E. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION
CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARABS
IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

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Abstract
The Arab peoples of the borderlands between Rome and Persia were useful allies to the Great Powers in the course of their military confrontation. Religious affiliation was an important marker of allegiance during this conflict, and we see Christianity being used in the fifth century as a sign of Roman clientage. However, the increasing importance of non-Chalcedonian confessions meant that Christianity could be de-coupled from its Roman associations, and take on other forms of political significance in the hands of both the Persian shahs and the Arab rulers themselves.

Introduction
As (the) reputation (of Symeon) spread everywhere, everyone hurried to him—not just those in the neighbourhood, but also those who lived many days’ journey away … The Ishmaelites … came in bands …, and repudiated their ancestral error with a shout. They smashed the idols they had revered in front of that great luminary, and renounced the orgies of Aphrodite.¹

Hagiographic writing of the fifth and sixth centuries often imagines the conversion of barbarians in stark terms. Barbarian leaders witness miracles, frequently the healing or exorcism of their children, and lead their people into true religion. In the case of the Arabs of the frontier, as for the peoples of the Caucasus, this was often accompanied by settlement and promises to defend the Roman frontier from the Persians.² As

1. Theodoret, Historia religiosa 26.11, 13 (SChrét 257, pp. 181, 191); trans. R. Doran, The Lives of Simeon Stylites (Cistercian Studies Series 112; Kalamazoo, 1992), pp. 74, 77 (adapted). In what follows, translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
2. There is a substantial secondary literature on Christianity among the Arabs, which comments on many of the texts discussed here: F. Nau, Les Arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et de Syrie du VIᵉ et VIIᵉ siècle (Cahiers de la société asiatique, première série, 1; Paris, 1933); H. Charles, Le Christianisme des Arabes nomades sur le limes et dans le désert syro-mésopotamien aux alentours de l’hégire (Bibliothèque de l’École des hautes études. Sciences religieuses 52; Paris, 1936); J. Tringham, Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times (Arab Background Series; New York, 1979); I. Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century (Washington, 1989), and Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century (4 vols; Washington, 1995–2009); T. Hainthaler, Christliche Araber vor dem Islam. Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit: eine Hinführung (Eastern
G. Greatrex shows in this volume, religious and political allegiance could go hand-in-hand.³

However, the confessional diversity of the sixth century changed this situation considerably. In particular, the activities of miaphysite and Nestorian missionaries in the space between Rome and Persia complicated any simple equations between religion and allegiance. This paper will seek to examine the course and the consequences of the Arabs’ encounter with Christianity. Throughout, it is important to remember that Christian missionaries and commentators might have different interests and agendas from those of the state or their Arab ‘converts’, and that we must read between the lines of their accounts to discern the agency of the Arabs themselves in these encounters with the new religion.

Settlement and Conversion in Cyril of Scythopolis

The Roman empire had long differentiated itself from its barbarian neighbours. Like the peoples across the Rhine and Danube, the Arabs could be depicted as irrational and uncontrolled, unable to achieve the peaceful, civilized life of the cities of the empire.⁴ As the empire Christianized in the fourth and fifth centuries, religious conversion was increasingly represented as a means of transforming the ‘natural’ state of barbarian ignorance through the transformation of Christ’s dispensation.⁵ But the adoption of Christianity was also assumed to be accompanied by a range of other ‘Roman’ values, among them, settlement in towns and cities.


3. Paper of Greatrex, this volume.


5. M. Maas, “‘Delivered From Their Ancient Customs’: Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Ethnography’, in K. Mills and A. Grafton (eds), Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing (Studies in Comparative History; Rochester, NY, 2003), pp. 152–88.
A good example of this transformation in the Arab context comes from the sixth-century Life of Euthymius, part of Cyril of Scythopolis’ Lives of the Monks of Palestine. He describes the conversion of an Arab client of the Persians, one Aspebetus, who goes on to receive baptism and ordination as a bishop.\(^6\) Conversion entails a promise to give up ‘all lawlessness and pagan worship’\(^7\), and is presented as an ethnic, as well as a religious and political transformation: the people of Aspebetus departed ‘no longer Agarenians and Ishmaelites but now descendants of Sarah and heirs of the promise, transferred through baptism from slavery to freedom’.\(^8\) Furthermore, the transformation of this group of Arabs into ‘Saracens’ was closely associated with Aspebetus’ decision to build a permanent settlement, the ‘Parembole’, among the monasteries of the Judaean desert.\(^9\) Parembole went on to function as a see for the Arab tribes of Palestine, as well as attracting further settlement and conversion.\(^10\)

This vignette from Cyril, which has several parallels in other histories and hagiographies,\(^11\) serves as an archetype of the deployment of religion as a tool of empire. Aspebetus and his followers remain loyal followers of the Romans, who are rendered acceptable through their religion and settlement. However, it is clear from Cyril’s account that Aspebetus’ descendants were not able to keep control of the various Arabs of Palestine, and that the story of Aspebetus is told with an element of nostalgia for an idealized Arab convert, whose like could no longer be found when Cyril wrote in the 550s.

\(^6\) Cyril of Scythopolis, Vita Euthymii 15 (TU 49.2, p. 25); Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century, pp. 183–84, reconstructs the episcopal succession at Parembole.


\(^8\) Cyril of Scythopolis, Vita Euthymii 10 (TU 49.2, p. 21); trans. Price, Lives, p. 16.


\(^11\) E.g. Ammonius, Narratio 14, 37, trans. D. Caner, History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai (Translated Texts for Historians 53; Liverpool, 2010), pp. 156, 169 (Sinai); Life of Conon of Isauria, ed. and trans. F. Halkin, ‘Vie de S. Conon d’Isaurie’, AB 103 (1985), pp. 1–34; Procopius, Buildings 3.5.2–6 (Caucasus).
The Jacobites between Rome and Persia

The dominant Arab allies of the Romans by the sixth century were the Jafnids, the elite family at the core of the Ghassânid confederation. The Jafnids were set apart from the likes of Aspebetus both by the scale of their power, and by their role as patrons of a distinct Christian confession. Where Cyril had presented Aspebetus as an essentially obedient client of the holy man Euthymius, his miaphysite counterpart John of Ephesus presents the Jafnids themselves as the patrons.

A series of letters written in miaphysite monasteries near Damascus in the 560s celebrate al-Ḥārith’s role in attempting to reconcile different groups of miaphysites during the Tritheist controversies. One excerpt praises him using his Roman honorific, as the ‘Christ-loving patrikios Arethas’. The Syriac miaphysite sources grant the Jafnid phylarchs a prominent role as leaders and sponsors of the Church. The ecclesiastical historian John of Ephesus presented al-Ḥārith’s son al-Mundhir favourably. John reports how he attempted to reconcile the miaphysite leaders Paul ‘de Beth Ukkama’, and Jacob Baradaeus. Al-Mundhir’s efforts were rooted in the long history of respect for both men among the Arabs, which made Jabiya an obvious place to convene the rival parties. Later, after the failure of his early efforts, al-Mundhir again attempted to reconcile the two men, this time in Constantinople itself.

Throughout this narrative, John emphasizes the high honours that al-Mundhir had earned in Roman service: he is the ‘patrikios’, the same title enjoyed by the Jafnids, see Sartre, Trois études, pp. 170–72, and Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century (Washington, 1995), pp. 84–87. These analyses are rooted in the comments of Procopius, Persian Wars 1.17.46–47.


that is recorded on his inscriptions in the Syrian desert. John also emphasizes his dynasty and its long association with Jabiya and with the miaphysite movement. Indeed, John deliberately inverts the image of the irrational and uncontrolled barbarian to present al-Mundhir as self-controlled and moderate during a time of schism, when all the great men of the Church had lost their heads. When the Roman commander of Bostra (‘a noted and famous man’) despises the forces of al-Mundhir’s son al-Nūmān as Arabs, and leaves the city to attack them, he is swiftly routed for his arrogance. For John, the use of barbarian stereotypes for the ‘orthodox’ Arabs, and the deceit with which the Romans treat their Arab allies is a sin worthy of retribution, justly punished when al-Nūmān falls on the cities of Syria.

Ecclesiastical history was a genre that was traditionally focussed on the deeds of an orthodox emperor like Constantine or Theodosius I. In John’s work, al-Mundhir has assumed a quasi-imperial role as a self-controlled, pious adjudicator between different ecclesiastical factions. We should reflect, therefore, on how innovative and provocative it was for John to place a ‘barbarian’ at the centre of book 4 of his history.

John’s near contemporary, Cyrus of Batna, provides another striking example of the inversion of the stereotype of the barbarian Arab. Cyrus, whose work is preserved in the medieval chronicle of Michael the Syrian, describes how the Chalcedonian Patriarch Ephraem of Antioch came to visit Mundhir’s father al-Ḥārith in his tent. Al-Ḥārith refuses to take

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19. John of Ephesus, Historia ecclesiastica 3.4.22 (CSCO 105, p. 209): ‘He [Longinus] came to Hīrtā [Jabiya], founded by Gabala, son of Harith, to find Mundhir, son of Harith’. For the equation of John’s ‘Hīrtā de Tayyaye’ with the ‘Hīrtā de Mundhir’ see Elias, Life of John of Tella (CSCO 7, p. 40), and for the identification of the site as Jabiya, see T. Nöldeke, Die ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Jafna’s (Berlin, 1887), p. 48.
20. John of Ephesus, Historia ecclesiastica 3.4.21 (CSCO 105, p. 208): ‘They [had] regarded Jacob highly since the days of Harith his [Mundhir’s] father’.
22. John of Ephesus, Historia ecclesiastica 3.3.42 (CSCO 105, p. 177).
24. Cyrus of Batna’s history in fourteen books extended from 565 to 582. Probably everything that is not from John of Ephesus in Michael the Syrian for this period derives from Cyrus, except for the episcopal lists derived from Jacob of Edessa. See J.-B. Chabot, Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d’Antioche (1166–1199) 1 (Paris, 1899),
Chalcedonian communion saying, ‘I am a barbarian and a soldier and I cannot read the scriptures but I will not eat pure meat infected by the body of a rat’. After Ephraem concurs, al-Ḥārith concludes, ‘that rat is the Tome of Leo’. Finally al-Ḥārith orders a meal of camel flesh to be brought in. When Ephraem recoils, the phylarch remarks that Chalcedonian communion is as objectionable to him, as camel flesh is to the patriarch.

In Theodoret of Cyrrhus’s *Life of Symeon the Stylite*, camel flesh had been used as a boundary marker: the hagiographer asserted that Arabs could change their diet to make themselves acceptable to the settled Christian world. By contrast, Cyrus’ Arabs have made, and need make, no attempt to adapt to the norms of the settled world. In terms of diet, others must accept the Arabs as they come. This in itself reflects the Arabs’ growing prestige, but it is accompanied by a superior position for al-Ḥārith as a miaphysite champion, whose disgust at Chalcedonian communion is the key to the anecdote. Cyrus vindicates ‘traditional’ Arab culture to undermine the claims of the Romans, whose ‘civilization’ is now tarred with heresy.

Both John and Cyrus present the Jafnid dynasty as miaphysite to the core, and see their support for this confession as the defining feature of their rule. Cyrus reports that al-Nu’mán refused an offer to take up the throne of al-Mundhir in exchange for receiving Chalcedonian communion, because he would be killed by his own people if he did so. But we should be wary of taking their reports at face value. The narratives of Cyrus and John constitute important evidence for how the miaphysites presented the Jafnids in the last decades of their rule, and they show how a ‘barbarian’ leader might escape criticism as a barbarian through pp. xxi–xxiii, and the comments of J. van Ginkel, ‘Making History: Michael the Syrian and His Sixth Century Sources’, in R. Lavenant (ed), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (OCA 256; Uppsala, 1998), pp. 351–58.

25. The *Tome of Leo* was an intensely Chalcedonian text produced by Pope Leo I, which remained a major stumbling block for miaphysites. See Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, pp. 212–13 and 217.


28. The vindication of ‘barbarian’ Arabs through ‘true religion’ would also become an important trope in the Muslim representation of the Arab conquests, where the pious conquerors trample the fine carpets of their decadent Roman and Persian opponents. See T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity. Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Divinations; Philadelphia, 2009), pp. 189–90.

29. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 374 Chabot: ‘All of the Tayyaye are orthodox: if I take communion from the synodites they will kill me’.
‘orthodox’ behaviour. In this regard, they illustrate important advantages that accrued to the Jafnids through their sponsorship of Christianity.

Yet we need not assume that the Ghassānid confederation, or the whole of the Jafnid clan, was exclusively miaphysite, or that the Jafnids had always been the major patrons of the miaphysites as they appear in the ecclesiastical histories. One important corrective is provided by John of Ephesus’ earlier work, the Lives of the Eastern Saints. This hagiographic collection is often quoted to show how al-Ḥārith successfully appealed to Theodora for two miaphysite bishops, Theodore and Jacob Baradeus, to be sent to the East. However, it is worth reflecting on the variety of accounts of Jacob’s consecration and al-Ḥārith’s role. The first of these follows on from an account of the patronage of miaphysite monks from across the empire by the Empress Theodora, and her construction of numerous monasteries for them in Constantinople. Jacob, we are told, was summoned to the episcopate by ‘the believing queen’ after establishing himself as a famed ascetic in Constantinople. His missionary remit is extremely broad: ‘he rushed from the Persian frontier to the royal city’ and ‘caused the priesthood to flow like a great river across the Roman lands’, but there is no reference to his presence in Syria and no mention of his connection to al-Ḥārith.

John’s second account of Jacob ties him more closely to his fellow-bishop Theodore, but he is still remembered chiefly for his work in Constantinople under Theodora’s patronage. This Life does accord an initial role to al-Ḥārith:

… after the time of the martyrdom of the blessed combatant for religion John, bishop of the city of Tella, … along with many others, the glorious Harith bar Gabala, the great king of the Saracens, asked the Christ-loving Queen Theodora to give orders that two or three bishops might immediately be instituted by the orthodox in Syria … she gave orders and two blessed men, well-tried and divine individuals named Jacob and Theodore, were chosen and instituted (as bishops), one for Hirta of the Tayyaye, that is Theodore, and Jacob for the city of Edessa.

But Jacob’s activities, though widespread in Asia Minor and Egypt, never include Syria or Palestine, or make any reference to the Arabs.34 John also tells us nothing further about Theodore: Jacob’s chief ally here is Theodosius, patriarch of Alexandria.

The third such account is only spuriously attributed to John, though its interest in the Jafnids and the person of al-Ḥārith suggests that we might still date it to the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh.35 This Life mainly presents Jacob as a miracle-worker for Mesoopotamia, rescuing the cities of Edessa and Tella from drought, demonic possession, and foreign invasion. But the opening passages of the Life greatly enlarge the cameo appearance that al-Ḥārith enjoyed in the Lives written by John. Al-Ḥārith has a vision of Jacob after his people are afflicted by bouts of insanity, and they send him to bring gold to the saint to ask him if God might visit them by his prayers. The hagiographer relates that

when they had crossed the river Euphrates to come to his (Jacob’s) monastery, the saint appeared to the Saracens in his habit at full morning, and said to Harith: ‘Why, o barbarian man, did you doubt the gift of God? Go and return to your land ... and release the man from Mount Sinai whom someone is detaining in your camp, and you will immediately be delivered from the distress’.36

Al-Ḥārith locates and slays the captor and his people are promptly cured.

It is possible to see this passage as an advertisement for the new extent of al-Ḥārith’s authority as leader of the Roman Saracens. Procopius reports that al-Ḥārith was recognized as chief of the phylarchs allied to the Arabs,37 and the Life presents al-Ḥārith’s writ running from the Euphrates to Sinai, a remit that goes well beyond the core of Jafnid holdings in the Golan (the ‘Hirta’ where Theodore was appointed). The author may even be deliberately celebrating the power of a miaphysite patron who was able to control the unruly, and probably unconverted, Arabs under his authority. Still, the main action of the Life has little to do with al-Ḥārith, and Theodora retains her principal position as Jacob’s sponsor.

35. John of Ephesus, Lives of the Eastern Saints (PO 19, pp. 262–64). Its interest in Edessa’s heroic resistance to the Persians might also suit a date before Khusrau II’s capture of Mesoopotamia in c. 610.
37. Procopius, Persian Wars 1.17.46–47.
These accounts do not allow us to see the reality of the relationship between al-Hārith, Jacob, Theodora, and Justinian. It may be that the court sought to keep the Jafnids in a Roman political orbit by providing bishops, and that miaphysitism was not initially seen as a problematic or divisive issue for an emperor who was willing to patronize both miaphysites and Chalcedonians.\(^{38}\) Or it may be that the ‘real’ target for these ordinations was the exiled miaphysite community in Persia, as our earliest source for Jacob’s consecration suggests.\(^{39}\)

The overwhelming impression of John’s accounts is that al-Hārith was a peripheral figure in the decision to consecrate Jacob, and that the Bishop Theodore, who was probably attached to Jabiya, never matched Jacob’s stature. When John wrote the *Lives* in c. 575, Theodora loomed much larger in the miaphysite memory of this period. The greater prominence of al-Hārith in the later anonymous *Life* may therefore reflect the further development of Jafnid patronage under al-Mundhir, when John's image of al-Hārith in the *Lives* has been elaborated to match the kind of prominence achieved by his son (a prestige that John himself would celebrate in his *History*). Whatever importance al-Ḥārith may have had for the miaphysite communities of the Golan, this role, and his connection to Jacob Baradeus, does not seem to have been widely acknowledged in his lifetime.

A second corrective to the image of the Jafnids as miaphysite champions comes from the archaeological evidence. Jafnid building at the pilgrimage site of Reṣāfa represented an important extension of their power, which supplemented and competed with earlier Roman building at the site. However, as E.K. Fowden has observed, there is little reason to view the see of Reṣāfa as lying under miaphysite control. Indeed, the site received dyophysite pilgrims from the Sasanian empire.\(^{40}\) If the Jafnids were using a pre-existent pilgrimage site to impress local Arabs who were already Christian, then we have no reason to suppose that these

\(^{38}\) See discussion in Wood, *We Have No King But Christ*, pp. 169–70. V.L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford, 2008), pp. 233–36, suggests that there was initially considerable suspicion of Theodora, which has been written out in many later miaphysite sources.


Mesopotamian Arabs were miaphysite. As C.J. Robin has reminded us, the Jafnids were only an elite family at the core of a wider confederation. The Ghassânid confederation as a whole may have included groups such as the Arabs of the Parembole in Palestine, or Pharan in Sinai, both of which were Chalcedonian and had much older relationships with local Christian institutions.

The Jafnids do not seem to have made an issue of their miaphysitism in any of their religious building or pious inscriptions. Intervention in miaphysite affairs gave al-Hārith and al-Mundhir a prestigious voice in Church affairs, and the political leverage that came with this. And the Christian tone of Jafnid leadership was impressive enough to generate imitation by subordinate phylarchs: the 568 bilingual inscription (in Arabic and Greek) at Harran in southern Syria by the non-Jafnid phylarch Sharaḥīl, appeals to his fellow Arabs in Christian terms, shortly after al-Hārith had begun to reconcile the miaphysites of the Golan. But we need not suppose that there was not a range of Christological beliefs among the Arabs or that such confessional differences always mattered.

It is only in Maurice’s reign, when the Romans turned against the Jafnids, that miaphysitism in the Persian borderlands was deliberately targeted by the state. The timing of this move may reflect the loss of miaphysite prestige in this decade as the movement splintered into different groups. As we have seen, the Romans may have tried to force al-Nu‘mān’s conversion to Chalcedonianism, and Evagrius reports that ‘many monasteries, fortresses, villages and tribes were brought into the Church of God’. This sponsorship of missionary activity in a rural border region, when most previous attempts to coerce the miaphysites had tended to target cities, may show that the Jafnids’ role as a miaphysite spokesman was recognized as problematic enough to prompt this change in tactics.

42. These are usefully summarized in F. Millar, ‘Rome’s “Arab” Allies in Late Antiquity. Conceptions and Representations from within the Frontiers of the Empire’, in H. Börm and J. Wieschöfer (eds), Commutatio et Contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin (Reihe Geschichte 3; Stuttgart, 2010), pp. 199–226 at 215. Also note the commentary of Fisher, Between Empires, pp. 149–56 on these, and other buildings by Arab phylarchs.
44. Fisher, Between Empires, p. 183, sees the failure of Jafnid attempts to reconcile the different groups of miaphysites as a source of embarrassment for the Jafnids.
It is, however, important to emphasize that this political miaphysitism was a feature of the last decade of Jafnid rule, and that their role as ‘defenders of the faith’ was only acquired gradually.

**The Jacobites and the Arabs of the Jazīrah**

A different perspective on the Christianization of the Arabs is provided by the small number of Syriac and Arabic texts that discuss the Arabs of the Sasanian world. Here, the confessional diversity of Roman Syria and Arabia was even more pronounced, and the presence of a non-Christian shah made the conversion of the Arabs of the borderlands even more politically ambiguous. It is perhaps only a consequence of the growing independence of miaphysite clergy in the Roman East that a pragmatic and powerful shah like Khusrau I began to tolerate proselytism on his western border, as miaphysites escaped persecution in the Roman world.46

This proselytism is described in the *Life* of the missionary bishop Aḥūdemmeh, who proselytized tribal groups living in the Jazīrah, the steppe-land that lies between Aleppo and Mosul.47 The Arabs of the Jazīrah had enjoyed little previous contact with Christianity. The hagiographer lambasts them as ‘tent-dwelling homicidal barbarians’, ‘the most ignorant of all the people of the earth until the light of the Messiah came to enlighten them’.48 They initially resist his early attempts to convert them, in which he casts down their idols and performs healings and exorcisms.49 Aḥūdemmeh goes on to convert other Arab tribes and establish in each a priest and a deacon, drawn from the many different lands of the miaphysite diaspora. After this he founds churches for each tribe, naming them after their chiefs, and providing all they need.50 Though the hagiographer strives to present Aḥūdemmeh as a heroic lone agent, we should remember that he was a bishop, and that he probably had the resources and manpower of his dioceses to help him build and staff these churches. Here Arab support for church structures was assured by making them memorials to tribal dynasties as well as centres for the liturgy. In time, Aḥūdemmeh’s investment in the Arabs paid dividends in their own

47. *Iraq and the Persian Gulf* (Naval Intelligence Division Geographical Handbook Series; London, 1944), pp. 76–79.
50. *Life of Aḥūdemmeh* (PO 3, p. 27).
support for nearby monasteries on both sides of the Roman-Persian border. Though we can only speculate, it may be that this support was an expression of competitive euergetism by these Arab leaders, whose patronage of local monasteries and the ascetic life was an acceptable way of channelling wealth that did not involve re-distribution through gift-giving within the tribe.

We can see this process of conversion as a confirmation of previously fragile authority structures. The story of the tribe’s conversion, when retold, becomes, primarily, a tale of the relationship between saint and chief and his dynasty. As G. Fisher observes, tribal hierarchies tend to be fluid and egalitarian, while the task of the chief was a vulnerable and thankless one. In placing the chief at the centre of the decision to convert, the hagiographer’s story of conversion also becomes a story of ‘royal’ authority and initiative. Similarly, Christianity gave this dynasty a way to memorialize their conversion by spending wealth gained in the service of the shah by building churches.

The culmination of Aḥūdemmeh’s activities on the frontier was his construction of a shrine to Sergius at Qaṣr Serīj, together with an adjacent monastery. The hagiographer observes that ‘the saint called this place Mar Sergius to detach them from Mar Sergius de beth Reṣāfa, which was on the other bank of the Euphrates and a long way distant’. Still, distance was not the only issue here, and it may have been equally significant that Reṣāfa lay within the Roman empire and, from Aḥūdemmeh’s point of view, the influence of the Chalcedonians. We get an impression of the importance of Aḥūdemmeh’s project from the reactions of others. His monastery is torn down by the Nestorians, before being restored by the shah, Khusrau I, who is moved to intervene by God. Aḥūdemmeh did not work in a vacuum, and his construction of a shrine on the Roman frontier was highly political. It may well be that the miaphysites relied on contacts at the Sasanian court to get permission to build such a shrine.

We may speculate that Khusrau was himself aware of the appeal of the

51. These included the famous monastery of Mar Mattai near Nineveh, the most ancient of the Jacobite centres in Iraq. See further Bar Hebraeus, Chronicon ecclesiasticum, vol. 3, cols 80 and 88 Lamy.

52. Paper of Fisher, this volume, pp. 000–000. Fisher, Between Empires, pp. 42–46, suggests that the Christianisation and settlement of elites might also threaten the leaders’ position among their followers.

53. Life of Aḥūdemmeh (PO 3, p. 29), with comments by Fowden, Barbarian Plain, pp. 121–25, and note, too, pp. 137–41 for Khusrau II’s interest in Reṣāfa.

54. An example from the following generation is the notorious Gabriel of Sinjar. See B. Flusin, Saint Anastase le Perse et l’histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIe siècle 2 (Monde byzantin; Paris, 1992), pp. 110–11). Khusrau later fell out with Aḥūdemmeh, which may explain why this co-operation is suppressed in the text.
Roman shrine of Reşāfa, and was willing to sponsor a rival shrine to Sergius irrespective of its confessional allegiance. Indeed, the greater patronage of Christian institutions by the shahs at the end of the sixth century may reflect a situation, where the presence of a ‘new’ Christian confession in the miaphysites made it possible for the shah to sponsor either group and to derive advantages from both.

The situation depicted here is much more complex than the conversion of Peter’s Arabs in Palestine. For Cyril of Scythopolis, conversion was the religious counterpart of allegiance to Rome. The Life of Ahūdemmeh, by contrast, shows us a negotiation between four different public confessions: the Chalcedonians in Reşāfa, who had threatened to lure away the Arabs of the Jazīrah; the miaphysites, who established an alternative Persian centre at Qaṣr Serīj; and the Church of the East, the most established Christian group in Persia, who were outflanked and displaced by interlopers from the Roman world. Finally, there was the officially Zoroastrian Sasanian regime itself, which could still move decisively against Christian proselytism of members of the court, but tolerated the conversion of the ‘pagan’ peoples of its borderlands. 55

The Naṣrids of al-Ḥīrah 56

I conclude by turning to the last conversion of a prominent Arab group, that of the Naṣrids of al-Ḥīrah. Though on a larger scale, al-Ḥīrah shared many of the features of a Parembole or a Jabiya, a fixed point of settlement where trade could be conducted between the nomadic world and the settled and where clients could be rewarded or punished. 57 Like

55. Cf. the Syriac Life of Aba, pp. 266–67 Bedjan, on the mission to the Hepthalites of Central Asia, which must have also found some level of state acceptance. However, in this situation Hepthalite Christians themselves approached the shah, and Aba simply consecrated a Hepthalite priest as bishop.


the Jafnids, the Naṣrid kings of al-Ḥīrah represented a dimorphic force, able to play a double role as leader of a tribal confederation and a courtier of the Sasanian shah.\(^58\)

Later Arabic sources stress the importance of Christianity as the defining feature of al-Ḥīrah’s settled population, the ʿĪbāḍ, when compared with the other members of the Lakhmīd confederation. Yet, for most of their history, the Naṣrid kings remained aloof from the ʿĪbāḍ’s attachment to Christianity. Greek and Syriac sources condemn them for pagan religious atrocities against the civilian population of their Roman opponents.\(^59\) It may be that this strident devotion to the deities such as al-ʿUzza strengthened their connection to the unsettled outer circle of the Lakhmīd confederation, as well as distancing them from the religion of the Romans. This situation altered with the public conversion to Nestorianism by the Naṣrid King al-Nuʿmān III in the early years of the seventh century. Al-Nuʿmān’s decision has sometimes been seen as a clumsy political move for a figure so closely linked to the Sasanian court, and a factor in his subsequent deposition by the shah Khusrau II.\(^60\) But this position ignores the major role taken by other Christians at the shah’s court and Khusrau’s readiness to participate in the ecclesiastical politics of the Church of the East and the miaphysites.\(^61\)

There are several different accounts of these events, which place the agency for the conversion at different points. One account in the Chronicle of Seert makes al-Nuʿmān the hero of the conversion story, comparing him to St Paul casting off the false belief of Judaism. This story credits the ʿĪbāḍi bishop of al-Ḥīrah, Simeon Jabara, for al-Nuʿmān’s conversion, and is written in strongly loyalist terms, praising al-Nuʿmān’s son Hasan for helping the shah during a civil war.\(^62\) A second story attributes al-Nuʿmān’s conversion to a dream in which he is promised wealth and power if he converts. Here al-Nuʿmān requests permission to convert from Khusrau, before allowing Simeon to baptize his household. However, al-Nuʿmān is later seduced by the miaphysites through demonic

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enchantment, and has to be converted anew by the bishop, and future *katholikos*, Sabrisho, who exorcizes the demon.\(^{63}\)

Both stories are keen to show off the preservation of good relations between the Naṣrids and the shah after the conversion. But while the first text does so by emphasizing Hasan’s support for the shah, the second has a much more deferential image of al-Nu‘mān. Similarly, the second text subverts the idea of al-Nu‘mān’s conversion by a Ḥīrahn, and gives the credit to the future *katholikos*. The tensions between the two stories make it clear that al-Nu‘mān’s Nestorian Christianity was unthreatening to the Sasanian state, but they give this Christianity different lineages. Where the first story sees al-Nu‘mān converted by the bishop of al-Ḥīrah and adopting the religion of the ‘ibād, the second places al-Ḥīrah firmly in the orbit of Ctesiphon, and sees his conversion as his adoption of a religion that has been endorsed by the state.

**Conclusion**

Christianity can sometimes be seen as a tool of the state. It was clearly presented in these terms by Roman authors in the fifth and sixth centuries and there was a real correlation between Christianity and pro-Roman sympathies. But the diversification of Christian confessions in the sixth century also left room for non-Roman involvement as patrons of Christianity. Arab phylarchs may have begun by building churches to signal their membership of a Roman elite to other members of that elite. But by the late sixth century, Arab phylarchs could use their Christian credentials to appeal to their own Arab clients, where patronage of churches and monasteries could preserve the memory of themselves and their dynasty.

Our narrative should therefore be a story of expanding agency, where phylarchs gradually took on a role once monopolized by emperors. But we should also be prepared to an even broader range of ‘non-state actors’ in our imagination of the process of conversion. First among these are

the missionaries and their hagiographers, who selected patrons who could sponsor religious adjudication or patronage after being rejected in the Roman world. In return, their Arab patrons might cease to be ‘barbarians’, unworthy of a political voice, and become ‘orthodox’, bastions of true belief set between ‘heretical’ or ‘pagan’ persecutors. Secondly, we should also remember that subordinate Christian Arab groups, of whom the ʿIbād of al-Ḥīrah are examples, might also be agents in the process of Christianization, and play a role in accelerating the conversion of their kings and communicating the event to their co-religionists.