
MICHAEL THE SYRIAN AND HIS SOURCES:
REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY OF MICHAEL THE GREAT AS A
HISTORIOGRAPHER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN HISTORIANS*



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Patriarch Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) wrote his famous *Chronography as a universal history*.¹ J. Tubach describes the work and author as follows:

Bleibenden literarischen Ruhm erwarb sich Michael durch seine Weltgeschichte, die von der Schöpfung bis ins Jahr 1194/5 reicht. Michael teilte die riesige Stoffmenge in drei Kategorien: Kirchengeschichte, Profangeschichte und Verschiedenes. Nach chronologischen Gesichtspunkten geordnet, berichtet er über die geschehenen Ereignisse in drei parallelen Kolumnen. Sein Ideal bei der Darstellung ist Objektivität und chronologische Präzision. Die Beschäftigung mit der Vergangenheit geschieht allerdings nicht um ihrer selbst willen. In der Geschichte sieht Michael Gott am Werk. Sein Walten in der Welt steht in enger Korrelation zum ethischen Verhalten der Menschen. Die Abwendung von Gott bringt nur Unglück. Erdbeben, Mißernten etc. sind eine unmittelbare Folge menschlicher Sünden. Durch die Lektüre vergangener Ereignisse

soll der Leser aus der Geschichte lernen, daß ein echter Gottesglaube seine Hoffnung nicht auf Menschen, Ideologien (Astrologie) etc. setzt und daß die Gleichgültigkeit in religiösen Dingen nur ein Glaube zweiter Wahl wider besseren Wissens ist. Implizit ist die Kirchengeschichte Michaels letztlich eine Apologie des Christentums.²

In order to write this enormous work Michael had to rely, for the most part, on other historiographical works of the previous centuries. Due to the method used by many Syriac authors of quoting and excerpting their sources in order to create their own account—a technique once referred to by Larry Conrad as a layering technique—many otherwise lost works have now been preserved, at least partially, in Michael's *Chronography* and in similar works, most notably the *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234*.³ The study of Michael's selection and editing process will help us in our study and use of these fragments as reflections of the preceding works. In the following study some more general remarks on the use of these fragments will be presented.

The need for a study like this has been indicated by Dorothea Weltecke, who has described the scholarly interest in Michael and his Chronology up until her own time as follows:

Nach hundert Jahren Text- und Quellenkritik lässt sich folgende Bilanz ziehen: Michaels Chronik scheint eine recht bunte, wenn auch "wertvolle Materialsammlung" zu sein, wie es Wolfgang Hage 1992 formulierte. Der Steinbruch erscheint noch lange nicht erschöpft, und der Abbau wird bis in die Gegenwart weiter vorangetrieben. ... Die vollständige Chronik als gewolltes Werk eines Einzelnen wird seit Langlois und Chabot nicht mehr untersucht. Eine Monographie ist nie erschienen. Es scheint, dass dem die Annahme zugrunde liegt, Michaels Chronik sei mehr oder weniger ohne einen willentlichen Akt entstanden, habe sich zufällig aus dem Material ergeben und spiegele höchstens die materiell oder intellektuell eingeschränkte Recherchierfähigkeit des Autors. Dass die Weite seines Horizontes an die Fülle der ihm zur Verfügung stehenden Quellen gebunden ist, versteht sich natürlich. Doch zeichnet sich in der Diskussion um die verlorenen Geschichtswerke eine Erkenntnis ab, die für unsere Fragestellung von einiger Bedeutung ist: Michael hat seine Quellen bearbeitet.⁴

The technique of quotations and excerpts is partly to blame for this use of Michael as a "Steinbruch". However, Michael may well have preserved fragments from his sources, but he did rework ("*bearbeitet*") them. As stated before, Michael did have a plan, and he did write his Chronography with a clear

and particular goal in mind; that of instructing his audience! As a result Andrew Palmer adapts the description of the layering technique as follows:

They [Syriac chroniclers] present themselves as objective analysts, but ... they compiled or composed their texts in retrospect to serve moral, religious and political purposes. ... By careful selection and significant juxtaposition of events they led the reader to draw conclusion by his own intelligence, with a minimum of didactic intrusion of the author's part.⁵

What are the implications of this new assessment of Michael's Chronography and his use of sources, especially for scholars who try to use these fragments to gain an insight into the ideas and ideology of the authors of these fragments? Can we extrapolate any guidelines for the historical usefulness of fragments as a source for the period of the original work and the original author? The aim is eventually to present a more structured account of Michael's working method and—hopefully—provide some additional insights in the "usefulness" of "fragments" for modern research, and on how to handle these fragments. Although similar work has been done for Western Medieval Historiography, this will probably be a first for Syriac Historiography. In this article some first preliminary thoughts will be presented.⁶

Methodologically this aspect of Syriac historiography can best be studied for the period from the 6th century until the 11th/12th century. The main reason is that we can assume that Michael had access to the original source text and did not have to rely on go-between texts. For the preceding period, however, he could only access his

sources through intermediaries, which may have adapted the original text.⁷

For the 6th century Michael used the works of Pseudo-Zachariah of Mitylene (ca. 568)⁸ and John of Ephesus (d. 588).⁹ For later centuries Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845) and Ignatius of Melitene (d. 1095) are the most important sources for his work.¹⁰ Sadly these works have been lost and only fragmentary traces can be found in later Syriac historiography, which has prompted the interest in some form of evaluation in the appreciation of these fragments in the first place.

Of special interest to us are Pseudo-Zachariah, John of Ephesus and Dionysius. Ignatius and Jacob are problematic because they do not seem to have written a narrative text like the other three authors. As a result Michael lifted only short remarks from these texts, which are very difficult to attribute to any particular source and are not very informative about the ideology and perception of history of their original author.¹¹

A study of Michael's use of the works of John and Pseudo-Zachariah—texts that have, in part, been preserved through an independent manuscript tradition—will help to establish Michael's method of use of his major sources, including some indications towards his selection process. These findings may then help interpret some of the larger fragments of Dionysius of Tel Mahre, and especially help to show the potential use of these fragments for historical research but also the limitations forced upon this kind of research.¹²

As stated before, fragments from these sources, most particularly from the Church History of Dionysius, have also been preserved by another so-called compiler / chronicler, the Anonymous Chronicler of

AD 1234.¹³ In addition to the comparison between Michael and the real text of his source, a comparison of the two compilations from the late 12th/early 13th century could help establish some insights on how "representative" of the real work these two collections of fragments are. In addition, a comparison of the anonymous Chronicle and John and Pseudo-Zachariah can shed light on the technique of the Anonymous chronicler.

My preliminary comparison of Michael and John of Ephesus was published in 1998. From this comparison it first became clear that Michael had reduced his source by about 75 percent. In order to adapt his material to his needs, Michael excerpted and rearranged it. At times, he also added brief statements to his excerpts, sometimes within the excerpts and quotations. His more general aim of instructing his audience also came into sharper focus. Part of his instruction seems to have been to arouse his lethargic community and to show them that their church, the Syrian Orthodox community, had always been the heirs of God's community and had always triumphed under pressure. As a result, I made the following statement in my concluding remarks: "Therefore I would argue against attempts to 'reconstruct' sources on the basis of these fragments."¹⁴ This statement has drawn some criticism,¹⁵ and I would argue that some clarification might be useful.

It was never my intention to deny that these fragments have their use for historians who aim to set forth the history of the preceding centuries. My main objective was to argue against "reconstructing" those sources, which gives the impression of a "real", coherent text, to be used as if it were a fragmentarily preserved text like Jacob of

Edessa's Chronicle as preserved in the mutilated manuscript of the British Library.¹⁶ My objection was that a reconstruction on the basis of fragments taken from compilations should be treated differently. The fragmentation in a mutilated manuscript is haphazard; an act of fate. The fragmentation, which forms the basis for a reconstruction of a lost text on the basis of later compilations, is not by accident, but is created out of a wilful act ... sometimes even of several similar acts through the centuries.

To what extent is it possible to make statements about the original work on the basis of these fragments? On the most basic level, events and historical data, which are explicitly mentioned in the text, can and should, with a high probability, be attributed to the original work. For example, dating the ascension to the throne of a certain king or caliph and descriptions of certain political, military or socio-economic events can be extracted from these fragments.¹⁷ However, the lack of a reference to a certain event does not mean that it was not part of the original. One should be careful to argue *e silentio*.

Based on Michael, our knowledge of the history of the heresy of the Tritheites would be minimal, whereas his source, John of Ephesus, has assigned half a book to this religious group.¹⁸

Juxtaposition of certain events, interpreted as potential implicit linking of two events as explanatory for either one of these events, is also more tricky. For example, the assassination of emperor Maurice and the release of al-Mundhir, the Ghassanid king, are located next to each other in the (possible) fragments of Dionysius of Tel Mahre in the Anonymous chronicle up until AD 1234. This link by positioning is not

present in Michael the Great.¹⁹ The Syriac language used in the two fragments also shows no explicit linking between the two fragments. The anonymous compiler in the 13th century probably did want to link these two events together, but we can not conclude from this that Dionysius of Tel Mahre, the source of the fragments, did as well!

Therefore, on a factual level, these fragments do provide us with "contemporary" source material, although we do need to be careful in our interpretation.

In addition, when using these collections of fragments for the study of an attitude or interpretation of a factual event by the author or the community of the author, one must consider the circumstances of their preservation. On the basis of these considerations, we may indicate whether or not some views and perceptions, which may be present in the fragments, can with more or less certainty be ascribed to the original, lost, work.

Statements on the motivation or interpretation are very difficult unless they are explicitly present in the excerpt, but even then a distortion is not unlikely. The same is true of the perspective on history (goal, driving force, etc.). The later author or compiler will only include these if they agree with his own perception and interpretation.

The only time that the attitude of the original author is most probably preserved is when fragments contain elements which are explicitly argued *against* by the later excerptor or whenever fragments run counter to an *explicitly* expressed line of argument or general perspective of the compiler, for example as stated in the introduction or in other meta-historiographical expressions of the excerptor.²⁰

After having established the *implicitly*

expressed general perspective and aim of the compiler on the basis of his own work—sometimes on the basis of a comparison of his use of an also independently preserved source—it is possible to attribute those elements that *run counter* to these aims and perspective to the “original” as well. However, assigning these elements to the original author is only as “trustworthy” as the establishing of the perspective of the compiler is clear.

The problem with this very critical approach is that under these “rules” one can not establish an overlap in perspective between the original author and the compiler. It is only the material that runs counter to what you expect of the compiler, and as such that will result in distortion as well!

As stated before, comparing the fragments preserved in various compilations, which have come into existence *independently* of each other, will help, although both excerptors will have adapted the material. If preserved in both, the perspective can be—to some degree—related to the original author, although one needs to keep in mind that the perspective of two independent compilers living in a similar historical and socio-political context may overlap and differ from the original author living under different circumstances.

In addition, having established a certain framework of thought, which can be assigned to the original author on the basis of these rules, one can then begin to theorise about other elements in the fragments that would also fit this framework and can be clearly found in the fragments from the original works. Even though these may also reflect the view of the compiler, they may well also reflect that of the original author. However, one always has to keep in mind

that these elements should always be treated with an increasing amount of caution and that the attribution is based on rather shaky evidence.

Therefore, when working with fragments, which have been preserved by way of a selection process by a later author, we need to be extra careful when studying topics that transcend the factual material of a fragment. This is especially true in the field of the history of *mentalité* (attitude towards a certain ideology or line of thought), ideology or sociological processes. The fragment and framework and arrangement in which they have been preserved first and foremost reflect the perception and ideology of the compiler, not the original author and his work. As a result, a “reconstruction” from the fragments themselves is never possible. The coherence of the material has been irretrievably lost and only a selection of fragments has been preserved. Statements on the basis of these fragments are possible, and should be made, but one always has to clarify the degree of reliability of the attribution of these ideas to the original author.

In the case of Syriac Historiography and the study of the development of a sense of identity within the Syriac historiographical tradition, this has some important implications. Michael the Great and the Anonymous Chronicle of 1234 have preserved large parts of earlier historiographical works. One would like to use these fragments as testimony of the attitude of the original authors. To do so requires, however, more analysis and much circumspection.

To return to the quotation from Weltecke’s study at the beginning of this brief article, Michael’s Chronography is not a Steinbruch, but it is a triumphal arch, a

work of art. The Arch of Constantine was built by using spolia from many older monuments. Those monuments are lost, but fragments live on through the work of Constantine's architect. However, although one

can admire the technique and the iconography of the fragments, but statements about the aim and intention of the original monuments that were taken apart for the building of this arch are, at best, hypothetical.²¹

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¹J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche 1166-1199*, (4 vol) (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899-1924) (cited as: MS <book>, <chapter> (text pages from vol. IV; translation pages from vol. II or III).

²J. Tubach, "Michael Syrus," *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/m/michael_syr.shtml.

³For references to this 'layering' technique, as Larry Conrad has called it, see J.J. van Ginkel, "Making History: Michael the Syrian and his Sixth-Century Sources," in *VII Symposium Syriacum 1996*, OCA 256, ed. R. Lavenant, S.J. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998), 351-358; J.-B. Chabot, A. Abouna, (*Anonymi auctoris*) *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, CSCO 81, 82, 109, 354 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1916, 1920, 1937, 1974).

⁴D. Weltecke, *Die Beschreibung der Zeiten von Mor Michael dem Grossen (1126-1199). Eine Studie zu ihrem historischen und historiographiegeschichtlichen Kontext*, CSCO 594 (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 14 (italics mine). Weltecke as at least partly remedied the lack of research of Michael in this her own study.

⁵A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), xxviii; also see Fiey, "Les chroniqueurs syriaques avaient-ils le sens critique?," *ParOr* 12 (1984-5) 253-64.

⁶For some first general remarks and an analysis on the basis of a limited text corpus see van Ginkel, "Making History...". The final version with a comparison of all relevant material will be part of my forthcoming study on Michael the Great.

⁷These preceding sources were all originally in Greek. Michael may have had access to some of these works in translation, but it is more likely

that he had only reworked versions of these texts.

⁸Michael refers to Zachariah (of Mytilene), but rather than using the Greek original, he refers to the Syriac Pseudo-Zachariah, who has reworked and added to the Ecclesiastical History of the real Zachariah. E.W. Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta*, CSCO 83, 84, 87, 88, (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1919, 1921, 1924, 1924), (cited as PZ <book>, <chapter> (<text pages>; <translation pages>).

⁹Only Part Three of his Church History has been preserved. E.W. Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesini Historiae Ecclesiasticae Pars Tertia*, CSCO 105, 106 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1935, 1936), (cited as JE <book>, <chapter> (<text pages>; <translation pages>).

¹⁰On the importance of these three see the editorial remark in MS X, 20 (377; 356-357).

¹¹It should be noted that there are some larger fragments from Jacob's Chronicle in Michael, but these refer to much earlier events, even before Christ. Although interesting from the point of view of why Michael included them, these are not useful for a discussion on the use of fragments as a source. Ignatius may be the intermediary for some larger fragments from the Byzantine tradition, although it more likely that his Chronicle consisted of only short lemmas.

¹²This comparison will be published in my study on Michael and his sources.

¹³For a collection of the fragments of Dionysius from the Seventh Century see Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 105-221; on Dionysius and his Church History, see Rudolf Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre, jakobitischer Patriarch von 818-845: zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 25,2 (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1940).

¹⁴van Ginkel, "Making History..." esp. 357

¹⁵For example Weltecke, *Die Beschreibung der Zeiten von Mor Michael dem Grossen*, 148

n.88: "Man darf aber vielleicht diese Skepsis auch nicht zu weit treiben."

¹⁶ E.W. Brooks, "Chronicon Iacobi Edesseni," in E.W. Brooks, I. Guide, I-B. Chabot: *Chronica Minorca* III, CSCO 5, 6 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1905, 1907), 261-327; 197-255.

¹⁷ E.g. M.G. Morony, "Michael the Syrian as a Source for Economic History," *Hugoye* 3.2 (2000) <http://bethmardutho.cua.edu/hugoye/Vol3No2/HV3N2Morony.html>.

¹⁸ JE III, bk 5, ch 1-12 (253-262; 191-198) have not been preserved in Michael's Chronography at all. On Tritheism and the importance of John of Ephesus's testimony see A. van Roey, "La controverse trithéite depuis la condamnation de Conon et d'Eugène jusqu'à la conversion de l'évêque Elie," *Von Kanaan bis Kerala. Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. Dr. J.P.M. van der Ploeg O.P.*, AOAT: Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des AOAT 211, ed. W.C. Delsman e.a. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 487-497; idem, "La controverse trithéite jusqu'à l'excommunication de Conon et d'Eugène (557-569)," *OLP* 16 (1985) 141-165; R. Ebied, A. van Roey, & L. Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum. Anti-Tritheist Dossier*, OLA 10 (Leuven: Department Oriëntalistiek, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1981).

¹⁹ 1234 (218-219; 172); MS X, 24 (388-389; II 375); also see 1234, ch. 137 (281-282; 219-220) on emperor Constans and some notable

events of his time. This material can be found in MS XI, 11 (432; 446: Constans move to the West), MS XI, 12 (433, 451: Easter date), MS XI, 8 (421-422; 432: eclipse [?]), MS XI, 10 (428; 443: famous bishops), MS XI, 8 (423; 433: famous people), the attack on Egypt is not mentioned in MS.

²⁰ For example Dionysius' assumption that originally the Arameans were only living west of the Euphrates, which Michael first quotes and then disputes (MS XII, 16 (522; (III) 76) = 1234 (112-4; 88-90)), cf. MS Appendix II (749-750; 445-446): Note that Michael quotes Dionysius in his Appendix, but has rearranged the material compared to the quotations in book 12 and 1234).

²¹ Hans Peter L'Orange, *Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinobogens* (2 vols.), Studien zur spatantiken Kunstgeschichte 10, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978; repr 1939); Beat Brenk, "Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41, Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday (1987), 103-109; Joseph Alchermes, "Spolia in Roman Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 48 (1994), 167-178; Jas Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian triumph: the art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).