

## Book Review

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Muriel Debié. *L'écriture de l'histoire en syriaque. Transmissions interculturelles et constructions identitaires entre hellénisme et islam*. Late Antique History and Religion 12 (Louvain: Peeters, 2015), xxxiv+724 pp. ISBN 978-90-429-3237-1, Price: €105.

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Muriel Debié's *L'écriture de l'histoire en syriaque* represents the consolidation of a recent dam-burst in the study of a long neglected aspect of the pre-modern Middle East. It is nothing less than a compendium of historical writing in Syriac in the late antique and medieval periods. It puts Syriac historiography on the map. It treats this thousand-year-long tradition with the same seriousness as the other great ventures in historical writing associated with the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, with the formation of medieval Western Europe and with the stunning historiographical output connected with the rise and establishment of Islam. It brings little-known writers, usually known to us only as so many names lurking at the very bottom of footnotes, into sudden, gripping focus as authors and historical actors in their own right. It conjures up places and landscapes as distant from each other

and from ourselves as the Constantinople of Justinian, the Baghdad of the Abbasid caliphs, and the plains and mountainous folds of modern eastern Turkey and northern Iraq.

Debié even takes us to the great western capital of the Chinese empire at Xian-fu, where an official inscription in Chinese, erected in 781, cites an imperial document of 638, which registered the coming of Christianity—"The Religion of Light"—to China. Covering as it does a hundred and fifty years, the Xian-fu inscription is a miniature essay in historiography. Framed by the names of the monks and clergy involved in this venture, and written in firm Syriac script, it is a monument to an "improbable encounter" (p. 127) between East and West such as only the Syriac Christianity of Iran and Central Asia, with its "apostolic," Eurasia-wide horizons, could have brought about (pp. 123–27).<sup>1</sup>

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1. See also Scott Johnson, "Silk Road Christians and the Translation of Culture in Tang China," in *Translating*



But Debié does far more than bring to light a vivid strand in the culture of the late antique and medieval Middle East. She treats the Syriac historians of the time with respect. They are no mere sources to her. They offer a way into a series of distinctive world-views, which change significantly over time.

One of the underlying ideas [of this book] is that the study of the memory and of the past of these societies was not fixed. It was a creation of the historians, and, as such, constitutes a way into their identity, their culture, their networks (p. xv).

In order to do this, she enters into the minds of these historians. She questions their notions of time and space. She reads over their shoulder, as it were, as they put together, often in seemingly mindless compilations, memories of the distant past. She shows how the image of the past, preserved in the great composite chronicles, which were characteristic of medieval Syriac historians, were never as inert as we might think. They were never mere blocks of information transferred, as if by human xerox-machines, from one book to another. Small changes in the copying—small inclusions and exclusions, barely noticeable additions—worked, like genetic “splicing,” to create significantly new versions of the past and its relation to the present. By abandoning the modern western notion of the single “author” in favor of a renewed respect

for the ingenious “patchwork” artistry of generations of alert scribes, Debié can make the seemingly mute pages of Syriac chronicles speak (pp. 70–75).

In this, she joins a lively tradition of recent studies of the relation between memory of the past and identity-formation in early-medieval Western Europe. Far from being fixed in some primeval mold of an “ethnic” (or in the case of the Syriac Christians of the Middle East, a “confessional”) identity, potentially fluid groups were constantly at work, thinking themselves into shape through constant retellings of their own past. This is what the Franks were doing in Western Europe at much the same time as the Syriac Christians struggled to define themselves in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

Debié reminds us that this work of memory was a constant feature of the rival religious confessions of the medieval Middle East. History-writing was a way of staking out the boundaries between different groups. Frontiers rendered dangerously fluid by a shared culture and by the shared rhythms of daily life were in constant need of firming up. Different Christian groups had to be constantly reminded (by stories of martyrdom and of long-past conflicts) that they were different from each other and from their Muslim neighbors, just as Christians in the perilously open world of the Sassanian Empire had to be reminded, through a particularly dramatic and poignant series of martyr-tales, of non-negotiable frontiers

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*Christianity*, ed. S. Ditchfield, C. Methuen and A. Spicer, *Studies in Church History* 53 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 15–38.

2. Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

in a world that normally functioned, dangerously well, in a “state of mixture.”<sup>3</sup>

Even the physical form of the manuscripts in which Syriac histories were written tells its own, mute story of tectonic changes of mentality. What does it mean to move from sets of chronological tables in which Christianity and the Roman empire seem to converge, literally “on the same page,” as in the Greek tradition of Eusebius, to the careful distinction between “things of the church” and “things of the world”—empires and all—that emerged with western Syrian writers of the early middle ages (pp. 86–98)? Behind this neat separation lie centuries in which not only had the political profile of the Middle East changed, with the diminution of the Christian Roman empire, but the Christianities of the Middle East themselves had been slowly shaken loose from the grand mirage of an easy union of church and empire, of Christianity and civilization, such as still haunted the chroniclers of Byzantium and of the Latin West. Those clearly visible gaps between the columns in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (patriarch of Antioch from 1166–99) (fig. 5, p. 96) are not mere clutter: they sum up, in visual form, centuries of sad thought on the role of the Christian churches in a world doomed to remain forever separate from the spiritual “Kingdom of Christ.”

Last but not least, Debié adds to her 500 or so pages of text a 130-odd-page Repertory of Syriac and Syro-Arabic texts from all the different confessions of Eastern Christianity. Just to look at the

bibliographies attached to each text shows how, in recent decades, Syriac studies have lurched forward. Syriac has, at last, attained the status which it has long deserved beside Greek and Latin, as the third great language of Early Christianity, and as a resource for the study of Islam that we can now no longer afford to ignore. Aided by data-banks such as the *Syriac Portal—syriaca.org*, directed by Professor David Michelson at Vanderbilt University, we are, at last, in a position to take the measure of one of the most long-lasting cultural empires in the history of the Middle East: “a nation—feeble indeed but whose salt seasons all kingdoms.”<sup>4</sup>

What can scholars who are not directly involved in the progress of Syriac studies draw from this magnificent book? Here let me speak for myself. For me, a particularly valuable contribution of Debié are the vivid portraits which she offers of the writers of so many of these histories. They are not what we had thought they were. A long tradition of European prejudice in favor of single, great authors (as in the classical Greco-Roman tradition) had led us to expect that, if such authors did not emerge in the Syriac tradition, then the only “fall-back” open to our imagination, when faced by the work of ecclesiastics, were faceless, credulous monks.

Nothing could be more different from this tenacious stereotype than the great ecclesiastical leaders who emerged as the chroniclers of the Syriac world. A man such as Dionysios of Tell Mahre came from a well-established noble family in Edessa.

3. Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture. Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 23–58.

4. Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, translated by David Wilmshurst (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2016), 244.

He described a local elite whose memories reached back over six generations to the days of Persian rule under Khosrow II, and whose great palaces, four storeys high, sheltered tenacious family legends of treasures buried in the last, dramatic days of Byzantine rule. Edessa still had its *jeunesse dorée*, devoted to horses and to hunting dogs, who had changed little, in their worldly swagger, from the days of Bardaisan and Abgar the Great. Edessa also still produced a *Geistesadel*. One of the most prominent features of the city was the Beth Shabta, a classical tetrapylon shaded by a dome,

where the elders used to rest after the morning service and discuss theological and philosophical topics until lunchtime.<sup>5</sup>

Dionysios became patriarch of Antioch from 818 to 845. Though an ecclesiastic, his position placed him at the charged friction point between his church and the outside world. We know so much of his life because the two columns, of “worldly” and “ecclesiastical” affairs, separated by the neat blank spaces in the text of the chronicle that recorded his deeds, were, in reality, joined in his person. The joining generated mighty sparks. It was aristocrat-bishops such as Dionysios, proud and multilingual, who acted as hinge-men between their local community and the distant court of Baghdad. They were permitted to approach the caliph on horseback and to stroll with him in the palace gardens. This was because they were useful to him. They

acted a “whistle-blowers,” keeping an eye on the caliph’s own, Muslim provincial governors, as provincial elites had done from time immemorial in the ancient Near East. Men well versed in the ways of the world, and not the bigoted and timorous monks of our imagination, were the historians of Middle Eastern Christianity. Altogether, Muriel Debié shows that it is important that we should do justice to the tenacity of the layers of social status among the Christians of the Middle East, who were only too often rendered faceless by their conquerors, in the manner of most conquest—and, later, of colonial—regimes (pp. 136–43).

But there is another, more silent development, which Muriel Debié has followed with unusual skill: Syriac historiography slowly but surely weaned itself from power. It is a model example of a trend which Michel Foucault acutely diagnosed in the changes in historiography in *Ancien Régime* France, when French antiquarians began to study the structures of early medieval Gaul at the time of the barbarian conquests, and the long-term effects of these conquests on the present state of French society: losers also had a history.

Up to this point, history had never been other than the history of power as told by power itself.

This new discourse [he adds] brings with it what might be called a new pathos.<sup>6</sup>

5. Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, p.124, copying Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* XII, 13, trans. Chabot, *Michel le Syrien* (Paris: 1899= Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 3: 61–62.

6. Michel Foucault, “Society must be defended,” *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. M. Bertrains and A. Fontana, English editor Arnold J. Davidson, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 135.

Syriac historiography (written by canny survivors such as Dionysios of Tell Mahre and Michael the Syrian) was never exactly a *vision des vaincus*. But it did project a de-mystified vision of empire. Furthermore, it tended to privilege the periphery at the expense of the center, and the local over the imperial. It involved a change from an emphasis on the fate of one single, privileged empire—the Christian Roman empire as presented by Eusebius, with his relentless diagram of the convergence of all history on the new Christian Rome of Constantine—to a more “polycentric” relation of different Christian peoples to the greatest King of all: to Christ. This was the only relationship that mattered, and it could be seen, in any corner of the world, in terms expressed by the prophets of ancient Israel – that is, in terms of the afflictions visited by Christ on His people for their sins and of the removal of these afflictions as a result of their repentance.

A history that moved to the pace of an inexorable alternation of affliction and mercy could be played out anywhere, but it would be experienced at its most gripping in one's own region. The writer of the article on Syriac literature for the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1911 understood this well:

Nearly all the best writers are characterized by a certain naïve and earnest piety which is attractive and not infrequently displays a force

of moral indignation which arrests attention.<sup>7</sup>

It was this de-mystified view of a humankind subject to the double scourge of nature and of government which ensured that Syriac historical sources were sought out by historians of provincial society in the Later Roman Empire long before Syriac studies were thought of as other than a somewhat dingy adjunct to the study of the Early Church. To permit myself a personal memory: when I was challenged by the resolute Marxist historian of ancient Greece, Geoffrey de Sainte Croix, in 1957, to name any classical author who itemized in any detail the rise of food-prices in a time of famine, I was surprised to be told by de Sainte Croix that no Greek or Roman author had ever bothered to mention such humble things; but he told me that a Syriac work—*The Chronicle of Our Time of Afflictions*, written by Joshua the Stylite—contained such precious details, when describing the onset of famine at Edessa in 500–1.<sup>8</sup>

These local histories do not have to be only histories of affliction. The “polycentric” nature of Syriac historiography sometimes offers us tempting glimpses of life in the provinces in the first, formative centuries of the Islamic empire, before local memories succumbed to the formidable centralization of historical memory and to the erasure of provincial differences brought about by the rise of the Caliphate of Baghdad (p. 383).<sup>9</sup>

7. Norman McLean, s.v. “Syriac Literature,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1911), 26: 311.

8. See now G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 220.

9. Antoine Borrut, “Vanishing Syria: Periodization and Power in Early Islam,” *Der Islam* 91 (2014): 37–68.

Afflictions linked to sin, however, were the privileged vectors of historical causality in most Syriac works. The so-called *Chronicle of Zuqn̄n* of 775 deliberately follows in the footsteps of the sixth-century *Chronicle* of Edessa. The events which it describes were seen as re-enactments of the affliction of Israel in the Bible. “Here,” writes the author, “Jeremiah the Prophet was of great use to us.” No other author but Jeremiah, the witness to the last days of the kingdom of Jerusalem, could do justice to the phenomenon of the collapse of an entire society, irrespective of religion and of Christian denomination. Terms such as “worshipping towards the South” [Muslims towards Mecca] and “Worshipping to the North [for Zoroastrians]” had become irrelevant. Even the sufferings of the Christian martyrs lost their unique glamor compared to the shared martyrdom of an entire region: “Truly the Lord had a case against all the inhabitants of the earth.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet this penitential language had another side. God might punish, but, as Christ, He still ruled in glory. The dogged capacity of Christian communities to endure up to the very end of the Middle Ages and beyond derived, in part, from an attitude to Christ as the King of His Church. Whatever happened in the world where mortal rulers (emperors or thugs: usually both in one) came and went, the Church was the *real* Kingdom. In it, Christ ruled undisputed, hidden only by the thin veil of the flesh—a veil as opaque yet as

light as the veil before the altar. Beyond that veil, all subjects were equal. Humans and angels would sing together “Glory to God in the Highest,” as the angels had once sung when the great blue veil of heaven itself had been lifted, for a moment, at the birth of Christ, “singing while clapping their hands and stamping their feet.”<sup>11</sup>

This vertical dimension, this sense of the veiled majesty of a kingdom where heaven and earth were joined even in the smallest, most neglected church, had survived among the battered Christian communities of northern Iraq in the fifteenth century. It would last. It was still there when the American Evangelical missionaries made contact with what to them were “lost” Christians in the mountains around Lake Urmia (in northwestern Iran) in the 1830s.

But the Christians of the Church of the East with whom these eager westerners came into contact did not feel “lost” at all. Looking out over a landscape like the top of the world—a landscape where (in nearby Takht-i Suleyman) Mongol Khans had camped beside the palace of the Sassanian King of Kings as world rulers, the rich grazing grounds of their horses overlooking the plains of the Middle East—the Christians of a “Church of the East” that had once reached as far as western China still knew that they stood at the imagined center of the world, “on the river of the Garden of Eden,” in the words of one of their patriarchs.<sup>12</sup> Their church was the prototype of the Kingdom of God, the only certain landmark in a changing world:

10. *The Chronicle of Zuqn̄n: Parts III and IV, A.D. 488-775*, trans. Amir Harrak (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 168, 273, 290.

11. Thomas Carlson, *Christianity in Fifteenth-Century Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108.

12. Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening. American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 61.

“Existing always in a higher frame outside of earthly time, it moves through this world as a ship on a voyage to its haven.<sup>13</sup>

This makes it all the more tragic that precisely the region which the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* of 775 presented as ravaged by famine, flight, and violence is the scene of similar horrendous events today. These are the areas of eastern Turkey and northern Iraq, where the plains meet the mountains in an ill-fated combination of places of seeming refuge, criss-crossed by valleys that have always served as

busy thoroughfares to men of violence. If anything of the former richness of the “surprisingly polyphonic world”<sup>14</sup> once shared by Muslims and by Christians of Syriac culture in the Middle East is to be saved, Syriac studies—for long the Cinderella of the study of the Early Church and of the Islamic world—must be taken seriously. And there could be no better way to do so than that proposed by Muriel Debié in her masterwork, *L'écriture d'histoire en syriaque*.

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13. Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 9.

14. Carlson, *Christianity*, 259.