

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST DURING THE PERIOD OF THE FOUR RIGHTLY-GUIDED CALIPHS

VICTORIA L. ERHART
DUMBARTON OAKS, WASHINGTON

The early seventh century was a period of intense stress for the Syriac Christian community in the Sasanian Empire. There were several far-reaching internal quarrels, including widespread disagreement among ecclesiastics over the notion of centralized authority in the office of the catholicos. How far did the juridical authority of the catholicos actually extend? To what extent were bishops and autonomous monasteries bound by the decisions of the catholicos?¹ This disagreement over the extent of catholicate authority was complicated by the rise of a parallel, competing Jacobite ecclesiastical hierarchy which did not at all accept the authority of the dyophysite catholicos.² The Jacobites instead looked to their own primate or 'maphrian',³ with the consecration in 628/29 of Maruta of Takrit (628/29–649) as head of the Jacobite church in Sasanian territory.⁴ These events within the Syriac Christian community occurred against the backdrop of twenty years or more of war between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, with the Syriac Christian community often caught right in the middle, both

¹ The acts of synods for the Church of the East for the period 410–775 are contained in the *Synodicon orientale*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902). The *Synodicon* was compiled in the late eighth century under the direction of Catholicos Timothy I (780–823) and does show some signs of editorial reworking. It nevertheless remains a first-rate source for Syriac church history. For a brief discussion of one sign of this editorial reworking see Stephen Gero, 'The see of Peter in Babylon: Western influences on the ecclesiology of early Persian Christianity', *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the formative period*, ed. Nina Garsoian (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 45–51. The Synod of 424 (*Synodicon*, 50–2 (Syr.), 295–7 (trans.)) theoretically conferred complete juridical power on the catholicos. In actual fact, however, a catholicos had only as much power as he could wrest from other bishops and monastic leaders. Throughout centuries various bishops refused to agree to centralized authority in the office of catholicos.

² I use the term 'Jacobite' to refer to those Christians who did not accept the two-nature christology as it was articulated in the statements of faith issued by the various synods of the Church of the East. This group eventually coalesced around the priests ordained by Jacob Baradaeus (c. 500–78), from whom they take their name. I use the term 'Syriac dyophysite' to refer to the Church of the East which adhered to a two-nature christology based primarily on the theological exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Antiochene school of biblical exegesis.

³ The title 'maphrian' was not actually used until a later date. From the Syriac root *pr'*, the term means 'to cause to be fruitful, to generate, to multiply'.

⁴ Maruta of Takrit's *vita* was written by his successor Denḥa (649–59). See *Histoire d'Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta*, ed. F. Nau (PO 3, 1909), 52–96.

geographically and politically.⁵ This period of war between the Byzantines and the Sasanians was followed immediately by war between the Sasanians and the Arabs, with the last vestiges of the Sasanian dynasty finally collapsing in 651.⁶ A new political order under Arab Muslim rule emerged. What were the immediate physical, political and theological consequences of this Arab invasion, as distinct from the Byzantine invasion a few years earlier,⁷ for the Syriac Christian community in Sasanian territory? How did the Syriac Christian community receive the Arab invaders? What new accommodations were required of the Syriac Christian community in its relations with the new Arab government? Did the Syriac Christian community benefit from the establishment of a new political power?

Chronological and Geographical Limitations

The consequences for Christianity of the Arab invasion make an enormous topic. I have limited my time-frame to the period of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, that is, from the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 up through the end of the caliphate of Ali in 661. Coincidentally, this period also covers the period of the catholicates of Mar Išo'yahb II of Gdela (628–46); Mar Emmeh (646–48); and Mar Išo'yahb III (649–658/59). I am concerned with the immediate daily consequences of the Arab invasion. I will not here attempt any analysis of the explosion of Syriac apocalyptic literature which began late in the seventh century when the Syriac Christian community had the time to reflect on the theological as well as the political ramifications of the Arab invasion.⁸ I am here

⁵ Khosru invaded Mesopotamia in 604. The Sasanians invaded Cappadocia in 611 and Anatolia in 624. By 626 the Sasanians were on the outskirts of Constantinople itself. See Agapius (Mahboub) de Menbidj, *Kitab al-'unwan. Histoire universelle* II:2, ed. A. Vasiliev (PO 8, 1912), 449–50, 458–61. On the notion of political identification for Christian subjects of the Sasanian Empire see Sebastian Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanian Empire: a case of divided loyalties', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), 1–19. Brock concludes (p. 11) that 'the church in Persia viewed itself, by the mid-sixth century, as an integral part of Sasanian society'.

⁶ Arabs invaded Sasanian territory beginning in 633. The Arab victory at the Battle of al-Qadisayyia in 637 opened the way for the invasion of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 638. The Arabs chased Shah Yazdgird III to Khorasan where he was finally assassinated in 651. See Agapius, *Kitab al-'unwan*, 470–1.

⁷ Heraclius's first campaign was in 622; his second in 625 and his final campaign in 627–28. See Agapius, *Kitab al-'unwan*, 452–3; 463–8. For a full treatment of Emperor Heraclius's military campaigns against both the Sasanians and the Arabs see Walter Kaegi, *Byzantium and the early Islamic conquests* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

⁸ For a discussion of Syriac apocalyptic literature see Gerrit J. Reinink, 'The beginnings of Syriac apocalyptic literature in response to Islam', *Oriens Christianus*, 77 (1993), 165–87; G.J. Reinink, 'The romance of Julian the Apostate as a source for seventh-century Syriac apocalypses', *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam: VIIIe–VIIIe siècles*, eds P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), 75–86; H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: a Syriac apocalypse from the early Islamic period', *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East, vol. I: Problems in the literary source material*, eds Avril Cameron and L.I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin, 1992), 149–87.

concerned with the period of time after the Arab invasion yet prior to the recognition by the Syriac Christian community that the Arab presence was a rather more permanent entity than might have been originally thought.

I have also limited the geographical boundaries of my investigation to those of the Sasanian Empire at the time of the Arab invasion, that is, roughly present-day Iran and Iraq. The Arab invasion of Palestine and Jordan has been studied in depth by Robert Schick,⁹ while the Arab invasion of Egypt has been studied by A.J. Butler.¹⁰ Both Walter Kaegi and Hugh Kennedy have provided much information on the Arab invasion of Byzantine Syria.¹¹ I shall confine myself to the territory under Sasanian control at the time of the invasion, mentioning the Arab invasion of other territories of the Middle East only in passing. No attempt will be made here to compare the Arab invasion of Byzantine-controlled territory with that of Sasanian-controlled territory, a topic which far exceeds the bounds of this study.

In keeping with the terminology of the Syriac sources themselves, I use the term 'Arab' rather than 'Muslim' to refer to the seventh-century invasion of Sasanian territory. While there was recognition in the Syriac sources that this current Arab invasion was of a different sort and magnitude from the bedouin raids which were all too familiar, there is no cognizance in the mid-seventh-century sources that there was a religious component to this new political rule. To the Syriac Christians the invaders were Arabs but it was not yet significant that they were Muslim Arabs. There is evidence that at least some of the groups of Arab invaders were Christian allies of recently converted Muslim tribes.

Sources

Any investigation of the Arab invasion of the Sasanian Empire is hampered by a lack of sources contemporaneous with the events. One of the few Syriac sources datable to the mid-seventh century and bearing on the Arab invasion of the Sasanian Empire is the collection of 105 letters written by Catholicos Išō'yahb III (649–58) over a twenty-year period as he rose through the ranks during his

⁹ Robert Schick, 'The fate of the Christians in Palestine during the Byzantine-Umayyad transition, A.D. 600–750', (3 vols, University of Chicago Ph.D. thesis, 1987); soon to be published as *Christian communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic rule: a historical and archaeological assessment*. For information on Jordan during the Arab invasion see Robert Schick, 'Jordan on the eve of the Muslim conquest A.D. 602–634', *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam*, i. 107–19.

¹⁰ Alfred J. Butler, *The Arab conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman dominion*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

¹¹ For a recent treatment of the Sasanian and Arab invasions of Byzantine Syria, as well as extensive bibliography on the subject, see Kaegi, *Byzantium and the early Islamic conquests*. See also Hugh Kennedy, 'The last century of Byzantine Syria: a reinterpretation', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 10 (1985), 141–83.

ecclesiastical career.¹² While he did not actually write a work directly against Islam, being more concerned for most of his catholicate with problems internal to the Church of the East, some of his letters do contain observations relevant to the Arab invasion of the Sasanian Empire.

The *Historia monastica* by Thomas, bishop of Marga, was written in the mid-ninth century. Contained within stories of monastic founders is information about earlier periods of eastern monastic history, particularly during the period covering the catholicates of Išo'yahb II and Išo'yahb III.¹³ The ninth-century *Universal history* of Agapius of Menbij/Hierapolis,¹⁴ used as a source for much of the later *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian¹⁵ is a worthy source, preserving much earlier material, most of which focuses on Arab-Byzantine history in Syria, not further east in the Sasanian Empire. The eleventh-century *Chronicle of Seert*¹⁶ is our fullest source, providing an almost continuous narrative up to the catholicate of Išo'yahb III. It is a complex, multi-layered document which must be used judiciously but much earlier information can be abstracted from its more developed, that is to say, more literarily polished accounts. Later Syriac Christian documents, the *Anonymous Chronicle to the Year 1234* and the *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* of Bar Hebraeus, contain a large amount of information on the topic but much of it is without independent historical value and some of it is highly embellished.¹⁷

On the Arabic side, the primary source is the *History* of al-

¹² The letters of Catholicos Išo'yahb III have yet to be translated into a modern language. There are two editions of the collection of letters. See *Išo'yahb patriarchae III Liber Epistularum*, ed. Rubens Duval (CSCO 11–12 (Syr. 11–12), 1904–05); and *The Book of Consolations, or Pastoral epistles of Mar Isho-yahb of Kuphlana in Adiabene*, ed. P. Scott-Montcrieff (London: Luzac, 1904).

¹³ *The Book of Governors: the Historia monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga A.D. 840*, ed. E.A.W. Budge, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893). For an analysis of this source see J.-M. Fiey, 'Thomas de Marga: notule de littérature syriaque', *Le Muséon*, 78 (1956), 361–6.

¹⁴ Agapius (d. 941) was Melkite bishop of this city. His *Kitab al-'unwan* (see n. 5 above) originally extended from Creation to 941 but has survived only to 776. Among otherwise lost works preserved by Agapius is the *Chronicle* of Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785).

¹⁵ Michael's *Chronicle* covers the period from Creation to 1194/95, using a number of sources no longer extant. Michael was Jacobite patriarch of Antioch (1166–99). The entire *Chronicle* has been edited by J.B. Chabot: *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (4 vols, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899–1924). The period under discussion is found in vol. 2, books 11, 12.

¹⁶ *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, ed. Addai Scher (PO 13, 1919), 545–639 for the period under examination. The *Chronicle of Seert* covers the period 251–442, 484–650. For a discussion of the author of the *Chronicle of Seert* see Pierre Nautin, 'L'auteur de la *Chronique de Séert*: Ishodenah de Basra', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 186 (1974), 113–26; J.-M. Fiey, 'Iso-dnah et la *Chronique de Séert*', *Parole de l'Orient*, 6–7 (1975–76), 447–59; Louis Sako, 'Les sources de la *Chronique de Séert*', *Parole de l'Orient*, 14 (1987), 155–66.

¹⁷ For a general introduction to sources available for seventh-century Syriac church history see Sebastian Brock, 'Syriac sources for seventh-century history', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 2 (1976), 17–36.

Tabari (d. 932),¹⁸ which preserves a great deal of earlier information without adding a veneer of literary polish or outright fabrication. Also very valuable is the *Kitab futuh al-buldan* (*Conquests of the countries*) of al-Baladhuri (d. 892).¹⁹ Arguably the most well-known Arab document relevant to our topic is the so-called 'covenant of Umar', a document purporting to be a treaty of surrender of an unnamed place negotiated between Umar I (634–44) and a group of Christians. Both A.S. Tritton and Daniel Dennett have analysed different versions of the 'covenant of Umar', presenting extensive and, to my mind, compelling arguments against the acceptance of the seventh century as the date for the composition of this document in the form in which it now exists.²⁰ The form in which the 'covenant of Umar' now survives is demonstrably several centuries later than its internal attribution of the seventh century and presupposes a long period of stabilized social interaction between Arabs and Christians. In addition it assumes a high degree of familiarity with the religious tenets of Islam. Both Tritton and Dennett assign their respective forms of the 'covenant' to the ninth century. In his study of early Islamic literature, however, al-Qadi is quite correct to argue that later forms of texts often preserve earlier versions of the same text.²¹ It is entirely plausible that some of the clauses in the covenant date from the seventh century. It is these which I would like to isolate and examine in this study.

Payment of a Poll Tax

In the earliest forms of the treaties negotiated between the Arabs and those in Sasanian territory, it is not clear whether acceptance of Islam was even at issue. There are examples of treaties which first offer the newly subject populace a chance to accept Islam in whatever form it may have been presented to them. None of the earliest examples convey any information about the content of Islamic doctrine or practice. If Islam was not embraced, and there is no evidence that it was by any significant number of people until the caliphate of Umar II when the social differentiation between Arab Muslim and non-Arab

¹⁸ The two volumes of the *History* of al-Tabari used in this paper are *The history of al-Tabari, vol. 12: The battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the conquest of Syria and Palestine*, trans. Yohanan Friedmann (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); and *The history of al-Tabari, vol. 13: The conquest of Iraq, southwestern Persia, and Egypt*, trans. Gautier H.A. Juynboll (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹⁹ *The origins of the Islamic state*. [a translation of *Kitab futuh al-buldan* by al-Baladhuri], ed. Philip K. Hitti (New York: Columbia, 1916).

²⁰ A.J. Tritton, *The caliphs and their non-Muslim subjects: a critical study of the Covenant of 'Umar* (1930; reprint London: Frank Cass, 1970); Daniel Dennett, *Conversion and the poll tax in early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1950).

²¹ Wadad al-Qadi, 'Early Islamic state letters: the question of authenticity', in *Byzantine and early Islamic Near East*, i. 220–1.

Muslim was removed,²² then payment of a type of poll tax was required. It is the refusal to pay the poll tax, not refusal of Islam, which constitutes an act of war in the Arab mindset. According to the tradition regarding the Arab embassy to Shah Yazdgird III, the Arab envoys told Yazdgird he could accept Islam and rule by the precepts of the Qur'an or pay a poll tax and continue business as usual. Yazdgird apparently thought the embassy was entirely about money and offered to lend the Arabs however much they needed.²³ There is no discussion about what it might mean to accept Islam nor about what the Qur'an was. There are also numerous examples of treaties in which acceptance of Islam is not even mentioned, the Arabs simply insisting upon payment of a poll tax. Dennett has argued that the Arabs did not have any intention of toppling the Sasanian government or even converting it. The Arab invasion was about money obtained either in the form of booty or from annual payments of tribute, generally in the form of a poll tax.²⁴

The imposition of a type of poll tax was not unfamiliar for subjects of the Sasanian Empire. Christians as well as non-priestly-class Zoroastrians paid this tax as a recompense for their inability to perform priestly duties. Under the fiscal reforms of Shah Khosru I Anoširan (531–79), the smallest amount was fixed at four *dirhems* per adult male, the highest amount at twelve. The amount went up according to one's ability to pay.²⁵ These are precisely the amounts listed in a series of instructions in the *Chronicle of Seert* purporting to be from Muhammad himself, but in fact from a later period.²⁶ It is not, however, unreasonable to posit that the Arabs kept the level of taxation the same as it had been under Sasanian rule. The Arabs, after all, took over Sasanian geographical and financial administration, using the same personnel as under the Sasanian system.²⁷ Under the Arabs, however, the poll tax was more widely imposed. It seems that at least initially no exemption was recognized for priests, monks or deacons. In the Christian sources there are numerous instances of various bishops appearing before the provincial governor to argue for exemptions for priests, deacons and monks,²⁸ but not for the general populace. Such exemptions were

²² H.A.R. Gibb, 'The fiscal rescript of 'Umar II', *Arabica*, 2 (1955), 1–16, examines Umar II's policy to encourage conversion to Islam by non-Arabs and the elimination of inferior social status formerly applied to non-Arab Muslims.

²³ Tabari, *History*, xii. 36 [2240–1].

²⁴ Dennett, *Conversion*, 16.

²⁵ For a discussion of Khosru's fiscal reforms see R.N. Frye, 'The political history of Iran under the Sasanians', *Cambridge history of Iran*, iii (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 153–4.

²⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, 612–13.

²⁷ For a detailed study of the continuation of Sasanian fiscal and administrative policies by the Arabs see Michael Morony, 'Continuity and change in the administrative geography of late Sasanian and early Islamic Al-'Iraq', *Iran*, 20 (1982), 1–49.

²⁸ *Chronicle of Seert*, 598–9.

later extended to cover bishops, hermits and those who wore wool, presumably ascetics.²⁹ Rabban Sabrišo' wanted the exemption enlarged to include not only priests and monks, but even novices and the school boys in the monastic school in his province of Beth Garmai.³⁰ There is no indication in the Christian sources that the imposition of a type of poll tax was considered onerous by the subject population nor any indication that it sparked instances of civil disobedience against the nascent Arab government.³¹

Protection of Persons and Property

In exchange for payment of a poll tax, the 'covenant of Umar' states that non-Muslim peoples were to be guaranteed protection for their persons, their fields, their movable property and their residences. Al-Tabari preserves several editions of early treaties with towns which came under Arab control immediately after the decisive battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 637, which opened the way to Seleucia-Ctesiphon for the Arabs. In one instance, the military commander wrote to Caliph Umar asking what should be done with the indigenous population, mostly peasant farmers. Some peasants had fled before the Arab advance, some insisted they were conscripted into the Sasanian army, and some had stayed put while the battle rolled over them. These peasants insisted they had already negotiated a treaty of protection with the Arabs at some point in the three-year period prior to the battle of al-Qadisiyyah when various groups of Arabs were engaged in raiding expeditions in Sasanian territory. The answer is given that only the property of those for whom it could be proven that they had voluntarily fought on the side of the Sasanians was to be confiscated as war booty. The remainder of the inhabitants were encouraged to return to their homesteads or were moved to a more secure place. Naturally, property belonging to the Sasanian royal family, as well as property belonging to the fire temples and other government agencies was confiscated and redistributed among the Faithful according to Qur'anic stipulation. This type of property was considered legitimate trophies of war.³²

Overall, one is struck by the low level of physical destruction which accompanied the Arab invasion. Pitched battles did occur but there is little trustworthy evidence that there was a concerted

²⁹ Ibid., 612

³⁰ Ibid., 633.

³¹ There may have been some increase in tax rates in particular places. See Michael Morony, 'The Aramaean population in the economic life of early Islamic Iraq', *Aram*, 3 (1991), 1–6, esp. 3, where Morony discusses increases in taxes in the area around Kufa, but not in the period immediately following the invasion. The tax rates in the area around Basra remained such that there was significant agricultural expansion throughout the seventh and eighth centuries.

³² Tabari, *History*, xii.151–5 [2368–72].

'scorched earth' policy among the Arabs. There are anecdotes preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert* which indicate that violence was a locally isolated phenomenon. One such anecdote is taken from the life of Mar Sabrišo'. The Arabs assaulted Mar Sabrišo's convent where he had gathered his disciples in the church as a refuge. The Arabs tried without success to breach the walls of the church. Later one of their leaders informed the others that, because of the presence of a virtuous monk in the church, a divine prodigy was at work so that none of their attempts to break down the walls would succeed. The Arabs then left.³³ In a general discussion of the coming of the Arabs, the *Chronicle of Seert* states that the land was in turmoil for five years and beset by continuous evils and ordeals until Arab domination was solidified, at which point prosperity returned to the land and Christians rejoiced at the rule of the Arabs who treated them with such benevolence.³⁴ This five-year period would refer to the last years of the Byzantine-Sasanian wars and the period when there were Arab raiding expeditions throughout the frontier territories, including the Sasanian frontier. It is conceivable that the aftermath of the Arab invasion was a period of relative calm in some locations.

Archaeological evidence for the Arab conquest in the Sasanian Empire is difficult to come by. In his examination of land use and settlement patterns in the early Muslim period, Michael Morony concludes that 'there has been a poverty of excavated and published sites relevant to the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods. Overwhelming attention has been paid to sites of greater antiquity or to urban sites with monumental architecture'.³⁵

The area of Palestine and Trans-Jordan is much better served from the point of view of archaeology. While there is no necessity to argue that lack of physical destruction in one geographic location means lack of physical destruction in another, the evidence from Palestine is enlightening. Schick concludes that Bishop Sophronius's pronouncements against Arab violence are rhetorical gestures, an element of successful preaching.³⁶ Schick argues that a distinction must be made between examples of violence and destruction which occurred at the site of a battle, and accounts by Sophronius and others of uncalled-for violence perpetrated by the Arabs against

³³ *Chronicle of Seert*, 585.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 581–2.

³⁵ Michael Morony, 'Land use and settlement patterns in late Sasanian and early Islamic Iraq', *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East, vol. II: Land use and settlement patterns*, eds G.R.D. King and Averil Cameron (Princeton: Darwin, 1994), 221.

³⁶ Schick, 'Christians in Palestine', i. 118–27. Sophronius considered the Arab invasion to be a punishment sent by God on account of Christian sin. See Sophronius, *Epistola synodica* (PG 87:3), cols 3197–8. Sophronius is preaching the need for Christians to repent and illustrates the depth of Christian sinfulness by references to the Arab invasion. In order for Sophronius to make the necessity for repentance clearer, he must portray signs of God's punishment by means of the Arab invasion as worse than the invasion actually was.

urban areas which did not offer resistance. Most urban locations agreed to surrender peacefully. The archaeological evidence from Palestine as presented by Schick does not support Sophronius's claims of widespread violence directed by the Arabs against non-hostile urban locations.³⁷

The same conclusion can be argued for the Sasanian Empire. The evidence for the disruption of the irrigation system in the Sasanian Empire dates from the period of Sasanian-Byzantine war, some years prior to the Arab conquest.³⁸ The lack of archaeological evidence for a violent conquest, coupled with positive evidence for stable, if not static, settlement patterns in the *Sawad*,³⁹ and the silence of the literary sources, makes it reasonable to postulate that the measures of protection articulated in the peace treaties were observed in fact. According to the archaeological evidence for southern Iraq in the mid-seventh century, Arab settlements soon were established in proximity to existing Sasanian town sites. Two large sites in particular were constructed by the Arabs immediately following the conquest: al-Kufa and al-Basra, which formed the main settlement and garrison centres in Iraq.⁴⁰ What violence there was seems to have been directed against the Sasanian royal family, its residences and its valuables. Even at that, attempts were made by the Arabs to limit the physical destruction of the items in the White Palace in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, including a superb gigantic silk carpet and the pillars of the Grand Hall which was later turned into a mosque. Much of the spoils from the Sasanian imperial treasury ended up in Arab hands by luck. The unexpected capture of the imperial baggage train and the recovery of mules carrying imperial treasures account for most of the war booty sent to the caliph for redistribution among the Faithful.⁴¹

Protection of Church Property

The earliest peace treaties in al-Tabari do not specifically mention places or buildings of religious significance. Later treaty formulations of the 'covenant of Umar' specifically prohibit the repair or construction of religious buildings, which may include fire temples as well as churches, monasteries, shrines and synagogues, but there is ample evidence that Christian construction projects

³⁷ The exception to this may be the town of Avdat. For Schick's discussion of the destruction of Avdat see 'Christians in Palestine', i. 129–31.

³⁸ Morony, 'Land use', 224.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 225. The term *Sawad* refers to the fertile lowlands of Iraq.

⁴⁰ On the establishment of Kufa and Basra see Hitti, *Origins of the Islamic state*, 434–48. For a study of early Islamic settlement practices in Sasanian territory see Alastair Northedge, 'Archaeology and new urban settlement in early Islamic Syria and Iraq', *Byzantine and early Islamic Near East*, ii. 231–65.

⁴¹ On the Arab capture of Sasanian royal property see Avinoam Shalem, 'The fall of al-Mada'in: some literary references concerning Sasanian spoils of war in mediaeval Islamic treasuries', *Iran*, 32 (1994), 77–81.

proceeded apace for some time after the Arab invasion with no outside interference. Rabban Khoudahwi built a monastery in Beth Hale near Mosul sometime prior to 659.⁴² Rabban Theodore built a convent and a school outside Kashkar.⁴³ Both Christian parties tried to fortify their presence in areas of Sasanian territory now under Arab control. Catholicos Išo'yahb III prohibited the construction of a Jacobite church in Takrit by asking for help from the Arab authorities, though under precisely what circumstances is unclear. Išo'yahb III himself states that it was the Jacobites who were responsible for involving the government officials under suspicious circumstances,⁴⁴ but later Syriac tradition records that Catholicos Išo'yahb bribed the Arab authorities so they would refuse permission to build.⁴⁵ Malkišo', a disciple of Rabban Sabor, founded and built the monastery called 'New Monastery' near Gundishapur during the period immediately following the Arab conquest.⁴⁶

Several later examples of treaties include the provision that neither churches nor other Christian buildings might be used wholly or in part in the construction of mosques,⁴⁷ but this clause dates from a later period. There is little archaeological evidence from the period immediately after the invasion to support the notion that the Arabs settled in extant towns or villages, or that they conducted extensive building programs. What more permanent settlements there were seem to have been established as autonomous Arab settlements, close by existing settlements but not co-mingled, as in Kufa and Basra.

Christian Aid to the Arab Invasion

The treaty terms for the newly subject population seem rather mild – the payment of a tax already levied, only now to a different set of officials. Christians as an autonomous group were not singled out for preferential treatment. The protections guaranteed by the treaties covered all people who did not take up arms against the Arabs of their own volition regardless of religious persuasion or social standing. The property and land of neither peasants nor wealthier residents could be confiscated if the residents could prove they did not actively work against the Arab invaders.⁴⁸ The inhabitants of conquered territories were not considered slaves and steps were taken in later periods to regularize marriage unions

⁴² *Chronicle of Seert*, 590–4. See also Thomas of Marga, *Book of governors*, ii. 102–3.

⁴³ *Chronicle of Seert*, 598.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 44: CSCO 11. 81–5 (Syr.), 12. 63–5 (trans.).

⁴⁵ *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, eds J.B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy (3 vols, Louvain: Peeters, 1877), iii.127–8.

⁴⁶ On the history of Malkišo' see *Chronicle of Seert*, 634–6.

⁴⁷ See *Chronicle of Seert*, 621 for a record of an edict purportedly from Muhammad himself enjoining on his successors the obligation to protect Christians.

⁴⁸ Tabari, *History*, xii.153–4 [2370–1].

between Muslim men and Christian and Jewish women, that is, women who were People of the Book.⁴⁹

Yet in much of the secondary literature which attempts to explain the seemingly easy victory of the Arabs over both the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires, there is a notion that Christians, encouraged by a sense of nationalist cohesiveness, actively aided the Arabs in their conquest. I do not wish here to step into the quagmire which questions regarding 'nationalism' in late Antiquity entail, but I do wish to examine the question of whether Christians, as a group, actively aided the Arab invasion, specifically in the territory of the Sasanian empire. If they did so, was it official church policy or simply a matter of expediency?

Both Bar Hebraeus and the *Chronicle of Seert* preserve records of treaty negotiations between a representative of the Christian community at Najran in the Arabian peninsula, Said/Seyyid the Ghassanid, and Muhammad. This treaty exists in its simplest form in Bar Hebraeus. Said/Seyyid brought gifts to Muhammad and promised that Christians would refrain from injuring Arabs. If necessary, the Christians would go into battle on Muhammad's side. In response, Muhammad states that if a Christian building should collapse, the Arabs would help rebuild it. Additionally, the poll tax will be four *zuzas* on the poor as well as on priests and monks but twelve *zuzas* on merchants and other people. Also included in this edition of the treaty is a clause stipulating that a Christian woman living in an Arab household may not be compelled to turn away from her own religion.⁵⁰ One can see even from this simplified form of the treaty that a period of social contact between Christians and Muhammad's followers is presumed. According to this treaty, the Arabs knew enough about the Christian community to recognize the clergy as a distinct class within the Christian community and grant the clergy special tax status. The clause protecting the status of Christian women in Arab households indicates that enough time has passed to allow for normalization of relations between Arabs and Christians. Only the clauses relating specifically to the Najranite offer of aid to Muhammad date originally to the seventh century.

Bar Hebraeus does not supply any information on why the Christians of Najran felt it to their advantage to enter into a treaty relationship with Muhammad, although it is quite plausible that the Christians of Najran may have wanted to contract an alliance with Muhammad against their common enemies, Jews and polytheists.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., xii.158 [2374].

⁵⁰ Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, iii. 117-18.

⁵¹ *Chronicle of Seert*, 605. Al-Tabari includes information on the fight the early Muslims had with the Jewish inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. See Seth Ward, 'A fragment from an unknown work by al-Tabari on the tradition "Expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian peninsula (and the lands of Islam)"', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 53 (1990), 407-20.

Irfan Shahid has studied the Christian community of Najran in detail, including the persecution of these Christians in the sixth century by a local Jewish ruler.⁵² One century later, these Christians had the opportunity to join Muhammad in a fight against a long-time enemy. There is no indication in Bar Hebraeus's account that the Christians of Najran were giving aid to Muhammad to further the Arab invasion in any other territory outside the Arabian peninsula. Nor is there any indication that the Najranites were aiding Muhammad *qua* Muslim. No mention is made of Christian conversion to Islam in order for the treaty to be ratified. The treaty is merely a localized agreement benefiting both parties against a third party.⁵³

The *Chronicle of Seert* contains a much fuller account of this same treaty between Muhammad and the Najranite Christian community represented by Said/Seyyid, Abraham the monk, and Isaiah the bishop.⁵⁴ The Najranite Christians offer to fight under Muhammad's banner if he is agreeable.⁵⁵ Muhammad accepts the offer of Najranite military aid against their common enemies, Jews, Qoreisites and polytheists.⁵⁶ He also lays injunctions upon all Arab chiefs and notables to respect the agreement which he, Muhammad, has made with these 'Christians who have regard for my cause, have strength to repulse incursions into their territory which they inhabit along the frontiers, and have proven themselves to be consistent in their observance of treaties into which they have entered. The priests and monks have shown a particular sympathy to my cause'.⁵⁷ There is no mention of Christian conversion to Islam in this account. Specific mention is made of the protections owing to Christians precisely because they are Christians, that is, the priests and monks who Muhammad states have long been receptive to his preaching of ethical monotheism. What is not clear from this account is whether the terms of this treaty are applicable to anyone other than the Christian community of Najran.

This treaty between Muhammad and the Najranite Christians serves as a model for a slightly later account of a treaty between Catholicos Išo'yahb II and Muhammad's successor, Abu Bakr. Išo'yahb had initially tried to negotiate with Muhammad himself, but Muhammad's death in 632 forced Išo'yahb to negotiate with Abu Bakr. According to the account in the *Chronicle of Seert*,

⁵² For a history of Christianity in Najran see Irfan Shahid, *The martyrs of Najran: new documents* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971).

⁵³ Al-Tabari preserves a record of Arab non-Muslim allies participating on Muhammad's side at the battle of al-Qadisiyyah. Perhaps the Najranites were among those allies. See Tabari, *History*, xii.127 [2340].

⁵⁴ *Chronicle of Seert*, 605.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 607.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 606.

Išo'yahb sent his representative, Bishop Gabriel of Maišan, to Muhammad. In exchange for a gift of 1,000 silver staters, Išo'yahb wanted Muhammad to look kindly on the Christians. Abu Bakr accepted the money and assured Gabriel that the Christians would be dealt with kindly. When Shah Yazdgird heard of Išo'yahb's deal with Abu Bakr, he was furious. Accused of treachery, Išo'yahb defended himself by arguing that he was only trying to buy protection from religious coercion for the Christians of Najran.⁵⁸ Shah Yazdgird was appeased when he learned that Išo'yahb's actions were not directed against the Sasanian government but covered only 'the Christian population bordering the Arabs'.⁵⁹

It is quite within the realm of possibility that Išo'yahb actually had dealings with Abu Bakr. Išo'yahb had prior experience as an ambassador due to his involvement in peace negotiations between the Sasanians and the Byzantines.⁶⁰ Išo'yahb may well have thought that it was his duty to act on behalf of a Christian community even if it lay outside the boundaries of his jurisdiction. It would be difficult to see Išo'yahb's gift of money to Abu Bakr as anything other than a form of bribery. Išo'yahb did not promise anything which could be considered as aid to the Arab invasion. In this instance, he was only trying to secure protection for the Christians of Najran.

There is ample evidence of treaties negotiated by towns or villages and Arab military commanders, both in Sasanian and in Byzantine territories. Residents of Malatyah in Byzantine territory made a treaty with the Arabs in their vicinity after the Byzantines were defeated at the Battle of the Yarmuk. When Emperor Heraclius found out about it, he expelled the inhabitants from the region and had the town burned to the ground.⁶¹ It must be remembered that for three years prior to the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah, Arabs were active in portions of Sasanian territory, raiding, collecting tribute, perhaps taking captives. Residents were forced to negotiate local treaties with the Arabs in order to survive.⁶² This is precisely what the Christian community of Hira did. They were accused by the Sasanian general, Rustam, of spying for the Arabs and paying them money. The Christians defended their actions by arguing that they were only trying to buy their own safety from Arab attack when it became apparent the Sasanian military could not protect them.⁶³ They did not undertake this action out of a desire to aid the Arabs or to jeopardize the Sasanian government, but to preserve their own safety.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 619–20.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 620.

⁶⁰ On Išo'yahb's experience as diplomat, see Thomas of Marga, *Book of governors*, ii.126.

⁶¹ Tabari, *History*, xii.134 [2349].

⁶² Ibid., xii.84–85 [2289–90].

⁶³ Ibid., xii.51–52 [2256]; Hitti, *Origins*, 390.

The textual evidence pertinent to the seventh century does not support the idea that Christians were instrumental in the success of the Arab invasion. The evidence preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert*, in its attempt to construct an impressive pedigree of loyalty to Muhammad personally and to the cause of Islam, reads more like a later attempt to explain Arab military victories in a way that would be theologically more palatable to Christians. The *Chronicle of Seert* presents the Arab invasion in such a way as to make a case that Islam did not actually defeat Christianity but that Christians themselves had a hand in the downfall of a pagan government and the establishment of a theocentric government. The idea that Islam defeated Christianity, both religiously and politically, is a much bigger problem for writers from Byzantine territory, although the difficulty surfaces among Syriac Christian sources as well.⁶⁴

There is no evidence to support the notion that the Christian populace in the Sasanian Empire was inherently disloyal because of its religious persuasion. There is a long list of instances in which bishops demonstrated their loyalty, whether they functioned as ambassadors to the Byzantine court, as in the case of Catholicoi Išō'yahb II and III; or whether they kept track of troop movements on the Byzantine side of the frontier as did Barsauma, bishop of Nisibis.⁶⁵ The Church of the East had long ago taken measures to remove itself from Byzantine control by not allowing its bishops to refer juridical matters to Roman ecclesiastical authorities; by proclaiming its independence from the patriarchate of Antioch;⁶⁶ and by prohibiting travel to the Byzantine Empire for the faculty and students at the School of Nisibis.⁶⁷ The Syriac church was generally persecuted by the Sasanian government only during times of war with Byzantium. After Emperor Heraclius's invasion of Sasanian territory in 626, Shah Khosru Parvez began to persecute Christians, regardless of christological position. After his death in 628, however, the persecution ceased. There is no evidence that there was enough residual ill-feeling against the Sasanian government at the time of the Arab invasion to support the notion that Syriac Christians would have helped the Arabs to the conscious detriment of the Sasanian government. So much depended upon

⁶⁴ On the inability of Byzantine writers to come to terms with the consequences of the Arab invasion see Walter Kaegi, 'Initial Byzantine reactions to the Arab conquests', *Church History*, 38 (1969), 139–49.

⁶⁵ On the importance of ecclesiastics in diplomatic relations see Nina Garsoïan, 'Le rôle de l'hierarchie chrétienne dans les rapports diplomatiques entre Byzance et les Sassanides', *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 10 (1973–74), 119–38. On the use of medical personnel who were also clerics as ambassadors see R.C. Blockley, 'Doctors as diplomats in the sixth century A.D.', *Florilegium*, 2 (1980), 89–100.

⁶⁶ Synod of 424: *Synodicon*, 50–2 (Syr.), 295–7 (trans.).

⁶⁷ Arthur Vööbus, *The statutes of the School of Nisibis* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1961), 69, 76.

the chance circumstances in which the Christians found themselves at the time of the Arab invasion.

Arab Interference in Syriac Church Affairs

Lest I present a picture of the Arab invasion as a rather benign occupation, the negative impact which the invasion did have on Syriac church affairs must be discussed. Even if the Arab invasion itself was not particularly violent, it did have a disruptive effect on Sasanian society, ultimately causing the downfall of the government. At the very least, Arab officials became unintentionally involved in Syriac church affairs just as Sasanian officials had been. Arab officials were forced to side with adherents of one or the other of the major christological parties, a fact already seen in the example of the attempt by the Jacobite community to build their own church in Takrit.⁶⁸ The Arabs also may have tried to engineer the election of their own favored candidates as bishops or even as catholicos, as in the case of Catholicos Mar Emmeh (646–48). While bishop of Nisibis, Mar Emmeh is recorded as bringing food to the Arabs in the region at the time of the invasion. He may simply have been trying to avert widespread pillaging by Arab troops in his district. Nevertheless, in gratitude for this, the Arabs wanted him made catholicos even though he was quite elderly at the time of his election.⁶⁹ If this account is factual, it assumes that very shortly after the invasion the Arabs understood the hierarchy of the institutional church, were willing to work within its parameters, and accepted the need for the various groups of the subject population to have official representatives with whom the provincial authorities could conduct business. In this sense the Arabs appropriated to themselves the prerogatives of the Sasanians without missing a beat.

Išo'yahb III (647/48–658), while metropolitan of Arbil, wrote that the catholicos was able to appoint higher-ranking ecclesiastics to positions without Arab interference.⁷⁰ But this must not have been the entire story, for Išo'yahb III also refers to the disruptions and confusions the Arab invasion caused. Bishops in the outer provinces, themselves uncanonically consecrated, appointed unworthy candidates to ecclesiastical positions. In particular Išo'yahb refers to the man who was to be bishop of Azerbaijan. The consecrating bishops had very little information concerning this man, what his theological beliefs were, how he lived, where he was from.⁷¹ This state of affairs would indicate that considerable confusion in church affairs followed upon the heels of the Arab invasion.

⁶⁸ For a history of the Jacobite presence in Takrit see J.-M. Fiey, 'Tagrit. Esquisse d'histoire chrétienne', *L'Orient Syrien*, 8 (1963), 289–342.

⁶⁹ *Chronicle of Seert*, 630.

⁷⁰ *Ep.* 50: CSCO 11. 98–100 (Syr.), 12. 75 (trans.).

⁷¹ *Ep.* 40: CSCO 11. 67–68 (Syr.), 12. 53–4 (trans.).

Yet it is not clear that the confusion in the church's affairs was entirely the result of the Arab invasion. At the same time the Arabs invaded the Sasanian Empire, the Church of the East was facing perhaps an even greater peril from within. In the year 628, the Syriac-speaking Jacobite church elected Maruta of Takrit to the position which would eventually grow into the maphrianate – a parallel, competing, ecclesiastical structure. High-profile defections from the dyophysite hierarchy to the Jacobite hierarchy, as in the case of Sahdona, may have caused just as much damage to the viability of the Church of the East as did the Arab invasion.⁷²

Struggles over the power and authority of the position of Catholicos in the Church of the East occurred against the background of the Arab invasion. In the long-running feud between Simeon, Bishop of Rev-Ardashir in southern Iraq and Catholicos Išo'yahb III over the notion of centralized authority, both sides attempted to involve the Arab authorities, and both sides tried to use civil authorities to back up ecclesiastical decisions.

In a letter to a group of dissenting bishops in Oman, Išo'yahb accused them of non-canonical consecration. As a result of their not sharing in the apostolic succession of bishops, he says, the faith in their jurisdictions has become tainted to the point where there are widespread conversions to Islam by former Christians who would rather keep all of their material property and lose their heavenly inheritance.⁷³ But this is not a matter of forced conversion to Islam. It is, rather, a matter of human greed. It is difficult to know how to interpret Išo'yahb III's remarks on Islam. They occur mainly in highly polemical, heavily rhetorical letters written in a very defensive tone. Išo'yahb may be using the defection of some Christians to Islam only to deflect attention from his more urgent problem, the refusal of the bishops to recognize Išo'yahb's claim to authority over them. Casting about for reasons to browbeat the bishops back into obedience, he latches on to the idea that Christianity is at risk in these areas on account of conversions to Islam, which to Išo'yahb are proof enough that the bishops are in the wrong. What seems to upset Išo'yahb more than these conversions is that the dissenting bishops have informed the local Arab authorities that they are no longer under obedience to the catholicos. Išo'yahb is thus forced to negotiate with the Arab authorities to whom he is responsible, rather than keeping the quarrel within the confines of the church.

A thorough study of the full corpus of Išo'yahb III's letters is necessary to assess his seemingly contradictory statements about the

⁷² For an account of Sahdona's defection to the Jacobite church, and Išo'yahb's long-running battle with him because of it, see Thomas of Marga, *Book of governors*, ii. 128–30, 132–47.

⁷³ *Ep.* 21: CSCO 11. 277–83 (Syr.), 12. 201–4 (trans.).

Arabs and the providential reasons for their conquest. A case can be made, however, that the coming of the Arabs and the growth and formalization of Islam in the former Sasanian Empire were initially less of a threat to the unity and survival of the Church of the East than were intra-church dissensions, rebellions against catholicate authority, defections to other christological parties by prominent churchmen and the rise of the competing Jacobite church.

