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Philip WOOD

HIRA AND HER SAINTS

The city of Hira in south-western Iraq served as a major political and cultural centre for the Arab world in the sixth century¹. The capital of a powerful yet fragile kingdom, it served as the core of a client state that the Sasanian Empire used to project its power and influence deeper into the Arabian peninsula. Through Sasanian patronage of its kings, Hira stood at the hub of a network of political allegiances and trading networks that brought wealth to its rulers².

A segment of Hira's population, the 'Ibad, laid claim to a long Christian history, and the city hosted the burial place for catholicoi of the Church of the East, as well as a monastic tradition that purportedly went back to the fifth century³. The 'Ibad saw themselves as an elite group, where Christian allegiance bound together men of very different lineages and gave them a prestigious role as Hira's aristocracy⁴.

From the end of the sixth century they were joined in their Christianity by the Nasrid king, al-Nu'man III, whose predecessors had long maintained a public paganism⁵. This move roughly coincides with a wider

¹ My thanks to Harry Munt and Nicola Clarke for inviting me to present this paper at a 2011 workshop on local history at the Oriental Institute, Oxford.

² C. E. BOSWORTH, *Iran and the Arabs before Islam*, in *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. III/1: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods*, ed. E. YARSHATER, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 593-612; M. J. KISTER, *Al-Hīra: Some Notes on its Relations with Arabia*, in *Arabica*, 15 (1968), pp. 143-169; I. SHAHĪD, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 vols., Washington D.C., 1995-2009; G. FISHER, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (= *Oxford Classical Monographs*), Oxford, 2011; I. TORAL-NIEHOFF, *Al-Hīra: eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (= *Islamic History and Civilization*, 104), Leiden, 2014.

³ J.-M. FIEY, *Assyrie chrétienne: contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq*. Vol. 3: *Bēt Garmāi, Bēt Aramāyē et Maišan nestoriens* (= *Recherches publiées sous la dir. de l'Institut de lettres orientales de Beyrouth*, sér. III, 42), Beirut, 1968, pp. 203-229 (esp. 218-219 for Dayr 'Abdisho' in the fifth century); ID., *Résidences et sépultures des patriarches syriaques-orientaux*, in *Le Muséon*, 98 (1985), pp. 149-168. The following paragraphs summarise my article, *Hira and her histories*, in *Religious Culture in Late Antique Arabia*, ed. K. DIMITRIEV – I. TORAL-NIEHOFF (Leiden, forthcoming).

⁴ I. TORAL-NIEHOFF, *The 'Ibād of al-Hīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq*, in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. NEUWIRTH – N. SINAI – M. MARX (= *Texts and Studies on the Qur'an*, 6), Leiden, 2010, pp. 323-348; T. NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Leiden, 1879, p. 24, describes the Syriac etymology of the 'Ibad as "servants [of Christ]".

⁵ The chief primary sources for the conversion are *Book of Chastity*, § 47, ed. and tr. J.-B. CHABOT, in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 16 (1896), pp. 225-290; Syriac *Life of Sa-*

shift in attitudes towards Christianity within the wider Sasanian world, where the shah Khusrau II began to position himself as a friend and patron of the Christians⁶.

Both the 'Ibad and their Nasrid rulers were celebrated in histories and poetry that continued to be reproduced in the Islamic period⁷. These asserted the importance of the 'Ibad or related the succession of the Nasrid kings, and several versions highlight the religious achievements of both, as builders of churches and monasteries. However, I would like to focus here on a third Christian tradition associated with Hira, namely the production of a distinctive cycle of saints' Lives that are set in the region around Hira in the aftermath of Nu'man's removal by Khusrau II.

These hagiographies discuss the miracles and monastic foundations of four holy men, active in the vicinity of Hira, though not in the city itself, in the period c. 590-680. These texts were probably originally composed in Syriac, the language used across the Church of the East and its rival, the "Jacobite" (Miaphysite) Church based in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia, and that was probably also used by the 'Ibad of Hira alongside Arabic⁸. However, the Syriac versions of these Lives only survive in a highly abbreviated form in the ninth-century *Book of Chastity* of Isho'dnah of Basra⁹. The longer versions of the Lives, though probably still abbre-

brisho', ed. P. BEDJAN, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques nestoriens*, Paris – Leipzig, 1896, p. 322 ff.; *Chronicle of Seert*, LX and LXV, ed. Addai SCHER, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 13, p. 468 and 478-480. Also note the discussions of I. TORAL-NIEHOFF, *Constantine's Baptism Legend: A Wandering Story Between Byzantium, Rome, the Syriac and the Arab World*, in *Communities, Culture and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, ed. B. CROSTINI, Trier (forthcoming) and EAD., *Die Tauflegende des Lahmidenkönigs Nu'mān: Ein Beispiel für syrisch-arabische Intertextualität?*, in *Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie der syrischen Kirchen*, ed. D. WELTECKE (= *Göttinger Orientforschungen. Syriaca*), Wiesbaden, 2012, pp. 63-78. The paganism of al-Nu'man's predecessors is a leitmotif of the Greek and West Syrian sources: see G. FISHER – Ph. WOOD, *Writing the History of the "Nasrid" Dynasty at al-Hirah: the Pre-Islamic Perspective*, in *Iranian Studies* (forthcoming)

⁶ For the broader political and religious framework see Ph. WOOD, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (= *Oxford Early Christian Studies*), Oxford, 2013, chp. 7.

⁷ One of the most important testimonies to the political and cultural importance of the 'Ibad comes from the poetry of 'Adi ibn Zayd al-'Ibadi: J. HOROVITZ, *'Adi ibn Zayd, the Poet of Hira*, in *Islamic Culture*, 4 (1930), pp. 31-69. Cf. Ph. WOOD, *Hira and her Histories*, in *Religious Culture in Late Antique Arabia*, ed. I. TORAL-NIEHOFF – K. DMITRIEV (forthcoming).

⁸ The term "Jacobite" is slightly problematic, but I employ it here because it is the common appellation for Miaphysite Christians in Syria and Iraq in the Arabic sources. For local use of Syriac, note E. HUNTER, *Syriac Inscriptions from al Hira*, in *Oriens Christianus*, 80 (1996), pp. 66-81, though her examples are not from the city of Hira itself.

⁹ See further J.-M. FIEY, *Îchô'dnah, métropole de Basra, et son œuvre*, in *L'Orient syrien*, 11 (1966), pp. 431-450.

viated, are found in Arabic recensions in the tenth- or eleventh-century *Chronicle of Seert*, a massive (though lacunose) compilation of histories and hagiographies of the Church of the East and its neighbours that stretches from the third to seventh centuries¹⁰.

Through these Lives, we can trace the survival and expansion of the Church of the East in the region of Hira at the expense of pagans and rival Christian confessions, in an area where no one form of Christianity had been dominant hitherto. In addition, the Lives also show us a change in perspective from the “Hiran histories” collected for their emphasis on kings, tribes and local bishops. The hagiographic collection deliberately embeds the story of the conversion of Hira’s hinterland, and the creation of a new network of monasteries outside the city, as part of the wider history of the Church of the East. The conversion story represents one part of a wider narrative of the spread of monasticism in the north of Iraq, of the defeat of the Jacobites and of a Church led by its catholicoi. Instead of emphasising Christianity as the religion of Hira’s ‘Ibadi elite, these hagiographies place the expansion of Christianity on the borders of Arabia into a broader tapestry of the seventh-century triumph of the Church of the East, in terms of its institutions and theology, while deploying a distinctive tradition of history-writing. In this paper, I would like to focus on the role of the Hiran hagiographic cycle as a form of local history-writing, a successor to the local histories of the Nasrid kings that focussed its narrative around the Christianisation of the region of Hira and presented it as one part of a process that was experienced by the whole of the east.

The Life of Babai the Scribe: the saint and the marzban

The four saints’ Lives embedded in the *Chronicle of Seert* are all connected with one another through a chain of masters and disciples spanning almost a century. In addition, these men all lived and preached in the same region, with three of the four coming from Hira itself, and all four were buried in monasteries founded by themselves or one of their disciples. Indeed, the recording of the burial sites of these holy men functions as an important form of commemoration, where the possession of relics emphasises the “lineage” of new monastic foundations back to an earlier monastic founder, Babai the Scribe.

¹⁰ *Book of Chastity*, § 74-78; *Chronicle of Seert*, XC, XCI, XCVII, XCVIII. I follow the translation and transliteration of Scher et al.

Babai's *Life* is set against the political background of the death of Nu'man III (d. c. 602), who had been removed by the shah, Khusrau II (d. 628). Khusrau replaces Nu'man with marzbans, frontier governors immediately loyal to him: the marzban Baboular, and his successor Rozbi ibn Mazruq, who lived in a fortress next to the city¹¹. Babai serves this Rozbi as a scribe and he accompanies the marzban on his hunting trips near the city. However, one day the hunting party comes across a hermit living in a cave near Hira, and Babai is so impressed by his piety that he decides to renounce his employment, gives up his wealth, and goes to live with the monk in his cave until the latter's death. After this he goes to Beth Hale, the future site of a monastery.

The marzban is then informed of his whereabouts when his huntsmen come upon Babai in the wilderness¹². Rozbi offers to give great sums of money to the poor if Babai will return to work for him, but Babai refuses and remains in the wilderness. It is only when Rozbi is struck down by an illness that Babai comes to him, and then it is to perform a miraculous healing.

Following this, Babai is told in a vision of the success of Rabban Khoudahwi, the disciple of his disciple, in gathering followers in the desert, and is inspired by this to summon monks to him in the desert. However, this retreat is not permanent, and he returns to Hira at the request of its bishop Sabrisho' to expel the Jacobites, whose missionaries had threatened the presence of the Church of the East in the city. Babai enters the city and asks for a newly baptised child. He asks it: "In whose name were you baptised?". The child, miraculously capable of speech, replies: "I was baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Christ is perfect God and perfect man and in him there are two natures and two 'hypostases' (*jawharān wa qanūmān*)". At this Babai announces that the child has declared the true creed and the people chase the Jacobites out of the city and they return to their former faith¹³.

¹¹ The Arabic chronicle sources give a different succession of rulers of Hira after the death of Nu'man III: see G. ROTHSTEIN, *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Hira. Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Berlin, 1899, pp. 123-125.

¹² The encounter between a huntsman and a holy man is a common topos of Middle Persian chivalric tales and east Syrian hagiography e.g. *The Life of Qardagh*, in *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, ed. P. BEDJAN, II, Paris – Leipzig, 1896, pp. 442-507, tr. J. WALKER, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (= *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, 40), Berkeley – Los Angeles, 2006, § 12ff. for the future saint's confrontation with a Christian holy man.

¹³ *Chronicle of Seert*, XC (ed. pp. 546-548).

A concluding note tells us Babai's age at his death and his eventual place of burial by disciples of his disciples, 'Abda ibn Hanif and Khou-dahwi, in the monastery of Ma'are¹⁴. But, though this seems to conclude the section, the compiler also adds an interesting postscript to the *Life*, telling us that, through Babai's prayers, Rozbi was able to defeat the Arab armies and escape Khusrau's attempts to remove him from his post. This piece of the narrative seems to have been even more compressed in the transmission process¹⁵.

Several features of this brief *Life* are worthy of comment. Firstly, it serves to extend the narrative of Christian rulers of Hira beyond the fall of the Nasrids. Nu'man's conversion had been seen as a major coup in the hagiographic sources embedded earlier in the *Chronicle*, and different versions of the story gave varying degrees of credit to the bishop of Hira, Shem'un (a member of the 'Ibad), and the catholicos Sabrisho¹⁶. Given Nu'man's removal by the shah less than a decade later, these stories can be read as near contemporary presentations of the event, an alliance between the Church of the East and the Nasrids that would soon reflect badly on the relationship between the Christians of Hira and the shah. Indeed, in addition to his move against Nu'man, Khusrau's relationship with the Nestorians was increasingly soured after his failure to influence the election of Sabrisho's successor, ultimately prompting him to suppress the catholicosate in 609¹⁷. With this in mind, the hagiographic account of Babai seems to celebrate the continuation of the close relationship between local Christians and the Nasrids' successor as rulers of Hira, the marzban Rozbi, who benefits from Babai's prayers in healing and in feats of arms and diplomacy. At a time when the harmonious relationship between Christians and the shah had collapsed, and when the newly Christian Nu'man had been removed, the hagiographer may have chosen to circumvent this fact by focussing on the establishment of the new relationship between the Christians of Hira and the Sasanian government, which was now represented by Babai and the marzban.

The celebration of the close relationship between Christian holy men and secular elites of the Sasanian world is a consistent pattern throughout the hagiography of the late sixth and seventh centuries. The *Life of Rabban*

¹⁴ Syriac: "the caves".

¹⁵ *Chronicle of Seert*, XC (ed. pp. 548-549).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, LX (ed. pp. 468-469) and LXV (ed. pp. 478-480).

¹⁷ C. BAUMER, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, London, 2006, pp. 92-97, provides a narrative.

Bar 'Idta, which describes events in the same period in northern Iraq, contains several examples of elites of different religious backgrounds providing patronage to Christian villages and monasteries as part of a reciprocal relationship with the holy man. Promises of healing and prayer were rewarded by the foundation of new monasteries or offers of famine relief¹⁸. Babai's relationship with Rozbi fits into the same pattern as the northern hagiography: the hagiographer shows the saint securing the patronage of a secular aristocrat and using the aristocrat's successful career as a means of showcasing the saint's miraculous powers.

However, the postscript on Rozbi's career suggest that this relationship proved abortive. The *Life of Babai* is set during a time of great uncertainty for the Church of the East, when the catholicosate was in abeyance, when Khusrau had turned against his Christian subjects and when Arab and Roman armies were beginning to put pressure on the borders of the Sasanian empire, in what proved to be the prelude to its dismemberment¹⁹. Rozbi is praised for deeds that must have accorded with the short-term political interests of the Church of the East (or parties within it), which had come to resent the reign of Khusrau but had no inkling that the Sasanian Empire, and its rules of patronage, were about to come to an end. Babai's role in securing Rozbi's defiance of Khusrau and his defeat of the Arabs point towards the composition of the text by a contemporary. But to the later compiler of these Lives, these details seemed irrelevant or embarrassing. The description of violent resistance to the Arab conquest in particular does not easily mesh with a late ninth-century account of early Islam embedded in the *Chronicle of Seert*, where the Christians are presented as allies of the Muslims against the Jews and pagans of Arabia²⁰. This may account for the dramatic abbreviation of the Rozbi episode at the end of the *Life*, which may have originally served as a much more significant and politically relevant conclusion²¹.

¹⁸ *Life of Rabban bar 'Idta*, ed. and tr. E. WALLIS-BUDGE, *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban bar 'Idtâ* (= *Luzac's Semitic Text and Translation Series*, 9-11), London, 1902, pp. 144-5/215-6 and 153/230, on the magnates Malbed and Zanda-Farrokh.

¹⁹ WOOD, *Chronicle of Seert*... (cf. *supra* n. 6), chp. 7.

²⁰ *Chronicle of Seert*, C-CIII. Discussion in WOOD, *Chronicle of Seert*..., pp. 243-249.

²¹ C. F. ROBINSON, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest. The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (= *Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization*), Cambridge, 2000, has stressed that it was not advantageous for Abbasid-era Christians to remember histories of resistance to the Arabs.

The Life of Babai the Scribe: The struggle with Jacobitism

A second noteworthy feature of Babai's *Life* is the prominent role he plays in the city of Hira in defending the Dyophysite Christology of the Church of the East. Significantly, his attack on the Jacobite "heretics" is the only one of his miracles that occurs within the city itself. This scene may be deliberately modelled on Antony's entrance into Alexandria, where the saint's ascetic retreat is used as the background to his public support for Athanasius and his miraculous defeat of the Arians²².

If the hagiographer does intend a parallel between the Jacobites and the Arians, it would accord with the strong theological boundary that the miracle implies. In declaring the Dyophysite creed the child provides a clear proof of the veracity of the theology of the seventh-century Church of the East: but it is important to realise that Dyophysite Christology had only very recently been interpreted in these terms (of two natures with two "hypostases" [*qnome*]), at the instigation of the formidable monk and theologian, Babai the Great²³. Thus the hagiographer clearly ties Babai the Scribe to the theological position of his more famous namesake, at a time when critics could have feasibly presented Babai's extreme Dyophysitism as an innovation²⁴.

In addition, by setting the miraculous announcement at a baptism, the hagiographer also heavily underscores the difference between the Miaphysite beliefs of the Jacobites and the Dyophysite beliefs promoted by Babai the Great. The miracle does not merely confirm the orthodoxy of one position over the other, but affirms its importance in defining baptism. Thus it implies that Jacobite baptism would be invalid. This kind of sacramental boundary, which we see in other miracles from northern Iraq in

²² *Life of Antony*, 86, ed. and tr. G. H. M. BARTELINK (= *Sources Chrétiennes*, 400), Paris, 1994, p. 356.

²³ G. CHEDIATH, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, Kottayam, 1982, p. 152. For earlier Christological definitions in the Church of the East, all of them primarily concerned with rebutting Theopaschism, see S. P. BROCK, *The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to the Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials*, in *Aksum Thyateira. A Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios*, ed. G. DRAGAS, London, 1985, pp. 126-132 and ID., *The Church of the East up to the Sixth Century and its Absence from Councils in the Roman Empire*, in *Syriac Dialogue: the First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syrian Tradition, with Focus on the Theology of the Church of the East*, Vienna, 1994, pp. 68-85.

²⁴ For an indication of the controversy surrounding these ideas see the reaction to the communion of the catholicos Isho'yahb II with Heraclius, *Chronicle of Seert*, XCIV.

the same era²⁵, is not something seen in the overlapping Chalcedonian and Miaphysite confessions of the sixth-century Roman Empire (where the re-ordination of Miaphysite priests was both extremely unusual and a matter of great controversy where it did occur)²⁶.

The strength of the boundaries that the hagiographer asserts here does not only reflect the novelty of Babai's theology. It is also a response to a recent influx of well-connected Jacobite missions into Iraq, prompted by periodic persecutions in the Roman Empire²⁷. The situation in Iraq was further complicated because some indigenous Christian groups had a longer history of support for the Miaphysite formula: for Hira we should note the appearance of a Hiran priest at Najran during the persecution of the (Jacobite) congregation there in the 520s.²⁸ The success of Jacobite proselytism among the Arabs of the Jazira, such as the Banu Taghlib²⁹, as well as new Jacobite prominence at the court in Ctesiphon³⁰, meant that this rival confession threatened to occupy the window of support for Christianity at the end of the Sasanian era, even causing Nu'man to waver between confessions after his conversion from paganism³¹.

Political anarchy provides the background for the hagiographer's abortive attempt to portray Babai the Scribe as the preserver of the good

²⁵ *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, ed. and tr. E. WALLIS-BUDGE *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmizd the Persian and Rabban bar 'Idtâ...* (cf. *supra* n. 18), pp. 70/103.

²⁶ For instance, Philoxenus of Mabbug, writing in the early sixth century, asserts that ordination is not dependent on behaviour or confessional allegiance, only on the apostolic succession. See D. MICHELSON, *Practice Leads to Theory: Orthodoxy and the Spiritual Struggle in the World of Philoxenos of Mabbug (470–523)*, Princeton, 2007 (unpublished PhD). Also see Ph. 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, chp. 6, for John of Ephesus' complaint, later in the century, that the Chalcedonian patriarch John Scholasticus demanded the re-ordination of Miaphysites, treating them like extreme heretics, whose sacraments are invalid, rather than schismatics. John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Part III, I. xiv, ed. and tr. E.W. BROOKS (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 106; *Scriptores Syri*, 3.3), Louvain, 1936, pp. 14/9.

²⁷ J. FIEY, *Jalons pour l'histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 310; *Subsidia*, 36), Louvain, 1970, p. 127.

²⁸ T. HAINTHALER, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam. Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit: eine Hinführung* (= *Eastern Christian Studies*, 7), Louvain, 2007, pp. 83 ff.

²⁹ *Life of Ahudemmeh*, ed. and tr. F. NAU, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 3, Paris, 1909, pp. 25–27.

³⁰ On the notorious Gabriel of Sinjar see the rival views of the *Khuzistan Chronicle*, in *Chronica minora*, I, ed. and tr. I. GUIDI (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 1–2; *Scriptores Syri*, 3.4), Paris, 1903, pp. 19–20, and the *Life of Marutha of Takrit*, ed. and tr. F. NAU, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 3, Paris, 1909, pp. 73–77.

³¹ *Chronicle of Seert*, LXV (ed. p. 480).

relations between the church and the rulers of Hira in the era after Nu'man's death. But the instability of Sasanian patronage also laid the seeds for a much more extreme position by the leaders of the Church of the East. Babai the Great's stark Dyophysitism was a reaction to a Jacobite intrusion that was undertaken in a political wilderness, without the expectation of preferment at court. This Dyophysitism, undertaken by a cleric based in the monasteries of the north, has a firm stamp in this Hiran hagiography³².

Babai's successors

Babai the Scribe is succeeded in the *Chronicle of Seert* by three further saints: 'Abda the Old, 'Abda ibn Hanif and Khoudahwi. 'Abda the Old is not presented in great detail: a Zoroastrian convert from a village near Hira, he sees an angelic vision in the church of Mar Sergius in Hira and attends the school there to be trained, before going to live in the desert with Babai. Here he takes the name 'Abda (after a fifth-century missionary to south-western Iraq). The section ends with a note that his disciples were 'Abda ibn Hanif and Rabban Khoudahwi, and that the latter built "a great monastery"³³.

The sections dedicated to these two disciples of 'Abda are delayed by the compiler and placed after a lengthy account of the reign of the catholicos Isho'yahb II (d. 645). 'Abda ibn Hanif is identified as a Hiran, chosen by God for the monastic life "as God chose Daniel". He begins this ascetic life with a vision of a lion that is stung to death by many mosquitoes, presumably a portent of the destruction of the Sasanian Empire by the Arabs, but also of the futility of mortal cares for the luxury of urban living³⁴. 'Abda goes to the wilderness and gathers a small group of disciples, living on palms and dates. Here he has a vision of a monastery in the wilderness, the future Beth Hale, in which an angel draws out the

³² On Babai the Great, the architect of this Dyophysite emphasis, and his role as monastic visitor in the north see Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I, xxvii, ed. and tr. E. WALLIS-BUDGE, London, 1893, pp. 51-2/91-2.

³³ *Chronicle of Seert*, XCI (ed. pp. 549-550). The identification of the monastery is rather confused in this section.

³⁴ This idea may be a point of intersection between hagiographic literature and contemporary Arab ideas about the Sasanians' pride and luxury. On the latter see the comments of Saleh Ahmad EL-ALI, *Al-Madā'in and its Surrounding Area in Arabic Literary Sources, in Mesopotamia*, 3-4 (1968-1969), pp. 417-439 and S. B. SAVANT, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory and Conversion* (= *Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization*), Cambridge, 2013.

boundaries of the building, and he instructs his disciple Khoudahwi to go and build it.

Following this 'Abda sets out for the place called Payram, to an oasis called 'Ayn al-Namir where he builds the monastery of Gamre. Here he converts the local people, recently transported by the shah from Khurasan, by healing the sister of their chief priest and distributing *hnana*, the blessed dust of the saints, to the people³⁵. After their conversion they begin to build churches in their village and burn down the idol Nahrđan that they once worshipped.

In a brief final scene, the hagiographer relates how an Arab leader, 'Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad, sought healing from the saint and received it after 'Abda blessed 'Ubaydallah's baton and returned it to him. After 'Abda's death in the reign of the caliph Mu'awiya, 'Ubaydallah visited Payram to pray at the tomb of the saint³⁶.

The last of these Lives is dedicated to Khoudahwi of Beth Hale, a medical student from Maishan in southern Iraq. Khoudahwi first comes to the monastic life after he is saved from the *jizya* (the Islamic poll tax) by an angel, who appears with the saints Babai, 'Abda and John of Beth Hale (the latter is otherwise unattested, but seems to be another disciple of Babai). Khoudahwi trains as a monk in Shushtar in Khuzistan with the monks Abu Yazdad and Barshade of Luj, where his future greatness is predicted, before going to join 'Abda's congregation at Ma'are. Here Khoudahwi is elected abbot of the community and composes a rule for his monks, and many travel to his monastery to learn it. The hagiographer inserts a further affirmation of Khoudahwi's pious asceticism: that he neither rode a horse, nor touched gold and silver.

After founding Ma'are, 'Abda informs Khoudahwi of his vision of Babai and the angels setting out the church at Beth Hale. Khoudahwi himself then experiences a vision, in which Simon Peter, Simeon bar Sebba'e and Simeon the stylite all appear to Khoudahwi. 'Abda and Khoudahwi inform Sabrisho, the bishop of Hira, and start to build their church, which receives a visit from the catholicos Giwargis (d. 680). Following this, Khoudahwi receives another vision, telling him to leave the convent for the desert, where he lives out his life, only receiving occasional visits from monks who wish to receive healing.

³⁵ *Hnana* is a prominent feature of the Syriac *Life of Symeon the Stylite*, e.g. § 38, tr. R. DORAN, *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, Kalamazoo, 1992, p. 123.

³⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, XC VII (ed. pp. 586-590).

The final section of the *Life* includes three short postscripts that have been more heavily abbreviated. The first of these describes Khoudahwi's vision of the future calamities to befall the Christians, which he tells to bishop Sergius of Hira. These events, observes the chronicler, were brought to pass with the persecutions of al-Hajjaj, the Marwanid governor of Iraq. The second of these scenes is a promise to his monks on his death-bed: he tells them to have no fear and promises them that they will not go hungry and that they will grow evermore numerous after his death. Finally the third postscript, which concludes the section, describes the incognito visit of the catholicos Isho'yahb III (d. 659), Giwargis' predecessor, and his shame on seeing the poverty of Khoudahwi's monks and their ascetic life in the desert³⁷.

These three Lives differ from Babai's Life by their greater emphasis on the conversion of populations beyond Hira and the foundation of cenobitic monasteries in the desert. Babai, like the 'Ibad of Hira, was not associated with missionary activity: it is a noticeable absence. This detail may represent real social conditions. In part the change in the generation of 'Abda must reflect wider trends in the Sasanian world, where the collapse of state support for Zoroastrianism coincided with the victory of the Christian Roman foe, in which the truth of Christianity was confirmed by political events³⁸. Especially for isolated populations, such as the Khurasani pagans of Payram, Christianity must have seemed an attractive option, as it did to Iranian aristocrats elsewhere in the former Sasanian empire³⁹. In addition, the continuing presence of endemic plague in the region may have also meant that Christian emphasis on healing cults and on *hnana* may have been a particularly effective missionary tool⁴⁰.

But if the collapse of the Sasanians offered a short-term opportunity to Christians in Hira's hinterland, the holy men celebrated here continued to seek political patrons to replace the marzban Rozbi. In a volte-face against Babai's support for Rozbi against the Arabs, 'Abda ibn Hanif is portrayed as an ally of 'Ubaydallah, the Arab Muslim magnate. Indeed,

³⁷ *Chronicle of Seert*, XCVIII (ed. pp. 590-595).

³⁸ M. MORONY, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984, pp. 300-302.

³⁹ R. PAYNE, *Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, 500-700 CE*, Princeton, 2010 (unpublished PhD), chp. 2 (on Karka de Beth Slouq).

⁴⁰ On the plague in Mesopotamia see M. MORONY, "For Whom Does the Writer Write?": *The First Bubonic Plague Pandemic According to Syriac Sources*, in *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic of 541-750*, ed. L. K. LITTLE, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 59-86 and P. CHRISTENSEN, *The Decline of Iranshahr: Irrigation and Environments in the History of the Middle East, 500 B.C. to A.D. 1500*, Copenhagen, 1993.

the story of 'Ubaydallah's reverence for 'Abda fits into a pattern of Christian stories of the early Islamic period where the new invaders recognise the miracles of Christian saints⁴¹. These stories recognise the permanence of Arab rule in the Near East and try to turn it to Christian advantage, prefiguring the political symbiosis of Nestorian Christians with the caliph's government in Abbasid Baghdad⁴². Moreover, at the same time as this reorientation of Christian hopes for patronage, the image of 'Ubaydallah praying at 'Abda's shrine may also point to some degree of local religious symbiosis, where, as at shrines in the modern Middle East, Muslims continued to revere Christian holy places⁴³. Thus, as well as objecting to moments of Arab tyranny, in the *jizya* or the reign of al-Hajjaj, the hagiographies also create a model for a positive relationship between the Arab conquerors and the Christians, where 'Ubaydallah succeeds his Sasanian-era predecessors as a pious patron for Christian saints⁴⁴.

The Hiran Lives as a hagiographic collection

As we have seen, the Lives track the role of these holy men in expanding Christianity beyond the city of Hira itself and the changing political position of Hiran Christians. By asserting the relationship between these holy men, the hagiographic collection in the *Chronicle of Seert* also presents a fundamental continuity between these different Lives and roots them in founder figures born and trained near Hira.

⁴¹ E.g. the healing and conversion of the Arab 'Ukbe in the *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, tr. E. WALLIS-BUDGE, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban bar 'Idiā...* (cf. *supra* n. 18), p. 117, or the miracles in the so-called disputation between an emir and the monk of Beth Hale (S. GRIFFITH, *Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hālê and a Muslim Emir*, in *Hugoye*, 3 [2000], pp. 29-54). Note also the comments of T. SIZGORICH, "Do Prophets Come with a Sword?" *Conquest, Empire and Historical Narrative in the Early Islamic World*, in *American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), pp. 993-1015 for the Muslim appropriation of Christian hagiographic ideas in the *futūḥ* narratives, a rather different indication of the appeal of the "Christian imaginary".

⁴² On this symbiosis see J.-M. FIEY, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbassides, surtout à Bagdad (749-1258)* (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 420; *Subsidia*, 59), Louvain, 1980, and M. ALLARD, *Les chrétiens à Bagdad*, in *Arabica*, 9 (1962), pp. 375-388.

⁴³ E.g. the Iraqi examples noted in H. KILPATRICK, *Representations of Social Intercourse Between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Some Medieval Arabic Works*, in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions. A Historical Survey*, ed. J. WAARDENBURG, Oxford, 1999, pp. 213-224, at 218-219. J. TANNOUS, *Syria Between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak*, Princeton, 2010 (unpublished PhD), chp. 12 provides a rich discussion of shared religious culture in the Levant.

⁴⁴ Objections to al-Hajjaj would have also been a sentiment that Iraqi Christians shared with the Muslims of Kufa. Note A. DIETRICH, *al-Hadjadj*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM edition, version 2.0.

However, if we read these texts against the grain, and look for the contradictions and repetitions within the hagiographies, it is also apparent that the texts were not initially conceived as a collection. We see from the repetition of the angelic vision of Beth Hale that the scene, an important feature in the Lives of 'Abda ibn Hanif and Khoudahwi, was written into both hagiographies, whereas one would expect an author to only mention the scene once if all the texts had originally been composed as a single hagiographic collection.

More significantly, the *Life of Khoudahwi* has been edited in such a way that it emphasises his connections to Hira. We are briefly told of his monastic tutors in Khuzistan, and it is likely that the original text included more material than just the names of these otherwise unattested holy men. Similarly, the existence of a *second* vision prompting Khoudahwi to found Beth Hale suggests that two different visionary narratives have been intertwined: one presented the foundation as a joint enterprise with 'Abda ibn Hanif, guided by Babai the Scribe, while the other saw Khoudahwi as the sole interlocutor with the heavenly messengers. Moreover, in this second version the message is not delivered by Babai, but by more internationally famous figures of the Church of the East and other Christian confessions: an apostle, a stylite and a martyred catholicos.

Thus, while some hagiographers might have wanted to emphasise Khoudahwi's Hiran connections, and the spiritual ancestors that continued to work through the saint, compressed portions of the Arabic narrative indicated that alternative emphases were possible, which considered Khoudahwi as a holy figure in his own right, guided only by holy men without regional associations peculiar to Hira. Indeed, Florence Jullien has emphasised Khoudahwi's role as the conduit for the monastic traditions of Abraham of Kashkar through his training by Rabban Shapur, and contrasts his cenobitic foundation at Beth Hale to 'Abda's less formal, anchoritic monastery at Ma'are ("the caves")⁴⁵. It may be this second, more "international" connection that causes the hagiography to compare him to "Abraham": not only the Biblical Abraham, with his many descendants (referring to the many followers of his rule), but also the sixth-century

⁴⁵ F. JULLIEN, *Xvadāhoy de Bēth Hālē. Un développement du monachisme réformé à Hira ?*, in *Aram*, 21 (2009), pp. 515-535. She highlights *Book of Chastity*, § 77-8 on the connection with Rabban Shapur. On Abrahamic monasticism in general see F. JULLIEN, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d'Abraham le Grand, père des moines de l'Orient* (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 622; *Subsidia*, 121), Louvain, 2008.

monastic founder Abraham of Kashkar, whose rule was disseminated from the great monastery of Izla⁴⁶.

Khoudahwi's ascetic reputation may also feed into his importance as the founder/disseminator of a monastic rule. His refusal to touch gold and silver or ride a horse corresponds to criticisms made against monks during the Islamic period both by Christians resentful of monastic political power and Muslims who objected to the prosperity of Christians in the caliphate: both embezzlement and the public use of horses were recurrent tropes in the criticism of monastic luxury⁴⁷. The establishment of Khoudahwi as an incorruptible figure may have been associated with the poor reputations of some monasteries elsewhere in the east. In the same vein, the establishment of an ascetic reputation may have also been a way of forestalling interference from a catholicos claiming the right to monitor or intervene in monastic life: the shaming of Isho'yahb III may fit into this pattern of monastic independence, when monasteries sought to escape from the will of a centralising catholicos⁴⁸.

Given his importance as the founder of a monastery from which a monastic rule was disseminated, it is not surprising that a Hiran author sought to emphasise Khoudahwi's connections to the city where the monastery was founded, to Babai and his disciples, rather than to the land of his birth and early training, to Maishan and Khuzistan, the lands where the *Book of Chastity* situates his ascetic legacy⁴⁹. The creation of a hagiographic collection, beginning with Babai the Scribe, must therefore be seen as a political intervention, aiming to safeguard Hira's reputation as a city of the saints through holy men that connected the city to its newly converted hinterland. While the histories of the city of Hira record the deeds of the Christian Nasrids or the churches and monasteries built in the city by 'Ibadi families and the bishops, this hagiographic cycle stands as

⁴⁶ Khoudahwi's followers were also not drawn from Hira but from Beth Aramaye: *Book of Chastity*, § 83 and 86. The parallel between the Biblical Abraham and the monastic founder is made by Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, I. iv... (cf. *supra* n. 32), ed. pp. 22-3/38.

⁴⁷ E.g. *The Life of Timothy of Kākhushā*, ed. and tr. J. LAMOREAUX – P. CAIRALA, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 48, Turnhout, 2000, [ms.] P[aris] 27.13. See FIEY, *Chrétiens syriaques...* (cf. *supra* n. 42), p. 46 on Muslim criticism. Note further the comments of C. VILLAGOMEZ *The Fields, Flocks and Finances of Monks: Economic Life at Nestorian Monasteries, 500-850*, Los Angeles, 1998 (unpublished PhD) on the wealth and influence of Nestorian monasteries in northern Iraq in this period.

⁴⁸ E.g. the conflict between the monastery of Beth 'Abe in northern Iraq and Isho'yahb III, when the latter tried to found a school there. Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, II, vii-x (ed. pp. 73ff./131ff.).

⁴⁹ *Book of Chastity*, § 79-83.

both a development of these histories and a replacement for them. It emphasises the spread of Christianity by men of Hira (defined now by chains of discipleship rather than family lineage) and the foundation of new monasteries in the city's hinterland.

However, we should remember that the Lives of the saints of the Hiran desert have been transmitted as a cycle within an even greater hagiographic collection that encompassed the whole of the former Sasanian world. In both the *Chronicle of Seert* and the *Book of Chastity*, the Hiran Lives form part of a collection of Lives, clustered in the late sixth- and seventh-century, that stretch from Adiabene and Beth Garmai in the north of Iraq to the Arabian Gulf. And a particular feature of these collections is to emphasise the territorial and ethnic origins of its monks and demonstrate how they overlap. For example, Abraham of Kashkar himself was born in Kashkar, a missionary in Hira and a monk at Izla; John of Ma'are was born in Hira and a monk in Sinjar in the north; Job of Revardashir in Fars founded a monastery in Adiabene, and Gregory, who was born in Kashkar, was educated at Ctesiphon and a monk at Nisibis⁵⁰.

Though the focus of these Lives is the north of Iraq, the sense of the whole is of the interlinked Christian networks, of birth, education, travel and burial, that tied together the former Sasanian Empire from Merv to Hira⁵¹. And this correspondence between the Sasanian Empire and the holy men is further underlined by their role as missionaries, converting Kurds and Arabs, as well as the Persian origins of many of the monks⁵². To a later compiler, whether a postulated later seventh-century compiler, working after the main body of these Lives, or later, ninth-century compilers such as Isho'dnah of Basra, this collection may have preserved a Christianised memory of the Sasanian world as a distinctive territory with its own unity, the historic land of the Church of the East and of Abrahamic monasticism⁵³.

The Hiran cycle was included in this broader project, a hagiographic collection within a hagiographic collection. The cycle invented and commemorated the indigenous origins of the great monasteries of Ma'are and

⁵⁰ *Book of Chastity*, § 14, 43, 46, 56.

⁵¹ On the formative role of religious travel in Syriac hagiography see now B. BITTON-ASHKELONY, *From Sacred Travel to Monastic Career: The Evidence of Late Antique Syriac Hagiography*, in *Adamantius*, 16 (2010), pp. 353-370.

⁵² *Book of Chastity*, § 5, 17, 34 and 47 and *Chronicle of Seert*, XLV, L, LIV, LXXVI.

⁵³ On the genre of the hagiographic collection as an assertion of territorial identity see WOOD, *We Have No King but Christ...* (cf. *supra* n. 26), pp. 182-183, discussing John of Ephesus, Cyril of Scythopolis and Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

Beth Hale. In so doing it eclipsed the connections between Beth Hale's founder and Khuzistan. But the Hira cycle has also come down to us as part of a much larger collection where these foundations have been enmeshed into a wider commemoration of Sasanian Christianity in an Islamic world. And, in this sense, the intentions of the compiler of the Hira cycle, to celebrate the prestige and sanctity of his city and its territory, were ultimately subverted by a broader focus on the post-Sasanian world at the hands of later compilers.

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Résumé. Cet article considère un cycle de quatre Vies de saints provenant de Hira, dans le Sud-Ouest de l'Irak. Le premier de ces textes, la Vie de Babai le Scribe, témoigne de la continuation de relations étroites entre les Chrétiens du lieu et les autorités politiques après la fin du règne des Nasrides à Hira. Les autres Vies décrivent la fondation de monastères et la conversion des «païens» dans les environs de Hira. Ces récits cherchent à éluder les connections internationales du plus fameux de ces saints, Khoudahwi de Beth Hale, en le présentant comme le successeur de saints de Hira, tel Babai.