Syriac Medicine: Introduction

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A growing interest in Syriac science and medicine can be observed in scholarship published over the last decades.\(^1\) An impressive wealth of new textual discoveries and studies has been produced, often in the framework of important European research projects, which has facilitated fruitful collaborations between scholars.\(^2\) Inspired by this vibrant exchange, the present issue was conceived after the conference Medical Translators at Work. Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Translations in Dialogue, which Oliver Overwien, Cristina Savino and I organized in 2014 at the Humboldt University of Berlin, as part of the Alexander von Humboldt Professorship programme Medicine of the Mind, Philosophy of the Body, directed by Philip van der Eijk.

The semantic layers that are potentially hidden in the expression ‘Syriac medicine’—which has been chosen to introduce this special issue—are instrumental in highlighting some key aspects of the subject. In fact, both the term ‘medicine’ and the adjective ‘Syriac’ require further specification. On the one hand, ‘Syriac’ can qualify the cultural milieu in which medicine was practiced, it can indicate the language in which medical texts were composed (or into which they were translated), or it can even specify the kind of script used to copy medical texts in manuscripts. Medicine penetrated different institutions

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\(^1\) For an updated survey on Syriac science, see the recent collection of papers edited by Emilie Villey, Les sciences en syriaque (Paris: Geuthner, 2014).

\(^2\) See the joint (as well as individual) studies published by the members of: (1) the ERC project FLORIENTAL—From Babylon to Baghdad: Toward a History of the “Herbal” in the Near East (2011–2017), directed by Robert Hawley and based in Paris; (2) two projects based in Manchester: the ERC project Arabic Commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms (2012–2017), directed by Peter Pormann, and the AHRC project The Syriac Galen Palimpsest: Galen's On Simple Drugs and the Recovery of Lost Texts through Sophisticated Imaging Techniques (2015–2020), directed by Peter Pormann along with Siam Bhayro and William Sellers; (3) the ERC project HUNAYNET—Transmission of Classical Scientific and Philosophical Literature from Greek into Syriac and Arabic (2016–2021), directed by Grigory Kessel and based in Vienna.
(schools, monasteries, hospitals) attached to distinct and sometimes competing churches, such as the Syriac Orthodox Church (sometimes called ‘Jacobite’) and the Eastern Church (also known as ‘Nestorian Church’). Single ‘cultural’ centres in particular have so far attracted the attention of scholars, such as the monastery of Qennešre, the school of Nisibis, and Gondēšāpūr. In some cases, however, the interpretations of ancient sources have led to contradictory conclusions: Gondēšāpūr, for instance, has been both identified with a sort of medical university and defined as a mythological fiction. In fact, the famous Boktišo‘ family, coming from Gondēšāpūr, may have forged a mythical past (claiming to come from a learned centre of study), in order to give more weight to its position in Abbasid Baghdad. Its members, indeed, served as court physicians between the 9th and the 11th centuries and composed significant medical works in Arabic. Before (and along with) using Arabic, Christian scholars and physicians (often bilingual or even trilingual) used Syriac to compose their writings, from the famous 6th-century translator Sergius of Rēš ‘Aynā up to leading figures of the so-called Syriac Renaissance, such as the 13th-century polymath Barhebraeus. Finally, in some cases the adjective ‘Syriac’ can just qualify the script used to copy medical texts: Syriac scripts, for instance, were used to copy Arabic medical texts (so-called garšūnī) as well as Persian pharmacological handbooks, such as in two folios now belonging to the Turfan Collection.

On the other hand, the term ‘medicine’ can refer to a broad spectrum of healing practices, which are often associated with historically determined sets of theories and beliefs. Moreover, it can encompass a variety of sub-fields and specializations, from anatomy to physiology, from pharmacology to surgery. A comprehensive historical study of the different ways in which medicine has been practiced and conceptualized in Late-Antique and Medieval Christian communities speaking Syriac is certainly a desiratum among scholars.

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5 Raymond Le Coz offered a preliminary description of the state of the art, mainly addressed to a general readership; see R. Le Coz, *Les médecins nestoriens au Moyen Âge. Les maîtres des*