

Research project (2022–2025)

The Syriac Works of Nonnus of Nisibis (d. after 862)

Edition and Annotated Translation

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One can distinguish between different lines of traditions within Christianity: Apart from the well-known Greek-Byzantine and Latin traditions, several different traditions of Middle Eastern Christianity exist; Syriac Christianity is one of them. In this context, ‘Syriac’ means the Aramaic dialect of the ancient city of Edessa (today’s Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey). This dialect became the language of literature and liturgy of a branch of Christianity which is accordingly called Syriac Christianity. One of the theologians writing in Syriac who has attracted little attention in modern research so far is Nonnus of Nisibis. He lived in the 9th century AD in Northern Mesopotamia and belonged to the Miaphysite or Syriac Orthodox tradition. Nonnus flourished in a period of transition in which Christian Syriac authors moved increasingly to write in Arabic. Christians of the Middle East lived under the rule of Muslim authorities since the 7th century. In the middle of the 9th century, the living conditions of Christians diminished during the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–861).

Altogether, five works written by Nonnus of Nisibis are preserved: Nonnus composed a commentary on the Gospel of John in Arabic that is preserved only in an Armenian translation. An English translation of this Armenian text was published a few years ago by Robert W. Thomson. Aside from this commentary, four works of Nonnus composed in Syriac are preserved in a single manuscript which is located in the British Library. Until now, only the text of one of these Syriac works of Nonnus has been edited and published with a Latin translation. It is the aim of this present project to produce the first critical edition and modern translation of all four extant Syriac works written by Nonnus of Nisibis. The translation will be annotated, placing the crucial contents of Nonnus’ Syriac texts into a broader historical, theological, and cultural context.

Nonnus of Nisibis lived in a period of intensive theological debates between the religious communities in the Middle East. Hence, Nonnus was also an author who dealt with different religious adversaries in his works; among his opponents were Christians of other theological traditions as well as Muslims and Jews. The apologetics and polemics against other religious notions in Nonnus’ Syriac works will be in the center of the annotations on his texts compiled in the present project. Thus, in addition to providing an access to primary sources, the project will contribute to the investigation of the historical relationship between the religions in the Middle East.

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