

RAMELLI: *Atti di Mar Mari*

Testi del Vicino Oriente antico 7

Pp.234. Brescia: Paideia, 2008. Paperback, € 25.80

ISBN 978-88-394-0745-0

Review by Sebastian Brock, Oxford

Thanks to the model set by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, the history of the Christian Church outside the Roman Empire has suffered badly from neglect at the hands of most modern historians of the Early Church. Happily, things are beginning to change, and the relevance of sources for Late Antiquity in languages other than Greek and Latin are now beginning to receive more attention. The present volume provides an excellent example of the presentation of an important source in translation for the benefit of scholars unable to read the text in its Syriac original.

According to tradition, Mari ('Mar' corresponds to 'St') was one of the 70 (72) apostles who evangelized what is today Iraq. The story of his missionary journey starts off from Edessa, since Mari is described as having been commissioned to go and preach 'in the region of Babel (Babylon)' by Addai (Thaddaeus), also one of the 70, who, according to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, I.13), had been sent by Thomas after the death of Jesus to Edessa (modern Urfa in southeast Turkey), where he healed and converted the local king, Abgar the Black. According to his *Acts*, Mari's travels take him first to Nisibis and then to such places as Erbil, Shahgird (to the east of Kerkuk), and Seleucia-Ctesiphon (to the south of Baghdad), which in due course was to become the seat of the Catholicos of the Church of the East in the Persian Empire. He ended his life at Dur Qunni, a little further south, and it was evidently a monastery there that was responsible for circulating the interesting narrative that comes down to us.

The sources for the early history of Christianity to the east of the Roman Empire are sparse, and it is not until the second quarter of the fourth century that we encounter the first Syriac author writing in the Persian Empire, known today as Aphrahat. Clearly Christianity was well established by then in a number of areas, but information about how it originally reached these (very probably already in the time of the Parthian Empire) is only provided by considerably later sources, whose already legendary character makes them hard to use in trying to reconstruct the earliest history of Christianity in this region. Among these later sources, it is the Acts of Mari which provide the most detailed account.

The Syriac text of the *Acts of Mari* was first published by J-B. Abbeloos in 1895, accompanied by a Latin translation. Although a German version was published in 1893, it was only a century or more later that translations into other modern languages have begun to appear, first into French (2001), then English (by A. Harrak, 2005), and now into Italian. As this pattern suggests, it is only in recent years that there has been something of a revival of academic interest in this text. The credit for resuscitating this interest goes largely to Christelle and Florence Jullien who, besides re-editing the text, have also written a separate monograph on it (*Aux origines de l'Église de Perse: les Actes de Mari*, 2003).

Ilaria Ramelli's present volume comes in a series that has already acquired a high reputation for the excellence of its introductions to, and translations of, selected texts from the different cultures and languages of the ancient Near East. Her book has a very substantial and well-informed introduction, running to some 120 pages. Since the *Acts of Mari* commence with a recapitulation of the conversion of Edessa by Addai, the first section of the introduction deals with questions touching their relationship to the Abgar legend in the *Teaching of Addai*, which constitutes the early fifth-century Syriac development of the narrative in Eusebius. Here particular attention is paid to the various subsequent sources containing the narrative of the conversion of king Abgar, to various anachronisms and redactional features, and to the identification of possible historical elements incorporated into the legendary narrative.

The considerably longer second section of the Introduction deals with the *Acts of Mari's* account of the early diffusion of Christianity in Mesopotamia; topics covered include biblical models, the possibility of the use of sources, the relationship of the information in the Acts to other sources, their cultural context, the Iranian background and anti-Manichaean elements, their theological position and possible historical value. A brief third section gives information about the manuscripts transmitting the Acts (none are older than the seventeenth century, a situation which quite often obtains with East Syriac texts; there is very little textual variation between the manuscripts).

Since Ilaria Ramelli is already an experienced translator of Syriac texts, it is no surprise to find that her translation is a reliable one, representing the original closely, but by no means slavishly. The annotation is both learned and quite extensive and detailed in character (not infrequently it takes up as much as half of the printed page beneath the translation); this is in contrast to the much briefer annotation accompanying Harrak's translation. Throughout excellent use is made of relevant sources in both Greek and Syriac, as well

as of the available secondary literature. There is a full bibliography, followed by good indexes. This is certainly a volume that will need to be consulted by anyone with an interest in traditions concerning the early history of Christianity in the Parthian and early Sasanian Empires, beyond the eastern borders of the Roman Empire.

In both the introduction and the annotation one can discern a desire to rescue as many traces as possible of genuinely historical matter incorporated into what is clearly a legendary framework. This can be seen, for example, in the interesting discussion, in the Introduction, of the quite striking parallels between Mari's journeys and those of Mani. Ramelli concludes (p. 113) that these do not so much call into question the historical basis of the account in the *Acts of Mari* as provide evidence of their Iranian cultural context; other readers of the text, however, might be inclined to take a more sceptical stance and to suppose that Mari's journeys are deliberately modelled on those of Mani, but presenting Mari as anticipating Mani's missionary work in the same area.

Combined with this entirely laudable desire to identify genuinely historical data is a tendency to give the work as early a date as possible. On p. 135 Ramelli finally opts for 'late fifth, or more probably, sixth century'. On linguistic grounds, however, it would seem that one should rule out a late fifth-century date as even a possibility, for the *Acts of Mari* contain a small number of terms which do not feature in any native Syriac writings before the sixth century. Thus the adjectival form *paroqaya*, 'saving', found in section 24, is first attested (outside translated literature) in a late work by Philoxenus of Mabbug, who died in 523, and it appears not to have come into common use until about the middle of the century. A sixth-century date at the earliest is also implied by the use, in section 24, of the rare adjective *shitanaya*, 'primordial', all of whose earliest attestations are in sixth-century East Syriac texts (note 2 on p.186, stating that it was current in the '5th-6th century', in fact misrepresents the source quoted, where all the evidence given is from the sixth century). What is very probably another sixth-century newcomer to the Syriac lexicon is the Greek loanword *dogma* (used in section 26).

Although the annotation is generous throughout, there are a few places where one might have wished it was a little more specific. Thus the *Acts of Mari* open with a narrative concerning the conversion of Edessa by Addai, known in Syriac from the early fifth-century *Teaching of Addai* and from Eusebius, over a century earlier. This account includes the famous letter of king Abgar of Edessa to Jesus, requesting him to come and heal a disease he

has, together with Jesus' reply. What is interesting, but not commented upon, is the fact that the Letters are closer in their wording to Eusebius than to the *Teaching of Addai*: thus Abgar calls himself 'toparch' and he addresses Jesus as 'the Saviour', whereas in the *Teaching of Addai* the king's letter begins 'Abgar the Black to Jesus the good Physician'. Although Jesus' reply ends with the blessing on Edessa and promise of its inviolability, present in the *Teaching of Addai*, but absent from Eusebius, the rest of the wording again corresponds more closely with that of Eusebius. In fact, some later forms of Jesus' reply, otherwise based on Eusebius' wording, likewise add the blessing, and it would be interesting to know if one might thus be able to pinpoint more precisely the source used by the author of the *Acts of Mari*.

A related point concerns another episode in the narrative concerning Abgar's conversion. It is well known that Eusebius' account has no mention (for whatever reason) of any portrait of Jesus, whereas according to the *Teaching of Addai* Abgar's emissary, Hannan, being a skilled artist, paints a portrait of Jesus. In the course of subsequent tradition, this portrait underwent a whole series of transformations (even ending up, according to one improbable theory, as the Turin Shroud!). In section 3 the *Acts of Mari* provide a witness to one of these later developments: Abgar indeed sends painters (now in the plural), but they proved incapable of depicting 'the portrait of the humanity of our venerable Lord'. Jesus, not wanting to disappoint Abgar, then takes a cloth (*seddona* < Greek *sendon*) and imprints upon it his face. One would like to know where this might fit into the development of the legend; all that Ramelli offers, however, is just a brief note on the Greek loanword, at the same time referring to an article on an unspecified later Greek text where Jesus' portrait is likewise imprinted. If the *Acts of Mari* indeed belong to the sixth century, then they represent, by quite a long way, the earliest witness to the transformation of a painted portrait into an imprinted piece of cloth. The Greek text alluded to in Ramelli's note is the *Acts of Thaddaeus* where the cloth is also called a *sendon*, whereas other Greek witnesses to the cloth tradition call it a *himation* or *rakos* (thus John of Damascus), though it eventually ends up being called a *mandylion*, the term used when the relic was triumphantly transported to Constantinople in 944. Unfortunately the dating of the *Acts of Thaddaeus* is very uncertain (the first half of the seventh century is the earliest that has been suggested). The only other Syriac witness to a term for a cloth image, other than *mandili*, is a passage in the Chronicle to the year 1234, which probably derives from the early eighth-century Chronicle of Dionysius of Tell-Mahre; there the cloth is described as a *shusheppa*, or 'veil'.

Since the *Acts of Mari* thus seem to be the earliest witness to this development in the tradition of the Edessa portrait of Jesus, the dating of the work takes on some significance. In this connection it is worth remembering that quite a number of earlier scholars opted for a date for the *Acts of Mari* that was *after* the mid seventh century. This was on the basis of an obscure passage in section 17, which may, or may not, refer to the end of the Sasanian dynasty. The passage reads, taken literally, as follows: ‘The other kingdom of the Persians, which took its ending (*shullama*) through Ardashir, had not yet taken its beginning’. If the reference is to the Sasanian dynasty, the name of the last shah is incorrect, since it should be Yazdgard (III). Although the last shah of the direct line was indeed an Ardashir, this Ardashir (III; 628-9) was just a young boy of seven whose reign did not last long in the turmoil of the aftermath of Heraclius’ victory over the Persians and the death of Khosroes II. Accordingly one needs to ask, is this just an error in the text of the *Acts of Mari*, or can some other way of taking the sentence be found? All three modern translators go for the latter option, but in different ways. In their re-edition of the *Acts of Mari* (2003) C. and F. Jullien provide ‘Or, cet autre règne des Perses qui avait trouvé sa réalisation grâce à Ardashir n’avait pas encore commencé’, the Ardashir here being taken as Ardashir I, the first Sasanian shah. As will be seen below, however, it is extremely doubtful that *shullama* can really have the meaning ‘realization’, and evidently they have tacitly followed an earlier emendation to *shumlaya* (as they acknowledge in their earlier translation of 2001). This is also the solution followed by Ramelli, though she cites the support of Brockelmann’s *Lexicon Syriacum* for the possibility that *shullama* can itself have the required meaning. Consultation of the two passages cited by Brockelmann, however, indicates that both have the sense of a prediction taking its fulfilment in some event, which is quite different from the sense of ‘realization’ that is required by the passage in the *Acts of Mari*. Furthermore, reference to ‘taking a beginning’ rather needs to be balanced by an earlier ‘taking an ending’. What also seems problematic about this interpretation of the text is the fact that it supposes that the author is effectively referring to the beginning of the Sasanian Empire in two different ways.

Whereas this solution also sees the reference as being to the Sasanian dynasty, Harrak offers a different understanding; he translates, ‘The other kingdom of the Persians [*sc.* the Parthians], which had ended at the hands of Ardashir, had not yet begun’. Harrak thus likewise takes Ardashir as Ardashir I, but sees him as the *cause* of the ending of the Parthian dynasty (loosely described earlier in the sentence as ‘the kingdom of the Persians’,

despite the fact that the author of the Acts goes on to speak of the Parthians). It must be admitted that neither of these approaches is really convincing, seeing that each has its own problems. Since no interpretation so far manages to avoid difficulties of one sort or another, it is perhaps worth suggesting yet another possibility, namely that the words ‘through Ardashir’ have simply got displaced, and that they really belong after ‘took a beginning’, and not after ‘took an end’. This would restore perfectly good sense to the passage, which would then read ‘the other kingdom of the Persians, which has taken its ending, had not yet taken its beginning through Ardashir (I)’. If there is anything in this suggestion, then we have here a definite *terminus post quem* of the mid seventh century for the date of the *Acts of Mari*.

It is worth pointing to a few things that might cause confusion to the more general reader. A puzzling reference is made on p. 81 to unspecified ‘documenti dei melchiti giacobiti’; since ‘Melkite Jacobites’ is a contradiction in terms, evidently Melkite *and* Jacobite must be meant (on the same page, the Palmyrene banqueting institution known as the *marzeah* is wrongly given as *mazreah*; likewise in the notes on p. 180). On p. 92 a translation of a homily on Thomas by Jacob of Serugh is incorrectly said to have been made by A. Salvesen, whereas the translator (in fact D. Miller) was left anonymous in the publication. On p. 103 the description of Turfan as being ‘to the north-west of India’ seems excessively vague. On p. 123 the Council of Constantinople of 553 is inadvertently called the Council of Chalcedon. An oversight in the bibliography has placed a volume by A. Heinz the name of E. Vergani. All these are but minimal blemishes on what is otherwise a very useful contribution to the study of this intriguing text.

In his edition (1907) of the problematic Chronicle of Arbela (which has elsewhere also been translated by Ramelli), the Chaldean Syriac scholar Alphonse Mingana wrote the following in a footnote (p. 78): “l’existence du disciple [*sc. d’Addai*] Mari doit être considérée, jusqu’à nouvel ordre, de plus en plus problématique et même fabuleuse”. The note incurred the wrath of the Chaldean Patriarch, being a successor in the line of Mar Mari, and it was probably also the cause of his losing his teaching post at the Syro-Chaldean Seminary in Mosul – as a result of which he ended up in Birmingham where, financed by Edward Cadbury, he built up the splendid Mingana Collection of Syriac (and other) manuscripts. Though Ramelli has (unsurprisingly) not been able to rescue the historicity of Mari himself, she has the great merit of indicating that, despite their legendary character, the *Acts of Mari* can indeed be shown to preserve several intriguing nuggets of genuine historical value.

The revival of scholarly interest in the *Acts of Mari* happens to have antedated the American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003, but in the event it can be seen to be of no small relevance to the current situation in that country, where large numbers of the indigenous Christian population have been driven out of their ancestral homes on the grounds that they do not belong in Iraq. Whether or not one accepts claims that the *Acts of Mari* here and there contain historical elements, their production is witness, along with a large body of other Syriac literature dating from the fourth to early seventh century, to the existence of flourishing Christian communities all over Iraq well before the advent of Islam.