

CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR SYRIAC STUDIES

SYMPOSIUM XX

14 NOVEMBER 2020

9:30-10 am CSSS Annual Meeting (for members only)



Symposium Programme in Zoom

<https://zoom.us/j/91552888392?pwd=SU52cXpqZkNHODZhNmdSUTJabzNldz09>

10:00 – 10:30 **Reagan Patrick**, University of Toronto

The Portrayal of Geographical Space in the Canons of Marutha of Maipherqat

10:30 – 11:00 **George Amanatidis-Saadé**, University of Ottawa

Yazdgird the forerunner: Early Iranian Cosmo-politanism and its effects on Christian Society in the Sasanid Empire

11:00 – 11:30 **Ani Honarchiansaky**, University of Utah

Demanding Conversions in Late Antique Iran: View from Syriac, Armenian, and Middle Persian Sources

11:30 – 12:00 **Michael R. J. Bonner**

Kavad's Vision of Christ at Amida

12 :00 – 12 :45 **Break – Lunch**

12:45 – 1:30 **Geoffrey Herman, École Pratique des Hautes Études**

The View from the Frontier and the View from Within: Comparative Perspectives of Jews and Christians in the Sasanian Empire

1:30 – 2:00 **Khalid Dinno**, CSSS

The Syriac Orthodox Dioceses: An Overview

2:00 – 2:30 **James Toma**, University of Toronto

Provincial Boundaries, Canon Law, and Expansion during the Golden Age of the Church of the East

The Portrayal of Geographical Space in the Canons of Marutha of Maipherqat

Reagan Patrick, University of Toronto

For the Syriac speaking world, the canons promulgated at the council of Nicaea were preserved through the supposed translation of Marutha of Maipherqat. The discordant content of these Syriac canons has necessitated its classification as Pseudo-Nicaean, while the designation of Marutha as the author of this work is also justifiably contested. Nevertheless, the canons attributed to Marutha of Maipherqat afford the modern reader fascinating insight into the perspective of the author, regardless of identity. In the text, foreign cities are unknown and thus precarious, while local lands acquire hagiographic histories in an attempt at self-aggrandizement. By examining the numerous references made to geographic locations – whether the metropolises of Rome and Alexandria or the somewhat elusive village referred to as Kfar Phahar – the present work will determine the author’s perception of the world around them as well as the role their community plays within it.

Yazdgird the forerunner: Early Iranian Cosmopolitanism and its effects on Christian Society in the Sasanid Empire

George Amanatidis-Saadé, University of Ottawa

Throughout his reign, the Shah Yazdgird I attempted to harness Christian symbolism while integrating it with the majority Iranian Zoroastrian culture. During his twenty-one years as Shah, Yazdgird undertook a wide-reaching program involving the Syriac community across borders. Though his projects attempted to achieve various goals, the common objective among them was to establish both internal and external stability for his empire. Although Yazdgird ultimately failed in doing so, his endeavors initiated a chain of events that would eventually bear fruit centuries later. This article will explore Yazdgird’s Christian ventures in the context of Richard Payne’s recent theory of Iranian Cosmopolitanism. The projects in question are the creation of the frontier martyr cult, the foundation of Martyropolis and the calling of the Council of Mar Ishaq. In the second section, these developments will be placed within the broader context of Christianity’s evolving status in Iran from the fifth to the seventh century. Within this context, it seems that Yazdgird was indeed a forerunner in his treatment of the Christianity and its adherents.

Demanding Conversions in Late Antique Iran: View from Syriac, Armenian, and Middle Persian Sources

Ani Honarchiansaky, University of Utah

The paper is part of studies dealing with the legal and political status of the Christians of Sasanian Iran. By bringing in the accounts written by Syriac and Armenian speaking populations of the Empire and setting them against the Middle Persian sources, I believe we can arrive at a better understanding of the social and cultural milieu of Sasanians and their Christian subjects. Previous scholarship focuses either mainly on Syriac sources or mainly on Armenian accounts to study the place of Christianity in late antique Iran. In fact, the Sasanians dealt differently with these two populations, understanding the distinctions can reveal important legal, political, and social complexities.

Both Syriac and Armenian sources have been written by people who were highly interested and invested in the way that the empire was structured. What I will focus on here are three main points of confrontation between Sasanians and its Christians subjects: learning culture, fiscal responsibility, and military involvement. It is in these areas that religion, politics, and ethnicity get entangled. Questions that my sources are trying to answer, or simply deal with, are about how and why should a Christian contribute to a non-Christian government. How can one be loyal to the king, kill and die for him, if one cannot pray to his gods?

I will focus on accounts with certain interest in learning and religion at their core. The first source, *Martyrdom of Pusai*, is written in Syriac by an unknown author, and is related to events during the reign of Shapur II in the fourth century. The source belongs to the collection of *Persian Martyr Acts*. The account focuses on the life and martyrdom of a man named Pusai, a craftsman, and a descendant of Roman captives who were relocated to the heart of Sasanian Iran as the result of the previous wars. If he was born a Christian or he was taught in Christianity would decide his faith and loyalty to the King of Kings. The second narrative is attested in the accounts of Łazar Parpc'i and Eliše historians of the sixth century, writing about the attempts made by Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE) in converting Armenians in the mid-fifth century from Christianity to Zoroastrianism.

My research indicates that the Sasanian kings were not passive receptacles of inherited Zoroastrian ideologies or well-defined political agendas, rather they were active participants in the discourse and politics of the state, reacting to ecclesiastical and political complexities within and without the empire. This will return agency to kings, emperors, magi, and bishops who were involved in shaping of the political structure of the empire.

Kavad's Vision of Christ at Amida

Michael R. J. Bonner

This presentation will introduce the miraculous appearance of Christ to Kavad I, as described by Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene and echoed in the Chronicle of Seert. It will situate the vision within the context of the great Persian and Roman war of 502, and within Zoroastrian and Christian relations more broadly. An historiographical analysis will follow, and some ideas about its significance and origin within Sasanian propaganda will be suggested.

The View from the Frontier and the View from Within: Comparative Perspectives of Jews and Christians in the Sasanian Empire

Geoffrey Herman - École Pratique des Hautes Études

Some earlier portrayals of the history of Christianity under the Sasanians seem to have been informed by an uneven blend of sources that reflect the Roman perspective with others having emerged from the Sasanian reality. This has been the case, in particular, for the discourse on martyrdom. An awareness of the provenance of our data helps to provide a more balanced picture.

A comparative examination of the Syriac sources with contemporary Jewish sources from Sasanian Babylonia can be informative and contribute towards offering a better sense of the experience of non-Zoroastrians in the Persian empire. This paper will focus on attitudes towards the Persian kingdom, and discuss the Sasanian legal system and its growing impact during the late fourth and fifth centuries.

The Syriac Orthodox Dioceses – A Historical Overview

Khalid Dinno - CSSS

From early Christianity the Syriac Orthodox lived as minorities in their historical homeland which was ruled by others: Byzantines, Sassanids, Arabs, Mongols and Turks. During this history of almost two millennia, they encountered almost continual existential pressures that led to the shrinking of their dioceses and subjected them to demographic changes. This paper sheds some light on these changes, based on the limited available sources. In addition to the valuable information provided by the Chronicles of Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus, further valuable material appeared in the twentieth century including the extensive manuscripts penned by Aphram Barsoum and dated 1924.

Provincial Boundaries, Canon Law, and Expansion during the Golden Age of the Church of the East

James Toma, University of Toronto

During the heights of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Church of the East witnessed a robust wave of social, political, and ecclesiastical influence within the eastern world stage. Scholars have come to classify this dynasty of East-Syriac history as the Golden Age of the Church of the East for good reasons. Firstly, it is this period that the Church of the East expanded its ecclesiastical jurisdiction beyond the inner provinces, reaching distant districts in India, China, and Central Asia; through the missionary expeditions summed by Timothy I (780-823). In fact, geographically the Church of the East was the largest church in the world from the ninth to fourteenth centuries. The geographic and religious expansion of the church was as a result of the inevitable challenges that the Islamic polity imposed onto Syriac civilization. The imperial and fearsome dominance Islam imposed onto the Church, consequently leading the East-Syriac establishment to react accordingly for its survival: rampant missionary expeditions in non-Moslem lands. Through observing East-Syriac provincial law and the canons issued during this period, it is visible that Islamic hegemony in the Near East caused the Church of the East to consolidate boundaries, enforce segregation, and most effectively—expand the Church’s hegemony through missionary projects afar. In order to do so effectively, the Church of the East reformed its legal system and granted ecclesiastical provinces with further discretion and a court-based system to litigate disputes for its faithful. Through shedding light on the former system of litigation practiced by the Church of the East (i.e., ‘substantive law’), a case will be made demonstrating the affect Islam had on reforming the Syriac system of litigation that ultimately caused it to broaden its jurisdiction, but simultaneously enforce its borders. This process led to the eventual establishment of the procedural system of Syriac law.

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