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## Michael the Syrian and Syriac Orthodox Identity

Dorothea Weltecke

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of Syriac Orthodox identity in the chronicle by Michael the Great as it is expressed in terms for the self-designation (like *mhaymnē*, *Suryōyē*) and in the structure of the narrative. The heritage of the ancient Near East, based on the ethnical and historical conception of the Arameans (including the Chaldeans and the *Ōturōyē* as well as the *Ōrōmōyē*) since the times of the ancient empires was a very important element of the identity. Just as important to him was the historical legitimacy of the Orthodox Church as a group excluding other Aramaic-speaking Christians. This conception of identity was complex, dialectic, and multi-layered, comprising ethnic, historic, cultural, and religious elements. Not unlike modern people, he and the members of the Syriac Orthodox communities participated in different and overlapping cultures and identities throughout the Syriac Orthodox world. The Syriac Orthodox identity had been under polemical attack for a long time, against which both historical and theological answers were formulated over the centuries. At the same time, Michael can be a witness only for a certain group and a certain region. He speaks mainly for the Syriac-speaking regions of the Syriac Orthodox world and the clergy. Neither the Syriac Orthodox identity of Arabic speaking Syriac Orthodox Christians, for example in Takrit, nor the identities of laymen are of his concern.

### Keywords

Michael the Great; chronography; Arameans; Suryoye; Oturoye; Chaldeans; Rum Orthodox; Syriac Orthodox Church.

### Introduction

The important and interesting work of the Leiden PIONIER Project on the formation of a communal identity among the Syriac Orthodox is coming to a conclusion. The project has now fully proven its worth, so this is an occasion not only to discuss but also to celebrate the achievements. There is and has been for some time a very inspiring Dutch scholarly tradition in the field of Aramaic studies and the history of the Christian Near East, developed in several universities, and with a considerable number of scholars taking part.

This tradition is influential internationally through a combination of admirable philological expertise, and at the same time inspiring analytical questions and up-to-date-methods. The present PIONIER Project is a commendable example of this Dutch School of Aramaic Studies.

In what follows I will confine myself to commenting on some of the findings, in view of my own impressions of the identity of the Syriac Orthodox in the Chronicle of Patriarch Michael Rabo.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, the hypothesis that there had been a process of ethnicization of a religious group has now been confirmed with empirical data. I would also like to highlight the usefulness of the theoretical frame of the group. As it combined the concept of 'invention of tradition' with theories of ethnogenesis it connected the best of both the constructivist position and the empiricists, insisting on the contents and specific historical nature of traditions.

The Syriac Orthodox communities present a good opportunity to rethink theories on nationality, ethnicity, and ethnogenesis, because the origins of this distinct group do not lie in the dark prehistoric past. The known theories have to stand up to well-illuminated beginnings, and to the changes which can be observed over the turn of not too many centuries. At the same time there are obvious elements of long continuity, which are just as surprising, given the dynamic circumstances under which this continuity survived. Through a happy choice of fields of research, even conflicting answers to the question were the result, which shows the need for dialectical descriptions and paves the way for further historical investigations.

### Syriac Orthodox Identity in the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian

Over the past years the discussion about history and identity among Syriac Orthodox laymen, clergy, and academics has been of lively interest. Syriac Orthodox intellectuals feel the need to reflect on their received identity, facing new challenges and interests in the present. One important challenge is the under-representation of Syrians in the narratives of the history taught at school, and covered in the media in Germany.

Michael the Syrian's achievement of a universal history told from a Syriac Orthodox perspective is usually recognized among these groups. On the other

<sup>1</sup> 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).

hand, world chronicles as part of a long tradition of historiography can be seen as an imperialist method of writing history. As it integrates the history of different peoples under one universal narrative, it tends to concentrate on dominant factors. It therefore seems not necessarily fit for the representation of the history of stateless peoples, minorities, and victims of history. Experiments in the theory and practice of historiography for persecuted peoples currently undertaken at the Institute for Genocide Studies in the city of Bochum (Germany), therefore hope to construct better models for the history of Syrians as well as of Jews and Armenians.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the problem of the adequacy of specific forms of history writing, the question of identity arises in its most concrete and basic form. Are we the same people as the Biblical Arameans, or the Assyrians, both, or one, or the other?

In this context I too have been asked occasionally whether it is not objectively wrong to identify present-day Suryoye with Assyrians. It does not help to answer that ethnicity is a matter of history rather than biology; that also in the ancient Near East identity was a matter of culture, not of nature. The objective, natural, even biological answer is wanted, in the hope of bringing the destabilizing conflicts to an end, of defining an identity under attack unambiguously once and for all. Western scholars are in no position to lecture people in need of political and historical recognition, or to decide any of the political questions. They can only take part in the ongoing discussion.

### Self-Designation

Of course there is the one integrating, non-ethnic and universal self-designation: *mhaymnē*, the believers, which is used by Michael and by other chroniclers writing in Syriac. *Mhaymnē* are usually Syriac Orthodox, but often members of the larger Miaphysite party, also designated as ‘Egyptians’ or ‘Armenians’ respectively.<sup>3</sup> *Mhaymnō* could also be some very trustworthy person. The term *mhaymnē*, then, points towards the continuing importance of the religious identity at that time and towards some limits of ethnicization. Someone who apostatized to Islam or to Greek Orthodoxy stopped being *mhaymnō*. At

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the background to the programme see Kristin Platt and Mihran Dabag (eds.), *Generation und Gedächtnis* (Opladen, 1995); <http://suryoye.com/archive/tebel/2006/06/25/fundatio-ns.php> (as accessed on 31 August 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien. Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (4 vols.; Paris 1899–1924, reprinted Brussels, 1963), ed. Vol. 4, pp. 608–609, trans. Vol. 3, p. 226.

the same time he also stopped being *Suryōyō*, as Michael did not see him as a member of his group any more. On a trip to the Tur 'Abdin some years ago, I was informed that people in a certain village were 'really' Suryoye, although they had become Muslims in the beginning of the twentieth century. Ethnization now goes beyond religious borders, and this is one of the important differences between the late twelfth century and the present state of affairs.

These were not the only possible self-designations of Syriac Orthodox in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. One term Michael would never use in his Chronicle apart from the one occasion where he gave an explanation for its meaning was 'Jacobite'.<sup>4</sup> But the term 'Jacobite' was in use elsewhere in the Syriac Orthodox world. It can be found in Palestinian sources as well as quite frequently in the *Anonymous Chronicle to the Year 1234*.<sup>5</sup> It was at the same time a pejorative term in use by the Greek Orthodox Church. Far away from the Byzantine Empire in the south and in the east this pejorative use seems to have mattered less than it did to Michael, for it seems to have been a rather neutral Arabic term in that area.

### Orthodoxy

In Michael's Chronicle the paramount position of the succession of the patriarchs, which structures the periods of his history as a whole, underlines the importance of religious identity for Michael. He incorporated the succession of the patriarchs systematically from even before the creation onwards, via the Hebrew patriarchs and the early four Christian patriarchs (Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Rome) into the succession of the Miaphysite patriarchs as a backbone of history. Michael's succession of patriarchs included the dates of the succession of at least the Coptic patriarchs, and he often mentions the dates of succession of the Armenian Catholicoi, even if his narration presents much more material on the Syriac Orthodox patriarchs.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, pp. 356-357, trans. Vol. 2, pp. 323-324.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens 2* (CSCO 82, Syr. 37; Paris, 1920), p. 224; trans. Albert Abouna, *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum C. 1234 pertinens 2* (CSCO 354, Syr. 154; Leuven, 1974), p. 168; Andrew Palmer, 'The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem. Part Two: Queen Melisende and the Jacobite Estates', *Oriens christianus* 76 (1992), pp. 74-94.

<sup>6</sup> See Weltecke, *Michael dem Großen*, pp. 197-208.

## Being Suryoyo

Things become less clear when we try to decide his position concerning secular and ethnic identity. It is obvious that for Michael the ancient Near East had a very special importance. The ancient Near East recurred in the *Chronicle*. In the heading of his Appendix II Michael states: 'With the help of God we write down the memory of the kingdoms which belonged in the past to our Aramean people, that is, sons of Aram, who are called Suryoye, that is people from Syria.'<sup>7</sup>

This statement seems to be straightforward enough. But compared to other phrases, some contradictions arise. Following the work by Flavius Josephus (37–after 100 CE) through intermediaries, Michael explains the change of name of ancient Near Eastern people and empires through changes by the Greeks: 'The Arameans were called Syrians by the Greeks and the *Ōturōyē* were called Assyrians.'<sup>8</sup> This statement is in accordance with the sentence just quoted. But when he named those descendants of Shem who possess a script he says the following: 'These are the names of the people who have script among the descendants of Shem: Chaldeans, Oturoye, who are the Suryoye, Hebrews, Persians, Medes, Arabs.'<sup>9</sup> A few pages before he said: 'These are the descendants of Shem: Oturoye, Chaldeans, Lydians, *Ōrōmōyē*, that is, Suryoye'.<sup>10</sup> Who are the Suryoye to Michael: Assyrians or Arameans? While it is painful for outspoken Arameans to be identified with the Assyrians, one has to bear in mind, that, following Jacob of Edessa, Michael also supports the hypothesis that the Assyrians are descendants of the Arameans.<sup>11</sup> For Michael, Aramaic is the original language spoken not only in all of the ancient Near Eastern empires but by mankind in general, before the confusion of the languages after the building of the Tower of Babel took place.<sup>12</sup> While Michael

<sup>7</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, pp. 748–751, trans. Vol. 3, pp. 441–447. On this particular passage, see Lucas Van Rompay, 'Jacob of Edessa and the Early History of Edessa', in Gerrit J. Reinink and Alex C. Klugkist (eds.), *After Bardaisan. Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers* (OLA 89; Leuven, 1999), pp. 269–285.

<sup>8</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 748, trans. Vol. 3, p. 443.

<sup>9</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 17, trans. Vol. 1, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 7, trans. Vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 18, trans. Vol. 1, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, pp. 9–10, trans. Vol. 1, pp. 19–20.

was not the first to hold this opinion,<sup>13</sup> his position will be underlined here to highlight the difference between his and modern viewpoints of Assyrians and Arameans.

The language for Michael is the common element shared by the kingdoms of Assyria, of Babylonia, Chaldea, the Aramean kingdoms, and the Syriac Orthodox. And of course the language was very dear to him as it was to all the other writers of Syriac historiography, and to those who shared in the revival of Syriac writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But the language is also a vehicle for Michael to prove the historical identity of the Suryoye: 'Our intention is to show that until the time of Cyrus the Persian there existed an empire with our language and our script' and therefore 'those are not right who say that from our people there never existed a king', Michael states clearly in one of the appendices to his work. These appendices function as indices and systematic summaries to the entire text.<sup>14</sup>

The identification with the ancient Near East is strengthened not so much by the existence of Islam as by the quarrel between the churches, more precisely, the quarrel with the Greek Orthodox and their attack on Syriac Orthodox identity. This makes sense for the original homeland of Michael, the city of Melitene in Cappadocia, with its Armenian Melkite rulers and its Christian population of different confessions:

We have gathered this material in this book against the Greeks, who are full of vain pride, and whose pride is their shame, because, when they saw our holy fathers departing from them, because they themselves had departed from Christ, they complained and lamented, because they wanted to deceive the simple ones, and they said, that never a king arose from our people, and that we never accept any ruler at all, as they do, and that this was the reason why we had abandoned them.

And he continues 'We however have shown that from our people there had been empires stronger than all the others.'<sup>15</sup> The situation Michael was living in during the twelfth century was different from the past of those mighty empires. The worldly empires are gone now, and: 'Today, as we renounce the temptations [of the Greeks] we belong to the anointed king of all.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Milka Rubin, 'The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity', *JJS* 49 (1998), pp. 308-333.

<sup>14</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 750, trans. Vol. 3, p. 446.

<sup>15</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 750, trans. Vol. 3, p. 447.

<sup>16</sup> Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 751, trans. Vol. 3, p. 447.

Michael's construction refutes an attack on Syriac Orthodox identity, which clearly conflated religious and historical polemics.

This attack on Syriac Orthodox identity was at one and the same time traditional and specific. As early as in the time of the Patriarch Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845) in the ninth century, there were some un-named people who proclaimed that the Syrians had never had kings. *Pšitē*, simple minds, Dionysius calls them.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Michael, however, Dionysius does not identify the Suryoye with the ancient Near Eastern empires but only with the Aramean kingdoms of the west. The result of this identification comes as a surprise: 'Therefore we can conclude that those west of the Euphrates are the real Syrians.' Those Syrians living east of the Euphrates are Syrians only in a metaphorical sense, he says, because they also speak Aramaic and 'the root and the basis of the Syriac language, that is the Aramaic language, is Edessa.' This argument is difficult to understand, especially because Edessa is east of the Euphrates. But it is clear that Dionysius splits the ethnic identity from the linguistic identity. For him, the parentage going back to Syrus, who lived in the west, was more important than the shared language. He also wanted to make a difference between real Suryoye and Suryoye in a metaphorical sense.<sup>18</sup>

One problem in the process of ethnicization of the Syriac Orthodox Church obviously was the existence of Aramaic-speaking Greek Orthodox Christians and the Aramaic-speaking Church of the East. For Michael, the Greek Orthodox Aramaic-speaking people, who also designated themselves as Syrians,<sup>19</sup> and who are known as *suriani* in the Latin sources,<sup>20</sup> were strongly felt competitors. To Dionysius it was the mighty Church of the East, as members of the Church of the East held high positions in the Abbasid Caliphate, where he

<sup>17</sup> The chronicle by Dionysius of Tel-Mahre is lost. See Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Anonymi Auctoris chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens I* (CSCO 81, 109, Syr. 36, 56; Paris, 1916, Leuven, 1937), ed. pp. 112-114; trans. pp. 88-90; Chabot, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, pp. 522-524, trans. Vol. 3, pp. 76-78, where similar excerpts of this passage of his work are extant.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Milka Rubin, 'Arabization versus Islamization in the Palestinian Melkite Community during the Early Muslim Period', in: Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Sharing the Sacred. Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First-Fifteenth Centuries CE* (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 149-162.

<sup>20</sup> Johannes Pahlitzsch, *Graeci und Suriani im Palästina der Kreuzfahrerzeit* (Berliner Historische Studien 33; Berlin, 2001).



himself sought for recognition.<sup>21</sup> Their respective solutions to the problem differ accordingly. Michael Graecized the Rum Orthodox by invariably addressing them as ‘Greeks’. He identified the Syriac Orthodox with the powerful empires of the ancient Near East. Dionysius, on the other hand, de-Syriacized the Church of the East. He identified the Syriac Orthodox with the Aramean kingdoms of the west. It was Barhebraeus who was the first Syriac Orthodox chronicler to write a history of the ‘Eastern Church’. With this term he designated an integrated history of the Syriac Orthodox and the Church of the East.

What triggered the ethnicization of the Syriac Orthodox in Michael’s writing? The most important factors are similar to the present-day situation—polemical questions and also attacks from outside, as well as a certain pressure to comply with the values and norms of a society with better access to resources. In the twelfth century, kings, power, and secular success mattered. In Michael’s region the historical relation to the neighbouring and still powerful Byzantine Empire was an important element. The memory of Byzantine rule in the eleventh century was still vivid, the Byzantine influence over Crusader Antioch was considerable,<sup>22</sup> and the emperor had close relations with Michael by way of interconfessional diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> A religious position was evaluated by measuring its secular success. In polemic struggles the past was included in the arguments.<sup>24</sup>

### Intertextual Discourse

Chronography as a universal Christian way of writing history at the same time seems to have been a factor in itself. In the intertextual discourse a place needed to be found within Christian world history. As chronography was a transcultural Christian genre, which spread all over the area of the greater Roman Empire and its adjacent regions, it was used by Latin Christianity as well as

<sup>21</sup> Cécile Cabrol, ‘Les secrétaires nestoriens dans l’empire abbasside de 762 à 1258’, *Parole de l’Orient* 25 (2000), pp. 407–491.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph-Johannes Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States 1096–1204* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 142 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baptiste Abbeloos and Thomas J. Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* 2 (Paris, 1874), p. 549 (p. 550).

<sup>24</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the sources and the historical implications see Weltecke, *Michael dem Großen*, pp. 220–249.

Greek-, Armenian-, and Aramaic-speaking Christians.<sup>25</sup> The descendants of *gentes* who had brought down the Roman Empire had to find a historical place for themselves within this transcultural narrative. As they received the chronographic genre, they were faced with Antiquity and the ancient Near Eastern empires, which had a much longer history accounted for in written records and in the Holy Scriptures. Compared to the efforts of medieval and early modern European chronographers to connect their history to ancient Troy or to ancient Egypt, Michael's historical rooting of the Syriac Orthodox in the ancient Near East is source based and academically sound.

### Limits of Michael's Chronicle

Michael is a crucial source for studying the formation of Syriac Orthodox identity. At the same time his historical construction should not be generalized. The results of the art-historical research of Mat Immerzeel and Bas Snelders have shown that there are distinct regional cultures within the Syriac Orthodox Church. There is, for example, the Levantine world of the coast and the Mesopotamian culture. There were different political allegiances, depending on the secular power ruling a given territory. Patriarch Michael himself always remained politically independent and felt free to change alliances.<sup>26</sup> Local elites and metropolitans, however, did not always have a choice.

Researchers interested in different regions and social groups realize that Michael's panorama is limited geographically. We hear for example less about the Syriac Orthodox on the coast, in the Holy Land, Cilicia, or the Jazira than about happenings in Mardin, let alone the regions under the jurisdiction of the maphrian. The patriarch visited them less, he knew them less, and perhaps he shared less with them than he did with his homeland. One element of limited uniformity among Syriac Orthodox Christians was the spoken language. The future Maphrian Lazarus in the twelfth century came from the Syriac West, as was the custom. He was somewhat worried after his appoint-

<sup>25</sup> Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik bis in das Zeitalter Ottos von Freising* (Düsseldorf, 1957); Alexander Randa (ed.), *Mensch und Weltgeschichte. Zur Geschichte der Universalgeschichtsschreibung* (Salzburg-Munich, 1969); Hans-Werner Goetz, *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein im hohen Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1999); see the interdisciplinary proceedings of the Society for the Medieval Chronicle, like Erik Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicle 2. Proceedings of the International Conference on the Medieval Chronicle, Driebergen/Utrecht, 16-21 July 1999* (Amsterdam, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See Weltecke, *Michael dem Großen*, pp. 54-116.

ment, because he did not speak any Arabic. The Syriac Orthodox community of Takrit on the other hand spoke no Syriac. They reassured him however and welcomed him by telling him that they had a very friendly Armenian Muslim Emir, who still had no command of Arabic either, although he had lived with them for 30 years. They certainly had good relations with him, and the emir would honour the new maphrian most certainly.<sup>27</sup> This anecdote, told by Barhebraeus, corresponds to Bas Snelders's findings concerning the dominance of Arabic inscriptions in parish churches in the Mosul area as opposed to Syriac inscriptions in monastic churches.<sup>28</sup> For the people of Takrit and Mosul, Syriac or Aramaic can only have been a symbolic element of their specific Syriac Orthodox identity. Michael does not elaborate on differences like these in his chronicle.

Michael's picture is also limited socially. That the clergy was instrumental in bringing about a common tradition of the Syriac Orthodox has been shown by Bas ter Haar Romeny.<sup>29</sup> To some extent, they are also responsible for the loss of other historical traditions of the Syriac Orthodox. There once had also been a lay culture. Dionysius bar Salibi in the twelfth century scolded the laity of Melitene for their worldly interests, and particularly their love of stories.<sup>30</sup> The exact forms of these stories as well as the lay historical narratives of kings and scholars are lost forever.<sup>31</sup> The chronicle by the Patriarch did not express much interest in them.

## Conclusion

To conclude, for Michael, both the heritage of the ancient Near East and the historical legitimacy of the Orthodox Church were important elements of his identity, or the identity of the Syriac Orthodox as he construed it. His own identity was complex, dialectic, and multi-layered, comprising ethnic, historical, cultural, and religious elements. Not unlike modern people, he and

<sup>27</sup> Abbeloos and Lamy, *Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* 3 (Paris, 1877), p. 335 (p. 336).

<sup>28</sup> See in this volume Bas ter Haar Romeny *et al.*, 'The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project', §9.2.

<sup>29</sup> Romeny *et al.*, 'The Formation of a Communal Identity', §11.

<sup>30</sup> Chabor, *Chronique*, ed. Vol. 4, p. 627, trans. Vol. 3, p. 257.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Barhebraeus, ed. Paul Bedjan, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Syriacum* (Paris, 1890), p. 457; trans. Ernest A.W. Budge, *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l Faraj, the Son of Aaron, the Hebrew Physician Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus, Being the First Part of his Political History of the World* 1 (Oxford-London, 1932), p. 392.

the members of the Syriac Orthodox communities participated in different and overlapping cultures, and assumed diverse identities throughout the Syriac Orthodox world.

Studying this identity confronts the scholar with a situation unfamiliar to the medievalist. It is no research in and for the ivory tower, but with direct consequences for the present political and social situation in our countries. The results of the interdisciplinary approach of the Leiden PIONIER Group contribute to the development of new historical and social identities not only for the Syriac Orthodox in the diaspora, but for all the inhabitants of the new and rapidly changing Europe.

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