

CHRISTIANISATION OF TIME AND REPRESENTATION OF THE HUMAN PAST:
Construction of Cultural Consciousness of the Christian East According to Syriac,
Greek and Armenian Sources and Early Christian Art

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The aim of my research is to contribute to our comprehension of the ways in which Near Eastern Christianities articulated their religious and anthropological notions before the advent of Islam. The overarching question of this project is twofold: the understanding of *time* in the light of ideas about the origins of the human race, and the role of this conception of the human past in the formation of anthropological, cosmological and historiographical representations.

The understanding of the human past relied on a vast literature of Jewish and Christian origin, only a part of which would form the Biblical Canon. The process of canonisation was not synchronised in all the Churches, and the boundaries between the Canon and Apocrypha remained unclear for a long time. Apocrypha are books of Jewish and Christian origin which provide accounts of numerous personages of the Bible, but which have remained outside the Biblical canon. Many apocryphal texts were destroyed as heretical; a number of texts of primary importance have been discovered only recently. Christians took an interest in numerous texts that had been rejected by the nascent rabbinical tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple. Different Christianities privileged different apocrypha, each set reflecting specific concerns of their respective cultures; books regarded by some Churches as apocryphal were incorporated within the Scriptures of others. Whilst the Bible has for centuries been explored with the greatest attention, the study of Apocryphal books, many of which still remain unpublished, is yet at its beginnings. This imbalance has led to the assumption that there was just one ‘Bible’ and, thus, one form of Christianity, with a few minor variants.

In ancient Christendom the place of man in time and space was construed with reference to the traditions about Adam and Eve, many of which would later be regarded as ‘apocryphal’. These traditions narrated about the dignity with which the first human beings were endowed by the Creator, their destiny and the eschatological expectations which they would pass on to their posterity. They also traced a direct line between Adam and the Messiah, interpreting the advent of the Saviour in the world with numerous references to the vicissitudes of the first human beings. Christ’s Nativity was depicted as the accomplishment of the promises received by Adam, Eve and other antediluvian patriarchs, whilst the infant Jesus was presented as an actor from the beginning of historical time. The association between Adam and Christ conditioned the development of the intertextuality in theology and art that we know as *figura* and typology; the juxtaposition of an old man with a new determined the evolution of historiographical and biographical literature. This theme was essential for the shaping of a new Christian worldview and a new conception of time.

Divergent ideas regarding the first human beings conditioned the anthropological conceptions of various confessional communities in different ways and even exercised divergent influence on their social and political life under Islamic rule. The elaboration of the traditions about Adam and Eve and their relation

to Christ was stimulated by debates with rabbinic Judaism, Gnostics (who stressed the infinite gap between the transcendent God and the world, and were reluctant to associate the divine Logos with the material body), Manichæans and docetic circles (who relativised Christ's humanity), in whose reflection Adam was also of crucial importance. One theme occupied a particular place, and not only for the shaping of Christian traditions, but also for the emergence of Islam: the transmission of divine revelation via Adam and other patriarchs, a transmission which made real the bond between creatures and the Creator.

At the centre of my attention lie Aramaic/Syriac speaking Mesopotamia, Syria and Armenia, within which area contemporary political events jeopardize the material remains of ancient times. Yet it may be within those material remains that we need to seek explanation of present discords. For almost three millennia the Aramaic speaking lowland and the Armenian highland, which overlapped with eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, enjoyed continuous cultural contacts; their literary and artistic legacies were shared and inextricable until the Genocide of 1915–16. It is through these contacts that, between the second and the third century, Christianity was introduced into the South Caucasus and, at the beginning of the fifth century, the Armenians, the Georgians and the Caucasian Albanians developed their original systems of writing. Through these contacts the South Caucasian Christianities became acquainted with the ancient debates that had divided Christianity, Gnosticism and rabbinic Judaism. These contacts also conditioned the development of their literatures, rituals, ecclesiastical institutions, principles of exegesis, the doctrinal profiles of their Churches, their architecture and arts, and even their mental geography.

The Syriac and Armenian literature, comprising the newly discovered sources, represents a depository of numerous ancient traditions which the West had lost or ignored; the collection of the Institute of Ancient Manuscripts of Yerevan alone holds over 15 000 Armenian manuscripts, of which only 2 700 have so far been described! These sources invite us to look again at Western literature and art and to challenge established interpretations. They are also our earliest witnesses to the emergence of Islam and to its affiliation to the Jewish and Christian traditions. By analysing the relations between Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Armenian sources I shall contribute to the reconstruction of an important cultural landscape, some of whose relics have been definitively lost in recent years. By transcending conventional compartmentalised approaches to textual, figurative and oral traditions, to historiography, apocrypha and sacred topography, I wish to stimulate a new exchange between different disciplines and to explain the salience of findings in the field of the Christian East for a wider community of scholars. This important tradition of learning, and of cultural self-understanding, needs to be revived.

The church of the Holy Cross built by the Armenian king Gagik Artsruni in 915–21 in Lake Van (Turkey)



Adam as the lord of the animal world, to which he has given names (Gen. 2. 19-20), at the centre of the east façade. The first human being is portrayed as an elder, i.e. a contemporary of the universe: in accord with a number of sources preserved in Syriac and Armenian, he maintains his kingly dignity also after the fall. Turning to the rising sun, he represents before the coming Redeemer (Mal. 3. 20; Mt. 24. 27) the entire humankind, from its origins onwards.

