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 (paštāhsā 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”

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-
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. 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.

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.

The East-Syrian martyr literature investigated in this book occupies a curious niche in the field of Syriac studies. 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. But like many of the hagiographies published during this period, the Qardagh legend has attracted little subsequent attention beyond a small circle of specialists. The resurgence of Syriac studies since the late 1980s has largely bypassed East-Syrian hagiography, focusing instead on the earliest phases of Syriac literature, and on West-Syrian hagiographers such as John of Ephesus (†588). East-Syrian literature has not been ignored, but


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. Grieth, 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.

the field still lacks monograph-length studies of even the most prolific East-Syrian writers, such as Babai the Great (†628) and the *catholikos* Isóyab III (†659). 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. 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. 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. 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,

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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 Munksgaard, 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., 1981).


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.”


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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-Ṭabarî (1932) offers a reliable guide to Sasanian political history.\(^\text{18}\) Albert de Jong and Shaul Shaked have produced important syntheses on Zoroastrianism.\(^\text{19}\) The catalogues of two major exhibitions of Sasanian art provide a stunning visual introduction to the material culture of Sasanian elites.\(^\text{20}\) Information on Sasanian archaeology remains more scattered, though here too the situation is improving.\(^\text{21}\) For all of these categories of evidence, the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* now provides indispensable guidance.\(^\text{22}\) 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-

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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.

terdisciplinary study over the past thirty years.\textsuperscript{23} In principle, the field has always included the Sasanian and early Islamic Near East, together with the Mediterranean and Europe. The new handbook \textit{Late Antiquity Guide} assumes the inclusion of the whole of the Near East.\textsuperscript{24} 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.\textsuperscript{25} 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.\textsuperscript{26} 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.\textsuperscript{27} In the words of one recent study, the Sasanian Empire was the other “Great Power” of the late antique world.\textsuperscript{28}

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

\textsuperscript{24} G. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, eds., \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{25} J. Walker, “The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran,” \textit{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 \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery}, ed. D. Unman and P. V. M. Flesher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 223.

\textsuperscript{27} Scholars of Zoroastrianism and Sasanian history are also moving in this direction. See, for example, G. Guoli, “L’Iran tardoantico e la regalità sasanide,” \textit{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 Guoli, \textit{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 Daryaee, 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.

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. 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 Bahram 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 Abdīšo. 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 Anšîrân (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 Abdīšo 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-

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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 Abdīšo. 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.31

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 Arbel. Neo-Assyrian cuneiform records (not previously linked to the Qardagh legend) indicate that the festival temple of the goddess Ishtar of Arbel 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 Arbel. The final demise of the shrine appears to have coincided

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.