

PART ONE

MINOR WEST-SYRIAN CHRONOGRAPHY

1. A RECORD OF THE ARAB CONQUEST OF SYRIA, AD 637

INTRODUCTION

This much faded note appears to have been penned soon after the battle of Gabitha (AD 636), at which the Arabs inflicted a crushing defeat on the Byzantines. The words 'we saw' (line 13: the alternative reading is also in the first person plural) are positive evidence that the author was a contemporary. He speaks of olive oil, cattle (?) and ruined villages, aspects of the invasion important to a native of peasant stock, but never reported by the Arab sources. If he was a peasant who could write, he was probably a monk or a parish priest. His purpose in jotting this note in the book of the Gospels was probably purely commemorative. He seems to have realized how momentous the events of his time might be. The note is preserved on fol. 1 of BL Add. 14,461, a codex containing the *Gospel according to Matthew* and the *Gospel according to Mark*; it has been edited most recently by E. W. Brooks in *CM* 2, p. 75. The surviving traces are here indicated and annotated in a way that is avoided elsewhere in this book. In addition to the published observations of Nöldeke, 'Zur Geschichte der Araber', and Brooks, this translation draws on an improved reading of the text by S. P. Brock, which has not been published. Syriacists who want to check the translation must be enabled to do so; and, although the Syriac letters themselves leave non-Syriacists none the wiser, the overall impression that the text is very fragmentary and many of its readings disputable will serve the useful purpose of making them more cautious in formulating any argument they may base on it.

- 1 {Syr. ...T².DL...}
- 2 {Syr. ...T} M[uhammad⁷⁰
- 3 [...] the p]riest Lord Elijah [...]
- 4 {Syr. ...š...S...WT...⁷¹} and they came
- 5 {Syr. ...W...BLYL⁷¹} and fr[om] Ba{Syr. ...⁷²}
- 6 [...] strong [...] month {Syr. ...N(final)} [...]
- 7 {Syr. ...⁷²} appeared {...Syr. WN(final)...} and the Romans [...]⁷²
- 8 {Syr. ...⁷³ ...} and in January they took the word for their lives,⁷³
- 9 (did) [the sons of]⁷⁴ Emesa, and many villages were ruined with killing by
- 10 [the Arabs of]⁷⁵ Muhammad⁷⁶ and a great number of people were killed and captives
- 11 [were taken] from Galilee as far as Bēth⁷⁷ {Syr. ZK..WT⁷⁸}
- 12 [...] and those Arabs pitched camp beside [Damascus?]⁷⁹
- 13 [...] and we saw⁸⁰ everywhe[re...] {Syr. ⁷⁹ ...}

⁷⁰ Brock, who has reexamined the manuscript, finds this word 'very uncertain'; yet Brooks prints M[W]HMD, without showing that it is a doubtful reading.

⁷¹ The last three letters are tentatively read by Brock.

⁷² Brooks restores here the word 'fled', but Brock feels that this 'cannot be right: {Syr. W..^cQWN(final)} is what I read.'

⁷³ This phrase is used several times, with reference to the submission of Christians to the Arabs, by the author of text No. 13 (Part Two).

⁷⁴ {Syr. b^enay}: conjectured by Palmer. Brooks conjectured {Syr. c^ammō}, 'the people'.

⁷⁵ {Syr. tayyōyē d-}: conjectured by Hoyland (cf. line 12 and text 2, AG 945).

⁷⁶ {Syr. MWHMD}.

⁷⁷ Marked by Brooks as uncertain.

⁷⁸ The last three letters are tentatively identified by Brock.

⁷⁹ Conjectured by Nöldeke.

⁸⁰ Brock comments: 'could be {Syr. h^edayn} "we rejoiced".'

- 14 and⁸¹ o[l]ive oil which they brought and {Syr. NŠ...R} them.
 And on the t[wenty-
 15 six]th⁸² of May⁸³ went S[ac[ella]rius]⁸⁴ {Syr.
 ...WN(final)}⁸⁵ cattle⁸⁶ [...]
 16 [...] from the vicinity of Emesa,⁸⁷ and the Romans chased them
 [...] ⁸⁸
 17 {Syr. ...W. 𐤒 ...N(final) ...} and on the tenth
 18 [of August⁸⁹] the Romans fled⁹⁰ from the vicinity of
 Damascus [...]
 19 many [people], some 10,000. And at the turn
 20 [of the ye]ar the Romans⁹¹ came; on the twentieth of August in
 the year n[ine hundred
 21 and forty]-seven there gathered in Gabitha [...]
 22 [...] the Romans and a great many people were ki[[lled of]
 23 [the R]omans, [s]ome fifty thousand [...]

⁸¹ On this line Brock comments: 'Most of this (especially the end) is very uncertain. {Syr. D^𐤒TYYW} "which they brought" could just be {Syr. ...R^𐤒YTBW} "... they settled".'

⁸² The only number which will fit the space.

⁸³ Brock comments: 'Could just be {Syr. B^𐤒B} "of August".'

⁸⁴ Nöldeke (supported cautiously by Brock) could read more than Brooks; it is possible that we should translate: 'the Sacellarius'.

⁸⁵ 'and raided', the conjecture of Nöldeke, requires the ending -BWWN. Brock finds even Brooks's ending -BWN unlikely: '{Syr. ...Q^𐤒WN(final)} or {Syr. ...NKWN(final)} are possible.'

⁸⁶ Brock comments: 'This word might be {Syr. B^𐤒YD^𐤒} "as usual".'

⁸⁷ Brock comments: '"Emesa" needs a lot of faith to read: it is just possible, but so are other restorations (only very faint traces).'

⁸⁸ cf. Theophanes, p. 337: 'The Emperor...dispatched the sakellarios Theodore with a large force against the Arabs. Theodore met a host of Saracens near Emesa; he killed some of them, and chased the rest with their commander as far as Damascus.' [R.H.]

⁸⁹ Nöldeke's conjecture.

⁹⁰ This reading is confirmed by Brock.

⁹¹ This word is written above the line.

24 [...] in the year nine hundred⁹² and for[ty-eight]
 25 {Syr. ... LH ... ܩܘܢܘܢܐ ... B ...}

DISCUSSION

The 'turn of the year' (lines 19-20) signifies that the beginning of the note refers to the year 634/5. First the Emesenes 'took the word for their lives', a 'technical' expression for surrendering on terms of tolerance, confirmed by oaths {Ar. *ṣulḥ*}. Then there was a battle (one infers) in Palestine, as a result of which many villages were ruined and many people from the region between Galilee and (perhaps) Beth Sacharya, 20 km south-west of Jerusalem, were taken captive. Then the Arabs laid siege to Damascus (if Nöldeke's supplement is right). In May, AD 635, a Byzantine general of the rank of *sakellarios* was in the region of Emesa. (His name, according to the Byzantine sources, was Theodore.) Apparently, however, he was unable to lift the siege of Damascus. The note dates the next battle (at Gabitha) to 20 August, AG 947 = AD 636, which agrees with the best Arab date for the battle of the river Yarmūk.⁹³ Gabitha is a town to the north of the river Yarmūk in the Golan massif.

⁹² Brock: '“Nine hundred” is very uncertain.'

⁹³ For further discussion see Nöldeke, 'Zur Geschichte der Araber', pp. 79-82; F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 142-6. De Goeje, *Mémoire*, pp. 89ff., 119ff. tries to reconcile this fragment with other sources. [R.H.]