ISSN 2283-3072 | Cod. ANCE (Miur-Cineca) E225625

Quaderni di Meykhane XV/1 (2025) special issue

Rivista di studi iranici collegata al Centro di Ricerca FIMIM
(Filologia e Medievistica Indo-Mediterranea)
Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna

http://meykhane.altervista.org

Numero speciale

Mondo iranico e culture limitrofe:
aspetti letterari, filosofici, storico-religiosi e artistici

The (Political) Eulogies of Xusraw 1st in the Synodal Documents of Mar Aba

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Abstract The present contribution focuses on the new edition of the Synodal Acts of the Church of the East, and in particular on the documents belonging to the "itinerant" synod of Mar Aba. It strictly concerns the formulas adopted in these texts in order to address king Xusraw I. A careful scrutiny of these sources shows that beyond a simple eulogistic approach, the theological contents of the invocations or the references to the role of the king implies a strategic program of conversion, in which the Persian *Šāhān Šāh*, despite his "pagan" religion, is presented as a person protected by divine grace, blessed by the saints and inspired by God, or even flanked by the example of Jesus. The analysis of these synodal acts also confirms the willingness of the Christian ecclesiastic authorities of taking aside the positive role of the highest royal power from that of the Persian Magi, so manipulating the historical reality in order to advance in the strategic program of conversion of the royal house.

Keywords: Christian Synodal Acts, Sasanian Iran, Kingship, Conversion, Xusraw I, Mar Aba.

A most recent[1] new edition and translation of the General Councils of the Eastern Christian Churches, in particular those of the Synods of the Church of the East,[2] has provided the specialists of Late Antiquity Iran with a very remarkable source for the study of the relationships between the Sasanian royal house and the Persian Christian Church. With the support of this updated documentation, the present contribution wants just to focus on one

[1] I must thank Prof. Vittorio Berti, University of Padua, for his kind help in the revision of the Syriac original text, and for some additional suggestions in the preparation of the present study.
[2] See COEGD V/2 (2023). The text and the translation of The Synod of Aba 540-544 have been edited by E.A. Ishac, R. Kitchen and V. Berti, pp. 759-771 (introduction, etc.), pp. 774-865 (Syriac text and facing translation).

period and one particular subject, i.e., the forms and contents of the eulogist references addressed to the ruling *Šāhān Šāh* of the *Ērānšahr*, the king Xusraw I, usually surnamed, probably after his death, with the epithet of *Anōšag-ruwān*. A careful study of the titles and epithets attributed to this paramount protagonist of the political and religious history of Sasanian Iran, which have been chosen in the various documents specifically belonging to the Syriac Acts of the Synodal meetings hold under the patriarchate of the katholikos Mar Aba,[3] offers a remarkable witness of the political strategy endorsed by the Christian Church with respect to the Persian power. In fact, the choice of official and unofficial titles addressed to Xusraw results to be never banal or casual, but it follows, more or less consciously, a strategy of approach and recognition of the supreme role of the royal person, whose function progressively becomes that of a good pastor, as the protector of the Christians and their community. Thus, the king, *volens nolens*, is presented as a *protégé* of God, and as an actor of a superior divine choice. This point of view was current in the Mazdean Iranian framework,[4] but it is very interesting to note that such an approach was followed also by Christian authorities, which seem to have been so able to turn a Zoroastrian political pattern into a Christian language. This fact would confirm the bilingual (or multilingual) level of this Church, and the underground deep knowledge of the political and theological languages of the Mazdeans of Persia.

This brief introductory investigation, which should be followed by a more technical, philological and linguistic study concerning the Syriac formulas, will give us the opportunity to focus on and detect some of the intricacies and subtilities of the "diplomatic" language adopted by the Eastern Syriac Church with the Persian authorities, the king in particular. Even though the relations between the Sasanian royal house and that katholikos himself have been the object of many detailed investigations,[5] especially with regard to his exile and the death sentence (never executed because of a direct royal interference), which was pronounced against him,[6] the analysis of the formal ways of addressing Xusraw needs a fresh revision, which can shed new light on certain fine ideological approaches advanced by the Christians toward the highest ranks of the Mazdean aristocracy.

In the framework of this contribution, it would be unnecessary to insist on the fact that the two protagonists of the game, the king and the katholikos, were in relatively good terms,[7] but it could be useful to emphasize that Mar Aba, as a Persian man, converted to Christianity from his ancestral Zoroastrian faith, well knew the mentality of the royal person and his way of thinking. For this reason, we should suppose without the fear of assuming too many interpretative risks, that the katholikos measured with deep competence the words and the titles

[3] Berti (2017) has discussed in detail the complex development of this synod, which he fittingly defines as "itinerant." As well shown also in the preface to the documents of this synod COEGD V/2 (2023: 760-767), we have at disposal seven documents plus a Short Introduction.
[4] On the Iranian concept of sacred royalty, see Panaino 2003, 2009, 2012, 2014.
[5] See already Tisserant (1931, coll. 179-180); cf. also Peeters 1946: 69-112; Devos 1966: 215-216; Panaino 2004; 2008.
[6] See Peeters 1946: 88-111.
[7] Panaino 2004. It is most important consider that the Christians represented a serious political problem within the Persian Empire, and that despite the hostility of the Church, they played a relevant role in the diplomatic relations with the west, and that their interaction was remarkable within the contest of the treaty established between Xusraw I and Justin after the Lazica War. See Panaino 2010.

he would like to adopt with his king. As supportive evidence of this assumption, we must carefully consider the different observations collected by Berti in his very seminal study about the so-called "itinerant synod" lead by Mar Aba. Berti[8] rightly stresses the fact that Mar Aba, whose Christology was more aggressive in Dyophysite terms during his earlier activity, after his ascent to the highest rank of the Church, assumed more balanced formulations in order to pacificate his communities, preventing new radical intestine fights.[9] This patent manifestation of maturity and prudence shows that the katholikos, in his full role of the chief of the Christian Church in Persia, although coherent and very strict on some doctrinal points, did not like to indulge in avoidable polemics or in inappropriate formulations. It is in this special context that we must evaluate the modalities of interrelation with the power and weight the deeper meaning of the (political) theology behind the strategy of dialogue with the royal house.

I cannot avoid mentioning the fact that, already in some other previous studies,[10] I had the opportunity to collect a large number of arguments supporting the view that, in its general strategy, the Persian Church was trying to follow the steps of the Armenian Christianity along its spiritual progressive conquest of the highest levels of the Iranian society, especially targeting the Persian royal family. The conversion of the king and his relatives,[11] although highly dangerous, as every ambitious action, implied its risks, but this solution resulted successful in other historical cases, and the Persian Christians well knew this. Despite the different Christologies contemporarily predominating in Iran and Armenia, both communities were in contact, and the Persian Church followed the successes of its Armenian (Monophysite) brethren-rivals.

Furthermore, various data actually underpin the conclusion that the Sasanian society was religiously contestable by the seductive message of evangelization within the framework of a step-by-step slow, but inexorable, march of conversion, whose positive conclusion was brutally interrupted by the Arabic invasion, which, in its turn, and from the social and religious point of view, was considered by many Persians as a quasi-Christian variety, and in any case as a stronger monotheistic phenomenon, simply closer to the Christian one. Thus, even though the attacks of the Christian authorities against different social and ritual habits of the Zoroastrians were inevitably numerous and rude, in particular in those frequent cases in which the Mazdean traditional customs were considered as morally inacceptable,[12] we must list also an important net of subtle attempts of finding common links, strongly emphasized in order to suggest the striking presence of original associations between Zoroastrianism and Christianity, of course deliberately presented under a new light, fruit of conscious theological and speculative reinterpretations. I have eventually tried to zoom on some of these facts within a larger analysis

[8] Berti 2017: 722-728. Already Brock (1985: 126-127, 134-135) emphasized the fact that Mar Aba, despite the fact the he himself had introduced in Iran and translated from Syriac some works by Nestorius, during the Synod of the year 544, would have adopted a very prudent and moderate theological language, proposing the final formulation of a very careful profession of faith, whose terminology was very elegant, deliberately purified of any ambiguous or controversial technicalities. Cf. also Guillaumont 1969-70: 44-46, about the relations between Mar Aba and Justinian, and Asmussen 1962: 6-7.

[9] See again Berti (2017: 722-728, passim) with additional bibliography.

[10] Panaino 2023; 2024a.

[11] We must consider the fitting case of Anōšazād, the son of Xusraw, who lead a rebellion in Samarkand. See Labourt 1904: 181-191; Brock 1982: 5-6.

[12] This, for instance, was the case of the bold opposition by Mar Aba against the recognition of previously celebrated next-of-kin marriages by Mazdeans converted to Christianity; see the discussion in Panaino 2008.

of the Oriental reception of the cycle of the Evangelical Magi,[13] but the focus on the paramount subject of the final resurrection and the role of the Resurrector, in the Iranian case, that of the third posthumous son of Zoroaster, the Saōšiiaṇt *par excellence*,[14] in Pahlavi named Sōšyans, certainly played a remakable function, which has called the attention of many scholars, starting with the investigations proposed by father Giuseppe Messina[15] in the thirties of the XX century.

It is within this intercultural religious and ideological context that I would like to frame the interlocutory strategy enacted by the Christian Church under the leadership of Mar Aba with the Sasanian king, as a sort of litmus test for the determination of the real targets hidden behind an apparently innocent eulogist address to the *Šāhān Šāh*. In his speeches, Mar Aba directly evokes the protective role of the Persian king. I would like to start with one most known reference, which has been rightly mentioned and debated and which concerns the fact that in the *First Document* of the Synodal Acts,[16] Xusraw was implicitly compared with Cyrus the Great in his quality of Mašiah.[17] The text, as edited in the new edition, much more interesting and informative that in the previous versions of Braun[18] and Chabot.[19] It starts as follows:[20]

> (This happened) in the month of *First Teshri*, which is *Tirmah* in the tenth year of the merciful and beneficent Khusrau, the King of Kings, protected by divine grace, (preserved) for long years in the dominion of his realm in health of body, in joy of soul, in a merciful mind, and in good intentions, (this being) after, by the grace of God, the Creator, Lord and Governor of all, (by) the care of the second Cyrus, more excellent than all kings and (more excellent) than the gentle and merciful Cyrus himself, that is, Khusrau,[21] in whose thoughts Christ, the Savior of all creatures, had insinuated, because of the goodness of his will, that he constantly consider all good things, for his holy church; […].

Not only Xusraw is explicitly presented as a second Cyrus, but he is also considered as "more excellent than all kings and (more excellent) than the gentle and merciful Cyrus himself." (ܡܢܝܢܐ ܡܢܝܢܐ ܕܟܠܗ ܡܠܟܐ: ܕܟܘܪܫ ܕܝ ܟܠ ܡܠܟܐ). These statements imply that the Christian Church considered the supreme political authority of Iran as superior to that of other countries and kingdoms, even the Christian ones. Furthermore, the text implies that Xusraw should be "protected by divine grace (ܡܛܠܐ ܡܛܬܝܗ ܐܠܗܐ), (preserved) for long years in the dominion of his realm in health of body, in joy of soul, in a merciful mind, and in good intentions." Thus, it is the grace of God, which protects and preserves the Persian king. All the good qualities, and in particular the thoughts of the king have been "insinuated" (ܐܝܢܥ) by Jesus Christ in order to protect his holy Church. It is difficult to consider all these statements

[13] See, for instance, Panaino 2012; 2013; 2023.
[14] On the Christian interplay with the role of the Saōšiiaṇt, implicitly associated with the arrival of Jesus, see Messina 1932; 1933; Panaino 2021.
[15] Messina 1932; 1933: 84-85, *passim*.
[16] The full text of the Document I is edited and translated in COEGD V/2 (2023): 776-799.
[17] Panaino 2024b with a large bibliography on the subject.
[18] Braun 1900: 99.
[19] Chabot 1920: 320.
[20] COEGD V/2 (2023): 776-777.
[21] This is the spelling preferred by the editors of the text, which I maintain in the translations of the Synodal acts. In the course of the article, I will prefer the Pahlavi form "Xusraw."

as a simple, unmeditated, enthusiastic eulogy without any design behind it. Xusraw is more than the old Cyrus, and his role is presented as desired and inspired by God the Father and Jesus as well. I have already observed that, although we cannot state as certain that Xusraw himself had been carefully acquainted with the story of Cyrus, Lord's anointed, as attested in *Deutero Isaiah*, it is highly improbable to assume that the Christian friends of the king, and the katholikos himself, had not been informed of the stories of the Old Testament regarding the ancestors of the present Persian kings.[22] It was in the interest of Mar Aba to be sure that his interlocutor might understand the contents of his discourse, especially the highest honorific titles and epithets addressed to him. Reading the Synodal Acts of Mar Aba we have the sound impression that these Christian texts were read and checked by Persian Mazdean officers, and that some activities, even inner ecclesiastic processes, were followed, if not even chaired by Persian authorities,[23] whose components were Mazdean as well. At the same time, we must remark, again following Berti,[24] that Mar Aba, even when in exile, did not avoid paying careful attention to the desires of some paramount authorities of the Empire, in order to preserve a good network of supportive powerful friends. The insight "insinuated" by God himself in Xusraw is a sort of charisma, corresponding to the Mazdean concept of *Xwarrah*, the light of glory, which distinguished gods, saints, heroes, etc., and that seems to have been depurated and re-adapted according to Christian values and principles.

We must also observe that few lines after the text of the long quotation we cited above, one can find a peculiar reference to a word which can be read as *Kidis* or *Kiris*.[25] As Berti underlined,[26] although this word could be interpreted as an unknown toponymical reference,[27] there is also the possibility that it was just a misspelling of the name of Cyrus. In this second case, the document would state that Mar Aba was coming back from the royal court and in particular from his king, named with the appellative of "Cyrus," as if this name meant something like *Caesar*. Of course, other options are possible, but it is interesting to remind the possible relevance of this alternative interpretation, which would show that the Syriac Christians (and not only them) might have already used the name of Cyrus as an appellative of the king *par excellence*.

These synodal acts mention and exalt king Xusraw eight times. One is that we have previously discussed, and which is probably the most important and complete from the ideological and political point of view, but the other ones, although less remarkable, have their own importance. I will list and discuss all of them.

The first is just in the beginning of the *Short Introduction* to the acts themselves. The text informs the reader that the following text is a copy of the ecclesiastical writing composed by the patriarch Mar Aba, the metropolitans and the bishops, collected in the thirteen year of the king Xusraw, and which is presented in this way:

[22] Panaino 2013; 2023; 2024.
[23] See Berti 2017: 721-722.
[24] Berti 2017: 718-720, 727-728.
[25] COEGD V/2 (2023): 778-779, line 2.
[26] Berti 2017: 703-704.
[27] In COEGD V/2 (2023): 778-779, note 2, only the interpretation as a reference to an unknown geographical place is mentioned, despite the mention of the variant *Kidis*.

> the gentle, merciful, and beneficent Khusrau, the King of Kings, preserved by divine grace
> (ܟܘܣܪܘ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܒܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܬܛܪܐ ܘܡܛܝܒܐ ܘܡܛܝܒܐ) […].[28]

As stated in the following documents, the idea that the life of the king has been preserved by divine willingness is clear, and this means that for the Christian Church of the East the Sasanian king was playing a role within an inspired project.

The same concept is repeated in the *First Document*, paragraph 11. Here we find the sequence:[29]

> […] the merciful, and beneficent Khusrau, the King of Kings, preserved by divine grace
> (ܟܘܣܪܘ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܒܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܬܛܪܐ ܘܡܛܝܒܐ) […].

The identity of the formula confirms that we have to do with a fixed way of addressing the king. We will see that these epithets and adjectives will be adapted and re-sued in the following references to the king with some amplifications.

In the *Second Document*, par. 25,[30] after the reference to the current month (*Teshri*), we find the following text:

> […] of the mild, merciful, and well-doing, preserved in the dominion of his kingdom [in health] of body and joy of soul, with a good will and a merciful intention, Khusrau, the King of Kings, sheltered by divine grace
> ܕܡܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܡܛܝܒܘܬܐ […] ܘܕܡ ܡܫܬܠܛܐ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܗ ܕܡܠܟܐ [ܘ]ܡܛܝܒܐ ܘܡܛܝܒܐ)
> […] (ܟܘܣܪܘ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܒܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܬܛܪܐ: ܘܡܛܝܒܐ: ܘܡܛܝܒܐ ܕܡܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܡܠܟ ܕܟܝ: ܘܒܥܝܢ:

This long sentence is certainly an expansion of the previously quoted formula, but it is very interesting from the theological and political angle of observation. The mildness and mercifulness of the king are openly connected with his solid power, firmly held in his kingdom and with his physical health, according to a pattern in which the *persona sacra* (which is not, *nota bene*, a *persona divina*)[31] of the supreme authority must be safe and sane in mind, body and power, of course if this is God's will. The Christian colour of these statements is given by the repetition of the concept of "divine grace," but this approach would have not offended the Mazdean sensibility, which would have assumed that the king was acting under the protection of Ohrmazd and his *yazdān*. I am not certain, but the matter is worth to be emphasized, if the reference to the "joy of the soul" implies the premature circulation of the main epithet of this king, well known in later times as *anōšag-ruwān*, i.e., "having an immortal soul,"[32] in force of his high reputation and profile. Perhaps, this assumption would be too strong, but certainly the strong appreciation of the spiritual protection and virtuosity of the king might have favoured

[28] COEGD V/2 (2023): 774-775.
[29] COEGD V/2 (2023): 786-787.
[30] COEGD V/2 (2023): 798-799.
[31] Panaino 2014.
[32] Gnoli 1995.

the diffusion of his standard epithet not only thanks to the Zoroastrians, but also with a certain sympathy by the side of the Christians, who considered him as a blessed person.

The fifth quotation occurs within a very significant context at par. 33 of the *Third Document*.[33] The text refers to the conclusion of a dramatic period of inner division within the Church, and declares that:

> […] the duality of leadership has ceased through the mercifulness of God and the watchfulness of the King of Kings, [Khusrau, maintained] by the mercy of heaven (ܒܪܚܡܐ ܕܫܡܝܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ), and the prayers of all the saints […].

It is highly impressive the parallel role attributed to "the mercifulness of God and the watchfulness of the King of Kings," which underpins the concept of a direct divine inspiration of the action of Xusraw. Furthermore, the text explicitly assumes that the "heaven," i.e., God, is protecting the king, whose life is blessed by the prayers of the saints. It is also difficult to avoid the suspicion that this document implicitly evokes a direct support of the royal power in favour of the patriarch and katholikos, and not simply a neutral role.

The sixth mention of the king occurs in the par. 42 of the *Fourth Document* within a similar context of ecclesiastic politics.[34] Here, the reference is again to the restoration of the unification of the primacy of the whole Church, and together with the mention of the remarkable action played by the late katholikos, Pawlos, the document states that the restoration started by Pawlos himself was obtained:

> […] through the grace and power of Christ, the Lord of all, and the assistance of the mild, gentle, and philanthropic Khusrau, the King of Kings […].

In this case the direct juxtaposition of the parallel actions endorsed by Christ and Xusraw would be astonishing if we had not clearly shown that the Christian Church of Persia had developed a proper kind of theology of the power, in which the role of the king was presented as supported, inspired and blessed by God and Christ. This kind of formulation was not the immature fruit of improvisation, transitory generosity or of a simplistic desire of *captatio benevolentiae*, but it was part of well-organized strategy, whose aims was that of gaining the soul of the king and his family, convincing them that their role was providentially directed and protected by God himself. This statement was certainly accepted by them, but the problem was to convince them that it was the Christian God and not Ohrmazd the true divine being to be worshipped and consider the actual protector of the dynasty, so that this conversion would have taken its own time, although it was an affordable result. This was a strategy, underpinned by the assumption that God would have protected his people and their kings within the framework of a long-term project. The Armenian model and the Roman one were a good example. The first was certainly inspiring because it had occurred in a closer country, where Zoroastrianism or some varieties of it had been dominant before the arrival of the Christians, the second one because the

[33] COEGD V/2 (2023): 808-809.
[34] COEGD V/2 (2023): 820-821.

dimension of that empire with its extensions and its political role presented a great number of points of direct comparison with the Sasanian Empire. These elements could not escape the historical evaluation of the Christian leaders, whose knowledge of these facts was solid and enriched by direct knowledge of the Western world. Within this intriguing scenario, as noted above, we should not forget that king Xusraw was presented as a second Cyrus, and implicitly as a kind of Messiah,[35] better that the earlier one, blessed in the *Old Testament*.

The seventh reference occurs in the *Fifth Document*, par. 58,[36] which is a sort of protocol to be subscribed, in particular by authorities who had been admonished and punished by the patriarchate. The part of the text, which is most interesting for the present investigations, runs as follows:

> Be strong, and pray with us for the state of the world and the tranquillity of the whole church, and for the life, health, and preservation of Khusrau, the King of Kings, kept by divine grace (ܟܘܣܪܘ ܟܘܪܝܐ ܐܠܗܝܐ), and for all human beings, among whom are our power selves.

The present document shows that even the single ecclesiastical authorities, when they repented and had to subscribe the higher directions established by the Synod and its members, were asked to pray not only for the sake of the whole world and the Church, but also for that of the king, whose health comes before that of the rest of humanity. We can observe that the universalistic approach of this prayer, which emphasizes the whole humanity, is tempered by the mention of the Persian king, whose role is foundational and indispensable.

The eighth and last reference to the king occurs in the *Sixth Document*,[37] known also as the *Pragmatic Letter*, in paragraph 60, which contains another prayer:[38]

> […] Pray for the tranquillity of the Church and for the life and sustenance, and protection of the merciful, peaceful, benevolent to everyone, Khusrau, the King of Kings, preserved by divine grace (ܟܘܣܪܘ [ܟܘܪܝܐ] ܐܠܗܝܐ).

In this text we can find the same motifs of the earlier formulas addressed to Xusraw, with some amplifications, but with the standard conclusion evoking the "divine grace," (ܟܘܣܪܘ ܟܘܪܝܐ) which seems to be a mark of legitimization of the royal power.

In conclusion, it is possible to establish some firm points emerging from a critical analysis of the ways of eulogistic addresses to Xusraw in the Synodal acts of the Persian Church, although this is only a brief and preliminary study, which needs a deeper investigation. The theological ideas underpinning the style, the contents, and the different formulations adopted with the highest person of the Sasanian society show that the highest ecclesiastical authorities under the

[35] Panaino 2024b.
[36] COEGD V/2 (2023): 836-837.
[37] COEGD V/2 (2023): 840-841.
[38] COEGD V/2 (2023): 764.

patronage and the leadership of Mar Aba tried to develop a coherent politics toward the king. In their vision, the royal person was openly presented as placed under the divine grace, i.e., as a blessed man worth of the prayers and the benedictions of the saints, and not as a separate, pagan, unfitting or immoral power. When there was a religious contrast, only the Magi were the target of attacks and critics, never the royal house, as this clan was not responsible for the religious politics of Iran, but a sort of hostage in the hands of the Zoroastrian clergy. This was a kind of manipulation of the historical situation, which will certainly need to be better studied in future and on the basis of a large number of documents, but it shows that the march of spiritual conquest was not improvised and extemporary, while it followed a basic model. In the same framework, we should consider the role played by the Christian doctors who treated the members of the royal family and the competences of the court astrologers, many of them Christian as well,[39] despite any apparent a priori assumption. Certainly, the potential emergence of a messianic role of the King of Kings was sleeping under the ashes, although some flames sometimes were visible. It is in the framework of this complex political strategy that we should also consider the importance of the new edition of these Synodal Acts, whose study will reserve in future other remarkable discoveries.

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[39] Panaino 2017.

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