

The Coming of Christianity to Mesopotamia

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to review and assess the available evidence for the coming of Christianity to Mesopotamia, the frontier provinces of the Roman and Iranian empires, in the first five centuries of the Common Era. The Christianisation of urban centres in Syria and Asia Minor is poorly documented, but was well advanced by the early fourth century, when missionaries turned their attention to the countryside. A similar pattern can be seen in Roman and Iranian Mesopotamia from archaeological and documentary evidence. But a text known as the 'Teaching of Addai' claims that as early as the first century, shortly after the death of Christ, King Abgar of Edessa and his nobles were converted by the apostle Addai. A disciple of Addai, named Mari, is said by a related text to have converted many in Iranian Mesopotamia. These legendary accounts have shaped many modern reconstructions of the Christianisation of Mesopotamia, even though these texts reflect later politics, theological and social concerns, and models of church institutions. In reality, on both sides of the frontier, the true missionaries appear to have been anonymous laypeople, deacons, priests, and ascetics.

Introduction

We know frustratingly little about the early expansion of Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean world before the fourth century. The New Testament texts provide us with valuable information about how their authors in the second half of the first century understood the beginnings of their movement, and how early disciples began to travel away from Jerusalem in order to proclaim their beliefs to others. In the sources for the second and third centuries we occasionally hear of prominent bishops, of persecutions and martyrs, of notable heresies, and, occasionally, we are lucky enough to possess the surviving writings of isolated authors. But we hear little or nothing of the means or agency by which Christianity was spread in cities, towns, and villages, we have no statistics for the numbers of converts, and we know little about contemporary church organization. Only in the fourth-century sources do we start to receive a clearer picture, and even then it is far less than we would like.

Take for example the city of Antioch, one of the three greatest cities of the Roman Empire, whose emerging church is better documented than most (Downey 1961: ch. 11-12). The Acts of the Apostles tell us that early followers of Jesus fled there from Jerusalem (Acts 11:19), that Barnabas (Acts 4:36), later joined by Paul (Acts 11:22-26), taught there for more than a year, and that it was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), presumably in the early 40s. Simon Peter (Kephias) was the first of the twelve apostles to visit Antioch (Gal 2:11), though it is only later tradition that describes him as the first bishop of Antioch (at a time when Peter and Paul had been claimed for Rome, Mark for Alexandria, and James for Jerusalem). After the end of the apostolic age, we have the seven letters written by bishop Ignatius during his journey to Rome, where he was martyred during the reign of Trajan, perhaps in December 116, we have the apology *Ad Autolyicum* of bishop Theophilus (d. pre 188), and we know of the martyrdom of bishop Babylas (ca. 250), preserved in a highly legendary form. In 256 Antioch was captured by the Persians and bishop Demetrianus was taken into exile along with numerous skilled craftsmen (Peeters 1924). In 260, when Antioch was again taken by the Persians, Paul of Samosata was made bishop, and was soon accused of

financial and moral corruption, and heterodox theology, which led to his expulsion in 270. There is then little to report until the outbreak of the Diocletianic persecution of the Christians in 303, and the subsequent martyrdoms of Antiochene citizens, including the biblical scholar Lucian in 312. Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge outside Rome in October 312 marked the beginning of a process that led to official toleration of Christian worship and practice, and the start of an imperially sanctioned and financed programme of church building, including the Great Church in Antioch, which was begun in 327 and completed in 341.

At first glance this might look like abundant evidence for the early development and organization of Christianity in Antioch, but we know nothing about the actual size of the Christian community in the city, or its relative membership in comparison to the local Jewish community, or to the various gnostic and other sects said to have thrived there. There is only evidence for one church building (the Old Church) prior to Constantine (Mayer & Allen 2012: 100), although others may have existed, and there is so little reliable archaeology for the city that the location of Constantine's Great Church remains unknown (Mayer & Allen 2012: 73). There is good reason, then, that most histories of Christianity in Antioch begin with Constantine and focus on fourth-century writers such as Libanius and John Chrysostom (Devreesse 1945, Festugière 1959).

When we turn inland from Antioch to the villages and small towns of the city's hinterland, we have a profusion of epigraphic evidence from the fourth-century onward that can be drawn upon to illuminate the progress of the expansion of Christianity. It reveals that "the new religion spread through northern Syria at rates that differed from massif to massif and from village to village" (Trombley 1993: 2.311), with sites on the main road network providing evidence of conversion from the late-fourth century (usually by individuals, rather than entire communities together). The clergy of Antioch appear to have increased their efforts in the countryside between 365-425, a period described as "the crucible of religious transformation for the Syrian peasantry" (Trombley 1993: 2.134), starting with preaching and then moving towards the construction of village churches. Following the imperial edict of Thessalonica issued in February 380 which promulgated Christianity, Christian radicals from Antioch began to destroy pagan temples, and yet it is clear that in many areas of Syria polytheism survived into the fifth and even the sixth centuries.

A similar pattern of Christian missionary activity can be seen in Asia Minor. Paul, who came from Tarsus in Cilicia, preached in Ephesus on the Aegean coast (Acts 19:1, Eph), and in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14), and in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in Lycaonia (Acts 14:1, 6, 16:1), and in Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16:6, Col, Gal, 1 Pet 1.1). The Book of Revelation attributed to John (late-first century) addresses letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:11), three on the Aegean, three in Lydia, and one in Phrygia. By the late second century there were Christian communities in many of the towns of Asia Minor, as far east as Cappadocia, and these grew rapidly from the mid-third century on, as the epigraphic evidence shows (Trombley 1993: ch. 7). By the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 most of the cities had bishops (Harnack 1908: 2.182-229). The villages and countryside, however, only provide evidence of conversion from the mid-fourth century on, with this intensifying during the fifth century. And John of Ephesus can still plausibly claim to have converted 80,000 pagans in Western Asia Minor during his campaign of ca. 538-566 (Trombley 1985).

Turning now to Mesopotamia (used here as a geographical rather than a provincial term, to indicate the lands from the Euphrates in the west to the lands on either side of the Tigris in the east, on both sides of the shifting Roman and Iranian frontier), we will see a very similar pattern

of Christianization emerge. Local epigraphic evidence only begins to appear from the mid-fourth century on, and prior to that we are heavily reliant on extracting data from the surviving writings of a few early writers, from brief entries in histories and chronicles, and from hagiographical accounts and legends.

Roman Mesopotamia

From the records of synods and councils it is clear that during the fourth century an extensive church hierarchy was being established in the region. For the Roman territories we have lists of the signatories of bishops at the councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 (Gelzer *et al.* 1898; Kaufhold 1993), which can be compared with the fully developed structure outlined in the *Notitia Antiochena* of the 580s (Rahmani 1920):

Nicaea 325	Constantinople 381	<i>Notitia Antiochena</i> 580s	
Mesopotamia: Edessa Nisibis Reshaina Makedonopolis / Birta Fars	Osrhoene: Edessa Carrhae Batnan Mesopotamia: Amida Constantina Amaria	Edessa, and her sees: Birta M'arta Harran / Carrhae Tella / Constantina Marcopolis Batnan of Serug Telmahrin Amorin Circession Daushar Callinicum Neo-Valentia	Antioch, and her sees: Beroea / Aleppo Chalkis / Qenneshrin Gabala Seleucia Anazartha Platon Gabbula (Salamia) (Barcuson)
Syria: Antioch Seleucia Laodicea Apamea Hierapolis / Mabbug Germanikaia Samosata Doliche Balanaion Gabala Zeugma Raphane Larissa Arethusa Neo-Caesarea Cyrrhus Gindaron Arboukadamon Gaboulon Epiphaneia Ibalas	Coele Syria: Antioch Laodicea Beroea Apamea Seleucia Epiphaneia Seleukobelos Larissa Paltos Chalkis Gabala Raphane Augusto-Euphratesia: Hierapolis Samosata Cyrrhus Perre Doliche	Amid, and her sees: Martyropolis Iggilon Bolebtina Aršamišat Beth Sophanaia Qidarizon Hesen Kepha Zugmatos Dara, and her sees: Reshaina Tur Abdin Menasobion	Autocephalous: Beirut Emessa Laodicea Cyrrhus Apamea, and her sees: Epiphaneia / Hamath Seleukobelos Larissa Balaneos Mariames Raphaneas Arista Hierapolis, and her sees: Zeugma Šura Romaeorum Beth Balash Neo-Caesarea Perrin Orim Doliche Germanicia Europos Lragiz Samosata

These lists should be understood as snapshots of church hierarchies in Roman Mesopotamia and surrounding regions in the fourth century, rather than as complete listings of all bishoprics - Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, in his account of the wars in 360 (XX.7.7; Rolfe 1940), mentions the bishop of Bet Zabdai, then a fortified Roman town on the Tigris. The lists are not easy reading because so many of the place-names are unfamiliar, and because of the changing designations of civic and ecclesiastical provinces. But they remind us that while our sources

may drive us to focus on a small number of missionary centres, usually within the Roman Empire, Christianity was actually spreading out from numerous cities simultaneously (many of which are hardly mentioned in our sources), including cities on the edges of Mesopotamia (for example Samosata and Zeugma). It should also be noted that Christian expansion in the Iranian world was not a later development, totally dependent upon that in the eastern Roman provinces, but, as will be shown below, it was a contemporary and largely independent movement that had extraordinary success. Both East and West of the Iranian-Roman frontier, however, our sources for the earliest centuries are disappointingly few, and poor in reliable information.

Although it is an easy fact to overlook, it needs to be noted that no Apostle or early disciple is recorded in the New Testament as having visited or written to a Mesopotamian city (Harnack 1908: 2.91-94), and no contemporary city or town of Mesopotamia is mentioned, with the exception of the ‘church in Babylon’ in 1 Peter 5:13 which is usually thought to be a coded reference to Rome. In the Acts of the Apostles 2:8 Jews from Mesopotamia, along with ‘Parthians, Medes, and Elamites’ are included among those who are said to have witnessed the first post-ascension Pentecost in Jerusalem. So early Christians in Mesopotamia who wished to establish local links with biblical episodes had a limited set of options. They could link their community to the ‘Magi from the East’ (Mt 2:1), who numbered twelve in the Syriac tradition (Jullien & Jullien 2002: 111-117), and could be seen as the very earliest confessors of Christ (Monneret de Villard 1952; Briquel-Chatonnet *et al.* 2000), or could even be claimed as founders of churches, as at Ḥaḥ in the Ṭur ‘Abdin (Anschütz 1984: 98). Another option was to emphasise the links with Old Testament events and prophets, such as the landing of Noah’s ark on mount Qardu (mount Judi, near Cizre, rather than Ararat, according to the Syriac Old Testament), Abraham’s origin in Harran (see below), or Jonah and the fast of the Ninevites (an annual Christian fast in the Syriac tradition).

An even more radical solution was adopted by unknown Christians in Edessa (modern Urfa) prior to the early-fourth century. They produced a legend that not only provided the missing apostolic link for their city, but actually put one of their ancient kings, called Abgar V Ukāmā (‘the black’, r. 4 BC-AD 7, and AD 13-50), in contact with Jesus. The earliest version of this tradition is to be found in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Ecclesiastical History* (HE I.xiii, Lake 1926: 84-97), in a section thought to have been written in 311, but which is only preserved in a final edition issued by Eusebius in 325. (A Syriac translation of the *Ecclesiastical History* was produced by the late fourth or early fifth century: Wright and McLean 1898, Nestle 1901.) Eusebius twice notes that his source was originally written in Syriac (HE I.xiii.5, 11), and states that the original documents are taken from the archives at Edessa, and are found in public documents there (HE I.xiii.5). It is unlikely that Eusebius has simply invented this tradition, but since he appears never to have travelled to Mesopotamia (Bauer 1934:14) he cannot have personally searched the archives for this document. A reference he makes to ‘a narrative which has reached us’ (HE I.xii.3, Lake 1926: 85) makes it more plausible to suppose that he was sent a Greek translation of documents which he was told were preserved in the archives.

Eusebius reports that ‘the toparch Abgar Ukāmā’, who was very sick, heard of Jesus and of the miraculous healings he was performing in the region of Jerusalem, and so wrote to him, via the courier Ananias, to proclaim that Jesus must either be God who ‘came down from heaven to do these things’, or a son of God, and to request that he come to Edessa to heal him. Jesus wrote a reply, blessing Abgar for his faith (alluding to John 20:29), but stating that he had first to complete his mission and be taken up to him who sent him, but that after that he would send one of his disciples to heal Abgar. Eusebius says that his source text went on to state that after the ascension of Jesus, Judas Thomas sent Thaddaeus, one of the seventy disciples (although

not named as such in the New Testament), to Edessa, where he stayed with Tobias son of Tobias. When the king heard of his arrival he summoned him to court, and then bowed down to Thaddaeus, having seen his face transformed, and confessed his faith in Jesus and in his Father. Thaddaeus healed Abgar, and other notables, and the following day preached the incarnation of Jesus, and his crucifixion, his descent to Hades, his raising of the dead, and his ascension to heaven with them.

A heavily expanded form of this narrative (for a textual comparison see Brock 1992; Mirkovic 2004) is to be found in the *Teaching of Addai* (Howard 1981; Illert 2007), a Syriac text usually thought to have reached its present form by the early fifth century, and preserved (at least in part) in several manuscripts, the earliest of which (BL Add. 14654, 14644) date to the fifth or sixth centuries. This text explains how king Abgar had heard about Jesus from ambassadors sent to a Roman procurator of Syria named Sabinus (a name perhaps derived from the procurator of Syria, fl. 4 BC, named by Josephus *Jewish War* 2.2.2, *Antiquities* 17.9.3), and states that the letter reached Jesus on the Wednesday before his crucifixion. Jesus' reply includes the addition of a blessing on Edessa: 'May your city be blessed, and may an enemy (or 'the enemy', Satan) never again rule over it'. It then introduces a brief account of Ananias (in Syriac Ḥanan) painting a portrait of Jesus. In this text the disciple who is sent to Edessa is named Addai rather than Thaddaeus, the name used by Eusebius (and by the Syriac translation of Eusebius). Addai tells Abgar a long story about how the wife of Claudius Caesar (r. 41-54), said to be called Protonike ('first victory'), was converted by Simon Peter in Rome, and travelled to Jerusalem, and while there forced the Jews to reveal the hiding place of Christ's cross. There is then a much longer form of Addai's preaching, said to have been delivered not just to the nobles of Edessa, but also to the craftsmen, both pagans and Jews, and to people from Nisibis, Harran, and the whole region of Mesopotamia. The multitudes converted to Christ, including even the pagan high priests (who tore down all their shrines except the main temple) and the Jews. Abgar promised to pay for a church, and for the teachers of the Gospel, and so at the time of prayer the converts read the Old and New Testaments, the Prophets and the Acts of the Apostles, and the Diatessaron (the Gospel harmony of Tatian, produced around 170) – later the Law, and the epistles of Paul are also mentioned. More churches were built, which attracted easterners from across the Iranian frontier who were in turn converted and ordained priests, before returning to the 'country of the Assyrians' where they built their own churches. The king of the Assyrians, Narsai (based on shah Narseh, r. 293-302, or just a good Iranian name?), wrote to Abgar requesting either that Addai be sent to him, or that Abgar relate the whole story, which is what he did. This royal correspondence is followed by an exchange of letters between Abgar and Tiberius Caesar (r. 14-37), both of whom criticise the Jews for their rejection and treatment of Jesus. Before he died, Addai is said to have built churches in other (unnamed) towns 'both near and far', and to have appointed Aggai as his successor, and Paluṭ as a priest. Aggai is later killed by an anonymous son of Abgar, and so Paluṭ went to Antioch to 'receive priesthood' (i.e. consecration as Bishop) from Serapion, bishop of Antioch (r. 190-211), who was himself said to have been consecrated by Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome (r. 198-217), in succession to Simon Peter.

This is a delightfully detailed story, that appears to answer many of our questions about the coming of Christianity to Mesopotamia, and so it is not a surprise that many historians have been reluctant to exclude it from their accounts of the Christianisation of the region. But it needs to be emphasised once again that this story is entirely legendary, in both its short and long forms, with no basis in historical fact. It tells us nothing about the earliest origins of Syriac Christianity, but it is of course a witness to the beliefs and ambitions of its authors in the early fourth century, and those of its later redactors in the following century.

Only some of the legendary and anachronistic features of these texts can be detailed here (the minor chronological problems should be obvious from the dates given above), if space is to be left for discussion of genuine historical sources. To start with, no contemporary source independently records the conversion of a local Edessan king to messianic Judaism / Christianity (it is not even mentioned in the *Chronicle of Edessa*, which genuinely used the city archives; Guidi 1903, Hallier 1892), and neither is there any archaeological evidence of the Christian faith of Abgar V Ukāmā or of any of his successors (who reigned, with breaks, until 242). By contrast the conversion to Judaism of Abgar's younger contemporary king Izates (r. AD 31-55) of Adiabene (centred on Arbela), and of his mother Helen, was recorded, and there is also supporting epigraphic evidence (Marciak 2014). Since the late nineteenth century (Lipsius 1880; Burkitt 1904), scholars have attempted to retrieve historical value from the legend by arguing that it was not Abgar V Ukāmā who converted, but Abgar VIII the Great (r. 177-212), wrongly labelled Abgar IX in earlier scholarship, at whose court the early Christian philosopher Bardaisan flourished. While this is a more plausible historical context, there is again no evidence to support the idea. It is not what our legends actually say; there are no Christian inscriptions from Edessa at this date; and a mosaic portrait of Abgar VIII (Drijvers 1981, 1982; Drijvers and Healey 1999) discovered in 1979 has no Christian symbols. Indeed, none of the dozen or so third-century mosaics from Edessa contain any Christian imagery, although produced by local nobles said to have converted with the king.

No local coin of Edessa (where the mint operated until 251) has any Christian symbolism, which is perhaps unsurprising since the first Roman coin with such a symbol, a (tiny) Chi-Rho labarum on Constantine's helmet, was minted in 315, and only from the 320s did Christian symbols start to become more common (Bruck 1955). On some small coins produced in Edessa during the reign of Commodus (r. 180-192), Abgar VIII is portrayed on the reverse wearing the distinctive Parthian domed tiara of the Abgarids (Hill 1922: 94, pl.XIII.14) with a pattern that some have identified as a cross. This claim ignores the fact that Parthian kings also wore tiaras with a similar pattern (Olbrycht 1997: pl. IV.J; Sellwood 1980), and that the larger coins portraying Abgar VIII during the reign of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211) have him wearing a tiara with a crescent moon and stars (Hill 1922: 94, pl.XIII.16). In contrast to the coins of many Syrian cities, there are no obvious graeco-roman deities portrayed on Roman Edessan coins, if one excludes (a.) a brief run of silver denarii produced by the Antonines in 167-169, modelled on Roman denarii with images of Mars, Juno, and Ceres (Hill 1922: 92-93), and (b.) the local Tyche, modelled on the Tyche of Antioch (Christof 2001), who was regularly portrayed on Edessan coins from the reign of Caracalla (r. 211-217). But each city in Syria and Mesopotamia had a distinctive identifying emblem added to its silver and (on occasion) bronze coins (Prieur and Prieur 2000); for Hierapolis (Mabbog) the lion (associated with Atargatis); for Harran (Carrhae) a bucranium (ox skull) or crescent moon; for Nisibis (on bronze coins only) a ram. The symbol for Edessa, was a depiction of a temple containing a baetyl, or sacred stone, which made its first appearance (Hill 1922: 91, pl.XIII.7, 8) on coins of king Wael bar Sahru (r. 163-165), more than fifty years earlier than the reign of the emperor Elagabalus (r. 218-222) who brought notoriety to the cult of the baetyls, and it continued to be used until the end of the reign of Gordian III (r. 238-244). The presence of non-Christian religious symbols on Edessan coins does not mean that there were no Christians in Edessa, but it does not seem compatible with the mass-conversion to Christianity of the king and nobles.

No early Syriac author (Bardaisan, Aphrahat, Ephrem, *Book of Steps*) refers to Addai, or to king Abgar becoming a Christian. The early third-century Syriac text of the *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (§45), composed by a disciple of Bardaisan, states that king Abgar outlawed

self-emasculatation in honour of the goddess Atargatis ‘when he believed’, but since these words are not found in the Greek quotation of the passage by Eusebius (PE 6.10.44) they are likely to be a later Syriac addition (Brock 1992: 223).

By the time the pilgrim Egeria visited Edessa in 384 (Wilkinson 1981) it is clear that the legend of Abgar’s correspondence with Christ was well known (she already had a copy at home in western Europe, and was given another copy as a souvenir, §19). However no mention is made of Addai, and indeed she states (§17) that the apostle sent to Edessa was Thomas (Devos 1967). Given her praise (§19) for the splendour of the Edessan martyr shrine newly-built for the bones of Thomas (the return of which from India is mentioned by Ephrem, CNis 42.1-2; Beck 1963), her reference to Thomas might be considered an obvious confusion. But a fourth- or fifth-century Greek inscription found in Edessa, which repeats Christ’s letter to Abgar, includes a statement that the disciple to be sent will be ‘Thaddaeus, also called Thomas’ (von Oppenheim 1914; Canali de Rossi 2004: 19; Illert 2007: 180). This possibly exploits an ambiguity in the wording of Eusebius’ mention of Judas, also called Thomas, sending Thaddaeus (HE I.xiii.11), but it does raise the question of whether the legend of Addai had failed to supplant an earlier tradition of Thomas as the local apostle, or whether the arrival of Thomas’ relics led some to assert for the first time that the great apostle of the east had in fact been their apostle.

Turning to the *Teaching of Addai* itself, it is obvious that the original legend has become a vehicle for many later narrative elements. The story of the painting of an icon of Christ by Abgar’s emissary is clearly anachronistic in any account of art history. No such icon existed in 384 when Egeria visited, since she was shown only marble images of Abgar and his son. The first clear references to an actual icon of Christ in Edessa, which became the object of great devotion, date from the mid-sixth century (Cameron 1983), a period when various miraculous icons began to appear in Syria (Kitzinger 1954). Again, the legend of Protonike’s discovery of the Cross is clearly dependent upon the legend of the empress Helena’s finding of the Cross, which itself probably came into being in the late fourth century (Drijvers 1992). The Protonike legend later forced Syriac writers to explain just how, having been found, the Cross so quickly managed to get lost again (Brock 1992b).

The editor of the *Teaching of Addai* also included references to Christian practices and institutions that were normal in his age, but which were quite unknown in the early years of Christianity. Examples of this include the biblical canon, mentioned above, which he takes for granted, but which took years to be written and collected together; and the institution of a Christian priesthood, with the associated practice of ordination. Less obviously problematic at first glance are his references to Addai building churches in Edessa and in other cities. And yet the archaeological evidence makes it clear that Christians before the fourth century rarely worshipped in buildings whose only function was to be a church, but instead met in a variety of temporary worship spaces (Adams 2016). In fact, the only certain archaeological example in the entire Mediterranean world, including Rome, of a building in the pre-Constantinian era whose sole use was as a Christian place of prayer is the church at Dura Europos on the Euphrates which was converted from prior domestic use between 232 and 256 (Adams 2016: 95, 111; Kraeling 1967). A building in Megiddo has also been identified as a Christian prayer hall, but its dating (and much else) is controversial, ranging from 230 to the fourth century (Adams 2016: 96-99). The late sixth-century *Chronicle of Edessa*, in the account of a catastrophic flood that damaged Edessa in November 201, famously refers to the destruction of ‘the building of the church of the Christians’ (Guidi 1903: 2.4). Scholars have often suspected this reference of being a later interpolation since it is not included in the repetition of the flood account in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* of 775 (Chabot 1927; Harrak 2017: anno 2232),

and for 313 the *Chronicle of Edessa* says that Bishop Qune laid the foundations of ‘the church’ in Edessa, which was completed by his successor. In any case, the references to church building in the *Teaching of Addai* cannot be based on historical fact.

So, if both the early fourth-century Eusebian account of the conversion of Abgar V and the later *Teaching of Addai* are legends, why were they produced when they were, and what do they tell us about Christianity in Mesopotamia at these dates? Some have attempted to link the account found in Eusebius to the news of the emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, or to the accounts of the conversion of king Tiridates III of Armenia (r. ca. 287-330) between 301 and 314, and of king Mirian of Georgia during the reign of Constantine, among other notable conversions (Mirkovic 2004: 120-122). Each of these accounts has its own historical problems, however, and the exact chronology of their production and circulation is debateable. Given that it is also not known exactly when the Abgar materials were incorporated into Eusebius’ history (Mirkovic 2004: 105), which provides the earliest date for the legend, the dangers of circular argument are evident. Clearly the early fourth century was a time when such stories could flourish, and when there must have been a degree of regional rivalry about whose ruler was the first to acknowledge Christ, but this does not establish the original motive for writing.

One of the distinctive features of the *Teaching of Addai*, with traces also in the Eusebian account, is the central role played by the noble families of Edessa. It is two nobles, Maryahb and Shmeshgram, along with Hanan, who first saw Christ in Jerusalem, and celebrated with the crowds, before bringing the news to Abgar. Addai appeared before Abgar and his nobles at the court in Edessa, and healed the king and a noble named Abdu bar Abdu, ‘the second of his kingdom’. It is the royal family (including Abgar’s mother, and Shalmath the queen) and the nobles (Howard 1981: 35, 65, 67) who first believe in Christ, and it is only nobles (and priests) who are named in the text. This is also a feature of the spurious martyr acts of Sharbil the high priest and the confession of Barsamya the bishop (Cureton 1864: 45, 63) which depend upon the *Teaching of Addai*, and are set in 104 but were probably written in the fifth century (Millar 1993: 464; Brock 1992: 223). Some of the same noble names appear in both texts, and several also appear in Syriac inscriptions of the second and third centuries (Brock 1992: 228; Drijvers and Healey 1999; Camplani 2009). By contrast, the acts of the genuine martyrs Shmona and Gurya (AD 297), and Habib the deacon (AD 309), reveal a quite different social world (Burkitt 1913; von Gebhardt and von Dobschütz 1911). The martyrs are attested by Ephrem (d. 373; CNis 33.13; Beck 1961) and the Syriac martyrology of 411 (Nau 1912), although, as Millar dryly notes, the acts ‘are certainly not documentary records of events’ (Millar 1993: 486-488). Nevertheless, all of these martyrs are villagers from outlying regions, taken to Edessa to be tried, (interestingly, Habib was said to be away working with Christians in villages around Zeugma when his family was arrested), and while little else is said of their origins, they are clearly not noble or, apparently, wealthy. This suggests that by the early-fourth century the noble families of Edessa, including the former royal family, were attempting to give their ancestors central roles in the Christianisation of their city, whereas in reality it may well have been villagers and ordinary citizens who were preaching the Gospel (Brock 1992: 228).

Another notable feature of the *Teaching of Addai* is precisely the change of the apostle’s name from Thaddeus, as in Eusebius’ Greek text, and in the Syriac translation of this, to Addai. This is not a scribal slip, but a deliberate change, and it is tempting to see a link with the famous Manichaean missionary called Addai / Adda who was active in Parthian Mesopotamia, and who also preached in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia in the 260s as part of a long mission in the west (Lieu 1999: ch. II). Edessa was an early centre of Manichaeism, and according to the

Cologne Mani Codex (64.7; Gnoli 2003: 74) some of Mani's (ca. 216-274) own writings were addressed to his followers there. The followers of Marcion (d. ca. 160) also flourished in Mesopotamia (Bundy 1988; Lieu 2015), as also small gnostic groups such as the Quqites (Drijvers 1967), and of course the followers of Bardaisan (154-222), a highly educated heterodox Christian philosopher at the court of Abgar VIII whose followers fragmented into rival groups, some with strongly gnostic tendencies (Drijvers 1966). When Ephrem moved from Nisibis to Edessa after 363 he was horrified to discover the strength of these rival religious movements in the city (HcHaer 22.5-6; Beck 1957), where his fellow Christians were ignominiously named Palutians, after the early bishop, rather than 'Christians', and so engaged in polemical writings against the rivals in both poetry (Beck 1957) and prose (Overbeck 1865; Mitchell 1912, 1921). Ephrem may well have played a key role in boosting the confidence and numbers of the orthodox, but only during the episcopacy of the ruthless Rabbula (411-436) were many of the heretical groups suppressed, although never completely (Blum 1969; Phenix and Horn 2017).

In his influential book on 'orthodoxy and heresy' Bauer thus chose Edessa as the first test case for his thesis that in many regions the earliest Christians were 'heretics' rather than those who would eventually become the Nicene 'orthodox', and that only later did the orthodox manage to write the heretics out of history (Bauer 1934). In such a scenario it is obvious why local Edessan Christians might want to appropriate the name of a famous Manichaean missionary, Addai, and then turn the tables on their opponents by projecting their own hero back into the apostolic era (Drijvers 1982b: 161), and so assert the primacy of their own brand of Christianity, with its claimed links both to Christ and to the orthodox churches in Antioch and Rome (Brock 1992: 227-228). Whatever one thinks of some of Bauer's particular arguments, he is clearly correct in his assertion that many of the early converts to 'Christianity' in Mesopotamia would not have been considered Christians by the later Nicene orthodox, and that from the late fourth and early fifth century there must have been many new Nicene Christians who had previously been 'heretics', or came from 'heretical' families. But his assertion (Bauer 1934: 26) that the 'orthodox' group only arrived in the region after the Marcionites and others cannot be affirmed without the discovery of new archaeological evidence, and the focus on heretical groups also tends to draw our attention away from the fact that the great majority of mesopotamian converts to Christianity must previously have been of graeco-roman or Zoroastrian religious belief, with a leavening of converts from Judaism, at least some of whom must have had formal religious education, given the transmission of Jewish exegetical traditions to Syriac Christian writers (Brock 1979; cf. Segal 1964).

But perhaps the most important motivation for the production of the legend of king Abgar's correspondence with Christ and his conversion at the hands of Addai is so obvious that it is rarely commented upon, namely the legend's central claim that the source and centre of all Christianity in Mesopotamia is Edessa. This is a claim that has been internalised by all Syriac scholarship, so that even when the historicity of the Abgar legend is rejected, the central role of Edessa in the early spread of Christianity is rarely questioned, and Syriac texts of no known provenance are routinely assigned to Edessa. But this claimed role needs to be challenged and put in context.

Although the earliest dated Christian Syriac manuscript, containing translations of Greek texts, was produced in Edessa in AD 411 (Brock 2013), no major early Syriac writer came from Edessa, with the possible exception of Philip, the disciple of Bardaisan (himself brought up in Hierapolis), who wrote the *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (3rd cent.). Aphrahat 'the Persian sage' (fl. 337-345) lived and worked in Iranian Mesopotamia; Ephrem (ca. 306-373) was born

in the region of Nisibis and lived there until 363; the ascetic *Book of Steps* (late 4th cent.) was produced in Iranian Mesopotamia; Balai (early 5th cent.) came from the Aleppo region; Narsai (ca. 399-ca. 502) was born and brought up in Iranian Mesopotamia; Jacob of Serugh was born in Kurtam on the Euphrates; Philoxenus (d.523) was born in Tahel in Iranian Mesopotamia. Literary genius, like sanctity, does not necessarily arise in centres of missionary activity or learning, but the lack of early Edessan authors and texts is striking.

The earliest inscription to refer to Christianity in Mesopotamia is the famous Greek funerary epitaph of Abercius (d. ca. 167), the bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, which was incorporated into his *Life* (Wischny 1980; Thonemann 2012). After referring to a visit to Rome, he says: ‘I saw, too, the plain of Syria and all its cities, even Nisibis, beyond the Euphrates. I found brothers everywhere’ (Thonemann 2012). The reference to Christian brethren in Mesopotamia at such an early date is invaluable, but unquantifiable. Is Nisibis mentioned as the furthest East of his travels, as seems likely, or as a notable Christian centre? Given that the inscription mentions only Rome, Nisibis, and Hierapolis, the failure to mention Edessa is not significant. However, it is noteworthy that the earliest Christian inscription found in Mesopotamia, dated 359, also comes from Nisibis, from the still-standing baptistery of St. James or Jacob (Sarre and Herzfeld 1920: 337-338; Canali de Rossi 2004: 39). This Greek inscription records that the baptistery was erected in the time of bishop Vologases, the successor of saint James of Nisibis, and so it would have been seen by Ephrem. Further Greek inscriptions were found during recent archaeological work on the baptistery, but have not yet been published (Keser-Kayaalp and Erdoğan 2013: 148). The earliest church we know of in Nisibis, the cathedral, was built between 313 and 320 (Brooks 1910: annus 624; Fiey 1977: 23), at the same time as that in Edessa (see above).

Further evidence of Nisibis’ early role as a Christian centre is to be found in the Syriac martyrology of 411 (Nau 1912). This has a section devoted to the western martyrs listed calendrically, mostly from Nicomedia, Antioch, and Alexandria, which appears to have been translated from Greek. Also included are a handful of martyrs from Mesopotamia. Shmona, Gurya, and Habib from Edessa have already been mentioned, but there are as many saints from Nisibis: the famous bishop Jacob of Nisibis (d. 338), perhaps the most celebrated saint of Roman Mesopotamia (15 July; Peeters 1920); the martyr Hermes and his military companions (Friday after Easter), who are also mentioned in the Acts of Shmona and Gurya (Devos 1972); Adelphius and Gaius (30 July); and another individual or group whose name has been lost (23 May). Other martyrs associated with Nisibis, such as Febronia, have early cults, but their acts preserve no reliable data (Simon 1924; Halkin 1958).

In Edessa all the early Syriac inscriptions produced up to AD 259, numbering about 110, plus three documents on parchment, are pagan (Drijvers and Healey 1999). The earliest discovered Christian inscriptions from Edessa are funerary inscriptions of the late fourth or fifth century, and, like the inscriptions in Nisibis, are also written in Greek (Sachau 1882; Canali de Rossi 2004: 21; the third-century baptismal inscription published by Ramelli 2003, actually comes from Edessa in Macedonia). A series of interesting Greek Christian inscriptions dating from the late-fourth to the sixth century were found in Tella / Constantina, to the East of Edessa (Canali de Rossi 2004: 23-26). The earliest Syriac Christian inscriptions, from 389 to the late-fifth century, all come from North Syria, West of the Euphrates, whereas the earliest Syriac inscription in Edessa is dated 493 (Sachau 1882; Brock 2009 provides a chronological listing of all early Syriac inscriptions and manuscripts). Some Christian funerary mosaics with Syriac texts recently found in Edessa will be an important addition to this body of evidence, but they remain unpublished as yet (Arkeofili 2016). The relative lack of early Christian inscriptions

from North Mesopotamia is notable, reflecting the fact that only in recent decades have archaeologists begun to undertake thorough investigation of regional Late Antique sites. Nevertheless, the fact that Christian inscriptions are far from confined to Edessa is striking, as also that the earliest Christian inscriptions from Edessa are in Greek.

Egeria's visit to Edessa in 384 has already been mentioned (Wilkinson 1981), but on her way there from Antioch she also stopped in Batnan (Serug), where there was a godly monk-bishop, a church, and several martyria (§19). She also visited Carrhae (Harran), which is interesting for two reasons. Despite having no Christian population (§20) it did have a monk-bishop who showed her the local sacral landscape, which was clearly well developed, including a church on the site of Abraham's house, and a spring identified as Rebecca's well (Gen 24:15). She was told that Nahor and Bethuel's tombs were a mile away, but Ur of the Chaldees was ten staging-posts away, in Iranian territory. She was then taken to Jacob's well (Gen 29.2), six miles from Carrhae (§21), where there was a large church. In nearby Fadana she was shown the tomb of Laban the Syrian. In addition to this Christian sacral landscape, Egeria also mentions the many ascetics living in cells whom she met at Jacob's well, and says that at Abraham's house in Carrhae there was a martyr shrine for a monk named Helpidius. She happened to be there for his feast day, 23 April, when all the ascetics came in from the surrounding desert. As Egeria makes clear, these ascetics were not living in monasteries, a practice introduced locally from the end of the fourth century (Vööbus 1960), but were living in caves and cells. These are the 'sons and daughters of the covenant' addressed by Aphrahat in his 6th Demonstration, written in 337 (Vööbus 1958: 173; Brock 1973), and they were clearly spread throughout the region, not just in major cities. Ammianus Marcellinus (XVIII.10.4; Rolfe 1935) mentions a group of female ascetics who were captured (and well-treated) by Shapur II in 359 when he took two Roman fortresses in the region of Amida.

Edessa clearly played an important role in the spread of Christianity in Roman Mesopotamia, but the fragments of available evidence suggest that it was part of a larger movement, and not the source of that movement.

Iranian Mesopotamia

Just as we lack a detailed picture of the early development of Christianity in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, so too in Iranian Mesopotamia and beyond. In 363 Nisibis and its region was seceded to Iran, but by this time Christianity had already spread widely, as will be seen. By the early fifth century it is clear that there was a strong church hierarchy in the Iranian empire, with at least six metropolitan sees and more than thirty bishoprics, as recorded by the signatures of the bishops who attended the first general synod of the empire in 410, and from the list of church provinces said to be subject to the catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the acts of the synod of 420 (Chabot 1902: 274, 617; 276; Wiessner 1967a). Within two centuries these expanded to ten metropolitan sees and ninety-six bishoprics. An even earlier list of sees in Iranian Mesopotamia (i.e. modern Iraq) has often been cited from the *Chronicle of Arbela*, which has exercised great influence on the historiography of Christianity in Iran, but although this work is no longer considered to be a modern forgery (Jullien and Jullien 2001), it is still a totally unreliable historical source for the early centuries of Christianity (Peeters 1925).

Synod of 410 (sees of signatories)	Synod of 420 (regions / provinces)	Mar Mari's legendary itinerary
Seleucia and Ctesiphon Kaškar	Bet Lapaṭ Nisibis Persia	Edessa Nisibis Arzanene
Bet Huzaye province: Bet Lapaṭ Karka d-Ledan Hormizd-Ardashir Šušterin Šuš	Armenia Prat d-Maišan Ḥadyab Bet Garmai Gurzan Bet Madaye Aran	(disciple sent to Qardu) Bet Zabdai Bet 'Arabaye Arbela / Assyria and Nineveh Bet Garmai Šahrgard Darabad
Bet 'Arabaye province: Nisibis Arzon Arzon d-Bet Aoustan Qardu Bet Zabdai Bet Rahimai Bet Moksaye	Abrašahr Adorbigan The Islands Istaḥr Karka Arzon Šuš Šušter Belašpar Dasqarta Zabe Peruz-Šapur Dargerd Bet Daraye Šapur-Kuast Ardašir-Parihd Bet Šapur Šaimarat	Ḥarbatgelal 'territory of the Persians' Bet Aramaye Radan Kaškar (§30) Seleucia-Ctesiphon Dura d-Qunni Kokhe
Maišan province: Prat d-Maišan Karka d-Maišan Rima Nehargur		Maišan Bet Huzaye Bet Parsaye
Ḥadyab province: Arbela Bet Nuhadra Bet Bagaš Bet Dasen Ramonin Bet Mahqart Dabarinós / Rabarinḥesn		
Bet Garmai province: Karka d-Bet Selok Šahrgard Lašom Arewan Radani Ḥarbatgelal		
'Distant sees' (not present): Fars The Islands (Qatar / Gulf) Bet Madaye (Media) Bet Raziqaye (S. of Caspian) Abrašahr (Khorasan)		

How did such a widespread church develop? We have seen that 'Parthians, Medes, and Elamites' were among those who were said to have witnessed Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:8), and that the *Teaching of Addai* claims that priests were ordained for the 'country of the Assyrians'. Another legendary source, the *Acts of Mar Mari*, builds upon the *Teaching of Addai* by claiming that one of Addai's disciples, Mari, was sent 'to the land of Babylonia' to preach the Gospel. The text in its present form was compiled by a monk in the monastery of Mar Qunni, 90km south of Baghdad, between the sixth and early seventh century (Harrak 2005: xvii; Jullien and Jullien 2003: 111). Like the *Teaching of Addai*, it is not a reliable source for the earliest expansion of Christianity, but it does throw some light on its own period. Notably, the catholicos had controversially been based in Seleucia-Ctesiphon rather than in north

Mesopotamia since around 300, and yet the *Acts* say that at first Mari found not one person to follow him in Seleucia, because all the people were evil drunken pagans (§19), and the people of Maišan were little better; and whereas the Synod of 410 established (or reaffirmed?) a strict hierarchy of church provinces, with Bet Huzaye in the South East preceding Nisibis in the North West, and then Maišan in the South preceding Adiabene and Bet Garmai in the North, the *Acts of Mar Mari* have the apostle working his way South through Mesopotamia (see table above), which creates a hierarchy of conversion starting with Nisibis and its province, then Adiabene and Bet Garmai. In a sixth-century church that was intellectually dominated by Nisibis and its monasteries, while its leadership resided in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the cities of Iran, this looks highly political.

So we need to turn to other sources for snapshots of the development of early Christianity in the Iranian empire. The *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (early 3rd cent.), written by Philip, a pupil of Bardaisan (Drijvers 1965), refers in passing to Christian ‘brothers and sisters’ in Hatra, Parthia, Gilan and Kušan (south of the Caspian), Fars (Persia), and Media. These Christians were presumably first converted by missionaries moving along the trade routes from Roman Mesopotamia. In 256 and 260 Shapur I, after his raids into Roman Syria, deported large numbers of people from Antioch and other cities and resettled them in various regions of his own empire, away from the frontiers, including the provinces of Fars and Bet Huzaye, and in the latter they rebuilt Bet Lapaṭ (Gundishapur), the capital (Morony 2004). These deportees included Christians (presumably a small proportion of the total), among whom was Demetrianus the bishop of Antioch (Peeters 1924), and they organised church communities which were independent of the Syriac-using communities deriving from Mesopotamia, and were sometimes in conflict with them (Jullien 2006). Shapur II (r. 309-379) also invaded Roman territory on several occasions, and took captives back to Iran, where he founded Karka d-Ledan for them. So the seniority of Bet Huzaye in the hierarchy of the synod of 410 starts to make sense, as also the hostility of the churches of Nisibis and north Mesopotamia.

No pre-Islamic Christian inscriptions have yet been found in Iranian territories (Harrak 2010). But in the late third century a senior Zoroastrian priest named Kartīr or Kirdīr (Skjærvø 2011) had an account of his career under seven kings carved as an inscription in three locations, laying emphasis on his reformation of Zoroastrianism, and his persecution of foreign religions, including the conversion of their holy places (‘the residence of demons’) into Zoroastrian shrines (MacKenzie 1989: 58; Gignoux 1991: 69). Amongst the groups that he saw as foreign threats he mentions Jews, Shamans, Bramans, Manichaeans, Makdags (baptists?), but also ‘Christians’ (*klstyd’n*) and ‘Naṣraye’ (*n’čl’y*). There has been much debate about the precise meaning of these two terms, but an emerging consensus seems to be that the former term designates the Christian deportees from Roman territories, and the latter Christian converts among the native population of the Iranian empire (Jullien and Jullien 2002a; 2002b: 183).

Further periods of persecution arose during the reigns of Shapur II, especially after 340, Yazdgard I (ca. 420), Vahram V (ca. 421-422), and Yazdgard II (ca. 446-448; Brock 1982). In a limited number of cases their acts and passions were given literary form (listed chronologically in Brock 2008), but a far longer list of names was preserved in the martyrology of 411 (Nau 1912; Brock and Van Rompay 2014: 389-392). Noble converts from Zoroastrianism were always vulnerable to prosecution and punishment, but at times of royal weakness and a corresponding growth in the influence of Zoroastrian priests, or in times of war with Rome, ordinary Christians became vulnerable, and could be put to death in large numbers. A recent study argues that punishment of Christians was a tool of political strategy or an assertion of hierarchical dominance, rather than a consequence of blind religious hatred, and

that as such it signalled the integration of Christians into imperial politics (Payne 2015). Such a nuanced historical view is needed now, but may not have been obvious to contemporary Iranian Christians. The sources for the persecution under Shapur II still need a thorough geographical analysis, but among the martyrs listed are bishops, clergy, and laypeople from each of the provinces recorded in 410 (excluding Nisibis, which still belonged to the Romans), with strong concentrations from Bet Huzaye and Bet Garmai (Wiessner 1967b). This is important, but rather neglected, evidence for the early spread of Christianity in the Iranian empire.

The available sources for the early spread of Christianity in Mesopotamia, on both sides of the frontier, are frustratingly limited, and many attractive accounts are quite without historical value. The Gospel was not spread through the region by Apostles, nor by kings and nobles, but by countless anonymous Christians - laypeople, deacons, priests, and ascetics – some by choice, and some as captives of a foreign power. They were active not just in the religious centres of Edessa and Nisibis, nor only at royal courts as in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, but in countless small villages, towns, and cities, from Dura on the Euphrates to Khorasan in the east of Iran. It is a less memorable story than that of the *Teaching of Addai* or the *Acts of Mar Mari*, but no less remarkable, and more true.

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