



EAST SYRIAN MONASTERIES IN SASANIAN IRAN

EAST SYRIAN MONASTERIES IN SASANIAN IRAN. Traces of monasteries in Sasanian Iran can be found in the sources as early as the 4th century. The first foundations in Babylonia and the Tigris valley are traditionally attributed to (1) *Mār Māri*, one of the seventy disciples of Christ, who may have built 365 monasteries and churches, according to his *Acts* (Jullien and Jullien, 2003b, pp. 17-18, no. 7; pp. 28-29, no. 18), and (2) for north Mesopotamia in the 4th century, to Mār Awgin and his disciples (Mār Malka or Ioḥannān Ṭayyāya), according to his biography (Fiey, 1977, pp. 141-44, 154-57). At this time, the *benay* and *benat qeyama*, sons and daughters of the Covenant, did not strictly live in monastic structures but near parish churches. Some monasteries took pride in their ancient origin, for example, 'Ain Deqla (Gismondi, 1899, p. 36; Vööbus, 1958, pp. 288-89) or the monastery of the Beth Sahde near Karkā d-Beth Slokh built under *Bahrām V* (Bedjan, 1891, pp. 559-64; *BHO*, nos. 923-26; see Chabot, 1896, p. 7; Vööbus, 1958, pp. 289-92) in honor of victims of the great persecution led by *Šāpur II* (Fiey, 1968, p. 51). For the area of Nineveh, J. M. Fiey inventorized some unidentified monasteries (Fiey, 1965, II, pp. 384-493); one may therefore distinguish Jonas monastery, known from Jerome, Epiphanius, and Pseudo-Dorotheus: its history was mixed up with that of the bishopric (Fiey, 1965, pp. 493-524). On the Mount Alpap, four monasteries are said to have been built as far back the 4th century by Greek ascetics—Mār Matta, Reša, Barāzi, and Kuḥta. The author of the *Chronicle of Seert* says that there was no monastery in *Beth Aramāye* in the 4th century except that of



Dorqonie (Scher, 1908, I/2, p. 307 [195]), dedicated to Mār Māri, and where the patriarchal investiture ended (Assemanus, 1728, pp. 676-78).

In Maišān, the main monastery was that of Dayr al-Dahdār, which was built before the Islamic era, according to Yāqut's testimony. J. M. Fiey attributes its construction to a disciple of Mār 'Abda in the 4th century, the bishop 'Abdišo', who wished to strengthen the faith of the inhabitants of Rima (Fiey, 1968, p. 279). One of the older indications for Susiana is attested in the [Acts of the Persian Martyrs](#): Badma, a former [magus](#), is presented as the *rišdayra* (leader of the community) of seven monks in the country of Beth Lapaṭ, in 376 (Bedjan, 1891, pp. 347-51; *BHO*, no. 131). The *History of Mar Yonān*, which relates the monk's visit to the Persian Gulf, indicates a monastery of Mār Thomas on a black island there, at the very beginning of the 4th century (Bedjan, 1890, pp. 466-525; see Yaqut, *Boldān* II, pp. 649-50, 79-80; IV, p. 342; Potts, 1990, pp. 245, 333; Jullien and Jullien, 2003a, pp. 160-61).

According to the *Chronicle of Seert*, before the 6th century in the Sasanian territories the monasteries were configured the same as those of Mār 'Abda' and his fellow monks (Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 172 [80]); in addition, each of the following was linked with a school for ecclesiastical training: Dorqonie, Kaškar, [Nisibis](#), [Arbela](#), and Seleucia. Spiritual writings for novices and monastic histories and rules enable us to know better the life within the monasteries—the hierarchy, stages, and evolutions of the community; the building of the monks' cells; daily work, the divine offices, etc. (Vööbus, 1960, pp. 115-88; Jullien, 2006b, pp. 143-84). Sources suggest also the existence of bilingual monasteries (in Rēw-Ardašir, Scher, 1908, I/1, p. 222 [12]) and of associations between monasteries (for example, Rabkennare and Rabban-Šāpur near Šuštār, Jullien, 2006a, pp. 337-38).

In 571, [Abraham of Kaškar](#) initiated on Mount Izla in Ṭur 'Abdin a reform which contributed to a revival within the East Syrian church owing to a disciplinary recovery (Budge, 1893, I, pp. 23-24; II, p. 41-42; Tamcke, 2004, pp. 124-32; Chialà, 2005; Jullien, 2008). From the time of [Baršauma](#), bishop of Nisibis in the 5th century, who obliged priests to marry, monastic life was less considered. The influence of this Great monastery extended over the Sasanian empire, particularly because of the excellence of the apprenticeship. The departure from it of disciples who laid the foundations of new monasteries (in the same area, the regions of Nisibis and Singar, there were important settings for ascetics: for example, that of [Babaï of Nisibis](#) at Dayr al-Za'farān; Fiey, 1977, pp. 150-53) was decisive in the diffusion of monasteries throughout the



Iranian provinces (*šahr*). The role of Abraham's heirs was essential in the survival of the East Syrian church as it was confronted with the Syro-orthodox successes in the empire and with the spread of Islam.

Ḳosrow II's Nestorian minister of finance, Yazdin, contributed greatly to the building of monasteries, particularly in **Beth Garmaï** (Guidi, 1903, p. 23; on Yazdin, see Budge, 1893, II, pp. 81-82, n.). The catholicos Sabrišo' I erected one near Karkh Juddān, where he died and was buried in 604 (Scher, 1919, II/2, p. 474 [154]-504 [184]; 520 [200]; Gismondi, 1897, p. 51). Another Sabrišo', metropolitan of Beth Garmaï in the first part of 7th century is considered as the founder of the monastery of Babta d-Maḥoze in the mountain of Šarān (Fiey, 1968, p. 76; Chabot, 1896, p. 50, no. 92). Many of the monasteries built by Abraham of Izla's disciples in the area dated back to this time: that of Ḥenanišo' in the neighborhood of Darabad (Chabot, 1896, pp. 8, no. 14; 12, no. 21; Scher, 1919, II/2, pp. 534 [214]-536 [216], named 'Amr Ḥannun), of Simeon in Šenna of Beth-Rāmān/al-Sin (Chabot, 1896, p. 40, no. 67; Scher, 1919, II/2, pp. 447 [127]-451 [131]; for the toponym: Budge, 1893, I, p. 292; II, p. 521), of Daniel, ca. 570-80 in Bašloy, the mountain of Uruk (Chabot, 1896, pp. 8, no. 14; 20, no. 31; Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 198 [106]; Gismondi, 1899, p. 55); the monastery of Dākok in 629 was dependent on Beth 'Abe (Budge, 1893, I, pp. 58-59; II, pp. 101-4).

In **Adiabene**, the monastery of Beth Reqna, built by Ḥenanišo', remained in existence until the 18th century (Chabot, 1896, pp. 62-63, no. 122 ; Scher, 1911, II/1, p. 198 [106]; Nau, 1914, cols. 1437-38); Beth-Qoqā near the Great Zab, the most famous of these foundations, was established by Sabrišo' at the beginnings of the 7th century (Chabot, 1896, pp. 36-37, no. 59): its history of over one thousand years is known from the *Chronicle* of this monastery (Mingana, 1907, p. 171-271 from a manuscript of 1617; Tamcke, 1988, pp. 9-64) and from monastic sources (Scher, 1919, II/2, pp. 583 [263]-585 [265]; Budge, 1893, I, pp. 89-90; II, pp. 209-210). Disciples or dissenters promoted the growth of monasticism in this country, like Mār Miḥā'il of Tar'il near Kephār 'Uzail (Mingana, 1907, p. 264; Chabot, 1896, p. 38, no. 61; for its location, see Fiey, 1965, I, pp. 176-78). At this time, Abba Zinaï constructed on the Little Zab a center of cultural life and formation especially for the missions nearby: Bar Šabta won renown in Ma'alta and Ḥenaitha (Chabot, 1896, pp. 40-41, no. 69; Scher, 1919, II/2, p. 506 [186]-507 [187]; Baumstark, 1922, p. 131). The reformed monasticism spread through the efforts of Mār Yonān the slave and Guiwarguis. The latter's monastery near Rumini played a great role in the



region, notably owing to related foundations as Beth Zaitē in Marga (Fiey, 1965, I, pp. 207-208; 287; Budge, 1902, I, p. 127; II, p. 186).

In Marga also, there were two main monasteries, both reformed: Beth-ʿAbe and that of Bar ʿEdta. The former is essentially known through the *Book of Governors* (Budge, 1893, I, pp. XLI-LXIX; Fiey, 1965, I, pp. 238-42) written in 840 by the bishop Thomas of Marga. Beth-ʿAbe became famous under the *rišdayra* Mār Jaʿqub, a former monk of the Great monastery, and for its missionaries, who were often chosen for the episcopacy. The monastery of Bar ʿEdta, the location of which is still disputed (Fiey, 1965, I, pp. 273-75, about the river Ḥāzir, pp. 275-80) enjoyed a long posterity (Budge, 1902; Scher, 1906, pp. 403-23; 1907, pp. 6-13).

For Qardu, the monastery of Kamul in the plain of Gudi was the work of Rabban Ukama, bishop of Arzon at the beginning of the 7th century (Chabot, 1896, pp. 19-20, no. 30; p.4, no. 7; Scher, 1919, II/2, pp. 582 [262]-583 [263]).

In the region of Mosul-Nineveh, on the mountain of Alqoš, were founded in 640 the monastery of Rabban Hormizd the Persian (Budge, 1902; Chabot, 1896, pp. 48-49, no. 88; Scher, 1919, II/2 pp. 595 [275]-597 [277]; Gismondi, 1897, p. 55; Fiey, 1965, II, pp. 535-6; The biography of Sabrišoʿ, catholicos in 596, lists several monasteries in Beth Lašphar and the Ḥulwan region; one named after Širin, Kōsrow II's queen, was near the royal residence (Budge, 1893, I, p. 47; II, pp. 80-82; Bedjan, 1895, p. 306; Jullien, 2006b, p. 170).

In Beth Aramāye, many of the monastic settlements are focused on the area of Kaškar (Ar. Wāsiṭ, on which see *ET*² XI, 2002, pp. 165-71) during the Sasanian era: Mār Gani/Ḥaia of the Great monastery introduced Abraham's reform at the end of the 6th century in the monastery known as Yoḥannān of Kaškar, named after one of the first monks in this area (5th century, Chabot, 1896, p. 4, no. 10; pp. 17-18, no. 28; Scher, 1919, II/2, p. 453 [133]; Gismondi, 1897, p. 36; 1899, p. 29). The bishop Grigor, who became metropolitan of Nisibis in 595, and Theodorus the Interpreter, Ḥaia's friend, each established a monastery; that of Theodorus was linked with a school (Chabot, 1896, p. 42, no. 73; Scher, 1919, II/2, pp. 598 [278]-599 [279]).

In Beth Huzāye, particular mention has to be made of Rabban-Šāpur, near Šuštār, from the 7th century, because of its spiritual force throughout Beth Huzāye and Beth Qaṭrāye as far as Beth Aramāye and Fārs (Scher, 1919, II/2, p. 461 [141]; Jullien, 2006a, pp. 345-46; branches: Chabot, 1896, p. 45, no. 77, Bar



Sahde; p. 45, no. 78, Xvadāhoy; p. 51, no. 95, Makkiha; p. 52, no. 98, Malkišo'). Dādišo' from Qaṭar and Isaac the Syrian retired to Rabban-Šāpur (Brock, 1995, pp. XXII-XXIII; Fiey, 1969, p. 247).

The acts of the synods make allusion to monasteries established in the islands of the Persian Gulf: Bārayn, Dayrin, Mazon (Chabot, 1902, pp. 619-20 at the beginning of the 5th century; cf. Miles, 1909, p. 23; Calvet, 1998, pp. 671-85; Jullien and Jullien, 2003a, pp. 165-70); in 585, Išo'yahb I mentions "holy monasteries, churches and monasteries in villages where lived the believers" (canon 15, Chabot, 1902, p. 441). The 6th-century Persian martyr Yazdbozēd's (Justi, p. 147a, no. 2; Gignoux, Jullien, and Jullien, p. 142, no. 449c) Passion points out a monastic presence on the island of Tālon (Fiey, 1966, pp. 135-36; Peeters, 1931, pp. 7-10, 13-16). Recent archeological discoveries in the Persian Gulf area have revealed monastic remains; the most important were found on [Khārg island](#), dated from the 7th century (Steve, 2003, pp. 85-154; on Šir Bani Yās, from the same time, King, 1997, pp. 221-31).

Monasticism was progressively introduced throughout the eastern regions of the empire. In Marv for example, a disciple of Abraham the Great, Guiwarguis, built a monastery near Zarq (Chabot, 1896, p. 23, no. 36; Le Strange, 1905, pp. 400-401; Fiey, 1973, p. 81, n. 34); based on Ferdowsi's account of the death of the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd III, in 651 and the disposition of his body (ed. and tr. Mohl, VII, 1878a, pp. 482-91; tr. Mohl, VII, 1878b, pp. 394-98), it was probably the monks of that place who buried him.

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