

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: UOA27
Title of case study: Promoting Understanding of Syriac Christianity
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Sebastian Brock's research on Syriac language, literature, and religion has changed public understanding of the history of Christianity and directly influenced the practices and beliefs of several Christian communities, helping to overturn centuries of theological opinion and persuading the leadership of western churches that Syriac Christianity is not a heretical offshoot but a central part of its history and development. The impact of his research is significant not just for followers of the Syriac traditions, for whom he has authored many resources for instruction and liturgy, but also for other denominations, including the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches and Roman Catholicism. His research opened the way to stronger relations among these communities, leading to official doctrinal agreements between the Roman Catholic church and the Syriac language-using churches. His publications have cemented his reputation as the voice of scholarly authority within the Syriac church.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>During 40 years in Oxford Brock has been a prolific researcher and writer in every field on which Syriac language and religion impinge. He has published more than 40 books and 450 articles, as well as liturgical texts and translations that Syriac churches in many parts of the world use in instruction and practice. The combination of techniques that he brings to bear on his material has enabled him to have a transformative effect: rigorous philology, high proficiency in an unusual range of languages – Syriac, Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Armenian – unmatched paleographical skills, literary and aesthetic sensibility, and extensive theological and historical grounding.</p> <p>Brock has taken what had been seen as a peripheral, minor language for the study of Christianity (Syriac), and through his scholarly work has persuaded academic historians of Christianity, including figures such as Peter Brown and Diarmaid MacCulloch, that far from being marginal, the doctrines and texts of Syriac authors are fundamental to understanding the history of the pre-medieval church. Syriac Christianity, he has consistently argued, is one of the faith's central varieties and needs to be seen alongside the Latin and Greek traditions as constitutive in the religion's history. Brock has shown that Syriac poets, mystics, and theologians influenced other Christian traditions and early Islam.</p> <p>In the 5th century Christian churches divided into several doctrinal groups, causing a rift between, on one side, the Roman and Orthodox churches, and on the other the churches on and beyond the eastern edges of the Roman empire: Nestorian, Syrian, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian. For many centuries, western academic theology had been entirely attuned to western, Catholic and Protestant, doctrine, and viewed communities such as Syrians and Nestorians as heretical. In turn the eastern churches and their theologians responded with antipathy to the western churches. Brock's works present evidence-based studies which show that differences in doctrine over such matters as the ontology of Christ are smaller than thought and that most perceived 'heresies' are not actual, that is, are not supported by the Syriac texts of the eastern traditions to which they had been attributed.</p> <p>We give three of many examples here. The Greek, Russian, and Syrian churches had held the 7th century Isaac the Syrian of Nineveh as a foundational figure for the understanding and practice of mysticism. This position was based on their knowledge of Isaac's Ascetical Homilies, only the first part of which was extant. Brock discovered, edited, and translated the lost second part, publishing it in 1995 (followed by popular versions in English [1997, 2006], Arabic [1998], Dutch [2002, 2008], German [2003], and French [2010]). His discovery doubled the known oeuvre of this key figure in eastern Christian monastic spirituality. Some ideas in the rediscovered part, such as Isaac's belief in universal salvation (even for non-Christians, the wicked, and demons), which are not present in the previously known portion of Isaac's work, have provoked a radical rethinking of his significance for the eastern churches.</p> <p>Brock's work on Ephrem the Syrian shows that, though largely downplayed as a literary figure in western scholarship for centuries, he was one of the greatest poets in Christianity, to be compared with Dante, and as a poet had an entirely different, symbolic way of doing theology. Churches and scholars accept Brock's appraisal, and the Syrian churches now consider Ephrem their foundational poet-theologian. Modern renderings of Ephrem's poetry have been published</p>

recently in languages of India and the Middle East, many of them inspired by Brock's work and produced for a readership in the religious community.

Poetry is integral to Syriac liturgies. The nature of the material and its liturgical uses led to excerpting, scattering, and reorganisation of individual verses of poems, mostly from the 5th century. Brock has reconstructed the original texts of many of these poems, using manuscripts and the comparison of extant liturgical material in a variety of languages. These reconstructions have usually been published not by academic houses but in series produced by religious institutions. Thus, the *Treasure House of Mysteries* (see section 3) appeared in the Popular Patristics Series from St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, the organ of a Russian Orthodox seminary. These publications usually include Brock's English translations, ensuring that his entirely original and highly rigorous research feeds directly into the liturgies of the eastern churches, who are often happy to use his translations in reformulating their practice. Scholars in the field also consult these works because of their significance.

Brock's research cannot be separated from his outreach and knowledge-exchange activities. Throughout his career he has engaged not only with theologians, historians, and philologists, but also with living Christian communities. The Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church bestowed on him the title of Commander of St. Ephrem, an honour never before awarded to a layperson. The same Church has declared him one of the very few Doctors of its faith. For his ecumenical writings and activities, the Roman church has made him a papal knight. His major research findings are disseminated in scholarly articles, in publications aimed at non-academic readers, as well as through his energetic ongoing involvement in guiding study and research in Syriac by practitioners within the Christian communities.

Sebastian Brock was Reader in Syriac Studies from 1974 to 2003. Since his retirement he has been Professorial Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Oxford and continues to be an active researcher.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), 'The Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI (2 vols, Leuven, 1995). [available on request]

Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy (Aldershot, 2006). [available on request]

Ephrem the Syrian. Select Poems [Syriac-English] (Provo, 2006) (with George Kiraz). [available on request]

The Hidden Pearl. The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage. I The Ancient Aramaic Heritage; II, The Heirs of the Ancient Aramaic Heritage; III, At the Turn of the Third Millennium: the Syrian Orthodox Witness (Trans World Film Italia, 2001). (with several collaborators) [available on request]

From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity (Aldershot, 1999). [available on request]

"The previous volumes [...] covered a range of topics and interests that, in a majority of cases, have come to be defined by Brock's pioneering scholarship. [...] Here, too, Brock's own prodigious scholarship defines the field." (review by Joseph P. Amar, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8.1 (2000), 115-16.

Treasure-house of Mysteries: Explorations of the Sacred Text through Poetry in the Syriac Tradition (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012). [available on request]

A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature, 2d ed. St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam 2008. [available on request]

Brock's lifetime of research was recognized by the British Academy in 2009 by the award to him of the Leverhulme Medal and Prize for Humanities and Social Sciences.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The influence of Brock is attested to by representatives of the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) in Kottayam, Kerala: “Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Russians, Greeks, Lutherans, Copts, Ethiopians, Georgians, St. Thomas Christians, Maronites, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syrian Orthodox and Ukrainians, have all taken him as a kind of Patriarch of Syriac studies, with unquestionable authority” [1]

Brock’s publications intended for Syrian Christian communities (as described in section 2) are translated further and used all over the world, extending the reach of his scholarly work into communities not normally exposed to original research. Through his participation with the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute “there is a genuine revival of Syriac studies in India” [1].

Numerous invitations have arisen from Brock’s world-wide reputation as a scholar in the Syriac tradition to consult with a variety of religious institutions on training courses and texts for religious formation offered to those wishing to enter one of the Syriac churches. For example, SEERI in India has established a correspondence course in English on Syrian Christian Heritage, for which Brock has authored three of the nine published course books [i]. At the Beth Aprem monastery Brock’s influence has meant that “East Syriac is studied and used in Liturgy, a new phenomenon in the much latinized Syro-Malabar Church” [1]. He has given lectures at seminaries across India such as the Orthodox Theological Seminary (Kottayam), Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary (Mulanthuruthy) and Good Shepherd Seminary (Palai) [1], and he has taught at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome [2].

As well as contributing to the education of those within Syriac churches, Brock’s publications serve as standard texts on numerous university courses around the world, such as the unit *East from Jerusalem: Christianity in Premodern Asia* taught in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Oregon [ii] and *Christianity along the Silk Road* in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University [iii].

Brock has played a significant role in ecumenical activities and related ecclesiastical texts, for example in his “translation of the ‘Burial service’ of monks (who are not priests) and nuns. The Syrian Churches were trying for this translation for more than 100 years in vain” [1]. This translation is used today by the St Thomas Christian Churches in India.

The international standing of Brock’s extensive research on the origins of Christian religious traditions has led to his becoming a member of the Pro Oriente Foundation, established to improve relations between the Catholic and Oriental Churches. “Its most recent meeting, held in January 2009, focused on the nature, constitution and mission of the Church. Brock continues to be a critical resource for all parties in this dialogue. In his publications he [ha]s illustrated again and again that Churches in dispute with each other often share the same ideas though they speak different languages” [2]. Participation with the Catholic church is further attested to: “His scholarly and erudite presentation of the Syriac anaphoras has practical implications for the ecumenical relations among Christian churches today. He demonstrates how unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. His recent publications (and they are many) continue to open new avenues for dialogue between the Catholic and Oriental Churches” [2].

The president of Beth Mardutho, The Syriac Institute, New Jersey summarises: “Sebastian Brock not only had far-reaching effects on Syriac scholarship in general (there is hardly a paper published that does not cite his work), but was able to have a tremendous impact on the life of Syriac Christianity today. One particular field that he affected is ecumenism. Throughout his writings and lectures at official ecumenical meetings, he brought together factions that have been separated for generations. He played an important role in showing that the faith of the Syriac Orthodox Church and that of the Church of the East, seen traditionally as heretical, are indeed orthodox. He coined the term miaphysite to replace the prejudicial term monophysite. Brock’s term not only received wide acceptance in scholarship, but was accepted formally by the Patriarchs of the Oriental Orthodox churches as a term that correctly describes their Christological formula. It is no surprise that Brock has received the highest honors from the Syriac Orthodox Church and from the Catholic Church.” [3]

As well as having an influence within religious communities, Brock’s research has also been brought to bear on interactions between church and state. The Mor Gabriel Syriac monastery in southern Turkey has had troubled relations with the Turkish state, which in 2012 expropriated the monastery’s lands. Through his research, advice, and briefing papers, Brock provided assistance to the Dutch MP P. H. Omtzigt, who with others applied pressure on the Turkish government to

return the lands, which they did in 2013 [iv].

Several interviews given by Brock are available for all on the internet and help circulate his findings to a wider audience. Melthodhaye, a Syriac Christian Youth Organisation, has posted an interview with Brock from their Second Annual Meeting in London, 2010 [v], where the interviewer specifically mentions the importance of Brock's academic work to the Syriac Church and language. A 2012 piece entitled "Sebastian Brock on the Syriac tradition in Christianity" was filmed for an educational portal of the Education Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church and had been viewed by 4237 people on YouTube [vi]. In February 2013 Brock participated in a public programme of study days, 'Meeting the Fathers', at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, teaching about St Ephrem [vii] and the event has been made publicly available for others to learn from [viii].

Brock's studies on Isaac the Syrian have significantly changed the understanding of his teachings, leading to an upsurge in interest and renewed publications and popular translations. For example, the monks at the Greek Orthodox Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston relied on Brock's work on the Syriac version of the text of Isaac's Ascetical Homilies when they published an English translation of the 8th–9th century Greek version. In the preface they referred to the "debt every lover of Syriac literature owes to Dr. Brock ... If Syriac studies are now more popular than they have ever been, if the research on Saint Isaac in particular is increasing, it is because those leading the way such as Brock genuinely love their subject and encourage, rather than deter, those who consider entering the field." [ix] Another example is a Dutch translation of Brock's Wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian, produced by the Syrian church in Holland [x]. Brock's English translations of dialogue poems and hymns have been published in the liturgical manuals of the Assyrian Church of the East. [xi].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

[1] Statement from Dean of Studies for the St. Thomas Christians in India (SEERI).

[2] Letter from Associate Professor, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome.

[3] Letter from President of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, New Jersey.

Other evidence sources

[i] <http://www.seeri.org/Publications.html>

[ii] http://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/407/rel_407.htm

[iii] https://registrar.princeton.edu/course-offerings/course_details.xml?courseid=010340&term=1134

[iv] "The Monastery of Mor Gabriel: a Historical Overview and Its Wider Significance Today", in P. Omtzigt, M. K. Tozman, A. Tyndal (eds), *The Slow Disappearance of the Syriac from Turkey and of the Grounds of Mor Gabriel Monastery* (Münster, 2012), 181–99. 9783643902689

Recent news item: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/return-of-mor-gabriel-land-to-be-debated-today.aspx?pageID=238&nID=55798&NewsCatID=339>

[v] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcLbLjmtXEK>

[vi] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=RsJfUbAmOLE>

The figure cited is as of 31 Jul. 2013.

[vii] http://www.iocs.cam.ac.uk/resources/texts/Community_Days_Poster.pdf

[viii] <http://vimeo.com/61259267>

[ix] *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, revised 2d edition, translated from the Greek and Syriac by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston Massachusetts, 2011, p. 110. (no author or editor is listed as it is a collective work of the monks.)

[x] *De Wijsheid van Sint Isaak van Ninevé*, tr. Annabelle Parker Glane: Bar 'Ebroyo Verlag, 2008. Based on S. B. Brock, *The Wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian* Oxford: Convent of the Incarnation, 1999.

[xi] *Kunash slawatha d-'ede qaddishe da-mdabranutha a(y)k taksa d-'Edta d-Madnha: Qyamta* (2012), 369–80; *Sullaqa* (2012), 211–15; *Pentiqosti* (2012), 253–6. (*Collection of Prayers of the Holy Festivals of the Divine Economy [of Christ] according to the Ritual of the Church of the East. Resurrection; Ascension; Pentecost.*) Sharafia and Beirut: Archdiocese of Lebanon of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East.