



MSt Syriac Studies
Course Handbook
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
University of Oxford
Academic Year 2025-26 v.1

FACULTY OF
**ASIAN AND
MIDDLE
EASTERN
STUDIES**



Master of Studies in Syriac Studies

Course Handbook

Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies

Course Director – Prof. [David G. K. Taylor](#)

THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook applies to students starting the course in Michaelmas Term 2025. The information in this handbook may be different for students starting in other years.

The information in this handbook is accurate as at Michaelmas Term 2025; however, it may be necessary for changes to be made in certain circumstances, as explained at www.ox.ac.uk/coursechanges. If such changes are made the faculty will publish a new version of this handbook together with a list of the changes and students will be informed.

The handbook sets out the basic framework for the MSt Syriac Studies, and what to do should you encounter delays, setbacks, or need to make changes. It provides basic advice about writing your thesis and submitting it for examination.

The Examination Regulations relating to this course are available here: [Master of Studies in Syriac Studies](#)

- the Examination Conventions and Rubrics;
- the Examination Regulations;
- the [University Student Handbook](#)
- your college handbook.

If there is a conflict between information in this handbook and the Examination Regulations then you should follow the Examination Regulations. If you have any concerns please contact the Senior Academic Administrator, [Edmund Howard](#).

Comments and criticism of the handbook are always welcome; they should be sent to the Director of Graduate Studies ([Jim Mallinson](#)) or the Senior Academic Administrator.

STUDENT HUB

The Student Hub is an ongoing project to provide a live online version of the handbook. Please check the information on the Student Hub in conjunction with this handbook as it provides you with additional important information covering:

- Support and Welfare
- Student Representation and feedback
- Examinations and Assessment information including forms and exam conventions
- Graduate Supervision (GSR)
- Graduate teaching opportunities and PLTO
- Research Ethics and CUREC approval
- Financial Support
- Support for unexpected circumstances, including applying for suspensions, extensions
- Researcher training and development

You can also access the Student Hub through the 'Student Hub' button on the top bar of the Faculty Website. You may need to log in using your SSO details.

Version history

1	October 2025	Original publication
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INTRODUCTION

This course has been designed to give students experience in reading and interpreting a wide range of Syriac texts, from a choice of genres and in all the major scripts, as well as a broad knowledge of Syriac literature and history, and an ability to use key research tools. It is can thus be either a stand-alone qualification or a solid foundation in the subject for those intending to go on to do doctoral research.

History

Syriac is the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa (modern Urfa, SE Turkey), which became the literary language of Aramaic-speaking Christians in the eastern Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, and spread with them from the Caucasus to Arabia and India, and from Syria to China, and is still spoken in classical and modern forms today. It has been studied and taught in Oxford since the 1570s. The Oxford University Press published many of the great eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century editions of Syriac texts, and the two-volume *Thesaurus Syriacus* of Robert Payne Smith and his daughter Jessie Payne Smith, as well as her *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, remain the standard lexica for most scholars and students of Syriac. In the late twentieth-century, through the innumerable and ground-breaking publications of Sebastian Brock, the names Syriac and Oxford became synonymous. Dr Sebastian Brock has retired from teaching but remains an active researcher in Oxford.

Oxford remains a major world centre of Syriac studies, with a great deal to offer all potential students in any of the academic disciplines associated with this language. As a result of the 450 year tradition of teaching Syriac the University of Oxford has one of the world's greatest library collections of printed Syriac books, and related materials, as well as an important collection of Syriac manuscripts. The Bodleian Library is the main research collection, but the Nizami Ganjavi Library also has a major collection of Syriac books. Other relevant collections are housed in the Bodleian Art, Archaeology and Ancient World Library (Archaeology, Classical Languages, Ancient Near East) and the Theology Faculty Library.

In addition to doctoral research and this MSt, Syriac is also studied in Oxford as part of the following degrees: undergraduate BAs in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and the Faculty of Theology and Religion; the MPhil Eastern Christian Studies; the MSt Bible Interpretation; and as language options in the MSt/MPhil Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, and in the MSt Greek and Roman History. As a consequence, Oxford usually has a surprisingly large community of students with an interest in Syriac language, history, and culture.

Close links are maintained between the Faculty's professors and students in Syriac and those teaching Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Greek, Persian, ancient Assyrian and Hebrew, as well as with colleagues in Byzantine Studies, Classics, History, Theology, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, and Archaeology.

Outline

Paper I, core course on the history, literature, and culture of the Syriac Churches.

An introductory lecture series on the background of Syriac literature, and key research tools for major literary genres, will be provided, 1 hour per week, in the first term. In addition students are expected to produce oral or written presentations on specified topics each week (for a tutorial or seminar lasting 1 and a half hours per week).

Papers II-IV, core courses on key Syriac literary genres.

Students must choose to study set texts for 3 of the following options:

1. Biblical versions
2. Exegetical literature
3. Early poetry
4. Liturgy
5. Historical literature
6. Secular literature
7. Monastic literature
8. Hagiography
9. Translations of Greek patristic texts
10. Theological texts
11. Any other subject approved by the Faculty Board

No more than three of these subjects are usually taught in any one year, and so the choice of subjects is decided by consultation between teacher and students in the first week of Michaelmas Term. It is thus possible that teaching for some options may not be available every year.

Teaching takes the form of (a) text-classes (usually 6 hours per week), for which students are expected to prepare; (b) seminars (usually one and a half hours per week): students are expected to prepare oral or written presentations on specified topics; and (c) lectures on the general background of Syriac literature (normally one hour per week in Michaelmas term). Other optional lecture courses on related subjects may be offered from time to time. Students are also encouraged to attend seminars in relevant areas: there are regular series in Patristic Studies, Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, Armenian Studies, Jewish Studies in the Greco-Roman Period, Old Testament, and New Testament, Ancient Near Eastern studies.

Teaching Staff

- Dr [Alison Salvesen](#)
- Prof. [David G. K. Taylor](#)

Academic and Academic Administration Staff

- [Jim Mallinson](#) – Director of Graduate Studies (except Trinity Term 2025, when the role will be filled by [Dominic Brookshaw](#))
- [Henrietta Harrison](#) – Faculty Board Chair
- [Thomas Hall](#) – Head of Administration and Finance
- [Edmund Howard](#) – Senior Academic Administrator
- [Xiaobo Wang](#) – Academic Administrator (Examinations)
- [Jane Kruz](#) – Academic Administrator (Graduate Studies)

EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE

Examination and Assessment Structure

Students will take one written examination on the core component of the course and one written examination on each of their options. Examinations will be held at the end of Trinity Term.

Language Learning and Competency Standards

Though the Faculty works closely with the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) and support students with SpLD, language papers represent competency standards and therefore cannot be replaced with easier language papers or non-language papers. If you have any questions or concerns relating to this please speak with your course director or the Director of Graduate Studies.

Examination Regulations

Examination Regulations are the immutable framework of study and assessment of University degrees to which students must adhere. The regulations for the MSt Syriac Studies can be found [here](#).

Examination Conventions and Rubrics

These are the formal record and explanation of the specific assessment standards for the course or courses to which they apply. They set out how your examined work will be marked and how the resulting marks will be used to arrive at a final result and classification of an award. They are approved and published by the Faculty each year and include information on:

Conventions

- Marking conventions and scaling
- Verification and reconciliation of marks
- Qualitative marking criteria for different types of assessment
- Penalties for late or non-submission; for over-length work and departure from approved title/subject matter; for poor academic practice; for non-attendance
- Progression rules and classification conventions
- Use of viva voce examinations
- Re-sits
- Consideration of mitigating circumstances
- Details of examiners and rules on communicating with examiners

Rubrics

- type and structure of examination (e.g. in-person or online examination)
- submission instructions
- weightings of paper
- time allowed
- instructions on the use of dictionaries and other materials
- instructions on the use of different scripts
- instructions on word limits
- instructions on handwriting

The conventions and rubrics will be published on the '[Graduate \(Taught\) Examinations and Assessment](#)' page on the Student Hub not less than one whole term before your examination takes place or, where assessment takes place in the first term of a course, at the beginning of that term.

You should take careful note of the dates for submission of essays and theses laid down in the Examination Regulations, course handbook, setting conventions, or rubrics. It is the candidate's responsibility to comply with these dates. The University Proctors, who have overall control of examinations, will not give leave for work to be submitted late except for cases of exceptional circumstances.

If there is any discrepancy in information, you should always follow the Examination Regulations and please contact the [Academic Administration team](#).

Examination Entry, In-person and Online Examinations

Entering for your exams

You will be invited by email to enter for your examinations when the examination entry window opens. It is your responsibility to ensure that you are entered for the correct number of papers and correct options, but you can speak to your college's academic office or the [Exams Administration team](#) if you are unsure about what these are. Please refer to the Oxford Students website for full examination entry and alternative examination arrangements (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/examination-entry>).

Timetable

Your personal timetable showing your papers and the dates, times and location at which they will take place will be published online at least two weeks before your first examination. If you have not received your timetable, or discover any problems such as a clash of papers, contact your college as soon as possible. It is your responsibility to ensure that you sit the correct examination and misreading of information will not be considered an acceptable reason for non-attendance.

In-person Examinations

Practical information and support for sitting in-person exams is provided on the Oxford students website (<http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/guidance>). The majority of in-person examinations take place at either the Examination Schools or Ewert House.

Online Examinations

Online exams are taken in Inspira. You must familiarise yourself with the system prior to taking an online exam. There are a wide range of resources to help you on the Oxford Students website, including expectations regarding standards of behaviour and good academic practice for online open-book exams (<http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/online-exams>).

Online exams require you to adhere to the University's Honour Code (www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/honour-code) and you should read this in advance of any online exams.

Candidate number

A candidate number is created for examinations to ensure anonymity, and you'll find your candidate number on the Examination and Assessment Information page in Student Self Service or by looking on the top of your individual timetable.

Your candidate number is not your student number.

Do not put your name or student number anywhere on your submissions.

Problems Completing Your Assessments

There are a number of University processes in place to help you if you find that illness or other personal circumstances are affecting your assessments or if you experience technical difficulties with an online exam or submission. Full information is available on the Oxford students website (www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/problems-completing-your-assessment).

If you experience unexpected circumstances that may affect your performance, you must discuss your circumstances with your College first as any application to the Proctors will come from them. They can advise on the best course of action for your circumstances.

Mitigating circumstances notices to examiners (MCE)

The form is designed so that you can make the Board of Examiners aware of any problems that occurred before or during your exams, or in relation to your submitted coursework, that seriously affected your performance. For further information about mitigating circumstances, please refer to the rubrics and to the [Oxford students website](#).

Vivas and Resits

You may be required to attend a viva voce examination after you have completed your written examinations. This is to enable your examiners to clarify any matters in your answers, and it gives you the opportunity to improve upon your performance, should that be necessary.

Information about when resits take place can be found in your Examination Conventions and you enter for resits in the same way as the first attempt. Please contact your college with any questions about your resits.

When making any travel arrangements for the post-exam period, it is your responsibility to bear in mind attendance at the viva and when resits may take place.

Infringements for Examinations and Submitted Assessments

Please refer to the examination conventions for penalties for infringements of word limit, late submission, plagiarism and non-adherence to rubrics.

Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies students should note that interpretation of the electronic word count is at the discretion of the Examiners, in view of the fact that most languages taught in the Faculty are not written in alphabetic scripts and the electronic word count may not be as accurate when taking these scripts into account.

Examiners' Reports and Previous Exam Papers

Examiners' reports from past exams are normally available from Hilary Term and will be uploaded to the '[Graduate \(Taught\) Examinations and Assessment](#)' page on the Student Hub. These reports give you an idea of how the exams were conducted and the performance of the cohort. Due to small class sizes for some degrees, it is not always possible to provide Examiners' reports for them. In these cases, please consult with your Course Director for some feedback.

Previous examination papers can be viewed on [Search Oxford Libraries Online \(SOLO\)](#), the online catalogue platform provided by the Bodleian Libraries.

GOOD ACADEMIC PRACTICE AND AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism

The University's definition of plagiarism is:

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own, with or without their consent, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement. All published and unpublished material, whether in manuscript, printed or electronic form, is covered under this definition. Plagiarism may be intentional or reckless, or unintentional. Under the regulations for examinations, intentional or reckless plagiarism is a disciplinary offence.

It is important that you take time to look at the University's guidance on plagiarism here: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>.

You should refer to the University's guidance on referencing (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/referencing>). If, after having done so, you are still unsure how to reference your work properly, you should contact your supervisor for guidance.

The University employs software applications to monitor and detect plagiarism in submitted examination work, both in terms of copying and collusion. It regularly monitors online essay banks, essay-writing services, and other potential sources of material.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

In accordance with our [Statement of Values](#), the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies is committed to creating a teaching, learning, and research environment in which every member of our community – at every academic level from undergraduate to senior academic, and among library and administrative staff – can achieve their full professional potential without discrimination on the basis of age, disability, gender, marriage or civil partnership, nationality, pregnancy or parenthood, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

We welcome suggestions for making our courses more diverse and inclusive. In general, you are encouraged to tell us if you see any ways in which the courses or this handbook might be improved. Staff and students are welcome to contact the Equality and Diversity team with any suggestions or concerns:

Faculty Equality and Diversity Officer: [Dominic Brookshaw](#)

WELFARE AND SUPPORT

Our community aims to encourage and support all students. The student experience at Oxford offers lots of opportunities for you to thrive, grow, and look after your own wellbeing, but we know that sometimes there can be stresses and challenges too.

We want to give you the agency to navigate welfare support, and to make your own decisions. This includes by:

- Keeping in touch with your College and Department, and letting them know if you need help
- Seeking support when needed
- Supporting your fellow students
- Registering with Disability Advisory Service for structured support if you have a disability

Should you have any concerns, or for guidance and support, please do not hesitate to contact the following people:

Disability Coordinators: [Thomas Hall](#) and [Edmund Howard](#)

Welfare Contact: [Edmund Howard](#)

Harassment Officers: [Leyla Najafzada](#) and [Laurence Mann](#)

Details of the range of sources of support available in the University are available from the [Oxford Students](#) website, including in relation to mental and physical health and disability.

COMPLAINTS AND ACADEMIC APPEALS WITHIN THE FACULTY OF ASIAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES

The University, Humanities Division, and the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies all hope that provision made for students at all stages of their course of study will make the need for complaints (about that provision) or appeals (against the outcomes of any form of assessment) infrequent.

Where such a need arises, an informal discussion with the person immediately responsible for the issue that you wish to complain about (and who may not be one of the individuals identified below) is often the simplest way to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

Many sources of advice are available from colleges, faculties/departments and bodies like the Counselling Service or the Oxford SU Student Advice Service, which have extensive experience in advising students. You may wish to take advice from one of those sources before pursuing your complaint.

General areas of concern about provision affecting students as a whole should be raised through Joint Consultative Committees or via student representation on the faculty/department's committees.

Complaints

If your concern or complaint relates to teaching or other provision made by the faculty/department, then you should raise it with the Director of Graduate Studies as appropriate.

Complaints about departmental facilities should be made to the Departmental administrator ([Trudi Pinkerton](#)). If you feel unable to approach one of those individuals, you may contact the Head of Administrator or the Faculty Board Chair. The officer concerned will attempt to resolve your concern/complaint informally.

If you are dissatisfied with the outcome, you may take your concern further by making a formal complaint to the Proctors under the University Student Complaints Procedure (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/complaints>).

If your concern or complaint relates to teaching or other provision made by your college, you should raise it either with your tutor or with one of the college officers, Senior Tutor, Tutor for Graduates (as appropriate). Your college will also be able to explain how to take your complaint further if you are dissatisfied with the outcome of its consideration.

Academic appeals

An academic appeal is an appeal against the decision of an academic body (e.g. boards of examiners, transfer and confirmation decisions etc.), on grounds such as procedural error or evidence of bias. There is no right of appeal against academic judgement.

If you have any concerns about your assessment process or outcome it is advisable to discuss these first informally with your subject or college tutor, Senior Tutor, course director, director of studies, supervisor or college or departmental administrator as appropriate. They will be able to explain the assessment process that was undertaken and may be able to address your concerns. Queries must not be raised directly with the examiners.

If you still have concerns you can make a formal appeal to the Proctors who will consider appeals under the University Academic Appeals Procedure (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/complaints>).

PROGRAMME AIMS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR MSt COURSES OF STUDY AT ASIAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES

The MSt degree is awarded after a course of directed study leading to an examination. The course normally lasts one year. It is thus suitable both for students who have no more than one year available for study and for those who require a year of preliminary training in a subject before proceeding to research. A general MSt. in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies is awarded to those students who have undergone training in a subject for which no specific MSt. is available. The MSt. is at the FHEQ level 7.

The MSt is available in the following subjects:

- Bible Interpretation
- Classical Armenian Studies
- Classical Hebrew Studies
- Islamic Art and Architecture
- Islamic Studies and History
- Jewish Studies
- Jewish Studies in the Graeco-Roman Period
- Korean Studies
- Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
- Syriac Studies
- Traditional China

In general, the arrangements for supervision are similar to those for the MPhil, and in the case of some subjects the course offered is actually a reduced version of a corresponding MPhil course, with the language training omitted.

Educational Aims of the Programme

The programme aims to enable its students to:

- Develop the practice of analytical enquiry;
- Achieve a high level of competence in a relevant language or languages, where relevant;
- Achieve a good level of competence in the textual and philological analysis of texts in the relevant language/s or historical and literary analysis of texts in the relevant language/s;
- Gain a wide-ranging critical knowledge of relevant secondary literature and of current developments in the field;
- Reflect on relevant issues of method;
- Develop skills in written and oral communication, including sustained argument, independent thought and lucid structure and content;
- Develop the ability to identify, understand and apply key concepts and principles;
- Where appropriate, prepare students for further research in the field.

Assessment

Formative assessment is provided by tutorial feedback and interaction with the Supervisor and/or tutor, by the discussion of prepared class-work, and by the Supervisor's termly report, which is discussed with the student in the Faculty and separately in the College

Summative assessment is provided at the end of the course by written examinations, submitted essays, portfolio, a thesis and *viva voce*, depending on the course.

PROGRAMME OUTCOMES

A. Knowledge and understanding

On completion of the course students will have:

- Acquired relevant linguistic and textual knowledge
- Acquired some specialist knowledge of relevant primary and secondary literature
- Gained enhanced understanding of how primary evidence is employed in philological, textual, historical and literary analysis and argument

Related Teaching/Learning Methods and Strategies

The main learning strategy is that a student should practise the relevant skills under close supervision, receive constant feedback, and have the chance to see the same skills practised by acknowledged experts in a manner which can be emulated. The methods used to achieve this aim include:

- Language and text-reading classes, for which students are expected to prepare
- Lectures
- Seminars with peers and senior academics
- Tutorials (individual) for which students prepare a substantial piece of written work for discussion with their Tutor(s)

B. Skills and other attributes

1. Intellectual Skills

The ability to:

- Exercise critical judgement and undertake sophisticated analysis
- Argue clearly, relevantly and persuasively
- Approach problems with creativity and imagination
- Develop the exercise of independence of mind, and a readiness to challenge and criticise accepted opinion

Teaching/Learning Methods and Strategies

As above.

Assessment

As above.

2. Practical Skills

All practical skills acquired are also transferable skills; see below.

3. Transferable Skills

The ability to:

- Find information, organise and deploy it;
- Use such information critically and analytically;
- Consider and solve complex problems with sensitivity to alternative traditions;
- Work well independently, with a strong sense of self-direction, but also with the ability to work constructively in co-operation with others;
- Effectively structure and communicate ideas in a variety of written and oral formats;
- Plan and organise the use of time effectively, and be able to work under pressure to deadlines;
- Make appropriate use of language skills;
- Handwrite in non-Roman script.

Teaching/Learning Methods and Strategies/Assessment

Since all these skills are essential elements of the course, they are taught and assessed in the same ways as at A above.