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RIKA GYSELEN (ED.)

REFLETS D'ÉPOQUES SASSANIDE ET POST-SASSANIDE (224-760 A.D.)

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THE SEAL OF THE CATHOLICOS BĀBŌY DISCOVERED? (FIFTH CENTURY IRAN)

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RÉSUMÉ

DÉCOUVERTE DU SCEAU DU CATHOLICOS BĀBŌY (IRAN, V^e SIÈCLE) ?

Depuis quelques années, à la faveur de l'étude des sceaux sassanides, de nombreux notables de cette période ont pu être identifiés, enrichissant singulièrement notre compréhension de la société perse. Dans cet article, nous examinons un sceau sassanide qui appartient à un personnage nommé en syriaque « Bābōy » d'après la légende. À cette époque, plusieurs membres du clergé syro-oriental sont appelés « Bābiy » ou « Bābōy », occupant différentes fonctions au sein de la hiérarchie ecclésiastique en diverses régions de l'empire. L'analyse de la datation du sceau, du contexte historique du motif et de l'inscription a conduit à une proposition d'identification précise du personnage : selon les résultats de cette recherche, il pourrait s'agir du catholicos de Séleucie-Ctésiphon au V^e siècle, Bābōy. Celui-ci dirigea la communauté chrétienne syro-orientale entre c. 457 et 484, sous les règnes d'Ohrmazd III et de Pērōz. Les sources historiographiques et hagiographiques syriaques et arabes chrétiennes ont développé plusieurs récits sur l'exécution de Bābōy : conspiration de notables de l'Église de Perse, déloyauté du catholicos envers le roi, cérémonies en faveur des martyrs chrétiens contestées par les autorités civiles, et une lettre adressée à l'empereur romain Zénon estampillée de son sceau personnel.

Mots clés

Sceau — Bābōy — catholicos de l'Église syro-orientale — période sassanide — le Bon Berger.

ABSTRACT

Since the time that researchers started paying serious attention to the study of Sasanian seals, and consequently identified many notables of this historical period, our understanding of Sasanian society has been enhanced. In this paper, we will examine a seal from the Sasanian period that probably belonged to someone named “Bābōy” in Syriac according to the inscription. During the Sasanian era, a number of the Eastern Church clergy named “Bābiy” and “Bābōy” held various positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in different regions of the Sasanian realm. In order to accurately identify this character, the dating of the seal, the historical context of the motif and its inscription have been examined. According to the results of this research, the closest individual to whom we can attribute this seal could be Bābōy, the fifth-century Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Bābōy led the East-Syrian community from c. 457 to 484, during the reigns of Ohrmazd III and Pērōz. Syriac and Christian Arabic historiography and hagiography have developed several accounts about the execution of Bābōy: conspiracy of some notables of the Church of Persia, dubious loyalty to the king, controversial ceremonies for Christian martyrs, and a letter sent to the Roman emperor Zeno which was stamped with Bābōy's personal seal.

Key-words

Seal — Bābōy — Catholicos of the East-Syrian Church — Sasanian period — the Good Shepherd.

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*INTRODUCTION*¹

Sasanian seals have attracted serious attention from researchers and with the decipherment of their inscriptions, our knowledge of the high-ranking officials and individuals of political, religious and military prominence,² and even of the administrative geography of this period, has been enhanced.³ Thanks to the sigillographic evidence, we now have relatively reliable information about some officials of the Sasanian Empire. Furthermore, this group of scholars and others have provided interesting sigillographic evidence regarding religious communities such as Jews and Christians,⁴ who were influential throughout the Sassanian Empire. Although archaeological and literary sources give lots of information on these minorities and their way of life in the Sasanian realm, so far only a very limited number of seals belonging to important historical figures associated with these minorities have been discovered. Obtaining material evidence of the existence of high-ranking individuals and religious leaders of these minorities can provide new perspectives on the action of such characters and new insights into historical and archaeological studies of this period. Due to the significance of this issue, in this paper, we will examine and describe a peculiar seal from the Sasanian period which was auctioned at Christie's. The inscription engraved on the seal indicates that it belonged to an individual named Bābōy. This name is well-known in Christian literary sources. Bābōy was the name of some of the leaders of the Eastern Church and Christian bishops in the Sasanian period.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SEAL AND ITS MOTIF

On December 8, 2005, during live auction No. 1583 at Christie's, an important jewel bearing the number 26 was auctioned.⁵ The ring, owned by an American private collection, was purchased in the 1980's and presented for sale at Christie's in 2005. The ring bezel, which has been dated to the fifth century, is 1.8 cm high and is made of banded agate. This bezel was later mounted on a gold ring.⁶ The scene depicted on the seal shows a beardless man carrying a ram on his shoulders while holding its legs. His face is engraved in profile and he looks to the left, but his body is depicted in frontal view. He is wearing a long knee-length tunic, pleated over the knee and fastened by a belt. The arms and legs are naked. The bezel bears a Syriac inscription (Fig. 1). This motif of a man carrying a sacrificial animal on his shoulders is well-known. Its oldest known examples can be found on Hittite reliefs from Zincirli Höyük and Karkemish⁷ (Fig. 4).

¹ We would like to thank Florence Jullien for her useful suggestions, Philippe Gignoux and Claudia Ciancaglini for their advice, and Željko Paša for sharing certain sources. Obviously, the authors are responsible for any shortcomings.

² See especially the studies of Gyselen 2001; Gignoux 1978 and 1980^a; Gyselen 1995, Gyselen 1999, Gyselen 2002 and Gyselen 2008; Gignoux / Gyselen 1982, Gignoux / Gyselen 1987; Lerner / Skjærvø 2006; Gignoux 1980^b.

³ Gyselen 1989; Gyselen 2019.

⁴ Lerner 1977; Shaked 1977; Gyselen 2006; Friedenberga 2009.

⁵ <https://www.christies.com/en/auction/ancient-jewelry-19613/> (Accessed, Jan 13, 2022).

⁶ https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-4617088?ldp_breadcrumb=back&intObjectID=4617088&from=salessummary&lid=1 (Accessed, Jan 13, 2022).

⁷ Klauser 1958, 27–28.



Fig. 1. The motif of the good shepherd on the seal auctioned at Christie's with a Syriac inscription (www.christies.com).

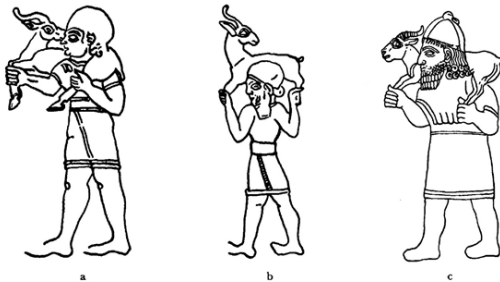


Fig. 4. Drawing of men carrying a sacrificial animal from Karkemish (a) and Zincirli Höyük (b/c) reliefs (Klauser 1958, p. 28, courtesy Sabrina Tatz, Franz Joseph Dölger-Institut).

This motif was later used in Greek art to depict Hermes as Hermes Kriophoros (lamb/ewe-bearer) or Moschophoros (calf-bearer). This imagery began in the Archaic period in Greece (550–480 B.C.) in the form of bronze statuettes, terracotta figurines and statues.⁸ But after Calamis introduced the Hermes that carried a ram on his shoulders, it became one of the most popular subjects for Greek sculptors⁹ (Fig. 5). This motif was also used by the Romans and they reproduced Kriophoros statues¹⁰ (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Hermes the Ram Bearer, No. 54 of the Archaeological Museum of Athens (Stroszeck 2004, p. 231, courtesy Prof. Barbro Santillo Frizell).



Fig. 6. The statue of the bearded Hermes Kriophoros, Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth n° 686. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Hermes the Ram Bearer, Roman Period, AM of Corinth, 202812.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hermes_the_Ram_Bearer,_Roman_Period,_AM_of_Corinth,_202812.jpg).

⁸ Westenholz 2000, p. 84–86.

⁹ Klauser 1958, p. 29–30.

¹⁰ Fullerton 1990, p. 165–167, p. 169–170.

Late in the third century, with the slight increase in the Christian populations in the Roman and Persian Empires, we see the appearance of this motif in early Christian art, which is specifically known in Christian literature as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd of this era appeared mostly on clay lamps and in funerary contexts. The motif can be seen in the mosaics of the cemetery under St Peter's Basilica, the wall paintings of the Tomb of the Aurelii, and the Catacombs of Via Latina, Domitilla, Priscilla and Callistus¹¹ (Fig. 7-8), etc.



Fig. 7. Ceiling paintings in the tomb of Callistus in Rome (3rd century AD). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Good shepherd 02b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_02b.jpg).



Fig. 8. Ceiling painting in the tomb of Priscilla in Rome (3rd century AD). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Good shepherd 01 small.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_01_small.jpg).

An iconography similar to that of the Good Shepherd is also attested on some of the seals that are dated to the Sasanian period. One of these seals is kept in a private collection; the information regarding this seal was published in 1982 by R. Gyselen and Ph. Gignoux. This seal has a Pahlavi inscription: *(š) 'hyn pn 'hy yzd 'n*, i.e. *šāhēn panāh yazdān*, “Šāhēn, protection of the gods” (Fig. 2); despite the plural form of the legend, it has been identified as Christian: R. Gyselen argues that the plural formulation could be due to a confusion of the lapidary, the final *-t* of singular *yzdt* read *-yn*.¹² Another seal belongs to the *Nayeri* collection (National Museum of Iran, No. 5740) and has an obscure inscription in Middle Persian¹³ (Fig. 3). With the discovery of Bābōy's seal, we have three attestations of this motif in Sasanian sigillography.



Fig. 2. The motif of the good shepherd on the impression of a Sasanian seal kept in a private collection (Gignoux / Gyselen 1982, 13.2/4.6).



Fig. 3. The motif of the good shepherd on the seal of the *Nayeri* collection (courtesy Dr. Jebrail Nokandeh, National Museum of Iran, No. 5740).

¹¹ Westenholtz 2000, p. 84–85; Marchioni 2018, p. 42, p. 46–47, p. 57, p. 65, p. 80, p. 85, p. 90–91, p. 100, p. 110, p. 114, p. 122.

¹² Gignoux / Gyselen 1982, p. 13.2, 4.6; repr. Gyselen 2006, p. 66–67, n° 110. “Il y a une certaine tendance à considérer que la formule ‘Confiance en les dieux’ pouvait être utilisée à la place de la formule ‘Confiance en Dieu’.” Une telle formule s’expliquerait par “une confusion graphique; en effet, écrite peu soigneusement, la lettre t dans le singulier *yzdt* ‘Dieu’ peut ressembler à *yn*. Le terme *yzdt* se lira alors *yzdyn* (...) On peut considérer qu’un lapicide analphabète qui grave des sceaux aussi bien pour des mazdéens que pour des chrétiens ait pu confondre *yzd'n* avec *yzdt*. (...) On peut en conclure que la présence de la formule ‘Confiance en les dieux’ sur un sceau n’est peut-être pas un critère absolu pour rejeter l’identité chrétienne de son possesseur”. Ibid., p. 29–30.

¹³ Personal correspondence with Rika Gyselen (M. E.).

The popularity of such a motif in early Christian art is related to a verse from the Gospel of John (10, 11¹⁴) where Jesus presents himself as “the good shepherd”; it can also be found in some parables.¹⁵ These allegorical descriptions from the biblical literature which present Jesus in the form of the “chief shepherd”¹⁶ refer to the Master’s leadership of the faithful.

THE SEAL INSCRIPTION

The inscription is not easy to read as some letters are not clearly formed.



Fig. 1A. Image and inscription on the impression of the seal (see: Fig. 1).

On the seal-impression, on the left side, the two first letters are clearly Syriac. It could also be true for the two next letters if we suppose that the *-w-* is not completely formed, and the *-y* is vertical: *bbwy*, “Bābōy”. On the right side: the letters are less easy to identify. The most probable assumption is the Syriac *rš*’, which literally means “leader/superior/head” (the word is usually used to signify a function of authority in the hierarchy of the Syriac Churches), and *’n*’, “I”, even if the first *’* has a ligature on the left – which could be due to a non-Christian scribe’s awkwardness.¹⁷ There is no doubt that we have a proper name in Syriac on the left, that of the owner, and perhaps his title on the right.

As a whole, the suggested reading for this seal (impression) is:

On the left: (syr.) *bbwy* On right: (syr.) *rš*’ *’n*’
Translation: “I Bābōy, (I am) the leader/the head”.

THE NAME “BĀBŌY” IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE SASANIAN PERIOD

The name Papa/Papai/Babū/Babai probably has Middle Persian origins,¹⁸ and has also been used by Jews and Christians in the Middle East. In addition, the name is still common among the Jewish and Syrian communities of Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Levant.¹⁹ In the Talmud, there is a reference to a

¹⁴ Cf. Ps. 23 (22), 1.

¹⁵ Parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, 4–7; parallel in Matt. 18, 12–14.

¹⁶ 1 Pet. 5, 4.

¹⁷ We express our gratitude to Claudia Ciancaglini and Philippe Gignoux who confirm the reading (personal correspondence C. J.). Left side Ph. Gignoux had first suggested the Pahlavi ideogram ŠPYR, *weh*, “good”: this adjective could have referred to the Good Shepherd the picture shows; but because of the letter missing after Middle Persian *-P-*, and the lack of connexion to the supposed Š- with the other letters, he has considered this reading uncertain. Moreover, seal inscriptions written in two different languages, Syriac / Pahlavi, are very uncommon; an example is the bilingual stamp seal n° Inv. 120260 in the British Museum, from fourth century Persia, which was made for a Christian owner. See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1967-0220-571. Bivar 1969, NA 1 and Gignoux 1977; Shaked was the first to have recognized the Syriac inscription: see Gignoux 1980^a, p. 312, n° III/8; Gyselen 2006, p. 43, n° 9.

¹⁸ Ph. Gignoux thinks that this name is a hypocoristic on the proper name *Bāb*, double of *Pāb(ag)*, Gignoux 1986, p. 53, n° 169; Gignoux / Jullien C. / Jullien F. 2009, p. 46, n° 78a.

¹⁹ Shavarebi 2019, p. 368.

Babylonian Amora named Rav Papa (c. 300–375 AD).²⁰ The Syriac synodical literature shows that the name was also quite popular among Christians and it specifically includes the names of some religious leaders. In these texts, many Christian priests (mostly high ranking) are called by different variants of the name (to identify these individuals, refer to Table 1). Three catholicos bore this name: Papa bar Aggai (d. 341), Bābōy (c. 457–484), Bābiy son of Ohrmazd (497–502/3). During all the Sasanian period, we can identify in the sources at our disposal 8 bishops, 4 priests, 1 abbot, and some laymen: 6 from Bēth-Huzāyē (including the province of Bēth-Mihraqāyē/Mihragān-qadag), 2 from Bēth-Garmai, 2 from Bēth-Aramāyē (Seleucia, Zabē), 1 from Media.²¹ In Syriac prosopography, we have other characters named Bābiy, especially monks; most of them were founders of monasteries and superiors (*ryš dayr*) in the Tūr ‘Abdīn (mount Izla) or in the surroundings of Hīra. Some bishops are also known, especially from the correspondence of the Catholicos Išo‘yahb III (649–659); Eliya bar Šinaya mentions in his *Chronography* the first attestation of a bishop named *bbw(y)*, Babū / Bābō, who succeeded Jacob of Nisibis around 338.²² Furthermore, laymen also bore this name, as we have observed in the acts of the East-Syrian synods. In the archaeological material, M. Moriggi noted a Bābiy, from an Aramaic inscription on a magic bowl.²³ Ph. Gignoux and R. Gyselen have identified several seal possessors named Babai.²⁴ The *Acts of Šarbil*, the high priest of Nebo and Bel in Edessa (d. 117), written in the mid-fourth century (after the first council of Nicaea), give an interesting detail: the name (*bby*) is borne by a woman, Šarbil’s sister.²⁵

We can notice that one of the variants, Bābōy/Babowai (*bbwy*²⁶), appears much less frequently than others. Little is known about one of these characters, a layman who signed one of the synodical letters of Mar Abba in 544. The Catholicos Bābōy is a more well-known figure in Syriac literature. According to ‘Amr ibn Mattā, he was originally a Zoroastrian from Tella (a magus by descent from Bar Hebraeus) and was married.²⁷ After converting to Christianity and rising through the ecclesiastical ranks, he probably assumed the position of catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon during the reign of Ohrmazd III (in 456 or 457), before the ascension of Pērōz (457–459). Sources do not agree about the religious policy of Pērōz, which is debated; the *Chronicle of Seert* tells of a persecution under his reign.²⁸ But despite his not so cordial relationship with the court of Pērōz, Bābōy retained the title until the end of the king’s reign.

It seems that his political allegiance was always questioned by the Sasanian monarch. Because of his Mazdean origin, his loyalty was highly suspect and he was considered a threat to the monarch.²⁹ He was even imprisoned for two years during one of the Roman-Sasanian conflicts.³⁰ The *History of Karkā d-Bēth-Slokh* also mentions that Bābōy held an annual commemoration for the martyrs of Karkā, who died during the persecution of Yazdgerd II (438–457). This action could hardly be considered a compromise.³¹

20 Shavarebi 2019, p. 374.

21 Chabot 1902, p. 654, p. 660, p. 666, p. 668–669, p. 677, p. 682–683, p. 685; Shavarebi 2019, p. 374.

22 Brooks 1910, p. 97–98.

23 *Incantation bowls*, Moriggi 2014, n° 19.

24 Gignoux / Gyselen 1982, p. 39 (4.3; 4.22); Gignoux 1986, p. 54, n° 176; Gignoux / Gyselen 1981, p. 206.

25 Ed. Cureton 1864, p. *mh*. 1.

26 *b’bwyh* in Bar Hebraeus, *EC*, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, p. 60–63, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 326–327. Bar Hebraeus, *Denḥa*, ed. Chabot 1898, syr. p. 93.

27 ‘Amr ibn Mattā, *Kitāb al-maḡdal*, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 36–37; Bar Hebraeus, *EC*, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, III, p. 61, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 326–327.

28 Ed. Scher 1911, II/1, p. 101 [9].

29 Gerō 1981, p. 38–40, p. 97–109.

30 Young 1972, p. 86.

31 Syr. ed. Bedjan 1891, *AMS* II, p. 531. Cf. Gerō 1981, p. 39–40.

Bābōy's authority was also contested within his clergy, especially by Barṣauma the metropolitan of Nisibis who probably did enjoy the trust of Pērōz, as S. Gerō has shown from Bar Hebraeus's *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* and the *Kitāb al-mağdal*.³² These dissents and squabbles generated intra-ecclesiastical divisions; Bābōy complained about the reforms introduced by Barṣauma, and tried to fight abuses, to regulate morality and to reaffirm clerical and catholical influence.³³ The focus on the defense of the institution of the catholicate has led later miaphysite authors to reduce the role of Barṣauma in the reform of Church governance and to implicate him to varying degrees in the murder of Bābōy.³⁴ The Syriac *Martyrdom of Babowai*, and the Arabic notice included in the *Asfār al-asrār* written by Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā al-Mawṣilī in the 14th century, recently edited by Ž. Paša, give an ambiguous portrait of Barṣauma who is accused of misusing his relationship with Pērōz and causing the Catholicos' death.³⁵ According to Ph. Wood, the brevity of this account, which presents him as a martyred catholicos of the Church, indicates that it was only his death that made him a suitable object of veneration.³⁶ In a letter sent to the Catholicos Acacius, the successor of Bābōy on the catholical throne, Barṣauma explained how he opposed Babōy by illegally gathering a synod and influencing the king to have the calumniated patriarch murdered.³⁷ The miaphysite authors Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē and Bar Hebraeus both consider Barṣauma to be his killer.³⁸ Furthermore, Bābōy was accused of having corresponded with the Roman emperor Zeno (r. 474–491), when tension increased on the western frontier.³⁹ The *Chronicle of Seert* and the *Martyrdom* (§ 23) report that the letter bore his seal, and they describe how the camp of Barṣauma intercepted it at Nisibis. In that letter, Bābōy complained to Zeno about the persecution of Christians in the empire and mentioned Pērōz and the Persian Empire with incriminating words.⁴⁰ As a result, Bābōy was executed for his actions at the end of Pērōz's reign on a charge of treachery. The king ordered him to be hanged on a gibbet outside Seleucia-Ctesiphon by the same finger that bore the pastoral ring which he had used to seal the letter.⁴¹ The author of the *Martyrdom* (§ 35), Ṣalībā and Bar Hebraeus report that he was crucified, attached to this finger.⁴²

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As discussed above, a number of East-Syrian clerics, especially from the late fifth to early seventh century, were referred to as Bābiy and Bābōy. These men held various positions in the Church hierarchy, from catholicos to priest, in many regions of the Sasanian Empire. Their names, official ecclesiastical

32 Ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, III, p. 61–65, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 326–327; 'Amr, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 35–37; cf. also Ṣalībā, *Book of Mysteries (Asfār al-asrār)*, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 17–19.

33 Ed. Chabot 1902, p. 302–306, syr. p. 55–56; p. 312, syr. p. 63. Cf. Brock 1985, p. 126–132.

34 Wood 2013, p. 12; p. 95–99.

35 *BHO* 126. Ed. syr. Bedjan 1891, *AMS* II, p. 631–634. Paša 2018, p. 499–525.

36 Wood 2013, p. 95–96 n. 6. Cf. the *Martyrdom of Babowai*, § 36: "His name was written among the martyrs", ed. Paša 2018, p. 514–515; Ṣalībā, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 19.

37 In the *Synodicon orientale*, ed. Chabot 1902, p. 534–535, syr. p. 527–529. On this affair, see Labourt 1904, p. 142–143 n. 6.

38 Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē in Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, Book XI, chapter 4, ed. and transl. Chabot 1899/1904, II, p. 413–417; Bar Hebraeus, *EC*, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, III, p. 73–75, 87, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 330–331, p. 334–335.

39 481 in the *Martyrdom* (§ 23); Greatrex / Lieu 2002, p. 49; Jackson Bonner 2020, p. 128.

40 Ed. Scher 1911, II/1, p. 99–102 [7–10]; parallels in 'Amr, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 36–37, and Ṣalībā, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 18. Paša 2018, p. 510, ar. p. 511.

41 Ed. Scher 1911, II/1, p. 102 [10]; 'Amr, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 36.

42 Ṣalībā, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 18–19; Bar Hebraeus, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, p. 65–66, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 326–327; Paša 2018, p. 510, ar. p. 511.

ranks, titles, and residential information are derived mainly from the collection of conciliar acts and canonical texts (such as letters, canons, statements, laws, etc.), compiled in the *Synodicon orientale* under the catholicate of Timothy I (780/799–823). These are the names of the bishops and representatives of the ecclesiastical jurisdictions who were present at the synods and confirmed their outcomes, or who thereafter adhered; they all approve the acts by adding their seal and signature. Other sources include historiographical material like chronicles and hagiographies (e.g., the *Martyrdom of Babowai, of Guiwarguis, of Yazdōy*⁴³). All in all, the sources related to this field of study are limited.⁴⁴ As a result, the names of certain Christian clergy may remain unknown to us.

But can we identify to which Bābōy this seal belongs? Can this seal be attributed to the known Bābōy-s, whose names are recorded in the sources of the Sasanian period?

The motif of a beardless young man known as the Good Shepherd, as a symbol of Jesus in early Christian art in the West and in areas of Roman influence, came to the attention of Christian converts at least from the late second century A.D.⁴⁵ But shortly after the fifth century, significant changes took place in the iconography of Jesus. Thus, the image of the humble Good Shepherd gradually evolved, later being portrayed in a similar way to the representation of the *decorum* surrounding the Roman emperor: a bearded priest in a golden chiton and a purple mantle draped on a shoulder, sitting on the throne with a supernatural halo of light above his head.⁴⁶ To put it concisely, the image of the Good Shepherd emerged late in the second century and declined in Christian art of the West in the first half of the fifth century.⁴⁷ But in the Sasanian territories, such a motif may have become common a little later than in the Roman domains. Although, the sigillographic evidence shows that the image of the Good Shepherd was not unknown in Iranian art of the Parthian period.⁴⁸ In the Syriac milieu, Ephrem the Syrian (d. c. 373) was one of the first authors to write on this theme, especially in his *Hymns on the Nativity*.⁴⁹ The motif has been applied to the representatives of Christ within the Christian community, *i.e.*, the catholical function *par excellence*. Some catholicoi are depicted as shepherds who took care of their flock: e.g., Simeon bar Šabba'ē in the fourth century, who refused to impose a heavy tax on the Christians and died as a martyr with a large part of his clergy (d. 340 under the persecution of Šābuhr II). In his *Martyrdom* (dated by the turn of the fifth century), we can read: “I [Simeon] give my blood to you [Jesus] for my flock” (§ 12); Simeon is praised as the “true shepherd and wise leader (*rš'*) who gives himself for his flock”, who loves his lambs, etc. (§ 9).⁵⁰ In the sixth century synods of the Church of the East, bishops are named “vigilant pastors of the reasonable sheep”;⁵¹ but the catholicos is the “father of the fathers and shepherd of the shepherds” (e.g., synod of Sabrišō' in 596).⁵² The Church is symbolically the sheepfold (in the Acts of Joseph, in 554).⁵³ But more than a sign of identity, the choice of the Good Shepherd theme could be a

43 *Martyrdom of Yazdōy*, ed. syr. Bedjan 1894, *AMS* IV, p. 201–207; ed. and tr. Jullien C. / Jullien F. 2021, p. 361–382. *Martyrdom of Guiwarguis*, ed. syr. Bedjan 1895², p. 416–571.

44 Gerō 1981, p. 1–13.

45 Finney 1994, p. 115–116.

46 Biernacki / Klenina 2016, p. 374–376.

47 Ramsey 1983, p. 375; Finney 1994, p. 115.

48 Bader 1996, p. 399, p. 455, fig. 50.

49 E.g. Hymn 3:15; see Murray 1975, p. 159–204.

50 *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabba'ē*, ed. Smith 2014, p. 24, syr. p. 25; p. 20, syr. p. 21.

51 See in the Acts of the synod of Ezekiel (576), Chabot 1902, p. 371, syr. p. 112; p. 373, syr. p. 114; p. 388, syr. p. 129.

52 An expression made according to the Pahlavi formulation, as “king of kings” and “*mowbedan mowbed*”. Chabot 1902, p. 456, syr. p. 196.

53 Acts of Mar Abba Catholicos (544), Chabot 1902, p. 346, syr. p. 90; Acts of Joseph Catholicos (554): p. 355, syr. p. 97; p. 363, syr. p. 106; p. 371, syr. p. 112; Acts of Išō' yahb I Catholicos (585): p. 454, syr. p. 195.

symbol of integration: in addition to its Christian signification, this well-known motif, long widespread in a cultural pagan milieu, might have been used as a means of acculturation. It was indeed understood by the Persians as a sign of protection and authority and thus could have been adopted with a double meaning by Christians.⁵⁴ Such practices would highlight our understanding of cultural interaction between these diverse communities within the empire.

The position of the catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was not merely that of a canon, but a state sponsored title.⁵⁵ S. McDonough and then R. Payne have shown that Mazdean Power could tolerate Christian expansion in exchange for compensation thereby helping to maintain coexistence and sharing of space: bishops tacitly agreed to cooperate with the Power in order to maintain internal order.⁵⁶ This tacit pact implied a ban on any opposition to the king's authority but also it was an interference by the Sasanian elites in the organization of the Church of Persia. The king presided over the "improvement" – that is to say the validation – of each newly elected patriarch, and could even appoint him – even against the Persian Church's candidate –, as was the case on several occasions when he wished to reward his Christian physicians.⁵⁷ Furthermore, it does not seem that every individual with any given ecclesiastical rank could use the title of "leader", "chief" or "head" (in the case of a Syriac reading of the legend on the seal), unless this had been delegated to him.⁵⁸

Christianity received official recognition by the Sasanian dynasty in 410 when a synod attended by all the empire's bishops, regulated the structure of the Church and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Yazdgerd I proclaimed a state decree before the synod and gave his authorization for the synod to be held.⁵⁹ Therefore, usage of the Good Shepherd motif, which probably emerged in the context of persecutions under Šābuhr II in the mid-fourth century, should have been reinforced after the recognition of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire in 410 AD, and also after that date, during the sporadic prosecutions in the fifth and sixth centuries. In Rome, with the rise of the Church, there was no longer any need for the existence of a shepherd who heroically defended the flock against threats.⁶⁰ But the recognition of Christianity and the need to protect the fledgling Christian community from an often-coercive policy (even under the reign of Yazdgerd I)⁶¹ in the Sasanian Empire, probably led to the appearance of that image. Thus, it seems that the motif on the seal should be dated between the early fifth century and the sixth century. This dating approximately coincides with the presence of Christian religious leaders for whom the names Bābiy and Bābōy are recorded in Christian religious texts.

Epigraphical study of the seal may also help in clarifying the issue. Since the writing of the names Bābō, Bābōy and Bābiy (*bbw/bbwy/bby*) was different in Syriac, we can identify the owner as someone

⁵⁴ This was also the case for the ancient Mesopotamian motif of the lion tamer, assimilated by the Christians in the Sasanian period with Daniel in the lions' den (Dn 6), and especially used on their seals as a symbol of resurrection: Lerner 1977, p. 22–26; Gyselen 2006, p. 35.

⁵⁵ Young 1972, p. 48–49.

⁵⁶ McDonough 2008^b, p. 87–92; McDonough 2011, p. 303–305; Payne 2015.

⁵⁷ Cf. Catholicos Eliša under Kawād I whose election led to a schism from 524 to 537; Joseph under Khusrō I; Grigor of Kaškar chosen by Khusrō II in spite of protests of the East-Syrian bishops. Labourt 1904, p. 159–162, p. 222; Jullien C. 2009, p. 119–131; Jullien C. 2021, p. 11–32. Another example: the control of the Church by civil Authorities is clearly expressed in the acts of the synod of the Catholicos Bābiy (497): all the bishops of the empire gathered "by the command of the king of kings Zāmāsp" (496-498) who sent them an imperial letter (*sqr*) and imposed the agenda of the meeting (about reform in the matter of marriage and procreation of children). Chabot 1902, p. 311–312, syr. p. 62–63.

⁵⁸ Cf. Young 1972, p. 49, p. 81–88.

⁵⁹ Chabot 1902, p. 256, syr. p. 19 and n. 3; Young 1972, p. 43–57, p. 69–73.

⁶⁰ Ramsey 1983, p. 377.

⁶¹ Boyce 1979, p. 121; McDonough 2008^a, p. 129–134; Payne 2015, p. 44–45; Patterson 2017, p. 190; Jullien C. 2022. Herman 2014.

named “Bābōy” as is clearly stated on the seal. Also, the possible use of the Syriac word *ršʿ*, “leader/chief/head”, by the owner would indicate his prominent position. In Christian hierarchy, it refers to someone who has a high authority, such as the abbot, superior of a monastery (*ršʿ dyrʿ*). We can consider its general definition of “bishop”, who usually presided over an ecclesiastical jurisdiction: the ambassador and bishop Marūtha of Maypherqaṭ is also called *ršʿ*, like all other bishops, in the *Acts* of the East-Syrian Church.⁶² But *ršʿ* in its absolute sense is fundamentally a usual title for the catholicos: in 410, Ishaq is presented as “Mar Ishaq, bishop of Seleucia and Ctesiphon and Catholicos (and) head of the bishops (*ršʿ d-ʿpysqwp*), [...] the first to open his mouth as the head (*ršʿ*) of his members”.⁶³ In the canon XVII, the patriarch is the “father and head (*ršʿ*), the bishop and metropolitan, (and) catholicos and head of the bishops” of all the Church,⁶⁴ the “head (*ršʿ*) over all Christians in the East”.⁶⁵ In Syriac literature, the same designation is made for the *mowbedān mowbed* (*ršʿ dmgwšʿ*), the head of the magi.⁶⁶ One might expect the symbol of the cross on a such a seal, as in the case of the famous ring of the ‘melkite’ great (*wuzurg*) catholicos in the region (*kust*) of Ardān and Balāsagān, which would go back to the Sasanian period.⁶⁷ But the image of the good shepherd/Christ has the same meaning of salvation as the symbol of the cross. In the acts of the synods of the Church of the East, the catholicos is often assimilated to Christ as the good shepherd, and this symbolic motif was clear for the Christians.

According to the available evidence regarding the seal, we can consider a date between the early fifth to the mid-sixth century. As the inscription is most likely written in Syriac (*i.e.*, the language of the Christian community), this artifact is undoubtedly Christian. The most probable option in determining the owner of this seal could be Bābōy, Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who led the Christian community of the Persian Empire from the mid-fifth century to the time of his execution in 484. If we consider the function of this character, and the role of his seal stamped on an incriminating letter – which was one of the reasons for his death –, this seal should be then an exceptional discovery.

Table 1. A list of characters identified as Papa, Papai, Bābō, Bābiy and Bābōy from the 3rd century to the mid-7th century A.D.

Name Syriac / Middle Persian	Rank	City / Region	Date
Babū (<i>bbw</i>) / Bābō ⁶⁸	bishop	Nisibis	<i>post</i> 338
Papā (<i>pp</i>) ⁶⁹	catholicos	Seleucia-Ctesiphon	d. 341
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy, sister of the martyr Šarbil ⁷⁰	laywoman	Edessa	mid-4 th century
Papā (<i>pp</i>), brother of bishop ʿAbdā from Ohrmazd-Ardašīr ⁷¹	subdeacon	Fārs	420

62 Chabot 1902, p. 255, syr. p. 18; p. 270, syr. p. 31.

63 Chabot 1902, p. 259, syr. p. 20; p. 260, syr. p. 21.

64 Chabot 1902, p. 269, syr. p. 30.

65 Chabot 1902, p. 261, syr. p. 21.

66 *E.g.* in the *Martyrdom of Yazd-panāh*, § 5, ed. Jullien F. 2015, p. 80, syr. p. 79.

67 Preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, N° 1972.1317.48, published by Gignoux and Gyselen, then studied by Fiey. Gignoux 1978, p. 64; Gignoux 1980^a, p. 305–306; Gyselen 1993, p. 154, Fig. 60.13, 7.5; Fiey 1995, p. 6–9. Kasumova 1991, p. 23–32. The legend is inscribed in Pahlavi.

68 He succeeded Jacob of Nisibis near 338. Eliya bar Šinaya, *Chronography*, ed. syr. Brooks 1910, p. 97–98.

69 *Synodicon orientale*, ed. Chabot 1902, p. 289–291, p. 296, syr. p. 46–47, p. 51.

70 *Acts of Šarbil*, the high priest of Nebo and Bel in Edessa (d. 117), ed. Cureton 1864, p. *mh.1*.

Babowai (<i>bbwy</i> , <i>b'bwyh</i>) / Bāböy ⁷²	catholicos	Seleucia-Ctesiphon	c. 457–484
Papā (<i>pp</i>) ⁷³	bishop	Maḥozē d-Arēwān (in Bēth-Garmai)	486
Papā (<i>pp</i>) ⁷⁴	bishop	Bēth-Lapaṭ (Gundešābuhr)	486
Papai (<i>ppy</i>) ⁷⁵	bishop	Šuš/Susa	497
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy ⁷⁶	bishop	Media	497
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy ⁷⁷	catholicos	Seleucia-Ctesiphon	497–502/3
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy, son of Māh-Anōš ⁷⁸	layman	between Bēth-Aramāyē and Bēth-Huzāyē	between 5 th –7 th century
Babowai (<i>bbwy</i>) / Bāböy, son of 'Ada ⁷⁹	layman	Ohrmazd-Ardašīr	544
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy, father of Abraham ⁸⁰	layman	Šuštar	544
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy ⁸¹	priest	Seleucia (Veh-Ardašīr)	544
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy, son of Pusiy ⁸²	layman	Bēth-Lapaṭ	544
Papā (<i>pp</i>) ⁸³	priest	church of Bēth-Mar Abraham	544
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy the Great ⁸⁴	abbot	Great Monastery on Mount Izla	c. 551–628
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy the Little, a disciple of Abraham of Kaškar ⁸⁵	monk	Nisibis, Mount Izla	c. 560–630

71 Bedjan 1894, *AMS* IV, p. 250, p. 253.

72 Chabot 1902, p. 532, p. 534, syr. p. 526, p. 528; 'Amr ibn Mattā, *Kitāb al-maḡdal*, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 36–37; Šalībā, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 18; Bar Hebraeus, *EC*, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, p. 60–63, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 326–327. *Book of the Bee*, ed. Budge 1886, 117, syr. p. *qlb*. Cf. *Chronicle of Seert*, ed. Scher 1911, II/1, p. 99 [7]–102 [10].

73 Chabot 1902, p. 299, p. 307, syr. p. 53, p. 60.

74 Chabot 1902, p. 300, p. 306, p. 314, syr. p. 53, p. 59, p. 65.

75 Chabot 1902, p. 311, syr. p. 63.

76 Chabot 1902, p. 310, p. 311, p. 316, syr. p. 62, p. 67.

77 Chabot 1902, p. 310–315, syr. p. 62–65. 'Amr ibn Mattā, *Kitāb al-maḡdal*, ed. Gismondi 1899, p. 40–41; Šalībā, ed. Gismondi 1897, p. 21–22; Bar Hebraeus, *EC*, ed. Abbeloos / Lamy 1872, p. 78–81, ed. Wilmshurst 2016, p. 332–333; *Book of the Bee*, ed. Budge 1886, p. 117, syr. *qlb*. 'Onithā on the East-Syrian catholicoi, ed. Assemani 1721, p. 389 n. II.

78 *Incantation bowls*, Moriggi 2014, n° 19. As M. Moriggi pointed out, the use of magic bowls more or less ceased at the beginning of the Islamic period.

79 Chabot 1902, p. 332, syr. p. 80.

80 Chabot 1902, p. 332, syr. p. 80.

81 Chabot 1902, p. 328, syr. p. 76.

82 Chabot 1902, p. 331, syr. p. 79.

83 Chabot 1902, p. 331, syr. p. 79.

84 E.g., *Martyrdom of Guiwarguis*, ed. syr. Bedjan 1895², p. 416, p. 570. Išō'yahb III, *Correspondence*, ed. Duval, 1904/1905, p. 100, syr. p. 133. *Martyrdom of Yazdōy*, ed. syr. Bedjan 1894, *AMS* IV, p. 201. *Liber de unione*, ed. Vaschalde 1915. *Book of the founders*, ed. Chabot 1896, p. 22, syr. p. 25, § 39. *The Book of Governors*, ed. Budge 1893, I, p. 26ss; II, p. 46ss. *Chronicon anonymum*, ed. Guidi 1903, p. 21–23, syr. p. 24–25. *History of Babai of Nisibis*, ed. Nau 1918/1919, p. 169, syr. p. 163. Cf. *Chronicle of Seert*, ed. Scher 1919, II/2, p. 530 [210]–532 [212].

85 He established a monastery on Mount Izla at the beginning of the seventh century. E.g., *Book of the founders*, ed. Chabot 1896, p. 11, § 17; *Chronicon anonymum*, ed. Guidi 1903, p. 22–24, p. 28; *History of Babai of Nisibis*, ed. Nau 1918/1919, p. 171–172, syr. p. 166–168.

Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy ⁸⁶	bishop	Bürzēn (probably north of Bēth-Garmai)	576
Bābai (<i>b'by</i>) / Bābiy ⁸⁷	bishop	Zābē (between Seleucia and Kaškar on the Tigris)	576
Papā (<i>pp</i>) ⁸⁸	bishop	Bēth-Mihraqāyē (Mihragān-qadag)	576 and 585
Bābai (<i>b'by</i>) / Bābiy, the father of Guiwarguis the martyr ⁸⁹	laymen, <i>ōstāndār</i>	Nisibis	6 th century
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy the Armenian ⁹⁰	bishop	Nineveh	6 th century
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy the Scribe ⁹¹	monk	Monastery of Bēth-Ḥalē near Ḥīra	c. 600
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy, son of Yonān ⁹²	monk	Great Monastery on Mount Izla	c. 600
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy ⁹³	bishop	<i>unknown</i>	c. 640
Babai (<i>bby</i>) / Bābiy the Persian ⁹⁴	monk	Bēth-Ḥalē near Ḥīra	c. 650
Babai / Bābiy (<i>b'pydy</i>), owners of seals ⁹⁵	laymen	Sasanian Empire	3 rd –7 th century

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90 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, ed. and transl. Chabot 1899/1904, syr. p. 494a.

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