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CHAPTER FIVE

FORMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE  
AND SYRIAC MONASTICISM

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*Florence Jullien*

in D. King (ed.), *The Syriac World*, Cambridge, ed. Routledge, 2019, p. 88-104.

In the Syriac milieu, the practical ways that developed for living out the religious life came in several forms (thematic bibliography in Jullien 2010: 305–32). There are few traditions that can claim such a variety of forms. Some, such as stylitism, have become famous for their spectacular and exaggerated outward appearance and through its exemplary characters. Monastic stories, canonical regulations, historiography, or hagiographies all reflect this situation. If we attempt to form a typology, we may identify four major strands: the pre-monastic *q<sup>ē</sup>yama* movement that was specific to the Syriac community; the various forms of solitary life (anchoritism); semi-anchoritism; and cœnobitism. It should however be noted that these last two models, in every nuance in which they were expressed, developed synchronically rather than according to any strictly chronological evolution.

Over the last twenty years, interest in the history of monasticism has been on the increase, thanks especially to archaeological discoveries in the Arabo-Persian gulf region (Steve 2003; Calvet 1998; Salles 2011) and in Iraq (Déroche 2013). Up until this time, following the work of Paul Bedjan, E.A.W. Budge, J.-B. Chabot, and Alphonse Mingana, researchers had focused above all on editing texts. When studies as such were carried out, they tended to deal with the

very earliest period of the monastic movement and the origins of asceticism, such as Arthur Vööbus's magisterial *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, published in three volumes (1958, 1960, 1988). However, it ought to be noted that these studies almost always concerned themselves with certain specific regions of northern Mesopotamia (especially the areas around Nisibis and Mosul) and with certain individuals renowned for their holiness. Vööbus's approach is instructive because it takes into account the types of asceticism that characterise earliest Christianity in its context, making especial use of data from unedited manuscripts. But it must be admitted that within this approach the institutional dimension of monasticism does predominate, while little attention is directed towards the margins, towards inter-religious controversies, and towards daily life within the monasteries. His method further depends upon exclusive categorisations.

Following the work of Antoine Guillaumont (1978, 1979), and also of Peter Brown on the figure of the holy man, more recent studies have placed an emphasis upon the importance of contextualisation, often of a comparativist type, and also upon the anthropological dimensions of monasticism, the economic conditions of its development, the place of monks within wider social life, and their investment in the theological debates and in the diffusion of knowledge (e.g. Jullien 2008; Villagomez 1998; Escolan 1999; Becker 2006; Wood 2013).

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## **Traditions of origins**

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The Syriac tradition itself attributes the first monastic foundations to two ascetic figures. The first is Mār Māri, who was considered to have been one of Christ's seventy disciples and was said to have built 365 churches and convents during his missionary journeys throughout the Sasanian Empire (Jullien and Jullien 2003). Thus, the institution of monasticism was projected back into the apostolic age. The second figure is Mār Awgin (Eugenius), who in fourth-century Syria and Mesopotamia was reckoned to have been the initiator of the monastic life. He gathered followers and imitators who in turn constructed monasteries across these territories. However, it

must be stressed that the sources for the ‘Eugenian cycle’ are late (his biography has been transmitted to us in a hagiographic account dating to the very end of the ninth century, Bedjan 1892: 376–480) and imbued with historiographic reconstructions borrowed from the lives of other ascetics, in particular Abraham of Kaškar, founder of a wide-ranging reform of the monastic life and therefore known as ‘the Father of the Eastern monks’ (Jullien 2008a, 2008b).

The question of the initial institution of monasticism in the Syriac world and of its relationship with Egypt has long been raised on account of the direct connection, established by monastic historiographers, with the Mesopotamian anchoritic current that had developed in the deserts bordering the Nile valley: the pilgrimage to the sources of monasticism in Thebes functioned as a rite of passage, a formative and character-building experience, and became a recurring theme in Syriac hagiographical literature. Beyond the anachronisms and the traditional constructions, we must question the mythographic aspects of this ‘trip to Egypt’ and the various topoi that are attached to it, in view of the fact that forms of the monastic life appeared contemporaneously in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (Jullien 2009).

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## **The pre-monastic qeyama movement**

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The writings of Ephrem the Syrian give evidence for the existence of secular ascetics, distinct from monks, who lived a form of life which has been called ‘pre-monastic’ (Beck 1958; Vööbus 1959): the benay and benat qeyama, ‘sons and daughters of the Covenant’, or ‘members of the Order’. The Syriac term qeyama evokes the idea of a close-knit group or fraternity;<sup>1</sup> etymologically it actually refers to ‘a standing position’ (which is the position, par excellence, for prayer), but also to the resurrection. The term benay qeyama does not imply at all the notion of a withdrawal to the desert (in the mountains or in caves) as would become the case a few years later within the monastic current properly so-called, especially under the influence of the ascetic literature of the Fathers of Egypt which spread across the Syriac world from the fourth century. Rather, these lay people were committed to a life of celibacy and were attached to a

parish in which they ensured the continuity of the liturgy and in particular the recitation of the offices; but their main tasks consisted firstly in the instruction of the faithful, a training that was conducted under the close supervision of the hierarchical authority (Pierre 2010; Macina 1999), and secondly in providing assistance to the poor and sick and visiting prisoners. Their service was thus exercised right in the midst of the church community.

The Persian sage Aphrahat, from northern Mesopotamia, was one of the first to describe the special status of the *benay* and *benat qeyama*, in his *Demonstrations* dated to 337. The author distinguishes them from others whom he calls ‘sons of our faith’, i.e. the regular faithful.<sup>2</sup> They used to gather in small communities around the church they served. Aphrahat mentions that in his day there were mixed groups of consecrated lay men and women, although his own preference was to have them separated into two communities (Pierre 1988: 385–6, 375). A century later in his canons, Rabbula bishop of Edessa prohibited *benay qeyama* from living with women, allowing visits only by close relatives (Vööbus 1960b: 36). The final commitment was marked by vows of voluntary renunciation, in particular of chastity. Asceticism and privation (especially fasting) remained a daily feature of their life: Rabbula recommends that members ought not to eat meat or drink wine, excepting the sick and infirm. Subsequently, these brothers were allowed to eat with the monks whenever they were staying in a monastery (Vööbus 1960b: 138, canon 3). Their conduct should always remain an example for the Christian community. It is possible to relate the *benay qeyama* to the institution, known in the Byzantine context, of clerics known as *kanonikos*: both groups consisted of minor staff in the Church, lay people committed to the service of the brothers (Macina 1999).

This movement was particularly well established in Babylonia and in areas to the east of the Tigris: the martyr narratives relate the lives of certain women who shared a common life and played the role of assistants to the deacons.<sup>3</sup> The system lasted until the end of the Sasanian era, since there are traces of it in Syriac texts of the sixth century such as the *Life of Catholicos Mār Abba* (Jullien 2015: 5–9; Fiey 1965b: 281–306).

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## Iḥidayutha and the forms of the solitary life

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In his *Treatise on the Solitude of the Weeks*, the ascetic author Dadīšō‘ Qaṭrāyā (d. about 690) provides a catalogue of the various forms of religious life practised in his day, as well as those from the past. Besides the benay qeyama, he mentions monks (dayraya) and solitaires (iḥidaya), among whom he distinguishes, in order: beginners (šarwaye), who live in monasteries and are subject to the community life; solitaires of the cells (iḥidaya qelaya), who keep silence for one week; those who keep silence for seven weeks and who fast strictly for several periods of the year; and the lonely who live in the desert ‘separated from all community’. He adds to these the gyrovagues or itinerants (metkarkane), who have no attachment to any monastery, and solitary anchorites (nukrayata, from the Greek anachôrêtês), whose conduct is qualified as ‘superior, laboured and perfect’ (Mingana 1934: 102, trans. 78; Fauchon 2010; Brock 1999–2000: 93–4). Each wears a tonsure according to his status, the smallest being carried by members of the Order (qeyama), the largest by the solitaires. For Dadīšō‘, what distinguished the monks from the solitaires was above all their lifestyle and their environment: the first had chosen the communal life, often worked outside the monasteries, and practiced hospitality, ‘serving with zeal all who come by, men and women of every condition’; the second was more specifically isolated from the civilian world. Among Syriac authors, there were several terms for describing monks, well summarised by C. Fauchon (2010: 47–9). The most common is qaddīša, ‘holy man/woman’, which originally also signified ‘continent’, and aḥa, ‘brother’; we also find ‘amīla, for those who practised ascetic exercises; makkīka, that is the ‘humble ones’, meaning those who carried out prostrations; the mourners, abīla; and the people of the desert, madbraya. The Syriac term iḥidaya refers to the anchorite and to the solitary (etymologically ḥad – monos in Greek – refers to the concept of uniqueness). In our sources, the iḥidaya was first of all unified in his being and in his heart as was the Christ, and then by extension he is the one who lives alone, isolated, who has made the choice of celibacy. For Syriac authors until the fourth century, this ideal of detachment and purity of heart by means of asceticism is offered to every Christian. Such a

choice for asceticism within a secular environment brings about behavioural transformations. Syriac hagiographic narratives often depict particularly committed Christians as prototypical figures, sometimes converted from paganism or Zoroastrianism (in the Sasanian Empire): after their baptism, they decide to adopt a new lifestyle, often a very harsh one, answering to the requirements of their zeal. Mār Abba, the future catholicos of the Eastern Church in the sixth century, while still yet a neophyte, was especially noted for his repeated vigils and fasts. At Karkā d-Bēth Slokh (modern Kirkuk), east of the Tigris, Šīrēn lived a form of religious life in her own home, imposing upon herself a regime that she regulated without the knowledge of her Zoroastrian parents, but also without specific commitment or special relationship with the local clergy. This emphasises above all the significance of individual initiative in this area. The earliest liturgical and canonical texts of Syrian Christianity reflect the importance of encratite influence (from the Greek *enkratēs*, ‘continent’) in fervent Christian circles. This common early Christian tradition was connected with Tatian, a disciple of Justin (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4, 28–9; Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 46), and was condemned repeatedly in the Byzantine Empire (in 382 and 428) due to its opposition to marriage. Throughout the Syriac regions, celibacy was from a very early stage regarded as a prerequisite for access to baptism (Brock 1973: 7–8). Several former hagiographic narratives depict the breaking off of conjugal relations when a new convert adopts a life of austerity. The *Acts of Thomas*, written in Osroene early in the third century, bears the mark of this: the apostle foils the wedding (§4–16) and breaks marriages (§82–170). Such encratite tendencies, together with Judeo-Christian baptist sects and Manichean communities, readily testify how these ideas spread and penetrated deep into the regions outside of Syria, especially Mesopotamia and Persia (Cirillo 1986: 133–7).

It was only later, thanks to the development of monasticism, that the term *iḥidaya* ended up being primarily associated with solitaries leading the life of a hermit or semi-anchorite (*yḥydy*) and became equivalent to the Greek word *monachos*, ‘monk’ (Guillaumont 1969a: 35; Brock 1985: 114–5; AbouZayd 1993: 269–72; 318–9). Solitaries stand out as ‘many different ladders for ascending to heaven’, to use the words of the fifth-century ecclesiastical historian

Theodoret of Cyrus, who mentions several such people within the Syro-Mesopotamian region: those who live in tents, huts, or caves or who just expose their bodies to the open air; those recluses (ḥbyš') who refuse any contact with the people, and those who reveal themselves to the gaze of all (*Historia Philotheos* 27, 1, Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1979: 216–9). The great diversity of ascetic practices adopted by the solitaries testifies to the wealth of Syriac anchoritism. It is not here a question of monasticism properly so-called, but of particular forms of the religious life.

## **Voluntary confinement and its extreme manifestations**

The most extreme of these ways of life was no doubt voluntary confinement, which could take on various different aspects. The lifestyle could be realised either inside a monastery or in close relation to one, in a nearby tower for example, and the remains of these buildings are still numerous in the mountains north of Nisibis. In the fourth century, Abraham of Qidoun lived as a recluse of this type in a small room in Edessa in Osrhoene; he had under his charge his niece Mary, an orphan he had welcomed and who lived in an adjoining room. He introduced her to the monastic life through the little window that separated their living quarters (Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1987: 29; Jullien 2010: 83 n.105). Huts without any light are often mentioned in the sources; in this period, for example, there was Eusebius of Tell 'Ada (Teleda for Greek writers), who never went out, spoke to no one, but still managed by his influence to export his way of life throughout a whole network of people (*Historia Philotheos* 4, 3–4, Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1977: 294–7). 'Stationaries', who chose to remain in a standing position for years, also participated in this sort of reclusive lifestyle. Besides those who retreated into tombs (*Historia Philotheos* 9, 3; 12, 2, Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1977: 410–3; 462–3), we find cases of people walling themselves in but open to the sky, for example Eusebius of Asikha (in the north of the region of Cyrus) who lived in the centre of a small open-air enclosure (*hypaiethros*), the door of which he sealed with a stone (18, 1–2, Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1979: 52–5).



Among these forms of confinement, special mention should be made of the stylites, both men and women, and of dendrites (solitaries who chose to isolate themselves in the branches of a tree or the cavity of a hollow trunk), two aspects of a single form of life lived between heaven and earth and which developed specifically in northern Syria. The tree is seen as a symbol, that of the cross of Christ considered as the tree of life; this explains the well-developed literary motif of the peaceful martyrdom of these hermits who were attached to trees, as a form of bloodless crucifixion (Charalampidis 1997: 141; Smith 2009). The Syrian Orthodox Church historian John of Ephesus mentions the example of a hermit named Maron who lived eleven years in the trunk of a tree at the end of the fourth century (Lives of the Eastern Saints, Brooks 1923: 56–9).<sup>4</sup> The stylite's column, which could sometimes be occupied for periods of time by the brothers of the same monastery in turn, was primarily a place of isolation, and the ascetic practices of stylitism remained those of the recluse (Callot and Gatier 2004 574; on female stylites, Delehayé 1908; Vööbus 1960a: 273–5). The best known of them was undoubtedly Simeon the Elder, who gradually increased the drums of his column until reaching a height of 18 m, the better to escape the public. This spectacular form of life, which specifically developed in the Antiochene, paradoxically became representative of all solitary lifestyles, and the term 'stylite' came to designate, from the eighth century, any kind of hermit or recluse in Syria and Mesopotamia (Callot and Gatier 2004: 586). Exposed to outward view as the very model of monastic heroism, this kind of recluse could induce pilgrimages, as did Simeon the Younger in the sixth century: the construction of a large monastery around his column, and buildings to accommodate pilgrims on the Wondrous Mountain in the hinterland of Antioch, was accomplished within his lifetime.

## **Monastic wanderings**

The continuous movements of wandering solitaries, known as gyrovagues and mendicants (mtrkn'), may be considered in itself as a form of asceticism (Guillaumont 1969a, 1979). Among them, those that Greek texts call boskoi (shepherds) and that were found throughout the

area from Egypt to Syria-Mesopotamia (Špidlik and Tenace 1999: 248), were characterised by their preference for the outdoor life and for their willingness to consume only plants and wild fruits in their natural state, so that they might commune with creation as if it was the garden of Eden. In the fourth century Ja‘qub, before he became bishop of Nisibis, had adopted this form of rough life (Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*, 1, 2). On several occasions, Ephrem speaks highly of its merits. These mendicants practised *xeniteia* (being a stranger in the world), a complete detachment favoured by their continual wanderings, a sort of mental reclusion (Fauchon 2012). This lifestyle of wandering was nonetheless often condemned by church authorities because of its excesses. The control exercised by the authorities upon these practises may be explained on account of the strong influence that Messalianism exerted upon Syriac monasticism, whose initial current came from northern Syria and which was widely spread around Antioch and Upper Mesopotamia in the second half of the fourth century, according to the testimony of Ephrem and Epiphanius of Salamis. Condemned by imperial law in 428, and again in 431, and expelled from the Roman Empire, the Messalians reached the Sasanian Empire. Right up until the seventh century, the great success of this movement was a significant challenge for East Syrian monasticism. Those who called themselves *pneumatikoi* (spiritual ones) roamed towns and villages preaching and proclaiming contempt for the hierarchy and the sacraments (Caner 2002; Escolan 1999: 91–124; Guillaumont 1980). Renouncing all possessions, they lived by begging and devoted all their time, as they claimed, to prayer (whence the nickname that was given to them – the root *šly* meaning ‘to pray’) to the detriment of any work. The East Syrian synods challenged their spiritual mysticism and accused their followers of impersonating monks (they are ‘clothed in a counterfeit habit of ascetics and members of religious orders’) and of wandering with women, the cause of numerous scandals. For monks, to follow a mendicant life was forbidden without the authorisation of the local bishop (Chabot 1902: 301–3; 374–5). The extinction of Messalianism within the Persian Empire may certainly be explained by the dynamism of the reformed monastic movement (Fiey 1977: 270–1; Jullien 2008a: 18–21). Several brothers came to establish themselves as anchorites in areas where these Messalian

communities had previously been strongly established, especially in the Sinjar region south of Nisibis, with the aim of eradicating that movement. The model of a life perceived as heroic could also promote the influence of the holy man on local populations.

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## Groups of ascetics

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The anchorites often won followings and initiated disciples. This is not yet a matter of communities, strictly speaking, but of groups of ascetics sharing the same form of life. One of the great ascetic authors of sixth-century Persia, Abraham of Nethpar, spent his whole life in seclusion in a cave, welcoming disciples who came to him and who dug small cells (*qly*’, from the Greek *kellia*) around his cave (Scher 1918: 174). Several of the places chosen by these cave-hermits (*speleots*) bear in the sources the name of *M’arrē*, that is to say ‘the caves’. A woman of the name of Šošān, a Persian aristocrat from the region of Arzanene, attracted to her cave a crowd of lay men and monks to seek advice (John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Brooks 1924: 554–5).

These sets of anchorites, gathered around a guide, could follow an eremitic lifestyle and sometimes be involved in evangelisation; these small monastic-like structures are attested very early in the Sasanian Empire, from the fourth century. The biography of Miles, later Bishop of Susa, reported that he divided his time between life in the desert and periods of preaching to the pagan or Zoroastrian populations, sometimes in the company of other monks who left their ‘desert’ to join up with him and assist (Bedjan 1891: 269–72). The precise location of this small community base is unknown, as also is the precise form of life that was followed there. Hagiographic literature mentions also the name of Baršibia, established in Fars, near whom ten brothers came to settle (around 342) and who were subsequently persecuted because of the success of their preaching (Bedjan 1891: 281–4). This evolution of the eremitic form of life from one lived in strict solitude towards one in which hermits lived in groups is something rather classic in Syria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Persia. Nevertheless, there was no specific Syriac

word for denoting this type of collegial eremitic life. It was similar to the model of lavras but without there being any enclosure.

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## **The semi-cœnobitic model**

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In Palestine, the lavriotic structure (lwr' from the Greek laura) is attested at the end of the fourth century and marks a stage in the organisation of a more communal way of life arranged around a small church building at the centre of a brotherhood surrounded by an enclosure. Cyril of Scythopolis was the first to use this terminology to describe this way of functioning, particularly for the lavra St Saba founded in the fifth century in the desert of Judea (Festugière 1962). There is no parallel specifically attested in Mesopotamia and Persia, except for what is hinted at in the History of Karkā d-Bēth Slokh: the author mentions some small constructions built in the countryside around Ḥaṣa in the fifth century by a group of anchorites who joined together for the dominical office (Bedjan 1891: 514; Vööbus 1958: 222–3).

## **The reform of Abraham of Kaškar: the rise of a semi-cœnobitic model**

From the sixth century, semi-cœnobitism became common in the East Syrian church thanks to the reform carried out by Abraham of Kaškar (d. 588) who gave 'a new form to the monasteries and the cells'. His work brought about a profound renewal of monasticism east of the Euphrates, at the time when the monastic movement had been reduced to secondary practices since the end of the fifth century following a period of relaxation. Moreover, it was deeply challenged by the rise of the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) movement which was spreading extensively throughout Persia following the persecutions of Justinian (Scher 1910: 172; Chialà 2005; Jullien 2008a). Abraham settled on Mount Izla in Tur 'Abdin (the 'mountain of the servants' in allusion to the

hundreds of monks there) and lived the eremitic life in caves, before founding the Great Monastery with those disciples who came to join him. The establishment was made up of several architectural units built around a central sanctuary, then further surrounded by communal buildings (infirmary, xenodocheion, libraries, refectory, etc.). It was only in the final period of his life, around 571, that Abraham agreed, at the request of his bishop, metropolitan Simeon of Nisibis, to draft a rule for governing their life. Abraham instituted a tonsure which was differentiated from that of the miaphysite (Jacobite) monks; the choice of a specific habit was thus also an external sign of Christological identity.

This way of life nonetheless privileged an ideal of complete solitude within the community, as was expressed, for example, by catholicos Mār Sabrīšōʿ in 598, himself a former monk: he refers to ‘those who, being gathered together in a convent, no longer live on their own and separately in cells’. Sabrīšōʿ describes everyday life in these mixed structures centred on the celebration of the Synaxis, as in the desert of Egypt, in Kellia or Scete:

those who [are] in the convent . . . will complete the holy mysteries each day. . . . On Sundays and other holy days, we shall all gather together as one in the convent and fulfil the divine office and the reading of the holy scriptures . . . , we shall then return to our cells and our monasteries.

(Chabot 1902: 464)

It is notable that during the Synaxis brothers were gathered from several monasteries, which therefore belonged to a single monastic network.

According to the reformed model, the monk is a hesychast (Syr. šelya, a term that signifies ‘solitude, immobility, repose, silence’ and which goes back to the Greek concept of hesychia, ‘quiet’); he stays in his cell, sometimes within, but more often away from a monastery, either in a tiny shack or a dug-out cave (Vööbus 1960b: 161; Jullien 2008a: 130, 71, 102, 272). During the same period, Cosmas Indicopleustes underlines the diffusion of the hesychast ideal in the Persian Empire: ‘Among the Bactrians, Huns, Persians, among other Indians, Persarmenians,

Medes and Elamites . . . there are countless churches, bishops, numerous Christian populations, many martyrs, and hesychast monks' (Christian Topography III, §65, Wolska-Conus 1968: 504–5). Many monastic texts of the seventh and eighth centuries had a considerable influence on the development of hesychasm; especially noteworthy was Isaac of Nineveh, but also John of Dalyatha, who translated the Paradise of the Western Monks (probably Palladius's *Lausiac History*), and Simeon of Taybouteh and his *Exposition of the Mysteries of the Cell* (Duval 1907; Brock 1998; Brock 1999–2000). In his *Book of the Founders*, a kind of catalogue of the principal figures of East Syrian monasticism from the fourth to the seventh centuries, ʾIšōʿ denaḥ also mentions Babai the scribe who wrote books for anchorites and hermits, and Joseph Ḥazzaya who composed a collection of biographies of the eastern ascetics, now lost. Dadīšōʿ Qaṭrāyā, who lived in one of the reformed monasteries in Susiana, at Rabban-Šabuhr, underlines the importance of hesychasm in both his *Letter to Abkoš* and his *On Solitude*, wherein he reported one of the religious and ascetic practices that was in use: the confinement to one's cell for between one to seven consecutive weeks, a period referred to as a 'retreat of weeks' (Guillaumont and Albert 1984). During that time, the brothers were exempted from attending church on Sundays with the rest of the community, instead participating in the Synaxis in a purely spiritual manner. The originality of the way of life constituted at Izla is less evident with respect to what was practiced in Palestine or Syria, where the Egyptian semi-anchorite models were well known (Jullien 2009: 155–6), than against the background of the monastic regimes found within the Sasanian Empire.

## **The stages of the religious life**

The steps taken by the young aspirant to the monastic life are known from canonical regulations and are generally the same as for a strictly cœnobitic context. The length of the apprenticeship and training varied according to different rules and locations; in general, it was fixed at three years. For the East Syrian monasteries, the *Life of Rabban Bar ʿEdta* (first half of the seventh

century) tells us that during this probationary period, the postulant lived ‘like a cœnobite’ (qnwby’) according to the custom concerned (Budge 1902: 172, 21; Vööbus 1960b: 191–204; Jullien 2008a: 149–51, 2006b). He also participated in the tasks of the community, in the preparation of meals, in serving seniors and guests, alongside those who were performing common services in turn on a weekly basis. In the West Syrian monasteries of Tur ‘Abdin, the period of apprenticeship appears to have been more rigorous, according to John of Ephesus. About one of the great monasteries of Amida, he says that the postulant attained the novitiate by a series of very strict stages. After abandoning all his property, he stayed at the door of the monastery for thirty days before being allowed inside the enclosure. He was then assigned to minor daily tasks for a period of three months, and received a special mark as a sign of his renunciation of the world (an allusion to the tonsure?). At the end of this year, in which he was required to prove his aptitude for the ascetic life, he was clothed with a straw tunic tied with a rope and a hood. But it was only after three years that he was able to take the monastic habit itself (John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Brooks 1923: 280–2). After this preparatory period of time, if he had performed well in accordance with the demands of the rule, the young monk was permitted to build a cell and was thereby definitively admitted to the monastery. The older monks could assist him in building his new habitation (Vööbus 1960b; Jullien 2008a: 157–76).

## **From master to disciples**

Inside the monastery, some of the monks were considered as masters of the religious life, gathering around themselves those of their followers whom they were training during their probationary period. In this matter, the notice concerning Mār Yonan in the *Book of the Founders* informs us that as a young man he attached himself to an older monk named Sebokht and became one of his spiritual children (Chabot 1896: 27, §49). Sebokht himself had followed the teachings of Babai of Nisibis at the Great Monastery, possibly as one among his group of

followers (Chabot 1896: 17, §29). Such decentralisation of authority is probably a reflection of the growing number of monks but did not in any way detract from the powers of the abbot and his council.

Scattered suggestions in the evidence indicate that some brothers from affluent social categories were allowed to keep a servant. Īšō‘denaḥ of Basra and the East Syrian History of Seert relate similar situations: thus Mār Gani entered the Great Monastery with a slave whom he had freed and who did not hesitate to follow him into a new foundation in Central Babylonia (Chabot 1896: 16, §28). Such a situation would necessarily have led to inequalities among the brethren. If we follow the narratives given us by certain church historians such as Theodoret, even a solitary could have staff: the Bishop of Cyrus mentions in this connection two female hermits around Beroea, each living in an roofless enclosure, who had arranged a small adjoining building for their maids; an opening in a wall allowed the hermits to train their servants in prayer and to receive food from them in turn (Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1977, I: 232–3).

## **The increasing strength of cœnobitism**

Gradually, the rule that was revised by Abraham of Kaškar’s successors manifested increasingly cœnobitic tendencies. It is no coincidence that around the middle of the seventh century, when this process had become very strong, the author of the Life of Rabban Bar ‘Edta presents Abraham as the legitimate successor of Pachomius (Budge 1902: 182; Jullien 2008a: 107–13), a rather uncommon claim and one that allows us to see clearly that there had been some internal alteration in outlook. The monastic remains found on Khārg Island, off Bushir in the Persian Gulf, have been associated with this reform movement; they testify to a decidedly cœnobitic architectural plan that overlay semi-anchoritic forms that have also been found in the immediate environment of the monastery (seventh–ninth centuries): although it is difficult to detect outer cells on account of the lightweight materials used in their construction, the excavators have unearthed isolated dwellings with an enclosure and a garden. Within the precincts of the



monastery, over sixty cells have been identified, as well as the communal buildings which make Khārg the largest monastic complex found in this region to date (Steve 2003; Jullien 2006a; Salles 2011).

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## **Life in the cœnobium and its manifestations**

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In the Book of the Founders, two words are used to denote a monastery: *dayra*, which refers to a monastic structure in the wider sense, and *‘umra*, used for the semi-cœnobitic type of monastery. In the Byzantine sphere, cœnobia are attested very early by Greek chroniclers and church historians, but also in the rules of the convents of Osrhoene and North Mesopotamia; those attributed to certain bishops such as Rabbūla (d. 435) or Marūṭa of Maipherqaṭ (d. early fifth century) show that the environment of the monastic life consisted in a large network of dwellings with the church located in the centre; meals were eaten together. The brothers were not allowed to sleep in beds with the exception of the superior and the sick (canon 19). The pseudo-canon of Marūṭa furnish a description of the tasks of the higher authorities, especially the *rišdayrā* (the superior), and the *rabbaitā* (a kind of sub-prior, or bursar appointed to deal with external affairs) (Vööbus 1960a: 154–8, 1960b: 130–1; Hendriks 1960). Cœnobia can be identified in Persian territory from the fourth century: the Persian Martyrs Acts describe how Badmā built a small monastic establishment close to the town of Bēth-Lapaṭ in Susiana for his seven disciples. His biographer relates interesting elements of his daily life: abstinence, weekly fasting, the raising of hands towards the sky at night in prayer, and wakefulness (Bedjan 1891: 347–51). It is certainly to this stage of development that we should also attribute the small fraternities established within sanctuaries and martyria. This type of establishment is attested in Mosul, for example, around the relics of Mār Behnam and his sister Sara (Bedjan 1891: 433). It eventually gave rise to genuine monasteries such as the one at Karkā on the site of the martyrs executed under Yazdgird II (Bedjan 1891: 530–1).

In general, Syriac historiographical and hagiographical sources attest to the deep integration of religious communities not only in the rural economy, but also in urban and suburban contexts, regardless of the particular form of life adopted. In his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, John of Ephesus depicts important monastic dwellings located either within towns or close against them, such as at Amida where a convent was erected under the ramparts which counted fifty monks at the time of death of its founder, Mār Yoḥannan Urtāyā (Brooks 1926: 207–9). The canonical legislative documentation that relates to the monastic reform movement of the sixth and seventh centuries reflects the importance of outlying buildings and land attached to monasteries, in some cases consisting of very large areas. Working in the fields was one of the activities imposed upon the monks (Budge 1902: 177–8; Vööbus 1960b: 161; Scher 1918: 470). Foundations were often established near major routes and at crossroads in the vicinity of towns, and a monastery's economy was dependent upon its relations with these centres of population (Wipszycka 1994; Villagomez 1998).

## **Networks and international monasteries**

In some cases, the mother-monastery and its affiliated offshoots shared a single controlling authority, such as at Tell 'Ada in the Antiochene, which was at the centre of a collection of convents managed by an overall superior; upon the monastery of Qarṭamīn, founded at the opening of the fifth century in Tur 'Abdin (Palmer 1990), there were several dependent monastic centres forming a vast and complex network. In his *Life of Theodosius*, Theodore of Petra 'the Cænobiarch' mentioned, around 530, a community in Palestine organised into four divisions: the Greek brothers, the Bessi (a Romanised Balkan tribe), Armenians, and 'penitents' (Festugière 1963). Greek and Syriac were both used as liturgical languages and the responses could be alternated. This type of so-called 'international monastery', either bilingual or trilingual, is well attested in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Persia (Hendriks 1958). In his *History of the Monks of Syria*, Theodoret describes one such founded by a certain Publius near Zeugma, in

which the two communities, Greek and Syriac, each had their own abbot, again subject to a common superior who governed the whole monastery (Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1977: 335). ʾĪšō ʿdenaḥ mentions a similar foundation of Persian and Syriac monks by John of Daylam in the seventh century, between Bēth-Huzāyē and Fārs (Chabot 1896: 50, §116; Scher 1908: 222; Brock 1981–1982).

## **The cœnobium and the apostolic life: the convent-schools**

Some cœnobia stood out in particular for their missionary endeavours. In central Babylonia in the fourth century, the monk Mār ʿAbda had instituted a form of religious life that combined a cœnobitic setting with a scholastic life and a missionary apostolate to the outside world. In his canons, ʿAbda emphasises the education of students, who were following the monastic rule together with the brothers. The monks brought together three types of activity, arranged in three stages: rest, common service (including education), and prayer. The community was subdivided into three groups, which were to take turns every seven hours for chanting the psalms in church. One of the characteristic features of the rule relates in particular to the missionary aspect of the community: ʿAbda carried out missions of evangelisation and was involved in controversies throughout the territory of Bēth-Aramāyē (Babylonia) (Scher and Dib 1910: 307–9). This double vocation of teaching and mission ensured that Christianity became thoroughly anchored in the region of the monastery, and its influence was to last long thanks to the further foundations of its disciples. The History of Seert points to the significance of this monastic movement of Dorqonia not far from the capital city Seleucia-Ctesiphon, noting that before the sixth century reform, ‘the monasteries were like those of Mār ʿAbda and his companions’ (Scher 1910: 172). The inclusion of schools in the monasteries is not so common, and it was initially the parish church that played the role of educating children. When patriarch ʾĪšō ʿyahb I (582–95) tried to impose a ‘student residence’ within the monastery of Bēth-ʿAbē, the majority of monks firmly opposed it (Budge

1893: 132). Conversely, however, the monks did sometimes participate in education in village schools: after his training at the Great Monastery, Abimelech taught in the school of Bēth-Sahdē (that is, of the Martyrion), near Nisibis, before founding in his turn another school attached to the convent he had built (Chabot 1896: 23). He was even buried in the ‘monastery of the school’.

The internal organisation of convent-schools, especially those which were permitted to teach higher-level courses, was based on a monastic regime; the students were tonsured, bound to celibacy, wore the religious habit (*eskima*), lived in cells, and participated in the religious offices (Vööbus 1960b; Chabot 1896: 43–93; Becker 2008). At Nisibis, the famous ‘School of the Persians’ (whose articles, written by one of its first directors, Narsai, have been preserved) was a renowned centre where the leadership of the Church of Persia was educated; hence this form of the monastic life was especially influential on the identity of the Church of the East. The bishops were required to observe the fast, to abstain continually from meat and wine, and to bear the religious habit as a sign of humility. In order to promote better integration of Christians in Persian territory at a time of persecution – the Persians being quite opposed to celibacy – the priestly commitment to chastity (an ancient characteristic of the Syriac communities) was challenged in the Church of the East following the action of Barsauma of Nisibis in 484 and of formerly Zoroastrian patriarchs (Gerö 1983). The reform of clerical discipline undertaken by Mār Abba in the sixth century was to revive the primitive ascetic tradition. This tradition deeply influenced the Miaphysite Church, which was particularly connected with the monastic institutions: the penetration of this Christological movement into Mesopotamia and Persia owed much to the monk Jacob Baradaeus (d. 578; Bundy 1978). The structure and constitution of the Syrian Orthodox Church were primarily the work of monks, ordained in droves for missionary purposes. The convent of Mor Mattai to the east of Mosul played a key role in this process. Among the miaphysite cœnobitic centres, John of Ephesus mentions the regions of Zeugma, Qennešrin, Tur ‘Abdin, Amida, where some 1,000 monks lived, and Adiabene (Lives of the Eastern Saints, Brooks 1926: 206–27).

# Supervision and centralisation

Justinian imposed the institution of the monastic enclosure across the entire Byzantine world in his 133rd Novella, which was concerned solely with monks and which was formulated between 535 and 556. These fences sometimes evolved into fortifications against the danger of external attack, as shown by the site of Bazyan in Bēth-Garmai (Déroche and Amin 2013) in the context of the insecurity of the Romano-Persian wars. It is likely that economic stakes favoured the centralisation of monastic establishments and productions in times of political instability (Wipszycka 1986). The cœnobitic model certainly came to be reinforced by these contingencies. The reclusive aspect of monastic life is strongly emphasised in the regulations: the monk is held to his unchanging station and must not leave the perimeter of the monastery without permission, which was proffered only subject to specific criteria (family concerns, ministerial office in village churches). The canons of Rabbula of Edessa, for example, forbade monks from entering the town. When he was required to travel, with the permission of his superior, the monk had always to stay in monasteries (Vööbus 1975: 153). The doorman played an important mediating role in the monastery (Fauchon forthcoming); Marūṭa placed great insistence on this function of both monitoring the brothers and welcoming passing travellers, strangers, the poor, and pilgrims, who were housed in the collection of buildings that formed the xenodocheion (individual cells, parlours, the refectory). The desire to control those people who were spreading Christological ideas perceived as dangerous after the Council of Chalcedon also explains the willingness of ecclesiastical authorities to supervise and regulate the monks more strictly.

The arrival of Islam did not at first slow down the rapid pace of the expansion of Syriac monasticism, but the movement would gradually undergo a retreat to the margins. In the eleventh century, the chronographer Elias of Nisibis lamented the inexorable disappearance of cœnobia and monasteries in Mesopotamia (Brooks 1910: 36) before the final blow was administered by the last Mongols and Timurids.

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1 It is in this sense that Ephrem applied the term to Greek philosophical schools (Beck 1958: 280–1).

2 The anonymous fourth-century work known by the title Book of Steps equally distinguishes the ‘righteous’ from the ‘perfect’, which latter term refers to those who had made a commitment to a way of life, the *benay qeyama*. Edition in Kmosko (1926), Vööbus (1958: 178–84, 190–7), Guillaumont (1976).

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3 The Life of Martha (Bedjan 1891: 233–41); of Tarbo: 254–60; of Thecla and her companions: 308–13; of Anahīd († 447): 583–603.

4 Another example is Adolas, from Mesopotamia, of whom John Moschos in his *Spiritual Meadow* tells us that he lived in a large hollow plane tree; he had made a small window through the bark by which he communicated with the outside world, Rouët de Journel (1946: 111–2, §70).