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Conversion to Christianity in the Sasanian Empire. Political and Theological Issues

CHRISTELLE JULLIEN

Summary – In the Sasanian empire, the relation to power of the different strands of Christianity (East-Syrian Dyophysite, West-Syrian Miaphysite, Chalcedonian) or Christian-oriented groups, partly derived from the landmark movements of deportation and missions starting in the East Roman lands, remained unsettled during the whole dynastic period (from the 3rd to the 7th century), moving from integration to defensive relation. Therefore the question of the conversion to Christianity is naturally correlated to the notion of identity affirmation on the one hand, within a minority context and an ethnic, cultural and religiously plural environment,¹ and to that of political loyalty towards the Persian king on the other, seeing that adhesion to Christianity within the Iranian territory challenged the very unity of the political body incarnated by the Sovereign. Periods of persecution of religious minorities, and specifically Christian minorities, between the 4th century and the Arab period, led to a vast literary production that has fundamentally contributed to the shaping of identity in the Church of the East. Syriac sources present several types of accounts of conversion. The *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* often give priority to the conversion of great characters from the Mazdean society (from the 6th century onwards especially); some hagiographies in fact mention cases of collective and widespread conversion (over a whole region for instance). In these accounts, the Sasanian king appears as the defender of Mazdaism, the official religion of the Empire, who intervenes on different levels in the process of conversion through a contrasting political approach, sometimes coercive, and sometimes supporting towards religious movements. These ambiguities lead to questions regarding the underlying interests behind such royal behaviour, but also in parallel concerning the writing process leading Christians to rewrite the persecuting king into a Christianised Sovereign.

¹ On this subject, see Jullien, F. (2012).

THE KING, DEFENDER OF MAZDAISM

The notion of “State religion” cannot apply to Mazdaism (or Zoroastrianism), given the interpenetration of religion and politics with the very concept of Iranity in its ethnic and religious sense.² Philippe Gignoux and Gherardo Gnoli had well shown that Mazdaism is first and foremost an ethnic religion:³ an Iranian subject professes Mazdaism, and if his parents are Mazdean, he becomes so through birth.

LOYALTY AND DISLOYALTY, OR “HOW TO BE ‘PERSIAN’?”

There is a tight correlation between political loyalty and practiced religion. The Sasanian rulers explicitly affirm their belief in the Mazdean religion, even in a divine ancestry, and legitimate their power as descending from the god Ahura-Mazda: reliefs depicting scenes of investiture show the sovereign (who possesses *xvarrah*, “the radiance of glory”) the same size as the divinities presenting him with the emblems of power.⁴ In the Iranian empire, the notion of political loyalty towards the sovereign is at the heart of the problem of conversion: forfeiting one’s forefathers’ religion equated to renouncing the king’s religion, but also led to a statutory transfer; the Iranian Christian converted from Mazdaism broke away from the world of *ērān*, and became a foreigner in his own country in a way.⁵ The polarity between *Ērān* and *Anērān* – between the Iranian empire and its subjects on the one hand, and the non-Iranian world on the other – is a geo-strategic and politico-religious reality which explains, amongst others, in martyrological Syriac texts, the presence of recurring motives such as lese-majesty committed by Persian notability converted to Christianity. Abjuring Zoroastrianism in favour of another religion *de facto* led to social consequences,⁶ and in particular forfeiture of any Sasanian administrative function, and sometimes even any privilege. The choice of a new name for those who converted – not always systematic, especially when the Middle-Persian family name remained significant from a Christian perspective – is also the public sign of such a renunciation, of a social break-away leading to conversion, as well as marking a change in allegiance, and the move

² Wiesehöfer (1993).

³ See Gnoli (1993: 1–31). Gignoux (1997a: 17); Gignoux (1997b).

⁴ See Huyse (2005: 140–141). Wiesehöfer (2005).

⁵ Jullien, Ch. – Jullien, F. (2002). See also De Blois (2002).

⁶ See Gignoux (1997a); Gignoux – Jullien, Ch. (2006). Debić (2010); Payne (2015).

towards a new and henceforth referring community. Names chosen are mostly Syriac – Syriac being the liturgical language of the Christians from the 4th century onwards, among others – or even a mixed composition between Middle-Persian and Syriac. That is the case for Dād-Gušnasp, “given by Gušnasp”, who chooses Dād-Īšō‘, “given by Jesus”.⁷

Nevertheless some rare examples enable us to qualify this pattern of exclusion of those converted to Christianity within the king’s entourage. Indeed, high-ranking imperial officers occasionally kept their position some time after their conversion through royal consent, such as Grigor, Khurso the 1st’s army commander-in-chief, or Yazd-bōzēd, a courtier of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon palace. This royal lenience was motivated by a rising awareness of the public use of such Christian notables in the service of a society they were perfectly integrated into.

This dual perception stemming from an opposition between Ērān and Anērān particularly applies to relations between Iranian subjects and their Byzantine neighbours. Conniving with the rival empire is one of the classic themes in East-Syriac literature reproached to the Christian community.⁸ Since the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313 by Constantine, the position of Christians within Sasanian society had become somewhat ambivalent. But the possibility that such an edict might have a direct impact on the persecutions put in place by Šābuhr II over more than 40 years starting from 339, when Persia was battling out borders with Byzantium, is still being debated. In hagiographical literature, Christians are often accused by Persian authorities of complicity with an emperor deliberately qualified as their “co-religionist”.⁹ This perception is partly based on an extract from the *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius, who reports on a *Letter* sent by the Emperor to Šābūhr, a text translated early on into Syriac: its authenticity is not yet agreed on, even though it tends to be accepted, as the latest work by Kyle Smith seems to suggest.¹⁰ According to Sebastian Brock, more than the *Letter*, it is Constantine’s

⁷ *The History of Mār Yazdīn*, see Bedjan (1891: 564).

⁸ See Brock (1982).

⁹ For example, see in *The Life of Simeon Bar Šabba‘ē*, Kmosko (ed.) (1907: 805–806). See Smith (2014).

¹⁰ Constantine’s letter to Šābuhr II, of which Eusebius of Caesarea claims to give a Greek translation, emphasises the idea of a common destiny for Christians across the frontiers, under the authority of the Roman emperor who entrusts the protection of the Christian communities of Persia to the Mazdean king. Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini*, IV, 9–13. New

status as universal patron of the Christians which was to contribute to an assimilation of these Persian communities to the Romans. In parallel, the hagiographical theme of the letter sent to the “Cesar” by the Christians of Persia in order to request his help spreads with a certain recurrence, since Persian epic literature still reproduced such a narrative (in particular the *Šāhnāmeḥ* by Ferdowsī in the 10th century).¹¹ Christians subjected to the Persian king, friends of the enemy, and potential disruptive elements, become a *leitmotiv* in Mazdean-Christian polemics, which deal with the concept of Christian loyalty / disloyalty to the king – an accusation which targeted converted Mazdeans in particular.¹² Such suspicions of unfaithfulness ran right into the 7th century in Syriac sources, despite the situation of Christian communities in the East evolving in the wake of the Christological quarrels and the dogmatic definitions of the Councils, which rooted them in the Iranian territory once and for all: between 451 and 486, Miaphysite and East-Syrian Churches in Iran had broken away from the official religious position of Byzantine power, which supported the Chalcedonian cause. From the mid-5th century onwards, converted Mazdeans had little choice other than political loyalty towards the king of kings. Therefore, the concept of heresiology remains at the core of the question of the political position of Christians in Iran (whether East-Syrian Dyophysites or West-Syrian Miaphysites) and of their relation to power and to the king himself.

On the other hand, we know of several Christian conversions to Mazdaism thanks to scarce information given by Syriac writers. Middle-Persian literature had not conserved any trace of these facts. In Syriac hagiographical narratives, examples, very scarce, are generally rather topical, no doubt because the communities these texts were destined to were depicted unfavourably.¹³ These former Christians generally appear as careerists or opportunists, who adopt the official religion out of frustrated ambition. The civil authorities’ reaction is

approach and reinterpretation of the letter and its recipient in De Decker (1979). See also Raub (1997). Recently, Smith (2016: especially pp. 20–32); Frendo (2001).

¹¹ In the *Šāhnāmeḥ* (or *Book of Kings*) of Ferdowsī, see Anōšagzād’s letter to “Caesar,” the Roman emperor, to gain support against his father Khusro Ist, Mohl (1877, repr. 1976: 180–181). See also Jullien, Ch. (2015).

¹² See for example, in the context of the resumption of hostilities between Rome and Persia in 540, *The History of Mār Abba*, § 12, Jullien, F. (ed.) (2015: Syriac text pp. 14–15); French translation, *ibid.*, pp. 15–17. When converting to Christian faith, former Zoroastrians have been accused of dual political loyalty by the Persians.

¹³ See Cantera (2010).

not known; hagiographers underline that the power sought to deepen their new religious choice (considered as a renegade choice by their former co-religionists) by attributing administrative functions to them. Furthermore, some are described as the executioners of their former co-religionists' sentence: would that be a *topos*? or perhaps a test of the authenticity of their conversion?¹⁴ Hence, the writers of martyrological narratives gladly associate them with the apostle Judas.¹⁵ Some elements from the Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church also mention defections. In 554 for instance, the first two canons feature the threat of adherence to Zoroastrianism of believers and clerics, disappointed not to have been considered by the ecclesiastic hierarchy, and seeking a better status amongst civil authorities.¹⁶

IMPOSE AND RULE

In a perspective where political loyalty and religion are intertwined, the imposition of Mazdaism was less the expression of a will to convert than a tool of power. One of the most relevant examples is no doubt the religious politics of Yazdgird II and his commander-in-chief (*vuzurg framādār*) Mihr-Narseh in the mid-5th century Armenia. In these borderlands of the empire, an influenced zone shared between Persia and Byzantium, the Sasanian believed he was winning over then mainly Christian populations by demanding (especially of the notables) that they adopt Zoroastrianism. Such a political intention aimed at detaching Armenia from the Byzantine (Christian) sphere thanks to a forced religious rallying; it would lead on to the great revolt of the years 450–451 which caused the defeat of the Armenian troops during the Avarayr battle and important human casualties on the Persian side. Such circumstances are reported by historians Łazar P'arpec'i and Elišē Vardapet.¹⁷ Many priests

¹⁴ See the examples given by Fiey (2004: 44–47, 54, 87, 111).

¹⁵ *The Chronicle of Seert*, Scher (ed.) (1911: 159 [67]). See *The History of Mār Abba*, § 25, Jullien, F. (ed.) (2015).

¹⁶ See *The Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church*: “Ceux qui accuseront leurs voisins pour faire détruire [une] église et attirer à eux une communauté qui ne dépendait pas d’eux, en exposant les prêtres, leurs confrères, aux chaînes, au pillage de leurs biens et à l’apostasie du christianisme”, Chabot (ed.) (1902: Syriac text pp. 98–99; French translation pp. 355–357).

¹⁷ Garsoïan (2009: 69). Łazar P'arpec'i, *History*, Thomson (ed.) (1991: 34–36); Elišē Vardapet, *History of Vardan*, Thomson (ed.) (1982: VI, 1–9). French translation Langlois (1867: 220–221, 296–297). Russell (1987). Garsoïan (1999: 125 n. 261, 20 n. 79).

were arrested and tortured according to the Pseudo-Sebēos, which also mentions deportations to the Khorassān region around 454.¹⁸ But would it not be appropriate to look beyond the writings of Christian hagiographers, and see in this episode more than a political blunder committed by the Sasanian sovereign, and its dire consequences? The reality seems more complex, as is suggested by Nina Garsoïan, who refutes the theory of a deliberately malevolent political line conducted by the Sasanians towards their Armenian subjects. She has shown that Yazdgird II, after the Great Revolt, did not seek to amplify the de-Christianisation policy of the country. He finally allowed the notables to practice their faith. Furthermore, the main noble families had accepted the Persian suzerainty over their country rather well.¹⁹ Yazdgird, vulnerable to military difficulties on the Northern front with the Hephthalite Huns, had to show some sort of leniency and agree to revise his project of forced imposition of Mazdaism over the Armenian territory.

It is also worth underlining along with Philippe Gignoux that proselytism in the Mazdean religion has not been proven for the Partho-Sasanian periods. Because of the notion of separation, *judāgīh*, a religious man could not have any relationships with non-Mazdeans or non-Iranians.²⁰ As such, the persecution of minorities does not *per se* imply forced conversion. Although Syriac martyrological literature mentions Magi forcing Christians to betray their faith in the king's name, these essentially concern former Zoroastrians to bring back; in other cases, the Mazdean clergy mainly sought to oppose certain customs deemed unacceptable – especially the burial of the dead, which was contrary to the Zoroastrian laws of purity. Rallying around the king's religion was thus perceived by the Mazdean authorities as contributing to bringing order into the world.²¹ Examples of forced conversion must therefore be reinterpreted through the prism of context.

¹⁸ (Pseudo-)Sebēos, *History*, Thomson (ed.) (1999: 64–65). See also Daryaei (2012).

¹⁹ Garsoïan (2009: 72–74). Garsoïan (1998–2000: 314–318 and n. 39). See also McDonough (2006).

²⁰ Gignoux (1997a: 17, 21–22).

²¹ On this subject, see Payne (2015: 30–33).

THE KING AND HIS CHRISTIAN SUBJECTS:
A CONTRASTED POLICY

The Sasanian Persians' policy *vis-à-vis* Christians was rather contrasted, wavering between open persecution (under Šāhbur II or Wahrām V's reign), and benevolent tolerance on other occasions (under Yazdgird I's or Khusro II's reign).

THE AMBIGUITIES OF ROYAL BEHAVIOUR

Royal interventionism

The king's direct interventionism at the high level of the Churches' hierarchy perhaps betrays a will to limit the movement of conversion to Zoroastrianism. In a recent thesis, Richard Payne has shown that Mazdean power could tolerate Christian expansion in exchange for compensation helping to maintain co-existence and distribution of space.²² From the reign of Yazdgird I onwards, kings granted Christians the establishment of their own ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In return, bishops tacitly agreed to pay their allegiance to the sovereign, so as to maintain internal order and to cooperate with power. This theory of a *modus operandi* had already been looked into by Scott McDonough.²³ This tacit pact implied a ban on any opposition to the king's authority, and therefore also on any conversion within the aristocracy. According to him, the recurrent violent acts committed against the Christian minority do not reflect an intolerant coercive power, but rather a tacitly established socio-religious balance, which ecclesiastical elites had to respect for the sake of the churches' survival and for their interests. Thus, the king presided over the "improvement" – that is to say the validation – of the newly elected patriarch, and could even appoint him, as was the case on several occasions when he wished to reward his Christian physicians: the Catholicos Elisha, personal physician to Kawād I, who was invested against the Persian Church's candidate, provoking a thirteen-year schism in the first half of the 6th century (from 524 to 537); Joseph (552–566), also physician to the court of Khusrō I, who was disowned by his clergy and deposed by the king after a series of complaints; or also Grigor of Kaškar (605–609), chosen by the sovereign Khusrō II in spite of protests of the East-

²² Payne (2015).

²³ McDonough (2011: 303–305). See also Kalmin (2006); Widengren (1961).

Syrian bishops.²⁴ The profiles of patriarchs are known thanks to Syriac sources and correspond to types of social categories: well-read, learned, often physicians. Similarly, by refusing to grant investiture after the Catholicos election, the royal authority asserted its power over its subjects and imposed its control over a religious minority both dependent and weakened. Between 609 and 628, the intervention of the Miaphysite Gabriel of Singar with Khusrō II led to a vacancy of the catholicos chair for almost twenty years.

The influence of Christian queens on the king's religious policy

The influence of some royal wives sometimes contributed rather significantly to re-orienting the religious policy of the kings with regard to Christian religious minorities, and even to transforming their personal attitude. The historian Procopius mentions the Christian name of one of Khusro I's wives, Euphemia, a former deportee from Sura. Under her influence, the king proved to be more clement towards the elites of her home city, and even offered to liberate the prisoners he had sent into exile during the conquest.²⁵ In Khusro II's entourage was a Chalcedonian Christian, Maria, daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice, according to the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian. Another significant example of such an influence is queen Šīrīn, wife of Khusro II (590–628). According to the Byzantine historian Evagrius Scholasticus (536–590 – whose work was later picked up and amplified by Theophylact Simocatta at the beginning of the 7th century), it was no doubt Šīrīn who encouraged Khusro II to offer ex-voto to the sanctuary of Saint Sergius in Reš'ayna (in Eastern Roman territory), in appreciation of the future birth of the heir to the throne. Furthermore the king attributed through the intercession of the saint the protection of the dynasty upon the coup of Wahram Čobin. The dedication was written not in Middle-Persian but in Greek, the language of the Byzantines:²⁶ this royal gift was solemnly sent to the basilica through the

²⁴ *The Chronicle of Seert*, Scher (ed.) (1919: 521 [201]–523 [203]).

²⁵ Procopius, *De Bello Persico* II, 5, 28, Haury (ed.) (1963: 171–172).

²⁶ Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* VI, Whitby (ed.) (2000: 312–316 [236]–[240]). Theophylact Simocatta, *History* V, 14, 8, Whitby – Whitby (eds.) (1986). On the reliability of the sources and historical problems in Theophylact Simocatta's work, see Peeters (1947: 5–56). According to Theophylact, Golindouš, who was a fervent follower of Saint Sergius, played an important role in the Queen's and Khusrō's personal life; they met her several times, probably at Circesium and Hierapolis, Peeters (1947: 25–26). Schilling (2008: 154–158).

patriarch Gregory of Antioch, with the approval of emperor Maurice. His open-mindedness towards the Miaphysite Christian community which Šīrīn belonged to is well known. Should this initiative necessarily be qualified as philo-Christian however? *A priori*, it resembles an approach reaching out to the *virtus* of a powerful protector. Such an initiative went on to raise the interest of the West, as is shown by the correspondence between bishop Domitian of Melitene and pope Gregory, while the conversion of the king Æthelbert of Kent was under way.²⁷ These *ex-voto* could also reveal a political attitude of the Mazdean sovereign towards Arab tribes who came to the sanctuary of Reš‘ayna²⁸ and, in the case of the Lakhmids, precious auxiliaries of the Persians on the *limes*. Here, the assertion of such an act also has strategic repercussions, aiming to strengthen adhesion to a political *koinon*.

THE “PAGAN” KING, SUPPORTER OF RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Religious communities sometimes managed to find in the supreme authority an ally and a support in favour of their expansion. Such a fact is well-known in the case of king Šābuhr I with Māni, who wrote in his honour the *Šābuhragān*, a kind of compendium of his doctrine around 240 (some Middle-Persian fragments of which have been found in Turfān). One of the acknowledged characteristics of this work, as Iris Colditz has shown, is the stylistic adaptation of its author to Zoroastrian terminology to present the theological elements of his religious system.²⁹ Such inclusive concern, which also pertains to a communication strategy, opened the possibility for dialogue with his Mazdean correspondent. Several *Kephalaia* mention the three audiences granted to Māni by the sovereign, enabling him to teach over the whole Persian empire.³⁰ Māni and his disciples were nevertheless made to revise their itinerary, no doubt due to the opposition of the Mazdean clergy; they travelled to Media

²⁷ Peeters (1947: 44–45 n. 1).

²⁸ On the devotion to Saint Sergius among the Arab tribes, see Fowden (1999: especially pp. 124–129.)

²⁹ Colditz (2005). It seems that a part of the *Šābuhragān* was read by the Manichaean community during a liturgical office: Yoshida (2000: 91). See also Reck (2010). MacKenzie (1979: 500–534); MacKenzie (1980: 288–310).

³⁰ Some regions of the Sasanian empire are mentioned: Fārs, Mayšān, Babylonia and Asūrestān. The first encounter took place around 240, *Kephalaion* I, 15, 31b–34; 16, 1–2; *Kephalaion* LXXVI, 184–186. Polotsky – Böhlig (eds.) (1940). Gardner (1995) Tardieu (1981), (1997²).

and to the regions bordering the Caspian Sea, as the *Kephalaia* and the *Cologne Mani-Codex* bear witness to.³¹

Such a dichotomy between the interests of official authorities and the king's motivations are to be found in other contexts. One could also mention in that respect the taste of Kawād (488–496/498–531) for the theologico-politico Mazdakite movement, initiated in the 3rd century by Zardušt, son of Xwarag, often called Mazdak the Elder, who advocated for a new social order by rejecting any form of private property. This perspective was justified by an eschatological legitimation and considered as a deviance from Mazdaism. Therefore Mazdak shook the very basis of Sasanian society, both nobiliary and religious, divided into classes, and questioned the government's functioning *via* Mazdean clergy and the notables.³² Kawād wished to strengthen royal power and to undermine the power of feudal families and of the Magi. Despite once being influenced by these teachings (during his first reign), he referred back to them in order to impose territorial reforms serving his own interests. His eviction from the throne in 496 finally drove him to contend with the support of notability and clergy, and to renounce his personal religious inclinations in order to win back power. The choice of his son Khusro for an heir, instead of his elder, pro-Mazdakite son Kaūs, would pave the way for a violent repression of the movement.

Syriac writers thus put forward initiatives taken by Sasanian princes against the actions of the Magi: some of the sovereign's options might have jeopardised the cohesion of the empire (both Mazdean and Ērānian) and its unity.

It could be said that the search for Royal consent by the Church and religious movements was one of the conditions of their expansion. Within West-Syrian Christianity, 13th century Syriac historian and compiler Grigor Bar 'Ebroyo relates how the missionary-bishop Simeon of Bēth-Aršam requested of king Kawād a free circulation permit through "the land of Sen'ar" (Babylonia) and Fārs. Such authorization depended on one condition: Simeon was expected to transmit to the king the names of the newly-converted. Indeed Bar 'Ebroyo underlines that bishop Simeon, wherever he went, obtained written commitments from the population, which he transmitted to the king, who

³¹ Römer (1994: 10–13).

³² Sources about the history of Mazdak and Mazdakism are not first-hand accounts and have a lot of contradictory data. See Christensen (1925) and (1936, 1944²: 317–320). Recently, Macuch (2015).

“confirmed them with royal seal”.³³ The attribution of a circumscribed missionary territory, once the permit delivered, the validation sealed, in return guaranteed political authorities access to missionary activities.

THE “CONVERSION” OF THE KING

On another note, and perhaps fuelled by such contradictions, Syriac authors sometimes surprisingly portrayed the persecuting sovereign in a very favourable light, even Christianising him, through hagiographic devices.

THE CHRISTIANISATION OF THE KING: A RHETORIC?

Syriac sources, and more specifically official texts from the Persian Church such as the acts of the East-Syrian synods, feature a rhetoric suited to sovereigns, who are not always favourable to the Christian cause.³⁴ Each report from a synodal assembly is preceded by a short eulogistic prologue, which reflects the allegiance of the Christian community to the master of the land, but perhaps also opportunism, since official documents provided by the ecclesiastical hierarchy were likely to be read by royal administration. Hence Khusro I was “the merciful and charitable king of kings” in the preamble of the 544 synod³⁵ – even though at this time, Christians were being imprisoned and the Catholicos himself was under house confinement. Occasionally, such phraseology went further than simple agreed-upon discourse. Such vocabulary could even go very far and echo expressions usually attributed to God alone: in 598, the Assembly of Sabrīšō presented Khusro as “our adorable, victorious and merciful master,” wishing him “long-living prosperity in all his enterprises,”³⁶ he the “master for eternity”.³⁷ The king was also a mediator, a “new

³³ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, section II, Abbeloos – Lamy (eds.) (1877: 85–86). On this practice, see Jullien, F. (2011, especially pp. 55–56); Jullien, F. (2016).

³⁴ I allow myself to refer to Jullien, Ch. (2009) and (2011).

³⁵ *The Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church*, ed. CHABOT, J.-B., *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Paris, 1902, Syriac text p. 70; French translation p. 320.

³⁶ *The Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church*, Chabot (ed.) (1902: Syriac text p. 207; French translation p. 470).

³⁷ *The Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church*, Chabot (1902: Syriac text p. 200; French translation p. 461). From a Pauline perspective, political authority could be seen as an image of the divine authority on earth, cf. Rm 13, 1–2: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities

Cyrus ruling over all kings”.³⁸ This indirectly suggested that political power could serve the East-Syrian cause.

THE CHRISTENING OF THE KING: A MESSIANIC IDEAL

Some Syriac, Armenian or even Byzantine Greek sources have sought to Christianise the sovereign more explicitly by associating him with the community of believers. Following the assertions made by Procopius, the anonymous author of a Syriac chronicle from the 8th century (*Chronicon ad annum 724*) curiously presents king Yazdgird I as “a Christian blessed among the kings”.³⁹ Yazdgird’s distancing himself from the Mazdean clergy and his attention to religious minorities⁴⁰ (two attitudes which earned him the nickname of “sinner” in later Arabo-Persian sources⁴¹) probably explain his favourable depiction in the Syriac sources. The “Christian” king is by definition he who has been anointed, blessed. The hagiographical, but also apologetic writing, thus remodels the “pagan” king through a Messianic perspective able to rally the community behind the Supreme authority, even when he became the enemy and the persecutor – as was the case for Yazdgird in the last year of his reign.⁴²

that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves”. See *The Chronicle of Seert*, chapter LXXI, where such a position is justified, Scher (ed.) (1983: 502 [182]).

³⁸ *The Acts of the Synods of the East-Syrian Church*, Chabot (ed.) (1902: Syriac text pp. 69–70; French translation p. 320). In a Muslim context, such a process of identification has been identified in narrative and epigraphic sources for the Mamluk Sultan Baybars for example, compared to Alexander the Great and to Moses, Eddé (2012).

³⁹ *Chronicon ad annum 724*, Brooks (ed.) (1904: Syriac text p. 107); Latin translation Chabot (ed.) (1904: 137). Procopius, *De Bello Persico* I, 2, 8. On Yazdgird I’s policy towards the Christian community in the Persian empire, and the mutual benefits each party received, see McDonough (2008b). After many years of persecution under the reign of Šābuhr II, the East-Syrian Church was strengthened and reorganized, and the Persian international and internal policy reinforced.

⁴⁰ For the author of the pahlavi text entitled *Šahrestānīhā-ī Ērānšahr*, Yazdgird is said to have married the daughter of the *reš galūtha*, the Jewish Exilarch, whose name was Šōšān-duxt. See the extract, edited by Daryaei (2002: 20). Some scholars have questioned this assertion, as Herman (2012: 60–61). See Secunda (2013: 169 n. 46).

⁴¹ See Sauerbrei (1905) and McDonough (2008a). See also Mosig-Walburg (2009).

⁴² One may compare this conception with certain attitudes of Syriac authors to imperial power in the context of the Byzantine empire in Late Antiquity. Manolis Papoutsakis (2017) has

The most accomplished development in such a literary process is expressed in the sequences describing the christening of the dynast. In a noteworthy and richly documented study, Alexander Markus Schilling analysed the pattern for the 6th and 7th centuries amongst the different traditions of the Christians of the East.⁴³ Sebēos in Armenia or John of Nikiū in his Greek *Universal Chronicle* claim that Khusro I and his father Kawād professed the Christian faith *in secreto* and got christened.⁴⁴ Sebēos extensively details the Christian actions conducted by Kawād, who ordered that the liturgy be celebrated in his palace and that the Gospel be read in his presence. The Armenian historian goes as far as to say that upon his death, Christians buried him in the “sepulchre of the kings”.⁴⁵ These presentations of pseudo-conversions also contribute to the Messiah-king theme, reflecting a communal hope and a political appeal.

The conversion of blood princes

These documents also mention tales of conversion to Christianity – and the subsequent martyrdom – of the children of royal blood. Several cycles can be mentioned when considering king Šāhbur II (309–379) who somewhat stood for the anti-Christian sovereign for generations to come, because of the 40-year long persecution covering his reign. The best-known text is the *Acts of Benham and his Sister Sara*, probably written around the 5th century – a novelistic passion, as has been shown by Bollandist Paul Devos.⁴⁶ Benham is curiously presented as the son of Sennacherib, king of Nineveh. During a hunting game, he met a hermit named Mattai, who converted him and cured the

explored the theme of ‘vicarious (Byzantine) kingship’ in Syriac political theology through eschatological pattern and Biblical models. But as we can see, in the Sasanian *milieu*, the exegetical reconstruction was rather an image and a support for the rewriting history strategy. My thanks to the editors for this reference.

⁴³ Schilling (2008).

⁴⁴ John of Nikiū, *Chronicle*, Charles (ed.) (1916, repr. 1981: 154–155). See Schilling (2008: 185–189). Jullien, Ch. (2009).

⁴⁵ (Pseudo-)Sebēos, *History*, chapter IX, Thomson (ed.) (1999: 9–10); French translation Macler (1904: chapter II).

⁴⁶ Devos (1966). Syriac text edited by Bedjan (1891: 397–441). See Bruns (2008) and (2011). For studies on the text, see Wiessner (1978). Younansardaroud (2002) and Holm (2014: 314–317).

young Sara who was a leper.⁴⁷ Both were baptised and had their throats slit by their own father who, following miraculous events, converted also. The very first lines mention a discreet reference to “Constantine, the victorious emperor,” opposed to Julian the Apostate and Šāhbur II, the shamed emperors under whose reign the narration takes place. Such a reference motivates the narrative and reveals the author’s intention to see Christian masters rule over the Sasanian empire as well as over the Eastern Roman empire.

A true narrative motive transpires through these writings, as other parallel examples show: the *History of Aḥudemmeḥ*, which reports the circumstances under which a child of royal descent was converted then christened, a son of Khusro I’s, potential heir to the throne;⁴⁸ the *Acts of Gubralaha and of his Sister Qāzō*,⁴⁹ said to be the children of Šābuhr II, who both were converted and converted in turn. Nikephoros, the patriarch of Constantinople (806–815), preserves in his *Breviarium* (Ἰστορία σύντομος) the narrative of one of the last sovereigns to govern the Sasanian empire, Šahrvaraz (for just a few months in 629). He was one of Khusro II’s generals (*spāhbed*), to whom he was related through his wife. Nikephoros presents the pact concluded between Šahrvaraz and Heraclius: the former had to hand back the lands won over the Romans as well as the relics of the Passion of Christ, taken by Khusro II in 614, whereas the latter had to acknowledge and the usurper general, to support his illegitimate accession to the throne. He also welcomed his children into the Byzantine empire by associating them through marriage to the imperial family.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ There are obvious biblical parallels, especially the healing of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who was afflicted with leprosy, and whose skin had become white as snow, Nb XII, 10–15; cf. also Lc XVII, 11–19; Lc V, 12–15.

⁴⁸ Aḥudemmeḥ sent him at once to the Roman territory for security reasons. Nau (ed.) (1909: 33 [33]–34 [34]).

⁴⁹ Gubralaha and his sister Qāzō are presented as the son and daughter of king Šābuhr II; they were converted under the influence of their Christian teacher, Dādōy, who also was put to death for his faith and became a martyr; formerly, Dādōy, member of the royal family, was a Magus. They were executed in 332. Syriac text edited by Bedjan (ed.) (1894: pp. 141–163; BHO 325).

⁵⁰ Nikephoros of Constantinople, *Breviarium* VI, 8, Mango (ed.) (1990, § 17, p. 64): Heraclius gave the dignity of Patrice to Nicetas, son of Šahrvaraz, and gave his daughter Nike in marriage to Theodosius, the son he had with the empress Martina; he also gave his son Constantine [III] in marriage to Gregoria, the daughter of Nicetas. According to (Pseudo-)Sebeōs, Šahrvaraz decided to favor Christian communities as his intention was to conclude a close alliance with Heraclius; but the historian does not mention any conversion of his children to christianity. Heraclius only recognized in him and in his son the legitimate

Cyril Mango in a study of the period has shown how this event had been prepared by the Byzantine chancellery and exploited by Heraclius, whose universalising ideology sought to impose over the Orient a policy close to the interests of the empire, whilst still maintaining the prospect of a conversion of Persia to Christianity.⁵¹ For this reason, some scholars suppose that Šahrvaraz's two children might have become Christians.⁵²

Mirror-modelling

Several models seem paramount to these presentations: first the christening of Constantine, the image *par excellence* of the Christian king, who finds his theoretical support with Eusebius of Caesarea, whose historical work serves as a literary framework to many Syriac chroniclers (the *Zuqnīn Chronicle*, *Chronicon ad annum 1234*, the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, etc.).⁵³ The figure of Constantine appears throughout the favourable descriptions of sovereigns in Christian historiography.⁵⁴ The conversion of the Lakhmid king No'mān III, christened by bishop Simeon of Hīra in 593, had a strong impact in Christian spheres.⁵⁵ It is also worth recalling that one of the key models behind these literary compositions stems from the New Testament tradition of Evangelical magi developed in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum* as well as in subsequent Syriac narratives (particularly the *Zuqnīn Chronicle* and the *Revelation of the Magi*), which tell, among other things, how the Magi upon arriving in Bethlehem from Persia to venerate the child Jesus were then

heirs to the throne of Persia. (Pseudo-)Sebēos, *History of Heraclius*, Macler (ed.) (1904: chapter XXVIII).

⁵¹ Mango (1985: 117). Schilling (2008: 295–296).

⁵² Kaegi (2003: 188–206).

⁵³ Concerning the diffusion and the Syriac translation of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Church History*, see Wright – McLean (1898). Duval (1907, repr. 1970: 188–191). About the importance and transmission of Eusebius's work in Syriac historiography, especially for the author of the *Zuqnīn Chronicle*, see Debié (2015: 297–300; 350–352). The apocryphal *Acts of Sylvester*, bishop of Rome, written in this city, may be known in the Syrian East since the VIth century as one of the metrical homilies ascribed to Jacob of Sarug mentions the theme. Frothingham (ed.) (1883: 167–242).

⁵⁴ For the figure of the emperor Constantine as a literary theme in the East-Syrian hagiographical literature in the Persian empire, and the influence of his conversion, see Barnes (1985), Smith (2016), McDonough (2008a). See Lieu – Montserrat (1998). Conterno (2013; my thanks to Vittorio Berti for reminding me of this article).

⁵⁵ See Jullien, F. (2009).

baptised by Thomas the Apostle who came to the Iranian land as a missionary.⁵⁶ In the Syriac tradition, the authors intentionally gave these characters the family names of Sasanian dynasts. In these descriptions of christenings, the Persian kings who adopt Christian faith are thus implicitly associated with these figures shown to be their forefathers.

These idealised presentations of the Messiah-king, loaded with political theology, have a very specific aim, which reflects identity issues. Different Christian communities from the Sasanian empire, rivalling over a missionary territory, and henceforth linked to the Persian land by their theological separation options, had little choice but to enter the political game to ensure their expansion, their permanence, their survival even. Whilst claiming their right to a deep insertion into the empire's society, administration and state apparatus, Christians developed narrative constructs as a prophylaxis meant to reassure, to create an idealised space within the empire, perhaps also to get even with an authority with ambivalent, almost persecuting motivations. Hagio-graphical writing thus becomes a formidable instrument to cast a favourable light onto a new political order in the Iranian world.

⁵⁶ On these traditions, see Monneret de Villard (1952); Panaino (2012). Ri (ed.) (1987); see Minov (2013) and (2017), and Schilling (2008: 159–185).

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