



NORWEGIAN  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

# Christianity in Bet Qatraye

a survey of textual and archaeological sources to the knowledge of  
Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf

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*This Master's Thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the MA degree at*

MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2016, autumn

AVH504: Spesialavhandling med metode (30 ECTS)

Profesjonsstudiet i teologi

17 363 words

## **Abstract**

Our knowledge of Christianity in Bet Qatraye is given by textual and archaeological sources that span over several centuries and a large geographical area. The few relevant texts are mainly documents related to the Church of the East, spanning four hundred years, from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, with sporadic references to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The texts mention a number of places and episcopal sees mainly around the Bahrain archipelago. The archaeological sources date to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and are scattered around the islands of the Gulf, as well as around Jubayl, Saudi Arabia. The archaeological finds are mainly churches and monasteries, which seem to bear several similarities in architecture and decoration despite the geographical dispersion, in addition to several lesser finds. This thesis gives an orderly, updated presentation of these sources, including information from the latest season of excavation at the site of al-Qusur, as well as some common interpretations, and reflects upon some issues often mentioned in connection to some of these interpretations.

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	5
1.1	Aim of the thesis.....	5
1.2	Accessibility of sources and literature.....	6
1.3	Terminology and transcription of names.....	7
1.4	Structure of the thesis.....	8
2	The historical background.....	9
3	Presentation of the textual sources.....	12
3.1	Chronicle of Arbela.....	13
3.2	Letters of Isho'yahb III.....	13
3.3	Thomas of Marga's Book of Governors.....	14
3.4	Synodicon orientale.....	15
3.5	History of Mar Yonan.....	18
3.6	Sporadic references.....	19
3.7	Indirect sources: The writers of Bet Qatraye.....	20
3.8	Identification of toponyms.....	21
3.9	Preliminary summary.....	22
4	Presentation of the archaeological sources.....	23
4.1	The monastic complex at Kharg, Iran.....	24
4.2	The monastic complex at al-Qusur, Kuwait.....	25
4.3	The monastic complex at Sir Bani Yas, United Arab Emirates.....	28
4.4	Other interesting sites.....	31
4.4.1	Akkaz, Kuwait.....	31
4.4.2	Jubayl, Saudi Arabia.....	32
4.4.3	Thaj, Saudi Arabia.....	35
4.4.4	Lesser finds.....	35
4.5	The problem of dating.....	36
4.6	Preliminary Summary.....	37
5	Reflections.....	39
5.1	The political and economic situation in Bet Qatraye.....	40
5.2	A boom of Christian activity in the 7 <sup>th</sup> century?.....	44
5.3	The textual silence.....	45
5.4	The identity of Christians of Arabia ("Christians" and "Nazarenes").....	47
5.5	Preliminary summary.....	49
6	Summary.....	51

7	Bibliography.....	53
7.1	References.....	53
7.2	Online sources.....	55

## List of illustrations

Figure 1.	Proposed locations of the toponyms mentioned in the texts. (Carter 2008) .....	12
Figure 2.	The archaeological sites. (Carter 2008) .....	23
Figure 3.	Sketch plan of the three monastic churches. (Bonnéric 2015) .....	25
Figure 4.	One of the stucco panels found at al-Qusur. (Bonnéric 2015).....	27
Figure 5.	Plaster tile from SBY-9. (Retrieved from <a href="http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY">http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY</a> ) .....	29
Figure 6.	Plaster panel from SBY-9. (Retrieved from <a href="http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY">http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY</a> ).....	29
Figure 7.	Akkaz archaeological site, level 2. (Gachet-Bizollon 2011) .....	32
Figure 8.	Proposed ground plan of the church at Akkaz. (Gachet-Bizollon 2011) .....	32
Figure 9.	The church at Jubayl. (Retrieved from <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church.jpg</a> , author: Harold Brockwell) .....	33
Figure 10.	Close-up of the decorations in the sanctuary of the Jubayl church. (Retrieved from <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church.jpg</a> , author: Harold Brockwell) .....	34
Figure 11.	Places of Christian activity according to the textual and archaeological sources. (Bonnéric 2015).....	39

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aim of the thesis

The research on the history of Christianity in Mesopotamia and Persia had its sparse beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the publication and translation of Syriac and Arabic literature followed by the first syntheses on church history in the area<sup>1</sup>. The research made progress through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the recent decades, we have seen a remarkable growth and evolution of the field, “conducted under a variety of overlapping disciplinary rubrics, including Syriac studies, Sasanian history, Middle Eastern archaeology, Islamic and Central Asian studies, the history of medicine and philosophy, and, increasingly, Late Antiquity”<sup>2</sup>.

This growth and evolution of the field has also facilitated an enhanced interest in research on Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf, particularly as the archaeological research made progress in the area from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Reviews of the sources to our knowledge of Christianity in this region and of the knowledge provided by these sources have been presented in different forms by several scholars. They have been presented as larger works<sup>3</sup>, shorter articles<sup>4</sup>, and as part of articles on archaeological sites<sup>5</sup>. However, Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf is a relatively new field of study, and excavations might still provide new finds and information. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that previous reviews and presentations of the sources of knowledge in this field have gradually become, or are about to become, outdated and that an update is required.

Thus, this thesis aims to summarize and present an updated review of the textual and archaeological sources to our knowledge of Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf, and in the wider historical context reflect upon issues relevant for the interpretation of these sources.

The aim is not to write a historiography, neither is it to present a normative interpretation of the sources, but to present the sources as such. However, the sources are presented along with interpretations already made by scholars in the field. When presenting the sources, the focus is on the information directly related to a Christian presence (buildings,

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<sup>1</sup> Walker 2012: 996f

<sup>2</sup> Walker 2012: 997

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Fiey 1969; Trimmingham 1979; Potts 1990

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Bin Seray 1996; Bin Seray 1997

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Carter 2008

names, artefacts), and not on theological questions. Geographically, the focus is on north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf, the region known as *Bet Qatraye* in the textual sources. The bordering and more well-known regions of lower Iraq and Persia are not included in this study. Temporally, the focus is on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, effectively defined by the range of the sources.

The issues considered relevant for the interpretation of the sources are the socio-political context and the relationships between the different sources. The main topics discussed in this regard are theories used to explain the lack of geographical and temporal overlap of the two groups of sources, as well as theories concerning Christian activity in relation to the political and economic context. As a notice of the importance of also considering the wider religious context when using the sources presented, the question of the denominational identity of the Christians of Persia and Arabia will also be touched upon.

## 1.2 Accessibility of sources and literature

As historical and archaeological studies on Christianity in the Gulf region are relatively new, it should be possible to get a reasonable overview of the field. It also implies that every new publication might contain new information, and contribute significantly to the reliability of theories and guesswork and to the general understanding of the field. This is especially true as the field is very much informed by recent and/or ongoing archaeological excavations. Thus, it is desirable to include the newest research and archaeological reports<sup>6</sup>. However, it has proved hard to get an overview of the research in progress and what sites are still being excavated or analysed.

The literature used in the thesis was collected by surveying chains of references and citations after first having read *Christianity in the Gulf during the first centuries of Islam* by R. Carter (2008). The article is a valuable source of information in itself. In addition, it provided a base of names of scholars in the field. Further searches for literature started out following the references from this article, searching primarily in library databases, but also widening to general web searches<sup>7</sup>. Web searches led to two resource sites, hosted by the

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<sup>6</sup> A good example of the case is the structure on the island of Marawah, UAE, first thought to be a church (Elders 2001), but later turned out to be a Neolithic site (Carter 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Searching for referenced literature, and the names of archaeological sites and texts mentioned, as well as general searches mainly using the key words 'Christianity', 'Persian Gulf', 'Church of the East', 'Bet Qatraye', 'north-east Arabia'.

University of Oklahoma<sup>8</sup> and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem<sup>9</sup>, respectively. These hold extensive bibliographies on Syriac Christianity, including Christianity in the Gulf.

When surveying the literature, everything that could potentially provide information related to the texts and archaeological sites mentioned in Carter's article was considered relevant. However, the area of interest was not confined to these texts and sites. Traces indicating other sources and more recent research in this area were followed as well. It turned out that the sources available, both texts and archaeological, are quite limited in number and they provided a natural delimitation for the thesis. However, there are some bordering topics (e.g. (south) Arabian epigraphy and the general history of religion in the Arabian Peninsula) that could have been further explored. However, because I could not find a direct connection to the history of Christianity in north-eastern Arabia, I chose to not include them in the thesis. Furthermore, if several articles focused on the same site or topic, I prioritized the articles providing the most detailed descriptions, and in general I have tended to prioritize the newest articles.

I have relied on English and German translations of the Syriac and Arabic primary sources, and have concentrated on the parts and topics most often mentioned by scholars. The primary sources have been skimmed, but not thoroughly analyzed and studied.

Much of the literature published in this field is in French, which I do not profess. In most cases, I have been able to bypass the problem by consulting other publications, or later publications in English. Occasionally, and for translation of shorter articles, I have used Google Translate. Unfortunately, the main publication on the island of Kharg<sup>10</sup> is only available in French, and neither earlier publications nor subsequent articles appear as detailed as this one. For this reason, there is a possibility that I have missed interesting details, and I have certainly missed the author's own view on if and how Kharg is related to the other churches in the Gulf.

### 1.3 Terminology and transcription of names

Although the majority of Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia came to hold the teaching of Nestorius and Theodore of Mopsuestia in high regard, and some even embraced the label

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<sup>8</sup> <http://syri.ac/>, «an annotated bibliography of Syriac resources online», providing links and digital versions of primary sources.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.csc.org.il/db/db.aspx?db=SB>, “a comprehensive bibliography on Syriac Christianity”. I mainly looked up the keyword “Persian Gulf”.

<sup>10</sup> Steve 2003

‘Nestorian’<sup>11</sup>, this term has been widely used derogatorily in European historiography. For this reason, I will not use it, although it is hard to avoid it completely due to the common use. I will use the designation ‘the Church of the East’, which refers to geography rather than 5<sup>th</sup> century Christology. This designation corresponds to the term ‘East Syriac’, which refers to the linguistic and liturgical tradition, and is distinct from the ‘West Syriac’ liturgical tradition, which also mainly followed the monophysite party in the Christological debates<sup>12</sup>.

There is so far no general agreement of the transcription of Syriac names in translations and secondary literature. I have chosen to use the more Latinized versions for the sake of readability, but have tried to retain some Syriac features (George, not Giwargis; but Jacub, not Jacob). There might be some differences between the thesis and its references concerning how names are transcribed.

#### 1.4 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is inspired by Bin Seray (1996): *Christianity in East Arabia*<sup>13</sup>, presenting the sources and the information they give as well as the historical context.

Part 2 presents briefly the early general history of Christianity in Asia, from the time of Christ to the first known synod of the Church of the East in 410. Part 3 presents the textual sources, centred on four texts. An identification with modern geography of the toponyms mentioned is given in 3.8. Part 4 presents the archaeological sources, consisting of three monastic complexes and two churches, as well as several lesser finds. In part 5, the information from the preceding parts is combined, and some of the theories often presented by scholars are discussed. The thesis is summarized and the limitations of the field of study are pointed out in part 6.

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<sup>11</sup> Walker 2012: 995

<sup>12</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 3-5; Walker 2012: 995-996

<sup>13</sup> Bin Seray 1996



## 2 The historical background

The Church of the East traces its roots all the way back to the apostle Thomas and the disciples Addai, Aggai and Mari who were among the seventy sent out by Jesus (Lk 10). According to some chronicles, these disciples are credited with evangelization and founding of churches all over Asia<sup>14</sup>. According to one tradition, the so-called “Abgar legend”, traceable back to Eusebius' works in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the sick king Abgar of Edessa asked for a visit by Jesus. He received a blessing because he believed Jesus without seeing him, and was also promised to be visited by an apostle after Jesus' death and resurrection. This apostle was Addai, who according to the legend both healed the king and founded the first church in Edessa<sup>15</sup>.

Archaeological evidence as well as evidence from other sources concerning Christianity in this area before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century are scanty<sup>16</sup>. Although it is likely that Christianity had entered into Mesopotamia already by the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christianity appears established in this area by the end of this century. The “Book of the Laws of the Countries”, written around 196 by a pupil of the Christian philosopher Bardaisan at the Edessan court, refers to Christians in, among other places, Parthia, Kushan, Persia, Media, Edessa, Hatra and Fars<sup>17</sup>.

Both Antioch and Edessa were important crossroads on the trade routes eastwards, and it is reasonable to assume that merchants brought thoughts, ideas and faiths to new areas in addition to their tangible goods, thus playing a crucial role in the spread of Christianity into the East. That the silk trade with China followed a route through the Parthian empire and was dominated by Jews might also have facilitated the spread of Christianity in these areas<sup>18</sup>. The 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century *Acts of Mar Mari* also notes the role of merchants, telling of merchants from Fars and Khuzistan that travelled to the “West”, probably Edessa and Roman Syria. In the West they met Addai, one of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus, and was converted to Christianity before returning home bringing their new faith with them. Although the connection with Addai cannot be confirmed, this is an indication of the role of merchants in cultural exchange at that time<sup>19</sup>.

Another significant mechanism through which Christian presence was strengthened in

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<sup>14</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 12

<sup>15</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 12ff

<sup>16</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 8

<sup>17</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 8; Walker 2012: 998

<sup>18</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 8

<sup>19</sup> Walker 2012: 998

the East was the deportation and resettling of prisoners of war, as well as refugees, from the Roman-Persian wars of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. During the reign of Ardashir (224-239) and Shapur I (239-270) Roman Syria, including Antioch (260), was conquered by the Sasanian empire and thousands of prisoners from the newly conquered lands were forcibly resettled in the “most fertile agricultural zones of their empire”<sup>20</sup>, including Babylonia, Persia, Parthia and Susiana<sup>21</sup>. As an unknown, but probably significant number of the prisoners were Christians, the Sasanian rulers were themselves responsible for “implanting small but resilient Christian communities in the heartlands of the empire”<sup>22</sup>. It is possible that these “Roman Christians” did not easily become integrated in their new lands. From this period, there are references to both “Christians” and “Nazarenes” in the same areas, which might reflect a difference between Greek and Syriac/Aramaic communities<sup>23</sup>.

By the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century an episcopal structure was clearly established in the Sasanian empire, evidenced by the conflict regarding whether the (“first definitively historical”<sup>24</sup>) bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Papa (285/91-327), should have primacy over the other bishops representing older sees in Khuzistan, Mayshan and Bet Aramaye<sup>25</sup>. The position of the bishop of the royal capital was further strengthened through the century, and recognised as “Grand Metropolitan and Head of Bishops”<sup>26</sup> at the synod in 410, later known by the title *catholicos*.

This structure and network of Christian communities was put to the test in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The Parthian and Sasanian empires had until then been a safe haven for Christians compared to the hostile policy of the Roman empire, but as Constantine and Constantius II changed the Roman official view of Christianity and claimed to be protectors of all Christians, and in face of the renewed conflict between the two empires, the loyalty of the Christians of the Sasanian empire was questioned and they were considered a potential threat to Sasanian interests. Combined with the increasing strength of Zoroastrianism and the refusal of the Christian communities to pay extra taxes<sup>27</sup>, this contributed to the persecutions carried out by Shapur II that came to be known as the “Great Slaughter” (c. 339/344-379)<sup>28</sup>. Churches were

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<sup>20</sup> Walker 2012: 998

<sup>21</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 9

<sup>22</sup> Walker 2012: 998

<sup>23</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 9; Walker 2012: 999. This will be further discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>24</sup> Walker 2012: 1002

<sup>25</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 9; Walker 2012: 1002

<sup>26</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 16

<sup>27</sup> Walker 2012: 1000. Payne explains the «persecutions» as a punishment for refusing to obey the King-of-kings' commands, “never indiscriminately targeting Christian communities as a whole”, Payne 2014: 4f

<sup>28</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 10f; Walker 2012: 1001

destroyed and bishops, priests, deacons and monks – the leadership of the Christian communities – were arrested and executed. After this, the diocese of Seleucia-Ctesiphon did not have its own bishop for over two decades. A vast martyr literature describes these events, focusing mostly on the heroism of the clergy. Although unbalanced, this literature testifies the strength and organization of the Christian communities: “The prominence of clergy in the martyr literature reflects not only Sasanian tactics of persecution in the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century but also the maturation of clerical authority during the preceding century”<sup>29</sup>.

The situation of the Christians improved after the deaths of Shapur II (d. 379) and his successor Ardashir II (d. 383). The relationship between the Sasanian and Roman empires improved, and Christians turned out to be good diplomats in this respect. Yazdgird I (399-420) began integrating Christians into imperial politics and also approved the first general synod of the Church of the East, held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, although the impulse came from the bishop and Roman ambassador Marutha of Maipherkat. Marutha brought a letter including three demands or recommendations to the structuring and organization of the church, signed by several Western bishops. These were eventually adopted and stated that there should be only one bishop in a diocese, given authority by the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon; the liturgical feasts should be celebrated together and on the same days; and the decisions of the council of Nicea should be accepted<sup>30</sup>. Although clearly inspired by Roman ecclesiastical models, there is no indication that the Church of the East was dependent on any Roman patriarchate. The decisions of the synod appeared expressions of an autocephalous church in communion with the Roman church establishing its own patriarchate<sup>31</sup>.

So far, the Church of the East had mostly been an organization of independent dioceses, but the synod of 410 formally established a lasting hierarchical structure centred on the bishop (Isaac I) of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, with initially six metropolitan sees overseeing the dioceses: Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Beth Lapat, Nisibis, Prat de Maishan, Arbela, and Karka de Bet Slokh<sup>32</sup>. More were added as the church expanded, among them the see at Rew-Ardashir in Fars, which also had jurisdiction over the Arabian Gulf coast and the islands of the Gulf, the region known as Bet Qatraye<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Walker 2012: 1002

<sup>30</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 15

<sup>31</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 17

<sup>32</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 15; Walker 2012: 1003

<sup>33</sup> Potts 1990: 244

### 3 Presentation of the textual sources

When and how Christianity entered north-eastern Arabia is as uncertain as its entry into Mesopotamia. It might have entered and spread along the trade routes, both inland and along the Gulf coast<sup>34</sup>, and some have mentioned north-eastern Arabia as a potential refuge from the persecutions of Shapur II<sup>35</sup>. Several dioceses and bishops might have existed in the area as early as 225<sup>36</sup>, and Maishan at in the northern part of the Gulf may have been the seat of a metropolitan-status bishop as early as 310<sup>37</sup>.

Our knowledge of Christianity in north-eastern Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf is largely based on a small number of literary sources, which provide important but patchy information about the period from the 4<sup>th</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. These sources are: the letters of catholicos Isho'yahb III, the writings of Thomas of Marga, documents from several synods of the church, the hagiographical *History of Mar Younan*, the *Chronicle of Seert*, and the questionable *Chronicle of Arbela*<sup>38</sup>.

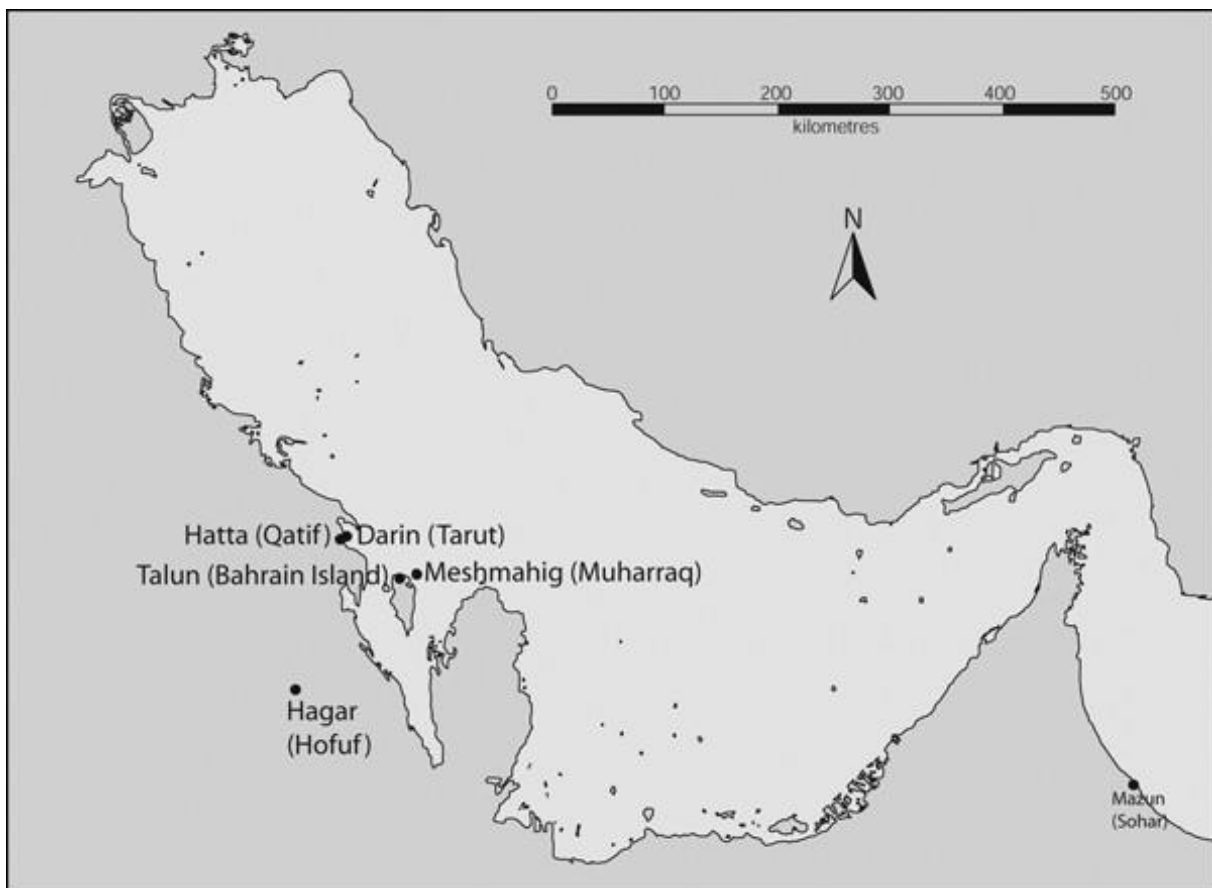


Figure 1. Proposed locations of the toponyms mentioned in the texts. (Carter 2008)

<sup>34</sup> Trimingham 1979: 280

<sup>35</sup> Healey 2000: 225

<sup>36</sup> According to the *Chronicle of Arbela*, Bin Seray 1997: 210ff

<sup>37</sup> Healey 2000: 225

<sup>38</sup> Bin Seray 1996: 316f

### 3.1 *Chronicle of Arbela*

The earliest reference to Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Gulf is found in the *Chronicle of Arbela*. This document is presumably written between 551 and 569 by the monk Meshiha-zekha of Mount Izla, presenting the history of the church in Adiabene (the geographical area surrounding the city of Arbela, modern Erbil). The document indicates the existence of several bishoprics in the Gulf area as early as in 225, among them in the region of Bet Qatraye<sup>39</sup>. However, the authenticity and historical value of the document, as well as the integrity of its modern publisher, have been questioned, and it is usually not used as a reliable source of information<sup>40</sup>.

### 3.2 *Letters of Isho'yahb III*<sup>41</sup>

Out of the extensive literary production of catholicos Isho'yahb III (649-659) consisting of 106 letters and a commentary on the Psalms, five letters were sent to Bet Qatraye: one to the bishops, two to the people and two to the monks<sup>42</sup>. They were sent during a conflict between the catholicos and the metropolitan of Fars<sup>43</sup>, where the latter with his bishops was reluctant to acknowledge the authority of the catholicos, going so far as to declare the metropolitanate independent of the church. In the course of this conflict, the bishops of Bet Qatraye also turned away from the catholicos, and subsequently also from their metropolitan at Fars.

Isho'yahb's five letters to Bet Qatraye were attempts to correct the wrongdoings of the bishops having turned away from the apostolic line and authority of the catholicate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, encouraging their repentance and inviting them to return to the fold. The bishops had been criticized for their infidelity and disloyalty, and their conduct was described as having cut themselves off from the life of the church. This was considered as serious as what the people of Mazun has done, who apparently has converted to Islam in significant numbers at that time. The bishops were accused of putting the faith in danger by cooperating with the secular authorities against the catholicos' envoys as well as ordaining their own bishops independently from the rest of the church. Apparently, the bishops had already been deposed and excommunicated by a synod in the capital, but to give them a chance to repent and escape spiritual death, the catholicos had not yet implemented the effects of the

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<sup>39</sup> Sachau 1915: 61f; Bin Seray 1997: 211

<sup>40</sup> Bin Seray 1997: 205; Healey 2000: 223

<sup>41</sup> I will be following Healey closely in the following, see Healey 2000: 229-233

<sup>42</sup> Healey 2000: 227-229

<sup>43</sup> Established around 415, with the metropolitan see at Rew-Ardashir. Bet Qatraye was subordinate to this metropolitan. Healey 2000: 226

excommunication.

On this background the people (including the clergy) were encouraged not to follow their unfaithful bishops (the bishop Abraha of Meshmahig is even accused for acting on behalf of Satan), but to break communion with them and remain faithful to the catholicos and the church, following the example of the monks. Isho'yahb wrote about his efforts to reconcile the bishops with the church, by inviting them to a synod and by sending two bishops to them, but his efforts appeared fruitless. He therefore asked the faithful of the islands and desert settlements to send him persons suitable for episcopal office, probably to replace the wicked ones.

The monks got the same admonition. In this time of testing and spiritual battle, they should remain faithful and zealous and not follow the “wicked bishops”. In one letter, they were paid compliments for their faithfulness, but in the other they were admonished for not supporting the catholicos. Some of the monks had disgracefully asked the catholicos for permission to rejoin the communion with the bishops. They were told to read and pay attention to the letters being sent to them, and to write to the catholicos about their course of action. The letters give no indication of a solution to the conflict.

A number of places are referred to in these five letters, indicating the areas affected by and/or related to the unrest, including Bet Qatrave, Deirin, Meshmahig, Tilun, Hatta, Hagar, and Mazun<sup>44</sup>.

### 3.3 Thomas of Marga's *Book of Governors*

The *Book of Governors* is a mid-9<sup>th</sup> century work attributed to Thomas, bishop of Marga in Adiabene, and later metropolitan of Bet Garmai (the geographical area surrounding the city of Karka de Bet Slokh, modern Kirkuk). The book is a monastic history, telling stories of noteworthy people related to the monastery of Bet Abhe, where also Thomas was a monk<sup>45</sup>. As such, this is considered a valuable source of the history of the Church of the East<sup>46</sup>. The catholicoi Isho'yahb III and George I are among the large number of people mentioned, and an episode related to the schism between them and the church in Persia and Bet Qatrave is described, although briefly:

*And after these things Mar Catholicus went down to Beth Ketrave that he might*

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<sup>44</sup> Healey 2000: 234f

<sup>45</sup> Budge 1893: xxvi-xxvii

<sup>46</sup> The work stretches over almost three centuries of history. Budge 1893: xxix.

*reconcile the inhabitants thereof, for they had cut themselves off from obedience to the episcopal throne of Rew-Ardashir, which is Persia; and he went to the island of Diren, and the people thereof were also reconciled. And he went up from there, and came to this holy monastery, and he brought with him cloths for the altar which had been woven for him in the island of Diren, of Beth Ketraye.*<sup>47</sup>

“After these things” refers to George’s reconciliatory effort at Nisibis and Prat de Maishan, as there were apparently others who also did not accept his ascension to the catholicate<sup>48</sup>.

### 3.4 *Synodicon orientale*

The *Synodicon orientale* is an 8<sup>th</sup> century collection of records of several synods held in the Church of the East between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>49</sup>. Representatives from the churches in north-eastern Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf are mentioned several times in these records. The first is the synod of Isaac in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, the last is the synod of George held at Deirin in Bet Qatrave in 676. The collection provides important information about the distribution and activities of the Church of the East through a period of 260 years.

In 410<sup>50</sup> the bishops Paul of *Deirin* and Battai of *Meshmahig* attended the important synod of Isaac I in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The bishop of Meshmahig is reported to have opposed these changes, and was therefore condemned, deposed and replaced. A diocese in *Todoro* is also mentioned. In 424 the bishop Yohannan of *Mazun* attended the synod of Dadisho in Markabata. In 544 the bishop David of Mazun attended the synod of catholicos Mar Aba. In 576 the bishop Ezechiel of *Hagar* attended a synod, and the same year the bishops Isaac of *Hatta* and Samuel of Mazun attended the synod of catholicos Ezechiel. Isaac of Hatta and the bishop Sergius of Meshmahig is reported to have given a written approval of the decrees of this synod.

Sometime between 582 and 592 the catholicos Isho’yahb I wrote a document consisting of 20 canons as a response to a letter written to him by the bishop Jacob of Deirin concerning liturgy and pastoral duty. Noteworthy is canon XV, which states that the faithful were expected to give their gifts and vows to their local *churches, monasteries and holy buildings*. This was for “the covering of their sins” and to prevent that “the holy buildings fall

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<sup>47</sup> Budge 1893: 188

<sup>48</sup> Budge 1893: 183-188

<sup>49</sup> Healey 2000: 223

<sup>50</sup> For this and the following see Bin Seray 1996: 320-323.

into disrepair, sins are committed, our own take offence, the outsiders mock and laugh at us, and the instruction of many is hindered”<sup>51</sup>. In particular, this was directed towards those who prayed and received the sacrament in their churches, but did not contribute with gifts. It was imperative that the faithful contributed to the community and did so willingly, and that both students and teachers were aware so that they did not allow foreign customs to enter the Christian community<sup>52</sup>.

Noteworthy is also canon XIX, which states that the Sunday should be properly honoured and observed, and only those who are forced by necessity are allowed to work on Sundays. The pearl-divers, about whom Jacob had explicitly asked, are also urged not to work on Sundays. However, “if our compulsion oppresses them”, the bishop was given the authority to command otherwise, to their benefit and to keep them from sin and harm<sup>53</sup>. This has been interpreted as a special allowance for pearl-fishers to work even on Sundays<sup>54</sup>.

In 676, the catholicos George, “after having visited other islands and places”<sup>55</sup>, held a synod at Deirin. The bishops of Deirin, Talun, Mazun, Hagar and Hatta attended, as well as the *metropolitan* of Bet Qatraye. This synod was probably the end of the schism, that had started about 20 years earlier, between the church in Bet Qatraye and the catholicoi. The canons from the synod (concerning church organization, Christian conduct and some legal questions) were not explicitly dealing with a schism, but the topics discussed were probably related to the disagreement. The introduction refers to reforms that have been needed for a long time, and necessity apparently forced the catholicos to formulate the church conduct in a new way, although much has already been clearly formulated by “the fathers at the earliest synods”<sup>56</sup>. The canons as such are aimed to be “of benefit to the inhabitants of these lands”<sup>57</sup>, which could also be a sign of the mainly local interest of the synod. That Bet Qatraye at this time had a metropolitan was possibly some kind of compromise made by the catholicos in the process of reconciliation; whether the catholicos merely accepted the “self-appointed” metropolitan or actually appointed him is unknown, and as this is the only reference to a metropolitan of Bet Qatraye, we do not know for how long a metropolitan see remained there<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 259. My translation.

<sup>52</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 262-263

<sup>53</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 267-268. My translation.

<sup>54</sup> Bin Seray 1996: 321

<sup>55</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 335

<sup>56</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 335. My translation.

<sup>57</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 336. My translation.

<sup>58</sup> Carter 2008: 101



Loyalty to the church and respect for the hierarchy appear important topics throughout the canons, even in legal questions. Canon VI states firmly that conflicts between Christians should be solved within the Church, by a judge chosen among the clergy by the bishop and accepted by the congregation. As long as “the worldly rulers” do not oblige, Christians should not take their cases to a “judge of the non-believers” without the consent of the bishop and the congregation<sup>59</sup>. This leaves the impression that the Christian community was an intentional parallel community.

Canon XIV clearly forbids women to marry non-believers, as it would introduce foreign customs to the religion and make the minds lax. It also states that anyone who chooses to do so is “far from the Church and all Christian honour in the Word of the Lord”<sup>60</sup>.

Canon II addresses the construction of new churches and monasteries, both in the towns and in the districts. No one should commence the new-building by their own decision, but consult the bishop and receive directions from him. All new churches and monasteries should be placed under the bishop’s supervision and management<sup>61</sup>.

Canon XV strengthens the impression that the monasteries had been largely independent of the church hierarchy in the time before the synod. It states that the Christians should visit the church for the daily prayers together with the congregation, and not pray at home. Neither should anyone “on the holy feasts or special days leave the parish church assembly and go to monasteries or convents, whereas the parish church lacks participation and proper ornamentation”<sup>62</sup>. This might be an indication of a tension between the parish churches and the monasteries when it comes to cooperation and the loyalty of the people, and it seems to fit well with the letters of Isho’yahb III, where the monks are addressed as (and encouraged to) acting independently of the local bishops, possibly having significant influence on the local Christian population. On the other hand, the effort of George to strengthen the hierarchy and centralize the Christian society might be seen not only as a solution to the schism, but also as an attempt to make the Christian society more robust against internal and external conflict and pressure in years to come.

Both the canons of Isho’yahb I and the synod of George mention churches and monasteries, and give the impression that churches and monasteries were well known and visited by the local Christian population. We do not get any information of the whereabouts of

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<sup>59</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 339

<sup>60</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 344

<sup>61</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 337. My translation

<sup>62</sup> Braun 1900/1975: 345. My translation

the monasteries or whether they were built in isolated places or in urban areas. However, it appears that they were not closely connected to the parish churches, and that at least some of them were located in places making them accessible to draw a significant number of visitors. The canons of the synod of George even mentions the building of new churches and monasteries, possibly indicating an ongoing or expected activity, and even growth.

Although the *Synodicon Orientale* gives information on the activity of the Christians of Bet Qatraye, it also points out that there were several synods that did not see the participation of representatives from this region. The gaps of 120 years (between the synods in 424 and 544), ca 90 years (between the canons of Ishoyahb I sometime around 590 and the synod in 676), and 114 years (between 676 and the last recorded synod in 790) are remarkable, but it is not likely that the collection presents the only synods held by the Church of the East between 410 and 790.

### 3.5 History of Mar Yonan

Another interesting source of information on the spread of Christianity in Bet Qatraye is the late 7<sup>th</sup> - early 8<sup>th</sup> century hagiography *the History of Mar Yonan*<sup>63</sup>. Although the story itself does not inspire historical reliability, it is situated in the period of the monastic reforms of Abraham of Kashkar and addresses the challenges of the traditional solitary/anchoritic form of monasticism in the face of the emerging coenobitism of Egyptian tradition.

The document tells the story of the monk Yonan, purportedly living in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Having met the legendary Mar Awgen and accompanied him to Egypt, he returned to Mesopotamia and established a community there. At some point, he left this community to pursue the solitary life, and came to the monastery of Mar Thomas somewhere in the Persian Gulf. This monastery facilitated coenobitic as well as anchoritic forms of monasticism and it was situated on a black, mountainous island somewhere along the coast of Mazun. The story tells that about 200 monks lived within its walls, in addition to the ascetics dwelling in the surroundings or on nearby islands. According to the story, Mar Yonan lived in a “great cell” comprised of a “courtyard” some distance from the monastery<sup>64</sup>, thus being able to continue his solitary life without unnecessary disturbance, but also maintaining the monastic and spiritual hierarchy.

The *History of Mar Yonan* has apparently lost scholarly attention the last century, being

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<sup>63</sup> Payne 2011: 99

<sup>64</sup> Payne 2011: 103

discredited as historically unreliable and possibly being fabricated. However, in recent years its status has improved as a consequence of the research on other hagiographies, most importantly the *History of Mar Awgen*. As a result, the text has been analysed against the background provided by the archaeological discoveries in the Gulf in recent decades, giving important clues to the understanding of some of the sites, as well as giving one of the earliest dates for Christian activity in the Gulf<sup>65</sup>.

### 3.6 Sporadic references

Some sporadic references to Christianity in Bet Qatraye are also made in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century *Chronicle of Seert*<sup>66</sup>. The chronicle mentions that the catholicos Ezechiel (mid/late 6<sup>th</sup> century), who was held in high regard by the Sasanian king Khosrow, had once been sent by the king “to Bahrain and Yamâma, from which Ezechiel had brought him pearls”<sup>67</sup>. This reference to pearls might indicate the king’s trust in the catholicos, if it was an inspection of the pearling industry, and it could also indicate that pearling in the area was a business mostly undertaken by Christians (cf. 3.4, canon XIX of Isho’yahb I)<sup>68</sup>.

The chronicle also mentions that catholicos Isho’yahb I in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century issued canons to help Jacub of Deirin in the administration of the diocese (cf. 3.4), but the content of the canons is uncommented<sup>69</sup>.

A third reference to Christianity in the Gulf in the *Chronicle of Seert* is the story about the monk Abdisho of Maishan. In the time of catholicos Tomarsa (363-371)<sup>70</sup>, he founded a monastery near Maishan and was consecrated bishop of Deir Mukhrâq. However, the people did not want him and he retired to the “island of Yamâma and Bahrain. He led a solitary life there and baptized the inhabitants. He then built a monastery there”. He later “left the island known today as Ramath, 18 parasangs<sup>71</sup> from Ubila and went for Hira, where he built a monastery”<sup>72</sup>.

In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, a letter on liturgical matters was sent to Isaac, “Visitor” of Bet Qatraye, from catholicos Isho’barnun (823-828)<sup>73</sup>. As late as the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, prayers for

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<sup>65</sup> Payne 2011: 108. Especially the courtyard houses of Kharg and Sir Bani Yas. See 4.1 and 4.2.

<sup>66</sup> See Alcock 2014: 2

<sup>67</sup> Alcock 2014, part 3: 43

<sup>68</sup> Trimmingham 1979: 281

<sup>69</sup> Scher 1919: 439

<sup>70</sup> Healey 2000: 226

<sup>71</sup> There is some uncertainty regarding this distance. Carter uses 68 parsangs, Carter 2008: 102

<sup>72</sup> Alcock 2014, part 2: 55f

<sup>73</sup> Brock 1999: 95, see his note 56

Bet Qatraye and the sea islands are found in the Qanone of Abu Halim, although it is not known whether this refers to a still existing Christian presence<sup>74</sup>.

### 3.7 Indirect sources: The writers of Bet Qatraye

In addition to the texts related directly to Bet Qatraye, we know of several writers related to Bet Qatraye, all from the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>75</sup>. Texts written by four of them have been preserved, and several others are known indirectly. Among these authors is the most-translated Syriac writer of all times, *Isaac of Niniveh*, who was born and served as monk and teacher in Bet Qatraye before he moved to Mesopotamia together with catholicos George after his visit and synod. As a young man, Isaac lived for a period where no one knew him, and it has been proposed that he was among the monks driven out of Bet Qatraye by the rebellious bishop of Meshmahig around 650<sup>76</sup>.

Other writers from this century are the monk Dadisho' Qatraya, writer of ascetic literature; various (possibly eight different, probably four) Gabriels, authors of Christological works, and biblical and liturgical commentaries; Abraham Qatraya bar Lipah, who reworked the liturgical commentary of Gabriel bar Lipah; the biblical commentator Ahob Qatraya; Isho'panah Qatraya; and an anonymous monk, translator of the Law Book of Shem'on of Rew-Ardashir (possibly the metropolitan Shem'on who rebelled against Isho'yahb III) into Syriac<sup>77</sup>.

The writers cite a broad range of other writers, and the concentration on the 7<sup>th</sup> century might imply that there was a monastic or ecclesial centre of learning in the region at this time, with high standards of its education, perhaps even comparable to the school of Nisibis<sup>78</sup>.

That Ahob and one of the Gabriels<sup>79</sup> refer to the language of Qatar, spoken by Qataris, as distinguished from Arabic, spoken by Arabs<sup>80</sup>, is an interesting detail of the general knowledge of Bet Qatraye provided by the writers.

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<sup>74</sup> Bin Seray 1997: 211

<sup>75</sup> Brock 1999: 95

<sup>76</sup> Brock 1999: 88

<sup>77</sup> Brock 1999: 89-95

<sup>78</sup> Brock 1999: 95

<sup>79</sup> Brock 1999: 93

<sup>80</sup> Kozah, Abu-Husayn, Al-Murikhi, & Al Thani 2014: 18

### 3.8 Identification of toponyms<sup>81</sup>

*Bet Qatraye*, Syriac for “territory of the Qataris”<sup>82</sup>, refers to the whole coastal area, including the islands, of north-eastern Arabia between modern Kuwait and Oman, not only the Qatar peninsula. In the same way, the later designation *Bahrain* refers not only to the modern Bahrain archipelago, but to the coastal area between Kuwait and the Qatar peninsula.

*Deirin* (also Dayrin, Diren, Daray and Ardai) has been identified with the location of a modern village bearing the same name on the island of Tarut opposite al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia. Deirin might also refer to Tarut island itself, as might perhaps *Todoro*, which is otherwise unidentified. The variant *Ardai* could be a separate toponym, related to ancient Arados and the island of Muharraq<sup>83</sup>.

*Meshmahig* or Samahig is in various sources described as an island in the vicinity of Bahrain that is connected to pearl-fishing<sup>84</sup>. It has been identified with the island of Muharraq in the Bahrain archipelago, where an urban district still bears the name Samahig (Samaheej).

*Hagar* has been used as a term for the whole region of Bahrain, and also for a town somewhere on the mainland of the region. The town is not identified, but the oasis of al-Hofuf and the site of Thaj some 90 km inland from Jubayl, Saudi Arabia, have been suggested as possible locations.

*Hatta* has been used in Arabic as a term for the wider coastline, but the place is usually identified with al-Qatif, Saudi Arabia, which until very recently was called al-Hatt.

*Mazun* (Bet Mazunaye) is apparently the Persian name for the province of Oman, described as being over 100 parsangs<sup>85</sup> in length. It is thus bordering Bet Qatraye, with the border being somewhere between Sohar and Qatar. There is a possibility that Mazun refers to a specific town in Oman, in that case probably Sohar.

*Tilun* (Talun, Talwan) has been identified with several islands in the Gulf. It is presently assumed to refer to the main island of Bahrain, because the name is very close to Thiloua and Tylos, which in Greek sources refer to this island.

*Ramath* is described as an island off Bahrain, 18 parsangs from Ubila (near modern Basra). It has been identified with Failaka off Kuwait<sup>86</sup>, but Carter and Potts<sup>87</sup>, argue that Failaka is too close. They use a distance of 68 parsangs and suggest the island of Abu Ali off

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<sup>81</sup> Bin Seray 1997: 210ff; Carter 2008: 101ff

<sup>82</sup> Healey 2000: 226

<sup>83</sup> Carter 2008: 101

<sup>84</sup> Bin Seray 1997: 217

<sup>85</sup> “Although variable, one *parsang* equates to around 5.6 km”. Carter 2008: 102, his note 22

<sup>86</sup> Salles 2011: 306ff

<sup>87</sup> Potts 1990: 245; Carter 2008: 102

Jubayl as a more likely alternative.

*Yamâma* is the name of a territory further inland from Bahrain/Hagar. The “island of Yamama”, however, is not identified.

### 3.9 Preliminary summary

Even if the picture emerging from the textual sources is patchy, it presents important information of the Church of the East, particularly from the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The beginning is shrouded, as is the end, but these sources indicate a significant Christian population in Bet Qatraye by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (and possibly earlier), and that some Christians were left in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (possibly later). At least five episcopal sees are affirmed in the region, as well as a (supposedly short-lived) metropolitan see.

From its beginning, monks and monasticism played an important role, and despite a conflict between the church in Bet Qatraye and the catholicate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century the region produced a number of writers influential well beyond the borders of Bet Qatraye. With the exception of Mazun, it seems that Christianity in the area was mainly concentrated on the coastal area in the vicinity of the Bahrain archipelago, and pearling might have been a large business for the local Christians. However, the references to bishops in towns further inland indicate that Christianity was not restricted to the coast.

The existence of contact with other regions is supported by the attendance of bishops of Bet Qatraye at patriarchal synods, as well as the regular contact with Fars and Persia implied by the organization of Bet Qatraye as subordinate to the metropolitan see at Rew-Ardashir. This communication also indicates that for the Christians of Bet Qatraye, Persian was a language as important as Syriac and the local Arabic languages<sup>88</sup>. Except for the reference to apostates in Mazun by Isho’yahb III, the texts do not directly indicate that the emergence of Islam had any significant effect on the development of Christianity in the region. They rather indicate that the Church formed, at least partially, a parallel community, and that Christian groups survived in the area into the 9<sup>th</sup> century, possibly even into the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>88</sup> Potts 1990: 244

## 4 Presentation of the archaeological sources

Concerning the presence of Christianity in the Persian Gulf, the textual evidence appears quite sparse and confined to the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, it is interesting to investigate how the archaeological evidence might enrich the picture emerging from the texts, which will hopefully result in a broader and richer picture.

There have been done several archaeological surveys in the Gulf region, and several finds are related to Christianity. The largest and most informative are the monastic complexes on the Iranian island of Kharg, on the Sir Bani Yas island belonging to the United Arab Emirates, and at al-Qusur on the Kuwaiti island of Failaka. In addition, the churches found on the sites of Akkaz and Jubayl are interesting, as well as an unidentified structure found at Thaj<sup>89</sup> and some lesser finds.

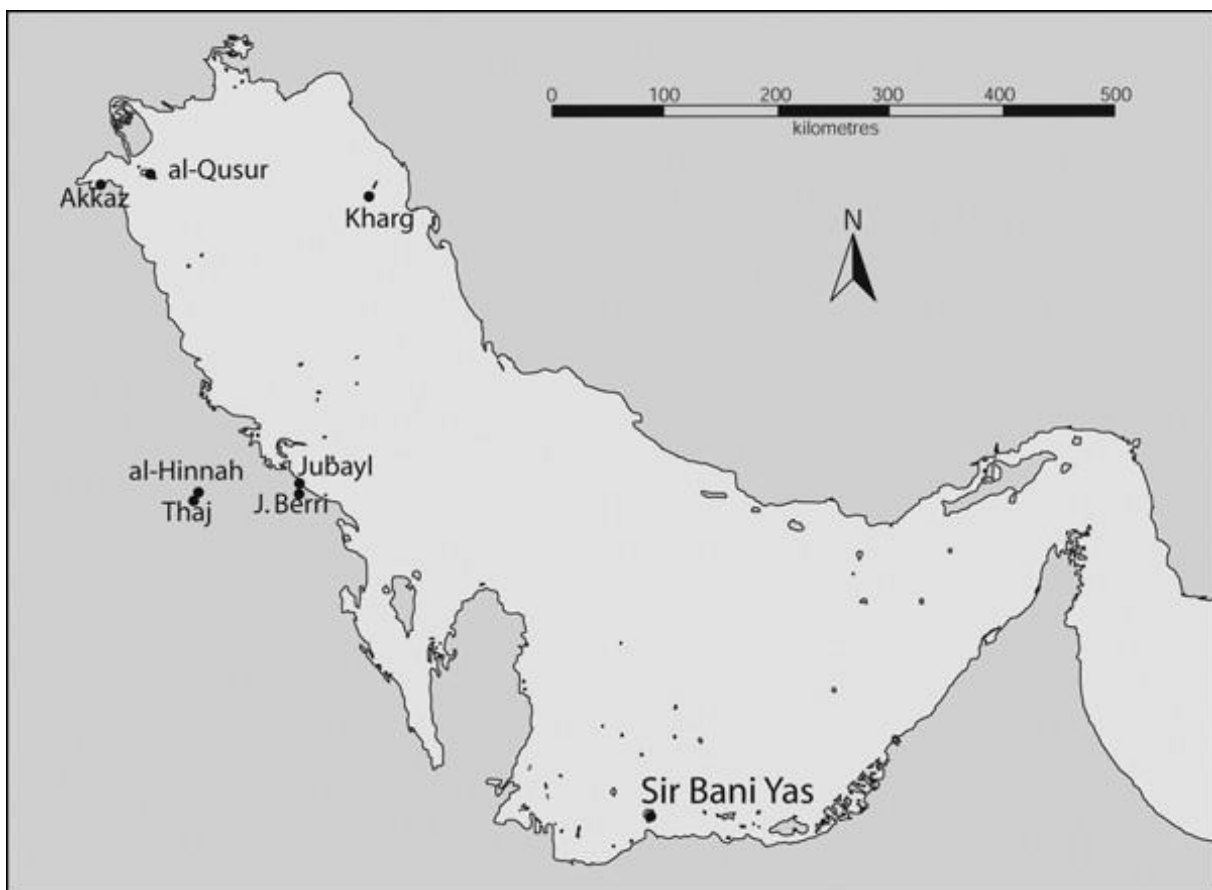


Figure 2. The archaeological sites. (Carter 2008)

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<sup>89</sup> Carter 2008: 71

#### 4.1 The monastic complex at Kharg, Iran

The Iranian island of Kharg in the north end of the Gulf has been known, and probably inhabited, since 1000 BC<sup>90</sup>. As the only major island in this part of the Gulf, it has been an important harbour for seafarers through the ages. An extensive archaeological survey was undertaken during the process of establishing a petroleum facility on the island, and the survey brought about several interesting finds. Two of them are directly related to Christianity. These are a “large number”<sup>91</sup> of tombs with a cross carved into the rock above the entrance, and a monastic complex in the barren western part of the island.

A NE-SW-oriented triple nave church made of hewn stones constitute the centre of the monastery. The central nave of the church is larger than the side aisles, and the apse is larger than the side rooms. Five steps led from the narthex down to the nave, and further four steps into the apse. The altar was apparently placed in the centre of the apse, as evidenced by a hollowed-out circle in the plaster floor. The left (southern) side chamber contained a small basin featuring a drainage hole, and the right (northern) side chamber might have contained a bed and a reliquary. A tomb containing the bones of four adult persons, elevated about 10 cm above the floor, was found in the northern aisle. The bones were probably brought in from another place, possibly belonging to martyrs or holy men<sup>92</sup>. The nave, apse and exterior walls of the side chambers were decorated with stucco, mainly series of roundels with geometrical or floral designs, over a row of merlons. Crosses described as “Nestorian” were found carved above the doors between the three aisles.

Several rooms and chambers are connected to the church to the west, among them two rooms identified as the library and the main refectory. The latter contains benches running along the walls and a large recess in the northern corner, possibly being the site of the abbot’s seat<sup>93</sup>. About sixty three-room cells have been excavated along the walls of the large courtyard, each containing a low bed of stone and plaster.

Several small structures were also discovered a few hundred meters from the monastery. The one excavated turned out to be a four-room house inside a walled yard. Initially, this house was interpreted, along with the other structures, as being the priests’ houses, where they could live with their families without disturbing the secluded life of the monastery. However, and in line with the similar buildings at Sir Bani Yas, these buildings

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<sup>90</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 8

<sup>91</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 13

<sup>92</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 19

<sup>93</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 21



could also be interpreted as cells for the senior monks living more isolated<sup>94</sup>. All in all, about one hundred people might have been directly connected to the monastery at its height<sup>95</sup>.

Based on the style of the ornamentation, the monastery was initially dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>96</sup>. This dating was later changed to the late 6<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century, and after an analysis of the pottery found, and a comparison with the data from al-Qusur, Carter claims:

*“There is [...] nothing to fix the date of the Kharg monastery to before the mid-seventh century, and if it is later than al-Qusur then it is likely to date to the mid-eight century or later, as also indicated by the pottery of both sites. At the moment, a ninth-century date is most likely.”*<sup>97</sup>

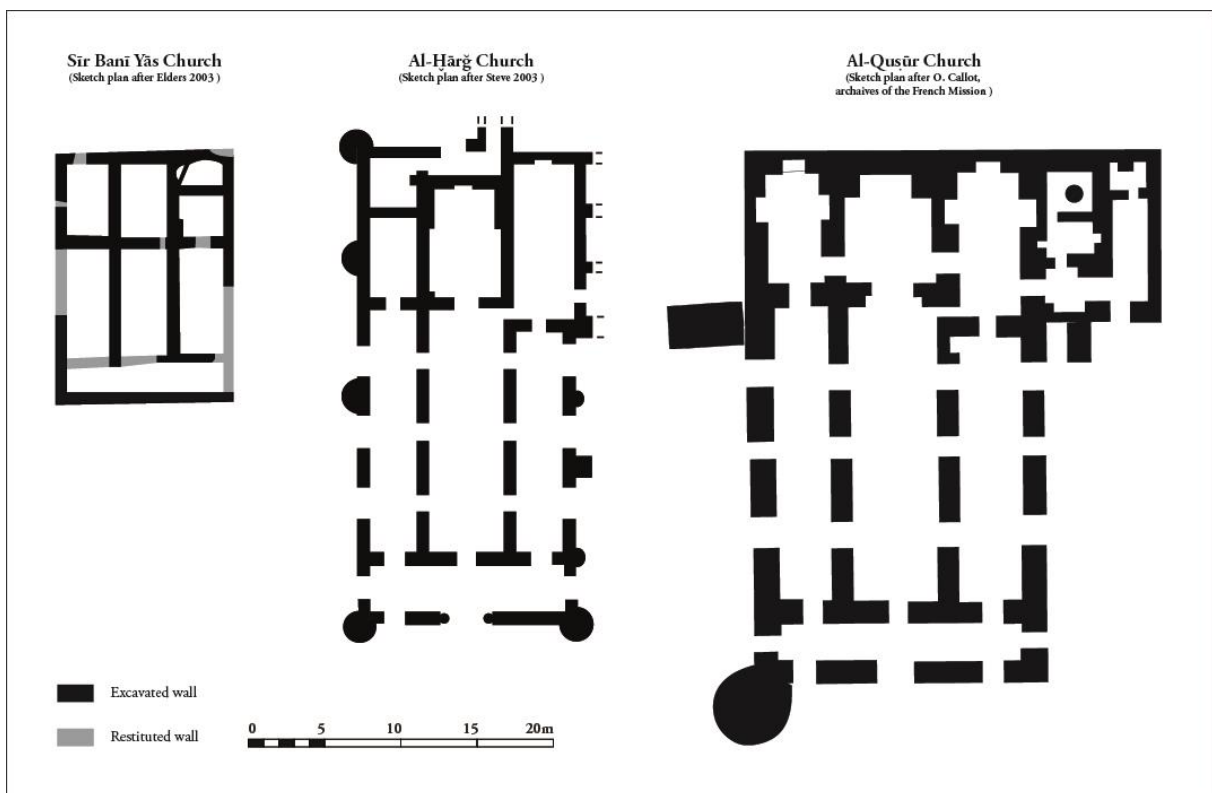


Figure 3. Sketch plan of the three monastic churches. (Bonnéric 2015)

## 4.2 The monastic complex at al-Qusur, Kuwait

In 1989, a church was found at al-Qusur at the island of Failaka off Kuwait<sup>98</sup>. It is a long, tripartite church oriented W/SW-E/NE, measuring 36x19 meters, with three aisles, an apse

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Payne 2011: 103; Elders 2001: 53

<sup>95</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 23

<sup>96</sup> Ghirshman 1965: 21

<sup>97</sup> Carter 2008: 97f

<sup>98</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 7

with two cross-shaped side chapels, and a narthex<sup>99</sup>. The nave could probably be closed from the aisles, as could the apse from the side chapels. The apse, which is 5.6 meters long and 7.5 meters wide, is elevated from the rest of the church by three steps. The northern chapel, measuring 7.5x3.6 meters, has four holes deeply cut in the floor of the eastern recess. It has been proposed that this recess was the site of a credence table and perhaps a reliquary.

The southern chapel, measuring 9.2x3.6 meters, has a hole lined by a plaster frame in its south-western corner. This could have been a small basin with a plughole for used waters from the church (cf. the similar feature at Kharg). Two recesses were cut in the northern wall of the southern aisle, one of them contained some remains of a human grave and shells that could be funeral offerings<sup>100</sup>. A couple of rooms, mainly unexcavated, was found adjacent to the church on the southern side. These appear built at the same time as the church, as the eastern wall of the church continues as a main wall of this annex. The easternmost of these rooms shows signs of a later phase of occupation, as a coarse circular stone pillar was found in the middle of the room. This has been interpreted as a grinder, thus pointing to a period of time after the cessation of the sacred use of the church building.<sup>101</sup>

The church walls were built of mudbricks and/or pisé, coated with thick plaster, in some parts faced with stones on the lower part (up to c. 60 cm), especially on the external eastern wall (up to 80 cm), probably for protection against weather. The load-bearing walls are 1.60 meters thick, but the foundations and substructures does not seem to have fitted the massiveness of the building, as several cracks and repaired cracks were found on them. The floors were also plastered, and several layers, probably repairs/repavings, were identified.

Four levels of occupational deposits have been found. The earliest level (level I), which refers to the period of the building or early use of the church, yielded almost no pottery. The few shards collected were reported to possibly indicate “the transitional period Sasanian-Early Islamic, that is the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>102</sup>, but later research has dated these shards no earlier than the level III pottery<sup>103</sup>.

The level indicating the main use of the church (level II) was found on some exterior floors later covered by building rubble. The pieces of pottery found, including eggshell ware and a glazed deep bowl, indicate a dating between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The occupational deposits found in the church proper were defined as level III, and

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<sup>99</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 9

<sup>100</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 9

<sup>101</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 11

<sup>102</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 11

<sup>103</sup> Carter 2013: 321

were assumed to be from the time between the ceased use of the church and its destruction, as it supposedly was kept clean and tidy throughout its use as a sacred building. Later, these deposits have been understood as belonging to the later part of the main occupation (i.e. level II), and that the levels had been separated due to refurbishing activities during the main occupational phase<sup>104</sup>. A lamp dated to the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a glazed deep bowl not common before the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and a fragment of eggshell ware pointing towards late 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century were among the few objects found at this level.<sup>105</sup>

The fourth and latest level (level IV) was identified in the smaller rooms outside the church. The finds from this level include the grinder, some domestic objects and pottery. This level probably represents the time of abandonment and reoccupation, and the pottery point towards the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. The abandonment of the church could thus have happened in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century or later.<sup>106</sup>

Fragments of a stucco decoration panel were found on the floor of the southern chapel, and fragments of another one were found on the floor of the southern aisle<sup>107</sup>. Reconstruction (see figures) of the panels shows that they were large, each featuring a single cross with flared arms and tear-drop serifs at the ends, with a “double base” attached to some kind of stand (figure 4). Leaves and floral motifs accompany the cross in the centre of the panel, and floral and geometrical designs make up the frame around it. One of the panels feature roundels with leaves (cf. the Jubayl



Figure 4. One of the stucco panels found at al-Qusur. (Bonnéric 2015)

<sup>104</sup> Carter 2013: 321

<sup>105</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 12

<sup>106</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 12

<sup>107</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 9

church as well as Kharg and Sir Bani Yas). During the 2015 season of excavation and analysis, stains of what could be painting were found on parts of one of the stucco cross panels, a discovery which possibly corrects the earlier assumption that the church was covered in uncoloured plaster.<sup>108</sup>

The church at al-Qusur with its dependencies has been interpreted as part of a larger monastic complex, albeit without unambiguous evidence pointing in this direction. However, recent excavations have contributed largely to the confirmation of this interpretation, especially by revealing a room with benches along the walls. This room is very similar to the supposed refectory of the Kharg monastery, and the Kuwaiti-French archaeological Mission in Failaka claims that this “demonstrates the existence of a monastery”<sup>109</sup>.

The small amounts of pottery from the earliest levels make the dating of the construction phase quite uncertain, but the church itself was most likely abandoned no later than the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The stucco decoration panels were at first assumed to be from the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, but now the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries are also proposed<sup>110</sup>.

Research and analyses on al-Qusur are continuing, and it will be interesting to follow upcoming publications on the site.

#### 4.3 The monastic complex at Sir Bani Yas, United Arab Emirates

A group of archaeological sites<sup>111</sup> dated to late pre-Islamic time has been excavated in the east of the desert island of Sir Bani Yas, situated about halfway between the Qatar peninsula and Abu Dhabi. These sites include several courtyard houses and what is assumed to constitute a monastic complex, named SBY-9. SBY-9 was discovered by the Abu Dhabi Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) in 1992, and (as for 2008) four seasons of excavations has been completed<sup>112</sup>. Stucco cross fragments were found in 1994, and a church in 1995. The church measures 16x11 meters and is tripartite. It has a central nave with side aisles, a central apse with side chambers to the east, and a narrow narthex to the west. The northern aisle and chamber, as well as the narthex, seem to have been added in a second phase of construction. The northern side chamber in its finished form was probably two-storeyed (and thus the only two-storeyed structure found at SBY-9) and could have had the function of a “bell tower”<sup>113</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> Bernard & Salles 1991: 11; Lic in French-Kuwaiti Expedition in Failaka 2015, internal interim excavation report, week VI, «Stuccos»

<sup>109</sup> Bonnéric 2015

<sup>110</sup> Carter 2008: 97

<sup>111</sup> SBY-3-9; King 1997: 221. An overview is available at <http://www.adias-uae.com/sirbaniyas.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Carter 2008: 73

<sup>113</sup> Elders 2001: 50f

The floors of the side aisles “were of extremely fine plaster”<sup>114</sup>, and a fine white plaster decoration from the interior, and particularly from the exterior of the eastern wall was recovered. The plaster from the eastern wall was so well preserved that a reconstruction of the eastern façade decoration was possible. The reconstruction of the façade indicates that grape clusters, vine leaves and a variety of crosses constituted the main motifs of the exterior decoration<sup>115</sup>. This indicates a combination of different cultural influences: Christian proper (both Latin and Greek crosses), Mediterranean late antique (vine scrolls and geometry) and Sasanian (floral designs)<sup>116</sup>. Some of the plaster fragments collected from the interior had curvature and traces of red colouring, indicating that there were arches in the superstructure and some kind of colouring of the interior<sup>117</sup>.



Figure 5. Plaster tile from SBY-9. (Retrieved from <http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY>)



Figure 6. Plaster panel from SBY-9. (Retrieved from <http://www.adias-uae.com/adiasgallery.html#SBY>)

The church is situated in the middle of an enclosed area of c. 90x70 meters, surrounded by a low wall (no more than 0,65 meters high) and buildings. The buildings were blocks of four or five small rooms, with “high quality plastered floors and walls”<sup>118</sup>, empty of any kind of deposits or litter, and scarcely decorated. By contrast, some occupation material (mostly pottery, fishbones and shells) was found in the internal yards between the blocks of rooms, and lots of shells and fishbones were found in a courtyard which also contained a trough (probably for animals) on the north side.<sup>119</sup> It is assumed that the small rooms were cells for the monks of the monastery.

A similar block of small rooms was found in the six courtyard houses outside the

<sup>114</sup> King 1997: 227

<sup>115</sup> King 1997: 228

<sup>116</sup> Elders 2001: 51

<sup>117</sup> King 1997: 229

<sup>118</sup> Elders 2001: 48

<sup>119</sup> Elders 2001: 48; King 1997: 226



monastic complex. Of these, only one (SBY-3) is completely excavated. This house measured 7,42x7,14 meters and was located in a walled courtyard of c. 20x20 meters<sup>120</sup>. The six houses were built in the same style and coated in the same type and quality of plaster as the buildings of the monastic complex, and were also as good as devoid of occupation material. The sites in this group (SBY-3 to SBY-9) are thus assumed to be part of the same complex and period, as the “element of standardization (...) suggests a system at work that fits well with the order implicit in a monastic settlement, where uniformity of building and limited possessions would be characteristics of the community”<sup>121</sup>. The courtyard houses could be living quarters for senior monks in self-imposed isolation<sup>122</sup>, or perhaps, if following Ghirshman’s interpretation of the similar buildings at Kharg, houses for the priests and their families<sup>123</sup>.

The style of the stucco decorations of the church has been proposed to be from the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>124</sup>, which was also the dating initially proposed based on the pottery collection<sup>125</sup>. A thorough analysis of the pottery was published by Carter in 2008, adjusting the date (of SBY-9) to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> to mid-8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>126</sup>. This is a comparative dating based on the pottery analysis of similar sites in the region by Kennet<sup>127</sup>, and thus on the dating of those sites. This is supported by a re-evaluation of the radiocarbon dating, indicating AD 660-780 instead of the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century proposed by Elders<sup>128</sup>. Depending on the (unknown) origin of the wood sample (fresh picked or part of the structure), this dating could either indicate the period of occupation or the period of construction. If the dating indicates the period of construction, the occupational period would probably extend well into the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>129</sup>.

No clay resources have been discovered on Sir Bani Yas, so the pottery was probably imported. The sources for all the pottery have not been identified, but material from southern Mesopotamia and India, probably also Bahrain, and perhaps the Lower Gulf are identified, indicating wide geographical connections. Combined with the proximity to the sea, “this was not a closed eremitic community”<sup>130</sup>.

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<sup>120</sup> King 1997: 229

<sup>121</sup> King 1997: 231

<sup>122</sup> Elders 2001: 53

<sup>123</sup> King 1997: 233

<sup>124</sup> Elders 2001: 52

<sup>125</sup> King 1997: 231

<sup>126</sup> Carter 2008: 90

<sup>127</sup> Kennet 2004

<sup>128</sup> Carter 2008: 90; Elders 2001: 56

<sup>129</sup> Kennet 2007: 93

<sup>130</sup> Carter 2008: 93-95

#### 4.4 Other interesting sites

In addition to these three well preserved sites, several other sites along the Gulf have given evidence of a Christian presence.<sup>131</sup>

##### 4.4.1 Akkaz, Kuwait

One of these is located on the former island of Akkaz, just off Kuwait City. The site is now part of the Shuwaikh Harbour, and only one of the at least seven tells once visible was (in 1998) relatively well preserved. The other ones were destroyed and the remaining one restricted to a diameter of about 50 meters with a height of 8 meters, and this was damaged by a modern structure and erosion<sup>132</sup>. In the course of three seasons of excavations between 1993 and 1996, seven layers of occupation were identified, the six lower (level 2-7) also with associated architectural remains<sup>133</sup>. The two lowest levels (7 and 6) were dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the levels 5 to 3 have not been dated. Level 3 consists of a circular structure 18 metres in diameter. Its function is still unknown, but it has been proposed that it is a Zoroastrian *dakhma* (or “tower of silence”)<sup>134</sup>.

The building interpreted as a church makes up level 2 and was built on the levelled and filled-in circular structure. The building is badly preserved, but some remains of walls and floors make it possible to sketch up the layout as a ESE-WNW oriented church at least 15.5 meters in length (figures 7 & 8). The church walls are built of stones, the higher courses possibly of mudbricks. All the interior walls and floors are thickly plastered. The thickness of the walls indicates a relatively light superstructure/roof, probably made of wood and/or textiles<sup>135</sup>. The northern nave is completely destroyed (or has never been there), the central measures 11 metres by 3.5 metres and leads to a slightly narrower apse to the east. At least one doorway leads from the central nave to the southern nave, and also the southern nave leads into a slightly narrower room to the east. A fragment of a stucco cross of a similar type as was found at al-Qusur was found in the doorway connecting the two southern rooms. It had probably decorated the jamb or the west facing wall next to the door<sup>136</sup>.

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<sup>131</sup> See Carter 2008: 97-99 and Bin Seray 1996: 325-327

<sup>132</sup> Gachet 1998: 69

<sup>133</sup> Gachet 1998: 70

<sup>134</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011: 121

<sup>135</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011: 132

<sup>136</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011: 129

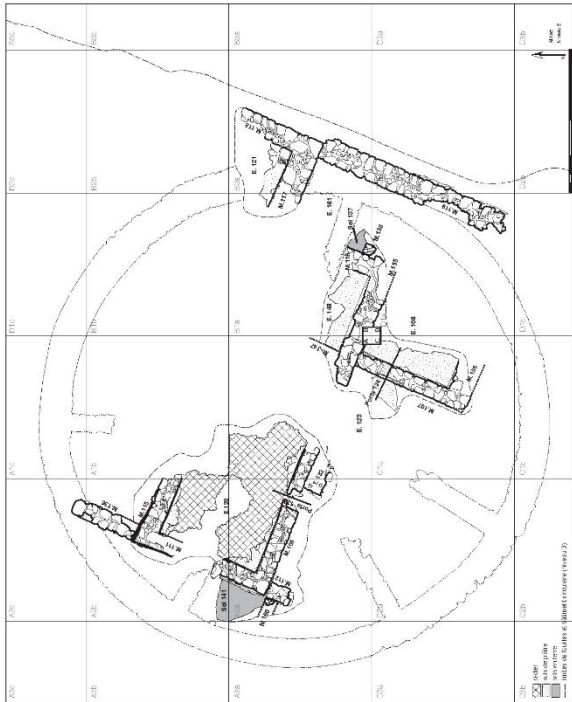


Figure 7. Akkaz archaeological site, level 2. (Gachet-Bizollon 2011)

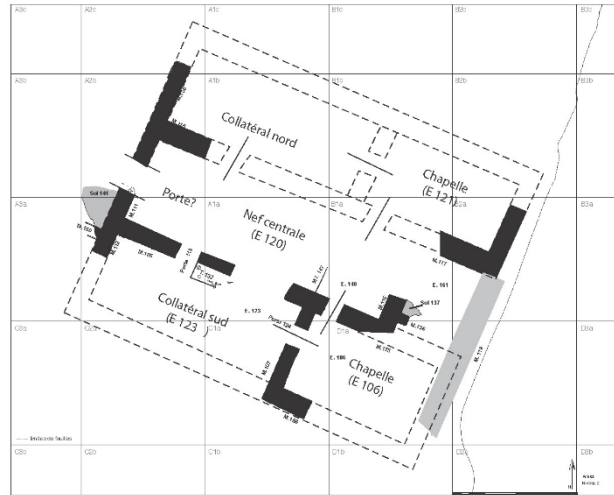


Figure 8. Proposed ground plan of the church at Akkaz. (Gachet-Bizollon 2011)

A tomb was found along the northern wall of the southern nave<sup>137</sup>. Although only the western part remains, the exterior length was reconstituted to about 190 cm, and it contained the remains of a skeleton lying in an extended position. The lacking parts were probably lost during an earlier excavation. The wall against which the tomb is built is slightly narrower at this point, giving the impression that the integration of the tomb into the building was intended already from the construction<sup>138</sup>. Due to the little material and evidence available, “the dating will be more likely provided by dating the circular building on which the church is built, by comparison with the site of al-Qusur and through a general study of church plans and of stucco in the Near East”<sup>139</sup>. Nevertheless, based on the few pieces of pottery and glass objects, a dating between the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century has been proposed<sup>140</sup>.

The uppermost level (level 1) has no architectural remains, but pottery sherds, as well as fifteen copper coins found in 1985, date it to the Early Islamic period<sup>141</sup>.

#### 4.4.2 Jubayl, Saudi Arabia

A church has also been excavated in Jubayl, Saudi-Arabia, but no official archaeological reports from this site have been published, and the area is closed to the public. Thus, the

<sup>137</sup> Gachet 1998: 73

<sup>138</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011: 130

<sup>139</sup> Gachet 1998: 74

<sup>140</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011: 138-139

<sup>141</sup> Gachet 1998: 75



following is based on Langfeldt's first-hand "tourist observation" report<sup>142</sup>.

The church in Jubayl is oriented east-west, consisting of a walled, probably open, squared courtyard (some 15-20 m<sup>2</sup>) with three rooms almost identical in size (4-5m<sup>2</sup>) on its east side. Almost the entire northern wall was destroyed in the crude initial clearing of the site. The remaining walls are plastered. The courtyard has entrances from the west and the south, and the three rooms have doorways both to the courtyard and between each other. The entrances to the central and southern rooms are flanked by cross impressions in the plaster on the courtyard side (four in total), about 28-30 cm high. The impressions are seemingly made from the same object, suggestively an altar cross, with flared arms. The plaster into which the impressions are made is apparently secondary to the main plaster coating of the walls. Another cross impression is found in the east jamb of the south entrance to the courtyard, but of another form.



Figure 9. The church at Jubayl. (Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail\\_Church.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church.jpg), author: Harold Brockwell)

Neither the courtyard nor the side rooms bear any distinctive features apart from the cross impressions. However, the central room does, probably indicating its function as the sanctuary. The eastern third of the floor seems to be elevated some height above the rest of the

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<sup>142</sup> Langfeldt 1994

floor, interpreted as a bema. Both sides of the bema, against the north and south walls, have three engaged columns supporting a soffit. The northern columns are a bit shorter than the southern. A frieze composed of seven (and a half on the south soffit) roundels displaying different floral motifs runs along the lower edge of the soffits. These columns were probably mainly of decorative function, but they could perhaps have supported an arch over the bema that was different than the superstructure of the rest of the room. That the roof was some kind of arched or domed is clear from the two columns found in the western corners of the room, where pendentive forms rise in both east-west and north-south directions. Three gravestones with crosses have also been found near the church, two of the crosses are basically of the same design as the impressions in the church, having flared arms<sup>143</sup>.

Dating of the church is difficult, but Langfeldt points out that field observation of the

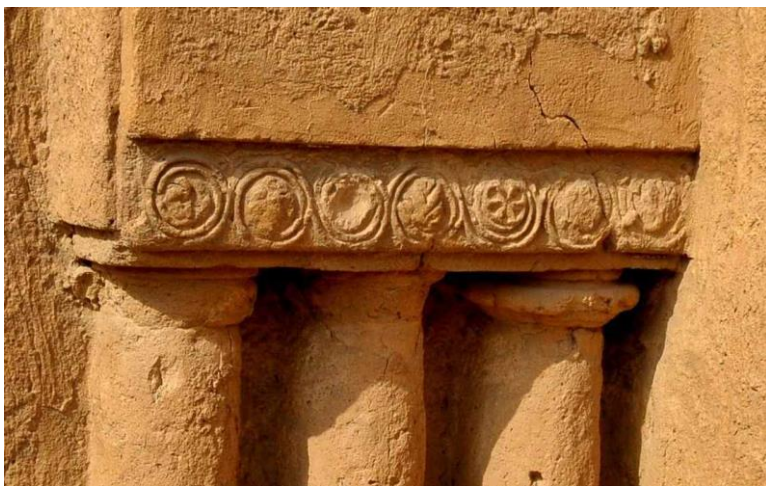


Figure 10. Close-up of the decorations in the sanctuary of the Jubayl church. (Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail\\_Church\\_column\\_closeup.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jubail_Church_column_closeup.jpg), author: Harold Brockwell)

site as a whole showed pottery that belongs to a period from at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>144</sup>. In addition, the similarity of the plaster roundels and their motifs with the ones found at Kharg may indicate that the two churches were contemporary<sup>145</sup>.

The seemingly different architecture of the Jubayl church compared with the other Gulf

churches (and also churches found in the Iraqi Western Desert)<sup>146</sup> has raised the question of whether this church belonged to a different denomination, e.g. the monophysitic (“West Syriac”) branch of Syriac Christianity<sup>147</sup>. So far this is but speculation. The simpler architecture could simply be the result of a less resourceful community, and as a dating is lacking, another possible explanation is that it was built in an earlier time than the more elaborate churches or somehow before the “standardization” of church architecture. As the site is not yet excavated and results published, there is of course also the possibility of walls

<sup>143</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 51

<sup>144</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 51

<sup>145</sup> Carter 2013: 323

<sup>146</sup> Carter 2008: 75

<sup>147</sup> Carter 2008: 98

or pillar footings being buried in the sand, and that the square room in fact was tripartite like the other churches<sup>148</sup>.

#### 4.4.3 Thaj, Saudi Arabia

According to Langfeldt's field report, a church may also have been found at *Thaj*, around 80 km west of Jubayl. This city is known from written sources, and the archaeological site, covering about 0,4 km<sup>2</sup>, is one of the largest in this part of Arabia<sup>149</sup>. The site has been dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC-4<sup>th</sup> century AD, although the last centuries apparently were a time of significant diminishment and/or abandonment<sup>150</sup>. The building in question is a small, simple, unornamented single room structure made of mudbricks on a base of hewn stone. There are other similar buildings on the site, and the only feature pointing towards this building being or functioning as a church is the doorway. The second stone from the top on either side of the jamb has a cross engraving. The stones are at about the same height, thus facing each other and giving the impression of a deliberate feature. This indicates Christians as the most likely constructors of the building.

The building gives the impression of being constructed by reused stone slabs, and then finished or repaired with mudbricks<sup>151</sup>. No significant dating evidence is found, but, given the crude and simple architecture, it might have been constructed some time during or after the general decline of Thaj. As this decline took place sometime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, a dating closer to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries is proposed as likelier than a date closer to the height of Thaj<sup>152</sup>. Whether the building actually was a church, and not just some building belonging to a Christian, remains to be concluded. Nonetheless, it indicates a Christian presence at Thaj at some point.

#### 4.4.4 Lesser finds

At Al-Hinnah, about ten kilometres north of Thaj, six stones with engraved crosses were found. These have been interpreted as Christian gravestones in a cemetery. At least one of the stones displays a cross with splayed arms similar to those at Jubayl<sup>153</sup>.

Some 10 km south of Jubayl, at *Jabal Berri*, three small crosses were found in the

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<sup>148</sup> Carter 2013: 323

<sup>149</sup> Kennet 2007: 103

<sup>150</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 48

<sup>151</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 47

<sup>152</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 49; Bin Seray 1996: 326

<sup>153</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 49

mid-1980s. Two of these have been published; one made of bronze and one of mother-of-pearl.<sup>154</sup> The bronze cross is made of two sheets soldered together, about 2 mm thick. The flaring arms are 1.6 cm wide at the junction and 3 cm wide at the ends. The horizontal arm is 8.4 cm long and the remaining part of the upright arm (the upper part is missing) is 7.3 cm long. There are tear-drop serifs at every corner, about 1.4-1.5 cm in diameter, although two are missing. The metal in the centre of the cross is quite rough. This could mean that some attachment was originally soldered to it, and holes in the centre of the arms near their ends might indicate that the cross was itself attached to another object<sup>155</sup>. The second cross is carved made of a single piece of mother of pearl, being 5 cm long and 2.6 cm wide. The arms are slightly flaring, being 0.4 cm wide in the centre and 0.7 cm wide at the ends. The base of the cross is formed as a small “stand”, and this form resembles one of the crosses of the Jubayl church<sup>156</sup>.

A certain dating of the crosses has not been done, but Potts mentions that the cross did not become a universal Christian symbol until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and that this particular form was common in other places during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>157</sup>.

Worth noting is also the discovery of an East-Syriac monastery near Jericho, which has an inscription in a mosaic floor interpreted to be the names of its four founders, one of them being “Isho’ dad of Qatar”<sup>158</sup>.

#### 4.5 The problem of dating

Even when the dating evidence is relatively abundant, some challenges still remain. At least two problems are recognized, and the two are closely intertwined: Firstly, as archaeology in the Persian Gulf is a relatively new field of study, there exist few reference collections of pottery from the area which are published and widely recognized<sup>159</sup>. Secondly, there has been a tendency to date archaeological sites in correlation with the written sources, even when the actual evidence points in other directions<sup>160</sup>. As the dating of newer sites is still dependent on comparative analysis with other sites, there is a possibility that the results are affected by the

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<sup>154</sup> Carter 2008: 98; Potts 1994: 61

<sup>155</sup> Potts 1994: 62

<sup>156</sup> Potts 1994: 63

<sup>157</sup> Potts 1994: 62

<sup>158</sup> Walker 2012: 1017

<sup>159</sup> See for example Carter 2008: 89, who is “fundamentally reliant” on the recent collection(s) and work in Kennet 2004 and 2007. He also makes reference to the Samarra horizon.; King et al. 1995: 70 cited in Salles 2011: 303

<sup>160</sup> Kennet 2007: 89



earlier, possibly wrong dating of those. Recent research has contributed significantly to correct this<sup>161</sup>, and has led to a redating to the Hellenistic/Parthian period of several sites previously assumed to be from the Sasanian period<sup>162</sup>. As the same tendency might have influenced the first dating proposals of the churches and monasteries of the Gulf (assuming that Christian building activity had to predate Islam<sup>163</sup>), this correction has also affected these sites, now generally dated to the late Sasanian/Early Islamic period rather than to the Sasanian period<sup>164</sup>.

Another challenge affecting the dating of the Gulf churches is the difficulty of dating the stucco panels and decorations. There has been a tendency to date the stucco to the Sasanian period and earlier than the pottery, as the stucco has parallels at Sasanian sites. However, the fact that similar stucco also is found at some undisputable Islamic-period sites<sup>165</sup> makes it hard to defend an early dating as long as the process of development is not understood and defined. More importantly, the wide date range for the stucco (Sasanian-Islamic periods) is “*entirely compatible with that indicated by the pottery, i.e. late 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries*”<sup>166</sup>. There has been no extensive comparative study and analysis of the decoration stuccowork so far. In this aspect, the coming publication of the PhD on Christian stucco in the Arabian Gulf and Mesopotamia by A. Lic at Oxford University (the paper and results are scheduled for 2016/17)<sup>167</sup> will be very interesting.

#### 4.6 Preliminary Summary

The archaeological finds directly associated with Christianity in Bet Qatraye are three monastic complexes, two churches, one unidentified building bearing engraved crosses, several gravestones, and three small crosses.

The five churches bear similarities in decoration and ornamentation (see figures), and except for the Jubayl church they also seem to have the same architectural structure, albeit different size. The churches at Kharg, al-Qusur and Akkaz all feature a tomb with human remains along the inner wall of one of the aisles. This indicates that all the churches belong to

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<sup>161</sup> Especially Kennet 2004

<sup>162</sup> Kennet 2007

<sup>163</sup> Carter 2013: 326

<sup>164</sup> See Kennet 2007; Carter 2008

<sup>165</sup> Carter 2013: 324f

<sup>166</sup> Carter 2013: 326

<sup>167</sup> See French-Kuwaiti Expedition in Failaka 2015, internal interim excavation report, week I, p.5

the same cultural context, and probably to the same churchly hierarchy, perhaps except for Jubayl.

The churches are roughly contemporary, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century, although the weak dating material of the church at Akkaz points to an earlier dating compared to the others. In addition, the lack of access to the Jubayl church still leaves a possibility of more detailed research and an earlier dating of this church as well.

The smaller finds are also difficult to date, but they indicate (especially the finds in Saudi Arabia) a Christian presence distributed over a fairly large area otherwise lacking evidence of Christianity. They are also the sole inland finds of north-eastern Arabia, giving an important indication that Christianity was not confined to the coast.

## 5 Reflections

The sources regarding Christianity in north-east Arabia and the islands of the Persian Gulf provide elements of information scattered over several centuries as well as a large geographical area. The textual evidence span from the early 4<sup>th</sup> to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, centred on the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, whereas the archaeological finds roughly date to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (although with some uncertainty concerning the lesser sites). The texts mention a number of places mainly around the Bahrain archipelago, whereas the large archaeological sites are scattered around the islands of the Gulf. The lesser sites are situated in eastern Saudi Arabia around and inland of Jubayl. As such, the texts and the archaeology do not overlap, neither in time nor in space, and it is difficult to say precisely in what sense they are related. It is possible that the “other islands” visited by Catholicos George prior to the synod at Deirin in

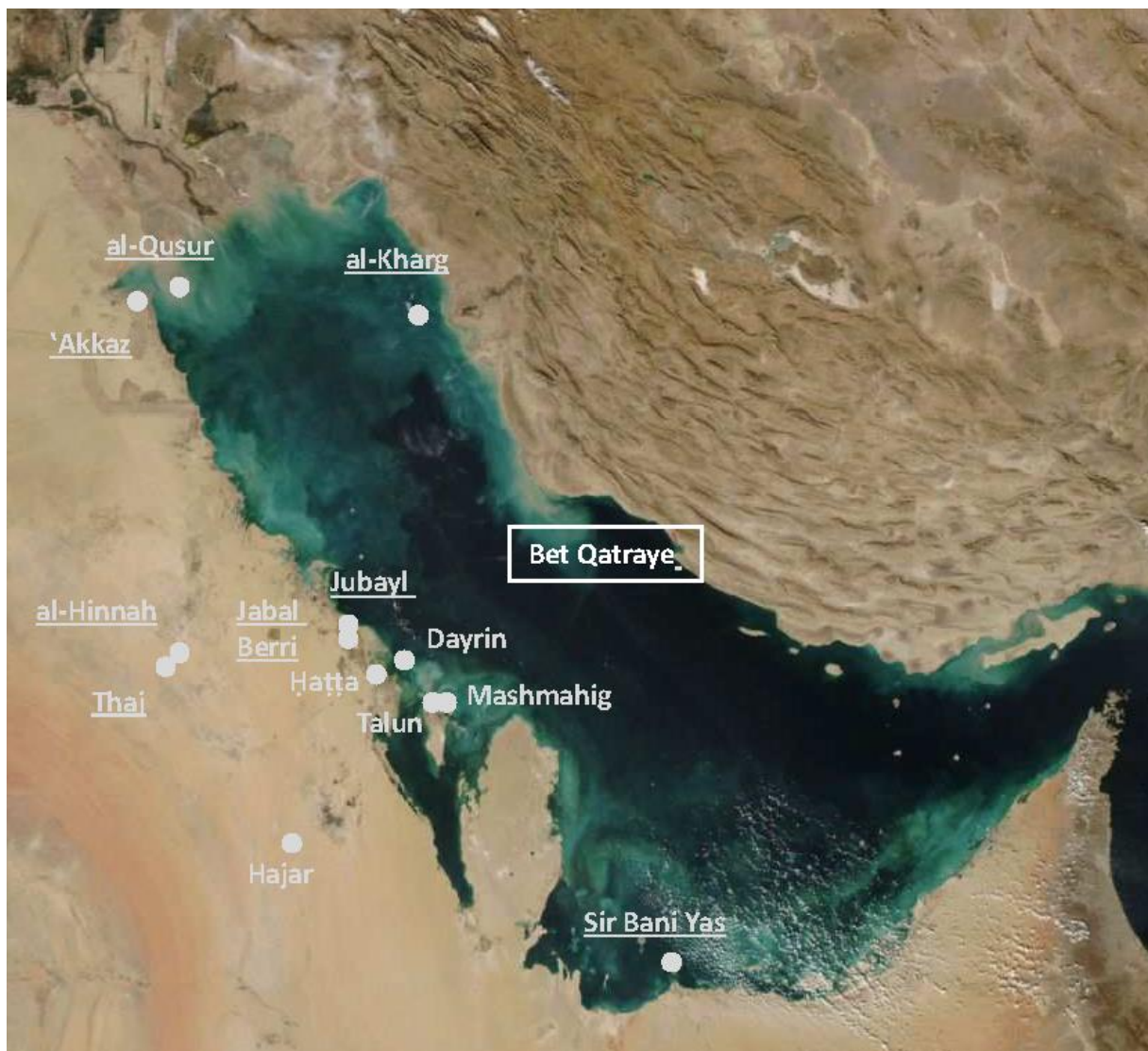


Figure 11. Places of Christian activity according to the textual and archaeological sources. (Bonnéric 2015)

identify Failaka with the island of Ramath mentioned in the *Chronicle of Seert*, and Sir Bani Yas with the “black island” of the History of Mar Younan. However, until now it has been impossible to prove that these attempts and suggestions are more than mere propositions and possibilities.

Starting in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the evidence of a Christian presence on the islands of the Gulf and on the Arabian side of the Gulf becomes increasingly stronger. The attendance of representatives from the Gulf dioceses at central synods of the Church of the East through three hundred years gives the impression of an integrated and acknowledged part of the East Syriac church organization, and the notice of the catholicos Ezechiel being sent on behalf of the king to the Gulf islands hints of some importance of the region. However, precisely how integrated and important this region was, ecclesiastically and secularly, is difficult to state from the ecclesiastical sources alone.

### 5.1 The political and economic situation in Bet Qatraye

The political role of Bet Qatraye among the regional and international powers is not very clear. The historical evidence for the Hellenistic and Parthian periods is poor, and although there are some indications of the area being under some form of formal Parthian control, it is by far certain. The historical record for the Sasanian period is notably better, but still patchy and incomplete.<sup>168</sup>

North-eastern Arabia came under Sasanian control under Ardashir, who is said to have founded cities in the region. However, the degree of control has probably varied a lot. From the reign of Shapur I the region was by large controlled as a satrapy of the client Lakhmids at Hira. The territory of modern Oman was regarded as a proper imperial province (Mazun), but by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century this control over Oman was lost, and by the early 4<sup>th</sup> century Arabian tribes from Bahrain/Bet Qatraye raided the coast of Fars, indicating that the Sasanians had lost control also over this area. These raids caused Shapur II to take further action in eastern Arabia in 325, forcing the resettling of Arabian tribes in Bahrain and organize a defensive system along the desert border to hinder further incursions<sup>169</sup>.

By the early 5<sup>th</sup> century the situation seems to have been changing again. On the one hand, the balance of power between the Sasanians and the Lakhmids seems to have changed so much that the Lakhmids asserted considerable influence on the Sasanian royalty. On the

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<sup>168</sup> Kennet 2007: 86

<sup>169</sup> Kennet 2007: 87



other hand, the establishment of Christianity during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and the organization of the Church centred on the Sasanian capital, with Bet Qatraye/Bahrain under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Rew-Ardashir in Fars, indicates some Persian influence as well. In the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, the central Arabian Kinda confederation challenged Lakhmid influence over north-eastern Arabia, and probably also disrupted Lakhmid control over Bahrain/Bet Qatraye. It has been suggested that this could explain the lack of Arabian attendees at the Church synods between 424 and 544<sup>170</sup>.

Sasanian and Lakhmid control over Bahrain and Oman (as well as over Yemen) was re-established under the reign of Khosrow I (531-579), with indications of a Persian official in Bahrain for the first time since Ardashir, as well as the establishment of forts and garrisons in both Bahrain and Oman, implying a more direct control than earlier. Despite difficulties in the Sasanian-Lakhmid relations at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the weakening of Sasanian power at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, both regions are assumed to have been formal Sasanian provinces until the Islamic conquest.

It thus seems that there is a pattern in eastern Arabia of three distinct Sasanian military interventions and impositions of direct control, followed by a gradual, slow drift away from this control, until the lack of control prompted a new intervention. The reason for the Sasanian interest in Arabia is not known, and the suggestions includes commerce, natural resources, competition with Byzantium and the need to defend the eastern border of Mesopotamia<sup>171</sup>.

The Sasanians were expelled from Arabia by Islamic forces in 630, and the dynasty itself collapsed in 650 after the Islamic conquest of Persia<sup>172</sup>. The Islamic conquest of eastern Arabia and the Sasanian empire could be a reason for the lack of Arabian attendees at the Church synods between 576 and 676 (and could also have affected the rebellion against the catholicos in the 7<sup>th</sup> century), but as Seleucia-Ctesiphon was conquered in 637, the disruption in communications was probably not that severe or long-lasting<sup>173</sup>.

The region was an area of unrest also after the Islamic conquest. First, in the Ridda wars, later due to the al-Julanda of Oman declaring independence at the rise of the Umayyads, and again towards the end of the Umayyad period<sup>174</sup>. The area was affected by the Zanj rebellion in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and towards the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Qaramita state arose

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<sup>170</sup> Kennet 2007: 88

<sup>171</sup> Kennet 2007: 88-89

<sup>172</sup> King 2001: 80

<sup>173</sup> Healey 2000: 228

<sup>174</sup> King 2001: 84-85

centred on Bahrain and al-Hasa, maintaining a powerful position for the most part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>175</sup>.

After a major review of the archaeological sites in eastern Arabia, Kennet argued that there has been a tendency to harmonize the archaeological finds with the historical records, having resulted in a significant number of sites being wrongly or doubtfully classified as Sasanian-period rather than Hellenistic-/Parthian-period, probably due to the comparatively better historical record for the Sasanian period in the area<sup>176</sup>. There are also some sites, mostly the excavated churches in the Gulf, that initially were dated to the Sasanian period rather than to the early Islamic period. The survey leaves an impression of the Sasanian period as a period of very little activity compared with the “*wealth of evidence that exists for the Hellenistic/Parthian period*”<sup>177</sup>. Very important in this aspect are the five large sites of Thaj, Failaka, Qala’at al-Bahrain, Mleiha and Ed-Dur. Although not entirely contemporary, all of these sites flourished during the Hellenistic/Parthian period, but the evidence for activity into the Sasanian period is greatly reduced, and they all seem to have been abandoned by the later Sasanian period.

*“Indeed, no significant later Sasanian-period site has yet been found on Bahrain, in Kuwait or in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It is only in northern ‘Uman at Kush and possibly Khatt that substantial occupation of this period has been found, but neither of these sites is on a scale anywhere close to the five Hellenistic/Parthian sites discussed here. [...] Five sites of this scale in an area roughly the size of the Levant would represent a very low level of development, but given the aridity and low agricultural productivity of eastern Arabia the Hellenistic/Parthian period represents a notable peak in settlement.”*<sup>178</sup>

The same pattern of a significant reduction in Sasanian-period evidence compared to the Hellenistic/Parthian period is also found in the number of rural settlement sites and coin deposits, and taken together Kennet presents the cause as being a “decline in both economic activity and population across the region”<sup>179</sup>. This decline started possibly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century

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<sup>175</sup> King 2001: 85-86

<sup>176</sup> Kennet 2007: 89

<sup>177</sup> Kennet 2007: 103

<sup>178</sup> Kennet 2007: 104

<sup>179</sup> Kennet 2007: 106

and span over a period of three or four centuries, with no sign of recovery until the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, although the contrast between “boom” and “recession” was possibly more marked in the Thaj region than in Oman<sup>180</sup>. This leaves an impression of the region as quite poor and low on population, and not very integrated into the Sasanian economy, which could explain why it seemingly was of little interest to the Sasanian Empire<sup>181</sup>. What caused this decline in settlement and economic activity is not clear, and changes in both trade patterns and climate has been proposed, although lacking evidence for both alternatives<sup>182</sup>.

The economic situation seems to have improved significantly in the early Islamic period, indicated by the increased number of archaeological finds from this period. A key feature from this period is the irrigated hinterland of Sohar in Oman, being developed in this period and reaching its full extension by the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>183</sup>.

The Islamic conquest at first did not significantly change the situation for the Christians in the former Sasanian empire. The ruling class was replaced, but both the social composition and the administrative organization of the society remained roughly the same. Although persecutions later occurred under the Abbasids, the Muslim caliphs let the Church stay largely self-governing. The catholicos was responsible for the taxation and discipline of the Christian population, which, due to the vast number of Christians under his jurisdiction, made him one of the most powerful and influential figures in the Caliphate<sup>184</sup>.

This led the caliphs to exercise strict control of the loyalty of the catholicate, imposing twelve of the thirty new catholicos of the first four centuries of Islamic rule, and imprisoning several of the others<sup>185</sup>. These actions underscored the importance of a good relationship with the caliph and the Muslim authorities, which, when amicable, opened new possibilities for the Church. Especially successful was catholicos Timotheos I during his 43 years in office (780-823). Having moved his see to the new Abbasid capital of Baghdad, he managed to build a good relationship with the court, engaging in theological debates, administrating the translation of philosophical works from Syriac to Arabic on behalf of the caliph<sup>186</sup>, getting permission to rebuild churches destroyed by earlier caliphs<sup>187</sup> and administrating missionary

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<sup>180</sup> Kennet 2007: 106

<sup>181</sup> Kennet 2007: 110

<sup>182</sup> Kennet 2007: 110

<sup>183</sup> Kennet 2007: 108

<sup>184</sup> Baumer 2006: 148

<sup>185</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 43; 59

<sup>186</sup> Walker 2012: 1024

<sup>187</sup> Baum & Winkler 2003: 60

activity in the East, all the way to India and China, in which the sea route through the Gulf was an important link of communication<sup>188</sup>.

Although the period during and following the catholicosate of Timotheos is sometimes referred to as a “golden age” and the apogee of eastern Christianity<sup>189</sup>, it is important to note that it also was a period of increasing difficulty. The caliphs were gradually increasing the pressure on Christians and non-Muslim communities. Extra taxes (the “*jizya*”) was a factor all along, being a Muslim as prerequisite for many official positions came later, as well as varying decrees on Christian clothing and conduct. Christians were gradually converting to Islam ever since the conquest, many motivated by the prospect of an easier living as Muslims. Against this, as well as against the ban against missionary activity and the death penalty for Muslim apostasy backed by a consolidating Islamic government, the church, even with a strong catholicos, had little chance affecting the rate of conversion<sup>190</sup>.

Against this background, it appears that Bet Qatraye was a region of lesser political importance to the Sasanian Empire, and a region of little economic activity in the Sasanian period compared to the preceding and subsequent periods. This might balance the impression given by the ecclesiastical sources of a significant (ecclesiastical) region in close contact with the Sasanian heartlands. It is possible that the reason why the dioceses of Bet Qatraye were originally subordinate to the metropolitan in Fars, was because Bet Qatraye was a less important and populated region at the time. This might also be a cause for the gaps in attendance at the synods. No representative from Bet Qatraye is mentioned at synods in the periods 424-544 and 576-676 (except for the correspondence between Jacob of Deirin and catholicos Isho’yahb I sometime between 582 and 592), and although this might be due to political events in the region (as noted above), it might also be due to a lower degree of activity and importance of the region than usually proposed.

## 5.2 A boom of Christian activity in the 7<sup>th</sup> century?

The political and economic situation also provides a background for the development of Christian activity in Bat Qatraye. It appears that as the economic situation improved in the early Islamic period, so did the Christian activity. The appearance of the writers attributed to Bet Qatraye happened in this period, as did the construction of the many churches known

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<sup>188</sup> Carter 2008: 105

<sup>189</sup> Carter 2013: 326

<sup>190</sup> Baumer 2006: 151, 156

from the archaeological excavations, and the largest of them were not placed in the most populated areas. The concentration of archaeological evidence from the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries is indeed striking, regarded as a sudden bloom in church building in the Gulf area<sup>191</sup>.

However, projecting the process of general economic recovery directly onto the Christian community and assuming that it was as significant there may be problematic. Salles<sup>192</sup> argues that the proposed “boom” of Christianity in the Gulf has got unnaturally much attention. As the textual sources tell, monasticism was far from unknown in the Gulf before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the synod of George in 676, proposed by Carter to be a possible cause for the church-building, presupposes the existence of churches and monasteries, as do the canons of Isho’yahb I almost a century earlier. The monastic activity clearly did not start with the synod of George, and considering the textual material, it is difficult to say if the archaeological finds are the result of an increase in activity, or just a renewal. Likewise, the writers of Bet Qatraye and the hypothetical school precede the synod of George, and could therefore not be an effect of it.

Salles proposes an alternative hypothesis for the development of the monasteries in the Gulf, in particular al-Qusur, which he identifies with the monastery founded by Abdisho at Ramath in the 4<sup>th</sup> century according to the *Chronicle of Seert*: A small community could have gathered around the hermit Abdisho, leaving no archaeological traces, slowly developing in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries into the community that became the basis for the construction of the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century complex. Although this hypothesis is hard to defend, it could help explain the presence of an agricultural community at al-Qusur after the main monastic phase (cf. the grinder), of which there so far has been found no trace of predecessors and which has been of little interest to the scholars<sup>193</sup>.

### 5.3 The textual silence

The combination of textual and archaeological sources makes it possible to get a fair impression of Christianity in eastern Arabia, and the lack of overlap between them is not as problematic as one may think. Lack of overlap does not necessarily mean contradiction, and the sources could offer different and complementary perspectives<sup>194</sup>.

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<sup>191</sup> Carter 2008: 105

<sup>192</sup> Salles 2011

<sup>193</sup> Salles 2011: 306

<sup>194</sup> Carter 2013: 327

The lack of archaeological finds from before the 7<sup>th</sup> century does not necessarily indicate an absence of Christians, as it can be explained otherwise: Earlier churches could have been constructed out of simpler, notwithstanding material that leave few remains, such as wood and mudbricks, or the parish church could have been located in a common house impossible for archaeologists to identify as a church. The churches could also have been located in populated, later urban, areas, which could have caused damage to or reuse of the remains, and/or construction of modern buildings on top, which would have concealed them and made them virtually impossible to rediscover. It is not unthinkable that this might have been the case in the Bahrain archipelago and the area around al-Qatif<sup>195</sup>. If so, and as several of the episcopal sees mentioned in the texts are identified with these highly populated areas, there is a possibility that corresponding churches will never be found. There is also a possibility that such earlier structures exist, but have not been found in the vast area of eastern Arabia yet.

It is also interesting that none of the archaeological sites are specifically mentioned in the texts. The complexes of Kharg and al-Qusur are large enough to be expected to be mentioned if the construction had been completed in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, especially if one of these was the site of the hypothetical school of Bet Qatraye. An easy and probable explanation is of course that the structures were not yet constructed. In addition, the letters of Isho'yahb III and the canons of Isho'yahb I and of George, the texts that are giving the most information and that could be expected to give some details about the monasteries, are mainly concerned with church hierarchy and jurisdiction, in which the monasteries seem to play a secondary role. Some of the canons (e.g. canon XV of George) seem indeed to be aimed to confine the influence of the monasteries over the laypeople. With such an aim, detailed descriptions of what one should not care too much about may be considered unnecessary or not strictly necessary.

The possibility that the monastic complexes did exist at the time of George, and that there should have been traces of them in the texts, has led to other speculations. The communities linked to the archaeological sites, in this case Kharg, could have belonged to another branch of Syriac Christianity<sup>196</sup> (i.e. the Monophysite, Jacobite West Syriac), and were thus not accountable to or interesting to the catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Although this is not impossible, and although it points to the interesting question of the identity of the

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<sup>195</sup> Carter 2013: 314

<sup>196</sup> Potts 2004

Christians in the Gulf, the allegation is hard to substantiate, and the similarity with the other Gulf churches does not support such an explanation.

Considering the number of archaeological sites from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the paucity of textual sources from the same period deserves a comment. It has been proposed that catholicos George was unsuccessful in the end, his synod only temporarily reconciling the bishops of Bet Qatraye with himself, thus explaining why the bishops of Bet Qatraye are not mentioned at later synods. This is possibly mainly a historiographical problem; as the textual sources are far from abundant, absence does not necessarily imply anything happened<sup>197</sup>.

#### 5.4 The identity of Christians of Arabia (“Christians” and “Nazarenes”)

The similarity of the Gulf churches with churches found in Iraq, combined with the textual evidence of Gulf churches under the supervision of the catholicos of the Church of the East, has led to the assumption that the excavated Gulf churches also belong to this denomination. The majority of the Christians within the Sasanian sphere belonged to the East Syriac branch, but other Christian or pseudo-Christian groups are witnessed in Persia already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and at the time of the excavated Gulf churches, the Christians of the Arabian Peninsula were by no means a homogenic group. A crucial factor in this regard is the use and meaning of the term “Nazarenes” (syr. Nazraya, gr. Nazoraios, arb. Nasrani).

The inscription of the chief priest Kirdir of king Bahram II in Fars in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century gives evidence of a religiously diverse Persia. Written in Middle Persian, the Zoroastrian priest boasts the destruction of cult sites of “the Jews (jahud), Buddhists (saman), Hindus (braman), Nazarenes (nacaray), Christians (kristiyan), ‘makdag’, and Manichaeans (zandik)”<sup>198</sup>. De Blois sees this as describing four religious traditions: the Jews, Indian religions, followers of Christ, and the community of the Manichaeans<sup>199</sup>. What is interesting here is that the pairs are internally distinct<sup>200</sup>, the term “Nazarene” is probably meant as distinct from “Christian”. Although the term certainly derives from the town Nazareth with which Jesus is associated, the term was used by the Jews before the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century as a name for Jewish Christian groups, but not for “catholic”, Nicene Christians. Likewise, from

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<sup>197</sup> Carter 2013: 327

<sup>198</sup> Walker 2012: 998-999. «Makdag» is often referred to as a term for the baptist sect of the Elchasaites, but the etymology is uncertain, cf. de Blois 2002: 6, his note 31.

<sup>199</sup> De Blois 2002: 6-7

<sup>200</sup> However, the auditors and the electi of the Manichaeans do not differ significantly in teaching, and the etymological evidence for “makdag” as related to the auditors is weak (see de Blois 2002: 7), thereby weakening the theory that the religious traditions are mentioned in pairs. However, this does not affect the distinction between “Christian” and “Nazarene”.

the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, “Nazarene” is used by Christian authors as a name for Jewish Christian heretical sects, but not as a self-designation of Christians in any language, except in Arabic<sup>201</sup>.

As the inscription is no Christian self-designation, some<sup>202</sup> propose that “Nazarene” is the term used by non-Christians do designate “native” Christians, and that “foreign” Christians, the Christians of western origin deported to Persia by Ardashir and Shapur I, are the ones named “Christians”<sup>203</sup>. “Nazarene” is used by some Syriac writers in this way, as a designation for Christians made by native non-believers, but in the Middle Persian corpus it appears only once, in the inscription of Kirdir. The most common designation for Christians, no matter the speaker’s faith, is “tarsag”, “God-fearer”, and also the Syriac loanword “kristiyan”, “Christians”<sup>204</sup>. It is thus likely that “Christians” is the term designating the Christian groups of the Sasanian empire, and that “Nazarenes” designate other groups that bear similarities with the Christians, but probably are not regarded as such by them, for instance Jewish Christians.

The Arabic “nasrani” (pl. “nasara”), the common Arabic word for “Christian”, is usually considered to relate to Nazareth (ar. an-Nasirah). However, the etymology does not seem to support this too well, neither does it support a derivation of the word from Hebrew or Aramaic/Syriac, possibly indicating a different origin of the term, and that the “nasara” of the Qur’an were not Nicene Christians, but rather representatives of the different Jewish Christian sects called Nazoraeans in Christian heresiographies<sup>205</sup>. This theory is somewhat disturbed by the fact that the term was used also as a self-designation by Nicene Christians writing in Arabic in the Abbasid period. The fringes of Arabia were in the 7<sup>th</sup> century mainly influenced by the large Nicene churches: “Melkites” in the north and west, “Nestorians” in the east, and Ethiopian monophysites followed by Persian “Nestorians” in the south, thus leaving little room for heretics. Central Arabia is however less known, and is not mentioned as a territory with a presence of the large churches at this time, and could still have housed heretical sects as the Nazoraeans. It is also possible that the meaning of the term had widened somewhat from its use in the Qur’an to contain also Nicene Christians in the Abbasid period.

De Blois strengthens this point by pointing to what is normally considered anti-Christian polemics in the Qur’an. It is striking that some of the accusations made against the

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<sup>201</sup> De Blois 2002: 2

<sup>202</sup> Walker 2012: 999

<sup>203</sup> De Blois 2002: 9

<sup>204</sup> De Blois 2002: 9-10

<sup>205</sup> De Blois 2002: 11-12



*nasara* regarding theology, e.g. the trinity and food regulations, are hardly fitting descriptions of the theology of the known, i.e. Nicene, churches in the region. The accusations could be intentional distortions, but it is also possible that they are actual descriptions of somebody's beliefs. If they represent actual beliefs, they seem to fit a Jewish Christian sect like the Nazoraeans better<sup>206</sup>.

*"[...] one should seriously consider that the nasara of the Quran were indeed Nazoraeans and that it is consequently likely that there was a community of Nazoraean Christians in central Arabia, in the seventh century, unnoticed by the outside world."*<sup>207</sup>

The inscription of Kirdir indicates that Jewish Christian groups being called "Nazarenes" were present within the Sasanian empire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and the Arabic word *nasrani* might bear the same meaning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Whether these groups were present at the north-eastern coast of Arabia is hard to tell, but there is a possibility that the Christian communities of north-eastern Arabia, and particularly the inland communities, had some contact with them.

## 5.5 Preliminary summary

This chapter has presented some issues relevant for the interpretation of the sources to our knowledge of Christianity in Bet Qatraye. The texts and archaeological finds do not overlap, but the lack of overlap neither confirms nor rejects a relation between the two groups of sources. The texts do in fact presuppose the existence of churches and monasteries. The seemingly sudden increase in Christian activity in the Gulf region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century might explain the construction of the buildings excavated at the different archaeological sites, and might be seen in contrast to the little political interest and economic activity of the region in the Sasanian period. However, it is not clear how sharp this contrast is, and it might not indicate that there were no such buildings present in the preceding centuries.

The religious composition of north-eastern Arabia in the Sasanian and early Islamic period is not definitely known. Although the textual sources are connected to the Church of the East, there might have been other Christian denominations and sects present in the region. Likewise, a better understanding and implementation of the political, social and economic

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<sup>206</sup> De Blois 2002: 13-16

<sup>207</sup> De Blois 2002: 16

context might contribute to the interpretation of the sources to our knowledge of Christianity in the area.

## 6 Summary

The sources to our knowledge of Christianity in Bet Qatraye given by the textual and archaeological sources presented in this thesis span over several centuries and a large geographical area. The texts are mainly documents related to the Church of the East, spanning four hundred years, from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, with sporadic references to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, mentioning a number of places and episcopal sees mainly around the Bahrain archipelago. The archaeological sources, on the other hand, at this point roughly date to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (with some uncertainty related to the lesser finds), and are scattered around the islands of the Gulf, as well as around and inland of Jubayl, Saudi Arabia. The churches seem to bear several similarities in architecture and decoration despite the geographical dispersion. As such, the texts and the archaeology do not overlap, neither temporal nor geographical, and although there is no reason to regard them as contradicting, it is difficult to determine how closely related these two categories of sources are.

The information provided by these sources indicates a substantial Christian presence in large parts of the Persian Gulf from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. At least five episcopal sees and three large monastic complexes have been identified, and several theological writers influential beyond the borders of the Gulf region are related to the region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Christians in this region had contact with the surrounding regions through trade and ecclesiastical business, although the importance of Bet Qatraye and the grade of interaction with the Sasanian heartlands in “secular politics” is uncertain. The texts indicate that the Christians in the region were a part of the Church of the East, but whether the Christians in the region were a homogenic group in this period, or if there were different denominations and sects present is not certain.

The main contribution of the thesis compared to earlier presentations of the sources to our knowledge of Christianity in Bet Qatraye, is that this thesis includes recent research on al-Qusur, which can now with a high degree of confidence be regarded as a monastic complex. In addition, the level of detail of the presentation, particularly of the archaeological sites, compiled in one document, provide otherwise available only through several articles.

The lack of overlap between the textual and archaeological sources, and the uncertain relations between the presented evidence and the wider context, lead to some propositions for further research. Firstly, it would be useful to continue the archaeological excavations and analyses of the sites already known, and with certainty establish the dates of the sites. It would of course also be desirable to open new excavations, preferably in the areas identified in the textual sources. Work on publishing and studying Syriac literature should also be continued, possibly providing more information on the ecclesiastical and administrative context.

Secondly, in order to better understand the development of Christian activity in the region and the size, composition, and social position of the known Christian communities, any information on the Sasanian and Early Islamic periods in the region concerning politics, economics, ethnography and language could be useful.

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