

# THE CHRISTIAN MONASTERY ON THE ISLAND OF KHARG

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The island of Kharg lies about 25 miles offshore from Bushire in the Persian Gulf. The monastery is towards the north end of the west side. It consists of two courtyards with the church sitting astride the barrier between both, i.e. the nave of the church is in the western courtyard, the chancel and sanctuary in the eastern (cf. plates 1 and 2). We are indebted to the



Plate 1. Aerial view of church and monastery, looking south. Note the (ancient) water tank towards top right corner.

National Iranian Oil Operating Companies who, when they began to develop Kharg as a deep sea oil terminal, asked Prof. Ghirshman to investigate ancient sites on the island. Prof. Ghirshman's excavation of the church and monastery showed the importance of the site. His statement on the monastery and church is included in the monograph *The Island of Kharg* first published by the I.O.O.C. in 1960.<sup>1</sup> Though his statement<sup>2</sup> is brief it is

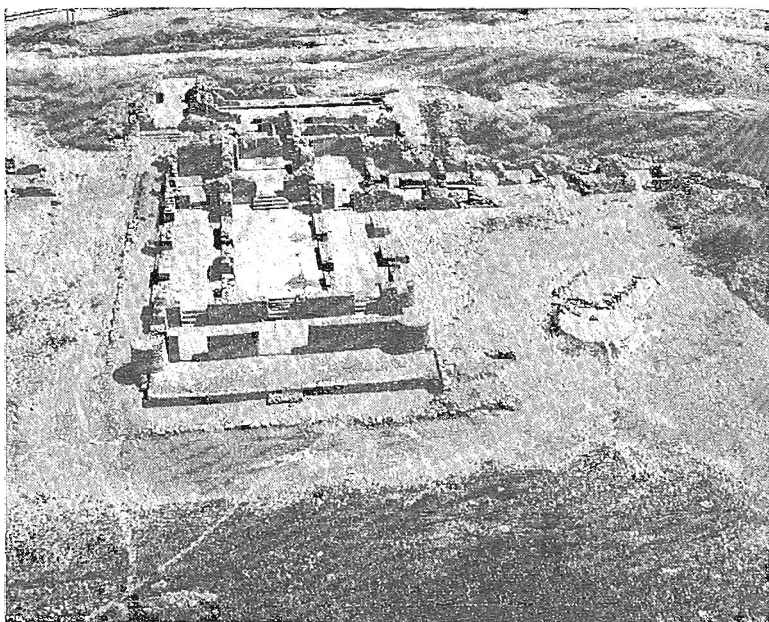


Plate 2. Aerial view looking east: in foreground the church proper, then respectively chancel and sanctuary, library and council chamber, with gate to right.

absolutely fundamental. He seems, however, to have concentrated more on the church<sup>3</sup> than the monastery.<sup>4</sup> The church was completely excavated, not so the monastery whose cells on the north side and most of the west were excavated by him, but not those on the south of the west court. Some work was done by him on the library in the east court immediately behind the church and on the council chamber which runs on a north-south axis behind that. In fact it was he who identified library and council chamber.<sup>5</sup> We are indebted to him for his plan of the church and monastery which appears in the Kharg monograph.<sup>6</sup> However, it appears from that, that he regarded the gate as in the south of the west corner.

When I was in Iran (October 1971-April 1972) as Honorary visiting Research Professor at the Asian Institute of the Pahlavi University of Shiraz, I was asked by the Oil Consortium to visit Kharg and give an opinion on the significance of a structure uncovered in the vicinity of the monastery by two archaeologists from the Iranian Ministry of Culture, Teheran. Before dealing

with this, one should state that the monastery is situated on a cliff top (plate 3). On the west side there is an extensive area,

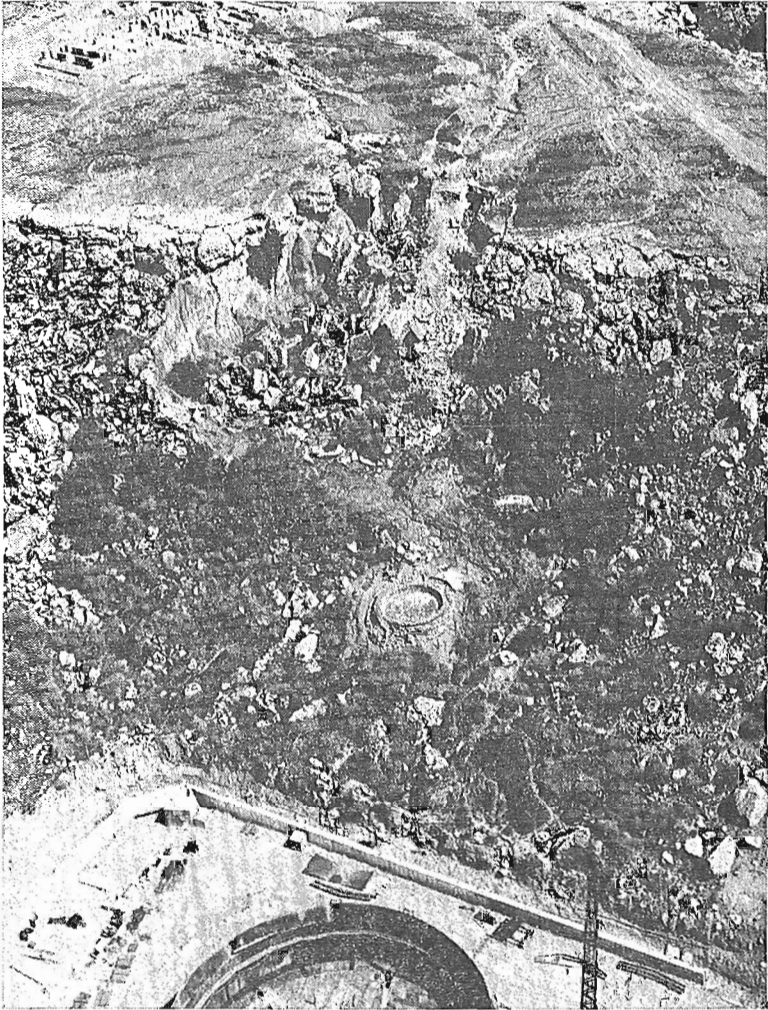


Plate 3. Aerial view, looking north-east, showing water tank in relation to the monastery (top left corner).

but at the south-west corner is a steep gully. Directly to the south of the monastery there is a level stretch of some acres

before one comes to the cliff edge. But there have been heavy falls of rock here which indicate that once this area extended the monastery there is another gully which, like that adjacent to further to the south. Out about 100 m from the south-east of the south-west of the monastery, led to a flat stretch of land near the sea-shore. Before new pipe lines to service the off-shore terminal were laid, the Iranian Ministry of Culture in their wisdom ordered a survey of the area immediately behind the eastern side of the monastery and down the gully to the flat stretch of land.

On the island there are *qanats* or underground channels of water drawn from aquiferous sands. One such *qanat* runs outside the eastern wall of the monastery. The water issues into a man-made pool at the top of the gully. The archaeologists from the Iranian Ministry of Culture found that from this pool water had run down the gully in a small man-made channel. Because of rock falls some of the channel had disappeared, but they uncovered it again towards the mouth of the gully where it runs over gently sloping land. Then there is trace of a miniature aqueduct which conveyed this water over a seasonal watercourse issuing from the other gully which started at the south-west corner of the monastery. Across this watercourse one can pick up again the man-made water channel which had come down from the pool at the south-east of the monastery. The watercourse ends in a huge water tank about 20 m in diameter and whose wall is approx. 2 m high (plate 3; cf. 1). When first the present writer saw the water tank, the nature and purpose of which he was asked to explain as well as its relation, if any, to the monastery, he said: "It is a *Miqwah*,<sup>7</sup> if it has provision for water to run out of it." On examination, this feature proved to have been supplied. A *miqwah* must have running water. The Kharg ancient water tank would have had water running practically all the year from the *qanat*. The opinion was held by some that it was a tank for agricultural purposes, for there was a tradition that there had been a garden on the level area between the tank and the shore. There are here and there along the west coast of Kharg traces of such gardens, in places where the cliffs do not come close to the sea; one further along has a well. But what seems to argue against the water tank being for agricultural purposes is the care to keep its water separate from that from the other gully by the provision of an aqueduct. Further, the present writer discovered that after the channel issued from the *qanat* pool not more than a third of the way down, there was provision made to shut off the channel to the tank and divert the water to another channel which seems to have been used for irrigating the garden which seems once to have graced the hillside and which has now

been restored. Further down the channel to the little aqueduct and on to the tank there were in at least two places still, tiny basins (cf. e.g. plate 4) in the channel immediately before drops



Plate 4. Small basin in water channel running to water tank.

in the level of the channel, which seem to have been provided to let silt settle. One formed the impression that every precaution had been taken to keep the water pure or further to purify it. Striking also was the fork in the channel. When not required the water to the water tank could be shut off.

What was the relation of the water tank to the monastery? The Iranian Ministry of Culture archaeologists had excavated a gateway at the south-east corner of the west courtyard. On Prof. Ghirshman's plan there is no doorway here but rather a chamber. Actually as one sees it now it is a very deep doorway about 10 m deep and constructed as if it were at least two wardrooms. However, at the threshold between the inner ward and the outer is a hefty stone gate-shoe. This would be the main gate. When the present writer saw and identified the gate-shoe, it solved for him the question of where the main gate of the monastery had been, but presented him with a new picture of the monastery. One must now think of the monastery as looking out to the south. Outside what we know now to have been the main gate a path runs to the *qanat* opening of the man-made pool. There would

have been stairs down the cliff, a track would have been too steep. The path would lead directly down to the water tank, then on to the gardens through which a stream flowed then as even now. It is the one that flowed under the aqueduct and is fed from both gullies. Now it is principally fed from the *qanat* water since the diversion channel to the water tank is not in use.

The water tank, when we look at the monastery from the south (plate 3), assumes new significance. One has to imagine people coming to the monastery from the sea.

The island of Kharg had a fire temple which Prof. Ghirshman uncovered. Relations between Christians and Zoroastrians were not good in the early Sassanian period. The monastery was isolated on the rocky SW. of the island. It was not that the monks were wanting to isolate themselves. The sea was their gateway. They did hold some rocky land back to the ridge that runs down the island. Just how far this penetration in depth extended along the coast will probably now never be known. There are still traces of some twenty or so little houses (cf. e.g. plate 5) in what



Plate 5. Small house near monastery.

appears to be two concentric arcs around the monastery. On the east some of the settlements have disappeared under the Petrol Tank Farm, though two remained in April 1971 on the cliff

above yet another gully further south-east of that at the bottom of which the water-tank stood.

To the immediate east of the monastery across the *qanat* gully there too were the ruins of a house. The arc(s) touch(es) the sea again up 1 km or so beyond the monastery where there are remains of two houses by the cliffside below which there is trace of possibly a vineyard in which there stands a large stone winepress (cf. plate 6). But up a further 1 km or more there is

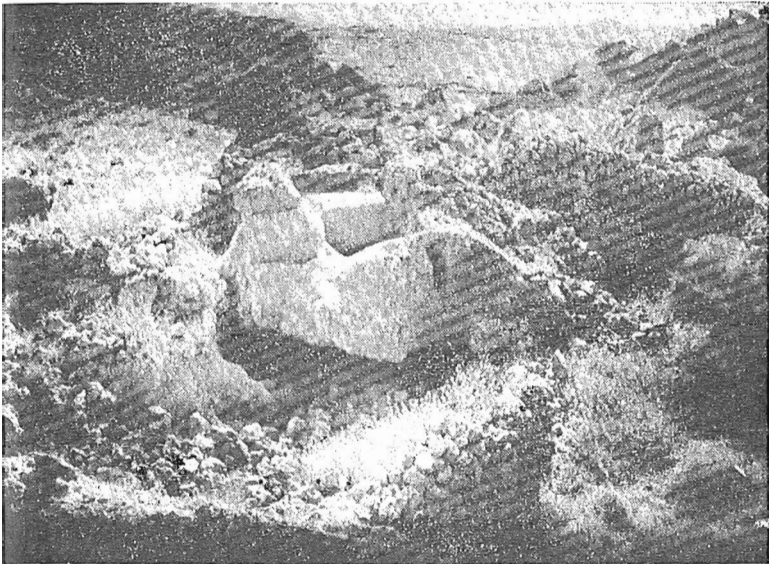


Plate 6. Possible winepress.

evidence of another house near the cliff. Behind the monastery towards the ridge there are remains of houses situated in two arcs. The houses are built on the rock. They seem to have had three or four rooms. Around most there is trace of a walled-in area which seems to have been cultivated.

In some, wild grain still grows sparsely. Beside the villas back to the ridge there are either *qanats* or wells, sometimes both. One gets the impression that the walled villas served several purposes:—

- (a) Protection of the *qanats*.
- (b) Conservation of water by damming the wadis, along



which some of them are built, and the use of the water for agricultural purposes.

(c) Defence in depth.

Within one of the villas near the ridge is a large piece of limestone shaped like an upturned mushroom (cf. plate 7a). There



Plate 7 (a). Inverted "mushroom" of limestone (see plate 5).

are two such at the monastery (cf. plate 7b). One in part of the library area behind the church has much bitumen deposit in the mushroom cap-like saucer. The present writer is convinced that these upturned "mushrooms" were used as convector heaters, the convex upright of which would get red hot as the crude *naft* burnt in the saucer. One cannot accept what seems to be Prof. Ghirshman's view<sup>8</sup> that it was a lampstand. There are oil wells on Kharg but probably the monks, if not the Zoroastrians before them, relied on seepages. In the still unexcavated south-west corner of the monastery one came across shards from jars with residue of *naft* on them. In the same area one came across glass and metal fragments. One wonders if this area, which seemed to project out considerably beyond the rest of the western face of the monastery, were the bake-house, pottery and smithy. I was informed that portions of a large jar with its interior retaining





Plate 7 (b). Similar, from library area, with bitumen in saucer.

traces of *naft* were found by the council chamber. This was found not far from the upturned mushroom heater and may have been for supplying the heater.

There is an abundance of fine glass fragments, especially dark blue, to be found in and around the monastery and at some of the villas. This glass is like the glass which, in the Muslim period, turns up as far east as Malaysia. One wonders whether the monks were not producing goods for export. At least they may have been following the example of the Palmyrene traders whose graves are on the island.<sup>9</sup> Presumably the Palmyrene traders thought it worthwhile to establish a post at Kharg to get the first options on the merchandise coming from India up to Charax where Basra now is.

The monks faced the sea. The early Persian Christians seemed also to have been interested in pearling and not merely in the "pearl of great price", their metaphor for Jesus. Between Kharg and Khargu (the smaller island) the black Kharg pearl long remained famous. Not only trade with India was involved, for Al-Muqaddasi in the 10th century called the Persian Gulf the sea of China. Even in earlier Muslim times trade with China

and the Gulf was greatly developed. But the monastic settlement at Kharg had, it appears, come to an end by the end of the first century of Islam, if one can so interpret graffiti (cf. plate 8) which

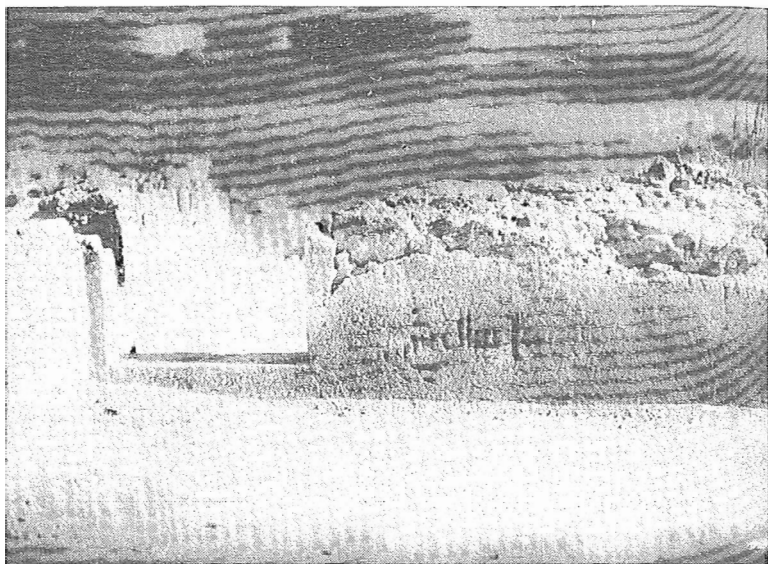


Plate 8. Persian inscription on plaster of villa of plate 5.

the present writer found on the plaster of one of the walls of the villa with the upturned mushroom heater. The inscription in Persian but in Arabic script reads *100 sal pish*, i.e. 100 years ago.

If one had come to enter the monastery from the sea one would have passed the rather special water tank. You could not miss it. If you had asked what it meant, the present writer believes you would have been told it was the gate to membership of the community and to full membership of the church. One should see the water tank at the foot of the way up to the main gate of Kharg's monastery as a baptistry.

In the Kharg monograph referred to earlier, Prof. Ghirshman remarked on the typically Sassanian architectural features to be seen in the monastery church.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the little villas fanning out from the monastery area, there is adjacent to the north side of the monastery the ruins of a more substantial house. Apparently this latter and the more distant villas he regarded as quarters for married priests.<sup>11</sup> It is the case that the

Persian Church Council of Beth Lapat declared the lawfulness of marriage for all Christians, including every grade of the hierarchy. This was part of a move by the patriarch Bar-Soma, c. 484, to reach a concordat with the Shah Piroz. One of the complaints of the Zoroastrians from the time of Shapur II against the Christians was that they taught men to refrain from marriage and the procreation of children.<sup>12</sup> Apparently on the basis of Bar-Soma's having the Persian Church c. 484 allow marriage for Bishops and priests, Prof. Ghirshman in the Kharg monograph<sup>13</sup> seemed to favour dating the foundation of church, monastery and settlement at this very time. The argument seems to be that the existence of the houses outside the monastery would be necessary for married priests. The present writer cannot follow this argument. In the Church of the East priests have always been expected to marry. Bishops before and apart from the Council of Beth Lapat (the recommendations of which were set aside) have been drawn from the celibates in the monasteries and were expected to remain unmarried. To arrive at a date for the establishment of the monastery other factors must be taken into account. One of these is the recently discovered water tank which the present writer understands to be a baptistry. There is precedent for a baptistry to be separate from a church, e.g. at Pisa. In the church on Kharg in a chamber to the left of the chancel or choir there is a deep earthenware basin (cf. plates 9a and b).

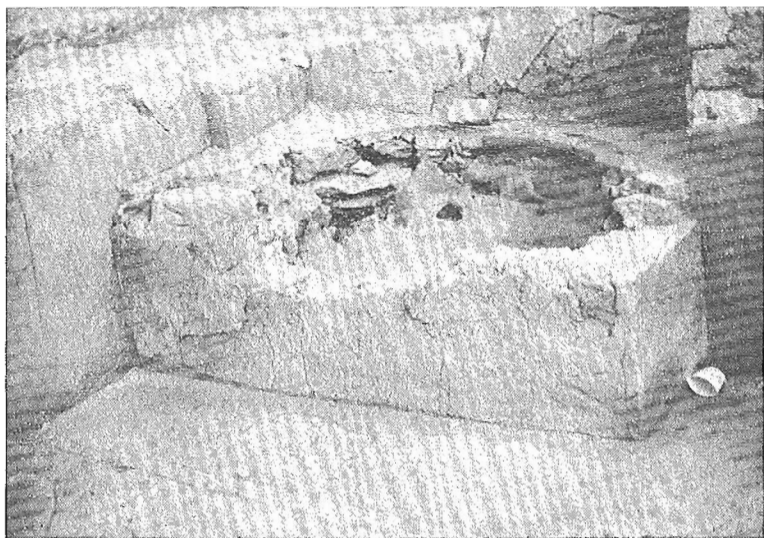


Plate 9 (a). *Tannura*, or deep earthenware oven used for baking bread.

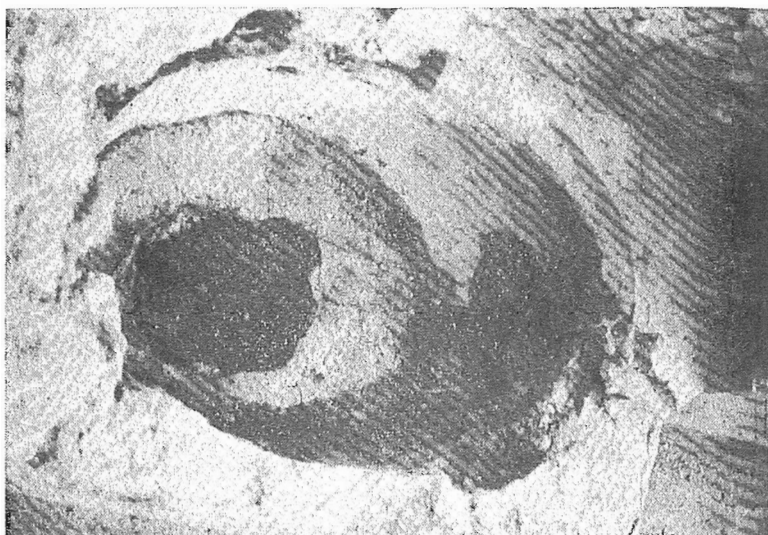


Plate 9 (b). Same, from above.

This is not a font, because there was no infant baptism in the early Persian Church. The deep earthenware basin is a *Tannura* or earthenware oven used for baking bread. In the church it would be used before every celebration of the *Qurbana Qadisha* (i.e. Mass) to bake the holy bread.

By the third century A.D. at the latest, Christianity was well established in nearby Khuzistan on the Persian mainland. In fact in 399 A.D. occurred the great persecution of the Christians of Sus. We are fortunate in having the Syriac tractate *Of the Sons of the Covenant*, by Farhad or Aphraates the Persian Sage (d. 336), which deals with *the Monastic Life and Baptism*.<sup>14</sup> This tractate is important for our investigation.

Aphraates makes it clear that baptism is only available to celibate young adults, male or female. The choice is baptism or marriage. The baptised are the sons and daughters of the covenant, a phrase which recalls, as far as the males are concerned, the sons of the covenant, i.e. the initiated members of the Qumran Community (cf. D.S.D.). In his tractate on the monastic life or, as he puts it, concerning the Sons of the Covenant, it is made plain that both male and female baptised Christians lived the conventual life together. Baptism was the entry to the conventual

life, and the only full Christians were monastic celibates. Aphraates<sup>15</sup> recognises that it were better, however, for the male or female Nazirite, a monk or nun who shared a cell, to marry than to burn with lust for each other<sup>16</sup> and such he advocated to leave the monastic life and marry. So it would appear Aphraates speaks of a time when all young people baptised had at least a spell of conventual life before marriage. From this we can see how fitting it was that the baptismal tank be at the entrance to the monastery or rather at the foot of the stairway that led up to the monastery. Baptism was on the night of Holy Saturday, which is the eve of Easter Sunday. Aphraates (tractate on Pass-over)<sup>17</sup> makes it plain that his Church taught that Jesus rose from the dead on the eve of Easter day at a similar time to when on the eve of Good Friday He had said "This is my body and this is my blood!" He is at pains to stress that he was really dead at that time if He said these words; we might say Aphraates was contriving to complete the three days by Holy Saturday night, the eve of Easter, when it was customary for the baptism of catechumens into the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter the baptised, who were now full members of the church and monastery, would ascend the stairway in the gully and enter the monastery by the main gate which was at the eastern end of the west courtyard. This gate stood about the centre of the south wall of the monastery; beyond it to the east was the east courtyard with the library and council chamber. The sanctuary of the church projected into it, though choir and nave were in the west courtyard. On entering by the main gate the baptised Christians would walk either directly into the choir of the church or follow the esplanade adjacent to the church round to its main west door and proceed up the nave and then into the choir.

Prior to 1948 and the discovery of the documents relating to the Dead Sea Sectaries, whose monastic rule we know from the Discipline Manual, it would have been difficult to have conceived even with our knowledge of Aphraates, that institutions with a developed monastic life of the coenobium type existed in Iranian Christianity of even the fourth century A.D. Early this century Wallis Budge in his introduction to his edition of Thomas of Marga, *The Book of the Governors*<sup>19</sup> (London, 1893, Introd. p. XIV), held that the type of monastic ideal that first influenced the Iranian Christians was that of the Desert Fathers of Egypt. Only some centuries after the development of the coenobium style of monastic life had developed in Egypt could one expect, he held, to find monasteries of such a type arising in Iran. But Iranian Christianity was an offshoot of the Syriac Christianity of Adiabene. The little buffer state of Adiabene in north-east Iraq

between the two Zab tributaries of the Tigris was situated in the ancient Assyrian homeland. Most of its inhabitants were Jews and its royal house converted to Judaism.<sup>20</sup> Helena, Queen of Adiabene, is mentioned in Mishnah and Talmud. She was well known in Jerusalem where she took life-long Nazirite vows<sup>21</sup> (cf. Nazir 3:6). Are we necessarily to think a) of Nazirite vows lasting only a limited period, say one month, and b) of Nazirites, while under the vow, going about their normal affairs? M. Nazir 1:2; T.B. Naz. 4a do admit that the life-long Nazirite vow was possible. Further we know from an early medieval Samaritan priestly source, the Kafi of Yusuf b. Salama, that Nazirites lived in community in the Samaritan High Priest's house at Nablus during their vow. Back in 1960 I suggested in an article in the *Annual of the Leeds University Oriental Society*<sup>22</sup> that the Samaritans, themselves Zadokite, in this might have been following the practice of the Jerusalem Zadokite priesthood. But I went on to show that the existing organisation for communal living for Nazirites, with which the Zadokite priesthood of Jerusalem were doubtless familiar even when they the Zadokites of Jerusalem withdrew to Qumran in the first quarter of the second century B.C., would have provided the basic pattern for the Qumran Community. Admission to the purity or water of the Many meant that the neophytes were now sons and daughters of the Covenant cf. the function of baptism in Aphraates' Persian Christianity.

It is becoming generally accepted now that after the fall of Jerusalem and, for that matter, of the Qumran monastery settlement of Murabaat, Jews from Jerusalem and sectaries from Qumran would flee for sanctuary in Adiabene, Queen Helena's homeland. Syriac Christianity in Persia came from Adiabene/Assyria. That Christianity is recognised as a significantly Jewish form of Christianity. If so Persian Christianity's monasticism might well be indebted not only to the pattern of the Nazirite Community in Jerusalem but also to the Qumran development of it. This means that we can be prepared to accept a much earlier date for the development of Persian Christian monasticism, now that we realize it was debtor to the Jewish monasticism of Qumran. I may add we have in the mystic writings of Dadisha Qatraya<sup>23</sup> of Qatar in S.E. Arabia clear evidence of the influence of the Essenic<sup>24</sup> practices on the rule of a Syriac Christian monastery.

As to the Kharg monastery, since Syriac Christianity was early heir to a developed Jewish monastic system, there would appear to be no need to date the establishment of the monastery towards the end of the fifth century.

I for one do not regard the houses arranged in arcs round the landward side of the monastery as houses for married priests or married monks. Had such eventuated, there would have been there and then the dissolution of the monastery. Rather it was more like the Qumran settlement. All would have done such basic training under the guidance of the monastery. Those who, male and female, chose marriage, would from their villas help defend the *ganats* and, as artisans and farmers, serve the monastery. But they were supporters, and if not members of the monastery, yet members of its larger community. If we accept this theory we would look for an earlier date than Prof. Ghirshman, for Jewish Christianity's major impact on Persian Christianity belongs primarily to Parthian and earlier Sassanid epochs. This is particularly so in the case of the Qumran-style monasticism.

This paper cannot be definitive. Much more has to be done at Kharg, especially on the villas, so that we can trace the full extent of the Christian settlement of which the monastery was head and heart.

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1. The page references in this article are to the *Third Printing*, 1965, Bahman Press, Tehran.
  2. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-22.
  3. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 19-21.
  4. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
  5. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 21.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
  7. Jewish baptistry for ritual purification.
  8. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.
  9. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  12. Cited by Wigram, *History of the Assyrian Church* (London, S.P.C.K., 1910), p. 64.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
  14. Published in *Patrologia Syriaca*. Pars Prima. Tomus Primus. MCMXXXVI, pp. 240-312. English Translation 'Of Monks'. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIII (Grand Rapids, 1969), pp. 362-382.
  15. *Ibid.*, 4, p. 366.
  16. Cf. Paul, 1 Cor. 7:9.



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17. *Patrologia Syriaca*, Tomus Primus, Paris, MDCCCXCIV, pp. 533-37 § 12.
18. Rom. 6:3, 4; Col. 2:12.
19. Wallis Budge, *Thomas of Marga, The Book of the Governors* (London, 1893). Introd. p. xiv.
20. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* XX, II, 1.
21. Cf. *Nazir* 3:6.
22. Vol. I, Brill Leiden, 1959, pp. 52-54.
23. Woodbrooke Studies, Vol. VII (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 70-143.
24. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 71, "Sons of the Pact", i.e. Covenant.