

Miaphysites in Iraq during the Last Great War of Antiquity (c. 604–28) and its Aftermath

by PHILIP JOHN WOOD
Aga Khan University, London
E-mail: philip.wood@aku.edu

This article examines the complex historiography of the establishment of a Miaphysite hierarchy in Iraq in the early seventh century and proposes a reconstruction of the events themselves. As the Sasanian conquest of the Roman Empire progressed, the monastery of Mar Mattai in particular played a role in staffing and organising Miaphysites in conquered territory. Roman victories in 628 led to a complete reorganisation of the Miaphysite East, with the creation of Takrit as the premier centre for Miaphysites in Iraq and the official downgrading of Mar Mattai. Nevertheless, in practice, Mar Mattai continued to be a significant centre under the Umayyads.

The history of the Severan Miaphysite Church in Iraq is often told using sources compiled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries such as Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus.¹ These view the struggles for power between the two main centres, Takrit (sometimes Tikrit or Tagrit) and the monastery of Mar Mattai (near Nineveh and Mosul), through the distorting lens of numerous later attempts to rewrite ancient tradition to fit later claims. Irrespective of the theoretical hierarchy between the sees, Mar Mattai and Takrit oscillated in their *de facto* political significance. Mosul was a major political centre in the eighth century, when

BH, HE = Bar Hebraeus, *Ecclesiastical history*, ed. and trans. D. Wilmshurst, Piscataway, NJ 2015; CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium; Michael the Syrian = manuscript reproduced (vol. iv) and trans. (vols i–iii), in J. B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche, 1166–1199*, Paris 1899–1924; PO = Patrologia Orientalis

¹ See, for example, B. Varghese, 'The origin of the maphrianate of Tagrit', *The Harp* xx (2006), 305–49, and Y. Qozi, 'Le Maphrianat de Tagrit et de Mossoul Nineve', *Bayn al-Nahrayn* xxv (1997), 1–14. Unless otherwise noted, 'Miaphysites' refers to Severan Miaphysites in this article.

many Matteans held the bishopric of Takrit, but Takrit came into ascendance in the ninth and tenth centuries, when it was the centre of a wealthy diaspora that benefited from the economic expansion of southern Iraq.² Conflict with Mar Mattai was also an endemic feature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and pre-eminence switched between the two sites according to the vicissitudes of the different Muslim dynasties that controlled Iraq.³ These twists of fortune produced ample motivation to alter the way that the foundations of Miaphysite Christianity in Iraq were described. Here I attempt to circumvent the interests of these later Syriac histories by prioritising the evidence of the earliest sources and contextualising the foundation of Miaphysite communities in Mar Mattai and Takrit in the last years of the Sasanian Empire.

The sources

The *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian contains a number of significant extracts that describe relations between Takrit and other significant Miaphysite sites. These narratives claim to show the agreements made

² The evidence is gathered in Philip John Wood, *The imam of the Christians: the world of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre*, c. 750–850, Princeton 2021, ch. v. For the Takriti sponsorship of Deir es-Surian in Egypt see K. C. Innemée and L. Van Rompay, 'La Présence des Syriens dans le Wadi al-Natrun (Égypte): à propos des découvertes récentes de peintures et de textes muraux dans l'Église de la Vierge du couvent des Syriens', *Parole de l'Orient* xxiii (1998), 167–202, and M. Immerzeel, 'The stuccoes of Deir al-Surian: a *waqf* of the Takritans in Fustat?', in M. Immerzeel and J. van der Vliet (eds), *Coptic studies on the threshold of a new millennium, II: Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Coptic studies*, Leiden, Leuven 2004, 1303–20, and *The narrow way to heaven: identity and identities in the art of Middle Eastern Christianity*, Leuven 2017, 98–100, 103–6. For Takriti colonies in other cities see I. Nabe Von-Schönberg, 'Die Westsyrische Kirche im Mittelalter (800–1150)', unpubl. PhD diss. Heidelberg 1977, 63, and J.-M. Fiey, *Mossoul chrétienne: essai sur l'histoire, l'archéologie et l'état actuel des monuments chrétiens de la ville de Mossoul*, Beirut 1959, 27 n. 2. And for Takrit's competition for precedence with Mar Mattai see Fiey, *Mossoul*, 25, for a brief summary, as well as M. Mazzola, 'Centre and local tradition: a reappraisal of the sources on the metropolis of Tagrit and Mor Matay', *Le Museon* cxxxii (2019), 399–413, and I. Bcheiry, 'La riorganizzazione della Chiesa Siro-Ortodossa in Persia nella prima metà del VII secolo: studio storicocritico delle fonti', unpubl. PhD diss. Pontificio Istituto Orientale 2015. The last references to a Takritian community in Cairo are from a manuscript note made in about 1005/6: Immerzeel, *Narrow way to heaven*, 99.

³ The very complex narrative can be followed in BH, *HE*. See also B. Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim interaction: medieval art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul area*, Leuven 2010, 62–7, and, on the medieval period, J.-M. Fiey, *L'Assyrie chrétienne: contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du Nord de l'Iraq*, Beirut 1966, ii, 338–40. For the medieval legends, set in the fourth century, that associate the holy man Mar Mattai with the martyrs Behnam and Sara see Fiey, *Assyrie*, ii, 760–2.

between the eastern Miaphysites and the patriarch of Antioch and give special prominence to the monastery of Mar Mattai. This material has often been read as a straightforward account of seventh-century events, but I argue here that it has been heavily altered to reflect later priorities.

In addition to the narratives in Michael, there is also a series of brief *Lives* of the bishops of Takrit that are embedded in the *Ecclesiastical history* of Bar Hebraeus. The latter are especially valuable because they seem to have been derived from Takritian archives rather than extracted from narratives written from the perspective of the patriarch.⁴ Narratives of the bishops of Takrit represent them as successors to the fifth-century catholicoi of the Church of the East before the latter's turn towards Dyophysite 'Nestorianism'. This claim of succession may be a medieval invention that reflects Bar Hebraeus' own position as leader of the Miaphysites in the East, but it is likely to correspond to the opinion of eastern Miaphysites in the early Islamic period too. This sense of the eastern Miaphysites' own importance may help to explain their expectations of independence in the face of the centralising efforts of the patriarch of Antioch.

Material set at two earlier points in the history of the Miaphysite East can also be drawn upon. For the late sixth century there are two saints' *Lives* that are dedicated to early leaders of the eastern Miaphysites, Ahudemme and Marutha, and short passages in Bar Hebraeus that describe the rivalry between eastern and western Miaphysites during the Sasanian occupation of Roman Mesopotamia and their *rapprochement* after the Roman victory. This period covers the establishment of Takrit as a Christian centre (and probably as a major settlement as well) during the Roman occupation of Iraq in the 620s as well as the formalisation of a Miaphysite ecclesiastical hierarchy in the East.⁵

One final narrative addresses the 'Nestorianisation' of the East in the fifth century. Passages in Michael and Bar Hebraeus describe how Barsauma of Nisibis accused the catholicos Babowai of treason in the 480s and instigated the persecution of 'the orthodox' in order to

⁴ O. Schrier, 'Chronological problems concerning the *Lives* of Severus bar Mašqā, Athanasius of Balad, Julianus Romāyā, Yohannān Saba, George of the Arabs and Jacob of Edessa', *Oriens Christianus* lxxv (1991), 62–90 at p. 71.

⁵ For the reconciliation of 629 see Michael the Syrian x.5 (Chabot edn, iv. 411–13/ii. 414–16). The Aleppo codex of Michael is much easier to read and preserves rubrication: a digital facsimile is published as volume i of G. Kiraz, *Texts and translations of Michael the Great*, Piscataway, NJ 2009. A useful table in volume xi by Sebastian Brock allows conversion from Chabot's text. On Takrit in general, with useful, if speculative, maps, see J.-M. Fiey, 'Tagrit: esquisse de l'histoire chrétienne', *L'Orient Syrien* viii (1963), 289–342. For the resistance to the imposition of eastern Miaphysites in the countryside during the Sasanian occupation of Roman Mesopotamia see the *Life of Cyriacus of Amida*, ed. and trans. F. Nau, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* vii (1902), 196–217.

implement ‘Nestorianism’ in the East. The strongly-worded, polemical history of Barsauma is less interesting as a reconstruction of the fifth century than as a window into efforts by later generations of Miaphysites to invent their own history.⁶

The Miaphysites in the East: Ahudemmeḥ

A Miaphysite presence is recorded in the Sasanian world from the start of the sixth century onwards, with the missions of Simeon beth Arsham in the region of al-Hira in south-western Iraq. Further missions departed from al-Hira deeper into the Arabian Peninsula. The *Chronicle of Seert*, a tenth/eleventh-century history written from the perspective of the Church of the East, describes the Miaphysite presence in Iraq as the result of flight from Roman persecution, but it might also be seen as a deliberate attempt to cultivate converts in regions that were relatively unpoliced.⁷

The Syriac *Life of Ahudemmeḥ* adds further details, but the text has been affected by later attempts to establish Ahudemmeḥ’s legacy as the founder figure of the Miaphysite Church in the East. The *Life* begins by attributing

⁶ This story appears in three different versions in Michael’s *Chronicle*. A brief story is appended to Michael’s account of Athanasius’ *rapprochement* with Christopher of Mar Mattai (Michael the Syrian ix.5 [Chabot edn, iv. 413/ii. 417]), emphasising the East as an autocephalous catholicosate and the preservation of episcopal succession at Mar Mattai. A much longer account is placed in the correspondence between Marutha and John Sedra in Michael the Syrian ix.9. This focuses on the history of Nestorius and Barsauma’s violent propagation of Nestorian ideas. A third account appears briefly in the course of an account of negotiations between Takrit and Mar Mattai during the reign of Dionysius of Tel-mahre: Michael the Syrian xii.7 (Chabot edn, iv. 494/iii. 29). The third of these stories is the simplest and probably the earliest. ‘Nestorianism’ is a polemical characterisation of the Christology of the Church of the East, both because it is very unclear whether Nestorius subscribed to the extreme Dyophysite Christology that is attributed to him by his enemies and because the Church of the East in the Sasanian period is better characterised by its anti-Theopaschism than by a hard-line Dyophysitism: S. P. Brock, ‘Nestorian Church: a lamentable misnomer’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* lxxviii (1996), 23–53; cf. P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian historical imagination in late antique Iraq*, Oxford 2010, ch. v.

⁷ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the eastern saints*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, PO xvii. 137 ff.; *Chronicle of Seert*, ed. and trans. A. Scher and others, PO vii. 142–4 for Miaphysites at Hira, some of whom were expelled to Najran. Many or all of these Hiran Miaphysites were Julianists. *Chronicle of Seert*, PO vii. 142 states that Miaphysite doctrine was received in Takrit and the nearby towns of Karme and Hassassa in the early sixth century, but this is likely to be an anachronism. In general see J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l’église en Iraq*, Louvain 1970, 127–32, and G. Fisher, P. Wood and others, ‘Arabs and Christianity’, in G. Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford 2015, 276–372 at pp. 357–63.

Ahudemmeh's fame to his success in converting the Arabs of the Jazira⁸ and, secondarily, to his conversion of one of Khusrau I's sons to Christianity, a deed that earned him his martyrdom in 579.⁹ But the *Life* also has Ahudemmeh securing funding for a series of monasteries (including Mar Mattai, Kokta, Sinjar and the monastery and church of Ain Qenoye, whose shrine to Sergius became a major pilgrimage site).¹⁰ And it concludes with a description of the initial burial of Ahudemmeh's relics at Ctesiphon and their later transfer to the fortress of Aqrunta, which lay near Takrit.¹¹ A final note in the *Life* relates that the Takritians eventually acquired a portion of Ahudemmeh's body for themselves.¹²

The descriptions of Ahudemmeh as an apostle to the Arabs and as a converter of a member of the royal household are plausible features of a sixth-century narrative. In addition, the *Life* stresses that it was Arab chieftains who put up the funds for the monasteries to ensure the memory of their lineages.¹³ There is no record of these Arab chiefs in later stories about Mar Mattai in Michael's *Chronicle*, which were composed at a time when Mar Mattai claimed a much more ancient lineage going back to the fifth century. This discrepancy suggests that the relatively straightforward narrative in the *Life of Ahudemmeh* is earlier. The political interests of the Miaphysite East had changed by a later stage, by which time the Arab tribal lineages that are celebrated by the *Life of Ahudemmeh* had lost their significance. But being earlier does not make the *Life of Ahudemmeh* true in all its aspects, nor does it mean that it is free of interpolations. Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent has pointed out that the association between Ahudemmeh and many of the monasteries is likely to be fictitious, and the connection between Ahudemmeh and Mar Mattai should probably be discredited too.¹⁴

Though Mar Mattai would be the premier monastery in the Miaphysite East in the Abbasid period, the *Life of Ahudemmeh* seems much more concerned with Ahudemmeh's role in securing funding from the shah for his shrine of Mar Sergius, which was deliberately intended to rival the

⁸ *Life of Ahudemmeh* 3–4. I quote from the section numbers of Francois Nau's edition and translation in PO iii. The manuscript is dated to 936: BL, MS Add.14645.

⁹ *Life of Ahudemmeh* 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 27–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 32 (his activities near Aqrunta while alive), 48–50 (his burial).

¹² *Ibid.* 50–1.

¹³ Fisher, Wood and others, 'Arabs and Christianity', 350–7. The present paper revises several assumptions of my 2015 commentary, especially the notion that Mar Mattai had a long history as a Miaphysite centre (p. 351). Note also that S. Pierre argues that the names of the Arab groups converted by Ahudemmeh are later interpolations from the Marwanid period: 'Les Tribus arabes chrétiennes de Haute-Mésopotamie (Ier/VIIIe–IXe/VIIIe s.)', unpubl. MA diss. Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris 2017.

¹⁴ J.-N. Saint-Laurent, *Missionary stories and the formation of the Syriac Churches*, Berkeley, CA 2015, 121. Saint-Laurent accurately notes that this story may overwrite earlier foundation stories that linked the sites to the Church of the East.

great Roman shrine at Rusafa.¹⁵ From the perspective of both the scale of the patronage and the significance of the site in the politics of Roman-Persian cultural rivalry in the late sixth century, this focus makes a composition date in the late sixth century plausible, as long as it is understood that the text has been interpolated, and that other centres, which only rose to significance later, have been included in the story of the famous missionary and martyr.

Takrit did not, most likely, exist as a significant settlement during Ahudemmeḥ's lifetime.¹⁶ The city's inclusion as the site of a small part of Ahudemmeḥ's relics seems an afterthought, and the original place of deposition, Aqrunta, appears much more significant. Over time, however, Takrit would acquire a much stronger connection to Ahudemmeḥ. In the third part of his *Ecclesiastical history*, possibly drawn in part from the archives of Takrit, Bar Hebraeus reports that Ahudemmeḥ founded a monastery at Ga'tani in Takrit and that a church bearing his name was built during the catholicosate of Denha II (688–728).¹⁷

A gloss on John of Ephesus' sixth-century *Ecclesiastical history*, embedded in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (wr. 775), refers to Ahudemmeḥ as a 'catholicos'.¹⁸ The term catholicos denotes an autocephalous bishop of Persia who is subordinate to the patriarch of Antioch but is entitled to ordain all other bishops in the East and to convene councils himself (which was otherwise a patriarchal privilege). The bishops of the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon had held the rank of catholicos, and later patriarchs of the Church of the East in Baghdad would continue to use the term. By calling Ahudemmeḥ by this title in his history, the glossator implies a continuity of honour with the leaders of the Church of the East before their turn towards Dyophysitism ('Nestorianism'). Of course, it is very hard to ascertain how widely these sentiments were shared, or when they date from precisely.¹⁹

¹⁵ On the Roman shrine to Sergius and its Persian competitor see E. K. Fowden, *The barbarian plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Berkeley, CA 1999, and J.-M. Fiey, 'Identification of Qasr Serej', *Sumer* xiv (1958), 125–7.

¹⁶ Yāqūt al-Hamawī describes Takrit as a fortress, constructed at the time of Shapur I, which came to be surrounded by the dwellings of Christian Arabs: *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, *Jacut's geographisches Wörterbuch*, Leipzig 1866–73, ii. 38.

¹⁷ Bar Hebraeus also claims, implausibly, that Ahudemmeḥ built the monasteries of 'Ain Qone and Ga'tani in Takrit in his own lifetime: BH, *HE* II.101.

¹⁸ *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, ed. J.-B. Chabot, *Incerti auctoris chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, CSCO xci/104, *Scriptores Syri xliii, liii*, Paris 1927–33, trans. A. Harrak as *The chronicle of Zuqnin parts III and IV: AD 488–775*, Toronto 1999, 110 (Chabot edn)/114 (Harrak trans.). The date of this gloss is unknown, but it is likely to be by an author other than John himself.

¹⁹ BH, *HE* II.99 also presents Ahudemmeḥ as the successor of fifth-century catholicos of Ctesiphon. W. Hage notes the different terminologies used to refer to the bishops of

Jean-Maurice Fiey follows the *Chronicle of Seert* in tracing the origins of the eastern Miaphysites to refugees from the Roman world.²⁰ This may be a partial explanation, but it should be remembered that the eastern Miaphysites preferred to emphasise their own claims to indigeneity, where they represented the true Church of the East, which adhered to a Miaphysite Christology rather than a Dyophysite one.

The Miaphysites in the East: Marutha

The section of Bar Hebraeus' *Ecclesiastical history* that is dedicated to the East gives a special place to Ahudemmeḥ as the first 'orthodox' catholicos after Babowai (d. 484), that is, the first catholicos since the Nestorianisation of the Church of the East. After Ahudemmeḥ, Bar Hebraeus discusses two further bishops, both active in Ctesiphon, who are not named in the hagiographies. He tells us that Khusrau's successor Hormizd IV (r. 579–90) allowed the Miaphysites to elect a leader, Qamisho, in their new church in Ctesiphon, which was adjacent to the royal palace.²¹ This Qamisho was succeeded in 619, during the reign of Khusrau II (r. 590–628), by a second Miaphysite leader in Ctesiphon, Samuel.²² Samuel held this position of leadership at a time when there was no patriarch in the Church of the East, which suggests that although little is known about him, his power may have been considerable.²³ It is even possible that the shahs recognised them as leaders of all the Christians of their empire during this period (which would have included the Roman territories that they had conquered as well).

Though Bar Hebraeus' account of the eastern part of the Church is silent on the issue, his history of the western part reports that the eastern

Takrit: 'bishops and metropolitans of Persia' (Michael the Syrian xi.7 [Chabot edn, iv. 433/ii. 423]), 'metropolitan of Takrit and the whole orient' (*Life of Marutha*, ed. and trans. F. Nau, PO iii. 61) and 'catholicos' (Michael the Syrian xi.14 [Chabot edn, iv. 503/ii. 462]): *Die syrisch-jakobitische Kirche in frühislamischer Zeit nach orientalischen Quellen*, Wiesbaden 1966, 25. The title 'maphrian', used by Bar Hebraeus, is a later invention that he retrojects onto his sources: Fiey, *Jalons*, 141; E. Honigmann, *Le Couvent de Baršaumā et le patriarchat jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie*, Leuven 1954, 96 n. 4. The significance of the term 'catholicos' is discussed in H. Leclercq, 'Katholikoi', in F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq and others (eds), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Paris 1907–53; S. Gero, 'The status of the patriarchs of Seleucia-Ctesiphon', in N. Garsoïan, Th. F. Mathews and R. W. Thomson (eds), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the formative period*, Washington, DC 1982, 45–51; and M. Van Esbroek, 'Primauté, patriarchats, catholicossats, autocéphalies en Orient', in M. Maccarrone (ed.), *Il primato del vescovo di Roma nel primo millennio: ricerche e testimonianze*, Vatican City 1991, 493–521. ²⁰ Fiey, *Jalons*, 127. ²¹ BH, *HE* II.103. ²² BH, *HE* II.111.

²³ For the politics of this period and Khusrau's suppression of the patriarchate of the Church of the East after 609 see Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 199–206.

Miaphysites were also involved in Khusrau II's occupation of Roman Mesopotamia, which followed his invasion of the Roman Empire in 604.²⁴ Khusrau expelled the Chalcedonian bishops and replaced them with Miaphysites ordained in the East (in 'the region of' Mosul, according to Michael the Syrian). This move prompted some reaction from local Miaphysites, who resisted the authority of the easterners in rural areas.²⁵ It also prompted sustained resistance from the future patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius Gamala (r. 605–35), who travelled to Egypt where he organised a union with the Theodosian (Severan Miaphysite) Church in about 616.²⁶ This conflict may explain the very different content of Bar Hebraeus' two accounts: the involvement of the easterners in the occupation became an embarrassing memory in the united Church of the Arab period.

According to Bar Hebraeus, Samuel was succeeded by Marutha,²⁷ who was the first bishop of Takrit and the subject of a famous saint's *Life* by Denha. This Denha may be his successor as bishop (650–60), which Francois Nau assumed, but he could also be Denha II, who reigned half a century later and who dedicated a church to Ahudemme in Takrit (688–728). Denha's *Life of Marutha* makes very little mention of Samuel at all, and it certainly does not conceive of him as Marutha's predecessor. Phil Booth has argued on the basis of the Armenian *Book of letters* that Samuel had entered into union with the patriarch Komitas of Armenia, who was a Julianist.²⁸ If he is correct, then there would also have been doctrinal reasons for later sources to gloss over the period of Samuel's rule at Ctesiphon.

Denha stresses Marutha's ascetic credentials, saying that he was trained in a monastery in Nardes near Nineveh,²⁹ in another monastery near Edessa and in the monastery of Mar Zakkai in Callinicum (i.e. on both sides of the Roman-Persian frontier).³⁰ Marutha then travelled to Mar Mattai, where he taught theology and issued 'ecclesiastical laws', before moving to Ctesiphon and reforming a negligent church that regularly

²⁴ On the progress of the war see J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a world crisis: historians and histories of the Middle East in the seventh century*, Oxford 2010, 436–45, and P. Sarris, *Empires of faith: the fall of Rome to the rise of Islam, 500–700*, Oxford 2011, 226–74.

²⁵ BH, *HE* I. 265–7; Michael the Syrian x.25 (Chabot edn, iv. 390/ii. 380).

²⁶ *History of the patriarchs of Alexandria*, ed. and trans. B. Evetts, PO I. 480–3.

²⁷ BH, *HE* II. 118–26. However, Bar Hebraeus' account of Marutha is dominated by the claims of the monastery of Mar Mattai; he says relatively little about Marutha as bishop of Takrit.

²⁸ P. Booth, 'Chalcedonians and Severans in the reign of Khusrau II', forthcoming.

²⁹ *Life of Marutha* 66. I quote from the sections used in Francois Nau's edition and translation. The manuscript is dated to 936 (BL, MS Add. 14645), the same manuscript that contains the *Life of Ahudemme*.

³⁰ *Life of Marutha* 69–70.

gave communion to ‘Nestorians’ without first confirming their orthodoxy.³¹ After the collapse of the Persian government during the Heraclian invasions, Marutha fled to the monastery of Beth Rabban Shapur near Kufa in southern Iraq.³² And he was still there when he was contacted by the Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius Gamala, and appointed the first bishop of Takrit in 629, ‘with the consent of all the bishops of the east’.³³ While in Takrit he founded a number of monasteries, both within the city and in the south,³⁴ and wrote a refutation of the ‘so-called catholicos of the Nestorians’.³⁵ On his deathbed, he blessed all the inhabitants of Takrit, ‘both great and small’.³⁶ Takrit itself is described as ‘a metropolis, and the mother of all the churches of the Orient’.³⁷

Denha’s *Life* dissociates Marutha completely from the eastern Miaphysites’ role in the occupation of Roman Mesopotamia. But it also disapproves of the Miaphysites of Ctesiphon, who had allowed ‘Nestorians’ to receive communion. It is careful not to criticise the lay sponsors of the church in Ctesiphon – the shah’s doctor Gabriel of Sinjar and his wife Shirin – but it does tacitly censure Bishop Samuel.³⁸ The *laissez-faire* attitude attributed to Ctesiphon is comprehensible in view of the fact that powerful laypeople such as Shirin crossed confessional boundaries and the shah could act as a patron for both churches.³⁹ After the fall of Khusrau’s regime, these incentives for cooperation disappeared, and Denha accordingly distances Marutha from such behaviour.

The involvement of Athanasius Gamala in Marutha’s election merits emphasis.⁴⁰ Bar Hebraeus reports that Samuel had wanted to ordain Marutha as bishop of Takrit, but that Marutha had refused the appointment.⁴¹ Whatever the truth of the matter, Marutha’s biographers are all keen to downplay any links to the discredited Miaphysite leadership in Ctesiphon in favour of a connection to the West, to the patriarch of Antioch. But it is also noteworthy that Athanasius Gamala was in a position to make such an overture: it is unlikely that he could have done so without the support of the Roman authorities, who had very recently invaded Iran

³¹ Ibid. 74–6.

³² This is an anachronism, given that Kufa was only founded in 636. This may be a further reason to date the text to Denha II. I thank Simon Pierre for this suggestion.

³³ *Life of Marutha* 78–9.

³⁴ Ibid. 85–7.

³⁵ Ibid. 92.

³⁶ Ibid. 94.

³⁷ Ibid. 82.

³⁸ Ibid. 74–6.

³⁹ Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 196, 201, 209. Shirin had played a very public role during the reception of the Dyophysite patriarch Sabrisho in Ctesiphon earlier in Khusrau’s reign.

⁴⁰ Athanasius is the only Miaphysite patriarch who receives a section in the *Chronicle of Seert*, PO xiii. 543–4. The *Chronicle of Seert* also reports an influx of Miaphysite merchants (both Greeks and Armenians) from the west during the period of Roman occupation: PO xiii.545.

⁴¹ BH, *HE* II.111.

and installed the short-lived shah Shahrbaraz (r. 629) as a client ruler.⁴² Athanasius' presence suggests that the Roman emperor Heraclius had engineered an effective *rapprochement* with the western Miaphysites and was also interested in co-opting the Miaphysites in the east.⁴³ Phil Booth has suggested that Athanasius may have spent the period 615–29 on the island of Cyprus, which remained under Roman control.⁴⁴ This might explain why Athanasius was considered a loyalist by Heraclius. Furthermore, both Marutha and Athanasius had spent time at Mar Zakkai, so there may have been a personal connection between these two men that predated Marutha's election, which was, in practice, as significant as Marutha's links to institutions within Iraq.⁴⁵

The selection of Takrit as Marutha's see also makes sense if his appointment is understood as part of a Roman initiative. Takrit was a Roman army base at a ford in the Tigris, a fortified site that could accommodate riverine traffic as well as the caravan trade.⁴⁶ It was adjacent to the territories of Arab tribes that had been converted to Christianity; during the Muslim invasion of Iraq, the Muslims faced Romans at Takrit together with the Romans' allies from the Iyad, the Taghlib and the Namir.⁴⁷ The city's good transport links and proximity to Christian Arab groups probably made it an attractive choice for the Miaphysites, and this attractiveness

⁴² Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 218–19.

⁴³ Michael the Syrian xi.3 (Chabot edn, iv. 409–10/ii. 412–13) describes Athanasius' meeting with Heraclius. This passage has been highly interpolated and shows the involvement of different authors with various agendas. Its presentation of Heraclius as a persecutor of the Miaphysites is likely to retroject the later breakdown in relations between Chalcedonians and Miaphysites. Letters preserved elsewhere in Michael (Michael the Syrian xi.1–2 [Chabot edn, iv. 403–7/ii. 402–8]) suggest that the theological discussion between Athanasius and Heraclius was civil and collaborative. See further discussion in P. Booth, *Crisis of empire: doctrine and dissent at the end of late antiquity*, Berkeley, CA 2013, 202–3, and W. Hage, 'Athanasios Gammālā und sein Treffen mit Kaiser Herakleios in Mabbūg', in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Syriaca II: Beiträge zum 3. deutschen Syrologien-Symposium in Vierzehnheiligen 2002*, Münster 2004, 165–74.

⁴⁴ Booth, 'Chalcedonians and Severans'.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Fiey, 'Tagrit'; N. Posner, 'The Muslim conquest of northern Mesopotamia: an introductory essay into its historical background and historiography', unpubl. PhD diss. New York 1985, 89–90.

⁴⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje in *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammad ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, Leiden 1879–1901, i. 2476–7, trans. G. Juynboll in *The history of al-Tabari*, Albany, NY 1985–99, xiii. 54–5; W. Kaegi, *Heraclius: emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge 2005, 219, 253 and *Byzantium and the early Islamic conquests*, Cambridge 1992, 152; Posner, 'Muslim conquest', 176–7. Al-Ṭabarī, i. 2475 (Juynboll trans. xiii. 54) describes the *dā'wa* that was offered to the Arabs defending Takrit but not to the Romans or the Persians. Yāqūt ii. 38 says that these Christian Arabs lived in the district before the foundation of the city proper. Cf. J.-M. Fiey, 'Syriaques occidentaux de "pays des perses": ré-union avec Antioche et "grand-métropolitain" de Takrit en 628/9?', *Parole de l'Orient* xvii (1992), 113–26 at p. 121. Several Miaphysite sees were linked to Arab tribes: Fiey, *Jalons*, 141–2.

would have been compounded by the city's proximity to the new masters of Iraq. From a Roman point of view, the creation of a new Miaphysite centre might have also been a means of punishing those eastern Miaphysites who had been involved in Khusrau's empire-building schemes.

Mar Mattai

The medieval sources also state that Marutha was responsible for establishing a Miaphysite episcopal hierarchy in the east, with Takrit at its head.⁴⁸ And the following century would see a number of significant churches built in the city.⁴⁹

However, other narratives assert a major role for the monastery of Mar Mattai in the organisation and staffing of church structures in the East. Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus both report a story in which Athanasius' syncellus John (the future patriarch of Antioch, r. 631–48) visited Mar Mattai. John then organised a meeting between the monastery's 'metropolitan bishop' Christopher and Athanasius, in which Christopher agreed to reunite with his fellow Miaphysites in the patriarchate of Antioch. Christopher and three other monks travelled to Antioch and were ordained as bishops and Marutha proclaimed bishop of Takrit. Christopher himself was made metropolitan bishop of Assyria, a position that was henceforth based in the monastery of Mar Mattai. This extract gives greatest prominence to Christopher as the correspondent of John and Athanasius. It does not deny Marutha's significance as the bishop of Takrit, but he is presented primarily as a monk of Mar Mattai.⁵⁰

According to another document, purporting to come from the correspondence between Athanasius and Christopher, Mar Mattai had upheld the Miaphysite faith since the fifth century, when the evil Barsauma of Nisibis (d. 491) had martyred many monks and forced the Church of the East to adopt Nestorianism and to renounce its ancient allegiance to Antioch. As Fiey has noted, this persecution account makes no reference to Takrit whatsoever.⁵¹

The significance of these two stories, then, is to assert the ancient rights of Mar Mattai as a seat of 'orthodoxy' and as a link to a Miaphysite Church of the East that predates the foundation of Takrit. The first set of

⁴⁸ BH, *HE* II. 126–8; Elias of Nisibis, *Chronography*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks and J.-B. Chabot, in *Eliae Metropolitanis Nisibene: Opus chronologicum*, CSCO lxii–lxiii, *Scriptores Syri*, 3rd ser. vii–viii, Paris 1910, 127(edn)/61(trans.); J.-M Fiey summaries the changes in the ecclesiastical geography: 'Les Diocèses du Maphrianat syrien, 629–1860', *Parole de l'Orient* viii (1977), 133–64.

⁴⁹ This is summarised in Fiey, 'Tagrit'.

⁵⁰ Michael the Syrian xl.4 (Chabot edn, iv. 411–13/ii. 414–16).

⁵¹ *Ibid.* xi. 9 (Chabot edn, iv. 423–8/ii. 433–9); Fiey, *Jalons*, 117.

documents does grant some significance to Takrit, but it is watered down by the elevation of Mar Mattai as a second metropolitanate in the east and by the depiction of monks of Mar Mattai as the founding bishops of several eastern sees, including Takrit.

The story linking Barsauma to the martyrs of Mar Mattai is an obvious forgery. Barsauma was a hated figure in the historiography of the Church of the East because of his opposition to the authority of Ctesiphon and the fact that he held synods independently of the catholicos. In the *Chronicle of Seert*, for instance, his name was blackened by being associated with the execution of the catholicos Babowai for treason against the shah.⁵² As Stephen Gero has persuasively argued, later Miaphysites' stories about Barsauma develop his image as an archetypal villain (and an opponent of the authority of Ctesiphon) to present him as a 'Nestorianiser'. The account in Michael adapts this earlier narrative and makes his crime against Babowai part of a wider plot to spread heresy in the Church of the East.⁵³

There is a brief reference to Barsauma's persecution in the *Life of Marutha*,⁵⁴ and the story is quoted by the monks of Mar Mattai in their quarrels with Takrit in the ninth century.⁵⁵ By this point, it is used to assert that the monastery of Mar Mattai had had its own succession since the fifth century. Here it should be noted that the version of the story deployed against Takrit in the ninth century is much shorter than those attributed by Michael to the monks of Mar Mattai in their correspondence with Athanasius Gamala. The latter version is much more extensive and was probably developed after the ninth century, and its inclusion reflects the continuing significance of Mar Mattai (and of Mosul) in the medieval period, when Michael and Bar Hebraeus wrote their works.⁵⁶

⁵² *Chronicle of Seert*, PO vii.99–102. This passage is discussed in Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 95–6.

⁵³ S. Gero, *Barsauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the fifth century*, Louvain 1981. Gero notes (p. 118) that the account of Barsauma should be read as part of Mattean propaganda to explain how the monastery became home to a bishopric and to endow it with a greater number of martyrs. Fiey anticipates several of Gero's conclusions and lists the many incredible features of the martyrdom account, not least the huge numbers of alleged victims: *Jalons*, 114–16.

⁵⁴ *Life of Marutha* 67.

⁵⁵ Michael the Syrian xii.7 (Chabot edn, iv. 494/iii. 29).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* xi.9 (Chabot edn, iv. 428/ii. 440) refers to additional sources in Arabic that describe the death of Barsauma at Karme near Takrit (for a version of this story in Hebrew see S. Gero, 'The Nestorius legend in the Toledo of Yeshu', *Oriens Christianus* lix [1975], 108–20). But the complexity of this legend suggests that many authors shaped it before it reached Michael in the twelfth century. It is likely that Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, writing in the early ninth century, had access to the simpler version of the story quoted in Michael the Syrian xii.7 (Chabot edn, iv. 494/iii. 29). Source critical issues surrounding Dionysius are discussed in Wood, *Imam of the Christians*.

However, there are also several reasons to distrust these narratives as factual records of events in 628/629, especially the recognition of Mar Mattai's 'ancient' claims. As Fiey has observed, the *Chronicle of Seert* notes that Athanasius threatened to anathematise anyone who did not accept his elevation of Takrit, which might suggest that there was (understandable) disquiet about his innovations at other sees, which may include Mar Mattai.⁵⁷ Andrew Palmer saw the location of a metropolitanate in a monastery as a genuine precedent that Mar Mattai set for the monastery of Qartmin in the Tur Abdin.⁵⁸ But even if Qartmin did indeed hold the authority that is attributed to it in some hagiographies, this is no reason for presuming that Mar Mattai enjoyed an ancient claim to a metropolitanate that long predated the arrival of John the syncellus.⁵⁹ The brief references in the *Life of Marutha* suggest that a monastery did exist and that it lay in Miaphysite hands in the first decades of the seventh century, but there is nothing to suggest that the monastery held prominence over other monasteries or that a bishop was already based there.⁶⁰

However, there is evidence that Mar Mattai might have enjoyed a higher status immediately before the establishment of Takrit, i.e. during the reign of Khusrau II. Michael describes the appointment of monks from Mar Mattai to nearby sees and the acknowledgement of the monastery's pre-eminence by the visit of the syncellus. These moves may have been a necessary compromise for the practical purpose of staffing the new dioceses of the East. Mattean tradition has represented them as a sign of Athanasius' recognition of the ancient claims of Mar Mattai as a site of martyrdom and as a metropolitanate in its own right, but Mar Mattai's dominance at the time may have been a much more recent phenomenon. Mar Mattai's

⁵⁷ Fiey, 'Syriaques occidentaux', 119.

⁵⁸ A. Palmer, *Monk and mason on the Tigris frontier: the early history of Tur 'Abdin*, Cambridge 1990, 153. J. Mounayer (*Les Synodes syriens jacobites*, Beirut 1963), Hage (*Die syrischjakobitische Kirche*), Nabe-von Schönberg (*Die Westsyrische Kirche*) and I. Yacoub (*History of the Monastery of St Matthew in Mosul*, trans. M. Moosa, Piscataway, NJ 2008, 35–45) are rather credulous in believing in the antiquity of Mar Mattai's claims, as was Wood in Fisher and others, 'Arabs and Christianity', 351.

⁵⁹ Fiey comments that it is very difficult to imagine Mar Mattai having an autonomous metropolitanate since the fifth century: who would have ordained these metropolitans?: 'Syriaques occidentaux', 119 n. 32.

⁶⁰ There is a document that purports to contain the canons of Marutha, embedded in a collection of synodical documents made in 1204, but Fiey argues that these are later forgeries, aimed at bolstering the claims of Mar Mattai over those of Takrit: *ibid.* However, I think Mazzola, 'Centre and local tradition' (developing Bcheiry, 'La riorganizzazione', 137–41) is persuasive in her demonstration that the *Canons of Mar Mattai* (ed. and trans. A. Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian tradition*, Leuven 1975–6) already underpinned the role of the bishop of Mar Mattai as a substitute for the bishop of Takrit during interregna, as occurred in the mid-seventh century, as well as claims made by the Matteans during debates with Takrit in the ninth century.

rise to significance may well have been a result of patronage by Khusrau as he attempted to use Christian divisions in his government of Roman Mesopotamia.

There are two pieces of evidence that link Mar Mattai to Khusrau's Miaphysite policy. The first comes from a saint's *Life*, the *Life of Rabban Bar 'Idta*, dedicated to a saint of the Church of the East who was active in the countryside near the future site of Mosul. According to this account, Mar Mattai belonged to the Church of the East during the saint's lifetime but was subsequently taken over by one Zakkai:

The wicked and unclean Zakkai, who was a shorn Severan,⁶¹ and his disciples, who were sorcerers, captured these places by the apostate assistance of Gabriel, Khusrau's doctor. This evil man Zakkai worked many injuries on our poor people . . . and when he saw that our holy man was glorious in his understanding, [Zakkai] sent him gold and silver, as if for the expenses of his monastery.⁶²

Small groups of villages resisted Zakkai, but the *Life* implies that most villages followed him, deceived by his claims of friendship with Bar 'Idta and afraid of the power of Khusrau's Miaphysite physician, Gabriel of Sinjar. The Miaphysite missionaries were able to call on Persian troops for protection.⁶³

The *Life* depicts the differences between Zakkai and his opponents in stark terms. Zakkai is not just a heretic but a sorcerer, who summons a demon who lives in the *martyrium* of Mar Mattai. But the accusation that Zakkai sent money to Bar 'Idta and told the people that he was Bar 'Idta's friend may indicate that local Miaphysites did not see great differences between the various confessional positions. Gabriel of Sinjar, who provides support for Zakkai, had himself been a member of the Church of the East, and there may have been much more overlap between confessional groups in the late Sasanian context than our sources let on.⁶⁴ This

⁶¹ Miaphysite monks traditionally adopted a tonsure, whereas monks of the Church of the East did not: Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 146.

⁶² *Life of Rabban Bar 'Idta*, ed. and trans. E. A. Wallis-Budge, in *The histories of Rabban Hormîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar 'Idtâ*, London 1904, i. 158/ii. 239:

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⁶³ *Ibid.* i. 159–60/ii. 240–1.

⁶⁴ Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 209–10.

takeover of monasteries such as Mar Mattai and eastern Miaphysites were dispatched to the sees of Roman Mesopotamia. But after Heraclius' victory, Athanasius reorganised the hierarchy in the East to give prominence to the Roman base of Takrit and the Miaphysite leaders in Ctesiphon were subject to a *damnatio memoriae*.

But this begs a further question. How, in spite of its collaboration with Khusrau, was Mar Mattai able to avoid the fate of the Miaphysites of Ctesiphon? Indeed a series of bishops of Takrit were themselves Matteans: Brisho (669–83), John Saba (686–8) and John Kiunaya (759–85). Another bishop of Takrit, Paul (727–58), was a monk of Kinushya in Sinjar, a region that was part of Mar Mattai's traditional zone of influence.⁶⁷ During *interregna* in Takrit, bishops of Mar Mattai may have also been able to act as a *locum tenens*.⁶⁸ And Mar Mattai was able to mobilise four bishops at a synod in 752: no other monastery in Syria or Iraq was associated with multiple bishops in this way.⁶⁹

The answer may lie in the changes wrought by the Muslim conquest and consequent changes in political geography. These changes are barely hinted at in the ecclesiastical histories but are none the less significant. Mosul, only 40 km away from Mar Mattai, was a new foundation of the Arab conquerors, next to the much smaller site of Nineveh. The city was a major site of Marwanid patronage. Its prosperity and its strategic position, dominating the Jaziran steppe, were recognised from early on within the administrative hierarchy, in which the city enjoyed direct authority over Shahrzur and Takrit to the south.⁷⁰

Another saint's *Life* composed in the Church of the East provides indications that the presence of an Arab governor in Mosul offered potential patronage to local Christians. The *Life of Rabban Hormizd* describes how the holy man began his career by seeking the patronage of a local aristocrat, Gabriel of al-Kosh, but then went on to cultivate a more prestigious

⁶⁷ BH, *HE* II.

⁶⁸ The prime example is John 'of Mar Mattai and Beth Parsaye', who acted as arbitrator between the patriarch of Antioch Severus Bar Mashqa and rebel bishops in about 684: Michael the Syrian XI.14 (Chabot edn, iv.439/ii. 460).

⁶⁹ See Michael the Syrian XI.23 (Chabot edn, iv. 470/ii. 516) for the signature of John of Mar Mattai, who also signed for three other Mattean bishops. Mazzola argues that the bishoprics of the Jacobite east were clustered into two distinct zones, around Mar Mattai and Takrit, which gave Mar Mattai a natural zone of influence: 'Centre and local tradition'.

⁷⁰ C. Robinson, *Empire and elites after the Muslim conquest: the transformation of northern Mesopotamia*, Cambridge 2000, 69–84; P. Forand, 'The governors of Mosul according to al-Azdi's *Tarikh al-Mawsil*', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* lxxxix (1969), 88–105 at p. 102 and al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, trans. H. Massé in *Abrégé du livre des pays*, Damascus 1973, 156. The link between Mosul and the Jazira seems to have been a later, secondary development of the Marwanid administration: Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 155.

relationship with 'Uqba, Gabriel's Arab superior in Mosul, and later with other Arab governors.⁷¹

A major theme of this *Life* is Hormizd's competition with local Jacobite monks. First they beat him in his cell.⁷² Then they denounced him to the Arab governor of Mosul for the murder of a prostitute whom he had allegedly impregnated.⁷³ Even after Hormizd had raised 'Uqba's son from the dead, the Miaphysites attempted to usurp Hormizd's position by baptising 'Uqba and his son themselves, and Hormizd was able to rescue the situation only by performing a miracle to demonstrate the invalidity of Jacobite sacraments.⁷⁴ In the denouement of Hormizd's competition for 'Uqba, the monks of Mar Mattai produced a magical cake made from the blood of children and obtained an audience with 'Uqba and his son in Mosul. They crumbled a piece of the cake into 'Uqba's wine, causing him to fall under their influence.⁷⁵

Hormizd destroyed the Jacobite monastery of Bezqin in a miracle, which impressed 'Uqba and caused him to realise the trickery of the Miaphysites.⁷⁶ This prompted the Miaphysites to hold a secret council in which their lay leaders (*marbosē*), together with monks and laymen, plotted to kill Hormizd and to bribe the governor of Mosul to turn a blind eye to their crime.⁷⁷ After this plot, too, failed, the last part of the *Life* deals with the rivalry between Hormizd and Ignatius the sorcerer, the abbot of Mar Mattai. This Ignatius was able to use his magic to gain the trust of 'kings and emperors', and he used a magical cake to drug 'Ali, the new governor of Mosul, and then complained to him about Hormizd.⁷⁸ Hormizd confronted Ignatius in front of 'Ali; he healed 'Ali's possessed son, and an angel killed Ignatius.⁷⁹ Hormizd left the city of Mosul after performing many miracles of healing.⁸⁰

There is much to comment on in this saint's life, but for the purposes of the present argument, the key point is that the culmination of many of Hormizd's miracles (and Ignatius' magic) is influence with 'Uqba and with 'Ali. Both sides in the conflict expect the Muslim authorities in Mosul to have the power to punish their rivals (and, in the case of the Jacobite villains, to allow them to murder their opponent with impunity). Other patrons, descended from families that had been powerful under the Sasanians, also continue to be significant, but in Mosul new forms of patronage trump these older forms of influence. It is in audiences with 'Uqba and 'Ali that the invalidity of Jacobite sacraments is demonstrated and Ignatius is finally killed. Though much of the *Life* is set in the

⁷¹ For the first appearance of Gabriel of al-Qosh, 'a descendant of the old inhabitants of Persia' see the *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, i. 58/ii. 86.

⁷³ *Ibid.* i. 61/ii. 90 ff. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.* i. 70-1/ii. 104-5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* i. 75-6/ii. 110-11.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* i. 77-9/ii. 114-16. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.* i. 90/ii. 134.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* i. 95-8/ii. 142-5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* i. 99-103/ii. 147-53.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* i. 104/ii. 154.

countryside, the text concludes with Hormizd's miracles in the city of Mosul and the spread of his reputation in Mosul and Balad.

Of course, the *Life of Rabban Hormizd* is a highly polemical work. The Miaphysites are not only heretics here, but pagans, sorcerers and murderers. Nevertheless, some weight can be granted to the work's interest in elite patronage from Arabs, a theme that appears gradually in the course of the text; its emphasis on the significance of Mosul as a site of such patronage; and its description of Mar Mattai as the greatest of the Jacobite monasteries and as one that enjoyed particularly good relations with successive governors of Mosul. It seems, therefore, that Mar Mattai benefited from the creation of a new Arab *miṣr* at Mosul. If the jealous accusations of Hormizd's hagiographer hold some truth, the Matteans were able to acquire a degree of influence with local governors, whose writ ran far to the south. In practical terms, this influence might have given the Matteans the political backing that they needed to monopolise the see of Mosul ('Assyria'), to install fellow Matteans as bishops of Takrit or even to claim primacy in the whole of the east.

Mar Mattai's pre-eminence over Takrit was a consequence of the significance of Mosul in the Umayyad administration and the Matteans' proximity to political leaders rather than the inevitable result of ancient claims. The Matteans came to control the new see of Takrit for much of the seventh and eighth century and developed a rich false history that retrojected Mar Mattai's own importance as a Miaphysite centre into the Sasanian period.