

Crossroads of Rhetoric: Syriac, Greek, and Arabic Intellectual Exchange

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Introduction

The variety of Aramaic known as [Syriac](#) was originally a local vernacular, which emerged in the early first century CE in the city of [Edessa](#) (modern-day Şanlıurfa, in Turkey). Speakers of Syriac originally lived in an area known as Osrhoene, where a large body of [documents](#) written in their mother tongue, encompassing inscriptions, mosaics, and legal documents, was found. From the fourth century, Syriac developed a literary language and, most importantly, the official liturgical language of Syriac Churches. This triggered a wider circulation of the language, which was employed by Christian groups all around the Mesopotamian and Syrian regions. These groups were never united under one state that represented their culture and interests (with the sole exception of the reign of the [Abgarids](#), from ca. 133 BC until the middle of the third century), and were often bilingual with other local or official languages.

Syriac-speaking members of the elite were forced to travel to Athens, Antioch, and Alexandria to get a higher education, which was imparted in the *lingua franca* of the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean: Greek. However, once Syriac acquired a literary status, Syriac speakers created their own school system, shaped after Greco-Roman *paideia*, which was fully developed by the sixth century. However, modern scholars believed that this system lacked an independent rhetorical theory and, consequently, a teaching curriculum on the subject. This is because even though Syriac literature is imbued with rhetorical figures and eloquent speeches, it was necessary to ascertain how Syriac Christians acquired these tools and how the curriculum of Syriac rhetorical studies emerged. Moreover, while engagement with Aristotelian philosophy was an important aspect of Syriac education, no Syriac translation of Aristotle's *Technē Rhetoriké* is preserved.

Even though Syriac schools were fully operating already in the sixth century, it is only in the ninth century, under the Muslim caliphate of the Abbasids, that the first (and only) handbook on Syriac rhetoric appeared, composed by a certain Antony of Tagrit. A teacher of rhetoric, Antony was the first Syriac scholar to articulate rhetoric as an academic subject; his treatise demonstrates engagement with classics of Syriac literature (e.g., [Ephrem the Syrian](#), [Jacob of Serug](#)), secular Greco-Roman culture (e.g., Homer, Plutarch, and the progymnasmata), Christian rhetoric (e.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea), but also with Aristotelianism more broadly. And yet, it is impossible to pin it down to a precise model or tradition, which suggests the existence of a proper Syriac rhetorical model, probably taught without fully-fledged manuals. The level of engagement that Antony's

handbook shows with both Christian and secular previous sources could hardly have been achieved by one scholar alone, especially considering that we ignore whether Antony knew Greek and some of his sources (e.g., the progymnasmata) never received a Syriac translation. This tradition, which developed within the walls of Syriac schools for centuries, did not receive a written standardisation until the Arabs and their language took over the intellectual supremacy in West Asia, making it necessary for Syriac Christians to showcase and preserve their tradition and heritage.

The identification of Antony's sources provides unprecedented insights into the material that circulated in Late Antique schools across language boundaries (Greek, Syriac, Arabic) and encourages us to look into the complex relationship between Syriac rhetoric and Byzantine and Islamic Aristotelianism. Even though it was often through Syriac intermediation that Greek philosophy received an Arabic translation, and even though the only extant Arabic version of Aristotle's *Techne Rhetoriké* was based on a Syriac version (lost today), the Syriac rhetorical tradition was far less dependent on Aristotle or Greek and Latin rhetors than one would expect.

To understand the level of engagement that Syriac rhetoric entertained, for instance, with Aristotle, one can compare Antony of Tagrit's handbook to the only witness of Aristotelian rhetoric in Syriac, [Barhebraeus'](#) (1225/6-1286) thirteenth-century *Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric*, to have an idea of how profoundly different they were.

Course Applicability

Undergraduate Courses

History of Rhetoric
 Ancient Rhetoric
 Theories of Persuasion: Cross-Cultural Approaches
 Religious Rhetoric

Graduate Courses

Comparative Rhetorics
 Religious Rhetoric in the Eastern Christian Tradition
 Byzantine Rhetorics
 Syriac Literature and Cultural Heritage
 Traditions in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic Thought
 Transmission of Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Medieval Worlds

Key Pedagogical Themes

Adaptation and evolution of teaching curricula: The Syriac-speaking Late Antique population grew in multilingual and multicultural contexts, in which its mother tongue and tradition were often minoritarian. Teaching

curricula were influenced by the surrounding dominant traditions (especially Greco-Roman) as much as anything else; therefore, whilst they developed alongside the growing status of Syriac as a literary and liturgical language, they kept many traces of adaptations of inherited models.

Birth of an independent rhetorical tradition expressed in Syriac: With the development of teaching curricula, we witness the birth of inherently Syriac disciplines. In the case of rhetoric, this discipline grew thanks to the integration of previous models with newly developed theories. The birth of the discipline also triggered the creation of a technical vocabulary to be used by teachers and students.

Ninth-century approaches to Syriac heritage: The need to affirm a Syriac identity and its role within the contemporary cultural horizon was brought about as a response to political changes and turmoil brought about by the Arab conquests and the establishment of Arabic as the new language of culture.

Rhetoric in Multilingual Contexts: This refers both to the multilingual situation of Syriac-speaking communities, as well as to their rhetorical target. Therefore, considering that ninth-century Syriac people were living under Arab rulers, the fact that rhetoric was taught in Syriac, to Syriac-speaking students and with Syriac models, is informative as to who was meant to receive it. A paradigmatic example of this is the fact that most polemics against Muslims were composed in Arabic, the language of the targeted group.

The role of rhetoric in Syriac: unlike the Greco-Roman world, Syriac rhetoric seems little concerned with winning public arguments or debating in court, and more focused on the production of panegyric and persuasive discourses about one's faith.

Essential Terminology

Syriac-speaking population: Those who employed Syriac, either as their mother tongue or, from the fourth century, as a liturgical language. The area where they lived (spanning over modern South-East Turkey, Syria and Iraq) had been subjected to the intellectual supremacy of the Greek language since the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE). Once the Roman Empire took over the Mesopotamian and Syrian regions, Greek remained the *lingua franca* of the area. However, there were Syriac native speakers who did not know Greek, as well as those who were educated enough to become translators from Greek into Syriac.

Syriac schools: At the beginning of the history of Syriac culture, primary education was imparted in village and church schools. However, centres for

secondary and higher education were absent, and members of the Syriac-speaking elite were frequently sent to Greek cities to pursue an education. Syriac centres for higher education emerged gradually in the context of urban areas. These institutions were often connected to monasteries, where books were copied and acquired.

Syriac curricula: Little is known about how teaching curricula emerged in Syriac schools. It seems that rhetoric and grammar constituted the core of the Syriac course of study. Throughout Late Antiquity, education in language sciences was considered a necessary tool in the Syriac ecclesiastical culture to gain access to the Scriptures and Christian theology. Once Syriac schools emerged and developed, the teaching curriculum broadly followed the subdivision of disciplines of the Greco-Roman *enkyklios paideia*, a progressive learning pathway to knowledge in which grammar, rhetoric (including metrics) and dialectic served to equip the students with the analytical method governing all other disciplines, from astronomy and geometry to medicine and physics.

Syriac students of rhetoric: Since rhetoric was probably taught within the walls of monastic schools, we can assume that at least some of the students were to become members of the clergy. These students must have already been advanced in their studies, as the complexity of the language and the philosophical concepts employed in rhetorical teaching were not suitable for elementary classes.

Definition of rhetoric: "Rhetoric is the faculty of persuasive speech, which possesses a proper sequence (*akolouthía*), on any given subject, either in sciences or in actions, and has the power and the ability to persuade the multitude and push the hearers to attention and consensus to what it is said (...) Some give account only of a part of this definition, saying that rhetoric is concerned only with the actions of the state (*d-fulṭiyo*)" (Antony of Tagrit, *On Rhetoric*, Book I, ch.2).

Rhetorical "classics": Texts used as models and examples of rhetorical devices and speeches. In Syriac rhetoric, these were Homer's epic, some Plutarchan and Pseudo-Plutarchan orations, the Scriptures and the Acts of the Apostles, Gregory of Nazianzus' orations and poetry, Ephrem the Syrian's and Jacob of Serug's compositions, and others.

Progymnasmata: preliminary exercises employed in Greek rhetorical schools to introduce students to the practice of declamation. These exercises covered a rich array of topics, useful for those who were destined to speak in public. The most important collections of progymnasmata were written by Aelius Theon (first century CE ca.), Hermogenes of Tarsus (second century CE), Libanius (d. 393), Aphthonius (second half of the fourth century CE), Nicolaus the Sophist (fifth century CE), and, later, John of Sardis (ninth century CE).

Definitions useful to understand secondary sources:

East Syrians: Members of the so-called "[Church of the East](#)", previously referred to as "[Nestorians](#)". The members of this Church reject the resolution of the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) and believe that two natures lived in Christ, his divinity and his humanity, which were sharply divided.

West Syrians: Members of the so-called "Jacobite" Church or [Syriac Orthodox Church](#). They adhere to Miaphysitism (or Monophysitism, as it was called), which denotes the belief in the single and indivisible nature of Christ, in which lived together both his humanity and his divinity. They reject the positions of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

Primary Sources

Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric Book 1*. English translation in Eskenasy, Pauline E. *Antony of Tagrit's Rhetoric Book One: Introduction, partial translation, and commentary*. PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1991. (Downloadable [here](#))

The following chapters are highly recommended:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Ch. 2 & 3 =
pp. 91 -98 | These chapters contain a definition of rhetoric according to Antony and a division of rhetorical speeches into 6 species, organised in 3 couples (praise and blame, accusation and defence, encouraging and discouraging battles – i.e., persuasion and dissuasion) |
| Ch. 5 = pp.
107-10 | This chapter discusses in detail how to derive blame from elements of praise, with many examples (especially from Homer) |
| Ch. 8 = pp.
126-41 | This chapter is the first of a group in which Antony explains the proper lexis to be used in each speech |
| Ch. 30 = pp.
273-280 | Epilogue |

Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric Book 5*. English translation in Watt, John W., *The Fifth Book of the Rhetoric of Antony of Tagrit* (CSCO 481, *Scriptores Syri* 204, Translation). Leuven: Peeters, 1986.

The following chapters are highly recommended:

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| Prologue = pp.
1-8 | Antony provides here a list of scopes for writing his handbook and clarifies how the idea of putting rhetorical teaching into writing came to him (i.e., as a consequence of the controversies with those who diminish the intellectual role of Syriac |
|-----------------------|--|

speakers and the Syriac language – the Arabs). The chapter also illustrates Antony's excellent rhetorical qualities as a speaker and writer of persuasive and ornate discourses.

On figures =
pp. 53-71

This chapter shows how non-Christian and Christian Greek sources in Syriac translation were re-employed alongside original Syriac literature as sources of examples. It also clarifies which figures of speech entered the Syriac tradition and how they were to be employed.

Barhebraeus, Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric. English translation in Watt, J.W. *Aristotelian Rhetoric in Syriac: Barhebraeus, Butyrum Sapientiae, Book of Rhetoric.* Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005. (Downloadable [here](#))

The following chapters are highly recommended:

Ch.1 = pp. 53-81 (only odd pages) This chapter is in stark contrast with Antony's rhetorical doctrine, as it follows Aristotle's *Techne Rhetoriké* and Avicenna's *Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric*. It is interesting to see what was retained from the Greek text and what was left behind, and to compare this with the Syriac rhetorical theory described by Antony of Tagrit.

Ch. 7 = pp. 241-87 (only odd pages) This chapter discusses rhetorical lexis and how to craft elegant speeches. It also provides some discussion on rhetorical figures. Again, it is interesting to compare this section with Antony's chapter on figures.

Secondary Sources

For an overview of Syriac education:

Farina, M. – Nicosia, M. 'Rhetoric and other language sciences in Syriac', in F. Woerther et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Rhetoric*. Cambridge: CUP (forthcoming 2026). (pre-print version downloadable [here](#))

This paper offers a brief and accessible overview of the role of rhetoric as part of the language sciences studied in school by Syriac-speaking students.

King, D. 'Education in the Syriac World of Late Antiquity', in P. Gemeinhardt, L. Van Hoof, and P. Van Nuffelen (eds), *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity. Reflections, Social Context and Genres*. London-New York: Routledge, 2018, 171–185.

This paper reconstructs the pathway that led to the development of Syriac education in Late Antiquity. It provides names of scholars and institutions, the philosophical premises behind each curriculum and the role played by rhetoric in such a context.

Rigolio, A. 'Towards a History of Syriac Rhetoric in Late Antiquity', *Millennium* 19 (2022): 197-218. (downloadable [here](#))

Comprehensive but accessible overview of the use of rhetoric in Syriac literature before it was written down as a fully-fledged "techne" by Antony of Tagrit. This overview is necessary to fully comprehend the width of the role that Antony's handbook played in the standardisation of the discipline and its consecration as a part of the Syriac cultural heritage.

Watt, J.W. 'Rhetorical Education and Florilegia in Syriac', in M. Farina (ed.), *Les auteurs syriaques et leur langue*. Paris: Geuthner, 2018, 95-110.

This paper discusses the roles of *gnomologia* (collections of sayings and maxims with a moral content) and *florilegia* (collections of excerpts) within Syriac rhetorical educations and highlights the points of contact and divergence with the classical Greek tradition.

On Antony of Tagrit:

"Antun of Tagrit" in: Brock, S.P. – Butts, A.M. – Kiraz, G.A. – Van Rompay, L. (eds). *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*. Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press, 2011. <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Antun-of-Tagrit>.

This encyclopaedic entry has the benefit of being brief and provides the most important initial information on the topic.

Nicosia, M. 'Reassessing Antony of Tagrit: when did he actually live?', *Oriens Christianus* 104 (2021): 67-88 (downloadable [here](#))

This paper discusses in detail, for the first time, the issue of dating the Syriac teacher Antony of Tagrit. His life was wrongly attributed to the beginning of the ninth century based on an oral tradition,

reported by Barhebraeus, that Antony was a contemporary of the Patriarch Dionysios of Tell Maḥre (d. 845). This paper provides new evidence in favour of positioning Antony's life at the end of the ninth/early tenth century, while discussing the contemporary intellectual situation in Iraq.

Nicosia, M. 'Heliodoros' Aethiopica in Antony of Tagrit's Fifth Book of Rhetoric: A Follow-up Study, Sixteen Years after the Discovery', *Le Muséon* 137, 1-2 (2024): 137-169. (downloadable [here](#))

This paper offers proof of the fact that Antony of Tagrit was the owner of the earliest manuscript with his handbook, closes definitively the discussion on his date, and partly corrects a previous study (Corcella 2008) on the quotations from Heliodoros' "Aethiopica" in Antony of Tagrit's treatise "On Rhetoric". It offers valuable insight into Antony's teaching methodology, the texts employed in Syriac schools, and what rhetoric teachers deemed worthy of consideration in class.

Nicosia, M. 'Crafting Traditions: Antony of Tagrit, his 'Classics' and the Syriac Classicising Rhetorical Learning', N. Gaul et al (eds.), *Performing Antiquity: Classics, Community and Power in Medieval Eurasia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, (forthcoming). (downloadable [here](#))

This paper offers both a summary of Syriac educational practices and how they emerged, and a discussion on the concept of "classics" in Antony of Tagrit's handbook. Therefore, it analyses for the first time the pedagogical programme offered in Syriac schools and the sources which informed it.

On Syriac rhetorical theory:

Nicosia, M. 'Antony of Tagrit and the progymnasmata: Towards a Syriac rhetorical theory in the Abbasid Era', *Histoire Epistémologie Langage* 46 (2024): 135-158. (downloadable [here](#))

This paper reflects on the role of ninth-century Syriac education and rhetorical teaching. Particularly, it reflects on why such a subject was conceived as a fully-fledged "techne" only under the Abbasids and shows how much of the Greco-Roman progymnastic heritage was kept in Syriac schools.

Nicosia, M. 'Antony of Tagrit and his teaching: Patristic quotations in the treatise On Rhetoric', in: S.C. Popa (ed.), *Teaching and Learning the Norms of Life and Faith: Pedagogues, Educators and their Heritage in Abrahamic Religions*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025, 277-301. (downloadable [here](#))

This paper reflects on the role of patristic quotations as sources of examples within Syriac rhetorical teaching and their relationship with quotations from non-Christian Greek "classics" used for the same scope.

Watt, J.W. *Rhetoric and philosophy from Greek into Syriac*. London: Variorum Reprints, 2010. (Ch. 4, 7, 10)

Ch. 4 offers an overview of the circulation of rhetorical theories and practices throughout Byzantium and, later, the Arabic-speaking worlds. Ch. 7 clarifies what was received of the rhetorical concepts of Plato and Aristotle in the Syriac tradition. Ch. 10 reflects on the theory of the "philosopher-king" that can be evinced within Antony of Tagrit's handbook and its role as a part of the Syriac rhetorical theory.

Watt, J.W. *The Aristotelian Tradition in Syriac*. London-New York: Routledge, 2019. (only Ch. 11)

This chapter explains the differences between the rhetorical theory explained in Antony's handbook and the Aristotelian rhetorical theory. Watt suggests that the distinction between these two branches should be understood as an opposition between philosophical and literary rhetoric.

Informal handbook on Syriac and Arabic rhetoric, which I put together for my undergraduates in Ghent (BE). (downloadable [here](#))

Even though this source is not "official", it was conceived for teaching purposes and might prove useful as a support for students and teachers.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the work of Antony of Tagrit reveal the influence of Graeco-Roman teaching tradition? How would you describe his understanding of rhetoric?
2. What is particularly innovative about Antony's approach?
3. What was retained from previous rhetorical traditions (e.g., Christian or Jewish rhetoric)?
4. If we consider the contents of Antony's handbook, what do you think was the purpose of rhetoric in the Syriac-speaking world? What were its main goals?
5. What are, in your opinion, the main differences between Antony's handbook and the *Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric* composed in the thirteenth century by Barhebraeus?
6. In light of what you learnt about the development of Syriac rhetoric, do you think that this challenges traditional narratives about the "decline" of rhetoric after the classical period?
7. Do you think that modern multilingual communities can be inspired by the Syriac approach to developing rhetorical theory in a vernacular language?
8. Do you see any parallels between the Syriac communities' need to develop a vernacular rhetorical education and the contemporary efforts to "decolonize" rhetorical studies? If so, why?

Sources Cited In-Text

All the sources cited in-text come from the *e-GEDSH* (<https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/index.html>), which is the online version of Borck, S.P.; Butts, A.M.; Kiraz, G.A.; Van Rompay, L. (eds), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press, 2011.

Abgarids: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Abgarids-of-Edessa> (T.S. Wardle)

Antony of Tagrit: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Antun-of-Tagrit> (J.W. Watt)

Barhebraeus: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Bar-Ebroyo-Grigorios> (H. Takahashi)

Church of the East: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Church-of-the-East> (S.P. Brock & J.F. Coakley)

(Old Syriac) documents: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Old-Syriac-documents> (A.M. Butts)

Edessa: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Edessa> (A. Harrak)

Ephrem the Syrian: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Ephrem> (S.P. Brock)

Jacob of Serug: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Yaqub-of-Serugh> (S.P. Brock)

Nestorians: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Nestorianism> (S.P. Brock)

Syriac: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Syriac-Language> (A.M. Butts)

Syriac Orthodox Church: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Syriac-Orthodox-Church> (G.A. Kiraz)

Additional Downloadable Resources

Antony of Tagrit, *Rhetoric Book 1*. English translation in Eskenasy, Pauline E. *Antony of Tagrit's Rhetoric Book One: Introduction, partial translation, and commentary*. PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1991. <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ll7cqeadz2duy67t23pl2/Eskenasy-1991-Antony-of-Tagrit-s-Rhetoric.pdf?rlkey=o5veiuw2pekizejjsnsoqhn8d&e=1&st=89j925wi&dl=0>

Barhebraeus, Commentary to Aristotle's Rhetoric. English translation in Watt, J.W. *Aristotelian Rhetoric in Syriac: Barhebraeus, Butyrum Sapientiae, Book of Rhetoric*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/mf2u378swlk6n1j5d3ha1/Watt_Aristotelian-Rhetoric-in-Syriac.pdf?rlkey=fmtgexskfc9z91a47wl7cudvr&e=1&st=9gh0lrsv&dl=0

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Informal Handbook:

https://www.academia.edu/130320403/Syriac_and_Arabic_Rhetoric_Informal_handbook_for_students_2022_23

Nicosia, M. 'Reassessing Antony of Tagrit: when did he actually live?', *Oriens Christianus* 104 (2021): 67-88.

https://www.academia.edu/61042453/Reassessing_Antony_of_Tagrit_when_did_he_actually_live

Nicosia, M. 'Heliodorus' Aethiopica in Antony of Tagrit's Fifth Book of Rhetoric: A Follow-up Study, Sixteen Years after the Discovery', *Le Muséon* 137, 1-2 (2024): 137-169. <https://poj.peeters->

leuven.be/content.php?url=issue&journal_code=mus&issue=1&vol=137

Nicosia, M. 'Antony of Tagrit and the progymnasmata: Towards a Syriac rhetorical theory in the Abbasid Era', *Histoire Epistémologie Langage* 46 (2024): 135-158. <https://journals.openedition.org/hel/5995>

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