

Michael the Syrian and Syriac Orthodox Identity

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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.¹ 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

¹⁾ 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).