

## The Melkite *Synaxaria*

*Majmū' li-l-sana kullihā tadhkūr fihi akhbār al-qiddīsīn...*, 'Compilation for the entire year mentioning the lives of the saints' (and similar titles); known collectively as the Melkite *synaxaria*

DATE Originates in second half of 11<sup>th</sup> century; later additions

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic translation of a Greek original; Arabic additions

### DESCRIPTION

The present entry is a postscript to the entry on the 'Synaxarion of the Great Church' (q.v.), the Greek Synaxarion of Constantinople, in which the existence of an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic translation of the Greek work is mentioned. What follows is wholly dependent upon J.-M. Sauget, *Premières recherches sur l'origine et les caractéristiques des synaxaires melkites*, which despite its provisional-sounding title remains the crucial study of the Arabic-language *synaxaria* of the Melkite churches between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A *synaxarion*, let it be recalled, is a liturgical book which lists, for each day of the year (beginning with September 1 in the Byzantine calendar), the feasts of saints and other commemorations observed on that day. Entries may be very terse, little more than the name of a saint and perhaps a few words of identification; or they may include an account of the life, martyrdom, or event being commemorated, varying in length from a few lines to a couple of pages.

Sauget has demonstrated that, sometime in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a particular recension of the Greek Synaxarion of Constantinople (which he labeled G, very similar to the text preserved in MS Milan Ambrosiana C 101 Sup.) was translated into Arabic for use in the Melkite churches, the largely Arabic-speaking Chalcedonian patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. (The oldest dated witness to this Arabic translation is MS Sinai Ar. 417 of 1095.) This 'archetype' of the Melkite *synaxarion*, however, was not transmitted without change; rather, commemorations were gradually

added to the 'primitive' calendar. At the Monastery of St Catherine, for example, a set of commemorations specific to the life of that monastery were added, which Sauget called 'le propre du Mont Sinai' (see *Premières recherches*, pp. 181-84). Sauget also identified about 35 commemorations as part of a 'propre melkite normal', which may have originated as an attempt to reform and contextualize the *synaxarion* by bringing into it a number of commemorations specific to the Melkite (as opposed to the Byzantine) churches (see *Premières recherches*, pp. 176-80). Judging from the manuscript evidence, these 'propers' were in existence by 1237 (the date of the MSS Sinai Ar. 418 and 421), and may have originated considerably earlier.

The 'propre du Mont Sinai' and the 'propre melkite normal' do not exhaust the additional commemorations found in the manuscript tradition; Sauget also listed 'commémoraisons du propre melkite moins diffusées' (*Premières recherches*, p. 181); these 'less widespread' commemorations sometimes occur in just one of the manuscripts he studied. Sauget set the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the end point for his inquiry into the Melkite *synaxaria*, noting that Meletius Karmā (patriarch of Antioch, 1634-35) prepared a new *synaxarion* (translated from Greek) for use among the Melkites. However, Sauget also showed how the Melkite *synaxaria* were adapted for use in Maronite circles (where his evidence is a set of manuscripts of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries; *Premières recherches*, pp. 185-92).

Flusin ('Synaxarion') has already listed the commemorations in the Synaxarion of Constantinople that make reference to Arab Muslims – many of which are commemorations of neomartyrs. These entries, translated into Arabic, became part of the Melkite *synaxaria*. In addition, the Arabic Melkite *synaxaria* add a number of relevant commemorations, again mostly of neomartyrs; these are listed below. They form part of Sauget's 'propre melkite normal' unless otherwise indicated.

22 October (*Premières recherches*, pp. 310-11): 63 martyrs of Jerusalem 'in the days of the Muslims'. The notice continues that they are venerated at a church outside Jerusalem, near that of St Stephen. These martyrs, a group of pilgrims to Jerusalem who were taken prisoner in 724, are known from Greek martyr accounts; see *CMR* 1, pp. 327-29, *BHG* 1217-18 and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 360-63.

24 December (*Premières recherches*, pp. 332-34; a 'less widespread' commemoration): Antony the Qurayshite, for whom it is mentioned that a *Martrydom* exists (*wa-lahu khabar*). This is a reference to the

well-known story of Rawḥ al-Qurashī, called Antony after his conversion, put to death for apostasy in 799; see *CMR* 1, pp. 498-501.

30 January (*Premières recherches*, pp. 343-44): Kyriakos of Mar Saba, whom 'the *amīr* of Jerusalem had cut [off his extremities? to bits?] in the days of the Muslims'. The circumstances of this martyrdom are not known.

1 February (*Premières recherches*, pp. 344-45, a 'less widespread' commemoration): Rizqallāh of Tripoli. One MS (Paris Ar. 254 of the 15<sup>th</sup> century) briefly relates the story of Rizqallāh ibn Naba', a Christian in the service of one Azdamur, *nā'ib* of Tripoli. He suffered a falling-out with a Muslim associate who demanded money from him and eventually resorted to torture in an attempt to get the sum he was demanding. Rizqallāh swore 'by the Son of God' that he had no more money – and was then decapitated for that oath, and thus died (according to the narrator) 'for the name of Christ'. On the basis of the identity of the *nā'ib*, Ḥabīb Zayyāt suggested a date of 1363-65 for the story ('Shuhadā', p. 461); but Tūmā Bīṭār (*Al-qiddīsūn al-mansiyyūn*, pp. 263-64, 268-70) has recently discovered an independent *Martyrdom* that dates Rizqallāh's death to 1477 (see the entry for Rizqallāh in *CMR*, forthcoming).

12 February (*Premières recherches*, pp. 352-56, from the proper of Mt Sinai): John, bishop of Mt Sinai. The notice tells the story of an invasion of the monastery by soldiers of the *Banī Hājar* ('Hagarenes', not further identified but to be distinguished from the local beduin Arabs). They ransacked the monastery, seeking hidden wealth; when they found nothing, they began to torture the monks. At that point, Bishop John insisted that they turn their attention to him and him alone – which they did, inflicting grievous harm on the venerable monk. Eventually the marauders departed, but John died of his injuries three days later. He had spent 53 years in the monastery, 20 of them as bishop. The events are dated to 1091 in the Era of the Incarnation, suggesting a date of 12 February 1083 for John's death (and 1063-83 for his tenure as bishop).

9 March (*Premières recherches*, pp. 366-67): 'Abd al-Masiḥ, 'who was martyred in the city of al-Ramlā'. This is a reference to the well-known story of 'Abd al-Masiḥ (Qays al-Ghassāni), superior of Mt Sinai, who was put to death for apostasy under the Umayyads; see *CMR* 1, pp. 684-87 (and, for the date of the martyrdom, add A. Bingeli, 'L'hagiographie du Sinaï en arabe...', *Pd'O* 32 (2007) 175-77).

21 May (*Premières recherches*, pp. 380-83): Christopher, patriarch of Antioch, 'martyred in the days of the Muslims'. Patriarch Christopher was murdered by opponents of the Ḥamdānid ruler Sayf al-Dawla on May 22, 967. For the *Life of Christopher* written by Ibrāhīm ibn Yūḥannā al-Anṭākī, see *CMR* 2, pp. 612-13.

19 July (*Premières recherches*, pp. 411-14): Michael of Mar Saba and Theodore of Edessa; the former was 'martyred in the city of Jerusalem'. These stories are likewise well known; the Arabic *Life* of Theodore of Edessa places them during the reign of al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-33). For the *Martyrdom* of Michael of Mar Saba, see *CMR* 1, pp. 911-15; for the *Life* of Theodore of Edessa, see *CMR* 2, pp. 585-93.

21 August (*Premières recherches*, pp. 427-29, a 'less widespread' commemoration): Isaac of Ḥamā. As in the case of Rizqallāh of Tripoli, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century MS Paris Ar. 254 relates the story of his martyrdom. The priest Ishāq of the village of Ḥanāk was arrested, apparently for his bold public preaching. He refused various blandishments and offers designed to persuade him to renounce his faith, and was finally decapitated outside the city of Ḥamā, though an attempt to burn his body was foiled by a sudden downpour of rain. Isaac does not appear to be otherwise known; even the details of his martyrdom as presented here were later 'appropriated' by that of Rizqallāh of Tripoli; see Tūmā Bīṭār, *Al-qiddīsūn al-mansiyyūn*, pp. 494-500.

We note that apart from the stories of Rizqallāh of Tripoli and Isaac of Ḥamā, related in a single 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, the entries for the additional neomartyrs are very brief. While the *synaxaria* do not hesitate to say that several martyrdoms took place 'in the days of the Muslims' (63 martyrs; Kyriakos; Christopher), almost nothing is said about Islamic faith. Indeed, John of Mt Sinai and Rizqallāh of Tripoli were not tortured for 'religious' reasons, but in order to get them to divulge where their wealth was hidden! Ironically, it is the latter story that reveals a specifically confessional disagreement: Rizqallāh, under torture, swore by 'the Son of God' that he had no more money. That oath was deemed blasphemous and deserving of death by Rizqallāh's Muslim torturer; but, according to the narrator, it qualified Rizqallāh as a Christian martyr.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The Melkite *synaxaria* preserve and celebrate the memory of a number of figures who played a role in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, Christian neomartyrs in particular. Several *Lives* or *Martyrdoms*

devoted to these figures have already been treated in the pages of *CMR* (e.g., Antony the Qurayshite, ‘Abd al-Masiḥ of Mt Sinai, Patriarch Christopher of Antioch, Michael of Mar Saba and Theodore of Edessa); the *synaxaria* are a witness to their ongoing significance in the life of the Melkite churches. This significance should not be underestimated. The *synaxaria* were regularly read in the liturgy and helped to shape the self-understanding of Melkite communities within the *Dār al-Islām*. In particular, the regular commemoration of saints who had died at the hands of Muslims served to define and harden communal boundaries; they urged Christians to cling to their faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and, if called upon to do so, to confess that faith with boldness, even unto death.

In addition, the Melkite *synaxaria* preserve for contemporary historians the mention of figures otherwise unknown or only poorly known (e.g. Kyriakos of Mar Saba, John of Mt Sinai, Rizqallāh of Tripoli, and Isaac of Ḥamā), and may serve as a starting point for further research.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

Sauget found 19 manuscripts upon which to base his study; these are thoroughly described in *Premières recherches*, ch. 1, pp. 37-103, and are listed here:

- MS London, British Library – Or. 11574 (11<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 417 (1095)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 410 B-A (1103)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 412 (12<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 418 (1237)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 421 (1237)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 413 (1285)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 420 (1287)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 414 (13<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 416 (13<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek – Sachau 138 (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek – Sachau 127 (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Paris, BNF – Ar. 254 (15<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Paris, BNF – Ar. 255 (15<sup>th</sup> century, restored in 17<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Vat – Ar. 472 (1560-61, restored in 1633)
- MS Harissa, Couvent de Saint-Paul – Ar. 70 (16<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Vat – Syr. 243 (1665-1666)
- MS Vat – Ar. 621 (1709)

MS Vat – Syr. 412 (last half of 18<sup>th</sup> century)

Undoubtedly this list can be extended.

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

There is no critical edition of any recension of the medieval Melkite *synaxaria*. A number of passages are transcribed, with a French translation, in Sauget, *Premières recherches*, passim.

STUDIES

J.-M. Sauget, *Littératures et manuscrits des chrétientés syriaques et arabes*, ed. L. Duval-Arnould and F. Rilliet (*Studi e Testi* 389), Vatican City, 1998 (includes a reprint of ‘À propos des “Premières recherches sur l’origine et les caractéristiques des synaxaires melkites (XI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)”’ at pp. 175-84)

Tümā Biṭār, *Al-qiddīsūn al-mansiyyūn fī l-turāth al-Anṭākī*, Beirut, 1995 (made use of Sauget, *Premières recherches*; helpful material on the neomartyrs)

J.-M. Sauget, *Premières recherches sur l’origine et les caractéristiques des synaxaires melkites (XI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (*Subsidia hagiographica* 45), Brussels, 1969 (the fundamental study)

J.-M. Sauget, ‘À propos des “Premières recherches sur l’origine et les caractéristiques des synaxaires melkites (XI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)”’, in *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis, 1898-1968, fondateur et directeur de l’Orient syrien, 1956-1967*, Louvain, 1969, 37-46 (helpful brief presentation of Sauget, *Premières recherches*)

Graf, *GCAL* i, 491-96

Ḥabīb Zayyāt, ‘Shuhadā’ al-Naṣrāniyya fī l-Islām’, *Al-Mashriq* 36 (1938) 459-65 (useful material on several neomartyrs)

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