

Yazdandukht and Mar Qardagh

From the Persian martyr acts in Syriac to Sureth poetry on YouTube, via a historical novel in Arabic

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Videos posted on YouTube show how stories of East-Syriac saints have found their way to a popular web platform, where they are re-told combining traditional genres with a culturally hybrid visual representation. The sketchy female characters Yazdandukht and Yazdui/Christine and the fully developed epos of Mar Qardagh, who belong to the narrative cycle of the Persian martyrs of Erbil and Kirkuk, inspired an Arabic illustrated historical novel, published in 1934 by the Chaldean bishop Sulaymān Ṣā'igh. A few years after the publication of the novel, a new cult of Mar Qardagh was established in Alqosh, in northern Iraq, including the building of a shrine, the painting of an icon, public and private rites, and the composition of hymns. In 1969 the Chaldean priest Yoḥannan Cholagh adapted Ṣā'igh's Arabic novel to a traditional long stanzaic poem in the Aramaic dialect of Alqosh. The poem *On Yazdandukht*, as chanted by the poet himself, became the soundtrack of a video published on YouTube in 2014.

Keywords: Hagiography, Persian martyr acts, Arabic historical novel, Neo-Aramaic, Classical Syriac

*Non esiste una terra
dove non ci son santi né eroi.
E. Bennato, L'isola che non c'è*

Social networks and mass media technologies offer various easily accessible and usable multimedia platforms to produce and reproduce cultural products, usually playing on the interaction of texts, music and images, and multiply the performance arenas in and for which these products are conceived. This results in a living process of hybridization of media, genres, repertoires and cultural contents and an acceleration of the processes of revitalization and transformation of a traditional culture, exposed to the influence of contents and aesthetics of the dominant culture.¹

¹ This paper is part of an on-going research project on the vitality and circulation of East-Syriac culture on YouTube (Mengozzi-Ricossa 2013a and 2013b, Mengozzi-Pastore 2017). The web, in general, allows minority cultures a wide circulation

In the present paper I intend to address these cultural and semiotic processes as concerns videos of hagiographic content posted on YouTube in the last years. They show how stories of East-Syriac saints have found their way to a popular web platform, where they are re-told combining traditional genres with a culturally hybrid visual representation. Before reaching the web, these stories were conveyed by traditional media of transmission and an attempt will be made to reconstruct their pre-mass media history philologically, which shows that cultural hybridization and revitalization characterize textual traditions well before the digital era and the accelerating factor of information and communication technologies. Stories manage to survive and re-propose traditional values thanks to processes of transformation that affect the choices of language, genre and medium of transmission to adapt to new contexts of reception and ensure their semiotic efficacy over time.

The history of tradition thus comes to encompass the dynamicity of the transmission process usually studied under the blanket terms “reception” or “fortune” of a text. Texts become songs, they are copied, read, performed, recorded, used as sound tracks for videos. Texts become images and cult practices that in their turn nourish textual traditions, characterized by the re-writing and translation of texts through different genres and languages. The history of East-Syriac liturgical and hagiographical texts may be instructive in this connection.

Looking at the dramatic and accelerated processes of transformation that texts undergo when they adapt to different media confirms the validity of a philological approach that clearly distinguishes the various stages of adaptation and places texts as precisely as possible in their contexts of production and use.

1. Yazdandukht and her narrative avatars

Three Persian saints will be considered here, two women and a man, who can pride themselves on a more than respectable pedigree within the East-Syriac tradition. Their identities and deeds are legendary and they belong as major or minor characters to the narrative cycle of Shappur II's (309-379) great persecution.² In the latest stage of the process of transmission and hybridization, the face of the

and a high level of visibility. In the case of Syriac Christians, it enhances contacts between the communities in the Middle East and the vast majority of them, who live in the worldwide diaspora, and in the meantime creates non-traditional channels of preservation and transformation of their cultural heritage.

² Stories of Christian martyrs under Zoroastrian rule probably quite soon became subject of literary compositions that transformed historically plausible figures of heroic converts to Christianity to models of enduring faith in times of persecution. On the corpus of acts and their various degrees of reliability as sources of historical information, see Vööbus 1983. A wider description of the phenomenon of Christian persecutions in various periods of Persian history is available in

male saint comes to overlap with that of a young champion of chastity, whose identity is rather vague, since his character appears to be tailored out of the hagiographic text. As we shall see, his figure is outlined only thanks to the literary and pedagogical functions it has within a fable-like narrative that does not claim to be historical.

The first East-Syriac saint destined to enjoy great popularity in the 20th-21st centuries is a charitable woman known by the clearly Persian name of Yazdandukht, which is translated into Syriac *ba(r)th alāhā* ‘daughter of God’ at its only occurrence in the *passio* of the one hundred and twenty martyrs of Seleucia Ctesiphon.³

The story says that in 345 AD one hundred and eleven men and nine women—priests, deacons, monks and nuns being among them—were collected from various places and imprisoned in Seleucia. “There happened to be a great woman—blessed be her memory—whose name was Yazdandukhti and can be translated as ‘daughter of God.’ She was from a place in Adiabene, from the town of Erbil.”⁴ During the six months of prison, she looked after the prisoners, providing them with whatever they needed. “When the day of the king’s order arrived, it was said to that woman believer, secretly, by a believer who loved her, that the martyr saints would be killed in the morning of the following day.” She did not say it to them in the evening, but prepared for them a sumptuous dinner, exhorted them to pray and read the Bible for them. In the morning, she revealed that on that day they would receive the crown of martyrdom and asked them to pray their Lord for her, a sinful woman, so that one day she could join them in heaven. They answered that their God would certainly grant her all goods and blessings since she had taken care of them in His name and she had asked them a prayer with faith

the online version of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, with updated bibliography and an overview of text transmission in Armenian, Greek and Syriac (Jullien 2008).

Between 2009 and 2017, various scholars published six Syriac acts, with critical introduction and English translation, in the series *Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation*, of Gorgias Press (Piscataway, NJ). The first volume contains a *Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts* by S. Brock (2008: 77-125). Smith (2016) challenges the traditional view, ultimately deriving from Greek and Syriac sources of later periods, that the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire was triggered by Constantine’s alleged conversion to Christianity.

On Jewish-Christian interaction and the interaction of Jews and Christians with Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion in the Sasanian Empire, see Herman (2015) and Herman (2018).

³ The Syriac text was first published and translated into Latin by Assemani (1748, vol. 1: 104-110). An English rendering of the story can be found in Butler 1821, vol. IV, 60-62. The Syriac text was included in Bedjan (1891, vol. II: 291-295). Bedjan (1912: 334-338) authored also a Sureth (Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic) version of the text.

⁴ In the footnotes, Bedjan (1891, vol. II: 291) gives Yazdandukht and Yazdandukhti as variants of the name and explains that Yazd or Yazdin is one of the Zoroastrian gods, whereas *dukht* or *dukhtar* means ‘daughter’.

(Bedjan 1891, vol. II: 293-294). When they went out to be put to death, she kissed them one by one and, once they were dead, she wrapped their bodies with fine linen, put them in coffins and buried them.⁵

In the *passio* of the bishop ‘Aqevshmā (Acephsimas; Bedjan 1891, vol. II: 351-396 and 1912: 410-423), his companions, the priest Yawsep and the deacon Aythilāhā, meet a character with an analogous narrative function, possibly the very same charitable woman: “There was in that town [Erbil, 379 AD] a woman, a great believer—blessed be her memory—whose name we have mentioned in another of our discourses.” As in the story of the one hundred and twenty martyrs of Seleucia the blessing formula “blessed be her memory!” accompanies her mention as a formal signal that links the two stories and in the meantime shows that the charitable woman is a supporting character, with a secondary role in the main plot of a *passio* that is not devoted to her. Her *dukhrānā*, that means both ‘memory’ and ‘memorial, commemoration feast’, does not generate a text entitled with her name and must be overtly mentioned within the text to receive due blessings from readers and hearers.

In a footnote, Bedjan (1891, vol. II: 379) accepts the identification of the two Erbilian women suggested by the text. So does the Bollandist Paul Peeters (1925: 292) in his *Passionnaire d’Adiabène*, but with the conviction that rather than a historical figure, this lady is nothing but a “figure cyclique en voie de formation,” that is, if I understand him correctly, a narrative *topos* in its germinal form.⁶ The character plays a specific role in the narrative—a noble, charitable woman who assists the Christians in prison—and can show up in different stories so as to create a kind of intertextual web that helps give a certain uniformity to a corpus as a collection of stories related to a narrative cycle and therefore substantiates an envisioned historical context.⁷

⁵ Concerns about the burial of martyrs would seemingly allude to the necessity of protecting their bodies from the Iranian Zoroastrian practice of exposure (see Herman 2010, Payne 2011: 91, and Briquel Chatonnet 2012: 9-10). Francisco (2016) finds the emergence of the motif in Jewish Hellenistic exegesis as a way to stress “the wicked nature of the persecutors who denied the saints proper burial” and critically discusses its relationship with the *inventio reliquarum* and the legitimation of Christian sanctuaries as places of worship.

⁶ Jean Maurice Fiey, OP (1914-1995), one of the best connoisseurs of history and geography of East-Syriac communities, seems to be less skeptical than Peeters about the historical identity or at least plausibility of Yazdandukht (Fiey 2004: 194).

⁷ The charitable woman who generously takes care of Christian prisoners can be seen as a variant of the *topos* of the good jail keeper, as we know from a Talmudic story (*Ta’anit* 22a-b) that also appears to have or have acquired strong Persian connotations. Herman (2012: 121-29) presents the episode as an “example of the intermediary position of the BT [Babylonian Talmud] that draws upon Palestinian tradition, reworking it under the inspiration of contemporary Persian literature”. Different versions of the story are known from Procopius of Caesarea (6th cent.) and the Arabic work of the Persian historiographer al-Ṭabarī (839-923), where it has a rather clear Persian setting and the female character has a more adventurous role in comparison with the pious women of the Syriac stories. Pretended menstrual impurity is a key narrative detail in the Talmud and in al-Ṭabarī’s version, whereas it is totally foreign to the Christian texts. I am grateful to Simcha Gross for drawing my attention to this *topos* in Sasanian-related Jewish and Christian sources.

Another woman may be a narrative avatar of Yazdandukht in the corpus of Persian martyr acts. She is known by her Persian pagan name Yazdui or the name Christine, indeed as Christian as possible, that she adopted after her conversion from Zoroastrianism. The only source of information we have about her is the second part of a composite text ascribed to the authority of Babai the Great (ca. 551-628).⁸ In Bedjan's edition, what remains of the life of the saint occupies one and a half pages, a good half of which contains rather generic praises of the saint and her virtues. Five and a half pages of theological reflection on Christ and the Cross precede the two remaining paragraphs of the life proper.

Mathias Binder (2012) translated the text into German and studied it, concluding that the contents of the long theological introduction are compatible with the attribution to Babai. According to Binder, the author refers to the killing of Khosrow II in a polemical passage against heathen kings who persecute Christians, but in the end fail and lose their position. Since Khosrow II was killed in the same year 628 when Babai died, the text would be a very late composition of the East-Syriac author. The vivid condemnation of persecution, the reflection on Christ's Cross and the martyrdom of a convert from Zoroastrianism makes it possible that the text was written during the late Sasanian period.

Binder goes so far as to hypothesize that Yazdui suffered martyrdom during the reign of Khosrow II, which would explain the harsh criticism of the author as an eye-witness of Khosrow's persecution. However, albeit very scanty and possibly re-arranged for literary purposes, the information on Yazdui's origin and family is rather precise and could point to an earlier date for the life and martyrdom of the saint. She was a Magian (Zoroastrian) of the region called in Syriac Beth Garmai and from the town of Karkha d-Beth Slokh, today Kirkuk in northern Iraq. She was the daughter of a certain Yazdin and belonged to a family of notables linked to the royal family. Her grandfather Miharzbirui "was appointed *marzbān* of Nisibis and she was married to a noble of Karkha [d-Beth Slokh], who was himself..." Here the text breaks off and we do not even know whether the author insisted on the noble descent, as Binder thinks, or rather the religious affiliation (Zoroastrianism) of her husband. Fiey (2004: 59) observes that her grandfather's appointment as governor of Nisibis must have happened after 363, when the city fell under Persian rule, which is a rather early *terminus post quem*.

⁸ The text is partly preserved in one manuscript (Diyarbakir 96) and was published by Bedjan (1897, vol. IV: 201-207). Only the life, without the theological introduction, is translated into Sureth in Bedjan (1912: 428). The ms. Diyarbakir 96 (Baumstark 1922: 138 n. 6) is a collection of hagiographic texts once belonging to the Church of Mar Pethion in Diyarbakir and then moved to Baghdad during the First World War. It reached the West thanks to a copy made in 1869 in Mosul. According to the dealer who provided the copy to the Bollandist Jean Baptiste Abbeloos the original manuscript was as old as 7th or 8th century. Unfortunately, it is now missing (Reinink 1999: 173 n. 13 and Walker 2006: 17).

This kind of information possibly had a function in the following narrative, which is probably irremediably lost. The noble lineage and the high social rank in the Zoroastrian community are *topoi* that serve to stress how much the saint has to lose from his or her conversion. The name Yazdui and especially the patronym ‘Yazdin’s daughter’—here given only in the Syriac form *ba(r)thēh d-yazdin*—suggestively sounds very much like that of the Erbilian Yazdandukht we know from the *passio* of the one hundred and twenty martyrs of Seleucia.

Peeters (1910: 45) does not list Yazdandukht in his *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis*. However, in the entry on Christine/Yazdui he would seem to suggest, in brackets and with an interrogative dot, that the patronymic “Yazdin’s daughter” may be shared by the two—or three—ladies and may thus formally tie together their stories into a web of intertextual references: “Christina quae et Iazdoi, Iazdin filia (Iazdinducht ?) v.m. [virgin and martyr] in Perside”. Nevertheless, even if the character and/or her name were invented to become part of a narrative cycle, the author of the story of St. Christine seemingly wanted to link her name with a religion, a specific place and family and therefore a given historical context, which can be the late fourth century, as hypothesized by Fiey, or the early seventh, as hypothesized by Binder.

In all likelihood, these stories are part of the great narrative cycle of the Christians who suffered persecution and martyrdom in the fourth century and have later received an oral and/or written form, more or less fictional, when memories of the first Zoroastrian persecution, the “great massacre” of Shapur II (Walker 2006: 10), served to strengthen and encourage the almost constantly persecuted or discriminated East-Syriac communities and provided them with a glorious past upon which they could build a communal identity. Charitable women, who assisted the martyrs in their last moments and buried their bodies, as well as noble converts belonging to families at the highest levels of Sasanian society, especially in the frontier buffer provinces, where loyalty towards neighboring empires could often change direction and intensity, did most probably play a historical role during the various waves of persecution and memories of them may have been long preserved and transformed in oral and written traditions.

2. Mar Qardagh, a frontier hero of Assyrian descent

Another legendary Persian martyr of the narrative cycle on the fourth-century persecution, Mar Qardagh, has enjoyed a remarkable revival during the 20th century, fictionally associated with the figure of Yazdandukht. As Fiey hypothesizes for Yazdui/Christine’s life, the author of the text that narrates Qardagh’s glorious deeds is probably a contemporary of Khusrow II (d. 628), whereas the story is set during the persecution of Shapur II (d. 379). The text has been translated into English and his

legend has been thoroughly studied and commented in an excellent monograph by Joel Walker (2006: 1), who points out that “while the story of Mar Qardagh’s “heroic deeds” preserves few, if any, reliable details about the fourth century, the legend presents an extraordinary window into the cultural world of seventh-century Iraq.”⁹

Mar Qardagh is a noble young man of Assyrian royal descent. His father is said to descend from “the household of Nimrod,”¹⁰ his mother from Sennacherib. His beauty, physical strength, heroism (*gabbāruthā*) and skills in archery, hunting and polo—the most appreciated martial art and sports of Sasanian society—conquer Shapur II who appoints him as *marzbān* of Nisibis, precisely like Yazdui’s grandfather. A series of miracles performed by the holy man ‘Abdisho’ and supernatural visions convert Qardagh to Christianity and make of him a military champion of the faith, who fights against both Roman (Byzantine) and Persian invaders to defend his territory and family. Saint Sergius, himself a frontier hero, appeared to Qardagh twice, first to prophesy his martyrdom and then to exhort him to fight as a hero (*gabbārā’ith*) for the sake of Christ.

Fiey (1965, vol. I: 205-206) accepts Peeters’ negative evaluation on the historicity of the story and compares Qardagh to other figures of charming young princes who steered the imagination of storytellers and audiences, in the Middle East as well as in Europe, and nourished popular piety:

Tous ces jeunes princes charmants, Behnām d’Āthōr, Gufrashnasp d’Adiabène, Abaï de Qulleth ici Qardāgh de Malqi ont offert un thème trop tentant à l’imagination et à la piété populaire. L’historien parcheminé comme ses «peaux mortes» peut bien se renfrogner encore et crier au blasphème, mais tous ceux qui ont été émus par la *Chanson de Roland* ou par le drame de *l’Aiglon* goûteront, dans leur genre littéraire, ces épopées naïves où apparaissent des archanges fulgurants et où Sapor parle comme *le Livre des Rois*.

Like Qardāgh, Behnām is of royal Assyrian descent, being the son of no less than “Sennacherib, king of Nimrud”. Amir Harrak (2001: 182) observes that Assyrian ancestry is a *topos* in North-Mesopotamian martyrological literature that should be systematically investigated. Helen Younansardaroud (2002:

⁹ Walker’s book is methodologically groundbreaking in that it posits the study of the acts of the Persian martyrs at the crossroads of three different research fields, that seldom combine and dialogue with each other: Syriac literature, Sasanian-Zoroastrian studies and the study of late antiquity, the latter being too often confined to or focused on Greek sources (see especially Walker 2006: 5-10).

¹⁰ Nimrod, mentioned in the Bible as king of Shinar/Mesopotamia, “was frequently incorporated into Iranian mythical history” (Payne 2012: 207 and 219). According to West-Syriac historiography, the impious giant Nimrud had a central role in the construction of the Tower of Babel and we find echoes of these stories in a Kurdish tale collected by Prym and Socin (1887: 12) from the mouth of an illiterate Suryoyo informant (Tardieu 2007-2008: 437).

188-191) tries to explain the apparent anachronism and suggests that local traditions may have brought together the story of Sennacherib's murder, the ruins of the Assyrian town Kalkhu—today called Nimrūd—near Mar Behnām's monastery and the legendary story of the noble prince and his sister Sara. Similarly, Walker (2005-2006) places Qardagh's Assyrian genealogy in a complex web of local traditions of Biblical and popular origins and links the martyr's story with an Assyrian and Zoroastrian cult site near Erbil.

In the region that encompasses historical Adiabene and Beth Garmai, with Arbela and Karka d-Beth Slokh—Erbil and Kirkuk in today's northern Iraq—as their capitals and metropolitan sees of the Church of the East,

there was a significant sub-current of local self-identity among Christians (but by no means confined to them)... there was some continuing awareness of the past Assyrian empire, and the terms *Athor*, *Athorāyē* (Assyria, Assyrians) are sometimes used (in a purely geographical sense) in preference to the names of current administrative usage, whether ecclesiastical or secular.¹¹

More recently, Richard Payne (2012: 2012-11) has demonstrated that Assyrian identity has no national connotations—anachronistic, by definition—in late antique Mesopotamia, as argued by Brock (1982, 16), but neither has it “a purely geographic sense.” It is part of a complicated process of literary (re)invention of local identities and noble lineages, according to a pattern of appropriation of the past that is probably shared by East-Syriac hagiography and Sasanian mythical historiography. Both history and geography are social and cultural constructions that are typically subject to manipulation by power elites and are constitutive of their ideological bias.¹²

It is in the light of the often interrelated categories of locality and nobility, rather than categories of ethno-religious difference, that we can apprehend the significance of the appropriation of the ancient past in Northern Mesopotamian hagiography for Christians endeavoring to define as lofty a place as possible for themselves within the Sasanian empire (Payne 2012: 214).

¹¹ On the re-appropriation of the glorious Assyrian past in northern Mesopotamia under Parthian rule, as opposed to the oblivion of the Babylonian and Chaldean past in southern Mesopotamia, Brock quotes Crone and Cook (1977: 55; on “Assyrian” Adiabene, see especially 189-190, n. 89).

¹² A discussion of this subject falls beyond the scope of the present article. I thank the anonymous reviewer for her/his suggestion to refer to Anderson (1991) in this connection.

Adam Becker (2008: 398) proposes seeing the appropriation of the Assyrian past as a learned trend in Syriac culture, deriving from scriptural and historical sources rather than local, traditional self-identification, and calls it “Assyrianization”, by which he means

the process whereby Syriac-speaking Christians in Mesopotamia employed the Assyria they found in the Bible as well as in Greek sources translated into Syriac as a model for understanding themselves and their place in the world.

According to the Syriac *Chronicle of Arbela*, Gufrashnasp of Adiabene was a fervent Zoroastrian who revolted against the Sasanian king in the last decades of the 3rd century and, like Qardagh, had to defend his citadel from the attack of the royal army. Rather than a historical model for the legend of Mar Qardagh, Walker thinks that Gufrashnasp’s story might be a forgery composed by Alphonse Mingana, born Hurmiz (1878-1937), the modern editor of the *Chronicle*, “based on his familiarity with the Qardagh legend”.¹³ A discussion on the contested authenticity of the *Chronicle* and the manuscript used by Mingana falls beyond the scope of the present study. From a literary point of view, however, a possible early-20th century forging of such a character as Gufrashnasp, on the model of Mar Qardagh, by or for a Syriac scholar of East-Syriac origin, is *per se* a very interesting phenomenon.

Whatever the roots of these “naïve epic sagas,” as Fiey calls them, may be—historical facts, more or less reliable historical sources or local oral traditions—Fiey is correct when he says that the charm of these young heroes and their stories full of supernatural appearances and heroic military deeds will probably meet the literary taste of readers accustomed to European medieval epic or later romantic drama. Considering the dynamic aspect of tradition, what matters is precisely this literary potential of the stories of Persian martyrs and saints and the ways they have been revived in modern times and in popular devotion, i.e., Fiey’s “piété populaire.”

Qardagh’s military skills and attitude do not change after his conversion. Hard and strikingly violent fighting in the name of Christ is not only accepted but even encouraged by God and saints in the story. Fiey is once again right in suggesting a similarity of Mar Qardagh’s story to the Roland Romance epic. Qardagh shares with western Roland or eastern Digenes Akrites the role of frontier warrior and his story has been interpreted as a foreshadowing of other holy wars of defense and conquest.

¹³ Walker (2006, 289-90), with bibliographic references on Mingana and the *Chronicle of Arbela*. See also Kawerau (1991) and Kiraz (2011).

The figure of Mar Qardagh may be read as one possible imaginative intermediary between mounted martyr saints such as Sergius, whose cult was so crucially important in the Syrian borderlands between Rome and Persia, and the mounted Muslim heroes of the conquest era, those saintly monk-raiders whose acts of martial valor manifested the will of the god of Abraham on the dusty plains of the Syrian steppe and the Iranian plateau (Key Fowden 1999 and Sizgorich 2009).

3. An illustrated historical novel

In the magmatic sea of the acts of the Persian martyrs, somehow canonized in Bedjan's editions,¹⁴ we thus find Yazdandukht of Erbil, who plays her role of charitable woman in the *passiones* of the one hundred and twenty martyrs of Seleucia and Acespimas of Kirkuk and his companions. In the same corpus, and related to the same region—today northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan— we find a few lines of praise and genealogical information on a noble woman of Kirkuk who converted from Zoroastrism and became a martyr for Christianity and whose name Yazdui may be related to Yazdandukht, and the epic heroic deeds of the noble Mar Qardagh, warrior for Christ of Assyrian descent, based in Erbil, on the eastern border of the Christian world in late antiquity.

Sureth¹⁵ versions of all these stories—martyrs of Seleucia, Acespimas, Yazdui and Qardagh— have been available since 1912.¹⁶ Paul Bedjan translated them into Sureth, together with many Classical Syriac lives of saints and acts of martyrs, and significantly contributed to mold the vernacular(s) of East-Syriac Christians into an elegant literary language for hagiography and Catholic popular devotion. It is difficult to say to what extent his books, luxuriously printed in Paris, were accessible and actually

¹⁴ Binggeli 2012 is an excellent overview of the manuscript transmission of Syriac hagiographic literature: see especially Binggeli (2012: 63-65) on the Persian martyrs. Brock (2008: 87-90) describes the transmission of the Persian martyr acts and reconstructs the manuscript sources used by Paul Bedjan.

¹⁵ Sureth is the autoglottonym used among other names – (Vernacular or Modern) Aramaic, (Modern) Assyrian, Chaldean (vulgar), (Vernacular or Modern) Syriac— for North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) varieties that were and are spoken and occasionally written by Christians of various denominations—especially Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrian Catholics—in today's northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, Syria and north-western Iran. The term derives from *surā'ith* "in Syriac" and has a strong confessional connotation, since the corresponding ethnonyms *surāyē* or *suryānī* mean simply "Christians" in various languages of the region.

¹⁶ One hundred and twenty martyrs of Seleucia (Bedjan 1912: 334-338), Acespimas (410-423), Yazdui/Christine (428), Mar Qardagh (364-374; Classical Syriac Vorlage in Bedjan 1891, vol. II: 412-507). The Classical Syriac text of Mar Qardagh was published twice in 1890: Abbeloos (1890, with Latin transl.), and Feige (1890, with German transl.). On the Persian Lazarist Paul Bedjan (1838-1920) as a Syriac scholar and Sureth author, see Murre-van den Berg (2011), with bibliography.

circulated in the East. However, many prayer books and a 1937 collection of hagiographical stories, including Mar Qardagh and Mar Behnam, contain handwritten copies of his works.¹⁷

A few decades after Bedjan's publications, the sketchy female character(s) and the fully developed epos of Mar Qardagh inspired an Arabic novel descriptively and programmatically entitled *Yazdāndukht al-sharīfa al-irbīliya: riwāya qaṣaṣiyya ta'rikhīya tatanāwalu ḥuqban min ta'rikh al-'irāq wa-tabḥathu fi shu'ūbi-hī wa-'aḥwāli-hī al-iḡtimā'iyya fi 'ahd dawla al-fars al-sāsāniyīn* 'Yazdandukht the noble Erbilian. Historical novel (lit. 'fictional narrative') with a portrait of a period of the history of Iraq, its peoples and social life under the rule of the Persian Sasanians.' Interestingly the female saint is chosen as main protagonist, whose Erbilian origin and life time allow the author to combine her story with the story of Mar Qardagh, as *marzbān* of Nisibis and then pugnacious convert to Christianity.

Yazdandukht the Noble Erbilian (Fig. 1) should be studied in the context of the global fortune of the historical novel as a genre and its Iraqi manifestation, to understand its relationships with Western and Arab models and its own original contribution to the history of Iraqi fiction.¹⁸ It is in fact a historical novel and thus belongs to a specific literary tradition, both at the global level, where the historical novel is a hallmark of European modernity that spread and became popular in the Arab world especially during the Nahḍa, and at the regional level, since historical narrative inspired the development of Iraqi modern fiction that is essentially a 20th-century phenomenon (Allen 1995: 17).¹⁹

¹⁷ Many manuscripts in various languages—Classical Syriac, Arabic, Garshuni (Arabic in Syriac script), Sureth, and Turkish Garshuni—belonging to Chaldean and Catholic collections, especially of the plain of Mosul and the surrounding region, are becoming available in digitized copies thanks to the tireless and praiseworthy work of Father Michael Najeeb, superior of the Dominicans of Mosul, and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML), at the Benedictine Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, MN (www.hmml.org).

The Sureth ms. 135 (1937) of the Chaldean Church of the Sacred Heart of Telkepe contains 19 lives of martyrs and saints, the *Story and proverbs of Aḥiqar*, and *Story of Sayf al-Masīh* (Arabic for 'Christ's sword'). The latter is a fable-like frame tale that includes series of riddles of Biblical and theological contents and turns out to be a re-writing of the *Story of the duenna and the prince* (Sureth text Lidzbarski 1896, vol. I: 328-43; German transl., vol. II: 267-279). At least 13 of the 21 texts included in the 1937 manuscript were directly copied from Bedjan 1912 (kind information of my MA student Samuele Baracani).

Bedjan's Sureth works and especially his books inspired by European Catholic devotions—rosary, prayer during the Mass, visits to the Eucharist, spiritual meditations, etc.—, such as *Le manuel de pitié* (Paris, 1886) or *Mois de Marie* (Paris-Leipzig, 1904), were very much appreciated by the Chaldeans of Iran and northern Iraq. Some of the Sureth prayer books listed in the provisional database of HMML may very well be copies and dialectal adaptations of Bedjan's books.

¹⁸ See Allen 1995 on the Arabic novel in general and Bahooora 2017 on Iraqi novel (*Yazdandukht* is cursorily mentioned on p. 251).

¹⁹ On the emergence of the Arab historical novel, with the Lebanese Christian author Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), during—and as an essential component of—the Nahḍa, see Moosa 1997, 197-218.



Fig. 1 – Title page of the novel *Yazdāndukht al-sharifa al-irbiliya* (1934)

Perhaps a little too enthusiastically, *Yazdandukht* was celebrated as the first Iraqi historical novel during a conference on the contribution of the Syriac Christians to Iraqi culture, held in the autumn of 2012 in Erbil (Shammāsh 2012). In fact, the anonymous Arabic translation of *Justice is the Basis for Monarchy* (published in 1919) on the life of King Henry IV and Sulaymān al-Dakhīl’s novel *Nāẓim Pāshā* (1911), which—very much like the hint at the social life of Sassanid Persia in the subtitle of *Yazdandukht*—“claims to be a literary, historical, social, and political story” (Allen 1995, 47), are examples of Iraqi historical fiction that shortly precede the publication of *Yazdandukht the noble Erbilian*.

Two editions of the novel are known, published in 1934 and 1953, by the Maṭba‘at al-nağm al-kaldāniya in Mosul. A 2003 reprint is now available, by the publishing house Dār adī shīr li-l-nashr wa-l-’a’lām of Erbil, in which the subtitle *riwāyā ta’rikhiya muṣawwara* ‘illustrated historical novel’ stresses the double medium dimension of the book.

As stated in the first paragraph of the preface (Şā’igh 1934, Erbil reprint of 2003, 17), the author’s intent is clearly pedagogical, following a trend that is well attested in both European and Arab (historical) fiction: facts and truth can be transformed in narration or even made up so as to teach, instruct and morally edify audience or readership. The first part of the novel is a long historical introduction on the eastwards spread of Christianity and its diffusion in the “idolatric” Sasanian Empire. It is written in the language and with the methods of Western historiography and the author adds bibliographic footnotes, sometimes containing excerpts of Classical Syriac sources.

Besides the *Chronicle of Arbela*, as edited by Mingana, and Bedjan’s *Acts of martyrs*, the author mentions among his sources East-Syriac works of historical content,²⁰ more or less contemporary French historians (Labourt 1904, Huart 1952, Nau 1933), a manuscript *Life of Bar Ēdtā* (Scher 1906-1907,

²⁰ *The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A. D. 840* (Budge 1893) and *Synodicon Orientale* (Chabot 1902).

Baumstark 1922, 203 and 351), unidentified works by Rubens Duval (1839-1911) and Addai Scher (1867-1915), an English translation of Ammianus Marcellinus and the Bulāq editions of 13th-century Muslim authors such as ‘Alī ibn al-Athīr (*Al-kāmil fī al-ta’rikh* ‘The Complete History’) and Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (*Mu‘jam al-buldān* ‘Dictionary of Countries’; Šā’igh 1934, Erbil reprint of 2003, 15).

The novel fictionalizes characters and stories of the manuscripts and of Bedjan’s books that regard the Sasanian period. More precisely, the author stretches the role that Yazdandukht played as a “figure cyclique” in the Persian martyr acts so as to insert her as a more or less active character or witness of stories in which she was not involved in the martyrological literature. In this way, she becomes a kind of “frame character” that sets the stage for other stories and characters of the Persian martyr acts, such as, e.g., Mar Miles (Fig. 2) and Mar Qardagh (Fig. 3).

The style of the illustrations reminds one of the wood engravings that illustrate martyr and romance narratives in Europe, from Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* onwards. Their sources, iconography and technique should be carefully studied, especially in comparison with the lithographed illustrations of Persian and perhaps Egyptian books.²¹ Like in the tradition of European orientalist painting, oriental details surface in clothes, headgear, furnishings and architecture. Fictionalization and auto-orientalizing figural representation serve the pedagogical and moral purpose of the author of *Yazdandukht*, who combines history and hagiography more or less as history and love romance are the constitutive ingredients of Jurji Zaydan’s novels (Almarsa News 2017; on Zaydan see Moosa 1997, 199).

²¹ Lithography was introduced to Persia through Russia in the nineteenth century (Marzolph 2009). “Allowing adherence to the Arabic standards of calligraphic beauty through the use of skilled scribes, lithography was adopted in some Muslim countries in the nineteenth century – mostly India, East Asia, Iran, certain parts of North Africa, and to some extent Egypt” (Ayalon 2016: 14); see also Green 2010 and Messick 2013. I would like to thank Francesca Bellino and an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this phenomenon and providing me with relevant bibliographical information.



القدّيس مار ميلس في غرفة المريض

Fig. 2 – Mar Miles visits the sick Sultan. Yazdandukht and her nanny stand behind his bed (Şā'igh 1934, Erbil reprint of 2003, 51)



القسّيس مار قرداغ على سطاح قصره

Fig. 3 – Mar Qardagh defends his fortress from the troops of the Zoroastrian emperor (*ibidem*, 320)

4. 20th-century Chaldean perceptions of Assyrianization and Assyrianism

The author of the novel *Yazdandukht the noble Erbilian* is Sulaymān Şā'igh (Mosul, 1886-1965) who was ordained a priest of the Chaldean Church in 1908 and bishop of Mosul in 1954. Besides Arabic, he was fluent in both English and French, which gave him first-hand access to European literary and historical sources. In 1923 he published the first volume of his monumental *Ta'riḫ al-Mawṣil* 'History of Mosul', commissioned by King Faysal I. The second and third volumes were published in 1928 and 1956. In 1928 Şā'igh founded the monthly journal *Al-Nağm*, where he worked for fifteen years. He wrote various dramas on moral, Biblical and historical subjects: *Al-Amīr al-Ḥamdānī* (1928), *Mashāhid al-ḥaḍīra* 'Scenes of virtue' (1931), *Zenobia* (1933), *Joseph the Upright* (1935) and *The Dove of Nineveh*, which was put on stage in 1947 and has Semiramis as its protagonist. In 1952 he translated Corneille's *Horace* for Arabic audiences.²²

The Persian rather than Christian name of the protagonist Yazdandukht and the reference to the broader scenario of Sasanian Persia explicitly declares the fictional agenda of the author, who emphasizes the connection of the Christian martyrs to the Iranian world in which the Church of the East emerged and developed as a distinct—yet transnational and multiethnic, in anachronistic modern terms—, Christian community. Yazdandukht's Erbilian origin is in line with the Iranian setting, but it

²² A bio-bibliography is published in the introduction of the 2003 reprint of the novel *Yazdandukht* and a short autobiography has been found among his charts (Ḥaddād 2012, Sa'īd 2012, Arabic Wikipedia 2019). On Şā'igh and criticism by his contemporaries, see Sako 2019.

also hints at a local context, the region of northern Iraq to which the author and his Chaldean community now belong. The stories refer to a specific geographical region and create a historical, cultural and social landscape,²³ in which author and envisioned readers may find and perceive themselves as discriminated or even persecuted minorities under Islamic rule, in the eastern borderland of Christianity and Christian modernity.

The title suggests at least two possible closely intertwined readings of the novel: a search for the glorious—Assyrian and Persian—past of the Chaldean community and—more in general, but through the decisive contribution of the Christian community—of modern Iraq, and a projection in the past of the contemporary condition of a persecuted Christian minority. Both interpretations circulate among Chaldean readers of today.

In his eighth lesson “against illiteracy for those who ignore the history of the Chaldeans in nationalism”,²⁴ which is devoted to the spread of Christianity at the very beginning and in late antiquity, ‘Abdalmasiḥ Būyā Yaldā presents the stories of Mar Qardagh and Yazdandukht, as they are known from the Persian martyr acts and Ṣā’igh’s novel respectively, as main sources for the history of the Chaldeans in late antiquity. In Būyā Yaldā’s reconstruction of Chaldean history, Yazdandukht is the rather anachronistic granddaughter of Abrasam, minister during the reign of Ardashir I (180-242), founder of the Sasanian Empire, she received a Christian education from her nanny Bā’ūth, met Mār Qardāgh and died around the year 370. The character of the nanny Bā’ūth²⁵ would thus seem to migrate rather straightforwardly from the realm of fiction—the historical novel—to a highly ideological, popularized version of history. As we shall see, this is not the only wonderful transformation induced by Ṣā’igh’s novel.

²³ See “the ability of literary specialists to reinvent an imagined landscape on the basis of available textual resources” that Payne (2013, 208) attributes to the authors of the Persian martyr acts.

²⁴ Būyā Yaldā 2013 would seem to be a Chaldean chauvinist and the title probably refers to the ignorance on Mesopotamian history deriving, in his opinion, from (Assyrian) nationalism. In the harshly polemical premise of each lesson, he specifies that “Assyrians (Nestorian Chaldeans)” are not entitled to comment on the lessons “since they are not Iraqis” (my translation). The old problem of denomination is a hot issue in the current cultural and political debates and has been touched in an official statement of the Synod of the Chaldean Church Bishops held in Rome, 4-8 October 2017, under the chairmanship of the Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako: “As a genuine Chaldean people, we officially reject the labels that distort our Chaldean identity, such as the composite name “Chaldean Syriac Assyrian” used in the Kurdistan Region, contrary to the name established in the Iraqi constitution. We call upon our daughters and sons to reject these labels, to adhere to their Chaldean identity without fanaticism, and to respect the other names such as ‘Assyrians’, ‘Syriacs’, and ‘Armenians’.” (saint-adday.com/?p=19632, Mey 2020).

²⁵ A certain Bā’ūthā, “a noble laywoman from Karka d-Beth Slokh [Kirkuk], was put to death outside her castle at the orders of the Mobed Adurgushnasp” (Brock and Harvey 1987, 77), but she can hardly be identified with Yazdandukht’s nanny, who seems rather to be a purely fictional character.

Not only in modern Arabic literature does history offer motifs and themes and historiography text-types and narrative models to historical fiction as “effective means of portraying the otherwise inexpressible.” The historical novel allows authors to narrate the past speaking of the present and especially “to point to the exercise of power in the contemporary Arabic-speaking world” (Allen 1995, 256). According to a contemporary Chaldean reader, the novel *Yazdandukht* gives expression not only to the pure love (*ḥubb ṭāhir*) of the pious protagonist, but also to the timeless condition of “a lost fatherland (*waṭan muḏī*), a land taken from its native population, the Chaldeans, since their political defeat in the fifth century BC and given to the plundering of invaders and other foreign peoples—Greeks, Persians, Turkmans and Kurds—until today” (Fatūḥī 2012, my transl.). The past of Mar Qardagh and *Yazdandukht* is the present of Iraqi Chaldeans.

From the contents the novel as well as a drama like Semiramis’ tragedy in *The Dove of Nineveh*, it is clear that the author and his readers are in line with the process of cultural appropriation of the Assyrian and, more in general, Mesopotamian past that Becker calls “Assyrianization” or, better, they try to find a Catholic Chaldean declination of or alternative to a very modern form of it, which with Edward Odisho (2001, 139) we can label “Assyrianism”:

...the view of virtually all of modern Assyrians, both educated and uneducated, initiated and spearheaded by the traditional scholars – or *Rabis* for more accuracy – of what I identify as the modern Assyrian Reawakening extending from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s. All modern Assyrians emotionally espouse the connection as a pillar and extension of their national and historical identity in the form of a nationalistic movement known today as *Aturayuta* (Assyrianism).

Assyrianism emerged as an (East-)Syriac nationalistic view among Urmi intellectuals of the 19th century and, precisely between the world wars of the 20th century, when Sulyamān Ṣā’igh was particularly active as an author and his novel was published, it gained growing popularity among Syriac Christians of all denominations.²⁶

In fact, the titles of Ṣā’igh fictional writings reveal a cultural agenda that surpasses both traditional Assyrianization and contemporary Assyrianism. The historian, familiar with modern Western history and historiography, seeks a “place in the world”²⁷ for the Chaldeans in a wider scenario. The homeland of the Chaldean people goes beyond first millennium BC Mesopotamia as

²⁶ On the term “Assyrian” in Syriac and the adoption of the Assyrian identity among modern (East-) Syriac Christians, see Butts (2017). On the role of the American evangelical mission in Persia in the development of modern cultural and religious ideas and practices among the Assyrians, see Becker (2015).

²⁷ See Becker’s definition of “Assyrianization,” as quoted above.

mediated by Biblical narrative and exegesis and moves to the western fringes of the Sasanian Empire, on the Byzantine border, as narrated and thus fictionalized in the Persian martyr acts. His historical horizon stretches from the ancient Nineveh of Semiramis to more recent periods of Islamic history. The adoption of typically western, and modern, genres such as drama²⁸ and historical novel is crucial in his ambitious intellectual plan of cultural modernization and fictionalization of Iraqi national history.

5. A shrine and an icon

From the same year 1934 in which the novel *Yazdandukht* was published, the main male character of the novel started to visit the Chaldean village of Alqosh in the plain of Mosul (Fiey 1965, vol. II: 396). In the summer of 1936 a beautiful man appeared to a woman while she was sleeping and promised her that had they built a *kūkh* 'hut' in his honor, in the place he was showing to her, the recurrent measles outbreaks would have immediately ceased to kill the children of the village. He said his name was Mar Qardagh, but the woman did not know that there was a saint with this name. He continued to appear to other Alqoshians in the following months. They built a small cube building in the place indicated by the saint and there were miraculous healings, not only among the children. No less than four children were healed in the month of February of 1937. In the following years, a number of boys of Alqosh were christened with the beautiful name of Qardagh.²⁹

It is difficult to ascertain what role the novel has played behind these miracles. However, the fourth-century hero of the borderland between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires and glorious defender of Christianity, even against his own pagan family, became in the thirties of the 20th century a fighter against the measles virus—*ḥuṣaba* in Arabic and *zāṭē* in Sureth—and other pathogenic invaders. Both at the personal and collective level, fictionalized history became spiritual experience and celebration of the wonderful deeds of the hero.

²⁸ In 1914, slightly before Šā'igh's floruit, a certain deacon Paul wrote a play in Sureth about King Nebuchadnezzar, based loosely on the narrative of the book of Jeremiah. Act II (2v) and III (7v) are preserved in the ms. 698 of the Dominican Friars of Mosul.

²⁹ Edmond Lasso (2012, 33-42) has collected a number of local documents on the miracles and on the construction of Mar Qardagh's shrine. He describes in detail the area that hosts the shrine, the church and other buildings linked to his cult in Alqosh and lists a number of other churches and monasteries dedicated to the saint in the region, belonging to the Chaldean Church as well as to the Church of the East (*ibidem*, 45-81).



Fig. 4 – The shrine of Mar Qardagh (1937; photo by A. Mengozzi, September 2012)



Fig. 5 – Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh (1937) by Şabiḥ Na‘āma (cover Ḥaddād 2011a and Lasso 2012)

A new shrine was built in 1937, a cube mausoleum surmounted by a dome (Fig. 4),³⁰ which is still visible in the place of the original ‘hut’, at the corner of the court garden that separates it from the big new church of Mar Qardagh, built in 1990. A new building has been added after 2007 near the shrine, to host a hall for meetings and receptions, especially on the occasion of funerals. Since 1936 a pilgrimage to the shrine has been held on the last Friday of summer, with a solemn procession. The ill and the needy visit the shrine during the whole year and enrich its décor with ex-votos.

On the altar of the new church, a modern icon represents the stoning of Mar Qardagh (Fig. 5). The saint rises for the third and last time, his feet still buried in a pile of stones, sword and helmet on the floor at his right hand. An angel lets the flower crown of martyrdom float over his head, while Qardagh’s father is ready to hit him from behind with the fatal blow. It measures 70×100 cm and was painted in 1937 for Mar Qardagh’s shrine by Şabiḥ Na‘āma (1913-1999) in a style that recalls 19th-century Catholic devotional art. Except for the helmets of two Persian soldiers who are stoning the saint, nothing is intentionally “oriental” in the clothes that, together with the arch and columns in the background, give instead a Neo-Classical flavor to the scene. The figure of the saint is oversized and his arms open and stretched towards heaven mark the St. Andrew’s cross-shaped structure of the composition, with the left-to-right diagonal pointing to the angered face and gesture of the father.

³⁰ Only the cross on the top of the dome distinguishes this type of building as a Christian cenotaph. The structure is similar to a small Islamic *mazār*. Any cultural expression of Iraqi Christian minorities—language, literature, art, architecture—reflects their position in or, better, their acculturation into the Islamic world.

The story of a saint, perhaps via a modern historical novel, has become cult practice and inspired a new image of the martyr, here resembling a muscular Roman soldier, with the seraphic gaze of a baroque Spanish or Italian saint, rather than an Iranian archer.

6. Sureth poetry on YouTube

A heroic life told in venerable books and in a modern illustrated novel, miracles, a shrine, an annual solemn pilgrimage, and a martyr with two different iconographies set the narrative and visual frameworks of a new cult of the Erbilian saint in Alqosh, a small all-Christian town 50 km north of Mosul, which has been the spiritual and cultural headquarters of the East Syrians at least since the 16th century and the cradle of Christian Neo-Aramaic religious poetry.³¹ Hymnography and poetry soon followed, contributing to the musical and aural dimension of the cult. Edmond Lasso gives a couple of verses of twelve poems dedicated to Mar Qardagh (Lasso 2012, 88-89):

1. An epic poem (Arabic *malḥama shi'rīya*) of 211 quatrains of seven syllable lines in Sureth by Francis Butrus Karmo (1937).
2. Eight quatrains of eight syllable lines in Sureth by the priest Francis Ḥaddad (1938). A handwritten copy is reproduced in facsimile in Ḥaddād (2011a, 71-73).
3. A long poem in Sureth by the priest Yawsep 'Abbaya of Alqosh (1937).³²
4. Twenty four quatrains of eight syllable lines in Sureth by Yawsep 'Abbaya (1942). A handwritten copy is reproduced in facsimile in Ḥaddād (2011a, 73-80), where the poem is however dated 1937.
5. A long poem in Classical Syriac by Yawsep 'Abbaya (1950), that consists of 50 pages of eight syllable lines. The genre is called '*onithā* in Classical Syriac (see Mengozzi 2011) and *tarnīma* in Arabic.
6. Epic poem of 1070 quatrains of seven syllable lines in Sureth by the priest Yoḥannan Cholagh (1969).
7. Epic poem of 262 couplets of dodecasyllables in Classical Syriac by the priest Ibrahim Yoḥannan (1984).

³¹ The nearby monastery of Rabban Hormizd was the see of a patriarchal line of the Church of the East from the 16th to the 18th century and became a center of cultural irradiation. Moreover, from the 16th century, Alqosh families of scribes created a system of hereditary monopolies and sustained a remarkable flowering of scribal and literary activities (Murre-van den Berg 2015, esp. 185-223).

³² The poem numbers more than 200 quatrains of seven syllable lines in the ms. 110 of the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, copied in Alqosh in 1940. See below, n. 42, on Yawsep 'Abbaya as a Sureth poet.

8. Epic poem of 256 quatrains of seven syllable lines in Sureth by the writer Benyamin Ḥaddad (1985). A handwritten copy is reproduced in facsimile in Ḥaddād (2011a, 1-70).³³
9. Poem of eight quatrains of dodecasyllables in Sureth by the poet Samīr Mikha Zori (1991).³⁴
10. *Turgāmā*³⁵ of 22 couplets of dodecasyllables, with alphabetic acrostic, in Classical Syriac by Samīr Mikha Zori (2001).
11. Eight couplets in Sureth by Hadīl Kuza (2001).
12. Poem of 51 dodecasyllables in Syriac by the poet Laṭīf Pola (2003).³⁶

As far as can be seen from Lasso's short anthology, almost all these poems explicitly refer to the cult of Mar Qardagh in Alqosh. In the last verses of his long poem on Mar Qardagh, Benyamin Ḥaddad (no. 8 in the list) narrates the construction of the shrine, thus including the modern continuation of the story within the epic narrative of the saint. However, Mar Qardagh inspired poets also outside Catholic Chaldean Alqosh. For example, the Erbilian martyr is mentioned in a Sureth lullaby from the more southern Karemlash, together with St. Barbara and Mar Behnam (Lasso 2012, 99).³⁷ A story in Sureth verses of the martyr Mar Qardagh, composed in 2001 by the priest Thomas Avraham, can be found on YouTube, sung and recited in 2012 and 2013 by the choir of the Church of Mar Qardagh in Baghdad, Assyrian Church of the East.³⁸

The 1969 poem listed as no. 6 in Lasso's list is in fact a poetic rewriting, in the most traditional form of Sureth poetry, of Ṣā'igh's Arabic novel *Yazdandukht the Noble Erbilian*. The author of the rewriting is the Chaldean priest Yoḥannan Cholagh, who was a gifted poet and singer, appreciated

³³ Benyamin Ḥaddad is a linguist and fine author of Alqosh. Among other things, he authored a dictionary of verbal roots of the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Alqosh (Ḥaddād 2011b).

³⁴ An interview with the poet and calligraph Samīr Mikha Zori by the Assyrian Ishtar.TV can be seen on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LZZagnI038). All mentioned YouTube videos have been accessed in May 2020.

³⁵ A *turgāmā* is a hymn chanted at Mass before the reading of the Gospel on special occasions (Mengozzi and Pastore 2017).

³⁶ In 2013, Emad Rammo published a number of poems by Laṭīf Pola on YouTube, including a long epic poem (*malḥama*) on *Mar Behnam and His Sister Sara* (2003; www.youtube.com/watch?v=mehPEi4foil_57T8PlMuy84).

³⁷ The monastery of St. Barbara faces the main entrance of the Chaldean village of Karemlash, some 30 km south-east of Mosul. The Syriac Catholic monastery of Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah is close to the town of Qaraqosh (Syriac Baghdēdhā, Arabic Bakhdīdā), 32 km south-east of Mosul. In 2014, this territory, its population and monuments were tragically affected by ISIS's offensive.

The lullaby quoted by Lasso has the introducing formula ("May he/she/they protect you!") and the structure of other Jewish and Christian Neo-Aramaic lullabies coming from the same region (Talia 2011a).

³⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LNK5MWF5Ro (part 1), [=JOWcjLeMR34](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOWcjLeMR34) (part 2), [=DvBCsB8OCcg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvBCsB8OCcg), and [=idlnbOaYB-c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idlnbOaYB-c).

interpreter of the Alqosh tradition of chant.³⁹ Three of his original poems in Sureth are available on YouTube: the poem *On Exile* (1970)⁴⁰ and two long “epic poems”, as Edmond Lasso would probably call them, that have holy women as their protagonists: *On St. Genevieve*⁴¹ and *On Yazdandukht* (1969).⁴²

The recordings of Cholagh’s performances were posted on YouTube in the years 2013-14 by Shatha Nona, a Chaldean lady of Detroit, MI, who also created the Facebook page of “Father Youhannan Jolagh”.⁴³ Shatha Nona has combined the original audios with images, as in slow slide presentations. The resulting videos are interesting because they reveal the YouTuber’s fondness for Father Cholagh’s poetry and voice and her attempt to bridge the gap between the traditional imagery associated with these texts and an imagery that derives from contemporary TV and media culture.

Shatha Nona’s technique is rather sophisticated. As Father Cholagh opened the audio recordings announcing the title of the poem he was about to sing and sometimes the place and date of the performance, Shatha Nona opens her videos always with photos of Father Cholagh himself (see, e.g., Fig. 6), in a kind of visual translation of the name of the author on the front page of a book or the singer on the cover of a disc. Stories and songs are thus immediately associated with the author or the voice that performs them.

In the video *On Yazdandukht* the YouTuber uses all the iconographic material available in the illustrated historical novel by Šā’igh. Yazdandukht, Mar Qardagh and other characters have the rather

³⁹ Yoḥannan Cholagh was born in Alqosh in 1935, studied in Mosul and was sent to Paris to study theology, where he remained only one year. He was ordained a priest in 1961 and taught for a certain time in the seminary of Mosul. He was then assigned to the parish of his native Alqosh as a pastor. From 1974 he was the pastor of Mar Ishaya in Mosul, where he died in 2006. He was buried in the beautiful church of Mar Mikha in Alqosh on the right side of the altar.

Many of his performances were recorded on audiotapes. They include all the liturgical melodies (*resh qālē*), the holy Mass, many traditional hymns and modern poems, composed by himself or contemporary poets.

⁴⁰ The poem has been published by Talia 2011b, with English transl., and on YouTube as chanted by the voice of the author: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGPjvPHXrBI.

⁴¹ Two recordings of the poem *On St. Genevieve* by Yoḥannan Cholagh are available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XW5TzN1TNyE (part 1), =7_wqb9Zfohs (2), =0eXHw0EhY_k (3), =uiMoQK64HYM (4), =McnQxUC6xTM (5), =r3s4pJYfLV4 (6), =lcmx2CgjVig (7), =16ty3QxipZM (8), =didtQ83ZbtY&t=18s (9), =d4UsaTPO4HQ (10), =f73klyb7X_0 (11), =QmJesdWCGI8 (12), =9IK44MxUYXI (13), =nl7xXvWD3I8 (14; chanted by the author according to various melodies) and www.youtube.com/watch?v=du8dy_dcej4 (chanted by George Yaldā; the video lasts two and a half hours and contains an Arabic translation of the text).

The story of the French saint enjoyed a certain popularity among Iraqi Chaldeans in the 20th century. The mss. 573 (Alqosh, 1952), 124v-150v and 638 (Alqosh, 1967) of the Dominican Friars of Mosul contain Sureth prose stories and a ms. of a private collection (PLK_YSH 3 in HMML database, dated Alqosh 1941), contains a Sureth poem on St. Genevieve.

⁴² www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBd_D7Vmewc (Part 1), =KrK2EtNBxKQ (2), =Cka1uRQgHaU (3), =rTKLvs6rikg (4), =IZLaX486NRg (5), =ToM0thsmeccs (6), =mmpIpcYKDCM (7).

⁴³ www.facebook.com/youhananjolagh. Last post September 2016.

static outlook they have in the black and white, auto-orientalizing illustrations of the book of 1934. The literary source of Cholagh's verses becomes the main source for their visual representation. Mar Qardagh is thus the Persian archer behind the Gothic-arched merlons of his fortress, probably intended as oriental—Assyrian or Persian—architectural details (Fig. 3). However, when the poems describe him as a handsome young man, Shatha Nona chooses the picture of a Brad Pitt-like male figure (Fig. 7) that in her eyes probably updates the saint's face to more current, global standards of beauty.

Shatha Nona implicitly recognizes that the beautiful young prince is a *topos* in martyrological literature and, once she has found a face that fits the role, she uses it for all Sureth poems in which a beautiful prince plays a role. The same face of Mar Qardagh (Fig. 7) is used for the protagonist of the video that translates into images the poem *On the solitary monk* by the priest Yawsep 'Abbaya of Alqosh, active in the first half of the 20th century. The text narrates the story of a beautiful prince who becomes a monk and learns from a hermit the art of basket weaving.⁴⁴ The literary *topos* of the beautiful prince is signaled at the visual level in a rather mechanical, but coherent, process of semiotic translation.

⁴⁴ The *Story of the solitary monk* (1912) has been published with the title *On the Hermit Barmalka*, from the ms. Habbi 3 (Braida 2011). The ms. Habbi 3 (Alqosh, 1933) is one of the most important and complete collections of Sureth poetry and is more or less contemporary to the historical novel *Yazdandukht*. Its content is described in Ḥabbi 1978. A photographic reproduction of the ms. is listed as no. 584 of the collection of the Dominican Friars of Mosul. The ms. was printed in facsimile in San Diego, CA, in 1977.

Four other manuscript copies of the *Story of the Solitary Monk* have become available: ms. 799 (20th cent.) of the Dominican Friars of Mosul, 21v-27r (where it is entitled *Zambilfrosh*, that is 'basket seller' in Kurdish) and three copies made and signed by Elias Stephan Madalu, mss. 298 (1989) and 299 (1988) of the Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, and 610 (1989) of the Dominican Friars of Mosul.

Two performances are available on YouTube: the one used by Shatha Nona is entitled *Qeşsettā d-Rabban Zambil* (lit. "Story of the monk Basket") and is sung by Yoḥannan Cholagh (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiO_joR5-6k), whereas the other is sung by another voice (George Yaldā?) and was published by George Mikho in 2015 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibspjuixsSU, with Arabic translation in the video).

Besides the three hymns on Mar Qardagh mentioned in Lasso's list (above) and the *Story of the Solitary Monk*, Yawsep 'Abbaya authored at least three other liturgical texts: a *Hymn for the feast of the Holy Cross* (1912; ms. 76, 159v-162r of the Chaldean Archdiocese of Mosul), an *Invocation of the Virgin* (1926; same ms., 162r-169r), and a *Hymn on St George* (1925-26, ms. 323 of the Dominican Friars of Mosul).

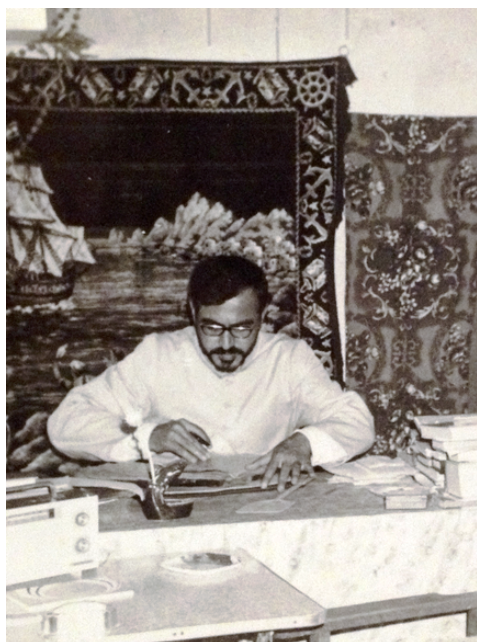


Fig. 6 – Detail from the cover image of www.facebook.com/youhananjolagh.



Fig. 7 – Face of Mar Qardagh and the Hermit Barmalka in Shatha Nona's YouTube videos.

The protagonist of *On the solitary monk* does not have the respectable literary pedigree of Mar Qardagh. In fact he does not even have a name. He embodies two hagiographical *topoi*: the beautiful young man and the noble rich hero who chooses the chaste, poor and simple life of the hermit. In the rubrics and in the text, he is just *Barmalkā*, Classical Syriac for ‘the prince’, or Prince as a proper name, whereas his female antagonist, the woman who repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempts at his virtue, is *Khātūn* ‘the princess’ or Princess. The characters are deprived of any historical and personal identity and are almost pure narrative functions in the text that is explicitly described by the author in the concluding verses as a kind of fable for children, a pedagogical story to teach asceticism and chastity as moral values.

Wikipedia or social networks such as Pinterest or DeviantArt are the repositories from which Shatha Nona draws fitting images to give a visual translation of traditional Sureth poems. The royal palace mentioned at the beginning of *On the solitary monk* is a black and white detail of the picture of the Château de Saumur in France, as it appears in English Wikipedia.⁴⁵ When the text mentions the protagonist *Barmalkā* a charming prince on a horse appears: he is Prince Arthur of the BBC series *Merlin*, broadcast between 2008 and 2012, whereas evil *Khātūn* has the face of the German Turkish actress Meryem Uzerli, who plays the role of a sexy provocative woman in the Turkish series *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* ‘The Magnificent Century’ (2011-2014) on the life of Sulayman the Magnificent.

⁴⁵ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Château_de_Saumur.

The two heroes of more or less traditional hagiography, Mar Qardagh and Barmalkā, share the face of Bradley James, the actor who plays the role of Prince Arthur in the BBC *Merlin*. In contrast with the Roman soldier and western saint of the Alqosh icon (Fig. 5) and as an integration of the Persian archer of the illustrated novel *Yazdandukht* (Fig. 3), the new, digital icon of Mar Qardagh (Fig. 7) is a reworking, available online, of Bradley James alias Prince Arthur.

What American Chaldean Shatha Nona does on YouTube is probably a creative updating and an attempt at revitalization of her Iraqi Syriac tradition. Her commitment to tradition and identity led her to visual art and online entertainment. Yazdandukht and Mar Qardagh must have a digital afterlife and, in the perception of a Chaldean living in the diaspora, contamination of cultural repertoires appears to be instrumental for the survival and revival of their stories, chanted in a language and by a voice that come from far away. Persian martyrs and Syriac saints can survive, quite far removed from their homeland, if they find a place in the global village of pop culture.

7. Conclusion in the form of a summary

The revival in modern times of the stories of Yazdandukht and Mar Qardagh shows the complexity of the dynamic process of linguistic, literary and semiotic translation that usually goes under the label of fortune of a text.

Classical Syriac hagiographical stories, traditionally preserved in manuscripts, received a first stabilizing form in the 19th century text editions. Paul Bedjan, the editor of six volumes of *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* (1890-1897), published in 1912 a Sureth—i.e., Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic—translation of a selection of the lives of saints and acts of martyrs, including the epic deeds of the frontier hero Mar Qardagh of Erbil, two stories in which Yazdandukht, a charitable noble lady of the same town, is involved, and the short biographic information on Yazdui of Kirkuk, who converted from Zoroastrianism and was called St. Christine.

Thanks to Paul Bedjan, the corpus of Persian martyr acts became available in book form, both in Classical Syriac and Sureth, as a source to (re-)construct the historical past and therefore the cultural identity of a specific geographic region. Historian and Chaldean bishop Sulaymān Ṣā'igh published in 1934 the illustrated historical novel *Yazdandukht the Noble Erbilian*, in Arabic. He chose genre and language according to canons and costumes of Arab modernity. In the novel the protagonist Yazdandukht functions as a frame character that sews and holds together as a unified narrative saga a

compendious Christian doctrine, Iraqi history and the stories of various (semi-) legendary⁴⁶ Persian saints and martyrs. For pedagogical purposes, the modern author exploits to the extreme the character of a pious Erbilian lady that has been interpreted as a *figure cyclique*, possibly together with Yazdui/Christine, and was probably meant as a unifying narrative device already by the author(s) or redactor(s) of the Persian martyr acts.

The re-use of *topoi* and narrative devices is paralleled by the persistence of ideological and cultural agendas over time and across different genres. As the appropriation of the Assyrian and Iranian pasts in the Syriac acts of martyrs of today's northern Iraq served for the preservation of local identities and the construction of provincial noble lineages in late Sasanian society, the author of the modern Arabic novel combines the stories of martyrs and saints to construct a more or less coherent historical and hagiographical narrative, that stresses the contribution of the Christians to Iraqi history.

As an Iraqi Chaldean intellectual, Şā'igh implicitly reacts to 20th-century Assyrianism, when it claims that (East-)Syriac Christians are the only heirs to the mythologized glorious past of the Assyrian empire. Instead, according to him, the Chaldean community is part of a broader historical scenario, from ancient Nineveh to medieval Islam, that forms the historical past of modern Iraq as an emerging nation-state with historically important religious minorities and inspires his fictional works as an Iraqi novelist and author of dramas in Arabic.

The hagiographical part of the novel probably had a much greater impact than what the author had imagined. Mar Qardagh, one of his main characters and a prominent figure of the Persian martyr cycle, appeared to some Chaldean faithful in Alqosh and asked them to build a shrine. Again, as the Persian martyr acts functioned as textual supports in the invention of relics and the creation, consolidation or Christianization of local cult sites, the story of Mar Qardagh, circulating in oral form, through Bedjan's Syriac and Sureth books or in the powerful and authoritative form of an illustrated Arabic novel, crossed the permeable border between literary fiction and cultu(r)al practice. The appropriation of the cult of the Erbilian martyr by Alqosh in the thirties of the 20th century shows how fast the process of formation of a local cult may be, including miraculous healings, the building of a shrine and a church, the painting of an icon, the establishing of public and private rites, a summer procession, and the composition of hymns.

The local character of the new cult of Mar Qardagh in Alqosh is stressed by the flourishing of poems on or in honor of Mar Qardagh, composed in the literary variety of the local Neo-Aramaic dialect (Sureth) and in the traditional form of the stanzaic poem that has been characteristic of Sureth poetry

⁴⁶ See Brock (1982, 16), precisely on Mar Qardagh.

since the emergence of Alqosh Neo-Aramaic as a written literary language in the late 16th century. One of these poems is the translation of Ṣā'igh's novel *Yazdandukht* in Sureth verses, composed in 1969 by the Alqoshian Chaldean priest Yoḥannan Cholagh. Sureth vernacular poetry (re-)absorbs a traditional story and the modernizing ambitions of an Arabic historical novel.

Father Cholagh's poem was recorded on audiotapes, as chanted by the author's voice, and a lady of the Chaldean diaspora decided to digitize and publish it in 2014 in the form of a YouTube video, in which Yazdandukht and Mar Qardagh, besides the faces and poses of the auto-orientalizing illustrations of Ṣā'igh's novel, present updated outlooks deriving from online repositories of digital images. Mar Qardagh, together with another young prince of a Sureth poem chanted by Father Cholagh, has the face of British actor Bradely James, who plays the role of Prince Arthur in the BBC series *Merlin*. The author of the video shows how local Sureth lore can be mediated by the global language of mainstream pop culture.

The visual representation of Sureth poems on YouTube makes blatantly evident mechanisms and purposes of a process of semiotic translation and cultural hybridization that started long before, when probably oral traditions on Persian martyrs were written down in Syriac with a precise ideological agenda, in the form of semi-epic accounts of the glorious deeds of frontier warriors of Assyrian and Iranian descent. In the 20th century, the Persian martyr cycle inspired a modern historical novel and, perhaps through it, the establishment of a local cult.

Stories survive and, indeed, revive only if they are told in different languages and genres, if they acquire and generate new imagery and meanings, adapting to the literary and ideological agendas of new authors and readers.⁴⁷

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