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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).

1. Context is Everything. Identifying Identity in the Art of the Syrian Orthodox

1.1 The Study of Medieval Christian Art from the Middle East

In the period from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, the Middle East witnessed a flourishing of Christian art. This is attested by the great number of medieval Christian works of art that have survived in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq (Fig. 1). The works of art include monumental wall paintings, mosaics, architectural reliefs, icons, woodwork, metalwork, and manuscript illumination. During the Crusader presence in the region (1098-1291), and at the pinnacle of Artuqid, Zangid, and Ayyubid rule (c. 1150-1250), in particular, the production of art rose to a new high for the various constituent Christian groups in the region: Copts, Byzantine Orthodox and Melkites, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Maronites, and Latin Christians. The Christians who lived under Muslim rule generally enjoyed a great deal of tolerance and protection during this period, with the exception of a few intervening phases in which they were more or less restricted in their freedom. But the revival of Christian art in the Middle East was brought to an end by the historical events that disturbed the region's equilibrium during the second half of the thirteenth century, more specifically the sweeping Mongol invasions and the establishment of Mamluk power.[1]

The systematic study of the history of medieval Christian art from the Middle East is a fairly recent phenomenon.[2] Jules Leroy and Paul van Moorsel, especially, were pioneers in this field. From the late 1960s onwards, these two scholars successively headed the research programme 'la peinture murale chez les coptes' of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) in Cairo. This project was aimed primarily at preserving and documenting the surviving Christian wall paintings in Egypt. Leroy published the findings of his fieldwork in the MIFAO series, including a monograph on the wall paintings discovered in two monasteries in the area of Esna (1975a), and another on the murals from Deir Abu Maqar and Deir al-Surian in the Wadi al-Natrun (1982). In addition, Leroy compiled a catalogue of illuminated Syriac manuscripts (1964), and a catalogue of the illuminated Coptic and Coptic-Arabic manuscripts (1974a), which still remain the standard reference works on these respective subjects.

Following in the footsteps of Leroy, van Moorsel carried on the field campaigns aimed at preserving and documenting the murals of two monasteries near the Red Sea, Deir Anba Antonius (1995) and Deir Anba Bula (2002), and the paintings in the monasteries located in the Wadi al-Natrun: Deir al-Baramus, Deir Anba Bishoy, and Deir al-Surian. Van Moorsel further initiated the project 'Egyptian-Netherlands Cooperation for Coptic Art Preservation' (ENCCAP) of Leiden University, which combined documentation and conservation activities with research. The work on Coptic painting was continued at Leiden University by a number of van Moorsel's former students, including Mat Immerzeel, Karel Innemée, and Gertrud van Loon.

Since the early 1990s, an international team under the direction of Innemée has been engaged in several restoration projects on the wall paintings at Deir al-Surian.[3] At present,

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[1] See Section 2.8.

[2] Historiographical issues pertaining to the study of Armenian art and Christian art from the Tur ᶜAbdin region in South-East Turkey, both broad subjects in their own right, are beyond the scope of the present research. They will therefore be omitted from this brief overview of previous scholarship on medieval Christian art from the Middle East.

[3] The results of the fieldwork are made public mainly through the Internet journal *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*.

various different layers have been uncovered, dating from between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries.[4] Together with these murals, the accompanying Coptic and Syriac inscriptions, which have been studied by Jacques van der Vliet (2004) and Lucas Van Rompay (2004), respectively, reflect the inter-communal character of Deir al-Surian's monastic community, and attest to the strong affiliation between the Coptic Orthodox Church and Syrian Orthodox Church at the time. The monographs published by Leroy and van Moorsel have also paved the way for more detailed stylistic and iconographic research.

Within the study of Coptic wall paintings, growing attention has been paid, for example, to the relationship between the function of different sections of a church and their individual decoration. In her fundamental study of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century murals featuring Old Testament scenes in the *haykal* (altar room) and *khurus* (intermediate space between the nave and the altar room) in Coptic churches, van Loon (1999) showed that the choice of particular subjects was determined primarily by the liturgical function of the room in which they were represented. She is currently completing a similar study devoted to the painted cycles of the Life of the Virgin and the Infancy of Christ as featured in Coptic churches.

Since 1992, the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) has also been engaged in extensive documentation and conservation work, especially in the Red Sea region, focusing mainly on the wall paintings at Deir Anba Antonius and nearby Deir Anba Bula. In 2002, Elizabeth Bolman edited a monograph on the murals at Deir Anba Antonius, providing us with a detailed analysis of the meaning of the entire decoration programme. A companion volume, on the wall paintings in Deir Anba Bula and edited by William Lyster, was published in 2008.[5]

While research on Coptic wall painting and manuscript illumination has made huge advances over the past few decades, other types of Coptic art, such as painted icons and carved liturgical woodwork, have only recently begun to attract more serious and systematic scholarly attention. Some individual medieval icons in Egypt were studied by Lucy-Anne Hunt (2000c) and Zuzana Skalova, who, together with Gawdat Gabra, also published a preliminary survey of Coptic icons (2006).[6] Coptic woodwork was the subject of the 2006 dissertation of Adeline Jeudy, which traced the development of Coptic liturgical furnishings executed in wood from the tenth to the fourteenth century.[7] Highlighting the considerable artistic and aesthetic overlaps between contemporary Coptic and Islamic art, Jeudy rightly emphasized that the study of Christian material culture in the Middle East should not be limited to the narrow confinements of 'Christian art', but can only be properly understood from a comparative study between Christian and Islamic art.

A similar admonition against too narrow a focus was already made earlier by Hunt in a selection of articles that were brought together in two volumes published under the appropriate title *Byzantium, Eastern Christendom and Islam. Art at the Crossroads of the Medieval Mediterranean* (1998; 2000). Taken together, the articles collected in these volumes attest to the large number of connections and interactions that existed between the various different regions and cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, underlining the necessity of taking broader cultural and historical events into account when dealing with artistic developments at the regional level. One of the most important lessons to be learned from these articles is that, both in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, artistic developments tend not only to cut across political boundaries, but also to transcend the various religious

[4] Innemée 1998a; *idem* 1998b; Innemée *et al.* 1998; Innemée/Van Rompay 1998; *idem* 2000; *idem* 2002; Innemée/Van Rompay/Sobczynski 1999.
[5] For an inventory of Coptic wall paintings, see van Loon/Immerzeel 1998; *idem* 1999.
[6] A catalogue of icons from the Coptic Museum in Cairo, which mainly date from the eighteenth century, has also been published: van Moorsel/Immerzeel/Langen 1994.
[7] On Coptic woodwork, see further Hunt 1998a; *idem* 1998d; *idem* 1998e, 326-331; Bolman 2006; Jeudy 2007.

divides. Moreover, the publication of these two volumes reflects a raised interest in medieval Christian art from the Middle East; this interest was also borne out by the establishment of a new academic periodical, entitled *Eastern Christian Art in Its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts*, in 2004.

The impressive numbers of wall paintings discovered in Syria and Lebanon over the past few decades have attracted much scholarly attention. Although some monuments had already been studied by Leroy (1975b) and Jaroslav Folda (1982b), among others, the actual impetus towards a more comprehensive approach was given by Erica Cruikshank Dodd. Having started documenting sites with wall paintings in the early 1980s, she devoted a monograph to the murals found at Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebk in Syria (2001), complementing it with a detailed study on the wall paintings from Lebanon (2004). A volume edited by Andrea Schmidt and Stephan Westphalen on the paintings at Deir Mar Ya^{c}qub near Qara in Syria was subsequently published in 2005. The book also contains a contribution by Immerzeel on the murals at the Cave Chapel of Mar Elias near Ma^{c}arrat Saydnaya. These wall paintings were restored as part of the project 'Syrian-Netherlands Cooperation for the Study of Art in Syria' (SYNCAS), a formal cooperative venture between the University of Damascus and Leiden University.[8]

Immerzeel continued his research on medieval Eastern Christian art as part of the Leiden PIONIER project 'The Formation of a Communal Identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians (451-1300)', publishing his research results in 2009.[9] In addition to a broad analysis of the wall paintings in Syria and Lebanon, the work also includes an additional study on a number of contemporary icons, which contributes greatly to our understanding of painting practices in the area during the period under consideration. Pointing out that the fields of wall and icon painting are closely related, Immerzeel is the first scholar to distinguish properly between several different group practices of artists ('workshops') that were active in the region.

The availability of new primary evidence in the form of wall paintings and icons also resulted in new insights regarding the development of what is commonly known as 'Crusader art'. Previous scholarship, largely unaware of the rich cultural and artistic heritage of the indigenous Christians, generally assumed that 'Crusader art' was produced, for a Crusader clientele, by Western artists living in the Crusaders states, and that it displayed a mixture of mainly Western and Byzantine elements. Today, scholars have come to acknowledge the important contribution of local non-Western artists in the production of this art.[10] Particularly groundbreaking in this respect were the publications on Crusader monumental painting by Annemarie Weyl Carr (1982b) and Gustav Kühnel (1988).

Most recently, Nada Hélou (2006) and Immerzeel (2007c; 2009, 125-142) have been able to ascribe a closely related group of icons which have traditionally been lumped together under the label 'Crusader art' to a group of (local) artists active in the County of Tripoli. Some of these artists have also proved to be responsible for the execution of wall paintings in churches in the region, of various denominations. Moreover, a number of icons from this group, rather than being intended for a Crusader clientele, were clearly destined for Melkite use. New insights of this kind suggest that works previously thought to have been made exclusively for Latin Christians could equally have been commissioned or bought by any of the Christian communities living in the Levant.

What these recent studies make abundantly clear, then, is that rigid classifications do not do justice to the complex artistic situation of the Middle East during the Crusader era. In this respect, Robert Nelson's important article *An Icon at Mt. Sinai and Christian Painting in Muslim Egypt during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (1983) deserves additional

[8] Immerzeel 2005a.
[9] Immerzeel 2009. Cf. ter Haar Romeny 2005, 389-394; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 29-34.
[10] Kühnel 1994; Folda 1995; *idem* 2005.

attention. Under his detailed analysis, a small thirteenth-century icon that had traditionally been seen as a Crusader work can now be ascribed to a Coptic painter who was also responsible for the illustration of a Coptic-Arabic New Testament manuscript.[11] Of particular importance to the present study, however, are Nelson's observations on the close correspondences with contemporary Islamic manuscript illumination, which lead him to question the appropriateness of the terms 'Christian' and 'Islamic' in classifying such works of art. Ultimately, the image that thus surfaces from recent studies on medieval Christian art from the Middle East, whether connected with either the Crusaders or any one of the local Christian communities, is that of a highly composite artistic tradition characterized by an array of connections and interactions.

If the focus hitherto has largely been on Christian art from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, the present book aims to broaden our current knowledge to include medieval Christian works of art originating from present-day Iraq. Within the context of the increasing international interest in the material culture of Middle-Eastern Christianity, a complete survey of Christian art from Iraq would of course add greatly to the picture. Unfortunately, the present political circumstances and the general inaccessibility of the region make such a full documentation impossible. In view of these practical drawbacks, this book therefore seeks to give an initial impetus towards the study of medieval Christian art from Iraq, but focuses in the first instance on the Mosul area in general and the Syrian Orthodox community in particular.

Like other regions of the Middle East, the Mosul area witnessed an increase of the production of Christian art during the medieval period. The proliferation of art connected with Mosul's Syrian Orthodox community, especially, was part of the 'Syrian Renaissance', a widespread cultural development which was marked by a flourishing of Christian culture from the early eleventh century until around 1300.[12] Although the majority of the Christian population in the Mosul area traditionally consisted of East Syrians (formerly also known as Nestorians), Mosul was an important Syrian Orthodox centre in this period. Points of focus were the monasteries of Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam, both located just outside Mosul, and several churches situated in the capital itself.

1.2 Aim of the Present Research

The aim of the present study is two-fold. First, since this research is part of a larger project investigating the formation of a communal identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians (also referred to as West Syrians), it examines the possible role of 'Syrian Orthodox art' in developing and maintaining a communal identity. Art can function as an important medium to express cultural and religious ideas and provide symbols of identity. How is identity expressed and communicated by this art, and which distinctive features contribute most to this? The present research starts from the hypothesis that by comparing the iconographic and stylistic details of the artistic traditions of different communities, information can be obtained about differences in ideas.

In the case of the art of the Syrian Orthodox, little is known about iconographic and stylistic characteristics and whether they were the result of a conscious and deliberate choice made by either artists or patrons. Elements familiar from Byzantine, Coptic, Crusader, and Islamic art are found as well, and it remains to be investigated how and why these elements were taken over. This problem is of course closely linked to defining the criteria for assessing whether or not certain art can be called 'Syrian Orthodox'. In addition, the relationship

[11] See Section 4.2.1.
[12] See Section 2.5.

between Christian (more specifically, Syrian Orthodox) and Islamic art will be studied while focusing on works of art from the Mosul area.

The central question that needs answering is: what makes art *Syrian Orthodox* art? Formulated in general terms, one might define 'Syrian Orthodox art' as those artistic products that were either made for a Syrian Orthodox clientele or meant to function in a distinctly Syrian Orthodox context, such as a West Syrian church or a monastery. This simplistic definition, however, leaves the question of whether, and how, it is possible to distinguish 'Syrian Orthodox art' from that of other communities. In other words, is it possible to identify a set of criteria that can be used to distinguish between the art of the Syrian Orthodox and that of other Eastern Christian Churches on the one hand, and between the art of the Syrian Orthodox and that of the Muslims on the other?

The possible distinctive features, or identity markers, that will be taken into account include: iconography (e.g., biblical scenes, saints, donors), style, and the languages used in the inscriptions. In addition to the matter of identity markers, other points of consideration are whether, and to what extent, a distinction can be made between secular and religious art, and why one religious community might commission artists with a different religious background. Was this a matter of know-how, availability, a common geographical origin, or the result of a particular relationship between the two communities at a certain moment?

In line with the current popularity of 'identity' in both academic and political discourse, the field of art-historical research has recently seen an increasing use of the term.[13] The basic problem with most studies dealing with aspects of art and identity is that they do not provide a clear definition of their concept of identity. This often leads to an unnecessary amount of vagueness. This problem is of course not exclusive to art history; the same tendency towards an inconsistent, often even casual, use of 'identity' is seen in other academic disciplines as well. As Margarita Díaz-Andreu and Sam Lucy have explained, the ambiguous uses of the term identity are often the result of the fact that they are used interchangeably to refer to both individual identity and communal or group identity.[14]

This methodological flaw was already acknowledged by Philip Gleason in 1983. In a study on the semantic history of 'identity', Gleason points out that much scholarly imprecision can be avoided if the term is clearly defined and consistently applied. In other words, a clear definition of 'identity' is a prerequisite. Such a definition, according to Gleason, should not only be reconciled to the most recent sociological and anthropological insights, but also to the methodological standards of the academic discipline in which it is applied.[15] Since a systematic study on art and identity has as yet not been carried out, it seems important to define a clear methodological approach. It may thus be useful to start with a brief review of some of the major conceptions of both community and identity as developed in modern sociology and anthropology, taking into account important insights gained in recent studies on material culture and identity.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

1.3.1 Community and Communal Identity

First introduced in the social sciences, the highly complex notion of 'identity' has stood at the centre of historical and archaeological debates from at least the 1960s onwards, especially in studies dealing with the question of ethnicity in the Late Antique Greco-Roman world and the

[13] Gerstel 2001; Eastmond 2004; Weyl Carr 2005; Jeudy 2006; Immerzeel 2009.
[14] Díaz-Andreu *et al.* 2005, 1-2.
[15] Gleason 1983; cf. Immerzeel 2009, 7-8.

early Middle Ages.[16] Within these debates, two major theoretical approaches to the understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity may be roughly distinguished: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialist scholars posit that ethnic identification is based on 'primordial attachments' between individuals, such as kin connections, language, religion, territory, and culture.[17] Constructivist scholars, on the other hand, maintain that ethnic and other communal identities are not fixed natural givens, but artificial social constructs.[18] The latter group argues that the attachments unifying a group of people are the product of actions and identifications made in specific social and historical contexts.

Although current scholarship generally favours constructivism over primordialism, tending to see ethnicity and ethnic identity as fluid and flexible constructions resulting from social interaction, the constructivist approach is problematic in the sense that it does not recognize that identities are usually neither entirely static nor completely changeable. On the contrary, they are the result of a complex interaction between both continuity and change.[19] In this respect, the development of the Syrian Orthodox community, which can be traced over a period of some fourteen centuries, has proven to be a case in point.

In order to transcend the simplistic primordialist/constructivist dichotomy, the Leiden PIONIER project applied another methodology for analysing the *formation* and *maintenance* of a communal identity among the Syrian Orthodox.[20] The significance of this approach is that it does not only concentrate on the social process of identity formation, but also acknowledges the importance of the contents of myths, memories, and symbols in both the formation and continuance of a community. A particularly fruitful approach in assessing the development of the Syrian Orthodox was the definition of an ethnic community as formulated by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. According to their definition, which comprises six distinguishing features, an ethnic community has a proper name that expresses the identity of the community, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, a link with a territory, elements of common culture, and a sense of solidarity or belonging.[21]

Analysing the Syrian Orthodox written sources with the features of Hutchinson and Smith in mind reveals that in the period between the sixth and the thirteenth century the Syrian Orthodox underwent a development from a *religious association* towards an *ethnic community*. Without going into details here, the Syrian Orthodox community developed itself in an ongoing process of both assimilation and differentiation, in which they continuously redefined themselves by adapting their identity to the historical situation. In the face of ever shifting circumstances, the Syrian Orthodox were always able to define a position of their own by selecting and rejecting elements from both the cultures out of which they developed (that is, Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, and Jewish culture), and those with which they came into contact (mainly Byzantine and Islamic).[22]

By the middle of the sixth century, the Syrian Orthodox Church, formerly often called 'Jacobite', had developed into an independent ecclesiastical organization (see Section 2.4). It had gradually formed itself out of the Christological debates that ensued after the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Council had been convened in order to settle once and for all the question of the divine and human nature of Christ, by formulating a new encompassing

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[16] See, for example, the papers selected in Hutchinson/Smith 1996; Pohl/Reimitz 1998; Gillet 2002; Díaz-Andreu *et al.* 2005.

[17] This line of thought is usually associated with the work of Clifford Geertz (1973).

[18] The constructivist point of view was first formulated in Frederik Barth's seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969).

[19] Eriksen 1993, 92-96; ter Haar Romeny 2005, 381.

[20] On the different sub-projects and the theoretical approach adopted by the Leiden PIONIER project, see ter Haar Romeny 2005; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009.

[21] Hutchinson/Smith 1996, 6-7.

[22] For a survey of the development of a Syrian Orthodox identity, see ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 42-51.

Christology that could be accepted by the various different groups that divided Christianity at the time. The final result, however, would turn out to be exactly the opposite of the Council's unifying intentions, resulting in a rift between different Christian factions that remains to the present day. In short, the decisions taken at the Council eventually led to a schism between, on the one hand, those who had accepted the newly-formulated Christology of the dual nature of Christ, and, on the other, those who believed in the unity of Christ's nature. The latter group was formerly known as Monophysites, but nowadays the term Miaphysites is preferred.

While the former viewpoint was actively supported by the emperor and eventually became the theological doctrine of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire, the latter doctrinal standpoint was to be shared by the Syrian Orthodox, the Coptic Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. Although non-religious ethnic, political, cultural, and social features were indispensable to the initial establishment of the Syrian Orthodox as a group, doctrinal differences prove to have played the key role in the formational stage of the community (451-650). The factor of religion was pivotal in the unification of a group of Syriac-speaking Miaphysites, with elements of culture besides religion playing a secondary role. A myth of common ancestry and a link with a territory, on the other hand, were not yet formulated.[23]

The rejection of the doctrine of Chalcedon was, then, the starting point for the development of the separate community presently known as the Syrian Orthodox. While religion continued to be an important feature in binding the newly established Syrian Orthodox association together, in subsequent centuries, other distinguishing features were gradually added to their identity as well. Today, the Syrian Orthodox are in their final stage of the formation of a fully-fledged ethnic community.[24] However, most of Hutchinson and Smith's six distinguishing features prove to have been present already in Syrian Orthodox exegetical and historiographical works of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries.[25] Although these centuries are characterized by remarkable collaboration and interaction between the Syrian Orthodox and other religious communities, both Christian and Muslim, an important conclusion of the Leiden PIONIER project is that the boundaries between the different communities nevertheless continued to be clearly demarcated in the West Syrian written sources. It remains to be seen, however, whether the boundaries between the different communities that are highlighted in Syrian Orthodox exegetical and historiographical works can also be detected in medieval 'Syrian Orthodox art'. This brings us to the concept of community and the role of symbols in marking its boundaries.

In modern sociology and anthropology, community, like the notion of identity, is commonly seen as a symbolically constructed concept, rather than a natural given structure.[26] Anthony P. Cohen's 1985 book *The Symbolic Construction of Community* has been particularly influential in this respect. As the author himself acknowledges, the study is firmly grounded in Frederik Barth's constructivist view of ethnicity as first formulated in his 1969 seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Cohen's main argument is that a community is a symbolic construction of boundaries, by which he means that communities are created and marked through the use of symbols. Central to the notion of community are a sense of solidarity and a feeling of belonging. According to this conceptual model, which focuses on aspects of meaning and identity, community implies that members of a particular group of people, such as the Syrian Orthodox, *believe* that they have something in common, and that

[23] Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 46-48.
[24] Atto, forthcoming; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 39-42, 51. The research of Naures Atto focuses on the identity discourses that currently prevail among Syrian Orthodox (or Suryoye) elite members in the European Diaspora.
[25] Van Ginkel, forthcoming; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 13-28.
[26] On the development of the concept of community in scholarship, see Delanty 2003.

this common denominator – religion for example, but it may virtually be anything – is not shared by other putative groups.[27] The symbols used to mark one's own community, whether ethnic, religious, occupational or otherwise, create a boundary in opposition to other communities, in turn creating both members and non-members, insiders ('us') and outsiders ('them'). Seen from this perspective, the idea that people belong to a community involves a continuous dialectic between similarity and difference.

Symbols used to create and maintain boundaries between different communities may comprise of a variety of features, ranging from language, dress, and hairstyles to the performance of rituals, religion, and various forms of material culture. While not always consciously articulated, such features could also be appropriated as institutionalized forms of marking community membership. Christian rites of passage are a clear case in this respect. The performance of rituals, such as the initiation ceremony of baptism, strengthen communal identity by means of including certain individuals ('Christians') and excluding others ('non-Christians'). It should be emphasized that communal identity is also hierarchically structured, in the sense that communities, as a rule, have a core (or *Traditionskern*) and a more diffuse periphery (see Section 1.3.2).[28]

Where the Syrian Orthodox were concerned, this hierarchical structure was established as part of their ecclesiastical organization. This is perhaps best exemplified by means of Syrian Orthodox practices surrounding the performance of the liturgy in the period under consideration. During the Eucharistic service, when the priests consecrated the bread and the wine, and asked God to transform the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ, the doors of the Royal Gate were closed, literally setting up a boundary between the clergy in the sanctuary and the lay people in the nave.[29] As such, the Eucharistic liturgy emphasized, both in visual and spatial terms, that the clergy formed the centre of the Syrian Orthodox community, while the lay members, who were not allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, comprised its margins.

Just as communities are far from homogenous, individuals simultaneously belong to various communities, and thus have multiple communal identities at the same time. The 'religious identity' of an adherent of the Syrian Orthodox faith was of course just one part of his or her identity. In daily life, the bonds with the family, territory, or socio-professional group were arguably considered far more important defining features than religious affiliation. This is seen for instance in the possibility of Syrian Orthodox Christians joining a professional collective known as the *mosserins*, a group of merchants originally from the Mosul area who had settled in Acre sometime during the thirteenth century.[30] Based on a shared common origin, this confraternity also included East Syrians, who, in terms of religious matters, were traditionally seen as among the West Syrians' enemies. Clearly, the divisions between the members of the two diverging Christian communities were easily overridden by both a shared economical interest and Mosul provenance.

As Cohen observes, communities and their boundaries are not a reality but a symbolic construct, and, as is the case with symbols in general, they are subject to multiple levels of meaning depending on the viewer and the context (geographical, chronological, cultural or whatever) in which they are viewed. The boundaries between different communities are therefore, by definition, highly ambiguous and fluid: 'They may be thought of, rather, as

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[27] Similarly, Benedict Anderson (2003) has emphasized that ethnic communities are *imagined communities*. Along similar lines, Jonathan M. Hall (1997, 19) has argued that 'ethnic identity is *socially constructed and subjectively perceived*'. This definition of ethnicity is mainly in line with that of Siân Jones (1997, 84), who defines ethnic communities as '*culturally ascribed identity groups, which are based on the expression of a real or assumed shared culture and common descent*'.

[28] Brather 2002, 171.

[29] For an introduction on the Syrian Orthodox liturgy, see Varghese 2004a.

[30] Richard 1999, 384-385; Jacoby 2004, 99.

existing in the mind of the beholder'.[31] By the same token, an identity is a highly flexible construction that is ultimately contextually defined.[32]

As can be seen from the above, recent definitions of (ethnic) identity have stressed the self-definition and changeability of such groups as the Syrian Orthodox. In short, being part of a community requires individuals to actively identify with a broader group on the basis of similarities and differences, which alternately bind them together and distinguish them from others. Identity thus involves defining oneself in relation to others. Rather than a static primordial given, identity is formed through a continuing process; it is a construction which results from the social interaction between people. Seen from this perspective, communal identity may essentially be defined as the way in which a number of individuals understand themselves as belonging to a group, whether ethnic, religious, professional or otherwise, through a shared condition or quality.

An obvious type of discourse in which the Syrian Orthodox community could define itself is written communication, but communal identity may also be articulated in various forms of material culture, including works of art. As the carriers of visual symbols *par excellence*, works of art can be appropriated in order to mark the boundaries between different communities. For the purposes of the present study, we are interested in identity chiefly as the way in which the Syrian Orthodox community defined itself *vis-à-vis* other religious groups through art.

1.3.2 Ethnogenesis Theory

First applied in the study of the emergence of the Germanic nations after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the 'ethnogenesis theory' was developed by scholars such as Reinhard Wenskus and Walter Pohl, among others, in order to provide a model to explain the origins of historical groups.[33] The theory revolves around the idea of a *Traditionskern*, a core group of families that were consciously trying to replicate communal identity by both safeguarding and handing down mythical narratives of the origin of the community. It argues that individual Germanic tribes, whose members were of different backgrounds, were bound together into cohesive units through their shared alliance with a *Traditionskern*, which was embodied in an aristocratic elite. By implementing a myth of common origin, these bearers of tradition were able to weld the different barbaric tribes into politically and culturally cohesive units.

Despite the recent critical reviews of, amongst others, Andrew Gillet, who questions the durability of such myths of common descent,[34] the members of the Leiden PIONIER project consider the concept of a *Traditionskern* a useful model. The concept of a core and periphery in communal identity provides the scholar with an additional tool that can explain not only the coming into being, but also the continuation of the Syrian Orthodox as a group.[35] Whereas in case of the Germanic tribes the leading families are thought to have been actively engaged in the promotion of the group's myths and memories of the past, the Leiden research project posits that the Syrian Orthodox community was able to endure for centuries because of the activities of the clergy in general and the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in particular.

As the keepers of the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the higher clergy continuously sought to bind the group of believers together by encouraging them to associate and identify with the mythical narrative of the group's origin and past. Historiography and hagiography were

[31] Cohen 1985, 12.
[32] Brather 2002, 171.
[33] Wenskus 1961; Pohl 1994.
[34] See the essay collections in Gillet 2002.
[35] Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 9-11; van Ginkel, forthcoming.

particularly useful tools in this respect.[36] The capacity of hagiographical works in shaping communal identity was recently touched upon by Michael Morony in an article discussing how communal identity and solidarity is expressed in Syriac chronicles.[37] Morony argues that hagiographical works are comparable with chronicles in the sense that both are essentially historical narratives communicating a particular view of the past.

Whereas the accessibility of chronicles seems to have been largely restricted to members of the clergy and monks, the saints' biographies had the great advantage of reaching a larger audience; they were recounted (at least once a year and sometimes more) during the annual commemoration of saints in the liturgy. Generally speaking, the commemoration of saints served to remind the community of the important figures of the past with whom they identified. Reinforcing a particular view of history and the identity of the community, these commemorations were very useful in revalidating collective memory.[38] Moreover, this system of recurring celebrations within the liturgical cycle ensured a regular dissemination of any propagandistic message incorporated within a saint's life.

In terms of a *Traditionskern*, the monasteries played the most important role in the preservation and continuation of the Syrian Orthodox tradition during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Already as early as the seventh century, the monasteries had replaced the schools as centres of learning, and in successive centuries they continued to function as the main transmitters of Syrian Orthodox culture and knowledge.[39] It is also from the ranks of the monks that most of the higher clergy were elected, including patriarchs, maphrians, and bishops.[40] Moreover, the monasteries, that is Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam in the case of the Mosul area, were the main attraction for pilgrims, rather than the churches situated in the city of Mosul or located in the villages in the vicinity.

Although the present study does not seek to focus specifically on the ethnogenesis of the Syrian Orthodox community, the concept of a *Traditionskern*, which is closely related to issues of artistic sponsorship and commission, provides us with a model that may explain any possible differences in the decoration of monastic churches and parish churches on the one hand, and between secular and religious art on the other.

1.3.3 Art and Identity

Let us now consider the function of art within the Syrian Orthodox Church during the 'Syrian Renaissance'. West Syrian theologians and liturgical commentators such as Yahya ibn Garir (d. around 1080), Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171), and Jacob (Severus) bar Shakko (d. 1241) commonly encouraged the use of religious imagery both to instruct the faithful and to remind them of the deeds of Christ and the saints.[41] In their view, the representations of the major events of sacred history, and the images of those extraordinary men and women who had imitated Christ's life, offered potent models for their community to emulate. In his *Book of the Guide* (*Kitab al-Murshid*), an Arabic handbook on Syrian Orthodox theology, Ibn Garir formulated it as follows (in Christine Chaillot's English translation): 'The souls of the faithful are penetrated by what they see: when they look at the representation of martyrdom they

[36] Van Ginkel, forthcoming.
[37] Morony 2005, 29-32.
[38] Morony 2005, 29.
[39] On the cultural role of monasteries as the main transmitters of Syrian Orthodox tradition, see Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, 134-166.
[40] Kawerau 1960, 16, 27, 35, 42-43, 123-124; Selb 1989, 268-273; Weltecke 2008, 316-317.
[41] A summary of Syrian Orthodox sources, both in Syriac and Arabic, informing us about Syrian Orthodox attitudes towards the function of art can be found in Hindo 1943, 312-315 (Cf. Leroy 1964, 37-46; Chaillot 1993, 15-33). A more systematic compilation and study of such references would be a valuable contribution to scholarship in this field.

immediately understand that the saint undergoes these sufferings in order to reach Heaven'.[42] Similarly, Bar Shakko, in his *Book of Treasures* (*Ktōbō d-simōtō*), a Syriac theological and monastic handbook, underlines the important role of images in the church (in Paul Hindo's French translation): 'Mais l'Eglise sainte du Christ peinte sa vie, sa mort, sa passion, sa resurrection, son ascension, car le Christ prescrivit à ses disciples de se rappeler. Et beaucoup d'hommes, d'enfants, de femmes qui n'apprennent dans les livres sa vie terrestre, l'apprennent par les murs, par le signe des images'.[43] To justify the practice of decorating church buildings with images, these Syrian Orthodox writers thus primarily highlighted the didactic function of art, reiterating the by then centuries-old common Christian argument that images have the capacity of conveying the important messages of the scriptures to those who cannot read.[44]

Yet it is clear that Christian art served a range of purposes and audiences. In general terms, Christian art may be defined as a visual expression of Christian religious beliefs. Like the verbal word in written communication, albeit by means of a visual idiom, it operates, supports, and expands Christian modes of thought. Especially in the service of the Church, but by no means exclusively, art was appropriated to teach and convince people of true doctrine by illustrating scenes and holy figures known from the Bible, apocryphal stories, hagiography, and popular devotion. Although one should always be careful in assuming a direct link between the two, the written word and the visual image are habitually manifestations of the same feelings and ideas. Christian works of art can often be seen to respond to topical doctrinal debates,[45] and the introduction of a new subject is sometimes the direct result of decisions taken at church councils.[46] In addition to written texts, visual art provided the Church with yet another means of communicating the politics of orthodoxy.[47] Likewise, rulers appropriated Christian imagery in order to bolster their own ideologies and political propaganda.[48]

Inasmuch as art plays a considerable role in the self-definition of Christian communities, Christian art, as a pictorial expression of the Christian faith, also functions as a marker of communal identity. Like historiographical and hagiographical works, it presents the audience with a particular view of the past; together with the commemorations of the saints in the liturgy, the scenes from the life of Christ and the images of saints were useful in strengthening collective memory. In the words of Thomas Mathews, 'Entering the church means entering the communion of saints and joining their ranks'.[49] But in addition to binding people together

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[42] Ch. 35: Chaillot 1995-1996, 78-79; Hindo 1943, 312-313.

[43] Ch. 39: Hindo 1943, 314-315.

[44] Sebastian Brock (1977) has shown that the question of the legitimacy of the use of images was already a topic for Syrian Orthodox writers from the seventh and eighth centuries onwards. The idea of *biblia pauperum* is expressed in similar terms in East Syrian sources, such as Isho^{c}yahb bar Malkon's twelfth-century treatise on the veneration of the holy icons, in which he states that 'Images in the churches take the place of writing for those who do not know how to write or read such as the common and the illiterate people. When they see the images, there is no need for them to ask for information from the experts' (Teule 2007b, 165). On texts justifying the veneration of images in the East Syrian tradition, see further Teule 2007c.

[45] Since the 1950s, scholars have come to acknowledge that the development of the representation of the Crucifixion, for instance, was closely related with the evolution of Christian belief in general and the debates that centred on Christ's nature in particular. Such theological debates not only impacted on the iconography of the theme, but, at different times and in different geographical regions, and for a variety of reasons, sometimes also led to a reluctance to represent the Crucifixion at all. For an overview, see Kartsonis 1994; Mathews/Sanjian 1991, 160-161.

[46] In the Byzantine context, for example, Iconoclasm and the Union of the Churches provide some clear cases of doctrinal decisions directly influencing art. On orthodoxy in Byzantine art, see especially the articles of Leslie Brubaker, Liz James, and Robin Cormack in Louth/Casiday 2006, 95-120.

[47] Corrigan 1992; Brubaker 1999.

[48] Cormack 1985, 179-214; Catalogue New York 1997, 183-191 (H. Maguire); Eastmond 2004.

[49] Catalogue New York 1997, 33.

by representing the heroes of the community with whom they identified and emphasizing their shared common Christian outlook, Christian art is also used to indicate the difference from other groups, both non-Christian and Christian alike.

We have already seen that the construction of identity involves differentiating from others. One might therefore expect that varying Christian groupings and denominations would use different visual symbols in order to promote dissimilar points of view. In structural terms, one might even say that the Syrian Orthodox community, like any other religious community, needed its opponents in order to assert its own orthodoxy. Without an adversary, the self-awareness of the community would simply amount to nothing. Seen from this perspective, visual imagery can affirm the religious and communal identity of a group by means of two different approaches: either by explicitly rejecting other religious groups and denominations, or by using elements that are different from those used in other religions or communities.[50]

Recent studies on medieval Christian art have shown that representations of the Jewish and Muslim 'other', in particular, played a crucial role in asserting Christian identity, both in the East and the West.[51] In depicting the 'Jew' or the 'Muslim' in a negative light, in other words, by visually underlining the difference between the 'Christian believer' and the 'pagan unbeliever', Christians were able to construct their own communal distinctiveness. The process of visual self-definition by means of carefully constructing the 'other' was not restricted to delineating the differences between Christians and pagans, however. Heretics, Christians that dissented from the accepted belief or doctrine, were commonly represented in negative visual terms as well. In Byzantine art, for example, they were usually depicted in a position of submission, as conquered enemies that are either trampled on, put to death by the sword, or swallowed by a dragon symbolising Hades.[52] They were also commonly shown burning in Hell, as part of scenes of the Last Judgement.[53]

Within the corpus of Byzantine heretic imagery, the image of the heretic being condemned by a church council appears to have enjoyed certain popularity. Encountered in manuscript illustrations from at least the tenth century onwards, this subject is also often found on the walls of the narthex or at the entrance to a church, although this seems to have been a post-Byzantine development.[54] A fine example is found in the Church of St Sozomenos in Galata on Cyprus, in an early sixteenth-century wall painting depicting both Nestorius and Arius crumbling on the ground before a church council.[55] But above all, heretics were deliberately likened to the Jews, who throughout the Christian world were considered as the archetypical sinners, on account of them having crucified Christ.[56] Usually, they are represented with grossly caricaturized facial features so as to emphasize their evilness.[57] That the defence of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity was argued primarily through the rebuttal of the Jews should

[50] Elsner 2001, 274-275; Dirven 2004, 3.
[51] Corrigan 1992; Weiss 1998; Strickland 2003.
[52] Walter 1970. Illustrative in this respect is the body of polemical imagery that survives in a group of marginal Psalters, which were made in the ninth century, shortly after the end of Iconoclasm. One particularly clear example is the illustration in the Khludov Psalter (Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. 129, fol. 51v) that depicts the iconophile Patriarch Nicephoros, holding an icon of Christ, trampling the arch-iconoclast, John the Grammarian, underfoot. The miniaturist has paired this image with that of St Peter trampling the arch-heretic Simon Magus, which further enhances the anti-iconoclastic message (Corrigan 1992, 27-28, Fig. 38).
[53] Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 90-91, Pl. 71.
[54] *ODB*, II, 919.
[55] Baumer 2006, plate on p. 44.
[56] Returning to the example of the Khludov Psalter, perhaps the best-known illustration is that in which the miniaturist has coupled the Crucifixion with two men whitewashing a portrait of Christ, thereby ingeniously equating the Iconoclasts with the two Jews torturing Christ on the cross (fol. 67r: Corrigan 1992, 30-31, Fig. 42). Cf. Strickland 2003, 107-122.
[57] Corrigan 1992, 46-49; Strickland 2003, 110-111.

be seen, according to Kathleen Corrigan, in light of the fact that the process of Christian self-definition over the centuries had always involved differentiating Christianity from Judaism.

Throughout history, visual images were used by Christians as weapons to assert their own doctrine and to refute the opposing views of other religious groups. It is important to emphasize, however, that this 'dogmatic warfare by means of images' was not always waged with works of art that actively represented the 'other' in a negative light.[58] To stick with the example of the denunciation of 'Nestorianism', this is perhaps best exemplified by the cycle of mosaics in the Church of Sta. Maria Maggiore (432-444) in Rome, which were commissioned by Pope Sixtus III in the years directly following the papal condemnation of Nestorianism at the Council of Ephesus in 431, when the right of the Virgin to carry the title *Theotokos* was confirmed. In view of the iconographic emphasis on the Divinity of the Christ-child and the role of the Virgin as 'God-Bearer', it is commonly thought that these mosaics were meant as a visual affirmation of the doctrinal decisions taken in 431, and even, more specifically, were designed as a polemical pamphlet aimed directly at Nestorianism.[59] However, the imagery represented in these mosaics should not be seen as an act of visual self-definition through the explicit rejection of an external doctrine. Rather, it is an internal affirmation of orthodoxy, for in striking contrast to the fifteenth-century wall painting on Cyprus referred to above, the main representative of the condemned heresy does not take centre stage. He is only subjectively perceived, standing behind the scenes, so to speak.

Although the polemical reading of the fifth-century mosaic programme is not the issue of the present study, the great difficulty with such an interpretation, generally speaking, is that it is possible to read polemical intent into virtually every image.[60] Indeed, the overriding problem when discussing visual polemics and identity is that images, by definition, have the capacity to convey multiple meanings at the same time. As visual symbols, works of art are multivocal (speak with multiple voices), polysemic (have multiple levels of meaning), and are multivalent (make multiple appeals).[61] Cohen and others have pointed out that the ambiguity and flexibility of symbols greatly contributes to their effectiveness. It is the multivalent quality of symbols which lends them their strength and makes them susceptible to appropriation by other groups for other purposes.[62] But at the same time, precisely these transcendent and versatile qualities tend not only to obscure their meanings but often also to make it difficult for the scholar to distinguish properly between the artistic traditions of different communities, especially when they are direct neighbours and participate in the same visual culture.

Scholarly debate on the nature and definition of 'Jewish art' is currently paying considerable attention to the basic art-historical problem of categorization and classification, chiefly as it relates directly to questions of identity.[63] Steven Fine, for example, in his study on art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, has applied recent definitions of ethnic and communal identity to the process of assimilation and differentiation of the Jewish community, both in Palestine and the Diaspora. Discussing both archaeological and historical sources, Fine rejects the traditional view that the Jews of ancient Palestine and Rome lived in virtual isolation from their surroundings. His detailed comparative analysis between Jewish and non-Jewish material culture provides a far more nuanced picture of extensive cultural interaction,

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[58] Quotation from Ouspensky 1982, 29 n. 1.
[59] Schiller 1966-1980, I, Figs 66, 230, 256, 310; IV.2, 15, 20-21, 25-26; Brenk 1975, 47-49; Ouspensky 1982, 29 n. 1.
[60] Lowden 1993.
[61] Womack 2005, 3.
[62] Cohen 1985, 12; Womack 2005, 77-78.
[63] See, for example, Rutgers 1995, esp. 50-99; Elsner 2001; *idem* 2003; Fine 2005.

in which the Jews were fully integrated into their environment while still retaining their own exclusive religious and communal identity.

Fine discusses, among other things, a number of Jewish synagogues in Byzantine Palestine, which in terms of plans and architectural features show no major differences with contemporary Christian churches from the region, and raises the question of how one is to differentiate between Jewish and Christian architecture. In some cases, it is only the inclusion of more or less distinctive Jewish or Christian religious symbols which makes it possible to establish the religious identities of the community that occupied a given building. For instance, the cross was used to demarcate Christian religious space, while the menorah served a similar function in the Jewish context.[64]

Although the possibility of distinguishing between the two communities on the basis of religious symbols generally appears to hold true for this particular group of religious structures, the situation does not always prove to be so clear-cut. Many Christian and Jewish symbols were actually used interchangeably. The menorah, commonly considered *the* Jewish symbol, is also encountered in distinctively Christian contexts, for instance.[65] Without precise archaeological records or the availability of a wider iconographic programme that could provide additional clues, it therefore becomes virtually impossible to determine whether a certain menorah was used by Christians or by Jews. Cogently, it is only once the precise context in which a symbol or image features is established that we can begin to speculate about how it functioned and what possible meanings it was originally meant to convey.

Moreover, especially when imagery is not overtly political it is very difficult to assess whether the choice of certain iconography was governed by political or religious issues.[66] Returning to the interpretation of the fifth-century mosaics at Sta. Maria Maggiore, the important methodological observation to be made here is that any supposed polemical intent can only be extrapolated when a variety of parameters have been more or less securely established. These parameters range from the precise religious and political context, the identity and background of the person who commissioned the work, to the community that occupied a building when it was embellished.

Clearly, the use of the same symbols and images by different groups greatly reduces the possibility of establishing the religious identity of a work of art or architecture, especially when other signifiers are lacking. Nevertheless, as also recently emphasized by Leonard Rutgers, the fact that scholars are often unable to draw a sharp line between the artistic traditions of different religious communities should not be taken to imply that there was no such line for the users of such works of art, let alone that their patrons or buyers had some ill-defined sense of identity.[67] In this respect, it is also important to bear in mind that the absence of religious identity markers on artefacts, for example, does not necessarily mean that they were never actively employed in unifying a group and enhancing its identity.

Indeed, many such objects can be regarded as useful in distinguishing between different groups, albeit not necessarily *religious groups*. Works of art are also commonly known to have been appropriated in order to enhance *social identity* and status, rather than religious affiliation.[68] Moreover, as Jaś Elsner has explained, one cannot exclude the possibility that communities developed specific meanings in the use of a certain symbol which they came to see as definitional of their faith simply because it was not necessarily and exclusively used by a single community.[69] To be sure, the meaning of symbols 'may be not only multiple but even

[64] Fine 2005, esp. 126-127, 162-163.
[65] Fine 2005, 156-157; Elsner 2003, 117-118.
[66] Corrigan 1992, 2-3.
[67] Rutgers, forthcoming.
[68] Vorderstrasse 2005a, 6.
[69] Elsner 2003, 117.

contradictory, with different viewers potentially believing different things about the same work of art'.[70]

In the present context, Elsner's argument may be exemplified by the iconographic theme of the Crucifixion with Christ dead on the cross, especially because it is commonly assumed to have been in the front line of Christian visual debates. Introduced into the iconographic repertoire sometime around the end of the seventh century, the image of the Crucifixion with Christ dead on the cross, as opposed to the type featuring him with wide open eyes and unbending body, is generally assumed to have been developed in Chalcedonian circles as a visual weapon against Miaphysitism.[71] Although it was originally designed to convey anti-Miaphysite messages, the Crucifixion with Christ dead on the cross was nevertheless eventually also taken over by the Miaphysites, precisely the group of Christians it presumably first set out to refute. In addition to Syrian Orthodox manuscripts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this particular iconographic type is also encountered in contemporary Armenian Orthodox manuscripts. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that the depiction of the Crucifixion with Christ dead on the cross in an Armenian manuscript known as the Glajor Gospel, produced at a monastery that is known to have been actively engaged at the time in a doctrinal struggle with the Byzantine Orthodox, was actually chosen in order to *oppose* Byzantine Orthodox doctrine.[72]

In short, images may have meanings for viewers of a variety of different denominations, no matter which particular group was initially responsible for their introduction into the iconographic repertoire.[73] As was observed by Elsner in case of the menorah symbol, one should not exclude the possibility that iconographic subjects such as the Crucifixion with Christ dead on the cross were considered as markers of religious identity by Byzantine Orthodox and Miaphysite communities alike.

Precisely because they are symbols, visual images could serve a multiplicity of purposes and were open to multiple interpretations, depending on the needs of both the people who commissioned works of art and the people who viewed them. In order for the modern scholar to disentangle these important nuances, the historical, religious, and architectural context of each individual image or work of art is indispensable, in addition to a detailed analysis of the iconographic details and the larger programmatic context. Likewise, only the proper contextualization of a work of art can allow us to discuss questions of identity. The methodological implications of this are succinctly brought to the fore in Immerzeel's brief discussion of an eighteenth-century icon of Mar Behnam (St Behnam), which has been preserved in the Monastery of St Menas in Cairo (Pl. 1):

> *Today this piece is listed among the Coptic icons in Egypt. It was produced by Yuhanna, a painter of Armenian origin whose father came from Jerusalem, who between 1742 and 1783 used his skills in the service of the Coptic community. Yuhanna depicted Coptic saints, applied Coptic and Arabic inscriptions, and was in the habit of dating his works according to the Coptic and Islamic eras. On the whole, therefore,*

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[70] Elsner 1998, 741.

[71] Anna Kartsonis (1986, 40-58, 67-68, 227-229), among other authors, has located the development of this new iconography in the same doctrinal context as the *Hodegos*, a late seventh-century polemical work in which the author, Anastasius of Sinai, provides the Chalcedonian party with arguments to refute Miaphysite doctrines. In this work, Athanasius explicitly uses the image of the Crucifixion to prove Byzantine Orthodox doctrine, arguing that Christ's lifeless body and closed eyes are evidence of his real human death.

[72] Los Angeles, University of California, Ms. 1, A.D. 1300-1307: Mathews/Sanjian 1991, 158-163, 186-187.

[73] Anti-iconoclast arguments inherent in the representation of Christ dead on the Cross have been proposed by Martin (1955), who stresses that the iconophiles regarded Christ's death as proof of his human nature and hence his ability to be represented in images. In addition, Corrigan (1992, 78-103, esp. 81-90) has recognized anti-Muslim tendencies.

> *there are no overriding objections to labelling his oeuvre as 'Coptic'. There are, however, a few exceptional brainteasers, and this icon of St Behnam is one of them. It was painted for the Church of St Behnam in the aforementioned monastery in Fum al-Khalig, which initially was used by Syrian Orthodox monks. In the eighteenth century this community would have joined the Syrian Catholic Church, which had broken away from the Syrian Orthodox Church and allied itself with the Church of Rome. The iconography is rooted in the Syrian Orthodox hagiography of St Behnam, the inscriptions are in Arabic, and the date 1782 (in Arabic ciphers) complies with the western era. Some elements in the execution betray Yuhanna's Armenian-Palestinian education, a tradition which was much influenced by European art. Nevertheless, given the subject, the era used, and the denomination of the chapel, it makes sense to classify the icon as an exponent of Syrian Catholic identity. This exceptional piece demonstrates the multi-layered, interactive character of oriental Christian art, and singling out identity-related elements would have been meaningless without any knowledge of the icon's context and time.*[74]

Arguing that medieval works of Eastern Christian art betray a similar multi-layered and interactive character, Immerzeel, while focusing exclusively on wall paintings and icons, points out that before attempting to interpret them, one should ideally establish at least the following factors: the religious denomination of the building in which the artwork is found; the background of both the artists and the patrons; the iconography; the style; the inscriptions, and the languages and dating systems used in them.[75] In order to properly understand the presumed function of art in the expression of communal identity, these different parameters should be investigated closely and systematically.

In discussing the importance of these parameters in studying questions of art and identity, Immerzeel distinguishes between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* factors, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Besides the specific denomination of the religious structure in question, external or contextual factors that should be taken into account when addressing matters of art and identity include the background of the people responsible for the production of works of art as well as of those who commissioned them or bought them from the art market. As we have seen above, 'Syrian Orthodox art', in general terms, may be defined as those artistic products made for a Syrian Orthodox clientele or intended to function in a distinctly West Syrian context. Formulated in this way, the most important feature in defining 'Syrian Orthodox art' is patronage, but when it comes to the selection of particular distinguishing features, what about the contribution of the artists and the craftsmen who made the works of art in question?

When it comes to the production of works of art, it is usually very difficult to distinguish properly between the input of the artists and that of the patrons. Nevertheless, it might be assumed that politics of orthodoxy, for example, generally played a far greater role in the context of official church art sponsored by the highest ecclesiastical authorities, than in the case of church decoration in parish contexts or on small items for private display. Differences in this respect may perhaps also be presumed between works of art that were the result of specific commissions and those that were stock made for the market. In the case of mass produced artefacts, such as pilgrim souvenirs for instance, one is perhaps less likely to come across elements pointing to a particular Christian community than in monumental church decoration.

Whatever the case may be, in discussing matters of art and identity one should always adopt a sensitive approach that pays proper respect to the function of the work of art under

[74] Immerzeel 2009, 8-9.
[75] Immerzeel 2009, 9-12.

discussion. Indeed, the factor of the work's function should be added to Immerzeel's list of important parameters. The disposition of a symbol or image, in other words, its precise location within the building, likewise always needs to be taken into account.

If one considers the background of the producers, 'Syrian Orthodox art', like medieval Eastern Christian art in general, does not usually provide information about the 'identity' of those responsible for its production, except perhaps for some monumental works of art, such as the wall paintings at Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebk in Syria (see Section 2.6), and a number of sculptural reliefs and stucco work at Deir Mar Behnam near Mosul (see Chapter 6). Usually, the information is restricted to the name of the artists and craftsmen: Hunayn (John), Sarkis (Sergius) son of the priest Gali ibn Barran, Abu Salim and Abraham, ʿIsa al-Nattafah and Michael.

As to the relevance of this information in defining 'Syrian Orthodox art', similar questions have recently been raised in Crusader studies. In this respect we may refer to Bianca Kühnel, who has questioned the actual importance of the origin and background of artists in defining 'Crusader art'. In so doing, she has given an important admonition, which is highly relevant to the present study. Pointing out that the names of medieval artists rarely help to characterize works of art or to reconstruct their artistic appurtenance, she warns us that 'an over-intensive dealing with problems of identity [of the artist] distracts attention from what should be the major goal of any study trying to outline a school of art, namely the definition of its profile and character. The obstinate hunt for the ethnic identity of an anonymous artist and the emphasis on historical and religious circumstances that could be seen to testify to indigenous artistic activity, mean bringing out the background into focus and leaving the monuments in the shadow'.[76]

Acting on Kühnel's advice, the focus in the present study will be on the works of art themselves, albeit with the qualification that the *context* is unequivocally of primary importance in assessing the possible meanings they were intended to convey, especially considering that the context in which works of art were meant to function is often the only interpretative key available to the modern scholar when it comes to decoding the meaning(s) of the ambiguous symbols depicted in them. As argued above, context is everything in establishing identity in the art of religious communities such as the Syrian Orthodox. While allowing for Immerzeel's extrinsic factors, the present study will focus primarily on the three intrinsic factors which are considered possible markers of identity: iconography, style and inscriptions, the latter in terms of both language and content.

1.3.4 Possible Identity Markers

A) Iconography

From the preceding discussion it has become clear that in order to retrieve the original meaning(s) of a wall painting, for instance, establishing the religious identity of the community that had it painted on one of the walls of their church is of primary importance. Unfortunately, when studying churches and monasteries in the Middle East, as elsewhere, one is often confronted with written sources which are inconclusive as to the exact denomination of a religious structure when it received its decoration. Buildings are known to have shifted hands throughout the centuries, for example, and it is not uncommon for churches and monasteries to be claimed simultaneously by different Christian groups. Therefore, one of the main questions of the present research is whether it is even possible to ascribe certain works of art to the Syrian Orthodox Church, when contemporary sources are either contradictory or completely lacking.

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[76] Kühnel 1994, 164-165.

To pose the central question again, is it possible to recognize a set of objective criteria or identity markers in the art of the Syrian Orthodox, for example in elements of iconography and style, which unequivocally distinguish these works from those of other religious communities? If we consider the factor iconography, religious groups can mark off their religious spaces by representing saints and other figures with whom the members of their respective communities identify. Particularly if these saints are cult-specific, in other words, if they are restricted irrefutably to a single religious group, they may serve as useful tools for establishing the religious identity of the community that made use of the building or the artefact on which they are featured.

The possibility of distinguishing between different saints is mainly due to the system of traditional types, for instance in the use of recurring physical appearance, dress, and additional attributes. The more common or popular saints, especially, were often depicted in accordance with established types. The apostles Peter and Paul are good examples of this: they are almost consistently recognizable through their characteristic facial features. While St Peter can usually be identified on the basis of his short grey hair and beard, St Paul usually has a dark beard and is balding. Other illustrative examples in this respect are the popular soldier saints George and Theodore. Whereas the former is commonly portrayed as a beardless youth with brown, curly hair, the latter is usually recognizable by his black hair and pointed beard.

In the Middle East, these military saints were, at least until the thirteenth century, further characterized by the fact that St Theodore was commonly depicted spearing a dragon, while St George was shown either killing a royal figure or saving a youth from captivity.[77] In the West in particular, but certainly not uncommonly in the East, Christian art depended on an intricate system of attributes, in which elements taken from the saint's hagiography were continuously used; one of the most famous examples is naturally the keys held by St Peter.[78] In many cases, however, the depicted saints are not stereotyped, but are impersonal, and can only be recognized from accompanying inscriptions.

To be sure, the use of the same iconography by different religious groups at the same time should not be taken to imply that the meaning of the iconography is superficial or did not actively contribute to the identity (whether religious, social or otherwise) of the people who used it. Here we should differentiate properly between the possibilities for the modern scholar to distinguish between the artistic traditions of different religious communities on the one hand, and the attempts to uncover the function and meanings that were attached to a particular iconographic subject by various communities, on the other. These meanings, as we have seen, are ultimately contextually defined.

B) Style

In the preceding sections, we have mainly been discussing iconographic matters. Questions of identity should not only be discussed in relation to the content and meaning of the subject matter, however, but also to style. The present study does not concern itself with the question of whether the development of style results from conscious decisions or not, but starts from the notion that at least the choice of a certain style may be a deliberate act in order to mark religious and communal identity. Throughout history, examples can be pointed out of style being actively used to mark boundaries between different communities. Artistic styles were often chosen in favour of others in order to communicate particular propagandistic messages.[79]

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[77] Immerzeel 2004b, 32-34; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.

[78] J. Hall 1997, 10; Immerzeel 2009, 10-11.

[79] Suffice it to refer to an example well known to students of Late Antiquity, namely a small group of ivories that were commissioned during the late fourth century by members of some old senatorial families (e.g., the

The use of style as a marker of identity implies that the choice for a particular style, or better, the choice of an artist working in a particular style, must have been a conscious and deliberate act. It should be emphasized, however, that, as is the case with iconography, the situation is usually not that clear cut, and it is generally very difficult to establish the rationale behind the choice of a certain artistic style: did the choice reflect a deliberate preference, or was it determined by the availability of artists trained in a certain style?

Moreover, stylistic currents can easily cut across social, religious, and cultural boundaries, and certain styles were used simultaneously by a variety of religious groups. The present study will therefore take into consideration the phenomenon of 'common workshop identity', a term which was used by Rutgers in order to explain the technological and stylistic overlaps between Jewish, pagan, and Christian artistic products in Late Antiquity.[80] This phenomenon was certainly not limited to Late Antiquity; on the contrary, examples can be found throughout art history. It is also one of the main characteristics of the woodwork industry in Cairo, for example, between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. Woodworkers apparently catered for a large clientele, which included Muslims, Christians, and Jews.[81] Obviously, the widespread occurrence of this phenomenon raises questions as to the reliability of style as a criterion distinguishing properly between the artistic traditions of different communities.

C) Inscriptions

Important information which may help us to ascribe certain works of art to particular communities can also be obtained through the study of inscriptions. In addition to legends, which help us to establish the identity of the persons and the subjects of the scenes depicted, other types of inscriptions (e.g., foundation, restoration, and commemorative inscriptions) may provide further information about artists and patrons. They may be helpful in ascribing certain works of art to specific groups, in establishing the denomination of a church building, or in shedding light on the meaning of a particular section of a church building and, by extension, its decoration. As far as the possible role of inscriptions as markers of communal identity in the Syrian Orthodox context is concerned, religious inscriptions containing either quotations or adaptations from liturgical sources naturally deserve additional attention, as they may reflect sectarian beliefs or distinct theological positions.

The dating systems used in the inscriptions are another point of interest. During the period under consideration, the Syrian Orthodox could choose between a number of different dating systems, and the wish to emphasize communal distinctiveness might have governed the choice of any one of these systems at the expense of another. Sometimes two systems were used in conjunction, however. In addition to aspects of content, the language used in the inscriptions also needs to be taken into consideration as a marker of Syrian Orthodox identity. Opting for a certain language, like choosing a particular iconography or style, may be a conscious and deliberate act aimed at marking the boundaries between different communities.

Language is generally considered a pivotal element in the construction of identity. Perhaps therefore it will come as no surprise that precisely this feature seems often to have played an important role in the formulation of a Syrian Orthodox identity, at least as far as can be gleaned from the West Syrian exegetical and historiographical sources.[82] Towards the end of

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Nicomachi and Symmachi), who in a final attempt to stop the rapid spread of Christianity tried to initiate a pagan revival. As part of a final stand against Christianity, they ordered a group of ivories that, in addition to being decorated with iconographic themes relating to traditional pagan religious beliefs, were deliberately executed in a style reminiscent of Classical Greece – as opposed to the fashionable stylistic current of the day (Kitzinger 1995, 34-35, with further references). On style as a conveyer of political meanings in Byzantine imperial art, see Maguire 1998.

[80] Rutgers 1995, 67-99.

[81] Jeudy 2006; Immerzeel/Jeudy, forthcoming; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.

[82] Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 20, 26, 48, 50.

the seventh century, Syriac became *the* language of the Miaphysites in Greater Syria, who recognized it as a powerful symbol that conveniently distanced them from their Chalcedonian opponents, who mainly used Greek.[83] As a written dialect of Aramaic, Syriac emerged in the first century A.D. and for centuries was commonly used by the Christian communities of Syria and Mesopotamia.[84] After the Arab conquest in the seventh century, some of the local Christians gradually adopted Arabic as their vernacular, while Syriac continued to be used primarily, if not exclusively, as a literary and liturgical language, especially in case of the Syrian Orthodox.[85]

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the linguistic situation of the Syrian Orthodox had entirely changed, but it was precisely in this period that Syriac regained importance as a marker of their communal identity. The Syrian Orthodox church leader Michael the Syrian, for example, seems to have considered the factor of language as *the* marker of identity.[86] The same holds true for Jacob bar Shakko and Barhebraeus, who both wrote grammars of the Syriac language, and considered it an identity marker *par excellence*.[87] While language was central to these authors' perception of identity, it remains to be seen whether the importance attached to Syriac as a marker of Syrian Orthodox identity is also reflected in the epigraphy of their works of art. These works feature Syriac, Greek, and Arabic inscriptions, either independently or in conjunction. In order to elucidate whether the choice of a certain language was governed by the wish to mark off their group identity, the relevant inscriptions will be studied in their proper context (e.g., monastic or parochial), taking the different categories of inscriptions into account.

Finally, there is the matter of the Syriac script. Three main variants have been distinguished.[88] The oldest of these is known as *Estrangelo* (or *Estrangela*), a formal type characterized by a clear and regular appearance. Because of its good readability, *Estrangelo* was considered particularly suitable for inscriptions, both in monumental and minor works of art. Important manuscripts were also written in this classical type of script. Out of this style of writing a less angular and more cursive script developed, *Serto*, which because of its compactness could be written more rapidly. Although the *Serto* script was initially intended for everyday purposes, it was also occasionally used in inscriptions accompanying wall paintings.[89] As it was the most common script among the Syrian Orthodox, *Serto* is also known as 'West Syriac' (formerly called 'Jacobite'), even though it was also used by the Maronites.

The East Syrians appear to have followed the *Estrangelo* tradition until around the middle of the thirteenth century, when they developed their own style of writing, known as 'East Syriac script' (formerly called 'Nestorian'). The Syriac inscriptions accompanying the thirteenth-century wall paintings at Deir Mar Ya^{c}qub near Qara in Syria suggest that Melkites used *Estrangelo* as well.[90] It would of course be interesting to know whether the Syrian

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[83] Brock 1994, 157-159; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 19-20.
[84] For an introduction to the development of Syriac, see Brock 2006, 19-24.
[85] It should be remarked, however, that although Arabic became more and more important, particularly in the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was still not self-evident for Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastics to have a good command of this language. Patriarch Dionysius VII Angur (1252-1261), for example, is known to have used Barhebraeus as a translator in his contacts with the Ayyubid ruler al-Malik al-Nasir in Damascus (Teule 2003, 22; *idem* 2009a, 182-183; *idem* 2009b).
[86] Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 26; van Ginkel, forthcoming.
[87] Teule 2009a, 182.
[88] For an introduction to the different Syriac scripts, see Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, 244-245; Hatch 2002, 24-30.
[89] The Syriac inscriptions accompanying the wall paintings of Layer 3 (A.D. 1208/09) at Syrian Orthodox Deir Mar Musa in Syria, for instance, are written in *Serto* (see Section 8.2.1).
[90] Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 139.

Orthodox used script as a marker of their communal identity, but this topic falls outside the scope of the present study.

1.4 Delimitation of the Research Material

Since the early 1990s, the archaeological and art-historical investigation of Iraq's rich material culture has been hampered by the country's political vicissitudes. Especially for Westerners, but even for Iraqi scholars, it is virtually impossible to conduct research at the various sites for any considerable period of time. The inaccessibility of the country greatly explains the general unfamiliarity with its Christian patrimony, which is coming more and more under threat due to today's political and military upheavals. As far as Christian works of art from the Mosul area are concerned, previous scholarship was largely limited to studies of two illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts dating from the thirteenth century. These manuscripts were more readily available, simply because they had ended up in European library collections. The first of these manuscripts is preserved in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Ms. Syr. 559) and was made for Deir Mar Mattai near Mosul; the second is in the collection of the British Library in London (Ms. Add. 7170). Since the first publications on these manuscripts by Guillaume de Jerphanion (1939; 1940) and Hugo Buchthal (1939), respectively, the close stylistic similarities between their miniatures and contemporary illustrated Islamic manuscripts have secured their inclusion in discussions on the development of Islamic manuscript illustration.

Another portable object that has generated a certain amount of scholarly attention is a Syrian Orthodox liturgical fan in the collection of the Musée Royal de Mariemont in Morlanwelz, Belgium. Bought in Egypt in 1914 by the wealthy coal industrialist and collector Raoul Warocqué, the piece was classified as a Coptic work until it was eventually discovered that its inscriptions are written in Syriac instead of Coptic. In 1974/75, Leroy published a short introductory paper on the fan at the request of the museum, but since then the fan has largely been ignored. Thilo Ulbert refers to the piece in his monograph on the so-called Resafa Treasure, a hoard comprising some liturgical vessels with Syriac inscriptions, but although he includes a very good photograph, the fan itself is hardly discussed in the text.[91] In 2004, Immerzeel and the present author, together with Van Rompay, devoted a more detailed study to the object, shedding light on its iconography, style, inscriptions, and provenance. Although the fan's dedicatory inscription explicitly mentions that it was made for Deir al-Surian in Egypt, our iconographic and stylistic analysis, which takes into account the wider historical context, suggests that it was originally produced in Northern Mesopotamia, most probably in the city of Mosul.[92]

As for Christian architecture and monumental decoration from the Mosul area, scholarship today still largely has to rely on the publications, mainly documentary in nature, of travellers and scholars who visited the region in the early twentieth century. Moreover, the churches and monasteries that were documented at that time were not really the central focus of study. The attention they attracted was rather the by-product of a heightened interest in the material culture of the Islamic countries in general and Islamic art and architecture in particular. Multiple surveying field trips aimed at recording and documenting early and medieval Islamic monuments were organized at the time throughout the Middle East. The first comprehensive surveys in present-day Iraq were conducted by, among others, Friedrich Sarre, Ernst Herzfeld, and Conrad Preusser.

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[91] Ulbert 1990, 33, Pl. 55b.
[92] Snelders/Immerzeel 2004.

The results of Sarre and Herzfeld's extensive archaeological journey in the Tigris and Euphrates region in 1907 and 1908 were published in four massive volumes (1911-1920), which have remained standard reference works even to the present day. Although Sarre and Herzfeld were primarily concerned with the Islamic remains, the extensive chapter on Mosul, which was written by Herzfeld, also contains a section on the city's churches and their medieval decoration. In addition to descriptions and ground plans, the survey includes drawings and photographs of details of their interior embellishment.[93]

Arguably one of the most important observations made by Herzfeld is that the decoration of medieval mosques and shrines in Mosul does not essentially differ from the contemporary decoration encountered in local churches and monasteries, which leads him to conclude that many of the Islamic buildings were constructed by Christian craftsmen.[94] As characteristic examples of this artistic overlap, Herzfeld mentions, in addition to some churches in Mosul, such as the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, Deir Mar Behnam, a Syrian Orthodox monastery situated some 36 km southeast of the city. This monastery had already been published by Preusser in a large single volume in 1911, together with other Christian and Islamic monuments from the region.

Preusser, who was originally trained as an architect, can be credited with providing an excellent ground plan and cross section of the monastery's church. The large number of photographs are also particularly useful, all the more so given that the monastery has undergone considerable transformations in its appearance since Preusser's visit in 1909 (see below). Indeed, although perhaps outdated in many respects, the publications of Sarre, Herzfeld, and Preusser are still of significant scholarly importance today, especially because many of the monuments they recorded have since been irretrievably lost through destruction or rebuilding, and they are therefore often only known to us through the work of these pioneering scholars.[95]

The sculptural reliefs adorning both the interior and exterior of the church at Deir Mar Behnam represent the most complete Christian decoration programme currently known to have survived in Iraq. As far as Syrian Orthodox monumental church decoration is concerned, the monastery is only equalled by Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, the Monastery of St Moses the Ethiopian near Nebk in Western Syria. With its three layers of wall paintings, dating from the eleventh and the thirteenth century, Deir Mar Musa comprises the most completely preserved painted church decoration from the Syro-Mesopotamian region. While Deir Mar Musa has attracted considerable scholarly attention since its discovery by Cruikshank Dodd in the early 1980s,[96] Deir Mar Behnam has been greatly neglected. Since Preusser, scholars have either only referred to the monastery in passing or limited themselves to summary descriptions. The only notable exception is the indefatigable Jean-Maurice Fiey, but his concern with Deir Mar Behnam and other churches and monasteries from the Mosul area is primarily directed towards detailing their historical development on the basis of written sources.

Despite the fact that Fiey pays relatively little attention to architecture and art, his extensive ecclesiastical and geographical surveys of the Syriac churches remain indispensable to any student of Christian Iraq. Particularly relevant to the present study are his *Assyrie Chrétienne* (1965-1968), which deals with the development of the Christian communities in the area today largely covered by Northern Iraq in general, and *Mossoul Chrétienne* (1959), which focuses specifically on Mosul. In these comprehensive studies, Fiey has attempted to include the historical details of all the known Christian sites from Northern Iraq, focusing not only on the churches and monasteries that were still functioning in his day, but also those that

[93] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 289-303; III, Pls CIII-CX.
[94] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 239, 302-303; Kröger 2006, 134.
[95] Kröger 2006, 135.
[96] See Section 2.6.

lay in ruins or had already completely disappeared. Most recently, Amir Harrak has resumed the study of the Christian monuments of the region as part of a larger project aimed at recording and studying the Syriac and Garshuni (Arabic texts written in Syriac) inscriptions from Iraq.[97] Considering that sculptural reliefs and inscriptions are both an integral part of church decoration in the Mosul area, Harrak's corpus opened the way for further art-historical research. This corpus was available to the present author before publication, as was the rich collection of photographs taken by Harrak during his field trips in the late 1990s.

In addition to the impossibility of studying monumental Christian art from the Mosul area *in situ*, another limitation to the present study is the relatively small number of Christian works of art that have survived from the region, especially when compared with the numerous wall paintings that have surfaced in Western Syria and Lebanon over the past few decades. One is constantly forced to deal with partial survivals in church architecture and fragmentary remains when it comes to figural arts such as monumental wall painting and sculptural reliefs. An important reason for the fragmentary and limited survival is that in 1743, when the Persian Nadir Shah Tahmasp invaded the region, most of the Christian patrimony of Mosul and the vicinity was either severely damaged or completely destroyed. Most of what currently survives dates from the restorations of the years directly following the invasion, although many medieval elements that had survived the destruction were reused during these extensive building and rebuilding activities. The corpus of Syriac and Garshuni inscriptions compiled in the Mosul area by Harrak in the 1990s is particularly illustrative in this respect. By far the majority of these inscriptions are dated shortly after 1743.

Although many Christian religious sites and their liturgical furnishings and manuscripts did not survive the invasion of Tahmasp, it is nevertheless conceivable that more Syrian Orthodox works of art may come to light in museum depots and private collections in the future. The 'discovery' of a liturgical fan with a Syriac inscription in the depot of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 2007 is one such example.[98] Moreover, more primary evidence is currently coming to light due to the considerable amount of building activities that have been undertaken in the numerous Christian villages in the Mosul area and the city itself over the past few years. During rebuilding activities conducted in 2005 at the ruined Church of Mar Giworgis (St George) in Qaraqosh, for example, a Christian village located some 29 km southeast of Mosul, a medieval wall painting representing the Baptism of Christ was discovered. Around the same time, a marble relief representing the Virgin and Child Enthroned was uncovered from the floor in the altar room in the Church of the Virgin (also known as 'Old Tahira Church') in Mosul.[99]

On the other hand, these activities also entail major drawbacks. Since many of the restoration activities are performed by local craftsmen, rather than professional restorers, a great deal of important art-historical material is likely to be damaged or lost before it has been properly documented. In their desire to bring churches and monasteries up to modern fashionable standards, local ecclesiastical authorities have often irreversibly changed the appearance and character of medieval religious structures, a common phenomenon throughout the Middle East.[100] Deir Mar Behnam is a case in point. After the large-scale renovation activities carried out during the tenure of the former superior of the monastery, Ephrem Abdal (1936-1966), which were mainly directed towards the reconstruction of the surrounding walls

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[97] Harrak 2009.

[98] This was discussed by Harrak at the Fifth North American Syriac Symposium, which was held in Toronto in 2007. Although according to the record of the Royal Ontario Museum the fan was discovered in Iran, Harrak proposes that it originated from the Syrian Orthodox community in Takrit, arguing, amongst other things, that such liturgical fans were not used in the East Syrian Church. For a short abstract of Harrak's preliminary paper, see http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV10No2VthSyriacSymposiumAbstracts.pdf (p. 13).

[99] www.syriaciraq.com/news/mar_2006/new_page_2.htm (accessed May 2008).

[100] Immerzeel/Jeudy, forthcoming; Immerzeel 2009, 7.

of the monastic complex and the erection of subsidiary buildings to provide for monks and pilgrims, the present superior, Francis Jahola, initiated yet another extensive reconstruction campaign. During the 1980s and 1990s, a team of local craftsmen, under the direction of Jahola's brother, covered the interior of both the church and the mausoleum of Mar Behnam with a new layer of plaster, while the exterior of both buildings and the surrounding walls were covered up with large stone plates, some of which were embellished with figurative carvings.[101]

Fortunately, the medieval sculptural decoration itself has not been tampered with at Deir Mar Behnam, but this is regrettably not always the case. In the case of the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh, for example, the restoration work has certainly not improved the very poor situation of the painting. The entire western section of the ancient church has been pulled down to allow for the erection of a new church, and in the meantime the mural is constantly exposed to weather influences. Judging from photographs taken by Harrak in 2008, the condition of the mural will rapidly decline if steps are not taken soon to protect it from further decay.

Although the present author has not been able to carry out field work in Iraq, a rich collection of photographs of monumental decoration in churches from the Mosul area taken by previous scholars have proved sufficient to overcome this limitation. The detailed shots made by Harrak, Cruikshank Dodd, and Ray Jabre Mouawad, in particular, were a valuable addition to the old photographs that were taken in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Preusser, Herzfeld, Sarre, and Gertrude Bell.

1.5 Summary

To recapitulate, the main concern of the present study is to establish whether the Syrian Orthodox community of the Mosul area used works of art in order to stress communal identity and distinguished itself from other groups through its art. The self-definition of the Syrian Orthodox community involves differentiation from other Christian groups, as well as differentiation from non-Christians, in particular the ruling Muslim community. In other words, is it possible to identify a set of criteria that can be used to distinguish between the art of the Syrian Orthodox and that of other Eastern Christian Churches, on the one hand, and between the art of the Syrian Orthodox and that of the Muslims, on the other?

Since, generally speaking, Christian art from the Mosul area developed in tandem with local Islamic art, as will be clear from the following chapters, a comparison between the art of the Syrian Orthodox and the art of the Muslim community should be our point of departure. On the other hand, it should be stressed, once again, that Syrian Orthodox communal identity does not necessarily converge with a possible set of criteria by which to identify a work of art as being Syrian Orthodox. As has become clear from the above discussion, the fact that we are perhaps unable to establish such a set of criteria should not necessarily be taken to imply that the Syrian Orthodox community itself did not perceive its art as being *Syrian Orthodox*.

In short, contextualisation is a prerequisite when dealing with questions of identity. Chapter 2 therefore details the historical and artistic background against which medieval 'Syrian Orthodox art' developed. In addition to discussing Northern Mesopotamia in general and the Mosul area in particular, this chapter will also introduce medieval Syrian Orthodox church decoration from Syria and Lebanon. This allows us to assess, later on in the study, whether there is a common denominator between Syrian Orthodox works of art that date from more or less the same period, but originate from different regions. For the same purpose,

[101] Diwersy/Wand 2001, 423.

Chapter 3 traces the artistic production of Deir al-Surian, a Syrian Orthodox stronghold in Egypt, starting with a discussion of the aforementioned liturgical fan in the Musée Royal de Mariemont.

Together with Chapter 3, the succeeding five chapters (Chapters 4-8) will analyse the iconography, style, and languages of 'Syrian Orthodox art' from the Mosul area by means of several case studies of the media of metalwork, manuscript illustration, monumental wall painting, and sculpture, successively. Syrian Orthodox manuscript illustration is the subject of Chapter 4, which focuses on Vat. Syr. 559 and BL Add. 7170. The recently discovered wall painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh is the subject of Chapter 5. Additional attention is paid to murals that once decorated Syrian Orthodox churches, but which are only known from the written sources. The sculptural reliefs of Deir Mar Behnam, which, as mentioned, comprise the best-preserved medieval decoration programme in Christian Iraq, are the topic of Chapter 6. The monumental sculptural reliefs in parish churches are dealt with in Chapter 7, which also briefly discusses the architectural characteristics of Syrian Orthodox churches in the Mosul area. Following the art-historical analysis proper, the matter of inscriptions is the focus of our particular attention in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9, finally, an attempt is made to chart Syrian Orthodox communal identity as expressed in medieval works of art.

A question of particular interest to the present research is whether the iconography and style of these works of art are typically and exclusively Syrian Orthodox (or indeed Christian), or whether they reflect aesthetic patterns prevalent in Northern Mesopotamia. The question of how much value to attach to those differences and similarities will be discussed briefly at the end of each chapter and then systematically in Chapter 9. A closely related question that will be at the focus of our attention is whether and in what way the works of art under discussion may be seen as relevant to the question of Syrian Orthodox communal identity. This, likewise, will be discussed in brief in the conclusion to each chapter, and then comprehensively in Chapter 9.