SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY AND THE HOLY CITY OF JERUSALEM: ENTANGLED HISTORIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his *Letter 108* (To Eustochium), Jerome poses a rhetorical question: "For what race of men is there which does not send pilgrims to the holy places?"[2] Reflecting on this observation by the renowned Western Church Father and pilgrim, one may reasonably infer that Syriac Christians – like many other Eastern Christian communities – were deeply drawn to the sacred geography of Jerusalem, which they regarded as a matrix for encountering holiness. Both Syriac monks and laypeople undertook pilgrimages to the Holy City as acts of devotion. Over time, they established enduring communities in the Holy Land. Until the Crusades – and indeed beyond – the Syriac-speaking presence in Palestine flourished, consolidating centers of ecclesiastical authority through the foundation and support of monastic institutions and the consecration of bishoprics.

What I intend to discuss today is this significant and multifaceted trajectory of Syriac Christianity toward the Holy City. My presentation is structured into five main parts. I will begin by outlining the early stages of the phenomenon, focusing on its origins in Syriac hagiography. Following this, I will turn to more historically grounded sources, examining the emergence of Syriac bishoprics and ecclesiastical institutions in the Holy Land. In the third section, I will reconstruct a portrait of the

[1] This paper represents the keynote lecture I gave at the Institute for Advanced Study Princeton, School of Historical Studies, October 25 2023, within the series Near Eastern Studies (NES) (https://www.ias.edu/video/syriac-christianity-and-holy-city-jerusalem-entangled-histories-late-antiquity-and-middle). First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Sabine Schmidtke for inviting me to speak as part of this renowned event series hosted by the Historical School at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Academician Victor Spinei, President of the Historical Sciences and Archaeology Section of the Romanian Academy, for the kind invitation to publish this lecture in the *Memoirs of the Section of Historical and Archaeological Sciences of the Romanian Academy*. This lecture draws upon my recently published monograph, *The Making of Syriac Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Syriac Literature of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World, London/New York, Routledge, 2023), and incorporates both a synthesis of its main arguments and supplementary material that expands upon its central themes.

[2] W.H. Freemantle (tr.), *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, vol. 6 (NPNF, 2nd series; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), p. 344 [196]. See Popa, *The Making of Syriac Jerusalem*, p. 2.

Syriac Orthodox community in Jerusalem during the late medieval period, drawing on evidence from manuscript colophons. Subsequently, I will expand this analysis by considering additional colophons and travel accounts left by late medieval Syriac pilgrims. Finally, I will offer a brief overview of the pilgrimage ritual as it was envisioned in the 13th century, with particular reference to the canonical regulations of Barhebraeus concerning pilgrimage practices in his time.

2. BETWEEN HOMELAND AND HOLY LAND: PILGRIMAGE IN SYRIAC HAGIOGRAPHIC AND INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

When examining the lives of prominent late antique Syriac church leaders, one finds that the pursuit of Jerusalem frequently emerges as a formative stage in their spiritual development. Pilgrimage to the Holy City appears as a customary practice among those striving for advanced Christian life and adherence to monastic ideals.

A noteworthy example is Barsauma, the ascetic and archimandrite of the 5th century, whose *Vita* recounts four legendary pilgrimages. These journeys depict him as both an atypical pilgrim and an unconventional monk. Regardless of the author's specific intent in shaping this hagiographic portrayal, several elements clearly point to the phenomenology of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We observe the following: During his *first pilgrimage*, Barsauma, still a teenager around the year 400, is said to have journeyed barefoot to Jerusalem (*Vita Barsaumae*), underscoring the ascetic rigor of the experience. In the *second pilgrimage*, he is accompanied by a group of 40 disciples, traveling together to pray and meditate at the sacred sites – suggesting a collective, almost liturgical dimension to the journey. The *third pilgrimage* takes place with a symbolically charged group of 100 companions. During this visit, Barsauma prays at Golgotha, performs an exorcism on a possessed pilgrim, and reportedly meets Empress Eudocia – highlighting both spiritual authority and political engagement. The *fourth pilgrimage* shifts focus toward Barsauma's active role in defending and asserting the identity of his confession in Jerusalem, particularly in theological confrontations with Jewish communities[3].

Another significant Syriac figure to consider is Rabbula of Edessa, a contemporary of Barsauma and a central actor in the Syriac confessional controversies of the fifth century. According to his *Vita*, Rabbula encountered Jerusalem during the formative stages of his Christian journey. Even prior to his conversion and entry into monastic life, he expressed a desire "to go to Jerusalem." His pilgrimage followed a standard itinerary of sacred sites, including the Holy Sepulchre, the site of the Ascension, the River Jordan, and other biblically significant locations[4].

The theme of Syriac pilgrimage (*aksenayutha*; pilgrim: *aksenaya*) continues to appear prominently in Syriac hagiographic literature of the sixth and seventh

[3] The Vita was translated by Andrew Palmer (ed.), *The Life of the Syrian Saint Barsauma: Eulogy of a Hero of the Resist-ance to the Council of Chalcedon* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 61, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2020). See Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 33–41.

[4] See R. Doran (tr.), *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth- Century Edessa* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006). See Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 42–45.

centuries. For instance, John of Edessa recounts the story of a female pilgrim named Mary, who, upon encountering Golgotha, enters into a state of spiritual ecstasy and remains in rapt devotion for three days before the Church of the Holy Sepulchre[5].

Similarly, the Life of Theodota of Amida (7th century) includes references to a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, followed by travel to Egypt, where Theodota performs miracles as a Christ-like imitator – further reinforcing the integration of pilgrimage into the hagiographic profile of saintly figures[6].

Taken together, these accounts clearly illustrate a pattern of alignment between monastic or saintly identity and pilgrimage to the Holy Land, affirming the spiritual legitimacy and symbolic significance of such journeys. At the same time, however, there appears to be a countervailing movement within Syriac ecclesiastical leadership – a tendency to regulate or even curtail pilgrimage activity in favor of reinforcing local religious traditions and ecclesial primacy. This tension reflects an evolving dynamic between the universal allure of sacred geography and the theological-pastoral imperative to cultivate rootedness in local expressions of faith.

With regard to the position adopted by certain institutional voices within the Syriac Churches against pilgrimage to Jerusalem – and in favor of promoting local religious traditions as a spiritual alternative to the Holy City – I would like to briefly highlight three illustrative examples. First, the West Syriac theologian and bishop Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523) offers a striking parallel in his *Letter to Astorkios*, where he writes that visiting the holy monastery of Qartamin in Tur ʿAbdin not once, but seven times, held the same spiritual weight as making the sacred journey all the way to Jerusalem[7]. This statement, dating to around the year 500, underscores the growing symbolic centrality of local monastic institutions and reflects efforts to redirect the spiritual prestige traditionally associated with Jerusalem toward regional sacred sites.

A second example is found in the correspondence of the East Syriac Catholicos Išōʿyahb I. In a letter addressed to Jacob of Dirin in 585, the patriarch articulates a critical view of pilgrimage to Palestine. His rhetoric centers on the concern that such journeys result in the abandonment of local churches and monasteries, thereby creating real pastoral and economic strain for the ecclesiastical infrastructure[8].

A third example appears in the *Life of Rabban Hormizd,* founder of the Rabban Hōrmīzd Monastery in Alqosh in 640. After receiving a dream, Hormizd set out for Jerusalem but was persuaded by monks from Bar ʿIdta Monastery to remain with them instead. They assured him that joining their community would make him "the likeness of the celestial Jerusalem." He abandoned his pilgrimage, reflecting the broader tendency to substitute local monastic life for travel to the Holy City[9].

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[5] For a more detailed discussion on the *aksenoyutho* see Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 52–62.

[6] A recent translation was published by Robert Hoyland and Andrew Palmer, *The Life of Theodotus of Amida: Syriac Christianity under the Umayyad Caliphate* (Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 73, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press, 2023). For further insights, see Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 47–48.

[7] MS British Library 17.265, fol. 24b. See Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 63–64.

[8] J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1902, p. 424–451. For a more detailed discussion see Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 65–69.

[9] E. A. Wallis Budge (ed.), *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban bar- 'Idta*, 2 vols. (London, Luzac, 1902), p. 11–13 (syr.), p. 17–19 (engl.). This is addressed in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 73–76.

The motif of travel to Jerusalem persists also in later Syriac monastic literature, particularly in the *Historia Monastica* by Thomas of Marga and the *Liber Chastitatis* by Īšōʿdenāh of Basra (9 th century). Several monk biographies in these texts include the title of "pilgrim" and brief mentions – often no more than a few lines – of journeys to Jerusalem and the Egyptian desert. Scholars such as Florence Jullien have argued that the monastic pilgrimage route typically followed three key stages: Jerusalem, Mount Sinai, and ultimately the desert of Scetis – a pattern also evident in the itineraries described in these sources. Notably, the evidence suggests that Jerusalem often functioned as a transit point en route to Egypt. This aligns with the distinction drawn by scholars like David Haberman and Georgia Frank between two types of pilgrimage in late antiquity: "Linear" pilgrimages, focused on reaching a single sacred destination; "Circular" pilgrimages, centered around encounters with holy people or multiple sacred sites[10].

Both *Historia Monastica* and *Liber Chastitatis* reflect two types of pilgrimage: some monks followed a linear route with Jerusalem as the final goal, while others embarked on circular journeys that included stops at biblical sites (e.g., linked to Moses or Elijah), Egyptian monastic centers, living saints, or revered shrines like John the Baptist's tomb in Emesa. In these narratives, Jerusalem functions not only as a geographical destination but also as a spiritual climax, marking the monk's ascent to heightened sanctity.

3. ROUTES AND BISHOPS

Syriac pilgrims reached Jerusalem via two main routes. The first was an overland journey through Nisibis, Edessa, Aleppo, Emesa, Damascus, and then Jerusalem. The second combined land and sea: after reaching Antioch, pilgrims traveled by ship along the eastern Mediterranean to Caesarea or Jaffa, then continued by land to Jerusalem. The journey could take several weeks. Egeria (4th c.) mentions 25 overnight stops, while the *Doctrina Addai* (5th c.) records a 30-day journey from Edessa to Jerusalem[11].

Turning to church structures, there is no evidence of an East Syriac bishopric in Jerusalem in the 7th century. Letters from Catholicos Išōʿyahb III (649–659) show East Syriac monks and clergy in Jerusalem but no established bishop[12]. In a later letter (c. 795–798), Patriarch Timotheus references biblical manuscript discoveries

[10] David L. Haberman, *Journeying through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 71–74;

Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2000), p. 8–9. For further insights, consult Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 81–82.

[11] See Martin Illert (ed.), *Doctrina Addai. De imagine Edessena – Die Abgarlegende. Das Christusbild von Edessa* (Fontes Christiani 45; Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 134, § 3. As detailed in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 239–240.

[12] Rubens Duval (ed.), *Išōʿyahb Patriarchae III Liber epistularum* (CSCO Scriptores Syri Syr. 11–12, Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1904–1905), p. 245–247 (syr.), p. 177–78 (lat.). Discussed further in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 135–145.

in Jericho and tasks the Metropolitan of Damascus with overseeing the matter – suggesting Damascus held jurisdiction over Jerusalem[13]. By the late 8th century, an East Syriac bishop titled "Metropolitan of Damascus, Jerusalem, and the Sea-Coast" appears. This title continues into the 13th century as: "Metropolitan of Tripoli and Jerusalem"[14].

In contrast, the West Syriacs seem to have established a bishopric in Jerusalem much earlier. Michael the Syrian, Patriarch (1166–1199), compiled a list of Syriac Orthodox bishops based on various sources. Scholars like Otto Meinardus and Jean Maurice Fiey have critiqued and corrected this list, noting a long (though partly reconstructed) line of bishops from 575 onward.

Michael records that after the expulsion of Chalcedonian Patriarch Elias (496–516), the Chalcedonians lacked a bishop, implying the West Syriacs filled this void. Eventually, their bishop was elevated to Metropolitan, possibly overseeing suffragans like a bishop of Tiberias (9th–11th c.)[15].

West Syriac Metropolitans of Jerusalem are attested in manuscript colophons and pilgrim records. Titles vary but include wide-ranging jurisdictions: "Metropolitan of the holy city of Jerusalem, that is to say of the city of the Lord, and of all the other cities by the sea (Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale Syr. 1); "Metropolitan of Jerusalem and of the seaside" (Bibliothèque nationale de France Syr. 51); "Metropolitan of Jerusalem and Damascus" (BnF Syr. 103); "Metropolitan of Jerusalem and Syria" (Leipzig Syr. 1]; "Metropolitan of the Holy City of Jerusalem and its Surroundings, Damascus, Homs and Tripoli" (Church of the Forty Martyrs 658]. These suggest a network of small Syriac communities across coastal towns (Acre, Tyre, Tripoli), likely serving pilgrims and merchants. Finally, the Metropolitan of Jerusalem held ecclesial and diplomatic significance. Mar Thomas, for instance, joined Patriarch John VII and other metropolitans on a theological mission to Constantinople in 969[16].

4. THE SYRIAC ORTHODOX MONASTERY OF ST MARY MAGDALENE: MS BNF SYR. 64 AND MS SYRIAC ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE 367

Following the establishment of Syriac bishoprics in Jerusalem, we turn to the Syriac Orthodox Monastery of St Mary Magdalene, located in the northwestern quarter of the city (later the Jewish Quarter). Founded by a Coptic Christian, Macarius Nabruwah, it was destroyed in 806/807 and later restored, becoming the spiritual center of the Syriac community in Jerusalem.

Although later also dedicated to "Simon the Pharisee," it retained its original devotion to Mary Magdalene.

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[13] See the treatment in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 149–154.

[14] Discussed in *Ibidem*, p. 154–156.

[15] Jean-Maurice Fiey, *Pour un Oriens Christianus novus. Répertoire des dioceses Syriaques Orientaux et Occidentaux* (Beiruter Texte und Studien 49, Beirut, Stuttgart, Franz-Steiner Verlag, 1993), p. 218–222; Otto Meinardus, *The Syrian Jacobites in the Holy City*, „Orientalia Suecana", 12 (1963), p. 60–82, esp. p. 81–82; This is addressed in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 157–158.

[16] This is addressed in Popa, *op. cit.,* p. 157–160.

The monastery served as the residence of the Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Jerusalem and housed both a hospice and guest quarters for visiting patriarchs. It was expanded in the 12th century during the tenure of Patriarchs Ignatius of Gadina and Ignatius Hesnun. In 1169, Michael Rabo referred to it as "our monastery in Jerusalem"[17]. Following Saladin's conquest, the monastery operated briefly before becoming the Maymuniyya, a Muslim school. Monks from this monastery were prominent in the wider Syriac Church. In the early 12th century, several were consecrated as bishops, including: Ignatius, Bishop of Kephar Tab; Basilius, Metropolitan of Amid, also from the monastery[18].

Michael Rabo, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch (1166–1199), made two pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Shortly after his enthronement in 1166, he visited Edessa and surrounding monasteries, then traveled through Cilicia, Antioch, Laodicea, and Tyre before reaching Jerusalem just before Easter in 1168 (possibly 1167, per Kaufhold). He celebrated Holy Week and Easter at the monastery of St Mary Magdalene and consecrated the Holy Chrism (Myron) there[19]. Michael's chronicle notes he was welcomed by Amalric of Nesle, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. This ecumenical exchange likely resulted in the Syriac Orthodox gaining access to the Chapel of St James in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, sometime between 1165 and 1173[20]. Michael made a second pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1179, further affirming the monastery's status as a vital religious and cultural center for the Syriac Orthodox in the Holy Land.

I would like to draw your attention to this point to an intriguing manuscript that offers evidence of the Patriarch's second visit to Jerusalem. During his time in the city, Michael composed a colophon – a written note – in this manuscript, which once belonged to the Syriac Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem. MS BnF Syr. 64 dates back to before the 12th century and contains selections of biblical exegesis[21]. The manuscript was restored in 1134 at the Monastery of Simon the Pharisee during the tenure of Ignatius I, the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Jerusalem. At a later stage, BnF Syr. 64 was transferred from Jerusalem to Cyprus, where it came into the possession of a deacon named John. Fol. 225v strikingly illustrates this, containing the inscription: "This book belongs to the weak and sinful John, by name, deacon of the mighty city of Cyprus"[22].

This raises the question: why was the manuscript moved to Cyprus? The answer likely lies in the historical context of Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem, during which many West Syriac monks were forced to flee. As they departed, they carried with them manuscripts from the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalene. Some of these monks likely found refuge in Cyprus, which had become a significant center for

[17] J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)*, vol. III (Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1910), p. 477.

[18] As examined in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

[19] Kaufhold, Hubert, *Zur syrischen Kirchengeschichte des 12. Jahrhunderts: Neue Quellen über Theodoros bar Wahbun*, „Oriens Christianus", 74 (1990), p. 115–151, 137, n. 91. As detailed in Popa, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

[20] Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, III, p. 386; Popa, *op. cit*., p. 220.

[21] A brief description appears in Hermann Zotenberg, *Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques et sabéens (mandaïtes) de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1874), p. 30–31.

[22] BnF Syr. 64, fol. 225v.

Syriac Orthodox communities and Miaphysite refugees since the 7th century. This hypothesis is further supported by later accounts of pilgrims who, en route to Jerusalem, passed through Cyprus and described Syriac churches in Nicosia – for example, Sargīs of Ḥāḥ in the 13th century, whom I will discuss later. Ultimately, the manuscript made its way from Cyprus to France, where it was added to the library of Jean-Baptiste Colbert by Étienne Baluze in 1673. This is confirmed by a note on fol. 224v: "Codex iste in bibliothecam Colbertinam delatus est ex insula Cypro anno Christo MDCLXXIII. Stephanus Baluzius"[23].

A closer examination of the colophon in BnF Syr. 64, fol. 224v reveals the following inscription: "Michael, Patriarch by the infinite mercy of grace which extends to everything that touches Almighty God, we prescribe by the decision of the living Word of Apostolic power that nobody takes this book from the interior jurisdiction of our Jerusalem monastery which bears the name of Saint Mary Magdalene. May peace always reign through its prayers over the Orthodox inhabitants. We wrote with our own hands in the year 1490 (of the Greeks = 1179)"[24].

According to our findings, a second manuscript also contains a colophon composed by Patriarch Michael within the Syriac Orthodox monastery: Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate (SOP) 367, fol. 156r. This manuscript dates back to the 9th century, with the colophon seemingly written on 20 May 887. Originally housed in Jerusalem (catalogued as no. 123), it was relocated in 1948 to Homs and later to Damascus. SOP 367 contains the Dionysian Corpus, along with various prefaces and marginal notes[25].

A note can be observed in the upper left margin of fol. 156r, which is Michael's second colophon. I would like to draw your attention to an additional line of text just below the colophon, which reads: "May the blessed Michael dwell in the bosom of paradise, and may the young Bishop Gregory of Jerusalem be remembered by his answered prayers"[26].

This raises a significant issue: the Syriac Orthodox episcopal lists contain no record of a Bishop Gregory in Jerusalem. This discrepancy suggests that the note may have been added at a later date, despite the handwriting appearing similar in tone and age to the main colophon.

When comparing the two colophons – BnF Syr. 64, fol. 224v and SOP 367, fol. 156r – it becomes apparent that parts of the colophon in SOP 367 are illegible. This invites the question: Why are there two colophons referring to a patriarchal visit to Jerusalem?

Although the intricate history behind these colophons remains challenging to unravel, two plausible hypotheses may be advanced: one colophon may have been copied from the other, likely as a precaution against the possible loss of the original manuscript amid the instability of the monastic community of St Mary Magdalene during the Islamic conquests; alternatively, the two colophons may reflect different visits made by Patriarch Michael Rabo to Jerusalem.

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[23] BnF Syr. 64, fol. 224v.

[24] BnF Syr. 64, fol. 224v.

[25] A concise description is available in G. Graf and A. Rücker, *Die literarischen Handschriften des jakobitischen Markusklosters in Jerusalem*, „Oriens Christianus" n.s. 2 (1912), p. 124–125.

[26] SOP 367, fol. 156r.

Before concluding this discussion, it is important to note that while several major studies – especially those by Martin, Zotenberg, and Nau – refer to the colophon in BnF Syr. 64, they make no mention of the one in SOP 367. This suggests the latter colophon remained unknown to these scholars[27]. Beyond the complex transmission history of these colophons and the issue of manuscript relocation, the key takeaway is this: both colophons unequivocally attest to the presence of Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Michael Rabo in Jerusalemand highlight the vitality of the local Syriac community and monastic life at the time.

5. TENSIONS AND DIVISIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY: MS CHURCH OF THE FORTY MARTYRS (CFMM) 324

The next point I would like to address concerns once again the figure of Michael Rabo, specifically in the context of his tense relationship with a contemporary Syriac Orthodox monk and theologian, Bar Wahbun. Theodore Bar Wahbun, born around 1240 in Melitene, was a learned but controversial Syriac monk, fluent in Syriac, Greek, Armenian, and Arabic. After being expelled from several monasteries in Melitene, Edessa, and Jerusalem, Theodore bar Wahbun served for seven years as secretary and synkellos to Patriarch Michael Rabo. He took part in ecumenical dialogues with the Byzantines and Armenians but eventually rebelled against the patriarch and was expelled from Mor Barsaumo Monastery. He then sought refuge in Jerusalem, where Michael's brother, Athanasios Slibo, had become metropolitan in 1184. There, Bar Wahbun launched a schismatic movement and, in 1187, was ordained as a rival patriarch in Cilicia with support from the Armenian king.

His presence in Jerusalem caused deep division. According to the Anonymous Syriac Chronicle, he incited conflict among the bishop and monks, including Sōhdō the Edessene, who later became bishop as Ignatius (likely in 1193). Michael Rabo's own chronicle also confirms the unrest Wahbun caused within the Syriac Orthodox community. His case highlights the complex ecclesiastical power struggles in Jerusalem and raises questions about his motivations, his relationship with the patriarch, and the broader tensions within Eastern Christianity at the time[28].

To illustrate this point, I will draw on two fascinating letters written by Theodore bar Wahbun. These are preserved in the manuscript Syr. 324, housed at the Church of the Forty Martyrs (copied by Yuhanna Dolabani in the 20th century). One letter is addressed to John, Metropolitan of Tarsus[29], and the other to Patriarch Michael himself[30].

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[27] Paulin Martin, *Tradition karkaphienne ou la massore chez les syriens*, „Journal Asiatique", ser. 6, vol. 14 (Oct.–Nov. 1869), p. 348–349; Zotenberg, *Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques et sabéens*, p. 30–31; François Nau, *Sur quelques autographes de Michel le Syrien*, „Revue de l'Orient Chrétien", 19 (1914), p. 379–380.

[28] Kaufhold, *Zur syrischen Kirchengeschichte des 12. Jahrhunderts*, p. 115. Discussed further in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 213f.

[29] CFMM 324, fols. 84–104.

[30] CFMM 324, fols. 104–117. View the digitized version of the manuscript at https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/137408.

In his first letter to the Metropolitan of Tarsus, Bar Wahbun recounts the events of his conflict with Michael, including pointed criticisms of the flawed ecclesiastical procedures that led to Michael's anointment as Patriarch, as well as Wahbun's own unjust expulsion from the priesthood. He explains that upon arriving in Jerusalem, he initially found shelter with the Armenians, only to be expelled by the Catholicos in a series of humiliations. Forced into a life of destitution, he lived among beggars and strangers in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, outside the city. Later, he turned to the Latin Patriarch, who offered him the West Syriac see of Jerusalem – an offer he refused, choosing instead to remain a guest among foreign communities (Letter to John, Metropolitan of Tarsus)[31].

A different tone emerges in his letter to Patriarch Michael where Bar Wahbun again recounts his arrival in Jerusalem, but focuses on the Patriarch's efforts to undermine him by appealing to the Latin Patriarch: *From there we came to Jerusalem and settled in the Armenian monastery. We were received with great honor by their superiors. But because of your letters to the Catholicos, we were expelled from there and from the monastery where we had been welcomed. We composed songs of lamentation about our humiliation. When the Catholicos of the Romans returned from Rome, your holy bishop turned to him, presented him with many arguments, and blinded his eyes. Then he made promises about our expulsion and therefore summoned us to him*[32].

Theodore continues by writing: *When we were brought before him, he investigated the matter thoroughly, as was proper. But when Athanasius, the bishop of the Armenians (Syrians), came to his senses and recognized the injustice, we were released. After the leaders deliberated, we remained with him – not by our own request or petition, but by divine will, and not by the power of men, but by his brotherly consent, in peace and love*[33].

In summary, the letters show that upon arriving in the Holy City, Theodore initially took refuge in an Armenian monastery, whose community had longstanding ties with the Syrians. Amidst the shifting alliances between West Syrians and the Latin Christians, Theodore also sought the support of the Latin Patriarch – a strategic move given his vulnerable status and his ambition for ecclesiastical advancement. Complicating matters further, Michael Rabo's brother, Athanasius, was serving as Bishop of Jerusalem at the time – a powerful local ally whose influence likely played a role in Theodore's difficulties.

Bar Wahbun's tone eventually softens, and by the end of his letter, he adopts a more conciliatory stance, even inviting Patriarch Michael to come to Jerusalem. However, the urgency in his words suggests that he was primarily concerned with resolving pressing issues at the monastery. He writes: *Therefore, if you wish to come to this region and ascend to the holy city of Jerusalem, your visit will yield many benefits. First, you will reclaim your servant; you yourself will find rest, and the Church of Christ will gain peace. The monastery will be restored and protected*

[31] CFMM 324, fols. 103–104.
[32] CFMM 324, fol. 112; https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/137408.
[33] CFMM 00324, fol. 113; https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/137408.

during your time. Those who dared to erase your name, impose unjust taxes, and damage the monastery will be rebuked. The one who has been wrongfully appointed will be deposed and condemned by the entire Church, and will repay in full the gold owed. Thus, neither you nor the monastery will suffer harm. By your coming, your glory will increase, your honor will be magnified. I will stand before you as a servant and disciple, faithfully executing your will – not only before our own people, but also before the Patriarch of the Franks. You will have in hand letters and guarantees of respect from him even before entering his domain. Come to Jerusalem in splendor and honor, in the tradition of the Patriarchs – confident, unafraid, and without anxiety. I stand before you with sincerity and genuine love...[34].

Bar Wahbun presents the Patriarch's potential visit to Jerusalem as pivotal for resolving the monastery's difficulties that may have involved conflicts with the Frankish authorities, excessive taxation, or disputes surrounding the election of the abbot, possibly Sōhdō of Edessa, whom Bar Wahbun held responsible for the monastery's decline. He even proposes a backup plan, should Michael be unable to travel: *If you cannot come – due to your age, time constraints, or any other compelling reason – send three or four bishops who are learned and articulate, free from flattery and bribery. If they come with your letter and carry out your instructions, we will act in unity with them and implement your will, especially regarding the management of the monastery*[35].

These letters not only reveal the complex power dynamics among the Eastern Christian communities in Jerusalem, but also demonstrate Bar Wahbun's strategic adaptability – oscillating between confrontation and reconciliation in pursuit of stability and ecclesiastical legitimacy.

6. POWER RELATIONS IN THE HOLY CITY: MS LYON, BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE SYR. 1, AND MS BNF SYR. 51

To shed light on the complex power dynamics of the Syriac Orthodox community in the Holy City, we turn to two colophons preserved in medieval manuscripts. The first appears in MS Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale, Syr. 1, fols. 318–320, and dates from before the 12th century.

This manuscript, originally a book of daily offices used in the church of Aleppo, was gifted by the Syriac Catholic Archeparchy of Aleppo to Laurent d'Arvieux, the French consul in Aleppo, on December 2, 1684. D'Arvieux subsequently donated it to the city of Lyon, where it is now preserved[36].

[34] CFMM 00324, fols. 114–115; https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/137408

[35] CFMM 00324, fol. 115; https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/137408

[36] A brief description and analysis of this manuscript can be found in F. Briquel-Chatonnet, *Manuscrits syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France (n° 356–435, entrés depuis 1911), de la Bibliothèque Méjanes d'Aix-en-Provence, de la Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon*, 1997, p. 195–196; P. Martin, *Les premiers princes croisé setles Syriens jacobites de Jérusalem*, „Journal Asiatique", XII (1888), p. 471–490; XIII (1889), p. 33–79; A. Palmer, *The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem*, Part 2: *Queen Melisende and the Jacobite Estates*, „Oriens Christianus", 76 (1992), p. 74–94.

The manuscript is richly ornamented, with rubrication in red lead and decorative elements, including an aesthetically striking full-page miniature of a cross at the book's opening. The Colophon was composed by the monk Michael, on 10 February, 1138, in the convent of St Mary Magdalene and St Simon the Pharisee, during the time of Ignatius II, Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Jerusalem. On fol. 319 one can see a wonderful scribal decoration with two interesting figural crosses representations and the scribal content that reads: "This book was written by a sinner named Michael, who wears wool, and came from the province and the administration of the city of Marash and belongs to the famous convent of Mar Giwargis, otherwise known as Gaseliud, in the black mountains"[37].

The scribe Michael reports that the Syriac Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem regained ownership of two villages – Bayt Arif and Adasiyya – previously seized by the Frankish crusader Geoffrey Plantagenet. Michael explains that when Metropolitan Cyril fled to Egypt (around 1100), Geoffrey illegitimately took control of the properties. While Geoffrey was later held captive in Egypt, the Syriac Orthodox community presented Christian and Muslim witnesses to prove their rightful claim. As a result, King Baldwin I restored the estates to them, in exchange for a large payment in gold.

The story continues: after his release, Geoffrey petitioned the king, demanding compensation from the Jacobites for the profits he had lost during his imprisonment. The case was brought before the royal court. Queen Melisende, who had ancestral ties to Melitene, was sympathetic to the Syriac Orthodox community in Jerusalem, and with her support, they ultimately won the dispute (Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale Syr. 1, fol. 320)[38]. This episode, along with others in which Metropolitan Ignatius leveraged similar ties to local authorities, highlights the Syriac Orthodox Christians of Jerusalem as an active and influential force in the city's complex political landscape.

The second colophon on this matter appears in BnF Syr. 51, fols. 117–119, and dates to before the 12th century. It was written by the monk Romanos on 25 August 1138, in the Syriac Orthodox convent in Jerusalem, during the tenure of Metropolitan Mar Ignatius. Romanos begins in typical fashion, noting the book, the scribe, and his context:"This gospel – or rather, this lectionary – was completed in the convent of the holy city of Jerusalem in the year 1449 (AD 1138), on the 25th of August, by the least of monks, the unworthy priest Romanos, secretary to our father Mar Ignatius, metropolitan of this place and of the coast, under whose spiritual guidance this book was written. He himself corrected it, as it was the first book I ever copied"[39].

Romanos goes on to describe the monastery's physical structure and recounts the history of the villages Bayt Arif and Adasiyya, long-held possessions of the monastery. These, he says, were originally purchased for a great sum by God's elect, Thomas III (patriarch from 1041/2 to 1057/8)[40]. The scribe continues the account of the dispute with the Frankish crusader Geoffrey, adding a key detail: when the Jacobites regained the villages of Bayt Arif and Adasiyya, they found them ruined –

[37] Lyon Syr. 1, fol. 319. See discussions in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 221–222.
[38] Lyon Syr. 1, fol. 320.
[39] BnF Syr. 51, fol. 117. As detailed in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 223–224.
[40] BnF Syr. 51, fols. 117–118

an argument used to reinforce their rightful claim. Romanos, closely aligned with Metropolitan Ignatius II Hesnun, portrays a tightly knit Syriac Orthodox community centered around the bishop's authority. He notes that the metropolitan issued a decree forbidding Jacobite monks from living in Jerusalem outside the convent – emphasizing unity and discipline within the monastic circle.

The colophon offers valuable information on the expansion of the monastery complex, likely enabled by periods of favorable relations with the Franks, who tolerated or even supported the building works. He describes the legal outcome: the Syriac Orthodox were ordered to pay Geoffrey 200 dinars and a larger sum to the king and his princes. Yet Queen Melisende, praised for her mercy and piety inherited from her mother, played a decisive role in supporting the Jacobite cause. The colophon concludes with an emotional tribute to Bishop Ignatius, who died in Acre just before Pentecost in 1138. His embalmed body was brought to Jerusalem on Pentecost Monday. Romanos writes with deep sorrow. He remembers Ignatius as a generous patron of the Church, who ensured the copying of liturgical books – like this very Gospel lectionary – under his direct guidance[41].

7. COLOPHONS AND TRAVEL REPORTS: EVIDENCE OF SYRIAC PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM

Pilgrimage emerges as a central element in the religious life of both laypeople and monastics during the medieval period, as reflected in Syriac colophons and travel accounts. These texts highlight the spiritual priority of journeying to Jerusalem. One such example dates to 950 AD, when two Syriac nuns undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. During their visit, they donated a manuscript to the Syriac Orthodox monastery and paid for oil to burn in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The colophon in SOP 367, f. 155v, records: "Hannah, abbess, and the nun 'Azizto, her companion, offered this book to our Jacobite Church in the city of Jerusalem, that God may pardon them and their departed relatives and write their names in the Heavenly Jerusalem. This was dedicated in my days and by me, Jeremiah, the weak among strangers, in my role as metropolitan of the See. I have sworn by the living Word of the Lord that no one may remove it from its place or erase this remembrance, in 1261 AG (950 AD)"[42].

Pilgrimage also functioned as a means of entering into lasting spiritual communion with holy places. Donors often sought this connection through intercessory prayer and permanent memorials. A striking example is found in a 13th-century illuminated Syriac liturgical manuscript from the Church of the Forty Martyrs 37. Lavishly decorated with silver, gold, and chrysography, this manuscript includes a prayer request on fol. 4: "Prayer to the Mother of God to intercede for God's mercy on the servant Abu Ishaq"[43].

[41] See Popa, *op. cit*., p. 224.

[42] SOP 367, fol. 155v.

[43] CFFM 37, fol. 4. Access the digitized manuscript at https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/123211

This beautifully illustrates the link between pilgrimage, donation, and the enduring desire for spiritual presence and remembrance.

Another noteworthy example is the brief note left by a Syriac reader named Jacob of Jerusalem in 1493 AD, found in SOP 367, f. 156r. Jacob identifies himself as a pilgrim and records the provenance of the manuscript: "This book was found by Jacob of Jerusalem in the wilderness (likely at Deir al-Surian Monastery, Wadi al-Natrun) in 1804 AG (1493 AD). It belongs to the Syriac Church of the Mother of God in Jerusalem. I ask for the prayers of all who read it. To God be the glory, Amen"[44].

A much more detailed and remarkable report comes from the priest and monk Sargīs from Ḥāḥ in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn (the later bishop of Ḥāḥ, 1505–1508), who made two pilgrimages to Jerusalem – first in 1489/90, and again in 1502/3.

His travel account is preserved in the MS *Saint Mark's Monastery* (SMMJ) Jerusalem 291, fols. 257r – 258v, a 15th-century manuscript that once belonged to the Syriac Orthodox chapel at the Holy Sepulchre. In his first pilgrimage, Sargīs traveled with secular officials collecting taxes for the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt[45].

In his first pilgrimage, Sargīs traveled with secular officials collecting taxes for the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt. He visited Cyprus beforehand and paid homage at the Syriac Church of St. Mary in Nicosia – highlighting longstanding ties between the Syriac Orthodox and Cyprus dating back to the 7th century. Sargīs' account focuses mainly on visual and geographic details, mapping the sacred topography of the Holy Land. He describes passing through Acre, Tyre, Caesarea Philippi, Jaffa, Bethlehem, and then Jerusalem. Within the Holy City, he visited major Christian landmarks among which Mount Zion, the Tomb of David, the Tomb of Stephen, Mary's Tomb, the Ethiopian monastery (Cave of David), the House of Caiaphas (in the possession of Armenians).

In his he narrative, he also refers to the legend of King Abgar of Edessa. While recounting his visit to the Mount of Olives, he ties it to the place where Jesus read Abgar's letter and imprinted his face on a cloth[46]. Another highlight of his account is the description of the Holy Fire ceremony at the tomb of Christ, emphasizing the Easter-centered nature of Syriac pilgrimage[47] Sargīs also left behind inscriptions carved on the columns at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: "Sargīs, monk from Ḥāḥ." These carved names served both as acts of devotion and as a public affirmation of Syriac confessional identity – anchoring the pilgrim's presence in the most sacred Christian site.

Moving from Sargīs' account, I now turn briefly to other Syriac pilgrims from Ṭur ʿAbdīn. One notable example is Addai Addai of Beth Sbirino, who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1491/1492, accompanied by priests, monks, and laypeople. They journeyed as part of a caravan, traveling under the protection of the Emir of Mardin, in search of the Holy Light and blessings from the Holy Sepulchre and the sacred sites of Jerusalem Like Sargis, Addai and his son Qawme are commemorated in an inscription at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: "The priest Addai and Qawme his son, from Sbirino"[48].

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[44] SOP 367, fol. 156r.

[45] SMMJ 291, fol. 258v. The manuscript can be viewed online at https://w3id.org/vhmml/reading Room/view/136499

[46] SMMJ 291, fol. 258r; https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/136499

[47] SMMJ 291, fol. 258v; https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/136499

[48] Discussed further in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 262.

Beyond Addai's story, numerous colophons from the 16th–17th centuries document Syriac pilgrimages to Jerusalem (e.g., SMMJ 133, 142, 159, 181), along with records of donations – silver items, crosses, and manuscript restorations (SOP 351, 352, SMMJ 9, SMMJ 423). One striking example is a colophon in SMMJ 181, which includes two notes by the pilgrim ʿAbdīšōʿ of Ātēl, dated AG 1955 (1643/4 CE) and AG 1962 (1650/1 CE). As mentioned earlier, several colophons describe pilgrims who donated to the Jerusalem monastery by buying back liturgical items from Muslims. This suggests that financing the recovery or maintenance of church items was part of the spiritual and communal responsibility of pilgrimage.

Another recurring feature in these records is the title *maqdšāyā* (Syriac for "pilgrim to the holy city"), a designation also found in Arabic (*maqdisī*) and Armenian (*mahtesi*), as highlighted by Hubert Kaufhold[49]. For instance, a 16th-century colophon (SMMJ 9) refers to a woman named Mary from Mosul who funded a monk, George, to restore a book for the Church of St. Mark's Monastery in 1555. Her name is followed by the abbreviation *mqd*, denoting her status as a pilgrim.

This title appears again in manuscripts such as SOP 352 (fols. 5, 15) and in Vat. Syr. 168, f. 342, which contains Barhebraeus' *Candelabra of the Sanctuary*: "This book, entitled *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, was bought by maqdasi Hermez, son of maqdasi Garabet"[50].

8. CANONS FOR SYRIAC PILGRIMS (13TH CENTURY)

To conclude, I will briefly highlight a set of pilgrimage canons that reflect how Syriac Christians in the 13th century understood and practiced pilgrimage. These canons, found in Chapter 9 of the *Book of Ethics* by Gregorius Barhebraeus (written in 1279 in Maragha), provide insight into the expectations, conditions, and spiritual goals associated with pilgrimage. Barhebraeus – one of the most influential Syriac Orthodox theologians and scholars – opens his discussion by contrasting two perspectives: the "perfect solitaries" who seek only the heavenly Jerusalem, and ordinary believers who yearn to see the earthly Holy City. This tension mirrors the wider ambivalence in Syriac Christianity regarding pilgrimage. Barhebraeus outlines two sets of canons intended to guide pilgrims both practically and spiritually, suggesting that pilgrimage was already a common and somewhat standardized religious practice. His goal was to ensure it remained a spiritually enriching experience rather than a distraction or danger.

Key Canons for Pilgrims concern the following aspects:

Spiritual Preparation: Self-examination and repentance before setting out.

Financial Integrity: Pilgrimage should be funded through honest work or inheritance.

No Trading: Avoid commercial activity – focus on "eternal trade."

[49] See Kaufhold, Hubert, *Der Ehrentitel Der Ehrentitel «Jerusalempilger» (syrisch maqdšāyā, arabisch maqdisī, armenisch mahtesi)*, „Oriens Christianus", 75 (1991), p. 44–61. See also the analysis in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 266.

[50] Vat. Syr. 168, fol. 342.

Charity: Share food, avoid begging, and show mercy to others.
Timing: Aim to arrive in Jerusalem for Holy Week and Easter.
Devotion: Recite psalms (especially Psalm 122) en route.
Humility: Avoid sinful behavior, travel on foot if possible, wear modest clothing.
Barhebraeus also details liturgical practices:
Reading Psalm 48 at the sight of the city; Psalm 122 at the entrance.
A priestly prayer when entering the Holy Sepulchre.
Dress Code: White linen/cotton for lay pilgrims, wool for monks.
Prayer at Holy Sites: Pilgrims should meditate at each site, return home afterward, and value the spiritual gain over the cost[51].

To illustrate the lasting influence of such ideals, I conclude with the story of Rabban Sauma and Marqos (from *The Life of Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, 1318). These East Syriac monks set out from Beijing intending to reach Jerusalem for devotion and the forgiveness of sins. Though they made it to Mesopotamia and visited local holy sites, their plan to continue was halted. Catholicos Mar Denḥa discouraged them, citing danger and promoting devotion to local traditions instead: "This is no time to travel to Jerusalem… If one visits [local shrines] with a pure heart, the benefits will not be inferior to those from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem"[52].

This echoes earlier views, like those of Philoxenos of Mabbug or Išōʿyahb I, opposing excessive pilgrimage and affirming the spiritual value of local sacred spaces. The continuity of this argument across centuries highlights the enduring theological concern over how pilgrimage should be practiced within the Syriac tradition.

9. CONCLUSION

In late antiquity, the medieval period, and beyond, Jerusalem served as a spiritual matrix – a formative stage for monastic life. The journey to the Holy Land deeply resonated with the spiritual aspirations of monks, symbolizing a path toward holiness and perfection.

Yet, a rhetorical boundary was often imposed by church leaders such as Philoxenos of Mabbug, Išōʿyahb I, Barhebraeus, and others. These authorities sought to temper the widespread belief that every Christian must physically visit and pray in the Holy City – a tradition that had become deeply rooted in communal consciousness and spiritual practice.

By the late Middle Ages, as colophons testify, Syriac pilgrimage to Jerusalem had become more fluid, regularized, and distinct. Pilgrims were now designated by the term *maqdšāyā* – marked as both pilgrims and donors to the holy places – distinguishing them from ordinary believers.

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[51] Herman Teule (ed.), *Gregory Barhebraeus, Ethicon. Mēmrā I* (CSCO, Scriptores Syri 534–535, vol. 218–219, Louvanii, E. Peeters, 1993). Refer to the discussions in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 228–246.

[52] Pier Giorgio Borbone (ed.), *History of Mar Yahballah and Rabban Sauma* (Hamburg, Verlag Tredition, 2020), p. 78 (syr.), p. 79 (engl.). See the treatment in Popa, *op. cit*., p. 246–261.

Syriac-speaking communities, monastic institutions, and manuscript traditions flourished in Jerusalem, notably around the Monastery of St Mary Magdalene and, later, the Syriac Orthodox Convent of St Mark. The latter became especially significant under Patriarch Michael, when the Syriac community was more dynamic and enmeshed in the complex power relations of the Holy City.

I close with a brief look at the Monastery of St Mark, now the spiritual heart of Syriac Orthodox identity in Jerusalem. Although its origins remain obscure, its role in preserving Syriac heritage is well established. According to tradition, it stands on the site of the house of Mary, mother of John Mark – a belief supported by an inscription discovered in 1940, thought by some to date to the 6th century (though others date it later). Whether historically continuous or a spiritual heir to the earlier Monastery of St Mary Magdalene, St Mark's remains invaluable – especially for its manuscript library of over 450 works in Syriac and Garshuni.

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to share this research here at the IAS Princeton. It has been a pleasure engaging with such a thoughtful audience. I end with a heartfelt hope that Jerusalem and the Holy Land – so central to the three Abrahamic faiths – will be safeguarded from the turmoil of present conflicts, and that peace will soon prevail again in this historic region.

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY AND THE HOLY CITY OF JERUSALEM: ENTANGLED HISTORIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Abstract

This paper examines the Syriac engagement with the Holy City from late antiquity through the late Middle Ages. Early Syriac pilgrims – both monastic and lay – regarded Jerusalem as a matrix of sanctity, establishing enduring ecclesiastical and monastic presences in the Holy City. Drawing on hagiographies, manuscript colophons, and ecclesiastical records, the study reconstructs a layered history of pilgrimage, institutional consolidation, and liturgical development from antiquity to the end of the medieval period.