

The World Chronicle by Patriarch Michael the Great (1126-1199): Some reflections

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I

Almost 800 years ago Michael the Great, one of the most important Syrian Orthodox patriarchs of Antioch and the East, died in his favorite monastery, Mor Barsaumô, on top of a mountain close to the old Cappadocian *metropolis* of Melitene, today the Turkish town of Malatya.¹ 700 years after his death, the first printed edition of his most acknowledged literary work, his world chronicle from the creation to the year 1195, was begun in Paris.² By this time the site where the monastery had once thrived and hosted hundreds of pilgrims each year, well-off Muslim tradesmen included, lay waste, and even its exact location was controversial.³ The tide of history had washed away the defense walls and the four watchtowers, the hospice and the patriarchal residence Michael built, the library Michael had enlarged with books he bought or copied, and the luxurious book of the gospels he himself had filled with silver and golden letters. Gone also was the church built of the beautifully carved stones which Michael had appropriated from a former Pagan temple in the vicinity. In an area distant from great Christian city centers such as Antioch and Edessa, this was seen as a church of considerable importance. This is confirmed by the Edesseean chronicler's remark that, "[w]hile it is small in size, here it stands very great, beautiful and high."⁴ Unfortunately, the greater part of Michael's achievements -- his church, his buildings, and his reforms -- were lost.

It is another matter when it comes to his world chronicle. It is the largest one written in Syriac and, according to some, it may have been the largest medieval

¹*Gregorii Barhebrei Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, I-III, ed./transl. Johannes Baptista Abbeloos/Thomas J. Lamy, Louvain 1872, Louvain, Paris 1874, 1877, 605. Today the Turkish town Malatya.

²*Chronique de Michel le Syrien. Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioch (1166-1199)*, I-IV, ed./transl. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, Paris 1899-1910.

³Wright, William, *A Short History of Syriac Literature*, London 1894, 250, note 5; Honigmann, Ernest, *Le couvent de Barsauma et le patriarcat jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie*, Louvain 1954 (CSCO, 146, Subs., 7), 1-5.

⁴*Anonymi Auctoris chronicon ad annum christi 1234 pertinens*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, Louvain, 1953 (CSCO, 81, SS 36), 234 [textus]; *Anonymi auctoris chronicon ad a.C. 1234 pertinens*, II, transl. Albert Abouna, Louvain 1974 (CSCO, 354, SS, 154), 314 [versio: fr].

chronicle of its time. Today, it stands as a monument not only to the Patriarch, his life and that of his contemporaries, but also more generally to the (Syrian Orthodox) patriarchal see of Antioch. Therefore, the anniversaries of Michael's death and of the publication of the chronicle offer a good opportunity to reflect anew upon his life and work. Let us begin with some observations on the genesis of the modern view on the chronicle.

In the 16th century, the Syrian Orthodox priest (and later bishop) Moses of Mardin traveled to Europe several times in the service of his patriarch. He came to know and to establish close friendships with a number of humanists. Together with Johann Albrecht Widmanstetter, he would go on to publish the first printed version of the Peshitta⁵ (his handwriting thus becoming an important model for the European Syriac printing-types). He taught Syriac and provided European scholars with manuscripts for the purpose of studying the Syriac language.⁶ He also copied manuscripts of theological or dogmatic interest. The Bibliotheca Vaticana, for example, is in possession of a detailed credo by Michael the Great, translated from the Syriac into Arabic and copied by Moses.⁷ Hence his activities form a vital part of the beginning of Syriac studies in Europe.

This very same scholar also was the scribe who undertook the difficult task of copying Michael's chronicle, and the last to witness his autograph.⁸ One expects that Moses made his European collaborators aware of the existence of the chronicle, considering also that Roman clerics were now aware of other works by the patriarch. It is, therefore, rather surprising to find that the chronicle is never mentioned in Europe before the beginning of the 18th century: The *Bibliotheca Orientalis* of the Maronite Joseph Simon Assemani appeared in 1721, and it would become the main source of knowledge of Syriac literature in 18th and 19th century Europe. Yet even there information about the chronicle

⁵Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 500, compare: Blum, Jost G., *Erstdruck des syrischen Neuen Testaments* (Kat. Nr. 32): *Das Buch im Orient. Handschriften und kostbare Drucke aus zwei Jahrtausenden*, Wiesbaden 1982, 76-77.

⁶Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. syr. 1, compare: Blum, Jost G., *Aus den Anfängen der syrischen Studien in Europa* (Kat. Nr. 31): *Das Buch im Orient*, 75-76; Strothmann, Werner, *Die Anfänge der syrischen Studien in Europa*, Wiesbaden 1971 (Göttinger Orientforschungen, 1), 11-15. Levi Della Vida, Giorgio, *Ricerche sulla formazione del più antico fondo dei manoscritti orientali della Bibliotheca Vaticana*, Città del Vaticano 1939 (Studi e Texti, 92), 205-213;

⁷Rome, Vatican, Ms. ar. 83, compare: Levi Della Vida, *Ricerche*, 212-213.

⁸Glosse by Moses: MS 377 (II, 356-357). Hubert Kaufhold suggests the date in between two journeys to Rome, the *terminus ante quem* being 1578: Kaufhold, Hubert, [Recension] Helga Anschutz, *Die syrischen Christen vom Tur 'Abdin. Eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung*, Würzburg 1984, *Oriens Christianus* 70 (1986), 205-211, here: 207-208.

was out of sight, and unnoticed by other scholars. Assemani did not mention the chronicle as a work by *Michael Magnus Patriarcha*. Instead, he merely quoted the preface of the church history by the celebrated Syrian Orthodox scholar Bar Hebraeus who, in turn, cited Michael as his source.⁹ Apparently Assemani had no knowledge of the existence and whereabouts of the chronicle. Consequently, Michael Le Quien, author of the well-known *Oriens Christianus* of 1740, is similarly unaware of the existence of the chronicle.¹⁰ When the first edition of the world chronicle by Bar Hebraeus was published in 1789, Michael's chronicle was again mentioned in the preface, apparently without being noticed.¹¹ Michael the Great was only known as a writer of legal, liturgical and some lesser hagiographic texts.

The scholarly investigation of the chronicle and its content began when some Armenian versions of the chronicle reached European libraries during the first half of the 19th century. Parts of them were translated to French and published by Édouard Dulaurier in the *Journal Asiatique* (1848) and in the *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades* (1869).¹² In 1868 a complete French translation of one of these Armenian versions was published by the Mekhitarist Victor Langlois.¹³ Langlois also started a philological investigation of historical sources and of the value of the text. The publication of two Armenian versions followed in 1870 and 1871.¹⁴ These texts opened new doors to the investigation of the history of

⁹Assemani, Joseph S., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana... II. De Scriptoribus syris monophysitis*, Rome 1721, 154-156; 363-369; quotation of the *prolegomenon* by Bar Hebraeus: 312-313.

¹⁰Le Quien, Michael, *Oriens Christianus in quatuor patriarchatus digestus*, II, Paris 1740, 1389-1391.

¹¹*Bar Hebraei chronicon syriacum*. ed. Paul J. Bruns/ Georg W. Kirsch, Leipzig 1789, 2.

¹²Dulaurier, Édouard, Extrait de la Chronique de Michel le Syrien, comprenant l'histoire des temps écoulés depuis l'année VIIIe du règne de l'empereur Justin II, jusqu'à la seconde année du règne de Léon III, l'Isaurien (573- 717), traduit de l'armenien, *Journal Asiatique* 4. Ser. 12 = 53 (1848), 281-334; 4. Ser. 13 = 54 (1849), 315-376; Dulaurier, Édouard, Extrait de la chronique de Michel le Syrien: *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades. Documents arméniens*, I, Paris 1869, 312-409.

¹³*Chronique de Michel le Grand, patriarche des syriens jacobite*, transl. Victor Langlois, Venice 1868. As for the *Mekhitarists*, they were members of an Armenian intellectual and spiritual group founded by Mekhitar in the 17th century. They lived and worked in a monastery in Venice, and translated and published many Armenian texts.

¹⁴Schmidt has recently emphasized the fact that these versions were indeed independent translations of the Syriac original: Schmidt, Andrea B., *Warum schreibt Petrus der Iberer an die Armenier? Ein pseudonymer Brief und die Armenisierung der syrischen*

the Near East, and for this reason they were highly welcomed. But soon it became obvious that the Armenian texts could only be adaptations rather than faithful translations; hence, a reliable representation of the original chronicle was still wanting.¹⁵

Therefore, “discovery“ of the Syriac original was welcome news. In 1889 the Italian Orientalist Ignace Guidi voiced his high expectations about the original text and his hope to see it published as soon as possible.¹⁶ He also identified the bishop of Edessa – later to become the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignace II Rahmani -- as the scholar responsible for this “discovery“. Rahmani had been bishop of Edessa since 1887. The copy he found in the Syrian-Orthodox church of St. Peter and Paul in Edessa/Urfa had been prepared by Michael bar Barsaumo in 1598, and it was based on an earlier copy version prepared by Moses of Mardin.¹⁷ The existence of the manuscript was already known in Edessa, since the church had acquired it at some point after 1810, and it had been examined by two metropolitans in succession, in 1826 and 1849.¹⁸ Rahmani took a copy of the manuscript with him on a journey to Europe and to Rome in particular, where he showed his treasure to Guidi and probably sought financial help for the publication.¹⁹ But things did not turn out as expected.

As we can see from a public argument in the *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* and the *Journal Asiatique*, Abbé Jean-Baptiste Chabot, who had recently passed his exams in Syriac studies, took the project in hand. He traveled to Edessa during a missionary journey, obtained a copy of the manuscript himself and began to publish it.²⁰ Since Chabot undertook this project on behalf of the French *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, he had the financial means to pursue

Plerophorien: *Horizonte der Christenheit. Festschrift für Friedrich Heyer zu seinem 85. Geburtstag*, ed. Michael Kohlbacher/ Markus Lesinski, Erlangen 1994 (Oikonomia, 34), 254.

¹⁵Gelzer, Heinrich, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die Byzantinische Chronographie*, II, Leipzig 1898, 431-458, here 431.

¹⁶Guidi, Ignace, La cronica siriana di Michele I, *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana* 3 (1889), 167-169.

¹⁷Zananiri, G., *Catholicisme. Hier. Aujourd’hui. Demain* XXII (1990), 443-444, s.v. Rahmani (Ignaz Ephrem II.).

¹⁸First unpagged folio of the ms, compare: Chabot, *Introduction = MS I, XL*.

¹⁹Gelzer, *Sextus Julius*, 432. Rahmani, 1905, 437.

²⁰c.f. Nau, François, Lettre de S.B. Mgr Rahmani au sujet de la Publication de la Chronique de Michael, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien*, 10 (1905), 435-438, for more references.

it.²¹ Sadly but understandably Chabot's method of discovering manuscripts had a long lasting side-effect on the relationship between scholars of Oriental studies and Oriental scholars, the impact of which is still felt to this day.²² In Europe, Chabot was honored for having "discovered" the chronicle after a year-long research.²³ During the publication of the Syriac original, Arabic translations became known or were acquired for European libraries respectively.²⁴ While none of these have been published, they have, however, been used by Chabot as a corroboration of the Syriac text in his translation and commentary. In 1996, a new Arabic translation appeared in Damascus.

II

Since the publication of the Syriac original, the chronicle of Michael the Great has been studied mainly for the following three purposes: First of all, Chabot continued Langlois' investigation of the text with regard to its sources. In his thorough introduction he identified the main sources, and provided a table concisely correlating various parts of the chronicle to its relevant main source.²⁵ Like Langlois he annotated his translation. While his commentary continues to be quite helpful, the reader is not always informed what, if any, relationship exists between Michael's statement and other text hinted at in Chabot's comment. Chabot also commented on and criticized the historical data. The critique of the data, however, is more or less reduced to the distinction between

²¹Nau, François, Sur Quelques Autographes de Michel le Syrien. Patriarche d'Antioche de 1166 à 1199, *Revue de L'Orient Chrétien*, 2nd Ser. 9 (1914), 378.

²²Vööbus, Arthur, Discovery of new Manuscript Sources for the Biography of Simeon the Stylite: *After Chalcedon. Studies in Theology and Church History, offered to Professor Albert van Roey for his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. C. Laga/J.A. Munitz/L. van Rompay, Löwen 1985, 479-484, 481: „Archibishop Dionysios was very kind and gave me permission to photograph documents which I needed, however, the council of the church overruled his decision, creating a very painful situation. I was permitted to see the manuscripts but the council members were sitting around me and followed every move. These people had not yet forgotten their deep resentment caused by Prof. J.B. Chabot who had broken their trust in Edessa as I was told.“

²³Parisot, Jean, Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche Jacobite d'Antioch, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 5 (1900), 322-325; 660-662, Faure, Paul, *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française VIII* (1959), 132-133, s.v. Chabot, Jean-Baptiste.

²⁴For references see f.e. Chabot, *Introduction = MS I, xliii-1*; Baumstark, Anton, Die literarischen Handschriften des Jakobitischen Markusklosters in Jerusalem (Fts.), *Oriens Christianus* N.S. 3 = 11 (1913), 128-134.

²⁵Chabot, *Introduction = MS I, xxv*.

“true“ and “false” statements, in light of the modern histories Chabot had worked with. The considerable *lacunae* in the Syriac original were filled by Chabot in his French translation, and larded with quotations of the world chronicle and church history by Bar Hebraeus. Unfortunately, scholars working with the text did not always take into account what amounted to Chabot’s segmented *pasticchio*.²⁶ In the end, Chabot himself knew that his investigation of the sources of Michael was incomplete.

The investigation of the text was continued by Felix Haase who compared the Syriac text with one of the Armenian versions, and who could now prove these to be more or less free adaptations for Armenian purposes and as historical sources of independent value.²⁷ This problem has recently been reviewed by Andrea Schmidt who criticized Haase’s results, and revised the comparison of the texts on the basis of the Armenian editions.²⁸ Schmidt intends to pursue a study of this question, and he proposed a closer examination of the Armenian versions. The results of the philological study of Michael’s chronicle, of his other texts, and of the biography research were summarized and elaborated in various encyclopediae, particularly in the 20th century histories of literature. Georg Graf’s history of Arabic Christian literature and Anton Baumstark’s history of Syriac literature, remain the main sources of reference to this day.²⁹

Michael’s chronicle has also served as a reliable reference to other mutilated or lost texts. To cite just a few examples, Heinrich Gelzer studied Michael’s text for the use he made of Julian Africanus, one of the inventors of Christian

²⁶Kaufhold, Hubert, Zur syrischen Kirchengeschichte des 12. Jahrhunderts. Neue Quellen über Theodoros bar Wahbûn, *Oriens Christianus*, 74 (1990), 115-151; here: 119-120; Lüders, Anneliese, *Die Kreuzzüge im Urteil der syrischen und armenischen Quellen*, Berlin 1964 (Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten, 29), abbreviations: Lüders quotes the part filled in by Chabot independently side by side with the text by Bar Hebraeus, apparently without realizing that the former is no authentic but an entirely artificial text.

²⁷Haase, Felix, Die armenische Rezension der syrischen Chronik Michaels des Großen, *Oriens Christianus*, New Ser. 5 = 13 (1915), 60-82; 271-283.

²⁸Schmidt, Andrea B., Die Zweifache Armenische Rezension der syrischen Chronik Michaels des Großen, *Le Muséon*, 109 (1966), 299-319.

²⁹Graf, Georg, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur II. Die Schriftsteller bis zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Città del Vaticano 1947; Baumstark, Anton, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn 1922; Tisserant, Eugène, *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* X, 2 (1929), 1711-1719, s.v. Michel le Syrien; Hage, Wolfgang, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* XXII (1992), 710-712, s.v. Michael der Syrer (1126/7-1199); Concerning Michael’s biography see also *Zwei Briefe Barwahbuns. Nebst einer Beilage: Das Schisma des Paulus von Beth-Ukkame*, ed./transl. Johannes Gerber, Halle 1911; and the very interesting new fragment published by Kaufhold, *Theodor bar Wahbûn*.

historiography in Late Antiquity.³⁰ An otherwise unknown history of the life of Bardaisan, the controversial Edessenian philosopher and Christian, was extracted from the chronicle by François Nau.³¹ Lost fragments of John of Asia's ecclesiastical history have been discovered.³² Michael's chronicle served to corroborate the chronicle by Euseb of Caesarea, and it aided in the reconstruction of vitally important Syriac chronicles such as those of Jacob of Edessa, and of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre.³³ It also proved useful for the investigation of theological texts. More recently, for example, polemical anti-chalcedonian and later tritheist discourses by John Philoponos were reconstructed with the help of Michael's quotations.³⁴ It is obvious that these investigations also increased our knowledge of Michael's chronicle itself and, in this respect, continued Langlois' and Chabot's critique.³⁵

The third area where Michael's chronicle proves valuable is in historical research. It would be futile to list a selection of titles purporting to be a representative choice, but we can offer some general remarks and a few examples. First, the chronicle may be seen as a window into the era when it was written. As such, it is a source for the history of northern Syria at the time of the Crusades. At the same time, it has been a rich historiographic source, exemplified especially by the celebrated work of Claude Cahen.³⁶

³⁰Gelzer, *Julius Africanus*.

³¹Nau, François, *Une Biographie inédite de Bardesane l'Astrologue* (Tirée de l'histoire de Michel le Grand..., Paris 1897).

³²F.e. Altheim, Franz/Ruth Stiehl, Michael der Syrer. Über das erste Auftreten der Bulgaren und Chazaren, *Byzantion* 28 (1958), 105-118.

³³Keseling, Paul, Die Chronik des Eusebius in der syrischen Überlieferung, *Oriens Christianus* 3. Ser. 1 = 23 (1927), 23-48; 223-241; 3. Ser. 2 = 24 (1927), 33-56; Brooks, Ernest Walter, The Chronological Canon of James of Edessa, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 53 (1899), 261-327. Abramowski, Rudolf, *Dionysius von Tellmahre. Jakobitischer Patriarch von 818-845. Zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam*, Leipzig 1940.

³⁴Roey, Albert van, Fragments antiariens de Jean Philopon, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 10 (1979), 237-250; Roey, Albert van, Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11 (1980), 135-163.

³⁵See also Brock, Sebastian P., A Fragment of Enoch in Syriac, *The Journal of Theological Studies* NS 19 (1968), 626-631.

³⁶Cahen, Claude, *La Syrie du Nord à l'Époque des Croisades et la Principauté Franque d'Antioche*, Paris 1940; Runciman, Steven, *A History of the Crusades*, I-III, London, 1951, 1952, 1954.

In addition, the chronicle has been an important source for church history. It has supplied material equally well for the early church, and for the formation of the churches which opposed the decisions of the Councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451. We especially note here the work of Erwand Ter-Minassiantz, equally adept in Armenian and Syriac, who published his well-documented history of the relationship of the Syrian Orthodox and Armenian churches in the Middle Ages.³⁷ Monographs of the history of the Syrian Orthodox church were to follow, making extensive use of the material.³⁸ More recently, interest in the history of the Latin church in the Crusader states has again led to the revision of the chronicle.³⁹ Scholars were somewhat disappointed to discover that Michael did not report the turns of secular politics or the tidings of the courts in any detail.⁴⁰ One exception to the rule might be the vital information Michael provides on pre-Islamic Arabic history, especially for the monophysite kingdom of the Ghassanids.⁴¹

Like the investigation of texts used by Michael, the various historical studies have also improved knowledge of the chronicle. For example, Ter-Minassiantz transcribed and translated the acts of the Synod of Manazkert (726) and *en passant* proposed several new interpretations.⁴² For his part, Thomas H. Benner

³⁷Ter-Minassiantz, Erwand, *Die armenische Kirche in ihren Beziehungen zu den syrischen Kirchen bis zum Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts. Nach den armenischen und syrischen Quellen*, Leipzig 1904 (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, N.F. 11 = 26, 4).

³⁸Chabot, Jean-Baptiste, Les évêques jacobites du VIIIe au XIIIe siècle d'après la Chronique de Michel le Syrien, *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 4 (1899), 444-451, 491-511; 5 (1900), 605-636; 6 (1901), 189-220; Honigmann, Peter, *Le couvent, Kawerau, Peter, Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance. Idee und Wirklichkeit*, Berlin 1960; Hage, Wolfgang, *Die syrisch-jakobitische Kirche in frühislamischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden 1966; see also note 43.

³⁹Hamilton, Bernard, *The Latin Church in the Crusader States: The Secular Church*, London 1980; Palmer, Andrew, The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem, *Oriens Christianus* 75 (1991), 16-43; Palmer, Andrew, The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem, Part Two: Queen Melisende and the Jacobite Estates, *Oriens Christianus* 76 (1992), 74-94.

⁴⁰See the introduction into sources to Byzantine history: Karayannopoulos, Johannes/Günter Weiss, *Quellenkunde zur Geschichte von Byzanz (324-1453)*, 2.4, Wiesbaden 1982.

⁴¹Nöldeke, Theodor, *Die ghassânischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafnas*, Berlin 1887; Shahîd, Irfân, The Restoration of the Ghassanid Dynasty, A.D. 587: Dionysius of Tellmahre: *A Festschrift for Dr. Sebastian P. Brock*, *Aram* 5,1-2 (1993), 491-503.

⁴²Ter-Minassiantz, *armenische Kirche*, 178-197.

discovered the quotation of a Byzantine document in the chronicle, a Chrysobullos Logos issued by Nicephoros II. Phocas (963-969)⁴³.

It would be quite a task to compile a complete inventory of all published works dealing with Michael's chronicle, even if one were to exclude publications which merely mention Michael without adding any new thoughts to the analysis or content of the text. And clearly, a scientific edition or a facsimile of the oldest manuscript is wanting. The problem of the sources for the last two books of the chronicle has not been investigated since Chabot's examination. Chabot's introduction remains the one monograph dealing with the entire chronicle and the complete biography of the patriarch. The necessity of further investigation has been voiced regularly, but to no avail as of yet. Chabot, therefore, is probably the sole scholar to have even *read* the entire text. Why is this so? Viewed from today's perspective, it would seem that Michael's chronicle was published at the wrong moment. In fact, as we will sketch below, the story of the chronicle's "discovery" and of its study is illustrative of singular academic attitudes prevalent a century ago.

III

While Chabot's achievement certainly improved his own reputation as a scholar of Oriental literature, it did not improve Michael's reputation as a learned man and historiographer. Syriac historiography was simply a tool for the European scholar, and otherwise not highly esteemed, as clearly revealed in William Wright's lukewarm remark on some of the best known Syriac writing historians: "*And even Syria's humble chroniclers, such as John of Ephesus, Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, and Bar-Hebræus, deserve their meed of praise, seeing that, without their guidance, we should have known far less than we now know about the history of two important branches of the Eastern Church, besides losing much interesting information as to the political events of the periods with which their annals are occupied.*"⁴⁴

At the turn of the century Christian medieval chronicles and annals in general were not studied and valued as historiographic texts in their own right. Latin and Greek chronicles received similar short-shrift. Often they were not published as complete texts but as excerpts containing only what was seen as the original contribution of the author to the corpus of data needed for the topics in question - which was usually his contemporary history. Karl Krumbacher paradigmatically shows the aim and criteria for these judgments in his

⁴³Benner, Thomas H. *Die syrisch-jakobitische Kirche unter byzantinischer Herrschaft im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert*, Marburg 1989, 25-33.

⁴⁴Wright, William, *A Short History of Syriac Literature*, London 1894, 2-3.

introduction to the two main historiographic genres in Byzantium: “Historiography” as the genre of the authors of contemporary history is written in a clear polished style, following the classical examples of Herodotus, Thucydides and Polybios, discussing the deeds of mankind and their causes. In contrast, “Chronicles” try to encompass the history of the world but without really telling a story. Krumbacher seems puzzled, even irritated, looking at these texts, by their attention to prices for food, catastrophes and miracles, their kaleidoscopic reflection of stained splinters of histories, stories, biographies, and documents. Krumbacher understands that such material is not meant to show man, his passions, and achievements but it is instead presented with a biblical-theological backdrop. Clearly, he sees the all too frequent moralizing tendency of the chronicles. Indignantly he points out that these writers have no understanding whatsoever for the beautiful structures Thucydides found in and gave to history. It is obvious that Krumbacher is thinking in non-historical criteria of what historiography is all about. To him there is an objective standard as to method, style and content. It was, quite naturally, formed on the basis of the classical tradition and the modern scientific aims and methods of historiography. To the highly learned scholar trained in the appreciation and understanding of classical texts, medieval chronicles demonstrated little beyond an absence of refinement and a sheer lack of education.⁴⁵

Apart from this attitude towards non-classical historiography we can also see another influence, cultural rather than scientific, on the study of the world chronicle by Michael the Great. By the end of the 19th century the character of Oriental studies had changed considerably from the days when bishop Moses of Mardin taught Syriac in Rome. It is true, European Oriental philology had its origins in medieval theology and the humanist’s quest for European religious and cultural roots. But in 1887, when the Seminar for Oriental and African languages was established in Berlin, the capital of the German Empire, it did not grow out of admiration for the Oriental cultures but was designed explicitly for the purpose of training civil servants and diplomats for the administration of the growing number of colonies and the even greater number the Empire hoped to acquire in the future.⁴⁶ The official memorandum we refer to here certainly

⁴⁵*Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur. Von Justinian bis zum Ende des Oströmischen Reiches (527-1453)*, München, ²1897 (Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften, 9, 1), 219ff. This view has successfully attacked by Beck, Hans-Georg, Zur byzantinischen „Mönchschronik“: *Speculum historiale. Geschichte im Spiegel von Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsdeutung*. Festschrift Johannes Spörl, ed. Clemens Bauer/Laetitia Boehm/Max Müller, Freiburg, München 1965, 188-197.

⁴⁶Sachau, Eduard, *Denkschrift über das Seminar für orientalische Sprachen an der Königlichen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin von 1887-1912*, Berlin 1912; Lenz, Max, *Geschichte der Königlichen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, II, Halle 1918, 144-145; III, Halle 1910, 239-247.

deserves source critique. It is clearly advertising the political usefulness of the Seminar. But the same imperialistic purpose of Orientalist research is expressed even where it was wholly unnecessary. In France, for example, Abbé Jean P. Martin in an article about the Crusaders (!) praised the editorial work of Paul Bedjan and added as a matter of course that he himself proposed to the French government the edition of Syriac manuscripts “as a means of conserving and enlarging the influence of France in the Orient ...”⁴⁷

It seems that the new function of Oriental Studies went hand in hand with a new attitude among the Orientalists themselves. Certainly, the people Bishop Moses of Mardin met in Europe did not all become his friends. In fact, the Vatican did not acknowledge his consecration as a priest for some time, which enraged Moses’ humanist friend, the monk Andreas Masius.⁴⁸ But apart from these dogmatic differences, Syriac was seen in the 16th century as the holy language Jesus spoke, and it was highly valued at least by the humanist scholars who were studying it.⁴⁹ Curiously enough, in the second half of the 19th century, the celebrated pioneers in the study of Syriac language and literature, such as William Wright, were themselves offering the candid opinion that the culture of the Syriac speaking communities was mediocre. In his influential *History of Syriac Literature* (first in 1887, again in 1894), Wright wrote: “As Renan said long ago, the characteristic of the Syrians is a certain mediocrity. They shone neither in war, nor in the arts, nor in science.”⁵⁰ The book he referred to was *De Philosophia Peripatetica apud Syrus* by Ernest Renan, which was published 1852 in Paris. Renan, like many others throughout Europe, was thoroughly convinced that “in general . . . the Semitic race appears to us as being an incomplete race by its very simplicity.”⁵¹ Progress, development, abstract thought was not to be expected from such people and, in Renan’s view, least of all from

⁴⁷ „...comme un moyen de conserver et d’étendre l’influence de la France en Orient. [...] Je ne crois pas cependant qu’il y ait beaucoup d’œuvres plus utiles que celle-ci à entreprendre...” Martin, Jean P., Les premiers princes croisés et les syriens jacobites de Jérusalem, *Journal Asiatique* 8. Ser. 12 = 133 (1888), 471-490, 8. Ser. 13 = 134 (1889), 33-79, here: 473.

⁴⁸Strothmann gives the fragment of a letter by Masius to Moses in *facsimile*: Strothmann, *Anfänge*, 41. It has been published fully by Müller-Greifffenberg, A., *Symbolae Syriacae*, Berlin 1673, a work which the present writer has had difficulty locating.

⁴⁹Strothmann, *Anfänge*, 1-2 etc.

⁵⁰Wright, *Syriac Literature* 1894, 1-2.

⁵¹Renan, Ernest, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, Paris 1863, 17.

the Syrians. As Frederic Rilliet recently pointed out, Syriac language and literature in the 19th century was widely held as the bastard par excellence, with no originality of its own, useful only as the transmitter of Greek knowledge to the Arabs.⁵² German students, working with Bergstraesser's *Introduction to the Semitic languages* from 1928 on were informed that: "*The Syriac language did not succeed in differentiating and defining its means of expression adequately, it is unable to overcome a certain vagueness and indistinctness of the expression of ideas.*"⁵³

Not surprisingly, therefore, Michael's chronicle was met with a reserve not easily overcome by a sober, occasionally even dry medieval book as his. Chabot stated in his introduction: "*Without any doubt, he completely lacks any critical sense and doesn't show any grand sagacity of spirit, but these defects he shares with all his contemporaries, whom he certainly surpasses by the dignity of his character.*"⁵⁴ Under the circumstances, a challenge to Chabot's position was not to be expected, and in fact it was never attempted. In the decades to follow, Michael even lost his appellation, "*the Great*". This was due to another remark by Wright who introduced him as "*the Elder*", "*so called to distinguish him from his nephew Michael the Younger . . .*"⁵⁵ *Mikha'il Rabbô*, as Michael is called by the Syrian Orthodox Church to this day, indeed means "Michael the Great". But the venerable Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, was not so sure, and he seriously discussed the possibility of translating *rabbô* to mean "the Elder."⁵⁶ Since that time, European scholarly literature refers to this Patriarch by the traditional cognomen "Michael the Syrian", or in other instances as "Michael I".

Michael's chronicle was used much the same way as he himself had used the old ruined Pagan temple in his neighborhood: The ancient stones assembled in his work simply were carried away to form the basis of new historical works. It is true that in the last couple of decades, criticism of Michael for his lack of historical sophistication has been muted, and he has even been praised as the great historian of the Syrians. But no criteria of any sort has been put forward to support this new attitude. Apparently, this simply grew out of a realization of the

⁵²Rilliet, Frédéric, Une victime du tournant des études syriaques à la fin du XIXe siècle. Rétrospective sur Jacques de Saroug dans la science occidentale: *A Festschrift for Dr. Sebastian P. Brock, Aram* 5,1-2 (1993), 465-480, here: 473.

⁵³Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Einführung in die semitischen Sprachen. Sprachproben und grammatische Skizzen*, München 1928, 62-63.

⁵⁴Chabot 1899, xvi. This statement, of course, owes much to the influential evaluation of chronography uttered by Krumbacher as quoted above.

⁵⁵Wright, *Syriac Literatur*, 1894, 250.

⁵⁶Tisserant, *Michel, 1714*. It seems ironic that Bar Hebraeus refers to Michael II. as *Micha'il Z'uro* to point out the difference between him and his worthy uncle.

vastness of his work, the fidelity with which he compiled his sources, and the immeasurable importance the work has gained. In contrast to the old judgment, which could at least draw on rational criteria as uttered by Krumbacher quoted above, there is now no answer available as to why Michael should be acknowledged as a historian, instead of being considered the Carrara quarry of Syriac history.

IV

Obviously the patriarch does not need us now to defend his reputation. But the anniversary of the publication of the chronicle leads to the question how the course of a century of research on Michael has been influenced by the cultural and political situation of the 19th and early 20th century. For a proper understanding, the criteria of the scholars in question must be seen in the context of their own outlook on life within a very self-assured Europe. “Importance“ in history was measured by political and military power (Wright) and, as we have seen, a language not easily accessible to speakers of European languages was dismissed as “imprecise” (Bergsträsser). Correspondingly, history had to be written as secular, rhetoric history. The cultural background and function of Michael’s chronicle was neither known to the scholars nor did any of them see a need for reconstructing it.

Consequently there is today no point in trying to prove that Michael was a historian by classical or modern standards. Rather than looking for objective criteria, we should ask why history was written at a given time, and what factors influenced the resultant historical writing. After all there might be different methods of demonstrating history apart from the rhetorical method. This investigation should lead to a better understanding of the function of Syriac historiography in general. What did Syriac speaking Christians need and use history for? How did they define it? What, in their view, were the main factors driving it? By exploring these questions, research on Michael could catch up with methodological changes now applied in the treatment of chronicles in other Medievalist disciplines: The study of Christian chronicles this century, as described by Krumbacher, points to an evolving analytical methodology, posing questions particular to the genre and asking to know the specific use to which the information is put. Ultimately the value and purpose of the chronicles in their own time and especially their view on history has become a new focus of attention.⁵⁷ Heretofore, Syriac studies only rarely came into the discussion, hence the paucity of research. Rudolf Abramowski published a study on

⁵⁷Spörl, Joachim, *Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdenken als Forschungsaufgabe*, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 53 (1933), 281ff. Beck, *Mönchschronik*.

Dionysius of Tel-Mahre.⁵⁸ It is true that he too was put off by all the data “we don’t reckon to be part of historiography proper”⁵⁹, i.e., the notorious miracles, catastrophes, food prices and the like. But it was a start, and a good one. Almost 50 years later, in 1987, the second historiographic analysis of a Syriac chronicle was presented by Witold Witakowski.⁶⁰ In 1993, a new translation of parts of the history by Dionysius of Tell-Mahre was published by Andrew Palmer, enhanced by an introduction pointing towards a new interpretation of Syriac historical writing.⁶¹ The narrow attitude about Syriac history we have sketched above may still be the rule rather than the exception. This would be a reasonable conclusion from a recent article on the world chronicle by Bar Hebraeus, which was described in familiar turn-of-the-century terms.⁶² But there is no gainsay that at least there are now available some inspiring thoughts on universal chronicles.

Perhaps the hypothesis lying underneath this kind of investigation is very post-modernist: There is no objective reason for writing history, except as it relates to a given purpose. Hence, there are no objective criteria for evaluating historiography, except for the universally acknowledged aim of every historian, which is to “record the truth.”

V

The modest aim of the present paper is to offer yet another short description of Michael’s chronicle. Much of this is generally known, but perhaps it can now be seen in a different light. The final entries Michael the Great made in his world chronicle describe events of the year 1195. Because Michael spoke about a severe famine continuing for 10 years “to this year which is the year 1506”⁶³, we may assume 1195 to be indeed the last year of his work on the

⁵⁸Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre*.

⁵⁹Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre*, 28.

⁶⁰Witakowski, Witold, *The Syriac Chronicle of PseudoDionysius of Tel-Mahrê. A Study in the History of Historiography*, Diss., Uppsala 1987 (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 9).

⁶¹Palmer, Andrew, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, , incl. two seventh-century Syriac apocalyptic texts, introd., transl. and annotated by Sebastian Brock, with added ann. and an hist. intr. by Robert Hoyland, Liverpool 1993 (Translated Texts for Historians, 15).

⁶²Hambye, Edouard R. S.J., Bar 'Ebroyo and the Byzantine Empire: *V Symposium Syriacum 1988*, ed. René Lavenant, Rome 1990, 403-408 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 236).

⁶³MS 738 (III 413).

chronicle.⁶⁴ By this time he had reached his 70th year and might not have had the strength to continue. Yet he lived four more years, and he was apparently well enough to undertake yet another demanding journey shortly before his death. Maybe he had reasons other than health for breaking off his report. It is not known when Michael started to write. This question is of great importance, because one characteristic of the chronicle is that it has been written by the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church himself, hence it is an official statement by the church. One would very much like to know whether the chronicle was designed as such. At this time, however, we seem to lack any internal or external clues to allow an answer to this question.⁶⁵ In general it was not entirely unusual for the highest Syrian Orthodox clerics to write historiography, viz., Michael Dionysius of Tel-Mahre who was also Patriarch, and Bar Hebraeus, the Maphrianat. There were also several metropolitans and bishops who wrote chronographies and church history.⁶⁶ But none of their works is as voluminous as Michael's chronicle. We can safely assume that Michael chose to write history out of self-motivation. For him paper might have been available with no great difficulty, and we are told that he wrote copiously.⁶⁷ Yet paper was a very expensive and precious commodity. One needed to have a good reason for expending it. Michael does not explain his reasons - his preface is lost. There is only the Armenian version of his preface, which apparently is a free adaptation, thus of little use for the question at hand.⁶⁸

The readers Michael had in mind can probably be characterized more specifically: He addresses them as brethren and scholars and asks them to pray for his memory.⁶⁹ He also gives suggestions to more extensive reading on a given

⁶⁴For dating purposes, Michael's starting point (based on the Seleucid era) is 311 A.D. Hence, we come to the date of 1195 after subtracting 311 from 1506.

⁶⁵Without quite realizing it, Lüders and Sharîd respectively *en passant* have proposed dates for Michael's work at the chronicle. According to Lüders, the last 4 books were written after 1187. Lüders, *Syrische Quellen*, 22. Shahîd, Irfan, *The Restoration of the Ghassanid Dynasty, A.D. 587: Dionysius of Tellmahre: A Festschrift for Dr. Sebastian P. Brock, Aram 5,1-2 (1993)*, 491-503, suggests (at p.501) that at least the portion from Book X onward was written after the 1170s. These assertions should be investigated in greater detail, since they probably were not meant as such and are not very well founded.

⁶⁶John of Asia was mentioned above. See also the summary of the sources by Brock, Sebastian P., *Syriac Historical Writing: A Survey of the Main Sources, Journal of the Iraqi Academy Syriac Corporation 5 (1979-80)*, 326-297.

⁶⁷AC 1234, 234-5/314.

⁶⁸See below, page 22-23.

⁶⁹See f.e. MS 731 (III 400).

problem.⁷⁰ The books he recommends usually have theological topics. The numerous Greek *termini technici* usually have been left untranslated whereas a Latin word like *comes* or the French *apostoile* (meaning the pope) is explained afterwards.⁷¹ From these suggestions we may safely assume Michael's readers to be, like himself, well-trained clerics. It is therefore a work meant for "insiders". As much as this is to be expected in Syriac historiography, this characteristic is not as banal as it may seem at first sight.

The claim on truth of any historical work is based on the agreement between author and reader that the events the author is reporting are supposed to actually have taken place and happened exactly at the time indicated. It is necessary for the historian therefore to connect his text in some convincing way to the past he is writing about. If the author cannot claim to have witnessed the events himself, this can only be achieved by way of using sources. Michael decided mainly to use written sources. The method Michael applied, was to quote and to excerpt texts and to compile the material afterwards. One characteristic feature of the compilation is that the author quoted his sources so extensively that for long passages he seems not to be doing any writing of his own. This method might have its downside when judging for originality (which was not a concern for Mediaeval chroniclers), but it goes a long way in lending credibility to the events reported. In this respect, Michael's chronicle remains highly valued, as noted earlier. One can name nearly 25 authors whom Michael has quoted directly.⁷² The material is further enlarged by various other documents and sources. Michael makes ample use of synodal records, polemical treatises about the nature of Christ and the like, partly relying on previous compilations and at times directly using archival.⁷³ At the same time Michael used no secular historiography at all, as that term is defined by Krumbacher. The ancient non-Christian authors whose quotations can be found wrote chronography instead. They came down to Michael indirectly by way of quoting Eusebius of Caesarea. Keseling proved that even the chronicle by Eusebius cannot have been used directly.⁷⁴ The same probably is the case with other Greek writing authors. Their texts already had been translated and compiled by Syriac writing authors and Michael used these compilations. One of them was Jakob of Edessa, the Syriac Jerome. He transmitted Eusebius' work to the Syrian schools. The small mosaic stones of Muslim historiography seem to have found their way into the chronicle

⁷⁰MS 634 (III, 269; 699 (III, 345).

⁷¹MS 719 (III 378).

⁷²Compare Chabot, *Introduction* = *MS I* 1889, xxiv-xxxvii.

⁷³Chabot, *Introduction* = *MS I*, xxix-x

⁷⁴Keseling, *Eusebius*, 39-46.

indirectly as well,⁷⁵ with perhaps a single exception.⁷⁶ Michael used a *specific* selection, namely chronographies and ecclesiastical histories by approved Syrian Orthodox authorities directly and excerpts of some of the Greek authorities, provided they had been previously vetted for their theological correctness.

It is impossible to reconstruct the content of Michael's library, and hence the exact number of texts available to him. The suggestion that he did not choose but randomly collected whatever he could get is just as difficult to prove as the opposite assumption. However, it is a fact that the corpus of his sources indeed has a specific character. Ultimately some evidence could be produced by a careful comparison with other historical works. Various sources definitely used directly by him also furnished historical works of other authors, such as the aforementioned chronicle of Jakob of Edessa or of the patriarch Dionysius of Tell-Mahre and, not surprisingly, Michael's selection is different to that of the Anonymus to 1234 or to Elish of Nisibis. While there are good arguments to be made in either direction, this question remains unanswered for the time being.

Michael usually informs his readers meticulously about the sources he is using for any given time, although he does not necessarily state whether he is referring to them as a direct source, or as a secondary reference derived from a primary source. Also, he faithfully signals the beginning and end of longer excerpts.⁷⁷ The list of these references, of the documents and of the theological authorities mentioned, is much longer than his actual source basis. It reads like the catalogue of a well-stacked Syrian Orthodox library, such as the one at the monastery in the Nitrian desert.⁷⁸ This is explained not so much as scholarly vanity as it is a characteristic of his method. Michael expected his readers at least to know the cited names and some of the material given. He in turn referred to these sources because they had been proven to be trustworthy, and he named them to underline the fact that he and his readers shared about the same kind of knowledge, contained in the corpus of books canonical to them. Mere hints and abbreviations are therefore very probable and make the text difficult to understand for a modern reader.

Michael did not follow modern methods in the use of sources. For example, he did not purposely use the source closest in time to the event.⁷⁹ What he did

⁷⁵Via Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: see f.e. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, xxv..

⁷⁶The anonymous Arabic book Michael refers to: MS 603 (III, 213).

⁷⁷See f.e. MS 88 (I 137); 121 (I 240).

⁷⁸Compare Wright's description: Wright, William, Preface: *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, III, London 1872, i-xxxiv.

⁷⁹See f.e. MS I (I, 4); 121-122 (I 239).

was to compare different reports at his disposal. While he could not resolve contradictory representations of the same event, he nevertheless cited the different views. To expect anything different would be anachronistic since textual critique was simply not been applied to historical texts in the Middle Ages.⁸⁰ The case is a bit different with theological texts. Here, in at least one instance, we find Michael discussing the content of treatises, comparing different views on the problem at issue, and suggesting a third opinion of his own.⁸¹

Creation of a new text by the collection and compilation of sources (which requires scholarly training), and referring to these in order to support one's own representation, are precisely the most important aspects of the medieval historical method.⁸² The range of the medieval chronicle therefore depended above all on the ability of the author to compile a good selection of sources (which, in turn, depended on his ability to travel, his access to libraries and archives, and the funds needed to acquire books); and it depended on his scholarly experience: Michael's working conditions were quite good.

There is another aspect to note. The contemporary books in the chronicle refer to sources which were then not known. One can imagine that Michael does not mention the source of these references, because they were not approved of in the same canonical way as the older texts. For this part of the chronicle he - as any writer of contemporary history - must have developed a method of his own to decide whom he wanted to believe. A case in point is his description of the history of the Order of the Knights Templars.⁸³ As unintentionally demonstrated by Anneliese Lüders in her dissertation about the perspective of Syriac and Armenian sources on the Crusades, Michael must have been quite successful in this respect as well.⁸⁴ It is true, Michael is only observing Franks and Muslims as an outsider and their actions are not at the core of his interest. Lüders criticizes Michael for not showing more interest in aspects of life which she, as a modern historian, customarily considers decisive factors. She disapproves of him when he explains historical events "wrongly", that is to say, in theological terms. Seen

⁸⁰Guenée, Bernard, *Histoire, annales, chroniques. Essai sur les genres historiques au Moyen Age*, *Annales E.S.C.* 28 (1973), 997-1016.

⁸¹MS 629-640 (III, 260-281): Discussion of the different theological explanations concerning the conquest of Edessa. The present author intends to pursue this issue in greater detail in her upcoming doctoral dissertation.

⁸²Schmale, Franz Josef, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt: 1985, 85-105.

⁸³MS 595-596 (III, 201-203). Michael seems to be quoting a written report here, because he marks its beginning with a headline which usually accompanies the beginning of an excerpt.

⁸⁴Lüders, *Syrische Quellen*.

less anachronistically, Lüders' results on the contrary allow a different evaluation: Michael appears to be very competent as to the cultural and religious background of Franks and Turks and their various relationships to each other even though he was unable to understand Latin or Turkish and only occasionally visited the places where the Franks dwelled. It is indeed fascinating to see, for example, how precisely Michael is informed about the deep conflicts of interest and mistrust between the assimilated Frankish colonists and the seasonal crusading troops arriving from Europe for the great campaigns, and of the different origin and character of leadership of these troops.⁸⁵ If we compare Michael's reports on the Franks with the poor and obscure knowledge of the Crusader's sources about the Syrian Orthodox, his light shines even brighter.⁸⁶

VI

The general topic of the chronicle is a „description of the times/*Makhtbanûthô dzabnê* as Bar Hebraeus informs us.⁸⁷ Michael organized his material in 21 books and divided each into varying numbers of chapters. This division seems not to have been required by the content of the reports or for any formal reason. Indeed Chabot stated that “usually the beginning of the books coincides with changes in government.”⁸⁸ This is certainly true but there are also constant changes of government within the books, and the cuts by Michael therefore seem to be arbitrary. The division perhaps reflects the economy of the working process. Michael might have arranged the material in sections and ultimately wrote one book after the other, whenever he found the time: At one point he thought it necessary to clearly inform the reader that the report at hand was out of chronological order and that it belonged to an earlier section. He excuses this lapse by explaining that he had become aware of a new source only

⁸⁵MS 639 (III, 276). Again Michael is apparently quoting a written source here, because he marks the beginning of the report distinctly (MS 638 III, 275). Bar Hebraeus compared the story with the Arabic sources at his disposal but found no confirmation: BH HE 341/342. The strong anti-Greek tendency points in any case rather to a Frankish or Syrian Orthodox origin. MS 735-737 (III, 407-8).

⁸⁶Brincken, Anna-Dorothee van den, *Die „Nationes Christianorum Orientalium“ im Verständnis der lateinischen Historiographie von der Mitte des 12. bis in die zweite Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Köln, Wien: Böhlau 1973 (*Kölner Historische Abhandlungen*, 22), 211-230. While clearly Michael is culturally curious and a skilled chronicler of his times, he appears underappreciated for his failure to offer new information about the Crusaders.

⁸⁷BH, CE I 693.

⁸⁸Chabot, note 1: MS III, 328.

after he had finished the preceding chapter.⁸⁹ Obviously it was too costly to write it again. This is due to the method with which Michael organized his material within the chapters:

The terrenal history is represented as a series of counted years. This series is depicted *optically* by way of tables synchronizing the terrenal empires such as those of the Hebrews, the Persians, the Greek, the Latin, the Arabs and the Turks. This table is continued throughout the chronicle at the bottom of the pages. It is not and can not be completely constant. Empires start and end, new conquerors establish themselves and start a new dynasty. The scholars investigating the chronicle immediately recognized the principal model for this method. It is ultimately the Christian chronography of Late Antiquity or, to be precise, the chronicle by Eusebius of Caesarea. The calligraphic effort of this method can hardly be overestimated. Mosshammer pointed out concerning the chronicle by Eusebius, that “*the composition of a work containing synchronic tables of dates as reckoned in several systems interconnected with historical text is extremely difficult.*”⁹⁰

The Eusebius model points to the historical genre used by Michael. The general outlines of the genesis of the Christian chronography are hardly controversial today. The chronography as it was developed most prominently by Eusebius is seen as a response to the need for historiography which could support the new Christian identity and which was supposed to form a contrast to the history of the Pagan environment. It was based in turn on the still older chronographic tradition of the Hellenistic Orient. The clash of Jewish and Pagan cultures engendered a polemic literature which was supposed to prove the older age of religious or historical events and hence to prove the superiority of the respective positions. This was pursued by synchronizing the events of each of the cultures in one universal time scale, which was a cultural achievement in its own right. Not surprisingly, the Jews emerged first in this chronology, and the Christians, who saw themselves as their heirs, used the system for their own purpose. With the synchronizing tables they accepted elements of the Jewish view on history, which saw history as linear and irreversible. This understanding of history was eminently theological, since it described God as manifesting himself continuously in the historical process. By its very nature, therefore, it had an apologetic and a polemical dimension.

At the same time Eusebius developed a new historical style. He substituted the rhetorical and artistic style of Pagan historiography with the simple language of the New Testament. Instead of quoting speeches the written source became the basis of the representation. This was intended to demonstrate the superiority

⁸⁹MS 603 (III, 213)

⁹⁰Mosshammer, Alden A., *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, Lewisburg/London: Associated Univ. Press 1979, 66.

of the written tradition.⁹¹ Both historiographic genres, the Christian chronography and the ecclesiastical history, have profoundly influenced Syrian historiography. This is not surprising at all since the Syrians were of course part of the Hellenistic or Roman culture respectively, a culture which produced the development sketched above. Hence Syriac chronography probably is more closely related to European development than to the Near Eastern environment. Better yet, there seem to be international historiographical genres developed and used mainly by Christians whether they lived in England, Syria or in the Balkans.⁹² This circumstance provides us with the methodological opportunity of using the results of Latinists and Grecists for the investigation of the Syriac chronicles.

The question why the Syrians continued using these genres once they were established is as yet by no means clear. Witakowski proposes quite convincingly that there was simply no reason for the Syrian clerics to use any other genre. Unlike in Byzantium, there were no courts with an audience demanding a renaissance of secular rhetorical historiography.⁹³ But that still leaves the problem of the meta-historical aspect of Christian chronography unsolved. Witakowski follows Brian Croke,⁹⁴ seeing historiography in the Eusebian tradition as rather epigonous, as a genre without purpose but being “*a simple tool for demonstrating God’s plan of Salvation.*”⁹⁵ This thesis leaves room for doubt, for when the Syrians started to write their own history on a larger scale in the 6th and 7th centuries, there indeed was the need for apology and for interpretation of the unfolding historical process. It was the very time of the theological disputes and the emergence of the Syrian Orthodox church in conflict with the Byzantine Empire, and suddenly subject to an altogether different and unforeseen Empire in the Middle East.

⁹¹See f.e. Brincken, Anna-Dorothee van den, *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik bis in das Zeitalter Ottos von Freising*, Düsseldorf 1957; Momigliano, Arnaldo, *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1963, 79-99; Chesnut, Glenn F., *The First Christian Histories. Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, Paris 1977 (Théologie Historique, 46).

⁹²*Mensch und Weltgeschichte. Zur Geschichte der Universalgeschichtsschreibung*, ed. Alexander Randa, Munich 1969.

⁹³Compare Witakowski, *Pseudodionysius*, 89.

⁹⁴Croke, Brian, The Origins of the Christian World Chronicle: *History and Historians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Brian Croke/Anna M. Emmet, Sydney 1985, 116-131.

⁹⁵Witakowski, *Pseudodionysius*, 88. See also 136-138; 172.

Turning back to Michael's chronicle the blurred picture has become somewhat clearer. Michael's method not only is in compliance with general medieval methods but it is based on a strong historiographic tradition. Evidently he does not write a Eusebian chronography in the strict sense: Three vertical columns usually appear on top of his horizontal table. The scribe Bishop Moses of Mardin states that "Pursuant to his view of the project, he [Michael] sorted out ecclesiastical (events) and, where possible, he gathered them in the superior column, just as we have written, and the succession of the kingdoms in the middle column, and the accidental things and miracles in the inferior column. He had great trouble with the separation, for the accounts were written helter skelter..."⁹⁶ This statement is very important. It could very well reflect introductory notes by Michael not quoted by the Armenian translator. As far as it can now be seen, this system of historical representation is Michael's own invention. How complicated his task really was one could only measure after a close investigation of the text. There can, however, be no doubt about the layout as being intentional; it definitely cannot be explained as mere chance, because it is consistently the pattern when it comes to single items of information. The layout deserves the utmost attention; it is, as it were, the most *original* part of the chronicle. It seems, therefore, that a thorough investigation of the layout could pave the way to a better understanding of the specific point Michael wanted to make - if he was making a point.

Before concluding this presentation, we offer some preliminary reflections on the layout. For one thing, with the tables at the bottom of the page, the three column system is an *optical* method. The chronicle requires the *reading* not the *listening* scholar, an aspect of the reception of historical texts which cannot be taken for granted in the Middle Ages and which is a major characteristic of the text. Michael has complicated Eusebius's already intricate system even further by introducing systematic differentiations within history, instead of only showing the synchronic chronology. By this means, Michael calls attention to the existence of different spheres or levels of historical events. Every historical sphere can be read at the same time and, what is more, it can be compared by the studying reader. It is quite obvious why Michael should see an opposition between the history of the church and the history of the kings. But then Michael is using three columns. This is where one finds well-known miracles and food prices. As for catastrophes such as earthquakes, droughts and famines, it is not difficult to take issue with Krumbacher's thesis that this is not part of history. Of course it is easy to say so at the end of the 20th century after the development of social history which is particularly interested in exactly this kind of information. It is acknowledged now that these elements have formed the lives of people as much as the deeds of kings, and nothing seems more natural than that world

⁹⁶MS 377 (II, 357).

chronicles should be interested in them. Apart from that, there was little doubt in the Middle Ages how earthquakes, solar eclipses, and other signs were to be interpreted. It was God himself trying to reason man with his powerful hand.⁹⁷

The three column system not surprisingly has been disapproved of as being ponderous. In this respect it is interesting to see that the different translations made of the chronicle, with the exception of the French translation by Chabot, gave up the three column system. But before passing harsh judgment on Michael, it is well to remember that fluidity of style can only be achieved by the telling of stories with a beginning, climax and end. As we have seen, such an approach misses the point. Michael is not telling a story, he is stitching ready-made historical patches - "memories" as Moses put it - into the chronology provided by the synchronic table at the bottom.

Michael was not the only one to perceive the conflict between chronology and systematic representation. Gert Melville points out that it also was discussed on the other side of the Mediterranean by the late medieval Latin historians, since a clear and precise representation of the *order* of the events (as opposed to their *causality*, which is the more modern purpose) was their highest aim. Some of them even started to use optical elements like circles and arrows to clarify the various synchronisms or successions.⁹⁸

One late mediaeval English chronicle, for example, is furnished with colored medallions in the middle of the scroll, which show miniature "portraits" of the English kings. At each side of the medallions some few deeds and events are represented. The medallions are connected by a broad, colored line, which usually runs at the center of the scroll. In addition to these, further lines or arrows have been used to demonstrate the kinship relationship between the monarchs. Sometimes a rather long arrow nearly two feet in length is needed to demonstrate descent of a certain king from the Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Obviously, such a chronicle also draws, even if not directly, on Eusebius's model with its chain of succeeding years. However, important changes have taken place. Instead of the history of the world, we now have the history of just one country. The bundle of synchronic empires has been reduced to one, and it is distinguished by way of colorful medallions. As was pointed out, this depiction is in itself a statement about history. Where the modern historian would find discontinuity, even anarchy, this chronicler strives very hard to achieve a picture

⁹⁷There is evidence that Michael supported this interpretation, as in his *expressis verbis* to the effect that the earthquake in 1170 occurred to purge the blasphemous people of Aleppo of their disbelief: MS 695 (III, 338).

⁹⁸Melville, Gert, *Geschichte in graphischer Gestalt. Beobachtungen zu einer spätmittelalterlichen Darstellungsweise: Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Patze, Sigmaringen 1987, 57-154.

of undisturbed continuity. Seemingly no changes of dynasty or of heads of families ever took place, England was governed by one sole dynasty deeply rooted at the very beginning of English history.⁹⁹ The layout of this chronicle, therefore, demonstrates a specific view not on the different events or the characters of the English kings but on the *structure* of English history as a whole.

The English chronicle obviously is rather an arbitrary example. Its evident use of optical devices nevertheless points to the representation of succession, continuity, and discontinuity in Michael's chronicle. In this respect it seems quite interesting to note that the patriarch begins his church history with an excerpt of Dionysios Areopagita about the ecclesiastical hierarchy and a discussion about the legitimization of priesthood,¹⁰⁰ which descends from heaven to start the series of the biblical patriarchs and continues with the Jewish High priests. Their priesthood is inherited by the Apostles,¹⁰¹ who in turn bequeath it to the Apostolic sees of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, until the sacred history reaches the time of the schisms of the 5th and 6th centuries and, consequently, the succession of the Syrian Orthodox patriarchs of Antioch.¹⁰² The secular empires are in no respect as clearly legitimized as is the sacerdotal succession. Consequently the opposition of church and empires is qualified.

At the same time Michael obviously does not try to reduce history into some harmonious picture as the English chronicler does. On the contrary, he demonstrates utmost *discontinuity*. Michael, who could very well have restricted himself to the history of the Syriac Orthodox patriarchs alone, describes numerous empires and several churches constantly struggling, sinking back into history and leaving room for new ones to emerge, constantly opposed by heretics or contestants to the thrones respectively. History here is complicated, full of sudden changes and difficult to understand, as it probably appeared to the Syrian Orthodox. But with the third column Michael succeeds in showing the almighty presence of God. As unending human strife remains a fixture, God sends forth natural calamities to remind people what they should be striving for.

⁹⁹Michael, Bernd, Rolle und Codex - Zwei Neuerwerbungen mittelalterlicher Handschriften, *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* 28 (1991), 391-405.

¹⁰⁰ MS 3ff (I, 6ff.)

¹⁰¹ MS 91 (II, 145).

¹⁰² Wann genau Michael eigentlich den Beginn der syrisch-orthodoxen Kirche ansetzt, bedarf weitergehender Untersuchung. Sie beginnt allerdings weder mit dem Konzil von Chalkedon 451 noch mit der Reorganisation der Monophysiten durch Jakob Baradäus (542-578), der übrigens anders als in den modernen Darstellungen durchaus keine überragende und schon gar keine überragend gute Wertung erhält: MS X,2,332f (Üs. II, 288). Die Darstellung der Sukzession des lateinischen und der griechisch-orthodoxen Patriarchenstühle tritt nur sehr allmählich in den Hintergrund.

It is well known that in the second half of the 12th century members of the Syrian Orthodox community started to doubt whether or not God still was in control of history. Apparently the difficult situation of the communities in Edessa and Aleppo led to this crisis. Even high clerics published treatises on the question.. Obviously this debate was vitally important for the Syrian Orthodox community: To see history without God would have meant losing the very basis of the Christian view of the world and hence the identity of a social minority based on Christianity. Perhaps not surprisingly, Michael is the sole chronicler to inform us about the dispute. In his chronicle he presents his own position: He concluded that God let man do as he wished but acted as He wished, changing things or leaving them as they were, omnipresent but never to be understood, and not easily reduced to a good or a punishing God.¹⁰³ As far as we know Michael did not write a theological pamphlet to support his opinion but, as this writer believes, he wrote his chronicle to demonstrate that God was making history.

¹⁰³MS 633 (III, 269).