of search and display, syriaca.org has used eXist-db. Members of the Syriaca.org research and editing team, Nathan Gibson, Winona Salesky, and David Michelson, have recently expounded on the utility of eXist-db at a symposium on Cultural Heritage Markup:

eXist-db provides a native XML database, for storing, processing and searching our TEI files. eXist-db provides a number of configurable indexing methods for searching XML documents, including a full text search backed by the [Apache Lucene](#) search framework. An advantage to using Lucene for full text searching is the level of control it can give to the developer through a wide variety of available text analyzers. Lucene also allows for the creation of custom analyzers as needed, as well as customizable weighting of elements in the index. In eXist-db multiple analyzers may be defined and used with different indexes. (Gibson, Salesky, and Michelson 2015)

The first volume of the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints, Qadishe* or “saints” in Syriac, is organized around Syriac holy *persons*. Each individual saint has his or her own entry. *Qadishe* contains biographical and historical information about these persons. Saints are listed by name and arranged alphabetically in English and Syriac. Entries are tagged

according to hagiographic topoi and motifs. In this volume, we have included any persons venerated in the Syriac tradition, and we have not distinguished between “historically verified” persons and “fictive” persons. Our starting point for collecting data was J. M. Fiey’s *Saints syriaques* (2004), which has 470 entries.

Under each individual entry, we have listed the saint’s name in Syriac and Roman transliterated script, as well as English and French. We have also written a brief abstract about the person. We included primary and secondary literature on him or her, as well as his or her birth, death, or *floruit* dates when known. We identify and list persons associated with the saint. Information on the saint is searchable by the person’s name or by the era in which he or she lived. We have also linked any references to place names associated with this person to *The Syriac Gazetteer*, a geographic database within Syriaca.org listing settlements and locations relevant to the Syriac world. Some of the saints in *Qadishe* are native to the Syriac tradition, whereas others were “imported” into Syriac from other linguistic traditions, including Greek. If they have been granted a religious commemoration (whether in text or liturgy) in the Syriac heritage, they are included in *Qadishe*. *Qadishe* includes saints whose lives have been edited, minor saints referenced in the lives of other saints, and saints who receive commemoration in liturgical calendars. The names of those saints whose lives have not yet been edited are included in *Qadishe*, but the descriptions describing these persons are not yet developed.

Qadishe shows scholars that hagiographic literature contains fertile areas in which to discover connections (sometimes fictive) between saints themselves or between saints and the communities and monasteries they symbolized. It is precisely this interconnected nature of Syriac hagiography that makes it so amenable to TEI encoding and linked data. Hagiographers created relationships among saints to promote their communities’ prestige, antiquity, and orthodoxy, or to affiliate their monasteries with others in both the Syriac-speaking world and Egypt. Syriac hagiographic traditions, for example, attribute the founding of many monasteries in Mesopotamia to disciples of the legendary ascetic, Mar (Saint) Awgin (*AMS* III: 376-480). Awgin was a pearl diver from Clysma (in Egypt) who became a monk in the monastery of Pachomius. Awgin and some disciples left Egypt and built monasteries throughout Mesopotamia. This imagined link between the monks of Egypt and Mesopotamia was mythologized in hagiographies describing founders who

traced their roots to Awgin (Insley and Saint-Laurent, forthcoming 2017). Some of these include: Sts. Aaron of Serug, Abraham of Beth Şayyare the Penitent, Benjamin, Dodo, Daniel the Doctor, Mar Eulogius, Mar Ezekiel, Isaiah of Aleppo, and John the Arab (Fiey 2004; Nau 1913, 1914, and 1917). *Qadishe* can generate a list of these “children of Awgin” quickly, enabling scholars to study more closely the links between these stories and monastic communities that wrote them.

The second database contained within the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* is entitled the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica* or *BHSE*. The *BHSE* is organized around literary works, specifically Syriac saints’ *Lives* or *vitae*. This database is a project inherited from Fr. Ugo Zanetti and his student Dr. Claude Detienne, the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca*. In the 1990s, they collated data pertaining to over 1800 texts on saints from the Syriac tradition along with the incipit, desinit, and other parts of these texts (Zanetti 1993). They also gathered information on the manuscripts that contain these hagiographic works as well as secondary literature on them. The project was done according to the rigorous model of hagiographic cataloguing established by the Société des Bollandistes, who produced the *Bibliotheca hagiographica orientalis* (Peeters 1910).

Fr. Zanetti and Dr. Detienne generously passed on their work to Syriaca.org, and we have updated and developed their data into the *BHSE*. We have encoded their data in TEI, so that titles, manuscript references, and bibliography (primary and secondary) can be searchable and linkable with any other databases and library catalogues. This will allow scholars to find new hagiographies to be edited and translated, as well as give scholars insights into the popularity and circulation of these stories in antiquity. It also helps scholars to study the cult of an individual saint. In some cases, for instance, several *Lives* or *memre* may exist on a single saint who enjoyed particular popularity. Our database enables scholars to see the relationships between these texts and see how the portraits of a single saint can vary greatly from text to text. Because the data will be linked to other modules in Syriaca.org, like manuscripts and place names, scholars can quickly find information about multiple aspects of the stories.

The *BHSE* includes texts written on both saints and biblical characters that were memorialized in hagiographies, homilies, or hymns. A scholar may be interested, for example, in the homilies and hagiographic poems about Mary, Mother of God. Through

our searchable database, the scholar would quickly find four major Syriac authors, Ephrem, Severus, Narsai, and Jacob of Serug, who produced one or more hymns or homilies on Mary. The scholar could then see which have been edited, translated or published. Depending on the interests of the scholar, such searching could lead to the production of a new edition or a comparative study of Mariology in the Syriac tradition. With increased digitizing of manuscripts from major library collections throughout the world, together with open access to our data and the free sharing of our code, our project can benefit scholars worldwide, even those who are far from a major library or research center.

Thus, we hope that Syriaca.org's databases will make contributions both to the study of Christianity in Late Antiquity as well as Syriac Studies more broadly defined. There is at present no digital or print tool that brings together so many different aspects of Syriac saints and hagiography in one place, with free and open access. We anticipate that this will be a helpful pedagogical tool for teachers to show students (through visualizations) the networks among ancient peoples and places in the Syriac world, many of whom were connected by real or imagined lineages delineated in hagiographic texts.

Following is a summary of the contents of *Qadishe* and *BHSE*:

- 1) Holy persons venerated in the Syriac tradition, their lives, dates, friends, associates, and outstanding traits.
- 2) Syriac Hagiographic texts: apocryphal narratives, *Lives*, hagiographic hymns and homilies, and shorter hagiographic vignettes.
- 3) Short excerpts from the saints' lives or hymns and homilies on these saints.
- 4) Bibliography on critical editions of texts when these have been produced.
- 5) Ancient translations of hagiographic texts that were originally written in other languages of antiquity, like Greek and Armenian.
- 6) Translations of these texts into modern languages.
- 7) Manuscript information linked to Syriaca.org's *Digital Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Library* and *A Union Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts* and *E-Ktobe*, a French database of Syriac manuscripts. The data model for the manuscripts is "msdescription", module 10 of the TEI (<http://www.tei->

c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/MS.html), based on a modified version of a TEI schema developed by Elena Pierazzo for Arabic manuscripts as part of Fihrist (<http://www.fihrist.org.uk/about>) with some changes to make the schema conform to Syriac description.

- 8) Geographic data on the places associated with the saints or the production of their lives, linked to Syriaca.org's *Syriac Gazetteer*. In later stages of our project, users will be able to visualize geographic networks with the Gazetteer.

For sample entries from this database, please see our development server:

<http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/q/index.html> .

Concluding Remarks

It has become a commonplace for scholars in Syriac studies to note how much work in our field remains to be done. Research *desiderata* range from historical investigations to raw philological and text critical work on unpublished or unedited texts. Translations of these edited works into modern languages will help scholars to integrate Syriac material into their research and courses. As Sebastian Brock noted in 2008, hagiographic material remains a “little tapped” resource (Brock 2008b). Syriaca.org's *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* will provide a research tool for scholars and students to see at a glance what work remains to be done to advance our field. Indeed, data in the *BHSE* suggests that approximately 500 hagiographic texts on saints have never even been edited. Of those that have been edited, many have not been translated into a modern language. Thus Syriac scholars interested in hagiography need not suffer from a lack of new material to explore. Because our database will be “community-built,” editors and users will be able to make suggestions, corrections, and updates pertaining to our data on an on-going basis, ensuring “quality control.”

Finally, we would be remiss if we were not to mention the relevance of our database for the preservation of the Syriac heritage, whose modern-day descendants, churches, and artifacts face ongoing risks of persecution or destruction on account of wars in the Middle East, including aggression against Christians. Groups like ISIS are

harming and driving people out of areas (like Northern Iraq) that are important centers for Syriac-speaking Christianity. The artifacts of the modern Syriac churches, both literary and architectural, are under tremendous threat of destruction. Syriaca.org, therefore, has a further obligation, as we see it, to use the work, scholarship and technology behind our database to preserve the endangered heritage of the Syriac Christians.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to David Michelson for assistance in editing this paper. I am grateful especially to Winona Salesky for her outstanding programming work that has made the *Gateway to the Syriac Saints* possible. Finally, we are grateful to Fr. Ugo Zanetti and Claude Detienne for the data from the *BHS* that they have entrusted to syriaca.org.

² The major branches include the Syrian Orthodox, the Syrian Catholics, the Maronites, the Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholics, the Syrian Malankara Church of India, and the Malabar Catholics.

³ Because of aggression from Chalcedonian bishops, Miaphysite (Syrian Orthodox) monks and bishops had to ordain new leaders for their communities throughout Mesopotamia and Syria. John commemorated these ascetic heroes and heroines in his collection, with noteworthy lives of John of Tella, Jacob Baradaeus, Simeon of Beth Arsham, and John of Hephastopolis. Amida is modern-day Diyarbakir in South-east Turkey.

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