Bas Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction: Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area.* Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 198. Leuven: Peeters, 2010. xii + 591 pp; hardcover. €85.00.

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This volume seems at first glance to be very much a companion volume to Immerzeel's *Identity Puzzles* (reviewed by this writer last year) and yet this preliminary impression does a disservice to a work that very much deserves to be hailed as an impressive piece of scholarship that stands alone from the rest of the Leiden research cluster on Syrian Orthodox Identity. Whereas Immerzeel employed a rather broad-brush approach to the question, Snelders takes a radically differing path by concentrating on a region that provides evidence of an overwhelmingly Syrian Orthodox identity amongst its Christian population.

By focusing on the diocese of Mosul and looking at a restricted geographical territory, Snelders takes a wider view of Syrian Orthodox Art by including a variety of media, rather than concentrating on frescoes and icons as Immerzeel has done. He considers metalwork, illuminated manuscripts, stuccowork and stone sculptures in his survey in an attempt to build up a more complete picture of medieval Mosul and its hinterland. In addition he never loses sight of the fact that the Syrian Orthodox were always a minority in these territories and therefore had to live and work alongside a sizable Muslim majority, and this inevitably had an effect on the commissions on offer and the religious identity of local artisans. This leads naturally to an assumption of religious co-operation amongst the artisan classes and Snelders argues convincingly that "Christian" commissions were not necessarily carried out by Christian artisans and vice versa.

The real benefit of taking the microcosmic rather than macrocosmic perspective is that it enables us to come to far more concrete conclusions about the nature of Syrian Orthodox Art at a denominational level, juxtaposed with Immerzeel's admission that based on fresco and icon evidence alone, it is difficult to argue for denominational identity in Syria and Lebanon. Whilst a relative paucity of firmly attributed evidence was always going to limit his conclusions, Snelders was at least able to conclude that Syrian

Orthodox art is adaptable to the circumstances in which it finds itself:

> ….it is first important to note that the way the Syrian Orthodox formulated their identity was determined by their immediate environment. Perhaps therefore it will come as no surprise that regionalism is an important factor in defining the characteristics of the decoration of Syrian Orthodox churches, liturgical implements, and manuscripts. While the Syrian Orthodox comprised one of the two main Christian groups in Mosul during the twelfth and thirteenth century, attaining their full artistic development under Muslim rule, their co-religionists in the Frankish states and the Emirate of Damascus encompassed only a rather a insignificant proportion within the larger community of Christians. Pp. 413–414

He goes on to point out, quite rightly, the fact that Syrian Orthodox in Syria and Lebanon were living alongside Byzantine Orthodox, Melkites, Maronites and Latins and this impacted on their artistic heritage. However he fails to consider the intriguing prospect that a study of Edessa, Mardin and the Tur 'Abdin region could perhaps offer a fascinating glimpse of an architectural and artistic legacy that is largely Syrian Orthodox. Snelders proves an excellent guide through the waters already navigated by scholars in a variety of disciplines but proves less imaginative when arguing from absence or trying to form hypotheses on gaps in our current knowledge.

An example of this is in Chapter 2 and his consideration of the frescoes of Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi. These frescoes are well known and have been widely published. Unfortunately Snelders follows the established line and does not think to question further. One element of his argument (and a very percipient one) mentioned above is that Syrian Orthodox regional dedications can prove crucial in establishing the denominational identity of an object or even of a church, in his conclusion he says:

> An exception to the rule is the iconographic attention paid to the patron saint and a few Syrian Orthodox martyrs at Deir Mar Behnam. Mar Behnam was a local saint, venerated at the time only by the Syrian Orthodox. Specifically Syrian Orthodox saints such as

> Mar Behnam and Mar Barsauma are lacking from the monumental decoration at Deir Mar Musa, but it should be noted that the loss of some wall paintings at the site may account for this absence, especially considering that the name of the latter saint turns up in a twelfth-century Arabic invocation in the southern isle [sic]. P.424

However Snelders fails to take into account that one of the few saints identified on the piers at Deir Mar Musa is Mar Julyano Sobo, who is also identified with Mar Elian esh-Sharqi the saint venerated at the monastery of that name 45 km north-east of Deir Mar Musa in the town of Qaryatayn. The combination of the presence of Mar Julyano/Elian and various instances of graffiti invoking him attest to the fact that a local denominational identity is present in Deir Mar Musa and that attachment to saints varies geographically. We cannot therefore rule out the possibility that the other piers also featured regional Syrian Orthodox saints. On another note, the inscription Snelders mentions in relation to Mar Barsauma is generally interpreted as being pilgrimage graffiti as Mar Musa was an important Syrian Orthodox way-station on the road to Jerusalem; this implies that the supplicant was invoking a regional saint that they were familiar with from home along with the patron saint of the monastery they were visiting.

It is this kind of detail that highlights the weaknesses in a generally extremely rigorous and impressive piece of work. The material covered is discussed comprehensively and coherently but in future this reader at least would like to see what happens when Snelders has the courage to break out onto roads less-travelled and engage more with the primary, rather than the secondary, material.