Christians in Umayyad Iraq: Decentralisation and expansion (600-750)

Iraqi Christianity has not loomed large in the study of the Umayyad period. Its notables and its institutional structures are invisible in the Muslim Arabic histories, such as Tabari and Dinnawari, which are normally used to reconstruct the period. And, unlike the better-known Christianities of the Levant, its relationship with the Christian Roman Empire and its Byzantine successor was both more attenuated and more temporary. Iraqi Christianity does not fit into the neat narratives of Roman collapse and Islamic victory that might suit a version of history centred on states. Instead, I argue here, it makes better sense to see Iraqi Christianity as a Sasanian institution (or set of institutions) that outgrew and survived the fall of the Sasanian Empire. Using sources written from the central perspective of the catholicoi of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and monastic histories and hagiographies written in the less urban north of Iraq, I suggest that we can chart the development of a set of cultural and political compromises, which saw its boundaries and internal power balance change in a way that was distinctive to the Umayyad period in general, and the experience of Umayyad Iraq in particular.

A Change of Masters

The collapse of the Sasanian empire at the hands of the Arab invaders brought dramatic changes. In particular, it resulted the precipitous disintegration of Zoroastrianism, which had held the status of an official religion. This loss of official status opened the flood-gates for ambitious elites to adopt new kinds of religious behaviour, now that the special relationship between Zoroastrianism and the laws and

ethnic boundaries of the Persians had been challenged.[1] One Zoroastrian apocalyptic text of this era, the *Zamasp-Nameh*, complains that 'eran and aneran will be confounded so that Iranian will not be distinguished from the foreigner and Iranians will return to foreign ways'. The apex of the sign of end-times to this writer, is not just ethnic mixing and the loss of tradition, but also the disappearance of the orthodox hierarchies of age and wealth and the appearance of new forces of competition between different regions of the former Sasanian Empire: 'the inferior and obscure will come to notice…and the districts will vie with one another'.[2]

In this period, Zoroastrianism's loss was Christianity's gain. The seventh century saw substantial gains by Christian missions and their celebration in hagiography. This was the era of John of Daylam's missions into Fars and the foothills of the Caspian. The impressive extent of the church's eastern missions is testified by the famous bilingual inscription in Chinese and Syriac at Siang—Fu, which heralds the beginning of the church's presence in the Far East in 635.[3]

The missionary expansion of Nestorian Christianity in the Sufyanid period was closely connected to the monastic movement, which continued the growth it experienced at the end of the Sasanian period. The ninth-century *Book of the Governors*, the monastic history of Thomas of Marga, reports the activities of the holy men of the monastery of Beth Abhe in converting nearby villages and constructing churches. Its monks are praised for their role in destroying pagan holy sites, such as

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[1] For the situation under the Sasanians: J. Choksy, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2 (1988), 35-53; For apostasy from Zoroastrianism see M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), 301-2.
[2] *Zamasp-Nameh*, tr. H. Bailey, *Bulletin of SOAS* 6 (1932), 55-85, quoting 56 (verse 13) and 59.
[3] C. Baumer, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London, 2006), 168-74 (on Central Asia) and 179-86 (on China).

the holy oak of Shirwan, and for converting villages through spectacular public miracles.[4]

The *Book of the Governors*, and the hagiography of the seventh century in general, is dominated by the issue of external funding. It is an issue that gives a special insight into the relationship between economic and social history of this period and the religious changes going on at the same time.

The hagiographies discuss the activities of Persian lay elites, lesser aristocrats referred to as 'dihqan'. The same category of Iranian aristocrats found ready employment as Arab *mawali* in the south of Iraq and in Central Asia, but here we see them occupying a more independent political niche in the north of Iraq.[5] The stories reported in the hagiographies, where such men fund and create new monasteries and convert to Christianity are, in one sense, an advertisement for the possibilities of a symbiosis between Iranian and Christian cultural systems. But they also set out the limits for this symbiosis, for the political and cultural compromises that must be made to render such patronage safe for monasteries and the Christian communities they wished to lead.

Persians as Monastic Patrons

Potential donors might also consider themselves Christian while still carrying the assumptions and customs of their older religion. A good example of this, where the hagiographer is keen to assert 'Christian' economic and political behaviour is a scene

[4] *Book of the Governors*, II. xxxii, 110/ 242.
[5] C. Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 108.

from c.660, reported in Thomas of Marga's *Book of the Governors*. Here one Hugair wishes to found a new monastery, 'not for a godly intention, but for boasting and pride. Acting as if he was a good man, he named it Hugair-abad, in the style of the Magians from whose race he had come'. However, Aha, metropolitan of Marga and former head of the monastery, refused to consecrate it and bring his monks and scribes there, saying 'The house of Hugair-Abad is ruined before it is built'.[6]

Maria Macuch notes that the Zoroastrian 'church' made no pious foundations of its own. Instead individuals made their own foundations, which provided ceremonies for the deceased, but also gave their founder inalienable rights over their religious estates. These estates would then grow cash crops, provide loans at interest and be used for prestigious local 'charity', such as building bridges and canals.[7] Hugair probably made similar assumptions about funding a monastery in his newly adopted religion, namely that he could enjoy a tax-protected investment as well as making a prestigious display of his wealth. The hagiography celebrates how a protégé of the monastery of Beth Abhe maintained the principles of monastic independence in the face of this offer of 'tied funding' following a Zoroastrian norm, and the story itself serves as a parable for the dependence of donors on the approval of the monastery, in spite of whatever material goods they might offer.

The Nut trees of Salakh

The need to control and re-direct the economic behaviour of former Zoroastrians is displayed in a different way in the course of the missionary monk Isho'zkha, another hero of the *Book of the Governors*. He was associated with the recently-converted

[6] *Book of the Governors*, II, xliii, 136-7/ 282-3. On Aha's election see II, xxxvi, 120/ 257.
[7] M. Macuch, 'Pious foundations in Byzantine and Sasanian law', in A. Carile, L. Ruggini and G. Gnoli, *La Persia e Bizansio* (Rome, 2004), 181-95.

villages of Salakh, where he sought to publicly humiliate local aristocrats who failed to treat him with proper respect and destroy the sacred places of older pagan practice. In one of these villages, his conflict with the locals was not centred on conversion per se, but on economic provision for Christian institutions and on the inheritance of property. Here, in the village of Golai, the Zoroastrian inhabitants had converted to Christianity and set aside a grove of nut trees and a small plantation to provide for their new church. After the death of the first generation of converts, their children challenged the arrangement with the priests and insisted that the trees belonged to them. To reconcile the two parties, Isho'zkha called on the trees to move to the church on their own, a miracle that convinced the children of the converts to give up their claim. All the more convincing, to the hagiographer, was the detail that half of the produce one of these trees had been given to a poor old woman by the villagers, and that this tree had divided itself in two halves, one of which remained in place in the centre of the village.[8]

Unlike Aha's defiance of Hugair, Isho'zkha's miracle concerns an entire village. It possible that the nut trees that were in dispute had been the shared property of the village as whole, and that the church's priests were asserting their ownership of them against longer established traditional rights, even if the initial conversion had seen an actual gift of property. Indeed, the detail about the half nut tree that remains with the old woman may be an indication that the hagiography explained a concession that was mediated by the bishop, whereby a traditional pre-conversion charitable arrangement was recognised and normalised through a Christian miracle. This arrangement also set

[8] *Book of the Governors*, II, xxxii, 110-1/ 242-3.

reasonable boundaries to the property of the church's priests, who may well have been outsiders, given the village's recent conversion.

The monks and the shahregan

A more complex example of the control and censure of local aristocratic patronage by the monks of Beth Abhe comes in the *Life of Maranemmeh*, the lengthy third part of the *Book of the Governors* set at the end of the seventh century. Maranemmeh, like Isho'zkha, seems to have particularly associated with a particular group of villages in the vicinity of the mountains of Izla. But, unlike Isho'zkha, Maranemmeh's villages seem to have been dominated by a powerful upper level of aristocrats, the shahregan, who dominated both the local peasantry and the dihqans as property-owners and tax collectors on behalf of the Muslim caliphate. The high-level aristocrats seem to have done very well out of the immediate aftermath of the conquests and may have profited considerably from the farming out of the tax system.[9] This agonistic relationship between the weaker dehqans, who seek Maranemmeh as an ally, and the more powerful shahregan stands at the background to Maranemmeh's condemnation of the latter.

Maranemmeh's tour of the region of Salakh is dominated by his condemnation of polygamy and sexual misbehaviour, especially that of the shahregan. In one such instance, Maranemmeh is moved to intercede on behalf of the wife of the shahrig Armenazwai after he commits adultery with one of the nuns of the convent Beth

[9] For Egypt, John of Nikiu, CXXI. 5, tr. R. Charles (Oxford, 1916) for the excessive taxation of the aristocrat Menas, theoretically acting on behalf of the Muslims. See also P. Sijpesteijn, 'Landholding patterns in early Islamic Egypt', *Journal of Agrarian Change 9* (2009), 120-33 on the retention of Christian pagarchs until the Marwanid period.

Tehunai. The sharig ignores the saint's chastisement and moves to strike him, whereupon the holy man curses him: 'I trust in our Lord that you and all your village will go down alive into Sheol like Korah, Daithan and Abiram'. Following the saint's warning, the shahrig and his village are swallowed up in the middle of the night.[10]

Similar scenes of destruction are performed at a number of villages on the saint's itinerary in Salakh and Zab. The hagiographer's chief theme here is to emphasise the fleeting nature of the wealth of the shahregan as sinful men who had opposed God and his agent Maranemmeh. To the shahrig Zadhai, the owner of some seventy-two estates in the region of Nineveh, he announces 'You shall fall from all this glory, and your estates shall be taken from you and you shall die of hunger'.[11] The disappearance of the Sasanian state had afforded great opportunities for the shahregan's political and religious independence in the uplands of northern Iraq, but, as we see in Thomas of Marga, it was an independence that was challenged by their monastic neighbours, who continued to articulate their own moral leadership of the Christians of the north and the illegitimacy of the sharegan.

This final scene, in which the saint prophesies the destruction of numerous village-estates dependent on the shahregan, is as a warning to the aristocrats of the north to respect the censure of the monks, but it is also a response to the precipitous decline of the fortunes of these aristocrats after the imposition of a new central authority under the Marwanids. This change of the intensity of Arab rule that precipitated the fall of the shahregan, and allowed Maranemmeh's hagiographer to parade the saint's victory over the pride of Armenazwai and his fellows.

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[10] *Book of the Governors*, III, viii, 161/ 324-5.
[11] Ibid., 163/ 329.

Arab elites in The Life of Rabban Hormizd

Thomas of Marga describes how monks and holy men tried to assert their authority over the independent-minded native aristocracies of northern Iraq. But other hagiographers, such as the anonymous hagiographer of the seventh century saint Rabban Hormizd, did not only emphasise the relationship between the saint and local aristocrats of Iranian culture, but also the relationship with the newly arrived Arab governors of Mosul and their local appointees. Here, with the saint's appeals to Arab elites for protection and his provision of healing miracles for these newly dominant aristocrats, the hagiographer, probably writing soon after Hormizd's demise, sought to include them into the same kind of reciprocal relationship that had previously been established for Iranian notables.

This quest for patronage and protection was especially fraught because, unlike Thomas of Marga's history, Hormizd was operating on the very edge of the region loyal to the Nestorian Church of the East. Very close to his grotto lay villages loyal to the Jacobites, to Syriac-speaking Christians who followed a Miaphysite Christology and whose successful missions in Iraq and beyond challenged the dominance of the Church of the East.[12]

In one scene, a group of Jacobite monks set out to frame Hormizd to slander his good name before the faithful. The Jacobites seize and beat Hormizd in his cell. Next they take a prostitute, who has first been impregnated by one of the monks of Bezkin, and

[12] J. Fiey, 'Chrétienités syriaques du Horāsān et Ségēstan', *Le Muséon* 86 (1973), 75-104, esp. map at 78; idem, 'Les diocèses de maphrianat syrien, 629-1860', *Parole de l'Orient* 5 (1974), 133-65; idem, 'Syriaques occidentaux du Pays des Perses', *PdO* 17 (1992), 113-27.

kill her and her child in front of the cave of Hormizd. After the beating, a local notable, Gabriel of al-Kosh, the wealthy descendant of an old Persian family, offers to help Hormizd. After the attempt to frame Hormizd for the murder of the prostitute that Gabriel goes to the governor. At this point, Hormizd resurrects the prostitute to give her testimony and he leads the local people in beating up the Jacobites.[13]

However, the local governor is unable to get any further intervention from his superior in Mosul. This man, 'Ukbe, is the subject of the next of Hormizd's miracles when his son falls sick and dies while being brought to the monastery. Hormizd comforts 'Ukbe and raises his son from the dead, after which both father and son ask to be baptised by the saint.[14]

A major theme in this narrative is the 'hierarchy of resort' in the search for aristocratic patronage: Hormizd starts off by appealing to Gabriel of al-Kosh, the same kind of local Iranian magnate whom we have encountered in Thomas of Marga. But he quickly upgrades from this to a more effective and prestigious relationship with the unnamed local governor and his superior 'Ukbe.[15] At the very least, the hagiographer suggests the existence of a new and wider reaching patronage network, where political favours can be sought to defeat the Jacobites and to fund church construction. There may have been a grain of truth to the claims or expectations that men like 'Ukbe might have converted to Christianity during the years of light Sufyanid governance in Iraq. In an era when Islam's boundaries with other monotheisms may have remained blurred, and when local Iranian aristocrats were public patrons of Christian institutions, it is not implausible that certain Arab elites

[13] *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, 60-64/ 90-5.
[14] *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, tr. 65- 68/ 97-100.
[15] Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 73 identifies him as either 'Utba bin Farqad or 'Uqba bin al-Walid.

might have trumped the local ties of men like Gabriel of al-Kosh by converting themselves.[16]

Conclusions: The monasteries and the catholicos

An important feature of the hagiographies that we have used so far is that they are all produced in a monastic environment, rather than in the court of the catholicos. It is worth observing that this shift in provenance is one of the most novel features of the Umayyad period. Much of the historical writing in the Church of the East before the seventh century was centred on the person of the catholicos, and his relations with other bishops, with the shah, and sometimes with the Roman emperor.[17]

Monastic history seems to have set itself up in opposition to this older, centralised history. Perhaps the most strident of these new historians was Sergius of Beth Rasthaq, whose hagiographic collection of the monks of Beth Garmai, composed in 640s, was included in Thomas of Marga's collection. Thomas notes that Sergius called his work 'Destroyer of the Mighty', since he did not write about the great men of the church but those who were victorious in the houses of their fathers or the churches of their own villages, who were men of simple spirit'.[18] It seems to have been a deliberate reaction to an older clerical tradition, in an era when the central

[16] On the blurred edges of early Islam see the arguments of F. Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims', *Al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-3), 9-53. For Arab settlement in Iraq see F. Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), chp. 5. For the alleged mass conversion of an Arab Muslim army to Christianity in Egypt in the same period see *Chronicle of 1234*, tr. A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian chronicles* (Liverpool, 1983), 114.

[17] See, for instance, the testimony of the medieval chronicles of 'Amr ibn Matta, ed. and tr. H. Gismondi, *Maris, Amri, et Salibae: De Patriarchis Nestorianorum Commentaria I: Amri et Salibae textus arabicus et versio Latina* (Rome, 1899) and Bar Hebraeus, ed. and tr. J. Abeloos and T. Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei chronicon ecclesiasticum*, 3 vols. (Paris/ Louvain, 1872-7), III, which probably preserve much of the form of this earlier material.

[18] *Book of the Governors*, I, xxxiii, 61/ 109-10.

relationship of shah and catholicos had been removed,[19] and when monasteries could assert their own financial and political independence through their relationships with local lay elites.

If the Marwanid period spelt the end of the road both for independent aristocratic activity then it also placed even heavier pressure on the prestige and freedom of action of the catholicoi. Giwargis I (661-80) ended his reign in prison after refusing to assist in raising large sums of money. And his career provides an indicator of how governors of Iraq viewed the catholicosate, as a means of extracting wealth from the land in the short term, but not an institution worth cultivating in itself. Similarly, Giwargis' successor Hnanisho following an alleged insult against Islam, and after receiving a bribe from a rival bishop.[20] There followed a sixteen year interregnum when al-Hajjaj suppressed the catholicosate.[21] In sum. The Marwanid period, with rule centred on Damascus, encouraged Arab governors to maximise profits from the Christians to fund an expanding state apparatus, or for personal gain, but where Christian leaders within Iraq had no access to the highest-ranking political leaders.

But it is notable that the monasteries of the north, and the missions to the east that they sponsored, seem to have had a very different attitude to worldly authority. Where al-Hajjaj was seen by some as an oppressive persecutor,[22] just as he was by contemporary Muslim historians, he was celebrated in the *Life of John of Daylam* for

[19] The effect of this disappearance is seen most clearly in the brevity of the accounts in the Ctesiphon-centred patriarchal histories of Mari ibn Sulayman and 'Amr ibn Matta, which become suddenly richer once more in the Abbasid period.
[20] Bar Hebraeus, *HE*, III, 136-40; John of Phenek, 184.
[21] Called 'a persecution of the church' in the prophecy of one holy man: *Chronicle of Seert*, II/ii, XCVIII (593).
[22] *Chronicle of Seert*, II/ii, LXXXI (525).

granting the saint a remittance from taxes for the monasteries of the east.[23] Not only do monasteries seem to have shown a greater resilience to the pressures of the conquests and the dislocation of established forms of patronage, they also seem to have been more successful in securing new forms of patronage, from both old and new elite groups.

It is only in the Abbasid period that the 'norm' of a centralised catholicosate was restored. The creation of a new capital in Baghdad and the transfer of the seat of the catholicos to the same city as the caliph maximised the potential for royal patronage in the reign of the Timothy I (780-823).[24] Here, urban Christians, many of them laymen, could find great rewards for their skills as translators, doctors, pharmacists and administrators, and outlets for their political ambitions as *eminences grises* for a series of catholicoi.[25] The famous seventh-century missions in Daylam, Fars and China continued to find successors in the great missions of Timothy and his creation of new oriental dioceses, as far afield as Turkestan, China and Tibet.[26] But the critical difference here is that Timothy was personally associated with the missions, whereas the earlier missions were not publicly identified as initiatives driven by the catholicos. The expansion of the Church of the East continued into the Abbasid period, the resurrection of the catholicosate at Baghdad would spell a future for the church where monasticism existed once more in symbiosis with the catholicos, and a return to a Sasanian norm.

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[23] *Life of John of Daylam*, 26.
[24] Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, 12 and 36.
[25] H. Putman, *L'église et l'islam sous Timothée I* (Beiruit, 1986), 93-108. Their activities are a recurring theme in Mari and 'Amr. For the famous family of Bokhtisho see Baumer, *Church of the East*, 155 and 158. See also the articles by L. Richter-Bernberg, 'Gondēšāpur: ii. History and medical school' and 'Bokt̲išu' in *EIr*.
[26] Fiey summarises all of his administrative reforms in *Pour Un Oriens Christianus Novus*: *répertoire des diocèses Syriaques orientaux et occidentaux* (Beiruit, 1993). See now the important study of V. Berti, *Vita e Studi di Timotheo I. Patriarca Cristiano di Baghdad* (Paris, 2009).