Syriac Historiography and Identity Formation

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Abstract

Historiographical texts are here read as literary compositions of their time, providing us with various elements of the process of identity construction or reconstruction. The first West Syrian historical texts were produced in the sixth century, when the history of what would become the Syrian Orthodox Church began. An examination of contemporary sources and myths of origins shows that the ethnic origins of the Abgarid dynasty played no part in Syrian ‘ethnogenesis’, but that there existed a notion of Syro-Mesopotamian origins, closely related to a supposed homeland, that of Aram. An acknowledged common ancestry going back to the Chaldean and Assyrian Empires relies on a common language more than a common homeland or sovereign. Whereas the Assyrians came to personify the ever-hostile Persian neighbour, a sort of stereotypical enemy, the Hellenistic kings were perceived as having effected a synthesis of the double Syro-Mesopotamian and Greek culture. The Seleucid era, as adopted by the Edessans, thus remained in use regardless of the prevailing political powers and is an assertion of independence and a strong local identity marker, being a rejection of the local Antiochene as well as the imperial Byzantine eras. The Syrian Orthodox also developed an innovative method of writing the history of their separated Church, producing a new genre consisting of lengthy chronicles written in several parts or columns, in which political and ecclesiastical history were kept separate. This Syrian Orthodox method of writing history is the only truly distinctive Syrian Orthodox literary genre.

Keywords

Historiography; chronicles; church histories; Seleucid era; Syria; northern Mesopotamia; Aram; Assyrians; Aramaic; 500–1300.

It should come as no surprise that such an important part of the Leiden research project under discussion in the present volume is devoted to historical writing, not only because, in the particularly rich West Syrian tradition, Michael the Great’s work is both a unique source for past events and a symbol of Syrian

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Orthodox learning, but also because it is here that the communal memory is at once created, kept, and transmitted. Since identity is not given but is socially and culturally constructed, historical writing participates in the constitution of a collective memory and thus shapes the communal identity. As Walter Pohl has pointed out ‘c’est par les textes que ces constructions (sociales et culturelles) sont achevées et communiquées’. Historiographical texts can thus be read as literary compositions of their time, providing us with various elements of the process of identity construction or reconstruction.

Nor is it any coincidence that historical texts are so numerous in the Syrian Orthodox tradition since the record and interpretation of the past was a necessary means of enforcing the legitimacy of the separatist Church and community. The first historical texts were produced in the sixth century, when the history of what would become the Syrian Orthodox Church began. The process of writing history did not however start in the same way as it did for the Armenians who became a Christian nation instantaneously and created for themselves, together with a new alphabet, a new memory based on biblical history in order to replace the pagan folklore of their national culture. The history of the Syrian Orthodox was already Christian, deeply rooted in Greek Christianity, albeit occasionally in Semitic dress. The same is true also for the East Syrians who began writing history when they were forced to defend their religious identity against fellow Christians of other confessions or heretical groups. Historiography was one of the tools used for expressing

3) See Theo M. van Lint in this volume.
5) On East Syrian historiography, see Muriel Debié, ‘Writing History as “Histoires”. The Biographical Dimension of East-Syriac Historiography’, in Muriel Debié, Hugh Kennedy,