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# Remarks on some European names in the Syriac life of

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## Mār Yaḅalāhā

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The biography of the Nestorian patriarch Mār Yaḅalāhā III and of his teacher Rabban Ṣawmā is a well-known book, arguably the most interesting historical work in Syriac, and an important source for the history of the Ilkhanate and its relations with Western Europe.

The Syriac text was published by Paul Bedjan in 1888 on the basis of one modern manuscript<sup>1</sup>, then republished by him in a second edition, with a slightly better manuscript basis, in 1895<sup>2</sup> (I cite it by page and line of Bedjan's second edition). In 1893–4 the eminent Syrianist J. B. Chabot published (from Bedjan's first edition) a complete French translation, with extensive and useful notes<sup>3</sup>. In 1889 Nöldeke published a valuable review of Bedjan's first edition<sup>4</sup>. An annotated English translation of the first part of the work (the account of Ṣawmā's voyage to the West) was published by J. A. Montgomery (London, 1927), and a complete English version (with a long introduction, but no annotation of the text) by E. A. Wallis Budge in 1928<sup>5</sup>; a reprint of the latter, with a new introduction by the esteemed dedicatee of this volume, appeared in 2014. A Russian translation by N. V. Pigulevskaya came out in 1958<sup>6</sup>, and a German version of the first part of the text by F. Altheim and R. Stiehl in 1961<sup>7</sup>. M. Rossabi published a summary of the book in 1992<sup>8</sup>. Most recently, P. G. Borbone has produced a complete Italian translation (with introduction, notes, extensive commentary, bibliography etc.) in 2000<sup>9</sup>.

It is superfluous to give here more than a brief summary of the contents of the first section of this famous work. The patriarch, whose baptismal name was Mark, was born in Kaoshang, in China, in 1245; his teacher, Rabban Ṣawmā,<sup>10</sup> some years earlier in the Mongol capital

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de Mar Jab-Alaha, patriarche, et de Raban Sauma*, (ed.) par Paul Bedjan (title also in Syriac), (Paris, 1888).

<sup>2</sup> (same title), 2<sup>e</sup> édition, revue et corrigée, (Paris (printed Leipzig) 1895).

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Chabot, "Histoire du patriarche Mar Jabalaha III et du moine Rabban Ṣauma", *Revue de l'Orient Latin*, 1, 1893, pp. 567–610; 2, 1894, pp. 73–142, 235–304. [Also published as a separatum (Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1895).]

<sup>4</sup> *Literarisches Centralblatt für Deutschland*, 1889, col. 842–4.

<sup>5</sup> *The monks of Qāblāi Khān*, London 1928.

<sup>6</sup> *История Мар Ябалахи III и Раббан Саумы*, (Moscow, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> F. Altheim, *Geschichte der Hunnen III*, (Berlin, 1961), pp. 190–217.

<sup>8</sup> M. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu*, (Tokyo etc., 1992).

<sup>9</sup> *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma*, (Turin, 2000). [A 2nd edition of this has since appeared (Moncalieri, 2009).]

<sup>10</sup> Ṣawmā is presumably an abbreviation for "bar Ṣawmā", "son of a fast", as Rohrbacher in fact calls him, (the higher clergy of the Nestorian Church do not eat meat, and it is common for ladies of priestly families to refrain from meat while pregnant in expectation that they might give birth to a son), but in the text he is styled simply "Rabban Ṣawmā" (our lord Ṣawmā).

Khānbaliq, the modern Beijing. Bar Hebraeus says that Yabalāhā was a Uighur, though this is not stated in the biography. In 1281 the two monks left China, with the personal permission of the Great Khan Qubīlay, to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but the hostilities between the Mongols and the Mamluks prevented them from crossing the border into Syria. At this point the Nestorian patriarch Mār Denḥā died in Baghdad and the clergy impressed on Yabalāhā to accept his succession, eager, the biography tells us, to have at the helm of the Church a man conversant with the language and customs of the rulers. The relations between the new patriarch and the Mongol rulers became particularly close during the reign of the Ilkhan Arghūn, who was, as we know from many historical sources, keen to establish a military alliance with the European powers against their common foe, the Mamluks of Egypt. The Christian hierarchs in his own empire must have seemed the ideal middlemen to their co-religionists in the West. In 1287 Arghūn assigned this mission to Rabban Ṣawmā, by now advanced to the rank of Visitor General, because, as our text tells us, he “knew the language” (48<sub>3</sub>: *yāre’ leššānā*, or read *leššānē* “languages”), presumably meaning Greek or Latin or both. Ṣawmā set sail from the Mongol territory in Northern Anatolia following the South coast of the Black Sea to Constantinople, where he paid respects to the Emperor and admired the glories of the Hagia Sophia. Then he made his way by sea across the Mediterranean and up the Western Coast of Italy, disembarked in Naples and proceeded by land to Rome. On arrival there he was informed that the Pope, Honorius IV, had died and that no successor had been named. Unable to present his letters to the Pope, Ṣawmā visited Genoa, the republican constitution of which was an object of astonishment for the visitor from the East, and then met king Philip of France in Paris, and the English king, Edward I, who was then in Bordeaux. In February 1288 a new Pope, Nicholas IV, was finally elected, and Ṣawmā was graciously received by him shortly after his return to Rome, where he joined in the celebration of Easter, which in that year fell on 28 March. Shortly after that Ṣawmā returned to the Ilkhanid capital at Marāgha, where he was welcomed with honours by his king and his Patriarch.

At the very end of the account of Rabban Ṣawmā’s voyage to the West, the anonymous author of the Syriac joint biography announces that he has extracted his account of these events from a much more detailed report written by Rabban Ṣawmā himself “in Persian” (86<sub>2</sub>: *pārsāyī*). We must regret that this is lost. But the author’s claim to have had his information from a first-hand source is supported by the fact that in his account of Ṣawmā’s meeting with the English King the Syriac author inadvertently slips into the first person. The fact that Ṣawmā, who, though a native of China, was resident at Marāgha, in Persian Azarbayjan, composed the description of his travels not in his mother tongue, nor in Syriac, the language of the Nestorian Church, but in Persian, is easy enough to understand, especially if we assume that it was written specifically for the Ilkhan and his court. But also the Christian laity in Persia were surely more conversant with Persian than with Syriac.

There is in fact a long tradition of Christian literature in Persian, set down in a variety of scripts. In Pahlavi script we have a large fragment of a Middle-Persian translation of the Psalms, found at Turfan<sup>11</sup>, but also a number of documents in New Persian written with

<sup>11</sup>F. C. Andreas, “Bruchstücke einer Pehlevi-Übersetzung der Psalmen”, aus dem Nachlaß herausgegeben von K. Barr, *SPAW* 1933, pp. 91–152.

Pahlavi letters: a sarcophagus of a Persian resident of Constantinople with an inscription of Christian content,<sup>12</sup> seals of Christian owners with inscriptions in Pahlavi script, some of them evidently post-Sasanian, as well as the Christian inscriptions in Pahlavi script from Southern India. In Syriac script we have many documents in Sogdian, but none (as yet) in Middle Persian and only a few fragments in New Persian.<sup>13</sup> New Persian in Arabic script was of course well established among Persian Muslims from the tenth century onwards, but is also attested for Christians at least since the Ilkhanid period, for example in the so-called Persian Diatessarion. Rabban Šawmā's account of his travels, if indeed written for Arghun and his court, would presumably have been set down in Arabic script (though I suppose one should not rule out the possibility that he wrote it in Uighur script, as the use of Uighur script for Persian is known from the Ilkhanid period), but if primarily for the local Christian community then possibly in Pahlavi script, or even Syriac script, though in this case too Arabic script is perhaps the most probable option. Anyway, we should keep all these possibilities in mind.

It is inevitable that the Syriac text of the dual biography, which has been preserved only in modern manuscripts, should have suffered a certain degree of corruption and that in particular the unfamiliar European names that figure in the account of Rabban Šawmā's travels are in part badly corrupted. Many of these corruptions can be explained easily in terms of errors of the Syriac copyists. A very obvious example is where the author refers to England as what in the text appears as<sup>14</sup> ܢܝܢܓܬܪܐ (ʿyngtr, 726) which is of course a mistake for ܢܝܢܓܠܬܪܐ (ʿnglytr), that is: Angleterre or Inghilterra, with the (in Eastern Syriac script) very common confusion of ܢ and ܢ and of ܠ and ܠ.

A more interesting example is at the point where the author describes how he set sail in the Black Sea. This body of water is called (49,10) ܡܝܢܐ ܕܡܟܐ, that is: either “the sea dmk’ ”, or “ the sea of mk’ ”. Chabot offered two explanations for this<sup>15</sup>: first *yammā damkā* ‘la mer dormante’, supposedly as a translation of Πόντος Ἐϋξεινος. But εϋξεινος means ‘hospitable’, not ‘sleeping’. And second: *yammā d-mk’*, supposedly ‘mer de μέγα’. Although it is true that in the thirteenth century the Euxine Pontos is sometimes called ‘the Great Sea’ (*mare grande*, or *mare maggiore*), still mk’ for the neuter μέγα is not perhaps very likely in a rendering of Πόντος μέγας or Θάλασσα μεγάλη. Borbone<sup>16</sup>, following Altheim and Stiehl<sup>17</sup>, reads *yammā d-mekkā* ‘mare da questa parte’, but the adverb *mekkā* ‘from here, hence’ does not really make any sense in this context, especially not in conjunction with the particle *d*, as Chabot in fact already noted. As I have discussed elsewhere<sup>18</sup>, the Euxine Pontos is not actually called “Black Sea” until the middle of the thirteenth century, and this is in keeping with Chinese and Central Asian colour symbolism, where “black” means

<sup>12</sup>See “The Middle-Persian inscription from Constantinople: Sasanian or post-Sasanian?”, *Studia Iranica* 19, 1990, pp. 209–218.

<sup>13</sup>N. Sims-Williams, “Early New Persian in Syriac script: Two texts from Turfan”, *BSOAS* 74, 2011, pp. 353–374.

<sup>14</sup>Here, and in what follows, I ignore the fanciful vocalisations in the published text (in this case: *ʿlnāḡtar*) and cite only the consonants.

<sup>15</sup>Chabot, *ROL* 2 p. 82 n. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Borbone p. 76 n.3.

<sup>17</sup>Altheim, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup>“The name of the Black Sea”, *Iranian languages and texts from Iran and Turan*, Ronald E. Emmerick Memorial Volume, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 1–8, especially pp. 3–4 (with further references).

“North”; the Black Sea is the sea to the North of the Ilkhanid vassal states in Asia Minor. The earliest recorded reference to this designation is in a bilingual Greek–Latin treaty between Venice and Constantinople from 1265<sup>19</sup>, which refers to fortresses “on the Black Sea” (εἰς τὴν Μαύρην θάλασσαν<sup>20</sup>, with the late, and modern, Greek word for ‘black’), rendered in the Latin version as *ad castra predicta Mauritalassae*, and glossed: *videlicet Mari Nigro*<sup>21</sup>. This is just 22 years before Rabban Ṣawmā’s voyage. It would be but a slight emendation to correct ܡܘܪܝܬܐܠܐܣܝܐ to ܡܘܪܝܬܐܠܐܣܝܐ (ym’ d-mbr’) ‘the sea of Μαύρη’, with Syriac soft ܒ̈ (Eastern Syriac [w]) for Greek /v/ or /w/<sup>22</sup>.

I have quoted these as examples of inner-Syriac scribal corruptions. The forms taken by some of the other foreign words and names in the account of Ṣawmā’s mission are, however, more readily explained as misreadings of the original Persian account. For example, the King of Aragon appears (547) as ܝܪܕ ܪܟܘܢ ܕܥܝܪܐ (’yrd r’rkwn), where we should expect ’yr d-’rgwn *ir-re di aragon*. The replacement of ܐ (g) by ܕ (k) is not as likely as a simple misreading of a text in Arabo-Persian script, where g and k are represented by the same letter, or, for that matter, one in Pahlavi script.

A misreading of the Persian, and then further corruption in Syriac, is a possible explanation for (726) ܠܟܣܘܢܝܐ (l-kswny’), which must mean “to Gascogne”: first misreading of Persian g as k, and then an inner-Syriac corruption of ܠܟܣܘܩܢܝܐ (ksqwny’) to ܠܟܣܘܢܝܐ, though a corruption of ܠܟܣܘܩܢܝܐ directly to ܠܟܣܘܢܝܐ is perhaps also possible.

“Cardinals” are mentioned frequently in a text describing the long wait for the election of a pope. On the first occurrence (559), and several times afterwards, we have ܠܟܬܘܢܪܐ (kltwnr’), with reversal of r and l, as one would expect in a transcription of Pahlavi script, where r and l are normally represented by the same letter, but interchange of l and r does occur elsewhere in Syriac. Afterwards, the same term appears several times (5512, 56<sub>apu</sub>, 58<sub>paen</sub>, 7514) as ܠܟܪܢܐ (krdn’), which could be a second stab at the word. The first-mentioned form occurs elsewhere as a spelling of *χαρτουλάριος* “keeper of the archives”,<sup>23</sup> and it is possible that somewhere along the line there is a confusion between the two words.

There is finally a third category of unexpected spellings of foreign words which result not from the corruption of the Syriac text, nor from a misreading of the Persian original, but from intentional word-play on the part of the author.

The first example is in the account of the difficulties encountered by Yaḫalāhā during the short reign of the Ilkhan Aḫmad (1282–1284), an account that is evidently not part of Rabban Ṣawmā’s narrative. We are told that two jealous bishops denounced their patriarch to the ruler through Ṣāḫibu d-dīwān Ṣamsu d-dīn and Ṣayx ‘Abdu r-Raḫmān; these dignitaries are called ܠܬܘܬܐܝܪܐ (39<sub>ult</sub>), that is: either ‘deceived ones’ (t’āyē or ta’īyē) or ‘deceivers’ (ta’āyē),

<sup>19</sup>G. L. Fr. Tafel, G. M. Thomas (eds.), *Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig*, III, Vienna 1857, pp. 62–89.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* p. 82.

<sup>22</sup>I am not sure whether in the thirteenth century Μαύρη had already its modern pronunciation /mavri/, or still had a diphthong. In the Latin version one can, of course, read either Mauri- or Mavri-. Michael the Syrian speaks of “black (ܡܘܪܝܬܐ) slaves”, which would be but another spelling for *maurāyē*; see Brockelmann, *Lexicon syriacum* p. 378, Payne-Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus* col. 2051 (Sokoloff’s English translation of Brockelmann p.730a has wrongly: ܡܘܪܝܬܐ).

<sup>23</sup>Brockelmann p. 329a (Brockelmann/Sokoloff p. 624a).

but surely here in allusion to the fact that they were Muslims (*tayyāyē*)<sup>24</sup>. *t'āyē* is not a mistake for *tayyāyē*, but an intentional wordplay by the author.

Second: When Ṣawmā arrived off the coast of Italy he witnessed, and commented on, a spectacular eruption of Etna. The text continues: “People say that there is a great serpent there, and for that reason it is called the sea of the dragon”. The word for dragon is *'attalyā* (53<sub>ult</sub>). Obviously, this alludes to the name “Italy”, which in Syriac has *t*, not *t*. But it would be wrong to emend ܬܝܠܝܐ to ܬܝܠܝܐ (an emendation which Bedjan already considered). We have to do not with a scribal error, but again with an intentional pun. This pun, like the one just mentioned, works only in Syriac, not in Persian, though *'attalyā* would probably have been understood by Persian Christians, especially since it occurs also as the Syriac name of the Sino-Mongol Year of the Dragon<sup>25</sup>.

The people of Western Europe are, of course, the Franks. On its first two occurrences in the account of Ṣawmā's travels their name occurs as ܦܪܘܓܝܐ (*prwgy'*; 48<sub>8</sub>, 53<sub>1</sub>); on its next occurrences in the same account it appears in the expected spelling ܦܪܘܓܝܐ (*prngy'*; 54<sub>paen</sub>, 55<sub>apu</sub>, 73<sub>apu</sub>, 85<sub>4</sub>); in the continuation of the narrative by the Syriac biographer the first spelling (with *w*) occurs again in 127<sub>ult</sub> and 137<sub>10</sub>. The letters *w* and *n* are not very likely to get confused either in Syriac script or in Arabic script, but in Pahlavi script both letters are completely identical. It is this consideration which first suggested to me that Ṣawmā's book “in Persian” might have been written in Pahlavi script and that Syriac *prwgy'* is simply a misreading for Pahlavi-Persian \**plng* (*farang*) with the Syriac suffix *-āyē*. I leave this proposal open for consideration<sup>26</sup>, but suggest that there is also another possibility. *prwgy'* is in fact the Syriac spelling for the historical name Phrygia; it is mentioned in the Bible (Acts 2:10, 16:6, 18:23) and was consequently well known to Syriac writers. It is unlikely that either Ṣawmā or the anonymous biographer confused the Franks with the Phrygians; it is however possible that we have here the same sort of quasi-etymological wordplay that identified the Muslims (*tayyāyē*) as the deceived ones (*t'āyē*) and that made the Italians the victims of a dragon (*'attalyā*). As a matter of fact, there are several Syriac-Arabic glosses<sup>27</sup> which define *pnūqīya* (Phrygia) as “the city of the Franks” (مدينة فرنجة) or the like, perhaps on the basis of this very passage. In that case we would have to do not with a scribal error, but with an attempt to fit the Franks into the framework of sacred geography.

The question remains whether these three instances of apparent wordplay go back to Rabban Ṣawmā himself, or whether they are the work of the anonymous author of the Syriac biography. The latter option might be supported by the fact the “Muslim = deceived” equation is in the section that is apparently not taken from Ṣawmā's travelogue. In this case we could imagine that the equations “Italy = dragon” and “Franks = Phrygians” are interpolations by the biographer into Ṣawmā's report; in the former case I would imagine that it is only the words “and for that reason it is called the sea of the dragon” which constitute the interpolation. This means that the biographer would have rendered Persian

<sup>24</sup>In this I follow Borbone p. 71 n. 4.

<sup>25</sup>Brockelmann p. 55a (Brockelmann/Sokoloff p. 111b).

<sup>26</sup>I made this suggestion in my paper “The life of Mar Yabhalaha and its source ‘in Persian’”, presented at VIIum Symposium Syriacum, Uppsala, 1996, but not published. It is reported succinctly by W. Klein in his book *Das Nestorianische Christentum an den Handelswegen durch Kyrgyzstan bis zum 14. Jh.*, (Turnhout, 2000), p. 191 n. 329.

<sup>27</sup>Cited in Payne-Smith col. 3243.

*farang* as Syriac *prūḡāyē* (Phrygians) in the first two occurrences of the name in Ṣawmā's report, then left it as "Franks" in the next four occurrences, before reverting to "Phrygians" in his own continuation of the biography. This would make a certain sense of the distribution of the two spellings.

I do not wish to conclude without stressing that, despite the decidedly weak textual basis of the available edition (Bedjan's second edition is based on four very modern copies of a nineteenth-century archetype) and the obvious corruption of many of the therein occurring foreign names, the text does give a very plausible reading of the work as a whole. Rabban Ṣawmā's account overlaps with European sources of the period and is in complete agreement with them as regards historical facts and general chronology. There are some who have doubted – rashly – that Marco Polo went to China, but nobody has ever doubted that Rabban Ṣawmā made the trip in the opposite direction. Whereas Marco Polo's book is clearly a combination of observed data and hearsay, Ṣawmā's account is manifestly based almost entirely on what he actually saw; apart, of course, from the dragon [fcdeblois@hotmail.com](mailto:fcdeblois@hotmail.com)

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