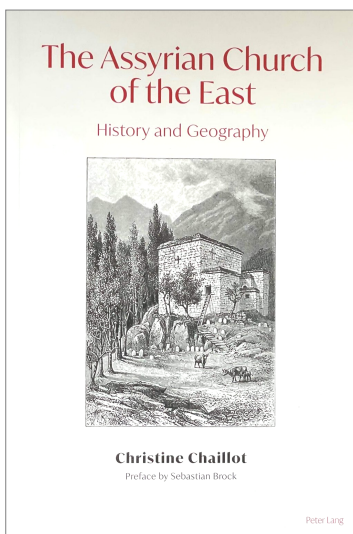


ԳՐԱԽՈՍԱԿԱՆՆԵՐ

BOOK REVIEWS



CHRISTINE CHAILLOT

“THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST: HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY”

(Peter Lang, Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-New York-Wien, 2021, 196 pages)

Christine Chaillot is very well known as a specialist in Orthodox (both Eastern and Oriental) Churches. She is the author of numerous articles and books on the Oriental Churches in the fields of history, theology and spirituality, namely – *Vie et spiritualité des Églises orthodoxes orientales des traditions syriaque, arménienne, copte et éthiopienne* (Le Cerf, Paris, 2010), *The Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2011), and *Les Coptes d'Égypte. Discriminations et persécutions* (1970–2011) (L'Harmattan, Paris, 2014), and many more. Her books have been translated into eleven languages.

The current English version of the book by Christine Chaillot titled “The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography” is a translation of the original French publication and definitely counts as one of the more important and significant researches dedicated to the history of the Assyrian Church of the East.

The book contains a Preface to the English edition by Dr. Sebastian Brock, the famous British scholar and professor of Oxford University, Introduction, 9 chapters, Conclusion, Bibliography, Timeline, and Maps (196 pages).

In this book, the reader is invited to travel in time and space and undertake the fascinating discovery of a very ancient apostolic Church whose two-thousand year

Christine Chaillot, The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography

history constitutes an indispensable chapter in the history of the universal Church. The cradle of the Church of the East was in Mesopotamia (between the rivers Tigris and the Euphrates), where it developed its first centre at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, then the capital of the great Persian Empire, and today an archaeological site to the south of Baghdad. From the very beginnings of Christianity until the 14th century, this Church experienced a remarkable expansion in Asia, its missionaries carrying the Gospel from Persia to India, via the Persian Gulf, and even as far as China. The Church of the East reached China as early as the 7th century via Central Asia and the celebrated Silk Road that linked China to the Mediterranean world. Much later, in the late 14th century, the invasions of the Mongol conqueror, Timur Lang (Tamerlane), across Asia brought about a great decline of the Church of the East. Eventually, after the genocide suffered by Christians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War and the massacres that followed in Persia, the Church of the East and its people were on the verge of extinction. In 1940 the patriarchal seat was moved to the city of Chicago (United States) and then in September of 2015 to the city of Erbil (Northern Iraq).

This book is a general overview of the history and geography of the Assyrian Church of the East, the two spheres of research being incapable of separation. On the one hand, history can't be understood without geographical locations; on the other, without history it's impossible to understand the geographical situation as it exists today.

In the **Introduction** of the book the author refers to Arthur Goldschmidt's words who says: "History depends upon geography" (page 5). According to C. Chaillot, that is the reason she includes maps in her research which are very informative. Also, the book has been conceived in such a way that each chapter can be read independently of the others. The reader will notice a gap between the 15th and 19th centuries. This is basically a period of great decline for the Assyrian Church of the East the details of which are still poorly understood and have become a subject of research interest for specialists today.

In **Chapter One** the author gives interesting details of the history of the Assyrian Church of the East from the 1st to the 18th centuries. Here the reader learns about the Assyrian Church of the East in Persia under the Parthian and Sasanian Empires, including the first widespread persecution of Christians when the Parthian rulers were in power, the autocephalous organization, the principal dioceses and metropolitan provinces of the Church of the East in the 14th-15th

centuries, the theological schools, the monasteries, the Arab invasion (7th century) and arrival of Islam, the translation movement under the First Abbasid Caliphs, periods during Seljuk (1038–1307), Mongol (1206–1368), Tamerlane (1370–1405) and their successors' invasions.

In this chapter it has been too briefly explained that the establishment of the Church of the East in the Persian Empire gave it a free hand over large territories. At that time there were numerous great commercial routes passing through Persia and Central Asia such as the famous Silk Road.

Chapter Two is relatively small and describes the missionary activities of the Assyrian Church of the East in Arabia, Yemen, and The Persian Gulf. In recent decades the archeologists have discovered the ruins of churches and monasteries of the Church of the East, details of which the reader may find in this chapter (pages 35–41).

Chapter Three is a very informative overview on the relationship of the Church of the East and India. In India, and particularly in Kerala, several churches of the Syriac rite, including the Church of the East, have existed until our days. According to the author of the book, at the time of Patriarch Yahballaha III (1281–1317) the name of the metropolitan of India was placed in the 14th position in the list of metropolitans of the Church of the East. In the 14th century the southern part of India escaped the depredations of Tamerlane (1370–1405). On the other hand, under different conditions, the majority of the Christians of the Church of the East were gradually conquered by the Roman Catholic Church. In the middle of the 16th century the communities in India represented the sole external metropolitan province to survive in the Church of the East. In other words, with the exception of the small remnant living in the vicinity of the Patriarchate situated in Kochanis (Western Armenia or nowadays South-East Turkey), the sole community of the Church of the East that has really managed to survive through the centuries up to the present time, is that of Kerala (South-West India).

The chapter also describes the details on Syrian Chaldean Church in India under the leadership of an archbishop whose seat is in Thrissur. It numbers about 25 thousand members out of total of Christians of Syriac rite in India estimated to be of 7,5 million. The Chaldean Catholic branch in India is called the Syro-Malabar Church. As of today the Syriac-rite Church with the greatest number of members is about 4 million (page 53).

Christine Chaillot, The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography

In **Chapter Four** Cristine Chaillot writes about the territorial expansion extended right across the continent of Asia, along the whole length of the Silk Road from the 7th to the 14th centuries. In this chapter she gives a detailed description of the geography and the history of the Silk Road, in addition to the missionary expansion of the Church of the East. Here the reader may also find information about the Nomadic tribes converted to Christianity in Mongolia (pages 61–64).

The author's explanations of how the languages and translation were used by the missionaries of the Church of the East during their mission in this huge territory, are of great interest too. She writes, "With regard to the liturgical language, not only Syriac was used but also other languages spoken by the people who were converted. These missionaries knew several foreign languages".

The amount of written sources along the Silk Road, which was rather scanty because many of these Christians were nomads, has recently been progressively improved by new fascinating archeological discoveries that allow us to enrich the study of the history of the Assyrian Church of the East with new and interesting facts and ideas. The results of excavations published by scholars prove the presence of the Church of the East and its expansion in Central Asia and beyond, before and after the Arab invasions. The inscriptions that have been found in the East Syriac language confirm that the finds relate to Christian communities belonging to the Church of the East.

Very far from the eastern frontiers of Persia and beyond the territories of the Turco-Mongol tribes of Central Asia, the missionaries of the Church of the East, priests and monks, penetrated still further eastwards until they reached the Great Empire of China. In 635 they arrived at the capital Chang'an (today called Xi'an) that was then a cosmopolitan city situated at the crossroads of important routes and at the eastern terminal of the Silk Road. The details of the relationships of the Assyrian Church of the East and China are presented by C. Chaillot in **Chapter Five** of the monograph. It is thanks to the stele of Xi'an that we learn about Alopen, a monk of the Church of the East, who arrived there with his mission. In fact, the beginning of the history of Christianity is attested by the celebrated Tablet of Xi'an, the principal document that is today exhibited in the Beilin Museum at Xi'an.

From 635–845 Christianity in China enjoyed a period of stability but the rate of its development could not rival that of Buddhism which expanded very rapidly. In 877 there is mention of massacres of thousands of Christians at Guangzhou and elsewhere.

At the end of the 13th century when the Mongols seized power in China, two new metropolitan provinces were created by the hierarchy of the Church of the East here. Among the Christians of the Church of the East who returned to China at that time were monks, merchants and administrators. As a matter of fact, some Christians of the Church of the East occupied important positions in the Yuan Mongol government (page 77).

It's worth mentioning that the presence of Christians of the Church of the East in China is undeniably confirmed by written documents not only in Syriac and Chinese but also in other languages, including Arabic and Latin.

Chapter Six describes contacts between Mongol rulers and the Christians of the Church of the East, the policy of the Mongol ilkhans toward the Church of the East and its role in the history of the Mongol Empire. On the whole, it may be said that the Christianity of the Church of the East played a relatively significant and important role in the history of the Mongol Empire, in particular through the mediatory role of various tribes and of Christians of this church in particular.

Tamerlane's (1370–1405) campaigns were immensely destructive: Christians were killed, churches and monasteries devastated, heavy taxes and anti-Christian laws imposed. When his troops passed through Central Asia and particularly the territories of modern Iraq, Syria and Turkey, they wrecked the infrastructure of the Church of the East almost totally. After they invaded Baghdad in 1393, the Christianity almost disappeared in the region. The Church of the East was at that time wiped out and consequently mainly survived only in two regions of the Middle East: in the mountains of the modern Turkish province of Hakkari and the surrounding area, such as the neighboring north-western Iran, and in Kerala (India).

Chapter Seven introduces modern Assyrians, the places they mostly resided, their patriarch Mar-Shimoun and his residency in Kochanis (in Turkey), their massacres in the 19th century by the Turks and Kurds, the missionaries of various churches who came to convert Assyrians to their denominations, mainly to Protestants and Catholics.

Chapter Eight, in fact, continues the previous chapter where the author writes about the history of the genocide of the Assyrian people in the Ottoman Empire by the Young Turks' regime during the First World War and in Persia in 1918, and after that the Simele massacres of Assyrians in Iraq in 1933. A special subchapter presents the assassination of Mar-Shimoun Benyamin XIX, the patriarch of the

Christine Chaillot, The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography

Assyrian Church of the East in March, 1918 (pages 116–117). Certainly, all these tragedies had a huge impact on the future of the Assyrian Church of the East. Subsequently, a large number of Assyrians left their homeland for Western countries.

The Assyrian Church of the East was reorganized in 1940 in the United States where Patriarch Mar-Shimoun XXI Eshai joined his emigrated community in Chicago, and the few next patriarchs of the Church of the East were also residing in US. In 2015 a new patriarch, Mar Givargis III Sliwa was elected and the seat again was moved to Erbil (Iraq).

In **Chapter Nine** the author describes the Assyrian Diaspora in the 21st century, depicting in different subchapters the Assyrian life under the leadership of the Church of the East in Middle East (page 131–135), North America (pages 135–138), European countries (pages 138–139), Ex-Soviet Union countries (pages 139–141), Australia (pages 142–143) and India (pages 134–144). All these Assyrians living in the Diaspora were, in fact forced to go to exile, in the prevailing majority of cases without any hope to return to the Middle East – the land of their ancestors.

In **Conclusion** the author generalizes her thoughts on the subject of her study and also shares her conversation on the Assyrian identity with the Assyrian Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Givargis III Sliwa (pages 149–150).

The **maps** attached to the end of the book, add to the value of the research accomplished by C. Chaillot. They avail the reader of a good opportunity to get a better idea about what has been described by the author, and may serve as important and reliable resources.

I am confident that the new book ***“The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography” by Christine Chaillot*** is a very valuable and tremendous contribution to a better understanding of Orthodoxy on a world scale. Myself being a genocide scholar of an Assyrian origin, I cannot but express my pride and gratitude to the author for this unique and exceptional research on the history of our church.

ANAHIT KHOSROEVA

Ph.D, Leading Researcher

Department of Armenian Genocide Studies

Institute of History, NAS of RA

akhosroyeva@yahoo.com