

Jacob of Sarug's Poem on the Forty Martyrs and Late Antique Syriac Translation Technique

In Late Antiquity, poets writing in Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Armenian negotiated the identity of their religious communities through the interpretation and textual representation of biblical and non-biblical texts. The account of the forty martyrs of Sebaste emerged in the fourth-century C.E. as a particularly rich locus of textual reflection: in that century alone, there appeared Greek *Acta*, followed by homilies by Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, and a Greek poem attributed to Ephrem (for the Greek Acts, see Musurillo 1972. For the homilies of Basil and Gregory, see Lemons 2003. The text of Ephrem Graecus' homily is printed in Assemani. To the best of my knowledge, no modern language translation exists). During the fifth-century the narrative of the cult made its way into Syriac, and, in the early sixth-century, became the subject of a poem by Jacob of Sarug, d. 521 (the Syriac *Acta* are presented in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, 3:355-375. Jacob's poem is printed in volume six of the same collection. Neither of these texts have been translated into modern languages). While Sebastian Brock (2012) has noted in passing that Jacob's poem on the forty martyrs is dependant upon the Syriac *Acta*, no more extensive study of the relationship between the two texts has yet been undertaken. In this paper, I first indicate the textual relationship between the Syriac *Acta* and Jacob's poem, arguing that Jacob did indeed draw upon the prose *Acta*. I then explore the relationship between the two texts in terms of late ancient translation technique. By comparing Jacob's representation of the narrative of the forty martyrs, with his representation of biblical narratives in other poems, I argue that Jacob's manner of representing prose texts in verse was remarkably consistent regardless of the source material he was representing.

Bibliography

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