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Identity and Christian-Muslim interaction : medieval art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul area

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Citation

Snelders, B. (2010, September 1). *Identity and Christian-Muslim interaction : medieval art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul area*. Peeters, Leuven. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15917>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Preface

Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East during the medieval period are often seen in terms of conflict and violent opposition. This point of view, rather than being based on the actual historical events, is shaped primarily by Orientalist approaches in previous scholarship, but also today's global political and military developments. The war in Iraq, in particular, has contributed much to the idea of a 'clash of civilizations' between the Christian world and Islam. While Christians are currently estimated to comprise a mere three percent of Iraq's 25 million population, the Christian community of Iraq is one of the oldest of the Middle East and has long played an important role in the country's society, culture, politics, and economy. Today, many Christians have been forced to flee Iraq and seek refuge elsewhere. At the time of writing, the Christian population of Mosul has already decreased considerably. In the twelfth and thirteenth century, however, the Mosul area still had a majority Christian population. As elsewhere in the Middle East, the Christians of Mosul witnessed a remarkable period of flourishing, which was characterized by intensive interaction and collaboration between Christians and Muslims on a day-to-day basis. In the midst of this extensive process of interchange, the Christians were able to define a position of their own and to retain their exclusive religious identity.

The present study seeks to investigate the evidence for the construction of a communal identity among the Syrian Orthodox Christians as reflected in art. A group of thirteenth-century works from the Mosul area that can definitely be connected with this particular Christian community are considered particularly fruitful for this investigation. Although until now only one medieval Christian wall painting has come to light in the region, the monumental sculptural decoration, manuscript illustration, and metalwork, especially when taken together, form a considerable corpus of material for research. With the exception, perhaps, of the wall painting, these works of art appear to have one basic feature in common: they were executed in what has traditionally been called an 'Islamic style'. Moreover, in most cases even the iconographic repertoire shows a remarkable conformity with contemporary Islamic art. This raises some important questions about the relationship between the local Islamic artistic tradition and that of the indigenous Christians.

The research at hand is part of a larger project, entitled 'The Formation of a Communal Identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians (451-1300)', which was conducted by a research group at Leiden University under the direction of Prof. Bas ter Haar Romeny. Financed by a grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Leiden PIONIER project's primary purpose was to study the phenomenon of identity formation and maintenance among the Syrian Orthodox community in the period between A.D. 451 (the Council of Chalcedon) and 1300. In order to create a comprehensive picture of this process, it was deemed necessary not to limit the analysis to written sources, such as biblical exegesis and historiography, but also to include art. As visual symbols on public display, works of art have the capacity to express the identity of a group; and this is perhaps especially true where religious art is concerned.

Within the art-historical component of the research project, the contextual differences that became apparent directly at the outset of the investigations made it clear that a regional approach would be required. In a separate monograph, published in 2009, Mat Immerzeel focuses on the numerous medieval wall paintings that have survived in more than forty chapels and churches in Western Syria and Lebanon.¹ The present book, on the other hand, is

¹ It had previously been assumed that a considerable number of these sanctuaries were of the Syrian Orthodox denomination at the time when the monumental decoration programmes were carried out, though this turned out to be incorrect.

largely limited to present-day Iraq, more specifically the city of Mosul and its direct vicinity. Additional attention is paid to the few sites in Syria and Lebanon which Immerzeel was able to identify as Syrian Orthodox at the time of their refurbishment, as well as to Deir al-Surian (Monastery of the Syrians), a former Syrian Orthodox monastic stronghold in Egypt, which had strong connections with the Mosul area during the period of interest.

This dissertation would never have materialized without the help of a number of people and institutions. Financial support was provided by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the former Research School for Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS) at Leiden University. Further support came from the Leiden University Fund (LUF), which allowed me to visit the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies (CSSS) at the University of Toronto, in order to study the photographic archive of Prof. Amir Harrak. I am especially grateful to Prof. Harrak for sharing with me his knowledge of Deir Mar Behnam and other Christian sites in the Iraqi region, for generously allowing me to use his excellent photographs, and for providing me with an advance copy of his forthcoming corpus of *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*. His hospitality and assistance were extremely helpful and much appreciated. I further wish to express my gratitude to Madame Marie-Cécile Bruwier, curator of the Musée Royal de Mariemont in Morlanwelz, and other staff members of the museum for their invaluable assistance when studying the liturgical fan from Deir al-Surian, and to David Jacobs, senior conservation officer at the British Library in London, who allowed me to handle one of the most richly decorated of Syrian Orthodox manuscripts to have come down to us.

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I have benefited from numerous scholars who either provided me with essential information, photographs, and articles, or commented upon certain chapters. In this respect, I am much indebted to Dr Krijnie Ciggaar, Prof. Erica Cruikshank Dodd, Dr Nada Hélou, Dr Colum Hourihane, Dr Ray Jabre Mouawad, Dr Adeline Jeudy, the late Dr Otto Meinardus, Prof. Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Dr Luit Mols, Dr Glenn Peers, Prof. Lucas Van Rompay, Prof. Leonard Rutgers, Ms Rima Smine, Prof. Herman Teule, Dr Hans Theunissen, and Dr Tasha Vorderstrasse. Valuable assistance was also provided by colleagues from Leiden University, including Ms Clara ten Hacken, Dr Gertrud van Loon, Ms Diklah Zohar, and, in particular, by the other members of the Leiden project team, Ms Naures Atto and Dr Jan van Ginkel, whose insightful comments have added greatly to this dissertation. I am most grateful to my advisors Prof. Bas ter Haar Romeny and Dr Mat Immerzeel for introducing me to the field of Eastern Christian studies in general, and Eastern Christian art in particular. I have good memories of our trips to Syria and Lebanon. My cordial thanks, finally, to Dr Maria Sherwood-Smith for her careful correction of the English text.

It has been a great pleasure to share my research experiences with Els van Dongen and Chris Nierstrasz, who both provided good cheer, but are thanked most warmly for sharing the fruits of the *Sipeu* tree. Els deserves additional thanks, not only for her humour and support, but also for continuously trying to prevent me from destroying whole rainforests with my printing. The friendship of Maite Garcia Lechner and Marije van der Vegt has greatly facilitated life and work during my studies and the writing of this dissertation. I am most grateful for their steadfast companionship and support. Dear Maite and Marije, thank you! I am looking forward to us still sharing beers at 'de Pels' and discussing the pecia system when we are old and grey. Here, I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Joost Veerkamp, who has always reminded me that everything is possible, at least if you are willing to put in some effort. If nothing else, the present study may be seen as a neat illustration of his adage.

I owe the layout of the cover of my unpublished dissertation and of the illustrations to the creative contributions of my father and brother, Kees Snelders and Daniël Snelders, and I am very pleased with the result. My mother, Mirjam Lafleur, deserves the greatest share of credit

for my education. I can never truly express the depth of my appreciation and thanks for her unwavering support, both financially and emotionally, throughout my educational career. The love of my little sister, Veerle Lafleur, is a joy forever. Last, but never least, I owe my deepest gratitude to my dearest friend, Constance van der Linde, who showers me with her light. Dear Constance, you have always been an inestimable source of love, confidence, and inspiration. Without your untiring encouragement, support, and enthusiasm, this dissertation would certainly not have seen the light of day, and therefore I dedicate this book to you.