

Joel Thomas Walker, *The legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian heroism in late antique Iraq*. [The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, vol. 40. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 2006; ISBN 0-520-24578-4.] xviii + 345 pp.; hardcover.

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- [1] The legend of Mar Qardagh is a Syriac text probably written around 600 C.E. at Arbela, modern Irbil in northern Iraq. It is set in the same place some two hundred and fifty years earlier, when the hero, Qardagh, was stoned to death as a consequence of his anti-Zoroastrian activities. Emphasis is laid on the patriotism of Qardagh, a commander of troops in a zone bordering on the Christian Roman Empire; his conversion to Christianity did not make him sympathize with the enemies of the Sasanian King of Kings and his rejection of his family and their Zoroastrian Faith did not lessen his determination to avenge his people when they were attacked by the Romans. Today Christians in the same region are sometimes suspected by Muslims of sympathizing with the Western Powers which recently invaded Iraq. In the sixth century there were many military confrontations between the Romans and the Sasanians, who claimed the whole territory once taken from the Parthians by Pompey and others and, earlier, from the Achaemenids by Alexander. In the first half of the seventh century, the frustrations of the Near East, for so long fought over by Romans and Persians, were brought to an end by an unexpected Arab invasion of both empires and the region which Garth Fowden has described as the Mountain Arena came to dominate both the Iranian plateau and (to some extent) the Mediterranean Basin. The legend of Mar Qardagh has a political message, as well as a religious one: being a Christian in the Church of the East is not the same as sympathizing with an Empire which proclaims the Christian Faith, nor is the adoption of the other-worldly values of the Gospel a justification for opting out of one's own world, when it comes to defending the community into which one was born from external aggressors.
- [2] W. gives us a tolerably reliable English version of the legend of Mar Qardagh to set beside the Latin of Jean-Baptiste Abbeloos and the German of Hermann Feige, both published in 1890; he also gives us the first ever monograph on the legend. This is no

Bollandist endeavour to eliminate historically suspect elements from the legend and so make it acceptable as history. This legend has no value, Paul Peeters had claimed, contradicting Theodor Nöldeke, as a source for the events it describes; and W. agrees with Peeters, though he admits Wiessner's point (p. 117) that there may be a tenuous link with a fifth-century Sasanian governor called Qardagh the *nekorgan*, who (according to the correspondence of Barsauma of Nisibis) resolved a border dispute involving the raids of pro-Roman Arab tribes. The value of the legend to the historian is as a literary testament of its own time. The story of Mar Qardagh enables us to 'breathe the climate of northern Iraq on the eve of the Islamic conquest,' the place and the time of its composition (p. 1, acknowledging Freya Stark as the source of the phrase 'literature is a sort of climate which one breathes').

- [3] As a source for history of the Church of the East, the legend was studied, long after Nöldeke and Peeters, by two students of Syriac-speaking Christianity, Jean-Maurice Fiey and Gernot Wiessner; the former was most interested in historical geography, the latter in the Persian epic motifs which are the subject of W.'s second chapter. The late Sasanian Empire has been studied by specialists in Persian and Arabic, with some contributions by archaeologists. Among earlier authors only Wiessner had adduced the legend of Mar Qardagh as a source for this period; Walker claims that the Qardagh legend 'provides new and unexpected evidence for this tradition [*i.e.*, the Iranian epic tradition] among the Christians of northern Iraq' (p. 163). With this formula W. does scant justice to Wiessner's contribution.

- [4] The legend contains a philosophical dialogue in the Greek style, the aim of which is to show that Zoroastrians make a categorical mistake in worshipping as eternal entities things which were made by the Creator of the Universe, such as the sun and the moon, fire and water, air and earth. This dialogue was translated into English by Philippe Gignoux in 2001, as W. acknowledges in a footnote on p. 28; one might have expected W. to justify the more important discrepancies between Gignoux's translation and his own.

- [5] W.'s translation, Part I of his book, is placed on pp. 19–69 after his introduction (pp. 1–18) and before the interesting selection of photographs with instructive captions (pp. 73–83) and Part II, consisting of five chapters and an Epilogue (pp. 85–285).

Chapters 1–3, on ‘The Church of the East and the Hagiography of the Persian Martyrs,’ “‘We rejoice in your heroic deeds!’ Christian heroism and Sasanian epic tradition’ and ‘Refuting the eternity of the stars: philosophy between Byzantium and late antique Iraq’ have been touched on in the preceding paragraphs. We turn now to the rest of Part II.

- [6] Chapter 4, on ‘Conversion and the family in the *Acts* of the Persian Martyrs,’ contains what is perhaps the most original insight of this monograph. W. notes that the *Acts* of the earliest Sasanian martyrs ‘typically emphasize the solidarity of Christian families, especially the affective bonds between mothers and their sons,’ whereas those of the late Sasanian martyrs tend to focus on ‘the persecution of the daughters and wives of vociferously “pagan” families,’ though they ‘include, more often than not, scenes of reconciliation’ (p. 244f.). ‘The Qardagh legend presents, by comparison, an utterly uncompromising view of Christian ascetic heroism’ (p. 245). What is not altogether satisfactory is W.’s explanation of these literary trends and, in particular, of the unique status which he claims for his text.

- [7] Chapter 5, on ‘Remembering Mar Qardagh: the origins and evolution of an East-Syrian martyr-cult.’ Here W., while regretting ‘the badly underdeveloped state of Christian archaeology in former Sasanian lands,’ pays tribute to the pioneering work of Fiey on the cults of the East Syrian saints and martyrs (p. 248), but remarks on how few other studies there have been. He tends to believe, though admitting that specific proof of continuity has yet to be excavated, that the annual market at Melqi, outside the walls of Arbela, attested by the legend of Mar Qardagh, is of pre-Christian origin and that its religious focus in earlier times was the cult of the goddess Ishtar. This goddess, whose statue may have been moved out every two years from her primary temple in the city of Arbela to Milqia (a name very like that of Melqi) outside the walls for the duration of her festival, has a warlike aspect (p. 251), but little else in common with the saint. The evidence is a ‘persuasive’ reconstruction by A. Livingstone of a fragmentary text. Melqi plays a prominent part in the story of Qardagh’s life and it was there that his monastery was later situated, presumably on the ruins of the church—no need, surely, to distinguish between the ‘great and handsome church’ in §98 of B and that in the corresponding

section of the Mosul MS—mentioned in the last paragraph of the text.

- [8] On p. 267 W. points out that the main stream of the West-Syrian tradition ignores Qardagh, although he was commemorated in the fourteenth-century calendar of Tur ‘Abdin. In this connection it is worth remarking that Tur ‘Abdin is a plateau which includes the northern slopes of Mount Izlo/Izlā, on the southern slopes of which several monasteries existed which belonged to the Church of the East. This ridge had once been the frontier between the Roman (Tur ‘Abdin) and Persian Empires, a fact ignored in Map 2 on p. 4, which, like most other maps of the Roman frontiers, places the greater part of Tur ‘Abdin in Sasanian territory. Far be it from me to suggest that my book, *Monks and mason on the Tigris frontier: the early history of Tur ‘Abdin* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 39; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) ought to be included in the sizeable bibliography of modern scholarship (29 pages); but that is where the relevant geographical evidence is collected. That there was, throughout the centuries, intellectual exchange between West-Syrian and East-Syrian monks living in close proximity to one another in this remote and agricultural region could be assumed, if it had not been demonstrated (which, I think, it has). This route for the transmission of the ideas of John Philoponus from West-Syrian circles (in which, for doctrinal reasons, he was favoured) to the Church of the East (where they are found, unexpectedly, in the legend of Qardagh) might perhaps be added to those enumerated in n. 150 on p. 203.

- [9] The conclusions of the several chapters are resumed in the Epilogue, where W. also suggests that the revival of the cult of Mar Qardagh at Alqoš after the First World War should be connected with the continuing tendency in the Church of the East (and to a lesser extent among Syrian Christians generally) to bolster the identity of a small ethnic group by reference to the past glories of the Assyrian Empire (p. 285). Already in the fourteenth century Rabban Saliba of Hah, the Syrian Orthodox compiler of the calendar cited in my last paragraph, highlighted this ‘nationalistic’ association in his brief entry: ‘Mar Qardagh of the *genso/gensā* of Sennacherib, who was crowned on a Friday.’ The Syriac word *gensā* can mean family or nation; this recalls §3 of the legend, where we read (in W.’s translation, p. 20): ‘Now holy Mar Qardagh was from

a great people (*gensā*) from the stock of the kingdom of the Assyrians (*ʿtōrāyē*). His father was descended from the renowned lineage of the house of Nimrod, and his mother from the renowned lineage of the house of Sennacherib.’

- [10] The beauty of the presentation is unfortunately let down by the shortcomings of the proofreading, particularly in the transcription of Syriac: I counted more than a hundred misspellings. The translation is also marred by a number of errors. Students of Christian architecture need to know that the word translated as ‘vaulted chancels’ in §69 (p. 69) is not a plural, but a transcription of the Greek *κογχη*, meaning ‘apse,’ and students of philosophy should compare all the existing translations of the dialogue on creatures, as the following short extract from §17 (p. 28 f.) shows:

The blessed one said to him, “Do you not worship the sun and the moon, fire and water, air and earth, and call them gods and goddesses?”

Qardagh said to him, “Yes, I worship them because these things are eternal entities and have not been made [this should be: and no creatures; the Syriac is *w-law* ‘*bidē*, not *w-law* ‘*bidin*].”

The blessed one said to him, “Now from what have you deduced that the luminaries are eternal entities and have not been made [see above]?”

Qardagh said to him, “From their constant course and because of the [var. B] immutability [B reads ‘mutability;’ the reading ‘immutability’ comes from A] of their nature, and from the fact that they endure [Syriac: *mkatrin*, which is ‘abide’] by the strength of their nature and are not changed like other things, and are set on high above [the conjunction *w-* is here strongly adversative; translate: ‘but are set on high’].”

- [11] In §18 (p. 29) the word *qāpsin/qāpes* is translated first as ‘store up [their warmth],’ then as ‘restrain [its rays];’ the former translation is inadmissible. I found as many mistakes on each of the following pages of the dialogue. On p. 30 ‘they also are not alive’ should be ‘they are not even alive,’ as in l. 4 f. of the same section (p. 29). In §19, l. 2, ‘greater’ should be ‘to a greater degree;’ in l. 5, ‘organs of the body: the brain *etc.*’ should be ‘organs of the body, such as the brain *etc.*’ in l. 8, ‘parts’ should be ‘things;’ in l. 9, ‘in’ should be ‘of;’ in l. 10 f. ‘the whole world would be destroyed’

should be 'that would entail the destruction of the whole world;' in l. 11, 'bond' should be 'girdle;' in l. 13, 'plants' should be 'roots.' On p. 31 (§20), l. 1, the word 'qualities' has been supplied by the translator and *mārānā'it* should be 'in a sovereign manner,' not 'chiefly;' in l. 2, 'receive' should be 'have received;' in l. 4 *metnged* should be translated 'is afflicted,' not 'is blinded,' and 'suffers' should be 'suffers harm to his sight;' in l. 10 'have been made' should be 'creatures' (see above) or 'created entities,' as in l. 13; in l. 15, 'rout' should be 'defeat;' in l. 16, 'dissolved' should be 'liquefied' and the word 'even' should be omitted; in l. 17, 'vanishes' should be 'evaporates;' in l. 19, 'heated' should be 'ignited' and 'by the luminaries' should be 'by fire' (although this involves emending the text); in l. 20, 'each of them' should be followed by 'singly' and 'even of' should be 'including.' In n. 58 on p. 31 W. writes: 'Literally "has come into being" (*hwāyā hū*).' This should be: 'Literally: "is a contingent being" (*hwāyā-[h]w*).' The corrections necessary on these three pages suffice to show that no scholarly argument can be based solely on this translation.

[12] One might also have hoped to see more sensitivity to the way the author plays on Syriac words, particularly on the word *mšihā* 'Messiah,' which has almost the same appearance on the page as *mšaynā* 'domesticated,' from *šayyen* 'he pacified' (see p. 50, l. 1: 'From when I put on Christ, the peace of the world, I did not want of my own volition to clothe myself in the rage of battles'), while the root *mšab* means both 'anoint' and 'measure' (see p. 22, l. 7: 'intemperate' = 'unchristened'). By no means all allusions to the Bible are noticed; for example, the child Samuel also said, 'Here I am!' when he heard his name called by a supernatural being in the night (p. 23).

[13] If one is not too pedantic, though, this book is enjoyable and instructive to read. It certainly gives a more panoramic view than any previous study of the legend, with more suggestive insights and more abundant documentation, though perhaps the contribution of Wiessner to the conception of Chapter 2 might have been more generously acknowledged.