

# Did king Suros really exist?

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Did king Suros really exist or is he a mythical king? What is known about him? Who has written about him and where is the primary source about him? And does the name *Suryoyo/Suryaya* originate from his name or not?

These are the questions that I am going to answer in this article.

## The story

*“During the time of Paleg there appeared different languages. One of Japhet's sons by the name of Aginur moved from the East towards the coast and built a town to himself there which he called 'Gnur' called Surin or Sur (On the Lebanese coast, modern Tyre/Tyrus). He got three sons: Suros, the firstborn; Cilicos, the second son; and Phoenicos, the youngest son. Aginur ruled for thirteen years. Immediately before his death, he divided his country and left a part of it to each one of his sons. Phoenicus got Phoenicia, Cilicus got Cilicia, and Suros got Syria”*

The story tells us that Japhet - one of Noahs three sons – had a son known as Aginur and that he in turn had three sons Suros, Cilicos and Phoenicos. Each one of these got a piece of land named after them Suros got Suriya (Syria), Cilicos got Cilicia in modern day Turkey and Phoenicos got Phoenicia on the Lebanese coast.

This was a way for the author of this story to explain origin of the names of geographical places (that is to say the etymology of Syria, Phoenicia and Cilicia) My focus of attention will be on Suros in this article.

## The Old Testament does not mention Aginur at all as a son of Japhet.

In the book of Genesis 10:2 it says the following *“The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.”*

So how did the author of the story about Aginur make Aginur appear to be as a son of Japhet? Why the Bible does not mention him at all is unknown. It could maybe be Flavius Josephus who mentioned his relation to Japhet. who in turn got it from a Greek source of the wise Dioclese.

## Surois in the Edessan Aramaic (Syriac) literature

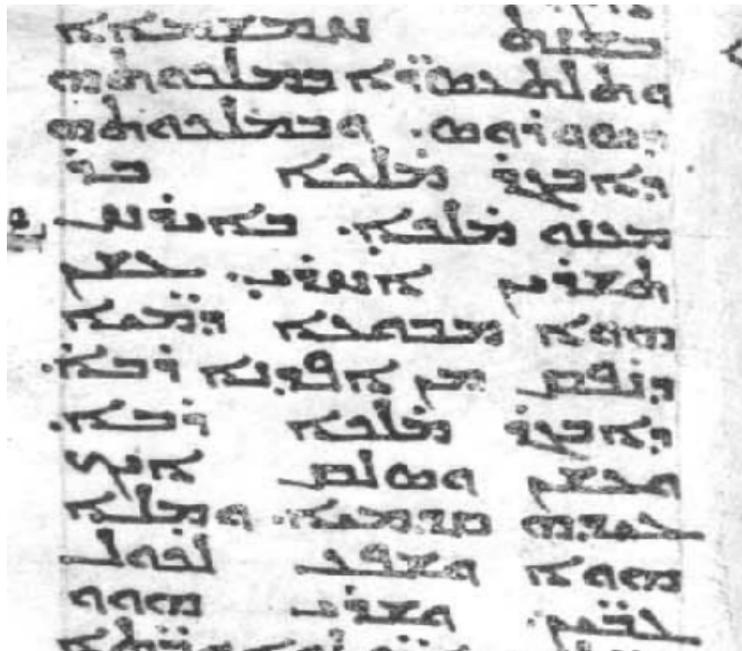
Let us take a look on what the Aramean (Syriac) churchfathers and scholars say about him in sources written in Edessan Aramaic (Syriac) in from different Syriac churchdenominations.

As you will see the myth grows and gets twists and flavors by different authors as you will see below. They entailed Surois' story in different ways as to where he lived, and where he ruled. They mention Antioch, Urhoy (Edessa) as well as in Damascus. Some of them even claimed that he founded Antioch near the Orontes river (*Nahr al'Asi*)

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The Chronicle of Edessa is one of the most important and authoritative early Chronicles. It was probably written in the mid 6th century using the city archives. It is extant in a single manuscript, now in the Vatican Library (Vat Syr. 163).

The Chronicle is notable for recording a flood which destroyed a Christian church in Edessa in November 201 AD;



It starts “*In the year 513 (of the Seleucid Era which is 201 AD) in the kingdom of Surois and in the kingdom of king Abgar Bar Ma’nu.....*” *see the Edessan Aramaic codex itself for a correct reading because the “ The Chronicle of Edessa. The Journal of Sacred Literature, New Series [=Series 4], vol. 5 (1864) pp. 28-45” erroneously translated Surois as Severus instead in the English text.*

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The Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Dionysios of Tell Mahre (d. 845) near Ar-Raqqa (Kallinikos) in Syria near the Balikh river wrote in his - now lost – chronicle. This chronicle which the patriarch Michael the Syrian (1126-1199) had in his possession and used it in his *History Chronicle* as a source:

Says:

*“Know that when the sons of Israel [sons of Jacob aka Israel the Israelites] settled in Egypt they saw two brothers in this land. One of them was known as Suros and the other was Cilicos*

*"We call "Syriacs", in a special way, those living in the land West of the Euphrates River, from the Mount Amanon in the north of Antioch until the boundaries of Palestine, and from the Red Sea until the Euphrates.*

*And in a figurative way, we call "Syriacs" those who speak this Aramaic language from the West and East side of the Euphrates (that is to say from the Mediterranean Sea until the land of Persia).*

*We said this, in order to show in a special way, that the "Syriacs" are those living in the West. And the inhabitants of the Island that is to say those living between the land of the Two Rivers are inhabitants of the land situated on the East side of the Euphrates: and that Urhoy (Edessa) is the country of the Syriac-Aramaic language and its foundation."*

*(Jean Baptist Chabot, Chronique de Michel le Syrien Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199) Tome I-II-III (French) and Tome IV (Syriac), Paris, 1899, Livre XII Chap XVI, p. 524, see also Gabriel Yalgins edition of 2006 on page. 599, 600, 601, )*

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The catholicos-patriarch of the Church of the East Mar Isho (Yeshu') Bar Nun († 827), who was taught by Abraham Bar Dashandad in the Upper Monastery at Mosul, succeeded Mar Timotheos I as patriarch. He produced a commentary on the whole Bible. Isho Bar Nun wrote:

*"Syria was thus called by the name of Suros, who having killed his brother, reigned in Beth Nahrin (Mesopotamia), and hence the whole region during his reign was called Syria. But in ancient times Syriacs were called Arameans [...] We know that the Aramaic language in which Abraham spoke was the Syriac (language)."*

Isho Bar Nun was quoted here by the Syriac Maronite scholar Paulus S. Assemani (1878-1944). He was from the famous educated maronite Assemani family.

*(Paulus Assemani: Luma Tarikhiya fi Fara'id al-Adab as-Suryaniya [= a short history of Syriac literature], Jerusalem 1933, p. 9)*

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The East-Syrian (Nestorian) lexicographer Isho Bar Ali († 890) was a pupil of Hunayn ibn Ishaq of al-Hira (southern Iraq), the famous Aramean scholar, physician and scientist. Isho Bar Ali was probably a Christian convert from Shia Islam judging by his father's name Ali. Anyhow the famous Chaldean catholic Jacob Augin Manna quoted him saying:

*"Syria is the country between Antioch and Urhay and it was named Edessa after Suros, who killed his brother and ruled over Beth Nahrin (Mesopotamia)."*

*(Chaldean Catholic bishop Jacob Augin Manna, "Chaldean-Arabic Dictionary" Babel Center Publications. Beirut 1915, p. 11-21, first the name of this dictionary was simply Aramaic-Arabic dictionary and later erroneously renamed Chaldean-Arabic Dictionary)*

With all due respect to both Bar Ali and Manna. I just want point out here that the city of Urhoy/Urhay was renamed not renamed Edessa after the name of Suros or after his lifetime. This was not true. It was in fact renamed Edessa by the founder of the Seleucid dynasty of Syria namely Seleucus I Nicator i.e the general of Alexander the Great himself according to real history. It was named so after the city of Edessa in Macedon. This is also the case with other Hellenistic cities such as Alexandria and Antioch (there were in fact many Alexandria's throughout Alexander's empire not just the one in Egypt – later ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt,. The same goes for Antioch and Ephesus. There were at least 16 cities known as Antioch to the Greco-Roman world – Antioch near the Orontes river were later Peter the Apostle found his Church and the city were the followers of the newly established religion of Jesus Christ were called Christians (*Kristyone* the Hellenized form in Edessan Aramaic), Edessa was called sometimes in the Roman sources *Antiochia Kallirhoe* and Nisibin (was sometimes known as *Nsibis* and sometimes *Antiochia Mygdonia*). Antioch near the Orontes River is also founded by Seleucus I Nicator according to modern historians. Seleucus named Antioch after his father's name Antiochus and it was not founded by Suros as the church fathers and ancient authors claim..

Abu al' Hassan from Baghdad, known as Bar Bahlul († 963), compiled his famous 'Lexicon', a small encyclopedia in which he collected, together with the lexicographical works of his predecessors, numerous notices on the natural sciences, philosophy, theology, and Biblical exegesis.

He recorded in his lexicon under the lemma 'Syria' (*Suriya*) that

*"Syria was derived from Suros, either during his lifetime or after his death. This Suros had killed his brother and ruled over Beth Nahrin (Mesopotamia). His whole kingdom was called Syria. The Syrians (Suryaye) were formerly called Arameans (Aramaye), but when Suros ruled over them, from then on they were called Syrians (Suryaye)"*

*(Ruval Duval (ed.), Lexicon Syriacum, Paris, 1888-1901, p. 1323, 1324)*

Agapius of Hierapolis/Mabbug (modern Menbij in Syria) was a 10th century Melkite Antiochian orthodox bishop. His *World History* features accounts of the world from its creation to the year 941/942. He wrote :

*"At that time [42 years after Moses was born] lived King Suros. His rule was in Damascus. Syria was called by his name."*

*(Kitab al-'Unwan according to the edition of Jesuit fathers, Beirut 1907, p. 26)*

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The Syriac Orthodox patriarch Mor Dionysios Jacob Bar Salibi, the great spokesman who lived in the 12th century, a native of Melitene [now Malatya, Turkey], passed away Nov. 2, 1171

He says in his book against the Armenians:

*"The Armenians say: "From whom do you descend--you who are Syriacs by race?"--Against them we will say: Neither do you know from whom you descend. The name "Armenian"(Armenoyo) is derived from "Armenia" which is the name of a country (and not of a person). It is we (Syriacs) who have enlightened your authors and revealed to them that you are descending from Togarma, who was from the children of Japhet. As to us Syriacs we descend racially from Shem, and our father is Kemuel son of Aram, and from this name of Aram we are also called sometimes in the Books by the name of "Arameans." We are called "Syriacs" after the name of "Suros," who built Antioch with its banlieue; and the country was called after him, "Syria"."*

*(Chaldean catholic scholar Alphonso. Mingana, The work of Dionysius Bar Salibi against the Armenians, in Woodbrooke Studies, Vol.4, Cambridge, 1931, p. 54)*

Against the Greeks (Byzantine church):

*"Because of hatred they (the Greeks) call us Jacobites instead of Syriacs and we answer and say that the name Syriac by which you do not call us anymore does not rank before the honorable name because this name is derived from Suros, who ruled over Antioch and after him the land was named Syria...however we are the descendants of Aram and from his name we were called in ancient times by the name "Arameans".*

*(Bishop Jacob.Augin Manna, Chaldean-Arabic Dictionary, Babel Center Publications. Beirut 1915, p. 11-21)*

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Jacob Augin Manna (1867-1928), born in Bet Qopa [Iraq] was the Chaldean Catholic Metropolitan of Basra [Iraq]. In 1901 he wrote in Mosul a book called "*Selected pieces of Aramean literature*".

In the preface of his Aramaic-Arabic dictionary he writes:

*The syriac authors whether in the East or in the West, state that the term [Syriac] comes from Suros. Suros was a man of Aramean origin, who founded according to their opinion the city of Antioch and conquered the countries of Syria and Beth Nahrin (Mesopotamia). Following him these countries were called Syria and their inhabitants Syriacs*

*(Chaldean Catholic Bishop Jacob Augin Manna, [Chaldean-Arabic Dictionary](#), Babel Center Publications. Beirut 1915, p. 11-21)*

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*History of the Syrian Nation and the Old Evangelical-Apostolic Church of the East* is the first account written in English on the history of the Church of the East by one of its own adherents. The basis of the book is a history that was written in northeastern Neo-Aramaic (Sureth) by *Shamasha* George David Malech (1837-1909) from the village of Supurgan in Urmia (Iran). The present English version had its provenance in an intermediate Norwegian translation, augmented by material in the form of texts and illustrations by the author's son, the Rev. Nestorius George Malech (1865-1927) and his Norwegian Lutheran friend, the Rev. Anders Haldorsen Gjevve (1852-1930).

**George David Malech** (1837-1909) studied theology at the Mission College in Seeri, Urmia (graduated 1855), and became a professor of oriental languages and literature at the Presbyterian Mission College in Urmia. Intending to publish his works in America, he left Urmia in 1909, but met with a serious accident on the Persian-Russian border and died there.

He wrote the following:

*"Others think that the name Syria is derived from the name of king Sores, who was an Aramean, and who conquered Sham i.e Syria and Beth-Nahrin i.e Mesopotamia and so these countries were called Syria after his name. And likewise, the Arameans were called by the same name Syrians. Bar Ali who wrote a dictionary, says, that the whole Syrian country was called after the name of Sores, And after that time the Arameans were called Syrians. Bar Salibi, a writer, says in his bok Arovata [correct: Oro'utho/Ara'uta, meaning Dialogue in Aramaic], we were called Syrians after king Sores"* (*History of the Syrian Nation and the Old Evangelical-Apostolic Church of the East*, Gorgias Press 2006, George David Malech published in english 1910 by Nestorius George Malech p. 8 )

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Malfono Ishak Akan (Baroshe) also mentioned Suros in his book in Swedish from 1995 “*En kort introduction av Syrianerna/Arameerna och syrisk ortodoxa kyrkan*” (A short introduction on the Syriacs/aramians and syriac orthodox church).

He mentioned that most ancient historians. - *I guess he refers to the church fathers here* – are united when comes to trace the origin of the Syrian name to Suros. Ishak Akan also adds that Suros ruled in Mesopotamia in 1600 BC and that he was an Aramean king. I wonder where on earth he got his info from since the Arameans did not establish any kingdoms or city states until 1050 BC at first and second of all there is no clay tablet, cuneiform inscription and not even a coin with his name nor depiction of him ever in history.

### **The confusion between the mythical king Suros and the Achaemenian Persian king Cyrus the Great of Persia.’**

The modern times old school generation of authors, bishops and patriarchs amongst the Aramean (Syriac) community had fallen victim to the Suros myth to a degree that they even tried to prove that he existed and that the name *Suryoye (Suryaye)* was to be traced back to his name.

Some of them even mixed up this mythical king Suros with Cyrus the Great of Achaemenian Persia. That confusion was only based on etymology which in turn got it wrong without using the tool of philology.

The first one I have seen using this claim was the former Syriac Orthodox patriarch Mor Ignatius Jacob III in his thin book from 1953 “*History of the Syrian Church of Antioch*”. Others who read his book such Ishak Akan partly believed in it as a historical fact. In fact Akan mentioned both these and many more theories in his book.

This confused etymology was based mainly from Aramaic-english and not from Aramaic-Aramaic or Aramaic-Old Persian or (modern *farsi/Persian*).

**English:** Cyrus (the phonetic C in english sounds like a semkad in aramaic)

**Swedish :** Kyros (with K does not sound like Suros phonetically)

**Aramaic and Arabic:** Koresh and Kurosh

**Old Persian cuneiform and modern farsi (Persian) :** Kurush

In Swedish he is known as Kyros with a “K”. So Suros and Kyros don’t sound alike in Aramaic-Swedish. In Aramaic and Arabic Cyrus of Persia is known as Koresh and Kurosh and in Old Persian cuneiform he was called Kurush. So using philology and etymology does not work.

Patriarch Jacob III even explained why he believed that the nomenclature *Suryoyo* was derived from Cyrus of Persia's name after he connected the name of Suros to Cyrus (*he did so through the English language where the C sounds like a phonetic S*).

He explained that because when the exiled Jews in Babylon (Babel) were released from their Babylonian exile and were willing to return to their homeland in Judah and Jerusalem they were allowed to rebuild God's Temple. And from a Jewish perspective Cyrus was seen as a Messiah figure.

Ishak Akan adds that the reason was that the name *Suryoyo* was synonymous to Christian (which is not true because in Aramaic the terms *Mshihohoyo/Mshi(k)haya* and *Kristyono/Kristyana* mean Christian). Then he adds that the term *Suryoyo* was used to denote the early disciples of Jesus in Antioch in Roman Syria (this is not true, because the book of Acts of the Apostles only says: "*And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.*" (Acts 11:23-26). The Edessan Aramaic Syriac version of the book of Acts uses *Kristyone* and not *Suryoye* here.

Akan goes on and says that since the pagans in Antioch heard that the converted Jews thought that Cyrus of Persia reminded them of the savior of humanity namely Jesus Christ. And the believers were now called *Suryoye* or Christians. (Once again this is not true because the Greek exonym *Surioi* had not entered the Aramaic language yet until centuries later through the translation movement of Edessa somewhere between 390 to 500s AD)

Then Akan goes on to say that the nomenclature came into use in Roman Syria to differentiate between the *Christianized Arameans* and the *pagan Arameans*. Then he added that from now on the term Aramean came to mean pagan or heathen and that Syrian meant Christian (Which is not true at all). This is simply a linguistic error based on the confusion between the Aramaic terms *Oromoyo/Aramaya* and *Armoyo/Armaya* (pagans or heathens). And the term *Suryoye/Suryaye* and *Suroye/Suraye* got a Christian connotation only in the mindset of the older generation of Arameans since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century and not before that date. Because its only authors such as Qlimis (Clemens) Joseph David, Jacob Augin Manna, Mar Touma Odu and others after them who claimed that when the Arameans converted to Christianity they called themselves *Suryoye/Suryaye* and stopped using *Oromoye/Aramaye* (this is not true our entire corpus use the both interchangeably until modern times.)

The old Syriac Orthodox monk Ishak Saka of Mosul even believed in the Suros myth. He wrote that the name *Suryoyo* "*Comes from King Suros who lived before the prophet Moses, Soros was Aramean and he ruled the regions of Syria and Mesopotamia that were named after his name and were called Syria and their inhabitants were called Surosians and later Syrians*". (no one before Saka has ever used this term *Surosians* (*Surosoye* in Aramaic, *Surosiyin* in Arabic). He must have coined it himself)

## Conclusion

The earliest Edessan Aramaic (Syriac) author to mention the name of Suros is so called Chronicle of Edessa from the mid 6th century (some date it to the 7<sup>th</sup> century) composed by an anonymous author., or Mor Dionysios of Tell Mahre in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century, or Agapius of Mabbugh, and the others following just followed.

Bar Bahlul must simply have quoted this from East-Syrian patriarch Isho Bar Nun because the formula of this sentence of them both is the same. I remember that the chor-episcopos Chabo Al-Khuri of the Syriac Orthodox Church of St Peter & Paul in Hallunda (a suburb of Stockholm) mentioned the quote of Isho Bar Nun in an article written a few years ago in Edessan Aramaic in the Sweden based *Bahro Suryoyo* magazine of the Syriac Aramean Federation of Sweden.

Once again the name of Syria is erroneously linked to Suros, the mythical nonexistent king. And as for the name *Suryoye/Suryaye* replacing the former *Oromoye/Aramaye* during this time in history is not entirely true at all. Both nomenclatures were used interchangeably and synonymously throughout the entire corpus of Edessan Aramaic (Syriac) literature since the *exonym* Greek term (*Surioi*) entered Edessan Aramaic vocabulary in the forms *Suryoyo Suryaya* through the contact with the Greek language and literature especially during the translation movement period of Edessa during the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD until modern times.

Nor did the term *Suryoye/Suryaye* push aside *Oromoye/Aramaye* during the conversion of the Arameans into Christianity as has been claimed by some persons of the former generations for the last 150 years or so. Those who made this claim did so on simple linguistic grounds based on that the term *Oromoye/Aramaye* and *Armoye/Armaye* were spelled exactly the same in Aramaic without the vowel signs..

*Armoye/Armaye* simply means pagan or heathen in Aramaic. So they simply used a dictionary in Aramaic or in Arabic or they drew that conclusion reading the preface of dictionary of the Chaldean Catholic bishop Jacob Augin Manna, or the Syriac Catholic Qlimis (Clemens) Joseph David, or the Chaldean catholic metropolitan of Urmi (Urmia) Mar Touma Odu.

The origin of the Suros myth is taken from a myth that is today in a manuscript in the British Library or British Museum with the number 12152 and the title is "The Wise Dioclese" (a Greek author or a Greek myth). So the origin of Suros is simply a Greek myth that circulated centuries ago and was later transferred into the corpus of the Edessan Aramaic (Syriac) literature and has changed and grown since then.

There are contradictions as to where he ruled Antioch, Edessa, and Damascus, as well as giving him an Aramean ancestry at a time when no Aramean kings ruled. And there are no coins with his name nor are there any coins with his picture nor is there any king list mentioning him in neither one of these cities. or inscriptions outside the scope than even mentions his existence.

And I want to add that the first time any king had the title "king of Syria" are the Seleucid dynasty of kings who succeeded Alexander the Great in geographical Syria. That dynasty was not Aramean but rather Macedonian.

I wrote this article to close this chapter once and for all so that nobody would claim the etymology of the name *Suriya* (Syria) and *Suryoyo/Suryaya* to his name in the future. Nor will I dwell on where the etymology comes from in this article.

I will end with a quote by Henri Bedros Kifa here :

*“Further on, mythology tells us that Hercules invented the red colour during the time of King Phoenicus and how this color came to be the color of Kings. The name Suros and the king Suros can undoubtedly be derived from the myth. We ought to resist from believing in myths. Otherwise we run the risk of getting our history crammed with myths.*

*Today there is, of course, no historian who believes that the word Syria is a modification of Suros”*