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John Chrysostom, Maruthas and Christian Evangelism in Sasanian Iran

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Neither John Chrysostom's efforts to evangelize in Sasanid Persia nor the conflict fought between Rome and Persia in 421 have drawn a great deal of attention.¹ So this paper will attempt to navigate the 20 years from John's initial efforts up to the outbreak of the war without much modern support. Beginning from a series of clues in ancient sources I will try to gather apparently unrelated narratives into a story of how John inadvertently contributed to the event that Kenneth Holum called 'Pulcheria's Crusade'. Not that this war earned any of the historical significance of the later crusades. Our sources tell of various religious disputes on the border that led to a Roman incursion into Sasanian territory, but the conflict was quickly dropped without any major strategic outcome.² On the other hand, this conflict could be seen as a milestone in the development of the role of exclusive religions in imperial politics. Though the term 'crusade' will at first sound anachronistic in the early 5th century, there does appear to be a development of religious motivations in conflicts between Romans and Sasanids. Roman battles against the first Persian invaders in the early 3rd century could hardly call upon any crusading attitudes, but Heraclius' climactic battles against Khosro II in the 7th century were able to return the true cross to Jerusalem. So when we see Theodosius' court react to Persian persecution of Christians with a full scale military attack, we may be tempted to test its status as the first Roman crusade and look for motivations and causes. However complex and manifold these may be, I will argue that the unique missionary zeal of John Chrysostom initiated a concatenation of events that led to war.

Before entering into the details of the evidence, it might be helpful to review our two characters and their relations. We all know John Chrysostom, but perhaps not all of us are familiar with his missionary zeal. In his recent biography

¹ The recent scholarly discussion on this war is summed up by three articles: Kenneth Holum, *Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory*: *GRBS* 18 (1977) 153-72; Omert J. Schrier, *Syriac Evidence for the Roman-Persian War of 421-22*: *GRBS* 33 (1992) 75-86; and Geoffrey Greatrex, *The two fifth-century Wars between Rome and Persia*: *Florilegium* 12 (1993) 1-14.

² Al-Tabari does not even mention this war, see Clifford E. Bosworth (transl.), *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. five (Albany, New York, 1999), 103.

J.N.D. Kelly stated that, 'John's great interest in promoting Christianity among barbarians and outside the borders of the empire was at this time unusual, not to say unprecedented.'³ Most of what we know about John's missionary interests comes from Theodoret who describes him sending missionaries beyond the Danube and establishing a sort of Gothic rite parish in Constantinople at which he himself preached using a Gothic translator.⁴ Maruthas, on the other hand, has left a surprisingly small footprint on history.⁵ He was a bishop in Iraq on the Persian border of the Roman empire who we are told helped depose John at the Synod of the Oak.⁶ Though Sokrates and Sozomen dwell at length on a bizarre story of how Maruthas killed Cyrinus, bishop of Chalcedon, by inadvertently stepping on his foot, other sources indicate his apostolic role in Persia. As we will see, he was instrumental in forming the hierarchy of the Persian Church at the Council of Seleucia in 410. The confluence of these two prominent ecclesiastics' lives creates the main current for suspecting John's role in the war of 421.

When we turn to specific evidence we find the first scrap comes from Chrysostom's 9th letter to Olympias in which he refers to Maruthas's part in eastern affairs:

Do not cease to pay attention to Maruthas the Bishop, as far as it concerns you, so as to lift him up out of the pit. For I have special need of him on account of the affairs in Persia. And find out from him, if you can, what he has accomplished there, and why he has come home, and let me know whether you have delivered the two letters which I sent to him: and if he is willing to write to me, I will write again to him: but if he is not willing, let him at least signify to your prudence whether anything more has taken place there, and whether he is likely to accomplish anything by going there again. For on this account I was anxious to have an interview with him. Nevertheless let all things which depend on you be done, and take care to fulfill your own part...

The missionary context of this statement is underscored by the following section's detailed discussion of Chrysostom's missions to the Goths. I presume that Maruthas's role in deposing John at the synod of the Oak would have caused a rift between the two of them which probably explains John's reference to Maruthas being in a 'pit', but this letter seems to imply that their shared interest in evangelizing Persia could possibly transcend ecclesiastical politics.

³ John N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), 144.

⁴ Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* V 38 (GCS 44).

⁵ For the literature left in Maruthas's name see Arthur Vööbus, *The Canons Ascribed to Maruta of Maipherkat*, CSCO 439-40 and Sebastian Brock, 'The Homily by Marutha of Tagrit on the Blessing of the Waters at Epiphany: *Oriens Christianus* 66 (1982) 51-74. See also Jean-Maurice Fiey, 'Maruta de Martyropolis d'après Ibn al-Azraq (? 1181): *AB* 94 (1976) 35-45; Ralph Marcus, 'The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat: *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1932) 47-71; Jacques Noret, 'La Vie grecque ancienne de S. Maruta de Mayferkat: *AB* 91 (1973) 77-103.

⁶ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VIII 16 (GCS 50).

It might even be possible to guess that John and Maruthas had plotted out a mission to the Sasanids as early as 399, or at least before John was exiled in 403. But whatever can be inferred from the vague suggestions of this letter, it is clear that John had some role in the origins of a mission to Sasanian subjects, and that he continued to be a prime motivating factor in these missions even into his third, or last, exile when the above letter was composed.

Extant sources show John's chosen agent, Maruthas, subsequently playing a major role in Persian evangelization as well as the establishment of a distinct Sasanian church. For instance, the Acts of the Council of Seleucia, held in 410, state the following:

The shah Yazdagird commanded the orders of his majesty be borne to his border commanders (*marzpan*s) of various places that they send their bishops... The king of kings has ordered to our honorable Father, Mar Isaac, bishop of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, catholicos and archbishop of all the East, and to his brother, the bishop Mar Maruthas, that they (bishops) all join themselves together.⁷

Such a command implies two things: that Yazdagird wanted to assume the same powers to call a synod that Constantine had established for the Roman emperor; and that the shah trusted Maruthas with this early process of creating a distinct Sasanian Christian church. Bahram, Yazdagird's son, upon his shaky accession to power in 420 accelerated the process of creating a state Christian church. By the Council of 424 the Sasanian shah not only convened all councils, but had defined the catholicos of Ctesiphon/Seleucia as the primate of all Christians within his empire and established a veto over the council's selection of the catholicos. Thus we see from the eastern sources that the shahs had decided to bring Christianity under state control and mysteriously Maruthas was one of the chief agents deliberately chosen to initiate this project.

The western ecclesiastical historians provide a different perspective. Most useful is Sokrates' discussion of a mysterious mission to Yazdagird's court around the time that Cyril took over as bishop of Alexandria or 412:

Frequent embassies were sent to and fro between the sovereigns of Persia and the Roman empire, for which there were continual occasions. Necessity brought it about at that time that the Roman emperor thought proper to send Maruthas, bishop of Mesopotamia on a mission to the king of the Persians. The king found great piety in the man, treated him with great honor, and listened to him as one who was indeed beloved of God. This roused the jealousy of the magi, whose influence over the Persian monarch is considerable, since they were afraid that he might persuade the king to embrace Christianity.⁸

⁷ My translation of the French from Nina Garsoian, *L'Église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*, CSCO 574 (Louvain, 1999), 54; Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale* (Paris, 1902), 256f.

⁸ Sokrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VII 8; Günther C. Hansen, ed., *Sokrates, Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin, 1995).

The story continues to describe Maruthas' thwarting of various intrigues by the Zoroastrian clergy and the propagation of Christianity throughout the Sasanian empire, much of which seems historically questionable. But we are forced to ask who exactly sent bishop Maruthas, and whether he was being employed as a diplomat or as a missionary. Sokrates began his seventh book by describing the death of Arcadius, the succession of the eight-year-old Theodosius II and Anthemius' competent regency as praetorian prefect. In this context it seems we would have to assume that Anthemius sent the mission, though Sokrates clearly states that the emperor (βασιλεύς) sent him.⁹ The only likely explanation for this story seems to be that Maruthas went to negotiate with Yazdagird concerning the status of Christians within the Sasanian realm. So we can infer that Maruthas' mission of 412 was diplomatic and possibly related to the Council of Seleucia in 410, but we can be certain that he was one of the few ecclesiastics known and well trusted on both sides of the border.

In a more sensational vein, Theodoret left us a description of the aftermath of Maruthas' evangelical successes leading up to war.¹⁰ Around 418 a bishop Abdas destroyed a fire-temple for which the Zoroastrian state clergy had Yazdagird summon him. When Abdas in his evangelical zeal refused the shah's order for restitution, he was killed, and, according to Theodoret, all of the bishop's churches were to be destroyed. The story, however incredible some of its details, illustrates the escalation of violence between Christians and Zoroastrians in the borderlands of the two great empires. Though it is unlikely that Yazdagird had all Christian churches in his realm destroyed, it is undeniable that waves of persecution left Christian exiles streaming back to the protection of their state religion in Rome. It may be that Abdas' martyrdom was a signal event in the escalation towards war, but Sokrates' claim that the accession of Yazdagird's son Bahram spurred war seems equally likely. In this version Bahram's insecurity upon accession in 420 opened him up to the influence of the Zoroastrian clergy who unleashed a vicious persecution against Christians that sent them flocking across the border into Rome.¹¹ When Bahram demanded their extradition, the pious Roman officials refused and thus incited more tension between the empires.¹² However much Sokrates rhetorically amplified the scale of these events, the events themselves fit well into a chronology that could lead to war. If we take the traditional dating of the martyrdom of Abdas in 418 and the accession of Bahram V in 420 then we can easily see how the religious

⁹ Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa* 8, SC 234, indicates Anthemius' experience in eastern matters.

¹⁰ Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* V 38.

¹¹ For instance, Cyril of Scythopolis' discussion of Aspebetos and his Arab tribe's migration, *Life of Euthymius* 18.22, Eduard Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis, Texte und Untersuchungen* 49.2 (Leipzig, 1939). See also Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC., 1989), 40-9.

¹² Sokrates, *Hist. eccl.* VII 18.

conflicts aroused in the tolerant reign of Yazdagird turned into a war under the less secure reign of Bahram.

A short chronological summary will be helpful. Around 400 Chrysostom and Maruthas discussed missionary activity in Sasanian lands; in 403 Maruthas took part in the synod to depose John; by 404 John is still trying to encourage Maruthas' mission; in 407 John died; in 410 Yazdagird assigns Maruthas to convene a Council to organize a Sasanian Church; in 412 Anthemius sends Maruthas to Yazdagird's court; in 418 Abdas destroys a fire-temple; in 420 Bahram V comes to power; 421 Romans initiate a short war; 424 Bahram convenes a Council to secure control over the Sasanian Christian Church. Sidestepping an array of interpretive problems in this short narrative, I would like to come back to John's role. On the one hand, it would be possible to assume that Maruthas, before any relation with Chrysostom, was already working to spread Christianity in the Sasanian realm and that John, as Bishop of Constantinople, only intended to encourage his efforts. But I find it more likely that John had concocted a strategy to evangelize the peoples living under the shah and this strategy started Maruthas on his career as co-founder of a new eastern church. John's evangelical strategy would have initially been rejected by the court of Theodosius II, when Anthemius was trying to use Maruthas as a diplomat around 412, but then embraced as the pious Pulcheria's reaction to Anthemius' cool diplomacy expressed itself in a passionate call for war to stop the persecution.

At this point, we might want to recall two factors: one, Pulcheria was said to be responsible for returning John's relics to Constantinople in the 430s and thus we can responsibly retroject her close connection to John's legacy back to 421; and, two, John's unparalleled work to create a Gothic Church. With these in mind I suspect that John had plans for a Sasanian Church similar to his Gothic model, that he insightfully chose Maruthas as his agent, and Pulcheria carried on this work after his death when she gained enough influence in court. But, as it turned out, the political situation in Ctesiphon was more complex than that in Gothia. As Christianity spread in Persia, the shahs brought long experience with state religious policy to bear, and, as we have seen, created a centralized church under their control. We can assume that any Roman efforts to spread Christianity could have been seen as hostile, especially by the shah's Zoroastrian hierarchy. Likewise from the perspective of Theodosius' increasingly devout court the efforts of the Zoroastrian hierarchy to control Sasanian Christians could easily have been understood as persecution, even before overt violence broke out.

Given the rarity of deliberate ecclesiastic missions to Persia, one wonders if John Chrysostom's zealous desire to foster a Persian church played a role in inciting the first Roman crusade. John may well have started Maruthas on a career that led to the intimate trust of Yazdagird and the apparent position of intermediary between the two empires and their religious hierarchies. Maruthas

in turn became instrumental in the development of a distinct Sasanian Christian Church. Such a church must have inspired concern both in the shah's Zoroastrian and the Roman emperor's Christian hierarchy. Because the spark of this concern fell amidst various brittle economic and political conditions and was fanned into violence, I suspect that John's missionary zeal inadvertently kindled the war of 421.¹³

¹³ I would like to thank Susan Ashbrook Harvey for her insights and suggestions.