

BAR 'EBROYO ON IDENTITY: REMARKS ON HIS HISTORICAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Maphrian Grigorios Bar 'Ebroyo's historical writing with regards to the construction of identity by focusing on his terminology and self-designations as well as his approach to important cities and other places of memory. In the overall structure of the chronicle, Bar 'Ebroyo reduces the lines of successions of the different empires found in his main source, the chronicle by Patriarch Michael I Rabo, and focuses on the different religions, Christian denominations, and events of the Eastern regions alone. He presents the maphrians as the authentic catholicoi against the claim of the Church of the East and as autonomous against the claims of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal See of Antioch. With Bar 'Ebroyo's treatment of the city of Tagrit he offers an interpretation that highlights Tagrit as being just as noble as Edessa, as a focal point of resistance to the "Nestorian heresy," as well as the only legitimate successor of See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

At the same time the self-designations and terminology he uses show different, overlapping fields of identity construction (historical, religious, confessional, linguistic). Thus the Syriac Orthodox identity represented here cannot be perceived of as being one religious or ethnic entity but was much more complex. In view of current debates it should be observed that Bar 'Ebroyo does not favor the term "Arameans" as a self-designation. His audience apparently did not identify with this term; they saw themselves as "Easterners." The

position of the Syriac Orthodox in the East being rather vulnerable in the late 13th century, Bar 'Ebroyo's work offers at the same time an Eastern and a Christian identity on historical grounds, which is flexible and inclusive but also reflects the specific perspective of his community.

I*

Historical memory and historical narratives are an important element of the identity of communal groups, nations or churches. They are formed and transmitted through liturgy, festivals, poems, songs, stories, and pictures. Chronicles also participate in the construction of communal historical identity, albeit probably to a smaller extent than the other genres. More importantly, chronicles reflect the historical identity of the world surrounding them and of which they themselves are a part.¹

Bar 'Ebroyo was one of the most important writers of his church and of his time. His Syriac world chronicle is the only one in the Syriac Orthodox tradition that is extant in many manuscripts.² He also wrote a shorter Arabic version of the chronicle, thus enlarging the potential audience of his work. In addition, he was very actively engaged in political and inter-religious relations, and, as head of his church, he was responsible for his flock in a fast changing world. His choice to write Syriac and to write works focusing on Syriac issues like his Grammar was intended to bolster his community's attachment to the Syriac culture. Therefore it is worthwhile analysing his chronicles to reconstruct his ideas on historical identity. This contribution aims to add to a growing field of research on the identity formation of

* This contribution was presented at the 2nd Aleppo Colloquium on the life and works of Bar 'Ebroyo, Aleppo July 1-4, 2010 and submitted for a collection of papers of this conference in January 2012. However, it now seems best to publish the paper independently, and I would like to thank the editors for this opportunity.

¹ As a new introduction to medieval historical writing (including Syriac, Arabic and Persian), see Dunphy, *Encyclopedia* and especially the systematic articles.

² Brock, 'Syriac Historical Writing'; Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*; Barš awm, *Scattered pearls*.

the churches and the peoples in the Syriac traditions.³ To this end, after a summary of the state of research the present study shall explore Bar 'Ebroyo's terminology and the self-designations he used in his chronicles. Secondly his treatment of some important cities and places of memory is of interest. An examination of both these issues will reveal some features of the specific audience he had in mind for his chronicle. Scholars have often assumed as a matter of course that there was a simple Syriac Orthodox identity common to all the members of the church. I shall argue that the situation was far more complex and that the description of communal identity needs to be differentiated. The historical identity Bar 'Ebroyo constructed or reflected in this chronicle was much more specific and was directly related to a certain place and a certain time.

II

Recent research has demonstrated that there was a gradual process of identity formation of the Syriac churches, which underwent historical change. The research group led by Bas ter Haar Romeny, for example, balanced their findings methodologically between a deconstructionist position, which tends to speak about an "invention of an identity", as if there were no material kernel to it and another position, which tends to see communal identity as something almost biological and a-historical. The relationship between religious and ethnic identity has been a long-standing issue concerning Eastern Christianity in general and Syriac Christianity in particular.⁴ While Arnold Jones had already stated that the schisms in the church were not caused by ethnic differences between Syrians and Greeks, Romeny developed this thesis and proposed that the religious choice for a dogmatic position preceded the formation of the specific Syriac Orthodox ethnic identity, which developed only gradually.⁵ This being said, there had indeed been a

³ Murre-van den Berg, Ginkel & Lint, *Redefining Christian Identity*; ter Haar Romeny, 'Communal Identity'.

⁴ See of late Fiey, "Assyriens" ou Araméens?; Sauma-Assad, *Word Suryoyo-Syrian*; Novák & Younansardaroud, 'Mār Behnām'; Younansardaroud, 'Mār Behnām'; Murre-van den Berg, 'Church of the East'.

⁵ Jones, 'Movements'.

competition between the Syriac versus the Greek language preceding the schisms. Yet in some respects this traditional rivalry had in fact united writers of Syriac across the confessional boundaries and continued to do so when the position of Syriac versus the Arabic language started to be debated.⁶

In these investigations, Syriac chronicles among other fields were always of primary concern. Research on Syriac historiography took a new turn during the last decade, which dramatically changed Western theories. At the same time the perception of Syriac Orthodox Christians toward their own past was undergoing processes of transformation. Migration to the West, participation in Western intellectual practices, as well as the political developments in the Middle East have triggered new social institutions and a new concern for affiliation and self-designation.⁷

Today no one would defend the assumption that Syriac chronicle writing was simply the compilation of material. Instead, scholars have demonstrated how the Syriac accounts, analogous to medieval chronography in other languages, constructed historical identity through the establishment of succession and affiliation. Like their counterparts in Byzantium and the Latin world the Syriac narrators explained critical situations of the communities and thereby encouraged the communal groups in phases of suppression and crisis. They also clarified the relations of the Syriac Orthodox Christians to the many other denominations in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world of the Middle East. Many aspects of historical thought in Syriac are still controversial.⁹ More basic research grounded in detailed source analysis is required before theories with a larger scope can be developed.

⁶ See for example Rubin, 'Language of Creation'.

⁷ An influential recent institution in Germany are the village-groups. See for example <http://www.sare-online.com/HOME-SARE.html> [21/12/2011]; Hanna & Hollweger, *Website Haboye*.

⁸ Harvey, 'Syriac Historiography'; Harvey, *Asceticism and Society*; Witakowski, *Pseudo Dionysius*; Palmer, 'Messiah and Mahdi'; Ginkel, *John of Ephesus*; Panzer, *Identität und Geschichtsbewußtsein*; Weltecke, "*Beschreibung der Zeiten*"; Morony, 'History and Identity'; Harrak, 'Syriac View'; Reinink, 'East Syrian Historiography' and other works by these authors.

⁹ The role of the Ancient Near Eastern Empires for the historical identity of the Syrians is evaluated differently, see for example Debié, 'Syriac Historiography', pp. 103 and *passim*.

Much progress regarding the chronicles of Bar 'Ebroyo has been made during the last twenty years as has been documented in Hidemi Takahashi's bio-bibliography.¹⁰ It is true, a critical edition of his chronicles is still a desideratum. Yet an important number of studies were published, and scholars have identified many of Bar 'Ebroyo's sources or have contributed to the analysis of the structure of his works.¹¹ Some elements of the meta-history of his narration have been identified. The findings can be summarized as follows: Bar 'Ebroyo created an innovative chronographic form on the basis of Eusebius of Caesarea's (263 – 339 A.D.) chronography and ecclesiastical history, both of which had already been modified and combined several times in the Syriac historiographical tradition.¹² The first part of his world chronicle, the secular history, notably includes a new and marked interest in scientific achievements and scholars from the early invention of astrology to the renowned physicians of his day. Instead of presenting a traditional succession of kings, wars, and empires, as was usual for the genre, Bar 'Ebroyo also incorporated scientific and cultural achievements. Bar 'Ebroyo included Muslim as well as Christian scholars from other churches, but by presenting many Syriac Orthodox scholars, members of this church were, for the first time, systematically integrated into such an account. Bar 'Ebroyo reduced the table of the many synchronic successions of Empires (*yūbolē d-malke*) he found in his main source, the chronicle by Michael the Great (1126-1199), to one succession of Empires only (Adam - Patriarchs - Judges - Kings of the Hebrews - Kings of the Chaldeans - Kings of the Medes - Kings of the Persians - Kings of the Greeks - Kings of the Romans - Kings of the Christian Greeks - Kings of the Arabs - Kings of the Huns). His profane history is much more focused on the Eastern regions, whereas the medieval Byzantine Empire is less important to him than to earlier Syriac orthodox chronicles.

In his two-part ecclesiastical history, which forms the second segment of his world chronicle, he also offered a new

¹⁰ Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*.

¹¹ Borbone, 'Barhebraeus e Juwayni'; Witakowski, 'Gregory Bar 'Ebroyo'; Samir, 'al-Qifti'.

¹² For the Syriac Orthodox tradition see the table in Weltecke, "Beschreibung der Zeiten", pp. 45-46.

construction.¹³ The traditional ecclesiastical histories had presented the apostolic successions in the four or five patriarchates respectively, the theological achievements, conflicts with heresies, as well as struggles with Jews.¹⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea and his successors in church historical writing wanted to show the progress of the Orthodox denomination which varied depending on each author's own definition. Instead, Bar 'Ebroyo invented a twofold construction only of the Syriac Orthodox Church, disregarding the Coptic or the Armenian succession he had found in Michael the Great's chronicle. He presented the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church as a juxtaposition of the Western Patriarchs and "our Eastern high priesthood", the maphrianate.¹⁵

Bar 'Ebroyo's work came to be the first history of the maphrians written in the Syriac Orthodox Church. The sources for this part are only partly known.¹⁶ The maphrianate here is grounded in the succession of the Apostles Thomas, Mari, and Addai. Thus, the (Syriac Orthodox) Church of the East becomes independent of or even equal to the Patriarchal See of Antioch, who maintained the dominion over the maphrianes during the medieval period. Bar 'Ebroyo also claimed the maphrians to be the legitimate heirs of the See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the original residence of the catholicos of the ancient autocephalous Church of the East in the Persian Empire.¹⁷ According to Bar 'Ebroyo this was at the same time possible and necessary because the head of the Church of the East and parts of the clergy and the community

¹³ Pinggéra, 'Christologischer Konsens'; Weltecke, "*Beschreibung der Zeiten*", pp. 208-220; Witakowski, 'Gregory Bar 'Ebroyo'; Hage, 'Anfänge der Apostolischen Kirche'.

¹⁴ Timpe, 'Was ist Kirchengeschichte?'; Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*.

¹⁵ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 2 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 2).

¹⁶ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 2 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 2). On the succession of the maphrians see Fiey, *Oriens Christianus Novus*, an important correction was published by Harrak, 'Excavations in Takrit', p. 18, concerning the dates of John I (686-688 according to Fiey). The latter must have ruled in 709/710 AD according to a dated inscription.

¹⁷ Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum*, pp. 23-35; Witakowski, 'Gregory Bar 'Ebroyo', pp. 70-71.

had left the path of Orthodoxy in the 5th and 6th century and the succession remained with the enduring believers. Thus, the maphrian was heir to the See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the same way as the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch was the legitimate successor of the ancient Patriarchs of Antioch.¹⁸ In other words, the maphrians were the authentic *catholicoi* while the Catholicoi of the Church of the East were only schismatics.

While Bar 'Ebroyo reduced the account of the patriarchates of the Roman Empire in the first section of his ecclesiastical chronicle to the one chain of the Patriarchs of Antioch, he integrated the affairs of the Church of the East as well as some of the Armenian and the Greek Church in the former Persian Empire into his succession of the maphrians. Thus, Bar 'Ebroyo's history of the Eastern high priesthood is not a history of orthodoxy in the world but rather an ecumenical history of all the Christians of this region. This narrative strategy is seen in accordance with his ecumenical attitude, which he demonstrated during his own maphrianate.

III

Scholars have noted that Bar 'Ebroyo used the term "Jacobites (*ya'qūbōyē*)," and it is said to have been the usual self-designation.¹⁹ This assumption may be somewhat revised. Bar 'Ebroyo's main source, the chronicle by Michael the Great, very rarely uses this word.²⁰ The third large chronicle of the period, the anonymous chronicle to the year 1234 on the other hand speaks about "Jacobites" even more often than Bar 'Ebroyo does.²¹ Still, even in the anonymous chronicle other self-designations occur more frequently. Concerning Bar 'Ebroyo's secular chronicle, the term "Jacobites" occurs rarely and is mostly a quotation of an outsider or even an enemy. In passages like these the term is clearly used in a derogative sense.²² On the other hand, Bar 'Ebroyo relates that in

¹⁸ Pinggéra, 'Christologischer Konsens', pp. 20-22; Hage, 'Anfänge der Apostolischen Kirche'.

¹⁹ Pinggéra, 'Christologischer Konsens', p. 3.

²⁰ See Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) IV, p. 724 (III, p. 387).

²¹ Anonymous, *Chronicon anonymum* (Chabot/Abouna), II, 233 (167); 336 (251).

²² Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 100 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), 94): "*ya'qūbīt ē*"; p. 134-5 (p. 123-124): "*ya'qūbōyē*".

the year 1001 the “Arabs” burnt down the church of the “Jacobites” in Baghdad. In this case “Jacobites” is obviously used in a neutral sense to distinguish between different denominations in Baghdad. In the year 1223 a renowned physician was murdered. Bar ‘Ebroyo names him “Amīn ad-Dawlā Abū al-Karām Sa’īd the Baghdadian from our Jacobites (*mēn ya’qūbōyē dīlān*).”²³ The physician has an Arabic name and probably belonged to an environment dominated by the Arabic language, “Jacobites” as a self-designation is thus connected to this Arabised culture. This practice is in accordance with Coptic historiography in Arabic, where the term indeed served as the usual self-designation.²⁴ The term could therefore be linked to Christian cultures in Arabic from which Bar ‘Ebroyo must have taken some of his sources. If this hypothesis is valid, the term “Jacobite” should appear more frequently in the Eastern part of the ecclesiastical chronicle than in the Western part, where the Syriac Orthodox were much less Arabised, which is indeed the case. In the Western ecclesiastical part and in the secular part of the chronicle the term “Jacobites” is hardly ever employed as a self-designation.

The simplest and the most unambiguous self-designation by the Syriac Orthodox always was “our people (*‘āmō dīlān*)” or simply “ours (*dīlān*)”, “all of us (*kulhūn dīlān*)” and this was also the case in Bar ‘Ebroyo’s language.²⁵ “Our people” designates the members of the church in a given area or a city and is frequently used throughout all three parts of the chronicle. These phrases also distinguish between the Syriac Orthodox and other Christians, like Greeks, Armenians or “Nestorians (*nest uryōnē*).”²⁶

Like “our people”, the expression “our faithful, the orthodox (*mbaymnē, mbaymnē dīlān*)” is often used to distinguish the Syriac Orthodox from other denominations such as the Greeks in

²³ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 449 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 385).

²⁴ See for example the Severus ibn al-Mukaffa et. al, *History of the Patriarchs* (Evetts et al.); Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, p. 369 (p. 370): “*ya’qūbōyē akēh ad n-nest uryōnē b-madnh ō.*”

²⁵ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 2 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 2).

²⁶ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 512, 527 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 437, 450).

Aleppo.²⁷ “Our faithful” is again especially frequent in the Eastern part of the chronicle. In the earlier passages of this part the Greek word “orthodox” was often used for the same purpose. In contrast to the exclusive “our faithful”, the term “Christians (*kerist̃ yōnē*)” is used to distinguish all the Christians of the different denominations from the Muslims. Throughout the chronicle, Bar 'Ebroyo frequently employs “Christians” for the mixed Christian population of cities like Tagrit or Melitene, comprising Greeks, Armenians, Syriac Orthodox or the Church of the East.²⁸

Beside their religious affiliation, another aspect of the identity of Bar 'Ebroyo's readers is their historical connection to the world of the Ancient Near Eastern Empires and their ethnic origin. Bar 'Ebroyo's source, Michael the Great, had mentioned both Arameans and Assyrians as ancestors of his people, identifying them with the Chaldeans. In another passage he had stated that the Assyrians were the Syrians, and in a third passage he had offered that the Arameans were the Syrians.²⁹ Bar 'Ebroyo omits these difficulties by speaking about the “ancient Syrians (*suryōyē 'atīqē*)”, which is an open ethnic designation that includes ancient writers and speakers of Aramean from East and West. Assyria, Babylonia as well as the Aramean principalities of the West are thus included. Bar 'Ebroyo also identifies the Chaldeans with these ancient Syrians (“*kulhūn bōlēn kaldōyē ēnūn* [i.e. some kings he had mentioned] *amkēt suryōyē 'atīqē*”).³⁰

In his Arabic Chronicle, Bar 'Ebroyo explicates that the Chaldeans are one of the seven oldest peoples, among the Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, Turks, Indians, and Chinese. These civilisations are divided between those who developed sciences, as did for example the Persians and the Chaldeans and those who did not,

²⁷ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 510 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 436). During the Mongol assault the Syriac Orthodox Christians fled into the Greek church. All of those Christians hiding there were, however, sold into slavery. On Syriac Christians in Baghdad see Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*.

²⁸ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 507 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 433).

²⁹ Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) IV, p. 17 (I, p. 32): “*ōtūroye*”; IV, p. 18 (I, p. 34): “*ōrōmōyē*”; Weltecke, “*Beschreibung der Zeiten*”, pp. 225-227.

³⁰ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 5 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 4).

like the Turks.³¹ While this is a rather distinguished group of cultures, the abstract term for the Chaldeans, literally “Chaldeanhood (*kaldōyūtō*)” is still denounced as “barbaric”. Bar ‘Ebroyo mentions this “*kaldōyūtō*,” critically discusses this in his grammar, and distinguishes his own language from it as the pure Aramaic of the Syrians.³² Apparently Bar ‘Ebroyo differentiated between historical and linguistic identity. While the ancient and the present Syrians had much in common historically, their languages differed. Below we will see how.

Another detail has some bearing on the contemporary debates: When Bar ‘Ebroyo explains the regions divided between the sons of Noah he says that the borders of Shem included the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Lydians, Syrians, and others.³³ Unlike in the chronicle of Jacob of Edessa (c. 640-708) or that of Michael the Great, who followed him, Bar ‘Ebroyo does not mention Aram in this context nor does he mention the Arameans. In fact, he omits the word “Arameans” from Michael’s list, which had included “Assyrians, Chaldeans, Lydians, Arameans that is to say Syrians”.³⁴ What is more, neither here nor anywhere else in this chronicle does Bar ‘Ebroyo write about the Arameans as a people let alone as his ancestors.³⁵ In his grammar he mentions Aramaic as a language and the “Aramean Syrianhood (*suryōyūtō orōmoytō*).”³⁶

In Bar ‘Ebroyo’s Arabic chronicle the term is again used in a linguistic sense. Bar ‘Ebroyo presents the thesis that Syriac had been the primordial language, in which God had conversed with Adam. This language parted into three branches, the purest of which was the Aramaic spoken by the inhabitants of Edessa, Harran, and the exterior Syrians. The second branch is defined as

³¹ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Tārīḥ* (Salhani), p. 4; Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Historia Compendiosa Dynastiarum* (Pococke), p. 2 (p. 2).

³² Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Livre de splendeurs* (Moberg), p. 2 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Buch der Strahlen* (Moberg), p. 1).

³³ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 7 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 6).

³⁴ Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) IV, p. 7 (I, p. 16).

³⁵ Bar ‘Ebroyo mentions only Uz as son of Aram, who according to Josephus had built Damaskus: Bar ‘Ebroyo *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p.10 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 11).

³⁶ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Livre des splendeurs* (Moberg), p. 2 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Buch der Strahlen*, p. 1).

the language of Palestine, Damascus, Lebanon, and the interior Syrians, the third as the language of Assur and the villages of Iraq. According to Bar 'Ebroyo the latter is the worst; it is precisely the Chaldean language he mentions critically in his grammar.³⁷

In the secular part of his chronicle Bar 'Ebroyo uses "Syrians (*suryōyē*)" as a general designation for Christians using the Syriac language. This name distinguishes them from Greeks and Arabs, when Bar 'Ebroyo mentions translations of works by Aristotle among Greeks, Arabs, and Syrians.³⁸ He mentions that "we, the Syrians" use the Seleucid chronology,³⁹ which during the 13th century was still true for most writings in Syriac by any of the churches in the Syriac tradition.⁴⁰ He uses "Syrians", or rather "all Syrians (*kulhūn suryōyē*)", as a generic term also in the famous passage where he regrets that the Syrians who once brought the sciences to the Muslims are now obliged to ask them for knowledge.⁴¹ Thus the term "Syrians" clearly is not geographic but rather an ethnic-cultural or a linguistic conception, including Christians of all the three denominations of the Syriac tradition.⁴² This interpretation is corroborated by Bar Ebroyo's grammar.

As the word "Syrians" often includes the entire Syriac speaking population, some further classification is needed to distinguish between Syriac Orthodox and other Syrian Christians. Emperor Leo IV (775-780), for example, is said to have persecuted the

³⁷ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Tārḥ* (Salhani), p. 17-18; Bar 'Ebroyo, *Historia Compendiosa Dynastiarum* (Pococke), p. 11. The passage is quoted by Barṣ awm, *Scattered pearls*, p. 4.

³⁸ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 54 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 54).

³⁹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum*, p. 37 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 40).

⁴⁰ Briquel-Chatonnet, 'Cahiers et signatures'. Brock, 'Hijra Dating'. I do not see that the choice for the Seleucid chronology proves an identification with Greek culture, see Debić, 'Syriac Historiography', pp. 99-103.

⁴¹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 98 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 92).

⁴² Only one exception of the rule is known to me at present: Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 232 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 207). Togril Bek wants to make war against the "*mōrūdē bnay suryōyē*". Here simply the population of Syria is meant, not the Christians only. Bar 'Ebroyo seems to be quoting directly from a Muslim source.

“people of the orthodox Syrians (*‘āmō trīš shubḥ ō suryōyē*)”.⁴³ Bar ‘Ebroyo relates that during the late 12th century 170 “Syrian men from ours (*gabrē suryōyē mēn bolēn dūlān*)” were killed.⁴⁴ He also combines “Syrians” with “the faithful, the orthodox (*mbaymnē*)”. The patriarch and his entourage took rest in a village “in a garden of one of the orthodox Syrians (*b-gantō d-ḥād mēn mbaymnē suryōyē*)”.⁴⁵

Bar ‘Ebroyo did not take sides in the older debate on the question who the real Syrians were, only those west of the Euphrates or all of those who wrote and spoke the language of Edessa. Patriarch Dionysius of Tel-Maḥ re (d. 848) in his chronicle held the view that only the West-Syrians were the real Syrians. He claimed that all the Syrians to the East of the Euphrates were called by this name only in a metaphoric sense. The chronicle to the year 1234 followed him by quoting his theory.⁴⁶ This debate was obviously inspired by an opposition between the Syrians east and west of the Euphrates. Abramowski assumed this to be a rivalry between patriarchate and maphrianate.⁴⁷ Dionysius, during his time, also felt the power of the mighty Church of the East.⁴⁸

Yet the meaning of the term “Easterners” or “East-Syrians” in the use of many Syriac Orthodox chronicles is unspecified. This is also true for Bar ‘Ebroyo, although in his grammar he classified the Eastern tradition as the tradition of the Church of the East. Elsewhere in his chronicle the term East-Syrians (*madnḥ ōyē*) designates either members of the Apostolic Church of the East or

⁴³ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 128 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 117).

⁴⁴ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 370 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 321).

⁴⁵ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) II, p. 679 (p. 680).

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *Chronicon anonymum* (Chabot/Abuna), I, pp. 112-114 (pp. 88-90).

⁴⁷ Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre*, pp. 85-100; on internal conflicts see Strothmann, ‘Heutiges Orientchristentum’, pp. 18-19. On the maphrianate in general also Fiey, “‘maphrianat’ syrien”; Hage, ‘Anfänge der Apostolischen Kirche’.

⁴⁸ Weltecke, “*Beschreibung der Zeiten*”, pp. 222-232.

Syriac Orthodox Christians from the regions east of the Euphrates who belonged to the jurisdiction of the maphrian.⁴⁹

Particularly noteworthy at this point are two features: The first is Bar 'Ebroyo's strategy of defining different, sometimes overlapping fields of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliation. Secondly, his disinterest in the term "Arameans" throughout his chronicle is also rather marked. For his own denomination he clearly prefers the terms "our Syrians" and "our faithful".

IV

One of the reasons why the term "Arameans" is not central to his chronicles might be that his addressees were not identifying themselves with Aram. Neither had they any interest in the debate about who the real Syrians were. Bar 'Ebroyo's audience was from the East. This geographical aspect of their identity crystallizes in the function of the city of Tagrit in Bar 'Ebroyo's history of the church as a corner stone of the Syriac Orthodox history. In this work, therefore, Tagrit became a rival to the claims of Edessa. The importance of Edessa for the Syriac historical identity cannot be disputed. The ancient city of Edessa was the root of the language, as had often been repeated, not least by Bar 'Ebroyo himself.⁵⁰ Likewise I was led to expect the same highlighted position for Edessa in Bar 'Ebroyo's chronicles, all the more as the first protagonists of the Eastern part of the ecclesiastical history – Thomas, Addai, Aggai, and Mari – are closely connected to the city.⁵¹ However, as useful as Edessa was for the establishment of the apostolic succession of the maphrianate in Bar 'Ebroyo's ecclesiastical chronicle of the East, it is less central for the structure of the work than one could expect.

In general, Bar 'Ebroyo mentions Edessa less often than Baghdad and Mosul. On the other hand, he frequently refers to Tagrit. In the third part of the chronicle, the city of Tagrit even

⁴⁹ Indeed they share ethnic and cultural traditions, see Varghese, *Syrian liturgical theology*, p. 4; Morony, *Iraq*, pp. 373-375.

⁵⁰ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Livre des splendeurs* (Moberg), p. 2 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Buch der Strahlen* (Moberg), p. 4).

⁵¹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, pp. 11-21 (pp. 12-22).

forms the centre of the narration, the main object, as has already been shown by Jean-Maurice Fiey.⁵² Yet this fact has strong implications for the interpretation of Bar 'Ebroyo's narration. Tagrit's crucial importance as the cornerstone of this work is revealed in the very beginning. On the first pages of the second part the first Christian city is not Edessa, as was the common understanding of Syriac historiography, but Tagrit.

Bar 'Ebroyo enumerates the regions through which the Apostle Thomas passed. On his way to the East, Thomas reached Tagrit, where "the king Ardashir, known as 'the black' (*Ardashir malkō d-mētida' ukōmō*)" had established a station. Thomas evangelized a number of inhabitants from this place. Only after the report of St. Thomas's achievements in India does Bar 'Ebroyo turn to Edessa many pages later, and only then to its King Abgar "the black (*ukōmō*)," who since the days of Eusebius of Caesarea is traditionally narrated to have been the first ever Christian king. The function of the story of a Tagritan king, who was called "the black" and who preceded the Edessan king also called "*ukōmō*," is obvious: The emerging town of Tagrit and its Christian inhabitants have an even more noble place in the history of Christianity than the Edessans. From where Bar 'Ebroyo received knowledge about these first Christians of Tagrit is unknown. Fiey considered this story as a detail peculiar to Bar 'Ebroyo. There might have been local traditions upon which he could draw. The Apostle Thomas was very important for Tagrit as can be seen from consecrations of churches with Thomas as patron as well as literary works dedicated to him.⁵³

Bar 'Ebroyo stresses that Tagrit alone remained on the orthodox path when the entire East became infected by "Nestorianism". As was noted earlier, Bar 'Ebroyo follows the polemical language of his sources in this decisive part of the formation of the maphrianate and frequently speaks about the "Nestorian heresy". Here again Fiey discovered that Bar 'Ebroyo narrated the same story twice. Bar 'Ebroyo placed the orthodox population that heroically withstood the persecutions of Metropolitan Barṣ awma of Nisibis (d. about 495) first in the ʿUr 'Abdin, and later on in the parallel narration again in Tagrit. Fiey

⁵² Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 289.

⁵³ Fiey, 'Tagrit', pp. 318-319.

also observed that the ultimate Syriac Orthodox source for this narration was a letter by the first primas of the Eastern part of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Marutha of Tagrit (d. 649). Yet the Tagritan letter had not mentioned either the persecution of the Tagritans or their resistance to Metropolitan Barṣ awma.⁵⁴ While Tagrit had indeed defied the reformations of the Church of the East in the 5th and 6th centuries, this story appears to be of a later date to bolster its prerogative for a leading function among the Syriac Orthodox communities. For the same purpose Tagrit is defended as the legitimate successor to the See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon against the claims of the rival Church of the East, as was said.⁵⁵ In reality, the caliphs had admitted the Catholicos of the Church of the East to move from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad as the new and splendid centre of power and had barred the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Here, Tagrit as the residence of the maphrians is explained as a deliberate choice for the most pious and loyal community to the Orthodox cause, the city therefore does not only surpass Edessa but also Baghdad in honour. This interpretation might also have been a local tradition rather than Bar 'Ebroyo's invention.

Later on Tagrit became also the burial place of the maphrians. As these burials are faithfully recorded throughout Bar 'Ebroyo's chronicle of the Eastern priesthood, Tagrit becomes no less than a sacred and blessed place.⁵⁶ Amir Harrak identified one of these burials, the grave of Maphrian Athanasius (887-904). It was situated in a church within the citadel of Tagrit, which Harrak considers to be the famous Church of St. Sergius and Bacchus.⁵⁷ At the same time Bar 'Ebroyo tended not to consider some of the conflicts and criticisms surrounding the maphrians he found in his sources.⁵⁸ The reports on the conflicts had always reflected the Western view

⁵⁴ Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 298. Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) II, p. 435-440 (IV, pp. 424-427). On the establishment of this new function see Fiey, "'maphrianat" syrien'; Fiey, 'Syriaques occidentaux'; Hage, 'Anfänge der Apostolischen Kirche'.

⁵⁵ Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 301. Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, p. 85 (86).

⁵⁶ There are indeed several churches in which maphrians were buried. Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 311-313; Fiey, "'maphrianat" syrien'.

⁵⁷ Harrak, 'Excavations in Takrit', pp. 23-24.

⁵⁸ For sources see Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 313.

on the rivalry between the patriarchs and maphrians, like the work by the above mentioned Patriarch Dionysius of Tel-Mahre or by Michael the Great. Significantly no other Syriac chronicle attributes a similar glory to Tagrit or even any glory at all. To Bar 'Ebroyo writing a history of the Eastern Church involved disregarding Western polemics in favour of constructing a heroic past and perspective peculiar to the Eastern Church.

Of Tagrit we know that its cultural and linguistic situation in the Middle Ages differed from regions west of the Euphrates. While Syriac was still the sacred language, Arabic was also widely spoken and written by Syrians.⁵⁹ The newly elected Maphrian Lo'zor in the mid-12th century argued against his being sent to Tagrit because he did not speak Arabic and could not speak to the people.⁶⁰ A Muslim Armenian governor ruled Tagrit at that time, as we learn from a letter from the Tagritans, who urge Lo'zor not to feel embarrassed and assure him that the governor would welcome him warmly. Lo'zor also learned that his predecessor did not speak Arabic when he first took up his office, and he learned little.⁶¹ Arabic was widespread in the great cities, as also the names of the scholars and donors attest, who are mentioned throughout Bar 'Ebroyo's chronicle. Unlike in the West they often have Arabic names, like the physician Amīn ad-Dawlā Abū al-Karam Sa'īd from Baghdad mentioned above.⁶²

⁵⁹ On this topic see Watt, 'Guarding the Language'. Bishop Basilios of Edessa relates that the Christian population of Edessa, used to Arabic language and script, evacuated the city together with the Muslims, when Edessa was reconquered by the Byzantine Empire in 1031, and fled to Tagrit. Fiey, 'Tagrit', p. 322. Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) IV, p. 640 (III, p. 280). See, however, Harrak, 'Excavations in Takrit', who published a number of inscriptions in Estrangelo and Serto, which document some knowledge of Syriac. In these mostly undated (but apparently rather early) inscriptions the Syriac names form the majority.

⁶⁰ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, p. 335 (p. 336).

⁶¹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, p. 335.

⁶² Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 449 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 385). See also the name of donors of a Church in Baghdad, Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) I, p. 445 (p. 446). On Syriac Christians in Baghdad see Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*.

A rational reason for Maphrian Lo'zor to decline a passage to Tagrit, however, was the situation in the city at that time. The multi-religious, multi-ethnic situation – beside the Syrians and the Arabs, Armenians and Greeks were also living in Tagrit – constantly endangered internal peace. Muslim rioters repeatedly attacked and destroyed churches and Christian property. Apostasy to Islam was also an issue.⁶³ Because of the unsafe conditions Maphrian Lo'zor transferred the metropolitan see to Mosul in the middle of the 12th century. Shortly afterwards the Caliph al-Muqtafi even destroyed parts of Tagrit. At that time the city was, as Fiey stated, only a shadow of its former glory.⁶⁴ Tagrit remained neglected until Bar 'Ebroyo's days.

V

Because of the difficult situation in the East, some of the maphrians of the first half of the 13th century never resided in Mor Mattay close to Mosul or in Tagrit but rather remained in the Levant altogether, leaving their community deprived of a central leadership. Bar 'Ebroyo, on the other hand, had taken on himself the passage to the East. Again the general political conditions had changed. Bar 'Ebroyo had survived the frequent wars between Mongols and Mamluks in the 13th century and the terrible effect they had on the Christian population. In the year 1275 Bar 'Ebroyo visited his Cappadocian home country. The region of Melitene and of the monastery Mor Barš awmo appeared to him like a vineyard beaten by hailstones.⁶⁵ As he said in a letter written to explain his disinterest in the patriarchate, the West was in ruins.⁶⁶ His own task at hand was to care for the people whom he was to lead in the East. The maphrianate at that time consisted of a reduced number of communities and bishoprics. The Syriac Orthodox Christians of the East formed a small minority compared to Christians of other denominations. Yet there was also reason for optimism. The

⁶³ Kawerau, *Jakobitische Kirche*, pp. 96-98; pp. 103-104.

⁶⁴ Fiey, 'Tagrit'. The city is hardly ever mentioned in Bar 'Ebroyo's secular chronicle or in the Arabic version.

⁶⁵ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 528 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 450).

⁶⁶ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) III, p. 459 (p. 460).

raiding wars and the wave of destruction were over and the Mongol Empire was consolidated. Baghdad, the rival see of the *catholicoi*, had lost some of its former glory as it showed the recent events. Ruins remained part of the city landscape for most of the 13th century, but Baghdad slowly recovered.⁶⁷ The Mamluks, who ruled the West, held the Christian communities of the Levant responsible for collaboration with the Crusaders. The Mongols in the East, however, provided new opportunities as their elite still inclined to Christianity.⁶⁸

Bar 'Ebroyo had started to write the chronicle no earlier than about 1275.⁶⁹ At that time he had already been leading his church as maphrian for over ten years. His uncompromising position concerning the apostolic succession of the maphrians and their claim on Seleucia-Ctesiphon was no secret. He insisted on the title even in his letter to Catholicos Denḥ a of the Church of the East (1265-1281) in 1279.⁷⁰ Yet Bar 'Ebroyo's attitude had not prevented both leaders from entertaining a good working relationship. When Bar 'Ebroyo visited the city of Tagrit in 1278 for two weeks, he was the first maphrian to do so for half a century. At that time his world chronicle might have been completed and been presented to the Syriac Orthodox public. Bar 'Ebroyo wished and expected his chronicles to be read aloud to an audience.⁷¹ Thus, the apparent pride of the Eastern Syriac Orthodox Church as it was constructed in the chronicle, and the fact that Bar 'Ebroyo insisted on the title *catholikos*, can be seen as

⁶⁷ The Dominican Riccoldo da Monte di Croce visited Baghdad at the end of the 13th century and mentioned ruins as well as beautiful gardens and buildings: Riccoldo di Monte Croce, *Pérégrination* (Kappler). See also Le Strange, *Baghdad*; Micheau, 'Baghdad'.

⁶⁸ On the state of research see recently Winkler, *Hidden Treasures*; see also Lane, 'Bar Hebraeus'.

⁶⁹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 37 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 40) explains chronology and mentions "today" as the year 1587 A. S.; Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 503 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 429) mentions Patriarch Joseph I Galesiotes (1267-1275) as still in office.

⁷⁰ Pinggéra, 'Christologischer Konsens', pp. 17-18.

⁷¹ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 1-2 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 1-2).

part of his program to enhance and develop the identity of the Syriac Orthodox in the maphrianate.

This line of interpretation is corroborated by some observations on Bar 'Ebroyo's treatment of himself in this chronicle. Very seldom does Bar 'Ebroyo indicate himself as "the writer of these [reports]" (*makṭbōnā d-holēn*)." He does so in the dramatic story of the Mongol raids in the region of the monastery Mor Barṣ awmo in the year 1249. His aged father was very close to these events. Instead of fleeing to the monastery for safety he chose to hide in the mountains, together with Bar 'Ebroyo's little brother, Barṣ awmo. The father had good reason to do so. The monastery, which had been a veritable castle in the 12th century, had been declining in strength in later times.⁷² Bar 'Ebroyo mentions himself only as witness to these dramatic events, to authenticate the story, not offering any personal memory or comment.⁷³ In this function, as a witness who heard eyewitness reports and who thereby authenticates them, we find him more often, mentioning himself in the first person singular as well as in the plural.⁷⁴ He also sometimes introduces himself as the writer in order to direct the reader to passages further up or down in the books.⁷⁵ Occasionally he offers his opinion as to sources and their reliability or decides between alternative representations of a given fact.⁷⁶

As someone involved in the events, he only very rarely mentions himself by speaking in the first person. He introduces himself in his report on the Mongol raids in Aleppo in the year 1260, when he, without success, tried to prevent a massacre and was incarcerated by the conquerors. In this dramatic and very emotional moment Bar 'Ebroyo presents himself as one who had a terrible responsibility, and who failed. It is true that in the role of

⁷² Kaufhold, 'Notizen'.

⁷³ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 492 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 420).

⁷⁴ Singular f.e. in Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), pp. 512, 513 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), pp. 437, 438); plural f.e. in Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 557 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 447).

⁷⁵ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), pp. 553, 556, 568 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), pp. 471, 473, 484).

⁷⁶ Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), p. 37 (Bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), p. 40).

maphrian he also sometimes mentions himself in the first person plural.⁷⁷ In the normal course of his ecclesiastical chronicle, however, be it as bishop or maphrian, he refers to himself in the third person as if he had no personal relation with this prelate “Grigorios,” whose moves and actions he sometimes mentions. As long as he was bishop of Laqabin he calls this persona “the one from Laqabin (*how d-laqabīn*)”;⁷⁸ after being moved to Aleppo, he presents himself as “Gregory from Aleppo (*Grigorios d-ḥ olob*)”.⁷⁹

There is obviously no autobiographical concept here. Rather, Bar ‘Ebroyo deconstructs any rudiments of a narrative of himself by constantly changing his identity according to the genre of the information and his given ecclesiastical function. Patriarch Dionysius of Tel Maḥ re and Patriarch Michael the Great on the other hand deliberately integrated their own deeds and achievements into the narrative of the legitimate successors of the Apostolic See of Antioch. Within this chain of succession, they also presented an interpretation of their own deeds and their characters.⁸⁰ In another book, the *Book of the Dove* aimed at monastic edification, Bar ‘Ebroyo presented a short passage about himself, again not as an active church leader but as a mystic detached from the struggles and the learning of this world.⁸¹ Thus, his non-narrative treatment of his own person in this world history was a deliberate choice.

In this chronicle Bar ‘Ebroyo was not interested in explaining his ecclesiastical program or constructing a place for himself in the history of the church. He disappeared behind the functions in

⁷⁷ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Syriacum* (Bedjan), pp. 528, 557 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronography* (Budge), pp. 450, 475).

⁷⁸ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) II, p. 715 (p. 716).

⁷⁹ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Abbeloos/Lamy) II, p. 749 (p. 750).

⁸⁰ Michael, *Chronique* (Chabot) IV, p. 503 (III, p. 42); IV, pp. 538-543 (III, pp. 104-110) contain Dionysius’s writing on himself. Most of the autobiography of Michael is lost and only extant in the abbreviated excerpts by Bar ‘Ebroyo. On the autobiographical writing of Michael and Dionysius see Weltecke, “*Beschreibung der Zeiten*”, pp. 83-84, 205-206 and passim.

⁸¹ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Book of the dove* (Bedjan), pp. 577-579 (Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Book of the dove* (Wensinck), pp. 60-62).

which he served. Yet it seems that he saw a need for a noble tradition for his addressees, which was grounded in the Tagritans' and Eastern Christians' own region. At the same time, Bar 'Ebroyo offered a new Christian identity of the East based on historical grounds, which overcame confessional and linguistic boundaries. This approach was fitting for the ecumenical movement of the time, and it was a prudent policy for a minority group even among the Christians.

CONCLUSION

Historical identity is always complex. It is shared with different groups in different respects. There are elements all the physicians or silver merchants share, all the inhabitants of a region or all the members of a religion in the world. We can see here that these patterns of overlapping fields of affiliation and identification we consider typical for the modern world can also be detected in the cities of the Medieval Middle East. These patterns create, connect and disconnect groups in different respects.

Bar 'Ebroyo used self-designations to define the historical, the ethnic-cultural, the linguistic, and the religious identity of the members of the Syriac Orthodox Church. He connected them to the world of the Ancient Near Eastern Empires and to their common Aramaic language and he defined them in the multi-denominational situation of the present. While these strategies are well known in principle, his specific use and his precise terms are worthy of notice. The Syriac Orthodox identity was clearly not uniform. Various writers and different local communities had ideas of their own about the value of the term "Aramean" or "Syrian". "Easterners" in Bar 'Ebroyo's language quite consciously designated the members of the Apostolic Church of the East as well as Eastern members of the Syriac Orthodox Church of the East. "Syrians" without specification often designates Christians of the different Syriac denominations. In the Arabised Christian world – be it Egypt or Baghdad – the word "Jacobites" was apparently considered an acceptable self-designation while the Western Syriac Orthodox rejected it. Unlike Michael the Great, Bar 'Ebroyo declined to use the word "Arameans". Neither did he mention the debate about the "real Syrians". He preferred to stress the common tradition of the East and for this end neither the term "Arameans" nor the debate, which identified the real Syrians with the Western

regions, were of use to him. In general Bar ʿEbroyo seems to have aimed for a neutral and inclusive language. His terms “ancient Syrians” and “our Syrians” for him best expressed the historical and ethnic-linguistic identity of the Syriac Orthodox.

As his work is related to expectations and imaginations of his intended readers, his terms in some ways probably reflect their specific Eastern perspective. Furthermore, I suggest here that Bar ʿEbroyo’s picture of the maphrianate as the legitimate successor of the apostolic See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, of the central role of Tagrit as the first Christian community, as the guard of orthodoxy, and as a sanctified place was aimed for his flock at a time of both danger and great chances.

Although there was never a question who “our people (*ʾāmō dīlān*)” were in everyday life, in the complex environment of the Middle East the specific designation and definition for this group had been and still remained problematic. There were clerics and scholars, who were very much connected to the Syriac language, but they did not belong to “our people”, which remained identical with the religious denomination. At the same time, not all members of the Syriac Orthodox denomination preferred to speak or read the Syriac language. Like other Syriac Orthodox writers, Bar ʿEbroyo had to find specific solutions for specific situations in time and space to formulate an identity that was flexible and adequate to this complex world. Still, as the exceptionally broad reception of his work shows, other regions in the Syriac reading world were also able to relate to Bar ʿEbroyo’s narrative.

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