



CHRONICLE OF ARBELA

CHRONICLE OF ARBELA, a Syriac church history of [Adiabene](#), written in the 6th century by Mēšīḥā-Zēkā under the title *Kētabā d-ēqlisyastīqī dā-Mēšīḥā-Zēkā*, chosen in conscious imitation of the *Ekklesiastikē historía* by Eusebius of Caesarea. It takes the form of a *liber pontificalis* of the metropolis Arbela (modern Erbil), northeast of Mosul. For the Parthian period Mēšīḥā-Zēkā drew primarily on the only Syriac writer to have an exact knowledge of Parthian history, Habel the Teacher, whose reports reveal that Christianity had spread east of the Tigris, in Adiabene, before 100, earlier than had previously been believed (Kawerau, tr. pp. 19, 22, 25). The Chronicle ends during the term of the patriarch Mār Āḇā of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (540-52). It was first edited in 1907-08 by Alphonse Mingana, who must have based his edition, not on the one manuscript now known (Or. fol. 3126, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin), but on another that has since disappeared (cf. Kawerau, tr. pp. 1-2, 3, 112).

From the point of view of the history of religion, the most remarkable account from the Parthian period is that of the Feast of the Magi in the month of Iyyār. The participants are said to have gathered at a large spring to bathe; then they prepared a meal and fed their slaves but ate nothing themselves. Next they threw one of their own small children into the fire, took its liver and kidneys, and hung them from the branches of the trees there, “as it were a sign of their celebrations. But afterward they shot many arrows into the sky and returned to their houses” (Kawerau, tr. p. 22).

Equally noteworthy is the account of the fall of the Arsacids and the beginning



of the reign of the Sasanians in 224, a date confirmed by the discovery in the 1930s of a bilingual Parthian and Middle Persian inscription at **Bīšāpūr** (Salles and Ghirshman; Altheim-Stiehl). At that time seventeen eastern bishops were mentioned, thirteen in Mesopotamia and along the Tigris, two in Susiana, and one in eastern Arabia.

In the early 4th century the bishop of Arbela ordained the Aramean Pāpā bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. “Because [Pāpā] lived in the most royal residence and because other bishops needed him for external reasons, he had demanded that he gain authority over all bishops, as if a single head were required, which they must have.” There was opposition to this demand, but Pāpā won the support of the bishop of Edessa and the western bishops of the Roman empire, who were themselves subject to the authority of patriarchs: “And all the bishops answered him . . . and promised him that they would support him before Basileus Constantine” (Kawerau, tr. pp. 68-69). The eastern bishops could not stand against this support and the wishes of the emperor Constantine I. The office of Roman Catholic patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was thus created to oversee the bishops within the Sasanian empire; in the Middle Ages its jurisdiction extended as far as China, and it still exists.

This account in the Chronicle of Arbela is the most important ancient source on early opposition to the primacy of the Roman pope over the whole of Christianity. Some Roman Catholic theologians have maintained that the Chronicle is not genuine. Its authenticity is, however, confirmed both by the bilingual inscription at Bīšāpūr and by the mention in the text of a solar eclipse that occurred on 10 July 218 (Kawerau, tr. p. 28).

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