

# Sinner or Savior

## Unraveling the Enigma of Yazdgird I\*

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### Abstract

This article re-examines the evidence for anti-Christian persecution in fifth century CE Mesopotamia. It concerns the Sasanian king, Yazdgird I, whose treatment of Christians allegedly underwent a reversal in the course of his reign. Comparing sources from the Greek ecclesiastical historiography with Syriac martyrdom accounts and other sources it questions whether such persecution took place. It argues that two conflicting narratives exist. The persecution narrative probably stems from the Roman Empire, but is less credible. The emergence of such accounts should therefore be sought in the Roman Christian discourse on active anti-pagan aggression rather than in the Sasanian Empire

### Key Words:

Yazdgird, Sasanian, Christian, Syriac, martyrdom

The status and experience of the Christians of the Sasanian Empire in Late Antiquity differed considerably from that of their brethren in the Roman Empire. While Christianity became tolerated, legitimized and finally dominant in the Roman Empire, across the border in the Sasanian Empire Christians remained a religious minority. These eastern Christians were generally tolerated and largely integrated. Their condition could, however, be adversely affected by diverse considerations including relations with Rome, religious zealotry, or court intrigue. Some kings appear to have been more tolerant towards them than others. This paper concerns Yazdgird I, whose treatment of Christians allegedly underwent a reversal in the course of his reign.

### I. Theodoret and Socrates

The 21, or 22 year long reign<sup>2</sup> of the early fifth century Sasanian monarch, Yazdgird I is an enigma. While most of it is acknowledged as an era of peace between Rome and Persia, and as a period of royal benevolence towards both his Jewish and

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Christian subjects, Yazdgird is said to have changed his course and cruelly persecuted Christians at the very end of his reign.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I wish to review the sources on this period. Finding problems that have been overlooked, I shall contest this portrayal of Yazdgird and suggest alternative ways to explain the discrepancy between the diverse sources on this period.

The Christian sources on Yazdgird, as Averil Cameron succinctly remarks, “praise him to the skies”.<sup>4</sup> Yazdgird is acclaimed for legitimating Christianity after a long period of uncertainty. A synod gathered in the year 410 CE, in the royal capital under royal auspices, to organize the formal centralization of the Persian Christian community. The detailed synod proceedings are altogether ecstatic about the event.<sup>5</sup> The record of this synod, edited later but probably based on a contemporary source, paints a portrait of excitement, hope, achievement, and pride. The official recognition of Christianity received an endorsement in a second synod held in 420 C.E., in the 21<sup>st</sup> year of his reign, under the catholicos, Yahbalaha, and in the presence of the Roman envoy, the bishop of Amid, Acacius.<sup>6</sup>

The change, we are told, occurred at the very end of his reign. He is said to have suddenly turned upon the Christians and initiated a cruel persecution that was continued after his untimely death by his heir, Warahrān V. The sources, however, are not unanimous about this turn of events. While they all concur that Yazdgird was very positive towards the Christians for most of the time, and that Warahrān persecuted

Christians at the beginning of his reign, persecution by Yazdgird is not supported by all the sources. There are in fact two principle and contradictory accounts of his reign within the early Greek ecclesiastical tradition provided by Theodoret and Socrates.

Theodoret, in the penultimate chapter of his Ecclesiastical History, completed in the late 440s,<sup>7</sup> after listing some items relating to Antioch in the early fifth century, notes that “at this time Yazdgird began to wage war against the churches”<sup>8</sup> on account of the act of a certain bishop, Abda. This bishop, spurred by religious zeal, destroyed a Persian fire temple. The king ordered him to rebuild it, but upon his refusal he had him executed and then destroyed all the churches. Cyril of Scythopolis, writing in the mid-sixth century also speaks explicitly of an anti-Christian persecution occurring at the end of Yazdgird’s reign.<sup>9</sup> There are a number of ancient Syriac sources that appear to support this version of events, and we shall consider them in detail below.

Quite a different account is provided by Theodoret’s slightly earlier contemporary, Socrates, in his own Ecclesiastical History. While summing up the background to the renewal of anti-Christian persecution in the Persian Empire he begins his account with the following:

When Yazdgird, the king of the Persians, who in no way persecuted the Christians there died, his son – Vararanes by name – received the kingdom in turn. Persuaded by the Magi, he persecuted the Christians harshly, bringing to bear on them various Persian punishments and tortures.<sup>10</sup>

He continues to explain that this led to the flight of Christians to the Roman Empire. The Roman refusal to turn these fugitives over to the Persians, together with additional Roman grievances was the pretext for the renewal of hostilities between the two empires that had remained in peace for the previous 40 years.<sup>11</sup> A few paragraphs earlier he had described the embassy to Yazdgird of the ecclesiastical emissary, Marutha of Mayferkat and the warm relations that ensued between them and between the Persians and the Romans in general. After Marutha, together with “Abda”<sup>12</sup> bishop of Persia” are said to have cast out a demon from the Persian king’s son, Yazdgird is said to have almost embraced Christianity and only his death prevented this.<sup>13</sup>

Eustathius, an early sixth century Byzantine author was already aware that for the later period of Yazdgird’s reign there were two versions – Theodoret and Socrates, and he refrained from choosing between them,<sup>14</sup> and so Evagrius Scholasticus, who borrowed his account from him some decades later.<sup>15</sup> Some later anthologists, such as Michael the Syrian and Nicephorus Callistus combined and harmonized the two, bringing Socrates’ account first, and ascribing all the persecution appearing in Theodoret’s account to the reign of Warahrān alone.<sup>16</sup>

Modern historians, however, have been inclined to follow Theodoret.<sup>17</sup> As for Socrates’ account, even though it offers a detailed and arguably logical progression of events, they have viewed it as exceptional and idealic,<sup>18</sup> and have believed that the evidence against it is “overwhelming”.<sup>19</sup> This is despite the fact that some have found this sudden change in policy difficult to comprehend.<sup>20</sup> It is also despite a broad awareness among scholars of Theodoret’s rather poor reputation for precise chronology and factually reliable information.<sup>21</sup> Many historians have subsequently sought ways to account for this inconsistency in Yazdgird’s policy towards the Christians, often taking the polemical assertions of the sources at face value. Some have accused the Persian Christians of unwise provocation;<sup>22</sup> others have blamed an alleged dramatic success in Christian missionary activity amongst the Persian nobility.<sup>23</sup>

Socrates' version of the period is, however, by no means exceptional and nor is the evidence against it overwhelming. As for its positive appraisal of Yazdgird, it is in agreement with a number of other sources, most of which are eastern, and many apparently independent of Socrates' account, and they should not be overlooked or dismissed so quickly. These include: 1) the 8th century *Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum*, which explicitly dates the persecution to the year 732 S.E. (= Seleucid Era), which was the first year of Warahrān. This source has good things to say about Yazdgird.<sup>24</sup> 2) *Chronica Minora*, a Syriac chronicle compiled in the seventh century, which provides evidence of unadulterated praise for Yazdgird by Roman captives who had been recaptured from the Huns by the Persians, and were now living in the region of the capital city.<sup>25</sup> 3) A sixth century eastern Syriac work on the history and martyrs of Karka de-Beth Slokh, which omits mention of any persecution under Yazdgird I even as it elaborates on some other major periods of Persian anti-Christian persecution.<sup>26</sup> 4) The 11<sup>th</sup> century world chronicle by Elias bar Shinaya which notes the year 732 S.E. as the year of Warahrān's ascension to the throne, and 733 S.E. as the year of the martyrdom of Jacob Intercisus.<sup>27</sup> 5) The late sixth century Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat, which refers to Kawād being good to the Christians on account of the benevolence of his "grandfather" Yazdgird.<sup>28</sup> 6) The tenth century Melkite writers, Agapius and Eutychios who know the pro-Christian Marutha traditions concerning Yazdgird, and also the Persian depiction of Yazdgird as an evil oppressor who was killed by a mysterious horse, but only state that *Waharān* persecuted Christians.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most significant testimony concerns the church synod held between the winter of 419 CE and the spring of 420 CE<sup>30</sup> with royal support. It strongly suggests that even at this point in time Ctesiphon maintained good relations with its Christian subjects.<sup>31</sup> This would not leave much time for persecution since it took place in the midst of the last year of Yazdgird's reign.

There are other suggestive sources. Procopius views Yazdgird very positively as the paradigm of a good leader. He focuses on the peaceful relations between Rome and Persia and on Yazdgird's consent to protect the infant Theodosius from pretenders to the Byzantine throne.<sup>32</sup> Procopius indeed remembered Yazdgird the way he, himself, had wanted to be remembered. The legend on the coins he minted – the only explicit source that provides us with contemporary and unadulterated evidence of Yazdgird's own intentions – is quite unique among Sasanian coin legends. He had the epithet *rāmšahr*, "peace of the empire" inscribed on them.<sup>33</sup> It was only after Yazdgird's death, Procopius observes, that this peace was breached by the actions of Yazdgird's son, Warahrān.<sup>34</sup>

The involvement of Marutha gave birth to legendary accounts of amity between this cleric and the Persian king. These accounts appear to have been popular and must have been in circulation close to the period we are considering since Socrates included them in his account. In no way, however, do they allude to any change in heart by Yazdgird. The adoption accounts are only attested in sources close to a century later,<sup>35</sup> but are said by Agathias to be well known and popular. This would certainly fit better with the image of a Persian king who maintained his reputation unsullied among the Christians – at least the Christians of the Roman Empire.

The Jewish evidence also indirectly supports such a positive assessment. Yazdgird is one of the few Sasanian kings to be mentioned by name in the Babylonian Talmud. Two exceptional sources portray the leading rabbis of the generation visiting this king in the royal court, trading scriptural verses with him, and enthusiastically reflecting on the reception they received.<sup>36</sup> A further piece of evidence, albeit problematic in its

details, is nevertheless highly suggestive. The eighth century Zoroastrian geographical work, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, asserts that Yazdgird's wife, called there *Šīšīnduxt*, was the daughter of the Jewish exilarch. And she was further said to be the mother of the next Sasanian monarch, Warahrān.<sup>37</sup> The relevance of the Jewish material from the Sasanian Empire is in its tendency, in broad strokes, to align with the Christian material. In moments of heightened Zoroastrian radicalism Jews often found themselves, together with other non-Zoroastrian minorities on the receiving end.<sup>38</sup> Yet Yazdgird I only has good reports in the Jewish sources.

The other side of the coin is the Persian historiographical tradition. In this literature, admittedly not typically given to nuance, the image of Yazdgird is unequivocal and negative.<sup>39</sup> Here, reflecting the interests of the Zoroastrian community, he is altogether condemned.<sup>40</sup> He is said to have alienated the support of the magi and nobles and oppressed the people. He is dubbed "the sinner",<sup>41</sup> and believed to have been divinely finally punished for his impiety with a wondrous death.<sup>42</sup> After his death there was a struggle for the throne. The nobles opposed the coronation of any of his sons, a fact that not only implicates them in his death but also suggests that they remained hostile to his policy to the end. His son, Warahrān, who did finally succeed in gaining the throne, did so with Arab military support. He achieved this, however, according to this tradition, through befriending both the magi and the nobles in order to consolidate his position.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps last-minute "penitence" might have found some recognition.

In sum, then, there is a thick dossier of historical sources that counters the consensus view. There are, thus, explicit and implicit arguments, in Christian and non-Christian sources that gravitate away from any change of heart by Yazdgird.<sup>44</sup> Against this we have Theoderas's faltering account with all its ambiguities. Indeed, a

Against this we have Theodoret's rathering account with all its ambiguities. Indeed, a critical reading of Theodoret, undertaken by the great Bollandist, Peeters, already a century ago, demonstrated very clearly how "l'évêque historien n'avait sur la persecution de Perse que des informations lointaines et inconsistantes, qui n'allaient guère au delà de ce qu'il nous donne pour un résumé."<sup>45</sup> Certainly this would not be the best source on which to base ourselves. It has undoubtedly been the Syriac martyrologies, to which we shall now turn, that have tipped the balance in favour of Theodoret.

## II. Syriac Sources

Eight Syriac works are relevant.<sup>46</sup> Five describe martyrs under Yazdgird<sup>47</sup> and three concern martyrs under Warahrān. The substance of these sources is as follows.

1. *Narse*.<sup>48</sup> This artfully written narrative tells of Narse's unintended journey to his martyrdom.<sup>49</sup> A priest (ܩܪܕܝܢܐ) named Shapur converts a Zoroastrian, Adurparvah, and builds a church on his estate. This is accomplished however, only after Adurparvah agrees to furnish him with a document of sale for the land on which the church was to be built. Narse would visit Shapur, his relative, from time to time. Later, Adurboze, the chief magus asks the king to act against a wave of Persian conversions to Christianity amongst the nobility and freemen. Adurparvah returns to Zoroastrianism and demands his document back. Shapur refuses and flees with the document. The building is now converted into a fire temple. When Narse next visits he discovers a fire temple in place of the church and extinguishes the fire, throwing the vessels out. He is seized by local Zoroastrians, arrested, and sent to the capital to be interrogated by Adurboze. There he is kept for nine months until the king moves to the winter capital. He is now placed under house arrest with a Christian who deposits 400 *zuz* as

a guarantee against flight. The king sends back an order that if he denies the charges against him he will be released, but if not, then he must gather fire from 366 sources and reconstitute the fire temple – or die. He prefers to die.

2. *Tataq*.<sup>50</sup> Tataq, a devout Christian freeman from Adiabene, was the royal *domesticus*.<sup>51</sup> He longed to follow the monastic lifestyle and left the royal service. The king summoned him to Seleucia where he was held in prison for four months before his final interrogation and execution. This martyrdom concludes with the description of how the brothers – that is, the monks – brought his body, together with his severed head, to the martyrion and laid it there alongside Narse.

3. *The Ten martyrs*.<sup>52</sup> These ten martyrs were laymen from Bet Garmai. They were formerly Zoroastrian. They were brought before the magus Mihrshapur<sup>53</sup> in the winter palace, and executed for refusing to return to Zoroastrianism.

4. *Abda and his companions*.<sup>54</sup> The end of this account is missing. The title refers to the martyrdom of eight Christians, the superior being Abda, the bishop of Hormizd-Ardashir (in Huzestan). It starts by recounting that in the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of King Yazdgird:

the nobles of the king together with the magi, who hold power, told falsehood against our people and said before the king that ... in the provinces of your kingdom those Nazoreans ... break your commandments and scorn your kingdom, and harm your gods, and despise the fire and water, and the bases of the fire temples which we worship they cast down, and in no small way do they despise our law (ܩܪܕܝܢܐ).

The king is furious, orders the repression of the Christians, and summons them to his court. Abda and his colleagues, the first to arrive are brought before him for questioning. Abda, the senior amongst them, denies the charges, but Hasho, a priest zealously (ܩܪܕܝܢܐ ܩܪܕܝܢܐ) butts in. He is rebuked for his lack of respect but nevertheless allowed to continue. He now lectures the king at length on the subordinate and non-divine nature of fire. Here the fragment ends.

5. *Shapur*. The account of the martyrdom of Shapur is also fragmentary, but here the beginning is missing. He is put to death by Gushnaq,<sup>55</sup> who tries to persuade him to deny his religion. This martyr, we are told "was crowned in the month of Adar, in the 18<sup>th</sup> year of King Yazdgird."<sup>56</sup>

6. *Jacob the Notary*. He was executed under Warahrān V. He says that Yazdgird turned against the Christians at the end of his days. He tells the king:

Your father Yazdgird ruled the kingdom in peace and well-being for twenty one years and all his enemies everywhere were subjected and friendly to him. This was because he honoured the Christians, built churches and granted them peace. At the end of his reign, when he turned away from this beneficial policy and became a persecutor of the Christians, spilling the innocent blood of a God-fearing people, you know very well yourself of the extraordinary death he died, and his corpse was not brought to burial. You, too, be warned lest when you do the same, you shall come to that result.<sup>57</sup>

7. *Mihrshapur*.<sup>58</sup> He was a Zoroastrian convert to Christianity. He had been imprisoned for his conversion. Later, in the persecution in the second year of the reign of Warahrān he was re-arrested, and cast into a dark closed pit to die of hunger and thirst.

8. *The martyrdom of Peroz*. This martyrdom has two main sections. The first is a lengthy introduction which alludes, in passing, to the fact that at the end of his reign, Yazdgird undid all the good that he had earlier accomplished for the Christians. The second section concerns the era of Warahrān V.

### III. Devos and the Yazdgird I martyrdoms

One of the more important and influential articles on this topic was written by Paul Devos in 1965. He compared the four accounts: Narse, Tataq, the 10 martyrs from Bet Garmai, and Jacob the notary; and observed thematic and stylistic parallels between them. The *Ten Martyrs* text is explicitly attributed to a scribe called Abgar in its colophon. Three of his conclusions are particularly noteworthy and relevant to this paper.<sup>59</sup> Firstly, Devos speaks of an “Abgarian cycle”, claiming that all four had been composed by this scribe. Secondly, he viewed these texts to be completely contemporary, composed between the years 421–424 CE.<sup>60</sup> Finally, he claimed that this ‘cycle’ distinguishes between two periods of persecution: that of Yazdgird I is called the ‘great persecution’, as distinct from that of Warahrān V. The three accounts which concern those martyred under Yazdgird I were composed after the second persecution had already begun, whereas that of Jacob the notary was composed a little later, after peace negotiations had commenced with Theodosius in 422 CE, as suggested by the change in tone.

There are, however, reasons to question whether all four accounts were written by the same hand. Jacob the Notary, for instance, seems to reflect a non-Sasanian or partisan provenance. We read there that Jacob “was strong and firm in his faith since his family was from the descendants of the Romans”.<sup>61</sup> The extent and quality of the knowledge on the Zoroastrians differs when comparing Jacob the Notary’s account to the Narse account. Contrast Narse’s reference to the collection of fire from 366 sources, a parody on an authentic, but little known Zoroastrian ritual,<sup>62</sup> to Jacob the Notary’s comical scene towards the end of his account. He has the Christian “brothers” dress up as magi, and join the soldiers guarding the corpse, telling them that they were sent there by the *hyparch* to ensure that the corpse is eaten by the birds and not by the dogs.<sup>63</sup>

Jacob the Notary states explicitly that Yazdgird changed at the very end. Jacob’s warning to Warahrān is of special interest. He reminds the king of the wondrous death which Yazdgird died, and that his corpse was never brought to burial.<sup>64</sup> He warns the king that the same thing might happen to him. This is, of course, nothing short of a prophecy – in the style of *vaticinium ex eventu*. Although Yazdgird is said in the Persian traditions to have died in a mysterious way, nothing is heard about the disappearance of his corpse. Now precisely such a tradition does exist concerning Warahrān. Warahrān’s death, according to some Persian traditions, was in the course of a hunt in which he vanished. Tabari, for instance, relates in detail the legend that he fell into a pit whilst chasing onagers and the efforts undertaken in vain by his mother to retrieve his body.<sup>65</sup> His body, however, was never found. The author of this piece seems to have compounded the death scenarios of Yazdgird and Warahrān. Yazdgird dies as a punishment for impiety; Warahrān’s corpse disappears. The accounts on Yazdgird’s mysterious death are according to the Persian traditions which had a distinctively Zoroastrian mythological flavor.<sup>66</sup> This author, then, has essentially absorbed the Zoroastrian understanding of his divine punishment for his oppression of them, but given it a Christian interpretation in the style of *de mortibus persecutorum*.

If the author is reading Persian legends into his account this certainly raises problems with Devos’ assumptions about this martyrdom text being practically

contemporary with the events.<sup>67</sup> Warahrān died in 438 CE, which is, of course, the earliest hypothetical date of composition. In fact, its dependence on a Persian legendary historiographical element raises a whole new set of questions concerning its dating and authenticity as it indeed informs us of familiarity with this Persian literature in eastern Christian circles.

Jewish sources in fact did something comparable. The 10<sup>th</sup> century gaonic scholar, Sherira Gaon records in his Epistle the tradition found in the “annals” (ספרי זכרונות) that Yazdgird II, who persecuted Jews, died when the Jews prayed to be saved from him and a dragon (תנין) came and killed him.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Jewish sources, as I. Lévi proposed over a century ago, transferred the popular (Zoroastrian) death story of Yazdgird I, who was good to the Jews, to Yazdgird II, who was not.<sup>69</sup>

Devos’ assumption that the sources refer to two distinct periods of persecution is based on the final paragraph in the narrative of Narse. Having described the construction of a grand martyrium under the auspices of Mar Marutha where the martyrs of Shapur II had been laid to rest, and where the corpse of Narse had now been brought, it reads as follows:

And when this persecution occurred we removed the martyrs’ bones from where they were placed for fear of the magi that they not uncover them nor treat them disrespectfully...

It then relates that all the martyrs were moved to a new location, where they are now. Devos rightly stressed the contrast between the persecution described in the narrative, itself and “this persecution” being a subsequent one. However, he identified “this

persecution” with the one at the beginning of the reign of Warahrān.<sup>70</sup> Such an interpretation, though, is hardly possible or likely. It assumes a period of peace between the (alleged) two persecutions that is not possible in the current reconstruction of events with the limited time frame allotted for Yazdgird’s (alleged) persecution. This account, more likely, was composed after or during the next persecution – under Yazdgird II in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, if not even later.<sup>71</sup>

The Abda fragment is curious in a sense since “Abda the bishop of Persia” appears already together with Marutha and Isaac the catholicos in Socrates’ account as in good favour with the king. There was another famous Abda from this period – the founder of the school of Dayr Qunni, a monastery in Mesopotamia.<sup>72</sup>

Although the existence of this Syriac martyrdom on Abda might seem to confirm Theodoret’s version, it departs from it in places. Against Theodoret’s account, it does not treat the provocation of the destruction of the fire temple as the pretext for the outbreak of persecution but rather relates that a series of events, including the uprooting of multiple fire vessels, have the magi bring the king to launch a comprehensive persecution. But it gives the sense of having been composed beyond the borders of the Sasanian Empire. It seems not too familiar with the historical record either. The “magi and nobles” are on the best of terms with the king from the start. Apart from the Persian names of the martyrs –which may be an authentic list – it keeps the description very vague. It speaks about the fire rites in generalities, devoid of any sign of insider knowledge. It uses many Syriac words derived from Greek, such as *cheimon*, *estixso* (*stoixeion*), *nomos*, *hypodiaconus*, suggesting that it might have been translated from Greek, or at any rate, composed in a community that was very comfortable with Greek.<sup>73</sup> All of this may be contrasted with the Narse narrative with its evocative Zoroastrian references. It is most probably an artificial literary piece based on some kind of tradition. Thus the recurrence of Abda in both this

account and by Theodoret does not confirm the historicity of this event since both are distant and vague.

The account of the martyrdom of Mihrshabur need not detain us. It is completely fabulous in its description of the death of the martyr. And yet, if we were to relate to it as in some ways authentic, then it seems to confirm Socrates rather than Theodoret. Mihrshabur was initially arrested for converting from Zoroastrianism because “accusers” had come forth against him. He was not executed for this though, but released. This was not part of a widespread persecution of Christianity but merely the law at work. It was only in the second year of Waharān, when the persecution began, that he was re-arrested and condemned to death.<sup>74</sup>

There are additional reasons to suspect the current Yazdgird martyrdom accounts. In the case of Tataq and the 10 martyrs from Bet-Garmai, mention of Yazdgird appears only in the title of the piece, and these accounts do not seem to be aware that the king had formerly been well disposed towards the Christians.<sup>75</sup> The latter, in fact, focuses on Mihrshapur as the chief culprit, who is well attested elsewhere as the persecutor under Warahrān and Yazdgird II.

Then there is the repetition of names – Adurparvah is the name of the Persian freeman in the Narse account, but a martyr from Bet Garmai. Adurparvah is also the name of a martyr from Tur Bara’in, from the period of Shapur II.<sup>76</sup> Narse of Ray is the hero of the account, but a Narse of Ray appears on the list of attendees at the synod of 420 CE. In the martyrdom of Mihrshapur, under Warahrān, his persecutor is said to have killed “Narse and Seboxt”. That persecutor was not, however, Adurbozi, as appears in our Narse account, but Ohrmazdadur.

There is reason to suspect the familiarity of the author with the historical reality. Tataq is a *domesticus*, Jacob is a *notarius* whilst the chief Zoroastrian persecutor Mihrshapur, is a *hyparchos*. Labourt commented, without, it seems, a hint of irony: “il semble que la cour de lazgerd et de Bahrām ait été organisée à la romaine”.<sup>77</sup>

There also exists an unpublished fragment of a martyrdom of a certain Shabur who, we are told at the end, “was crowned in the month of Adar, in the 18<sup>th</sup> year of king Yazdgird”.<sup>78</sup> All the rest, the dialogue and the passion, are fairly typical of the genre. This curious fragment does not fit scholars’ assumptions about when this persecution occurred. This text does not appear to have been written within the Sasanian Empire. It contains a Roman-Greek phrase that suggests the Roman Empire – *ksestos conditum*, “a pint of spiced wine” and its descriptive parts are general and offer nothing substantial to promote either its historicity or the likelihood of Sasanian provenance. This however, is not an argument to remove it from the discussion, but the reverse, it is symptomatic of the genre, and thereby exemplary in conveying the manner in which some of the martyrdoms may have been composed. In its essence it is artificial or fictional, but nevertheless it contains some authentic data. It is dated to a year in the reign of a Persian king – but the date – and the king – might just be wrong.

#### IV. Themes and Issues

After a closer look at the sources the argument for Theodoret is considerably weakened. The Syriac martyrologies are not as contemporary as had been assumed. Some play with the details, or seem distant. If both “Jacob the notary” and the “Narse” piece cannot possibly be dated earlier than 438, and Theodoret’s comments were written a decade later, we have a situation where the conviction that Yazdgird I persecuted Christianity most likely emerges some 20 or more years after his death. It

is the distance between the key sources and the events: chronological, geographical,

and political, that I would suggest deserves closer scrutiny when accounting for our data. – The main theme of these sources is the destruction of a fire temple,<sup>79</sup> and this action, itself, is perhaps the most problematic of all to reconcile with everything else we know about this period.

A rare event for Persian Christianity and here we are to accept, with the sources, at least two occurrences in a period of unprecedented tolerance. This seems odd if not incomprehensible. The Narse narrative – that is closer to the Sasanian world, is clearly quite embarrassed by the whole affair, and is little short of a closely argued apology and cautionary tale for something that should never have happened, but only occurred through a misunderstanding. In short, I believe that the Narse narrative has been composed to counter a pre-existing version. The inspiration for this pre-existing version has, I suspect, come from the Roman world and should therefore be considered in light of the Roman context.

In this period, in fact, the question of destroying pagan sanctuaries was very much on the agenda in the Roman Empire. In 435 CE Theodosius had legislated permitting such destruction<sup>80</sup> but for a long time it had, and would continue to be, the subject of keen deliberation within the Christian empire.<sup>81</sup> And this, for sure, is the theme of the two extended martyrdom texts. However, Abda, the more distant (Roman?) one, offers a more defiant Christian approach; the Narse narrative a more apologetic position. Now, it has been suggested recently that they reflect the migration of the values of Christian anti-pagan violence from the Roman Empire over to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>82</sup> It might, however, be more of a case of Romans pondering the subject through the example of Persia. Such a response may have arisen in the wake of the change in Sasanian benevolence towards Christians under Warahrān and Yazdgird II.

### Conclusions

The consensus regarding the brief period at the end of the reign of Yazdgird needs to be reassessed. The best sources supporting Yazdgird's alleged persecution were written at least 20 years after his death. Much had changed in this period. It was a new political religious reality. There had been a war. Persian tolerance for Christianity had dissipated and people were asking why, how, and who was responsible. It would seem that the view became current – but never dominant – that the change had begun already under Yazdgird I. This view seems to have originated in the Roman Empire, as part of a broader process of introspection. A new narrative was woven that blamed Christian anti-pagan aggression. The emergence of such accounts should therefore be sought in the Roman Christian discourse on active anti-pagan aggression rather than in the Sasanian Empire.<sup>83</sup>

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77, 78-79, trans. 1977). Both fifth century Syriac Christian annals, *Agathias* and *Eutychius* record this Persian perspective, alongside the achievements of Marutha in strengthening Christianity in the Persian Empire.

<sup>30</sup> The Persian church synod was held during the 21<sup>st</sup> year of the reign of Yazdgird, corresponding with the fifth year of the catholicate of Yahbalaha. Whilst the regal year would have begun on 9<sup>th</sup>

August, 419 CE, the synod was held in the winter capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and as is stated explicitly in the proceedings, it took place in the presence of the king there (Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, 277), placing the synod between the winter of 419 CE and the spring of 420 CE. The next synod, held in 424 CE under Warahrān V mentions earlier and current persecution but in general terms and it is not possible to infer from there whether there had been persecution under both Yazdgird and Warahrān. It refers to Yazdgird explicitly as having arrested Isaac (the catholicos) within its discourse on the earlier success of the western powers in extricating them from trouble under the Persians, but this refers to the period prior to the first synod in 410 CE.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Schrier, "Syriac Evidence", 77: "even in the last year of Yazdgird's reign Byzantium and Ctesiphon undoubtedly maintained normal, even friendly relations".

<sup>32</sup> On this legend see also Agathias, 4.26; Theoph. *A.M.* 5900 (80, de Boor); Cedren, 334c (586 Bonn); Zon. 13, 22 Michael Syr., 8, 1 (ii, 2 Chabot); Bar Hebr. I, 66 (Wallis-Budge; Chron. Ad. A 1234 28, and also Daudpota, "The Annals of Hamzah al-Isfahani", 71–72. On this episode see Sauerbrei, "König Jazdegerd der Sünder"; Cameron, "Agathias on the Sasanians", 149; Börm, "Prokop und die Perser", and many others.

<sup>33</sup> See Daraee, "History".

<sup>34</sup> Procopius, Wars, I, ii. Agathias, too, has only praise for Yazdgird (*Histories*, IV, 26) although for his dependence on Procopius for this period see Cameron, "Agathias", 148–151.

<sup>35</sup> Holum, *Theodosian Emperors*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> BT Zevahim 19a; BT Ketubot 61a–b.

<sup>37</sup> *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* 47, 53 (Daryaei ed., 15–16, 18).

<sup>38</sup> Such is the case with respect to the Zoroastrian exhumation. See my article, "Bury my Coffin Deep!"

<sup>39</sup> Tabari, 847–850; Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, 920–1; Y'aqubi, I 183.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g. *Mujmal al-tawārīkh*, ed. M. Š. Bahār, Tehran, n. p. A.H. 1316, 68; Pseudo-Jāhiz, Zeki Pasha, A., Djahiz, *le livre de la couronne*, Caire, 1914, 163.

<sup>41</sup> Tabari, I, 847; *Šāh-nāma*, VII, 264.

<sup>42</sup> Tabari 849, Nöldeke trans, 77; Eutychius, Poccocke, II, 78; Firdausi, Mohl, V, 418. Nöldeke surmises that the nobles assassinated him in less than mysterious circumstances, a suspicion supported by Christensen, *L'Iran*, 268, and Cameron, "Agathias", 150. Although scholars have connected his condemnation in the Persian sources with his praise in the Christian (and Jewish) sources, the Persian sources, one should note, do not relate even indirectly to his treatment of his non-Zoroastrian subjects, nor connect their criticism of him with that matter.

<sup>43</sup> Tabari 843–850.

<sup>44</sup> I am not in any way suggesting that all these sources are either historically accurate or beyond reproach. They certainly have their own issues.

<sup>45</sup> Peeters, "Une Passion arménienne", 404. This may be contrasted with Van Rompay's positive judgment concerning the value of Theodoret's account.

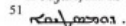
<sup>46</sup> An additional Syriac work that condemns Yazdgird I is the *Chronicle of Arbel*. We find there the following: "In his time there was a persecution, as in the time of Maran Zeka, which was hard for the Christians through the crafty plots of two criminal kings, Jezdegerd and Bahram." [16. Daniel of Arbela]. The account is very confused, however, and the credibility of the work as a whole has been the focus of much scholarly debate. For a recent discussion on this issue see Jullien, "La *Chronique d'Arbèles*".

<sup>47</sup> Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, listing Persian martyrs *sub Jezdegerd I (378–420)* [sic!] includes, in addition, S. Abd al-Masih de Singar, who, in fact, is said to have been martyred in the year 390 CE. This account has been published and also exists in Armenian and Arabic versions (*AB* 5 1887, 5–51; *AB* 44, 1926, 270–341). But it is, at any rate, quite obviously very late – written under Islam, and reflects back to the time when the Persians ruled and when Jews lived in Singar as the distant past.

<sup>48</sup> Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 170–180, based on Ms. Or. Oct. 1257 (Marburg). A small part of it is preserved in BM Rich 7200, fol. 86. A partial translation is in G. Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 36–38.

<sup>49</sup> This was early recognized for its literary qualities. Cf. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l'Église de perse*, 108–9: "une des meilleures pièces hagiographiques que contient la littérature syriaque"; Devos, "Hagiographe perse méconnu", 304.

<sup>50</sup> Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 180–184.

<sup>51</sup> 

<sup>52</sup> Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 184–188.

<sup>53</sup> On the identity and title of this person see Gignoux, "Éléments" 265.

<sup>54</sup> Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 250–253. BM MS Rich 7200, fol. 105b. A partial translation is in Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 34–35. This source appears in Armenian too, *Vitae et Passiones sanctorum selectae ex Eclogariis*, 2 vols, Venetiis, 1874, I, 1–5. See Peeters, "Une passion arménienne" for discussion and a Latin translation.

<sup>55</sup> 

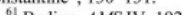
<sup>56</sup> This account is unpublished and has been ignored by most scholars. For its imminent publication see Herman, "The Passion of Shapur, martyred in the 18<sup>th</sup> year of Yazdgird with a fragment of the Life of Mar Aba Catholicos", *Journal of Semitic Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>57</sup> Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 196.

<sup>58</sup> MS Vatican 161, Bedjan *AMS* II, 535.

<sup>59</sup> Devos, "Hagiographe", 326–327. Devos' feeling of having recognized an authentic, eye-witness and thoroughly contemporary piece of testimony, is evident throughout his article. He even wonders whether the "brother" who offers the martyr a cup of water on his journey to his execution was the author, Abgar, himself. This is, of course, a topos, and it also recurs in the unpublished martyrdom of Shapur.

<sup>60</sup> This conclusion is accepted by a number of scholars. See, e.g. McDonough, "A second Constantine", 130–131.

<sup>61</sup> 

<sup>61</sup> Beqjan, *AMS* IV, 192.

<sup>62</sup> Modi, *The Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, 200–226.

<sup>63</sup> These Zoroastrian practices appear to have been known to Greek authors. See De-Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 432, 440–444. For the Christian evidence see Herman, “Bury my Coffin Deep”, 37–41.

<sup>64</sup> This, too, is a sign of distance from the Zoroastrian burial practice. Cf. Herman, “Bury my coffin deep”, 34–36

<sup>65</sup> Tabari 865. This story is also found in al-Yaqubi, *Ta'rikh*, I, 184; al-Masudi, *Muruj*, II, #612, and in detail in al-Dīnavārī, *al-Akhhbār al-tiwāl*, 58. See too, Nöldeke, Tabari, 103, n. 3, who suggests that this tale originated in an effort to provide an alternative aetiology for his by-name, Gōr. Later works, such as Neẓāmī's *Haft peykar* and Amīr-e Kosrow's *Hašt behešt* speak of him chasing an onager into a cave and disappearing. Firdowsi, however, says he died in his sleep.

<sup>66</sup> A. Shapur Shahbazi, “The Horse that Killed Yazdagerd ‘the Sinner’”.

<sup>67</sup> Devos does not consider whether this could be an *ex eventu* prophecy for Waharān.

<sup>68</sup> B.M. Lewin, *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, Haifa, 1921, 95. This suggests that R. Sherira Gaon uses the term זכרונות ספרים to refer to Gentile historical chronicles.

<sup>69</sup> Lévi, “La mort de Yazdagerd”. It has also replaced the horse, a peculiarly Zoroastrian tool of Divine justice with the more neutral dragon.

<sup>70</sup> He evoked the beginning of the martyrdom of Peroz that refers explicitly to the exhumation of the dead. Exhumation of the dead was however an on-going concern in the Sasanian era, see my “Bury my Coffin Deep”.

<sup>71</sup> Devos, himself, (“Hagiographe”, 313, n. 1) notes that a theme appearing in the account of the 10 martyrs is prominent a century later in the Passion of St. Šīrīn of *Karka de-Beth Slokh*. The Narse martyrdom account seeks to *explain* the incident of the destruction of a fire temple. It is clearly an apologetic piece relating how the event occurred through a misunderstanding. It stresses the lack of innate hostility between the kingdom and the Christian subject, as well as the confidence of the Christians in the value of the law. As such it is essentially a Sasanian piece, and it is presumably responding to an alternative version of the incident that may have been current. I suspect that such a version was manufactured in the Roman Empire. This later date of composition might correspond well with an interesting detail in this account. It is generally assumed that the chief magi, Adurboze is the same *Adhurbozed*, mentioned in Pahlavic works and described in them as a *mōbedān mōbed*. In fact, one Pahlavi work describes him explicitly as the *mōbedān mōbed* under king Yazdgird. The trouble is that it does not indicate under which of the two relevant Yazdgirds he was the *mōbedān mōbed*. From the context, some Iranologists have taken the reference to be Yazdgird II (Bulsara; Tafazzoli. Pigulevskaja) and those who have preferred Yazdgird I have not based this conclusion on independent criteria but appear to have swayed only by the assumption that the Narse martyrdom belongs to the era of Yazdgird I. See Justi, *Iranische Namenbuch*, 5; Macuch, *Das Sasanidische Rechtsbuch*, 232–233; Gignoux, “Eléments”, 258–9.

<sup>72</sup> In this monastery, according to the Chronicle of Seert, both Ahai and Yahbalaha resided prior to becoming catholicus, and one of them is said to have written a vita of this Abda. He evidently died

during the reign of Yazdgird I, and before the death of Yahbalaha, if we are to accept the account provided by the Chronicle of Seert.

<sup>73</sup> The Armenian version appears even more distant. I would like to acknowledge the kind and devoted help with this Armenian text proffered by Prof. Valentina Calzolari of the University of Geneva.

<sup>74</sup> This text mentions that he was condemned by the same persecutor who had killed Narse and Seboxt. Evidently, the reference is to two well-known martyrs, and the proposition that this is the same Narse in the other account is very appealing. This would place Narse's martyrdom under Warahrān and not Yazdgird. The account of Narse, as we noted, considers the chief magus involved in his case to be Adurbozi.

<sup>75</sup> Devos, “Hagiographe”, 306, n. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Albeit an improbable date – 318 CE. *AMS*, II, 1–39.

<sup>77</sup> Labourt, *Le christianisme*, 113, n. 4. Jacob the notary, as mentioned, was deemed firm in his faith since he came from the Roman Empire.

<sup>78</sup> See Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, 75, n. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Which has become for many scholars, accepting all the sources, a “series of attacks” on fire temples, cf. Gaddis, *There is no Crime*, 196.

<sup>80</sup> Codex Theodosianus, XVI, 10, 25 – of 14<sup>th</sup> November, 435 orders the destruction of pagan temples.

<sup>81</sup> See Gaddis, *There is no Crime*.

<sup>82</sup> As advocated by Gaddis, *There is no Crime*, 197–198, n. 180.

<sup>83</sup> If, as I suspect, Yazdgird did not persecute Christians but only Warahrān, then we must rethink the development of events that led up to the escalation of conflict between Rome and Persia at the beginning of the reign of Warahrān. If, as Holum implies, Rome embarked upon a steady decline towards “crusade” in the period close to 420, was the relationship between Rome's invasion and Warahrān's persecution one of cause or effect?