

CHAPTER 4

WEST SYRIAN, COPTIC AND
ARMENIAN SOURCES¹

Fragment on the Arab Conquests

On the front fly-leaf of a sixth-century Syriac manuscript containing the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Mark are scribbled a few lines about the Arab conquest, now very faint. The following entries are the most readable:

¹Non-Greek East Christian sources of the seventh and eighth centuries are surveyed by Albert *et. al.*, *Christianismes orientaux*, 144–49 (Armenian), 187–213 (Coptic), 226–28 (Ethiopic), 276–90 (Georgian), 356–58 and 362–73 (Syriac). For Armenian authors see also Thorossian, *Histoire de la littérature arménienne*, 101–12; Inglisian, "Armenische Literatur," 165–77; Etmekjian, *History of Armenian Literature*, 183–241. For Coptic authors see also *C.E., s.v.* "Literature, Coptic," which has a useful bibliography. For Ethiopic authors see also Littmann, "Äthiopische Literatur." For Georgian authors see also Deeters, "Georgische Literatur," 131–37. For West Syrian authors see also Assemani, *BO* 1 and 2; Wright, *Short History of Syriac Literature*, 134–66; Duval, *Littérature syriaque*, 374–79, 383–85; Baumstark, *GSL*, 242–84, 335–43; Chabot, *Littérature syriaque*, 81–93; Baumstark and Rücker, "Syrische Literatur," 190–95; Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia syriaca*, 170–87; Barsaüm, *Al-lu'lu' al-manthūr*, 272–323; Brock, "Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History," 18–20, 28, 32–36. As regards Syriac, I shall, for clarity, always in this book translate *ṭayyāyā* as "Arab," *'arbāyā* as "Arabian," *hagrāyā* as "Hagarene," *ishma'lāyā* as "Ishmaelite," *hanpā* as "pagan" and *mhaggrā/mhaggrāyā* as "Muslim" (the vocalisation in early manuscripts and the phrase *haw d-haggar* [n. 170 below] suggest that one should read *mhaggrāyā* [thus Brock, "Syriac Views," 15] rather than *mahrāyā*, which would seem to be a later formulation).

In January {the people of} Ḥimṣ took the word for their lives² and many villages were ravaged by the killing of {the Arabs of} Muḥammad (*Mūḥmd*) and many people were slain and {taken} prisoner from Galilee as far as Beth....

On the tw{enty-six}th of May the *Saq{ilā}rā* went {...} from the vicinity of Ḥimṣ and the Romans chased them {...}.³

On the tenth {of August} the Romans fled from the vicinity of Damascus {and there were killed} many {people}, some ten thousand. And at the turn {of the ye}ar the Romans came. On the twentieth of August in the year n{ine hundred and forty-}seven there gathered in Gabitha {a multitude of} the Romans, and many people {of the R}omans were kil{led}, {s}ome fifty thousand.⁴

Beyond this only scattered words are discernible. Wright, the first to draw attention to the fragment, wrote that "it seems to be a nearly contemporary notice," a view to which Nöldeke also subscribed.⁵ Neither scholar produced evidence to corroborate his assertion, but in its favour is the occurrence of the words "we saw" on l. 13, and the fact that it was a common practice to jot down notes for commemorative purposes on the blank pages of a Gospel. It is of some significance that the fragment accords with one of the dates given in Arabic sources for the battle at Gabitha (assuming this is to be identified with Yarmuk), namely 20 August AG 947/12 Rajab AH 15 (636), and bears resemblance to certain notices in Theophanes, but Donner is right to advise caution given the unknown provenance and frequent illegibility of the text.⁶

²*Shqal meltā l-ḥayyḥōn*, i.e. they pledged their submission in return for their lives.

³Cf. Theophanes, 337: "When he (Theodore the treasurer [*sakellarios*]) came to Emesa, he met a multitude of Saracens whom he slew together with their emir and drove the rest as far as Damascus."

⁴*Fragment on the Arab Conquests*, ll. 8–11, 14–16, 17–23; whatever appears in curly brackets is unreadable, so any letters/words given are conjectured.

⁵Wright, *Catalogue*, 1.65 (no. 94); Nöldeke, "Zur Geschichte der Araber," 76.

⁶Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 144; note that Anastasius of Sinai, *Sermo* 3, PG 89, 1156C, distinguishes between the battles of Gabitha and Yarmuk.