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Editors
Ilya Afanasyev, Juliana Dresvina and Erik Kooper

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BEDE AND THE SYRIAC CHRONICLERS: INTERACTIONS OF SUBJECT AND GENRE IN CONTEMPORANEOUS HISTORIOGRAPHY

Douglas Whalin

Abstract

In the eighth century AD, despite differences of language Christian chroniclers and historians worked in a still-unified literary tradition. This tradition was shaped by rapid dissemination of historical data throughout the Christian world, by the common set of literary genre from which these writers drew, and by the similar themes which shaped their engagement with the past. Authors conceived of themselves as an interconnected community bound by their faith. Narratives about that community naturally focused on the universal, Christian, Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople as that world's central political player.

While best-known for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the Venerable Bede (c.672–735) authored a staggering quantity of material in other genres, including two chronicles. In this paper, Bede's minor historical writings are compared with similar works written by his contemporaries. This group included many anonymous authors who wrote in Latin, Greek, Syriac, and other languages, but also the polymath philosopher and historian Theophilus of Edessa (c.695–785). In doing so, it becomes clear that even though the reality of political unity under the Roman emperors was a thing of the distant past, conceptually the Mediterranean world had not yet become divided between East and West.

Between the end of the sixth century and the start of the ninth, a revolution occurred in the way history was recorded. Authors like Gregory of Tours (d. 594), Isidore of Seville (d. 636) and Paul the Deacon (d. 799) realigned the practice of historiography in response to the now multipolar political structure of the once united Mediterranean world by authoring 'barbarian' histories (Goffart 1988). Prolific authors, each produced a varied literary corpus which reflected the education and interests of Christian intellectuals of their time. However, they are best known today because each produced monumental works in the genre of the 'institutional history', a genre which they applied to novel subjects, namely the

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political history of the post-Roman 'barbarian' kingdoms. In effect, they turned away from the genre which had traditionally been used to narrate political events, the 'classical history',[1] a genre which had dominated the way in which Greek and Roman history had been told for over a millennium between Herodotus and Thephylact Simocotta (fl. 620s) (Momigliano 1990: 132-57), and applied the genre to new subjects. Taken together, these new institutional histories present a picture of a literary tradition in transition away from a Late Antique world dominated by the old genres of writing and towards new, post-Roman medieval forms. This evolution from 'classical' to 'barbarian' modes of writing history is one of very slow development. Unlike a modern school, this change did not occur concurrently across the Christian literary world but over a very long period of time.

All of these trends converge with the career and works of one of the most singular minds of the period, the Venerable Bede (c.672–735). Like the other writers of 'barbarian' institutional histories, Bede was not primarily a historian, despite the fact that that is what he is best known for today. He produced some 48 works, which include epistles, biographies, commentaries, handbooks, homilies, biblical exegesis, mathematical texts, scientific tracts and, of course, historical writings. During his career he made contributions to most active literary genres of this period; in some cases, he is the *only* known contributor to a given field. However, none of the afore-mentioned authors were contemporary to him – Isidore of Seville died almost forty years before his birth, while Paul the Deacon could not have been much more than an infant at the end of Bede's life. What if Bede's works are examined not in the context of the *longue durée*, but in the immediate context of his own life? In terms of the subjects written about and the manner in which they were approached, how do Bede's historical works compare with those of his chronological contemporaries from across the Christian world?

Bede's contemporary writers of history in the first half of the eighth century – one should hesitate to call them 'historians', for few if any treated historical inquiry as their primary profession – had several different genres from which to choose, common across the wider Mediterranean world – the *oikoumene*.[2] The styles of historical writing available to eighth-century authors may be categorized into two broad

[1] Literary traditions pioneered by pre-Christian authors will be referred to as 'classical' rather than the misleading and pejorative term 'pagan', for some Christians did write in the genre.

[2] Goffart (1988: 245-46); Hoyland (2011: 23, 29-34); Angold and Whitby (1998: 839-41); Inglebert (2011: 75-101).

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groups depending upon the subject of the story which they wished to tell: *impersonal* and *personal* accounts.

Impersonal narratives, those of institutions, societies or phenomena, form the focus of the present paper. These include *classical histories*, *institutional histories* and *chronicles*. This classification could also include *apocalypses*, for these texts were semi-historical in nature, providing a narrative which situates events with the assumption that they are significant with respect to the (always impending) end of the world.[3] However, the eschatological theme causes authors to intentionally obscure historical specificity, making apocalypses ultimately a form of historical fiction. They are thereby fundamentally incomparable with historiography and so not fit for inclusion in this study.

On the other hand, personal historical narratives form a group of genres which centre their narratives on the lives of individuals. Genres in this group notably include *biography* (particularly *hagio*graphy) and *romance*.[4] However, while Bede certainly wrote in these genres, these works resist systematic comparison in the manner proposed in this paper. The first problem is one of quantity; a database of Greek-language hagiographies whose subjects lived in the iconoclast period (seventh, eighth and ninth centuries) has over 110 entries (Kazhdan and Talbot 1998), and that is before considering the volume of lives written in other languages. The second and more serious problem is one of chronology; the vast majority of personal historical accounts are not only anonymously authored, but it is impossible to date their composition more precisely than sometime between the subject's death and the date of the manuscript, differences which can be half a millennium or more. Considering the logistical difficulties presented by their quantity and the ambiguity of their dates of composition, these works differ so much from the impersonal histories under consideration that comparison of these works must lie beyond the scope of the present analysis. Practicability necessitates that this comparative reading be restricted to impersonal historical narratives only: *classical histories*, *institutional histories* and *chronicles*.

Of these, the oldest genre, *classical histories*, are our main source for pre-Christian Greek and Roman history. Although some Christians wrote in the genre, it is overwhelmingly associated with 'pagan' authors. Literary features of the genre include: extensive digressions; information presented out of chronological sequence; speeches invented by the author as literary embellishments; 'high' register language; obscured source material, its content blended smoothly into the narrative structure and its

[3] Palmer (1993: 222-50); Reinink (2008: 75-87); Scharf (1995: 103-08, 113).
[4] For biography, see Brock (1976); Davies, *Liber Pontificalis*; Efthymiadis (2006); Sarris, Dal Santo and Booth (2011). For romance, see Ross (1985); Field (1999).

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presence regularly unacknowledged.[5] However, while authors had access to and read Greek and Latin classical models,[6] for most of the authors history writing was done in one of the following two overtly Christian formats, both pioneered by Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century (Johnson and Schott 2013). *Institutional histories* are focused on an individual institution (first the Church, later applied to monasteries and states) and its community, which defines the work's temporal and geographical scope. Like classical history, they construct interpretational narratives, often concerning political and military events, but eschewed tropes diagnostic of that genre, for example quoting source documents directly rather than invent speeches.[7] Because these works were prestigious literary undertakings, authors were typically named for these works, and their texts were treated as *closed* by later copyists who transmitted them with minimal change. *Chronicles* are distinguished by providing information in strict chronological sequence, typically written in a medium or low literary register. While often presented annalistically with every event listed chronologically under a date heading, more loosely narrated formats are also attested. Although some chronicles were sufficiently renowned to be treated as closed texts, most were treated as *open*, fair game for any would-be copyist to alter and improve as he might have seen fit.[8]

Furthermore, two forms of chronicles need to be distinguished: *local* and *universal*. With regards to time and space, local chronicles are limited and focused on the specific, this usually meaning cities or monasteries from their foundation to the author's present. Universal chronicles, on the other hand, embraced the Christian church and the Roman Empire as the rightful institutional and geographical focus of their narrative. This universalism strove to begin with creation, and carry on down to the author's present; therefore, instead of composing completely new works, older chronicles could be brought up-to-date by appending a continuation. While short, like local chronicles, continuations are extensions of the universal, and should not be confused with the former. Whether local or continuations of universal chronicles, those which are extant from the period are often quite modest in scope and ambition. In nature, early medieval chronicles seem to have been intended to be recycled, a process which both obscures and preserves the contributions of the authors of the

[5] Cameron (1996: especially the introduction).
[6] These works were used in the schoolroom as instructional texts, and preserved as models for literary style (Reynolds and Wilson 1991).
[7] Goffart (1988: Chapter 1, especially 5-8).
[8] The encyclopedia and dictionary are modern examples of this, where entries are valued for the factual information conveyed and not, as a rule, for the literary quality of their composition.

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sources. Whether an author composed his own freestanding chronicle, or appended his contribution to the end of another work, the final product was derivative from multiple hands and sources, which were themselves occasionally left functionally intact. This way of practising history is fundamentally different from that used by either classical or institutional historians.

With differences of genre in mind, let us return to Bede. Bede spent his adult life in the monastery Wearmouth-Jarrow. He studied under the well-travelled Benedict Biscop until the latter's death in 690.[9] Little is known about his family, but his privileged education and courtly connections evidences that he came from an aristocratic background.[10] Yet while Bede is today best known for his monumental institutional history, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, it is certainly not his only historical work – he also authored two much-shorter chronicles, works which are very different in subject, scope and presentation from the former. These chronicles present an interpretative challenge, for they fit none of the trends which the institutional histories appear to have forged – they are intensely universal in scope, with the church and the (Eastern) Roman Empire as the primary historical actors. How can these differences be reconciled?

To attempt this, we will take a comparative approach, establishing the wider context of Bede's literary productions in terms of his own contemporaries. As is clear from Bede's own work though, he defined his contemporaries not merely in terms of the Latin world, but the whole of Christendom, a scope which we shall adopt here, too. The early eighth century saw a final expansion and stabilization of the frontiers of the Caliphate with the conquest of Visigothic Spain in the far west and the failure to penetrate the Indian subcontinent in the east (Kennedy 2004). The Northumbria in which he spent his life was at the utmost limits of the Mediterranean *oikoumene*. Local concerns were dominated politically by the interactions between Anglo-Saxon, Briton, Irish and Pict communities. Religious fault lines ran deep, and tended to coincide with ethno-political divides. While the Picts were still 'pagans', Briton and Irish churches had both been established since Late Antiquity preceding the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. However, these churches were not all part of the same ecclesiastical structure, and the Briton's church had, at least in Bede's account, fallen into heresy. Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christi-

[9] Campbell (1986: 14-24). For what Bede read, see Love (2010: 43). For what Bede had not read, see Brown (2009: 102).

[10] DeGregorio (2010: 3-9). At some point in his life Bede also learned enough Greek to be able to read and translate saints' lives, which made him one of the few men in Latin Europe outside Italy who could. For a very optimistic assessment of Bede's competency with Greek, see Love (2010).

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anity had spread not from the 'heretical' British, nor from the nearby Frankish or Irish churches, but through the direct intervention of Pope Gregory I who had sent Augustine to Canterbury in 597. Nonetheless, it was as much thanks to the missionary efforts of the Irish as to those of Augustine of Canterbury that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were brought into the Christian community over the course of the seventh century (Rollason 2003). Bede expressed a direct connection with the Papacy and the Italian city of Rome in his writings. The world which emerges in Bede's historical writings is at once intensely local in its focus on Northumbria and the concerns of the various peoples of the British Isles, and cognizant of the universal affairs of the Church and the Christian Empire centred in New Rome, Constantinople.

The *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is a truly monumental capstone to Bede's career, longer than all other extant contemporary historical material from the first half of the eighth century combined. While the narrative ends in 731, Bede seemed to have continued working on it right up until his death in 734. The *Ecclesiastical History* was certainly the most widely read and copied of all historical documents composed in the early eighth century.[11] In the tradition of the 'barbarian' institutional histories written by Gregory of Tours and Isidore of Seville, Bede's opus encompasses a history of the Christianization of the Angles down to his present. Yet despite its ambitious nature, it is ultimately a work of its time and place which, in regard to form and originality, contains nothing not seen elsewhere among his contemporaries. Although a work defined by the Anglo-Saxon experience, it is also one which is aware of its place in a wider Mediterranean context. For example, Bede is careful to relate the implication of Briton heresies concerning the date of Easter to the wider Christian community, and the effects of universal ecumenical councils as they pertain to the local.

This awareness of the wider scope and impact of his subject can be found as a thread throughout Bede's literary productions. His earliest works date to around 701, and he composed his *Minor Chronicle* around the year 703. His *Major Chronicle* dates to the 720s; both of the chronicles are appended to the ends of treatises on other subjects. Both the *Minor* and *Major Chronicle* look very much like Mediterranean chronicles in the Eusebian model. Both are universal chronicles in genre, beginning with creation. Were it not for the known authorship, there is little to indicate that it originated from the British Isles, as notices concerning local affairs are few in comparison to the amount of space dedicated to the affairs of Constantinople and Rome. For both chronicles,

[11] There are over 170 known medieval manuscripts of the text, demonstrating its canonical position from the beginning (Brown 2009: 101-02).

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Bede was heavily dependent upon a version of the *Liber Pontificalis* (up-to-date as of at least 701); for the *Major Chronicle*, he was also in possession of quite recent reports concerning the failed Arab siege of Constantinople of 717–718, showing that he continued to gather additional material beyond what he had available when he wrote the *Minor Chronicle* some twenty years earlier.[12] These are unmistakable evidence for continued collection of information about the wider Mediterranean world by the monks at Wearmouth-Jarrow over an extended period of time in the early eighth century. This also demonstrates the power of genre to dictate topic; despite what has always been assumed to have been, at most, indirect contact between Northumbria and Constantinople, the political history of the latter are writ large in the chronicles' narratives.[13]

Although he stands apart in the quantity and variety of his work, Bede was fully a part of the same Latin literary tradition as his continental contemporaries; for all of them, the shared Latin language dominated the literary scene to the exclusion of almost anything else.[14] Unlike Bede, all other Latin authors are anonymous to us. Where we can identify anything about them personally, Bede's contemporary yet anonymous Latin chroniclers appear to have lived lives remarkably similar to his. These were men who followed careers with either the church or in the courts of their kingdoms' rulers. Because both church and court were viable career paths for young men of noble families, men pursuing both careers received similar educations in their youth, shared common world-views as adults, and had robust family connections with one another throughout their lives. These authors were closely engaged with the events of the wider world. Authors based at court had access to information from diplomatic missions, and showed an interest in political affairs across the Mediterranean world; churchmen recorded the pious (and blasphemous) outcomes of church councils, and were careful to record and condemn heresies which afflicted distant lands. They clearly conceived of themselves has having a role in the wider ecumenical community.

[12] McClure and Collins (2008: xxiv-xxix, xxxiii, 305-40). Scully (2009).

[13] Because of the status of Bede's works, they are uncharacteristically closed texts; however, this did not stop succeeding generations from offering continuations of their own; see Whitelock (1979: 258-60); Higham (2006: 21-27).

[14] Vernacular writing, while only extant in fragmentary form, has a little evidence in the early medieval west, where literature is mostly limited to biblical translations. Besides Anglo-Saxon's *Beowulf* (whose origins might date to this period), examples come from Gothic and Old Saxon (*Die gotische Bibel* and the Old Saxon *Heliand*). On commonality of Latin and Greek culture in Late Antiquity and beyond, see Wickham (2009: 21-36). On general history of early medieval Latin: Wright (1982).

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Beside Bede's works, all other Latin chronicles dating to the early eighth century originate in either Hispania or Gaul. There are no histories or chronicles dating to this period coming from Italy, although biography was certainly being written in Rome, as witnessed by the *Liber Pontificalis*. The most striking case is of North Africa, only lost to the Eastern Roman Empire in 698. Despite a long indigenous Latin literary tradition – it was of course home to St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) – output appears to have come to an abrupt and complete cessation in Bede's lifetime. Four or five Latin chronicles are contemporary to Bede's career, depending on how different versions are reckoned. The *Liber Historiae Francorum* (ends 727)[15] and two continuations of the *Chronicle of Fredegar* (first to 727, and a second to 751/2)[16] originate in circles closely connected with the rising Karling dynasty in northern Gaul. On the other hand, the *Byzantine-Arabic Chronicle* (written after 741)[17] and *Mozarabic Chronicle* (to 754)[18] both originated in the Muslim ruled Iberian peninsula. To these latter two works we will return below, but for now some general observations are instructive. All are additions which bring older works up-to-date. The Frankish texts have been strongly influenced by institutional histories (their institution being the Merovingian and Carolingian court), but are ultimately local chronicles in shape and scope.[19] On the other hand, although continuations, the Spanish chron-

[15] The anonymous author of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* has been identified with the Neustrian court in the late seventh century. Little attention is paid to the wider Mediterranean world, especially after the sixth century, and the work almost wholly ignores church history. Dating information is scarce, and is invariably provided within regnal contexts (Bachrach 1973: 9-22). A redaction of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* was also made during this period, which was appended as the First Continuation to the Chronicle of Fredegar.

[16] Whereas Fredegar's original chronicle included several passages informing about events in the eastern Empire, all of the eighth-century continuations are strictly local in focus. There are few dates, notices are short and strictly chronological, and the subject is concerned almost exclusively with the affairs of the Frankish court (Wallace-Hadrill 1960: ix-xxviii, xliii-xlv, 80-103).

[17] Also known as the *Chronicle to 741*, this is a short work continuing the chronicle of John of Biclaro (ends 590). It contains notices about political events and wars involving the Eastern Roman Empire, the Caliphate and the Visigothic kings. Information is derived from Isidore of Seville and the eastern source, but there may have been others which, because lost, cannot be identified. See Cardelle de Hartmann (2003: 15-17); *Chronica Minora*, 323-70; Wolf (1999: 23-24).

[18] Elsewhere known also as the *Chronicle to 754*, this was probably a continuation of Isidore of Seville's universal chronicle. It records information from all across the Mediterranean world, but its main focus is definitively the Iberian Peninsula. Also dependent upon the eastern source, it shares many notices with the *Byzantine-Arabic Chronicle*. See: Cardelle de Hartmann (2003: 13-19); *Chronica Minora*, 323-70; Wolf (1999: 23-37).

[19] Ullmann (1969); Trompf (1973); McKitterick (2008).

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iclers' focus on the universal establishments of the church centred on Old Rome and the Eastern Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople mark them both as belonging to the genre of universal chronicle. The detailed information recorded about affairs from across the Mediterranean demonstrates that these authors functioned in a conceptual universe which remained much more united by their Christian heritage than divided by their political allegiances.

Historiography in the east was dominated by the traditions and conventions of the Greek language, but was not limited to it. Late antique and early medieval historical works, of one genre or another, were written in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, Hebrew, Pahlavi and Old Church Slavonic.[20] However, the two languages represented in the extant literature of the early eighth century are Greek and Syriac.[21] Syriac is the classical language of the city of Edessa and a prestigious literary dialect of Aramaic which spread alongside Christianity across the first-millennium Near East. A tradition of translating texts from Greek into Syriac was well-established during Late Antiquity, disseminating access to the works of Eusebius and the Church Fathers. This tradition formed the basis for the rapid translation of Greek literature into Arabic through Syriac during the early years of the Caliphate. Syriac communities had long since spread beyond their homeland in northern Mesopotamia, and during the eighth century could be found all the way from Thrace to China, as attested by the so-called 'Nestorian stele' which records the presence of a Christian community inscribed in both Chinese characters and Syriac script (Hunter 1996; Keevak 2008). Through the movements of people and ideas for purposes such as trade, war or ecumenical councils, these regions were closely connected with the wider Christian (and Muslim) world.

These extant chronicles, both in Syriac and Greek, come from the region which lies within reach of the dwindling sphere of Eastern Roman authority, an area which includes parts of modern Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Politically divided between the Romans and the Caliphate since the Arab conquest of provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia in the 630s, its inhabitants remained within reach of Roman power, for imperial military expeditions periodically penetrated far into the region long after political control was ceded. This both disrupted life and served as potent remind-

[20] Zaborowski (2008); Matthews (1950); Griffin (1988); Brock (2008: 47-49, 121-23); Brubacker and Haldon (2001); Angold and Whitby (1998, especially 842-43).
[21] Hoyland (1991); Lemerle (1986: 17-27).

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ers that the Christian Roman Empire was not yet defunct either in power or as an idea.[22]

Extant Syriac works share several common features: they are all chronicles, generally annals, and when dating systems are used there is a marked preference for the *anno graecorum* epoch (derived from the state calendar of the Seleucid Empire, and long used as the civic calendar for the region's largest city, Antioch). However, like Bede's British Isles, the Syriac literary community was divided by confessional schisms into three major communities: those who rejected the council of Ephesus in 431 (called the Church of the East, and sometimes 'Nestorians' by their doctrinal opponents); those who accepted the council of Ephesus but rejected the council of Chalcedon in 451 (called variously miaphysites and monophysites), and finally those who accepted the council of Chalcedon and were thus in communion with the patriarchs in Constantinople and Rome (called variously Melkites or Chalcedonians).[23] Only the *eastern source* and the *History of the Third fitna*, were written by Chalcedonians; all others were written by Miaphysites.

Besides the Chalcedonian works, which have been associated with Theophilus of Edessa and to which we shall return shortly, there are five relatively intact Syriac-language works from this period. One is a local chronicle, a collection of *historical notices* (covering the years 712–716) (Palmer 1993: 45-48). The other four participate in the universal genre: a *list of Caliphs* (c.715) (ibid.: 43-44), the *Chronicle to 724* (ibid.: 49-50), the *Chronicle to* c. *728*, and its first continuation to 746 (ibid.: 75-84; Brooks 1897). In these extant pieces of literature, a sizable collection of universal chronicles have been preserved written in the Syrac language, which by their very nature conceived of Christian community of the Mediterranean world being united by the universal Church and the universal Roman state (Hoyland 997: 116-215). The subject matter and structure of these works deemphasized the denominational divides between the different branches of Christianity.

Only one minor Greek chronicle is known to have been written in this period. Although it is no longer extant, a *Constantinopolitan chronicle*, written in the aftermath of the unsuccessful Arab siege of the city in 717–718, has been identified as a common source used in both Patriarch Nikephoros' *Short History* (probably written in the 780s) and for Theo-

[22] For evidence of the extensive trade networks which tied the Late Antique and early medieval Mediterranean together, see Jackson et al. (2012); Bowden, Lavan and Machado (2003: 291-92); Loseby (1992). On the Eastern Empire's influence in Italy and control over the papacy until the middle of the eighth century, see Ekonomou (2007).
[23] Ter Haar Romney et al. (2009: 1-52); Brock (1996).

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phanes' *Chronicle of 528 Years* (ends 813).[24] Because it only exists as something which has been cited elsewhere, it is impossible to identify with certainty its original purpose and scope. Nevertheless, we can observe that the excerpted material indicates a work which was narrow in temporal and geographical scope, allowing a provisional identification of the work as having been originally a local chronicle.[25]

Among the minor eastern chronicles the genre of each work can be described in terms of established literary forms which were available to Christian historians across the Mediterranean *oikoumene*. When Syriac writers chose to compose in the genre of the universal chronicle, like their western contemporaries writing in Latin, they displayed an interest in the topics appropriate to the genre. This was done by depicting the Christian community as being united in a common faith (and therefore avoided drawing unnecessary attention to the real differences between various confessional branches) and recognizing the central importance which the emperor in Constantinople played as leader of that community on earth.

This leads us to the final works under examination, the body of historical literature which has become associated with the name of Theophilus of Edessa. As the only identifiable individual author other than Bede, it is worth digressing a moment to look at the man to whom the works have been attributed. Born in 695 in Edessa, little is known about Theophilus' life as a youth or young man. Nevertheless, it is clear that he received the benefit of a classical education, from a syllabus fundamentally similar to that taught to other Greek-reading pupils elsewhere across the Christian *oikoumene* (Lemerle 1986: 139-42). Theophilus was an astrologer by profession, with four extant works on the subject attributed to him, all in Greek. His profession brought him into the court of Al-Mahdi sometime before the latter became Caliph (r.775–785). Besides access to the highest echelons of society, this patronage no doubt gave Theophilus a professional stake in the success of his employer's Abbasid dynasty, as well as access to the resources necessary to document its recent meteoric rise. Multilingual, Theophilus worked in Syriac, Arabic and Greek; he even translated classical Greek texts into Syriac, including Homer. Writing history was only one part of a varied (although now mostly fragmentary) literary career.[26]

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[24] For debates on authorship of this now-lost chronicle, see Mango (1990: 12-18; Howard-Johnston (2011: 306-09). Contra: Zuckerman (2006).

[25] One final work deserves a brief mention as well, the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*, written during the reign of Leo III (717–741). Although clearly a work of historical literature in the most general sense sharing certain affinities with local chronicles, its precise categorization into any well-defined genre, much less the purpose of the text, remains enigmatic (see the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronokai*, especially the introduction).

[26] For a summary of what little is known of Theophilus' biography: Hoyland (2011: 6-7).

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Theophilus' contributions as an historian are no longer extant, and, like the *Constantinople chronicle*, can only be reconstructed from later material which relied upon it as a source. We know that he wrote some sort of history because his name is referenced by later authors (most notably Dionysius of Tel-Mahre and Agapius) in conjunction with mid eighth-century passages about the Caliphate.[27] Common notices are found in Latin, Greek, Syriac and Arabic source material, all of which relate to Syria and converge on the seventh and early eighth centuries. These have collectively been referred to as the *eastern source*. Much of the information derived from the *eastern source* is indicative of a chronicle (Hoyland 2011: 19-23); most of it is characterized by short notices, with special attention paid to natural disasters, and is ordered strictly chronologically, albeit without many dates.

The earliest version of this lost *eastern source* has been identified since the late nineteenth century.[28] Its earliest form comes from Spain, found in the Latin *Byzantine-Arabic Chronicle* which was encountered above. Written c.741, the work contains detailed notices about affairs in the eastern Mediterranean culminating with the political turmoil caused in the Caliphate by the failure of the Arab siege of Constantinople in 717–718.[29] These notices have a high degree of concurrence with Theophanes' chronicle, which led to the original identification of a common source. This evidence suggests that the core of the *eastern source* was originally completed sometime shortly after this major political event, possibly in the 720s. This supposition is further supported by notices found in the *Mozarabic Chronicle* (written c.754), another Latin chronicle from Umayyad Spain. This work includes notices about the civil war between Constantine V and Artabasdos in 742–743, but this version of this event is strikingly different from that common to extant Greek and Syriac sources, providing conflicting information concerning how long after the death of Leo III the revolt broke out, where Constantine and Artabasdos were when it started, and Artabasdos' fate afterwards. Because it no longer concurs with the notices found in the Greek and Syriac sources, this indicates that the later chronicler accessed a second, independent source for events in the East after 730 that was not the same as the

[27] The reader should not confuse the reconstructed Dionysius with 'Pseudo-Dionysius', the eighth-century chronicle erroneously attributed to him but now commonly referred to as the Zuqnin Chronicle; see Hoyland (2011: especially 11-13).
[28] Brooks (1906: 578-87); see also Whitby (1982); Howard-Johnston (2011: 192-236).
[29] *Chronica Minora*, 356-59. The author was aware that Leo III had died (establishing the *terminus post quem* of composition as 741), but there is no further significant information from the east after the 720s. This is evidence that important information (like the death of emperors) still traveled quickly in this era.

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eastern source.[30] Neither Latin chronicler identifies a name with author of their material pertaining to Syria and the empire.

As already mentioned, the second extant attestation of the *eastern source* comes from Theophanes' *Chronicle of 528 Years*, which contains notices of Syrian derivation until c.780. Theophanes' *eastern source*, then, must have been compiled in multiple phases. Besides a core chronicle in the late 720s which was common with the Spanish chroniclers, we also have a continuation which ended c.780, at which time the information was most likely translated from Syriac into Greek. One date would seem implausibly, though not impossibly, early to identify with Theophilus of Edessa, the other late. However, that is not to rule out the possibility that the edition translated in 780 was assembled with the help of several now-obscured sources to fill in the information for the intervening 60 years, and it is in this gap where evidence for Theophilus' authorship are the most robust.

The third independent attestation of the *eastern source* is shared by Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, a ninth-century Christian chronicler who wrote in Syriac, and Agapius, a tenth-century chronicler who wrote in Arabic. Crucially, Theophanes only concords with Agapius and Dionysius until 755, following the end of the third Muslim civil war (Fitna), after which the notices in the Greek chronicle are unique.[31] However, in the years immediately preceding 755, the quality and quantity of the notices preserved in all three surviving chronicles increased dramatically for a short period. In the pre-755 notices common to Theophanes, Agapius and Dionysius, there is a spike in the length and detail of information beginning in 747, with the outbreak of the revolt in Persia, based upon the marked increase in length and detail of notices and the increased variation given in their content.[32] As noted, a burst of common material ends in 755, concluding with the notice concerning how Al-Mansur came to power as the second Abbasid Caliph.[33] Throughout this section, notices are all long and agree in principal outline of the major events, but the details vary significantly – a feature which suggests that it is derivative of a much longer narrative, focused on political events, and narrated stylistically differently from the chronicles which excerpt from it.

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[30] For the relevant passages in translation, see: Hoyland (2011: 238-39, 244); *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 574-81; Wolf (1999: 124).

[31] Cf. *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, lxxxii-lxxxxi.

[32] Hoyland also identifies this as a moment of divergence in the sources, and suggests a change of source is the root cause. However, he dates the start of this section to 744, and ends it in 763 (Hoyland 2011: 265 n.790).

[33] Hoyland (2011: 294-300). Caliph Al-Mansur (754–775) was the father of Theophilus' employer, Al-Mahdi, who would succeed his father as the third Abbasid Caliph (775–785).

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The best example of this is the climax and resolution of the war, recorded in the detailed entries concerning the Battle of the Zab (750) and the death of the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II (r. 744–750). The narratives are vivid, but each version contains details missing in the others, indicating that each redactor made choices about which episodes to mention. The descriptions of battle are poetic: Theophanes embellishes the narrative with a scriptural reference, while Agapius' text suggests the presence of long, excised speeches in the oaths which were supposedly taken before the battle. The order of events is different between the three extant versions, indicating that the original contained digressive narratives which the redactors had difficulty restoring to strict chronological order.[34] It is for these entries specifically which Agapius credits 'Theophilus the Astrologer' as a witness whose account extended over 'several books', hinting at a monumental scale for the original work (Hoyland 2011: 275-83, especially 278).

The common material between 747 and 755 is therefore likely derived from the major incidents according to a once sizable work of history by Theophilus of Edessa, which will henceforth be called, for convenience, the *History of the third fitna*. The translator of Theophanes' *eastern source* used Theophilus' *History of the third fitna* as one of the sources for the period between 720 and 780, but supplemented it with later material. This would explain why Theophanes has so many unique notices, especially after 755.[35] Of the three authors whose works are somehow dependent on Theophilus' history, it is quite possible that only Agapius read and redacted it himself.

As for content, in the *History of the third fitna*, Theophilus outlined the instability which caused the revolution, climaxed with the battles which took place during the fitna, and resolved with the consolidation of Caliph Al-Mansur's power and the establishment of Abbasid rule over the near east. Besides the highly political subject matter, other evidence of the work's original nature and scope diagnostic of its genre, including digressive departures from strict chronology, inventive reported speeches, and chronological focus on a single conflict, all point in the same direction. The original work was neither a chronicle nor the history of an institution, but a work of classical history, fittingly written by one of the few Christian historians of the day whose primary employment was non-ecclesiastical.

[34] Cf. Theophanes' entry for AM 6237, the order of which does not agree with Agapius or the works dependent upon Dionysius.

[35] In Hoyland's concordances Theophanes regularly fails to include notices found in the other works: Hoyland (2011: 263, 279, 283-84, 287, 290-91, 293, 300-03, 306, 308). On the other hand, it does provide notices about the east which are not in either Agapius or Dionysius; see *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, lxxxii-lxxxvii, 583-94.

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Although circumstantial, the situation and subject lend support to this interpretation. While a Christian, unlike his contemporaries across the *oikoumene* Theophilus did not follow an ecclesiastical or monastic vocation. He was a philosopher and, crucially, a philhellene. The subject matter of the work was neither an institution nor the universal order of the world but the ascension of one dynasty to power, making it unsuitable for treatment in either an institutional history or in a chronicle. Finally, his direct patronage by the family victorious in the fitna would have given him access to necessary source material and an audience who would likely have been receptive to the literary immortalization of their accomplishments. In short, the genre of classical history recommends itself to the situation and subject far better than the other genres available for use. Provided this identification is correct, this would make it the final example of that genre being used, a notable event in the history of historiography.

To return our inquiry to its wider scope, we can tentatively identify two separate eighth-century compositions. The first is the *History of the third fitna*, a work in the genre of classical history, which was written by Theophilus of Edessa sometime after 755. Secondly, we can also identify the *eastern source* as a chronicle composed in multiple phases, one of which incorporated a paraphrase of Theophilus' history.[36] The chronicle is noteworthy for its wide distribution and influence, demonstrating continued interest in the exchange of information between distant areas of the Christian *oikoumene*.

Bede's works are usually analysed in the historical *longue durée*, in a context which presupposes the emergence of a post-Roman, 'barbarian' historiography over the course of the early middle ages. Because of their size and ambition, his historical writings may appear at first glance to be different from his early eighth-century contemporaries on the continent and in the eastern Mediterranean. However, on closer inspection that is actually evidence for how genre and topic interacted to shape an author's work. Theophilus and Bede, the authors of two seemingly very different works, were genuine polymaths in an age of few others: both men were well-educated, widely-read, and multilingual. Their literary output shows that their interests covered many varied subjects. What is striking about the historical works associated with each of them is not their differences but how much they have in common. Like their contemporaries in the rest of the Mediterranean *oikoumene*, Bede and Theophilus worked within the same taxonomy of literary genres and shared interests in subjects which were inherited from a common Late Antique, Christian, Roman cultural

[36] For a visual diagram of his reconstruction of the relationship between the various sources, see Hoyland (2011: 337, Figure 1).

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past. Rather than expressing a decisive or revolutionary break with these traditions, Bede and contemporaneous eighth-century authors perpetuated mutually utilized genres along with a common Christian culture, a culture which was still conceived as providing a unitary narrative to their historical accounts of their politically and doctrinally fractured world.

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