THE SYRIAC WORLD REDISCOVERED

Interview with Peter Brown, 2011 Balzan Prizewinner for Ancient History (Graeco-Roman world) and David Michelson, project leader of Syriaca.org, by Susannah Gold, Balzan press office advisor – USA
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Susannah Gold: Fruit of a meticulous interdisciplinary work, Syriaca. org portal is the cornerstone upon which Peter Brown's Balzan research project entitled «Figures in a Landscape» has been built.

The project seems to have been an enormous undertaking. All of the details, languages and cultures that had to be investigated together with the geographical scope of the work is most impressive. How did you organize the team?

Peter Brown: We were very fortunate indeed. I had a wonderful cohort of graduate students, among them Professor Michelson who was one of the leading members. There was real excitement among the students for the project who were much more connected to the idea of using the Internet and all of its capabilities and devices. Thanks to the Internet we could think large. We were dealing with Syriac culture, one of the international languages throughout Asia in ancient and medieval times. It was wonderful to be able to have a team of students, looking at the topic in Syria but also in Western China and Central Asia and Iran and Iraq. They were all keen for the subject and we finally had the means to bring the project all together.

David Michelson: The charge we got from Professor Brown was to build a reference work for an entire culture. This was what became **Syriaca.org.** One of the goals was to get a group together who had wide-ranging expertise. Later Roman social history, the history of Christianity, Islamic history, Syriac culture under the Mongol empire and other topics. A wide range of expertise is covered and that is evidence of the kinds of collaboration that are possible thanks to the Internet. We have weekly editorial meetings online via Skype. We have long-distance collaborators throughout the globe. At present, we have five in the U.S. and one in Germany. We use other tools

in addition to Skype including Google docs and a Silicon Valley tool called Github. Editing tool.

S.G.: *Figures in a Landscape* is quite an interdisciplinary work and is a great example of what the Balzan Prize wants to see in its research projects. Professor Brown's influence on this project is clear. Who are the other researchers who are leaving their mark on the Syriaca project?

P.B.: Dave Michelson is the real one who brought the group together. Some of the others were my students Professor **Thomas Carlson**, now at Oklahoma State University and Professor **Dan Schwartz** now at Texas A&M University, who are both in this same field. One of the great changes in academic life is there is now a very high level of interaction between graduates within the same field. This is particularly true in a new field such as Syriac culture. It's much like scientists who feel they are on the cutting edge of something and therefore it is easy to recruit helpers.

D.M.: One thing that brought us together was the opportunity to reconsider pre-existing scholarship in the field. When writing a print book, such as a catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum, for example, once it is printed it is already out of date because of new research that wasn't included. We wanted to use this project to reconceive how to create historical reference works. Because databases require precision, we had to rethink basic assumptions in the field. This meant bringing together many people with different expertise such as Prof. **Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent** of Marquette University, who co-directed **Qadishe: A Guide to the Syriac Saints**, and the **Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica**. Prof. **Daniel Schwartz** who brought the technical support of Texas A&M's IDHMC center and has taken the reigns to direct the project into its next phase; Prof. **Thomas Carlson** who served as the first postdoc on the project as co-creator of **The Syriac Gazetteer**; Dr. **Nathan Gibson**, Vanderbilt University, is the current postdoc on the project and co-editor for **A Guide to Syriac Authors and the New Handbook of Syriac Literature**; and our digital librarian and software developer, Winona Salesky, who brought previous experience working for The Library of Congress and other major libraries. We were also grateful to many colleagues who contributed data, including **Ugo Zanetti** and **Claude Detienne**.

S.G.: For those who don't work in this field, Syriac culture will not be familiar. They will not understand how that culture bears so heavily on the religious and cultural history of the three great monotheistic religions of

the West. What are the advantages and disadvantages for a historian of immersing oneself in this kind of cultural study?

P.B.: There is enormous enjoyment in that we are a small group who are making advances. Professor Michelson has developed the tools that make us fully realize that Syriac has left a huge legacy. Piles of manuscripts exist in Egypt, Northern Iraq and Europe. These original manuscripts have barely been touched which is very different when compared with manuscripts in Latin and Greek. There is an entire third voice of the ancient Christian church. Scholars recently found in a monastery in Egypt a whole room of unseen documents. It is the equivalent of opening an Egyptian Pharaoh's tomb.

D.M.: When I first wrote the proposal for a database it was as a conference paper I gave in 2006 when I was still a graduate student (many of the people who were at the graduate conference are now working on the project). At the time, I wanted to give an idea of how many Syriac manuscripts existed and I estimated 10,000. With Balzan funding we held a conference two years ago, and one of the presenters reported that they had digitized over 20,000 Syriac manuscripts. This gives you a sense of the scale of the need. The goal is to help us search all of these materials at once. We want to be a hub or a portal where knowledge about Syriac can be pooled. Of course, such a task is a bit blessing and a curse. Although printed catalogues are immediately out of date, at least they can be completed. Working digitally and online means that our project is always adding new data. The work is never done.

S.G.: Syriaca.org is a portal that shows how new internet technologies can be used to connect and make sense of widely dispersed historical materials covering the literary and political remains of some of the peoples who lived in the vast area between the Mediterranean and China in the period from 300 to 1300 AD. It is an instrument that is relatively new to historical research. Did your efforts, and those of your colleagues produce a model that could be replicated or did your model evolve while you were undertaking the research project?

D.M.: We took very seriously the funding that we got from the Balzan Foundation. This is a unique opportunity for the study of Syriac and we didn't want to take it for granted. We knew we had a responsibility to create digital methods that will be replicable by other scholars in our field long term. We were surprised, however, to find out how immediately and

flexibly our work could be reused. The Syriac Gazetteer is a geographical reference work of over 2,000 places relevant to Syriac studies. A colleague of mine at Vanderbilt wanted to create a historical gazetteer of Peru and he was able to re-use the data model and software funded by the Balzan Prize for The Syriac Gazetteer for that project with, of course, making changes such as from Syriac to Spanish and Quechua. Two other projects, one for the study of Sanskrit and another for the study of Ge'ez, have also expressed interest in re-using our model. And, of course, several other Syriac digital projects are using our tools, for example the work of James Walters, George Kiraz, Ute Possekel and Kristian Heal, who have been key collaborators.

P.B.: I had no idea that it would expand to this degree. I knew that it was important but Professor Michelson and his colleagues were able to turn it into such a big project. It was wonderful news for me. It is a good online reference work for Syriac and this was an added bonus that others can use it as a model as well.

S.G.: What will be the next steps in the evolution of the portal, Syriaca.org?

D.M.: There are two things to point out about the model. Our overall goal was an online reference work for Syriac studies. Instead of an encyclopedia, it is more of a series of reference works. We have now begun to receive proposals from scholars in our field wanting to contribute additional volumes. We just approved a proposal that will be a section on ancient and medieval scientific and medical texts in Syriac. We will provide the container and the database model and peer review oversight. Already we have five such additional volumes in the works. A second one is on homilies. That is one direction of the evolution. Another is to begin to ask what are the new scholarly questions that can be answered thanks to this digital dataset. The model here is digital network analysis, think a sort of Facebook for ancient Syriac saints. Prof. Schwartz is working to develop this new digital tool that can create a digital map of relationships between historical events, persons, and texts. This is a topic of great interest to many ancient and medieval historians.

S.G.: What would you say is the principal historical importance of Syriac culture? I know you have dealt with this question in your books and lectures, but could you give our readers a summary of your thinking about this question?

P.B.: This is the third great language of ancient Christianity, Aramaic, known as the language of Jesus. It speaks of Christian thought, hopes, and organization. There are areas of the Middle East and Asia that were left out of the picture in the Greco-Roman world. This is the third world of Christianity. It has influenced the Latin and the Greek worlds so deeply. Yet it is like discovering the other side of the moon. The ancient Christian world was not only Greece and Rome but it was the Syriac-speaking Middle East and Asia. The other part is that Syriac is an international language. It spread thanks to the silk road and trade. An example of this is one beautiful monument from the seventh century with both Chinese inscription in ideograms and along the side names of missionaries in Syriac. Another example is to realize that one of the most popular works of literature in Medieval Europe was the life of *Saint Alexius of Rome*. After the Bible, it was the first work translated into several European languages. It is in its origins a Syriac story, set in a Syriac-speaking area of Roman Empire. Another example is the medieval Mongolian alphabet, itself derived from Syriac script brought by Syriac monks. This is a different story of the history of Christianity than what we had previously thought. And yet we are in danger of losing this story just as it is beginning to be known. Syriac culture has faced crushing extinction in our own day due to the terrible political situations in the modern Middle East. Now we are able to preserve what we can of that culture at least digitally.

S.G.: One of the signal achievements of the Syriaca portal is the compilation of the names, and the lives they led, of more than 1000 Christian Saints venerated in the Syriaca tradition. How do these Eastern Saints, if I may put it this way, differ in their outlook and their intellectual achievements compared to their counterparts in the Western tradition?

P.B.: Christianity creates its own languages in the plural such as Northern Protestants, Greek and Russian orthodoxy. Each have their own languages and their own grammar. I found when I moved from the study of Saint Augustine, when I came into the Syriac world, this is a third language of ancient Christianity. It is a different way of seeing things than we had had in Latin and Greek. This new religious language is truly mind opening. The story of Saint Alexius is a different sort of sainthood, hidden form the world. He is a saint who wanders but doesn't do miracles. He lives under the staircase of his parents' house. Only after death does his sainthood truly become known. This gives a sense of how Christianity is only the hidden side of things. There are elements of this in Greek and Latin Christianity, but this is much stronger in Syriac. These sort of concepts are so charged

and that is the first thing you learn when you study Syriac, the meaning of charged words.

D.M.: My own current interests in comparing East and West have to do with the history of reading, especially monastic reading. We tend to think we know the story of how Latin monks «saved civilization» with their libraries, but this is only one side of the story of the long, intertwined history of Christianity and the history of book culture. In a book I am writing called *The Library of Paradise* I argue that for Syriac monks reading was much more about cultivating the presence of God than preserving the authors of antiquity. Theirs is a related but different story of Christian and monastic readers from that in the West. It looks familiar but then it takes its own turns.

S.G.: When did you become aware of the trove of manuscripts and other historical materials in the Syriac part of the Ancient world, ranking third behind the extant number of Greek and Roman literary and historical remains?

P.B.: I was genuinely happy to just enjoy reading in Syriac but about 10 years ago I discovered how many there were. My students reported how many manuscripts there were in the British Museum. They had to virtually blow away the dust. I had a general awareness from 2000 on that there was much more material out there than we had thought.

D.M.: I became Professor Brown's student in that time, fall of 2001. I was interested in the Coptic language and trying to decide what to study when Professor Brown said: «Could I interest you in Syriac?». Syriac became a passion for me from that point on.

S.G.: To what extent did you use Syriac material in your early research? Were you already interested in Syriac when writing your highly regarded biography of Augustine of Hippo or your groundbreaking book *World of Late Antiquity*?

P.B.: I was beginning to be interested when I wrote on Augustine because I already knew that he became a follower of the prophet Mani, a religious movement that began in Mesopotamia. At that time it was mainly the Coptic texts by Mani that were translated and found. Not at that time, but later, I learned that the first texts behind Mani were in Syriac not Coptic. Thus there are links of modern Baghdad right to Carthage. I discovered

how open to the Middle East the Christianity of the time was. I had a sense that there was something greater out there. But by the time I wrote the second book, I realized that half of the works out there were in Syriac. This was around 1967-1972. An entire third world of Christianity, the Byzantine empire and the Persian Empire opened up. I was discovering an entire population but had no real understanding of the Syrian world, their legends and imagery. A world that was drawing on a rich undergrowth. In order to understand this world, I began to study Syriac.

S.G.: Had you always wanted to do such a project?

P.B.: Without the Balzan Prize monies I wouldn't have thought of it. It gave me the opportunity to do this. The nature of Syriac culture is so rich and widespread throughout Asia. We had to do it by some form of collaboration. Our own students formed a collaborative venture but they were pipe dreams until the Balzan prize enabled us to do the work. It was an absolutely crucial prize. We owe so much to the Foundation. These were real dreams for us. Scholarship dreams don't always come true like this.