

National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times[§]

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The Neo-Assyrian kings pursued an active policy of nation building, whereby the citizenship of Assyria was routinely granted to the inhabitants of newly established provinces. As a result of this, by 600 BC the entire vastly expanded country shared the Assyrian identity, which essentially consisted of a common unifying language (Aramaic) and a common religion, culture, and value system. This identity persisted virtually unchanged and was converted into an ethnic identity in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods (600-330 BC). After the disintegration of the Seleucid Empire (130 BC), several semi-independent Mesopotamian kingdoms (Osrhoene, Adiabene, Hatra, Assur) perpetuated Assyrian religious and cultural traditions until the third century AD. From the fourth century on, Christianity has been an essential part of Assyrian identity and has helped preserve it to the present day despite endless persecutions and massacres, which have reduced the present-day Assyrians into dwindling minorities in their home countries. The self-designations of modern Syrians and Assyrians derive from the Neo-Assyrian word for “Assyrian”, Assūrāyu/Sūrāyu.

Introduction

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-609 BC) was a multi-ethnic state composed of many peoples and tribes of different origins.¹ Its ethnic diversity notwithstanding, it was a uniformly structured political entity with well-defined and well-guarded borders,² and the Assyrian kings certainly regarded it as a

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¹ Cf. Postgate 1989. I find Postgate’s characterization of Assyria as a “multi-racial” state not quite appropriate and prefer the term “multi-ethnic”.

² The “border” or “territory” (*mišru, tahūmu*) of Assyria is referred to over 300 times in Neo-Assyrian sources; “crossing” or “violating” it is referred to 15 times. The frontiers of the country were heavily garrisoned (Parker 1997) and their crossing points well guarded (see, e.g., *SAA* 1 186-187 and NL 40; *SAA* 16 148). Extradition of fugitives and political refugees from Assyria was a standard clause in Neo-Assyrian treaties and a recurrent topic in Neo-Assyrian administrative

unified whole, “the land of Aššur”, whose territory they constantly strove to expand.³ To the outside world, it must have appeared as a uniform, monolithic whole, whose inhabitants were unhesitatingly identified as Assyrians regardless of their ethnic backgrounds.⁴

However, just how far did the masses of the Empire's population actually share the Assyrian identity? Did they consider themselves as members of the Assyrian nation, identifying with the ideals and ways of life of the Assyrian ruling class, or did they rather identify themselves in terms of their diverse ethnic origins, loathing and resenting the Assyrian rule and way of life? I shall try to answer these questions by first considering the matter briefly from a theoretical perspective and then reviewing the available evidence, both Assyrian and post-Assyrian, in detail.

1. *The Role of Ethnicity in Multi-ethnic States*

Contrary to what one might be prone to think, national and ethnic identities⁵ are not mutually exclusive, nor does the former depend on the latter (or vice versa). Most citizens of multi-ethnic states have, in addition to their national identity, one or more secondary ethnic identities.⁶ To take an obvious example, first-generation American immigrants generally maintain a strong attachment to their home countries but, after many years in the country, may start developing a secondary American identity.⁷ Their children, who were born in the country, are Americans by birth; but they still (often subconsciously) maintain a strong ethnic identity, having been exposed as children to their parents' native language and

correspondence. The relevant contexts make it clear that the term “territory of Assyria” denoted areas permanently incorporated into the provincial system of Assyria, as opposed to non-annexed vassal or allied states, which had borders of their own.

³ Tadmor 1999; see also below.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Isaiah 7:18-20 and 8:7. In *ABL* 1430, a letter from Babylonia from the time of Assurbanipal, eight Assyrians (LÚ.aš-šur.KI.MEŠ) are referred to by name; three of the names are Aramaic (Idriya, Sabini, Sameš-idri), the rest are Akkadian (Ubar-Sayasu in rev. 3 being a NB rendering of NA /Ubru-Šamaš/).

⁵ By “national identity” I understand “national collective identity” in the sense of Hall 1999, but differently from Hall, I believe that such identities already existed in ancient societies, long before the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism (see below). By “ethnic identity” I understand, with Alba 1990, 25, an individual's subjective orientation toward his or her ethnic origins.

⁶ Vassady 1989, 47-48; Alba 1990, 41; 50. Ethnic identity naturally constitutes only one of the several secondary identities an individual may have. “An individual can be simultaneously a male, a Polish American, a father, and a plumber” (Alba 1990, 23)—one could add, a Catholic, a stamp collector, and many other things. Many people are strongly attached to a particular family, city or city quarter.

⁷ Kivisto and Blanck 1990, 115, contra Hansen 1937b [1990], 205-207.

cultural heritage.⁸ In the third generation and later, ethnic consciousness recedes to the background, without necessarily disappearing altogether.⁹ The development of national identity thus goes hand in hand with language acquisition and social integration. The moment an individual fully masters the language of the country he (or she) lives in, and has internalized its customs, traditions, values and religious beliefs; he (or she) becomes a fully integrated member of the society and, consciously or not, shares its collective identity.¹⁰ The whole process takes a *maximum of three generations* to complete and is by no means limited to the United States only but is universal.¹¹ The presence of ethnic communities in the host country may help maintain the ethnic identities of immigrants and their descendants, but it cannot halt, slow down or reverse the assimilation process.¹² Ethnic consciousness is, however, related to education so that educated people may cultivate an inherited or adopted ethnic identity long after the critical three-generation limit.¹³ It is also related to social discrimination and persecution, so that oppressed and persecuted ethnic minorities may develop stronger identities than undisturbed ones.¹⁴

2. The Shaping of Assyrian Identity in the First Millennium BC

To return now to Assyria, there cannot be any question that it was and remained a multi-ethnic society, and many of its ethnic minorities seem to have retained their identities (at least to some extent) till the very end of the Empire. For example, legal documents from Assur, Nineveh, and Dur-Katlimmu on the Habur dating from the last decades of the Empire mention numerous Assyrian citizens identified or identifiable as Egyptians, Israelites, Arabs, Anatolians and Iranians on the basis of their names or the ethnic labels attached to them. It is questionable, however, how far these ethnic names and labels actually reflect

⁸ See Alba 1990, 22; 25. Hansen (1937a) argued that the second generation, keenly aware of the contempt in which the foreign accents and customs of their parents were held, did their utmost to forget their ethnic heritage. In his words, “Nothing is more Yankee than a Yankeeized person of foreign descent” (1937a [1990], 194). However, this view needs tempering as too extreme.

⁹ Kivisto and Blanck 1990; Alba 1990, *passim*, especially the on pp. 64 and 68. M. L. Hansen postulated a general resurgence of ethnic consciousness in the third generation. His famous thesis of a third-generation return to ethnicity (“What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember”, Hansen 1937a [1990], 195) is, however, not borne out by facts, see Kivisto and Blanck 1990.

¹⁰ Hall 1999, 34-36.

¹¹ See, e.g., Deniz 1999.

¹² See Kivisto 1989; Odisho 1999.

¹³ Alba 1990, 29 and 55.

¹⁴ Cf. Alba 1990, 27; Hall 1999, 34.

ethnic consciousness and ethnicity.¹⁵ From the late eighth century BC on, ethnonyms like *Arbāyu* “Arab”, *Mādāyu* “Mede”, *Mušurāyu* “Egyptian”, and *Urartāyu* “Urartian” frequently appear as personal names borne by fully Assyrianized, affluent individuals in high positions. The sons of the three men with Israelite names mentioned in a late seventh-century text from Dur-Katlimmu all had Akkadian or Aramaic names.¹⁶ Certain parts of the Empire, such as Babylonia, were for political and ideological reasons allowed to keep their traditional institutions and administrative infrastructures, which naturally helped preserve their ethnic identities.¹⁷ In addition, some nomad tribes and a few ethnic pockets in inaccessible areas within the borders of Assyria may have never been fully brought under Assyrian rule. Thus it would be absurd to claim that every individual or group of people in Assyria shared the Assyrian identity.

On the other hand, it is an undeniable fact that from the latter part of the second millennium BC on, the population within the Empire's provincial system—that is, within Assyria proper¹⁸—was for centuries subject to a continuous and systematic process of assimilation and integration. Especially the policy of mass deportations introduced by Ashurnasirpal II and continued on a vastly increased scale by Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-Pileser III and the Sargonid

¹⁵ See Zadok 1997.

¹⁶ Adad-milki-ereš, son of Manasseh (Radner 2002, no. 37 r. 13); Dadi-larim, son of Ahzi-Yau (ibid. r. 14); Am-yadi', son of Same'-Yau (ibid. r. 15). Cf. Lawson Younger 2003, 66.

¹⁷ Babylonia (actually, “the land of Akkad”) *de facto* became part of Assyria in 731 BC, when Tiglath-Pileser III, following a pattern already set by Shalmaneser III (858-824) and Adad-nerari III (810-783), invaded the country at the invitation of the clergy of Marduk and assumed the kingship of Babylon. Despite several revolts, the country was allowed to remain nominally independent till the end of the Empire. Parts of it (Dur-Šarrukku, Lahiru, Der, Ur, and the Sealand) were, however, annexed to Assyria as provinces already in the eighth century, and the whole country was incorporated into the provincial system in 656 at the latest (see Frame 1992, 271, for the eponym officials of the years 656, 645 (643), and 633, all of them entitled “governor (*pāhutu*) of Babylon”), but probably much earlier. An Assyrian governor of Babylon exercising control over the entire “land of Akkad” is already attested in 710 and probably stayed in office until the last year of Sennacherib (681); see *SAA* 15 nos. 217-238 and the discussion ibid., xx-xxiii and xxxviii. Under Esarhaddon, the governor of Babylon bore the traditional Babylonian title *šākin tēmi* (Frame 1992, 73). If this was part of Esarhaddon's reconciliatory Babylonian policy (Porter 1993, 38), then the reintroduction of an Assyrian *pāhutu* in 656 may well have triggered the Šamaš-šumu-ukin rebellion (652-648 BC).

Other annexed areas comparable to Babylonia were the Philistine city states and the kingdom of Judah, which functioned as buffer states against Egypt and continued enjoying nominal independence despite recurrent revolts and despite the fact that they had *de facto* been incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system (Otzen 1979, 255-256; Gitin 1995).

¹⁸ Cf. Postgate 1992, 252, and see below.

dynasty, utterly changed the political, demographic and linguistic map of the Ancient Near East. Between 830 and 640 BC, an estimated 4.5 million people from all parts of the Empire were removed from their homes and settled elsewhere, mostly in the Assyrian heartland and the big urban centers there.¹⁹ These deportations may originally have had purely political and economic goals, but in the long run they ended up having far more extensive linguistic, social and cultural consequences.

2.1 *The Aramaization of Assyria*

In the first place, these movements brought hundreds of thousands of foreign, mostly Aramaic-speaking people into the Assyrian heartland and the eastern provinces of the Empire, thus turning the previously largely monolingual society of Assyria into a multilingual one. Within a relatively short period of time—already by the middle of the eighth century—Aramaic became established as a common language (*lingua franca*) throughout the Empire.²⁰ Concomitantly with this, the Assyrian administration started using the Aramaic alphabetic script alongside the cuneiform script. Aramean scribes writing on papyrus or parchment scrolls beside Assyrian scribes writing on clay tablets or waxed writing-boards are depicted on royal reliefs from the mid-eighth century on,²¹ and Aramean scribes working with Assyrian ones are mentioned in administrative documents already half a century earlier.²² By about 700 BC, the Aramaic alphabet had effectively replaced cuneiform as the Empire's everyday writing system.²³

2.2 *The Assyrianization of the Empire's Population*

Secondly, the massive deportations of foreign people into Assyria, and the

¹⁹ Oded 1979, especially pp. 21-32.

²⁰ Garelli 1982; Tadmor 1975, 1985; Eph'al 1999, 118-119.

²¹ See Tadmor 1982, 1991; R. Barnett and M. Falkner, *The Sculptures on Tiglath-Pileser III* (London 1962), pls. V-VI; F. Thureau-Dangin and M. Dunand, *Til Barsib* (Paris 1936), pl. L = M. Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon* (Thames and Hudson 1961), fig. 348; P. Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon King of Assyria* (Paris 1986), pl. 133; R. Barnett, E. Bleibtreu and G. Turner, *Sculptures from the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh* (London 1998), pls. 83, 132, 143, 173, 186, 363 (Sennacherib), and pls. 193, 213, 222, 244, 255, 256 (Assurbanipal). Also note P.-E. Botta & E. Flandin, *Monuments de Ninive II* (Paris 1849), pl. 145 = Albenda, *Palace of Sargon*, pl. 136 (official, reading from a parchment scroll, urging inhabitants of a besieged Mannean city to surrender; see Tadmor 1991, 421f).

²² *NWL* 9 r.20 (786 BC), 10 r.7, 13:12 (c. 790 BC), 17:2 (c. 787 BC), 21 r.8 (c. 792-786 BC).

²³ Parpola 1997b, xvi.

concomitant reorganization of the conquered areas as Assyrian provinces, subjected huge numbers of new people to a direct and ever-increasing Assyrian cultural influence. This included, among other things, the imposition of taxation and military service, a uniform calendar, judiciary, and conscription system, as well as imperial weights, measures, and other standards.²⁴ In addition, Assyrian royal ideology, religious ideas and mythology were incessantly propagated to all segments of the population through imperial art, emperor cult, religious festivals, and the cults of Aššur, Ištar, Nabû, Sîn and other Assyrian gods.²⁵ The peoples of the newly established provinces routinely became Assyrian citizens.²⁶ While the process of Assyrianization thus put under way undoubtedly worked fastest in the big cities of central Assyria, it must have proceeded rapidly in the new provinces as well, as they were no longer the countries they used to be. Their intelligentsia had been deported to Assyria and replaced with Assyrian administrators, their capitals had been razed and rebuilt in Assyrian fashion, and their populations now included, in addition to deportees from other parts of the Empire, also considerable numbers of Assyrian immigrants and colonists.

2.3 The Social and Cultural Homogenization of the Empire

The intense acculturation process thus started continued for a period of more than two hundred years. It was boosted by intermarriages, participation in common military expeditions, building projects and business ventures, and continuous interaction between all segments of population in all aspects of daily life. As a result, at the same time as Aramaic developed into the *lingua franca* of the Empire and the use of the Aramaic alphabet in its administration steadily increased, its originally heterogeneous population became progressively homogeneous socially and culturally.²⁷ This development finds a perfect parallel

²⁴ Parpola 2003b; for details see Postgate 1974 and 1976, 63-72; Radner 1999; Kaufman 1972; Levine 2003; Eph'al and Naveh 1993, 61-62; Gitin 1995; Lipiński 2000, 548.

²⁵ Porter 2000a and 2000b; Winter 1997; Watanabe 2002; Pongratz-Leisten 1997; Holloway 2001; Parpola 2000a, 2001; Parpola in press. Though people deported to Assyria were not prevented from practicing their religion in their new homeland, the annexation of a rebel country usually involved destruction of its main cult center, pillage of its sacred objects and gods, and establishment of Assyrian cult centers in the rebuilt capital and elsewhere (Cogan 1974; Frame 1997; Parpola 2003b, 100-101). The images of the deported gods either received a permanent new home in Assyria and were incorporated in the pantheon of the Empire, or were recreated in the temple workshops of Assur in Assyrian fashion and returned to the annexed country along with a new theology (Nissinen and Parpola 2004).

²⁶ See Oded 1979, 81-91, and below, p. 000 and Appendix I.

²⁷ Garelli 1982; Pedersén 1986; Postgate 1992. For example, the two *Hundurāya* families in Assur discussed by Pedersén 1986, 85-95, were deportees from the Iranian city of Hundur, settled in Assur in 714. Their sizable archives, which cover

in the social and cultural homogenization of the United States, which also involved the transformation of an initially multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural society into a uniform one through the adoption of a common *lingua franca* (American English). As in the United States, this process gradually obliterated all tensions that may have originally existed between various ethnic groups. In the end, the ethnic origins of the people became largely irrelevant, as evidenced by the Neo-Assyrian onomastics, which includes hundreds of Akkadian names adopted or given to their children by individuals bearing non-Akkadian names, as well as a fair number of Aramaic names given to their children by parents with Akkadian names.²⁸

2.4 The Internationalization and Bilingualism of the Assyrian Ruling Class

These developments cannot be dissociated from the progressive internationalization of the Neo-Assyrian ruling class.²⁹ While men with non-Akkadian names only sporadically appear in high state offices in the ninth century, they are frequently encountered on all levels of administration in the late eighth and seventh centuries BC.³⁰ These newcomers to the ruling class were carefully educated in Mesopotamian literature and culture; they dressed and behaved in the Assyrian way, and spoke Akkadian and used the cuneiform script as distinctive markers of their social class. Their primary language of

the years 681-618 BC, show that in less than one generation, they had become entirely Assyrianized in every respect, including their names. The same is true of the other archive discussed by Pedersén (1986, 125-129), that of the Egyptian colony at Assur, whose leaders had names such as Urdu-Aššur “Servant of Aššur,” Kišir-Aššur “Host of Aššur,” and La-turammanni-Aššur “Do not forsake me, O Aššur!”

²⁸ Garelli 1982, 441; Zadok 1997; Parpola in press. Hybrid patronymics are already found in early eighth-century BC texts from Calah (e.g., Salamanu son of Libušu, *GPA* 78 r.5 [792 BC]; Marduk-nadin-ahhe son of Bar-il, *ibid.* 103:15 [788 BC]).

²⁹ See, in detail, Parpola in press.

³⁰ E.g., Šidqi-il, governor of Tušhan, eponym for 764; Bur-Sagale, governor of Guzana, eponym for 763; Mahdê (= Ammi-hatî), governor of Nineveh eponym for 725; Hananu, governor of Til-Barsib, eponym for 701; Metunu, governor of Isana, eponym for 700; Zazaya, governor of Arpad, eponym for 692; Gihilu, governor of Hatarikka, eponym for 689; Manzarnê, governor of Kullania, eponym for 684; Se'-rapa', governor of Barhalzi (*SAA* 16 29); Milki-Ia, governor of Talmusa (*SAA* 691, 681 BC); Abi-ramu, Grand Vizier, eponym for 677; Banbâ, deputy vizier, eponym for 676; Atar-il, governor of Lahiru, eponym for 673; Mar-larim, commander-in-chief, eponym for 668; Gabbaru, governor of Dur-Sin-ahhe-riba, eponym for 667; Gir-Šapunu, eponym for 660; Milki-ramu, cohort commander, eponym for 656; Awiyanu, governor of Que, eponym for 655; Sagabbu, governor of Harran, eponym for 651; Ahi-ila'i, governor of Carchemish, eponym for 649; Sailu, chief cook, eponym for 620*. See further Tadmor 1975 and 1982; Oded 1979, 105-109; Garelli 1982; and cf. Alba 1990, 6.

communication, however, like the rest of the Empire's, was certainly Aramaic, and the entire ruling class, including the royal family, must have been fully bilingual by the beginning of the seventh century at the very latest. All Neo-Assyrian kings from Tiglath-Pileser III to Esarhaddon had Aramaic-speaking wives or mothers,³¹ and there are indications that at least some of them spoke Aramaic as their first language.

Seventh-century BC Assyria was thus divided into two major language groups: speakers of Aramaic—in practice, the entire population of the country—and speakers of Akkadian, including the largely bilingual inhabitants of the Assyrian heartland and the fully bilingual ruling class. This dichotomy was, however, largely social, not cultural, and it came to an end with the fall of the Empire and the subsequent massacre of the Assyrian aristocracy.³² Although Neo-Assyrian certainly continued to be spoken and written in Harran at least until the end of the reign of Nabonidus,³³ Aramaic now fast became the only language spoken in Assyria outside the Assyrian heartland, and eventually in the latter as well.

2.5 The Creation of Assyrian National Identity

Ethnic identities develop spontaneously. National identities, however, especially those of multi-ethnic states, are consciously and systematically *created*. That is why some social historians like Rodney Hall argue that national identities are the product of modern times and did not exist in “territorial-sovereign” states, which dominated the international order prior to the nineteenth century. Hall believes that the abstract notion of *citizenship*, which he correctly sees as the necessary precondition for the development of national identity, came about only with eighteenth-century nationalism; consequently, he sees “nation building” as a central characteristic of modern nation-states only, which rely on the “imagined community” of the *nation* as a legitimizing principle rather than on dynastic legitimizing principles.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that nationalism and the concepts of nation and citizenship are by no means new

³¹ The name of Sargon's queen, Ataliā (Kamil 1999, 17; *PNA* 1/II 433), is clearly Hebrew (cf. Athaliah [*Ātalyā(hū)*], mother of Ahaziah [c. 844/3 BC] and granddaughter of Omri, 2 Kings 11, and 2 Chron. 22-24); accordingly, she almost certainly was a Judahite princess exiled to Assyria after the conquest of Samaria in 722 BC. The name of Tiglath-Pileser III's queen, Yabā, is derived from the Aramaic verb *yhb* “to give”, see Frahm, *PNA* 2/I s.v. Iabā; on Naqia (Aram. “pure”), the queen of Sennacherib and mother of Esarhaddon, see Melville 1999 and Streck, *PNA* 2/II s.v. Naqī'a.

³² Cf. Grayson 1975, 94. Note, however, that the Assyrian ruling class was certainly not *totally* annihilated at the fall of the Empire, see Parpola 2000, 2; cf. Novák and Younansardaroud 2002, 188-190.

³³ Schaudig 2001, 73.

³⁴ Hall 1999, 4-5.

phenomena but already played an important role in the ancient world, not only in ancient Athens³⁵ and Rome but also in ancient Mesopotamia. In view of the considerable benefits that came with Roman citizenship,³⁶ for example, it would be absurd to claim that the average Roman citizen did not consider himself Roman or did not share the national collective identity of Rome.

As regards Assyria specifically, the concept of Assyrian citizenship was central to its expansion, and we can be sure that the Assyrian kings systematically and resolutely strove to unify the multitudes of people ruled by them into a single nation. The very name of the country, “land of Aššur”, connoted a kingdom of God set apart from the rest of the world. It originally was only a province around the city of Aššur, but it grew with the addition of new provinces. Every new province was turned into an integral part of the original “land of Aššur”, and their peoples became regular Assyrian citizens (*mar’ē* or *nišē māt Aššūr*, or simply *Aššūrāyē*)³⁷ with full civil rights and obligations (cf. Appendix I).³⁸ As Assyrians they had to pay regular taxes and do the required

³⁵ Cf. Coleman 1997.

³⁶ Crawford 1996.

³⁷ *mar’ē māt Aššūr* (lit., “sons of Assyria”) and *nišē māt Aššūr* (lit., “people of Assyria”) were semantically equivalent terms, the former being the proper Neo-Assyrian term for “Assyrian citizens”, the latter a literary term used only in royal inscriptions. For example, the phrase “Assyrian citizens, high and low” appears as *mar’ē māt Aššūr qallu dannu* in the Zakutu Treaty (*SAA* 2 8:8), but as *nišē māt Aššūr šeher rabi* in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal (Borger 1956, 40; Streck 1916, 4-5). In the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, *mara’ māt Aššūr*, “Assyrian citizen”, is contrasted with *mara’ māti šanītimma* “foreign citizen” (*SAA* 2 6: 163, 222, 321, 338). The gentilic adjective *Aššūrāyu* is the most common term for “Assyrian(s)” in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian letters (e.g., *ABL* 74:9, 202:1, 262:7 and 11, 290 r.15, 460 r.1, 520:5, 1000 r.13; *CT* 53 78+:9, 146:8) and is contrasted with *dāgil pāni māt Aššūr* “vassal of Assyria” in the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon (*SAA* 2 6:162). Assyrian citizens settled in newly established provinces are referred to as *nišē māt Aššūr* or (*amīlē*) *Aššūrāyē* “Assyrian (freemen)” in the royal inscriptions (cf. Fuchs 1994, 94: 76 [*nišē māt Aššūr*]; *ibid.* 200:18 [*Aššūrū*]; Muscarella 1981, 125:5 [*Aššūrāyē*]; *RIMA* 2 218:82 and 3 19:34 [*amīlē Aššūrāyē*]). In NA royal inscriptions and literary texts, Assyrian citizens are often referred to as *ba’ulāt Illil* “subjects of Enlil (or: the God of gods)”, an ideologically loaded phrase going back to the third millennium Akkadian Empire (see *CAD* s.v. *ba’ulātu*). This phrase, which also has the variants *ba’ulāt Aššūr* “subjects of Aššur” (*KAV* 171:31) and *ba’ulāt māt Aššūr* “subjects of Assyria” (*RIMA* 3 7:6; *SAA* 3 32 r.32), identifies the Assyrian citizenry as a religious community, “the people of God”.

³⁸ The phrase *itti nišē māt Aššūr amnušunūti*, “I counted them as citizens of Assyria”, is already attested in the inscriptions of the Middle Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076), but until the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727) it almost exclusively refers only to people deported to Assyria from annexed countries or cities. Of the early Neo-Assyrian kings, only Ashurnasirpal (883-859) explicitly states that he granted Assyrian citizenship to the population of a new province (Māzama) in its entirety. From the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III on, the phrase in question is regularly

military and labor service; but in return, they got safety and prosperity, were equal before the law, and could appeal directly to the Great King in case of dire need.³⁹ The king, who ruled as a chosen Son of God,⁴⁰ was the bond that united the nation by virtue of his role as helper in distress. He was the rescuer of the weak and the destitute, the great healer, the sun of his people, the good shepherd that loved and protected his sheep and guided them to the right path.⁴¹

The long-term strategic goal of Assyria thus was not the creation of an empire upheld by arms, but a nation united by a semi-divine king perceived as the source of safety, peace and prosperity. As we have seen, this goal was achieved through a systematically implemented assimilation and integration policy geared to delete the ethnic identities of the conquered peoples and to replace them with an Assyrian one. The efficacy of this policy is strikingly demonstrated by the fate of the tens of thousands of Hurrians who were deported from their homeland and resettled in Assyria in the Middle Assyrian period. A few centuries later, the descendants of these people had been so completely absorbed into the Assyrian society that no trace of their Hurrian ancestry, except for a few garbled personal names, remains in the Neo-Assyrian sources.⁴² They now were in every respect ethnic Assyrians, indistinguishable from their fellow citizens.

By the end of the seventh century BC, almost all provinces and dependencies of Assyria including the Levant had been Assyrian territory for more than a hundred years, most of them for hundreds of years (see Appendix II). Keeping in mind that ethnic identities in multi-ethnic societies universally start declining already in the second generation, it is absolutely unthinkable that the average Assyrian citizen living in the late seventh century could have regarded himself (or herself) as anything but Assyrian.⁴³ His cultural milieu was pluralistic

tied to the conversion of a country into an Assyrian province and the imposition of Assyrian military service, corvée and taxation, and is in complementary distribution with the phrase *ana mišir māt Aššūr amnu*, “I counted it into Assyrian territory”. Hence granting Assyrian citizenship to inhabitants of newly established provinces certainly was a standard procedure under Tiglath-Pileser III, and even though relevant evidence is lacking, probably already much earlier. The word *Aššūru* occurring in the corvée and taxation clause is a collective noun meaning “Assyrian(s)” at large, and relates to the (much more common) gentilic *Aššūrāyu* in the same way as the noun *Arubu* “Arab(s)” relates to the *Arbāyu* “Arabian/Arabic” and *Arumu* “Aramean(s)” to *Armāyu* “Aramean/Aramaic”.

³⁹ Postgate 1974 and 1975.

⁴⁰ Parpola 1997, xxxvi-xliv.

⁴¹ Parpola 2001; Annus 2002.

⁴² Röllig 1996.

⁴³ A telling example is the author of SAA 16 126-129, Itti-Šamaš-balāṭu, a loyal Assyrian official in Phoenicia under Assurbanipal. He writes in fluent Neo-Assyrian, but his name and several Babylonianisms in his language show that he was originally a Babylonian. He is almost certainly identical with the author of the Babylonian

and often cosmopolitan but nonetheless thoroughly uniform and Assyrian wherever he went. Assyria was the only world he knew; any memory of the ethnic roots of his ancestors had long since faded out or become irrelevant as a result of mixed interethnic marriages in several generations.⁴⁴ True, people in different parts of the country practiced different customs, dressed differently, spoke different local languages, and venerated different local gods; but all of them pledged allegiance to the same king, worshipped the same national gods, and spoke the same national language, Imperial Aramaic. This was not the language spoken by ethnic Arameans but a creation of the Empire, a *lingua franca* born from the interaction of numerous ethnic groups and therefore serving as a unifying rather than separating factor.

The common religion, culture, world-view and value system, and above all, the common unifying language (Imperial Aramaic) effectively set Assyria apart from the rest of the world and created a feeling of unity and solidarity within the country.⁴⁵ The inherent notion of “us” against “all the others” that came with this dichotomy—Aramaic was not spoken outside the Empire—agreed well with the dualistic ideology of the Empire, which saw Assyria as the kingdom of God commissioned to spread the light of civilization to the world surrounding it.⁴⁶ The shaping of Assyria and its national identity has an obvious parallel in ancient Rome, which likewise expanded from a city to a world empire. The analogy of Rome is instructive also in showing how deeply the national identity of the Empire could become rooted even in areas far removed from its original core. The Antonine constitution of AD 212, which granted full Roman citizenship to the entire Roman Empire, is generally recognized to have “promoted in both east and west a consciousness of being Roman that lasted until the fall of the Empire, and sometimes beyond it”.⁴⁷ Centuries after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the Byzantines still identified themselves as *Rhōmaioi* and were known as Romans to all nations of the Near East.⁴⁸

letter SAA 18 80 (compare obv. 5-7 and rev. 2-3 of this letter with SAA 16 126:19-20 and 127 r.15-16), and had thus started his career as “prelate” (*šatammu*) of Uruk under Esarhaddon.

⁴⁴ Cf. Alba 1990, 11-12, 43-56.

⁴⁵ Cf. Alba 1990, 17-18.

⁴⁶ Oded 1992.

⁴⁷ Honoré 1996.

⁴⁸ Kazhdan 1991, 1793 and 1809-1810. It should be noted, however, that the average Syrian Monophysite was not so much moved by imperial doctrines and identity as by “his loyalty to his own Church, his own bishop and the holy men of his neighbourhood” (Mango 1980, 30). In classical Syriac, *Rhūmōyō* continued to mean “Roman” or “Latin”, and only rarely “a Greek, i.e. a citizen of the Eastern Roman Empire” (Payne Smith 1903, 531b). In modern literary Arabic, by contrast, *Rūmī* still means both “Roman” and “Byzantine”.

3. The Continuity of Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times

In this context it is important to draw attention to the fact that the Aramaic-speaking peoples of the Near East have since ancient times identified themselves as Assyrians and still continue to do so. The self-designations of modern Syrians and Assyrians, *Sūryōyō*⁴⁹ and *Sūrāyā*,⁵⁰ are both derived from the ancient Assyrian word for “Assyrian”, *Aššūrāyu*,⁵¹ as can be easily established from a closer look at the relevant words.

3.1 The Neo-Assyrian Origin of Syriac and Modern Assyrian *Sūryōyō/Sūrāyā*

The word *Aššūrāyu* is an adjective derived from the geographical and divine name *Aššur* with the gentilic suffix *-āyu*. This name was originally pronounced [Aššūr], with a palato-alveolar fricative, but owing to a sound shift, its pronunciation was turned to [Aθθūr] in the early second millennium BC.⁵² The common Aramaic word for Assyria, *Āθūr*, reflects this pronunciation and in all probability dates back to the twelfth century BC, when the Aramean tribes first came into contact with the Assyrians. Towards the end of the second millennium, another sound shift took place in Assyrian, turning the pronunciation of the name into [Assūr].⁵³ Since unstressed vowels and even whole syllables were often dropped in Neo-Assyrian at the beginning of words,⁵⁴ this name form later also had a shorter variant, [Sūr], attested in alphabetic writings of personal names containing the element *Aššur* in late seventh century BC Aramaic

⁴⁹ Payne Smith 1903, 371 s.v. (“A Syrian, Palestinian”). Note that in classical Syriac, the toponym *Sūrīya* also covered Mesopotamia and Assyria (= *Sūrīya barōyītō*, “Farther Syria”, *ibid.* 370); cf. Appendix III.

⁵⁰ Maclean 1901, 223. “This is the ordinary name by which the E. Syrians call themselves, though they also apply it to the W. Syrians or Jacobites” (*ibid.*).

⁵¹ See notes 38-39 above.

⁵² The shift [š] → [θ] was an internal Assyrian phonetic development leading to the merger of /š/ and /θ/, as evidenced by the use of a single set of cuneiform graphemes (ŠA, SI, ŠU) for both /š/ and /θ/ in Old Assyrian (Hecker 1968, § 40a). That the merger resulted in /θ/ not /š/ is proved by variant spellings like OA *I-ri-tim* (= [Iriθim]) for normal *I-ri-si-im* (genitive of *Irišum*, Hecker 1968, § 40i), or MA *tī-ru* (= [θīru]) for **šīru* “flesh” and *ut-ra-a-aq* for **ušrāq* “he will thresh” (Mayer 1971, § 17), where /θ/ (< */š/) is rendered with graphemes normally used for writing the alveolar stop /t/ and its fricative variant [θ].

⁵³ Parpola 1974; Fales 1986, 61-66.

⁵⁴ E.g., *addurāru* → *durāru*, *ammāka* → *māka*, *ammār* → *mār*, *annāka* → *nāka*, *ikkillu* → *killu*, *issēgalli* → *sēgallu*, *issunaka* → *sunnaka*, *iššaššūme* → *šaššūme*, *Uppūmu* → *Pūmu*; for references and many more examples see Parpola, *SAAB* 2 (1988), 75-76; Hämeen-Anttila 2000, 37; Luukko 2004, 121-122.

documents from Assyria.⁵⁵ The Neo-Assyrian word [Assūrāyu], “Assyrian”, thus likewise had a shorter variant [Sūrāyu] in the seventh century.

This variant is hidden behind standard orthography in Assyrian cuneiform texts, but its existence is confirmed by the classical Greek words for Assyrians and Assyria, which display a corresponding variation between forms with initial *A-* (*Assúrios/Assuría*) and ones without it (*Súrios/Súros/Suría*; see Appendix III).⁵⁶ The Greeks, who were in frequent contact with Assyria in the eighth and seventh centuries BC,⁵⁷ would not have borrowed the word without the initial *A-*, had the Assyrians themselves not omitted it, since omission of initial vowels is not a feature of classical Greek phonology.

⁵⁵ *srgnr* = Aššūr-gārū’a-nēre, Fales 1986, no. 58:4; *srslnh* = Aššūr-šallim-ahi, *KAI* 234 = Fales 1986, no. 47:2; *srsrd* = Aššūr-(a)šarēd, *KAI* 236 = Fales 1986, no. 49 r. 4 (cf. *PNA* 1/I 155b; *Šarru-(a)šarēd is not attested in Neo-Assyrian). The variation [Assūr] ~ [Sūr] has a perfect parallel in the NA forms of another important divine name, Ištar (NA [Iššār]), which was also realized as [Šār] in Neo-Assyrian, see *PNA* 1/I, xxv. As in the case of [Sūr], the short form [Šār] is effectively concealed behind the predominantly logographic or ossified cuneiform spellings of the divine name (^(d)15, ^dINNIN, ^dIŠ.TAR), but its existence is raised beyond any doubt by the NA spellings of the Urartian royal name Sarduri [Šārdūri], which is written varyingly as ^{m(d)}15-du-ri, ^{md}INNIN-du-ri or ^msa-ar-du-ri in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions (see *PNA* 2/I 568f; note also the spelling URU.15-BĀD-a-ni = Sarduriani in *ABL* 147 = *SAA* 5 97 r.11). The “rebus” spellings ^{m(d)}15-du-ri and ^{md}INNIN-BĀD/du-ri, implying the short form [Šār], are already attested in several inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III from c. 740 BC, and continue to be found in the letters and inscriptions of Sargon II (721-705) and Assurbanipal (668-630; for the latter, note ^m15-BĀD LUGAL KUR.ur-ar-ṭi in Streck 1916, 84:40, and ^{md}[IŠ.TAR-du-r]i LUGAL KUR.ú-ra-ar-ṭi-im-[ma], *ABL* 1240:4-5). Like [Sūr], the short form [Šār] is also explicitly attested in Aramaic alphabetic spelling (cf. *šrdrq’l* = ^{md}15-BĀD-qa-a-li [Iššār-dūr-qāli], *AECT* 31) and in NB spellings of the Neo-Assyrian name Issār-tarṭba (^{md}iš-šar-ta-ri-bi, ^{md}iš-šār-ta-ri-bi, ^mšar-ta-ri-bi, ^{md}šār-ta-ri-bi, ^{md}15-ta-ri-bi, and ^{md}IŠ.TAR-ta-ri-bi, all referring to the same person), see Zadok 1984, 4.

⁵⁶ Assyria and Syria are mostly free variants in classical Greek and Latin texts (Nöldeke 1871). Some authors (e.g., Strabo) use the two forms interchangeably; others use either Syria or Assyria, the former being the more common form in older (6th-century) texts. Xenophon generally distinguishes between *Assuria* (= Achaemenid *Aθūrā*, the western part of the former Assyrian Empire, i.e., the Neo-Babylonian Empire) and *Suria* (= the former Assyrian Empire [*Cyr.* 6.1.27, 8.3.24] and Assyria proper, i.e. the Assyrian “heartland” to the east of *Aθūrā* [*Cyr.* 1.1.4, 1.5.2, 4.5.56, 5.2.12, 5.4.51, 6.2.22]). He calls Nabonidus and Belshazzar “the king of the Assyrians” (*Cyr.* 1.4.16, 1.5.2, 4.5.10, 4.6.2, 5.4.11), “the Assyrian” (*Cyr.* 2.4.7-8, 5.2.25 and 26, 5.3.8, 26 and 30, 5.4.15, 5.4.24 and 27, 5.4.33, 6.1.11 and 25), or “the Assyrian who holds Babylon and the rest of Assyria” (*Cyr.* 2.1.5). Note, however, that this usage is not entirely consistent: in *Cyr.* 5.5.24 and 6.2.19, the “Neo-Babylonians” are exceptionally referred to as *Súroi*, not *Assúroi*.

⁵⁷ Rollinger 2001.

Phonologically, Modern Assyrian *Sūrāyā* perfectly agrees with Neo-Assyrian [Sūrāyu], while Syriac *Sūryōyō* displays an intrusive *yod*, which it shares with Greek *Súrios* and *Suría*. This intrusive *yod* surely is due to Greek influence, since in classical Syriac the word also occurs in the form *Sūrōyō*, in perfect agreement with the Modern Assyrian *Sūrāyā*.⁵⁸ It is worth noting that *Sūrāyā* is reported to have a variant with initial *A-*, but this is avoided in careful speech, since it instinctively sounds incorrect in view of the classical Syriac *Sūryōyō*.⁵⁹ Since omission of initial vowels is not a feature of Aramaic phonology, the lack of the initial *A-* in *Sūrāyā*/*Sūr(y)ōyō* cannot be due to internal Aramaic development but must go back directly to Neo-Assyrian.

The phonology of *Sūrāyā* (*Sūrōyō*) thus implies that this term, which is crucial to the identity of the present-day Aramaic-speaking peoples, entered the Aramaic language in the seventh century BC, when the Arameans already were a fully integrated part of the Assyrian nation. In contrast to the word *Āθūr*, which was borrowed into Aramaic when Assyria still was an alien society, it cannot be regarded as a loanword but as an *indigenous self-designation*, which the Aramaic-speaking Assyrians shared with their Akkadian-speaking fellow citizens.

3.2 The Continuity of Assyrian Culture under the Achaemenid Empire

With the fall of Nineveh, the Empire was split in two, the western half falling into the hands of a Chaldean dynasty, the eastern one into the hands of Median kings. In 539 BC, both became incorporated in the Achaemenid Empire, the western one as the megasatrapy of Assyria (*Aθūrā*), the eastern one as the satrapy of Media (*Māda*).⁶⁰

The political power of Assyria was gone, but its people, culture and religion lived on. In marked contrast to the resolute integration policy of the Neo-Assyrian kings, the Achaemenids did not interfere in the internal affairs of their satrapies as long as the flow of tribute and taxes continued undisturbed.⁶¹ This was no problem in Assyria, whose population continued to venerate the Great King as the source of peace and security. The Aramaic *Sayings of Ahiqar*, a popular collection of wisdom composed in the Neo-Assyrian period, praised fear of God and King as the highest moral virtue; at the same time, being set at the Assyrian royal court, they continued to boost the Assyrian identity of the

⁵⁸ Syriac /ō/ goes back to Old Aramaic /ā/.

⁵⁹ Frye 1997. According to Yildiz 1999, 24, writings of *Sūryōyō* and *Sūrāyā* are occasionally preceded by the vowel sign *alap* with a *linea occultans* above indicating that this *alap* is not to be pronounced.

⁶⁰ Parpola 2000b, 4-5.

⁶¹ Dandamayev and Lukonin 1989, 104.

population.⁶² The Achaemenids, who themselves were significantly Assyrianized, felt no need to change the existing realities.⁶³ Thus everything went on just as before. Imperial Aramaic continued as the *lingua franca* of the Empire, the Aramaic script—now called the Assyrian script⁶⁴—was the everyday writing system, local religions and cults were tolerated, and the judicial system, calendar and imperial standards imposed by the Assyrians remained in force everywhere.⁶⁵

The 210 years of Achaemenid rule thus helped preserve the Assyrian identity of the Aramaic-speaking peoples. Although the times of Assyrian hegemony were over, the satrapy of Aθūrā kept Assyria on the map as a political entity and its inhabitants as Assyrians in the eyes of the contemporary world. Paradoxically, the period of massacres and persecutions following the fall of Nineveh seems to have strengthened their national and ethnic identity. The last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, who was of Assyrian extraction, reverted to Assyrian royal titulary and style in his inscriptions and openly promoted Assyrian religion and culture, evidently as a chauvinistic reaction against the Chaldean dynasty from which he had usurped power.⁶⁶ No wonder the Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon remembered him as an Assyrian king.⁶⁷

3.3 Assyrian Identity in Hellenistic and Roman Times

Under the successors of Alexander the Great, Assyria became the power base of the Seleucid Empire,⁶⁸ which at its largest covered much the same area as the Assyrian Empire previously. Even though the Seleucid kings pursued an active policy of hellenization and laid great stress on their Macedonian origins, they adopted the administrative methods of the Achaemenids and on the whole respected the local traditions; in due course, they inevitably began to assimilate to the local population.⁶⁹ To the contemporaries, their kingdom was a continuation of the Assyrian Empire. It is called “Assyria” (*Ašūr*) in the Dead

⁶² Lindenberger 1985; Dalley 2001; Parpola n.d. On the continued popularity of *Ahiqar* among the Aramaic-speaking peoples of the Near East in later Christian and Islamic times, see also Meissner 1917.

⁶³ Dandamayev 1997; Parpola 2002; Eph'al 1978, 87.

⁶⁴ Nylander 1968; Steiner 1993.

⁶⁵ Levine 2002; Eph'al 1988, 147-161; Grelot 1972.

⁶⁶ Mayer 1998.

⁶⁷ Herodotus 1.188.1; Xenophon, *Cyr.* 1.4.16, 1.5.2 and *passim* (cf. Parpola 2003a, 343-344). Also note that the two pretenders to the throne of Babylon in 522-521 BC, both of whom claimed to be Nabonidus' sons, are depicted as Assyrians in the sculptures of Darius (Seidl 2000).

⁶⁸ Cf. Livy 35.49.8 (citing Titus Flaminus), “The armies of Antiochus III [the Great, 222-187 BC] were all Syrians”.

⁶⁹ See F. Millar in Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987, 129-130; Crone and Cook 1977, 64.

Sea Scrolls⁷⁰ and in the Babylonian Talmud,⁷¹ and “the kingdom of the Assyrians” (*Assuriōn basileia*) in the *Antiquities* of Josephus.⁷²

When the Seleucid Empire disintegrated at the end of the second century BC, its western remnants were annexed to Rome, while several semi-independent kingdoms of decidedly Assyrian stamp and/or identity (Osroene, Adiabene, Hatra, Assur) popped up in the East under Parthian overlordship. These kingdoms perpetuated Assyrian cultural and religious traditions⁷³ but were also receptive to Christianity, whose central ideas were in line with the central tenets of Assyrian religion and ideology,⁷⁴ and which was felt as intrinsically Assyrian because of the Aramaic affinity of Jesus and the disciples. The Roman West likewise perpetuated Assyrian traditions, and Assyrian religion persisted

⁷⁰ 1QM 1:2 and 6 (The War Scroll).

⁷¹ Steiner 1993.

⁷² “170 years of the kingdom of the Assyrians, which was after Seleucus, who was called Nicator, got the dominion over Syria”, *Ant.* 13.6.6.

⁷³ As late as in the third century AD, personal names at Assur and Hatra were still completely in line with Neo-Assyrian onomastics, see Appendix IV. The gods Aššur, Šerua, Ištar, Nanaya, Bel, Nabû and Nergal continued to be worshiped in Assur at least until the early third century AD; the temple of Aššur was faithfully restored in the second century AD; the local cultic calendar was that of the imperial period; and the stelae of the local rulers resemble those of Assyrian kings in the imperial period (Andrae and Lenzen 1933; Aggoula 1995, pl. 1; cf. e.g. Reade 1983, 15; Porter 2000a, 13). For Hatra (Neo-Assyrian Ḥaṭṭallu) see Niehr 1998, 186-190 and the literature listed there; see also al-Salihi 1983. For Edessa/Osroene in the Balikh valley, see Segal 1970, 9-61. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (23.6.20-23) and Pliny (*HN* 6.16.41), Adiabene extended from Lower Zab to Armenia and included the cities of Arbela and Nineveh in the Assyrian heartland; according to Josephus (*Ant.* 20.3), its king Izates (AD 36-60) also controlled Nisibis. Cassius Dio (68.26.4) calls Adiabene “a district of Assyria in the vicinity of Ninus”, and notes that it “has also been called Atyria in the language of the barbarians, the double S being changed to T.” It was the target of Trajan’s Mesopotamian campaign (AD 116), which may have resulted in the establishment of a short-lived Roman province of ‘Assyria’ (Millar 1993, 101). A “king of the Assyrians” contemporary with Tiberius, with the Iranian name Nersai, is mentioned in the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai* (line 65); the king of Adiabene at the time of Trajan also had an Iranian name (Dio 68.26.5). On “Sennacherib, king of Ātôr” in Sasanian times (c. AD 350), mentioned in the Syriac *Acta Martyrum*, see Novák and Younansardaroud 2002.

⁷⁴ For example, the passion, redemptive death and resurrection of Christ, “the good shepherd”, echoed the fate of Tammuz, “the good shepherd”, who was annually wailed in former Assyrian territories well until the fourth century AD and even beyond. The exaltation of Christ to the right side of his heavenly Father echoed the exaltation of the saviour god Ninurta/Nabû, “the great healer”, whose victory over death and sin was likewise celebrated in an annual festival and proclaimed as “good tidings”. See Parpola 1997, passim; idem 2000a, especially p. 207; idem 2001, especially pp. 191-193; Annus 2002, 121-123; 187-202.

alongside Christianity in all its major cities until late Antiquity.⁷⁵

In the second century AD, two prominent writers from Roman Syria, Lucian and Tatian, ostentatiously identify themselves as Assyrians (*Assúrios*). This self-identification is commonly misinterpreted to imply nothing more than that these writers were ethnic Syrians (in the modern sense) speaking Aramaic as their mother tongue.⁷⁶ It is perfectly clear from the contexts, however, that they were specifically referring to their native identity and cultural heritage, which they proudly and defiantly contrasted with the Greek culture.⁷⁷ That heritage was Assyrian. It is worth emphasizing that while *Assúrios* in Roman times could refer to an inhabitant of the Roman province of Syria, it basically meant “Assyrian”, nothing else. No “Syria” in the modern sense existed in antiquity. In Armenian, Parthian and Egyptian sources of the Roman period, Roman Syria is consistently and unmistakably referred to as “Assyria” (*Asorik*, ‘swry’, ‘İsr’).⁷⁸

4. The Assyrian Identity Today

From the third century AD on, the Assyrians embraced Christianity in increasing numbers, even though the Assyrian religion persisted in places like Harran at least until the tenth,⁷⁹ in Mardin even until the 18th century AD.⁸⁰ The single-minded adherence to the Christian faith from late antiquity until the present time has made Christianity an indelible part of Assyrian identity, but it has also subjected the Assyrians to endless persecutions and massacres, first at the hands of the Romans, then at the hands of the Sasanian Persians, and most recently at the hands of Arabs, Kurds and Turks. These persecutions and

⁷⁵ Lucian, *De Dea Syria*; Segal 1970, 43-61; Green 1992, 54-73.

⁷⁶ Millar 1993, 460.

⁷⁷ Tatian’s *Address to the Greeks* begins: “Be not, O Greeks, so very hostilely disposed towards the Barbarians, nor look with ill on their opinions. For which of your institutions has not been derived from the Barbarians? ... To the Babylonians you owe astronomy; to the Persians, magic; to the Egyptians, geometry; to the Phoenicians, instruction by alphabetic writing. Cease, then, to miscall these imitations inventions of your own.” Note that this anti-Greek attitude is not limited to Tatian. “One of the most vocal critics of Hellenism, Ephrem [Syrus (AD 306-373), whose father was a pagan priest in Nisibis], likened it to poison... His hostility toward Greek ... wisdom did not stem solely from religious antagonism; in the fourth century, at least, such attacks could be seen as an assertion of a still vigorous local Syriac culture” (Green 1992, 75). Compare Hall 1999, 38: “The fundamental (even primordial) motive of self-preservation will ... ensure that individuals will come fully to the *defense* of the collective identity that they see as fundamentally constitutive of their selves, when they feel that collective identity to be endangered” (my emphasis).

⁷⁸ See Frye 1992; Steiner 1993.

⁷⁹ Green 1992, 94-161; Hämeen-Anttila 2002.

⁸⁰ See Chwolsohn 1856, 151-156 on the “sun-worshippers” [Shemshiyeh] described by Carsten Niebuhr and Southgate.

massacres have reduced the total number of Assyrians from an estimated 20 million or more in antiquity⁸¹ to well under two million today.⁸² They have decimated the Assyrian nation, but they have also helped it survive through the millennia. While innumerable Assyrians have been forced to change identity in order to survive, others have rather chosen martyrdom than denied their Assyrian identity and faith. Hagiographic sources such as the Syriac *Acta Martyrum* show that the Assyrians of the Parthian period took pride in their glorious past, many nobles tracing their ancestry to the Assyrian royal house.⁸³ The Nestorian church of the seventh century AD, which had cloisters and bishoprics all over the ancient homeland, including Nineveh in the eparchy of Atūr, chauvinistically asserted its Assyrian identity.⁸⁴

Today, the Assyrian nation largely lives in diaspora, split into rivaling churches and political factions. The fortunes of the people that constitute it have gone different ways over the millennia, and their identities have changed accordingly. The Syriacs in the West have absorbed many influences from the Greeks, while the Assyrians in the East have since ancient times been under Iranian cultural influence. Ironically, as members of the Chaldean Catholic Church established in 1553, many modern Assyrians originating from central Assyria now identify themselves as “Chaldeans”, a term inevitably associated with the Babylonian dynasty that destroyed Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire!⁸⁵

Disunited, dispersed in exile, and as dwindling minorities without full civil rights in their homelands, the Assyrians of today are in grave danger of total assimilation and extinction.⁸⁶ In order to survive as a nation, they must now unite under the Assyrian identity of their ancestors. It is the only identity that can help them to transcend the differences between them, speak with one voice again, catch the attention of the world, and regain their place among the nations.

⁸¹ Personal estimate.

⁸² Deniz 1999, 501-502.

⁸³ Crone and Cook 1977, 55-56 and 189-193; Novák and Younansardaroud 2002.

⁸⁴ Vööbus 1970, 94-101, 333; Gewargis 2002, 81-85.

⁸⁵ In an interview with the late Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Mar Raphael I Bedawid, published in the *Assyrian Star* 55/3 (Fall 2003), 20, the Patriarch comments on the name issue as follows: “I personally think that these [different] names serve to add confusion. The original name of our Church was the ‘Church of the East’ ... When a portion of the Church of the East became Catholic, the name given was ‘Chaldean’ based on the Magi kings who came from the land of the Chaldean, to Bethlehem. [T]he name ‘Chaldean’ does not represent an ethnicity... We have to separate what is ethnicity and what is religion... I myself, my sect is Chaldean, but ethnically, I am Assyrian.”

⁸⁶ Aprim 2003.