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Mar Elia Aboona and the history of the East Syrian patriarchate

This subject of this article is a work in Syriac entitled *Beginners' guide to the stories of the eastern patriarchs* (ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ) by the Chaldean bishop Mar Elia of the Aboona family of Alqosh (1862-1955). This author and his treatise having been overlooked by the standard authorities on Syriac literature, it will be in place here to identify him and it first. The rest of the article will consider whether the work may, unexpectedly, claim to have at one or two points some primary value as a source for the history of the East Syrian patriarchate.

Mar Elia himself is not an unknown figure,¹ although the course of his career is still obscure in places. By name Giwargis son of Yacu, he was a member of the Aboona family, which had furnished one of the two lines of East Syrian patriarchs down to the early nineteenth century. He attended the Chaldean seminary in Mosul and was ordained priest in 1887 or 8, after which he had appointments in various places before going to his family's home town of Alqosh in 1908. The next year he proposed to lead a party of disaffected Catholics who wished to rejoin the Old Church, and on 2 May 1909, having made the adventurous journey into the mountains to the patriarch's village of Kochanes, he was consecrated by Mar Benyamin Shimun as a bishop in the Assyrian Church of the East. He took the name of the old patriarchs of Alqosh, Mar Elia. The new bishop's plan was, however, frustrated by the authorities in Mosul, who refused to let him settle in the area. Eventually in September 1912 Mar Shimun gave him the diocese of Taimar (the region around Van), where he then served until he was displaced from Turkey by the War in c. 1915.² We hear of him next at the consecration of the patriarch Mar

1 See my *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford 1992), 303-12 etc.; and 'The Church of the East since 1914', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996), 179-98, specif. 183-4, with a picture. Most of the present paragraph is taken from Mar Yusuf Babana, القوش عبر التاريخ (Baghdad 1979), 179-80, also with a picture. For this reference and for some supplementary information based on oral sources I am grateful to Mr. Solomon Solomon.

2 Mar Elia mentions his three years in Serai (i.e., Serai d-Mahmidai, the chief village of Taimar) in *Beginners' guide*, ii. 88.

Polus Shimun in Urmia in April 1918,³ and then in Mosul in October 1920 when he signed the instrument authorizing Mar Timotheus of Malabar to become regent of the boy patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun.⁴ The next year, as it seems, and for reasons that are not recorded, he left the Church of the East and returned to the Chaldean church.⁵ He was received as a bishop, although he was not at first given a diocese. In 1924 he became acting bishop of Aqra, but left this see after a year and a half to return to Alqosh. In later life he travelled and visited his nephews in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Habaniyyah. He died in Kirkuk in 1955 at the age of 93.

Mar Elia's historical work on the East Syrian patriarchate, the *Beginners' guide*, was not published in his lifetime, and although part of it has recently appeared in Iraq in an Arabic translation,⁶ it is still in need of an introduction. The present writer had the good fortune to be lent a photocopy of the original manuscript⁷ and then to see this manuscript in the possession of the bishop's great nephew Mr. Sargon Aboona.⁸ In 2000 Mr. Aboona graciously gave the manuscript to the Harvard College Library, along with two other manuscripts by Mar Elia,⁹ and it is now MS Syriac 182 in the Houghton Library collection.

3 Surma d-Mar Shimun, *Assyrian church customs and the murder of Mar Shimun* (London 1920), 101; and Ya'qob bar Malek Ismael, *ܕܡܪ ܫܝܡܘܢ ܕܡܪ ܝܫܝܐ ܫܝܡܘܢ* (Tehran 1964), 119.

4 Mar Aprem, *Mar Abimalek Timotheus* (Trichur 1975), 81. I thank the author for this reference.

5 His reason was evidently not any disgust at the election of Mar Eshai Shimun to the patriarchate at age eleven. In the *Beginners' guide*, written six years later, he is enthusiastic about 'our dear patriarch' (ii. 153) – so much so that I had previously concluded he was still in the Old Church at that time. I also have to discount another story told to me, according to which his return to the Chaldean church had to await the death of Patriarch Mar Emmanuel Thomas in 1947.

6 In *Bayn al-Nahrayn*, the journal of the Chaldean patriarchate, in eight parts with various titles between nos. 75–76 (1992) and 93–94 (1996). (I have not seen all these.)

7 I thank Bishop Mar Bawai Soro for this favour. I was led to ask about the work after seeing it cited in a small book published by the Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun (*The book of Marganitha* (Ernakulam 1965); appendix by Q. Ishaq Rehana, 'Table or tree of life of apostolic succession of the catholicos patriarchs of the Church of the East', pp. 109–120, specif. p. 115). See further my article 'The patriarchal list of the Church of the East', in *After Bardaisan* (festschrift for H. J. W. Drijvers), ed. G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 89; Leuven 1999), 65–83, specif. 68–9 n. 12. It seems that Mar Elia, who was unable to find a way of publishing his work in Iraq, sent another copy of the manuscript to the patriarch in the United States (i.e., sometime after 1940) in the hope of better success there. The publication never happened, but it must be this copy that Q. Ishaq used. Its present whereabouts are unknown to me.

8 Mr. Aboona acquired the manuscript after the bishop's death in 1955. It is not clear when and where the Arabic translation (see n. 6) was made, but it was evidently before that since the translator, Benyamin Haddad, says that he used a manuscript in the author's hand (p. 41).

9 For one of these, see the next note. The other is a treatise in Arabic on astronomy, now Houghton Library MS Arabic 394.

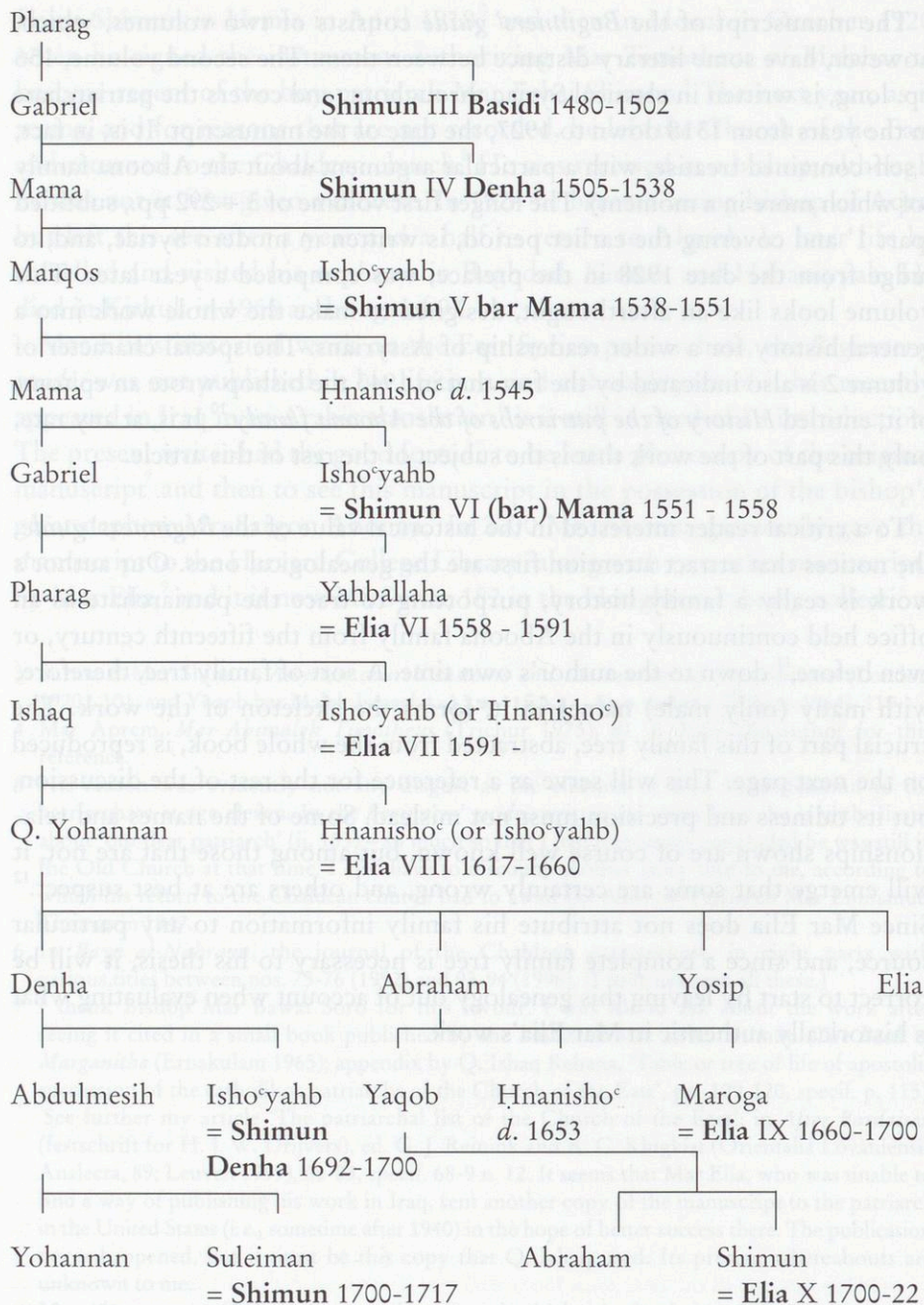
The manuscript of the *Beginners' guide* consists of two volumes, which, however, have some literary distance between them. The second volume, 156 pp. long, is written in classical Syriac throughout, and covers the patriarchate in the years from 1318 down to 1927, the date of the manuscript. It is, in fact, a self-contained treatise, with a particular argument about the Aboona family (of which more in a moment). The longer first volume of 3 + 292 pp., subtitled 'part 1' and covering the earlier period, is written in modern Syriac, and, to judge from the date 1928 in the preface, was composed a year later. This volume looks like an afterthought, designed to make the whole work into a general history for a wider readership of Assyrians. The special character of volume 2 is also indicated by the fact that in 1943 the bishop wrote an epitome of it, entitled *History of the patriarchs of the Aboona family*.¹⁰ It is, at any rate, only this part of the work that is the subject of the rest of this article.

To a critical reader interested in the historical value of the *Beginners' guide*, the notices that attract attention first are the genealogical ones. Our author's work is really a family history, purporting to trace the patriarchate as an office held continuously in the Aboona family from the fifteenth century, or even before,¹¹ down to the author's own time. A sort of family tree, therefore, with many (only male) names in it, forms the skeleton of the work. The crucial part of this family tree, abstracted from the whole book, is reproduced on the next page. This will serve as a reference for the rest of the discussion, but its tidiness and precision must not mislead. Some of the names and relationships shown are of course well known, but among those that are not, it will emerge that some are certainly wrong, and others are at best suspect.¹² Since Mar Elia does not attribute his family information to any particular source, and since a complete family tree is necessary to his thesis, it will be correct to start by leaving this genealogy out of account when evaluating what is historically authentic in Mar Elia's work.

10 (ܡܪ ܝܠܝܐ ܐܒܘܢܐ) ܠܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ. This is now Houghton Library MS Syriac 183. The date 1943 comes from the preface. This was perhaps the moment when a copy of the larger manuscript went to the United States.

11 Mar Elia in fact claims that the patriarchs from Timothy II (1318-) on were probably from the Aboona family (ii. 7, 22).

12 See nn. 19, 22, 52 below.



Mar Elia's genealogical scheme.

The names of patriarchs are in bold. The Roman numerals (which do not correspond to the usual numbers in the lists of patriarchs) are Mar Elia's.

A more promising start to the present enquiry can be made in Mar Elia's introduction where he mentions the sources he has used (ii. 3):

هني خذنا هسكنا هسسما دحتنا دصحننا دصحننا دصحننا دصحننا دصحننا
 سافا هني احسنهم صمدا لمتنا دنك مدينا هب ملقة نلغذا همننا
 ذننا دهنننا ين هسنا هحلا (ذخيرة الاذهان) ملعهملنا دصنا
 فهذه نمذ هب نفاه حننا.

I have skimmed the sweet cream from stories and histories and the colophons of manuscripts of¹³ writers that have preceded me. From the lexicon of the German missionaries concerning the East¹⁴ I have gleaned a great deal; and a great part of this our compilation I have taken and collected from the *Treasury of information*, the ecclesiastical history of Q. Petros Nasri.

Mar Elia does indeed take most of the information in his narrative from Nasri's history,¹⁵ although that fact does not always deprive it of historical interest: some of this borrowed material is itself unknown and open to investigation.¹⁶ However, of most importance to the present study is Mar Elia's claim to have used some primary sources, namely 'colophons' and 'stories' (including, presumably, unwritten ones). An example of believable but otherwise unknown data from a colophon will appear presently; that the same should come from orally transmitted stories is at least a hypothesis that can be tested.¹⁷ The rest of this article considers two points in Mar Elia's history where it may after all have genuine information to impart.

Shimun bar Mama and the schism of Sulaqa

Mar Elia devotes two pages (ii. 27-8) to the patriarch Shimun bar Mama (Shimun V in his numbering), at the end of which is the following:

13 Probably we should read **مصحف**, ‘manuscript colophons *and* writers that have preceded me’.

14 I am unsure what book is meant.

¹⁵ Nasri's book (French title: *Histoire des églises chaldéenne et syrienne*) is in two volumes, published by the Dominican press in Mosul in 1905 and 1913. Also relevant to the present subject is an article by Nasri entitled أصل النساطرة الحاليين ("The origin of the modern Nestorians") in *Al-Mashriq* 16 (1913), 491-504. This article may have some relation to the reported unpublished third volume of his history; see A. Nouro, *My tour* (Beirut 1967), 233. But Mar Elia seems to cite only vols. 1-2.

16 This is so especially for some of Nasri's information about the obscure patriarchs of the 14th-16th centuries (ii. 79-88).

17 For an example of a story evidently transmitted orally for at least 180 years, see 'The patriarchal list', 82.

from 1539 to 1544 or 5 and then not again.²⁰ Mar Elia's statement that Ḥnanisho^c died in 1544/5 agrees nicely with this evidence, and is based, he says, on Ḥnanisho's tombstone in Rabban Hormuzd. It is unfortunate that no such inscription is mentioned by Vosté in the inventory of inscriptions in Rabban Hormuzd that he published in 1930, and particularly so since it seems that if this inscription does exist it must have been seen by Mar Elia *before* 1930. Still, the citation by Mar Elia is quite confident; it gives the date as a Seleucid year (as is usual on tombstones, but against Mar Elia's usual practice);²¹ and its undesigned coincidence with other facts strongly suggests that it is a genuine piece of evidence.

Now, if Mar Elia is correct about the death of Ḥnanisho^c, it may help to fill in the background for the election of Sulaqa as a dissident patriarch seven years later. The successor of Shimun bar Mama in 1558 was his nephew, whose name was Elia²² and who kept this name as patriarch. According to his tombstone, he was a metropolitan for fifteen years and then patriarch for thirty-two;²³ thus he was first consecrated c. 1543. Manuscript colophons begin to call him *natar kursia* in 1550.²⁴ A colophon of 1562 gives the further and significant information that in that year – at least twelve years after his becoming *natar kursia* – the patriarch could still be described as in his 'youth'.²⁵ The nephew Elia was therefore very young in 1545, *ex hypothesi* the year of Ḥnanisho's death, and even though he was already a metropolitan, it is easy to believe that the patriarch waited as long as five years to elevate him to the status of successor; and that when he did so, there was a revolt and the election of an anti-patriarch.

It seems to me that this reconstruction is plausible, and that, furthermore, it

20 Mss Vat. Syr. 379 (1539) and 66 (1554/5), and five other manuscripts in between. See D. Wilmshurst, 'The ecclesiastical organization of the Church of the East 1318-1913' (diss., Oxford, 1998), 12 n. 24; and his unpublished paper, 'The origins of the Uniate Chaldean Church: the myth and the truth', nn. 6-11. I am grateful to Dr. Wilmshurst for the chance to draw on his database of East Syrian colophons. A really comprehensive database makes it possible not only to find positive evidence, but to draw conclusions from negative evidence (i. e., what names *do not* appear at what dates).

21 Notice that for the (nonexistent) burial of 1551 Mar Elia's reference is vaguer and does not refer to a tombstone.

22 His name Elia appears in the colophon to Ms. Diarbakir Scher 53 (1552); and he is called the patriarch's nephew in Ms. Mardin Scher 38 (1554). Our author wrongly records that his real name was Yahballaha and that he was the great-great-nephew of Shimun V. But these errors are immaterial here.

23 J.-M. Vosté, 'Les inscriptions de Rabban Hormizd et de N.-D. des Semences près d'Alqoš', *Le Muséon* 43 (1930), 263-316; specif. no. 28, pp. 288-90.

24 The earliest manuscript is Ms. Mosul Scher 80 (1550) (Wilmshurst, 'Ecclesiastical organization', 12 n. 25).

25 Ms. Berlin Syr. 82, fol. 82b (quoted in E. Sachau, *Verzeichniss der syrischen Handschriften der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (1899), i. 311).

aligns somewhat with the two primary pieces of Latin evidence about this episode. According to the letter of the Chaldeans of Mosul, brought by Sulaqa to Rome in 1552,

*Nunc porro unus solus superest Episcopus ex ea prosapia, qui et ipse conatus est per impudentiam ita agere, ut egerunt illi, qui ante ipsum fuere. Verum nos non acceptavimus neque proclamavimus ipsum ...*²⁶

This we may gloss as follows:

Now there is only one bishop left from his (Mar Shimun's) family (after Hnanisho's death, viz., Elia), and he has impudently tried to act as his predecessors did (in designating him as successor). But we have not accepted him or proclaimed him ...

The other document, the memorandum of Cardinal Maffeo of 20 February 1553, reports what Sulaqa told the cardinals, as follows:

Cum vero nunc tandem postremus simili ratione suum est fratre nepotem, quem idcirco puerum octo annorum episcopum fecerat, sibi in patriarchatum successorem facere cogitasset, verum antequam puerum in eam auctoritatem evehere potuisset, fatis functus esset, universus populus tam laici quam ecclesiastici datam sibi divinitus abrogandae illius usurpationis occasionem ratus dico de vindicando vetere eligendi ritu cogitavit.

This last patriarch, in the same way (as his predecessors), tried to make his brother's son his successor, and to this end he had consecrated him as a bishop at the age of eight; but before he could elevate the boy to the office, he died. Whereat the whole population, clergy and laity, decided to take this divinely-sent occasion to put an end to the tyranny and restore the old rite of election.²⁷

On any hypothesis, the statement recorded by the cardinal is more or less false. The consistory took it to mean that Mar Shimun himself had died, and if that is indeed what Sulaqa intended to say,²⁸ then he was deliberately misinforming them. But if we are to give Sulaqa credit for a statement not wholly cynical, he might have meant to refer to Hnanisho^c instead: *he* was the boy of eight, and he was the one who died.²⁹ His death was not, indeed, the immediate cause of the revolt, but it might have been seen and represented as the indirect one. This reconstruction, while it does not easily agree with all the sources on

26 Lampart, 51 n. 1.

27 Ibid., n. 3.

28 That seems to be the inference made by the other authors who have studied this episode (see n. 19 above), most lately Wilmshurst (with whose reconstruction I otherwise agree).

29 Grammatically, the words *fatis functus esset* could refer to the nephew. This fact would be especially significant if the memorandum were a translation from something written by Sulaqa.

דבש איז געבן געווארן צו אונזערע קינדער. און אונזערע קינדער
זענען געווארן געזונט. און אונזערע קינדער
זענען געווארן געזונט.

31 *Guda* 'wall' – but also 'lectern', a meaning suggested to me by Prof. S. P. Brock and confirmed by Bishop Soro. Cf. also J. M. Fiey in *Le Muséon* 82 (1969), 358.

That is the first part of Mar Elia's narrative. The story goes on, and now unexpectedly brings in the other East Syrian patriarch, one of the successors of Sulaqa. The early patriarchs of this second line, in which the hereditary succession did not at first operate (and which had no the connection with the Aboona family), are not of special interest to Mar Elia, and he mentions them only in the course of his chapters on the Elia patriarchs.³³ However, his interest revives with a Mar Shimun whose dates he gives as 1653-92 and whose seat was in Urmia in Persia.³⁴ According to our author's narrative (ii. 45), Denḥa, having done the murder, fled with his sons Ishoʿyahb and Abdulmesih to the mountains, and thence to Urmia. There Denḥa recounted his story to the patriarch Mar Shimun and his bishops, and

when they realized who he was and the son of whom, they had pity on him when they saw the floods of tears in his eyes on account of the wrong done to his son who had been deprived of his birthright.

They comforted Denḥa by promising that he could settle with them, and

He was honoured by the whole people because he was of the *Bayta Abahaya Patryarkaya*.

Then (ii. 55) when this Mar Shimun died in 1692, the synod of bishops gave the patriarchate to Ishoʿyahb, as they had promised his father Denḥa; and the new patriarch was called Shimun Denḥa *Qatola* (i.e., the murderer). This, says Mar Elia, was by God's will, that his sin should be plain to all and for always, and that he himself should be kept in mind and ashamed of it like Cain. Having ascended to the patriarchate, Shimun Denḥa made a break with his predecessors, and removed his see to Kochanes in Hakkari, and reinstated the hereditary succession of patriarchs ordained by Mar Shimun Basidi. Thus, incidentally, the Mar Shimun patriarchs, still the reigning dynasty in 1927 when our author wrote, belong to the Aboona family too.

33 Mar Elia evidently takes his information about these patriarchs (ii. 38-43) from Nasri. The dates and names that Nasri gives for them are significantly different from those in the usual list (as given by E. Tisserant, art. 'Nestorienne, l'Église' in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* XI. 1 [Paris 1931], 157-288, specif. 261-3, and many others). The difference ultimately arises from the real paucity of sources concerning this patriarchate in the seventeenth century: no tombstones, no informative manuscript colophons, and just a few documents in Roman archives, none of them giving any dates of accession to office or death. There are thus good reasons to treat any list of these patriarchs with suspicion (see my 'Patriarchal list', 80). It is certainly uncomfortable to see names and dates like 'Simon XI 1638-1656' repeated in the work of such otherwise careful scholars as Tisserant and Fiey – as if we knew *any* of this except the name Shimun!

34 Ii. 42. There probably was a Mar Shimun living in or near Urmia at this date: see J. M. Fiey, 'Résidences et sépultures des patriarches syriaques orientaux', *Le Muséon* 98 (1985), 149-68, specif. 165.

Dominating all other evidence is a *madrasha* on the very subject of interest, the murder of Mar Hnanisho^c, composed, according to the caption given by our author, in 1653, the year of the murder itself, by a certain Sh. Jundar (?³⁵) of Mosul. Mar Elia says that he read this *madrasha* in a manuscript of the burial service dated 1780 that he found in a remote village in Supna.³⁶ Mar Elia copies the text (ii. 47-8) exaly – ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ, he says – and I reproduce it with translation as follows:

li. 49: the manuscript belonged to the church of Mart Mariam in the village of Barzane in Aqra and Zehbar, but he found it in the church of Mart Shmuni in the village of Araḏan in Sana. The *madrasha* was copied into the manuscript in 1780 by Sh. Isho^c son of Q. Abraham son of Q. Hadbshabba brother of Mar Elia XI. This copyist is known from another manuscript, Trichur 74, a *Taksa* dated 1796/7 (see Mar Aprem in *Symposium Syriacum* 1980, OrChrA 221, p. 371).

A *madrasha* on the murder of Mar Ḥnanisho^c the patriarchal *natar kursia*: which they in the town of Alqosh used to affirm, those who were known as the Aboona family.³⁷

And it was composed by Deacon Jundar of Mosul in the year 1964 in the Greek (reckoning), and of Our Lord 1653.

(*Refrain*) Blessed is Christ our Saviour, lord of creation,
whose will has commanded concerning those killed without cause!

1. O my brethren, hearken to the story of this dear martyr,
Sweet of name, Mar Ḥnanisho^c, choice and spotless,
meditating day and night
before God in prayer and fasting.
And as he was saying 'Praise the Lord', the envious one came,
He drove an arrow inside him; the wronged one was killed and died.

2. On the day of the feast of Pentecost called the day of worship,³⁸
Two bright pillars stood in prayer:
Mar Elia, chief of fathers,
and Mar Ḥnanisho^c, a worthy offspring.
The enemy came and separated them one from another in a moment.
May the Lord rejoin their souls in the abode of delights!

3. Then there was fear, shivering and trembling.
His mother, his brothers and sisters wept and lamented,
Supplicating with grievous tears
before God that the wound might be healed.
Yet the day came for his departure from this world and sorrow,
To go and rest and be happy in the bridechamber of the Kingdom.

4. And he called to his blessed mother, 'Hearken and carry out my words:
Refrain from grief and sadness, Mother, and be still.
The Lord has requited all my enemies,
like Cain, whose limbs shook.'³⁹

37 Reading ܡܕܪܫܐ for ܡܕܪܫܐ and perhaps ܡܕܪܫܐܬܐ for ܡܕܪܫܐܬܐ. This line is not in the other copy (n.43 below).

38 The *Hudra* contains a special service of *segdtha* said before the liturgy of Pentecost.

39 Gen 4.12 in the Syriac Bible; reading ܕܡܕܪܫܐܬܐ ܕܡܕܪܫܐܬܐ, although ܡܕܪܫܐܬܐ ought to be masculine. (The rhyme has interfered with the grammar in this stanza.)

And may the Lord give me a share with those martyrs slain
for the truth, and with those who carry out his will.'

5. Mar Ḥnanisho^c wept and said, 'O exalted master,⁴⁰
By that Word that dwelt and became a complete human person,
Comfort yourself and refrain from weeping.
For thus the Living God has been pleased with me.
Petition and ask in your prayers for me before the Lord.
May he give me a share in the Kingdom in the dwelling-place of heaven.'

6. When his flock heard of his bitter death
Intense was the weeping and loud the lamentation among great and small.
And they all cried out, 'O Lord Christ,
Join the soul of this honoured father
And with the saints let him be happy in the bridechamber of light,
In the tabernacle not made with hands, and bright splendour.'

7. Monasteries and churches, priests and deacons, wept,
Learned men and teachers wept, scholars wept,
Morning and evening prayers wept,
The Psalm-portions and the in-between prayers⁴¹ wept,
The nave wept, the chancel, the altar and all the holy vessels,
Over the father who had consecrated them from all accidents.

8. On the first day of June our noble father died and lay down,
The metropolitan and keeper of the throne of Addai,
In the year 1964 in the reckoning of the Greeks.
O Christ our splendid Lord and God,
When you raise⁴² those who lie in the dust on that your last day,
In your mercy invite him with you into your eternal light.

40 I.e., Mar Elia.

41 I cannot make sense of the text; perhaps this could be the meaning if the text were **ܡܠܚܩܬܐ** **ܡܥܬܝܪܐ**.

42 Reading **ܡܥܬܝܪܐ**.

On the face of it, this *madrasha* invites some confidence in our author's story: the date 1964 = 1653 C.E. in particular puts it at the correct place near the end of the reign of Mar Elia (VIII). Unfortunately, however, this date cannot quite be taken as read. Sh. Jundar's *madrasha* was copied from the same manuscript by another scribe, the priest Elia Homo of the Nasro family of Alqosh, in 1926. His text was published in English translation by William Macomber in 1968⁴³ and it can be compared with our author's. There, along with other less significant variant readings,⁴⁴ the date in stanza 8 reads not ܡܕܪܫܐ = 1964 = 1653 C.E. but ܡܕܪܫܐ = 2061 = 1750 C.E., and in the heading no date at all is given alongside the name Jundar. Now, the date 1750 cannot be historically correct, since in that year Pentecost fell too late, on 3 June, after the date of Hnanisho's death on 1 June according to stanza 8. In 1653, Pentecost fell on 29 May, giving an interval consistent with stanza 3 which suggests that Hnanisho did not die on the same day he was attacked. But the variant must raise some doubt whether 1653 was the original reading either. Perhaps in the manuscript that both scribes copied the date in stanza 8 was illegible; perhaps '1653' occurred in the heading as the date of the composition of the *madrasha*, and perhaps Mar Elia reproduced it in stanza 8 as the date of the murder – but unless the manuscript should once again turn up, this will remain speculation. Otherwise, the *madrasha* is actually not very informative beyond describing the murder, naming the victim as the *natar kursia* Hnanisho, and placing his death on 1 June. The murderer is not identified, and there is nothing of Mar Elia's story of intra-family revenge.

The second consideration urged by Mar Elia in favour of his story is the fact of its being an oral tradition. As he puts it (ii. 46):

It was by old tradition that we first knew that there was a murder between relatives over the patriarchate, as it was related to us by our fathers, and in the same way our fathers were told it by their fathers.

This has to be taken seriously, especially since the other copyist of the *madrasha*, Elia Homo, also asserts that the text he is copying is a confirmation of 'the tradition that our ancestors handed down to us in succession'. By way of an introduction to the *madrasha* he writes:

43 'A funeral madraša on the assassination of Mar Hnanišo guardian of the Chaldean patriarchal throne, by Deacon Jander of Mosul', in *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis* (Louvain 1968), 264–273.

44 In spite of Mar Elia's claim to have copied exactly, Homo has an extra and no doubt original stanza after stanza 7. This begins, in Macomber's translation: 'The [divine] office wept, the *hullālē*, the *gazzā* with the *hudrā* ...'. Stanzas 4 and 5 are also in reverse order. There are surprisingly many other variants, although apart from the line in the heading (n. 37 above) none of them affect the sense of the *madrasha*.

When the Chaldean patriarchate was renewed in Alqosh by hereditary succession, it continued by this succession for the space of nearly four hundred years. The members of this family multiplied after a hundred years and more, and were divided and separated, becoming two houses, the upper and the lower. There was a contract and statute that whenever the patriarch would be from the members of the upper house, the *natar kursia* would be from the members of the lower house, and similarly *vice versa*. Then, one of these patriarchs whose name was Elia (this being the name of all the patriarchs) ordained his brother Mar Hnanisho^c (all the *natar kursia*-s were designated with this name) *natar kursia*, transgressing the contract that existed between [the two houses], and [so] the patriarch and the *natar kursia* were of one house. Then the members of the other house were provoked and inflamed with rage, nursing a grudge [against] the patriarch and the *natar kursia* and plotting to kill the said Mar Hnanisho^c. It happened that while Mar Elia and Mar Hnanisho^c were praying in the church with the multitude of the clergy, the day being Pentecost Sunday, their enemies climbed up on a nearby roof and stood afar off. Mar Hnanisho^c began the psalms of the morning office, chanting 'All the earth praise the Lord!' [when] a blow came upon him from behind. At once he collapsed, and after a few days he died.⁴⁵

But the harvest of data from these two statements is not large. The oral tradition seems after all to have consisted of only one fact, that there was a murder within the patriarchal family. That is all that Mar Elia states, and Homo's longer statement becomes evidently fanciful (all *natar kursia*-s called Hnanisho^c, etc.) just at the points where it goes beyond that fact and beyond what he could take from the *madrasha*.

For the murderer's name Denḥa, not mentioned in the *madrasha* or, apparently, in the oral tradition, Mar Elia finds confirmation elsewhere. In the curious Arabic document published under the title *Statistique inédite de l'ancienne église chaldéo-nestorienne* (Beirut 1909) there is the phrase 'the year 1680 in the time of the patriarch Denḥa Qatola'.⁴⁶ This Mar Elia quotes, remarking that such a name could not be a joke; that the date 1680 is approximately right; and that there is no one else to whom it could apply except the murderer of Hnanisho^c. (The fact that Denḥa is called 'patriarch' does not harmonize with his story, but he passes over this.) The attestation of this name 'Denḥa Qatola' is not, indeed, restricted to the dubious *Statistique inédite*. According to J. Tfinkdji, writing in 1914, it was conferred by tradition on the patriarch Mar Shimun Denḥa supposed to have been in office 1551-8,⁴⁷

45 Macomber's translation, pp. 266-7, with a few words altered.

46 This occurs on p. 3 of the French translation. (I have not seen the Arabic text.) The editor P. Aziz places the text at the end of the seventeenth century, but J. M. Fiey has warned against investing any credence in it as a historical source (e.g., *Assyrie chrétienne* (Beirut 1965), ii. 526 n. 1 with reference to the names of patriarchs).

47 The first appearance of the second name Denḥa for this (imaginary) patriarch seems to be in J. A. Assemani, *De Catholicis seu Patriarchis Chaldaeorum et Nestorianorum commentarius* (Rome 1775), 214. His source does not appear. Some modern lists transmit it (Kelaita, Tisserant, *et al.*) and others (Nasri, Mar Elia) do not.

on account of his part in the death of Sulaqa.⁴⁸ Since there was no such patriarch,⁴⁹ he cannot be the genuine referent of this name, and Tfinkdji's tradition, if it counts for anything, might count instead in support of Mar Elia's story. On this hypothesis, when the murder of Mar Ḥnanisho^c was no longer clearly remembered, the name 'murderer' would have been transferred to the one historical character, even though a fictitious one, who was remembered as complicit in a murder.

The final piece of evidence adduced by Mar Elia (ii. 46) in support of his story comes from the autobiography of the patriarch Yohannan Hormuzd (1760-1838). He quotes it as follows: 'There was in our house up until my own time a picture and representation of the murdered Ḥnanisho^c carved on a piece of stone. And he is pierced with an arrow in his abdomen and his head too is crushed by the force of a blow.' Even if this is to be believed,⁵⁰ it offers at best a variant to the story of the murder and no new information. In any case, it has to be set down without confirmation, since the only surviving manuscript of this text is a fragment which does not contain this passage.⁵¹

All this makes for a fragile construction by Mar Elia. There is no good reason to deny the story of the murder as the *madrasha* gives it; but it is not firmly anchored to the date 1653, and none of the rest of Mar Elia's story apart from the name Denḥa is supported at all. How fragile it is, may be demonstrated by the effect on it of one fact not taken up by our author. Among the signatories of a profession of faith made by Patriarch Mar Elia in 1619 there is a metropolitan named Ḥnanisho^c who was the patriarch's *natar kursia* already at that time;⁵² but there are, strikingly, no manuscript colophons mentioning him or any other *natar kursia* in the reign of this patriarch.⁵³ This is consistent with our author's reconstruction if we suppose that the Ḥnanisho^c of 1619, perhaps the patriarch's nephew, died or otherwise left office shortly afterwards, so that by the 1650s it was, as he says, a matter of selecting a candidate from the next younger generation. But if, logically, we do not like to multiply unknown Ḥnanisho^cs, we might prefer to conclude that it was the earlier man himself who was murdered, shortly after 1619. The year 1621,

48 'L'église chaldéenne autrefois et aujourd'hui', *Annuaire pontifical catholique* 1914 (Paris 1913), 457 n. 2.

49 See n. 19 above.

50 It is hard to know what to make of it. If a pious statue really was to be found in an East Syrian household, it was surely of western Catholic origin. Might it have been St. Sebastian?

51 MS Cambridge Add. 2819 (cf. G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their rituals* (London 1852), i. 152-60).

52 S. Giamil, *Genuinae relationes inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum Orientalium seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam* (Rome 1902), 186; Tisserant, 236-7. This Ḥnanisho^c is, on any hypothesis, unknown to our author.

53 Again (as above, n. 20), I am indebted to D. Wilmshurst for this statement.

when Pentecost fell on 20 May, is a possibility. The murderer might still have been named Denḥa, but the rest of Mar Elia's circumstantial story would hardly survive this dislocation.

The second part of the story – the subsequent flight of the murderer and his son's election to the other patriarchate – is equally important to Mar Elia to defend, since it explains the alleged kinship between his family and the Mar Shimun patriarchs. He admits, however (ii. 49), that it is harder to find corroboration for it than for the first part; and in fact he can offer none. Indeed this part of the narrative, on account of its obvious incoherence, speaks against itself. Why did Išo'yahb take his father's name Denḥa when he became patriarch? And why was it fitting to remind him of 'his' sin if it was his father, and not he himself, who was the sinner? Perhaps an earlier version of the story had it that Denḥa himself was elected patriarch,⁵⁴ but that would scarcely improve its credibility. Was the veneration for the old patriarchal house really so great that the church in Persia would welcome even a confessed murderer from it to be their leader? This extreme enthusiasm for the Aboona family may well seem more characteristic of Mar Elia than of the historical figures to whom he attributes it. Or if it the story had an earlier origin, the following explanation might cover the facts. Several lists have it that the patriarch Shimun ('1662-1700') was called Denḥa.⁵⁵ It is not clear where this information comes from, but there is no reason to suppose that it is dependent on Mar Elia's story. Instead, it could be simply a coincidence that two men, one a patriarch and one the killer of Ḥnanisho^c, had this name; and the story might have begun by making the two into one and the same person.

Our author does advance arguments for the kinship of the two families that are independent of the narrative. In the first place, he says, members of the two families have, for hundreds of years, called each other 'cousin'.⁵⁶ He is able to cite Nasri for the fact that the Mar Shimuns themselves transmitted the tradition that they were from the Aboona family.⁵⁷ And if oral tradition is acceptable in ecclesiastical matters, our author says, why should it not be admitted in this case? Secondly, the Syrian people settled down peacefully after this time into two provinces under their patriarchs, a state of affairs most easily explained if there was a family relationship between the two men. Or again, he says, only a descendant of Shimun Basidi, the patriarch who instituted the hereditary succession, could have restored it after a lapse of more than a

54 The citation in n. 46 above might be a relic of this version of the story.

55 E.g., Tfinkdji, Nasri, and G. D. Malech: see my 'Patriarchal list', 81.

56 Or 'uncle': Mar Elia uses the colloquial word **ܩܥܝܢܐ**; pl. **ܩܥܝܢܐܐ** (ii. 49).

57 Mar Elia, ii. 43; Nasri, ii. 190. It may be wondered, however, if Nasri's source for this statement may have been Mar Elia himself.

century in the Sulaqa line. He cites, finally (ii. 57-8), the colophon of another manuscript discovered by him, this time in Kochanes in 1912. The manuscript, of the Gospels, was written in the year 1722/3 by a certain Sh. Abdlahad son of Q. Yohannan, brother of Mar Shimun Suleiman, both sons of Q. Abdulmesih. The three names Abdlahad, Suleiman, and Abdulmesih, all belonging to the Mar Shimun family, are Arabic names, he reminds us, characteristic of the Chaldeans of Mosul but not of Syrians elsewhere.

Mar Elia uses these arguments to support his aetiological story. If this story is disbelieved, the arguments do not necessarily lose their cogency, but they are not so compelling without a narrative to explain how this kinship came about. The oral tradition about this kinship was never very lively,⁵⁸ and it is not surprising that while the patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun was alive, Mar Elia's hypothesis had an uncertain status within the Church of the East.⁵⁹ Since the end of the Mar Shimun dynasty and the abandonment of the hereditary succession to the patriarchate in 1976, the hypothesis has lost what ecclesiastical interest it had. It is, however, still worth calling attention to here as a historical proposition that is plausible, although yet awaiting either proof or disproof.

A work of a learned author such as Mar Elia's *Beginners' guide*, which claims to fill in some dark places in history on the basis of otherwise forgotten oral traditions, deserves a careful and critical examination. The present article has tried to make a beginning and has reached a somewhat nuanced result. There is every indication that the author's genealogical thesis has, indeed, produced some spurious names and connections, and has interfered with the facts in some places. However, a sample of two incidents in his narrative has also demonstrated that some of its statements do have a claim on our attention in writing the history of the East Syrian churches at this period.

two families for the fact that the Mar Shimun dynasty was founded by a marriage between a Syrian and an Assyrian. And if this tradition is trustworthy in ecclesiastical matters, our author's story should not be rejected in this case. Secondly, the Syrian people settled down peacefully after this time into two provinces under their patriarchs, a state of affairs most easily explained if there was a family relationship between the two men. Or again, he says only a descendant of Shimun Basid, the patriarch who married

58 Although it was known to Nasri in 1913 (see n. 57 above), it is notably absent from the writings of W. A. Wigram, an Anglican missionary who was a frequent visitor to Kochanes and a collector of stories. Wigram left the mission in 1912.

59 In the book published by Giwargis d-Bet Benyamin of Ashitha to commemorate Mar Shimun's visit to Iraq in 1970, ܡܪ ܫܝܡܘܢ ܬܝܠܡܝܕܐ (Baghdad 1970), we have a picture of him with the Chaldean Patriarch Polos Cheikho (following p. 20). The caption is 'Two Assyrians from Alqosh' – presuming, that is, that Mar Shimun was from the Aboona family. But I am told that not all readers were amused.