

Virtual Teaching Day
From Syria to Xi'an: Syriac along the Silk Road

February 26, 2022
11:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. EST



Floor Mosaic with Beribboned Parrots, late fifth century to early sixth century, Antioch on the Orontes. Dumbarton Oaks BZ.1938.74.b.1.

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Program

- 11:00 a.m. Welcome by Nikos Kontogiannis, director of Byzantine Studies, Dumbarton Oaks
- 11:10 a.m. *Syriac: Culture and Language between Two Empires*
Robin Darling Young, Catholic University of America and Dumbarton Oaks
- 11:30 a.m. Museum Object Discussion
Elizabeth Dospěl Williams and Jonathan Shea, Associate Curator of the Byzantine Collection and Associate Curator of Coins and Seals, Dumbarton Oaks
- 11:40 a.m. *Early Syriac Christianity and Its Relationship to the Jewish Tradition*
Emanuel Fiano, Fordham University and Dumbarton Oaks
- 12:00 p.m. Museum Object Discussion
Elizabeth Dospěl Williams and Jonathan Shea, Dumbarton Oaks
- 12:10 p.m. Q&A Discussion
- 12:30 p.m. Break
- 1:00 p.m. *Syriac Christians and the Rise of Islam: Coexistence, Conflict, and Cooperation*
Nathan Tilley, Duke University and Dumbarton Oaks
- 1:20 p.m. Museum Object Discussion
Elizabeth Dospěl Williams and Jonathan Shea, Dumbarton Oaks
- 1:30 p.m. *The Journey of Syriac Christianity on the Silk Road and Its Encounter with China*
Rong Huang, Harvard University and Dumbarton Oaks
- 1:50 p.m. Museum Object Discussion
Elizabeth Dospěl Williams and Jonathan Shea, Dumbarton Oaks
- 2:00 p.m. Q&A Discussion
- 2:20 p.m. Concluding Remarks by Jonathan Shea, Dumbarton Oaks
- 2:30 p.m. Program Ends

Abstracts

Syriac: Culture and Language between Two Empires

Originating in the region of Edessa and Nisibis in ancient Mesopotamia, and spreading west, east, and south from there, Syriac culture began in the second century and flourished throughout the first millennium as a community, a literary tradition, and a variety of Christian communities. This lecture is an introduction to early Syriac culture beginning with Bardaisan's writings and concluding with the establishment of separated East- and West-Syrian communities and their institutions as they related to their neighboring cultures.

Robin Darling Young is an associate professor in the Church History program at the Catholic University of America. She received her doctorate from the University of Chicago and has also taught at the University of Notre Dame, the University of Virginia, and the University of Chicago (visiting professor in Armenian studies). She is chief editor and translator of the Gnostic Trilogy of Evagrius of Pontus, under contract with Oxford University Press. Her coedited translation of *The Armenian Letters of Evagrius* is forthcoming in the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OSCO) series.

Early Syriac Christianity and Its Relationship to the Jewish Tradition

This talk will deal with the relationship between early Syriac Christianity and the Jewish tradition. Firstly, it will argue that the problem of the origins of Christianity in Syria presents a particular set of challenges and opportunities for scholars of ancient Christian-Jewish relations. Secondly, it will propose that a particular corpus within Syriac literature can offer some insights into the thorny historical problem of Jewish Christianity. Thirdly, it will tackle the question of the presence of "real Jews" (as opposed to mere literary creation) in late ancient Christian texts. In this connection, it will suggest that Syriac literature provides us with an interesting example of the integration of anti-Jewish rhetoric into an early civic Christian project.

Emanuel Fiano is an assistant professor of Syriac Studies at Fordham University, the Jesuit University of New York, where he teaches Syriac, Coptic, and early Christianity more broadly. He holds a BA in historico-religious sciences from Sapienza University of Rome as well as an MA and a PhD in religion from Duke University. Emanuel researches the intellectual history of late ancient Christianities, with a particular focus on Syriac and Coptic literature, on religious controversies, and on Christian-Jewish relations. His first book, *Three Powers in Heaven: The Emergence of Theology and the Parting of the Ways*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

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Syriac Christians and the Rise of Islam: Coexistence, Conflict, and Cooperation

Syriac Christians were the first Christians encountered in the Levant as the Islamic conquest progressed towards the Byzantine border. Yet, despite early Syriac accounts of these military campaigns, sources from the early centuries of Islam reveal more than simple conflict. Not only does the Syriac background show that Islam emerged marked by aspects of Syriac Christianity, but these Christians also worked together in later centuries with Muslims in the study of Greek philosophy and science. To demonstrate the spectrum of Muslim-Christian relations in this period, I briefly examine three encounters: (1) early Syriac responses to the Islamic conquests, (2) reflections of Syriac Christianity in the Qur'an, and (3) scholarly cooperation of Christians and Muslims on Greek learning in eighth- to eleventh-century Baghdad. By examining Muslim-Christian conflict, borrowing, and cooperation, we discover the surprising variety of religious interaction in the emerging medieval Middle East.

Nathan Tilley is a junior fellow of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks and a PhD candidate in religion at Duke University. His current research examines the varied receptions of Greek philosophy, theology, and medicine in East Syriac Christianity.

The Journey of Syriac Christianity on the Silk Road and Its Encounter with China

This talk will start with a brief introduction to the so-called "Silk Road," its geographic locations, history, and cultural significance. It will then give an overview of the journey of Syriac Christianity on the Silk Road and the active role the Sogdian people assumed in spreading this Christian tradition toward the East. The rest of the talk will focus on the encounter between Syriac Christianity and Chinese culture, introducing the audience to the texts and artifacts left behind by Syriac missionaries in China, while also discussing how we as scholars should employ the larger historical and cultural contexts to interpret the meaning of this interaction.

Rong Huang is a PhD candidate in religion at Harvard University and a Tyler Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks from 2021 to 2023. Her research interprets the East Syriac Christian texts written in classical Chinese during the Tang Dynasty (618–907).