

## E. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION



# CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARABS IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

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## *Abstract*

The Arab peoples of the borderlands between Rome and Persia were useful allies to the Great Powers in the course of their military confrontation. Religious affiliation was an important marker of allegiance during this conflict, and we see Christianity being used in the fifth century as a sign of Roman clientage. However, the increasing importance of non-Chalcedonian confessions meant that Christianity could be de-coupled from its Roman associations, and take on other forms of political significance in the hands of both the Persian shahs and the Arab rulers themselves.

## *Introduction*

As (the) reputation (of Symeon) spread everywhere, everyone hurried to him—not just those in the neighbourhood, but also those who lived many days' journey away ... The Ishmaelites ... came in bands ..., and repudiated their ancestral error with a shout. They smashed the idols they had revered in front of that great luminary, and renounced the orgies of Aphrodite.<sup>1</sup>

Hagiographic writing of the fifth and sixth centuries often imagines the conversion of barbarians in stark terms. Barbarian leaders witness miracles, frequently the healing or exorcism of their children, and lead their people into true religion. In the case of the Arabs of the frontier, as for the peoples of the Caucasus, this was often accompanied by settlement and promises to defend the Roman frontier from the Persians.<sup>2</sup> As

1. Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* 26.11, 13 (SChrét 257, pp. 181, 191); trans. R. Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Cistercian Studies Series 112; Kalamazoo, 1992), pp. 74, 77 (adapted). In what follows, translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2. There is a substantial secondary literature on Christianity among the Arabs, which comments on many of the texts discussed here: F. Nau, *Les Arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et de Syrie du VII<sup>e</sup> et VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Cahiers de la société asiatique, première série, 1; Paris, 1933); H. Charles, *Le Christianisme des Arabes nomades sur le limes et dans le désert syro-mésopotamien aux alentours de l'hégire* (Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études. Sciences religieuses 52; Paris, 1936); J. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (Arab Background Series; New York, 1979); I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, 1989), and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (4 vols; Washington, 1995–2009); T. Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam. Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit: eine Hinführung* (Eastern

G. Greatrex shows in this volume, religious and political allegiance could go hand-in-hand.<sup>3</sup>

However, the confessional diversity of the sixth century changed this situation considerably. In particular, the activities of miaphysite and Nestorian missionaries in the space between Rome and Persia complicated any simple equations between religion and allegiance. This paper will seek to examine the course and the consequences of the Arabs' encounter with Christianity. Throughout, it is important to remember that Christian missionaries and commentators might have different interests and agendas from those of the state or their Arab 'converts', and that we must read between the lines of their accounts to discern the agency of the Arabs themselves in these encounters with the new religion.

*Settlement and Conversion  
in Cyril of Scythopolis*

The Roman empire had long differentiated itself from its barbarian neighbours. Like the peoples across the Rhine and Danube, the Arabs could be depicted as irrational and uncontrolled, unable to achieve the peaceful, civilized life of the cities of the empire.<sup>4</sup> As the empire Christianized in the fourth and fifth centuries, religious conversion was increasingly represented as a means of transforming the 'natural' state of barbarian ignorance through the transformation of Christ's dispensation.<sup>5</sup> But the adoption of Christianity was also assumed to be accompanied by a range of other 'Roman' values, among them, settlement in towns and cities.

Christian Studies 7; Leuven, 2007); G. Fisher, *Between Empires. Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford, 2011), esp. pp. 34–71 (Ch. 2).

3. Paper of Greatrex, this volume.

4. For these stereotypes and their history see Y. Dauge, *Le barbare. Recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation* (Collection Latomus 176; Brussels, 1981); A. Chauvot, *Opinions romaines face aux barbares au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.* (Études d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne; Paris, 1998). For the application of these stereotypes to the Arabs see R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London, 2001), p. 86, B. Shaw, "'Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk': The Ancient Mediterranean Ideology of the Pastoral Nomad", *Ancient Society* 13–14 (1982/83), pp. 5–31 (repr. in idem, *Rulers, Nomads, and Christians in Roman North Africa* [Variorum Collected Studies 497; Aldershot and Brookfield, 1995], Ch. VI). See also the paper of Whately, this volume, pp. 000–000.

5. M. Maas, "'Delivered From Their Ancient Customs': Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Ethnography", in K. Mills and A. Grafton (eds), *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing* (Studies in Comparative History; Rochester, NY, 2003), pp. 152–88.

A good example of this transformation in the Arab context comes from the sixth-century *Life of Euthymius*, part of Cyril of Scythopolis' *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. He describes the conversion of an Arab client of the Persians, one Aspebetus, who goes on to receive baptism and ordination as a bishop.<sup>6</sup> Conversion entails a promise to give up 'all lawlessness and pagan worship',<sup>7</sup> and is presented as an ethnic, as well as a religious and political transformation: the people of Aspebetus departed 'no longer Agarenians and Ishmaelites but now descendants of Sarah and heirs of the promise, transferred through baptism from slavery to freedom'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the transformation of this group of Arabs into 'Saracens' was closely associated with Aspebetus' decision to build a permanent settlement, the 'Parembolē', among the monasteries of the Judean desert.<sup>9</sup> Parembolē went on to function as a see for the Arab tribes of Palestine, as well as attracting further settlement and conversion.<sup>10</sup>

This vignette from Cyril, which has several parallels in other histories and hagiographies,<sup>11</sup> serves as an archetype of the deployment of religion as a tool of empire. Aspebetus and his followers remain loyal followers of the Romans, who are rendered acceptable through their religion and settlement. However, it is clear from Cyril's account that Aspebetus' descendants were not able to keep control of the various Arabs of Palestine, and that the story of Aspebetus is told with an element of nostalgia for an idealized Arab convert, whose like could no longer be found when Cyril wrote in the 550s.

6. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 15 (TU 49.2, p. 25); Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, pp. 183–84, reconstructs the episcopal succession at Parembolē.

7. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 10 (TU 49.2, p. 20); trans. R.M. Price, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* (Cistercian Studies 114; Kalamazoo, 1991), p. 15.

8. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 10 (TU 49.2, p. 21); trans. Price, *Lives*, p. 16. For the identification of the Arabs as Ishmaelites, F. Millar, 'The Theodosian Empire (408–450) and the Arabs: Saracens or Ishmaelites?', in E. Gruen (ed.), *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity* (Oriens et Occidens 8; Stuttgart, 2005), pp. 297–314.

9. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 15 (TU 49.2, p. 24).

10. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 15 (TU 49.2, p. 24). For the eventual collapse of the relationship between the monasteries and the Arabs, and of the security situation in Palestine more generally, see M. Sartre, *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine* (Collection Latomus 178; Brussels, 1982), p. 151; J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ. The Monasteries of Palestine, 314–631* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford, 1994), pp. 112–13.

11. E.g. Ammonius, *Narratio* 14, 37, trans. D. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai* (Translated Texts for Historians 53; Liverpool, 2010), pp. 156, 169 (Sinai); *Life of Conon of Isauria*, ed. and trans. F. Halkin, 'Vie de S. Conon d'Isaurie', *AB* 103 (1985), pp. 1–34; Procopius, *Buildings* 3.5.2–6 (Caucasus).

*The Jacobites between Rome and Persia*

The dominant Arab allies of the Romans by the sixth century were the Jafnids, the elite family at the core of the Ghassānid confederation.<sup>12</sup> The Jafnids were set apart from the likes of Aspebetus both by the scale of their power, and by their role as patrons of a distinct Christian confession. Where Cyril had presented Aspebetus as an essentially obedient client of the holy man Euthymius, his miaphysite counterpart John of Ephesus presents the Jafnids themselves as the patrons.

A series of letters written in miaphysite monasteries near Damascus in the 560s celebrate al-Ḥārith's role in attempting to reconcile different groups of miaphysites during the Tritheist controversies.<sup>13</sup> One excerpt praises him using his Roman honorific, as the 'Christ-loving *patrikios* Arethas'.<sup>14</sup> The Syriac miaphysite sources grant the Jafnid phylarchs a prominent role as leaders and sponsors of the Church. The ecclesiastical historian John of Ephesus presented al-Ḥārith's son al-Mundhir favourably. John reports how he attempted to reconcile the miaphysite leaders Paul 'de Beth Ukkama', and Jacob Baradaeus.<sup>15</sup> Al-Mundhir's efforts were rooted in the long history of respect for both men among the Arabs, which made Jabiya an obvious place to convene the rival parties.<sup>16</sup> Later, after the failure of his early efforts, al-Mundhir again attempted to reconcile the two men, this time in Constantinople itself.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout this narrative, John emphasizes the high honours that al-Mundhir had earned in Roman service: he is the '*patrikios*', the same title

12. For terminology see the paper of Hoyland, this volume, pp. 000–000. On the 'super-phylarchate' enjoyed by the Jafnids, see Sartre, *Trois études*, pp. 170–72, and Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* 1 (Washington, 1995), pp. 84–87. These analyses are rooted in the comments of Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.46–47.

13. The correspondence was published by T.-J. Lamy, 'Profession de foi adressée par les abbés des couvents de la province d'Arabie à Jacques Baradée', in idem (ed.), *Actes du onzième congrès international des orientalistes, section sémitique* (Paris, 1898), pp. 117–37 and J.-B. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas* (CSCO 17; Leuven, 1952). See now F. Millar, 'Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet', *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009), pp. 97–116, and R.G. Hoyland, 'Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: a Problem of Centre and Periphery', *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009), p. 117–39.

14. *Documenta* 39 (CSCO 17, p. 198).

15. On Paul, see E. Honigmann, *Évêques et évêchés monophysites d'Asie antérieure au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (CSCO 127; Leuven, 1951), pp. 195–205; on Jacob, Honigmann, *Évêques et évêchés*, pp. 168–77, and D. Bundy, 'Jacob Baradaeus: The State of Research, a Review of Sources, and a New Approach', *Muséon* 91 (1978), pp. 45–86. Also note W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 285–89 and 328–29.

16. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.21–22, 36 (CSCO 105, pp. 208–210, 216–17).

17. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.39 (CSCO 105, p. 219).

that is recorded on his inscriptions in the Syrian desert.<sup>18</sup> John also emphasizes his dynasty and its long association with Jabiya<sup>19</sup> and with the miaphysite movement.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, John deliberately inverts the image of the irrational and uncontrolled barbarian to present al-Mundhir as self-controlled and moderate during a time of schism, when all the great men of the Church had lost their heads.<sup>21</sup> When the Roman commander of Bostra ('a noted and famous man') despises the forces of al-Mundhir's son al-Nu'mān as Arabs, and leaves the city to attack them, he is swiftly routed for his arrogance. For John, the use of barbarian stereotypes for the 'orthodox' Arabs, and the deceit with which the Romans treat their Arab allies is a sin worthy of retribution, justly punished when al-Nu'mān falls on the cities of Syria.<sup>22</sup> Ecclesiastical history was a genre that was traditionally focussed on the deeds of an orthodox emperor like Constantine or Theodosius I.<sup>23</sup> In John's work, al-Mundhir has assumed a quasi-imperial role as a self-controlled, pious adjudicator between different ecclesiastical factions. We should reflect, therefore, on how innovative and provocative it was for John to place a 'barbarian' at the centre of book 4 of his history.

John's near contemporary, Cyrus of Batna, provides another striking example of the inversion of the stereotype of the barbarian Arab. Cyrus, whose work is preserved in the medieval chronicle of Michael the Syrian, describes how the Chalcedonian Patriarch Ephraem of Antioch came to visit Mundhir's father al-Ḥārith in his tent.<sup>24</sup> Al-Ḥārith refuses to take

18. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.39 (CSCO 105, p. 219).

19. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.22 (CSCO 105, p. 209): 'He [Longinus] came to Hirta [Jabiya], founded by Gabala, son of Harith, to find Mundhir, son of Harith'. For the equation of John's 'Hirta de Tayyaye' with the 'Hirta de Mundhir' see Elias, *Life of John of Tella* (CSCO 7, p. 40), and for the identification of the site as Jabiya, see T. Nöldeke, *Die ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Jafna's* (Berlin, 1887), p. 48.

20. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.21 (CSCO 105, p. 208): 'They [had] regarded Jacob highly since the days of Harith his [Mundhir's] father'.

21. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4.36 (CSCO 105, p. 216). Ecclesiastical history had long equated heresy with 'barbaric' irrationality: P. Wood, 'We Have No King But Christ'. *Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest* (c. 400–585) (Oxford Studies in Byzantium; Oxford, 2010), pp. 21–37 (Ch. 1).

22. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.3.42 (CSCO 105, p. 177).

23. On the genre in general see G.F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories. Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius* (2nd ed.; Macon, GA, 1986) and, more recently, P. van Nuffelen, *Un héritage de paix et de piété. Étude sur les histoires ecclésiastiques de Socrate et de Sozomène* (OLA 142; Leuven, 2004).

24. Cyrus of Batna's history in fourteen books extended from 565 to 582. Probably everything that is not from John of Ephesus in Michael the Syrian for this period derives from Cyrus, except for the episcopal lists derived from Jacob of Edessa. See J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* 1 (Paris, 1899),

Chalcedonian communion saying, 'I am a barbarian and a soldier and I cannot read the scriptures but I will not eat pure meat infected by the body of a rat'. After Ephraem concurs, al-Ḥārith concludes, 'that rat is the Tome of Leo'.<sup>25</sup> Finally al-Ḥārith orders a meal of camel flesh to be brought in. When Ephraem recoils, the phylarch remarks that Chalcedonian communion is as objectionable to him, as camel flesh is to the patriarch.<sup>26</sup>

In Theodoret of Cyrillus's *Life of Symeon the Stylite*, camel flesh had been used as a boundary marker: the hagiographer asserted that Arabs could change their diet to make themselves acceptable to the settled Christian world.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Cyrus' Arabs have made, and need make, no attempt to adapt to the norms of the settled world. In terms of diet, others must accept the Arabs as they come. This in itself reflects the Arabs' growing prestige, but it is accompanied by a superior position for al-Ḥārith as a miaphysite champion, whose disgust at Chalcedonian communion is the key to the anecdote. Cyrus vindicates 'traditional' Arab culture to undermine the claims of the Romans, whose 'civilization' is now tarred with heresy.<sup>28</sup>

Both John and Cyrus present the Jafnid dynasty as miaphysite to the core, and see their support for this confession as the defining feature of their rule. Cyrus reports that al-Nu'mān refused an offer to take up the throne of al-Mundhir in exchange for receiving Chalcedonian communion, because he would be killed by his own people if he did so.<sup>29</sup> But we should be wary of taking their reports at face value. The narratives of Cyrus and John constitute important evidence for how the miaphysites presented the Jafnids in the last decades of their rule, and they show how a 'barbarian' leader might escape criticism as a barbarian through

pp. xxi–xxiii, and the comments of J. van Ginkel, 'Making History: Michael the Syrian and His Sixth Century Sources', in R. Lavenant (ed), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (OCA 256; Uppsala, 1998), pp. 351–58.

25. The *Tome of Leo* was an intensely Chalcedonian text produced by Pope Leo I, which remained a major stumbling block for miaphysites. See Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, pp. 212–13 and 217.

26. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 310–11 Chabot.

27. Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* 26.13 (SChrét. 257, p. 190).

28. The vindication of 'barbarian' Arabs through 'true religion' would also become an important trope in the Muslim representation of the Arab conquests, where the pious conquerors trample the fine carpets of their decadent Roman and Persian opponents. See T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity. Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Divinations; Philadelphia, 2009), pp. 189–90.

29. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 374 Chabot: 'All of the Tayyaye are orthodox: if I take communion from the synodites they will kill me'.



'orthodox' behaviour.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, they illustrate important advantages that accrued to the Jafnids through their sponsorship of Christianity.

Yet we need not assume that the Ghassānid confederation, or the whole of the Jafnid clan, was exclusively miaphysite, or that the Jafnids had always been the major patrons of the miaphysites as they appear in the ecclesiastical histories. One important corrective is provided by John of Ephesus' earlier work, the *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. This hagiographic collection is often quoted to show how al-Ḥārith successfully appealed to Theodora for two miaphysite bishops, Theodore and Jacob Baradeus, to be sent to the East. However, it is worth reflecting on the variety of accounts of Jacob's consecration and al-Ḥārith's role. The first of these follows on from an account of the patronage of miaphysite monks from across the empire by the Empress Theodora, and her construction of numerous monasteries for them in Constantinople.<sup>31</sup> Jacob, we are told, was summoned to the episcopate by 'the believing queen' after establishing himself as a famed ascetic in Constantinople. His missionary remit is extremely broad: 'he rushed from the Persian frontier to the royal city' and 'caused the priesthood to flow like a great river across the Roman lands', but there is no reference to his presence in Syria and no mention of his connection to al-Ḥārith.<sup>32</sup>

John's second account of Jacob ties him more closely to his fellow-bishop Theodore, but he is still remembered chiefly for his work in Constantinople under Theodora's patronage. This *Life* does accord an initial role to al-Ḥārith:

... after the time of the martyrdom of the blessed combatant for religion John, bishop of the city of Tella, ... along with many others, the glorious Harith bar Gabala, the great king of the Saracens, asked the Christ-loving Queen Theodora to give orders that two or three bishops might immediately be instituted by the orthodox in Syria ... she gave orders and two blessed men, well-trying and divine individuals named Jacob and Theodore, were chosen and instituted (as bishops), one for Hirta of the Tayyaye, that is Theodore, and Jacob for the city of Edessa.<sup>33</sup>

30. On the increasing emphasis placed on orthodoxy as a definition of 'Romanitas' see G. Greatrex, 'Roman Identity in the Sixth Century', in G. Greatrex and S. Mitchell (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), pp. 267–92.

31. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 18, pp. 676–83).

32. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 18, pp. 693, 698).

33. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, pp. 153–54); trans. Brooks (adapted). Theodore is said to have 'exercised authority in the southern and [eastern] countries and in the whole of the desert and Arabia and Palestine'. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, p. 238) claims that Theodore was bishop in Bostra. See Honigsmann, *Évêques et évêchés*, pp. 163–64, who favours Jabiyā.

But Jacob's activities, though widespread in Asia Minor and Egypt, never include Syria or Palestine, or make any reference to the Arabs.<sup>34</sup> John also tells us nothing further about Theodore: Jacob's chief ally here is Theodosius, patriarch of Alexandria.

The third such account is only spuriously attributed to John, though its interest in the Jafnids and the person of al-Ḥārith suggests that we might still date it to the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh.<sup>35</sup> This *Life* mainly presents Jacob as a miracle-worker for Mesopotamia, rescuing the cities of Edessa and Tella from drought, demonic possession, and foreign invasion. But the opening passages of the *Life* greatly enlarge the cameo appearance that al-Ḥārith enjoyed in the *Lives* written by John. Al-Ḥārith has a vision of Jacob after his people are afflicted by bouts of insanity, and they send him to bring gold to the saint to ask him if God might visit them by his prayers. The hagiographer relates that

when they had crossed the river Euphrates to come to his (Jacob's) monastery, the saint appeared to the Saracens in his habit at full morning, and said to Harith: 'Why, o barbarian man, did you doubt the gift of God? Go and return to your land ... and release the man from Mount Sinai whom someone is detaining in your camp, and you will immediately be delivered from the distress'.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Ḥārith locates and slays the captor and his people are promptly cured.

It is possible to see this passage as an advertisement for the new extent of al-Ḥārith's authority as leader of the Roman Saracens. Procopius reports that al-Ḥārith was recognized as chief of the phylarchs allied to the Arabs,<sup>37</sup> and the *Life* presents al-Ḥārith's writ running from the Euphrates to Sinai, a remit that goes well beyond the core of Jafnid holdings in the Golan (the 'Hirta' where Theodore was appointed). The author may even be deliberately celebrating the power of a miaphysite patron who was able to control the unruly, and probably unconverted, Arabs under his authority. Still, the main action of the *Life* has little to do with al-Ḥārith, and Theodora retains her principal position as Jacob's sponsor.

34. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, pp. 155–58).

35. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, pp. 262–64). Its interest in Edessa's heroic resistance to the Persians might also suit a date before Khusrau II's capture of Mesopotamia in c. 610.

36. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, pp. 233–34); trans. Brooks (slightly adapted).

37. Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.46–47.

These accounts do not allow us to see the reality of the relationship between al-Ḥārith, Jacob, Theodora, and Justinian. It may be that the court sought to keep the Jafnids in a Roman political orbit by providing bishops, and that miaphysitism was not initially seen as a problematic or divisive issue for an emperor who was willing to patronize both miaphysites and Chalcedonians.<sup>38</sup> Or it may be that the 'real' target for these ordinations was the exiled miaphysite community in Persia, as our earliest source for Jacob's consecration suggests.<sup>39</sup>

The overwhelming impression of John's accounts is that al-Ḥārith was a peripheral figure in the decision to consecrate Jacob, and that the Bishop Theodore, who was probably attached to Jabiya, never matched Jacob's stature. When John wrote the *Lives* in c. 575, Theodora loomed much larger in the miaphysite memory of this period. The greater prominence of al-Ḥārith in the later anonymous *Life* may therefore reflect the further development of Jafnid patronage under al-Mundhir, when John's image of al-Ḥārith in the *Lives* has been elaborated to match the kind of prominence achieved by his son (a prestige that John himself would celebrate in his *History*). Whatever importance al-Ḥārith may have had for the miaphysite communities of the Golan, this role, and his connection to Jacob Baradeus, does not seem to have been widely acknowledged in his lifetime.

A second corrective to the image of the Jafnids as miaphysite champions comes from the archaeological evidence. Jafnid building at the pilgrimage site of Reṣāfa represented an important extension of their power, which supplemented and competed with earlier Roman building at the site. However, as E.K. Fowden has observed, there is little reason to view the see of Reṣāfa as lying under miaphysite control. Indeed, the site received dyophysite pilgrims from the Sasanian empire.<sup>40</sup> If the Jafnids were using a pre-existent pilgrimage site to impress local Arabs who were already Christian, then we have no reason to suppose that these

38. See discussion in Wood, 'We Have No King But Christ', pp. 169–70. V.L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford, 2008), pp. 233–36, suggests that there was initially considerable suspicion of Theodora, which has been written out in many later miaphysite sources.

39. Pseudo-Zachariah, *Chronicle* 10.12a (CSCO 84, p. 193), with trans. and comm. by G. Greatrex, C. Horn, and R. Phenix, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor. Church and War in Late Antiquity* (Translated Texts for Historians 55; Liverpool, 2011), p. 416: 'So that those who became priests in Persia should not be defamed by their opponents ... they blessed and appointed bishops in Arabia'.

40. *Vita Gulunducht* 14.7–15.1, ed. G. Garitte, 'La passion géorgienne de Sainte Golindouch', *AB* 74 (1956), pp. 405–40 at 426–40, with discussion in E.K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 28; Berkeley, 1999), p. 156.

Mesopotamian Arabs were miaphysite. As C.J. Robin has reminded us, the Jafnids were only an elite family at the core of a wider confederation.<sup>41</sup> The Ghassānid confederation as a whole may have included groups such as the Arabs of the Parembolē in Palestine, or Pharan in Sinai, both of which were Chalcedonian and had much older relationships with local Christian institutions.

The Jafnids do not seem to have made an issue of their miaphysitism in any of their religious building or pious inscriptions.<sup>42</sup> Intervention in miaphysite affairs gave al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir a prestigious voice in Church affairs, and the political leverage that came with this. And the Christian tone of Jafnid leadership was impressive enough to generate imitation by subordinate phylarchs: the 568 bilingual inscription (in Arabic and Greek) at Harran in southern Syria by the non-Jafnid phylarch Sharaḥīl, appeals to his fellow Arabs in Christian terms, shortly after al-Ḥārith had begun to reconcile the miaphysites of the Golan.<sup>43</sup> But we need not suppose that there was not a range of Christological beliefs among the Arabs or that such confessional differences always mattered.

It is only in Maurice's reign, when the Romans turned against the Jafnids, that miaphysitism in the Persian borderlands was deliberately targeted by the state. The timing of this move may reflect the loss of miaphysite prestige in this decade as the movement splintered into different groups.<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, the Romans may have tried to force al-Nūmān's conversion to Chalcedonianism, and Evagrius reports that 'many monasteries, fortresses, villages and tribes were brought into the Church of God'.<sup>45</sup> This sponsorship of missionary activity in a rural border region, when most previous attempts to coerce the miaphysites had tended to target cities, may show that the Jafnids' role as a miaphysite spokesman was recognized as problematic enough to prompt this change in tactics.

41. C. Robin, 'Les Arabes de Ḥimyar, des "Romains" et des Perses (III<sup>e</sup>–VI<sup>e</sup> siècles de l'ère chrétienne)', *Semítica et Classica* 1 (2008), pp. 167–202.

42. These are usefully summarized in F. Millar, 'Rome's "Arab" Allies in Late Antiquity. Conceptions and Representations from within the Frontiers of the Empire', in H. Börm and J. Wiesehöfer (eds), *Commutatio et Contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Reihe Geschichte 3; Stuttgart, 2010), pp. 199–226 at 215. Also note the commentary of Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 149–56 on these, and other buildings by Arab phylarchs.

43. Hoyland, 'Late Roman Provincia Arabia', p. 133; G. Fisher, 'From Mavia to al-Mundhir. Arab Christians and Arab Tribes in the Late Antique Roman East', in K. Dimitriev and I. Toral-Niehoff, *Religious Culture in Late Antique Arabia* (Leiden, forthcoming); C.J. Robin, 'La réforme de l'écriture arabe à l'époque du califat médoinois', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 56 (2006), pp. 319–64 at 332–36.

44. Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 183, sees the failure of Jafnid attempts to reconcile the different groups of miaphysites as a source of embarrassment for the Jafnids.

45. Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.22, p. 238 Bidez–Parmentier.

It is, however, important to emphasize that this political miaphysitism was a feature of the last decade of Jafnid rule, and that their role as 'defenders of the faith' was only acquired gradually.

*The Jacobites and the Arabs of the Jazīrah*

A different perspective on the Christianization of the Arabs is provided by the small number of Syriac and Arabic texts that discuss the Arabs of the Sasanian world. Here, the confessional diversity of Roman Syria and Arabia was even more pronounced, and the presence of a non-Christian shah made the conversion of the Arabs of the borderlands even more politically ambiguous. It is perhaps only a consequence of the growing independence of miaphysite clergy in the Roman East that a pragmatic and powerful shah like Khusrau I began to tolerate proselytism on his western border, as miaphysites escaped persecution in the Roman world.<sup>46</sup>

This proselytism is described in the *Life* of the missionary bishop Aḥūdemmeḥ, who proselytized tribal groups living in the Jazīrah, the steppe-land that lies between Aleppo and Mosul.<sup>47</sup> The Arabs of the Jazīrah had enjoyed little previous contact with Christianity. The hagiographer lambasts them as 'tent-dwelling homicidal barbarians', 'the most ignorant of all the people of the earth until the light of the Messiah came to enlighten them'.<sup>48</sup> They initially resist his early attempts to convert them, in which he casts down their idols and performs healings and exorcisms.<sup>49</sup> Aḥūdemmeḥ goes on to convert other Arab tribes and establish in each a priest and a deacon, drawn from the many different lands of the miaphysite diaspora. After this he founds churches for each tribe, naming them after their chiefs, and providing all they need.<sup>50</sup> Though the hagiographer strives to present Aḥūdemmeḥ as a heroic lone agent, we should remember that he was a bishop, and that he probably had the resources and manpower of his dioceses to help him build and staff these churches. Here Arab support for church structures was assured by making them memorials to tribal dynasties as well as centres for the liturgy. In time, Aḥūdemmeḥ's investment in the Arabs paid dividends in their own

46. J. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'église en Iraq* (CSCO 310; Leuven, 1970), p. 123.

47. *Iraq and the Persian Gulf* (Naval Intelligence Division Geographical Handbook Series; London, 1944), pp. 76–79.

48. *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ* (PO 3, p. 21).

49. *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ* (PO 3, pp. 23–26).

50. *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ* (PO 3, p. 27).

support for nearby monasteries on both sides of the Roman-Persian border.<sup>51</sup> Though we can only speculate, it may be that this support was an expression of competitive euergetism by these Arab leaders, whose patronage of local monasteries and the ascetic life was an acceptable way of channelling wealth that did not involve re-distribution through gift-giving within the tribe.

We can see this process of conversion as a confirmation of previously fragile authority structures. The story of the tribe's conversion, when re-told, becomes, primarily, a tale of the relationship between saint and chief and his dynasty. As G. Fisher observes, tribal hierarchies tend to be fluid and egalitarian, while the task of the chief was a vulnerable and thankless one.<sup>52</sup> In placing the chief at the centre of the decision to convert, the hagiographer's story of conversion also becomes a story of 'royal' authority and initiative. Similarly, Christianity gave this dynasty a way to memorialize their conversion by spending wealth gained in the service of the shah by building churches.

The culmination of Aḥūdemmeh's activities on the frontier was his construction of a shrine to Sergius at Qaṣr Serij, together with an adjacent monastery. The hagiographer observes that 'the saint called this place Mar Sergius to detach them from Mar Sergius de beth Reṣāfa, which was on the other bank of the Euphrates and a long way distant'.<sup>53</sup> Still, distance was not the only issue here, and it may have been equally significant that Reṣāfa lay within the Roman empire and, from Aḥūdemmeh's point of view, the influence of the Chalcedonians. We get an impression of the importance of Aḥūdemmeh's project from the reactions of others. His monastery is torn down by the Nestorians, before being restored by the shah, Khusrau I, who is moved to intervene by God. Aḥūdemmeh did not work in a vacuum, and his construction of a shrine on the Roman frontier was highly political. It may well be that the miaphysites relied on contacts at the Sasanian court to get permission to build such a shrine.<sup>54</sup> We may speculate that Khusrau was himself aware of the appeal of the

51. These included the famous monastery of Mar Mattai near Nineveh, the most ancient of the Jacobite centres in Iraq. See further Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, vol. 3, cols 80 and 88 Lamy.

52. Paper of Fisher, this volume, pp. 000–000. Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 42–46, suggests that the Christianisation and settlement of elites might also threaten the leaders' position among their followers.

53. *Life of Aḥūdemmeh* (PO 3, p. 29), with comments by Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, pp. 121–25, and note, too, pp. 137–41 for Khusrau II's interest in Reṣāfa.

54. An example from the following generation is the notorious Gabriel of Sinjar. See B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle* 2 (Monde byzantin; Paris, 1992), pp. 110–11). Khusrau later fell out with Aḥūdemmeh, which may explain why this co-operation is suppressed in the text.

Roman shrine of Reṣāfa, and was willing to sponsor a rival shrine to Sergius irrespective of its confessional allegiance. Indeed, the greater patronage of Christian institutions by the shahs at the end of the sixth century may reflect a situation, where the presence of a 'new' Christian confession in the miaphysites made it possible for the shah to sponsor either group and to derive advantages from both.

The situation depicted here is much more complex than the conversion of Peter's Arabs in Palestine. For Cyril of Scythopolis, conversion was the religious counterpart of allegiance to Rome. The *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ*, by contrast, shows us a negotiation between four different public confessions: the Chalcedonians in Reṣāfa, who had threatened to lure away the Arabs of the Jazīrah; the miaphysites, who established an alternative Persian centre at Qaṣr Serij; and the Church of the East, the most established Christian group in Persia, who were outflanked and displaced by interlopers from the Roman world. Finally, there was the officially Zoroastrian Sasanian regime itself, which could still move decisively against Christian proselytism of members of the court, but tolerated the conversion of the 'pagan' peoples of its borderlands.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Naṣrids of al-Ḥīrah*<sup>56</sup>

I conclude by turning to the last conversion of a prominent Arab group, that of the Naṣrids of al-Ḥīrah. Though on a larger scale, al-Ḥīrah shared many of the features of a Parembolē or a Jabiya, a fixed point of settlement where trade could be conducted between the nomadic world and the settled and where clients could be rewarded or punished.<sup>57</sup> Like

55. Cf. the Syriac *Life of Aba*, pp. 266–67 Bedjan, on the mission to the Hephthalites of Central Asia, which must have also found some level of state acceptance. However, in this situation Hephthalite Christians themselves approached the shah, and Aba simply consecrated a Hephthalite priest as bishop.

56. Political histories are given in C.E. Bosworth, 'Iran and the Arabs before Islam', in E. Yarshater (ed), *The Cambridge History of Iran* 3.1 (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 116–80, and Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 184–86.

57. M. Kister, 'Al-Hira: Some Notes on Its Relations with Arabia,' *Arabica* 15 (1968), pp. 143–69; B. Finster, 'Das Reiseroute Kufa-Saudi-Arabien in frühislamischer Zeit', *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), pp. 27–39. Also note the excavation report by D. Talbot-Rice, 'The Oxford Excavation at Hira', *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934), pp. 51–73. I have also drawn on J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, 'Nomads, Phylarchs and Settlement in Syria and Palestine', in A.S. Lewin and P. Pellegrini (eds), *Settlements and Demography in the Near East in Late Antiquity. Proceedings of the Colloquium, Matera 27–29 October 2005* (Biblioteca di Mediterraneo antico 2; Pisa, 2006), pp. 131–45, and E.K. Fowden, 'Rural Converters among the Arabs', in D. Schwartz, N. McLynn, and A. Papaconstantinou (eds), *Conversion in Late Antiquity. Christianity, Islam, and beyond* (Farnham, forthcoming), for their models of fixed points of settlement.

the Jafnids, the Naṣrid kings of al-Ḥīrah represented a dimorphic force, able to play a double role as leader of a tribal confederation and a courtier of the Sasanian shah.<sup>58</sup>

Later Arabic sources stress the importance of Christianity as the defining feature of al-Ḥīrah's settled population, the 'Ibād, when compared with the other members of the Lakhmid confederation. Yet, for most of their history, the Naṣrid kings remained aloof from the 'Ibād's attachment to Christianity. Greek and Syriac sources condemn them for pagan religious atrocities against the civilian population of their Roman opponents.<sup>59</sup> It may be that this strident devotion to the deities such as al-ʿUzzā strengthened their connection to the unsettled outer circle of the Lakhmid confederation, as well as distancing them from the religion of the Romans. This situation altered with the public conversion to Nestorianism by the Naṣrid King al-Nu'mān III in the early years of the seventh century. Al-Nu'mān's decision has sometimes been seen as a clumsy political move for a figure so closely linked to the Sasanian court, and a factor in his subsequent deposition by the shah Khusrau II.<sup>60</sup> But this position ignores the major role taken by other Christians at the shah's court and Khusrau's readiness to participate in the ecclesiastical politics of the Church of the East and the miaphysites.<sup>61</sup>

There are several different accounts of these events, which place the agency for the conversion at different points. One account in the *Chronicle of Seert* makes al-Nu'mān the hero of the conversion story, comparing him to St Paul casting off the false belief of Judaism. This story credits the 'Ibādi bishop of al-Ḥīrah, Simeon Jabara, for al-Nu'mān's conversion, and is written in strongly loyalist terms, praising al-Nu'mān's son Hasan for helping the shah during a civil war.<sup>62</sup> A second story attributes al-Nu'mān's conversion to a dream in which he is promised wealth and power if he converts. Here al-Nu'mān requests permission to convert from Khusrau, before allowing Simeon to baptize his household. However, al-Nu'mān is later seduced by the miaphysites through demonic

58. W. Rowton, 'Urban Autonomy in a Nomadic Environment', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 32 (1973), pp. 201–15.

59. References are collected in G. Fisher and P. Wood, 'Writing the History of the "Naṣrid" Dynasty at al-Ḥīrah: the Pre-Islamic Perspective', forthcoming.

60. E.g. E. Hunter, 'The Christian Matrix of al-Hira', in C. Jullien (ed.), *Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran Sassanide* (Studia Iranica 36; Paris, 2008), pp. 41–56 at 48.

61. See now P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford, 2013), Ch. 7.

62. *Chronicle of Seert* 60 (PO 13, pp. 469–72).



enchantment, and has to be converted anew by the bishop, and future *katholikos*, Sabrisho, who exorcizes the demon.<sup>63</sup>

Both stories are keen to show off the preservation of good relations between the Naṣrids and the shah after the conversion. But while the first text does so by emphasizing Hasan's support for the shah, the second has a much more deferential image of al-Nu'mān. Similarly, the second text subverts the idea of al-Nu'mān's conversion by a Ḥirahn, and gives the credit to the future *katholikos*. The tensions between the two stories make it clear that al-Nu'mān's Nestorian Christianity was unthreatening to the Sasanian state, but they give this Christianity different lineages. Where the first story sees al-Nu'mān converted by the bishop of al-Ḥirah and adopting the religion of the 'Ibād, the second places al-Ḥirah firmly in the orbit of Ctesiphon, and sees his conversion as his adoption of a religion that has been endorsed by the state.

### Conclusion

Christianity can sometimes be seen as a tool of the state. It was clearly presented in these terms by Roman authors in the fifth and sixth centuries and there was a real correlation between Christianity and pro-Roman sympathies. But the diversification of Christian confessions in the sixth century also left room for non-Roman involvement as patrons of Christianity. Arab phylarchs may have begun by building churches to signal their membership of a Roman elite to other members of that elite. But by the late sixth century, Arab phylarchs could use their Christian credentials to appeal to their own Arab clients, where patronage of churches and monasteries could preserve the memory of themselves and their dynasty.

Our narrative should therefore be a story of expanding agency, where phylarchs gradually took on a role once monopolized by emperors. But we should also be prepared to an even broader range of 'non-state actors' in our imagination of the process of conversion. First among these are

63. *Chronicle of Seert* 65 (PO 13, pp. 478–81). Other versions of the same story are transmitted in the Syriac *Life of Sabrisho*, pp. 321–28 Bedjan, and by the eleventh-century Muslim author Abu l'Baqā. Note the translation and commentary of I. Toral-Niehoff, 'Die Tauflegende des Laḥmidenkönigs Nu'mān: Ein Beispiel für syrisch-arabische Intertextualität?', in D. Weltecke (ed.), *Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartsfrage der syrischen Kirchen. Beiträge zum sechsten deutschen Syrologen-Symposium in Konstanz, Juli 2009* (Göttinger Orientforschungen. Syriaca 40; Wiesbaden, 2012), pp. 99–114, as well as her discussion of Nu'mān's conversion in the context of other royal baptism legends: 'Constantine's Baptism Legend: A "Wandering" Story between Byzantium, Rome, the Syriac and the Arab World', in B. Crostini and S. La Porta (eds), *Negotiating Co-Existence. Communities, Culture and 'Convivencia' in Byzantine Society* (Turnhout, forthcoming).

the missionaries and their hagiographers, who selected patrons who could sponsor religious adjudication or patronage after being rejected in the Roman world. In return, their Arab patrons might cease to be 'barbarians', unworthy of a political voice, and become 'orthodox', bastions of true belief set between 'heretical' or 'pagan' persecutors. Secondly, we should also remember that subordinate Christian Arab groups, of whom the 'Ibād of al-Ḥirah are examples, might also be agents in the process of Christianization, and play a role in accelerating the conversion of their kings and communicating the event to their co-religionists.