
It is possible to negate the existence of an entire culture simply by omission. This has been the case with an ethnic group known as the Syrian Orthodox (referred to in English as the Syriac Orthodox), who played a vital role in the early development and dissemination of Christianity. The Syriac Orthodox rejected the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and emerged as an ethnic people with their own distinct identity and culture. For centuries, the West has ignored this tenacious tradition but more recently European scholars are addressing the issues of Syriac literature, music and art, as exemplified in publications emanating from Leiden University, in the Netherlands and Oxford University, England. The sudden interest may have been heightened by today’s political and military upheavals which have threatened the Christian patrimony of what was once Mesopotamia. Snelders’ book is one of the fruits of a pioneering project entitled, The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians (451-1300) funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research.

This latest title in the series challenges the notion that a distinct division existed between Christian and Muslim in the multicultural Medieval East; Snelders attempts to establish the idea of a shared visual vocabulary among Christians and Muslims alike in the Middle East of the twelve and thirteenth centuries. Working essentially with two similar thirteenth-century Syriac illuminated manuscripts, (Syriac 7170 presently in the British Library and Syriac 559 in the Vatican Library) Snelders suggests that because of the prevalent syncretism, particularly in the Mosul area, it is sometimes virtually impossible to establish the religious background of an artist based on style. Snelders proposes as identity-markers three factors: style, iconography and inscriptions. Making his case slowly and dealing with much of the previous literature on the topic of Syriac art, Snelders discounts arguments in favor of a distinct Syriac iconography and style while, on the other hand, acknowledging Christian superiority in the areas of education, craftsmanship, and trade in medieval Mesopotamia.

The argument for an Islamic style in Christian art of the Mosul area is somewhat compelling; however, Snelders does not present us with enough visual information to clearly make his case. He stipulates the importance of assessing this art contextually but when discussing the two manuscripts in question, that together contain more than one hundred illuminations, Snelders provides us with fewer than ten illustrations. The reader is thus left at a disadvantage. More illustrations of these and other extant Syriac manuscripts would have further enlightened the reader and may have convinced some of Snelders’ “shared style” theory rather than the prevalent and widely-accepted theory of “regional style” that has been promulgated by such art historians as Jules Leroy and André Grabar.

Other than a comprehensive bibliography (despite the lacunae of the significant work of Sylvie Merian in Syriac and Armenian bookbinding) the supplementary material of the book is lacking; for most Westerners a good map of medieval Mesopotamia would have been enlightening, and a less cumbersome system of indexes, would have facilitated easy access to the book’s lengthy text. These are minor inconveniences that should not overshadow Snelders’ success in addressing a complex cultural history and investigating a visual and material culture that has been neglected for far too long.

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