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SYRIAC LANGUAGE II. SYRIAC WRITINGS ON PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN
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SYRIAC LANGUAGE

ii. SYRIAC WRITINGS ON PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN

The Syriac works which provide information about pre-Islamic Iran can be divided into several groups. We must first rule out the literary works as such, the content of which is mainly theological, philosophical, or exegetic: great authors such as Aphraates, Ephrem, Narsaï, Jacob of Sarug, Philoxenes of Mabbug, and others wrote for the Christian community and were not interested in other religions except to challenge them. Similarly, the Syriac translators of the Greek sciences that they transmitted to the Arabs, philosophy and medicine (see HEALTH AND MEDICINE IN ANCIENT IRAN), tell us nothing about ancient Iran. The records of church history in Iran, such as the accounts of synods (Chabot, 1902; see in general CHRISTIANITY i), are outside the scope of this article. Three other categories of works do provide sources for our inquiry: historical writings, that is, chronicles; hagiographic works, chiefly the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*; and apocryphal texts such as the *Acts of Thomas*.

There are numerous chronicles in Syriac but since they use and repeat the

same information they contribute little to our knowledge of Iran. We must distinguish between the sources that derive from the western Syrians or Jacobites, and those which originate with the eastern Syrians or Nestorians. The Jacobite sources, of which E. Yousif (p. 59) has compiled a list and analyzed the content, do not deal with the subject of Iran. The Chronicle of Pseudo-Denys [Dionysius] of Tell-Mahre, otherwise known as the Chronicle of Zuqnin (to 774/75), or that of Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) have little to report about Sasanian Iran; and the famous, and older, Chronicle of Edessa (to 540) restricts itself to the history of that city. On the other hand, the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite (early 6th cent.) does merit discussion (see below).

Among the eastern Syriac chronicles, the harvest is definitely richer. The Chronicle of Elias of Merv (7th century) is unfortunately lost, but the *Book of Scholies* of Theodore Bar Konai (see BAR KŌNAY; 8th-9th centuries) provides us with some interesting information about Iranian mythology. On the other hand, the chronicle of Elias of Nisibis (975-1046), which is known to us by a single bilingual Arabic-Syriac manuscript, which is incomplete (B.M. 56), or that of Bar Hebraeus (see EBN ʿEBRI 13th century), are chronographies which enumerate series of events and dates that are well-known from other sources. For example, Elias of Nisibis reports the period of the kings of Media, reckoned as 260 years (cf. MEDIA at *iranica.com*), after Eusebius of Caesarea (4th cent.), then enumerates the Sasanian kings with the duration of their reigns (altogether 418 years), and finally lists the regnal years of both Roman and Sasanian rulers. He was also familiar with the feasts of the Persians (such as Gāhānbār, Nowruz, Frawardigān).

The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite preserved by a later author, Denys of Tell-Mahre, Jacobite patriarch 818-48, contains the story of the wars between Byzantium and Persia under the kings Pērōz, Valaxš (see BALĀŠ, SASSANIAN KING OF KINGS) and Kawād. The threat posed to both empires by the Hephthalites led Pērōz (r. 459-84) to demand sums of money from the emperor; such demands made up the main clause of peace treaties between them (Wright, pp. 7-8). In the calculation of the amount to be paid, it is interesting to observe that, if the service of an armed man could not be furnished to the Persians, his replacement cost was valued at 300 staters, i.e., 1,200 drachmas (Wright, p. 7). The liberation of Pērōz from his captivity among the Hephthalites in 465 or 469 could not have been carried out without Zeno's (r. 474-75, 476-91) money. The unfortunate reign of the next king, Valaxš (484-88), who was blinded by the magi for having had baths built in the

cities, is quickly sketched (Wright, pp. 12-13). On the other hand, the wars of Kawād (r. 488-96, 499-531) are related year by year, from 501 to 506/7. Kawād is described as having married his own niece, the daughter of his sister captured by the Hephthalites (Wright, p. 15), and as re-establishing the sect of the *Zarduštagān*, the disciples of Mazdak (Wright, pp. 13). A large space is devoted to the capture of the city of Amida by the Sasanians during Kawād's war with the emperor Anastasius in 502-06, and to the repeated stratagems and ambushes employed by the Byzantines in attempts to recover it. Description of the siege engines of the period inherited from the Romans, such as the ramp of earth erected by the besiegers against the city walls, or the catapults of the besieged, give the account a true historical authenticity (e.g., Wright, pp. 38-39, 41-42). Even in this situation, money played a major role in the confrontation between the two empires (e.g., Wright, pp. 38, 66). As in the other chronicles, the author was impressed with the attendant natural disasters, such as earthquakes and locusts.

The Chronicle of Pseudo-Denys or the Chronicle of Zuqnin relays some of the same information as Joshua. The principal reports about Iran are the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem (at the time of the Nativity), the war of succession between Narseh (r. 293-302) and Vahrām III (see BAHRĀM iii), the campaigns of Pērōz against the Hephthalites, and those of Kawād against the Romans. To be noted is the title given in Syriac as ʾsṭbyd, which the editor rightly connects (p. 211, n. 3) with Greek *aspebedēs* and which represents Ir. *aspbed* "head of the cavalry"; the term has often been wrongly interpreted as **spāhbed* "general." (It is clear that the person who transposed the term into Syriac mistook the Pahlavi letter "p" for a "t," which is quite similar.)

The *Acts of Persian Martyrs* probably forms the principal source of information on Iran in Syriac literature, even if one must allow for the legendary character associated with any hagiographic document. They have so far been too little used, no doubt because there only exists a non-critical edition (Bedjan, II, 1891) and very few, fragmentary translations in European languages (mainly in German: Braun, Hoffmann). These *Passions* of Christian martyrs provide us with a very rich documentation on social life in the Sasanian Empire, governmental and judicial organization, administrative titles and functions (reconstructed in Middle Persian from their loan translations into Syriac and in some cases not yet attested in Pahlavi literature), onomastics and toponymy, Mazdean religious practices, and the forms of punishment and torture during the persecutions under Šāpūr II and

Yazdegerd I (C. and F. Jullien, 2004). The Acts on the whole deal with the period between the 3rd and 6th centuries, from Bahrām II to Bahrām V. Since the Christians in Iran were bilingual (see Gignoux, 1984, pp. 202-3), the information they provide on social life in Iran is all the more trustworthy.

Modern translators and commentators have not always been able to recognize the titles of civil or religious officials under the disguise of Syriac writing, or have supplied fanciful transcriptions far removed from the authentic form of Middle Persian. Among civil functions, we must mention the *āmārgar* (Syr. hmrgrd) "accountant" or, better, "treasurer" of the different administrative divisions of the empire, as we learn from the administrative seals. In the history of the patriarch Mār Abā, this treasurer is in touch with a *harzbed* < OIr. **harcī-pati-* (Syr. *ʾrzbd)*, which has been considered as a corruption of the term *argbed* "chief tax collector or taxation manager" (*EIr.* II/4, 1986, p. 400), an important function belonging to the royal family which is attested in the Paikuli inscription (Humbach and Skjaervo, 3.2, pp. 39-44). But Tafazzoli *(*1990) has shown that the Syriac word, spelled in the same way, is attested in the martyrdom of Guhišt-āzād, where this man is described as "chief of the royal eunuchs and fosterer of the king" (Šāpūr II). Hence this title of "chief of the eunuchs" can no longer be confused with the *argbed* "tax-collector." The father of Mār Guiwarguis was an *ostāndār* (Syr. ʾwstndrʾ) at Nisibis, an important function probably corresponding to that of a "satrap" and well attested in sigillography (see Gyselen, 2002). The holy martyr, who served at the table of the king, had personally been raised to the dignity of *padixšar* (Syr. *pdkšr* = MPers. *ptḥšly*; see Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha*, p. 437.5-6). This rank, of which the exact meaning is difficult to define, is connected in the 3rd century inscriptions with *gāh*, the latter probably being the place occupied by the noblemen and grandees in the assemblies in the presence of the king of kings. Skjaervo translated the word "honor, dignity" (Humbach and Skjaervo, 3.1, p. 120). In any case, it was not a title, but perhaps a certain quality awarded by the royal power, which was also invested with it.

The martyr Kardag, before his conversion to Christianity, was *marzbān*, governor, of Adiabene (Gignoux, 1984, p. 192). His father bore another important title, that of *naxwaragān* (Syr. nkwrgn), corresponding to the Armenian *naxaran* (< Parthian **naxva-dāran*). Kardag's father, before his own conversion, was *bidaxš* of Assyria and *marzbān* of the region of Nisibis, and he resided at Arbil, the capital of Adiabene. The title of *ēwēnbed* (*EIr.* IX/1, 1998, pp. 87-88) "master of manners" is puzzling, for it looks like an administrative

function, that of an archivist, or perhaps a financial role. But the Syriac sources indicate a religious function: in the history of Mār Pethion, the *ainbed* (Syr. ʿynbd/ʾynwd) is surrounded with a guard of horsemen, but in the martyrdom of Mār Abā, an *ēwēnbed* called Kardag is also a magus and judge of the empire (*šahr dādwar*), as was the great magus Kerdir in the 3rd century.

The Syriac sources also inform us of religious titles: the *mowbed*s (Syr. *mwhpṭʾ*), of whom there are three categories (Gignoux, 1984, pp. 197-98). At the highest level stood the *Mobedān mobed* (Syr. *mwbdnmwb(y)d*), who is also called in Syriac *ršʾ d-mgwšʾ* "chief of the magi"; the Great Mobed (Syr. *mwhpṭʾ ḥd rbʾ*); and the provincial Mobeds, who are in charge of specific regions. According to the situation, the Grand Mobed had to stay at court, but could also travel to the provinces, no doubt as representative of the Mobadān Mobad. The latter title seems to have appeared from the 6th century on.

The different categories of judges are well documented: the *rad*s and the *dādvar*s, as well as the *dastvar*s. The Rad is apparently the highest of religious judges and may, at the same time, be the Mobed (Gignoux, 1984, p. 201). The legal treatise *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* indicates that, in the procedure of the ordeal, judgment cannot be pronounced in the absence of the rad. He is attached to a province, and he is distinct from the *ēwēnbed*. In the *History of Karka d-beth Slokh*, where the names of the officials in charge of carrying out the punishments are indicated, one of them is called the *dastbar ham rad* (Syr. dstbr hmrd), the "judge (who is) also *rad*." Another of these officials is called in Syriac, without our being able to determine the equivalent in Middle Persian: *mṭaksānā d-magušūtā*, literally "organizer of magism," perhaps the representative of the local magi. A third bears the title of the seventh priest according to the list of the Avesta: he is the *srōšvarz-rad* (Syr. srwšʾwrzrdy; Av. *sraoša.varez-*, *AirWb.*, col. 1636), who must have been the judge supervising the legality of the execution of punishments.

The Acts inform us about the successive stages in the Sasanian judicial process and are confirmed on various points by the judicial treatises *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (in Pahlavi) and *Corpus juris of Išōʿbuxt* (in Syriac). Cross-examination was used to make evident the apostates—that is, the numerous Mazdeans who had embraced Christianity. It was carried out by the marzbāns or by committees led by a mowbed. The conditions of imprisonment are also well known: after the first cross-examination, the accused was put in preventive detention, under the guard of the warden (*zendānpān*), who was to inquire about him and his family. Release on bail could be exercised. The

prisoners were badly treated in their cells, where they were chained by their feet and hands so that they could not even move and finally died, like Mani, who succumbed after only a few days. Others who could move were nevertheless heavily chained. Additional tortures, like starvation and thirst, could only lead to death. But relatives were sometimes allowed to bring food to a prisoner, unless the judge prevented them from doing so. Beatings, use of sharp reeds to pierce the flesh, whipping, shredding the skin, or tearing with hooks were applied to obtain confessions. All these tortures evoked those that the just Virāz (see ARDĀ WĪRĀZ) witnessed in hell in the course of his extra-terrestrial journey. Ordeals by molten metal or fire are well attested in our Acts. The tearing or dislocating of limbs was another kind of torture, but crucifixion as practiced by the Romans was much less common. Mutilation by the sword, or the "nine deaths," a torture consisting of successively cutting off different parts of the body, showed the ferocity of the punishment, and so did the sawing of the body, which could also be broken under a press (see C. and F. Jullien, 2004).

Finally, the exposing of corpses to birds and dogs, a Zoroastrian custom, was also used against Christians, who nevertheless tried to retrieve the body of the martyr. In the story of Mar Guiwarguis (Bedjan, IV, p. 156), this martyr was bound hand and foot and thrown under the hooves of stallions, but by escaping them he was considered as a magician. This curiously resembles the episode in the legend of Zoroaster, who was thrown by a sorcerer under the hooves of cattle and then of horses, but without success (*Wizidagīhā ī Zādspram*, ed. Gignoux and Tafazzoli, chap. 10.6-7). Elsewhere (Bedjan, IV, p. 176), it is said that Narsaï, who had destroyed a Fire, was sentenced to restore it by assembling 366 different fires: this number may refer to the fact that this operation could take a year, but J. Duchesne-Guillemin (p. 82) states that there were subsequently 144 kindlings needed.

The stories related by the hagiographers attest to their good knowledge of the Mazdean milieu. In the history of the martyrdom of Kardag, Šāpūr II, when going to hunt, asked the latter to shoot an arrow at a target fastened on top of a high pole, recalling the kind of exploit carried out by Šāpūr I at Ḥājiābād (Bedjan, II, p. 444.2-3). Further on, the reporter shows his familiarity with the ritual of the *bāj* preceding meals (Bedjan, II, p. 459.19) and with the system of the foundations of Fires (Bedjan, II, p. 471.7). He mentions the smallest of the fires (Syr. ʾdrwqʾ = MPers. *ādarōg*) and knows what the *barsom* is (Bedjan, II, p. 487.16). Finally, this hagiographer was familiar with the name of the *spāhbed*

(Syr. rbʾ ḥylʾ d-m ʿrbʾ), chief general of the West, as Burzmihr Šābūr; the office is recorded on bullae in the Saeedi collection (Gyselen, 2001, pp. 42-43; the official in this later period is named Wistahm, with honorifics).

Among other matters, we learn that certain legal advocates were sentenced to take care of elephants throughout the winter (Bedjan, IV, p. 189); and, during the six months of summer, they were required to maintain the king's road, cutting down trees and pulling out stones. (The king used to return to Seleucia-Ctesiphon in October-November.) Mani's death is also mentioned (IV, p. 463 and 468). He is said to have been devoured by dogs, then skinned and filled with straw by Šāpūr's order, punished because of a sickness of a son of that king, whom Mani had not been able to cure.

In the apocryphal literature, the *Acts of Thomas*, dating from the first half of the 3rd century, have transmitted a *Hymn to the Pearl*, of which some elements may have been borrowed from Parthian, since that saint, who was buried at Edessa, was the apostle of the Parthian country and India. The setting of the story is a royal court, and certain titles are of Iranian origin, as Poirier has shown: thus Syr. psgrybʾ is a loan from Middle Persian and Sogdian *pasgrīv*, lit. "after-oneself," hence "heir;" Syr. *trayānā* "second" translates Ir. *bidyaxš*; Syr. *wisprē* corresponds to Iranian *wispuhr* "prince;" and Syr. *parwānqīn* "guides," a Parthian plural (cf. Parth. MLKYN, e.g., Paikuli, ll. 13, 20) comes from Ir. *parwānag*; Syr. gzbrʾ "treasurer" represents Parthian gnzbr/gznbr (Gignoux, 1972, p. 51); and, finally, Syr. mlk mlkʾ translates the title of "king of kings."

The *Acts of Ādur-Hormizd and Anāhid* (Bedjan, II pp. 576 ff.), who were martyred in 446, report a polemic that suggests one by Theodore of Mopsuestia in his book against the Magi, which was translated into Syriac. Within a similar polemic context, Mar Kardag (see above) argues with a marzbān, whom he reproaches for adoring creatures, that is, the sun, the moon, and fire, water, air, and earth—in other words, the four cosmic elements. Mar Kardag proves to him that these are neither alive, nor sensitive, nor able to move by themselves, and hence are merely creatures (Gignoux, 2001, pp. 119-21).

Syriac literature well attests to the "Zurvanite" myth in Zoroastrianism. R. C. Zaehner (1955) translated and compared the passages that relate to it: in Syriac by Theodore Bar Konai and Yohannan Bar Penkayē, and in Armenian by Eznik of Kolb and Elishe. According to this myth, Zurvān made offerings for

a thousand years to have a son, but, since he suffered doubt, the twins Ohrmazd and Ahriman were conceived; and he decided that the first-born should become king. When Ahriman found out, he pierced the womb and came out first. Since he was ugly and dark, Zurvān said to him “You are not my son.” Then Ohrmazd was born, and Zurvān acknowledged him as his son. But Ahriman reminded him of his promise, and Zurvān had to allow him kingship for 9,000 years. After that period, Ohrmazd was able to reign. E. Benveniste (1932-33) explained at length the difficult passages of the *Book ofScholies* by Theodore Bar Konai: the three aspects of Zurvān, which suggest the three ages of man; the myth of the women who fornicate with demons, which is related to the Manichean myth of the seduction of the archons; and finally a legendary part, alluding to the Iranian dynasties and to heroes such as Manušcihr, Frasiyāk, Keršasp, and Kay Kavus, and which goes back to the Cihrdāt Nask (see ČIHRDĀD NASK), which Benveniste considered as one of the most widely known sections of the Sasanian Avesta.

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