



ACTS OF THE PERSIAN MARTYRS

ACTS OF THE PERSIAN MARTYRS, a collection of the acts of martyrdom under Šāpūr II (309-79 A.D.). They were made known by S. E. Assemani on the basis of Ms. Vat. Syr. 160 (*Acta sanctorum martyrum* I, Rome, 1748). New and better manuscripts emerged, which made possible a new edition by P. Bedjan (*Acta martyrum et sanctorum* II, Leipzig, 1891), based on the Ms. Dijarb. 96, Ms. B.M. Add. 14,645 and Ms. Berlin Sach. 222. Other sources have also emerged; however, only the acts of Šemʿōn have been critically edited, by M. Kmosko (*Patrologia Syriaca* I/2 Paris, 1907, col. 715-960). This collection of documents has an epilogue on the background of their literary tradition. It states that, during the persecutions, records were composed in honor of the victims and that these existed also in written form. The author tells something about his own work. He states that the text is not a free composition for glorification of the martyrs, but rather rests on information he gathered from those close to the actual happenings—even eyewitnesses. He asserts that he was an eyewitness to the more recent martyrdoms reported in his collection. The author also states that he divided his work into two books, the first being a general treatment of martyrs in Persia and a summary panegyric on their sufferings. These hints make it possible to identify this document in Ms. Dijarb. 96, of which only the beginning has been lost; it bears all the marks of the description in the epilogue and contains sections which display a great vividness. The author makes brief mention of the second book. It contained historical narratives in chronological order about a number of individual



martyrs under Šāpūr II. His work, he says, began with the acts of martyrdom of Šem'ōn bar Sabbā'ē, first victim in the persecutions, and ended with the acts of 'Aqwbšmā. The extant collections do begin and end with these acts. But, while the transmission seems to have preserved this framework, the individual texts have not escaped revision and modification, regarding which scholarly views are divided. New pieces seem to have been inserted. In one case, at least, these have replaced an ancient story, namely, the narrative about the great massacre in Bet Huzzāyē which, according to the epilogue, belonged to the original composition.

According to a view frequently expressed since Assemani's days, the author of this collection was Marūtā of Maipherqat. This is pure speculation and a very negligent one. The vita of Marūtā (preserved in Armenian), which gives an account of his life and work, contains no suggestion that he composed the acts of martyrs. The same silence appears in Sozomenos, who enumerates those who collected acts of martyrdom (*Historia ecclesiastica* 2.14). According to the internal evidence, the collector must have done his work during the period of troubles prior to Yazdegerd (399-420). Thus we are dealing with a very ancient source.

One cycle of the acts (*Acta martyrum et sanctorum* II, pp. 307f.) constitutes a special group. This cycle stands out by the scheme which binds these texts together, namely the chronological order. They all deal with the martyrs of the diocese of Ḥediyab (Adiabene) and are characterized by simplicity in composition. The internal evidence indicates that their roots reach into the early martyrologies kept in the liturgical traditions of the church, making them documents which flow from historically reliable sources. Another cycle is presented by the trilogy (*Acta martyrum et sanctorum* II, pp. 260f.) which revolves around the martyrdom of Mīlēs. These texts appear first in Ms. Vat. Syr. 160, codex of great antiquity (written in 747). The acts of Mīlēs illustrate the fact that antiquity alone is not a guarantee of trustworthiness. They display fable and fantasy; it is not possible to separate truth from the folklore of Rāzīqāyē. Little can be accepted, and that only with caution. On the other hand, the acts of Baršabyā form a matter-of-fact narrative without any embellishment and leave a very different impression. The same is the case with the acts of Daniel and Warda, both of the country of Rāzīqāyē. As to historical value, each text must be treated individually. The taste of writers and copyists has caused them to embellish the texts. When obvious fabrications stand opposite to texts characterized by sobriety and lapidary



presentation of the facts, the manipulatory hand becomes clearly visible. But even such works are useful for knowledge regarding popular beliefs and social, legal, and political institutions of the centuries in which they were composed. Through the more reliable acts which have not been seriously modified, we have access to important data regarding the origin and early stages of developing Christianity—persons, circumstances and places, as well as direct and indirect evidence regarding beliefs and practices.

See also: [Acts of Adur-Hormizd and of Anāhīd](#); Sogdian literature: Christian.

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