Mosul's Hinterland:
Village and Monastery in Early Islamic Iraq

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Abstract

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This dissertation offers a social history of monasteries and villages in the hinterland of Mosul during the early Islamic period. Modern historians of the medieval Islamic world often mention the large Christian populations that flourished in the rural areas of the caliphate, but rarely include close analysis of these communities. Syriac monastic sources, however, take readers deep into rural landscapes of the ʿAbbāsid Empire, which remained little known to Muslim geographers.

Using John Bar Kaldoun's *Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya,* a tenth-century narrative about the rise and fall of the East Syrian monastery of Beit Ṣayyare in the highlands of northern Iraq, this work traces the interactions between urban center and hinterlands and the tangled connections between monasteries, local villages, and Kurdish tribes. Its anecdotes about the war between the Ḥamdanid and Buyid dynasties also give a glimpse of Islamic history from below and the consequences that followed the seismic political shifts that wracked the middle ʿAbbāsid era.

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I owe an incredible debt of gratitude to my advisor Joel Walker, who oversaw this dissertation from the beginning and believed in it long before I did. Together, we explored key parts of the Busnaya manuscript, discussed my findings and theories, and anchored Beit Sayyare in the still-murky space between Syriac Studies, Islamic and regional history, and the history of Christianity. Along the way, I was fortunate to embark with him on a series of cultural adventures tied to the rich history of Middle Eastern and Christian communities, including Ethiopic, Persian, Mongol, and Armenian endeavors. *Tawdi sagi* from this wayward student for your role as a mentor in every sense of the word.

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And to God, *aba, bra, w'ruḥa d'qudsha*. In Your light do we see light.

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Introduction

During a mission trip to Iraq and Iran in 1843, the American missionary Justin Perkins climbed to the mountain church of Mar Sargis near Lake Urmia, only to find to his dismay that the church was already full of Muslims. "We found several Mussulmans of both sexes within," he grumbled,

> These same Muhammedans had brought their sick to the church of these same despised Christians and employed a Nestorian deacon to read prayers over them; and similar cases, the deacon informs us, are of almost every day occurrence. And I have often seen Muhammedan mothers, of high rank as well as low, resorting to the Nestorian church of St. Mary, kissing the cross and the New Testament upon the altar and leaving incense or some other offering there, in hopes of thus being furnished with favor by the patron saint.[1]

To Perkins, the casual presence of Muslims in a church suggested that Christianity in the region was in a dangerous state of superstition and decay, one which he and his fellow missionaries could repair by introducing Protestantism to the area's Syriac-speaking Christians. He notes elsewhere with exasperation that "The position of the [locals], in relation to the enemies of Christianity, is alike trying and interesting."[2] Seen in a different light, however, the tableau in Mar Sargis represented a remarkable artifact, a rapprochement between the area's ancient forms of Christianity and its newer Muslim arrivals, reached over the course of more than a millennium and constituting a fixture of Islamic culture. Places like Mar Sargis represented the survival of a once-widespread Christian population in the hinterland, one which had formed part of the bedrock of highland society and still played an important part in its rhythms and customs.

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[1] Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia Among the Nestorians, with Notices of the Muhammedans* (Andover: Allen, Morrill, & Wardwell, 1843), 380. Perkins' frustration at this harmonious scene also stems from sporadic episodes of anti-Christian violence at the hands of local Muslims; just prior to this entry, he records how one of his Syriac interpreters suddenly had to return to his family's village deep in the mountains after their harvest had been stolen by marauding Kurds. Perkins, *Residence*, 379.

[2] Perkins, *Residence*, 22.

The Christian presence in northern Iraq has sharply diminished in recent times, and its current marginal state belies how significant a part of Islamic history it once represented. In 1876, more than three decades after Perkins climbed his mountain, Ottoman census figures still showed Syriac, Greek, and Armenian Christian populations as comprising about a quarter of the total population of the empire, particularly in Anatolia, historic Armenia, and northern Iraq.[3] By contrast, Christians make up less than one percent of the population in Turkey and Iraq today. Waves of anti-Christian violence in the late nineteenth century, followed by brutally effective genocides in the early twentieth, have reduced or completely eliminated the Christian presence in many areas, and subsequent decades have seen survivors flee to Western countries for asylum and new economic opportunities.[4] As Christians have vanished from the region, the memory of their influence has also faded, obscuring the many roles, large and small, that they played in the development of the Islamic world.

In Late Antiquity, Christians formed a plurality of the population across much of northern Iraq, a situation that did not change until deep in the Abbasid period. Indeed, it appears that Christianity *expanded* its presence in Iraq during the Umayyad period, during what Chase Robinson has memorably described as "an Indian summer" for the region's Christian communities.[5] During the seventh and eighth centuries, the Church of the East established, for the first time, dioceses and monasteries in the Levant, while the Syriac Orthodox Church

[3] Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20.
[4] Several compelling studies of the Hamidian massacres of Armenian Christians in 1894-97, the Sayfo and Armenian genocide of 1915, and the Simele massacre of Assyrian Christians in 1933 demonstrate the extent to which these communities were devastated. For the rootedness of local Christian populations among their neighbors, see especially David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006). For the collapse of the region's Jewish population in the mid-twentieth century, see Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012).
[5] Chase Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57.

established dioceses as far east as Herat, in modern-day Afghanistan.[6] Existing church complexes grew larger, while monasteries were established on islands in the Gulf.[7] While some Christians had converted to Islam from its inception, new missions were launched deep into Central and East Asia. Christianity and Judaism's presence in the Middle East was so dense that although the period when Islam became the predominant religion in the Middle East is disputed, conservative estimates place it in the late ninth century – two hundred fifty years after Islam's arrival – while others place it as late as the thirteenth.[8] Archaeological, literary, and geographical sources all appear to confirm that Islam was still in the early phases of penetrating the region, leaving most of its population to adhere to their ancestral religions. Muslim writers echo this judgment as well: the ninth-century writer al-Baladhuri reminisced that in the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-644), each Muslim in the Sawad had charge of three non-Muslim peasants, indicating a ratio of 25% Muslim to 75% non-Muslim.[9] In fact, Baladhuri's estimate for Muslims in the seventh century was probably much too high – tax receipts for the 850s indicate that only 20% of the population in Iraq were Muslim, meaning that the Muslim population did not approach Baladhuri's numbers until two centuries after the conquest.[10] As Thomas Carlson has pointed out, Muslim geographical writings in the late tenth century list the number of mosques in a given region – hardly any of which appear to exist outside of major

[6] Philip Wood, "Changing Geographies: West Syrian Ecclesiastical Historiography, 700-850" in *Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity*, ed. Peter Van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 158.
[7] Richard Payne, "Monks, Dinars, and Date Palms: Hagiographical Production and the Expansion of Monastic Institutions in the Early Islamic Persian Gulf," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 111 (2011), 100.
[8] At the conservative end of the spectrum, Richard Bulliet famously calculated that Muslims became the majority in Iraq by the year 888, using hundreds of genealogical books to map a rough curve. Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period: an essay in quantitative history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82. At the maximalist end, Jack Tannous speculates that Muslims may only have become the majority well after the Crusades, during the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 492-493.
[9] Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State: Being a Translation from the Arabic*, trans. Philip Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 423.
[10] David Wilmshurst, "The Church of the East in the ʿAbbāsid Era," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2018), 193.

urban centers.[11] Other scholars have emphasized the thinness of the Muslim institutional presence in rural areas even in the late Ottoman period.[12]

The invisibility of such a large non-Muslim population has long posed a question for historians of how best to capture life in the Islamic world as a whole rather than primarily through urban elites. Dubbed the "Dark Matter Problem" by Jack Tannous, there has been a growing awareness that a strong emphasis on Muslim culture and writings as the central source materials for the early Islamic Middle East leaves much of that world still untapped:

> [W]e cannot understand Islam in the early medieval and medieval period unless we see it in the context of the great mass of non-Muslims—in formerly Roman areas, most of whom will have been simple Christians—and their gradual conversion to Islam. We let these groups slip through our fingers to our own detriment: they are the Dark Matter that makes everything else in our universe intelligible, for it is in looking at the relationship between the groups that historians usually focus on and the groups they do not—how the simple related to the learned, how simple Christians became simple Muslims, how learned Muslims related to simple Christians and to Muslims who were descended from simple Christians, and so on—that we gain a more textured perspective on late antique and medieval Christianity and Islam and learn to see them in a new light.[13]

In this work, I tackle part of the Dark Matter question by examining the world of rural Syriac Christians in northern Iraq as they lived "off-screen" from the larger political and cultural developments that marked early Islamic history. In particular, I rely on a tenth century narrative, *The Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya*, which concerns the rise and fall of the East Syrian monastery of Beit Ṣayyare north of Mosul at a critical juncture in Islamic history, namely the collapse of centralized ʿAbbāsid authority.[14] This manuscript survives in multiple manuscripts,

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[11] Thomas A. Carlson, "Contours of conversion: The geography of the Islamization of Syria: 600-1500," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 4 (October-December 2015), 799.
[12] James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227-33.
[13] Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 501.
[14] One previous study on Beit Ṣayyare was defended recently by Ralph Barczok, which discusses the manuscript history and narrative structure. Among other important notes, he identifies eleven surviving *Busnaya* manuscripts. Ralph Barczok, "Die Vita des Joseph Busnaya: Eine historische Quelle des Nordiraks des 10. Jahrhunderts" (PhD diss. University of Konstanz, 2017), 7.

most notably Siriaco 467, which was originally copied at the monastery of Mar Elia, but later taken to Europe by the East Syrian Beit Mamma family from Alqosh and given to the Vatican, which subsequently digitized it. It is this digital edition which I have used to tell the story of Beit Ṣayyare throughout. This narrative, penned by the East Syrian monk John Bar Kaldoun at the end of the tenth century, relates his memories of living in Beit Ṣayyare as well as those of the vivid personalities in and around the monastery. In integrating John's work with larger events from below, I attempt to capture the social history of a particular region of "Dark Matter" Iraq, the ways in which independent subcultures thrived and expanded outside of the structure of political administration and religious categories, as well as theorize why and how those cultures ultimately became subsumed into a broader Islamicate society.

In addition to John's narrative about his master Rabban Joseph Busnaya and the monks of Beit Ṣayyare, I rely on several other Syriac monastic chronicles from the same northern highland regions penned between 661 and 1000 (see Appendix A). Although only loosely defined as a genre, "monastic chronicles" or "monastic histories" form a distinct body of literature by relating the story of a monastery and its community rather than the life of a single saint. They share the following conventions: an extended timeline over multiple generations, a changing cast of monks, even when there is a central hero, and detailed descriptions of interactions between the monks and their surroundings. Broadly speaking, they may be conceived as a cross between hagiography, memoir, and local history.

Like conventional hagiographies, monastic chronicles sometimes include miracles and fantastic or supernatural events, which makes it difficult on occasion to distinguish between

recollection and invention.[15] At the same time, they involve actual people, places, and events: a complex interplay of memory and oral history underlies the narrative architecture of these monastic histories. This is especially true of John's narrative, which is told in the first person and includes recollections of people who are alcoholics, shut-ins, or simply forgetful. Such details describe unromantic or personalized impressions of monastic life. Other narratives, such as *The History of Rabban Hormizd*, clearly model some of their anecdotes on idealized or hagiographic models; in these cases, the sources contain high levels of fiction, but also contain real places and cultural norms. When discussing these stories, I try to indicate which ones appear to reflect actual events and which ones appear to have been invented, with the caveat that it is impossible to categorize them with complete accuracy.

Even fictitious stories, however, have high historical value as time capsules of a particular time, place, and culture. In parsing these anecdotes, I have taken two approaches common to historians who work with hagiography. The first is the technique of looking at "incidental details" unrelated to the reputation of the monastery or religious or moral teaching, such as the names of now-lost villages, the customs, habits, and diets of highland inhabitants, and the close interweaving of the man-made and natural worlds. Such details reliably sketch the shape of rural society regardless of the truth or falsity of the events they describe. Instead, I attempt to show a cultural context in which such events appeared plausible, even commonplace, because the belief that monks wielded actual supernatural power is crucial to understanding their

[15] Two pioneering studies on the social use of hagiography include James Goehring and Cynthia Villagomez. See especially James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1999). Villagomez's work, which examined East Syrian monasteries in particular, has illustrated their extensive and shrewd economic dealings. Cynthia Jan Villagomez, "The Fields, Flocks, and Finances of Monks: Economic Life at Nestorian Monasteries, 500-850," (PhD diss. University of California, 1998).

place in society. In Chapter 3, I attempt to tease out the complex interplay of fiction, hagiography, folk spirituality, and memoir involved in reports of supernatural events.

In terms of procedure, I have translated all monastic excerpts included in this work directly from Syriac, even though several of the Syriac sources that I use in this dissertation also exist in English, French, or German translation. Many of these translations are archaic, so while I consulted them during my work, I retranslated the passages according to my own reading directly from the original Syriac. I have thus listed both Syriac edition and translation for each relevant citation. For Muslim sources, which appear in Arabic, I have relied on French or occasionally English translations.

Terms, Sources, and Concepts

This project sits at the intersection of three historical traditions: the history of the Islamic world, the history of Christianity, specifically East Syrian Christianity and monasticism, and the regional history of northern Iraq. In light of the differing conventions of each field, as well as the Syriac heritage community, I have tried to balance academic distance and rigor with readability and modern usage. Many of the people and places in this work have modern corollaries which differ in meaning from their historical terms. Scholars of Islamic history, for instance, will notice that I have framed my work as taking place in "Iraq." However, in the context of early Islamic studies, Iraq usually only refers to the south of the country, comprising the Persian Gulf to Baghdad (after 763) and Tagrit, an administrative region literally known as al-Irāq; it is not the term that writers of the period would have used. The chronicles I cite throughout this dissertation were composed in a different province, most commonly referred to

as the Diyār Rabīʿa, although its name and borders varied.[16] Simultaneously, the north of the country was commonly known as the Jazira (or "island," a reference to the broad swath of fertile land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers), which encompassed a geographic region but only partly corresponded to a political one. In more recent times, under British rule, the north of Iraq was referred to as "Mesopotamia." But Jazira is an unfamiliar term outside of Islamic studies, while Mesopotamia strongly connotes the ancient Sumerian civilization found in the south of modern-day Iraq – once again a different region. I therefore use all three terms, but have chosen northern Iraq as the one most likely, for modern readers, to evince the area north of Mosul.

Religious and ethnic names constitute a thornier question, since they involve living communities and issues surrounding group identity. Northern Iraq was a multireligious, multicultural zone, one in which identity was mapped through a shifting combination of language, religion, and social structure – the coalescence of which is what I mean by the term "ethnic," which itself can be a freighted term. As a general rule, I have simply translated these terms in the same sense that they were used by the authors. For instance, "Kurd" (*kartuya*) is a generic term, used by both Syriac and Arabic writers to refer to the semi-pastoral peoples of the hill country, but it also serves in the text as an umbrella term which is often made more specific: e.g., "[Kemel] was from the Kurds (*kartuye*) who are called Dasenoye," which identifies Kemel as part of the broad category of Kurd as well as the tribal and familial links within that category. The term Kurd is thus framed by linguistic and cultural references rather than religious ones. When discussing the coming of the Buyids, John uses a similarly layered approach, referring to them as "Dailamites" to signify their origins near the Caspian Sea but also as Persians. Here

[16] For a brief history of the changing administrative geography of the Jazira, see Hannah-Lena Hagemann, "Whence Diyār Bakr? An Inquiry into Early Jazīran Administrative Geography," *Der Islam* (Berlin), 96 no.2, 324–44.

again, either a broad category or narrow one appears to be interchangeable, and I have kept such references in translations throughout.

Terms for Syriac Christians are more difficult to define, in part because the writers rarely assign a term for their specific group. When they do wish to differentiate themselves from other Christians, they use the terms, "orthodox" or "believers," or identify themselves or their enemies as followers of key theologians, a practice I discuss more throughout. The more generic phrase "Syriac Christianity," which connotes language rather than theology, exists among Western scholars to differentiate a variety of distinct churches from Latin, Greek, Coptic, and Armenian Christians. Medieval Syriac Christianity shared a common liturgical language and centuries of theological development before splitting in the fifth century over issues of Christology, devolving into several rival groups which continue to exist. Previously, the two major groups were known as Jacobites and Nestorians, after two major theologians, Jacob Baradaeus and Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. In the past, both groups used these names to refer to themselves or each other, but they are generally either considered inaccurate or offensive today.[17] In modern parlance, Western scholars divide the two groups into "West" and "East" Syrian, which refer to dialects spoken either west or east of the Tigris, but these terms are partial misnomers, as West Syrian churches existed in the east and vice versa, and also, perhaps more pressingly, because both churches comprised a swath of different cultural and linguistic groups, such as Arab tribes, Kurds, Aramaic farmers, Indians, Turks, and Persians. "West" and "East"

[17] Adding to this difficulty are terms like "Assyrian" or "Aramean," which are sometimes preferred by members of the heritage community and indeed appear at times in medieval texts, but today are often used in narrower ways than I envision the groups I discuss here. For instance, I have avoided the term "Assyrian" in part because it sometimes excludes Chaldean Christians, who stem from the same heritage, in favor of the Assyrian Church of the East, even though in other contexts it may refer to both groups. For a framing of the naming debate from two sides of the issue, see Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), and Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History : Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

are best understood to correspond only loosely to geography; in reality, they encapsulate theological difference. The nominal forms are the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. Almost all the sources quoted here derive from East Syrian documents, which have preserved more monastic chronicles and form a discrete cluster, with the exception of the *History of Qartmin*, which is a West Syrian chronicle.

Finally, it is also worth examining my status as a Western scholar writing a social-historical study of a Middle Eastern community. For various reasons, Syriac heritage scholars have not examined the Busnaya manuscript in detail, the most obvious of which is that the community is still recovering from the process of genocide and displacement that devastated it in the early twentieth century. Although Syriac and Assyrian communities have successfully resettled in Western countries and some have embarked on careers as academics, they have largely been devoted to work dedicated to restoring communal identity, preventing assimilation by promoting a sense of culture, religion, and language among the next generation, and rebuilding a presence in their former homelands, all in the face of considerable headwinds. A social history such as the one I have written is less conducive to those goals. The same is true for those who remain in or have returned to the Middle East and still use various forms of Syriac, who all face rapidly diminishing communities and a lack of resources: discussions about millennium-past social history are far less relevant than other, pressing needs. However, while not aimed at or produced entirely for the use of heritage communities, I intend it to help connect the history of Syriac and Assyrian Christians to their place in Western Christian, regional, and Islamic historiographies.

I also hope that it elucidates the reasons behind the role of monasteries as part of the Syriac heritage and Middle Eastern culture more broadly. As recounted by Naures Atto in her

work, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora*, 2009 saw a mass rally in Germany as diaspora Syriacs and Assyrians united in concern over the fate of the ancient monastery of Mor Gabriel in southern Turkey. More than 19,000 protestors marched on the Brandenburg Gate, using the phrase *I am the son/daughter of Mor Gabriel* as their catchphrase.[18] As Atto comments, Mor Gabriel represents an important touchstone for the Syriac/Assyrian heritage, one of the last distinctive physical manifestations of their history in Turkey. A broader question might also ask, why did monasteries as a whole become so symbolic of the Syriac/Assyrian heritage? Despite nationalist discourse linking modern Assyrians and Syriac diasporas to ancient pre-Christian (and pre-Islamic) empires, monasteries retain a vital place in the shared identities of each community. Likewise, how did they retain such a central role among Muslims well into the twentieth century?

Overall, I argue that John Bar Kaldoun's narrative, and the tenth century more broadly, serves as an inflection point: the moment when Christian communities of northern Iraq could recall a time within living memory when they experienced rapid growth, while anticipating the shift towards the late ʿAbbāsid era. The major events of the period – the collapse of the caliphate as a functional body, the conversion of the Kurds to Islam and their migration westward, and the eclipse of Syriac Christianity in the highlands – appear only faintly in the background, but show the change in society that happened at first gradually, and then very quickly. At the same time, these changes highlight the means by which Christian monasticism – and Christian communities as a whole – survived as a vital force in highland society into the modern era, through the place they established for themselves during the tumultuous years of the medieval period.

[18] Naures Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: identity discourses among the Assyrian/Syriac elites in the European diaspora* (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2011), 1-2.

Chapter Overview

The dissertation proceeds as follows, mapping out the history of Beit Ṣayyare in the context of its region, its culture, and the history of East Syrian monasticism in the Early Islamic Empire. The first chapter, **Mapping Northern Iraq: Islamic and Christian Views of Mosul and its Hinterland**, analyzes the place of northern Iraq in the conceptual frameworks of both Muslim and Christian intellectuals. Using medieval Islamic geographies, it illustrates how Muslim scholars often overlooked rural and inaccessible areas, providing only glimpses of the multireligious, multicultural world of northern Iraq. Jewish and Syriac Christian sources present the same region through a very different lens, one less centered on Mosul and more attentive to the village networks of its hinterland. The chapter also show how the highlands north and east of Mosul comprised a distinct territorial and cultural zone with its own links – economic, religious, and tribal – to the region's official network of roads and cities.

The second chapter, **Beit Ṣayyare: Envisioning a Tenth Century Monastery**, introduces the tenth-century Syriac history of the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare and discusses the narrative's survival through the twelfth-century manuscript Siriaco 467, now held in the Vatican. The narrative's author, John Bar Kaldoun, uses the life of his master Rabban Joseph as the basis for a wide-ranging account of the monastery's foundation, growth, and struggles, including revealing anecdotes surrounding its abbots and many of its monks. By probing the many episodes set in and around Beit Ṣayyare, I develop a picture of the monastery's spirituality, internal conflicts, and built environment. Comparison with other monastic chronicles from northern Iraq show often the events narrated by John Bar Kaldoun illustrate broader patterns in the development of the region's Syriac Christian culture. Other episodes provide glimpses into

the rural life outside the monastery and trace its connections to the surrounding villages and tribes.

The third chapter, **Demons, Wolves, and Witches: Folklore and Danger in the Hinterland** examines the reputation of monasteries as centers for miracles and healing that continues in the region to the present. It discusses the reception of late antique demonology through the transmission of late antique hagiography and the literature of spiritual guidance developed in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Anatolia. This chapter explores how the conception of demons forged in dialogue with these texts became predominant among Syriac monks, especially Evagrian theories and practice. It then compares Christian intellectual understandings of demons with village stories and artifacts about evil spirits, suggesting that the Evagrian ideas shaped a dialogue between local folklore and concerns with those of Syriac monks. The chapter ends by examining witchcraft and women as portrayed in the monastic chronicles, which often depict women as potential sources of corruption, but also give rare glimpses into women's diverse roles in village society.

In Chapter Four, **Growth and Flourishing: The Spread of Syriac Christianity in the Highlands**, I examine the rapid growth of Beit Ṣayyare as an example of how new monasteries could still be highly successful three centuries after the arrival of Islam. I use John's history to add new information about the peak of Christianization in Iraq, especially how Christian communities took advantage of the arrival of Muslim conquerors to carve out new spheres of influence in the highlands. A surge in missionary activity accompanied the construction of new monasteries as clerical and monastic leaders attempted to consolidate orthodox beliefs in multireligious villages through simplified theology and canon law. Finally, I use John's narrative and other monastic histories from northern Iraq to examine the monasteries' evolving

demography which included monks of Syriac, Persian and Kurdish descent. This analysis also provides clues as to why the missionary movement in northern Iraq ultimately slowed and stopped.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, **Falling Apart: Beit Ṣayyare and the Eclipse of Syriac Monasticism**, I read John's accounts of the destruction of Beit Ṣayyare as part of the ripple effect of the collapse of central governance in the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. Using John's descriptions of the problems that beset the monastery, the chapter examines why the monastery ultimately collapsed and how John and other highland monks interpreted the political turmoil as the result of their own spiritual shortcomings. In conjunction with political studies of the region, I suggest that the changes of the tenth century marked a definite shift from the period of flourishing that John's narrative captures and paved the way for Syriac monasticism's enduring but no longer expansive presence in Iraq.

Chapter One

Mapping Northern Iraq: Islamic and Christian Views of Mosul and its Hinterland

Introduction:

For the late ninth century civil servant al-Yaʻqūbī (d. 897), the highlands north and east of Iraq were hardly worth discussing. "Rough and harsh, always covered in snow," he wrote dismissively, adding, "[And their] inhabitants, the Kurds, have hard hearts."[19] The comment is all the more striking because he had previously served in Armenia, which he also describes as cold and undesirable, but apparently not as impassible as the mountainous regions. Al-Yaʻqūbī's concept of the highlands is characterized most of all by absence, specifically the lack of detail or interest – in its culture, inhabitants, or connections to the broader caliphate – that he shows in his other discussions of the Muslim world.

Al-Yaʻqūbī was not alone: most other Muslim geographers of the period – al-Istakhri (d. ca. 957), al-Muqaddasī (d. ca. 1000), Ibn Ḥawqal (d. ca. 978) – also bypass the highlands in their conception of the Islamic world, even though the area fell squarely within Islamic territory. Reading tenth-century Islamic geographies give an impression of an empire that was sprawling and far-flung; their guidebooks lead the reader to cities and villages along the high roads spanning the caliphate, but leave swathes of blank spaces between the main routes, especially where the terrain was rough and undesirable. During the ʿAbbāsid period (ca. 750-1258), none of these main roads led directly into the mountains. Instead, the primary routes followed much the same course that they had in Sasanian times, curving along the base of the highlands rather than leading through

[19] Aḥmad ibn Waḍīḥ al-Yaʻqūbī, *Le Pays*, trans. G. Wiet (Frankfurt: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science, 1997), 8.

them. To go to Anatolia, or modern-day Turkey, from Mosul, a traveler would either need to follow along the riverbank of the Tigris to Diyarbakir (estimated by Ibn Ḥawqal to take a journey of fourteen days) or to take the much more roundabout journey from Balad, just northwest of Mosul, to larger cities at Sinjar and Nisibis (modern-day Nusaybin in Turkey, on the Syrian border). As a result, by following the paths set out in the Islamic geographies, the typical traveler would never enter the highlands at all.

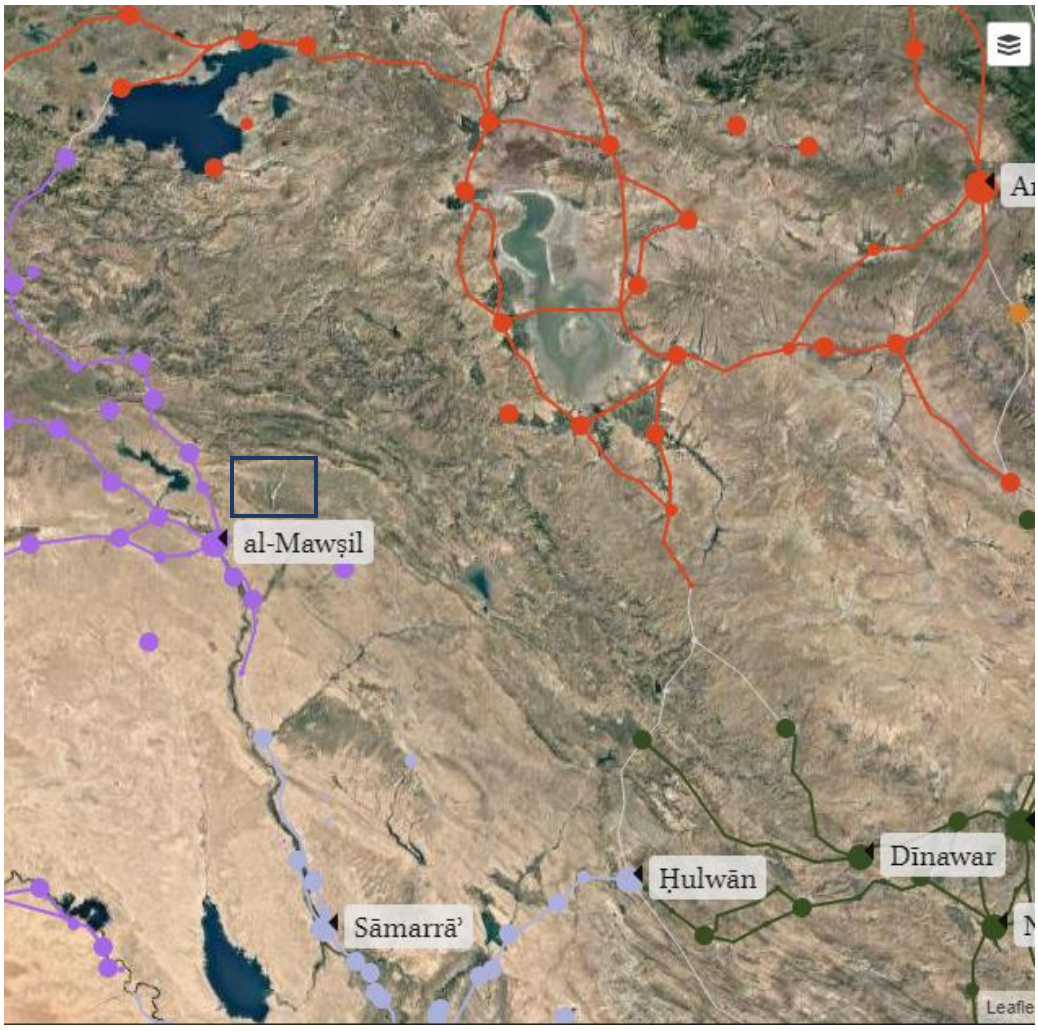

Figure 1: The main roads, as described by ninth and tenth-century Islamic geographers, skirted a wide path around the highlands. The blue square marked above Mosul roughly indicates the location where the monastic sources were composed.
Credit: al-Ṯurayyā Project, https://althurayya.github.io/

The writers of these geographies were well-educated Muslims, and they center the world on places of Islamic political, religious, and economic importance. But the areas which they pass over were the heartland of several religious and cultural traditions, including Syriac Christian communities with their own rich legacy of writing. Consequently, Syriac writings offer a chance to examine the Islamic world from below, providing a different angle on Islamic history and culture as well as the overlooked rural and agricultural corners of the caliphate. Their descriptions of Mosul, the highlands, and their interactions with the lowlands, combined with incidental references in Islamic writings, illustrate how the striking physical geography that differentiated the plains of northern Iraq from the highlands contributed to different imagined geographies. Subsequently, they also open the door to rereading the history of overlapping tribes, cultures, and religions that organized their own lands, as well as the space that they shared with Islamic centers of power, according to their own needs and customs.

The following sections examine the influence of topography on the relationship between Mosul, the largest urban center in lowland northern Iraq, and the highlands. It begins with a study of the geographical challenges of the area before moving to two separate perspectives on Mosul: how the city's history is represented by urban Muslim writers as opposed to its place in monastic histories. It also explores the role of topography in shaping early Islamic expansion, while also providing an environment in which cenobitic monasticism, which was also a recent arrival to the region, had begun to thrive. Finally, it traces the ways in which the two topographic zones, although separated in many ways, were also connected through personal and economic ties, and the myriad informal routes that did connect lowlands and highlands.

Topography of the Plains and Highlands

The north of Iraq has long been the seedbed of culture both literally and figuratively. Much of northern Iraq consists of wide alluvial plains, sustained by three great rivers: the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Great Zab. The ground is easily cultivated, since the area is rarely stony and the nutrients in the soil are replenished by the Tigris and Euphrates and their many offshoots, which flow from the mountains of southeastern Anatolia down to the wetlands that empty into the Persian Gulf. The Islamic geographers labeled the area between these three rivers, stretching from eastern Iraq to eastern Syria, al-Jazira, or "island," but of particular note is a large, roughly triangular area in the very north of the country, between the Tigris and the Great Zab, that contains the area's densest human settlement. The two rivers converge about forty-five miles south of Mosul, forming the point of the triangle, while the highlands to the north form the base. The fertility of the area and the easy access by water provided an ideal location for a settlement, and in ancient times, it had been the site of Nineveh, the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire from ca. 705-612 B.C. This area represented the farthest extent of the administrative centers in the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid periods. Flat and easily traversed, the plains of northern Iraq offer relative ease of movement and control; the major geographical divide is the Zagros Mountains, which separate Mesopotamia from the Iranian Plateau to its east and Anatolia to its north, but the majority of its territory constitutes a plain that lies open to Syria and the Levant to its west and the Hijaz to its south.

The highlands, by contrast, are dangerous and difficult to navigate. Consisting of the Zagros Mountains and their foothills about thirty miles north of Mosul, the land abruptly transitions from wide plains into peaks, rising from a base of 244 meters in Mosul proper to around 485 meters in Alqosh, and then sharply doubling, up above 1000 meters and in some cases to 2000 meters in the hills east of Dohuk, where the primary monastic sources were composed. A vivid

anecdote penned by the American missionary Justin Perkins (1805-1869) illustrates the sheer difficulty of maneuvering along the region's highland trails:

> We passed along the high cliff [of Kergan]. It hung frightfully over our heads, while the waves dashed angrily below. . . [The next day], crossing low, rocky ridges, [we] entered the district of Soldooz. On a former occasion, almost fourteen years ago, I travelled this way by the upper road, from the village of Sheitanava, near Dole, to Negaddah, the principle town of Soldooz; but the danger from the Koords on the mountains above was now considered as too great to allow us to go that way; and even on the lower road, near the lake, we were pointed, in a deep ravine, to the graves of several Persians recently murdered there by the Koords, and to the cave of a rocky ridge, nearby, that is much frequented as a den of robbers.[20]

Perkins' harrowing passage took place on the Iranian side of the border, several days journey from Mosul, but the language he uses to describe his journey – the narrow path, the limited sight lines, the ravine on one side and the cave on the other – gives a vivid impression of how rapidly the terrain changes. It was a landscape that was dangerous in and of itself, as well as, as Perkins notes, an ideal place for robbers.

The climate of the highlands is also wetter, colder, and less predictable than that of the lowlands. Most of the summer months are dry, but late fall, winter, and early spring see heavy precipitation in the form of either snow or rain. While Muslim geographers comment most often on the coldness of the mountains and the resulting snow and ice, monastic writers rarely mention cold but often dwell on the fear of floods.[21] In the tenth-century *Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya*, a monk attempts to return home to visit his parents, only to be caught in the swell of the water

[20] Justin Perkins, "Journal of a Tour from Oroomiah to Mosul, through the Koordish Mountains, and a Visit to the Ruins of Nineveh." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2 (1851): 72-73.

[21] There are two exceptions where monastic writers do mention cold. One is Thomas of Marga's description of an elderly monk, Rabban Mar Abraham of Beth Rabban Zkha-Isho, who moved from a monastery high in the mountains to Beth Abhe, "because of the cold (*qursha*) of this land of Dasen." *Book of Governors* 92, trans 214. The second is from John, commenting on Rabban Joseph's largesse to the poor: "Only one tunic (*kutna*), without a change, remained to him amidst all the severity of the deeply intense cold and great quantities of snow and ice that are found in that place." *Busnaya* 90 (folio 189).

during a flash flood and nearly drowns in the encounter.[22] In the *History of Beth Qoqa*, written near Adiabene, a group of villagers seek shelter on an island in the Great Zab, but face a similar fate: they are trapped when the waters suddenly rise and require a miraculous rescue by one of the monks of Beth Qoqa.[23] Fear of sudden, violent flooding remained a problem in modern times; in the course of his journey, Perkins comments on the difficulty of crossing the same river, marveling that the Great Zab was narrower than the Connecticut River but far more treacherous:

> The river here, at this season, is at least half as broad as the Connecticut is in Massachusetts, and with its powerful current is probably more than half as full. . . It must have been low at that time, judging from the width of the stream where we crossed it, which we thought to be seven hundred feet. No bridges now exist on the Zab, after it leaves the mountains; nor could they be supported, so powerful is the current when swollen, and so easily, on these alluvial plains, are its shores washed away.[24]

Climatological studies on the Dohuk region have reported winter rainfalls of up to 560 mm (22 inches) during December and January, nearly four times as much as the rainiest month in Seattle, tapering off to one or two inches per month in shoulder seasons before and after winter.[25] Sudden, heavy storms in fall and winter and melting snow in spring can lead to flash flooding, and in at least one case, the prevalence of flash flooding caused a serious loss for scholarship; in the 19th century, the monks of the monastery of Rabban Hormizd, on the edge of the highlands just above Alqosh, hid a trove of manuscripts outside the walls for fear of Kurdish raiders, but they were lost when the river rose and swept them all away.[26] Like the mountains themselves, the waters could be treacherous and far more unpredictable than Mosul's serene canals; although the Tigris posed

[22] *Busnaya* 87 (folio 0184).
[23] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, ed. Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1908), 233-234.
[24] Perkins, *Journey of a Tour from Oormiah to Mosul*, 107, 108.
[25] Meeran Akram Fawzee, Samira M Salh, and Slahaddin A. Ahmed, "Statistical Distribution of Rainfall in Kurdistan-Iraq Region," Al-Mustansiriyah Journal of Science 30, no. 4 (2020): 22.
[26] E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar-'Idtâ: The Syriac Texts Edited with English Translations* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), xxiii.

dangers for travelers near Mosul, it could be crossed by bridge or ferry in a relatively reliable manner, but the same was not always true for the Upper and Lower Zab and their tributaries that flowed in the highlands. All of these features – the rugged, forbidding landscape, the cold and temperamental climate, and the challenges of living in the area – separated the highlands geographically from the sophisticated Muslim-ruled cities that lay only a handful of miles away.

The difficulty inherent in traversing this rugged topography limited political power in both ancient and Islamic times. Xenophon, whose retreat took him across the eastern edge of the mountains near Lake Urmia in 401/400 BC, illustrates many of the difficulties that an invading army might face:

> And Cheirisophus ascended the summit before any of the enemy were aware of it. Then he led on more slowly, and as each part of the army went over the peak, it followed him down to the villages in the hollows and nooks of the mountains. . . When the last of the Greeks were descending into the villages from the summit, when it was already dark (for since the road was narrow, their ascent and descent into the villages took all day), then some of the Carduchians gathered together and attacked the ones at the end.[27]

The "hollows and nooks" of the mountains and the physical exhaustion of ascending and descending the slopes presented a forbidding challenge, compounded by an enemy that knew how best to use it. The Carduchians used this to their advantage, hurling rocks and arrows down from peaks and then rapidly moving to others when the Greeks got too close, surprising the Greeks in narrow ravines and unbeaten tracks, and ambushing them again and again. The Greek army also battled with storms and fog that prevented them from seeing the Carduchians, and, like Perkins, struggled with the swift currents of the mountain rivers, which proved difficult to cross: "When they made their attempt, the water appeared to be more than breast-deep, and the riverbed was rough with large and slippery stones. It was not possible to hold one's weapons in the water, or if

[27] Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Wayne Ambler and Eric Buzzetti (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), IV:1:7, 10. The Carduchians are often read as Kurds.

one did, the river swept them off."[28] The combination of rough terrain and an enemy that could take advantage of it made it difficult to sustain a conventional army in the highlands, and thus limited the ability of urban centers to extend political control.

Like Xenophon, Syriac writers in the Islamic period also represent the landscape as an aid to resisting intrusion by outsiders, particularly those who represented the administration in Mosul. A common theme in monastic histories is the unsuccessful tax collector, who has been haplessly driven away by noncompliant villagers. Thomas of Marga, writing in 840, praises the villagers of Zarn, who beat a tax collector until he fled back to his city.[29] The attacks on tax collectors – mentioned as well by Benjamin of Tudela three centuries later in his description of mountain Jews, some of whom also refused to pay taxes – stemmed less from any organized hostility than the realization that outsider officials were unable to enforce the government's will.[30] This resistance sometimes applied to ecclesiastical officials as well – when a bishop attempted to take a jeweled Gospel from the mountain monastery of Beth ʿAbhe, the monks rioted and beat him, despite his sacred office.[31] In modern times, the rugged topography was still a valuable ally in fending off incursions. The American missionary Dwight Marsh, writing in 1857, wrote that the Kurds used the steep ascents at the base of the mountains to fend off sheep raids by the lowland Bedouins every spring, thus deploying the landscape against nomadic intruders as well as military expeditions.[32] Drawing from the work of James Scott, Hannah Lena-Hagemann has analogized the mountains north of Mosul to a "shatter zone" where outside forces had difficulty penetrating,

[28] Xenophon, *Anabasis*, IV:3:6.
[29] Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, 293-294, trans. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840 Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2003), 523.
[30] Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 76.
[31] Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 102: 229-230.
[32] Kamal Salibi and Yusuf Khoury, ed., *The Missionary Herald: Reports from Northern Iraq, 1833-1870*, vol. 3 (Amman, Jordan: Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, 1997), 151.

and though the term deserves further qualification, a number of writers, both ancient and modern, also describe the mountains as areas where lowland authorities struggled to establish a presence.[33]

Travel narratives of all eras are united in how forbidding the highlands were, and monastic sources capture that danger as well. Like Perkins' description of perilous mountain travel and Xenophon's stories of constant ascent and descent, many of the stories in the monastic histories explicitly locate their events on a slope. A wild goat wails from the crags *above* the monastery as she mourns her slain kids.[34] The monks move downhill to villages and arable land *below*.[35] The cell of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta is located within the monastic walls, above the well but below the church.[36] In one anecdote, which hints at the pitfalls of living in this region, the *Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya* describes the process of building a watermill on the Ṣaphna River, which traces its path through the Ṣaphna Valley floor in the midst of the highlands. The monastery, perched on the slope of a mountain, lay some distance away, and the monks had to travel down to build the mill. As they worked in the valley below, several rocks dislodged from the top of the slope and hurtled towards them:

> Right after (the workers had set up a table near a tree to eat), a boulder broke away from the mountain above the tree. The boulder, which was like a mountain itself, came down, bringing many other huge rocks with it and tearing up another tree by the roots, and burying it under rocks so completely that no one could see it [anymore].[37]

The chronicler interprets the avalanche as an act of Satan to prevent the monastery from growing, but the fact that it remained etched in the monks' memories also incidentally reveals the danger

[33] Hagemann, "Limits of Imperial Control," 30. Hagemann qualifies her characterization by stating that the Jaziran north was not entirely a shatter zone. For the theory of shatter zones and the effects on highlands on government control, see James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
[34] *Busnaya* 99 (folio 0206).
[35] *Busnaya* 123 (folio 0259).
[36] *The Life of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 135, trans. 199.
[37] *Busnaya* 129 (folio 0264).

which the landscape itself posed to its inhabitants, and the steep grade of the land which formed their home.

The topography was challenging for human habitation, but the chronicles show that life in the highlands could be managed with the right approach. Even though the mountains form the most distinctive and forbidding aspect of this area, the landscape is highly varied, including hills, ravines, and river valleys, and the uneven topography creates multiple kinds of micro-environments, many of which are conducive to settlement. Whereas the soil of the plains is dry, flat, and sandy, the highlands are much rockier, but home to a diverse set of flora and fauna. Fruit and nut trees – pears, pomegranates, juniper berries, cherries – grew freely: one of the monastic rules forbade junior monks from eating summer fruit as part of their ascetic discipline, as they were easy to obtain, occasionally growing within the walls of the monasteries themselves.[38] The seventh-century monastic history of *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta* mentions that crops grown on monastic land included not just grain, but also, "millet, summer beans, cucumbers, melons, and other small herbs," as well as fruit trees, nut trees, herds of sheep and goats, and working animals including camels, mules, and donkeys, and local game.[39] Some of the land was devoted to vineyards, both for sacramental purposes and for daily use.[40] The monks also cultivated barley and wheat, which

[38] The monk Rabban Abdisho, for instance, was reputed to have gained the power of visions through his strict asceticism, and turned his miraculous ability to identify a junior monk who had been climbing one of the monastery's trees and stealing nuts. *Busnaya* 135 (folio 0283). Another story, more flattering to the junior monks, relates that one of them had found a pear, but rather than eating it himself, passed it around to the other monks. Despite the tempting fruit, none of them took a bite. *Busnaya* 152 (folio 0317). A fig tree also grew in the monastery of Beth 'Abhe. *Book of Governors* 351-351, trans. 611.

[39] *The History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta* 152, trans. 288. Ibn Ḥawqal also notes with approval the number of fruit trees that lowland Christian peasants near Mosul are able to cultivate; see, for instance, his discussion of Kafr ʿuzza on 211 and Balad on 213.

[40] Wine frequently features into stories in highland monastic chronicles, often kept privately in individual cells as well as used sacramentally. *Busnaya* 83 (folio 0176). Although Muslim nobles frequently visited Christian monasteries to partake of wine, they appear to have primarily kept to the lowlands along well-traveled routes; a list of more than fifty monasteries in contemporary *diyarat* poetry by al-Shābushtī, helpfully compiled by Elizabeth Campbell, recommends only a handful near mountains. Elizabeth Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters at Monasteries in the Early Islamic Middle East" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2009), 271-301.

made up the mainstay of the monastic diet in the form of hardened bread, although the lack of level ground made it difficult to grow on the same scale as the plains. Later missionaries commented that the lack of grain posed the major dietary need of the region, despite the other kinds of food that could be grown, and medieval writers likewise write of famine when the crop failed.[41]

Conversely, because grain was not as reliable or plentiful as in the lowlands, the highland diet was also probably richer than that of the plains. A highland monk, Ishoʿyahb, the ascetic founder of Mosul, scandalized the monks in the lowlands when he shared a portion of meat with some shepherds, showing that what was commonplace for him did not translate into lowland religious life.[42] The Syriac churches and the Church of the East in particular have a long tradition of strict vegetarianism among ascetics, but meat was part of a typical mountain-dweller's diet, and monks appear to have taken part regularly. In part, the lack of intensive habitation provided space for herds, and steep slopes, unsuited for farming, were ideal for pastoring. The lush mountain grasses were well-suited for sheep and goat herding, and less commonly cattle, who in turn provided milk and cheese.[43] Alongside these domestic animals, wild animals flourished. Wild sheep and goats, including the ibex, benefited from the same mountain grasses that fed their domestic counterparts, and in at least one incident, the monks hunted them for meat. The various streams yielded fish, and monks are shown roasting, boiling, and making them into stews.[44] These anecdotes, often in the context of real or expected dietary prohibitions, show an environment which

[41] *Busnaya* 56 (folio 0120). See also *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 151-52, trans. 227, and *Missionary Herald*, 187.
[42] Anthony Alcock, trans. *Chronicle of Seert*, 47.
[43] Like the story of the fruit, the availability of cheese is partly known through a story of prohibition. One monk ventured to a village, where he was permitted to eat anything that was offered to him, but not to make requests; he craved cheese and violated monastic protocol by asking another villager to give him some. *Busnaya* 134 (folio 0274).
[44] *Busnaya* 132 (folio 0269). See also William Rupert Hay, who reports that the Zab was abundant in fish. William Rupert Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer, 1918-1920* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd., 1921), 30.

would sustain its inhabitants but without the regularity that a monk might have in Mosul, where grain was consistently available.[45]

The topography of the highlands thus yielded two very different cultures, creating a natural separation between the urban fabric of the Islamic world and the less-accessible rural areas to the north. In continuity with al-Ya'qūbī's sweeping characterization of a region always covered with snow, both ancient and modern writings describe a forbidding, dangerous terrain, where hazards both natural and human made life difficult. Nevertheless, Syriac writings also show how the highland remained home to diverse human and animal populations who were able to make ample use of materials at hand, building a myriad of cultures that remain essentially off-screen from Islamic writers. As will be seen in the following sections, despite living on the margins of the empire, these groups also did not appear to consider themselves inferior to or satellites of the new Islamic urban centers, instead telling stories which placed themselves at the center and Islam at the periphery.

Mosul and its Surroundings

The center of Islamic political and cultural life in northern Iraq was Mosul, founded thirty miles from the foot of the highlands. The Islamic conquest of Iraq in the 640s had resulted in the absorption of huge territories and a rapidly shifting frontier, and Mosul had been part of the general campaign of city-building and resettlement that strategically secured the newly conquered territories. Established first as a garrison town in the 640s, it was greatly expanded and

[45] *Busnaya* 99 (folio 0206). The story is meant to demonstrate moderation: the disciple slew two goats, and the wailing of the mother goat moved Rabban Yohannon to bring them both back to life. Nevertheless, the casual acceptability of hunting and eating meat remains a striking departure from standard ascetic vegetarianism, as with Ishoʿyahb above.

incorporated as the capital of the new Diyār Rabīʿa province, which encompassed most of the Jazira. In keeping with Islamic practice with new cities elsewhere, the town was principally settled by reliably Muslim tribes from the Arabian peninsula, in this case most prominently the Azd tribe from Yaman.[46] In the late 920s or early 930s, a member of the Azd tribe, the *qāḍī* Abu Zakariyya Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Azdī, wrote a political history about Mosul's growth, its notable families, and its frictions with caliphal rule; although only one-third of his manuscript now survives, it remains the predominant source of information on Mosul's early Islamic history. Al-Azdī's interest in prominent families in particular provides a detailed social history of the city and its phases of growth and redefinition, while another major work by the tenth-century geographer Ibn Ḥawqal describes its economy and its position within the empire. These two sources remain the primary contemporary sources of information about early Islamic Mosul.

Mosul underwent several transitions during the seventh and eighth centuries, moving from garrison town to administrative center to a multicultural commercial city. Although Mosul had been founded for military purposes, annual offensives in the late seventh century quickly pushed the border between Byzantium and the caliphate from northern Mesopotamia and Syria deep into Anatolia, leaving Mosul relatively secure from the fear of counterattack. Consequently, by the late seventh century, Mosul was free to evolve in new directions, developing into a center of administration, production, and trade. Whereas other new Islamic cities retained their distinctive tribal identities, Mosul transitioned away from its roots as the home of the resettled Azd tribe and became multicultural, attracting Arab Muslim settlers - including from the rival cities of Kufa and

[46] Brian Ulrich, *Arabs in the Early Islamic Empire: Exploring Al-Azd Tribal Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 196. For the special role of cities in early Islamic society and theology, see Paul Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh Through Tenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), especially 226-27.

Basra – as well as Kurdish immigrants from several different tribes.[47] Situated on the Tigris, at the juncture of major roads to the west, the Caspian, and the new Islamic cities to the south, Mosul lay at the center of several major trade networks by both water and land, "the commercial center of (Iranian) Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, and Syria," as Ibn Ḥawqal summarized it.[48] Its access to fertile farmland included fields planted with wheat and groves of fruit trees, such as dates and vineyards, while the rapidly flowing river permitted the construction of several mills, including a type specific to Mosul, the *'urub*, a fine piece of Islamic engineering in which the mill was suspended by chains in the middle of the Tigris rather than relying on a waterwheel.[49] The quantity of wheat imported into the city yielded several million gold dirhams per annum and testified to the richness of its farmland.[50] Its location on vital trade routes and the fertility of its land soon enriched not only the city's landed families, but also its reputation as a local hub. Reminiscing about his time in Mosul in 969/358, Ibn Ḥawqal describes the magnificent markets – "two, three, or four for every kind of specialty, each one having more than a hundred shops," stone houses, and mosques, an artificial canal – a key source of drinking water – public baths, inns, spacious public squares, and cobblestone streets, added in the late seventh century by the Marwanid caliphs to mark its

[47] As of the late tenth century, the Arab tribes in Mosul included the Banu Fahd, the Banu Imran, the Banu Shakhak, the Banu Awad, the Banul-Djarud, the Banu Khaddash, Sadamites, Omarites, and the Banu Hashim, and the Kurdish tribes the Hadhbaniya, Humaidiya, and Lariya. See Muḥammad Abū'l-Qāsim Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration de la terre*, trans. J.H. Kramers and Gaston Wiet (G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose: Paris, 1964), 209.
[48] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration*, 209. Robinson has argued that the transition from garrison city to commercial center was unnatural and resulted from deliberate social engineering on the part of the caliphs. Chase F. Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), x. But the natural resources in the area, as well as its location relative to other areas of the empire, provided significant advantages in and of themselves and already laid the preconditions for its later commercial success.
[49] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration*, 208, 213. Waterwheels in the Islamic world sometimes used water power alone, but often combined water with animal power. See Thorkild Schiøler, Roman and Islamic Water-lifting Wheels (Odense: Copenhagen, 1973), 98-99, which discusses waterwheel technology on the Euphrates. The design of the *'urub* was therefore especially innovative, presumably maximizing efficiency by immersing as much of the wheel in the current as possible and encapsulating Mosul's position as an intellectual and cultural hub.
[50] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration*, 211.

transition to an administrative center.[51] He equally admires the inhabitants of the most prosperous quarters, primarily Yamani Muslims of old family lines.[52] Mosul's distinctiveness thus rested in its economic and cultural rather than political power, and as such, its rulers showed little interest in aggressively pursuing territorial expansion.

The one area in which Mosul did engage in military conflict was in minor clashes with the central Islamic government in the eighth and ninth centuries. Economic prosperity, combined with a significant distance from the various capitals of the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid periods – Damascus and Raqqa to its west and later Kufa, Baghdad, and Samarra to its south – let Mosul's notables develop a rebellious streak, both religious and political. Religiously, Mosul's nobles were highly sympathetic to Kharijism, the Islamic movement that rejected caliphal rule and emphasized piety as the only test of Islamic leadership, and the city was subject to several expeditions to quell potential Kharijite revolts during the eighth century.[53] Later, an attempt at tax revolt in 796-797 was quickly put down by the ʿAbbāsid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809), who finally demolished its walls to prevent future rebellions.[54] But the fact that the walls could be demolished at all, leaving Mosul unprotected and open, was perhaps the final indication that Mosul's initial role as a garrison town was no longer necessary in the larger scheme of the caliphate, and that it had fully embraced a new identity as a center of cultural diversity, commerce, and innovation. At the end of the ninth century, after being roiled by Kharijite raids, it would once again assert its

[51] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration*, 208-209. Mosul's canals filter into John's text as a metaphor for serenity: "His mind was like a canal (*šqitha*) [full] of water." *Busnaya* 70 (folio 0145).
[52] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La configuration*, 209. The fact that both Kufans and Basrans lived together in the old quarters suggests that Mosul was not defined as either a northern or southern Yamani city.
[53] Pockets of Kharijism flourished throughout the caliphate, but it was especially rooted in the Jazira; troops from Mosul marched in Kharijite armies, and ties between Mosul's notables and Kharijite leaders allowed considerable rebel influence over the city. See Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 148-149. The local brand of Kharijism accepted Abu Bakr and ʿUmar but rejected ʿAlī and ʿUthmān as legitimate rulers, and of course both the Umayyads and ʿAbbāsids. Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 114.
[54] Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 80.

independence, but this time more cannily; the governor of Mosul, ibn Ḥamdan, would gradually assume more responsibilities, eventually declaring himself, along with the governor of Aleppo, as emirs, but never formally breaking with the caliph. The Ḥamdanid period introduced a brief period of stability during the tenth century before the city fell to Buyid forces in 978.

Less discussed by Muslim writers, but equally important, was the city's large non-Muslim population. Mosul is a prime example of the "Dark Matter" thesis outlined by Jack Tannous, in which non-Muslims constitute much of the city's population but rarely appear in Islamic texts. In sketching Mosul's overarching history, Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Azdī focus on the history of the faithful – both Kurdish and Arab – and devote little space to the non-Muslims who lived in the city. Al-Azdī's only surviving reference to Christians involves the forced seizure of part of the West Syrian Mor Thomas church in 779; although the Christians appealed to the caliph al-Mahdī, a large part of the church was destroyed and a mosque dedicated to the caliph either built or rebuilt on its grounds.[55] However, Mosul was far more religiously mixed than their writings suggest, housing a large number of both Christians and Jews with their own patterns of development, connections, and rivalries. Although new Muslim cities were supposed to be free of non-Muslim places of worship, Mosul boasted several built after the conquest.

A parallel to the non-Muslim presence in Mosul might be the development of Baghdad – founded in 763 as the capital of the new ʿAbbāsid empire and also a new city, which should have theoretically been dedicated exclusively to Muslims and yet saw the growth of substantial non-

[55] Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 11. The particulars of the case are cloudy: was it the case that the church, which was at that point the Syriac Orthodox cathedral church, had encroached on the mosque's property, in which case the caliph restored balance between the two communities (despite an attempted Christian bribe)? Or was the caliph's visit an opportunity for local Muslims to expand the mosque? Robinson accepts the first explanation, although the second appears more likely, especially in light of the fact that the mosque then became the congregational mosque of Mosul, which suggests enlargement from its original hypothetical structure.

Muslim communities and landmarks. As Joshua Mugler has documented, despite the ostensible prohibition on building non-Muslim houses of worship, Baghdad quickly included dozens of churches and monasteries belonging to various Christian sects.[56] Jewish demographics from the middle ʿAbbāsid period are lacking, but at least by the time that the Jewish Navarran traveler Benjamin of Tudela visited Baghdad in 1173, he counted twenty-eight synagogues, suggesting a wealthy and sizeable population.[57] Hence, even though Baghdad was planned from the top-down as a Muslim city, the character of the city was also reshaped organically by the large non-Muslim communities who were drawn there.

Like Baghdad, Mosul included growing non-Muslim as well as Muslim communities. Before Mosul's founding, the area had already been the home of both East and West Syrian Christians as well as Jews and polytheists. Nevertheless, after Mosul's initial phase as a garrison town, new churches and monasteries were constructed within the city walls. The main Christian population in the city was East Syrian, and they continued to build new churches and monasteries during the ʿAbbāsid period to accommodate their growing numbers. Besides their cathedral, Mar Ishʿaya, two additional churches, Mar Pethion and Ṭāhra of the Chaldeans, are attested in the tenth century.[58] In addition, a number of small East Syrian monasteries existed in or near the city, including Mar Gabriel, Mar Yonan, and Mar Elia.[59] Three other churches belonging to their Syriac-speaking rivals, the Syriac Orthodox or West Syrians, were built in the eighth century, two of which were referred to as "Churches of the Takritans." Since Takrit was a major center of the

[56] Joshua Mugler, "Recent Constructions: How the Churches of Classical Baghdad Were Built" in *Muslim World* (Hartford) 107, no. 3 (2017): 502.
[57] Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. Marcus Nathan Adler (New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1907), 64.
[58] J. M. Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne: Essai sur l'histoire, l'archéologie et l'état actuel des monuments chrétiens de la ville de mossoul*. (Beirut: Impr. Catholique, 1959), 103.
[59] Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne*, 21, 36.

Syriac Orthodox Church north of Baghdad, these names indicate that a wave of Christian immigrants came to Mosul from Takrit well over a century after Mosul was founded.[60] Finally, evidence for the Jewish presence in Mosul is fragmentary, but judging from scattered references elsewhere, the city must have included at least three synagogues by the twelfth century, one of which had been elevated in the eleventh century to an exiliarchate, showing both its prestige and intellectual influence.[61] Both Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Ratisbon report around seven thousand Jews living in Mosul in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, respectively.[62]

These measures indicate that Mosul was not simply a Muslim city built on top of the remnants of an older, pre-Islamic culture, but rather a hub for non-Muslims as well as Muslims, and that its economic and cultural opportunities attracted immigrants from all groups. As in other parts of the Islamic world, of course, this coexistence could often shift into various forms of suppression. During the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, for instance, several churches in Mosul were pulled down or converted into mosques in 849 and 853 on the grounds that they were post-conquest constructions and thus forbidden under the Pact.[63] The legality of new churches on Muslim ground was hazy, and their continued existence depended on the disposition of the authorities and the goodwill of the Muslim populace. The skyline of Mosul changed as, in more permissive times, new houses of worship rose and, in more restrictive times, fell. However, the whole picture is dynamic rather than one of gradual non-Muslim decline, as both East Syrians and West Syrians built even more churches and monasteries during the periods of Seljuk and Mongol occupation in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

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[60] Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne*, 25, 103.
[61] Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish Literature* (New York: Ktav Publishing Inc., 1931), 479.
[62] Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 42. Petachia of Ratisbon, *The Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, trans. A. Benisch (London: Messrs. Trubner & Co.), 21-23.
[63] Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne*, 36.

Partly because both Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants continued to settle in the city, it is difficult to guess the demographic proportion of Muslims to non-Muslims in ninth or tenth century Mosul, but the balance may have been roughly equivalent or even tilted towards non-Muslims. Despite Islamic narratives that put the dramatic emphasis on Mosul's Muslim inhabitants, the many new Christian and Jewish houses of worship suggest a large and thriving population. As late as 1541, after the area had undergone considerable Islamization, an Ottoman census showed that the number of Christians in Mosul remained high at 37%.[64] Additionally, if one extends the territory to include the precincts outside the city, the demographics skewed rapidly towards non-Muslims; Ibn Ḥawqal noted that as one traveled away from Mosul for more than ten miles in any direction – east to Bashiqa and Bartella or Kafr-Azza, south to Haditha, north to Balad – the religion of the population shifted suddenly and solidly towards Christianity, either in the form of Arab Christian tribes or the farms of the *shahrigan*, rural landowners and their tenants.[65] This picture suggests that during at least part of this period Muslims may have been the minority or only a bare majority within the city that they had built.

In the eyes of al-Azdī and Ibn Ḥawqal, Mosul was many things - garrison town, cosmopolitan trading post, center for craftsmanship and innovation, the home of distinguished Muslim families and fine old architecture. By the tenth century, it had more than three centuries of Islamic history, dating back nearly as far as the conquest. But it also had a parallel Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian history, one which is nearly invisible in the Islamic sources but continued to make up a significant part of the city's culture during the ʿAbbāsid period.

[64] Thomas Carlson, "Syriac in a Diverse Middle East: From the Mongol Ilkhanate to Ottoman dominance, 1286-1517." *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2018), 722.
[65] Ibn Ḥawqal, 211.

Mosul as Part of the Christian Landscape

Islamic narratives place the hinterland at the margins, but in Syriac narratives, it is Mosul that exists on the periphery of the highlands, on the edge of the center of Christian asceticism and the pursuit of holiness. As a result, there is sometimes a disconnect between the official views of Christians as subordinate to Muslims, and the texts of the Christians themselves, which often seem at least partly oblivious to their status. A popular legend relates that in the early days of Islam, the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattab (r. 634–644), summoned the Syrian Christian leaders to see him. As People of the Book, he explained, they were under his protection and entitled to the right to continue worshiping according to their tradition, but they would also be subject to certain restrictions. Accordingly, the Christians came up with a set of promises to define their secondary status. Among them were the following:

> We shall not build in our cities or in their neighborhood, new monasteries, churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall into ruin or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.
> We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims.
> We shall only use clappers in our churches very softly.
> We shall not raise our voices in church services or in the presence of Muslims, nor shall we raise our voices when following our dead.[66]

Though the Pact exists in several variations and has several origin stories, these promises quickly became one of the guiding legal principles for the place of Christians under Islamic rule.[67] The Pact provided an idealized standard, though enforced unevenly and inconsistently, which

[66] Al Ṭūrṭūshi, *Siraj al-Mulūk*, trans. Bernard Lewis, *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 218.
[67] The variations of the pact and its origins are discussed in Milka Levy-Rubin, "The Pact of ʿUmar," in David Thomas ed., *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations,* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81-85. It is variously dated to the eighth or ninth century. See Maher Y. Abu-Munshar, "In the Shadow of Muslim-Christian Relations: A Critical Analytical Study to the Narration of the Pact of ʿUmar," *Al-bayan Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021), 19-22, for an argument for a mid-ninth century date.

regulated the social place of Christians relative to Muslims, including restrictions on clothing, mode of transportation, and the ability to carry weapons. In occasional circumstances, it also provided the justification for the destruction of Christian property which was believed to infringe on Muslim rights.[68]

In the memory of the Christian communities of northern Mesopotamia, however, the Pact of 'Umar carried a very different meaning. In a version of the events preserved among the Christians of Tur 'Abdin, the caliph liked Christians so much that he encouraged them to be as noisy as they liked. An eleventh-century chronicler narrated that the head of the local monastery, Mor (St.) Gabriel, had met with the caliph and come to his own version of the agreement:

> Now Mor Gabriel went to the ruler of the Hagarenes, who was 'Umar the son of Khattab, in the city of Jazira. ['Umar] received him with great joy, and after a few days, [Mor Gabriel] asked his written permission… that the sound of the church clappers would not cease, and that they might sing anthems before the body of a dead man from the moment when he leaves his house to be buried, along with many other customs. And ['Umar] rejoiced that the holy man had come to see him, and [Mor Gabriel] returned to his monastery in high spirits.[69]

In this version, the anecdote relates the same events as the Pact but comes to the opposite conclusion, one in which the government sees no need to interfere with the existing social structure in the hinterlands. The tone of the text is probably sincere rather than subversive: to this day, churches in the area greatly outnumber mosques.[70] The setting where the anecdote was written was one where, as a different eleventh-century chronicler mentions, the predominantly

[68] See, in particular, Dridi, who discusses cases of both destruction and restoration in eighth and ninth-century Fustat. Audrey Dridi, "Christian and Jewish Communities in Fustāt: Non-Muslim Topography and Legal Controversies in the Pre-Fatimid Period" in Robert G. Hoyland ed., *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2015), 118.
[69] Andrew Palmer, *A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Qartmin Trilogy: Being the Lives of Samuel of Eštin, Simeon of Qartmīn, and Gabriel of Bēṭ Qūsṭān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72. I have modified Palmer's translation slightly for clarity.
[70] I was struck by the humor in the anecdote after a trip to Tur 'Abdin in November 2019, where the density of churches and Christian or formerly Christian villages is apparent.

Christian inhabitants of one highland village could offer to buy out their Muslim neighbors; when the Muslims accepted and left for other parts, the remaining villagers broke up the mosque and reused the stones for their own purposes, and also expanded their lands to include an abandoned village and vineyard nearby.[71] Needless to say, none of this fits with the image given by the Pact of 'Umar or Islamic law more generally, and it demonstrates how the social realities of the region differed from what a reader might imagine from the official line.

Viewing the highlands as a cultural center in their own right helps in interpreting Mosul's second origin story, preserved in two East Syrian works, the ninth century *Book of Chastity* and the eleventh century *Chronicle of Seert*, emphasizes its origins as a Christian foundation. In this version, Mosul was created by a monk named Ishoʿyahb bar Qusre in the 590s. After studying in the mountains with the famous ascetic Mar Ayob the Persian, Ishoʿyahb returned to his native Nineveh. There, he astonished both Syriac Orthodox Christians – the West Syrian theological rivals to Ishoʿyahb's Church of the East – and polytheists alike by crossing the Tigris miraculously after taming it with his cloak, a feat reminiscent of the Biblical prophet Elijah.[72] Having demonstrated his mastery over both the inhabitants and the natural landscape of the area, he built a church and a small monastery. The story claims that his initial settlement was then expanded by the Persian king Khosrow II, who added a garden and walls, and only decades later by the Arabs.[73] Ishoʿyahb's church, which was named Mar Ishaʿya after the Biblical prophet Isaiah, would become

[71] Andrew Palmer, *A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Qartmin Trilogy: Being the Lives of Samuel of Eštin, Simeon of Qartmīn, and Gabriel of Bēṭ Qūṣṭān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 249-250. The anecdote in question is from the *Book of Life*, a chronicle of the village of Beth Svirina (modern-day Basebrin/Bsorino), folio XIV, p.21. Muslim writers of the period also mention villages in north Syria where there had once been a mosque, but which were now entirely Christian, underscoring the tenuousness of Islamic identity in the countryside. Carlson, "Contours of conversion," 792.
[72] Anthony Alcock, trans. *Chronicle of Seert*, 47, cf. 2 Kings 2:8. See also Ishoʿdnah of Basra, *Le livre de la chastete*, trans. J.B. Chabot (Rome: L'école française, 1896), 28, trans. 32.
[73] Anthony Alcock, trans. *Chronicle of Seert*, 47.

the cathedral church for the Church of the East in Mosul.[74] Mosul thus exists in this retelling as an outpost of Syriac asceticism, rather than an imperial center of a new religion, even though it eventually served that purpose as well.

Hence, although Mosul's administration itself did not reach out into the highlands to incorporate them into the Islamic world, the inhabitants of the highlands themselves forged cultural and economic ties with Mosul. Within the city itself, not only was the East Syrian cathedral church built by a highland monk, but Beit Hale, another seventh-century East Syrian church in Mosul, was reportedly founded by a monk named Rabban Symeon, a disciple of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta, the subject of one of the earliest monastic chronicles.[75] The East Syrian church of Mar Pethion, which is mentioned in a tenth century chronicle as being located in Mosul on the shores on the Tigris, is named after a fifth century saint who preached in the mountainous region near Erbil.[76] These naming conventions within the city provide a glimpse of how tightly linked the non-Muslim religious life of Mosul continued to be with the pre-Islamic geography of monastery, village, tribe, and synagogue that still made up much of the hinterland.

Although no major roads led into the highlands, opportunistic traders created their own patterns of travel among highland villages and down into Islamic cities. One of the earliest and most striking stories, preserved in the *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, describes a cattle rustler who traveled from deep in the highlands to steal a prize bull:

> A certain bald (*qriḥa*) man from the village of Beth Qadshaye, which is in Marga, had a bull, truly a very great bull. And while [the bull was] among the herd, and the herdsman was asleep, some men passed by, and led him away, and departed. . . And the [bald man] rose up and came to [Rabban Bar-ʿIdta]. When he had heard his story, Rabban said to him, "Swear to me in the name of God that you will not expose the thief, that the power [over

[74] Fiey, *Mossoul chretienne*, 103.
[75] Fiey, *Mossoul chretienne*, 35. Thomas of Marga claims that Mosul passed to the Azd family through the blessing of the monks of Beth Abhe. *Book of Governors* 656 (386).
[76] Fiey, *Mossoul chretienne*, 123.

> his fate] may fall into my hands, and [that] he will not lose anything either from his person or his money." And he swore by the Living God, [saying], "I will not expose the thief." Then the blessed old man said to him, "Behold, your bull is hidden in the house of the thief Layolokh, who is from the village of Beth Zakho. And they are now ready to carry him and sell him in Beth 'Edrai. But go quickly, and ask for it from him secretly, and, behold, because of his fear he will allow you into his house. Take your bull, and come here secretly late at night." And the man, having done this, according to the word of the honorable old man, took his bull, and departed to his house in joy, and praised his Creator.[77]

The place names in the story reveal a wide range of travel. The man is from a village in Marga, the highland region northeast of Mosul above the Greater Zab. The thief, on the other hand, is originally from Beth Zakho, a village seventy miles northwest of Mosul, although he has apparently relocated much closer to the city. He has stolen the landowner's prize bull and is planning to sell it in Beth ʿEdrai, modern-day Baʿadra, in the lowlands just at the base of the mountains. The story both hints at widespread travel across the highlands – from Beth Zakho to Marga, and from Marga to Beth ʿEdrai – and passage from highlands to lowlands. Although only of marginal interest to Mosul's economy, the various villages of the highlands created their own economic links and ties among each other and with lowland towns.

Part of the reason for these economic ties to the lowlands was the need for refined or manufactured goods. Despite the ample raw materials that could be grown, hunted, or harvested in the highlands, more specialized goods required highland monks to make the trip to Muslim cities. In the eighth-century monastic chronicle *The History of Rabban Hormizd*, for instance, the monastic superior asks Rabban Hormizd to take some money to buy some oil either from the town of Ma'allethaye or Balad, both of which lie in the lowlands.[78] Oil was a good that the monastery needed for ritual purposes, such as baptism and ritual anointing, as well as practical matters such as light; the fact that Rabban Hormizd has been sent into town to buy it suggests that the monastery

[77] *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 183, trans. 278.
[78] *Rabban Hormizd*, 30-31:45-46.

unable to produce its own, and that such trips would have been regular excursions out of the highlands. Perhaps understandably, monastic writers are reticent to mention that purchases also included luxury goods rather than simple necessities, but Bar Hebraeus' accounts of goods taken in a Kurdish raid on the monastery of Mar Mattai lists in several places the kinds of the objects that must also have been bought on these trips: "They devastated the monastery and carried off the hangings of the temple, the vessels, crosses, chasubles, pastoral staffs and copes of the fathers. They also carried off the corn and the grain, and vast sums of gold, silver, and bronze."[79] The intricate craftsmanship that went into embroidered cloth and metal-worked crosses and staffs would have needed to come from Mosul or perhaps even farther away. In another incident, a tenth-century writer mentions that a monastic caravan was ambushed on its way to Mosul, and while the goods that they carried are not mentioned, ten mules were seized by bandits (quickly replaced by eleven mules, donated by local villagers), suggesting a sizeable load.[80] Monastic trade, or its existence, are not explicitly described in monastic chronicles, but incidental details such as these hint at well-established patterns through which both monks and other highland peoples routinely benefited from the new economic opportunities that Mosul and its suburbs presented.

Besides economic routes, spiritual routes, including pilgrimage, also created a flow of travelers between both highlands and lowlands outside of the main roads. The ninth century *Book of Chastity*, which details the monasteries which were founded by the followers of the sixth century saint Abraham of Kashkar and their locations, mentions several instances where monks from the highlands journeyed south to create new foundations in the plains, one as far south as Anbar (about seven days' travel south of Mosul, in Iraq proper). John bar Kaldoun mentions that the monks of

[79] Bar Hebraeus, *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, 492.
[80] *Busnaya*, 129 (folio 0263).

the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare, some sixty miles north of Mosul, traveled to the cathedral in Mosul once a year to celebrate Easter liturgy and to visit the city baths.[81] But the direction of travel also flowed from the lowlands up into the highlands, largely in the form of those seeking healing, exorcism, or simply advice. *The Life of Joseph Busnaya* mentions several believers from Mosul physically visiting the monastery, such as a Christian scribe who suffered pain in his hands.[82] In another case, the visitors stay for other reasons, such as a highland merchant from Dasen who first stops at the monastery on his way to Mosul to trade, but returns more permanently when he loses his wife and child to disease.[83]

Eventually, the reputation of the monasteries attracted urban dwellers from even farther afield. In the *Life of Joseph Busnaya*, the author, John Bar Kaldoun, describes helping his master, Rabban Joseph, process letters that have come to his monastery of Beit Sayyare from Christian priests and lawyers in Mosul and Baghdad (Rabban Joseph eventually tires of answering them and instead tells John to compose answers on his own).[84] Similarly, a blind man from Balad, a minor town north of Mosul, travels to visit the monastery of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta; the chronicler explains that in such cases, the monastery had designated a steward who would host the visitor in his cell until the holy man was ready to receive him, indicating a system to handle visitors without personal connections.[85] Such stories hint at an interest in highland monasteries that went beyond personal and familial connections and now included strangers who encountered the monastery through word of mouth.

[81] *Busnaya*, 133 (folio 0271).
[82] *Busnaya*, 88 (folio 0185).
[83] *Busnaya*, 147 (folio 0296).
[84] *Busnaya*, 82 (folio 0172).
[85] *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 45, trans. 68.

Hence, despite the physical separation between highland and lowland, the two zones were still connected. Culturally, the Christian and Jewish populations in the highlands were linked with their coreligionists down in the plains, creating traffic between the two areas. Economically, the opportunities presented by Mosul as a thriving center of commerce meant that the inhabitants of the highlands created their own routes and pathways, among themselves and down into Islamic cities, in order to trade and to bring back specialized goods. The volume of such travelers from the lowlands to the highlands was never more than a trickle compared to the amount of traffic that flowed on official roads, but the existence of such routes shows how, while there were no state efforts to extend Islamic control, their inhabitants partly integrated themselves into it.

Conclusion

Far from a single, comprehensive vision of northern Iraq that begins in Mosul and radiates outwards, the writers described above offer two competing senses of the landscape and the centers of importance. The first is the one taken by contemporary Islamic writers, who begin with the political center of Mosul and expand outward, describing the highlands and the sizeable Christian and Jewish populations of both city and country only in passing. The writers from the mountains, by contrast, rather than seeing themselves as marginal, focus on the minutiae of daily life in the countryside and ascribe to themselves an ancient spiritual heritage, of which Mosul is only an extension. Rather than describing a clear political/religious/administrative center around which everything revolves, the writers present overlapping networks which are only partly visible to one another. They illustrate how Mosul, as a major hub and commercial center, had a cultural and economic effect on the rural areas beyond its immediate control, while the pre-existing Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian inhabitants pursued their own independent interests and connections.

Their versions of Mosul's history highlight the underlying culture woven through the much more visible Islamic culture. They also vividly rearrange the reader's mental visual and audial impressions of the early Islamic Near East: alongside soaring minarets, churches and shrines; alongside or instead of an Arabic call to prayer, Syriac chants and hymns.

But by bringing both sets of writers together, a third element emerges: the dynamic by which the rugged topography separated the highlands and lowlands while also fostering unofficial links via trade and spirituality. Travel off the beaten path, whether down into the lowlands to buy and sell at Muslim markets, or up into the highlands in search of miraculous healing or pilgrimage, created new patterns of movement and interaction despite the difficulties in ruling the area directly. The following chapters describe the patterns of life in the highlands off-screen from the major events of Islamic history: rural and village society, the social importance of monasteries in a world without centralized control, the growing influence of Christianity, and, finally, how the two zones eventually converged.

Chapter Two

Beit Ṣayyare: Envisioning a Tenth Century Monastery

Introduction:

Monastic chronicles pull the reader from Mosul and ʿAbbāsid urban centers to the predominantly Jewish and Christian territories in the hinterlands. Although these chronicles comprise the primary lens for rural life in general, the monastery itself plays the central role in the narrative and deserves special attention. This chapter examines daily life within the monastery and its role in broader society, focusing on the tenth-century history of Mar Abraham of Beit Ṣayyare, a monastery of the Church of the East located some fifty miles north of Mosul. Told in the first person by the East Syrian monk John Bar Kaldoun, the narrative combines a hagiography of John's mentor, Rabban Joseph Busnaya, with stories of the many monks at Beit Ṣayyare over the three prior generations.[86] Its chronology encapsulates virtually the entire existence of the monastery, comprising only the eighty years from the founding of the monastery in the late ninth century to Rabban Joseph's death between 975 and 978. As the only extant East Syrian monastic source dating from the tenth century, it also provides an important point of continuity with previous histories from the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.

Originally written sometime in the late tenth century, several copies of John's manuscript survive, most notably one copied at the East Syrian monastery of Mar Elia, south of Mosul, in 1186. This copy was later taken to Europe by the East Syrian Beit Mamma family from Alqosh,

[86] Syriac monks generally only used their religious title and a single name rather than a patronymic or place of origin. However, John usually refers to Rabban Joseph as Rabban Busnaya, in a rare use of place of origin rather than given name. I use both below.

and given to the Vatican, where it was labeled Siriaco 467.[87] There, it was rediscovered many years later by the French priest Jean-Baptiste Chabot, who published a serial translation in French between 1897 and 1900 in the Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium.[88] The Vatican manuscript, Siriaco 467, now available digitally, is written in a clean eṣtrangela hand and comprises almost four hundred pages, of which part of a postscript appears to be missing, though the colophon remains intact. Chapter and section titles are marked irregularly, some in red ink at the top of each section, and others in black ink as marginal notes; otherwise, the margins are clean. Apart from minor fading and some damage to the final leaves, the manuscript is remarkably readable.

The narrative is only roughly linear, beginning with a biography of Rabban Joseph, then frequently jumping back and forth chronologically between John's own experiences and anecdotes passed down by Rabban Joseph and other monks. It also includes Rabban Joseph's modifications to Abraham of Kashkar's Rule specific to Beit Ṣayyare, which comprises several pages of instructions about the training of cenobites, tactics to use when faced with temptations, and stages of spiritual progression. At the beginning of each formal chapter break, John also devotes a lengthy introduction to his own theological meditations about the relationship between asceticism and the Trinity.[89] The manuscript thus crosses genres, working as a history, hagiography, theological work, and guide to monastic practice, making it an unusual – and rich –

[87] Mar Elia was destroyed by ISIS in January 2015. See "Iraq's Oldest Christian Monastery Destroyed by Islamic State," BBC News, January 20, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35360415.
[88] *Busnaya*, ii. The original manuscript can be found here: Digital Vatican Library, https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/detail/Vat.sir.467, last accessed 11/15/2022. While I have consulted Chabot's work, all translations herein are my own, and sometimes differ in significant ways from his readings. Each reference lists the page number of his translation and the folio number of Vat.sir.467.
[89] The continued meditations on the Trinity possibly hint at John's age at time of composition; he later writes that contemplation of the Trinity is the mark of a monk who has advanced very far in his spiritual exercises. . . though he of course insists that his work is in fact more like the words of Balaam, the pagan prophet who aided the Israelites only inadvertently. *Busnaya* 222 (folio 0426).

source among other monastic histories. A formal study of the manuscript and discussion of the history of the monastery was defended in a doctoral dissertation in 2018 by Ralph Barczok of the University of Konstanz, but much remains to be explored.[90]

The primary value of John's work is its intimate, human portrayal of rural life. It provides a personal experience of monasticism in such a way that makes day-to-day features of rural life visible, and it captures a moment of transition in which highland culture was shifting, retaining the dense network of Syriac Christianity but also foreshadowing the decline of monasticism that followed shortly thereafter. John's limited focus offers a change in scale; the history of Beit Ṣayyare is nearly the opposite of the works of the Islamic historians and geographers introduced in the previous chapter: rather than offering a grand overview of the region, it emphasizes the small, minute, even petty aspects of life outside major urban centers and roads. Because of his intense interest in depicting the lives of the monks, outside events and figures filter in largely through their effects on the monastery rather than direct storytelling. Consequently, his narrative foregrounds the highland culture surrounding Mosul – the web of monastery, church, village, and tribe – while the major political events which rocked the caliphate during the same time recede in importance.

This chapter examines through John's work in three phases. Beginning with a brief history of the monastery and its major figures, especially Rabban Busnaya, I outline how the monastery extended its reach through the region. I then move to its rhythms and spirituality, describing how the monastery operated internally on both a religious and social level, its

[90] Ralph Barczok, "Die Vita des Joseph Busnaya: Eine historische Quelle des Nordiraks des 10. Jahrhunderts" (PhD diss. University of Konstanz, 2017). Busnaya has also featured in J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chretienne*, 541-543 and 660-665, and David Wilmshurt's *The Martyred Church: A History of the Church of the East* (London: East & West Publishing Ltd, 2011), 226-227, largely to elucidate questions of geography.

idealized form, and the discrepancies that can be perceived between the lines in John's narrative. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining the world outside the monastery, especially the Kurds near Beit Ṣayyare and their connections to nearby regions. The resulting study of Beit Ṣayyare illustrates how a small rural community functioned and the networks that formed a world distinct from the administrative and political ambitions of the Islamic caliphate.

A Brief History of Rabban Joseph and Beit Ṣayyare

John's picture of Joseph Busnaya's life illuminates the tight-knit world of rural Syriac Christianity and the connections between highland and lowland settlements. Joseph was born in the small town of Beth ʿEdrai (already also known by its Arabic name Baʿadra, which it retains today), at the base of the highlands, about thirty-three miles north of Mosul. Beth ʿEdrai was located in the region known as Ba Busna, which gave Joseph his eponymic of Busnaya.[91] Taught psalm-singing, reading and writing, and concern for the poor and the stranger, all five children in Joseph's family developed a sharper religious bent than their parents intended, and as teenagers, Joseph and his younger brother, Gabriel, ran away to the monastery of Rabban Hormizd, located not far from their home on the mountain slope above Alqosh, with the dream of becoming monks. Their mother pursued them, begging them not to make any hasty decisions and instead to come back home with her. Joseph relented and returned to Beth ʿEdrai, but Gabriel did not, choosing instead to defy his mother and enter the monastic life. When Joseph eventually changed his mind years later and decided to become a monk around the age of thirty, he returned to the monastery of Rabban Hormizd, but by that time Gabriel had long since moved

[91] John states that Rabban Joseph died at 110, "more or less" (*ithir ḥasir*), meaning that he would have been born around 869 – an indication of some of the dating problems inherent in the text. *Busnaya* 239 (folio 0451).

on, journeying further north to the slopes above the Ṣaphna River to join the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare.[92]

After years passed, Gabriel died, and Beit Ṣayyare's abbot, Rabban Mousha, invited Joseph to move to Beit Ṣayyare and take his place. After reaching the status of a fully-fledged monk at the age of thirty-four, Rabban Joseph had strengthened his training by spending time in many monastic communities in both lowlands and highlands.[93] However, he had always maintained a cell at Rabban Hormizd and was reluctant to move. After Rabban Joseph had ignored his offer many times, Rabban Mousha sent a young novice, or cenobite, to gently tweak him for his continued rudeness:

> [Rabban Mousha] sent a cenobite who was called Mousha Bar Ṣayde, who was young and short of stature. . . and he went to the monastery and knocked on the door of Rabban [Busnaya's] cell, explaining that he was a novice of Rabban Mousha's. When Rabban [Busnaya] heard this, he quickly got up and hurried over to the door, opening it and letting [Mousha the cenobite] come inside. And, according to custom, Rabban sat down on his chair and the cenobite stood before him. And the cenobite asked Rabban, "Is there anyone else in the cell with you?" And Rabban said, "No, my son." The cenobite repeated his question a second and third time, and Rabban was surprised, and said, "I already told you that there is no one else here in the cell with me, my son."
>
> Then [Mousha the cenobite] leaped forward, grabbed Rabban's feet, and sent him tumbling over the chair. When Rabban got up, astonished. . . the cenobite said to him, "Forgive me, lord, and do not be angry with me, but I was carrying out Rabban Mousha's order." Then Rabban understood the reasons behind the action and grasped that the cenobite had not acted impulsively, and he set out to walk the road to Beit Ṣayyare.[94]

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[92] *Busnaya* 17-18 (folio 0047). John claims that Gabriel was also the abbot of Beit Ṣayyare for many years before his death: *Busnaya* 36 (folio 0080). I concur with Barczok that this seems unlikely, both because Gabriel was young when he died and because elsewhere in the text John strongly implies that Rabban Mousha succeeded Rabban Bar-Yalda directly. Ralph Barczok, "Die Vita des Joseph Busnaya," 93.
John also includes the unusual biographical detail that Joseph was especially close to his sister, the youngest of the family. She died young (*b-ʿalimuthā*), probably before puberty, since she received the divine reward for virginity despite not having undertaken religious orders. *Busnaya* 16, 36 (folio 0046, 0080)

[93] Rabban Joseph briefly stayed at Koumateh, the monastery of Mar Gabriel in Mosul, the monastery of Aphnimaran, and the monastery of Shamrak, while apparently retaining his cell at Rabban Hormizd. Monks from all his former monasteries attended his funeral. *Busnaya* 237 (folio 0448).

[94] *Busnaya* 40-41 (folio 0086-0087).

Rather than continuing to attempt to persuade Rabban Joseph with words, Rabban Mousha's message simply conveyed that he was being arrogant by refusing to take his brother's place. It worked - chastened, Rabban Joseph decided to join the community, met at the gate of Beit Ṣayyare by monks who celebrated his arrival and joked about his "special message" in good humor. Thereafter, he became heavily involved in the monastery and did not move again.

Joseph Busnaya's odyssey illuminates the world of Syriac village notables that flourished independently of major urban networks. By contrast, John's reveals a family with ties to the larger Islamic world. John provides only glimpses of his own life in offhand comments, but he sketches the picture of a man who was well-educated and previously enjoyed high social status. Raised in a Christian family of means, he was taught Arabic and only learned Syriac as a second language.[95] His family was anxious for him to make his way in the world, and he seems to have retained personal connections in Mosul after his monastic profession, possibly indicating that he was from the city or its suburbs originally.[96] His brother, who is never named but who appears in the narrative in several places, worked for the Ḥamdanid ruler of Mosul in some capacity – like many upwardly mobile Christians, possibly as a scribe or a physician.[97] John's brother frequently visited him at the monastery, and both of them received some spiritual instruction from Rabban Joseph.[98] John was thus part of the trend among the Christian elite of Iraq which saw a shift from Syriac to Arabic in the ninth and tenth centuries, though he notes that many

[95] *Busnaya* 82 (folio 0171).
[96] *Busnaya* 63 (folio 0132).
[97] Religious minorities in the caliphate gravitated to medical practice throughout the late medieval period, often rising to high ranks. See Thomas A. Carlson, "'The Garden of the Reasonable': Religious Diversity Among Middle Eastern Physicians, AD 1000-1500," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 81.1 (April 2022), 100. In the last quarter of the tenth century, contemporaneous to John's writing, al-Muqaddasī commented that most of the physicians in Syria were Christians. Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. Basil Anthony Collins (London: Centre for Muslim Contributions to Civilization, 1994), 166.
[98] *Busnaya* 60 (folio 0126).

letters written by urban priests and lawyers to the monastery were still composed in Syriac during his time at Beit Ṣayyare.[99]

John's brief description of himself upon entering monastic life indicates a man who was most likely already a mature adult, since he was suffering from chronic illness:

> Now at a previous time I, sinner that I am, wanted to depart this world [for the monastic life]. . . and I had heard about Rabban Joseph. . . and I told him that I wanted to put on the robes of an ascetic. He was glad for me, but he said, "It is [first] necessary for you to work in the cenobium, for God will command you later to rest in the cell." But I was very sickly – I was not able to walk by foot very much and used a mount [to get around] instead. And I had had a pain in my liver for about six years.[100]

However, a cup of blessed wine cured his liver (John was surprised that this would work; he complained, "It has been six years since I have drunk anything alcoholic at all – wine or anything like it – so why should I drink this unmixed wine now?"), and the grueling work that he undertook at the salt mill and the bakery as a novice appears to have hardened him; he mentions with pride how he eventually could labor for hours.[101] He completed his cenobitic period six years before Rabban Joseph's death; since the novitiate typically lasted three or four years, this indicates that he most likely joined Beit Ṣayyare during the 960s, perhaps between 966 and 968.[102]

Because he entered the monastery late in its history, John's descriptions of the community are heavily inflected by the stories told by Rabban Joseph, those of other monks, and some of the outlying villagers and tribesmen whom he meets, rather than his own memories.

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[99] *Busnaya* 82 (folio 0171).
[100] *Busnaya* 68 (folio 0142). "God will command you later to rest in the cell" – i.e., God would eventually call John to contemplative rather than active monasticism.
[101] *Busnaya* 69 (folio 0143-0144). The element of skepticism is partly a hagiographic trope meant to underscore the miracle, but also shows that John knew that alcohol would inflame his liver, giving a glimpse of medical theories of the time.
[102] *Busnaya* 229 (folio 0435).

Some of his stories reach back to the very beginning of the monastery, but are clearest for the last forty years of Beit Ṣayyare. He also states that he has left out any overlapping material covered in a previous work, now lost, that covered the life of the second abbot, Rabban Mousha, though on the whole he appears to have included any and all material that he saw fit.[103]

Because of John's non-linear style, the history of the monastery can only be partly reconstructed. Building from the events that he does provide, Beit Ṣayyare had been established in the late ninth century by two young monks, Rabban Bar-Yalda and his then-disciple Rabban Mousha on the ruins of an older abbey, Mar Abraham the Penitent (*Mar Abraham Abila*). The ruined monastery had gotten the nickname "Beit Ṣayyare" (House of the Painters) from local peoples, although John did not know its origin. Somehow the two names were combined when the new monastery was founded, keeping Mar Abraham as the community's patron saint but becoming known as Mar Abraham of Beit Ṣayyare.[104] The rebuilt monastery was located above the Ṣaphna River, a minor tributary of the Great Zab that flowed through a secluded river valley, giving it access to both water and arable land that would be a key factor in its future growth.

The stories about Rabban Bar-Yalda, as the founder and first abbot, fluctuate between a deep reverence and quasi-legendary sanctity and depictions of a man who was prone to flashes of arrogance and ill-temper. Because he died before either Rabban Joseph or John entered the monastery, most glimpses of him come through his supernatural protection of the monastery. One monk reported that while he was alive, he had regularly seen angels descending to his cell to talk to him.[105] A day commemorating him formed one of the major feast days of the monastery, and *ḥnana*, or sacred dust, connected to him formed a treasured relic even in Rabban Joseph's

[103] *Busnaya* 115 (folio 0235).
[104] *Busnaya* 157 (folio 0314).
[105] *Busnaya* 167 (folio 0332-0333).

generation.[106] On the other hand, another episode illustrates his temper: after journeying a long way to visit the famous anchorite Ishoʿ of Koumateh – eventually a mentor to a young Rabban Joseph – he fumed at being made to wait outside while the saint met with a lowly villager (*gabra quryaya*) who had arrived after.[107] He was a proud man who preferred his own company - on one occasion, when Rabban Mousha suggested that they could eat with the novices, Rabban Bar-Yalda demurred, insisting that he would prefer to stay in his cell:

> Rabban Bar-Yalda called [Rabban Mousha] and said to him, "I can't go to the table tomorrow, but [as for you], go in good health, be with the brothers and feast with them." Rabban Mousha said to him, "But they have come to see you and to celebrate with you; will you not come out to be with them?" But because Rabban Bar-Yalda was a perfect man in all spiritual things, unable to lower himself to consider earthly matters, and also because he was extremely zealous, he replied out of his zeal and said, "I will not come. You go." And he went back to his cell. But at the time of the evening gong (*nqusha d-muthba*) he came to Rabban Mousha and said to him in a humble tone, "Yes, brother, I will come to the table with the brothers. For the rod of Christ has pursued me ever since I told you that I would not come. And what could we say to Christ, who wants us to be servants and slaves to other people?"[108]

Although Rabban Bar-Yalda changed his mind and decided to join the communal celebration, his aloofness filters through between the lines – the fact that the cenobites, even in this small monastery, are eager just to see (*ḥza*) him suggests that they had very little access to him, as does his initial brusque dismissal of Rabban Mousha's request. The dual impressions of Rabban Bar-Yalda hint at the various sources that comprise John's perspective: enough time had passed that he had attained immense spiritual stature, but the anecdotes that circulated about his actions in life hint at someone who had rough edges and a strong will.

By contrast, John's stories about Rabban Mousha tend to emphasize his spiritual power, kindness, and humor. Rabban Mousha assumed leadership of the monastery after Rabban Bar-

[106] *Busnaya* 155 (folio 0310), 136 (folio 0277).
[107] *Busnaya* 110 (folio 0225).
[108] *Busnaya* 160 (folio 0319).

Yalda's death in 929. Although Rabban Bar-Yalda provided much of the impetus to establish Beit Ṣayyare in its early years, it was Rabban Mousha who really left his mark on the monastery, partly through administrative skills which facilitated the monastery's rapid growth and partly through his character, which was decidedly less stern than Rabban Bar-Yalda's. Besides the story of the prank he pulled on Rabban Joseph and his advice to Rabban Bar-Yalda to mingle with the cenobites, he also encouraged his monks to moderate their piety; on one occasion, he encouraged a monk who was too abstemious to eat some roast fish he had prepared, while he urged another, who struggled with his appetite, to sit and keep him company instead of partaking.[109] Anecdotes such as these highlight the essential qualities that John associated with Beit Ṣayyare: warmth, fellowship, and most importantly, God's active presence in the monastery.

In the 930s, under Rabban Mousha's reign, Beit Ṣayyare experienced both feast and famine. Encouraged by growing numbers, Rabban Mousha built the first watermill in the valley below, with the aid of some monks from the mother monastery of Beit Qoqa; the text later mentions multiple mills which ground the monastery's grain.[110] He also stored wheat, beans, and lentils (*ḥemṣe w'ap ṭlapḥe*), enough to support twenty more cells.[111] Despite this, a period of severe hunger struck. As with other descriptions of famine, it happened during winter, when the torrential rain and snow precluded any hope of gathering more crops, hunting game, or fishing in the Ṣaphna.[112] Although John often describes the monastery as the site of miracles, no outside deliverance came in this case, and the monks survived on what they could scrounge or forage.

[109] *Busnaya*, 132 (folio 0269).
[110] *Busnaya* 78 (folio 0163).
[111] *Busnaya* 118 (folio (0240). The wording of the anecdote leaves it unclear whether he stored the grains himself or merely found them in the granary.
[112] *Busnaya* 57 (folio 0118).

This period of famine recurs in the narrative as a distinct communal memory within the monastery's history, but did not slow its growth or affect Rabban Mousha's leadership.

In 946, Rabban Mousha died, and Rabban Joseph appears to have become the new abbot, although he was never explicitly given control of the monastery.[113] The monastery continued to prosper, with around one hundred fifty fully-fledged monks – together with the fifty cenobites that John mentions, this would put Beit Ṣayyare's numbers at around two hundred, although he often estimates its members as closer to three hundred.[114] In contrast with Rabban Bar-Yalda's abrasive style, Rabban Joseph maintained Rabban Mousha's gentler way of disciplining. Curiously, it is in this section that Rabban Joseph begins to fade from the chronicle; from this point forward, other monks dominate many of John's anecdotes, and Rabban Joseph is frequently absent from the stories entirely, although some of the stories about monks, particularly a handful from his old monastery of Rabban Hormizd, are clearly indebted to his memories. John mentions no further building or administrative innovations after Rabban Mousha's death, and the monastery experienced gradual stagnation, including a slight decline in members.

Despite Rabban Joseph's unremarkable tenure as abbot, there were the beginnings of discord among the monks, which John claims led to his death (see Chapter 5). The narrative ends with the death of Rabban Joseph in the mid-970s, shortly before a cataclysmic destruction that overtook the region that appears to have destroyed Beit Ṣayyare. The monastery's history

[113] Rabban Joseph is never explicitly named as the abbot, but leaving the monastery without an abbot for thirty years is unlikely. Furthermore, there are hints throughout the narrative that Rabban Joseph was a figure of authority for all the monks, not just John; Gabriel, the sacristan, recalled that Rabban Mousha entrusted the souls of all those at Beit Ṣayyare to Rabban Joseph, compelling a reluctant Rabban Joseph to abandon his plans to leave Beit Ṣayyare for another monastery. *Busnaya* 237 (folio 0448).
[114] *Busnaya* 117 (folio 0239), 160 (folio 0320).

thus only spanned three generations, and because Rabban Joseph entered it midway through its existence, John's descriptions provide a finite but richly detailed account of the monastery's heyday. John's concern is to preserve the memory of a community and mentor that he loved, but in doing so, he also inadvertently captures the personal and institutional troubles that accompanied the founding of a new monastery and its rapid rise, expansion, and decline. His work describes the internal workings of the monastery, but also its continued interactions with other monasteries many miles away, including Rabban Hormizd, Koumateh, and Beth Qoqa, as well as its connections to both village life and urban elites. At the close of the tenth century, the network of monasteries and villages still formed a center of gravity that drew people like John, Rabban Joseph, and other Syriac Christians further up into the highlands rather than the opportunities of Mosul.

Monastic Rhythms

The image that John paints of daily life in Beit Ṣayyare is one of loose harmony rather than a well-organized, rule-based society. While novices, or cenobites, had an established rule, fully-fledged monks more or less ruled themselves, coming together for worship or in time of need, but always at times of their own choosing. Moreover, monks sometimes left to wander the mountains for weeks, months, or years at a time, returning to their cells when it pleased them.[115] While the monastery had regular offices, rituals, and administration, it also featured a substantial amount of flexibility, which gave it a much different character than Latin monasteries. In

[115] This practice seems to have circumvented the prohibitions on wandering monks in the Synods of Mar Ezekiel in 576 and Mar Ishoʿyahb in 585. Synod of Mar Ezekiel, Canon 1, and Synod of Mar Ishoʿyahb, Canon 8. For controversy over itinerant monks in earlier Syriac asceticism, see Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), esp. 50-51.

particular, because Syriac asceticism emphasized that spiritual power was linked to individual holiness, the monastery consisted of a series of overlapping circles of monks pursuing their own routes to the divine.

Like most Syriac monasteries, Beit Ṣayyare was designed to be semi-communal or semi-cenobitic, leaving monks to pursue individual paths to holiness despite living in the same space. Early monastic practice emphasized that holiness was a solitary pursuit, and Syrian asceticism was especially severe: long after communal monasteries had taken hold in Egypt and Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries, respectively, Syriac ascetics were chaining themselves to hilltops, living in roofless walled up buildings, and living on pillars (stylites), in trees (dendrites), and in caves, often for years at a time.[116] Forms of rigorous individual prayer persisted in the medieval period, and the remnants of stylite pillars and monastic caves, which never gained popularity in Latin Christendom, survive in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere. In compensation for their extreme self-denial, ascetics of all stripes sometimes received extraordinary spiritual gifts – healing, foretelling, the ability to cast out demons – which in turn lent importance to their role, and consequently the more extreme the asceticism, the more powerfully gifted the ascetic could potentially be. But the defining feature of this early monasticism was its individuality; with few exceptions, asceticism was undertaken by an individual or small group.

Around 550, the Syriac monk Abraham of Kashkar transplanted an adapted communal model from Egypt to Mount Izla, and his rule or variations of it formed the dominant basis of

[116] Florence Jullien, "Forms of the Religious Life and Syriac Monasticism," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2018), 92. Two other forms existed in Syriac Christianity's early phase: the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant (*bnai* and *bnat qyama*) involved permanent ties between ascetics and churches. Members took a vow of celibacy, helped conduct the liturgy, and committed themselves to the care of the sick, the poor, and prisoners, all priorities of late antique churches that often arise in sermons of the time.

Syriac monasticism from that point forward.[117] Cenobitic monasticism, pioneered most notably by Shenoute and Pachomius in the fourth century, offered a structured, communal approach to the ascetic life; ascetics lived in walled compounds, employed in a variety of crafts, from farming and fishing to basket weaving and shoemaking, their time and presence in the monastery highly regulated. The highly structured communal life allowed for the gradual progression towards holiness and salvation rather than severe, individual asceticism. In Abraham of Kashkar's schema, a two-tiered system of monks existed, one of junior monks, or cenobites, who, following the cenobitic model, were housed together, and a second of fully-fledged monks, or anchorites, who received permission to live alone in their own cells. The cenobites performed most of the work until they could achieve permission to live independently as anchorites either inside or outside the walls. In order to progress spiritually, they also individually attached themselves to senior monks as disciples and received specialized mentorship and training. The result was a culture that preserved some of the goals of Pachomianism – the gentle, gradual progression to spiritual maturity – but also the charismatic power that allowed for the miracles and spiritual heroism of the old Syriac ascetics.

This individualism is essential to understanding the culture of the monastery. A life of individual contemplation was the most highly prized aspect of being a monk. Rabban Joseph's modified rule outlines three paths that anchorites could take to the kingdom of God – through silence and contemplation in the cell, through administering church offices and caring for the church building, and through work in the monastery's fields and vineyards. However, even though both work and service involved spiritual practice, especially the duties of providing food and alms to people from surrounding communities, monks who chose the latter two paths were

[117] Jullien, "Forms of Religious Life," 94.

considered spiritually weak, with physical work acting as a concession to souls unprepared for the direct communion with God that solitude offered.

> [Rabban Joseph said]: There are three paths [that a monk can choose]: to remain in the cell in stillness [*shelya*], or [to become] a bright light of knowledge and a pillar of the church, or [to become] a laborer in the fields and vineyards. And look, my son, choose whichever one you wish. But if a brother chooses one of the latter two, knowledge or [working in] the vineyard, it is as though he were nursing an injured limb.[118]

Rabban Joseph invites John to pursue either work, study, or contemplation, but cautions him that work and study ultimately hold the monk back. His map of spiritual progression imagined three stages: the discipline of the body, the mastery of the soul, where the monk received the perspective of angels, and the ascension of the spirit, where the monk forgot himself and communed directly with the Trinity. Consequently, work and service could advance the monk to the first and second stage, but only individual contemplation would bring the monk to his full spiritual potential. As a result, anchorites ranked the most highly among the three paths.

As a result of this culture of individual spiritual heroism, the monks behaved in highly idiosyncratic ways. The story of Rabban Ishoʿ Bar Nun, an anchorite at Beit Sayyare, illustrates this kind of behavior. Much to the surprise of the other monks and especially the cenobite who had attached himself to him, he showed up to church one day with his face smeared with paint, his tunic half undone, a bone necklace dangling around his neck, and a stick that he pretended to ride like a horse, racing around the monastery grounds while the rest of the monks looked on bewildered:

> Rabban [Joseph] related the following [story] about him. One day, when the brethren were gathered in the church to celebrate the holy mysteries, this blessed one [Ishoʿ Bar Nun] went to the church also, but his appearance was shocking and very strange. For his face was blackened, and he had hung a rope around his neck which had bones (attached), and he had girded his loins and hiked his tunic above his knees. He was riding a stick

[118] *Busnaya* 182-183 (folio 0358).

> and had [another] staff in his hand, and he was galloping as though he were mounted on a horse. He went into the church like this, going all the way until he stood before the altar, and then he left the church and [galloped across the monastery] to the cenobium, and from there back to the church.[119]

When his embarrassed disciple pulled him aside to ask what he was doing, he whispered that some demons had been trying to stir up his pride, so he wanted to make himself as ridiculous as possible. The story illustrates how the monastery sometimes operated as a series of hermitages within a common structure. Ishoʿ Bar Nun had made his own judgment about how to advance spiritually; the existence of other monks in the same space only served as an audience.

Each anchorite waged a similarly individual war, and, if strenuous enough, was gifted supernatural powers. Rabban David of Beit Mourdani, for example, was known for having divine visions, and shared several with other monks at Beit Sayyare throughout the history of the monastery.[120] Rumors around the monastery claimed that Rabban Joseph was bathed in light when he prayed and to be able to hear angels.[121] Other monks were reputed to be able to raise dead animals, see far-off events, heal the sick, or exorcise evil spirits. In contrast to the Latin Benedictine rule, which emphasized obedience, stability, and the gradual growth of grace, Syriac monastic spirituality was rooted in individual charisma, a Christian heroism in which monks became channels of the divine.

The monks believed that they communicated with God himself, usually Christ himself, and that especially at more advanced spiritual levels they would receive specific instructions and answers to prayer. A proverb from Rabban Joseph held that when a monk prayed, he spoke to God, and when he read the Scriptures, God spoke back to him, but in practice, advanced monks

[119] *Busnaya* 103 (folio 212).
[120] *Busnaya* 65 (folio 0135-0136).
[121] *Busnaya* 77 (folio 0160-0161).

believed they received answers from God without the need for reading. When the sacristan of Beit Ṣayyare, Gabriel, informed Rabban Mousha that he no longer wanted to fulfill his duties and preferred to lead a quiet life, Rabban Mousha promised to consult God and see what he said. The next day, he regretfully told him that Christ continued to prefer him to be sacristan.[122] On one occasion, after a monk begged Rabban Joseph for advice, he asked God, but was surprised to initially receive no answer; only when he was about to go and speak to the monk did Christ give him detailed instructions on what to do, indicating that he believed that Christ spoke to him in more than Scriptural interpretation.[123] In contrast to Rabban Joseph's admonition that one could hear God speaking through Scripture, these anecdotes describe a religious atmosphere centered around dynamic, charismatic power rather than static, official channels, such as church office, scriptural interpretation, or institutional tradition.

The one strict hierarchy in the monastery was the relationship between anchorites and cenobites. Anchorites exercised enormous personal power over cenobites – although John praises Rabban Joseph for addressing cenobites as though they were his equals, he also instructed one of his cenobites, Isaiah, to sleep on the inner threshold of his cell so that no one would disturb him (presumably stepping on the sleeping novice and creating an impromptu alarm system).[124] In another passage, during a great famine that struck the monastery, the anchorites foraged for stubble, rotten grapes, and dates to keep body and soul together. Rabban Joseph simply lay down in his cell and resigned himself to die of starvation, but just in the nick of time, his friend Rabban Yohannon of Dasen brought him a sheaf of grain to share. Rabban Joseph embraced him – and immediately summoned a cenobite to go all the way down to the

[122] *Busnaya* 152 (folio 0306).
[123] *Busnaya* 46 (folio 0097).
[124] *Busnaya* 77 (folio 0160-0161).

mill, on the valley floor, to grind it.[125] Whether the cenobite was equally famished was left unsaid; even in times of crisis, the monastic hierarchy remained intact. Cenobites were crucial to running the monastery, as they carried out many of the ordinary duties, such as planting and harvesting, cleaning and cooking, and maintaining the church and its liturgy. Although the cenobitic period theoretically only lasted a few years before full admission into the community, the dynamic between cenobite and anchorite in Beit Ṣayyare illustrates some of the underlying tension in monastic life.

Among senior monks, the strong individualism of the monastery also led to a clash of personalities, most of whom were unused to being governed or having to accommodate other people. Although John claims that the perfect harmony of the community made Satan both furious and depressed, the seams of his narrative hint at underlying tensions obviously exist. In one instance, a monk named Rabban Abdisho of Dasen appears to have been the source of one such personality clash. While normal practice was to receive a weekly ration of bread at a communal assembly, Rabban Abdisho had carved a window into his cell so that food could be delivered to him; in response, one of the other monks blocked it up.[126] The guilty party is left unnamed, but one could imagine a rival anchorite, or, perhaps more likely, a cenobite who found Rabban Abdisho's attitude a little highhanded and blocked his window as a means of revenge.[127] Rabban Abdisho left the monastery soon after, and the reference to tensions between him and others suggests that his difficulty fitting into the community was at least partly to blame.

[125] *Busnaya* 57 (folio 0118).
[126] *Busnaya* 139 (folio 0283).
[127] Thomas of Marga describes a similar situation with one of his main sources for monastic lore, a monk named Tumana. Tumana was too old to go out much and was dependent on a rotation of younger monks to deliver food to him, but one of them got tired of the task and simply stopped doing it, leaving him without food that week. *Book of Governors*, 428, trans. 226. In Rabban Abdishoʿs case, since other anecdotes describe him as physically fit, this task must have been even more exasperating.

In terms of the day-to-day life at Beit Ṣayyare, the semi-cenobitic system provided little in the way of regular communal activities. Liturgy was sung every day, but attendance was optional, as was communion – received less and less frequently as the monk progressed spiritually, because he had less need for the forgiveness offered by the holy elements.[128] The monk's day was theoretically organized along spiritually symbolic times. After a morning spent in reading and contemplation, he began a sequence of penance at midday – the hour when man first sinned against God – including prayers and physical prostrations in his cell, continuing to three in the afternoon, the hour when God chased Adam and Eve from the Garden and also the hour when Jesus died on the cross. After a further series of prayers in the evening, he could take the daily meal, and Rabban Joseph advised against further prostrations after this point in order to avoid an upset stomach.[129] Preparing food was the monk's own responsibility, varying from dried bread to simple vegetable soup. Those monks who avoided soup and ate only bread were praised for their spiritual athleticism – John identifies three at the monastery who refused even to keep the ingredients used in soup in their cells.[130]

Here again, however, the rigor of this schedule of prayer and meals appears to be an ideal rather than a description and does not correspond well with other anecdotes that John provides. Instead, each monk sought God on his own terms and at his own pleasure, leading to a cacophony of individual worship. John compares the sound to the buzzing of bees, because someone was reading or praying or singing the liturgy at every hour of the day. While his metaphor is meant to emphasize the energy and industriousness of the monks, there is also a ring of truth to the soundscape he describes: in his younger days, Rabban Busnaya sometimes sought

[128] Rabban Busnaya's modified rule suggests that novices should receive communion every day, then gradually reduce to Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday, and finally just on Sundays. *Busnaya* 192 (folio 0374).
[129] *Busnaya* 189 (folio 0368).
[130] *Busnaya* 171 (folio 0340).

refuge outside the walls of the monastery to find someplace quiet to pray.[131] Similarly, John praises Rabban Busnaya for neither letting visitors into his cell nor going to visit others, presumably because monks did wander in and out of each other's cells for conversation or distraction.[132] There was no heavy hand organizing the monks' daily activities, and what authority did prevail appears to have been drawn only weakly from formal offices and rules and mostly from personal charisma, willing submission to a spiritual master, and guidance drawn from the canons and writings of church authorities.

A final note on the rhythm of the monastery should note that the architecture and layout of the monastery was equally impromptu. Both monastic and lay structures were designed to be adaptable, capable of being reconfigured even by amateurs, relying on materials readily at hand. Walls, churches, and major buildings required expert help, but most cells were built of mud and plaster, which could be easily assembled into modular structures. The *Book of Governors* describes how the abbot Ishoʿyahb was left with a huge pile of mud and debris after demolishing the abbey church in preparation for a new construction. By hinting to the monks that no one should touch it, he was able to trick them into reincorporating the debris into their own cells.

> On the day of the assembly, [Ishoʿyahb] said to the monks, "Blessed ones, you know. . . that most of this clay [*medra*] came from Ḥadatha, and the rest from Adiabene. And this clay has no equal; in fact, it is even better than plaster [*geṣa*]. Therefore, let no one among you take any of it, because when we [re]build the sanctuary of God, we will pull down all the buildings in the community and use this clay to build them back up again."
>
> When the monks heard this, since some of them were friends and some were enemies, they wanted to steal the clay and plaster it onto their own cells [rather than sharing it as a communal project]. And since [Ishoʿyahb] wanted to avoid the effort and expense of

[131] *Busnaya* 20 (folio 0052).
[132] *Busnaya* 26 (folio 0064). Because solitary periods in the cell was considered crucial for spiritual development, John is also making a point about Rabban Busnaya's spiritual prowess. See Darlene L. Brooks Hedstrom, "The Geography of the Cell in Early Egyptian Monastic Literature," *Church History* 78.4 (December 2009), 774-775. However, visits from other monks, and monks jealously guarding their privacy, are recurring tropes that give John's observation here a literal sense as well.

> having the clay carried away, he spent the whole Sabbath in the abbot's cell, sending out an announcement saying, "I am sick." When the monks realized their opportunity, they laughed and celebrated, stealing it [all] away. . . and when he saw it. . . [Ishoʿyahb] said, with a gentle and modest chuckle, "They have not left even a little of that earth. May God pardon and forgive us all!" [133]

The joke implicit in the narrative, of course, is that the clay was nothing special, just a nuisance that the village laborers would have to cart away at extra cost, but by pitching it as special clay from afar that he had reserved for a (non-existent) project, Ishoʿyahb got the monks to clean it up for him. But the anecdote also shows how individual the practice of customizing a cell could be, since the trick depended on exploiting rivalries among the monks for having the most impressive living quarters. And, by the same token, it indicates the extent to which building or modifying a cell could be done without specialized labor.[134] Another passage from *The Life of Rabban Busnaya* describes monks building together with handfuls of plaster, indicating just how manageable construction could be. There was also added incentive to expanding or beautifying the cell; it was the property of the monk rather than the monastery, and could be sold to a new arrival if he did not want to build his own cell or preferred a different location within the complex.[135]

Although the simplicity of the construction materials suggests that cells were modest affairs, they could actually be very elaborate. John's description of Rabban Joseph's cell as "very small, only two trenches (*gepe*) cut from the rock," does not make sense with the other actions that place there and probably refers to a smaller internal area within a larger cell.[136] As

[133] *Book of Governors* 400-401, trans. 206-207.
[134] The amateur construction described in the texts is buttressed by surviving Syriac monastic cells, which show no sign of being built on a foundation. Julie Bonneric, "Archaeological evidence of an early Islamic monastery in the centre of al-Qusur (Failaka Island, Kuwait)," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 32.1 (March 2021), 57.
[135] *Busnaya* 72 (folio 0145).
[136] *Busnaya* 34 (folio 0077). For a West Syrian example, where Mor Gabriel's cell in the monastery of Mor Gabriel, still preserved, is a rock-cut enclosure accessible by a narrow ascent. The cell then broadens out to be quite large with a high ceiling, but includes a narrow slit where it is difficult to stand upright.

seen in the anecdote above where Mousha the cenobite yanked Rabban Joseph off his feet, cells could be quite spacious – Mousha keeps asking if there is anyone else around before attacking Rabban Joseph. Other Syriac monasteries show similarly elaborate cells: those excavated on the island of Kharg near Iran and Qusur off the coast of Kuwait, for instance include three rooms and a courtyard.[137] Elsewhere, John also hints at multiple rooms and a courtyard attached, and mentions that the outer areas were separated from the interior of the cell by a wooden door.[138] Furniture within the cell depended on space and the monk's preferences. Chairs, cabinets, wine vessels, and shelves and niches for books and relics are all attested in various cells in John's narrative.

Descriptions of village houses are similarly temporary. Before he became a monk, Rabban Joseph demolished the family's home and rebuilt it into a much larger structure; to his mother's dismay, he carelessly destroyed the family's threshing floor, where she had experienced a miracle during a winter famine years before.[139] The constant remodeling and reuse of buildings relied on materials that could be molded and remolded to suit the architect's purpose.[140] The material culture described by John, humble and simple rather than elegant or made to last, does not differ much from that of highland villages and hints that no matter how

[137] Bonneric, "Archaeological evidence of an early Islamic monastery," 57. Cells in late antique Egypt were also often spacious and well-appointed. James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1999), 43.
[138] *Busnaya* 34 (folio 0077).
[139] *Busnaya* 15 (folio 0042).
[140] See Julia Gonnella: "Columns and Hierographs: Magic *Spolia* in Medieval Islamic Architecture in Northern Syria," *Muqarnas* 27 (Leiden: BRILL, 2010) 103. Gonnella discusses the free pillaging and reuse of building materials, both for ideological use and for simple construction purposes. Rural architecture, even for churches and shrines, remained very basic well into the modern period. Grehan cites an eighteenth-century travelogue of a village church in Syria consisting of a "dirt room, about four to five yards square, walled with dirt. . . [and] an altar, built of the same materials with the wall; only it was paved at the top with potsherds and slates, to give it the face of a table." Such descriptions match well with those of the monastic chronicles, which emphasize the simplicity of dirt, lime, and sometimes stone in making their dwellings. Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints*, 24.

much the monastery conceived of itself as set apart from the secular world, there was considerable overlap.

The simplicity of the architecture, the semi-coordinated structure and cult of individual heroism that defined monastic life helps illuminate the connections between the monastery as an institution and the villages nearby. Unlike Pachomian and Benedictine models, in which monks form a single community, Abraham of Kashkar's rule created a society of individuals. Its emphasis on contemplation rather than work or study gave it a reputation for supernatural power rather than one of learning, even though manuscript writing and copying took place there. Similarly, rather than the monastery being a grand structure, the monks by and large used similar materials and techniques as the people around them. As the next section will show, the boundaries of the monastery were often blurred in their connections to nearby villages in other ways as well.

Village and Tribe

Traditional rhetoric around monasteries emphasizes their separation from the world around them. John describes Beit Ṣayyare as existing "in the desert," like an Egyptian monastery. In reality, most Syriac monasteries were located within a few miles from other settlements. As James Goehring has noted, early communal monasteries in Egypt were often founded on the sites of deserted villages, providing easy access to arable land, transportation, and other settlements, and it is likely for similar reasons that Rabban Bar-Yalda founded Beit Ṣayyare on the ruins of an earlier monastery.[141] The demands of maintaining a large group of

[141] James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1999), 95.

people required more than a single settlement could provide on its own. We have also already seen how, although the highlands and lowlands were separate geographic zones, monks and pilgrims routinely traveled to cities and vice versa. Besides their involvement in regional trade networks, , monasteries were tightly enmeshed with their neighboring tribes and villages, and monastic chronicles like John's provide a glimpse of how the highlands contained a cross-section of identities.

One of the narratives that best illustrates the importance of tribe is the story of Koma, the monastery's miller. Koma came from the village of Marios, and one day, when he was working alone at the mill, a Kurd named Kemel, decided to pursue a longstanding feud:

> There was a certain Kurdish man (*gabra ḥad kartuya*) from the village of Kaphar-Qoure, which is in Rustaqa, in Ain-Babel. He was from the Kurds who are called Dasenoye (*kartuye henun d'mtqrin dasenoye*). His name was Kemel. . .
>
> [Kemel] had a brother who had been killed in the village of Marios, in the land of Zozan. And one day he went to the monastery's mill, which was on the Ṣaphna River. And he found Koma the solitary, whose story I have related above. And because Koma was from the village of Marios, where his brother had been killed, he drew a wicked knife which he had with him, and he forced Koma down and [tried to] slaughter him. . .

Kemel attacked Koma with a long knife and subdued him, but a miracle paralyzed him while Koma escaped back to the monastery. Kemel's mother later loaded him up onto a mule and brought him to Rabban Mousha, who healed his paralysis. Thereafter, Kemel regularly paid his respects to Rabban Mousha and later Rabban Joseph, and John relates that he himself had heard this story from Kemel in Rabban Joseph's cell many years after the events.[142]

The story demonstrates how layered highland identities could be. Ethnic, religious, or village identity is one of the prime identifiers in the text, and the many vanished tribes and

[142] *Busnaya* 123 (folio 0251-0252).

villages that dot the histories underscore the intensity of the rivalries between neighbors. It bears emphasizing that Kemel encountered Koma in a different part of the highlands from both their home villages, and that he was still immediately able to identify him as a member of a rival village. The feud had followed Koma from his village. Monastic writers themselves, immersed as they were in this context of micro-identities, often write in the expectation that their readers will also be familiar with the niceties of local tribal identification. For instance,, *The History of Beth Qoqa* tells of a miracle in which the abbot of the monastery, Mar Prance, cut off a local spring because some of the locals were causing trouble, and names the guilty party: "He dried up a water source known as 'Raven's Rock' which provided a lot of water, because the Aradeans were causing a lot of harm to the monastery when they came to drink there."[143] Barring scribal error, the village or tribe of the Aradeans is now unattested, and the chronicler leaves unmentioned their religion, ethnicity, and language; what stands out is their proximity to the monastery and the tension caused by a shared water source. The story reveals a hyper-localized milieu, one in which groups were separated by the distance of only a few miles but held great significance.

John's description of Kurds is especially valuable in this light, since medieval Syriac reports on the Kurds and their history and social structure are scarce and often problematic. Extant sources consist primarily of passing references in urban Islamic writers, who reference their transhumant herding patterns.[144] John's position as a writer in the rural highlands rather than the city provides more fine-grained detail, and he identifies four distinct tribes: the Hakkari, Dasenoye, Ṭalabani, and Herazdoye. They also appear to be largely absent from earlier monastic

[143] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 255.
[144] Ibn Ḥawqal, *La Configuration de la Terre*, 215.

accounts, but this may be partly due to migration to the west that occurred in the ninth century: the Syriac Chronicle of 1234 mentions that in the year 830, the Kurds underwent a mass conversion to Islam and spread north to Armenia and west to the Jazira.[145] In John's account, all of the tribes appear to be at least partly Muslim, but not completely – some members of the tribes also appear to be monks, a topic elaborated on in Chapter 4 in the discussion of the ethnic composition of the monasteries. In contrast to their reputation as nomads, the Kurds in John's narrative are only semi-nomadic – though often encountered while mounted on horse or camel, they also appear to live in villages.[146]

Most of the Kurds appear to have lived to the east of the monastery. The Ṭalabani, which still play a prominent role in Iraqi Kurdistan, are currently located near Erbil; encounters with the Ṭalabani possibly took place while the monks traveled to their mother monastery of Beth Qoqa, but Rabban Joseph also encountered one outside of Rabban Hormizd, south of Beit Ṣayyare, indicating that their range of travel reached quite far.[147] Their religion is referenced only obliquely: the monk Shoubhalisho once stopped a Ṭalabani, "who was mounted on a camel, going to Balad," to ask whether to enter the monastery or to continue to live as a hermit, but the Ṭalabani responded by saying that he seemed to be on his way to the monastery and had already made his choice. Rabban Shoubhalisho then rebuked himself for having learned a spiritual lesson from a Ṭalabani, which suggests that they were assumed to be non-Christian.[148] They play no significant role in the narrative apart from the threat they pose as robbers, but the banter

[145] A. Abouna and J.-M. Fiey, *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad A. C. 1234 pertinens*, II (CSCO 354; 1974), 17-18/25-26.
[146] *Busnaya* 123 (folio 0251-252).
[147] *Busnaya* 108 (folio 0222).
[148] *Busnaya* 113 (folio 0232).

between the Ṭalabani and Rabban Shoubhalisho suggests that they were a familiar aspect of the monks' environment.

Only Kemel is definitely identified as being a member of the Dasenoye, although several monks came from Dasen and were possibly Kurdish. Dasen, which lay north and east of Beit Ṣayyare, was a colder region with higher elevations, better suited for pastoral than agrarian practice.[149] As Barczok points out, John does make a distinction between the region of Dasen and the Dasenoye as a tribe, and Dasen contained a mixture of religions and cultures.[150] Little is mentioned of their religious practice, although Kemel's name (from Arabic كمل), implies Muslim heritage, while the proliferation of monks from Dasen suggest a mixed Christian and Muslim tribe. The possibility of mixture lends itself to an intriguing footnote: the Dasenoye would later become synonymous with the Yezidis, who still describe themselves as Dasini.[151] While the text does not indicate any Yezidi practices, the mixture of Syriac Christian and Islamic members partly foreshadows the Syriac origin story of the Yezidis, in which they wandered into heresy because of a lack of educated clergy. Other scholars have noted the preponderance of Christian as well as Islamic imagery in Yezidi belief.[152] The story potentially anticipates several elements

[149] Barczok, "Die Vita des Joseph Busnaya," 186.
[150] J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne, contribution á l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq* vol. 2 (Beirut: Impr. catholique, 1965), 787.
[151] Birgül Acikyildiz, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2014), 37. I am indebted to Michael Sims for making me aware of this connection.
[152] For instance, Yezidism includes a Trinitarian element (God, or *Xwēdē*, manifests himself in three forms, including human form); the ritual of baptism, and the ritual consumption of wine, all of which suggest some Christian influence. Acikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, 71, 75, 79. Several Islamic elements are also present, especially the key story of Iblis refusing to bow before Satan and the association of Satan with the peacock. Yezidism, of course, is far more complex than merely an amalgamation of Christian and Muslim motifs, but the parallels are striking in light of its emergence in a Christian and Muslim milieu such as that described by John, and the social elements of John's story, including the name of the tribe and the mountain banditry, foreshadow later associations of the Yezidis.

of modern Yezidism: the name of the Kurdish tribe which now forms their emic name, the reputation as mountain robbers, and the mixed heritage of Islam and Christianity.

Another tribe, the Herazdoye, was also partly Muslim. A Muslim religious teacher from the tribe once came to the monastery to argue with the monks, though he was humbled by a miracle by Rabban Mousha.[153] Other members of the tribe feature Islamic names, such as Abu'luqa.[154] However, the main village of the Herazdoye appears to be Beit Mourdani, and since several monks and supplicants in the account came from Beit Mourdani, the tribe's religious affiliation was also likely a mixture of Muslim and Christian. In general, the Herazdoye appeared to be on relatively good terms with the monks, and there are no stories of them raiding the monastery or robbing monks. Unlike the Dasenoye, Ṭalabani, and Hakkari, no modern version of the tribe appears to exist, and they are already missing from the list of Kurdish tribes in the 16th century Ṣarafnama.

Finally, the Hakkari appeared to be the biggest tribe and the largest threat. The modern region of Hakkari lies in southeastern Turkey, between Iraq and northwestern Iran, though thirteenth-century writers such as Yaqut and Ibn al-Athir place them closer to Amadiyya.[155] Some Hakkari appear to have lived near the monastery and regularly harassed it: when Rabban Joseph wanted to express the depth of his love for humanity, he mentioned that it even included "those Hakkari murderers."[156] Of all the tribes, the Hakkari were the only ones to successfully raid Beit Ṣayyare itself before its final destruction, scattering almost all the monks into the hills

[153] *Busnaya* 120 (folio 0246).
[154] *Busnaya* 62 (folio 0130).
[155] Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes, and Veli Yadirgi, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Kurds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 27.
[156] *Busnaya* 75 (folio 0157).

while the bandits pillaged and sacked the monastery.[157] It is perhaps indicative of this dual attitude that a grateful Hakkari chieftain, Prince Hasan, forbade his kinsmen from harming any more monks from Beit Ṣayyare after they healed his leprosy – hinting, of course, that they had been causing a great deal of trouble before.[158]

John's emphasis on tribal name rather than Kurd, Muslim, Christian, or villager shows that local identities mattered more than regional or religious ones. Violence between larger groups also appear: in *The Book of Governors*, one bishop's brother was known as a famous "Kurd-killer," and counted every day wasted if he did not kill at least one Kurd, a sign that away from centralized forms of justice, blood-feuds and tribal violence could become endemic.[159] But such violence coexisted with rapprochement between nomads and villagers, monks and robbers. As Kemel's visits to the monastery show, the Kurdish tribes also came to the monastery as pilgrims and supplicants, sometimes forging long-term relationships with the monks. When one monk, Rabban Ishoʿ, successfully warded off a Kurdish bandit in the hills, the man came to visit him regularly with gifts. John noted that the monk allowed him to enter his cell even during Lent.[160] This suggests that the Kurd was indifferent to the Christian calendar; neither inclined to convert nor perhaps even repent, he nevertheless cultivated a friendship with his one-time victim.

When it comes to the farming villages around Beit Ṣayyare, John's anecdotes are less vivid than those of the Kurdish tribesmen. The emphasis lies instead on their proximity to the monastery. descriptions of the soundscape of the monasteries reveal how thin the boundaries between monastery and village often were. A frequent motif in the chronicles is that the sounds

[157] *Busnaya* 150 (folio 0301).
[158] *Busnaya* 60 (folio 0125).
[159] *Book of Governors*, 524, trans. 294.
[160] *Busnaya* 107 (folio 0221).

of villagers nearby annoy the monks, in one case causing a group of monks to relocate completely and rebuild their monastery elsewhere.[161] In *The History of Beth Qoqa*, the abbot Shoubhalmaran was remembered, among other things, for chasing away a group of village boys who sat by a pile of threshed grain and sang drinking songs all night.[162] In another instance, the monks used the soundscape to their advantage; after the monastery of Ineshak, close to Beit Ṣayyare, was destroyed by a Kurdish raid, the monks rebuilt it on a peak so that their cries would carry to the villages lower down the slope, signaling the need for reinforcements.[163] Examples such as these underline that the monasteries were not isolated, and, on the contrary, were physically located close to other settlements in the region.

Few villagers in John's text are directly given a voice, but returning to the anecdote about Koma and Kemel, Koma himself represents another way in which locals were drawn into the monastery's orbit. Although John describes him as a solitary (*iḥidaya*), one of the standard terms for monks, as he tells other anecdotes about Koma, it becomes increasingly unclear what his connection to the monastery was.[164] He lacks the religious title of Rabban – although some other monks do as well - but in an earlier passage, John describes him primarily as an employee, in phrasing that suggests a worker rather than a monk: "There was an old man in the monastery whose name was Koma. He was connected to the work at the mills belonging to the monastery

[161] Andrew Palmer, *A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Qartmin Trilogy: Being the Lives of Samuel of Eštin, Simeon of Qartmīn, and Gabriel of Bēṭ Qūsṭān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15.
[162] *History of Beth Qoqa*, 252. Michael Morony theorizes that Shoubhalmaran's strong reaction must have been because the songs were pagan – but the text gives no indication whether they were pagan or not. Like the other stories, the sound itself seems to have been irritating. Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 398.
[163] *Busnaya* 138 (folio 0281).
[164] There is some ambiguity in the phrase ܚܕܝܕܝܐ as well, since it also can act as an adverb, "alone, by oneself" as well as a noun: "a solitary." In an alternative reading, rather than "Kemel found Koma, the solitary," the passage would read, "Kemel found Koma alone," in which case John never identifies Koma as a member of the monastery. I suspect that "the solitary" is a more likely reading, although the other ambiguities about Koma's character remain.

(*asir hwa hu hana b'qurdḥa d'ruḥutha d'gawa*)."[165] The monastery sometimes hired outsiders to do specialized work – building, for instance, or financial stewardship. The monastery of Beth ʿAbhe employed an Arab steward to manage its grain, for instance, although he lived outside the monastery and was not a monk.[166] It is possible that Koma fit into this category, especially since John mentions that he was also a drunk. At the end of Lent, after Rabban Mousha had forbidden him from drinking during the days of fasting, he came to Rabban Mousha after the liturgy and begged him to pour him a drink. Rabban Mousha obligingly poured him a cup of wine, which Koma immediately gulped down. Dismayed by his gluttony, Rabban Mousha laid a curse on him that he would feel sick if he ever drank wine again. The curse lasted until after Rabban Mousha's death, when Koma came to Rabban Joseph, complaining that working at the mills was very difficult and some wine would ease his pain; Rabban Joseph agreed and lifted the curse, letting him drink again.[167] The story suggests a man who was not quite under monastic discipline, part of the community and yet not dedicated to its severe asceticism, and one who was defined primarily by his work. Several similarly pathetic figures appear in the margins of the text – a man with oozing sores whom Rabban Yohannon of Dasen took into his cell, a poor man outside the gate of the monastery to whom Rabban Joseph gave his tunic.[168] In this scenario, Koma might have been yet another misfit, drifting to the monastery because he had failed at some other aspect of life, working long hours at the mill to exorcise some stubborn demon.

Because highland life is represented from the monastic perspective, pieces of valuable data are missing. Most notably, the many Jewish communities that dotted the same region until

[165] *Book of Governors*, 231, trans. 104.
[166] *Busnaya* 78 (folio 0164).
[167] *Busnaya* 79 (folio 0164-0165).
[168] *Busnaya* 149 (folio 0299). The anecdote seems to imply that beggars often came to the gate of the monastery to beg for alms.

the mid-twentieth century are almost entirely absent. Islamic writers, including Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Muqaddasī, mentioned large, vibrant Jewish communities in the area north of Mosul as well as Adiabene, with al-Muqaddasī avowing that there were more Jews on the eastern edge of the Zagros mountains than Christians.[169] John does not mention Jews at all, while other chronicles describe them only in the context of seeking cures at the monastery, and in one case converting to Christianity.[170] Contemporary sources on Jewish mountain life are nearly absent, although Benjamin of Tudela describes a vibrant community that, like their Christian counterparts, vigorously resisted attempts to extend lowland control into their territory.[171]

John's narrative provides color and nuance to the many groups that lived in their own corner of the highlands. Because of his focus on individual anecdotes, his manuscript shows how the relationships between clan, village, and monastery could be simultaneously adversarial and symbiotic. The stories of recurrent feuds, the simultaneous fear of robbers and their sometime ties to the monasteries, the linked structure of monastery and village location, all point to a society centered around personal and tribal rather than institutional bonds. As will become clear in the next chapter, the personal element played a large role in establishing monasteries as major social players in highland life.

Conclusion

[169] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions: a Translation of Ahsan Al-Taqasim Fi Ma'rifat Al-Aqalim*, trans. Basil Collins (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1994), 350.
[170] *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 172, trans. 261.
[171] Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. Marcus Nathan Adler (New York: Philip Feldheim Inc., 1907), 77.

The value of John's narrative lies in its finely detailed recollections of Beit Ṣayyare and the lives of its monks. Its emphasis is on the life of Rabban Joseph, secondarily the broader community of monks, and only faintly the wider world beyond. John's goal is not to set out a reconstruction of the major political events of the region or even a chronological history of Beit Ṣayyare. However, because of its focus on the small and the ordinary, the narrative offers a wealth of incidental details that bring the monastery and its surrounding community to life. Read slantwise, John's narrative reveals the monastery's structures and lived environment, its struggles with famine and local conflict, and even the quirks and personalities of the people who lived there.

So focused is John on the lives of his monks that political implications appear only faintly. He concludes one chapter by writing simply, "In the year 359 of the Arabs (969), Rabban Mar-Atqen left this world."[172] Rabban Mar-Atqen is omnipresent in the manuscript; he had been a monk at Beit Ṣayyare since the days of Rabban Bar-Yalda. By all rights, he should have enjoyed seniority and respect, but the stories that John tells about him, scattered across several anecdotes, show him in anything but a leadership position. When his friend Rabban Babai urged him to consult Rabban Joseph as a confessor, despite the fact that Rabban Mar-Atqen was much older and more experienced than the man he would be confessing to, he leapt at the opportunity.[173] It was Rabban Mar-Atqen who came up with the idea of scouring the winepress for rotten grapes during the famine (when Rabban Joseph got some grain, he immediately sent some to Rabban Mar-Atqen so that he could eat better).[174] He also had a prodigious appetite – the cenobites were amazed when on one occasion, after the monks were told to eat as much as

[172] *Busnaya* 147 (folio 0296).
[173] *Busnaya* 45 (folio 0095).
[174] *Busnaya* 142 (folio 0287), 57 (folio 0118).

they wanted, he immediately wolfed down thirteen loaves of bread.[175] Rabban Mar-Atqen had no great achievements or wisdom and was not a major spiritual or theological figure – he comes across instead as a little humble, a little comic, and very earnest. He was the kind of person who was a pillar of the community simply by his presence. His death did not cause any waves in the Church of the East, northern Mesopotamia or the Islamic empire, but it did shake the little world of Beit Ṣayyare, which remembered him fondly and mourned his passing.

To John, Rabban Mar-Atqen's death was the most important event of the year 969. But fifty miles to the south, in Mosul, the Ḥamdanid emir Nasr al-Dawla, the longtime ruler of the kingdom, had just been deposed by his brash young son, Abu Taghlib. In the same year that Rabban Mar-Atqen was passing away, Nasr al-Dawla died in prison.[176] His death accelerated the dynasty's political turmoil: in the same year, Aleppo and Mayyafaraqin decreed that they were splitting from Mosul's control.[177] At the same time, Byzantine raids under the emperor Nicephorus penetrated deep into Syria, capturing Antioch and leading the geographer and historian Ibn Ḥawqal to bewail that the Ḥamdanids must have secretly converted to Christianity and were in league with the Byzantines to Christianize the land.[178] And with Abu Taghlib's ascent to power, the war between the Ḥamdanids and the Buyids, which the Ḥamdanids would lose only a decade later, was marching closer, with devastating consequences for those in Mosul, its hinterland, and the monasteries themselves. Under a combination of external pressure and internal division, northern Mesopotamia was buckling and beginning to fracture.

[175] *Busnaya* 142 (folio 0287). John comments that he had a massive figure, but was normally very dutiful in fasting.
[176] Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty of Mesopotamia and North Syria 254-404/868-1014," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1981), 935.
[177] Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty," 949, 954. Aleppo fell to Byzantine forces soon thereafter.
[178] Ibn Ḥawqal, *Configuration de la Terre*, 205.

Only faint echoes of these intrigues, however, appear in John's history, which is as remarkable for what it leaves out as for what it includes. The concerns in John's manuscript are not at all typical of the Islamic world writ large; instead, they show how the caliphate only minimally impacted highland villages, leaving local people and places to take a much larger role. John's intense interest in the monks of Beit Ṣayyare leaves the great political movements of the period blurred and out of focus, but it offers the kind of experiences that must have been typical of an average villager living in the hinterland.

Chapter Three

Demons, Wolves, and Witches: Folklore and Danger in the Hinterland

Introduction

Syriac monasteries have long been associated with healing and other miracles, and their reputation for supernatural power remains one of their longest-lasting legacies in the Islamic world. Although in the modern day this reputation has ebbed, especially since the emergence of Western-style hospitals, monastic spaces are still sometimes treated as places of spiritual protection and divine presence, even in areas where Christians themselves have vanished entirely.[179] In the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid periods, the connection between Syriac monastic practice and miraculous power represented one of the most important factors in the relationship between monasteries and local villages, especially in the decentralized, lightly governed highlands. Belief in miraculous power transformed the monastery into a place of authority and attracted pilgrims from both local villages and the more urbane lowlands, and also cemented its social status across religious and cultural lines.

One example, involving a deacon brought from Mosul during the tenth-century chronicler John bar Kaldoun's days as a junior monk Beit Ṣayyare, illustrates the gravitational pull of the monastery for those seeking extraordinary healing:

> Now when I was among the cenobites and serving as a sacristan at the church, some people brought a man from Mosul who had been possessed, whose name was 'Isa. He was a

[179] James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 186-187. For the folklore of healing and divine power that still surrounds an abandoned monastery near Erzerum, see Victoria Arakelova and Kristine Grigorian. "The Halvori Vank': An Armenian Monastery and a Zaza Sanctuary," *Iran & the Caucasus* 17, no. 4 (2013): 383-90. The roots of this association of monasteries with healing can be traced to late antiquity, where pagan shrines served a similar purpose.

> deacon of the faithful who were [known as] the Bnai Elia. His case was very difficult, and the demons who were in him were even more malevolent than Legion, who was in the man who was dwelling among the tombs.[180] We bound him up with chains in the martyrium. Now his story was astonishing and very perplexing, a story unlike anything which one can find in books or histories. The man was not separated from the demon which was in him, and all the time, he was hitting his right hand against his surroundings or the door. But [ʻIsa] retained his knowledge and understood everything. He was speaking to me in different voices, and he was mocking me, and he was saying some things, and he said other things which he did not [seem to be the one] who was saying, but rather the demon who was dwelling in him was using his mouth to say them. And when I anointed him with oil and holy water as was the custom [for such cases], he would permit the oil to touch his body only with great difficulty.[181]

After the failed exorcism with holy objects, John turned ʻIsa's case over to Rabban Busnaya, who was able to discern the reason for the possession and successfully expel the demon:

> After three days, I brought him to Rabban [Busnaya]. . . and when Rabban stretched out his hand to place it on his head, the demon cried out again and said, "Agh! Do not burn me, old man! Do not put your hand near me; I will go out of this man. But God was the one who let me have power over him, because he ate meat during the fast. And he gave me power over his right hand, but he didn't give me power over his understanding or his mind, and if I had taken this power, I would have immediately been destroyed." These things were said in the Arabic tongue (*b'lshana tayyaya*) by the filthy demon, through the mouth of that man. So then I questioned [ʻIsa] at that time, about what the demon had said with his mouth, and he said that yes, he had eaten meat during the fast.[182]

This account of an exorcism highlights how the reputation of holy figures appealed to visitors from a wide range of backgrounds. But coming to the monastery also meant entering a space that reinterpreted these phenomena through a rural Christian lens. The deacon, ʻIsa (rendered as ܥܝܣܐ rather than its Syriac equivalent ܝܫܘܥ), has an Arabic name and presumably spoke Arabic natively, but when he speaks Arabic during the exorcism, John attributes it to demonic influences. The

[180] Cf. Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39. The reference to the Bnai Elia – ܒܢ̈ܝ ܐܠܝܐ, Sons of Elijah – is unclear, perhaps referring to the monastery of Mar Elia south of Mosul, though the "bnai" form is never used elsewhere for inhabitants of a monastery. Alternatively, it perhaps refers to an urban religious order with connections to the Biblical prophet Elijah, who frequently appears as a model East Syrian saint, like the *bnai/bnat qyāmā* (Sons and Daughters of the Covenant).
[181] Or "he was speaking to me with different words/phrases" [ܒܡܠ̈ܐ ܡܫ̈ܚܠܦܬܐ], though voices make more sense in context. *Busnaya* 67 (folio 0139-140).
[182] *Busnaya* 67 (folio 0141).

monks also blame the deacon's possession on his own faults; specifically, his failure to observe the Christian fast. Their argument that his mouth and his right hand had been lawfully ceded to the evil spirit because they were implicated in his sin reinforced the importance of honoring the Christian calendar, especially in such a worldly place as Mosul. John's diagnosis, and his retelling of the story, assert the superiority of monastic spirituality against the potential corruptions of city life, but also show the authority that monks wielded in such situations. This reputation of monasteries for healing and protection against evil spirits in the late ʿAbbāsid period represents the culmination of trends that combined Christian intellectual circles and local folk beliefs, and in turn crystallized the role of Christian monasteries in the Islamic world throughout the medieval and early modern eras.

This chapter uses three lenses to examine how miracle stories built monastic standing in Mosul's hinterland and the surrounding villages. The first section addresses how Syriac chroniclers borrowed hagiographic and intellectual motifs from earlier monastic literature from Egypt, especially through stories of demonic possession. These motifs provided stock imagery for the stories of local saints, but they went beyond a purely fictional or literary function, filtering into real-life situations when monks displayed inexplicable behavior. The second section looks at how anecdotes about villagers and demons revolve around a different axis, namely the hazards of living in a remote, rural area, including threats from wildlife and sickness. While sometimes incorporating literary models, these stories underscore how the monastery was believed to provide a defense for the community. Finally, by examining stories about witchcraft, the third section suggests the importance of physical objects and ritual practice as the medium for the dialogue between local folklore and Christian beliefs about the supernatural.

The Impact of Egyptian Theories of Demonology on Syriac Practice

The demonic encounters that punctuated the lives of monks in ʿAbbāsid northern Mesopotamia tapped into a deep reservoir of stories and beliefs about demons that had developed in Christian monastic culture since the fourth century. The seeds of this demonology can be traced to the world of the desert fathers and mothers of Egypt and the literary models that emerged from that milieu. Among the most important of these literary models was the *Life of Antony*, written by the bishop Athanasius around 360. Describing Antony's quest for complete solitude among the tombs far outside the city, Athanasius portrays demonic tactics as spiritual temptation and illusion meant to shake the believer from his adherence to Christ:

> But [the demons], if they happen to see Christians – all Christians, but especially monks – working cheerfully and making [spiritual] progress, first endeavor and attempt to place obstacles on the path: these obstacles are evil thoughts (*logismoi*). But we do not need to fear their suggestions, for by prayer, fasting, and faith in the Lord, their attacks falter straightaway.
>
> However, being thwarted [once] does not mean that they stop; they come back again with trickery and deceit. For when they are not able to deceive the heart openly with base pleasures, they attack by other means. Taking on other appearances, they attempt to instill fear, changing their forms to imitate women, wild animals, creatures with huge bodies, and troops of soldiers. But there is no need to be afraid of these displays, for they are nothing and quickly disappear, especially if one has prepared himself with faith and the sign of the cross.[183]

While demons in local folklore often tend to cause physical mischief, these demons adopted a new target – specifically Christians and monks, although they could strike anywhere – a new modus operandi – to induce their victim to sin via one of the passions – and, consequently, new vulnerabilities via fasting and prayer, which fortified self-discipline. Nevertheless, demons could still cause harm in the material world as well, and much of the *Life* consists of battles between

[183] Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, trans. H. Ellershaw, in Volume IV of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 23:1-4.

Antony and demonic forces. Although Athanasius claims in the passage above that demonic attempts at intimidation are merely displays, the demons in his hagiography maul Antony in one of his early forays into the desert:

> And the Enemy [Satan] could not bear it any longer, because he was honestly afraid that in a short while, the desert would become a city of monks (*polisei teis askeseos*). Coming one night with a horde of demons, he dealt [Antony] so many blows that he lay on the ground unable to speak from the agony.[184]

These encounters show to the reader that the demons were indeed worthy foes of the monks, capable of tangible as well as spiritual harm. Despite many such trials, including an attack by demons disguised as serpents and vermin, Antony ultimately tames the wasteland through his unflagging discipline, attracting a host of other monks to join him in the desert in large numbers. Just as Satan had feared, Athanasius writes, Antony's presence attracted more people to the ascetic life: "And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains, and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in heaven."[185] Athanasius' version of Antony cemented the idea that one of the primary tasks of monks was to settle in distant, uninhabited places; by venturing into more remote locations, the better their chances of waging warfare against evil spirits.[186] The romanticization of the desert as the proving-ground for monks ultimately came to define the ideal of monastic heroism, both in its barren setting and in its stories of spiritual combat, and largely replaced earlier forms of Christian asceticism.[187]

The demonology of the Syriac monastic tradition owed an equal or even greater debt to Evagrius Ponticus (d. ca. 399), who fled from Constantinople to Egypt in 382 and produced a host

[184] *Life of Antony,* 1:8.
[185] *Life of Antony,* 1:14.
[186] William Harmless memorably compares monasticism to "spiritual land development," and points out that wherever Antony settles in his journeys in the desert, the demons complain that they are losing their homes. William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86.
[187] James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 85-88.

of influential treatises on the spiritual life based on his experiences among the monks at Nitria.[188] Evagrius wrote a systematic analysis of demonic behavior which found wide readership throughout the late antique Christian world, especially as outlined in his works *Praktikos, Kephalaia,* and *Antirhetikos*.[189] While the *Life of Antony* focused on the real-world dangers of spiritual combat, Evagrian writings imagined demonic activity primarily as a proxy war, waged through repetitive, persistent thoughts, or *logismoi*, according to each demon's specialty – lust, gluttony, pride, etc. In *Praktikos*, he reasoned that the demons' chief strategy was to change the object of the victims' desire to something sinful that they themselves wanted and to let them lead themselves to destruction: "Whatever a person loves, he desires above all, and what he desires, he struggles to attain. Now, desire is the source of every pleasure, and sensation gives birth to desire."[190] The goal of the demons was to stimulate already-existing desires. The counterstrategy for the monk was therefore to discipline himself, and limit how much his desires could control him, regardless of how much the demons might try to sway him, and he could do so through careful diagnosis of those thoughts and an appropriate form of resistance.[191] "Whether or not all these thoughts trouble the soul is not within our power," Evagrius avowed, "but it is for us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether they are to stir up the passions."[192]

Since thought, desire, and sensation were the primary means by which demons led monks to sin, almost all the countermeasures recommended by Evagrius grounded the monk in the physical world either by work or deprivation: thirst to discipline lust, stillness to combat

[188] Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 313-314.
[189] For a complete translation of the original Greek editions of his works, see Robert E. Sinkewicz trans., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[190] Evagrius, "Praktikos" in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 138.
[191] Columba Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 2 (2011): 266.
[192] Evagrius, "Praktikos" in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 138-139.

restlessness, and charitable works to counter sadness.[193] Consequently, the antidote to *logismoi* depended on which demon was troubling the monk. Some solutions lay in identifying and then responding to the demons in verbal combat (addressed in Evagrius' *Antirhetikos*) or even occasionally in pitting demons against each other, but the idea of taxonomy allowed the monk or his spiritual teacher to tailor a defense. The taxonomy of both demonic activity and its antidote of centering the monk in the real world against the illusions of his mind thus represent a major innovation in the understanding of spiritual power and dangers. Demons could still technically wreak chaos or interfere in the physical world; Evagrius gives the colorful example of one pair of demons, irked by a saint who was praying too intensely, who "attacked him and for two weeks used him as a ball, catching him on his mat."[194] But their primary goal was the corruption of the soul, especially souls that sought God through prayer and meditation, rather than the stillbirths, illnesses, and wrecked marriages that characterized the beliefs of folk magic.

Both streams of this late antique demonology, the stories of vivid spiritual combat and the Evagrian works about taxonomy and discipline, filtered into the Syriac monastic world through a series of translations and commentaries. This process, which still awaits a full study, was already fully under way by the end of the fourth century. The *Book of Steps*, one of the foundational ascetical works in the Syriac world dating to the late fourth century, draws from Evagrius in its introduction, and the theologian Babai the Great completed a translation of parts of his *Kephalaia Gnostica* in the latter part of the sixth century.[195] The seventh-century monastic chronicle of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta recalls that the monks of northern Iraq were required to memorize the works of

[193] David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of a Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 58.
[194] Evagrius, "On Prayer," in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 205.
[195] Robert Kitchen, *The Syriac Book of Steps: Fascicle 1* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), 4. Notably, Babai's translation took place after Evagrius was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 553.

Evagrius and other Egyptian ascetics. Rabban Bar-ʿIdta reported: "All of these [ascetic treatises] I worked at in my mind, and I toiled at the repetition of them by heart, until at length I did not substitute the word *ger* for *den* throughout."[196] Even a remote monastery like Beit Ṣayyare had copies of Evagrius and *The Life of Antony* on its shelves.[197]

Many of the stories of demonic encounters in the East Syrian monastic chronicles echo Egyptian tales of demonic combat. Without ever mentioning Antony's name, the biographer of Rabban Hormizd depicts his hero in an almost identical struggle against angry demons.

> At midnight there burst upon [Rabban Hormizd] a host of evil spirits [*dayowe*], threatening and menacing the holy man. The filthy beings fell upon the righteous man and beat him without mercy, with the cruelest blows. And they left him lying exhausted, with only one small breath remaining within him.[198]

Like Antony, Rabban Hormizd endured the physical attacks manfully and redoubled his ascetic efforts. In a further echo of Antony's trials, an angel visits Rabban Hormizd the next morning and witnesses his torment by the demons; in the *Life of Antony*, it is a messenger with a loaf of bread who witnesses the aftereffects of the demonic combat. The parallel continues into the next scene, in which Rabban Hormizd, like Antony, faces a horde of crafty demons who intimidate him with shapeshifting and illusions:

> Then the devils began to wage war of a different kind against him, for they used to come against him at night in hateful, vile forms, in all manner of destructive beasts, and creeping things, and dragons, and huge snakes that shot forth deadly venom, that they might infect his mind with terror and panic. Thus, they would distract him and fill him with horror at

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[196] *The Life of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 175, trans. 120. His discussion of *ger* and *den* indicates that he could distinguish between even minor particles in the text.

[197] *Busnaya* 22 (folio 0056). Evagrius was also read in Beth ʿAbhe: among several references, see especially the missionary bishop Mar Elijah who quotes *Praktikos* when arranging his cell. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, trans. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840 Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2003), 495-498, trans. 270-273.

[198] E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar-'Idtâ: The Syriac Texts Edited with English Translations* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), 41; trans. 27. The Syriac term here, *dayowe*, is unusual, borrowing from the Persian word for demon (*daeva*) and possibly reflecting Rabban Hormizd's Persian origins.

> the sight of them, and thus they might be able to lead captive his mind. But. . . the blessed man cut apart the nets of their snares.[199]

These passages show how deeply Syriac hagiographers had imbibed Egyptian models. By mimicking the language in *The Life of Antony* for local Syriac monks, they implicitly attributed the same importance to their own saints. They also demonstrate the patterns to which saints were expected to conform; because they had undergone similar opposition from demonic foes, local monks could be confirmed as genuine spiritual heroes. *The Life of Antony* thus continued to have a narrative influence on how chroniclers imagined and portrayed their subjects.

The influence of Egyptian Christian ideas about demonology went beyond literary imitation, shaping both the understanding of demons among Syriac ascetics and the treatment applied to defeat them. On balance, these treatments drew from Evagrius' taxonomy rather than Antony's heroism. For instance, John mentions a monk named Ya'qub who was going mad and who was initially treated by being given a new rule to ground him in good Evagrian fashion, although it failed to produce the desired results:

> There was a certain brother in the monastery who was called Ya'qub. . . [who] was vexed by a struggle with satanic hallucinations [*sargriatha satanatha*]. And when he confessed to Rabban [Busnaya] about this, Rabban created a rule [*qanouna*] suitable for him. And he commanded him to be vigilant and careful about it. But [Ya'qub] transgressed the word of his mouth, and this brother wandered away from the commandment of Rabban and disobeyed his rule. And his mind was damaged and held captive by the demons. And he was bound with chains in the martyrium for a time.

Later, Ya'qub escaped and went to Mosul, where John happened to encounter him.

> [Ya'qub] went to the city of Mosul, and as he wandered all over the city the pagans and children were mocking him. And I was in the city because some affair had summoned me [there] and some people informed me about him. With great effort I led him back to the monastery with me. . .[200]

[199] *The Life of Rabban Hormizd*, 29; trans. 43.
[200] *Busnaya* 63 (folio 0132).

An Evagrian treatment was applied again: Ya'qub was sent to work in the fields with the cenobites, but his fits of madness disconcerted the others and the monks were forced to remove him. Only an exorcism by Rabban Busnaya caused the hallucinations to cease.[201]

The case of Ya'qub helps highlight the influence of Evagrian demonology on the monks' interpretation and treatment in real life rather than a hagiographical or literary context. Unlike the ritual formulae written on the incantation magic bowls discussed below, the demons here were not acting as tangible threats to children, livestock, or marital harmony. Instead, Ya'qub's illness is portrayed as the result of an existence lived primarily through the mind. The initial attempts to cure him aimed to bring him back to his senses through slow, steady immersion in ritual and work, as Evagrius had prescribed. A similar case recounted by John underscores the hazards of too much contemplation even more explicitly, as a monk named Rabban David began neglecting the material world during a period of divine ecstasy:

> When he went to Rabban [Joseph], as I have mentioned above, and told him of these [wonderful experiences]. . . [Rabban] imposed some labors on him to which he should apply himself. . . But in that year, during the fast of Our Lord, when this brother was in sackcloth, some divine experience happened to him in an exquisite and glorious manner. . . He did not take anything to eat at the conclusion of those days [of fasting]. And he was inflamed with love for humanity, until he was offering himself as a sacrifice before God on behalf of all men. And he did not stop with this alone; but he also pleaded with God and begged that he alone could be [a sacrifice] for all the rest of rational creation, and [even] offered himself [to bear] all punishment that was yet to come. . .and he was injured in his mind and taken captive by demons.[202]

Here again, John's story shows a monk's mental exercises, while beneficial to his spiritual progress, could also leave him vulnerable to danger if pursued too exclusively. John indicates that since Rabban David refused to abide by the treatment of work which Rabban Joseph prescribed at

[201] *Busnaya* 63 (folio 0132).
[202] *Busnaya* 65 (folio 0135-0136). Rabban Busnaya's first act as part of Rabban David's cure is to give him some food to eat, thereby breaking the fast that he was so proud of.

the beginning of the visions, he ultimately exposed himself to the dangers of pride, which then led to the demon becoming too entrenched to be driven out by Evagrian grounding alone.

These and other stories about demons reveal an East Syrian reworking of earlier monastic demonology that bridged both practice and imagination. The literary allusions and intellectual theories about demons expressed in monastic chronicles demonstrate how thoroughly Egyptian thought had penetrated rural Mesopotamia in the early Islamic period. The Evagrian aspect of monastic demonology also underscores the need to parse stories about supernatural events through multiple lenses: literary invention or imitation in some cases, but also often an extension and reformulation of Evagrian strategies of spiritual training. In their approach to battling demons, the monks of ʿAbbāsid Iraq proudly and legitimately presented themselves as the heirs of late antique Egypt.

The same monastic communities faced other situations in which Egyptian theoretical and literary models fell short. The Egyptian models that often worked well to describe the interaction between monks and demons were less well matched to village demon folklore and beliefs. For instance, the diagnosis of excess contemplation was not applicable to those outside the monastery. Demonically inspired madness was said to strike some villagers as well, but for those who labored in the fields all day, too much of the life of the mind was unlikely to be the issue. Instead, stories about demons in local contexts operate under the assumption that evil spirits primarily wanted to cause significant physical harm, rather than merely leading souls astray. For supernatural danger as reported by those outside the monastery, a different set of tools was required, centered on holy objects and Christian symbolism.

Folk Demonology: Dangers to Health, Hearth, and Home

Reconstructing the cultural worldview of the village communities of northern Iraq is difficult, since our sources for medieval village life are inevitably filtered through the eyes of monastic chroniclers. To understand the anxieties of ordinary people in late antique and early Islamic Iraq, we must turn to other types of sources, such as incantation bowls and amulets that complement the stories recorded by the monastic chroniclers. By combining the evidence from Syriac hagiography with these documentary sources, we can begin to piece together a picture of the popular demonology. In this way, I treat the accounts of demonic encounters in the East Syrian hagiography as evidence for *both* real local beliefs and monastic interpretation and responses to these beliefs. Interpreted in this way, some of the stories recorded in the East (and West) Syrian hagiography introduce us to a folk demonology quite different from the Evagrian model discussed above, revealing a tendency away from *logismoi* and instead focusing on spirits that simply intend to do harm.

Ample material evidence, including spells, amulets, and incantation bowls, provide a window into popular religion in late antiquity and complement many of the descriptions of village complaints in monastic sources. One of the best sources for everyday religion in late antique and Islamic Mesopotamia is the tradition of incantation bowls, an apotropaic practice which peaked in the sixth and seventh centuries and largely faded away by the eighth. Incantation bowls, clay objects which were usually buried beneath houses as an apotropaic measure, especially attest to a belief in demons that was shared across both social and religious divides.[203] While magical literature was common across the pre-Islamic Near East, the phrasing, formulae, and art of

[203] The practice seems to have stopped around the early eighth century. Its origin point is murkier, although most extant exempla are from the sixth and seventh centuries. See Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 2-3.

Mesopotamian incantation bowls reflect a local culture with its own unique magical texts.[204] Typical formulae named the demon, invoked a ban, often with the aid of an angelic helper or occasionally a rabbi or holy man, and instructed it to leave the supplicant alone.[205] The inscriptions often mimic legal language, sometimes using the terminology of divorce between the demon and the afflicted. An example of one such formula from Nippur in southern Iraq, invoking the second century B.C. rabbi Joshua bar Perahya, shows some of the Jewish and Mesopotamian precedents that would later be folded into Christian exemplars:

> The lot I cast and I take, magical act that was performed like it was when Rab Joshua bar Peraḥya sat (in court), and wrote against them a bill of divorce against all of them: demons and devils and satans and liliths and no-good-ones that are in the house of Dʾdbh son of ʾSmndwkt. Again he wrote against them a bill of divorce that is forever: in the name of the sign of *mdg* , the sign of signs, the signs out of signs, the signs of the name, the blank space out of the blank space, that by virtue of those were pressed the heaven and the earth and the mountains and by virtue of those were uprooted the heights and by virtue of those were delivered (for punishment) the sorcery, demons and devils and satans and liliths and no-good-ones and through those (they) went out from the world and he ascended against you to the heights and he brought against you the counter-charms: destruction to destroy and removing to remove you from the house of Dʾdbh son of ʾSmndwkt and from everything he has.[206]

The litany of dangers, including sorcery, demons, devils, satans, liliths, and no-goods, gives a cross section of the many potential supernatural dangers that lurked nearby.[207] Notably, however, the bowl does not attack evil spirits so much as guard a particular space – the house of D'dbh. It marks off an area which is off-limits to any nefarious forces. The text winds upwards around the bowl, encircling a sketch of a divided circle where the demon would potentially have been trapped.[208]

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[204] Dan Levene and Gideon Bohak, "Divorcing Lilith: From the Babylonian Incantation Bowls to the Cairo Genizah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 63, no. 2 (2012), 198.
[205] Shaked et al., *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 11-13.
[206] Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls: Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 44.
[207] Such spells often protect against human evils as well – including arrows, swords, and, beginning in the nineteenth century, guns. See David Calabro, "Soundings in the Textual History of Syriac Amulets," in *Studies in the Syriac Magical Tradition*, eds. Marco Moriggi and Siam Bhayro (Boston: Brill, 2022), 177-178.
[208] Incantation bowls were buried upside down, so the center of the bowl would have entrapped the demon if it tried to enter the space – "like a mouse trap or roach motel" in Morony's memorable phrase – although,

In other cases, the center of the bowls shows the demon bound and thus rendered ineffective, signaling the power of human divines in restoring order.[209]

Incantation bowls and amulets demonstrate that fears of evil spirits were not simply imported wholesale by Christian monks and instead already constituted an important religious belief in rural late antique society. An important feature of incantation bowls is their shared practice - written most often in one of the dialects of Aramaic, with a few late exemplars in Arabic and Middle Persian, incantation bowls appear across Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities. A common conception of demons often led members of one religious community to seek out power from other traditions, without understanding themselves as switching from one faith to another. The repetition of formulae from Jewish, Christian, and occasionally Zoroastrian sources in rival religious communities show petitioners willing to seek out whatever relief was necessary in order to solve their particular issue, across religious lines.[210] The role of demons thus directly correlated to the fears that plagued a premodern society: infertility, danger in childbirth, infidelity, illness or death. In particular, villagers express concerns about marital disharmony, the onset of deadly or incurable diseases, or evil spirits that cause mayhem and physical harm rather than attempting to endanger their salvation.

Although the practice of burying incantation bowls largely tapered off early in the Islamic era, the concerns that underlay village complaints about demons can be seen in Syriac amulets

counterintuitively, some bowls speak of expelling the demon rather than trapping it. Michael Morony, "Religion and the Aramaic Incantation Bowls," *Religion Compass* 1.4 (2007), 419.

[209] Naama Vilozny, "The Art of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls," in *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 29-37. The demon is often bound at the wrist or ankles, visually representing the binding effect of the spell.

[210] See, for instance, the invocation of Jewish formulae on Syriac incantation bowls, Marco Moriggi, "Jewish Divorce Formulae in Syriac Incantation Bowls," *Aramaic Studies* 13, no. 1 (January 2015), esp. 85-86. For another example of Syriac borrowing referencing "liliths," or demons devoted to sexual chaos, see Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls: Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 23.

which often incorporated more explicitly Christian language while retaining much of the older formulae. An amulet from Urmia, in northwestern Iran, includes the following injunctions against demons mixed with appeals to Christian holy men.

> . . . by the power and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, I bind and I expel and I objurgate the evil and bewitching eye, and the eye green and heavy, and the eye of men and the eye of women, and the eye of every kind of man and beast. And I bind wounds and the stroke of rupture and all sicknesses, and all diseases and all plagues and all rebellions and all *incubae* of night, of demons and rebellious devils and satans. And I bind evil fevers and evil strokes and fears and tremors of false (deceptive) sleep. . . the ban of Mar Abd'Ishu', the anchorite and monk of God, which is useful for exorcizing.[211]

The similarities in formulae and content between this exemplar, from the rural highlands, and the far more numerous incantation bowls from Nippur, also show widespread cross-fertilization of ideas across geography and time. The amulet pairs this and several similar spells with images of armed saints hurling spears at demons, a feature more common to Christian spells than Jewish, although it also includes segments written in Hebrew characters which demonstrate its indebtedness to other Aramaic magical traditions. Like the bowl fragment quoted above, the amulet also identifies the many supernatural problems that plagued the hinterlands: the evil eye of a jealous neighbor, the curse of a male or female witch, terror, sexual assaults at night, illness. Notably, these are all pragmatic issues – the bearer of the amulet, a woman named Gauza bat Shima, is attempting to guard herself from different kinds of harm rather than temptation or danger to her soul.

Magical rites could be found in both rural and urban contexts, but without attempting to reduce beliefs in demons to sociological context, it is worth noting that these concerns were especially pronounced in the hinterlands. Because the highlands enjoyed relative political freedom, they also remained susceptible to dangers that urban residents could largely avoid or ameliorate.

[211] Willis Hatfield Hazard, "A Syriac Charm," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 15 (1893): 285-286.

In Islamic cities, for instance, a municipal police force (*shurta*) secured the streets from criminals and mounted patrols were appointed to keep the roads outside the cities clear of bandits, while banditry remained endemic in the highlands: John writes of robbers ambushing monks simply to take their clothes if they had no money.[212] The contrast between the two zones is illustrated in an anecdote in the ninth century *Book of Governors*, which mentions the ruthless effectiveness of one of these patrols when a group of bandits attempted to expand their operations to the lowlands near Shenna. Although they had been a long-time terror in the highlands, the bandit gang was quickly tracked, caught, and killed by the local garrison.[213] The caliphal system could bring force to bear to protect its roads and towns; in the highlands, villagers were on their own.

Similarly, the ʿAbbāsid period was a time when Islamic medicine flourished, but its benefits were largely confined to urban centers. Many large cities contained hospitals and medical guilds, and the vast extent of the caliphate meant that physicians were able to integrate medicines and treatments from Greek, Egyptian, Arabic, and Indo-Iranian traditions. In Baghdad, the medical community included the Bukhtīshūʿ clan, an East Syrian family, which produced seven generations of doctors, published a number of books in the ʿAbbāsid period, including works on pharmacology, respiratory systems, and eyesight, drawing from Greek, Syriac, and Indian translations that they gathered in their library in Khuzestan and transported to Baghdad.[214] No comparable concentration of medical resources was available in rural northern Mesopotamia.

[212] The benefits of having police varied, sometimes verging into brutality against the populace or neglect of their duties, but the existence of a paid, well-organized, well-structured force to keep the peace represented a major difference from highland society. For the ʿAbbāsid *shurta*, including the scandals that rocked its reputation during the tenth century, see Maaike Van Berkel, Nadia Maria El Cheikh, Hugh Kennedy, and Letizia Osti, *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: formal and informal politics in the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially 137-140. For John's example, see *Busnaya* 108 (folio 0222).
[213] Thomas of Marga *Book of Governors*, 556/315.
[214] Husain F. Nagamia, "The Bukhtīshūʿ Family: A Dynasty of Physicians in the Early History of Islamic Medicine." *Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America* 41, no. 1 (2009): 7-12.

Although medical texts circulated among mountain monasteries, trained physicians were largely found in urban settings. Once again, rural inhabitants were largely left to their own resourcefulness.

As a result, where urban dwellers enjoyed the protection of several sophisticated institutions, the highland monastery performed a myriad of similar functions for rural inhabitants: a place of healing instead of hospitals, a means to ensure village borders, and an antidote to problems for which there were no precise terms to describe. The monastery therefore took on a social role that went well beyond religious worship and discipline for its members, and villager complaints give a glimpse of how monasteries came to fill several gaps in rural society, offering protection and reassurance against a host of dangers, both physical and supernatural. The anecdotes below are subdivided into three categories: evil spirits, animals, and diseases, which are represented in both late antique apotropaic rites and monastic chronicles.

Animals

In the overwhelmingly agrarian and pastoral economy of northern Iraq, animals and humans lived in extremely close proximity. The extent to which human and animal life was intertwined can be gleaned from the letters of the West Syrian bishop Jacob of Edessa, who admonishes a priest not to celebrate the Eucharist in the presence of animals or in sheepfolds, which he considers demeaning to the sacrament, although he allows that the fragments of the Eucharist or the dust of the sanctuary could be administered to them in their food or drinking water.[215] Descriptions of animals are often pragmatic, as livestock or beasts of burden, but other

[215] Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 142.

anecdotes emphasize their intelligence, human-like characteristics, or dignity. In one instance, when a monk at Beit Sayyare allows his disciple to hunt a wild goat's kids, the mother goat is so devastated at the loss that she spends the night crying above the monastery; moved by remorse, the monk then resurrects both kids and sends them on their way.[216] Stories such as these emphasize the kinship that rural inhabitants saw between themselves and the many other inhabitants of the natural world who lived in and around their settlements.

By the same token, human mastery over animals was partial and incomplete, and wild animals in particular posed a constant threat to village life. Predators such as wolves and mountain lions preyed on herd animals and, occasionally, people. A story from the seventh century history of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta highlights one such instance where wolves began to overrun a village, carrying out regular raids into houses rather than livestock pens. Set in the period just prior to the coming of Islam, these incursions by the wolves underscore the extent to which rural communities had to depend on their own resources for protection:

> Before the departure of Rabban [Bar-ʿIdta], there went forth into this country of Marga an evil night-wolf [*daba bisha ramshaya*], according to what is said in Jeremiah. And many young children, from their beds, that is to say, from their cradles (*periatha*), were snatched away and devoured. Now this did not take place only in one village but not in another; in fact, from many villages in a single night, children were snatched away. As soon as deep sleep fell, he [the wolf] struck, unseen by any of them. And many passed the whole night without sleep, watching for him. And many crowds of people gathered together and went round their houses with weapons.
>
> And when they saw that this oppressive evil had increased, the [people of the] villages gathered themselves together and came to the holy man, weeping for their children who had been eaten by this plague of night-wolves. And having received from Rabban some *ḥnana* and water from his spring of prayer, they sprinkled it on the boundaries of their villages, and the night-wolves were driven away.[217]

[216] *Busnaya*, 99 (folio 0206).
[217] *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 291-292/193. The reference is to Jeremiah 5:6: "[A] lion out of the forest will slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them." Wolves naturally hunt at night, but the Biblical language adds a supernatural

The anecdote blurs natural and supernatural phenomena, but the enemy faced by the villagers bears a close resemblance to the real wolves that have always lived in the terrain around the villages of northern Iraq. As late as the early 20th century, Kurdish farmers complained of wolf attacks, and while wolf attacks have now declined, leopard attacks, another persistent theme in monastic chronicles, still pose a threat to humans and livestock in the region.[218] The intervention by Rabban Bar-ʿIdta sidesteps the animal, however; instead, the monks focus on restoring the integrity of the village boundaries through supernatural means. Notably, the methods are similar to those described earlier for combating demons via amulets and incantation bowls: Rabban Bar-ʿIdta uses holy water and *ḥnana* to guard a space rather than eliminate the wolves. The role of the monks in these cases is to re-establish the proper boundaries between the human and animal worlds.

Animals could also cause misfortune through no fault of their own, and other stories illustrate the dangers that came from simply living so close to the wild. For instance, the following anecdote, taken from the *History of Rabban Hormizd*, describes a shepherd who was bitten by a snake through his own carelessness:

> Now, it [happened] at a certain time on a certain day that this shepherd poured some milk into a bowl in which there were pieces of bread (*petpetha*), [planning] to eat the meal that he had prepared. But something called him away, and he left the food in the bowl uncovered, and he got up to take care of the business which had called him. And by one of the chances (*gadsha ḥad*) which happen in the world, an evil snake fell into the bowl, and having shot forth his poison, wandered away. When the shepherd came to his meal, he stretched out his right hand and put [food] into his mouth once or twice, suddenly the

resonance. Presumably, the writer also references a single wolf in the beginning to mirror the passage from Jeremiah, even though he changes to the plural later.

[218] Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan*, 29. Hay suspected that many of the "wolf attacks" were in fact carried out by the enterprising herdsmen themselves, but noted that they still represented a common threat. For recent leopard attacks in the Kurdish highlands, see Igor Khorozyan, Mahmood Soofi, Mobin Soufi, Amirhossein Khaleghi Hamidi, Arash Ghoddousi, and Matthias Waltert, "Effects of Shepherds and Dogs on Livestock Depredation by Leopards (*Panthera Pardus*) in North-eastern Iran." (San Francisco, CA, 2017).

> poison spread through his body, and he was violently convulsed by severe pain and died straightway.[219]

Although the hagiographer characterizes the snake as "evil" (*bisha*), he takes care to introduce the encounter as happening by chance rather than due to some moral failing of the shepherd. There is no indication that the snake is itself demonic, as St. Antony, for instance, had warned. The story of the fatal snakebite is embedded in a miracle story in which God reveals the shepherd's location to Rabban Hormizd, who is then able to bring him back to life on account of the shepherd's purity and chastity. As with other anecdotes, the veracity of the account is less important than its incidental details as a window into rural life, such as the shepherd's meal of bread and milk, and the snake's attraction to the unguarded milk, which illustrates how easily villagers might stumble into a deadly encounter with local wildlife.

Even domestic animals could pose a serious threat at times. Three separate accounts, preserved in three different chronicles, describe victims who were brought to the monastery after being savaged by village dogs. After being bitten by one dog, a man was rushed to the care of the monks after he was thrashing about, out of his mind, and unable to either eat bread or drink water – a description that somewhat resembles rabies.[220] Another set of victims involved a group of children who were attacked by a dog from a neighboring village:

> One day, a mad dog (*kalba paqra*) came forth from the village of Niram, and as it passed by some children who were playing, it fell upon one whose name was Maron, and tore open his belly. . . and his parents picked him up and brought him to Rabban [Cyprian].[221]

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[219] *Rabban Hormizd*, 74, trans. 49. A similar incident is recounted in *The Life of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, which discusses a cenobite who is bitten by a "black poisonous snake." The monks then avenge the attack by sealing up the snake's lair with rocks. *Bar-ʿIdta*, 257-259, trans. 169-171.

[220] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 71, trans. 47. Another village woman dies from the bite of a mad dog in *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 255.

[221] *Book of Governors*, 665, trans. 393. A later, unrelated anecdote mentions that the villagers in Niram were mostly shepherds; presumably the mad dog was a sheep dog or Kurdish mastiff. *Book of Governors*, 668, trans. 394.

Like the story of the snake, the dog is hardly at fault, and the chronicler neither blames him for biting the children nor the villagers of Niram for failing to control him. Instead, it simply testifies to the hazards of living with animals in rural areas. Dogs were necessary for guarding livestock and protecting property, but inevitably the jaws that made them useful for villagers also made them a danger to those they served.[222] In these cases, again, the monks are portrayed as re-establishing balance, correcting nature's mistake in such a way that no harm comes to either human or animal.

Finally, monastic literature also portrays monks as able to reach across the human-animal divide, living in harmony with wild animals even of the predatory type. John relates the story of a lone monk, confronted by Kurdish robbers who thought he had silver to steal; the holy man summoned to his defense two leopards whom he fondly referred to as his disciples (*tālmide*).[223] Because of their ability to communicate with wild animals, some anecdotes describe monks as resolving human-animal issues by relaying the problem to the animals directly. In an instance where a sudden blight of locusts destroyed much of the food supply around the monastery, Rabban Bar-ʿIdta and his fellow monks kill, cook, and serve them to the local villagers.[224] But in another case, two monks were reputed simply to forbid the locusts from harming the crops, arbitrating between the village and the natural world.[225] For villagers who rightly worried about the threats posed by such animals, the power of the monks to coopt or deflect wild creatures was a major part of their appeal. The Eden-like quality to some of the stories also reflects the dual attitude of

[222] Dogs were working animals, but two anecdotes describe pets kept for pleasure – one monk named Ammonius gifted a wild goat kid to a village, where it lived tame for many years, while Rabban Cyprian kept a cat. See *Book of Governors*, 650 and 667, trans. 650/382 and 667/394.
[223] *Busnaya*, 103 (folio 0220). In a parallel passage, two lions came to pay homage at the grave of the Egyptian ascetic Abba Paul. Jerome, *Vita S. Pauli* 16, quoted in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 107.
[224] *Bar-ʿIdta* 154, trans 231. Locusts were still a pest in Kurdistan in Hay's time as well. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan*, 20
[225] *Bar-ʿIdta* 149, trans. 223.

highland inhabitants to wild animals – a sense of fear on the one hand, but mingled with genuine curiosity and affection for creatures that were part of the same landscape and rural world.

Sickness

Villagers came to the monastery to be delivered from physical ailments as well as spiritual ones. As with animals, stories about disease or chronic medical complaints are not necessarily linked to the demonic, and chroniclers represent sickness as an unfortunate but natural hazard of life. Diet was often to blame. "[After moving to Rayy], when I had partaken of the food and bread made from wheat (*laḥm ḥeṭe*) I became exceedingly sick," the ninth-century bishop Mar Yahballaha reportedly confessed, "because I was accustomed. . . to a diet of rice-bread (*laḥm ruzā*)."[226] Another monk was permitted to dip his bread in olive oil rather than water, because years of salt and bread, the traditional ascetic diet, had left him unable to stomach hard foods.[227] Such references illustrate a natural as well as supernatural understanding of illness, and a distinction between illness and demonic possession.

The monastic chroniclers emphasize that all healing ultimately comes from God, even in passages that describe lengthy medical treatments. Marqos, a priest from the church of Mar Pethion in Mosul, journeyed to Beit Ṣayyare because of serious pain in his liver. John's explanation of the episode interweaves hagiographic convention with a precise description of the pharmacological treatment:

[226] *Book of Governors* 493-494/269-270. Thomas reports the story second-hand, via two other monks who knew Mar Yahballaha, as a way to illustrate Mar Yahballaha's origins in Moqan, in northwestern Iran, before he became bishop of Rayy (just south of Tehran).
[227] *Book of Governors,* 506-507/280-281.

> And when Marqos told Rabban about his affliction, [Rabban Busnaya] said to him, "Tomorrow, take the sacraments and come to me." And when he believed the time was right, the priest came to him while he was in pain. Then Rabban gave him a big cup full of old wine, pure, without water. And he said to him, "Drink this." And he offered him another vessel that was full of honey, mixed with olive oil and cumin. And he said to him, "Eat also from this." And the priest was not inclined to dispute anything with him. But he did what Rabban commanded, and he ate the honey which was mixed with olive oil and cumin and he drank the cup of wine.
>
> And he understood and comprehended in his mind, that this thing was a miracle, like that which the prophet said: "Place leaves of bitter figs on the severe ulcer."[228]
>
> Then, in order [for him] to receive healing by the prayers of Rabban, Rabban commanded that he refrain from idle talk and sleep under a tree which was in his cell between sun and shade. And it was in the hot days of summer. And in nine hours he awoke and found a flow from a great discharge.
>
> And he stood up, healed from his illness. And he was quenched from the burning of his liver. And the priest (Marqos) was astounded by this, and he praised God who had provided for him this remarkable miracle at the hands of Rabban Busnaya which was beyond the knowledge of this world. And he was there for some days eating and drinking wine liberally. When he wanted to go to his church, Rabban commanded him and said, "See that you do not use this thing [which I have done] here in the city, because it is not appropriate for the city." He said these things because he was joking with him. And the man departed, praising God and glorifying the merciful Name.[229]

Rabban Busnaya's treatment of the ailing priest links a simple medicinal remedy to the sacraments. John's description emphasizes ritual action – the power of prayer, the ambiguously-ironic comment that such a cure would not work in Mosul, and the ascetic advice that the cure depended on Marqos "refraining from idle talk,"[230] but at the same time, the treatment seems indebted to contemporary ʿAbbāsid medical practice. Medical texts contemporary to John's chronicle mention spice and honey as purgatives for illnesses where the body has too much moisture, and the effect of the sun and shade could be seen to balance the need of the body for heat and cold, especially

[228] Possibly a reference to Isaiah 38:21, regarding the healing of King Hezekiah from a chronic illness: "Now Isaiah had said, 'Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.'"
[229] *Busnaya*, 58-59 (folio 0122-0123).
[230] Magical and medical texts were often bound in the same volume, as with the nineteenth-century Syriac "Book of Protection," which combines pharmaceutical recipes with astrological and divination texts. Siam Bhayro, "Syriac Magic and Medicine: A Near-Eastern Paradigm of Priestcraft," in *Studies in the Syriac Magical Tradition*, eds. Marco Moriggi and Siam Bhayro (Boston: Brill, 2022), 35.

the imbalance in the liver.[231] Both Syriac and Muslim physicians advocated balancing the humors of the body, and prescribed combinations of herbs similar to the mixture of cumin, wine, honey, and olive oil that Rabban Joseph prescribed to Marqos.

A similar dynamic is at work in Thomas of Marga's story of the monk who needed olive oil to dip his bread: his stomach was afflicted by "coldness" (*qarirutha*) and olive oil would counteract it by "warming" it, bringing his body back into balance. Galenic logic is apparent throughout, although Thomas ends the vignette with the same emphasis as John. After Mar Elijah uses oil, salt, and the sign of the cross to heal an injured donkey in his caravan, Thomas declares that medicine is ineffective and emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ as the source of medical success: "And this was known to all that company of people which was journeying with him into that country, and they praised and confessed the mighty power of Christ by Whose disciples sicknesses were healed without medicines and without drugs."[232] In alluding to Galenic treatments while denying their efficacy, Thomas and John respectively blur the dual functions of the monastery as a place of healing: as a shrine where divine power was believed to heal otherwise intractable diseases, but also a place in which the monks practiced medicinal cures.[233]

Stories about sickness, regardless of their origin, also point to the everyday injuries and problems of village life in the mountains. In the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare, a builder (*ardekla*) from a nearby Kurdish village, Beit Mourani – where Rabban David also was from – was brought

[231] Time of day was believed to balance the body in ancient Mesopotamian medicine, with sun and shadow regulating temperature, indicating that having Marqos sleep half in sun and half in shade could be part of a folk cure. See Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider, eds. *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 47.

[232] *Book of Governors* 507, trans. 281. In another passage, Thomas declares that abstemious monks "never needed the medicine of the children of Galen," indicating that he was familiar with Galenic treatments. *Book of Governors* 280, trans. 135.

[233] The prevalence of medicinal practice in Syriac monasteries is partly attested by the presence of Galenic medical manuscripts in Turfan, as well as a fragment of a treatment translated from Syriac into Uighur. Grigory Kessel, "Syriac Medicine," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 451.

in by his friends after a construction accident had left him unable to rise from bed or move on his own for a year.[234] In another episode, a Kurdish bandit from the village of Kaphar-Qoure who attempted to execute a monastery worker in a revenge killing, found himself paralyzed in his face, his hand, and his leg. Eventually, the bandit's mother brought him to the monastery, where he was miraculously healed.[235] The cure for both cases, paralysis and stroke, was the same – the prayers of the holy man and the blessing of the cross and holy water.

Not all illnesses could be cured, even by saints. Although mentioned far less often, occasional cases involve villagers being subjected to longer-term treatments. In a case described in *The History of Rabban Hormizd*, a boy of twelve, struck by madness, was chained in the martyrium for twenty-nine days and kept under watch to keep him from suicide.[236] But since their condition was beyond any medical knowledge and far from the reach of any medical institution, it was the best that anyone could hope for. The use of monasteries as places of forced confinement for those "possessed by demons" continued deep into the Islamic period. As in cases with wild animals and spirits, the monastery's access to medicinal treatment and the hope of miraculous cure created a reputation that transcended its religious identity.

Evil Spirits

Stories about evil spirits in village contexts emphasize destruction, terror, and mayhem rather than spiritual warfare. In contrast to Greek, where *daimon* indicates an intelligent spirit of either good, evil, or no particular inclination, the common word for demon in Syriac, (*shida*,

[234] *Busnaya*, 61 (folio 0127).
[235] *Busnaya*, 120 (folio 0253). The description appears to resemble a stroke.
[236] *Rabban Hormizd* 31-32, trans. 21.

ܫܝܕܐ), simply connotes destructiveness. A related form, ܫܕܐ, from the same verbal root, ܫܕܐ, indicates a whirlwind. The image of a spirit roaming, striking at random, tearing through a village or house which simply had the bad luck to be in its path, represents a continuity between the fears in amulets and magic bowls and the village anecdotes preserved in monastic chronicles. Consequently, the duty of the monks was to provide protection against evil spirits, using Christian symbols to guard the community.

One of the most striking examples of such folk demonology involves a possessed well. The abbot of the monastery of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta had sent out two monks on unspecified business in Marga, the region northeast of Mosul. One of the monks, Mattai, was approached by villagers who complained that their well was possessed and that it was frightening away passersby:

> Now our Lord performed an astonishing deed in the land of Marga through Mattai, in a village called Beth Kesaye, which had a deep well, which went all the way down to the abyss, and an evil demon (*shida bisha*) lived there. And he used to appear in the form of a horse to those who passed his way. And when the people of those villages came, they complained to Rabban [Bar-ʿIdta] and persuaded him to do something about it, to deliver them from this demon.
>
> So he called Mattai and said to him, "Go with these people, my son, and ask Christ our Lord to deliver them from the devils." And when they had gone a little distance from the monastery, [Mattai] took three little stones in his hands, and he made over them the sign of the Cross; and he commanded the people, "When you come to the well, cast in these little stones, and the power of Christ shall drive the demon out of that place." And they did what he told them, and the demon was never seen again.[237]

The elements of this story are local rather than borrowed from hagiographical models. Notably, the rationale given for the well being possessed is the almost comical claim that its deepness puts it close to hell, rather than any theological reason. Additionally, the spirit in question manifests itself as an untamed horse rather than the traditional snakes, scorpions, or venomous creatures that Evagrius and Antony mention. The solution is also local, literally drawn from the ground itself.

[237] *Bar-ʿIdta* 146, trans. 218.

Rather than exorcising the well directly, Mattai chooses stones from the road, blesses them, and commands the villagers to throw them at the evil spirit. Left unmentioned is whether the villagers are Christian or belong to another religion; in later anecdotes, the region is mentioned as still largely pagan in the eighth century, though the passage itself gives no indication.[238] Regardless, the story highlights the importance of place and exorcistic practices that needed to be immediate rather than long-term.

As with the practice of incantation bowls, belief in evil spirits unified rural inhabitants across religious lines. A Jewish tailor is said to have brought his demon-possessed son to the monastery of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta to be blessed by the monks after his son repeatedly tore his garments to shreds.[239] In the monastery of Beit Qoqa, monks heal, at various times, a Persian woman, a paralyzed Muslim child, and a "pagan" from Hadatha.[240] In the case of the Jewish tailor, the miracle leads to conversion, but in the majority of cases involving non-Christians, the patient does not convert after the miracle takes place; in many of them, the religion of the patient is not mentioned at all. Instead, the monastery functions as a shared site of spiritual power, even though it is specifically associated with the Christian religion.

One of the most powerful examples of Christian symbolism across religious lines is in non-converting baptism, later referred to as the Baptism of John. In the Gospels, the prophet John the Baptist had conducted his own baptismal ritual before the coming of Jesus, one which remained distinct from the salvific baptism that Christians offered but nonetheless conferred spiritual

[238] *Book of Governors* 305, trans. 150. Thomas identifies the beliefs of the people in rural Marga as a mix of Zoroastrianism and paganism: "[T]hat country [of Salakh] abounded in Magianism, and not only in the worship of the sun, moon and stars, but [the people] in their stupidity offered worship also to trees of beautiful foliage, and this worship of trees existed even in the days of the old man from whom I learned this." More likely, the countryside was already partly Christianized, with a mix of local beliefs.
[239] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 261, trans. 172.
[240] *History of Beth Qoqa*, 230, 256, 261.

power.[241] Syriac Christians took advantage of this tradition to create two forms of the baptismal rite themselves: one for believers and their children that cleansed them from sin, and one for non-believers which was understood to protect them from evil spirits but not to convert them to Christianity. An apotropaic version of the Baptism of John specifically for Muslim children was codified in the Syriac Orthodox Church in the twelfth century, but forms of the rite are referenced even in the earliest years following the conquest.[242] The *Life of Rabban Hormizd* describes the Muslim governor asking an East Syrian monk for just such a rite as early as the seventh century, using the same scriptural reference, "Give me the baptism of repentance and let us be pardoned by it, just as John [the Baptist] gave the baptism of repentance to the Jews."[243] Additionally, although he does not identify the rite specifically as a Baptism of John, John Bar Kaldoun describes a case in Beit Ṣayyare in which a Muslim man brought his child to be baptized, presumably as a preemptive measure to ward off evil spirits.[244] Both monks and villagers thus participated in a ritual where the religious aspect was not so important as the spiritual power it could potentially channel for the safety of the community.

In cases where demonic possession could not be taken to the monastery to be cleansed, the monks brought the monastery to the village, using the same set of tools as described earlier. In an incident where demons were sowing chaos among a newlywed couple and their parents by impersonating various members of the family, the monks cleansed the house with holy water and

[241] Cf. Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3.
[242] David G.K. Taylor, "The Syriac Baptism of St. John: A Christian Ritual of Protection for Muslim Children" in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims Among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2015), 437-460.
[243] *Rabban Hormizd* 103/69. The uncertainty in firmly dating *Hormizd*, as discussed in the introduction, makes it more difficult to pinpoint its exact timeframe than *Busnaya*. Regardless, such anecdotes may hint that some form of the rite, or a similar informal practice, existed earlier than its formal codification.
[244] *Busnaya* 101-102 (folio 0209-0210).

ḥnana, reclaiming the space and driving the demons away.[245] In such cases, as above, the remedy to the villagers' anxieties would not have been comprehensible in Evagrian terms, however effective such spiritual discipline could be among the monks. Instead, Christian symbols and physical objects were deployed to resolve the situation.

Women and Witchcraft

In the early seventh century, a man from the town of Harbath-Senonitha reported an unusual problem: every night, his wife would turn into a dog. Unsettled by this behavior and convinced that his wife must be a witch (*ḥarshta*), the man decided to abandon his family, including his house and children, and become a monk in order to escape the sorcery that he believed had befallen his home. However, upon reaching the monastery and confessing his plight to the saintly abbot Rabban Bar-ʿIdta, he was informed that his wife was not a witch at all. Instead, she had been cursed by demons (ܫܝܕܐ), the result of secretly eating meat on a Friday, which was well-known to be forbidden to all believers. To solve the problem, Rabban Bar-ʿIdta gave the man some *ḥnana*, dust from the graves of the saints, for his wife to eat, and the demonic affliction soon vanished.[246]

The remarkable problem of this village family highlights rural fears, the attitude towards women, and the role of monks in interpreting and reinterpreting the problems which were brought

[245] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 294, trans. 192.

[246] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 268-270, trans. 177-178. The word for witch here could also be translated as sorceress or enchantress, since it has a direct masculine equivalent (ܫܚܪܐ), but the village context renders witch more readily accessible in English.

It is unclear whether the story of the woman transforming into the dog is a later invention or reflects an actual case, but it may reflect a genuine (if mistaken) complaint rather than later hagiographical imagination. As a parallel, for instance, as recently as 2009, a group of villagers in Nigeria complained that a car thief they had been pursuing had turned himself into a goat, which they promptly arrested and turned over to the authorities. BBC News, "Nigeria Police hold 'Robber' Goat," 1/23/2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7846822.stm, (last accessed 1/25/2022).

to their attention. Examining how hagiographers envision women as potential risks to sanctity in the chronicle also reveals that monks conceived of their spiritual power as grounded in their bodies, and partly explains the growing emphasis on physical objects to fight evil spirits in place of inscriptions and incantations. It also illustrates the overlap between folk ideas of demonology and newer monastic understandings, bringing together the two concepts discussed in the previous sections.

Recent scholarship has elucidated the distinctive place of women in Syriac Christian tradition, more prominent in many respects than in the Greek and Latin traditions. As in Western Christendom, women served as deacons in church through late antiquity, but the practice lingered longer in the East. Thanks in part to the authority of Ephrem of Nisibis (d. 373), women also exercised a formal part in the church service as hymn-singers, a practice that continues to the modern day in both East and West Syrian traditions. Moreover, a popular theme of *sogyatha*, or dialectical poetry, involved taking minor, often silent female characters of the Bible and giving them voices, often battling and outwitting the forces of evil.[247] The West Syrian theologian Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) declared that the coming of Jesus had opened a new dispensation for women and specifically for their outspokenness: The devil, through Adam's foolishness and weakness, had shut their mouths in ancient times, but now Christ had set their tongues free for eternity:

> Your silent mouth, which your mother Eve closed,
> Is now opened by Mary, your sister, to sing praise.
> The old woman (Eve) tied a cord of silence around your tongues,
> The Son of the Virgin loosed your bonds so that you may sing out.[248]

[247] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in the Syriac Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 13.
[248] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Encountering Eve in the Syriac Liturgy" in *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium*, eds. Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, and Kyle Smith (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 25.

Jacob's affirmation of women's voices marks what he sees as a fundamental shift in the order of the world. In the old dispensation, women were silent and submissive because of the sins of Eve, but that was always a temporary, undesirable measure. Now that Christ had come and the new dispensation had begun, they could resume the role they were always meant to have, speaking and singing freely.

In the East Syrian monastic chronicles, however, women generally appear as sources of social vulnerability: particularly open to demonic attacks, practitioners of witchcraft, or sources of sexual temptation for monks in a way that endangered the community as a whole. If chastity and fasting characterized monks, women represented a partial opposite, either prone to letting demons take control or representing a temptation for monks to break their vows. When an unnamed woman from Mosul, sick with leprosy, had her relatives bring her to the cell of Rabban Hormizd, the monk lectured them sternly on the impropriety of their actions:

> Why have you brought a woman to [visit] monks in the desert? For they are a snare of Satan for ascetics, and [the cause of] a fall from which you cannot rise up again to those who run in this spiritual race. You should not have dared to bring a woman into a congregation of ascetics, for a woman is not able to come into their dwelling place.[249]

Rabban Hormizd's warning was an idealized vision of male ascetic life – the boundaries between monks and village women were much thinner than hagiographers would have liked. The flow of visitors in and out of the monastery inevitably raised the possibility of sexual temptation. A number of stories mention women coming to the monasteries for healing or exorcism, or to escort sick relatives, so, despite Rabban Hormizd's professed shock, their presence must have been relatively common. Sex does not explicitly appear in the stories about Beit Ṣayyare, but John's concerns about the behavior of monks with village women can be seen around the edges of the stories about

[249] *Rabban Hormizd* 72, trans. 48.

fasting. In one passage, he tells the story of two monks coming to the cell of an elderly hermit who was revered for his piety. When approaching the cell, they froze, realizing that they could hear the hermit talking to someone inside – a woman, they guessed, who was secretly living with the old man. They knocked anyways, were let inside, and subsequently accepted the offer of the hermit to serve them dinner. Their suspicions were allayed when they saw what the hermit had to serve them; bowls of warm water with rocks inside. Rather than talking to a woman, the hermit had been talking to his stomach.[250] What is striking about the story is the cell as the site of sexual temptation rather than the village; the monks' assumption about the hermit living with a woman reflected the very real possibility that it was possible to take outside lovers in the confines of their own chambers. In one of the rare passages where John addresses the possibility of sexual liaisons directly, he also envisions the cell rather than the village as the place where such liaisons were likely to happen, particularly for monks who had earned a reputation as healers and miracle workers: "Entire villages gather at [the monk's] door, both men and women, and by conversation with the daughters of Eve. . . he sins, and often falls, and his stay in the cell is useless."[251] In *The Book of Governors*, Thomas of Marga reports that one of the monks became aware of village women and their children cohabiting with monks in their cells; ultimately, they were discovered and expelled.[252]

In rare cases, women stayed for longer durations. The most detailed case includes Rabban Joseph's mother, an ordinary village woman from Beth 'Edrai who moved into his cell when she was elderly so that he could care for her. John recalled her fondly as having a special gift for seeing demons which were invisible to the other monks, and that her sign of the cross was

[250] *Busnaya*, 105-106 (folio 0214-0215).
[251] *Busnaya*, 199 (folio 0385).
[252] *Book of Governors* 54, trans. 29.

particularly efficacious at expelling them. But by that point, of course, age had rendered her like a monk herself: celibate, immobile, and immune to worldly pleasures.[253] This ad-hoc arrangement, however, and the concerns that Thomas and John express about crowds gathering outside monastic cells, point to the monastery walls being porous rather than sealed, and hint at the anxiety that monastic writers had about the purity of their community.

In her work, *Purity and Danger*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas attempted to answer why people would believe that rituals performed on human and animal bodies would have any impact on the outside world. She concluded that bodies acted as a microcosm of society; what one did to an individual body was acting out in miniature what would affect the group to which the body belonged:

> The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries that are threatened or precarious. . . We cannot possibly interpret [magical] rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva, and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.[254]

If the body is a symbol of a bounded system, then any openings – the mouth, ears, nose, eyes, genitals – are key to guarding its integrity. Similarly, anything that could pass through any of the body's openings, like saliva, tears, semen, or blood, potentially has special power.[255] The emphasis on boundaries, and on monks being able to seal village boundaries against wolves, locusts, and

[253] *Busnaya* 36 (folio 0080-0081).
[254] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concept of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 116.
[255] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 122. Douglas notes that different substances evoke various reactions depending on culture, citing as an example: "In some [societies], menstrual pollution is feared as a lethal danger; in others, not at all." Hence, while bodily openings and fluids commonly denote ritual power across societies, the exact meanings and rituals will vary from culture to culture. In the case of northern Mesopotamia, the number of stories concerning demons possessing mouths – either seeking entrance, controlling, or using to express their power – is striking.

demons has been discussed above, but their power depended on being able to maintain their bodies and the monastery as a sealed system as well.[256]

Douglas' emphasis on bodies as a miniature of society offers a way to interpret both the appeal of ascetics in the rural highlands and the subsequent fear of witches. Stories about women and witchcraft emphasize social vulnerability expressed through their bodies. An example includes a young bride who was possessed by demons after the members of her wedding party insisted on singing traditional pagan songs rather than Psalms against the warning of the groom and the local monks:

> [The groom's] brethren and kinsfolk would not listen to him, saying, "We will not spoil our gladness. Everything will be done according to our custom." And having arrived half-way on their road, a vision of the devil (*shaidnaya*) appeared unto the bride, and she tore away her clothing, and let down the tresses of her hair. And her brothers and relations took her and lifted her down from the ass immediately. And since the wretched woman had become ill and tormented by demons, her brethren took her back to their house in sorrow.[257]

Although the people at fault in this anecdote were the singers, the only person in the party who was possessed was the bride. Her possession, emphasized by the porousness of her body, constituted the punishment for the entire disobedient wedding party, and was remedied, fittingly enough, with *ḥnana*, the dust of sanctified bodies. But, corresponding with Douglas' theory that the vulnerabilities of society are symbolized by vulnerabilities in the body, many of the stories focus on their mouths. Besides the woman from Harbath-Senonitha in the beginning of the section, who invited demons into her body by eating meat on a Friday, and the case of 'Isa, whose mouth

[256] Notably, Manichaean tradition, which emerged from the same northern Mesopotamian context, also laid a heavy emphasis on "three seals," including the "seal of the mouth," which echoes the language used by John above. The rationale is slightly different: in the Manichaean case, the seal prevents outside corruption from harming the purifying process within the Elect, while the Christian example does not place special emphasis on the seal itself, but imagines that those sealed are able to effect supernatural change around them. For a description of the Manichaean seal, see especially Jason BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 34-38, 72. I am indebted to Michael Williams for this connection.
[257] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 270-271, trans. 178-179.

was possessed after he too ate meat during a fast, a similar case included a deacon at Beit Ṣayyare, whom Rabban Mousha instructed Rabban Joseph to strike in the face; the demon, he learned afterward, had possessed the youth's mouth.[258] Chroniclers make a point of mentioning that demons who control the possessed often also speak in either Persian or Arabic, languages associated with Zoroastrianism and Islam, respectively, though also commonly spoken by Christian laypeople. Here again, the sound of pagan tongues issuing from the mouths of possessed women represent a physical incursion into Christian spaces.

Even passing too close to the wrong women could be dangerous: a story from the *Book of Governors* describes the risk posed when a local Persian layman named Bastomagh passed by a group of women washing clothes in the Zab:

> Now [the Persian nobleman Bastomagh] possessed some small estates in the land, among which was one called Beth Ziwa, and he was constantly coming over [to the monastery] either to visit his estates, or to be blessed by Rabban. And he always passed over the King's Bridge, which was below his village, the ruins of which are known to this day, and came by Estwan, a village on the Zab. And it came to pass that once when he was passing over the bridge, he saw some sorceresses washing clothes by the Zab, and they were singing to each other the songs of demons, and everything which was round about them danced as they sang. Now as he drew near to them on his way a small fragment of one of the refrains which they were singing became fixed in his mind, and when he had gone a short distance from them, he began to meditate upon what he had heard. And straightway devils joined themselves to him openly. . .[259]

Bastomagh spurs his horse to the nearest monastery, where he receives relief. From a non-monastic perspective, the laundresses in question, singing a work song, also offer a welcome glimpse into the day-to-day lives of village women, but notably the danger that Bastomagh faces from the laundresses, like the bride possessed during her wedding procession, comes via a song – once again, of course, from their mouths. In another instance, the presence of a village woman

[258] *Busnaya* 125 (folio 0255-0256).
[259] Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 48-49, trans. 83-84.

who worshiped demons in her home risked resurrecting the old Zoroastrian gods; a monk receives a dream commanding him to sacrifice to the sun.[260] The presence of a witch thus put the whole community at risk, even when she was not actively trying to seduce monks. For monks who were beyond the age of sexual temptation, food could be another feminine weapon: one malicious village woman attempts to poison a monk by cooking a delicious meal and bringing it to his cell.[261]

The counterpart to such bodily vulnerability was monastic discipline. Monks gained their power by sealing their bodies through fasting and celibacy and thereby creating a closed and purified system. John uses the language of sealing to draw a parallel between monastic practice and the elevated spiritual state that angels enjoyed: "Angels do not eat, nor do they drink, for the unbroken seal of the fast [is] placed upon their mouths."[262] While monks could not abstain from eating and drinking entirely, he conceded, they could reduce their intake to one simple meal a day. Such a diet would bring them further into harmony with creation as well. In a story related by Thomas of Marga, a monk who is attacked out in the wilderness appeals to help from mountain goats, on the basis that his fasting was similar to their own eating habits.[263] "When the heart of a holy man is cleansed from these five kinds of sin," Thomas writes, "namely, the love of money, and gluttony, and the lust of the body, and anger, and pride. . . all creation will be found to be friendly to him."[264]

The sanctity of the monk was physically channeled through his body. Hence, one of the most potent weapons deployed against evil spirits, animals, and disease alike was *ḥnana*, the dust

[260] *Bar-ʿIdta* 263, trans. 173-174. The cause of the dream was the presence of a witch who lived in the village and both practiced magic and received the Eucharist.
[261] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 268, trans. 176-177.
[262] *Busnaya*, folio 29 (0069).
[263] *Book of Governors*, 271, trans. 128-129.
[264] *Book of Governors*, 269, trans. 127.

of dead saints and their tombs. It explains why proximity to their corpses through prolonged stays in the martyrium remained a common treatment for stubborn afflictions. In a few cases, villagers take relics of saints to use in their homes. In the *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, people from the saint's native village of Beth Ghurbak cut off a finger as he lies in his casket to serve as a blessing to the village.[265] Similarly, in *The Book of Governors*, Mar Maran'ammeh requests his assistant to smuggle him out of the village of Beth Rewai where he had been staying, as he is afraid that the people of the village would prevent him from leaving and dismember his body after his death to make relics.[266] This power also extended to objects which had been touched by the monks, including the rags from their worn-out garments.[267] Because monks physically embodied order, boundedness, and stability, through their fasting, celibacy, and walled enclosures, their bodies exerted control over the various forces of evil spirits, animals, and disease which pressed ordinary life to the brink. And consequently, witches form a special challenge to monastic life because they attack the integrity of monks' bodies.

There is a risk here of overinterpreting monastic chronicles as sources and assuming that the depiction of women in the eyes of monks necessarily represented their actual roles. And, conversely, there are glimpses between the lines of the chronicles of women playing a much more significant role, both in spiritual and village life, than most anecdotes portray. Two women are listed among the earliest disciples of Abraham of Kashkar, and are mentioned as founding monasteries of their own, harkening back to the many heroic female ascetics in earlier layers of Syriac Christianity.[268] Similarly, one of the monks at Beth ʿAbhe, Maryahbh, describes receiving spiritual advice from a particularly holy woman, the illegitimate daughter of a female ascetic, both

[265] *Bar-ʿIdta*, 300, trans. 198.
[266] *Book of Governors*, 341, trans. 170.
[267] *Book of Governors*, 647, trans. 380.
[268] Ishoʿdnah of Basra, *Le Livre de la Chasteté*, trans. J.B. Chabot (Rome: L'École française, 1896), 4.

of whom had achieved the highest levels of spiritual insight.[269] And, in a more secular context, the chronicler of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta's life mentions that when he was left an orphan, his sister HanahIshoʿ inherited their parents' property. She personally ensured that he went to a local school and, when he became a monk, bought his robes for him.[270] These brief passages show women being active and far more engaged with everyday life than most of the anecdotes above suggest. The ability to learn alongside male disciples and to create institutions, to encounter God on a level beyond most monks, own property and run a household alone, all contravene the flat images of the witches above. But they are the exception rather than the rule, and as in beliefs about the demonic, the monastic view of women – and consequently their diagnosis and treatment of their problems – shaped the roles they played in real life as well.

The contrast between bodily vulnerability and the language of sealing helps illuminate the ways in which cenobitic monasticism brought divine power to the highlands. The monks themselves were vessels of sanctity; their presence in the hill country was itself a ward against the problems that plagued its rural inhabitants. The power of Christian symbolism and holy objects was amplified by their physical bodies, either alive or dead. Precisely because their bodies played such a crucial role, witches came to represent a special threat not just to the individual monk's spiritual journey, but more broadly the well-being of the entire community, monastery and village alike.

Conclusion

[269] *Book of Governors*, 74-75, trans. 43.
[270] *The History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 170-171/118, 178/122. Hanahishoʿ owned the house that they both lived in; he slept there and walked to the school during the day.

Many of the phenomena described above were generally unseen in person and perceived only through effect. The sudden symptoms of an unknown sickness, the erratic behavior of possession, the woman who had long been a neighbor but was believed to secretly be a poisoner or worker of magic, all struck without warning or obvious means of defense. The problem of such unseen enemies was heightened by the vulnerabilities that accompanied life on the margins of society. Villagers were left without means to identify and combat these problems beyond one's own neighbors and tribe – which were in turn of limited use against an enemy that struck from within. Stories about demonic possession, sickness, and danger thus paint a vivid picture of the fears that accompanied highland living.

Monasteries thus stood in the gap between rural inhabitants and their fears. By offering divine power, the links that formed between monastery and village shaped the reporting, diagnosis, and treatment of afflictions both supernatural and prosaic. Borrowing from Christian theories about demonology and illness, monasteries created a convergence between local folklore and broader intellectual traditions that were gaining purchase throughout the Christian world. Nowhere is this better seen than in complaints about witchcraft. The emphasis on the bodies of the witches as opposed to the healing bodies of the monks hint at a possible convergence between Evagrian and local understandings. The self-discipline by which monks purified their bodies also provided some of the ways by which their physical presence could counteract the effects of evil around them. By the time that John was writing, Evagrian theory and practice both infused the bodies of monks with self-discipline as an armor against the persistent attacks of demons which were believed to accompany monastic life and, at the same time, gave them a special potency against the more ordinary forms of evil that affected people in everyday life.

Chapter Four:

Growth and Flourishing: The Spread of East Syrian Christianity in the Highlands

Introduction

Like other Syriac monasteries during the early Islamic period, Beit Ṣayyare saw rapid growth within only a few years. The monastery's chronicler, John bar Kaldoun, recounts that Beit Ṣayyare was initially founded by only a handful of monks from the monastery of Beth Qoqa in the late ninth century, positioning their new monastery on the ruins of a small abbey, known as Mar Abraham the Penitent, which had long been abandoned. The first attempt failed; an early raid scattered the monks and destroyed the new monastery. One of the would-be founders, Rabban Bar-Yalda, took shelter further up in the highlands in the monastery of Mar Bokhtyazd, where he encountered another monk, Rabban Mousha, who agreed to help him try again. On this second try, they were able to establish a more permanent institution.[271] Within a few years after Beit Ṣayyare's second founding its numbers had jumped first to sixty monks, then three hundred at its height in the 930s and 940s, before declining slightly to two hundred-seventy by the time John entered the monastery.[272] While John's numbers, like many medieval chroniclers, are likely approximate or exaggerated, his descriptions of new monastic buildings during the tenure of Rabban Mousha (r. 929-946), who succeeded Rabban Bar-Yalda as Beit Ṣayyare's second abbot, confirm the expansion of both its population and influence, especially the construction of new cells, the first mill, and the cenobium. Despite being only recently founded, Beit Ṣayyare already contained sophisticated buildings, such as a library, a church, diaconium, and martyrium, and had

[271] *Busnaya*, 157 (folio 0314-0315).
[272] *Busnaya*, 117 (folio 0239), 160 (folio 0320). John only gives a few exact dates in his narrative, mostly the deaths of key monks, and not all of them seem to resolve into a coherent timeline. However, judging by death dates, the monastery reached its maximum number after the death of Rabban Bar-Yalda (d. 929) but before the death of Rabban Mousha in 946. He lived at the monastery at least five years before the death of Rabban Busnaya (978-979) and had just completed his novitiate, meaning that he probably entered the monastery in the early 970s.

acquired extensive fields which provided grain and income, indicating that it had quickly established itself in the area.[273] The flourishing of a new monastery is all the more remarkable considering that Beit Ṣayyare existed in a multireligious landscape in which East and West Syrian Christians were only the largest groups among many others, as well as an environment in which it was competing for members with many other monasteries.

Beit Ṣayyare's rising star thus reflects the broader growth of Christianity in the region post-conquest. Multiple factors outside of John's narrative attest to this growth: the splitting of ecclesiastical districts to accommodate more believers, bishops establishing dioceses in new regions that had been the target of missionary campaigns, and, of course, the founding of new churches and monasteries.[274] The tenth century was the period when the dioceses of the Church of the East reached their greatest number, and thus the moment in which the Christian demographic in northern Mesopotamia was arguably at or just past its densest, even more so than it had been during the coming of Islam three centuries before.[275] There were already hints that this moment would not last, but to tweak Chase Robinson's characterization of the period following the conquest as an "Indian summer" for Syriac Christianity, the monks of the early days of Beit Ṣayyare must have felt that it was *simply* summer, as they saw new constructions flourish and new members swell their ranks.

[273] On the other hand, three hundred monks is a large, but not impossible, number – archaeological estimates of two contemporary East Syrian monasteries on islands near Kuwait, Sir Bani Yas and Kharg, suggest that they each housed one hundred monks, and it is not a stretch to imagine one on a bigger scale. Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 11.

[274] David Wilmshurst, "The Church of the East in the Abbasid Era," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2018), 195.

[275] Unattested, unfortunately, is how the demographics of administrative expansion (through new parish churches and dioceses) and monasteries compared to the number of lay believers. Given the celibate character of monastic living, I assume that the number of monks reflect much larger numbers of invisible, lay parents, siblings, and neighbors and that more monks also mean greater concentrations of lay Christians. In Rabban Joseph's case, his family included five children, but whether this was typical is impossible to say. See *Busnaya* 16 (folio 0045).

This chapter explores how the groundwork for the density of Syriac Christianity in the tenth century was laid through three different phases – the rivalry between East and West Syrian churches in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Conquest; the missionary movements that expanded the reach of the churches in the seventh and eighth centuries; and the consolidation of church influence in remote villages through orthodoxy and law in the eighth and ninth centuries. The first section, using *The History of Rabban Hormizd*, describes how rivalry among Christians provided an impetus for growth, which in turn provides a window into the relations of highland Christians with the Islamic government in Mosul. The second, drawn primarily from the ninth-century East Syrian bishop Thomas of Marga's *Book of Governors*, examines stories in which monks ventured into the surrounding highlands to make and solidify converts, as well as the specific methods that they used. Finally, a study of the prosopography of Beit Ṣayyare will attest to a population drawn from a much more local demographic than previous monastic accounts, showing how Christianization of the region had peaked and foreshadowing its decline. As glimpsed through several excerpts from the monastic histories, the thinness of political power, the rivalry between different Syriac groups, and the decline of local non-Christian elites ultimately accelerated the growth of Syriac monasticism in the highlands during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.

Rivalry as a Catalyst for Growth

The rivalry between West and East Syrians, rather than Christians and Muslims, forms the driving tension in the early monastic chronicles of the seventh and eighth centuries.[276] Although

[276] While "West" and "East" Syrians imply geographical differences, they instead refer to followers of the two main branches of Syriac Christianity, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East.

Muslims and Islamic culture could both be found in the highlands, Islam as a religion played a much more limited role in highland life than Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, nor did it effectively wield much political power until deep into the ʿAbbāsid era. However, while the emerging caliphate focused its expansion on the lowlands, the coming of Islam inadvertently intensified the conflict between the two sects, particularly because it led to a slow-motion collapse of the local elites, namely the Persian landowning class. As a result, monasteries wielded new local authority and the competition between West and East Syrians accelerated. Much of the history related in the chronicles describes how highland Christians sought Mosul's favor to bolster their own authority, while simultaneously launching efforts to expand their own influence.

Both churches had played an adept political game before the conquest. Throughout Sasanian history (ca. 224-651), West Syrian and East Syrian Christians were occasionally persecuted by the nominally Zoroastrian government, but by the sixth and seventh centuries, both churches had gained a measure of public recognition, and individual figures at court were even able to use their influence to sway the shah to reward their communities. The balance of power rested with the Church of the East as the older Christian community in Persia, which, after an initial tumultuous relationship with the Persian state, managed to integrate into society by the early fifth century. Although Persian persecution of Christians continued sporadically, especially of Zoroastrian converts, the Synod of Mar Isaac, in 410, opened by thanking God for the end of the times of distress and praising the shah Yazdegerd I for the peace that had settled on the churches, signifying a new *rapprochement* between East Syrian Christianity and the government.[277] Within a generation, East Syrian monks and bishops deepened their association with the state, going so

[277] Synod of Mar Isaac, Preamble, *Synodicon Orientale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1902), 17-18. Later Christian writers represented Yazdegerd as a new Constantine, offering political legitimacy to the Church of the East. Scott McDonough, "A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.1 (2008), 130.

far as to serve as diplomats to their Christian Roman counterparts and accompanying Persian armies on campaign.[278] Just prior to the Islamic conquest, the government went so far as to formally ratify the election of new *catholicoi* of the Church of the East and to personally select clergy to serve as bishops.[279] The Church of the East thus successfully framed itself as an authentically Persian form of Christianity as opposed to the West Syrians, which they accused of sympathizing with Rome; Sasanian West Syrian hagiographies consequently emphasize the loyalty of West Syrians to the shah and the compatibility of the Syriac Orthodox church with Persian customs.[280] At times, however, the Syriac Orthodox were able to exercise influence of their own, particularly during the reign of Khusrau II, who had a West Syrian wife, Shirin, and physician, Gabriel of Sinjar, who both influenced him to award favors to the West Syrian community.[281] Several shahs, including both Yazdegerd I and Khusrau II, even sponsored the construction of churches and monasteries while retaining their Zoroastrian identity.[282] Consequently, the government receded as a threat to the well-being of the church, and the main rivals shifted from Jews and Zoroastrians to other Christians, who competed with each other for converts, territory, and influence.

Set in the generation immediately following the conquest, the *History of Rabban Hormizd* describes how this rivalry carried over into the Islamic period and the new opportunities that arose. Its hero, Rabban Hormizd, an East Syrian Christian from Beth Lapat (near modern-day Shiraz, Iran), migrates to northern Mesopotamia, where he builds a monastery near a Syriac Orthodox

[278] *The History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 224, trans. 149-150.
[279] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 2-3.
[280] Jean-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories and the Formation of the Syriac Churches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 82.
[281] Gabriel was a particular bugbear for East Syrians, and the *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta* accuses him of giving the important monastery of Mar Mattai to the West Syrians. *The History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 204, trans. 137.
[282] Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 333.

stronghold, Bezkin (now lost), and close to several major towns. The location of the new monastery, positioned at the edge of the highlands, thus puts Rabban Hormizd in contact with several major lowland towns as well as the ascetic world of both West and East Syrians, offering a glimpse of some of the dynamics between all three groups in the mid-seventh century.

The History of Rabban Hormizd envisions Muslims in similar terms as the Sasanian court, with the Muslim governor of Mosul and the Muslim officials in Balad acting only as figures whose favor could benefit one side or the other. Even when the weight of the Islamic regime is described, as when Rabban Hormizd encounters twenty-seven men who had been imprisoned in a church for failure to pay the *jizya*, or poll tax imposed on non-Muslims (*ksef risha*), the chronicler only notes that the government had wronged them, but does not criticize the religion itself.[283] In fact, the hagiographer describes the Muslim governor of Mosul, ʿUkba (ܥܘܩܒܐ, possibly a Syriac rendering of ʿUtba b. Farqad al-Sulamī, who was governor from 640-643), as a "good man and a believer also" (*gabra taba wʿap mhaymana*), even though he is not a Christian.[284] The real rivalry is between Rabban Hormizd and his fellow Christians, the Syriac Orthodox. In sharp contrast to the lack of anti-Muslim sentiment, the text accuses the Syriac Orthodox of having a "lying baptism" that confers no sacramental value, an accusation echoed in the *History of Beth Qoqa*.[285] They secretly worship jeweled idols which are inhabited by demons and practice black magic, which they learned from the arch-heretic Marcion and an Egyptian sorceress, and are literally in league with the devil.[286] Worst of all, they trick the Muslim governor – ʿUkba's replacement – with an

[283] *History of Rabban Hormizd* 46/31.
[284] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 99, trans. 66. The chronicle mentions that ʿUkba was soon replaced – possibly by Harthama b. 'Arfaja, the subsequent governor – although the replacement is never named. A reconstruction of the early administration of Mosul, via the mint that ʿUtba established in the city, places ʿUtba's reign from 640-641 and Harthama's from 641-644, dating the setting in Rabban Hormizd to the early 640's. See Gernot Rotter, "The Umayyad Fulūs of Mosul," *Museum Notes of the American Numismatic Society* 19 (1974), 166.
[285] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 105, trans. 71. *History of Beth Qoqa*, 229.
[286] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 110, trans. 74 and 121, trans. 81.

enchanted cake, brainwashing him and winning him over to their side.[287] In response, the East Syrians – always reluctantly, and under strict instructions by angels – take both direct and indirect action. They attempt to correct the governor's misperceptions, demonstrating the miraculous powers granted to them by God by curing his son.[288] In the highlands, out of sight from Muslim authorities, they take matters into their own hands - they rally several villages against the West Syrians, drown a boatload of Syriac Orthodox monks and laypeople in the Tigris, and sneak into the Syriac Orthodox monastery of Mar Mattai and dip their books in mud to make their library unusable.[289]

As discussed in the introduction, *Rabban Hormizd* as a text is far more fantastic, far less sober, and far less reflective of historical events than the other monastic chronicles. Nor, as several scholars have noted, was the division between East Syrians and Syriac Orthodox as vitriolic as *Rabban Hormizd* suggests.[290] Even if few if any of the events in *Rabban Hormizd* can be taken as historical, it is remarkable for its portrayal of Islam, which is neither a political nor a religious threat, instead representing a force that has stumbled into an existing network of conflict, relationships, and tensions which it does not fully understand. In this environment, it is only natural for the East Syrians to use Muslims to their own advantage, leveraging their formal networks of power to give them unofficial authority in the backcountry. It attests to a schema in

[287] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 146, trans. 98.
[288] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 92 trans. 63, 95 trans. 64 97-103, trans. 65-70.
[289] *History of Rabban Hormizd*, 135-136, trans. 96, 139-140, trans. 93-94. Destroying the books not only rendered their heretical teachings powerless, but also represented a significant financial blow. Book production was enormously expensive, and hence book-stealing could be a lucrative business. See *Book of Governors*, 609-610, trans. 351, where a book thief attempts to bore through an unguarded part of the monastery wall to access the library of Beth ʿAbhe.
[290] Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 441. Animosity between the two sects also seems to have faded with time. Thomas of Marga reports that by the late eighth century, the Syriac Orthodox bishop and East Syrian bishop of Balad took turns praying in each other's shrines, while a Syriac Orthodox layman in the same city tells some visiting East Syrian monks that he values their presence because of their debating ability against Chalcedonians (the Byzantine Orthodox), the other traditional foe of the West Syrians. See *Book of Governors*, 463-465, trans. 249-251.

which the Muslim governor represents a beneficiary who can award a village to the East Syrian faction, rather than an agent of an occupying power. Both sides compete for his favor as a tool to further their own larger machinations in the region, rather than to gain access to the world which he represents.

The fruits of winning Mosul's favor included new territory and the implicit backing of the new regime. While the West Syrians of the monastery of Mar Mattai – the central Miaphysite stronghold in northern Mesopotamia since the fifth century – temporarily sway the Muslim governor to their side, the East Syrians enjoy their own victories. With the blessing of the governor of Mosul, East Syrian settlers are permitted to take over some of the territory of West Syrian Christians near Alqosh and drive out the old inhabitants:

> Now at one time the village of Arsham used to be full of heretics, but after a while, the governor of Mosul drove out the inhabitants from the districts near the saint, and faithful Christians from the land of Hazar came, and they live there to this day. And Mar ʿAbdisho, bishop of Beth Nuhderan, came to our monastery, and our monks went down with him to the village of Arsham, and they consecrated the church with hymns and psalms, and behold, the village is the home of true [i.e., East Syrian] Christians to this day.[291]

Arsham was previously a significant West Syrian center, and its loss struck a heavy blow to the West Syrian heritage in the region, made much worse by the fact that it had been sanctioned by the new government. It also encouraged further violence; the chronicle reports that later, emboldened by the same government support, the new East Syrian settlers of Arsham and other nearby towns decided to take the fight one step further. Assembling a makeshift mob, they armed themselves with clubs and staves and destroyed a West Syrian monastery.[292] As with other episodes involving armed conflict in the highlands, this violent clash serves as a reminder that the theoretical extent of Islamic political authority often did not match its actual extent, and also points

[291] *History of Rabban Hormizd,* 54 trans. 80-81.
[292] *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 78, trans. 115.

to how Syriac Christians pursued their own aims and petty feuds independent of the overarching goals, structure, or vision of the Islamic world as a whole.

If conversion was the goal of both Syriac groups, monasteries were often the key in swaying local Christians from one side to the other. In the early seventh-century chronicle of *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, after the West Syrian abbot Zakkai and his monks establish a group of cells near several East Syrian villages, Rabban Bar-ʿIdta laments that his flock will more likely gravitate to the new monastery than retain their ancestral faith:

> The saintly old man, Rabban Bar-ʿIdta, said to his disciples, "The villages of Nineveh, from place to place, little by little, will accept [West Syrian Christianity]." The brothers said to him, "Even Beth Ghurbak, O our father?" And he said to them, "God forbid! That will not happen. Beth Ghurbak will keep the truth of the doctrine of our Lord in its entirety until Christ reveals himself."
>
> It was the same way with all the villages which had faith like [Beth Ghurbak]: Karmelish, and Beth Zabha, and Beth Bore; these [four] kept the faith.[293]

The listing of the names of the faithful villages lays a dramatic emphasis on the effect of the new monastery – in the end, the chronicle claims that all but four villages in the entire plain near Mosul converted from the Church of the East to Syriac Orthodoxy. This is an exaggeration: the Nineveh plain remained predominantly East Syrian. But the reason for such pessimism is not hard to guess; building a cenobitic monastery introduced a formal West Syrian claim on the territory, a permanent structure that would become a social and religious center. It also meant the arrival of dozens of new potential missionaries, as the number of clergy who focused full-time on religious practice would increase.

The effect of some of these missionaries was deliberate – as in the case above, where the new West Syrian monastery sent monks from village to village – but, in other cases, incidental.

[293] *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 159, trans. 240.

The *History of Beth Qoqa* mentions that the people who lived in the plain of Mahoze in Sen'ar were converted when a monk came there looking for food during a famine.[294] Passages describing the effects of famine note that during such times, monks were scattered afar to look for new food sources, some choosing to leave the monastery, and others being sent to specific regions, and some of these inevitably led to religious encounters.[295] In another instance, a monk who was taken captive by slavers from Dailam, in northwestern Iran, laid the foundations for a Christian presence; two centuries later, some of the monks in Beit Ṣayyare came from the monasteries he eventually founded in Dailam.[296] These incidental stories of conversion must be multiplied when it is considered that monasteries dispatched monks into the surrounding territories on a more regular basis: to gather donations, to visit believers, to tend crops, and, for the more spiritually advanced, to seek solitary communion with God. Although monasteries concentrated the religious in a single place, they also increased the number of interactions that men and women who were single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of Christianity had with those around them. The presence of large numbers of cenobitic monks, rather than individual hermits, thus also contributed to the conversion and consolidation of the surrounding countryside.

Finally, the construction of new monasteries also paved the way to train and send missionaries to new territories further up in the highlands or even farther abroad. The sixth and seventh centuries were periods of rapid missionary expansion for both branches of Christianity.

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[294] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 257.

[295] *The History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta* describes a severe famine where the monks cooked locusts and distributed them among the villagers, while local lay leaders dispatched messengers to three regions which were rumored to have food; these were brought back and also rationed and distributed by the monastery. Both the expeditions and the distribution would have introduced new contact and goodwill between the monastery and locals. See *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, 228-232, trans. 151-154. *Busnaya* 97-98 (folio 0201-0202) describes a monk, Rabban Yohannon of Helephta, who took the monastery's pack animals and went to search for food in the east during time of famine, as well as visiting the outlying hermits. The monastery as a social center, with additional resources and plenty of mouths to feed, thus created new ways for highland inhabitants to respond to famine.

[296] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 245. *Busnaya*, 47 (folio 0100).

For the Church of the East, the establishment of the caliphate coincided with the creation of Christian communities as far away as Central Asia, China, and India.[297] Monasteries in Iraq played a major role in sending missionaries and maintaining communications with far-flung outposts, as attested by Syriac manuscripts found in Central Asian monasteries.[298] Additionally, however, during the reign of the *catholicos* Timothy I (r. 780-820), a number of missionaries were dispatched much closer to the Syriac heartland, especially the highlands of northwestern Iran.[299] The description of one such mission, sent from the monastery of Beth ʿAbhe in northern Mesopotamia to Moqan, on the edge of the Caspian Sea, describes how the wealth and resources of monastic centers prepared them to train and equip missionaries:

> It was the day of the consecration of the saint [Mar Shubhalishoʿ], and all the leaders among the believers who had heard that he was going to convert the nations offered him much money and the clothing and vessels he needed. Then, together with the power of God and the virtuous disciples who accompanied him, he set out for those regions.
>
> Now Mar Abraham, the Catholicos, truly a holy man, was the one who told me all about [Mar Shubhalishoʿ], and he told me that [Mar Shubhalishoʿ] entered [the lands] in great splendor (*mfargutha d'tab*), for those who live in the lands of the barbarians needed to see a little worldly glory, so that they would become envious and draw near to Christianity.[300]

The presence of cenobitic monasticism, with its additional resources, organization, and manpower, allowed for much more orchestrated efforts at conversion like the ones above. Both in the highlands, the conquest opened up new territories that had previously been difficult to penetrate, and concurrently new ways that both churches could channel their energy and innovation.

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[297] See Mark Dickens, "Syriac Christianity in Central Asia," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2018), esp. 591, and Joel Walker, "From Nisibis to X'ian: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia," in *The Oxford Book of Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.

[298] Syriac manuscripts in monasteries in Central Asia and China included Bibles, medical works, and the newly standardized Ḥudra. See Erica Hunter, "Turfan: Connecting with Seleucia-Ctesiphon," *Entangled Religions* 11.6 (2020), https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8779.

[299] *Book of Governors* 467-468, trans. 252.

[300] *Book of Governors*, 260, trans. 480.

The effects of these combined elements – the accelerated dynamic in which the conquest heightened rivalry between East and West Syrians, the rising strength of the monasteries, and the limitation of Islamic political power – all played a significant role in forming the highlands into a uniquely dense Christian zone. Without any one of these, the demographics of the tenth century might have looked quite different, perhaps with a much smaller and less wealthy Christian population. At the same time, the monasteries themselves played a large role in shaping the region for future generations, particularly because the numbers afforded by the cenobitic shift of the sixth century increased their power and reach into remote rural areas. The next section examines how cenobitic monasticism not only expanded its membership, but also consolidated it, forging a distinct cultural and religious identity among the villages of northern Mesopotamia.

Orthodoxy and Heresy

Besides making new converts, the churches also took steps to cement a sense of affiliation among their laypeople. Monks played a major role in ensuring that ordinary people adhered to a specific confession, and although never entirely successful, their efforts resulted in stronger ties between rural life and church affiliation. While discussing the growing prosperity of the monastery of Beth ʿAbhe, bishop Thomas of Marga mentions the efforts that were made to consolidate orthodox belief among both religious and laypeople alike during the late seventh and early eighth centuries:

> The blessed Mar Babai was going round from village to village and monastery to monastery, visiting and asking questions and making inquiries concerning the orthodoxy

> (*tarsut shubha*) of belief and the evidence of doctrine in the minds of all the monks and heads of monasteries to whom he came.[301]

Enforcing orthodoxy in remote villages through representatives like Mar Babai was a bold move; it shows that by the early eighth century, the Church of the East felt certain of its power in the highlands. There is no indication that these activities were permitted by Muslim officials – or, for that matter, that Muslim officials would have been aware that such a movement was underway. The entire episode takes place off-stage from the events that concern the caliphate at large.

This anecdote naturally raises the question of what orthodoxy looked like to the average East Syrian villager. There is no hint whether the theological explanations that Mar Babai provided were made in such a way that villagers without formal theological training could understand. But additionally, given the difficulty that lowland governments had in enforcing their laws in the highlands, this aside about establishing religious orthodoxy is counterintuitive. Put differently, the anecdote of Mar Babai also poses the question of why the population of the highlands, which was so resistant to political authority, did not appear to develop widespread heterodox or idiosyncratic beliefs as a reaction to religious authority, particularly in an environment in which no single idea could establish total control. Unlike medieval Western Europe, where the alliance of church and state created a shared Catholic identity and the means to enforce it, the highlands remained a decentralized, multireligious environment.

The History of Beth Qoqa and the *Book of Governors* both describe villages with considerable religious mixture during the eighth century. An East Syrian woman in the *History of Beth Qoqa* is described in passing, without any moral reflection, as living with a Muslim man.[302] A second instance in the same chronicle mentions a Syriac Orthodox woman who lives with a

[301] *The Book of Governors* 54, trans. 97.
[302] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 250.

"pagan" man, probably a Muslim but possibly a Zoroastrian. Chronicles give an indication of how many believers from different faiths rubbed shoulders in the same village; while tending to their East Syrian flock from village to village, itinerant monks also heal Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Syriac Orthodox, generally without converting them, indicating the variety of languages, customs, and beliefs that one could find in a small area. In the ninth-century *The Book of Governors*, when a missionary converts a Zoroastrian family in the village of Sawra *en masse* to East Syrian Christianity, they promptly receive baptism in the village church, the presence of which indicates that at least some of their neighbors were Christians all along.[303] These stories indicate diversity within single villages, rather than clear-cut territories belonging to one sect or the other. This situation meant that the Syriac churches had to establish confessional boundaries where no geographical boundaries existed.

Rites, as well as shrines, festivals, and holy figures, were shared across communities. Belonging to one religious community in particular did not prevent villagers from drawing from other influences. As outlined in Chapter 3, these shared practices could include magical traditions, even though they were strictly forbidden by canon law. Regular contact with members of other religions sometimes meant adopting or participating in new practices without changing religious affiliation. After the abbot Mar Sabrishoʿ blesses the Syriac Orthodox woman above with children, her non-Christian husband brings them to him for christening, "unspoiled by the baptism of the Severans [West Syrians]," his wife's religion, thus introducing an East Syrian rite into this already religiously-mixed family.[304] An eighth-century West Syrian canon law forbids both clergy and laypeople from receiving communion from the hands of East Syrian priests, a sure indication of

[303] See, for instance, the encounters with Muslim, East Syrian, and Syriac Orthodox villagers within a short distance in *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 247-250. The Zoroastrian family who converts is described in *The Book of Governors*, 607-608, trans. 348-349.
[304] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 229.

the existence of the practice, especially among mixed families.[305] Both these examples show how simple it was to borrow rituals from one religious tradition without formally adopting its strictures.

The task of establishing orthodox belief in a particular Syriac doctrine was further complicated by the fact that the disagreement between the two factions was highly technical. The theological dispute between the West and East Syrian churches rests on a difference discussed at the Council of Ephesus in 431: whether Christ had one nature (*physis*), which comprised both his human and divine elements though hypostatic union (the West Syrian position), which had been proposed by Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, or whether a distinction remained between his human and divine persons (*prosopa*), even though he was only one being, which had been proposed by Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. The difference has legitimate theological implications; does describing Christ as human and divine reduce him to just the sum of his parts – or worse, a split personality? Or, conversely, does describing Christ as one person ultimately render his humanity superficial to a simpler understanding of him as God? If so, what implications would that have for salvation, since Christ's resurrected human nature was a guarantor of the divine rising that awaited his followers after death? The difference in phrasing, even if minor, has real theological implications, but however legitimate the debate, the language itself is difficult to grasp, reliant on Greek rather than Syriac, and consists of theological minutiae unlikely to have been understood to its full extent by laymen or even most clergy.

The success that the East Syrians enjoyed in establishing orthodoxy thus relied on other methods, which appear as a three-pronged approach in the chronicles: simplified theology, liturgy, and praxis, especially canonical guidance on social relations. All three methods avoid lengthy

[305] Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle* East, 94.

theological excursions in favor of the simple and concrete. Two anecdotes from the *History of Beth Qoqa* highlight concise ways by which monks conveyed the essence of these complex teachings. The first abbot of the monastery, Mar Sabrishoʿ, taught his monks the following formula:

> "Observe," he would say, "the pious belief in the unity of the *parsopa* [*prosopa* - persons] of the Son of God and Son of Man; **call the Virgin the mother, not of God, but of Christ**. Separate the natures, and make the persons visible, but give them one and the same adoration." Thus, he flouted the wicked confusions of the heretics and closed his ears to their blasphemies.[306]

Mar Sabrishoʿ ties Nestorius' Christology to biblical terms – the Son of God and Son of Man, both of which are titles that Jesus uses to refer to himself in the Gospels – and quotes Nestorius' most memorable point, that Mary could not properly be called the Mother of God (*theotokos*) because she did not preexist the Trinity; instead, she was the Mother of Christ (*christotokos*). Both of these phrases drastically condense and simplify the argument that was presented at the council, but they make it vivid and tangible, easily encapsulated. In the absence of even this much theology, however, it was enough simply to know that Nestorius was right and that Cyril was wrong. In a second anecdote from the *History of Beth Qoqa*, a blind Syriac Orthodox man from the village of Kawkab pays his respects to Nestorius as a saint, and, through the prayers of an East Syrian monk, receives his sight again; the man's decision to switch, so to speak, to Team Nestorius, or at least to pay lip service to the fact that Nestorius was a holy man, was only loosely related to whether or not he grasped the difference between his former religion and his new one.[307] Similarly, the *History of Rabban Hormizd* imagines a time when Christians in northern Mesopotamia "were corrupted by the impurity of Cyril the Egyptian," making Nestorius' opponent Cyril the

[306] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 228, emphasis mine.
[307] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 260.

synecdoche of West Syrian Miaphysite theology – no *prosopa*, *physes*, or *hypostases* are introduced.[308]

Consequently, the primary tools that monks used to establish orthodox belief were rooted in practice rather than teaching theological discourse. Festivals were often shared between confessional groups, but they also served as opportunities to establish specific days and rites that connected members of the same church across linguistic and geographical divides. During the tenure of Ishoʿyahb III (r. 649-659), comprehensive reform of the East Syrian litany of prayers, the Ḥudra, was undertaken in order to standardize the prayers said by clergy regardless of their geographic location. At the same time, the Church of the East also underwent a movement to reform liturgical singing, which, according to Thomas of Marga, had previously been highly localized:

> Every place, and town, and monastery, and school had its own melodies and liturgical songs (*qynata w'kurke*), and sang them in its own way, and if a teacher or a scholar happened to be outside of his own school he stood [silent] like an ignorant man. . . before the time of Mar Ishoʿyahb of Adiabene the Catholicos, the orders of the services were performed in a confused manner in every place. But by means of this man, the liturgies of all the churches gained harmony.[309]

Ishoʿyahb's roots in the hill country of Adiabene may have contributed to his awareness about the great local variation between prayers, songs, and liturgy. He assigned the founding or reformation of two dozen musical schools to Mar Babai the Musician (a different Mar Babai than the one who enforced orthodoxy in the villages), who developed the new form of singing that would characterize liturgy across the entire Church. Such standardization had the advantage of coordinating ritual practice, but it also served as an effective tool for building and reinforcing

[308] Intriguingly, West Syrians are never referred to as Jacobites in these conflicts; the perjorative term used across the chronicles is "Severan," after Severus of Antioch.
[309] *Book of Governors* 142, trans. 293-294.

identity, and even, according to complaints by the Syriac Orthodox, as a motivation for conversion. Written from a West Syrian perspective, *The History of Maruta* confirms Thomas' narrative from another angle by lamenting the effectiveness of East Syrian singing for luring believers over to their camp:

> The Nestorians of the East, who want to attract the simple to their error and charm the ear of the laypeople who are very easy to deceive by their songs and by their sweet cadences – and also in order to please the world and to rule it, and thus to devour the houses of widows and married women according to the word of the Gospel, under the pretext that they extend their prayers – have taken care to establish a school in each of their towns to speak in this way. They have organized them with chants, canticles, responses, and hymns which are sung in the same manner in every place where they are.[310]

In response, the Syriac Orthodox founded their own rival musical schools in the highlands and developed a distinctive musical style of their own. Thus, as an unintended side effect of East Syrian efforts at musical standardization, both sides developed institutions to consolidate their forces and to strengthen the boundaries of confessional identity.

The final aspect of orthodoxy as described in the chronicles involved adherence to the canon law of the Church of the East, which had taken on aspects of civil law between the sixth and seventh centuries, just before and after the coming of Islam. While canon law theoretically exists as an internal Christian means to govern the conduct of believers regardless of the laws of secular society, the political structure of the Sasanian Empire permitted representatives of minority religious groups to wield limited amounts of legal power in governing their own people, thus transmuting it into civil law as well. As recognized religious minorities, both West and East Syrian churches had been given the right in 585 to adjudicate certain legal disputes among their flocks, especially those concerning marriage, property, and inheritance, although civil Zoroastrian law

[310] *Vie d'Ahudemmeh*, trans. François Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis* IV.1 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909), 65-66.

still technically obtained in all other matters.[311] Later, however, at the Synod of George in 676, shortly after the Islamic conquest had collapsed the administrative structure of the Sasanian Empire, the East Syrian church assumed *all* legal power over its flock, both civil and religious, and further prohibited recourse to other courts, especially Islamic ones, on pain of excommunication.[312] Subsequently, each East Syrian village theoretically had two legal representatives, a priest and a lay villager, or *sholtana*, who reported to the bishop and enforced his judgements, although the extent to which this mechanism worked or which regular reporting was possible, especially in the highlands, is dubious.[313] Canon law thus provided a third means of enforcing orthodoxy, by defining the praxis of a given community with secular power that ran directly through the church.

The most detailed retelling of how canon law was used to enforce orthodoxy occurs in the *Book of Governors* in a fantastical set of stories by Thomas of Marga about Mar Maranʿammeh, an eighth-century bishop of Adiabene. Written in both prose and poetic form, the story describes how Mar Maranʿammeh was tasked by God to reform the hill country of Marga in the northeast corner of modern-day Iraq. Although Mar Maranʿammeh initially rejected this calling, preferring a simple life of healing and caring for the poor, God sent an angel to coerce him to bring the true doctrine to the villages. Chastened, he traveled from village to village, working miracles that closely paralleled those of the Biblical prophet Elijah and punishing local figures who were leading the people astray. The story's roots may lie in a similar story regarding a different Mar Maranʿammeh, an eighth-century reforming monk who lived in Marga and is mentioned in the

[311] Michael Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17, no. 2 (1974): 115.
[312] Uriel Simonsohn, "Seeking Justice among the 'Outsiders': Christian Recourse to Non-Ecclesiastical Judicial Systems under Early Islam," *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, no. 1 (2009): 206.
[313] Morony "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," 125.

History of Beth Qoqa, although rather than being a bishop, he is depicted as an abbot and has a different patronym. Like Thomas' account, the Mar Maranʿammeh in the *History of Beth Qoqa* pursues a similar itinerant track around the villages of Marga, confronting Syriac Orthodox, pagans, and errant East Syrians alike while working miracles.[314] Mar Maranʿammeh the abbot lived contemporaneously and in the same region as Thomas' Mar Maranʿammeh the bishop, who is also mentioned in the chronicle and appears to have known him; it is possible that Thomas conflated the stories attributed to the two figures.[315]

In the hagiography, Mar Maranʿammeh primarily enforces East Syrian norms for believers, rather than outsiders, and these norms correspond with some of the anxieties expressed in canon law and elsewhere. For instance, Mar Maranʿammeh begins his ministry by confronting a man who has taken a second wife, in general contradiction to Christian monogamy, but also explicitly violating a canon law established in 540 which prohibited taking two wives – whether two formal marriages or, correspondingly, sleeping with a concubine, mistress, or servant girl besides one's legal wife.[316] After giving the man an ultimatum to turn out the second wife, he curses the man's house, resulting in the man dying the next day from an accidental knife cut while cutting meat.[317] The anecdote reinforces the norms of the law, but also underscores Mar Maranʿammeh's divine authority in enforcing it; as the bishop of Adiabene, he is empowered by the law to maintain order

[314] *History of Beth Qoqa*, 258-263.
[315] *History of Beth Qoqa*, 263.
[316] Christian sexual practices, especially celibacy and monogamy, aroused deep suspicion from Zoroastrian clergy, and the law appears to have originated so as not to cause scandal. See Uriel Simonsohn, "Seeking Justice Among Outsiders," 196. In the Islamic era, when confronted with a polygamous Islamic society, keeping the distinctiveness of Christian marriage practices took on a renewed edge, especially since it was easy for disobedient Christian men who wanted more than one wife to switch to Islam. In one instance, after a Christian deacon and physician was ordered to abandon his practice of keeping concubines under penalty of church discipline, he simply refused, arguing that having two wives was no more sinful than having two cloaks. Lev Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph: Law, Marriage, and Christian Community in Early Islam* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania, 2018), 188.
[317] *Book of Governors*, 308, trans. 150.

in his district.[318] From this beginning, he then executes summary justice on several small, villages. The causes are unnamed, but the villages are: Beth Tehunai, Bahosh, Habbushta. The stories demonstrate his reach and his power, but most especially his episcopal authority over the most remote parts of his diocese.

As Mar Maranʿammeh travels through the highlands, he also challenges and defeats representatives of the old legal order, specifically Zoroastrian law. This too reflects eighth-century anxieties: because so much of the civil aspect of East Syrian law was drawn from Zoroastrian precedent, Zoroastrian figures continued to play a role in adjudicating community disputes among Christians as well as their own believers.[319] One anecdote concerns Mar Maranʿammeh encountering a village school founded by Shahbor, a formerly devout Zoroastrian who had "become a heathen," (possibly a Muslim), and then a Christian, leading a small group of twelve disciples. Mar Maranʿammeh curses Shahbor and prophesies that a Kurdish raid will destroy the village, which comes to pass the next day.[320] In this anecdote, the issue leading to the school's destruction is unmentioned and no fault on Shahbor's part is explicated, but in his role as an authority figure, Shahbor would have represented a rival to Mar Maranʿammeh's episcopal and judicial authority; by removing him and his school, Mar Maranʿammeh reasserts the legitimacy of his own divine appointment.

[318] Non-East Syrians appear in a much more limited capacity. Mar Maranʿammeh encounters a Syriac Orthodox stylite in Beth Qardagh, a traditional East Syrian stronghold, and urges him to repent of his blasphemy against Christ's personhood. When the stylite refuses, Mar Maranʿammeh summons a storm, which destroys both him and his pillar. This is the only instance in which Mar Maranʿammeh uses violence against someone outside of his flock, but it follows the same pattern as the other villages which he punished earlier, in re-establishing his right as bishop to sole control of the area.

[319] Richard Payne, "East Syrian Bishops, Elite Households, and Iranian Law After the Muslim Conquest," *Iranian Studies* 48:1 (2015), 7.

[320] *Book of Governors,* 328-329, trans. 163.

Finally, Thomas' hagiography of Mar Maranʿammeh describes how he reined in heterodox Christology that had begun to ferment among the local elite. One specific problem, this time attributed to a group of notables (*shahrigan*) rather than ordinary villagers, identifies their doctrinal lapse as believing that Christ was a man rather than God:

> And some of the people in the country were *shahrigan,* who were Christians in name but believed that Christ was merely an ordinary man (*barnasha shima*), and said, "He was like one of the prophets." The bishops who lived in that region labored among them, but they did not accept the true and orthodox doctrine.[321]

The belief that Christ was an ordinary man was characteristic of some pre-Islamic northern Mesopotamian religious movements, especially Judeo-Christian baptizers, and it may represent either residual influence or a newer, local variant.[322] On the other hand, the phrasing of the passage, placing Christ among the prophets, and the high social status involved, suggests that this group had absorbed some Islamic ideas, though if this were the case, it is significant to note that they retained their identity as part of the East Syrian community rather than converting to Islam wholesale, which would have conferred additional social advantages. Following Sasanian practice, the *shahrigan* consisted of large landowners who were then responsible for gathering taxes from village notables, the *dehqane,* and passing the finances on to the central government.[323] This anecdote involves Mar Maranʿammeh both cajoling and threatening the *shahrigan*,

[321] *Book of Governors*, 309, trans. 151.
[322] See especially Patricia Crone, "Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm," *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times* 8 (1980), 361-97.
[323] *Book of Governors*, 311, trans. 152. The initial conquerors adopted the preexisting tax system in any given region, retaining both method and personnel – in this case, the quasi-feudal Sasanian system of regional lords and village notables. See Michele Campopiano, "State, Land Tax and Agriculture in Iraq from the Arab Conquest to the Crisis of the Abbasid Caliphate (Seventh-Tenth Centuries)," *Studia Islamica* 107 (2012), 8. Robinson notes that while the existence of these Persian landowners in highland Mesopotamia is attested in a handful of ninth and tenth-century Islamic sources, and while they fit other patterns of rolling over existing tax systems into the new caliphate, they are hardly visible from an urban, Muslim point of view. The fact that they loom so large in the early Syriac chronicles testifies again to the distinction between highlands and lowlands, and the amount of local political power that they wielded. Chase Robinson, *Empire and Elites: Northern Mesopotamia After the Islamic Conquest*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90-91, 106-107. The tenth century Muslim historian and geographer al-Masʿūdī noted that *dehqans* were further subdivided into five ranks, signified by clothing. See Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, 187-188.

prophesying that a Muslim lord, Ḥitm bar Ṣalah, would come and destroy them for their unbelief, their failure to yield to his authority, and their oppression of the *dehqane*.[324] Unlike the villages, however, the nobles are given a chance to repent; after seeing Mar Maranʿammeh perform a miracle at a mill they had wrongly seized, they convert to the orthodox faith.[325] After he curses a disobedient *sharigh*, leading to a series of events that end with the loss of his lands and wealth, there is no further hint of rebellion among the notables. Instead, seventy of them, both *sharigan* and *dehqane*, join him as an escort during the remainder of his travels, and at his funeral, the *shahrigan* are chief among the mourners, thus indicating that he had brought the local elite back into obedience to the church.[326]

Fantastic elements aside, the enforcement of discipline in Mar Maranʿammeh's hagiography points to, in Uriel Simonsohn's phrase about the importance of canon law, "the very essence of a Christian community at stake."[327] Although the sins at first seem to be purely moral, the different encounters between Mar Maranʿammeh and the villagers are meant to define the borders of the body of believers. In some cases, the narrative revolves around the practices and expectations of how East Syrian Christians behave as opposed to their opponents, but it also reinforces the link between bishop, monastery, and village. Crucially, Mar Maranʿammeh's followers eventually include members of the landed class, emphasizing the importance of local elites in maintaining the authority of the church. This combined disciplining and co-opting of

[324] *Book of Governors*, 152-153, trans. 312. Robinson places the events alluded to here in 799 – about 50 years after Mar Maranʿammeh and 40 years before Thomas wrote this account. Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 96.
[325] *Book of Governors*, 154, trans. 315.
[326] *Book of Governors*, 164, trans. 329-330.
[327] Uriel Simonsohn, "Seeking Justice among the 'Outsiders': Christian Recourse to Non-Ecclesiastical Judicial Systems under Early Islam," *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, no. 1 (2009): 216.

landed elites in the highlands ensured that new monasteries – like Beit Ṣayyare – could spring up and that ecclesiastical authority could be administered at local levels.

Thomas's hagiography of Mar Maranʿammeh is an idealized picture of what episcopal authority would look like if enforced by divine power. As described above and in Chapter 3, both canon law and monastic chronicles show a much messier entanglement of East Syrian Christians with their neighbors and with local folklore and theology. But it does reflect a real, and partly successful, effort to extend religious authority into highland villages throughout the eighth century, and it provides an explanation for why, by the tenth century, the region possessed a strong East Syrian community and a dearth of heterodox movements despite the decentralized, multireligious landscape. This picture was not an accident, and instead emerged as the result of several deliberate efforts – through teaching, music, and praxis – to differentiate East Syrians from their neighbors and to strengthen their identity with local and ecclesiastical institutions.

Identity and Ethnicity

If the seventh and eighth centuries had been periods of growth and consolidation, the picture painted by John in the tenth century shows its results. This final section examines the evidence in monastic chronicles, especially John's, for the collapse of local elites and the changes in culture and ethnicity that began after the conquest but sharpened in the ninth and tenth centuries. Specifically, the hundreds of names listed across the chronicles show a steady decline of highland Persian culture and a rise in Kurdish and Arab influence. The importance of this shift was manifold: while the influence of local Persian elites had posed a challenge to the spread of Christianity, the loss of Persian culture limited the pool of locally-based leadership.

Monastic chronicles provide lists of monks and, to a lesser extent, a cross-section of the people with whom monks regularly came in contact. John, for instance, includes short anecdotes of dozens of individual monks, describing their personalities and what they were known for in the monastery. These often occupy only a page or two: e.g., "Rabban Benjamin," followed by a short description of his notoriety at the monastery, with the next entry, "Rabban Mar-Atqen and Rabban Babai," taking up another page, and so on. Some monks receive multiple entries in different contexts or appear and reappear throughout the chronicle as part of the stories of other monks. But, finding that he was running out of room, John also sometimes resorts to simply listing names without context:

> I do not have enough time to speak of the simple man of God, Rabban Mar-Atqen the Bearded, the imitator of Paul the Simple, who endured beyond all limits of endurance, because for about fifty years he bore a difficult sickness with perpetual thanksgiving, in exile and destitution, without anyone to assist him.
>
> Nor of Rabban Paulos, who was modest and pleasant in his conduct.
> Nor Rabban Ḥnanishoʿ of Dasen, who lived in complete poverty. He was mighty in hard and difficult labors.
> Nor Rabban Israel Saibath, who lived in the deepest stillness and kept silence all the days of his life.
> Nor Rabban Maranʿammeh, who worked mighty deeds through divine power.
> Nor Rabban ʿOuria, who lived in poverty in every respect, who was more perfect in his virtues in exile (*ʿaksnayuta*) than most.
> Nor Rabban Ishoʿ, a brave worker and diligent laborer.
> Nor Rabban Rahemishoʿ, distinguished by his virtuous life.
> Nor Rabban Hanania, nor Rabban David, nor Rabban Nathaniel, nor Rabban Mashelia, nor many other perfect elders, nor laboring brothers. . .[328]

The names are common enough that John needs to use epithets to distinguish the fact that several monks have the same name. John is not the only chronicler to adopt this method; similar lists can be found in *The History of Beth Qoqa* and *The Book of Chastity*, and all the chronicles mention the names of dozens of minor monks and laypeople in passing. But his dedication to listing as

[328] *Busnaya* 172 (folio 0341). A similar list can be found on 164 (folio 0328).

many names as possible, with backstory when he can manage it, provides an unusually vivid cross-section for the kind of people who lived in Beit Ṣayyare, which is summarized in a chart further on.

There are three caveats here. First, I have assumed that the demographics of any given monastery likely reflects broader patterns in the region. While each of the five monasteries which produced chronicles were located in different areas across the highlands, they all had contact with one another, assisted each other, and sometimes attended each other's ceremonies; hence, I depict them here as representing distinct but overlapping recruitment pools. This is of course an extrapolation, but given that many of the monasteries also exchanged monks, a reasonable one. Second, names do not always accurately reflect the ethnicity of their bearer or may reflect mixed influence or mixed ethnicity. An example is the delightfully named Syriac Orthodox layman Uthman bar Khusrau in *The Book of Governors*, who lived in Balad in the eighth century and whose name combines Arabic, Syriac, and Persian influences. His first name indicates that he is probably an Arab (given his location in Balad, which had a high population of Taghlibi Arab Christians at that time), even though the second part of his name appears to be a Persian patronymic, though perhaps it is more likely that Bar Khusrau is a nickname to indicate some personality trait, much like Bar-ʿIdta or Bar Ḥnana – especially since Uthman exhibits commanding qualities, such as being a prominent layman with very definite opinions.[329] In addition to obviously mixed names, there are also Arab, Kurdish, and Persian Christians who simply have a Syriac name, such as a monk in Rabban Hormizd's monastery named John the Persian, or the seventh-century theologian George of Izla, who had changed his name from Mihramgushnasp to George when he converted to Christianity. Others went by two names, like a

[329] *Book of Governors*, 465, trans. 251.

monk with the Syriac name of Sabrishoʿ (Hope in Jesus) who was also known as Rostam, the name of a legendary Persian hero.[330] This means that a comparison of names will probably tilt the balance towards those of Syriac origin and undercount Syriac Christians of Kurdish, Persian, or Arab backgrounds. Finally, although monastic histories each provide dozens of names, they do not necessarily do so in a systematic way – that is, they do not provide lists of *all* the names of the monks. Even John, for instance, only lists of some of them, although because there are several lists and they are varied in place and context, I take them as roughly representative of the monastery and its surroundings as a whole. Names are thus an imperfect tool for determining ethnic makeup, but they are *a* tool, and as will be shown below, they also reflect definite patterns, especially when paired with place of origin.

The most notable trend is a decrease in membership from Persian families. In all the chronicles, Syriac names predominate, but the earliest monastic chronicles depict a state of mixture, with Persian names heavily prominent in the lists. During the seventh century, several Arab tribes who had settled in lowland northern Mesopotamia were still Christian, especially the Banu Taghlib, while there had been a surge of interest in Christianity among Persians as discussed above. Many of these Persian families were also longstanding settlers in the region, and the chroniclers explicitly specify in at least two cases that they come from local stock.[331] The Persian population suffered considerably during the conquest, however, and a cryptic reference in the West Syrian history of Qartmin mentions that in 653, a great number of Persians went out of Mesopotamia.[332] Although a significant number of Persians seem to linger in the highlands as late

[330] *Book of Governors*, 209, trans. 90.
[331] The Persian shah Kavad I had accelerated this process, settling thousands of Persian families in Iraq in the late fifth century. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, 182.
[332] Andrew Palmer, *A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Qartmin Trilogy: Being the Lives of Samuel of Eštin, Simeon of Qartmīn, and Gabriel of Bēṭ Qūsṭān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, 190-193, reviews the archaeological evidence suggesting wholesale

as the mid-eighth century, they then suffer a steep decline. Robinson has speculated that the coming of the Muslim warlord Ḥitm bar Ṣalah in 799, who was granted the privilege of collecting a year of tax revenue for himself by Harun al-Rashid and levied it from the *shahrigan* (referenced above in the hagiography of Mar Maranʿammeh) probably broke their power for good.[333]

John's lists reveal that most monks at Beit Ṣayyare had Syriac names, rather than the Persian names that dot the chronicles of *Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, *Rabban Hormizd*, and the *History of Beth Qoqa*.[334] In one passage, describing the monk Rabban Yohannon of Dasen, John describes how he struggled to adjust to having a disciple who had a Persian name:

> [Rabban Yohannon] had a disciple named Bokhtishoʿ who waited on him. Bokhtishoʿ served him for about ten years, but [Rabban Yohannon] never learned his name. Sometimes, he called him Dadishoʿ [rather than Bokhtishoʿ], sometimes something completely different. Whenever I would run into him, I would ask him teasingly (sinner that I am) what the name of his disciple was, and he would say, 'I think he is called Dadishoʿ. . ?' His face shone like a bright lamp.[335]

Dadishoʿ (Beit Qatraye) was an important translator of ascetic texts as well as the name of a fifth-century *catholicos*, but perhaps more relevantly, like Bokhtishoʿ, it is also a Persian name, the equivalent of the Syriac name Ishoʿyahb; Rabban Yohannon appears simply to be reaching for the first ethnic name that comes to mind. In fact, it is the only Persian name in the entire text - of the many names that John mentions in his narrative, Bokhtishoʿ appears to be the only Persian monk. This represents a significant change from the days of both Rabban Bar-ʿIdta and Rabban Hormizd

abandonment of 36% of Sasanian sites in central Iraq, seeming to confirm the physical flight of many of Mesopotamia's Persians.

[333] Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 97-98.

[334] *Rabban Hormizd*, 66, trans. 44, 86, trans. 58, 117, trans. 79.

[335] *Busnaya* 148-149 (folio 299). "His face shone like a bright lamp" – probably that he was a very holy man despite his shortcomings, as opposed to John, who is a (ܚܛܝܐ), or wretch, sinner. John's obvious fondness for Rabban Yohannon and the prank he plays on him make this passage particularly endearing.

in the seventh century, when monks and laypeople with Persian names represent roughly 17-23% of the figures mentioned in the chronicles (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Names/Figures by Chronicle[336]

	Syriac	Persian	Arab	Kurdish	Other	Persians as Percentage
The Book of Chastity (6th-8th c.)	103	24	8	0	6	17%
History of Beth Qoqa (6th-8th c.)	17	6	2	0	1	23%
Rabban Bar-ʿIdta (7th c.)	40	13	0	0	4	23%
Rabban Hormizd (late 7th – early 8th c.)	15	5	4	0	1	20%
Book of Governors (6th-9th c.)	125	35	14	1	1	20%
Rabban Busnaya (10th c.)	73	1	5	13	3	1%

[336] Includes both monks and outsiders who are explicitly identified as belonging to a given ethnic group. Those who have names of one ethnicity but are identified as members of a different group are classified by their ethnicity rather than by name (e.g., Gabriel the Persian is tallied as a Persian, even though his name is Syriac). Unquantified groups of Kurds, Syriac villagers, and Arabs are not included, nor are public figures without direct contact with the monastery (e.g. the Persian ruler Khusrau, the Ḥamdanid king Abu Taghlib), or unnamed figures without specified ethnicity (e.g. a woman whose legs were both broken) though significant unnamed figures with definite ethnicity (e.g. the Persian who stole the monastery's mule, the Kurd who chastened Rabban Ishoʿ) are.

The demographic data from the chronicles largely corresponds with Robinson's predictions above. Notably, although the *Book of Governors* appears to hold steady with prior chronicles at 20%, a significant portion of those names date either prior to the conquest (7/35) or just after, during Thomas' lengthy descriptions of the reign of Ishoʿyahb in the mid-seventh century and the account of Mar Maranʿammeh in the mid-eighth. At the beginning of the ninth century, there is already gradual decline, and only a century after that, the dropoff is unmistakable.

The demographics of Beit Ṣayyare thus reflect a radically changed world, one in which the Persian elite which formerly dominated the highlands has almost completely vanished from northern Mesopotamia. This change consisted of several components. The collapse of Zoroastrian authority, previously the state religion under the Sasanians, created a subsequent opportunity to evangelize a population that had previously been protected by law and had enjoyed social and political dominance in the region. Some Zoroastrians had already converted to Christianity during Sasanian times, despite legal prohibitions, including death, against doing so, but many more followed suit during the Islamic period. As religions of the book, Christianity and Judaism were semi-protected religions under Islamic law, but Zoroastrianism was not, and although in practice many Zoroastrians preserved their faith and customs for centuries post-conquest even in new Islamic centers, the pressure to switch to a more socially respected religion was high. In addition to the social incentive of joining a protected religion, members of the landowning classes found that they could preserve their property by donating it to a monastery, where it would be untaxed. In describing the case of one *marzban*, or viceroy, the *History of Beth Qoqa* alludes in veiled terms to the protection that Zoroastrian elite sought in Christianity:

> The Muslims captured a *marzban* and forced him to turn over all his goods. The wretched man sought help through the prayers of our noble father. . . [Mar Sabrishoʿ] said to him, "I am not privy to hidden things, but it seems to me that your end approaches. Even so, if

> you abandon your false religion, there is hope – though not certain, I have firm confidence that you alone will perish, but no one else among your parents will be struck down by the enemy." The matter played out in its entirety and our saint perceived correctly the things to come; in fact, the *marzban* alone was put to death, but his children were spared.[337]

Two points in this anecdote stand out – the mention of the *marzban*'s property, and the mention of his children and heirs, which follows the pattern of other Sasanian notables entrusting their goods to a monastery, though in this case at least some of the property had already been confiscated. Whatever the rationale, the execution of the *marzban* broke a link in the transmission of Persian Zoroastrian tradition, shifting his family to the East Syrian fold. The cohesion of the previous local elite – its customs, religion, and social rank – was left in disarray.

The decline of the Persian landowners freed the monasteries to take a greater hand in the region, but it also represented the loss of a significant local leadership class. The Persians represented a class of local notables who acted decisively and had the means and power to sway events in their favor. Persian figures, both monks and laypeople, play an outsized role in the early development of the monasteries, particularly because of their wealth and connections. In the *History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta*, a Persian notable donates some land to the monastery and builds a market on it, ceding its revenue to the monastery as a source of income thereafter; in another instance, a Persian layman, Khuznahir, organizes the entombment of several prominent figures and pays the expenses.[338] Among the monks themselves, after the monastery of Beth ʿAbhe is divided over a plan to build a school nearby, several monks grumble that the noise of children's voices will disrupt their meditations, but it is a Persian monk who takes action, rallying seventy men and removing the founder's body from the monastery in protest, ultimately forcing the school to be relocated to a village instead.[339] When they are physically gone, the Persian community also

[337] *The History of Beth Qoqa*, 123.
[338] *Book of Governors*, 216, trans. 94.
[339] *Book of Governors*, 153, trans. 77.

lingers in Syriac chronicles through references to their infrastructure – a ruined fire temple, bereft of worshipers, a bridge across the Zab, later vanished, the king's highway.[340] Their absence haunts the landscape.

In their place, the spread of people who enter the monastery appear to be primarily local, primarily Aramaic, and primarily located either in the highlands or in their immediate vicinity. They continued to contribute wealth – one of the ways that the lay population can be seen indirectly is through the donation and support network that quickly sprung up around Beit Ṣayyare, which was so successful that on more than one occasion Kurdish bandits assumed that itinerant monks were carrying silver back to the monastery.[341] But the leadership quality which the old elite provided was missing. When the monks of Beit Ṣayyare negotiate with highland notables, they inevitably deal with Kurdish tribal chiefs rather than landowners of various ranks, and while the chiefs often have amicable relations with the monastery, they do not build infrastructure or contribute to a common society.

The Persian decline also corresponds with a shift to rural Kurdish lands to the north and east rather than from the more urbanized world to the south. Efforts to establish missions to the Kurds began early in cenobitic monastic history, with Mar Schalita, one of the disciples of Mar Awgin, building a monastery among the Kurdish tribes in the sixth century.[342] Several monks in Beit Ṣayyare come from areas that were known for having heavily Kurdish populations. Besides the unnamed monks from Dailam, several other figures, including Rabban ʿAbdisho of Dasen, Rabban Yohannon of Dasen, Rabban Ḥnanishoʿ of Dasen, and Rabban David of Dasen, come from

[340] Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 48-49, trans. 83-84, *Rabban Bar-ʻIdta*, 132, trans. 194.
[341] *Busnaya* 103 (folio 0220), *Busnaya* 134 (folio 0274).
[342] *The Book of Chastity*, 5.

the land of the Dasenoye, described as a Kurdish tribe.[343] Two other monks come from Beit Mourdani, a village which John says was inhabited by a Kurdish tribe called the Herazdoye, and both show some indications of having a Kurdish identity. One of them, David (mentioned in Chapter 3 as being possessed by a demon after too much experimentation with mystical experience), came originally from Beit Mourdani; like Rabban David of Dasen, he also bears the same name as the first East Syrian bishop of the Kurds. The other, who remained unnamed, decided that the life of a monk did not suit him and left the monastery to return to Beit Mourdani, where he was killed while hunting "with others like him" (*d'mah leh*).[344] Though Kurds were never as numerous as those of Persian background, they appear to have constituted a significant minority within Beit Ṣayyare.

Arab names represent the other ethnic group that increases its share in monastic rolls. In the earlier period, they would have been drawn from Arab Christian tribes, and during the tenth century, some Arab Christians still lived at the base of the lowlands. But given the general conversion of Arab Christians to Islam prior to the ninth century, the trend probably represents Syriac Christians who took Arab names. Many of them are city-dwellers, 'Isa, the possessed deacon from Chapter 3, is one, and Abu Zakari, a scribe from Mosul, is another, both of whom are identified as Syriac Christians. John himself appears to belong to this category; although his origins are unknown, his surname, Kaldoun, appears to be an Syriacized version of Khaldun, and many of his connections are in Mosul. He himself mentions that his first language was Arabic rather than Syriac, because his Christian parents believed that he would have a better chance of professional and social success with Arabic rather than Syriac; consequently, he did not know how

[343] *Busnaya* 123 (folio 0251).
[344] *Busnaya* 125 (folio 0254-255). Presumably the phrase, "with others like him" refers to other Kurds rather than other ex-monks, though possibly other hot-headed or bloodthirsty people.

to read or write Syriac until he served as Rabban Busnaya's secretary, and attributed his ability to learn it to a miracle.[345] The presence of Arab names in later chronicles thus points to a different kind of diversity than in earlier times – whereas before, they indicated monks who came from a rural, pastoral background, they now signified the introduction of urbane, Islamicized culture into the monastery.

The shift in the names in the monastic rolls indicates some of the transformations, besides mission work, that the highlands underwent in the ninth and tenth centuries. The most significant of these was the collapse of the landowning elite, which had persisted since Sasanian rule but whose Persian cultural traditions came under far more pressure than their Christian and Jewish counterparts. In their place was a growing Kurdish presence, aided in part by the Kurdish migration discussed in Chapter 2, and an increased Arab demographic that reflected the ongoing Arabization of Mosul and the surrounding countryside. While the monasteries continued to have a multiethnic character, they also tended to reflect a much heavier Syriac presence. The results of these changes foreshadow the shape of Syriac monasticism in northern Iraq in the later Islamic world – increasingly static and monocultural rather than dynamic and expanding, as it had been in earlier centuries.

Conclusion

The chronicles described above, especially the history of Beit Ṣayyare, thus provide an impressionistic glimpse of the arc of Christianization in northern Iraq. The relative independence of the highlands provided new opportunities for both West and East Syrian Christians, and the

[345] *Busnaya* 82 (folio 0171).

tension between them formed a driving force that only accelerated once the ruling Zoroastrian elite had been put into disarray. Active missionary efforts, taking place in Islamic territory but off the radar of Islamic centers, introduced Christianity to new territories and consolidated it in what would become the Syriac heartland. While the lowlands witnessed the unfolding of Islamic political, religious, and cultural development, the hinterland underwent a very different path during the seventh and eighth centuries, deepening its association with Syriac Christianity and cenobitic monasticism.

Beit Ṣayyare's demographics represent the point when this process had reached its apex and just started to decline. On the one hand, the ability to draw so many monks into a new monastery so quickly, was the result of the intensifying Christianization described above. On the other hand, the names and places of origins of the monks show a much more local recruitment pool. The decline of Persian converts, the Islamization of many of the Kurds, and the conversion of many of the pastoral Christian Arab tribes to Islam, all limited opportunities for expansive growth of the kind that had shown itself in the monastic rolls in earlier chronicles. While the mission phase of the Church of the East farther abroad, in Central Asia and Mongolia, had yet to play itself out, it had begun to reach its limits in northern Iraq.

Chapter Five

Falling Apart: Beit Ṣayyare and the Eclipse of Syriac Monasticism

Introduction

One day, when his brother was visiting Beit Ṣayyare, John took him to see an elderly monk named Rabban Ishoʿ. They found the old man greatly agitated, storming around his cell, and the arrival of John's brother only seemed to anger him further. "Your master, Abu Taghlib, has the temerity to tax monks!" he shouted at them. "So I have put a curse on him." Abu Taghlib was the new king of the Ḥamdanid emirate that ruled Mosul; John's brother worked in his employ. While both John and his brother begged Rabban Ishoʿ to reconsider cursing the king, he adamantly refused. "The arrow has left the bow," he stated flatly, and added that he only looked forward to seeing divine judgment befall such an evil man.[346]

Although other scholars have placed the end of the "Indian summer" of Syriac Christianity in the eleventh, twelfth, or even thirteenth century, the events of the tenth century marked a critical turning point.[347] Just as several factors had once allowed Syriac monasticism to spread rapidly – the separation between lowlands and highlands, the charismatic reputation of the monks, the collapse of the old Zoroastrian system after the conquest – new factors now converged to change the makeup of the Islamic world. Two of these are especially important: the conversion of the Kurdish tribes to Islam and their migration westward, which created a danger to monasteries from within the highlands themselves, and the internal chaos which befell

[346] *Busnaya* 168 (folio 0334-0335).
[347] Tannous speculates on, though does not firmly commit to, a late twelfth or early-thirteenth century date for majority Islamization, citing the thirteenth-century writer Burchard of Mt. Zion and the archaeologist Gerald Avni for support. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 492-493.

the caliphate, which transformed the region from a backwater to a battleground. The new taxation was one of many harbingers of a disaster that John describes eventually befalling the monasteries of northern Mesopotamia. The region had undergone many periods of political upheaval before, most notably the initial Islamic conquest and the wars in which the ʿAbbāsid dynasty overthrew the Umayyad caliphate (ca. 750), as well as several civil wars, but these events are largely invisible in the monastic histories, due in large part to the geographical separation between highlands and plains. The tenth century, however, saw the political divisions within the Islamic empire shift from a struggle over control of a centralized government to the establishment of several regional kingdoms. The caliphate continued to exist in name, but power rested in the hands of local rulers; rather than a single capital based in Baghdad, the closest emir to the highlands held his court in Mosul, and rather than controlling vast swathes of territory, the new kings operated with much more limited resources. The resulting struggle between two of these rulers, the Ḥamdanids of Mosul and Aleppo and the Buyids, an expanding kingdom originally from Iran, ended with a substantial intrusion of the victorious Buyids via Kurdish proxies into the highlands and a decisive end to the golden age of monastic expansion.

John's description of these events represents the culmination of earlier monastic chronicles, painting a picture of a highland monastery and its rural community under new, unanticipated pressures that ultimately became permanent features of life in the hill country. As is typical in the narrative, John takes an internal view, ascribing the wider political changes to the monks themselves, such as Rabban Ishoʿ above, and holding that the spiritual dissolution of the monastery resulted in the collapse of the region. However, he also includes enough details to link his spiritual meditations to external factors in the lowlands and beyond. Consequently, he illustrates how the highland communities, long separated from the caliphate by their rugged

topography, were eventually enmeshed in the political and religious changes that swept the broader Islamic world between 868 and 980.

The War Between the Ḥamdanids, the Byzantines, and the Buyids

The ʿAbbāsid caliphate radically transformed in the tenth century from an effective political authority to a nominal one, in which the caliph acted only as a figurehead. Originally, it had embraced an agenda of centralization and expansion, realized through a well-organized bureaucracy, cultural innovation, and powerful military. At its height between 750 and 850, the ʿAbbāsid caliphate wielded authority over much of the Islamic world, especially its heartland in Iraq, Arabia, Syria, and Iran. It enjoyed several strong caliphs, particularly Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809), who had brought Muslim forces all the way to the walls of Byzantium in 782, and al-Maʿmun (r. 813-833), who recruited scholars to translate medical, scientific, and philosophical works and thus centralize Western and Eastern knowledge. Additionally, it boasted sophisticated legal, financial, and municipal systems, capable of tackling large-scale issues.[348]

Beginning in the late ninth century, this trend reversed, and the central authority of the caliphate began to unravel. A sustained slave revolt by African slaves near Basra, the Zanj, beginning in 869 and lasting until 882, cut trade routes between Baghdad and the Gulf for over a decade and destroyed much of the agricultural land of southern Iraq.[349] A reliance on Turkic and Dailamite slave soldiers had transferred most of the military power from Arab hands to societal

[348] Michele Campopiano, "State, Land Tax and Agriculture in Iraq from the Arab Conquest to the Crisis of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate (Seventh to Tenth Centuries)," *Studia Islamica* 107 (2012), 25, succinctly captures how the various mechanisms of ʿAbbāsid government combined to weigh legal, administrative, and engineering issues in regards to land tax and improving crop yield.
[349] Udjang Tholib, "Economic Factors of the ʿAbbāsid Decline During the Buwayhid Rule in the Fourth/Tenth Century," *Majalah Al-Jamiah* 47.2 (2009), 357.

outsiders, and raids by Turkic soldiers on agricultural lands rendered them unfit for farming, despite innovative agricultural techniques.[350] Simultaneously, brigandage became a serious problem, culminating in the robbery and massacre of a Muslim pilgrim caravan not far from Baghdad in 924.[351] The result was a loss of power and credibility; by the early tenth century, the caliphate had lost its ability to project centralized power, and had been seen to deal with crises ineffectively, which paved the way for new challengers.

During John's time, northern Iraq felt the events of this breakdown only lightly at first because of a new force that stabilized much of the region: the Ḥamdanids, a small tribe that gained prominent after joining with a local tribal alliance and quickly maneuvered its way to a position of power.[352] A clash between local tribes and Kharijite forces in the ninth century had led to Mosul being occupied by an anti-Kharijite tribe known as the 'Umarids in 874, supported by the Ḥamdanid chieftain Ḥamdan ibn Ḥamdun.[353] After ʿAbbāsid forces regained control in 894, Ḥamdan was initially imprisoned, but later released after his clan switched to assisting the caliph and helped break the remnants of the Kharijite army, securing the region. In recognition of his contributions to ʿAbbāsid security, Ḥamdan's son 'Abdallah assumed the governorship of Mosul and the surrounding territory of Diyār Rabīʿa in 905.[354] Because the Ḥamdanids had developed from already-existing ʿAbbāsid political structures and had tamed some of the regional tensions that had caused problems in the ninth century, the north remained stable even as the heart of the Islamic world was turned upside-down.

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[350] Tholib, "Economic Factors of the ʿAbbāsid Decline," 361.
[351] Van Berkel et al., *Crisis and Continuity at the ʿAbbāsid Court*, 137.
[352]Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty of Mesopotamia and North Syria: 254-404/868-1014" (Diss. University of Michigan, 1981), 219. citing al-Azdi and others. The history of the Ḥamdanids – a short-lived, regional kingdom – has still only lightly been studied. To date, there are only two major book-length works on them, with Bikhazi's dissertation building on an earlier study by Marius Canard in 1954.
[353] Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty," 252.
[354] Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty," 238.

Their ambitions persisted, and the Ḥamdanids began to separate from the rest of the caliphate in 908, when a member of the Ḥamdanid clan, Ibn al-Mutazz, unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate the caliph, al-Muqtadir and claim the throne for himself, effectively chilling relations between Baghdad and Mosul.[355] The Ḥamdanid patriarch, al-Husayn, formally reconciled with the caliph after disposing of another rival, but then began to take on the trappings of a ruler: raising troops, minting his own money, and levying his own taxes.[356] He soon became a ruler by default, and later elevated himself to rulership in title as well, styling himself as the *amir al-umara*.[357] In 943, the Ḥamdanids under Nasr al-Dawla and his brother Sayf al-Dawla expanded westward. Nasr al-Dawla remained in Mosul, while Sayf al-Dawla reigned as his co-equal in Aleppo. They also established redoubts in the north, at Mayyafaqarin, and another citadel even farther north at Mardin.

The caliphate further suffered two other setbacks: the effects of a resurgent Byzantine military and the loss of Dailam, in northwestern Iran, where the Buyid generals began to establish their own rulership under a series of disaffected Shi'a dissidents. The Byzantines, freshly reorganized under Nicephorus Phocas, began to take territory that had long belonged to the Islamic world at an alarming rate. Cilicia fell to the Byzantines in 965, Antioch in 969, Aleppo in 970.[358] In each of these cases, the Byzantines fortified their frontiers by moving in Armenian and Syriac settlers to establish a buffer zone even as their troops advanced even

[355] Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty," 270.
[356] Jere Bacherach, "Al-Ikhshīd, the Ḥamdānids and the Caliphate: The Numismatic Evidence," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94.3 (July-Sept. 1974), 363.
[357] Bacherach, "Al-Ikhshīd, the Ḥamdānids and the Caliphate," 364.
[358] William Garood, "The Illusion of Continuity: Nikephoros Phokas, John Tzimiskes, and the Eastern Border," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 37.1 (2013), 23-24.

deeper into northern Iraq.[359] At the same time, the Buyids spread southward along the Zagros mountains before swinging around and marching through the south of Iraq – the heartland of the caliphate, which had been ravaged by conflict for almost seventy years – claiming more territory as they went.

In 945, centralized control had deteriorated to such a degree that the Ḥamdanids and the Buyids fought for control of Baghdad itself – a sign that the caliph could not even muster enough strength to safeguard his own capital – but concluded matters peacefully. Baghdad and the caliph fell into Buyid hands, while the territory north of Tagrit was controlled by the Ḥamdanids, who were able to turn their attention to the newly revitalized Byzantine threat. Ostensibly, the old order continued – despite the Shi'a leanings of the Buyids which theoretically called for a restoration of a leader of Muhammad's direct bloodline, they deposed the existing caliph but confirmed his successor in his position as the leader of the Muslim world. But the caliph was now only a figurehead, subsisting on a small personal allowance, part of which was garnished to fund jihad.[360] Although the caliphate continued to exist in theory, there was no centrifugal force and no administrative machinery to hold the ʿAbbāsid empire together.

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[359] Perhaps in light of Byzantine gains, Ibn Ḥawqal claimed that Ḥamdanids had their origins as jihadi warriors gone rogue. Although incredibly successful as raiders, once they realized that Islamic lands made for easier prey, they made peace with the Byzantines and carved out territory from the caliphate itself:

> They had broken the strength of the Byzantines, reduced their families to captivity, destroyed their fortresses at their leisure, and spread themselves throughout their entire land. . . [but then] these Arabs returned to Muslim lands, very well acquainted with their vulnerable points, understanding the means to bring about their ruin, and having knowledge of the roads both generally and in detail. Their hearts were enflamed with resentment, boiling with the urge to fight, and burning with hate. . . for most of them had the aspiration of owning their own lands as the reason for their avarice.

By the time that Ibn Ḥawqal was writing, much of northern Iraq had been devastated by war as it reverted to a frontier between the caliphate and the Byzantines, and he casts its fate as a tragic arc, one in which a good group of Muslim warriors went bad. Precisely because they had once been the best of the frontier jihadists, they now brought disaster to the Muslim world. In Ibn Ḥawqal's telling, they were also entirely illegitimate, a group of mercenaries grasping for power that rightfully belonged to the caliph. Ibn Ḥawqal, *La Configuration de la Terre*, 206.

[360] Tholib, "Economic Factors in ʿAbbāsid Decline," 349.

The significance of the moment, in which the caliphate had fallen under the sway of a rebel general, was muted by the scramble for territory and the jockeying for power within the Ḥamdanid ruling families. While they enjoyed increased sovereignty and a temporary peace on their southern border, the Ḥamdanids were themselves in turn destabilized by internal politics, especially through the machinations the son of Nasr al-Dawla, Abu Taghlib. After Sayf al-Dawla died in 967, leaving Nasr al-Dawla as the sole ruler, Abu Taghlib then deposed his father and imprisoned him, hoping to secure the entire emirate for himself. The emirate instead split; in the confusion, Aleppo fell to a small Byzantine raiding force even though the emperor had ended the campaigning season. A new emperor, John Tzimitskes, then returned and began making new inroads into Ḥamdanid territory in 972.[361]

Inevitably, however, the Buyids were not content with the southern half of Iraq, and took advantage of the chaos to expand their territory at the Ḥamdanids' expense. In 974, five years after Abu Taghlib had assumed power by eliminating both the previous rulers, the Buyids began pressuring him for more tribute. When he refused, the Buyid army marched north. In 978, they met the Ḥamdanid army at Mosul itself and inflicted a punishing defeat, effectively ending the emirate.[362] Abu Taghlib fled and tried to reestablish his throne a few years later, but was unable to muster much support; a subsequent attempt later by his sons, who had sworn fealty to the Buyids, also failed, although remnants of the Ḥamdanid family persisted for nearly fifty years afterwards. The Buyid dynasty itself was not much more permanent than the Ḥamdanids; it would fall less than a century later, in 1055, to a combination of Turkic and Kurdish incursions.

[361] Garood, "The Illusion of Continuity," 26.
[362] Bikhazi, "The Ḥamdanid Dynasty," 974.

Simultaneously, the tenth century saw the old order fracture even further. In 969, Egypt, one of the richest parts of the empire, seceded under the powerful Fatimid family, effectively ending ʿAbbāsid rule over Africa.[363] Between 951 and 990, the northern areas in eastern Anatolia were usurped by Kurdish dynasties, the Marwanids and Shaddadids, who would engage in a century-long struggle by revived Christian foes, the Armenian and Georgian Bagratids, ultimately yielding much of the territory that the caliphate had held since the seventh century and paving the way for the establishment of new Christian kingdoms.[364]

The effect of this conflict in the long-term was to permanently end the ʿAbbāsid administration in its old form as a centrally-ruled Islamic empire. Although the ʿAbbāsid dynasty continued to rule from Baghdad, thereafter, Iraq, Iran, Anatolia, and Syria would be divided under small regional kingdoms. Khalid Blankenship has argued that the Umayyad caliphate (ca. 661-750) ended when it was no longer possible for Muslim armies to rapidly acquire new territory, thus grinding the economy, which depended on plunder rather than production, to a halt.[365] The dissolution of the ʿAbbāsids two centuries later represents another ratcheting of that failure. While the Umayyads had fallen, the concept of a caliphate as a political and spiritual sphere had initially remained: there was a unified Islamic administration from Baghdad to Bactria, dedicated to the expansion of Islam. The splitting up of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate represented something new. Politically, it meant the end of the concept of a single Islamic polity. This meant that the highlands, while still difficult to access, were no longer free

[363] Egypt had earlier flirted with secession from the ʿAbbāsids under the Tulunids in 868, but had been forcibly reincorporated in 906. This second break in 969 was permanent. Carl F. Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 1: 640-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 108, 120.
[364] Carole Hillenbrand, *The Medieval Turks: Collected Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 361-363.
[365] Khalid Blankenship, *The End of the Jihad State: The Reign of Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 102.

from territorial ambitions. When the first Arab conquerors had annexed the Jazira and built Mosul in 640, they did not bother to press into the highlands in part because the territories of Byzantine and Sasanian empires were crumbling as quickly as they could advance into them. As outlined in Chapter 1, Islamic rule was far-flung and had only lightly penetrated beyond its urban centers, and initially conflict centered around the new Muslim cities and the rulership of the Hijaz. With the fragmentation of the caliphate into much smaller territories, each warring not only with the enemies outside but also rival Muslim claimants within, regional kings began to delve more deeply into the resources more immediately at hand. In the case of the Ḥamdanids, that including the monasteries, untaxed or inconsistently taxed since the inception of Islam, and consequently holding ample reserves of lands and money that could be funneled into state coffers.

Part of the reason that the highlands had long been able to flourish as a separate region had depended on the caliphate existing as a single massive polity, as it had under the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid period. When the politics changed, devolving into smaller, regional, and far less stable kingdoms, the highlands no longer enjoyed the luxury of being a backwater. Pressed by Byzantine incursions from the north, raids from the Numayri Bedouin tribe, and the expanding Buyid kingdom from the south, the Ḥamdanid emirate was running short of both money and manpower. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Abu Taghlib was reaching for new sources of revenue to counter this threat. But from the perspective of the highlands, separated as they were from the events below, the world was still largely untroubled; for Rabban Ishoʿ, and for the monks of Beit Ṣayyare, Abu Taghlib was acting purely out of greed.

John's Description of Events

As described in the anecdote about Rabban Ishoʿ, John tells the story of the Buyid-Ḥamdanid war and the destruction that befell the highlands only as part of the backdrop of the story of Beit Ṣayyare. While he indicates that he is aware of the geopolitical events that are shaking the Islamic world, he dedicates his energy instead to describing the deaths of several prominent monks, which in turn foreshadow the physical destruction of the monastery and, by extension, the end of the particular moment when Syriac monasticism thrived. The way in which John views this shift partly reflects the contours of his genre, since he is writing as a hagiographer rather than a historian, but also infuses the events with a personal understanding. John reads the war as primarily the lapse of spiritual power. When the power of the monks and the internal cohesion of the monastic community waned, the rest of northern Iraq fell apart as well.

John is certainly cognizant of the wider situation, and some of the major conflicts of the war directly correspond to anecdotes included throughout the narrative. He mentions, for instance, that his brother was involved in a battle on the side of the Ḥamdanid king; Rabban Joseph had a vision of him being wounded but surviving.

> When the king of the Persians whom I mentioned above [Panah khusrau, the Buyid emir] came to this land, the king of Mosul went down to fight him (*nḥet l-maqrab*). And my brother, because he was with him, was there too and went down with him. On the day when the kings joined battle with each other, at the very moment when the king of Mosul was defeated, Rabban [Joseph] called me and asked, "Has any news come to you from the battle of the kings?"
>
> I replied, "I haven't heard anything."
>
> Then he wept and said vaguely, "I hope to God that He will not make me suffer because of this."
>
> I didn't understand this. But after a few days, I received painful news: my brother had fallen in the battle and no one knew what had become of him.

> I went to Rabban, weeping, and said in a loud voice, "Your student – my brother – was killed in battle."
>
> But he quieted my tears and said to me, "Fear not. I have hope that God will not cause me pain through your brother, because he showed me [a vision of] his face, whole in body and soul."[366]

Later, his brother returned to the monastery to recover from his wounds after the Ḥamdanids had lost. The incident points to 977 or 978 as the most likely year, either in the battle for Mosul or, perhaps in the skirmishes leading up to it. But the exchange between John and Rabban Joseph and their anxious waiting for news of the battle also indicates the way that the war was beginning to infringe on the highlands in ways that previous, much more serious conflicts had not.

The accounts of the Buyids are sparse on their forays into the hill country, but John also explicitly connects the fall of the Ḥamdanids with the destruction that befell the highlands afterwards. His clearest statement about the invasion occurs in the middle of the narrative, when Rabban Joseph prophesies that after his death, the region would be consumed by violence during a Buyid invasion:

> For four years before the coming of the Persian – that is, the Dailamite called Panah-khusrau – Rabban used to cry out in a loud voice every time [he had a vision], saying, "Glory to God! What will happen to these people and monasteries, [these] villages and cities?" And many people heard him say this, because he was overwhelmed by the violence and grief that he had seen. . .
>
> After four years, as I have said, the [Dailamite] king came to these lands, at the end of the year 367 according to the Arabs. . . and a year and a quarter after the arrival of this king, [Rabban Joseph] passed away to his Lord, just as he had pleaded, so that he would not see the devastation of the monasteries and hermitages, and the scattering of the brothers and believers [who lived] in them.
>
> After his departure, the Kurds and Talabani ruled over these lands, and they destroyed the monasteries, the hermitages, and the villages, and the brothers [who lived] in them were scattered to every place. . .

[366] *Busnaya* 60 (folio 126).

> And I saw this with my own eyes: the destruction of the entire land of Dasen, and the scattering of its people. They were killed by the Kurds known as the Hakkari, about five thousand people [in total].[367]

The timeline becomes tangled at this point: according to John, this prophecy came to pass two years after Rabban Joseph's death during an invasion led by Panah-khusrau in the year 367 of the Arabs, or 977. However, he also dates Rabban Joseph's death to 979. The battle for Mosul, meanwhile, took place in 978; since the Buyid armies advanced from the south, the destruction of the highlands almost certainly took place afterwards. It is possible that because the raids were led by the Hakkari, they were not part of the Buyid force proper, and instead part of the general havoc that overcame the region; in this case, they could have theoretically taken place at any time. But the easiest way to reconcile John's dates would be to place the death of Rabban Joseph slightly earlier – sometime between 975 and 978 – and the raids sometime in the wake of the Buyid invasion of Mosul, between 978 and 980. The description indicates that this was a decisive change to the status quo. There had been Kurdish raids since the ninth century, but they were disorganized and merely sought plunder.[368] John understands this attack as organized: unlike previous attempts to control the highlands, the destruction was carried out by Buyid order through the proxy of Hakkari raiders, who lived in the highlands and were able to carry out their raids without the difficulties of supply and terrain that typically beset lowland armies.

Although the manuscript provides valuable historical information about the destruction of highland settlements, Rabban Joseph's death, rather than the end of the monastery, comprises the central event in the final part of John's narrative. John's decision to focus on Rabban Joseph is striking precisely because it takes place against the backdrop of much more consequential events

[367] *Busnaya* 53-54 (folio 0114).
[368] In an indication of how complicated the breakdown of social order would be, three Christian villages joined with the Kurds in the sack of one monastery during Thomas of Marga's time. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, 388 trans. 659.

– both for the highlands and for the ʿAbbāsid empire as a whole – as outlined above. Instead, there is almost no sense of the importance of the fall of the ʿAbbāsids and only slightly more emphasis on the collapse of the regional Ḥamdanid power. Nevertheless, the way in which John frames the final days of Rabban Joseph and the collapse of the monastery connects the internal dissension within Beit Ṣayyare with what he sees as a broader pattern: the ending of an era, and the passing of God's grace. By retelling the story through the passing of major figures within the monastery, John captures the sense of destabilization and upheaval that also accompanied the Buyid raid.

John casts Rabban Joseph's death as a reflection of the Last Supper, in which he was poisoned at a communal meal with his disciples, though he lingered several years thereafter. By the late 970s, Rabban Joseph had helmed the monastery for almost thirty years, about a third of its existence. Although John had insisted earlier in the narrative that there were no disagreements among the monks, he now amends his statement to say that the monastery had been suffering from difficulties which John does not describe, but he adds that a great number of the monks were faithless and unworthy. One day, while sitting at the communal table, some of the monks poisoned Rabban Joseph's food – a deed that John compares to the attempted assassinations of two *catholicoi* of the Church of the East, Mar Henanishoʿ (r. 686-701), who was shoved off a cliff, and Mar Ishoʿyahb of Arzun (r. 580-595), who was poisoned by a discontented monk through the communion chalice.

> Sometime after [Rabban Joseph] had recovered from his sickness, a year more or less, Satan caused the loss of a great number of souls, through some fools who dared to do something horrible and destructive, terrible even to hear. . .
>
> There were some fools (*nashe sakle*) in the monastery, who were envious of Rabban [Joseph's] virtue, not in a good way, but evil, and they were driven to oppose him out of an overpowering wickedness. . . One man, whose heart Satan had filled with evil, put a

> deadly poison in a portion of bread and concealed it in the meal that he had set before him when he was eating with the monks at the communal table. . .
>
> Rabban [put] the poisoned bread in his mouth, but he perceived it by the grace of the One who had also warned the catholicos [Mar Ishoʿyahb of Arzun]. He wanted to get rid of it and spit it out of his mouth, but he remembered our Lord, who said, "If [my disciples] drink deadly poison, no harm will come to them, it will not hurt them."[369]

Rabban Joseph tasted the poison as he put the bread into his mouth, but decided to eat it anyways. He then became very sick. For several days and nights, John cared for him, feeding and washing him, until one day he had rallied enough to tell the monks, "Praise God, my children, and give him thanks, for the Lord has shown his salvation, and he has not let the enemy's wicked scheme and evil design succeed."[370] But the poison continued to eat away at him for years, and finally, five years later, he fell into a second sickness from which he would not recover, and passed away.

The five-year gap between the dinner and Rabban Joseph's death casts doubt on whether he was actually poisoned. No cause is given for any of the monks to try and assassinate him, and because he was then very elderly, it is possible that his interpretation, which John faithfully repeats, is mistaken. Rabban Joseph had just recovered from a serious illness only a year before, indicating that his health was possibly already on the wane.[371] Additionally, the event took place during the dead of winter, before the feast of the Epiphany, when food was already an issue – as described in Chapter 2, winter saw many famines and also monks eating food of questionable quality, as with Rabban Mar-Atqen and the rotten grapes. On the other hand, as John points out, such poisonings did have precedent. In any case, John mentions that the culprit or culprits, if

[369] *Busnaya* 232 (folio 0438)
[370] *Busnaya* 232 (folio 0440).
[371] *Busnaya* 229 (folio 0435).

they did exist, were never caught, nor did Rabban Joseph publicly reveal his suspicions about who specifically had poisoned him.

What the story of the poisoning of Rabban Joseph does emphasize is the insular nature of the monastery, and the extent to which petty disputes could take on meaning beyond their proportion. John's image of monks poisoning their leader due to internal squabbles also echoes the tragedy that will soon befall the monastery itself; rather than preparing to weather the political changes of the era, the monks are oblivious to how they might be consumed by the war only a few dozen miles away.

After his death, Rabban Joseph became a cult figure for monks and villagers alike. Although Rabban Joseph had earlier warned John that the devil often tempted monks to spiritually direct women as a means of corrupting them, both laymen and lay women attended his funeral, an indication that he was known at least by reputation in the villages. Gabriel the sacristan told John that he had seen Rabban Joseph's spirit conversing with that of Rabban Mousha, and that although Rabban Joseph had told Rabban Mousha that he wanted to leave, Rabban Mousha had entrusted him with the guardianship of the monastery. Another monk told of a dream where an eagle flew into the tomb of Mar Abraham, the old saint who had founded the monastery which had predated Beit Sayyare, and the monks decided to bury Rabban Joseph there. Soon afterwards, miracles began to take place in Rabban Joseph's tomb, including the healing of a long-time paralytic named Paulos.[372]

[372] *Busnaya* 238 (folio 0449).

Almost two years after Rabban Joseph had died, Rabban David of Beit Mourdani came to John with a dream of his own. In his dream, the great church of the monastery was falling, and no one would be able to build it again:

> Rabban David of Beit Mourdani. . . came to me and revealed to me what he had seen. He saw the following. Behold, a great church, the monastery's own church, was falling, and no one could be found among those who were gathered there who could raise up anything like it.[373]

The next day, Gabriel, the ancient sacristan of the monastery, died in his sleep. He had maintained the monastery's church for thirty-five years, since the days of Rabban Mousha, although he had earlier asked to be removed from duty to become a normal monk. John noted that he died a day after the feast day of the monastery's founder, Rabban Bar-Yalda, during a liturgical cycle especially dedicated to the consecration of the church.[374] The symbolism of the falling church in Rabban David's dream and the liturgical cycle corresponded to the death of Gabriel, but the timing of Gabriel's death, two years after the death of Rabban Joseph, also just precedes the final Hakkari raid. The dream thus holds an ominous second meaning: on the surface, the falling church indicated that the community would never have a sacristan like Gabriel again, but read in retrospect, it also hinted that the monastery itself was soon to fall as well.

Through these dreams, John highlights again how central the actions of the monks are in his conception of the world. The discord of the monks is the central story from which the war and political division happens to be an extension, and the deaths and the visions that accompany them carried more weight to John than the raid itself. The description of the deaths of the monks

[373] *Busnaya* 153 (folio 0308). A second monk, Hannoun, told John a few days after Rabban Gabriel's death that he had had the same dream.
[374] *Busnaya* 155 (folio 0310).

encapsulate the collapse of the monastery itself – in a few short years, Rabban Mar-Atqen, Gabriel the Sacristan, and Rabban Joseph had all passed away, severing the links to the previous generations under Rabban Bar-Yalda and Rabban Mousha. The attempted poisoning of Rabban Joseph had meant that the solidarity of the community had collapsed as well. As seen in the chapter on witchcraft, when monks were disciplined and self-controlled, they sheltered the surrounding area. The inverse was also true: walls and buildings could be rebuilt, but without the spiritual heart of the monastery, not only the monks but the entire region was inevitably thrown into chaos.

Rabban Joseph had also described the monastery as rising to unprecedented spiritual heights and on the brink of falling, with catastrophic consequences for all involved. After reporting his prophecy about the Kurdish raid, John notes:

> [Rabban Joseph] often prophesied about the change that would befall the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare. He said, as though speaking about a mystery, "You are Capernaum: you were raised up to heaven, but you will fall all the way down to hell." But during his life, not a single thing changed.[375]

Capernaum, a small town in Roman Galilee, was where Jesus lived with the family of his apostle Peter and where he spent most of his ministry. In the Gospels, Jesus warns the people of Capernaum that they would suffer on the Day of Judgment for refusing to acknowledge his miracles. Rabban Joseph appears to be referring to this passage from Matthew 11:22-24 in his own warning:

> And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."[376]

[375] *Busnaya* 54 (0114).
[376] Matthew 11:22-24.

Rabban Joseph does not appear to be cursing Beit Ṣayyare; instead, he tweaks the quotation by saying that Beit Ṣayyare *did* ascend to the heavens, but that that time had passed; soon it would be doomed to suffer as much as it had once prospered. In discussing the difference between Christ's warning to Capernaum and Rabban Joseph's warning about Beit Ṣayyare, it is also worth underscoring that John does not seem to imply that the destruction of Beit Ṣayyare was the result of Rabban Joseph's death; instead, he says that Rabban Joseph saw it coming and asked God to let him die before it happened.

In perhaps the most concise description of the purpose of his hagiography, John positions Beit Ṣayyare as the vessel of God's grace, which in his retelling had passed from age to age as God chose a specific people and place to bless:

> Providence, to which belongs the governance of all things and which orders all things with wisdom, chooses a particular people and place in every age and sets them apart. . . In the beginning, [God] consecrated Eden generally, and Paradise specifically, and from the virtuous people which were on earth, he chose Adam, Enoch, Noah, and others like them. . . At another time, the Israelite people generally, and the Promised Land which is the only [place] where God dwelled. . . Then from the [Israelite people], he chose the rod of Jesse, the blessed David, for the virtue of his house, and Zion, where he made blessed David the ruler. . .
>
> He set the Christian people apart generally, but specifically chose the Apostles. Instead of Zion, [he chose] the upper room of the Apostles, and instead of Jerusalem, Antioch, and many brothers were gathered together and were resplendent in all the divine virtues. And after a time, when it pleased him in his wisdom and in order to be worshiped by all, he chose the Desert of Scete which is in Egypt, and he set apart virtuous men for wisdom, and also that truly all the power of God might be displayed [forever], not briefly. And so on, not to prolong the narrative, until his holy light dawned in the East and shone through Mar Awgin and Mar Abraham [of Kashkar] and the brothers with them. And Mount Izla shone like Mount Zion and like the holy upper room, and light spread from there all over the East and the monasteries and hermitages were filled with virtuous men who dwelt in them. And Providence has continued to order the world like this until the present moment, for it chose the monastery of Beth ʿAbhe. And it was rich in the thousands of virtuous men and anchorites who dwelt there, of whom the world was not worthy.

> At one time, [God chose] these, at another time, others. In this latter time, God chose the monastery of Mar Abraham of Beit Ṣayyare and set it apart, elevating it above all the other monasteries of our time.[377]

In John's brief synopsis of the Bible, he understands God as pairing a particular chosen people with a particular place, but that the specific people and place changed from time to time. In earlier times, God's vessel had been Israel and Jerusalem, the Apostles and Antioch, the desert monks and Egypt, Mar Abraham and Mount Izla, Mar Yaʿqub and Beth ʿAbhe. Finally, God had chosen the monks that John had known and Beit Ṣayyare as the people and place where his grace would dwell. Implicit in John's words, but unstated, is that one day the grace of God was destined to move on to a new people and destination, even if, like the monks of Egypt and the Syriac monks of Mount Izla, Beit Ṣayyare would leave a lasting model to follow. The section quoted above is followed by the modified set of rules that the monks followed, which is unique among monastic chronicles, indicating how the monastery is meant to serve as an exemplar to continue God's work. As such, it imagines Beit Ṣayyare as one stage in a new progression, in which the presence of God will continue to become more evident on earth.

Although John foreshadows the destruction of the monastery, he ends his manuscript before the events actually took place, instead culminating his narrative with the death of Rabban Joseph. As the life of Rabban Joseph is John's stated goal in writing this hagiography, his death is a natural ending point, but it also represents a synecdoche of the changes that befell the highlands in the wake of the Buyid conquest: the loss of Rabban Joseph to John personally, the destruction of Beit Ṣayyare, but also, more broadly, the ending of a particular chapter in Syriac Christianity, the Indian summer in which East Syrian communities, and the highlands more broadly, constituted a separate zone.

[377] *Busnaya* 155-156 (folio 0310).

Conclusion

John's narrative extends the story of the Ḥamdanid-Buyid war into the highlands, but more importantly, illustrates the meaning of the events beyond their political implications. John shows what the war meant to his community, rather than simply narrating the events. He captures a community in crisis, where the tensions from external pressures and the loss of its leaders causing it to fold. He interprets the final raid by the Kurds, which destroyed not only the monastery but also much of the surrounding territory, as an extension of the fractures within the walls of Beit Ṣayyare, its own failures at its mission, and the passing of God's grace.

But John also inadvertently demonstrates how the highlands could not be exempt from the changes in the broader Islamic world forever. The apocalyptic tone of the last episodes in the manuscript hint at how a time period was ending, and how the loss of the caliphate, which had long safeguarded the existence of small marginal communities like Beit Ṣayyare by virtue of its size, had repercussions far from the centers of power. He shows how the tenth century saw the convergence of forces that ultimately changed the relationship between highlands and lowlands – the migration of Kurdish tribes, the fracture of the caliphate, and the growth of regional powers.

Two postscripts deserve mention. A twelfth-century hagiography relates that John journeyed down to a monastery north of Mosul, Mar Michael, along with another companion from Beit Ṣayyare, where he eventually faced a similar revolt to Rabban Joseph's. Several of the monastery's monks spread rumors in Mosul that he planned to build a new monastery in violation of Islamic law, stirring up a mob whom he had to placate with money. Afterwards, he

abandoned the monastery and returned to the highlands, disappearing from view.[378] However, a new monastery named after Rabban Joseph Busnaya was built on the slopes of the Ṣaphna, not far from where Beit Ṣayyare had been. Although its founding date is unknown, it is attested by 1215, and endured until the sixteenth century.[379] Hence, despite the changing atmosphere of the tenth century, some things remained constant long after Beit Ṣayyare had vanished: the complicated relationship between Christians and Islamic law, the tension between Mosul and its hinterland territories, and the enduring presence of Syriac monasticism in the highlands.

[378] Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, 664.
[379] Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, 455.

Conclusion

The historian Heleen Murre Van den Berg, meditating on the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy's 1997 novel *The God of Small Things*, commented on the importance of telling stories that show cultural and historical depth as well as its driving force:

> I read her novel as showing, from an unexpected corner, the importance of telling multiple stories, of telling the stories of the small groups, groups that in and of themselves are not changing the course of history, but whose small histories help to understand something of the way the world moves, of the way that societies almost imperceptibly move from one phase to another. Studying the small groups sensitizes us to what else than the power of states and armies drives forth history.[380]

This dissertation focuses on the experience of one of those "small groups" – the Christian community of Mosul's hinterland under early Islamic rule. It approaches the study of this community – as well as their non-Christian neighbors and rivals – through a set of monastic chronicles composed between the seventh and tenth centuries, and particularly through the story of Beit Ṣayyare, Rabban Joseph Busnaya, and his disciple, the monk John Bar Kaldoun. John paints a picture of a rural community that did not directly participate in politics, war, or statecraft, where events like building a mill, the danger of famine, and the interpersonal tension within the monastery walls loom much larger than the power struggles that were slowly building in Iraq. By telling stories of the monks at work, prayer, and play, he gives faces and personalities to the people who made up much of the hinterland around Mosul.

Indirectly, John's narrative and the other monastic chronicles also unpack broader and more consequential trends. The introduction to this work discussed two major interventions in the historiography of the early Islamic world: Jack Tannous' "Dark Matter" analogy that

[380] Heleen Murre-van den Berg, "The Unexpected Popularity of the Study of Middle Eastern Christianity," in *Christsein in der Islamischen Welt: Festschrifte für Martin Tamcke zum 60 Geburtstag*, eds. Sidney H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 11.

underscores the importance of Christian sources for developing a fuller picture of the social history of the medieval Middle East; and Chase Robinson's "Indian summer" metaphor that captured the quandary of how Christianity thrived after the conquest. I have used John Bar Kaldoun's narrative to build on and refine both these models. While providing a micro-historical, intimate look at a rural community on the margins of the caliphate, and I have also used John's narrative to address those more general questions. While providing a microhistorical, intimate look at a rural community on the margins of the caliphate, John's narrative, taken in combination with other Syriac chronicles and contemporary Islamic writings, also inadvertently sketches out much broader trends that indicate how non-Muslim communities thrived in the early ʿAbbāsid countryside and why Syriac Christianity's phase of rapid growth came to an end. In particular, the rocky terrain of the highlands created a distinct zone from the lowlands which was difficult to control, initially limiting the penetration of Islam's religious and political influence. That terrain in turn caused monasteries to secure their position among their neighbors as centers of spiritual power, rather than relying on state protection or social approval, and also opened up considerable opportunities for evangelism. Simultaneously, the rigors of the environment and dangers of living in the area, combined with the means to realistically support sizeable communities, bolstered the reputation of the monks and allowed them to boost their numbers.

By the tenth century, the situation had changed in several important ways from the period of rapid monastic expansion. First, the conversion of the Kurds to Islam and their migration westward posed new dangers to the monasteries; rather than contending with an invading army from the lowlands, communities faced constant threat of attacks from other highland inhabitants. Second, the centers of power shifted. The caliphate ceased to be a single, massive entity that was continually expanding its borders and instead fell prey to a series of internal conflicts. These

conflicts began in the lowlands, but soon spilled over into the highlands. As detailed in Chapter 5, the fracturing of the caliphate had already begun in the early tenth century but took decades to finally play out; by the time that Beit Ṣayyare experienced its effects, the rest of the Islamic world had already splintered. The tenth century was thus a period in which the entire Islamic world was undergoing a serious and long-lasting transformation, and the highlands were no longer merely a backwater.

John's narrative provides a snapshot of these moments of transition, when the period of Syriac Christianity's rapid missionary expansion and consolidation was still within living memory, even, as he writes tellingly, highland communities were increasingly sensing the "difficulty of the times."[381] Only in the light of Syriac monasticism's long period of success and tranquility can the monks' incomprehension and bewilderment at the Buyid invasion be understood. His experience of Beit Ṣayyare came at a time when it was still possible to found a new monastery from scratch and have it grow to several hundred members, as it had at the peak of Syriac Christianity's strength, but his narrative also reflects the impending doom that would befall the monastery and the highlands more generally.

But perhaps more importantly, John's narrative offers a window into aspects of life in the rural caliphate hitherto unseen. It allows historians to examine the myriad of other actors who shaped the emerging Islamic world at the local and regional level – monks and villagers, tribal chieftains and enterprising merchants, day laborers and craftsmen, all of whom negotiated a very different society than the one presented by urban Muslim writers. As such, it serves as a window into the Islamic world at its most ordinary and mundane. While his story is situated in an

[381] John made this comment, described in Chapter 2, in context of rebuilding the nearby monastery of Ineshak after a Kurdish raid. The new monastery had to be rebuilt on higher ground, indicating that the security of the monks could no longer be as assured as it had once been.

unusually inaccessible area of the caliphate, it illustrates the limitations of the pre-modern administrative state, and how much of life was determined by local rather than top-down factors. His vision, though specific to one community, casts a light on the many other densely Christian and Jewish communities that still dotted the Middle East until very recently.

Appendix A: Monastic Chronicles and Supplementary Sources

Besides *The Life of Rabban Busnaya*, this dissertation makes reference to a number of Syriac sources composed in northern Iraq in various religious communities and across several centuries. The main sources are listed below with short descriptions to orient the reader to their date, provenance, and genre.

- History of Rabban Bar-ʿIdta
    - Composed around 660 by Abraham of Zab for the community of Beth Ghurbak, this source describes the construction of a monastery during the last years of the Sasanian Empire. It contains several vivid anecdotes about life within the monastery, particularly the struggle to make and manufacture food, but also the monastery's interactions with local villages and its spiritual services, its growing connections with nearby regions, and encounters with Zoroastrians. Rabban Bar-ʿIdta lived not long after the reforms of Abraham of Kashkar (d. ca. 586) had initiated the first frenzy of founding monasteries, and a few episodes highlight the struggle with the ethics of monks acquiring wealth and power.

- History of Rabban Hormizd
    - Composed in the early eighth century by Rabban Simon Yozadaq, it is closest to a true hagiography and most fictitious of the sources. Rabban Hormizd is a monk from a Persian family in Khuzestan who travels to northern Iraq and takes up residence in a monastery on the edge of the highlands. The narrative focuses on Rabban Hormizd's repeated struggles against the wicked Syriac Orthodox monks from the nearby monastery of Bezkin (now lost), which he ultimately wins. Though many of its elements sound fantastic (enchanted cakes, miracle contests, and lurid descriptions of magical rituals), the text also offers vivid evidence for the gradual expansion of Islamic institutions in the region.

- The Book of Governors
    - Composed around 840 by Thomas of Marga, a secretary to the Catholicos and later a bishop and metropolitan, this chronicle describes the history of Thomas' former monastery of Beth ʻAbhe, one of the largest and most prominent East Syrian monasteries (now lost) from its founding at the end of the Sasanian period to the ninth century, with the bulk of its history focusing on the expansion of the hold of the Church of the East in the mountains in the late seventh and eighth century. It contains stories of missionaries to outlying regions, musical and ecclesiastical reform, enforced orthodoxy, contacts with the lowlands and Muslims. It also describes village life, particularly the lives of notables and landowners who frustrate the efforts of the church to instill its teachings.

- The Life of Rabban Joseph Busnaya

- Composed around 990 by John Bar Kaldoun, written in the first person and describing the rise and fall of the monastery of Beit Ṣayyare deep in the highlands near the Saphna river.

Other major Syriac Sources referenced in the dissertation

In addition to these four East Syrian chronicles, this dissertation draws upon a number of other Syriac sources – chronicles, hagiographies, canon law, and letters – composed between the seventh and thirteenth century

Other East Syrian sources:

- History of Mar Sabrisho‘/Beth Qoqa – written near Adiabene in the ninth century, this chronicle traces the history of a single monastic community from the late sixth century to the late eighth. It contains the most negative depictions of Muslims, though still mild, and laments the destruction of the early conquest and the oppression of the new taxation.

- The Book of Chastity – composed in the early ninth century by Ishoʿdnah of Basra, this source describes the foundation of new monasteries by the disciples of Abraham of Kashkar and their successors, albeit with only short descriptions of each founder and location.

- Synodicon Orientale – collected legal decisions of East Syrian councils from 410 to 775. It laid the basis for both civil and canon law among village communities and formed the basis of later medieval collations of canon law.

- The Chronicle of Seert – composed in Arabic in the early eleventh century, the surviving portions of this chronicle present a history of the Church of the East from the mid-third century to the mid-seventh century.

Major West Syrian sources:

- The Zuqnin Chronicle – an anonymous ninth century chronicle, ending in 775 and detailing the effects of the Islamic conquests on local communities.

- The Life of Mor Theodota of Amid – a ninth century hagiography about a West Syrian saint who traveled extensively between Byzantine and Islamic territory.

- Questions posed to Jacob by Addai, a Priest – collected legal decisions by Jacob, Bishop of Edessa, in response to a village priest. Composed ca. 708. Jacob’s answers laid the basis for much of later West Syrian canon law.

- Questions posed to Jacob by John, a Stylite of Litarb - collected legal decisions by Jacob, Bishop of Edessa in response to a village priest. Composed ca. 708.

- The Qartmin Trilogy – an eleventh century West Syrian monastic chronicle describing the history of Qartmin Abbey (now Mor Gabriel) and its surrounding villages in the region of Tur ʻAbdin from the fourth century to the early Islamic period.

- The Book of Life – A village chronicle composed in two phases in the eleventh and fifteenth century, focusing on the history of the town of Ba'sebrin (modern Bsorino). It can be found as printed edition and translation in the appendix to Andrew Palmer's *A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Qartmin Trilogy: Being the Lives of Samuel of Eštin, Simeon of Qartmīn, and Gabriel of Bēṭ Qūsṭān*.

- The Ecclesiastical Chronicle – a thirteenth-century church history for both West and East Syrians, composed by the West Syrian maphrian and polymath Bar Hebraeus.

- The History of Michael the Great – a twelfth-century world and ecclesiastical history that details Syriac, Armenian, Byzantine, and Islamic changes to the region.

- The Chronicle of 1234 – a thirteenth-century world and ecclesiastical history that draws from older West Syrian historical traditions as well as Arabic writings and others that are no longer extant.

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