

CORPSE EXPOSURE IN THE ACTS OF THE PERSIAN MARTYRS AND ITS LITERARY MODELS

HÉCTOR RICARDO FRANCISCO

IMHICIHU-CONICET/ UNIVERSIDAD DE BUENOS AIRES

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the literary models of the corpse exposure motif in East-Syriac Hagiography.

INTRODUCTION

A well-known passage of the History of Łazar P‘arpec‘i described how the Šābānšāh Yazdgard II commanded that his servants leave the corpses of the executed Christians unburied in deserted places because:

They (i.e. the Christians) say about the bones of those who die for their God, that if anyone has in his house even a small fragment of them no harm or evil machination touches him or his house or his dear ones. Furthermore, he said, they claim that in judicial proceedings [the relics] give success, wisdom, bravery, and security. They attempt by personal efforts and money, even at

the cost of their lives, to obtain at least a tooth or nail of such persons and to take to their homes.¹

This quotation may be taken as an evidence of the well-known Zoroastrian taboo about dead matter. But, after a second reading of its arguments, it is surprising to learn that it does not express the concern of a pious Zoroastrian king about the purity of the earth; instead, it actually reveals a strategy directed to avoid the establishment of a cult around the bodies of the executed Christians. The reasons given to do so are a good example of how the cult of the martyrs was perceived not by the Zoroastrian authorities, but by the author himself. Like all Late Antique Christians, he conceived relics as a source of spiritual as well as material benefits. Additionally, the fruitless attempt of the persecutors to prevent the remains of the Christian heroes from becoming the focus of worship confirmed their victory over death. Undoubtedly, the disposal of the bodies of the Christian martyrs occupied the center of the scene, but it is noteworthy that the speech entailed a different set of preoccupations other than the purity of creation. In fact, it turned the control over them into a central issue, not only because of the fear of reprisal on the part of the Magi but also because of the place occupied by relics within the Church's life. Thus, from the author's point of view, the anecdote highlights the importance of the relics in Christians' lives and, by extension, their impact on the definition of power relations inside the Church.

In the following pages I will analyze the origin and function of the stories concerning corpse exposure in the East-Syrian Martyr Acts. In particular, I will concentrate on the literary nature of these stories, arguing that East Syrian hagiographers organized the stories about the exposure and ransom of martyrs' corpses on the basis of a literary *topos*. The result was twofold. Beyond any doubt, these stories built a specific image of a religious "other" (i.e. the Magi) through which communal boundaries could be defined. However, they were primarily designed to legitimize the pretensions of the episcopacy to exercise control over Christian sanctuaries.

Corpse exposure –along with close kin marriage– has been regarded as one of the key features of the religious practices in pre-

¹ R. Thomson, *The history of Lazar P'arpec'i* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 135.

Islamic Iran. In fact, both contemporary literary sources and modern specialists have defined it as a mark of “Zoroastrian” identity. Although the allusions to corpse exposure in East-Syrian hagiography were frequently noted, their study is relatively recent, and chiefly focused on its theological aspects. Actually, in his study of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs under Shapur II, Gernot Wiessner had already mentioned them in a non-exhaustive catalog.² But the first systematic approach is Peter Bruns’s study of the stories related to corpse exposure in East-Syrian hagiography. By analyzing its contents and structure, Bruns concluded that these narratives alluded to an actual debate between Christian and Zoroastrian theologians.³ Thus, by appropriating images and concepts of Zoroastrian theology, Christian writers could claim the superiority of their faith over that of their religious opponents. Geoffrey Herman reached similar conclusions in his comparative study on the exhumation of corpses in the Talmud Bavli and Christian literature.⁴ Herman has demonstrated that exhumation has been a troublesome factor for Jewish and Christians living in the Sasanian Empire at least from the mid-fourth century onwards. The chronological parallels have pointed “to a synchronized common plight for both of these non-Zoroastrian communities” caused by a “Zoroastrian activism” which “legitimated the meddling in the practices of all non-Zoroastrians where these offended Zoroastrian sensibilities.”⁵

The valuable works by Bruns and Herman consider those narratives as directed towards the “outsiders” of the Christian community. This does not mean that Christian writers were arguing directly against the Magi. On the contrary, like most of the Late

² G. Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II*, Untersuchungen zur Syrischen Literaturgeschichte I, Abh. Gött, Philol.-hist.Kl., Dritte Folge 67 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 219-221.

³ P. Bruns, “Reliquien und Reliquienverehrung in den syro-persischen Märtyrerakten,” *Römische Quartalschrift für Christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 101 (2006), 194-213.

⁴ G. Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep! Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources,” in *Tiferet Leyisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus*, ed. J. Roth, M. Schmeltzer, Y. Francus (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2010), 31-59.

⁵ Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep,” 52.

Antique Christian polemics, the targeted audience was their own co-religionists. For both studies, the underlying purpose of the narratives was to warn them about any possible compromise with the Magi while establishing the theological limits between both “religions.” Moreover, the above-mentioned anecdotes may be considered testimonies of the existence of an actual debate on two antagonistic theological conceptions about Death and Afterlife. In general terms, I agree with their conclusions but tend to feel that they simplify a much more complex scenario. Christian writers described some exemplary Zoroastrianism in order to transmit their own teachings. Their ultimate intention was not to generate an accurate description but to strengthen (or even create) a communal identity built on the concepts and practices which defined the *how-to-be Christian*. Thus, the images of this Zoroastrian “other” were based on a well-established literary tradition about the Iranian culture. Paradoxically, this tradition was not only developed through the contact with “actual” Zoroastrians, but was also built on references extracted from Classical ethnographers and reproduced by Jewish and Christian literature. In other words, this literary tradition was a sort of prism through which actual experience was seen. As we shall see, it seems apparent that the events related to corpse exposure in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* were inspired by western models, chiefly by the *History of the Martyrs of Palestine* by Eusebius of Caesarea.

CORPSE EXPOSURE IN IRANIAN MILIEU

It is well known that the Iranian custom of corpse exposure to the action of animals (birds and dogs) and natural elements caught the attention of foreign observers, namely ancient ethnographers and modern travelers. Literary evidence suggests that this practice was very old.⁶ Yet, in spite of their abundance, the early testimonies present a considerable number of interpretative problems. First, from Herodotus to Agathias, Classical and Christian sources offered a substantial amount of information about it.⁷ But these

⁶ M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 325-330.

⁷ For a detailed record of the testimonies in Classical and Christian Literatures see: A. De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and*

“external” sources are too contradictory and biased to be taken unreservedly. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to affirm that they do not provide much more than an insight into the prejudices and literary clichés designed to create the image of the Barbarian.⁸ Second, “internal” (i.e. Avestan and Pahlavi) sources do not provide a unanimous description. Avestan purity prescriptions designed to prevent the elements (Earth, Fire, and Water) from being polluted by corpses were complemented by Medieval Pahlavi literature which regulated a complicated funerary ceremony.⁹ Although the *Vendidad* gives several details about the rituals prescribed for the disposal of the dead and the theological principles behind them, the information provided in it is “slightly contradictory” and suggests the coexistence of various practices besides exposure.¹⁰ On the other hand, most Pahlavi theological texts -although unambiguous in their descriptions- date from a relatively late period, and their value as source for Late Antiquity is problematic, to say the least.

Furthermore, archaeological evidence offers little information on the uniformity of the funerary practices in Late Antique Iran. Recent surveys have demonstrated that corpse exposure coexisted with a great variety of funerary practices, including inhumation.¹¹ In

Latin literature, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 436 and A. Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23-24 (1969), 67-183.

⁸ De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 433-437.

⁹ Most of the ritualistic prescriptions on the treatment of corpses in Avestan literature are contained in the *Vendidad*, see A. Panaino, *Vendidad: la legge di abiura dei demoni dell'Avesta zoroastriano*, (Milano: Mimesis, 1990). B. T. Anklesaria, *Zand-Akāsib, Iranian or Greater Bundahišn. Transliteration and Translation in English*, (Mumbai: Rahnumae Mazdayasnan Sabha, 1956), 25; J. Tavadia, *Šāyast-nē-šāyast. A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs*, (Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter, 1930), 30-73. For detailed descriptions of these rituals see: J.J. Modi, *The funeral ceremonies of the Parsees: their origin and explanation*, (Mumbai: Fort Print Press, 1905) and D. Menant, “Les rites Funéraires des Zoroastriens de l’Inde,” in *Conférences faites au Musée Guimet*, (Paris: Leroux, 1910), 141-198. For a modern analysis, see: M. Boyce, “Corpse, Disposal of, in Zoroastrianism,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2011, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/corpse-disposal-of-in-zoroastrianism>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ L. Trüpelman, “Sasanian Graves and Burial Customs,” in *Arabie orientale. Mésopotamie et Iran méridionale de l’âge du fer au début de la période*

addition, there is evidence that funerary practices presented multiple local variations which may have transcended religious boundaries.¹²

Besides the extent and uniformity of corpse exposure as a funerary practice, there is another issue involving the correlation between corpse exposure and the Zoroastrian “theology of Death”. The development of a Zoroastrian theology regarding the origin and nature of Death antedates the Sasanian period. However, it seems that this theology fully dealt with funerary practices only in relatively later times.¹³ As I have already mentioned, Pahlavi literature of the Early Islamic period complemented prescriptions about proper disposal of the dead in the *Vendidad*. However, as Satnam Mendoza Forrest has showed, for Zoroastrian orthodoxy the potential of contamination of a corpse was not that straightforward, and depended on the piety of the deceased while

islamique, ed. R. Bourchalat (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1984), 317-329; R. Bourchalat, “Pratiques funéraires à l’époque sassanide dans le Sud de l’Iran,” in *Histoire et cultes de l’Asie Centrale préislamique: sources écrites et documents archéologiques: actes du Colloque international du CNRS, (Paris, 22-28 novembre 1988)*, ed. P. Bernard, F. Grenet, (Paris: CNRS, 1991), 71-78; D. Huff, “Archaeological evidence of zoroastrian funerary practices,” in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed., M. Stausberg, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 593-630.

¹² On the debate about Christian Acculturation on Iranian funerary practices see: M.-J. Steve, et al., *L’Île de Kharg. Une page de l’Histoire du Golfe Persique et du Monachisme Oriental* (Herman Gasché, Neuchâtel, 2003), 69-77; S. Hauser, “Christliche Archäologie im Sasanidenreich: Grundlagen der Interpretation und Bestandsaufnahme der Evidenz,” in *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich*, ed. A. Mustafa, J. Tubach, & G. Sophia Vashalomidze, (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007): 93-136; S. J. Simpson & T. S. Molleson, “Old Bones Overturned: New Evidence for Funerary Practices from the Sasanian Empire,” in *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*, ed. A. Fletcher, D. Antoine, and J.D. Hill, (London: British Museum press, 2014), 77-90.

¹³ M. Hutter, “The Impurity of the Corpse (nasā) and the Future Body (tan ī pasēn): Death and Afterlife in Zoroastrianism,” in *Human Body in Death and Resurrection*, ed., T. Nicklas, F. V. Reiterer, J. Verheyden, H. Braun (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 13-26. For a general view about the development of Zoroastrian theology, see: S. Shaked, *Dualism in transformation: varieties of religion in Sasanian Iran*, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994).

alive.¹⁴ For example, both for the *Vendidad* and the Pahlavi literature the corpses of the unbelievers were a minor source of pollution.¹⁵ According to Mendoza Forrest, “the more advanced the departed soul was, the more rage the demon of dead matter feels when entering the body”.¹⁶ As a consequence, the bodies of Christian Holy Men may have been considered a less harmful source of pollution than those of the pious Zoroastrians. This distinction may explain the absence of a cult around the pious Zoroastrians’ bodies but, at the same time, proves that Christian worship would offer no serious threat to their purity taboos.

East-Syrian, Armenian and Talmudic sources are purportedly first-hand witnesses. As I have already pointed out, Geoffrey Herman has demonstrated that exhumation of corpses was an actual issue for both Jews and Christians in the Sasanian Empire. However, we must also consider that the purpose of their narratives was mostly pedagogical. Moreover, their various inconsistencies and contradictions show that they cannot be taken at face value. Two frequent features of these narratives demonstrate that Christian hagiographers had little concern for the empirical accuracy of their descriptions of the Zoroastrian taboos concerning dead matter. First, all the stories point to the fact that inhumation as a practice was apparently out of the question, and the problem arises only in those cases in which Christian worship threatens the religious *status quo*. Second, the intervention of Sasanian authorities frequently seems to come directly into conflict with the practices sanctioned by Pahlavi literature.¹⁷

¹⁴ S.K. Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 54-55.

¹⁵ *Vendidad*, 5.36. Quoted by Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers*, 54; A. Barthelemy, *Gujastak Abalish. Relation d'une conférence théologique présidée par Le Calife Mámoun*. Bibliothèque de L'École des Hautes Études 69 (Paris, Vieweg, 1887).

¹⁶ Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers*, 55.

¹⁷ For example, the bodies of the bishop and martyr Baršēbyā and his companions were thrown to be devoured by beasts and birds, but their heads were hanged on the doors of the temple of the goddess Anahīd at Estakhr, *AMS* II, 283. The *Martyrdom of Šūltan Mahdūkbē*—though set in a completely legendary context—makes several references to Sasanian culture. Despite this, the story states that the body of the saint was cremated, *AMS* II, 38. According to the *Life of Mār Abā*, the Magi

Two examples could shed some light on this point. The first one is the short dialog between the East-Syrian Catholicos Mār Baboī and the *Šābānšāb* Djamasp contained in a late source, the *Chronicle of Seert*, dating from the tenth or eleventh centuries.¹⁸ Bruns makes an extensive analysis of the theological and, especially, medical concepts in the dialog, concluding that the words of the Catholicos reflected an accurate understanding of Zoroastrian theology. However, the dialog gives us only a hint about the Galenic influence on East-Syrian anthropology, while leaving little room for an insight into the Zoroastrian viewpoint on the topic.

On the contrary, the testimony of Elišē's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*¹⁹ can help us to reach some interesting conclusions. On the one hand, Elišē refers to Yazdgard's invective against the Christians for polluting the earth by interring the dead.²⁰ But, on the other hand, these purity taboos are set aside in another episode devoted to the execution and exposure of a *Magus* converted to Christianity. In this case, the king's concern was less related to the conservation of the purity of Earth than to the effects of the cult of the relics on religious status quo.²¹ For the king, just like in later Pahlavi literature, the focus of the debate was on the status of the corpse rather than on the burial itself, and his main concern was to avoid the spread of the cult around the martyr's relic.

Both examples demonstrate that the references to corpse exposure in Christian literature must be read with caution. Without any doubt, there were occasional clashes between Christians and the Magi about the cult of relics. Indeed, the Christian insistence

unsuccessfully tried to take the corpse of the celebrated Catholicos—a convert from Zoroastrianism—and threw it to the dogs. Finally, they accepted the superiority of Christian leadership and participated in the procession that translated his body, see P. Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar Jabalaba, de trois autres Patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques nestoriens*, (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1895), 271-272.

¹⁸ A. Scher, *Histoire nestorienne inédite: (chronique de Séert). Seconde partie. (I)*, PO 7.2, (Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1911), 37-38. This same anecdote is reproduced with interesting variants by the two versions of the *Kitab Al Majdal*.

¹⁹ R. Thomson, *Elišē. History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1982).

²⁰ *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 90.

²¹ *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, 207.

on the contact with dead matter as a means to reach God necessarily affected Zoroastrians' sensibility. But there is no conclusive evidence about a systematic and long-term policy against the deposition of saints' relics in churches.²² On the contrary, Christian *Martyria* were allowed into the cities and kings were eager to finance their construction.²³ In general, they did not expect religious homogeneity and they were tolerant of Christian practices, except in those cases (as in the case of Elišē's story) when the religious hegemony of the Magi was challenged.

To sum up, regardless of their undeniable factual value, I consider that these anecdotes might also be approached from a literary stance. From this point of view, they may be interpreted as literary devices which differentiate the theological concepts and funerary practices of Christians from those of "others", i.e. the Magi, the Jewish and the Manicheans. At the same time, they allowed the development of the cult around the relics, which became an incontestable mark of Christian identity. Yet they also constituted internal bonds through the assignment of hierarchical roles to the living in their exchange with the dead. Consequently, the stories about the ransom of the saint's bones from the exposure to the elements and animals, and their subsequent deposition in a *Martyrium* entitled the clerical elite to hold control over them.

THE EXPOSURE OF THE MARTYRS' CORPSES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

As mentioned above, modern studies have addressed the narratives related to the exposure of martyrs' corpses as a product of the interaction between Christians and their Zoroastrian adversaries. However, the motif of the unburied corpse was frequent in classical, Jewish and Christian literature and undoubtedly inspired East-Syrian hagiographers. In this section I will analyze some

²² The only (possible) exception to this observation is the Martyrdom of Pērōz, *AMS* IV, 254, which states that the infamous Mobad Mīharšābhōr commanded the exhumation of all the dead who had been buried during the reign of Yazdgard I.

²³ Cf. *AMS* IV, 180, *Life of Mār Aḥūdemmeb*, 31; *Chronicle of Seert* 2.2, 146-147. Cf. J. B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1902), 107 (text), 364 (translation).

potential literary antecedents and the possible ways in which they could have reached East-Syrian literature.

References to corpse exposure abound in the Bible, though none of them is related to the Iranian culture. The first occurrence is a particular one in the Book of Jeremiah known as “the burial of the ass” (קְבוּרַת הַמֹּזֵר), which was the punishment reserved for perjurers and blasphemers.²⁴ The second form is directly related to the formula “food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.” This formula can be found more or less *verbatim* thirteen times throughout the Bible and, although this repetition hinders the identification of any order of precedence, we can find two distinct sets. Both are closely interrelated, but their significance is clearly different.

The largest group (made up of ten occurrences) is part of the Deuteronomistic tradition, and makes reference to the desecration of corpses as the punishment reserved to those who disobeyed God’s commandments.²⁵ Almost all of these references are related to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 BC.²⁶ The only exception is Deut. 28: 26 in which the prophecy is replaced by the more abstract, but equally threatening, overtone of Moses’ speech about the calamities which would fall on Israel due to their disobedience.

²⁴ Jer. 22:19. Cf. *Sanb.* 82a; and especially in the Synods of the Church of the East where the “burial of the ass” is reserved for those found guilty of incestuous marriages and polygamy, see: *Synodicon Orientale*, 84-85 (text), 338 (translation).

²⁵ Jer. 7:33, 15:3, 16:4, 19:7, 22:19, 41:20; Ezek. 29:5; Isa. 18:6; 1 Sam. 17:44-46. This punitive dimension may be related to the horror shared by most ancient civilizations for the unburied corpses, and evidences the close relation between moral behavior and proper burial, although there is no mention of any link between them and individuals’ destiny in the afterlife. In Ancient Mesopotamia, denying a proper burial was a punishment for extremely awful crimes, such as impiety and treason. D. J. Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20.1 (1958), 61-62. Classical Greek literature identified the practice of leaving corpses unburied with Barbarians. J. P. Vernant, “La Belle Mort et le Cadavre outragé,” in *La mort, les morts dans les Sociétés Anciennes*, ed. G. Gnoli, J. P. Vernant, (Paris: Editions de la maison des Sciences de l’homme, 1982), 45-77.

²⁶ The only exception is 1 Sam. 17:44-46 which is related to the combat between David and Goliath.

The second group is represented by Psalm 79: 2-3 and associated passages in the Maccabees' tradition.²⁷ All of them make reference to the defilement of Jerusalem but shift the punitive dimension of the first group to a martyrological context, adding corpse exposure to the sufferings of the Jews under an impious monarch. Yet, the exact relationship between Psalm 79 and its counterparts in the tradition of the Maccabees is problematic. The former is a lament for the destruction of Jerusalem. Verses 2 and 3 plead for the victims of the slaughter:

The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be food unto the birds of the heavens, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them.²⁸

Although most modern scholars relate Psalm 79 to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC,²⁹ this psalm is often identified by late antique exegetes as a prophecy of the defilement of the Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BC.³⁰ This identification is based on the textual similarities between Ps. 79:2 and 1 Macc. 7:16-17, in which the massacre of sixty *Hasidim* (Ἀσιδαῖτοι) by the pro-Syrian High Priest Alcimus is described:

Whereupon they believed him: howbeit he took of them threescore men, and slew them in one day, according to the words which he (Alcimus?) wrote, The flesh of thy saints have they cast out,

²⁷ 1 Macc. 7:16-17, 2 Macc. 9:15, 3 Macc. 6:34.

²⁸ Ps. 79:2.

²⁹ M. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 132-133.

³⁰ J. Goldstein, *I Maccabees. A new translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 332-336; Theodoret, *Interpretatio in Psalmos*, PG LXXX, 1503-1510; R. Hill, ed., *Theodore of Mopsuestia. Commentary on Psalms 1-81* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 1086. M. J. Pierre, *Aphraate le Sage persan. Les Exposés I: Exposés I-X*, SC 349 (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 345-346.

and their blood have they shed round about
Jerusalem, and there was none to bury them.³¹

The passage of 1 Macc. 7:16-17 resumes the martyrological overtones of Ps. 79:2-3. Both are purported as a lament for the calamities which befell on the pious Jews. Notwithstanding the similarities of the vocabulary in both sets of references, their consequences are different. While the Deuteronomistic tradition emphasizes the punitive character of the exposure, Psalm 79 and the Maccabean tradition are more concerned with the motif of the fate of the innocents killed by the impious tyrant.

The martyrological exegesis of 1 Macc. 7:16-17 was translated into Latin and Greek martyr stories.³² Although the earliest testimonies are not directly connected to martyrological context,³³ the second- and third-century's martyr stories made the relation more explicit. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius quoted a letter concerning the execution of the martyrs of Lyon.³⁴ This document dates from the second century AD and although it is impossible to determine the exact measure to which the original text was reproduced by the bishop of Caesarea, it is undeniable that the Books of Maccabees inspired the author of the letter in his portrayal of the Christian heroes.³⁵ This inspiration is evidenced in

³¹ 1 Macc. 7:16-17.

³² H. Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques*, (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1906), 32-33.

³³ In the *Acts of Pilate* the image of the unburied corpse is present in the form of a threat directed to Joseph of Arimathea for having buried the body of the Savior. See J. K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 178.

³⁴ *HE* V, 1 55-56. The translations of the *Ecclesiastical History* are taken from K. Lake, *Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library, (London: W. Heinemann, 1926).

³⁵ For a general view of the relationship of hagiography and biblical text see: M. Van Uythfange, "Modèles bibliques dans l'hagiographie," in *Le Moyen Âge et la Bible*. P. Riché, & G. Lobrichon, Dirs. (Paris, Beauchesne, 1984), 449-487; V. Saxter, *Bible et Hagiographie. Textes et thèmes bibliques dans les Actes des martyrs authentiques des premiers siècles* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1986), 37; O. Delouis, "Topos et typos, ou les dessous vétérotestamentaires de la rhétorique hagiographique à Byzance aux viii^e et ix^e siècles," *Hypothèses*, 1 (2002), 235-248.

the story of the martyr Blandina.³⁶ Both the vocabulary and the course of the events allowed the reader/audience to establish a typological connection between the figures of Mart Šmūnī, the mother of the seven martyrs of 2 Macc. 7: 1-42 / 4 Macc. 8:1-17:6 and the noble Galo-Roman lady.³⁷ By encouraging their children to keep faithful to God in the face of the wicked persecutor, both women became the models of maternal bravery.³⁸ In order to emphasize the parallel, the author borrows Maccabean vocabulary to describe Blandina and other characters in the story. By applying the Maccabean term “beasts” (θηρία) to refer to the magistrate and the pagans of Lyon, the persecutors are equated with the animals of the arena.³⁹ This parallelism also allowed the hagiographer to make an explicit connection between the martyrs and their Jewish forerunners in the final paragraph dedicated to the fate of their corpses:

Not even thus was their madness and cruelty to the saints satisfied, for, incited by a wild beast (ὕπὸ γὰρ ἀγρίου θηροῦ⁴⁰), wild and barbarous tribes (ἄγρια καὶ βάρβαρα φύλα) could scarcely stop, and their violence (ὕβρις) began again in a new way on the bodies; for that they had been conquered did not even shame them, because they had no human reason, but it rather inflamed their wrath as of a wild beast (καθάπερ θηρίου) [...]⁴¹

In this paragraph, the author stressed the persecutors’ irrational and foolish nature by establishing a mimetical link between them and the biblical story. After the mention to 2 Macc. 7, the narrator turned to another martyrial reference in the Maccabean circle, i.e. 1

³⁶ HE V.1.55-56.

³⁷ HE V.1.55 Cf. 2 Macc 7:41. Saxter, *Bible et Hagiographie*, 38.

³⁸ T. Rajak, “The Maccabean Mother between Pagans, Jews, and Christians,” in C. Harrison, C. Humfress, I. Sandwell, eds., *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 50-53.

³⁹ Saxter, *Bible et Hagiographie*, 40-47.

⁴⁰ Syriac translation says: ܡܟܘܠܝܢ ܕܘܫܬܝܢܝܘܬܝܢ ܡܢ ܚܝܘܬܝܢܝܘܬܝܢ ܡܢ ܫܬܝܬܝܢܝܘܬܝܢ ܡܢ ܫܬܝܬܝܢܝܘܬܝܢ
“From wild beasts, that is to say, from Satan.”

⁴¹ HE V.1.57-58.

Macc. 7:16-17. Both the governor and the people were depicted as wild (ἄγρια) and beastlike (καθάπερ θηρίου) for leaving the corpses to the dogs.⁴² The remains of the martyrs were subsequently burnt and their ashes thrown to the Rhône river. The story ends with a lament in the first person:

We could not bury the bodies in the earth (μὴ δύνασθαι τὰ σώματα κρύψαι τῇ γῆ.), for night did not avail us for this, nor did money persuade nor entreaty shame, but in every way they watched, as though they would make, some great gain, that the bodies should not obtain burial.⁴³

In both passages, the author associated bestiality with the irrational (even demoniac) nature of persecutors. In contrast, the Christians of Lyon—in all likeness with the Maccabean heroes—are endowed with martyr's virtues such as endurance and impassibility. But, unlike the subsequent references in Martyr stories, there is no posthumous victory for the Saints. On the contrary, the impious and animal nature of the pagans prevented the Christians from rescuing the corpses.

There are two other testimonies in Eusebius's works which may give us a clearer viewpoint about the transmission of the motif of corpses' exposure. Both belong to *The History of the Martyrs of Palestine*.⁴⁴ Due to its structure and contents, the Syriac translation provided successive East-Syrian martyr stories with the most obvious narrative model. The first testimony belongs to the chapter devoted to the confession of Antoninus and his companions. In this story, the bishop of Caesarea uses biblical imagery to describe

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ HE V.1.61-62.

⁴⁴ This text survives in two versions. A shorter version is preserved in Greek and is included as an appendix of the *Ecclesiastical History*, see E. Schwartz, *Eusebius Werke. Erster Teil, Zweiter Band, Die Kirchengeschichte, GCS*, (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 908-950; The longer version survives in a few Greek fragments published by H. Delehaye, "Eusebii Caesariensis De martyribus Palaestinae Longioris Libelli Fragmenta," (*Analecta Bollandiana* 16 [1897]), 113-39; and an almost complete Syriac translation published by W. Cureton, *History of the Martyrs of Palestine by Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea. Discovered in a very Ancient Syriac Manuscript*. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1861).

the judge's brutality against the Christians. The magistrate "was carried away even beyond the laws of nature (ܘܚܘܡܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ) so that he wreaked his vengeance and hatred even upon the lifeless corpses (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ) of the Christians, and forbade their burial." Eusebius follows:

[...] orders were issued that their dead bodies (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ) should be devoured by beasts (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ), and be carefully guarded (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ) night and day till they should be devoured by birds (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ). Guards (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ) were therefore appointed to watch over this barbarous order from a distance, and to keep guard to prevent the bodies of the confessors from being carried away by us by stealth. So the beasts of the field (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ), and the dogs (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ), and the fowls of the sky (ܘܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ), were here and there tearing to pieces the flesh of men, so that men's bones and entrails were found even in the middle of the city; and all men were clad in sorrow on account of these things, because never before had such atrocities been done.⁴⁵

Following the same argument of the letter of Lyon, Eusebius used the parallel between the judge and the beasts to highlight the irrational nature of the sentence. Moreover, the vocabulary of the parallel resembles that in the Maccabean story and the reference to "guards" appointed to prevent the stealing of the corpse may be an indirect reference to the resurrection of the Lord.⁴⁶ This same idea is expanded with new elements in the confession of Pamphilus and

⁴⁵ *History of the Martyrs of Palestine*, 33-34; the Greek text in Schwartz, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, 929.

⁴⁶ J. Corke-Webster, "Author and Authority. Literary Representations of Moral Authority in Eusebius of Caesarea's *The Martyrs of Palestine*," in *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity 300-450 AD: history and discourse, tradition and religious identity*, ed. P. Gemeinhardt & J. Leemans (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 51.

his companions.⁴⁷ In this story, Eusebius applied a similar set of images to define the barbarous attitude of the persecutors who exposed the corpses of the martyrs to become “food for the beasts” (ܠܫܘܬܐ ܠܗܝܘܬܐ).⁴⁸ But in this case, the Christian heroes had a posthumous victory when, according to the Syriac translator, “not even the wild beasts (ܠܘ ܗܝܘܬܐ)” dared to harm the bodies⁴⁹. Then, the believers ransomed their remains and carried them to a church where commemorations (ܠܝܘܪܐܝܐ) were celebrated in their honor. The inclusion of a miracle which allowed the ransom and deposition of the relics matched the triumphal overtones of Eusebian narrative. But most importantly, it showed all the ingredients that are present in later narratives.

Greek and Latin hagiographical texts from the fourth and fifth centuries were influenced by Eusebian material. The case of the *Martyrdom of Sergius and Bacchus* is of great interest due to its popularity among the Christians of the Sasanian Empire.⁵⁰ The cult of these two Roman soldiers spread over Mesopotamia and western Iran, and their story was soon translated into Syriac and Armenian.⁵¹ The earliest Greek version states that the judge in charge of the execution of the martyrs “became irritated because he was defeated” and did not allow the burial of the body of Saint Bacchus. Then, he ordered that his remains “be thrown out and exposed as food (βορὰ) to the dogs, beasts, and birds (κυσὶν καὶ θηρίοις καὶ ὄρνέοις) outside the camp⁵².” The Syriac version is more explicit in quoting directly from the *Pešitta*: “but thrown to the dogs

⁴⁷ *History of the Martyrs of Palestine*, 38-48. Cf. Schwartz, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, 945, Delehaye, “Eusebii Caesariensis De martyribus Palaestinae,” 139.

⁴⁸ *History of the Martyrs of Palestine*, 48. The Greek version is significantly different: εἰς βορὰν τοῖς σαρκοβόροις [θηρίοις].

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* The Greek text of the Long version reads: οὐδὲν αὐτοῖς προσεῆει οὐ θῆρ, οὐκ ὄρνεον, οὐ κύων, Cf. Delehaye, “Eusebii Caesariensis De martyribus Palaestinae,” 139. The shorter version reads: οὐ θηρίον, οὐ πτηνόν, οὐ κύων προσπέλαζεν, Cf. Schwartz, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, 945.

⁵⁰ BHG 1624-1625. BHO 1052-1055. E. Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵¹ Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*, 101-173.

⁵² I. Van Den Gheyn, “Passio antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi Graece nunc primum edita,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 14 (1895), 389.

(يُنذِرُ وَيُعَذِّبُ الْجَائِعِينَ), and that would be food for the beasts of the desert and the birds of the sky (يَجْعَلُهُمْ لِحَبَسَةِ دَابَّاتِ السَّمَاءِ وَطَيْرِ السَّمَاءِ).⁵³

In both versions, the scene ends when the birds guarded the body of Bacchus “as rational human beings” (ὕπὸ τινῶν λογικῶν ἀνθρώπων/ دَابَّاتِ السَّمَاءِ وَطَيْرِ السَّمَاءِ حَافِظِينَ) until the next day, when the monks dwelling in the caves adjacent to the *Castrum* ransomed his corpse and buried it with honors. A comparable story is related by the Latin *Passio of Saint Vincent of Zaragoza*.⁵⁴ According to the *Passio Brevior* and the testimony of Prudentius,⁵⁵ the body of the Spanish deacon was thrown on the field to be devoured by dogs and beasts (*canes aut bestiae*); however his corpse was kept safe by the intervention of a raven (*Corvus*).⁵⁶

To sum up, the motif of the exposure of saints’ corpses was originated in the exegesis of the Hellenistic Judaism and then propagated to early Christian martyrological literature. Central to this motif was the theme of the wicked nature of the persecutors who denied the saints proper burial. Then, the fourth- and fifth-century Christian martyr stories added the element of the saint’s posthumous triumph thanks to divine intervention. As Wiessner has already stated, Eusebius’s *History of the Martyrs of Palestine* contributed some specific vocabulary to the East-Syrian narratives of the ‘Great Persecution’.⁵⁷ But the development of this motif in East-Syriac and Armenian literature was not the mere reproduction of a hagiographical cliché. It is undeniable that inhumation in general and the cult of the saints in particular could eventually be an issue for the Christians living in the Sasanian Empire. However, western hagiographical tradition was the prism through which

⁵³ *AMS* III, 305.

⁵⁴ *BHL* 8627-8648; *BHG* 1866-1867. The story of the martyrdom of this Spanish deacon is attested by three different recensions published in “Acta S. Vincentii martyris, archidiaconi Caesaraugustani, qui passus est Valentiae in Hispania, et relatio translationis ejusdem,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 1 (1882), 259-278. Cf. the sermons of Augustine: *PL* 38, cols. 1252-1267.

⁵⁵ V. H. G. Thompson *Prudentius*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1953), 190-195.

⁵⁶ *Acta S. Vincentii martyris*, 262.

⁵⁷ Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrer-überlieferung*, 266-270.

actual events developed specific meanings which were relevant to the definition of Christian identity.

SAINTS' CORPSES AND ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY IN SASANIAN EMPIRE

The Cult of the Saints, its sociological, political and cultural consequences have captured the attention of the majority of the historians devoted to Late Antiquity for the last forty years. A great number of studies have pointed out the control exercised over the saints' tomb as a source of power in the construction of episcopal authority.⁵⁸ This control was materialized by three elements: the configuration of a sacred space in which the relics were deposited, the periodical performance of the liturgy according the Church's calendar, and the composition of narratives related to both. From the fourth century onwards, the periodical celebrations or "commemorations" of the feasts of the saints and martyrs sanctified time and space. On the one hand, those liturgical commemorations defined "sacred places", i.e. sanctuaries, where they were performed.⁵⁹ The presence of renowned sanctuaries in a city or a district projected sanctity to their surroundings. On the other hand, these celebrations often included the Memorial of the saints, a practice which served as a temporal bridge between their heroic deeds and the believers. As a consequence, the past became central to Church's life, instituting historical (i.e. biographical) narrative as one of its key components. The fourth element (relics) involved a much more conflictive process. Unlike Jewish and pagan taboos on dead matter, Christianity subverted⁶⁰ the relation between the living and the dead, thus establishing a "Tactile

⁵⁸ This may not be the time to list the vast bibliography on the Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity. For a quick reference see P. Brown, "The rise and function of the Holy man in Late antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; Idem, *The cult of the saints. Its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁵⁹ S. MacCormack, *Loca sancta: the organization of sacred topography in late antiquity*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1990); R. Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places," *JECs* 2.3 (1998), 257-271.

⁶⁰ A. Vauchez, "Introduction," *Micrologus. Natura, scienze e società medievali*, VII, Il Cadavere (1999), 1-10.

Revolution”⁶¹ in which death was not a source of pollution but a means to reach God. Hence, both realms were integrated by having the tomb of these “very special dead”⁶² within the city walls.

As a consequence of the presence saints’ relics, Christian sanctuaries became places where spiritual authority was manifested. But this authority also flowed through space, thanks to their circulation in the form of a “blessing” (Gr. εὐλογία, Syr. ܠܗܘܘܬܐ) which was perceived as endowed by the saint’s power.⁶³ Although blessings may be defined as “disinterested gifts”, their circulation established hierarchical bonds not only between individuals, but also between communities. Following Patrick Geary, we could define relics as “Sacred Commodities”: “goods destined to circulation and exchange” which establish hierarchical relations between the donor and the receiver.⁶⁴ The relics may have circulated as a reminder of the power of the saint, but especially as an expression of the special relation between him and a specific community.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the circulation of the saints’ relics could have strengthened or challenged the hierarchical relations between them. For example, J. M. Fiey has showed that the translation of the bodies of the saints in Late Antique Iraq was part of an agonistic exchange between communities.⁶⁶ This competition was intended to legitimize the authority of the *relic-holder* over his neighbors.

⁶¹ A. Samellas, *Death in the eastern Mediterranean (50-600 A.D.): the Christianization of the East : an interpretation*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 148-162.

⁶² Brown, *The cult of the saints*, 69.

⁶³ See: D. Caner, “Towards a Miraculous Economy Christian Gifts and Material ‘Blessings’ in Late Antiquity,” *J ECS* 14 (2006), 329-377; *idem*, “Alms, Blessings, Offerings,” in *The Gift in Antiquity*, ed M. L. Satlow (Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁶⁴ P. Geary, “Sacred commodities: the circulation of medieval relics,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169.

⁶⁵ On the translation of Saints’ relics see: H. Delehaye, *Les origines du culte des martyrs* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1912), 63-119; C. Mango, “Constantine’s Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83.1 (1990), 51-62.

⁶⁶ J. M. Fiey, “La vie mouvementée des reliques dans l’orient,” *Parole de l’Orient* 13 (1986), 183-196.

In the West, the Cult of the Saints reinforced and amplified a previously existing episcopal structure. But until the first decades of the fifth century, the Church of the East had a scarcely organized episcopal organization. From the first decades of the reign of Yazdgerd I onwards, there was a process which led to a much more formal ecclesiastical structure. While this episcopal structure was being formalized, a Christian cult of the saints was developed. This cult expanded around the martyrs of the ‘Great Persecution’ under Šapūr II and it spread to a number of local martyrs and ascetics. The stories told around their deeds –what we could call the East-Syrian hagiographical tradition- were the means of expression of a Christian culture in which martyrdom was paramount. One of the main components of this culture was the assertion of a radical opposition between the Christian heroes and their religious rivals.⁶⁷ But this insistence on polemic and conflict does not conceal the multiple instances of adjustment of Christians to the Persian Culture.⁶⁸ Moreover, in posing the opposition of two antagonistic patterns of behavior, martyr stories were not intended to build a “realistic” model of Christian behavior but an ideal of Christian

⁶⁷ A. Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sassanian Empire. The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpanch,” *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 2 (2009), 300-336.

⁶⁸ An extensive bibliography puts accommodation and negotiation at the center of the Church-State relations in Sasanian Empire: R. Payne, *Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500 – 700 CE*. (Princeton: PhD. Thesis, 2010); J. T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); S. McDonough, “A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Tazdgerd II (438-457 CE.),” in *Violence, Victims, and Vindication in Late Antiquity*, ed. H. Drake (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69-82; *idem*, “Bishops or Bureaucrats?: Christian Clergy and the State in the Middle Sasanian Period,” *Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History*, D. Kennet & P. Luft, eds., (Oxford, Archaeopress, 2008): 87-92; P. Gignoux, “Sur quelques relations entre Chrétiens et mazdéens d’après des sources syriaques,” *Studia Iranica*, 28 (1999), 83-94; L. Van Rompay, “Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdgerd I (419-421),” in *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans*, ed., M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 363-375.

heroism. This heroism was the starting point for the transmission of authority from the martyrs to the clergy in charge of their cult. This last observation leads us to the other characteristic of Christian culture: its local character, and its temporal continuity through the succession of martyrs and bishops.⁶⁹ The sanctuaries housed the saints' charisma, which was transmitted to the clergy attached to them by the re-enactment of their martyrdom by means of asceticism and liturgy.⁷⁰ They were actually the source of a Christian identity which stemmed from the development of a culture centered on Martyrdom.

At this point, it becomes apparent that the events related to corpse exposure in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* could be addressed within this much broader view. This scope includes not only the theological polemic but also the literary tradition underlying them and, chiefly, their function in the plot of each narrative. As a general hypothesis I would like to suggest that the events of corpse exposure were a form of *Inventio reliquarum*. The *Inventio reliquarum* is a well known feature of Late Antique hagiography related to the need to legitimize Christian sanctuaries as places of worship. The most notable of these findings is the *Inventio* of the relics of the Holy Cross by Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine.⁷¹ As a literary device, the *Inventio reliquarum* was a means to fill the gap between the "historical" time of a saint and the emergence of his or her cult. Most of the stories about the exposure of the martyrs' body in East-Syriac literature are closely related to the *Inventio* of the relics in which a miracle reveals the place where the saint's remains are located.

⁶⁹ M. Debić, "Writing History as 'Histoires': the biographical dimension of East Syriac historiography," in *Writing 'True Stories': Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East* A. Papaconstantinou, M. Debić, H. Kennedy (eds.) (Paris: Brepols, 2010), 43-75.

⁷⁰ Cf. the link between the martyrs of Bēth S'elōkh and the monks, *AMS* II, 531-535.

⁷¹ J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*. (Leuven: Brill, 1992).

CORPSE EXPOSURE IN EAST-SYRIAN MARTYR STORIES

Approximately sixty percent of the seventy three⁷² hagiographical pieces related to the Sasanian Empire contain some reference to corpse exposure, but their extension and characteristics are not homogeneous. Ironically, explicit references to exposure to the elements, dogs and birds are relatively sparse and ambiguous.⁷³ In some cases the references are undoubtedly bonded to biblical typology.⁷⁴ Most of them do not mention animals and are brief and plain, almost of formulaic nature. They only state that the corpses were left unburied and taken by the believers “secretly” or “by night” because they feared the Magi.⁷⁵ While some events include miracles or portents which allowed the ransom of the body,⁷⁶

⁷² This number is taken from the exhaustive catalogue made by S. Brock, *The History of Mar Ma'in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 1, (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 78-84, plus a few additions of our own.

⁷³ See the martyrdoms of the captives of Bēth Zabaī, *AMS* II, 323; Jacob and Azad, *AMS* IV, 140; Baršebyā, *AMS* II, 283, Miles of Susa, *AMS* II, 275, the Greek martyrdoms of IA, H. Delehaye, *Les Versions grecques des Actes des Martyrs Persans. Textes grecs et traductions*, PO 2.4 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907), 460-461 and Širīn, P. Devos, “Sainte Sirin, martyre sous- Khosran ler Anosarvan,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 64 (1946), 131; the *Life of Mar Abā*, Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar Jabalaba*, 598, and the *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ*, F. Nau, *Histoires d'Aboudeemmeḥ et de Marouta, métropolitains Jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient (V^e et VII^e siècles), suivies du Traité d'Aboudeemmeḥ sur l'homme*, PO 3.1 (Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1909), 46-51. Some references are unclear, see: the martyrdom of Ādhūrḥormīzd and his daughter Ānahīd, *AMS* II, 596-600.

⁷⁴ As is the case of the introduction to the history of Simeon Bar Šābbā'e, Cf. A. Scher, & J. Perier, *Histoire nestorienne inédite: (Chronique de Séert). Première partie. (I)*, PO 4.3, (Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1908), 299. M. Kmosko, *S. Simeon Bar Sabba'e*, PS 1.2, (Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1907), 718. Cf. K. Smith, *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Sabba'e*, Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 3 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Cf. the martyrdoms of Šābōr and Isaac, *AMS* II, 56; the 120 martyrs, *AMS* II, 295; Badmā, *AMS* II, 351; Dadō, *AMS* II, 221; Pinhas, *AMS* IV, 218; Narsai, *AMS* IV, 180; Tataq, *AMS* IV, 184; Aqebhšēmā, *AMS* II, 390-391.

⁷⁶ See the martyrdoms of Pōsī, *AMS* II, 232; Jacob and Azad, *AMS* IV, 140. Cf. Bruns, “Reliquien und Reliquienverehrung,” 201-209.

others showed how the crafty believers managed to recover it.⁷⁷ Details may vary, but their structure and contents are almost identical. First, there is often an explicit or implicit allusion to biblical literature. The Maccabean martyrs or Jesus' resurrection⁷⁸ are among the most common. Second, nearly all of the cases stressed the presence of Christian witnesses, who were also agents of the ransom of the corpse. Third, and foremost, the clergy mediated between the relics and the people depositing them in the sacred space of a sanctuary.

Only a few cases offered a more elaborated account of the events. All of them included the exposure of corpses in the context of the competition for the control over the saint's remains. The first examples come from the set of stories named by Wiessner as the *B-Zyklus*: the long version of the martyrdom of Simeon bar Šābbā'e⁷⁹ and the stories of Pōsī⁸⁰ and his daughter Marthā.⁸¹ All of them include narratives related to the final destination of the relics, especially their location in the local sanctuaries. In the final section of the *History of Simeon*, devoted to the execution and burial of the bishop and his companions, no mention was made to the exposure of the corpses to the animals.⁸² Instead, there was a reference to

⁷⁷ See the martyrdom of Gūbarlāhā, *AMS* II, 160; Z'ebīnā and his companions, *AMS* II, 49 and Sabas-Pirgušnašp, *AMS* IV, 249.

⁷⁸ In particular, the references to the episode given by the guards of Jesus's tomb in Mat. 27:64-28:13.

⁷⁹ *BHO* 1119.

⁸⁰ *BHO* 993.

⁸¹ *BHO* 698. These stories narrate the persecution in Karkhā d'Ēdān during the reign of Shapur II (circa 340 AD) but were written (probably by the same author) in the first decades of the fifth century, Cf. Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrer-Überlieferung*, 102-103. Although some of these texts may have experienced several transformations until they reached their definitive form, see G. Wiessner, "Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung der erhaltenen syro-persischen Märtyrerakten. Das Pusai-Martyrium," in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte*. Ed. *Göttinger Arbeitskreis für syrische Kirchengeschichte*, (Göttingen: Lagarde-Haus, 1968), 231-351.

⁸² This anecdote, absent in the shorter version of the martyrdom, was reproduced and expanded with supernatural elements by the *Haddad Chronicle*, B. Haddad, *Mukhtašar al-akhbār al-bī'iyā*, (Baghdad: Al-Diwan, 2000), ١٩٢, and the *Chronicle of Seert* 1.1, 303, 'Amr Ibn Mattā: H.

how the bodies were “taken away on that very night” (**حَمَّ حَكْنَا هَوَّ** (**لِاسْمِئِيلَ**) by some “Roman captives who lived in Karkhā d-Lēdān,” and were buried in honors (**دَلِمَاكَ هَوَّ حَامِلًا**)”⁸³ in an unidentified place. Immediately, the desire for a portion of their bodies spread among the Christians, both local and foreign, who asked for “blessings” (**حُورَمَا**) of the saints, “and they were given to them by the bishops who were at Karkhā at that time.”⁸⁴

The most striking feature of this anecdote is that the author transformed the exposure of the saint’s body into the starting point of its fragmentation and subsequent circulation among believers. The sequence implies that the narrative was the response to an actual competition for the control over the remains. By leaving the corpses unburied, the persecutors lost control over them, allowing their ransom by Roman captives. Unlike the place of execution, their burial site was not identified and the narrator never explained how the bishops took control of the “blessings”, which were later distributed. At this point it is worth questioning the reliability of the scene. The shorter and earlier version (i.e. the *Martyrdom*) does not mention the fate of the corpses and might seem that this final section of the *History* was a later addition. Thus the inclusion of the corpses’ ransom may reflect an interest in promoting a cult centered on the relics. Other minor inconsistencies in the narrative like the reference to Christian soldiers asking for relics⁸⁵ and the

Gismondi, *Maris, Amri et Slibae: De Patriarchis nestorianorum commentaria ex codicibus vaticanis*, vol. 2 (Roma: De Luigi, 1899), ١٨ (text), 11 (Latin translation). Surprisingly, ‘Amr wrongly states that the Magi intended to “cremate” (**حرق**) the bodies. This same connection between Zoroastrianism and cremation is suggested by ‘Amr in the story of the dialogue between Catholicos Babaī and the King Zamasp, *Cf. Idem*, pp. ٣١ (Text), 21 (Latin Translation). Others directly omitted or simplified the reference. For example, Michael the Syrian did not mention it, and Marī Ibn Suleymān just stated that the Bishop of Al-Ahwaz (Khuzestan) buried their remains.

⁸³ *History of Simeon Bar Šabba’e*, 98. The Syriac text and English translation are taken from K. Smith’s *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon Bar Šabba’e*, 210-211.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ As Kyle Smith noted (p. 210 n. 97), this statement contradicts the previous accusation against the Christians for not serving in the king’s army.

presence of bishops in Karkhā after the execution of Simeon might lead to the conclusion that the whole scene was an invention meant to fill the gap between “historical” events and the author’s time.

A different pattern applies to the martyrdoms of Pōsī and Marthā. Both stories conclude with the deposition of their relics in the house of a local Christian family. In the case of Pōsī, the Mobad in charge of the execution sought to prevent Christians from burying the corpse of the saint and taking “relics (مَنتَن) and blessings (بَرَکَات)” by appointing guards (نَظَرَان) to watch the corpse; however, a miraculous hail frightened the guards away and allowed the believers to take the body and carry it into the city.⁸⁶ The story goes on to state that a portent pointed to the house of a captive woman and *Barth q̄yāmā* as the final resting place for the saint. The pious woman and her brother, after discovering the identity of the corpse “embalmed the corpse of the glorious Pōsī, and buried it with honors, so that it will be a treasure of blessings for the citizens.⁸⁷”

Pōsī’s execution was followed by that of his daughter Marthā, who chose death over a forced marriage. Her burial was undertaken by the same family who had buried her father: “The brother of that blessed (woman) who had buried her father gave money and took her corpse. And he also embalmed her and deposited her with her father”.⁸⁸ The burial of Pōsī and Marthā’s bodies in the house of the *Barth q̄yāmā* indicates that martyrs’ shrines could frequently be a family business.⁸⁹ However, the narrator also avoids any criticism stating that the woman commemorated them every year in her habitation (مَکُونَت) “in the presence of the priests of the Church”.⁹⁰ The commemoration continued even after the woman’s death, when the shrine passed on to her brother’s son and, after his death to his two sons. At this point the narrator states that the family control over the sanctuary

⁸⁶ *AMS* II, 230.

⁸⁷ *AMS* II, 232.

⁸⁸ *AMS* II, 240.

⁸⁹ R. Payne, “The emergence of martyrs’ shrines in late antique Iran: conflict, consensus, and communal Institutions,” in P. Sarris, et al., *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 89-113.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* مَکُونَت تَجْت مَکُونَت.

ended when both brothers had a dispute over the control of the relics. The quarrel was settled by the bishop Ṣāūmaī who “persuaded the two of them and he took them (the bones) from them and gave them to the people of the Church of Karkhā as a good reminder and a valuable treasure from the Church of the Messiah.”⁹¹ This Ṣāūmaī was Bishop of Karkhā d^eLēdān during the first decades of the fifth century and was an active promoter of the cult of the martyrs in his diocese.⁹² His intervention allowed the translation of the control over the sanctuary from the lay elite to the local bishop. Thus, the exposure of the Martyrs’ corpses was part of a larger narrative that revealed the concern of a still precarious episcopal authority over the development of “lay” sanctuaries, i.e. the deposition of the Martyrs’ bones in private houses.⁹³

In other words, the stories of the secret burial of Simeon and the recovery of Pōsī and Marthā’s bones were less concerned with any Zoroastrian opposition than with the tensions produced by the competition for the control of martyrs’ relics. It might be alleged that in the first decades of the fifth century, the bishops of Karkhā d^eLēdān tried to legitimize their monopoly over the relics of the fourth-century martyrs of the great persecution. These relics were scattered among a variety of sanctuaries devoted to their memory. The stories of Pōsī and Marthā reveal that some centers of worship remained outside the control of the episcopal authority. Thus, the narratives concerning the exposure and ransom of their bodies may be interpreted as literary devices to put them under clerical control.

The story of *Simeon* is the earliest example of corpse exposure in East-Syrian martyrs’ literature. Successive stories developed this motif at full length. Two late sixth- or seventh-century hagiographical texts from opposite fields are good examples of the diffusion of this motif. Although the details are mostly creations of a later date, these stories may reflect some historical kernel. The first one belonged to the *Life of Mār Abā*, which described the

⁹¹ *AMS* II, 240-241.

⁹² J. M. Fiey, “L’élam, la première des métropoles ecclésiastiques syriennes orientales,” *Parole de l’Orient* 1.1 (1970), 127.

⁹³ Cf. Payne, “The emergence of martyrs’ shrines,” 98-102. A.Vööbus, *The Canons ascribed to Marūtā of Maipberqat and related sources*, CSCO 439-440, *Scriptores Syri* 191-192, (Leuven, Peeters, 1982), 105 (Text), 88 (transl.).

funerals of the great sixth-century Catholicos (who died circa 552 AD) as a competition between Christians and the Magi for the control of his corpse:

Then the Magi from everywhere stirred up because he would not be translated until the King commanded it. And then they deposited him on a bier (ܘܠܥܝܝܒܐ gr. λεκτίκιον) and transported him with great difficulty because of the multitude of believers because many people cast shrouds (ܘܫܘܕܪܝܘܢ gr. σουδάριον) and vestments on him, and took them up again as relics (ܘܫܘܩܝܢܐ) and blessings (ܘܒܪܝܚܝܢܐ), until they arrived to the great church (ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ gr. ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ i.e. the cathedral) of Kōkhē. And the Magi commanded that he be thrown to the dogs. And many companies of believers rose (saying) “If someone approaches the body of the saint, we will make havoc.” And numerous crowds approached and torn the wagon to pieces (ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ)⁹⁴ and took it as blessing. And nothing remained except for the chest (ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ gr. Γλωσσόκομον) which contained the body of the saint.⁹⁵

The story continues stating that the body of Ābā was honored for seven days in the cathedral of Kōkhē. During that time “all the crowd of believers from everywhere took the clothes (ܘܫܘܕܪܝܘܢ) and garments (ܘܫܘܩܝܢܐ) which covered his body to their homes as blessings (ܘܒܪܝܚܝܢܐ).”⁹⁶ The conflict ended with a sort of negotiation, when the king commanded the Zoroastrian authorities to visit the body in order to confirm the saint’s death. Only after this ceremonial display of royal authority was the body of the saint posed on another bier (ܘܠܥܝܝܒܐ) and transported to the monastery of the city of Seleucia (ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ gr. ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ) with great honor. As previously

⁹⁴ The word ܘܠܥܘܕܝܬܐ is related to the Parthian *bayasapak*. See C. Ciancaglini, *Iranian loanwords in Syriac*. (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2008), 127.

⁹⁵ *Life of Mār Ābā*, 270-271.

⁹⁶ *Life of Mār Ābā*, 272. Cf. Delehay, *Les Origines*, 63-64.

mentioned, even the judges and the Magi participated in the procession.

The primal function of the whole narrative on the conflict over the corpse of Mār Ābā is to stress the leadership of the Catholics over both Christian believers and their pagan opponents. For the Magi, their unsuccessful effort to give him a pious Zoroastrian burial (i.e. throwing his remains to the dogs) was not only a reminder of Ābā's Zoroastrian origin but also the tacit recognition that his prestige outreached religious boundaries. But they gave way to Christian pressure and followed the funeral procession to the saint's final resting place, maybe at a prudential distance from the wagon.⁹⁷ This attitude reveals that the concern over the due treatment of the corpse occupied a secondary place. On the contrary, it seems evident –if we assume that the events are historical- that even if Ābā had been Zoroastrian, a proper burial was object to negotiation.

But the story poses another –and less obvious– issue. The *Life* affirms that Ābā died in a place next to the church of Bēth Narqōs at Ctesiphon,⁹⁸ but his body was moved to the “great church” of Kōkhē⁹⁹ and then to his final resting place in the “monastery of Seleucia” (ܡܢܝܨܬܐ ܕܫܠܘܥܝܐ).¹⁰⁰ This journey is marked by the believers' desire to strip both “blessings” from the litter and other elements which had been in contact with his body. At first sight, this attitude may be interpreted as the recognition of the privileged relation between the bishop and God. Indeed, this was a usual, though controversial, custom among Christians both in the east and the west. An echo of this controversy in the Church of the East may be found in the Canon XIV of the Synod of Mār Yešōʿab (585) which condemned the incorrect use of amulets made from the bones of the saints.¹⁰¹ Although this canon dates from a later time, it expressed the same concern over the misuse of relics by lay and

⁹⁷ The use of the expression ܡܢܝܨܬܐ ܕܫܠܘܥܝܐ seems to point in this direction.

⁹⁸ *Life of Mār Abā*, 270. On this church see J M Fiey, “Topographie Chrétienne de Mahozé,” *L'Orient Syrien* 12.4 (1967), 413.

⁹⁹ Cf. Fiey, “Topographie,” 403.

¹⁰⁰ This information contradicts the testimonies of Marī Ibn Süleyman and 'Amr who state that Ābā was buried at Hirtā, cf. Gismondi, *Maris, Amri et Slibae*, 45.

¹⁰¹ *Synodicon Orientale*, 150 (text), 411 (translation).

monks alike. In the same way, the author of the *Life of Mār Ābā* stresses that, despite the challenge of the Magi and lay believers, the body of the saint remained unharmed and under Church's control until its final deposition in the monastery.

To sum up, the story of Ābā's burial primarily supported the claims of the episcopal elite to monopolize the control over the Holy Man's relics. Far from being a mere description of the events, the text was organized on the basis of two distinct, but interrelated, conflicts. The first one involved the opposition between Christians and the Magi on the origin of the saint's authority. Hence, the Zoroastrian funerary custom, although pious from the Magi's perspective, was presented as an act of desecration. However, we must remember that there is no hint to indicate any concern over the earth's purity. On the contrary, the author stressed that Zoroastrian authorities were eager to negotiate, thus validating Christian worship. The second conflict may be interpreted in a very different light. The Christian crowd occupied a central place not only in the defense of the body of the saint but also in the tearing of the garments off the corpse. The resulting "blessings" scattered among the Christian households symbolized the dissemination of the saint's protection over the city.

The second example is taken from the Miaphysite literature. In the early sixth century, Miaphysite missionaries from the Roman Empire started crossing the border into the western provinces of the Persian Empire.¹⁰² However, it was only during the first decades of the seventh century, that the Miaphysite Church became a significant opponent to the Dyophysite hegemony on the Persian Church. By the seventh century, the Church of the East was structured through a well-established net of urban bishoprics hierarchically organized around the Catholicos of Māhozē. In addition, the "Nestorians" could claim continuity from the Apostles themselves through a succession of bishop-martyrs like Simeon bar Šābbā'e or Mār Ābā. Unlike their opponents, the Miaphysite Church, organized in scattered communities, could not claim such an ancient and well-established history. On the contrary,

¹⁰² For a history of the Persian Miaphysitism, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 282-285, 321.

it was a barely organized net of isolated communities around the monastery of Mār Matay near Mosul, and the city of Tagrīt.¹⁰³

Besides the West-Syrian historians of the Eastern Roman Empire, the early history of the Persian Miaphysism is contained in two hagiographical stories concerning the two first *Maphrian*: Mār Āḥūdemmeḥ and his successor Mār Marūthā. Both stories, written in the first decades of the seventh century, were composed to endow the recently organized Miaphysite Church with a prestigious past. In particular, the *Life of Mār Āḥūdemmeḥ* was conceived to fill a chronological gap between the seventh-century metropolis and its semi-legendary founder.¹⁰⁴

The *Life of Mār Āḥūdemmeḥ* was most likely written a few years before the Islamic invasion, and describes the semi-legendary history of this bishop, missionary and confessor who died in prison circa 575 AD. His *Vita* is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to his mission among the pagan Arabs who dwelled in the frontier district of Bēth ‘Arabayē. The second part records his imprisonment and execution after being found guilty of the conversion of one of the sons of King Cosroes II.

Space and movement are central to Āḥūdemmeḥ’s story to the extent that his missionary travels prefigure the geography of the seventh-century Miaphysism. The saint is not only a preacher and performer of miracles but also an itinerant bishop, following the Arab tribes around the steppe. This mobile nature of the pastoral function of the saint may be considered the consequence of the control exercised by “Nestorian” bishops over the main cities. Although Āḥūdemmeḥ is credited as bishop of the country of the

¹⁰³ Some traditions located the See of the Miaphysite *Maphrian* (i.e. Catholicos, or Metropolitan bishop) of the East in Mosul, while others in Tagrīt. J. M. Fiey, “Tagrīt. Esquisse d’histoire Chrétienne,” *L’Orient Syrien*, 8.3-4 (1963), 301-309. Michael the Syrian states that the first Metropolitan of the Sasanian Empire was certain Garmaī, ordained by the Catholicos of Armenia in the Monastery of Mār Mattay. J. B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, vol. II, (Paris: E. Leroux, 1901), p. 417 (transl), *idem*, vol IV (1910), p. 413 (text).

¹⁰⁴ The only contemporary testimony to Āḥūdemmeḥ is provided by the Miaphysite historian John of Ephesus, who did not directly relate him to the See of Tagrīt. E.W. Brooks, *Iohannes Epheseni. Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*. CSCO, 105/106, *Scriptores Syri* 54/55, (Leuven, Peeters, 1935-36), 316-317 (text), 240 (transl.).

Arabs (طالوا و حاصوا) and Metropolitan, his mission is not restricted to a particular location, i.e. an episcopal see. On the contrary, his authority extended over isolated communities around the shrines of *Mār Sargis*, adjacent to the monastery of Ainqenoie,¹⁰⁵ and the monastery of Ga'atany near the castle of Āqrūntā some distance from the city of Tagrūt.¹⁰⁶ This mobility of the episcopal function is also apparent in the episode devoted to his capture.¹⁰⁷ The saint was arrested and sent to Māhōzē to be interrogated by the king. The road to the royal city was presented as a pilgrimage to the place where the saint would testify the true faith.

This sense of perpetual movement which pervaded the *Life of Mār Ahūdemmeḥ* is the key to understand the section devoted to the ransom of his relics. According to the final section of his *Vita*, the saint died after two years in prison. The believers tried to recover his body for a proper burial but the attempt to bribe the guards was unsuccessful.¹⁰⁸ Instead, the guards carried the body outside the walls of the prison, cut his head off and took it along with the royal seal attached to the necklace. Then, they departed after leaving the body to the wild animals. At this point, the author makes a brief *excursus* by comparing the beheading of the martyr with that of John the Baptist by Herod. Finally he concludes:

And they (the guards) threw his corpse with the rest of the men who had died in that prison, *and they went out to throw it in front of the dogs* (حاصوا) that were also accustomed to devour the flesh of the men. And *some believers stayed at some distance* and watched so that the flesh of the saint would not be eaten *by birds and dogs* (حاصوا به و حاصوا). And they saw a miracle and they were astonished. Those dogs approached the corpse of the saint, but none of them touched it. Not even the birds that hovered settled on him because of the dogs. Oh prodigy! That the wild dogs became his guards! Oh the hardness of heart of the tyrant

¹⁰⁵ *Life of Mār Ahūdemmeḥ*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ *Life of Mār Ahūdemmeḥ*, 32.

¹⁰⁷ *Life of Mār Ahūdemmeḥ*, 35-40.

¹⁰⁸ *Life of Mār Ahūdemmeḥ*, 47.

king who did not obey the commandments of God, like the dogs!¹⁰⁹

Although, at first sight the scene seems to depict the Iranian custom of corpse exposure, the sequence of events seems to be inspired by Eusebius's *Martyrs of Palestine* in which –as we have already seen– animals' behavior is equated to the persecutors'. Yet, in this case, the comparison brings on an opposition. Unlike Cosroes, whose orders were contrary even to human law and the fear of God, the irrational dogs acknowledged the holy nature of the martyr and kept the corpse unharmed. Undoubtedly, this feature does not necessarily override the historicity of the anecdote, but its actual meaning derives from the combination of a known figure in martyrological literature and a well established tradition which associates corpse exposure to the Iranian milieu.

Furthermore, another element of the narrative points to a broader meaning than the simple description of the Iranian custom. This is the case of the believers who witnessed the exposure. Their testimony not only assures his sanctity, but also serves as recognition of the link between the saint and the royal city. Thus, the miracle is a sign of divine protection over the bodies of those who keep his commandments and the starting point of the long journey of the saint's relics. This journey has a symbolic value, since the path gives a specific meaning to both the authority of the shepherd and to his flock. As a consequence, it could be asserted that the narrative projects the contemporary claims of different communities over the body into the past.

And when the sun set and the dominion of twilight of the dawn of that Saturday began, those believers stole the body of the saint, and took it to Māhōzē and they deposited it in the church that was there, which is called of the rebībē.¹¹⁰

Although there is no other information about the church of the rebībē, it is worth noting that the deposition of the saint's body in it connects the Miaphysite church to the royal cities. This first stop on the saint's journey may be considered as a hint of the existence of a developed cult around the martyr in the local

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Life of Mār Aḥūdemmeb*, 48.

community, although this assertion is merely speculative. In any case, the main focus of the narrative is the translation of the relics further north, to the region adjacent to the city of Tagrīt. An hour after the deposition of the saint in the church of the capital, the deacon who was his disciple took the body and translated it to the monastery of Bēth Āsā near a village named Āqrūtā, and then made his way to Tagrīt. In its new location the relics of the saint became the focus of a struggle for their control. The story goes on to state the disciple's desire to become abbot (جمع وينا) of the monastery located inside the city. The way to achieve his goal was to negotiate with the citizens (جمع حدب حدب), who accepted to make him abbot in exchange for the translation of Āhūdemmēh's relics into the city.¹¹¹ Then, the disciple and some of the city noblemen (انغا مبتدا) went to Bēth Āsā in order to require their delivery from the monks. They spent two days in the monastery "pressing" (لحقى) the abbot until he agreed to give them the corpse. After achieving their goal, they crossed the river back to Tagrīt.

If the translation of the relics from the Royal city to the north was apparently due to human craftiness, the chain of events is henceforth explicitly ruled by divine intervention. On its way from Bēth Āsā to Tagrīt, the raft passed the village of Āqrūtā. At that moment, a wind from the south disturbed the river preventing the raft from going forward. This prodigy was understood by the deacon and the believers as a sign of divine will. At the end of the story, the bones of Āhūdemmēh were deposited (بأرضه) in the village, except for "a little portion of him" (صلىا صلا صلا)¹¹² which was given to the citizens of Tagrīt.

As in the case of Simeon, it can be assumed that the episode of the ransom of Āhūdemmēh's bones and their subsequent translation was intended to fill a temporal gap, projecting the seventh century's geography of his cult into the past. Nevertheless, it also filled a spatial gap, because the final result was the location of the relics inside the city. By stressing their miraculous path, the author justified the power relations inside the diocese, or rather the different negotiations which ended with the partition of the Martyr's relics. Then, although most of the body was laid in a

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *Life of Mār Āhūdemmēh*, 50.

nearby village, the mere presence of a single part of it enabled the city to claim him as its first bishop.

CONCLUSION

As in most of the historiography of Late Antiquity, the main purpose of hagiography was to provide models of behavior to its audience. Thus, “facts” were incorporated to the plot to serve its primary pedagogical aims. The references to corpse exposure in East-Syriac hagiography reflected the same principle: they were pedagogical tools. However, their ultimate meaning was far from univocal. Furthermore, there was no consistency in the meanings of these references as a whole insofar each of them seemed to be the answer to specific situations. Certainly, the cult around the relics of the Christian martyrs was a controversial matter for Christians in the Sasanian Empire, but the reasons were far more complex than the mere opposition of their Zoroastrian adversaries. Although it seems undeniable that the proximity with dead matter was perceived by the Magi as a threat to the purity of creation, Christian funeral practices (i.e. inhumation) were not a central issue as long as Zoroastrian purity laws were not conceived as a universal rule, but as a constitutive part of the *ethos* of a specific ethnoreligious group.

On the other hand, theological differences between Zoroastrians and Christians about the origin and nature of death did not necessarily impact on funeral practices. Ironically, the Medieval Pahlavi literature stressed that the most serious threat of pollution came immediately after death, and that the bleached bones of the dead exposed to the sun were a minor source of pollution. Moreover, as we have already seen, the threat increased if the dead had led an extraordinary pious life.¹¹³ These statements derived from a materialistic conception of death as a demonic power created by Ahrimen to defeat the good creation of Ahura Mazda.¹¹⁴ For their part, East-Syrian and Armenian theologians may have known these arguments and insisted on the divine origin and pedagogical dimension of death. Attached to human nature by God for the sake of instruction (rather than merely for

¹¹³ Hutter, *The Impurity of the Corpse*, 18. Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers*, 54-55.

¹¹⁴ *Yasna* 30:3-4.

punishment),¹¹⁵ death was perceived as a legitimate means to reach Him.

The cult devoted to the relics, as a logical result of the Christian theology of death, was of great importance to define a distinctive Christian identity. Notwithstanding this obvious function, this cult has to be performed properly, in consecrated places and overseen by the right authority. Such was the concern of East-Syrian writers as Narsai¹¹⁶ or Isaiah,¹¹⁷ who were less concerned with the hypothetical objections of the Zoroastrian authorities than the establishment of a legitimate way for the living to interact with the dead. In other words, it was the consequences of the Cult of the Saints that was at stake, rather than the polemic with external adversaries about funeral practices.

In this paper I have proposed to analyze the function of the topic of corpse exposure in East-Syrian hagiography as a result of the tensions generated inside the Church. To the extent that they fixed Christian sanctity in space, *Martyria* were not only places where Christian memory was materialized, but also the means by which God's power manifested. The stories about the exposure and ransom of saints' relics, as a form of *Inventio*, were intended to endow the clergy attached to the *Martyria* with a portion of this

¹¹⁵ Leaving aside the problem of the original immortality of Man. P. Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai sur la Création*, in *PO* 34.3-4 (Paris: Brepols, 1968), 130; M. J. Blanchard & R. Darling Young, *Ezṛīkē of Kolb. On God*, (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 72-76. Cf. P. J. De Menasce, *Une apologétique mazdéenne du IXe siècle. Škand-Gumānik Vicār, La solution décisive des doutes*, (Fribourg: Librairie de l'Université, 1945).

¹¹⁶ See the homily "On Martyrs" attributed to Narsai, A. Mingana, *Narsai doctoris Syri Homiliae et carmina*. vol. 2, (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905), 46-55. P. Krüger, "Traduction et Commentaire de L'Homelie de Narsai sur les Martyrs. Contribution à l'étude des Martyrs dans le nestorianisme primitif," *Parole de L'Orient* 3.1 (1958), 299-316.

¹¹⁷ A. Scher, "Traité d'Isai le docteur et de Hnana d'Adiabène sur les Martyrs, le Vendredi d'or et les Rogations," in *PO* 7.1 (Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1911), 15-52. In particular, his doctrine of the inactivity of the soul after death (derived from Narsai's anthropology), see P. Krüger, *Traduction et Commentaire de L'Homelie de Narsai sur les Martyrs*, 302-303. M. Dal Santo, "The Saints' Inactivity post mortem: Soul Sleep and the Cult of Saints East of the Euphrates," in *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237-320.

divine power, filling a more or less prolonged chronological gap between them. The stories of the ransom of the bodies of Simeon bar Šābbā'e, Ābā and Āhūdememēh are good examples of this process. All of them projected into the past the tensions caused by the particular conditions in which they were written. But, in spite of the different circumstances, all of them reflected a common cultural heritage in which the rules that governed the relationship between the living and the dead were central to define the power relations inside the Church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anklesaria, B. T. *Zand-Ākāsib, Iranian or Greater Bundabišn. Transliteration and Translation in English*. Mumbai: Rahnumae Mazdayasnan Sabha, 1956.
- Barthelemy, A. *Gujastak Abalish. Relation d'une conférence théologique présidée par Le Calife Mámoun*. Bibliothèque de L'École des Hautes Études, 69, Paris, Vieweg, 1887.
- Becker, A. "Martyrdom, Religious Difference and 'Fear' as a Category of Piety in the Sassanian Empire. The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh," *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 2 (2009): 300-336.
- Bedjan, P. *Histoire de Mar Jabalaha, de trois autres Patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques nestoriens*. Paris: Harrassowitz, 1895.
- Blanchard, M. J. & R. Darling Young, *Ezriq of Kolb. On God*. Leuven: Peeters, 1998.
- Bourchalat, R. "Pratiques funéraires à l'époque sassanide dans le Sud de l'Iran," in *Histoire et cultes de l'Asie Centrale préislamique: sources écrites et documents archéologiques : actes du Colloque international du CNRS, (Paris, 22-28 novembre 1988)*. ed. P. Bernard, F. Grenet, Paris: CNRS, 1991, 71-78.
- Boyce, M. *A History of Zoroastrianism*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 1975.
- Boyce, M. "Corpse, Disposal of, in zoroastrianism", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2011, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/corpse-disposal-of-in-zoroastrianism>.

- Brock, S. *The History of Mar Ma'in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008.
- Brooks, E.W. *Iohannes Epheseni. Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*. CSCO, 105/106, *Scriptores Syri* 54/55, Leuven, Peeters, 1935-36.
- Brown, P. "The rise and function of the Holy man in Late antiquity." *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.
- Brown, P. *The cult of the saints. Its rise and function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Bruns, P. "Reliquien und Reliquienverehrung in den syropersischen Martyrerakten." *Römische Quartalschrift für Christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 101 (2006): 194-213.
- Cameron, A. "Agathias on the Sassanians." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23-24 (1969): 67-183.
- Caner, D. "Towards a Miraculous Economy Christian Gifts and Material 'Blessings' in Late Antiquity." *J ECS* 14 (2006): 329-377.
- Caner, D. "Alms, Blessings, Offerings." In *The Gift in Antiquity*, ed M. L. Satlow. Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Chabot, J. B. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4 vol. Paris: E. Leroux, 1899-1910.
- Chabot, J. B. *Synodicon Orientale*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1902.
- Ciancaglini, C. *Iranian Loanwords in Syriac*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2008.
- Corke-Webster, J. "Author and Authority. Literary Representations of Moral Authority in Eusebius of Caesarea's The Martyrs of Palestine." In *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity 300-450 AD: history and discourse, tradition and religious identity.*, ed. P. Gemeinhardt & J. Leemans, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, 51-78.
- Cureton, W. *History of the Martyrs of Palestine by Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea. Discovered in a very Ancient Syriac Manuscript*. London: Williams & Norgate, 1861.
- Dal Santo, M. "The Saints' Inactivity post mortem: Soul Sleep and the Cult of Saints East of the Euphrates," in *Debating the Saints'*

- Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 237-320.
- De Jong, A., *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin literature*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- De Menasce, J. *Une apologétique mazdéenne du IX^e siècle. Škand-Gumānik Vicar, La solution décisive des doutes*. Fribourg: Librairie de l'Université, 1945.
- Debié, M. "Writing History as 'Histoires': the biographical dimension of East Syriac historiography." In *Writing 'True Stories' Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, M. Debié, H. Kennedy. Paris: Brepols, 2010, 43-75.
- Delehaye, H. "Eusebii Caesariensis De martyribus Palaestinae Longioris Libelli Fragmenta." *Analecta Bollandiana* 16 (1897): 113-139.
- Delehaye, H. *Les légendes hagiographiques*. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1906.
- Delehaye, H. *Les origines du culte des martyrs*. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1912.
- Delouis, O. "Topos et typos, ou les dessous vétérotestamentaires de la rhétorique hagiographique à Byzance aux viii^e et ix^e siècles." *Hypothèses* 1 (2002): 235-248.
- Devos, P. "Sainte Sirin, martyre sous- Khosran 1^{er} Anosarvan." *Analecta Bollandiana* 64 (1946): 87-131.
- Drijvers, J. W. *Helena Augusta*. Leuven: Brill, 1992.
- Duval, Y. *Après des saints corps et âme: l'inhumation "ad sanctos" dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du III^e au VII^e siècle*. Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1988.
- Elliot, J. K. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Fiey, J. M. "Tagrît. Esquisse d'histoire Chrétienne." *L'Orient Syrien*, 8.3-4 (1963): 288-341.

- Fiey, J. M. "Topographie Chrétienne de Mahozé." *L'Orient Syrien*, 12.4 (1967): 397-420.
- Fiey, J.M. "L'élam, la première des métropoles ecclésiastiques syriennes orientales." *Parole de l'Orient* 1:1 (1970): 123-153.
- Fiey, J. M. "La vie mouvementée des reliques dans l'orient." *Parole de l'Orient* 13 (1986): 183-196.
- Frend, W.H.C. *The Rise of the Monophysite movement*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Geary, P. "Sacred commodities: the circulation of medieval relics." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 169-191.
- Gignoux, P. *Homélie de Narsai sur la Création*. PO 34.3-4, Paris: Brepols, 1968.
- Gignoux, P. "Sur quelques relations entre Chrétiens et mazdéens d'après des sources syriaques." *Studia Iranica*, 28 (1999): 83-94.
- Gismondi, H. *Maris, Amri et Slibae: De Patriarchis nestorianorum commentaria ex codicibus vaticanis*. 4 vols. Roma: De Luigi, 1899.
- Goldstein, J. *I Maccabees. A new translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976.
- Goulder, M. *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.
- Haddad, B. *Mukhtaṣar al-akhbār al-bi'iyā*, Baghdad: Al-Diwan, 2000.
- Hauser, S. "Christliche Archäologie im Sasanidenreich: Grundlagen der Interpretation und Bestandsaufnahme der Evidenz," in *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich*, ed. A. Mustafa, J. Tubach, & G. Sophia Vashalomidze, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007, 93-136.
- Herman, G. "Bury My Coffin Deep! Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources." In *Tiferet Leyisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus*, ed. J. Roth, M. Schmeltzer, Y. Francus. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2010, 31-59.

- Hill, R. *Theodore of Mopsuestia. Commentary on Psalms 1-81*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006.
- Huff, D. "Archaeological evidence of zoroastrian funerary practices." In *Zoroastrian rituals in context*, ed. M. Stausberg. Leiden: Brill, 2004, 593-630.
- Hutter, M. "The Impurity of the Corpse (nasā) and the Future Body (tan ī pasēn): Death and Afterlife in Zoroastrianism." In *Human Body in Death and Resurrection*, ed. T. Nicklas, F. V. Reiterer, J. Verheyden, H. Braun. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, 13-26.
- Key Fowden, E. *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Krüger, P. "Traduction et Commentaire de L'Homelie de Narsai sur les Martyrs. Contribution à l'étude des Martyrs dans le nestorianisme primitif." *Parole de L'Orient* 3.1 (1958): 299-316.
- MacCormack, S. *Loca sancta: the organization of sacred topography in late antiquity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Mango, C. "Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics." *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83.1 (1990): 51-62.
- Markus, R. "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places." *JECs* 2.3 (1998): 257-271.
- McDonough, S. "A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Tazdgard II (438-457 CE)." In *Violence, Victims, and Vindication in Late Antiquity*. ed. H. Drake. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 69-82.
- McDonough, S. "Bishops or Bureaucrats?: Christian Clergy and the State in the Middle Sasanian Period." *Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History*, ed. D. Kennet & Luft, P. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008, 87-92.
- Menant, D. "Les rites Funéraires des Zoroastriens de l'Inde." *Conférences faites au Musée Guimet*, Paris: Leroux, 1910, 141-98.
- Mendoza Forrest, S.K. *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

- Mingana, A. *Narsai doctoris Syri Homiliae et carmina*. 2 vols. Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905.
- Modi, J.J. *The funeral ceremonies of the Parsees: their origin and explanation*. Mumbai: Fort Print Press, 1905.
- Nau, F. *Histoires d'Aboudehmet et de Marouta, métropolitains Jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient (VIe et VIIe siècles), suivies du Traité d'Aboudehmet sur l'homme*. PO 3.1. Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1909.
- Panaino, A. *Vendidad: la legge di abiura dei demoni dell'Avesta zoroastriano*. Milano: Mimesis, 1990.
- Payne, R. *Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500 – 700 CE*. Princeton: PhD. Thesis, 2010.
- Payne, R. "The emergence of martyrs' shrines in late antique Iran: conflict, consensus, and communal Institutions." In P. Sarris, et al. *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*. Leiden: Brill, 2011, 89-113.
- Pierre, M. J. *Abraate le Sage persan. Les Exposés I: Exposés IX. SC 349*. Paris, Cerf, 1988.
- Rajak, T. "The Maccabean Mother between Pagans, Jews, and Christians." In C. Harrison, C. Humfress, I. Sandwell, eds. *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 50-53.
- Samellas, A. *Death in the eastern Mediterranean (50-600 A.D.): the Christianization of the East : an interpretation*. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 12. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002.
- Saxter, V. *Bible et Hagiographie. Textes et thèmes bibliques dans les Actes des martyrs authentiques des premiers siècles*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1986.
- Shaked, S. *Dualism in transformation: varieties of religion in Sasanian Iran*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994.
- Schwartz, E. *Eusebius Werke. Zweiter Band, Die Kirchengeschichte, GCS*. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908.
- Scher, A. "Traité d'Isaï le docteur et de Hnana d'Adiabéne sur les Martyrs, le Vendredi d'or et les Rogations." In PO 7.1. Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1911, 15-52.

- Scher, A., et al. *Histoire nestorienne inédite (Chronique de Séert)*. PO 4.3, 5.2, 7.2, 13.4. Paris: Firmin & Didot, 1908-1919.
- Simpson S. J. & T. S. Molleson. "Old Bones Overturned: New Evidence for Funerary Practices from the Sasanian Empire," in *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*, ed. A. Fletcher, D. Antoine, and J.D. Hill, London: British Museum press, 2014, pp. 77-90.
- Smith, K. *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Sabba'e*. Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation 3. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014.
- Steve, M.-J., et al. *L'Île de Khârg. Une page de l'Histoire du Golfe Persique et du Monachisme Oriental*, Herman Gasché, Neuchâtel, 2003.
- Tavadia, J. *Šāyast-nē-šāyast. A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs*. Hamburg: Friederichsen. De Gruyter, 1930.
- Thomson, R. *Elišē. History of Vardan and the Armenian War*. Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1982.
- Thomson, R. *The history of Łazar P'arpec'i*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991.
- Trüpelman, L. "Sasanian Graves and Burial Customs." In *Arabie orientale. Mésopotamie et Iran méridional de l'âge du fer au début de la période islamique*, ed. R. Bourchalat. Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1984, 317-329.
- Van Den Gheyn, I. "Passio antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi Graece nunc primum edita." *Analecta Bollandiana* 14 (1895): 373-395.
- Van Rompay, L. "Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdgard I (419-421)." In *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective. Memorial Louis Reekmans*, ed. M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun. Leuven: Peeters, 1995, 363-75.
- Van Uythfanghe, M. "Modèles bibliques dans l'hagiographie." In *Le Moyen Age et la Bible*. Dir. P. Riché, & G. Lobrichon. Paris, Beauchesne, 1984, 449-487.
- Vauchez, A. "Introduction." *Micrologus. Natura, scienze e società medievali*, VII, *Il Cadavere* (1999): 1-10.

- Vernant, J. P. “La Belle Mort et le Cadavre outragé.” in *La mort, les morts dans les Sociétés Anciennes*, ed. G. Gnoli, J. P. Vernant. Paris: Editions de la maison des Sciences de l’homme, 1982, 45-77.
- Vööbus, A. *The Canons ascribed to Marūtā of Maipberqat and related sources*. CSCO 439-440, *Scriptores Syri* 191-192. Leuven, Peeters, 1982.
- Walker, J. T. *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006.
- Wiessner, G. *Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II*, Untersuchungen zur Syrischen Literaturgeschichte I, AbhGött, Philol.-hist.Kl., Dritte Folge, 67. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967.
- Wiessner, G. “Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung der erhaltenen syro-persischen Märtyrerakten. Das Pusai-Martyrium”, in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte*. Ed. Göttinger Arbeitskreis für syrische Kirchengeschichte, Göttingen: Lagarde-Haus 1968, 231-351.
- Wiseman, D. J. “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon.” *Iraq* 20.1 (1958): 61-62.