The Marvels Found in the Great Cities and in the Seas and on the Islands

A Representative of ‘Aǧāʾīb Literature in Syriac

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1. INTRODUCTION
The Arab takeover of the Near East changed the social and cultural landscape of the region, giving birth to a range of new polities dominated by the religion of Islam. The contribution of the Christian ‘minority’, including that of Syriac-speaking Christians, to the formation of Islamic culture, is a much-discussed and well-documented topic. A relatively less-studied subject, however, is the opposite direction in the never-ceasing process of mutual cultural transfer between Muslims and Christians, that of the influence exercised by the culture of the dominant majority upon Christians.

Scholars have noticed and discussed various areas of the Muslim impact upon practices and beliefs of Christians living throughout the Middle East, including such fields as science, philosophy, legal thought, and even theology. One of the particularly fruitful venues of such interaction was the appropriation by Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Christians of various literary forms and techniques that were developed among Muslim literati. Among examples of this kind, discussed by scholars, one can mention the use by Christian writers of such literary genres and forms as apologetic interreligious disputation-maǧlis, maqāmāt stories, ḥamriyyāt poetry, and rubāʿiyāt quatrains. There are

1 On inadequacy of this term for describing the demographic situation during the first several centuries of the Islamic rule, see Tannous (2018a, 340–52). For a general introduction into Christians and Christianity in the world of Islam, see Griffith (2007).

2 On maǧlis, see Griffith (1999); on the development of this genre, see other contributions in Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (1999); on maqāmāt: Katsumata (2002); Tannous (2018a, 432); Younansardaroud (2010); on
also examples of whole works that originated in a Muslim milieu, being read and transmitted by Christians, as in the case of some stories from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, such as that of *Sindbad the Sailor*, found in Christian Arabic manuscripts, or the *Story of the Ten Viziers*, translated from the New Persian *Baktīār-nāma*, and transmitted both in Arabic and Neo-Aramaic versions.

In this book, I would like to present for the first time a hitherto unpublished Syriac composition, entitled the *Marvels Found in the Great Cities and in the Seas and on the Islands*, which presents its readers with a loosely organized catalogue of marvellous events, phenomena, and objects, natural as well as human-made, found throughout the world. This work is unique in that it bears witness to the adoption by Syriac Christians of another literary mode that was popular among Muslims, the so-called ‘aḡāʿīb, literally ‘marvels’, which is paradoxographical literature.

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*ḥamriyyāt*: Taylor (2010); on *rubāʿiyāt*: Mengozzi (2014).

3 See Braida (2016); Bellino (2019); Mengozzi (Forthcoming).

4 For the Christian Arabic version, see mss. Paris, BnF Syr. 324 (1889), fols. 3v–66v; Paris, BnF Syr. 331 (1883), fols. 101v–166v; Berlin, Sachau 231; Berlin, Sachau 164, fols. 1r–23r. For the Neo-Aramaic version in the Fellīḥī dialect, see ms. Berlin, Sachau 230. See Mengozzi (Forthcoming).

5 See Dubler (1986); Bosworth & Afshar (1985); Rodinson (1978); Ron-Gilboa (2017). For a detailed inventory of these works in the Arabic literary tradition, see Demidchik (2004, 119–219). By using the term ‘aḡāʿīb literature’ I do not imply that there is such a formally defined literary genre, but imagine rather a cluster of the works of diverse
There is a rich and developed tradition of the paradoxographical mode of writing in Arabic and Persian literatures, the earliest preserved specimens of which, such as Buzurg Ibn Šahriyār’s ‘Aḡāʾīb al-ḥind and Abū D-ulaf’s second risāla, go back to the ninth and tenth centuries. This tradition finds its culmination in the most famous composition of Muslim paradoxography, ‘Aḡāʾīb al-maḥlūqāt wa-ḡarāʾīb al-mawḡūdāt, the encyclopaedia of natural history produced in Arabic by Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī (1203–1283).6 As for its purpose, this literature had not only erudite or entertaining functions, but a religious dimension as well, as it sought to instil in its audience the feeling of amazement and, thus, advance it in the knowledge of God ‘through observing his creations, and contemplating the wonders of his works’.7 As I am going to demonstrate, the Syriac Christian compiler of the Marvels appropriated this mode of writing creatively, both following its conventions and adjusting it to the needs of his audience.

6 For a general introduction into his life and work, see von Hees (2002); Demidchik (2004, 45–118).

1.1. Textual tradition

The Syriac text of the Marvels is attested in the following four manuscripts, described here in chronological order:

\[ V = \text{Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Borgia sir. 39; paper,} \]
\[ 31/31.5 \times 21.5/22 \text{ cm, 298 fols., 1 col., ca. 1680.} \]

The manuscript is written in a partially vocalized East Syrian script. Although its final section, which may have included a colophon, is lost, the scribal notes found on fols. 162v, 219r, and 281v provide information that this manuscript was produced by a scribe named Yaldā (ܐܠܕܐ) for a church dedicated to Mary in the village of Karsabā (ܟܪܣܒܐ). In a detailed investigation of Borgia sir. 39, Joseph-Marie Sauget comes to the conclusion that this scribe should be identified as the priest Yaldā bar Daniel, a member of an established East Syrian scribal dynasty in Alqosh, and that the manuscript was produced around the year 1680, at the beginning of Yaldā’s prolific scribal career, which spanned the period of approximately 1679 to 1725. It should also be mentioned that we know of at least five other manuscripts that

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8 For a comprehensive codicological description, see Sauget (1981). A digital reproduction of the manuscript is available online at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Borg.sir.39.

9 See Sauget (1981, 49–62). Of the manuscripts produced by Yaldā, at least twenty four have survived. On Yaldā and the Naṣrō family of Alqosh, to which he belonged, see also Wilmshurst (2000, 247–50); Murre-van den Berg (2015, 93–94).
Marvels were commissioned from different scribes of Alqosh for the church of Mary in Karsabā (also spelled as Karsāpā) during the seventeenth century.¹⁰

Borgia sir. 39 is an anthology of writings, mostly comprising hagiographical works, with the addition of some parabiblical and other texts. The text of the Marvels is located on fols. 111r–115v: it follows an edifying story about a boy killed by his teacher (fols. 109v–111r), and is followed by the Fables of Aesop (fols. 115v–122v). The title of the work as well as its concluding sentence are rubricated. Throughout the text, rubricated subtitles and introductory words, such as ‘a marvel’ or ‘marvels’, are used as well.

L = London, British Library, Or. 4528; paper, 17 × 10 cm, 248 fols., 1 col., 1737.¹¹

The manuscript is written in a partially vocalized East Syrian script. According to the information provided in the extended colophon (fols. 244r–245r), it was produced by the priest ‘Abdişō‘ bar Qūrţibeg (ܒܪ ܩܘ��ܓ ܒܪܝܐ ܡܐ ܒܪ ܩܘ��ܓ) in the village of Qūdšānīs (ܢܝ���ܩܘܓ) in the region of Bārwār (ܒܪܘ��), in the year of the Greeks 2048 (i.e., 1737). The scribe also relates that he carried out his task during the reign of ‘Mār Shem‘on, Catholicos and Patriarch of the East’. Taking into consideration the date and

¹⁰ For the references, see Wilmshurst (2000, 240), who tentatively identifies this village with ‘the village of Khôrsâbād in the Mosul plain, several miles east of Telkepe’.

¹¹ For a brief description, see Margoliouth (1899, 47).
place where the manuscript was produced, we can safely identify this hierarch as Šemʿōn XIV Šlemōn (1700–1740). This indicates that ʿAbdišō was a member of the East Syrian community.

As for its content, Or. 4528 is an anthology of diverse works that includes parabiblical texts, such as Pseudo-Basil’s *History of Joseph*, as well as hagiographical, exegetical, chronological, and some other compositions. The text of the *Marvels* is located on fols. 73v–78v: it follows a brief question and answer addressed to an unnamed doctor (fol. 73v) and is followed by the *Story of Arsanis* (fols. 78v–81r). The title of the work is rubricated. Throughout the text, rubricated subtitles and introductory words, such as ‘there is’, ‘another’ or the first words of a unit, are used as well.

**B1** = Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Orient. quart. 802 (Berlin Syr. 59); paper, 21.5 × 15.5 cm, 80 fols., 1 col., 18th c.¹²

The manuscript, written in a partially vocalized East Syrian script, was produced by the scribe and priest Īšō bar Ḥediršā, who left several scribal marks (fols. 41r, 75r, 80v). According to Eduard Sachau, who dates it to the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was produced in the vicinity of Urmia.¹³ The confessional affiliation of the scribe should, most likely, be regarded as East Syrian, given the kind of script used,

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¹² For a description, see Sachau (1899, 1:200–204). For a facsimile of the manuscript, see Appendix.

¹³ Sachau (1899, 1:204).
and the absence of any explicit identity markers that would point in another direction.

Orient. quart. 802 is an anthology of diverse writings, for the most part parabiblical and hagiographical. The text of the *Marvels* is located on fols. 68v–72v: it follows a brief notice on St Melania (fol. 68r) and is followed by a geographical composition attributed to Andronicus (fols. 72v–75r). The title of the work as well as its concluding sentence are rubricated. Throughout the text, rubricated subtitles and introductory words, such as ‘there is’ or the first words of a unit, are used as well.

**B2** = Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Sachau 118 (Berlin Syr. 86); paper, 16.5 × 10.5 cm, 31 fols., 1 col., 17th–18th cc.\(^{14}\)

This composite manuscript binds together portions from various manuscripts, written in a vocalized East Syrian script, although by different hands. Unfortunately, none of the included parts features a colophon or a scribal mark with a date or other information. While Sachau tentatively dates the script of the manuscript to the eighteenth century,\(^{15}\) Richard Gottheil, who published one of the works that it contains, dates its script to the seventeenth century.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) For a description, see Sachau (1899, 1:317–19). For a facsimile of the manuscript, see Appendix. I am grateful to Alessandro Mengozzi for sharing with me images of the relevant folios.

\(^{15}\) Sachau (1899, 1:319).

\(^{16}\) Gottheil (1888, 208).
A collection of various works, it includes compositions dealing with natural history and human nature. The text of the *Marvels* is preserved only partially, represented by two folios, 7 and 8: they follow a folio containing a section of an unidentified zoological work (fol. 6) and are followed by a hexaemeric composition,\(^{17}\) also partially preserved (fols. 9a–13b). Throughout the text, rubricated subtitles and introductory words, such as ‘a marvel’ or ‘marvels’, are used.

The two textual witnesses V and L should be grouped together since they are almost identical in regard to the sequence of units as well as their content, except for minor textual variants. Most significant among the differences are the absence of unit I.40 in L, and the relocation in L of unit I.23 after I.19, and of unit I.16 after I.64. It should be pointed out that although the manuscript containing L is somewhat younger than that of V, the former is not derived directly from the latter, as one can conclude from some cases where L offers better readings than V.\(^{18}\) To this group of manuscripts also belongs B2, comprising two disparate folios. As far as their content allows us to judge, this version contains the same units in precisely the same order as V, that is: fols. 7r–v — the second half of I.27, I.28, I.29; fols. 8r–v — the end of I.41.

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\(^{17}\) It seems to be identical to the *Wonders of the Six Days of Creation*, preserved completely in ms. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Add. 2017, fols. 113r–126r; see Wright (1901, 2: 556–57).

\(^{18}\) Cf. I.31 — ‘six digits’ in L vs ‘three digits’ in V; I.32 — toponym *Balōs* in L vs *Klāmīs* in V.
I.42, I.43, I.44, I.45, I.46, the beginning of I.47. The text in these folios is identical to that of V.

The textual witness B1 differs from V and L to a considerable degree. On the one hand, it lacks not a small number of units, such as I.8–12, I.23, I.25–27, I.33, I.41, I.43, I.47–53, I.56. On the other hand, it contains several units that are absent from V and L, such as II.29, II.36–38, II.41, II.43–48, II.52–53, II.57. Moreover, in several cases of shared units, B1 provides better readings than V and L. It is possible, then, that B1 preserves at least some units in a form closer to that of the original version of the Marvels.

Based on these observations, it seems reasonable to divide all textual witnesses of the Marvels into two main groups: Recension I, represented by V, L and B2, and Recension II, represented by B1. At the moment, it is difficult to establish with certainty which of the two recensions preserves a version of the text that stands closer to the original version of the work, and which is a result of its later reworking. It should be pointed out, however, that even the oldest textual witness of Recension I, i.e., manuscript V, cannot be regarded as an autograph of the work’s compiler since it contains mistakes and copying errors.

19 Cf. toponym Waqwaq in II.32 vs Baqāwās in V and Bāqāwās in L of I.42. Cf. also such units, derived from the Alexander Romance, as II.40 and II.42.

20 Besides several cases, where V has readings inferior to those of L, the unit I.65 that concludes it seems to be out of place, with a more suitable concluding unit being the preceding one, i.e. I.64, as in B1. Cf. also the
Moreover, one cannot exclude the possibility that some of the textual units that are absent from Recension I, but appear in Recension II,\(^{21}\) were not a part of the original composition. In fact, given the fluid textual tradition of our work, whose atomistic literary structure makes it easily amenable to alteration and rearrangement, it might be futile to try to reconstruct the original text of the *Marvels*.

In addition to the Syriac version, there are also a Neo-Aramaic and, closely related to it, Arabic version of the *Marvels*. Found in the same single manuscript, London, British Library, Or. 9321 (fols. 231v–244r), both versions have been published recently by Francesca Bellino and Alessandro Mengozzi.\(^{22}\) The two versions of the *Marvels* are included in an anthology of texts in North-Eastern dialects of Neo-Aramaic that was compiled on behalf of the German scholar Eduard Sachau by the Chaldean priest Gabriel Quryaqoza during the last decade of the nineteenth century. While the content of the Neo-Aramaic and Arabic versions of the *Marvels* in this textual witness is practically identical, it comprises only about a third of the original Syriac composition. As for their textual affinity, their text corresponds
couple of truncated and almost identical units I.62 and I.65 vis-à-vis the corresponding unit II.40.

\(^{21}\) I.e., units II.29, II.36–38, II.41, II.43–48, II.52–53, II.57.

\(^{22}\) Bellino & Mengozzi (2016).
closely, both in the sequence of units and in their content,\textsuperscript{23} to the part of Recension I that encompasses units I.1 to I.25.

According to Bellino and Mengozzi, who were not aware of the existence of a complete Syriac version of the \textit{Marvels}, the \textit{Vorlage} behind the Neo-Aramaic version was ‘a Christian Arabic text, written or transmitted in East Syrian milieu’.\textsuperscript{24} Although they do refer to the Syriac fragments of the \textit{Marvels} from ms. Sachau 118 in their discussion,\textsuperscript{25} Bellino and Mengozzi were not able to identify them as coming from the same composition. The main reason for this is that these fragments come from the part of the work that, for some reason, was not translated into Arabic and Neo-Aramaic.

As has been suggested by Bellino and Mengozzi, it was most likely Gabriel Quryaqoza himself who translated the text of the \textit{Marvels} from Arabic into Neo-Aramaic.\textsuperscript{26} While this suggestion seems plausible, there are still several difficult questions that are posed by the published Arabic and Neo-Aramaic versions of our work.

Thus, the task of establishing the exact nature of the relationship between the two versions poses a certain challenge. On the one hand, one comes across evidence that suggests the primacy of the Arabic version, namely, instances where its text stands closer to the Syriac original than to that of the Neo-

\textsuperscript{23} It lacks only unit I.23.

\textsuperscript{24} Bellino & Mengozzi (2016, 449).

\textsuperscript{25} Bellino & Mengozzi (2016, 434).

\textsuperscript{26} Bellino & Mengozzi (2016, 449).
Aramaic version. One such case, pointed out by Bellino and Mengozzi, is the translation of the Syriac toponym *Taymnā* ‘the South’ in unit I.22/II.17 with the similarly sounding toponym *al-Taymāʾ* in the Arabic and with the general *daštā* ‘the plain’ in the Neo-Aramaic version. An even more telling example comes from unit I.9/II.9, where the Syriac noun *qūmrē* ‘chains, bonds’ is rendered as ‘moons’ — *aqmār* in the Arabic and *sērē* in the Neo-Aramaic version. As one can recognize at once, it is the Arabic version that mistranslates the Syriac original, most likely as a result of confusion over the nominal derivatives of the root *qmr* (attested both in Syriac and Arabic, albeit with different meanings), whereas the Neo-Aramaic version follows the choice made by the Arabic translation. On the other hand, however, there are readings that go in the opposite direction, such as the case of the Syriac noun *estūnē* ‘columns’ in the same unit I.9/II.9 being faithfully reproduced in the Neo-Aramaic version, while rendered as *ahrām* ‘pyramids’ in the Arabic one. One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that the author of the Neo-Aramaic version carried out his translation on the basis of the Arabic version, while making occasional use of the Syriac original.

In their discussion, Bellino and Mengozzi seem to hold the opinion that the Arabic version is a full or abridged copy of the aforementioned Christian Arabic Vorlage. In light of the much

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27 I.e., the oasis of Tayma in north-west Arabia.


29 See also Bellino & Mengozzi (2016, 440).
longer Syriac version of the work, however, the abridged and derivative character of the Arabic version becomes evident. What remains unclear is who and for what purposes produced this truncated translation of the Marvels. One possibility is that it was made impromptu by Gabriel Quryaqoza, or one of his associates, for the sake of inclusion in the anthology that he was preparing for Sachau. Another possibility is that this version was already in existence before this project. Since there is no textual evidence so far that would confirm the latter, the former scenario appears to be more likely.

1.2. Language

In the absence of any unequivocal textual evidence that would confirm the hypothesis of Bellino and Mengozzi about a Christian Arabic Vorlage of the Marvels, I find it preferable to regard this work as an original Syriac composition. So far, there seem to be no unambiguous linguistic or other markers that would allow us to establish with certainty that it was translated from Arabic. The heavy reliance on Muslim sources by its compiler, as well as the appearance in the text of Arabic and Persian loan-words, cannot be taken as decisive arguments in favour of it being translated as a whole from either of these languages.  

30 This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that some individual units of the Marvels were translated from Arabic. This is relevant, especially, for those units that find close parallels in the works of Muslim authors, but might also apply in the case of some explicitly Christian units, such as the story of the ape-martyr (I.48).
The language of the *Marvels* in all four of the textual witnesses is standard Classical Syriac. However, it exhibits a number of peculiarities: some of them reflect the influence of the Islamicate cultural milieu, in which the work was produced and circulated, while others bear witness to its socio-linguistic matrix, as it exhibits the impact of the Neo-Aramaic dialect that was, apparently, spoken by the compiler or, alternatively, by the scribes who copied his work.

In what concerns the former aspect, it manifests itself in the appearance of a significant number of Arabic and Persian loan-words or calques. Given the nature of the work, many of them are found among toponyms or references to natural phenomena: the cities of *Baghdad* (I.43), *Basra* (I.49–50, II.52), and *Tus* (I.43), *Qonya* for Iconium (I.12), *Hejaz* (I.22/II.17), *Serendib* for Sri Lanka (I.33, I.51), the *Sea of Qulzam* for the Red Sea (I.58/II.49, II.53), the fabulous tree of *Waqwaq* (I.42/II.32), the island *Bartil* (I.64/II.58), the explicitly marked as ‘Persian’ gloss gālim gōš to refer to the ‘ear-people’ (I.28/II.19). In addition to these, there are also cases like the weight measurement unit *qafiz* (I.44/II.33), the nouns *hağ* and *hağayē* for ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘pilgrims’ (I.47), and the ethnonym *parangāyā* for a Frankish man (I.46/II.35).

In this regard, one should also mention the use by the scribe of V of the Garshuni sign for marking the letter ǧamal, in order to render the consonant ǧ, absent from Classical Syriac, in cases of such borrowed nouns and toponyms as *hağ* ‘pilgrimage’ and *hağaye* ‘pilgrims’ (I.47), Ādurbayğ, i.e., Azerbaijan (I.23), Bēt Dlig (I.24–25), Qātāğ (I.25). Yet, as the case of *Hejaz* spelled as (I.22) demonstrates, he was not consistent in following this path.
The same inconsistency characterizes the approach of the scribe of L, who sometimes uses ǧamal, but more often does not.\textsuperscript{31}

The influence of everyday speech in the text of the Marvels can be recognized, first of all, in the cases of phonetic spellings of Classical Syriac words, such as ܩܒܝܐ as ܩܘܝܐ (I.17), or ܢܦܛܐ as ܢܘܛܐ (II.12). More interesting, however, are instances of the intrusion of Neo-Aramaic vocabulary in the text or the use of intratextual vernacular glosses to explain some Classical Syriac words. As for the former, one could point out the Neo-Aramaic spāqē ‘jars’ used alongside the Classical Syriac gūrnē (I.5/II.5), and the Neo-Aramaic gamešē ‘buffalo bulls’ used instead of the Classical Syriac gāmūšē (I.51). As for the glosses, one comes across the Classical Syriac noun šušmānē ‘ants’ glossed with the Neo-Aramaic šekwānē (I.10). In a similar manner, the Syriac noun gālē ‘turtles’ is glossed with the Neo-Aramaic qrāyē (I.54/II.54).

At this point, it is difficult to establish with certainty whether this Neo-Aramaic stratum belongs to the original text of the work or whether it was introduced later, during the process of its transmission by East Syrian scribes. However, because the Neo-Aramaic noun spāqē, ‘jars’ in I.5/II.5 is not marked as a gloss, but appears as an organic element of the text in both recensions, the former scenario seems entirely plausible.

\textsuperscript{31} Contrary to the scribe of V, he uses this letter to spell Ḥeqāz (I.22), ǧālim ǧōš (I.28), haq (I.48).
1.3. Content

In what concerns the general structure of the *Marvels*, it is rather simple, being made up of a sequence of units of varying length, in which various wondrous objects or events are described. These units are grouped roughly into three main parts, that is, the marvels of the cities, marvels of the seas, and marvels of the islands. This tripartite division is signalled in the title of Recension I, as well as marked by additional paratextual means, such as subheadings written in red ink. In Recension I, there are two subheadings: ‘About marvels of springs and waters’ before I.13, and ‘About marvels that are in the Eastern islands and beyond’ before I.28. Recension II, likewise, features two subheadings: ‘About rivers’ before II.8, and ‘Again, marvels in the Eastern islands’ before II.19. It should be noted that the content of some of the units within the subsections marked by these subheadings does not always fit their proclaimed subject. Another paratextual feature of the work is the marker ‘marvel/marvels’, also written in red ink, that introduces most of the textual units.

As one reads through the text of the *Marvels*, it becomes apparent that its compiler derived this diverse material from a wide range of sources, written as well as oral. It is, however, only on rare occasions that he indicates the origin of individual units.

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32 It should be pointed out that the scribes of all four of the manuscripts of the *Marvels* resorted to the paratextual strategy of rubricated titles, subtitles, and introductory words (‘a marvel’, ‘marvels’, ‘another’, and others) in order to make it easier for readers to navigate the text.
Thus, only in one case, I.48, a written source, ‘the book of Mār Basil’, that he used is explicitly mentioned (on this, see below). In what concerns oral sources, the compiler discloses them more often: by providing names of his informants, which include Joseph, the brother of ʿAbdišōc of Elam (I.12), a certain Anās (I.40/II.31), Qūryaqōs of Mosul (I.41, I.47), and Rabban Emmanuel (II.47), or by referring to them in general terms (‘merchants’ in I.42, ‘they’ in I.46 and I.49). Yet, there might be even more oral accounts, incorporated into our work, whose origin is not made explicit by the compiler. One such case is, probably, the cluster of four textual units dealing with the region of Bitlis in Kurdistan (I.24–27). Given the narrow territorial focus of these units, as well as the fact that none of them seems to find close parallels in the major Arabic and Persian paradoxographical or geographical compositions, it seems justified to regard them as the elements of local folklore that reached the compiler of the Marvels not via literary sources, but through the process of oral transmission.33

1.3.1. Christian background

In what concerns the composition’s milieu and the confessional identity of its author, there is no doubt that it was produced by a Christian. Setting aside the fact that it is preserved in Syriac, the language used during the Middle Ages exclusively by Christians, the work features several distinctively Christian themes and images.

33 Note that unit I.25 features a local proverb.
To begin with, one should point out Christian names of several among the compiler’s informants, such as Joseph, the brother of Mār ‘Aḍīšōʾ of Elam (I.12), the priest Qūryāqōs of Mosul (I.41, I.47), and Rabban Emmanuel (II.47).

In addition to that, one comes across several instances of the compiler’s dependence on Christian written sources. There is only one instance when he mentions explicitly a Christian work used by him, that is, when he introduces the story about the ape-martyr in I.48 as coming from ‘the book of Mār Basil’ (i.e., Basil of Caesarea). And indeed, this account has a very close parallel in the Arabic version of the Questions of Basil and Gregory.34 However, most of the Christian sources, on which our compiler apparently relied, remain unnamed. Nevertheless, one can single out at least two Syriac compositions that were likely used by him, whether directly or indirectly.

One of them is the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes’s Alexander Romance,35 in which a number of units connected with the figure of Alexander the Great find close parallels, such as the scorpion-legged people (I.31/II.22), the people with dogs’ teeth

34 For the text and discussion, see Commentary below.

35 Edited in Budge (1889). Of course, in its origin the Romance is a late antique composition, usually considered to be authored by a non-Christian writer; for a general information, see Nawotka (2017). Its Syriac version could be categorized as a Christian work only conditionally, in the sense of it being produced and transmitted in the Syriac Christian milieu. On reception of the Romance and popularity of the figure of Alexander among Syriac Christians, see Gero (1993); Brock (2011); Kotar (2013); Doufikar-Aerts (2016); Stoneman (2017); Nawotka (2018).
Marvels (I.34/II.24), the headless people (I.35/II.25), the raven-like people (I.37/II.27), the ass-legged people (I.38/II.28), the wolf and leopard (I.53), Alexander and the two talking birds (I.61/II.39), Alexander and the two talking trees (I.63/II.42), the people with lions’ heads (II.29), the horned serpents (II.37), the animal bigger than an elephant (II.38), Alexander and the growing trees (II.40/I.62, 65), the partridge-looking bird (II.41), the half-human animal (II.43), the animals attacking Alexander’s troops (II.44), the threatening bats (II.45), the bird on a tree-top (II.46). It is noteworthy that all these parallels come from chapter 7 of the third book of the Romance, comprising the letter of Alexander to Aristotle, in which the king describes his journey to India.36

Another written source that might have been used by the compiler seems to be the Syriac Book of Natural Beings,37 in which several units dealing with rivers or seas find close counterparts, such as the river Bāêtlas (I.13/II.18), the Sea of Reeds (I.14/II.9), the place ʾEwrīqōs (I.15/II.10), the river that flows one day during the week (I.16/II.11), the river that flows on the Sabbath (I.19/II.14), and the river of sand (I.20/II.15).

36 This section of the Romance played an important role in the development of paradoxographical tradition in medieval Europe, where it often circulated as an independent work. See Zuwiyya (2011, 17, 322–23); Kim (2017).

37 Edited in Ahrens (1892), it is a medieval naturphilosophical compilation, comprising 125 chapters, about one-third of which come from the Syriac version of the Physiologus.
It should be emphasized, however, that in the case of neither the units that find parallels in the *Alexander Romance* nor those that are similar to the *Book of Natural Beings* is there unambiguous evidence of direct textual dependence of the compiler of the *Marvels* on either of the two written sources. A most likely explanation for this textual dissimilarity is that material from the two works reached the compiler by way of oral transmission, hence the concise character of many such units in comparison with the original passages.

Furthermore, the text of the *Marvels* features several references to Christian religious beliefs or practices. One should point out such cases as the mention of *ḥnānā*, the mixture of blessed oil, water, and dust from the tombs of saints (I.18/II.13), and the mention of Antichrist (I.64/II.58). However, the most striking expression of the Christian background of the work’s compiler is found in two grotesque stories, one following the other in units I.47 and I.48.

The former story (i.e., I.47) is, perhaps, the most unusual apologetic attempt to affirm the primacy of Syriac as the primeval language. The notion of Syriac primacy is old and goes back to Late Antiquity, found in such Syriac works as the *Cave of Treasures*. ³⁸ The compiler of the *Marvels* or, to be more precise, the source he used for this unit, offers a novel argument in support of this idea, by presenting the account of a child who grew up alone in the desert while suckling on the breast of his dead mother and who, when brought back to human society by his father, started to speak Syriac. Typologically, this argument

³⁸ See Rubin (1998); Moss (2010); Minov (2013, 165–75).
follows the pattern established already in Greco-Roman antiquity, in the famous story recounted by Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.2) about an experiment conducted by the pharaoh Psammetichus, who had ordered that a couple of new-born children be brought up without a person speaking with them, in order to see what would be the first words they speak and, thus, establish what nation is oldest in the world. The story in I.47 employs a similar logic while embedding it within the grotesque narrative framework, where a half-decayed corpse is able to breastfeed.

An equally bizarre account in unit I.48 explores another important Christian theme: the notion of baptism as a primary marker of belonging to the community. It does so by telling a story of the martyrdom of the offspring of a woman and an ape. Longing to become a full member of the Christian community, but denied the sacrament of baptism by the bishop on account of his ambiguous status, the half-human protagonist of the story finds an alternative path to obtain his goal, by inflicting on himself voluntary martyrdom and, thus, being baptized by his own blood. Much like the previous story, this narrative continues the late antique tradition of the Christian understanding of martyrdom as the second baptism, but does so by resorting to grotesque imagery.

These two stories serve as an excellent example of how the rhetoric of monstrosity and grotesque narrative conventions typical of Islamic ʿaǧāʾib literature were appropriated by Syriac Christians and employed to convey distinctively Christian messages of the Syriac language as an essential identity marker and of the crucial role of baptism as a *sine qua non* for belonging.
within the Christian community. Regardless of the original context of these stories, the compiler’s decision to include them in his compilative work bears witness to the importance of the issues they problematize in the milieu in which the Marvels were composed and circulated.

1.3.2. Muslim background

Alongside the Christian elements, the text of the Marvels exhibits numerous traces of indebtedness to the Muslim geographical and literary tradition. Most significant among them is the choice of the literary form itself, as indicated explicitly in the work’s title. The Syriac plural noun *tedmrātā* in the title of our work corresponds to Arabic ʿaḡāʾib ‘marvels, wonders’ that appears in the title of many works. The title of the Marvels, thus, evokes titles of such Arabic compositions as ‘Marvels of India’ (ʿAḡāʾib al-Hind) by Buzurg Ibn Šahriyār and ‘Marvels of the Sea’ (ʿAḡāʾib al-baḥr) by several other authors, which are listed in the Fihrist by Ibn al-Nadīm (10th c.).

It should be pointed out that, so far, there is no compelling evidence proving that the Marvels as a whole was derived from any of the Arabic or Persian paradoxographical compositions that are known to us. One cannot, however, rule out entirely the possibility that such a composition existed and was available to the Christian compiler of our work. In that regard, Ibn al-Nadīm

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Marvels provides us with an interesting testimony. He opens a brief section dealing with ‘aḡāʾib works in chapter 8 of his catalogue with the following report:

There is the book known as The Book of Ṣaḥr al-Maḡribī, which was written by ... It contains thirty stories: ten about the wonders of the land, and ten about the wonders of the dawn, and ten about the wonders of the sea.

There are two noteworthy details in this concise description of an apparently lost work. First of all, like the Marvels, it is a relatively brief and simply organized composition. Second, it had a tripartite structure, similar to what we see announced in the title of the Marvels. Moreover, its ‘the wonders of the land’ section corresponds to ‘the marvels of the great cities’ in the Marvels, while ‘the wonders of the sea’ part corresponds to ‘the marvels in the Eastern islands’. Of course, these similarities are not specific enough to presume that the Marvels was modelled after the lost book of Ṣaḥr al-Maḡribī. The testimony of Ibn al-Nadīm is still significant, however, as a witness that, alongside extended and sophisticated ‘aḡāʾib compositions, such as the works of Buzurg

40 The manuscript has a blank space at this point, indicating, probably, that Ibn al-Nadīm intended to add the name of the book’s author later.

Ibn Šahriyār or Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī, there existed more modest representatives of this genre, which offered not much more than a simple catalogue of the wonders of nature and culture.

The presence of a significant number of Arabic and Persian loan-words or calques in the vocabulary of the Marvels has already been discussed above. In addition to these cases, one comes across many parallels between geographical and mythological traditions incorporated into our work and the works of Muslim authors. Most of them come from geographical or paradoxographical works, such as Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik by Ibn Ḫordāḏbeh,42 Aḥbār al-ṣīn wa-l-hind by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī,43 ‘Aḡāʾīb al-hind by Buzurg Ibn Šahriyār,44 ‘Aḡāʾīb al-maḥlūqāt by Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī,45 and some others. Sometimes these parallels can be narrowed down to particular works or authors, such

42 Cf. the descriptions of Alexandria and its lighthouse (I.2–3/II.2–3), the mirror in Alexandria (I.4/II.4), the lighthouse of brass (I.5/II.5), the wall between the Caspian and Mediterranean seas (I.7/II.7), the city with seven gates (I.8), the brass columns in Egypt (I.9), the brass horseman in Andalus (I.10), the pyramids of Egypt (I.11), the raining place Maṭlāyā (I.21/II.16), the rain in Hejaz (I.22/II.17), the tree climbers of Serendib (I.33), the buffalos of Serendib (I.51), the bull-fish (I.60), and the island of Antichrist (I.64/II.58).

43 Cf. the stories about the big fish (I.58–59/II.49–50), and the fish called 'sea-locust' (II.53).

44 Cf. the stories of the giant fish and sailors (I.58/II.49), the bridge made from the fish rib (II.52), and the whale stranded ashore (II.57).

45 Cf. the descriptions of the river in Azerbaijan (I.23), and the various kinds of human monsters (I.28/II.19, I.30/II.21, I.34–36/II.24–26).
as the story about a child raised by a dog (I.49), which finds a very similar account in *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* by al-Ǧāḥiẓ. Some of them, however, such as the image of the legendary insular tree of Waqwaq (I.42/II.32), are attested in such a diverse range of Arabic and Persian sources, that any attempt to establish the exact source used by our compiler would be impossible.

Especially remarkable are rare occasions when the compiler of the *Marvels* introduces Islamic religious vocabulary or traditions. In what concerns the former, he uses the Arabic loan-word *ḥag* and its derivative *ḥagāyē* to refer to ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘pilgrims’, respectively, in I.47. As for the latter, in I.64/II.58, he represents Antichrist by locating him on the island of Barṭīl, full of sounds of musical instruments. In doing so, he follows Muslim conventions about the corresponding eschatological figure of Daḡḡāl, who is often represented in Arabic sources as chained to a mountain on a distant island in the sea.

It remains an open question as to how exactly the Syriac Christian compiler of the *Marvels* became acquainted with this rich assortment of Muslim geographical and anthropological lore. Although the possibility of his dependence on some specific *ʿaḡāʾib* composition cannot be ruled out completely, it does not seem particularly likely, as I was unable to discover an Arabic or Persian work that would contain all these traditions. A more plausible scenario, thus, is that he culled these traditions while perusing a number of existing Muslim geographical and paradoxographical works, such as those by Ibn Ḫordāḏbeh or al-Qazwīnī, and reworked them according to his taste, as he rendered
this material into Syriac.\footnote{For examples of the use of Muslim Arabic works on natural science by such Christian authors of ‘Syriac Renaissance’ as Barhebraeus and Jacob bar Shakko, see Takahashi (2004, 293–97; 2002; 2006).} At the same time, a possibility of the oral transmission of at least some of these traditions, which one can easily imagine becoming a part of the folklore of the Islamicate world, should also be taken into consideration.

1.4. Date and milieu

The anonymous and compilative character of the *Marvels* makes the task of determining the date of its composition particularly challenging. The *terminus ante quem* of ca. 1680, provided by the date of the oldest textual witness in which it is attested (i.e., Borgia sir. 39), could be pushed to a somewhat earlier date, given the fact that this manuscript does not present an autograph. The *terminus post quem* is, however, much more difficult to establish. Such linguistic markers as the appearance of a gloss in New Persian (I.28/II.19) and the mention of a Frankish man (I.46/II.35) certainly point to a post-Crusader period. Moreover, the story about the victims of the ‘great plague’ in Basra (I.49) might indicate the time after the onslaught of the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century. At the moment, the period between the fifteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century appears to be the most plausible time of the work’s composition.

In what concerns the milieu, from which the composition originates, it may be said with a fair degree of confidence that it was produced by a member of the East Syrian Christian
community, most likely, in Northern Mesopotamia. As for a more exact location of the place where the compiler of the *Marvels* might have carried out his work, it cannot be established with absolute certainty. It should, however, have been one of the urban centres, where a literate member of the East Syrian community might be exposed both to Arabic (and/or Persian) Muslim culture as well as to oral traditions from such regions as Central Anatolia (cf. I.12), Kurdistan (cf. I.24–27), and the Persian Gulf (cf. I.40). In a manner of speculation, a city like Mosul, the commercial hub of north-eastern Iraq, seems to be a likely option. In that direction points also the fact that one of the compiler’s informants, the priest Quryāqos (I.41, I.47), is said to be a native of this city. However, other cities with significant East Syrian communities, such as Alqōš or Urmia, cannot be ruled out completely.