From Sacred Travel to Monastic Career:
The Evidence of Late Antique Syriac Hagiography
di
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In one of the dramatic moments in the conversion of Rabbula – a prominent figure in the Church of Edessa in the first half of the fifth century – Acacius bishop of Aleppo and Eusebius bishop of Edessa led him to the monastery of Marcian and Abraham, two local holy recluses belonging to the Syriac ecclesiastical landscape[1]. There Rabbula declared his desire to convert to Christianity and to shut himself away, like them. But before entering this new way of life he expressed one desire:

> To go to Jerusalem and see the holy place and be baptized in the Jordan where Christ was baptized as a model for us[2].

Rabbula then «entered Jerusalem, prayed in front of Golgotha…, entered the tomb of the Lord and the cave where he was born, and went up to the place of the Ascension… From there he went down to the Jordan; at once he petitioned the priests and recited before them the creed, and they anointed him and baptized him»[3]. As soon as he was baptized he went back to his city, where he assumed a social position, and appeared as the patron of the poor[4]. Later on he launched his episcopate career and served as the bishop of Edessa in 411-412 and again in 435-436, emerging as an opponent of Nestorius and supporter of Cyril of Alexandria. This account narrated in the *Life of Rabbula*, composed around 440, close to the hero's own time, offers an intriguing close-up of the social and intellectual elite's conversion against the background of Edessa's Hellenic culture at the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth[5]. Furthermore, this episode of self-transformation exemplifies the function of sacred travel in the identity formation of ascetic leaders in late antiquity, revealing the role of sacred geography, the local and the central, as the arena in which the hero's journey toward a new religious identity reached its goal[6]. The author of the *Life of Rabbula* introduced his goal in the opening sentence:

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[1] This is further evidence on which Bowersock drew for arguing the historicity of some aspects in the *Life of Rabbula*. See G. BOWERSOCK, The Syriac *Life of Rabbula* and Syrian Hellenism, in: *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. T. HÄGG and P. ROUSSEAU, Berkeley 2000, 255-271, esp. p. 269: «The author has painted an image of the saint in a realistic landscape».

[2] The *Vita* was published by J.J. OVERBECK, *S. Ephraemi Syri, Rabulae Episcopi Edesseni, Balaei Aliorumque opera selecta*, Oxford 1865, 154-209. Re-issued by P. BEDJAN, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, IV, Paris 1894 (repr. Olms 1968), 396-470. English translation by R. DORAN, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa*. Kalamazoo (Michigan) 2006, 69-70.

[3] Eng. trans., DORAN, *Stewards of the Poor*, p. 70.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 103. In imitation of Paul (Rom 15,25-26), he also sent gifts to the holy poor dwelling in the desert of Jerusalem.

[5] On this aspect of the *Life*, see BOWERSOCK, The Syriac *Life of Rabbula* and Syrian Hellenism.

[6] There are many hagiographic accounts that embrace this motif of the affinity of pilgrimage to Palestine and conversion. See, for instance, the problematic composition presenting the travels and deeds of the violent fifth century monk, Barsawma. See F. NAU, *Résumé de monographies syriaques*, Revue de l'Orient Chrétien 18 (1913) 270-276.379-389; 19 (1914) 113-134.278-289.414-440; 20 (1917) 3-32. For the Ethiopian version, see S. GRÉBAUT, *Vie (éthiopienne) de Barsauma le Syrian*, Revue de l'Orient Chrétien 13 (1908) 337-

> Through writing we are depicting…an icon of the excellent way of life of Mar Rabbula the bishop, the pride of our city, so that he might be to us and to every generation a paradigm that stimulates [us] to imitate his virtues[7].

Furthermore, through his writing the author aimed to perform an «incarnation of the holy»[8], inherent in the saint himself, his monastery and his city as well. The geographic spaces of the *Life of Rabbula* where the «incarnation of the holy» took place comprise the local shrines of Cyrrhus, in which his first step toward conversion occurred, and the Jordan River, the scene in which this transformation reached its peak. However, the late fifth or early sixth-century composition, the *Life of Alexander Akoimetos*, provided a rather different version of Rabbula's conversion (sections 9-23)[9]. According to this account, which is considered by scholars an interpolation, Rabbula was converted by Alexander, a famous Messalian leader of Syriac monks who is not mentioned in the *Life of Rabbula*[10]. The author explained that Alexander «suggested to [Rabbula] that he not be baptized in the city, but that he go to a certain martyr's shrine» three days' distance from the city[11]. While retaining his conversion, this version omits altogether Rabbula's visit to Palestine, thus alluding to the tricky burden of sacred territory. This textual appropriation of Rabbula's conversion served to enhance the link of the *Akoimetoi* with the theological predisposition of Rabbula and his circle. The denial of Rabbula's visits to Jerusalem and the Jordan River and the substitution of Edessa for the sacred landscape of the Holy Land is therefore not surprising[12].

This *liminal* aspect of Rabbula's pilgrimage – a sort of *rite de passage* that includes an element of self-transformation – served as a hagiographic strategy of representation intended to shape the identity and the charismatic authority of the hero[13]. Identifying the transformative aspect of the act of pilgrimage, and its historical consequences, is in line with the approach that perceives this literature as performative writing, and an expression of ascetic discourse, reflecting a system of ideals in a wide monastic context relating to questions of Christian identity. Thus the main focus of this essay is not so much to depict the phenomenon of pilgrimage in Syriac Christianity but rather to examine the function of pilgrimage in Syriac

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345; 14 (1909) 135-142.264-75. See also the story about Golinduch, a Zoroastrian woman that converted to Christianity and then undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, recounted by the seventh-century historian Theophylact Simocatta, *History* V.12. 1-13, ed. C. DE BOOR, re-ed. P. WIRTH, Stuttgart 1972. Eng. trans., M. and M. WHITBY, *The History of Theopyhlact Simocatta*, Oxford 1986, 148-149.

[7] *Life of Rabbula* 159,4-8. Eng. trans., Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, p. 65. On the motive of depicting an icon, see BOWERSOCK, *The Syriac* Life of Rabbula *and Syrian Hellenism*, 257-260.

[8] *Life of Rabbula* 160,5-11. Here I followed Bowersock's translation (*The Syriac* Life, 258), which is slightly different from that of Doran (*Stewards of the Poor*, 65-66).

[9] The *Vita Alexandri* survives in a single manuscript from the tenth or eleventh century. *Vita Alexandri*, ed. with Latin trans. E. DE STROOP, *La Vie d'Alexandre l'Acémète*, PO 6, fasc. 5, Paris 1911, 645-704. Eng. trans., D. CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2002, 250-280. On Alexander's monastic career, see *ibid.*, 126-157.

[10] See bibliography in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, p. 255, note 44.

[11] *Life of Alexander Akoimetos* 14, Eng. trans., p. 259.

[12] *Ibid.*, 13-15, pp. 258-259.

[13] On the *liminal* aspect of pilgrimage, see V. TURNER – E. TURNER, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, Oxford 1978; V. TURNER, *Pilgrimage as Social Processes, Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Ithaca 1974, 166-230.

hagiography; my emphasis is not on the network of holy places but on the very idea of sacred travel. I shall argue here that this model of Christian devotion, persistently oriented toward Palestine and Egypt, as reflected in Syriac hagiography, created a variety of religious and economic problems and resulted in tension between the ecclesiastical authorities and the local monastic institutions. This tension, which can be especially sensed in the *Synodicon Orientale*, containing the official records and acts of the first 13 synods of the Church of the East from 410 to 775, will be discussed in the last part of this essay[14]. Yet before proceeding, the problem of the sources should be addressed.

Late antique pilgrimage in Eastern Christianity has long been the focus of scholarly study; in particular, the last thirty years have seen a growing interest in various aspects of this religious piety[15]. An intense scholarly attention was given to holy journeys and sacred landscape in the Mediterranean world, especially, Palestine[16] and Egypt[17]. All these studies, however, were the result of investigating mainly late antique Greek, Coptic and Latin Christian literature. The Syriac evidence has for the most part been overlooked in this scholarship, and only a few articles on Syriac pilgrims to Jerusalem and Egypt had been published[18], although there is evidence for an ongoing interest in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine from the fourth century up to the Ottoman period[19]. There is still no comprehensive study of local pilgrimage and Syriac sacred topography in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, nor have the attractive destinations of Palestine and Egypt been explored. This prompts the question: Why is this so? The easy answer is that although we have witnessed a linguistic turnabout in scholarship in recent decades, the schematic division of Greek Eastern Christianity and Latin Western Christianity

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[14] The Syriac text and translation was published by J.B. CHABOT (ed.) *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil de synodes Nestoriens,* Paris 1902.

[15] On the concept of pilgrimage and its problems in relation to Graeco-Roman and late antique Christianity, see the discussion by J. ELSNER and I. RUTHERFORD (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (Oxford, 2005), 1-38.

[16] P. MARAVAL, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: Histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe*, Paris 1985. For the affinity of pilgrimage and holy places in Palestine to ecclesiastical politics, see especially D. HUNT, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD 312–460*, Oxford 1982; L. PERRONE, *Christian Holy Places and Pilgrimage in an Age of Dogmatic Conflicts: Popular Religion and Confessional Affiliation in Byzantine Palestine (Fifth to Seventh Centuries)*, POC 48 (1998) 5–37; ID., *Pierre l'Ibère ou l'Exil comme pèlerinage et combat pour la foi*, in: L. DI SEGNI, Y. HIRSCHFELD, J. PATRICH and R. TALGAM (eds.), *Man Near A Roman Arch: Studies presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafrir*, Jerusalem 2009, 190*-204*.

[17] See, for example, the rich information provided in the collective volume edited by D. FRANKFURTER, *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, Leiden, Boston and Cologne 1998. See also, A. PAPACONSTANTINOU, *Le culte des saints en Égypte des Byzantins aux Abbassides: L'apport des inscriptions et des papyrus grecs et coptes*, Paris 2001.

[18] J.-M. FIEY, *Le pèlerinage des Nestoriens et Jacobites à Jérusalem*, Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale 12 (1969) 113-126; A. PALMER, *The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem*, Oriens Christianus 75 (1991) 16-43.

[19] On pilgrims from the Church of the East and from the Syrian Orthodox Church in later periods, see S. BROCK, *East Syrian Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Early Ottoman Period*, ARAM 18-19 (2006-2007), 189-201; S. BROCK, H. GOLDFUS, and A. KOFSKY, *The Syriac Inscriptions at the Entrance to Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem*, ARAM 18-19 (2006-2007), 415-438. The views on pilgrimage to Jerusalem are discussed by H.G.B. TEULE, *The Perception of the Jerusalem Pilgrimage in Syriac Monastic Circles*, in: R. LAVENANT (ed.), *VI Symposium Syriacum, 1992*, 311-321, Rome 1994; ID., *Syrian Orthodox Attitudes to the Pilgrimage to Jerusalem*, Eastern Christian Art 2 (2005) 121-125.

– deeply rooted in the scholarly tradition – still infects various fields of research, among them the investigation of local cults and models of piety in Syriac Christianity.[20] A more cogent reason for this lacuna is the lack of critical editions of many Syriac texts, and the scattering of manuscripts in various libraries in monasteries, which are not always easily available to scholars, also accounts for the marginality of scholarly attention to Syriac evidence in general and the social history of Syriac Christianity in particular. The publication in 2004 of Jean-Maurice Fiey's *Saints Syriac* – a catalogue of Syrian saints that includes a short description of the *Lives* of saints, dates, and the authenticity of the texts – has made our investigation of pilgrimage much easier[21]. But there is still a daunting amount of work to be done. Given the state of the research and the scant availability of sources, the scope of this essay will inevitably be very limited.

Although many of the late antique pilgrims that visited Palestine and Egypt came from the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, the genre known as the *itinerarium* – that is, an account of the experiences of the pilgrim, written in the first person[22] – well represented in the Latin West, for instance, the *Journal* of Egeria, has no counterpart in late antique Greek Christian literature.[23] Likewise in Syriac literature, which was inspired by Greek patristic literature and developed under its tradition from the fifth century on, no evidence for such a genre is known to me. Despite the lack of the *itinerarium* – or at least any explicit writings about pilgrimage such as the letters of Jerome and of Gregory of Nyssa relating to pilgrimage[24] – the main types of sources that can be explored at this stage to depict the role of pilgrimage in Syriac monastic culture are the *Lives* of saints. In recent decades much of the pioneering studies of the Christian Mediterranean world in late antiquity have dwelt on hagiographic texts, particularly those written in Greek, Latin and Coptic. Syriac hagiography has to a large extent been

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[20] On this change in recent decades, see D. BRAKKE, *The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory, and the History of Christianity*, Church History 71/3 (2002) 473-491.

[21] J.-M. FIEY, *Saints syriaques*. Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 6, ed. L.I. CONRAD, Princeton 2004.

[22] On the genre of the *Itinerarium*, see D.R. HOWARD, *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity*, Berkeley 1980; O. LIMOR, *Holy Journey: Pilgrimage and Christian Sacred Landscape*, in: *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land*, eds. O. LIMOR and G.G. STROUMSA, Turnhout 2006, 346-349. On images and rhetoric in pilgrimage literature, see W. WILLIAMS, *Pilgrimage and Narrative in the French Renaissance: 'The Undiscovered Country'*, Oxford 1998.

[23] Indeed, we might consider as an *itinerarium* such a work as the second-century *Sacred Tales* by Aelius Aristides, in which he vividly recounted his own personal experiences on his sacred journey *(The Sacred Tales*, ed. C.A. BEHR, *The Complete works of P. Aelim Aristides*, Vol. II, *Orations XVII-LIII*, Amsterdam 1981). Yet this is an isolated voice that has no continuity in Greek literature of later periods. On this pilgrimage see also, M. GALLI, *Pilgrimage as Elite* Habitus*: Educated Pilgrims in Sacred Landscape during the Second Sophistic*, in: *Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity*, eds. J. ELSNER – I. RUTHERFORD, Oxford 2005, 253-290; A. PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS, *The Body in Space: Visual Dynamics in Graeco-Roman Healing Pilgrimage*, in: *Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity*, 210-217. Nor do Pausanias' travels and stories about local shrines in Greece represent the genre of the *itinerarium*. For a reevaluation of Pausanias' composition with previous bibliography on this topic, see W. HUTTON, *The Construction of Religious Space in Pausanias*, in: *Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity*, 291-317.

[24] On those letters, see my *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2005, Chapters 2 and 3.

neglected by historians of late antiquity – a situation lamented recently by Sebastian Brock[25]. I wish to point out that the Syriac hagiography is very meager in terms of details about pilgrimage routes, networks of holy places, and individual experiences. Nonetheless, that late antique hagiography is an essential source for reconstructing the social and cultural history of that period needs no further proof or justification, even if its interpretation continues to intrigue the historians.[26]

Certainly, the Council of Chalcedon was a historic moment in the development of Eastern Christianity, and its decisions provided a new opportunity for self-definition that was mirrored in hagiographic texts written during the Christological controversies of the fifth to sixth centuries. Those texts were widely circulated, tended to cross linguistic boundaries, and served as theological and political propaganda. By creating a literary and rhetorical basis, the hagiography of that period became an important factor in the formation of Christian identity[27]. The *Lives* of saints produced textual portrayals of monastic cultural agents whose historical validity in some cases is difficult to determine. Yet each portrayal represents a chapter in the local history of a region in the Roman and Sasanian empires, as well as a large cultural network in which a particular worldview, ethos, and religious pattern of thought and behavior were deeply rooted. Needless to say, the unreliable tendencies inherent in such a genre should not be overlooked. Yet beyond this caveat, it is not at all my intention to investigate whether the texts discussed here transmitted authentic stories about sacred travels. Even if we tend to agree with Cyril Mango's statement that: «People went on pilgrimage in the early Christian period because it had become the thing to do», the evidence in Syriac hagiography nevertheless offers more than that[28]. I am more interested in the cultural picture that emerges from late antique Syriac hagiography as a whole, revealing the ascetic imagination and religious spectrum of the period, than in how each hagiographic author related to pilgrimage itself.

Late antique hagiographic texts frequently mentioned travel and pilgrimage to Sinai, Egypt and Palestine, and we can perceive it as a *topos*. Furthermore, travel served as the axis around

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[25] S. BROCK, *Saint in Syriac: A Little-Tapped Resource*, JECS 16/2 (2008), 181-196. On Syriac hagiography, see S.P. BROCK, in *Byzantine Hagiography: A Handbook*, ed. S. EFTHYMIADIS (Aldershot: Ashgate), forthcoming; *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*: Introduced and translated by S.P. BROCK – S. ASHBROOK-HARVEY, Berkeley 1987. On how to approach hagiography for evaluating the interaction of formulaic and historical material in the case of John of Ephesus' hagiographic collection, see S. ASHBROOK-HARVEY, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Berkeley 1990, pp. XIII-XVI, 34-42, 134-146.

[26] E. PATLAGEAN, *Ancient Byzantine Hagiography and Social History*, in: *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, ed. S. WILSON, Cambridge 1983, 101-121. Various issues relating to our topic are addressed in the inspiring introduction by T. HÄGG and P. ROUSSEAU, *Introduction: Biography and Panegyric*, in: T. HÄGG – P. ROUSSEAU (eds.), *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2000, 1-28. See also D. KRUEGER, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, Philadelphia 2004. The main standpoints in late antique scholarship on the historical value of hagiography are cogently stated in D. FRANKFURTER, *Hagiography and the Reconstruction of Local Religion in Late Antique Egypt: Memories, Inventions, and Landscapes*, Church History and Religious Culture 86 (2006) 13-37. For the function of hagiography in writing Christian landscape, see J. VAN DER VLIET, *Bringing Home the Homeless: Landscape and History in Egyptian Hagiography*, Church History and Religious Culture 86 (2006) 39-55.

[27] On writing hagiography as a factor in shaping identity, see KRUEGER, *Writing and Holiness*, 89-197.

[28] C. MANGO, *The Pilgrim's Motivation*, JAC Suppl. 20/1 (1991), 9.

which certain *Lives* were composed. The extensive travel narrative in *The Life of Peter the Iberian*, the fifth-century anti-Chalcedonian leader, is a case in point.[29] Yet pilgrimage in itself and holy places are not the main focus of hagiographical interest, even though sainthood was occasionally defined in terms of travel, topography and perpetual wandering[30]. However, the major part of a *Vita* is usually devoted to what Bernard Flusin has termed as: «du voyage à la carrière»[31], that is, the return home from holy travels or inner spiritual journeys, the construction of the saint's new monastic career and, sometimes, to his integration into the local monastic and ecclesiastical institutions. This process of institutionalizing sainthood lies at the heart of late antique hagiography.

From the second half of the fourth century, the attraction of the Egyptian desert increased for those Syrian Christians endowed with ascetic inclinations – a tendency that had much to do with the idealization of Egyptian monasticism[32]. This attraction did not fade even though monasticism was already widespread and deeply rooted in East and West Syriac Church[33]. This pattern of religious behavior was further promoted by the translation from Greek to Syriac of the *Historia Lausiaca*, written by Palladius in 420, which enjoyed enormous popularity[34]. The Syriac version of the *Historia Lausiaca*, dated to the sixth century[35] – as well as an additional translation made in the seventh century – is preserved in a large number of manuscripts[36]. Dadisho' Qatraya, the seventh-century nestorian author, was intrigued by the following question concerning Mar Awgen, the legendary 'father of the monks' in fourth and fifth century Mesopotamia:

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[29] On this function of sacred travel, see B. BITTON-ASHKELONY, Imitatio Mosis *and Pilgrimage in the* Life of Peter the Iberian, Le Muséon 118 (2005) 51-70; PERRONE, *Pierre l'Ibère*; C. HORN, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian*, Oxford 2006, 68-73.233-260.

[30] B. FLUSIN, *Miracle et histoire dans Cyrille de Scythopolis*, Paris 1983, 145-148. Flusin has observed that Cyril of Scythopolis borrowed from Athanasius' *Life of Antony* the concept of spiritual itinerary in which the stages correspond to a particular travel of the monk.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[32] For some aspects of Syriac monasticism, see S.H. GRIFFITH, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism*, in: *Asceticism*, eds. V.L. WIMBUSH – R. VALANTASIS, New York-Oxford 1995, 220-245; P. ESCOLAN, *Monachisme et Église: Le monachisme Syrien du IVᵉ au VIIᵉ siècle: Un monachisme charismatique*, Paris 1999.

[33] O. MEINARDUS, *The Nestorians in Egypt*, Oriens Christianus 51 (1967), 112–29; FIEY, *Le pèlerinage des Nestoriens et Jacobites à Jérusalem*. For the interesting phenomenon of Syrians in Wadi Natrun, see K. INNEMÉE and L. VAN ROMPAY, *La présence des Syriens dans le Wadi-al Natrun (Égypte): À propos des découvertes récentes de peintures et de textes muraux dans l'Église de la Vierge du Couvent des Syriens*, Parole de l'Orient 23 (1998) 167-202. On the library of Dayr-al Suryan, see S. BROCK, *The Development of Syriac Stisies*, in: K.J. CATHCART (ed.), *The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures* (Dublin, 1994), 94-109, and also L. VAN ROMPAY, *Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition*, Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies 3/1 (2000), 11.

[34] Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca,* ed. C. BUTLER, Cambridge 1899–1904 (repr. Hildesheim 1967). Engl. trans. by R.T. MEYER, Washington 1965. On the hermeneutic aspect of pilgrimage in the *Historia Lausiaca*, see G. FRANK, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2000.

[35] BROCK, *Saints in Syriac*.

[36] Anan ISHO, *Stories of the Holy Fathers,* ed. and translated from the Syriac with notes and introduction by E.A.W. BUDGE, Oxford 1934.

> How is it that, although the blessed Mar Awgen was a contemporary of Saint Antony…Palladius in his 'Book of Paradise' does not mention Mar Awgen together with Abba Antony and Abba Lonis and the rest of the Egyptian Fathers?

Dadisho' answered this question in his *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, all the while expressing his desire to place Awgen in Palladius' Egyptian ascetic pantheon and include him in the heroic ascetic generation[37]. The yearning of Dadisho' attests to the enduring magnitude of the prestigious image of the Egyptian desert, which dominated late antique Syriac hagiography. Palladius' text contains stories primarily of famous Egyptian monks, virgins and others who traveled as pilgrims to Egypt and Palestine, some of whom became part of the monastic milieu of the late antique Mediterranean world. Among them were Melania the Younger and her grandmother, Melania the Elder, and Evagrius Ponticus, one of the most influential thinkers in Eastern Christianity.

Palladius, however, also recounted stories about ascetics and holy men who did not reach Palestine and Egypt although later traditions included such voyages in their *curriculum vitae*. This seems to be the case of the *Life of Ephrem*, a Syriac legend most likely based on the Syriac version of the *Historia Lausiaca*, as well as on other Greek sources[38]. The Syriac *Life of Ephrem* survived in several different recensions; its place and dates of authorship are unknown, but it was probably composed in the late sixth century, providing an anachronistic image of Ephrem[39]. For our purpose here I wish to mention only one anecdote from the *Life*, namely Ephrem's fabulous and stormy sea journey to Egypt, where he sojourned for eight years among the monks of Scetis, learnt Coptic and struggled against Arianism[40]. This voyage is not mentioned in *Historia Lausiaca*, chapter 40, Palladius' account of Ephrem. As the compiler of the *Life* proceeded in his narrative, he 'transported' Ephrem to Cappadocia, where he met Basil of Caesarea, who dubbed him 'Father of the desert', thus linking him with prestigious monastic centers and leading ascetic teachers[41]. As scholars have observed, Ephrem's portrait underwent profound changes, including a remarkable update to the sixth-century ascetic world. Ephrem was not simply 'located' in Syria as the local Edessan deacon who provided assistance during the city's great famine – as emerged from Palladius' depiction, who paid no heed to Ehprem's role in the Church of Nisibis and ignored his literary compositions. Rather, in this accumulated hagiographic tradition Ephrem appears as an ideal eremitic monk living in a cell, an international voyager and Christian figure who wrote many books in the desert

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[37] The quotation is from a fragment published by N. SIMS-WILLIAMS, *Dadisho' Qatraya's* Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers, Analecta Bollandiana 112 (1994) 44-45. See also the brief remark on Mar Awgen and Egyptian monasticism as a source of inspiration for Syriac asceticism, S. BROCK, *Early Syrian Asceticism*, Numen 20 (1973), 3 and note 6.

[38] For the principal extant sources and the hagiographical process through which the historical figure of Ephrem virtually disappeared behind a stereotypical profile imposed by the compiler, see B. OUTTIER, *S. Ephrem d'après ses biographies et ses oeuvres*, Parole de l'Orient 4 (1973) 11-33; J. PHILLIP, Amar, *The Syriac "Vita" Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1988, 30-38; S. GRIFFITH, *Images of Ephrem: The Syrian Holy Man and his Church*, Traditio 45 (1989/90), 7-33.

[39] S. BROCK, *St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition*, Hugoye: Journal of Syrian Studies 2/1 (1999), 1-18. For an outline of Ephrem's Syriac *Life*, see also *ibid.*, *appendix* II, pp. 11-12; Amar, *Syriac "Vita" Tradition*, 63-64.

[40] Amar, *Syriac "Vita" Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, Syriac text, pp. 114-120, Eng. trans., 251-257.

[41] *Ibid.*, 128-149; Eng. trans., 265-288.

(according to one recension he wrote them in Coptic), returning to his city Edessa after being ordained by Basil, who later cited him as a combater of heresies. Of course, this transformation of Ephrem's image aimed to meet sixth-century expectations. Nevertheless what seems to me important is the decisive role of travel as a hagiographic mechanism in reconstructing the saint's identity. We may doubt the validity of many stories in the *Life of Ephrem*, but the expectations of the readers were real; the stories did not merely relate to literary fashion, but exhibited authentic perceptions of sainthood and ways of shaping and performing ecclesiastical authority.

This legendary *Life of Ephrem* also indicates the enduring appeal of the Egyptian desert and its mythic image for Syriac ascetic culture[42]. The frequent claim in Syriac hagiography concerning famous monastic figures' affinity to the Egyptian desert manifested the prestige and image of Scetis as a monastic school where attendees received a correct training in the ascetic way of life, as well as blessings from the Fathers[43]. This is also apparent from the brief reference relating to the seventh-century monastery of Bet Hale, in the region of al-Hira, known as the monastery in which «many monks settled as in the Egyptian desert» (*Chronicle of Siirt* II, 270-275). Other examples abound. Yet Syriac hagiographic literature is not exclusively devoted to pilgrimage stories of prominent figures such as Rabbula and Ephrem; similar stories are recorded of monks who were not at all well known and whose careers left no clear impression whatsoever on Syriac ecclesiastical or monastic history. Moreover, the motif of pilgrimage is present in both long and very short hagiographic compositions, attesting that such travels had become an essential component of this literature and the ascetic culture.

The anonymous brief *Life of Aziz*, an unknown fourth or early fifth-century saint, is only two pages long, yet it is written in a well-established hagiographic style, replete with clichés, including an account of the hero's sacred travels. Aziz, a disciple of the famous ascetic figure, Awgen, in fourth-fifth century Mesopotamia, after a period of withdrawal on Mount Izla in which he proved his miraculous powers, undertook a journey from Emesa to Jerusalem and Sinai. After returning from his pilgrimage he founded a monastery in his village, Zérini, and his tomb became a pilgrimage site for the Syrian orthodox[44]. This pattern of a saintly pilgrim's travel followed by the founding of a monastery has many examples in Syriac hagiography.

A further example confirming the importance of pilgrimage in hagiography is the epitome of a long saint's *Life*, the legend of a certain Mar Asia from Paria in the province of Euphrates[45]. Very little is known about this figure or about the time and place of the composition, which is

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[42] On the myth of the Egyptian desert in the Byzantine period, see J.E. GOEHRING, *Monasticism in Byzantine Egypt: Continuity and Memory*, in: R.S. BAGNALL (ed.), *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, Cambridge 2007, 390-405. Goehring perceives the myth of the Egyptian desert in dynamic rather than static terms: «The myth and the movement existed rather in a dynamic dialectical relationship with one another. As the myth continued to inform and shape the movement, so the movement continued to augment and develop the myth». (p. 393).

[43] K. INNEMÉE and L. VAN ROMPAY, *Premiers témonis de la présence syrienne: les colophons des manuscrits*, Parole de L'Orient 23 (1998), 182-184.

[44] FIEY, *Saints syriaques*, 40-42. The manuscript has not been yet published; a summary of it is provided by J.M. FIEY, *Saint Aziza et son village de Zérini*, Le Muséon 79 (1966), 429-433.

[45] A summary of the Syriac text was published by F. NAU, *Résumé de monographies syriaques*, Revue de l'Orient chrétien 10 (1915-1917) 3-32.

preserved in Syriac and Karshuni versions from a manuscript of the twelfth century[46]. Mar Asia's account is written in the first person, and the entire story is represented as a journey of initiation towards an ascetic life, constructed according to the hagiographic literary conventions: his miraculous birth after his parents' plea for a child made at the holy site of John the Baptist in his city, his embrace of ascetic habits from infancy, his withdrawal from his family, etc. Escaping from a marriage arranged for him by his parents, he set out on a pilgrimage to the holy places in Jerusalem and the place of the crucifixion, «the tomb of the Holy One». Five months later he reached Sinai and lived as a recluse for ten years, continually wandering. This saint's story is linked with the Roman Empire and is set in the days of the Emperor Theodosius (379-395). Many elements in this story attest to Mar Asia's new stature and authority once his holy travels ended: He discerned the coming death of his teacher Domitius, a capacity reserved in hagiography to saints. He arrived in Antioch as a miracle worker and was assigned the title 'Asia', the physician. After demonstrating his miraculous powers, he built a monastery in Antioch, an act that marked the final stage in the long process of shaping his image as a saint and institutionalized his monastic authority in the local society. Mar Asia then carried on his wandering in the eastern part of the empire, the center of hermitic monasticism, and it was only at the request of the emperor Theodosius to come and heal his daughter that he returned to the imperial city, the center of political and religious power of the time. Needless to say, it is unwise to vouch for the historicity of this text, yet it seems significant that in the ascetic narrative of Mar Asia, known only from the *Life*, pilgrimage was not merely a religious fashion or literary *topos* but the *sine qua non* in shaping sainthood and authority.

The persistent nature of this *sine qua non* in the social and religious life of Syriac ascetic culture is well illustrated by the lengthy hagiographic composition devoted to Rabban Hormizd, one of the leading figures of sixth and seventh-century Nestorian monasticism[47]. The young Hormizd determined to «go to Jerusalem to pray in the holy places…and from there he wanted to go to the desert of Scetis, to stay with the holy fathers and to worship Christ there»[48]. He left his homeland in Shiraz and reached Musul after 37 days. Three monks from the monastery of Bar Idata, intent on derailing his project, suggested that he join their monastery instead and not go as far as Jerusalem and Egypt. Persuaded by them, Hormizd finally renounced his original plan. In fact this dilemma relating to the holy places was not new in the ascetic context, as attested in earlier Greek hagiography, disclosing a complex view within monastic culture about the prevalence of wandering monks and the tension inherent in this ascetic piety[49]. But why, in the case of Hormizd, does the hagiographer recounts all this? After all, we expect the author to describe the saint's life and achievements, not his unrealized venture. I suggest that the author deliberately chose to recount the renunciation of the travel to

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[46] In 1999 E.J. Wilson discovered a Karshuni version; four other manuscripts are also known, see E.J. WILSON – S. QUMSIYEH, *A Karshuni Text of the Legend of Mar Asia*, Parole de l'Orient 32 (2007) 125-162.

[47] There are three *Lives* in Syriac that were edited and translated by E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban bar-'Idta*, Vol. I, London 2003² (text); trans., vol. II, London 1902.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[49] FIEY, *Saints syriaques*, 94-95; ESCOLAN, *Monachisme et Église*, 171-176. On wandering monks and the reservations of the ecclesiastical institution in the late antique Mediterranean world, see CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 206-241; BITTON-ASHKELONY, *Encountering the Sacred*, 146-160; M. DIETZ, *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300-800*, Pennsylvania 2005, 69-105.

Jerusalem and Egypt because in his cultural world, travel to the holy places and Egyptian monasticism had come to be seen as almost a vital component in the formation of a hero's identity and as an act of ascetic renunciation in itself. In other words, this *acte manqué* of Hormizd's pilgrimage attests to the very decisive religious and social function of sacred travel. For the author, what was important in the life of Hormizd was not so much the visit to holy places in itself as the *imaginaire* of pilgrimage and its renunciation.

The last example is drawn from the impressive *Life of Benjamin of Nehardea* (d. 466), the founder of a large coenobium near Dara and one of the students of the school of Edessa[50]. His *Life* is dotted with dreams and visions that guided the hero from one place to another. It also contains typical stories about conversions, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Sinai and Scetis, the founding of monasteries and the transfer of relics, with the Nestorian controversy serving all the while as the setting for this well-orchestrated life. The immediate incentive for this saint's holy journey was his desire to escape the burden of ordination and the admiration of the mob, a well-known *topos* in Greek hagiography[51]. But before leaving for Palestine he promised his disciples: «I will be with you until the end of days». These, as we shall see, were not empty words but decisive for the saint's entire ensuing course of action.

The first step in Benjamin's journey toward Palestine was a visit to the local shrine in Emesa, where he received a blessing at the shrine where the head of John the Baptist was buried[52]; he then entered Jerusalem and worshiped in Golgotha[53]. And here, as is common in hagiography, the life of the saint is linked with the center of power: the patriarch of Antioch happened to be in Jerusalem at the same time and, against Benjamin's wishes, ordained him bishop of Tarsus. But once again Benjamin escaped. He reached Sinai, where he prayed in the place of God's revelation to Moses, then went on to Scetis[54]. After fifteen years of an astonishing life in the desert, fighting demons and working miracles, he was ordered in a vision – a medium that finally resolved his dilemma about going home – to return to the East and build a monastery and a hospital for the coenobitic monks, pilgrims and visiting strangers. These building projects reflect the institutionalization of his authority, which was grounded in the local sacred tradition. He had also been ordered, in a vision, to «worship Mar Awgen and the elders that are with him… that he might receive also their blessing before he died, since it would be better than finishing his life in the desert in solitude»[55]. This vision reflects the magnetism of the holy places in Palestine and their competition with local Syriac sacred sites. It might reflect, in addition, an anxiety about local monasteries and shrines in a period of religious conflicts. Thus, on his way home, while making a final round of visits to the holy places in Jerusalem, Benjamin had yet another vision. This time, Awgen himself warned that the Nestorian heresy «will occupy our monastery and the countries in the East». Fearing that his tomb will be destroyed by the Nestorians, Awgen asked Benjamin to transfer his relics and those of the

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[50] For the Syriac text and the French translation, see V. SCHEIL, *La vie de Mar Benjamin: Texte syriaque*, Zeitschrift für Assyriologie 12 (1897), 64-96; V. SCHEIL, *La vie de Mar Benjamin traduite du syriaque*, Revue de L'Orient Chrétien 2 (1897), 246-261.

[51] Among the earliest examples of this *topos* is the case of Julian Saba, *Historia Religiosa* II.13 (SC 234, p. 222) with BITTON-ASHKELONY, *Encountering the Sacred*, 159, 194.

[52] *Life of Benjamin of Nehardea*, pp. 76-77, trans., pp. 252-253. The tomb of John the Baptist at Emesa was founded around 383, MARAVAL, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages*, 253, 267.

[53] *Life of Benjamin of Nehardea*, p. 79, trans., p. 254.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 80, trans., p. 255.

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83, trans., pp. 256-257.

elders buried with him on Mount Izla,[56] giving him very precise instructions and indications as to where to bury them: «In the monastery of Shalmon, below Nathafa's monastery, near Mardin, in the eastern side, since it is God's will that we be buried there until the day of the Resurrection».[57] Besides the theological concept of resurrection of the body expressed here by the author, he provides a further reason for the request to transfer the relics: «Because now our monastery has been destroyed and abandoned». This concern about the tombs and relics probably alludes to historical tension in the East Syriac Church. Awgen's alleged desire was to keep his holy territory – that is, his monastery and his tomb – even though the Nestorians were in control of the region. He thereby redefined and delineated a new sacred territory[58]. This detail reveals the reason for the author's providing the reader with the names and origins of the elders buried with Awgen: They were from Palestine, Arabia, Persia, Egypt, and Jerusalem, thus showing his hero as not only a local saint but a cosmopolitan one[59]. In the tenth-century version of the *Life of Benjamin*, the list was enlarged to include further names, probably attesting to Awgen's enhanced status.

In the consciousness of this monastic milieu, Benjamin's mission to return home instead of continuing his perpetual pilgrimage in Palestine and Egypt, and his being instructed to transfer the relics are closely related. We should remember that in late antiquity the transfer of relics was not an unimportant matter. Such transfer was reserved especially for bishops and leading monastic fathers, who knew how to exploit relics to enhance their authority and standing. This detailed story, then, aims above all to attest to Benjamin's new charismatic stature after spending years in the holy places and transferring the relics of his master and his disciples. Furthermore, Benjamin was responsible for founding a monastery and building a school[60]. Thus, by locating the memory of his master in a new tomb, he was ensuring his own authority. The hagiographic text in this case functions as a way to control and perform the sacred. It hardly matters whether the story of Benjamin's pilgrimage was based on actual fact. On the other hand, there is no reason to doubt the anxiety about deserted monasteries encapsulated in Benjamin's call to return home and take care of the tomb of his master. As we shall see, the fact that people were streaming to Palestine and Egypt aroused the fear that the monasteries would be abandoned and local shrines fall into ruin.

Accounts of pilgrimage to Palestine, Sinai and Egypt are included also in epitomes of the *Lives* of saints. In truncation the narratives, the epitomizers consistently preserved this information, considering these travels to be a formative phase in the construction of the saint's identity that definitely should not be omitted. Two brief examples will illustrate this point. The first is

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[56] On the East Syrian monastic settlements on Mount Izla, see J.-M. FIEY, *Nisibe: Métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants, des origines à nos jours*, CSCO 388, Louvain 1977. Further evidence for monasteries on Mount Izla in later period indicated by S. BROCK, *Notes on some Monasteries on Mount Izla*, Abr-Nahrain XIX, Leiden, 1980/1, 1-19 (= *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, London 1984, XV).

[57] *Life of Benjamin of Nehardea*, pp. 84-85, trans., p. 257.

[58] On the processes of sacralization of space in the late antique Roman Empire, see B. CASEAU, *Sacred Landscapes*, in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. G.W. BOWERSOCK, P. BROWN and O. GRABAR, Cambridge, 1999, 21-59. On the case of Palestine's sacred landscape from late antiquity up to the eleventh century, see O. LIMOR, *'Holy Journey': Pilgrimage and Christian Sacred Landscape*, in: O. LIMOR – G.G. STROUMSA (eds.), *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, Turnhout 2006, 321-353.

[59] *Life of Benjamin of Nehardea*, p. 86, trans., pp. 257-258.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 88, trans., p. 259.

related to Abraham of Kashkar (491-576 or 588), one of the outstanding teachers of the school of Nisibis in the sixth century and the most important reformer of Nestorian monasticism[61]. In an abbreviated version of the *Life of Abraham*, written perhaps on the basis of numerous longer versions by his disciples, the author included general information about Abraham's pilgrimage. Abraham of Kashkar was ordered in a vision to build a monastery on Mount Izla near Nisibis; it was founded in 571 and was known as «the large monastery»[62]. He went first to Egypt, to the monastery of Antony and Pachomius, and to Scetis, then to Jerusalem to pray in the holy place;[63] he then ascended Mount Sinai. At the end of this long journey, Abraham returned to Nisibis as a miracle worker and a monastic legislator who drew up instructions and rules for monks in the East. In this context the author also mentions a long list of monasteries built by Abraham's disciples on his recommendation, among them a monastery in Palestine, on Mount Ephrem[64]. This list of monasteries enhances Abraham's authority and presents him as a cosmopolitan monastic leader, whose fame and impact through his disciples extended far beyond his local society, and redefined the boundaries of his leadership. After his death, his disciple Rabban Haia[65], a rich man who brought his slave with him to the monastery, emulated this pattern and undertook a journey to the Egyptian desert and to Jerusalem; only a divine call brought him back home, where he founded a monastery in Bet Aramaye in the region of Kashkar[66]. Several sources, which differ in their details and perspectives, recount Abraham of Kashkar's pilgrimage to Palestine and Egypt[67]. My concern here, however, is not so much the historical veracity of these accounts, although this is certainly of great interest to historians. What seem important for my purpose are the redactor's decisions regarding what not to omit when he undertook the task of epitomizing Abraham's *Life* – namely, the sacred travel to Egypt, Sinai and Jerusalem. This has to do not simply with literary conventions and literary

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[61] F. NAU, *Histoires d'Abraham de Kaskar et de Babai de Nisibe*, Revue de L'Orient Chrétien III.21 (1918-1919), 161-172. This epitome comprises two compositions that are no longer extant, a hagiographic work written by three disciples of Abraham, and another work composed by Babi. For a discussion on Abraham's role in the school of Nisibis, see A.H. BECKER, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, Philadelphia 2006, 192-194.

[62] *The Life of Abraham*, text, p. 164, trans., p. 170. On the «large monastery» and its relationship with the ecclesiastical Persian leadership, see A. CAMPLANI, *The Revival of Persian Monasticism (Sixth to Seventh-Centuries): Church Structures, Theological Academy, and Reformed Monks*, in: *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism: Proceedings of the International Seminar, Turin, Dec. 2-4, 2004*, A. CAMPLANI – G. FILORAMO (eds.), Leuven 2007, 277-295.

[63] *The Life of Abraham*, text, p. 163, trans., p. 169.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 165, trans., p. 170-171.

[65] Who was known also by the name of Ganni, FIEY, *Saints syriaques*, pp. 82-83.

[66] This information is mentioned in the Syriac chronicle composed between 912 and 1020 and contains earlier information on the sixth century. *Chronicle of Siirt*, PO XIII, p. 453.

[67] See, for instance, the evidence discussed by M. TAMCKE, *Abraham of Kashkar's Pilgrimage*, ARAM 18-19 (2006-2007), 477-482. Although Tamcke did not endorse the historical veracity of all the details of Abraham's pilgrimage, and he ascribed much importance to the "symbolic value" of the visit of the Egyptian desert, his approach differs from mine, in that he ascribes great importance to "the ancient experience of the salvation in the desert, where the Holy Spirit works" (p. 482), while I tend to stress the function of the literary account on the religious consciousness of the author (or authors) and his monastic milieu.

expectations but also with the concept of sacred travel as a necessity in shaping the identity of saints.

The same can be said of the *Life of Mar Abba*, known also by his Greek name Patrikios, the future Catholicos of the Eastern Syriac Church, from 540 to 551, and a prominent teacher in the school of Nisibis[68]. The information about Mar Abba's travel to the East is inserted in the wider context of his twofold conversion. Instructed by his master, Manah of Arazon, he converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity; then, after learning Greek in Edessa he underwent a scholastic conversion, through which he rejected the Persian and Greek traditional approach to learning and adopted that of the school of Nisibis[69]. After dramatic changes in his life, Mar Abba, with his Greek teacher Thomas, journeyed to Palestine and Egypt. Additional information relating to the pilgrimage of Mar Abba is preserved in the sixth-century composition by Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography*. The author writes of having met Mar Abba with Thomas in Alexandria, during which time he taught him religious piety and the knowledge of truth[70]. Cosmas does not mention their visit to Jerusalem, although he records other travels undertaken by the two, to Constantinople and Greece. It was after this long journey that Mar Abba was appointed the Catholicos of Persia[71].

Abraham of Nethpar (Northern Iraq), like Mar Abba, his contemporary and also an adherent to the school of Nisibis, among the famous pilgrims in the Nestorian monastic milieu, undertook the pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine. After a period of seclusion in a local cave he visited the monastery of Pachomius, holy places in Palestine, and various monks[72]. This example reflects a consistent trend in hagiography – namely, to link the travel of the hero to the construction of his image as a pilgrim-ascetic leader, all the while retaining the trivial features of the text – that is, concise descriptions of the sacred travels. The simple fact that authors used the *topos* of travel in both sorts of hagiographic compositions, whether long or epitomized versions, is telling.

Pilgrimage accounts are preserved as well in collective hagiographic compositions such as Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the monks of Syria* and Cyril of Scythopolis' *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. John of Ephesus (507-588), the anti-Chalcedonian author, inserted three accounts of pilgrims to Jerusalem in his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. John used the image of the traveler in the service of the ongoing theological controversies, in a chapter devoted to Simeon the bishop, «the Persian debater»[73]. Simeon was a wandering monk, preacher and bishop who carried on a war against the disciples of the school of Nestorius. Drawing on the image of Paul in Rom 15:19, John wrote: «It would not have been improper to speak with boldness like the

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[68] The *Life of Mar Abba*, ed. P. Bedjan (*Histoire de Mar-Jab-Alaha*), Paris-Leipzig 1895, 206-287.

[69] As argued by Becker, *Fear of God*, 36-38. See also S. Brock, *Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning*, in: *Syriac Perspectives*, chapter 5, esp. p. 22.

[70] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétienne* II.2, ed. and trans. W. Wolska-Conus, SC 141, Paris 1968, 306-307.

[71] The *Life of Abba*, pp. 218 and 223. See also, P. Peeters, *Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba, catholicos de l'Eglise Perse (540-552)*, Studi e testi 125 (1946), 69-112 (repr. in: Peeters, *Recherches d'Histoire et de Philologie Orientales* Bruxelles 1951, I, 117-63; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, Louvain 1965, 161-162; Becker, *Fear of God*, 157-158.

[72] The information on Abraham is scattered in various hagiographic works: see R.-M. Tonneau, *Abraham de Natpar*, L'Orient syrien 4 (1975), 339.

[73] John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 10, ed. and Engl. trans. by E.W. Brooks, PO XVII, Paris 1923, 137-158.

holy Paul and say: "I have toiled more than all" (1Cor. 15:10), and to say further this also, that he had traveled not only from Jerusalem and as far as Illyricum, but also in all the countries in which the gospel of Christ had traveled»[74]. It is difficult to say of course whether this quotation contains an allusion to any actual visit of Simeon to Jerusalem. Even in this brief literary construction of sanctity, however, the *topos* of travel is not omitted.

The author is much more explicit in the case of Mary, who went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and spent days and nights praying and gazing in wonder and tears at the site of Golgotha. This story exemplifies the perfect blend of an extreme ascetic life in which the ideal of *aksaniutha* is fully realized in the holy places of Jerusalem, and perpetual escape from being honored as well[75]. In the author's eyes, Mary's holiness intensified during her three years of praying and weeping at the entrance to Golgotha, to the point that her holiness merged with that of the holy places.

John of Ephesus dramatically represented the sacred travel to Jerusalem as an initiation to ascetic life in the story of Susan, a virtuous girl who decided to go and worship in the holy places[76]. Her parents laughed at her, saying: «You haven't even learned to understand the Scriptures, and yet you want to go to Jerusalem!». She finally reached the holy places after chancing upon a large caravan of women and men traveling toward Jerusalem[77]. Although it was against the monastic rules to admit children to monasteries, the young Susan insisted on joining a community of women located between Ascalon and Gaza[78]. After repeated pleas she entered the monastery, changed her name and advanced in her ascetic career. An echo of the persecution that befell the region of Gaza, forcing the women to submit to the Chalcedonian faith, is interwoven in her story, in which she resists the Chalcedonian cause. It is uncertain when this persecution took place; Justin the First, however, who became an emperor in 518, adopted a severe policy toward the anti-Chalcedonians. In the period 525-531 he banished monks and bishops from Syria and Palestine to Egypt. John provides yet another piece of information about the persecution, this time against the monastery of Peter the Iberian, leader of the Palestinian anti-Chalcedonian camps, near Mauma. He and his followers were expelled to Alexandria. Susan and her entourage, having escaped from the monastery, also reached Alexandria. From there she wandered in the desert, increasing her holiness[79].

I have recounted here several stories of pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine from late antique Syriac hagiography; additional material survives from the early Islamic period[80], such as the

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[74] *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 10, p. 138.

[75] *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 12, PO XVII, 166-170. Eng. tr., S. BROCK – S. ASHBROOK HARVEY, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, Berkeley 1987, 124-126. For a discussion of Mary's pilgrimage in the context of ascetic culture, see *Encountering the Sacred,* pp. 150-151.

[76] *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 27, PO XVIII, Paris 1924, 541-558. For a new English translation, see *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 133-141.

[77] *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 27, 545-543

[78] For a list of the monasteries in the region of Gaza, to which this monastery should be added, see Y. HIRSCHFELD, *The Monasteries of Gaza*, in: *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, eds. B. BITTON-ASHKELONY – A. KOFSKY, Leiden 2004, 61-88.

[79] On the fate of the anti-Chalcedonian monastic community in the region of Gaza, see BITTON-ASHKELONY – KOFSKY, *The Monastic School of Gaza*, 213-222.

[80] See, for example, the story about Ananisho's pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Scetis in the seventh century reported by Thomas of Marga; E.A. BUDGE (ed.), *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Maragâ A.D. 840,* I, London 1893, 175. There are also information about groups of pilgrims, not only individual accounts. See, for instance, the story on the penitential pilgrimage of a group to Jerusalem after

report about John of Dailam, an East Syrian saint of the seventh and eighth centuries: «He rose up as instructed by God and went up to pray in Jerusalem, receiving a blessing from the holy places where our Lord had walked»[81]. Some narratives lie in important manuscripts that still await publication. A prime example is the *Life of Theodotos of Amida* (d. 698)[82]. This impressive *Life* – discovered in 1976 – is a mine of information on daily life in Amida in the early Islamic period. The *Life* contains accounts of four journeys by a certain Theodotos, who is unknown from other sources[83]. He was a wandering monk who escaped from the burden of bishopric in his city and traveled to Egypt, Sinai and Jerusalem with a sack of relics on his back, accompanied by his disciple. He ended his career as a saint who dealt with various illnesses, particularly headaches. Although many details concerning his miraculous travels to the East can be dismissed by historians as fictitious, the *Life of Theodotos* provides further confirmation that the continuous struggle of monastic and Church leaders to prevent monks going on pilgrimage or incessantly wandering from one holy place to another did not succeed.

One of the most explicit texts revealing the ecclesiastical politics on the matter is the *Synodicon Orientale*, which contains the acts issued by the Nestorian synods, among them the synod held in 585/6 and headed by Iso'yahb I, the Catholicos of the East from 582 to 595[84]. This document, compiled in the late eighth or the early ninth century, shows signs of editorial revision. The Synod addressed various social matters, among them care for the poor and widowed, leadership, the authority of bishops, the relationship of master and disciple in the school of Nisibis[85], policies regarding the construction and repair of monasteries, and alms to the local churches and monasteries. It is precisely in this social and religious context of organizing the local communities that the Synod related to pilgrimage and evoked the topic of monks traveling outside the local bishopric, and not from the theological perspective known from other sources. The canon decreed that the inhabitants should support the renovation and reconstruction of monasteries and holy places in the region[86]; the foundation of new

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the great plague in the year 543/4 («the illness of madness and frenzy lasted one year, especially in the city of Amida») reported in the eighth century chronicle, *Chronicon Syriacum Pseudo-Dionysiani,* ed. J.-B. Chabot, vol. II, CSCO, Syr. III.2, Paris 1933, 118. Eng. trans., W. WITAKOWSKI, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle (Known also as the Chronicle of Zuqnin),* Part III, Liverpool 1996, 106-107.

[81] Ed. and trans., S.P. BROCK, *A Syriac* Life of John of Dailam 26, *in:* Parole de l'Orient 106 (1981-1982) 139.148.

[82] On this discovery, see A. VÖÖBUS, *Découverte de la biographie de Théodote d'Amid par Semon de Samosata,* Le Muséon 89 (1976) 39-42; ID., *Discovery of an Unknown Syrian Author: Theodote of Amida,* Ancient Near Eastern Studies 24 (1986) 196-201; A.N. PALMER, Semper vagus: *The Anatomy of a Mobile Monk,* Studia Patristica 18/2 (1989), 255-260; ID., *Saints' Lives with a Difference: Elijah on John of Tella (d. 538) and Joseph on Theodotos of Amida (d. 698),* in: H.J.W. DRIJVERS – R. LAVENANT – C. MOLENBERG – G.J. REININK (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genre in Syriac Literature (Groningen-Oosterhesselen 10-12 September),* Rome 1987, 203-216. There is also a translation of the Syriac text into Garshuni made in the 18th century, A. PALMER, *The Garshuni Version of the* Life of Theodotos of Amida, Parole de l'Orient 16 (1990-1991) 253- 260.

[83] As the text has not been published, the information here is based on the publications of Vööbus and Palmer.

[84] The Syriac text with French translation published by J.B. CHABOT (ed.), *Synodicon Orientale,* Paris 1902.

[85] On Iso'yahb I and his activity in the school of Nisibis, see A. VÖÖBUS, *History of the School of Nisibis,* Louvain 1965, 223-230. For the ideological and intellectual background of the school of Nisibis in the sixth and seventh centuries, see BECKER, *Fear of God.*

[86] *Synodicon Orientale* X, p. 146, trans., p. 408.

monasteries was forbidden if it could not be proven that there would be enough funds for their building and maintenance. According to the canon, the merit of one who restores a monastery is even greater than that of a founder. It is repeatedly stated that the bishop will consecrate a newly built monastery only if the revenue for supplying the needs of local pilgrims and visitors is guaranteed[87].

All these canons lend support to the typical depiction in many hagiographic narratives: pilgrims streamed to the East, abandoned their monasteries and thus perpetuated a real social and economic problem. The repeated calls of the Church and monastic authorities for pilgrims to return to their homeland cannot be dismissed as a mere fiction intended to make the story more interesting. Pilgrimage had become an almost obligatory act of piety in monastic culture and a mark of religious identity created tensions with the local authorities that explain the panic underlying the various canons of the Synod. These canons also testify that the *topos* of the monk-pilgrim establishing a monastery after returning home was not a pure fabrication of hagiographers looking to enhance the sacred territory of their hero. There was a very real tension between this religious act and the economic needs of the local communities. Another canon disclosed this tension, explaining that many had asked for permission to protest against those who bestow their alms on distant and foreign places, resulting in many monasteries and churches falling into ruin. The Synod, therefore, requested the believers to direct their donations to the local churches and monasteries, and only then would the interdiction to visit other places be removed[88]. Given the prevalence of ruined and vacant churches and monasteries, the Synod's stance against pilgrimage comes as no surprise[89]. It is worth noting that the Synod actually prohibited visits on Sundays and feast days to shrines located in monasteries outside the bishopric – probably because donations were much more generous on those days[90]. Canon XV stipulates:

> Above all, believers must visit the holy monasteries, churches and monks' cells in the villages where they live. They must pay their vows and give donations and alms for oblation of their sins in their own places! Should the custom to wander from one place to another continue; thus will many monasteries be destroyed, the sin will dwell, the inhabitants will be shocked, the non-believers will laugh at us, and the study of many will cease[91].

Since the monasteries functioned also as schools and social institutions that governed many aspects of life, the anxiety reflected in the following canon and the clear standpoint against pilgrimage are understandable:

> Why, therefore, and for what benefits do the believers wander in places that are not theirs? If it is for pleasure, then it is an infantile act, this is rather….for the benefit of the belly than for the spirit. If it is because they expect to gain a spiritual benefit that they leave the holy places in their own territory and go to pray in holy monasteries located outside their places, thinking

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[87] *Ibid.*, XI, p. 147, trans., p. 408.

[88] *Ibid.*, XII, p. 147-148, trans., p. 409.

[89] Destruction of the monasteries and churches was probably the result of the plague at that time. See, for example, V. ERHART, *The Development of Syriac Christian Canon Law in the Sasanian Empire*, in: R.W. MATHISEN (ed.), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2001, 115-129.

[90] *Synodicon Orientale* XI, p. 146, trans., p. 407.

[91] *Ibid.*, XV, p. 182, trans., p. 441. On this passage, see also FIEY, *Le pèlerinage*, 115-116.

that God will hear them better and will be more accepting of their petitions and offerings, then, their opinion is wrong![92].

This phrasing is reminiscent of the arguments used by Gregory of Nyssa in his famous letter against pilgrimage to Jerusalem, although it is uncertain whether Gregory's protest lay directly behind this canon[93]. However, even if it is not possible to show a clear link to Gregory's letter against pilgrimage to Jerusalem[94], the arguments against pilgrimage voiced in Canon XV are classic, based mainly on the biblical view of God's omnipresence. Moreover, the author of the canon buttressed his position by drawing on famous passages in the New Testament that reject the holiness of earthly places – such as those attacking the worship of Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem as well as on Mount Gerizim. The canon drew on the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus: «Woman, believe me, the hour comes when you shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father…the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth…God is Spirit and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth» (John 4:21-24). According to the canon, before the coming of the Lord, people worshiped idols and statues in specific places because they thought that God was active and helpful there. But Christians should not now behave like the Jews – who were punished, expelled by force and widely dispersed.[95] Despite the polemical aspects of his argument, which is not free from anti-Jewish rhetoric that might be a later interpolation in the text, the canon once more addresses the main issue of the Synod, saying:

> If there are believers that after visiting the monasteries and churches where they live, still wish to visit monasteries located outside their places, and not because they hold the view that God will help them there (in the places outside their region), but because they want to endow part of their property to the head of the monastery, we will not prevent them. Yet if they wander from one place to another as people that have lost their God, and they do not know to whom they listen, then they are mistaken and distance themselves from perfect and true law[96].

The decisions clearly outlined and adopted in the *Synodicon Orientale* attest to the concern of the Catholicos to secure the flimsy ties of believers to their local institutions, monastic and ecclesiastic, when pilgrimage to remote shrines and to the Holy Land had become a real threat.

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[92] *Synodicon Orientale* XV, p. 183, trans., p. 442.

[93] Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter 2* in: *Lettres,* ed. and trans. P. MARAVAL (SC 363) Paris 1990, 107-123. For the theological and political aspects of Gregory of Nyssa's letter, see BITTON-ASHKELONY, *Encountering the Sacred,* 30-32.48-64, where previous studies relating to this letter are discussed.

[94] Although about half of Gregory's extant writings were translated into Syriac by the sixth century, there is no trace of *Letter 2*. See M.F.G. PARMENTIER, *Syriac Translations of Gregory of Nyssa,* Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica 20 (1989) 143-193; ID., *Syriac Translations of Gregory of Nyssa,* Studia Patristica 22 (1989) 60-64; F.S. PERICOLI RIDOLFINI, *Versioni siriache di Gregorio di Nissa*, in: *Autori classici in lingue del Vicino e Medio Oriente. Atti del VI, VII, e VIII Seminario sul tema "Recupero di testi classici attraverso recezioni in lingue del Vicino e Medio Oriente* (Milano 5-6 Ottobre 1987; Napoli 5-6 Dicembre 1988; Bologna 13-14 Ottobre 1989), ed. G. FIACCADORI, Roma 2001, 47-56. Among the Syriac fragments of Gregory's letters only one small fragment of letter 3 is extant which does not include the information regarding Gregory's visit to Jerusalem in 381/382. On this fragment, see PARMENTIER, *Syriac Translations*, 184-185.

[95] *Synodicon Orientale* XV, pp. 183-184, trans., pp. 442-443.

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 184, trans., pp. 443-444.

Above all, a great effort was made to deepen believers' sense of obligation to their local church. Only in the context of a society in which pilgrimage had grown to be a mark of cultural and communal identity, and not merely 'a thing to do', can such panic and anxiety about its social and economic consequences as voiced in the *Synodicon Orientale* be understood.

In conclusion, late antique pilgrimage to Palestine, Sinai and the Egyptian desert Fathers as narrated in Syriac hagiography – whether it really occurred or not – is an integral part of the Syriac ascetic discourse, serving to shape monastic identity in the East Syriac Church, with its center in Nisibis, and in the West Syriac Church as well[97]. Even if we assume that many accounts of pilgrimage in Syriac hagiographical texts should be considered as *topos*, the choice of this particular *topos* was a deliberate act of the hagiographer aimed at shaping the charismatic authority of his hero. Pilgrimage was a visiting card promoting the charisma and stature of the monk, and it had major consequences for society as a whole. The Syriac evidence that I have presented here is in line with scholarship that perceives the construction of identity, at its heart, as being a matter of an *imaginaire*, rather than a fixed reality[98]. But my interest in these stories is that they point clearly to the social forces that the dynamic of such an *imaginaire* created.

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[97] On the formation of East Syrian identity, especially from the theological perspective, see G.J. REININK, *Tradition and the Formation of Nestorian Identity in Sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq*, Church History and Religious Culture 89. 1-3 (2009) 217-250.

[98] R. MILES (ed.), *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, London, 1999, 1-15, esp. p. 4.