

**‘From Beit Abhe to Angamali:
Connections, Functions and Roles of the Church of the East’s
Monasteries in Ninth Century Christian-Muslim Relations’**

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ABSTRACT

An important yet often neglected and largely unknown story in Christian-Muslim relations is the connections, functions and roles of Church of the East monasteries in the early Abbasid period of the ninth century. These monasteries had already existed in pre-Islam Arabia and were written about by Muslims in the following centuries. The thesis argues that monastic mission activities took place in the early and middle ninth century under Muslim rule with a similarity to prior centuries. It also argues that these activities focused on the Muslim context around them in Mesopotamia, differing from other scholarly work on the subject. One of these works is by William G Young, who describes his perception of the lack of witness to Muslims as a ‘puzzle’ that still needs more evidence. Contributing four more pieces to the ‘puzzle’ in this thesis, a more nuanced and comprehensive picture emerges.

An original contribution of the thesis is in its investigation from primary sources of both faith perspectives whether mission activities were able to be sustained both in Mesopotamia and to the east in the early Abbasid context. What this mission may have meant and involved for both the Church of the East and Muslims will also be explored from these sources. Occurring both in Christian and Muslim imaginations as well as in reality, these encounters centred in the monasteries were written about in both Christian and Muslim sources providing resources for sustenance of Church activities in the early Abbasid period.

The thesis also investigates the importance of monasteries like Beit Abhe and the leadership of Patriarch Timothy for those activities, including the nature of an expansion east to places like Angamali in Malabar as well as China. The interaction between the involvement in Mesopotamia and to the east will be examined more closely than in other studies. Involvement to the east will be reflected on in how that affected the ‘image’ of the Church in its homeland and relationship with the Abbasids as well.

Whether these monastic activities were sustained in the early ninth century is important because it offers the story of a period when the Church in Asia lived without political power yet had a history of previous involvement in witness. A similar context is still relevant in several ‘contact zones’ of the world today, where Christians struggle to understand what mission means in their context of living as minorities under Muslim rule and at times are

facing existential issues of survival. Through this examination of the sources a further way of engagement is reflected on based in the nature of mission while living in difficult environments. The role of a Church subject to Muslim rule yet engaged in mission and learning activities within and beyond the regions of that rule provides a different historical paradigm than usually envisioned.

The Church of the East monastery in its presence and encounter is analyzed in this thesis as a blend of a 'contact zone' and 'conflict zone' in Christian-Muslim relations of the early ninth century. Mission in this thesis is defined in these two dimensions of presence and encounter for a purpose of witness to the Christian faith, particularly from a monastic framework. Training for mission of the monks will be explored as part of the dimension of presence, focused in the monastic context.

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Middlesex

March 2014

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.



Signed

Date ...5 March, 2014.....

STATEMENT ONE

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote.

Other sources are acknowledged by midnotes or footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.



Signed

Date5 March, 2014.....

STATEMENT TWO

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Date5 March, 2014.....

**DEDICATED
TO
THE IMPERISHABLE MEMORY
OF THE
INNUMERABLE COMPANY OF MARTYRS
OF THE CHURCH OF THE EAST
WHO
LIVED AND DIED
IN THE
LIGHT OF ETERNITY**

The above dedication appears at the beginning of John Stewart's 1928 book on the Church of the East, written and published in South India. In including it here, I would like to add to it by honouring the memory of the martyrs of the Church of the East who have died particularly in Iraq in the last ten years.

We honour the past of the Church of the East and look forward to a continued future in faith.

Acknowledgements

This research and thesis writing process has been a multi-year journey, at times like a marathon with its own twists and turns and detours. At other times it was like climbing a mountain, with mists covering the summit, or a false summit giving false hope that the end of the climb was closer than it really was.

But whatever the metaphor and the challenges involved, I have thoroughly enjoyed the process and learning, especially with hindsight! What has enabled me to continue has been the strong support of several people.

For my supervisors, the support and assistance rendered has been received with deep gratefulness. Thanks to Prof. David Thomas and Dr. David Singh. They are both extremely busy, but gave me all the time I needed and were always willing for more. I'm also grateful for the faculty of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and the grace-filled community of scholars there. Being a part of this global family, even though it was in tantalizingly short segments of actual residence each year, was such a privilege.

Librarians have been of course crucial to this effort. I've been especially blessed with three of the best: Ralph Bates at the Oxford Centre, who not only guided me to sources but was unflinching in his interest in my topic. He attended all of my research seminars and had very helpful comments each time.

At the Bodleian Library, for the first few years of my research an entertaining and accomplished librarian, Miss Vera Ryhajlo, was always helpful. Sadly, in my last year of research she died of cancer, and many will miss her life of joy.

Thanks also to Adam Jackman, my local librarian at the Pierce County Library in Washington State, who quickly and efficiently located books for me from all over the USA. His constant help has been vital to this research.

And for my family: I am deeply grateful for the unflinching support of my wife, Elisabeth, and my two daughters, Carin and Annalisa. All three of them lived with their husband and father spending huge amounts of time immersed in the ninth century, and for the girls that was most of their teenage years. Thanks for everything!!!

Finally, in the last two years of this project several people important to me and this research have died, including Vera as mentioned above. Another was the late Brenda Hoddinott of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, who throughout my studies was a wonderful encouragement. Also in the past two years, both my parents have passed away, and I hope that somehow they were aware of these last steps in the journey.

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Language Abbreviations

Ar	Arabic
Fr	French
Grc	Greek
Lat	Latin
Ma	Malayalam
Syr	Syriac

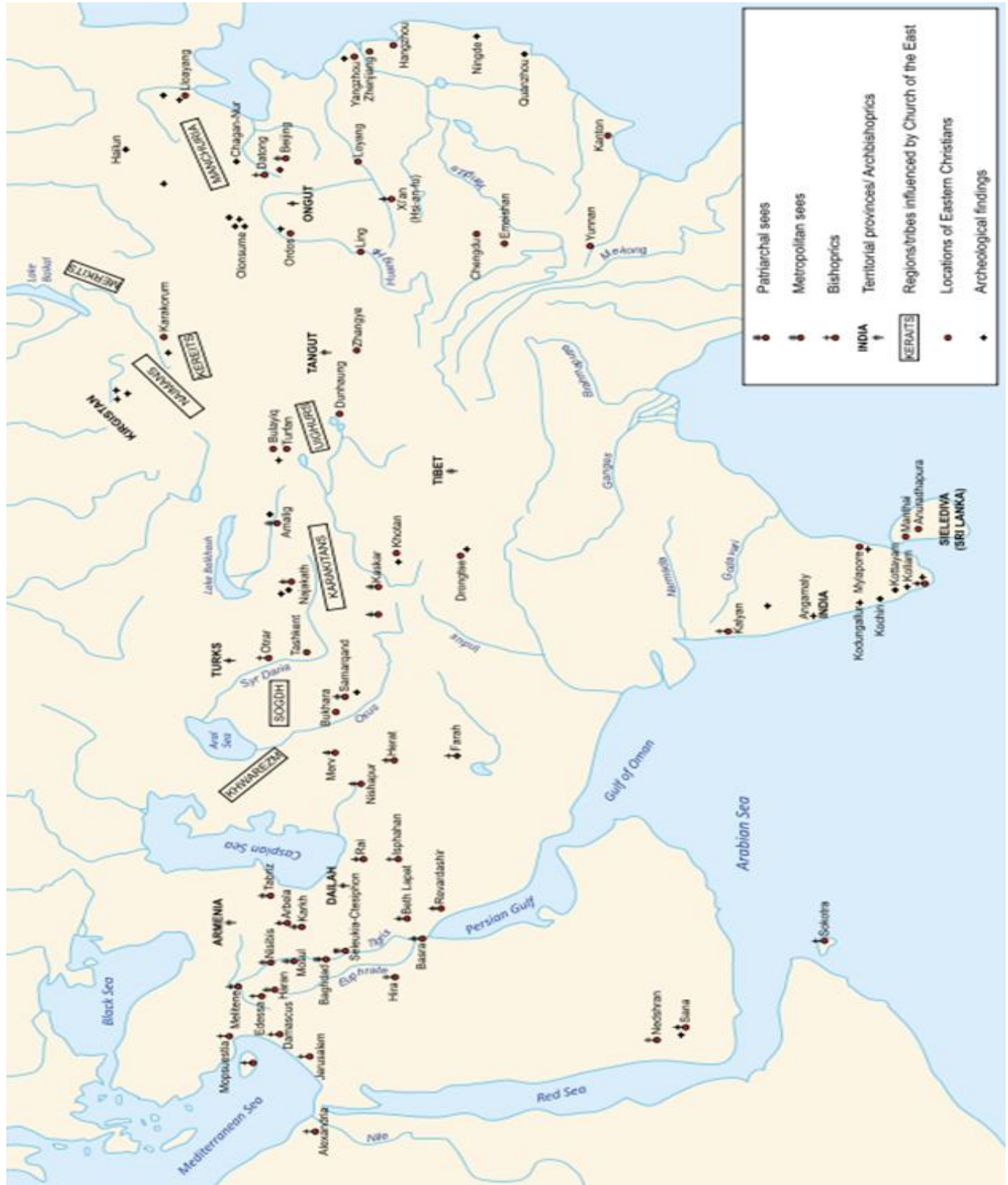
Glossary

<i>Anchoritic</i> (Lat)	Living separate but often near monastic community
<i>Bayt al-Hikma</i> (Ar)	House of Wisdom
<i>Belles-lettres</i> (Fr)	Literary writing
<i>Bnay qyama</i> (Syr)	Sons of the Covenant
<i>Bnat qyama</i> (Syr)	Daughters of the Covenant
<i>Coenobitic</i> (Lat)	Living in monastic community
<i>Dhimmi</i> (Ar)	A subject or protected community
<i>Diaphysite</i> (Gr)	Dual nature of Christ
<i>Diyarat</i> (Ar)	Monasteries
<i>D'rasa</i> (Syr)	Debate format in Syriac tradition
<i>Emir</i> (Ar)	Notable person
<i>Ihiduyuta</i> (Syr)	Singleness, celibate either physically or spiritually
<i>Ijazat</i> (Ar)	License to teach
<i>Kamriyyat</i> (Ar)	Wine literature
<i>Licentia Docendi</i> (Lat)	License to teach
<i>Majalis</i> (Ar)	Gatherings for various entertainment or religious

purposes

<i>Majnun</i> (Ar)	One who is possessed or a madman
<i>Mar</i> (Syr)	Priest or monk
<i>Maruwan</i> (Ma)	Syrian Christian leader
<i>Mepashqana</i> (Syr)	Interpreter/Commentator
<i>Messalians</i> (Syr)	Those who pray
<i>Miaphyste</i> (Gr.)	Single nature of Christ
<i>Peremul</i> (Ma)	Malabar King or Ruler
<i>Risalah</i> (Ar)	Essay intended for general circulation
<i>Serra</i> (Ma)	Inland area of Malabar
<i>Tarisa</i> (Syr)	One who prays or place of prayer, church
<i>Tayyaya</i> (Ar)	Religious or ethnic term, commonly referred to Muslims
<i>'Uraba</i> (Ar)	Desert-dweller or Arab

Provinces of Church of the East in Ninth-Tenth Centuries



Beit Abhe monastery's location is believed to be east of Nisibis in Northern Mesopotamia and Arbela, the modern city of Erbil in Northern Iraq

Angamali is in Southern India and a modern city of Kerala state

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 An Alternative Story in the Early Abbasid Period and its Importance

Though still relatively unknown in the wider circles of Church history, research on the Church of the East in Mesopotamia provides opportunities to examine a period in Christian-Muslim relations three centuries before the first Crusade in 1096 C.E.¹ An important yet often neglected part of this story is the connections, functions and roles of the Church of the East's monasteries in the Church's continued involvement during the first century of Abbasid Muslim rule. Interrogating Christian and Muslim primary sources for what can be learned about these monastic activities, this thesis also explores implications of potential relevance in Christian-Muslim relations today and in the future.

The primary question in this research is what kinds of activities in Christian mission and training were Church of the East monasteries able to engage in during early Abbasid rule? Questions explored within this include: the nature of the theology of witness of the Church and what monastic activities were happening among Muslims and to the East leading up to the ninth century (Chapter 2), what mission involvement may have meant to the Church in the early ninth century from their own sources and how that interacted with issues of survival (Chapter 3), what function did training have in preparation for outreach activities from the monasteries (Chapter 4), how did the Muslim community interact with the monasteries and what did monastic presence and encounter mean to them (Chapter 5), and in what way relations with the Muslim and other Christian communities affected and shaped the Church of the East's identity in mission during the early ninth century period (Chapter 6). The final chapter (7) brings out conclusions related to these questions and reflects on issues related to the present and future in Christian-Muslim relations arising from monastic involvement examined in the thesis.

In researching these questions related to Church of the East monastic mission activities, the lack of awareness of these activities in larger circles of Church history and mission may

¹This first of several crusades was called for by Pope Urban in 1096 to mobilize Christian Europe to conquer the Muslim-held areas of Palestine.

seem surprising. Reasons for this are both theological and geographical. Using the title for them of ‘Nestorians’, Western scholarship at times ignored or dismissed the Church’s history in Asia as the story of a heretical Church even though that history pre-dated the Christological struggles of the fifth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there began to be a reassessment in Western circles as to whether Nestorius was indeed a heretic, driven by the discovery of a Syriac manuscript of one of his writings in 1897, the *Bazaar of Heracleides*.² The existence of this work was then made known to the English-speaking world generating a reappraisal of Nestorius.³ Scholars began to read for themselves his own writing including one of his most famous statements: ‘I separate the natures but I unite the worship.’⁴

Yet the theological roots of the Church extend before Nestorius to Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) considered one of their most important Church Fathers. Indeed the Church could easily be called ‘Theodoran’ rather than ‘Nestorian’. During the Pontificate of John Paul II in 1994 a Common Christological Document was agreed upon by representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of the East signaling a new era of relations and communion. The Church of the East grew from Edessa with its Christological position consistent with the stance of Antioch believing in both the divinity and humanity of Christ but attempting to articulate that mystery in their own linguistic and theological terms.

In an article by Sebastian Brock the issue of nomenclature is discussed. Brock calls for an end to using the term ‘Nestorian’ for the Church of the East, writing that it is a ‘lamentable misnomer’ and even ‘pejorative’.⁵ Mar Aprem, the present Metropolitan of the Trichur, India based Church of the East, has also advocated for the usage of this name to end. He writes this of the Church:

We believe in a Christ who is a perfect man and perfect God. How the union of these two natures has taken place is an open question. If we attempt to understand exactly how

²See Driver (1925) for English translation of Nestorius’ work.

³Bethune-Baker (1907)

⁴:91

⁵Brock (1996:35ff)

Godhead and manhood are united, in the one person of Jesus Christ, we reach the inevitable conclusion that the problem of Christology is insoluble.⁶

In this thesis the term ‘Church of the East’ will be used, shortened from the present full title of ‘Holy Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East’. Also used interchangeably will be the term ‘East Syrian Church’, a *Diaphysite* Church [dual nature of Christ] which brings out the theological, geographical and linguistic differences with the ‘West Syrian Church’ a *Miaphysite* Church [single nature] that uses the West Syriac dialect. West Syrians also had monasteries that were centres of learning and scholarship based primarily in the Tur Abdin region of Northern Mesopotamia. They were also involved in outward activities of witness but not with the scope across Asia of the East Syrians.

As well as theological, another reason for the Church of the East being relatively unknown is that they spread to the east from their initial centre of Edessa in the second century and were outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Deep animosity and occasional wars between the Romans and Persians helped create a cultural and relational distance within the Churches of West and East with the Church of the East growing primarily within the Persian sphere.

Geographical ignorance has also been discussed by Andrew Walls, who focused in part in his writings on the need for more awareness of the history of the global Church. In his article ‘Eusebius tries again: Re-conceiving the Study of Christian history’, Walls writes of the need to learn and teach more of the history of the Church of the East in Asia including in curriculums of modern seminaries and colleges. He writes: ‘If we place Edessa at the western end of the map, and pigeonhole the Roman Empire for a while, we can observe a remarkable alternative Christian story.’⁷

The alternative story studied here is important because it tells of a period when the Church lived in a context of restrictions on their practice of faith, similar to other Christian-Muslim contexts today. Argued in this thesis is that there were activities in mission happening both to other regions of Asia as well as in the context of Mesopotamia. In this engaging in mission, the Church of the East’s story has continued relevance to areas where Christians

⁶Aprem (1967)

⁷Walls (2000:108)

live as minorities seeking to survive in hostile contexts yet desiring to be effective witnesses to their faith in Christ.

The monasteries of the Church of the East and their activities in mission provide a ‘lens’ through which the Christian-Muslim relationship in the early Abbasid period can be seen in a more nuanced light. How the monasteries in Mesopotamia were involved in monastic mission activities to other regions of Asia is also explored, particularly in relationship to what this meant for their continued sustenance as a minority community.

1.2 Relationship of this Thesis to Recent Scholarship

Recent secondary scholarship on the Church of the East has included several general historical studies. One of the most comprehensive is by Samuel Moffett, a Princeton based scholar who grew up in Korea. Moffett’s volume on the history of all branches of the Church in Asia up to 1500 included material on East Syrian Christianity and a few years later a second volume was published on the period up to the present.⁸ A work written two years earlier by John England, though not as widely known as Moffett’s, focused more specifically on the Church of the East but had little information on monasteries of the Church and their role in witness.⁹

Gillman and Klimkeit¹⁰ published an overview of Church of the East history that built on Moffett but had a more specific focus on both West and East Syrian branches. Irvin and Sunquist¹¹ wrote a general mission history of the global Church and included material as well on the Church of the East. Two years later Wilhem Baum wrote a more concise history of the Church of the East in one volume.¹² In 2005 a different perspective emerged as a general history of the Church of the East was published by Suha Rasam, an Iraqi living in

⁸Moffett (1998) and (2003)

⁹England (1996)

¹⁰Gillman and Klimkeit (1999)

¹¹Irvin and Sunquist (2001)

¹²Baum (2003)

the U.K, bringing the views of one who had grown up in the tradition.¹³ Another study of the general history of the Church of the East as well as West Syrians was published in 2006 by Christoph Baumer, with photographs by the author of West Asian church sites interspersed with content on the history of the Church.¹⁴ Though each of the above writers mentioned briefly the existence and role of monasteries, none of them provided in depth analysis of their importance particularly related to both the Muslims around them or how that interacted with the growth of the Church to the east.

A recent work by David Wilmshurst also gave a general history of the Church.¹⁵ In Chapter 3.4 this thesis will engage with Wilmshurst's work from primary sources on his theory relating to Patriarch Timothy and the management of the Church's image . It will go beyond his work in linking activities of the Church to the east with Mesopotamia and creating a new interpretation on the idea of the image that Timothy may have managed.

In a 2008 general work on the 'lost history' of the Church in Asia, Philip Jenkins discussed the issue of 'dechristianization' and how the Church in some regions declined and struggled to survive, calling it one of the 'least studied aspects of Christian history.'¹⁶ A much earlier work by L.E. Browne had similar material on the 'Eclipse' of the Church of the East but little on the role of the monasteries, particularly on how they may have related to the Muslims around them.¹⁷ The thesis contributes to this discussion in its study of the Church of the East in the early Abbasid period, exploring how the Church faced the context it lived in and engaged in its own struggle to survive there. Both of the above writers discussed the issue of endurance in the Church's history and this will be further elaborated on in my research.

¹³Rasam (2005)

¹⁴Baumer (2006)

¹⁵Wilmshurst (2012)

¹⁶Jenkins (2008:29)

¹⁷Browne (1933)

Each of the secondary works above assumed a mission involvement of the Church over several centuries including the period of the early ninth. In going beyond these works by examining primary sources from both Christian and Muslim faiths for monastic activities, this thesis seeks to understand how the Church in Mesopotamia looked at these activities as well whether, and if so to what degree these activities were able to continue in the context of the first Abbasid century. Each of these general studies also included some recognition of the presence of monasteries and to some degree included the West Syrians as well. There is little definition however of the importance of those monasteries and what function and role they had in the witness of the Church. There is also a lack of material on connections across Asia and how that may have related to their role as subjects under Muslim rule in their homeland of Mesopotamia.

Along with the above works on the history of the Church of the East another area discussed in this thesis is the learning activities of the Church related to outward witness and more specifically the training of monks for mission. In recent years some work has been done on this topic by Adam Becker including his PhD dissertation and the monograph that resulted from it.¹⁸ To date Becker's work has been the most comprehensive study of the East Syrian school system. It has not, however, specifically drawn out the implications of how that school system interacted with monasteries particularly related to activities of witness in Mesopotamia and other parts of Asia.

There is also no material in Becker's work on the question of how monks engaged in mission may have been trained and how this fit within a tradition of East Syrian monastic learning. Sidney Griffith's translation and commentary on the *Scholion* of Theodore bar Koni discusses how documents may have been used by the Church in the Abbasid period.¹⁹ The thesis explores the dimensions of the question while suggesting conclusions on how this mission training may have happened. The history of the East Syrian emphasis on monastic and semi-monastic learning is blended with the specific mission involvement of the Church in the early Abbasid period.

¹⁸Becker (2004, 2006)

¹⁹Griffith (1981)

Along with the East Syrian school system another element of their identity was formed by a commitment to liturgy and the lectionary in their seven times a day prayer in the monasteries. Liturgy was also important to the West Syrian tradition. the Church of the East had a liturgy that in their understanding traced back to Edessa itself. Several studies have been written on the importance of the liturgical tradition and the lectionaries of the Church of the East²⁰ but there is a lack of material on the direct connection of their liturgy to witness in forming an aspect of their overall identity. In Scott Sunquist's unpublished PhD dissertation there is a tracing of that tradition to the theological writings of Narsai, an important Father of the Church and the principal of the School of Nisibis. The theological base for mission provided by Narsai as well as liturgical contribution to mission identity will be further examined in my thesis.²¹

There is also a focus in this research from primary sources on the monastery of Beit Abhe in Northern Mesopotamia. Though work has been done by Cynthia Villagomez²² on Beit Abhe from the standpoint of the economic factors of the monasteries, there has been no study on its connections further east especially in light of its context in Christian-Muslim relations of the period. Villagomez's work, an unpublished PhD dissertation, fits East Syrian monasticism into its social and economic context in Abbasid-ruled Mesopotamia. These two elements of the ecclesial links to the east as well as mission presence and encounter in Mesopotamia are both seen in the monastery of Beit Abhe. In my research there is an expansion on both areas and thus a story of presence and encounter that goes beyond other work.

An important figure for this research is the Patriarch of the Church of the East in the late eighth and early ninth century, Timothy I. His leadership role and commitment to witness and learning based around the monasteries will be another prominent part of this study. The only full monograph to date on the life of Timothy is by the Italian scholar Vittori Berti.²³

²⁰Maclean (1894), MacComber (1966), Taft (1984), Kannoakadan (1991)

²¹Sunquist (1990) See Chapter 2 of this thesis for discussion of Narsai's theological base of mission and Chapter 6 for liturgical practices as contributing to a mission identity.

²²Villagomez (1998)

²³Berti (2010)

A 1986 PhD dissertation by Thomas Hurst focused on several of Patriarch Timothy I's letters but did not include the context of the monasteries and their role in providing a foundation for the Church's activities.²⁴ My research focuses on other letters that concern the spread across Asia as well as Timothy's apologetic concerns in the Islamic context. Included is the Patriarch's particular concern for the monastery of Beit Abhe as well as his interest in Church relations farther east. These dual concerns as seen in these letters will be explored in a way that also has not been done in existing studies.

An important part of the Mesopotamian context relevant to this research is the nature of activities going on in Christian-Muslim communication of their faiths. The literature on the disputation texts of both Christians and Muslims that were circulating in the Abbasid period as well as before and after has been growing in recent years. Several studies have been done by David Thomas including two important edited series on the *History of Christian-Muslim Relations* and *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*.²⁵ Other important works have been done on these texts by G.J. Reinink,²⁶ Robert Hoyland,²⁷ Mark Beaumont²⁸ and David Bertaina.²⁹ These works examine also the period of these disputations and provide important secondary studies as well as translation and publishing of texts.

A different emphasis is explored in this thesis with the shared world of Christian-Muslim relations happening around the monasteries featured. It seeks to bring together the disputations and other engagements between Christians and Muslims with other kinds of encounters happening in the period. While not saying that all of these disputations were a

²⁴Hurst (1986)

²⁵Thomas (2001, 2002) and for the first volumes of the edited series (2003 and 2009)

²⁶Reinink (1999, 2003, 2005)

²⁷Hoyland (2004)

²⁸Beaumont (2005)

²⁹Bertaina (2011)

form of mission, this thesis explores what elements of these texts as well as other encounters were involved in these monastic activities.

William G. Young's study in 1974 broke new ground in the area of the Church of the East's relationship to political power throughout their history.³⁰ Another writer to comment on the political relationship of the Church to the Abbasids is Garth Fowden³¹ who notes the spread in Asia that occurred without imperial backing and brings out implications of that context. The relationship of the Church to the Abbasids provides another important backdrop to the monastic activities studied in this research.

Young's work notes the importance of the Church of the East as secretaries and translators to the Abbasids but has little reflection on what this involvement meant to the position of the Church in society. He describes his perception of the lack of witness to Muslims as a 'puzzle' that still needs more evidence. Contributing four more pieces to this puzzle, the thesis brings a more nuanced and comprehensive picture. These will be specifically outlined in the conclusion in Chapter 7. Young has little mention of the importance of the monasteries as potential places of encounter for this witness but does include them as locations for sending out of monks as missionaries to the east. My thesis goes beyond Young's work in bringing together Christian and Muslim sources with monasteries as an important component in both, examining what they may reveal of monastic presence and activities. It also argues in contrast to Young that mission activities were happening within Mesopotamia among Muslims as well as to the East.

Studies on the Abbasid Empire and its history are numerous but not on the place of the East Syrian monasteries within that context and the interaction with the surrounding Muslim environment. Two writers that have included some material on these monasteries in the Abbasid milieu are Michael Morony³² and Chase Robinson.³³ The earlier history of

³⁰Young (1974)

³¹Fowden (1994)

³²Morony (1994)

³³Robinson (2000)

Christian monasteries in Arabia has been covered in a series of works on Byzantium and the Arabs by Irfan Shahid³⁴ providing continuity for the later monastic spread in West Asia.

Two works that built in recent decades on the literature on monasteries from Muslim eyes are an unpublished PhD dissertation of 1958 by Battija Lovejoy, an Iraqi who grew up visiting the existing Church of the East monasteries. She details many of the monasteries mentioned by Arab Muslim writers as well as noting the importance they had in Christian-Muslim encounter.³⁵ A recent unpublished PhD dissertation by Elisabeth Campbell³⁶ explored the place of Christian monasteries particularly in the Muslim imagination as well as building on the work of Arab Muslim writers. In both of these studies, however, the role of the monasteries in Muslim eyes is not set alongside the Christian understanding to present a fuller picture.

Other recent writers on the importance and extent of Syrian monasticism are Florence Jullien³⁷ with comprehensive works on monasticism in Persia and Mesopotamia and Sabino Chiala.³⁸ An earlier article by Gerard Troupeau³⁹ focusing on the monasteries in the literature of the Arabs brings out some of the reasons Muslims visited them particularly from the work of al-Shabushti.⁴⁰ An article by Hilary Kilpatrick⁴¹ also references Troupeau's work and highlights the importance of East Syrian monasteries in Christian-Muslim relations. Both these works have little discussion on the aspect of what training and sending may have been going on from the monasteries and how that occurred in the overall context of Abbasid rule.

³⁴Shahid (1984, 1990, 2002)

³⁵Lovejoy (1957)

³⁶Campbell (2009)

³⁷Jullien (2008, 2010)

³⁸Chiala (2005, 2010)

³⁹Troupeau (1995)

⁴⁰al-Shabushti was a tenth century Muslim writer whose work on monasteries will be discussed in 5.2.

⁴¹Kilpatrick article in Thomas (2003)

Sebastian Brock has written works on many aspects of the Church of the East including monasticism. He has also had a major role in encouraging the growth of scholarship on the Church in India with his support of the development of the St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) and the regular conferences and publications there.⁴² Writing on similar themes from within an Asian perspective has been Brian Colless who in a recent study contributed to deepening an understanding of its importance.⁴³

Indian authors like T.V. Philip⁴⁴ and Mar Aprem⁴⁵ have also written on the history of the Church of the East but with much of the material on the post-Portuguese period. A.M. Mundadan⁴⁶ has written some of the most comprehensive work on the pre-Portuguese period. Mundadan's 2001 volume is the first of a series on the History of Christianity in India and has material on the first 1500 years. Other Indian writers like Abraham Mattam⁴⁷ have written on the history of the Church of the East in Asia but his claims for an extensive mission effort from Indian missionaries to SE Asia and China cannot be substantiated with evidence. More recently a history of the Church in India has been published by Robert Frykenberg⁴⁸ with some material on the pre-Portuguese period. Pius Malekandthil has provided translated works from the Portuguese in recent years as well as writing studies linking East Syrian pre-1500 history to a larger context in Asia.⁴⁹ Another Indian writer, George Menanchery, has brought together several secondary sources in a two volume series devoted to the history of the St. Thomas Christians, as well as a third volume with translated sources from Indian history and tradition.⁵⁰ These secondary works were

⁴²Brock (1997, 1999, 2011)

⁴³Colless (2008)

⁴⁴Philip (1996, 1998).

⁴⁵Aprem (2003)

⁴⁶Mundadan (1970, 1997, 2001)

⁴⁷Mattam (2001, 2004)

⁴⁸Frykenberg (2008)

⁴⁹Malekandthil (2003, 2010)

⁵⁰Menanchery (1973, 1982, and 1998)

consulted for context of the spread of the Church of the East into India and more insight into the primary sources examined in 6.3 of this thesis.

1.3 Earlier secondary sources

An important secondary source that brought many Syriac documents to the attention of the Western tradition was Joseph Assemani's three volume magnum opus, the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* written from 1719-1728. Assemani, from a lineage of Maronite scholars, translated many works from Syriac and other languages into Latin including the important work of history the *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* written by Bar Hebraeus in the fourteenth century. Bar Hebraeus, though from the West Syrian tradition, writes about the East Syrians including the monastery of Beit Abhe. Assemani devoted various volumes of his work to different branches of the Eastern churches with Volume 3, parts 1 and 2 to the Church of the East or 'Nestorians'. He made available to Western scholars for the first time important primary sources like the ninth century monastic history *Historia Monastica* by Thomas of Marga.

The Japanese scholar P.Y Saeki,⁵¹ following the earlier work of Legge,⁵² detailed the existence of Church of the East monasteries in China from the seventh to ninth centuries. Both scholars wrote works on the famous 'Nestorian stele' as well as Holm and Foster.⁵³ More recently MacCulloch in a larger work on the history of Christianity included material on a possible monastery in X'ian that dates back to the T'ang dynasty but it is still unclear if the evidence is actually of a Christian structure.⁵⁴ These secondary works on China will be consulted in this thesis for insights related to primary evidence on monastic activities in China in the early Abbasid period.

⁵¹Saeki (1916, 1950, 1951)

⁵²Legge (1880)

⁵³Holm (1923), Foster (1938, 1939)

⁵⁴For the general history which includes an extensive section on East Syrian Christianity see MacCulloch (2009). For material on the possible monastery see Palmer (2001) who MacCulloch also interviewed in his BBC documentary series based on his book as well as Palmer's.

In the early twentieth century general studies of the Church of the East were written by Europeans including French scholar Jerome Labourt⁵⁵ on the period under the Sassanid Empire of 224-632, German studies by Oscar Braun with critical editions on Church of the East Synods⁵⁶ and Timothy's letters.⁵⁷ Several of Timothy's letters in Latin and Syriac with French summation were also published mid-century by Raphael Bidawid.⁵⁸ John Stewart, Scottish missionary to India, wrote *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: the Story of a Church on Fire* which brought the Church's history to a wider audience in the English-speaking world.⁵⁹

From within the Syrian tradition Alphonse Mingana wrote a series of articles and books in the first few decades of the twentieth century that brought original Syriac sources to the public. Two years before Stewart's book appeared Mingana published two articles that highlighted mission activities of the Church of the East, one on Central Asia⁶⁰ and the other on India.⁶¹ Stewart's comment on the Church of the East being the 'greatest missionary church the world had ever seen' came from Mingana's article of two years before⁶² highlighting a similar problem that Mingana had at times with going beyond the evidence.⁶³

In the early and middle twentieth century an important writer due to his work on monasticism in the Eastern traditions was Jean Fiey, a missionary scholar who lived in Iraq for over forty years. Fiey published several works of a topographical nature especially his

⁵⁵Labourt (1904)

⁵⁶Braun (1900)

⁵⁷:1914

⁵⁸Bidawid (1956)

⁵⁹Stewart (1928)

⁶⁰Mingana (1925)

⁶¹:1926

⁶²Stewart (1928:313), Mingana (1926:447)

⁶³Mingana could be a careful scholar but at times also lapsed into speculation. The most serious question about his work relates to whether he forged a document titled the *Chronicle of Arbil*. There is no conclusive evidence of this either way. See Samir (1990) for a fuller discussion of Mingana and his contributions to the field.

multi-volume *Assyrie Chretienne* [Christian Assyria] ⁶⁴ which lists and describes monasteries in each province of Mesopotamia and Persia. Fiey's work has been important in highlighting a number of monasteries existing in Northern Mesopotamia between the seventh and fourteenth centuries including those of both West and East Syrians. More recently David Wilmshurst built on Fiey's work in his monograph of 2010 expanding on his descriptions of monasteries and providing material on later centuries. ⁶⁵

Another writer that contributed to Syriac studies overall and particularly to the study of asceticism and monasticism was Estonian scholar Arthur Voobus. He translated and published extant statutes of the School of Nisibis as well as other documents of legislation and monastic rules for the Church of the East. One of his most important works for East Syrian monasticism was a three volume history of asceticism in the Syrian Orient⁶⁶ which was a key influence in stimulating Sebastian Brock's formative interest in Syriac studies ⁶⁷ and in it the importance of monasticism to the mission of the East Syrian Church is mentioned. Voobus never completed the planned final two volumes due to his death in 1988. These volumes were to have included more research on the spread of monasticism in India and other parts of Asia.

1.4 Methodology

The thesis has a focus on monastic mission activities and training for that involvement by the Church of the East across Asia in their context within the Abbasid Empire. Mission is defined in this thesis as involving elements of presence and encounter leading to an outward involvement in witness from the Church to other communities, an involvement that went back to their origins in the first centuries after Christ. Its meaning to the Church will be explored in Chapter 3 from their own sources in the early Abbasid period. It will also be examined prior to that in Chapter 2 from a continuity of the sources leading up to the period.

⁶⁴Fiey (1965-1968)

⁶⁵Wilmshurst (2010)

⁶⁶Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* (1958, 1960, 1988)

⁶⁷Brock mentions his debt to Voobus in a contribution in a festschrift for him by Fischer (1997).

Within that mission focus, the specific phenomena of their monasticism will be examined as a 'lens' to see what these activities meant to the Church from their sources. These monastic activities had a degree of continuity that went back several centuries and how and in what form they continued will be examined and discussed from looking at these sources. The Church of the East continued to exist in this period in the context of a *dhimmi*⁶⁸ relationship to the Muslim Abbasids. The word *dhimmi* [protected ones] will appear throughout this thesis. The asymmetrical relationship between the Abbasids and Christian communities was often an unpredictable affair. That relationship and how the Patriarchs of the Church managed it, particularly related to the role of the monastery, will figure prominently in this research.

East Syrian monasteries will also be studied in a contiguous 'contact zone' to the Muslims around them in the homeland of Mesopotamia in the ninth century period. An idea of a 'zone of contact' alongside a 'zone of conflict' is particularly relevant in the past, present and future of Christian-Muslim relations. The terminology of 'zone of contact' comes from the writings of Mary Louise Pratt who wrote from within post-colonial discussions and focused on nineteenth century travel writing as seen from the eyes of 'empire'.⁶⁹ She describes contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths.'⁷⁰ Though Pratt is writing from a nineteenth century context her definition has application to the situation of ninth century Abbasid Muslim/Christian *dhimmi* relations where there was often 'highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' between the two.

The idea will be explored in this research that a 'contact zone' as a 'social space where disparate cultures meet' was the Christian monastery, where encounters of various kinds were occurring. Pratt's words about how these groups related, in her case 'imperial'

⁶⁸*Dhimmi* is an Arabic word that means subject or subordinate, in this context the Christians in their relations to the Muslim Abbasids who ruled them. A European writer under the pseudonym 'Bat Yeor' has written several works on the topic in (1985), (1996) and (2002).

⁶⁹Pratt (2008)

⁷⁰(:7)

travelers and their witnessed subjects, are also relevant to this research as they related ‘not in terms of separateness but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.’⁷¹ The East Syrian monastery was a social institution that overlapped in a contact zone providing places of presence as well as encounter. Expanding on as well as sharpening Pratt’s theory in this thesis, the ‘contact zone’ of Christian-Muslim relations in the early Abbasid period will be further defined as a place where two different yet overlapping engagements were happening, one of presence and at other times of encounter. Though there is a strong overlap between presence and encounter, for the purposes of this thesis the first indicates the existence of these institutions over several centuries, including the pre-Islamic period. Encounter refers to the meetings between Christians and Muslims in the context of the monastery, both in reality as well as in the imaginations of both faiths.

In this research both presence and encounter will be centred in the monastery which provided a stability of presence both in imagination as well as reality to the Muslim mind. Together these two elements of presence and encounter make up a ‘contact zone’ in Christian-Muslim relations in the early Abbasid period. The thesis is not a work of analysis of the results of these encounters in terms of conversions due to the lack of evidence available but seeks to show what kinds of encounters were happening and if they were consistent with monastic mission activities of earlier centuries even in the difficult environment of being a subject community to the Abbasids.

The methodology in exploring this ‘contact zone’ of the monastery in both presence and encounter, as well as a ‘conflict zone’ that was also occurring, will be by investigating primary sources from both Christian and Muslim faiths in the period of the seventh to tenth centuries in Mesopotamia. The late eighth and early ninth century provides the primary context due in part to a Church of the East leader, Patriarch Timothy I, who embodied monastic concern for witness and learning. These sources will be interrogated especially by asking the following questions: what mission and learning activities may have meant to the Church of the East, how the monasteries were viewed from Muslim sources, and how that related to Christian witness and Muslim perception of that presence and encounter. By

⁷¹(:8)

looking at these texts alongside each other, the desire is to place them in a ‘contact zone’ with the monastery as the element of common attention and common space.

Another part of a ‘contact zone’ was in the function of training and scholarship. It will be examined from Church of the East sources particularly related to how this training may have related to the outward witness of these monasteries. What continuity these monastic activities were built on from previous centuries as well as how they contributed to involvement in scholarship in the Abbasid realms will also be discussed. Training of the monks will be discussed as part of a role of presence leading to encounters with Muslims visiting the monasteries, as well as involvement in translation activities.

The common idea of the monastery as a place where desires for learning and spiritual experience could be fulfilled will be explored from the texts of both faiths. The monastery as a focus of some of these desires was part of a shared world with shared practices in the ninth century of both Christians and Muslims. The context included also a ‘conflict zone’ of a polemical nature in disputations between Christians and Muslims in the period but another kind of discourse may have been occurring. This discourse, both of a shared world in certain areas and of conflict in others, occurs between two faiths that have of course many areas of common understanding as well as differences.

My thesis concerns a particular period in Christian-Muslim relations yet also contributes to the larger history and future of these relations. Martha Frederiks in her study of the history of Christianity in the Gambia gives several models that more generally apply to the nature of Christian relations with Muslims.⁷² The first is a more traditional model of mission, *expansion*, where the emphasis is on numbers of converts and church growth. The second has an emphasis on reconciliation, service and peacemaking, called *diakonia*. Third is a model of *presence*, emphasized by the lives and witness of Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld in North Africa. The fourth model that Frederiks highlights is *dialogue*, more popular in recent years with an emphasis on the ongoing need for relationships between the two faiths at several levels. The final one is *kenosis*, or self-emptying, which Frederiks argues has seldom been followed in Christian-Muslim history but involves the Church

⁷²Frederiks (2003:90)

living among Muslims with humility and love. Building particularly on this last model, the thesis offers a further one in Chapter 7 emerging from the Church of the East's monastic engagement in the early Abbasid period.

These zones of contact and conflict in the early ninth century will also be examined related to the relationship of the Church in Mesopotamia to the areas further east. 'Connected history' is a term used by Oxford scholar Sanjay Subrahmanyam to refer to the interconnectedness of regions often studied separately. Instead of viewing each of these contexts in isolation there are a growing number of scholars who link them together.⁷³ Though Subrahmanyam also writes within a post-colonial framework and his agenda is different than one exploring activities in the ninth century, it is still a potential approach for identifying a larger context in Asia in this period. An aspect of this is the contacts between these regions called 'conjunctural movements' by the above scholar as part of his project in 'reworking the history of South Asia into a larger Eurasian space of conjunctural movements.'⁷⁴ Instead of seeing primary sources in this thesis only related to their own region, linkages between the Church in Mesopotamia and farther east will be explored opening up implications that may not be seen as clearly otherwise.

In exploring the nature of evidence available for Mesopotamian links further east, four field research visits were undertaken to Southern India in the course of this work, including to Angamali. These visits included conversations with Church of the East clergy, especially the Father responsible for starting a new monastery that consciously connects to an earlier possible East Syrian monasticism in Malabar.⁷⁵ A field visit to Northern Iraq was finally undertaken in Feb. 2014 after a previous attempt and the original location of Beit Abhe was pursued as well as the existing monastery of Rabban Hormizd.

⁷³This includes Cherian (1969), Sedler (1980), Liu (1988), Wink (1990), Abu-Lughod (2005), as well as Subrahmanyam (2005).

⁷⁴Subrahmanyam (2005:1x)

⁷⁵My conversation with this priest and implications for a renewal of East Syrian monasticism will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The field visits mentioned above were part of a mission career that has so far spanned almost thirty years in India with much of that time spent focused on the Muslim community. Interest began to grow for me in that context about the history of the Church of the East and their involvement in mission. After several years of teaching on the subject particularly in Asia a desire deepened to further investigate this involvement and what it may have meant to Christian-Muslim relations in the early Abbasid period.

A challenge in this research relates to the issue of sources in multiple languages. If a methodology had been attempted that looked at comparative monastic witness across Asia, languages desired in fluency would have been Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, Malayalam and several other Asian languages. The methodology chosen instead examines several primary sources from the Christian and Muslim faiths in a more limited amount of languages as well as epigraphic inscriptions from the period and places them in a 'zone of contact'. Despite this writer being inadequate in linguistic capacity every effort has been made to locate and analyze available works and develop from these works the foundation from which the conclusions of the thesis have been drawn. In instances of great importance works have been consulted in their original sources with every effort for accuracy. At times there has been reliance on extant primary sources in translation both published and unpublished. Unpublished translations by other colleagues were provided through direct contact with me and are greatly appreciated. Without these unpublished translations of important primary sources being available it would have been extremely difficult to have engaged in this research.

1.5 Primary Sources

Sources from the eighth and ninth centuries studied in this research include monastic histories which add to the knowledge of East Syrian monasteries and monastic figures. The first, the *Historia Monastica* written in about 840 by Thomas of Marga, chronicles the monastery of Beit Abhe from its founding in 595 by Rabban Jacob until the time of Thomas' writing. It is important not only for the detail it includes about Beit Abhe itself in its Northern Mesopotamian context but also for description of its sending activities into other parts of Asia.

Two other monastic histories from Northern Mesopotamia are *The History of Rabban Hormizd* and *The History of Rabban Bar-Idta*. Though these works refer to events two centuries before the ninth century period, and have even less historical content than Thomas of Marga's work, they are valuable for accounts of activities of founders and monks of East Syrian monasteries. Rabban Hormizd monastery's relevance also is in the fact of its existence since the seventh century as the only formerly East Syrian institution still in Iraq.

The letters of two East Syrian Patriarchs will be explored for understanding the nature of the Church's ecclesiology and the extent of its witness as well as for issues of continuance and survival. Examined in this work will be the seventh century letters of Isho-yahbh III who wrote to provinces in the east, as well as the letters of Timothy I who also wrote of Beit Abhe and Church involvement in the east.⁷⁶ The letters of both Patriarchs will be set alongside the *Historia Monastica*, as well as Muslim authors below, as evidence having the monastery as a location of presence as well as encounter.

Several genres in Arab *Belles Lettres* [literary writing]⁷⁷ describe the monasteries from the eyes and writings of Muslims and will be examined alongside the above Christian sources. These include the *Kitab al-Diyarat* [Book of Monasteries]⁷⁸ of al-Shabushti which is the only work of its kind still extant.⁷⁹ A sub-stream of this genre is the *kamriyyat* [wine literature] that was included in the ninth century poems of Abu Nuwas.⁸⁰ His poetry will be examined particularly as it referenced the monastery. Still another stream is in the area of 'Medieval Arabic Graffiti' in the *Kitab al-ghuraba* [The Book of Strangers]⁸¹ with its

⁷⁶For Isho-yahbh's letters, see in Syriac with English translation Scott-Moncrief (1904), and in Syriac and Latin Duval (1905). Also for some of the letters in English translation see Young (1999). For Timothy's letters, see in Syriac and Latin Braun (1914) and Bidawid (1956), in Syriac and French Putman (1975), and some in English in Brock (1997).

⁷⁷This genre of writing refers to the social literature of the Abbasids. See Ashtiany (1990).

⁷⁸*Diyarat* is the Arabic word for monastery, and was the subject of its own genre of Muslim literature. This will be explored in 2.3 and then more fully in 5.2

⁷⁹For al-Shabushti's work the only complete published copy is in Arabic by George Awaad (1951). I am indebted to Jack Tannous for sharing with me his unpublished English translation of much of the work and for the rest relied on Atiya (1939).

⁸⁰See Colville (2005) for English translations of several of Abu Nuwas' poems.

⁸¹Crone (2000) has translated portions of this work into English.

emphases on nostalgia and heart-longings. Several of these graffiti were set at the monastery and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Primary sources from the earlier centuries that are explored include the fourth century *Demonstrations* by Aphrahat and particularly *Demonstration 6* which speaks of communities of men and women in witness, the *Bnay Qyama* and *Bnat Qyama* [Sons and Daughters of the Covenant]. The Church of the East had its own extensive literature from the seventh and eighth centuries by mystics such as Isaac of Ninevah and Sahdona, both of whom had extensive contacts with Beit Abhe. Writers such as Alphonse Mingana,⁸² Sebastian Brock⁸³ and Brian Colless⁸⁴ have published editions of these works with particularly Isaac's writings becoming common to traditions as diverse as Russian and Greek Orthodox churches, Egyptian Copts and Western evangelicals as well.

Early sources of importance from the sixth century for this research also were the *Statutes of the School of Nisibis* as well as extant canons of the Church that will be consulted related to monastic learning and witness including the *Canons of Rabula* and the *Canons of Abraham of Mt. Izla*.⁸⁵ In the mid-sixth century connections across the Indian Ocean were noted in the *Christian Topography* of Church of the East member Cosmas Indicopleustes [the India-sailor].⁸⁶

Existing primary source evidence of the presence of the Church in ninth century Malabar is in the form of epigraphic inscriptions on copper plate charters and crosses as well as references from the letters of the Patriarchs and earlier sources such as Cosmas. These pieces of evidence have been examined and discussed in this research related to the larger ecclesial context in Asia in the early Abbasid period and what this may have meant to monastic activities in witness and learning from the context of Mesopotamia. It will be

⁸²Mingana (1934)

⁸³Brock 1987)

⁸⁴Colless (2008)

⁸⁵See Voobus (1960) and (1965) for English translation of these canons and statutes.

⁸⁶See Winstedt (1909)

done by looking at texts of the Church in Mesopotamia alongside epigraphic inscriptions from copper plate charters and crosses from Malabar and a stone monument in China in the similar time period of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. By placing these texts and extant inscriptions and artifacts in a common interpretative space, there will be an exploration of what they may reveal related to the nature of monastic activities. The monastery will be the 'lens' through which this evidence will be examined.

1.6 Outline of Chapters

The chapters of this dissertation are organized in the following structure. Chapter 2 examines the foundation and theology of monastic mission activities of the Church of the East. It also looks at monastic activities among the Arab Muslims both in presence and encounter up to the ninth century, as well as activities further east and how that related to the witness of the Church in the first two centuries of Islam.

Chapter 3 then analyzes from late eighth and ninth century Christian sources monastic presence and encounter within the Abbasid Empire and what that meant for issues of continued mission involvement under that rule. It also discusses what mission activities meant to the Church from those sources both within the Empire as well as to the east.

In Chapter 4 continued functions of scholarship and training for mission in monasteries are examined from Christian sources of the period. To what degree witness to the surrounding Muslim community was an important component and focus of that training, as well as being a strategy of survival, is also explored in this chapter.

Chapter 5 examines from Muslim sources of the ninth and tenth centuries the role of Church of the East monasteries in imagination as well as in the reality of Muslim visits to those monasteries. The chapter also explores how these sources bring another perspective of what may have occurred in Christian mission around the monasteries and how those activities interacted within the context of Abbasid restrictions.

Chapter 6 deals with identity-forming practices in East Syrian monasteries in their functions and roles in a proximity of presence to their West Syrian neighbours as well as to the Muslims of Mesopotamia. Engaging in mission in the early Abbasid context and what that may have meant to their identity will be explored. The larger identity affirmed by the monks in their practices of liturgy will also be examined in this chapter.

Chapter 7 brings the thesis to a conclusion stating the key findings of the research. It also discusses the renewal of monasticism in the context of Christian-Muslim relations in the early twenty first century, where issues of engaging in mission while living in a context of restrictions are still relevant.

Chapter 2: Foundations and Activities of Church of the East Monasteries until the Early Ninth Century

2.1 Introduction

Mission and monasticism are not mutually exclusive but have had aspects of integration in history including in the activities of the Church of the East. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundation for this integration in the particular history of this Church. It will also explore the nature of these monastic activities in witness in the period leading up to the ninth century both before the coming of Islam as well as in the centuries after.

The chapter (2.2) begins with an enquiry into the theological foundations of the Church's monastic witness. In the next section (2.3) this witness is explored related to the Arabs both from monasteries that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia as well as after. A particular genre of Arab literature about Christian monasteries is discussed that in later years would be identified by Muslims themselves as being part of their historiography. Some specific encounters with Muslims and Christian monks are also referenced from the sources.

The last section of the chapter (2.4) discusses the nature of ecclesial links and monastic activities across the Indian Ocean and Asia from origins in the fourth century until the beginning of the ninth century. Included are portions of letters of a Church of the East Patriarch, Isho-yahbh III, to his church members in Fars and India in the seventh century, as well as letters to Beit Abhe monastery earlier when he was Bishop. These letters are explored as to what they may reveal about the perspective on Islam in its first few decades and what that meant to the Church of the East related to its later continuity.

2.2 Theological Foundations for Monastic Mission

Church of the East activities examined in this research raise a question how monasticism co-existed with outward witness. Anastasios Yannoulatos posed it this way: 'Is there an antithesis between monasticism and mission?'⁸⁷ While not drawing a strict border between

⁸⁷Yannoulatos (1969: 226)

inward and outward dimensions, the concept of monks withdrawing in ascetic practices to inaccessible islands, mountains and deserts to worship God and battle demons has been a normative pattern in Christian history. Yannoulatos answers his question:

The role of monks and monasteries in bringing Christianity to idolatrous populations in the East cannot be overestimated, although most of its pages remain unknown at several points of value. The fact beyond dispute is that from the beginning of monasticism, the most daring and most efficient missionaries were the monks who lived the gospel without compromise.⁸⁸

A stream of withdrawal is unmistakable in monastic history yet is only one part of a story that has included at times an engagement with society and involvement in Christian witness. Historian of Christianity Kenneth Scott Latourette writes: 'From the sixth century onward most of the missionaries of the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches were men and women who had taken monastic vows.'⁸⁹

Egyptian monasticism in the early fourth century became a popular model of monastic withdrawal from the world, due largely to the example of Saint Antony (d. 356) documented by Athanasius (d. 373) in his *Life of Antony* in 357 C.E.⁹⁰ Yet at a similar period of time a Mesopotamian Syriac-speaking variety was also emerging. It is not certain if there were connections between the two, though E.A.W. Budge attributed to Mar Augin (d. 363) from Egypt the founding role for the Mesopotamian version.⁹¹ An important figure in Church of the East and Syriac studies, Sebastian Brock, disputes this and claims a more indigenous emergence separated from Egypt.⁹² Even though the origins and relations of both versions are unclear there did seem to be a difference in how they related to the world. As T. V. Philip surmises: 'In Egyptian monasticism, the saints ignored the world and

⁸⁸Yannoulatos (1969:226)

⁸⁹Latourette (1953:223). Movements that had a strong missionary aspect to their monasticism include the Russian Orthodox Church, the Celts of Ireland and Scotland, the Benedictines and the Franciscans. The Celts most famous monastery, on the island of Iona, was founded in 560 C.E., just 35 years before Beit Abhe in 595. Both Iona and Beit Abhe would have a similar contribution to sending out monks in mission but with no known connection between them.

⁹⁰For the *Life of Antony* in English translation see Gregg (1979)

⁹¹Budge in *Historia Monastica* Vol. 1. Introduction (2003:125)

⁹²Brock (1985:131)

retreated to the desert in caves and cells. By contrast, Syrian ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor and preaching the gospel.’⁹³ Moffett writes of this early Syrian/Mesopotamian monasticism: ‘The ascetic communities became the major dynamic for missions in Asia from the third century on, continuing the work of the wandering missionaries of the first two centuries.’⁹⁴

A question beyond the scope of this thesis is what degree of influence Judaism and ascetic communities like Qumran had on the first two centuries of Christianity growing east of Edessa. Murray calls Syrian Christianity ‘authentically Semitic, a true native growth, the spontaneous response of hearts touched by grace, without any constraint of foreign forms.’⁹⁵ Koonammakkal stresses the connections and links of Syrian monasticism back to the New Testament world of John the Baptist and Jesus and the requirements of cross-bearing discipleship combined with the impetus of the Great Commission to the ends of the earth in Matthew 28:18-20.⁹⁶ Ascetic communities that were emerging eastwards from Antioch and Edessa in Syria and Mesopotamia in the first two centuries of the church provide glimpses of a developing ‘proto-monasticism’.⁹⁷

Other influences on Syrian monasticism in these early centuries were coming from farther east. Buddhism with its emphasis on a missionary monasticism may have had some influence on early Christian versions. It may have been particularly through the Persian mystic Mani (d. 276 C.E.) who possibly witnessed the Buddhist form on a trip to the Indian subcontinent in 240 or 241 C.E. Buddhist monasticism reached its peak in the period 606-647 C.E. in India with more than one thousand monasteries and perhaps as many as fifty thousand monks.⁹⁸ Monasticism having an outward dimension of witness and service was never solely a Christian phenomenon. In fact it is quite probable that the origins of

⁹³Philip (1998:x)

⁹⁴Moffett (1998:101).

⁹⁵Murray (2004:344)

⁹⁶Koonammakkal (1991:27)

⁹⁷Lorenzo (2005:233) gives this term for this early version of monasticism.

⁹⁸Ahir (2005:1)

monasticism lie in Buddhism in its Indian homelands. As a Sri Lankan Jesuit and leader in inter-religious dialogue writes: ‘The religion founded by Buddha is essentially a missionary monasticism.’⁹⁹ Many Buddhist monks and nuns traveled across the Indian subcontinent as well as into Central Asia and China, founding monasteries with an emphasis on study and witness. Discerning how much if at all Buddhist monasticism influenced early Christian forms as well as Mani's version is a complex issue and though referred to briefly in this thesis is beyond its bounds.

Mani went on to found his own religion, Manichaeism, which developed its own missionary monasticism in Mesopotamia and Persia and was a direct rival for several centuries to East Syrian Christianity.¹⁰⁰ It seems likely that Syrian missionary monasticism was shaped from both Western and Eastern directions while developing its own indigenous version.¹⁰¹ The East Syrian variety took advantage of its geographical position to receive a ‘cross-pollination’ from various directions.

Early church historian Sozomen wrote of the advance of Christianity into the east beyond Edessa.¹⁰² Sozomen brought together in his history the lives of Syrian missionary monks in these early centuries. A representative of the Syrian proto-monasticism that Sozomen describes was the Persian sage Aphrahat (d. 345 C.E.). Much of his work is not extant but among his surviving writings are twenty-three *Demonstrations* [a ‘showing forth’ or ‘argument’] composed between 337 and 345.¹⁰³ It includes *Demonstration 6* which deals with the centrality of Covenant [in Syriac the word *qyama*] and the Sons and Daughters of

⁹⁹Pieris (1988:67).

¹⁰⁰An authority on Manichaeism, Samuel Lieu (1994) raised the question of how much its form of monasticism influenced Egypt. It is possible that Pachomius (d. 346) who followed on from Saint Antony to found coenobitic communities may have personally seen examples of Manichean monasticism and imitated it. Whether that was true or not the missionary aspects of it did not seem to have shaped the Egyptian version.

¹⁰¹Arthur Voobus (d. 1960) was an Estonian scholar who spent much of his career translating and editing both West and East Syriac works on a variety of subjects including monasticism. Voobus’ work in recent years has received criticism including his contention (1958) that influences on East Syrian asceticism were coming from the Manicheans, Buddhists and Hindus.

¹⁰²Sozomen (d. 450) focused on the period 323-425 C.E. See Schaff (1952) for an English translation of his work.

¹⁰³For the English translation from Syriac of the *Demonstrations* see Valavanolickal (2005).

the Covenant [*bnay qyama* and *bnat qyama*]. In an extensive series of admonitions and expositions of Scripture passages Aphrahat provides a rule of life for those called to intentionally live together in faithfulness to God's call.¹⁰⁴

Two streams in Syrian monasticism from the beginning were *coenobitic* [living in community] and *anchoritic* [living separate but often near community]. Reading Aphrahat's sixth chapter indicates that both streams were included in his conception of monastic life. It also included the spiritual elite as well as the more common believer. In one passage in *Demonstration 6*, Aphrahat lists some of the qualities necessary for both streams:

Above all else, it is appropriate that the man upon whom the yoke [of Christ] is laid should have a sound faith, in accordance with what I wrote to you in the first letter; he should be assiduous in fasting and in prayer, he should be fervent in the love of Christ, he should be humble, composed and alert; his speech should be gentle and kind, he should be sincere-minded with everyone, he should speak [carefully] weighing his words, he should make a fence [barrier] for his mouth against any harmful words, he should distance himself from hasty laughter, he should not have a liking for finery in clothing, nor again should he let his hair grow [long] and adorn it; it is not appropriate for him to use on it scented unguents, nor should he take a seat at banquets.¹⁰⁵

Aphrahat also writes in *Rule 12* of *Demonstration 6* to those living together in covenant:

I would remind you once again, my beloved, of what is being written [in Scripture], for it is written as follows; [telling] how, when it was proving too onerous for Moses to guide the [Israelite] camp by himself, the Lord said to him: "I will take a little of the spirit which is upon you and I will give [it] to the seventy men [who are] the elders of Israel" [Numbers 11:17]. When he had taken a little of the spirit of Moses and the seventy men had been filled with it, Moses did not lack anything, nor was his spirit recognized as having had a little taken from it.

The blessed Apostle also said "God has divided up of the spirit of Christ and sent it among the prophets—but Christ was not harmed in any way, for his Father did not give him the Spirit using a measure" [John 3:34].

For it is from the spirit of Christ that the prophets received, each of them in so far as he was able to bear; and what is being poured out today on all flesh is from the spirit of this same Christ, with the result that sons and daughters, old and young, servants and maid servants are prophesying [Acts 2:17-18; Joel 3:1-2].¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Brock (1973:3) says that this work of Aphrahat 'represents Syriac Christianity in its purest form, virtually uncontaminated by Greek influences.'

¹⁰⁵*Demonstration 6.8.143* English translation by Valavanolickal (2005: 143)

¹⁰⁶*Demonstration 6.12.149-150* (: 149)

Monastic community was encouraged by the dividing of ‘the spirit of Christ’ and it being poured out ‘on all flesh’, quoting from the Old Testament prophecy of Joel repeated in Peter’s sermon in the New Testament Book of Acts. A pouring out so it can be divided even more was not without an emphasis on suffering and even martyrdom. In *Demonstration 21* Aphrahat extols the importance of the tradition of martyrdom from Jesus and the Apostles:

Great and excellent is the martyrdom of Jesus. He surpassed in affliction and in confession all who were before or after.

And after this, Apostles in turn had been martyrs. And also concerning our brethren who are in the West, in the days of Diocletian there came great affliction and persecution to the whole Church of God, which was in all their region. The churches were overthrown and uprooted, and many confessors and martyrs made confession. And the Lord turned in mercy to them when they had been persecuted.¹⁰⁷

The tradition of martyrdom that Aphrahat wrote about continued in the Church of the East in the coming centuries representing not only the end of earthly life due to persecution but also the daily life of sacrifice. It involved both virginity and holiness, two qualities important to East Syrian monastic identity and further discussed in 6.2. The identity was affirmed in daily practices of liturgy which will be explored in 6.4.

A key Syriac word that encompassed these two qualities of virginity and holiness as well as both *coenobitic* and *anchoritic* streams was *ihiduyuta*. It had at least three converging meanings of singleness: singleness in a physical celibate sense, single-minded in devotion, and a special relationship to Christ in singleness as the Heavenly Bridegroom.¹⁰⁸ Singleness in all three meanings characterized the wandering ascetics of the Syro-Mesopotamian world, called *Messalians* [those who pray] who also engaged in mission witness.¹⁰⁹ With a similar theme as Aphrahat in his emphasis on the witness of a martyr Church, Robert Murray describes these monastic witnesses as ‘deliberately homeless followers of the homeless Jesus on their ceaseless pilgrimage through the world.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷*Demonstration 21* English translation by Young (1969:280-281)

¹⁰⁸See Murray’s article (1975) for an expansion of the meaning of the word *ihiduyuta*.

¹⁰⁹The *Messalians* would be resisted by Timothy I during his Patriarchate accused of a lack of doctrinal purity. For discussion of Timothy’s relationship with them see the recent article by Trieger (2011).

¹¹⁰Murray (2004:28).

Also in the fourth century, an important Father of the Church, Saint Ephrem (d. 373), whose writings would have a deep influence on many traditions including the Church of the East until the present day, combined a commitment of devotion to Christ with rich poetic imagery contributing to a growing emphasis on monastic communities that mirrored heavenly realities. The richness of his imagery provided strength and nurture for the Church to live in faithfulness to its call of both inward devotion and outward witness.¹¹¹

Theological foundations for the monastic mission of the Church of the East can be seen not only in the work of Aphrahat but also in the sixth century Church leader Narsai (c. 520). Along with Saint Ephrem and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428),¹¹² Narsai provided some of the most important religious and intellectual roots for the school system of the East Syrians and also in his homilies a wealth of Biblical exposition used in Nisibis and other monasteries and schools of the Church. One of Narsai's homilies that described the calling of the Church to outward witness is in his *Homily to Paul and Peter*.¹¹³ In this homily, one that also espouses the value of martyrdom, the emphasis on the Spirit's empowering is included in over fifty-five references. Sunquist writes:

‘Narsai’s theology must be understood within the missiological framework of its original context. We might have expected this dimension to his theology judging from the rapid and extensive spread of the East Syrian Church, but little has been said about the theological foundation for the geographic spread.’¹¹⁴

In another homily of Narsai, *Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany and Ascension*, he writes:

¹¹¹See Narinskaya (2013) for the richness of Ephrem's poetic imagery in his hymns.

¹¹²Theodore was called 'The Interpreter' for his important role for the Church in Biblical exegesis and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

¹¹³For a translation of this homily see Kruger (1958). Also, Scott Sunquist has written on Narsai's mission dimension to his theology in his unpublished PhD dissertation (1990).

¹¹⁴Sunquist (1990:127).

Your [task] is this: to complete the mystery of preaching. And you shall be witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person. You I want to seal with your signature, the testament which I have written in blood for the sons of Adam. You I send as messengers to the four quarters [of the earth] to convert the Gentiles to kinship with the House of Abraham. By you as light, I will banish the darkness of error; and by your flames, I will enlighten the blind world. Go forth, give freely the freedom of life to mortality!¹¹⁵

In this exposition of Acts 1 in the New Testament, Narsai imagines the commission of Christ to his disciples that describes elements of involvement in mission activities. Included are ‘the mystery of preaching’, being ‘witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person’, and being sent ‘as messengers’ to the whole earth. The Church is called to be light by which darkness will be banished and as flame to ‘enlighten the blind world.’ All of these activities continued in later centuries as part of the Church of the East’s monastic mission and will be further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis. Narsai has Christ’s closing words to be ‘Go forth’ and they will ‘give freely the freedom of life in mortality.’

Missionary dimensions in Narsai’s theology included martyrdom for Christ, a special calling of Christians to be a witness to the world, the importance of the teacher in that calling, and the universal nature of that mission call to the whole earth. Of that universal calling, Narsai writes:

In the temple of Jesus’ body, He willed to receive the worship of men; and in his visible [nature], to show the universe the power of his [hidden] nature. Mortality, filled with passions, I have sought to examine; because it has suddenly become a spring that pours forth life to the universe. He fulfilled the will of his Sender by [His] redemption of men; and accomplished [His] active work [or salvation] for the universe.¹¹⁶

The above elements in Narsai of martyrdom in witness and the calling to universal mission are also seen in a letter of Isho-yahbh III (d. 658) who was Patriarch of the Church in the period of Islam’s early growth stage:

The perfect life of the Christians is proved by two indications: by a holy life, and by Divine miracles which they can perform; and above all by this, that they match a faithful life with a faithful death. They wondrously achieve these three things, because they first

¹¹⁵English translation in Sunquist (1990:127) For full translation of homily see P.O. Vol. 40:1:182. Moffett also comments on this homily in (1998:202).

¹¹⁶English translation in Sunquist (1990:114)

received the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism. But the Spirit Himself is rightly and justly given by the priestly power for the Holy Church of God, conferred by the laying-on of hands and the Apostolic succession, which is imparted canonically in the Holy Church of Christ our Lord.¹¹⁷

Isho-yahbh's exhortation to Christians is that a 'faithful life' is to be matched with 'a faithful death'. Believers can achieve this in part by receiving 'the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism', continuing a similar emphases in Aphrahat and Narsai that included the calling of martyrdom with the giving of the Holy Spirit for service. In the Patriarch's letter, the 'perfect life' is proved by both inner and outward dimensions: the life of holiness and the performing of 'Divine miracles'.

In examining the foundation and theology of monastic mission in the Church of the East, various models of response can be seen from monasticism to the surrounding cultures and faiths they encountered. A helpful list of five is given by a historian of Asian missions, Samuel Hugh Moffett.¹¹⁸ First is the *Hermit on his Holy Hill* with an emphasis on hostility to culture, personified by St. Simon Stylites who would sit on an elevated platform near Aleppo: praying, preaching or just being silent. Hundreds of these platforms existed in the region of Syria and Palestine but were much less common further east in Mesopotamia and Persia. An emphasis on withdrawing from society whether to a platform above the ground or to a lonely place was a common perception of the monasticism found in Egypt. It was also similar in perception to the harsher forms of Syrian monasticism particularly in its West Syrian version. It is not that it was unknown in East Syrian monasticism but less common. Examples of this harsher monasticism include a dressing in rags and even self-destruction through fire.¹¹⁹

A second model was the *Bishop in his Blessed City* with an emphasis on drawing people for witness and wisdom. Monasteries in this model were places of hospitality and while there the traveler or visitor received various forms of solace or advice. In the next section of this

¹¹⁷Letter 14, Latin in Duval (1905) and English translation in Young (1969:322).

¹¹⁸Moffett (1987:473-486)

¹¹⁹Voobus (1958:168) elaborates on some of the harsher aspects of Syrian monasticism postulating that this was due to influences coming from India.

chapter (2.3), the monastery as a place of encounter in pre-Islam Arabia will be explored from Christian sources in the sixth and seventh century. As Islam began to develop Muslims began to be aware of and wrote about these monasteries around them, also discussed in the next section. In 5.2 and 5.3 this awareness of monastic activities in the monasteries will be examined from Muslim sources in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Third was the model of the *Teacher in his School* with the school often within or next to the monastery. Though common to both West and East Syrian branches, this model would become particularly important to the latter and be combined with training for monastic activities in witness. Aspects of this role of the teacher in these monastic activities will be discussed particularly in Chapter 4 from Christian sources in the eighth and ninth centuries.

The fourth model was the *Patriarch in his Christian Ghetto*. The nature of being a *dhimmi* community within Islam created at times separation into their own worlds and realities. In the early Abbasid period that this thesis focuses on, the influence of Patriarch Timothy I with the Muslim rulers would provide the East Syrian Church with a realm of stability and peace though living under various restrictions.

Fifth was the model of the *Missionary to the ends of the earth*. The thesis will especially focus on models 3 and 5, the teacher and missionary as part of an argument that they were vital to the sustaining of monastic activities across Asia in the early Abbasid period. Vital links between them in the context of the monastery as a location for outward witness and influence will be elaborated on particularly in Chapter 4.

A sixth model that Moffett does not mention, but should be added, and that would have importance across the Indian Ocean to India and China was *The Merchant across Asia*. This thesis in 6.3 will explore from Christian sources how the monks going out from the monasteries may have been linked to merchant activities and how that informed their identity in outward witness.

2.3 Monastic Mission among the Arabs in the Seventh-Eighth centuries

In the early seventh century as a new prophetic voice emerged in Arabia these monks in cells were spread throughout West Asia including in the Arabian Peninsula. They belonged to both West and East Syrian monasteries, living at times a *coenobitic* life and also an *anchoritic* one. Their presence had been noted by Arabs in the years before Islam began and would be written about as it developed, creating a new form of literature for Muslims discussed later in this section.

Important seventh century Christian sources for this Arabian monasticism, as well as in Mesopotamia, are monastic histories that detail activities of the monks and the role of these monasteries. These works include the *History of Ahudemme* and the *History of Maruta*.¹²⁰ Maruta served as the Metropolitan of Tikrit (629-649) and built a monastery dedicated to Saint Sergius near the river Euphrates.¹²¹ The *History of Maruta* has descriptions of some of the monasteries that had been constructed as well as their impact on the surrounding areas as Islam began to spread into Mesopotamia:

By them [the monks] and by this monastery all Mesopotamia was pacified because [the monastery] was situated at the center of it. God, by the hands of our father [Maruta], made of it a refuge, a harbor, and a place of repose for all who travel and dwell in this desert, and at the same time a joy, a refuge, a protection from danger, against hunger and thirst, for all who pass the place. Those who cross the desert to reach ‘Aqula find rest there, it is their harbor. Those who travel from the Euphrates to the Tigris or the Tigris to the Euphrates stop there. One must see the [multitudes who] camp there and pass on, and others who dwell there; feeding their hunger they are sated, drinking, they are refreshed. The indigent, the afflicted, the sick, and the feeble are brought there, above all by the people who live in Mesopotamia, and are cured and leave strengthened, in good health and succored as much in body as in spirit. [This monastery] saved many men, it protected them and guarded them from lions, from chill, from heat, and from other dangers and rescued them from lions, from chill, from heat, and from other dangers and rescued them. The monks who live there led many souls that were far from God and from knowledge of Him to the Orthodox faith, and they were a cause of good to them. This was the case not only for travellers in the desert but also for those who dwell in the fortress of the Euphrates.¹²²

¹²⁰For these works in Syriac with French translation see Nau (1905)

¹²¹See Fowden (1999) for background history to this period of the seventh century.

¹²²Denha *History of Maruta* 6.85-86 in Fowden (1999:125).

The above description of a particular monastery in Mesopotamia as Islam was beginning to expand has several important points in it. The monastery was ‘a refuge, a harbor, and a place of repose’ as well as a place where the hungry are fed and the thirsty are nourished. It was also a place where ‘the indigent, the sick, the afflicted and the feeble’ are brought to the monastery, and ‘are cured and leave strengthened, in good health and succored as much in body as in spirit.’ It was part of Christian witness in a role of being a ‘harbor’ and ‘refuge’ for those who were not only travellers in body but in spirit.

An important location for monastic witness among the Arabs both before and after the coming of Islam was the city of Hira in what is now western Iraq. In a 1974 Japanese archaeological expedition to Hira excavations have uncovered ‘one of the many monastic institutions which dotted the region of Hira in the fifth-eighth centuries.’¹²³ Abraham of Kaskar (d. 588 C.E.) who built the ‘Great Monastery’ at Mt. Izla in Northern Iraq and wrote his monastic rules in 571, had been a missionary among the Arabs at Hira before moving to Mt. Izla. These rules provided a model and impetus for many other new monasteries that included Beit Abhe.¹²⁴

Hira was a location of importance also as the place where the genre of Islamic writing about Christian monasteries started and included material stretching back to pre-Islamic Arabia as well. The first Muslim to write about the monasteries was Hisham al-Kalbi (d. 819 C.E.) who lived in the region of Hira. His work was titled *Churches and Monasteries of al-Hira and the genealogies of the Ibadites by Hisham bin Muhammed b. al-Saibal-Kalbi*.¹²⁵ It provided a detailed list of the monasteries in and around Hira. As Irfan Shahid has noted: ‘From him derive all subsequent writers on monasteries, the most important of whom was Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d.967), the author of *al-Aghani*, who is known to have written a non-extant book on monasteries, *Kitab al-Diyarat*.’ [The Book of Monasteries]¹²⁶

¹²³See Hunter’s article of (1996) on Hira and its place in the monastic witness to the Arabs.

¹²⁴Abraham’s rules will be discussed further in 4.3

¹²⁵Hunter (1996:80)

¹²⁶Shahid (2002:157).

Irfan Shahid, in a three volume series on the historical relationship between the Arabs and Byzantines, has also written extensively on these monasteries of the West and East Syrians and Melkite communities up to the seventh century, including the impact on Arabs both before and after the coming of Islam.¹²⁷ The first two volumes place in context the role of Christian monastic communities in the pre-Islam period with the last on the beginnings of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Shahid in this third volume notes Arab writers who wrote on monasteries and lived around the Mesopotamian city of Mosul including two brothers named Abu Uthman and Abu Baker. They were poets and ‘interested mainly in poetry on monasteries in the Islamic period and related matters. Their work titled *Kitab al-Diyarat* has not survived but portions are quoted in later works on the subject.’¹²⁸ Another poet who wrote on the monasteries, al-Sari al-Raffa, was from the Aleppo area. His work, also titled *Kitab al-Diyarat*, has not survived. Only the *Kitab al-Diyarat* by the tenth century writer al-Shabushti is extant and none of the earlier works. It will be discussed in 5.2 in a section on how Muslims of the ninth and tenth centuries looked at monastic activities.

The amount of material written by Muslims on Christian monasteries and their activities, though the great majority is lost, suggests a certain level of readership and interest. One Muslim writer, al-Dhahabi (d. 1348), even called this literature its own genre. As part of his volumes on pre-Islamic Arabia and into the seventh century Shahid writes:

Of the long list of Muslim authors who apparently were attracted by this genre of Arab historiography on monasteries, reference should be made to the work of those who were interested in the monks themselves. Al-Dhahabi, a Muslim author (d. 1348), wrote a monumental history, *Tarikh al-Islam [The History of Islam]*, in which he enumerated what he called *Funun al-Tarikh*, “the genres of historiography,” of which he counted forty and of which one was called *Tarikh al-Rubban wa Uli al-Sawani [The History of the Monks and Those of the Monasteries]*. By the time of Dahabi, this genre apparently had established itself as a legitimate one in Islamic historiography. It is noteworthy that the two terms he used for monks and monasteries were the terms used in the *Qur’an*.¹²⁹ This raises the question of whether interest in the history of monasteries may be added

¹²⁷These volumes appeared in 1984, 1990, and 2002.

¹²⁸(:157).

¹²⁹In 5.2 there is a description of three passages from the *Qur’an* dealing with the monks.

to the list of themes, the treatment of which by historians and *Qur'anic* exegetes was inspired by reference to them in the *Qur'an*.¹³⁰

When it is seen how many of these works on monasteries were written in the centuries before and after the coming of Islam a couple of points can be noted. First is that the amount of writings, particularly by poets describing the monks and monasteries, indicates that the monasteries were of at least some importance for the Arabs both pre-Islamic and after. Al-Shabushti's work has also a large amount of poetry that includes the symbols of the monasteries and activities there. Though some of these poems are simply featuring events based in the monastery, others provide valuable reflection by Muslim authors on the presence and activities of these monasteries.

The second point about these books on the monasteries is that they are no longer extant pre-tenth century. Al-Shabushti's is the only one to survive and even that may be with some pages lost.¹³¹ It is of course not unusual for large amounts of material from earlier centuries to be lost and to find that sometimes only one work by a writer may survive, like the East Syrian monk of the eighth-ninth century Theodore bar Koni (c. 799 C.E.)¹³² In this case, however, a whole genre of writing before the tenth century is no longer extant. Some portions of these works continued to be available at least until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when they were still able to be used by Muslim geographers. Shahid credits Isfahani with developing it into a genre though 'Hisham should be credited with the initiation of this genre of historical writing in Islamic times.' He notes:

Isfahani developed it into a genre that dealt with monasteries in a comprehensive fashion, not local or regional, limited to one particular geographical area. In so doing, he has preserved for posterity some very valuable data on Arab Christianity and its structures before the rise of Islam. It is especially unfortunate that the book is not extant, but much of what the subsequent authors on monasteries have written derived from Isfahani's *Kitab al-Diyarat*, which thus partially survives in quotations.¹³³

¹³⁰Shahid (:158).

¹³¹See a brief discussion in 5.2.

¹³²The *Scholion* is his only surviving work and is discussed in 3.4. For English translation see Griffith (1981)

¹³³(:159).As Shahid notes these quotations from Isfahani in later works have been brought together and published in a work of over 200 pages titled *Al-Diyarat (1991)*.

In the passage on the monastery in the *History of Maruta* above it was seen as a place of refuge, repose, and succor in various ways for travellers passing through. One of those monastery founders prayed for Arabs as part of his monastic witness, an East Syrian ascetic named John of Dailam (d. 738).¹³⁴ Stories of his life are also in the *Historia Monastica*, an important work discussed in the next section of this chapter.¹³⁵ An account exists in Syriac of his life and stories of encounters with Arabs.¹³⁶ John had close links with Beit Abhe monastery and received his training there:

[John] overheard [as a child] two monks talking about the monastic life; they were from the monastery of Beit Abhe, and were speaking about the riches of the monastic life and about their love for God and for each other. As a result of hearing about these divine matters his mind was inflamed with love for Christ and he set off for the monastery of Beit Abhe. They refused to accept him on the grounds that he was still a child, but one of the holy men, who knew his parents, received him into his cell and gave him a sufficient training in the scriptures.¹³⁷

Then the saint entered even more interior regions, ascending difficult mountains. In that N.E. region he converted many people over the course of 33 years, enduring hunger, thirst and nakedness, extirpating every trace of paganism in the East....He prayed over them and blessed them, entrusting them to God.¹³⁸

One of the encounters John had was in Damascus with the Arab Ummayyad Caliph [King] Abd al-Malik (685-705 C.E.):

The King asked him to pray for his daughter who was tried by demons. She was healed. The King then offered John gifts, but he refused them, asking the King instead for peace and calm for the Christian people, and for permission to build churches and monasteries wherever they wanted.¹³⁹

The history of John is primarily a hagiographical account filled with stories of his activities in the areas of Dailam and ‘in the East’ with a journey to Damascus in about 701 as well as Basra and Fars in 703. On several journeys he founded monasteries as mentioned in his

¹³⁴Dailam is a region that corresponds to southwest of the Caspian Sea, or the modern areas of Azerbaijan or northwest Iran.

¹³⁵John of Dailam appears in the *Historia Monastica* in *Book 2.25.220-227*.

¹³⁶See a description and partial translation by Brock (1981)

¹³⁷(:144)

¹³⁸English translation by Brock (:148)

¹³⁹(:148)

account and ‘a hostel for wayfarers is also built, and this was run by monks.’¹⁴⁰ The story of the healing of the Caliph’s daughter above, though an account written by a Christian and with no known attestation from others in the royal court, still brings out important material on the role that monastic witness may have played. Monastic witness among the Muslims involved aspects of some of these elements above; providing a place of refuge and hospitality for the wayfarer, with that hospitality offered not only to Christians but also to Muslims. There was also the opportunity for prayers for healing and the ‘succor of body and spirit’ as noted earlier in this section in the *History of Maruta*.

According to this account the encounter that John of Dailam had in Damascus led to the Caliph giving ‘permission to build churches and monasteries wherever they wanted.’ Though this is written from a Christian perspective, it does sound similar to what will be seen in 6.3 of this thesis, where in the copper plate charters in Malabar in the early ninth century and in China as inscribed on the stone monument of 781 C.E. a degree of favour from rulers was indicated.

In the decades just before these encounters of John of Dailam, the Patriarch of the Church of the East Isho-yahbh III (d. 658) was aware of the growing influence of the new faith of Islam and how many Christians were going over to it. In his letters the sense of ambiguity and questions that many had about the nature of this faith would also be apparent. In one letter written to Shem’on, a Metropolitan¹⁴¹ of the Church, the Patriarch comments on what is happening in areas of Oman and Kerman. The passion of the Christian leader comes through:

Where are your sons, O father forsaken? Where are your sanctuaries, O priest cast out? Where is the vast population of Mazon? [Oman]? They have not been compelled by sword, or fire or torments, but merely seized with a desire for the half of their possessions! Mad! –for apostasy has straightway swallowed them up, and they are destroyed for ever, while two...only, so-called priests, have escaped from the flame of impiety and have been brought to nought. Alas! Alas! From so many thousands of men called Christians, not one least offering is made to God as fitting sacrifice for our true Faith! Where, too, are the sanctuaries of Kerman, and of all Fars?¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰(:173)

¹⁴¹The role of Metropolitan in the Church referred to a leader usually in authority over at least 12 bishops.

¹⁴²*Letter 14* English translation by Young (1969:317)

His letter brings out the passionate struggle the Patriarch was feeling as he saw ‘so many thousands of men called Christians’ going into apostasy. Isho-yahbh sees the motives of why they are leaving the faith as not being from outward compulsions of violence but for economic reasons. A sense of helplessness of the Christian leader comes through in the letter and perhaps contributes to a sense of an unpredictable future.

Later in the same letter, however, the Patriarch takes a different tone with a greater sense of ambiguity about the new faith and its leaders and their involvement in areas where churches and monasteries exist:

Nevertheless those very Arabs, to whom God has granted the rule of the lands at this time, lo! They are in our part of the country, as you know; but they not only refrain from attacking our religion. They even commend our Faith, honour the priests and saints of our God, and confer benefits on churches and monasteries!

Why then, have your people of Mazon given up their faith because of them? And that when the Arabs, as the people of Mazon themselves admit, did not compel them to give up their religion, but ordered them to give up merely half of their possessions in order to keep their Faith! But they have forsaken the Faith which brings eternal benefit, to keep half of the possessions of this transient age. A Faith, which all peoples have purchased and purchase still be shedding their life-blood, and by which they obtain the inheritance of eternal life, your people of Mazon would not purchase for half of their possessions.

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The above sections in the same letter show a degree of ambiguity in how the Patriarch views the new faith and how the Christians are responding to it. Isho-yahbh starts this section by affirming that ‘God has granted the rule of our lands at this time’ to the Arab Muslims. He then writes that ‘they even commend our Faith, honour the priests and saints of our God, and confer benefits on churches and monasteries!’ It is written in the first generation of Muslim rule when the churches and monasteries were strong institutions in many areas and the relationship between the two faiths was unpredictable and uneasy. Whether the Patriarch or the many Christians in these areas expected the rule of Islam to continue indefinitely into the future is unknown. His comments in this letter do relate the leaving of the Christian faith ‘which brings eternal benefit’ to a holding on to possessions in

¹⁴³*Letter 14:318*

this life. The Patriarch's own commitment to an ascetic life and not focusing on material gain may shape his response to those becoming Muslims.

In this first century of Muslim rule two monastic histories were written: *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian* and *The History of Rabban Bar-'Idta*.¹⁴⁴ Though both are titled as histories there is less history than in the *Historia Monastica* and more emphasis on hagiographical stories particularly about Rabban Hormizd. There is great emphasis on the character of this monk and the stories of the miracles he did both of which seem to attest to the East Syrian version of the faith being the correct one over the West Syrians. Rabban Hormizd lived thirty nine years in and around the monastery of Bar-'Idta, and then after several years in the mountains near Alqosh the local people built a monastery for him which survives until today. Bar-'Idta, from whom the monastery was named that he founded in 562, just a few years before Beit Abhe, did many miracles and died in 612 having lived to the age of 103.

In the *History of Rabban Hormizd* he receives an affirmation to mission from Matthew 28:19:

He hath raised up for Himself spiritual physicians in His Church that they might be the salt which should salt the palates of those who had lost their taste, and the light which should illumine the hearts which had become darkened.¹⁴⁵

The two themes of spiritual physicians and teachers that would illumine the darkness were important as motifs for mission of the Church of the East and appeared frequently in their mystical and theological writings.¹⁴⁶ When these works were written, most likely in the middle to end of the seventh century or early eighth, Islam was still in its first century and the threat to the Church it would represent in the future was perhaps not yet understood. To

¹⁴⁴See Budge (1902) for translation of these works. In his introduction to the Syriac and English versions of these two books Budge writes that he obtained the manuscript in 1890 on a visit to the monastery of Rabban Hormizd. It had been in the possession of the monks there for several centuries and was 'greatly prized by them.' The manuscript did not have either a colophon or date on it so identification of how far back it goes is difficult to ascertain though the monks said that it had been copied from one even older.

¹⁴⁵*History of Rabban Hormizd*, pg. 28

¹⁴⁶See Chapter 4 for the connection of monastic activities in training with the idea of illumination.

the East and West Syrians, the factor of what they faced in each other and the Christological views of the other still represented the greater threat. Both groups continued to emphasize their own identities, which took form particularly based in their Christology, but would also manifest in how they expressed the mission witness of their faith.

In the story below, along with describing monastic activities among the Arabs in the seventh century, another theme that emerges is the hostility towards the West Syrians that monks like Rabban had. It is recorded with words of great venom in other sections of the work. In the passage below when Rabban Hormizd turns his face to the East to pray he voices an identification of who Jesus is. He seems to be praying with an East Syrian understanding of who Jesus was including both elements of his divinity but also his humanity in the prayer. The phrase ‘Jesus, son of Mary’ identifies Jesus in his humanity, important to the Church of the East, and also a term that Muslims would use to refer to Jesus in the *Holy Qur’an* as well. West Syrians emphasized more the divinity of Jesus and this was a point of difference and hostility between these Christian communities. These issues of identity and hostility will be further explored in 6.2 of this thesis.

As part of these *Histories* activities of healing as well as preaching are described, including the healing of ‘Shaibin the Arab’ who was the son of Ukbe, the ‘great governor of Mosul’:

Now Shaibin the Arab, the son of Ukbe, the great governor of Mosul, fell sick of a disease, and his sickness waxed exceedingly sore and grievous, and although the physicians of the city laboured with him, in no wise did they benefit him, on the contrary, his sickness gained more and more hold upon him. And his father was distressed greatly because of him, for the physicians had cut off his hope, saying, ‘Our knowledge faileth [to help us] in the sickness of this young man, but we counsel thee, O our son Amir ‘Ukbe, to carry thy son gently in a litter and to take him to the holy man Rabban Hormizd, and when he hath laid his right hand upon him he will be healed completely of whatever sickness he hath upon him.

And the holy man answered and commanded his servant Gabriel to bring the young man and to set him before him, and Gabriel did so. Then Rabban Hormizd turned his face to the East, and prayed before our Lord, saying, ‘O our Lord Jesus Christ, Thou beloved Son, Who art from the Holy Father; Thou O our Lord, the Son of Mary, the Son of God, during Thy human dispensation didst raise from the dead three dead men. The children of Thy nation, the Jews, crucified Thee upon the wood, and Thou wast buried in the heart of the earth three days and three nights, and having risen from the grave in the glory of the Father, thou didst take Thy seat in the heavens at the right hand of the Father. And Thou didst command us to ask of Him petitions in the Name of Jesus the Nazarene, rise up, O Shaibin, from thy state of death.’ And at this word, life entered into the young man, and his flesh began to quiver, and as soon as the holy old man saw that his life had entered into him he drew nigh to the body, and moved his right hand three times over

him that was dead, and said 'Shaibin, in the Name of Jesus the Nazarene rise thou up from the dead, for by His Resurrection our Lord Jesus hath abrogated the sentence of death which was passed on thee,' and immediately he opened his eyes and they straightened him, and he sat up.

Then the holy man drew nigh unto him, and gave him a washing [from his cross] to drink, and he drank, all those who were standing there were seized with wonderment and joy, and they cried out, saying, 'In very truth the Christians stand in the truth, and they worship their Lord Christ blamelessly, for by the Name of Jesus the Nazarene this man hath been raised from the dead.'¹⁴⁷

Several elements in this story stand out as points to be noted. First is that the person afflicted is the son of the 'great governor of Mosul'. The encounter has resulted not only in a healing but a resurrection from the dead and Rabban Hormzid uses this opportunity to preach about this Nazarene who has caused it. The crowd around cries out with joy at this miracle and says 'In very truth the Christians stand in the truth, and they worship their Lord Jesus Christ blamelessly, for by the Name of Jesus the Nazarene this man hath been raised from the dead.'

The result of the crowd around crying out 'In very truth the Christians stand in the truth' suggests that they are Muslims and that the author is making this point to show the superiority of the claims of Christ. Activities of healing by the Rabban have resulted in a miracle that causes others to hear of 'this Nazerene' and identify for themselves that this 'Name of Jesus' would raise a man from the dead. There is no record of conversions in the crowd but a proclaiming of what the Christians believe.

Hostility between the two parts of the Church as seen in this passage¹⁴⁸ had an important bearing on the mission and identity of the Church of the East. Though this account is from the seventh century, that competitive hostility would continue into the ninth and become part of their expansion to the east, which will be further expanded on in the next chapter when the idea of mission as 'dispersal' will be explored from the Church's own sources.

The section has explored the presence of monks and monasteries both before and after the coming of Islam. It resulted in mission activities among the Arabs that were documented in

¹⁴⁷*History of Rabban Hormizd, Chapter 11.97-101.*

¹⁴⁸Rabban Hormizd uses in the above passage phrases for Jesus hostile to the West Syrians like 'Son of Mary' and 'Son of God'.

Christian and Muslim sources of the period. In the next section, links across the Indian Ocean in monastic mission up to the ninth century will be examined.

2.4 Mesopotamian links across the Indian Ocean up to the Ninth Century

Monastic activities in mission were happening not only before and after Islam began in Arabia and West Asia but also further east as well. In this section involvement up to the ninth century will be considered and related to the ecclesial leadership of the Church in Mesopotamia. These activities in Church tradition went back to the first century and the journey of Apostle Thomas.

A contemporary source of the mid to late first century C.E. is the *Acts of Thomas* which tells the story of the Apostle Thomas and his journey and work in India. Though the historicity of this document has been challenged it does present a plausible background for the journey to India from West Asia of a Jewish man in the mid-first century. An interesting dimension of Thomas' trip to India portrayed in the *Acts* is his joining the merchant Habban showing a trade-witness nexus.¹⁴⁹

There is plausibility in these two things: journeys across the Indian Ocean and involvement of merchant activity at times combined with religious witness which can be seen in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*¹⁵⁰ the first documented journey across the Indian Ocean.¹⁵¹ As a voyage log from the period of the mid-first century it shows that merchant activities were occurring across the Indian Ocean. Much of this upsurge across the Indian Ocean in

¹⁴⁹There is a large volume of secondary sources on Thomas coming to India with scholars like Medlycott (1905), Mingana (1926), Farquhar (1927) and Mundadan (1970) believing in its historical probability. The South Indian church tradition strongly support it as well. Others like Rae (1892) and Joseph (1955) have considered it legend. Also in question is whether he made one or two trips to India and whether he was in North India as well as the manner and location of his death. The importance of St. Thomas can be seen today in that several streams of Indian Christians refer to themselves as 'St. Thomas Christians.' In this thesis they will be referred to not by that name but as identified with the East Syrian Church. This is not to downplay the connection with Thomas but to be consistent with the emphasis of this research on the context with the homelands of Mesopotamia.

¹⁵⁰The *Periplus* is extant in a single manuscript held in Heidelberg, Germany, dated to the beginning of the tenth century. It was written in a range of time as early as 30 C.E. to as late as 230 C.E. Casson (1989) has the complete edition of the *Periplus* with commentary.

¹⁵¹See Schoff (1974) as well as an English translation.

the next few centuries was through ‘anonymous seamen, merchants and hangers-on who followed the sea-lanes from the Red Sea to the Malabar Coast, perhaps also occasional Christian missionaries.’¹⁵² As Casson notes: ‘The *Periplus* makes clear that for the merchants of Roman Egypt, India’s west coast was the prime trading area, and the East Coast played a distinctly secondary route.’¹⁵³ In the document two ports in Western India are listed: ‘Barygaza’ which is modern-day Broach in Gujarat and Muziris which is Cranganore or modern-day Kollam.

A discovery in the last century confirming the plausibility of a regularity of Indian Ocean trade in the first several centuries C.E. came from excavations done in 1945 on the East Coast of India near Pondicherry. Evidence has been uncovered of a Roman trading outpost that dates back to the middle or second half of the first century which was a similar period to the writing of the *Periplus*.¹⁵⁴ The existence of this Roman link at Arikamedu underlines that in the middle of the first century when St. Thomas is believed to have made a similar journey either overland or across the Indian Ocean, other expeditions were also arriving on both the West and East sides of India.

A journey in the third century was made by Mar David in 250-300 C.E. He came to India from Basra as described in the *Chronicle of Se’ert*. Very little is known about David except that he was a priest of the Church of the East offering some kind of assistance to the Indian church. The passage in the *Chronicle of Se’ert* reads: ‘During the patriarchate of Shalufa and Papa, Dudi [David], Bishop of Basra on the Persian Gulf, an eminent doctor, left his see and went to India, and where he evangelized many people.’¹⁵⁵

It is not certain of course that this ‘India’ was the one to the east but as seen earlier there were regular voyages across to India by this period of history and it is plausible that David

¹⁵²Sedler (1980:85).

¹⁵³Casson (1989:22).

¹⁵⁴Excavation was done under the Archaeological Survey of India and published the following year of 1946 by Wheeler, Ghosh and Deva.

¹⁵⁵The *Chonique de Seert*, also titled the *Histoire Nestorienne Inedite*, is translated and edited by A. Scher, tragically murdered in Se’ert itself in 1915. Material on Mar David comes from P.O. 1V, pg. 236, translation by Young (1969:29).

did make his way there.¹⁵⁶ Just after this was the 325 C.E. Council of Nicea and one of the delegates was ‘John the Persian’. According to a fifth century history written by Gelasius John was bishop ‘of the whole of Persia and Greater India.’¹⁵⁷

In 403 C.E. Church Father Jerome wrote to a lady named Laeta how to bring up her child and said : ‘From India, from Persia, from Ethiopia we daily welcome monks in crowds. The Armenian bowman has laid aside his quiver, the Huns learn the Psalter, and the chilly Scythians are warmed with the glow of the faith.’¹⁵⁸ The context of Jerome’s letter refers to the Christian faith and the effect on those he is writing to, presumably Christians and not pagans, indicating that when he mentions ‘monks from India’, he may have been referring to the Church of the East and not the Buddhists or Manicheans. He does include monks from ‘Persia and Ethiopia’ and particularly Ethiopia would not have had Manichean monks. In Jerome’s reference to India in this letter as well as in other early references in the centuries before Cosmas the ‘confusion of Indias’ comes up.¹⁵⁹

More solid historical evidence of links comes from references to India in the work of Church of the East navigator and monk Cosmas Indicopleustes [India-sailor]. Writing the *Christian Topography* during 554-560 C.E., Cosmas mentions churches in various parts of India and Ceylon.¹⁶⁰ There is a question whether he actually visited India or drew on the accounts of other merchants. Little is known of Cosmas but he was a native most likely of Alexandria and a Church of the East believer.

¹⁵⁶Even more shadowy is a reference by Isho ‘Dad of Merv in the ninth century to a ‘Daniel the Indian’ who worked as a priest in Mesopotamia in about 425 C.E. Daniel supposedly was involved in helping Mar Kummi in translating the Epistle of Romans from Greek to Syriac. See Young (:28).

¹⁵⁷Mundadan (2001:79)

¹⁵⁸See Schaff (1893), Vol. 6 and letter 107 of Jerome.

¹⁵⁹Myerson (1993) uses this phrase for the title of his article that explores particularly in the Byzantine sources the name ‘India’. He thinks that a possible visit in the fourth century of Theophilus to South India was actually to the Homerites in the Arabian Peninsula and that Pantaneus went to South Arabia instead of western India. Myerson does acknowledge that Marcellinus (d. 395) and later Procopius (c. 565) showed ‘a fairly sound knowledge of the subcontinent of India.’ Mingana (1926) had similar questions about ‘India’ prior to Cosmas.

¹⁶⁰For the *Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* see Windstedt (1909).

The ecclesiastical hierarchy in India in the sixth century that Cosmas writes about was linked to a larger framework of organization in the Church of the East. The direct link of obedience for the Indian Church was to the Metropolitan of a city named Rev-Ardeshir in Persia. The importance of Rev-Ardeshir on the eastern side of the Gulf is attested by a letter in the following century coming from the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Isho-yahbh III (d. 658).¹⁶¹ As Patriarch in *Letter 14*, of which excerpts were seen in the previous section of this chapter, he writes a strong letter of rebuke to Shem'on the Metropolitan in the city of Rev-Ardeshir and the principle city in the province of Fars. Shem'on's offenses are not clear from the letter but the Patriarch reminds him of consequences for the people of India connected to his leadership:

Along with this, my God-loving brother, remember this as well: if our predecessors had closed the door of the gift of the Lord [i.e. Episcopal ordination] in the face of your need, in the way you have closed the door of Episcopal ordination in the face of the many peoples in India, depriving them of the gift of God for the sake of advantages that are subject to corruption and which feed the body's lusts, then maybe you would realize in what desperation the present general state of affairs has now reached.

But insofar as the gift of God has traveled, and does travel, by canonical paths, by way of good transmitters, see how the world has been filled with bishops, priests and faithful—like the stars in the sky, being increased day by day. Whereas in your region, from the time when you grabbed for yourselves rebellion against the ecclesiastical canons, the priestly transmission has been cut off from the people of India, and it has sat in darkness, deprived of the light of divine teaching which comes through true bishops.

This does not apply just to India, which stretches from the edge of the boundaries of the kingdom of Persia as far as the place called QLH, a land of 1200 parasangs,¹⁶² but it also applies to your own region, Fars. You will have an opportunity to realize the loss and misfortune that arises from disobedience such as this on that fearsome day when repentance is of no use to those who proffer it.

Look carefully at all this, our brother, and consider well the danger in which we are standing—I am not going to say 'you', for you personally are free from the compulsion of secular servitude, and you possess as well, so people say, a mind that loves virtue. Strive with all your strength to put aright the past and the recent harmful events which have occurred in your midst and at your hands—events which have been harmful for a long time to ecclesiastical law. Consider whence sin took its commencement—in the corruption of the canons; and how this was transmitted to the present state of weak faith and lax way of life. It is from that point, and to that point, that the eager course of your setting affairs to right should run, accompanied by labours induced by the fear of God.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹For Isho-yahbh's letters see Scott-Moncrieff (1904) and Duval (1905). Assemani in 1725 was the first to bring these letters to the attention of the Western scholarly community. Later Budge in his translation of the *Historia Monastica* by Thomas of Marga also printed some of the letters in (Vol. 1, lxxviff)

¹⁶²The question of QLH which may have been Klang in modern Malaysia is taken up in Colless (1969: 23-41).

¹⁶³*Letter 14* translation by Brock (1997:223-225)

The above passages of Isho-yahbh's letter reveal a pastoral concern for 'the many peoples of India' as part of his rebuke of Shem'on. It is not clear if 'the many peoples' refers to a great number that were part of the Church of the East in India or the population overall. His pastoral concern does indicate the connection that the Patriarch felt with India and his desire that the 'gift of God' would 'not be deprived them'. He was also concerned that the 'priestly transmission' had been 'cut off' through the Metropolitan's neglect or corruption. Isho-yahbh, writing in the seventh century says that India 'has sat in darkness, deprived of the light of divine teaching which comes through true bishops.' It is not clear if this is a reference to India perhaps ordaining its own Bishops and that these were not seen as 'true bishops' by Baghdad. It does indicate, however, that at this time of history there were links between Baghdad and India though mediated through the province of Fars. Connections back to Baghdad helped to sustain and strengthen the monastic witness and activities of the Church across Asia continuing into the early Abbasid period.

The letter also brings out an aspect of the internal structures of the Church of the East in this period of its long history. Edward Sachau wrote the following: 'The Church of this period was not a monolithic entity as was generally understood but had several streams and subdivisions.'¹⁶⁴ Part of an ongoing struggle of the Rev-Ardeshir province for greater authority and influence, the struggle would result in Fars going its own way from the middle of the sixth century until Timothy restored them in 790 C.E. and also separated India making it a Metropolitan itself in the last part of the eighth century. These letters attest to the ecclesial links between Baghdad, the Persian provinces, and India in the seventh and eighth centuries. Similar correspondence would be mirrored just over a century later by Timothy's own letters concerning India. Together they provide important evidence for connections between regions of the Church of the East in the seventh to ninth centuries as well as the strategic place Beit Abhe and the monasteries had in those relationships.

¹⁶⁴Sachau (1916) quoted in Malekandathil (2010:7).

Another letter of Isho-yahbh III, to the monks of Qatar, attests to these ecclesial connections with the East and highlights the difficulties of communications over long distances:

Lo there are more than twenty bishops and two metropolitans in the East, who have received in the past, and receive in the present, Episcopal ordination from the Church of God [i.e. the Patriarch] , and none of them have come to us for many years, nor did we ask them to come, but we know that in spite of the long distance that separates them from us they fulfill the obligations of their episcopacy in strict conformity with the Church of God, while the rights of their Episcopal jurisdiction are duly received from us. We write to them and they write to us.¹⁶⁵

In this letter the areas of the 'East' are not identified but the remoteness of the locations and indeed the Patriarch comments on the 'long distance that separates them from us' but still they 'fulfill the obligations'. They also 'continue to receive Episcopal ordination from the Church of God' despite these distances and lack of contact. As seen in Isho-yahbh's letters to Fars and his recognition of the connections to India, the 'East' may refer to India or also to China which had received a Church of the East monastic mission in 635 just fifteen years before he became Patriarch in 650 C.E. and just over twenty years before he died.

Isho-yahbh III had been a disciple of Rabban Jacob the founder of Beit Abhe in the early part of the seventh century and then studied at Nisibis.¹⁶⁶ He had a fond feeling about Beit Abhe the rest of his life addressing two letters to the monastery when he was the Bishop of Mosul in the early part of the seventh century. Isho-yahbh III was so closely tied to Beit Abhe that Budge writes: 'The history of the advancement of Isho-yahbh is practically the history of the progress of Beit Abhe.'¹⁶⁷ The first of his letters is a lengthy address dealing with his support for an unpopular abbot and other ecclesial affairs. The future Patriarch writes:

To the brethren in his monastery concerning the appointment of a Head, to the dear and beloved God-loving brethren, Simon, John, Kam-Isho, Bar-Denha, Daniel, Beraz-Sorin, Bar-Non, Isho-zekha, Aphni-Maran, and to all the holy brethren who are in the

¹⁶⁵Letter 3, Latin in (C.S.C.O. 2:63:202) English translation in Young (1969:23-24).

¹⁶⁶For more on Isho-yahbh's life see Duval (1905)

¹⁶⁷Budge (Vol.1: lxxxiv).

Monastery of Beit Abhe, individually and collectively, Isho-yahbh your brother in the Lord. Peace.¹⁶⁸

In another section Isho-yahbh in his attestation of Mar John the elder affirms the importance of the teaching going on in the monastery. It will be investigated further in Chapter 4 related to the kind of training going on in monasteries like Beit Abhe. He writes:

Take heed, then, O beloved brethren, to your God-loving brother Mar John the elder—to the testing of whose virtues a period but little short of seventy years hath been given, of these he hath passed [the last] thirty in leading blamelessly the life of a solitary, and the other years before these he hath passed in leading the perfect life of an instructor in the schools—and to yourselves, but especially to the old and honourable man who is in your midst, He was a receiver of instruction and a teacher who was associated with our blessed father, and now, by the command of our father, he hath been crowned over all these things with the crown of headship.¹⁶⁹

The second of his letters to the monks of Beit Abhe includes a brief reference to India in the context of his writing to Beit Abhe, connecting the monastery with the province of India at that period. The importance of this letter is as evidence that in the seventh century Beit Abhe was already involved with India and that there was ecclesial oversight from Baghdad. By the time of the eighth and ninth century and Timothy's patriarchate the monastery of Beit Abhe would still be a place where Timothy would call on for monks to go to other regions of Asia, as discussed in the next chapter.

One of the most important monasteries of the Church of the East, Beit Abhe (Monastery of the Forest), was founded in 595 C.E. by Jacob of Lashom formerly of the Great Monastery at Mt. Izla and was located on a mountain-side about 100 miles NE of the modern Iraqi city of Mosul near the Upper Zab river. It was one of the most famous monasteries 'both because of the social position of the majority of its monks, most of them rich Persians or Arabs and because of its proselytizing activities'.¹⁷⁰

During the written period of documentation of Beit Abhe's existence, 595-850 C.E., 'at least 100 monks became bishops, metropolitans and governors all the way to India and

¹⁶⁸Budge (Vol. 1: lxxvii.)

¹⁶⁹(:lxxx).

¹⁷⁰Leroy (1958:162).

China. For this reason, what happened at Beit Abhe during those years was of vital importance to the church as a whole.’¹⁷¹ Budge in his introduction also describes the far-reaching influence of Beit Abhe:

Many of the monks and ascetics therein belonged to noble Persian and Arab families, and the far-reaching influence of its sons who had gone forth into all parts of Armenia, Kurdistan, Babylonia, Arabia, Persia, and even into remote China, gave that house a reputation which must have eclipsed that of all others during the period of its greatest glory.¹⁷²

The most important primary source for the history of Beit Abhe and perhaps for the history of East Syrian monasticism in general is the *Historia Monastica* by Thomas of Marga written in approximately 840 C.E. It is ‘the largest and most important of the works written by Thomas.’¹⁷³ The text that E.A. W. Budge assembled in 1893 in Syriac and English came from four different manuscripts and according to him have a general agreement in material. The four manuscripts are in the British Library, the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris and two at the Vatican library. All of these manuscripts are similar in how the work is arranged and the contents which lends credence to Budge’s conclusion that ‘it has come down to us in the form to which it left the hands of its author.’¹⁷⁴ Assemani was the first to bring this work to the scholarly public in Europe by publishing the Syriac manuscripts with a translation into Latin in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis*.¹⁷⁵ The work fits within the genre of hagiographical and monastic history yet with a concern for detail and accuracy not existing in *The History of Rabban Hormizd*.

When the letters of both Isho-yahbh III and Timothy I are read along-side the *Historia Monastica* corroborating details emerge. Thomas of Marga in arranging his materials relied on stories told to him as well as having access to at least some of both Patriarchs’ letters. At the beginning of this section Isho-yahbh’s letter to Simon containing his rebuke of him and his disaffection towards the Fars Metropolitan can be also read in the *Historia Monastica*:

¹⁷¹Young (1974:109)

¹⁷²Budge (Vol.1:xxx)

¹⁷³(:xxvii)

¹⁷⁴(:xxviii).

¹⁷⁵See Assemani (1730)

And after these things Mar Catholicus (Isho-yahbh) went down to Beth Ketraye¹⁷⁶ that he might reconcile the inhabitants thereof, for they had cut themselves off from obedience to the Episcopal throne of Rev-Ardashir which is Persia; and he went to the island of Diren,¹⁷⁷ and the people thereof were also reconciled. And he went up from there, and came to this holy monastery, and he brought with him cloths for the altar which had been woven for him in the island of Diren, of Beth Ketraye.¹⁷⁸

The above passage not only connects Isho-yahbh's letter and his desire to reconcile those who had cut themselves off, it also indicates the connection of the Church of the East in the Gulf with Baghdad. The altar at the 'holy monastery', Beit Abhe, was adorned with cloths that had been woven in the island of Diren bringing physical connection to links with the churches and monasteries of the Persian Gulf.

Thomas of Marga, a former member of Beit Abhe himself who entered it in 832 C.E., writes about activities of the monks from this and other monasteries in *Book 5* of his *Historia Monastica*. Particularly in *Book 5*, he details stories of various missionary monks like Mar Yabhalla, Kardagh his brother and Bishop Mar Elijah: 'Men who were ordained by Mar (Patriarch) Timothy, for the countries of the barbarians remote from all understanding and a decent manner of life, and to whose part of the world no preacher and planter of the truth had ever gone.'¹⁷⁹ These monks will be discussed in depth in the following chapter of this thesis (3.2).

Thomas of Marga's work will be further explored in 3.3 related to what mission activities meant in how the monks related to the surrounding Muslim community. These encounters had elements of both unpredictability as well as ambiguity. A factor that may contribute to this ambiguity as well as unpredictability in how the Arabs are presented is the timing of when the *Historia Monastica* was written. The traditional date that is given by Budge is that Thomas wrote it in 840 but this has been challenged by Fiey who pointed out that it

¹⁷⁶What was known as the province of Qatar in eastern Arabia.

¹⁷⁷Near the present location of Bahrain.

¹⁷⁸*Historia Monastica, Book 2.14.188.*

¹⁷⁹5. 3.468

actually must have been written after 850 as Thomas mentions the death of Abraham II who was the Patriarch and only died in that year.¹⁸⁰

Robert Hoyland wonders if the writing was in the 860's as 'the fact that (Thomas) remembers himself as a youth when he worked for the Catholicos in the 840's suggests that he is writing considerably later, probably about the 860's.'¹⁸¹ The date of writing is important because by the middle of the ninth century a new Caliph had come into power, al-Mutawakkil (847-861). If Thomas composed his work in 840 it would have been just before this Caliph came to power when the context for Christians was relatively easier. If written a decade or more later, and perhaps as the work began to circulate, al-Mutawakkil had begun to put into prison several Christian leaders and ended the tradition of *majalis* [a gathering for entertainment or religious purposes] in the royal court. The translation movement would continue as would the East Syrian mission efforts but there was a different context that was developing. Though Thomas was writing primarily a history of the monastery of Beit Abhe, the timing and context of his writing, particularly related to how Muslims were portrayed, may have been affected.

From Beit Abhe monastery near Mosul in Northern Mesopotamia monks journeying east by the sea route may have traveled south to Basra and then into the Persian Gulf rather than taking the land route. The 'Silk Road' by the ninth century actually included several different routes but had limitations of access due in part to shifting control. The event that was the catalyst, a battle in 751 C.E. at the Talas River near the modern city of Talas on the border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, between the newly in power and victorious Abbasids and the T'ang Empire, was part of these new geo-political realities.¹⁸²

In the last few decades more archaeological evidence has come to light of specific Church of the East monastic complexes in the Persian Gulf areas particularly from the sixth,

¹⁸⁰Fiey (1965) Thomas of Marga article pg. 361-366

¹⁸¹Hoyland (1997:215)

¹⁸²The degree of limitations on the land routes is still a matter of discussion. But the Abbasid victory at Talas did result in a shifting situation in inner Asia. See Barthold (1945) and Beckwith (2009) for more.

seventh and eighth centuries. In the modern region of what is now the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) on the Western side of the Gulf, excavations that started in 1959 and resumed in 1994-1995 uncovered the 'largest pre-Islamic monastic site anywhere in Eastern Arabia'.¹⁸³ It was on the island of Sir Bani Yas and is evidence of a continual presence there from the first century up to the seventh century. Some of the buildings excavated have been identified as a monastery and a church and as the authors note: 'they almost certainly belong to the Nestorian Church, which at the time of the coming of Islam was effectively the indigenous Church of Eastern Arabia. It is not only the largest monastic complex ever found in the area but provides the first evidence so far found of the presence of Christianity in the U.A.E.'¹⁸⁴

In further excavations in 1995, the following was noted regarding the walls of the monastery building:

They seem simply to have collapsed outwards as a result of weathering and perhaps of rising salts in the stonework that weakened them. There is a lack of evidence of deliberate destruction, such as walls that had been broken, or extensive signs of charcoal and ash that would suggest buildings had been burned. This suggests that the inhabitants simply abandoned the settlement and moved away.¹⁸⁵

It is an important finding as in other excavations of monastic sites in the Gulf that there is also no evidence that they were destroyed but rather seems that the monks may have moved. In a Church of the East synod of Arabian bishops held in 676 C.E. on the island of Tarut, also off the Gulf Coast, a Bishop Stephen of Beit Mazunaye was in attendance, the last time a Bishop from that area would ever be recorded attending a Church of the East synod.¹⁸⁶ It is not known whether most of the monks converted to Islam or perhaps re-located to other monasteries back in their homelands or even perhaps farther east.

¹⁸³Hellyer and King published a book on these excavations in 1998 titled, *Filling in the Blanks*, taken from a lecture title by Dr. King at the Society of Arabian Studies. It is an appropriate title when considering the importance of this and other monastic finds made in the Gulf, showing a network that stretched to Asia along an important route of travel.

¹⁸⁴(1998:45)

¹⁸⁵(:48)

¹⁸⁶See Chabot's *Syndicon Orientale* (1902). This of course was forty-four years after the Prophet's death and by this time much of the area was controlled by Muslims.

An interesting question also raised by the excavations of these monastic remains concerns the fact of their proximity to some of the best pearling banks in the southern Gulf. Writers like Brian Colless have noted the importance of the pearling trade for the Church of the East, titling his latest book of Syrian mystical writings *The Wisdom of the Pearlers*.¹⁸⁷ The Sassanians were known for their merchant activities and used primarily the Old Persian language of Pahlavi up until at least the ninth century when the dominance of Arabic strengthened. The Church of the East in their merchant activities and witness across Asia also used Pahlavi to some degree, though Syriac continued to be the ecclesial and liturgical language. Further discussion of this will be in 6.3.

Another important monastic settlement unearthed in the last fifty years is on the island of Kharg, on the Eastern side of the Gulf and according to Whitehouse: ‘traditionally, captains approaching Basra put in at Kharg to engage a pilot before entering the Shat-al Arab and the Island thus played a significant role in the maritime trade of the Gulf.’¹⁸⁸ In fact many of the ships headed to India from Basra would make Kharg a port of call and the existence of a Church of the East monastery and community on the island was an important discovery. The excavation was led by a French archaeological mission in the late 1950s at the direction of an oil company. The initial findings were published in 1960¹⁸⁹ based on evidence of a large number of tombs carved in the rocks and with crosses in the same style as used by the Church of the East. From the findings a deduction of the researchers was that there was an important ‘Nestorian’ community on the island from the third until at least the seventh century but perhaps lasting longer into the eighth or even ninth century. Only three to four hours from Kharg by ship going eastwards down the Gulf was a Metropolitan of the Church of the East, Rev-Ardeshir, the capital of the province of Fars, which had ecclesiastical jurisdiction over India until it was made a separate Metropolitan by Timothy in 790.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷Colless (2010)

¹⁸⁸Whitehouse (1973:43)

¹⁸⁹See Ghirshman (1960).

¹⁹⁰See Giamil (1902)

On the western end of Kharg a monastery was excavated made with stones and with a triple nave which was a Sassanid Persian architectural style. The estimate is that the monastery and church were initially built in the fifth or sixth century, and as part of the monastery there were found ‘numerous alcoves’, in three levels, and this indicates that ‘these rooms were used as a library, with scrolls bound in niches.’¹⁹¹ The monastery contained about sixty cells and there were also homes for priests nearby indicating that some may have even lived with families. Based on the cells and other buildings it could be estimated that the monastic community alone may have consisted of one hundred at a minimum. Whitehouse surmises that the monastic complex at Kharg may have even had a ‘special function of training missionaries for service abroad.’¹⁹² With evidence of a well-stocked library of scrolls and its proximity to India-bound traffic, as well as its closeness to the Metropolitan responsible for several centuries for India, this is not an unlikely deduction.

Discovering monasteries at places like Kharg and other locations in the Gulf has given some level of confirmation for the idea that there was a network of monasteries of the Church of the East on the way to Asia in the centuries leading up to and perhaps including the ninth century. Mingana had written in 1926, before these excavations, that by the mid-fourth century the ‘way to India was strewn not only with bishoprics, but with monasteries.’¹⁹³ With the discovery of these monasteries and churches in the Gulf on the sea route to India and China it can be seen that he may not have been too far off the mark.

2.4 Conclusion

Monastic mission of the Church of the East had its foundation in the solitary and community groupings of the fourth century as described by Aphrahat and found a theological depth through the writings of Narsai. The writings of both Aphrahat and Narsai involved an appreciation of the role of martyrdom both in the potential of losing their lives

¹⁹¹(:14)

¹⁹²Whitehouse (:43)

¹⁹³Mingana (1926)

due to persecution but also the daily cost of faithfulness in their activities in mission. A life of martyrdom was to be energized by the Holy Spirit and was to result in a universal call to take the Gospel to all people.

There was an integration in the Church of a call to monastic life with outward activities of witness which was not unique to Christian faith. There may also have been influences from Buddhism and Manichaeism on its version of monasticism. The chapter has explored the nature of monastic activities that included areas of the Arabian Peninsula in the centuries before Islam and continued in locations like Hira and other parts of Mesopotamia in the centuries after. Monks and their monasteries had also become a part of a genre of Islamic writing and had begun to occupy a place in the Muslim imagination as well as reality.

The context of the growth of Islam also included for the Church of the East a competitive hostility of the West Syrians which already existed in the seventh century and would continue in the coming centuries. The challenges of this relationship, as well as bad character in Church clergy in places like Fars in Persia, at times overshadowed the developing threat of what Islam may have represented for the future as seen in the letters of Isho-yahbh III.

Monastic activities were also continuing across the Indian Ocean, as they had since the first century, under the Patriarchate of Isho-yahbh III. He wrote letters to Beit Abhe monastery, his own place of monastic development, referring to believers in India under his jurisdiction. Monastic presence and activities to the East were linked within the ecclesial structure coming from Mesopotamia. Excavations in recent years have affirmed the existence of these monastic complexes along a sea route to India.

In Chapter 3, these monastic activities will be explored more fully in how they continued and what they meant to the monks from their own sources in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Involvement was not only to areas to the east but also within Mesopotamia as well.

Chapter 3: Monastic Presence and Encounter in Mission: Mesopotamia and the East in the Early Ninth century

3.1 Introduction

Monasteries of the Church of the East existed in a continuity that went back centuries to small groups of ascetics in the fourth century. In Chapter 2 the foundation of these monastic groups was examined including their involvement in pre-Islamic Arabia as well as in the early Islamic centuries. Ecclesial links across the Indian Ocean under Patriarch Isho-yahbh III in the seventh century were also explored.

The monastery of Beit Abhe in Northern Mesopotamia was founded in the late sixth century and was a focus of letters of both Patriarch Isho-yahbh III and Timothy I. In this chapter its continued activities in mission in Mesopotamia and to the east will be examined from Christian sources of the period. In 3.2 these activities will be explored in the *Historia Monastica* and letters of Timothy.

Like other monasteries in Abbasid-ruled areas, Beit Abhe existed in a Muslim context. In 3.3 the witness to Muslims around them will be discussed from Thomas of Marga's work, Timothy's letters and other sources of the period. Maintaining this particular monastery's witness in the early Abbasid period to the areas around it will be highlighted from these sources.

Continuing monastic activities to the East in this period are examined in 3.4 also from the *Historia Monastica* and Timothy's letters. How the image of a Church involved in witness was managed by the Patriarch in a context of continued survival under the Abbasids will also be discussed.

3.2 Beit Abhe and Monastic Mission Activities in the early Ninth century

In *Book 5.1* of the *Historia Monastica* Thomas of Marga describes the names of specific monks emerging from monasteries like Beit Abhe as well as some of their activities:

And we will place at the beginning of all those histories which our speech is about to unfold the account of the victorious deeds of the ascetic priest, and victorious martyr, the blessed Rabban Mar Shubhhal-Isho, the Metropolitan Bishop; and to it we will add that of the pious and holy men who followed in his footsteps throughout the land in which he taught, Mar Yahbhlaha and Kardagh his brother, as well as that of the blessed Bishop Mar Elijah, the men who were ordained by the pious Mar Timothy, the Catholicus and Patriarch, for the countries of the barbarians who were remote from all understanding and a decent manner of life, and to whose part of the world no preacher and planter of the truth had ever gone, and where the doctrine of the glad tidings of our Redeemer had never been proclaimed.

They taught and baptized, and wrought mighty deeds, and shewed forth wonderful works, and the fame of their acts was carried to all the ends of the East.¹⁹⁴

In his monastic history primarily devoted to Beit Abhe Thomas spends a majority of the fifth book focusing on the lives of monks who were involved in outward activities of mission encounter beyond the walls of the monastery within Northern Mesopotamia as well as to the East. In the above portion Thomas names them as Shubhhal-Isho, the brothers Yahbhlaha and Kardagh, and Elijah of Moka. Each of them had roles as Bishops, were from Beit Abhe monastery, and each had been ordained by Patriarch Timothy. Their specific activities as described by Thomas of Marga provide a window into seeing what mission involvement looked like in the early Abbasid period. In this section, these four monks will be looked at for these activities, with the next section focused around what mission presence and encounter meant more specifically for the Muslim communities around the monasteries.

The first of the four, Shubhhal-Isho, was ‘descended from the race of the children of Ishmael’¹⁹⁵ though presumably had been raised a Christian in the city of ‘Herta-dhe-Na’man’.¹⁹⁶ He had been ‘trained in the Holy Scriptures and instructed in the literature of the Arabic [language], which was their own tongue.’¹⁹⁷ After enduring years of preparation as well as persecution and accusation even from fellow monks according to Thomas of Marga, Shubhhal-Isho goes ‘to the pious Mar Timothy the Catholicus, and informed him

¹⁹⁴*Historia Monastica* 5.1.467-468

¹⁹⁵*Historia Monastica* 5.2.469

¹⁹⁶The Church of the East centre of Hira.

¹⁹⁷5.1.469

what had been done to him.’¹⁹⁸ The Patriarch who ‘loved this monastery greatly and honoured it with many gifts, because it was here pointed out to him that he should become Catholicus’¹⁹⁹ rebukes the monks of Beit Abhe and directly connects their poor harvest in the last years to their bad treatment of Shubhhal-Isho.

Thomas then writes of Shubhhal -Isho:

Now in respect of this man of whom we speak, inasmuch as he was exceedingly able, very much was entrusted into his hand. And when he went down to the holy Mar Timothy, who having learned concerning all his affairs, and seen that he was instructed in the Syriac language and learning, and also in the Arabic and Persian tongues, determined to anoint him with holy oil, and to make him hold the pastoral staff, and to send him as a shepherd and teacher to the barbarian nations who had never received a bridle of the teaching concerning God, and into whose country none of the preachers and evangelists of the kingdom of heaven had gone since the time of the Apostles until the present.²⁰⁰

The Patriarch after anointing him with oil determines ‘to send him as a shepherd and teacher to the barbarian nations’ and ‘to convert those erring nations by his hand’.²⁰¹ The passage indicates the involvement of Timothy in selecting a monk for mission involvement to ‘barbarian nations’ even a monk that had seemingly been out of favour and under accusation by fellow monks. In one of Thomas of Marga’s rather whimsical sidetracks he writes that he heard ‘fully concerning all this matter’ (about Shubhhal-Isho) from Mar Abraham, and that this informant had told him that Shubhhal-Isho had begun his work among the barbarians ‘with exceedingly great splendour, for barbarian nations need to see a little worldly pomp and show to attract them and to make them draw nigh willingly to Christianity.’²⁰² It makes one wonder if some of the monk’s acumen for his surrounding audience may have been taught him from the Patriarch himself. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter Timothy seemed to have had strong skills at having the right image and words at the right time and for the right audience.

¹⁹⁸:476

¹⁹⁹: 477. The monastery Thomas is referring to is Beit Abhe.

²⁰⁰5.4.479

²⁰¹:479

²⁰²*Historia Monastica* 5.4.480

Thomas describes next the activities that this monk engaged in:

And when he had entered those countries he began to teach and to shew them the true knowledge of his doctrine, and while he was teaching with these words, Christ our Lord was confirming them by the miracles which he worked, by cleansing the lepers, by healing the sick, by opening the eyes of the blind, by making the lame to walk, by raising the dead, and by making barren women fruitful, for the Divine dispensation is accustomed to shew forth mighty works at the beginning of Divine operations, more particularly in the case of those barbarians who from their earliest times and throughout all generations had been led captive by evil devils to the worship and service of their corrupt things.²⁰³

An emphasis on teaching as part of East Syrian monastic mission will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, but it is interesting to see in the above portion that teaching is accompanied by the confirming of miracles and other signs. In this story and others that Thomas of Marga relates, the work of monks in preaching the Gospel is often confirmed by accompanying miracles meant to confirm that word. Thomas of course is also writing from the testimony of the Gospels where the life and ministry of Christ involves both teaching and miracles.

Direct links between teaching imparted and confirming miracles is again emphasized a few lines later:

And by the sight of the miracles which our Lord worked by the hands of the blessed man, he taught many cities and thickly peopled districts, and baptized [their inhabitants], and brought them near to the doctrine of Divine life. And he built churches, and established priests and deacons in them, and he set apart some of the brethren who were with him to teach them psalms and spiritual praises, and he himself went further and further into the country, until [he arrived at] the ends of the East in the great teaching which he made among the heathen, and Marcionites, and Manichees, [against] every object of worship and every impure thing; and he sowed among them the glorious light of the doctrine of the Gospel, the mother of life and peace.²⁰⁴

In this passage we find perhaps the clearest description of the activities of this monastic mission. Five different mission activities can be identified in the work of Shubhhal-Isho, and these find resonance in other stories that Thomas relates in Book 5. They are 1) teaching confirmed by miracles 2) baptizing and in that baptism there is a ‘bringing near

²⁰³:480

²⁰⁴:481-482

to the doctrine of Divine life' 3) the building of new churches 4) the establishing of leadership for those churches, including setting some apart for the teaching of 'psalms and spiritual praises' and 5) the going of the Apostle 'further and further into the country' to the East for more 'sowing' of 'glorious light of the doctrine of the Gospel.'

There is however a sixth activity in Shubhhal-Isho's life and ministry: his martyrdom. It occurs after he returned to Beit Abhe from his mission journeys:

Now when he had remained in those countries for many years, while God planted and watered and nourished by his hands, like the blessed Paul, he was wishing to come [back] to the Bethel of his fathers, namely to this monastery, and to pay back the gifts of honour due [from him] to the monastery from which he had gone forth, and was esteeming that which had happened [to be] a benefit [to him]—as was the selling of Joseph by his brethren---and he forsook the fields of the doctrine of life which he had sown, and the churches which had founded, and the temples which he had established to the Lord, until he could come and worship and return there. But when the Enemy, the hater of all truth, saw that his own doctrine was made a mockery, and that the fire-temples and the fire-altars of his cakes were pulled down, he plotted death against the blessed man by the hands of certain workers of evil, and remnant that remained.²⁰⁵

Shubhhal-Isho's martyrdom occurs in Chapter 5 of Book 5, just after Thomas of Marga has listed Biblical martyrs like Stephen, James, Peter, Paul, Bartholomew, and Thomas as well as Church of the East martyrs like Mar Simon, Shahadost and Barba'shemin.²⁰⁶ The theme of martyrdom as part of the testimony of a faithful life was an important element of Church devotion as noted in the previous chapter (2.4).

The next two Bishop monks described in Book 5 are said by Thomas to be brothers and 'became disciples' at Beit Abhe.²⁰⁷ They are named as Kardagh and Yahbhlah and are called upon by Timothy to be shepherds of the flock that Shubhhal-Isho had 'brought into the fold of life.'²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵*Historia Monastica* 5.5.484

²⁰⁶These three Church of the East martyrs had died in the persecution of Sapor, the Persian ruler. See Budge's note (pg. 483).

²⁰⁷5.6.487

²⁰⁸5.6.488

And when Mar Timothy, of pious memory, had urged this [service] upon every man who was able to do this, and there was no one who would undertake the work for God's sake like unto that man, the blessed Mar Catholicus was obliged to send to this monastery for these two blessed brethren, that he might consecrate them bishops, and send them to those countries.²⁰⁹

A calling to be shepherds for these two brothers involved not going to an already established place of service but rather to 'countries that were destitute of all knowledge of Divine things and holy doctrine, and which abounded in sorcery and idolatry and all corrupt and abominable practices.'²¹⁰

The importance of Beit Abhe as a place of replenishing monks for specific assignments is also affirmed in this passage as Kardagh and Yahbhlaha will be joined at the monastery by other monks:

So the two went down according to the rule of the Church, and [Mar Timothy] anointed them Metropolitans, Kardagh of Gilan and Yahbhlaha of the people of Dailom. And when they came up to this monastery to put their affairs in order, there went with them according to what I have learned, fifteen monks [who were] holy and enlightened men, that they also might be companions with them in the spiritual labour of the Gospel of Christ, and some of them would be Bishops to the countries beyond Gilan and Dailom.²¹¹

The two brothers are said to be appointed by Patriarch Timothy as Metropolitans of Gilan and Dailom. Gilan and Dailom were located in an area southwest of the Caspian Sea or the modern areas of Azerbaijan and the northwest part of Iran. 'Countries beyond' then could be the area of what is now Afghanistan or even farther east. As the previous passage above notes they are being sent to 'countries that were destitute of all knowledge of Divine things and holy doctrine' and Thomas of Marga would have likely believed in the tradition of Thomas the Apostle going to India in the first century. It may indicate that this is not a reference to India or at least the southern part, or could also be a general description and not meant to specifically define where these 'barbarian nations' were in detail.

²⁰⁹5.6.488

²¹⁰5.7.489

²¹¹*Historia Monastica* 5.7.490.

Activities of these two Metropolitans would closely correspond to those of Shubhhal-Isho. Mar Kardagh is said to have ‘penetrated far into the countries which were beyond those where his brother was’ and according to Thomas he ‘never came back here’, alluding to Beit Abhe monastery.²¹² Another passage gives several other activities in their mission involvement:

And when [these men] had laboured in that uncultivated country for many years, and had spread abroad the Gospel of our Lord in those rational countries, and had taught, and converted, and baptized and sanctified many, they all of them ended their days there, and [their names] were written down with the first-born, [whose names] are written down in heaven, in the Book of the Kingdom, and happiness is laid up for them with the Prophets, and Apostles, and teachers, and martyrs, by whose prayers may our Lord make priesthood to be at peace with royalty; and may wars be abolished from the ends of the earth, and may our Lord give to the whole world, and especially to His Holy church, of His hope, and rest and peace from all conflicts, and may we all lift up praise to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for ever, Amen.²¹³

Of the six activities noted in the section on Shubhhal-Isho all are listed above except the ‘building of churches’. ‘Establishing of leaders’ mentioned in that previous passage is similar to involvement of the brothers as they ‘sanctified many’. It also refers to martyrs of the Church, showing a link between ‘spreading abroad the Gospel of our Lord’ and martyrdom.

In the next chapter of Book 5 the fourth missionary Bishop and his activities are described by Thomas of Marga. Mar Elijah is said to be a ‘blessed twig’ and a ‘simple but wise man’. He is from the village of ‘Ain Bakre in the country of Marga which is the same area as the biographer.²¹⁴ After two chapters devoted to describing the ascetic devotion of Mar Elijah which included periods as a hermit living in a cell²¹⁵ near to Beit Abhe, Thomas again notes the involvement of Patriarch Timothy in the selection of a monk for service:

Now when the pious Mar Timothy had anointed and sent the holy Metropolitans Mar Yabhlaha and Kardagh to Gilan and Dailom, he wisely determined that he would appoint to the city of Mokaan also a shepherd and prosperous husbandman to cultivate

²¹²5.7.491-492

²¹³5.7.494

²¹⁴5.8.495

²¹⁵Thomas of Marga actually calls it a ‘booth’ made of ‘reeds and narrow bits of wood. See 5.8.496

the rational souls that were therein, which had been led captive by the Calumniator²¹⁶ from days of old. And because he knew by experience, and had found out in very deed that men of might and athletes of valour had gone forth from the divine congregation of the holy Mar Jacob, and because from these men Mar Catholicus had appointed fitting persons to all regions and cities [of the world], and because by them wonderful acts of power and glorious cures had been made manifest, he chose from this stock to send to that city also a rod of power as out of Zion, that he might obtain dominion over the demons and devils which were in that wretched city, [where] the sore of destruction had spread abroad. And because he had heard about the extraordinary manner of life of the blessed Elijah, he wrote a letter to him with love and patience, like a wise father to a son who can be easily persuaded, [telling him] to come down to him and he would appoint him Bishop of the city of Moka.²¹⁷

The passage affirms the direct involvement of Timothy in the choosing and appointing for mission of a monk connected to Beit Abhe, the ‘divine congregation of the holy Mar Jacob’, from whom he had ‘appointed fitting persons to all regions and cities of the world’. In this case it was for a city called Moka which Thomas writes is ‘in a country to the north-east near to the border of the peoples of Dailom’. Moka is a place where ‘its inhabitants are barbarians, and they worship dumb animals.’²¹⁸

A few lines later Thomas writes that Mar Elijah ‘went down to Mar Timothy who confirmed him and sent him off with certain merchants who were going into the countries in which Moka was situated.’²¹⁹ Pairing of monks going out with merchants and how that relates to East Syrian mission identity will be discussed more in Chapter 6.4 of this thesis as part of a section examining extant copper plate charters of early ninth century South India.

In the following pages of the narrative Thomas identifies some of the activities in mission that Mar Elijah was involved in. When he arrives in Moka itself he sees the spiritual state of the ‘heathen’ and makes a distinction with Arabs and Jews that he has been more familiar with:

Now when by the hand of God his helper the holy Mar Elijah arrived at that city of the heathen, and went into it, and saw that the name of God, the Lord of all, and confession

²¹⁶Budge’s translation of a word that Thomas uses for the Devil.

²¹⁷5.10.505

²¹⁸5.10.505

²¹⁹5.10.506

of Him did not exist therein at all, but that all the people that were in it offered up worship to dumb trees and senseless stones, and that it was destitute even of the Arabs and Jews who confess One God, the Creator of heaven and earth, he offered up prayer ceaselessly to Christ our Lord on their behalf, that He, Who according to the custom of His graciousness and longsuffering had brought all nations to the worship of His Godhead, might by all means, as by the hand of the Apostles, give to those people a new heart and a new spirit, that they might despise the images and senseless forms which they worshipped, and be converted to the knowledge of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.²²⁰

In this passage Thomas notes the difference between the people of Mokaan, worshippers of ‘dumb trees and senseless stones’, and ‘Arabs and Jews who confess One God, the Creator of heaven and earth.’ Though it is not said more directly than that in the *Historia Monastica* there does seem to be in Thomas of Marga’s reference a sense that the Arabs and Jews around him were in a different spiritual category than the ‘barbarian nations’. It will be noted again in the next section of this thesis where activities in mission are discussed related to the Arab Muslim communities in Mesopotamia.

Other activities of Mar Elijah in the following pages include preaching to the inhabitants of Mokaan ‘with a loud voice’²²¹ and:

Having gone round and about the whole day in this preaching of Life, every evening he used to go forth outside the city, and fix the cross [upon his staff], and sing the service for the night and pray until dawn; and when it was morning, and they opened the gates, and [the people] came forth, and saw that he sat openly before the cross they marveled and were astonished.²²²

Along with the work of preaching Mar Elijah was involved in healing the sicknesses of those that came to him through ‘the blessed oil [taken] from the phial which he had upon him, and by prayer, and the sign of the Cross, and the making mention of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.’²²³

²²⁰5.11.508

²²¹*Historia Monastica* 5.11.508

²²²5.11.509

²²³5.11.510

After describing a direct challenge by Mar Elijah to the worship of a tree by the ‘children of Yazd’²²⁴ that involved cutting it down and burning it Thomas then lists several other activities of the Bishop:

And after the burning of their images of accursed devils they all went up to that city, being glad and rejoicing in the victory which the soldier of Christ, who had been sent for the conversion and life of their souls, had wrought. And they all began to build the glorious building of a church, and Mar Elijah ordered it with all its arrangements, and he baptized many of them, and ordained them priests and deacons, and he wrote out psalms for them, and taught them the responses, and thus little by little they became virtuous, and increased, and the grace of Christ grew and dwelt in them.²²⁵

In this passage, several of the activities seen in the previous stories are again listed: converting people, building of the church, baptizing, ordaining priests and deacons, and teaching. In all three stories activities of the monks who were going out from Beit Abhe to the countries beyond are noted by Thomas of Marga. They provide a similar list of what was involved in monastic mission at this period of the East Syrian church.

Along with these activities there is also a reporting back to Beit Abhe by Mar Elijah as also happened with the other monks in Book 5:

And when he had tarried with them for many years, the holy man was minded to come to this country to worship in the holy monastery of the house of his fathers, and to return. And when he had done this, and had come here [Beit Abhe], he shewed to all his brethren the conversion of those erring nations which, by his hands, had been converted to life and redemption, and how he had built for them a church, and how he had baptized and sanctified them, and [how] they had become participators in his joy in divine gratitude for these things.²²⁶

The monks at Beit Abhe had ‘become participators in his joy in divine gratitude for these things’ and reports from these mission fields perhaps provided encouragement for more of them to become involved. As for Mar Elijah one further story is related by Thomas about his life and ministry, this one involving an Arab woman. That story will be discussed at the start of the next section dealing with the witness of the monks to the Arab Muslims around them.

²²⁴May be a reference to a Persian rite of worship.

²²⁵5.11.512-513

²²⁶5.11.514

After this encounter he returned to Beit Abhe now at the end of his life. Desiring to not die in exile, he would receive his wish and be buried in his sending monastery.

As seen in Thomas of Marga's work, the involvement of these monks in mission from monasteries like Beit Abhe was encouraged and at times directly asked for by Patriarch Timothy. Thomas seemed to have had access to the letters of the Patriarch in writing his history as he notes: 'For I have read the letter of Mar Timothy the Catholicus to Mar Yahbhlaha and the letter which was sent by him in answer to the Catholicus'.²²⁷ It is not known what exact letters of the Patriarch that Thomas had access to but only fifty-nine of perhaps two hundred of Timothy's letters are still extant. Several of them comment on monastic mission and Timothy's role in it. In one of his letters to his friend Sergius, who was Metropolitan of Elam, a province of Persia, the Patriarch gives specific appointments for specific places. Written near the end of his life, Timothy closes the letter showing the extent of the mission spread and ecclesial structure he was overseeing in the first two decades of the ninth century. The section begins with a more personal appeal to his friend:

Pray for me: my frame is weak, my hands are not very good at writing, and my eyes are feeble. Such things are indications and messengers of death. Pray for me that I may not be condemned at our Lord's judgment.²²⁸

The Patriarch then goes on to detail some of the appointments made in the East including for Turkestan, Tibet, Persia and closer to home at Beit Abhe:

The Holy Spirit recently appointed a Metropolitan for Turkestan, and we are making preparations to anoint another for Beth Tuptaye (Tibet). We have sent another to Shiarzur and another for Radan, since Nestorius the metropolitan of Radan has died. We are also making preparations for another at Ray (Tehran region), since Theodorus has died; another for Gurgan, another for Balad-Cyriacus of Beth 'Abe; another for Dasen since Jacob has sunk into the pit from which there is no resurrection; another for Beth Nuhadra, which has no bishop.

²²⁷*Historia Monastica* 5.7.490

²²⁸*Letter 47* English translations by Brock (1997:250) For Timothy's letters; see Bidawid (1956) with the commentary in French and the letters in Latin and Syriac as well as Braun (1914). Brock has translated into English some of these letters including No. 47 in Moran *Etho* 9 (1997:249-250). There is still no critical edition of all of Timothy's extensive correspondence.

Timothy's letter provides important evidence for the geographic spread of the Church in this period and the connection back to Baghdad including places like Turkestan in Central Asia, Tibet and several locations in Mesopotamia and Persia. His wording is that 'The Holy Spirit' had 'appointed' a Metropolitan for Turkestan. Reflected here is a continued understanding of the role of the Spirit in Church of the East theology present in Narsai's homilies as well. The difference in wording in how both of the Metropolitans are being appointed is interesting also as one is appointed by the Holy Spirit and the other for Tibet is anointed by the Patriarch and the rest of the 'we'. The process for Timothy of ecclesial appointments was a combined one with Divine and human involvement together. Timothy's concept of the importance of the Spirit in ecclesial appointments is echoed by Thomas of Marga. When the Patriarch is questioned concerning whether Kardagh and other monks on the field would have authority to appoint bishops, he writes in a letter quoted by Thomas of Marga: 'May the Divine Spirit direct and govern His sanctifications by your means even as He did with the blessed Apostles.'²²⁹

Timothy then writes a prayer that connects the mission of the Church of the East with the words of Christ in the gospels: 'So pray with us to the Lord of the harvest that he may send out labourers for his harvest.' The final lines in this section specifically make a connection with Beit Abhe and the role it had as a place for Timothy to call on for the replenishment of missionary monks: 'Shubhalisho' of Beth Daylameye²³⁰ has plaited a crown of martyrdom. We have sent in his place ten monks from Beth 'Abe. Pray for me, revered father in God my Lord.'²³¹

Thus in the closing years of Timothy's life when his 'hands were not very good at writing' and his 'eyes were weak', he was writing about the extent of the monastic mission of the Church and the role of monasteries like Beit Abhe in providing more monks to take the place of Shubhalisho. The latter had woven his 'crown of martyrdom' as noted earlier in this

²²⁹*Historia Monastica* 5.7.491

²³⁰ Beth Daylameye or the monastery of Daylam was also famous to the Church of the East as being the see of John of Daylam, a seventh century East Syian ascetic and missionary, whose *Syriac Life* is discussed in 2.4.

²³¹*Letter 47* (Brock :250)

section. It is not clear what the process was in Timothy's choosing of monks from Beit Abhe in this case to replace a martyred monk. Were these ten monks and the fifteen mentioned by Thomas of Marga in the passage earlier in this section personally chosen by the Patriarch? Or did he signal in a more general way that there were needs for more monks for mission assignments and let the local monastery take the specific initiative? Either or both may have been the case depending on the specific need.

Individual choosing of monks from Beit Abhe by the Patriarch may have been combined at times with several monks asked for at once as in the letter above. What is evident is that the monastery of Beit Abhe was a place Timothy called on to provide monks for assignments to the east. Some of these monks are specifically named by Thomas of Marga:

And when the blessed men had received this permission from the Patriarch, they ordained and made Thomas, Zacchaeus, Shem, Ephraim, Simon, Ananias and David, bishops of the countries which had been taught by their hands, through the signs and mighty deeds which had been manifested by them, no one of which, on account of their number and the remoteness of the countries in which they were wrought and completed, have we been able to distinguish clearly how it was worked, or in what village or city, or in whom a healing was performed, or from whom devils and sicknesses were expelled.

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It can be seen from Timothy's letters as well as the *Historia Monastica* that he was choosing specific monks for specific activities in mission. It is not clear, however, if this was established practice in the Church of the East or based uniquely around the Patriarch's passion for extension of the Church and his relationship with Beit Abhe. The letters of Isho-yahbh, discussed in 2.5, show a concern for believers of the region of Fars and farther east to India as well as the importance of Beit Abhe monastery. There are, however, no references to him personally choosing monks for mission assignments to other regions. Since the process of choosing monks for these tasks is not clearly evident in the sources, Timothy's direct involvement cannot be seen as normative practice for Patriarchs of the Church. It can be seen though as an important example of how the witness of the monasteries was maintained in this early Abbasid period by the commitment of no less than the Patriarch showing a value and importance for the mission encounter. In the next section

²³²5.7.491

the monastic activities among Muslims will be explored also through Thomas of Marga's work as well as Timothy's letters.

3.3 Beit Abhe and Monastic Mission Presence and Encounter among Muslims

While the majority of stories in *Book 5* deal with pagans or 'barbarian nations' as Thomas refers to them and not monotheistic Muslims, we do find scattered references to healings, deliverances, blessings and curses involving the latter.²³³ Some writers like Shedd, Young and Brock have argued that the seeming lack of references about Muslims in the *Historia Monastica* indicates a strange reluctance on Thomas' part to notice them or even a desire to ignore them.²³⁴ Taking into consideration, however, that Thomas's writing was a monastic history of a particular monastery, Beit Abhe, as well as a more general history of East Syrian monasticism from the sixth to ninth century emanating from Mt. Izla, it is unsurprising that his focus had little to do with the Muslim community. His descriptions of Arabs, both pre-Islam or after, whether those that were benefactors or those that wished the monasteries harm, were more in how the encounters reflected on the monastery or how the monks exerted their charism of healing or hospitality.

There are, however, more references to Muslims in this work than these writers have indicated. Thomas of Marga did not ignore the other faith. There are up to eleven references or anecdotal stories related to Muslims in the *Historia Monastica*, and these stories indicate different kinds of encounters.²³⁵ As Penn notes, 'descriptions of beneficent as well as hostile Muslims, as well as the overall impression of Muslim unpredictability... all make the Book of Governors an important moment in the history of Christian representation of Muslims'²³⁶ In writing about Muslims Thomas does not employ the usual terms for them used by Christians, like 'Hagarenes' (sons of Hagar), 'Saracens' or 'Ishmaelites.' Thomas

²³³*Historia Monastica Book 5, 433,450, 516,558*

²³⁴See Shedd (1904:111), Young (1974:118ff) and Brock (1984:11) for these discussions.

²³⁵These references to Muslims using the word *tayyaya* are found in 2.41, 3.3, 3.4, 4.18-19, 4.21-22, 4.24, 5.11, 5.11, 5.16, and as Penn notes in 2.40 and 3.9 related to *Hijra* dating. See discussion of these words below in this section.

²³⁶Penn (2010:17) For the following discussion of the words used for Arabs and Muslims in the *Historia Monastica*, I am indebted to Michael Penn for sharing his article with me prior to publication in 2010.

does use the last term four times for figures in his work but uses it more as a term of race rather than religion as he writes not only of Ishmaelite Muslims but also Ishmaelite Christians. Thomas three times uses a term that can be translated ‘Arab’, ‘*uraba*. As Penn also notes, two of these three times it is not clear if the ‘*uraba* is a Muslim or a Christian Arab.²³⁷ These words are complex in their meaning and ‘*uraba* could also refer to a desert dweller rather than a civilised person.²³⁸ Some East Syrian writers like Theodore bar Koni, in the *Scholion Chapter 10* uses the term *hanpe* for Muslims, which at times was used more generally for pagans.²³⁹ Patriarch Timothy most often in his letters uses the term *Muslim*, or even *Mussulman* rather than Arab.²⁴⁰

The term that Thomas of Marga most commonly uses in his work for Muslims is the Syriac word *tayyaya* or its plural *tayyaye*. Though its original meaning was to a specific tribe before the Muslim conquest, it also was used by Syriac writers to refer more generally to the peoples of Arabia. It was a term used in that context both for Christian and Muslim Arabs as well. As Islam began to spread the term *tayyaya* commonly referred only to Muslims though there was some ambiguity as to whether it was referring to ethnicity rather than religion. As Penn has pointed out ‘each of the eleven characters whom Thomas calls a *tayyaya* appears in a context suggesting that he or she is a Muslim.’²⁴¹ An implication of Thomas using this term for Muslims in his work, rather than the more derogatory ones used even in his own historical period, was that he was not ignoring the Muslim context around him but rather writing in a sensitivity to that context. Whether he was writing in the somewhat easier situation around 840, or a decade or two later under a more difficult environment when al-Mutawakkil was Caliph, Thomas employed terms that indicated an awareness of the Muslims around him.

²³⁷(:8).

²³⁸*Uraba* could perhaps be closer in meaning to the word ‘Bedouin’.

²³⁹*Scholion 10 (CSCO 69:232)*

²⁴⁰See Young (1974:137)

²⁴¹Penn (2010:9)

Recognizing the importance of the *Historia Monastica* as a document of ecclesiastical, social and even economic history of a particular monastery, it was unlikely to be intended by Thomas as a description of witness to the surrounding Muslims. It rather has accounts in some detail of the places to the East that these monks were sent as well as their specific names and activities. That focus is unsurprising when it is considered that Thomas of Marga would have been aware of the context of restrictions on *dhimmi* populations when it came to propagating faith closer to home.

Even with those restrictions, however, an argument in this thesis is that there were ongoing monastic mission activities happening among Muslims as well as to other regions of Asia. In the last section some of the stories and activities of Mar Elijah were discussed. In another story close to the end of the same Bishop's life, Thomas writes of an encounter with an Arab Muslim woman:

Now when he [Mar Elijah] had arrived at the city of Shahrai, the people saw him and came forth to meet him from this village, and they begged and entreated him to go into the house of a poor Arab woman who was afflicted with an evil devil, and pray for her, and he did so. And when he had gone in he commanded me to say, 'Peace', and he himself prayed and made the sign of the cross before the woman, who was in great affliction and was beaten so mightily by that devil that four women were [obliged to] hold her and to kneel upon her that the devil might not break her to pieces with the blows and beatings with which he rent her. Now the devil through the mouth of that woman began [to give utterance] in the Arabic tongue to wicked blasphemies and horrible abuse of the blessed man. And since he wore hung round his neck the Book of the Gospels instead of a cross; [even as I have written in a preceeding passage], 'he brought it forth from his bosom, and laid it on the breast of that woman, at the same time anathematising and adjuring the devil to come forth from that woman. And when the devil had acted with great insolence, and had contended against the command of the holy man,--now the holy man was ordering him to depart from her with quietness,--his answers began to fail little by little. And he answered in the Arabic tongue and said to the blessed man, 'Where dost thou command me to go, O bishop?' And the blessed man answered and said to him, 'For the sake of our Lord, thou wilt not be restrained until thou goest to Harran, and moreover, by the word of the Lord thou art bound not to return to this woman again.' And as the entire village being gathered together, was listening to the words of the holy man, and the answers of that devil to his speech, the devil began to go forth from her, and he cried out in Arabic, saying, 'Ho, let us go to Harran, ho, let us go to Harran.' And we heard his voice as he cried out in the air, going towards the west, for a long time, and [then] little by little his voice died away and became inaudible to us in the distance. And fear and trembling laid hold upon all those that were there, and they began to glorify Christ and to magnify his servant the blessed Mar Elijah; and that woman received a complete cure, and she confessed the power of Christ, and lived freed from the attacks of the devil a life of gratitude to Christ our Lord, and she proclaimed, 'There is no true belief except among the holy Christian people.'²⁴²

²⁴²*Historia Monastica* 5.11.516-517.

Though the above story is compiled by a Christian and written most likely for Christians, it indicates similar monastic mission activities to Muslims in the area of signs and healings as seen in the previous stories. The Arab woman in the story is a *tayyaya*, identifying her as a Muslim. The final line where she says: ‘There is no true belief except among the holy Christian people’ is similar in tone to the attestation of faith by the Emir in the Bet Hale monastery story as will be discussed in 5.4 of this thesis. Closest to a conversion story of a Muslim that Thomas of Marga relates in his work, it may also be a recognition of the miracle she has experienced at the hand of Mar Elijah.

Placing of the above story and the one below by Thomas in his work could also be significant. They are found in *Book 5* which as seen in the previous section of this chapter has a series of stories that deal with the monastic mission activities of the Church of the East. When Thomas’s overall work is compared with the earlier histories of Rabban Hormizd and Rabban Bar ‘Idta, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, one of the key differences is the lack of emphasis on outward witness in the latter works. In the *Historia Monastica* and particularly in *Book 5* there is an emphasis on monastic mission activities of particular monks from Beit Abhe. Inclusion of these stories involving the *tayyaye* in *Book 5* suggests that mission to the Muslims around them, however restricted, was as much a part of their call as to the other regions. Thomas of Marga is writing a monastic history of Beit Abhe that has existed in a continuity of monastic mission of the Church to Arabs both before and after the coming of Islam.

After writing several stories of Bishop monks from Beit Abhe Thomas of Marga spends the rest of *Book 5* on another figure named Mar Narses. He is said to be an ‘ascetic from Beit Abhe, to be a shepherd and governor of their church.’²⁴³ A reluctance of Mar Narses to become the Bishop of Shenna will be overcome by Patriarch Timothy himself:

And Christ also urged them through him to go after him without delay, and they went down to the pious Mar Timothy, and made known to him that he must ordain as their Bishop Rabban Narses the solitary and ascetic. And Mar Timothy wrote [and sent] by their hands a canonical letter ordering Mar Narses not to dispute the Divine choice, and

²⁴³5.14.537

when the blessed man had read it, and saw that in any case he was bound and compelled to appear before the Patriarchal throne, he assented to the Divine Will and departed with them, and was consecrated by the Patriarchal hands and by the prayers of the chief priests, and he was reckoned like Matthias in the series and company of the priests of the Church.²⁴⁴

Thomas of Marga writes several stories describing Mar Narses' gift of healing including one in Baghdad that comes to the notice of Timothy:

Now the blessed Mar Narses had a man sick of the palsy in the house of a certain rich God-fearing believer in Baghdad, and one year the holy man went down to see the Catholicus Mar Timothy. And when these people learned and heard from many concerning the gift of healing which the blessed man possessed, they went to Mar Catholicus and entreated him to write to the holy man Mar Narses to command that the boy should be brought to him, so that he might pray over him, that peradventure by [his] help he might receive healing.²⁴⁵

The boy is healed which 'induced and moved all men to give praise to God, the Lord of all, Who had visited our evil generation in the person of this holy man', and what happened became known throughout Baghdad. Monastic mission activities of healing as confirmation of the preaching of the Gospel are seen in this story and included Arab Muslims as well.

In another story a few pages later Mar Narses encounters an Arab fisherman, another *tayyaya*, along the banks of the Tigris river:

And also, one year when I for some reason or other was coming up from the low countries with the boatmen along the banks of the Tigris, there met me above the city of Hadhatta a certain fisherman whose name was Heshim, and who having tied up his large net was wishing to cast his *gawpa* [a long narrow net] into the river.

And he lifted it up in his right hand, and spake with his mouth, saying, "In the name of the living God, and by the prayer of the holy Mar Narses." And I said to him, "How is it that being an Arab thou didst call upon the holy Mar Narses, a Christian teacher, to help thee by his prayers?" He said to me, "Upon which Mar Narses thinkest thou that I called?" And I said to him, "As I think, Mar Narses the teacher who lived in Nisibis." He said to me, "That Mar Narses upon whom I called was the blessed Mar Narses who was Bishop of Shenna. For when I was a boy with my father and we were fishing there, we used to see him continually crossing over upon the water at night-time from his city to the Monastery of Rabban Simon, and back again from the monastery to the city. And when he perceived that we had seen him, he sent his disciple after us early one day, and called my father to him, and he prayed and entreated of him that he would reveal [this] to no man until [after] the holy man's death." And he blessed us, and said to us, "Every time ye fish, and ye make mention of the living name of God, the Lord of all, and the

²⁴⁴*Historia Monastica* 5.14.537

²⁴⁵5,16,549

name of thy sinfulness, an abundant catch of fish shall be brought back to you in a full net', and from that time to this, whenever we have made mention of that holy man, we have made a large haul of fish in the Tigris."²⁴⁶

The context of this story is the power of the holy man and the results in fruitfulness and abundance of prayer and blessing. The question is raised by the observer, Cyprian the priest: 'How is it that being an Arab man [*tayyaya*] thou didst call upon the holy Mar Narses, a Christian teacher, to help thee by his prayers?' The Arab witnessed as a boy the monk 'continually crossing over the water at night-time'. It is not clear if this refers to walking on the water as a miracle or crossing in a boat. Due to Mar Narses asking them to not reveal that they had seen him until after his death, it is possible that the context may include walking on the water. The result of this encounter is that Heshim and his father are promised an abundance of fish each time they call on the 'Lord of all'. Inclusion of this story by Thomas of Marga may have reminded Christian readers of the gospel stories of Christ bringing abundant catch to the disciples.²⁴⁷ He includes an Arab *tayyaya* being blessed by a Christian monk's prayers, showing they were not being left out of a continuity of monastic mission activities in the early Abbasid period. Michael Penn notes: 'In the Book of Governors the primary function of Muslims is to provide Christian holy men with both an opportunity and an audience for their miraculous deeds.'²⁴⁸ Thomas of Marga's work instead of ignoring Muslims acknowledges their presence as those who experience the Christian monks' acts.

In these stories from *Book 5* Thomas of Marga included Muslims around him in the context in which he lived. He does this in a way consistent with a work devoted to monastic history primarily read by his own faith adherents. These encounters with Muslims show that there was a continued witness from the East Syrian Church at this time period that had a continuity with the past. It was of course limited in nature yet had monastic activities as a vital component.

²⁴⁶5.16.557-558

²⁴⁷Luke 5:1-11 and a similar miracle after the resurrection in John 21:1-8. Both references come from the Revised Standard Version (1971).

²⁴⁸Penn (2010:15)

Monastic activities that brought Christian and Muslims into a ‘zone of contact’ also overlapped at times with a ‘zone of conflict’. The unpredictability and ambiguity in how Muslims and Christians viewed each other can be seen in the below story in another section of the *Historia Monastica*. Thomas of Marga writes of a circumstance related to the raising from death of a dog belonging to an ‘evil and ill-natured’ Arab. The group consisted of a ‘large company of followers’ and they were offered hospitality by the monks of Beit Abhe. During the night the dog died unleashing a series of events:

And a certain evil and ill-natured Arab who was passing from the mountains to the city came to this monastery with a large company of followers, and he had with him a hunting dog, which he had brought with him as a gift for one of the chiefs who were his superiors; and having tied him up in the outer martyrion by some chance or other the dog died. And when it was morning, and [the Arab] saw that his dog was dead, he was greatly grieved, and he began to abuse and to threaten the monks, and also to demand from them the price of the dog, saying, “Ye have killed him.” And when the monks had gone in for necessary purposes, and the Arab was still threatening them, and his striving was becoming more violent, they went to the cell of Rabban, and informed him of the matter. And he took the abbot’s staff and came, and when he went in and saw the Arab he said to him, “Why art thou thus enraged, and why dost thou threaten us?” And the Arab said, “Because ye have killed the dog which I brought [with me] with such great trouble.” Rabban said to him, “Now if thy dog be not dead thou wilt ask nothing from us?” And the Arab said, “God forbid that I should importune you in anything.” And the blessed old man asked for the dog, and they shewed him to him lying outside; and he said to the Arab, “Thy dog is not dead; rise up, and do thou and thy companions mount your animals, and I will wake up thy dog and he shall go with thee.” And when the Arab had mounted Rabban went and pricked the dog with the top of his staff, saying, “Rise up, dead dog, and die outside of our territory;” and straightway the dog stood up. And all those Arabs saw and marvelled, and they threw a bark-rope over him, and took him away and when he came to the Edhre dhe Balas [threshing floor of Balas] the dog died. Thus those men went away having harmed [us] in nothing.²⁴⁹

Though a hagiographical tale that sounds like it belongs in al-Shabushti’s third section of the *Kitab al-Diyarat* [Book of Monasteries] where the monasteries as places of wonders are described²⁵⁰, it does show that hospitality was offered at this period by the monasteries even to those ‘ill-natured’ Arabs who may offer abuse and threats. In the middle decades of the ninth century when Thomas was writing there was not an avoidance of the Muslim community around them. At times even in strange circumstances hospitality was given as part of a ‘zone of contact.’ Though stipulations of the *Pact of ‘Umar*²⁵¹ specified that

²⁴⁹*Historia Monastica* 4.19.432-434.

²⁵⁰This source will be discussed in (5.2) of this thesis.

²⁵¹The *Pact* was supposedly made by Muslim Caliph ‘Umar in late seventh century and included the rule (among others) that the Christians were to subscribe to: ‘We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims

Muslims were required to be given hospitality by Christians for a period of three days, the involvement in hospitality by monasteries had gone back to the pre-Islam period as seen in Chapter 2.4 of this thesis.

In the above story of the ‘evil natured Arab’ and his dead dog Thomas’ purpose may be to show how the power of the Rabban’s prayers can raise a dead dog to life and solve a problem and potential conflict that had arisen. The dog died again (without any record this time of being raised) soon after leaving Christian ‘territory’, probably the environs of the monastery, but the problem was solved and had the other Arabs as witnesses. Including this story risks Thomas representing Muslims in a bad light with an ‘evil nature’ and either indicates that Thomas was not concerned that Muslims would read his work or he took the risk of doing so not fearing the consequences. The fact that potential consequences were unclear points to a context of unpredictability in relations with the Muslims around them.

Though stories such as the raising of the dead dog were read most likely primarily by Christians there was still a need for caution in the presentation of material due to the Christians being a *dhimmi* community. The geography and timing of Thomas writing this work were briefly considered in 2.4 of this thesis. He was writing from the location of Beit Abhe monastery in Northern Mesopotamia that up until the 840’s and its sacking by the Kurds had experienced a certain degree of security. It is not clear from the primary sources of the period whether the Church in the North was experiencing a significantly different level of religious freedom for their activities than was Baghdad. If this was the case it may explain why Thomas of Marga had a greater ability to convey stories about Muslims being healed or their dogs being raised to life than if he lived and was writing in the Baghdad context.

The issue of the timing of the writing of the *Historia Monastica* was discussed in 2.4 presenting the possibility that it may have been written during the Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (847-861). It is important as it may have meant that the context that Thomas

who pass our way for three days.’ See Tritton (1930) for more on the *Pact*, as well as issues as to when it was actually written. A version of the text of the *Pact* is produced and discussed in 5.4 of this thesis.

was writing in had become even more oppressive and thus resulted in an increased need to be careful in what he wrote about encounters with Muslims.

The above stories from Thomas of Marga's work portray Christian holy men in encounters with Muslims and involved in activities consistent with previous centuries. In them Patriarch Timothy has a role in oversight including hearing of the healing role of Mar Narses in his own capital city. Another important source for exploring this area of Church of the East monastic witness to Muslims is found in Timothy's letters. They provide important material for viewing the context and his own perspective on the challenge of communicating Christian faith to Muslims. His letters echo those of another Patriarch almost two hundred years before, Isho-yabh III, which deal at times with similar concerns. These previous letters include a common love for Beit Abhe monastery, but also the continued problems of a rebellious province in Fars as well as what to do with the province in India.²⁵² Also like his predecessor, Timothy's letters grappled with the growing presence of Muslims though the context had changed from so long before.

Timothy's own views on the Muslims around him may have had some similarity to the distinction Thomas of Marga made between the 'barbarian nations' and the Arabs and Jews who worshipped one God. In one of his letters, the Patriarch writes:

The Jews are despised today, and rejected by all, but the contrary is the case with the Arabs, who are today held in great honour and esteem by God and men, because they forsook idolatry and polytheism, and worshipped and honoured one God.²⁵³

And a few lines later:

God honoured [Muhammad] exceedingly, and brought low before his feet two powerful kingdoms...the Kingdom of the Persians and that of the Romans. The former worshipped the creatures instead of their Creator, and the latter attributed suffering and death in the flesh to the ones who cannot suffer and die in any way and through any process.

²⁵²Some of Isho-yabh's letters are discussed in 2.4 and 2.5.

²⁵³Letter 5 in Young (1974:136)

Timothy's recognition of the Muslim worship of one God placed them in a different category related to being a focus of mission, but from the letters below he shows a concern to communicate Christian truth to them. There is no obvious indication in Timothy's letters that the monastic mission activities of the Church were in any way limited or pressured by the situation of being in a Muslim-ruled region. It does not mean that he did not feel that pressure and it may have not been prudent to allude to it. Instead Timothy links the mission of the Church to the call of Christ to 'send out labourers for His harvest'. Monastic mission of the East Syrian Church as led by Timothy was consistent with its theology and history and not dependent on the context it lived in as a *dhimmi* community. Limitations imposed on the Church as part of the context as well as the growing challenges to its continued survival did affect it but mission continued to the east as well as Mesopotamia regardless.

Some of the Patriarch's letters directly relate to ongoing communication of the Christian faith to Muslims. In *Letter 34* written in 789 C.E., Timothy is addressing priests in Basra and Huballat according to the title. It is not addressed to one person but to ordained clergy of his church which may indicate a desire to have it circulated more widely. *Letter 34* in part deals with Muslim objections to Christian beliefs and starts with an exposition of Christ as servant from the scriptures. In the second part there is a more direct argument to how Muslims view Christ. Timothy uses the *Qur'an* itself as he does in other letters including 35 and 39 and indirectly in 36. In *Letter 34* the Patriarch is writing as in a debate with a scholar who though not identified as a Muslim holds similar objections and ideas. He is either describing an actual encounter or using a rhetorical device to provide scriptural answers to questions that were emerging from Christians hearing these Muslim arguments against their faith.²⁵⁴ In either event, the arguments he is proposing were for an audience of priests and monks who had responsibility to help their people respond.

In *Letters 35* and *36* Timothy is writing to Mar Nasr who he calls in the letter: 'a believer, a scholar, a researcher, indeed a searcher of the mind of the Holy Spirit, and an examiner of the words of the Holy Scriptures.'²⁵⁵ Both letters deal with doctrines held by Christians that

²⁵⁴For more on these specific letters and partial English translations see Hurst (1986) as well as short notes on each letter in Thomas (2006).

²⁵⁵Griffith's translation in article in Bekkum (2007:117)

Muslims object to among other subjects including in 35 a discourse on a particular way of explaining the Trinity and in 36 giving a Christian explanation of the Virgin birth. According to Griffith *Letters 35-37* are that of a ‘letter-treatise, an epistle on the order of the Arabic *risalah*, an essay intended for general circulation and meant to be read by others than just the person or persons to whom it is finally addressed.’²⁵⁶ If accurate it is likely that these letters of Timothy, like his pastoral letters that Thomas of Marga referred to, were meant to be circulated and read to help believers be ready to answer objections by Muslims.

In 781 C.E. Timothy engaged in a two day dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdi (775-785). The dialogue seems to have been conducted in a particular form of Syriac literary genre called the *d’rasa* [debate]. In this genre the works were often circulated to a larger group for purposes of study and further discussion. In this case it was included as *Letter 39* in Timothy’s correspondence and addressed to his friend Sergis. It was written in Syriac with an Arabic version later and provided arguments for the Christian faith communicated to Muslims.²⁵⁷ Though the dialogue is only recorded from Timothy’s side and there is no known account from the Caliph’s perspective, it is interesting that in it Timothy is clearly in the subservient role and not a triumphal one. The Patriarch’s tone is respectful and even when they grapple on issues like the Trinity or the Cross the form of the dialogue is not fashioned on Timothy ‘winning’ the argument.

In the letter describing the dialogue Timothy details how he drew primarily from the Old Testament particularly relying on Psalms and showing how the passages found fulfillment in Christ. Timothy also relies on the book of Isaiah, applying the prophecies to Christ and carefully emphasizing Christ’s superiority to Prophet Muhammad. He also uses the Gospels to show the miracles Jesus performed. In the dialogue Timothy’s references to the Prophet are carefully worded, reflecting the importance of sensitivity to the Caliph and his faith as well as the subordinate position that the Christians were in. It is interesting that in the record of the dialogue, which was the Patriarch’s version, Prophet Muhammad is said to ‘walk in the way of the Prophets’, meaning the prophets of the Old Testament. Of course

²⁵⁶:117

²⁵⁷For the dialogue in complete form in Syriac and with English translation see Mingana (1928).

this is an ambiguous statement as it indicates similar activities that Muhammad was engaging in as a prophet but does not clearly designate him a true prophet by Timothy. Giving an ambiguous answer to a sensitive question enabled the Patriarch to show by example how to engage in these kinds of conversations. It may also have provided a strategy of defense for those reading this letter on specific questions like Muhammed's role, which was particularly important if the letter was being circulated to Christian communities as a form of pastoral instruction in relating to Muslims.

Letters of Timothy, including those above that directly deal with Muslim objections to the Christian faith, were written not just as personal correspondence but as Pastoral Epistles that could provide direction, encouragement and counsel to the clergy of the Church. Timothy and other Patriarchs before and after as well as Metropolitans, Bishops and individual monks knew at least to some degree the limitations they lived under while maintaining mission activities to their Muslim neighbours. Griffith alludes to this referring to Timothy's letters: 'While they have received some modern scholarly attention, few have recognized how much Islam and the intellectual pre-occupations of Muslims affected the Patriarch's thought and gave shape to his traditional Christian teaching.'²⁵⁸ The argument that Timothy's letters were studied as part of a 'transmission of learning' for mission purpose will be further explored in the next chapter (4.3).

In a private collection in Aleppo so far 'inaccessible' to examination'²⁵⁹ several texts are held including a refutation of Islam by a secretary to Timothy, a work entitled *Kitab al-Burhan* [the Book of Proof] and dated early to mid-ninth century. Swanson, in noting these documents and others in this collection, makes the comment several times 'it bears witness to a lively apologetic enterprise' going on in these early decades of the ninth century by the Christians toward the Muslims. Based in the context of restrictions on witness that the Christians lived under this 'lively apologetic enterprise' that included the letters of the Patriarch as well as documents below was a form of mission encounter in the period that the Church engaged in. There is not a sense in reading these documents that the Church was

²⁵⁸Griffith (2000)

²⁵⁹Collection of material is detailed in Spath's *Fihris* and noted by Swanson in Vol.1 of *Christian-Muslim relations: A Bibliographical History*, Thomas and Roggema (2009).

ignoring their Muslim neighbours, however difficult that witness was. Calling these writings a form of mission encounter does not judge either the aggressiveness or results that the Christians had among Muslims for living under the restrictions as a *dhimmi* would have severely limited both.

Sustaining the witness of the Church in the early Abbasid period, including to the Muslims, would be crucially dependent on having the example of the Patriarch both in his encouragement as well as in his providing intellectual resources for the monks and larger Christian community. The influence and example of Timothy will be further explored in the next section.

3.4 Mesopotamia to the East in the early Ninth century and the ‘Image’ of the Church

The example of Patriarch Timothy in his encouragement of monastic mission activities to the East is seen in his *Letter 13* written in the last decade of the eighth century. Timothy writes to his friend Sergius, the Metropolitan of Elam, about a problem with a newly appointed Metropolitan:

We ordained Hanan-ishu, about whom I have written to Your Grace, as Metropolitan of Sarbuz, and we told him to keep the matter a secret between the two of us. “Don’t let anyone realize who you are,” I told him, “till you arrive at the See for which you have been appointed.” This had to be done because the Persians were cruel and ferocious. Before the ordination had even been carried out, however, he let out the secret in our Royal City; and so I made up my mind that seeing he could not keep a secret, I would never lay hands on him to impart the Holy Spirit. Then he ran to some friends, and got their help; and they pestered me with their entreaties; “Forget this stupidity of his,” they said. “It was the result of impatience, not of malice.” And when, after long efforts, they had persuaded me to go ahead with the ordination, I told him not to wait even for an hour in the Royal City, or in Basra or Huballat, but to set off at once to the place he was sent to. “I need expenses,” he said. “Many monks,” I told him, “cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging-bag. Get it into your head that you are just as well-off as they are: you are setting out across the sea with ample resources!”²⁶⁰

In the last section of this chapter some of Timothy’s letters were discussed that deal with weighty theological matters. In this one a rather humorous and biting side comes out as he

²⁶⁰*Letter 13* in Braun (1953) He has Timothy’s letters in Latin translation as well as Syriac. This is Young’s English translation (1974:130-131).

addresses a Metropolitan for an area of Persia that ‘can’t keep a secret’ of his own appointment. Perhaps in a semi-serious tone the Patriarch writes: ‘if he can’t keep a secret’ then ‘I would never lay hands on him to impart the Holy Spirit.’ The new leader, Hanan-ishu, then gets his friends to pester Timothy who reluctantly agrees to ordain him but with the push to get going to his assignment. Again the reluctant leader annoys the Patriarch with his request this time for his expenses which then provokes the rebuke: ‘Many monks cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging-bag. Get it into your head that you are just as well-off as they are: you are setting out across the sea with ample resources!’

While noting with caution that Timothy may have been employing a certain degree of overstatement about the ‘many monks’ with a lack of resources as a form of rebuke, several things can be noted from this reference. First, Timothy does describe the monks going to the east as ‘many’ implying that it was more than a few, with the Latin for this phrase *multi-monachi* or ‘many monks’.

Secondly, Timothy also writes that these monks were crossing the sea rather than taking branches of the Silk Road. By this time of the late eighth and early ninth century the land routes had lessened in importance for trade and travel purposes in favor of the Indian Ocean both via the Red Sea as well as the Persian Gulf. As noted in Chapter 2.4, the battle at the Talas River in 751 just a year after the Abbasids had come to power had limited routes to the East from Mesopotamia and Persia. The sea route had already been growing in importance in the lead-up to the early Abbasid period. By the first few decades of the ninth century there were fresh links developing in trade between the Abbasid Empire of Mesopotamia/Persia and China via India. Timothy also specifically attests in this letter that these monks were moving east to India and China, areas that were ecclesiastically part of the Church of the East and under his jurisdiction. The reference does not refer to their activities in these places but that they were clearly monks may imply similar involvement in mission activities consistent with other monks being sent out from monasteries like Beit Abhe.

Lastly, he comments that these monks were going out with ‘nothing more than a staff and begging-bag.’²⁶¹ The phrase is vague and the general context for it is not given in the letter but Timothy may be employing this kind of wording in a rebuke not only to Hanan-ishu personally but also to the *Messalians* [those who pray], a group that he had condemned in the Synod of 790 C.E. as heretics. Their simplicity of faith and practice was attractive to many Christians but they refused to give allegiance to the Baghdad ecclesial structures. Timothy reserved some of his sharpest comments for this group and his affirming of these monks going to the east in his letter may have countered some of the *Messalian* model that others were trying to emulate. By that affirmation the Patriarch is emphasizing that monks under his leadership were truly going out in simplicity of witness but not affiliated with a heretical group.

Timothy’s reference to India and China as destinations where these monks are going is consistent with sources of the period. Thomas included China as he identifies the far reaches of Asia in the following passage, giving a list of those from Beit Abhe monastery ‘elected and consecrated Bishops of those countries’ :

David was elected to be Metropolitan of Beth Sinaye—now I have learned concerning this man from the Epistles of Mar Timothy—together with Peter his disciple, who was alive and held the office of Bishop of the country and Yaman and of Sana when I was secretary to Mar Abraham.²⁶²

The passage affirms that from the monastery of Beit Abhe there were leaders being ordained for other regions of Asia. Included in this list of leaders is David, being elected to the senior ecclesial position in *Beth Sinaye* [China]. Thomas of Marga also directly ties him to the letters of Patriarch Timothy writing that ‘I have learned concerning this man from the Epistles of Mar Timothy.’ It is not clear from where in Timothy’s letters Thomas has read of David and if it is a specific reference to him by name or if David was included in Timothy writing of ‘multitudes of monks crossing to India and China’ as he did in *Letter 13*.

²⁶¹*Letter 13* in Braun (1953)

²⁶²4.20.448.

While China is specifically mentioned in the *Historia Monastica* Thomas does not specifically mention India. Though the region of *Beth Hind* [India] is not mentioned by name Thomas uses terms that could refer to it like ‘the ends of the East’²⁶³ and ‘the countries beyond’²⁶⁴ as it was to the East of important provinces of the Church like Dailom and Fars. The land of India and Hindu faith could also certainly fit some of the descriptions of those who worship various animals and also fits the idea of being at the ‘ends of the East.’ In *Book 5.1* Mar Timothy was ordaining from Beit Abhe monastery men:

But why should I speak of the [knowledge] of Christ our Lord [only]? For they had not even received the knowledge of God, the Creator of the worlds and their Governor, like the Jews and other nations, but they offered, and behold they [still]offer, worship to trees, graven images of wood, four-footed beasts, fishes, reptiles, birds of prey and (other) birds, and such like things, and they bow down to worship fire and the stars and planets.
265

While this description is not evidence that monks from Beit Abhe were being ordained by the Patriarch Timothy for India as included in the mission to the East it is a description that could easily fit the multiplicity of worship in India. There are also descriptions of these places beyond that could be of regions including India:

And they did not only accept established and princely thrones, which were [situated] in flourishing towns and civilized countries, but also [those of] the countries which were destitute of all knowledge of Divine things and holy doctrine, and which abounded in sorcery and idolatry and all corrupt and abominable practices, that they might uproot the evil and sow the good, and drive out the darkness of error and make to shine upon them the glorious light of their doctrine, and cast forth the devils [who were] teachers of all uncleanness.
266

Timothy’s direct involvement as noted in his letters in encouraging and overseeing monastic mission activities to places like India and China does however raise a larger question. How was he able to lead and manage this involvement while also living in an environment of the growing strength of the Abbasid regime? At times there must have seemed even to such a strong and seemingly resilient leader a growing battle for the

²⁶³This phrase appears in 5.2.468, as well as 5.4.481 and 5.7.493.

²⁶⁴5.7.490-491.

²⁶⁵5.1.468.

²⁶⁶*Historia Monastica* 5.7.489

survival of his Church. The Patriarch had evidenced qualities of being able to manage difficult situations throughout his career, including even how he came to the position. In a chapter with the unsubtle title of ‘How Timothy obtained possession of the Patriarchate by fraud, like Jacob who obtained by fraud the blessings of Isaac his father’, Thomas of Marga describes a rather sordid process. Even though there was fraud involved, ‘such means and help are allowed by the Will of God, even though they progress by cunning.’²⁶⁷ After giving several Biblical examples of shady ethics from a human perspective in accomplishing God’s designs, Thomas writes, ‘And in this case also, since the Patriarchate was set apart for Timothy, truth acted with subtlety and performed its work.’²⁶⁸

The phrase, ‘truth acted with subtlety,’ is a good expression for the career of Timothy, at least from the perspective of the Patriarch. His ability to lead his far-reaching Church and give encouragement to monastic mission activities while managing relationships with five different Caliphs must have demanded not a small degree of subtlety and shrewdness. Even before Timothy became Patriarch, in a period (777-778) when the Caliph al-Mahdi had lost a battle to the Byzantines, this subtlety was required. The Caliph had reacted to his defeat by attacking and destroying some of the Christian churches, and Timothy needed to approach him for succor. In a letter to Ephraim of Elam, he writes:

It is not because of pride or negligence that we have not come to visit you. That is displeasing to God. But the reason is the reconstruction of churches, and other urgent matters. If, as a matter of fact, Almighty God has permitted, and the King—may god preserve his life!—has consented to the reconstruction of the churches, we have had, nevertheless, to go into the presence of the King six times to get this matter settled.²⁶⁹

Thus Timothy claims that no less than six times he had to go into the presence of the Caliph ‘to get this matter settled’. Skills of negotiation and persistence, combined with subtlety that helped him attain his leadership role, would be well-honed in the years ahead as Patriarch dealing with different Caliphs. Was this skill, however, combined with the ability

²⁶⁷4.4.382

²⁶⁸4.4.383

²⁶⁹Letter 5 quoted in Labourt (1904:607)

to create and communicate an image of his Church with little substance in reality? In a recent history of the Church of the East by David Wilmshurst, the author writes of Timothy:

He was also responsible for crafting an image of the Church of the East that has persisted to this day. In Timothy's reign, as romantics have imagined it, groups of humble Nestorian monks trudged along the roads to China and Tibet, each carrying a Bible in his knapsack, to preach Christianity to the heathen, while back in the glittering capital, their urbane Patriarch engaged a Moslem commander. These images were shaped by Timothy himself, and his great achievement was to persuade posterity that the Church of the East in the ninth century counted for far more than it did in reality. Timothy was a very successful illusionist.²⁷⁰

The image in the above passage, where 'groups of humble Nestorian monks' are 'trudging along the roads to China and Tibet', is most likely partially taken from Timothy's *Letter 13* which was discussed earlier in this section. Wilmshurst postulates that these images were created by the Patriarch himself, a 'very successful illusionist'. He does not give a reason for Timothy's desire to craft these images, other than to 'persuade posterity' that the Church 'counted for far more than it did in reality.' A more relevant reason may actually have been that the Church's involvement in monastic mission to the East, whether imagined or in reality, provided strength to its ranks and indeed was a strategy of its ongoing survival.

By confirming the continuation of monastic activities in the late eighth and early ninth centuries as consistent with what had been happening before, it has been seen in this chapter that these involvements were not just an image constructed by a Patriarch well-versed in subtlety but indeed had substance in reality. Even if the miracles that Thomas of Marga included in his writing did not happen in reality, there were churches and Christians of the Church of the East in locations mentioned in his work. Timothy's letters, including ones discussed in the previous section, were written to real priests and leaders in real locations. Even if some of the encounters he wrote about, including his own debate with Caliph Mahdi, were events told from his side, they still provided teachable moments.

Wilmshurst's point about Timothy's skill at 'illusion', however, may have some substance to it. The image of the Church being broader than its homelands in Mesopotamia could have found resonance to two different audiences. First would be the Christians themselves, in

²⁷⁰Wilmshurst (2011:140)

providing assurance that though it was an increasingly difficult time being a *dhimmi* community, their continued survival was a given due to their historical strength and continued geographic reach. In that way the monastic mission activities and how they were portrayed become a strategy for that very survival. Secondly would be the Muslim audience which Timothy needed to persuade that his church was not decreasing in influence but rather still strong and vibrant for the purpose of gaining concessions and privileges. To both of these groups, the institution of the monastery was a continued presence in image and reality, especially in Northern Mesopotamia but also in Baghdad. For the Muslims, as discussed in the previous chapter, the monastery had become part of their literature even in the pre-Islam days. As will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis from Muslim sources, this image and reality of the monastery would continue to have a role in the ninth and tenth centuries as well. Timothy's ability to manage both audiences at the same time would have required a range of communication skills and indeed a depth of subtlety.

Increasing pressures and struggle for survival that the Church faced may have looked differently from Timothy's perspective living in Baghdad from that of monks of monasteries in the North like Beit Abhe. Chase Robinson has postulated that Muslim consolidation was much more gradual in the North due to the strength of the monasteries and schools of the Church of the East.²⁷¹

3.5 Conclusion

Overseeing an ecclesial organization that stretched across Asia at the dawn of the ninth century was an aging Patriarch, and he wrote to his friend Sergius about the year 800 C.E. that now the 'Holy, Holy, Holy of the Eucharist liturgy was being sung in different languages by Persians, Turks, Indians, Tibetans and Chinese.'²⁷² The Patriarch was Timothy 1, the leader of the Church of the East that stretched from his homeland of Mesopotamia all the way to India and China. According to Thomas of Marga, who had entered the monastery himself in 832 and later was the Bishop of Marga and Metropolitan

²⁷¹See Robinson (2000:169) In light of the evidence of monastic mission activities in and from the north, this idea of Robinson may indeed be plausible.

²⁷²Timothy's letter to Sergius, in Bidawid (1956)

of Beth Garmai, Timothy loved Beit Abhe ‘greatly, and honoured it with many gifts, because it was here pointed out to him that he should become Catholicus.’²⁷³ The chapter has examined several of the monks sent out from this monastery, as well as some of the monastic mission activities they were involved in.

As seen in Chapter 2 of this thesis, institutions like Beit Abhe had existed before the Islamic faith and were centers of scholarship and culture. The paradox of social and religious pressures from having *dhimmi* status under the Abbasids, yet also with a monastic mission to the East, raises the question whether that very mission to the East was in fact compelled by the pressures they were under. As noted in the last chapter, however, the monastic mission did not begin only under the Muslims, but in fact had been going on since the fourth century. This had included periodic ventures across the Indian Ocean like the monastic mission to China led by Alopen in 635.²⁷⁴ These efforts involved a continuity of movement to the East that had been part of the Church’s identity from the beginning. Pressures of living under Muslim rule did not seem to noticeably affect that growth, but as seen in this chapter would in fact continue in some vigor throughout the leadership period of Timothy.

There is no obvious indication in Timothy’s letters that the monastic mission activities of the Church were in any way limited or pressured by the situation of being in a Muslim-ruled region. It does not mean that he did not feel that pressure, but that it may have not been prudent to allude to it. Instead, Timothy links the mission of the Church to the call of Christ to ‘send out labourers for His harvest’. Monastic mission of the East Syrian Church as led by Timothy was consistent with its theology and history and not dependent on the context it lived in as a *dhimmi* community. It is not to say that it wasn’t affected by that context and the limitations imposed, as well as the growing challenges to its continued survival, but that it continued mission to the East as well as in Mesopotamia regardless.

²⁷³5.3.477

²⁷⁴The route of a monastic mission in 635 to China is not definitely proven to be by land but is the accepted theory in the secondary sources. While the arrival is attested to by the stele of 781, the exact route is not written.

Up to his death in 823 C.E., Timothy would navigate the difficult tensions of leading a *dhimmi* people under the Muslim Abbasids while encouraging their mission calling. The calling was not only to other parts of Asia but also to the Muslims around them, albeit in a highly restrictive environment for that witness.

As seen in this chapter from Church of the East sources, an important activity in monastic mission was in the area of teaching. In the next chapter this activity will be described in more detail from these sources, as well as the nature of a transmission of learning for the continued witness of the Church.

Chapter 4: Training for Monastic Mission Activities in Early Abbasid Period

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2 the question of what monastic mission meant to the Church of the East monasteries up to and during the early Abbasid period was discussed. Then in Chapter 3 the continued involvement in mission both in Mesopotamia and further east in the early Abbasid period was explored. Activities were argued to be part of a strategy of survival and ‘image management’ by Patriarch Timothy who himself contributed to the strengthening of the Church through letters giving arguments for use among Muslims.

Monastic mission of each of the monks discussed involved activities of teaching. In this chapter, how these monks were trained for mission will be explored. Attention will also be given to how that training was different from the general monastic learning. Both general monastic training and more specific learning for mission involvement had areas of integration in the East Syrian Church. An integration of involvement will be investigated in a discussion of the translation activities of the Church in the early Abbasid period.

In 4.2 monastic mission activities in teaching will be discussed as part of the school culture of the Church. Monasteries of Mesopotamia were often also locations of schools. Schools were also part of a larger East Syrian system that existed within and alongside the monasteries. Integration of mission and learning leading up to and during the early Abbasid period will be investigated in this section.

The next section focuses on examining from Christian sources what kind of training was occurring leading up to and including the early Abbasid period, from the perspective of both general learning and more specific training for mission. The life of Patriarch Timothy as an example in his own learning development will be referenced from his letters as well. The section closes with an exploration of methods and texts in how this learning for mission involvement was occurring.

Training of monks for mission will be extended in 4.4 to another area of activity happening in the early Abbasid period, the involvement in translation by the East Syrian Church. The example of their Patriarch was important in this area as well. Not all of this involvement was for mission purposes but it occurred in a context where integration was happening which will be explored in this section.

4.2 Church of the East Monastic Mission Teaching Activities

As discussed in the previous chapter (3.2), Thomas in *Book 5* of the *Historia Monastica* gives various descriptions of monks going out of Beit Abhe including Mar Shubhhal-Isho, the brothers Mar Yahblaha and MarKardagh, Mar Elijah and Mar Narses. Monks had been ordained by Patriarch Timothy and they were being sent to ‘the countries of the barbarians who were remote from all understanding’ where ‘the doctrine of the glad tidings of our Redeemer had never been proclaimed.’²⁷⁵ They ‘taught and baptized’ and ‘the fame of their acts was carried out to all the ends of the East.’²⁷⁶ In the description of monastic mission activities given by Thomas of Marga for each of these monks the involvement in teaching is common to all of them.

About the monk Mar Shubhhal-Isho Thomas writes:

And when he entered those countries he began to teach and to shew them the true knowledge of his doctrine, and while he was teaching with these words, Christ our Lord was confirming them by the miracles which he worked, by cleansing the lepers, by healing the sick, by opening the eyes of the blind, by making the lame to walk, by raising the dead, and by making barren women fruitful, for the Divine dispensation is accustomed to shew forth mighty works at the beginning of Divine operations.²⁷⁷

Involvement in teaching and then the confirming of it by miracles was a common theme in Thomas of Marga’s descriptions of East Syrian monastic mission. Of this same monk, Thomas writes:

²⁷⁵*Historia Monastica* 5.1.468

²⁷⁶:468.

²⁷⁷*Historia Monastica*:480.

And he built churches, and established priests and deacons in them, and he set apart some of the brethren who were with him to teach them psalms and spiritual praises, and he himself went further and further into the country, until he arrived at the ends of the East in the great teaching which he made among the heathen.’²⁷⁸

The two brothers, Mar Yahblaha and Mar Kardagh, along with seven others from Beit Abhe were Bishops ‘of the countries which had been taught by their hands, through the signs and mighty deeds which had been manifested by them’.²⁷⁹ Two pages later Thomas writes of these two monks:

And they became like rays of light from the height of the eminence of their course of life, and the pure lamps of their doctrine were shining brightly, being set not under a bushel and measure of sluggishness, but upon a candlestick, and they lightened all the ends of the East.’²⁸⁰

The metaphor of the ‘pure lamps of their doctrine’ that were ‘shining brightly’ linked the monastic activity of teaching with an image of light shining in the darkness of ‘barbarian nations’. With another Bishop Monk of Moka, Mar Elijah, there was a combination of baptism and ordaining new priests and deacons with teaching of responses to psalms until ‘they became virtuous and increased, and the grace of Christ grew and dwelt in them.’²⁸¹

The final stories in *Book 5* that Thomas writes are about Mar Narses and the ministry of teaching is an important activity in establishing ministry in new areas. In this case Thomas quotes Mar Narses in employing the form of questions and answers in teaching the new priests that was familiar in East Syrian culture as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter:

And the holy Mar Narses answered him, saying, “The histories of the holy fathers which have written above them [the statement] that they were composed by him, were actually written by him, but the questions and their answers he gathered together from the collection of the books of the Fathers. Now on the holy days of the Passover, and the Passion and the Resurrection, when they were going forth from the restraint of fasting, between one service and the other, the holy fathers were accustomed to sit down with the novices before them, and scribes wrote down the questions which were asked and the explanations of them, and counsels, and answers, and they placed them in writing for

²⁷⁸:481.

²⁷⁹:491

²⁸⁰:493.

²⁸¹:11.513

their own benefit, and for the benefit of those who should come after them; and Divine grace worked upon the holy Bishop Palladius, and he gathered them together.”²⁸²

Monks in this passage were involved in an activity that went back to the very beginning of their faith and the command of their Master Teacher. In the introduction to his history of Beit Abhe, Thomas of Marga gives several examples of those in Biblical history who had walked in the way of ‘virginity and holiness’, important elements of Church of the East life as seen in 2.2. He then writes of the sending into the entire world to teach, quoting Matthew 28:19-20:

And He made virginity and holiness perfect for them at the time of His Ascension from the earthly Shalim [Salem] to Jerusalem, the great city which is in heaven, when He lifted up His holy hands and blessed them, and commanded them, saying, “Go ye forth and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy ghost, and teach them to keep everything which I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all the days in which the world maintaineth the course of its generations.”²⁸³

While not all activities in teaching and scholarship emanating from monasteries like Beit Abhe were focused on mission, teaching ‘all nations’ and teaching ‘them to keep everything which I have commanded you’ was an important part of East Syrian monastic life. In Chapter 2 of this thesis the letters of Patriarch Isho-yahbh III were consulted for elements of the activities of the Church in the seventh century. Thomas of Marga writes of a curious incident in 647 C.E. when the newly installed Patriarch, after building in Beit Abhe monastery ‘a splendid temple at great expense’, now wants to build a school there as well:

And a short time after these things Mar Isho-yahbh wished to build a school near his cell, and to provide it with all that was necessary, and to bring to it teachers and masters and expositors, and to gather together many scholars and to provide for them in all things. And he had made ready in his mind, and had resolved and decided to carry out this work in such a way that for every child who was trained and instructed therein the monastery might be near at hand for the purpose of [his] becoming a disciple, so that the school and the monastery might become one; the school to give birth to and rear scholars, and the monastery to teach and sanctify them for the labours of the ascetic life. And he brought workmen and builders to build what he wished.²⁸⁴

²⁸²*Historia Monastica:15.547*

²⁸³*1.3.26*

²⁸⁴*2.7.132*

The Patriarch's desire to build this school for school children rather than for training the monks, was met with great opposition. The leader of Beit Abhe Kam-Isho says that 'the monastery was intended to be a place where they were to pass their lives in weeping and mourning, and not a school for children'.²⁸⁵ After the clash escalated to the point where Kam-Isho leaves the monastery with seventy monks, Isho-yahbh backs down and builds the school instead in his native village. Thomas then quotes the Patriarch as saying, 'that the school and the monastery might become one; the school to give birth to and rear scholars, and the monastery to teach and sanctify them for the labours of the ascetic life.'²⁸⁶

Integrating school and monastery in the mind of the Church leader, though in this case with local opposition to a school near Beit Abhe for children, was not unique to this cameo but was representative of East Syrian tradition overall. The role of the school in birthing scholars and the monastery to teach monks for the labours of the ascetic life would often be linked in the life and ministry of the Church. As will be discussed in the next section, the bond between the rules of asceticism that the monks were governed by and the training for their 'labours' that included mission was a close and at times inseparable one.

An important figure in East Syrian history for this school and monastery integration was Rabban Babhai, active in the eighth century period of Patriarch Selibha-zekha (d. 728). According to Thomas of Marga this monk was one of the greatest founders of schools. Originally from the east bank of the Tigris River near the modern Iraqi city of Samarra, Rabban Babhai became a 'father of teachers and a master of the wise' who 'founded a large and famous school in Kepahr-Uzzel, a village of rich and noble people.'²⁸⁷

Nearby Rabban Babhai also founded twenty-four other schools. Thomas writes that in case anyone would question his accuracy in that number and be among 'boasters and liars' or 'speakers of vain things' he says he will 'mention these schools by their names' and proceeds to do so in the following chapter.²⁸⁸ A statement of defense like this may have

²⁸⁵This quote is from Budge's introduction to the *Historia Monastica* pg. xcvi.

²⁸⁶Budge xcvi

²⁸⁷3.1.294-295.

²⁸⁸:295.

been to stress Thomas' credentials as a recorder or a response to a challenge by others to Rabban Babhai's activities. In the following chapter after the list of the villages that schools were started in, Babhai is said to have had sixty disciples who were teachers and that he founded another sixty schools presumably with their help. Babhai was also concerned about the ongoing care for these schools and he 'set apart for them property and funds for their maintenance' as well as coming back 'twice a year' and visiting each of the schools in order that 'laxity of discipline might not enter into them.'²⁸⁹ Numbers may be exaggerated but even if a lesser number of schools were started it does evidence the foundation of training happening at the village level that the monasteries were able to draw from.

As well as founding schools Babhai according to Thomas was involved in other monastic mission activities. While teaching at Kephra-Uzzel, a mother brought her lame son to him. She begins by weeping and saying 'Master, pray for this half of a man to whom I have given birth.' Instead of healing him as happened in other stories of this nature Rabban Babhai prophesies over him: 'This is no half a man, and he shall become a father of fathers and a chief of teachers, and his name and his doctrine shall be proclaimed in all the East.'²⁹⁰ The young man would become Abraham bar-Dashandad and be known as 'Mar Abraham the Lame' the rest of his life. He would also become the teacher of Patriarch Timothy as well as his successor Isho bar-Nun.

A link between activities of founding schools and teaching and other monastic activities like prophecy can also be seen in the life of Mar Maran-'ammeh. A disciple of Rabban Babhai, he was one of the sixty mentioned earlier that went out to start schools. He is called by Thomas a 'teacher and preacher of the Spirit'.²⁹¹ After Babhai had founded the school in Kephra-Uzzel he left Mar Maran-'ammeh to teach there. Later in his life, he was appointed to a pagan area as teacher and missionary:

²⁸⁹:297.

²⁹⁰3.3.302

²⁹¹*Historia Monastica* :350

Now there was in the country of Salakh a holy and venerable Bishop called Mar Isho-zekha, the history concerning whom I have already written, by whose hands mighty deeds and miracles were wrought in that country, and when he departed this life of troubles and trials for the rest of those who sleep in Christ, inasmuch as that country abounded in Magianism, and not only in the worship of the sun, moon and stars, but [the people] in their stupidity offered worship also to trees of beautiful foliage, and this worship of trees existed even in the days of the old man from whom I learned [this], the blessed Metropolitan Mar Aha was obliged to appoint and send the holy Maran-'ammeh to that place, for he was a teacher and a righteous man, that by his knowledge and manner of life he might root up the tares from that country. Thus he was appointed, and he set out for that country, having received from the Holy Spirit with [his] consecration [the power] to work mighty deeds and to show forth miracles, while the Divine love which was in his soul, and the great purity of life which he had cultivated from his youth, exalted him in the chief-priesthood and in spiritual workings.²⁹²

Thomas of Marga describes in this passage the activities of a teacher trained by Rabban Babhai who went to a pagan area. Mar Maran-'ammeh's involvement was not only in activities of teaching but also in healing and 'spiritual workings'. His teaching ministry was also not only focused on strengthening the Church but on pagan areas as well. Maran-'ammeh was a 'teacher and righteous man' appointed to 'work mighty deeds and to show forth miracles'. His life evidenced integration between these activities of teaching and other mission involvement in a pagan context.

Integration can also be seen in the life of Patriarch Timothy. In his correspondence is a concern and commitment for training teachers for the Church. In a letter to his friend Sergius, he writes:

Take care of all that concerns the scholars, whether boarders or day scholars. Take special care of the Monasteries of Saliba, and Bait Abe, and the other convents. Take good care to copy out Dionysius as closely as possible to the version of Athanasius and Phocas. Examine the letters I wrote to Mar Pethion, of holy memory: borrow them from Elijah bar Farrikzad. Enquire what books of our Fathers there are in Bait Mar Mattai, and let me know about them. Enquire about rare books, as many as you can, and let me know about them.²⁹³

Whether it was scholars studying in Church schools, monasteries like Beit Abhe where some of these schools were nearby or within, or fostering a book culture: all three were important elements of the Patriarch's concerns. Later in this chapter (4.4), Timothy's commitment to

²⁹²3.3.309

²⁹³Letter 9 English translation from Young (1974:130)

translation and how that related to monastic activities of teaching will also be discussed from his letters.

In the final section of another letter, the Patriarch gives a list of books he would like to read and have sent to him:

Send me the Apologia for Origen by Eusebius of Caesarea, so that I may read it and then send it back. Make a search for the Discourses on the soul by the great Patriarch Mar Aba: there are three of them, but only one is available here. And copy out and send the Homilies of Mar Narsai, since we have not got them; for Mar Ephrem, of holy memory, wrote to us to say that there is a great deal there with you which is not available here.²⁹⁴

Timothy's commitment to learning reflected a larger commitment of the Church to scholarship in monastic collections the Patriarch could draw on. Monasteries provided a foundation for this book and school culture of teaching and doctrine within their walls by having well-stocked libraries. Beit Abhe monastery itself had a 'large collection of books many of which had been bequeathed by pious benefactors'. It may have been up to as many as 700-1,000 volumes in the early ninth century. Monks were continuing to copy manuscripts at Beit Abhe seemingly up to the thirteenth century.²⁹⁵ The monastery that was one of the most famous of the East Syrians, Mt. Izla, had a library as Thomas of Marga noted: 'They [Anan-Isho and Ishyo-yahbh] became disciples in the Great Monastery [of Izla] as the books which belong to them in the library of this monastery testify.'²⁹⁶

The importance of the written word for the East Syrian Church even included the walls of Beit Abhe according to Thomas of Marga: 'The noble Anan-Isho composed definitions and divisions of various things, which were written upon the walls of his cell.'²⁹⁷ Kharg, an island in the Persian Gulf mentioned in 2.4, was one of the places on the sea route for purposes of mission and trade to India and China up to and including the ninth century. The monastic complex according to excavations Ghirshmann details had a five room library.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁴Letter 47 English translation from Brock (1997)

²⁹⁵For more comments on Beit Abhe's library see Budge (2003:xxx)

²⁹⁶2.11.174.

²⁹⁷:178

²⁹⁸Ghirshmann (1961)

Whether in the heartland of the Church in Northern Mesopotamia or the Persian Gulf these libraries provided a foundation for this integration of school culture with monastic activities in mission.

Integration was seen earlier in this section through Thomas of Marga quoting the command of Jesus in his introduction of his history of Beit Abhe. Centuries earlier, in a document extant from the sixth century, the *Statutes of the School of Nisibis*²⁹⁹ Narsai, a Principal of the School, has the following paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19-20:

Your task is this, to complete the mystery of preaching! And you shall be witnesses of the new way I have opened up in my person. You I send as messengers to the four quarters of the world to convert the Gentiles to the Kingdom of Abraham.By your flames I will enlighten the blind world.³⁰⁰

As discussed in 2.2 of this thesis, Narsai in his role at the School of Nisibis helped form an East Syrian missionary theology. The passage above was part of a homily that he preached as an exposition on the closing verses of Matthew and Acts 1 that brought out his emphasis on mission. Combined with this emphasis within the school context of Nisibis was the formal and informal environment of a monastery. Monks were shaped studying in the monastic schools giving them a common language and resources to be prepared for mission calling. Sunquist in his study on Narsai writes that he 'expresses a very specific missiological concern through the universalism of his theology, the special calling of Christians to the world, and the model of Paul and the model of the martyrs.'³⁰¹ Students were learning Narsai's writings during the Church of the East's long history of monastic training. His works were influential both in the study of the scriptures as well as the calling of students into monastic mission activities. In Narsai's missionary homily he mentions the

²⁹⁹See Voobus (1965) for the *Statutes* in Syriac and English translation. Voobus also published the *History of the School of Nisibis*, (1965) with commentary. Becker (2008) has updated Voobus' work writing more on the sources that went into the writing of the *Statutes* and the *History*. Becker questions some of Voobus' conclusions about Nisibis saying that 'he often assumes what is there and then fills in the blanks.' (2004:219)

³⁰⁰*Statutes of Nisibis*, pg. 65 The *Statutes* [or Canons] appeared in Arabic for the first time in the *Fiqh an-Nasraniya* [Laws of the Christians] an eleventh century collection of laws and canons of the Church compiled by East Syrian monk and writer Ibn at-Tayyib (d. 1043). For this work in Arabic and German see (1957).

³⁰¹Unpublished PhD dissertation Sunquist (1990:111)

Spirit fifty-five times, showing his emphasis on the Spirit as well as an image of a doctor going out to bring healing to the world.³⁰²

A source used in formation of students at Nisibis that continued in coming centuries in the monasteries and schools was the *Cause of the Foundation of Schools*.³⁰³ It was written by Mar Barhadbeshabba (c. 600 C.E.) in the late sixth century with a distinct view of history. He saw the history of the world as a history of God's schools all the way back to the Garden of Eden. A particular recommended course of study is not given in his work but rather provides a theological and historical foundation to training at Nisibis. This world-view saw the importance of monastery and school as integrated institutions with a theological foundation. According to Mar Barhadbeshabba there was also a purpose to expand these schools as part of God's plan to bring His instruction and teaching to the world.

After listing and describing schools from the Garden of Eden to Nisibis, Mar Barhadbeshabba brings his work to a conclusion:

So then let us be struck by this scourge, let us labor diligently, according to the aim of our learning, while we adjust our way of life to the reading of our learning, as our Lord said: "Thus let your light give light before people," that is your way of life, "so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father who is in heaven"³⁰⁴ and remove the evil from your midst. Do not mix yourselves with him so that he is ashamed. Crucify yourselves to the world. Strip off the old man with all of his ways; put on the new man who through knowledge is renewed in the likeness of his creator, to whom and to his father and to the Holy Spirit be glory and honor forever and ever.³⁰⁵

As in the passage by Narsai earlier, the role of light is prominent as a goal of East Syrian learning in these words of Mar Barhadbeshabba. It is to be given to the people, quoting from the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16. The role of giving light involved also the interpretation of the scriptures as well as activities in mission. Narsai at the School of Nisibis had the role

³⁰² For the French version of the missionary homily of Narsai, see Krueger (1958). For the image of the doctor, see Sunquist (1990:124).

³⁰³ Addai Scher (1908) has it in Syriac and French, and Becker (2004) in his unpublished PhD dissertation has a translation of the *Cause* in English.

³⁰⁴ Matthew 5:16

³⁰⁵ English translation in Becker (2004:418) Full English translation of the *Cause* is in Becker (:366-418)

of giving light to his students so that they may give it to others. In the Church of the East this was the *mepashqana*, a Syriac word meaning ‘interpreter/commentator’ and an important concept in Church life. Theodore of Mopsuestia (d.428) was the first officially known in Church of the East tradition as ‘the Interpreter’.³⁰⁶

The function of interpretation of the scriptures continued in later centuries of the Church including other parts of Asia. In a thirteenth-fourteenth century cemetery near Lake Issukyl in the modern nation of Kyrgyzstan several Church gravestones were discovered in the late nineteenth century. Some had inscriptions referring to those who were teachers and commentators of the scriptures. One grave is of Shliha ‘the celebrated commentator and teacher, who illuminated all the monasteries with light.’³⁰⁷ Though from a period of several centuries later and a different region to the East, these inscriptions attest to the important role of the teacher/interpreter in the Church within the context of monastic mission activities.

In one of Patriarch Timothy’s letters, this idea of a teacher ‘who illuminated all the monasteries with light’ is also seen. In *Letter 14* to Sargis a teacher is described ‘through whom the light went out to the end of the world.’³⁰⁸ The description of ‘the light went out to the end of the world’ was an important metaphorical description of the East Syrian combination of the teaching gift and the devotion of monastic life to activities that included mission. How this teaching gift ‘going out to the end of world’ was nurtured in the monasteries will be examined in the next section.

4.3 Transmission of learning for Monastic Mission encounter

In the last section the general nature of an integration of monastery and school was explored, noting that often schools were started as part of the monks’ activities that at times included mission involvement as well. In this section the question of how these monks were nurtured and trained to carry out this monastic mission in the late eighth and early ninth

³⁰⁶For more on the life and theology of Theodore see Dewart (1950)

³⁰⁷See Stewart (1928:216)

³⁰⁸*Letter 14* in Braun (1953)

centuries will be considered. It will first be examined by looking at the more general training happening in schools through their canons and description of stages of study. There will then be a more specific argument for how training for mission involvement may have taken place with what kind of methods, subjects, and texts.

In the *Statutes of Nisibis* discussed in this section the subjects taught are not listed in a systematic way but must be deduced from various references throughout. In the sixth and seventh centuries students at Nisibis began their studies with a reading of the Psalter and to gain admission they would have already learned how to read at the village school level. Upon entrance into the School of Nisibis their subjects included how to read correctly including how to pronounce accurately. The ability was developed extensively through the daily reading of the liturgy in the context within which the school and monastery culture existed. The students also received instruction in writing alongside the learning of reading. The student was also immersed in the study of Old and New Testament writings as well as the Fathers of the Church of the East, particularly Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ephrem. Other subjects taught included Greek philosophy, history, geography, some medical studies and even astronomy.³⁰⁹

Neither of the two authors who have written secondary sources on the curriculum at Nisibis, Voobus and Becker, have dealt with the question of training for mission there. The subjects above are not specifically related to training for monastic mission activities but for the ascetic life and more general teaching activities in the school culture of the Church. Certainly they were part of the foundation of a monk that was involved in mission as for any other monk. Before exploring more specifically the training for mission in East Syrian monasteries, the more general formation through ascetic practices will be discussed through an examination of canons of the Church.

The first list was formulated by Abraham who founded the monastery of Mt. Izla in the sixth century and provided a list of rules that governed not only this monastery near Mosul but

³⁰⁹For subjects taught at Nisibis see Voobus (1960 and 1965) in his works on both the history and statutes of the school there. More recently, Adam Becker (2006) has written a comprehensive study on Nisibis and East Syrian school culture in general.

also monasteries founded from it like Beit Abhe.³¹⁰ There are eleven in number, under the title: ‘The Canons which were laid down by Mar Abraham the Great, the head of the ascetics in all Persia.’

The first canon deals with the importance of tranquility and silence for the life of the monks, with the life of the mind in learning an important part of the context:

And again the holy Mark the solitary said, “If the body be not quiet, the mind cannot be quiet.” Quietness then is preserved by these two causes, viz., constant reading and prayer, or by the labour of the hands and meditation, according to that which Abba Isaiah spake and according to what the wise man [Solomon] spake, “Idleness begetteth a multitude of evils”; and again, “The man who doeth no work is at all times cast into lust”.

Importance of ‘constant reading and prayer’ as a way to preserve ‘quietness’ is pointed out in the first canon, and after the second one deals with fasting, the third canon expands on prayer and reading:

Concerning prayer, and reading, and the recital of the offices for the day and night (we may learn) from the word of our Redeemer, for He spake to them a parable that they should pray at all times, and be not remiss. And again, “Watch and pray at all times”,³¹¹ and again “Be watchful and pray that ye enter not into temptation”.³¹² And the Apostle [Paul] spake, “Be ye continual in prayer, and be watchful therein, and give thanks”.³¹³ And also Mark said, “Prayer is the mother of virtues”.

Concerning reading, when the Apostle wrote to his friend Timothy, he said, “Be zealous in reading, and in praying, and in doctrine until I come; meditate upon these things, and remain in them”.³¹⁴ And the Lord God said to Joshua, the son of Nun, “Let not this book of the Law depart from thy mouth, and meditate therein day and night”.³¹⁵ And again Moses said to the people, “It shall be a sign upon thy hand, and a memorial between thine eyes”.³¹⁶ And from the Fathers [we learn] that “without constant reading and entreaty of God, it is not possible for a fair manner of life to exist in the soul”. And

³¹⁰These canons are translated from Syriac to English in Budge (2003: cxxxiv-cxl).

³¹¹Luke 21:36

³¹²Mark 14:38

³¹³Colossians 4:2

³¹⁴1 Timothy 4:13

³¹⁵Joshua 1:8

³¹⁶Exodus 13:9

Mark the holy man said, “Pray to God and He shall open for thee the eyes of thy understanding, and thou shalt know the profit which [ariseth] from prayer and reading”.

Concerning the services of the hours of prayer the Psalmist saith, “Seven times in the day have I praised thee because of thy righteous judgments”,³¹⁷ and three times in the day did Daniel kneel upon his knees and pray and give thanks and praise before God.

The following four canons deal with rules related to how a monk should speak, his need to receive permission for movements outside the monastery, and the need to not murmur. Then in Canon VIII, there is a return to the importance of reading together:

On the first day of the week when the brethren are gathered together, whosoever shall come first to the church shall take the Holy book and shall sit in the place which is set apart; and shall meditate upon it until all his brethren arrive, so that when each of them cometh his mind may be laid hold upon by the hearing of the reading, and they turn not aside to speech upon matters which are alien [to the day], or narratives and rumours of battles and wars, or to conversation upon worldly matters, or to vain stories which do harm to the soul, or to that which is foreign to this life of excellence.

The final three canons again come back to the subject of fasting, followed in Canon X by the rule that:

When brethren come and they are accepted, let them be tried three years in the monastery, and then, if they have borne themselves in a befitting manner, the brethren shall give them permission to build cells for themselves or according to what the strength of the community sufficeth, let them help them as is customary.

The eleventh canon returns to the importance of a monk’s speech as well as a rule on receiving correction in a good spirit.

These canons give structure for the daily life of monks and some of the important rules that should govern their lives. In the canons appearing above, the importance of ‘constant reading and prayer’ is addressed. Budge has these comments as to some of the details of those areas:

Originally the monk was supposed to pray seven times a day, but gradually the habit of praying four times only became common; the solitary brethren usually prayed always. In summer the monk worked from dawn until the day became hot and from that time to the sixth hour he read and meditated; from the sixth to the ninth hour he ate and rested, and from the ninth hour until evening he worked. In winter he read from dawn to the third

³¹⁷Psalm 119:164

hour, from the third to the sixth hour he rested, and from the ninth to the twelfth hour he worked.³¹⁸

Following these canons became the common practice of Beit Abhe and other monasteries founded by Mt. Izla and provided a context of learning and prayer with a clearly regimented daily practice. There is no particular emphasis in these canons on specific mission instruction or the challenge within these canons to an outward focused life. They are focused instead around the inner workings of the monastic life within the monasteries, which could be because the rules themselves were not meant to convey the calling or vocation of mission encounter that some monks had. They rather were the internal framework of the community that all monks were part of. These monastic rules provided a context at monasteries like Beit Abhe that was one of a stability of presence centered on disciplines of prayer and constant reading. At first this can seem inconsistent with a mobility of encounter that involved reaching out beyond the monasteries to the people around them as well as to the East. These rules however can be looked at as providing foundations for spiritual strength needed for mission assignments they were called on for both in earlier centuries as well as later in Timothy's Patriarchate.

A second extant list of similar monastic rules are the *Canons of Rabbula*, formulated by a principal, Rabbula (d. 435) of the School of Nisibis. There are twenty-six canons with a supplement of three more. These rules are more detailed than Abraham's on the lifestyle of the scholar/monks but also have many similarities on the need for solitude, spiritual disciplines of prayer and good character. Several of the rules directly concern monks needing to stay within the monastery. In Rule 2:

The brothers of the monasteries shall not enter the villages except only the *sa'ura* who enters a village or a town shall not go around to the guest houses and pass the night with secular people, but only in the church or monastery if there is one near.

In Rule 13: 'The abbots shall not allow the brothers to meet with their relatives nor that they go out and go to them, in order that they do not relax [in their zeal].'

³¹⁸Budge (2003:Vol. 1. cxlviii)

In Rule 14: ‘The brothers shall not leave their monasteries under the pretext of sicknesses, and roam in the towns and villages, but shall endure their pains in the monasteries for the sake of God’s love.’

In Rule 15: ‘The monks shall not leave their residence and suborn the judges by themselves on behalf of others, and go into the towns or to the judges.’”

And related to mobility, Rule 26: ‘None shall receive a brother who moves from monastery to monastery without the word of the abbot with whom he was [domiciled].’³¹⁹

A canon that counters this emphasis on isolation within the monastery is Rule 17: ‘They shall receive strangers kindly, and shall not close the door in the face of one of the brothers.’

There was not to be movement allowed from the monasteries unless there was clear permission from the abbot but there was the provision for hospitality to the stranger who visited. In this canon the dual emphases of presence and encounter was conveyed in the attitude toward the stranger. As noted in the previous chapter the *Pact of ‘Umar* required the Christian monasteries to give three days lodging to any Muslim who asked for it, so at times perhaps this monastic hospitality was not freely given.³²⁰

The two lists of monastic/school rules above give an impression of solitude and emphasis on presence rather than encounter with the world around them. Emphasis in these rules is on spiritual disciplines of fasting, reading, prayer, watching their tongues, and stability rather than mobility indicates the training that was going on and the context of a transmission of learning. These disciplines and the learning of scriptures were, however, building the monks' strength of character and spirit.

A list of monastic rules closer to the ninth century was by Isho’bar Nun (d. 828) who headed the Seleucia monastic school near Baghdad. He lived for a period at Mt. Izla monastery, and then became the Patriarch after Timothy from 823-828 C.E. He was known

³¹⁹Translation from Syriac to English of these canons is in Voobus (1960).

³²⁰A further discussion with the actual stipulations of the *Pact of ‘Umar* is in 5.4 of this thesis.

particularly for his contributions in Syriac in the area of judicial law. Isho'bar Nun's rules have detailed instructions for how one becomes a monk and relations with family and others after entrance into the monastery. He also emphasized studying the Psalms with Rule 13 reading: 'If a monk knows only one Psalm, he should fill his time with it.'³²¹

Two other extant documents from the eighth-ninth century period give some idea of what was included in a more formal monastic school curriculum from the time of Nisibis on to Beit Abhe. The first, the *Nomocanon* of 'Abdiso bar Berika gives a three year schedule of studies:

In the first year if there is a bread in the school the *mawtha* shall be the second week that is after the Sunday "After their burial"; and if there is not bread in the school and the students have the need to eat from their labours, the second week that is after the Sunday "Not from the living."

The first year they shall write the first part of the *bet mawtbe*,³²² the book of Paul and the Torah.

The one who teaches the chanting [*si'ata*] shall teach together with the lections of the table the funeral hymns.

But in the second year they shall write the second part of the *bet mawtbe* and David [i.e. the Book of Psalms] and the prophets; and together with the table of lections they shall learn the '*unyata* [response] of the Mysteries.

In the third year the third part of the *bet mawtbe* and the book of the New Testament, and together with the table of lections they shall learn the '*unyata*.³²³

In the second, another formal description of studies in the monastic/school setting is from the Upper Monastery near Mosul and dated to the ninth century. Known for its library, this monastery had a place of some prominence for the Church of the East. There are nine of its canons which give more details of what was studied there:

1. Every Friday instruction in writing takes place in it under the direction of one of the scholars from the priests first and then from the deacons, after both have realized what is their task.

³²¹These rules also listed in Voobus (1960).

³²²According to Voobus this is a 'liturgical term' perhaps referring to prayers repeated between the readings of the Psalms.

³²³*Statutes of Nisibis (107-109)* Voobus questions whether this is actually from the School of Nisibis or a later monastic school. It does seem to provide a general three year schedule that could be used in a variety of school settings. See also Becker (2006:92-93) for further discussion.

2. The functionaries shall exhibit a pedantic care and during the time of spelling shall stand on their feet and listen attentively to the chapters.
3. In the service of the altar, every month one of the priests shall perform the service of the altar without the deacons.
4. In the school of al-Mada'in [i.e. Seleucia-Ctesiphon], the curriculum is divided into three [parts].
5. For the boys [or youth] who are about to strive for the ascent of their ranks, there is the little curriculum, and [also] for those who have not read the New Testament.
6. And if they have completed the New Testament and have started the Torah, the middle curriculum will be assigned.
7. And to those who are through with the *mawtba* and the prophets, the full curriculum shall be assigned.
8. The teachers shall love the pupils and give them good education, and stimulate [censure?] them and keep them in instruction.
9. And for the pupils there shall be obedience as the obedience of sons towards their fathers—and sonship in scholarship is more excellent than the sonship in nature.³²⁴

In both of these descriptions a more systematic process of study is outlined that has at its foundation the study of scriptures and especially the Psalms. Importance of teachers as seen above in rule 8 is emphasized and there will be further discussion of this at the end of this section. Along with the study of the scriptures, other subjects are also mentioned such as writing (rule 1), spelling (rule 2), and instruction in the serving of the altar (rule 3). A systematic exposure to three stages of curriculum is also listed with the last one mentioned in rule 7 as the ‘full curriculum’. The last rule deals with the importance of obedience of the scholars towards their teachers as ‘sonship in scholarship is more excellent than the sonship in nature.’

When these five lists of monastic canons and school curriculum are examined a foundation emerges for the training of scholar/monks which has the study of scripture and the cultivating of ascetic practices at the center. It did not directly involve instruction in mission according to the available evidence, which may have been because general training of monks was formed within a context of mission theology going back to Narsai as discussed in 2.2 of this thesis. Later in this section the argument will be presented that a ‘transmission of learning’ was happening in a more informal way for instruction in mission centred on the teacher-student relationship studying texts together.

³²⁴English translation is from Voobus (1960) and the notations are from Becker (2006).

An example in the early Abbasid period of the formation of a monk named Cyprian is detailed in the writing of Thomas of Marga. Cyprian was born in Marga of believing parents in an area formerly devoted to paganism. His education started thus:

And having read for a short time the Psalms and the subjects which children are taught in their village church, he arrived at the state of being a young man, when every man doeth his own will and pleasure, without let or hindrance, and he chose these things which belong to the Spirit, and dedicated himself to the service of the Lord, and wandered about as a pilgrim in foreign countries.³²⁵

Cyprian then attended one of Rabban Babhai's schools, 'where he was thoroughly trained in all the glorious doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, and in the books on the dispensation of life, and in expositions of them.'³²⁶ His 'wanderings' included a trip to Jerusalem and periods of living in the deserts of Egypt as well as involvement in monastic activities of healing. In one of the stories that Thomas relates about Cyprian, a woman has brought her daughter, 'vexed by Satan', to the monk:

And when she had laid her at the feet of his holiness, he stood up and prayed over her, and we were all looking on, and wasps vicious as those excited by smoke came forth from her mouth, and thus our Lord speedily gave her healing; and the woman took her daughter and went out before him confessing and glorifying God with us. But why should we strive as it, forsooth, we were able to relate [all] the wonders of this holy man?³²⁷

Ascetic training of Cyprian in the village and monastic schools was based in the Psalms and other Scriptures providing a foundation that would prepare him for a lifetime of ministry that included monastic activities in mission. A link between asceticism and ministry, or an inward focus with an outward one, is seen in Thomas' work describing the brothers Yahbhlaha and Kardagh, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis:

Now this pair of holy men having been first of all healed [of their own sicknesses], and having gathered together treasure of the good things of heaven by tranquil solitude and by labours of asceticism in this holy monastery, were then sent forth as apostles by God to the countries of the heathen to make their souls to live. And they became like rays of light from the height of the eminence of their course of life, and the pure lamps of their

³²⁵*Historia Monastica* 6.2.581

³²⁶.582

³²⁷6.6.615

doctrine were shining brightly, being set not under the bushel and measure of sluggishness, but upon a candlestick, and they lightened all the ends of the East.³²⁸

Two brothers are ‘first of all healed of their own sicknesses’. They then were trained ‘having gathered together treasure of the good things of heaven’ through solitude and other ‘labours of asceticism’ and ‘sent forth as apostles.’ Here Thomas states clearly the link between training in asceticism and the sending forth in the monastic mission. Ascetic rules and practices including solitude are meant to bring personal healing and training and then prepare the monks to shine brightly all the way to the ‘ends of the East.’

Along with Cyprian these two brothers had been trained initially in village-based schools which would count the Patriarch himself as one of its students. The training of Patriarch Timothy is instructive in the process of formation in East Syrian monastic school culture. Timothy's own letters provide some ideas of the type of instruction and formation that he received as well as what he desired to be passed down to monks being trained in the monasteries. Of the 59 extant letters of Timothy twelve have some mention of his personal concern for the School of Basos and most of these are addressed to his good friend Sergius, director of the school.³²⁹ Timothy himself had studied at Basos, a school started by Rabban Babhai as seen in the previous section of this chapter. In one of his letters to Sergius at Basos, Timothy asks the director to:

Teach your servant Humansah scrupulously and constantly the fear of God, reasoning and the wisdom of the scriptures...Take care of our brother, and shape and form in him an image of your virtue and knowledge. Be indeed a skillful sculptor.³³⁰

In another letter to Sergius, the Patriarch writes about another monk he desires to groom for greater leadership:

This is the reason why we called Sabr-ishu to come to us. I have instructed him to preach in front of the people, and he preached boldly and agreeably, with elevated, bold, and easily flowing speech, coloured with excellence of

³²⁸5.7.493

³²⁹This insight is from Suermann (1997:53).

³³⁰Letter 6 in Braun (1915)

composition and quality, now with rhetorical argument, now with quotations from our father Gregory [of Nazianzus]. If he does not daily and delay when he is called, he, and no other, will attain to the see of Nisibin.³³¹

Several areas of instruction can be seen in these two letters. In the first portion the Patriarch specifically calls for Humansah to be taught the fear of God, reasoning and instruction in the scriptures. As seen in the canons and statutes referenced earlier these three areas were part of the foundation of monastic training. Training in the fear of God that Timothy wrote about refers to the area of spiritual formation which was developed by a liturgical habit. Complemented with spiritual formation was training in ‘reasoning’ or eloquence which included studying philosophers like Aristotle. It included ways to express that reasoning in preaching and disputing. In the second letter the monk Sabr-ishu is evaluated by Timothy on his preaching, which he does ‘boldly and agreeably’ with ‘elevated, bold, and easily flowing speech.’³³² His speech also had an ‘excellence of composition and quality’ as well as ‘rhetorical argument’ and quotations from a Greek Church father, Gregory of Nazianzus. Timothy also writes of this eloquence in another of his letters to Sergius, showing the kind of care that teachers in the East Syrian schools system needed to have for their pupils: ‘The teacher has to anoint the student like an athlete with the oil of admonition in order to stand up in the fight of virtue and eloquence.’³³³

Timothy is advising these things to be taught at the village school level but also advocating a structure that included further studies at the monastic level. Though Timothy’s letters evidence a loving concern for both Basos and Beit Abhe, a time period is not given for how long he studied at either location. From the canons discussed in this section it can be surmised that he would have had a comprehensive grounding in the Psalms initially, then the rest of the Old Testament, followed by studying theologians and interpreters. According to Colless this advanced period of study may have been three years with much of the instruction given in the traditional East Syrian style of a question and answer format.³³⁴

³³¹Letter 55 in Braun (1915)

³³²Letter 55 in Braun (1915)

³³³Letter 11 in Braun (1915)

³³⁴Colless (1967:28)

Seeing evidence of monastic canons and statutes at the beginning of this section provides clues to general training of a monk in East Syrian monasteries. It does not, however, answer the more specific question of how these monks were trained for monastic mission activities. Timothy's letters refer to subjects common to monasteries like the scriptures and areas of training in virtue. As in Thomas of Marga's work Timothy's letters do not specifically mention an organized curriculum that provided a transmission of learning for mission. The emphasis rather from these two sources was that individual or groups of monks were chosen and then given assignments.

It is proposed in this chapter that there were two types of 'curriculum' happening in the East Syrian monastic training schools. First was a formal curriculum that involved Biblical studies within an ascetic framework that formed the monks in spiritual disciplines and knowledge. The second type of curriculum was more informal and tacit and based in a transmission of learning with monk teachers studying texts as well as with those who had actually been out in mission. The word 'curriculum' in this section refers to this transmission of learning whether in a formal list of subjects and practices or in a more informal sense.

A more informal curriculum in East Syrian monastic training for mission would have been in historical and theological continuity with their values of liturgical and biblical scholarship combined with a theology of mission. There may not be a record of specific curriculum and texts studied due to the nature of it having informal aspects built on the foundation of monastic rules. Involvement in mission, and the training for it, may also have been so embedded in the Church that it was not necessary to spell it out formally. Both formal and informal 'curriculums' in East Syrian monastic training involved studying texts in a teacher-student relationship while engaged in disciplines of prayer and liturgy. In both there was also an emphasis on the oral dynamic of question, answer and discussion that was consistent with the East Syrian format of a transmission of learning going back to Nisbis.

The idea of a ‘transmission of learning’ has been used by scholars like Berkey and Chamberlain³³⁵ related to Islamic educational models from the twelfth century. Other writers like Nakosteen and Makdisi, who both wrote on the history of Muslim education, have used the word curriculum related to the Madrasa models but with little definition. Nakosteen refers to the monastic based school complex of Jundishapur in Persia as having ‘developed a curriculum of studies patterned after the University of Alexandria, and during the sixth century synchronized Indian, Grecian, Syriac, Hellenistic, Hebrew and Zoroastrian learning.’³³⁶ As the institution where Church of the East translator Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873) studied it is possible that some of these elements were part of the program of study in Jundishapur. With no formal curriculum extant it is not however possible to verify that there was a ‘curriculum of studies’ in Jundishapur that ‘synchronized’ all those elements.

Transmission of learning in various faiths was centred on personal relationships with teachers and students. Berkey refers to Mameluke-era Islamic education while noting broader applications including close parallels with Jewish learning. He fails however to acknowledge that Eastern Christianity also had some of these same dynamics in their own transmission of learning and at an earlier time period than its Islamic equivalent. Berkey’s comments on Islamic education do have some resonance with the idea of a transmission of learning for monastic mission. He writes that it took place ‘in a vibrant world of fluid categories...what will emerge is less a formal system than a dynamic network, loose but comprehensive... and extraordinarily effective, not just in transmitting knowledge, but also in forging a common Muslim cultural identity.’³³⁷ A ‘dynamic network’ rather than a ‘formal system’ could be applied to this second kind of East Syrian monastic training.

In a transmission of learning the teacher to student relationship was vital in the East Syrian system at its various levels. In a section of writing on the contemporary scene of Mesopotamia in the mid-ninth century, Hunayn ibn Ishaq compares the medical school of Alexandria to what he saw around him in East Syrian training:

³³⁵Berkey (1992) and Chamberlain (1994)

³³⁶Nakosteen (1964:15) For Makdisi see his work of 1981.

³³⁷Berkey (1992:20)

The members of the medical school would gather every day to read and study one leading text among those [books by Galen], just as our contemporary Christian colleagues gather every day in places of teaching known as *skhole* for the study of a leading text by the ancients. As for the rest of the books, they used to read them individually; each one on his own, after having first practiced with those books which I mentioned, just as our colleague today read the commentaries of the books by the ancients.³³⁸

The above passage is enlightening as it reflects on a mid-ninth century scene of learning that Hunayn was observing. Students were studying these ancient texts alone at times as well as gathering with others. Hunayn writes that they are gathering in ‘places of teaching’ which he does not specifically name as monasteries. Due to a tradition of learning from the village school up through the monasteries as seen in this chapter it could be proposed that these ‘places of teaching’ may have been monastic as well. It seems implied that this learning together and then individually was being guided by teachers who may have also been monks.

As Snyder commented more generally of ancient world education there is a ‘complex symbiosis that obtains between texts and teachers.’³³⁹ An important concept found in Islamic higher education is that of *ijazat* [license to teach], which a student would receive from a recognized teacher once they had completed a rigorous program of study based primarily in texts. Rifat Ebaid calls the *ijazat* something like ‘an academic passport and certificate of competence.’³⁴⁰ A ‘license to teach’ as given by an established teacher was also used in the Christian educational models in Europe where it was called in Latin *licentia docendi*. Chamberlain writes on the association of learning with loyalty to a specific teacher by one medieval student’s claim: ‘I am the slave of whoever teaches me one letter of the alphabet.’³⁴¹

³³⁸Translation in Gutas (1998:15ff.)

³³⁹Snyder (2002:227)

³⁴⁰Ebaid (2003)

³⁴¹Chamberlain (1994:87)

An informal and hidden curriculum based in teacher-student relationships involved studying specific texts together. In 3.3 of this thesis several of Timothy's letters were discussed that dealt with specific objections of Muslims to the Christian faith. It was noted in that section that the *Historia Monastica* indicates that some of Timothy's letters were available to monasteries like Beit Abhe. The potentially 'lively apologetic enterprise'³⁴² represented by this material would not have bypassed these monasteries but instead provided locations where these texts could be circulated and studied. These works lent themselves well as 'training manuals' for use in the monasteries in giving instruction on matters of faith related to their Muslim neighbours as part of a 'transmission of learning' for mission involvement.

An example of a similar text that may have been studied for mission purpose with monks and teachers together in the monastery setting was written in the late eighth century. It was by Theodore bar Koni, an East Syrian monk himself based in Kaskar in the southern part of Mesopotamia. Bar Koni from the copious scripture references within seems to have composed the *Scholion* for the purposes of general Biblical instruction. Little is known about Bar Koni and the *Scholion* is his only existing work. According to Abdisho in the fourteenth century, he did write a book of history that is lost.³⁴³ The *Scholion* was composed in about 792 and may have begun to circulate in the school and monastic circles shortly after. Primarily a work of theological instruction and relying heavily on Theodore of Mopsuestia it is particularly *Chapter 10* that concerns arguments of Christianity related to Islam. The name *Scholion* comes from the word *scholia*, or commentaries, and it presents a series of commentaries and exposition on the two Testaments as well as some of the difficult to understand Biblical passages. The other nine chapters of the *Scholion*, as well as an appendix that forms *Chapter 11* composing a listing of prevalent heresies of the period of the late eighth century, are an extended commentary on the Old and New Testaments.

³⁴²This phrase is from Mark Swanson and discussed in 3.3 of this thesis.

³⁴³Selvasen in Romeny (2006:339). For translation of the *Scholion*, see Hespel and Draguet (1982), and in Syriac with introduction in Latin. Scher (1910) and (1912) has it in two volumes 55 and 69 of CSCO.

In an important preface to *Chapter 11* bar Koni gives an idea of his purpose in writing not only about the heresies and those holding them but also provides a statement of context the Christians were facing living as *dhimmis* under Muslim rule. He is writing:

Against those who while professing to accept the Old Testament, and acknowledging the coming of Christ our Lord, are nevertheless far removed from both of them, and now they demand from us an apology for our faith, not from all of the scriptures, but only from those which they acknowledge.³⁴⁴

Chapter 10 of the *Scholion* is organized with an introduction followed by eight sections that address some of the crucial areas of Christian-Muslim differences. Section one discusses the harmony of the Old and New Testaments, Section 2 is on the baptism of Christ and issues about baptism, Section 3 on the mysteries of the faith, Section 4 on questions about the will of God, Section 5 on the Person of Christ and presents some of the key doctrine of the Church of the East in relation to the Muslim views, Section 6 is on the importance of the adoration of the cross of Christ, Section 7 on the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem and His coming passion and what that means for believers again in light of the Islamic faith, and Section 8 is on the Sonship of Christ, again with the view of describing that to a Muslim and defending the truth of it.

Like the rest of the *Scholion* these sections are presented in a question and answer format that lent itself to study purposes by those reading and hearing it. In looking at these sections, it can be seen that there was a mix of doctrinal and Biblical material in light of the defense of the faith to Muslims but also areas of practical application of that faith. In Sections 2 on baptism, 3 on the mysteries of the faith, 6 on adoring the cross of Christ, and 7 on the entrance into Jerusalem of Jesus and the attitude of humility shown, there were important attitudes that bar Koni was encouraging the Christians in as well as giving them intellectual resources to buttress their faith in light of the objections of the Muslims. An integration of intellectual and character resources were vital in order that the Christians could be built up for ongoing life and witness.

³⁴⁴Scher (1910, Vol.69:231)

The question of how this document and others like it was used is an important one. As Griffith has noted, ‘Perhaps as a popular manual of instruction the *Scholion* was improved at now unknown times and places, by anonymous hands, to serve better its instructional purposes.’ Particularly *Chapter 10* was ‘a reasoned reply to the challenge of Islam.... a topic not to be missed in an introductory manual of theology.’³⁴⁵ Was bar Koni writing more for ‘defensive’ purposes, in providing strength and encouragement to the believers in light of the growing prevalence of Islam and even conversions happening from the Christian community? Sidney Griffith holds this opinion but it does seem to be a fine line at what point a purpose of giving strength and encouragement changes to become a resource for giving a witness to that faith. Or was it indeed a manual of instruction that could help to train the East Syrian Church in sharing with Muslims in specific areas of difference? Perhaps the answer is in neither of these extremes, but in both.

Another document that may have circulated and been studied for mission purpose in the monasteries of the ninth and tenth centuries was also written in a question and answer format. It was by Church of the East scholar and apologist, Ammar al-Basri (c. 850 C.E.), and titled the *Book of Questions and Answers*.³⁴⁶ The work was dedicated to the Caliph, which was probably al-Ma'mun (813-833).³⁴⁷ If so it would place the authorship somewhere in the mid-ninth century although there is no definitive evidence that it would have been available that early to the Christian believers either in the monasteries or elsewhere. The work of Ammar was one of his two apologetic treatises with the other being *Book of the Proof*. In both these works he is dealing with primary areas of Christian-Muslim controversy: the Trinity, Incarnation, the Gospels, and how Christians viewed the doctrine of revelation. In the *Book of Questions and Answers*, Ammar seems to be suggesting answers to real questions asked by Muslims.

³⁴⁵Griffith (2002:262)

³⁴⁶For this work see Hayek (1977:91-266). Also see Beaumont (2005) for an informative comparison of the work of al-Basri and two other Christian apologists on Christology of the ninth century with scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

³⁴⁷See Hayek (1976:73) and Beaumont (2005:68).

In this kind of format, Christians reading these documents were able to prepare themselves for the kinds of questions Muslims may ask and then have confidence that they could give an answer. Like any apologetic works of this kind the questions were usually hypothetical and the whole framework at times may have seemed artificial. The purpose of the writer may have been to give confidence to the Christians that there were well-thought out answers available to these kinds of questions. In the fourth and final section which takes up a third of the work, there are fifty-one questions that Ammar has Muslims asking about the Incarnation of Christ. Mark Beaumont makes the interesting point that in this work Ammar ‘refers to the Muslim questioner in the third person as ‘he’, which may indicate that it... was primarily designed to assist Christians in defense of their faith.’³⁴⁸

Different than Timothy’s dialogue with the Caliph, both bar Koni’s work as well as Ammar’s seem to not reflect actual debates or conversations with individual Muslims. They rather are attempts in a fairly systematic way to transmit a body of learning to the Christian community about what Muslims believe and how they could attack the Christian faith with particular arguments. Both of these writers are concerned to a great measure with doctrine and both were formed out of Christological thinking that traced back to Theodore and Nestorius. They were also part of a long tradition of East Syrian Biblical understanding. Both also used the question and answer format that was part of that tradition and employed in training in the East Syrian school system both in the monasteries and village based schools.

For monks that were staying in Beit Abhe and other monasteries in Mesopotamia and not going elsewhere in Asia, these resources enabled them to relate their faith to the Muslims around them. By being attentive to questions and answers in the *Scholion Chapter 10* as well as other documents in circulation in the period, resources were provided that enabled them to maintain mission activities even in their homeland though with restrictions. Resources to study and learn from also provided the security that their faith would not be overwhelmed by Islam and that they could be involved in sharing that faith with those around them.

³⁴⁸Beaumont (2005: 74).

It is not stated in either the work of Thomas of Marga or the letters of Timothy what other subjects or texts may have been studied with a specific mission focus. If the transmission of learning was more informal and based in relationship with monks that had already been out in mission the training may have been specific to the assignment required. An example of that was language learning. Monks that Timothy was choosing for assignments to the east would have needed to learn languages of those areas at some point. It is not clear from the sources if there was some kind of language instruction that may also have been included at the village and monastic school levels beyond Syriac and perhaps to an increasing degree Arabic. Writing about Mar Shubhhal-Isho, Thomas of Marga says: ‘He went down to the holy Mar Timothy, who having learned concerning all his affairs, and seen that he was instructed in the Syriac language and learning, and also in the Arabic and Persian tongues.’³⁴⁹ Mar Shubhhal-Isho, discussed in 3.2, had learned these languages at some point and it is possible it was in the monastic training he experienced.

Other languages required for assignments monks would engage in are not mentioned as being taught in Thomas' work, but regions like Dailam and China among others are listed in his work. It is possible that relevant languages may have been learned in more personal studies with a teacher rather than as part of any formal monastic training. Timothy's letters that include references to sending monks to places like India, Tibet as well as China also do not mention teaching these monks the languages needed or what other specific learning they would need to go. Thomas of Marga does attest as seen in 3.2 that monks that were going out in monastic mission were also returning to monasteries like Beit Abhe. It is probable that some of the training for specific fields was happening in the relationships with these returning monks.

Along with the transmission of learning for mission, these monastic schools also provided an intellectual backdrop for training those involved in the production of translations. Though the involvement in translation is not written of in the context of the mission of the Church of the East, there was a degree of integration which will be examined in the next section.

³⁴⁹*Historia Monastica* 5.4.479

4.4 Translation activities in the Church of the East

A letter of Timothy written towards the end of his life details several locations that Metropolitan appointments were being made for and choosing of monks for mission assignments, including from Beit Abhe. At the beginning of the same letter, the Patriarch takes up other matters including his receiving of a Syriac translation of a Greek work by Origen, the *Hexapla*. In this passage Timothy describes the painstaking work that was done in copying of the manuscripts:

The manuscripts have now been written out with much diligence and care, at the expense of great trouble and much labour, over six months more or less; for no text is so difficult to copy out or read as this, seeing that there are so many things in the margin, I mean readings of Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus and others, taking up almost as much space as the text of the Septuagint in the body of the manuscript. There are also a large number of different signs above them—how many, it is not possible for anyone to say. But we had bad and greedy scribes, eight men for just under six months. The copying was done as far as possible using correction, seeing that it had been made from dictation; the copies were gone over a second time and read out. As a result of the excessive labour and work of correction my eyes were harmed and I nearly lost my sight—you can get an idea of the weakness of our vision from these shapeless letters that we are writing now.³⁵⁰

The passage above from *Letter 47* concerns some of the copying and translation work that Timothy and others were doing. It was exhausting work and had taken a toll on him. At times his choice of scribes was not the best as his statement of ‘bad and greedy scribes’ attests to. In this letter the Patriarch is not only choosing scribes but also monks for mission assignments to the East as discussed in 3.2. Choosing monks for both copyists and translators as well as for mission assignments to the east speaks of an integration of involvement in the Church that Timothy was an example of.

As mentioned in the previous section, both village and monastic schools were steeped in Biblical exegesis. According to Timothy’s letters there was some degree of study of Greek as well. A foundation was provided for the emergence in the eighth and ninth centuries of a group of East Syrian translators from Greek into Syriac and then into Arabic. Involvement in translation work that grew in the ninth century was in part built on a foundation of learning imparted at the village level and then for some carried on in the monasteries. The

³⁵⁰*Letter 47* English translation in Brock (1997)

East Syrian school system at its various levels provided many well-trained leaders and teachers not only in ecclesiastical affairs but also as secretaries to the Abbasid rulers, medical doctors, and as noted, translators, among other professions.³⁵¹ It served these diverse streams by providing a foundation built in part on monasteries, contributing to a network of institutions for the Church which enabled it to maintain and strengthen learning activities in the early Abbasid period.

Some of the translations may actually have been produced in the monasteries by the monks. Attested by Patriarch Timothy's *Letter 47* where he writes about the painstaking work of translating and copying going on, he requests more works from the monastic library. An important monastery in the West Syrian tradition that became known in the ninth and tenth centuries for the excellence of its Greek studies was the *Dayr Qunna*, south of Baghdad on the Tigris river. A former student and teacher at this monastery, ibn Yunas, founded a school of Aristotelian studies in Baghdad in the early tenth century.³⁵²

Translations done in monasteries in the early Abbasid period were not a new development in East and West Syrian tradition. According to a recent work on the history of the Bible in Arabic by Sidney Griffith, monasteries had a prominent role:

It would seem that the first Arabic texts were prepared in the environs of Jerusalem and the cosmopolitan monastic establishments of the Judean desert, but very soon work was also underway in the hitherto Aramaic and Syriac-speaking milieu of Mesopotamia.³⁵³

Griffith writes of the visit to monasteries of one Muslim 'bibliophile' Malik ibn Dinar (d.748) from Basra in the mid-eighth century in search of translated materials into Arabic.³⁵⁴ It indicates that monasteries were places where translations were held and possibly produced. Griffith also writes:

³⁵¹For more on the secretaries to the Abbasids see Cabrol (2000) and Landron (1994).

³⁵²See Gutas (1998:15) for more on this monastery and particularly the Greek learning going on there.

³⁵³Griffith (2013: 102)

³⁵⁴Griffith (2013:108)

The monasteries were, already in the seventh and eighth centuries, at the center of an early translation movement devoted precisely to the translation of biblical and other ecclesiastical texts from Greek into Christian Palestinian Aramaic and from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. Not to mention that the monasteries were also the source of original compositions in Arabic from the eighth century onward.³⁵⁵

Though there is a conclusion in this passage that monasteries were in the seventh and eighth centuries ‘at the center of the early translation movement’, there is no discussion of later translation movement locations. Held as a tentative conclusion in this thesis due to a lack of definitive evidence, monasteries like *Dayr Qunna* may have had an important role also as places where translations were continuing to be produced in the ninth and tenth centuries. Monasteries like Beit Abhe as well as *Dayr Qunna* had well-stocked libraries and a tradition of Greek learning as well. There was a tradition of learning going on at these monasteries and the idea of them being places of translation efforts seems probable.

Instead of pointing to the monasteries as a location of translation activities, scholars such as Dmitri Gutas have postulated the existence of a *Bayt al-Hikmah* [House of Wisdom] in Baghdad established in 832 by Caliph al-Ma'mun.³⁵⁶ There are different ideas of what this institution was, and how extensive it was; whether primarily a library or a place that scholars could gather for the purpose of translation. When this institution is written about, it seems to be presented as the primary and perhaps even the exclusive place where translations were happening.³⁵⁷ Gutas emphasizes the role of the ‘Syrian intellectuals’ in these efforts but has little reference to the role of the monks and the monasteries as locations for translations other than some comments on *Dayr Qunna*. The nature of this ‘House of Wisdom’ is not clear from the primary sources and seems to be taken too far at times in the secondary sources in speculation as to its functions.

³⁵⁵:117

³⁵⁶For the House of Wisdom and the translation movement more generally see Gutas (1998) especially, as well as O’Leary (1939), Toorawa (2005), and Griffith (2008).

³⁵⁷For two recent more popular works promoting a strong role for a House of Wisdom but with little scholarly basis, see Lyons (2009) and Bobrick (2012). An earlier writer who advocated this theory was O’Leary (1939) and even Gutas (1998) to some degree.

There also does not seem to be a recognition of the proximity or role of the East Syrian monasteries or West Syrian ones either. As will be seen in 5.2 in an exploration of al-Shabushti's work, the *Kitab al-Diyarat*, there were many Christian monasteries still in the tenth century even within Baghdad itself. While a library and center connected to the Abbasid royal court may have been involved in some of the translation work, it is quite possible that it was a shared role to some degree with East and West Syrian monasteries.

The most famous translator of all in the East Syrian tradition, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, was trained himself in medical learning in Jundishapur but also had a certain degree of Biblical and monastic based training. He was a translator as well as a Christian concerned for communication of his faith to Muslims. Normally these two seemingly diverse activities of translation and mission have been seen as isolated from each other, seen in the lack of studies that show the two involvements in any kind of symbiotic relationship. A relationship could have existed in some form due to common intellectual roots in the monastic training both translators and missionaries received as seen to some degree with Hunayn. As Becker writes:

Few scholars have looked at the cultural milieu out of which these Syriac intellectuals [translators] came...they have considered it sufficient merely to recognize the Syriac Christian importance in this cultural transmission, while ignoring the sources for the very institutions and intellectual proclivities that made this translation process possible.
³⁵⁸

Activities of learning and mission should be looked at with more integration starting first at the village levels of the East Syrian school system and then at the level of monastic training itself. A term that has been used in this chapter to refer to the monastic learning for mission that was imparted has been 'transmission of learning' and it can emphasize process as well in the impartation from teacher to student.

4.5 Conclusion

In the early ninth century at monasteries like Beit Abhe in Northern Mesopotamia, an East Syrian school tradition continued as the Abbasid Empire was moving toward the end of their

³⁵⁸Becker (2004:28)

first century of rule. The tradition included a variety of schools: village based ones described by Thomas of Marga in the *Historia Monastica*; the semi-monastic based ones like Nisibis and Jundishapur; and monastic training within monasteries like Beit Abhe and Mt. Izla. Though a specific localized revolt happened against placing a school for children at Beit Abhe in the seventh century, schools more generally could be near or within the monastic environs. Some of these schools were started by monks and were part of the monastic mission activities of the Church. Not all of these schools or the activities of teaching had a mission purpose but they were part of an integrated monastic mission context that had continued for centuries.

Learning was transmitted in various ways both formal and informal. Examined in this chapter were some of the aspects of a transmission and activities of learning that were happening in monasteries like Beit Abhe up to and including the early Abbasid period. It was argued that two kinds of curriculum were involved in training of the monks. The first was more formal and based in scriptural studies and ascetic canons. The second was more informal and primarily based in the teacher-student relationship. Relationships for learning involved textual study as well as interaction with those returning to the monasteries from the field. They were also socialized for mission encounter through the Church's theology which emphasized the role of the Spirit in their being sent out and the spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading contributed to that preparation.

The East Syrian monastic school movement across Asia provided an important link in its context of being an important intellectual tradition for major trends that were happening in inter-faith relations and mission in the ninth century, a period extremely rich in culture and interaction. Events and activities that seem to appear in isolation and exist separate from each other can find some degree of context from a greater realization of the strength and role of these monasteries and schools and their purpose in mission. Both the translation and mission activities were fed by a strong tradition of learning in the monasteries which enabled the Church of the East to find the resources to continue to survive in the early Abbasid period.

Without the intellectual and social background of a commitment to learning and devotion in the context of mission the translation movement can seem like an historical aberration that appeared out of nowhere. Translation activities rather were a continuation of an intellectual tradition of ‘illuminating’ and ‘enlightening’ that traced back to Edessa and Nisibis and continued in part through the East Syrian monasteries and schools of the ninth century.

Seemingly diverse developments of monastic mission activities in Mesopotamia and other parts of Asia and the production of translations, both going on in the early ninth century, can be integrated more closely when the function and role of the monastery is considered. Monasteries existed in social contexts of a ‘contact zone’ that provided a strong challenge both religiously and culturally yet continued to have a role in both the imagination as well as actual face to face meetings with the Abbasids. The monastery and its roles in presence and encounter will be examined in the next chapter from Muslim sources.

Chapter 5: Views of East Syrian monasteries from Muslim Literature of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries

5.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters have examined monastic activities in mission leading up to and including the ninth century, arguing that they had continued and been part of the Church's ability to sustain itself both in self-confidence and reality. Included in the previous chapter was a discussion of the training for mission activities in monasteries and how that was part of a larger East Syrian school culture. In each of these chapters the sources investigated were from the Church of the East itself. In this chapter primarily Muslim sources from the ninth and tenth centuries will be explored for what they have to say about the role and activities of the monasteries and how Muslims viewed them. Sources will be queried as to what implications they have for these monastic mission activities and in what form they continued from the Muslim perspective.

Particular focus will be given in 5.2 to the genre of literature in Islam based on the monasteries known as the *diyarat* material which had been contributed to by several Muslim authors as discussed in 2.3. Several works on the Christian monasteries at least in some portions were still extant in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but only one from the tenth century has survived to the present. It will be explored in this section particularly for what it has to say about the activities of the monasteries in Mesopotamia.

Attention will be given in 5.3 to other literature as it involves the monasteries including the ninth century Abbasid poet Abu Nuwas. Sources will be investigated for how they bring out not only the actual reality of the monasteries as they existed in the context but also the role they played as the 'other' in the Muslim mind. It will be argued that the continuity and strength of the monasteries both in the Abbasid imagination and literature as well as in reality was an aspect of their sustained mission and learning activities stretching from Mesopotamia across Asia.

The next section (5.4) examines the ninth century context for the Christians of Mesopotamia. Included in this context were visits to the monasteries by Muslims for various purposes. It also involved conversations held in various locations including the Abbasid royal court. Visits and conversations emerged from the proximity of contact and location between entities as part of the shared world and ‘contact zone’ of the period.

In this section there is also a perspective on Christians from another important ninth century Muslim writer named al-Jahiz who commented on the role and activities of the Church and provides a view that supplements other Muslim writers in the previous sections of this chapter. It concludes with a discussion on the restrictions the Church faced as evidenced in the *Pact of ‘Umar* and what implications that had for their mission in the ninth century.

5.2 Muslim Views of the Monasteries from their Literature

The presence and activities in mission of Christian monasteries in pre-Islamic Arabia was discussed in 2.3 of this thesis. In that discussion it was noted that the first writing about the monasteries by Muslims was in the Hira area of western Mesopotamia/eastern Arabia. Monasteries were on trade routes in Arabia and it is possible that Prophet Muhammad himself may have seen Christian monasteries and monks. Indeed there is reference in Muslim tradition to a monk named Bahira that the Prophet interacted with.³⁵⁹ Yaqut al-Hamawi (d. 1229), who wrote geographical dictionaries, listed three different monasteries where Bahira may have met Muhammad, all near Basra in southern Mesopotamia.³⁶⁰

In acknowledging the presence of monks and monasteries Muslims had continued to produce *diyarat* material. They also wove these monks into their own traditions like the one about Bahira. These traditions embraced the activities of monasteries but brought them into Islam and re-focused them. In the *Qur’an* there are three passages with descriptions of

³⁵⁹For the Bahira tradition see Barbara Roggema (2011)

³⁶⁰:45

Christian monks and monasticism. Like Bahira, the monks would be devoted in their faith yet follow the revelation of the Prophet. The first passage reads:

Strongest among men in enmity to the Believers wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans; And nearest among them in love
To the believers wilt thou find those who say, "We are Christians": because amongst these are Men devoted to learning and Men who have renounced the world and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Apostle, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: They pray: "Our Lord! We believe; write us down among the witnesses."³⁶¹

In the passage Yusuf Ali translates the phrase on the fourth line as 'Men devoted to learning and Men who have renounced the world and they are not arrogant.' He writes that he has translated it that way 'following the commentators' and that he believes it refers to Abyssinian Christians who then 'recognized the truth'.³⁶² Irving translates the Arabic word *rubban* as 'monks'³⁶³ so instead of 'men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world' it would read 'priests and monks'. In both translations the Christians referred to in the passage end up responding to the revelation with their 'eyes overflowing with tears'.

The second passage reads:

O ye who believe! There are indeed many among the priests and anchorites, who in falsehood devour the substance of men and hinder them from the way of God. And there are those who bury gold and silver and spend it not in the Way of God: announce unto them a most grievous penalty.³⁶⁴

In this passage Yusuf Ali translates *rubban* as 'anchorites' while Irving uses the more standard word 'monks'.³⁶⁵ Ali does not give a reason why he has used 'anchorite' though it can refer to a more solitary form of monasticism. The passage is a more straightforward one of judgment on these priests and monks who 'hinder them from the way of God.'

³⁶¹ *Surah* 5:82-83 English translation by Yusuf Ali (1983: 268-269)

³⁶² Ali (1983:268)

³⁶³ English translation by Irving (1991:60)

³⁶⁴ 9:34 English translation by Yusuf Ali (1983:449)

³⁶⁵ Irving (1991:96)

The third reads:

Then, in their wake, we followed them up with [others of] Our apostles: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary. And bestowed on him the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy. But the Monasticism [*rabbaniyya*] which they invented for themselves, We did not prescribe for them. [We commanded] only the seeking for the Good Pleasure of God, but that they did not foster as they should have done. Yet we bestowed, on those among them who believed, their [due] reward, but many of them are rebellious transgressors.³⁶⁶

Yusuf Ali has translated the Arabic word *rabbaniyya* as ‘monasticism’ where Irving has chosen the word ‘monkhood’. In both there is a sense that the Christians got the institution wrong and ‘invented’ it ‘for themselves’. It does not seem to be an outright condemnation but rather a rebuke for how the Christians are doing it. Instead the Muslims will reinvent it themselves and make it part of their tradition, as they did with the *diyarat* literature or Bahira.

Two other characteristics of these monks to be accorded praise can also be seen listed in *Surah 5*. First is that they were ‘men devoted to learning’. Commitment to learning was a characteristic of these monasteries and monks throughout East and West Syrian tradition as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. It is not clear from these references where these monks were from. As noted this is from Ali’s translation and may reflect his understanding that these priests and monks were Abyssinians but still the nuance of being ‘men devoted to learning’ may have applied more generally to early Muslim perceptions of Christian monks.

Secondly they were also said to be ‘men who have renounced the world and are not arrogant.’ Monastic devotion as a point of qualified esteem emerges in the ninth century poetry of Abu Nuwas discussed in the next section. The monks in *Surah 5:82-83* are said to ‘have eyes overflowing with tears’ as they ‘recognize the truth’ of Islam. A similar aspect as in the *Qur’an* of Christian monks recognizing the revelation of Islam continued through Muslim social literature in later centuries discussed in the next two sections. It provided a backdrop for some of the ribald stories of life in the monasteries from the Muslim

³⁶⁶*Surah 57:27* Ali (1983:1506) and Irving (1991:316)

perspective. According to al-Shabushti and Abu Nuwas, the monks at times may be corrupt but when they come to their senses they will indeed acknowledge the truth of Islam.

In McAuliffe's study of how the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* commentators looked at the monks and monasteries she brings out the 'exceptional ambivalence'³⁶⁷ in these three references. Particularly this is true in *Surah 5* where McAuliffe uses the phrase 'puzzling praise'³⁶⁸ to refer to the monks when they recognize the truth of Islam. Monasticism itself as indicated in *Surah 57:27* is an institution that the Christians have gotten wrong in the development though the level of devotion can be commended.

When these passages in the *Qur'an* were written is a matter of increasing question and has some bearing on the context of Christian monastic activities among Muslims. According to writers like John Wansbrough the compilation and writing of the *Qur'an* may not have been until the ninth century in Mesopotamia.³⁶⁹ If this is the case the prevalence of monasteries and their activities in the ninth century may have helped form the context that these passages were written in. Even if it was formulated in the seventh century, closer to the beginnings of Islam, Christian monasteries were already in existence in Arabia as noted in 2.3.

In the first two centuries of Islam's growth in Arabia and other parts of West Asia an environment existed that included numerous monasteries. It was especially true in Northern Mesopotamia where monasteries dotted the countryside as well as in urban settings. An unpublished Ph.D dissertation by Elizabeth Campbell lists the monasteries included in three Muslim sources: the *Kitab al-Diyarat* [Book of Monasteries] of al-Shabushti discussed later in this section, the *Mu'jam al-Buldan* [Dictionary of Countries] of Yaqut al-Hamawi and the *Masalike al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar* [The Roads of Looking in the Kingdoms of the World] of al-'Umari (d. 1349).³⁷⁰ The latter two documents are geographical dictionaries

³⁶⁷McAuliffe (1991:282) and Waardenberg (1999)

³⁶⁸McAuliffe :263

³⁶⁹Wansbrough (1978) has controversial theories related to these issues of timing. They continue to be vigorously debated. See also Reynolds (2008) and (2010)

³⁷⁰Campbell (2010:271-301 Appendix B)

and include portions of earlier *diyarat* material now lost. Three Muslim sources list the monasteries as being in parts of Arabia and Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. When the monasteries in Mesopotamia are added together they come to over one hundred and seventeen with almost half of those in the North.³⁷¹ It is not clear how many more monasteries may have existed beyond the ones listed in these Muslim sources but with the Christian lists included it was considerable.³⁷²

The number of monasteries in proximity to Muslims was part of the context before and after Islam began. A genre of Muslim social writing called the *diyarat* literature developed and continued into the ninth and tenth centuries. It describes non-Muslims and their institutions, in particular the Christian monastery. It is an especially interesting type of material for the attention given to non-Muslims and their cultural and social influence.³⁷³ The literature ranges from subjects as diverse as the beauty of gardens to the pleasure of forbidden activities. The monastery becomes often the staging area for these activities through the realm of poetry. The purpose for this thesis in examining the literature in this section and the next is to see elements of monastic activities from the views of Muslims of the period. It is also to explore what images related to these activities centred in the monasteries may have meant to an overall perception of the Church in the early Abbasid period.

Though much of the *diyarat* literature has been lost there is a surviving book, al-Shabushti's *Kitab al-diyarat*, that describes many existing monasteries in the ninth and tenth centuries.³⁷⁴ The *Kitab* is organized into three sections with the first detailing thirty-five monasteries

³⁷¹This is my own count but there are at least thirty others in the sources not clear as to their location.

³⁷²Fiey (1965) and later Wilmschurst (2000) have both done work on lists of monasteries from Christian sources. In a recent trip to Northern Mesopotamia, I was told by Church scholars there that they believe there were four hundred in that region alone.

³⁷³Kilpatrick writes that it 'is rare for members of the dominant religion in a society to write about aspects of a subordinate religion in the same society.' (in Thomas 2003:19)

³⁷⁴There is no published translation of al-Shabushti's work and I am indebted to Jack Tannous sharing with me his unpublished translation in English of the first six monasteries of Iraq in the first section and all of the last section. In the mid 1930's Iraqi scholar George Awaad published in Arabic in Baghdad the Berlin manuscript that had originally been thought to be by al-Isfahani.

in Iraq and two in Syria; the second containing material on four monasteries in Egypt; and the third titled 'Monasteries known for their wonders' with each chapter in that section focusing on a strange manifestation from a particular monastery.

The author of this work, al-Shabushti (c. 950), was originally from Persia and the private librarian for Caliph al-Aziz Hakim (996-1021) of Egypt. The second section of the *Kitab* deals primarily with monasteries in Egypt and has been translated by Atiya.³⁷⁵ Al-Shabushti focused the majority of his three section work on Mesopotamia rather than Egypt and the surrounding Palestinian monasteries. The reason why he did so is not clear but he did allude in his descriptions to the beauty of monasteries though they belonged to another faith. Perhaps the sheer number of them in Mesopotamia attracted his attention. It may also have reflected his interest in the closer context of Mesopotamia to his home area.

Though there are thirty-five monasteries from Iraq listed in the *Kitab* many others are not referenced in the work, possibly due to a third of the work being lost as Awaad believed. Based on Awaad's comments and his disagreement with the cataloger of manuscripts in the Berlin library that there were only ten pages lost, Tannous surmises that 'a number of Iraqi monasteries are not mentioned in the manuscript as we have it.'³⁷⁶ It could be because al-Shabushti as well as al-Umri and Yaqut in later centuries were describing monasteries they had personally seen or had heard of from other informants. It also would not have been exhaustive considering other monasteries mentioned in Christian sources like the *Historia Monastica* or the letters of Timothy.

Each of the fifty-four chapters in the three sections of the *Kitab* is named after a monastery or church beginning with a short description of the monastery. There are then several lines of poetry describing distinct qualities or pleasures found there. As noted, the monastery or church is the contextual place where this poetry finds its location and this Christian setting at times seems to be almost an after-thought. It is a poetry that emphasizes the 'secular' activities going on at the monasteries while also noting that visiting Muslims were coming

³⁷⁵See Atiya's article (1939) for comments on the situation in Egypt when al-Shabushti was writing and his English translation of section 2.

³⁷⁶Tannous (2011:47) in an unpublished English translation and paper sent to this author.

for Christian festivals and observation of other Christian practices like prayer. Other descriptions in the work are more direct as to monastic activities, and the interactions Muslims had in the monasteries will be particularly focused on in this section.

The *Kitab* details visits of Muslims to the monasteries in several descriptions. In writing about *Dayr Samalu* located east of Baghdad al-Shabushti notes that ‘Muslims make Samalu their destination for outings. It is one of Baghdad’s famous excursion spots, one of its oft mentioned places of revelry.’³⁷⁷ At *Dayr al Th’alib* in the western part of Baghdad:

The people of Baghdad make it their destination and go there to stroll about, it is scarcely ever bereft of someone who’s visiting it or dropping in. It has a feast that no Christian or Muslim ever stays away from.³⁷⁸

Muslims visiting Christian monasteries for their feasts were noted by al-Shabushti including that in one situation the ‘strange spectacle’ took place at *Dayr Samalu* of a Muslim visiting at Easter and ‘taking the Eucharist.’³⁷⁹ In this source as well as others in the next section a Muslim participating in such a clearly Christian activity as the Eucharist or other festivals presents some curiosity. The *Kitab* author does not elaborate on why a Muslim taking Eucharist was a ‘strange spectacle’ especially on whether there was a spiritual dynamic to this visit and participation. It may have been an opportunity to enjoy the wine used by the monks in the ceremony. The importance of wine-drinking not only as an illicit activity but also as a symbol will be discussed later in this section and in the next when other Muslim literature is explored. In light of examples of Muslims enjoying the pleasure of wine in this work as well as others, it seems al-Shabushti would not have thought it a ‘strange spectacle’. An ambiguity of activities of Christian and Muslims at the monasteries occurs often in this literature as seen in the passages below.

A ‘handsome and wholesome’ monastery in Baghdad, the *Dayr al Jathliq*, according to al-Shabushti was ‘surrounded by gardens and trees and aromatic plants’ and was ‘sought as a destination and frequented, never empty of people strolling about there or visiting it. In it

³⁷⁷ *Kitab* 1.79 English translations of these passages are by Tannous.

³⁷⁸ :93

³⁷⁹ :78

are its monks and male youths and those of the debauchees and leisure class who frequent it.³⁸⁰ Here the Muslims are visiting the monastery in some frequency for its gardens and fragrant setting. Visitors include debauchees and leisure classes³⁸¹ that helped to make the monastery ‘never empty of people strolling about’.³⁸²

Still another monastery near Baghdad, the *Dayra Mudnan*, was ‘visited for strolling about and for drinking and is never bereft of visitors and lodgers.’³⁸³ A monastic tradition of housing travellers went back to earlier centuries as well. In 2.3 the seventh century Christian source *History of Maruta* was referenced calling the monastery a ‘refuge, a harbor, and place of repose.’³⁸⁴ Monasteries in the seventh century as Islam was beginning provided places along the trade routes for Christian pilgrims and other travellers. Several centuries later this monastery near Baghdad according to al-Shabushti is ‘never bereft’ of those visiting and at times lodging as well. The monastic activity of hospitality likely included Muslims that desired to experience the pleasures found at the monasteries.

In another part of the first section of his work al-Shabushti includes a ninth century poem that contains a list of Christian symbols centred on the monastery. He attributes this poem to the Muslim writer Abu Nuwas who will be further discussed in the next section. There is a degree of attraction to these Christian symbols in the first stanzas ending with an increasing ambiguity:

By the baptism of the Ancient Monastery,
by its metropolitans and by the catholicus,
By Simon, by John, by Jesus,
by Saint Sergius, by the compassionate priest,
by the birth of the Messiah, by the day of Epiphany,
by the Rogations, by the submission of obligations...
by Holy Mary and by the day of Easter,
by the Bread of offering and by the ancient Wine,
by the crosses...

³⁸⁰ 1.99

³⁸¹ It is not clear from the passage if these visitors are all Muslims or some were Christians as well.

³⁸²:99

³⁸³:108

³⁸⁴Nau (1905)

which are brilliant and glittering,
 by your pilgrimage when you visit Saint Sarjisan,
 at the monastery of Nubhar...
 by the Sanctuary of the Church of God the Savior (the
 Holy Sepulchre),
 and the priests who arrive there from afar,
 by the sound of the *nakhus*³⁸⁵ of the churches,
 when the prayer is recited at dawn,
 By Mary, by the Messiah, by each priest,
 Apostle of a religion worthy of confidence,
 By the monks of the hermitages on the summits,
 who dwell there in effort and asceticism,
 by the opening Gospel [reading] of Palm Sunday,
 when the Christians recite it along the way,
 by the great crosses which then appear,
 and by the sash on the delicate waist,
 by the beauty inscribed on you, have you not
 pity for my burning desire, of the dryness of my
 throat
 Your devotees are tempted to come to the Christians,
 to leave Islam and apostatize.³⁸⁶

For most of this poem the writer lists a series of Christian beliefs and personages that includes the ‘monks of the hermitages on the summits’. They ‘dwell there in effort and asceticism’ and are involved in activities of reciting the Gospel on festival days. The amount of activities listed starting with the ‘ancient monastery’ shows a familiarity by the Muslim writer with symbols and institutions of the Christian faith. It is only in the last few ambiguous lines of the poem that Abu Nuwas expresses his ‘burning desire’ and the reasons for it.

At *Dayra Mudnan* al-Shabushti refers to a Muslim writer named al-Husayn ibn al-Dahnak who said:

Hurry the wine, for truly the cup is full of something that sometimes stirs the causes of desire. Truly I was moved by monks conversing piously, in the sanctuary after the tranquility of the evening. Therefore, I was frightened at a yearning in me through which I was reminded of the Karkh of Iraq and brothers and sorrows.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵The *nakhus* was “a wooden, clapping instrument used in the eastern Christian world to summon believers to prayer.” (Villagomez 1998:49)

³⁸⁶1.131-132 This poem also appears in English in Villagomez’ unpublished PhD dissertation (1998:47-48) and a French translation in Landron (1994).

³⁸⁷:108

The passage describes the possibility of wine drinking for Muslims in the monasteries but also the linking of that cup of wine with the stirring of desires and longings. Monks ‘conversing piously’ ‘frightened’ this Muslim writer with the ‘yearning’ he felt for the memory of fond places and brothers and ‘sorrows’. A link of yearnings and longings of drink with places close to the heart was also a ninth century theme in other poetry discussed in the next section. When this material is read from a perspective of noticing these ‘yearnings’ and ‘longings’ and how monasteries become locations for their fulfillment, however at times ‘forbidden’, visits of Muslims portrayed in this literature offer a further layer of complexity and ambiguity to relations between the faiths.

In the poem by Abu Nuwas quoted earlier in this section by al-Shabushti there is a fairly straightforward list of many symbols of Christianity which evidences a degree of knowledge of that faith. He then quotes Abu Nuwas to say ‘have you not pity for my burning desire, of the dryness of my throat’, which seems to be provoked by the ‘beauty inscribed on you’ and the ‘sash on the delicate waist’. Interplay of the theme of longing and desire includes a ‘burning desire’ which causes a ‘dryness of the throat.’ Longing seems to be provoked by the beauty of the devotees and the phrase ‘the sash on the delicate waist’.

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The next phrase ‘Your devotees are tempted to come to the Christians, to leave Islam and apostasize’ appears also in an earlier eighth century Christian source that will be discussed in 5.4 of this thesis. It was a story located at the monastery of Bet Hale in Mesopotamia. In the poem above, copied by al-Shabushti in the tenth century, this phrase is at the end without any explanation. It is not clear whether this was said with an ironic superiority or if there was indeed a sense that the poet recognized that a possibility of leaving Islam was indeed real. The quote appears after a long enumeration of Christian practices and beautiful symbols which had some attraction to Muslims. Attraction could have come from a ‘religious memory’ as some of the readers and listeners to the *Kitab* and earlier poetry from the ninth century had fathers, mothers or other relatives that had at one time been Christians themselves and this symbolism still had great power. Aziz Atiya writes of this religious

³⁸⁸:131-132

memory for some Muslims: ‘The happy associations of childhood with these monasteries... gave them impetus to compose the said works on such institutions.’³⁸⁹

A theme of forbidden longings centering on the monastery also appears in another story in al-Shabushti, the tale of ‘Abbada:

When the Caliph al-Mutawakkil exiled him to Mosul, ‘Abbada went to the Monastery of Demons [Dayr al-Shayatin]; He drank there and did not leave it. He fell in love with a young monk from the monastery that had a very beautiful face and figure. He loved him passionately, and became crazy and remained at the monastery because of him. He did not stop hanging around him, cajoling him, and giving him presents, until the monk quit the monastery and left with him. The monks of the monastery figured out that ‘Abbada had perverted the young boy and they wanted to kill him by throwing him from the top of the monastery into the valley below. But ‘Abbada discovered what they wanted to do. He fled and did not come back to that place.³⁹⁰

In this passage al-Shabushti links the pleasures of drink with the attraction to a young monk who had a ‘very beautiful face and figure’. Longing grew into passionate love ‘making him crazy’ and this presumably Muslim visitor ‘stayed at the monastery’ because of him. Finally the monk ends up leaving with the man and Abbada barely gets away from the rage of other monks at the monastery. It is interesting that the figure in this story, ‘Abbada, is actually a relative of the Caliph and had been ‘exiled’ by the Caliph to Mosul. It is not said what offence may have provoked the exile but the metaphor of ‘exile’ is combined with the theme of longing for the forbidden and the love of beauty. With this story, as well as others in the literature of this section and the next, it is not clear whether these are actual events with real people or rather stories meant to evoke a certain mood and lead to an interpretation about monasteries and the activities going on there. Either one may be true depending on the given story.³⁹¹

Visits of Muslims to monasteries for pleasure are an important theme in the *Kitab al-Diyarat*. Yet there is also a visiting for festivals and other Christian practices including

³⁸⁹Atiya (1939:3)

³⁹⁰al-Shabushti pg. 185 in Campbell unpublished PhD dissertation (2010).

³⁹¹See Hamori (1974:38) for a helpful analysis of the poet as living on the margins in Medieval Arabic Literature and the question of whether poets like Abu Nuwas were writing such at times erotic verse as a ‘literary pose’ for more veiled spiritual longings. (pg. 57)

prayer. Previous passages in al-Shabushti's work in this section describe visits by Muslims to monasteries in the Baghdad area. They include for purposes of enjoying Christian festivals and aesthetic pleasures such as beautiful gardens and wine. Visits were also taking place at locations in Northern Mesopotamia. At the monastery *Dayr Ushmuna* named after a woman who was buried there 'no one of the people who love aesthetic pleasure and frolicking stays in the city, but rather goes out to the monastery.'³⁹²

At a large monastery near Mosul which 'contains many monks' there is a 'day each year in which people from every place gather there.'³⁹³ The description is from al-Shabushti's third section which was given to 'Monasteries known for their wonders' and this one was known for its infestation of black beetles on these gathering days. Even its name *Dayr al-Khanafis* has a meaning similar to 'black beetles'. The beetles would be so numerous that they would 'cover its walls until it was blackened with them.' Then 'after the people would pray the beetles disappear until the next year.'³⁹⁴

It is not clear who in the above passage are 'the people' praying the beetles to disappear but in light of 'people from every place' gathering there it may have involved Muslims as well as Christians. Another monastery al-Shabushti describes in his third section, the *Dayr Mar Shamun* in Northeast Mesopotamia, was known for a 'wonder' of having 'an Episcopal throne with a well in it. Whoever is overtaken by leprosy visits it and washes in the well. He does not stop washing until leprosy has left him.'³⁹⁵ Al-Shabushti does not indicate whether the 'whoever' with leprosy was a Christian or Muslim but there were times when Muslims did receive healing at the monasteries.³⁹⁶

In this third section of the *Kitab al-Diyarat* there is an emphasis on 'wonders' occurring at monasteries like the ones above. There is a shift from pleasures able to be experienced there

³⁹² *Kitab 1.135*

³⁹³ 3.147

³⁹⁴ :147

³⁹⁵ :153

³⁹⁶ See 3.3 in this thesis for monastic mission activities of healing in the *Historia Monastica*.

to participation in activities of prayer as well as witnessing these miracles, however strange, that can happen within the monastery's walls. When all three sections of this work are taken together they reveal two kinds of readings that may have been done by Muslims.

One reading of al-Shabushti's work by Muslims may have been as a polemic against Christians by describing the monasteries as places for Muslims to have forbidden pleasure particularly through drink and illicit sexual encounters. Reading in this way placed the monasteries in a role of the 'forbidden other' which lessens their attraction as locations of serious spiritual engagement. The first two sections of his work particularly include these activities of pleasure highlighted in the poetry of Abu Nuwas.

Another reading may have also been done by Muslims of the period and later centuries. The *Kitab al-diyarat* and other Muslim sources explored in this section and the one to follow may have been read also with a view of monasteries and their activities that was more ambiguous. It may have represented spiritual longings and attractions that fit with the already centuries old awareness of these Christian institutions. The last section of al-Shabushti's work has a greater emphasis on 'wonders' happening at monasteries and monastic activities of prayer and healing. Reading these stories in this manner was similar to passages on monasticism in the *Qur'an* discussed at the beginning of this section, ambiguous in meaning but still with monks acknowledging the truth of Islam.

In either way of reading or both, Muslims in the ninth and tenth centuries were to some degree aware of monasteries and their activities. Included were not only activities that Muslims engaged in that featured the monastery as a staging area for pleasure, but also places where they participated in Christian festivals and practices of prayer. The *Kitab al-Diyarat* provides valuable evidence that Muslims were aware of Christian practices and activities in the early Abbasid period, however ambiguous. It also indicates that there was some participation in these activities as well. The next section examines other Muslim literature which includes visits to monasteries for a variety of reasons.

5.3 Other Muslim Sources on Monasteries in the Early Abbasid Period

A series of visits to monasteries with an ambiguity of motives is found in Muslim stories and poetry in the late eighth century under the title of *majnun* [one who is a madman or possessed] literature. Though not a self-described genre by Muslims like the *diyarat* literature, it can be included as a sub-genre of al-Shabushti's *Kitab* and some of the stories fit particularly well in the third part given to monasteries that had 'wonders'. The literature refers to two themes common in both Muslim and Christian traditions: mental illness at times cured by prayer and the tradition of the 'holy fool'. Michael Dols writes: 'The wise fool, like the holy fool, was essentially harmless in his actions, but unlike the latter, the "intelligent insane", usually made sense. The wise fool could be a joker, a court-jester, or an intrepid social critic.'³⁹⁷ 'Fools' like the demon-possessed tended to dwell on the margins of society and one of those locations of margin was the Christian monastery. A similar Arabic term, *mujun*, is described by Julie Meisami as 'both a type of social (or anti-social) behavior, and a type of writing which reflects, or purports to reflect, that behavior.'³⁹⁸ Both this poetry and the stories below emphasize those at the margins considered to be anti-social and often looked at with humour.

In a series of stories set in Caliph al-Mahdi's rule (d. 785) focusing on the *Dayr Hizqil* [Ezekiel Monastery] which also appeared in al-Shabushti's work, Muslims visit the monastery to observe the madmen who dwelt there including the holy fool 'Uliyan. Madmen were sometimes chained to the wall while the monks would pray for them. In one of the stories a Muslim named Dhu n-Nun dreams of a visit to the monastery:

Dhu n-Nun had a dream, in which he was told about a *hakim*, or wise man, in Dayr Hizqil and was instructed to visit him. He went to the monastery but was told that there was no one there but an idiot, a fool, and a sick person. He asked to see them, but he saw nothing until he reached the farthest compartment, where he saw a man bound and shackled to a large rock. Dhu n-Nun recognized 'Uliyan and greeted him. Asked why he was confined there, 'Uliyan said that it was simply God's will; He tested and healed, punished and forgave. As

³⁹⁷Dols (1989:12) Dols wrote important works on medical history particularly in Islam and focused his last book before death on the concept of the *majnun*.

³⁹⁸See Meisami (1993) for her monograph on *mujun* poetry.

usual, the anecdote ends with Dhu n-Nun asking for pious instructions out of respect for the wise fool, and ‘Uliyan gives it.’³⁹⁹

In another story a Muslim visits a monastery with a friend:

He passed by Dayr Hizqil with a friend who suggested that they visit the monastery to observe the wit of the madmen. They entered and met a comely youth who was handsomely dressed; he combed his hair and painted his eyes with kohl. Despite his apparent gentleness and charm; he was chained to the wall. They greeted one another with pious expressions, and the boy recited his poetry. When he elicited their approval, he recited more, but they confessed that they really did not understand what he said. Then, he pulled strenuously on the chain. His tongue stuck out; his eyes protruded; and his lips emitted blood. He lay on the ground an hour and, then, died, and the visitors were very remorseful about the reaction that they had provoked in the young man.⁴⁰⁰

Stories of Muslims visiting the monastery known as *Dayr Hizqil* are important not only for details of healings but also for the place of the monastery and monastic activities in these different kinds of literature and poetry. Writers of this literature seem to have a degree of first-hand knowledge of these monasteries and what goes on there. It may have come from their own visits to the monastery and thus from witnessing actual events similar to what they have written. Or as noted in the last section it could also be from what they had heard from Muslims who had a ‘Christian memory’ of these activities before their conversion to Islam.

In the story above it is not clear if the boy is a Christian and the poetry he is reciting relates to his faith. It is also not clear what provoked the youth to have such a reaction and then die. The witnesses to this though are Muslims and have gone to the monastery to ‘observe the wit of the madmen’. A strange encounter with a mad youth and the lack of clarity in how this tale is resolved is similar to other tales and poetry of this nature dealing with Muslims visiting monasteries. The tone is ambiguous and has a wistful longing that centres on the monastery and the monks that lived there. The story does not include prayers for healing by monks but does attest to Muslims visiting the monastery to hear wit, even from a ‘holy fool’ chained there.

³⁹⁹English translation is by Dols (1989:360)

⁴⁰⁰:360

The argument can be made that in this Muslim literature these ‘holy fools’ were not only madmen chained to monastery walls but also the monks who pray for them. An idea of a ‘wise fool’ who lives in the margins fits well with the depiction of monks in the monasteries. Monks and their activities were in the realm of the ‘other’, whether to be lusted after or to participate with in Christian events like festivals or the Eucharist.

‘Holy fool’ literature emphasizing at times monks and their activities at the margins of society is also seen in the work of the ninth century poet included by al-Shabushti in his *Kitab al-Diyarat* discussed in the previous section. The Muslim writer, Abu Nuwas, had a far-ranging oeuvre that included a focus on Christian monasteries. His poetry is described by James Montgomery as that of ‘ambiguity and ambivalence, of paradox and antinomianism.’⁴⁰¹

An aspect of Abu Nuwas’ writing that is distinctive is the extensive listing of Christian symbols woven into the poetry. In the last section, the inclusion of a love for drinking wine with worship at the monastery is seen in material from al-Shabushti, including by Abu Nuwas. In a poem from the time of Abbasid Caliph al-Amin (809-813) there is a similar theme:

Let’s leave behind the apple trees and rose
And take the high road to al-Ukayrah,
A place where worship makes men thin as ghosts.
At matins and at vespers there, the bells
Acompany the chanting of the Psalms;
Now listen while the nearby monks intone
the Christian gospels and Messiah’s name.
However, their main specialty
Is vintage wine, served in the finest glass
Attended by one slender boy who wears
A woolen cassock over his hair shirt.⁴⁰²

Ambiguity in how the Christians and their monasteries were viewed is seen in still another kind of poetry called the *khamriyya* [wine song]. It is part of Abbasid *belles-lettres* [literary writing] which refers to writing under the Abbasids dealing with cultural and social topics

⁴⁰¹See Montgomery (2011:42). His article has a re-evaluation of the poet arguing for his work to be taken more seriously and nuanced than it has been in the past.

⁴⁰²This poem by Abu Nuwas is translated into English by Colville (2005:36)

from poetry and music to the enjoyment of life through wine and illicit relationships. Some of the poetry of Abu Nuwas fits into this ‘wine poetry’ genre. His poems dealing with the drinking of wine can often be found happening at Christian monasteries.

In later centuries other Muslim as well as Christian poets would also contribute their own verses to this genre. A Muslim Sufi⁴⁰³ named 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn al-Farid (d. 1235) wrote about wine at the monasteries: ‘ I salute the folk of the Christian convents, who have often got drunk on it, though they never imbibed it, but they only hoped to do so.’⁴⁰⁴ David Taylor also refers to the later thirteenth century wine poetry of Syriac Christian writers who began ‘to experiment with the wine song genre that was so widespread in the literatures of the dominant languages around them.’ The genre of wine songs was ‘closely linked with the *ghazal* [love poetry] and *hasib* [erotic poetry] in Arabic literature.’⁴⁰⁵ In all three types of literature a location for activities was the Christian monastery.

Associated with monasteries also in some Muslim perceptions was pleasure connected to sexual looseness as well as drunkenness. Abu Nuwas contributed to this idea in his combination of *khamriyya*, *ghazal* and *hasib* poetry. While his verses are filled one moment with references to Christian monastic activities and symbols, in another there are also other attractions. The next three poems have both the pleasures of drink and sexual desire included. In the first, the narrator’s longings are strong for a Christian boy:

Wearing the *zunnar*, he walks to his church; his god is the Son, so he
said, and the Cross.
O I wish I were the priest or the metropolitan of his Church! No, I wish
that I were the Gospel and the Scriptures for him!
No, I wish that I were a Eucharist which he is given or the chalice from
which he drinks the wine! No, I wish I were the very bubbles [of
the wine]!⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³The *Sufis* refer to a mystical stream within Islam that was developing in the ninth century. To *Sufis* these three genre of *khamriyya*, *hasib* and *ghazal* would be written about increasingly in the next few centuries with some degree of Christian symbolism. See Andrae (1987) and Seppala (2003)

⁴⁰⁴Ashtiany (:233)

⁴⁰⁵Taylor (2010:31)

⁴⁰⁶Montgomery (1996:115-24) also appearing in Campbell (2010:133)

The image here is a strong one: the poet desires even to be ‘a Eucharist’ or the ‘chalice’, or even the bubbles of the wine itself! Provided is the most intimate access possible to the priest who attracts him. Using terminology like becoming the Eucharist, so holy to Christians, would be most likely quite provoking to any Christians who might read it. To Muslims, as argued at the end of the previous section, it could have been read in various ways.

Still another poem by Abu Nuwas again mixes activities at the monastery with deeper longing:

The church bell heralds break of day,
The Monk intones his prayer;
The drunk man longs to have more wine,
The rain has filled the air.

The garden smiles with yellow and
It laughs at you with green;
You mix friends’ wine with water that
You ladle from a stream.

Upon a bed of lavender
And lilies you repose,
While young gazelles around you lie,
For whom your longing grows.

How good it is to have a drink
In monastery grounds,
And April is the sweetest month
To drink in such surrounds

The Christian boys who live within
The church’s sanctuary
Would never serve me if they knew
Of my debauchery.

But oh, how nice to come right out
And freely sodomize
A beardless boy, as long as you
Can hide from your God’s eyes! ⁴⁰⁷

Abu Nuwas again writes of themes of longing and Christian symbols within the setting of the monastery:

⁴⁰⁷Colville English translation (2005:59)

May rain fall on Mesopotamia and its shadowy trees, and on Dayr
 ‘Abdun in refreshing showers.
 Long ago I was awakened there for the morning drink, in early dawn,
 when the birds were still in their nests,
 by the voices of monks in a monastery, intoning their prayers,
 blackbearded, singing aloud before sunrise,
 wearing the *zunnar* around their waists, and on their heads they had
 arranged the hair in crowns.
 There was many a boy among them with a pretty face, the eyes
 painted with *kuhl*, casting down coquettishly his lids over their whites
 I followed him with longing glances until he acquiesced in obedience,
 promising to meet me by a wink of his eye.
 He came, wrapped in the cloak of night, hastening his step out of fear
 and caution.
 The crescent moon shed its light, almost exposing him, as if it was a chip
 of the fingernail cut off.
 I spread my cheek on the way for him in humility, and I dragged my
 sleeves over the traces.
 Then happened what happened, which I shall never tell. So think the
 best of it and do not ask!⁴⁰⁸

The poem combines desire for the Christian boys with other things happening in the monastery that the poet ‘shall never tell’ and the reader should ‘think the best of it, and do not ask.’ Written in the ninth century environment, this was another example of the monastery and Christian faith being looked at as the realm of the forbidden with a rather whimsical feel about it. Wrapping his poem in the longings around the monastery may also have been a way of expressing the ambiguity inherent in how the Christians were viewed and how their continued presence in the monastery was received.

Ambiguity is seen in still another Muslim source in the early Abbasid period. In the *Kitab al-Ghuraba* [Book of Strangers], the author is probably a tenth century young man from Baghdad rather than al-Isfahani (d. 867) who it is attributed to. According to Patricia Crone, this work until recently was thought to have survived in only one copy, but in 1999 Modarressi showed that there were actually three manuscripts with the oldest in Qum, Iran. She writes that ‘the *Ghuraba* also has affinities with the Diyarat genre which seems to be unique to the 10th and 11th centuries.’⁴⁰⁹

The work has three descriptions of long visits to monasteries for the purpose of drink, to see the beautiful gardens, and also have the opportunity of erotic adventures. A quaint and

⁴⁰⁸Jacobi (1975:35-36, 39) also appearing in Campbell (2010:134)

⁴⁰⁹See Crone (2000) for an important work on this source and partial English translation.

rather strange source, it is a collection of graffiti verses that were written on physical surfaces like walls, stones and places that travelers would have access to. The author makes claims that he has seen some of them but others are ‘yarns’. Some of this graffiti was written on walls of monasteries or in other locations with references to the monasteries and activities there. Monasteries in these stories and graffiti about them can be seen as a territory where Muslim standards were temporarily relaxed.⁴¹⁰

As an example of this relaxation of standards, one of the stories in the *Kitab al-Ghuraba* is set in 965 at the *Dayra al-Thalib* in western Baghdad. Though many of the stories in this genre deal with the monks and male youths, this one focuses on the moral looseness of Christian nuns and how alluring they are:

She went out on the day of her feast,
dressed as a nun,
and captivated with her haughty walk
everyone coming and going.
For my misery I saw her
on the feast of the Th'alib monastery,
swaying young women,
a buxom girl among buxom girls,
in whose midst she was like the full moon
surrounded by stars.

Then the guests discussed among themselves these verses and added their own:

A slender girl of bewitching looks passed by us [in the monastery],
Brought out from her seclusion by the monks,
to glorify the religion as living proof of it.
She passed by us
Strutting in her gait as if her figure were a ben tree,
bending in the wind that blew on her
and swaying like a basil branch.
Thus she enslaved my heart,
stirring up old sadness and grief.⁴¹¹

Description of the ‘slender girl’ who had ‘bewitching looks’ and how she ‘enslaved my heart stirring up old sadness and grief’ leads to longing and passion that has brought a sadness and grief. The context of this work is about locations, as seen through the eyes of a

⁴¹⁰: 150

⁴¹¹*Kitab a-Ghuraba* 34-6, in Campbell (2010:148-149)

traveller, which stir up a desire for home. The monastery is one of these locations, a place of nostalgia even though it belongs to the 'other' and also at times the realm of the forbidden.

In another story in the *Ghuraba* the Caliph al-Rashid (786-809) visits a monastery in Hulwan and the author notes the following graffiti left on a stone there:

How long will I be arriving at places and departing, continuing the long struggle in bad luck and in good, far removed from my home, forever distanced from the loved ones who do not know my plight and later in the inscription, "it is contentment that is wealth, not a lot of money."⁴¹²

It is not known if the Caliph himself left this inscription. It is, however, recorded as his and the occasion of visiting the monastery has provoked a longing for an end of a life of transition. There is also an expression of homesickness attributed to the Caliph. Something about this Christian place in its beauty and perhaps 'otherness' had provoked in this Muslim leader these feelings and moods.

Another story from the *Kitab al Ghuraba* of a Caliph visiting a monastery, al-Mutawakkil (847-861), was visiting Hims. As he walked around the monastery he would say, 'O my, do you see where we are? I have never seen anything like it.' At one point, the Caliph sees the daughter of a monk, they drink together and she sings for him. He becomes enraptured with her; she converts and becomes his favourite wife.⁴¹³

Here in this story another Caliph in visiting the monastery is taken by its beauty in the gardens and surroundings. Then he sees beauty of another kind which awakens in him the longings for this daughter of a monk. Again the themes of beauty, longing and drink can be found together. Passages that deal with the beauty of the monastery are not always written by Christians, but rather in this case by what seems to be a young Muslim who is most likely writing for other Muslims. Also this collection of stories and graffiti and indeed the

⁴¹²English translation is from Crone (2000:28).

⁴¹³(:58).

various kinds of genre that feature the monasteries and monks by Muslims link Muslim rulers and elite to these locations and practices.

Further on in this same passage the Caliph says to his traveling companion: ‘I want to walk around in all the monks’ churches, and also in the place known as the Faradis, when we get there, for I have heard that it is a pleasant place.’⁴¹⁴ It is the same Caliph, al-Mutawakkil, in whose reign increased persecution of the Christians happened including destroying churches and monasteries.⁴¹⁵ Yet here in this passage recorded by a Muslim is a desire by the Caliph to see the churches and places of the Christians. Attraction by al-Mutawakkil to Christian symbols and institutions is not proved by this, but it indicates that in Muslim literature after his reign the place of Christian monasteries and their activities was still recognized as an established part of the cultural and religious scene.

Just a few pages after these stories of Caliph visits there is a recording of an inscription written on a monastery’s wall: ‘The stranger acts and speaks freely because he has escaped surveillance and feels sure he will not be blamed for his lapses.’⁴¹⁶ The passage infers that the monastery was a place where the traveller or ‘stranger’ could find anonymity and ‘escape surveillance’. It could be a place where one could ‘act and speak freely’, a kind of cultural zone where anything goes and there would not be blame for longings and lapses. A place of escape was combined with rather elaborate description at times of the beauty in Christian practices and places.

Monks and monasteries in Mesopotamia had a degree of interaction with the religious and social context around them. In these two sections monastic activities have been viewed through Muslim social literature from the ninth and tenth centuries. It has the monastery as a location for various kinds of activities, as part of a larger oeuvre that deals with social and cultural life in the ninth and tenth centuries. The view of the monasteries and their activities from these sources is ambiguous, with a considerable listing of Christian symbols and

⁴¹⁴Also pg. 58 but this English translation is by Tannous (2011)

⁴¹⁵See further discussion of this persecution under al-Mutawakkil in 5.4

⁴¹⁶(:78)

practices including festivals and prayer as well as miracles of healing. These sources suggest that Muslims were aware in the early Abbasid period not only of the presence of the monasteries but also involved in encounters with the monks there that involved participation in Christian activities.

The awareness of monasteries in their literature as well as Muslims visiting them confirms that Christian institutions were locations that continued to provide places of meeting between the two faiths. It was for a variety of motives, but activities of prayers for healing and participation in the Eucharist and other festivals by Muslims suggest that monastic mission was happening in the early Abbasid period, however restricted. Mission involvement in this literature was different in nature from monks being sent out of the monasteries to other regions of Asia in the same period, as discussed from Christian sources in Chapter 3 of this thesis. It was not a mission that involved being sent out of the monastery for activities of preaching and teaching the Christian faith as in other regions of Asia. It rather was centred in the monastery and involved interactions with Muslims who were visiting. Though the mission context was different in Mesopotamia with more limitations due to restrictions as a *dhimmi* community, similar activities of prayers for healing were still able to continue.

Restrictions that the Church faced in the early Abbasid period will be discussed in the next section as part of the context in this period for these monastic activities. Perspectives of other Muslim sources in the ninth century on these activities will be examined as part of that discussion.

5.4 Early Abbasid Context for Christians from Muslim Sources

The early Abbasid context in Mesopotamia included an articulate Muslim writer and philosopher named Abu 'Uthman 'Amar ibn Bahr al-Kinani al-Bari, or as commonly known, al-Jahiz (d. 869). He wrote near mid-century a work titled *The Refutation of the Christians*. Al-Jahiz was born in Basra and lived in Baghdad fifty years before returning to his home area for the final part of his life. This caustic and entertaining writer loved books so much

that according to tradition he died when a large pile collapsed on him.⁴¹⁷ In the period of residence in Baghdad (811-861) he was a contemporary of Timothy for the last decade of the Patriarch's life though there is no evidence they ever met. Al-Jahiz provides an important perspective on the Christians during a period that included a relative degree of lenience under the Abbasid Caliphs that Timothy related to. He also witnessed the Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (847-861) which was a more difficult time for the Church.

In one account written by a Christian, this Caliph was at one point provoked by the behaviour of a prominent Christian's deception towards him:

And al-Mutawakkil was angry and commanded him⁴¹⁸ to be deposed, and a month after his appointment sent to Baghdad and put him in prison, and proceeded to destroy the churches and monasteries in Samarra, and treated the Christians harshly, and forbade their employment in the royal service.⁴¹⁹

Though there were periods of persecution al-Jahiz portrays a varied context for Christians and their influence. According to Pelliat the work titled *The Refutation of the Christians* was designed 'to furnish arguments against Christians occupying high positions in Muslim countries' which included Baghdad itself. Al-Jahiz comments on these Christians:

The reason why the common people respects and loves them is that they include among their number secretaries, kings, flunkies, noblemen's physicians, perfumers and money-changers, whereas the Jews are dyers, tanners, barbers, butchers and tinkers.'⁴²⁰

The passage mentions al-Jahiz's observation that the 'common people respects and loves' the Christians because of some of these roles they have. In his writing there is an ambiguous tone related to the Church with at times an almost grudging respect or at least tolerance of their existence. In a section of the *Refutation* focused on the Byzantine Christians al-Jahiz expresses his incredulity that they could believe in the incarnation of Jesus:

⁴¹⁷Pelliat (1969:87) quotes this tradition but says it is likely 'spurious'.

⁴¹⁸Church Patriarch at the time, Theodosius.

⁴¹⁹English translation Browne (1933:54) quoting document from thirteenth century historian Mari

⁴²⁰English translation from Pellat (1969:87)

How can a nation of theologians, physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, diplomats and skilled craftsmen of every sort maintain that a man who has been seen to eat and drink, urinate and defecate, feel hunger and thirst, dress and undress, grow and shrink, and was killed and crucified, could be a Lord and creator, uncreated not created, who makes the living to die and brings the dead man back to life.⁴²¹

When al-Jahiz is writing of ‘a nation of theologians, physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, diplomats and skilled craftsman of every sort’ he may have also been including with the Byzantines those Christians he sees around him in Baghdad. The Muslim writer expresses dismay that people of this stature could believe what they did about God. An example of a Christian that was prominent in the Abbasid milieu and a contemporary of al-Jahiz was the East Syrian translator Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873). In his work titled *Kayfiyyat idrak haqiqat al-diyana* [How to Perceive the Truth of Religion]⁴²² Hunayn is responding to a member of the royal court trying to convince him of the truth of Islam. The setting of this response suggests a possible public gathering which will be further discussed at the end of this section.

Hunayn responds with six reasons that someone would embrace falsehood, and then four reasons to accept religious truth. Though the identity of the Muslim is not revealed, and may have been an example of a conversation to instruct Christians rather than a real encounter, the following arguments that Hunayn counters could be the kind of ones in reverse that al-Jahiz made in his *Refutation*. There are six reasons for embracing the falsehood of Islam, according to this Christian writer: outward pressure, material betterment, more power, a persuasive argument, ignorance, and a prior relationship with the one making the argument. None of the reasons for conversion to Islam are because of its truth and beauty. al-Jahiz has noted in the passages above and the ones that will follow of the power and social position of the Christians, reasons perhaps that they had embraced the falsehood of Christianity. The positions of these two articulate and prominent representatives of their faith, al-Jahiz and Hunayn ibn Ishaq, mirror one another including almost a surprise that each could believe what they do about God.

⁴²¹:38

⁴²²See Toorawa (2005:138) for a fuller discussion of this document.

The next section of Hunayn's work lists the reasons for accepting religious truth: signs and miracles, the life and teaching matching in the one making the argument, clear proof, and a match between the teaching itself from beginning to end. These reasons for accepting truth are interesting also in light of the context of the mid to late ninth century period that Hunayn wrote in. He was a contemporary of al-Jahiz and their residences in Baghdad may have overlapped by a few years. Hunayn's inclusion of signs and miracles as a reason to accept truth shows an awareness that even as an intellectual and philosopher he was open to the confirming of truth in this manner. The context that he wrote in included miracles of healing done by monks of the monasteries as seen both in Christian sources like Thomas of Marga discussed in 3.3 as well as Muslim sources discussed in the first two sections of this chapter.

Al-Jahiz also writes on the Church's monastic activities. In one passage he directly rebukes the asceticism of the Church:

And when you hear their speech about pardon and forgiveness, and their talk of the wandering monastic life, and their grumbling against anyone who eats flesh, and their preference for eating vegetables and not touching animal food, and their encouraging continence in marriage, and their neglecting to seek children, and their praise of the Catholicus and the Metropolitan and the Bishop and the monks for neglecting to marry and to seek offspring, and their honouring the chiefs, you know that between their religion and that of the Zindiqs there is an affinity, and that they have a natural leaning toward that religion.⁴²³

In this passage the writer shows his awareness of the presence and involvement of Christian monks in this period. He is warning his readers that they may hear the monks speak 'about pardon and forgiveness' as well as 'the wandering monastic life'. He continues with a series of rebukes for the lifestyle of the monks and likens them to the *Zindiqs*, another name for the Manichaeans. They are discussed related to East Syrian monasticism in 2.2 of this thesis.

In another passage al-Jahiz suggests that earlier restrictions on Christians were not always being enforced:

We do not disagree with the people with regard to the great wealth of the Christians, and that they have an established power, and that their water is pure, and that their business is

⁴²³English translation from Browne (1933:69)

reputable; and we only disagree with regard to the difference there is between the two heresies and the two parties [i.e. between the Christians and the Jews], in the strength of the opposition and of the obstinacy, and the revenge against the people of Islam in all manner of trickery, to say nothing of the ignoble character of the origins and the vileness of the roots. And as for their power and their trade and their form, we know that they take hackney horses and racing steeds, and they gather crowds together, and smite with the mallet [i.e. on the board used as a church bell], and the citizens ogle at them, and they put on thick material and the overcoat, and they take hired servants, and they are called Hasan and Husain and ‘Abbas and Fadl and ‘Ali, and they all take these as surnames; and there is nothing left but that they should be called Muhammad and be surnamed Abu ‘l-Qasim. And the Muslims inclined towards them. And most of them gave up wearing the waist-belts, while others wore them under their clothes. And most of their great ones abstained from giving the *jizya*,⁴²⁴ and refused to pay it, although they were able to do so. And they hit him who hit them, and smote him who smote them. And they did not do what was in their power. And most of them, and our judges and our people, saw that the blood of the Catholicus and the Metropolitan and the Bishop was worth as much as the blood of Ja’far and ‘Ali and al-‘Abbas and Hamza.⁴²⁵

The above passage is instructive as it gives in some detail some of al-Jahiz’s specific responses to Christian behavior in the mid-century Abbasid period. He begins by noting that he does not ‘disagree’ that the Christians have ‘great wealth’ and ‘established power’ and even that ‘their business is reputable’. His disagreement with the Christians relates to their heresies along with the Jews and the way they are involved with ‘trickery’ as well as having ‘ignoble character’ and ‘vile roots’. Al-Jahiz writes that this ‘trickery’ is a form of revenge against the Muslims. He is not specific as to how and to what end Christians are attempting to trick Muslims but it may relate to how the Church is not keeping restrictions and continuing to use Muslim names.

Al-Jahiz critiques the Christians also for some specific activities that could also be part of this trickery. They are using the power they have socially and culturally to ‘gather crowds together’ and continue to use a mallet to call people to church. In turn this causes the ‘citizens’ to ‘ogle’ them. Whether the ogling was more than observation and what the consequences were is not clear from the passage, but just after al-Jahiz writes that Muslims ‘inclined towards’ the Christians. It is written right after he has rebuked the Christians for even possibly taking names that are clearly Muslim including Muhammad.

⁴²⁴A tax the Christians were required to pay.

⁴²⁵English translation in Browne (1933:47-48)

In a further note in the same document al-Jahiz writes the following: ‘The Christians have done the Muslim community much harm, and they continue to make converts.’⁴²⁶ Important evidence is provided here that during the period just a few years after Thomas of Marga’s work al-Jahiz is complaining that the Christians ‘continue to make converts’. Though the passage is not specific as to whether the converts were Muslims or from other faiths to the east of Mesopotamia, the first part saying that the ‘Christians had done the Muslim community much harm’ suggests that the converts referred to were Muslims.

A complaint of al-Jahiz that the Christians ‘continue to make converts’ raises the question of what restrictions they were facing in the early Abbasid context. He has noted they had social and cultural positions of power and were to some degree causing Muslims to be inclined to them. His writing in the *Refutation* rebukes the Christians for some of their practices including not paying the *jizya* and continuing to call people to Church through a mallet. In these passages he suggests that somehow they are no longer keeping restrictions that were in place before at some level. The question must then be raised as to what restrictions were in existence in the period and known to both the Church as well as to the Muslims around them?

In answering that question, a list of restrictions on the Christians as a *dhimmi* community should be discussed. Perhaps most frequently referred to is the *Pact of ‘Umar* formulated in 637 C.E. between Caliph ‘Umar and the Christians of the period. There are different versions of this document as well as questions when the stipulations were actually known, circulated and enforced. It has been suggested by Tritton that they were actually formulated in the ninth century and retroactively said to date to the seventh century.⁴²⁷ Barbara Roggema writes that the ‘literary form’ of the *Pact* may date to the later ninth or even tenth century but the ‘contents’ relate to the post-Islamic conquests and the context then.⁴²⁸ It is possible that a more formalized list of the restrictions did not circulate until the later centuries. If that is true, then the restrictions may have been more an accepted cultural and

⁴²⁶English translation of this passage is from Pellat (1969: 88)

⁴²⁷See Tritton’s monograph (1930)

⁴²⁸Roggema (2011:113)

religious expectation by Muslims toward Christians. Al-Jahiz in the passage above seemed to be responding in his complaints to similar stipulations as listed below.

This is one version of the *Pact of 'Umar*:

We heard from 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Ghanam [d. 697] as follows: When Umar ibn al-Khattab, may God be pleased with him, accorded a peace to the Christians of Syria, we wrote to him as follows:

In the Name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a letter to the servant of God Umar [ibn al-Khattab], Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians of such-and-such a city. When you came against us, we asked you for safe-conduct [aman] for ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our community, and we undertook the following obligations toward you:

We shall not build, in our cities or their neighborhood, new monasteries, Churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.

We shall keep our gates wide open for passerby and travelers. We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days.

We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy, nor hide him from the Muslims.

We shall not teach the Qur'an to our children.

We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it.

We shall show respect toward the Muslims, and we shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.

We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the qalansuwa, the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their kunyas.

We shall not mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our persons.

We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals.

We shall not sell fermented drinks.

We shall clip the fronts of our heads.

We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the zunar round our waists.

We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall use only clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims.

We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims.

We shall not build houses overtopping the houses of Muslims.

[When I brought the letter to Umar, may God be pleased with him, he added, “We shall not strike a Muslim.”]

We accept these conditions by ourselves and for the people of our community, and in return we receive safe-conduct.

If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant [dhimma], and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition.
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The question of when these stipulations for the *dhimmis* were written is perhaps not as vital as when they were actually enforced and to what degree that happened. Al-Jahiz writing in the mid-ninth century complains that Christians are continuing to make converts, perhaps the most serious charge, as well as not paying the taxes *dhimmis* were required to. They were also violating rules he does not specify that involve how Christians dress, the names they take, calling people to their meetings, and taking slaves. When the list of restrictions in the above version of the *Pact* is compared with these specific rebukes to the Christians, it suggests that al-Jahiz may have had something similar he was responding to. That may have been more in the realm of expectations of how Christians and Jews would behave rather than a formal list.

During the Caliphate of Al-Mutawakkil (847-861) a Christian-written document referred to earlier in this section also alludes to specific enforcement by the Caliph:

And he imprisoned the Catholicus after one month in Baghdad and brought him to Samarra; and he destroyed the monastery in Durqona and he granted it to Muhammad b. Jamil, the chief of police, to build it into a hospice. And he prevented the Christians from riding on horses, and he commanded them to wear dyed garments and to put a patch on their shirts, and that none of them should be seen in the market on Friday, and that the grave of their dead should be destroyed, and that their children should not learn Arabic in the schools, and that their house-tax should be brought to the mosque, and that wooden images of devils should be erected on their gates, and a sound summoning them to prayer should not be heard, and a place should not be set apart for the liturgy; and he destroyed a number of churches and religious buildings.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹English translation of *Pact* from Internet Medieval Source Book, Halsall (1996) Fordham University

⁴³⁰English translation by Browne (1933:54) from Mari

As with al-Jahiz, this writer refers to specific restrictions that al-Mutawakkil is enforcing. Some of them are quite similar to ones in the *Pact* itself. Similarities of both Muslim and Christian writers in referring to these restrictions raises a possibility that there was some form of expectation known at the time. Al-Jahiz writes that they were clearly not being enforced, and yet in al-Mutawakkil's Caliphate they were.

Even with some form similar to the restrictions above, the early Abbasid context included not only Muslims visiting monasteries but also interacting with Christians in other formats. The *majalis* provided opportunities where Christians and Muslims could interact in a setting understood to fit within limitations that Christians faced.⁴³¹ It is not clear where these gatherings were normally held but one location may have been the Abbasid royal court as in Timothy's debate with the Caliph discussed in 3.3.⁴³² Due to the context of restrictions for the Christians it is likely that there was no expectation of conversion from these gatherings, at least from Islam to Christianity, but provided the Christians an opportunity to communicate their faith in a setting clearly circumscribed and with some level of security.

In al-Shabushti's *Kitab al-Diyarat* discussed in the second section of this chapter there are references to Muslims visiting monasteries and their perceptions of them. There is also a *majlis* occurring at least in part given to entertainment. The following reference does not say whether the gathering is happening in a monastery or in the royal court. It appears, however, in a section devoted to the *Dayr Mudyān*, indicating that the location may have been a monastery:

The Caliph said, "What angered you and why did you go out?" Ishaq replied, "O Commander of the Faithful, perhaps you imagine that this Kingdom does not have foes as it has friends. You sit in a *majlis* where doings like these daily wear you out, pull on the edge of your robe, and each of them is disguised in a hidden way."⁴³³

⁴³¹See Lazarus-Yafeh (1999) and particularly Griffith's article.

⁴³²That discussion in 3.3 did present the possibility that the dialogue was for purposes of instruction and did not actually take place in exactly the way it was portrayed.

⁴³³*Kitab 1.122*

It is not clear what these ‘doings’ were but if this gathering was at the monastery then perhaps it involved too much talking when the visitor would rather like to be freer to enjoy some wine, take in the views of the gardens, or take in the view of beautiful monks, nuns or relatives of them.

When the Caliph or a Muslim *Emir* [notable person] would visit monasteries like *Dayr Mudyān* there were times when entertainment would be provided. It is not written who arranged this and may have been combined between the monastery and the Caliph’s attendants. The programme included the telling of stories, performers, or the religious dialogue that some *majlis* involved. In this story the Caliph was able to witness the proceedings from above: ‘After this an elevated *majlis* was constructed for al-Mutawakkil and he would look down from it on the *samajah*.’⁴³⁴

Jack Tannous in his unpublished translation comments on this reference: ‘From the context of the story, the *majlis* being referred to here seems to have been some kind of raised platform from which the Caliph would look down upon visitors and performers.’ It may have been set up either at the monastery or the royal court. Tannous does not comment further on the question of where these gatherings were held.⁴³⁵

Another reference to a similar gathering comes from a Christian source. A letter from Patriarch Timothy to his friend Sergius in the late eighth century refers to meeting with an Abbasid Caliph. At the end of the letter the Patriarch writes that the Caliph stood up and prayed a blessing on him saying: ‘Since a great number of people have gathered around us, and here is a stopping point, I will see you again in another gathering.’⁴³⁶ The phrase ‘a great number of people have gathered around us’ describes what may have been a *majlis*-like gathering as this encounter had a good number of witnesses. Timothy then writes to Sergius that such ‘contests and confrontations’ at the Caliph’s court as he has just reported

⁴³⁴:122 The Arabic word *samajah* literally means ‘grotesque’ and refers to the entertainment group that was performing for the Caliph. They would dress in outlandish garb and do impersonations and other comic routines.

⁴³⁵Tannous (2011:125)

⁴³⁶Letter 40 Griffith pg. 113 in Bekkum (2007)

to him are ‘increasingly common.’⁴³⁷ Encounters with Muslims in formats like this public gathering were happening in the early Abbasid context with a certain frequency though it is not clear how often.

Similar gatherings were occurring in other Christian-Muslim contexts as well. In the Aleppo collection of documents also referred to in 3.3 of this thesis is a text from the ninth or tenth century, *The Disputation of the Monk Ibrahim al-Tabarani*, about a monk that is involved in Jerusalem in a ‘religious disputation’ at the court of the Emir Abd al-Rahman al-Hasmi. Though it is most likely, according to Mark Swanson, about a Melkite monk and not an East Syrian, it reveals a similar kind of dispute as a *majlis* and quite similar to the *Emir’s* encounter with the monk at Bet Hale discussed below.⁴³⁸

In the previous century a Syriac Christian wrote of a dialogue that took place between a monk of *Beth Hale* and an Arab Muslim leader who was visiting the monastery. It is not clear whether this encounter actually happened or instead was meant to illustrate a type of meetings taking place between Christians and Muslims. The document locates the encounter as taking place at a monastery. It is possible that the monk and the Muslim *Emir* are not the only two involved but may have had an audience, perhaps of monks and visitors, in a *majlis* format.

At one point in the story the Muslim becomes interested in the monks’ activities in prayer and starts a dialogue with them:

When he saw our rites, performed at the appropriate seven times, in accordance with what the blessed David said: “Seven times a day I praise you for your judgments, O righteous one,” and he called me to him. And because he had acted as steward in the government for a long time and because of his exaltedness and our lowliness, he would speak with us via an interpreter. He began by reproving us for our faith, saying: “You make prayers much, night and day you are not silent, and you outdo us in prayer and fasting and in your petitions to God. However, in my own opinion, your faith rules out that your prayers will be accepted.”⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷:114

⁴³⁸Swanson pg. 876 in Thomas and Roggema (2009)

⁴³⁹Translation is from Hoyland (2004:466).

In this story the Muslim is said to have seen the prayer of the Christian monks and says 'you pray too much' and 'outdo us in prayer and fasting and in your petitions to God.' Though written by a Christian it does provide another perspective that Muslims were visiting monasteries and seeing the activities of prayer of the monks. In 5.2 of this chapter it was noted that al-Shabushti gives a later Muslim view from the tenth century, relying on poetry in part from the ninth, that there was continued participation in Christian festivals and prayers at the monastery.

At another point in the dialogue the Arab leader says: 'Truly you are in possession of the truth and not error, as men think. Even Muhammad our Prophet said about the inhabitants of the monasteries and the mountain dwellers that they will enjoy the kingdom.'⁴⁴⁰ The quote reflects a similar ambiguity in perspective that the monks and monasteries are held in as was seen from *Surah 5* in 5.2. It also suggests a degree of knowledge by this writer of a continuity of thought about Christians by Muslims that went back to the beginnings of Islam.

At the end of the dialogue, the Arab *Emir* says to the Christian monk:

I testify that were it not for the fear of the government and of shame before men, many would become Christians, but you are blessed of God to have given me the satisfaction by your conversation with me.⁴⁴¹

Written by a Christian, this document suggests a motive to encourage fellow Christians of a continued strong position of their faith. It indicates an understanding of two motives for why Muslims do not convert to Christianity: first was for 'fear of the government' and secondly 'shame before men.' The statement of al-Jahiz that Christians were causing Muslims harm and perhaps involved in at least attempting to make converts indicates that in both faiths in the early Abbasid period there was a sensitivity to activities that existed in a context of restrictions. It also indicates that the attempt to make converts had not ended for the Christians in the ninth century and mission activities were ongoing in this period.

⁴⁴⁰Griffith English translation (2000:34)

⁴⁴¹:36-37

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined a variety of Muslim literature of the ninth and tenth centuries where Muslim visits to monasteries are written about. In these sources the monastery became a place of engagement where a 'zone of contact' happened and a form of mission was able to take place however restricted in the Abbasid realms. Interactions in this 'zone of contact' of the monastery helped the East Syrians to sustain their mission and learning activities in this Abbasid Muslim environment by providing them an element of favour and recognition within the context.

Monasteries were often built along major trade routes and near urban populations providing places for religious discussions and prayer as well as beautiful and relaxing surroundings. They provided settings for pleasure of various kinds not only for their own faith but for Muslims as well. A setting where longings both real and imagined could be attained is seen in these sources. Christian institutions had been part of the scene in Mesopotamia both before as well as after Islam began.

Whether viewing the beautiful gardens, sampling the home-grown vineyard wine, or indulging in erotic adventures in imagination or reality, the monastery and monastic activities in Muslim literature became an example of Christian 'otherness'. Sources in this chapter could have been read by Muslims in different ways. One reading may have emphasized the strangeness and moral looseness to the detriment of the Christian community. Another may have accentuated a view of a Christian institution and practices that had existed before Islam that included a quaintness and charm as well as perception of deeper longings able to be realised there. Muslims reading these sources in the ninth and tenth centuries may have interpreted them both ways.

The argument of this chapter has been that these Muslim sources not only wrote of the presence of monasteries but also of Muslim-Christian encounters going on there. Encounters in the monasteries were consistent with involvement in mission that had been going on since pre-Islamic days in Arabia and Mesopotamia. Mission to Muslims happening in the monasteries included praying for their healing, their participation in

Christian festivals, offering hospitality, and providing a location for gatherings where some form of conversation on faith could take place. These activities had continued to happen in the early Abbasid period as they had in previous centuries centred in the monasteries.

Monastic mission activities within Mesopotamia were also happening in an early Abbasid context that included a form of continued restrictions. A context of restrictions was enforced in different ways at different times but still tolerated continued mission activities to extend beyond Mesopotamia. Christians were also to some degree able to exist with social influence and esteem from the Muslims around them, and even at times were seeking conversions from Muslims according to al-Jahiz.

An involvement to some degree in seeking converts in a context of restriction is contrary to what secondary sources like Shedd, Young and Brock have written.⁴⁴² These writers concluded that the Church of the East either ignored or otherwise neglected the Muslims around them as potential converts. Contrary to those views, this thesis is arguing that there were monastic mission activities also going on in Mesopotamia, and Muslim sources explored in this chapter provide clues to those activities centred in the monasteries.

Encounters between Muslims and Christians in the context of the monastery were happening in reality but also in the realm of 'image'. Included in that 'image' was both how the Muslims perceived the monasteries as places for activities both permitted and illicit, and also how the Christians saw their own involvement in mission activities related to Muslims. The monastery for the East Syrians was a place where the *Emir* would visit and the monk would convince him of Christian truth. Both kinds of meetings, in 'image' as well as reality, enabled the Church to continue to function with a degree of recognition from the Abbasids even within a context of restriction. The strength of the monastery both as a cultural and religious symbol to Christians and Muslims alike enabled monastic mission activities to continue in this period. It also enabled Patriarch Timothy to preside over a Church sustained in its continued growth to other regions in Asia.

⁴⁴²Shedd (1904:111), Young (1974:118ff), Brock (1984:11)

East Syrian monks also lived in a broader context that included their Muslim neighbours as well as other streams of Christian faith particularly to the immediate west of them. Encounters with these groups formed and sustained their own identity in monastic mission activities particularly to the East. That identity in mission was also strengthened by liturgical discipline in their monasteries. These areas of identity for monastic mission in the Church of the East will be examined in the next chapter

Chapter 6: East Syrian Monasteries in the Early Abbasid Period: Issues of Identity and Role in Mission

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters of this thesis it has been argued that monastic activities in mission had continued into the early Abbasid context in similar ways as they had before. It has also been argued that these activities were happening not only to the East but also within Mesopotamia. They provided a foundation to sustain the Church in its own extension as well as training monks for those activities. In this chapter, these monastic activities will be discussed as having given the Church an identity that involved a continuity in mission involvement from their sources. Activities in mission were also ongoing to the East and provided further strengthening of this identity. In this chapter, the argument is that this continuity in mission to the East as well as a commitment to liturgy were important parts of their identity in the early Abbasid period.

In 6.2 the continuity of involvement in mission will first be examined from Thomas of Marga's work. It will be argued that this continuity provided the East Syrians an identity in a context where the West Syrians were also involved in mission and had monasteries of their own. Both group's monasteries were at times only a few kilometers apart but developed their own leadership structures, separate identity, and sense of engagement in scholarship, devotion and mission. How the relationship with the West Syrians related to the mission identity and activities of the East Syrians, including in their mission to the east, will also be discussed in this section.

These monastic mission activities to the east will then be discussed in 6.3 from an extant copper charter from the ninth century in Southern India. Other epigraphic evidence from crosses in India and a stone monument from eighth century China will also be explored for clues related to these activities in other regions of Asia. They will also be examined to see what implications there may be for this monastic mission identity.

Monasteries and monks of the Church of the East also had an identity which included a larger symbolic and functional strength nurtured by liturgical disciplines. These liturgical practices contributed to a monastic mission identity, and this important place for the liturgy will be explored in 6.4.

6.2 Identity of Monasteries Related to Monastic Mission

Monastic mission activities of the Church of the East were explored in Chapter 3 from Christian sources including the history of Beit Abhe by Thomas of Marga and the letters of Patriarch Timothy I. In this section those activities will be considered alongside an idea of mission emerging also from Thomas' work and the interaction with the West Syrians nearby. West Syrians had their own monasteries and an outstanding level of scholarship including having copied the first Arabic Bible.⁴⁴³ In 2.4 interactions between the two branches were discussed from sources in the seventh and eighth centuries. Similar yet competitive activities had continued into the ninth century. The section will end with a discussion of how involvement in mission to the east by the East Syrians was part of a distinct identity separate from the other branch.

In Chapter 3.2 of this thesis references from Thomas of Marga's work and Timothy's letters were discussed for what they may suggest of monastic activities in the early Abbasid period. In *Book 5.1* of the *Historia Monastica*, Thomas described the mission of some of these Beit Abhe monks ordained by the Patriarch:

Men who were ordained by the pious Mar Timothy, the Catholicus and Patriarch, for the countries of the barbarians who were remote from all understanding and a decent manner of life, and to whose part of the world no preacher and planter of the truth had ever gone, and where the doctrine of the glad tidings of our Redeemer had never been proclaimed... they taught and baptized, and wrought mighty deeds, and shewed forth wonderful works, and the fame of their acts was carried to all the ends of the East.⁴⁴⁴

The 'fame of their acts' 'being 'carried to all the ends of the East' from monasteries like Beit Abhe under Timothy was a continuance of what had gone on in previous centuries. In

⁴⁴³ See Griffith's new monograph of 2013.

⁴⁴⁴*Historia Monastica* 5.1.467-468

this continued moving to the East the Church was strengthened to be able to sustain and expand the activities of mission and learning in the early ninth century period. As Thomas writes they went where the ‘doctrine of the glad tidings of our Redeemer had never been proclaimed.’⁴⁴⁵ As the passage above also notes, Patriarch Timothy was ordaining monks for assignments that included activities of proclaiming the ‘glad tidings of our Redeemer’, teaching, baptizing, and doing ‘mighty deeds’. These activities were part of sustaining an image of the Church that was cultivated by Timothy but had a basis in reality as well. The image of the ‘fame of their acts’ carried to ‘all the ends of the East’ was important also for the continuance of their monastic involvement in Mesopotamia as well. Though a *dhimmi* community under some level of restrictions as discussed in 5.4, some involvement in conversion activities was continuing that al-Jahiz complained about. Continuance in mission also involved monks being sent to other regions of Asia. The mission within Mesopotamia and to other regions combined with the training and teaching involved contributed to a particular identity.

At the end of the *Historia Monastica*, Thomas writes a series of prayers, one of which brings the stories of these holy men from the past and those who would come after together in a context of praise to God:

To God now, for Whom holy men live, Who doeth for the benefit of our nature everything which He doeth in their lives and in their deaths, to Him Who hath made victorious the early [saints], Who hath sustained those who come next, and Who hath made mighty those who come last, be praise, and honour, and adoration, and exaltation, from every rational being who hath lived and who liveth. By the prayers of these saints whose histories we have recounted, may He make His blessings to accompany this assembly in all its crises, and may He extend to it His help, now and always, and for ever and ever! Amen.⁴⁴⁶

Mission identity of the Church of the East, centred around the monastery and the activities of its monks appears in this prayer of Thomas in the context of the provision of God who has ‘made victorious the early [saints], sustain those who would come next, and make mighty those who would come last.’ Sustaining of this identity in its mission activities happened in a context that included monks that had gone before as well as those that would

⁴⁴⁵:468

⁴⁴⁶6.18.684

come after. The stories of those that had died and the victory that they achieved, even when suffering or martyrdom was involved, may have been meant by Thomas to bring encouragement and faith to those who would need God's help now. In the first pages Thomas of Marga writes of his effort to record actual events as he knew of them:

Let the reader, then, perceive clearly, and let the listener understand, that the things concerning holy men which my narrative recounts are not vain imaginations of my own, for I have collected the materials for them from the things which have been said concerning them in the living speech, and from the written statements which I have found concerning them in the histories and traditions of others. And I shall finish the contest which I have undertaken at the wish of my brethren, and shall add according to the inclination of my opinion, those things which are accepted by discreet and prudent men, provided that they are not prejudicial to the truth of any particular, not the wonderful signs and miracles, and mighty deeds which these holy men have wrought, but to speak as [each] occasion shall require, and to add a word concerning each, one after another, on the things which have been wrought by them, and to arrange all these things, one after another, in one consecutive order, a matter which belongeth to the care of writers, and which the order of historical works requireth.⁴⁴⁷

Thomas writes that he desired to 'finish the contest' which he is undertaking 'at the wish of my brethren.' In writing this history of Beit Abhe and the stories of its monks he suggests that it was on the urging of others. Thomas has a concern to 'arrange all these things' and from start to finish includes stories of monks that were involved in activities of 'wonderful signs and miracles, and mighty deeds.' He does this however to 'speak as [each] occasion shall require' and with an order to it that 'historical works' require.⁴⁴⁸

In the following chapter Thomas of Marga begins his history of Beit Abhe by going back to the history of the Old Testament and particularly the life of Moses. He writes of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with his face glowing, and that it indicated 'that virginity and holiness should spread abroad in later times and be exalted.'⁴⁴⁹ These two qualities of virginity and holiness were important to Church of the East tradition as noted in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat discussed in 2.2. Christ would 'make virginity and holiness

⁴⁴⁷*Historia Monastica* 1.3.23-24

⁴⁴⁸.:24

⁴⁴⁹1.3.26 quoting Exodus 34:35

perfect' for the Apostles when he ascended to heaven.⁴⁵⁰ Then Thomas quotes the words of Jesus before he ascended recorded in Matthew 28:19-20:

He lifted up His holy hands and blessed them, and commanded them, saying "Go ye forth and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and teach them to keep everything which I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all the days in which the world maintaineth the course of its generations."⁴⁵¹

Virginity and holiness is then 'descended from hand to hand among all nations, but especially among the pious armies of monks that exist in all quarters of the earth.'⁴⁵² In the next few pages of Thomas' work these two qualities would continue as part of the lineage and identity of the monks right up to the founding of Beit Abhe. In Thomas' view, these monks are part of a historical continuity back to the beginning of their faith and continuing through the calling to mission from Christ.

Sending the Apostles out to all the world by Christ is captured in a similar idea a few pages later where Thomas uses the following title for a chapter: 'Of the Dispersion of the Holy Fathers into all countries, which although it was considered to be have been wrought of evil temper and human passion, was nevertheless the Divine Will and Work.'⁴⁵³ Thomas of Marga uses here a word, 'dispersion', to refer to the going out of the 'Holy Fathers' in the 'Divine Will and Work.' They were going 'into all countries' and this passage is in the continuity of sending that goes back to Christ and the Apostles.

The concept of 'dispersion' even at times due to the 'evil temper and human passion' of man was a part of the identity of the Church of the East in mission. In this chapter Thomas describes the vision of a monk named 'Bar Idta'⁴⁵⁴ who 'with the eye of the spirit foresaw this dispersion' from Beit Abhe monastery. Thomas has the seer saying to the other monks:

⁴⁵⁰:26

⁴⁵¹:26

⁴⁵²:27

⁴⁵³*Historia Monastica* 1.14.65

⁴⁵⁴It is not clear from the text if this is the same Bar 'Idta that wrote the earlier monastic history.

My brethren, many matters come to pass and are wrought in this world, which from the trials [to which they give rise], or from their outward appearance, are thought by men either to arise from the opposition of devils, or to have been performed by the natural imagination of man; but our Lord God bringeth forth the dispensation of His will from them, according as He knoweth what is best, and at the end the wise and prudent know that they were not performed without His command, and that it was in no common manner that they came to the end which stirred up the praise of the wise, as for example the flight of Jacob from Esau, the selling of Joseph, the murder of the Egyptian by Moses, the persecution of David by the hands of Saul, and many other such like matters.
455

The dispersion that ‘Bar Idta saw happening from Beit Abhe is likened above to examples where lives of Old Testament figures were shaped by evil actions by others. Some of the Beit Abhe dispersion was happening according to Thomas because the ‘bond of agreement’ between the monks internally had been broken.⁴⁵⁶ The ‘evil temper’ and ‘human passion’ referred to in the chapter title’ and breaking of agreement was happening in Beit Abhe resulting in internal squabbles in the monastery itself. The particular dispute may refer to the monks revolting against Patriarch Isho-yahbh’s desire for a primary school within the monastery’s walls.⁴⁵⁷

The result of this controversy however led to consequences that in the end meant a further growth of monastic activities. Thomas in the next section describes what these dispersed monks accomplished:

And they, and many others, built holy monasteries in various places, and thus by the Divine Power which aided them, the departure and the dispersion which outwardly carried suffering and strife into their hearts, at the last became a peace-making and friendly gathering together. And they filled the country of the East with monasteries, and convents, and habitations of monks, and Satan who had rejoiced at their discomfiture was put to shame; and they raised up to God everywhere holy worshippers of His comandments. May we be sustained by our Lord through their prayers, and according to His will may we live before him in grace, Amen.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ 1.14.66-67

⁴⁵⁶ :65

⁴⁵⁷ 2.8.147-150

⁴⁵⁸ *Historia Monastica* 1.14.68

Dispersion of these monks to build monasteries and indeed ‘fill the country of the East with them’ carried a ‘suffering and strife’ that filled their hearts but in the end resulted in a ‘peace-making and friendly gathering together.’⁴⁵⁹ Activities of these monks not only included starting monasteries but they also ‘raised up to God everywhere holy worshippers of His commandments.’ Indicated is that some form of conversion activities and perhaps the starting of churches was also involved.

Along with internal struggles that went on at times in monasteries like Beit Abhe, another candidate for the ‘evil temper’ or ‘human passion’ which could cause dispersion was at times the West Syrians. In the *Historia Monastica* and even more in the hagiographical stories of Rabban Hormizd and Rabban Bar ‘Idta discussed in 2.3, the machinations and sin of mankind are represented more by the West Syrians than the Muslims. Stories included in Thomas of Marga’s work about the West Syrians particularly relate to the centuries before the ninth as he recounts the larger history of Beit Abhe monastery. Another difference between the *Historia Monastica* and *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd and Bar ‘Idta* is that in Thomas’s work, *Book 4* and *Book 5* in particular detail a series of stories that specifically refer to activities in the east whereas the latter two works have less material on specific ventures of witness in the centuries they were written in.

Other examples of hostility and at times struggle of competition between the East and West Syrians that had been taking place for at least two centuries are found in the *Historia Monastica*. Thomas of Marga details several interactions between the monks of Beit Abhe and their West Syrian counterparts. In one of them found in *1.34* the story is told of the seventh century East Syrian monk Sahdona who in the first part of the chapter is praised by Thomas:

And after having been fully trained at Nisibis in the teaching of Divine Books, and being wise and learned in them, he took upon himself the garb of the ascetic life at the hands of Rabban Jacob in this monastery. And he zealously attached himself to the things which conduce to a divine manner of life, that is to say, to abstinence and fasting, and watching, and prayer, under the guidance of Rabban [Jacob].

Sahdona also wrote two volumes on the various exercises of the monastic life, and a book of ‘Consolations’ is also attributed to him, and other works on various matters. He

⁴⁵⁹:68

also composed a history of Rabban [Jacob] and of the triumphs of the ascetics who lived in the country of the East.⁴⁶⁰

The monk Sahdona, whose story from two centuries before during the Patriarchate of Ishoyahb III was included in Thomas of Marga's work of 840, had a strong pedigree of the East Syrian church. He was trained in Nisibis in the teaching of the 'Divine Books', he had become an ascetic at Beit Abhe under the very leadership of its founder, Rabban Jacob, and he had also received guidance in the spiritual disciplines also directly from the founder. In fact in a comment right after the portion quoted above Thomas writes that Sahdona even 'wrote the funeral oration for the burial of Rabban Jacob' signifying his favoured place in the monastery of Beit Abhe.

A dramatic turn of events happened at some point in 630 as on his way back from a mission to the court of the Melkite Patriarch he seemingly became a convert to West Syrian views. At the end of *Chapter 34*, soon after the portion quoted above Thomas of Marga writes that Sahdona 'did not continue to write to the end, for he went out of his mind; but how his understanding was destroyed, I will relate afterwards in the place where his history requireth it to be written.'⁴⁶¹ What had happened to this man who in East Syrian history afterwards would be known as 'Sahdona the apostate' that would mean that he 'went out of his mind' and had his 'understanding destroyed'? Thomas of Marga recounts the story in *Book 2. 7* when he includes a section of letters from Mar Isho-yahbh to East Syrian clergy. In that section, the Patriarch recounts how Sahdona was in the 'country of Damascus' and had 'a discussion with the monks of a certain Jacobite monastery.' Isho-yahbh relates that the West Syrian monks were beaten in the argument by the East Syrians but then there was an invitation to come in and meet their abbot, John. The others refused but Sahdona, 'feeling himself equal to the occasion went in, and after a very short time was converted by the abbot.'⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰1.34.111-112

⁴⁶¹1.34.112

⁴⁶²See 2.7.132-147 for the Syriac. This is Budge's comment on this portion in his introduction, (pg. lxxxvii).

Converting to West Syrian views was equated at worst as becoming a victim of Satan's deception and at best as going insane. Though this may have not always been the prevailing view, it does indicate the distance and hostility between the East and West Syrian branches that had carried on from Isho-yahbh's time and the founding of Beit Abhe in the seventh century to Thomas of Marga's period. Due to the closeness to the Patriarch, as well as to the founder of the monastery of Beit Abhe and his prominence in East Syrian circles, the conversion of Sahdona to West Syrian views was a big blow and was carried forward in historical chronicles like *Historia Monastica*. In reading Thomas of Marga's work as well as the earlier monastic histories from the seventh century, the tone of stories that have to do with West Syrians seem to have a greater hostility to them than the stories about Muslims. There was a clear delineation of identity between the two branches and even as late as the early ninth century the greater threat to the future of their version of the Christian faith to the East Syrians was more from the West Syrians than the Muslims. When Isho-yahbh was Patriarch in the middle to late seventh century Islam was still in its beginning stages and it could be seen more clearly that the West Syrians were the greater threat.

Formation of separate identities of the two groups most likely happened over several centuries. Reinink believes that 'it took a long time before the Nestorian identity obtained a firm footing in the different organizations, i.e. churches, schools and monasteries, perhaps by the eighth century.'⁴⁶³ By the second decade of the sixth century according to Morony 'the final separation' may have occurred 'when mixed congregations and monasteries were purged by both sides.'⁴⁶⁴ A purging that was going on in the early sixth century and into the seventh is a large part of the context of these works of *The History of Rabban Hormizd* and *The History of Bar 'Idta*, and particularly the latter. It was in the sixth century that the East Syrian mission into the Gulf was growing stronger as noted in 2.4. Reform monasticism originating out of Mt. Izla was also beginning to plant new monasteries like Beit Abhe. Moving into separate identity units helped to strengthen a growth of scholarship, monastic foundations, and mission for both of the branches while still preserving their distinctiveness.

⁴⁶³Reinink (2009)

⁴⁶⁴See Morony (1984: 332ff.)

A move also into more separateness involved a ‘dispersion’ of the East Syrian Church that in its spread to the east distinguished them from the West Syrians. Part of the identity of both branches included a commitment to witness but there is no evidence of the West Syrians going east in mission to the areas further in Asia as the East Syrians did. Dispersing to the east by the monks of the Church was geographically the most natural progression as moving to the West as well as South would have brought them into territory where their co-religionists were primarily active. East Syrians did move south to Basra and then went east through the Persian Gulf having established monastic communities by the seventh century around the Gulf, in Kharg, Siraf, and Qatar⁴⁶⁵ as part of the Metropolitan based in Rev Ardashir.⁴⁶⁶ Also, in earlier centuries as Islam emerged in the seventh century East Syrian Christianity was active to some degree in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁶⁷

There is evidence that East Syrians had a limited dispersal in the other direction as there are archaeological finds for East Syrian monasteries to the west as well. In 1933 near Jericho while repairing a road workers found the remains of a ninth century East Syrian monastery mosaic floor. Especially interesting is the Syriac inscription on the mosaic naming the founders as Daniel of Khuzistan, John of Fars, Isodad of Qatar and Baya of Sahrzur. The importance of this evidence is that it links in the early Abbasid period several provinces of the Church to monastic mission involvement in this part of West Asia. A group of founders with this multi-ethnic composition attests to East Syrian strength in the ninth century with provinces to the east of Jericho like Qatar in the Persian Gulf, Fars in Persia, and Khuzistan and Sahrzur in Central Asia. Several decades later in the 1970’s a team of Germans excavated a smaller East Syrian monastery in the Negev region. Coming probably from an earlier time period than the ninth century it may have been a hospitality point for pilgrims coming from Jerusalem to the Sinai.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ According to Whitehouse (1973) by the seventh century there were no fewer than eight dioceses in the Gulf with a Metropolitan at Rev Ardahsir.

⁴⁶⁶ As noted in 2.4 the island of Kharg was important as it had a monastic centre and it may have the ‘special function of training missionaries for service abroad’ as Whitehouse notes. For Kharg see Ghirshman’s (1960) account of excavations there..

⁴⁶⁷ Hellyer (2001:93) brings up an interesting point that as ‘the Church in Eastern Arabia fell into decline with the coming of Islam, the greatest successes of the Nestorian missionary endeavor also took place. In 635 the first Nestorian mission reached China.’

⁴⁶⁸ See Walker’s article in Johnson (2012) for reference to both archaeological finds.

A question involving this dispersal in mission is why the East Syrians did not move to the south towards East Africa? While outside the scope of this thesis an answer may be that the Coptic Church as well as the Ethiopians south of them were primarily Monophysite in their Christological views and therefore hostile to East Syrian beliefs. It is unlikely that the East Syrians would have moved into a sphere that was dominated by these views. In light of the antagonism theologically between the groups particularly over Christology, though so similar in other ways both culturally and intellectually, dispersal in mission by the East Syrians was another important part of their different identity. Even though each branches' monasteries existed at times just a few kilometers away from each other at places in Northern Mesopotamia, a frontier existed similar in strength as that between the Roman Empire and Persians in earlier centuries. According to Michael Morony there was a 'surge of competitive missionary activity led by the monks on both sides aimed not only at proselytizing from each other but at enrolling as much of the non-Christian population as possible against the other side.'⁴⁶⁹ A move to the east in mission encounter took place in this context of competitive animosity with the West Syrians.

For both East and West Syrian Churches the early ninth century provided a context increasingly shaped by their Muslim neighbours. As Romeny has written 'the cultural context with Islam was a major factor in the formation of the Syriac Orthodox identity.'⁴⁷⁰ One of the key differences for the East Syrians in this period was the strong advocate they had in their Patriarch, Timothy I. As his meetings with the Caliphs show there were opportunities for an East Syrian leader to be in proximity to the Abbasid rulers. Being *dhimmi* communities, as both confessional branches were, did have its disadvantages on a daily basis and there was increasingly a sense of insecurity and at times intimidation. Living in the monasteries whether near to or in the cities or more remotely in the North gave the monks a sense of identity that was more removed and unassailable at least for a while. The early ninth century was a time when Christian conversions to Islam had already

⁴⁶⁹Morony (1984: 347).

⁴⁷⁰See Romeny (2010:34) for a series of excellent articles on identity issues of both communities, as part of a larger inter-disciplinary project based in Leiden.

begun but had not yet reached a ‘tipping point’ as it would in the following century.⁴⁷¹ Anxiety related to living as a community in survival may have already begun in the Baghdad area. Especially in Northern Mesopotamia monks in the monasteries still represented stable, secure bastions of identity in a world that may have been harder to comprehend each day.

Though experiencing changes around them in places like Baghdad itself, East Syrians as discussed in 4.4 were serving as secretaries to the Abbasids and translators to a degree greater than the West Syrians. According to Cabrol ‘Secretaries, doctors, translators; men of letters and of science, the Nestorians were in the first row of Abbasid society.’⁴⁷² ‘First row’ involvement may have its roots in the simple issue of proximity as more of the East Syrian Christians were living near the centres of Abbasid power than the West Syrians especially in Baghdad itself. These encounters were within restrictions that both East and West Syrian Churches faced by being *dhimmi* communities but were also part of their identities.

Involvement in translation work by the East Syrians to a greater degree than the West Syrians may have had a foundation in their monasteries that were in greater proximity including in Baghdad itself. This involvement also became another part of their identity that included continued activities of learning and scholarship. As noted in the discussion in 4.4 the translations were not exclusively based in the monasteries and done by monks but there was a greater role for these monasteries than often recognised.⁴⁷³ Known for his contacts and close relationship with the Abbasid caliphs of his day, Timothy also at least on one occasion asked the West Syrian monastery of Mar Matti for a Greek manuscript he wanted to examine as evidenced in a letter he wrote to Mar Pethion. After Timothy spends a few paragraphs in a degree of self-praise for his abilities as a translator, he asks Mar Pethion of the monastery of Mar Matti for a copy of several manuscripts, including Aristotle’s *The*

⁴⁷¹Conclusive evidence is lacking for conversion rates to Islam in Mesopotamia in the ninth century but Bulliet (1979:57ff) does give interesting ideas on what may have been likely in the period.

⁴⁷²See Cabrol’s (2000:409) article on the East Syrians in their roles as secretaries to the Abbasids.

⁴⁷³Gutas (1998) is a key source for the translation movement and its context but as noted in 4.4 he does not have much material on the role of the monks and the monasteries in his work.

Topics.⁴⁷⁴ At another point in his correspondence the Patriarch also asks help from the Melkite Patriarch with a complex issue involved in one of his translation projects.⁴⁷⁵

Contacts with the two other primary branches of the church in Mesopotamia, the West Syrians and Melkites, indicates Timothy's willingness to interact and even ask for assistance for documents and specific help from other branches of the Christian faith though in an atmosphere of competition. Competitive activity also entered into activities of scholarship though the East Syrians schools were both well-developed and more broadly based than their rivals. West Syrians also had a series of schools based around their own monasteries. Florence Jullien raised the possibility that the East Syrians consciously created a network of schools to help delineate them from their rivals in identity.⁴⁷⁶

It is an interesting question whether the involvement in serving the Abbasids as secretaries and translators, as well as dispersal in mission to the East, shaped the East Syrian identity and kept them from more interaction with Christians to the West. Due to the Christological controversies that both branches had been formed in, it is more likely that hostility with the West Syrians helped stimulate that eastward dispersal. At a previous point in 489 the East Syrians had been pushed east from Edessa to Nisibis,⁴⁷⁷ which may have contributed to a historical memory that enabled the continued dispersal east to be a familiar part of their identity. The Church of the East since its inception in Edessa in the second century had been a Church primarily moving east and this had continued into the ninth century. Movement east was not so much a matter of geographical location alone but rather part of their history as refugees, merchants and monk-missionaries.

⁴⁷⁴Reference is in unpublished letter 43 in *Vat. Syr.605, fol. 303v*. See Hurst (1986:22ff) for a further discussion in his unpublished PhD dissertation.

⁴⁷⁵Hurst (1986:73) The Melkites were a branch of Eastern Christianity linked to the Byzantine Empire of Constantinople and what would emerge as part of 'Orthodox Christianity' in later centuries.

⁴⁷⁶Jullien (2009)

⁴⁷⁷Before 489 the previous two centuries had already seen conflict Between the two most powerful empires of the time, the Romans and the Persians. Edessa and Nisibis were frontier cities in a fairly constant battle for position and power between the two empires.

Dispersal to the East contributed two further components to the East Syrian identity of the early Abbasid period. First of all was the role trade played across Asia. The East Syrian priests at times traveled alongside merchants in their trans-Indian Ocean journeys. In the next section an inscription on a copper charter given to two religious leaders and a merchant named Sabriso in Southern India will be examined for clues to merchant activities linked to mission.

Thomas of Marga makes a connection with merchants and monastic mission activities to the east in the *Historia Monastica*. He writes that the reader can learn ‘clearly concerning all these things’ from a letter that merchants and king’s scribes ‘who were going in and coming out from those countries for the purposes of trade and the business of government, wrote to Mar Timothy’.⁴⁷⁸ The ‘these things’ that Thomas refers to were the activities of the monks going out in mission from Beit Abhe. These activities included that ‘they taught and baptized, and wrought mighty deeds, and shewed forth wonderful works, and the fame of their acts was carried to all the ends of the East.’⁴⁷⁹ It was concerning these kinds of activities that merchants were writing about to the monasteries back in Mesopotamia.

Secondly, mission to the East was a continuation of moving east as refugees that had gone on ever since 489 C.E. when a Church of the East school was closed in Edessa and moved to Nisibis in the wake of the back and forth Roman-Persian conflicts. They had been a church that had moved east for centuries and this continued as part of their identity in the early Abbasid period. Though a *dhimmi* community the East Syrians were also a ‘refugee Church’ that had a long history already of involvement and contact all the way to China as noted in the next section.

It is being argued in this chapter that this involvement to these other regions of Asia was part of ‘dispersal’ to the ‘ends of the East’ as Thomas wrote in his work.⁴⁸⁰ In the next

⁴⁷⁸*Historia Monastica* 5.1.468-469

⁴⁷⁹:468.

⁴⁸⁰:468

section extant epigraphic evidence on copper and stone from Malabar in Southern India and China will be discussed as well as implications for the Church's identity in mission.

6.3 Identity of the East Syrian Church Related to Monastic Mission Activities in India and China

In Chapter 2.5 the seventh century letters of Isho-yahbh III were discussed that dealt with the rebellious province of Fars in Persia. He scolds them severely in part because many in India are being kept in darkness due to the actions of the leaders in Fars. By Timothy's period of leadership in the late eighth century relations between Baghdad and Fars had not improved, leading Timothy to use the following strong language in one of his letters:

Write to the 'Tyrant of Fars' and inform him that every metropolitan who is appointed by a bishop with his co-ordiners is subject to the canon of the Church of God, the Synod of the 318 Fathers (sc. the Council of Nicaea), and the canons of Mar Aba.⁴⁸¹

The letter affirms that this ecclesiastical problem had been going on for over two centuries and needed action to deal with it. Separation of the province of India from its allegiance to Fars and the granting to India of its own Metropolitan took place in the synod that Timothy presided over in 791 C.E.⁴⁸² In extant charters and crosses discussed below from a similar period as this synod the Pahlavi language [Old Persian] is used, attesting to a continuing link with Fars and the surrounding areas in Persia at least until this time.

As seen in Timothy's desire to grant his Indian subjects their own Metropolitan, the Church of the East's identity there continued to be shaped by links with the Mesopotamian homeland. There is no evidence in this period of West Syrian/Jacobite influence in Southern India, though in the post-Portuguese centuries West Syrian contacts and relationships with Christians in Malabar would grow considerably.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸¹Letter 47 English translation from Brock (1997)

⁴⁸²For synod see *Fiqh an-Nasraniya* by Ibn at-Taiyib edited by Hoenerbach (1956)

⁴⁸³There are historians in India like Cheriyan (2003) who claim that the links historically were always with the Jacobite Church and the 'Nestorians' were heretics that for a period did have some involvement in the Malabar area. As the Portuguese arrived and especially in the centuries after, the ecclesial order was restored with some links to the Syrian Orthodox church. These different groups as well as different interpretations of history continue today in Kerala.

Involvement of Timothy with the province of India continued the concern that Isho-yahbh had shown two centuries before as well as their common enmity and frustration with Fars. Towards the end of Timothy's rule and a few years after the Synod granting India their own Metropolitan, a local tradition in Malabar dates the arrival of two Bishops from Mesopotamia named Mar Sapor and Mar Proudth. They are credited as being the founders of the city of Kollam [modern Quilon] in 825, the year that starts what is called the Kollam Era in calendars still used today. The tradition is found in a Syriac document titled *A Brief History of the Syrians in Malabar*. It dates from the eighteenth century and is attributed to a local believer named Matthew. The document's history before the eighteenth century is unknown as are the sources it is based on. The tradition reads:

In those days and in the days that followed, Syrian fathers used to come to that town by order of the Catholicus of the East and govern the diocese of India and Kerela, because it was from it that these Syrians used to go to other parts until they were dispersed. Then in the year 823, the Syrian fathers, Mar Sapor and Mar Parut [Piruz], with the illustrious Sabr'isho, came to India and reached Kollam. They went to the King Shakirbirti, and asked from him a piece of land in which they could build a church for themselves and erect a town. He gave them the amount of land they desired, and they built a church and erected a town in the district of Kollam to which the Syrian bishops and Metropolitans used to come by order of the Catholicus who sent them.⁴⁸⁴

According to the tradition, it was the 'Catholicus of the East' who 'ordered' the sending of the Fathers, a name used at times for the Church of the East Patriarch. Also from the diocese of 'India and Kerela' went forth the 'Syrians' to 'other parts' until they were 'dispersed'. What this phrase 'until they were dispersed' refers to is not specified and neither is the location of these 'other parts'. It may refer to Syrian fathers going to places like China from Malabar as will be discussed at the end of this section. At the same period in history, there still was a monastic presence of the Church of the East there. The 'dispersed' result the tradition refers to may refer to the ending of the Church of the East presence in China that occurred just two decades after this arrival in Malabar.

It also affirms that there were Syrian Bishops and Metropolitans coming by order of the Catholicus, the leader of the Church of the East, indicating some kind of ecclesiastical

⁴⁸⁴ See Giamil (1901) and for English translation see Land (1927:45)

structure in the ninth century that local traditions of the Indian Church had accepted and passed down to the present. The concept that a local *Perumal* [local Malabar ruler] favoured these foreign Christian priests and merchants with land for settlement and even building a church does not seem strange or exceptional. Indeed the fact that the dating of a modern city in Kerala looks back to this arrival is remarkable and suggests a level of tolerance achieved by the Christians with local community and rulers.

Granting of a piece of land by the King as well as building of a church and town in Kollam is also referred to in the charters discussed below. It is possible due to similarities that the tradition was based on these charters. After the Portuguese arrived in Malabar they took possession from the local Christians of a group of copper charters in 1530. These charters were then lost until 1806 when the British resident, Colonel Macaulay, recovered them. He then turned them over to the Old Seminary of the Orthodox Church in Kottayam where they are held today.⁴⁸⁵ Several sections of this charter pertinent to this thesis are produced below.

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The first three sections are similar to the tradition in the giving of land to an arriving group:

a. Hail! In the time of Perumal Sthanu Ravi Gupta, who now rules gloriously for many hundreds of thousands of years, trading underfoot hostile heads, in his fifth year, this year under the concurrence of His excellency the Ayyan Adigal, governing the *Venandu*, of *Anjuwqannam* The Jewish principality of Deed No.1, and of *Punnattala's* Lord, the following grant of a freehold has been given by His excellency the Ayyan Adigal to the *Tarisa* church, established by Isodata Viarai of *Kurakkeni Kollam*.

b. And I also, who formerly had the possession of the share-staff, of the four families of Hawar, and of the eight families of Hakeyar, belonging to them, and one family of washermen coming from the same stock as these-all these being entitled to the fetter-right and ladder-right to the tax for the elephant feeder, and to the wash-gold, which the Chandan is wont to get, as well as to the harvest gold, to the nightly meal of rice and to the pot measure-I, possessed of this share-staff, and of the Cavvan [or tribute], and of those five kandis [pieces of ground or shares?], have given them by a free and unrestricted transfer.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵John (1999) notes that three of these copper plates are held in Kottayam with the other two located in Tiruvalla. The latter two had been lost but were found in the Marthoma Metropolitan palace in Tiruvalla. The actual charters are no longer being shown at the seminary in Kottayam but facsimiles can be viewed as I experienced on a visit in 2010.

⁴⁸⁶English translation of charter and accompanying notes are by Gundert published in Philip (1950: 436-440).

⁴⁸⁷The translator describes this section (b.) as the 'most difficult of the whole, on account of the many antiquated terms of country customs' and also 'on account of the construction' of the sentences.

c. Maruwan Sapir Iso who has received the water of this town, having arranged that these four families of Hawar, two families of ---[not clear], one family of carpenters, and four families of Vellaler [Tamil agriculturists], the latter being Caralar, [Tamil ploughmen], of the *Alave* land—that all these may do their duty to the God, the planter by planting, the setter by setting, so that the required ceremonies, such as the oil for the church, suffer no diminution, has enacted and given to the *Tarisa* church the land now to be described.

The above three sections of the charter [a,b and c] refer to a land grant given to the Syrian father, Maruwan Sapir Iso, suggesting his role as the leader of the group that has arrived on the Malabar Coast. Gundert in his translation notes some question related to the exact name and title on the deed but links him to the community he represents. Two important implications about his name are that the title *Maruwan*, or a derivative in Syriac of *Mar*, is a name for priest or monk. The use of Syriac suggests an ecclesial connection with Mesopotamia. It is possible that Sapir Iso was also a merchant or had merchant links but that is not clear from the charter itself. A second implication is that his name Sapir Iso indicates a link with Fars province under the Abbasids as Sapor or Saphir was a Persian name held by several rulers.

An aspect of this copper deed concerned the giving of a land grant which appeared to be for the building of a place for prayer or church by the *tarisa* community. In section [e] the authority of the community is affirmed:

e. And it has further been settled, with the concurrence of His Excellency the Ayyan Adigal, His Excellency Rama, and the Palace-Mayor, that the Church people [*Palliyar*, probably heads of the *Tarisa* citizens] alone have power to punish the [heathen] families of this land for any offence whatsoever, and receive the fines, expenses, head-price and breast-price [probably the right of selling males and females for serious caste-offences.]

The word *tarisa* has the meaning of prayer or meditation in Old Syriac. It may also have a similar meaning as a ‘place for prayer’ or a church or gathering place for worship. One scholar also includes a comment by the traveller John of Monte Corvino that the ‘Nestorians’ in China and other areas of Asia were called ‘Tarisas’ which can also be a derivation on the word ‘Tarshish’, or ‘those that come from the Syrian city’.⁴⁸⁸ The charter was being given to a community of Christians that had some connection to ‘Syria’ as well

⁴⁸⁸See Narayanan (1996:186ff) for more discussion on the word *tarisa*.

as being recognized as people of prayer. According to M.G. Naraynan these charters described an ‘ancient practice’ that saw land granted to ‘foreign and native merchants in return for presents and offerings in case or kind.’⁴⁸⁹ In this case there is no record of a reciprocal gift from the arriving priests and the tone seems to be of acceptance and inclusion into an existing social order.

In this inscription there seems to be a lack of surprise locally at the arrival of this group from West Asia, indicating that there was already an accepted place for Christians in Malabar as this group was not treated with hostility but rather the giving of a land charter by royal authority. As Sircar writes, epigraphs that described royal grants of land ‘were generally engraved on copper plates’ and ‘among metals, copper was the most popular writing material in ancient and medieval India.’⁴⁹⁰ Sections of this charter several times refer to local royal authorities and other leaders, showing that granting of a piece of land for building a church had some degree of royal authorization.

Sections [*n*, *o*, *r* and *s*] of the charter also suggest the ceding of property for a church:

n. And let Maruwan Sapir Iso, who took the water for this town, since he acquired the share-staff, and those five pieces which formerly were the property of the Palliyar, pay for it the full price of the church. This also I have given over by unrestricted transfer.

o. I have ceded to the *Tarisa* church people, by full and unrestricted tenure, every kind of revenue by this copper-deed for the time that earth, moon, and sun do last.

r. I have given this in the manner detailed in the copper-deed, for the time that earth, moon, and sun do last, by full, free and unrestricted tenure.

s. The person who made this full, free and unrestricted transfer to the *Tarisapalli* through His Excellency the Ayyan Adigal, is Maruwan Sapir Iso.’

These sections identify Maruwan Sapir Iso in a leadership role and attest that the giving of the land is by ‘unrestricted transfer’ and ‘unrestricted tenure.’ Land ceded to the *tarisa* church people, ‘by full and unrestricted tenure,’ comes with a traditional oath promising that the tenure will be as long as the ‘earth, moon and sun do last.’ The oath and the giving

⁴⁸⁹Narayanan (1996:130).

⁴⁹⁰See Sircar (1965:4, 74).

of the land are from the royal authorities and an ‘unrestricted’ gift. An implication from this is that there may have been history already that the Malabar authorities had experienced with the Christians, including foreigners arriving on their coast. It is not mentioned on these copper charters of prior arrangements for this visit or if this was a local response to a sudden and unplanned arrival. The language of a gift of land for the purpose of a Christian gathering place suggests some history already of interaction with an existing Christian community in Malabar.

The tradition in *A Brief History of the Syrians in Malabar* lists the charters being given to two Bishops, Mar Sapor and Mar Piruz, with the designation *Mar* the Syriac title for a revered leader in the Church.⁴⁹¹ They are represented as two saintly brothers who came to India from Mesopotamia or Persia which in the ninth century was included under Abbasid rule. The *Brief History* says that Mar Sapor and Mar Parut were accompanied by the ‘illustrious Sabr’isho’, a name that means in Syriac ‘Jesus is my hope’. The name that appears on the copper plate itself is Maruwān-Sapir-Iso, or a derivative of the Syriac name Marwan Sabr Isho, which has the meaning ‘Our Lord Sabrisho.’⁴⁹² Thus between the traditions and the copper plate itself the common name to both is Sabrisho.

Earliest reference to two Bishops of the early ninth century was from a later East Syrian Bishop, Mar Abuna in 1533.⁴⁹³ He wrote that they had come 700 years before to Malabar and these ‘saintly brothers’ had come to Quilon. Mar Abuna calls their names Xaor and Aproits and that they were from ‘Armenia’. Though Armenians had a role in trade in later centuries, there is no record of activities in Malabar as early as the ninth century. The confusion may have been because the Bishops were accompanied by merchants as well, indicating to historians centuries later that Armenians must have been involved. Other Portuguese writers like the historian Gouvea writing in 1603 called them Mar Xabro and

⁴⁹¹Giamil (1901), English translation in Land (1927:45)

⁴⁹²This is the translation of Mingana (1923).

⁴⁹³ For Abuna see an unpublished document in Rome in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu (ARSJ) noted by Mundadan (2001).

Mar Prodh and connected the beginning of a Christian ‘dynasty’ to them, and in the same year Roz wrote of them and called them Mar Sapor and Mar Aprot.⁴⁹⁴

The question also arises of who these arriving prelates were linked to. Mundadan disagrees with those who suggest they may have been West Syrians or Jacobites, writing that ‘the date of their arrival coincides with the intensification of the missionary expansion of the Persian church under Patriarch Timothy.’⁴⁹⁵ Burnell believed that these priests may have actually been Manicheans, but this seems far-fetched especially in light of the strength of local tradition and evidence of correspondence from Timothy to the East Syrian Church in India.

As far as the dating of the arrival of the Bishops and the copper plate charter itself there are some discrepancies. According to Malabar traditions the arrival was in 823 C.E. and the founding of Quilon was two years later in 825. The copper plate itself refers to events of 823-825 but the charter could have been officially granted as late as 880. This discrepancy could be accounted for by the charter being seen as a permanent record given much later. It commemorated events of a previous generation that then became part of historical memory for the community.

Assemani writes of an earlier visit to the Malabar Coast from Mesopotamia led by a ‘Bishop Thomas’ and a group of Persian immigrants in 774 or 775 C.E.. Was this a whole different group than the one with Mar Sapor and Mar Proudth in approximately 823-825 C.E.? ⁴⁹⁶ Or was this Thomas confused with an earlier immigration in the fourth century also led by a Thomas? ⁴⁹⁷ Assemani makes a link with this visit in the late eighth century with Timothy ordaining a Bishop Thomas from the monastery of Beit Abhe to go to Malabar. The date however is unclear and there is no record on the charter of a Thomas

⁴⁹⁴Gouvea (1603) translated into English by Malekendathil (2003).

⁴⁹⁵Mundadan (2001)

⁴⁹⁶Assemani (*B.O.3.2.444ff*)

⁴⁹⁷The immigration in about 345 C.E to Malabar of a group from West Asia led by a Thomas of Cana is held as a tradition in Kerala by the ‘Southists’ part of the St. Thomas Christians. Though there is not documentary evidence for this arrival, it is plausible as that was the period of persecution happening to Christians in Persia under the Sassanians.

included among the Syrians. What is intriguing is the unsourced reference Assemani makes to Beit Abhe being called on by the Patriarch to provide a specific monk for the work in India, one found nowhere else. As discussed in 3.4 Timothy had an interest in establishing new missions in Asia including India and China as evidenced by his writing: ‘Many monks cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging bag’.⁴⁹⁸ In light of this, it is a possibility that a visit to Malabar of a Bishop Thomas in the last decades of the eighth century may have been followed by another group in the third decade of the ninth century.

Other sections of the copper charters refer to the existence of groups of Jewish and Christian traders that were in operation in the period of these charters:

f. Mine own relations, whoever they be, whatever the charges be, shall never have the right there to speak as heads of the land dealing with subjects. Let the *six hundred*, the *Anjuwannam* and *Manigramam* [Jewish and Christian principalities] be the protectors.

g. Let them, even *Anjuwannam* and *Manigramam*, act both with the Church and with the land, according to the manner detailed in this copper-deed for the time that earth, moon and sun exist.

k. With the sanction of the Palace-major Vyaraka Devar, who has given to these [the *Palliyar*] the 72 jammi right, such as for marriages [or procession], the elephant’s back, the earth, the water, etc, at all events, [marks of nobility], and with the concurrence of His Excellency the Ayyan Adigal, His Excellency Rama, the ministers and officers, the *six hundred*, and the Lords of Punnatala and Pulacudi, let *Anjuwannam* and *Manigramam* carry out this unrestricted possession right in the manner described by this copper-deed for the time that earth, moon and sun exist.

l. If any injustice be done to these, [not clear who, either the *Palliyar*, or *Anjuwannam* and *Manigramam*], they may withhold the tribute and remedy themselves the injury done to them. Should they themselves commit a crime, they are themselves to have the investigation of it.

m. And let whatever the two chieftains in *Anjuwannam* and *Manigramam*, who have taken the water as trustees for this town, may do in unison be counted for one act.

The nature of these groups is not clear from this source but may have been ‘associations of merchants’ or an artisan class.⁴⁹⁹ The reference to these two merchant groups on the copper charters is the first time they were referred to in a surviving inscription. According to

⁴⁹⁸Letter 13 discussed in 3.4

⁴⁹⁹This term ‘association of merchants’ is from Narayanan, who has an extensive treatment of these groups in his work of 1996. Earlier writers like Burnell (1874) thought that these groups were Jewish and Christian colonists but did not develop the idea of merchant associations.

Gurukkal the *Manigramam* ‘was a large organization of big merchants, probably the Syrian Christians, with numerous regional bases of operation in South India.’⁵⁰⁰ It is not clear from this charter what specific trade the Christians of the coast or *Serra* [interior] of Malabar engaged in. It may have been the pepper trade according to Gurukkal. An important city of the *Serra* was Angamali, perhaps already a Metropolitan centre of the Church by the early ninth century.⁵⁰¹

A discovery in Cairo in the early 1960’s that suggests the presence of merchant associations many centuries ago was the *Geniza* papers. S.D. Goitein calls them ‘not an archive, but a wastepaper basket’ in that many kinds of records were dumped and not in any organized way.⁵⁰² These documents date to the late eleventh century but have references to centuries earlier as well. In these materials there is a Christian merchant mentioned related to the Indian trade. According to Goitein ‘the relationship with him’ to merchant activities ‘is referred to in a manner which shows that it was no means anything peculiar’.⁵⁰³ There are also several Hindu merchants listed. These papers emphasize the importance over several centuries of Indian Ocean trade and suggest that Christian merchant activities, though perhaps not extensive, were also not ‘peculiar.’⁵⁰⁴

The multi-ethnic nature of the context that these trading groups functioned in is suggested from signatures on the copper plate charters. Signatures were in various languages that included Pahlavi, Hebrew, and Kufic, indicating the presence of Persians, Jews, and at least some Arabs. Arab traders may have reached the Malabar Coast ‘not long after the death of the Prophet and swiftly gained the status of privilege and influence among the Hindu rulers of Malabar.’⁵⁰⁵ Cherian concludes that though there may have been Arab merchants as

⁵⁰⁰See Gurukkal’s article in John (1981:58).

⁵⁰¹For the role of Angamali in Church of the East history see Cochrane (2013)

⁵⁰²See Goitein (1963).

⁵⁰³(:205).

⁵⁰⁴For more on the trading links across the Indian Ocean in earlier centuries see Sedler (1980:98ff) and Chanda (2007:44-45).

⁵⁰⁵Chand (1963:38)

early as the late seventh century, most likely there were no residential settlements until the early ninth century.⁵⁰⁶

According to the earliest work written on Muslim history in South Asia, the *Tohfut-ul-Mujahideen* [1579]⁵⁰⁷ there was already in about 710 C.E. a ‘company of Moslems that emigrated to certain ports of Malabar’⁵⁰⁸ and the island of Ceylon providing stopping points on the way to China. Janet Abu-Lughod calls South India, and particularly Malabar, a ‘true hinge’⁵⁰⁹ between the trading centers of the Gulf and China. Meera Abraham also notes the importance of Kollam in the context of these charters: ‘The 9th and 10th centuries were the peak period of the Arab trading voyages to India and China..., and the port of Quilon (Kollam) is frequently mentioned in Arab works as the main halt for Arab seamen on the way to SE Asia and China.’⁵¹⁰

Two Arab accounts of mercantile activity from this period that mention stopping in Southern India are extant from Muslim voyagers. The first one by ibn-Khurdadhbih (912 C.E.), a Persian geographer writing between 845-850 C.E. who described in some detail stages of the voyage from the Persian Gulf via India/Ceylon to China.⁵¹¹ The second account is called the *Akhbar al-Sin w-al Hind* [Reports of India and China] and is by an anonymous Muslim author in 851 C.E., though generally thought to be a trader named Sulayman. He ‘issued a collection of reports from merchants about the sea route from Siraf to Canton and the customs of the Indians and Chinese.’⁵¹² From these two accounts, Hourani has re-constructed a possible trade route that may have been followed in the mid-

⁵⁰⁶Cherian (1969:12).

⁵⁰⁷This work was written by Sheikh Zeen-ud-deen in Arabic and included a section on early origins of Islam in South Asia. It was translated into English by Rowlandson in 1836. See also a later four volume history of Islam in India by Mohammed Kasim Ferishta (1609) translated by Briggs to English in 1829.

⁵⁰⁸(1836:5).

⁵⁰⁹Abu-Lughod (1989:259).

⁵¹⁰Abraham (1988:22)

⁵¹¹Hourani (1995) has detailed stages of these voyages as well as some of the challenges in navigation they would have faced. See also Ferrand (1913) and Sauvaget (1948) for French translations of these journeys as well as commentary. Renaudot (1811) has an English translation of the voyages from the Arabic.

⁵¹²(:68).

ninth century from the Gulf to China via India with possible time tables of the voyage.⁵¹³ It is not known what route the arriving Syrians in Malabar took in the early decades of the ninth century but what Hourani has outlined is a possibility.

Similar epigraphic evidence to the charters also found in Southern India indicates monastic activities originating in Mesopotamia. It is four Persian crosses found during the last two hundred years. Hambye believes that some of them may in fact date to the same early ninth century arrival of the Mesopotamian monks.⁵¹⁴ One of the crosses, discovered near Kottayam, has the following inscription in Pahlavi: 'I, a beautiful bird from Ninevah, have come to this country, written by Mar Shapur, I whom the Holy Messiah, the forgiver, freed from thorns.'⁵¹⁵

The importance of Pahlavi as a language used on the charters as well as these crosses indicates links with the province of Fars at this period:

The inscriptions on the crosses speak of the dominant use of Pahlavi in churches of Malabar and coastal Western India. Gerd Gopp says that up to the eleventh century the church in Fars used Pahlavi and ordained bishops for Oman, Socotra, and India. It was only after 1040/1050 C.E. with the advent of the Seljuks, that the Metropolitan of Rev-Ardashir was extinguished. From that time on the bishops for the Gulf and India were ordained by the Patriarch of Baghdad. It seems highly probable that Syriac came to be used as the liturgical and ecclesiastical language in Malabar only after these developments in the eleventh century.⁵¹⁶

When Syriac was first used outside Church liturgy is not clear from the evidence but the importance of Pahlavi for the pre-Portuguese centuries is seen from the charters and the crosses. The ecclesial allegiance to Fars that lasted for centuries until 791 C.E. meant in some ways that the Baghdad patriarchate was once-removed and that some kind of awareness of Persia was present for centuries in Malabar.

⁵¹³(:74).

⁵¹⁴Hambye (1952:380)

⁵¹⁵English translation by Dr. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1926). For more on the crosses see Burnell (1874), West (1896), Ayyar (1926), Winckworth (1929) and Kollampampil (1994)

⁵¹⁶Malekandathil (2010:8).

The location of a place called Nineveh in the inscription is important as it testifies to the Northern Mesopotamian origin of the writer, an area that included Beit Abhe monastery. The name 'Mar Shapur', though a common Persian name, is similar to the one on the copper charter. Another name on the smaller cross, also found in the Kottiyam region, says it was made by 'Afras, son of Chaharbutt' 'who professed the faith of the Syrian Church'. It is a very similar name to Aphrat who was part of the arriving group and may have been one of ten Pahlavi signatures on the copper charter. Winckworth speculates that 'it is quite likely that Afras was a mason they brought with them on the expedition.'⁵¹⁷

All four of the crosses have a dove inscribed on them, a symbol of the Holy Spirit both in the Scriptures as well as in the East Syriac tradition. The existence of the dove on the crosses led A.C. Burnell to believe that they were a sign of Manichean missionaries in Southern India as the dove was a sign also linked historically with Mani.⁵¹⁸ There is however no other evidence of Mani's disciples in the Malabar region at this period of history or even earlier. A more likely reason was that the crosses were in a context of Persian thought and cultural symbols that Mani had also been nurtured in.

In the T'ang ruled empire in China another kind of document had been recorded in 781 C.E. and then lost for centuries. In 1625 news of an amazing discovery began to circulate among the Roman Catholic missionaries in Asia: a stone monument or *Stele* that had been buried for some eight hundred years had been found in the ancient capital of X'ian, China.⁵¹⁹ With an inscribed date of 781 C.E. it was stunning evidence of the existence of Christianity many centuries before the coming of the Western missionaries. It provided a historical record of the activities of the Church of the East in China from the arrival of Alopen and a group of monks in about 635 C.E.

Part of the inscription is below:

⁵¹⁷Winkworth (1929)

⁵¹⁸Burnell (1878)

⁵¹⁹Much has been written on the *Stele* by Western scholars Legge (1888), Holm (1923), Drake (1936) and Foster (1939) and Asian scholars Saeki (1916) and Li Tang (2001). Legge included a translation into English.

In the time of the accomplished Emperor Taitsung, the illustrious and magnificent founder of the dynasty, among the enlightened and holy men who arrived was the Most-virtuous Olopun, from the country of Syria. Observing the azure clouds, he bore the true sacred books; beholding the direction of the winds, he braved difficulties and dangers. In the year A.D. 635 he arrived at Chang-an; the Emperor sent his Prime Minister, Duke Fang Hiuen-ling; who, carrying the official staff to the west border, conducted his guest into the interior; the sacred books were translated in the imperial library, the sovereign investigated the subject in his private apartments; when becoming deeply impressed with the rectitude and truth of the religion, he gave special orders for its dissemination. In the seventh month of the year A.D. 638 the following imperial proclamation was issued:

Right principles have no invariable name, holy men have no invariable station; instruction is established in accordance with the locality, with the object of benefiting the people at large. The Greatly-virtuous Olupun, of the kingdom of Syria, has brought his sacred books and images from that distant part,' and has presented them at our chief capital. Having examined the principles of this religion, we find them to be purely excellent and natural; investigating its originating source, we find it has taken its rise from the establishment of important truths; its ritual is free from perplexing expressions, its principles will survive when the framework is forgot; it is beneficial to all creatures; it is advantageous to mankind. Let it be published throughout the Empire, and let the proper authority build a Syrian church in the capital in the I-ning May, which shall be governed by twenty-one priests. When the virtue of the Chau dynasty declined, the rider on the azure ox ascended to the west; the principles of the great Tang becoming resplendent, the Illustrious breezes have come to fan the East.”⁵²⁰

Though the context and time period of the copper charters and *Stele* are different there are three similarities. They are both recording the arrival of East Syrian monastic initiatives from West Asia: to China in the Eighth and India in the Ninth century. Secondly there is also a degree of royal favour given: in the *Stele* inscription the Emperor sends his Prime Minister to get the holy books that Alopen has brought, and then after having ‘investigated the subject in his private apartments’, the sovereign becomes ‘deeply impressed with the rectitude and truth of the religion.’ It leads to him desiring that the ideas be ‘disseminated’ in his realm and a proclamation is then issued. In the copper plate charter of the early ninth century royal attention is also given to the arriving group of East Syrians and though a different result happens in not such an endorsement being given, it is not one of hostility. In both these accounts which have survived in epigraphic form over many centuries, one on copper plates and one on stone buried over eight centuries, it is noteworthy that these were public attestations of approval by royal authorities who were not Christians.

⁵²⁰The English translation of these portions of the inscription is from Wylie and appears in Frits Holm’s book of 1909.

A third similarity is that there were consequences that involved granting of property for the establishing of a church institution in the area. The T'ang Emperor issues a proclamation for the dissemination in his realm of these foreign doctrines, but then also provides for the 'proper authority' to 'build a church' in the capital that will be overseen by twenty-one priests. Whether a church or monastery is indicated in the inscription or something inclusive of both it suggests a degree of favour from the Emperor for East Syrian monastic activities in this period of T'ang history. In the copper charters examined earlier in this section there was a royal gift of physical land for the *tarisa* community to build a place of prayer or church. There was no proclamation to disseminate the Christian faith, as in China a few years earlier, but there was a gift of property that would ensure a physical location for the Church in Kollam in the early ninth century.

The following paragraphs of the inscription continue to attest to a level of royal favour being given to 'Olupun' and the other monks:

Orders were then issued to the authorities to have a true portrait of the Emperor taken; when it was transferred to the wall of the church, the dazzling splendor of the celestial visage irradiated the Illustrious portals. The sacred traces emitted a felicitous influence, and shed a perpetual splendor over the holy precincts.

The Emperor Kautsung respectfully succeeded his ancestor, and was still more beneficent toward the institution of truth. In every province he caused Illustrious churches to be erected, and ratified the honor conferred upon Olopun, making him the great conservator of doctrine for the preservation of the State. While this doctrine pervaded every channel, the State became enriched and tranquility abounded. Every city was full of churches, and the royal family enjoyed luster and happiness.

Thereupon the Emperor composed mottoes for the sides of the church, and the tablets were graced with the royal inscriptions; the accumulated gems emitted their effulgence, while their sparkling brightness vied with the ruby clouds.

The accomplished and enlightened Emperor Suhsung rebuilt the Illustrious churches in Ling-wu and four other places; great benefits were conferred, and felicity began to increase; great munificence was displayed, and the imperial State became established.

The Emperor decrees that 'in every province' there would be 'Illustrious churches' to be erected as well as rebuilding churches in Ling-wu and four other places. The context of approval from royal authority for Church activities continued for one hundred more years

until 850 when there was an edict of suppression on both the Christians and Buddhists of the T'ang Empire.⁵²¹

In this section, monastic mission activities in other regions of Asia originating in Mesopotamia are suggested from extant epigraphic evidence of the eighth and ninth centuries. These involve the dispersal of East Syrian religious leaders to other regions of Asia that included India and China. Reasons for this dispersal were internal within the Christian faith due to competitive hostility with the West Syrians as well as external due to restrictions from the Muslim rulers that made mission within Mesopotamia more difficult. The dispersal was however consistent with the moving east of a 'refugee' church that had been doing so since partially leaving Edessa in the fourth century for Nisibis.

Monastic mission activities resulting from this dispersal included the starting of churches and monasteries in places like Malabar and China. Involvement in these activities farther east was part of an identity that the Church though living under restrictions in their homeland was able to claim both in image and reality. Their Patriarch in the early Abbasid period was aware of these initiatives to the East and wrote of them in his letters, contributing to an identity that was not limited to being only a *dhimmi* community under restrictions.

These monastic mission activities emanated from monasteries like Beit Abhe that daily celebrated liturgical discipline. These practices emphasized an identity linked to the past as well as providing sustenance for the present and future which will be discussed in the next section.

6.4 Symbolic Function of the Monasteries in Local and Trans-local Contexts

In the beginning pages of the *Historia Monastica*, Thomas of Marga describes his purpose in writing the stories enclosed:

⁵²¹See Bays (2012) for a recently written account of Chinese history including the T'ang period.

Now I am commanded by the holy brethren of the holy Monastery of Beth 'Abhe, in which I have ministered for many years, that of the written and unwritten histories, and excellent stories of the holy men who have lived therein, and have been victorious, I should spin a thread of the stories concerning them, formed of the matters omitted by the compilers of written and unwritten histories.⁵²²

Whether in the context of real monastic mission encounters or as a symbol in Muslim writings the monasteries of the East Syrians represented a realm of the 'other' that mediated between heaven and earth. Monks who inhabited them and at times went out from them in mission lived in a tradition of the 'athletes of might and warriors of strength' that had lived before them and some of whom were buried within the walls of the monastery.

Stories of the holy men who had been victorious in the past were not only for the purposes of the knowledge of history, but that they would 'be ground in the mill of discernment, and be kneaded in the kneading-trough of belief, and be baked in the oven of love, and laid as a glorious offering upon the altar of the mind of Holy of Holies.'⁵²³ These qualities of discernment, belief and love would be needed by the monks in Thomas' own time for their own monastic mission activities. Through martyrdom at times they would also be offered up upon the 'altar of the mind of the Holy of Holies'.

Thomas then goes on to describe how the hearing of these stories is meant to add to the present generation more qualities that they would need:

And to belief also, confidence; and to confidence, excellence; and to excellence, righteousness; and to righteousness, holiness; and to holiness also, constancy; and to constancy, hope; and to hope, stability; and to stability, strength; and to strength, love; which is the crown of the completion of the excellent things, in which standeth our profession, and upon which is laid the foundation of our doctrine.⁵²⁴

In recording these stories for the present and future generations of monks at Beit Abhe and the other monasteries, Thomas provides a context that included:

⁵²²*Historia Monastica* 1.2.21

⁵²³1.2.22

⁵²⁴*Historia Monastica* 1.2.22

the excellent matters of the histories of holy men, those athletes of might and warriors of strength, who did battle with the body and the passions thereof and with rebellious devils, and who bound on the crown of victory and overcame, and were crowned in the spiritual contest of their lives which pleased God.⁵²⁵

Monks had daily reminders of this continuity of history through their spiritual disciplines of which the most regular was the liturgy. As Budge notes the monks at Beit Abhe would be having daily services seven times a day, following the pattern of the Psalmist, who said ‘Seven times a day do I praise thee, because of thy righteous judgements.’⁵²⁶ Services would also involve readings from the *hudhra* [lectionary] which was a book of collections of scripture readings for that day or special season in the Church calendar. During Isho-yahbh’s years as Metropolitan in the seventh century, a lectionary had been written at Beit Abhe. Thomas of Marga writing in the ninth century mentions this lectionary in his work.⁵²⁷ Forms of this same lectionary were carried on in Church practice for centuries after. A copy of a similar lectionary was made in Angamali, Malabar in 1301, the earliest known document of the Church of the East in India.⁵²⁸

Monks were called to the services by the sound of a board struck as Thomas of Marga relates.⁵²⁹ The liturgy, or public worship of the monks in the monastery, involved the reading or singing of some of the Psalms each day as well as select prayers part of this liturgical practice. It was a central practice of the monastery and provided a regular habit of prayer as part of life in the community.

Liturgy was important in the daily shaping and forming of the monks’ spiritual lives and provided part of an overall framework of life and devotion. East Syrians primarily used the liturgy of two figures important to early tradition of the church. They were Addai and Mari and had been sent out from Edessa in the first and second century. The English translator of

⁵²⁵5.1.467

⁵²⁶See Budge (1893: lv) from Psalm 119:164

⁵²⁷2.11.177-179

⁵²⁸Van der Ploeg (1983)

⁵²⁹2.27.229-230

the liturgy, M.J. Birnie, calls Addai and Mari the ‘disciplers of Asia’ for this early role in the Church’s tradition of mission involvement.⁵³⁰

Using the names of two early apostles of the Church provided a connection back to Edessa and a historical continuity for monastic activities in later centuries. Jones felt that using the names of Addai and Mari for the liturgy ‘represents an instinctive appeal to apostolicity on the part of a church whose orthodoxy had been challenged.’⁵³¹ Though their orthodoxy would be questioned by branches of the Church, East Syrian identity had this apostolic component that included involvement in mission to the East before the Christological controversies in the fifth and sixth centuries.

It is not clear how often the full liturgy of Addai and Mari was sung or read in the monasteries. Perhaps portions of it were involved in each of the daily times of service as included in the lectionary.

Below is a prayer from this liturgy:

O my Lord, in your many ineffable mercies, make a good and acceptable memorial for all the just and righteous fathers who were well-pleasing before you through the commemoration of the body and blood of your Christ which we offer you upon your pure and holy altar, as you taught us. Bring to pass your tranquility and peace in us all the days of the world. Yea, our Lord and our God, bring to pass your tranquility and peace in us all the days of the world, that all the inhabitants of the earth may know you and know that you alone are God, the Father of truth, and that you sent our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son and your Beloved, and he, our Lord and our God, came and taught us in his life-giving gospel all the purity and holiness of the prophets and apostles, of the martyrs and confessors, of the bishops and teachers, of the presbyters and deacons, and of all the children of the holy catholic church - who have been signed with the living seal of holy Baptism.⁵³²

In the words of this prayer, part of a liturgy central to the East Syrian church, several aspects should be noted. First, the just and righteous fathers who have gone before are remembered and brought before the altar as a living memory of their faithfulness. As in the

⁵³⁰Birnie (2013)

⁵³¹Jones (1964:2).

⁵³²English translation of portion by Chorbishop M.J. Birnie (2013)

words of Thomas of Marga earlier in this section, remembering these holy athletes of God was part of the daily lives of the monastic community, here enshrined in the liturgy of the community.

The prayer also includes the mission call to the whole earth: ‘That all the inhabitants of the earth may know you and know that you alone are God, the Father of truth, and that you sent our Lord Jesus Christ, your son and your Beloved’. In this portion the prayers for tranquillity and peace are in the context of ‘all the inhabitants of the earth’ knowing God. For the East Syrian Church, using both the liturgy of Addai and Mari who were known in tradition as sent out apostles and a lectionary by the monastic founder of Beit Abhe provided resources for their monastic mission activities.

Each time this liturgy was used this prayer helped the monks remember that all the inhabitants of earth were included in activities of witness. These inhabitants included the Muslim communities around them. Whether that direct application was made is not known but the monks were nonetheless praying this prayer for mission ‘to the whole earth’ regularly.

A third part of this prayer following a call to the whole earth included God sending ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, your son and your Beloved.’ Monks in Beit Abhe and other monasteries were regularly remembering as part of their liturgy that the Gospel of Christ was central to their activities daily and this same Gospel had also been central to Addai and Mari in the days of Edessa in the early period of their Church. Remembrance of their faith in the sending of Christ for the whole world was part of a link in meaning and reality with a continuity of their Church’s history.

In daily practices of liturgy the identity of the monks was formed within a monastic context. The monastery was an important cultural symbol, a ‘vehicle for cultural meaning’⁵³³ that conveyed the strength of an institution that had given the East Syrians an identity that was stable and secure. In fact, the monastery as a ‘symbol with great conceptual elaborating

⁵³³See Ortner (1973: 1340)

power' could be also identified as a 'root metaphor'⁵³⁴. A 'root metaphor' is an idea that is powerful in and of itself and provides a description that other meanings can be enfolded into. The originator of the phrase 'root metaphor' was Stephen Pepper in 1942. He linked this concept to Thomas Kuhn's idea of 'paradigms'. Both phrases carry the idea of interpretive patterns that point to a reality larger in its dimensions. According to Buck, 'root metaphors' serve to establish a 'certain view of the world.'⁵³⁵ An example of this would be the idea of martyrdom that is such an important part of several faiths, including for the East Syrians. As seen in the above prayer, the 'martyrs and confessors' of the Church were also included in the regular remembrance of prayer.

For East Syrians, monasteries like Mt. Izla and Beit Abhe provided a continuity of tradition that had lasted for centuries. Monasteries were 'way-stations' between heaven and earth and between the earthly journeys in monastic mission activities across Asia. Continuity of tradition was represented by the practice of liturgy having a location in the monastery. The tradition was lived out in remembering actual members of the Church who had lived before and been involved in monastic mission activities. It also had a remembrance tied to the symbols of the monks' faith, including the monastery itself.

Edward Farley writes of 'deep symbols' that 'shape the values of a society and guide the life of faith, morality and action.'⁵³⁶ The monastery fits this idea of a 'deep symbol' that both 'shapes' and 'guides' a community of people, in this case the East Syrians in their mission involvement. The monastery being a kind of 'deep symbol' was not only true for the Christians. As seen in Chapter 5 of this thesis, several strands of Muslim literature in the ninth and tenth centuries included monks and monasteries as symbolic locations for various kinds of activities that centred around longings, both erotic and spiritual and sometimes a mix of both. These longings, including for places where the 'other' and 'forbidden' could be encountered, placed the monastery both in Muslim imagination and reality as a location where shared longings and a shared world could meet.

⁵³⁴Ortner is here quoting Pepper (1942) when using term 'root metaphor'.

⁵³⁵Buck in unpublished PhD dissertation (1996:12).

⁵³⁶Farley (1996:1). Monasteries continue today to be those 'deep symbols' across the world especially in places like Mt. Athos in Greece that continues to attract pilgrims.

Even as monasteries offered hospitality to Muslim visitors in Northern Mesopotamia or in other areas of Asia, they functioned as ‘high places for inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding and exchange’.⁵³⁷ One kind of exchange that at times happened was in the *majalis* format which included gatherings for the purpose of religious discussion, but also the witnessing in a public setting of a miracle or healing. As one writer has said in a more modern context, ‘Many bridges have been built in the monasteries not only among monks who come from far and wide, but also among the many visitors and sympathizers to whom this irresistible charismatic power of loving exchange is extended.’⁵³⁸ Monasteries have been places where people are welcomed, particularly the stranger. The idea of caring for the stranger, so central to Biblical faith and indeed the Abrahamic faiths in general, was a vital part of East Syrian monasticism. According to Nichols, ‘the Syrian monks were convinced that God came to them at times in the guise of a complete stranger to test their fidelity.’⁵³⁹

6.5 Conclusion

The chapter has explored the identity of the East Syrian monks as they engaged in mission activities in both Mesopotamia and other regions of Asia. These monks were part of an ecclesial framework in the early Abbasid period that stretched across Asia with a Patriarch that encouraged mission as well as engagement with the Muslim rulers. As seen in the *Historia Monastica* and his own letters Timothy was selecting, encouraging and ordaining monks from monasteries like Beit Abhe to go out as witnesses and leaders of new monasteries and churches to other regions of Asia.

One way this mission involvement was described by Thomas of Marga was as a ‘dispersal’. ‘Dispersal’ to the east was an important part of the identity of the Church and had continued in the early Abbasid period from previous centuries. It was consciously linked by Thomas to Biblical examples when the evil of man led to dispersal and positive results. Even

⁵³⁷Boniface (1993:58)

⁵³⁸(:58)

⁵³⁹Nichols (1995:45)

though the West Syrians were competitive irritations at times and though Muslim restrictions were present a dispersing to the east continued.

Another aspect of identity was the involvement in monastic mission activities to other regions of Asia. Examined in this chapter were extant inscriptions from India and China that provide clues to activities in these regions. It has been argued that these activities to regions outside Mesopotamia were known to the Patriarch and the Church in the early Abbasid period and that they provided an additional aspect of identity to the Church. Their identity as a *dhimmi* community in Mesopotamia was strengthened and sustained by this involvement to other regions. Patriarch Timothy included reference in his letters to monks going to these regions and was personally involved in an ecclesial decision giving India its own Metropolitan. His sustaining of both the image and reality of a Church in mission in this period was nourished by this actual involvement in monastic activities to India and China.

A strengthening of this mission identity also happened through practice in the monasteries of liturgy. Daily practice of liturgy was in the context of the monastery, an institution that provided continued continuity both as a symbol as well as in reality. Through using the liturgy of Addai and Mary there was a link back in history to remembered pioneers of their faith and the sending city of Edessa. These daily practices also brought a foundation by regular prayers for mission to the whole earth as part of the liturgy.

For East Syrian monks of the early Abbasid period at places like Beit Abhe there was a larger paradigm that included not only the local enclosure they lived in but also the monastic mission activities in other regions. They were given through this a sustained identity as the Church of the East in this period though living under the restrictions of the Abbasids.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Monastic Mission Activities in the Early Abbasid Period

The primary question that concerned this thesis was what kinds of activities in Christian mission and training for that mission were Church of the East monasteries able to engage in during early Abbasid rule? Questions examined under this included the nature of the theology of witness of the Church and what monastic activities were happening among Muslims and to the East leading up to the ninth century (Chapter 2), what mission involvement may have meant to the Church in the early ninth century from their own sources and how that interacted with issues of sustenance as a *dhimmi* community (Chapter 3), what function did training have in preparation for mission activities from the monasteries (Chapter 4), how did the Muslim community interact with the monasteries and what did monastic presence and encounter mean to them (Chapter 5), and in what way relations with Muslim and other Christian communities, as well as their own liturgical practices, affected and shaped Church of the East identity in mission during the early Abbasid period (Chapter 6).

In exploring this primary question it has been argued that East Syrian monastic mission activities continued in similar ways in the early Abbasid period as they had since pre-Islam days in Arabia and Mesopotamia. These activities were an important element in the shared space and shared world of early ninth century Christian-Muslim relations. They centred in monasteries extending across Asia with a variety of connections, functions and roles. The place of monastic mission activities in this period of history both across Asia and especially in Mesopotamia to Muslims has been to some degree overlooked or disregarded. An alternative story was presented for the early ninth century, one that included involvement by the Church of the East in mission activities to the East while being a *dhimmi* community. The monastery was portrayed as a 'lens' from which the period was seen, particularly with the mission of the Church of the East in view.

Mission involvement of the Church has been assumed on the part of a growing group of historians in more recent scholarly literature on the subject. Authors like Young,⁵⁴⁰ Moffett,

⁵⁴⁰Young (1974)

⁵⁴¹ England, ⁵⁴² and Gillman and Klimkeit ⁵⁴³ have written about these mission activities but have not focused in any depth on the important role of monasteries in this involvement. In the early decades of the twentieth century two historians, John Stewart ⁵⁴⁴ and Alphonse Mingana, ⁵⁴⁵ not only wrote about the mission of the Church of the East but called it the 'greatest missionary Church in history.' In writing of this mission involvement, these historians whether more recently or in the last century assumed that an extensive spread had happened across Asia. There was little to no reflection, however, on how this mission may have been able to be sustained while being a *dhimmi* community. There was also no investigation of how these monks were trained for this mission and what the role of Patriarch Timothy may have been in it.

In investigating from sources of the period whether and if so what kind of monastic mission activities were actually taking place, this thesis has gone beyond other scholarly literature. It has explored primary sources to see what mission may have meant to the Church in the late eighth and early ninth century period. From that investigation it has been argued that activities of mission were occurring not only to the east but within Mesopotamia to Muslims as well.

The above scholarly sources in recognizing a Church of the East mission spread in Asia suggested that there was no mission happening to Muslims within Mesopotamia and even that they were being ignored. William G. Young wrote an important study on the Church in its relations to political entities, including during the Abbasid period. ⁵⁴⁶ He also wrote on mission involvement and called the lack of witness to Muslims in Mesopotamia by the Church a 'puzzle' that awaits further answers. The thesis goes beyond Young in arguing that

⁵⁴¹Moffett (1998)

⁵⁴²England (1996)

⁵⁴³Gillman and Klimkeit (1999)

⁵⁴⁴Stewart (1928)

⁵⁴⁵Mingana (1929)

⁵⁴⁶Young (1974)

monastic mission activities were actually happening among Muslims in this period and adds four pieces to the puzzle that help to form a more coherent picture of the Church's overall spread.

The first piece added to the puzzle in this research was by seeing the importance of a continuity of monastic mission activities back to earlier generations, including before Islam began in Arabia. The Church of the East had a commitment to mission from its beginning centred in its monasteries. Chapter 2 of this research explored the nature of this commitment to mission and how it formed and grew. The Church of the East, spreading from Edessa in the second century, had been consistent in their commitment to mission from their beginning. They had a theology of mission going back to Ephrem, Aphrahat and Narsai and formed in its schools in Edessa, Nisibis and Jundeshapur. They also had a liturgy tracing back to Addai and Mari and the Edessan tradition which affirmed a commitment to mission. Both their theology and liturgy gave a framework for a mission-saturated identity. Their very name, the Church of the East or East Syrians, connoted not only a geographic designation as opposed to the West Syrians but also a mission identity that would cause them to be, according to one scholar 'the deliberately homeless followers of the homeless Jesus in their ceaseless pilgrimage through this world.'⁵⁴⁷ Pilgrimage in mission had similarities to the Celtic church of the sixth to tenth centuries that went forth from missionary monasteries and also planted churches and monasteries in the areas they travelled to.

Activities in witness to Muslims in the early Abbasid period continued a tradition of missionary monasticism back to the fourth century with the *Bnay* - and *Bnat qyama* [Sons and Daughters of the Covenant], a development emerging in a similar time period as St. Antony in Egypt and the beginnings of monasticism there. Monasticism in the Church of the East was similar but also different in nature from the form in Egypt, resulting in monastic centres that were outward looking as well as inward, fostering the desires of learning and spirituality with a commitment to mission encounter. Encounters centred in the monasteries included Muslims around them. These activities were not new for the Church

⁵⁴⁷Murray (2004:28)

but a continuation of what had gone before in their history. Though facing restrictions as a *dhimmi* community they did not stop their monastic mission activities but maintained them.

A second piece that helps answer the question of what mission involvement among Muslims was happening in the period is looking at Christian sources for clues of these activities. My thesis examined a history of Beit Abhe monastery by Thomas of Marga and the letters of Timothy for how they may provide answers. From that exploration, the argument was made that contrary to secondary sources like Shedd,⁵⁴⁸ Young⁵⁴⁹ and Brock⁵⁵⁰ there was content in Thomas' work that mentions mission activities to Muslims in the early Abbasid period. Discussed in 3.3 of this thesis, this interpretation of the *Historia Monastica* in its depiction of Muslims is also valuable in being able to understand not only the unpredictability in these stories of encounters with monks and monasteries but also the ambiguity of these meetings in terms of meaning and results. Though Thomas of Marga's work was likely read primarily by Christians and few Muslims if any, it has been explored in this research alongside Muslim works about monasteries from the ninth and tenth century to provide different perspectives of these activities going on.

Timothy's letters also provided evidence of a concern for strengthening the Church in face of Muslim objections to their faith. He had specific content in those letters that provided resources for engaging Muslims in religious discussion. The Patriarch did not ignore the Muslims around him, but rather met with Caliphs, at times involved with them in religious discussion, and encouraged as well translation activities in his Church.⁵⁵¹

A third piece brought by this research was in exploring from Muslim literature the place of monastic mission activities in the monasteries. In Chapter 5 there was an examination of these sources and from them how Muslims viewed the monasteries and what went on there. Muslims were attentive to the monasteries around them and also visited them for a variety of reasons. A practice that went back to the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century, it

⁵⁴⁸Shedd (1904:111)

⁵⁴⁹Young (1974:118ff)

⁵⁵⁰Brock (1984:11)

⁵⁵¹This was at times on behalf of Caliphal commissions.

had indeed happened even before in places like al-Hira for the pre-Islamic Arabs. As described in the surviving *diyarat* material of al-Shabushti in the tenth century, as well as in the twelfth century geographical dictionaries of Yaqut and the fourteenth century work of al-Umari, these works represented Christian institutions as realms of neutral space but also as places of spiritual longings and desires common to both faiths, expressed at times in forbidden practices of wine drinking and sexual longings. Discourse of this nature would continue to extend from the ninth century into the tenth and eleventh centuries in the emergence of the influence of Sufism in Mesopotamia and Persia as well as across Asia to the Indian subcontinent.

Though there was a sense of the ‘other’ that existed around these Christian institutions including at times a sense of the ‘forbidden’, Muslims did visit these monasteries. Throughout the centuries and continuing to the present as Bahija Lovejoy personally experienced,⁵⁵² Muslims visited for religious discussions, as places to see loved ones healed of mental or physical diseases, or for relaxation in the often beautiful surroundings. The *diyarat* literature refers to luxuriant gardens in the monasteries as pleasure spots where Muslims could relax. This was true of Beit Abhe as well which had an aesthetic that was pleasing and relaxing.⁵⁵³ Situated near trade routes and cities yet often with majestic views of the surrounding areas, monasteries were places where Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia could visit and enjoy the peaceful surroundings regardless of different religious views.

Monasteries were places that Muslims visited, wrote about, and made the place of the forbidden ‘other’ where their imagined (and perhaps at times real) desires for wine and illicit sex could be fulfilled. Muslim literature also described activities in the monasteries that Muslims at times participated in, including Christian festivals and prayer. It is on these activities in these sources that this thesis has in part been focused. They provide from Muslim perspectives evidence that these monasteries were places of encounter with the

⁵⁵²Lovejoy calls the monasteries of Iraq and West Asia the ‘psycho-analytical institutions’ of the East today. She writes of visiting them on summer holidays as a young girl in Iraq. (1957: 245) Also see Dalrymple (1998) for a wonderful though heart-breaking modern journey through the Eastern Christian realms of West Asia today including Muslims visiting monasteries today.

⁵⁵³Beit Abhe was situated near a plentiful supply of drinking water and seemed to have had beautiful gardens.

surrounding non-Christian communities. Through meetings in settings like the *majalis* Christians interacted with Muslims within the restrictions placed upon them.

Along with this piece of the puzzle coming from Muslim literature of the early Abbasid period, there has also been in Chapter 5 an exploration of another influential source from the period, al-Jahiz. He wrote in the mid-ninth century period about Christians, complaining of the social influence they had in some settings and even that they were trying to make converts of Muslims. More evidence is drawn from his writing that contrary to the Church ignoring or not engaging in monastic mission activities to Muslims, there were actual efforts going on in a climate of restrictions sporadically enforced.

A fourth piece of the puzzle on mission involvement among Muslims actually comes from the Church's extension to the east in the same period. As noted earlier, this spread has been assumed by many secondary sources but this involvement has not been factored back into the context in the homelands of Mesopotamia. Authors like Young have surmised that the Church went east in mission in part because of restrictions on mission to Muslims they faced as a *dhimmi* community.⁵⁵⁴ Yet the early Abbasid period was not the beginning of the Church's mission to other regions of Asia. These connections between Mesopotamia and India, as noted in 2.4 of this thesis, had been going on since at least the sixth century. Evidenced by the *Christian Topography*, a travel narrative of Cosmas Indicopleutes, a description is provided in the work of Christians in South India and their priests and monks, identifying them with the Church of the East.

A spread to the East was not purely because of frustrated efforts in the Abbasid context but rather also a continued move in a direction as a 'refugee' church that had been going on for centuries. My thesis has explored in Chapter 3 how Patriarch Timothy not only knew of this mission to the East but used it in his portrayal of the Church. The image of the church he conveyed was not only as a *dhimmi* community but also one that was spread across Asia, larger than its bounds in its homeland.

⁵⁵⁴Young (1974)

These four pieces in this thesis contribute to a clearer conception of what monastic mission activities were going on among Muslims in the early Abbasid period. In adding them there is a more complete and coherent picture that emerges than from other scholarly literature. The continuity of monastic mission activities in the past adds context to the Church in the early Abbasid period. Following clues from both Christian and Muslim sources to these continued monastic mission activities provides further strengthening of the argument. By adding an extension to the east as evidence of a continued vitality and stronger image of the Church in the period, a more comprehensive picture of monastic activities emerges.

7.2 Monasteries as a ‘Zone of Contact’ in Christian-Muslim relations

Monasteries of the Church of the East like Beit Abhe provided a visible and strong Christian institution to the Muslims that had pre-dated Islam including in Arabia itself. It was proposed in this research that a theory of a ‘zone of contact’ can be expanded to include within it elements of both ‘presence’ as well as ‘encounter’. Terminology of a ‘zone of contact’ came from the writings of Mary Louise Pratt who focused on nineteenth century travel writing as seen from the eyes of ‘empire’.⁵⁵⁵ She described contact zones as ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths.’⁵⁵⁶ Though Pratt wrote from a post-colonial framework her definition has application into early Abbasid period Muslim/Christian relations where often ‘highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’ existed between the two.

Exploring the idea that a ‘contact zone’ as a ‘social space where disparate cultures meet’ was the Christian monastery, the thesis has identified where encounters in monastic mission of various kinds were occurring. Pratt’s words about how these groups related, in her case ‘imperial’ travelers and their witnessed subjects, are also very relevant as they related ‘not in terms of separateness but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.’⁵⁵⁷ The East

⁵⁵⁵Pratt (2008)

⁵⁵⁶(:7)

⁵⁵⁷(:8)

Syrian monastery was a social institution that overlapped in the contact zone providing points of presence as well as encounter. Expanding on as well as sharpening Pratt's theory, the 'contact zone' of Christian-Muslim relations in the early Abbasid period was further defined as a place where two different yet overlapping engagements were happening, one of presence and at other times encounter. There is a strong overlap between presence and encounter in the monastic mission activities written about in this research. For the purposes of this thesis, however, presence has indicated the existence of these institutions over several centuries including the pre-Islamic period. Evidence has been presented that Muslims were not only aware of this presence but had written about them and even included them as a kind of genre in their literature. Encounter has referred to meetings between Christians and Muslims in the context of the monastery both in reality as well as in the imaginations of both faiths.

A 'zone of contact' in both presence and encounter has been explored through an interpretative reading of literature of both faiths from the ninth and tenth century. Though these sources were most likely not normally read by the other faith community, a common 'lens' they can be interpreted through is the East Syrian monastery. These documents have been rarely placed within a similar shared world when examined in existing scholarly literature. Genres of literature included both Christian sources like monastic histories, books of instruction on religious discussion or Patriarchal letters, as well as Muslim sources like books of tales set in monasteries, risqué poems and wine literature. When these sources were read together in this research, with a similar time context of the early Abbasid period, an important role emerged more clearly for the monastery and its activities.

One of these important East Syrian monasteries in the early Abbasid period presented in this research as a 'zone of contact' in Christian-Muslim relations was Beit Abhe. Remembering that during the documented existence of Beit Abhe in *Historia Monastica* (595-840) at least '100 became bishops, metropolitans and governors all the way to China....for this reason, what happened at Beit Abhe during those years was of vital importance to the church as a whole.'⁵⁵⁸ Beit Abhe's celebrated history began during

⁵⁵⁸Young (1974:109)

Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and its documented story continued into the early centuries of the Islamic faith and the Abbasid Empire in particular. Though only one of many monasteries in Northern Mesopotamia, its relationship to Patriarchs Isho-yahbh III and Timothy I and involvement in mission activities in both the Abbasid realms and other regions of Asia makes it an important example of the maintenance of mission and learning of the Church of the East in this period and centuries after as well. Unfortunately the final end of this monastery remains unknown.⁵⁵⁹

Beit Abhe monastery has featured strongly in my work as a focus point of a 'zone of contact' for both monastic missions to the East as well as within Mesopotamia to Muslims. Cynthia Villagomez⁵⁶⁰ in her unpublished PhD research is the only scholar who has written a full length work on this monastery. Her focus was particularly on its importance as a window into economic issues in Christian-Muslim relations of the period. I have taken a different focus in writing of its importance in monastic mission activities. Monasteries like Beit Abhe in their context in Abbasid Mesopotamia have been connected with their links to the east as part of an overall important part of their mission identity. It has been argued that the monastery was a significant factor in this mission spread to the east, and in turn that spread contributed to that identity.

Growth to other regions of Asia has provided a further element of a 'zone of contact' that the monasteries in Mesopotamia represented. It has been argued that involvement in these activities by the Church was part of a portrayal by Patriarch Timothy that made the image of the Church more expansive. In Chapter 3.4 of this thesis, the argument of David Wilmshurst⁵⁶¹ is discussed where he claimed that Timothy was 'crafting an image of the Church' by claiming mission involvement to India and China. He called the Patriarch a 'successful illusionist'. An image Wilmshurst referred to of humble monks 'trudging along the roads to China and Tibet' was most likely partially taken from Timothy's *Letter 13* discussed also in 3.4. He did not give a reason for Timothy's desire to craft these images other than to

⁵⁵⁹On a trip to Northern Iraq in Feb. 2014, this writer met with an Iraqi scholar who has investigated an existing monastic site and believes it is Beit Abhe.

⁵⁶⁰Villagomez (1998)

⁵⁶¹Wilmshurst (2011:140ff)

‘persuade posterity’ that the Church ‘counted for far more than it did in reality.’ The argument of this thesis has been that a more relevant reason was that the Church’s involvement in monastic mission to the East, whether imagined or in reality, provided strength to its ranks and indeed was a strategy for its ongoing sustenance.

The image of the Church being broader than its homelands in Mesopotamia found resonance in two different audiences. First was the Christians themselves, providing assurance that though it was an increasingly difficult time being a *dhimmi* community, their continued survival was a given due to historical strength and continued geographic reach. In that way the monastic mission activities and how they were portrayed become a strategy for that very survival. Secondly was the Muslim audience which Timothy needed to persuade that his church was not decreasing in influence but rather still strong and vibrant for the purpose of gaining concessions and privileges. For the Muslims the monastery also had a symbolic reality that went back to pre-Islamic days and had been written about for centuries. Even in periods in the future when unfriendly Caliphs or weak Patriarchs ruled as would happen just two decades after Timothy’s death, the monastery still represented a powerful symbol that helped the Church maintain for centuries its spread to the East and even many of its monasteries in the Abbasid heartlands.

The role of Patriarch Timothy in this period of the Church of the East has also been an important part of this research. He brought together in his own person East Syrian elements of scholarship, heart for mission, breadth of learning and understanding of the mission of his Church across Asia, while recognizing and living within the Islamic context he found himself in. He valued deeply the monastic framework he was educated and nurtured in, especially the monastery of Beit Abhe. Timothy’s death at the age of 95 in 823 would represent the end of an era for the Church of the East, where concern for monastic mission to Muslims in Mesopotamia and to the east combined with a commitment to scholarship would not find such a champion again. In these ways Timothy represents to some degree a unique figure; able to take what already existed in monasteries like Beit Abhe and channel its resources in learning and activities in translation as well as encouraging and choosing monks for mission encounter.

Activities to regions of the east have been included in this thesis as they attest to a Church with vibrance even in this period of being a *dhimmi* community. Timothy was aware of at least some of these activities as seen in his own letters. In the same year of 781 C.E. that Timothy engaged in a dialogue with Abbasid Caliph Mahdi, the Church had erected the *Stele* in China, listing some of the history of the mission there to that point as well as mentioning four monasteries existing in China under the T'ang dynasty. A contribution to a fuller picture of monastic activities in the time of Timothy has been accomplished by examining in 6.3 extant epigraphic materials like copper plate charters and crosses in Southern India as well as this monument in China. These sources have been examined for clues to monastic mission activities in places like Kollam and Angamali in Malabar and China in the east and links to sending monasteries of Mesopotamia like Beit Abhe.

Though the context and time period of the copper charters and *Stele* are different, this thesis has noted three similarities as clues to these monastic activities. They both recorded arrivals of East Syrian monastic initiatives from West Asia: to China in the Seventh and India in the Ninth century. Secondly there was also royal favour given: in the *Stele* inscription the Chinese Emperor sent his Prime Minister for holy books that Alopen brought, and then after having 'investigated the subject in his private apartments' the sovereign becomes 'deeply impressed with the rectitude and truth of the religion.'⁵⁶² The Emperor is led to desire that the ideas be 'disseminated' in his realm and a proclamation is issued. In the copper plate charter in Malabar royal attention was also given to the arriving group of East Syrians and though a different result happened in not such an endorsement being given, it was not a response of hostility. In both these accounts which have survived in epigraphic form, one on copper plates and one on stone buried over eight centuries, it was noteworthy that these were public attestations of approval by royal authorities who were not Christians.

A third similarity is that there were consequences that involved the granting of property for the establishing of a church institution in the area. The T'ang Emperor issued a proclamation for the dissemination in his realm of these foreign doctrines, but then also provided for the 'proper authority' to 'build a church' in the capital that will be overseen by

⁵⁶²English translation of *Stele* is by Wylie appearing in Holm (1909)

twenty-one priests.⁵⁶³ Whether a church or monastery is indicated in the inscription or something inclusive of both suggested a degree of favour from the Emperor for East Syrian monastic activities in this period of T'ang history. In the copper charters examined earlier in this section there was a royal gift of physical land for the *tarisa* community to build a place of prayer or church. There was no proclamation to disseminate the Christian faith, as in China a few years earlier, but there was a gift of property that ensured a physical location for the Church in Kollam in the early ninth century.

These inscriptions attested to monastic activities occurring in other regions to the east that involved the starting of churches and monasteries. There is no extant documentary evidence in India and China that affirmed the Church's spread other than these inscriptions, which did provide clues to the presence and encounter of monastic initiatives in the early Abbasid period. An analysis of the copper charters also yielded the interesting possibility that Christians participated in this trade as part of merchant societies known as the *Anchuvannam* and *Manikkiramam*, which operated from places like Kollam and the *Serra* centre of Angamali to areas across the Indian Ocean. Abbasid merchants had begun to sail to China in this period, including via the Malabar Coast. Muslim settlements were only in a very nascent phase in Malabar at this point and the importance of Muslim trade in the Indian Ocean and on to T'ang ruled China was growing by the middle of the ninth century. A spread to the east from monasteries of the Church was another aspect of a 'zone of contact' that this research had as a context.

7.3 Training for Monastic Mission Activities

As discussed in Chapter 4 a key function of the East Syrian monasteries across Asia was in the area of training. It had various purposes for the Church and continuity over their history going back to Nisibis in the fifth century. Arthur Voobus and Adam Becker wrote scholarly works on this East Syrian monastic and semi-monastic learning.⁵⁶⁴ This thesis went beyond these works with a focus on how the monks involved in mission activities were

⁵⁶³Holm (1909)

⁵⁶⁴Voobus (1958, 1965), Becker (2004, 2006)

nurtured. It examined several of the monastic rules of the period and earlier bringing out implications for understanding how the monks were trained. From these rules as well as examining the letters of Timothy and work of Thomas of Marga, the conclusion was that nurturing for mission involvement was built on a foundation of monastic training. Training had a primary emphasis on Biblical exegesis, continuing a tradition in East Syrian schools since Edessa and Nisibis that had learning the works of Ephrem, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai prominent. There was no specific evidence of a curriculum for mission training separate from a more general one, but there was however evidence for the choosing of monks from monasteries such as Beit Abhe for specific mission assignments. It was proposed that these monks were trained for mission in more of an ‘informal’ curriculum, based in relationship with other monks and studying texts together like Timothy’s letters.

According to David Thomas, the ninth and tenth centuries are ‘maybe the most active in controversial and intellectual exchanges in the whole of Christian-Muslim relations.’⁵⁶⁵ The position taken in this research is that these exchanges at times involved the communication of Christian faith not only for defense but for mission purpose. The letters of Timothy and works by Theodore bar Koni and Ammar al-Basri were explored to see how they fit into an ongoing commitment to train and encourage the Christians. These documents were often in a question and answer format with specific issues highlighted that provided points of contention between the two faiths, as well as resources leading to answers used in real encounters of witness. How these documents were used in witness efforts can’t be definitely known but the nature of similarities in a question and answer format indicated that the audience was Christians and equipping these Christians for mission was at least part of the purpose. An example of this kind of meeting was evidenced by the dialogue of their Patriarch Timothy I with Caliph Mahdi as evidenced in Timothy’s letter. Some of the Patriarch’s letters, as well as *Chapter 10* of the *Scholion* of Theodore bar Koni and the writings of Ammar al-Basri were written in the form of instruction and a tentative conclusion was that they were being circulated in the monasteries and used as part of a transmission of training for witness.

⁵⁶⁵Thomas (2006:17)

Training for witness happened in an environment in the early ninth century filled with theological disputation among the three faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in Mesopotamia. The translation movement in Mesopotamia was growing in the early ninth century with East Syrians having an important role in it. In Chapters 4.4 and 6.2 this translation movement was put in context with the mission of the Church in a discussion of where the translations were done. The conclusion that at least some of the translations were done in the monasteries was proposed and contrasted with the usual emphasis that the primary location was a *Bayt al-Hikma* [House of Wisdom]. An important scholarly work on this subject of translations is by Dmitri Gutas.⁵⁶⁶ Questioning the lack of emphasis in his work on the role of the East Syrian monasteries in the translation involvement, my research has not argued that all these activities were mission, but rather that it fit within a context that included monastic activities in mission. It was also argued that the involvement in mission activities and translation should be considered in a closer relationship than they have been in other scholarly literature on the subject.

7.4 Effectiveness of Monastic Mission Activities in the Early Abbasid Period

Reflecting on an alternative story of Church of the East monastic activities in Asia, Sebastian Brock at the Oriental Institute in Oxford in May, 2006 asked me this question: ‘What was the secret of the Church of the East’s mission effectiveness?’ A complex question to answer, it needed to include the difficult measuring of spiritual factors in that effectiveness as well as the specific region or time period. A different question, yet related, was taken up in this research: what activities in monastic mission were able to continue and be sustained in the early Abbasid period in a context of being a *dhimmi* people? If the answer to the latter question was that these activities in mission were able to be maintained in this period, it would indicate that continuance over several centuries had happened. According to the conclusions of my research, these activities indeed continued and were part of strengthening the Church by the Patriarch.

If Brock’s question was applied to the Church’s mission in Mesopotamia among the Muslims in the early Abbasid period, the answer would be minimal effectiveness if

⁵⁶⁶Gutas (1998)

numbers of converts is the measure. A more complete picture of what was happening in the Church's homeland among Muslims was presented in this research, with involvement in mission occurring in various ways. It has also answered the question of effectiveness from arguing that the sustaining of mission to the east during this same period suggests a strength and vitality going on in the Church. If effectiveness is seen in this way, the continuance and expansion of mission and learning activities of the East Syrians in this period can be seen as centrally tied to the institution of the monastery.

The very 'secret' of this effectiveness was seen as embodied in the monastery in the way it provided 'glue' to the spread of the Church across Asia as well as being an important symbol to the Abbasids in imagination and reality. In coming at Brock's question of a 'secret' for effectiveness from another direction, monastic mission activities were actually an important part of that 'secret.' It was not a story of triumphalism but rather continued endurance over many centuries. Looking for a 'secret' of effectiveness must be in the context of this endurance during very difficult periods of the Church of the East's history.

In a recent book by Philip Jenkins a broader study was done on the history of the Church of the East and one of his chapters was titled 'The Mystery of Survival.' He wrote: 'Instead of trying to understand why religions perish, we should perhaps be asking why they survive at all under such difficult circumstances.' A few pages later Jenkins states that we need a 'theology of extinction' for why some churches die and others survive or thrive.⁵⁶⁷ The Church of the East endured during this period when difficult circumstances in being a *dhimmi* people was combined with mission involvement in and beyond their context. A 'zone of contact' of the monastery with Muslims around them at times overlapped with a 'zone of conflict'.

In researching what these monastic mission activities meant to the Church of the East as well as to Muslims in the early Abbasid period, several models from the work of Martha Frederiks on Gambia were considered in Chapter 1.⁵⁶⁸ These will be listed briefly again,

⁵⁶⁷Jenkins (2011:227,249)

⁵⁶⁸Frederiks (2003:90)

with an additional one suggested by my research included after. The first was the more traditional model of mission, *expansion*, where emphasis is on numbers of converts and church growth. In the Church of the East, there was growth through monastic mission activities based in a network of monasteries. When this research was first being conducted, there was an assumption on my part, particularly drawn from scholarly literature, that the Church of the East had a mission ‘movement’ going on across Asia for many centuries. In examining the primary sources of the period that viewpoint has been reassessed.

A more useful description that this thesis has proposed comes from the *Historia Monastica* itself. It is that monks were ‘dispersed’ to other regions of Asia. This happened at times according to Thomas of Marga because of human pressure and sin. The ‘dispersal’ of the Church of the East monks was a form of expansion that involved activities that stretched across Asia. Within Mesopotamia due to the restrictions involved the mission of the Church was centred in the monasteries. Expansion and growth, as well as effectiveness in results looked very different in that context. Timothy's unique role in choosing monks from the monasteries and his own passion for mission was also considered.

The second model Frederiks used had an emphasis on reconciliation, service and peacemaking, called *diakonia*, which has not been developed or applied in this thesis related to the Church of the East. Third was a model of *presence*, emphasized by the lives and witness of Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld in North Africa. In this research on the early Abbasid period, it was argued that monasteries of the Church provided a presence that Muslims were aware of and wrote about as well. Presence had at times within it the element of encounter as Muslims visited the monastery for various reasons.

The fourth model that Frederiks highlighted was *dialogue*, more popularly discussed and implemented in recent years in Christian-Muslim relations. It had an emphasis on the ongoing need for relationships between the two faiths at several levels. In the early Abbasid period, intellectual exchanges of various kinds occurred between the two faiths that perhaps could be included under this model.

The final one was *kenosis*, or self-emptying which Frederiks argued has seldom been followed in Christian-Muslim history but involved the Church living among Muslims with humility and love. Monks of the Church of the East in their mission involvement lived out a self-*kenosis* that was evidenced by living as a *dhimmi* community yet continuing to engage in mission encounter with the Muslims around them. Self-emptying is linked by Frederiks to the example of Christ as written about by Paul in Philippians 2 of the New Testament.

A similar but additional model to self-emptying was suggested in my thesis by the story of the monastic activities in mission in the early Abbasid period, and that is the Church of the East as a *martyr* Church. Involvement of the Church in these activities was strengthened by their conscious foundation of liturgy that gave them regular disciplines of memory. It was a memory that included martyrs who had gone before and were remembered in the daily prayers in the monasteries. Being a *martyr* Church did not only mean the sacrifice of physical life but an ongoing tradition of sacrificial living that went back to their early history in the work of Aphrahat and Narsai. A lifestyle of mission involvement over centuries centred in the monasteries experienced periods of ebb and flow in the relationship with the Muslims around them. Explored in this research was mission involvement at a particular period in the Church's history that had within it the continued understanding of a *martyr* identity.

7.5 Issues For Further Research

Archaeological finds that have occurred in the past few decades including in the Persian Gulf and India and China have been mentioned in this research. Several studies need to be written that could bring together these findings as well as bringing in other discoveries and contextual understandings from across Asia specifically in the area of monastic witness. In Leiden in recent years, a cross-disciplinary project was undertaken on the history and culture of the West Syrian church. A similar project, perhaps sponsored by an educational institution and bringing together scholars from many regions, backgrounds and disciplines, all focused on across-Asia Church of the East monasticism, would be very enlightening.

In the early stages of this research there was an ambition to try to come to a definitive conclusion whether East Syrian linked monasticism was present in ninth century Malabar and particularly Angamali. In fact as the investigation began some enquiry was even given to whether there was a East Syrian presence in North India as well that may have continued into the fourteenth century. Upon further research, it was seen that there was not enough evidence to draw even tentative conclusions about the nature of the links between the Mesopotamian Church and North India. Thus that question has not been touched on in this work. Further investigation into the nature of East Syrian monastic presence in the Malabar region of pre-Portuguese India is still needed. It will be difficult, however, without new discoveries of documentary or archaeological evidence taking place.

The fact that crosses dating back to the seventh-ninth centuries have been discovered in Malabar in the twentieth century raises the possibility that a discovery of a buried *Stele*, such as happened in China by the Jesuits over eight hundred years after its burial, could still happen in Malabar or other parts of India. A founder of the new Kottayam monastery referenced in the next section feels certain that there would be something to find in the Angamali area of the modern Indian state of Kerala if excavations were able to be done and he hopes that a project can be initiated.⁵⁶⁹ That kind of excavation was beyond the scope of this research project but this research affirms a need for it.

7.6 Monasteries as Signposts in Future of Christian-Muslim relations

In this last section there will be reflection on the role of the monastery and its activities in present and future relations between Christianity and Islam. While this thesis has focused on an alternative story of monastic mission activities of the early Abbasid period, there is also recognition that it can have relevance to the present and future as well. A particular period in Christian-Muslim relations was featured in this research that also contributes to a larger history and future of these relations.

In researching monastic mission activities of the Church of the East, I have not titled the early Abbasid period a 'golden age' for the Church of the East, or tried to portray it as such.

⁵⁶⁹Father Thomas in a conversation with me in Sept. 2010 at the site of the new Kottayam monastery

It was a time of unpredictability and ambiguity in the relationship between Christians and Muslims with monasteries being both a 'zone of contact' but also at times a 'zone of conflict'. Indeed as discussed in the last section, a model of a *martyr* Church is relevant to this period as well. As in recent years in places like Iraq and Syria, Christians living in the ninth century as a *dhimmi* community faced changes in the situation around them, sometimes sudden and perhaps even dramatic and catastrophic. Within just a few decades of Timothy's death a new Caliph had come to power that would bring in changes that would make life more difficult for the Church than it had been in the previous period.

In various contexts throughout history, including the ninth century as described in this thesis, Muslims have visited monasteries for diverse reasons, whether aesthetic, religious, or for pleasure. Even today, as detailed by one Western Benedictine monk who spent time in the Coptic monasteries of Egypt, 'many Muslims come to the monasteries' and some of those came 'in the evening' to receive exorcism from demonic possession. He explains these Muslims' rationale as they explained it to him:

They say that their own sheikhs do not deal with this kind of power, but only with the One God, so they appeal to the Christian monks instead. By this kind of explanation, they get the help they need, yet preserve a sense of their own religious integrity.⁵⁷⁰

A fascinating novel written by an Egyptian in 1996 is set at a Coptic monastery just after the Israeli-Arab war of 1967. Titled *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery*, author Bahaa' Taher wove a touching story of familial love, revenge and betrayal in the midst of the revolutionary changes in the broader Middle East. The monastery became a symbol and actuality of refuge and protection for a local Muslim who has unjustly been beaten. He then kills the leading official responsible, and now the official's wife, Safiyya, seeks her revenge. At one point, when some are seeking the murderer at the monastery another Muslim leader says 'Do you want me, Hinein, to turn on these monks, whose protection, according to the Qur'an, is enjoined by our Lord?' and later 'The monks are mentioned in the Holy

⁵⁷⁰Gruber (2002: 86) The idea of Muslims coming for peaceable reasons to the monasteries must also be balanced with the struggle at times in history of attacks occurring, whether due to religious persecution or because of power dynamics related to identity. For example in recent years there have been renewed problems for the Coptic monasteries in facing persecution from more fundamentalist Muslim movements.

Qur'an'.⁵⁷¹ As has been described in 5.2 in discussing passages in the Qur'an, revealed is an 'exceptional ambivalence' in the understanding of a contemporary Egyptian novelist towards the hospitality, protection and refuge represented by the Christian monastery. The monastery did represent a 'zone of contact' in the story.

One of the monasteries that continues to exist in Muslim lands today is Rabban Hormizd, located in Northern Iraq near Mosul, founded originally most likely by the East Syrian saint portrayed in *The History of Rabban Hormizd*. After coming under Chaldean administration in the mid-19th century, it was deserted in the 1960's with the remaining monks moving to a new monastery on the plain below.⁵⁷² Hope remains that as the Iraqi Church passes through this dark season in its history, the future could mean a strengthening and expansion of the monastic call in places like Rabban Hormizd and other monasteries.

In Malabar an initiative for a new East Syrian monastery began in 2006 with the groundbreaking and dedication at a location outside of Kottayam. Father Thomas Koonamakkal, the founder of Beit Aprem, Nazrani Dayira [The House of Ephrem, a Christian Monastery], in a personal conversation with me stated that the starting of this monastery was a conscious continuation of the history of previous monasteries in Southern India like Angamali, Kukigad, and Edapally.⁵⁷³ Renewal of East Syrian monasticism has begun there and continues.

The larger context for this monasticism is a renewal of the institution worldwide, in Christian traditions as diverse as the Greek Orthodox Church in places like Mt. Athos, the Russian Orthodox, the Coptic Church in Egypt, and a 'new monasticism' even among Protestants in countries like Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵⁷⁴ A growth and re-birth of monasticism has included in many places the dimension of intentional contacts and exchanges with other faiths. As has been argued in this research,

⁵⁷¹Taher (1996:101-102)

⁵⁷² I visited this monastery in Feb. 2014.

⁵⁷³ 13 Sept. 2010.

⁵⁷⁴ For more on the 'new monasticism' see Wilson-Hartgrove (2008).

many centuries earlier there were Muslims visiting monasteries in Mesopotamia, providing opportunity for some degree of witness encounter to the Christian faith. These interactions, often centred on these monasteries, provided signposts to a mutuality and hospitality of faith that at times have been overshadowed by more violent encounters through the centuries between Christians and Muslims.⁵⁷⁵ Though many of these monasteries are in ruins today or have disappeared, a handful still exist and provide places where Muslims still come for relaxation, prayer and even to have demons exorcised in ‘incubation rooms.’⁵⁷⁶

The institution and practice of Christian monasticism has endured in Islamic lands through almost fifteen centuries, albeit in a highly reduced form. In inter-faith relations today it is imperative to find new/old paradigms for strengthening dialogue and relationship. One of these possible paradigms could be the monastery as a signpost pointing to a mutuality of faith encounters. A modern Western monk likens the monastery to the inn of Luke 10:33, and portrays the monk as the host or inn-keeper. He writes ‘It is a place where everyone is gathered and welcomed...it is an inn for all pilgrims travelling lightly towards the Lord’s return.’⁵⁷⁷ The monastery as inn could be a possible ‘zone of contact’ with branches of the Muslim faith including the *Sufis*.

Monasteries throughout history have been places where there has been a ‘zone of contact’, though for many different activities and reasons. As Apostolov writes, ‘Christian-Muslim relations are socially constructed, and people can influence them,’ and raises a key question ‘in what direction are these relations moving, towards conflict or co-operation?’⁵⁷⁸ Relations between the world’s two largest faiths continue to face the question of what social constructions exist that can influence this future direction, and the monastery provides one of those continued constructs. The monastery provides a social space that opens up

⁵⁷⁵Perhaps the most dominant story told in inter-faith relations in Muslim lands, and often in Christian ones as well, concerns the Christian crusades of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

⁵⁷⁶See Baumer (2006), for reference to ‘incubation rooms’ and also Dalrymple (1997) and Gruber (2002) for continued visits by Muslims to monasteries.

⁵⁷⁷Boniface (1993:59)

⁵⁷⁸Apostolov (2004:177)

opportunities for encounters for co-presence and interlocking experiences that can reduce the 'zone of conflict' between the faiths.

There will continue to be 'zones of contact' as well as 'zones of conflict' between the two faiths. In the presence of these monasteries, whether ancient ones still in existence or newly developing ones, there can also be continued opportunities for encounter. Christian-Muslim relations will continue to experience the ambiguity and unpredictability they have always encountered but these monasteries can provide a 'zone of contact' needed in a common future. In the almost thirteen centuries since Patriarch Timothy died in 823, with the Church of the East at its largest geographic spread with perhaps its greatest number of monasteries in existence; to the present day where the Church has only a handful of monasteries left, it has been an extremely long decline and twilight. The reality of being a *martyr* Church continues to be a very real description today. Yet there are stirrings of renewal in East Syrian monasticism, recognizing its history and honouring the same longings that once in existence.

Could it be possible that through a re-birth and renewal of Christian monasticism, even in Islamic countries, new bridges could be built? What was seen in this thesis through this often neglected part of inter-faith history in earlier centuries was an alternative story that may provide a signpost to a needed alternative future, one that emphasizes 'zones of contact and exchange' rather than mutual exclusion and conflict. It certainly also carries many possibilities of ambiguity and unpredictably even as it did in the ninth century. The relating and learning from an alternative story in Christian-Muslim relations from the past may however lead in new directions to an alternative story in the future.

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