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The Church of the East in Mesopotamia in the Early Fourteenth Century

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Jingjiao

The Church of the East in China and Central Asia

景教

Edited by
ROMAN MALEK
in connection with
PETER HOFRICHTER

COLLECTANEA SERICA

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THE CHURCH OF THE EAST IN MESOPOTAMIA IN THE MONGOL PERIOD

HELEEN (H.L.) MURRE-VAN DEN BERG

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1. Introduction

When in 1888 the learned Father Paul Bedjan, a Lazarist missionary born within the Chaldean Church of Persia,¹ published the Syriac text of the *Histoire de Mar Jab-Alaha, Patriarche et de Raban Sauma*,² a new chapter of the history of the Church of the East was about to be written. Before the discovery and publication of this text,³ our knowledge of the Mongol period of the Church of the East in Mesopotamia, roughly from 1250 to 1350, was rather limited, and based mainly on Giwargis Bar 'Ebroyo's historical work. His work was concerned more with his own Syriac-Orthodox Church and with general history, and his comments on the Church of the East, insightful

¹ The Chaldean Church of nineteenth-century Persia has its origin in Yuhannan Sulqa's ordination by the Pope in 1553 as head of the Uniat Chaldean Church, which thereby separated itself from the Church of the East (the "Nestorian" Church). For an overview of this period, including further bibliographical references, see H.L. Murre-van den Berg 1999.

² This paper, as well as most translations and studies of the text, are based on P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²].

³ Manuscript copies of the Syriac text first turned up in what is now Eastern Turkey in the 1880s. All known manuscripts derive from a lost manuscript, and the earliest copy is dated 1884. Protestant American and Lazarist French and Persian missionaries, among which Desirée Solomon and Paul Bedjan, played a key role in the further publication of the work. Cf. further: P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. ix and xiii-xiv, and P.G. Borbone 2000, pp. 11-15.

though they were, had not attracted much scholarly attention.⁴ This changed when Paul Bedjan published what in the actual text is described as "The history of the father of fathers and the lord and head of shepherds, Mar Yawalaha, Catholicus and Patriarch of the East, and of Rabban Sauma, Visitor-General, Turks of the East."⁵ Over the last hundred years, this text has been the subject of numerous scholarly publications, all of which contributed to our knowledge of the Church of the East in this particular period.⁶ However, when about a year ago I myself turned to this text, I discovered that despite all the work done, much more was to be uncovered by a fresh reading of the testimony of the anonymous early fourteenth-century writer. In this paper, I will focus on what the author, through the life story of the two protagonists, tells us about the Church of the East around the year 1300. While reading the text in this way, I also began to form ideas about a possible identification of the author, a subject I will return to at the end of the paper.

Before discussing what I think are the five major themes of the *History*, a short introduction to the main line of the story is in order. The *History*, spanning a little over two hundred pages in Bedjan's Syriac edition, tells the story of two monks from what is now China: Rabban Sauma from Khan Baligh and Rabban Marcos from Kawshang. Rabban Marcos, at least ten years the junior of his fellow monk and tutor, around 1278 persuades Rabban Sauma to embark on a pilgrimage to the west, if possible to Jerusalem, to see the holy places and to be blessed by the relics of the martyrs and re-

⁴ Barhebraeus (Gregory al-Faraj, Giwargis Bar 'Ebroyo) was the Maphrian of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Maragha between 1266 and 1286. He was a prolific writer on a wide range of subjects (for an introduction and bibliographical overview, cf. Takahashi Hidemi 2001), and his historical works are of particular importance for our subject, see J.S. Assemani 1728, vol. III, pp. 451-454, 473-476, and E.A.W. Budge 1932a, p. 492 (note that part of the information on Rabban Sauma and Mar Yawalaha was not written by Bar 'Ebroyo himself, but by those who completed his historical work after his death in 1286).

⁵ Cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 1. The translations are my own, the transcription of names is intended to convey the Syriac pronunciation as closely as possible in English script. Since all translations use the page numbers of Bedjan's second edition as a reference, I will refer to the page numbers in Bedjan's edition only.

⁶ The most recent and up-to-date study is that of P.G. Borbone 2000, which covers the whole range of philological and historical issues involved with the study of this text and is indispensable for all further studies of the text. Earlier important editions and studies are those of J.B. Chabot 1893, 1894, 1896, J.A. Montgomery 1927, E.A.W. Budge 1928, T. Jansma 1959, and J.M. Fiey 1975a. For an extensive bibliography, see P.G. Borbone 2000.

ceive complete forgiveness of sins.⁷ After a long and arduous journey, they arrive in Mesopotamia where they are blessed by their visits to the holy shrines, but are unsuccessful in travelling on to Jerusalem.⁸

While waiting for another opportunity, their patriarch, Mar Denha, ordained Rabban Marcos as the new metropolitan of Kati and Ong⁹ under the name of Mar Yawalaha, and Rabban Sauma as his helper, styled "Visitor-General." Less than a year later, Mar Denha died and Mar Yawalaha was chosen as his successor, because, as the *History* tells us, "No one was as familiar with the way of life, the customs and the language of the Mongolians as he was."¹⁰ The choice proved to be fortuitous, and for long periods of his reign Mar Yawalaha was able to secure considerable safety and well-being for his community. After describing the initial years of Mar Yawalaha's reign, the story turns to the famous embassy of Rabban Sauma to the west on behalf of both Mar Yawalaha and the Mongol (Il-Khan) king Arghun, in 1287/1288.¹¹ The author of the *History* based this part of his book on a Persian report of Rabban Sauma, now lost,¹² and the text is full of interesting details about Rabban Sauma's visit to Constantinople, Rome, Genoa, Paris, and Gascony.¹³ After returning from Europe, Rabban Sauma was allowed some sort of retirement. He died in 1294, leaving Mar Yawalaha bereaved and sorrow-stricken.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the focus of the book has shifted to Mar Yawalaha's reign and his dealing with successive Mongol rulers, who at first were rather positive towards the Christians, but from 1295 onwards increasingly yielded to pressure from Muslim officials to end

⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 4-12.

⁸ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 12-26.

⁹ That is, for Cathay and the Önggüt people, cf. P.G. Borbone 2000, p. 66.

¹⁰ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 26-46, quotation p. 34.

¹¹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 47-86.

¹² P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 85-86: "Because we did not intend to relate everything that Rabban Sauma did and saw, we left out a great deal from what he himself wrote in Persian. The things we have told here, were shortened and included in view of our object."

¹³ This part of the *History* has attracted much scholarly attention, for a variety of reasons, among which an interest in east-west travelling parallel to famous cases of west-east travelling of the time (e.g., Marco Polo and William of Rubruck), interest in the diplomatic relationships between Europe and the Mongol rulers, inter-church relationships (see below), and the attraction of seeing Europe of the Middle-Ages through a foreigner's eye. See, e.g., T. Jansma 1959, M. Rossabi 1992, D.E.H. de Boer 1998, and S.P. Brock 1969.

¹⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 94-96.

the special position of the Christian community.¹⁵ The final quarter of the book is almost entirely devoted to the tragic story of the siege and fall of the fortress of Arbil, describing the events in the winter and spring of 1310.¹⁶ After the fall of Arbil and the massacre of its Christian inhabitants, Mar Yawalaha's power was broken and the story ends in 1312, when the number of bishops and metropolitans ordained by him is said to have been seventy-five. In all likelihood, the final lines of the *History* that tell us about Mar Yawalaha's death in 1317 were added after the story was finished.¹⁷

The fascinating story of the years of Mar Yawalaha's reign during the Il-Khans of Persia is confirmed by other sources on all main points,¹⁸ and there is no doubt that its author intended to present a faithful account of what happened in his day. That there is some reason to believe that his account is coloured by his personal view on the developments of the period under discussion, will become clear in the last part of this contribution.

2. The Church of the East According to the Author of the *History*

What were according to the anonymous author of the *History* the most important characteristics of the Church of the East around the year 1300? He pays particular attention to five themes: (1) religious life within the Church of the East; (2) the concept of Providence; (3) the Christian community and the 'Powers that be'; (4) the relationship with the Muslims; (5) the Church of the East as an international community.

Religious Life

The most pervasive element in the author's description of religious life of the Church of the East is the overwhelming importance attached to the sacred. Holy places and persons play a major role in the book and one might

¹⁵ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 86-154.

¹⁶ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 154-201.

¹⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 202-204. On the time of writing of the *History*, cf. J.M. Fiey 1988b, and P.G. Borbone 2000, pp. 16-18. Both agree that the note on Mar Yawalaha's death was added after the text was finished, which would suggest that most of the writing took place in 1312 (the last year mentioned in the text) or shortly thereafter. Borbone points to the possibility that the writing of the text perhaps started earlier, before the fall of Arbil.

¹⁸ Mainly by Bar 'Ebroyo (see n. 4), but also by a variety of other sources, Mongol, Arabic, and Western, cf. references in P.G. Borbone 2000. Note in particular the other Syriac sources on Mar Yawalaha: the honorary poem by bishop 'Awdisho' (J.M. Vosté 1929), and the biography by 'Amr b. Matta (cf. P. Kawerau 1977), pp. 108-127, 208-227).

even characterise the book as first and foremost a hagiography of both protagonists.¹⁹ Indeed, not only their exemplary early lives, conversions to ascetism and pilgrimage to the west display all signs of the hagiographic intent,²⁰ but the author considerably adds to the protagonists' holiness by describing their regular visiting of holy places²¹ and their large contributions (in money and personal supervision) to the building of churches and monasteries.²² The protagonists also seem to add to their holiness by meeting holy persons: the patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Denha, after their long journey from China to Mesopotamia, and the Pope (Mar Papa) in Rome.²³ As is fitting for a patriarch, Mar Yawalaha is considered even holier than Rabban Sauma: according to the author, his arrival in Mesopotamia and his election to the patriarchate were due to divine providence (see below), which was underlined, among other things, by portentous dreams experienced by Mar Yawalaha himself and by local bishops.²⁴

However, the description of the lifestyle of the protagonists not only serves the "sanctification" of the protagonists, but also serves distinct educational purposes: to present exemplary models of Christian behaviour and enlarging the readers' knowledge of the Christian church and its history. The author not only emphasises the importance of holy places and the benefit that comes from visiting them and contributing to them, but he also deliberately mentions many names of holy persons and their shrines.²⁵

¹⁹ This has been recognised by earlier commentators, cf. P.G. Borbone 2000, p. 19.

²⁰ See P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 3-12: with Sauma, we find an unexpected birth, an early conversion to ascetism and his overcoming of the opposition by his parents, with Marcos, we have a dream announcing his birth, divine election and opposition to and testing of his vocation during his early monastic years.

²¹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 22-24, on their pilgrimage in Mesopotamia (including Tur Abdin), and pp. 49-84, on Rabban Sauma's trip to Europe, where he visited an astonishing number of holy places in Constantinople, Rome, and Paris.

²² Both Rabban Sauma and Mar Yawalaha spent considerable money on building and enlarging monasteries and churches, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 92 on Rabban Sauma's church (total costs 17.500 dinar), and pp. 97, 135-140 on Mar Yawalaha's building of the monastery of Mar Yuhannan in Maragha (total costs: 81.000 dinar, including a village to provide annual income).

²³ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 21-22, 76, and 79. Note that in both cases the protagonists are moved to tears, in Rabban Sauma's case after receiving communion from the hands of the Pope.

²⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 30-32, 43-45. Another interesting example of the role of dreams is that of King Ghazan (Kazan, 1294-1303), who when he stayed overnight in the Maragha monastery had a dream that promised him healing, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

²⁵ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 22-23 (Mesopotamia), pp. 50-52 (Constantinople), pp.

All this suggests that pilgrimages and visits to holy places should be considered one of the most important ingredients of the piety of the time. The blessing received from being near to the relics of saints and martyrs benefits the visitor in the here and now as well as in the afterlife,²⁶ not in the least by the possibility of acquiring "complete forgiveness of sins."²⁷ In addition, the author highly values an ascetic lifestyle, including celibacy, a vegetarian diet,²⁸ study and prayer.²⁹ More in general, if the author is representative of the clergy of the Church of the East of the time, liturgy is of great importance,³⁰ as are canonical issues,³¹ whereas no doubt can exist about the importance of the bible, considering the very frequent use of bible verses, both in underlining an argument and in expressing grief and loss.³²

62-66 (Rome), pp. 70-71 (Paris). On the benefit of Jerusalem, see *ibid.*, p. 12, where Marcos proposes to head west, "to be blessed by the shrines of the holy martyrs and the apostolic fathers. And if the almighty Christ spares our lives and supports us by his grace, we shall go to Jerusalem, in order to obtain complete forgiveness of sins and absolution for our offences."

²⁶ Cf. e.g., P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 23-24: "And they were blessed by all the shrines and monasteries and religious houses and monks and bishops of that province. [...] And the spirit that had made them undertake this journey came to rest, although they had not reached their final destination [i.e., Jerusalem]." "Being blessed by" is the usual formulation of the benefit of a certain shrine.

²⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 12.

²⁸ A strict vegetarian diet was part of the ascetic lifestyle of the monks and higher clergy (who were recruited from the ranks of the monks) of the Church of the East, turning to "vegan" (excluding eggs and dairy products) in periods of fasting or at other special occasions. Sauma is said to have chosen such a vegan diet, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 6: "Animal products [*mē'klē zahhomē*] became as nothing to him and intoxicating drinks he rejected completely."

²⁹ Note that the element of prayer is explicitly referred to in connection to lay people, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 4-5, on Sauma's parents who pray fervently for a son and obtain their wish.

³⁰ One may think here of the elaborate description of the liturgical customs in Rome (P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 77-82), and perhaps also of the frequent dating in the text by the liturgical names of the Sundays of the year (*ibid.*, pp. 11, 38, 95, 99, 107, etc.).

³¹ He notes the canonical (*nāmosā'it*, "lawful") marriage of Rabban Sauma's parents, the election procedure and consecration of Mar Yawalaha, and Mar Yawalaha's punishment of two of the clergy that had opposed him before the Khan, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²] pp. 4, 33-38, 46.

³² Almost every page contains references or allusions to the Bible; cf. e.g., the prologue, P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 1-3, the birth and youth of Sauma, pp. 3-9, etc. Cf. also the long passage inserted after the description of the fall of Arbil, where this city is bewailed by means of ingenious use of the book of Lamentations, *ibid.*, pp. 195-199, 200.

Providence

Although the *History* certainly is not a systematic-theological treaty, its author is interested in dogmatic issues. This is especially apparent in his rendering of Rabban Sauma's encounter with the cardinals in Rome, where an interesting discussion on western and eastern positions on the *filioque* (the procession of the Holy Spirit) is found.³³ During that same discussion Rabban Sauma produced a traditional "Nestorian" confession, in which two *qnume* (besides two natures and one person) are distinguished in Jesus Christ, a statement which surprisingly goes unnoticed by the cardinals.³⁴ However, these issues are not taken up again by the author in other parts of the book and stand isolated in the part that is based on Rabban Sauma's travelogue.

A theological issue that apparently occupied the mind of the author himself is the subject of divine providence. Two lines of thought can be distinguished in this text. The first is the conviction that God is the supreme ruler over the kingdoms of this world, and rules especially with an eye to the well-being of his church.³⁵ The author, therefore, concludes that it was no coincidence that Rabban Marcos and Rabban Sauma happened to be in Mesopotamia at that particular time: it was God who guided these two monks on their way to the west and it was God who elected Rabban Marcos to serve the Church of the East.³⁶ The name Mar Yawalaha, given by Mar Denha by choosing randomly from a number of names on the altar, underlines this point, since the name resulting from this procedure means "God given."³⁷ Especially in the first half of the book the author is able to point to quite a number of cases of divine intervention that all benefited the Church of the East.³⁸

³³ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 58-62. On this issue, see P.G. Borbone 2000, pp. 80-82 and 192-196.

³⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 59. Rather than assume that the cardinals did not quite know what their position of the natures of Christ was supposed to be, it seems very well possible that Rabban Sauma's translator consciously or unconsciously might have adapted the creed to western ears.

³⁵ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 44.

³⁶ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 8-9: "In the foreknowledge of God everything is known [...]. [9] Since the person about whom we are going to speak was chosen because of his superior lifestyle, it is necessary for us to describe the manner of his election and show how this confirmed the perfect will." Cf. also *ibid.*, pp. 34-36.

³⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 28: "And the name of Yawalaha appeared. He [Mar Denha] said: 'This is of the Lord, he will certainly be blessed'."

³⁸ Cf. e.g., P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 1, 19, 43-44, 88, 119, 122, 125, 129-131 and 149.

However, when in the second part of the book the author tells the story of the siege of Arbil, he clearly needs to refine his theory of divine providence further. The possible explanation of God testing his beloved does not suffice, because the author can see no good resulting from the massacre of Arbil's inhabitants.³⁹ He then turns to the notion of punishment. He suggests that the Christians of Arbil had transgressed divine laws so irrevocably that their punishment in the form of the destruction of their city was well deserved.⁴⁰ Of course, according to the author, this explanation does not exclude others of a more inner-worldly nature: the long-standing hatred of Arab Muslims towards the Christians of this city, and the non-intervention policy of the Mongol king. There seems to be a link, though, between the inhabitants' mistakes in dealing with the situation, and the way in which God punishes by not interfering and by letting the inhabitants dig their own graves.⁴¹

The Powers that Be

Although the author does not spend many words reflecting on the relationship between the Church of the East and the Mongol Il-Khans of Persia, it becomes clear that this subject is one of his main interests. Throughout the book numerous references inform the reader about the ways in which the various rulers influenced the situation of the Christian community. Three aspects can be distinguished.

First, the author carefully describes the official relationship that existed between the Mongol kings and the Church of the East, *via* its head, the patriarch. A new patriarch had to be formally accepted by the Mongol ruler, a practice the Mongols had inherited from the Abbasid rulers.⁴² With every

³⁹ Earlier in the text, the author portrays God as testing his beloved in connection to the tribulations that befell the patriarch: "God chastises in mercy and gives suffering to win us back" (P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 99-116, here 113).

⁴⁰ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 155-156: "It must be said, however, that the inhabitants of the fortress and others with them, had hardened their hearts. They relinquished the way of the Christians and treated the divine laws with utter contempt. They made fun of recluses and priests, robbed each other, and broke through the fences of our Lord, so that no opportunity was left for warnings or instruction."

⁴¹ Cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 156-157 – if this is what this somewhat obscure passage tries to say. On similar, but more elaborate ways of reconciling divine and human agency in such matters, see Weltecke's description of Michael the Syrian's historiographic method, D. Weltecke 2003, in particular pp. 244-245.

⁴² This also included tax regulations (*jizya* – capital tax for non-Muslims within a Muslim state). Under the Mongols these earlier regulations were variously dealt with: tax collection was sometimes allowed to the patriarch (who then could use the revenue for purposes within the Christian community), but after Muslims became more influ-

new ruler, Mar Yawalaha, during whose reign seven different Il-Khans ruled Persia, had to obtain official recognition of his position and his right to levy taxes from his people. This official recognition was with every new ruler readily granted and was sealed with gifts and official documents.⁴³ The Church itself accepted this as a normal way of doing things and saw prayer for the royal family as an apostolic injunction.⁴⁴

Secondly, despite the rather sober description of this relationship with "the Powers that be," in a few instances the author proves to be well aware of the high expectations the Church of the East had of the Mongol rulers in the early period of their rule. His description of the reign of King Argon (1284-1291), who was the last Mongol ruler to express sincere sympathy towards Mar Yawalaha and the Christian community and who envisaged a joint attack on Jerusalem with the Pope and other Western rulers,⁴⁵ reflects all the hopes of the Christians for a time when not only the Christians would be fully part of society, but in which also the rulers themselves would be Christians.⁴⁶ A similar hope perhaps forms the background of Rabban

ential at court, it was also again directly (and disproportionately) levied by the local officers. Cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 111, 130, 150, 182.

⁴³ This is most elaborately described for Mar Yawalaha's first official investiture, P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 36-37: "And he [King Abga, 1264-1282] took Mar Yawalaha's hand and said to him: 'Be strong and a good leader, and may God be with you and support you.' And he covered his head with the *mapra* [*pallium*] that was on his shoulders and gave him one of his own *sandali*, i.e., a small throne. And he also gave him a parasol, which is called *sukor* in Mongolian and which is held above the heads of kings, queens and their children to protect them against sun and rain, but mostly are spread above them to honour them. He also gave him a gold *paiza*, the sign of these kings, alongside the usual permits, so that he might rule over everyone, and the great seal of the former Catholicus, and he paid him the many expenses of the consecration." See for further descriptions of official meetings, *ibid.*, p. 45 (Argon), p. 91 (Gaigatu), pp. 105, 114-115, 141 (Ghazan), pp. 149, 153, 202 (Ulgaitu).

⁴⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 45: "And in these days, he (Mar Yawalaha) and some bishops went to king Argon to bless him and to render to him that which Christians ought to give to their kings, according to the apostolic commands, that everyone should obey the supreme governments, there is no government that is not from God. [Rom 13:1]. After he saw king Argon and had blessed him, he prayed for the continuation of his kingdom."

⁴⁵ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 47-8, 58, 68-69, 72-73, 75.

⁴⁶ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 86-87: "And because of the honour of the Catholicus, and to support the hearts of the Christians - all who confessed Christ - and to increase their love to Him among them, he set up a church very close to the entrance to his throne, so that the ropes of the church tent intermingled with those of his house. He threw a large party lasting three days, and king Argon himself brought food to the Catholicus and handed the cup to him and to all those in his service. And the king took care that meanwhile the clerics, holy fathers, priests, deacons, and

Sauma's admiring remarks on the Christian kingdoms of the west, first in Byzantium,⁴⁷ then in Rome.⁴⁸

Thirdly, however, the author does not lose himself in dreams of a bright future for Mesopotamian Christianity. In this book he is primarily interested in the intricacies of the actual relationship with the rulers, with all the diplomatic pitfalls and inter-communal rivalry, especially between Christians and Muslims, that come with it. He reminds his readers of the fact that Mar Yawalaha was chosen primarily because the clerical and lay leaders of the Church expected him to be best suited to deal with the Mongol rulers, considering his "Turkish" provenance.⁴⁹ And they were not disappointed in this respect: "Day by day their [the Christians'] glory grew and the splendour of their church increased. All this because of the great diligence and the wise rule of Mar Catholicus and his insight in the reasoning of the royal family."⁵⁰

In the second part of the book, however, it becomes apparent that the political skills of the patriarch were no longer sufficient to maintain the good relationships and the established position of the Church of the East. Large bribes were needed to counteract the influence of Muslim officials who gained influence at the court, accompanied by continuous diplomatic efforts by the patriarch himself.⁵¹ The siege and fall of Arbil forms the apotheosis of this tendency, in which the patriarch, even with the help of the metropolitan of Arbil and some high Mongol officials, was not able to prevent the eventual massacre of all the Christians in the fortress of Arbil. The author describes the attempts at saving the situation in great detail, and in the end primarily blames the Arab Muslims and the Arbil inhabitants for this out-

monks recited the liturgy day and night, and that the *naqosha* [simantron] of this church was never silent. And thus the glory of the eastern and western Christians grew, until they exclaimed with one voice: "Blessed be the Lord who has made us rich. The Lord has visited his people and has given us redemption!"

⁴⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 50: "Now I have seen a Christian king, my exhaustion has disappeared and my great effort has been forgotten. I very much longed to see your kingdom – may the Lord keep it."

⁴⁸ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 63-64, referring to an Emperor's consecration: "They say that after the prayers, the Pope takes up the crown with his feet and covers him with it, that is, he places it on his head, so that the priesthood reigns over kingship."

⁴⁹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 34 (cf. above, n. 10). It is usually assumed that Mar Yawalaha was of Önggüt provenance, whereas the text itself calls him a "Turk" (*Ibid.*, p. 1). Bar 'Ebroyo calls him a *Yugur* (probably: Uighur), cf. E.A.W. Budge 1932a, p. 492.

⁵⁰ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 91.

⁵¹ Cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 102-103, 108, 113, 129, 179.

come. The conclusion, however, is obvious: the Mongol rulers were no longer interested enough in the Christians to prevent such a disaster from happening, which leaves Mar Yawalaha empty-handed and bitter: "I am weary of the service the Mongols."⁵²

The Muslims

There can be little doubt that the author first and foremost attributed the Mongols' change towards the Christian community to Muslim influence at various levels. In fact, every disaster, great or small, that befell the Christians in this period in one way or another is ascribed by the author to Muslim influence. The first of these calamities is Mar Yawalaha's imprisonment following a false accusation of disloyalty to the first Mongol Il-Khan who converted to Islam, Ahmad Tegüder (1282–1284). Although the accusation was put forward by two Christian clerics, it was in fact supported by two important Arabs.⁵³

This incident was followed by years of peace for the Christians under Argon (1284–1291), Gaikhatu (1291–1295), and Baidu (1295), but from 1295 (Ghazan, 1295–1304) the situation started to change: "The Arab people rose up to take revenge on the Church and its children because of the destruction wrought by the father of these kings."⁵⁴ A Muslim emir called Nauruz was able to organise the capture and torture of the patriarch, force conversions to Islam and in general to pose severe restrictions on the Christian and Jewish communities.⁵⁵ Spring 1296, Ghazan restored Mar Yawala-

⁵² P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 202. Note also the author himself, who comments on a change of power after King Argon died in 1291, *ibid.*, pp. 88–89: "And at his departure the whole Church under the heavens mourned, because the things that were done and undone before his time, were put straight in his time. Who would not be sad during a change of power? See, how difficult the issue is for every one, how bitter the matter? When one knows the high officials of the king and the members of the royal household and not to speak of the present king?" I assume that the author is referring to the time of writing, during Uljaitu (1304–1316) or perhaps Abu Said (1316–1335), rather than the time following the death of king Argon; so also P.G. Borbone 2000, p. 95.

⁵³ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 39–46. The author uses the term "Arab" (*tayyāyā*), to denote the Arab Muslims, but in addition he uses a number of non-ethnic terms: (*ethaggar*, "to become a Muslim," *ibid.*, pp. 42, 107), *hāgarāyē* ("Hagarenes," *ibid.*, pp. 39, 149), *bnay hāgar* ("sons of Hagar," *ibid.*, pp. 127, 155), *ishma'layē* ("ishmaelites," *ibid.*, p. 124), and *mašmānē* ("Muslims," *ibid.*, p. 171).

⁵⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 99. The reference here is to the fall of Baghdad in 1258 by Hülegü (Hulavo in this text), who spared the churches and the Christians but brought destruction and massacre to the Muslim inhabitants.

⁵⁵ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 100–110.

ha to his former position, but the author notes in conclusion: "but as the King slightly increased his honour [of Mar Yawalaha], hatred increased in the hart of the enemies."⁵⁶ The first years of king Ghazan's reign was to prove a period in which serious anti-Christian incidents occurred, including another looting of Maragha accompanied by forced conversions,⁵⁷ and the first attempt by Muslims to expel the Christian forces from the fortress of Arbil, both in 1297.⁵⁸ Again, Nauruz is said to be the evil genius, but after his capture and decapitation other emirs take over the task of plotting against the Christians of Arbil.⁵⁹ It is during this first siege of Arbil that the proposal is made to Mar Yawalaha to have all the Christians leave Arbil and resettle elsewhere, "because the enmity between these two religions, of the Syrians and the Arabs, has increased. If we leave the matter like this, great harm will be done to this kingdom."⁶⁰ The patriarch refuses to cooperate and for the time being the matter is solved by treaty. This forms the introduction to an apparently peaceful period between 1299 and 1309 under Ghazan and Uljaitu (1304–1316), on which the author has little to say.

Finally the siege and fall of Arbil in 1309–1310 is also attributed primarily to Muslim plotting. Divine punishment of the Christian inhabitants, the Mongol rulers' disinterest, perhaps even the Catholicus' failing diplomatic insights may all have contributed to the disaster leading to the gruesome massacre of the city's inhabitants, but it is the Arab Muslims, lead by a man called Nasr, "evil by nature and of bitter intent," who bear the blame: "He became the cause of the realisation of the evil intent of the Arabs, which he had begun already in the year 1608 of the Greeks [A.D. 1297]. And all the sons of Hagar, great and small, important and humble, emirs and soldiers, scribes and lawyers, governors and senators, connived to take the fortress of Arbil from the Christians and to destroy its inhabitants."⁶¹ They succeeded in their plan by using a variety of less than honourable means, including

⁵⁶ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 115.

⁵⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 116–120.

⁵⁸ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 121–131. A Christian army force, consisting of people called *Kayajiye*, was stationed in the fortress of Arbil and apparently caused great resentment among the Muslims of the city. From 1297 onwards, the latter employed a variety of means (including setting up the Kurds against them, bribing Mongol officials and setting up the Christians among themselves) to obtain their expulsion.

⁵⁹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 124–125.

⁶⁰ So the messengers of Ghazan introduced the king's proposal to Mar Yawalaha, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 126.

⁶¹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 155.

bribery of Mongol officials and repeated breaches of promises of free exit.⁶² These made it impossible for Mar Yawalaha and the metropolitan of Arbil to successfully finish their negotiations with high Mongol officials who were still inclined to support the Christian community. One such Mongol official, who was willing to negotiate a treaty with the Christians, was denied any support by the local Muslim governor, because: "You want to save Christians, who hate our religion and are enemies of our people."⁶³

The Church in East and West

The theme of Arab enmity towards the Christians, which dominates the second half of the book, almost entirely supplants the theme that is of particular importance in the first half of the book: the Church of the East as an important part of the World Church. The author was well aware of the expansion of his church and certainly was proud of it. He includes a number of references to this fact, starting off in the prologue with a reference to Christ's promise to be with the apostles until the end of times, and suggesting that the Christianization of "Indians, Chinese, and other Eastern peoples" constituted the fulfilment of this promise.⁶⁴ This forms the introduction to the early histories of Sauma and Marcos, whose impeccable family backgrounds in Khan Baligh and Kawshang bring home to the reader that far-away places like this produced outstanding Christian leaders.⁶⁵ The Far-Eastern background of these two men remains an important aspect of the story, which is referred to a couple of times, e.g., when Mar Denha intends to send them back to the East,⁶⁶ and when Mar Yawalaha is made patriarch.⁶⁷ When Rabban Sauma has his first extended meeting with the cardinals in Rome, he too

⁶² P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 163, 172-173, 187-188. For an instance of bribery, see p. 184.

⁶³ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 193.

⁶⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 2. The promise in Matthew 28:20 is preceded by what became known in Anglo-Protestant Christianity as the 'Great Command' in which Christ orders his disciples to make all the peoples of the world into his disciples. The author seems to presuppose knowledge of this passage.

⁶⁵ On Sauma's family, see P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 3-4: "There was free man, a believer, fearing God, rich in worldly and natural goods, famous for his family and tribe. His name was Shibān the Visitor. He lived in the city of Khan Baligh, the [main] city of a kingdom in the land of the East. He was legally married to a woman named Qyāmta [Resurrection]." On Marcos, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 9-10: "There was in the city of Kawshang of the land of the East, a believing and righteous man, pure and blameless, [...], whose name was Baniel, archdeacon."

⁶⁶ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 27-29.

⁶⁷ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 33-34, 36.

stressed the fact of the importance of Christianity among the Mongols, due to the missionary activities of the Church of the East.⁶⁸

The story of Rabban Sauma's visit to Rome and, especially, his discussions with the cardinals, however, is more concerned with the second aspect of the international relationships of the Church of the East: what is or should be the relationship between this church and the Church of Rome? The *History* presents Rabban Sauma's reception by the cardinals as entirely friendly and based on mutual respect and recognition. Although there is difference in opinion about the procession of the Holy Spirit,⁶⁹ this does not prevent the cardinals and later the Pope to accept Rabban Sauma and his church as part of the Catholic Church – or at least so it appears from the text as we have it. Rabban Sauma is allowed to celebrate a Syriac mass, which meets with general approval,⁷⁰ he receives communion from the hands of the Pope himself,⁷¹ and his return is marked by the explicit recognition of Mar Yawalaha's jurisdiction over "all the Easterners."⁷² In turn, Rabban Sauma recognised the primacy of the Pope over the worldwide Church,⁷³ although he later seems to restrict the actual jurisdiction of the Pope to the Western Church.⁷⁴ Although there is some reason to doubt the *History*'s presentation of the western side of the story,⁷⁵ its views on papal primacy and the separate jurisdictions of the Church of Rome and the

⁶⁸ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 57-58.

⁶⁹ See above, n. 32.

⁷⁰ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 77-78: "On that day many people gathered to see how the ambassador of the Mongols celebrated the Eucharist. And when they had seen it, they rejoiced greatly and said: the language is different, but the rite is the same."

⁷¹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 79.

⁷² P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 83-84: "And he sent to Mar Yawalaha the Catholicus a crown of pure gold set with precious stones, purple liturgical vestments with gold-thread, a pair of slippers with embroidery of little pearls, sandals, a ring with his seal and a *ptika* [patented letter] which gave him patriarchal jurisdiction over all the Easterners."

⁷³ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 76-77: "And he said to Mar Papa: 'May your throne stand for ever, O our Father, and be blessed above all kings and nations, and may peace reign in your days in the whole church to the ends of the earth'."

⁷⁴ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 84, in a caption: "On the return of Rabban Sauma from Rome and from Mar Papa, Catholicus Patriarch of the Romans and all the westerners."

⁷⁵ It is certainly remarkable that Rome should so easily have accepted the "Nestorians" within its fold. Perhaps the cardinals did not obtain an accurate enough translation of Rabban Sauma's confession of faith, and they possibly did not realise at all that Rabban Sauma's Church was the same as the "Nestorian Church" known to them as heretical.

Church of the East as expressed by Rabban Sauma are in line with what we know of the Church of the East in this period.⁷⁶ This is confirmed by Mar Yawalaha's later contacts with Rome.⁷⁷ These contacts, which took place in 1303 and 1304, make one wonder, though, why the author of the *History* has not included any reference to it. He could hardly have disapproved, since the main gist of the confession that has survived is rather similar to the one found in the *History*.

Perhaps this gap must be attributed mainly to the fact that the author in the second half of the book narrows his focus almost entirely to northern Mesopotamia, to the events in Maragha and Arbil. International matters fade into the background, and the threat of the extinction of the Christian community in its centre seems to make all other issues lose importance. Neither east nor west were able to help the inhabitants of Arbil, and the last time these regions are mentioned explicitly is in 1297, during the first siege of Arbil, when Mar Yawalaha exclaims in despair: "Why do I live? Let my Lord the King order me to return to the east, where I come from, or that I go the countries of the Franks and spend the rest of my days there!"⁷⁸

3. The Anonymous Author of the *History*

It is exactly the imbalance in the *History* between the international outlook of the first part and the concentration on Maragha and Arbil in the second part, that set me to wonder about the author. The text suggests that this person was probably personally acquainted with both protagonists, but that he was most familiar with Mar Yawalaha in his later years. In addition, there is little doubt that he must have been a cleric of some sort, considering his extensive theological and biblical knowledge and his interest in liturgy and ascetism. He might have formed part of the patriarchal household in Marag-

⁷⁶ So 'Awdisho', who was bishop of Nisibus (Ebediesu Sobensis) under Mar Yawalaha, in 'Awdisho' 1838, pp. 154-155 (Latin), pp. 316-317 (Syriac).

⁷⁷ On these contacts, including earlier contacts of the Church of the East with Rome, see J. Richard 1998, pp. 98-112. It seems highly likely that Yawalaha's profession of 1304, transmitted in an Arabic and Latin version, originally contained "Nestorian" expressions comparable to those in Rabban Sauma's profession in 1288. The Latin version did not contain these expressions. For a translation of the Arabic version, cf. B. Landron 1994, pp. 298-299, for the Latin version, see E.A.W. Budge 1928, pp. 96-100 and J.B. Chabot 1893/1894/1896 [1894b], pp. 630-667.

⁷⁸ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 127. The completion of the monastery of Maragha in September 1301 requires the prayers of the saints for "the world and the whole inhabited world" (*ibid.*, p. 138).

ha,⁷⁹ but must have had some connection with Arbil as well, the city whose fate seems to be particularly close to his heart. Although we might assume that the Arbil massacre was a decisive event for many Christians of the time, the very detailed description of the protracted negotiations and the various stages of the siege, suggests personal involvement.

Only one significant person in the *History* is not mentioned by name: the metropolitan of Arbil during the siege of 1310.⁸⁰ The author had mentioned the name of the metropolitan who was in office during the siege of 1297, Mar Awraham, "an old and weak man,"⁸¹ who plays no further role in the *History*. The metropolitan of 1310, however, is extremely important: he is the one who speaks for the Catholicus at the Mongol court on two different occasions and earnestly tries to prevent utter disaster to happen.⁸² At the same time, it seems that the extensive report of the metropolitan of Arbil's diplomatic efforts also serves to defend this cleric against possible accusations by those who might have blamed him for the disastrous ending of the procedures. Whatever went wrong and however hesitant the metropolitan might have been, the author is convinced that he had done his utmost to save the Arbil inhabitants.⁸³ All this brings me to the conclusion that the author of the *History* might well be no other than the metropolitan of Arbil in 1310.

Is there any evidence outside the text that supports this identification? So far, what is known about the metropolitan of Arbil is consistent with this

⁷⁹ The text suggests that the author personally saw the monastery when it was completed, and the extensive description even suggests personal involvement in the building process, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 135-138.

⁸⁰ Apart from the metropolitan of Arbil, only very minor characters go without names. Considering the important role of this metropolitan in the story, it is hardly conceivable that the author merely forgot to mention his name and thus the omission must be deliberate.

⁸¹ P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 123.

⁸² P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 167-168 and 177-183. The metropolitan's speech on the second occasion is reported in full and displays intense personal involvement in the matter.

⁸³ On the first occasion it is mentioned that the metropolitan had fled to the village of Bet Sayyada, because "he was angry at the inhabitants of the fortress, because they had not listened to him" (P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 167). He was then convinced by the patriarch to use this opportunity to intercede for his people. On the second occasion, the metropolitan is again portrayed as hesitant about what to do. Paralysed by fear, he was again hiding in Bet Sayyada (cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], pp. 177-178). He then realised that he had to risk his life to save the patriarch and the people of Arbil and made a final attempt at finding help for the Christians among the highest Mongol emirs. He succeeded, but others prevent his plan from being carried out.

identification, but does not conclusively prove it. Timothy II, the successor of Mar Yawalaha, is known to have been the metropolitan of Arbil under the name of Mar Yosep before his elevation to the patriarchate in 1318.⁸⁴ The acts of a synod convened by him shortly after his election have survived and testify to his interest in canon law, education of clergy and lay people, proper ascetic lifestyle of monks and bishops, and the establishment of pious foundations to support churches and monasteries.⁸⁵ Most of these are probably not very characteristic of individual clerics, but they certainly support the identification as the interests are very similar to those of our author. This also accounts for the work that Mar Timothy produced under his own name on the "mysteries of the Church."⁸⁶ As far as can be concluded from Assemani's description, nothing contradicts my hypothesis, but again, interest in the liturgy as such is insufficient evidence for a positive identification. All other references to Timothy II present the same pattern: the identification is possible and perhaps even likely, but not proven.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ A. Mai 1838, p. 260. Before becoming metropolitan of Arbil, he was metropolitan of Mosul. Unfortunately no date is given for the move from the one archbishopric to the other, and neither are we certain that it was under the same name of Mar Yosep. The city and metropolitan of Mosul are referred to a couple of times in the *History*, but neither of these instances sheds further light on the issue of the later Mar Yosep, cf. P. Bedjan 1888 [1895²], p. 23 (the time of Rabban Sauma and Rabban Marcos' arrival in Mesopotamia), p. 37 ("Mar Gawriel, metropolitan of Mosul and Nineveh," present at Mar Yawalaha's consecration), 40 (emir Shammot/Ashmut, governor of Mosul), p. 113 (paying ransom for the church of Mosul in 1296), pp. 133-133 ("the region of Arbil and Mosul" where king Ghazan is staying), and p. 196 ("the metropolitan of Mosul" during the siege of Arbil in 1310).

⁸⁵ A. Mai 1838, pp. 260-268.

⁸⁶ *Ktābā d-ellātā d-(')rāze 'edātānāyā* ("Book of the causes of the mysteries of the Church"), cf. A. Baumstark 1922, p. 325. For an overview of the contents of this unpublished work, see J.S. Assemani 1728, III,I, pp. 572ff.

⁸⁷ Timothy II is once referred to in a manuscript: Diarbakir 70 (*ktaba d-memre d-Narsay*), 1328 "during Timothy II," monastery of Mar Mikha'il of Tar'il, Arbil-region" (cf. D. Wilmshurst 2000, p. 391. Tentatively: Mosul 99 (Ethiqon Barhebraeus), Maragha, patriarchal Cell Dec. 10, 1292, scribe: Joseph – priest, monk (D. Wilmshurst 2000, p. 390). Timothy II is quoted in a theological tract of uncertain date found in a manuscript of 1725, cf. Ms. Berlin 85, E. Sachau 1899, pp. 313-317. The most intriguing aspect is Mar Timothy's possible disapproval of a union with Rome, cf. R. le Coz 1995, p. 272. However, considering the lack of evidence for Le Coz' statement on the one hand, and the question to what extent Mar Yawalaha had really repudiated "Nestorianism" on the other, this issue perhaps loses its relevance.

4. Conclusion

Whether or not the author of the *History* was indeed Mar Yosep of Arbil, the later patriarch Timothy II, the text strongly suggests that the events in Arbil constituted a defining moment for the author and possibly also for the Church of the East of the early fourteenth century. The change from the relatively benevolent reign of the Mongols in the last decades of the thirteenth century to a period in which Christians had to defend themselves at all costs to Muslim opposition, was probably all the more bitter because of the high hopes the Christians of Mesopotamia had had of Mongol power. The Church of the East, which around 1300 was at the high point of its expansion, with contacts in Rome and Beijing, at that very moment was not able to defend the inhabitants of one of its important cities against the plotting of local Arab Muslims who resented the Christians' important position under Mongol rule. Although more than two hundred years later, in the middle of the sixteenth century, the Church of the East managed to recover at least partly from the disastrous events of the fourteenth century (from most of which our author was probably spared), the *History* stands as an enduring testimony to a writer who knew that the times were changing for the worst but who still wanted to record the greatness of the Church he knew and loved.