

# Textual Exchanges in Late Antiquity East and South of Byzantium Seen Through an Eastern Christian Lens

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**Abstract** Scientific and philosophical texts circulated as is expected between the Roman and Sasanian empires as well as more east and west towards Europe and towards India and China. Arabia, though still often absent from the mental map of Late Antiquity, was also involved in exchanges of written texts, mainly letters. It is more surprising to see that religious texts were also discussed in the courts. Byzantium engaged in geopolitical and religious dialogue with its eastern and southern neighbours through clerics who played also a role as ambassadors of knowledge and cultural delegates. Syriac texts written in the eastern Roman empire or east of Byzantium offer a slightly decentred picture of these relations viewed from and beyond the borders of empires.

**Keywords** Eastern Christianity. Syriac studies. Byzantium. History of sciences. Cultural history. Sasanian empire. History of religions. Global history. Late antiquity.

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The angle and standpoint are central in the way we envision the notion of relations with neighbours. Since this session is planned in a congress of Byzantine studies, its perspective is overtly ‘imperial’ (in the sense of the Byzantine empire) and implies an insider view of Byzantium’s neighbours. Viewing the Sasanians or the Arab and Persian Muslims from the perspective of Greek, Syriac or Armenian texts and not Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian or Arabic shows how Byzantium is placed at the centre of the circle of neighbouring countries and cultures. Because of a relative dearth of written sources in Middle Persian, the history of Sasanian Iran, just as that of the Achaemenid period, is still largely seen through ‘western’ eyes and ‘western’ sources written in Latin, Greek, and Syriac.<sup>2</sup>

Inviting a specialist of Syriac texts, however, allows for a slightly de-centred viewpoint, having recourse to peripheral texts produced in the eastern empire and east of the empire, in the Sasanian and Islamic periods. Syriac texts offer an insider/outsider view of Byzantium, not only from a geopolitical point of view but also from a geo-ecclesial perspective. They are generally considered by Byzantinists as representative of ‘eastern Christianity’ (eastern ‘Christianities’/ *christianismes orientaux*, in the plural, would be more appropriate) and not as Byzantine texts proper, although they were produced in the third cultural language of the empire in terms both of the size of its literature and its unique presence in the first Church councils, whereas Latin and Greek were the only official languages of the Church (Millar 2006). This is primarily due to the hierarchic position of Greek and Latin as the official languages of the Roman “cosmopolis” (on this notion see Pollock 2006) and as *hiéroglossies*, the official and hence dominant languages of imperial Christianity (Debié forthcoming a). Syriac – as well as Coptic, Arabic, Armenian, and Georgian – , is not either an idiom of ancient or ‘classical’ culture as it is defined in the West, whose only languages are Latin and Greek, although the cultures expressed in these languages took over and acculturated to a large extent the ancient Hellenic *paideia*. Syriac’s marginal position is also related to the fact that Orthodoxy over time became more and more equated with Greek and Byzantium, although Roman, with Hellenism (Dagron 1994; Cameron 2014). Since those who refused the conclusions of the ecumenical councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) in Syria and Mesopotamia increasingly used Syriac (Coptic, or Armenian) as their ecclesiastical and cultur-

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Emiliano Fiori for his reading and suggestions. All mistakes and infelicities remain mine.

<sup>2</sup> This has started to change in the past twenty years.

al language (whatever language they may have spoken otherwise: Greek, other forms of Aramaic, Arabic etc.), and were gradually rejected as 'others': they were not part of the Orthodox world although they deemed themselves as the true Orthodox. They are still viewed in modern scholarship as Oriental Orthodox, through the lens of confessional affiliations and as outsiders in terms of Byzantine Orthodoxy. From the perspective of Byzantinists, Syriac texts are already in many ways 'eastern', while they are produced inside the Empire. In a sense, they tend to be considered as 'neighbouring' productions within the Roman Empire, as peripheral to the main cultural, religious and linguistic streams. They are all the more so when they were written beyond the Byzantine polity, in the Sasanid empire and even further in Central Asia or China or when they originated from Arabia.

Syriac texts are instrumental as sources for Sasanian history, since they provide information from inside the Empire, while we have few Middle Persian texts. Just as in the Byzantine Empire, however, they were somehow peripheral, since they were prominently produced in former Aramaic-speaking areas in the western part of the Empire, by a religious minority within the Zoroastrian official religion.<sup>3</sup> Since they were written in both empires, they occupy nonetheless a central position for understanding the relations between them and attest two-way exchanges.

The Southern neighbours of Byzantium were not included in the programme of this session, although the Arabian Peninsula was part of the geopolitical and geo-religious relations between Byzantium, Axum and the Sasanian Empire in Late Antiquity (Bowersock 2017). Syriac sources offer an insider view of the exchanges of the Roman Empire with Persia and Arabia (in the sense of Southern Arabia, not only the Roman province of Arabia) since some of them were written or circulated in the Arabian Peninsula. They can thus provide a broader view of Byzantium's neighbouring worlds. Ethiopia and Nubia should also be considered in that network of civilisations and empires.

## 2 Eastern Transfers

After the belligerent state of the Romano-Sasanian relations in the third century, more consensual relations developed in the following centuries in spite of recurrent wars (Dignas, Winter 2007; Greatrex, Lieu 2002), and a common verbal and iconographic language was used in the two courts to present the king in an increasingly sa-

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<sup>3</sup> They have thus been often considered as 'tertiary' by specialists of Iranian studies after Gignoux's classification, which separated Sasanian sources, considered as primary, from the Roman ones, treated as tertiary (Gignoux 1978).

cred way (Canepa 2009; Payne 2013). The two hostile systems of sacred universal sovereignty nevertheless implied cross-cultural relations. The artistic, ritual, and ideological interactions between the late Roman and Persian Empire were accompanied by textual productions and exchanges in spite of – or perhaps because of – their constant rivalry.

Letters were exchanged between sovereigns, like the famous letter sent by Constantine to Shapur II about the Christians in Iran (Smith 2016). Peace treaties entailed negotiations and exchanges through translations and written accounts in both Greek and Middle Persian that were also probably sent to the Arab clients of each empire, who were involved in the discussions, since their situation was discussed in the treaties' clauses. Official letters and documents circulated between Constantinople and Ctesiphon and among the Arab, Hunnic and Turkish clients or enemies of both empires. A written multilingual culture was weaved through these official interactions beyond the borders of each empire. Bureaux of the barbarians in both empires gathered information, provided interpreters, and managed the sometimes troublesome allies. Exchanges existed at an administrative level and produced texts that are seldom considered as literary production. They were, however, a crucial part of the interactions between the various late antique polities at a political level.

If we focus on texts, translations are the most obvious way of following their transmission.<sup>4</sup> They exemplify how Hellenic culture circulated in languages other than Greek and outside of the Roman/Byzantine Empire (Debié 2017), and how in turn it was permeated by external texts. Circulation of people was an important means for the transmission of ideas and texts. Ambassadors sent from one court to another were agents of intellectual and literary transfers. They were chosen among the high-ranking officials of each empire in order to negotiate peace, but scholars were also sent for discussions. Byzantine physicians were especially popular for these missions since they could cure the Persian kings, their family or their courtiers, and thus gain their trust and have direct access to their person. Conversely, bishops were often sent by the shah to the Christian emperor with the same goal of winning his trust and finding a familiar ground for conversation more easily. Encounters and dialogues held at court, in the presence of the king in Constantinople and in Ctesiphon, whether on philosophical, scientific or religious matters, were privileged occasions of direct contact and intellectual exchanges in spite of the linguistic obstacles and cultural differences. In addition to discussions about military and economic questions over peace treaties, both empires deployed a diplomacy based on science, philosophy, and re-

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<sup>4</sup> For exchanges in terms of material culture and artistic productions, see Canepa 2009.

ligion aimed at answering the curiosity of each party for its adversary, and at creating the conditions of a better understanding - or political leverage.

A long-term process of cultural transfer and amalgamation took place in the Sasanian period, during which Iran was a crossroad of knowledge coming from east and west in the various languages in use in the empire (Dignas, Winter 2007; Zakeri 2022). Late antique Iran hosted “Roman philosophers, Indian sages, and Jewish and Christian religious leaders from within and outside the empire” (Zakeri 2022, 55) who contributed to a cosmopolitan and connected culture well before the Abbasid period and its translation movement (Debié 2014). Yet Sasanian Iran is still little included in studies dealing with Late Antiquity although, in principle, its importance has long been acknowledged (Walker 2002). The links of Byzantium with Central Asia and India are even less considered.

## 2.1 From Byzantium to Ērānšahr and Back. Medicine and Philosophy

The history of sciences in Zoroastrian sources (which are preserved in written form dating to the Islamic period) relies on the constructed memory of a major divide between the Greek west and Iran provoked by Alexander the Great’s invasion of Persia, which led to the nearly total destruction and dispersal of all sacred and profane Iranian wisdom and religious texts (although the *Avesta* was in fact transmitted orally until the Sasanian period).<sup>5</sup> The loss would be repaired under the Parthians and more actively by the Sasanians, especially by Kōsrow I Anušīrvān (r. 531-79), who reclaimed the traces of knowledge from all quarters of the world (Shaki 1981; Zakeri 2022, 58). The religious text of the *Avesta* and scientific knowledge shared the same fate of dispersion after the Greek conquest and destruction and were associated in progressive restoration according to the Zoroastrian tradition (*Dēnkard*, ninth century). The image of the ‘Greeks’ is thus marred by the layer of Hellenistic memory, although Greek became the *lingua franca* used in western Asia alongside Aramaic under Alexander and the Seleucids, until at least the first century CE. In the Sasanian period, Greek and Indian texts on

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander was viewed in a very negative light in the Sasanian period, which is why it is very improbable, from a historical point of view, that the *Alexander Romance* was translated from Greek into Middle Persian (and then into Syriac) as has long been stated and is still defended by some (Van Bladel 2007). Other linguistic arguments point in the same direction (Ciancaglini 2015). The consensus now is that it was translated directly from Greek into Syriac, without a Middle Persian intermediary of which there is no trace (Debié forthcoming b).

astrology and astronomy, physics, medicine, and mathematics were translated into Middle Persian starting with the reign of Ardashir I (r. 211/212-224), the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, and his son Shapur I (r. 240-70), and then under Kōsrow I (Zakeri 2022, 68-70).

In Roman imagination, conversely, Persia was the place where Chaldean magic and astrology originated. It was also the gateway to India and the wisdom of the Brahmins and had a special appeal to philosophers.

Physicians played an important role in the transmission of knowledge and in the diplomatic relationships between the Roman and Sasanian empires. The first attestation of Greek physicians settling in the Sasanian Empire date to the third century, purportedly following the marriage of the daughter of the Roman emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) with the Sasanian king. Hippocratic medicine was thus taught in Iran at least since that time and the city of Gondešapur may have become since then a centre for medical practice and study, although it is attested mostly in the ninth century when East-Syriac physicians educated in the local school flourished (Debié 2014).

Shapur's head physician was a Persian Christian named Theodore, who wrote a compendium of medicine, according to Ibn al-Nadīm (*Kitāb al-Fihrist* [ed. Flügel 1872, 303.16-18]). This is only the first example of a long line of very influential Christian physicians at the Sasanian court (Debié 2014, 33-5).

Around 532, another physician, Uranius, a Syrian, was sent as an ambassador to the Persian court and made a great impression with his knowledge of philosophy (Blockley 1980). When he came back to Constantinople, he was invited to dinner by the civic elites so that he could read passages of the letters he had received from Kōsrow - who purportedly presented himself as Uranius' disciple - and narrate his encounters with the shah (Agathias, *Histories* II.29-30.2 [ed. Keydell 1967, 78-9; transl. Frensdorf 1975, 63-4]; Walker 2002, 67). The courtiers of Byzantium were obviously curious and eager to hear about the Sasanian court and king.

In 544, Stephen, a physician from Edessa, was chosen by the inhabitants of the city to negotiate with Kōsrow who was besieging the city, because he had sojourned at the Persian court and cured Kawad, the previous king (d. 531). Several other physicians are mentioned in Kōsrow's entourage: Tribunus, also an envoy of Justinian, was a Byzantine *archiatros*, head physician, as well as one Sergius.

East-Syriac physicians were also influential at his court: Birway, Qišway (who gave to Abraham d-Bet Rabban the piece of land where he constructed the hospital of the East-Syriac school of Nisibis), Gabriel of Šiggar, and Joseph, who was also the *catholicos* of the Church of the East and enjoyed *parrhesia*/freedom of speech with the king according to the sources. Soon after 574, the physician Zachariah was sent four times as an ambassador of Justin II to the Sasanian king (Debié 2014, 35).

Trained as physicians, these learned men also studied philosophy - and theology. They belonged to the elites of the two empires and ensured the relations of both courts at the highest level. They were also likely the instruments of transmission of philosophical and medical knowledge between empires, and, more marginally, of *belles lettres* (see below).

In 489, when the School of the Persians in Edessa was closed because of its Dyophysite teaching, the students and professors settled in Nisibis, which became one of the most famous schools of the Persian Empire where Greek texts of theology, law and medicine were read, translated into Syriac and commented (Becker 2006; 2008). Ma'na of Shiraz, who studied at the School of the Persians in Edessa and was elected metropolite of Rew Ardashir c. 480, translated from Greek into Syriac the works of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, which became the theological and scholastic basis of teaching in the Church of the East. Philosophy and medicine were closely linked and were both taught at the School, with theology as the crowning subject of the curriculum for clerics. As in Byzantium, the *trivium* or *quadrivium* remained the normal curriculum of study in the East-Syrian schools. It included geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and meteorology.

Sergius of Rēš'aynā (a city located in Northern Mesopotamia; d. 536) who had studied medicine in Alexandria and was a priest as well as an *archiatros*, was the first to translate Greek philosophical and medical texts into Syriac and write commentaries on Aristotle's *Organon* (Brock 2011c). He also composed two works of his own, *On the Influence of the Moon* and *The Movement on the Sun*. His translations formed the basis of translations from Syriac into Arabic at the Abbasid period, thus disseminating Greek culture over time and across languages and religions. Sergius occupied a prominent position in the Byzantine Empire: in 535, Ephrem, the Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch (526/8-545) entrusted him with letters for the Pope and sent him to Rome. He was among those who escorted to Constantinople Pope Agapetus I who travelled in a mission to Justinian at the behest of King Theodahad of the Ostrogoths. He was thus part of ecclesiastical diplomacy at the highest level and is exemplary of the links between Rome and Antioch on the one hand, Italy and Constantinople on the other. We cannot but wonder if his geo-ecclesial embassy also implied the circulation of texts from the eastern Roman Empire to the West. His career ended there since he died in Constantinople the following year. It is noticeable that he had also personal links east of Byzantium, in Iran. He addressed his commentary on the *Categories*, as well as several of his translations of Galenic medical texts, to one Theodore, bishop of Karḥ Ğuddān, a town located on the River Diyālā in Iran. He thus had connections from one end to the other of the Roman Empire, between Constantinople and Rome, as well as

east of the empire. His case exemplifies the circulation of texts beyond the political borders of empires and the high status a physician aka philosopher held at the Byzantine court.

Fascination for Persia and India probably partly explains why philosophers repeatedly went to the Iranian court. In 242 CE the philosopher Plotinus accompanied the army of Emperor Gordian III (238-44) when he invaded the Sasanian territory. It seems that he was trying to get to India and wanted to meet with philosophers of both empires. In 337, the philosopher Metrodorus went from the eastern Roman Empire to India via Iran. It is likely that he stopped at the Persian court since Emperor Constantine I (306-37) threatened the Sasanian shah with war if Metrodorus' goods that were stolen on his way back were not returned. Eustathius, a noble Roman and a pupil of the philosopher Iamblichus, was sent in 358 to Shapur II as an ambassador of Constantius II (r. 337-61). According to Ammianus Marcellinus and Eunapius, he impressed the shah to the point that the latter was almost ready to adopt the philosopher's cloak (Zakeri 2022, 70).

Conversely, we know that at the court of king Kōsrow I, Paul the Persian, an East-Syriac theologian and philosopher, wrote a short commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (Bennett 2003). Aristotelian philosophy was taught in East Syriac schools in Syriac, and probably partly in Greek. But this text was written in Middle Persian and translated from Middle Persian into Syriac by the already mentioned Severus Sebokht (d. 666-667), who was of Iranian origin and himself taught Aristotelian philosophy and astronomy. It is still extant in Syriac. It was also translated into Arabic later on. Paul also produced a text exposing Aristotelian logic for the Sasanian king, the *Treatise on the Logic of Aristotle the Philosopher Addressed to King Kōsrow* (Bennett 2003). It was also likely written in Middle Persian since it was intended for the king who, as far we know, did not know Greek. Through this example, we witness the double movement of Greek philosophy making its way into the Persian court by way of a Middle Persian commentary dependent upon Porphyry's *Isagoge*, written by a scholar who was a member of the Church of the East. This particular treatise made its way back to Syria thanks to the translation into Syriac made by Severus, a scholar active in the monastery of Qenneshre on the Euphrates, which was famous for its lineage of monks, patriarchs and bishops who were also scientists and philosophers (Jacob of Edessa and George of the Arabs in particular). The fate of this text exemplifies the circulation of texts across the borders from east of Byzantium.



## 2.2 The Two Eyes of the Earth in the Sixth Century. Justinian and Kōsrow

We have no other detailed account of a Roman-Sasanian peace treaty like the one of 561 CE recorded by Menander Protector (Blockley 1985). It emphasises the degree of interactions and exchanges between the Two Eyes of the Earth. This cosmic expression that designates the Roman and the Sasanian empires is used in Theophylact Simocatta's history, in a letter addressed by Kōsrow II to the emperor Maurice (Canepa 2009, 1), but can be applied as well to earlier periods, in particular to the powerful kings Justinian and Kōsrow.

Kōsrow's reign marks an acme in the interest in philosophical and scientific texts at the Sasanian court. The Persian king had texts of astronomy and medicine translated from Greek, Sanskrit, and Syriac into Middle Persian, making his court a crossroad open to sciences coming from east and west. He was also interested in texts of other religious traditions. John of Ephesus (c. 507-c. 586), a historian in the service of Justinian who wrote in Syriac, reports that the king was keen on reading the religious books of all creeds, as well as philosophy.

It is well known that in 529, when Justinian closed the Neoplatonic school in Athens, seven philosophers reputedly took refuge at the court of Kōsrow I who was interested in philosophy and sciences and was hailed by them as Plato's Philosopher King.<sup>6</sup> The reason for their exile, according to the historian Agathias (*Histories* II.30.3-31.9 [ed. Keydell 1967, 80-1]), was that:

They were forbidden by law to take part in public life with impunity owing to the fact that they did not conform to the established religion. (transl. Frendo 1975, 65)

These Hellenic (non-Christian) philosophers, however, went back to the Roman Empire when peace was signed between the two empires in 532, apparently disappointed by the king's erudition and the corruption of the Persian court (a Greek *topos*) if we follow what Agathias says. In the peace treaty of 532-533, Kōsrow made sure to stipulate that the philosophers would be allowed to return to their homeland. They were permitted to keep their belief but not to teach it, in order to conform to Justinian's regulations. The Persian king thus appears as the protector of the non-Christian philosophers in the Byzantine Empire through the peace treaty negotiations just as Constantine had

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<sup>6</sup> There is a large bibliography on the subject, with sceptic or positive views of the reality of the philosophers' travel. See in particular Watts 2004; 2011; Beaucamp 2002; Hartmann 2002; Walker 2002; Tardieu 1994; Marcotte 2014; 2015; Dan 2017.

posed as the protector of Christians in the Sasanian Empire. According to Agathias, K̅osrow verified adherence to the stipulations (Agathias, 2.31.2-4; Kettenhofen 2009).

We have a unique trace of their participation in a discussion at the Sasanian court in presence of K̅osrow in the form of a short treatise that one of them, Priscian of Lydia, addressed to the Persian king. It has not survived in Greek – neither in Middle Persian – but a Latin translation made in the Carolingian period, maybe in the entourage of John Scotus Eriugena (c. 800-c. 877), is preserved under the title *Solutiones eorum quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex*. It consists in ten chapters, each providing answers to a question asked by the king about meteorology (as Aristotle envisioned it) and physics. Rather than a mere collection of random subjects, it was an introduction to Aristotle for the Platonic king (Tardieu 2015). It started with the soul's nature, went on with medicine, the body as the place of the soul and ended with the cosmos as the place of the body. In the *proemium*, Priscian gives an ideal list of sources, of which only a few are actually cited in the work, likely from collections of extracts (Marcotte 2014; 2015). K̅osrow, according to Agathias, knew the *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* and other Platonic dialogues. Priscian cited them in the first place, then passing to Plotinus and Proclus, the Neoplatonic teacher, through Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Poseidonius's and Arrian's meteorology, following the late antique Neoplatonic curriculum as it was transmitted in scholarly text-books of ἐκλογαί, extracts, or in the teachers' ὑπομνήματα, notes (Dan 2017, 574).

### 2.3 Geography and Astronomy

Interest in the eastern empire and the routes to Iran and India is manifest in Byzantium in the sixth century. The *Chrestomathies* (χρηστομάθεια, 'useful knowledge') of Strabo were recomposed in the sixth century in the region of Osrhoene (or northern Syria), as we can infer from the central position it occupies in the reorganisation of the matter. To Strabo's geography were added citations of Xenophon, Arrian and Ptolemy. The recension 'E' of the *Chrestomathies* was also associated in the Paris manuscript with Isidore of Charax' *Parthian Stations*, Σταθμοὶ Παρθικοί, an itinerary from Antioch to India commissioned by the emperor Augustus (Marcotte 2014; 2015). The special interest shown in the text – and in this particular manuscript – for the region of Osrhoene and the itineraries to Persia and India coincides with the reconstruction of strongholds in the region by Justinian. Geography was an important form of practical knowledge for both empires in the context of the Roman-Persian wars.

A similar version of the *Chrestomathies* was also cited by Priscian in his *Solutiones*, reflecting Neoplatonic adaptations made in north-

ern Syria or Osrhoene. His choice of topics like naphtha or biting snakes may reflect an adaptation to local interests at the Sasanian court. He may have in turn observed or found in Iran a detailed description of the evolution of rabies *per regionem persarum* (Dan 2017, 585). He introduced Greek geography in Iran, whereas Zoroastrian cosmology and sacred history were the guiding knowledge and principles for the Sasanian kings and their court (Shapira 2001; Payne 2013).

Astronomy was another important field of interest in Late Antiquity, although astrology as such was condemned by the Church. Astrologers, like physicians, had direct access to the Persian kings and as such also played an important role at the court since they were in charge of establishing military horoscopes and personal horoscopes of important people (Panaino 2017). In the Byzantine Empire, too, and in spite of the condemnation of astral determinism, astrology was part of the everyday life of the population and was influential at the Byzantine court (Magdalino 2006). Iatromathematics was of special importance and the presence of both physicians and astrologers at the Sasanian court enhanced the complementary character of these fields, where theory and practice were implemented and confronted in schools, hospitals, and in the entourage of the shah (Delaini 2014). We know that Kawād had a personal Christian astrologer named Musa (or Maswi) who used his influence for the election of one of his relatives as *catholicos* of the Church of the East, in which the king had a say (Panaino 2017, 151). Kōsrow II Parwēz (590-628) was also influenced for the election of the *catholicos* Gregory by a Christian astrologer, philosopher and physician who was also an archdeacon, named Aba of Kaškar (Panaino 2017, 152-3). His high position at the court is confirmed by the fact that Kōsrow sent him as an ambassador to the emperor Maurice (Sako 1986), following the tradition of sending high clerics who were also renowned scholars to the neighbouring and rival empire. The circulation of these ambassadors of knowledge probably fostered the cross-cultural circulation of texts and ideas between empires.

We have an interesting report of such circulation in the context of applied sciences at the Sasanian court. As with medicine, the practical aspects of astronomy were the main reason for the emperors' interest and their sponsoring of scholarly activities. In 556, in the twenty-fifth year of his reign, Kōsrow I convened a conference of astronomers in order to update the royal astronomical tables and had an Indian text compared with Ptolemy's *Syntaxis*. These tables needed to be revised regularly in order to conform to the astronomical year and enable the calculation of political and personal horoscopes as well as set up the yearly calendar. It was the occasion of a confrontation of mathematical calculations based on various traditions coming from east and west. This circulation from India to the Sasan-

ian Empire might explain how the Syriac scholar Severus Sebokht (d. 666/7) who was active in the monastery of Qenneshre on the Euphrates and wrote a *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and a *Treatise on the Constellations* heard about Indian numbers (Villey 2014; Debié 2014).

In the sixth-eighth centuries, astronomical knowledge circulated from China and India through Persia to the Jazira and Byzantium. Émilie Villey recently found evidence of Chinese vocabulary and classification of comets in Syriac texts. The Syriac *Book of Medicine*, in a passage that might be dated before 550 and was composed in Huzistan, seems to have preserved Sanskrit terms whereas Chinese influence is attested in Jacob of Edessa's *Hexaemeron* (before 708) and later Syriac-Orthodox texts (Villey 2021). This material from Chinese astronomy can be explained by the presence of Syriac-Orthodox, since at least the beginning of the seventh century, in Herat, in Khorasan (ancient Bactria or Tokharistan, modern Afghanistan), which became a bishopric and an ecclesiastical metropolis. Since 648, the region was under the control of the Tang dynasty, which facilitated the circulation from and to the Chinese capital Chang'an and the implantation of Chinese officials, including astronomers in charge of the observation of the sky for the establishment of the calendar and of horoscopes. We know also from Chinese sources that embassies reached Byzantium in the seventh and eighth centuries, enabling cross-cultural artistic exchanges (Walker 2003).

The other way around, astronomers/astrologers who were members of the Church of the East disseminated western astronomical science all the way to the court of the Tangs. The discovery in the 1980s of a funerary tombstone confirmed that a Christian astrologer of Iranian origin named Li Su (743-817), also known as Wenzhen, was also one and the same as the Luqa mentioned on the famous Chinese-Syriac stele of Xi'an (781), who likely was a cleric of the Church of the East. He was sent to the Chinese court in Chang'an between 766 and 779, where he became the director of the bureau of astronomy (Panaino 2017). He supplanted an Indian dynasty of astronomers, just as Chinese vocabulary and classification of comets seem to have overtaken Indian knowledge in Syriac texts. From the little information we have in Syriac, a shift of influence from Indian to Chinese astronomy seems to have taken place at the beginning of the eighth century.

Closer to Byzantium, Severus Sebokht sent one of his disciples to teach Stephanos, *illustris* and *chartularius* of the Jazira, how to use Ptolemy's astronomical tables. The practice of astronomy went on based on the Greek tradition. In the eighth century, the famous Theophilus of Edessa (Debié 2015; 2016), a Maronite astrologer at the court of the Abbasid caliphs, wrote astronomical treatises in Greek. These treatises attest that he knew Indian and Iranian astronomy. They were later cited by Arab scholars on the one hand and reached Constantinople c. 775 on the other, through the intermediary of Pseu-

do-Stephen of Alexandria, and were kept there. Pseudo-Stephen also wrote treatises in Greek in Baghdad that were then translated into Arabic (Tihon 1993; Magdalino 1998).

## 2.4 Literary Texts from the East to the West and Back

Religious and, interestingly, profane literature circulated with these high clerics who were also scholars. The famous Aba I, the future *catholicos* of the Church of the East (d. 552), who was educated in Middle Persian *belles lettres*, learned Syriac in Nisibis and Greek in Edessa. He visited with his teacher of Greek, Thomas, Alexandria, Egypt, Athens, Corinth, Constantinople, and Antioch before coming back to Nisibis and Ctesiphon. He is mentioned under the name of Patrikios by Cosmas Indicopleustes as his teacher for biblical studies. Translations from Greek into Syriac made Christian authors known in the Sasanian Empire.

A literary text enjoyed a tremendous success in the Middle East and then in the West, where it was translated into many languages. The collection of fables called *Kalila and Dimna* from the name of the two protagonists, two jackals, in which the actors are animals, treated political questions and was translated from the now lost Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* and other Indian collections of tales and fables into Middle Persian (Brock 2011a). The translation of tales from these collections was made in the 570s by Burzoy (Barzaway), who was also a physician at the court of Kōsrow I and was sent to India by the king, as is stated in his 'autobiography' that precedes the Arabic translation by Ibn al-Muqaffa'. His translation does not survive but it was in turn translated into Syriac by Bodh, a *periodeutes* (ecclesiastical visitor) of the Church of the East, and is still extant. A later translation from Middle Persian into Arabic was made in the first half of the eighth century, by the Persian scholar Ibn al-Muqaffa'. This does not survive either but formed the basis for all the subsequent translations into Arabic, Persian, Greek, Hebrew and Old Spanish. It was also translated into Syriac in the tenth or eleventh century in an expanded version, compared to the first one, including the narrative of Burzoy, which the first translation did not include. A second translation from Arabic into Syriac was made in the nineteenth century by Thomas Audo. Under the title of the *Fables of Bidpay*, or Pilpay, this small collection was translated into Turkish and into western languages: John of Capua translated it into Latin in 1270. The French version (*Le Livre des lumières ou la Conduite des rois*, 1644) inspired Jean de La Fontaine for his own fables. It is also known in translations in Thailand, Laos and Indonesia. It reached Byzantium only in the eleventh century, when a Greek translation was made in 1080 by the Jewish scholar Simeon Seth, under the title *Stephanites and Ich-*

*nelates*. A more complete Greek version was made in twelfth-century Sicily, connected with Admiral Eugenius of Palermo. Although the first Syriac translation that made the stories known in the Middle East dates to the sixth century, it did not circulate in Byzantium and was known only later on from the Arabic version. The retranslation into Syriac from Arabic confirms the little success met by the first one. Although both were made in Iran, only the second one reached Byzantium via a Greek intermediary.

A similar text of 'oriental' tales, Sindbad/Sintypas the sage (not to be confused with the even better-known Sindbad the sailor), was translated from a Persian or Indian original dating to the late Sasanian period from Middle Persian into Arabic in the ninth century (Brock 2011d). It enjoyed great popularity and was also translated into Hebrew and hence into Spanish and other European languages where it was known under the title of *The Seven Sages of Rome*. It was translated early on from Arabic into Syriac. In the eleventh century, Michael Andreopoulos translated it from Syriac into Greek in Melitene, a city of contacts between the Syrian-Orthodox and Greek Orthodox after the Byzantine reconquest. He gave Sindbad the name of Syntipas under which it is generally known today.

Another fictional text, the *History of Alexander the Great*, probably composed in the sixth century,<sup>7</sup> stages a war between Alexander, reimagined as a pious monotheistic king, and a fictitious Persian king named Tubarlaq. Alexander receives a revelation from an otherworldly being and triumphs over the Persian king. He also builds an impregnable door that reminds the reader of the formidable Sasanian walls reconstructed in the sixth century against the Huns. In two of these texts, the Huns are equated with the eschatological people of Gog and Magog. These apocalypses function as additional and independent Christianised episodes of the so-called *Alexander Romance* known in countless languages and cultures – including Syriac. They are a literary means to come to terms with the Roman-Persian wars and the related eschatological anxieties, and to reclaim for a 'Greek' king the exploit of keeping at bay both the Persians and the barbarians from the north. The anonymous author who composed the core of the *History of Alexander* weaved a story on what he heard about the military and political situation of his time on the borders between empires. We can find strong echoes of the *History of the Exploits*, that is a development of this first version, in surah 18 of the Qur'ān. This successful story should be replaced in the context of the images con-

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<sup>7</sup> For a date at the beginning of the sixth century and not in the seventh century of this history, which is known in three different versions in Syriac (in the *Chronicle of Zuqin*, in the *Mimro*, falsely attributed to Jacob of Serugh, and in the *History of the Exploit of Alexander*), see Debié forthcoming a.

veyed on the shared (and often conflictual) history of the Roman and Sasanian empires, and read as a comforting as well as entertaining literary composition intended for Syriac Christians living in the borderlands of both empires.

Christians in both empires shared a common spirituality based on the cult of martyrs. Whereas persecutions ceased in the Roman Empire after the so-called edict of Milan, they went on in the Sasanian Empire, although in a more specific and less massive mode than in the third and fourth centuries. Numerous Acts of martyrs were written in Syriac (Brock 2008). The names of Persian martyrs reached the Roman Empire and became part of one of the most ancient lists of martyrs copied at the end of the earliest dated Syriac manuscript, written in Edessa in November 411 (Brock 2011a). This transmission of the martyrs' names was accompanied by the translation of relics from the Persian Empire and the translation into Greek of some of these Acts (Brock 2011b). Marutha of Maypherqat is the driving force behind these movements. Trained as a physician before he became the bishop of Maypherqat (Greek Martyropolis, modern Silvan in Turkey), he gained the favour of Yazdegerd I (399-420) and was sent to his court in 410 as a legate by Theodosius II. He obtained to convene a council for the Church of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410. He reputedly translated into Syriac the canons of the ecumenical council of Nicaea and several documents linked to it. We know that he brought back with him the relics of Persian martyrs that owed his city the name of Martyropolis. He was probably also at the origin of the translation of Acts of the martyrs under Shapur II (309-79) that he had gathered while in Iran. Information about these martyrs also made their way into the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen.

Due to massive deportations of war prisoners from the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries, Greek-speaking Christians and their hierarchy played an important role in the Church of the East until at least the fifth century. This might explain the translations and regular contacts on both sides of the border. The interest for Persian martyrs in the west did not end with the martyrs under Shapur. In the case of two Persian martyrs under Kosrow I (531-79) and Kosrow II (591-628), Shirin (*BHG* 1637) and Golindouch (*BHG* 700-702; *CPG* 7521), two noble women belonging to the royal family, only the Greek versions survive, the Syriac originals having been lost. In the seventh century the Acts of Anastasius the Persian were written in Greek in Palestine where he was deported before his death, during the Persian occupation of the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire (Flusin 1992). These translations or compositions in Greek attest the interest for fellow Christians in the Sasanian empire and conveyed information about everyday life in the neighbouring realm as well as about the administrative and ecclesiastical (Zoroastrian) institutions.



Polemics and controversies as well as political concerns sparked translations from and into several languages. Agatangełos' *History of the Armenians* was thus translated into Middle Persian at the Sasanian court in order to give proof to the shah of the ancient nobility of the Armenians. The *catholicos* Aqāq purportedly translated an account of Christian beliefs into Middle Persian for the Sasanian ruler Kawād, in order to help him understand Christianity. A debate between a delegation of six members of the Church of the East (including the future *catholicos* Īšō'yahb I) led by Paul, bishop of Nisibis, and the emperor Justinian took place in 562 in Constantinople (Rigolio 2019, no. 58, 219-22). Recorded in writing, this dispute relied on citations of Biblical and Patristic excerpts. Paul wrote his own account of the dispute that was addressed to Kashwai, one of Զosrow I's physicians mentioned above. The *Catalogue* of Syriac writers compiled by 'Abdīšō' bar Brīkā of Nisibis (thirteenth century) mentions a *Conversation with Caesar* (*Debate with Caesar*, CPG 6897) that Paul of Nisibis had authored and that could be this report (now lost). Christological debates were thus transmitted in both empires and manifest the implication of both sovereigns who were interested in keeping religious unity and peace in their realm between religions and between Christian confessions and churches. They applied theology to their political agenda.

Interestingly an anonymous fictitious *Conversation at the Sasanian Court* (Διήγησις or Ἐξηγήσις τῶν παραχθέντων ἐν Περσίδι [*De gestis in Perside*], CPG 6968) was composed in the sixth century (Rigolio 2017, no. 59, 222-9). Four debates in presence of a Sasanian king called Arrhinatus opposed representatives of the main religions of Late Antiquity - Hellenic paganism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism - , who also bore fictitious names and competed through miracles. One of the main interests of this text are the passages in Pseudo-Persian, the language in which the debates supposedly took place. Set at the Sasanian court, it reports that extracts from the ecclesiastical historian Philip of Side were read. It adds letters and the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, an apocryphal text on the Magi, that circulated independently. It also heavily relies on the Book of Daniel. The text is an imaginative rendition by a Byzantine author of the Sasanian court as a place of confrontation and at the same time of *convivencia* between religions, where the judge, a high-ranking Sasanian official and philosopher, proffered a discourse of religious freedom. This dialogue romance was probably inspired to a Christian author in the Roman Empire who heard about the interreligious dialogues held at Justinian's or at the two Զosrow's courts (Guillaumont 1969-70; 1970). It is indicative of the image a Christian of the Roman Empire had of the Sasanians' practice of public dialogues.

Scientific and philosophical texts circulated as is expected between the Roman and Sasanian empires as well as more east and



west towards Europe and towards India and China. It is more surprising to see that religious texts were also discussed at the courts. The political impact of religious dissents and violence actually meant that knowing better one's adversaries and talking with them was instrumental in order to maintain a balance between the official religion of the empire and the other ones, in the variety of their internal movements. Whether from intellectual curiosity or more practical political concerns, religious dialogues were also the occasion for the circulation of texts.

### 3 Southern Exchanges

The new discoveries of the past decades in terms of Arabian epigraphy have changed in depth our understanding of the history of the Peninsula before Islam and have in particular shown how integrated it was, not only in the economic networks of Late Antiquity, but also in the geopolitical and geo-religious relations between Byzantium, the Sasanian, South Arabian and Ethiopian kingdoms (Hoyland 2001; Bowersock 2004; 2017; McDonald 2009; Fisher 2011; Robin 2014; Robin, al-Ghabbān, al-Sa'īd 2014; Genequand, Robin 2015). Although the map of Late Antiquity should fully integrate the region, not just as a grey zone of desert, but as a region with courts, buildings and cities, economic as well as religious and political networks, the impact of these changes very slowly sinks in the historiography of the region and the history of religions. The history of Late Antique Judaism hardly considers Arabian Judaism and Christianity in Arabia is seldom part of the picture of ancient Christianity.

Emperors in Byzantium were not only interested in securing alliances with their Arab clients but also eager to have some weight in Arabia. Justin I (518-27) sent to the Lakhmid king al-Mundhir at Ḥirta/al-Ḥira (the capital of the Naṣrids in northwest Arabia) Abramios, a priest and diplomat, son of Euphrasius and father of Nonnosos, who belonged to a family of diplomats. During the reign of Justinian and the Roman-Persian war in 530, Sergius, a deacon known to the Arab king, travelled back and forth holding the letters of al-Mundhir. These clerics were sent as delegates for peace discussions and travelled with letters from both parties.

Texts also circulated in and from the Arabian Peninsula in attempts to gain Arabs and Ḥimyarites to the miaphysite faith. Competition between the various Christian affiliations fostered religious-diplomatic encounters: Severus of Antioch and Philoxenus of Mabbug sent letters to the phylarch and *stratelates* of Ḥirta/al-Ḥira, on Christological and ecclesiastical issues, in the context of the competition with the dyophysites of the Church of the East. Discussions were held at the enemies Arab courts of Ḥira and Gabitha, spon-

sored by the Arab 'kings' on neutral ground. Envoys of the Byzantine emperor, members of the Church of the East, and the highest authorities of the miaphysite party were present. In 536, when Justinian enacted laws against the Miaphysites, Ephrem, the patriarch of Antioch, tried to gain al-Ḥarīth b. Jabala/Arethas to the Chalcedonian cause. In the 580s, the miaphysite patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria participated in a discussion convened by the Jafnid patriarch in Gabitha at his encampment, and aimed at bridging the gap between them. As in the Church councils, convocation letters were sent in Greek, extracts from dogmatic texts were produced by each party and discussed in these reunions, letters dispatched the results of the discussions. Echoes of these sophisticated theological discussions can be traced in the Qur'ān (Debié 2016).

The hagiographic dossier of the so-called martyrs of Najran exemplify the circulation of various clerics – Greek Orthodox, Syriac Miaphysites, members of the Church of the East, miaphysite Ethiopians and local Arabs and Ḥimyarites belonging to these Christian denominations – inside Arabia and between empires (Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet, Robin 2011). Simeon of Beth Arsham, 'the Persian debater', who circulated in the Sasanian Empire in order to convert to Miaphysitism Christians of the Persian Empire, was also active in the Arabian Peninsula. He received at the court of Ḥirṯha/al-Ḥīra in 523 the news of the massacre of Christian in Najran by Dhū Nuwās, the Ḥimyarite king converted to Judaism. He wrote a letter that was brought to a monastery in northern Syria in order to make the news known in the Roman Empire. Acts of the martyrs were written in Greek, in Syriac (the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*) and in Ethiopic, and were translated into Arabic. Echoes of the massacre were also identified in the Qur'ān.

Texts were thus exchanged between Constantinople and the Arabian Peninsula, as they were also with the neighbouring kingdoms of Ethiopia and Persia. A literate culture existed in Arabia, which explains how quickly written documents started to be written in Arabic shortly after Muḥammad (Debié forthcoming c). Byzantium engaged in geopolitical and religious dialogue with its eastern and southern neighbours through clerics who played also a role as ambassadors of knowledge and cultural delegates.

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