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## CULTURAL CONTACTS BETWEEN THE SUPERPOWERS OF LATE ANTIQUITY: THE SYRIAC SCHOOL OF NISIBIS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF GREEK EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE TO THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

### Introduction

Any scholar of antiquity who reads that most famous of texts created within the late antique East Syriac School of Nisibis – its *Statutes*, or literally, the *Canons* – is struck by the similarity of its institutions<sup>1</sup> to those of a Graeco-Roman philosophical community. This initially surprising analogy, together with the grand scale of the school's educational project – providing students with intellectual skills ranging from basic literacy to Aristotelian logic and, finally, enabling them to interpret the Scriptures within the East Syriac exegetical tradition – has led many scholars to call this school the 'first university of Christianity', or even simply the 'first university'.<sup>2</sup> Although such seemingly anachronistic qualifications may not do justice to the School's actual character and wider significance, it remains true that we can demonstrate substantial parallels in a scholarly community's organisation and self-definition between the School of Nisibis and other educational centres that existed in the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean during the same period.

In modern scholarship, there is a long tradition devoted to this fascinating connection. Recently, in the concluding pages of his monograph on the School of Nisibis, Adam Becker suggested that one may consider the parallels between the Nisibis community and the late antique philosophical schools to be of a very general character, and cannot be attributed to any real contact or influence.<sup>3</sup> However, as this paper will attempt to demonstrate, there exists sufficient evidence to reconstruct at least some routes of communication through which Greek ideas would have reached late antique Mesopotamia and contributed to the development of the School's organisation and self-definition. Consequently, this paper will focus on the intellectual centres and intermediaries which may have transferred knowledge of how Greek philosophers and

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<sup>1</sup> In this text I understand an 'institution' as a small-scale social organization characterized by a relatively clear purpose, more or less formalised internal regulations, stability, and, finally, persistence over a longer period of time (at least a few generations).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, N.V. Pigulevskaâ, *Kul'tura Sirijcev v srednie veka*, Moscow 1979.

<sup>3</sup> A.H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Philadelphia 2006, pp. 207–209. Becker refers here to Pierre Hadot's understanding of the ancient philosophy.

rhetoricians taught and organised school life to communities of Syriac-speaking Christians in Persian Mesopotamia; it will, therefore, examine all the possible channels of cultural communication between the School of Nisibis and the late antique Roman East. It will be demonstrated that the journeys of single individuals – in particular the journey to Alexandria of Mar Aba, future *katholikos* of the Persian Christians – can provide a solid background by which the striking similarities between these, at first glance, distant educational environments may be explained. For this reason, Mar Aba's *Vita* constitutes the central focus of this paper, which also offers the first English translation of several selected passages, namely those describing Mar Aba's journey to 'Western' (which, in Mar Aba's case, meant East Roman) intellectual centres.

Of course, every modern reader of the School's internal regulations would realise that it was the monastic community which served as the primary model for the School's organisation. This is not surprising, since its founders lived in a world where monastic and ascetic communities were already well-established within the local churches. These communities provided a readily available model of how a small Christian community could function, and their influence may be recognised, in particular, in the early evidence of the School's life.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we know about several late antique monasteries which became centres of religious learning. The difference between the aims of the School of Nisibis and those of the monastic communities is that, in these latter institutions, learning was supplementary to the primary mission of attaining ascetic perfection while, at the School, the educational process and intellectual activities were at the very heart of communal life and – as will be demonstrated in this paper – became an increasingly conscious element of the School community's self-definition.

The case of the School of Nisibis is particularly useful for the study of intercultural intellectual contacts at the dawn of the Middle Ages, as there exists relatively reliable documentation on its internal structure and purpose originating from the School itself. The contact of the East Syriac scholarly milieu with Greek culture was – together with the simultaneous process by which Armenian Christian culture came into being – perhaps the first case of the reception of Greek philosophical traditions into a new cultural environment on such a grand scale; the only precedent is, perhaps, the 'integration' of the Romans within the Greek cultural world during the Republic. The School of Nisibis embraced the late antique Neoplatonist version of Aristotelian logic in both its educational curriculum and in the texts it produced, which took place in the context of a larger process of Syriac reception – both within and outside the Roman Empire – of Greek intellectual traditions, both pagan (though almost always in a Christianised

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<sup>4</sup> These similarities also invite a comparison of the School with the two well-known (albeit short-lived) Christian ascetic-intellectual communities, that is, of two great late antique theologians attempting to define a Christian version of the *otium*, or elite philosophical life: Augustine at Cassiciacum and Basil the Great (together with his friend Gregory of Nazianzus) at Annesoi. These were, however, completely different situations. In the case of Nisibis, there is no great member of the elite who would have had experience and knowledge of the ideal of the *otium*. In some respect, the creation of the School is similar to the beginnings of the monasticism in its lower- or middle-class social context. Moreover, the ideals of the traditional Graeco-Roman aristocracy were not accessible to the founders of the School both because of their social status and because of the fact that the Persian aristocracy's ethos was completely different. Cf. D.E. Trout, 'Augustine at Cassiciacum: *Otium honestum* and the social dimensions of conversion', *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (1988), pp. 132–146; J.A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography*, Crestwood 2001, pp. 94–95.

version) and Christian.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the School of Nisibis provides a much more promising subject for such a study than other more or less educational communities described in the ancient sources, which seem to have shared similarities with Greek philosophical communities.<sup>6</sup> Only in this case do we have the sources, however scarce, which allow us to reconstruct the mechanisms of the intercultural contacts and factors which played a role in these interactions.

Nevertheless, these sources are of a very fragmentary nature and, at first glance, appear only to shed light on isolated issues. They can, however, be assembled into a coherent argument thanks to the fact that they all describe various contexts in which the intercultural contacts between 'Rome' and 'Persia' took place. Another methodological problem faced by this paper is an imbalance of evidence between Alexandria (as well as other late antique Greek educational centres) and Nisibis, to the advantage of the latter. There is no documentation on school life in Alexandria similar to the evidence we have from Nisibis, which makes a comparison of both educational centres very difficult and potentially biased. There are, however, some traces of evidence which hint at the concrete inspirations that contributed to developments in Nisibis. Both of these source problems will, to some extent, determine the structure of this paper, which begins with an analysis of the self-definition of the School as visible in the evidence it produced, and proceeds to discuss various pieces of evidence which shed some light on the contacts between the Nisibis community and the world of the Graeco-Roman education. This method of analysing each issue independently one after another is meant to overcome the problems posed by this paper's source base.

## The development of the School's self-definition

Even though the School itself was founded in Nisibis shortly after 489<sup>7</sup>, the deep resemblance of the School's organisation and self-definition to the ideals shared

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<sup>5</sup> Becker, *Fear of God*, pp. 126–154; on Aristotle in Syriac, see H. Hugonnard-Roche (ed.), *La logique d'Aristote du grec au syriaque: études sur la transmission des textes de l'Organon et leur interprétation philosophique* [= *Textes et traditions* 9], Paris 2004; on the reception of Greek learning in Syriac in general, see S. Brock, 'From antagonism to assimilation: Syriac attitudes to Greek learning', [in:] N.G. Garsoïan, T.F. Mathews, R.W. Thomson (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Washington 1982, pp. 19–34; H. Hugonnard-Roche, 'Le mouvement des traditions syriaques: Arrière-plan historique et sociologique', [in:] P. Derron, R. Goulet, U. Rudolph, C. Riedweg (eds.) *Entre Orient et Occident: la philosophie et la science gréco-romaines dans le monde arabe* [= *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 57], Geneva 2011.

<sup>6</sup> There exist several studies of such parallels, almost always unable to provide evidence of actual contacts between the community in question and any Greek philosophical community, e.g.: J. Taylor, *Pythagoreans and Essenes. Structural Parallels*, Paris 2004; A. Izdebski, 'The School of Nisibis: an ancient religious community?', *Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia* 2 (2010), pp. 67–72; J.S. Kloppenborg and S.G. Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London 1996. In this context, it is also interesting to note the organizational (but not intellectual, i.e. relating to the content/type of learning) parallels between the East Syriac schools and the rabbinic academies in Mesopotamia in the sixth century and the early Islamic period – A.H. Becker, 'The comparative study of "scholasticism" in late antique Mesopotamia: rabbis and East Syrians', *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 34 (2010), pp. 91–113.

<sup>7</sup> This is not an uncontroversial date. Several older studies would have given an earlier date in this context (e.g. A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Subsidia* 26], Louvain 1965, pp. 33–47). However, Adam Becker's recent study of the history of the School presents a convincing argument for this later dating of the School's creation (*Fear of God*, pp. 70–75).

by the philosophical communities of the late antique Mediterranean<sup>8</sup> is only attested a century later, in texts dating from the later sixth century. Among the texts produced by the schoolmen from Nisibis, there are two narrative texts composed by Barhadbeshabba<sup>9</sup> – *The Ecclesiastical History* and *The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools*, in all probability a speech delivered to new students at the beginning of the school year – which provide the clearest expressions of the School's self-definition towards the end of the sixth century. These two texts portray the school as a community of students and teachers working together for the purpose of achieving Christian perfection through learning and virtuous life. The unity of learning and moral perfection is emphasised in both texts. Heads of the school are presented as 'adorned with all things, with true learning and perfect virtue in manner of life', which clearly recalls the Greek ideal of a well-rounded education.<sup>10</sup> This idea was also shared by late antique Christian philosophical circles in Alexandria, as can be seen for instance in the *Vita Severi* of Zacharias (a biography of a patriarch of Antioch who studied in Alexandria, written by his fellow student in the early sixth century).<sup>11</sup> The motif of learning requiring moral perfection (or at least proper conduct) reappears at the very end of the *Cause*, in the very final exhortation addressed to the school community: 'labour diligently, according to the aim of our learning, while we adjust our way of life to our didactic reading'.<sup>12</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that the author of the *Cause* included the pagan philosophical 'schools' into the chain of scholastic communities – starting with the angels, followed by Adam and other key biblical characters – which preceded the community of Nisibis; the pagan schools are discussed before the Christian schools, which began with 'Jesus the Master Teacher'. The few paragraphs on the pagan schools treat respectfully not only Plato and Aristotle, but also Epicurus, Democritus, Pythagoras and the natural philosophers, on the one hand presenting the elements of their doctrines perceived to be correct but, on the other, explaining to the reader (or rather the listener) the ways in which Greek philosophers were mistaken.<sup>13</sup> Their presence in this text is not surprising given the fact that throughout the fifth and, in particular, sixth centuries, a considerable corpus of Greek gnomologies (collections of sayings of famous philosophers) were translated into Syriac. Interestingly, these collections are usually contained in the same manuscripts (early medieval, thus later than the School of Nisibis) as Church Fathers; therefore, there can be no doubt that they already enjoyed considerable respect among Syriac Christians in Late Antiquity, before they gained great popularity in the medieval Arabic world.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On the organisation of the late antique philosophical schools, see two recent studies, E.J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* [= *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 41], Berkeley 2006; E. Szabat, 'Teachers in the Eastern Roman Empire. A historical study with a prosopography', [in:] T. Derda, T. Markiewicz and E. Wipszycka (eds.), *Alexandria: Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka and Late Antique Education* [= *Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement Series* 8], Warsaw 2007, pp. 177–345.

<sup>9</sup> In all probability, Barhadbeshabba 'Arbaya – see A.H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* [= *Translated Texts for Historians* 50], Liverpool 2008, pp. 11–16.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbula in the *Ecclesiastical History* (the quotation), see: Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, p. 57 (Nau's original edition: p. 598); Henana in the *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools*, see: Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, p. 155 (Scher's original edition: p. 390), see also note 74 on p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Zacharias, *Vita Severi*, M.-A. Kugener (ed.) [= *Patrologia Orientalis* II.1], p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, pp. 159–160 (Scher: p. 390).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 132–133 (Scher: pp. 363–366).

<sup>14</sup> S. Brock, 'Syriac translations of Greek popular philosophy', [in:] P. Bruns (ed.), *Von Athen nach Bagdad. Zur Rezeption griechischer Philosophie von der Spätantike bis zum Islam*, Bonn 2003, pp. 9–28; Brock, 'From antagonism to assimilation', p. 27.

However, given the fact that gnomologies contained primarily general moral advice focused on self-containment, it is hardly plausible that the pagan sages and their schools could serve as a real model for the Nisibean community.

While reading the literary sources associated with the School of Nisibis, one notices that the first clear expressions of a 'Greek' organisational self-definition appears in the late sixth century. This accords with the chronology of the subsequent parts of the *Canons of the School of Nisibis*, which is the only source shedding light on the School's self-image both at the end and at the very beginning of the sixth century.<sup>15</sup> The text of the *Canons*, as preserved in the manuscripts, consists of two subsequent collections of short regulations, two ratifications and a proem, composed across the entire century of the School's *floruit*. Some statements in the first collection may be interpreted as assuming the existence of an even earlier version; these would either date to the very first days or months of the School's existence (which seems probable), or perhaps even to regulations already agreed by students and teachers in fifth-century Edessa, where there existed a study circle of East Syriac Christians, headed by Narsai, later the first head of the School of Nisibis.<sup>16</sup> The text that we have was most probably assembled in 602, according to the date mentioned in the proem. However, the second collection of canons had been created more than a decade earlier, with the date of the promulgation given in the text as 590.

The regulations contained in the two collections are focused in radically different ways. The first – which is roughly a century earlier than the second one and reflects, therefore, the self-definition of the School at its very inception – is concerned with basic organisational matters. It sets forth the School's key offices, it regulates certain property issues and the daily round of prayers, and it imposes disciplinary measures against common offences committed by members of the community. The contents of the second collection are, of course, the result of the School's subsequent developments, in particular the growth of its infrastructure and possessions; it contains regulations for instance, on the functioning of a hospice (*xenodocheion*) which was built in the middle of the sixth century. However, what makes this collection different from the earlier one is primarily its concern with establishing a border between the school community and the city. This is visible even from the very first canons; the second canon obliges students to live in cells on school premises,<sup>17</sup> while the third forbids students to go into the city even on the pretext of helping their ill school-brothers.<sup>18</sup> It was also forbidden to seek company, eat meals or even participate in commemorations of the deceased in the city.<sup>19</sup> Even those brothers who were too weak to work and earn their living during breaks (i.e. during harvest time) were not allowed to go into the town in order to beg for alms.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the brothers had to be distinguishable 'on the streets of the city' by their appearance: 'they shall not shave entirely, also they shall not grow curls like

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<sup>15</sup> *Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, A. Vööbus (ed.) [= *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 12], Stockholm 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, pp. 90–93, where the author even tries to trace these oldest canons in the extant version.

<sup>17</sup> The first canon of the collection was composed when Henana was the head of the School (Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, p. 93). The cells must have been built roughly forty years earlier than the promulgation of this canon.

<sup>18</sup> Henana's canon 3 (pp. 93–94).

<sup>19</sup> Henana's canons 13 and 16 (pp. 97–99).

<sup>20</sup> Henana's canon 14 (p. 98).

the seculars' and they shall dress in a way which would be 'far from luxury'.<sup>21</sup> All these regulations, which effectively established the school as a separate community within the city, are summarised in the ninth canon: 'Of the brothers who live together, each of them shall not eat bread by himself, but their life shall be in common as their study'.<sup>22</sup> It is important to stress that these rules and the desire to create a distinctive identity applied not only to the students, but also to the teachers; according to one of the canons, longer stays in the city could disqualify a teacher.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the desire to bind schoolmen to a common life in the school was not aimed at transforming the school into a monastic community: should anyone wish to practice an ascetic life, he had to quit the school and join a monastery.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the later collection of the *Canons* puts much more emphasis on achieving perfection by living together and learning within a scholastic community. What is striking in this context is the appearance of a distinctive manner of life characteristic of the School – its presence in Barhadbeshabba's writings has already been discussed above. In the *Canons*, this idea is expressed through a variety of Syriac terms (some of them coming from Greek) all of which all have the same basic meaning: a specific way of life, directed towards a certain goal. Thus, the canons of Henana (the head of the School in the late sixth century) actually end with a reference to this idea: 'And he who turns away and neglects [the canons'] observance, is foreign to our community and the manner of life that is among us'.<sup>25</sup> Another important way of referring to this idea may be found in the sixteenth canon of the same collection, which encourages the brothers to 'live according to their covenant in the school community' (specifically, by 'enduring in their cells' rather than going to the city).<sup>26</sup> The notion of the covenant – which was a pivotal idea in Early Syriac Christianity<sup>27</sup> – symbolised one's special relationship with God associated with a specific, most often ascetic, manner of life. The idea that there was a scholastic mode of life specifically suited to the members of the Nisibean community appears also in the opening part of the proem to the *Canons* (composed twelve years later than the second collection). It refers to the 'manner of life' as something central,<sup>28</sup> and it also mentions the covenant established by the members of the school.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, this idea does not appear – in any of its lexical forms, including the notion of the covenant – in the earlier collection of the canons, composed at the time of the School's foundation in the late fifth-early sixth century. It appears rather to have been a later development, reflecting the growing self-definition of the community.

<sup>21</sup> Henana's canon 17 (pp. 99–100).

<sup>22</sup> Henana's canon 9 (p. 96).

<sup>23</sup> Henana's canon 7 (pp. 95–96).

<sup>24</sup> Henana's canon 4 (p. 94). It is important to bear in mind that in the East Syriac Church there was a very clear institutional divide between schools and monasteries, leading even to anti-school polemic on the part of the monks – Becker, *Fear of God*, pp. 169–203.

<sup>25</sup> Henana's canons, conclusion (p. 102).

<sup>26</sup> Henana's canon 16 (p. 99).

<sup>27</sup> A. Vööbus, 'The institution of the Benai Qeiama and Benat Qeiama in the ancient Syrian Church', *Church History* 30 (1961), pp. 19–27; A. Jaubert, 'Gottesbund: "Bund" in der syrische Kirche', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 933–996.

<sup>28</sup> Proem to the *Canons*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Proem to the *Canons*, p. 53.

## The Edessene educational landscape at the inception of the School

One might reasonably expect that there were at least two different moments at which the Greek model of education and scholarly community was received by the School of Nisibis. The first phase, which consisted in shaping the basic institutions of the future school on the model of Greek elite education in Late Antiquity, has already been dated by Adam Becker to the period of Narsai's activity in Edessa, before the foundation of the proper School in Nisibis, that is to the second half of the fifth century. According to two sermons written by Narsai – the later first head and founder of the School of Nisibis himself – as well as according to both Barhadbeshabba's texts, when asked to provide instruction for the community of Persian students in Edessa (i.e. East Syriac Christians coming from the Persian Empire), Narsai demanded that, apart from him, two other teachers should give instructions to the students: the first one should teach basic literacy, while the second should build on this and develop regular reading skills. Thus, Narsai became the teacher of biblical exegesis, the advanced skill which parallels rhetoric. Consequently, his position parallels that of the rhetorician within Graeco-Roman educational institutions.<sup>30</sup>

Although the evidence is meagre and fragmentary, there are reasons to believe that some form of Greek education was available in Edessa from an early date. It is not surprising, therefore, that a Greek-style curriculum would have already been introduced by Narsai in his student circle in Edessa, and subsequently recreated in Nisibis. The *Canons* treat the three-level hierarchy of teachers as something so obvious that there was no need to formally introduce it. Its early existence is also indirectly attested by a text written in Constantinople in the 540s referring to information obtained from a former student of the School who was active in the city in 527; this might suggest that he possessed a knowledge of the School structures as they existed in the 510s or early 520s).<sup>31</sup> Evidence concerning the educational history of Edessa comes mostly from two separate traditions. The first is associated with the writings and activity of a Christian philosopher living in Edessa in the second century, Bardaisan (probably AD 154–222). Although he wrote in Syriac – the extant fragments of his texts are, in fact, some of the oldest preserved examples of Syriac literature – he was certainly aware of contemporary Greek philosophical schools, such as Middle Platonism, and must have been able to read Greek proficiently. Moreover, his students translated some of his works into Greek and it is in these versions that they were read by Eusebius of Caesarea (in Palestine), the first church historian, who lived roughly a century after Bardaisan. In fact, if one accepts the results of a recent reassessment of the first Syriac philosopher's significance, which seems to have been comparable with the contemporary intellectual achievements of Origen and Clement of Alexandria,<sup>32</sup> then Edessa would count among

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<sup>30</sup> Becker, *Fear of God*, pp. 70–72 and 97–89.

<sup>31</sup> Junillus Africanus's *Instituta Regularia Divinae Regis*: '[...] the Syrian School in the city of Nisibis, where the Divine Law is taught in a disciplined and orderly fashion by public teachers in the same way that in a secular education grammar and rhetoric are taught in our cities', trans. by M. Maas, *Exegesis and Empire in the Early Byzantine Mediterranean: Junillus Africanus and the Instituta Regularia Divinae Legis*, Tübingen 2003, pp. 119–121; for the identification of Junillus's source, Paul the Persian, with the Paul the Persian debating with a Manichean Photinus in 527, see Maas's introduction on p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> I. Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation*, Piscataway 2009.

the most important Christian intellectual centres of the late second century, alongside Rome, Alexandria, or Antioch; of course, this does not mean it would count among the most important intellectual centres of the Roman world. However, given the lack of intermediary sources and, also, of evidence concerning the literary activity of Bardaisan's disciples, it is difficult to believe that there was a substantial institutional continuity in the Edessene educational landscape between the time of Bardaisan and that of Narsai, and one must not assume the continuous existence of a centre of advanced learning in either Greek or Syriac; the latter, indeed, is even less probable given that, until the fifth century, there were very few (if any) translations of Greek texts into Syriac and, furthermore it was not until the fourth century that the Syriac literary tradition began to develop.<sup>33</sup> However, even if one discounts the possibility of an advanced Christian philosophical circle in Edessa during the lifetime of Bardaisan, a standard Greek education must nonetheless have been available in Edessa during the second century; there must, at the very least, have been some teachers of Greek literature, and perhaps even of Greek rhetoric, otherwise the existence of a Greek philosopher with a group of disciples in the city would be highly implausible.

Two centuries after Bardaisan, the availability of a standard Greek education in Edessa is suggested in Armenian sources which describe the creation of the Armenian alphabet. The key source for these events, which took place at the beginning of the fifth century, is the *Life of Maštoc'*, creator of the Armenian alphabet, written by his pupil Koriwn in the 440s.<sup>34</sup> In search of a script suitable to represent the sounds of the Armenian language, Maštoc' travelled to Edessa where he was hoping to receive support from the Syriac Christian community.<sup>35</sup> However, it was in Samosata that the alphabet was finally created,<sup>36</sup> owing to the Greek school of a scribe called Ruphinus (*Hropanos* in Armenian). In the *Life of Maštoc'*, there is no mention of a proper Greek school in Edessa although, for its author, a Greek school seems to have been the type of institution that one would expect to find in a large city in Roman Syria.

At first glance, the other Armenian source which describes these events – the *History of Armenia* by Movsēs Xorenac'i – offers an even more detailed account; it attests the availability of advanced Greek philosophical education in Edessa, in the person of the sophist Plato ('a pagan rhetorician and keeper of the archive [of Edessa]') and his teacher Epiphanius.<sup>37</sup> However, the dating of this source to the late fifth century is

<sup>33</sup> This is suggested by J.W. Drijvers, 'The school of Edessa: Greek learning and local culture', [in:] J.W. Drijvers and A.A. MacDonald (eds.), *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East* [= *Brill's Studies in Intellectual History* 61], Leiden 1995, pp. 49–59; cf. Becker's arguments against this opinion, *Fear of God*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> G. Winkler, *Koriwns Biographie des Mesrop Maštoc': Übersetzung und Kommentar* [= *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 245], Rome 1994; for the dating of the text, see pp. 80–82. However, although the credibility of this source is relatively high due to its proximity to the events it describes, it is possible that there is some bias towards overemphasising the role of Syriac Christianity in the development of an Armenian Christian culture, since this text was written in the times when Syriac ecclesiastics had strong influence on Armenian church affairs, cf. G. Winkler, 'An obscure chapter in Armenian Church history (428–439)', *Revue des Études Armeniennes* 19 (1985), pp. 85–180.

<sup>35</sup> Koriwn, §§43–46.

<sup>36</sup> Koriwn §§46; 50–51.

<sup>37</sup> Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. R.W. Thomson [= *Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies* 4], Cambridge (Mass.) 1978: III 52.



controversial, and the text is full of literary amplifications.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, information about the presence of ‘sophists’ in fourth-century Edessa added by Movsēs to Koriwn’s account seems to be a later addition,<sup>39</sup> probably based on an eight-century version of Koriwn’s text (called ‘Koriwn II’), which mentions the name of Epiphanius as the master of Ruphinus; this text does not, however, present Epiphanius as a sophist, neither does it mention Plato.<sup>40</sup> Thus, if the Armenian tradition allows for any conclusions, it is possible to suggest that the Edessene educational landscape at the beginning of the fifth century was dominated by Syriac learning, consisting of basic literacy, plus a Christian religious education in Syriac;<sup>41</sup> the availability of elementary Greek education (literacy and basic literary skills) can only be speculated.

## The key intermediary: Mar Aba and his journey to Alexandria

Given that clear expressions of the School’s self-definition and organisation – expressions not dissimilar to those of the Greek philosophical schools – can be dated to the second half of the sixth century, we should expect to find evidence for important contacts between this community and the centres of Greek philosophical learning shortly before ca AD 550; it was during this time that the School experienced its first larger infrastructural developments under the leadership of Abraham of Beth Rabban.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, we have evidence of a remarkable journey to the ‘West’ undertaken by a schoolman from Nisibis, Mar Aba, the later *katholikos* of the Church of the East (540–552), who is also credited with introducing the study of Aristotelian logic into the School of Nisibis and, consequently, into the entire East Syriac Church.<sup>43</sup> Fortunately, we know a great deal of detail about his life from his biography, most probably written by a contemporary.<sup>44</sup> However, from the point of view of a student of intellectual history, the information in this text is far satisfactory. Despite the fact that Mar Aba did not die a martyr – the text begins with his early Zoroastrian education and his career in the Sassanian fiscal administration, ending with his death as a patriarch – his *vita* actually belongs to the genre of martyrological literature. In technical terms, the saint would be called a ‘confessor’, that is a Christian who suffered persecution due to his perseverance in believing in Christ, but was not actually put to death for it. Consequently, out of the

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<sup>38</sup> See R. Thomson’s introduction in Movsēs Xorenac’i, *History of the Armenians*, pp. 56–61.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. also R. Thomson’s commentary, Movsēs Xorenac’i, *History of the Armenians*, p. 320.

<sup>40</sup> On ‘Koriwn II’ see G. Winkler’s introduction: Winkler, *Koriwns Biographie des Mesrop Maštoc’*, pp. 72–74.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. also Koriwn §§133–36.

<sup>42</sup> Barhadbeshabba, *Ecclesiastical History* – Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, pp. 77–80 (Nau 622–624). On the accumulation of property by the Church of the East in the Sassanian period, see C.J. Villagomez and M.G. Morony, ‘Ecclesiastical wealth in the East Syrian Church from Late Antiquity to Early Islam’, [in:] G.J. Reinink, A.C. Klugkist and H.J.W. Drijvers (eds.), *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honor of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers*, Leuven 1999, pp. 303–315.

<sup>43</sup> Brock, ‘From antagonism to assimilation’, pp. 21–22, 26; Becker, *Fear of God*, pp. 127–29.

<sup>44</sup> The Syriac text: P. Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, des trois autres patriarches, d’un prêtre et de deux laïques, Nestorians*, Paris 1895, pp. 206–287; a German translation: O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer: mit einem Anhang: Ostsyrisches Mönchsleben*, München 1915, pp. 188–220; the English translation presented beneath – Adam Izdebski. For general introduction to the Persian martyr acts, see: C. Jullien, ‘Les Actes des martyrs perses: transmettre l’histoire’, *L’hagiographie syriacque* [= *Études Syriaques* 9], Paris 2012, pp. 127–140; S.P. Brock, *The History of the Holy Mar Main with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*, Piscataway 2008.

work's 41 chapters (68 pages in the modern edition), only 10 (a mere 18 pages) are focused on Mar Aba's life before he became the *katholikos*; the rest of the text describes his activities as patriarch, and is focused primarily on the persecution that Mar Aba suffered under the Zoroastrian magi and, to a certain extent, the Sassanian authorities.

Nevertheless, the text remains an important source of information about Mar Aba's life. It was most probably written by a contemporary who was a native of his patriarchal see, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and had no connection with the School of Nisibis, which does not feature as an important element in the *vita*.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of the text is to present an exceptional example of Christian endurance in the face of persecutions, and its creation is certainly related to the development of the cult of the saint patriarch-confessor (which is very well illustrated by the description of the funeral). Unfortunately, the author was not as interested in Mar Aba's intellectual trajectory, and instead wrote a very simplified literary rendering of his hero's life before he became the *katholikos*. As a result, the first chapters of the *Vita* are quite chaotic and – as opposed to the account of his pontificate – full of miraculous stories. Thus it is possible to assume that, although our author witnessed many of the events he described (at least the final months of Mar Aba's life), he was not a member of his immediate entourage.

It is now worth quoting *in extenso* the description of Mar Aba's journey to the West, and of the subsequent events, in order to better illustrate this problem.

And as soon as he set out and arrived in the city of Nisibis [after his conversion], he entered [p. 217] the holy school which was there. And he loved the contemplation of the Divine Scriptures more than his own life. And he learnt the Psalms in a few days. And he began the study of the Scriptures. This is how he engaged with a gentle man, Mar Ma'ni, the bishop of Arzon,<sup>46</sup> a man of God and a true teacher, who in his beautiful way of life was surpassing many. And at that time everyone was amazed at his eagerness and his intelligence which surpassed many who had been before him and also those active in the time of Mar Ma'ni, the bishop. He [Mar Aba] followed him and walked with him. And it is said that he watered the land of Arzon with teaching and all who were there gained a lot from him. And he turned back many heretics to the true faith. And afterwards he returned to Nisibis. And every day he was becoming better and was indeed growing in the interpretation [of the Scriptures] and spiritual contemplation. Then there occurred an opportunity to depart to the country of the Romans. Firstly, in order to visit and see the beautiful dwellings that are holy [i.e., the Holy Land] [218] and to obtain blessing through praying [there]. Secondly, because of a man called Sergius who shared the views of Arius (involved in impiety/paganism) – so that he [Mar Aba] would go and dispute with him and [thus] affirm the true faith.

<sup>45</sup> In his commentary on this *Vita*, P. Peeters observed several elements which would support such identification of its author. First, the description of the last months of the saint's life and of his funeral are as detailed as an eyewitness only would be able to give (p. 101). Second, the fact that the text does not mention the names of the royal medical physicians sent by the shah to Mar Aba may suggest that one of them was the patriarch's successor, Joseph, who was a physician to the royal court just before becoming the patriarch (552–567) according to the shah's order; every reader would have known who these doctors were (pp. 109–110). Third, the titles used to refer to Khosrau I are the same as the ones used in the synodal acts produced by the Church of the East during his reign, which could mean that the *Vita* was written before Khosrau's death in 579 (p. 88). P. Peeters, 'Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba, catholicos de l'Église perse (540–552)', [in:] *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati. 5. Storia ecclesiastica [= Studi e testi 125]*, Città del Vaticano 1946, pp. 69–112.

<sup>46</sup> According to Peeters, Mar Aba must have left the diocese of his teacher after he died, since he is not attested in any of the synodal acts composed during Mar Aba's pontificate ('Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba', p. 76).

And when he arrived to the city of Edessa, a brother called T'omā – who had been disciple since his youth – joined him. And thus throughout the many years he was with him, he [Mar Aba] surpassed many in the study under the guidance of this blessed one. After he covered [everything] and learnt a lot, to the extent that he was even instructed by him in the Greek language, he descended into the Egyptian desert. He illuminated many of those who were there through his teaching and his way of life. And he went to distant places, in great labours and travelling through difficult roads. And in Alexandria he explained the Divine Scriptures in Greek and he turned back many from among those who had [219] alien [pagan] thinking and he also rebuked those who engaged with oracles/magic. And he had overthrown the heresy by astonishing them with his beautiful way of life (everyone was admiring his voluntary poverty) and with his enlightening teaching. And from there he went to Athens. And he reprimanded the Athenians who had a very good opinion about themselves, as since the beginning they engaged with the alien [pagan] education. And he converted many to the knowledge which is true/sure through signs and miracles which were performed at his hands, also in Corinth. We are now presenting one of them, a double miracle.

[220] There was a woman, a head of a monastery, a holy convent of sisters. And she has been sick for an illness of intestines and diarrhoea for a long time. And she was close to being lost from this life. Then there was in this monastery a sister who was a heretic. And this one was haughty against the head of the monastery. And she aggravated her through her reviling. The head of the monastery, however, was a great and eminent woman. And when she heard about his [Mar Aba's] teaching and his way of life, she believed that if this blessed one sends here blessing from what he was eating, at once she would be healed. And she sent and besought him. And they were macerating chickpeas from which they were eating. And he sent from it [to her], because there was nothing else among them. And once the head of the monastery, who was close to death, consumed these chickpeas, she was healed. And at once ceased the diarrhoea of the stomach, despite the opposite action of chickpeas in such sicknesses. But the custom of the Divine Providence is [exactly] like these deeds – like when it made sweet the bitter water [221] through the bitter wood at the hand of Moses and through salt at the hands of Elisha the prophet. Thus also at the hands of this blessed one it healed [this time]. And the head of the monastery besought God through the prayers of the blessed one regarding the reviling of the woman who was in her monastery. And during the very night she was cured, the other one departed from this life, due to her reviling against God, as well as against the blessed one and against the fact that the head of the monastery was cured through his blessing.

And besides, [there were] some sophists [also: wise men] whose minds were alien [pagan]. As soon as they heard his teaching, they drew near to the knowledge which is sure and burned the alien books they had. And the rumour about that went out into the entire land of Achaia. And [everyone] confessed and praised God. And then the heretics who were there were stirred by his teaching with the help of which he was skilfully dismissing their stratagems and was denying their motives. And because of that they wanted to kill him. And God saved him from their hands. And he sat into a boat and went up to the royal city, Constantinople. [222] And there he taught the true faith for one year. And several people were offering him quite a lot of gold as well as garments of great value. And he did not consent to take from it, for he was eating from the work of his hands, obtaining enough through braiding baskets. And they were selling and were living, so that five breads with pale weeds sufficed for him and his disciple in the land of Cilicia for seven months. And what shall I say about these masters of the roads who abandoned their brigandage and returned to cities and villages, and repented on account of the evil they had done, and became peaceful and full of love for the other? For on one of the days when he was passing through a dreadful road towards Thebes, the land which was full of bandits, they met him and said to him: 'Take off [your clothes] and put [in front of you] everything you have!'. And he took off [everything]. And they saw that he had nothing but a book for teaching. And at once

the bandits started crying and fell to his feet and besought him to forgive them [223] that they had harassed him. And they demanded him [the following]: 'Take for yourself our gold and silver, as much as you want!'. And he was not persuaded by them. And they renounced their deeds and distributed what they possessed to the poor.

These and more than these was done by him in the West. Thus having heard about his teaching and the excellence of his conduct, also the emperor of the West desired to see him. And as soon as the blessed one learnt about that he departed and went to Antioch. And immediately he returned to Nisibis. And seeing the division between the ecclesiastical authorities he hastened to depart to the desert. And when the bishops of the diocese heard about that, they threatened him with excommunication, so that it would not be allowed that he would depart. And he remained in the teaching office for a long time. And he rejoiced in the spiritual study more than in all the goods of this world. And of the deeds [224] which happened through his hands, I am saying [just] one among many. There was one school-brother. And he was harshly tempted by the daemon. And this blessed one fastened and prayed for the brother saying: 'I have relied upon God that the bad spirit shall be quickly removed from him'. And it happened as he said. And this spirit departed from this brother after three days. And it did not approach him again. And all those who saw and heard confessed and glorified God.

And after all this he was chosen to the great office of the *katholikos* by the metropolitans and the bishops.

As one can see, this is not a straightforward account of Mar Aba's journey to the West. On the contrary, problems of interpretation arise from the very first question, namely the saint's motives for going to the Roman Empire. The Arian Sergius is an especially problematic figure: although many scholars identify him with Sergius of Resh'aina,<sup>47</sup> the great translator of Greek philosophical works into Syriac, it seems rather improbable that a relatively young student from the periphery of the Syriac world would be a suitable opponent in a theological dispute with a much older and much more famous scholar<sup>48</sup> – his appearance is, most probably, little more than literary fiction. Of course, Sergius was certainly not an Arian; however, this text is not the only East Syriac source which refers to West Syriac theologians – who were possessed of reasonably pronounced miaphysite views – as Arians. At the time this text was written, 'Arian' seems to have been a common name for a (detested) heterodox – regardless of the actual theological views of the detested person – in the East Syriac Church (at least outside of the School of Nisibis).<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is hard to believe that a meeting with Sergius of Resh'aina was actually Mar Aba's aim when he left Nisibis and moved to Edessa. This may even lead one to suppose that the hagiographer – who, in any event, seems to know very little of Mar Aba's journey – actually had to invent the background for his hero's great journey, and simply referred to motives which his audience in Seleucia in the 550s–560s would understand.<sup>50</sup> First of all, it is said that the saint wished to visit the Holy Land. In addition, according to the hagiographer, this reputable intellectual must certainly have had

<sup>47</sup> For instance, J. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide (224–632)*, Paris 1904, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> This is the opinion of P. Peeters, 'Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba', p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, Oxford 2013, chapter 5 ('Roman ecclesiastical history in the Sassanian world: reception, adaptation and reaction') – I am grateful to the author for sending me his draft.

<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Barhadbeshabba in his *Ecclesiastical history* seems to rely entirely on the Western sources when it comes to the description of the church events which took place in the Roman Empire. This would

some intellectual reasons for his travel, and a dispute with an heretical scholar, whose name was vaguely familiar to the hagiographer, could serve as such a reason. Moreover, it would appear that our author did not have at his disposal a single written account of Mar Aba's journey while composing the *vita*, as the travels are presented in a distorted order; a visit to the upper part of Egypt, the Thebaid, is mentioned only after the saint had left Alexandria and moved on to Athens. Thus, it seems highly probable that the author knew only the names of a few key places which his former patriarch had visited, and that he fleshed out this information with hagiographical *topoi* and general images of these remote places; the information on Athens, for example, seems to derive from the Acts of the Apostles. To conclude, there is not much one can infer from the hagiographer's account except that (1) during his journey, Mar Aba learnt Greek; (2) he visited the main intellectual centres of the sixth-century world: Alexandria, but perhaps also Athens and Constantinople; (3) after his journey, he returned to Nisibis and spent a few years as a teacher at the School.

If we had only this account of Mar Aba's journey, we could not be sure whether the saint actually contacted any of the leading intellectuals living in these three cities. However, there is another testimony of his journey, this one from the scholarly milieu of Alexandria. Kosmas Indicopleustes, the first Christian cosmographer, mentions Mar Aba as one of the sources of his information; in all probability, their meeting took place in Alexandria.<sup>51</sup> At the beginning of the second book of his *Christian topography*, Kosmas declares that he received religious instruction from a certain Patrikios, who had come from 'the country of the Chaldeans' accompanied by his disciple Thomas of Edessa. Moreover, this Patrikios is said to have later become the 'katholikos of the entire Persia'.<sup>52</sup> There is no doubt that Kosmas met Mar Aba and that 'Patrikios' is just the Greek translation of the traveller's name.

In the context of Kosmas's meetings and disputes with Mar Aba and his companion Thomas in Alexandria, it is not surprising that a very late Syriac source reports that Mar Aba had contacts with a certain John the Grammarian 'Tritheita',<sup>53</sup> who could be identified with the great Alexandrian philosopher John Philoponus.<sup>54</sup> These two independent sources should thus confirm that, at least in the case of one great East Roman intellectual centre, the East Syriac scholar was in close contact with the leading local philosophical circles. It is, therefore, more than probable that it was in Alexandria<sup>55</sup>

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further confirm the hypothesis that the East Syrians in general knew little about the Church and education context beyond the border. See Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>51</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustès, *Topographie chrétienne*, W. Wolska (ed.) [= *Sources chrétiennes* 141; 159; 197], Paris 1968; on the place of the meeting, see VIII 25. W. Wolska convincingly argues for Alexandria as the place of the meeting in W. Wolska, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustès: théologie et science au VI siècle*, Paris 1962, note 3 on p. 66.

<sup>52</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustès, *Topographie chrétienne* II 2.

<sup>53</sup> Gregorius Barhebraeus, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum* II 92.

<sup>54</sup> This identification was first proposed by H. Kihn in 1880; see Wolska, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustès*, p. 70. Another hint at Mar Aba's connection to John Philoponus could actually be the mentioning of Sergius in the *vita*. Sergius of Resh'aina certainly knew John Philoponus and could be associated with him. Perhaps, therefore, the strange mentioning of Sergius in the *vita* is another unclear reflection of Mar Aba's contacts with John Philoponus? See Wolska, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustès*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>55</sup> Certainly not in Athens, where the pagan philosophical school had a completely different character and was very exclusive.

where Mar Aba gained a first-hand acquaintance with details of the internal organisation and self-definition of a Greek philosophical school. Later, during his teaching activity in the School of Nisibis in the 530s, Mar Aba most probably transmitted his experience and knowledge of the Alexandrian philosophical schools, contributing decisively to the development of the School of Nisibis's specific self-definition, as visible in the texts written in the decades which followed his activity at the School.<sup>56</sup>

## Mar Aba's experience and the importance of the Egyptian examples in the East Syriac Christianity of the sixth century

In order to better understand this process of transmission, it is worth investigating what Mar Aba's educational experience in Alexandria might have been. As has already been mentioned in the introduction, sources about the Alexandrian 'schools' are much fewer and much more difficult to interpret than the exceptional collection of texts we have from the School of Nisibis. Although we are aware that, in the 520s, important organisational developments and discussions must have taken place within the pagan-Christian school milieu in Alexandria, we are left with so little evidence that any reconstruction of these events must remain hypothetical.<sup>57</sup> For a greater understanding of the situation in Alexandria at the time of Mar Aba's visit (i.e., the 520s), one must look back to the decade for which our source material is better, albeit still concentrated in just one text, Zachariah's *Life of Severus*, the miaphysite patriarch of Antioch in 512–518, who studied in Alexandria in the 480s. The part of this *vita* which describes the Alexandrian school life in this decade was probably written as early as the 490s, and is an attempt to discuss the relationship between pagan philosophical education and Christianity.<sup>58</sup>

While describing conflicts between Christian and pagan students, the text refers several times to the links between some of the Christian students and the Alexandrian *philoponoi* ('the arduous'). This was the most popular name for Christian religious confraternities which existed in many Egyptian cities, in particular in Alexandria. Their existence, in a sense, complemented the monastic movement by offering a path towards Christian perfection that did not involve becoming a monk, but which rather allowed one to remain within the structures of their previous socio-economic life and family ties. Consequently, the *philoponoi* were distinguished by 'humility of life' and chastity. Apart from forming one of the organised social groups within a local church (besides clergy and monks) and often offering precious support to a local bishop in conflicts with external powers, they also participated actively as a distinctive group in religious

<sup>56</sup> But certainly not through founding the School of Seleucia, as claimed by a much later source, the *Chronicle of Seert*, (ed.) A. Scher [= *Patrologia Orientalis* VII.2], Paris 1911, pp. 165–166. The saint spent too little time as a patriarch in the capital to found a school and he certainly was not there before becoming the *katholikos*. Cf. Peeters, 'Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba', pp. 85–86, 112; Becker, *Fear of God*, pp. 157–158.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance E. Watts's treatment of this decade – *City and School*, pp. 237–246.

<sup>58</sup> E. Watts, 'Winning the intracommunal dialogues: Zacharias Scholasticus' *Life of Severus*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), pp. 437–464.

services and even kept their own prayer meetings. It was, in fact, during the liturgy that this group most clearly manifested its identity and local importance.<sup>59</sup>

The *philoponoi* movement in Alexandria, while gathering people from most social strata of the city's society, seems to have had a scholastic student branch which attracted Christian intellectuals, particularly students; such a group is attested, in the *Life of Severus*, to have existed in 480s. However, it is unclear whether this group of student-*philoponoi* formed a separate, independent confraternity, which aimed at gathering most Christian students, or whether these were just individual Christian students involved in a larger organisation. Both options are conceivable.<sup>60</sup> We have examples of students who were clearly members of the Alexandrian *philoponoi*,<sup>61</sup> as well as students whose formal membership in the group is not explicitly reported, but who were known to everyone (in particular, to pagan students) for constantly attending prayers held by 'those who are called *philoponoi*' in Alexandrian churches.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the Alexandrian *philoponoi* undoubtedly supported the Christian students in any conflicts they may have had with their pagan colleagues.<sup>63</sup> Apart from this, the *Life of Severus* informs us about two persons from the scholarly milieu, a student of law (yet not a student in Alexandria, a newcomer) and a teacher of rhetoric (who is later said to have had an exceptionally good philosophical education) who joined one of the monasteries at the Enaton monastic complex near Alexandria. They were taught there the Christian 'philosophy' by Salomon, who at that time 'was the head of those who were doing philosophy at this monastery [i.e., at the Enaton]'.<sup>64</sup> Later, one encounters a phrase 'the monastery of Salomon',<sup>65</sup> which allows speculation that perhaps there was a separate monastery at the Enaton which attracted either monks with links to the Alexandrian scholastic milieu, or simply those who wanted to study the 'true philosophy'.<sup>66</sup>

It is precisely this monastery which offers the most important link between the situation in the 480s and in the 520s, when Mar Aba visited Alexandria. There is a considerable body of evidence from different sources suggesting that the Enaton remained a centre of advanced intellectual activity throughout the sixth century. For instance, Solomon's disciples are said to have formed their own schools there, which would take us into the 510s and 520s, the very time when Mar Aba would have visited Alexandria.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, throughout the century, this monastic centre also attracted monks of non-Egyptian origin, in particular Syrians; it was here, for instance, that a new

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<sup>59</sup> E. Wipszycka, 'Les confréries dans la vie religieuse de l'Égypte chrétienne', [in:] E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive* [= *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 52], Roma 1996, pp. 257–278 (the first version of this paper was published in 1970 in the *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology*).

<sup>60</sup> Wipszycka, 'Les confréries dans la vie religieuse de l'Égypte chrétienne', p. 266, in particular note 23 on the inaccuracies on pp. 1–51 of F.R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, ca 370–529*, vol. 2, Leiden 1994.

<sup>61</sup> Zacharias, *Vita Severi*, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 26 and 31–32.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15 and 27.

<sup>66</sup> This issue is addressed by Watts, *City and School*, pp. 213–219. His interpretation that there existed a separate confraternity of Christian students with direct links with the monastery at the Enaton remains very hypothetical.

<sup>67</sup> Zacharias, *Vita Severi*, p. 43.

translation of the New Testament and the Septuagint into Syriac was prepared in the early seventh century.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the *Life of Severus* allows us to make yet another link – apart from the presence of Syriac monk-intellectuals at the Enaton – between this monastery, the milieu of Christian students of Alexandria, and Mar Aba. The *Life* mentions a certain person called John who was also a student of Solomon and who later became famous for his knowledge of medicine and pagan philosophy, as well as for his efforts at promoting the ‘true’ (Christian) philosophy.<sup>69</sup> There are grounds to suppose that this John is the philosopher known later as John the Philoponus, since there is no other philosopher John who could have been known to Zachariah’s Alexandrian audience either in the 490s or 520s.<sup>70</sup> Thus, if Mar Aba indeed had contact with John the Grammarian whom scholars today identify as John the Philoponus, this would be another clue pointing at Mar Aba’s participation in Alexandria’s intellectual and Christian-student life during the 520s. He must, therefore, have had the opportunity to observe how Christian students of pagan philosophy tried to Christianise their educational experience by remaining close to the *philoponoi*, with their focus on communal prayer and moral perfection in lay life, as well as to the intellectual centres of the Enaton monasteries.

Thanks to the recent discoveries of the Polish-Egyptian excavations of the Kom el-Dikka area in modern Alexandria, we now know much more about the infrastructure behind Alexandrian education in the sixth century. In recent years, archaeologists have unearthed a large complex of (presently) twenty auditoria of various sizes – usually large enough to accommodate 20–30 people seated on rows of benches located one above another – which were built throughout the fifth and early sixth century in the centre of Alexandria. The didactic purpose of these buildings is clearly visible in the presence of centrally located platform-seats for the teachers and in the amphitheatrical arrangement.<sup>71</sup> The creation of such a large and concentrated space for learning within the late antique city can possibly be linked with the destruction of the Serapeion, the great temple of Serapis in 391, which had served as the pagan place of learning and studies. The new auditoria, which gradually expanded into the large complex we know from the excavations, would have been conceived as a religiously neutral place of learning in the midst of an urban community experiencing violent internal conflicts.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, Mar Aba must have also observed that the philosophical education in Alexandria resulted in the creation of special personal ties not only among the Christian students who joined the *philoponoi*, but also among those students and intellectuals who had nothing to do with any Christian confraternity. Living in close com-

<sup>68</sup> J. Gascou, ‘The Enaton’, [in:] A.S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, New York–Toronto 1991, pp. 954–958.

<sup>69</sup> Zacharias, *Vita Severi*, p. 43.

<sup>70</sup> He is first attested to be known with this nickname in 680 – Watts, *City and School*, p. 252 (note 103).

<sup>71</sup> G. Majcherek, ‘The late Roman auditoria of Alexandria: an archaeological overview’, [in:] T. Derda, T. Markiewicz and E. Wipszycka (eds.), *Alexandria: Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka and Late Antique Education* [= *Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement Series 8*], Warsaw 2007, pp. 11–50; G. Majcherek, ‘The Auditoria on Kom el-Dikka: a glimpse of late antique education in Alexandria’, *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology, Ann Arbor 2007* [= *American Studies in Papyrology*], Ann Arbor 2010, pp. 471–484.

<sup>72</sup> C. Haas, ‘Kom el-Dikka in context: the auditoria and the history of late antique Alexandria’, [in:] T. Derda, T. Markiewicz and E. Wipszycka (eds.), *Alexandria: Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka and Late Antique Education* [= *Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement Series 8*], Warsaw 2007, pp. 85–96.



munities with their masters, the most engaged students would have adopted a specific way of life, focusing on moral perfection obtained gradually in the course of advanced philosophical studies, most often revolving around the texts of ancient masters credited with quasi-sacred authority; this phenomenon is clearly attested in late antique Alexandria.<sup>73</sup> Thus, Mar Aba must have experienced and observed in Alexandria a very wide variety of forms of scholastic life, in which intellectual activities were closely linked to moral perfection in a communal effort. This was the experience which – along with the Neoplatonist version of the Aristotelian philosophy – he brought back to Nisibis in the early 530s.

Apart from Mar Aba, there is no other East Syriac intellectual known to have had direct contact with the philosophical schools of Alexandria, or any other East Roman city, by the end of the sixth century. However, we know of other journeys to the Roman Empire undertaken by East Syriac churchmen. In 527, a ‘Paul the Persian’ is reported to have confronted Photinus, a Manichean, in a debate held in Constantinople.<sup>74</sup> In the 540s, a Constantinople-based author, Junillus Africanus, names ‘Paul the Persian’ as the source of inspiration for his introduction to scriptural exegesis; Junillus says he has seen this theologian himself.<sup>75</sup> In 531, 547, or 561 (most probably 547)<sup>76</sup> a group of East Syriac Churchmen – among them a ‘Paul, bishop of Nisibis’ (d. 571)<sup>77</sup> – visited Constantinople to discuss theological matters with Justinian.<sup>78</sup> The question of whether these various ‘Pauls from Persia’ are all in fact the same person is still a subject of scholarly debate. Nevertheless, none of them are reported to have gone anywhere other than Constantinople, which makes their journeys completely different from Mar Aba’s. It is, therefore, not surprising that the intellectual’s hagiographer did not fully understand his hero’s aims, and that this literate member of the capital’s clergy was forced, some three decades after Mar Aba’s original journey, to fall back on clichés, *topoi* and miracles devoid of any local flavour when describing the great intellectual centres of the Roman Empire.<sup>79</sup>

There is one figure in the history of sixth-century East Syriac Christianity who, in some ways, offers a parallel to Mar Aba. Abraham of Kashkar, the great reformer of East Syriac monasticism, travelled to Egypt in order to learn there the rules of ‘true’ monasticism.<sup>80</sup> But whereas the future *katholikos* returned to his homeland with ‘Western’ ideas

<sup>73</sup> P. Hoffmann, ‘Les bibliothèques philosophiques d’après le témoignage de la littérature néoplatonicienne des Ve et Vie siècles’, [in:] C. d’Ancona (ed.), *The Libraries of the Neoplatonists* [= *Philosophia antiqua* 107], Leiden 2007, pp. 135–153; E. Watts, ‘Doctrine, anecdote, and action: Reconsidering the social history of the last Platonists (c. 430–c. 550 C.E.)’, *Classical Philology* 106 (2011), pp. 226–244.

<sup>74</sup> Its records are edited in *Patrologia Graeca* 88.

<sup>75</sup> Junillus Africanus, *Instituta Regularia Divinae Legis*, [in:] Maas, *Exegesis and Empire*, p. 468.

<sup>76</sup> Marek Jankowiak, a draft chapter of the forthcoming monograph on Monotheletism.

<sup>77</sup> A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Berlin 1968 (Bonn 1922), pp. 120–121.

<sup>78</sup> *Chronicle of Seert*, pp. 187–188.

<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, it was approximately at the time the hagiographer was probably writing that the *topos* of a journey to Egypt, i.e. to the roots of monasticism, started to develop in the East Syriac literature. Although it later gained great popularity in the monastic hagiographical literature, it remained very poor in any real detail. F. Jullien, ‘Types et topiques de l’Égypte: réinterpréter les modèles aux VI<sup>e</sup>–VII<sup>e</sup> siècles’, [in:] F. Jullien and M.-J. Pierre (eds.), *Monachismes d’Orient. Images, échanges, influences* [= *Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses* 148], Leuven 2011, pp. 151–164.

<sup>80</sup> S. Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità: la rinascita del monachesimo siro-orientale*, Magnano 2005, pp. 32–36; M. Tamcke, ‘Abraham of Kashkar’s pilgrimage’, *ARAM* 18–19 (2007), pp. 477–482; F. Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse: la réforme d’Abraham le Grand, père des moines de l’Orient*, Louvain 2008, pp. 71–78.

about school life which (probably) reshaped the organisation and (certainly) changed the self-definition of the Nisibean community, Abraham brought with him 'Western' ideas about the organisation of monastic life. In the latter case, the original ideas were more Egyptian than Greek, although still Western; of course, in the sixth century such ideas could be regarded as being common to the entire Eastern Roman world.<sup>81</sup> The importance and later consequences of these two journeys to the West for the entire East Syriac Christian community would suggest that, rather than conceiving of such travels as commonplace and widely available to elite members of the Church of the East, leading to a continuous traffic between Mesopotamia and the Roman world,<sup>82</sup> we should think of them as exceptional undertakings, possible for only a few highly-motivated individuals. Such a journey certainly would not have been an obvious course for the average East Syriac school- or churchman.<sup>83</sup> Finally, it is worth remembering that the fourth canon of Narsai's collection (from the first years of the School's existence) forbid the students/members of the School to go the Roman Empire ('for the cause of instruction, nor because of a pretence of prayer, also not in order to buy or to sell') without the consent of the heads of the community. Of course, this canon does not suggest anything about the frequency of such travels; it does, however, suggest that they were a serious matter.

The importance of these isolated, exceptional journeys of East Syriac Christians to the Roman Empire is corroborated by the fact that, until the peace treaty of 561, the Roman-Persian frontier seems to have been a real border which was not easy to cross; contact between these two worlds would appear to have been quite limited.<sup>84</sup> Almost all of the known journeys undertaken by educated men between the two empires are diplomatic missions, and the travellers were either skilled rhetoricians or theologians.<sup>85</sup> In light of these considerations, it seems improbable that the famous journey of the Athenian philosophers had any importance for the development of the School. It took place in the early 530s, when there was not yet any substantial contact between the School of Nisibis and the Sassanian capital, where the philosophers stayed for a few

<sup>81</sup> Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità*; Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse*.

<sup>82</sup> As argued by J. Walker in: 'The limits of Late Antiquity: philosophy between Rome and Iran', *Ancient World* 33 (2001), pp. 56–67; *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2006, pp. 164–204.

<sup>83</sup> One more person about whom we know – but only in a very general way – that he received training in the West is Joseph, the successor of Mar Aba as *katholikos*, who is said to have spent a longer period of his life in the Roman Empire where he learnt medicine (*Chronicle of Seert*, p. 176). It is important to remember that if it was practical medicine which he learnt – and not the theoretical-philosophical medicine of the Alexandrian schools – it was something completely different to real philosophical-theological education and in all probability did not involve bringing back any experience of 'higher education'.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *Codex Justinianus* IV 63.4.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. U. Hartmann, 'Geist im Exil: Römische Philosophen am Hof der Sasaniden', [in:] M. Schuol, U. Hartmann and A. Luther (eds.), *Grenzüberschreitungen: Formen des Kontakts zwischen Orient und Okzident im Altertum*, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 123–160. An early example of such philosophers-diplomats comes from the fourth century, when both a philosopher (Eustathios, a disciple of Iamblichus) and a rhetorician (Spektatos, Libanios's cousin known also from his letters) accompanied the comes Prosper on his mission to Shapur II (Ammianus Marcellinus XVII 5,15; I am grateful to Prof. Paweł Janiszewski for informing me about this). The presence of such well-educated people was necessary in order to reject skillfully the Persian claims to the Roman territory based on the historical arguments derived from Greek historiography of the first (Achaemenid) Persian empire.

months.<sup>86</sup> Although the question of which route the philosophers took when they returned from Persia is not easily answered (none of various hypotheses seems to prevail),<sup>87</sup> no scholar has ever suggested – and there certainly is no ground for such a suggestion – that they stayed for any period of time in Nisibis or had any contacts with the East Syriac schoolmen.

## Conclusions

This detailed survey of different sources from throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and Persia allows us to draw some important conclusions. It is clear that the developments which took place at the School of Nisibis during the hundred years following its foundation conform with the scattered pieces of information we have about the educational world of the Eastern Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. The idea of organising the educational process in the School on the model of Graeco-Roman education – which had already been put into action in Edessa – is in keeping with the fact that some intermediate classical education must have been available in the city, and certainly the structure of the classical *curriculum* was known to all those who had experienced any contact with the Greek culture of late antique Syria. On the other hand, it is not surprising that the later, and more complex, self-definition of the School as a Christian scholastic community working towards the intellectual and moral perfection of its members, is not attested in the early sixth century. An advanced Greek rhetorical and philosophical education would, in all probability, have been unavailable in late fifth-century Edessa, and the Greek philosophical texts available to a Syriac reader at this time would certainly have not contained the ideas which later formed the core of the self-definition of the School of Nisibis.

However fragmentary the evidence at our disposal may be, we can still reconstruct important elements of Mar Aba's intellectual experience of the 'West' in the 520s. There can be no doubt he had contact with the Alexandrian scholastic milieu. First of all, it seems he had the opportunity to observe how Christian students at Alexandria reconciled their training in pagan philosophy with their Christian religious identity. In addition to joining the city's Christian confraternities and, in particular, participating in their prayers, they also had frequent contacts with the Enaton monastery which put a special emphasis on developing Christian learning, to the extent of receiving part of their intellectual-spiritual formation from its monks. Mar Aba could also observe the infrastructure which the Alexandrian teachers of philosophy, medicine and rhetoric had at their disposal, as well as the practical philosophical life shared among some of the teachers and students in small communities. It is very probable that Mar

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<sup>86</sup> The story is related by a sixth-century historian Agathias (II 28–30). The literature on this subject is huge and several important issues are bound together in the research on various aspects of this journey. See: A. Cameron, 'The last days of the Academy at Athens', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 195 (1969), pp. 7–29; R. Thiel, *Simplikios und das Ende der neuplatonischen Schule in Athen* [= *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* 8], Stuttgart 1999; C. Luna, '[A review of] *Simplikios und das Ende der neuplatonischen Schule in Athen* by R. Thiel', *Mnemosyne* [= *Fourth Series*], 54 (2001), pp. 482–504; Walker, 'The limits of Late Antiquity', pp. 56–67.

<sup>87</sup> E. Watts, 'Where to live the philosophical life in the sixth century: Damascius, Simplicius, and the return from Persia', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 45 (2005), pp. 285–315.

Aba's Alexandrian experience initiated, precipitated or simply directed the process of transforming the School of Nisibis into a substantially different institution. Both its infrastructural development and, even more, its emphasis on a specific scholarly way of life leading to the Christian perfection occurred after Mar Aba's return, and has clear parallels to the Alexandrian schools of the sixth century as far as we know them.

It follows, therefore, that it was a single individual who made possible the process of communication (or rather, of transmission, since it was unidirectional) without which the School of Nisibis would not have developed into a complex academic-spiritual institution. The example of Mar Aba demonstrates very clearly how intercultural contacts on an advanced intellectual level depend on the writings and activities of individuals who undertake the practical and mental effort of moving between different cultures. What is more, it shows that the common religion, Christianity, and the desire to excel in its philosophical understanding, were the key factors underpinning intercultural contacts between the societies that existed in Rome and Persia, the two great superpowers of Late Antiquity. Without the Eastern Syriac Christians' interest in improving their exegetical skills with the help of Aristotelian logic and other intellectual tools of sixth-century Alexandrian philosophy, Greek texts in Syriac translations would have not been studied in Mesopotamia, and no community in the Persian realm would have been inspired by the various late antique versions of the Greek *vita philosophica*.