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Mixed Up by Time and Chance? Using Digital Media to “Re-Orient” the Syriac Religious Literature of Late Antiquity

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Abstract:

The British Library’s collection of approximately 1000 Syriac manuscripts is one of the world’s richest collections of materials for the study of Syriac Christianity. These manuscripts were catalogued in the nineteenth century shortly after a large collection of over 500 manuscripts were acquired by the British from the monastery of Dayr al-Suryān in Egypt. This article examines the intellectual assumptions that guided the nineteenth-century cataloguing efforts and offers a methodological proposal for how a new digital catalogue of the manuscripts could and should differ. New methods of digital

representation can permit users to engage the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts and the whole of the British Library Syriac collection from multiple, varied, and even conflicting perspectives. Several such digital approaches are being implemented in Syriaca.org's digital catalogue of the British Library Syriac manuscripts. The diversity of such digital approaches promises to open new insights into the history of Christianity in late antiquity and beyond.

About the Author:

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Introduction: New Approaches to the Study of Syriac Manuscripts¹

The manuscripts arrived in the British Museum on the 1st of March 1843. Upon opening the cases, very few only of the volumes were found to be in a perfect state. From some the beginning was torn away, from some the end, from others both the beginning and end; some had fallen to pieces into loose quires, many were

completely broken up into separate leaves, and all these blended together. Nearly two hundred volumes of manuscripts, torn into separate leaves, and mixed up together by time and chance more completely than the greatest ingenuity could have effected, presented a spectacle of confusion which at first seemed almost to preclude hope. (Cureton 1846, p. 60)

With these words in 1846 William Cureton, assistant keeper of manuscripts at the British Museum in London, lamented the dilapidated state in which a part of the library formerly belonging to Dayr al-Suryān—the monastery of St. Mary of the Syrians in the Nitrian desert of Egypt—was acquired by the United Kingdom.² In spite of this rather inauspicious arrival, the value of these manuscripts was widely hailed. All told, about 580 manuscripts were acquired from Dayr al-Suryān, dramatically increasing the British Museum's Syriac collection. That collection, now housed at the British Library, is recognized today as one of the richest troves for the study of Syriac Christianity. Cureton and his successor, William Wright, deserve much of the credit for the later scholarly use of this collection due to their decades-long work organizing and cataloguing these materials to make them accessible. Indeed, Wright's three-volume (1200 pages, 1036 manuscript entries) catalogue of the collection—*Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired Since the Year 1838*—has now stood for over a century as an essential reference in English for research on Syriac literature (Wright 1872). In light of the fact that Syriac literature is one of the largest corpora of Christian texts to have survived from the religion's formative period of late antiquity, Wright's scholarly contribution to the history of Christianity is difficult to overstate (Brock 2008, p. 181).

Wright's 1872 catalogue was part of a flourishing epoch of reference works for Syriac studies including catalogues for manuscripts in Paris (Zotenberg 1874) and Berlin (Sachau 1899) and culminating in what remains the standard guide to Syriac literature, Anton Baumstark's *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (1922). These monumental works notwithstanding, there is today a growing academic consensus that an update to Baumstark's guide is now overdue (Van Rompay 2007, p. 27). It is not a simple matter, however, to write a new history of Syriac literature. Baumstark's work was dependent on

the cataloguing work of Wright and others. Accordingly, before a new history of Syriac literature can be written, it is necessary to reconsider the manuscript cataloguing work upon which earlier generations of Syriac scholarship have been built.

This article offers a methodological justification for how a new digital catalogue of the Syriac manuscript and literary heritage—a project I am directing through a digital collaboratory, *Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal* (<http://syriaca.org/>)—will differ from earlier scholarship. I use the work of Wright and Cureton as a case study to be reconsidered in light of current theoretical work in the fields of religious studies, new media studies, and digital humanities.³ My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I identify the assumptions, discourses, and theology employed by Wright and Cureton to justify the creation of the British Museum's Syriac manuscript collection. Rhetorically, they represented their cataloguing and arranging of the collection as simply sorting through texts that had been “mixed up...by time and chance”. In the first section of this article, however, I use a close examination of their acquisition accounts to reveal the narratives of civilizational and theological superiority which shaped their cataloging work.

Understanding the agendas that shaped earlier scholarly encounters with the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts leads to the second part of this study, in which I call attention to the aspects of Syriac literature that were obscured in Cureton and Wright's cataloguing work due to their cultural assumptions. Specifically, they were inclined to overlook or even malign four aspects of the collection: texts which they saw as representative of medieval theological decline, manuscripts which they viewed as peripheral to Greek or European Christianity, texts which reflected the monastic elements of Syriac Christianity, and nearly any part of the collection which reflected its recent history or use by its previous owners at the monastery of Dayr al-Suryān. My purpose here is not to lay blame upon Cureton and Wright for sharing the cultural frame of their era. Rather, the purpose of such an archeology of knowledge is to bring into focus in the present what may have been intellectually inaccessible to past generations of scholars. Moreover, attention to the historical construction of knowledge allows us not only to see the blind spots of past scholarship, but also to reflexively critique and historicize our own methods.

In the final section of this article, I describe how the new catalogue project that I am directing is using methods of digital scholarship to address the shortcomings of Cureton and Wright's univocal history of Syriac literature. This new digital catalogue of the British Library Syriac manuscripts, undertaken by Syriaca.org, has been intentionally designed to enable a diversity and multiplicity of scholarly approaches to these materials. This section presents the methodological justifications for the technical choices that Syriaca.org has made, such as structuring its data to employ the following best practices: creation of Linked Open Data in a graph database, the use of non-hierarchical visualization tools, attention to database design so as to enable fluid or even conflicting perspectives, and engagement with the diverse audience needs which arise from traditional cultural materials.⁴ Of course the digital representation of data is not a scholarly panacea or without its own ideological biases but the intentional use of digital new media can nevertheless avoid some of the univocal approaches of past print scholarship. By employing such digital tools, Syriaca.org aims to allow the histories of Syriac literature to be told in a way that better preserves the multiple perspectives and diverse theological and literary traditions that produced these manuscripts.

1. "The Government and the Museum Have Done Their Duty": Justifying Manuscript Acquisitions

Any new history of Syriac literature in English must begin by taking into account the previous foundational scholarship which has shaped our perspectives, especially William Wright's *Catalogue* (1872) and his article on "Syriac Literature" in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1887).⁶ In order to critically evaluate Wright's scholarly contribution to the field of Syriac literature, it is essential to consider it in context. These historical contexts are the physical and intellectual lineage that both made Wright's work possible and shaped his aims. Close reading shows that Wright and his predecessors framed their work within a narrative of European civilizational progress, marked by the advancement of knowledge and the flourishing of both Protestant and British imperial ideals.

The story of how English scholar-adventurers acquired the manuscripts and fragments that became the core of the British Museum's Syriac manuscript collection is not a pretty one. As Columba Stewart has observed:

A huge portion of the manuscript patrimony of the eastern churches has been transferred to western libraries over the past three hundred years. This has occurred both by purchase at what now seems to be risible prices or by outright theft. The historical circumstances of these transfers are inevitably complex, though in every case it could be argued that western collectors (and their eastern agents) exploited the greatly weakened circumstances of eastern Christian manuscript guardians. (2008, p. 622)

In particular, Stewart singles out the case of Dayr al-Suryān as “the most dramatic example of the transfer of manuscripts from an Egyptian monastery to a European library... The progressive spoliation of that unique collection is one of the most thoroughly documented instances of western appropriation of significant eastern Christian manuscripts” (2008, p. 623). Sebastian Brock has traced how the tale of the British acquisition of the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts was told and retold many times in the nineteenth century, especially in first- and second-hand accounts of the exploits (Platt 1841; Platt 1842; Cureton 1846; Cureton 1848; Curzon 1849; Curzon 1850; Brock 1994, pp. 101–103). These accounts reveal that high-minded motives of preserving ancient texts often mixed with disreputable means of acquisition including deceit, stealth, theft, inebriation, bribery, and intimidation based on colonial authority.

Stewart has rightly identified these reports of acquisition trips to Dayr al-Suryān as part of the burgeoning enterprise of British and European Oriental travel literature that flourished in the period:

Many of the classic elements of western encounters with the Orient are present in these accounts: disdain for the religious beliefs and practices of the local Christians, imputations of craftiness or avarice, the use of alcohol to lower resistance [to selling

the manuscripts], persuading the guardians that cash was of more use to them than old books. The successful collectors were well aware of the scientific importance of the materials, and, not incidentally, of their value for enhancing institutional or national reputations in the fiercely competitive colonial period. (Stewart 2008, pp. 623–26)⁷

Taking Stewart's analysis one step further, it may be argued that these provenance narratives reveal the epistemological and cultural assumptions that shaped the European encounter with Syriac manuscripts in the era. In particular, four tropes, common across multiple Dayr al-Suryān accounts, reveal how the Western scholars perceived the transfer of the manuscripts from Egyptian into British hands: (1) The manuscripts were passing from the hands of ignorant clerics and primitive monks into the hands of enlightened scholars. (2) The manuscripts were of no value *in situ* or to their "Oriental" owners, but became of inestimable value once possessed by Western owners "capable" of appreciating their value. (3) The manuscripts, like the intellectual traditions of their "Oriental" owners, were "dying", "dead", "buried", or in danger of perishing without notice unless they could be preserved in Europe. (4) In British possession, the manuscripts became a treasure and trophy to the triumph of nation, Church and Crown.

These motifs are reiterated by all of the British agents, both those who acquired the manuscripts in Egypt (Lord Curzon and Henry Tattam) and those on the receiving end at the British Museum (Cureton and Wright). Although Cureton and Wright never travelled to the Middle East, their accounts of the manuscripts appear to share much of the Orientalizing outlook of those who acquired the manuscripts. Since our aim is to determine how such motifs may have shaped these librarians' subsequent work describing the collection, we may take Wright and Cureton as our focus rather than Curzon or Tattam.

The first two tropes, indigenous ignorance and manuscripts as neglected treasures, are quite pronounced in the comments of Wright and Cureton. In his 1846 survey of the history of the library at Dayr al-Suryān, Cureton concluded that after the mid-1500s the manuscripts:

were probably altogether neglected, the monks becoming too ignorant to make any further use of them. The volume with the most recent date in the collection was written seventy years later, and after this time there seems to have been no effort in these monasteries either at composition or translation into Syriac, or even to reproduce any of their ancient literature by new transcripts. Indeed the examination of this collection brings conviction, that for two or three centuries at least previous to this time little had been done in the way of transcribing further than to copy liturgies, lives of saints, a few homilies, and such parts of the Holy Scriptures as were needed by the monks in the daily services (Cureton 1846, p. 62).

In short, by the time of the nineteenth-century sale of the Syriac manuscripts the British considered the Egyptian owners of the manuscripts as unable to put them to any scholarly use. This same sentiment was echoed in 1872 by Wright, who not only repeated much of Cureton's account verbatim but also noted that in 1707 the Vatican emissary Elia Assemani found the manuscript library "in utter disorder, and falling to pieces through age and want of care" (Wright 1872, p. iv). Wright also reprinted a questionable anecdote from Curzon, who claimed that in 1837 some of manuscripts were being used as lids for jars of preserves and that once the pots were emptied of their edible contents the monks had no further use for the manuscripts and were happy to part with them (Wright 1872, p. ix). To these allegations, Wright added a lengthy litany of other quotations from Lord Prudhoe, Tattam (via Eliza Platt) and Cureton to demonstrate that prior to their acquisition by the British, the manuscripts had, in the words of Prudhoe, "remained undisturbed in their dust and neglect for some centuries" (Wright 1872, p. ix).

A corollary to this trope of monastic ignorance was to imply that the manuscripts of Dayr al-Suryān were of no value *in situ* because the Egyptian monks could not properly appreciate cultural value. Cureton made the point most starkly when he lamented that the only recent manuscript "production" at Dayr al-Suryān seemed to be "the destruction of some of the finest and most ancient manuscripts", in which the highest quality vellum Greek manuscripts were chemically erased as palimpsests for reuse in

copying out new service books and lectionaries (Cureton 1846, pp. 62–63). In Cureton’s judgment, this act had transformed manuscripts “of the finest class and of the greatest antiquity” into those “in the worst condition of any in the collection” (Cureton 1846, p. 63).

From an alarm such as this, it is easy to see how both Cureton and Wright could construe the library’s acquisition as a matter of literary life and death. Cureton was effusive in his account of the manuscripts’ arrival in London, noting that “we cannot refrain from congratulating the learned of Europe generally that these manuscripts have been rescued from perishing in a vault in the desert of Africa” (Cureton 1846, p. 68). In Wright’s judgment of the monks of Dayr al-Suryān earlier refusal to sell their books (in spite of “decaying churches and mouldering cells”), he described their resolve as equivalent to choosing “to be buried in the ruins [rather] than part with their manuscripts” (Wright 1872, p. viii).

Civilizational, racial, and national pride echoes in Cureton’s account of the collection’s arrival in London.⁸ In 1848, he dedicated a critical edition based on a Dayr al-Suryān manuscript to his patron, Francis Russell, 7th Duke of Bedford, with these words:

Your name stood at the head of the subscription to promote the first literary mission into Egypt in the year 1838, and your Grace further encouraged and supported it by your personal interest and influence.... The acquisition of these inestimable volumes, of such venerable antiquity, has conferred a literary honour upon Great Britain, which even persons unacquainted with their contents can sufficiently estimate to feel indebted to those who have been chiefly instrumental in securing for our own country this unrivalled distinction.... I am so deeply impressed with the conviction of their extreme importance, not merely for the objects of literature, but further, for the sacred cause of truth, of their theological as well as their historical and philological value, that I cannot adequately express my own gratitude. (Cureton 1848, p. [i–ii])

Cureton continued by explaining that the acquisition of the Dayr al-Suryān collection “forms a most distinguished portion of our National Library, and has rendered it, in this class of literature, unrivalled in all the world” (Cureton 1848, p. v). These sentiments give a full sense to the remark with which Cureton had concluded his 1846 report: “we are pleased and proud that the Government and the Museum have done their duty as respected the Treasure of the Desert” (Cureton 1846, p. 69).

The rhetorical strength of these claims are such that if one had only the European accounts as evidence, one would be led to conclude that the British acquisition of the Syriac manuscripts from Dayr al-Suryān was effectively the end of the library at the monastery. This impression is, however, largely false (Kominko 2015, p. lii). While the nineteenth-century acquisitions did reduce the number of early Syriac manuscripts held at Dayr al-Suryān, the monastery library has remained one of the greatest Christian libraries of the Middle East.⁹ Today the library still holds nearly 1,000 Coptic and Arabic manuscripts and at least 48 Syriac volumes and fragments (Stewart 2008, p. 626; Brock & Van Rompay 2014, pp. 3–4).

The four tropes noted above reveal that the protagonists in the acquisition and formation of the British Museum Syriac manuscript collection understood their efforts through a rhetorical tradition that Christopher D.L. Johnson has recently described as “Eastern Christian Orientalism” (Johnson 2014, p. 816).¹⁰ Johnson identifies ten typical tropes of Eastern Christian Orientalism, five of which overlap usefully with those we have encountered: “Eastern Christianity (1) as dead body, (2) as unevolved or devolved specimen, (3) as static or ahistorical relic of the past... (6) as passive and helpless victim of oppression and inertia... (9) as missionary trophy” (Johnson 2014, p. 816). Of particular note here is that, both in Johnson’s typology and in our list of motifs, little agency is permitted to the Orientalized Eastern Christian subjects, who are presumed to be either dead, static, or incapacitated by ignorance (even when the monks “sell” the manuscripts they are presented as having to be persuaded to do so, not as independent agents).

These assumptions are very similar to what Tim Youngs has identified as the “blank spaces” on the mental (and actual) maps of nineteenth-century European travellers.

The inhabitants of these blank spaces (for example in Africa) were rendered invisible by European prejudices which considered them to be devoid of civilization (Youngs 2006, pp. 1–2). Accordingly, it is now worth asking how the four civilizational tropes which we have identified above may have created “blank spaces” in Wright and Cureton’s historical atlas of Syriac Literature, lacunae where cultural assumptions blinded them from seeing what was actually on the page or between the leaves.¹¹

2. “The Literature of Syria Is, on the Whole, Not an Attractive One”: Blank Spaces in the Interpretation of Syriac Literature

While it was William Cureton who deserves credit for amassing the British Museum collection and casting a vision for its place in Orientalist and theological scholarship, it was William Wright, taking over for Cureton in 1861, who ultimately did the hard work of organizing and cataloging the collection. From his writing, it is clear that Wright shared many of Cureton’s effusive views about the British Museum’s new Syriac manuscript collection. Yet, as later scholars have noted, Wright simultaneously held decidedly negative views about the relative merits of the literary and intellectual heritage of the Syriac churches (Barsoum 2003, pp. 529–32). These points of dissonance within Wright’s own views reveal how his cultural assumptions led him to elide or ignore aspects of the Dayr al-Suryān library.

It is anachronistic to expect Wright or Cureton to have been exempt from the colonial prejudices of their day or to meet modern academic standards. Stewart observes that “Modern sensibilities about patrimony and cultural property would have been utterly incomprehensible to them” (Stewart 2008, p. 626). Moreover, while Wright and Cureton were well trained as nineteenth-century philologists they could not have anticipated the disciplinary protocols that guide librarians, codicologists, ethnographers, and historians today. Nevertheless, careful attention to the cultural assumptions in their work is essential if we are to identify where our modern revision of their work must begin.

There are at least four ways in which the Orientalizing assumptions that shaped the acquisition of the library also carried over into scholarly misjudgments of the contents

of the manuscripts themselves: (1) Wright and Cureton's approach to Syriac literature assumed a Protestant "dark age" decline narrative that privileged the wisdom of the ancient Church over the "ignorance" of medieval and contemporary Eastern Christianity (as exemplified by the monks of Dayr al-Suryān). The value judgments implicit in this narrative affected how Wright evaluated certain portions of the Dayr al-Suryān collection, for example the palimpsest manuscripts. (2) Wright and Cureton's interest in the Dayr al-Suryān collection and the other Syriac manuscript holdings of the British Museum was an extension of their own identity as European Christians (an identity which encompassed Greek but not Syriac Christianity). Thus for reasons of intellectual genealogy, they preferred Syriac manuscripts which preserved Greek authors in translation and were less interested in indigenous or anonymous Syriac theological traditions. (3) In their analysis of Syriac literature, both Wright and Cureton were largely uninterested in the place of monasticism in Syriac theology, thus devaluing a large portion of the Dayr al-Suryān collection. This distaste was part of a general preference for doctrinal treatises over the literature of religious practice. (4) Wright and Cureton showed little to no respect for prior organizational systems of the library or the function of the manuscripts *in situ* in a monastic library. Instead, they took it for granted that it was up to the British Museum to rescue the "disordered" collection through proper Western [re-]classification. This reclassification had the effect of obscuring any prior systems of classification. These four unexamined assumptions limited the horizons of Wright and Cureton's encounter with the Dayr al-Suryān library. By reflecting on these prejudices, we can uncover aspects of Syriac literature hidden from this early generation of Syriac scholars.

Our consideration of Wright and Cureton's views on Syriac literature must begin by understanding the nature of their enthusiasm both for Syriac literature and the Dayr al-Suryān collection specifically. This positive evaluation is summed up nicely by the following paragraph in Wright's 1872 preface to his *Catalogue*:

Such is, so far as I have been able to trace it, the history of the once magnificent library of the convent of St. Mary Deipara [Dayr al-Suryān], of the intrinsic value of which it is almost impossible to speak in too high terms. To the [manuscript]

collection now deposited in the British Museum is due the revival of Syriac studies, which has taken place during the last five and twenty years. From the date of Dr. Cureton's first publication in 1848, hardly a year has passed unmarked by the appearance of some work of importance, either linguistic, historical or theological. (Wright 1872, pp. xvi–xvii)¹²

While these sentiments are self-serving panegyrics, they are not empty rhetoric. In his preface, Wright singles out historical Syriac figures of note for specific praise:

That books should at all times have been abundant in the hands of the ancient Egyptian ascetics was only to be expected. There were among them men of high station and great refinement.... [The monastery's] chief benefactor was its own abbat, Moses the Nisibene, evidently a man of taste and an ardent lover of literature... making an extensive journey through Mesopotamia and Syria, he returned home in 932, bringing with him no less than two hundred and fifty volumes... Many of these very manuscripts are now deposited in the British Museum, and are in most instances conspicuous above their fellows for age and value. (Wright 1872, pp. iii–iv)

Wright also praises the talent of specific Syriac authors, usually as translators, such as Jacob of Edessa:

one of the ablest and most versatile men of his age, an accomplished Greek scholar, acquainted with Hebrew, theologian, historian, philosopher and grammarian, a hard student and a practical man of the world. As a translator he was indefatigable. (Wright 1872, p. xxi)

Yet in spite of such high praise, Wright's appraisal of Syriac literature was also marked by ambivalence and at times malevolence. Wright began his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article with this dismissive remark:

We must own—and it is well to make the confession at the outset—that the literature of Syria is, on the whole, not an attractive one. As Renan said long ago, the characteristic of the Syrians is a certain mediocrity. They shone neither in war, nor in the arts, nor in science. They altogether lacked the poetic fire of the older—we purposefully emphasize the word—the older Hebrews and of the Arabs. But they were apt enough as pupils of the Greeks; they assimilated and reproduced, adding little or nothing of their own... The Syrian Church never produced men who rose to the level of a Eusebius, a Gregory Nazianzen, a Basil, and a Chrysostom; but we may be grateful to the plodding diligence which has preserved for us in fairly good translations many valuable works of the Greek fathers which would otherwise have been lost (Wright 1887, p. 824).

As startling as these harsh judgments are, Wright's vacillating views fit well with Johnson's paradigm of Eastern Christian Orientalism as a "semi-Orientalism" which

provoked significant ambivalence: the Christian East was Oriental and thus... Other, yet it was also a form of Christianity, however "debased," and so seen as somewhat familiar. The cognitive dissonance created by the mixture of supposedly distinct and unmixable elements, Orient and Occident, led to a variety of fascinating descriptive imagery and complex religious reactions (Johnson 2014, p. 813).

Wright's conflicting rhetoric reflects this same tension: he was able to engage with and even appreciate Syriac literature but only within the limited range of vision permitted by his nineteenth-century British Protestant assumptions.

In our effort to gauge what Wright and Cureton could and could not see in the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts, we have the advantage of being able to compare two closely related texts: Cureton's short 1846 report on the British Museum's acquisition of the manuscripts from Dayr al-Suryān and Wright's longer 1872 preface to the British Museum catalogue (Cureton 1846; Wright 1872). Although separated by a quarter

century, the imprint of Cureton's work on Wright is so strong that we can treat the latter work as being an expansion and revision of the former. The intellectual structure and outline of both documents is similar. At times Wright's ordering of topics mirrors Cureton's almost identically, and at other times he repeats Cureton verbatim without attribution. These documents are useful sources because each author uses a *précis* of the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts as a survey of Syriac literature in general. It is important to note that the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts are not the only manuscripts included in Wright's catalogue, but nevertheless they are by far the largest portion of the materials in the catalogue and as such receive the bulk of his attention.

Given that Wright had the benefit of over ten years of labor on the manuscripts and also of the general increase in scholarship between 1846 and 1872, it is easy to see how his views had developed in the interval between Cureton's summary and his own (for example, Wright is generally much more aware than Cureton of what texts should be considered pseudonymous). What is also interesting for our inquiry, however, is where Wright's summary remained as terse or dismissive as had been Cureton's earlier views even after so much scholarly work. What Cureton had missed in 1846 could have been due to only three years of access to the manuscripts; what Wright ignored after intimately cataloguing the entire collection in masterful detail for over a decade is much more likely to be due to his presuppositions and value judgments about Syriac literature.

We may turn then to the first of the four ways in which Wright misjudged the collection. The first is his medieval decline narrative. We have already caught a glimpse of this in Wright's dismissal of Syriac poetry above: "They altogether lacked the poetic fire of the older—we purposefully emphasize the word—the older Hebrews and of the Arabs" (Wright 1887, p. 824). Because Syriac literature is today recognized as having produced some of the most notable early Christian poetry (Brock 2004), it is relatively easy to see here how Wright's judgment is informed by Protestant and Enlightenment decline narratives. This preconception assumed Christianity had become debased during "the dark ages", falling away from the purity of its connection to the "older" biblical languages and texts: "The literature of Syria...was at its best from the 4th to the 8th century, and then gradually died away, though it kept up a flickering existence till the 14th

century or even later” (Wright 1887, p. 824).¹³ As might be suspected, such antiquarian values led Wright and Cureton to pay most attention to the earliest Syriac manuscripts in the hopes that the Dayr al-Suryān library might produce copies of rare early texts.

From a contemporary academic perspective, it is easy to sympathize with their desire for the recovery of rare texts. Nevertheless, we must also recognize that their attention to the smaller number of early materials came at the expense of the copious number of later authors and texts. We have seen this already in Cureton’s complaint about palimpsests made from the “most ancient manuscripts” discussed earlier (Cureton 1846, p. 62-63). It was the erased palimpsest to which he assigned value, not the overwritten texts which he dismisses briefly and generically as “service books”. Ironically, in the very act of lamenting medieval erasure, Cureton himself mentally erased the medieval overwriting, reducing it to an imagined blank surface through which one might glimpse the ancient manuscript. From this perspective the copyist of the palimpsest had not created anything of value, leading Cureton to note that “the [palimpsest] manuscripts are consequently in the worst condition of any in the collection” (Cureton 1846, p. 63).

For his part, Wright treated the palimpsests with more nuance than Cureton, diligently cataloguing both layers of many palimpsests.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Wright also made the same judgment of their value. He goes so far as to note that one should perhaps be happy that Syriac manuscript production ceased at Dayr al-Suryān in the late middle ages:

we have, perhaps, reason to be thankful that they [the monks of Dayr al-Suryān] withheld their hands. If, even in the tenth or eleventh century, the transcribing of a volume of sermons brought with it the destruction of a Greek poet or a Latin historian, and the binding of a new lectionary furnished an opportunity for utilising the relics of hoar antiquity, what could be expected from the barbarism of the fifteenth or seventeenth century? (Wright 1872, p. v)

The fact that Wright takes the palimpsests as *prima facie* evidence for decline is an insightful example of how the assumptions of the decline narrative led to mistaken

judgments. The palimpsests actually counter the decline narrative. What Wright took to be a sign of literary collapse can equally be seen as evidence of continued intellectual activity. Although the monks were copying medieval liturgical texts and not “the relics of hoar antiquity”, the very existence of these palimpsests reveals that textual production was ongoing. The decline is assumed rather than demonstrated. Because of his textual prejudices, Wright was not able to see that the colophons of these palimpsests could in fact be valuable sources for understanding how the history of Syriac reading habits had changed and shifted.¹⁵ Instead, such overwriting was maligned.

A second dynamic of misjudgment and omission is closely related to Wright and Cureton’s preference for ancient texts. Although Wright and Cureton highly valued the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts, the history of Syriac literature *per se* was not the focus of their scholarly inquiry. They were primarily interested in how materials preserved in Syriac might grant access to lost cultural patrimony of European Christianity, namely biblical or Greek texts. Wright and Cureton’s interest in the Dayr al-Suryān collection seems to have largely been framed in terms of their own identity as European Christians, leading them to have little interest in the later trajectory or development of Syriac cultures.

This is apparent in the surveys of Syriac literature offered by both Cureton and Wright, where original works by Syriac authors receive short shrift—treated almost as an afterthought! For example, Cureton begins his survey with the following overview:

The contents of these manuscripts are as we should naturally expect chiefly theological and in this department they are most important. The copies of the Holy Scriptures are some of the oldest in existence and the translations of the works of the great [Greek]¹⁶ Fathers of the Church are most valuable not only because many of them in all probability were made during the lifetime of the authors (we have the means of proving certainly that some of them were) but also because the manuscripts in which these Syriac versions are found are the oldest copies of these [Greek] works now extant and were written some centuries earlier than any of those in which the original Greek exists. Moreover this collection contains several really important

works of which the Greek copies have been long since lost and are now only known to us either by their titles which have come down to us or by very short extracts preserved by other writers. Besides these there are many original works of Syriac authors (Cureton 1846, p. 63).

Since Wright's preface of 1872 is longer than Cureton's, he is able to give somewhat more attention to "original works of Syriac authors", but he maintains the same hierarchy of importance from Cureton's survey: biblical texts, Apostolic (pre-Nicene) Fathers, Greek authors, and then Syriac authors.¹⁷

It may be argued, however, that Wright's continuation of this hierarchy is perhaps unwitting. His comments reflect the ambivalence we have already discussed. For example, although Wright places the section on Syriac authors last (and separate from his discussion of "the [Greek] theologians" of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries), he does note that "Of original Syriac authors the list is also considerable and even more important than that of the translations [from the Greek]" (Wright 1872, pp. xxi–xxii). On the other hand, we have already seen that in Wright's 1887 article, quoted above, he unfavorably compares the Syriac authors with the Greek Fathers and then reduces the entire contribution of Syriac literature to "the plodding diligence which has preserved for us in fairly good translations many valuable works of the Greek fathers which would otherwise have been lost" (Wright 1887, p. 824).¹⁸

With their attention firmly focused on biblical, ancient, and Greek texts, Wright and Cureton missed many things in their encounter with Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts. Although "original works of Syriac authors" came last in the list, these works did receive some attention. Both Cureton and Wright comment on Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, Philoxenos, and especially Jacob of Edessa.¹⁹ Wright goes into even greater detail than Cureton, describing authors up to the era of Bar Hebraeus (13th century). And yet two categories of literature get only cursory mention from both Cureton and Wright: ascetic texts and anonymous works such as hagiography and miscellanies.

Here a quantitative or numeric analysis is insightful as to the scope of their oversight. Cureton's survey of Syriac literature is approximately 1800 words in length

and Wright's 1872 survey is approximately 5600 words.²⁰ Out of 1800 words, Cureton dedicates 50 words (less than 3%) to note the presence among the manuscripts of:

...a considerable collection of Martyrologies, Lives of Saints, Fathers, and eminent Bishops; which may supply much matter hitherto unknown. In general theology there are several anonymous treatises on Christianity and works against various heresies, together with some volumes of miscellaneous sermons. Of Ascetic writers—numerous treatises of Ammonius, Macarius, Evagrius, Esaias, &c. &c. (Cureton 1846, p. 67)

Although in general Wright is more prolix, on this topic Wright's preface has only slightly improved on Cureton's survey, offering 135 words (also less than 3% of the whole):

Of ascetic writers the roll is likewise a long one, but it may suffice to mention the names of Ammonius, the two Macarii, Evagrius, John the Monk, Isaiah of Scete, Gregory the Monk, Mark the Monk, Nilus, and Isaac of Nineveh.... As for martyrdoms, and lives of saints and holy men and women, their number is too great to attempt any enumeration. I must content myself with calling especial attention to the different redactions of the work of Palladius (nos. dccccxxiii. — dccccxxix.), with the illustrations of 'Anan-Yeshua' (nos. dccccxxx. — dccccxxxii.); to the very ancient acts and martyrdoms contained in nos. dccccxxxiv. — dccccxl.; to those huge collections of later date, nos. dcccclii., dcccclx., and dcccclxiii.; and to the oldest of all extant martyrologies, at the end of the oft cited manuscript of A.D. 411. (Wright 1872, pp. xxi, xxiv)

These elisions are significant when one compares Wright's preface with his actual catalogue. In the catalogue, these same materials receive almost 500 pages of description out of some 1200 pages. In other words, ascetic, hagiographic, anonymous, and miscellaneous manuscripts make up as much as 40% of Wright's catalogue, but less than

3% of his summary.²¹ Both Cureton and Wright appear to downplay portions of the Dayr al-Suryān library that we might see as more representative of Syriac literature as a whole: ascetic literature, miscellanies, hagiography, and anonymous works (the latter disappear completely from Wright's preface!). The net result is an account of Syriac literature that is lacking many of its most popular and long-lived elements.

Among these missing elements, we should particularly note the neglect of Syriac monastic literature. Its absence is the third way in which Wright and Cureton's scholarship was limited by their theological assumptions. The consequences of this oversight had long-term effects. It is only recently that scholars have begun to call for more systematic attention to Syriac monastic literature. In a 2015 publication, Grigory Kessel accurately noted:

The study of the Syriac monastic literature is particularly young... While many Syriac monastic texts... were published during the twentieth century there is still a lot to be done. A census of all extant monastic texts in Syriac is an urgent desideratum. Moreover, the study of Syriac monastic literature has been heavily dominated by research into doctrine with a gross neglect of the textual transmission of the texts (Kessel 2015, p. 411).

Kessel's observation about a scholarly over emphasis on doctrine is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Wright's catalogue in general. Judging from the length and frequency of his comments, Wright gives ample attention to doctrinally-notable authors and texts (Wright 1872, pp. xix-xxv and 401-1037). For example, the classification system which Wright used to group the manuscripts allots an entire volume (Volume Two) to "Theology", with seven subcategories making it relatively easy to find specific topics or authors (Wright 1872, unnumbered "Contents" page). On the other hand, his attempt to reconstruct the monastic history of the library is of varying and limited quality. There is a section dedicated to "Service Books" with eight sub-categories, but this section only implicitly conveys the role of such books in the active life of the Dayr al-Suryān community.

In Wright's preface, we find direct but conflicting statements about the monastic history of the library. On the one hand, Wright is well aware that recent copies of liturgical books make up a significant part of the collection:

Of the various classes of Service-books...the Nitrian collection comprises almost a superabundance of copies, most of them too are of comparatively modern date, this class of manuscripts being above all others liable to decay from constant use.

(Wright 1872, p. xviii)

On the other hand, Wright makes it clear that he does not consider these manuscripts as the proper core of the library. Thus he concludes, "From the twelfth century onwards the books lay neglected, with the exceptions of those required for daily services. More than one monk lifts up his voice in lamentation over the mass of mouldering tomes which found no readers..." (Wright 1872, p. iv). This pronouncement of the demise of the library in the 1100s is more value judgement than it is impartial historical observation. Wright himself provides evidence that the volumes in the Dayr al-Suryān collection saw systematic restoration and repairs in A.D. 1194, 1222, 1493, and 1624 (Wright 1872, pp. iv-v). What Wright means by demise, however is a tragic shift away from patristic texts to the "superabundance" of service books which he considered of lesser value. It may be that we find echoes in Wright's telling use of "superabundance" of his disdain for the "poor ascetics" who previously owned the manuscripts at Dayr al-Suryān (Wright 1872, pp. viii, xviii).

This disdain for the immediate past owners of the manuscripts brings us to a fourth and final way in which cultural prejudices clouded Wright and Cureton's observations about the Dayr al-Suryān library. It seems that both scholars took it for granted that it was up to the British Museum to rescue the "disordered" collection through proper Western [re-]classification. Neither showed much awareness of any prior organizational systems of the manuscripts *in situ* at Dayr al-Suryān. For example, Cureton's description of the manuscript's arrival in London seems to go out of its way to eliminate any agency by the monks of Dayr al-Suryān in curating the collection:

Nearly two hundred volumes of manuscripts, torn into separate leaves, and mixed up together *by time and chance more completely than the greatest ingenuity could have effected*, presented a spectacle of confusion which at first seemed almost to preclude hope. To select from this mass such loose fragments as belonged to those manuscripts which were imperfect, and separate the rest and collect them into volumes, was the labor of months. To arrange all leaves now collected into volumes in their consecutive order will be the labor of years” (Cureton 1846, p. 60).

[Emphasis added.]

There is little reason for us to doubt that the collection was in some disrepair or that it included hundreds of loose fragments. Nevertheless, awareness of the tropes of Eastern Christian Orientalism should also make us somewhat suspicious of the hyperbole here. Cureton’s claim that the manuscripts were “mixed up... more completely than the greatest *ingenuity* could have effected” seems to be going out of its way to deny that the manuscripts bore any traces of earlier organization by the monks of Dayr al-Suryān. Indeed, these monks are effaced and replaced by the void of “time and chance”.

Although Wright repeats the above passage approvingly, he also provides evidence that not all of the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts had lost their bindings: “Many of the volumes in the Nitrian collection were made up of two, three, or even four totally distinct manuscripts, which had been fortuitously bound together in the convent of S. Mary Deipara [Dayr al-Suryān]” (Wright 1872, p. xxxiii). And yet even in making this observation Wright appears to find little or no evidence of an earlier system of organization (note his use of the adverbs “totally” and “fortuitously”). After abandoning an initial plan to catalogue the manuscripts according to the sequential order in which parts were bound together in Egypt, Wright explains, “We resolved to separate these so far as the description of them was concerned, and to refer each manuscript to its proper class. In most of the classes a further subdivision has [also] been attempted” (Wright 1872, p. xxxiii). In this manner Wright actually split up the description of whole codices into separate entries based on scribe, content, date, etc.

Neither Cureton nor Wright was inclined to find rationality in the existing organization or binding of the manuscripts by the monks. Instead they were anxious to order the manuscripts according to their own preferences concerning genre, author, and date. This desire to divide and classify was so strong that Wright even briefly considered separating and reordering the contents of individual miscellany manuscripts even if they were written by a single hand, but he abandoned this as impractical since collections of texts “put together by the same scribe... form manuscripts incapable of partition” (Wright 1872, p. xxxiii). In this impulse to classify, Cureton and Wright’s work should be seen as part of a larger reform movement in bibliographic control at the Library of the British Museum.²² This movement was led by Antonio Panizzi who as Keeper of Printed Books (1837–56) and Principal Librarian (1856–66) set about reforming and rationalizing the catalogue system of the Library of the British Museum as a whole (Panizzi 1841, pp. v–ix; Miller 1967; Weimerskirch 1982).²³

The end result of this “new scheme,” as Wright called it, was a model of nineteenth-century classificatory genius with all of the strengths and flaws of the era. The print edition of the British Museum catalogue of Syriac manuscripts that Wright produced follows most of the hierarchy of importance that Cureton had set out in 1846, as revised by Wright in 1872. The catalogue first takes up biblical manuscripts, then service books (this being one break with Cureton’s ordering, and perhaps an indication of a higher valuing of service books), then authors from earliest to later (in this section Greek and Syriac authors grouped by date and not separated by language). At the end of the second volume one finds the collected authors (miscellanies) and anonymous works. The third volume includes hagiography.²⁴ It is also worth noting that Wright’s use of the print medium for his catalogue (as opposed to a catalogue written in manuscript) was so innovative that today we might describe it as “bleeding edge” technology.²⁵ In the same period, the catalogue of the British Museum’s general printed holdings was still kept in a manuscript ledger and updated manually. Panizzi’s effort to complete a general print catalogue of the British Museum did not come to fruition until 1881, nearly a decade after Wright’s publication (Norman 2014).

The legacy of Wright's British Museum print catalogue of Syriac manuscripts has been twofold. For more than a century, the texts which it privileged and made easily accessible (biblical manuscripts and the works of great Greek and Syriac Fathers) have become well known not only in Syriac studies but beyond. On the other hand, the information which was less suited to Wright's classification scheme, such as anonymous or collected works, has remained hidden in the shadows and in some cases been rendered invisible in the catalogue. For example, Wright's zeal to divide codices and describe them according to their parts affected about 120 codices. Their contents were then divided into nearly 450 separate entries in Wright's catalogue (Reif and Penn 2013). These divisions not only prevent the user from easily browsing the catalogue by codex, but they have literally excluded from Wright's catalogue evidence for the choices made at Dayr al-Suryān to bind certain works together. It is almost impossible to get a sense from Wright's catalogue of the intellectual context in which a medieval reader at Dayr al-Suryān would have encountered certain texts. Much evidence for medieval grouping of texts is obscured from view by the homogenizing rationality of Wright's classification system and the linear nature of the new print medium he employed.

In short, the design of Wright's catalogue is of limited utility for the reader who would like to understand how the monks of Dayr al-Suryān used their library.²⁶ While Cureton and Wright may have preserved some of the manuscripts of Dayr al-Suryān from decay, it must be recognized that the end result was that they did not preserve the library itself. They "dis-oriented" and transformed the contents of the Egyptian monastic library into a new collection, organized on different principles and for a different community with different values. Wright's catalogue does not offer access to part of the monastic library of Dayr al-Suryān but to the British Museum's rationalized vision of Syriac literature, a new academic collection to be of interest "not merely to the Orientalist but also to the classical scholar, the theologian, and the historian" (Wright 1894, p. 28).

We should conclude our analysis of these four limitations implicit in Wright's work by recalling that, seen in historical perspective, Wright's catalogue was nevertheless a monumental contribution to scholarship. The British Library's Syriac collection and Wright's catalogue made possible much of the exponential growth of

Syriac studies over the twentieth century. Indeed, because Wright chose to publish a print catalog (rather than produce a hand-written list) he made accessible a good portion of the materials to those who could not physically access the British Library.

In the near century and a half that has passed since Wright's work, however, new media and new methods in cataloguing have developed and so a group of scholars, working in a digital collaboratory—*Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal* (<http://syriaca.org/>)—have begun working on a new catalogue of the Dayr al-Suryān materials held at the British Library.

3. “What Is the Use of Knowledge If It Does Not Refine?” Syriaca.org's Use of Digital Media to Diversify Knowledge Production

In considering the creation of a new catalogue, it is necessary to state first how the goals of scholarship have changed since the age of Wright and Cureton. The limitations which we have identified in Wright's catalogue would not likely have been seen as such in that era. While we may regret today the univocal approach of the catalogue and the inflexibility imposed by the linear nature of its bound print media, these were in fact improvements over past scholarship and thus desiderata for Western scholars of the time. Accordingly, the first step towards a new catalogue is to recognize the unique scholarly demands and opportunities of our own age.²⁷

The primary methodological justification guiding Syriaca.org's “re-orienting” of our aids for finding materials held at the British Library is the increasing scholarly recognition that a single set of sources may fruitfully produce a variety and multiplicity of interpretations. This is not to say that the production of knowledge is arbitrary, but to acknowledge that it is humanly impossible to anticipate the breadth of interpretation possible from a collection of historical sources as rich and chronologically diverse as those that came from Dayr al-Suryān. While the librarians of the age of Wright and Panizzi were confident that their work of classifying and cataloguing would soon reach a definitive end, our own era has realized that the number of productive ways of organizing knowledge is infinite (Weinberger 2008). In a similar way, historians and literary

theorists have begun to turn their attention to the long interpretive life of historical texts, using a variety of methodological schools such as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, reception history, or the history of the book to expand the bounds of what is meant by interpretation (Knight 2010; Darnton 2007). Moreover, scholars working with cultural heritage materials have grown increasingly aware of the fact that Western scholars are not the only communities with interpretive interests (Stewart 2008; Kominko 2015). Indeed, scholars working from a post-colonial lens have rightly pointed out the need to include academic voices from within heritage communities in the scholarly narratives (Johnson 2014).

In light of these scholarly demands, Syriaca.org has begun designing a new catalogue of the Dayr al-Suryān library (and of the British Library Syriac collection more generally) to allow a variety of stories to be told from the manuscripts. At a practical level, this re-orientation has required us to re-think how to construct, organize and publish a catalogue in a way that will promote interpretive diversity. We have been aided in this task by recent work in new media studies and digital humanities that has shown how digital approaches to information architecture offer flexibility over previous print media (Shirky 2005; Weinberger 2008; Wesch 2013).

It is important to caution here that we have not assumed that digital solutions are either a panacea or without unintended consequences. Indeed, we have been mindful that an optimism about technological solutions is one of the driving mistaken assumptions of our own age (Morozov 2013). Nevertheless, medium and message are symbiotic. Some media are better suited to foster diversity of interpretation than others and we have pursued five areas of technological innovations in an effort to open up new avenues of scholarship. (1) In order to overcome the linear organization of past print catalogues, Syriaca.org's catalogue is a digital resource encoded in an extensible data format, TEI XML, taking advantage of the greater ease with which digital data can be re-organized, sorted, or continuously updated. (2) In an effort to avoid privileging particular genres or authors, we are also serializing (replicating in a different format) our data using non-hierarchical ways of organizing information—namely the graph databases designed for Linked Open Data. This innovation will also eventually offer the opportunity for a digital union catalogue of Syriac manuscripts beyond the British Library holdings. (3) Because

the history of Syriac textual transmission involves data that are highly connected but only semi-structured (one may often have both gaps and links in a chain textual transmission), we are using visualization tools (such as D3js and the Neo4j Browser) designed for non-hierarchical network graphs to create new maps and models for the history of the Syriac manuscript tradition. (4) In an effort to foster a variety of interpretive approaches, end user access to Syriaca.org will not be limited to only one classification system or one hierarchical representation. Our digital catalogue will offer multiple ways to browse the collection: for example, providing one description of the manuscripts as currently held in the British Library and another representing how the manuscripts were held in the library of Dayr al-Suryān over time. (5) Because digital data can be given diverse representations, Syriaca.org's digital catalogue of the British Library Syriac manuscripts will also make its data available to serve multiple audiences and, when possible, to reflect their diverse knowledge needs, including the perspectives of Syriac heritage communities who view these manuscripts as their cultural patrimony.

Of these five innovations, the latter four build upon the first: overcoming the limitations of print media (both the linear nature of prose and the expense of printing) through digitization of metadata about the British Library Syriac manuscripts. This task is already well underway. Nearly fifty student research assistants have collaborated on creating metadata from the traditional data in Wright's catalogue and other sources.²⁸ This data also includes over 3 million characters of Syriac text, transcribed in Unicode characters by Robert Aydin. Because the data is both coming from documents and about documents (Wright's catalogue and the manuscripts themselves), it is being encoded as TEI compliant XML documents (www.tei-c.org/).²⁹ TEI XML is an extensible (flexible) digital format specifically designed for the description of textual data. The final representation of the data is not limited to XML, however. The data have intentionally been encoded in a way that allows for easy serialization (conversion) into other databases and formats. Just as Wright's catalogue laid the foundation for Baumstark's later history of Syriac literature, Syriaca.org's digitized manuscript dataset can serve as the raw material for digital representations of Syriac literature.

According to the best scholarly estimates, there are now approximately 20,000 Syriac manuscripts and fragments that have been digitally documented in some way (Stewart 2015). Achieving a broad panoramic view of the history of Syriac literature is beyond the scope of a single human perspective (unaided by technology). As we have seen, even the diversity of the approximately 1000 manuscripts in his catalogue was difficult for Wright to summarize in a representative way. While these numbers are perhaps small compared to some data sets in the natural sciences, we are nevertheless still in the range where machine analysis of digital data can offer insights beyond the ability of a scholar working by hand, and therefore a digital catalogue opens possibilities not available from a print catalogue.

In building the digital data model for our catalogue, we have been guided by an ultimate aim to lay the ground work for a digital union catalogue for Syriac manuscripts, an electronic search portal that could return results from multiple manuscript catalogues at multiple institutions. Syriaca.org has played a central role in planning such a union catalogue search function, bringing together three projects which will link their data: Ektobe, a project of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris (<http://www.mss-syriaques.org/>); the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Minnesota (<http://www.hmml.org/>); and Syriaca.org (<http://syriaca.org/>). Syriaca.org and its partners are creating the combined data set by employing emerging tools used to query data on the web, particularly Semantic Web technologies such as NoSQL graph databases and the best practices of Linked Open Data (LOD) being developed by several digital humanities projects concerned with the ancient world (Poole 2013; Elliott et al. 2014).

The use of non-hierarchical graph databases is the second digital method that we have determined will foster a diversity of interpretation and a breadth of data. Implementation of non-hierarchical databases is part of our use of Linked Open Data, “a set of best practices for sharing digital resources” (Elliott et al. 2014; Berners-Lee 2009). The key feature of Linked Open Data is linking together datasets through shared Uniform Resource Identifiers (URIs) and common Resource Description Framework (RDF) vocabularies (also called “ontologies”). In our case these will enable the linking of data needed for a union digital catalogue. URIs are unique identifiers which allow the linked

data sets to refer to the same objects in a uniform way (such as the same ancient authors: for example, Syriaca.org has indicated the author and saint Ephrem the Syrian as <http://syriaca.org/person/13>). The URIs provide a controlled way to refer to unique objects and the RDF vocabulary provides a controlled set of terms for annotating the relationships between data. For example, the Dublin Core Ontology (<http://dublincore.org/documents/dc-rdf/>) offers common terms and “semantic” definitions for bibliographic description, including such vocabulary as “creator”, “title”, and “publisher”.

Useful ancient world models with similar implementation of Linked Open Data (using URIs and RDF) can be found in Pelagios, a project for the study of ancient geography (<http://pelagios-project.blogspot.com/>), and the Standards for Networking Ancient Prosopographies project (<http://snapdrgn.net/>). The benefits of this approach for the study of Syriac manuscripts are threefold. First, by using the shared URIs and RDF vocabularies established by Syriaca.org, projects are able to combine and link together related data, thus increasing the “big picture” through aggregation of data. Various visualization tools can be applied to this dataset to help scholars analyze information across datasets that was previously only visible in part.³⁰ Second, as the semantic properties of Linked Open Data (the shared definitions of terms such as “title”) come into use across multiple catalogues, common vocabularies will allow researchers to run sophisticated queries, such as limiting searches based on “title” or “creator” and including vocabulary more specific to manuscripts such as “scribe”.

The most attractive benefit of the Linked Open Data approach from our perspective, however, is that it enables the creation of a non-hierarchical graph database. A graph database draws upon graph theory in mathematics and computer science to represent the relationships between objects as a structured graph (a geometric abstraction representing an ordered set of relationships or “properties” between items (Easley & Kleinberg 2010)). Representing data in a graph database differs from a traditional tabular database (where data is stored in tables) because the data in a graph may be re-organized according to multiple perspectives without being limited by its structure in a table.

Syriaca.org uses a graph database to resolve one of the conceptual difficulties of Wright's print catalogue, where the organization of the information prioritizes genre, author, original language, and date as the classifications through which one may view the collection. For example, the emphasis of Wright's catalogue on biblical texts and prominent Greek and early Syriac Fathers makes it very difficult to get an accurate view of the mass of Syriac literature, which is largely composed of medieval miscellanies and anonymous texts not prioritized in his ordering system. A non-hierarchical graph can also contain this same information about relationships between manuscripts based on genre, author, and date (so one can still browse this way), but the graph database also allows *any point of information* (any "node") to serve as the vantage point from which to organize the whole collection. Accordingly, one may analyze the manuscript data from alternate hierarchical perspectives (e.g., browse the data by scribe or location), from multiple simultaneous perspectives (faceting), or from an infinite number of visualizations of the whole graph (Robinson et al. 2015). Because the data is linked by properties, it can convey all of the information of the previous print catalogue and yet because the data is a graph it can be queried and visualized in ways that hierarchical data cannot not.

Non-hierarchical technologies and linked data provide a data architecture which allows multiple and even competing perspectives on the data, but there is also a need for tools for the users who want to query or evaluate the data for their research. This is the third innovation in digital media that Syriaca.org has pursued. We have already seen that the hierarchical organization and linear nature of Wright's print catalogue is not suited to the genetic models needed for tracking the transmission history of individual parts of miscellanies or anthologies. This is because most of our historical information on textual transmission involves data that are highly connected but only semi-structured (i.e. we know only some of the relationships between texts, exempla, and manuscript trees, but often must work by inferences and with many gaps). This highly connected but variably structured information is very similar to the World Wide Web data that is currently processed with graph databases (Robinson et al. 2015, p. 19).

Already scholars of the ancient and medieval world are beginning to see the power of Semantic Web graph databases for mapping complex networks of relationships.

The Sharing Ancient Wisdom's project (<http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/>) has created an RDF vocabulary for tracking the development and transmission of *gnomologia* (wisdom sayings) across textual and cultural traditions (Lawrence & Jordanous 2013; Jordanous et al. 2013). The specific need for such a tool has already been recognized not only for the study of mixed-content “miscellany” manuscripts (Birnbaum 2003) but also for the monastic miscellanies (*apophthegmata*) of the Syriac tradition in particular (Rubenson 2013; Holmberg 2013). The RDF serialization of the Syriaca.org catalogue will include the SAWS ontology when possible, and if possible will structure its data graph to reflect the transmission relationships between *apophthegmata*, *gnomologia*, and similar anthologized genres.

Besides assisting scholars with traditional questions, such as tracing the origin and transmission of texts, graph data also makes possible new ways of visualizing collections of text. The D3js Data Driven Documents project, which developed out of the Stanford Visualization Group, offers numerous tools for exploring networks and relationships, many of which have been noted as useful ways for visualizing humanities data (most prominently by their use in the *New York Times* (Bostock et al. 2011)). A similar suite of tools has also been developed around the Neo4j graph database. Syriaca.org's new digital catalogue of Syriac manuscripts has already begun demo work on how to assist users with easy scripts for running such visualization tools.

A fourth innovation of the Syriaca.org catalogue is similarly motivated by a desire to foster a variety of interpretive approaches. Our digital catalogue will offer multiple ways to browse the collection: for example, providing one description of the manuscripts as currently held in the British Library and another representing how the manuscripts were held in the library of Dayr al-Suryān over time. Because a graph database makes it simple to generate multiple perspectives on the same dataset, digital reuse of Syriaca.org's catalogue is not constrained by the same limitations as Wright's catalogue. The cost of printing meant that the print representation of the manuscripts (the catalogue) could use only one classification system and one hierarchical system—although, to Wright's credit, it should be noted that he did provide several useful indices in the third volume which offered some alternative but more difficult paths through his catalogue.

We have been guided in our interpretive decisions by recent post-colonial scholarship in Museum Studies which has begun to suggest how digital representations (“digital objects” or digital catalogue descriptions) could be mutable, mobile, and able to “carry a multitude of complex references to the original physical object, while being decoupled from its dominant institutional account” (Srinivasan et al. 2010). Syriaca.org’s new digital catalogue will offer multiple digital representations of the same physical objects. For example, in one configuration a digital catalogue of the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts will describe them in their current state as held in the British Library. Another digital representation will rearrange the data to reflect how the manuscripts were acquired and held in the library of Dayr al-Suryān over time.

From the perspective of historical research, a number of digital projects have served as models for us of the digitally recreation of historical knowledge bases, especially virtual recreations of period manuscript libraries. The Reichenau-St. Gall Virtual Library hosted by UCLA (<http://www.stgallplan.org>) is a very successful example of recreating two medieval manuscript libraries by digitizing and preparing metadata for 171 manuscripts which were originally held at the libraries in the ninth century. The Bibliotheca Laureshamensis—digital: Virtuelle Klosterbibliothek Lorsch (<http://www.bibliotheca-laureshamensis-digital.de>) is an even more ambitious project, in which 309 European medieval manuscripts that were once held in the monastic library of Lorsch but are now owned by 73 libraries worldwide have been digitally reassembled online to permit scholars to engage the collection in its medieval context (approximately eighth to eleventh century). Finally and most recently, the Virtuelles Skriptorium St. Matthias (2015) has virtually reassembled over 500 manuscripts held by 25 institutions to recreate the library of the St. Matthew monastery in Trier (<http://stmatthias.uni-trier.de>).

In 2002, the British Library’s annual report featured the idea of a virtual Dayr al-Suryān library as a case study for ways in which the British Library could share its collection with heritage communities (2002, p. 13). Since 2002, this dream has received approval from other scholars in the field (Stewart 2008, p. 629; Kominko 2015, p. liii). Syriaca.org’s catalogue could eventually be designed to facilitate the creation of multiple virtual Dayr al-Suryān libraries representing different eras in the history of the collection.

These libraries would not only include the British Library materials but could digitally reunite those manuscripts with other manuscripts from Dayr al-Suryān now held elsewhere across the globe (Brock & Van Rompay 2014).

Moreover, such a virtual library of Dayr al-Suryān could reunite the codices which Wright split in his descriptions, allowing scholars to see how the texts might have been arranged in the Middle Ages. This codicological “stratigraphy” may or may not reflect an intentional system of organization on the part of the medieval curators, but it is an important historical context for us to recover. We may be surprised to discover that certain pairs of texts circulated together (for example, the *Sentences of Sextus* appeared so often with the works of Evagrius that at times the former were eventually attributed to the latter). The potential for discovery from such a virtual reassembling of the physical collection is great. With some irony, scholars have begun to realize that the digital era has not effaced the role of the physical object in interpretation. Instead, it has forced scholarship to admit that the connection between message and medium, between text and support, is essential to interpretation (Clivaz 2012, pp. 35, 52; Clivaz 2014). Accordingly, the virtual library of Dayr al-Suryān should be designed with an aim to help us digitally recreate the original, physical context in which the manuscripts were consulted, read, copied and disseminated.

We have already seen that digital data can be given diverse representations. The fifth digital innovation of Syriaca.org’s manuscript catalogue arises from our decision that while these representations should be generated for purposes of historical research, they should also be created to serve other audiences as well. Like many Western museum objects, the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts were appropriated using dubious means during a period of increasing European colonial hegemony. In the present era, however, both ethical principles and scholarly best practices have called attention to the special responsibilities of institutions and scholars who are curators and conservators of “traditional cultural expressions” (TCEs) such as manuscripts (ALA 2010). One of the first duties is to work with indigenous source communities to ensure culturally sensitive means of access and interpretation for such objects. In particular, Ramesh Srinivasan has suggested that this can be accomplished through the design of culturally sensitive

information systems, enabling digital collections and catalogues to be simultaneously responsive to multiple communities and even reflect their diverse local knowledges (Srinivasan et al. 2009; Srinivasan et al. 2010; Srinivasan et al. 2010). These information systems include the use of multiple ontologies (classification systems) and interactive or Web 2.0 technologies to welcome participation by heritage and indigenous communities (Shilton & Srinivasan 2007).

Wright's catalogue was arranged to serve as evidence for a univocal European scholarly vision of Syriac literature—a vision situated firmly in a narrative of Oriental and medieval decline followed by Occidental enlightenment. In its linear print format and authoritative scientific vocabulary, the catalogue does not easily lend itself to accommodating other viewpoints, such as the needs and perspectives of contemporary Syriac and Coptic heritage and religious communities for whom the manuscripts are more than museum pieces for study. In response, Syriaca.org's digital catalogue has intentionally engaged members of the heritage communities to serve as advisors and researchers. In addition, we have built extensibility into the data architecture so as to allow for the catalogue to be reorganized in the future according to indigenous criteria suggested by the heritage communities. Finally, we have adopted “free culture” licenses on all of our data to allow independent reuse in the future.³¹

Given that many of the weaknesses in Wright's British Museum catalogue arose from insensitivity or even animosity toward the previous owners of the manuscripts at Dayr al-Suryān, it is fitting that we conclude this article by highlighting our intentional decision that future digital catalogues of materials from the Dayr al-Suryān library should be designed in dialogue with the Syriac and Coptic cultural and religious communities who consider the manuscripts their heritage. In fact, such a call for open-minded dialogue was already made over half a century ago by the Syriac scholar and Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Ignatius Aphram I Barsoum. In his 1943 book *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*, Barsoum criticized Wright's negative summary of Syriac literature (“the literature of Syria is, on the whole, not an attractive one...”):

... some contemporary European writers have attempted... to gain fame by defaming eminent (Syrian) writers... This is sheer hypocrisy. After all, what is the use of knowledge if it does not refine man to the point where he would refrain from profaning what is sacred to other people. Above all they claim to belong to an age which has achieved a great degree of refinement and civilization. Yet how ill their deeds and how false their words... (Barsoum 2003, p. 538)

As a scholar working from within one of the Syriac religious traditions, Barsoum called for an ethic of mutual respect (“refrain from profaning what is sacred to other people”) that leaves room for the religious communities which created the Syriac literary heritage to carry their traditions forward with intellectual and hermeneutical autonomy. As the leader of a Middle Eastern minority community during the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century, Barsoum was viscerally aware that the organization and construction of knowledge is not a neutral endeavor. His call—“what is the use of knowledge if it does not refine”—should serve as a reminder that the primary purpose of knowledge production and preservation in the humanities is to increase mutual understanding across human cultures and societies. This sentiment is the ethical and scholarly imperative that drives the technical and methodological choices of Syriaca.org and undergirds our resolve that future catalogues of Syriac manuscripts should actively welcome and encourage the voices of the contemporary Syriac communities and diaspora.³²

Conclusion: “The Delights of Manuscripts”

In the epilogue to his *Introduction to Syriac Studies*, Sebastian Brock writes of the “delights of manuscripts” with particular reference to a special manuscript from Dayr al-Suryān, BL MS Add. 12150, the oldest dated Syriac manuscript:

To read, as one sits in the Oriental Studies Room of the British Library, the words “this volume was completed in the month Teshri II of the year 723 in Urhay, the capital of Beth Nahrin” is a moving experience, for at the end of this, the earliest of

all dated Syriac manuscripts (411 of the Christian era), is also a list of names of Persian martyrs, almost certainly brought back from Seleucia-Ktesiphon only a few months previously by Marutha, bishop of Martyropolis, who had been serving as ambassador to the Sasanid court. It does not take much imagination to find oneself transported back across time and space to Edessa in November 411. (Brock 2006, p. 61)

The delight of discovering past voices through the Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts has been shared by scholars, clerics, monks and all Syriac readers for well over a millennium. In the digital era this potential for discovery continues, and has even expanded, as new technologies promise to open up new methods of access. It is this spirit that Syriaca.org has tried to pay particular attention to method and technique so that the delight of these manuscripts can be shared with new readers and new audiences well into the future.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank a number of interlocutors who have commented on my argument, especially Paul Dilley and Claire Clivaz and other anonymous reviewers of the article who improved its clarity dramatically. Comments from or discussions with colleagues, including members of Vanderbilt University's Overlook Seminar as well as Chris Benda, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Jay Geller, Kristian Heal, Christopher Johnson, and Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent have also sparked my thinking. My father, Paul Michelson, deserves credit for my interest in nineteenth-century intellectual history. Lastly, my research groups of students at Vanderbilt University and the University of Alabama, chief among them Robert Aydin, have been patient partners in working through William Wright's prose as we digitize it. Any mistakes in this article remain, of course, my own.

² This monastery is known by a variety of names. This article has followed here the transliterated head word used by Syriaca.org's *Syriac Gazetteer* in its entry on the monastery, which for disambiguation is assigned the URI: <http://syriaca.org/place/360> (Michelson & Carlson 2014). In some of the sources used in this article, the monastery is also referred to as St. Mary Deipara (Mother of God). It should be noted that the monastery was from the eighth century until some point in the early modern period a Syriac monastery in Egypt, but by the time that the manuscripts began to be sold the monastery was entirely a Coptic monastery. Accordingly, the resident monks in the nineteenth century had less use for the manuscripts in a language they were likely unable to read. An informative set of essays about the monastery has been edited by

Mikhail & Moussa (2009) and a recent essay on the Syriac manuscripts from the monastery can be found in Van Rompay (2015).

³ Wright's work serves here as a useful case study, but it is not by any means the only earlier scholarship in need of review in the re-writing of the history of Syriac literature. In any language, Anton Baumstark's *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* remains the standard (1922). More recent works by Ortiz de Urbina and Brock offer updated but decidedly less exhaustive coverage of Syriac literature (Ortiz de Urbina 1965; Brock 2011). Nevertheless, the scope of this article is limited to a reconsideration of Wright's work as a necessary first step toward a new survey of Syriac literature—with the hope that this article may inspire another scholar to analyze the Syriac work of Baumstark to the same end. Recent work on Baumstark's intellectual context by scholars in liturgical studies reveals that there will be much of methodological or revisionist interest to Syriac studies as well (West 1995; Berger 2011; Baumstark 2011).

⁴ Tom Heath and Christian Bizer offer the following definition of Linked Data: "The term *Linked Data* refers to a set of best practices for publishing and interlinking structured data on the Web. These best practices were introduced by Tim Berners-Lee in his Web architecture note *Linked Data* and have become known as the *Linked Data principles*" (2011, p. 7). Linked "Open" Data follows these same principles but with an added emphasis on allowing *open* access to the data. Linking to data without access is of course of less utility.

⁶ Wright's 1887 encyclopedia article is perhaps better known today through its later reprint as a stand alone volume: *Short History of Syriac Literature* (Wright 1894). For this article, the 1887 American edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has been used.

⁷ For further on the genre of European travel literature see Bridges (2002, pp. 56–8).

⁸ While Cureton's work does not dwell on racialized African themes, it is certainly present in the broader literature. For example, Curzon's *Visits to the Monasteries of the Levant* gratuitously includes a lithograph of a bare-breasted "negress waiting to be sold in the slave bazaar, Cairo", the only purpose of which seems to add a voyeuristic element to the work since the woman depicted is not referred to in the text at all (Curzon 1850, p. 5).

⁹ Sebastian Brock has pointed out the great tragedy of how the nineteenth-century acquisition did have the effect of cutting off access by the Syrian Orthodox church to some of its own authors since the sole copies of certain early texts were now held only in Europe (Brock 1994, pp. 103–104).

¹⁰ Johnson's analysis is in conversation with the long running debate over Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1979). Scholarship on Orientalist travel literature has now rightly noted that Said's construct must be significantly nuanced to make room for more flexible models (Melman 2002). Johnson's interpretation is one such example. Eastern Christian Orientalism does not exactly fit the binary tropes of Orientalist literature posited by Said, but does function as a sort of "literary tradition of 'semi-Orientalism,' which mixes 'classical' Orientalist rhetoric with a view of the Christian East as not fully Oriental but somehow tainted" (Johnson 2014, p. 833) Averil Cameron's recent work on "Byzantinism" independently arrives at a similar paradigm (Cameron 2014).

¹¹ The concept of an "atlas" of literature is borrowed here from Franco Moretti (Moretti 2007; Goodwin 2011).

¹² See note 1 above on the various names for the Dayr al-Suryān monastery.

¹³ On the long history of “medievalism” and the term “dark ages” see Nelson (2007).

¹⁴ Indeed, it may be that Wright had more time to decipher them, as he mentions the use of “chemical reagents” to recover the underwriting of the palimpsest (Wright, 1872, p. vi).

¹⁵ See for example BL MSS Add. 14,490 where an extensive colophon offers an insight into why this particular palimpsest was overwritten at Dayr al-Suryān in the year A.D. 1089 (Wright, 1872, pp. 160–61).

¹⁶ *N.B.* The adjective Greek is assumed here and elsewhere to such a degree that its normative status is clear.

¹⁷ Wright does insert a new category high into this list, “Service-books”, but even these are divided between texts “of comparatively modern date” and “copies well worthy of notice”, e.g. of ancient provenance (Wright 1872, p. xviii).

¹⁸ It should be noted as further proof of the tension that even later in the same work, Wright backtracks to note: “Besides the versions of Holy Writ and other works enumerated above, the literature of Syria comprises a vast amount of matter, interesting not merely to the Orientalist but also to the classical scholar, the theologian, and the historian” (Wright 1894, p. 28). This comment is ambivalent, however. It could be that Wright means that the Syriac authors are of interest “merely to the Orientalist”, while the early texts and translations from Greek are of wider interest to “the classical scholar, the theologian, and the historian.”

¹⁹ It is perhaps not a coincidence that these same authors have received the bulk of attention from Syriac studies scholarship in the twentieth century.

²⁰ These word counts have been rounded to the nearest hundred since they are approximate and come from an OCR scan of the document, not a precise hand count.

²¹ Because a full digital version of the catalogue is not yet available, this argument relies on an approximate page count from the printed volume rather than a precise word count. It should be made clear here, however, that these page numbers refer to the length of Wright’s descriptions, not to the actual size of the manuscripts being described.

²² “Bibliographic control” is a technical term in library science for the organization of bibliographic information (Taylor et al. 2015, pp. 3–4).

²³ Panizzi’s work was controversial and Panizzi received the public support of Cureton in 1856 against his critics (Cowtan 1872, pp. 324–326).

²⁴ Both Wright and Cureton also briefly discuss “scientific” texts such as Aristotle as an addendum, but these are omitted from discussion here since Wright and Cureton make it clear that they view these texts as separate from the main body of “Christian” literature. This Enlightenment trope is itself germane to the analysis here, but a separate lengthier treatment is needed for how they handle those materials and is beyond the scope of this article.

²⁵ It should be noted that Wright had two precedents for choosing print media for his catalogue: the very brief (140-page) prior catalogue of Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum (Rosen and Forshall, 1838) which did not include the Dayr al-Suryān acquisitions and the much longer (4000-page) catalogue of the Vatican Syriac manuscripts produced in the early 1700s (Assemani, 1719). Wright mentions both in the opening paragraph of his preface (Wright 1872, p. i).

²⁶ Thus even at present Kessel rightly concludes: “Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid in earlier scholarship to the actual manuscripts that preserve the monastic literature” (Kessel 2015, p. 413).

²⁷ This is not, however, meant in anyway to assert that the scholarly aspirations of our own age are any more objective or less historically conditioned than those of previous scholars. Our generation’s work will benefit from the critical judgment of the future just as much as any.

²⁸ See <http://syriaca.org/project-team.html> for a list of the contributors. Although at present our data set is only based on William Wright’s catalogue, an eventual plan is to expand the data to include other Dayr al-Suryān manuscripts and eventually a linked data set of all Syriac manuscripts.

²⁹ An open repository of the documents published to date can be found at <https://github.com/srophe/manuscripts>.

³⁰ Under the rubric of visualization, we include not only “the visual display of quantitative information” as modeled by Edward Tufte but also renderings of data into software, user interfaces, and even mental visualizations of data through prose (Tufte 2001).

³¹ At present, data derived from Wright is released in the public domain. Additional data is released under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.

³² One example of such a project is the Digital Samaritans project which grew out of a similar concern with making Samaritan manuscripts held at university libraries digitally accessible to the heritage community and diaspora (Ridolfo, Jim et al. 2010; Ridolfo 2013). A further example is the effort of the “Manuscripts of Lichfield Cathedral” project to take into ethical consideration the needs of the religious community which owns the manuscripts (Endres 2014). The role of digital representations of traditional culture expressions to serve the needs of diaspora communities has also been examined by Srinivasan (Srinivasan & Pyati 2007).

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