Reflections on Identity.
The Suryoye of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Bar Salibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus

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Abstract
The present article studies some aspects of the literary output of three Syriac Orthodox authors, Dionysius bar Salibi, Jacob bar Shakko, and Gregory Barhebraeus, who are considered the most important representatives of the period known as ‘the Syriac Renaissance’ (twelfth and thirteenth centuries). The focus of this study is on the growing importance of Arabic, the concern for the preservation of Syriac, considered as an important identity marker, the influence of Muslim cultural patterns and the West Syrian attitude to Islam as a religious system, and, finally, the emergence or rejection of ideas which tend to consider the Christologies of the East Syrians and Chalcedonians acceptable.

Keywords
Language; identity; Syriac; Arabic; Syriac Renaissance; Islam; Christology.

The objective of the present paper is to discuss some elements in the writings of the authors Bar Šalibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus which can help our reflection on the process of identity formation in the complicated period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sometimes characterized as a Syriac Renaissance.¹

Why These Three Authors?

Firstly, it is important to study different, authoritative, more or less contemporary authors together, since this is the only way to collect information about mainstream thinking in a certain period, which is somewhat obscured when one focuses on the literary production of a single author.

Secondly, all three writers are, to a certain extent, also considered by the present-day Suryoye as bearers of their identity and thus still relevant for our modern times. For instance, the Luqbal Tayyőyê (Against the Arabs), of Dionysius bar Salibi remains extremely popular reading among the West Syrians of today, as appears from the number of handwritten copies circulating in Suryoye diaspora circles or in the Middle East.\(^2\) The same holds true for his Fuşq evangilyon (Gospel Commentary) still intensively studied by the Syriac clergy.\(^3\) Severus bar Shakko’s theological and monastic handbook, Któbó d-simôi tô (the Book of Treasures), was recently made available to the Suryoye who no longer read Syriac by the publication of an Arabic translation.\(^4\) As to Gregory Barhebraeus, modern editions and handwritten copies of most of his works abound not only in the diaspora, but also in the Middle East or India.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) A few recent manuscripts: Ms. Rabban Said Cakici, Mor Aftrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, copied in 1983 in Mezizah; Ms. Hori Gabriel Kaya, copied in 1997 in Hengelo by the owner, a manuscript in the possession of Raban Eliyo Öztas (Mor Aftrem Monastery, Glanerbrug), written in Damascus in 1754; a manuscript in the possession of Priest Samuel Essen, Enschede (no date). With thanks to Gabriel Rabo (Göttingen) and G. Acis, who refers to these manuscripts in his unpublished MA-thesis: *Traktaat van Dionysius Bar Salibi tegen de moslims. Inleiding en commentaar. Któbó d-ôrû ôthô luqbal Tayyőyê* (Nijmegen, 2003), pp. 38–42. See Joseph P. Amar, *Dionysius bar Salibi. A Response to the Arabs* (CSCO 614, 615, Syr. 238, 239; Leuven, 2005), ed. pp. v–vii (Amar lists 5 manuscripts), and Acis, *Traktaat*, pp. 37–39, who gives a list of 20 manuscripts.

\(^3\) A recent copy was made by Hori Gabriel Kaya from Hengelo (see note 2 above), who considers the copying of this manuscript as one of ‘most important services he can offer to his community. About this commentary, see now Stephen D. Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi’s Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73–82* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 57; Paris, 2004), pp. 15–17.
