

Arabian Christianity: The Historical Evidence for Christians on the Southern Side of the Arabian Gulf.

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Introduction

Whilst the relative scarcity of both texts and archaeological remains makes it difficult to pinpoint the arrival of Christianity in the Arabian Gulf with any certainty it seems relatively safe to assume that there were Christians in the region from the fourth century onwards. Initially at least, these Christians were not native to the area. In 256 and 260 the Sasanian King, Shapur I deported large numbers of Christian prisoners of war from Antioch having defeated the Roman citizens of Syria in battle.

The material evidence for this is somewhat limited but late antique Syrian artefacts have been found on both sides of the Gulf. Ghirshman recorded that on Kharg there were a number of pre-Islamic rock tombs and the most spectacular of these were two caves of a “Palmyrene” type. In addition there were more than a hundred other tombs in the eastern part of the island and he reported that a number had crosses inscribed over their entrances and in one case one had a Syriac inscription. Another had a cartouche but the inscription was too weathered to be legible.¹

The presence of a Palmyrene trading colony seems even more likely on the Arabian side of the water. Funeral reliefs have been discovered on the island of Tarut which are stylistically extremely close to those of late antique Syria and could conceivably have been grave monuments for an early Christian community.² These “Palmyrene style” artefacts suggest that there was a Syrian presence in the Gulf even before Christianity and with more Syrians deported to the area in the fourth century it is unsurprising that Syriac-speaking Christians soon established themselves in the region. However it must be noted that whilst in both these cases the tombs and the statues are recognisably of a style evolving in late antique Palmyra, it is impossible to make any assumptions about the religion of the people buried or depicted.

The deported prisoners initially settled in Mesopotamia and Iran but further persecutions under Shapur II (339-379) drove these Christians of Syrian extraction

¹ Y. Calvet, *Monuments paléo-chrétiens à Koweït et dans la région du Golfe*, Symposium Syriacum VII, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256 (1998), pp.671-85, p.679.

² Potts, p.212. The funerary monuments are now in the National Museum of Bahrain and show stylistic links with Palmyrene art of the first centuries AD. Potts also compares them to late sixth-century grave-stelae from Rasm al-Qanafez in Syria. However it is difficult to say whether these are “Christian” monuments or otherwise given their lack of Christian symbols.

further into the Gulf where they settled along the coastal regions.³ Therefore we find two streams of Syrian influence reaching the Gulf; the Antiochean Christian deportees and the Palmyrene traders who plied their trade across the desert and down the vital artery of the Euphrates into the Gulf and beyond.

The evidence of late antique maritime trade suggests that the region became a major trading hub, perhaps to some extent taking some trade away from the overland routes, from the third century onwards when the Christian deportees began to settle into their new communities. It seems that the Christians used different routes and were perhaps more adventurous than other traders as they appear to have utilised different harbours and followed an alternative route to the native merchants. The merchant fleet set sail from the north side of the Gulf before crossing the water and sailing along the south side of the Gulf, touching Oman and then heading for Socotra off Yemen before catching the Arabian trade winds towards southern India and then vice versa.

It seems that this initiative was supported by the Sasanian rulers who rewarded this search for new markets by offering privileges to the Christians of Persis. They were settled in the most important towns of the province and occupied royal bases in both Bahrain and Oman.⁴ The view that the Christians were settled along the coast and clustered in the harbour towns is supported by the fact that the identifiable bishoprics of the region are all in coastal areas.

Whilst these Syrian settlers spoke Syriac, which was also the liturgical language of the Church of the East, it was soon apparent that many of these coastal communities

³ See D.T.Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vol 2 (Oxford, 1990), p.242 & V.Bernard et al, 'L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweït', *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy*2 (1991) pp.145-181, p.165.

⁴ Gropp, G., Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf, in Schippman, K., Herling, A., & Salles, J.F. eds, *Golf-Archäologie* (Buch am Erlbach, 1991), pp.83-88, p.87.

conducted their business in Persian.⁵ Persian became more common even in ecclesiastical circles and this is clearly illustrated by the sources.⁶

However this does not mean that Syriac was completely obsolete. As late as the twelfth century the *Qanoneh* of Abu Halim (1176-1190) were a collection of Syriac prayers written for the priests of Bet Qatrayeh and the “maritime isles”. Whether or not this was a purely academic exercise or whether there was an active Christian community in the region at the time is open to conjecture, but it is significant to note that the Christian community on the Arabian side of the Gulf was still referred to in ecclesiastical literature as late as the twelfth century.⁷

By the fourth century there is the first literary evidence for the presence of Christians in the region. There are two fourth-century accounts of wandering monks descending from Mesopotamia to convert “the isles”. The *Vita Iona*e purports to be the story of a monk who lived during the time of Catholicos Barb’ashemin (343-346) and refers to a monastery of Rabban Thomas that existed in the region of Bet Qatrayeh.⁸ The *Chronicle of Seert* mentions a monk named Abdisho who was active during the Catholicate of Tomarsa (363-371) and who was from Mesene. He travelled to the Gulf where he founded several monasteries before returning to Hira.⁹ These accounts and evidence of trade routes overland from Iraq show that Christianity also reached the Gulf from Mesopotamia.

⁵ This Persian influence on both Syriac and Arabic is mentioned in a number of different contexts. An early example of this is the Apocryhal *Acts of Thomas*, see J.K.Elliott (ed.) *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1993), pp.437-511. This was probably written in third-century Edessa in what was then the Roman province of Osrhoene (now Şanlıurfa in Turkey). Whilst always viewed as a heterodox text outside the Christian mainstream, the *Acts of Thomas* are a useful clue to the situation in the Gulf. A key element to the text is the inclusion of a prose poem known as the *Hymn of the Pearl* or the *Hymn of the Soul*. This is included in the text as a dream experienced by Thomas in prison and recounts the story of a prince from “the east” who is sent by his parents to Egypt to find and bring back a priceless pearl which has been taken from them. This quest has been interpreted allegorically in many ways and is often attributed to a Persian pre-Christian tradition. What is interesting in the context of the current work is the emphasis on the pearl as a central symbolic element (for the significance of the pearling industry in relation to Gulf Christianity see below) and the fact that it was originally written in a form of Syriac that included a number of Persian words in the text. Early grammarians noted also that Persian words were mixed with the Arabic spoken along the coast at a time when the written and liturgical language was Syriac but the vernacular was Arabic (Potts, p.244).

⁶ For example, Ma’na II, who is listed as Metropolitan of Rev Ardashir at a 486 synod, is mentioned by the *Chronicle of Seert* as translating various religious works from Syriac into Persian and sending the volume as a gift to the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh (Potts, p.244).

⁷ Fiey, p.212.

⁸ The *Vita Iona*e is also notable in that it talks of a monastery in the south of Bet Qatrayeh that is on “the borders of the black island”. It has been posited that this black island was either Sir Bani Yas or Dalma, now both in Abu Dhabi.

⁹ See Potts, p.245, Bernard, p.172 & J.S.Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (Beirut, 1990), p.280.

Finally there is the evidence of an early Christian community in Mazun (modern Oman) as the presence of a bishop from this region is recorded in synods of the Church of the East from a very early date. Although there is speculation that the emissary sent by the Byzantine Emperor Constantius II (337-61) to Yemen made converts as far as the Hadhramaut it seems unlikely that this was the cause of Christianity in Oman. Theophilus the Indian was, like the emperor, a follower of the Arian heresy.

The literary evidence suggests that the Christians of Mazun were members of the Church of the East (Nestorian Christians) and so it seems that they were evangelised from some other source, most probably through their trade contacts both overland to Mesopotamia and by sea with the Gulf and India. Anything else is highly unlikely as there is no record of the Arian heresy ever gaining a foothold in the Arabian peninsula. It must be acknowledged that there is extremely little evidence about this community either in the literary or archaeological record. However it seems reasonable to conclude that Bet Mazunaye was never as prominent as Bet Qatrayeh as the term Bet Mazunaye seems only ever to have referred to one diocese whereas Bet Qatrayeh was a collective name for a number of bishoprics along the southern coast of the Gulf.¹⁰

Ecclesiastical authority: Catholicoi, Metropolitans and Bishops

In 410 a synod was held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon that formulated the hierarchy of the Church of the East. Having broken away from the western Syrian Church, later called the Syrian Orthodox (monophysite or “Jacobite”) Church¹¹ this new denomination was formally recognised by the Sasanian King Yazdagird and their leader, Mar Isaac, was declared “the great Metropolitan, the Catholicos of Seleucia and Ctesiphon”.¹² Beneath the Catholicos there were the Metropolitans, who were each responsible for ruling an ecclesiastical province that included a number of diocesan bishops. Whilst it is unclear exactly which date a Metropolitan was created for the Gulf region by c.415 there was a Metropolitan of Fars with a seat at Rev-Ardeshir. He was listed as being sixth in matters of Metropolitan precedence and his jurisdiction included both sides of the Gulf.¹³ This meant that the eastern area of the Arabian peninsula, known as Bet Qatrayeh, looked to Persia rather than Mesopotamia in Church matters.

¹⁰ See below.

¹¹ The Syrian Orthodox are referred to as the West Syrian tradition in literary sources and the Church of the East is called the East Syrian tradition.

¹² J.F.Healey, ‘The Christians of Qatar in the 7th Century A.D.’, in I.R.Netton (ed), *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, vol.1 (Leiden, 2000) pp.222-237, p.224. The Church of the East officially broke away in 431 after the Council of Ephesus and the Syrian Orthodox broke from the Greeks after the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

¹³ Healey, p.226.

The area referred to as Bet Qatrayeh was actually a group of bishoprics that spread from contemporary Kuwait eastwards. To the eastern end of the peninsula lay Bet Mazunaye. This area included modern Oman and regularly sent a bishop to synods held by the Church of the East. However there is only ever one bishop at a time connected to Bet Mazunaye, whereas Bet Qatrayeh referred to a collection of bishoprics suggesting a much larger province.

It is now difficult to assert with any certainty where the boundary between these two ecclesiastical authorities was drawn but the most likely conclusion is that it was somewhere in the territory of the contemporary United Arab Emirates. The existing archaeological evidence, although scant, suggests that the island of Marawah may be the eastern boundary of Bet Qatrayeh. The evidence for this is that the foundation appears to have been a daughter house of the monastery on Sir Bani Yas and was left unfinished when the site seems to have been abandoned in the mid seventh century. This would suggest that this was as far as Christianity stretched in Bet Qatrayeh but we cannot state this with absolute certainty.¹⁴ However the archaeology of the UAE is a relatively new phenomenon and it may be that more evidence will be forthcoming in the future.

One matter that has remained unclear is the extent to which the bishops of Bet Qatrayeh were prepared to accept the authority of the Metropolitan of Fars (based in Rev-Ardeshir). There are a number of factors that support the view that this was never an easy relationship. The Christians of Bet Qatrayeh were native Syriac speakers whilst the Christians on the other side of the water, despite their Syrian origins, appear to have soon adapted to Persian dialects.¹⁵

This division between the Persian and Mesopotamian Church appears to have appeared relatively early. In the fifth century the Church of Persia adopted St. Thomas

¹⁴ The archaeological record remains incomplete for the Abu Dhabi islands but the evidence largely supports this theory. Very little archaeology of the late pre-Islamic period is still extant with the exception of a variety of pot scatters. However the distribution of this pottery (See R. Carter, "Tracing Bronze Age Trade in the Arabian Gulf: evidence for way-stations of the Merchants of Dilmun between Bahrain and the Northern Emirates", *forthcoming*) largely fits the pattern of occupation suggested, ie that Christian settlements were perhaps more numerous towards the west and the Qatar peninsula. However, we must not make the mistake of arguing from silence. Recent evidence from Abu l' Abyad suggests that the island was occupied in the late pre-Islamic period and the evidence of extensive shell middens shows that it was used frequently by the pearling fleet. Taking into account the lack of archaeological data available for the coast between Abu Dhabi and Ras Al Khaima we must accept that the evidence is changing constantly, but that at the time of writing there is scant evidence for Christian sites east of Marawah.

¹⁵ A cross in Mylapore is stylistically very close to reliefs found at Mamallapuram near Madras. These have been dated to the era of King Narasimha (625-645) and the cursive Pahlavi on the Christian inscription (on the cross) has been put at c.600. The inscription reads "Our lord Messiah may show mercy over Gabriel, son of Chaharbokht. Long life may be for him who made this (cross)." The name Chaharbokht is typical of personal names in the region of Rev-Ardeshir and is a form of Pahlavi dialect rather than a classical term. It translates as "having four sons" and demonstrates that by the beginning of the seventh-century the merchants of Rev-Ardeshir were using Pahlavi rather than Syriac (which was the liturgical language of the Church of the East). See Gropp, pp.86-7.

as their saint and evangelist, in contrast to the Mesopotamians claimed to have been evangelised by Mari, their patron saint.¹⁶ Linguistically they were also divided. Whilst in Bet Qatrayeh the Christians appear to have been familiar with Syriac (later mixed with Persian and Arabic) the Persian Church wasted no time in translating Holy Scripture into Persian. In 420 Bishop Ma 'na of Rev-Ardeshir translated the Bible into Persian and so from an early date we can see that the use of Syriac was not widespread in Rev-Ardeshir despite the fact that it was the liturgical language of the Church of the East.¹⁷ This linguistic and ethnic difference between the two sides of the Gulf appears to have been a cause of tension and matters reached open rebellion in the seventh century.

The rift began in the Catholicosate of Isho Yahv III (580-659). Isho Yahv was Catholicos from 649 until his death in 659. He was an educated man whom we know through a selection of literary works that have survived. He was an acknowledged expert on the liturgy and undertook a variety of reforms in this respect. However to fully understand him we must see his reign in the context of the extraordinary events that were occurring all around him.

When Isho Yahv became Catholicos it was the fifth year of the rule of the third of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Uthman, and the Muslim conquest was firmly established. However relations with the Muslims do not appear to have been a particularly difficult issue for Isho Yahv, in a letter to Metropolitan Simeon of Rev-Ardeshir he said:

“Quant aux Arabes, à qui Dieu a accordé l’empire de la terre dans cette tempête, vous savez qu’ils sont pour nous. Non seulement ils ne combattent pas la religion chrétienne, mais ils louent notre foi, ils honorent les prêtres et les saints de Notre Seigneur, ils font des dons aux églises et aux couvents.....La foi est en paix et florissante.”¹⁸

It seems that the first Muslims had better relations with the Church of the East than with the Syrian Orthodox (Monophysite) Church and that this attitude was shared by Isho Yahv who preferred dealing with the Muslims to dealing with his co-religionists.

The chronicler Mari states that Isho Yahv was held in such high regard by the Muslim governors that he would visit them every Friday to ask favours for the good of the Christian population.¹⁹ However there were obvious problems for the Church at this time and Isho Yahv was fighting to prevent his flock from abandoning the Church. In

¹⁶ Gropp, p.87.

¹⁷ Gropp, p.85.

¹⁸ J.M.Fiey, *Īšō‘yaw le grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien Īšō‘yaw III d’Adiab’ne (580-569)*, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35 (1969), pp.305-333 & 36 (1970), pp.5-46, p.30.

¹⁹ Fiey, *Īšō‘yaw le grand*, p.31.

further correspondence with Simeon of Rev-Ardeshir he commented on the failure of the Church in Bet Mazunaye:

“Pourquoi donc vos Mazūnāyé ont-ils abandonné leur foi à cause des Musulmans? Ce n’est pas, comme ils le prétendent, parce qu’ils ont été forcés à abandonner leur religion, mais parce qu’ils leur ont ordonné de céder la moitié de leurs biens pour avoir le droit de garder leur foi. Mais eux, abandonnant la foi qui est utile pour l’éternité, ils ont gardé la moitié des biens de ce monde qui passé. La foi que tous les peuples ont achetée et achètent encore du sang versé de leur cou, et par laquelle ils gardent l’héritage de la vie éternelle, vos gens de Mazūn n’ont pas voulu l’acheter de la moitié de leurs biens.”²⁰

For Isho Yahv the cruellest blow was that the very worldly issue of money was what prompted the Mazunites to convert rather than deeply held religious beliefs.

However it appears to have been a financial issue that sparked a schism between the Catholicosate and this same Metropolitan Simeon of Rev-Ardeshir. This schism had wide reaching consequences and certainly increased incidences of apostasy. It began with a dispute over India. The Catholicos wanted a Bishop in India but Simeon refused to consecrate one, perhaps because this would have ended tribute from India being paid to him. By refusing to submit to Isho Yahv, Simeon plunged the Church of the East into a crisis and its repercussions were swift and numerous. The problem actually had its roots from the time of the election of Isho Yahv, when Simeon failed to send the usual letters of welcome expected in such a situation.

Politically Simeon knew that he was beyond the reach of the Catholicos as Isho Yahv was resident in the province of Bet Aramaye which had been taken by the Muslims in 635. Persia meanwhile had remained under Sasanian jurisdiction and was ruled by Yazdegerd III. Although the fall of Istahr in 648/9 ended this, Simeon had become used to his independence and a precedent had been set, in the years around these events more than twenty Bishops and two Metropolitans were consecrated in the region without the legal investiture of the Catholicos. Isho Yahv did not seek to undo this but sought a compromise by asking that they exercise their episcopates in communion with the Church and demonstrate their willingness to do this by an exchange of letters with him. When these letters were not immediately forthcoming he initially left the matter but eventually he had to act to counteract this disobedience.²¹ Isho Yahv sent letters and envoys to Rev-Ardeshir without success

²⁰ Fiey, *Īšō‘yaw le grand*, p.33.

²¹ The Metropolitanate of Rev-Ardeshir had a reputation for insubordination long before this crisis. The province had been raised to the level of Metropolitanate in the time of Catholicos Ishaq (399-410) or Yahwalaha I (415-420) and, as mentioned above, was sixth in order of preference amongst the Metropolitanates of the Church of the East. Dissension soon followed. In 497 Metropolitan Yazdad boycotted a synod held by Catholicos Bawai. In 544 a dispute between two rival Metropolitans Narsai and Elisa was ended when both were deposed by Catholicos Aba I and replaced by Ma’na. Between 551 and 566 Catholicos Joseph treated Bishop Malka of Darabgard roughly causing all of Persia to rally behind Malka. In 585 Metropolitan Gregory and all his Bishops refused to attend the synod of Isho Yahv I. With a history like this it is no surprise that the annalist Mari claims that none of Simeon’s predecessors had ever submitted to the Catholicos, largely because they considered themselves as the

and in the midst of the confusion the Bishops of Bet Qatrayeh took the opportunity to declare that they would no longer follow the Metropolitanate on the other side of the water.

One issue that has never been particularly clear is whether or not Bet Qatrayeh was firmly within the fold of Rev-Ardeshir or had actually enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy over the centuries. There are several references that suggest that there was regular contact across the water. The clearest illustrations to this are references to the languages that were utilised in Bet Qatrayeh. Early grammarians had commented that Persian words were mixed into the Arabic spoken on the southern side of the Gulf. Whilst the written and liturgical language of Bet Qatrayeh was Syriac the vernacular was Arabic but the fact that the area was under a Persian ecclesiastical province ensured that many inhabitants would have known some Persian. Several references to the languages utilised for religious meetings cast light upon this issue.

Ma'na II the Metropolitan of Rev-Ardeshir who attended the synod of Acace in 486 is mentioned in the *Chronicle of Seert* as translating a selection of religious works from Syriac into Persian and sending this work as a gift to the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh. Al-Numan III (579-601), the last independent Lahmid king of al-Hira was a native Arabic speaker who had a Persian interpreter called Ma'ne, who was a native of Darin on the island of Tarut, now in contemporary Bahrain. As Potts comments Persian was “an important and widely spoken vernacular in the area.”²²

Whilst this tells us that there was regular interaction between the two sides of the Gulf it still does not clarify whether or not the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh remained obedient to Rev-Ardeshir. There is no reason to suspect that relations were particularly difficult but neither should we be surprised that Bet Qatrayeh ultimately sought independence either. Although it appears that originally both sides of the water were evangelised by deported Syrian Christians and traders, after several centuries these people would have become fully assimilated. The culture of the north side was Persian but on the south side they were part of the Mesopotamian and Arab spheres of influence.

Which leads us to the matter of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Isho Yahv is quite definite that the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh are *more* in error than those of Rev-Ardeshir because they are refusing not only his authority but that of the Metropolitanate of Rev-Ardeshir as well. This is pointed out at length to them in the five letters to Bet Qatrayeh that are still extant. One is addressed to the Bishops, two to the monks and two to the people of Bet Qatrayeh, with the people he also addresses the lower clergy of the region as well. In these letters it is clear that many more were sent (and are now lost) as he hoped that the circulation of these epistles would help to bring the people of the region back to the true path.

mother province of the Persian Empire whereas Ctesiphon had always been in the lands of the Arameans. See Fiey, *Īšō'yaw le grand*, p.36.

²² Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, p.244-5.

Although Isho Yahv visited Persia and settled his dispute with Rev-Ardeshir, he died before he could make his proposed journey to Bet Qatrayeh and it was left to his successor, George I (661-80), to finally resolve matters. At a local Synod held by George in 676 a Metropolitan of Bet Qatrayeh is referred to.²³ This is the first and last reference to such a title. The council was held at Darin in May 676 and was attended by Bishops from Darin, Mazun, Hagar and Hatta.

A Bishop Thomas was named Metropolitan at this meeting which Fiey argues was a concession in the negotiations to bring Bet Qatrayeh back into the fold as this title was never formally used either at the time or subsequently. On the other hand Beaucamp and Robin see this as an argument from silence, pointing out that the role of the Metropolitan is defined in canon 3 on episcopal recognition.²⁴ Other canons also illustrate the concessions that both sides were called upon to make. The Bishops of Bet Qatrayeh had to concede over the exchange of letters with the Catholicos and over episcopal visits to him. They also had to pledge not to take ecclesiastical disputes before secular rulers but to settle legal disputes between Christians internally. It was agreed that Christians would pay poll-tax to the local secular authorities but that Bishops would be exempt from this. One interesting aside is that canon 14 makes reference to Christian women marrying “Pagans” and how this practice should be discouraged, suggesting that a number of women were perhaps marrying Muslims.²⁵ After this period records become increasingly scant but it appears that from this date Bet Qatrayeh was no longer linked to Rev-Ardeshir.

The Literary and Intellectual Life of Bet Qatrayeh

“It was Christianity which, for various political and ecclesiastical reasons, remained insular: it had its own liturgical life, hierarchy, dogmas, and discipline. Because of its strengths, it was able to survive persecution, and was even able to reach as far as central China in an important and inspiring missionary expansion in 638AD.”²⁶

This remark is made in an introduction to a work by the most famous ecclesiastical and literary figure to come out of Bet Qatrayeh, St. Isaac of Nineveh. It highlights one of the surprising elements of Gulf Christianity: how did a province on the fringes of society that has always been seen as only marginal to Christian affairs manage to produce so many learned and respected figures in the seventh century?

St. Isaac of Nineveh is undoubtedly the most influential and significant individual associated with Gulf Christianity. He was born in Bet Qatrayeh at some point in the first half of the seventh century. We know very little about his life and rely solely on

²³ J.M.Fiey, ‘Diocèses syriens orientaux du golfe persique’, *Memorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis* (Louvain, 1969) pp.176-219, reprinted *Communautés syriaques en Iran et Irak des origines à 1552* (London, 1979) II, p.211.

²⁴ For a summary of the arguments see Healey, p.233.

²⁵ Healey, p.233.

²⁶ M. Hansbury, in the introduction to Isaac of Nineveh, trans. M. Hansbury, *On Ascetical Life* (New York, 1998), p.11.

two short sources one a ninth-century text by the Nestorian writer Isho‘dnah and the other by a Syrian Orthodox author. Both say that he was born in Bet Qatrayeh and the Syrian source says that he studied the Church Fathers and taught as a monk in his home province.²⁷ To place his life in context it must be pointed out that he was a monk at the time of the Bet Qatrayeh rebellion against Catholicos Isho Yahv III and the Syrian writer says that when Catholicos George (c.659-680) visited the region in 676 for the local synod he took Isaac back with him to Bet Aramaye (the province around Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the centre of the Church of the East). According to the source Isaac was taken because he was a relation of Gabriel Qatraya “the interpreter of the Church” (see below). He was then made bishop of Nineveh but asked to be relieved of his duties after only five months as a bishop and retired to live an eremitical life in Khuzistan in the monastery of Rabban Shapur. The date of his death is unknown but it appears that it was in this last period of his life that he started writing. The autobiographical element of his work suggests that he left Bet Qatrayeh as a young monk but returned there before 676. It has been suggested that this means he was one of the monks who was driven out by Bishop Abraham of Mashmahig in the 650’s. Whatever his earlier movements we know that he never returned to Bet Qatrayeh after his journey to Bet Aramaye.

Two separate parts of his writings have survived and come down to us. The first part had a much wider circulation and was used by the Syrian Orthodox Church as well as the Church of the East. Greek translations were also made largely from this first body of work. In Syriac this first work comprises 82 separate texts or chapters. Recently a manuscript of the much rarer second part was discovered in the Bodleian library in Oxford and this has 40 new texts, the longest of which is four centuries²⁸ on “Headings (*Kephalaia*) on Knowledge”. “The Book of Grace”, seven centuries on the spiritual life has also been attributed to him but this attribution is by no means certain.

Isaac’s writings show him to have been extremely erudite. Whilst he is not particularly systematic, his influences included Evagrius, John of Apamea (Isaac used his threefold view of spiritual life), Macarius, the Apophthegmata and other literature on the Egyptian Fathers which had recently been introduced to the Church of the East by Ananisho as “the Paradise of the Fathers”. He was also aware of the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Abba Isaiah and Mark the Hermit. Finally he does mention that he knows the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, even though he does not appear to have been unduly influenced by him.²⁹ His spirituality has made him one of the foremost writers of the entire Syrian tradition, both the Syrian Orthodox and the Church of the East and his works have also had a significant impact on the Greek Church. He remains one of the most significant influences on Eastern Christian monasticism even today.

²⁷ S.P. Brock, Syriac Writers from Bet Qatrayeh, *ARAM* 11/12 (1999-2000), pp.85-96, p.88.

²⁸ A century is a group of one hundred sayings, which was a popular way in the early Church of recording the wisdom of the Church Fathers.

²⁹ S.P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp.244-245.

Gabriel Qatraya provides us with a series of puzzles. It appears that there was more than one writer from the province with this name but how many Gabriels there were in all remains extremely confused. Brock identifies up to eight different Gabriel Qatrayas from Bet Qatrayeh as follows:

- 1) Isaac's relative Gabriel "the Interpreter" who was a Biblical exegete active in Bet Aramaye.
- 2) Gabriel Qatraya Bar Lipah who wrote a commentary on the liturgy which is preserved in a manuscript dated 1267/8. However it seems to have been written in the first half of the seventh century as it antedates the reforms of Isho Yahv III.
- 3) Rabban Gabriel Qatraya who is often quoted in East Syrian commentaries of the eighth and ninth centuries as an authority on Biblical exegesis of both the Old and New Testaments and he is normally thought to have lived in the seventh century.
- 4) Gabriel Qatraya who owned and collated a manuscript of the Peshitta New Testament written in Nisibis in the 25th year of the reign of Chosroes II (614/5). It is likely that this was copied in the school in Nisibis and that he was young at the time. He writes that he wrote it "in the presence of the true teacher, Mar Zakka."
- 5) Addai Scher says that an epitome of canons in a lost manuscript of the Chronicle of Seert mentions a Gabriel Qatraya who was a teacher at the school of Mahoze (Seleucia-Ctesiphon) and his pupils included the future Catholicoi Hnanisho (686-700) and Aba Bar Brikhsebyaneh (742-753).
- 6) In his catalogue of Syriac writers Abdisho of Nisibis mentions a book about Babai the Great (d.628). Abdisho says that Babai wrote a "Book of Causes" either "about" or "against", amongst others, Gabriel Qatraya.
- 7) Abdisho makes a separate reference to a Gabriel Qatraya who wrote a "Discourse on the Union" (ie: Divinity and Humanity in the Incarnate Christ) and some "Resolutions to Questions on the Matter of the Faith."
- 8) Abdisho also mentions a Gabriel Arya who is said to have been a relative of St. Isaac of Nineveh and have written a "Tradition/Transmission of the Scriptural Text" which was presumably a sort of Biblical commentary. Abdisho says that it only covered selections of Scripture and it is only the mention of Isaac that connects this reference to Bet Qatrayeh.

However it seems more than likely that several of these references refer to the same person and Brock argues that there were only four, and possibly even less people with the name Gabriel Qatraya. He says that 2,4 and 6 come from different decades but overall he groups them as follows:

- 1) Gabriel the Interpreter of Mahoze (5) was the relative of Isaac (1) who wrote Biblical commentaries (3) and was known as Gabriel Arya (8).
- 2) Gabriel Bar Lipah (2) was the author of the commentary on the liturgy.
- 3) Gabriel who collated the New Testament at the School of Nisibis in 614/5 (4).

- 4) Gabriel who was author of a Christological treatise and against whom Babai wrote a book (6).³⁰

Abraham Qatraya Bar Lipah, Dadisho Qatraya, Ahob or Ayyub Qatraya, Ishopanah Qatraya and Jacob Qatraya are also all listed as noted Christian writers from the province of Bet Qatrayeh. Whilst some, such as Gabriel and Abraham are thought to have been related to each other, Qatraya is a name denoting a person of that region and so they were not necessarily all from the same dynasty.

Other influential authors of the Christian community in the southern Gulf included Jacob, Bishop of Darin who wrote to Catholicos Isho Yahv I with a list of questions about liturgical practice. We have Isho Yahv's reply in the form of twenty canons dated 585. An Anonymous monk translated from Persian into Syriac the legal book of Simeon of Rev-Ardeshir. He says in the work that he is from the region of Bet Qatrayeh and is carrying out the work at the request of the Priest Simeon.³¹ Finally Rabban Bar Sahde was a founder of a monastery who Ishodnah said came from the island of Dayrin "in the sea of Bet Qatrayeh". Ishodnah describes him as a merchant who travelled to the region of the Indians but was attacked by pirates. He then vowed that if he escaped he would become a monk and was the only man on the boat to survive the attack. He went to the monastery of Rabban Shapur where he was awarded the monastic schema³² and went off to found a monastery in the village of Baruqa near Hira in Iraq.

In conclusion Brock remarks that Christianity is securely attested to in Bet Qatrayeh for five hundred years, from the fifth to ninth centuries, but our knowledge of the writers of the region is clearly dominated by the seventh century. The implication is that by the seventh century there were Church and monastery schools in Bet Qatrayeh which were capable of educating local people to an extremely high level that was comparable to the great school of the Church of the East in Nisibis. Several of these writers were exceptional in the breadth of their literary knowledge, especially Isaac and Dadisho. Others, for example Ahob and Gabriel the Commentator, show an exceptional knowledge of the Bible and had extensive influence on not only the Church of the East but on other rites of Oriental Christianity as well.

Ultimately all pale beside the achievements of Isaac who remains *the* most influential Church Father of the whole Syrian sphere of influence. Both East and West Syrian traditions and other "foreign" Churches such as the Greek Orthodox still revere him.

³⁰ See Brock, *Syriac Writers from Bet Qatrayeh*, pp.89-92 for a discussion of the various Gabriels and how they are (or are not) related to each other.

³¹ Brock, *Syriac Writers from Bet Qatrayeh*, p.94-95. Brock mentions that it is unclear whether or not this was the same Simeon who was the rebel Metropolitan who caused the schism of the seventh century.

³² Brock, *Syriac Writers from Bet Qatrayeh*, p.95. Brock says that this dates the events to the mid-seventh century.

Not even St. Ephrem that other great Syrian writer has been translated into as many languages as Isaac and his work is still influencing Eastern monasticism today.

For a province seen by many as marginal, the literary output of Bet Qatrayeh alone argues for a re-evaluation of the situation. A region that was only nominally Christian would never have been able to produce such a stable of distinguished Christian academics. Only an entrenched system of organised and well equipped monastic schools could have trained these men and this argues for a vibrant religious life in Bet Qatrayeh in the seventh century, a tradition that neither the internal ecclesiastical struggles or the expansion of Islam seems to have particularly have affected in this period and which would appear to have matured from its fourth century beginnings into a cosmopolitan and distinctive local culture.

Arabs or “Nabataeans”? Language and Ethnicity amongst Arabian Christians

It is the diverse ethnicity of the Gulf Christians, which encompassed Syrians, Persians and people from the local Arabian tribes, that may account for the fact that some regions of Arabia appear to have embraced Islam far more readily than others.

In the mid seventh century, during a long-running dispute with the Christians of Rev-Ardeshir and Bet Qatrayeh, Catholicos Isho Yahv III makes reference to the Christians of Bet Mazunaye who have already largely converted to the new religion.³³ This is supported by the fact that we know that Bahrain and Oman were conquered by Muslim armies between 636 and 639 and so the people of these regions were amongst the first to come into contact with this new religion.

A lack of comment in the Syriac sources suggests that this was not a particularly violent episode and later canons promulgated at local synods support this view. The major preoccupations of the time appear to have concerned paying the poll tax for non-Muslims and the reinforcement of the fact that Christian men were only allowed one wife.³⁴ The canons of the Bet Qatrayeh synod in 676 make it clear that Christians and Muslims were living peacefully alongside Jews, Mazdaeans and various other faiths.³⁵

In fact as mentioned above, in some cases Christians had better relations with the Muslims than they did with other Christians. So much so that canons promulgated at the 676 synod decreed that disputes should be settled by the ecclesiastical authorities and the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh were to end their habit of taking their grievances to the temporal rulers every time they disagreed with the Church.

³³ Isho‘yabh III, *Iṣō‘yahb iii patriarcha. Liber epistolarum*, ed. (interpretatus est) R.Duval , CSCO, Scr. Syr. 64. (Paris, 1904). See letter XVII, pp.260-262 & XVIII, pp.262-270.

³⁴ J.Beaucamp & C.Robin, ‘L’Évêché nestorien de Mašmahig dans l’archipel d’al-Bahrayn (Ve-Ixe siècle)’, in D.T.Potts (ed), *Dilmun*, (Berlin, 1983), pp.171-196, p.186.

³⁵ Beaucamp & Robin, p.185.

This evidence therefore presents a pattern of gradual conversion that began in the regions furthest away from foreign influences and with the largest concentration of Christians drawn from the indigenous tribes (in this case Bet Mazunaye). As Islam progressed throughout the Arabian peninsula it did not necessarily sweep all other faiths away immediately, but it does seem to have made a rapid impression on the local tribes.

This is perhaps unsurprising given that the tribes would have shared a common language (Arabic) and have had the same cultural values. However in the coastal region the settlements were dominated by a population descended from Syrian and Persian origins. They spoke a different language and had been following the Christian faith longer than the Christian converts in local tribes.

In such circumstances it seems only logical that they took longer to surrender their faith and in these communities Christianity seems to have endured several centuries longer. It seems that a gradual erosion through inter-marriage with local Muslims or expedient conversions to avoid tax finally ended the Christian presence in the Gulf with a whimper, rather than a cataclysmic event or widespread persecution by the new Muslim overlords as some have envisaged.

Whilst, as mentioned above, there is a twelfth century source that refers to the Christians of Bet Qatrayeh it is unclear just how many of them would have remained at this time. By the ninth century the region was a stronghold of the Karmati branch of the Ismailiyya and it may be that the particular brand of Messianic Islam popular along the Gulf coast was attractive to the final Christians in the region.³⁶ A combination of these factors: disruption of routes to and from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the appeal of Messianic Islam and the common culture of the local people led slowly but inexorably towards a final extinction of Christianity in Arabia.

Christianity and maritime trade in pre-Islamic Arabia

As mentioned above the Christians of the Arabian Gulf gained privileges from the Sasanian rulers due to their willingness to undertake the higher risk long-haul trade routes to southern India. This is supported by the fact that early Muslim sources do not report a Muslim fleet in the Gulf until 638, and even then this fleet was foundered on the Persian side.³⁷ The region was pivotal for the maritime trade in frankincense and textiles from Oman and the varied items produced by the Indian sub-continent, however it appears that Christians did not just act as merchants. They appear to have played a key role in the industry that supported the coastal population of the Gulf: the pearl industry.

³⁶ W. Madelung, Karmati, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1978), vol 4, pp.660-665 and G. King, pers. comm.

³⁷ In 638 al-‘Alâ‘ al-Hadrami, governor of al-Bahrayn sailed across the Gulf and travelled to Istahr (Persepolis) but the ships were destroyed leaving him to travel back overland. See Beaucamp & Robin, p.184.

The pearling industry is found on both sides of the Arabian Gulf and it would seem that the ecclesiastical authorities took a keen interest in this trade. The large monastic complex on the Iranian island of Kharg is located in an area famous for fabulous black pearls³⁸ and there are numerous references to pearl fisheries and pearl divers in ecclesiastical sources. These references refer to practicalities; for example the letter of Catholicos Isho Yahv I (582-95) to bishop Jacob of Darin clearly states that pearl divers must be left to make their own decision whether or not to work on a Sunday. In what appears to be a special exception, the Catholicos says that this is a matter left to the conscience of the divers and no one else.³⁹

Whilst this hints at the importance of pearls to the local economy it seems that their influence went far beyond the merely financial – they could be used to political advantage as well. At a time of disputed authority Catholicos Ezekiel (567-81) was elected largely due to the support of the Sasanian ruler Chosroes Anoshirwan. Chosroes had favoured Ezekiel ever since he had undertaken a survey of pearl fisheries on the Gulf and returned with a particularly sumptuous pearl as a gift for the ruler.⁴⁰

That this industry remained significant over a considerable period of time is also attested to by a ninth-century episode reported by both Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus. They report that a large fish terrorised the Gulf so much in the 830's that for three months the pearl fleets were too scared to enter the water. Faced with ruin the Christians prayed for deliverance which came in the form of a small fish which swam into the gills of this monster and suffocated it.⁴¹ This tells us several important pieces of information; there were Christian communities still active in the region nearing the middle of the ninth century and many of them depended on pearls for their livelihood. It also tells us that the trade was so vital that a Syrian chronicler living in the twelfth century (Michael died in 1199) was aware of events linked to this industry even though it was remote from him geographically and the incident in question had happened several centuries beforehand.

Conclusions

An initial survey of the sources reveals that, whilst not exactly abundant, there is still a significant amount of literary material relating to the Christians of the Arabian Gulf and that there is scope for further research in this respect. The Christian literature of the region is remarkably diverse ranging from the apocryphal Biblical tradition (the

³⁸ J.Bowman, 'The Sasanian church in the Kharg Island', *Acta Iranica* I (Tehran-Liège, 1974), pp.217-220, p.219.

³⁹ J.B.Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la bibliothèque nationale 37 (Paris, 1902), p.448.

⁴⁰ A.Scher, *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, R. Graffin & F.Nau, eds. (Paris), vol.4, fasc.3 (1908), vol.5, fasc.2 (1910), vol.7, fasc.3 (1911), vol.13, fasc.3 (1919). For story of Ezekiel see vol.7, fasc.3, p.150 & p.178.

⁴¹ Beaucamp & Robin, p.187.

Hymn of the Pearl in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*) and the mystical spirituality of St. Isaac of Nineveh to Church Canons and liturgical treatises.

Unfortunately it is often extremely difficult to relate ancient place-names to contemporary topography. Too many scholars have made the assumption that significant sites will be found only west of the Qatar peninsula and on the Iranian side of the water without explaining why they assume this. Most of the papers surveyed for this research pre-date the discoveries on Sir Bani Yas and Marawah in the islands of Abu Dhabi and it would be interesting to provoke renewed discussion in the light of this new archaeological data.

Whether or not any new discoveries are made depends on one factor common to all these sites be they in Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain or the UAE. The monasteries were largely sited in areas with a water supply and other amenities favourable to settlement. In most cases these conditions have not changed and the sites have remained occupied. At a time of increased building activity in the region it is a sad fact that few sites are likely to have survived. However the link with the pearling industry suggests that Christian settlements could also have been in more remote outposts and we cannot yet rule out the possibility of further discoveries.

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