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Pulling a Yoke through the White Field: East Syriac Poetic Paraphrases of Scribal Rhetoric

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Abstract

As shown in recent studies, East Syriac colophons were rather standardised, at least in the Ottoman period, and they incorporated into the main colophon body not only prose passages, but also poetic ones. The current article discusses one such passage that occurs in both prose and poetic forms in various manuscripts, namely the topos of ‘the five twins that pulled a yoke from the forest through the white field’. It provides a fascinating example of the trope’s transmission over the centuries, as well as the poetic creativity of East Syriac scribes as manifested in the Ottoman period.

Keywords

manuscript colophons – East Syriac tradition – poetry – verse rendering – scribes – poetic anthologies – ‘Aṭāyā of Alqosh – ‘Abdišō‘ of Gāzartā

1 Introduction¹

As shown in recent studies, East Syriac colophons were rather standardised, at least by the Ottoman period,² exploiting in most cases similar or identical pat-

1 I would like to thank the following people who helped with this study: Margaret Graves (Indiana University), Pier Giorgio Borbone (University of Pisa), Mark Dickens (University of Alberta), as well as two anonymous *AS* reviewers.

2 See H.L. Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures. The Church of the East in the Eastern Ottoman Provinces (1500–1850)* (Eastern Christian Studies, 21, Leuven: Peeters, 2015) pp. 113–142.

terms of rhetoric.³ They moreover incorporated into the main colophon body not only prose passages, but also poetic passages.⁴ We have discussed various categories of these texts in another article that will be published soon.⁵

The current article analyses just one of these passages that occur in both prose and poetic forms in various manuscripts. It provides a fascinating example of the poetic creativity of East Syriac scribes during the Ottoman era. As will be shown below, the poetic versions are of later origin and reflect the growing popularity of poetry in the period.

The text in question is a detailed metaphor that contains a supplication addressed to the Lord to grant a reward to ‘the five twins that pulled a yoke from the forest (or thicket) through the white field’. Its sense is rather clear: it alludes to the five fingers that carried a stylus (i.e. a reed), from the inkwell to the manuscript leaves; it thus describes the labour of a scribe.

2 Prose Versions of the Passage

The prose version was reproduced and carefully analysed by Heleen Murre-van den Berg, following the lectionary manuscript Jerus. Syr. 1, fol. 128^v, written by the priest Gīwargīs in Alqosh in 1679^{AD} and currently in the library of the Greek Orthodox Jerusalem patriarchate.⁶ The copyist is well-known as an active scribe and poet;⁷ nevertheless, this passage is rendered in prose, rather than poetry, as is the rest of the colophon.

In fact, this is not the first time that this metaphor appeared; it is found already in a Gospel lectionary, DCA 00096, fol. 108^r (Chaldean Diocese of

3 On certain rhetorical figures used by scribes, see S.P. Brock, ‘The Scribe Reaches Harbour’, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 21 (1995), pp. 195–202 (198–201); T.A. Carlson, ‘Formulaic Prose? Rhetoric and Meaning in Late Medieval Syriac Manuscript Colophons’, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 18.2 (2015), pp. 379–398.

4 The poetic colophons composed by ‘Abdišō’ of Gāzartā were published and studied in A. Pritula, ‘Abdišō’ of Gāzartā, Patriarch of the Chaldean Church as a Scribe’, *Scrinium: Journal of Patrology and Critical Hagiography* 15 (2019), pp. 297–320 (304, 316–320).

5 See A. Pritula, ‘Verse Pieces in the Paratextual parts of East Syriac Manuscripts: Main Types and Categories’, *Scrinium: Journal of Patrology and Critical Hagiography* 17 (2021) (forthcoming).

6 Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures*, pp. 19, 271, 288, 312–313 (the name of the scribe Gīwargīs mentioned in the colophon is found on p. 312).

7 For more details about the scribe and his production, see H.L. Murre-van den Berg, ‘The Patriarch, the Scribe and Mr. Reader: The Colophon of Jerusalem Ms. Syr 1, a Gospel Lectionary from Alqosh (1679)’, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 63.3–4 (2011), pp. 277–310.

15), before directly mentioning the reed (stylus) that comes from the wood and closing with a supplication for deliverance from the hellfire.

One meets a prose version of this scribal passage in much earlier East Syriac manuscripts, such as the famous ‘Masora’ (Add. 12,138 in the British Library), dated to 899 AD,¹³ and even earlier in BL Add. 14,551, apparently from the 8th century.¹⁴ In both manuscripts, the paragraph being discussed contains the request for God not to withhold the reward of the five brothers who work in the field sowing the good seed. Both early manuscripts (BL Add. 12,138 and BL Add. 14,551) mention ‘bird feathers’ (ܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ) instead of the ‘reed’ (ܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ), and the ‘field of animals, parchment’ (ܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ) rather than the ‘white field’ (ܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܦܝܘܬܐ).¹⁵ Obviously, this earlier version refers to the production techniques of the earlier period, namely writing with a feather quill on parchment (vellum) folia. It is generally believed that quills were replaced by reed pens in the Syriac tradition by the 10th–11th centuries,¹⁶ whereas the replacement of parchment by paper occurred over several centuries and was nearly finished by the 13th century in the West Syriac tradition, slightly earlier than in the East Syriac.¹⁷

Thus, it seems rather certain that the prose version is earlier than the Ottoman era poetic versions discussed below. Moreover, there are no Syriac quatrains at all—or indeed any short poetic forms—that would be as old as the two aforementioned British Library manuscripts (8th–9th centuries), where the earliest prose versions occur. The earliest Syriac quatrains are known from the Mongol period (late 13th–early 14th centuries) and have been studied and published by Alessandro Mengozzi,¹⁸ who has extensively studied the

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- 13 See the complete text edition and a detailed study in J.A. Loopstra, *An East Syrian Manuscript of the Syriac ‘Masora’ Dated to 899 CE: A Facsimile Reproduction of British Library, Add. MS 12138* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014–2015) vol. 1, p. 621; vol. 2, p. 411.
- 14 See W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired since the Year 1838*, vol. 2 (London: British Museum, 1870–1872) p. 585b.
- 15 See Loopstra, *East Syrian Manuscript*, vol. 1, p. 621; vol. 2, p. 411.
- 16 See W.H. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1946) p. 8.
- 17 F. Briquel Chatonnet, ‘De l’usage du parchemin à celui du papier dans les manuscrits syriaques’, in F. Briquel-Chatonnet and M. Debié (eds.), *Manuscripta Syriaca. Des sources de première main* (Cahiers d’études syriaques, 4, Paris: Geuthner, 2015) pp. 141–160 (150–152).
- 18 See A. Mengozzi, ‘Persische Lyrik in syrischem Gewand: Vierzeiler aus dem Buch des Khamis bar Qardaḥe (Ende 13. Jh.)’, in M. Tamcke and S. Grebenstein (eds.), *Geschichte, Theologie und Kultur des syrischen Christentums: Beiträge zum 7. Deutschen Syrologie-Symposium in Göttingen, Dezember 2011* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, Syriaca, 46, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014) pp. 155–176; A. Mengozzi, ‘Quatrains on Love by Khamis bar Qardaḥe: Syriac Sufi Poetry’, in S.H. Griffith and S. Grebenstein (eds.), *Christsein in der islamischen*

complex relationship between prose and poetry in both the Syriac and the Neo-Aramaic tradition.¹⁹

3 Poetic Versions of the Passage

There are at least two quatrains that represent poetic versions of this scribal supplication. One of them, embedded in the place corresponding to prose colophons, occurs in at least seven manuscripts:

- CCM 000398, fol. 168^v (Chaldean Cathedral of Mardin, formerly Diyarbakir 95), *Miscellanea*, 1583AD²⁰
- DCA 25, fol. 256^r (Chaldean Diocese of Alqosh), *New Testament*, 1821AD²¹
- ACA 00003, fol. 81^r (Chaldean Archdiocese of ‘Aqrah), *Book of Ordination*, 1824AD²²
- DCA 99, fol. 443^v (Chaldean Diocese of Alqosh), *Ḥudrā*, 1824AD²³
- DCA 91, fol. 092^r (Chaldean Diocese of Alqosh), *Book of Homilies for the Rogation of the Ninevites*, 1845AD²⁴
- DCD 27, fol. 65^r (Chaldean Diocese of Dahok), *Book of Homilies for the Rogation of the Ninevites*, 1866AD²⁵
- ACK 00091, fol. 217^v (Chaldean Archdiocese of Kirkuk), *Book of Ordination*, 1895AD.

Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015) pp. 331–344. Syriac scribes of the Ottoman period might have followed these poetic models.

- 19 For instance, see A. Mengozzi, ‘Simon Magus and Simon Peter in Rome: The Sureth version of a late east-Syriac Hymn for the commemoration of Saints Peter and Paul’, *Kervan—International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies* 22 (2018), pp. 65–89.
- 20 Formerly Diyarbakir 95 in the Diyarbakir Chaldean collection. See A. Scher, ‘Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l’archevêché chaldéen de Diarbékir’, *JA* 10 (1907), pp. 331–362, 385–431 (395). See also Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures*, pp. 323–326, online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132517>.
- 21 Available online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/208287>. Description: Sana, ‘Manuscripts of Al-Qosh Church’, p. 232.
- 22 Available online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/500441>. Description: Y. Ḥabbī et al., *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in Iraq*, vol. 2 (Baghdad: Publications of the Iraqi Academy, Syriac Corporation, 1981) pp. 29–30, no. 30; J.-M. Vosté, ‘Catalogue des Manuscrits Syro-Chaldéens conservés dans la Bibliothèque Épiscopale de ‘Aqra (Iraq)’, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 5 (1939), pp. 368–406 (381, no. 22).
- 23 Available online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/208324>.
- 24 Available online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/208316>. Description: Sana, ‘Manuscripts of Al-Qosh Church’, p. 96.
- 25 Available online at vHMML: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/133519>.

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Quatrain that is suitable to be written at the end of a book; by the same one

O Lord, do not withhold the wage of the five twin-brothers,
 Who toiled and pulled the yoke through the white fields!
 But rescue them from the flame of fire
 And honour them with the prepared reward of the Kingdom!

The contents of the quatrain are very similar to the other prose and poetic versions, save for the direct mention of the reed pen, which is absent here. Both the fingers and the stylus are alluded to, rather than being directly referenced. This suggests that the piece represents a form of *ūḥadtā* (enigma, riddle), dozens of which were composed by ‘Abdišō’ of Gāzartā, many of them present in the CCM 000398 poetry collection (for example, see fol. 256^v, 257^r, 258^r, 259^v, 260^v, 261^r).³¹ The poet seems to have had a special taste for these *ūḥadtā*, even exploiting a paragraph of the manuscript colophon to compose such pieces.

Since this quatrain (fol. 264^v) is found in CCM 000398, dated to 1583, it must be at least as old as the other quatrain on the same subject in that same manuscript (fol. 168^v). Moreover, it must have been written before 1570, the supposed date when ‘Abdišō’ of Gāzartā,³² to whom it is ascribed, died. Since this text is found only in the aforementioned poetic anthology, it was either not popular among scribes or other manuscripts where it was used have not survived.

31 See also Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures*, p. 324.

32 The date of this patriarch's death is disputed; we follow the date suggested in D. Wilms-hurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation of the Church of the East, 1318–1913* (CSCO Subsidia, 104, Louvain: Peeters, 2000) p. 94; and Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures*, pp. 250–251.

4 Conclusion

As one can see from the texts examined, the prose version of the ‘white field’ passage is much older than the poetic versions. The initial version of the passage found in earlier manuscripts, from the 8th–9th centuries, referring to parchment and quill, was then changed in response to the evolution of manuscript production techniques. Later on, the modified version seems to have circulated for centuries, as the manuscripts listed above testify. At some later stage, no later than the 16th century, it was rendered in poetic form.

Thus, it seems that in most cases, just like in the case under discussion, poetic versions of scribal passages are secondary to the original prose versions, appearing as a response to the growing popularity of poetry;³³ this is made even more likely by the fact that many of the scribes were poets themselves.³⁴

The question arises, then, whether the copyists, acting as poets, started by inserting such quatrains into the colophons of the manuscripts they were copying, after which these pieces were included in poetic anthologies. A movement in the opposite direction might also be possible, with the poets (who were also practicing copyists) first including the poetic versions in their collections of poetry, after which such pieces were used as manuscript colophons.³⁵ Most likely, there were diverse ways of transmitting such pieces; in many cases, poems integrated into the paratextual manuscript parts could circulate in a parallel way within the anthologies, with each form of transmission being used by the other. This reflects the very complex processes by which poetry circulated within East Syriac manuscripts of the Ottoman period, when poetry gained more popularity and space in the tradition than ever before. In the process of such a complex circulation over centuries, some of the poetic versions obviously became popular among scribes, whereas others did not, resulting in their occurrence in just a single poetry collection.

The popularity of scribal poems in the Syriac tradition during the Ottoman period is comparable to the spread of such texts in the contemporary Islamic

33 For instance, see A. Pritula, ‘What Kind of Poetry Would a Syriac Manuscript-Thief Read about Oneself?’, *Scrinium: Journal of Patrology and Critical Hagiography* 16 (2020), pp. 390–397.

34 See, for instance, Pritula, ‘Abdišō’ of Gāzartā’; A. Pritula, ‘Reading and Writing on Reading and Writing: Short Poetry on Flyleaves in a Manuscript of the Metrical Grammar (DCA 00065)’, *Scrinium: Journal of Patrology and Critical Hagiography* 16 (2020), pp. 1–19; Pritula, ‘What Kind of Poetry’; Pritula, ‘East Syriac Poetry Embedded’.

35 See, for instance, A. Pritula, ‘Scribal Quatrains in Poetic Collections: General Typology and the Question of Origin’, *Manuscripta Orientalia* 27.1 (2021) (forthcoming), DOI: 10.31250/1238-5018-2020-26-2-3-11.

tradition. Such a comparison certainly invites further study. A priori, one can point out the following:

1. Poetic texts incorporated into paratextual manuscript parts were generally common in the Middle East in the late medieval and early modern periods.
2. East Syriac poetic texts incorporated into paratextual manuscript parts entered the general canons of ecclesiastical book design, whereas similar pieces in the Islamic tradition were no more than individual scribal and local features.³⁶
3. As suggested in the current article, this may be explained by the fact that hierarchs, scribes, and poets in the East Syriac tradition were quite often roles jointly held in the transmission and development of ecclesiastical books. This peculiarity should be considered an important feature of the East Syriac manuscript tradition in Ottoman times.

36 For instance, see R. Şeşen, 'Esquisse d'une histoire du développement des colophons dans les manuscrits musulmans', in F. Déroche and F. Richard (eds.), *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997) pp. 190–221; A.M. Piemontese, 'Devises et vers traditionnels des copistes entre explicit et colophon des manuscrits persans', in F. Déroche (ed.), *Les manuscrits du Moyen-Orient: essais de codicologie et de paléographie: actes du colloque d'Istanbul (Istanbul, 26–29 mai 1986)* (Istanbul / Paris: Institut français d'études anatoliennes d'Istanbul and Bibliothèque nationale, 1989) pp. 77–87.