THE PERCEPTION AND PRESENTATION OF THE ARAB CONQUEST IN SYRIAC HISTORIOGRAPHY: HOW DID THE CHANGING SOCIAL POSITION OF THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX COMMUNITY INFLUENCE THE ACCOUNT OF THEIR HISTORIOGRAPHERS?[1]

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An often quoted phrase about the Arab conquest from the *Chronography* of Michael the Great (d. 1199), also known as Michael the Syrian, runs as follows:

> Heraclius did not allow the orthodox to present themselves before him, and he refused to hear their complaints about acts of vandalism committed on their churches. This is why the God of vengeance, who alone has power over all, changing the rule of men as He wants, giving it to whom He wants and raising up to it the lowliest of men, seeing the cruelty of the Romans, who, wherever they ruled, cruelly plundered our churches and our monasteries and condemned us mercilessly, [for that reason God] brought from the land of the South the children of Ishmael that by their hands we would acquire salvation from the hands of the Romans. And if, in truth, we did suffer some damage, in that the cathedral churches that had been seized and given to the Chalcedonians remained with them—because when a city submitted to the Arabs, they would give to each one of the confessions those temples that they found in their hands. At that time the great church of Edessa and that of Harran were taken from us. But it was no light benefit for us to be freed from the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, their anger and their bitter zeal towards us, and to find ourselves in peace.[2]

[2] J.-B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)*, 4 vols, Paris, 1899-1924, Book XI, Chapter 3 ; vol. IV, p. 410 (Syriac text), vol. II, pp. 412-13 (French translation). [Hereafter cited as follows : *MS* XI, 3 (IV, 410 / II, 412-13).] For quotations in secondary literature see, for example, S. Brock, 'Syriac Views of Emergent Islam', in G.H.A. Juynboll, ed., *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (*Papers on Islamic History* 5), Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982, pp. 9-21, 199-203; here p. 11. My English translation takes Brock's as a starting point (although note that Brock in fact translates a hybrid text,

This image of the Arabs as rescuing the anti-Chalcedonians from
the oppression of the Byzantines has been repeated by many, both
by Syrian Orthodox authors and by modern scholars writing on
the seventh century. It presents the Byzantine empire as an empire
at odds with itself, and more particularly with large parts of its
population. This in turn is seen as the reason why the Byzantine
empire collapsed under the onslaught of the Arabs in the seventh
century.

In 1981, however, J. Moorhead wrote an important article called
'The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasion', challenging the
perception that during the Arab invasions of Syria, Palestine and
Egypt the indigenous peoples supported, or at least failed to oppose,
the attackers.[3] Moorhead asserts, in the first place, that there were
large numbers of (so-called) Monophysites fighting against the invad-
ers; secondly, that the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire were
by no means completely Monophysite; and finally, that *at that time*
the most vocal dissidents in the empire were not the Monophysites,
but rather the strict Chalcedonians: it was people like Sophronius
and Maximus Confessor who led the most direct opposition to the
emperor.[4]

Scholars such as Friedhelm Winkelmann and Walter Kaegi have
pointed out the complexity of the fighting that took place in this
period, adding detailed evidence to the more general criticism of
Moorhead.[5] In addition, the perception of 'Monophysite disloyalty'
does not take into account the fact that the Byzantine empire of the
early seventh century was not a national state, but rather an empire

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incorporating elements of Michael's account and a fragment from the anonymous
Chronicle of 1234; see below, n. 24).

[3] J. Moorhead, 'The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasion', *Byzantion*
51, 1981, pp. 579-91; here p. 579.

[4] W. Brandes, '"Juristische" Krisenbewältigung im 7. Jahrhundert? Die Prozesse
gegen Martin I. und Maximos Homologetes', *Fontes Minores* 10, 1998, pp. 141-212;
F. Winkelmann, 'Die Quellen zur Erforschung des monenergetisch-monotheletischen
Streites', *Klio* 69, 1987, pp. 515-59. On the history of the seventh century see J.F.
Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge,
1990.

[5] W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquest*, Cambridge, 1992; idem,
Heraclius, Cambridge, 2003; F. Winkelmann, 'Ägypten und Byzanz vor der arabischen
Eroberung', *Byzantinoslavica* 40, 1979, pp. 161-82. From an Arab perspective, see
F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton, 1981.

of power networks.[6] In such an empire, geographical territory is not as clearly defined as in a national state and, as a result, loyalty is less directed to a concept of a 'state' than to members of the network and their ideology, which has given them the power to rule. The borders of the state may change without causing the collapse of the state. A comparison of the seventh-century transitions with the 'ease' with which Chalcedonian citizens in the Balkans adapted to life under Avar rule in the sixth century is instructive.[7]

The Syriac sources that describe the Arab conquest have been discussed by Sebastian Brock in his article on 'Syriac Views of Emergent Islam',[8] which appears to have been, at least in part, an inspiration for works by Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (1993), and Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (1997).[9] Although much has been written about Syriac authors' views of early Islam, the focus in this contribution will be on how these authors may have used their presentation of the events of the seventh century to assert, shape and explicate their own community's identity at the time of writing.

This essay, then, is concerned with matters of perception and presentation—how the conquest is being seen with regard to the position of the (proto-) Syrian-Orthodox community in society, both at the time of the conquest and at the time of the authors—rather than with trying to reconstruct 'the historical events'. How do Syrian Orthodox writers see this turning point in history in the context of history as a whole? Does their presentation tell us anything about the self-image of the community that they represent?

Few of these early Syrian Orthodox histories have come down to us in one piece. Some independent works are preserved in the manuscripts, but only in a mutilated state; others are not preserved independently at all, but only as fragments incorporated within later works, most notably in the *Chronography* of Michael the Great and the

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[6] M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. I, *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 250 ff.

[7] See *MS* X, 21 (IV, 379 / II, 361), based on Chapters 45-49 of Book VI of the Third Part of the *Church History* of John of Ephesus (d. c. 588).

[8] Brock, 'Syriac Views', pp. 9-21; idem, 'Syriac Sources for Seventh Century History', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2, 1976, pp. 17-36.

[9] A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (*Translated Texts for Historians* 15), Liverpool 1993; R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (*Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 13), Princeton, 1997.

anonymous *Chronicle of AD 1234*.[10] Although these fragments give us
a tantalizing peek at works now lost, they must be used with caution;
we do not know to what extent the later authors and compilers have
influenced the corpus by preserving only those parts of earlier works
that suited *their* point of view, rather than the point of view of the
original authors. It is often assumed that Michael incorporated his
sources into his work almost indiscriminately or 'completely', but,
for example, when referring to Jacob of Edessa's *Chronicle* Michael
states explicitly that he 'incorporated the entire chronicle *insofar
as it was relevant to the subject*'.[11] In a paper presented at the Syriac
Symposium in Uppsala in 1996, I have shown how an author like
Michael the Great could *manipulate* his sources, using only excerpts
and fragments in order to fit his perception of the events of a par-
ticular century. By comparing Part III of the *Church History* of John
of Ephesus with Michael's account based on excerpts from this text,
I was able to document a significant shift from John to Michael in
the representation of the conflict between Chalcedonians and anti-
Chalcedonians.[12]

Given this result, in the present study only those fragments will
be used which show a clear difference in approach to the works
in which they have been preserved, or those which are preserved
independently in other works.

Survey of the historical accounts

No major Syrian Orthodox historiographical works contemporary
to the Islamic conquest have been preserved, but there are some
fragmented chronicles.[13] They describe the conquest as a war with
many casualties, without the invaders making any distinction between

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[10] See the introduction of J.-B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Anonymi auctoris : Chronicon
ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, I (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 81 = syr.
36 [Text], 109 = syr. 56 [Translation]), Louvain, 1920, 1937. [Henceforth cited as
1234, page in text volume / page in translation volume. Other references to separate
text and translation volumes will be handled the same way.] Note that when *MS*
and *1234* have parallel accounts, *1234* usually has the more elaborate version.

[11] *MS* XI, 17 (IV, 450 / II, 482-3). Emphasis added.

[12] J.J. van Ginkel, 'Making History: Michael the Syrian and his Sixth-Century
Sources', in R. Lavenant, ed., *VII Symposium Syriacum 1996* (*Orientalia Christiana
Analecta* 256), Rome, 1998, pp. 351-8.

[13] For a survey of the relevant texts see Palmer, *Seventh Century,* pp. 1-42.

Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians.[14] No specific explanations are given for the success of the invaders.

More extensive texts exist from the eighth century. First of all, there is a short notice of natural disasters, dated to the years 712 and 716, in which the fact that the Arabs are the rulers of the country is clearly stated. The author describes a long list of disasters as a rebuke to those who had acted wickedly and as a goad to make them repent of their sins. The rule of the Arabs itself is not clearly identified among the disasters, but rather as the context within which the disasters occur.[15] The Arab rule is seen as another 'empire', a *malkūtā*, not the rule of a new religion. The invaders and new emperors (*malkē*) are Arabs, not Muslims.

This ties in with the lists of caliphs that have come down to us. One of these lists, part of the 'account of the generations, races, and years, from Adam down to the present day', written in AD 775, continues its listing of emperors after Phocas and Heraclius with Muḥammad and the caliphs. It simply states that during the reign of Heraclius, the Arabs entered Syria and took control.[16] For the author, the caliphs were the successors of the emperors; Palmer speaks of a '*translatio imperii*'.[17] The invaders are no longer plunderers, i.e. a temporary nuisance, but are replacing the 'imperial top layer'. One empire replaces another.[18]

The perception of the conquest as 'castigation' and an appeal by

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[14] E.g., in the *Chronicle of AD 640* we read: 'Some 4,000 poor village people of Palestine were killed there, Christians, Jews and Samaritans. The Arabs ravaged the whole region.' E.W. Brooks, ed., and J.-B. Chabot, trans., *Chronica Minora* II (*CSCO* 3 = syr. 3 [Text] and 4 = syr. 4 [Translation]), Paris, 1904, pp. 77-156 / 61-119; esp. pp. 147-8 / 114; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 19. The English translation given here is Palmer's.

[15] Edited with a French translation in F. Nau, 'Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716 d'après le ms. du British Museum Add. 17193', *Journal Asiatique* ser. 11, 5, 1915, pp. 225-79; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, pp. 45-7, esp. p. 47. It should be noted that in the manuscript this account of disasters is preceded by an account of a dispute between Patriarch John I with an unnamed emir, but the two texts are linked only in the manuscript, which dates from AD 874.

[16] E.W. Brooks, ed. and trans., *Chronica Minora* III (*CSCO* 5 = syr. 5 [Text] and 6 = syr. 6 [Translation]), Paris, 1905, pp. 347-8 / 274; also *Chronica Minora* II, p. 155 / 119; Palmer *Seventh Century*, pp. 51-2 (and also see p. 43). Palmer's translation of the title.

[17] Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 52.

[18] On *malkā* and *malkūtā*, see Brock, 'Syriac Views', pp. 13-14, 20.

God to repent and to turn away from wickedness can also be detected in the *Zuqnīn Chronicle* (AD 775), the first major Syrian Orthodox historiographical work written after the conquest that has been preserved.[19] Again, the conquest is seen as a more or less permanent state—no direct hope of a return of the Roman Empire is expressed—but the rule of the Arabs is not seen as bringing anything positive for the Syrian Orthodox community. The Arab conquest is a war on the Christian empire, which the empire lost. The war is presented in a rather detached manner, as a war between two armies rather than as a war against the people of the region.[20]

The Zuqnīn Chronicler is aware of Islam and uses Arabic terms like *rasūl* and 'prophet' to refer to Muḥammad. However, in a general introduction the Arabs are described as 'lascivious and sensual'.

> Every law instituted for them, be it by Muḥammad or by any other God-fearing person, is despised and dismissed if it is not instituted according to their sensual pleasure. But a law which fulfils their wishes and desires, even if it is instituted by a nobody among them, they accept, saying: 'This has been instituted by the Prophet and Messenger of God. Moreover, it was commanded to him in this manner by God.'[21]

It is this perception of the Arabs which becomes dominant in the later part of this *Chronicle*, but it does not dominate the account of the conquest. This may be the result of the fact that the Zuqnīn Chronicler's source material for the seventh century was limited to a chronicle with few narrative elements.

The main historiographical source of the ninth century is the *Church History* of Patriarch Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē (d. 845). Although this work as such has not survived the vicissitudes of history, many parts have been preserved in both the *Chronography* of Patriarch Michael

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[19] J.-B. Chabot, E.W. Brooks and R. Hespel, *Incerti auctoris: Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, I-II (*CSCO* 91, 104, 121, 507 = syr. 43, 53, 66, 213), Paris, 1927, (first three vols.) and Louvain, 1989. [Henceforth *PD*, Part, page in text volume / page in translation volume.]

[20] *PD* I, pp. 149-51 / 111-13. See also A. Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin, Parts III and IV: A.D. 488-775* (*Medieval Sources in Translation* 36), Toronto, 1999, pp. 141-4. A lack of interest in civilian casualties can also be detected in a *Chronicle of AD 819*; J.-B. Chabot, 'Chronicon anonymum ad annum Domini 819', in *1234*, pp. 3-22 / 1-15, here p. 11 / 7.

[21] *PD* I, p. 150 / 112; Harrak, *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, p. 142. Harrak's translation.

the Great and an anonymous work known as the *Chronicle of AD 1234*.[22]

Dionysius seems to be the first Syrian Orthodox historian known to us who makes a clear and explicit distinction between his community and that of the Chalcedonians, and stresses the dichotomy to the point of making it an element that leads to the 'aramisation' of the anti-Chalcedonians in Syria:

> When the holy fathers who have been the writers in our Church saw that they (the Chalcedonians) had been corrupted not only by the doctrine of two natures, but also by that of two wills and *energiae* and forms and properties, and that instead of one Christ they confessed Him as two, they turned right away from them for this reason and did not even use their language and their literature as in former times, nor did any Orthodox scholars remain in their regions.[23]

It is this distinction that Dionysius uses to depict history as it unfolds.

The conquest is introduced as follows:

> However, the God of vengeance, who holds sovereignty over the kingdom of men on earth, will give it to whom He chooses and raise up to it the lowliest of men. When He saw that the measure of the Romans' sins was overflowing and that they were committing every sort of cruelty against our people and our churches, bringing our Confession to the verge of extinction, He stirred up the Sons of Ishmael and enticed them hither from the land of the south. This had been the most despised and disregarded of the peoples of the earth, if indeed they were known at all. By their hands we acquired salvation. In this manner it was no light benefit for us to be delivered from the tyrannical rule of the Romans. Yet we suffered a loss as well. The cathedral churches which had been unjustly confiscated from our people by Heraclius and given to his co-religionaries, the Chalcedonians, have continued to languish in their possession until the present day. Because when cities made an agreement at the time that they opened themselves up and submitted to the Arabs, they [the Arabs] would give to each one of the confessions those temples that they found in their hands. In this way the Orthodox were robbed of the Great Church of Edessa and that of Harran; and this process continued throughout the west, as far as Jerusalem. …[24]

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[22] On the difficulties of using excerpts and fragments taken from later works of compilation, see p. 174.

[23] *MS* XI, 17 (IV, 452 / II, 482-3); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 94. Palmer's translation, with very slight adaptations.

[24] *1234*, pp. 236-7 / 185; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 141. Cf. *MS* XI, 3 (IV,

When Isaiah, the Syrian Orthodox bishop of Edessa, denies Hera-
clius communion unless he rejects Chalcedon, the narrator (Dionysius)
calls him 'zealous to a fault or rather, to tell the truth, an uneducated
idiot'.[25] As a result, the Church is handed over to the Chalcedonians
and the Syrian Orthodox bishop is expelled.

Dionysius presents a reasonably accurate although polemical
description of some of Muḥammad's teachings. The military account,
however, has few references to the religion, although the Arabs are
presented as extremely well-behaved. Arab troops are instructed
to

> kill neither the aged, nor the little child, nor the woman. Do not force
> the stylite from his high perch and do not harass the solitary. ... Do
> not cut down any (fruit-) tree, neither damage any crop, neither maim
> any domestic animal, large or small. Wherever you are welcomed by a
> city or a people, make a solemn pact with them and give them reliable
> guarantees that they will be ruled according to their laws and according
> to the practices which obtained among them before our time. They
> will contract with you to pay in tribute whatever sum shall be settled
> between you, then they will be left alone in their confession and in
> their country. But as for those who do not welcome you, make war
> on them. Be careful to abide by all the just laws and commandments
> which have been given to you by God through our prophet, lest you
> excite the wrath of God.[26]

The war is presented as one between 'noble' Arabs[27] and arro-
gant Romans. This is highlighted by an anecdote about Theodoric,

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410 / II, 412-13), translated at the beginning of this article. The translation of *1234*
given here is Palmer's with adaptations, some on the basis of Brock's translation
in 'Syriac Views', p. 11 (see note 2 above). Note the small differences between this
text from *1234* and the passage quoted earlier from Michael the Syrian.

[25] *1234*, pp. 235 / 184; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 140. Palmer's translation.
Compare *MS* XI, 3 (IV, 409 / II, 411-2): same account but without the criticism
of Isaiah.

[26] *1234*, pp. 240 / 188; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 145. Palmer's translation.
See R. Hoyland, 'Arabic, Syriac and Greek Historiography in the First Abbasid
Century: An Inquiry into Inter-cultural Traffic', *Aram* 3, 1991, pp. 217-33, esp. pp.
220-2. Note that Michael has not preserved this text! This instruction can also be
found in Arabic accounts of the conquest. Whether or not Dionysius had access
to Arabic material is still under discussion.

[27] For example, no Arab horseman drowns while crossing the river Tigris in the
battle against the Persians; *1234*, pp. 247 / 193; *MS* XI, 7 (IV, 417-8 / II, 423-4);
Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 153. Tribute to the Emesenes was returned as the Arabs
had been promised the city under the condition that they defeat the Romans first;
1234, pp. 250 / 195; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 156.

brother of Heraclius and general of the Roman army. He visits a Chalcedonian stylite near Emesa, who asks him to persecute the followers of Severus after his victory over the Arabs. After his defeat, a Syrian Orthodox soldier reminds him of his promise—pointing up Theodoric's hubris and implicitly making a distinction between the soldier's religious community and the arrogant Chalcedonians.[28] Time and again the Arabs are presented as being on their best behaviour. Whenever they are tempted to plunder, a commander reigns them in. The inhabitants of the land should pay a tribute and then be left alone.[29] The Romans on the other hand, as they 'marched towards the Arab camp every city and village on their way which had surrendered to the Arabs shouted threats at them. As for the crimes the Romans committed on their passage, they are unspeakable, and their unseemliness ought not even to be brought to mind.'[30] After the defeat, Heraclius says 'Farewell, Syria', and has his army pillage the territory 'as if Syria was already enemy territory'.[31]

Dionysius also refers to the conquest of Egypt and the active role that patriarch Benjamin played in 'handing it over' to the Arab general 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ, referring to the 'tales and stories of the Egyptians' as the source of his account.[32] These 'tales and stories of the Egyptians' may possibly refer to the Life of Benjamin as preserved in the *History of the Patriarchs*. Interestingly enough, Dionysius' version of the story gives Benjamin a more active role than the account that has been preserved by the tradition of the Coptic Church.[33]

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[28] *1234*, pp. 242-4 / 190-1; *MS* XI, 5 (IV, 414-5 / II, 418); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, pp. 148-9.

[29] E.g. *1234*, pp. 248-9 / 194-5; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 154-5: on the capture of Damascus, the Arabs behaving themselves, the population becoming tributaries, and 'Umar preventing the taking of captives and looting. *1234*, pp. 250 / 196; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 157: on the anti-Roman behaviour of the local population.

[30] *1234*, pp. 250 / 196; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 157. Palmer's translation. This passage is not preserved by Michael.

[31] *1234*, pp. 251 / 196; *MS* XI, 7 (IV, 418 / II, 424); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 158. Palmer's translation.

[32] *1234*, pp. 252 / 197; *MS* XI, 9 (IV, 422-3 / II, 432-3); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 158.

[33] 'Life of Benjamin I', in *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, ed. and trans. B. Evetts, *Patrologia Orientalis* 1, 1907, pp 487-518 [223-54]. Note that the (Arabic) 'Life of Benjamin' in the *History of the Patriarchs* was based on a previous (Coptic) Life, probably written in the early eighth century, or possibly the late seventh century. See also J.J. van Ginkel, 'Heraclius and the Saints', in G.J. Reinink and B.H. Stolte, eds, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*

Dionysius is very keen on naming the various cities that received a 'contract' from the Arabs by capitulating. The accounts, which portray the Arabs in a positive way, fit very well with Christian attempts of the eighth/ninth centuries to 'reinvent' the history of the seventh century so as to assert the antiquity of the special status of the various Christian communities. It is in this period that the so-called 'Covenant of 'Umar', with its rules and regulations for non-Muslims in society, seems to have become more prominent in Christian-Arab relations.[34] Apparently, Christians met challenges to their special position in society with references to the contracts of old. However, at least some of the details were settled only round about the time of Dionysius, and were then given authority by attributing them to the acknowledged contracts from the seventh century. Dionysius' account may well be seen in this light.

Although the image of the conquest in Dionysius' presentation appears to be clear, some problems remain. As stated earlier, Dionysius was one of the main sources of Michael and the Anonymous Chronicler of 1234, but there were others: Michael explicitly refers to Jacob of Edessa, John of Litarba and Ignatius of Melitene.[35] These sources were almost certainly available to the Anonymous Chronicler as well, so that not every account common to Michael and the Anonymous Chronicler necessarily comes from Dionysius. For example, an account of the slaughter of anti-Chalcedonian ascetics and monks on the mountain near Mardin[36] does not fit in well with the overall picture of Dionysius, in which the noble and honourable Arabs do their utmost not to harm the local population. In fact, this particular account is known from another chronicle-like source from the seventh century.[37]

(*Groningen Studies in Cultural Change* 2), Leuven, 2002, pp. 227-40. Note that after Benjamin's death in 'The Life of Agathon' and 'The Life of John III' in *The History of the Patriarchs*, ed. and trans. B. Evetts, *Patrologia Orientalis* 5, 1910, pp. 1-12, the author states that the Chalcedonians were the most influential Christian force in Islamic Egypt and that the Coptic hierarchy only achieved a similar influence under governor 'Abd al-'Azīz (after 685), rather than, as Dionysius would have it, under the leadership of Benjamin (d. 661).

[34] On the pact see, e.g., M. Cohen, 'What was the Pact of Umar? A Literary-Historical Study', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23, 1999, pp. 100-57.

[35] *MS* X, 20 (IV, 377 / II, 357)

[36] *1234*, pp. 245 / 192; *MS* XI, 5 (IV, 414 / II, 419); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 150.

[37] Brooks, *Chronica* II, pp. 148 / 114; Palmer *Seventh Century*, 19.

Even more problematic is a second account of the conquest. According to both the *Chronicle of AD 1234* and Michael the Great, presumably on the basis of Dionysius, the success of Muhammad in converting his fellow tribesmen to Islam is based on his repeated success as a raider into Palestine. The conquest is described as an intensification of the raids culminating in the Arabs' taking possession of the land. 'And God, whose purpose was to chastise us for our sins, nodded in assent while this [Arab] empire waxed in power.'[38] Now this does not fit Dionysius' overall picture at all. But neither does the account look like a lemma from a chronicle. This example, and the previous one, illustrate the need for some caution in ascribing all texts available in both the *Chronicle of AD 1234* and Michael the Great to Dionysius.

Before the *Chronography* of Michael the Great, no complete written account of the events of the seventh century by a Syrian Orthodox author has survived (with the exception of the *Zuqnīn Chronicle*).[39] Since Michael had to rely on his sources to present his view of the conquest, his own perspective must be detected by the small changes and adaptations he made in the text of his sources. This can be done, assuming that variants between Michael's *Chronography* and the *Chronicle of AD 1234* normally reflect conscious decisions by Michael, because the *Chronicle of AD 1234* does not appear to have altered its source material—at least, most of the time. Because Michael used the work of Dionysius extensively, his perspective appears to be comparable to that of Dionysius;[40] yet often he abbreviated Dionysius' account, removing some of the nuances present in it. In Dionysius' account of Heraclius' encounter with Isaiah of Edessa (as preserved, we assume, in the *Chronicle of AD 1234*), the author rebukes the bishop and calls him an 'idiot' for opposing Heraclius so directly over Chalcedon. Michael, however, merely reports the event, without the critical comment. By doing so he implicitly seems to take the side of Isaiah. Rather than adopting a pragmatic stance

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[38] *1234*, pp. 228 / 179; *MS* XI, 2 (IV, 405-6 / II, 404); Palmer, *Seventh Century*, pp. 130-1. Palmer's translation.

[39] However, the *Zuqnīn Chronicle* does not seem to have had any impact on the Syriac tradition of historiography. According to A. Harrak (*Chronicle of Zuqnin*, pp. 12-17), the surviving manuscript is the autograph. In later Syriac historiography, no fragments or even influence of this chronicle can be detected.

[40] If our assertions about Dionysius are correct!

(like Dionysius), Michael stands on principle. Michael, even more than Dionysius, sees the history of his community as a battle against Chalcedon. Whoever opposes Chalcedon will not receive rebuke from Michael.[41]

Interestingly enough, however, Michael is generally more pragmatic or realistic than Dionysius as far as the Arabs are concerned. Where they are almost too good to be true in the fragments of Dionysius (as preserved in the *Chronicle of AD 1234*), some of his most positive passages about the Arabs are not included in Michael's account. For example the instructions for the invading Arabs[42] are missing, and on the final march of the Romans to the Yarmuk there are no jeering villagers.[43] Michael also includes accounts of plunder and destruction, even when anti-Chalcedonians were being targeted or killed.[44] He also does not refrain from using terminology which has a negative connotation, such as *bnay Hagar*.[45]

Epilogue: Developing group identity

A few trends seem to be emerging from this quick survey of views of the conquest in Syrian Orthodox historiography. First of all, after the initial perception of a period of plunder and anarchy, the Arab conquest was seen early on as the arrival of a new 'government' replacing an old government because of the failure of all Christians. The war became more and more a war between two armies in which the community was not involved, marking a mental separation from the 'Christian Empire'. Rather than identifying with that empire—which, up until then, had been the norm even though a particular emperor may not have been orthodox in the eyes of the Syrian Orthodox—the community is presented as a 'bystander' (often suffering, no matter what). There does not seem to be a specifically Syrian Orthodox identity in the account of the conquest, but rather a Christian identity, which has suffered through

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[41] Also see van Ginkel, 'Making History'.

[42] See above, p. 178 and n. 26.

[43] See above, p. 178-9 and n. 29.

[44] e.g. *MS* XI, 6 (IV, 416-17 / II, 421-2): plundering the region between Aleppo and Antioch and assaulting the people gathering at the monastery of Symeon the Stylite.

[45] *MS* XI, 2 (IV, 405 / II, 403).

war and plunder. Although the original 'identity' of being a member of the 'Christian empire' gradually disappears, it is not until the late seventh or early eighth century that a clearly separate identity is present in the accounts.

Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē is the first Syrian Orthodox writer (at least the first whose text is at least partly available to us) who presents the conquest as a positive event. He presents the Arabs in a very positive light. The event is now seen as part of the struggle with the Chalcedonians; it is *their* behaviour, their sins, that bring about the conquest. There is no desire any more for a 'Christian Empire'; a repentant emperor is no longer on the agenda. The community has come to terms with existence in a society ruled by an elite of another religion. The past, however, seems to have been used to protect the societal position held by the community at a particular time. Group identity is now established over against the new dominant force in society, the Islamic Arabs.

Later authors like Michael the Great seem to have reduced the pro-Arab elements in the narrative to more normal proportions. Nevertheless, Michael often sees the Chalcedonians as the main opponents threatening the existence and identity of his community. The more balanced description of the Arabs found in works from the time of the Crusades may reflect the diminished power of the Arabs in the Near East at that time.

The accounts of the Arab conquest illustrate the gradual move from a 'greater Christian' identity towards a specifically Syriac Christian identity. Although not clearly visible in the accounts of the conquest, this shift is not, in the first place, towards a *dogmatically* defined identity. While the Chalcedonians are the defining 'not-us', interestingly enough the anti-'Nestorian' element in group identity receives less stress. As shown above, already Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē instead stresses language as a defining element of the community. This trend finds its culmination in Michael the Syrian. The identity of the Syrian Orthodox community could in part only be formed by the fact that the Arabs had conquered their lands and had separated them from the 'Greek-speaking' Christians. Until the arrival of the Arabs, this linguistic distinction had not been a boundary between religious communities, and both Greek and Syriac had been used by Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians alike. Due to the Arab conquest the cultural setting of Syria changed; Greek faded away, as well as Chalcedonian Christianity in parts of Syria. What remained

was the Syriac-speaking miaphysite community, which then claimed
to be the only 'Syrian' Christianity. After establishing this perception
of identity, some of their historiographers used it to 're-narrate' the
arrival of the Arabs. They projected the clear separation of Chal-
cedonians and anti-Chalcedonians in their own days back upon the
early seventh century, thus reinventing history.