

INTRODUCTION

Marco Polo was not the only traveler to cross the width of Eurasia in the 1200s. At the very moment when Marco Polo was accompanying his father and uncle from Venice to China, two other travelers (who were more important in their time) were moving in the opposite direction. They were eastern Turks, born in China, and traveling as Christian pilgrims with the goal of reaching Jerusalem and the holy places there. They never reached that destination, but instead they played key roles in Eurasian geopolitics at a moment of rapid change. The older of the two, known as Rabban Sawma,¹ was sent as an ambassador by the Mongol rulers of Iran to the courts of European Christendom, meeting the kings of France and England as well as the new pope in Rome and the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, seeking to broker a military alliance to recapture Jerusalem from the Mamluk Empire of Egypt. His younger fellow traveler was selected to lead their eastern Christian denomination, known in English as the “Church of the East,” with its headquarters in Baghdad, under the name of Mar Yahballaha III.² As Marco Polo made his way back home to Venice, Rabban Sawma passed away at a good old age, and Yahballaha III corresponded with the pope and western kings, as he personally led the largest Christian community in Iraq and Iran through the shifting conditions of Mongol rule, during the period in which many members of the Mongol government converted to Islam. Unlike Marco Polo, neither of these eastern Turks returned home. This is the story of those two travelers and Christian leaders from East Asia who traveled westward, almost Marco Polo in reverse.

1. “Rabban” is a title of respect, literally “our chief.”

2. “Yahballaha” means “God gave,” similar to the Greek name Theodore (i.e., “gift of God”), while “Mar” is a title of honor meaning “my lord.”

This primary source is unique in many ways. We have many Latin European accounts of travels to Asia during the medieval period, but this may be the only text authored by an Asian traveler describing what he saw in Latin Europe. Out of the dozens of people who were sent as Mongol ambassadors to the popes and kings of Christendom, Rabban Sawma is the only one whose travel account is preserved, providing a unique outsider's perspective on high medieval Europe, including, among other things, an early description of the University of Paris. At a moment when the Roman church hierarchy was seeking to centralize control and root out what they considered "heresy," they welcomed Rabban Sawma with curiosity and exchanged the sacraments with a church leader from the East whom their doctrine would label as heretical. His skillful politeness enabled him to avoid contentious theological disputes, which were at that time being used so aggressively by Latin inquisitors against Jews and "heretics," without compromising his own views.

Beyond Europe, this text also reveals both the opportunities and tribulations of individuals subject to the rule of the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan. It describes some of the inner workings of that empire, alongside its diplomatic successes and failures, from the perspective of someone who had access to the Mongol royal encampment but was not writing to curry favor with the ruler. The account also details the complex relationships between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East during a period of religious transformation, as the Mongol ruling class converted to Islam and cemented the ascendancy of that religion from Anatolia to Central Asia. This unique primary source was written by a contemporary during the lifetimes of the two main characters and shortly after their deaths. The entire text is presented here, rather than only the diplomatic mission to Europe or the later Christian-Muslim strife and negotiations, in the hopes that the whole text, seen together, will provide a fuller picture than carving it up. But to understand the text, it is first necessary to know something of the political and religious context in which the events unfolded, as well as how the text took shape and was transmitted to us seven centuries later.

The Mongol Moment in World History

Some measure of how the world became interconnected as a result of Genghis Khan's conquests might be seen in the increasing number of names known across the width of Eurasia. Although it is difficult to prove, it is likely that the first person whose name was known from England to China was Jesus, since Christian missionaries from Persia entered China in the mid-600s and left written accounts of their doctrine. Only in more recent times have names of people earlier than Jesus become known more widely, such as Confucius or the Buddha, about whom Europeans knew nothing before the Mongol Empire. Other names of people connected with Jesus came alongside his, such as his mother Mary and the apostle Thomas. As a second wave, the first person *not* connected with Jesus whose name was known from England to China was probably Muhammad, since Bede wrote slanderous polemics against him in the 700s, and Muslim ambassadors and merchants came to China from the Abbasid caliphate. As the third wave, the first person connected with *neither* Jesus *nor* Muhammad whose name was known from England to China was probably Genghis Khan.

Genghis (or, better, Chinggis) Khan was acclaimed ruler of all who dwell in felt tents (including Mongols and other steppe nomads) in 1206, though some opposition remained. He began the conquest of northern China and Central Asia before he died in 1227. His son and successor Ögödei (d. 1241) finished conquering northern China and moved on to attack the southern Song dynasty, while also sending armies to attack Iran and eastern Europe. It was this last invasion, in Hungary and Poland in 1241 and 1242, that attracted the attention of western Europeans, and their diplomatic correspondence with the Mongols lasted the length of the Mongol Empire and its successor khanates. Ögödei's reign was followed by a long interregnum during which his widow, Töregene Khatun, exercised power for almost five years until their controversial son Güyük (r. 1246–48) was acclaimed as the great khan (*qaʿan*).³ After his death,

3. The basic title for a Mongol ruler is *khan* or *qan*. A “great khan” is known as a *khaghan*, *khaqan*, or *qaʿan*, depending on the system for spelling Mongolian words.

Güyük's widow Oghul Qaimish served as regent for longer than her husband had reigned, until a different branch of Genghis's growing family was able to seize power for themselves in 1251. Led by Genghis Khan's daughter-in-law Sorqaqtani Beki, the widow of Ögödei's younger brother Tolui, this faction enthroned her son Möngke (r. 1251–59), Güyük's first cousin. All subsequent great khans would be descended from Tolui and Sorqaqtani Beki. Rabban Sawma was born in the aftermath of Genghis's first Mongol invasions in northern China, while his student Rabban Mark (later known as Yahballaha III) would have been born in the 1240s, when the Mongol Empire was firmly established from China to Russia and Iran but showing the first signs of strained unity.

The great khan Möngke continued the invasions of southern China but entrusted the further conquest of the Middle East to his brother Hülegü. The latter conquered Baghdad in 1258, and his generals captured Damascus briefly in 1260, until a defeat by the Mamluk army from Egypt forced them to withdraw. But Möngke's death in 1259 led to the permanent division of the Mongol Empire, as his two other brothers, Qubilai and Ariq-böke, fought a civil war for the ability to claim the title *qa'an*. Qubilai defeated his brother and was recognized by their brother Hülegü in far-off Iran, but not by his cousins who ruled Russia and the western steppe (what became "the Golden Horde") or his cousins who ruled in Central Asia, including Ögödei's grandson Qaidu (d. 1301). Though Qubilai went on to complete the conquest of China by crushing the southern Song dynasty in 1279, the Mongol Empire had been divided into separate and often warring khanates. When Rabban Sawma and Rabban Mark set out from China for Jerusalem, they had to navigate the conflicts between the great khan Qubilai in China and the independent Mongol rulers (including Qaidu) in Central Asia.

Qubilai (d. 1294) lived and reigned a long time as the great khan in China, but Hülegü died much earlier, in 1265 (as did his chief wife, long remembered in the Middle East as the Christian queen Doquz Khatun). But Hülegü started a dynasty of rulers, known as Ilkhans



A painting of Hülegü and Doqуз Khatun, in a manuscript of the history of Rashid al-Din.

(from *il* meaning “submission” + khan) who effectively ruled Iraq and Iran independently while still nominally recognizing the supremacy of Qubilai and his successors in China, at least most of the time. In the aftermath of the Mongol Civil War, Hülegü also inaugurated the foreign policy of seeking a military alliance with western European rulers (all known as “Franks” in Middle Eastern texts) against the Mamluk Empire in Egypt and Syria, while the Golden Horde to the north made an alliance with the Mamluks against their common enemy, the Ilkhanate of Hülegü and his successors.

Hülegü’s son Abaqa (r. 1265–82) continued his father’s military and diplomatic objectives, fighting with the Chaghatai Khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde, and the Mamluks in Syria, while sending ambassadors to the Franks in Europe. He briefly corresponded with Lord Edward of England (the future King Edward I) while the latter was crusading in Palestine in 1271. Edward’s intervention could have been significant, but it was mismanaged, and for all the Europeans’ enthusiasm for the idea of recapturing Jerusalem, it would be several more centuries before they managed to bring an army to the eastern Mediterranean

coast again. It was during Abaqa's reign that Rabban Sawma and Rabban Mark arrived in the Middle East, and Rabban Mark was elevated to the patriarchate as *catholicos* Mar Yahballaha III.⁴

Abaqa was succeeded by his brother Tegüder (r. 1282–84), who had also adopted the name Ahmad when he became Muslim. Some people, then and now, expected the new ruler's Islamic religion to drastically reshape his policy, but scholars debate whether to characterize his diplomatic outreach to Egypt as conciliatory or the same old demand for submission in a new Islamic vocabulary.⁵ While the biography of Rabban Sawma and Yahballaha III presents Ahmad Tegüder as an oppressor of Christians, it also indicates that he was a tool being manipulated by others (Christian as well as Muslim) to cause harm to the *catholicos*, and other Christian sources remember Tegüder's reign more positively.⁶ In any event, Tegüder was deposed before any significant difference in policy could be realized, and he was replaced by his brother, Abaqa's son Arghun (r. 1284–91).

Arghun continued the diplomatic goals of his father and grandfather, sending multiple embassies to the Franks in what was probably the most intensive phase of Mongol-European diplomacy. When Pope Nicholas IV responded favorably, Arghun had one of his sons (Öljeitü, a future Ilkhan) baptized and given the additional name Nicholas, in order to secure the alliance. But European military assistance never arrived in the Middle East, since the popes were usually more interested in converting the Ilkhans to Roman Catholic Christianity than in providing material support to a Mongol invasion of Syria, and the European kings preferred to maintain their own local quarrels. Arghun never invaded Syria himself,

4. The Church of the East used the titles *catholicos* and patriarch interchangeably for the leader of their denomination.

5. Judith Pfeiffer, "Aḥmad Tegüder's Second Letter to Qalā'ūn (682/1283)," in Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn, eds., *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle East: Studies in Honor of John E. Woods* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 167–202.

6. Pier Giorgio Borbone, *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, trans. Laura E. Parodi (Hamburg: Tredition Verlag, 2021), 344–45.

and the armies of Mamluk Egypt captured the last crusader stronghold on the Syrian coast at Acre between Arghun's death and the selection of a new Ilkhan. Arghun's brother and successor Geikhatu (r. 1291–95) is remembered primarily for his abundant generosity and disastrous economic policy: he attempted to introduce and enforce Chinese-style paper money in his capital city, Tabriz, leading to a complete shuttering of all legal commerce until he relented. When Geikhatu was killed in a rebellion in spring 1295, he was succeeded initially by a first cousin named Baidu, another grandson of Hülegü, and then by Arghun's son Ghazan, who came from his position as governor of Khorasan (northeastern Iran) to seize the throne from Baidu.

Ghazan's reign (1295–1304) is remembered as the greatest height of the Ilkhanate's power and glory, due in no small part to modern scholars' incomparable debt to Ghazan's vizier, historian, and propagandist, Rashid al-Din Hamadani (d. 1318), who is also mentioned in the biography of Rabban Sawma and Yahballaha III. Rashid al-Din took great pains to present his ruler and patron in the most glowing terms available to him, depicting Ghazan as a pious Muslim and a reformer of both Geikhatu's corruption and the pagan ways of the Mongols. Yet Ghazan's foreign policy closely resembled that of his predecessors, as he continued to seek a Frankish alliance against Mamluk Egypt. Unlike his father Arghun and his uncle Geikhatu, Ghazan invaded Syria no fewer than three times, achieving battlefield success but never managing to secure territorial gains. Ghazan's reign began with a turbulent period within the Ilkhanate, as he sought to root out the remaining supporters of his rival Baidu, and Christian sources recall the first eighteen months of his reign as a period of persecution, in which churches were confiscated and people were forced to convert to Islam. This period of violence is blamed in this source on Ghazan's supporter, the emir Nawruz, who was also Muslim and had earlier rebelled against Ghazan when the future Ilkhan was still governor of Khorasan. When Nawruz fell from the ruler's grace in 1297, he was hunted down and executed. The remainder of Ghazan's reign might well have seemed like a wonderful respite to both Christians and Muslims after the upheavals of the previous several years. Ghazan died at the age of thirty-two in 1304, with no sons, and was buried in a

monumental mausoleum he had constructed outside of the capital city of Tabriz.

The Mongol nobles respected his wishes to enthrone his younger brother Öljeitü, then only twenty-two years old, after him. Though he had earlier been baptized, in service of his father Arghun's diplomacy with western Europe, by 1304 Öljeitü had become Muslim. He reportedly sponsored religious debates at his court between Muslims and non-Muslims, and even between Sunnis and Shiites. During his reign, peace was concluded among the four Mongol khanates that had fractured after the Mongol Civil War of the 1260s, a fact that Öljeitü announced in a letter to the king of France, and the Ilkhan continued seeking a western European alliance against the Mamluks in Egypt. Öljeitü invaded Syria again in 1312, but less effectively even than Ghazan's temporary successes. He constructed a new capital city at Sultaniyya, as well as a monumental mausoleum there that is still standing.

Öljeitü died in 1316 at the age of thirty-four and was succeeded officially by his young son Abu Sa'id (r. 1317–35), then only twelve years old. Various Mongol commanders gained power and competed for influence due to the Ilkhan's youth, but especially the "emir of emirs" ("commander of commanders") Chupan. Factionalism weakened the Ilkhanate, and Chupan stayed busy putting down rebellions of various emirs and defeating invasions from the Golden Horde and the Chaghatai Khanate, until Chupan himself rebelled against Abu Sa'id but was defeated in 1327. Abu Sa'id (and Chupan) had already signed a treaty ending the Ilkhanate's long-running war with Mamluk Egypt in 1322, which simultaneously ended the Ilkhan's search for an alliance with the fractious rulers of western Europe. European merchants and missionaries continued to pass through on occasion, and as late as the death of Timur Lenk (1405), some European powers held out hope of a "Mongol alliance" against "the Muslims" (though most western Mongols were now Muslim as well), yet no alliance ever materialized. When Abu Sa'id himself died in 1335 at thirty years old, he had no sons, brothers, or even first cousins. Other than his sister Sati Beg, who had been married to Chupan and was briefly acclaimed as the reigning queen (as a puppet in the power of Chupan's family), Abu Sa'id's closest relative was an elderly

second cousin, the grandson of Geikhatu, whose father had been executed by Öljeitü. There was thus no consensus candidate for the throne of the Ilkhanate, and the rival factions of the Chupanid and Jalayirid clans put forward various nominal rulers as puppets under their respective control, but none of them achieved real power or widely recognized legitimacy. The Chupanid clan was eliminated by the Golden Horde in the 1350s, while the Jalayirids declared their independence and ruled from Baghdad, and other parts of the Ilkhans' vast lands were taken over by other new dynasties. The Mongol moment was over.

The Church of the East

Though many of us forget it now, Christianity was never only a Western religion. Christianity spread eastward across Asia just as rapidly as it spread westward across Europe. Whether or not the tradition of the apostle Thomas preaching in India is correct, Christians in Mesopotamia were sufficiently numerous to attract opposition from state-sponsored Zoroastrianism by 275, to have a metropolitan (an archbishop) residing in the Central Asian trading capital of Merv (Marw) in what is now Turkmenistan before 410, and for Christianity to be preached in China with the emperor's permission by 638, within a generation or two of Augustine of Canterbury being sent to England. Western European Christianity from an early period translated Greek into Latin, while the Christianity of Iraq and farther east used Syriac, a dialect of the widely distributed Aramaic language (of which Jesus himself spoke a different dialect). Syriac is identified as the variety of Aramaic spoken in Edessa, a Hellenistic cultural capital in northern Mesopotamia. Just as Western tradition ascribed the founding of their church to Peter and Paul in Rome, the tradition of the Syriac churches maintained the story that Christianity came to them through the apostle Thomas, his disciple Addai who went to Edessa, and Addai's disciple Mari (not Mary), who founded a church in Kokhe, one of the close cluster of cities that included Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Persian dynasty (224–651 CE) in southern Iraq. The "Liturgy of the Apostles" attributed to Addai and Mari continues

to be celebrated in this denomination today, and the church (or throne) of Mar Mari in Kokhe continued to be necessary for enthroning new patriarchs of this denomination even after they moved their residence to Baghdad (founded as an Islamic capital in 762) and later Maragha (in northwestern Iran, which became a capital city of the Mongols).

Like other branches of Christianity, the Church of the East divided Christians into various categories, including clergy, monks (who might also be clergy) or nuns, and laypeople, the largest category, who were neither clergy nor monks or nuns.⁷ The most common clergy were priests and deacons, found in every church, and some additional ranks of lower clergy were created, such as subdeacons and readers, each with their role to play in church services. As in every branch of Christianity other than the western European one, priests and deacons could be married and raise families.

Alongside the clergy, and overlapping with them, were the monks (and sometimes nuns). Syriac tradition reports that the practice of monks living together (cenobitic monasticism) was transplanted from Egypt to Syria by Mar Awgen in the 300s CE, though the actual origins of monasticism seem to be rather messier. Regardless of the movement's origins, in the medieval period monks were recognized by having a special haircut (a "tonsure"), wearing a special outfit (a "habit"), withdrawing from normal society, refusing to marry (celibacy), and refusing to acquire wealth (poverty). Most monks lived in monasteries with other monks, where they would live in a "cell" (Greek *kellos*, Syriac *qlitā*), but some monks lived alone as "recluses" either out in an uninhabited area or locked within their cell in the monastery and never leaving. Wilder varieties of monks such as anchorites (who moved from place to place without settling permanently) or stylites (who lived on the top of pillars) were occasionally observed. By their prayers, monks were thought to be powerful spiritual intercessors with God, for the guidance and protection of Christians. But

7. It is important to recognize, though scholars have generally failed to do so, that William of Rubruck's claim that all males were ordained priests even while still babies in the cradle is baseless slander intended to delegitimize his ecclesiastical rivals, not sober ethnographic reporting.

their decision to opt out of carrying on the family name and lineage also made the monks' way of life controversial with their parents.

Monks could be priests, but most were not, and priests could be monks, but most were not. But above the priests in the church hierarchy were the upper clergy, who all had to be monks as well. Bishops had responsibility primarily for a city and its surrounding region, although by the Mongol period there were also bishops appointed for nomadic groups and large areas with many cities in East Asia. A special kind of bishop, with bishops under his authority, was the metropolitan, corresponding partly to an archbishop and partly to a cardinal in western European Christianity. Above the metropolitans, at the apex of the hierarchy of the Church of the East, was the *catholicos*, the patriarch who functioned for Eastern Syriac Christians as the pope functioned for Western (Latin) Christians. The *catholicos* could also appoint special agents to represent him in places to which he was unable to travel; these representatives were sometimes called *chorepiscopoi* (from Greek), *periodeutai* (also from Greek), or “overseers” (Syriac *sā ʿōrē*, singular *sā ʿōrā*), and they roughly correspond to papal legates in western Europe. This could be a temporary appointment or a permanent one, and this was the office to which Rabban Sawma was appointed as “general overseer” (*sā ʿōrā gāwānāyā*) when Yahballaha became *catholicos*. When a *catholicos* died, a nearby bishop administered the patriarchal household, while the metropolitan of Elam (in southeastern Iran) convened the nearby metropolitans in order to elect a successor. As the biography translated here makes plain, the clergy and laypeople of the city of Baghdad also participated in the deliberations.

The “cells” of *catholicos* patriarchs and of metropolitans were more than a single bedroom inhabited by the church leader alone, and therefore the many occurrences of “cell” in this biography, when referring to the residence of a high-ranking cleric, have been translated instead as “residence,” often clarified as the patriarchal or metropolitan’s residence when that is implicit in the Syriac text. The day-to-day operations of the “patriarchal cell” were managed by one or more “deacons” (who could also be priests or even a bishop), and many other people might live in the “patriarchal cell” at any given time. Metropolitans and bishops who visited him would stay in the “patriarchal cell,” and there were often

“disciples” who could run errands for the *catholicos* and serve practical functions, while being trained as monks and perhaps for future roles as bishops. A *catholicos* or metropolitan was also supposed to be generous to orphans, and often collected small children without families to live with him, some of whom became “disciples of the patriarchal cell.” Some such members of the entourage of a *catholicos* should be presumed to be always present, and Yahballaha’s biography makes more frequent mention of the younger occupants of the patriarchal residence than other medieval texts typically do.

Some readers will want to know what makes the Church of the East “different” from “normal” Christianity, but such a question of course presumes that western Christianity is “normal,” a point the Church of the East today would likely dispute. Most differences would have been cultural, as the Church of the East developed in Iraq and farther east, in cultural contexts far removed from the late Roman Empire and the warrior culture that slowly replaced it, and direct contact between the easternmost and westernmost edges of Christianity was exceedingly rare before the Mongol period. Finicky theologians may wish to label the Church of the East “Nestorian” due to their failure to condemn the “errors” of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (deposed 431), and indeed the Church of the East considered Nestorius to be a saint, though not a very important one for their theological tradition. After the (western) Council of Chalcedon in 451 redefined Aristotelian philosophical jargon in order to say that there are two “natures” but only one hypostasis in the incarnate Christ, Syriac Christians maintained the older Aristotelian usage but disagreed how it applied to Jesus: Western Syriac Christian leaders (polemically labeled “Jacobites,” today called Syriac Orthodox) asserted that there was only one hypostasis (Syriac *qnōmā*) and *therefore* only one nature of God incarnate, while the Eastern Syriac Christian leaders (the Church of the East) insisted that Jesus has two natures, one divine and one human, unified permanently, and therefore two hypostases (Syriac *qnōmē*), but only one person (Greek *prosōpon*, Syriac *paršōpā*) in Christ. The Armenian churches eventually (mostly) came to agree with the Western Syriac formulation. Such muddy depths of theology were rarely relevant for the function of the churches, except for identifying their relationships

with other Christians who followed rival bishops. In the biography, such precise theological distinctions occur only in the section titled “Rabban Sawma’s Creed, Which the Cardinals Requested from Him,” and curiously the learned cardinals failed to recognize Rabban Sawma’s expression of what they would have considered the heresy of Nestorianism. Instead they preferred to examine him regarding their fashionable theological controversy of the day, whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (the usual Greek position), from the Son alone (a bizarre position invented by these cardinals as a test for Rabban Sawma), or from both (the relatively new official position of the Roman papacy). As modern scholars are increasingly realizing, such theological niceties have loomed larger in the obsessions of theological pedants than in the practical experience of most Christians.⁸

The Church of the East is the only one of the ancient branches of Christianity never to have been a state-sponsored religion, though it did benefit from nonexclusive royal patronage from Sasanian *shahanshahs*,⁹ Islamic caliphs and sultans, and Mongol Ilkhans. Farther east, away from Muslim rulers, Christianity spread among the nomads of the Eurasian steppe. The Kereyid (or Kerait) tribe was known to be largely Christian, from which tribe came Genghis Khan’s first protector (named Toghril), as well as the mother of Hülegü and Qubilai and their brothers (Sorqaqtani Beki), Hülegü’s queen (Doquz Khatun), and many others highly placed in Mongol society. The Önggüd Turkic tribe, into which Rabban Mark was born and perhaps Rabban Sawma likewise, was also known to contain many Christians. While Christianity experienced setbacks in China itself during the chaos following the fall of the Tang dynasty, it again flourished in China following the Mongol conquests and with the patronage of the great khans. When the cardinals in Rome expressed surprise that Christianity was found so far to the east, Rabban Sawma gently chided them for their ignorance of the wider world.

8. Jack B. V. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020).

9. The Persian emperor’s title *shahanshah* means “king of kings.”

Christian-Muslim Relations

From its origins to the present day, Islam has existed in contact with other religions, and perhaps none of them more intensively than Christianity. Yet the interactions between Christians and Muslims are often misunderstood today, due to overly general attempts to characterize these interactions as either unceasing conflict (a “clash of civilizations”) or generally harmonious coexistence (often termed *convivencia*). These two frameworks do more to advance modern political agendas than to improve our understanding of the intertwined history of the two largest world religions. One can find as many examples of violence or peacefulness as desired, but the reality was much more complicated than either characterization admits.

While westerners today often think “Christianity” refers first to medieval European Christendom, medieval Muslims in the Middle East often thought of “Christians” much closer at hand than faraway Europe. There was almost no religious segregation in the medieval Middle East, and under the powerful Abbasid caliphs of 700s and 800s CE, Christians often served as government bureaucrats and royal physicians. When Muslims employing non-Muslims became controversial, the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861) issued an edict prohibiting everyone *other than the caliph* from hiring Christians. The prohibition did not work. Most of Greek medicine and philosophy were translated into Arabic in this period by Christian (and some Jewish) translators, and it is through these translations that Aristotle was eventually reintroduced to western European thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas. At the same time that the caliphs were waging wars against the Byzantine Empire, they were presiding over a multireligious court in Baghdad. As the empire of the Abbasid caliphs waned and fragmented after 900 CE, and especially as the (Muslim) Seljuk Turks conquered most of the caliphate and much of the Byzantine Empire after 1050 CE, previously customary ways of Christians and Muslims interacting needed to be renegotiated with new rulers, often on a more local geographical scale.

Under Muslim rulers, various theories were proposed of the proper relationships between Muslims and Christians in society. The most

tenacious of these was the collection of *jizya*, a discriminatory tax on non-Muslim individuals that was regarded as humiliating, and was mandated in the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book. A separate set of ideas, independent of the Qur'an, included the wearing of distinctive clothing (Arabic *ghiyār*), which for Christians in the period shortly before the Mongol invasions usually took the form of a wide belt (Arabic *zunnār*, from Greek *zōnariōn*). In reality, enforcement of clothing differentiation and other measures was often haphazard and inconsistent throughout the medieval era. While the conquests of the pagan Mongols swept away these ideas for a time, as the Mongols converted to Islam, their (non-Mongol) Muslim advisors increasingly advocated for the restoration of such discriminatory policies and a return to the government-recognized supremacy of Islam over other religions as practiced by pre-Mongol rulers.

But the Christians under Mongol rule sometimes had other ideas. The actual process by which the *jizya* and the wide belt were reenacted and enforced in practice continued to be inconsistent until the end of the Ilkhanate, but they were sometimes required and much loathed by the Christians subject to them. When Ghazan came to the throne, Christians were again required to pay the *jizya* and wear wide belts, but then the requirements were abolished again after his chief supporter emir Nawruz fell from favor. The *jizya* and differential clothing requirements were reinstated under Öljeitü, but then temporarily lifted again after appeals from multiple Christian leaders. More dramatically, these conflicting Christian and Muslim ideas about the relationship between Mongol imperial rule and religious hierarchy provide the background to the two sieges of Christians in Arbil mentioned in this primary source. The Mongol armies included non-Mongol units, among which were groups of soldiers trained to fight in the mountains (here called *qāyājis*), unlike the Mongols themselves who fought best in open grasslands. Many if not all of these “mountaineers” were recruited from Christian populations (Georgian, Armenian, Syriac) in the highlands between what is today eastern Turkey and northwestern Iran, and as loyal fighters in the service of the Mongol khans, they no doubt felt superior to civilians, even Muslim civilians, in the cities of the Ilkhanate. In 1297 and again in

1310, trouble arose between these *qāyājis* and Muslims in Arbil, a city in what is today Iraqi Kurdistan.

In 1297, after eighteen months of persecution of Christians that the author of this text blames on the Muslim Mongol emir Nawruz, the Mongol ruler Ghazan decided to arrest and execute this supporter who had helped put him on the throne in 1295, but the task turned out to be more difficult than anticipated and took six months of hunting to capture the fugitive. During the same spring and summer, according to this text, Muslims in the city of Arbil decided to destroy a Christian church located in the city's well-fortified citadel, a fortress large enough to contain not only soldiers but also a civilian residential population. But the church was defended by the Christian *qāyājis*, in the process of which they shot at and killed "a famous man" (unidentified, but perhaps a Mongol). This was interpreted not only by the Muslims but also by the local Mongol garrison as an act of rebellion against the Ilkhanate, and the forces outside laid siege to the Christians in the citadel. The people besieged in the citadel faced the difficulty of not being able to present their explanation of the conflict at court, so the ruler heard only the viewpoint of their enemies. It took the capture and execution of Nawruz, careful rhetoric and extensive negotiations by Yahballaha III, and large sums of money to accomplish a settlement of the crisis. In a frankly surprising show of mercy, which the author attributes to divine intervention, Ghazan allowed the Christians to remain in the citadel, creating a situation in which the population of Arbil was partially religiously segregated, with most people in the lower city Muslim and most people in the citadel Christian.

Thirteen years later, a similar crisis in the same location ended much more violently, the story of which occupies a large portion of the end of this narrative. Unlike the earlier crisis after the upheavals of Ghazan's early reign, in 1310 Öljeitü's reign was secure, but Yahballaha III now had less influence on the Mongol court. In recent years he had spent more time away from the royal encampment, as he was getting older and finding constant travel more taxing. The author also blames Öljeitü's Islam for this loss of influence (implausibly, since Ghazan was likewise Muslim) by claiming that Öljeitü did not summon

Yahballaha to court like his predecessor had. Nevertheless, the author does concede that when Yahballaha III visited the royal encampment, he was honored by the Mongol ruler, though allegedly “not from the heart.” The author also engages in conspiratorial thinking, choosing to believe that all Muslims were longing to destroy the Christian community in the Arbil citadel, as they had allegedly attempted and failed to accomplish in 1297, despite the fact that his own account includes several Muslim Mongols (such as Chupan) who tried to help the besieged Christians in the citadel. The author (who was likely in Arbil at the start of the crisis, if the hypothesis of his identity is correct) also blames the restive Christian “mountaineers” (*qāyājis*) stationed in the citadel for infighting and complaining against their commander, which prompted Öljeitü to replace him with Nasir Dilqandi, a Muslim commander and the person who prompted the crisis. Finally, the author sees in the catastrophe divine judgment on the sins of the Christians living in the Arbil citadel.

Conflict between the *qāyājis* and the new commander Nasir Dilqandi led him to label them rebels, which was confirmed when the Christian *qāyājis* resisted a command from Öljeitü to leave the citadel of Arbil in March 1310. The author faults the Christians and even Yahballaha III himself for failing to go to the royal encampment to explain the situation, which might have averted the catastrophe. Attempts to reach a negotiated settlement, such as ended the earlier crisis in 1297, nearly succeeded in resolving the situation in late April, in mid-May, and again in late June, but ultimately the Ilkhans’ commands to end the siege without harm to the besieged Christians of the citadel failed to prevent a massacre, and the citadel was taken back under Mongol control at the beginning of July 1310. Empires then as now regarded any perceived rebellion as requiring a serious response, and while the author of this primary source presents the conflict as one between Christians and Muslims, it is clear that the Mongol commanders and rulers viewed the issue as rebellion by the inhabitants of the Arbil citadel against Mongol rule itself. That those rebellious inhabitants were Christian was considered irrelevant by some Mongols, and by others, as further proof of their disloyalty.

Rabban Sawma and Mar Yahballaha III

In the context of the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan, the Church of the East, and the long trajectory of relations between Christians and Muslims, two men born in what is today China crossed the width of Asia and played a key role in politics and religion in the Middle East. The joint biography translated here is not the only primary source for their lives, since they were noticed by their contemporaries. A short overview of their lives, as known from this and other texts, might help prepare readers to understand the biography that was produced.

The older of the two was named Sawma, a name that means “fasting” or refers to the church season of Lent, preceding Easter. He was born near what became Beijing, though at the time he was born, that capital city had not yet been founded by the Mongols. The biography refers to Sawma and his younger follower as “eastern Turks,” while other sources label them “Uyghurs”; it is likely that Middle Eastern sources were not extraordinarily precise in distinguishing ethnicities in East Asia. But he was the only child of older parents, conceived with difficulty (unless that is a trope) and raised as a Christian, who withdrew from the normal expectations of marrying and carrying on the family line in order to become a hermit monk. His fame as a Christian holy man seems to have attracted a follower named Mark, born around 1244 to a family in the city of Kosheng, in the region inhabited by the Önggüd Turks, and the two of them decided to set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem around 1275. Some sources, though not all, say that the pair were in fact commanded to travel to Jerusalem on behalf of Qubilai, the great khan (*qaʿan*), a detail omitted in this biography. The journey for the two monks across Central Asia took them across war zones and was more difficult than either expected, so that entering a monastery in northeastern Iran felt like being reborn.

These two pilgrims reached Iraq, but there was no available route onward to Jerusalem, due to ongoing warfare between the Mongol Ilkhans, who ruled Iran and Iraq, and the Mamluk Empire, which ruled Egypt and Syria, including Jerusalem. Forced to abandon their pilgrimage, they lived in monasteries in Iraq and caught the attention of the *catholicos* of the time, Denha, who recognized the value of having church leaders who

understood the Mongols' language and customs. He involved them in his relationships with the Ilkhan Abaqa (d. 1282) and ultimately decided to send them back to East Asia to be regional leaders of their Christian denomination. Thus in 1279 he ordained Rabban Mark as the metropolitan of Ong and Katai (i.e., the Önggüd lands and northern China), with the new name Mar Yahballaha, and the *catholicos* ordained Rabban Sawma as a "general overseer" to assist the new metropolitan. Yet by that time, the path back across Central Asia was unsafe, due to warfare between the Ilkhanate and the Chaghatai Khanate, so the two travelers continued to be stuck in Iraq. After the *catholicos* Denha died in 1281, the metropolitans of the Church of the East met in Baghdad and chose Yahballaha to be his replacement, explicitly due to his familiarity with the Mongols, and he was confirmed as the new *catholicos* by Abaqa, who granted him an annual stipend. When Abaqa died in 1282, he was succeeded as Ilkhan by his son Tegüder (known as Ahmad in the biography translated here), who was a Muslim. Tegüder's relationship with Yahballaha III was initially more strained, and the annual stipend was discontinued. The author of the biography blames Tegüder's Islam for the tension but also indicates the roles played by ambitious Christian leaders who sought to get Yahballaha deposed, as well as Muslim government officials. By contrast, other Christian texts from the time remember Tegüder more favorably. In any event, Tegüder was ousted in 1284 by the rebellion of his brother Arghun.

Under Arghun, Rabban Sawma reached the pinnacle of his fame. In pursuit of an alliance with European crusaders against their common enemy, the Mamluk Empire in Egypt and Syria, Arghun sent a series of diplomatic missions to the Franks in western Europe. Rabban Sawma was sent as an ambassador in 1287, only to discover that the pope had died earlier that year, which prevented him from completing his mission until a new pope was elected in early 1288. After visiting the kings of France and England (the former in Paris, the latter located in southern France),¹⁰ Rabban Sawma spent the winter in Genoa, the home of

10. The Plantagenet dynasty which ruled England at the time also governed the duchy of Aquitaine in southwestern France under the sovereignty of the French monarchy.

one of his fellow ambassadors, until he received word of the election of Pope Nicholas IV, to whom he delivered the letters, messages, and gifts from Arghun and Yahballaha. They stayed in Rome through Easter of that year, then returned to Arghun in Tabriz, carrying gifts and letters from the pope and the European kings. As part of this diplomacy, after Rabban Sawma returned, Arghun commanded Yahballaha III to baptize the Ilkhan's young son Öljeitü, giving him the additional name Nicholas, in honor of the new pope. Yahballaha III continued to correspond with later popes, of which two of his letters to Boniface VIII survive.

In addition to this diplomatic activity, Yahballaha III and Rabban Sawma were involved in building churches and monasteries. Yahballaha renovated and enlarged a church in Maragha early in Arghun's reign, and when Rabban Sawma returned from Europe, Arghun endowed a tent church within the Mongol royal encampment, which moved with the rest of the royal household. After Arghun's death, during the reign of his famously generous brother Geikhatu (r. 1291–95), Rabban Sawma retired from the annual nomadic movement of the royal camp and built another church in Maragha. Rabban Sawma passed away in Baghdad on January 10, 1294, and was buried in the "Court of the Romans," the residence of the earlier *catholicos* patriarchs of the Church of the East. Later that year, Yahballaha began building a monastery just outside Maragha.

When Geikhatu was killed in early 1295, a more difficult period developed for Yahballaha, as Geikhatu was briefly succeeded by his cousin Baidu, who favored Christians, but by September Baidu himself was defeated and executed by Arghun's son Ghazan, who was Muslim and had been put on the throne by a Muslim Mongol emir named Nawruz. Various sources report confiscations of church buildings and violence against Christians (and, incidentally, Buddhists) in cities across the Ilkhanate during the first eighteen months of Ghazan's reign, as the new ruler consolidated his power and the loyalties of Christians were suspected to favor his defeated rival Baidu. Yahballaha faced repeated violence and extortion from various individuals and groups during this time, with occasional respites when he was able to claim protection from more powerful patrons. But after Nawruz fell from Ghazan's grace in 1297,

Yahballaha received more consistent honor and gifts from the Ilkhan, allowing him to rebuild his earlier church and monastery at Maragha. It is during Ghazan's reign that Yahballaha seems to be most consistently traveling with the royal camp, even celebrating the Mongol New Year in the city of al-Hilla in southern Iraq.

After Ghazan died in 1304, he was succeeded by his brother Öljeitü, who had become a Muslim in the years since he had been baptized by Yahballaha III. The *catholicos* seems to have had a more distant relationship with the royal encampment after 1304, as he established a new patriarchal residence ("cell") in the citadel of the city of Arbil in northern Iraq and spent increasing amounts of time there. Thus he was in the citadel itself at the outbreak of the crisis of 1310, and he participated in various attempts to resolve the crisis peacefully. He spent much of that period as a prisoner of the Mongol commander in charge of ending the standoff (one way or another), part of the time locked into the citadel itself, and part of it in a village nearby. In any event he watched in horror as the situation went from bad to worse, and he was unable to effectually rescue the Christians of the city. Following that disaster, he again went to the royal camp and received honor from Öljeitü and other members of the Mongol royal family, but afterward he reportedly withdrew to the monastery outside Maragha that he had built, where he died on November 15, 1317.

The Author and Composition of the Text

The author is not named in the manuscripts and does not identify himself in the text, so our knowledge of the author is in the first instance based on clues within the text. The author begins his biography of these two church leaders by an extensive theological meditation on divine providence, and he was so familiar with the variable hymns of the church services that he often gives the date of events not according to the month and day of the calendar, but according to the Sunday on which a particular hymn is to be chanted in the liturgy. He indicates that Rabban

Sawma's own travel account contained much more than he translated into Syriac, but the notes from that journey included in his text focus primarily on relics, church architecture, and the papal liturgies of the Easter season in Rome. When the siege of the Christians in the citadel of Arbil ends disastrously, the author laments in words taken directly from the biblical book of Lamentations, rephrased to refer to "the church." With the ability to compose in Syriac and at least to read Persian (to be able to translate Rabban Sawma's travelogue), the author clearly was a priest or other church leader in the denomination of Yahballaha III and Rabban Sawma, the Church of the East.

Beyond that is guesswork, but guesses can sometimes be confirmed by reexamining the evidence. Heleen Murre-van den Berg first proposed that the unnamed author was none other than Mar Yahballaha's successor as *catholicos*, Timothy II.¹¹ She observed that the metropolitan of Arbil during the 1310 siege plays a large role in the narrative but is the only significant figure in the text who is not named, and we know from another source that Timothy II had been the metropolitan of Arbil, named Joseph, before his election as *catholicos*.¹² Murre-van den Berg proposes that the extensive discussion of the metropolitan's ultimately thwarted attempts to rescue the Christians of Arbil make this text a defense of that church leader against criticism.¹³ I would add that not only is the metropolitan of Arbil the only major character not named, his name is deliberately suppressed: he is once referred to by Yahballaha as "Metropolitan *so-and-so* of this place."¹⁴ This is the only use of "so-and-so" (Syriac *plān*) in the whole text; other minor characters

11. Heleen Murre-van den Berg, "The Church of the East in Mesopotamia in the Mongol Period," in Roman Malek with Peter Hofrichter, eds., *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 391–93.

12. Herman G. B. Teule, "The Synod of Timotheos II—1318," in Alberto Melloni and Ephrem Ishac, eds., *The General Councils of the Eastern Christian Churches* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2023), 2:1455.

13. Murre-van den Berg, "The Church of the East in Mesopotamia," 392.

14. See p. 133 of the translation. Italics added for emphasis.

are simply unnamed. Obviously Yahballaha III knew the metropolitan's name, and given the author's extensive reporting of the event and naming every other major participant, he must have known as well. But in the Syriac literary tradition, it was considered boasting to write one's own name in one's book, and suppressing one's name was a mark of humility appropriate for a monk or church leader. Further, this metropolitan of Arbil is the only person other than Yahballaha whose interior thoughts are reported in the narrative. While it may be impossible to prove conclusively that Timothy II, the former metropolitan of Arbil, is the author of this biography, it seems by far the most plausible explanation of these odd features of the text.

Not much else is known about Timothy II, however. He had been bishop of Mosul before he became metropolitan of Arbil, though it is unknown when he assumed either office. He was elected *catholicos* of the Church of the East in 1318, but the date of his death is as unknown as the date of his birth. Based on dating formulas in surviving manuscripts, he seems to have been still in office in 1328, but his successor Denha II was consecrated as the *catholicos* in 1336, so he must have died before then. Of Timothy II's acts in office, all that is known is that upon becoming *catholicos* he held a council to reform the church, whose decisions are recorded, and at some point he composed a commentary on the seven sacraments in Syriac. The text of this story mentions that the metropolitan of Arbil had a younger brother, but nothing else is known about him.

The biography contains evidence that it was composed over a long period of time. Of course Rabban Sawma composed his travel account in Persian during or immediately after his return from western Europe in 1288, and the abridged Syriac translation of Rabban Sawma's account, which is included in this text, occasionally preserves a "we" from the Persian source, which does not reflect the author of the Syriac biography. Yet when the Syriac text describes Rabban Sawma's church, it says, "To this day he is its glory, and prayers and offerings are continual in it," which may suggest that this description was first penned before Rabban Sawma's death in 1294, though perhaps this means merely that the glory of that particular church is having had such an eminent founder. More concrete evidence is the use of parenthetical benedictions, asking for

the Ilkhan Ghazan (d. 1304), the emir Irinjīn (d. 1319), and the emir of emirs Chupan (d. 1327) to be “preserved in life,” which suggests that the text was already being composed during the lifetime of Ghazan (before 1304), even though it continued being composed until after the death of Mar Yahballaha in 1317. Given that the composition of the text spread over at least a couple decades, the place of its composition probably similarly varied, but as Heleen Murre-van den Berg observed, after Rabban Sawma’s return from Europe the horizons of the text constrict to Iraq and northwestern Iran, with special focus on Arbil. The text was probably composed partly in northern Iraq and partly in northwestern Iran.

The text fits uneasily within a few different genres. On one level, it is a joint biography of two special monks who rise to positions of leadership within the church hierarchy, and the first portion of the text reads like many other saints’ lives and hagiographical texts, complete with tropes of overcoming worldly obstacles in order to fulfill one’s monastic vocation, and the devout desire to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The beginning of their pilgrimage introduces another relevant genre, the travel account, which follows first their itinerary from China to the Middle East and then Rabban Sawma’s travels to western Europe, providing some details about what they saw and whom they met along the way. Yet they never reached Jerusalem. Instead, hagiographic glorification gives way to a political biography of Yahballaha III under Mongol rule, tracing his shifting relationships with the successive Ilkhans governing Iran and Iraq, from Abaqa (d. 1282) until Öljeitü (d. 1316). But then more than a fifth of the text is dedicated to one episode, the siege of the Christians in the citadel of Arbil in 1310, an episode in which the *catholicos* plays a significant (and largely negative) role, but he is not always the center of the narrative action. Here the author shifts fully into the lament genre, mourning the destruction of his Christian community, including castigating the Christians for their sins and extensively echoing the biblical book of Lamentations. The last seven years of the *catholicos*’s life are reported tersely, as an afterthought. So the text is a biography, but one whose focus occasionally drifts and incorporates other genres.

The audience and purpose of the text need to be understood in light of its composition. As a text authored in Syriac, its primary audience

would be those who could read such a language, which by the Mongol period would be primarily limited to clergy and their family members. In the early stages of the composition, during the reign of Ghazan, when Rabban Sawma and Yahballaha III had corresponded with popes and built elaborate churches and monasteries, the purpose of this narrative was undoubtedly to glorify the two protagonists as holy monks guided by God who led the church, and the *catholicos* in particular held on to the faith even while suffering tortures from his enemies in the early 1280s and again in 1295. Yet the narrator also criticizes Yahballaha's naivete at several points, especially during the 1310 siege of the citadel of Arbil, which suggests that the political biography can be read for its lessons on what to imitate and what not to imitate, even in the hero of the story. The account of the metropolitan's actions during that same siege serves to vindicate his attempts to rescue the situation, even though they were ultimately unsuccessful, and that portion of the text may serve as a defense for Yahballaha's successor. Ultimately, Yahballaha's conclusion, "I am tired of serving the Mongols," may serve as a warning to churchmen of the dangers of seeking too close a relationship with political power, especially as the Mongol rulers turned to Islam.¹⁵

These reflections on genre, audience, and purpose need to shape all assessment of the historical value of this source. Any text that covers from China in the 1220s to Europe in the 1280s to Iraq in the 1310s will necessarily be heterogeneous. The author's information about the family background and upbringing of Rabban Sawma and Mar Yahballaha was necessarily conveyed by the protagonists themselves, but then reworked in light of the conventions of saints' lives as a genre, such as parental opposition to children becoming monks. Rabban Sawma's diplomatic journey to Europe contains all the pitfalls and potential usefulness of travelogues: they report details that the locals might not have considered noteworthy (such as architectural and agricultural details), while also

15. If this interpretation is accurate, it may also explain the author's decision to omit any reference to Qubilai sending Rabban Sawma and Rabban Mark to Jerusalem, as that would tie their travel to worldly Mongol authority rather than to independent spiritual inspiration.

being unable to distinguish which of the things witnessed were typical and which were unusual. The long narrative of the siege of the citadel of Arbil highlights aspects that fit the author's lament, such as the sinfulness or neglect of the Christians, the demoniacal enmity he ascribes to the Muslims, and the justice of divine action in bringing this punishment upon them. In order to use this biography most profitably as the rich historical source that it is for politics, religion, and society across the width of Eurasia, it needs to be read critically.

Being Polite or Its Opposite

Being polite was essential in the medieval Middle East, and it shaped everything written in that period, in ways that defy translation into English. For example, when addressing someone politely it is important to highlight their high rank, virtue, splendor, power, and so forth, meaning that a common way of saying "you" was to say "your fatherhood" or "your holiness." English speakers still do this in fossilized phrases by addressing kings as "your majesty" and judges as "your honor," though perhaps surprisingly, in this biography speakers do not use this form of speech to address kings, preferring instead to say, "O king, live forever!" Conversely, when referring to oneself, it was important to emphasize one's lowliness, unworthiness, inability, servility, and so on; one way of saying "I" is by referring to "my weakness." My own inability to render these into clear English in a way that will immediately communicate the intent to the uninitiated has caused the following translation to replace most such polite phrases with "you" and "I," respectively.

Another feature of medieval Middle Eastern politeness was to address someone as "my lord" or "my lady," and to refer to oneself as "your servant." While fossilized traces of this again survive into modern English, in fact its usage in medieval Syriac exceeds anything comprehensible to the modern reader. Thus the honorific "Mar" that precedes Yahballaha's name is "my lord" in Syriac, and it occurs before every instance of his name in the text, including in the narrative. "Mar" (or

the feminine “Mart”) also precedes every name of every saint (where it has been replaced by the more usual English honorific “Saint”), as well as references to the Cross of Christ (*mār šlībā*, “my lord the Cross”) and Zion as a poetic name for Jerusalem (*mār šehyōn*, “my lord Zion”), in ways for which there is no corresponding English custom (and so is sometimes translated “holy” or “revered” in the text that follows). “Mar” also precedes most, but not all, occurrences of the titles “*catholicos*” and “pope,” but since this translator judged it off-putting for a narrator to be continually referencing “my lord the *catholicos*” or “my lord the pope,” in third-person narration the phrase has been replaced with “the lord,” though occasionally in reported speech it made sense to preserve “my lord” as a form of direct address.

Politeness also accounts for one of the trickiest portions of the text to read, namely, Rabban Sawma’s encounter with the pope. Among the polemics and apologetics of modern Roman Catholics and Protestants, to accept the pope at all is to recognize his claims of authority over the entire church, but the situation looked rather different from medieval Baghdad or Maragha. The Church of the East had only very infrequent contact with the Roman papacy, as Rabban Sawma himself says to the cardinals on his first visit to Rome, yet they might be content to accept him as a brother patriarch, as they were sometimes willing to recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople. A tenth-century Eastern Syriac author named Emmanuel Bar Shakhare had proposed that five patriarchates were set up by the apostles, in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon (the capital of the Sasanian Persian Empire), each with regional jurisdiction.

From such a perspective, the Church of the East simply was not confronted with papal claims for exclusive universal authority, either to accept or reject them. So when Rabban Sawma prays for the newly elected Pope Nicholas IV to be a blessing for the church, or for the papal throne to be established forever, this does not imply considering the pope his superior. Similarly, when the cardinals asked Rabban Sawma whether he believes what the pope believes or something else (making papal doctrine the touchstone of orthodoxy), he replied that he believes what the apostles taught but is uninformed about what the popes might

believe. When Rabban Sawma asked for the pope's permission to depart or to celebrate his own liturgy, this does not imply subordination to papal authority but rather conformity to protocol as the Mongol ambassador and a foreign guest. There is no doubt that Pope Nicholas IV viewed his open letters to Mar Yahballaha and to Rabban Sawma as formally investing them in their offices, reflecting his claims of universal authority, but it seems equally certain that the author of this text presents the pope merely as the "*catholicos* patriarch of Romania [the land of the Romans] and of all the Westerners," on an equal footing with Yahballaha III, the "*catholicos* patriarch of the East."¹⁶

Yahballaha's letters to later popes, dated 1302 and 1304, have long been taken as evidence that he at least accepted papal supremacy, since they contain a key phrase asserting a duty of obedience to the papacy. But this phrase was in fact inserted into the Latin translation and does not occur in the Arabic original.¹⁷ Yahballaha III wrote nothing about obeying the pope, and when he refers to the pope as Christ's "deputy" (Arabic *khalifa*, from which we get the English word "caliph"), this does not invoke Latin understandings of the "Vicar of Christ," though the medieval translators chose to represent it that way.¹⁸ The letters' references to the pope as the "father of fathers" were merely using the language of any patriarchate. Yahballaha III, like Rabban Sawma before him, was being very polite, and too many modern scholars have been misled by medieval Latin translators rather than consulting the Arabic originals.

The opposite of politeness is not rudeness but execration, the ability to call down curses on one's enemies, which has likewise shaped this biography. Thus people who cause trouble for the author's own community

16. See pp. 42 and 88 of the translation.

17. Dietmar W. Winkler, "Two Letters of Yahballaha III to the Popes of Rome: Historical Context and English Translation," in Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler, eds., *Artifact, Text, Context: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2020), 220–21.

18. Laura E. Bottini, "Due lettere inedite del patriarca mar Yahballaha III (1281–1317)," *Rivista degli studi orientali* (1992): 245.

(and especially the emir Nawruz) are referred to as “cursed” or similar phrases. Just as blessings might be inserted in parentheses after any mention of a king or favored patron, so curses might be inserted with each mention of an enemy to be execrated. The author’s extremely negative characterization of “the Muslim people” partially partakes of this tradition, while also crossing into the realm of negative stereotyping. (Indeed, the author gives evidence to undermine his hostile depiction of “the Muslim people,” as some Muslim civilians in Arbil sheltered Christians during the rioting, and the emir Chupan who intervened on behalf of the Christians was himself a Muslim who requested to be buried in Medina.) While the author presents an oversimplified negative stereotype of “the Muslim people” as always hating Christians, it is also important to recognize the place of the inverse of politeness in the culture of his time. In a sense, some extreme Christian and Muslim partisans at the time, including the author of this biography, were engaged in a “culture war” through which they viewed developments, and they sought to enlist their coreligionists on their side, while most Christians and Muslims at the time did not see relationships across the religious difference as necessarily hostile. For church leaders in particular, presenting Muslims as always hostile might also serve to discourage conversion to Islam among one’s fellow Christians. Execration and negative stereotyping were (and are) techniques used by the extremists to force the more amiable bulk of the population to pick sides.

Keeping Time

The biography of Rabban Sawma and Yahballaha III covers almost a century, and it uses multiple ways of keeping time to indicate when events happened. Most surprisingly, it makes no reference to the Islamic lunar calendar, in which months correspond to the cycles of the moon and twelve new moons comprise a year. It also makes no reference to the Chinese zodiac, in which years are associated with one of twelve animals in a repeating cycle. It makes only one brief reference to Mongol methods

of reckoning time, when it alludes to the “White Feast” of the Mongols, which is the “White Moon” of the Mongolian new year (corresponding to the Chinese new year, the second new moon after the winter solstice). There is similarly one reference to the ancient Babylonian zodiac, a reference to the sun moving into “the sign of Aries” in the spring.

Instead, the usual way of marking years was based on the Seleucid era, while two systems coexisted for marking time within a year, one based on the cycle of church services and the other on a cycle of months. The Seleucid era was known in medieval Syriac texts as “the year of the Greeks,” though it did not in fact count years since the reign of Alexander the Great, as medieval authors believed. Instead it counted solar years that had passed since an event almost no one remembered, the entrance of one of Alexander’s successors, Seleukos I Nikator, into Babylon in 312 BCE. (Seleukos later regarded that event as the founding of his empire, named the Seleucid Empire after him.) Each year is 365 days long, except for leap years (one year in every four), which are 366 days long. The “year of the Greeks” (AG for *anno graecorum*) began on October 1 each year, so from January 1 to September 30 one can convert from AG to CE by subtracting 311, and from October 1 to December 31 by subtracting 312.

Syriac Christians divided each year into twelve months, inheriting their names in many cases from Akkadian names used in ancient Babylon. But by the late medieval period, each month had developed a length corresponding to a month in the Julian calendar, so that First Teshri (31 days) always corresponded to October, Second Teshri (30 days) to November, First Kanon (31 days) to December, Second Kanon (31 days) to January, Shevat (28 or 29 days) to February, Adar (31 days) to March, Nisan (30 days) to April, Iyar (31 days) to May, Haziran (30 days) to June, Tammuz (31 days) to July, Ab (31 days) to August, and Ilol (30 days) to September. To facilitate reading, Syriac month names have been replaced by the corresponding English month’s name in the translation.

But Syriac Christian clergy used another method for indicating dates within a year, one based on the church calendar and the changing shape of the church service throughout the year. Some church feasts occurred on fixed calendar dates, such as Christmas (*yaldā* or “Nativity” in Syriac) on

December 25 and the Feast of the Cross (*shkhāhtā* or “Finding” in Syriac) on September 13. Other feasts, such as Easter (*qyāmtā* or “Resurrection” in Syriac), were originally tied to lunar cycles that shifted relative to the solar calendar’s dates, and by the late medieval period the dates of such feasts were calculated using a complicated system that corresponded neither to solar nor lunar phenomena (eventually prompting the Gregorian calendar reform). The calculation of the Easter date for each year was an important part of marking time, since roughly half of each year was counted as leading up to Easter (starting three weeks before the beginning of Lent, with a fast known as the Petition of the Ninevites) or following from it (through Pentecost, considered the first Sunday of seven Sundays dedicated to the apostles). Each Sunday, whether counted from the beginning or end of the year or counted before or after Easter, had some hymns that were only to be sung on that Sunday, and by referring to “the Sunday of the hymn *aynāw āsyā*,” for example, a clerical author could quickly identify for other priests when in the cycle of church services an event occurred. The hymn “titles” are always just the opening words of the hymn (as is usually the case in medieval Latin hymns as well), for which reason they have not been translated in the following text, but in each case the day and month have been calculated and supplied in brackets to assist the reader.

The Transmission of the Text

When this biography was completed in the aftermath of the death of Yahballaha III, it existed only in a single copy handwritten by either the author himself or a scribe to which he gave dictation. How was this biography preserved and transmitted, so that today it has been read across Eurasia and in the Americas?

The earliest stages of the transmission of the text are very unclear. As is commonly the case with the literature of the Church of the East, it must have been copied repeatedly in the centuries following its composition, but the earliest known manuscript today only comes from the 1880s.

Until that time, knowledge of the text does not seem to have extended beyond a small region in the Hakkari Mountains of what is today eastern Turkey. An elderly local monk named Rabban Yonan found a manuscript in a small village, made a copy of it, and sent it to the city of Urmia (now in northwestern Iran) in 1885 by the means of a priest named Osha'na, who showed it to American missionaries there. They announced the discovery of this biography to a western audience, but before they published the Syriac text, it was already printed in Europe in 1888 by a Lazarist Catholic priest named Paul Bedjan on the basis of a manuscript newly copied in Urmia in 1887. Four additional manuscript copies, all made in the 1880s, came to light in the next few years, prompting Bedjan to issue an improved edition of the Syriac text in 1895. Of these manuscripts, only three are accessible today.¹⁹

Translations soon followed, first into French by Jean-Baptiste Chabot (1895), English by James A. Montgomery (1927, partial) and Ernest A. W. Budge (1928), Russian by Nina Pigulevskaia (1958), Neo-Aramaic by Mattay d-Bet Petros (1961), German by Franz Altheim (1961, partial), Arabic by Louis Sako (1974, partial), Italian by Pier Giorgio Borbone (2000), German by Alexander Toepel (2008, complete), and French by Pier Giorgio Borbone and E. Alexandre (2008). In English, Montgomery's translation provides only the first part of the text, while Budge's translation, though complete, contains a number of misunderstandings due to his primary expertise being located in the Ancient Near East, where he extensively translated ancient Assyrian and Egyptian texts. For as long as I have been interested in medieval Syriac (and likely much longer), scholars have been complaining about the quality of Budge's translation and wishing for a replacement. Pier Giorgio Borbone and Laura Parodi provided the first complete English translation since Budge's in 2021.

Scholars who wish to use this text for research will still need to consult Pier Giorgio Borbone's Syriac edition and Laura Parodi's English translation published by Tredition, which includes Borbone's extensive commentary and textual notes. The translation presented here is revised

19. For details, see Borbone, *History of Mar Yabballaha*, 13–15, 58–71.

from that translation, chiefly with the aim of making it more accessible to North American undergraduates, including some who do not have the broad vocabulary displayed there. Some annotations are given here to facilitate reading the text, but it has not been possible to include here the rich level of detail provided by Borbone's annotations published there. In a small number of cases, corrections have been introduced into the translation in consultation with Borbone's Syriac edition, so it is hoped that this text might be useful to a broad audience, and especially for students, but for researchers it cannot replace Borbone and Parodi's 2021 translation. If this publication introduces more people to the astonishing story of two eastern Turkic Christian monks, who traveled from China to the Middle East and (in Rabban Sawma's case) even to western Europe, at a time of rapid political and religious change, it will have achieved its purpose.