



ABRAHAM OF KAŠKAR

ABRAHAM OF KAŠKAR, Christian monk of the 6th century CE, regarded as father of the monks in the Orient.

Syriac sources attribute to Abraham an undisputed paternity over the monks of the Orient: for the author of the *Chronicle of Seert* and of the *History of Rabban Hormizd*, he is “the chief of the monks” (Scher, 1919, II/2, p. 531 [210]; 1911, II/1, p. 133 [41]; Budge, 1902, I, p. 123; II, p. 180); for Išo'denaḥ (8th century) and Thomas of Marga (first half of the 9th century), the “father of the ascetics” (Budge, 1893, I, p. 23; II, p. 38; Chabot, 1896, p. 7, no. 14); and for [Bābay the Great](#), his disciple and one of his successors, who wrote a biography of his master now lost, “the first-born in the country of the Persians” (Bedjan, 1895, pp. 424, 463, 474), “the spiritual father of all of us” (Vaschalde, 1915, p. 2). Thomas quotes information he came across in lost histories, referring to historians who had written the main events of his life (Budge I, p. 24 ; II, pp. 42-43).

The exact date of Abraham's birth is not known. We can deduce 491/492 or 501 from the anonymous *Chronicle of Seert*; his birthplace was Kaškar, in the province of [Beth Aramāye](#). According to Abraham's *Vita* (Nau, 1918-1919, p. 163; ms. Sachau 329, fol. 132r-136v), he studied first in the famous school of [Nisibis](#); then he contributed to the evangelization of pagan populations in the [Ḥira](#) region; eventually he went to Egypt, in the Scete desert and in Sināi, so as to encounter the monks who were settled there (see also Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 133 [41]). But this kind of biographical presentation also owes much to the traditional style of hagiography. Afterwards, he decided to go to Mt. Izla, in



Ṭur ʿAbdin, in the area of Nisibis, where he founded the Great monastery. This monastery became the main center for East Syrian monasticism.

Abraham of Izla was the reformer of ascetic life for East Syrian monks, as Mar Abba the patriarch (542-52) was for the secular clergy. The *Chronicle of Seert* summed up his work: “[he gave] a new form to monasteries and cells” (Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 172 [80]). This reform insists on a faith identity: Abraham instituted distinctive signs, such as tonsure, specific costume, and shoes (Chabot, 1896, p. 7, no. 14; Scher, 1911, II/1, pp. 134 [42]-135 [43]; Budge, 1893, I, p. 23; II, pp. 40-41), so as to distinguish his monks from the Syro-Orthodoxes.

Abraham’s rules were written in Ḥaziran (June) 571 (Vööbus, 1960, p. 152); they were kept in the *Catalogue* of ʿAwdišoʿ (Mai, 1838, p. 290) and in various manuscripts; the most ancient one is a 14th-century manuscript held by Notre-Dame des Semences, a monastery of the Church of the East at Alqoš, Iraq. We learn from these sources that the rules prescribed a semi-monastic life as observed in Scete, Egypt, with a cenobitic dimension which grew in importance with Abraham’s successors Dādišoʿ (d. 604) and Bābay (d. 628), who completed his instructions (Vööbus, 1960, p. 164; Hoenerbach, Spies, 1957, pp. 176-80). Such an evolution can be found, for example, in the *History of Rabban Bar ʿEdtā*, one of the first Abraham’s disciples. Abraham is even referred to as spiritual child of the Egyptian monk Pachomius (292-351 CE) (Budge, 1902, I, p. 82; II, p. 182). These canons were translated from Syriac into Pahlavi by Job of Nethpar (Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 174 [82]; Gismondi, 1899, p. 52) who spent some years in Izla at the beginning of his monastic life. For the first part of the 7th century, about fifty reformed monasteries can be listed (Vööbus, 1960, pp. 150-51).

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