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Nicholas Coureas

Abstract

The Melkites of Cyprus like the Georgians identified with the Greek Church and followed their rite. They began settling on Cyprus during the later Byzantine period and were prominent on Lusignan Cyprus (1192-1474) as traders, especially in Famagusta, the chief port of the island. In Syria and Lebanon from the time of the seventh century Arab conquest onwards they had developed a distinct religious identity in opposition to both Muslims and non-Chalcedonian Christians, expressed through a tradition of composition or translation of religious works into Arabic. This tradition continued on Cyprus. Since, however, most of the Cypriot population were Chalcedonian Christians, Latin, Greek or Maronites, the Melkites on Cyprus were absorbed by degrees into the Latin ruling class and the Greek majority population. The absence of a politically and numerically dominant Muslim ‘other’ and of important non-Chalcedonian Christian groups facilitated this absorption.

The Melkites who can also be called Syrian Orthodox were Syrian Chalcedonian Christians, who developed a distinct religious identity during the period 750 to 1050 under Muslim rule. They were Orthodox Christians like the Greeks but used the Arabic language in everyday discourse and also to articulate their doctrine and worship, a process involving the translation of Greek texts into Arabic, although their liturgical languages were Syriac and Greek and they adhered to the Greek liturgy. They developed a distinct religious identity emphasizing their differences firstly from the Muslims and secondly from non-Chalcedonian Christians, these non-Chalcedonian

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Christians being the Monophysite Jacobites, the Nestorians who were followers of the third century heretic Nestorius and the Maronites. This last group, initially Monothelites, became Chalcedonian and began to acknowledge the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church from the late twelfth century onwards. Jerusalem was the spiritual and cultural centre of the Melkites throughout the period from 750 to 1050 (Griffith 2008: 176-185; Hamilton 1980: 207-208). The Melkites in northern Syria, however, were under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox patriarchs of Antioch. It must be emphasized that the Melkites developed their religious and cultural identity in opposition to two ‘Others’; the Muslims outside the Christian faith and the non-Chalcedonian non-Orthodox Christians within it. In Syria and Palestine there were large Melkite populations in Antioch, Laodicea, in the other coastal towns and as far afield as Damascus (Griffith 2008: 186-203; Hamilton 1980: 159-161, 172-173 and 312-317).

Melkite Christians are recorded on Cyprus from the early thirteenth century although they probably arrived earlier. But the ethnic and religious composition of the population of Cyprus differed radically from that of Syria. The Roman Catholic Latins who had conquered Cyprus in 1191 and ruled the island right up to 1570 were Chalcedonian Christians and so was the Greek Orthodox majority population. The less numerous Georgians and the Maronites were also Chalcedonian Christians. The non-Chalcedonian Jacobites and Nestorians who were also few in number were present on Cyprus, as were small numbers of Jews and Muslims. Nevertheless, the great majority of the island’s population were Chalcedonian Christians (Coureas 1997: 252-261). On account of this the Melkites living there did not have the two groups of ‘Others’ mentioned above, namely the Muslims and the non-Chalcedonian Christians, in large numbers so as to differentiate themselves from them. Therefore, it was easier for the Melkites on Cyprus to become gradually assimilated to a mainly Chalcedonian population. This indeed came to pass due to external as well as internal factors, with developments in thirteenth century Syria playing an important role in the attitudes that Melkites on Cyprus exhibited towards the Latin rulers and the Greek majority population.

A letter of Pope Honorius III dated 20 January 1222 and addressed to various prelates of Latin Syria alluded to how Eustorge the Latin archbishop of Nicosia had complained of the insubordination shown towards him by Syrians, Jacobites, Nestorians and Maronites, and he
instructed these prelates to compel these groups to obey the archbishop. The first group mentioned, the Syrians, clearly relates to the Melkites, for those Syrians not belonging to the Orthodox Church are invariably designated as Jacobites or Nestorians, both non-Chalcedonian confessions, or Maronites, who as stated above came to acknowledge papal primacy while maintaining their distinct Arabic language rite. The presence of the Syrian Melkites on Cyprus at this time was also acknowledged by Germanos, the Ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, resident in exile at the Byzantine court in Nicaea after the Latin capture of Constantinople in 1204. In the second of his letters addressed to the Cypriots he condemned those submitting to the Latin Church. This letter of 1229 was addressed to ‘Christ-loving and devout men ... who happen to live on the famous island of Cyprus, both Greeks and Syrians’ (Coureas & Schabel 1997: no. 35; Nerantze-Varmaze 1996: 126-129; Coureas 1997: 270).

Developments among the Melkites in Syria and Palestine influenced the Melkites living on Cyprus. From the eleventh century onwards the Greek patriarchate of Constantinople with the support of the Byzantine emperors became more influential in the affairs of the Orthodox communities of Syria and Palestine (Griffith 2008: 189-190). In addition, a quarrel between Prince Bohemond IV of Antioch and Peter of Angoulême, the incumbent Latin patriarch of the city, leading to the latter’s imprisonment and eventual death in custody, resulted in the election of Ibn-abu-Saibe as Orthodox patriarch of Antioch by the Syrian Orthodox of the city. Under this new patriarch, who had Orthodox suffragan bishops under his jurisdiction, the Latins were admitted to the divine services in Orthodox churches. But the papal legate St Albert of Jerusalem excommunicated him after the death of the Latin patriarch. He was exiled to Cilicia in 1213 and in 1217-1218 went to the Byzantine court in Nicaea. There he did penance for having previously entered into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. As an Orthodox patriarch who had clashed with the Latin clergy in Syria and who by 1229 had been resident at Nicaea for over a decade, he probably influenced Patriarch Germanos in his decision to urge both the Greek and Syrian Orthodox on Cyprus to resist the Latins in his letter of 1229 addressed to them. It is noteworthy that Patriarch Symeon II also condemned the pope and the Roman Curia for heresy when Pope Gregory IX sent Franciscan friars to Nicaea in the years 1231-1234 to discuss theological issues with the Greeks (Hamilton 1980: 313-315 and 321).
Other factors external factors impelling both Syrian Melkites and Greeks on Cyprus and in Latin Syria to resist the Latins was the increasing intolerance shown by Latin clergy originating from and trained in Western Europe towards Orthodox liturgical usages, especially from the time of Pope Honorius III onwards, and the increased hostility of the Byzantine clergy towards the Latins after the Fourth Crusade of 1204 resulting in the Latin conquest of Constantinople, most of continental Greece and the Aegean area. In 1216 Jacques de Vitry, the Latin bishop of Acre, observed that the Orthodox, Syrians and Greeks, washed the altars of churches after Latins had used them, omitted the filioque when reciting the Creed, had married priests, insisted on using unleavened bread in celebrating the sacraments and allowed simple priests to confirm infants directly after baptism. All these divergences from Roman Catholic practice also existed among the Orthodox Syrians and Greeks of Cyprus. Furthermore, when Pope Gregory IX received complaints that in Antioch Latin Christians avoided paying tithes by employing Greeks and Armenians to cultivate their lands, since the latter paid no tithes on the lands that they themselves cultivated according to custom in the Latin east, he was alluding to a subterfuge also current in Cyprus where the nobles installed Greek and Syrian Melkite baillis (Hamilton 1980: 315-317; Coureas 1997: 25 and 259-279; Schabel 2010: I, d-27). Some of the Orthodox clergy in Antioch continued to obey the exiled Patriarch Symeon II, and in 1225 Pope Honorius III told the incumbent Latin patriarch of Antioch to deprive such clergy of their benefices. The martyrdom of 13 Greek monks in Cyprus in 1231 for refusing to accept the validity of unleavened communion bread would have become known among the Syrian Melkites and Greeks in Latin Syria, worsening their relations with the Latins to a greater extent than the post-1204 hostilities between Latin and Greeks in relatively distant Greece (Hamilton 1980: 318-319; Coureas and Schabel 1997: no. 69).

Yet David, who succeeded Symeon II as the Orthodox patriarch of Antioch shortly after 1244, was less hostile towards the Latins. He came to reside in Antioch with the consent of Prince Bohemond V, expressing his wish to be reconciled with the pope in 1247. Since Latin sources do not mention a schism with the Orthodox after this date it is possible that he acknowledged papal primacy. Euthymius, who succeeded him as patriarch in 1258 quarreled with the Latin patriarch Opizo dei Fieschi and was expelled from Antioch, returning in 1260 following the submission of
Prince Bohemond to the Mongol khan, the latter having requested his return. Expelled once more in 1263 Euthymius made his way to Constantinople and remained there until his death in 1274, for in 1268 Antioch fell to the Mamluks who sacked and destroyed it (Hamilton 1980: 321-326). The conciliatory attitude and possible submission of the Patriarch David to the pope and the fact that his successor Euthymius spent most of his term of office in exile must have prevented the Syrian Melkites of Cyprus from receiving any effective support from them in the matter of resisting Latin demands.

The Syrian Melkites were nevertheless alluded to in the demands the Greek archbishop of Cyprus submitted via Eudes of Châteauroux, papal legate a latere in Latin Syria and Cyprus, in July 1250, when among other things he demanded that the tithes received by the Latin Church from free Syrian and Greek peasants should be transferred to the Greek bishops (Haluscyński & Wojnar 1962: no. 74). This demand was never conceded, and in a letter dated 30 January 1267 that William the titular Latin patriarch of Jerusalem wrote to Velasco, the Latin bishop of Famagusta, it was stated explicitly that Syrian peasants had to pay tithes according to ancient custom and in accordance with the terms of the agreement of 1222 concluded between the Latin Church and the crown and nobles of the kingdom of Cyprus (Coureas & Schabel 1997: no. 106). The Syrians in question were indubitably Melkites, for as seen above those of other denominations were not mentioned as Syrians in the documentation of the time. Besides, the Latin Church could hardly exact tithes from non-Chalcedonian Syrian Christians such as the Jacobites or Nestorians, who were deemed heretics.

The Syrian Melkites were also mentioned in the terms of the Bulla Cypria, the agreement concluded in 1260 in Rome according to the terms of which the Greek Church of Cyprus accepted papal primacy. The final section of the agreement states that it was also applicable to ‘the Syrians of the same kingdom who from ancient times have observed the same practices, rites and the ecclesiastical justice of a common law as the Greeks’. The insubordination and hostility of the Syrian Melkites as well as that of the Greeks towards the terms of this agreement is also recorded in various letters of Pope Urban IV of 1263 and 1264 addressed to Hugh of Fagiano, the Latin archbishop of Nicosia, and to Prince Hugh of Antioch, the bailiff of the kingdom of Cyprus. In these letters, the Melkites and Greeks were accused of not observing the agreement and of heaping abuse on the Latin
archbishop and his churches. The bailiff was urged to use his coercive powers to secure their obedience, although the pope complained that both he and numerous nobles were refusing to support the archbishop, maintaining that his powers of punishment were limited to his serfs and clerics (Coureas & Schabel 1997: nos. 11, 75-79 and 106; Schabel 2001: nos. 25-29).

New developments took place when Theodosius de Villehardouin was elected Orthodox patriarch of Antioch in 1278. Although belonging to the Orthodox confession, he originated from a Latin princely family ruling the Morea. Assenting to the union of the Orthodox with Rome, he wrote a treatise supporting this together with the Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria and persuaded the Orthodox under Latin rule in Syria to make their peace with the Latin Church, as appears from a letter Pope Nicholas III wrote in 1279 to Prince Bohemond VII, count of Tripoli and titular prince of Antioch (Hamilton 1980: 327-328). These developments did not have an immediate effect on the attitudes towards the Latins held by the Syrian Melkites on Cyprus. The insubordination of the Melkites towards the terms of the Bulla Cypria is recorded in the later thirteenth century when a provincial council of the Latin Church convoked under Archbishop Ranulph in around 1283 stated that “many things which suggest division from the unity of the Church … have arisen among the nation of the Greeks and the Syrians of the kingdom of Cyprus, out of ignorance, simplicity, and …the misdeeds of those who are supposed to instruct them” (Schabel 2001: 118-119).

This was a swipe at the clergy of the Greek rite, theoretically acknowledging papal primacy following the agreement of 1260 but not doing so in practice. Syrian Melkites and Greeks were accused of failing to confess their sins on a regular basis, of not confessing to their own priest and of avoiding those priests who had accepted the terms of the 1260 Agreement whereby the Greek Church of Cyprus had acknowledged the jurisdiction of the Roman Church and accepted papal primacy. Instead, such Syrian Melkites and Greeks preferred confessing their sins before priests who refused to accept the terms of this agreement and whom the Roman Church considered to be heretics. It was decreed that all should confess their sins at least once a year to their own parish priests, with “bishops and priests, ephors, master chaplains and laymen, Greek and Syrian” ordered to observe this decree strictly on pain of excommunication. This penalty must have hardly troubled those who did not recognize papal primacy in any case. In addition, Greek and Syrian monks and priests not appointed
to hear confessions in the city and diocese of Nicosia were forbidden to hear confessions, and the laity forbidden to confess to them (Schabel 2001: 126-131).

Nevertheless, the gradual loss of the Latin possessions in Syria and Palestine to the Mamluks between the years 1260 and 1291 led to a major influx of Latin but also Syrian Christian refugees to Cyprus in general and Famagusta in particular, so that by the end of the thirteenth century this town, which had become the chief port of the kingdom, had a very large Syrian population. Melkites as well as other Syrian Christians were among them. The Orthodox patriarchs of Antioch seem to have had good relations with the kingdom of Cyprus during the early fourteenth century, something probably facilitated by the absence of Latin clergy in their midst from 1268 onwards, following the fall of Antioch to the Mamluks. This information is found in the fifteenth century Cypriot chronicle of Leontios Makhairas, whose family despite their Greek ethnicity had connections with the court of the Lusignan kings of Cyprus (Coureas 2013: 240-241). Makhairas states in his chronicle that prior to the Latin conquest Cyprus was subject politically to the emperors of Constantinople and ecclesiastically to “the patriarch of Antioch the Great”. This is completely untrue, given that the Orthodox Church of Cyprus acquired autocephaly at the Council of Ephesus in 431, but it shows how Makhairas was retrojecting the close links that existed between Antioch and Cyprus in his own time. He mentions how under King Hugh IV (1324-1359) Patriarch Ignatios of Antioch had an icon he had told the king to have painted for combatting a plague of locusts consecrated and sent to the village of Palaikythro, infected by plague. Furthermore, this patriarch also had a huge cross constructed out of walnut, within which was placed a fragment of the True Cross and the relics of 46 saints, so as to be used in combatting locusts or the plague (Dawkins 1932: I, §§40, 77 and 158). Both Ignatios and Cyril the Orthodox bishop of Sidon were anti-Palamites who found refuge at King Hugh’s court in the years 1355-1360 (Coureas 2010: 443). Their presence probably acted as a catalyst in the formation of good relations between Latins and Greek-rite clergy on Cyprus.

As stated above, the formation of Melkite identity in Syria and Palestine took place to a great extent in opposition to two others, the Muslims on one hand and non-Chalcedonian non-Orthodox Christians on the other. This tradition began in the eighth century with John of Damascus, who in
his Fountain of Knowledge refuted Islamic doctrines and practices, using polemical arguments even to the point of distorting Islam. It was continued by other Melkite writers coming after him, initially in Syria and later on in Cyprus itself (Griffith 2008: 195-196 and 202-203). This is proven by the initial composition and the subsequent emendation of the ‘Letter from the People of Cyprus’. This polemical Christian text that is probably dateable to the early thirteenth century was written by the Melkite Bishop Paul of Sidon, ostensibly as a letter to a Muslim friend in that city. Paul stated in his ‘letter’ that he has travelled to various Christian lands at the request of his unnamed Muslim friend in order to ascertain the opinions and beliefs of the Christian leaders and experts in these lands regarding Muhammad. Bishop Paul then cited passages of the Quran, at times doctored to make them conform more closely to Christian belief, and reasoned argument to show that the Quran supports and agrees with key articles of the Christian faith, for instance the Trinity, the duality of Christ and the Incarnation. Bishop Paul, moreover, maintained that the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings were addressed to the illiterate desert Arabs as a preparatio evangelica, a means whereby Christianity, the ultimate religious truth, could be imparted to them, and not to mankind as a whole. This tract, circulating widely in the thirteenth century and known among Muslim scholars, was refuted by one, Shihab al Din al Qarafi, in his writings (Ebied and Thomas, Muslim-Christian Polemic, pp. 1-5).

This polemical Christian text was recast extensively by an anonymous author in the early fourteenth century. He was either a Syrian Melkite or a convert from Islam to Melkite Christianity, and had perhaps fled to Cyprus after or shortly before the Muslim re-conquest of Latin Syria to escape the capital punishment for apostasy Muslim law prescribed. This is indicated by his fluency in Arabic, his thorough knowledge of the Quran and his citations of the Bible in its Arabic translations. Aiming to make the text more acceptable, less refutable and above all more convincing for the Muslim audience it was directed at, he deleted much of the original’s logical reasoning, corrected the doctored citations of the Quran and added more such citations, also adding citations from the Bible. Following this thorough revision, the ‘Letter from the People of Cyprus’ was sent to two Muslim scholars in Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya in 1316 and al-Dimashqi in 1321. Arguing from a wholly Quranic perspective, Al-Dimashqi wrote a comprehensive refutation of this piece of Christian polemic only four months after receiving it. Whether this reply
reached Cyprus is not known. Besides, its survival in just one manuscript indicates a limited diffusion. Composed either to boost Christian morale in the wake of the Muslim re-conquest of Latin Syria or to attempt conversion of Muslims by peaceful means, the ‘Letter from the People of Cyprus’, indicates that the Syrian Melkites living on Cyprus were in regular contact with those living in Syria during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They adopted the religious polemic against Islam fashioned by Syrian Melkites like Bishop Paul of Sidon but were also able to remould it so as to strengthen its impact (Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic*, pp. 5-35).

The growing numerical and economic strength of those Greek-rite Christians, Melkites and Greeks, belonging to the Greek Church is reflected in the construction of the church of St George of the Greeks in Famagusta, specifically conceived as an episcopal church designed to rival the Latin cathedral of St Nicholas in the same city that had been constructed at the start of the fourteenth century. Syrian Melkites and others donated sizeable sums of money towards the construction of this church but also to other Greek churches in the city and diocese of Famagusta (Olympios 2014: 168-173). This appears, moreover, from wills drawn up in the second half of the fourteenth century. One of them was prepared by someone who seems to have been a Melkite or at least to have been married to one. On 3 April 1363 Fetus Semitecolo, a citizen of Venice residing in Famagusta, drew up a will in which he expressed his wish to be buried in the Greek church of St Epiphanios in Famagusta. This stipulation, his bequest to his wife Maria of 3,000 white bezants owed to her over the sale of a house, inscribed in the Court of the Syrians in Famagusta, and his instruction that any goods of his put up for sale were to be sold by the president and jurors of the same court strongly suggest that he was a ‘White Venetian’, a Syrian Melkite under Venetian protection, or that at least his wife was a Syrian Melkite. He bequeathed 1,000 white bezants to assist the episcopal church of St George of the Greeks and decreed that his wife had to provide the Greek monastery of St Gerasimos fifty white bezants per annum. Besides, if she decided to rent the house she was living in, which he bequeathed to her, she had to pay two priests to celebrate mass in the church of St Epiphanius from the rental incomes she was to get, for the good of Fetus’s soul (Otten-Froux 2003: no. 6).

This increase in the number of Syrian Melkites in Famagusta also occasioned a sharp dispute between the Latin bishops of Famagusta and
their Greek counterparts, the bishops of Karpasia. A letter of Pope John
XXII dated 11 February 1321 and addressed to the Benedictine abbot of the
Holy Cross and to Canon Peter de Genoliaco of Nicosia makes this clear.
One of the issues raised was that of jurisdiction over the Syrian Melkite
Christians, who as stated above were Chalcedonian and followed the Greek
rite. The Greek bishops Leo of Solea and Olivarios of Lefkara, speaking on
behalf of all the Greek bishops of Cyprus, maintained that the provisions
of the Bulla Cypria had acknowledged them to be under the jurisdiction of
the Greek episcopacy, who were entitled to confirm the elections of Syrian
abbots who had come over to Cyprus after 1260, the date of the Bulla Cypria,
and were resident there. The two Greek bishops maintained that they and
their forerunners had had such abbots and other Syrians directly subordinate
to them, confirmed their elections and adjudicated over instances of marriage
arising either within the Syrian community or between Syrians and Greeks
from 1260 until their incarceration by the legate Peter de Pleine Chassaigne.
Following this incarceration, the Greek bishops asserted that their Latin
counterparts had usurped all those rights over the Syrian Melkites, either in
person or via their vicars or other officials. Therefore, they were violating,
at least in part, the provisions of the Bulla Cypria and acting nefariously
towards the Greek bishops of Cyprus (Mollat 1904-1947: no. 12955; Tautu
1952: no. 36; Schabel 2001: no. 38). The final part of the Bulla Cypria does
indeed state that the agreement was also applicable to Syrian Melkites of
Cyprus. But it does not clarify whether those covered were simply Syrians
currently on the island or also those arriving in the future. From the 1260s to
the fall of Acre and Tyre in 1291 a considerable number of Syrians coming
over to Cyprus, including Melkites, arrived just after the date of the Bulla
Cypria, and so whether its provisions regarding Syrians applied to them as
well was a moot point (Coureas & Schabel 1997: no. 78; Schabel 2001: no.
25 [32]).

Peter Thomas, the Carmelite friar, titular patriarch of Constantinople
and papal legate a latere in the East, played an important role when the issue
of jurisdiction over the Syrians resident in Famagusta resurfaced later in the
fourteenth century. Peter de Pleine Chassaigne’s earlier decision was that
jurisdiction over the Melkite Syrians pertained to the bishops of the Latin
Church. Nevertheless, Bishop John of Karpasia, a successor of Hilarion,
raised this issue once more before 1365 with Leodegard, the Latin bishop of
Famagusta. On 24 March 1365 Pope Urban V wrote a letter to Archbishop
Raymond of la Pradelle of Nicosia in which he referred to the earlier dispute which had occurred in the Latin diocese of Famagusta between Bishop Baldwin and Bishop Hilarion of Karpasia. He referred to the recent petition presented to him on the behalf of Bishop Leodegard, the incumbent of the Latin bishopric of Famagusta, affirming that the Latin bishops exercised jurisdiction over all Greeks and Syrians in the city. The letter also stated that when Bishop Hilarion had disputed the issue previously he and the Latin bishop Baldwin as the contesting parties appeared before the papal legate, who had ruled in Bishop Baldwin’s favour. No appeal had been made against the legate’s decision at the time, as a result of which Bishop Baldwin and the Latin bishops succeeding him had enjoyed undisputed jurisdiction over both Greeks and Syrians in the city of Famagusta. Pope Gregory XI sent the same letter on 25 January 1373 to Archbishop Raymond de la Pradelle of Nicosia, which suggests that the Greek bishops had re-ignited this issue in the meantime (Laurent 1954-1986: no. 15019; Tautu 1964: no. 72; Tautu 1966: no. 54; Schabel 2001: no. 58).

Patriarch Peter of Constantinople, then bishop of Coron in the Peloponnese and papal legate in the east, had passed judgement on this matter before the ruling of Pope Urban V. He too had pronounced judgement in favour of Leodegard, the Latin bishop, ordering Bishop John of Karpasia to keep silence on this issue for evermore. Bishop John decided to appeal against the sentence but he apparently lodged his appeal after the expiration of the legal time limit, even though he had been able to appeal within the requisite deadline. Therefore, Pope Urban V ordered Archbishop Raymond to ensure that this judgement was firmly adhered to, and if necessary the archbishop was to summon the help of the secular arm to this end. The letters of both Pope John XXII and Pope Urban V record the heavy concentration of Syrians in the city and diocese of Famagusta. Besides, Pope Urban’s letter refers to ‘Syros seu Sorianos’ which must mean Syrians or Nestorians, including therefore Christians of a non-Chalcedonian confession. The Syrians Melkites, however, were the ones subject to the dispute described above, for neither the Latin nor the Greeks Church would have claimed jurisdiction over non-Chalcedonian and therefore heretical Christians (Laurent 1954-1986: no. 15019; Tautu 1964: no. 72; Schabel 2001: no. 58).

Some of the Melkites coming to Famagusta after 1260 were wealthy merchants engaged in the export of cotton. A group of them originating from Laodicea co-operated with merchants from the town of Ancona on the
Adriatic seaboard of Italy as exporters of Syrian cotton to Western Europe via Cyprus. Between July 1300 and October 1301 there exist no less than 28 notarial deeds on the shipment of cotton to Ancona and to other destinations. Indeed, most of the contracts are for the month of October 1301. No less than 15 of them regard consignments of cloth sent by Syrian Melkite merchants originating from Laodicea who had clearly left the city in the second half of the thirteenth century and were now residing in Famagusta (Balard, Duba & Schabel 2012: no. 274; Polonio 1982: nos. 48, 54, 59; Pavoni 1982: nos. 181, 182, 185, 186, 188, 192-196, 198-200, 202-208, 220-222; Balard 1984: no. 153). One observes here that Syrian Melkites were established in Laodicea long before the Mamluk re-conquest. Gerard of Nazareth, a Benedictine monk who became the Latin bishop of Laodicea in around 1140, wrote a treatise on Mary Magdalen against the Greeks as well as a now lost treatise against the Melkite priest Sala, whom he accused of introducing a Greek bishop into Laodicea in opposition to the Latin bishop (Pahlitzsch 2001: 205). The Melkite merchants operating from Cyprus in the early fourteenth century forwarded this cotton on ships owned by Anconitans and especially on the ship of the Anconitan Baronus Pellegrinus of Galante, who between October 1300 and October 1301 sent no less than twelve consignments of cotton on board his ship to Ancona and to other places, mainly on behalf of the merchants in Famagusta originating from Latin Syria, such as Cosmas and Damian of Lezia, Simon Dimitri of Lezia and Costas of Antioch (Pavoni 1982: nos. 188, 192, 193, 195, 196, 198-200, 202, 208, and 220-222). During this period Ancona was a major distribution point for cotton imports to central Italy’s thriving cotton industry (Abulafia 1993: 202).

Syrian Melkites are attested as pursuing careers at court in mid-fourteenth century Cyprus, and the fifteenth century Greek chronicler Leontios Makhairas expressed hostility when they crossed over from the Greek to the Latin rite for the sake of personal advancement. The ire Makhairas felt towards the Syrian burgesses finds its fullest expression in his account of the downfall of Thibaud Abu’l Farage, a Syrian burgess ennobled by King Peter II for services rendered during the war against Genoa but who was subsequently tried and sentenced to capital punishment for his role in the murder of the priest Sir Philip. Thibaud was already in the king’s confidence at the beginning of the war with Genoa. Following the Genoese seizure of Famagusta, where the king was being held captive, he gave a letter to Thibaud as well as confidential oral instructions, to be conveyed
to the king’s uncle, the constable of Cyprus. Thibaud duly came from Famagusta to Nicosia and delivered the letter to the constable, instructing him to go to Kerynia and guard it for the king, on 18 November 1373. He served the king again in 1374 after the hostilities had ended, going to Venice with funds on a diplomatic mission in order to secure aid for the kingdom against the Genoese who were holding Famagusta. Going to Venice with his own money as well as that of the king’s, “for he was a rich man”, as Makhairas states, he acquired a ship with an armed force of 800 men, overpowered two Genoese galleys and their crews that had been ordered to apprehend him on his return to Cyprus. He then returned to Cyprus, alighting at Paphos with his ship and the two Genoese galleys (Dawkins 1932: I, §§403-404 and 556-561; Coureas & Edbury 2015: §§912 and 982).

Pleased with his exploit, the king appointed him turcopolier of Cyprus and granted him a number of estates, but on the advice of his tutor, the Latin priest Sir Philip, he refused Thibaud’s request to grant him the coastal town of Gorhigos, once part of the Cilician kingdom of Armenia. According to Makhairas Thibaud was angered by this refusal because ‘the custom-house of Gorhigos is worth three or four thousand ducats a year’. He and a Cretan named Alexopoulos killed Sir Philip. Queen Eleanor, who hated Thibaud on account of the tortured he had allegedly inflicted on her servants, some of whom he had had killed, persuaded the king, despite his initial misgivings on account of the services Thibaud had rendered the kingdom on his mission to Venice, to have both Thibaud and Alexopoulos arrested and tried for treason. They were sentenced to death by having their flesh torn apart by hot pincers, after which they were taken outside Nicosia on carts and hanged on the so-called gallows of the lances. Following his execution, Thibaud was found to have possessed considerable treasure, including gold, silver, gems and Rhodian coins, which perhaps came from dealings with the Hospitalers of Rhodes, as well as a pearl studded saddle meant to have been given as a wedding present to King Peter II and his new bride, Queen Valentina, the daughter of Bernabo Visconti the duke of Milan. This treasure was handed over to the king (Dawkins 1932: I, §§565-578; Coureas & Edbury 2015: §§984-993).

What is striking, however, the sententiousness and obvious satisfaction with which Makhairas narrates Thibaud’s downfall. Through his account what comes through clearly is the chronicler’s dislike not only
of Thibaud, but of Syrian burgesses on account of their wealth and even more so when they achieved upward mobility, joining the knightly class. Makhairas himself originated from a Greek family that served the royal court in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Dawkins 1932: I, §§566, 608, 631 and 633, II, 20-21; Grivaud 2009: 188-189). Therefore, he and other Greeks at court may well have seen the Syrian Christians with similar functions as rivals. Makhairas states that Thibaud’s downfall took place “because for the vanity of the world that he deserted the faith of his fathers and became a Latin …Now I am not condemning the Latins, but what is the need for a Greek to become a Latin?” From this it is clear that Thibaud, a Syrian Melkite and so a member of the Greek Church, had crossed over to the Latin Church, even though the Greek Church of Cyprus, having accepted papal primacy in 1260, was a part of the Roman Catholic Church to which the Latins also belonged. Since therefore both the Greek and Latin churches were doctrinally correct, as Makhairas states further on, there was no reason for him to cross over: “Thibaud was no heretic who became a good Christian”, as he states, implying thereby that had he belonged to one of the non-Chalcedonian Christian confessions on Cyprus such as the Nestorians, the Copts or the Jacobites, then his conversion would have been justifiable. Nor was Thibaud an isolated instance. Makhairas describes the bailli of the royal court Sir Thomas Barech, whose surname is clearly Syrian and who was originally a burgess, as “a Greek who had become a Latin”. Clearly crossing from the Greek to the Latin rite helped Syrian Melkites who were ambitious and desired upward social mobility (Dawkins 1932: I, §§563, 579, 599 and 607-608). Furthermore, Makhairas seems to have resented the Syrian Melkites’ economic privileges on Cyprus, remarking that they paid only one half of the standard taxes imposed on the purchase or sale of goods, “and whatever dues the natives paid they were not to pay” (Dawkins 1932: I, §26).

The presence and importance of the Syrians in Famagusta towards the end of the period of Lusignan rule is indicated by the Cypriot chronicler Florio Bustron writing towards the end of the sixteenth century. He states that according to the terms of surrender agreed for Famagusta in 1464, when the town was restored to the Lusignan kingdom, “the Greek burgesses should have access to the Court of the Syrians and be governed by the usages and assizes that they were accustomed to from now on”. This passage is important, for its shows us that following their progressive
enfranchisement from the mid-fourteenth century onwards Greeks in Famagusta had access to the Court of the Syrians. Some of those “Greek” burgesses would have been Syrian Melkites and vice-versa. The terms Greek and Syrian had become legally interchangeable, for on Lusignan Cyprus religion was the primary marker of identity, not ethnic origin. Therefore, the Syrian Melkites and the Greeks, by and large following the same rites and rituals in the sphere of religion, even though culturally and linguistically distinct, also came under the same courts in the sphere of legal jurisdiction. This commonality in the religious and judicial spheres, however, eventually facilitated the gradual absorption of the Syrian Melkites of Cyprus into the more numerous Greek population (Mas Latrie 1886: 412; Richard 1992: 394-395).

The history of the monastery of St John the Evangelist “of Bibi” in Nicosia provides an example of such absorption in the religious sphere. The foundation date of this monastery is unknown, but the sobriquet “of Bibi” refers to the well-known Syrian Cypriot family of Bibi, clearly a corruption of the Arabic name “Habibi”. The chronicles of Makhairas and of ‘Amadi’ refer to this family among the prominent “White Genoese” families of Cyprus, Eastern Christians who were subjects of Genoa, on the eve of the Genoese invasion of 1373 (Dawkins 1932: I, §375; Coureas & Edbury 2015: §896; Coureas, Grivaud and Schabel 2012: 166-169). Members of this family are recorded between the years 1391 and 1468 in various chronicles and documentary sources. Their connection with Greek-rite monasteries is attested in an anonymous statement of accounts compiled in around 1423. Both the compiler and the person it was compiled for are unknown, but the accounts refer to how a Greek nunnery in Pallouriotissa, a neighbourhood in Nicosia, paid eleven bezants annually to a certain James Bibi, a strong indication that this person and other members of this family were Syrian Melkites (Collenberg 1984: 629; Richard 1962: 28).

Syrian Melkites were manifestly being buried at the monastery of St John of Evangelist “of Bibi”. On 11 February 1389 the wife of a certain Andre Tartous died and was buried in this monastery. The wife of George Tartous died on 6 September 1399, although her place of burial is unknown. Furthermore, on 31 October 1402 a certain Germanos Tartous died and was likewise buried at the monastery of St John of Evangelist “of Bibi”. The surname Tartous is a corruption of Tortosa, the Syrian coastal town from which the families of the deceased originated (Darrouzès 1953: 84, 89
and 91). The monastery of St John the Evangelist is also mentioned in the proceedings of the Synod of Cyprus held in secrecy in June 1406, during which the Greek bishops and other prelates tried in vain to persuade the Constantinopolitan monk Joseph Bryennios that they were truly Orthodox Christians despite having acknowledged papal primacy from 1260 onwards. When asked by the Greek bishop of Solea how he regarded the monastery of St John the Evangelist, referred to as “Bibi”, Joseph Bryennios observed that monks living there had been ordained by Orthodox clergy from outside Cyprus as opposed to Greek clergy on the island who acknowledged papal primacy, and so considered themselves to be the only genuinely Orthodox clergy on Cyprus (Katsaros 2000: 51). Given the proximity of Antioch to Cyprus it is possible that they were being ordained by Syrian Orthodox clergy from the patriarchate of Antioch. Nevertheless, this monastery must have gradually lost its initial Syrian identity in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Stephen of Lusignan writing in 1573, shortly after the fall of Cyprus to the Ottoman Turks, refers to it simply as one of the four Greek monastic houses in Nicosia (Lusignan 1573: 33 verso).

Syrians of various Christian confessions continued to migrate to Cyprus in general and to Famagusta in particular during the later Lusignan and Venetian periods. The Venetian governor of Famagusta in 1533 reported that many of the town’s 8,000 inhabitants were of Syrian origin. This is attributable to large scale migration from Syria to Cyprus during the late Mamluk period. Many of them arrived in 1506, perhaps encouraged by Venetian incentives offered to new settlers. Indeed, after the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516 the Turkish Sultan Selim I requested the repatriation of all Syrians who had left Tripoli over the past 20 years, a request politely rejected by the Venetians. Following a new wave of immigration during the 1560s, Sultan Selim II in 1567 threatened to break the peace with Venice unless the Venetians implemented measures to halt immigration to Cyprus (Arbel 1995: 173; Arbel 2014: 101-102). Yet it is not known how many or what proportion of such immigrants were Syrian Melkites, for the Syrian Christians also included Jacobites or Nestorians.

In conclusion it can be said that the community of Syrian Orthodox Melkites on Cyprus, unlike other minor communities such as the Armenians and the Maronites that managed to retain their distinct cultural identity throughout the Ottoman period and right down to the present day, gradually disappeared for various reasons. Most important among
them was the religious environment of Lusignan and Venetian Cyprus. In Syria the majority of the population were Muslims and non-Chalcedonian Christians and the Syrian Melkites were therefore able to develop a distinct religious and cultural identity in contradistinction to both these groups. Both the Muslims and the non-Chalcedonian Christians were perceived as “Others”, the former on account of their different faith and the latter on account of their doctrinally different forms of Christianity. The Syrian Melkites on Cyprus, however, were among a population consisting mostly of Chalcedonian Christians, the Roman Catholic Latin forming the ruling group, the Greek Orthodox Christians forming the majority of the island’s population, and the Maronites, who were originally Monothelite but acknowledged papal primacy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This meant that the Melkites on Cyprus could not maintain a distinct religious and confessional identity as easily as in Syria, and consequently were absorbed by degrees into the Greek and Latin ethnic groups.

Yet another question must also be addressed here. If the Maronites, a small Arabic speaking community of Chalcedonian Christians on Cyprus like the Syrian Melkites, could preserve their cultural identity to this day, why was this not possible for the Syrian Melkites? One possible answer is that the Maronites were concentrated in several villages in north-west Cyprus and were thereby able to maintain their ethnic identity and cultural traditions in relative isolation from other more numerous or politically powerful ethnic groups. This was not so for the Melkites, a mainly urban community present in the major towns, Nicosia the capital and Famagusta the principal port. Unlike the Maronites, the Syrian Melkites lacked a distinct geographical space to facilitate the preservation of their cultural identity. Another small Christian community settled on Cyprus since the seventh century that was able to preserve its cultural identity down to this day were the Armenians. They too like the Syrian Melkites were dispersed throughout the island, but their distinct miaphysite form of Christianity, doctrinally unique, was what enabled them to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity notwithstanding their cohabitation among other Christian confessions on Cyprus.

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