

Michael the Syrian

DATE OF BIRTH 1126
PLACE OF BIRTH Malatya (Melitene)
DATE OF DEATH 7 November 1199
PLACE OF DEATH Monastery of Mar Bar Şauwmō (near
Malatya)

BIOGRAPHY

Michael the Syrian is the name under which this Syrian Orthodox church leader is generally known to the Western world, though in the Syriac tradition he is called Mikha'il Rabō, Michael the Great or Michael the Elder, Rabō being originally used, by Barhebraeus among others, to distinguish him from his namesake Michael II Z'ōrō ('the little', 'the younger'). The Syrians also called him Mikha'il d-Qindasī, after his family. He was son of the priest Elias in Melitene. He grew up in the Monastery of Bar Şauwmō, of which he was elected abbot in 1156. In 1165/66 he declined to succeed John of Mardin as metropolitan of that city, but one year later he was elected patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church and consecrated on 18 November 1166.

As patriarch, he initiated an important reform movement in administrative and canonical matters, such as the relationship between patriarch and synod, and issued regulations concerning the acquisition of episcopal dignity (non-simoniactal and without interference of worldly authorities). He built or restored several important monasteries and churches, including his main patriarchal residence Mar Barsaumō.

Michael made several pastoral journeys to Antioch, Jerusalem and many cities in northern Mesopotamia and Cilicia. His attempts at reform were opposed by some of the Syrian orthodox bishops, who elected his former disciple Theodore bar Wahbun anti-patriarch in 1180, thus creating a schism which only ended with Theodore's death in 1193. He entertained good relations with the crusader secular and ecclesiastical authorities and, generally speaking, with the Armenians, except for the period when the latter recognized the anti-patriarch Theodore.

Michael was highly valued by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus, who invited him several times to Constantinople for

doctrinal discussions. However, he consistently declined, in the same way as he refused to attend the Third Lateran Council, to which he had been invited by the Latin Patriarch of Antioch. His refusal to accept these invitations is possibly motivated by his loyalty to the Muslim rulers who reigned over large parts of the territories where the Syrian Orthodox Church was established.

As well as his chronicle, he wrote several homilies, canons and shorter theological texts.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

Michael's own chronicle

J.-B. Chabot, 'Discours de Jacques (Denys) Bar Salibi à l'intronisation du patriarche Michel le Syrien', *Journal Asiatique* 11 (1908) 87-103 (edition and French trans.)

Anonymi Auctoris chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens II, ed. J.-B. Chabot (CSCO 82), Louvain, 1953; French trans. (CSCO 354), Louvain, 1974

Kirakos of Gantzak, *Patmut'yun Hayots' (History of Armenia)*, ed. K. Melik'-Awhanjanyan, Yerevan, 1961; French trans. M. Bosset, *Deux histoires arméniennes Kirakos de Gantzac XIII^e s.*, St Petersburg, 1870, pp. 78-79 (a brief remark about his presence at the coronation of the Armenian King Leo II in 1187)

Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum, ed. J.-B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy, vol. ii, Paris, 1874, vol. iii, Paris, 1877

Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Syriacum, ed. P. Bedjan, Paris, 1890; trans. E.W. Budge, *The chronography of Gregory Abu'l-Faraj, the son of Aaron, the Hebrew physician, commonly known as Barhebraeus*, Oxford, 1932

Secondary

W. Witakowski, 'Syriac historiographical sources', in M. Whitby (ed.), *Byzantines and crusaders in non-Greek sources 1025-1204*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 255-58

D. Weltecke, *Die 'Beschreibung der Zeiten' von Mōr Michael dem Grossen (1126-1199). Eine Studie zu ihrem historischen und historiographiegeschichtlichen Kontext* (CSCO 594), Louvain, 2003

H. Kaufhold, 'Zur syrischen Geschichte des 12. Jahrhunderts. Neue Quellen über Theodoros Bar Wahbūn', *Oriens Christianus* 74 (1993) 115-51

J. Tübach, art. 'Michael Syrus', in *Biographisch-bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon*, Herzberg, 1970-

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Maktbōnut Zabnē, Maktab Zabnē,
'Chronography'

DATE Between 1195-96 and 7 November 1199

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

DESCRIPTION

Michael's work is a universal chronicle, beginning with the creation and ending three or two years before his own death. It is divided into 21 books and a number of appendices (for a survey, see Weltecke, pp. 127-28). The historiographical material is presented in three columns, the first on church history, the second secular history, and the third noteworthy occurrences ('incidents and miracles'; on this division, see Weltecke, pp. 163-78). Michael's chronicle is based on many earlier historiographical works, fragments of which are frequently quoted *verbatim*. These sources are mostly Greek and Syriac (among them Dionysius of Tell-Maḥrē [q.v.]), but Michael also consulted Muslim Arabic works, though without naming them. His Muslim sources include a lost Arabic work that was also known to Ibn al-Athīr, and in Book 14 an account on the history of the Turks (Witakowski, p. 259).

The chronicle has many important *lacunae* in Books 17 and 18, which can be partly filled in with the help of the ecclesiastical history of Gregory Barhebraeus, who used Michael's chronicle as one of his principal sources and frequently quoted him *verbatim*.

The last three books are observations and reflections about contemporary events.

SIGNIFICANCE

Michael's chronicle is one of the works that allows for a partial reconstruction of the *Chronicle* of Dionysius of Tell-Maḥrē (q.v.), especially the passages on Muḥammad and the beginnings of Islam.

Like Dionysius, Michael records a number of developments pertaining to Islamic history in general, sometimes interpreted from the perspective of the leader of the most important Christian community of Syria and eastern Anatolia. Thus, he not only mentions names and deeds of rulers (e.g. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn), local governors, generals and other political leaders, but also their attitude towards Christians in general or, more particularly, to his own community, as well as the practice

for Christian leaders to receive their 'diploma' from the hands of Muslim officials.

He describes a number of encounters (official, informal, juridical) between Muslims and Christians. Especially noteworthy is his encounter (Book 21) with the Seljuk Sultan Qilij Arslan II in Melitene, where Michael was allowed to explain his faith (probably the Trinity) on the basis of arguments from 'the Gospel and nature', possibly an allusion to the Trinitarian analogies often used as arguments by Christians in discussions with Muslims. About the contents of his conversations with the Persian philosopher Kamāl al-Dīn, who was working at the court of Qilij Arslan II, nothing is known except that they discussed interpretation of the scriptures. Another important encounter took place with one of the generals of the Zangid ruler Sayf al-Dīn of Mosul, in which Michael shows he is acquainted with the Qur'ānic verse 'There is no constraint in religion' (Q 2:256); he uses this to show that princes are not allowed to settle matters of faith 'by the sword' (Book 20).

Like Dionysius, he gives information – contemporary, as an eyewitness, or based on older sources – on issues such as tax collection, apostasy, destruction and rebuilding of churches, raids and conquests, protection or persecution of Christians, and their social position.

MANUSCRIPTS

MS Edessa (1598; Rahmani and Chabot (1899) are copies of this)

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, s.l., s.n., 2006

Gregorius Ṣalībā Shem'un, *The general Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, ed. Y. Ibrahim, Aleppo, 1996 (Arabic trans.)

J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)*, Paris, 1899-1924, vol. iv (Syriac text); vols i-iii (French trans.)

Zhamanakagrut'iwn ex yatags k'ahanut'ean teaṛn Mikayēli Asorwots' Patriark'i, Jerusalem, 1871 (Armenian trans.; partial French trans. E. Delaurier, 'Extrait de la chronique de Michel le Syrien, traduit de l'Arménien', in *Recueil des historiens des croisades. Documents arméniens*, 2 vols, Paris, 1869-1906, i, pp. 309-409

Teaṛn Mihkayēli Patrark'i Asorwoy Zhamanakagrut'iwn, Jerusalem, 1870 (Armenian trans.; French trans. of one of the MSS used for this edition, V. Langlois, *Chronique de Michel le Grand, patriarche des Syriens jacobites*, Venice, 1868, pp. 281-361)

STUDIES

- W. Witakowski, 'Syriac historiographical sources', in Whitby, *Byzantines and crusaders in non-Greek sources*, 253-82 (with extensive bibliography)
- T. Greenwood, 'Armenian sources', in Whitby, *Byzantines and crusaders in non-Greek sources*, 221-52, particularly pp. 244-45
- J. van Ginkel, 'Michael the Syrian and his sources. Reflections on the methodology of Michael the Great as a historiographer and its implications for modern historians', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 6 (2006) 53-60
- J.J. van Ginkel, 'The perception and presentation of the Arab conquest in Syriac historiography. How did the changing social position of the Syrian orthodox community influence the account of their historiographers?', in E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas (eds), *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, 171-84
- Weltecke, *Die 'Beschreibung der Zeiten'*
- H. Suermann, 'The Turks in Michael the Syrian', *The Harp* 5 (1991) 39-51

Memrō

DATE Between 1159 and 1199

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

DESCRIPTION

This poem, which is no longer extant, was about the steadfastness of a Syrian Orthodox girl who resisted pressure exerted by Muslim doctors from Mosul to convert to Islam, and also about a Maphrian who was put into jail by the Muslims for his principled attitude in matters of religion.

Information about this poem and its contents is given by Barhebraeus, in *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, ed. J.-B. Abbe-loos and T.J. Lamy, 3 vols, Louvain, 1872-77, iii, pp. 347-52. Dionysius bar Salibi (q.v.) also wrote two poems on the same theme.

SIGNIFICANCE

At the least, the poem attests to continuing resentment between Muslims and Christians, and to the difficulties Christians might easily

encounter in Muslim company, where religious differences could lead to religious discrimination or worse.

MANUSCRIPTS —

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS —

STUDIES —

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