

Tara L. Andrew, “Historiography of the Christian East”,
Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle,
R.G. Dunphy ed.
(Brill, Leiden and Boston 2010), 807–811

Historiography of the Christian East

1. The Christian East; 2. Historiography of the Caucasus; 3. West Syrian historiography; 4. East Syrian historiography; 5. Christian Arabic historiography; 6. Conclusion

1. The Christian East

The “Christian East” refers to the Christian peoples of the eastern Mediterranean beyond Byzantium, that is, throughout Arabia, Syria, Iran, Egypt, and the Caucasus. These were the Christian peoples who were never subject to the East Roman (Byzantine) Empire, or who fell away from Byzantine rule and came under Arab domination over the course of the seventh century. Many of the distinct eastern Christian identities emerged as a consequence of the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries, culminating in the Third and Fourth Ecumenical Councils (of Ephesus and Chalcedon respectively). These include the ‘Nestorians’ in Iran, and the rival Chalcedonian and Miaphysite churches of Syria and Egypt; eventually, the autocephalous church of Armenia would also set itself explicitly against the council of Chalcedon—that is, against the Chalcedonian church of Georgia, and against a Chalcedonian minority within Armenia.

The historiography of the Christian East includes histories and chronicles written by all of these groups. Parallel traditions developed relatively contemporaneously in Armenia, Syria, and Georgia; in Armenia and Syria in particular, the *Chronicle* of → Eusebius of Caesarea was the single most influential work in the development of local historical traditions. This text was translated independently in East and West Syrian circles in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and is the major influence on the form and content of chronographies in both regions. A significant testament to its influence is the fact that the only surviving complete text of the *Chronicle* is a translation into Armenian.

Armenian and East Syrian circles, the two Christian traditions of the Iranian world, exhibit a similar range of engagement with the outside world. In both traditions, history remained closely allied to stories of saintly mission and martyrdom and was regional in focus in the fifth and sixth

centuries. Both traditions also see an explosion of their awareness of outside events at the end of the seventh century, when the wars of Khusraw II prompted more universal history writing and a back-projection of these broader interests into the past. West Syrian writing has these broader interests earlier, with → John of Ephesus and → Zacharias scholasticus leading the Syriac continuation of the Roman ecclesiastical historical tradition. The historiography of the Arabic-speaking Christian communities emerged largely from these older Syriac and Greek traditions; by and large, they retained the universal focus that had developed throughout the Christian East, and occasionally incorporated aspects of the Muslim Arabic historiographical tradition as well.

2. Historiography of the Caucasus

Literature, including works of history, began to develop in the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, and Albania) in the early fifth century AD, following the invention of alphabetic scripts for the Caucasian languages. The first works of Armenian and Georgian history took the form of biographical or hagiographical Lives of major figures, including the *Life of Grigor the Illuminator* attributed to → Agat’angelos, the *Life of Nino* that appears in the → *K’art’lis C’xovreba* (Georgian Chronicle), and the *Life of Maštoc’*, the inventor of the Caucasian scripts, by → Koriwn. Almost nothing is known of the Albanian tradition, and both the language and the alphabet have since disappeared; the only surviving history of the Ałuank’ (Caucasian Albanians), that attributed to → Movsēs Dasxuranc’i, was composed in Armenian. More is known of the Georgian tradition, albeit only through the single extant work of Georgian historiography, the *K’art’lis C’xovreba*.

While the Georgian tradition retained its emphasis on the narration of history through Lives, the Armenian tradition began to include an element of narrative history and epic tales, beginning with the *Buzandaran* of → P’awstos. The works of Agat’angelos, Koriwn, and P’awstos formed the beginning of what came to be a single Armenian historical canon, with very few overlapping works (the history of → Elišē is the only example prior to the tenth century of a full re-narration of a historical event), which can be

treated as a chain of historical tradition stretching through the works of → Sebēos in the seventh century and → Lewond in the eighth. Meanwhile, Armenian history began to reflect a distinctly Old Testament outlook, heavily influenced by the Books of Maccabees, with its tale of a people who gladly embraced martyrdom to protect their culture and faith from the encroachments of hostile powers.

After the eighth century, the universal history of → Movsēs Xorenac'i began to exert its influence. The *History of Xorenac'i*, which was itself deeply influenced by the *Chronicon* of Eusebius, served as model and mirror to the tenth-century historian → T'ovma Arcruni, and he came to be regarded as *Patmahayr*, or "Father of History". The work of T'ovma is the first example of "re-localized" Armenian history, and a parallel may be seen with the near-contemporaneous *History of the Albanians*. This localizing tendency did not fully take hold until after the twelfth century, however; the intervening histories of → Step'anos Asolik, → Aristakēs Lastivert'ci, and → Matt'ēos Urhayec'i retained both the universal outlook and the stated reliance on the earlier historiographical canon.

With the demise of the medieval Bagratuni kingdoms of Armenia and the rise of the kingdom of Georgia and the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia in its place, Armenian historiography began to include local histories once more (e.g. → Smbat Sparapet for Cilician Armenia; → Step'anos Orbelian for the province of Siwnik'/Sisakan) alongside the more universal histories (e.g. those of → Kirakos Ganjakec'i and → Vardan Arewel'ci.) It is to some of these later medieval historians, notably Vardan, that we owe the survival of early versions of Syriac and Georgian texts.

3. West Syrian historiography

Historical writing in Syriac, like the greater part of Syriac writing in general, was focussed on the city of Edessa in the fifth century. The story of the correspondence between Abgar of Edessa and Christ, recorded and popularised by Eusebius, would form the core of the city's foundation myth, the *Doctrina Addai*. But even this pseudo-history also refers to the city's archives, which had been used from the third century and which, combined with external king lists would

be used in the 540 → *Chronicon Edessenum*. Even in much later chronicles, Edessa's early importance is reflected in the disproportionate amount of material devoted to it in sections covering the fifth century and before.

The sixth century saw the importation and elaboration of more developed forms of secular and ecclesiastical history from the Greek-speaking world. → Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite's account of Edessa's resistance to the Persians in the start of the sixth century shows an awareness of classical forms of history and cyclical patterns of historical change. Syriac ecclesiastical history, in the tradition of Eusebius of Caesarea or → Socrates scholasticus, also flourished in this era, though the genre was pushed to its limit by → John of Ephesus. John incorporates large amounts of secular material and occasionally allows the Arab phylarch and Miaphysite patron Mundhir to usurp the traditionally central role of the emperor.

The centuries following the Arab conquest saw a reversion to chronographies in the West Syrian tradition, like the *Chronicon Edessenum*, rather than literary ecclesiastical histories. These terse accounts, composed in the seventh to ninth centuries, record the calamities and political events that affected the Christians of the caliphate, and combine a broad sense of the deeds of their Muslim rulers with an extremely localised account of Christian history, which is often focussed on a particular region or monastery. Even the → *Zuqnin Chronicle*, whose author employs large-scale ecclesiastical histories from the past, such as Eusebius and John of Ephesus, have become heavily restricted in scope for the seventh and eighth centuries. The same era also saw the use of history as a basis for apocalyptic writing, such as that of → Pseudo-Methodius in the 690s, which rapidly spread into Greek and other languages.

The ninth century saw an attempt to write a more sophisticated universal history by → Dionysius of Tel Mahre, who composed linked secular and ecclesiastical histories. These are not extant, but extended from the late sixth century and self-consciously continued the Syriac histories of late antiquity. His work was part of an encyclopaedic fashion in the middle 'Abbasid period, and represents a basis, in form and content, for the West Syrian historians who succeeded him in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the → *Chronicle of 1234* and → Michael the Great.

4. East Syrian historiography

Syriac “historical awareness” in the Church of the east is mainly restricted to martyria and missionary accounts that represent the “foundation myths” of the catholicoi of Ctesiphon. Histories may have been composed from expanded versions of lists of catholicoi, supplemented by this hagiographic material, from the late fifth century, though exact reconstructions are not possible and rely on later Arabic and Syriac sources like the → *Chronicle of Se’ert* and on the eastern material preserved in → Gregory Bar ‘Ebrōyō.

The sixth century saw more detailed institutional histories, focussing on the School of Nisibis and its successors (such as → Barḥadbshabba ‘Arbaya) and on the “reformed” monastic movement of Abraham of Kashkar. Much of this material is also not extant, but is clearly visible in later Arabic and Syriac histories such as Thomas of Marga or Ishodnah of Basra. However, it is only at the very end of this century that these strands of history became integrated with older narratives focussed on the catholicoi and with material drawn from Roman ecclesiastical history. Together, these histories asserted the symbiosis of catholicos, monasticism and the school system and the centrality of the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia to the eastern church.

Later decades also saw the composition of a bilingual chronography in the Eusebian style by → Elia bar Shinaya, though he should be distinguished from the western minor chroniclers by his much broader scope and his more extensive use of Arabic sources. These features might be taken as general indications of the relative importance of the western and eastern regions of Syriac culture in the ‘Abbasid period, especially since Elia represents only the tip of the iceberg of a now vanished literary culture, testified to in the thirteenth century book catalogue of ‘Abdisho of Nisibis. Many of these Islamic-era east Syrian histories may leave traces in Christian Arabic compilations of the tenth century and later.

5. Christian Arabic historiography

Christians whose communities had formerly used Greek, Syriac, or Coptic would continue to write universal histories within their Melkite, “Jacobite” and “Nestorian” traditions in the

language of their new rulers, beginning with the tenth century chronicle of the Egyptian Melkite → Eutychius. Eutychius’ chronicle incorporates material composed by Muslims, and through them Sasanian Persian traditions as well, and his composition reflects the increasing permeability of historical traditions in the Islamic period. At the same time, the continuations of his chronicle in the Levant also show the importance of history for demarcating the boundaries of confessional identities in the absence of a Christian state.

Other communities show similar patterns to the Melkite Eutychius. Iraqi compositions, such as the tenth century → *Chronicle of Se’ert* and the recently discovered → *Mukhtasar al-Akhbar al-Bi’iya* are examples of a “Nestorian” universal chronicle tradition stretching from Jesus to the compilers’ own days. These employ older Syriac histories translated into Syriacised Arabic, and are notable for their readiness to use Islamic formulae in a Christian context and for their flagrant anachronisms. These too represent attempts to present universal histories, with material shared by all Christians as well as Roman, Sasanian and Islamic “secular” history, which set out the prestige and orthodoxy of the “Nestorians”. Briefer compilations, such as those of → Mari ibn Sulayman and Sliba, continue this agenda but restrict their narrative to the catholicoi and their succession.

Jacobites seem to have been marginally less active in the composition of Arabic historiography. An important exception is → Gregory Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s *Mukhtasar al-duwāl*. In spite of its name, this is no mere summary of his Syriac history and also incorporates Muslim Arabic sources, leading him to present Muhammad as an instrument of God, rather than stressing forced conversion to Islam, and to include the biographies of Islamic scholars. Bar ‘Ebrōyō, Eutychius, and the *Chronicle of Se’ert* all provide good examples of Christians incorporating Muslim Arabic material into historical traditions that originated in Greek or Syriac, both for encyclopaedic reasons (befitting their status as universal chronicles) and to set out a paradigm of ideal relations between Muslims and Christians. However, not all texts in Arabic had such broad aims, and some, such as the fourteenth-century *Kitab al-Tawārikh* of Yuhannan al-Mawsuli are compendia of dates that deal only with intra-Christian developments.

The Arabic historiographical tradition within the Coptic community begins in the eleventh

century with the → *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, an Arabic translation and re-working of earlier Coptic-language histories. The original compiler of the *History of the Patriarchs*, Mawhūb ibn Maṇūr ibn al-Mufarrij, made very little use of sources from outside the Coptic tradition, although the earliest of these sources did partially base itself upon the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius. Similarly, → Yūsāb al-Muḥabrak of Fūwah seems to have used Coptic sources exclusively. The universalist tendency asserted itself relatively quickly, however, with the history of → Ibn al-Rāhib and his successor al- → Makīn, who drew upon Jewish and Arabic sources as well as those of other Christian confessions.

6. Conclusion

A great deal of scholarship remains to be done in providing modern editions and translations of the vast majority of the Eastern Christian histories, and many questions about the content, structure, nature, and purpose of each work remains unanswered (PALMER, GREENWOOD, DEN HEIJER). Some general trends are nonetheless clearly visible. The beginnings of historiography in these regions from Syria to the Caucasus developed according to Greek and Biblical models shortly after the spread of Christianity, and were heavily influenced by the works of Eusebius of Caesarea. These traditions, at first almost exclusively local and focussed on a single ethnic group, underwent a sudden and dramatic shift around the time of the Arab conquest, particularly in Armenia and Syria, toward more universal histories that incorporated a variety of sources, borrowed from each other, and had a much broader scope. The first Arabic Christian histories appeared in a second universalising moment as part of a wider era of Abbasid humanism in the tenth century, reflecting and extending the historiographical traditions

of the ethno-confessional groups from which they arose.

Bibliography

Literature: L. CHEIKO, “Al-tawārikh al-nasrani fi al-‘arabiya”, *Al-Mashriq*, (1909), 472–502. L. CONRAD, “On the Arabic chronicle of Bar Hebraeus. Its aims and audience”, *Parole de l’Orient*, 19(1994), 319–78. M. DEBIÉ, “Record-keeping and chronicle-writing in Antioch and Edessa”, *Aram*, 11–12 (1999–2000), 406–18. J. VAN GINKEL, *John of Ephesus. A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-century Byzantium*, 1995. G. GRAF, *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabische Literatur*, 1944. J. DEN HEIJER, “Coptic Historiography in the Fātimid, Ayyūbid and Early Mamlūk Periods”, *Medieval Encounters*, 2.1 (1996), 67–98. R. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 1997. J.P. MAHÉ, “Entre Moïse et Mahomet: Réflexions sur l’historiographie arménienne”, *Revue des études arméniennes*, 23 (1992), 121–53. A. PALMER, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles*, 1993. H. TEULE, “Tārikh”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition). R.W. THOMSON, *A bibliography of classical Armenian literature to 1500 A.D.*, 1995. R.W. THOMSON, “Supplement to ‘A bibliography of classical Armenian literature to 1500 A.D.’: publications 1993–2005”, *Le Muséon*, 120.1–2 (2007), 163–223. M. WHITBY, *Byzantines and Crusaders in Non-Greek Sources, 1025–1204*, 2007, 253–82 [articles by T. GREENWOOD, C. HILLENBRAND, S. RAPP, and W. WITAKOWSKI on Armenian, Arabic, Georgian, and Syriac sources respectively]. W. WITAKOWSKI, “The Chronicle of Eusebius: Its Type and Continuation in Syriac Historiography”, *Aram*, 11–12 (1999–2000), 419–37. W. WITAKOWSKI, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. A Study in the History of Historiography*, 1984.

TARA L. ANDREWS
PHILIP WOOD