



**HAL**  
open science

**Syrische Astrologie und das syrische Medizinbuch by Stefanie Rudolf. Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures 7. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 353**

Emilie Villey

► **To cite this version:**

Emilie Villey. Syrische Astrologie und das syrische Medizinbuch by Stefanie Rudolf. Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures 7. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 353. 2021, 10.33137/aestimatio.v2i1.37727 . hal-03562662

**HAL Id: hal-03562662**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03562662v1>**

Submitted on 9 Feb 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*Syrische Astrologie und das syrische Medizinbuch* by Stefanie Rudolf

Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures 7. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018. Pp. 353. ISBN 978-3-11-056364-1. Cloth €121.45

Reviewed by  
Émilie Villey\*  
CNRS Paris  
emilie.villey@cnrs.fr

In her book entitled *Syrische Astrologie und das syrische Medizinbuch*, Stefanie Rudolf tackles a Syriac encyclopaedia known as the *Book of Medicines*, which was edited and translated into English for the first time by William Budge in 1913. Budge's edition was based on a reading of the manuscript BL 9360, which was, in Budge's estimation, copied in 1894 in the city of Alqosh from a 12th-century manuscript.

The *Book of Medicines* is a collection of heterogeneous medico-astrological texts. Budge pointed out the fact that they are actually grouped into three sections of distinct origin. The first, which deals with human anatomy, pathology, therapeutics and provides some prescriptions, is nothing more than the translation of a medical text by Galen. The second, which is the object of Stefanie Rudolf's study, is generally described as "astrological": it comprises more than 130 chapters on various subjects relating to iatromathematics, meteorology, astronomy, divination by numbers, the calendar, and even weights and measures. The third section, which contains 400 medical prescriptions, is, according to Budge, the work of "physicians" who were both ignorant and superstitious, but who were different from the authors/translators of the first two sections.

The description of the manuscript proposed by Rudolf [116–124] confirms Budge's proposals by showing that the three sections have not traditionally circulated together and that it is, therefore, quite justified to study them independently. The section on Galen has already been well studied by scholars such as Siam Bhayro [2013 and 2015]. In the book that concerns us now, it is to Rudolf's merit that she has isolated and brought to light the more or less coherent set of chapters that make up the second section of Budge's edition and has provided the first German translation [201–289].

---

\* ÉMILIE VILLEY is chargée de recherches at the CNRS (UMR 8167 Orient et Méditerranée) in Paris and teaches Syriac at the Sorbonne University. Her current research focuses on Syriac astronomical and cosmological texts.

Scholars interested in the knowledge recorded in those chapters are always embarrassed when asked to date their redaction and to contextualize them geographically. Indeed, this second part is itself composed of many chapters of various origins and dates: to illustrate this, let us note, for example, that the planets are systematically designated by means of an Arabic lexicon in some chapters, while in others they always have a Greek name, and in still others a name that is neither Greek nor Arabic, but which belongs to the oldest Syriac cultural heritage. A study of the history of those texts constituting the second part of the *Book of Medicines* was thus necessary and much awaited in order to provide a solution for researchers wishing to study the history of science as indicated in this compilation.

Rudolf presents a very general introduction to the late antique and medieval Syriac cultural and literary context [1–104]. There is a part focused on the analysis of the structure of the whole *Book of Medicines* [105–199]; an annotated German translation of its second part [201–288]; an appendix in the form of tables presenting in a synthetic way the subject of the chapters, the type of science concerned, the incipit of the text, and some elements of intertextuality [297–307]; a bibliography [309–342]; and indices [343–353].

In the very first part of her introduction [1–34], we note the author's interest in the important question of Babylonian heritage. One wonders what may have happened between the first century AD, when Mesopotamian copyists stopped transcribing their astronomical and astrological knowledge into cuneiform Akkadian, and the time when the first Syriac astronomical texts appeared. What became of the Babylonian heritage in the meantime? As much as current research has succeeded in establishing contacts between Greek and Syriac astronomical and astrological texts, it remains difficult to establish direct transmissions between the Akkadian and Syriac corpora.

Stefanie Rudolf, who is trained in Assyriology and Syriac, was, from this point of view, well armed to attempt an answer to this question. However Rudolf, instead of concentrating on the astral and meteorological sciences, which form the core of the second section of the *Book of Medicines* here translated, broadens the perspective of her introduction to medicine, and presents the cultural characteristics peculiar to Babylonian culture and to late ancient culture (Arabic, Syriac, Greek). But the relationship that this has with the text studied is not clear. Furthermore, while Rudolf's interest in the transmission of Babylonian knowledge to the Syriac astrological corpus is welcome, the reader would also have appreciated learning her thoughts on other possible sources of influence coming from India or from the Zoroastrians. It would have been very useful as well to have a distinction made

between texts clearly written after the Arabization of the Near and Middle East and those written before.

In short, a fundamental reflection on the dating of texts is lacking. The reference to a remark by Furlani [53], according to which all the chapters are translated from an Arabic text, needs to be reconsidered and discussed on the basis of a precise and differentiated analysis of the texts that make up this set of chapters.

Several sections in this introduction are welcome and very informative, such as the one on Harran [25–29] and the one on techniques of divination [125–152]. The latter is undoubtedly the most interesting part and informs the reader precisely about all the links to be established between these chapters and the divinatory arts.

The description of the manuscripts is incomplete, however. The ms Paris BnF syr. 425, copied from the same model used by Budge, is not taken into account. Yet, it contains the entire second section as recorded by Françoise Briquel Chatonnet in her catalog *Manuscrits syriaques* [1997]. Readers may find the description of this manuscript online on the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France [<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc1012501>] and on the website of the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes [<http://www.msscatalog.org/64913>]. Rudolf has plainly confused this manuscript with Paris BnF syr. 325, which she mentions, and which contains only the third section of the *Book of Medicines*.

Since many of the chapters translated by Rudolf in her book are dedicated to astrology and astronomy, it is surprising that her introduction devotes so much importance to the history of medicine and less to the history of astrology and astronomy. Concerning the subjects of meteorology, geography, and alchemy also dealt with in the text, it would have been useful to refer the reader to the work of colleagues currently active in the field, such as Hidemi Takahashi (for meteorology), Matteo Martelli (for alchemy) and Olivier Defaux (for geography), some of whose articles have been conveniently collected in *Les sciences en syriaque* published in 2014. Finally, the reader would have appreciated having Rudolf's point of view on the possible points of contact between the various Syriac encyclopedias dealing with natural sciences, astronomy, and astrology. A more in-depth comparison with Theophilus of Edessa's encyclopedia and that of the *Causa causarum* would have been profitable [99]—it is a question of similarities between the *Causa causarum* and the *Book of Medicines* but without specifying the themes concerned.

In sum, there are some good elements in this introduction which deserve to be isolated to form a more direct and effective gateway to the reading of the texts translated in Rudolf’s book.

The translation of the Syriac text is generally faithful to the text. One occasionally regrets, however, the persistent influence of Budge’s interpretation. Consider the passage on comets [285], for example:

ܩܘܡܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܩܘܡܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܩܘܡܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܩܘܡܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ  
[Budge 1913, 1.550]

Rudolf translates this by

Ihre Funktionsweise ist wie die Eigenschaft der Luft. Sie verursachen Kriege, Feindschaft und Ähnliches.

and Budge, by

The operation of these is like unto the nature of the airs. And they cause wars, and bitter envy, and other such like things.

Now, given the explanation, formulated in the Syriac text, that the comet is a “cause of wars”, it is obvious that the Syriac word « ܩܘܡܬܐ » (‘RS) does not designate the plural of the word for “air”, but rather that it is a typographical error in the copied text, which originally referred instead to the planet Mars, whose bellicose character is well known in astrology, and whose Greek name “Ares” is commonly used in Syriac in the form « ܩܘܡܬܐ » (‘RS). In addition, the chapter on comets includes terms foreign to the Syriac language (« Buba », « Lakta »): the reader would surely appreciate learning about their origin. In the same chapter, a certain Andronicus is mentioned several times. It would have been useful for the reader to refer to the historiographical work of Muriel Debié, who devotes a section to the identification of this Andronicus [2015, 516–517], and who supposes that he came from the region of Ḥuzistan, which is mentioned several times in this chapter. In general, the annotations to the text would benefit by expansion.

Rudolf’s book, which is based on her doctoral thesis, thus constitutes a praiseworthy effort towards the mastery of the corpus of astrological texts that make up the second part of the *Book of Medicines*, first published by Budge in 1913. We can only hope that Rudolf will continue her work by proposing a new critical edition of the translated texts as well as a commentary.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhayro, S. 2013. “The Reception of Galen’s *Art of Medicine* in the Syriac *Book of Medicines*”. Pp. 123–144 in B. Zipser ed. *Medical Books in the Byzantine World*. Bologna. Online: [http://www2.classics.unibo.it/eikasmos/doc\\_pdf/studi\\_online/o2\\_zipser\\_medical\\_books.pdf](http://www2.classics.unibo.it/eikasmos/doc_pdf/studi_online/o2_zipser_medical_books.pdf).
- 2015. “Theory and Practice in the Syriac *Book of Medicines*: The Empirical Basis for the Persistence of Near Eastern Medical Lore”. Pp. 147–158 in J. C. Johnson ed. *In the Wake of the Compendia: Infrastructural Contexts and the Licensing of Empiricism in Ancient and Medieval Mesopotamia*. Berlin/Boston.
- Budge, W. 1913. *Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics, or “The Book of Medicines”*. 2 vols. London, UK.
- Debié, M. 2015. *L’Ecriture de l’histoire en syriaque*. Leuven/Paris/Bristol.
- Villey, É. 2014. ed. *Les sciences en syriaque*. Paris.