

Christianity in the Gulf: vestiges of the East Syrian presence in late antiquity

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ABSTRACT

The Arabian-Persian Gulf area has been fertile soil for different civilisations through the centuries, and bears the traces of numerous settlements of many different historical periods. Specifically, the area known in the past as Bêt Qaṭrāyē shows the vestiges of the Christian Syrian presence. The coastal region stretching from Kuwait to the United Arab Emirates, including also some of the Persian islands, displays a strange unevenness between the literary sources and the archaeological data relating to the history of the Christian communities that lived there between the fourth and the ninth centuries. The main texts naming the area, specifically its upper clergy and its most important religious circumstances, are the acts of the councils, but there are also other mentions scattered in different sixth and seventh centuries authors’ texts. Following the path of the ups and downs of the Church of the East, this paper aims at reconstructing a hypothetical history of the dioceses and the settlements in the area that witnessed the Christian presence. Anyway, this history cannot be understood only by relying upon written sources, and needs then to be integrated with the archaeological reports produced during the last decades. The result of this integration is the picture of a highly lively community, strong and self-reliant, whose history was too often forgotten.

KEYWORDS

Bêt Qaṭrāyē, Syriac, Church of the East, Syriac Christianity, Arabic-Persian Gulf

1. Preliminary remarks

The history of Syriac Christians living in the area known as Bēt Qaṭrāyē has been somewhat understudied by Syriac scholars, leaving thus many questions unanswered. However, if we take a closer look at the data we have about the centuries from the fourth to the ninth, we see a very fascinating and lively reality, made up of highly educated writers, distinguished theologians and, most of all, a very strong religious class capable of releasing itself from the Persian metropolitan authority.

The name Bēt Qaṭrāyē (BQ) refers to a huge area spanning from the coasts of the Kuwait, to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.¹ This area has been affected by important movements of people, goods, cultures and cultural patterns. Specifically, it was inhabited for several centuries by some Eastern Christian communities.²

The Church that is to be found in the BQ region is the Church of the East, also labelled Nestorian, East Syrian, Chaldean Church, Assyrian Church (of the East), etc.: the BQ Church was suffragan of the Persian metropolitan see of Rev Ardashir (that was under the authority of the patriarchate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon). Concerning the presence of the

¹ According to modern excavations, it must have stretched to a small portion of the coasts of Iran. See BRIQUEL CHATONNET, DEBIÉ 2017, p. 122: 'Cette dénomination recouvre un espace plus large que le Qatar actuel qui en a hérité son nom, et s'applique à pratiquement toute la côte orientale de la péninsule arabique et aux îles qui la bordent'. But later, p. 124: 'Les traces archéologiques retrouvées de cette implantation chrétienne dans le Golfe se sont multipliées depuis un demi-siècle. Près de la rive orientale, le site insulaire de Kharg (Iran) a été fouillé dans les années 1959-1960 avant l'installation d'un terminal pétrolier'.

² Briefly put, the two main councils of Late Antiquity, namely the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, triggered the great Christological schisms within Eastern Christianity. The so-called East Syrian Church rejects the Christological positions of Ephesus, which were mainly the definition of Mary as *Theotókos*, the repudiation of Nestorianism and the acceptance of miaphysitism (which denotes the belief in the single and indivisible nature of Christ, in which live together both his humanity and his divinity). On the other hand, the West Syrian Church rejects the positions of Chalcedon, which were mainly the negation of monophysitism (which denotes the belief in the one and only divine nature of Christ) and the superiority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople over those of Antioch and Alexandria.

so-called Jacobite or West Syrian Church, this was rather settled in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, as testified, for instance, by the massive massacre of Christians belonging to this Church that took place in Naḡrān in 523 CE.³

2. Sources about BQ

The sources mentioning BQ or testifying a Christian presence in the area can be divided into written and archaeological sources: they are quite variegated and also hardly ever consistent one with the other. They shall be treated in the following two paragraphs.

2.1 Written sources about BQ

The textual evidences come both from Islamic and Christian sources. Reference to Christianity in the Arabian peninsula are found in the Qur'ān, in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767 CE), in the *Ta'riḫ al-umam wa-l-muluk* by al-Ṭabari (d. 922 CE) and in some genealogies, though all those sources often pose problems of historicity.⁴ Regardless, certain sources written by Muslim authors, such as the *Murūj al-dāḥab wa ma'ādin al-jawābir* by al-Mas'ūdī (d. 958) and the *Mu'jam al-buldān* by Yāqūt al-Hamawī (d. 1228 CE), represent useful tools to reconstruct, for instance, the toponomastics.⁵ On the Christian side, there are acts of synods, chronicles or letters: these sources,

³ GAJDA 2009, pp. 97-102; ROBIN 2010, pp. 69-79.

⁴ Naturally, this statement does not rest on the personal judgment of the present writer, but on the fact that the period under examination coincides with the early centuries of Islam, and the texts belonging to that moment were usually arranged to legitimize Islam and the Prophet Muḥammad, often belonging to the anti-Christian disputes. Being Sacred Texts or texts about the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad, they often display mythical accounts and cannot be considered entirely historically reliable. It is possible to say the same about genealogies, since it is not unusual to have invented characters or people that apparently lived for more than one hundred years in order to fill the gaps between two or more characters.

⁵ For accounts on the Muslim sources and their problems see BIN SERAY 1996, pp. 324-325, MOURAD 2014, pp. 40-44, 53-55 and AL-MURIKHI 2014, pp. 250-253.

primarily composed for practical reasons, present anyway certain limitations, lacking in accurate information about, for instance, the exact location of the towns they mention.

The text that places a diocese in BQ earlier in time is the much discussed *Chronicle of Arbela*, mentioning the existence of a bishopric already at the times of the bishop of Arbela Hairān (217-250 CE),⁶ but, considering the scholarly *querelle* about its authenticity, it is more prudent not to rely upon it. It should be noticed, though, that Christian merchants might have lived in the region from the first century on, working on the flourishing routes connecting the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.⁷

The first reliable mention of a diocese in the area of BQ is in the acts of the synod of Mar Isaac in 410.⁸ Interestingly, these acts contain an invective against a certain Baṭai of Mašmahīg, whose removal from his functions as bishop is confirmed and repeated. For the time being, it will only be stated that Mašmahīg is one of the most important towns in the BQ area. About Baṭai, we learn that he has been accused of unspecified misconducts and, as Chabot translates, he « était censuré et repoussé, est de nouveau censuré, excommunié, déposé et reprouvé par tout le synode, lui et quiconque oserait recevoir de lui l'imposition des mains ».⁹ Furthermore, a certain Daniel, previously ordered by Baṭai, is said to have attended the synod: about him Chabot translates « qu'il soit lui-même censuré et excommunié par ce synode; qu'il sorte du pays où il a jeté le trouble et qu'on ne l'y rencontre plus; qu'il s'en aille à sa place, censuré, déposé et reprouvé ».¹⁰ Among the signatures concluding these acts, there is the one of a certain Elias bishop of Mašmahīg, that apparently agreed upon the two excommunications.

The second mention is found in the acts of the following synod of Mar Yahbalaha I in 420,¹¹ who

⁶ KAWERAU 1985, p. 31 (text); RAMELLI 2002, p. 43 (transl.).

⁷ BRIQUEL CHATONNET, DEBIÉ 2017, pp. 122-129.

⁸ CHABOT 1902, pp. 17-36 (text) and pp. 253-275 (trans.).

⁹ Ibid., p. 34.26-27 (text) and p. 273 (trans.).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 35.9-13 (text) and p. 273 (trans.).

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 37-42 (text) and pp. 276-284 (trans.).

in the first lines is called, among the others, patriarch of 'the isles': this name was used to indicate, together with 'the black islands', the archipelago of Bahrain before the seventh century, when the designation Bēt Qaṭrāyē came into usage.¹² Bishops coming from BQ are mentioned in many other synods until the one that took place in 676, which will be discussed later.¹³

What we learn, particularly from the first text, is that the reality of the BQ area was lively and turbulent already: there was at least one bishopric and some dissidents, people that apparently used to be bishops or members of the clergy but must have deviated from the directions of their Christian authorities, being thus removed from their roles. Anyway, these dissidents still performed their functions, like ordering new priests, and must have had a conspicuous number of followers, according to the words of the acts of the synod.

Among the most important sources describing the history of the area there are the letters written by the catholicos Išo'yahb III, addressed to the clergy, bishops, monks and people of BQ.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the religious controversies already described in the synod of Mar Isaac were not fated to end, and the whole area apparently released itself from the control of the metropolitan. It seems thus that the ecclesiastical authorities of BQ were powerful enough to set an important rebellion, to the extent that Išo'yahb III (catholicos from 649 to 659) felt the need to address them a set of letters with undisguised impetuosity and a certain lack of Christian charity, in order to reproach their rebellion and gain their loyalty back. These letters describe a community that acts independently, has excommunicated bishops that order new priests,

¹² It should be remarked, though, that in a footnote Chabot (Ibid., p. 276) explains that the diacritic indicating the plural form 'the isles' might as well be a scribal mistake, implying that 'the isle' would point to the Jazira region. Regardless, in the previous synod the indication of 'the isles' unmistakably designates the islands of the Gulf (Ibid., p. 34.20 text and p. 273 trans.).

¹³ BEAUCAMP, ROBIN 1983, p. 181; BIN SERAY 1996, pp. 320-321; BIN SERAY 1997, pp. 212-217. See also BRIQUEL CHATONNET 2010, pp. 179-180.

¹⁴ For brief accounts on Išo'yahb III's life see HOYLAND 1997, pp. 174-182; HEALEY 2000, pp. 227-229; HEALEY 2009, pp. 3-7 and WILMSHURST 2011, pp. 104-106.

and, most of all, relies on the civil (Muslim) authorities to solve the controversies.¹⁵ In order to give a hint of the concern displayed by Išo'yahb, some brief quotations from his letters are provided here, in the remarkable translation recently offered by Mario Kozah.¹⁶

Letter XVII, addressed to the bishops of BQ:

You have hindered yourselves from coming to the Church of God and have set off with thoughtless haste towards the leader of your rebellion and you have with unintelligent madness written and sealed the rebellion against God. Furthermore, you have also brought the book of your rebellion to the door of the temporal rulers, and have already done enough to cut off all hope of a life in the Church. God's Church [...] has now [...] removed you from the honor and the rank through which you have become renowned. [...] Therefore, let us know your situation as soon as possible, not just with simple letters, as (you have done) thus far, but with a true demonstration of action and the Lord through his grace will help you to do what is appropriate for your salvation, and be strong.¹⁷

Letter XIX, addressed to the people of BQ:

The tale of evils which have occurred in your region, my beloved brothers, presses us to write to you a second time, since I am very troubled by the fear of other evils which are set to happen in your region. For from the beginning, when I heard that your bishops contrived wickedly, wrote and sealed a document of apostasy from the Church of God, I realized that they were prepared to fall into every evil and would cast down the people of God whose bishops they are called.¹⁸

Important details about the names of the towns included in the region are provided by the Letter XVI-II, addressed again to the people of BQ. We read:

Since, however, your bishops-in-name were not satisfied with impiety against the Church of God, they presented a public display of their rebellion [...]. You,

however, priests and deacons, fulfill the ecclesiastical ministry with all that is legally just without the communion of those who were called your bishops until a priestly chair is established for you by the Church of God according to the precept and ordinance of the spiritual laws. And you, faithful, in whose hands is placed ancillary authority of the islands and the dwellers of the desert, I mean Dayrīn (dyryn) and Mašmahīg (mšmhyg) and Talon (tlwn) and Ḥaṭṭa (ḥṭ') and Hagar (hgr), strive at this time more than ever to guard your faith and in legal establishment of the priesthood by which you have been consecrated, more so than for worldly affairs. [...] ¹⁹

Scholars have been able to reconstruct the modern location of the places mentioned by the patriarch as follows: Dayrin has been recognized as a village on Tarut island in Saudi Arabia, Mašmahīg as al-Muharraḡ in Bahrain, Ḥaṭṭa as al-Qaṭīf, in Saudi Arabia and Hagar as al-Hufūf in Saudi Arabia as well. Concerning Talon, the toponym resembles the old name of Bahrain itself, as reflected in Greek *Tylos*, and thus might refer to the Bahrain archipelago generally speaking, even though it would be the only toponym referring to an entire region instead of a single town.²⁰ In addition to that, concerning the location of this place, in the final canons written for Jacob, bishop of Daray (probably Dayrin), by Išo'yahb I, it is said that the island of Daray was next to *Talūn* (the toponym spelled as *t'lw'n*).²¹ Moreover, in the *Passion* of the martyr Yazdbozid, it is said that a monk, identified by Fiey with Moses II, partner of Abraham the Stranger, was brought as a captive on an island called *Talwn* around the sixth century.²²

Another interesting source for the history of BQ is the *History of Mar Yawnan*:²³ it is a hagiographical text about the life of Mar Yawnan, the

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 51-53 (trans.) and 74-75 (text).

²⁰ See TRIMINGHAM 1979, p. 281; BEAUCAMP, ROBIN 1983, pp. 171-179; HEALEY 2000, pp. 233-235; CARTER 2008, pp. 100-103; CARTER 2013, pp. 313-314 and KOZAH 2017, p. 63. For a discussion on *Tylos* see POTTS 1990, pp. 125-149.

²¹ CHABOT 1902, p. 165.27-28 (text) and p. 424 (transl.).

²² FIEY 1966, pp. 135-136 and C. and F. Jullien in STEVE 2003, p. 166.

²³ PAYNE 2011; BROCK 2015, pp. 1-41.

¹⁵ KOZAH 2015, p. 44.

¹⁶ KOZAH 2015, pp. 45-88.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 45-47 (trans.) and 69-70 (text).

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 57 (trans.) and 78 (text).

renowned founder of the famous monastery near Piroz-Shabur/Anbar, on the Euphrates, who is likely to have lived in the fourth century. This *History* is however to be dated probably to the late seventh or early eighth century. This text is the only extant example of hagiographic Syriac literature concerning the Gulf area: the supposed author, Zadoy, is indeed abbot of the monastery of Mar Thomas on the 'black island' and writes with the purpose of linking the monastic life of the region to that of the great founder fathers. The narration offers thus a reliable proof of the monastic life in BQ and provides us with a hint of the need that the monastic communities had to validate themselves.

Another mention of the region that has to do with monasteries is to be found in the *Chronicle of Seert*, chapter 62: it tells the story of the building of some monasteries by 'Abdišo' (who lived during the catholicosate of Mar Tomarsa in 363-371 CE), one of which was on an island of Bahrain.²⁴

Moreover, Qatar is mentioned in the *Chronicon anonymum de ultimis regibus Persarum*,²⁵ an anonymous chronicle written probably by an East Syrian monk around 660 CE, known also as *Chronicle of Khuzistan*.²⁶ The 'islands of Qatar' are mentioned after the narration of the last years of the emperor Heraclius I and of his death in 641. The islands are mentioned along with other towns in the Arabian Peninsula, among which we find also Hagar and Ḥaṭṭa. The people living in these towns appear to be monotheistic, but it is not possible, in the opinion of the present writer, to decide whether they should be accounted as Christians or Muslims, according to the information provided by this text. In the same chronicle there is also a mention of a certain Ma'nē, native of the island of Dayrin, who was interpreter for the Lāḥmid king al-Numan III (579-601). Moreover, there is a mention of BQ and another one of Qatar, even though in none of those cases there is a specific reference to a religious affiliation.²⁷ Bahrain is also

mentioned in the same non-connoted way in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian during the events of the years 824/825, even though later, during the events of the 834/835, the people of Bahrain appear to be Christians.²⁸

The last important mention of the dioceses of BQ is to be found in the synod held by Mar Giwargis I in 676 in the town of Dayrin.²⁹ Mar Giwargis was Išo'yahb III's successor, and was apparently the one who tamed the rebellion and restored order. According to this last text, Dayrin had a bishop at that time, Išo'yahb, who signed the acts of this synod, but there appears to be also a metropolitan bishop of BQ attending the synod, named Thomas, whose signature was written right after that of Giwargis. Did BQ become a metropolitan see in the meantime? Fiey suggests that this title might have been 'usurped' by Thomas without Giwargis's validation,³⁰ but it might as well be the case that Giwargis, for the sake of peace, accepted BQ as a metropolitan see and admitted its exponents in the list of participants to win back their loyalty.³¹

From this moment on, we will not find a single written account regarding churches in this area. Fiey states that he was able to find another mention of Christians (generally speaking) in Bahrain in 835 and that their last mention of these is under catholicos Yūwānīs III (893-899), when a rebel *šayḥ* takes power and behaves well towards the Christians.³² This writer was however unable to track these events in the work indicated by Fiey, which is Mari Ibn Sulayman's *Aḥbār faṭārkat kursī al-mašriq min kitāb al-maḡdal* (translated by Gismondi as *De patriarchis nestorianorum commentaria*).³³

pp. 18, 22 and 30 (Latin).

²⁸ CHABOT 1899, III, pp. 61-62 and 85.

²⁹ CHABOT 1902, pp. 215-226 (text) and pp. 480-490 (trans.).

³⁰ FIEY 1969, p. 211.

³¹ BEAUCAMP, ROBIN 1983, p. 184 and KOZAH 2014, p. 7.

³² FIEY 1969, p. 211.

³³ GISMONDI 1899.

²⁴ SCHER 1910, 310-312.

²⁵ GUIDI 1903, p. 38.26 (Syriac text) and p. 31 (Latin translation).

²⁶ DEBIÉ 2015, pp. 611-613.

²⁷ GUIDI 1903, pp. 20.9, 25.27 and 37.3 (Syriac) and

2.2 Archaeological data

Those who would like to see the vestiges of the towns of Dayrin, Mašmahīg, Ḥaṭṭa and Hagar would be very disappointed to learn that not a stone has been unearthed from the places where these towns used to be, even though, in 1914, alleged ‘old foundations’ have been noticed near Mašmahīg.³⁴ What is even more incredible is that interesting sites have been excavated in other places all around the area, places that are never mentioned in the written sources. The sites that are going to be described briefly here are those of al-Quṣūr on the island of Failaka in Kuwait, Sir Bani Yas in the United Arab Emirates, Jubail in Saudi Arabia and Kharg in the Iranian province of Bushehr. These sites are to be dated between the seventh and the ninth centuries. Minor Christian vestiges have been excavated in Akkaz (Kuwait), Thaj and Jebel Berri (Saudi Arabia) as well, but they will not be described in this paper.

The site of al-Quṣūr, which is one of the biggest on the island (2,80 × 1,60 km),³⁵ has been surveyed for the first time by an Italian team in 1975-1976, followed by a French mission from 1988 to 1990³⁶ – when the Gulf War forced the mission to interrupt its works –, and then again in 2007 and from 2012 on.³⁷ At the present time, the Mission Archéologique Franco-Koweïtienne de Faïlaka (MAFKF), launched in 2011, is responsible for the excavations: the mission constantly updates its website with articles, information, pictures and

³⁴ POTTS 1990, p. 124. Among the alleged remains of the ancient Eastern Christian towns, there are also the three limestone funerary stelae from Tarut, displaying figures recalling those of the Christian stelae of Rasm al-Qanafez, in Syria. These three issues, kept at the Bahrain National Museum, have no record of acquisition with their original provenance, making it very difficult to account them as proper evidences. See POTTS 1990, pp. 212-213. Besides, Baumer mentions a monastery on the island of Tarut (where Dayrin was supposed to be placed), but since he gives no further reference on the topic there is no way to understand which structure he refers to, since he is the only scholar mentioning it. See BAUMER 2006, p. 138. For a discussion on archaeological evidences in Qatar see AL-THANI 2014.

³⁵ BONNÉRIC 2016, p. 107.

³⁶ See BERNARD ET AL. 1991 for the preliminary report of the 1989 mission.

³⁷ SALLES, CALLOT 2013, p. 237.

news concerning the proceeding of the works.³⁸ The site of al-Quṣūr displays two churches: the first one (called A1) was discovered already in 1989, while the second one (A2) had to wait until the 2008 to be found. Another space has been excavated in 2009 near those churches, described as an “ecclesiastical” space probably used for residential purposes: the whole area displays more than 140 structures, that have been interpreted as monks’ cells, with a kitchen and a stocking area.³⁹ The two churches show different architectures: A1 is bigger (35 × 19 m), built in mud bricks, finely plastered and has a big central nave and apse, with aisles on both sides preceded by a narthex, while A2 is smaller (22 × 7 m) and with a single nave.⁴⁰ This last building has to be considered an *unicum* in the Gulf area, considering that the other churches excavated are similar to A1.⁴¹ A tomb, dating back to 280 CE, has been found in the south wall of the central nave of A1: its date must not lead to the conclusion that the Christian site belongs to the third century, but testifies instead that the area was occupied before the arrival of the Christians. According to the discoveries of the MAFKF, the first installation of Christians in the site belongs to the end of the Sasanian period, and lasted until the ninth century.⁴² The hypothesis of the MAFKF is that the whole area used to be a monastic complex.

The second site is Sir Bani Yas, in the United Arab Emirates. This site displays an imposing monastic complex (90 × 70 m)⁴³ that was found in 1992 by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) mission, and has been excavated from 1993 to 1996.⁴⁴ In 1995 the archaeologists found a finely plastered church (16 × 11 m), very similar to A1 in al-Quṣūr, with a big central nave and apse, aisles on the sides and a narthex.⁴⁵ Be-

³⁸ <http://mafkf.hypotheses.org/>.

³⁹ BONNÉRIC 2016, p. 108.

⁴⁰ SALLES, CALLOT 2013, pp. 242-259.

⁴¹ BONNÉRIC 2016, p. 108.

⁴² Ibid. p. 111.

⁴³ ELDERS 2001, p. 48.

⁴⁴ See KING 1997 for the preliminary report of the 1990s excavations.

⁴⁵ For the analysis of the phases of construction of the church see ELDERS 2001, pp. 49-53.

sides, the archaeologists found six courtyard houses in the surroundings of the monastery.⁴⁶ The dating of the site has been defined by Carter on the basis of ceramic and radiocarbon evidences, giving a mid-seventh to mid-eighth occupational time span, even though the stucco work seems to indicate rather a eighth/ninth century date.⁴⁷ The site of Sir Bani Yas thus appears to be contemporary to the one in al-Qusūr, even though the latter might have been occupied for a little longer.⁴⁸ It is worth adding that another church with related structures was excavated not far from Sir Bani Yas, in Marawah, during the 2000 spring campaign: the two sites are similar one to another.⁴⁹

The third site is the one in Jubail: it displays a remarkable church that has been found by accident in 1986. This site has a complicated history and unfortunately, as soon as some crosses on the wall were discovered, it has been surrounded by fences restricting the access to it.⁵⁰ The Saudi Department of Antiquities undertook excavations in 1987, but apparently the report has never been published: the only study we have seems to be the unofficial one provided by Langfeldt in 1994, which states that the church appears similar to the ones in al-Qusūr and Sir Bani Yas under the point of view of the stuccos, but different in the architecture, having a single square room instead of central nave with aisles. Due to these reasons, Carter suggested that the Church might belong to the Jacobite confession, even though there is no concrete evidence to confirm this hypothesis.⁵¹ Apparently, three Christian gravestones have been found in the vicinity of the site, but the circumstances under which they have been discovered prevent us from considering them as proper evidence.⁵²

⁴⁶ CARTER 2008, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-92. See also KENNET 2007, pp. 89-94.

⁴⁸ CARTER 2013, p. 321.

⁴⁹ ELDERS 2001, pp. 53-56.

⁵⁰ LANGFELDT 1994, pp. 32-34.

⁵¹ CARTER 2008, p. 98.

⁵² LANGFELDT 1994, pp. 42-44 writes that he was contacted by three people that have found these gravestones some 200/250 metres north of the church and consequently decided to bring them home, believing that the Saudis would destroy them. Subsequently, however, they decided all together to relocate the gravestones in one of the rooms south of the church,

The last site is Kharg, in the Iranian province of Bushehr, that was excavated for the first time in 1959 by the Mission Archéologique Française. This site displays a stunning monastic complex measuring 123 × 88 m: it has a church with a big central nave (5 × 15 m), aisles and narthex, a refectory, a library and a sizable number of cells,⁵³ a structure that resembles those of the monasteries excavated in Egypt.⁵⁴ Not very far from the monastery, the archeologists found a housing area that they recognized as married priests' residences, since Eastern Christianity allows the clergy (but not the monks) to get married.⁵⁵ Someone else instead considers this area as rather inhabited by people linked to the monastery, for instance, by working relationships, or by hosts of the monastery.⁵⁶ It has been estimated that the whole complex could have hosted about 100 people, and displayed ingenious hydraulic and agricultural works in order to provide its population with everything needed.⁵⁷ The site displays also a certain number of Christian tombs, connoted by crosses engraved on them and by some Syriac inscriptions.⁵⁸

3. The authors of BQ

The BQ region gave birth to several well-known authors, who lived during the sixth-seventh centuries. Some of them were known everywhere in the Syriac-speaking community as being refined theologians, learned biblical exegetes and religious poets. They are explicitly said to be born and educated in BQ, where most of them spent their entire life. The most important writer of this group is Isaac of Nineveh, who left BQ at a certain moment

covered by some inches of sand, and called the Department of Antiquities in order to leave a record of the discovery.

⁵³ STEVE 2003, pp. 85-113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁵ BOWMAN 1974-5, pp. 58-59. On Persian monasticism in the Gulf see the detailed account given by C. and F. Jullien in STEVE 2003, pp. 155-183.

⁵⁶ STEVE 2003, pp. 150-151.

⁵⁷ GHIRSHMAN 1960, p. 23; BOWMAN 1974-5, pp. 52-54; STEVE 2003, pp. 150-152.

⁵⁸ GHIRSHMAN 1969, p. 6; STEVE 2003, pp. 45-59.

during the struggle with the Persian metropolitan see: he was bishop of the city of Nineveh only for five months, after which he resigned and went living as an eremite in the Khuzistan region.⁵⁹ Other important names are those of Dadisho' Qaṭraya, Aḥob Qaṭraya and Abraham bar Lipah.⁶⁰ Among the authors of BQ there were also a certain number of writers all named Gabriel, whose identities and works have been studied by Brock.⁶¹ The existence of this intellectual class implies the presence of a high-level pole of education and learning in BQ, able to provide refined knowledge on matters such as biblical exegesis and religious studies. As a matter of fact, Brock's idea of the existence of monasteries acting as higher education schools, like the famous one in Nisibis, appears very well-grounded.⁶² Moreover, these monasteries are likely to have served as caravanserais, since there are evidences for an involvement of Christians in the shipping and commercial activities in the Gulf, with specific regards to trade in pearls.⁶³ Thus, we should not imagine these places as closed structures whose access was restricted, but as gathering places open to the population, where there was an exchange of goods, knowledge and probably medical cares.

4. The language of BQ

There is one last puzzling enigma concerning the language spoken by the people of BQ. As a matter of fact, the identity of the Syriac communities is grounded both on religious and linguistic bases, but the language used as the written variety and acting as a vehicular language is not actually a spoken variety.

Leaving alone the city of Edessa – whose Aramaic dialect turned to become what we call Classical Syriac –, all the towns belonging to the community have their own mother tongues, not necessarily belonging to the Aramaic group. This happens because the boundaries of the Syriac world span from Turkey, to Mesopotamia, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula, and also as far as India and China, meaning that the Christians of Syriac tradition speak different languages.⁶⁴ Of course, BQ is no exception: it is worth remarking that, among the languages used in the Gulf area, there were different Arabic varieties, Aramaic, Hasaitic⁶⁵ and Persian.

Given that the religious language of BQ was Classical Syriac, concerning the language these Christians spoke, scholars came across a set of glosses in the alleged “language of Bēt Qaṭrāyē” in a manuscript, the (*olim*) *Diyarbakır 22*, containing an East Syriac ninth century commentary to the Bible. These glosses have been investigated first by Schall⁶⁶ and later by Contini⁶⁷, and even though the two scholars analyzed different groups of words, they drew the same conclusions: the glosses seem to pertain to a language identifiable as a south-eastern variety of Aramaic. Admittedly, Syriac is also a dialect of Aramaic, as explained above, but it is actually a central Aramaic dialect,⁶⁸ whereas this spoken variety was southern Mesopotamian, as Mandaic. What is even more interesting is that, according to the study of these glosses, some of the words display Persian etymologies, as well as Arabic and common Semitic ones, while others so far defied any attempt at identifying an etymology.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ On Isaac of Nineveh see, for instance, BROCK 1999-2000a, pp. 88-89; BROCK 1999-2000b; KOZAH 2014, pp. 7-13, CHIALÀ 2014, KESSEL 2015 and HANSBURY 2015.

⁶⁰ For accounts on Syriac writers from BQ see BROCK 1999-2000a, 2009; KOZAH 2014, 2015, 2017.

⁶¹ BROCK 1999-2000a, pp. 89-92.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

⁶³ CARTER 2008, p. 105. Probably also the pearl divers mentioned in the XIX canon of the synod of Išo'yahb were Christians from BQ, see CHABOT 1902, p. 198.16 (text) and p. 448 (trans.).

⁶⁴ See CONTINI 2004 on this topic.

⁶⁵ For an account on Hasaitic in East Arabian context see AL-JALLAD 2018, p. 32-34.

⁶⁶ SCHALL 1989.

⁶⁷ CONTINI 2003.

⁶⁸ For an updated and recent discussion on Syriac as a dialect of Late Aramaic, and on its position in this group, see BUTTS 2019.

⁶⁹ See SCHALL 1989 and CONTINI 2003 for all the details on these words. Moreover, a fair amount of so far unexplained vocabulary of presumably external origin has been pointed out by HOLES 2002, pp. 274-279 in Bahraini Arabic.

5. Attempted conclusions

Considering all that has been described so far about the BQ region, it is clear that the area shows a certain number of incongruities: first, given that the Christian presence is attested from the fourth to the late ninth century, we are faced with written sources only up to the seventh century and after that only with archaeological data;⁷⁰ second, nothing has been unearthed from the towns mentioned in the texts, while quite large archaeological sites have been excavated in places that the written sources never mention; third, texts written by local authors belong only to the late sixth – early seventh century.

These problems are to be considered unsolved, even though it is possible to make some reflections.

The main question concerns the incongruity between written sources and archeological data. The first hypothesis is that before the seventh century there were no proper Christian buildings in the area, built in bricks or stones, used as churches: this implies that the congregations rather gathered inside the houses of their members and that those houses were probably made of perishable material.⁷¹ Even though we have parallels elsewhere, it must be underlined that this community was strong and well settled and was thus likely to have a physical place to give expression to its faith. Most likely then the vestiges of the ancient towns of BQ lie under the modern constructions and palm gardens.⁷²

To explain the disappearance of BQ from written records, Carter suggested that the bishops of BQ stopped attending the synods or ceased to be part of the East Syrian community:⁷³ he pointed out the possibility that Giwargis's synod was a complete failure and did not solve the controversies, leaving BQ completely disconnected from the Mother

Church.⁷⁴ The disappearance might be due then to a conviction of these dioceses to some kind of *damnatio memoriae*.

None of these hypotheses, at least taken in isolation, is fully conclusive. The (entirely speculative) idea of a relocation of the communities from the seventh century on, from the places mentioned by the written sources to the places where the archaeological sites are, cannot explain the lack of textual mentions of the towns and of the reasons for the movement itself. Anyway, even though this was not the case for the seventh and eighth century, the spread of Islam might be responsible for the ultimate decay of Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula, at least from the ninth century on.⁷⁵

Concerning the authors of BQ, given that the sixth and seventh centuries were the most active ones under the cultural point of view for the Eastern Syriac presence in BQ, we cannot exclude that there existed other texts belonging to different periods that got lost, even though it seems unlikely that these are not mentioned elsewhere.

One last remark can still be made: there is a chance that the monasteries that have been found by the archaeologists were not connected, for some reason, to dioceses settled in BQ region, justifying the disappearance of the local dioceses from the sources. Besides, if Payne's remark about the monasteries of Kharg and Sir Bani Yas sharing a striking number of features with the one described in the *History of Mar Yawnan* is correct, we would have found at least one of the missing pieces of the puzzle.⁷⁶ This theory would be in perfect harmony with the idea previously put forward: since the monasteries were placed in a land far from the important religious centres, the need of linking their own history with the more relevant ones appears justified.

⁷⁰ Admittedly, as MORONY 1982, p. 40 pointed out, there were many other bishoprics in the Mesopotamian and Persian provinces that disappeared from the sources already after the synod of 605, a fact that he explains as the reflex of the conflict between the East and West Syrian Churches and eventually of ecological changes. See MORONY 1982 for a detailed account on the changing in administrative geography of Iraq in Sasanian and Early Muslim periods.

⁷¹ CARTER 2008, pp. 103-104.

⁷² CARTER 2013, p. 314.

⁷³ CARTER 2008, pp. 103-104.

⁷⁴ CARTER 2013, p. 327.

⁷⁵ As soon as the Muslim authorities started to gain the civil power, they imposed a poll tax on all the non-Muslims living under their control. Many people then decided to convert for economical reasons: for instance, in Beth Mazūnaye, many non-Muslims converted in order to avoid giving up their possessions. See, among others, CARTER 2008, p. 100, AL-MURIKHI 2014, pp. 249-250 and KOZAH 2015, pp. 44.

⁷⁶ PAYNE 2011.

Ultimately, it is very likely that the ruins of Dayrin, Mašmahīg, Ḥaṭṭa and Hagar lie under the modern settlements, and that after the synod of Giwargis the importance of BQ was extremely reduced, causing the disappearance of these towns from the official records. It is reasonable to believe that the only important Christian centers remaining in the area were the monasteries.

In conclusion, further works would certainly be necessary. Unfortunately, even though the history of BQ has recently been object of renovated interest, it appears still doomed to its destiny of being left aside: for example, whereas Hoyland's able synthesis takes into account the events of BQ,⁷⁷ no mention of them is made in Fisher's comprehensive book, since the only Christians taken into account are the miaphysites.⁷⁸

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⁷⁷ HOYLAND 2001, pp. 27-32.

⁷⁸ FISHER 2015.

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