The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe

Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation

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Series Editor

Adam H. Becker

Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac is a series of Syriac martyrological texts composed from the fourth century into the Islamic period. They detail the martyrdom of a diversity of Christians at the hands of Sasanian kings, bureaucrats, and priests. These documents vary from purely mythological accounts to descriptions of actual events with a clear historical basis, however distorted by the hagiographer's hand.

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Kyle Smith

gorgias press
2014

Gorgias Press LLC, 954 River Road, Piscataway, NJ, 08854, USA

www.gorgiaspress.com

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2014 ܐ

ISBN 978-1-4632-0245-3 **ISSN 1941-871X**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Kyle, 1977-
The martyrdom and history of Blessed Simeon bar Sabba'e / by Kyle Smith.
pages cm. -- (Persian martyr acts in Syriac: text and translation, ISSN 1941-871X)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-4632-0245-3
1. Simeon bar Sabba'e, Saint, Patriarch of the Church of the East, 316-341. 2. Martyrs--Iran. 3. Church of the East--History. 4. Iran--Church history. I. Sahdúta d-Túbana Šem'ún bar Saba'e. II. Sahdúta d-Túbana Šem'ún bar Saba'e. English III. Title.
BX159.S564S6 2014
272.0955--dc23

2014014995

Printed in the United States of America

for Luke

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PREFACE

The primary aim of the "Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation" series is to increase the profile of Syriac martyrdom narratives by making these rich and historically fascinating texts more easily accessible—particularly to those who may have limited knowledge of Syriac. In this volume, as in others in the series, the Syriac text is paired with an accompanying English translation and notes along with a general introduction and a bibliography of relevant primary and secondary sources.

While I hope that this material will be useful to those who specialize in Syriac Christianity, I am particularly keen to see Simeon's acts reach the hands of those who study ancient Christian martyrdom narratives in languages *other* than Syriac. To my mind, the value of these texts for contemporary scholars lies primarily in how they demonstrate the forging of religious identity and the writing (and re-writing) of history through narrative. In this way, Simeon's *Martyrdom* and *History* may have more in common with non-Syriac martyrdom narratives than they do with Syriac texts composed in other literary genres.

In seeing *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe* through to publication, three people have been especially helpful. Adam Becker, associate professor of Religion and Classics at New York University and the general editor of the "Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac" series at Gorgias Press, has been a generous friend and colleague for several years. He encouraged this project along from the outset, and, besides carefully copyediting the Syriac text, offered many perceptive suggestions that greatly improved the translation and introduction.

Visually speaking, this book would not have been the same were it not for the *pro bono* contributions of my wife, Maggie Fost, who drew the map and designed the book's cover. Because I could find no suitable depiction of Simeon to use on the cover, Maggie

proposed a more abstract approach. The ripples of red cloth are intended to evoke Simeon's surname ("the son of dyers"), which a passage in the *Martyrdom* explains: "Simeon, who is called 'Bar Ṣabbaʿe,' was the bishop of Seleucia and Ctesiphon—the Cities. Rightly is he called by this name because his parents dyed silk with foreign blood as clothing for the impious kingdom, but he dyed the garments of his soul with his own blood as a vestment for the holy kingdom" (*Martyrdom* 7).

Finally, profound thanks are due to Lucas Van Rompay, professor of Eastern Christianity at Duke University. Luk taught me all the Syriac I know, and much more that I have already forgotten. When I was a Ph.D. student at Duke, Luk suggested we read Simeon's acts together as a translation exercise. I recall spending a number of early mornings alone at my desk preparing for our meetings, puzzling over one of the many abstruse passages in the *Martyrdom* or the *History*. A number of late mornings were spent together with Luk in his campus office as he patiently helped me decipher some of those same passages. I will always be grateful to Luk for so freely offering me his time and instruction. I could not have dreamed up a better advisor or a more erudite mentor, and I hope that this volume, which bears the imprint of Luk's knowledge throughout, may serve as a small token of my gratitude for his friendship.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Ancient Sources

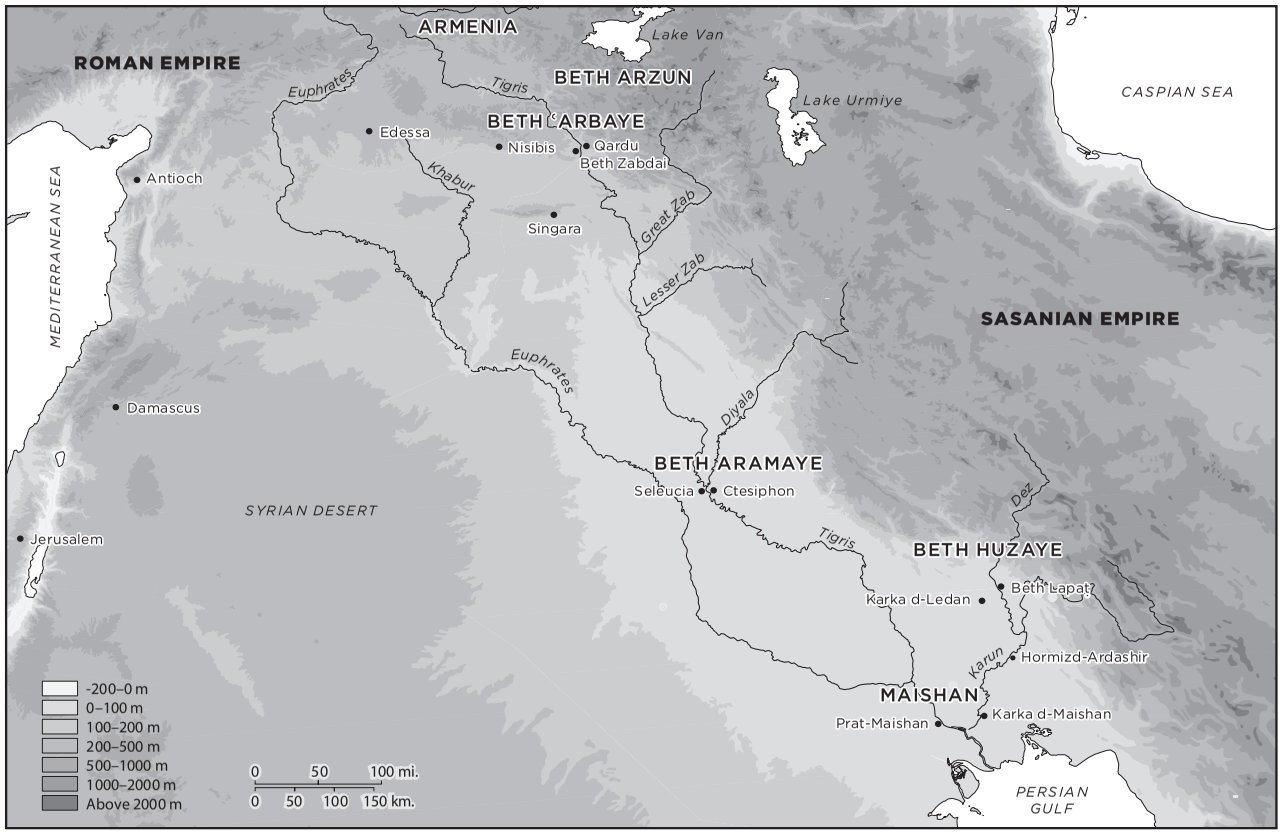
Amm. Marc.	Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*
AMS	*Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*
Aph. *Dem.*	Aphrahaṭ, *Demonstrations*
ASM	*Acta Sanctorum et Martyrum*
Berʿain	*The Martyrs of Mount Berʿain*
Eph. *adv. Jul.*	Ephrem the Syrian, *Against Julian*
Eus. *VC*	Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*
History	*History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe*
Jul. *Or.*	Julian, *Orations*
Maʿin	*History of the Holy Mar Maʿin*
Mar-Jabalaha	*History of Mar-Jabalaha*
Martyrdom	*Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe*
Qardagh	*History of Mar Qardagh*
Soz. *HE*	Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*
Syn. Or.	*Synodicon Orientale*

Journals and Series

AAntHung	*Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*
AB	*Analecta Bollandiana*
AJSR	*Association for Jewish Studies Review*
BAI	*Bulletin of the Asia Institute*
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
Britannia	*Britannia: A Journal of Romano-British and Kindred Studies*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*

Byzantion	*Byzantion: Revue internationale des Études byzantines*
ByzZ	*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
CH	*Church History*
CQ	*Classical Quarterly*
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
Florilegium	*Florilegium: Journal of the Canadian Society of Medievalists*
GCS	Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller
GEDSH	*Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*
Historia	*Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
Hugoye	*Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*
HUS	*Harvard Ukrainian Studies*
IJAIS	*Name-ye Iran-e Bastan: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies*
Iranistik	*Iranistik: Deutschsprachige Zeitschrift für iranistische Studien*
JCSSS	*Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*
JEOL	*Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JLA	*Journal of Late Antiquity*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
Klio	*Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte*
Mus	*Le Muséon: Revue d'Études Orientales*
Numen	*Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*
OC	*Oriens Christianus*
OCA	*Orientalia Christiana Analecta*
OrSyr	*L'Orient syrien*
PdO	*Parole de l'Orient*
Persica	*Persica: Uitgave van het Genootschap Nederland-Iran*

PO	*Patrologia Orientalis*
PS	*Patrologia Syriaca*
RB	*Revue biblique*
RÉArm	*Revue des Études Arméniennes*
RecAug	*Recherches augustiniennes*
ROC	*Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*
SP	*Studia Patristica*
StIran	*Cahiers de Studia Iranica*
Traditio	*Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion*
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
VChr	*Vigiliae Christianae*
ZKG	*Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*
ZKTh	*Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*



Roman Mesopotamia and Sasanian Persia, ca. 450 CE

INTRODUCTION

I. BETWEEN ROME AND PERSIA: SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY AND FOURTH-CENTURY MESOPOTAMIA

According to the *Martyrdom* (*sahduta*) and the *History* (*tashʿita*) *of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe*, the executioners of King Shapur II beheaded Simeon on Good Friday around the year 339 CE.[1] The details differ, but the two Syriac versions of Simeon's martyr acts (the shorter and earlier *Martyrdom* and the much longer and later *History*) agree that Simeon was arrested for refusing to collect taxes from the Christians of Persia.[2] Following his arrest, Simeon was bound in chains and deported from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, a city in central Mesopotamia on the River Tigris, as his church was being destroyed.[3] A few days later, his captors presented him before the gate of Shapur's summer palace at Karka d-Ledan in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains in southwestern Iran.[4]

Although it was tax-avoidance that led to Simeon's arrest, it was the bishop's brazenness before the king that occasioned his

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[1] *Martyrdom* 7; *History* 4. For brief overviews of Simeon's life, about which relatively little is known beyond what is recorded in his martyr acts, see Cerbelaud 2009; Fiey 2004: 177–78; Labourt 1904: 43–69; Van Rompay 2011, with further references; and Wiessner 1967. For the Syriac hymns attributed to Simeon, see Franca 1983; Kmoskó 1907: 1048–55; and Thelly 2004.

[2] In the *Martyrdom*, Simeon refuses to collect any taxes; however, in the *History*, Simeon claims that Christians will pay taxes, just not the *double* tax the king has ordered them to pay. See *Martyrdom* 6, 8, 10, and 12; *History* 4–9, 17, and 38–40.

[3] *Martyrdom* 14; *History* 18.

[4] *Martyrdom* 15; *History* 25.

execution. Simeon knew Shapur. In fact, Simeon's martyr acts suggest that not only was he acquainted with the king, but that he had even once been friends with him.[5] After Simeon's arrest, however, he openly mocked the king's gods, keenly aware of the consequences of his actions. Simeon's response to Shapur's interrogations, which the *Martyrdom* and *History* recall in rather different ways, is illuminating. In both texts, Shapur puts aside the issue of taxes and focuses on persuading Simeon to join him in worshipping the sun.[6] It is no surprise that Simeon rejects the king's entreaties and rails against Shapur's sun god. In the *Martyrdom*, the sun is disparaged as an ignorant creature unworthy of the veneration due to its creator.[7] In the *History*, by contrast, there is a more protracted theological debate between Simeon and Shapur, one in which the bishop offers the king a reasoned explanation of why he will not worship fire, the sun, or the moon.[8] The level of the king's discourse is more elevated, too. The Shapur of Simeon's *History* has enough knowledge of Christianity to ask the bishop questions that compel Simeon to address and correct the king's theological misunderstandings, and, in the process, to sharply distinguish how Christians differ from Marcionites.[9]

The martyr's scorn for death and open disdain for false gods and deviant sects are literary elements that will be familiar to readers of other late ancient martyrdom narratives. It is well known that many Christian martyr acts tell tales of those who are arrested, put on trial, given an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the state, and are then sentenced to die for their intransigence—for their refusal to deny Christ by doing the bidding of the king or procurator. Simeon's acts are no exception. In addition to Simeon, the *Martyrdom* and the *History* record the demise of over one hundred others who were killed on that Good Friday in Karka d-Ledan. Not for their Christianity, per se, but for insulting the king by refusing to pay proper homage to him and his gods.

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[5] See *Martyrdom* 38 and 40; *History* 8, 10, 47, and (especially) 79–81.

[6] *Martyrdom* 17; *History* 41.

[7] *Martyrdom* 10 and 31.

[8] *History* 43, 45, and 77.

[9] *History* 44.

One of these other martyrs is the king's beloved tutor, an old eunuch called Gushtazad, whose trial and death factor prominently in the *Martyrdom* and the *History*.[10] Like Simeon, Gushtazad was a Christian. Unlike Simeon, Gushtazad had succumbed to the persuasion of the king's servants who encouraged him to do the will of the king by bowing to the sun "just for a moment."[11] When Simeon hears that Gushtazad worshipped the sun, the perfunctoriness of the eunuch's gesture does nothing to stem the bishop's rage. He is furious with Gushtazad and charges him with apostasy, an offense that Simeon says he cannot forgive.[12] Gushtazad soon understands that dying a martyr's death is the only way he can repent for his sin and thereby win back Simeon's affection. Shedding his courtly robes and donning black vestments of mourning, Gushtazad rejects the king's gods, publicly declares himself a Christian, and is beheaded.[13] When Simeon and the others imprisoned with him hear about Gushtazad's deeds, they praise him for his glorious return to the fold. In the *History*, Simeon and his brothers celebrate Gushtazad as a second Daniel, the biblical prophet who remained true to his God while serving earlier Persian kings as a eunuch in the court of Babylon.[14]

Although these stories about Simeon and Gushtazad rehearse themes that are common to Christian martyrdom narratives, the *Martyrdom* and the *History* are anything but stock texts. Rather, they are uniquely important and influential literary sources that can rightfully be acclaimed as the two pillars of the Syriac *Acts of the*

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[10] Although neither the *Martyrdom* nor the *History* says so, the *Martyrs of Mount Berʿain* (discussed below) claims that Gushtazad was a convert to Christianity. The martyrdom of high-ranking Sasanian officials and noblemen who converted to Christianity is a common theme among the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. See Debié 2010b and Gignoux 1997.

[11] *Martyrdom* 26; *History* 28. The quotation is from the *History*. The *Martyrdom* is less clear about what transpired, saying only that Gushtazad worshipped the sun "under compulsion."

[12] *Martyrdom* 26; *History* 32. Again, the *History*'s account is more specific than the *Martyrdom*'s.

[13] *Martyrdom* 26–33; *History* 51–60.

[14] *Martyrdom* 34; *History* 62–66.

Persian Martyrs. The length of the two texts alone, and the fact that two fully distinct versions have survived, is a testament to why they are such important literary artifacts from late antique Persia. (The *Martyrdom* is one of the longest late ancient Christian martyrdom narratives in any language, and the *History*, at more than twenty thousand words, is well over twice the length of the *Martyrdom*.)[15]

More than anything else, however, it was Simeon's personal stature as "the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God," that made the bishop's name famous among the Christians of Persia.[16] From the perspective of many texts among the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, not just the *History*, Simeon was the protomartyr of the first great persecution of Christians in Persia, a forty-year period of oppression that began with Simeon's death and persisted intermittently until 379 CE when the long-reigning Shapur finally died.

The Date of Simeon's Death and the Historicity of His Acts

Although both the *Martyrdom* and the *History* state that Simeon and those with him were beheaded in the thirty-first year of Shapur's reign (= 339/40 CE),[17] the specific year in which Simeon was killed remains a matter of some dispute, with possibilities ranging from 339 to 344 CE.[18] Calculations of Simeon's death date are complex, but they often rely on two pieces of evidence besides the dates listed in Simeon's acts: first, a brief reference to Shapur's persecution that occurs at the very end of the twenty-third and final *Demonstration* of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage; and, second, ancient calendars that establish the years during which the fourteenth day of the Jewish lunar month Nisan fell on a Friday. This date, Friday the fourteenth of Nisan, is important not just because Simeon's acts emphasize that it was on this day that he was

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[15] An excellent overview of Syriac hagiography more generally can be found in Brock 2011.

[16] *History* 1. The *Martyrdom* does not make this claim.

[17] *Martyrdom* 7; *History* 7.

[18] See Barnes 1985; Burgess 1999a and 1999b: 244–58, 263–69, and 287–304; Higgins 1951, 1953 and 1955; Peeters 1938; and Stern 2004.

killed, but because it is the first day of Passover and the day on which *Jesus* was killed.[19]

Although the desire to use ancient calendars and possible corroborating texts to determine the precise year (within a five-year span) in which Simeon may have been killed is understandable, it must be done with caution. Following a Bollandist approach that remains influential today, many scholars have sought to mine the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* for historical data and to then classify the texts based on assessments of their relative historical reliability or tendencies toward rhetorical excess.[20] In this approach to reading martyrdom narratives, the specific year in which Simeon was killed is important to ascertain because the bishop's death can then be plotted as a waypoint in a more extensive event history of the mid-fourth century—in this case, one that accepts the historicity of Shapur's persecution and seeks to find its causes in the Roman emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the conflict between Rome and Persia that began around the time of Constantine's death in 337 CE.

If, however, one chooses to read the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* as the literary means by which late ancient Christians rhetorically constructed their religious identity, endowed the deaths of their co-religionists with eschatological significance, and differentiated themselves from other religious sects, then references to specific dates or events might be read more skeptically.[21] It is not a coincidence that Shapur's persecution is said to have lasted for a numerologically-significant forty years, or that both of Simeon's martyr acts (especially the *History*) conspicuously stress the parallel

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[19] See *Martyrdom* 37 and *History* 76, with further notes. On the often tenuous boundaries between Jews and Christians in Sasanian Persia, see Becker 2007, which includes numerous references to Simeon's *Martyrdom* and *History*.

[20] Although he relies on earlier scholarship, Devos 1966c provides the most detailed classification system for the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, characterizing the texts as "historical," "epic," or "romantic" passion narratives.

[21] On the overlap between hagiography and historiography in East Syriac sources, see Debié 2010a.

between the day and date of Simeon's beheading and Jesus' crucifixion. Nor is it a statistical quirk that many other Syriac martyr acts recall that their heroes were killed on a Friday. Connecting the Christian martyr to Jesus is a crucial element of the martyrological genre.[22] The link between Simeon and Good Friday should thus be understood as an intentional way of glorifying the bishop as another Christ, not a way of accurately dating his death.

That said, opting to read the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* as "literature" rather than "history" does not negate the obvious importance of Shapur's reign in the historical and collective memory of Persian Christians. Even a cursory survey of the *Acts* confirms that the mid-fourth century was remembered as an especially tumultuous and transformative time. Although a number of Syriac martyr acts, chronicles, and histories claim that there were later periods of anti-Christian violence in Sasanian Persia, more than two-thirds of the nearly seventy texts that comprise the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* are set during the reign of Shapur II. And Simeon's acts are foundational for this entire collection of texts, not just those set during Shapur's reign. Several Syriac martyrdom narratives specifically invoke Simeon or Gushtazad by name; a few spin off altogether new tales centered around martyrs who are first mentioned in the *Martyrdom* and the *History*; and many more demonstrate clear topical and compositional reliance upon Simeon's acts.[23]

Not infrequently, texts that mention Simeon were composed in periods long after the bishop's death. Simeon's name may have been used to lend these later texts an air of authenticity, antiquity, or authority. The *Martyrs of Mount Berʿain* is one such example. This text was not composed until the mid-seventh century, perhaps during the transition from Sasanian to Islamic rule, but it is set centuries earlier—in the ninth year of Shapur's reign (= 318/19 CE), or about twenty years before Simeon's death and the purported start of Shapur's persecution.[24] The eunuch

[22] On this theme in Greek and Latin martyrdom narratives, see Moss 2010.

[23] See Brock 2008: 110 and Wiessner 1967: 40–198.

[24] Brock and Dilley forthcoming.

Gushtazad plays an important role in the text. He occupies the same sort of liminal space in *Berʿain* as he does in Simeon's acts, in that he serves Shapur but is also a Christian.[25] Interestingly, it is the children whose deaths are commemorated in *Berʿain* who are said to have converted Gushtazad to Christianity after curing his gout and healing his withered fingers.[26] The young martyrs-to-be send Gushtazad off to see "Mar Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe, the chief of the priests in the East," telling him that Simeon "will clothe you in the holy garment of baptism and make you share in the true adoption of sonship." Then they confirm for Gushtazad that one day he, too, will "be held worthy of the victorious crown" of martyrdom.[27]

Unquestionably, Simeon and Gushtazad were famous among the Christians of Persia. And, thanks to martyrologists and ecclesiastical historians writing in Syriac, Greek, Armenian, and Arabic, they became relatively well known even among Christians who were chronologically, geographically, and linguistically distant from fourth-century Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Karka d-Ledan.

Yet despite the extensive literary evidence recalling the persecution of Christians during the time of Shapur II, there are, as I have suggested, good reasons to be suspicious about the historicity of these texts. Many Syriac martyr acts, befitting the genre of the martyrdom narrative, are often exuberantly ahistorical. And many of these texts—Simeon's *History* not least among them—were composed decades or even centuries after the events they ostensibly describe.[28] Although Simeon's *Martyrdom* (or some version of the text very similar to the one reproduced here) had certainly been composed within a hundred years of Simeon's death, and may have been in circulation by the turn of the fifth century, Simeon's *History* seems to date to no earlier than the second half of

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[25] On Shapur and Gushtazad, see Peeters 1910 and Pigulevskaja 1968.

[26] On the miracles of saints and martyrs in Sasanian Persia, see Gignoux 2000.

[27] *Berʿain* 94–95; trans. Brock and Dilley forthcoming.

[28] For example, the sixth-century *History of the Holy Mar Maʿin* and the seventh-century *History of Mar Qardagh*. See *Maʿin* (text and trans. Brock 2008) with Fiey 1971 and *Qardagh* (text Abbeloos 1890; trans. Walker 2006) with Walker 2006.

the fifth century. Arguably, traces of even later interventions can be identified.

This is often the case with the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. There is good evidence that Syriac-speaking Christians reckoned a large number of individuals to be martyrs by the early fifth century, yet martyrdom narratives about many of them did not reach the form in which they presently exist until considerably later.[29] Accurately dating these texts—much less accurately deciphering which parts of each are more ancient than others, or which may reflect more credible elements of historical reality—is often impossible. In this respect, analyses of so-called "legendary" texts, such as the *History of the Holy Mar Maʿin* and the *Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh*, are less fraught since it is roundly agreed that these texts are literary constructs from later eras. Concerns about their historicity are thus less likely to surface.

The Historical Context of Simeon's Death

Evaluations of the historicity of the events discussed in Simeon's acts typically begin with a discussion of the quarter-century period of strife between Rome and Persia that began around the time of Constantine's death in 337 CE and ended shortly after the death of the emperor Julian ("the Apostate") in 363 CE. It is this larger historical and political context in which Simeon's death is said to have occurred—a context that is discussed in detail at the beginning of Simeon's *History*, yet scarcely mentioned in the *Martyrdom*—that is a major reason why Simeon's acts are so important.[30]

What is clear is that there was a border dispute between the Roman and Persian Empires that quickly boiled over into a

[29] The *Martyrdom of Pusai* is a key example. See *AMS* II: 208–32. On the problem of dating the *Acts*, with specific attention to the difficulty of dating the *Martyrdom of Pusai*, see Wiessner 1968.

[30] For overviews of this context and its impact upon the Christians of Persia, see Barnes 1985; Blum 1980; Brock, 1982; Decret 1979; Dignas and Winter 2007; Dodgeon and Lieu 1991; E. Fowden 2012; G. Fowden 1994; Hage 1973; Mosig-Walburg 2002, 2005, 2007, and 2009; Poggi 2003; Rist 1996; and Wiesehöfer 1993.

substantial war between the two powers.[31] In the late 330s CE, the Roman Empire controlled large tracts of northern Mesopotamia east of the Tigris. Much of this territory had been won just a few decades earlier, at the end of the third century, and Shapur was keen to retake possession of this important buffer zone.[32] Shapur's destructive assaults on what he considered to be Rome's ill-gotten Transtigritanian provinces are notorious among Roman historiographers. Particularly well remembered are the king's three sieges of the city of Nisibis, the first of which occurred in 338 CE.[33] Through the work of the Latin military historian Ammianus Marcellinus, the Syriac hymnologist Ephrem the Syrian, the Greek church historian Theodoret of Cyrus, and even the Greek orations of the emperor Julian himself, we know that Nisibis stood firm against the might of the Persian army throughout each siege.[34] According to some sources, the city walls even withstood a massive flood after Shapur's army constructed a system of levees that re-directed the course of the River Mygdonius straight into the city.[35]

Shapur never could take Nisibis by force, but he did eventually win the city, evacuated of its inhabitants, in 363 CE. Five Roman provinces in northern Mesopotamia, in which Nisibis and a dozen other fortified cities were located, were ceded to the Persians as part of a disastrous peace treaty that had to be negotiated in order to secure the safe passage of the trapped Roman army following Julian's battlefield death east of the Tigris on the plains of

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[31] For Shapur's motivations, see Daryaee 2001; Huyse 2002; and Shayegan 2004. For the response of Constantine's son, Constantius, see Blockley 1989 and 1992.

[32] On the wars between Rome and Persia in late antiquity, see Isaac 1998.

[33] On the date of the first siege and the role of Jacob of Nisibis, see Burgess 1999c and Peeters 1920. For Syriac Christian perspectives on the third siege, see Marôth 1979, and, more broadly, Lightfoot 1988.

[34] On the varying accounts of the sieges of Nisibis, see Smith 2011: ch. 4. For an overview of non-Christian perspectives on the Persian threat, see Seager 1997.

[35] Theod. *HE* II.30, 6–7. In Julian's account, the flood so completely encircled the city that it became an island. See Jul. *Or.* II, 62c.

Samarra.[36] Although Christian historians were quick to blame Rome's embarrassing defeat on Julian's tactical blunders, non-Christian writers from the Roman Empire sought to find Constantine ultimately responsible for having instigated the war in the first place.[37]

That Rome and Persia were at war, or the verge of it, when Simeon is said to have been killed is certain. What is not certain, and largely dependent upon how one chooses to read the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, is how the conflict between Shapur and Constantine—and, later, Constantine's heirs—may have affected the Christians of Persia. A spike in taxation, or the institution of other means of coercion, would not be unheard of in wartime.[38] But whether the adherents of a minority religious group were the only ones singled out for higher taxes, and then subsequently rounded up, imprisoned, and killed as traitors, is another matter entirely. Despite the accusations of "the Jews" in the *Martyrdom* and *History*, who are said to have alleged that Persian Christians were surreptitiously in league with Caesar,[39] it cannot be taken for

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[36] On the treaty, see Blockley 1984. On the political and cultural consequences of the loss of Nisibis, see Teixidor 1995 and Turcan 1966.

[37] See G. Fowden 1994.

[38] On the difficulty of assessing Sasanian tax policies, especially in the fourth century, see Goodblatt 1979. More generally, see Altheim and Stiehl 1954.

[39] For the accusations of the Jews, see *Martyrdom* 13 and *History* 12–13. Simeon's farewell speech to his flock in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (*History* 22) suggests that there were many sects—among them, Jews, Marcionites, and Manicheans—who were competing for the attention of Christians and, perhaps, leading them astray. Ultimately, the *Martyrdom* is relatively uncritical of Jews, at least compared to the *History* which is much more vitriolic (e.g., *History* 22). It should be kept in mind, however, that polemics against Jews occur very infrequently in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. As Jacob Neusner points out in an article that surveys all the references to Jews in the *Acts*, "Jews occur only in the martyrologies of Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe and his sister Tarbo. I find no references to Jewish instigation of, or participation in, any other aspect of the persecution of Christianity by Shapur II" (Neusner 1987: 81). For more on Judaism in

granted that religious allegiances (or even religious communities) were clearly defined in the mid-fourth century.[40] There are no Sasanian textual or inscriptional remains attesting to an anti-Christian purge, and there is no way of establishing that Shapur must have viewed *Christianitas* as coterminous with *Romanitas*—and thus the Christians of his realm as a fifth column of Rome. Beyond the stories found in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* and the sources that draw from them, there is only one other source that attests to a persecution of Christians in fourth-century Persia: the homiletic work of Aphrahaṭ, which, as I have argued elsewhere, provides less evidence than some have believed.[41]

Quite surprisingly, the most important fourth-century Syriac writer, Ephrem the Syrian, is silent about the persecution of Christians in Persia. Although he lived the last ten years of his life in Edessa, where he died in 373 CE, Ephrem was a native of Nisibis. He was there, and already a grown man ministering to the church, when Shapur first besieged the city, and he was present for the second and third assaults against Nisibis some years later, in 346 and 350 CE. Although Ephrem's sympathies for Constantine and the idea of the Roman emperor as a supporter and promoter of Christianity are well known, he never once suggests that Shapur was an anti-Christian nemesis.[42] Instead, Ephrem's concern is with the *Roman* Empire's return to paganism and its concomitant

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the Sasanian Empire, and conflicts between Christians and Jews in Persia, see Brody 1990; Koltun-Fromm 1996; Neusner 1969, 1971, and 1975; and Pierre 2008. On accusations of Jewish persecution in earlier Greek and Latin Christian sources, see J. Lieu 1998. And, going the other direction, namely for Zoroastrian polemics against Jews, see Shaked 1990.

[40] The scholarly literature on the fuzziness of religious identity in late antiquity is legion. With respect to Syriac Christianity in Sasanian Persia, see especially Becker 2007, 2008, and 2009; Boyarin 1999; Payne 2010 and 2011; Smith 2011; and Walker 2006.

[41] See Smith 2012. On using Aphrahaṭ as evidence for Shapur's persecution, the most important studies are Barnes 1985; Burgess 1999a and 1999b; Higgins 1951; Koltun-Fromm 1996; Morrison 2004; and Neusner 1969, 1971, 1975, and 1987.

[42] On Ephrem and the "Church of the Empire," see Griffith 1986.

suppression of Christianity during Julian's brief reign. Ephrem's surviving hymns, several of which refer to Shapur by name and even detail the king's victorious entry into Nisibis, strongly suggest that Ephrem must have been unaware of Shapur's reputation as a persecutor even after the war had ended and after Simeon had been dead for at least twenty years. All the more remarkable is how Ephrem interprets the loss of Nisibis in his hymns. He views it as a divine act of justly apportioned vengeance over the city's worship of false gods and neglect of the Christian altar during Julian's reign. In Ephrem's eyes, Shapur is thus a tool of providence: he is a king whose triumph over Rome is lamentable, but intelligible as a means of bringing about Julian's demise and the eclipse of paganism in the Roman Empire.[43] What role, if any, the Christians of Persia might play in this teleological drama is not stated.

Later Christian historians and martyrologists, from within both the Roman and the Persian empires, continued to narrate Shapur's clash with Rome in religious terms. Some interpreted Shapur's persecution as a response to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, while others saw it as an opportunistic political move following the death of Constantine—whom Shapur feared as the powerful patron and protector of the Christians of Persia. Still, as the lack of definitive evidence for an extensive persecution or distinctly religious conflict suggests, it is uncertain whether Christianity played a major political role between Rome and Persia in the middle of the fourth century. Simeon's importance in the historiography of Christianity in fourth-century Mesopotamia thus lies, in part, in the different ways in which the causes and consequences of his death are presented across various late antique sources. These sources are key to understanding how the history of Christianity in Persia has been written, and re-written, to reflect and shape what were certainly very fluid and shifting perspectives about religion, politics, and Christian identity.

While the two Syriac versions of Simeon's acts, the *Martyrdom* and the *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbaʿe*, are surely the most important sources for Simeon's death, there is an important Greek version of the events that has to be discussed alongside the Syriac

[43] See Eph. *adv. Jul.* (ed. and trans. Beck 1957) and Griffith 1987.

texts. This third version (which is summarized, but not reproduced or translated, here) is an abbreviated edition of the *Martyrdom* preserved in Book II of Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*. It was written in Constantinople in the early 440s CE, a century after Simeon's death.[44]

Intriguingly, these three texts, two Syriac and one Greek, present not just three different versions of Simeon's death, but three different ways of conceptualizing and narrating the broader history of Christianity in Persia during the upheaval of the fourth century. Each is addressed in turn in the subsequent sections.

II. *THE MARTYRDOM OF BLESSED SIMEON BAR ṢABBAʿE*

Outline of the *Martyrdom*

1–9 Comparison between the Maccabees and the Christians of Persia.

10–13 Simeon refuses to collect taxes from the Christians of Persia.

14–25 Simeon is arrested and refuses to bow before Shapur or worship the sun.

26–33 Trial and martyrdom of the king's tutor, Gushtazad the eunuch.

34–48 Martyrdom of Simeon and his companions.

Relics and Roman Envoys: Maruta of Maypherqaṭ and Simeon's *Martyrdom*

There are few hints in the *Martyrdom* that help indicate when and where the text may have been composed. As is the case with most martyrdom narratives, the text was authored anonymously. While one might assume that it was written in Seleucia-Ctesiphon or Karka d-Ledan, the text does not betray intimate knowledge of either city—or any other place, for that matter. Moreover, the extensive comparison (in *Martyrdom* 1–9) between Simeon and the Jewish warrior Judah the Maccabee is completely unique and

[44] No full Greek version of Simeon's acts exists. Other Persian martyr acts do, however, exist in Greek. See Delehaye 1907.