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MARTYRS, CHRISTIAN

MARTYRS, CHRISTIAN: accounts of Christian martyrs during the Sasanian era and later in the medieval Islamic period.

THE SASANIAN PERIOD

Since Georg Hoffmann's *Auszügeaus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer* (1880), Paul Peeters' various studies (1925), and Gernot Wiessner's published dissertation (1967), modern scholars have recognized the historical value of the surviving corpus of Persian Christian Acts of martyrsin the Iranian lands (Brock, 1968, p. 300; Gignoux, 1984, p. 225). In spite of its composite nature, including inserted discourses and stanzaic hymns (madrashe), as well as fictitious and marvelous descriptions, this literature is of great interest to the study of the administrative history and historical geography of the Sasanian empire. The juridical background is given precisely: custody, questioning, preliminary investigation, typology of punishments (Jullien, 2004, pp. 243-69), and hierarchy of judges (Gignoux, 1983, pp. 191-203).

The passion accounts are known from two sets of literary corpus: one in Syriac, and the other in Greek. Some of the Syriac *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* were first published with a Latin translation in 1748 by Stefano Evodio Assemani (1711-1782), on the basis of the ancient Vatican manuscript 160. Later, from 1890 to 1897, Paul Bedjan, republished the Syriac corpus, adding new hagiographical texts under the title *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (7 vols.). Since then, additional texts have enhanced the collection. These have usually appeared in the *Analecta Bollandiana* series (henceforth *AnBoll*). In the

Byzantine period, the Syriac testimonies had been rapidly translated into Greek and achieved a wider circulation, frequently with revisions and alterations. Most of them were known as far back as the 5th century CE. About the same time, the early church historian Sozomen tells briefly about the persecutions of Šāpur II (*Ecclesiastical History* II.9-14). He certainly knew the Syriac language (Devos, 1966a, pp. 449-50 and 454). The Greek passion accounts, published by Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941), provide further information, though often embellished compared with those in Syriac (1907, pp. 401-560). Some of them are only known from the Greek versions (Ia, pp. 453-73, Pherbutha, on the framework of the Syriac passion of Tarbō, pp. 439-44). The Syrian theologian and bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus also describes some passions (*Ecclesiastical History* V). The Syriac martyrologium of 411 (B.L., Add. 12150) has been translated from a Greek original (written after 362), probably inspired by Eusebius (Nau, 1912, p. 9). This was often used as a model after 420, in particular for the Armenian narratives (Devos 1966b, pp. 240-42; van Esbroeck 1977, pp. 169-79), which are known essentially from 22 manuscripts. Some passions depend on the Greek; others are only in Armenian (Bardišō', BHO 136 for example). Sogdian fragments of the *Acts* have been recovered at Bulayïq, north of Turfan (Sims-Williams, 1985, pp. 31-50 and 185; Pethion, pp. 139-47: martyrs under Šāpur II; Schwartz, 1970, pp. 391-94).

The identification of the author of the main passions under Šāpur II with the bishop of Maypherqaṭ Marutha (end of the 4th to the beginning of the 5th century CE), is still a matter of debate (Labourt, 1904, pp. 53-54; Tisserant, 1928, pp. 142-47; van Esbroeck, 1977, p. 179; Ter-Petrossian, 1979, pp. 129-30). Marutha is known for having gathered martyrs' relics, which he transferred to his bishopric, consequently named Martyropolis. According to ʿAmr (14th cent.), the catholicos Aḥay (in 418 CE) is also presented as an author of an account of Christian martyrs (Gismondi, 1897, p. 26). Sozomen reported, that the Acts were collected by "Persians, Syrians and inhabitants of Edessa" (II, 14, 5).

The problems created through the process of transmission and revision of this literature may also account for the difficulty in making a clear distinction between history and legend (Dehandschutter, 1995, pp. 296-98; van Henten, 1995, pp. 303-22; Baumeister, 1995, pp. 223-32). However, the use of literary models does not necessarily imply the lack of a historical nucleus. Hagiographers usually classify the narratives into three categories (Saxer

1990, pp. 1575-80): historical passions, based on juridical reports, or contemporary testimonies (Delehaye, 1927, pp. 106-109), like the stories of Širin under Ḵosrow I, Mehršāpur under Bahrām V, Yaʿqub the Notary and, under Yazdgerd I, Narseh from Bēṯ-Raziqāyē. One could also add narratives concerning the persecutions under Šāpur II, often written shortly after the events described (Devos, 1966, pp. 221-23). Successive revisions lead us to rank them, for the most part, as belonging into the next category.

The second category is that of narrative passions and eulogies. Among them, some Acts were written based on older accounts, such as that of Šemʿon (Simeon) bar Sabbāʿē (*AMS* II, pp. 123-207; Kmosko, 1907, Cols. 715-960; Arm., BHO 1118), Pusiy (*AMS* II, pp. 208-32) and Martha (*AMS* II, pp. 233-41), of the zealous monk Baršibia (*AMS* II, pp. 281-84), Anāhid (*AMS* II, pp. 583-603), and Pethion (*AMS* II, pp. 559-63, 604-31; Corluy, 1888, pp. 5-44). They belong to the same cycle, in which narrative developments abound.

The third category, that of novelistic stories, contains texts with interpolations and mixed anecdotes, e.g., the stories of Mār Kardag (*AMS* II, 442-506; Abbeloos and Lamy, 1890, pp. 5-106; Walker, 2004), Dadō (*AMS* IV, pp. 218-21) or Mehrnarseh and his family (*AMS* II, pp. 1-39), Zebin, Lazarus, Brikišō' and their companions (*AMS* II, pp. 39-51; Delehaye, 1907, pp. 421-39), Isaac and Šāpur, bishop of Bēṯ-Niqṭor (*AMS* II, pp. 51-6). Some passions appear highly structured and contain many interpolations, such as that of Joseph, Aqebšema and Aithalaha (*AMS* II, pp. 351-96; Delehaye, 1907, pp. 478-557; Arm. BHO 23; Peeters, 1925, pp. 293-97 who recognized there three distinct passions gathered on the Simeon-Guštazad-Pusiy pattern). Nevertheless, it is agreed that they contain real historical elements, with the original tradition overlaid by novelistic features (cf. Duval, 1907, pp. 120, 127-28).

Persecution throughout Persia can be defined as localized, and some passions seem to belong to a collection related to the same geographical region. Martyrdoms often occur at royal residence sites (Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Karkā d-Ledan, Bēṯ-Lapaṭ), since a royal order was necessary for any execution, and among armies on the march. However, Syriac sources document well the great enforcement of the edicts in rural areas, as far as small hamlets (in Adiabene or Bēṯ-Garmē for example), especially in the most western provinces.

Before the reign of Šāpur II, we cannot speak of an organized and systematic persecution, even if, under Bahrām II, Christians were troubled, like Candida, the king's Roman favorite (Brock, 1978, pp. 167-81). The executions that did

take place happened during the persecution of Manicheans. The *Chronicle of Seert* underlines the confusion made by the Mazdean authorities between these two religious movements (Scher, 1907, p. 237-39).

Šāpur II (r. 309-79). Šāpur II's reign brought forty years of large-scale persecution, followed by episodic outbreaks under his successors. The *Acts of Persian Martyrs* describe the Church's suffering. These persecutions coincide with the conversion of the emperor Constantine (r. (306-37) and the official adoption of Christianity in the rival Roman empire (under the Edict of Milan in 313). Christians of Mesopotamia, living under Sasanian law, could easily be accused of complicity with the Roman emperors. This kind of accusation is recurrent in the sources. The figure of 16,000 martyrs, put forward by Sozomen, (*Eccl. Hist.* II, 14, 5), has to be qualified. Eugène Tisserant (1931, pp. 167-68) thought that the persecution essentially decimated the clergy. Māri b. Solaymān proposes the rather unreliable figures of 160,000 or 30,000 victims (Gismondi 1899, pp. 17, 21).

The first attestation of Christian martyrs in the Sasanian empire concerns the country of Karkā d-Bēṯ Sloḵ, in the Ṭur Brayn mountain: In the ninth regnal year of Šāpur, Ādurparwa, Mehrnarseh and their sister Māhdoḵt were put to death. Their martyrdom was described by a monk of Bēṯ-ʿAbē in the second part of the 7th century (Budge, 1893 I, p. 92). After 327, Isaiah of Arzōn wrote up the passion of Zebin, Lazarus, and their companions that he witnessed, possibly in Arzanene. The bishop of Susa, Miles, was executed in his native country of Bēṯ-Rāziqāyē in about 340 (*AMS* II, pp. 260-75; Arm. BHO 773). Other areas were also affected. In Bēṯ-Garmē, Isaac of Bēṯ-Niqṭor perished in 339; his passion, probably written in Edessa, is implausible in places, in comparison with more reliable texts like the *History of Karkā* (*AMS* II, pp. 507-35; Fiey 1964, pp. 189-222). The role of the Manicheans at the beginning of the persecution is emphasized by this source. In Šahrqard, Narseh and Joseph were killed around 344 (*AMS* II, pp. 284-89), and in 376, Badma the Monk (*AMS* II, pp. 347-51; Delehaye, 1907, pp. 473-77). In Bēṯ-Huzāyē, Pusiy, head of the king's craftsmen, and his daughter Martha, a nun, were arrested and tortured in 340. Bēṯ-Zabday was also the centre of a massacre of the ecclesial hierarchy; 9,000 inhabitants were deported about 362 (*AMS* II, pp. 316-24; among them, many Christians, and the bishop Heliodorus).

From 344 to 376, persecutions focused on Adiabene (*AMS* IV, pp. 128, 131, 193), and arrests were numerous in Arbela and Ḥazza, but also in the villages. Many bishops were concerned (Yoḥannan in 344, *AMS* IV, pp. 128-30, Abraham his

successor in 345, *AMS* IV, pp. 130-31; Delehaye, 1907, pp. 450-52), as well as priests (Yaqub in 347, with benat qeyama, *AMS* II, pp. 307, 308-13), deacons (Baḥadbešabba in 355, *AMS* II, pp. 314-16), or laymen (Ḥanania in 346, *AMS* IV, pp. 131-32, Aithalaha and Ḥafsay in 355, *AMS* IV, pp. 133-37). Troubles reached the capital too, and some Catholicoi were arrested: Šemʿon (Simeon) bar Sabbāʿē and his sisters (Tarbō, *AMS* II, pp. 254-60), Šahdōst and Barbaʾšmin, between 339 and 341 (*AMS* II, pp. 276-81; Delehaye, 1907, pp. 445-50; *AMS* II, pp. 296-303). Executions were perpetrated in Karkā d-Ledan during the paschal week, known as the "Great Massacre" (*AMS* II, pp. 241, 248). Other passions underlined the extent of some repressions: groups of 40 or 120 persons were condemned and killed together (*AMS* II, pp. 325-47; pp. 291-95). We can add that Armenian historians like Faustus of Byzantium (*Buzandaran*,IV.16-17, 54) echoed this persecution. Moreover, the protagonist is sometimes related to the king or his familiars by the hagiographies, particularly in legendary tales: Gubarlaha and Qazō (*AMS* IV, pp. 141-63), presented as Šāpur's children, with Dadō their tutor (in 332); Bassus and his sister, the mobad Ābvar-Zād of Bēṯ-Zabdē's children (in 368, *AMS* IV, pp. 471-507; Chabot 1893); Benham and Sara (*AMS* II, pp. 397-441), whose father is described as a Mawžil sovereign (Fiey, 1965, II, pp. 565-78); the acts of Pirgōšnasp, who chose the baptismal name Saba (*AMS* IV, pp. 222-49), designate him as Šāpur's nephew (362). Among the notables, there are the general Muʾain (codex 960, no. 67, foll. 388v-394v, in Wright, 1870, pp. 1134-35; Fiey, 1971, pp. 437-53), Mār Kardag, *marzbān* of Nisibis (*AMS* II, pp. 442-507; text probably written in the 6th century, with fanciful elements, according to Peeters, 1925, p. 298-301; Walker, 2004, Appendix A), or else Gōštazād, head of the eunuchs and the king's favorite, who perished in 341. As a result of his death, Šāpur ordered more rigorous proceedings (*AMS* II, pp. 284-86; Kmosko, 1907, pp. 831-96).

Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420). At first, Christians were eulogistic of this king, who was considered as gracious and tolerant, wise and liberal (cf. Chabot 1902, p. 21). But the large number of conversions of Mazdean notables to Christianity (e.g., Mehršāpur, Pērōz from Bēṯ-Lapaṭ) and the mages' growing authority at the Court seem to have encouraged Yazdgerd I to pursue his predecessors' persecution policy. Descriptions of provocative actions of Christians towards Mazdean cult places, often developed in these texts, have to be qualified. For example, a priest from Hormozd-Ardašir, Hašu, was accused of having destroyed a fire temple erected next to a church (*AMS* IV, pp. 250-53). This narrative is also known from Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who underlines that this

destruction was the reason for the persecution (*Eccl. Hist.* IV.39). During the same period occurred the martyrdom of Narseh from Bēṯ-Raziqāyē. Without his knowledge, a church built by him was converted into a fire altar. As he celebrated Mass there, he was accused of destroying the temple and subsequently imprisoned. He appeared before the *marzbān* of Bēṯ-Aramāyē (*AMS* IV, pp. 170-80). Such reports substantiate the thesis of Christian rashness (Christensen, 1944, p. 272; Kötting, 1979, 329-36). In fact, however, it appears that such provocations were only isolated cases (Van Rompay, 1995, pp. 363-75).

A contemporary monk named Abgar is considered by Paul Devos, as the author of four passions: Narseh's, that of Ṭāṭāq, a former king's servant (*AMS* IV, pp. 181-84), of the layman Hormozd and nine martyrs from Bēṯ-Garmē (*AMS* IV, pp. 184-88), and under Bahrām V of Yaʿqub the Notary (Devos, 1965, pp. 303-28; 1966, pp. 213, 218).

Bahrām V (r. 420-38). Bahrām V continued his predecessor's policy. Thanks to Syriac sources, we possess some valuable texts concerning famous martyrs who were condemned under Yazdgerd I and put to death under his successor in 421, that is in the second year of his reign (Nöldeke, 1879, pp. 420-22). Mehršāpur, who was starved to death in an underground cistern (*AMS* II, pp. 535-39); Pērōz, a notable who was decapitated in Syārazur (*AMS* IV, pp. 253-62); Yaʿqub the Notary (*AMS* IV, pp. 189-200) and Yaʿqub Intercisus from Bēṯ-Lapaṭ (*AMS* II, pp. 539-58, Arm., BHO 395, Copt., BHO 396; Devos, 1953, pp. 157-210; 1954, pp. 213-56). This martyr was condemned by the *mobadān mobad* of Bahrām to suffer the "nine deaths" on royal order: each of his members was cut off and his corpse left without burial—a punishment reserved for apostates from Mazdeism. These Acts seem to be the result of a compilation with elements taken from the *Notary's Passion* and from that of Pērōz, a repentant former apostate (Labourt, 1904, p. 117, n. 2). Some martyrdoms are known from other literary traditions, like that of Hormozd, Šahin, Persian notables, and Benjamin the deacon, whose story was reported by Theodoret (*Eccl. Hist.* V.39, 12-24; cf. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* VIII, 4, 15; 17) also preserved in an Armenian document (BHO 7; Peeters, 1909, pp. 399-415). Nevertheless, according to the synodical acts of the Church of the East, confessors were not so numerous, and in 424, Dadišō' deplored apostasies, adding that many Christians find refuge in the neighboring Roman empire (Chabot, 1902, p. 45).

Yazdgerd II (r. 438-57). For this period, sources mention three centers of

persecution: the Armenian border, the Balašfarr country, and that of Bēṯ-Garmē. Lazar of Pharp (*History of Armenia* 42) and Elisha Vartabed testify to the extent of the proceedings, in particular those against the captive Christians in Persia after the Battle of Avarayr in 451 (van Esbroeck, 1977, p. 173; Ter-Minassian, 1957, pp. 183-92); Armenian princes were exiled to Nišāpur (Thomson, 1991, pp. 132-133). Quite reliably, the Armenian passion of Atom Gnuni, Manačihr Rštuni and their companions (*AMS* IV, pp. 170-80) was certainly translated from Syriac (Gray, 1949, pp. 361-76). The story of the hermit Pethion describes his missions through the mountains of Media and in the Tigris valley. This cycle in four parts, often epic, presents the notable Yazdēn (*AMS* II, pp. 563-65), the Maguh Ādur-Hormizd (*AMS* II, pp. 565-83), and his daughter Anāhid. All of them were converted, thanks to the monk Pethion, and died as martyrs. The *History of Karkā d-Bēth Slokh* (Selōḵ) establishes that Karkā was the center of decisions for the organization of the persecution in Adiabene, Bēṯ-Nuhadrā, Bēṯ-ʻArabāyē and Garamegan. Yoḥannan, metropolitan of Karkā, appears among the victims in 446.

*Pērōz (*r. *459-84).* The reign of Pērōz was more clement. The only known martyr is the catholicos Bābōy who was slandered by Barṣauma of Nisibis (for ʿAmr see Gismondi, 1897, pp. 30-31) and, after an illegal synod, executed in 484 on the king's order (Chabot 1902, pp. 534-35; *AMS* II, pp. 631-34; Barhebraeus, *Eccl. Chr.* II; Abbeloos and Lamy 1877, pp. 61-65).

Ḵosrow I (r. 531-79). The resumption of hostilities against Byzantium entailed new persecutions. Five noblemen, former fire worshippers, were murdered. The commander Pirāngošnasp, called Grigor after his baptism, was the leader of the Persian armies in the war against the Romans. Denounced by his family, the Mehrān, he was beheaded in 542 (Bedjan, V, 1895, pp. 347-94). His companion, Yazd-panāh, was also killed (Bedjan, V, 1895, pp. 394-415). As a result of this event, Yazd-bōzēd was converted and suffered martyrdom in Armenia in 553 (Arm., BHO 433; Peeters, 1931, p. 18; Fiey, 1966, pp. 133-35). There is a single Greek translation from Syriac of Širēn's (Širin) story. Traditions on Golinduch are given by Greek chroniclers (such as Evagrius and Nicephorus Callistus) on the basis of contemporary testimonies (Devos, 1946, pp. 87-131; Peeters, 1944, pp. 74-125; Garitte, 1956, pp. 405-40).

Ḵosrow II (r. 590-628). From the 6th century, arrests became more sporadic, according to political and internal circumstances. It is among Syriac hagiographical sources about this period that we find the largest number of historical passions, most of them concerning converted Mazdeans: Mehr-Māh-

Gošnasp/Giwargis and his sister Hazārōy in 615 (BHO 323; Bedjan, V, 1895, pp. 416-571); a horseman in the royal armies, Mogundat/Anastasius, who died in 628 at nearby Dastgerd (BHG 84; Flusin, 1992); Nathaniel, bishop of Syārazur, east of Bēṯ-Garmē, crucified in 610-11 (Guidi, 1903, p. 21; Scher, 1919, p. 520; cf. Chabot, 1896, pp. 39-40; idem, 1902, pp. 164, 214) and Išōʿsabran (Chabot, 1897, pp. 485-585). Fortunately, some of them left valuable pieces of literature: Babay the Great is the author of the passions of: Giwargis; Yazdoy-Christina, daughter of Yazdēn, governor of Nisibis (*AMS* IV, pp. 201-204; cf. Duval, 1907, p. 135); Išōʿyahb of Adiabene, catholicos-to-be; and Išōʿsabran.

THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

At the beginning of the Islamic period (from the 7th century onwards), Christians were not subject to persecution in the full sense of the word. Relationships between Muslims and Christians were based, firstly, on principles of tolerance and protection (Ar. *al-d¯emma*), since Christians were a "People of the Book" (*ahl al-ketāb*), and secondly, on social separation. However, because of their status as members of a minority religion, Christians suffered legal discriminations, which applied to special taxes, specific clothes, as well as other humiliating measures. Some rare and sporadic cases of arrests can be noticed, but these were related essentially to infringements of the *d¯emma* prescriptions.

During the Omayyad period, the caliph ʿOmar II (r. 717-20) hardened his policy against non-Muslim communities and instigated persecutions: in 705, massacres of Christians were perpetrated in Armenia (Dédéyan, 1982, p. 196). Discriminatory measures were taken by his successors. Under the ʿAbbasids, many Christians were put to death because of their links with the previous Omayyad dynasty. Destruction of churches and convents occurred under Mahdi (r. 775-85) and Motawakkel (r. 847-61). For the reign of Manṣur (r. 754-75), Michael the Syrian reported concerning a Christian apostate named Cyrus, who reverted to Christianity and so was decapitated on the order of the governor of Jazira, ʿAbbās (Chabot, 1902, II, p. 527), but such executions of Muslim apostates were a general practice. At around the year 820, a Christian notable from Takrit, ʿAbdun, a relative of the Jacobite metropolitan Basilius, was asked to abjure his faith, tortured, decapitated, and his corpse exposed (Fiey 1980, pp. 64-65). In 838, the son of the caliph Moʿtaṣem (r. 833-42) persecuted Muslim converts to Christianity. Many of them were tortured (Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*; Chabot, 1903, III, pp. 96-97, Barhebraeus, *Eccl. Chr.* I; Abbeloos and Lamy, 1872, p. 384). Under Moqtader (r. 908, 908-29, and

929-32), Abu Yāser, the chamberlain's friend, was killed (Fiey 1980, p. 127).

THE MONGOL PERIOD (IL-KHANATE OF PERSIA)

If the first sovereigns of the Persian Il-khanate were on the whole favorable to Christians (see IL-KHANIDS), the conversion of Ḡāzān Khan (r. 1295 to 1304) to the Muslim faith in 1295 and his successors' Islamic policy would give an impulse to persecutions: humiliations, excessive taxes, massacres as in Arbela (1310), or the transformation of convents into mosques (near Marāḡa, under Abu Saʿid (r. 1316-35) for example, Fiey 1975, pp. 68-84). The advent of Timur ("Tamerlane," r. 1370-1405) determined the decline and the retreat of Christian communities in the Lake Orumia region.

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