

**Antoni Tronina, Mariusz Szmajdziński, *Wprowadzenie do języka syryjskiego* (Introduction to Syriac), Studia Biblica 6, Kielce 2003, Instytut Teologii Biblijnej Verbum, 153 pp., ISBN 83-915855-9-X.**

Many years ago Professor Andrzej Zaborski informed me, as he used to do every time we met, of a newly published Father Antoni Tronina's grammar and he kept repeating this information, which was also one of his habits, until I bought the grammar myself (Zaborski was an unexhausted source of bibliographic information). It took years before I decided to learn Syriac from Tronina's grammar. Before, I had attended Syriac lessons in Zaborski's class, who relied on two excellent, traditional grammars by T. Nöldeke and C. Brockelmann (Zaborski also made use of texts from anthologies other than Brockelmann's extensive *Chrestomathie*). Later I also joined the class of late Father Jerzy Woźniak, who used L. Palacios' *Grammatica Syriaca*. Palacios' Latin instructions are a special pleasure for a Classics scholar. The Classicist experiences the same sense of satisfaction every time he opens Brockelmann's and Brun's Syriac-Latin dictionaries.

The next step in my *Orient-Reisen* across the lands of Syriac grammar was also inspired by Zaborski. One day he brought me W. Thackston's *Introduction to Syriac* and suggestively advised me to read it. I went through Thackston's lessons and anthology in one breath. It certainly took me a long time to finish Thackston's handbook of Syriac (his anthology of texts was influenced by Brockelmann's *Chrestomathie*). Thackston wrote his successful and inspiring grammar as a modern-style introduction to a living language. I recommend Thackston's manual to every Syriac student. His grammar is a great achievement in the contemporary Syriac studies.

I have recently worked in the splendid libraries of L'Orientale in Naples, libraries which call for a comparison with the mythical library from Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*. I looked at a couple of standard Syriac grammars, earlier as well as more recent ones, to compare them with Tronina's manual. The first one I consulted was H. Gismondi's *Linguae syriacae grammatica* (Rome 1913), which offers systematic chapters on morphology, noun, conjugation and syntax (the arrangement we know from standard Classical Greek grammars), and his extensive anthology of interesting texts supplemented by an exhaustive vocabulary. A selection of authors and genres makes Gismondi's grammar an ambitious book to read. Arthur Ungnad's *Syrische Grammatik* (München 1932) follows a similar compositional order with a more developed grammatical part. L. Costaz' *Grammaire syriaque* (Beirut 1955) with its carefully composed and extensive chapters on the syntax of dependent clauses, is also worth mentioning in the context of Tronina's *Wprowadzenie do języka syryjskiego*. Costaz' syntax is more exhaustive and instructive than our standard Syriac syntax in Brockelmann's *Syntaktische Bemerkungen* (*Syrische Grammatik*, pp. 104–124, Leipzig 1965).

What makes Tronina's modest *Introduction*, a handbook and a grammar in its own right against the demanding and erudite background of Syriac manuals and textbooks which I have sketched above? His arrangement of grammatical material is not as systematic as like in our standard grammars. It is a judicious selection of material intended on a gradual introduction to Syriac texts in the subsequent anthology. The selected illustrative examples of Syriac clauses are appended with clear instructions. From the very start Tronina introduces carefully selected examples to illustrate some essential grammatical and syntactic problems which must be mustered if we are to read and understand idiosyncratic Syriac language patterns, which are symptomatic for Syriac narrative. Different grammatical phenomena and syntactic patterns are illustrated by carefully selected attractive literary examples from a wide range of the early Christian, early Byzantine and medieval Syriac letters. Along with his systematic Syriac instruction, Tronina makes good and judicious use of the Rabbinic method of textual interpretation: all the difficult points should be carefully explained to students, who have not yet the level of grammatical complexity in the given text. As if incidentally, though not at all by chance, Tronina imperceptibly slips in a new verb class or two. He continues to teach grammar in the explanations to the first three texts of the anthology. The reader can find this way of teaching satisfactory, when he feels progress in his skills. In this way the reader's transition from lessons of Syriac to Syriac texts is smooth and natural. The selected texts correspond to the linguistic level of Tronina's grammar. The dictionary compiled for readers of his anthology has been well designed (the same can also be legitimately said of Thackston's dictionary for the readers of his more extensive anthology).


Tronina chose St. John's lucid *Prologos* for his students' Syriac initiation, a text which looks simple grammatically, and is very instructive at the same time, and also spiritually inspiring. The choice of Abgar and Jesus Christ's apocryphal correspondence, a jewel of the Syriac letters, for an introductory exercise is traditional and good (cf. Brockelmann's *Chrestomathie* followed by other grammarians, e.g. by Thackston). All three textual exercises selected by Tronina (with the Messianic *Psalms 110*) are supplemented with their own vocabulary and essential grammatical instructions, so that the student may smoothly read the more difficult *loci*. Tronina's anthology looks modest if compared with Gismondi's and Brockelmann's selections which established two different patterns of Syriac *chrestomatias*. It is, however, well harmonized with the pattern and linguistic level of his Syriac lessons. It is also attractive as literature (Saul and the witch of En-dor, the Beatitudes according to Matthew, Afrahat's sermon on the Resurrection, Ephraim's poem, James of Sarug's apocalyptic text, and a dramatic chapter selected from Joshua the Stylite's narrative of the Persian-Roman wars).

Consistent with his methodology Thackston offered his reader conjugation tables in Latin transcription. However, Syriac is mainly a language of texts. Its

grammars are predominantly for readers, not speakers. Tronina has appended his Syriac course with conjugation tables in Syriac Estrangelo characters (like Gismondi). A good choice!

It is a pleasure to learn Syriac from Tronina's grammar, from well selected, interesting examples; to acquire new grammatical material which is gradually introduced, to encounter new grammatical phenomena from lessons on morphology, verbal classes and syntax. If we can say that a grammar, a handbook, an introductory language course can be delightful, Tronina's manual has its idiosyncratic charm. It is a pleasure to read and learn Syriac using Antoni Tronina's and Mariusz Szmajdziński's manual.

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(with the intriguing Aphel from  as *intellexit, cognovit*, Tronina and Szmajdziński 2003, p. 82).

Tomasz Polański