Historiography, Syriac

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The beginnings of writing history in Syriac remain unknown, but one may connect it to the existence of notes on various events that were kept in the royal archives of Osrhoene (although there must have been similar archives in other Aramaic-speaking countries, e.g., in Adiabene, we have no information about them). The notes per se are not historiography, but they could be used to construct a narrative of some kind about the past. After the end of the kingdom of Osrhoene, the materials from the royal archives, at least partly, found their way to the episcopal archives. This can be inferred from the first W.-Syr. local chronicle that we know, the Chronicle of Edessa, written soon after 532 in which local material from both the pre-Christian epoch (such as the chronologically first note: 'The year 180 [of the Seleucid era = 132/1 BC]: kings began to reign in Edessa.') and Christian epoch was included.

Chronicle Writing

The Chronicle of Edessa opens the series of local chronicles (which occasionally also have notes on non-local events, e.g., on the birth of Jesus or the accession of Roman emperors). A comparison of this Chronicle with other chronicles of similar character has revealed that it is an excerpt from a more extensive, not extant, work conventionally called the Original Chronicle of Edessa. Some of the notes (lemmata) of the latter that are not present in the extant Chronicle of Edessa can be found in other Syriac chronicles, e.g., the Chronicle to the year 819. In its first part it seems to have followed quite closely the Original Chronicle of Edessa, but in the second part it notes other events: a series of lemmata recount events connected with the Monastery of Mor Gabriel, from which it may be inferred that its author was a monk of that monastery.

What the local chronicles also have in common is their annalistic structure, which means that they present historical events in short pieces of information, called lemmata. These begin with a year date and state what happened that year. A typical such lemma is for instance 'The year 672: Walgash, bishop of Nisibis, died...'.

There were certainly other chronicles of this type, which however have not survived. We have several fragments of such works, sometimes only a few folios long, but still valuable for the historical information they provide, as for instance one very mutilated folio that brings information on the Arab conquest of Syria in the beginning of the 7th cent., or a fragment of a Chronicle up to the year 813 (*Chronica minora*, II & III).

In addition to historical information of local character soon another type of historiographic literature developed, the so-called universal (or world) chronicles. This genre was implanted in Syriac by translation of two chronicles written in Greek, those of Hippolytus of Rome and Eusebius of Caesarea.

The first of them seems to have been intended not as a continuous exposition of the events of world history, but rather as a gazetteer providing geographical, ethnographical, and linguistic information on the then known world, in addition to data on the early history of mankind, culled from the Bible. The Chronicle of Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235), or rather its material (as it had a complicated transmission history) is also known as the Division of the earth (*Diamerismos tēs gēs*), i.e., between the sons of Noah, since geographical lists (of countries, mountains, rivers,

islands), ethnographical (of various peoples), linguistic (of languages including those that have written literature), and historical were all expressed within the account of the vicissitudes of the three sons of Noah and their progeny. They were believed to have divided the world into their respective possessions. In Syriac several versions of Hippolytos's material are known, sometimes only fragmentarily preserved, either as separate texts (Peoples after the confusion of languages in Babylon, On the families of languages), or — more often — incorporated into larger works, be it chronicles (the Chronicle to the year 724, the Chronicle of Michael Rabo, and that of Bar ʾEbroyo ʿEbroyo [see below]), or other texts, such as biblical commentaries (Scholion of Theodoros Bar Koni, the Commentary of Ishoʿdad of Merv, and two other anonymous commentaries, all from the period of the 8th to 10th cent.), and accounts of sacred history (Shlemon of Baṣra's 'Book of the Bee', 13th cent.) (Witakowski 1996).

The Chronicle of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) had a very specific form, called canons: it was written in the form of tables with parallel columns in which the years of the rulers of all nations or states known to him were enumerated (the so-called *fila regnorum*), whereas on both sides of these columns, the so-called *spatium historicum*, notes on various events were placed (Witakowski 1999–2000). The Chronicle was translated into Syriac in the 6th cent. It has not been preserved, but it was used by many later Syr. chroniclers, thanks to whom we know relatively well how it was structured and what it contained. The work of Eusebius was expanded by later Greek chroniclers (Annianos [5th cent.] and Andronikos [6th cent.]), who added material from the creation of the world (Eusebius started his canons from Abraham) and continued its narrative up to their time. These chronicles were translated into Syriac too, but none of them is extant.

The earliest Syr. chronicle which used Eusebius's work as its source is the so-called Maronite Chronicle, written after 664. Its author supplemented the Eusebian material with material from other sources and notes on the history of the Maronites. He continued it until his own epoch, adding notes on the history of the Arabs. The Maronite Chronicle does not have the column form.

Even earlier than the work just named is the Melkite Chronicle, composed after 638, which, however, did not use the Chronicle of Eusebius. It brings Old Testament chronology, and for the Christian period, lists of patriarchs of the main sees, becoming more informative only from the epoch of Nestorius. Its Melkite origin is clear from the presence of anti-Miaphysite anathemas (ed. de Halleux).

The Eusebian model is on the other hand clearly seen in the Chronicle of Yaʿqub of Edessa (d. 708). This work, only fragmentarily preserved, has the column format of Eusebius. Yaʿqub did not copy Eusebius's work, only continued it. He provided material on the history of the Church, of the Byzantine empire, and of Persia, a country which Eusebius totally neglected, but which the Syr. historians for obvious reasons could not (Witakowski 2008).

Ecclesiastical History Writing

Eusebius's influence in Syr. historiography is seen not only in chronography, but also in another genre of history writing, namely ecclesiastical (or church) history (Syr. *eqlisiyasṭiqi*). Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History was very soon, in any case before the middle of the 5th cent., translated into Syriac (Van Rompay 1994), and contrary to the Chronicle it has been preserved, though with lacunae. It was used by later Syr. historians, whereby the genre of ecclesiastical history was implanted in Syriac historiography.

Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History found continuators in Greek too, and the work of at least one of them, Socrates Scholasticus (d. ca. 450), was translated into Syriac, and has been preserved both in excerpts and in an abbreviated form (not published). Whether works of other continuators of Eusebius, Sozomen, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus were also translated into Syriac, but have not been

preserved, is not certain. On the other hand, at least two fragments of the latter's 'Religious History' were translated into Syriac: the lives of Yaʿqub of Nisibis and Shemʿun the Stylite. What is extant in Syriac is a translation of another Ecclesiastical History, namely that of Zacharias Rhetor, bp. of Mitylene (d. after 536), which is even more valuable as the Greek original is lost. Zacharias was a Miaphysite, which is why copying his works in Greek was discontinued, whereas they have survived in Syriac translations. The Syriac version of his Ecclesiastical History was incorporated into a larger compilation supplied with hagiographical and other material and continued until the year 569, by an anonymous historian who for lack of a better name is referred to as Pseudo-Zacharias.

A church historian a few years younger than Zacharias was Yuḥanon of Ephesus (d. 588), a monk from Northern Mesopotamia, who spent most of his life in Constantinople. Only the last, the third, part of his Ecclesiastical History has survived in a separate ms. tradition. We owe to Yuḥanon also another work, the 'Lives of the Eastern Saints', which is a collection of lives of Syr. ascetics, most of whom Yuḥanon knew personally.

As far as the state of preservation is concerned the Ecclesiastical History of Patr. Dionysios of Tel Maḥre (818–845) fared even worse. Fortunately it was used by later Syriac historians, especially by Michael Rabo and the author of the Chronicle to the year 1234.

Later W.-Syr. Historiography

A work once erroneously attributed to Patr. Dionysios is a universal Chronicle whose anonymous author was a monk in the monastery of Zuqnin near Amid (8th cent.). The Chronicle, composed in 775, was previously called the Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysios, but is now mostly referred to as the Chronicle of Zuqnin. Although the author used Eusebian material, his work, especially in later parts, does not present information in short lemmata, but has extensive excerpts from other kinds of sources. In fact it is the largest Syr. historiographical work written until the 8th cent., introducing a new genre: developed chronicle. The annalistic structure is kept (though there are no canons) but the author often inserted material from his sources in large extracts or in their entirety. His main sources are the Bible, the Chronicle of Eusebius, the Ecclesiastical History of Socrates, and that of Yuḥanon of Ephesus, while the last part contains his own material. He used many other sources, including works which have been subsequently lost (Witakowski 1987). One of such works, most probably copied by him in its entirety, is the Chronicle of Pseudo-Yeshuʿ the Stylite, a history of the Persian-Byzantine war of the beginning of the 6th cent., written practically as an eye-witness account.

With this first developed chronicle in Syriac, the genre difference between chronicle and ecclesiastical history was abolished.

It does not mean however that short chronicles were no longer composed. The material published under the title of the Chronicle to the year 724 (anonymous, but see Palmer 1992) is actually not a chronicle in the meaning of a planned and elaborate historiographic work, but a collection of series of lemmata culled from various sources, including the Chronicle of Hippolytus, the Chronicle of Eusebius, together with its Antiochene Continuation (Burgess 1999), an account of Church councils, and a list of Umayyad caliphs, put down one after another without the chronological order. In fact for many lemmata dates are missing.

The Chronicle to the year 846 is again a short lemma chronicle. Although the preserved text starts from the birth of Levi, the son of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob (there are many lacunae further on in the text too), there can be no doubt that it was a universal chronicle. It includes material taken from several sources, such as the Chronicle of Eusebius for universal history, and — for local data — the Original Chronicle of Edessa, the Chronicle to the year 819,

the Teaching of Addai, the Ecclesiastical Histories of Yuḥanon of Ephesus and Zacharias of Mitylene, lists of bishops of various sees, and accounts of church councils.

Later chronicles, written during the period of the so-called Syriac Renaissance, are all of the developed type. These are the Chronicle of Michael Rabo (d. 1199), the anonymous Chronicle of 1234, and the Chronicle of Bar ʿEbroyo (d. 1286). From the indications of the sources that the authors of these works have made (e.g., the Chronicles by Basil of Edessa, Dionysios bar Ṣalibi, etc.) we know that there was much more historiographical literature composed before the epoch of Michael Rabo, but none of them is extant. (For the latter Chronicle, see the entry on Michael Rabo.)

The author of the anonymous Chronicle of 1234, was probably a monk of the Dayro d-Mor Barṣawmo, and seems to have had some more or less official auxiliary ecclesiastical duties. He was a native of Edessa, which can be seen in his detailed notes on the events of the history of that city. Most of them, it is true, were taken from the lost Edessene chronicle of Basil Bar Shumana, the metropolitan of Edessa, but they continue even after the date of the latter's death (1171). The Chronicle was begun as a simple work of universal history, but after the epoch of Constantine the abundance of material to be dealt with caused the author to divide it into two parts, ecclesiastical and secular. The Edessene author used many of the sources that Michael Rabo did, but independently from him: he did not know Michael's work.

Dividing historiographical works into two parts became a solution also with Bar ʿEbroyo. With his Chronicle the classical period of W.-Syr. historiography ends. (For further information on his work, see the entry on this author.)

E.-Syr. Historiography

The output of the E.-Syr. historians seems smaller today than that of their W.-Syr. colleagues, but this impression is due to the fact that even fewer E.-Syr. historiographic works have been preserved than was the case with the W.-Syr. We do know, however, from Eliya of Nisibis (see below) and from ʿAbdishoʿ Bar Brikha, the author of the so-called 'Catalogue' (13th cent.), that there were once many more historiographic works than are extant today in the known collections of mss.

One such work of which ʿAbdishoʿ informs us was an Ecclesiastical History composed by one Mshiḥa Zkha. When a ms. containing an account of early Christian history in Adiabene was discovered and published in 1907, it seemed to its finder and editor (A. Mingana) that it was Mshiḥa Zkha's work. This identification may not be correct, and in fact today it is referred to as an anonymous Chronicle of Arbela. It is a collection of biographies of 20 bps. of this see, from the early 2nd cent. up to the middle of the 6th cent., when it was probably composed. The authenticity of the Chronicle of Arbela was questioned (because of forgery of the only known ms. of the Chronicle; Fiey 1967), but the opinion of most scholars today is rather in favor of the authenticity of at least large parts of the material of the Chronicle (Kawerau 1985).

The Ecclesiastical History of Barḥadbshabba ʿArbaya (6th cent.) is the oldest (preserved) E.-Syr. work of this genre. Barḥadbshabba, who was a senior scholar (Syr. *bādoqā*) of the famous theological School of Nisibis, provides a series of accounts of Church Fathers and 'heretics', starting from Arius and coming up to Narsai and Abraham, the doctors of the Persian Church (6th cent.), attached to the School. Much place is naturally devoted to Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius, but John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, and other fathers have their place here too. Among the sources of Barḥadbshabba are the Ecclesiastical History of Socrates for the Greek fathers and Nestorius's Book of Heraclides.

The anonymous History of Karka d-Beth Slokh (6th cent.), except for a few details regarding the history of the city, is an account of the martyrdom of several inhabitants of that city who were killed during the persecutions of Yazdgard in the middle of the 5th cent.

The Chronicle of Khuzistan, also known as the Chronicle of the last Sasanians (7th cent.), provides information on the history of the Persian Church, and moreover, it contains much valuable data for the history of Persia from the reign of Hormizd IV (579–90) until the Arab conquest. The Chronicle seems to be an excerpt from a larger (not preserved) work on ecclesiastical history, the author of which was, according to some scholars, Eliya metropolitan of Merv.

Yoḥannan bar Penkaye, i.e., from the village Penek in Northern Mesopotamia, wrote soon after 686 the 'Book of the Main Events' (*Ktābā d-reš melle*), which is an epitome of world history, intended as an account of God's salvation economy. Still it is a valuable source for the last decades it covers (the reign of Caliph Muʿāwiyya and beyond).

The E.-Syr. authors were perhaps more interested in monastic history than the W.-Syr. historians. One work of this type is the 'Book of the Abbots of the Monastery Beth ʿAbe', composed ca. 850 by Toma bp. of Marga in Adiabene.

One or two decades later another monastic history, entitled 'The Book of Chastity', was composed by Ishoʿdnah the metropolitan of Baṣra. It contains 140 biographical sketches of E.-Syr. monastics, famous as founders of monasteries or as authors of ascetic writings. The same author is also known to have composed a separate Ecclesiastical History, which has not survived.

The Chronicle of Eliya of Nisibis (d. 1046) is the only E.-Syr. universal chronicle of the Eusebian type. In the first, so-called chronographical, part Eliya, following Eusebius, gathered lists of Old Testament patriarchs, kings, and rulers of various countries, together with an annotated list of the catholicoi of the Ch. of E. The next part, the canons, is written in columns, but Eliya uses them in a different way from Eusebius. From right to left they contain: 1. dates given in the Seleucid era, and, for the Muslim period, in the era of Hijra; 2. the source of the entry (it is here that we learn of many Syr. historiographic works that once existed), which as a regularly recurring piece of information is exceptional in Syr. chronicle writing; and 3. the actual lemmata given in two languages, Syriac and Arabic (an indication that the Arabization of the E. Syrians had already made some progress). Eliya's sources include Eusebius's Chronicle, Socrates's Ecclesiastical History, and W.-Syr. works: the Chronicle of Yuḥanon 'the Jacobite', i.e., Yuḥanon of Ephesus, Chronicle of Yaʿqub of Edessa, and a list of the Syr. Orth. patriarchs. This shows exchange between the intellectuals of the two Syr.-speaking churches. Among the E.-Syr. sources he quotes a list of the catholicoi and a chronicle of the metropolitans of Nisibis, but also Arabic sources. Altogether he quotes ca. 60 sources of which half are unknown (Pinggéra 2006; Witakowski 2007).

From the last period of the classical epoch of Syr. literature comes the biography of the Cath. Yahbalaha III (d. 1317), who before his election was a monk in China of Uighur or Turkish origin. The Story of Yabhalaha is a biography of the cath. but also a travelogue of his journey, together with his companion, Rabban Ṣawma, across Asia, and in its second part Ṣawma's across Europe. As such it is unique in Syriac literature. It provides an insight into the contacts between geographically remote provinces and the center of the once pan-Asiatic Ch. of E. before its decline in the subsequent epoch.

E.-Syr. authors wrote also historiographic works in Arabic. The change of the language occurred gradually, the first step being taken by Eliya of Nisibis who used both languages in the same work. There is no doubt, however, that works such as the Chronicle of Siirt (10th cent.) or The

Book of the Tower (*Kitāb al-Majdāl*; ca. 1350), although written in Arabic, were based on Syriac sources.

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