

## INTRODUCTION

# Christianity in Late Antique Iraq and the Legend of Mar Qardagh

The Syriac Christian legend that lies at the heart of this book was composed during the final decades of the Sasanian Empire, which spanned the period 224–642. Its anonymous author was probably a contemporary of the late Sasanian ruler, Khusro II (590–628). The legend's hero, Mar (i.e., "Saint") Qardagh, was believed to have lived some two hundred and fifty years earlier, during the reign of Shapur II (309–379), who appointed Mar Qardagh to serve as the viceroy and margrave (*paṭāhšā* and *marzbān*) of the region extending from the frontier city of Nisibis to the Diyala River in central Iraq. 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. To adapt a phrase from Freya Stark, the story of Mar Qardagh enables one to "breathe" the climate of northern Iraq on the eve of the Islamic conquest.<sup>1</sup> Translated from Syriac into English here for the first time, the *History of Mar Qardagh* presents a hero of epic proportions, whose characteristics confound simple classification. During the several stages of his career, Qardagh hunts like a Persian king, argues like a Greek philosopher, and renounces his Zoroastrian family to live with monks high in the mountains west of Lake Urmiye. His heroism thus encompasses and combines cultural traditions that modern scholars typically study in isolation. Taking the Qardagh legend as its foundation, this book explores the articulation and convergence of these diverse traditions in the Christian culture of the late Sasanian Empire.

The district of Arbela, where the Qardagh legend originated, lies in what

1. F. Stark, *Letters*, vol. 8, *Traveller's Epilogue*, ed. C. Moorhead (Wilton, Salisbury, Wiltshire, England: Michael Russell Ltd., 1982), 45, where Stark draws a contrast between history that must be approached "from the outside" and literature that is "a sort of climate that one breathes."

is today the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq. The aerial photo in figure 1 shows the great tell at Arbela (modern Erbil), created by over four thousand years of continuous urban settlement. The tell stands in the middle of an extensive, elevated plain containing some of the best farmland in all of Iraq. Early European visitors often commented on the Arbela district's dependable rainfall and "well-tilled fields" of wheat.<sup>2</sup> From the early nineteenth century, European and British travelers passed through the region with increasing frequency, often interpreting its landscape through the lens of the Greco-Roman historians they had studied in school.<sup>3</sup> Many remarked on the fact that Alexander the Great had won his decisive victory against the Persians at Gaugamela, somewhere to the north of Arbela.<sup>4</sup> The next generation of travelers, inspired by the decipherment of cuneiform and Layard's excavations at Nimrud, knew Arbela as the "sacred city of Assyria," where the kings Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal received "assurances of victory" from the goddess Ishtar.<sup>5</sup> Yet these same travelers typically knew little about the Christian history of Arbela. Despite employing local Christian guides and interpreters, few travelers took a serious interest in the rich Christian heritage of northern Iraq. As one British historian observed in 1842, "Of the character of the Christians in that part of Asia, the little we know is not very favourable."<sup>6</sup>

European interest in the Christians of Iraq grew dramatically over the latter half of the nineteenth century, partly in response to news of massacres in the highlands northeast of Arbela. Already in the 1840s, several schol-

2. On the rain-fed fields of the Arbela plain, see the map in the *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* (hereafter *TAVO*) by J. Härle, *Middle East: Land Utilization*, TAVO A VIII 8 (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1992). For travelers' remarks, see, for example, C. Niebuhr, *Entdeckungen im Orient: Reise nach Arabien und anderen Ländern, 1761–1767* (Tübingen and Basel: Horst Erdmann Verlag für Internationalen Kulturaustausch, 1973), 161; and K. Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf: Sixteenth-Century Physician, Botanist, and Traveler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 132, for the quotation here.

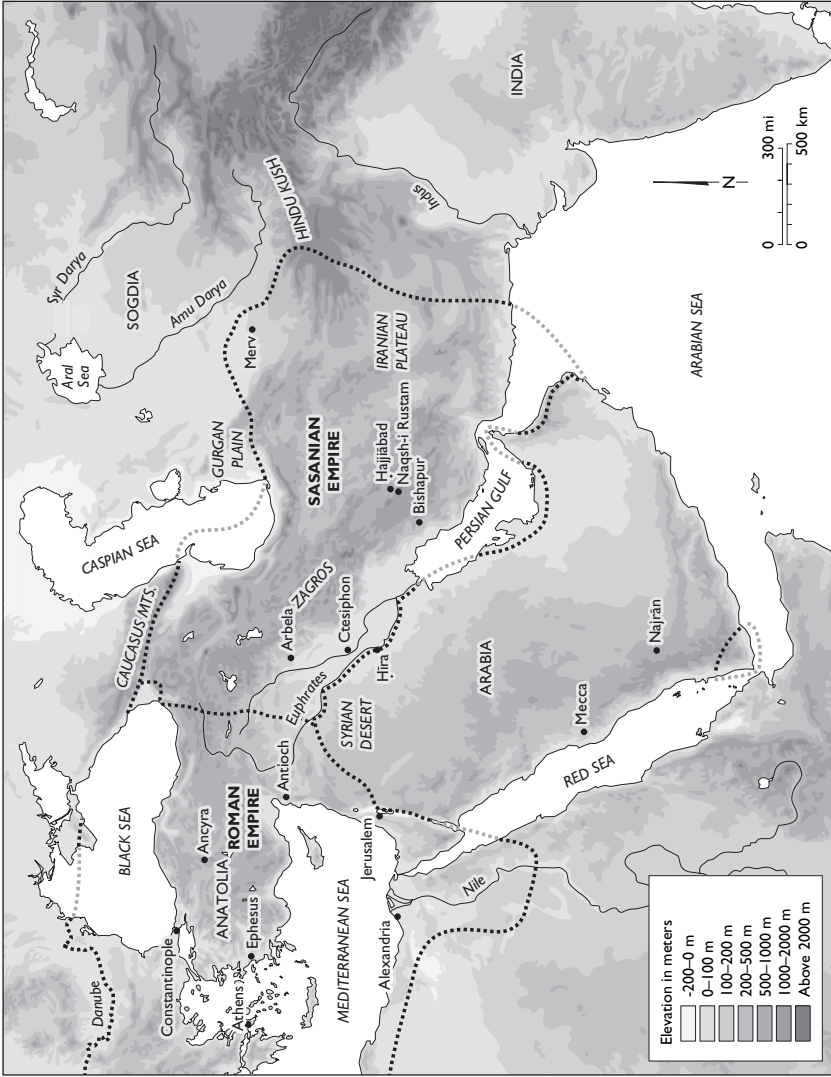
3. See, for example, J. Shiel, "Notes on a Journey from Tabríz, through Kurdistan, via Ván, Bitlis, Se'ert and Erbil, to Suleimányeh, in July and August, 1836," *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society* 8 (1838): 54 and 98, on the place-names used by Xenophon and Arrian.

4. For recent analysis of the battlefield's probable location ca. 65 km northwest of Arbela, see A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 1: 293–94 and his map on 295; also, with further bibliography, E. Badian, "Gaugamela," *Enc. Ir.* 10 (2000): 332–33.

5. E. B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise, with Historical Notices of the Kurdish Tribes and the Chaldeans of Kurdistan* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company Publishers, 1912), 104, 108, and esp. 110 on Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal's activities at Arbela. For the excitement generated by Austen Henry Layard's excavations at Nimrud, see M. T. Larson, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840–1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

6. J. Baillie Fraser, *Mesopotamia and Assyria from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd; London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1842), 322.





MAP 2. Major Provinces of the Church of the East, c. 600 C.E.

ars had begun to lay the foundation for serious inquiry into the region's Christian history. Building on eighteenth-century studies of the East-Syrian manuscripts in the Vatican, learned missionaries emphasized the ancient origins of the "Nestorian" Christian community.<sup>7</sup> Copies of Syriac manuscripts recovered from the churches and monasteries of northern Iraq and southeastern Anatolia gradually filtered into Europe, where they supplemented collections acquired from Egypt and Syria. Publications based on these East-Syrian manuscripts ca. 1880 and 1910 (see below) opened a bold new chapter in the history of Christianity in Asia. The manuscripts preserved dozens of previously unknown Syriac texts—a splendid variety of Christian theology and exegesis, poetry and historical prose, liturgy, philosophy, and, not least, stories of martyrs and holy men. These East-Syrian texts confirmed the breadth and strength of Christian settlement in the pre-Islamic Near East; the administrative hierarchy of the late Sasanian church extended across the whole of Iraq, the southern Caucasus, the Iranian plateau, and the shores of the Persian Gulf (see maps 1 and 2). A portion of this once great church survived in the highlands of northern Iraq and southeastern Anatolia until the upheavals of World War I. Known today as the Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, descendants of this ancient church can still be found, albeit in steadily decreasing numbers, in the cities and towns of modern Iraq. This book seeks to illuminate a small slice of this Christian tradition that once stretched across Asia. By probing the narrative of one saint's "heroic deeds," it attempts to reconstruct the distinctive Christian culture of late antique Iraq.

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### CHRISTIANITY IN LATE ANTIQUE IRAQ: THREE SCHOLARLY CONTEXTS

The cultural world of late antique Iraq stands at the intersection of three quite different fields of modern scholarship. To give readers some context, it may be useful to explain here this book's debt and intended contribution to each of these fields: Syriac Christianity, Sasanian-Zoroastrian studies, and the study of late antiquity.

7. Two of these early missionary accounts of northern Iraq remain notable for the depth of their historical and ethnographic research. See J. P. Fletcher, *Notes from Nineveh, and Travels in Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Syria* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850); and G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals with a Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842–1844 and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850*, 2 vols. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852). Both works were heavily indebted to the pioneering study of East-Syrian manuscripts in the Vatican by G. S. Assemani (ed. and trans.), *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, vol. 3, *De Syris Nestorianis* (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1728; repr., Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1975).

The East-Syrian martyr literature investigated in this book occupies a curious niche in the field of Syriac studies.<sup>8</sup> The first editions of the Qardagh legend published in 1890 were part of a flurry of scholarship during the period ca. 1885–1910, sparked by the arrival of new Syriac manuscripts in Europe.<sup>9</sup> But like many of the hagiographies published during this period, the Qardagh legend has attracted little subsequent attention beyond a small circle of specialists.<sup>10</sup> The resurgence of Syriac studies since the late 1980s has largely bypassed East-Syrian hagiography, focusing instead on the earliest phases of Syriac literature,<sup>11</sup> and on West-Syrian hagiographers such as John of Ephesus (†588).<sup>12</sup> East-Syrian literature has not been ignored, but

8. A dialect of Aramaic prevalent in the district of Edessa (Sanliurfa in southeastern Turkey), Syriac flourished as the primary literary and liturgical language of Christianity in large parts of the Middle East until the thirteenth century, and in some districts to the present. For general orientation in the field's history and bibliography, see S. Brock, "Syriac Studies in the Last Three Decades: Some Reflections," in *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992: University of Cambridge, Faculty of Divinity, 30 August–2 September 1992*, ed. Lavenant (Rome: PISO, 1994), 13–29; idem, "The Development of Syriac Studies," in *The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures*, ed. K. J. Cathcart (Dublin: University College, 1994), 94–109; and A. de Halleux, "Vingt ans d'étude critique des églises syriaques," in *The Christian East, Its Institutions and Its Thought: A Critical Reflection*, ed. R. Taft (Rome: PISO, 1996), 145–79.

9. J.-B. Abbeloos, "Acta Mar Kardaghi: Assyriae praefecti qui sub Sapore II martyr occubuit," *AB* 9 (1890): 5–105, with a Latin translation; and H. Feige, *Die Geschichte des Mär Abdisō' und seines Jüngers Mar Qardagh* (Kiel: C. F. Haesler, 1890), with a German translation. The editions were produced independently of one another. Other East-Syrian hagiographies published during this generation include the *Acts of Mar Mari* (1885), the *Acts of Mar Pethion* (1888), the *Acts of Mar Bassus* (1893), Thomas of Marga's *Book of Governors* (1893), Išō'dnah's *Book of Chastity* (1896), the *Acts of Išō'sabran* (1897), the *Lives of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar'Idta* (1902), and the hagiographical collections by Ho<sup>9</sup>mann (1880) and Bedjan (1890–96). For the period 1890–1910 as the "high watermark for Syriac studies in the United States," see J. T. Clemons, "Syriac Studies in the United States: 1783–1900," *ARAM* 5 (1993): 85.

10. For previous scholarship on the legend, see chapter 1 below.

11. Interest in the formative phase of Syriac literature (first century–fourth century) remains very strong, often accounting for the majority of papers at Syriac studies conferences. For recent work on the great Syriac poet and theologian Ephrem of Nisibis (306–373), see S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985; rev. ed., 1992); and S. Gri-th, *'Faith Adoring the Mystery': Reading the Bible with St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997). The intensity of scholarly research on Ephrem has yielded a variety of thematic studies that often illuminate later Syriac writers as well. For their contribution to understanding the Christian imagery of the Qardagh legend, see nn. 2, 3, 57, 108, 116, 135–36, 147, and 173 to the translation.

12. See esp. three books that contributed to my own awareness of the diversity of Syriac hagiography: S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1990); R. Doran, trans., *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 1992); and S. Brock and S. A. Harvey, trans., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987). The last of these books includes some coverage (63–99, 177–81) of East-Syrian texts.

the field still lacks monograph-length studies of even the most prolific East-Syrian writers, such as Babai the Great (†628) and the *catholikos* Iṣōʿyab III (†659).<sup>13</sup> The paucity of previous scholarship on the Qardagh legend thus reflects a general tendency to favor the earlier and more western streams of Syriac Christian literature. Many categories of East-Syrian literature await new editions, translations, and historical analysis. The large and diverse corpus of East-Syrian martyr literature, outlined in chapter 1, is particularly ripe for new investigation.

Sasanian and Zoroastrian studies form the book's second academic pillar. Scholars of the Iranian world have long recognized the value of Syriac Christian sources, and particularly the martyr literature, for Sasanian history.<sup>14</sup> Translating this recognition into practice, however, has been difficult. Research on the Sasanian Empire typically breaks down into a variety of sub-disciplines, reflecting the diversity of the empire's linguistic and religious communities.<sup>15</sup> This fragmentation, while understandable, tends to obscure the connections among the empire's diverse communities. Too often East-Syrian literature has been studied in isolation from the rest of Sasanian history.<sup>16</sup> In this book, I have tried to forge an interdisciplinary approach that fully integrates East-Syrian literature with other types of Sasanian sources: Zoroastrian and early Islamic literature, epigraphy, art history, and archaeology. While previous studies have taken significant steps in this direction,<sup>17</sup>

13. For recent work on these important writers, see S. Brock, *Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1960–1990)* (Kaslik, Lebanon: Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik, 1996), 37–38, 153. On the evolving canon of Syriac literature, see L. Von Rompay, "Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.1 (2000): 1–31.

14. In his pioneering synthesis on Sasanian history, the Danish Orientalist Arthur Christensen describes the Syriac martyr literature as "une source de haute importance, non seulement pour l'histoire des persécutions des chrétiens en Iran, mais aussi pour la civilisation de l'Iran sassanide en général" (*L'Iran sous les Sassanides* [Copenhagen: Levin and Muksgaard, 1936], 76–77). The Russian historian Nina Pigulevskaya was among the first to make extensive use of the Syriac sources for the study of Sasanian social history. See esp. her monograph *Les villes de l'état iranien aux époques parthe et sassanide: Contribution à l'histoire sociale de la Basse Antiquité* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1963).

15. M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) remains the best synthesis. Despite its title, the book includes long and substantial discussion of pre-Islamic Iraq. See pp. 169–235, 265–430, where Morony surveys the major ethnic and religious communities of late Sasanian and early Islamic Iraq.

16. As Morony (*Iraq*, 620) observes, modern scholarship on East-Syrian literature, while very extensive, "deals almost entirely with issues of church history and religious thought and life, with very little attention given to how these materials could be used for comparative religion, social and economic history, or wider issues in intellectual history."

17. See, for example, P. Gignoux, "Titres et fonctions religieuses sassanides d'après les sources syriaques hagiographiques," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 28 (1980): 191–203; and further work by Gignoux, Michael Morony, and Shaul Shaked cited throughout this book.

more remains to be done. Fortunately, recent scholarship has made it easier to navigate through the various subfields of Sasanian studies. Bosworth's annotated translation of al-Ṭabarī (†932) offers a reliable guide to Sasanian political history.<sup>18</sup> Albert de Jong and Shaul Shaked have produced important syntheses on Zoroastrianism.<sup>19</sup> The catalogues of two major exhibitions of Sasanian art provide a stunning visual introduction to the material culture of Sasanian elites.<sup>20</sup> Information on Sasanian archaeology remains more scattered, though here too the situation is improving.<sup>21</sup> For all of these categories of evidence, the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* now provides indispensable guidance.<sup>22</sup> These tools make Sasanian history a much more accessible field than it was even one generation ago.

Finally, as its title announces, this book belongs to the field of late antiquity. The “world of late antiquity” has become the subject of vigorous in-

18. C. E. Bosworth, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk)*, vol. 5, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999). Bosworth's notes (cited here as “Bosworth, *Sāsānids*”) provide a detailed commentary on numerous aspects of Sasanian political and social history, including thorny issues of chronology. As such, Bosworth's translation constitutes a worthy successor to Theodor Nöldeke's annotated translation of al-Ṭabarī, which essentially laid the foundation for the modern study of Sasanian history. See T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabari* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879; repr., Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1973); I. Shahīd, “Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*: An Evaluation,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 8 (1977): 117–22.

19. See esp. A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 5–63, a lucid introduction to the historiography of Zoroastrianism and current methodologies for its investigation. Despite its title, the book is by no means limited to the Greek and Latin sources. S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994), though more difficult, focuses explicitly on the Sasanian period.

20. P. O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire* (New York: The Asia Society, 1978); and the multi-author catalogue *Splendeur des Sassanides: L'empire perse entre Rome et la Chine [224–642]: [Exposition] 12 février au 25 avril 1993* (Brussels: Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, 1993). Older surveys of Sasanian art by K. Erdmann (1936–43), R. Ghirshman (1962), A. Godard (1962), and G. Herrmann (1977) have also been helpful.

21. For specific types of artifacts, the essays collected in *Splendeur des Sassanides* provide a good starting point. Reports on recent fieldwork appear in a wide range of regional journals. The launch in 2001 of a new bilingual journal, *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies*, printed in Tehran, should improve access to the results of current fieldwork in Iran. As discussed in chapter 5, the Sasanian archaeology of northern Iraq remains severely underdeveloped.

22. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshatar (London and Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1982–). Ten complete volumes (A–Gindaros) are currently in print, averaging over eight hundred pages in length. Coverage of pre-Islamic, especially Sasanian, topics is extensive. For a useful review of the first seven volumes, see T. Daryaei, “Sasanian Persia (ca. 224–651 C.E.),” *Iranian Studies* 31 (1998): 431–62. See also in the same volume (333–48, 417–30, 503–16, 661–81) the review essays on the entries for pre-Islamic archaeology (B. A. Litvinsky), history (P. Husyē), languages (W. W. Malandra), and religions (J. Choksy).

terdisciplinary study over the past thirty years.<sup>23</sup> In principle, the field has always included the Sasanian and early Islamic Near East, together with the Mediterranean and Europe. The new handbook *Late Antiquity Guide* assumes the inclusion of the whole of the Near East.<sup>24</sup> But in practice, for a variety of reasons, the field has often been reduced to the later Roman Empire and the post-Roman kingdoms of early medieval Europe. I have discussed elsewhere the detrimental effects of this truncation.<sup>25</sup> Modern political geography has exacerbated the marginalization of Sasanian studies, obscuring, for instance, the development of Christian and Jewish architecture in the late Sasanian Empire.<sup>26</sup> This study approaches the history of late Sasanian Iraq as an integral part of the late antique Near East. My use of the term “late antique Iraq” is thus deliberate, signaling the book’s interdisciplinary approach to Sasanian history.<sup>27</sup> In the words of one recent study, the Sasanian Empire was the other “Great Power” of the late antique world.<sup>28</sup> The chap-

23. P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Mohammad* (London: Thamesand Hudson, 1971) was foundational. For its impact, see now T. Hägg, ed., “SO Debate: *The World of Late Antiquity Revisited*,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997): 5–90, with essays by eleven prominent scholars in the field, including a valuable autobiographical essay by Brown (5–31).

24. G. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), x, which places the chronological horizons of late antiquity at 250–800 C.E.

25. J. Walker, “The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran,” *Ancient World* 33 (2002): 45–69, esp. 47–51, 67–68. Cf. the more restricted version of late antiquity assumed by, for example, P. Garnsey and C. Humphreys in *The Evolution of the Late Antique World* (Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2001), a fine survey, but one of many that largely ignores the world east of the Euphrates.

26. On the weakness of Christian archaeology in former Sasanian lands, see Walker, “Limits of Late Antiquity,” 54–56. Iran, Iraq, and most of the countries bordering the Persian Gulf remain totally closed to the type of Christian archaeology that has become well established in Jordan, Israel, Syria, and Turkey. Modern political geography also explains why we know virtually nothing about the archaeology of Babylonian Judaism. See Walker, “Limits of Late Antiquity,” 54–55; and I. Gafni, “Synagogues in Babylonia in the Talmudic Period,” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, ed. D. Unnan and P. V. M. Flesher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 223.

27. Scholars of Zoroastrianism and Sasanian history are also moving in this direction. See, for example, G. Gnoli, “L’Iran tardoantico e la regalità sassanide,” *Mediterraneo antico: Economie, società, culture* 1 (1998): 117, arguing for the extension of “il concetto storiografico di tarda antichità” to include the Iranian world. See also Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on Its Origin* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989), 162–63, for an earlier version of this suggestion. The “Sasanika project,” recently launched by Professor Touraj Daryaei, has identified greater integration of Sasanian history with the field of late antiquity as one of its chief goals. The project is slated to include a new series of conferences and publications on Sasanian history, art history, and archaeology.

28. J. Howard-Johnston, “The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 3, *States, Resources, and Armies*, ed. A. Cameron (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), 157–226, an excellent systematic comparison of the geography, political structures, and military resources of the Roman and Sasanian empires.

ters that follow will hopefully make plain the intellectual advantages of this framework.

Part I of this book presents an annotated translation of the *History of Mar Qardagh*. Although many of the legend's episodes are quoted or summarized in the chapters that form part II, the translation itself has a narrative charm and coherence that is best experienced directly before proceeding to the analysis presented in part II.

Part II consists of five chapters and an epilogue that employ the Qardagh legend as a foundation to explore the cultural history of Christianity in late antique Iraq. Chapter 1 sketches the historical and literary background of the legend. It opens with a geographic survey of the Church of the East as represented by the East-Syrian synod of 605. Readers unfamiliar with Sasanian geography may want to read this chapter with copies of maps 1 and 2 before them.<sup>29</sup> The synod of 605 also serves to illustrate the influential position of Christians in the late Sasanian Empire. Qardagh's hagiographer lived in an era when many Christians—not least the East-Syrian bishops—were prepared to declare their fealty to the “victorious and merciful King of kings,” Khusro II (590–628).

The *Acts* of the Sasanian martyrs, introduced in the second half of chapter 1, offer a much less sanguine vision of Christian-Sasanian relations. The prosperity of the late Sasanian church was only achieved after many generations of chronic persecution. The “Great Massacre” under Shapur II (309–379), two and a half centuries prior to Khusro II's reign, took a heavy toll on the Christian communities of Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran. Further, more restricted outbreaks of persecution occurred under Bahrām V (421–439), Yazdgird II (439–457), Khusro I (531–579), and even under Khusro II (590–628). Over time, stories about these “Persian martyrs” developed into a burgeoning corpus of East-Syrian martyr literature. The second half of chapter 1 briefly surveys previous scholarship on this martyr literature, with particular attention to the “Great Massacre” under Shapur II. Although modern study of this literature extends back to the mid-eighteenth century, much of the scholarship has been limited to issues of historicity and dating. This is especially true for the largely (or completely) fictive martyr narratives, such as the Qardagh legend. The definition of the Qardagh legend's provenance hinges on a cluster of approximate indicators discussed in the notes to the translation and the chapters that form

29. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no comparable survey in English introducing readers to the ecclesiastical geography of the Church of the East. The abundant bibliography in the notes to chapter 1 is thus designed as a resource for readers interested in the historical geography and archaeology of specific Sasanian provinces.

part II. In brief, these indicators suggest that the Qardagh legend originated in the region of Adiabene, near Arbela, during the late Sasanian period. An anonymous East-Syrian author gave the legend its definitive written form, the *History of Mar Qardagh*, during the early decades of the seventh century.

The next four chapters each begin with a scene from the legend of Mar Qardagh. The scenes each introduce a major theme of the Qardagh legend. These themes, in turn, introduce and embody various facets of the cultural world of late antique Iraq. In the court scenes at the beginning of the legend, young Qardagh displays his “mighty strength” before the Persian King of kings. Chapter 2 uses evidence from Persian literature and art—including the Middle Persian *Book of Ardashir* (ca. 600), the *Shāhnāma* of Firdowsi (†1018), and the late Sasanian cliff reliefs at Taq-i-Bustan—to illustrate the Sasanian narrative models behind the court scenes of the Qardagh legend. Previous scholarship, while noting the existence of these parallels, has largely overlooked their significance. The “heroic deeds” of Mar Qardagh represent an adroit recasting of the epic traditions of the Sasanian world. Few, if any, Syriac Christian texts betray a comparable fluency in the imagery and underlying ideals of Sasanian epic. Qardagh’s hagiographer artfully combines Sasanian epic motifs with scriptural models of “holy war” to portray his hero as a Sasanian Christian warrior. The chapter thus highlights a rarely considered component of Syrian Christian tradition.

Chapter 3 explores a more familiar and well-documented aspect of East-Syrian Christian tradition—namely, its engagement with Aristotelian philosophy. The Qardagh legend includes a long disputation scene between Qardagh (still, at this point of his story, a fervent Zoroastrian) and a Christian hermit named Abdišo.<sup>30</sup> The language of their debate bears a clear affinity to similar formal debates described in both Byzantine and Sasanian sources. Previous scholarship has not fully recognized the cosmopolitan scope of this tradition of disputation. In the era of Justinian (527–565) and Khusro Anūshirvān (540–579), Christians, Zoroastrians, and polytheists all participated in a tradition of formal debate grounded in the rules of Aristotelian logic. The content of the Qardagh legend’s debate scene is equally revealing. To refute the alleged eternity of the sun, moon, and stars, the hermit Abdišo employs arguments that can be traced to the insights of John Philoponus, the most distinguished Christian philosopher of sixth-century Alexandria. The hagiographer’s debt to Philoponus, while perhaps indirect, offers intriguing new evidence for the influence of Byzantine philo-

30. As explained in “Transliteration and Terminology” above, I have simplified the transliteration of the hermit’s name from ‘Abdišo’ (“the servant of Jesus”) to Abdišo. For the etymology and significance of the name, see the translation, §9, n. 27.

sophical models on the intellectual life of the late Sasanian Empire. The language of the Qardagh legend reflects the formation of a genuine philosophical *koine* shared between the rival empires of early Byzantium and Sasanian Iran.<sup>31</sup>

In a cluster of scenes near the end of the Qardagh legend, the future martyr rejects a series of supplicants who congregate outside his fortress and beg him to surrender and renounce his newly found Christian beliefs. These supplicants include the saint's wife, father-in-law, and other noble relatives. Qardagh's forthright rejection of his kith and kin brings dramatic closure to a narrative thread that runs throughout the legend: as Mar Qardagh discovers his new spiritual family defined by Christian fellowship, he must sever all of the traditional kinship ties that bind him to his "pagan" family. Chapter 4 explores the nuances and significance of this theme as it is developed in the Qardagh legend and across the larger corpus of Sasanian martyr literature. The depiction of family relations in this literature offers an enormous variety of narrative strategies, ranging from tales of Christian familial solidarity to stories of prolonged and violent conflict between martyrs and their non-Christian families. Charting these narrative patterns identifies the place of the Qardagh legend in the overall tradition of East-Syrian hagiography and underscores the harshness of the hagiographer's rhetoric of familial rejection. East-Syrian synodical and monastic legislation, examined in the final section of the chapter, suggests the disparity between this hagiographic rhetoric and actual social patterns among the Christians of late antique Iraq.

The final chapter examines the origins and evolution of Mar Qardagh's principal cult site, at a village named Melqi on the outskirts of Arbela. Neo-Assyrian cuneiform records (not previously linked to the Qardagh legend) indicate that the festival temple of the goddess Ishtar of Arbela once occupied this cult site. Unfortunately, there is not a shred of literary documentation for the cult site between ca. 600 B.C.E. and ca. 600 C.E., so the Zoroastrian phase of occupation described by the Qardagh legend remains unsubstantiated. According to the *History of Mar Qardagh*, Qardagh, while *marzbān* of northern Iraq, constructed a fortress on top of the "tell" at Melqi, and a Zoroastrian fire temple at its base. The saint's hagiographer also details, in his epilogue, the eventual construction of an entire ecclesiastical complex at Melqi. Later East-Syrian writers of the ninth to twelfth century confirm the longevity of this shrine, which came to be known as the "monastery" (*dayrā*) or "place" (*baytā*) of Mar Qardagh. Two writers, independent of one another, attest to the monastery's use by the metropolitan bishops of Arbela. The final demise of the shrine appears to have coincided

31. An earlier version of this argument appears in J. Walker, "Against the Eternity of the Stars: Disputation and Christian Philosophy in Late Sasanian Mesopotamia," in *La Persia e Bisanzio*, (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2004), 509–37.

with the upsurge of anti-Christian violence in the Arbela district during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

A brief epilogue considers the annual trading fair at Melqi, where Christians gathered during the final week of summer to buy, to sell, and to honor Mar Qardagh. The saint's hagiographer claims that the "*souk* at Melqi" was a direct outgrowth of the annual commemoration of Mar Qardagh on the site of his martyrdom. As we shall see, the opposite is more likely true: the cult of Mar Qardagh developed around the site of a pre-Christian festival. The story of Mar Qardagh, narrated during the annual festival at Melqi, explained and justified Christian veneration for a site once dedicated to Ishtar, the "lady of Arbela." Set into writing in the late Sasanian period by a skilled hagiographer, the legend of Mar Qardagh became part of the Syriac Christian literary tradition. This textual account ensured the survival of the Qardagh legend long after the saint's shrine at Melqi had been abandoned and forgotten.