

THE SYRIAN EAST

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“ASSYRIANS” OR ARAMEANS ?

In the first volume of the Magazine¹, Mgr G. Khouri-Sarkis posed the following question: “To what extent does the expression ‘Assyrian Church’ correspond to a historic reality?”

To begin answering this thorny question, I feel that my essay on *Christian protohistory of the Turkish Hakkari*² demonstrated the presence of natives in these mountains and their christianization since the first centuries A.D. Are we now in a position to take a step further by declaring that these people that we call “Assyrians” are really the “genuine and sole descendants”³ of the ancient Assyrians, who withdrew to the Hakkari mountains following the fall of their empire, in 612 B.C. ?

They certainly believe it themselves today, and their homes are decorated with lithographic prints of Semiramis on her chariot; their Christmas cards show Assurbanipal driving a spear in the mouth of a lion; their children are named Sargon and Sennacherib.

But are they really from the race of the fierce Assyrian conquerors of yore? In French and in English the similarity of names is complete. In Arabic it tends to become similar; whereas a few years ago the distinction between the ancient Ashuraya and the modern Athuraya was carefully maintained⁴, today the latter make claim of the first name. Are they justified?

One of the first champions for this proposition was the scholar Mgr. Addai Scher. In his *History of Chaldea and Assyria*⁵ he devoted three full pages of the preface to support the thesis.

In brief, the prelate maintains that in antiquity the indivisible appellation *Chaldean-Athoraya* applied to one and the same people, who shared the same language, civilization and customs. If they failed to identify themselves as Chaldeans, it was because by then the name had become synonymous with pagan astrologers, while they themselves had become Christians.

1 The Syrian East, vol. 1 (1956) p. 10

2 The Syrian East, vol. IX (1964), p. 443-472.

3 P. Rondot, *The Christians of the East*, (Notes of Africa and Asia, vol. 4) Paris 1955, ch. 8, p. 152-170 : The Assyrians, here p. 152.

4 The distinction does not exist anymore in the *Selected List of Modern Literary Arabic*, compiled by the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies, Shemlan, Lebanon 1959, p. 132.

5 *Kaldu wa Athur*, vol. 2, p. a, b, c.

It is not within the scope of this paper to ascertain whether the Nestorians of Cypress were justified, upon return to the Catholic Church in 1444, to petition Eugene IV that henceforth they be called Chaldeans⁶. Suffice it however that we consider here the mysterious paths taken by the word “Assyrians”.

SYRIANS AND ASSYRIANS

If in fact the name “Chaldeans” was forsaken by the ancients, the name “Assyrians” was to have an even more tormented fate. Since before Christianity, Greek and Latin authors seem to have used the words “Assyrians” and “Syrians” indiscriminately⁷. Linguists claim that the latter word is but an abbreviated form of the first, simply dropping the prefatory, which is some sort of (proto)hittite article⁸. If a distinction had to be made between the two names, certain scholars of Greek studies tended to believe that the Suriyo more likely described the non-Assyrian tribes of the Assyrian empire⁹. Among these tribes, the Aramaeans were obviously in a predominant position¹⁰. Along this line, Posidonius (around 150 B.C.), claimed that those whom the Greeks called Syrians referred to themselves as Aramaeans¹¹. And in the 6th century A.D., Simeon of Beth Arsham indiscriminately referred to Patriarch Acace as Assyrian or Aramaean.¹²

Under the Greek-Roman administration, the name Syrians wins over its rival, but it is not immediately that it becomes synonymous with “christians”, because the great province of Syria, the center of which was Antiochia, was a civilian diocese as well as a religious one. As a matter of fact and up until our time the name Syrians has always had a double meaning, sometimes

6 The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (ed. 1961, London, OUP) in Chaldean Christians, (p. 259) does not hide its scepticism on this point: □convenient, if not very appropriate title□.

7 It would be beyond my subject and competence to attempt a summary of the use of the words: Asurios, Surios, Suros, depending on the different periods. The Hebrew Bible recognizes only the word Aram, and Homer speaks of Arimoi. Herodotus, in the Vth century B.C., seems to be the first to use sometimes □Syrians□ and sometimes □Assyrians□ (II, 12, etc.), but appears to think (VII, 13) that this latter word is barbaric form. (Refer to D.G. Hogarth, art. Syria, in Encyclopedia Biblica, IV (1903), col. 4845, and Encyclopedia Britannica, XXI (1929) p. 715). Later authors (Xenophone, Anabase I. 4 and Cyr. 2. 5; Strabon 16,737; Pline, etc.) Are also always vague in the use of names. An essay of classification has been attempted by L. Dilleman, Higher Mesopotamia, p. 86-88, based on the works of Noeldeke, Schwartz and Honigmann.

8 Refer to E. Honigmann and A. Maricq, Reaserches on the Gestae Divi Saporis p. 45 no. 1 - Meanwhile, there is a district, probably in the northern Euphrates, mentioned by Babylonians under the name of Suri, which evidently is not the classical Assyria. Refer to Enc. Bibl. And Brit. Cit. - In another way it is difficult to tell what distinction makes Theodoret de Cyr, Hist. Eccl. Lib. I compare 7 (P. G., vol. 82 p. 917-918) between Syrians and Assyrians who all call Nisibe the Antiochia of Mygdonia.

9 Black, Bible Dictionary, 1954, p. 720-721

10 It should be pointed out that the ancient Aramaeans, whose different groups spread over these areas since the XIVth century B.C., often foud themselves struggling against the Assyrians, before being subdued by them. Refer to Aram Naharaim, of the late F. Roger T. O□Callahan (Pont. Inst. Bibl., 1948, Acta Orientalis 26, p. 93-97, 100-105, with map (No. III) of the Aramo-Assyrian period (1350-1000).

11 Greek text in Dilleman, cit. P. 86; the same with Strabon, cited in D. B. , see Syria by A. Legendre, vol. 5, col. 1930-1948.

12 Letter, in B.O., vol. I, p. 204 and 351.

signifying the inhabitants of the country called Syria, and sometimes the “Syriac” Christians; the Arab translators of the Encyclopedia of Islam, in the article about Irbil for example, are not always clear.

When the word “Assyrian” or “Syrian” came to signify “Christian”, it didn’t have any proper ethnic reference, but more and more it became synonymous with “Aramaean”¹³, whence Beth Aramaye would soon be called Suristan or Athorestan, in other words: Assyria. Noeldeke was the first to notice¹⁴, and Honigmann and Maricq established¹⁵, that with the Greek and Latin authors the name Assyria sometimes retains the classical meaning and signifies the ancient empire, therefore roughly the great Adiabene, and sometimes it designates the Sassanian royal province, anchored by the cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, hence the classical Babylonia, the future Al-Iraq al-Arabi. For Trajan, as for the Sassanians, and probably also for the Parthians, the province of Assyria covered southern Mesopotamia¹⁶.

Meanwhile, whatever political names used, the Christians have always held to the name of Beth Aramaye for Babylonia, and have always reserved the name of Athor for classical Assyria¹⁷.

But here a remark needs to be made which I believe to be important and which derives from the morphological comparison of the two appellations, Beth Aramaye and Athor. The first comprises an ethnique, it is the district where Aramaeans live; the second is a purely historical survival of the past of the glorious Assur, and I have never encountered the appellation Beth Athoraye¹⁸.

This having been said, we can predict all the misunderstandings that this ambiguity couldn’t fail to engender, and which in fact it did engender¹⁹ -- the ambiguity between the two Assyrias, a civil administrative term for the south and a classic term adopted by the Christians for the north.

13 Already with Josephe (refer to Res Gestae, p. 49, no.2 and p. 45) and with the LXX, who translate the Hebrew Aram as Suria, refer to Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. James Hastings, vol. 12 (1921 and 1934) col. 164 b., and Syrians (or Arameans) by Frederic Macler. Also see the Jerusalem Bible, see II. Mach, 15:36, p. 320, note d.

14 In Hermes, vol. 5 (1870) p. 443 sq.

15 Meanwhile, a conflicting note in Dilleman, cit. P. 288-289.

16 Complements to Researches on the Res Gestae, in Syria, vol. 35 (1958) notably p. 349; and The Province of Assyria created by Trajan, in Syria, vol. 36 (1959) p. 254-263 and the map p. 258, by A. Maricq.

17 Babylonia, Persia and Athor were the three central regions of the Syrian Church of the East, according to patriarch Timothee, Letter to the monks of Mar Maron, ed. Mgr. Bidawid, p. 85, trans. P. 117, and according to Thomas de Marga, Book of Governors, vol. II, p. 40. Therefore, it would appear quite improper to call all the church with the name of what was but a part of it, the province of Athor (see province of Ishoq̄yaw, metropolitan of Erbil, Letters; CSCO, lat. P. 81) this means the country of Mossoul, even if its inhabitants are “the wisest, the best made, and the most handsome of all men” (Bar Hebraeus, *The candelabrum of Sanctuaries*, trans. Fr. By Jean Bakos, P.O., vol. 22, fasc. 4, p. 98; fourth climate. See in note 6 a quotation parallel to that of Moise bar Kipho).

18 At the very most we must mention that Thomas de Marga, in the IXth century, uses in his poems the name of *the city of Athoraye* for Mossul. Bk. II, p. 368.

19 Res Gestae, p. 50; The Province, p. 256.

In summary, therefore, maybe we can say the following: From ancient Assyria the name, abbreviated to “Syria”, is given to a vast Roman province; when the Aramaeans of this province became Christians, the name “Syrian” becomes synonymous with “Christian”; finally, if Maricq is right, the long journey of the name must have come to an end when, because of the Christianity of its Aramaean inhabitants, Babylonia in its turn is called Assyria.

In the mean time, the racial entities were well-blurred. The Syrians, that is the Christians of the north and the south of Iraq, and notably the Athorians of the region of Nineveh, were not only of the Aramaean stock, but offered a mixture of all races. Medes, Persians, Parthians, Jews, Kurds, and not excluding the descendants of the ancient Assyrians, all melted inside the great Syrian Church. From 424 A.D., this church is split in the western and eastern churches, and the Christological heresies, like the wars between the Persians and Romans, quickly upset the borders between the two rites and caused a further soldering of the races.

The only point that can be put forward with certainty is that, for historians of religions and the liturgists, the Aramaeans of the south and the inhabitants of Athor in the north are “Syrians”, of the east or of the west. From the point of view of faith, they are Nestorians or Monophysites.

And the names continue their saraband. We find the whole range of names among the Oriental authors of the XIth, XIIth and XIIIth centuries, who indifferently apply the names Syrians, Athorians, Chaldeans, and even Babylonian²⁰.

ROMAN USAGE

The documents of the pontifical chancellery, which have multiplied as a result of the attempts toward unification in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, have tried to put some order in the appellations. There is still some wavering. For example, the representative of Rome, Leonard Abel, in 1597, uses the terms “Chaldean nation in Assyria” or “Assyrian nation” without distinction, and goes on to localize Mosul, that is Djesirat ibn Omar, in Babylonia²¹; the official documents place Mossul “in Assyria Orientali”²². Awdisho IV Marun (1555-1571), the successor of Sulaqa, is sometimes called by Rome “patriarch of Assyrians and Chaldeans”, but most of the times he is the “patriarch of the Assyrians and of Mossul”, or “patriarch of the Assyrians of the east”²³.

In 1582, the representative, in Rome, of Simon IX Denha, the metropolitan of Amedia, Eliya Hormizd, calls himself “Chaldean of Assyria” and asks cardinal Caraffa that his nation “not be called Nestorians anymore but oriental Chaldeans of Catholic Assyria”²⁴. In fact, a document in 1610 talks about “Oriental Chaldeans”²⁵.

20 Based on their very documents Assemani calls them, sometimes, Chadaei seu Assyrii, Syri Nestoriani, or Babylonii. Refer to B.O., vol. 3/2, p. 1, 3, etc., Table p. 957- yielding to Arab usage, Mari, Liber Turris, lat. P. 24, ar. P. 28, calls Beth Aramaye, the region of Nabateans.

21 Genuinae Relationes, p. 115-116, 118, 121.

22 Ibid. P. 15, 24, 32, 52, 63, 64.

23 Ibid. P. 52 to 75.

24 Ibid. P. 91, 97.

Meanwhile, a line of conduct is being created, and as was remarked by H.E. cardinal Tisserant²⁶, Rome gives the successors of Sulaqa (the Simons) the title of “patriarch of the Assyrians of the east”, and to those of Simon bar Mama (the Elies) the title of “patriarch of Babylon”. In reality, Assyria proper did not depend on the patriarch of the “Assyrians of the east”, because the delimitation of territories, as it was fixed in 1610²⁷, assigned to Elie VII, patriarch of Babylone, an eparchy extending from Amedia to Assyria, Babylonia and Basrah, up to Erbil, the Hakkari and Persia, i.e., roughly the present-day Iraq, plus a part of southern Turkey, whereas Simon X, “patriarch of the Assyrians of the east”, ruled from Persia to Djulamerk and from Seert to Amed.

If Rome would henceforth hold on to these appellations, the interested parties themselves would never use them. Next to his title of Patriarch of Babylon, Elie VIII also uses the title of Patriarch of the East²⁸ and Servant of the seat of Saint Thaddaeus. On the other hand, Simon V (Simon VIII Denha), when writing to Clement X in 1670, calls himself equally “servant of the patriarchal seat which is in the East”²⁹.

Beginning from 1681, with the conversion to Catholicism of the archbishop of Amedia and his patriarchal induction under the name of Joseph 1st, there will be three patriarchs: One Joseph, “patriarch of Chaldeans”, or “patriarch of Babylon” at Amadia, another Simon at the Turco-Iranian border, and a third Elie in Mesopotamia, with its seat in Rabban Hormizd or at Mosul itself.

In summary, the documents from Rome show the use of the title Assyria, from the XVIth to the XVIIIth centuries, to designate the patriarch of the Turco-Persian confines, when the patriarch on whom depended the ancient Athor is called patriarch of Babylon. Evidently, it was enough to understand one another, but geography and history seem to have had but a meager role to play in assigning the different titles. Again, before speaking of Assyrians, one would have to see how the name was translated (by the Maronite secretaries) in Syriac and in Arabic, when these texts were sent to their destinations; was it Athoraye? Or Suraye? Unfortunately only the Latin or Italian originals seem to subsist.

HOW DID THEY DESIGNATE THEMSELVES ?

As to the people, those who today claim the name Assyrian, how did they call themselves ? We had to wait for the XIXth century and the Protestant missionaries who lived among them to have some testimony on this subject.

Dr. Asahel Grant, for example, who in 1844 published his stupendous work *The Nestorians or the Lost Tribes*³⁰, does not mention a single time the name of Assyrians. If we object that he didn't do it because he didn't want to compromise his less probable theory that the

25 Ibid. P. 108.

26 Nestorian Art (church) in DTC, col. 231.

27 *Genuinae Relationes*, p. 110-114.

28 Ibid. P. 143.

29 Ibid. P. 202.

30 London, Murray 1844.

Nestorians represent the rest of the ten Jewish tribes that had disappeared, we can take the work of a man who knew them well, i.e., the Rev. G.P. Badger. In his classic work *The Nestorians and their Rituals*, which appeared in 1852³¹, he never calls them Assyrians. This becomes more striking when Badger, in order to set straight Dr. Grant's extravagance, makes "some remarks on the names by which the Nestorians identify themselves"³². Several names are mentioned, but not the Assyrians³³.

Similarly, *The History of the Mission of the American Board : Churches of the East*³⁴, by R. Anderson, contains several chapters on the mission to the Nestorians. One of the chapters³⁵ is titled "The Mission to Assyria", but the author hastens to specify³⁶ that "the Mission of Assyria has been so called for geographic reasons". And we see that, in fact, the mission was concerned about other Christians besides the Nestorians. Four chapters of this book are devoted to "Nestorians"³⁷ and takes us up to 1870 without the author mentioning the name of Assyrians for a single time. At this date, the Mission is transferred to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and named "Mission to Persia", because henceforth it limits itself to the region of Urmia.

1886: ORIGIN OF THE AMBIGUITY

Meanwhile things had begun to change. In 1867, the "Christians of Assyria, usually called Nestorians" had addressed to the Church of England, via the intermediary of the archbishops of Canterbury and York, a call for help, in order to rescue them out of their "great ignorance and obscurantism". In 7th of January 1870, the Archbishop of Canterbury transmitted their letter to the Anglican faithful³⁸. Under the pen of the prelate, already once in the text, the name "Christians of Assyria" becomes "Christian Assyrians". It should be noted, however, that this is only an adjective with geographical value, and not an affirmation of a belonging as was the case with the expression "Assyrian Christians". In fact, the only claims that they consider to be rightful are aimed at the generosity of the Anglicans.

In the summer of 1876, an emissary of the Archbishop is dispatched to visit the districts of Hakkari and Urmia, to study the situation and to evaluate the needs. His trip is financed by the two *Societies for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and for the Propagation of the Gospel*. The emissary, named Lewes Cutts, would publish two works in 1877. The first is an official

3131. 2 vol. London, 1852.

32 Vol. 1, p. 223-224.

33. Meanwhile, in p. 179 and 190, he is ready to admit a certain Assyrian descendance □among all the people of the region, Nestorians, Jacobites, Sabeans, Yezidis, and many among the Kurds□.

34. Vol. 4, Boston 1875.

35. Ch. 27, p. 78-106.

36. p. 83.

37. Ch. 28, 29, 36, and 37; p. 107-149, 280-323.

38. Extensively reproduced by CUTTS, Crescent. P. 348.

report to the Archbishop and to the two societies who had supported the expedition. It is titled *The Assyrian Christians*, which means the “Christians of Assyria”³⁹. Except in the title, the word Assyrians is never mentioned in the report, and throughout the document the talk is about “Nestorians”.

The same year of 1877, Cutts also published, for the public at large, a description of his voyage, under the title of *Christians under the Crescent in Asia*. The word “Assyrian” is used twice: At the end of a nomenclature of Eastern communities (p. 344-345) we come upon the “Christian Assyrians” or rather “Christians of Assyria”. It is clearly specified whose *descendants and representatives they are* : but it is not yet the question of Assyrians, “as the usual misconstruing of the antedate” might induce us to expect it, but simply *of the ancient Church of the further East*.

While summing up elsewhere in (ch. XV) *the history of Nestorians*, Cutts again specifies that “by race” as well as by “ecclesiastical lineage”, modern Nestorians are the descendants of the ancient eastern Christians. There is never any attempt to claim another lineage.

Reinforcing the fact that the author does not have ethnic implications in mind is his usage of the same term to denote the “Jacobites, or the Monophysite Assyrians”⁴⁰.

We shall point out that here, for the first time, the word “Assyrians” has become concrete. Cutts, therefore, talks about “Assyrians”, but to designate the Jacobites.

Meanwhile, we see how easy it would be to pass from *Assyrian Christians*, the Christians of Assyria, to *Christian Assyrians*, the Christian Assyrians.

The official action taken in response to the survey and report of Cutts was the creation, by Archbishop Benson in 1886, of The Archbishop’s Assyrian Mission, i.e., the Archepiscopal Mission of Assyria.

We can guess, through the works of Cutts, why the name was chosen. The Mission couldn’t, at any price, be called “Nestorian”. The interested parties themselves didn’t designate themselves by this name and claimed that their church was older than Nestorius; moreover the *solemn conviction* of the author⁴¹, following a report by Badger to the *Church Conference of Liverpool* in 1869, was that the “so-called Nestorians” did not profess the heresy of Nestorius, and in any case would be completely ready to adopt the formulas of the council of Ephesus, if the Church of England came to their rescue.

From the point of view of the Anglican Church, to call the Mission “Nestorian” would seem to indicate a will to convert, because the readers of Gibbon could not ignore the doctrinal repercussions of the name. Whereas, the Archbishop had already said in his letter of 1870, the

39. Here I would like to thank Mr. J.P.G. Finch, who kindly accepted to go to London and to go through these two works for me, going all the way to Lambert Palace to find the report, and who made useful suggestions on the psychological elements of the choice. The complete title of the report is : *The Assyrian Christians. Report of a journey undertaken by desire of His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury and His Grace the Archbishop of York to the Christians in Koordistan and Oroomiah, by the Rev. Edward L. Cutts, B.A.*, by B. Clay, Sons and Taylor, London 1877.

40. In 1934-1935 an Orthodox Syrian becomes the president of The National Assyrian Federation of America (refer to: *The British Betrayal of the Assyrians*, Chicago 1935, by Yusuf Malek, himself a Chaldean of Tell Kaif, p. 102). There he says: □the Jacobites are Jacobites only because of their religious faith; they are Assyrians by virtue of their nationality□. Similarly, at present in Marseille, a Syrian Orthodox is president of the Commmity of Assyrian Mutual Help.

41. *Crescent*, p. 232-233.

objective is not to make converts for the Church of England, but to help them reform their own Church, where it is needed, on a “primitive” basis and according to “primitive” models. Cutts having already followed this line of action, criticizes the American missionaries he had met, because they had acted differently.

Therefore, If the Mission couldn’t be called “Nestorian”, the most simple thing was to hold on to an approximate geographical appellation: the Mission of Assyria. They did not press upon the relationship with the ancient Assyrians, who might not have been very sympathetic to these great lecturers of the Bible who were the Victorians, but it was fair for the promoters of a subscription to play on the infatuation with regard to all the things that were coming from Assyria, where the all new archaeological discoveries were firing up enthusiasm in England.

Later, in 1910, writing a book on *The Assyrian Church*, the Rev. W.A. Wigram, a member of the Mission, would never call his members “Assyrians”, he would only speak of (p. 23) The Church of Assyria and, elsewhere (p. 309) of Jacobites and of Nestorians, while adding the remark that “in effect, since they had accepted the label given to them by others, maybe we too can make use of it”. In his Foreword (p. VII and VIII), Wigram made it very clear that the name of Assyrian Church was adopted only because all other names (Eastern, Persians, Syrians, Chaldeans, Nestorians) had already been used by other groups or they would become a source of error for the English reader. That’s why all these names had been abandoned and a word was selected “that at least had the merit of being familiar to the friends of this Church today”. But it is understood that “there is no historical authority for this name”⁴².

Another member of the Mission of the Archbishop, the Rev. G.J. Mc Gillivray⁴³ also explains the title: “Why the Mission was called Assyrian, it is a little difficult to understand. The people themselves do not call themselves Assyrians but Syrians, or, if they want to distinguish themselves from the western Syrians, they call themselves Syrians of the East. The only reason to call them Assyrians is that they occupy a portion of what was the Assyrian empire, but that became, equally, at other times, part of different other empires. The title, at all events, has the advantage of being picturesque”.

The name was adopted and stayed. Henceforth it is found in all works dealing with the minorities of this corner of the world. One of the first authors to use the new name may be H. Rassam, in *Ashur and the Land of Nimrod*⁴⁴.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that even the authors who use the name Assyrians, do not thus recognize, ipso facto, the ethnic origin of those who bear it. In fact the question had not yet been raised at this time, even by the Nestorians themselves. Sir Harry Luke, for example, in *Mosul and its Minorities*⁴⁵ respects the convention made with respect to their name, but when he tells their history at length, he always calls them Nestorians⁴⁶. He begins to use the name

42. In the same sense, the author P.F. W. Anderson, S.J., in A sketch of the ethnical... position in Transjordan, Syria and Iraq (Eastern Churches Quarterly, vol. 8 (1949) p. 106), would say: □The terms Chaldean and Assyrian, which evoke memories of past greatness, have little genuine ethnic significance□.

43. Through the East to Rome, London, Burns 1931, p. 30.

44. p. 148.

45. London, Hopkinson 1925.

46. With the exception of one instance, p. 64.

Assyrians only after mentioning the Mission of the Archbishop. As to their racial belonging, he never raises the question⁴⁷.

S. H. Longrigg, a historian of modern Iraq⁴⁸ very often mentions the Assyrians, but he is far from conclusive on their identity when he writes: “These Eastern Syrians, or Nestorians, or Assyrians, shepherds and farmers, were an ancient Christian millet, [millet means nation in Turkish. Translator], with Syriac language, and of an uncertain origin and blood”.

It appears, therefore, that, approximately until the war of 1914, the name “Assyrians” was used only for its convenience, to avoid the name Nestorians, while at the time the problem of its ethnic accuracy did not bother too many people, least of all, those to whom the name was given.

ASSYRIANS ?

But the time arrived when the official claim of the title would be recorded. In 1929, completely reversing his position of 1910, the Rev. W.A. Wigram published in London *The Assyrians and Their Neighbours*, where he devotes an entire chapter (p. 177-185) to the question of *Ancient and Modern Assyrians*. He, henceforth, categorically asserts that the existing “Assyrian, Chaldean, Nestorian represents the ancient Assyrian stock, the subjects of Sargon and Sennacherib, to the extent that this very distinguished type still exists”.

The reasons given, the same ones the Assyrians actually put forward, are developed along the chapter and summed up at the end (p. 184-185): “The race of the modern Assyrians, who live in the same country of the ancient bearers of the name, who use a form of the same language and the same writing as that of their predecessors, who have the same features, and who through their very traditions claim their descent as a matter of fact, can be correctly considered to represent the ancient race”. In the course of the chapter, Wigram examines the five reasons: habitat, tradition, features, costume and language. Let us consider these briefly.

A) Habitat

“At the beginning of the Christian era, says the author, we find them in ancient Assyria, and there is no trace of a large emigration or immigration in the interval.”

In the study of the Turkish Hakkari we saw that, if not “in the beginning of the Christian era”, then at least since the time we have documents on the subject, there were already peoples strongly resembling our modern Assyrians, living in the districts of Tyari, Diz, Baz, Djilu, Tkhuma and Urmia. Is it accurate to call this the “ancient Assyria”?

The supporters of this proposition must, therefore, have recourse to a migration from Athor. There is an ancient tradition in favor of such a migration, that has already been collected by Cutts in 1876, therefore before the selection of the appellation. But when did the exodus take place? Logic required that it be placed at the time of the fall of Nineveh, in 612 B.C.. At such a distance from us, the fact would be unverifiable, and if it couldn't be proved, it couldn't be rejected right away either; at least the point wouldn't be lost to the defense.

47. Still another Anglican missionary, the Rev. A. J. Mc Lean, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12 (1921), see Syrian Christians, not a single time does he speak of Assyrians, with the exception of mentioning (col. 130 b) the Assyrian Mission.

48. In Iraq, 1900 to 1950, OUP, 1953, text p. 15.

Certain modern authors, believing that they are withdrawing to an adequate distance⁴⁹, locate the migration in the middle of the IVth century A.D., when “the Romans and the Persians began one of their wars”; the vagueness of expression is admirable.

In fact, it is neither the VIIth century B.C. nor the IVth century A.D. that tradition determines. Wigram himself, contradicting his statement quoted at the head of this paragraph, reports it (p. 145) by saying: “according to their very tradition”, the people of Adiabene were pushed towards the mountains by the massacres of Tamerlane. In effect, it is this latter name that is usually put forward to explain the exodus, which, therefore, must have taken place at the end of the XIVth century. At this time, they say, “some Assyrian groups, with a particularly energetic character, succeeded in digging themselves into the impenetrable mountains of the Hakkari, south of lake Van”⁵⁰.

Another version of the same opinion attributes to Tamerlane, the quasi-annihilation of Christians, with the survival of a small number in the mountains⁵¹. Here, it is not the question of an exodus anymore, but of a survival. I have already noted that the hagiographic legends of the mountainous regions prove the existence of an ancient Christianity in these regions, maybe subsequently increased in numbers due to the influx of refugees.

What limits these influxes and unsettles the argument of massive exodus at the time of Tamerlane, is the report by Elie VIII, dated 1610⁵² which I brought up in my preceding article. Nearly two hundred years after the alleged events, the patriarch does not say that his proud “warriors and musketeers”, who obey neither the Turks nor the Persians, have chosen this liberty at the price of a voluntary exile in other regions. In fact, the few traditions that mention the displacement of people, in the XIVth century or other periods, give testimony of the migration of at most a few families.

What is accurate is that most of the Christians stayed in the country of Athor, that is Mosul⁵³ or its great province⁵⁴, which, at certain periods, included Erbil and the Adiabene. It is these Christians, who, for centuries, have lived in the lands of Assur, Kaleh, and Nineveh, that shall have more right to the title, even though they are called Chaldeans or Syrians. Meanwhile,

49. *Betrayal*, cit. P. 10, with reference to *The Assyrian Tragedy*, Annemasse 1934.

50. RONDOT, cit. P. 155 (we can make the remark that the word Assyrian here is an anachronism).- Also *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 947.

51. Tradition collected by the Rev. A.J. Mc Lean, see art. *Syrian Christians* cit. Col. 176 b.

52. *Genuinae Relationes*, p. 113-114.

53. In Arabic it is Athur and in Syriac, Athor.- In his remark about Athur in *Historical and Geographical Researches in the Region East of Mosul*, in Arabic, in Sumer, Bagdad, vol. 17 (1961) p. 44, M.G. Awwad has a thorough summary of the various accepted forms of the word: Athur for Mosul has also passed into the passengers' vocabulary such as that of Benjamin of Tudele (between 1159 and 1173) where Mosul stands for □The great Assur □ (*Ancient and Modern Travellers, Paris 1869, vol. 2, p. 188*). Concerning the equivalence of Athor-Mosul, see the Lexicon of BAR BAHLUL (vol. 1, col. 322) and the *Thesaurus* of PAYNE SMITH (vol. 1, col. 240)- The scholar Shamasha Givargis, of Ain Zalah, who today is 60 years old, remembers that when he asked his uncle : Who are, then, these Athoraye? He would reply: The Mosulites.

54. With some Arab geographers, the province of Athur exists. It has become Aqur in the MAQDASSI (Ahsan al-Taqasim, BCA, p. 136 s) where it corresponds to the three regions of *Diyar Rabi□a*, *Diyar Mudar* and *Diyar Bakr*.

when a western Syrian copyist of 1826 signs: “Qas Behnam Athoraya”, he means “from Mosul”⁵⁵ and does not claim any kinship with the people of Assur.

b) Tradition.

According to Wigram, their very traditions affirm that they are from the old Assyrian blood, “perhaps with a mixture of certain Babylonian and Chaldean elements”. And the author cited, though without putting too much trust in him, a certain David de Qalaita, from the village of Marbishu, who claimed to be a direct line descendant of Nebuchadnezzar.

The argument based on tradition would have value if we could find proof of such claims before the Anglicans had chosen the name Assyrians. Until the new order, the documents gathered in the paragraph : *How did they designate themselves*, seem to indicate that it was the denomination that provoked the claim, rather than a “tradition” of which there is no ancient trace. I am afraid that it may be the name, which in the space of about fifty years, has created the sentiment of belonging. As an Assyrian naively told me: “Our sons are called Assarhaddon and Assurbanipal⁵⁶, this very well proves that we are Assyrians!” *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Some even go as far as asserting that their ancestors, too, had such names. I just finished compiling the index of my *Christian Assyria* which required drawing up some fifty pages of proper names of persons; needless to say that there is not a single “Assyrian” name.

C) The features.

The resemblance of types would add a new proof, and Wigram⁵⁷ draws a parallel between the profiles of an Assyrian king and that of a modern “Assyrian” priest.

Today we can no longer be content with placing two well-chosen clichés side by side in order to base a comparison on it⁵⁸. Scientific anthropology has taken the matter into consideration and I am afraid that it has some deceiving findings to reveal. The measurements taken not long ago at the Habbaniya camp, by Dr. Henry Field are suggestive⁵⁹ : all racial types, including the Armenian type, were found among the *Assyrian Levies*.

I know very well that nobody, Wigram or anyone else, believes anymore in the existence of pure races, especially at a cross roads of a world like the one these Christians inhabited up until the last invasions by Mongols; meanwhile, the ethnographic argument would have been the only one to support the thesis in a scientific way. Being negative, it will weigh heavily on the verdict.

55. Cod. 64 of Library of the American mission of Urmia. Catalog 1898, p. 14 at the top.

56. I even know a Sargonid. What do Assyriologists think of this ?

57. Photo facing p. 179.

58. This does not prevent the paper of a modern sect □The plain Truth□, (Pasadena-California), the article □Germany in prophecy□, vol. 27, 12 (Dec. 1962) p. 25-27 and vol. 28, 1 (January 1963) p. 15-17 and 27-30, to reproduce three clichés of contemporary Assyrians, in order to show how much they resemble... the Germans, who are therefore the genuine descendants of the Assyrians ! Further more, the modern Assyrians of Kirkuk are completely ready to share their title with the Germans, whose qualities as warriors they admire.

59. *The Anthropology of Iraq, part 2, No. 2, 1932, Kurdistan*, p. 64-71.

d) The dress.

Wigram is the only one to use this indication of kinship. Again, he limits the resemblance to the conical felt cap of modern Assyrians⁶⁰, which he claims to have found in the ancient low-reliefs. In reality, there, this head-gear is a soldier's helmet, which M. Contenau describes as follows: It encases the head and rises in a conical shape, but to end with a tapering tip⁶¹. As to the head-gear of the ancient Assyrian people, sometimes it consisted of a type of turban, ordinarily formed by "a simple tie which passes around the forehead and holds the hair in place, or a very complicated assemblage looking like a cap following the shape of the head, and made of inlaid work"⁶². A lot of goodwill is, therefore, needed to compare the ancient helmet to the modern felt cap, which is shorter, flatter, and flared in the shape of a patella. And, once more, all the rest of the costume is different.

d) The language.

The author himself says: "The language evidence must be dealt with some degree of prudence, because all Semitic languages seem to have approximately the same grammar, more or less elaborate, and a vocabulary that has many common features when it comes to the root of the words". Here too, from the point of view of language, to consider the ancient Aramaeans as the ancestors of the modern "Assyrians", might have, maybe, more chance of being accurate⁶³.

As to handwriting, no philologist has ever dreamed of deriving the Syriac letters of the alphabet, from the cuneiform symbols which represented syllabuses.

The arguments brought into the debate and formulated especially by Wigram do not, therefore, seem to be invalidating. Modern Assyrians often add a final argument: What, then, happened to the Assyrians? To which we can reply with another question: What happened to Babylonians, Sumerians, Akadians, Hittites, the Parthians, and closer to us in time, the Ghassanides, the Taghlibites, etc. In this melting-pot which is the region of Nineveh, where the displacement of people has followed at such an accelerated rate, countless tides have risen and swollen, growing with elements that were not always of original descent, then ebbing and dissolving into the great ocean. When the wave dies, what happens to the foam which, a moment earlier, was crowning it ?

It is a fact that, apart from Wigram, all the Anglican missionaries who have worked at the Mission of the Archbishop do not attach an ethnic value to the name. The learned *Encyclopedia Britannica* has not applied the name Assyrians for the modern Assyrians, it always speaks of "Nestorians"⁶⁴ and mentions the new name only in reference to the "Assyrian Mission". As to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*⁶⁵, it does not hesitate to conclude, without compromise, that "the name Assyrian, despite W.A. Wigram, is almost certainly a misnomer".

60. See photo of priest, in WIGRAM facing p. 196.

61. *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria*, Paris 1950, p. 151. This form would subsist □ in the armaments of Indian troops □.

62. *Ibid.* P. 74.

63. I was not able to consult the article of R.J.H. GOTTHEIL, *Syriac and Assyrian*, in *Hebraica*, vol. 3 (1886/1887) p. 187.

64. Vol. 16 (1929) p. 244-245.

I wouldn't go that far, because an exhaustive scientific study of all the aspects of the problem does not yet exist, at least to my knowledge. It might be time for such a study to replace moving speeches and passionate affirmations. As to me, I do not want to draw conclusions; the poor "Assyrians" have already lost so many things for us now to also dispute their name. Maybe we should simply realize one thing: It is through a very tortuous path that this name has come to them, or as they say, has returned to them.

J.M. FIEY.

Mosul, February 1965

If you ever use this translation in a publication, could you please refer to it as:
English translation and editing by Francis Sarguis, with assistance of George Yana and Gladys Warda.

65. Ed. By F.L. CROSS, London OUP, 1961, see Assyrian Christians. Also see TH. BOIS in *The Christian Near East*, vol. 12, (1962) p. 389.