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## **The Formation of Christianity in Syria and Armenia: Two case studies – The Abgar Tradition and the Conversion of Armenia to Christianity**

[1] Since identity is not given, but is socially and culturally constructed, historical writing participates in the constitution of a collective memory and thus shapes the communal identity. The notion of belonging to any particular nation never appears in the histories or chronicles, nor is there any specific place which the Syriac-speaking Christians are stated to consider their home. The Acts of the Apostles reported that there were Mesopotamians amongst the peoples present at Pentecost, but there was no history of the conversion of the Syrians. Syriacspeaking communities retold the stories of their origins in such texts as the *Doctrina Addai*, the Acts of Thomas and, later, Mar Mari. According to the *Doctrina Addai*, the conversion of the city of Edessa occurred under Abgar Ukkama (4-8 BC), though even the alleged conversion of King Abgar VIII is a myth and christianity in fact took hold only in the fourth century. The legend of the Apostle Addai, who was introduced to king Abgar by a Jewish merchant from Palestine and converted the king to the Christian belief, is a conglomerate of stories from a variety of sources. The true founder of orthodoxy and builder of the Great Church of Edessa, bishop Qune, might be the spiritual father of the *Doctrina Addai* meant to enhance the prestige of the local Edessene orthodoxy. The following reception process is dynamic, confirming and altering elements from different sources. It takes part in two phases, oral and written (Eusebius, Egeria etc.). Some scholars suggested anti-manichaeic polemics in the Abgar tradition (Drijvers).

[2] Any investigation of Armenian history is heavily dependent on local sources. As the first documents written in Armenian postdate the conversion by a century or more they present a generally self-serving interpretation of the establishment of christianity in their country; furthermore they add an anachronistic view of the historical settlement. Therefore the development of Armenian literature may be seen as a stage in the christianization of that people, when the self-awareness of Armenians as a distinct branch of christendom took root. Claims of apostolic origin (Thaddaeus/Addai) are adopted from Syria; the tradition of Saint Gregory the Illuminator as founder of the Armenian church shares several versions and is attributed to a certain Agathangelos (composed after 451). The story tells the conversion of the pagan Armenian king Trdat (III.?) to christianity; relevant information is also fostered by the *vita Gregorii* (composed 435-451). The date is highly disputed (tradition: 301; most western scholars: 314/315). Missionary activities in southern Armenia are due to Syrian influence (bishop Daniel and his alphabet). The christian church in Armenia developed within the social fabric of that country, the leading role being played by the Pahlavunik' and the direct descendants of Gregory (destruction of local pagan cults, the building of churches on those sites, and the conversion or death of the pagan clergy). Around 400 a totally new script was successfully invented, based on the principles of the Greek alphabet. The forging of Armenian identity in *Armenia maior* owed much to the struggle of the church against attempts to impose Zoroastrian orthodoxy. Involvement in the theological quarrels of the Roman Empire was secondary.