The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project

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Abstract

Among those who opposed the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the West Syrian (or Syriac Orthodox) Christians were probably least likely to form a national or ethnic community. Yet a group emerged with its own distinctive literature and art, its own network, and historical consciousness. In an intricate process of adoption and rejection, the West Syrians selected elements from the cultures to which they were heirs, and from those with which they came into contact, thus defining a position of their own. In order to study this phenomenon, scholars from various disciplines, and affiliated to two different faculties, were brought together in a programme financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO. This essay introduces their research project and methodology, and presents their results and conclusions.

Keywords

Syriac Orthodox Christianity; identity, formation and maintenance of ~; religion and identity; ethnicity; art and identity; biblical interpretation; historiography; Christian-Muslim relations; diaspora.

1. Introduction

For the Western Church, the Council of Chalcedon of 451 CE marked the conclusion of the internal struggles of the fourth and fifth centuries, as was intended by its conveners. In the East, however, the debate continued. The subject was the relation of the human and the divine in Christ: how did his divinity relate to his incarnation as a human being? Those who advocated a more or less radical duality, and stressed the existence of two natures in Christ—the Dyophysite position—had seen their ideas condemned already in 431. Chalcedon moved somewhat in their direction, but did not reverse this

decision. They found support in the independent ecclesiastical hierarchy that had developed in the Persian Sassanid Empire, the Church of the East (formerly often referred to as 'Nestorian'). Its language of communication and liturgy was Syriac, a late form of Aramaic. Within the Eastern Roman Empire, the main struggle was between the advocates of the Miaphysite (or, less precisely: Monophysite) teaching, which stressed the oneness of Christ's nature, and the adherents of Chalcedon, who took a middle position.

The Chalcedonian party eventually gained the upper hand, but Miaphysitism did become the standard for three 'national' churches: the Armenian, the Coptic, and the Ethiopian Church. In contrast to the East Syrians, many Syriac-speaking Christians on the western side of the Roman-Persian border also supported the Miaphysite party. Periodically, they suffered persecution at the hands of the Byzantine emperors. In the middle of the sixth century they developed their own ecclesiastical hierarchy: this laid the first foundations of what was to become the West Syrian or Syriac Orthodox Church (formerly often called 'Jacobite').[1] Monasteries replaced the city schools as the institutions where knowledge, and culture in general, was transmitted.

The advent of Islam after 630 relieved the West Syrians from the pressure of the Chalcedonian authorities. The seventh century was therefore a period in

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[1] A recent comprehensive and authoritative account of these developments is Lucas Van Rompay's 'Society and Community in the Christian East', in Michael Maas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (New York, 2005), pp. 239–266. The classic book on the subject is William H.C. Frend's *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1972). Interesting but not entirely convincing is Volker L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford, 2008). He discusses a relatively limited period of time, the period 518–553, and claims that the Syriac Orthodox *Church* already came into existence within this period, following the 'decisive moment' of the enforcement of Pope Hormisdas' *libellus* in 518. I would rather advocate a *longue durée* perspective. We do see the emergence of something like what sociologists would call an association (cf. Frend's 'movement'), but one could hardly call this a separate church. The emergence of a separate Syriac Orthodox Church was a gradual process, which was not brought about by the single event of 518. On the contrary, in this period the feeling that things might one day take turn for the better was still present among the Miaphysites, who hoped that the emperor would mend his ways and accept their position. Even Jacob Baradaeus' mid-sixth-century activity did not entail the systematic construction of a new hierarchy; it was rather an emergency measure (Van Rompay, 'Society and Community', p. 251). In contrast to Menze, *Justinian*, pp. 274–275, I would also say that both anti-Chalcedonians and Chalcedonians can claim continuity; in his view the anti-Chalcedonians split from the Church of the Empire.

which West Syrian culture could develop freely, and in which contacts between East and West Syrians became easier, as both groups were brought under Arab rule. However, Arab rule also started a process of Arabization and Islamization. Eventually this weakened the position of the Syriac Orthodox, and forced them to rethink their position and identity. They had to define and delineate the canon of their cultural heritage, their uniqueness, and orthodoxy. Of course, the Syriac Orthodox did not consider their beliefs as a new development, resulting from the schism of 451. They stressed continuity and originality. Consequently, thinking and writing about 'being Syriac Orthodox' reached back beyond 451 to the roots of Christian culture.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the Seljuks conquering the Arab Abbasid Empire, followed by the Mongols. Cultural contacts, rather than the pressure of persecution, explain the so-called 'Syriac Renaissance': intellectually a flourishing period, with a renewed effort to summarize and transmit Syriac Orthodox culture. Some of the Syrian authors most quoted today, Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus, as well as some of the most notable art, date back to this era.[2] The end of the thirteenth century was the turning point. The Mamluks defeated the last Crusaders, and the Mongol Il Khan was converted to Islam in 1295. Christianity seemed to have been defeated in the whole Middle East. Many Christians followed the example of the Il Khan. The 'golden era' of Syrian culture came to an end. In the subsequent periods of Mongol persecution, it was all but annihilated. Its revival had to wait until the nineteenth century. For their main concepts and ideas, however, the Syriac Orthodox still refer to their golden era before 1300.

2. The Problem

Historians have often stated that the schisms of the fifth century were brought about by national or ethnic rather than purely religious movements. The classic statement of this idea is Sir Ernest Woodward's 1916 study *Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire*.[3] At first sight, it seems improbable that the detailed theological discussions on Christology could explain the development of separate communities. It is tempting to think of the resurgence

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[2] On this period, see now the essays in Herman Teule, Bas ter Haar Romeny, and Jan van Ginkel (eds.), *The Syriac Renaissance: A Period of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue* (Eastern Christian Studies; Leuven, forthcoming in 2009).

[3] Ernest Llewellyn Woodward, *Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire* (London, 1916).

of older, non-religious, ethnic features. However, this idea was refuted for the Syriac Orthodox, the Donatists, and even for the Copts, by A.H.M. Jones in his 1959 article 'Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?'[4] His answer is a clear no. He demonstrates that the factions cannot be equated with ethnic communities, and their opposition not with ethnic conflict. Yet the idea is so attractive, that even a modern sociologist such as Anthony D. Smith, who recognizes the importance of religion, is still talking of a *reassertion* of ethnic symbols and ties under new forms and contents. Monotheism broke the rule of the Old World that a religious and an ethnic community always coincide, but the rise of various sects brought back the old situation in a new form, aided by the 'remoteness' of these communities and the use of a different 'peripheral' language, he seems to suggest.[5]

It appeared to us that there was room to study this problem again, the more so since the social sciences have given us new tools and more precise definitions of such core terms as ethnicity, nation, and identity. Moreover, we still lacked a full description of the process of identity construction among the Syriac Orthodox. How did they define themselves and how did they differentiate their own culture from that of others? How did they connect with the past before 451? What exactly was the role of religion in this? Did additional factors play a role, such as other elements of culture, or feelings of enmity towards the Byzantines? It is important to note that the linguistic and cultural pattern in the area was very complex.[6] Syrian culture was heir to at least three cultures: Aramaic or Mesopotamian, Graeco-Roman, and Jewish culture,[7] whereas an Arabic element may also have played a role. This raised the question of how the Syriac Orthodox wove a new culture of their own out of these threads, and how they related to other Miaphysites, to the East Syrian Dyophysites, the Chalcedonians, and later also to Islam, and the Church of Rome.

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[4] A.H.M. Jones, 'Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?', *JThS* NS 10 (1959), pp. 280–298.

[5] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986; repr. 1999), pp. 35–36, 113.

[6] See Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395–600* (London–New York, 1993), pp. 182–186.

[7] Sebastian P. Brock, 'Syriac Culture, 337–425', in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History* 13. *The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 708–719, here pp. 712–714.

3. Aim of the Programme

Our research programme was designed to investigate the evidence for the construction of a communal identity for the Syriac Orthodox as it is reflected in the literary and art-historical traditions of the period 451–1300. We considered three areas especially fruitful for this investigation: biblical interpretation, historiography, and art (see paragraph 5). We approached each of these areas working back from the later period (650–1300) to earlier times. In iconography, this later period is simply the era from which most material has been preserved. In biblical interpretation and historiography, this period yielded a number of collective works that attained classical status and are still read today. These works use earlier sources, from both before and after the split between East and West Syrians. The selection and presentation of material is highly significant. It shows which developments in the earlier period (451–650) were eventually decisive, especially in self-identification and differentiation from others. By the later period, biblical interpretation, historiography, and art have assumed features characteristic of the Syriac Orthodox, which are recognizable to outsiders as well. As an extension to the project, the transformation of this identity in diaspora situations today was also considered. The Syrian Christian refugees in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany intensely debate their identity, and many have nationalist aspirations.

In order to study the three areas mentioned above, the programme combined five different disciplines: religious studies, history, art history, philology, and social anthropology. In the following paragraphs I first discuss the theoretical background to the issue and the choices we made in our research programme. Next I go into the three groups of sources that we selected and discuss the results for each of these. Finally, I present a synthetic survey of the process of formation, maintenance, and renewal of identity among the Syriac Orthodox, which I relate to our initial hypothesis.

4. Theoretical Framework

The notions of communal and ethnic identity play a significant role in social anthropology and sociology. Their importance for historical studies has also been recognized. Over the past decade, communal identities in the late antique Graeco-Roman world have already received much attention.[8] Yet in

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[8] See the introduction in Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex, *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London–Swansea, 2000).

the area of Eastern Christianity much remains to be done. With one or two exceptions,[9] specialists in this specific field have not tackled these issues in a systematic fashion, though as we have seen, the area has already attracted the interest of sociologists and social anthropologists writing from a more theoretical perspective.[10] We believe that the categories developed in social anthropology can indeed help to describe the complex cultural patterns of the Near East in the late antique and Islamic periods. At this moment, however, the debate on nationalism, ethnicity, and identity formation is still in progress. It is therefore important to state our position in this debate more clearly.

4.1. *The Nation and its Origins*

The concept of 'nation' has evolved in academic circles within the last thirty years. Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson proposed that it is a product of modern times,[11] brought about by industrialization and the intricate complexity of modern-day society. Gellner even claims that nationalism did not arise from existing nations but in fact brought about the formation of nations: nationalism precedes the nation. However, sociologists and historians have been quick to point out that even before the modern era, processes of community building were taking place which could be compared to those of nations. Communities existed that were linked by shared myths of origin, memories of past events, as well as common values and symbols. These ethnic communities could sustain themselves for many centuries and some even form the basis of some of our modern nations. Scholars such as Armstrong and Smith conclude that new nations do not emerge from a void but are transformations of earlier ethnic communities. Smith speaks of the 'ethnic origins of nations'. The Christian communities of the Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, and Syrians are important in that they are witnesses to the existence of close-knit ethnic communities in Late Antiquity and the Islamic era. The fact that they have endured to the present day is also remarkable.

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[9] See Ahmad M.H. Shboul and Alan G. Walmsley, 'Identity and Self-Image in Syria-Palestine in the Transition from Byzantine to Early Islamic Rule', *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), pp. 255–287.

[10] John A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1982); Smith, *Ethnic Origins*.

[11] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised ed.; London, 2003).

4.2. *Ethnicity and Identity*

This brings us to the debate on ethnicity and identity, and the explanation of continuity and change in them. One group of scholars stresses the importance of what they call 'primordial attachments'. These are attachments that are thought to stem from the 'givens' or assumed 'givens' of social existence: kin connection, religion, language, and social practices. They would seem to flow from a natural or spiritual affinity rather than from social interaction.[12] This point of view is still widely held and defended, as is clear from the popularity of Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*.[13] The latter author defends the idea that ethnic conflicts such as that in the Balkans are fought along the 'fault lines' of the age-old civilizations of the Orthodox, Islam, and the West, the identities of which are determined to a large extent by their religion. This 'primordial-ist' or 'essentialist' approach has been criticized by those who defend positions sometimes denoted as 'instrumentalist' or 'constructivist'. Central to constructivist approaches is the conviction that communal and ethnic identities are not static entities, but social constructs. Attachments are not given, but defined in social interaction. Language and culture are not overpowering, coercively binding agents in and of themselves, as the primordialists would have it. They are the product of actions and identifications. Communal identities thus reside in our perception and ideas, and ethnic communities are *imagined communities*, as Benedict Anderson stressed.[14]

To return to the example of the conflict in the Balkans, Huntington was criticized for not recognizing that fifty years of official secularism and economic modernization had eroded the hold of organized religion. All sides in the conflict used religious symbols, but these symbols were often empty, linked to a shallow and unauthentic religious conviction.[15] Religion had become a minor difference among Yugoslavians, but it had been defined as a major one by those leaders who wanted to exploit the fear connected with the collapse of

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[12] C. Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973; repr. 1993), pp. 255–310.

[13] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).

[14] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[15] Among others, Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London, 1998), pp. 34–71.

the overarching state. In other words, Huntington is describing the end result of a process rather than the process itself.

The problem with the static, primordialist approach to ethnicity is that it lacks explanatory power, especially where ethnic change is at stake, as in the case of migrations, major political developments, or the appearance of new communities, such as occurs with the Syriac Orthodox. It is not surprising, therefore, that the classic statement against the primordialist position, Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*,[16] was indeed written with people in mind who change their ethnic identity.[17] Yet Barth's approach is also not without its problems. It does not account sufficiently for ethnic durability and the persistence of elements of older social structure and culture. In defining ethnic groups as units of ascription and self-ascription, as Barth does, and in focusing on the boundary that defines the group, instead of on 'the cultural stuff that it encloses', it may seem that 'anything goes', as though there were no relation to shared cultural characteristics initially possessed by the members of a group. Theoretically it is perhaps possible to invent a completely new identity, but in practice this is rather exceptional, to say the least. Usually there is at least some continuity with the past.[18] Myths, memories, and symbols have a very important function in unifying a group, and ensuring its continuity, and their content now receives more attention from social scientists and historians following the lead of Armstrong[19] and Smith.[20]

It is important to recognize that at least some of the confusion is due to the fact that a discourse that is intended to strengthen the sense of identity usually claims the distinctive features to be primordial.[21] The rhetoric that 'it has always been so' implies 'it should always remain so', thus connecting the

[16] F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston, 1969).

[17] Cf. Fredrik Barth, 'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of Etnicity: Beyond 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'* (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 11.

[18] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity & Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives* (London, 1993), pp. 92–96.

[19] Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*.

[20] Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, as well as, among others, his *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford, 2003); *The Antiquity of Nations* (Cambridge, 2004); and *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Malden, MA, 2008).

[21] Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (New York–London, 1999), pp. 81–96.

symbols of the community with a sense of security and belonging—which is the main commodity offered by any community. Culture needs to be reified in order to be communicated in a convincing way. Our own point of view is that, though this process of reification cannot be termed 'wrong' in any sense, it is the task of the scholar to look further than the end result. We follow the critics of the primordialist approach, and accordingly will pay close attention to the social process of identity formation. But in so doing, we take account of the modifications of Smith and Armstrong, who pointed to the importance of the content of myths, memories, and symbols, especially when explaining the complex interaction of continuity and change.

In other words: some elements of an identity can be very old, others can be newer. It is important to see which threads continue as they are, which are broken off, and which are dyed a different colour. It is within a narrative that these symbols are given their significance: a discourse which serves to define the differences between an individual and the other members of the group as minor, and the differences between this individual and outsiders as major. This narrative is the context within which and by which the various elements of religion and culture are interpreted and preserved, or discarded.

For a number of reasons, we think that the case of the Syriac Orthodox is important to the debate. In the first place, we have a clear case of a new community that gradually formed itself. In the second place, we can follow this group over a long period of time. Our data extend from its very beginnings, in which a choice different from the mainstream in a religious debate was the only distinguishing feature, until it became a full-fledged ethnic community. In addition to the *formation* of identity, we should therefore speak of the *maintenance and renewal* of identity: the Syriac Orthodox were successful in adapting their identity to new situations. The process of maintenance and renewal, through sifting, selecting, and summarizing earlier material while adding new elements and giving new meanings, is the key factor in explaining the durability of an identity, and one that deserves much more attention. In the case of the Syriac Orthodox, historiography, biblical interpretation, and art were very important tools in this process (see Section 5).

4.3. *Ethnogenesis Theory*

Initially without any connection with the social scientific debate, historians studied a number of other cases of ethnic groups that came into existence at the end of the Western Roman Empire: the Germanic tribes. Their results tally

well with the approach of Smith and Armstrong. Thus Reinhard Wenskus[22] recognized that the Germanic tribes that invaded the Roman Empire were not stable communities based on common descent, but were continually subdividing and merging, and changing their composition. Still, Wenskus and his followers maintained that there was some level of continuity that needed to be explained. Thus the Huns consisted of several groups, but they did identify with each other and had a myth of common origin. Wenskus suggested that a *Traditionskern*, a core group of families, guarded and handed on mythical traditions regarding their origin. Circumstances permitting, others associated with this core group, and thus within a relatively short time a large ethnic group could come into existence, which identified itself on the basis of the myths and memories of the 'kernel of tradition'.

Scholars such as Andrew Gillett[23] and Walter Goffart[24] have criticized the approach of Wenskus and his Vienna school. So far, their criticism has not assumed a systematic character, and it is partly based on anecdotic evidence. Wenskus's followers, in particular Walter Pohl[25] and Peter Geary,[26] have already dealt with many of the issues raised by Gillett and Goffart. Now they do allow the Romans a central role in the formation of the Germanic peoples, for instance, and they have given up the etymologizing tendencies of Wenskus. One of the major points remaining is that Goffart does not admit that myths and memories could last for more than three generations in oral tradition. Therefore he questions the reliability of the memories of these Germanic tribes, which were, for that matter, only written down at a later stage by Roman

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[22] Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterliche Gentes* (Cologne, 1961).

[23] Andrew Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002); Andrew Gillett, 'Ethnogenesis: A Contested Model of Early Medieval Europe', *History Compass* 4.2 (2006), pp. 241–260.

[24] Walter Goffart, 'Did the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion-Age Germans?', in Gillett, *On Barbarian Identity*, pp. 21–37.

[25] Walter Pohl, 'Tradition, Ethnogenese und literarische Gestaltung: eine Zwischenbilanz', in Karl Brunner and Brigitte Merta (eds.), *Ethnogenese und Überlieferung: Angewandte Methoden der Frühmittelalterforschung* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 31; Vienna, 1994), pp. 9–26; Walter Pohl, 'Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies', in Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Malden, MA, 1998), pp. 13–24; Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800* (The Transformation of the Roman World 2; Leiden, 1998).

[26] Peter Geary, 'Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages', *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983), pp. 15–26.

historians. In a recent article, Wolf Liebeschuetz has pointed out that this is less problematic than Goffart would have us believe.[27] We for our part would stress that the idea of a *Traditionskern* is a model. It is useful because for some of the Germanic groups it does have considerable explanatory power, but there are no hard facts to prove the existence of groups of families functioning as 'kernels of tradition'.

One of the main tools in our research is the list of features of an ethnic community given by Hutchinson and Smith.[28] According to them, an ethnic community has a proper name expressing the identity of the community, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, a link with a territory, elements of common culture, and a sense of solidarity. This list of features provides us with a matrix that is helpful for describing the various layers of identity within a community at one given moment in time. It helps to map the degree of ethnic awareness within the community. However, for a diachronic perspective we felt we needed additional tools. The concept of ethnogenesis as developed in the study of the creation of the Germanic nations after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West has therefore also been used. It seemed useful to find out whether for the Syriac Orthodox, who were also living on the border of the Roman Empire and who became visible in written sources at more or less the same time, this model would be valuable. In ethnogenesis theory there is a distinction between elements of identity which have a certain duration and others, which may be more short-term. In other words: for the explanation of ethnic durability it stresses the importance of myths and memories, as do Smith and Armstrong in their criticism of the more radical constructivist position.

5. Selection of Sources: Biblical Interpretation, Historiography, and Art

The decision to study biblical interpretation when dealing with the question of West Syrian identity formation is a natural one. Biblical interpretation plays a major role in shaping, legitimising, and conveying any orthodoxy, but this seems to have been particularly true in the case of the West Syrians. A large part of the literary output of the Syriac Orthodox and some of the main genres of their literature were concerned with exegesis. Exegetical works used the authority of the Bible to discuss the creation of the world, its early history, and

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[27] Wolf Liebeschuetz, 'The Debate about the Ethnogenesis of the Germanic Tribes', in Hagit Amirav and Bas ter Haar Romeny (eds.), *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honour of Averil Cameron* (Late Antique History and Religion 1; Leuven, 2007), pp. 341–355.
[28] John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 6–7.

the future; to give moral guidance; and to inform the reader about physics, astronomy, and other sciences. Some works dealing with the Creation were in fact up-to-date encyclopaedias of contemporary scientific knowledge. Thus biblical interpretation served as a vehicle for a complete world view. This world view had its background in the different traditions that contributed to Syrian culture, but also had a clear individuality, which defined the position of the Syriac Orthodox vis-à-vis the surrounding world. Biblical interpretation forms the key to the authoritative biblical myths, histories, and commandments: it selects what is important for the community under the circumstances of the moment, and it redefines and resignifies their content to serve its changing moral, theological, and political needs.

If biblical interpretation is the key to the origin myth, early history, ethics, and world view of the community, historiography collects and interprets the shared memories of a common history that binds members together and distinguishes them from others.[29] It has to present itself as objective, in order to give the community an anchor-hold in the past. However, selection, adaptation, and imagination always play a role,[30] though the author himself is not necessarily conscious of this. The different historical sources can be seen as witnesses to the various attempts to foster a communal identity among their readers. In the case of the West Syrians, this seemed to be a highly promising field of investigation. The data gathered from the different periods is often contradictory and mutually exclusive, sometimes legendary, sometimes more factual in our eyes. Opinions on who the Syrians 'really are' were not constant. Every period created its own story, building on the traditions and chronicles of the period before, while adapting them to its own needs and circumstances. The popularity of some of these works, as well as some of the exegetical collections, in the Syriac Orthodox community today ensures that their influence is still felt in the self-definition of this group.

An even more obvious function, in terms of providing symbols of identity, is fulfilled by works of art. This aspect of art, however, has not attracted very much systematic attention.[31] Art can be seen as a means of expressing the identity of

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[29] Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, pp. 25–26.

[30] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1–14.

[31] Though see Averil Cameron, 'The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation', in Diana Wood, *The Church and the Arts: Papers Read at the 1990 Summer Meeting and the 1991 Winter Meeting of the EHS* (Studies in Church History 28; Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–42.

a group, especially where religious art is concerned. The ultimate consequence of identity formation is the creation of a conceptual universe expressing what one believes or who one believes one is. From this standpoint, religious art cries out identity. Christian art is a visual realization of doctrines, veneration, and celebration, and can be both traditional and innovative. It tells what Christians believe, and communicates with the faithful allowing them to identify themselves with the saints it depicts, or to take lessons from illustrative narrative scenes. Simultaneously, it is also integrated into church propaganda. Representations confront people with the official positions, and tell them what they have to believe. In short: art can be used as an instrument to canalize theological ideology and therefore contributes to the creation of a religious identity.

An iconographical analysis of works of art is analogous to a linguistic study, analysing the 'vocabulary' and 'grammar' of an image. By comparing the iconographical details of the arts of different communities, we can obtain information about differences in ideas. Similarly, a comparison of styles used in art can tell us about the formulation of a way of expressing such ideas, proper to a community. Both style and iconography in the art of a certain region, culture or community, can be subject to influences from other groups or regions. These influences can be evaluated as: (1) a conscious process of copying elements from other communities or cultures, in order to express common ideas; (2) an expression of rivalry, using the same official religious or political iconography; (3) the adoption of elements due to a lack of knowledge concerning their meaning. In the case of the religious painting of the West Syrians little was known about stylistic and iconographical characteristics and whether they are the result of a conscious choice by the artists or patrons. Elements from Byzantine and Crusader art can be found as well, and it remained to be investigated how and why these elements were taken over. This problem is closely linked to defining the criteria for assessing whether or not certain art can be called 'Syrian', which is another issue we tried to tackle.

Issues and results specific to each of the projects will be dealt with in detail in the following sections.

6. Biblical Interpretation: Two West Syrian Exegetical Collections

6.1. *Exegesis and Identity: Practical Considerations*

The contribution of biblical interpretation to the formation of a West Syrian identity was studied on the basis of two large Syriac Orthodox exegetical collections, dating from the seventh and ninth century respectively. It is often

stated that Syriac exegesis, and especially later Syriac exegesis such as we find it in these sources, is not creative or original. Now earlier material does indeed play a very important role in all West and East Syriac exegetical works, whether they are attributed to an author or handed down anonymously. But wherever these sources are known and still available to us, they enable us to look into the mind of the compiler. It is the subtle strategy of adoption and rejection of earlier material that we have tried to describe. In not a few cases, the comparison with earlier material told us more of what was considered important at a certain moment than a so-called original work might have done. At the same time, the comparison with the later collections of Dionysius bar Salibi and Barhebraeus showed us the differentiations of later centuries.

The two collections we studied are the *London Collection* (probably second quarter of the seventh century) and the *Collection of Simeon* (end of the ninth century; better known as *Catena Severi*). The *London Collection* unites the opinions of various, mainly Greek, exegetes. This material poses the question of the attitude of the Syriac Orthodox towards Greek learning. This work has not been reproduced in our own days. The *Collection of Simeon*, for its part, combines the early Syriac interpretation from before the split with the explanations of Jacob of Edessa and other Syriac Orthodox authors, thus illustrating continuity and change in biblical interpretation and doctrine. This text was edited in part in a very unsatisfactory way in the eighteenth century,[32] and continues to be used and copied today.

Within the two collections, we concentrated on the Pentateuch. The commentaries on the Pentateuch give insight into the contemporary knowledge of the sciences, the world view, and the picture of the origins of mankind and the position of the Syrians. Important information was obtained from a comparison between the way the list of descendants of Noah in Gen. 10 was discussed in the *Collection of Simeon* and other exegetical works (unfortunately, the part dealing with Gen. 10 in the *London Collection* is no longer extant). The Table of Peoples of Gen. 10 formed the basis of virtually all pre-modern ideas on the relations between peoples. Special attention was also paid to the treatment of Babylon and Assur, kingdoms connected with the Syrians in some of the modern publications of the Syrians, but also by historians from the period under investigation, such as Michael the Syrian. This material belongs to a cat-

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[32] Petrus Benedictus, *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem syri Opera omnia quae exstant* 1–2 (Rome, 1737–1740). See now Bas ter Haar Romeny, 'Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa in the Commentary of the Monk Severus', in George A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone. Studies in Honour of Sebastian P. Brock* (Piscataway, NJ, 2008), pp. 535–557.

egory that we could term 'identifications': instances where Syriac Orthodox exegetes saw references to their own community in the Bible. Other categories that were identified as important for the question of how exegesis contributed to the formation of a communal identity include: references to contemporary events; discussions of doctrinal issues, as well as views on the right version of the Bible; and the original language. In the course of our research we also established that the structure of the commentaries and the choice of material gave a clear picture of the kind of tradition their authors wanted to hand down.

6.2. *Results: Identity in Exegetical Sources*

The discussion of the Creation does indeed give a picture of the world view of the Syriac Orthodox. Thus the *Commentary on the Hexaemeron* of Moses bar Kepa (d. 903) presents a long list containing a diversity of issues, partly in the form of questions and answers. To mention just a few of these: he explains the Trinity; the fact that the world was not created out of the mingling of five or two beings; the question of what is prophecy; various aspects of the four elements; the different animals; the size of the earth; and verse by verse, the Creation narrative itself.[33] Simeon's collection lacks the formal structure of Moses' work, but deals with many of the same issues while going through the Creation narrative. A number of long quotations from Jacob of Edessa's *Commentary on the Hexaemeron* add depth to the discussion of the philosophy and theology of the work of Creation and the world that is its result. Though one can certainly point out differences between their views and those of Theodore of Mopsuestia and his followers in several points of detail, we did not get the impression that Moses' and Simeon's viewpoint on these matters was exclusive to the Syriac Orthodox. The Syriac Orthodox picture of the Creation and physics of the world, in its combination of Graeco-Roman and biblical traditions, would rather seem to overlap with that of most other late antique Christians.

We found the category of identifications more telling. Ephrem (d. 373) already identifies the cities where Nimrod was king (Gen. 10:10–12) with Edessa, Nisibis, Ctesiphon, Adiabene, Hatra, and Reshʿaina: important cities for Syrian Christianity.[34] The identifications of the cities themselves are also known from other sources, that is, from the Targumim, but it is conspicuous

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[33] See the full table of contents in Lorenz Schlimme, *Der Hexaemeronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha* 1 (Göttinger Orientforschungen 1.14; Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 63–90.

[34] Edition: Raymond M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri In Genesim et in Exodum commentarii* (CSCO 152, Syr. 71; Leuven, 1955), p. 65.

that Ephrem takes over exactly these identifications, and that he had a positive view of Nimrod, the legendary king of this area.[35] In his *Commentary on the Octateuch* Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) does not mention Nimrod, but he does explain how the world was divided over Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Vat. sir. 103, fol. 36ʳ). He indicates that 'The whole blessed land from the Euphrates until the shores of the sea fell to Shem'. An expanded version is found in his *Scholia*[36] and has also been used by the *Commentary of the Monk Severus*, which formed the basis of Simeon's collection (Vat. sir. 103, fol. 17ᵛ). This version confirms that Jacob was referring to the Mediterranean Sea rather than the Indian Ocean, as some Greek sources did. Thus he gives more or less a mirror image of what these sources say. A little further on, Jacob allots the Lebanon, the anti-Lebanon, Phoenicia, and the whole area to the west of the Euphrates to Shem's son Aram. The only explanation we could give for this is that Jacob identified his own community, which was indeed strong in the area mentioned, with the descendants of Aram.

If our interpretation is correct, the identification with Aram, which became very important to the West Syrians, can first be found in Jacob of Edessa's exegesis. It is interesting to contrast his opinion with that of the East Syrian Ishoʿdad of Merv (ninth century). The latter also seems to think of Shem as his forefather. However, he describes the area allotted to Shem as that of Persia and Bactria as far as the Indian Ocean.[37] This may be based on Hippolytus of Rome,[38] but does accord well with the area in which the East Syrians were living. Ishoʿdad copied this from the *Diyarbakır Commentary*,[39] but he adds to

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[35] For views on Nimrod in rabbinic and early Christian literature, see Pieter W. van der Horst, 'Nimrod after the Bible', in Pieter W. van der Horst, *Essays on the Jewish World of Early Christianity* (Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 14; Freiburg–Göttingen, 1990), pp. 220–232, here pp. 225–226.

[36] *Scholion* 16, in Ms. BL Add. 17193, fol. 64ᵛ. On the *Scholia*, see Dirk Kruisheer, 'Reconstructing Jacob of Edessa's Scholia', in Judith Frishman and Lucas Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (Leuven, 1997), pp. 187–196; See also Jacob's letter no. 13, edition in Wright, 'Two Epistles of Mār Jacob, Bishop of Edessa', *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* NS 10 (1876), pp. 430–433, pp. ܩܒ–ܩܟ, here p. ܩܟ.

[37] Edition: J.M. Vosté and Ceslas Van den Eynde, *Commentaire d'Išoʿdad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament 1. Genèse* (CSCO 126, Syr. 67; Leuven, 1950), pp. 130–134.

[38] *Chronicon* 47, ed. Adolf Bauer, *Hippolytus Werke 4. Die Chronik* (2. Aufl. bearb. von Rudolf Helm; Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte 46; Berlin, 1955), p. 10.

[39] Edition: Lucas Van Rompay, *Le commentaire sur Genèse–Exode 9,32 du manuscrit (olim) Diyarbakır 22* (CSCO 483, Syr. 205; Leuven, 1986), p. 65.

this source that thirteen Syriac-speaking tribes descended from Joktan. Now Joktan was the great-grandson of Arpachshad, the brother of Aram. This would seem to indicate that in his opinion, at least the East Syrians descended from Arpachshad rather than Aram.

It appeared that the number of references to contemporary events in the commentaries we studied was relatively small. The view held by Antiochene and East Syrian exegetes that the Old Testament usually does not refer to things beyond the horizon of the Old Testament itself would seem to have also influenced these authors, though an important exception is made for references to Christ, which are recognized especially in passages of a prophetic nature. There are more exceptions, however. Thus in its explanation of the Blessings of the Patriarch Jacob (Gen. 49), Jacob of Edessa's *Commentary on the Octateuch* explains with, among others, Cyril of Alexandria, that Asher means 'rich one'. He adds, however, that the nourishment that Asher is to provide to the princes according to the biblical text, refers not only to nourishment of angels, as Cyril said, but also to that of 'earthly princes, that is, the believing kings and the orthodox bishops' (Vat. sir. 103, fol. 43b). Apparently he distinguishes between two groups of bishops: those who followed the Miaphysite teaching and those who did not.

A scholion on Gen. 49 in the *Collection of Simeon* is very negative about the Roman Empire: it is being led astray, it is even itself at the root of all evil, and it will be cast on its back, that is, it will come to an end. This attitude fits a situation in which the Roman Empire was seen as the representative of non-orthodox teachings. Though its apocalyptic interests would indeed be at home in the seventh century, it would even be possible to date this scholion later: it could have been written in the eighth or ninth century, a period in which open criticism of the Arabs was perhaps difficult, but in which the boundaries between Jews and Christians, and between Miaphysites and Chalcedonians could again be emphasized. Whenever we should date this particular scholion, it is clear that for Simeon at the end of the ninth century, the picture of the Roman Empire being led astray was still relevant. In an East Syrian context, or even a later West Syrian context, one would not expect so much attention to the wickedness of Rome. The commentaries of Isho'dad[40] or Barhebraeus[41] do not mention the Romans in their explanations of this verse.

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[40] Vosté and Van den Eynde, *Commentaire d'Išo'dad de Merv*, p. 217.
[41] Edition: Martin Sprengling and William C. Graham, *Barhebraeus' Scholia on the Old Testament* 1. *Genesis–II Samuel* (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 13; Chicago, 1931), pp. 96–97.

An excursus in the *London Collection* may be taken to suggest that the author was writing before the death of Yazdegerd III, the last of the Sassanid rulers, in 651.[42] An earlier digression, discussing, among other things, why God permits holy men to be tried, and that to flee from persecutors does not deserve blame (London Ms. BL Add. 12168, fols. 35ʳ–36ʳ), would suggest that the author lived through the persecutions under the Chalcedonians: these are not just memories of a difficult past, but attempts to hearten those who experienced these hard times themselves.

One of our main findings is the fact that the structure of the two collections gives a clear picture of the tradition their authors wanted to hand down. It appears that the seventh century saw a major change of opinions in this respect, which was also related to the choice of language—a major identity marker. There is no doubt that the two compilers had different ideas on the tradition they wanted to lay down and pass on to the next generation.[43]

The London compiler is offering West Syrian readers, familiar with the Peshitta (the original Syriac translation of the Old Testament based on the Hebrew), a digest of Greek material in a form that is meant to replace earlier Syriac material. He tries to make this new tradition acceptable through its form and through a limited number of links to the earlier tradition. The choice of authors is telling. For the Pentateuch we find the names of Cyril of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Ephrem; for the Prophets, Athanasius, Cyril, Severus, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Ephrem. In other words: some of the more moderate Alexandrians, the moderate Antiochene Chrysostom, the Miaphysite leader Severus, the Cappadocians, and finally Ephrem as the only Syrian authority. The biblical text quoted is usually a Syriac rendering of the Greek text of his sources, or the Syro-Hexapla (the seventh-century translation of the Greek Old Testament into Syriac).

The choice of authors and the predilection for the Greek biblical text bring to mind the position of the later Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523). In earlier works, such as his *Memre* against Habbib, quotations from Ephrem were still of central importance. In the theological treatise to the monks of Senun, however, it seems that Philoxenus mentions the great exegete only because it was impossible to do without him. The vast majority of quotations come from

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[42] William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since 1838* 2 (London, 1871), pp. 905–906.

[43] Also Bas ter Haar Romeny, 'Greek or Syriac? Chapters in the Establishment of a Syrian Orthodox Exegetical Tradition', in F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis (eds.), *Studia Patristica* 41 (Leuven, 2006), pp. 89–95.

the Greek authors that were also important to the London compiler. As the treatise to the monks of Senun was written at the end of Philoxenus' life, it is possible that the new Greek perception of tradition was developed during his lifetime, and possibly even under his influence.[44]

The Old Testament part of the *Collection of Simeon* or more precisely its core, the *Commentary of Severus*, makes an impression completely different from the *London Collection*: the biblical text quoted is that of the Peshitta, the main authorities said to have been excerpted are the Syrians Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa. The quotations from the Greek Bible are few and they are clearly marked as readings from the *Yawnaya* 'the Greek'; the number of explicit references to Greek exegetes, most of which may have been added by Simeon rather than Severus, is likewise low. All in all, the work seems to be the opposite of the *London Collection*: this is the best of Syriac exegesis on the authentic Syriac Bible, with only passing references to Greek sources. The fact that the New Testament part is said to be based on John Chrysostom shows that there is no full opposition between Greek and Syriac; the reason for this may well be that there was no traditional Syriac alternative, as Ephrem had written a commentary on the Diatessaron rather than on the four Gospels. Still, one cannot deny that there is a shift from a preference for all things Greek to an interest in what seemed to be authentic Syriac material. This fits very well, we would argue, into the atmosphere among the Syriac Orthodox in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Paradoxically, at the beginning of the seventh century the acceptance of Greek learning among the Syrians was at its height, whereas there was considerable discontent with the Byzantine Empire, especially for its religious politics.[45] If we look at the attitude of some Syrian monks at the end of the century, who quarrelled with Jacob of Edessa because they thought his teaching was too much concerned with Greek writings,[46] it seems that the popularity of Greek learning among the West Syrians had also begun to ebb. Language was seen more and more as a boundary marker: gradually Syriac became the language of

[44] Lucas Van Rompay, 'Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition', *Hugoye* [http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/] 3.1 (2000), §10 with note 5; Lucas Van Rompay, 'Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ. Ephrem in the Works of Philoxenus of Mabbog: Respect and Distance', *Hugoye* [http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/] 7.1 (2004).
[45] Sebastian Brock, 'From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning', in N. Garsoïan *et al.* (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period (Dumbarton Oaks symposium, 1980)* (Washington, DC, 1982), pp. 17–34, here pp. 17–25.
[46] William Wright, *A Short History of Syriac Literature* (London, 1894), p. 43; Jean Maurice Fiey, 'Jacques, dit «l'Interprète», évêque d'Édesse', *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* 26 (Paris, 1997), pp. 663–664.

the Miaphysites, and Greek that of the proponents of Chalcedon.[47] With Lucas Van Rompay, we could say that in this period, the balance between the Greek and the Syriac stream in the tradition was redressed.[48] It was out of sheer necessity that Jacob of Edessa, with his great knowledge and love of Greek, became instrumental in this process.

As Jacob of Edessa and his followers adopted many interpretations of Greek origin in their commentaries, we could say that these were 'Syriacized' in three stages. After the full translations of authors such as Athanasius, Cyril, and Gregory of Nyssa, abbreviated versions such as we find them in the *London Collection* were produced. Finally, later Syriac authors wrote their own commentaries on the basis of either the shorter or the full versions, adopting interpretations without indicating the source. The *Commentary of Severus* represents the last of the stages just mentioned. As Jacob of Edessa was thoroughly influenced by Greek authors such as Cyril, the work of the monk Severus, who followed in Jacob's footsteps, to a large extent eventually goes back to Greek sources. Thus we see the paradox that his anti-Greek attitude is combined with a full appropriation of the contribution of Greek authors to the Syriac Orthodox tradition. The boundary between 'Greek' and 'Syriac' is clearly one that is invented.

6.3. Conclusion

Even though the exegetical collections of the Syriac Orthodox were less outspoken than their polemical works, they did contribute to their sense of belonging together. The stress was not so much on the boundaries of Syriac Orthodox beliefs and views as on their content. They offered the building blocks of a Syriac Orthodox world view. They explained the right views on the physics and metaphysics of Creation, they sketched the relation between the peoples on the earth and the position of the Syrians, dealt with problems such as the origin of evil and what is to be expected at the end of time, and made explicit the ethical code and doctrines of the community. It is an important fact that biblical interpretation connected these elements of a world view to the authoritative text of Scripture. The resulting narrative of what a Syriac Orthodox Christian should think and believe, helped to strengthen the existing community. In an

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[47] Sebastian P. Brock, 'Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria', in Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in The Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 149–160, here pp. 157–159, reprinted in Sebastian P. Brock, *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1999), Ch. 1.

[48] Van Rompay, 'Past and Present', § 22.

implicit way, however, the choice of content also set the boundaries between the Syriac Orthodox and the others. These boundaries become clear if we study the use of sources in these collections, as well as the differences between them and their East Syrian and Chalcedonian counterparts.

Finally, when we call these works traditional, we should realize ourselves that they were in fact inventing the tradition. The comparison between the two Syriac Orthodox collections shows that the period of the seventh century to the ninth was a critical one in this process. The way this tradition was perceived at the beginning of the period was not the same as at the end: we move from a conception of tradition which almost exclusively credited Greek sources to one that seems to have preferred Syriac, as if one was no longer aware of the contributions of Greek authors which had been fully appropriated. And that the tradition remained open for further refinement appears from the collections of Dionysius bar Salibi and Barhebraeus, which show us the differentiations of later centuries.

7. Historiography: Michael the Syrian and his Sources

7.1. *The Use of Syriac Historiographical Sources*

In order to study the process of selecting and rewriting shared memories, which is vital for the construction of a communal identity, Michael the Syrian's *Chronography* was an obvious starting point because of its position, its extent, its wealth of sources, and the originality of its conception. Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, wrote his famous *Chronography* as a universal history.[49] In order to write this enormous work Michael had to rely for the most part on historiographical works of the previous centuries. Due to the method used by many Syriac authors of quoting and excerpting their sources in order to create their own account—a technique referred to by Larry Conrad as a layering technique—many otherwise lost works have now been preserved, at least partially, by Michael and similar works, most notably the *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234*.[50] The study of Michael's

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[49] Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (4 vols.; Paris, 1899–1924).

[50] Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens* (CSCO 81, 82, 109, Syr. 36, 37, 56; Paris, 1916, 1920; Leuven, 1937); Albert Abouna, *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum C. 1234 pertinens* 2 (CSCO 354, Syr. 154; Leuven, 1974).

technique and the method behind the composition of his work has been a desideratum for a long time. Dorothea Weltecke describes the study of Michael in the twentieth century as follows:

> Nach hundert Jahren Text- und Quellenkritik lässt sich folgende Bilanz ziehen: Michaels Chronik scheint eine recht bunte, wenn auch „wertvolle Materialsammlung" zu sein, wie es Wolfgang Hage 1992 formulierte. Der Steinbruch erscheint noch lange nicht erschöpft, und der Abbau wird bis in die Gegenwart weiter vorangetrieben. … Die vollständige Chronik als gewolltes Werk eines Einzelnen wird seit Langlois und Chabot nicht mehr untersucht. Eine Monographie ist nie erschienen. Es scheint, dass dem die Annahme zugrunde liegt, Michaels Chronik sei mehr oder weniger ohne einen willentlichen Akt entstanden, habe sich zufällig aus dem Material ergeben und spiegele höchstens die materiell oder intellektuell eingeschränkte Recherchierfähigkeit des Autors. Dass die Weite seines Horizontes an die Fülle der ihm zur Verfügung stehenden Quellen gebunden ist, versteht sich natürlich. Doch zeichnet sich in der Diskussion um die verlorenen Geschichtswerke eine Erkenntnis ab, die für unsere Fragestellung von einiger Bedeutung ist: Michael hat seine Quellen *bearbeitet*.[51]

The determination, characterization and potential usefulness of these fragments for establishing the development of a perception of identity within the Syriac Orthodox historiographical tradition has been the first objective of this project. Michael's technique of quotations and excerpts is partly to blame for the use of his work as a *Steinbruch*. However, if Michael preserved fragments from his sources, he did rework (*bearbeitet*) them. Michael did have a plan; Michael did write his *Chronography* with a clear and particular goal in mind, i.e. that of instructing his audience. As a result Andrew Palmer adapts the description of the layering technique as follows:

> They [Syriac chroniclers] present themselves as objective analysts, but … they compiled or composed their texts in retrospect to serve moral, religious and political purposes. … By careful selection and significant juxtaposition of events they led the reader to draw conclusions by his own intelligence, with a minimum of didactic intrusion of the author's part …[52]

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[51] Dorothea Weltecke, *'Die Beschreibung der Zeiten' von Mor Michael dem Grossen (1126–1199). Eine Studie zu ihrem historischen und historiographiegeschichtlichen Kontext* (CSCO 594, Subs. 110; Leuven, 2003), p. 14, italics added. Weltecke has at least partly remedied the lack of research on Michael in this her own study.

[52] Andrew Palmer (ed.), *The Seventh Century in West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), p. xxviii; Jean Maurice Fiey, 'Les chroniqueurs syriaques avaient-ils le sens critique?', *Parole de l'Orient* 12 (1984–1985), pp. 253–264.

The study which results from this project presents a more structured account of Michael's working method and aims to provide some additional insight into the usefulness of the 'fragments' for modern research, and on how to handle them. Methodologically this aspect of Syriac historiography was studied for the period from the sixth century until the twelfth. The main reason is that for this period, we may assume that Michael had access to the original source text and did not have to rely on intermediary texts. For the preceding period, however, he could only access his sources through intermediaries, which may have adapted the original text.[53]

For the sixth century Michael used the works of Pseudo-Zachariah of Mitylene (*c.*568)[54] and John of Ephesus (d. 588).[55] For later centuries Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845), and Ignatius of Melitene (d. 1095) are the most important sources for his work.[56] Sadly, most of these works have been lost and only fragmentary traces can be found in later Syriac historiography. Of special interest to us are Pseudo-Zachariah, John of Ephesus, and Dionysius. Ignatius and Jacob are more problematic because they do not seem to have written a narrative text like the other three authors. As a result Michael adopted only short remarks from these texts, which are very difficult to attribute to any particular source and are not very informative about the ideology and perception of history of their original author.[57]

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[53] These preceding sources were all originally in Greek. Michael may have had access to some of these works in translation, but it is more likely that he had only reworked versions of these texts.

[54] Michael refers to Zachariah (of Mitylene), but rather than using the Greek original, he is referring to the Syriac Pseudo-Zachariah, who has reworked and added to the Ecclesiastical History of the real Zachariah. Edition: Ernest W. Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta* (CSCO 83–84, 87–88, Syr. 38–39, 41–42; Leuven, 1919–1921, 1924).

[55] Only Part Three of his Church History has been preserved: Ernest W. Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesini Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia* (CSCO 105–106, Syr. 54–55; Paris, 1935, and Leuven, 1936).

[56] On the importance of these three, see the editorial remark in Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* X. 20, ed. Chabot, Vol. 4, p. 377, trans. Vol. 2, pp. 356–357.

[57] It should be noted that there are some larger fragments from Jacob's Chronicle in Michael, but these refer to much earlier events, even before Christ. Although interesting from the point of view of why Michael included them, these are not useful for a discussion on the use of fragments as a source. Ignatius *may* be the intermediary for some larger fragments from the Byzantine tradition, although it is more likely that his Chronicle consisted of only short lemmas.

A study of Michael's use of the works of John and Pseudo-Zachariah—texts that have, in part, been preserved through an independent manuscript tradition—established Michael's method of use of his major sources, including some indications regarding his selection process. These findings have been used to analyse some of the larger fragments of Dionysius of Tel Mahre. They helped especially to show the potential use of these fragments for historical research but also the limitations forced upon this kind of research. Fragments from these sources, most particularly from the Church History of Dionysius, have been preserved by another so-called compiler/chronicler, the Anonymous Chronicler of 1234 CE.[58] In addition to the comparison between Michael and the text of his source itself, a comparison of the two compilations from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries helped to establish some insights into how 'representative' of the real work these two collections of fragments are. In addition a comparison of the anonymous Chronicle and John and Pseudo-Zachariah shed light on the technique of the Anonymous Chronicler of 1234.

The result of this study has been that the fragments can be used, but only conditionally.[59] Whatever outlook these fragments provide on the works and attitudes of previous authors, we always have to keep in mind that we are looking through the eyes of twelfth-century authors who have made a selection out of their pool of sources in accordance with their own ideology, their own perception of the world and the historical trends and processes, including their own ideas about what it means to be a 'Syrian'. For a study in the field of the history of *mentalité*, that is, attitude towards a certain ideology or line of thought, also as it developed within a sociological process, one needs to be very careful when referring to authors whose works have not come down to us in an independent tradition. The use of fragments of their works in new compositions is the result of a careful process of selection suited to the programmatic and ideological framework of the later chronicler. As a result a full, reliable 'reconstruction' of the earlier works is never possible. The coherence of the material has been irretrievably lost and only a selection of

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[58] For a collection of the fragments of Dionysius from the seventh century, see Palmer *Seventh Century*, 105–221; on Dionysius and his Church History, see Rudolf Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre, jakobitischer Patriarch von 818–845: zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 25.2; Leipzig, 1940).

[59] For a preliminary publication of criteria for the evaluation, see Jan van Ginkel, 'Michael the Syrian and his Sources: Reflections on the Methodology of Michael the Great as a Historiographer and its Implications for Modern Historians', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 6 (2006), pp. 53–58.

material has been preserved. Statements on the basis of these fragments are possible—and should be made—, but one always has to clarify the degree of reliability of the attribution of these ideas to the original author.

In view of the limited amount of material in direct tradition, the works which have come down to us in excerpts within later chronographies and chronicles cannot be ignored; in fact, the excerpts had to take a central position in this study after all. But we did find that the evidence of the 'tainted' material of the later chronicles should always be compared with that of the larger independent—more or less complete—works from the sixth century (Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, John of Ephesus, and Pseudo-Zachariah), the eighth century (Zuqnin Chronicle), and the twelfth century (Michael the Great, *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234* as sources for their own time). In addition, the shorter, usually heavily damaged chronicles from the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries should be taken into account. Most of these are anonymous, but one is attributed to Jacob of Edessa.

To give but one example of the importance of Michael's selection criteria with regard to questions of identity, it is clear that he aimed at highlighting the differences through time between his community and that of the Chalcedonians or 'Greeks'. In his own time the clash between both denominations is central to the self-perception of his community. Michael has his own definition of 'Greek', which he also implicitly inserted into his source material. When a source uses this terminology or its opposite ('we', 'the Orthodox', 'the Syrians') Michael sees these fragments and excerpts within the context of a deeper dichotomy than was perceived by the original authors. He selects and excerpts to fit this perception. In his excerpted account of the sixth century, the period of the gradual appearance of the Miaphysite, and later (seventh century and onwards) the appearance of an autonomous and independent Syriac Orthodox Church, there is no room for compromise, debate or unification, which was central in the original works. Also the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic aspects of the anti-Chalcedonian, Miaphysite movement is less visible in his presentation.

7.2. *Results: Identity within the Genre of Historiography*

Analysing the Syriac Orthodox texts with the features set out by Hutchinson and Smith in mind revealed that the authors show an increasing interest in the use of the 'right' name for the community. Although there already seems to have been a discussion at the time of Jacob of Edessa (seventh century), the work of Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845) shows a conscious effort to 'name' the community and link this community with a certain area. This effort is

reflected and developed by Michael the Great (d. 1199). Within the tradition, name and geography are often linked to language. Language, however, did not play a central role in the early texts (sixth century) to define the community: religion mattered more. Interestingly, it would seem that historiography picked up language issues later than other genres. Only in the eighth century did Dionysius of Tel Mahre use the linguistic element to define his community. However, again it was Michael who took it one step further, making language *the* marker of identity in one his appendices to his *Chronography*. In this Appendix he summarizes the history of his community from the Flood to his own time by selecting fragments of his *Chronography* which refer to the use of 'Aramaic'. To him, whoever spoke Aramaic as his mother tongue was a predecessor of his community. Their history was the history of his community. Even if he had to use non-Aramaic sources—Bible, Greek historiography—to describe that history.

Other criteria of Hutchinson and Smith are not central to Michael's perception of community, but they are reflected in his work. His solidarity is aimed at various groups, but not surprisingly, most notably to his own religious community. However, he also shows a solidarity with other Christians in the region, but making distinctions between the various groups. 'Greeks', that is, the Greek Orthodox (on religious level) or Byzantines (political level)[60] are among those with whom he seldom feels a connection. The Crusaders are seen in a more positive light, but again they are presented as 'others' and Michael seldom speaks in an inclusive way with regard to them. A certain solidarity with the Armenians is clearly present in his work, but the differences are also highlighted. Copts are treated similarly to the Armenians, although they are less prominent in his account and tend to be out of sight. The East Syrians (Church of the East) are often presented in a negative light where theological issues are discussed, but in hardship—such as the destruction caused by war or natural disasters—they are less visible than other communities and seem to be included in his term 'Syrians'.

The East Syrians are also included in the linguistic community present throughout the *Chronography*, and especially the Appendix II. Their pre-Christian and early Christian past is treated as part of the history of his own community. In short, Michael reflects a conscious group identity on the basis of name, common ancestry (and the myth thereof), a shared collection of mem-

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[60] Note that these levels are almost indistinguishable to Michael.

ories, a shared language and regional culture with the East Syrians.[61] The link to a homeland and a certain solidarity are also present. Although on a religious level he is well aware of the differences between the Syriac Orthodox and the Church of the East, he puts less emphasis on it than previous historiographers (notably Dionysius of Tel Mahre). In addition he can include them in the 'Christians' in opposition to the Muslims, and sometimes the Crusaders or the Greeks. Although this identification is present, one should not put too much emphasis on it and it is very clear that his first loyalty was to his own Church community. Therefore one could argue that Michael reflects a certain level of ethnic awareness—more so than his predecessors—but that it never got to the stage of 'nation building'.

If we look at Michael's predecessors it is clear that in the sixth century this level of group identification is less pronounced. Authors such as Pseudo-Zachariah and John of Ephesus felt connected to a certain geographical area, where the Syriac language was dominant, but not necessarily to the entire area (that is, outside the Roman Empire). In addition they did feel a connection to the Empire in its entirety. Linguistically they were aware of being a subdivision within the Empire but the religious boundaries between various denominations cutting right through the various linguistic communities were more important for their personal identification (and group identification) than the language. Also the historical memories and common ancestry is usually seen from a more universal Christian and Roman perspective. As a result they do not reflect a conscious ethnic awareness. Jacob of Edessa is a singular source in that he reflects the attitudes of the past (sixth century) and reacts to tendencies within the community which seem to reflect a distancing from that past, and in particular the identification with the Roman (Byzantine) Empire. It seems that from the end of the seventh century and throughout the eighth the interest in the 'Western' (Byzantine) identity continually diminishes. Rather than opposing the Greeks on the religious level or on a cultural level, there is a certain lack of interest. Only when the subject is forced upon the authors do they take their—negative—position against them, mainly on religious topics. The Church of the East is usually seen as an opposing community, although the linguistic unity is acknowledged—and at times other shared cultural elements.

Dionysius of Tel Mahre may well reflect the final phase of this gradual development, which resulted in a self-conscious Church, which also became

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[61] It should be noted that the Maronites do not feature in Michael's Syriac speaking world—either positively or negatively.

aware of a 'homeland' and started to look for a common name, also outside
the religious context. However, outside the religious context 'Syrians' could also
refer to inhabitants of Syria, irrespective of their religion and—sometimes—
language.

The fragments of Ignatius of Melitene (eleventh century) are too small in
size and number to make too many claims, but it should be noted that he
connected to the Greek tradition again. He consciously used Greek sources
to create his *Chronicle*. He clearly is aware of the 'Greeks' being different,
but he does link his community with their historical memories again. As to
solidarity, customs, and the like, there is too little to go by. However, it is
noteworthy that he—and many of his Church including most patriarchs and
bishops—were willing to stay within the Byzantine Empire, even though they
had the opportunity to relocate into Islamic territory. This suggests a certain
level of solidarity with the empire of the Christians, that is, the Byzantine
Empire.

7.3. *Conclusion*

On the basis of the historiography of the Syriac Orthodox tradition it seems
that a self-perceived group identity gradually took an ethnic form. To what
extent the presence of the various features of Hutchinson and Smith need
to be present in order to be able to say that a group is indeed an *ethnos*
is open to debate. In any case, even in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries
the limited political aspirations of the Syriac Orthodox did not entail the
idea that community should be sovereign in its own homeland, and thus we
certainly cannot speak of a nation. This was clearly not an option for the Syriac
Orthodox (or the Syriac speakers of the Middle East). However, the Syriac
Orthodox did 'invent' a tradition of their own, a history back to the time of
Noah (and even further to Adam), based on whatever source material available,
not just the Bible. Therefore their identity was not just religiously motivated—
although that element was always dominant—but also included the cultural
traditions of pagan empires such as those of the Assyrians and the Aramean
kingdoms. As is the case with other examples of ethnogenesis, this core of
traditions is not a given, but something that crystallized out of the available
stories and customs and only slowly came into existence. It is not unchangeable,
but is continuously reinterpreted, added to, and detracted from. However, the
Syriac Orthodox were by the twelfth century aware of having such a core. If
one would like to point out a *Traditionskern* as well, one should perhaps not
think of a group of families, but of the clergy.

8. Art: West Syrian Mural Paintings

8.1. *The Study of Art as a Possible Identity Marker in Practice*

The aim with which we started this part of the research programme was twofold. First, we wanted to answer the central question: What makes art *Syriac Orthodox* art? In other words, possible criteria that distinguish Syriac Orthodox art from that of neighbouring cultures had to be established. The distinctive features (identity markers) taken into account included: iconography (biblical scenes as well as saints and donors, and their appearance, dress, and attributes); style; and the languages used in the inscriptions. Second, we wanted to determine how West Syrian art contributed to identity formation. How is identity expressed and communicated by this art, and which of the distinctive features contributes most to this?

Points of consideration were: whether we could speak of local, 'Syrian schools'; whether artists limited themselves to one medium; and which commissioners they worked for (were they Syriac Orthodox, Byzantine Orthodox, Maronite, Latin, or even Muslim?). The decision to include evidence of Byzantine influences in our research enabled us to see whether typical Syriac Orthodox elements could be distinguished from Byzantine. The material from Deir al-Surian in Egypt offers contrasting examples of another kind: here the question is to what extent the paintings and other objects express a Syriac Orthodox identity and to what extent they conform to the Coptic tradition.

We stated above that artistic representations confront people with the official positions of the clergy and tell them what they have to believe; art can be used as an instrument to canalize theological ideology and therefore contributes to the creation of a religious identity. Yet Christian art contains more identities, complicating the distinction of the art of one community from that of another, in particular if these groups are close neighbours. The Syriac Orthodox, Maronites, and Byzantine Orthodox of western Syria coexisted within the borders of adjacent Crusader and Muslim states. By consequence, we found that we also had to reckon with the possibility of artistic interaction on a regional level.

A late eighteenth-century icon of St Behnam on horseback in the Church of St Menas in Cairo from 1782 is a good illustration of the complexity scholars encounter in dealing with identity issues. Today this piece is listed among the Coptic icons in Egypt. It was produced by Yuhanna, an Armenian painter from Jerusalem who in the early 1740s moved to Cairo to use his

skills in the service of the Coptic community.[62] Yuhanna depicted Coptic
saints, applied Coptic and Arabic inscriptions, and had the habit of dating
his works by the Coptic and Islamic eras. On the whole, therefore, there are no
overriding objections to labelling his oeuvre as 'Coptic'. There are, however, a
few exceptional brainteasers, and this icon of St Behnam is one of them. It was
painted for the Chapel of St Behnam, adjacent to the Church of St Menas
in the Fum al-Khalig district near Old Cairo.[63] In the eighteenth century
this chapel was used by adherents of the Syrian Catholic Church, which had
broken away from the Syriac Orthodox Church and allied itself with the
Church of Rome. The iconography is rooted in the hagiography of the Syriac
Orthodox saint Behnam,[64] the inscriptions are in Arabic and the date 1782
complies with the western, thus Roman Catholic era. Some elements in the
execution betray Yuhanna's Armenian-Palestinian education, a tradition which
was much influenced by European art. This exceptional piece demonstrates the
multi-layered, interactive character of oriental Christian art, and singling out
identity-related elements would have been meaningless without any knowledge
of the icon's context and time. Similar complexities were also to be expected in
regard to medieval art.

8.2. *Choice of Area; Initial Hypothesis*

The focal point of the study were the wall paintings of Lebanon and Syria
(eleventh-thirteenth centuries), the area where the Syriac Orthodox Church
was supposed to be well represented, and where a local artistic tradition existed.
These were placed in a wider context, taking into account both the earlier
witnesses of Syriac Orthodox art (such as manuscript illumination), as well
as contemporary examples, Christian and Islamic, from the Crusader states,
the Byzantine Empire, and other areas of the Mediterranean and the eastern
periphery of the Byzantine Empire. Cruikshank Dodd[65] had given the initial

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[62] Zuzana Skalova and Gawdat Gabra, *Icons of the Nile Valley* (Cairo, 2003; 2nd ed. 2006),
p. 236.
[63] Otto F.A. Meinardus, *The Historic Coptic Churches of Cairo* (Cairo, 1994), pp. 51–52,
Fig. 8.
[64] Jean Maurice Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne. Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie
ecclésiastiques et monastiques du Nord de l'Iraq* 2 (Recherches 23; Beirut, 1965), pp. 466–479.
[65] Erica Cruikshank Dodd, 'Christian Arab Painters under the Mamluks', *Aram* 9/10
(1997–1998), pp. 257–288; Erica Cruikshank Dodd, *The Frescoes of Mar Musa al-Habashi.
A Study in Medieval Painting in Syria* (Toronto, 2001); Erica Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval
Painting in the Lebanon* (SKCO 8; Wiesbaden, 2004).

impetus to deal with the question of how 'Syrian' the murals of Lebanon and Syria are; on the basis of her work, we started out with the hypothesis that the local style that could be discerned in many of the wall paintings could be connected to the Syriac Orthodox Church.

However, this line of approach seemed problematic for several reasons. Even at an early stage, our hypothesis that many of the decorated sanctuaries were Syriac Orthodox turned out to be unfounded. Instead most of them were revealed to be either Byzantine Orthodox or Maronite by denomination; only Deir Mar Musa could convincingly be assigned to our initial target group. A second objection was that the Syriac Orthodox material heritage seemed to be bound to regional developments, and was too scattered in time and space to allow a unanimous judgement. When we sought an alternative approach, these disadvantages emerged as an advantage. For, after all, the featuring of the art of different Churches within a limited area made this an ideal subject for a comparative study. With this approach and the aims of our project in mind, we had to study the medieval Christian art of Lebanon and Syria as a whole, and this became our new perspective. Likewise, we found that an isolated study of the Syriac Orthodox material from Deir al-Surian (the Monastery of the Syrians) in Egypt, detached from Egypt's contemporary Coptic art, would not do justice to these, in many aspects, unique works of art.

8.3. *Results: Identity in the Wall Paintings of Syria and Lebanon*

In many aspects the Maronites, Melkites, and Syriac Orthodox of western Syria shared the same iconographic, regional taste. Had Deir Mar Musa's murals from the eleventh and thirteenth centuries been found without any inscriptions and without any knowledge on its history, this Syriac Orthodox convent would easily have passed for a Melkite retreat. The iconography, style, and actually also the languages used for names of saints (Greek and Syriac) do not give away any conclusive indications as to its denomination. In fact, the same holds true for the other embellished churches in the region to the north of Damascus. Historical sources stress the Melkite character of places like Qara and Saydnaya, but their art, with the inclusion of the choice of languages, is so closely related to that of Deir Mar Musa, that it would not be out of place in a Syriac Orthodox context. Obviously, we are dealing with a regional culture of visualization rather than with segregated Melkite and Syriac Orthodox traditions.[66]

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[66] Mat Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles. Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon* (OLA 184; Leuven, forthcoming in 2009), Ch. 2.

In Lebanon, the traditional division of the Tripoli area between a Melkite territory in the north (Kura District) and a Maronite one in the south and in the Qadisha Valley is also evident from the thirteenth-century decoration pro-grammes. In particular the Greek inscriptions in churches of the Kura District coincide with their assumed Melkite denomination. The only exception is the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftun, which has inscriptions in Greek and Syriac, but the exceptional Byzantine flavour of its decorative programme confirms its Melkite denomination. In addition, Kaftun's art is attributed to an atelier held responsible for the embellishment of other churches in its vicin-ity; it also produced icons, which have been kept in a Greek Orthodox envi-ronment up till the present (see below). However, these 'Melkite' artists also worked on behalf of the Maronites, for example in the Monastery of Qannubin and the Church of St Saba in Eddé al-Batrun.[67]

Not only do the churches in the more southerly Maronite district have the almost entirely consistent use of Syriac in common, some were also decorated by one local artist, 'The Master of Bahdeidat'. It is intriguing that the Church of St Theodore in Bahdeidat (near Jbeil) would have had a Syriac Orthodox priest in 1256. West Syrians certainly dwelled in the County of Tripoli, and the established increase of Syriac Orthodox activities in the 1250s, most likely caused by refugees from the Mongol assaults in Mesopotamia, enhances the credibility of this claim.[68] These are, however, not valuable arguments for regarding all contemporary paintings in this Maronite area as Syriac Orthodox. What also complicates our analysis of Bahdeidat's murals are the depictions of two donors, who from their appearance, in particular their dress, must have been Latins. In about one third of the embellished village churches within the borders of the former County of Tripoli, such representations were found. Apparently, local Frankish authorities contributed to decoration programmes in the shape of *ex voto* images. All in all, the key question of the denomination of the Church of St Theodore at the time it was decorated cannot be answered. Either the West Syrians took over a decorated sanctuary from the Maronites, or they commissioned the embellishment of their own church from the apparently Maronite master. In view of his active period, fixed between 1243 and 1261/1262, both options are open.

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[67] Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, Ch. 3.
[68] Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, Ch. 3.

The research also focussed on the production of icons in the Tripoli area in the thirteenth century, and resulted in a remarkable outcome pertaining to the phenomenon of 'Crusader icons'.[69] The discovery of an icon and several wall paintings in the Monastery of Kaftun, all made by the same artist, revealed that painters were involved in the production of both mediums. Since the same hand was also recognized in several icons in the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai, formerly attributed to Crusader artists, it turned out that in Lebanon icon painting flourished alongside the embellishment of church interiors. Given the art-historical features and the context of the specimens under consideration it is obvious that they were made for Melkite use.

As far as the chronology is concerned, the flourishing of art production in Lebanon and West Syria coincided with Ayyubid rule and the Crusader period after the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, and more specifically after the treaty between these two parties of 1204, bringing some peace in the area. Taking into account the increasing difficulties imposed by the Mongol invasions and subsequent Mamluk advance from the 1260s onwards, it is likely that the artistic revival diminished or even came to an end in the years leading up to 1270.

8.4. *Conclusion*

Even though the possible function of church art as a marker of Christian identity is obvious, we found that artistic interaction on a local level was a very strong factor. As far as the present state of the paintings allows us to draw conclusions, the execution of the wall paintings of Lebanon and Syria cannot be identified with one single denominational group; doctrinal divisions between Christian communities known from the written sources did not find concrete shape in church art. This makes us realize once more that identity is not simple and single, but that people combine various loyalties that sometimes overlap and strengthen each other, but are contradictory at other times. One can only speculate about another dimension: it is possible that the identities expressed by the written sources formed a concern mainly of the clerical elite, whereas local church members had to deal with the reality of everyday life in the small towns and villages. Though this may be true at least to some extent, research into the patronage of religious art shows that commissioners

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[69] Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, Ch. 4.

(both clerics and laymen) were inclined to place practical considerations over principle: the quality (or simply availability) of a painter was often more important than his denominational background.

We started with questions about 'religious identity', and ended with others about 'identity of power'.[70] There are strong indications of Latin involvement in the decoration programmes of several Maronite, Melkite, and Syriac Orthodox village churches, mainly in the shape of *ex voto* images with the addition of donor portraits. Apparently such contributions were an integrate part of the maintaining of good relations between Crusader authorities and their indigenous subjects. All the same our search for expressions of identity and identity markers virtually came down to the question of whether depicted donors were Latins or indigenous.

9. Art: Christian-Muslim Artistic Interchange in the Mosul Area

9.1. *Practical Considerations, Choice of Area*

According to our hypothesis, the cultural contact with Islam was a major factor in explaining the formation of a Syriac Orthodox identity. Therefore it was decided that the relation with Islamic art should be studied in a separate Ph.D. project. Its subject was the strategy of adoption and rejection followed by the Syrians, as well as the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

As we have seen above, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a flourishing of art. It should be noted, however, that this blossoming of 'Syriac Orthodox art' was by no means restricted to the region of modern Lebanon and Syria or Deir al-Surian in Egypt; it is also attested in northern Mesopotamia, more specifically the city of Mosul and its surroundings. Even though the majority of the Christian population in the area consisted traditionally of East Syrians (Assyrians/Nestorians), Mosul was an important West Syrian centre during the period under consideration. It centred on the monasteries of Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam, both located just outside of Mosul, and several churches situated in the capital itself. Although wall paintings have been preserved in only one church in this region, the output of manuscript illustration, sculpture, and metalwork associated with this particular community is considerable.

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[70] Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, Introduction.

It appeared that the works of art of the Mosul area have one basic feature in common: they are executed in what has been called an 'Islamic style'. While their iconography is sometimes in accordance with the Byzantine or Eastern Christian examples, in other cases even the iconographic repertoire relies heavily on Islamic art, adopting motifs from the Islamic pictorial tradition. This raised some important questions about the influence of the local Islamic artistic tradition on that of the West Syrian Christians, and the reciprocal nature of this influence.

The main concern of the present project was to establish whether the Syriac Orthodox community of the Mosul area distinguished itself from other groups *artistically*. The self-definition of the Syriac Orthodox community involves differentiation from other Christian groups, as well as differentiation from non-Christians, in particular the ruling Muslim community. The central question was again: what makes art *Syriac Orthodox* art? In other words, was it possible to identify a set of criteria that can be used to distinguish between the art of the Syriac Orthodox and that of other Eastern Christian Churches on the one hand, and between the art of the Syriac Orthodox and that of the Muslims on the other? The possible distinctive features taken into account included: iconography (biblical scenes, saints), style, composition, decoration patterns, and the languages used in the inscriptions. Considering that Christian art from the Mosul area generally speaking developed in tandem with local contemporary Islamic art, it was a comparison between the art of the Syriac Orthodox and the art of the Muslim community that represented our point of departure.

9.2. *Results: Art, Identity, and Muslim-Christian Relations*

Apart from a few short interim periods when they were more or less restricted in their freedom, the local Christians enjoyed a great deal of tolerance and protection from the Muslim authorities. They participated fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of the time. Besides the blossoming of Islamic art, the production of Christian art also reached a peak. Moreover, at the height of this artistic activity there was an apparently fruitful interaction between Christians and Muslims. Illustrative in this respect is a group of some eighteen inlaid brass vessels with Christian themes, which were produced in the Syro-Mesopotamian region. Dating from around the mid-thirteenth century, these vessels are decorated with Gospel scenes, images of the Virgin and Child, and friezes of clerics and saints together with scenes familiar from Islamic art, such as the standard set of images based on the pastimes of the royal court, the so-called Princely cycle. The success of this distinct group of luxury

objects has proved to be explicable from their intrinsic appeal to both the Muslim and Christian upper classes. They shared the same fashionable taste, which was connected with their social position rather than with their religious backgrounds.[71]

The application of a wide range of interchangeable images and patterns to various purposes illustrates the cultural symbiosis between the two different communities. Depending on the context in which they are applied these images address Christian as well as Muslim recipients. A good example of the use of identical iconography by Christians and Muslims is the decoration of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh (mid-thirteenth century) in Mosul. Apart from the cross on the keystone, now lost, it does not contain any distinctively Christian elements. The lintel is decorated with motifs from the popular visual repertory of the 'Princely cycle'; enthroned figures holding goblets and falconers. The iconographic and stylistic resemblance to contemporary Islamic art is striking and demonstrates that there was a distinct conformity between Christian and Islamic art. Time and again, they used the same kind of representations which received an Islamic or Christian connotation only within the context in which they were represented. In a distinctively Christian religious setting, the specific meaning of the mounted falconers derives from their contextual location and not from the image of the falconer itself, which remains in accordance with the iconographic standards of the period. The Eastern Christian tradition of placing paired equestrian saints at entrances, where their protective capacities are most fully exploited, provides the key to the interpretation of the mounted falconers at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh. The falconers may be seen as a fashionable variant of the genuine Christian mounted warrior saint. Christians participated fully in the visual culture of their times, and the mounted falconers were simply one of the possibilities for placing apotropaic riders at the entrance of the sanctuary.[72]

At least in the study of sculpture we should make a clear distinction between sculpture in parish and monastic contexts. The parish church of Mar Ahudemmeh hardly shows genuine Christian motifs, apart from the cross, whereas the

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[71] Eva R. Hoffman, 'Christian-Islamic Encounters on Thirteenth-Century Ayyubid Metalwork: Local Culture, Authenticity, and Memory', *Gesta* 43 (2004), pp. 129–142; Bas Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction. Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area* (Leuven, forthcoming in 2009), Ch. 2.

[72] Bas Snelders and Adeline Jeudy, 'Guarding the Entrances: Equestrian Saints in Egypt and North Mesopotamia', *Eastern Christian Art in its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts* 3 (2006), pp. 103–140; Snelders, *Identity*, Ch. 7.

church of the monastery of Mar Behnam near Mosul shows representations that are typically Christian, including saints, martyrs, and two scenes based on the life of the church's patron saint. This distinction finds a parallel in the use of languages: the inscriptions in Mar Ahudemmeh are in Arabic, the language of the people—Muslim and Christian—, whereas in the monastery the liturgical language, Syriac, takes a dominant place. Though the monks of Deir Mar Behnam would seem to have made conscious and deliberate choices in language and iconography to bolster their Christian identity, it should be remarked that even in this monastery many motifs can be found that are paralleled in Islamic contexts.[73] And the recently discovered wall painting showing a unique Baptism scene in the parish church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh shows that the distinction between monastery and parish should not be drawn too strictly.[74]

Another important result of this research is that stylistic features cannot be connected exclusively with one faith community. A strong example is a liturgical fan from Deir al-Surian.[75] This piece of metalwork depicts the Enthroned Virgin Hodegetria, a theme that was relatively rare in Byzantine art, but popular among Copts and Syrians. The fan has an inscription in Syriac which states among others that it was produced in 1202/1203 for Deir al-Surian in Egypt. It is clear, however, that it had been made in the Mosul area. There is an obvious agreement in style between this object and a collection of eighteen other metal objects with Christian themes (see above), of which it was assumed that the style was Islamic, and that the artists must have been Muslims. In the case of the fan, the Syriac inscription might be taken as an indication of a Christian craftsman, but we would rather say that it shows that the question of the religious identity of the maker is essentially irrelevant. Artists and craftsmen made objects for Christian and Muslim patrons at the same time and probably in the same workshops. We would stress that the formal characteristics of these works of art are determined by the techniques the artist applied rather than by his religious or linguistic background.[76]

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[73] Snelders, *Identity*, Ch. 6.

[74] Bas Snelders, 'A Newly Discovered Wall Painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh, Iraq', *Eastern Christian Art in its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts* 4 (2007), pp. 27–48.

[75] Bas Snelders and Mat Immerzeel, 'The Thirteenth-Century Flabellum from Deir al-Surian in the Musée Royal de Mariemont (Morlanwelz, Belgium). With an Appendix by Lucas Van Rompay on the Syriac Inscriptions', *Eastern Christian Art in its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts* 1 (2004), pp. 113–139.

[76] Snelders, *Identity*, Ch. 3.

The stylistic agreement between the Islamic and Christian art of the Mosul area makes it impossible to use style as a criterion for the Syriac Orthodox nature of a work of art. The same holds true for the other features that we initially considered possible identity markers. Even typically Christian representations were not unique to the Syriac Orthodox, as we found parallels in other Christian communities. For instance, our study of the evidence of wall paintings in this area showed that the decoration programmes usually consisted of conventional scenes from the life of Christ, such as the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. An exception to the rule is the iconographical attention paid to the patron saint and a number of Syriac Orthodox martyrs in Deir Mar Behnam. Mar Behnam was a local saint, venerated only by the Syriac Orthodox. It should be noted, however, that for the identification of these representations the Syriac inscriptions were essential. If we compare Deir Mar Behnam to Coptic church decoration, the attention paid to local monastic saints also appears to be relatively limited. Therefore we should not overestimate the amount and importance of features proper to Syriac Orthodox monumental decoration.

9.3. *Conclusion*

The systematic study of the art of the Mosul region undertaken in this project has made it clear that all communities in the region ordered metal objects, illustrated manuscripts, and sculpture, and that these objects came from the same workshops or were at least made by artists with identical training, who were producing art for Christian and Muslim patrons alike. The appeal of Christian themes for a Muslim audience has demonstrated that the presence of Christian subjects should not necessarily be assumed to indicate a particular religious or communal identity, neither on the part of the artists nor on that of the patrons.

The great difficulty when it comes to evaluating whether works of art or the images represented on them were appropriated in order to enhance communal identity is that images generally speaking have the capacity to convey a multiplicity of meanings depending on the social and religious position of the onlooker. The use of the same symbols by different groups often greatly diminishes the possibility of differentiating between the religious identity of works of art, especially when other signifiers are lacking. In other words, only when the precise context in which a symbol or image is featured has been established with a degree of certainty can we begin to speculate about what possible meanings were attached to them.

The considerable overlap between Christian and Islamic art shows that it was not possible to distinguish between the two groups from the point of art and craftsmanship. Terms such as 'Christian style' or 'Islamic style' appear to have no content. This forms a confirmation of, and extension to, the conclusions of the wall paintings project (Section 8 above), which showed that divisions between Christian communities known from the written sources appeared to be broken by artistic links.

10. Transformations: Identity Discourses among Suryoye in the European Diaspora

10.1. *A Modern Extension to the Programme*

It may have become clear from the above that before 1300, at least the outlines of an ethnic identity had appeared among the Syriac Orthodox. Unfortunately, we have not been able to investigate all developments in the following years. However, by way of extension to our programme, a Ph.D. project was dedicated to mapping the discourses of identity among Suryoye elite members in the European diaspora. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Syriac Orthodox Christians, or *Suryoye*, originating in the current nation states Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey have formed diaspora communities in Europe. Among their members, the communal identity of the Suryoye is hotly debated. The project attempted to explain these discourses—which show a transformation of identity—in relation to the social, political, and historical context in which the Suryoye live today. It also aimed at a description of how Suryoye elite members mobilized these discourses. In this project we limited ourselves to the Suryoye who migrated from Syria and Turkey to Sweden and Germany. The people that have played the most important and leading role in the identity formation of the Suryoye in the last century have been different elite groups, such as educated secular leaders, as well as religious and informal influential 'leaders'. Our research therefore focused on these elite groups.

The project first dealt with the process of emigration and settlement, as this forms the backdrop against which the transformation of the identity of the Suryoye should be explained. It also discussed the growth of national movements among them. The focus was on the situation in Sweden, whereas material from Germany was used for comparative purposes. Next, on the basis of in-depth interviews, participative observation, and the study of internet sources the identity discourses among the Suryoye were studied. For this purpose, a number of the features of ethnic communities listed by Hutchinson and Smith were selected.

In the first place we looked at the name of the community. In contrast to the situation in the homelands, the Suryoye in the western diaspora received the same status as other citizens in the receptor country. Consequently they were referred to as a minority group in the sense that they did not belong to the majority of the indigenous population. For the receptor society they were Syrians or Turks, like all other people originating from these nation states. In the opinion of Suryoye elite members these names were misnomers. The discussion about the right designation in western languages to refer to the Suryoye has ended in a conflict which has not been resolved yet. We dedicated one chapter to the different arguments used in favour of the choice of a certain designation.

The sense of solidarity and the extent of the Suryoye in their self-definition were also investigated: we asked people to define whom they would include when they were talking about 'our people'. Then we studied the link with the homeland, asking people where and how they define their homeland (*athro*). Throughout the chapters it was shown that the shared memories of persecution (especially those of the *Seyfo*, the genocide of the *Suryoye* during WW I in Ottoman Turkey) in the Middle East have played an important role in their collective identity. Furthermore, our research indicated that in the diaspora, traditional elements of culture such as the Syriac language are combined with new elements of culture which evolved in the diaspora. Examples are the success of the soccer team Assyriska in the Swedish league, the production of new genres of music, dances, theatre, literature but also an entrepreneurial business culture. These new elements show the dynamics in the process of the formation of a collective identity in a new context.

Finally, we studied the question of leadership, an element to which Hutchinson and Smith did not pay as much attention as the other elements (for the obvious reason that they described the features of an ethnic community rather than a nation). Through the identification of Suryoye leadership, elite members have shown their orientation towards religious or secular leadership and with that their positioning as a people among other peoples. Suryoye elite members have started to lobby national governments and international organizations about taking the Suryoye into consideration. Though most Suryoye are realistic enough to see that a Suryoye state will not be possible in the near future, the principle that it *should* be possible is widely accepted. Many Suryoye dream of a leadership that functions on a par with the leaders of other states, and would like to have some sort of a parliament.

10.2. *Findings: A Non-Religious Definition of Ethnicity, and National Aspirations*

Among our findings, here we would highlight the fact that a national movement came up among the Suryoye, which stressed the non-religious elements of their ethnic identity and promoted a distinct national identity of the Suryoye as a people. This movement started on a low scale as early as the beginning of the twentieth century in the homeland. Two leading figures were Ashor Yusef and Naum Faiq.[77] In Europe this movement has gained considerable strength. Its goal was the increase of a shared sense of nationhood among the Suryoye and the members of other Syriac Churches.[78] The religious element in their identity was not what mattered most any more. Instead, they defined the main characteristic of their *ethnie* on the basis of an idea of common descent and their shared cultural and linguistic background. The focus on the shared background started to function as the basis of a new appeal: to be recognized nationally and internationally as a people, and to be entitled to cultural, linguistic, and religious rights, like other peoples.

The national movement had its roots in the homelands, but it expanded extensively in the diaspora situation. Three important reasons that can be detected for the expansion of the national movement in Europe are the following. In the first place religion had lost its function as a boundary between the Suryoye and other people in the secular diaspora countries. Thus it became necessary to find new ways of positioning the Suryoye in the societies in which they came to live. Although the Suryoye were officially nationals of the nation states Syria and Turkey, in practice they had often been treated differently: an outcome of their position in the former Millet system in the Ottoman Empire. In this polity, informed by religious affiliation and solidarity, ethnic identity had played a marginal role.[79] The problem of identification became acute because of the names given to the Suryoye arriving in the receptor countries: they resisted being identified on the basis of Turkish or Syrian identity.

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[77] Ashor Yusef was born in 1858 in Kharput, Turkey. He was killed in 1915 by the ruling government in Turkey. Naum Faiq was born in 1868 in Diyarbakır (Omid) in Turkey. In 1912 he fled to America and died there in 1930. Until his death he continued publishing his ideas about the situation of the Suryoye.
[78] The Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Church, the Maronite Church, the Melkite Church, the Syriac Orthodox, the Syriac Catholic and Syriac Protestant Churches.
[79] Milton Jacob Esman and Itamar Rabinovich, *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), p. 5.

A second reason for the expansion of the national movement is that the opportunities to study in Europe resulted in an enormous increase of educated secular elite members. Consequently these laymen put topics on the agenda of their people that could not be thought of before in the homeland. The secular elite members started to increase their influence on issues relating to the Suryoye both in the homelands and in the diaspora. In the homelands one could say that the clergy were still far more influential than the secular elites. The central power was with the clergy who represented their church members formally. They decided about the major issues regarding the Suryoye. Our research showed that even among those most loyal to the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Patriarch is now only seen as a religious leader; for secular leadership, the Suryoye are looking elsewhere.

A third reason for the expansion of the national movement in Europe has been freedom of speech. The Suryoye were allowed to talk about a distinct national identity. They have even used their new position as European nationals to speak out about the rights of the Suryoye as a people in both the homelands and in Europe. In this regard one can observe that the *Seyfo* is on the agenda of many Suryoye secular organizations.

The dispersion of families worldwide led to a transnational community structure that functions as a network through which this discussion is led. In this way, the subject of identity is not only discussed at regional or national level, but also at transnational level. Important tools for this have been the use of the latest communication technology, and easy international transportation. This acceleration in the exchange of information as used by the educated elite has influenced the central position that the subject of 'identity' has taken. Although the national movement was relatively small, it led the way for a national consciousness among the Suryoye in Europe, no matter what designation they choose to use, Aramean, Assyrian, or Syriac.

11. Survey of the Development of a Syriac Orthodox Identity

By way of conclusion we give our reconstruction of the development of Syriac Orthodox identity, relating our finds to our initial hypothesis. Roughly speaking, five main periods with distinct interests were discerned in our research. In Section 3 we have already defined an early period, from 451 up to the middle of the seventh century. This period was primarily concerned with the validation of Syrian Christianity as the legitimate continuation of the 'official', apostolic Church. The later period (650–1300) can be divided into two parts. The first section, from the mid-seventh up to and including the tenth century,

was a period of re-orientation, necessitated by political developments and the contacts with Islam. It showed efforts to establish a tradition, and to determine who the Syrians really were and where they came from. The last section then, from the eleventh up to and including the thirteenth century, was a period of further compilation and codification. Authors contributed much to the formation of a West Syrian identity as they strove to integrate the spectrum of earlier understandings. In addition to these three periods, we also paid attention to the period before the split, and to the developments in our own times.

Our hypothesis was that the choice made in religious matters was the starting point for the new group, but that there were a number of factors that contributed to its development: the position of the clergy and an autonomous centrifugal force in the Byzantine Empire, for which religious difference became the focus and symbol. Through a process of selection and resignification, gradually other features from the complex cultural background of the Syrian Christians were added: language, for example—one of the most easily recognizable, and therefore strongest, features of identity—, became very important, but only after some time. On the western side of the Byzantine-Persian border, the use of Syriac seemed to gravitate towards the Miaphysites. As soon as the use of Syriac became recognized as a symbol of the religious association that was in the process of becoming a community, it offered the possibility of establishing a link to a more distant, and more glorious, pre-Christian past: did not the Bible say that the Babylonians and Assyrians spoke Aramaic, that is, Syriac? So they were Syrians, too. We should not think of ancient fault lines here, but of a social process of identity construction. It was the choice for the Miaphysite doctrine that was used as the focal point for a number of new and existing, partly competing, partly complementary loyalties, under the pressure of the Chalcedonians and later the contact with Islam, which accorded the Syriac Orthodox, as well as some other Christian communities, a special social and juridical status.

Basically we think that this hypothesis still explains the development very well, and can accommodate the sources we studied. We have a number of modifications and adjustments, however. The main ones are the following:

(a) Even more than before we started, we tend to see the seventh century as the time when the Syriac Orthodox developed from a religious association to a community that gradually acquired the sense of being an *ethnos*. Though certain developments had already started earlier, the beginning of Islamic rule was a turning point.

(b) The art-historical evidence points to the fact that identity is never exclusive
     and simple. Whereas our written sources indicate clear borders between the
     Syriac Orthodox and other communities, it appeared that the local style
     in the wall paintings of Syria and Lebanon was not exclusive to the Syriac
     Orthodox, and that Muslim and Christian art in the Mosul area could not
     be distinguished on the basis of style or even iconography.

(c) The combination of art-historical and written evidence suggests to us that
     the higher clergy were the carriers (and inventors) of the tradition and acted
     much in the same way as the *Traditionskern* in ethnogenesis theory.

In the following sections we discuss our reconstruction in more detail.

11.1. *Before 451*

With regard to the origin of the Syriac Orthodox as an ethnic group we
hypothesized that the choice made in religious matters was their starting point.
The reason for this was that the Syriac-speaking Miaphysites had never known
political independence, as had the Armenians, nor did they exhibit any of the
six features associated with ethnic communities.[80]

Syriac-speaking Miaphysites had no proper name expressing the identity
of the community. When Tatian describes himself in the second century as
someone who 'philosophizes in the manner of the barbarians, born in the
land of the Assyrians, educated first on your principles, secondly in what I
now profess' (*Oratio ad Graecos* 42), we would agree with Fergus Millar that
the barbarian philosophy must be Christianity, and that the word 'Assyrians'
refers simply to the inhabitants of the province of Syria.[81] Syriac-speaking
Miaphysites could not claim a myth of common ancestry or shared historical
memories exclusively for themselves; nor were the elements of common culture
exclusive to them: they shared the Syriac language with some Chalcedonians
and with the East Syrian Dyophysites, and their Miaphysite beliefs with Copts,
Ethiopians, Armenians, and Greek-speaking Miaphysites. In the fifth century,
at any rate, their network and sense of solidarity were not exclusive either. Even

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[80] As defined by Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*, pp. 6–7.

[81] Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA), pp. 227, 460,
following Theodor Nöldeke, 'Ἀσσύριος Σύριος Σύρος', *Hermes* 5 (1871), pp. 443–468, here
p. 465.

in the early sixth century, Miaphysites still cherished the hope of being reunited with those who professed the official religion of the Byzantine Empire.[82]

The only feature of an ethnic community that to some extent may have been present is the link to a certain territory. But as this is an isolated feature, the indications we have point rather to a sense of loyalty to the region than to anything else. I am referring to the way Ephrem seems to stress the role of his own region in his Genesis commentary, identifying the cities where Nimrod was king with Edessa, Nisibis, Ctesiphon, Adiabene, Hatra, and Resh'aina. His positive view of Nimrod, the legendary king of this area, is conspicuous (see Section 6.2 above).

Though it is known that there must have been people who knew the cuneiform script and the Akkadian language up to at least the first century CE, we have not found any indication of a *Traditionskern* that passed on Assyrian or Babylonian traditions to the later Syriac Orthodox. On the contrary, in the twelfth century Michael the Syrian himself explicitly states that in order to become good Christians, his community gave up all pagan knowledge. It is through Greek sources, he says, that one can regain a connection with the pre-Christian past. This would seem to be a clear description of a tradition being reinvented.

It should be stressed that the term 'reinvented' does not entail a value judgement: even modern nation states such as Belgium and the Netherlands have invented their past. After all, apart from a geographical one, no connection can be demonstrated between the tribe of the Belgians of whom Julius Caesar said that they were the bravest fighters of all and the present state of Belgium, nor can one contend that the present Dutch had anything to do with the megalithic tombs in the province of Drenthe. Yet they do appear in the 'canon of history' which the Ministry of Education has now sent to all primary schools. One can say, however, that Syriac-speaking Christians were living in an area where the Assyrian Empire once reigned. The empire disappeared in the mists of history, but its inhabitants may have continued to live there, mingling with the people they overcame and that overcame them. If outsiders deny the Syriac Orthodox the right to identify themselves with the Assyrians, they would be using double standards. Moreover, one should not forget that the question 'who the Syriac Orthodox *really* are'—which is behind such a denial—can only be posed if one defines ethnic communities in essentialist or even biological terms.

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[82] Jan van Ginkel, *John of Ephesus. A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Groningen, 1995), p. 182.

Within today's community in the diaspora a discussion is going on about the question of whether the Syriac Orthodox should identify themselves with the Assyrians or the Arameans. In terms of a *Traditionskern*, it might be more obvious to think of the families in Edessa that became Christian and decided to use their dialect of Aramaic as a liturgical language. Their Aramaic was a dialect that already had a literary tradition and, as one of the offshoots of *Reichsaramäisch*, a respectable pedigree. Yet it does not mean that they defined themselves as Arameans. The situation in the Edessa of the first centuries would seem to have been more complicated: there are clear Arab influences, among other things, in the names of its kings, whereas other sources speak of the town as Armenian rather than Aramaic. As *lingua franca* in the first millennium BCE, Aramaic had actually been adopted by various people. The use of the language on the coins of the Edessan state can be seen as a statement of independence from the Romans and Parthians, and was in that sense an identity marker. However, it did not point to an allegiance with the ancient kingdoms of Aram.

The possible role of the Edessan families as *Traditionskern* for the Syriac Orthodox is further limited by the fact that many of the Miaphysites in the area to the west of the Euphrates were actually expressing themselves in Greek, at least when they wanted to write something down—it is possible that some of them used Aramaic as a spoken language, but it is uncertain whether this was Eastern Aramaic or Western. Their use of the Eastern Aramaic dialect we now call Syriac was a development of later centuries. As a *Traditionskern* hands down traditions which can, if circumstances allow, become the tradition of a much larger group, this in itself is not a problem, but it would perhaps suggest a more central role for Edessa in these later developments than is borne out by the sources. This possible *Traditionskern* would also be atypical in the sense that it passed on a language rather than a myth of origin. Finally, it would not explain the split between East and West Syrians.

11.2. *451–650*

It was in the sixth century that the first outlines of a communal identity appeared. Syriac- and Greek-speaking Miaphysites in the area of present-day Syria, Lebanon, and south-eastern Turkey had begun to define themselves in opposition to the Chalcedonians, and came to be defined so by others. Jacob Baradaeus (d. *c.*578) laid the foundations of a separate Miaphysite ecclesiastical hierarchy, which was not officially linked to the 'national' Miaphysite churches. Those who had been persecuted by the Byzantines assumed the role of martyrs,

and were remembered as such. These memories formed the basis of a histor-
ical conscience. The religious position of the new hierarchy was also further
developed.

As Momigliano[83] explains, monotheism fosters theological controversy.[84]
In the pre-Christian world the periphery of the Roman Empire had defined
itself in relation *to* the centre through the general compatibility of various
polytheisms; now the new notions of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' allowed the
periphery to define itself *against* the centre. The Miaphysites viewed themselves
as in the first place Christians. They accepted the writings and teaching of the
Church from before 451, but since the others had departed from orthodoxy,
they felt that they were the only ones who kept to the correct doctrine. The
pressure from the centre and the persecutions reinforced this mechanism of
alienation, just as support from the centre, such as that given by Theodora,
the wife of Emperor Justinian I, kept the idea of belonging to the Christian
Empire alive.

Centrifugal forces were greatly assisted by the position of the clergy. Imperial
officials were constantly recycled, while bishops could build up a local power
base. Together with the monks—from whose ranks the Syriac Orthodox bish-
ops were chosen—they formed a continuous presence in their area. Monas-
teries began to dominate cultural and intellectual developments, controlling
the communication channels for the diffusion of the myths and symbols that
shaped the community. Bishops also extended their authority to secular areas.[85]

Though all this suggests that the mechanisms of group formation were
in place in this period, the level of group identification seems not to have
taken the form of an ethnic awareness yet. The historians and chroniclers we
studied express their connection to a certain geographical area, as Ephrem
had done earlier. In addition they express their allegiance to the Empire as
a whole—but not to emperors who held the wrong opinions in doctrinal
matters. There was a clear hope that the Empire would become Miaphysite,
and there were certainly events that fed this hope. Linguistically they were
aware of being a subdivision within the Empire but the doctrinal boundaries
between the various denominations were more important for their group

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[83]   Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State', *Classi-
cal Philology* 81 (1986), pp. 285–297; repr. in Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and
Christians* (Hanover, NH, 1987), pp. 142–158.

[84]   See also Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late
Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 106–108.

[85]   Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, pp. 107–108.

identification than their language. The Syriac exegetical sources actually show a clear predilection for everything Greek. The idea seems to have been that the doctrinal strife was due to inexact translations and unclear formulations by earlier theologians. The number of references to earlier Syriac sources (even Ephrem) drops dramatically; there is a clear development towards more literal translations. The Miaphysite movement in the area was bilingual: some of its strongest representatives wrote in Greek rather than Syriac.

11.3. *650–1000*

It is as if history were revived, and tradition reinvented in the following period. There was a sense of continuity, but not all the lines of the earlier periods were actually followed. The contact between Muslims and Syriac Orthodox Christians already necessitated further delineation of the position of the latter. Moreover, the arrival of Islamic rule cut off the Miaphysites in the area of present-day Syria, Lebanon, and south-eastern Turkey from the Byzantine Empire, and confronted them with the fact that they were on their own: they were no longer part of the Byzantine Empire and the Empire would not become Miaphysite. What may have appeared a fluid situation before, had now become crystallized.

The Syriac language started to play a role as a distinguishing feature: Miaphysites in the area distanced themselves from Greek. The polymath Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) found that his fellow monks had begun to distrust everything Greek: they actually quarrelled with him because of his Greek learning. Again, an important role in this process was played by the Arab invasions, which cut off direct contact with most of the Greek-speaking world.[86] Greek became associated, it seems, with 'the enemy' in both doctrinal and political senses. Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845) and Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) appear to have seen language as an important identity marker, and it was through language that they connected their community with a pre-Christian past. Earlier indications of such a connection we found in Jacob of Edessa's exegesis (d. 708), however. Interestingly, his identification of his community with the descendants of Aram was not explicitly connected with the language, though this may have played a role in the background. The same holds true for the remark Sebastian Brock[87] found in Severus of Nisibis (d. 666/667): 'Nobody I think will dispute that Babylonians are Syrians'.

[86) Brock, 'Antagonism'.
[87) Brock, 'Antagonism'.

On the basis of the sources we studied, we would say that the impact of the Arab invasions made the Miaphysites gradually distance themselves from the Byzantine Empire and define their tradition as Syriac, while they started to identify with some of the pre-Christian peoples of the area. At least in the early ninth century, in Dionysius of Tel Mahre and in the *Commentary of the Monk Severus*, the different elements have been connected and form a system. Though all six features of an ethnic community are present (name, myth of common origin, shared historical memories, shared elements of culture (religion, language), links with a geographic area, and a sense of solidarity), it is clear that the religious aspect remained central.

With regard to the carriers of the tradition we can say that the rise of Islam did not fundamentally change the position of the higher clergy, but their powers in worldly matters were now officially confirmed: since the middle of the eighth century, the Caliphs gave the Patriarchs a charter to this effect.[88] They acted as the leaders of their community and their monasteries were the centres where the tradition was kept and developed. A family aspect may have played a role as well: at least about the East Syrians we know that important families put their stakes on different options, sending some of their sons to the clergy and making others study medicine and become important and powerful doctors at the Abbasid court. There is no doubt that such families played an important role in the reinvention of the tradition.

11.4. *1000–1300*

The next period, often dubbed that of the 'Syriac Renaissance', started only after a period of at least a century in which the production of literature in Syriac by the West Syrians almost came to a standstill. The enormous output of Yahya ibn Adi in tenth-century Baghdad shows that the Syriac Orthodox were still active, but he wrote in Arabic. It seems that political and military developments, including the Byzantine military achievements against the Muslims in the twelfth century and the Crusades, favoured a new start of Syriac literature in the area of present-day Turkey, if only because of the stimulus of cultural contacts.

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[88] Peter Kawerau, *Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance: Idee und Wirklichkeit* (Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten 3; Berlin, 1955), pp. 75–79; Wolfgang Hage, *Die syrisch-jakobitische Kirche in frühislamischer Zeit: nach orientalischen Quellen* (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 67–68.

The historiographical and exegetical works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries try to summarize the tradition once more, and show evidence of further 'cultivating' and 'pruning'. The work of Michael the Syrian is witness to a growing interest in the pre-Christian past. Language as an identity marker was extremely important to him, as we have seen: whoever spoke Aramaic was one of his forefathers, he suggests. It is important to note the background to Michael's argument: what he wanted to do was to prove that the Syrians would be able to govern themselves. The fact that they had had kings and empires in the past would be sufficient proof. As a Patriarch Michael had considerable power, not just in ecclesiastical affairs but also in civil matters. He had to deal, however, with the aspirations of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos, who wanted to reunite and restore the Roman Empire. Manuel was already talking to the Armenians, who were a nuisance to Michael anyway, as they were a strong power in southern Turkey. Therefore he and his friend Dionysius bar Salibi were relatively negative about the Armenians, who in terms of doctrine should have been their allies, and relatively positive about the Chalcedonian Franks (the Crusaders), with whom Michael sought to enter into an alliance against Manuel. It is conspicuous that Michael's enemies within the Syriac Orthodox Church did want to give in to the Byzantines: the borders between the communities became a function of power politics and alliance making.

The fact that political alliances became more important than doctrinal matters may point to the fact that the stress on the religious aspect of the Syriac Orthodox identity became slightly less pronounced. Another indication to that effect is the openness towards the East Syrian tradition in both the exegetical and historiographical sources. Already in the ninth century exegetes from both communities had started to use each other's works. In Dionysius bar Salibi, in the twelfth century, this was still no more than a utilitarian issue: if Isho'dad had something he could use, he would take it without indicating the source. If Isho'dad offered an explanation Dionysius did not like, he would stress the East Syrian provenance. The importance attributed to language as identity marker may have played a role: at least in his friend Michael we see that this made him recognize that both Syriac communities were of common descent. Barhebraeus, one century later, was more generous than Dionysius, and also showed a marked openness towards Islam.

Still, in all the written works we studied the borders between the communities are clearly indicated. It was our study of the art of this period that made us realize that this was not the whole story. The wall paintings in the area of present-day Syria and Lebanon clearly show intensive contact between Byzantine Orthodox, Maronites, and Syriac Orthodox, whereas there are also Cru-

sader and Muslim influences. And neither the style nor the iconography of the art of Mosul suggests that Christians and Muslims had different artistic traditions. Much of the art must have been made in the same workshops. We do see evidence of local schools, however. This makes us conclude that the reality of everyday life in the small towns of the Middle East necessitated contacts between the various communities to a much higher level than the keepers of the tradition, the clergy, may have wanted. Personal identity is always based on a combination of different loyalties, which may contradict. Even though at this time the loyalty to the Syriac Orthodox Church came with a sense of common descent, it was not the only identity people had.

11.5. *Today*

Today the Syriac Orthodox are in the final stage of the formation of an ethnic community. They still do not agree on their common ancestry and their name. These issues cause tensions far beyond the Middle East. In Sweden, they have been the cause of riots among Syriac Orthodox refugees coming mainly from the south-east of Turkey. In the Netherlands the same issues are hotly debated in towns such as Enschede and Hengelo, where many Syriac Orthodox refugees have settled. However, these dissensions are a matter of defining the features of an ethnic community rather than of not having any. Moreover, many Syriac Orthodox do apply the terms of 'nation' and 'ethnic community' to themselves. Though most of the features of the ethnic identity of the Syriac Orthodox were already present in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the national movement which arose in the homelands and gained considerable strength in the diaspora stressed its non-religious elements. This entailed a clear change of situation in comparison with the Ottoman Empire, and points to the situational aspect of identity. In the Ottoman Empire ethnic identity played a marginal role and one's religious affiliation was what mattered, whereas the receptor societies in Western Europe tend to classify people according to their nationality. Strikingly, our study of the ideas on leadership within the community shows that even among those who stand close to the Church, many think that in secular issues the clergy has no leadership role to play.

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