



وزارة التراث والبحوث
KING ABDULAZIZ FOUNDATION
FOR RESEARCH AND ARCHIVES



Syriac Sources for the History and Civilization of the Arabs and Arabia

Cover Map:

The northern Arabian Peninsula and the Crescent Fertile

Fisher, Greg. *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 65.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

PREFACE

As a part of its continuous interest in studying and documenting the sources of the history and civilization of the Arabs and Arabia, the King Abdulaziz Foundation (*ad-Darah*) has inaugurated a new phase of collecting and translating non-Arabic sources by launching a new project “*Syriac Sources for the History and Civilization of the Arabs and Arabia*” which provides a qualitative contribution to the sources of the history and civilization of the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabs. Because *ad-Darah* is keen on producing a work of high standards, it has decided to delegate supervision of this project to a scholarly team that is composed of a number of researchers and specialists in Syriac literature and the ancient and Islamic history of Arabia. The aim of appointing a scholarly team drawn from different disciplines is to create a database that is not limited to texts translated into Arabic only, but also goes beyond that to study and provide these texts in the original Syriac language and with English translations.

INTRODUCTION TO SYRIAC SOURCES

Syriac has been widely known as the language of religion, culture, and writing in the Fertile Crescent (Greater Syria and Mesopotamia) since the 2nd century CE. It appears to be a natural evolution of an older Semitic language, namely Aramaic. Since then, Syriac writing flourished in religion, philosophy, medicine, literature, philology and grammar. History was also presented in several types of writings such as chronicles, ecclesiastical Histories, hagiography and so on.

The lack of a definite date for the beginning of historical writing in Syriac prompted some scholars to suggest the early 6th century CE as an approximate date, whether by taking the Chronicle of Edessa or the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite as the first Syriac historical work. However, the scattered historical data that can be gleaned from the early writings of Bardesan, Ephrem the Syrian, Mar Narsai and Jacob of Sarug indicates that historical writing went through more than one stage of development since the 3rd century CE before becoming independent in the 6th century with the emergence of Syriac historians such as John of Ephesus, Joshua the Stylite, Zacharias of Mytilene, and Simeon of Beth Arsham. Two periods witnessed great development and flourishing of historical writing in Syriac; the first one was between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE, and the second lasted from the 12th to the 13th centuries CE, especially under the Islamic Arab rule, which provided it with a great deal of tolerance, freedom, and security.



Family Portrait Mosaic from Edessa, probably second or early third century.

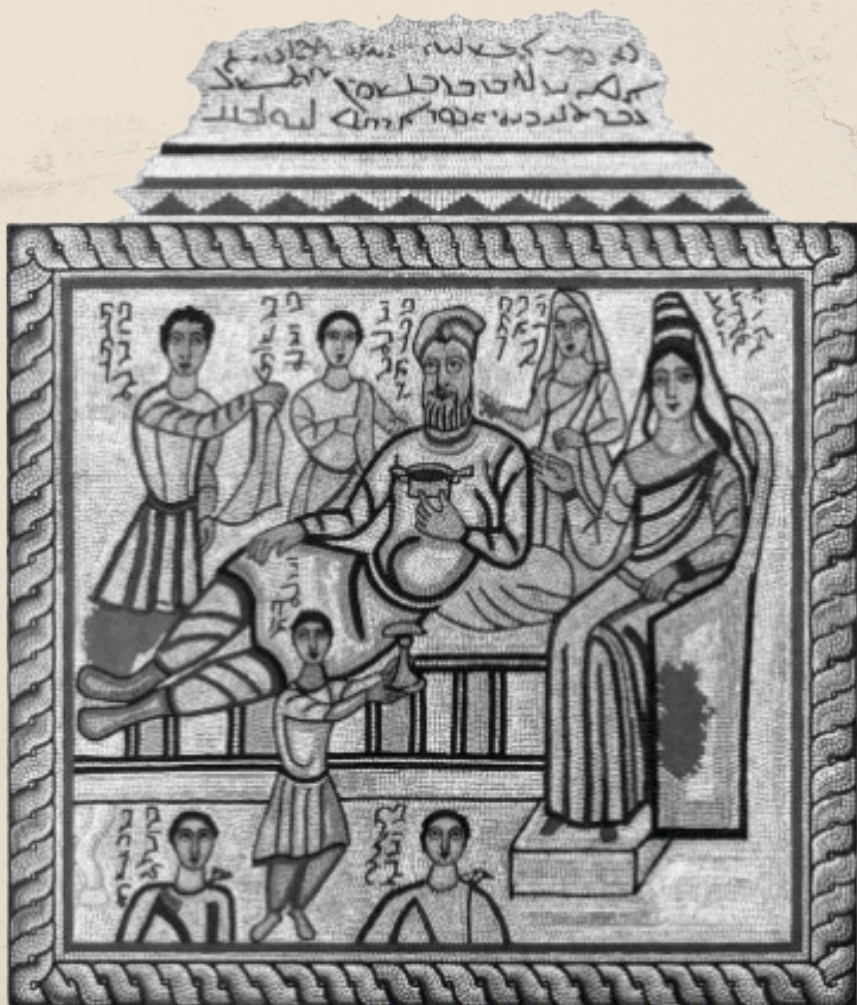
Debié, Muriel, "The Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity", *Syriac World* p. 13.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SYRIAC SOURCES

The Syriac-speaking people are considered the people most closely related to the Arabs due to their geographical location and their Semitic roots. Accordingly, they were very interested in writing about Arab religious, economic, political, and social history. Moreover, Syriac sources recorded valuable details about Arab ethnic origins, their religious life during the pre-Islamic period, and some of their economic activities, as well as some geographical information about Arabia.

These sources are also replete with important and valuable information about the Ghassanid and Lakhmid kingdoms, the tribes of northern Arabia bordering Syria and Mesopotamia, their relations with the Syriac communities, the Sasanid and Byzantine empires, and the Christianization of some tribes in eastern and central Arabia. The Syriac-speaking people also paid great attention to writing about the persecution of the Christians of Najran (the Ḥimyarite Christians), and the conflict between Abyssinia and Ḥimyar.

Since the 7th century CE, Syriac sources have provided us with important information about Arabia at the time of the rise of Islam, its most important cities and ports at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad - peace be upon him- and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, as well as valuable details about the Islamic conquests and the attitudes of the Syriac Christian communities (Nestorians, Jacobites, and Melkites) towards them, and the policy of the Arab conquerors towards the conquered areas. These sources also contain some valuable texts about the relationship of the Umayyads and the Abbasids with the church, religious rituals, social traditions, religious dialogue between Christianity and Islam, and the conditions of Christian communities under Muslim rule.



The Funerary Couch Mosaic, Edessa dated 278 CE.

Debié, *The Eastern Provinces*, p. 14.

INTEREST IN SYRIAC SOURCES

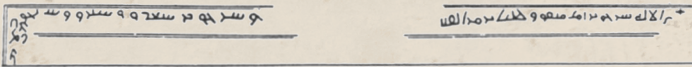
Syriac literature has received great attention in the West for a long time, which has resulted in many publications; collections of sources, editions, translations, as well as many studies that reflect a Western point of view of Arab history in the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. A number of Western presses have published several of the original Syriac texts, edited and translated, in source collections such as the *Patrologia Orientalis* and the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* of Giuseppe Simone Assemani, or series such as *Translated Texts for Historians*, published by the Liverpool University Press, and the *Syriac Studies Library*, published by Gorgias Press.

On the other hand, such literature has been absent from most modern Arabic studies, with a few exceptions led by Louis Sheikho and Jawād 'Alī. Interest in citing Syriac sources in the study of Islamic history began late, with only a few works that appear to be descriptive rather than critical.

Despite the interest of contemporary Syriac communities in translating their literature into Arabic, as well as the attention given by some scholarly institutions in the Arab world such as the Syriac Language Department at the Iraqi Academy of Sciences (formerly Syriac Language Academy) and Dar al-Mashriq Press, only a few works of Syriac literature have been translated. Many of these translations are marred by major errors in titles, authors, and text and the like, in addition to the lack of interest in explaining the terms of the main text.



(a)



(b)

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
 و سیرة ی سحر و سحر و سحر و سحر

Zebed Inscription: A Pre-Islamic Trilingual Inscription in Greek, Syriac & Arabic From 512 CE.

The inscription text: “With the help of God, Sergius, son of Amat Manaf, and Tobi, son of Imru’l-qais and Sergius, son of Sa’d, and Sitr, and Shouraih...”.

<https://www.islamic-awareness.org/history/islam/inscriptions/zebed.html>

THE PROJECT'S CONCEPT

The current project consists of several stages that will begin by collecting the sources of Syriac literature, followed by the extraction of texts that are directly related to the history of the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabs, and Islamic history from the 3rd to the 13th centuries CE, such as the *Chronicle of Zacharias of Mytilene*, the *Chronicle of John of Ephesus*, the *Book of the Himyarites*, *The History of Thomas the Presbyter*, the *Short Chronicle*, and *A Summery History of the World* By John bar Penkaye and many others.

This will be followed by the creation of a database to include the following:

- The original texts with their Arabic and English translations.
- A complete study with an introduction to each source, including the author, his era, and the importance of the source.
- A comment on the terms contained in the main text.
- Indexes (places, peoples, tribes, etc.).
- Appendices (maps, tables of terms, etc.).



The page cover of the manuscript of the *Ktâbâ d-rêš mellê* (OR Summary history of the world) by John bar Penkāyē.

The text reads: “With the help of Our Lord (= God)...we are beginning to write the Book of Events, a history of this word...which was composed by the holy saint John son of Penkāyē “.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Syriacque 405.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105263125?rk=21459;2&lang=EN>

TIMELINE

The duration of the project is 36 months, starting from the date of formation of the scholarly team and ending with the completion of all project requirements.

THE COMMITTEE

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