

## Article

# When Identity Shifts to Violence: Historical and Hagiographical Cases from Syriac Churches in Interaction with Confessional and Religious Rivals

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**Abstract:** This article briefly epitomizes violence in the broad context of Eastern Christianity, and secondly deals with the transfer of this phenomenon in Syriac Christianity, for the reason that this has not been studied as much as in the Byzantine literature. The purpose is to demonstrate that identity-based violence was a feature included in the narratives of antique and medieval Eastern Christian discourses, this being closely linked to the struggle for ecclesiastical primacy and political power. The paper discusses paradigmatic cases, methodologically studied in their context, of Christian individuals and religious characters that suffered or acted against rivals with violence. The main focus is on historical and historiographical sources illustrating: (1) Syriac communities and factions defending their identity through language or acts of violence; and (2) identity-based confrontations within the Syriac family: factions within the same community, or sister Churches that became rivals (Syriac Orthodox against East Syrians) instrumentalizing the language of violence, mostly actions of destruction, against their opponents. The conclusion indicates that perseverance in defending the truth, as part of their identity, made the communities opt for confrontation, and when one endured violence, one accepted this on the models of the martyrs and the *imitatio* Christi.



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## 1. Introduction

Late Antiquity, which featured increasing polemics, theological debates, and apologetic contexts among Christian sects and other religious groups, makes the phenomenon of religious violence much more visible in the social area of the Middle East. This period was characterized as the age in which Christological divergences dismembered the body of the Christian Church into competing groups, dominated by two factions: adherents of the Miaphysite faith (defending the belief that Jesus Christ possessed only one *physis*, synonymous with one *hypostasis*) and Dyophysite doctrine (preserving the faith in two natures, one divine and another human). Miaphysite Christology is considered by some to be a form of Monophysitism (a condemned heresy deriving from the teaching of Eutyches of Constantinople), but this is an erroneous conclusion. The body of Syriac Christianity, the main focus of this paper, has also been divided into two sister Churches: (1) On the one hand, Syriac Orthodox Christians with a Miaphysite dogmatic heritage (considered to be related to Cyril of Alexandria's teaching of one *physis* of the Logos, and putting more emphasis on the concern "to provide a formulation that did full justice to the reality of the incarnation, for without this salvation would not be effective" (Brock 1994, p. 81)); (2) On the other hand, the Church of the East or the East Syriac Church, which, for the reason "to maintain the transcendence of Godhead" and to exclude "any idea that the Godhead could be subject to any kind of suffering", respectively, to articulate the salvation that comes through the humanity of Christ ("*homo assumptus*") (Brock 1994, p. 81), kept a tenacious Dyophysite credo (more complex than that of the Byzantine world; the East

Syrians imagined Christ possessing: two *kyane*, a term that corresponds to nature; two *qnome*, an additional term that means individualisation or concretization of *kyane*; and one *parsopa*, a synonym with the Greek term *prosopon* which means person) (Engelmann 2013; Winkler 2003; Chediath 1982). As *qnoma* was sometimes used as semantic equivalent to the Greek concept *hypostasis*, at least in Trinitarian discussions, for a clear and constructive understanding of the Syriac Christological terms one should read the statement of Sebastian Brock: “Although hypostasis was always rendered into Syriac as *qnoma*, the term *qnoma* has a much wider range of sense than does hypostasis, and in any discussion of the christology of the Church of the East, it would seem advisable to retain the Syriac term *qnoma*, rather than retrovert it as hypostasis” (Brock 1996, p. 169; see also Brock 1994, p. 82; Ebeid 2016, p. 355).

Starting with the fifth century, the Christians of Syriac tradition developed a robust identity around Edessa, based on Abgar Ukkama’s legend of exchanging letters with Christ and inviting Him to come in his kingdom of Osrhoene to receive protection from Jewish oppression, and to heal the king’s disease (Illert 2007). At the same time, the connection with the apostolic mission of Addai and Mari, who allegedly brought the message of the Gospel in the area of Edessa, stand at the basis of their identity which later on was even more safeguarded and defended in the context of Christological polemics. Through a local council held in 421, the East Syriac Church became a centralized institution under the leadership of the bishop of Seleucia Ctesiphon, and from now on it loses communication with the Church located in the Eastern Roman Empire (Winkler 2003; Ebeid 2016), in the sense that, by taking over the legacy of Teodor de Mospuestia, it built a road that theologically diverges from the Christological approach of Byzantium. By the same token, at the ecclesiastical administrative level, there have been attested only a few attempts of exchange with the Church of Constantinople. Living in the Sassanid Empire made the Church suffer religious turmoil many times, so the East Syriac Christians, subjects to a Zoroastrian state religion, have suffered many official persecutions. Once with the Sassanid king Yazdegerd I (r. 399–420), Christianity flourished in the Persian empire (McDonough 2008), but even now cases of persecution have not completely disappeared, especially as result of hostilities with the Byzantines, Christians suspected by the Persian authorities of collaborating with the Church authorities in the Byzantine area (Brock 1994, p. 74).

One century later, a Church hierarchy—that of West Syrians or Syriac Orthodox Christians, shaped culturally and geographically in closer connection to Byzantium, although dogmatically divergent to the Church in Eastern Roman Empire—gained momentum in the area. Both East and West Syrians rejected the Council of Chalcedon held in 451 (official rejections are hard to find in the early sources, authors of both traditions being engaged in debate with Chalcedonians much later on) (Popa 2019). This refusal has affected bishops, clergy, and communities, especially that of Syriac Orthodox tradition, mostly in the area under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Roman Empire. The initial development of Syriac Orthodox clergy in Syria is owed to Jacob Baradaeus, a non-Chalcedonian who, after being consecrated Bishop of Edessa in 543 by Theodosius of Alexandria (the deposed Patriarch being in exile in Constantinople at that time), supported the revival of non-Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, especially in Syria and Mesopotamia. He consecrated non-Chalcedonian bishops and clergymen and accelerated the development of the West Syriac hierarchy (Mellon Saint-Laurent 2015). These Syriac non-Chalcedonians suffered oppression in Late Antiquity by the Chalcedonian religious leaders and imperial power (this happened mostly with the intronization in 518 of Emperor Justin I, a Chalcedonian follower) (Menze 2008). Cases of such clashes due to faith divergences will be discussed below, with the question of how violence was legitimated in the Christian competition for possessing the right faith, which oftentimes was decided in favour of those who had access to politics and were benefited by sympathies and influence of imperial power. In this analysis of Syriac Christian sources, one might see that conflicts, intolerance, and violence were manifested against external rivals (confessional opponents: Syriac Orthodox against East Syrians, or Chalcedonians against Syriac Orthodox; and religious opponents: East or West Syrians against Jews or

Muslims against East or West Syrians), as well as against groups inside the same Church tradition and community.

The chosen cases will attempt to argue if Syriac sources find agreeable the phenomenon of violence; what was the experience of enduring or legitimizing violence in Syriac Christianity (and how these cases might be classified based on the current scholarship on violence in late antiquity); and, respectively, in which matter the phenomenon differs from what one reads in the scholarship about the relationship between Christianity and violence in the Eastern Roman Empire, a much-studied topic.

## **2. Violence and Cultural Separation between the Eastern Roman Empire and Syriac Christians**

Scholars should agree that religions must inoculate the virtue of peace to their leaders and followers (e.g., Isaiah 2:4; Matthew 5:39; Qur'an 8:61). Reading the history of Christianity and that of Abrahamic religions, one might see that this is a choice not always attested in the Middle East religious experience nor in the Christian communities itself, when identity of faith and doctrine was threatened. Moreover, I do not intend to argue from the perspective of moral judgments or Christian ethics but will keep my focus on historical observations.

There are many features of religious violence identified in the history of Christianity. The academic literature distinguishes between forms of religious violence: 'physical', 'psychical', 'subtle', 'structural', and 'legitimate/non-sanctioned violence' (Fath 2018, p. 8). The chosen Syriac cases belong to the above-mentioned categories, except the first class, in which only limited cases will be narrated.

Violence has been a perpetual phenomenon in the religious framework, with oscillations and far-reaching social mutations generated by crises of spiritual authority and the relation between Church and State power, especially in the Eastern Roman Empire and most likely once the religious cult became a public phenomenon. Scholars viewed signs of violence in the religious spectrum of Late Antiquity (see Neil and Simić 2020), with the decisive phase for this trend seeming to be "the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire to Christianity" (Hahn 2015, p. 379; Van Nuffelen 2020, p. 512). Now, as Christian public worship is allowed, Christians are able to especially react against pagan heritage. Events after Constantine's policy were sometimes provoked by the tension of legitimate illegitimate orthodoxy and the rapport with secular powers (see Fournier and Mayer 2020).

Especially in the 4th–5th centuries, violence also took hold over the factions forming between the Christian communities on the basis of doctrinal differences and the rivalry between ecclesiastical powers as manifested by the various bishops and their struggles for increased authority. Now, a "fractious nature of Christianity" (Van Nuffelen 2020, p. 513) will come to the fore against the backdrop of Christological disputes, oscillating between more moderate and more strict forms depending not only on the nature of the disputes of faith but also according to which faction the political power favoured.

The Churches of the Syriac tradition were not unfamiliar with violent clashes: firstly, because their identity formation was predicated, on the one hand, against the backdrop of cultural and political separation with the Byzantine world, but also on dogmatic differences, on the other. Syriac Orthodox Church (otherwise known as the 'West Syriac') was culturally closer to Byzantium; nevertheless, it accentuated its distinct identity as possessor of a Miaphysite Christology which dogmatically kept it strictly separate from Chalcedonian Churches. In stark opposition, its sister Church, the East Syriac (otherwise known as the 'Assyrian') Church of the East, adopted a strict Dyophysite position. Although this stance was not far from the concept of the Byzantine doctrine of the two natures of Christ, it was considered to have permanently corrupted the orthodox position, which made it not hesitate to insinuate the same about not only its Byzantine opponents, but also its sister, Syriac Orthodox Church. Tensions and confrontations did not bypass these Churches: although in their theological polemics language became often aggressive and insulting, direct confrontations with acts of physical or mental violence are probably rarer than in

other Eastern Churches. Not all cases should be attributed to the hagiographic literature which one tends to read as literary conventions and stereotypical pictures, through the intention of authors is to express what truly matters is the hero's struggle in defence of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Scholars claim that in Late Antiquity the institution of episcopacy, like the clergy institutions of other religions, was drawn into this vicious cycle by the legitimization of aggressive acts of emperors against those considered their enemies (Drake 2011, pp. 219–20). This practice made bishops' opponents subject to acts of intolerance and even aggression. Not all who felt that they endured hostility criticized the hierarchy's oppression towards them but accepted their fate with the thought of martyrs. A rare alternative was to practice a vocal criticism and to seek justice as in the case Peter van Nuffelen brings up of Eutheries of Tyana, a defender of Nestorius who, after the condemnation of the Patriarch accused of heresy, criticized the violent actions on the basis of which the synod of Ephesus resolved the issue and showed that violence was chosen, in lieu of peace (Van Nuffelen 2020, pp. 524–25).

It is not only such well-known cases from the classical Christological disputes that show how violence has drawn stern criticism from those subjected to it. Going beyond the case of the Antiochian Nestorius, or even that of Severus of Antioch (considered a defender of Orthodoxy by the Syriac Orthodox Christians) and other prominent figures, less well-known examples are, for instance, the confrontation between Theodore bar Wahbun, a 12th century Syriac Orthodox theologian who caused a revolt against the Patriarch Michael Rabo (in office between 1166–1199) contesting the legitimacy of his election. Being deprived of his priestly robes, put to penance in the Barsauma monastery, and harshly criticized by the Patriarch, he left the monastery and went into exile, seeking support from the Armenian community and, later, from the community of his own Church in the Holy City. Even if Theodore's perceptions of the conflict and his polarisation against the Patriarch differ from Michael Rabo's stated position, he still managed to draw harsh opposition from the Patriarch's faction through accusations, verbal violence, and even aggression. Such stories are numerous in the history of the Eastern communities (Kaufhold 1990, pp. 115–51).

Verbal violence is a continuous presence in texts ranging from Late Antiquity to the medieval period. Of note, Babai and Iso'yahb III (Ioan 2009, p. 21; Bcheiry 2019, p. 169) slandered those they considered heretics. The East Syriac Patriarch Iso'yahb III called those who betrayed his Church "scorpions" (Duval 1955, p. 81 [syr.], p. 63 [lat.]; Ioan 2009, p. 28) or "Judas" (Duval 1955, p. 66 [syr.], p. 52 [lat.]; Ioan 2009, p. 28) and identified them as the Christological enemies of his Church, epithets persisting in the literature until the Syriac Renaissance, as viewed in Elias of Nisibis (11th century) who named the West Syrians "enemies of the truth for the magnitude of their lie" (Horst 1886, p. 55; Popa 2021, pp. 178–79). In his polemical treatises, the Syriac Orthodox Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171) also aligns to this trend, portraying his confessional rivals as "illiterate and insensible people", and "enemies" of his West Syriac community (Mingana 1927, pp. 133–34).

The Church used canonical means to act against those who strayed from the dogmatical faith and ethical order as established by the universal or local councils. In addition to the various forms of repentance, it recommended to those who were in disagreement with the faith of the Church that there were also other forms of isolation, cessation of communication, or also anathema, which means to excommunicate someone from the active body of their Church and from liturgical community. The Syriac Orthodox bishop Dionysius Bar Salibi, a contemporary of Michael Rabo, presented it thus: "Anathema is a separation from God, and when you have separated them from the Church and rejected and denounced them, you have anathematized them" (Mingana 1927, p. 146). While one should not imagine that anathema was part of what is called "the register of verbal violence", this can still be seen as a vehicle against an opinion of faith and order divergent to that of the bishop and the Church. Peter van Nuffelen refers to aggressive language as provoking violence in Late Antiquity which was, indeed, no stranger to a polemical spirit taken to the extreme



through insulting language, intolerance, and a fierce confrontation on topics of different understanding of faith (Van Nuffelen 2020, pp. 518–19).

Even if peace was the ideal of monastic actors and clergy, the Syrians did not choose peace at the expense of a prompt reaction when dealing with issues of faith or spiritual progress. Dionysius Bar Salibi argues that: “Peace is a very beautiful and praiseworthy thing, an honourable one, but not all peace; [...] Learn, therefore, that peace with immoral passions and with the enemies of truth drives us away from God.” His conclusion, in turn, is: “Examine well the saying of this Doctor who teaches us that peace with everybody is not advantageous” (Mingana 1927, p. 139).

Violence appears only sporadically referenced directly within the literature; this being, most often, caused by divergent positions regarding themes of Christian doctrine that were sensitive topics for the various Eastern communities. Beyond dogmatic discussions, violence appears as leitmotif in the Eastern Christian literature mostly when comes to orthopraxy. One case refers to the making of the sign of the Holy Cross, some century later after the context of the trisagion: (MS Vatican Syriac 37 (17th c.), fol. 200) tells an exacerbated, violent account of 80,000 fingers that the Dyophysites are accused of having cut off the hands of Coptic believers in Alexandria, solely because the Coptic community made the sign of the Cross with one finger.

### 3. Violence, Faith, and Heresy in the Syriac Orthodox Context

A broad range of generic cases of religious violence narrated in the Syriac literature of Late Antiquity are without doubt those born from Christological conflicts, manifested by the domination of Chalcedonian over non-Chalcedonian groups. Sizgorich features some of these as “spectacular acts of violence” (Sizgorich 2009, pp. 11–12), in which they are sometimes described as the “forces” or “troops” of Chalcedonian adherents and of the Chalcedonian hierarchy against non-Chalcedonians. Such classic cases are almost indispensable from histories and the hagiographic literature, as scholars have pointed out (see Sizgorich 2009, p. 109). It could be plausible that the spectacular nature of some cases probably depends on the author’s intention, mostly in hagiography, and how they highly wanted to make the impact of the description felt on the readers.

The narrative of the Chalcedonian/non-Chalcedonian tensions is constructed in the Syriac literature, sharing the picture that Chalcedonians were “oppressive” and the non-Chalcedonians were possessors and keepers of the true and “pure faith.” This was the paradigm that many Miaphysite authors shared in their writings (see Mayer 2021, p. 45). Among the many stories of the lives of the Eastern Saints, one can read about an act of violence whose protagonist is a Syriac monk named Sergius, the disciple of a famous ascetic named Simeon. During the imperial attempts to promote the doctrine of Chalcedon in Syria, this monk and the community he belonged to were visited by imperial officials. During the liturgical service, both believers from the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian communities listened to the sermon preached by a Chalcedonian priest who was promoting that doctrine. The historian John of Ephesus further describes the intervention of Sergius against this preacher: Sergius had a vision in which a man carried his cross on his shoulder (likely an allusion to the stigmatization of non-Chalcedonians in Syria by imperial policies), and he immediately advanced into the church to the place wherefrom the priest was preaching, and, reprimanding and hitting the preacher, Sergius shouted that he refuse the Chalcedonian teachings and asked the priest to repent for what he has proclaimed (Brooks 1923, pp. 84–111, esp. 102–3; Sizgorich 2009, p. 131). This precedent led to a confrontation between believers, some defending Sergius’s gesture, and others indignant and revolted by it, demanding that he be condemned. Upon this, the local officials took Sergius to a monastery in Armenia, where he was tortured; however, he escaped shortly thereafter. Sizgorich reads this scene “through the prism of narratives of persecution and resistance” (Sizgorich 2009, p. 132). No doubt that this is part and parcel of the specific repertoire of John of Ephesus of how anti-Chalcedonians endured violence from the imperial Chalcedonian forces. It cannot be denied that such scenes enter the pattern of

polarization and violent conflicts between the pro- and anti-Chalcedon factions (Brooks 1923, pp. 103–6), a phenomenon that did not bypass the Syriac Orthodox Christians as well.

Such cases are attested not only in the works of John of Ephesus. The way in which sometimes John of Ephesus presents his heroes makes the impression of a constructed rhetoric of violence which his Church tradition endured, which is not comfortable at all. I find appropriate, to use for John's approach of violence, the concept Wendy Mayer discusses, namely "the memory of religious conflict" which communities call into question when positioning themselves toward rival groups. Mayer features this with psychological terms as "the dark side of the historical reasoning" or "the dark side of the mind" (Mayer 2021, 24, pp. 26–27). Another theory that fits our argumentation is that pointed out by Christine Shepardson. Even if her approach is more applicable to the ecclesiastical communities, more central and more integrated in the Eastern Roman Empire and less to Syriac Christians, peripheral of this world, Christine Shepardson argues that through these accounts of violence, the most likely "anti-Chalcedonian leaders adapted earlier narratives of martyrdom and persecution as markers of true Christians to fit their changing contexts", so that the authors who reported them meant "to wrest from those with imperial power the certainty of God's support, proof of their legitimacy, and the title of Christian orthodoxy" (Shepardson 2020, p. 366). At first reading of John of Ephesus' *lives of the Eastern Saints*, one would likely approach confessional clashes with caution; however, their historical value should not be questioned. They have at least been considered as real, even if on a smaller scale, or in less violent circumstances than described. What John writes about his community and the Chalcedonian threats and violent actions against his actors can also be read as a program of solidarity to his Syriac Miaphysite community. Here, Shepardson's observation is correct that, in "his intentional construction of his *auctoritas*", he "suggests his awareness of the potential that his writings about the past had to shape the future of Syriac Christianity" (Shepardson 2021, p. 186).

There is no doubt that authors tried to cast the other group in a negative light, as the effect of polarization between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian communities.

Yet, from such stories, the observation that Syriac Christians were not strangers to a discourse of violence between their own *ekklesia* and rival Churches appears as much more relevant. When they narrate about violent attacks they suffered, authors used to depict it with theological and literary constructions, appealing to an older genre of martyrdom literature.

Similar episodes and discourses of suffering violence are attested in the Syriac Orthodox theologian and bishop Philoxenos, a contemporary of Severus who shared the same Christological line and with whom he even collaborated for "consolidating the Miaphysite coalition through the administration of their sees" (Michelson 2015, p. 45), was also involved in the resistance against the Chalcedonians. As Michelson points out, "Even in these final four years of his life, Philoxenos continued what had been one of his main polemical activities: writing letters to monks encouraging them to fight for the Miaphysite Christology" (Michelson 2015, p. 15). Until he died in 523, Philoxenos constantly acted, in writing, against the violence that he saw being propagated by the Chalcedonians against the Miaphysites. It would appear that he felt this violence on his own skin, as can be read from his letters, in particular the *Letter to the Monks of Senun* where we see how the Bishop of Mabbug refers to a typology of persecutions. His situation during his years of exile is described by the "suffering" and "pains" caused by the "violence" he endured as a result of his stance rejecting Chalcedon (De Halleux 1963, pp. 78–80; Shepardson 2020, p. 353). Philoxenos claims that even as he barely escaped death in Mabbug at the hands of his Chalcedonian opponents, other believers and monks were violently treated to death, "wearing the signs of Christ in their bodies" (De Halleux 1963, pp. 80–81; Shepardson 2020, p. 353), which fits with *imitatio* Christi.

The perspective of Syriac Orthodox sources is focused on how the Miaphysites suffered attacks and how they were part of a harsh image of public violence, and how they endured the hostile treatment from the Chalcedonian counterparts. On the model of the martyrs, Philoxenos considers the acceptance of violence through patience as a condition to become

a martyr and teacher of higher things (Vaschalde 1902, p. 160; Shepardson 2020, p. 355). One can better understand this perspective of Philoxenos with the observation of W. Mayer on the vocation of resistance preserved in Church narrative: “Moral strength is exhibited through resistance, which demonstrates obedience to the true authority. When martyrs enter this narrative pattern, they both reassure the in-group that they have not apostatised and are promoted as the model for weak insiders to follow. The hero-martyr exemplifies loyalty to the in-group, demonstrates obedience to the true authority and remains pure and undefiled” (Mayer 2021, pp. 46–47).

Resistance against any pressure, coercion, appalling physical treatment, verbal violence, and insults is the key by Philoxenos, Severus, and other Miaphysite leaders. The pattern of the sources focuses on the hero’s attitude to not provoke and respond to such deeds, but to assume an irenic spirit of accepting suffering on the model of the martyr forebears whose reactions to violence and attacks on their religious identity they made themselves follow. Stories of this kind are mentioned a number of times, again in John of Ephesus, in his *Church History*, where, as Saint-Laurent points out, the author paints all the iconic features of the “Miaphysite body as a whole”, with all their suffering and hopes for survival (Mellon Saint-Laurent 2015, p. 72; Shepardson 2020, p. 361). Another case can be noted in the *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, that of John of Tella (one of the foundational pillars of the creation of the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy, ordaining many Miaphysite priests) who was tortured by the Chalcedonian Patriarch Ephraim of Antioch at Reshaina, where he was imprisoned in 537 until his death in 538. In suffering the violence of his persecutors, John is compared with the martyr Ignatius of Antioch, the author naming him the “second Ignatius” (Brooks 1924, p. 523). This image of imitating martyrs in front of harsh persecutions for not adhering to the doctrine of Chalcedon is a common motif in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, which the author connects to the profiles of martyrs from the earlier periods of the Church (see Shepardson 2020, p. 363; Shepardson 2021, pp. 190–92). Using an expanded vocabulary, John of Ephesus also epitomizes in many stories of his work what persecution against “the holy church” means, a *topos* discussed in detail by Shepardson (see Shepardson 2021, pp. 193–94).

One should argue that reading or imagining violent actions narrated in some hagiographical works is hard to believe. To this category one tends to include some stories from the life of the atypical monk Barsauma. The hagiographic author of the text attributes to this Syriac Orthodox monk violent destruction of temples, a fairly common issue in the profiles of fathers defending local orthodoxies (see Hahn et al. 2008) and “one of the virtues worthy of being admired and emulated” in hagiography (Marcus 2015, p. 190). There is nothing spectacular here: the hagiographer attempts to justify the violence he caused to Christians divergent to his own confession (and to pagans and Jews, specifically) in the pursuit of his alleged vocation of fulfilling and protecting the righteous faith. Barsauma has been considered by scholars a particular and almost unique case in the Syriac literature. He is comparable with the Egyptian monk Shenoute of Atripe, the third archimandrite of the White Monastery from the beginning of the 5th century (d. 465) who seems to be cast in a similar vein, having taken a stand against an influential pagan from his area, together with his disciples attacking his house and destroying the idols within it together with his disciples. Shenoute reacted to the accusation that they committed an act of illegal banditry, justifying his Christian zeal against other religious groups, claiming “there is no crime for those who have Christ”; this well-known motto is seen by scholars as part of a “hegemonic religious community”, which began to be embraced by some spiritual authorities as early as the Constantinian era (Gaddis 2005, p. 1).

Barsauma’s case shows at first glance that there are no differences between the Syriac narratives and those from the Eastern Roman literature about religious violence. The *Life of Barsauma* is viewed through the lenses of the acts of violence in which the hero appears, and the hero’s zealous fight against those who alter the faith of the Church—seen as the doctrine and identity of his own confession. This reflects a broader tendency of authors to transmit a strong identity from generation to generation, by which the defence of the faith would

take precedence over any other social norms. On his agenda, Barsauma, “behaving like a ravaging militia” (Marcus 2015, p. 186), has several social and religious groups against whom he resorts to violence, in addition to the Dyophysite Christians and especially the adherents to Chalcedonian doctrine. He enjoys the profile of a “gladiator” (if one can use this term) of faith against all: Jewish communities with their synagogues (mentioning one in Rabbat-Moab, etc.), but also the Samaritan community, as well as pagan communities and their material heritage. The *Life of Barsauma* even attributes him to the presidency of the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 (named by Chalcedonians “Latrocinium” or the “Robber Council,” which they rejected). It is a *Life* filled with violent destructions and killing, but also with harsh asceticism. In this regard, Barsauma was not only harsh with those he considered “heretics” or “infidels,” but also with himself, acquiring the nickname of “the Roasted” because he always looked towards the burning sun, his face and chest scorched, “resembling a fish that is fried in a pan”, “the skin of a lamb when it blisters in a fiery oven” (Palmer 2020, p. 29). An opponent of pagans, Jews, and Samaritans, Barsauma also fought against the Christian opponents of the Chalcedonian profession, being accused of violently beating the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, during the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 such that the bishops incriminated him as a “murderer” (Price and Gaddis 2005, p. 156). He was even accused of killing the Patriarch, but this he denied (Palmer 2020, p. 109; Menze 2016, p. 235).

Barsauma appears like a zealot who pounces on everyone who does not share the creed he propagates (Gaddis 2005, p.153), a pattern that fits with what one finds out in the literature of 5th–6th centuries devoted to ascetics and monks, involved in inter-Christian and inter-religious conflicts (Sizgorich 2009, p. 109). The story of Rabbula of Edessa, anointed Syriac Orthodox bishop of the city in 412, integrates well into the same landscape. His *Life* states how, after becoming a monk, Rabbula and the bishop Eusebius made a trip to the city of Baalbek (Heliopolis), a major centre of paganism. Ardent with the desire to become martyrs, they tried to attack the pagan shrine and were beaten up by the local pagans (Doran 2006, p. 74). Rabbula shares many features in common with Barsauma, albeit the perspective of the Bishop of Edessa is much more urbane than that of the atypical monk Barsauma. For him, violence seems to be one of the multiple possible modes of action, to which he resorts without hesitation when it comes to propagating the faith against ‘non-Christians’.

Barsauma’s zeal for the violent destruction of the religious infrastructure of rival Christians, Jews, and pagans, fits well with the statement of Marcus that “sacred violence had spiritual advantages for those who heroically carried it out” (Marcus 2015, p. 171). It might be that what we read in the hagiographical sources in terms of violent images are part of a narrative intention that probably did not have a background in a completely objective situation based on real facts. I find applicable to Barsauma’s hagiographic portrayal scholars’ advice to not “overestimate” the “sacred” violence, taking into consideration the intention of the authors through this excess of violent deeds (see Saradi 2008). For this reason, some scholars revisited the thesis and considered that the motif of religious violence has existed in more limited forms than the sources make it clear (see Marcus 2015, p. 172; Sotinel 2004; Salzman 2006). A different precedent from the same register of demolishing pagan temples (see Sotinel 2000) appears to an East Syriac bishop Abdas of Susa, who was encouraged to destroy by violence a fire temple of the Zoroastrians, and when he refused the request of the Persian Shah Yazdgard I (399–420) to rebuild it, he was, in turn, treated violently by the imperial power, not only through his own hanging but also through the suffering experienced by the entire local church, now having lost the king’s tolerance and sympathy towards them (Drake 2011, pp. 218–19; Van Rompay 1995, pp. 363–75).

Turning back to the life of the West Syriac Barsauma, it can be further read that, in their tours, the monk’s ‘gang’ stands accused of violence, destruction, and stoning by the Jews, who brought this to the knowledge of Empress Eudocia (Gaddis 2005, p. 246). As usual, in the hagiographic reports, the imperial factor does not miss in a frame of encountering opposing religious groups. Circumstances of Barsauma’s antisocial behaviour are also



partially common to other Eastern monks, and taking these together, scholars talk on an overall picture of monks sharing not an “irenic coexistence” (Sizgorich 2009, p. 109) in complex religious communities, but, on the contrary, a non-irenic situation, polarizing communities located in a mingled Christian or religious societies. Although Sizgorich’s observation seems to fit better into the context of the Eastern Roman Empire, along with the Chalcedonian/non-Chalcedonian competition, this becomes part of Syriac ambitions as well. Monks frequently appear in the history of Christianity as supporters of bishops in dogmatic decisions at local or ecumenical councils (Bacht 1953), and not sporadically through violent and obsessive zeal do they disharmonize the irenic spirit of such meetings. However, this is the other side of the coin to what Sizgorich opines above.

One can notice that in violent contexts, monks as people of faith and pillars of Church hierarchy are featured in the Byzantine as well as in the Syriac literature as “undisciplined itinerant holy men”, as Gaddis opines, and these are “popular stereotype common to Christians as well as pagans.” The description that Gaddis here attributes to Barsauma and Alexander the Sleepless (the *Akoimete*) (Caner 2002, pp. 126–57), in particular, is a common picture that justifies monks as defenders of the truth against those who alter the orthodox faith: “With their black robes, their ragged hair, their bare feet and clanking chains, their faces pale from fasting, and above all their chanting of hymns, monks stood out in popular imagination as symbols of the violence that was so intimately associated with Christian zeal” (Gaddis 2005, p. 249). What one should understand from Gaddis’ observation is that this profile of the rebel monk, who can easily and comfortably instrumentalize violence to defend his faith identity, is so transferable from the Greco-Roman Christian world to the Syriac church affairs.

A Syriac character comparable to what we saw in Barsauma is Rabbula, bishop of Edessa between 411–435. Reading his life, one wonders how he displayed violence not only towards pagans and other groups outside Christianity but also in its internal struggles, where he became an opponent of Dyophysitism and especially of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s teachings. Barhadbeshabba Arbaya, a sixth-century bishop of Helwan, in Mesopotamia, tells a story in his work about the establishment of the School of Nisibis, that when attending in Constantinople at a synod, Rabbula, a former friend and student of Theodore of Mopsuestia, had allegedly shown violence towards the clergy by hitting them, defending himself with the example of Jesus who expelled the moneylenders from the Temple. Theodore of Mopsuestia deplored his violent approach, answering that the great attitude of Jesus did not show physical violence towards people. He never hit anyone, but only turned over their tables and removed their animals, ordering them to leave. Barhadbeshabba tells us this reprimand of Rabbula by Theodore caused the former to hold a grudge, and, after Theodore died in 428, made him burn all his writings that were found in Edessa (Scher 1981, pp. 66–67). The profile of Rabbula, a fierce defender of Miaphysitism, was harshly criticized by the Dyophysites, called “the tyrant of Edessa” by his successor to the bishopric of Edessa, the Dyophysite Ibas (Gaddis 2005, p. 259). In Rabbula’s *Life*, the harshness of some of his disciplinary actions is correlated with the strict goal of spiritual salvation and the health of the faith. He always understood his strict decisions and violent actions, being compared to those of a doctor who uses both painful and less-painful treatments. Rabbula’s approach was to correlate his personal asceticism with the imposition of restrictive discipline—not only toward one’s own person but even to those around him, onto the body of the ecclesiastic and urban community, even making use of violence against others; as Gaddis points out: “his own asceticism, understood as violence against the self, set the model for the violent discipline he applied to others” (Gaddis 2005, p. 267). In the case of Rabbula, violence was also an often-fierce struggle of the monk in the spiritual process of ascesis and resistance against the aggressive temptations of demons: Rabbula himself fought against demons on the model of Anthony the Great (see Doran 2006, p. 73). Although asceticism refers to maintaining balance, disentangling thoughts of anger or rage, and calming the choleric spirit, the body of ascetic literature, however, also recounts examples of confrontations between ascetics and devils that aggressively attack their body. Van Nuffelen illustrates the

motif of adoption of military imagery or language when presenting spiritual progress or the fight against the passions of the body (especially by monks); however, these analogies, as emphasized by Van Nuffelen, do not in any way justify the embrace of violence (Van Nuffelen 2020, pp. 518–19). The form “asceticism” and self-“violence” was often discussed in the literature (Vecoli 2020, p. 312; De Wet 2020, p. 323). Finally, a rare violent image in the selected Syriac literature is of monks making use of violent actions as a correction of faith, seen in the eighth-century Syriac ascetic Timotheus of Kakhusha, who treated a monk touched by heresy with a correctional punishment: he requested two disciples to harshly beat the monk “until he saw the light” (Lamoreaux and Cairala 2000, pp. 604–9; Sizgorich 2009, p. 114). This type of faith correction through beating is illustrated by Thomas Sizgorich by the correct observation that Timotheus was a kind of guardian, “perched on the boundaries of his community”, to whom was attributed the “crucial work of monitoring passage across that boundary—challenging and rebuking those who did not comply, authorizing and admitting those who did” (Sizgorich 2009, pp. 113–14). Limited stories of violence appear beyond matters regarding the correct faith; one of these refers to orthopraxy, or how to practice the correct faith as was mentioned above in the reference from (MS Vatican Syriac 37 (17th c.), fol. 200).

#### 4. Syrians and the Language of Violence in Early Islamic Times

Violent measures of the local Church in Persia against “heretics” are mentioned in the period of the rise of Islam through the letters of Iso‘yahb III. Iso‘yahb manifested a hard attitude towards the propaganda of “heretics”. He means here the Syriac Orthodox Christians (the West Syrians) who dogmatically differed from the doctrine of the Church of the East. Iso‘yahb constantly tries to encourage his monks and bishops to be more authoritarian in their works against these. From his letters, one can learn how the Patriarch recounts his addressees the cases of their forefathers who confessed their faith and fought against the pagans (Duval 1955, pp. 94–96 [syr.], pp. 71–73 [lat.]; Bcheiry 2019, p. 165). He encourages them to act against the “heretics”. At the same time, the letters also tell of the violence that the East Syrians had to endure at the hands of their dogmatic opponents: one East Syrian bishop who fought against the heretics ended up being abandoned by them in the desert to die of hunger or to be killed by wild animals; another was thrown into a river to die, but miraculously escaped drowning (Duval 1955, pp. 136–37 [syr.], pp. 102–3 [lat.]; Bcheiry 2019, p. 165). Iso‘yahb’s conclusion about resistance and violence in the letters is, ultimately, that the great ascetic fathers and confessors of the East Syrians (especially Abraham of Kaskar, Dadisho‘, and Babai) did not fear heretics or violence, but stood firm in their struggle (Duval 1955, pp. 238–39 [syr.], pp. 172–73 [lat.]; Bcheiry 2019, pp. 165–66; Ioan 2009, pp. 21–22).

Iso‘yahb III’s exhortations were rather aimed to strike back than to turn the other cheek when the Church was attacked. He does not resort to the image of martyrs as we saw in the Syriac Orthodox Philoxenos. He exhorted the faithful to fight back against the enemies of the faith and their ‘demonic abodes’, here referring to a building of Miaphysites (Duval 1955, p. 223 [syr.], p. 162 [lat.]; Ioan 2009, pp. 28, 42–43). In the opinion of Iso‘yahb III, this must be done in any way possible; he even reproached the Christians of Fars, on the Persian Gulf, for not fighting back when the churches were attacked by heretics (Duval 1955, pp. 248–49 [syr.], pp. 179–80 [lat.]; Bcheiry 2019, p. 142).

Even if Iso‘yahb III’s letters are not hagiographical, and their historical character cannot be doubted, the narrative is rather artificially created from the perspective of a strong confessional identity, which must not hide in front of its rivals. Such examples of confrontations are also mentioned in different times, even as late as the 12th century, where Dionysius Bar Salibi denounces the violent attitudes of the Melchites (communities of Chalcedonian Christians that lived outside Byzantine borders but shared the theological vantage point of the Byzantine emperor) against his Syriac Orthodox community, mentioning that in Melitene they were more aggressive against the Syrians than the Turks themselves (Mingana 1927, p. 170). In this process of inter-Christian clashes, Dionysius

reproaches the Melkites of Melitene for keeping Muslims closer than Syrians, an aspect confirmed by the fact that there was a mosque in their city, but no Syriac church. In this sense, Dionysius asks himself: “Do they do this out of their good nature, or out of their wickedness? By their actions, they show that the faith of the Mohammedans is better than the Orthodox faith of ours” (Mingana 1927, p. 136). Dionysius anticipates new tensions between his community and that of the Melkites, bringing to light historical grievances showcasing the Byzantines’ aggressive intentions towards his community in the time of bishop Ignatius of Melitene, when a church belonging to his tradition and located in Constantinople was ordered to be burned, along with the Syriac books preserved therein, by the Patriarch of Constantinople: “and their Patriarch of that time ordered our books that were in it and the church vestry, and the holy chrism, to be burned in the middle of the bazaars” (Mingana 1927, p. 136). One effect of this aggression against his tradition Dionysius mentions is that “in that very night, that Patriarch was struck by a sudden illness and lost his life” (Mingana 1927, p. 136). He concludes by asserting how difficult it would be for his community if the Byzantines would once again be in power: “If they had the power, they would not have left a single Christian alive, as their fathers did in the times of yore.” This claim is unlikely to be historical. However, even though this image should be approached with doubt, destruction of sacred spaces and church buildings was also mentioned by other sources. Even if attempts to protect churches from external violence or from the estrangement of ecclesiastical property did exist (Frag 2021, p. 46), there were still numerous cases when these edifices fell prey to the enmities and conflicts between inter-Christian or inter-religious groups that degenerated into demolition. For example, the East Syriac Patriarch Iso’yahb III (six centuries prior to Dionysus bar Salibi) tells how the West Syrians, the enemies of his confession, built a new church at the entrance to the city of Nineveh, and that some adherents of the East Syriac community were offended by it and, driven by the ‘true faith,’ were ready to attack it with violence and demolish it. Still, the fear of the local authorities, who were in good contact with the West Syrians, stopped them (Duval 1955, pp. 82–83 [syr.], p. 64 [lat.]; Ioan 2009, p. 28; Bcheiry 2019, p. 82).

Violent circumstances between Eastern Christian denominations that could often manifest in different forms can also be seen in some descriptions from the Chronicle of Michael Rabo. In a story of an event from the year 969, when the Syriac Orthodox patriarch was Mar John, the Patriarch is alleged to have travelled to Constantinople for ecumenical discussions with the Chalcedonians, together with the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Thomas of Jerusalem and three other bishops. Because the arguments of Syriac Orthodox bishops dominated the floor of discussions, the Chalcedonians threatened them that if they relented and accepted their Christological confession, they would receive honours; otherwise, they would be taken into exile. Refusing the Dyophysite formula, they were imprisoned for four months. Then, the chronicle tells that, in the year 1285, a Chalcedonian Patriarch named Agapius obtained the emperor’s support by forcing several Syriac Orthodox from Antioch to accept the Christology of Chalcedon. Moreover, the violence against the Syriac Orthodox and the Armenians increased, destroying churches and throwing away their books of prayer into the fire and obstructing their liturgical services for the Feast of Epiphany (Chabot 1910, pp. 131–32).

Scenes of violence are also described in another chapter, in which Michael Rabo recalls the violent invasion of the Armenians in Melitene, when, in the context of the disagreements between the Franks, Greeks, and Armenians during the time of the Crusades, confrontation sparked and prisoners were taken from the Syriac community; among them was Dionysius Bar Salibi, who was brought to Maras and there managed to escape to the monastery of Kalsiour (Chabot 1910, p. 314). Another allusion to confessional violence was also made in the chronicle for the period 1169–1172, when Michael Rabo was allegedly thrice invited by messengers to Constantinople to attend emperor Manuel Comnenus, in relation to matters of faith. Apart from Michael, the emperor also invited Narses IV, the Catholicos Patriarch of the Armenians. While Michael sent delegates, he refused each request to go in person; in response to the last invitation, he clearly formulated his refusal, arguing that

he was afraid of violence and of being forced to accept doctrines that went against the tradition of his Church, despite the fact the letters of invitation from the Byzantine imperial power stressed that the West Syriac Patriarch would be received with honours, and that he would return to his parish without being forced to confess to something he did not accept. These histories confirm to a certain degree that Syrians experienced violence, as much as in Eastern confessions, often verbal, but also physical (Chabot 1910, pp. 335–36).

In the conflicts between Christian denominations, it is often evident how the violence brought by the Islamic conquests was being ignored by notable Christian figures and bishops, who saw the coming of Islam as the liberation of Syriac Christians from the Byzantine threat. Such lines of reasoning were commonplace, starting with the first East Syriac Patriarch to govern the Church under Islam, Iso‘yahb III (Duval 1955, p. 251 (syr.), p. 182 (lat.); Brock 1982, pp. 10–11; Penn 2015, p. 7), and up to Patriarch Timotheus I, who, in his apology against the Caliph al-Mahdi, stressed that Islam and Muhammad brought an administrative power that replaced two former illegitimate powers which had not been confirmed by divine authority, these being the Persian empire that followed the Zoroastrian religion and the Roman empire that encouraged erroneous Christological dogmas (Mingana 1928, pp. 61–62; Sizgorich 2009, p. 3). Of course, Timotheus’ perception is less relevant for this study; what is interesting is the Patriarch’s diplomatic position towards the authority of Islam, which indicates that even though Christians enjoyed a limited freedom of public expression of their faith, they preferred this state of affairs to a power that would allow their Christian opponents to have dominion over them. The Patriarch’s fear of the violence that a Byzantine power hostile to the East Syriac faith could have caused was greater than his fear of potential Islamic hostility. However, in spite of all these apparently favourable positions, most Syriac Christians arguing against Islam criticized the illegitimate violence that led to the latter’s spread and to the creation of a new political administration governed by Muslim leaders (see Rassi 2022). In this vein, Ammar al-Basri (9th c.) and other later authors widely criticized the “sword of Islam” (Hayek 1977, pp. 32–33; Sizgorich 2009, p. 1).

## 5. Conclusions

Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Roman and Persian culture, Syriac Christianity was a witness to the permanent tension of these empires. Both Churches belonging to Syriac Christianity have developed strong identities that rivalled those of the imperial Church in Byzantium. Syriac Christians were no strangers to persecution and violence against their heritage, mostly at times when Sassanid power suspected them of being collaborators of the Eastern Roman church administration and imperial power. The experience of persecutions carried out under the Sassanid rule made the Syriac Christians reinforce their identity which would later resist, fed by “the memory” and experience of their own religious clashes, other challenges caused by the substitution of the Persian administration with the politics of Islam. Violence was not alien to Eastern Christianity in general; so too, neither could it be absent from Syriac Christianity. Divided between Miaphysites (Syriac Orthodox, or West Syrians) and Dyophysites (East Syrians), both these Church communities testified various forms of violence, manifested by Chalcedonians Byzantine against non-Chalcedonians, or conflicts within their own Syriac tradition, and sometimes confronting other religions as well.

From the texts brought into the discussion, one can draw the conclusion that violence appears in the Syriac literature in a way different from what we see in the Church of the Eastern Roman Empire. This true scenario is due to the fact that stories of resistance and the question of identity were capital for these Christians who found, in keeping their Church identity, no support from the political power of their region, as was the case in Byzantium. The Syriac authors talking about such cases have constructed their discourse through the filter of a robust identity of the Syriac communities, emphasizing, on the one hand, the virtue of the Syrians to endure like martyrs when they are treated with violence, and, on the other hand, promoting the virtues of their saints and heroes engaged in defending the truth



of faith, a matter that helps them validate, legitimize, and justify, when it is the case, its own violent deeds against other rivals or those considered heretics, features overestimated especially in hagiographic works.

The encounters between the Syriac confessions, and especially between them and the Chalcedonian communities and ecclesiastical power centres of the Eastern Roman empire, were featured as entangled stories; the literature propagated the idea that violent confrontations on sensible matters of faith took the form of public manifestations, and the Syriac Christians were not infrequently subjects of these. Perseverance in defending the truth has often brought circumstances of suffering destruction and violence; in this matter, Syriac Christians perceived the models of the martyrs not as cases relegated to the past but also of the present vocation of Church, and part of every era and every living Church that cares about its immutability. The Syriac literature often argued that, by virtue of this attribute, it is the assumed violence lived, not provoked, that is in *imitatio Christi* and does not scare those who experience it.

Outside of Christological disputes with the potential of emerging violence, conflicts that brought destruction of the rivals' religious infrastructure were born out of other circumstances as well, even within the same Church or community, from certain schisms and usurpations in the higher echelons themselves. In conclusion, beyond these limited stories, it should be said that, much later, violence remained a reprehensible blight on the societies in which Syriac Christians lived, making this remarkable form of Christianity become much more fractured than it ever was before and more vulnerable to the threats of the majoritarian Muslim society.

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