Al-Ḥīra and Its Histories

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This study considers the production of history-writing in the Naṣrid kingdom of al-Ḥīra at the end of the sixth century. It argues that Ḥīran history-writing encompassed king-lists, stories of tribal migration, and episcopal histories for the see of Ḥīra, and that the majority of these were composed in the era of the last Naṣrid king, al-Nuʿmān III. It goes on to argue that the Ḥīran material embedded in later sources such as al-Ṭabarī reflects the politics of the Ḥīran court in the period ca. 590–610, the last generation of Ḥīran independence.

The city of al-Ḥīra in southwestern Iraq was famous in the Islamic period as a center for the production of Arab poetry and as the capital of Arab kings.[1] It can probably be identified with *Ḥirtā d-Nuʿmān* of the Syriac sources, the capital of the "Persian Arabs" whose armed forces were a lynchpin of the western policy of the Sasanian shahs.[2]

In spite of its impressive military performance, however, we should remember that the success of the kings of al-Ḥīra was brittle. Its power was based on a divide-and-rule policy among the tribes of inner Arabia whom it threatened, cajoled, and rewarded, just as the kings themselves demanded rewards from their Persian masters. The kings of al-Ḥīra received landed estates and military support from the shahs, and in turn they appointed tribesmen as kings, military leaders, and tax collectors elsewhere in Arabia.[3] M. J. Kister suggested that some of these tribes actually pastured their flocks in the city's vicinity, while others

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1. In "Insider and Outsider Sources: Historiographical Reflections on Late Antique Arabia" (in *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. G. Fisher and J. H. F. Dijkstra [Leuven, 2014], 267–80), Robert Hoyland warns against treating the Muslim Arabic sources as insider accounts of pre-Islamic Arabia and assuming that the terminology for confederations and dynasties (such as "Lakhmid" or "Naṣrid") was used in pre-Islamic al-Ḥīra. Contemporary Greek and Syriac sources tend to speak in much more general terms of the "Persian Saracens." See also Ch. Robin, "Les arabes de Ḥimyar, des 'Romains' et des Perses (IIIe–VIe siècles de l'ère chrétienne)," *Semitica et Classica* 1 (2008): 167–208; G. Fisher, "Kingdoms or Dynasties? Arabs, History, and Identity before Islam," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 4 (2011): 245–67; G. Fisher and P. Wood, "Writing the History of the 'Naṣrid' Dynasty at al-Ḥīrah: The Pre-Islamic Perspective," *Iranian Studies* 49 (2016): 247–90. For al-Ṭabarī's list of Ḥīran kings, see the appendix to this article.

2. On the Arab allies of the Sasanians in general, see C. E. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs before Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3,1: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge, 1983), 593–612. For the identification of *Ḥirtā d-Nuʿmān* (camp of al-Nuʿmān) with the city known to Muslim Arabs as al-Ḥīra, see G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Laḥmiden in al-Ḥīra: Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Berlin, 1899), 12–13. However, we should note how vague the sixth-century term is, even if the Arabic name does indeed derive from the Syriac *Ḥirtā*; see the discussion in Fisher and Wood, "Writing the History."

3. M. Kister, "Al-Ḥīra: Some Notes on Its Relations with Arabia," *Arabica* 15 (1968): 143–69, at 152 (for the estate of ʿAyn al-Tamar, which may have been dedicated to date production); 147 and 159 for tribal appointments (especially the appointment of a king in Yathrib by al-Nuʿmān III). Al-Ṭabarī (*Annales*, ed. M. de Goeje [Leiden, 1879–1901], 1: 890) reported the construction of irrigation canals for the city. For Sasanian influence deeper into the Arabian peninsula, see M. Lecker, "The Levying of Taxes for the Sassanians in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib)," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002): 109–26.

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represented an "outer circle" of allies who participated in mutually beneficial trade treaties.[4] Yet much of this system was the result of changeable and temporary treaty-building. Later Muslim authors would revel in the seizure of Persian equipment given to the king's allies or in the expansion of Mecca's trading interest, in the wake of al-Ḥīra's decline, by men resentful of its haughty kings.[5]

Greg Fisher has emphasized that the kings of the Persian Arabs, like their rivals in Roman Syria, were examples of interstitial powers that inhabited the borderlands between Rome and Persia.[6] The kings of al-Ḥīra themselves were, in M. B. Rowton's terminology, "dimorphic," able to play a role as Sasanian courtiers as well as leaders of an Arab federation.[7] This ability to adapt to different political situations and to act as channels for Sasanian influence explains both their success in this borderland and the suspicion with which these poachers-turned-gamekeepers were held in some early Muslim sources, who were sympathetic to their enemies in the Banū Tamīm or Banū ʿAwf.[8]

The "interstitial" position of the kings of the Persian Arabs in great power politics was mirrored in their capital city of al-Ḥīra. Most of the kings were pagans,[9] yet the archaeological surveys of the early twentieth century have highlighted the Christian character of the border city.[10] The city hosted a bishop (Hosea) who signed the attendance lists of the 410 synod of Ctesiphon.[11] And Christianity was identified by Islamic-era sources as a defining feature of the ʿIbād, the elite stratum that co-existed with more recently settled migrants.[12] Still, it

4. Kister, "Al-Ḥīra," 153–57 (esp. the role of the Banū Sulaym in guarding Ḥīran caravans beyond Najaf). For the caravan trade to the southwest of Arabia, see B. Finster, "Die Reiseroute Kufa–Saʿūdī-Arabien in früh-islamischer Zeit: Bericht über den Survey vom 9–14. Mai 1976 auf dem westeuphratischen Wüstenstreifen," *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 9 (1978): 53–91; M. D. Bukharin, "Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity," in *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (Leiden, 2010), 115–34.

5. M. J. Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm (Aspects of Their Relations)," *JESHO* 8 (1965): 113–63. He highlighted the defeats of the "Lakhmids" by the Tamīm in the years leading up to the Islamic conquests and the important role of this group in dominating trade between Mecca and southwestern Iraq.

6. G. Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (New York, 2011).

7. M. B. Rowton, "Urban Autonomy in a Nomadic Environment," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 32 (1973): 201–15.

8. On the origin of later Muslim sources in the poetry of inter-tribal conflict (*ayyām*), see F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998), 180, 208; R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London, 2001), 224–27; W. Caskel, "Aijām al-ʿarab: Studien zur altarabischen Epik," *Islamica* 3 (1930): 1–99. On the criticism of kingship as a major theme in early Islamic thought, see L. Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 1997); I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2 vols. (London, 1967–71), 1: 70–76.

9. Some kings of the Persian Arabs are accused of very flamboyant paganism, including human sacrifice, but this is likely to be Roman black propaganda. See the sources cited and discussed in Fisher and Wood, "Writing the History."

10. See studies by D. Talbot Rice, "The Oxford Excavations at Ḥīra," *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934): 51–73; Y. Okada, "Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-Western Desert," *Al-Rāfidān* 12 (1991): 71–83. Also note the summary by E. C. D. Hunter, "The Christian Matrix of al-Hira," in *Les controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide*, ed. C. Jullien (Paris, 2008), 41–56, at 50.

11. *Synodicon orientale, ou, Recueil de synodes nestoriens*, ed. and tr. J.-B. Chabot (Paris, 1902), 35. Al-Ḥīra was also said to serve as the burial place of a number of sixth-century catholicoi: J. M. Fiey, "Résidences et sépultures des patriarches syriaques-orientaux," *Le Muséon* 98 (1985): 149–68.

12. T. Nöldeke (*Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit des Sasaniden* [Leiden, 1879], 24) describes the Syriac etymology of the ʿIbād as "servants [of Christ]." For Christian identity in Iraq in this period more generally, see S. P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982): 1–19, and in the late sixth century, J. T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006). For Christianity among the Arabs, see the source commentary

was only under the last independent ruler, al-Nuʿmān III, that the city's kings embraced the religion of its aristocracy.

Al-Ḥīra in late antiquity was thus a Sasanian client state with a prominent Christian population. Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), Arabic, and Persian must have all seen common use in the city.[13] Each of these language groups had its own traditions of historical memory, focused on the Christian church and holy men,[14] on tribal deeds of valor,[15] and on the reigns of the Sasanian kings, respectively.[16] It will be argued here that each of these traditions had a part to play in the creation of a distinctive set of Ḥīran histories centered on the reigns of its kings, almost all of whom were thought to stem from a single dynasty, the Naṣrids.[17]

THE MEMORY OF AL-ḤĪRA

Most of our information on al-Ḥīra, and certainly our information for histories composed in al-Ḥīra, is derived from Arabic sources from the ninth century and beyond, compiled by both Muslims and Christians. Much of this has passed through three, now lost, works of Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819), whose monumental volume on Arab tribal geneaology remains extant.[18] Several modern commentators have attempted to comb these Islamic-era accounts to write *histoires événementielles* of the city and its kings in the Sasanian period. The foundational work of reconstruction in this school is Gustav Rothstein's late nineteenth-century monograph on the "Lakhmid" dynasty, which was succeeded in the twentieth century by the works of Irfan Shahid and J. S. Trimingham.[19] Much of this secondary material is very useful and thought-provoking, but it is has proceeded without source-critical treatment of the full range of the Arabic material.

To some extent, the histories of al-Ḥīra pose the same set of problems for the modern commentator as the sources for seventh-century Islam; that is, they may tell us much more

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of G. Fisher et al., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. G. Fisher (Oxford, 2015), ch. 6. For the different sections of al-Ḥīra's population, see (for instance) the account in al-Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 822, with further sources cited in I. Toral-Niehoff, "The ʿIbād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq," in Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, *Qurʾān in Context,* 323–48, at 326–27.

13. I. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra: Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden, 2014).

14. In *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford, 2013) I discuss the traditions of historical writing and hagiography in an East Syrian context.

15. A. A. Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, tr. L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1983), 137; Caskel, "*Aijām al-ʿarab*."

16. P. Huyse, "Late Sasanian Society between Orality and Literacy," in *The Sasanian Era*, ed. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart (London, 2008), 140–53. On all of these kinds of history writing, see J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010).

17. Along with those of the Romans and Persians, the histories of al-Ḥīra were one of the stories "known from books" that were recited in early seventh-century Mecca: M. Omidsalar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic, the Shāhnāmeh* (New York, 2011), 42.

18. On Ibn al-Kalbī's surviving work on geneaology, see W. Caskel, *Ǧamharat an-nasab: Das genealogische Werk des Hišām ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī* (Leiden, 1966), as well as H. Kennedy, "From Oral Tradition to Written Record in Arab Genealogy," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 531–44; B. Ulrich, "Constructing al-Azd: Tribal Identity and Society in the Early Islamic Centuries" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), 53–56. They stress the immense scale of Ibn al-Kalbī's task, which was to record the descent of an entire "nation." Ibn al-Kalbī was said to have composed three works on al-Ḥīra: a book of al-Ḥīra, a book on its churches, monasteries, and the ʿIbād, and a book devoted to the ʿIbādī poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd (J. Horovitz, "ʿAdi ibn Zeyd, the Poet of Hira," *Islamic Culture* 4 [1930]: 31–69, at 32).

19. Rothstein, *Laḥmiden*; I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 vols. in 4 (Washington, DC, 1995); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington DC, 1989)*;* idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC, 1984); J. S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London, 1979). Also note G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

about the context in which they were transmitted and composed than they do about the events that they relate.[20] M. J. Kister and M. Plessner analyzed the work of Ibn al-Kalbī in just this light. They show how his genealogical analysis fits into the Abbasid construction of the *jāhiliyya*, whereby prominent Baghdadis sought to prove their Arabness in a multi-ethnic environment whose connections to the Arab peninsula and its history had become unclear.[21] Such claims build on the earlier assertions of nobility and prowess by different tribal groups, some of which may have stressed a Ḥīran connection (whether real or imagined) for its associations with lineage, wealth, and Arab culture.[22] Furthermore, for a later Muslim audience, the Christian associations of al-Ḥīra may have also been attractive. As Thomas Sizgorich observed, some of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's Muslim correspondents understood Arabian Christians such as the martyrs of Najran to have been proto-Muslim.[23] In an environment where early conversion to Islam was highly prestigious, a monotheist ancestry that predated Muḥammad may have been a desirable characteristic for tribal history.[24]

Rather than focusing on the context of their compilation or the third- to sixth-century realities they purport to describe, here I attempt to use the Ḥīran histories to investigate the period of their written composition. In other words I intend to investigate the patterns and agendas of the Ḥīran material preserved in the Arabic compilations to make some initial statements on how and why this material was created. The later universal histories such as that by al-Ṭabarī draw on the work of earlier collectors, of whom one is Ibn al-Kalbī; these in turn produced unified histories of al-Ḥīra by drawing on a series of disparate source traditions—the genealogies of the kings; reports (*akhbār*) about specific kings; divergent narratives of the Arab settlers of al-Ḥīra; tales of the foundation of its monasteries; and accounts of the deeds of its bishops. I focus my inquiry on this earlier layer of sources, many of which were composed in the last generation before the Sasanian collapse.[25]

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20. Cf. R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, rev. ed. (Princeton, 1981), 69.

21. M. J. Kister and M. Plessner, "Notes on Caskel's Ǧamharat an-Nasab," *Oriens* 25–26 (1976): 48–68; R. Dory, "The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 33–49; Donner, *Narratives*, 107–9.

22. One good example is the Azd; see Ulrich, "Constructing al-Azd," 256–57. See further J. Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London, 2003), 478, for their Ḥīran connections; B. Ulrich, "The Azd Migrations Reconsidered: Narratives of ʿAmr Muzayqiya and Mālik b. Fahm in Historiographic Context," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 38 (2008): 311–18, for the stories of their migration. Also note Abū l-Baqāʾ, *al-Manāqib al-mazyadiyya fī akhbār mulūk al-asadiyya*, ed. S. Darādka and M. Khuraysāt (Amman, 1984), 114, for the claims of Rabīʿa, Muḍar, and Iyād to be early members of the *aḥlāf* introduced by the fourth-century king Imruʾ al-Qays.

23. T. Sizgorich, "Become Infidels or We Will Throw You into the Fire": The Martyrs of Najrān in Early Muslim Historiography, Hagiography, and Qurʾānic Exegesis," in *Writing "True Stories": Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Early Medieval Near East*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou (Turnhout, 2010), 125–47. Also note the identification of (pre-Islamic) Christian ascetics, such as the monk Baḥīrā, as early witnesses to Muḥammad's prophetic status: S. H. Griffith, "Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥîrâ: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 146–74. For other examples of Muslim interest in Christian culture, see H. Kilpatrick, "Representations of Social Intercourse between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Some Medieval *Adab* Works," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. J. Waardenburg (New York, 1999), 213–24.

24. Abū l-Baqāʾ (*Manāqib*) alters the story of the Naṣrid conversion to Christianity to make it impermanent and to denigrate the Arab kings of the *jāhiliyya* in a panegyric to the Bedouin kings of his day. But these alterations reflect an eleventh-century situation and need not reflect the earlier reception of the Ḥīran narratives.

25. For this discussion I draw on al-Ṭabarī, al-Dīnawarī, al-Yaʿqūbī, Ḥamza Iṣfahānī, and al-Masʿūdī, as well as the Haddad Chronicle (see nn. 29, 34, below).

TALES OF THE FOUNDATION OF AL-ḤĪRA

The richest of the compilations that discuss al-Ḥīra is that of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), and I will use the material he preserved as a chief example of the complex and varied histories of the city and its kings. Al-Ṭabarī presented Ḥīran history in a series of excursus from his narratives of the Sasanian shahs.[26] He gave numerous different "foundational" moments for the city, its royal dynasty, and the wider confederation that it ruled.

One of these stories is devoted in particular to the royal foundation of the city and the role of the ʿIbād. Al-Ṭabarī draws on Ibn al-Kalbī to describe the flight of the Tanūkh from Iraq during Ardashir I's reign (224–241), the settlement of al-Ḥīra, and the subsequent division of the city and its environs between three groups: the ʿIbād, who dwelled in fortified houses in the city proper; the Tanūkh, who lived in hair tents across the river; and the *aḥlāf*, more recent migrants from the south.[27] These events serve as a "social charter" for al-Ḥīra, whereby these three different groups are demarcated by their behavior and their individual histories. The ʿIbād were allegedly the original migrants to the city, the companions of the first Naṣrid king, ʿAmr ibn ʿAdī, while the *aḥlāf* were bound to them by a treaty (*ḥilf*) of mutual protection and may have gradually assimilated into the settled population.[28]

Ibn al-Kalbī's account of the social charter does not provide any further information on the composition of the ʿIbād, but it is clear from other sources that membership in this group was prestigious and monitored through genealogical lists.[29] Although the ʿIbād's Christianity was obviously an important feature of their identity,[30] it does not seem to have been a sufficient criterion; Ibn al-Kalbī's account maintains that membership was limited to the companions of ʿAmr.[31] Yet it should also be recognized that this social charter was probably invoked to protect the status quo for a privileged group and that its image of a changeless political order, legitimated by events in the past, is likely to be a retrojection of the situation at the time of composition.[32]

My chief concern here is with the Ḥīran kings and the ʿIbād. Space does not allow a survey of the many contradictory accounts of al-Ḥīra's foundation in full, but we should always bear in mind that there were other ways of telling al-Ḥīra's story that gave a much greater role to those who preferred to represent it as part of Arabian tribal history, to "Bedouinize" al-Ḥīra.[33] We might speculate that they formed part of the oral histories of Tanūkh or of the *aḥlāf* who dwelt near al-Ḥīra and participated in the confederation led by the Naṣrids. Thus,

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26. Note the comment of C. E. Bosworth, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5: *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (New York, 1999), 19 n. 69.

27. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 822.

28. I draw on Toral-Niehoff*, Al-Ḥīra*, 43–48, 103, 108.

29. Haddad Chronicle, ed. B. Haddad, *Mukhtaṣar al-akhbār al-bīʿiyya* (Baghdad, 2000) §LXXXV (140). The section is entitled "The Tribes of the ʿIbād." Another list of ʿIbādī tribal origins is referred to at §LXXXIV (140 l. 15), but is not provided.

30. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (132 ll. 24–133).

31. Abū l-Baqāʾ (*Manāqib*, 114) observed other groups that were allegedly introduced into the ʿIbād under the fourth-century king Imruʾ al-Qays (which is probably an invention to bolster tribal prestige).

32. Here I draw on J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, tr. H. M. Wright (Chicago, 1965), esp. 32–34, 101; C. Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Richmond, Surrey, 2001), 56–60; L. E. Sweet, *Tell Toqaan: A Syrian Village* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1960), esp. 37; A. Shryock, *Nationalism and the Geneaological Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997); I. Toral-Niehoff, "Talking about Arab Origins: The Transmission of the *ayyām al-ʿarab* in Kūfah, Baṣrah and Bagdad" (online at www.academia.edu).

33. On Arab elites—among whom the kings of al-Ḥīra should probably be counted—as sponsors of quasi-popular, Bedouinizing poetry, see J. E. Montgomery, *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah: The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge, 1997), 258.

some of the stories included in al-Ṭabarī center on the migration of Arabs from other parts of the Arabian peninsula rather than on the arrangement of the new city—their purpose is to either reconcile the (contradictory) geneaological claims of the different tribes allied to al-Ḥīra[34] or to establish a "pecking order" among them.[35]

THE NAṢRID KING-LISTS

These foundation stories stand in an interesting relationship to the history of the Naṣrid kings (*mulūk*) that is found in the later medieval compilations. The succession of the Naṣrid kings seems to have been the only source that al-Ṭabarī and his fellow compilers could turn to when they sought to write a continuous history of the city of al-Ḥīra, but the Naṣrids do not play a role in all of the foundation accounts. Some of the accounts that describe tribal migrations ascribe the foundation to other rulers, such as Asʿad ibn Karib[36] or Mālik ibn Fahm.[37] However, Ibn al-Kalbī's account of the tripartite division of al-Ḥīra gives pride of place to the ancestor of the Naṣrid dynasty, ʿAmr ibn ʿAdī, who is said to have founded al-Ḥīra with the first of the ʿIbād and engaged in lengthy and bloody wars.[38] The author of the "social charter" situated his account by linking it to the idea of a Naṣrid foundation as well as to a Naṣrid succession that tied a legendary past to the present and rendered the story more credible.

ʿAmr's career is related in different ways by the compilers, but for all of them it presented a threshold between the mythical early days of the city and the succession of its kings. Al-Ṭabarī used the discussion of ʿAmr as a moment to reflect on the role of the whole of the Naṣrid dynasty. He commented that ʿAmr's descendants were able to remain kings of al-Ḥīra because they served the Persians by keeping nearby Arabs under control, which continued "until [Khusrau] Aparviz ibn Hormizd killed al-Nuʿmān [III] ibn Mundhir."[39] For al-Ṭabarī (or his source), al-Ḥīra and its history could be understood through two red-letter days—first, the city's foundation in a time of chaos and second, the removal of al-Nuʿmān III (ca. 602) and the end of his dynasty.

All of the compilers who claim to use Ibn al-Kalbī provided lists of the kings of al-Ḥīra that connect these two red-letter days and allow Ḥīran history to be integrated into other dated accounts (as in the combination of Ḥīran history with that of the Sasanians that we see

34. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 745–48. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXVI (137, from l. 17) links the settlement of the Tanūkh near al-Ḥīra to the Bahraini migrations. Other stories of a migration from Yemen are included in Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (131–32); Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. V. Guirgass (Leiden, 1888), 55; Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. and tr. C. Barbier de Meynard and P. de Courtcille, 9 vols. (Paris, 1861–77), 3: 182 (henceforth, Masʿūdī); Ḥamza Iṣfahānī, *Taʾrīkh sinī mulūk al-arḍ wa-l-anbiyāʾ*, ed. and tr. J. M. E. Gottwaldt, 2 vols. (Petersburg, 1844), 73/94–95; Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 771. Cf. the discussions of tribal geneaologies as a product of changing political situations in F. M. Donner, "The Bakr bin Wāʾil Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam," *Studia Islamica* 51 (1980): 5–38, at 9–11; Kennedy, "Oral Tradition," esp. 533–34; M. Lecker, "Tribes in Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia," in idem, *People, Tribes, and Society in Arabia around the Time of Muḥammad* (Aldershot, UK, 2005), no. XI, 2; Ulrich, "Constructing al-Azd," 62–71.

35. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 685. On the existence of a tribal "pecking order" in the seventh century, see F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), 20–49.

36. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (131).

37. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXVI (137); Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 749–50.

38. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 761–68; Ḥamza Iṣfahānī, ed. and tr. Gottwaldt, 75/97; Masʿūdī, 3: 181–82; Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, ed. Dār Ṣādir, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1960), 1: 209. Ḥamza and al-Masʿūdī both make ʿAmr a relative of earlier rulers of al-Ḥīra, which may be an attempt to reconcile multiple foundation accounts.

39. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 769.

in al-Ṭabarī).[40] But it is notable that none of these regnal lists is an exact match of another and that, with two exceptions (al-Nuʿmān I and al-Nuʿmān III), they give very little detail.[41] Several show a suspicious repetition of sequences of royal names in the fourth century or ascribe improbably long reigns to the early kings.[42] It is no wonder that Rothstein expressed frustration at the difficulty of reconstructing an accurate king-list for the fourth century.[43]

The purpose of the compilers' list was to fill in an embarrassing historical lacuna between the sixth century and the foundation of al-Ḥīra, and to present al-Ḥīra as a city that had been created by the Naṣrids (and that had always been under Naṣrid rule). As Ruth Watson and Andrew Shryock have observed in their studies of modern Nigeria and Jordan respectively, when previously oral claims are systematized and rendered in writing they can then much more effectively annex or oppose rival claims that have remained purely oral, such as the claims of kings of al-Ḥīra who were not from the dynasty of al-Nuʿmān.[44]

However, the presence of non-Naṣrid rulers at al-Ḥīra in the Sasanian era is occasionally visible in the Arabic histories of al-Ḥīra.[45] Some of these "interregna" are confirmed in contemporary Syriac sources[46] and in pre-Islamic poetry.[47] Their presence in the medieval histories indicates that the Naṣrids were not able to dominate the historical record completely. It may be that other Arab groups preserved the memory of these non-Naṣrids and that medieval compilers attempted to integrate them with a king-list that was solely composed of Naṣrids.

On the basis of the structure of the Ḥīran material preserved in the Abbasid-period histories, I suggest that the reign of al-Nuʿmān III (582–ca. 602) was the most important juncture for the organization and elaboration of the king-list, which forms the bulk of the Ḥīran material preserved in the later compilations. The vignettes devoted to al-Nuʿmān III are much longer than those of any other king, even though some of his predecessors were very successful in their wars with the Romans and their Arab allies if we are to believe the Greek and Syriac sources. Moreover, it is only for the reign of al-Nuʿmān that we have a detailed description

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40. Al-Masʿūdī, Ḥamza, and al-Yaʿqūbī all present their Ḥīran histories in a single bloc, but that of al-Ṭabarī is interwoven with material of Persian derivation (esp. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 822, 846, 850–54, 855–58, 882, 1016–30). The final section in this list is dominated by the relationship between ʿAdī ibn Zayd and Nuʿmān III and probably derives from Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb ʿAdī ibn Zayd al-ʿIbādī* rather than his *Kitāb al-Ḥīra*. The compiler of the Haddad Chronicle does not give any of these king-lists in full, though he does inform us that he drew on similar material, e.g., Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (133, from l. 12).

41. See the useful table in Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, appendix 2.

42. E.g., the sequence Imruʾ al-Qays–ʿAmr ibn Imruʾ al-Qays–Imruʾ al-Qays II–ʿAmr ibn Imruʾ al-Qays II. ʿAmr ibn ʿAdī is said to have ruled for around 120 years.

43. Rothstein, *Laḥmiden*, 50–59.

44. R. Watson, "*Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan*": *Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City* (Athens, OH, 2003), 7–23. Shryock (*Nationalism*) sees the writing of history as a challenge to the more varied claims of "spoken authority."

45. E.g., Abū Yaʿfur appears very briefly in al-Ṭabarī (ed. de Goeje, 1: 900), but not in other accounts: Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, appendix 2.

46. A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog: Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Louvain, 1963), 205–8; A. Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925): 297–371.

47. Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (*Aghānī*, 25 vols. [Beirut, 1957–1964], 2: 99–103) observes that Zayd, father of the well-known poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd, briefly ruled al-Ḥīra after the death of al-Nuʿmān II until the shah could formally appoint a Naṣrid successor, and then established himself as a power behind the throne during the reign of al-Mundhir IV. However, the transmission of such sources via ʿAdī's descendants in Kufa should lead us to be sceptical of these traditions as records of simple fact: Horovitz, "ʿAdi ibn Zeyd," 35–37, 68. Also note T. Hainthaler, "ʿAdī ibn Zayd al-ʿIbādī: The Pre-Islamic Christian Poet of al-Ḥīra and His Poem Nr. 3 Written in Jail," *Parole de l'Orient* 30 (2005): 157–72. For their family, the Banū Ayyūb, see Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 315–16.

of affairs at the court of al-Ḥīra, especially of the relations between the king and the differ-ent aristocratic families and between the Naṣrid king and the Sasanian shah. It is this court and its internal and external tensions ca. 600 that is the "present" for which the earlier royal history has been collected and developed. The king-list, and its image of permanent rule of al-Ḥīra by the same dynasty going back to its foundation, is the product of an environment where the king was threatened both by the elite ʿIbādī families of al-Ḥīra[48] and by the cen-tralizing ambitions of the Sasanian shah.[49]

Al-Nuʿmān III was appointed king as a candidate of the ʿIbādī aristocrat and poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd, whose machinations at Ctesiphon ensured that the young prince was selected over his brothers. Once king, al-Nuʿmān turned against his sponsor and had him executed.[50] The chief agenda of the Ḥīran histories is the centrality and permanence of Naṣrid rule, and this fits into the context of this struggle between the king and the ʿIbād. This agenda also explains the absence of any discussion of the court life of the earlier Naṣrid kings. In the sources available to the medieval compilers for much of the fourth to sixth centuries, the role of ʿIbādī courtiers in the mold of ʿAdī ibn Zayd has been suppressed in favor of an image of autocratic royal power within al-Ḥīra and the close relationship between the kings and the Sasanian shahs, which supersedes any aristocratic intermediaries. This interest in Naṣrid–Sasanian relations makes it unlikely that the bulk of the material is a product of the Islamic period, when both dynasties had collapsed.

This relationship is one of the key themes of the king-list. Al-Nuʿmān I, the fifth-century king, is celebrated as the founder of the palaces of Khawarnaq and Sadīr.[51] He would also be remembered as a symbol of lost grandeur, a bittersweet warning to the Abbasid caliphs in their hour of triumph.[52] And his supposed treatment of the Greek architect Sinnamar, whom he allegedly hurled off the roof of Khawarnaq, served as a symbol of royal tyranny.[53] But both stories seem to be later developments of a core narrative that originally emphasized al-Nuʿmān I's wealth and his service to the Sasanian shah; Khawarnaq was built to accom-modate the Sasanian prince Vahram Gur, while he was being brought up among the Arabs.[54] The subsequent account of al-Nuʿmān I's son al-Mundhir presents him as a tutor to Vahram Gur, who trained him in chivalric pursuits before Vahram became shah.[55]

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48. On the families of the Banū Ayyūb, Banū Liḥyān, Banū Qabīṣa, Banū Marīna, and Banū Buqayla, see Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, 88–104.

49. P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London, 2008); Z. Rubin, "Nobility, Monarchy and Legitimation under the Later Sasanians," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 6: *Elites Old and New in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, ed. J. Haldon and L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 2004), 235–73.

50. Yaʿqūbī, ed. Dār Ṣādir, 1: 212–15; Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 1016ff.

51. E.g., Ḥamza Iṣfahānī, ed. and tr. Gottwaldt, 79–80/102; Masʿūdī, 3: 200; Yaʿqūbī, ed. Dār Ṣādir, 1: 209–10; Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (133 l. 15).

52. Al-Masʿūdī (3: 223) noted that the Abbasids used Khawarnaq after the foundation of Baghdad. See further A. Talib, "Topoi and Topography in the Histories of al-Ḥīra," in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. P. Wood (New York, 2013), 123–47.

53. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 851. Al-Nuʿmān I is also said to have waged war unjustly against the Banū ʿAwf. The description of his treatment of Sinnamar seems to fit into this association between Naṣrid wealth and Naṣrid tyranny.

54. Al-Nuʿmān I is also said to be the first king to receive the support of Persian regular troops: Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 853.

55. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 855–57; Dīnawarī, ed. Guirgass, 53. Vahram Gur was especially renowned for his martial abilities and his adventures in India, which are often commemorated in Sasanian minor arts: R. Ettinghau-sen, "Bahram Gur's Hunting Feats or the Problem of Identification," *Iran* 17 (1979): 25–31.

To be sure, we cannot assume that any story in the Islamic-era compilations that describes the cooperation of the Arabs of al-Ḥīra with the Sasanians stems from a Ḥīran composition. After all, the shahs would have also had good reason to mention the obedience of their clients and their involvement in war against the Romans and their allies.[56] And the medieval Arabic compilers made wide use of sources that derived originally from Middle Persian.[57] But the report that Khawarnaq was founded for Vahram Gur and that it was a Ḥīran king who trained the epitome of Persian martial virtue looks like a Ḥīran invention, which responds to a Persian historical tradition in order to establish the prestige and legitimacy of the royal house.

CHRISTIANITY IN THE ḤĪRAN HISTORIES

A second feature of the story of al-Nuʿmān I also demands comment, namely, his renunciation of all his wealth and his retreat into the wilderness to live as an anonymous hermit.[58] The juxtaposition of his construction of Khawarnaq with this ascetic retreat made him a suitable subject for poets considering the impermanence of material things.[59] Al-Yaʿqūbī represented al-Nuʿmān's behavior in this scene as devotion to God, portrayed in neutral terms.[60]

A different perspective is given, however, by *Mukhtaṣar al-akhbār al-bīʿiyya* (or Haddad Chronicle), a tenth-century Christian Arabic source that preserved a number of different collections of Ḥīran material.[61] These share many of the narratives seen in the Muslim sources, but also add further narratives drawn from episcopal histories and hagiographies. One of these tales makes it clear that the king's ascetic retreat was stimulated by a conversion to Christianity, and it attributes al-Nuʿmān I's conversion to his bishop, Shemʿūn ibn Ḥanẓala.[62] A fifth-century bishop named Shemʿūn is indeed recorded in the Syriac Synodicon,[63] but this story seems to have been generated to stress the significance of a later Shemʿūn, a prominent member of the ʿIbād who claimed a role in the conversion of al-Nuʿmān III.

This narrative gives al-Nuʿmān III's conversion the legitimacy of antiquity: his conversion repeats the act of the earlier al-Nuʿmān. But they also gave a parallel legitimacy to the influence of sections of the ʿIbād over the king, by emphasizing that the ʿIbād had been Christian long before the king converted to their religion. Similar stories can be found in

56. E.g., Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 959.

57. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 341–54.

58. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 853; Ḥamza Iṣfahānī, ed. and tr. Gottwaldt, 80/102; Yaʿqūbī, ed. Dār Ṣādir, 1: 209.

59. Talib, "Topoi and Topography," 130–32.

60. Yaʿqūbī, ed. Dār Ṣādir, 1: 209.

61. Almost all of the material in the extant Chronicle runs chronologically from Jesus and the apostles through to catholicoi of the mid-fourth century. It bears many resemblances to the Chronicle of Seert but is not its lost early section, as was once thought. The Ḥīran material has therefore been placed out of chronology, which may reflect the fact that it has been drawn from different sources from the rest of the Chronicle. Since the title itself is relatively meaningless and the text is anonymous, I refer to it here as the Haddad Chronicle, in honor of its discoverer and editor. H. Teule, "L'abrégé de la chronique ecclésiastique *Muḥtaṣar al-aḥbār al-bīʿiyya* et la chronique de Séert: Quelques sondages," in *L'historiographie syriaque*, ed. M. Debié (Paris, 2009), 161–77; Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 70–71.

62. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXV (134–35). This story identifies al-Nuʿmān the builder of Khawarnaq with the same al-Nuʿmān who appears in the Syriac Life of Symeon the Stylite (the original fifth-century story is translated in R. Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* [Kalamazoo, MI, 1992], §67). Al-Nuʿmān initially prevents his followers from visiting the stylite on pilgrimage, until the saint appears to him in a vision. In this version the vision provides an introduction to his conversion by the bishop Shemʿūn ibn Ḥanẓala (cf. Abū l-Baqāʾ, *Manāqib*, 121, on this figure).

63. There is a useful episcopal list for al-Ḥīra in Rothstein, *Laḥmiden*, 23.

the poetry attributed to ʿAdī ibn Zayd, who claimed, in the poetry attributed to him, to have converted al-Nuʿmān II (*sic*).[64]

In the fifth century Christianity had been presented in histories and saints' lives as a badge of Roman affiliation. But by the sixth century the proliferation of different Christian confessions outside the Roman empire watered down this association and made it easier for non-Chalcedonian Christians, both Miaphysites and the Church of the East, to find favor in the Persian world.[65] The Christianity of much of the population of al-Ḥīra—the settled ʿIbād as well as the nomadic groups surrounding the city—and the changed political significance of this religious affiliation represent an important background to al-Nuʿmān III's conversion. In addition, al-Nuʿmān's shift in policy may owe something to the distinctive stance of the new shah, Khusrau II, who deliberately promoted different Christian groups after his victory in the civil war of 598–99, which he won with Roman support.[66] If we bear in mind the shah's sponsorship of East Syrian Christians and his involvement in the internal politics of the Church of the East, then al-Nuʿmān's conversion does not seem so surprising.[67] Instead of seeing al-Nuʿmān's conversion as a move against the shah, as some have done,[68] we should remember that his actions suited the broader Sasanian context as well as the religious makeup of al-Ḥīra and the confederation as a whole.

Al-Ḥīra was also the site of a Christian school, founded in the tradition of the schools of Edessa and Nisibis.[69] Church history had been written in the school of Nisibis since the start of the sixth century, and the southward spread of the East Syrian scholastic system may have also stimulated history-writing among the ʿIbād (as it had done in Ctesiphon).[70] The conversion of the king to Christianity and closer alignment between the interests of the kings of al-Ḥīra and the ʿIbād were other factors that facilitated the creation of written histories of al-Ḥīra's past. Certainly it is noticeable that Ibn al-Kalbī wrote that he found the histories

64. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 2: 133, gives a similar narrative to that found in the histories for the conversion of al-Nuʿmān I but names the king as the son of al-Mundhir al-Akbar, i.e., al-Nuʿmān II. Al-Iṣfahānī himself (2: 135) points to the impossibility of the story. Note the comments of Horovitz, "ʿAdi ibn Zayd," 55.

65. For citation of sources and discussion, see P. Wood, "Christianity and the Arabs in the Sixth Century," in *Inside and Out*, 355–70 (supra, n. 1); for the broader political-religious context, see G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993). Both Miaphysites and the Church of the East had a presence in al-Ḥīra: Haddad Chronicle §LXXXV (135 ll. 13ff.). Also note Trimingham, *Christianity*, 193–94, for "Jacobitism" at al-Ḥīra. Al-Masʿūdī (2: 328) was wrong to see the ʿIbād as uniformly members of the Church of the East—though this may have been an impression created by history-writing in Arabic that was allied to the Church of the East.

66. The Naṣrid dynasty may have been able to influence church politics through the family's female members, who were able to convert without incurring the shah's suspicion. They are often credited as church builders: Trimingham, *Christianity*, 192, 196 (citing Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, 6 vols. [Leipzig, 1866–73], 2: 530–31, 709, on al-Lajja, daughter of al-Nuʿmān I, and Hind, wife of Mundhir III). This may account for the inclusion of the mothers of the Naṣrid kings in the king-list in Haddad Chronicle §LXXXV (141) and in al-Masʿūdī and Ḥamza Iṣfahānī.

67. Note especially Khusrau's close relationship to Sabrishoʿ, the cleric credited with al-Nuʿmān's conversion: *Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert), seconde partie (II)*, ed. and tr. A. Scher and R. Griveau, Patrologia Orientalis, vol. 13 (Paris, 1919), §§LXV–LXXI. For Khusrau's claims and the course of the war, see Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, ch. 7.

68. E.g., Hunter, "Christian Matrix," 48; R. G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (New York, 2015), 35.

69. A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 159–66.

70. Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, esp. 131–34.

of al-Ḥīra in the city's churches,[71] and drew attention to the membership of the ʿIbād and to their early role in the city's foundation.[72]

The ʿIbād were not a united group, however, and one of the Christian accounts illustrates how al-Ḥīra's foundation was an important locus for competitive claims for precedence among them. The ninth-century ecclesiastical historian Ishoʿdnaḥ of Basra (wr. 850s),[73] whose work is preserved in the Haddad Chronicle, reports that the ʿIbād converted to Christianity after the reign of the fourth-century king ʿAmr ibn ʿAdī. According to this story, one of the Banū Liḥyān[74] was the first to convert, "followed by the Banū ʿAdī and the rest of the people." Later, but while they still lived in hair tents, priests and deacons came to them and started singing psalms and building churches and houses. The appearance of these missionaries starts an argument between the Banū Liḥyān and the Banū ʿAdī, with the latter claiming that "the king is from our line and we should build the church and hold gatherings there." Ultimately it is agreed that "the church, the chair (i.e., the seat of the bishop), the cross, and the gathering of the people of al-Ḥīra should be [under the authority] of the Banū Liḥyān," but the highest status, as well as the right to speak first before the kings, belong to the Banū ʿAdī. This decision is then written down and witnessed before the king, ʿAmr ibn Imruʾ al-Qays. Oaths taken in these meetings in church are then defended by the threat of excommunication: "the curse of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and of the Old and New Testaments will be upon him."[75]

Several points of this story are worthy of comment. To begin with it relates that Christian missionaries played an important role in building the first permanent buildings in al-Ḥīra and that this stimulated further building by different groups of competing converts; and it presents the key role of these churches as sites for competitive display by new Christians and for oath-taking, where sacraments and holy books served as a social censure. At least in the imagination of our historian, Christianity and its physical structures explain al-Ḥīra's existence and its stability.

But the story indicates competing claims for precedence between the royal house and the Banū Liḥyān. The Liḥyān claimed that one of their number, Aws ibn Qallām, had been king,[76] and this claim to early conversion and the control of church buildings and sacraments represents an important bid for prestige. This kind of direct juxtaposition of the claims of the royal house and a group of ʿIbād is not present in the material from Ibn al-Kalbī, which seems to reflect the interests of the house of al-Nuʿmān much more closely. As a late convert to Christianity, al-Nuʿmān III was staking a claim in a set of institutions and practices that already had their own histories and stakeholders, and this story highlights this. It acknowledges the tension between the royal house and the Banū Liḥyān, and allows for the precedence of the Banū ʿAdī when the church is in use for a royal audience, but it also asserts the control of other aspects of church ritual by the Banū Liḥyān.

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71. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 770.

72. Ibid., 822, with discussion above.

73. On Ishoʿdnaḥ's historical output, see P. Nautin, "L'auteur de la «Chronique de Séert»: Išōʿdenaḥ de Baṣra," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 186 (1974): 113–26; J. M. Fiey, "Īšōʿdnāḥ et la *Chronique de Seert*," *Parole de l'Orient* 6–7 (1975–76): 447–59. Nautin's attribution seems unlikely to me.

74. The Banū Liḥyān, also known as the Banū Aws ibn Qallām, were linked by marriage to the Banū Ayyūb, the house of ʿAdī ibn Zayd: al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 2: 98.

75. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (132 ll. 24ff.). For an example of the role of oaths in moderating conflict between elite families, see the oaths of ʿAdī ibn Zayd and ʿAdī ibn Marīna regarding satirical poetry (Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 1019).

76. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, 99–101.

AL-ḤĪRA AND ITS BISHOPS

The account of the contest over precedence in church ritual shows us one of the ways in which, after the Naṣrid conversion, tensions between the king and the ʿIbād came to be expressed through historical writing. We see this even more clearly in the preservation of episcopal histories of al-Ḥīra and in the description of al-Ḥīra's political history through the lens of this distinctively Christian genre.[77]

A set of vignettes related by Ishoʿdnaḥ are connected directly to episcopal history. He follows his account of the precedence of the Banū ʿAdī by describing the foundation of churches in al-Ḥīra, beginning with the "church of the angels," built by ʿAmr ibn Imruʾ al-Qays for the Banū Liḥyān, and following with the churches built by the different bishops of al-Ḥīra. His account takes the form of an annotated episcopal list, which is occasionally cross-referenced to the catholicoi of the Church of the East and to the Naṣrid rulers.[78]

Much of this episcopal information does not seem very politically motivated. It is only tangentially aware of wider politics and is strictly a history of the bishops of al-Ḥīra. This pattern changes in a final extended anecdote that the author gave at the start of chapter LXXXVI. This anecdote, set in the reign of the catholicos Ishoʿyahb I of Arzun (582–595), describes how the people of al-Ḥīra wrote to the catholicos asking that one Sharīḥ ibn Sarjān ibn Lāḥiq the teacher (*malfān*) be elected bishop. The man who was to conduct the ordination was to be the future catholicos Sabrishoʿ (r. 595–604), then bishop of Lashom. But when Sharīḥ stood next to the altar waiting to be named bishop, Sabrishoʿ turned around and brought the wrong man up to be consecrated, one Shemʿūn ibn Jābir, a young man of twenty-two, and ordained him instead. The people and clergy objected, but the catholicos reminded them that it is not possible to resist the Holy Spirit.[79]

This controversial story is all the more surprising when we note the role claimed by both Sabrishoʿ and Shemʿūn as the men who converted al-Nuʿmān III, which event was critical in securing Sabrishoʿ's election as catholicos after Ishoʿyahb.[80] The different versions of this story in the tenth- or eleventh-century Chronicle of Seert give contrasting levels of credit to Shemʿūn. In one version, drawn from a seventh-century saint's life dedicated to Sabrishoʿ, Shemʿūn is only responsible for an abortive initial conversion of al-Nuʿmān, who then begins to be attracted to the Jacobite "heresy" and must be converted a second time by the healing

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77. These accounts of bishops and churches seem to have been drawn from another Ḥīran history, "a famous book that tells of kings, believers, bishops, saintly people, and the miracles they performed." Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (136 ll. 13ff.).

78. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXIV (132–33). On these episcopal lists, see further J. M. Fiey, s.v. "Hira," *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* (Paris, 1912–). The compiler made it clear that he abbreviated Ishoʿdnaḥ's list, and he referred the reader to Ishoʿdnaḥ for further details. An account of al-Nuʿmān I's conversion has been inserted into this episcopal history (§LXXV), before the account of Shemʿūn's election.

79. Haddad Chronicle §LXXXVI (135–36). The dating formula at the end of this section (ll. 8–11) seems to be a mistake by the compiler.

80. "Le livre de la chasteté (§47)," ed. and tr. J-B. Chabot, in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 16 (1896): 225–90; "Tašītā d-mar Sabrīšoʿ" [Syriac Life of Sabrishoʿ], ed. P. Bedjan, in *Histoire de Mar-Iaballaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens*, ed. idem (Paris, 1895), 322ff.; Chronicle of Seert, §LX (468), §LXV (478–80). On Sabrishoʿ's career, see M. Tamcke, *Der Katholicos-Patriarch Sabrīšoʿ I. (596–604) und das Mönchtum* (Göttingen, 1988). Also note the discussions of the baptism of al-Nuʿmān in I. Toral-Niehoff, "Constantine's Baptism Legend: A 'Wandering' Story between Byzantium, Rome, the Syriac and the Arab World," in *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures and* Convivencia *in Byzantine Society*, ed. B. Crostini and S. La Porta (Trier, 2013), 129–41; eadem, "Die Tauflegende des Laḫmidenkönigs Nuʿmān: Ein Beispiel für syrisch-arabische Intertextualität," in *Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen: Beiträge zum sechsten deutschen Syrologen-Symposium in Konstanz, Juli 2009*, ed. D. Weltecke (Wiesbaden, 2012), 99–114.

miracle of Sabrishoʿ, at that time still bishop of Lashom.[81] In the second version embedded in the Chronicle, there is only a single conversion, and Sabrishoʿ and Shemʿūn act together to convert the king.[82] The disagreements between the versions hinge on the degree of prestige that the bishop of al-Ḥīra might be accorded for the conversion of the kings of al-Ḥīra: Shemʿūn's involvement was too widely known to be simply denied, but the first account clearly subordinates Shemʿūn to Sabrishoʿ.

Though a young man, Shemʿūn was not merely a creature of Sabrishoʿ. While Sabrishoʿ's *Life* only presents Shemʿūn as a facilitator of al-Nuʿmān's conversion, it avoids any mention of how the young bishop fit into Ḥīran hierarchy. Convincing details emerge piecemeal in the poetry attributed to ʿAdī ibn Zayd— Shemʿūn was a member of the Banū Liḥyān, the part of the ʿIbād that claimed to be the earliest converts to Christianity, and linked by marriage to the family of ʿAdī ibn Zayd, who were liaisons to the court in Ctesiphon.[83] Furthermore, his father, Jābir ibn Shemʿūn, had been wealthy enough to provide loans to al-Nuʿmān III after the latter's accession.[84] Such private wealth may have also allowed Shemʿūn to sponsor the construction of a new cathedral, which was built during his episcopate.[85]

Several of the stories of the events of al-Nuʿmān's conversion have a bias in favor of Ctesiphon. But if we read them against the grain, with knowledge of Shemʿūn's background, then the agency of figures other than the future catholicos emerges. This was, after all, a particularly uncertain political environment in which Naṣrid kings, Ḥīran bishops, Sasanian shahs, and the catholicos at Ctesiphon all had a stake in the act of conversion and in its representation.

THE REIGN OF AL-NUʿMĀN III

Once we take into account Shemʿūn's wealth and lineage, the stage management of the episcopal election comes to look like an initial alliance between Sabrishoʿ and one of the prominent houses of the ʿIbād over the interests of "the clergy and the people" who had requested that Sharīḥ be bishop. Soon afterward, the shah Khusrau II began to give clear signs of his interest in Christianity, likely prompting al-Nuʿmān's acceptance of Dyophysite Christianity in a ritual orchestrated by Shemʿūn. There was probably a moment, however, when Miaphysitism seemed just as attractive to the king, especially since it offered a measure of independence from the bishops of al-Ḥīra and represented a growing force in Iraq and among the Arabs.[86]

81. Chronicle of Seert, §LXV (480). For further discussion, see Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 192–94.

82. The account in the Chronicle—§LX (468)—has Shemʿūn and Sabrishoʿ cooperating to baptize al-Nuʿmān and exorcise the demon that possesses him.

83. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 2: 98; Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, 99–101.

84. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 2: 115; Horovitz, "ʿAdi ibn Zeyd," 51; Nöldeke, *Geschichte* (supra, n. 12), 315 n 3. This poem makes Jābir a bishop, which corresponds with the episcopal lists taken from the Syriac *Synodicon*, dating this figure to the 580s (Ḥīran bishop-lists are reconstructed in Rothstein, *Laḥmiden*, 23–24). Also note the poem quoted in Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 1019.

85. Abū l-Baqāʾ, *Manāqib,* 260.

86. On Miaphysitism in the Sasanian world, see J. M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (Louvain, 1970), 127; idem, "Syriaques occidentaux du «pays des perses»: Ré-union avec Antioche et «Grand Métropolitat» de Takrit en 628/629?" *Parole de l'Orient* 17 (1992), 113–26; M. Hutter, "Shirin, Nestorianer und Monophysiten: Königliche Kirchenpolitik im späten Sasanidenreich," in *Symposium Syriacum VII*, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome, 1998), 373–86, for the competition between the confessions later in Khusrau's reign. Two key primary texts are the Life of Ahudemmeh and the Life of Marutha, both translated by F. Nau, in *Histoires d'Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta, métropolitains jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient (VIe et VIIe siècles)*, Patrologia Orientalis, vol. 3 (Paris, 1909).

If we consider the first of the conversion accounts given in the Chronicle of Seert, al-Nuʿmān III seems to have changed his mind once more when it became clear that he could claim a more high-profile conversion at the hands of the prominent holy man Sabrishoʿ and still secure independence from ʿIbādī interests in al-Ḥīra. This new alignment between al-Nuʿmān and Sabrishoʿ seems to have cut out Shemʿūn, possibly as a prelude to al-Nuʿmān's decision to turn against his relative ʿAdī ibn Zayd. In other words, al-Nuʿmān was trying to distance himself from the ʿIbād, in favor of links to church leaders elsewhere in Iraq. This arrangement seems to have been beneficial for both al-Nuʿmān and Sabrishoʿ, at least in the short term. Khusrau made his favor for the Church of the East clear by his decisive intervention in the election of Sabrishoʿ as catholicos, an event that had never occurred before in the church, and by the public promulgation of his recognition of Sabrishoʿ's miracles, which he credited with giving him victory in a civil war.[87] In this pro-Christian (and pro-Dyophysite) environment, his conversion allowed al-Nuʿmān to secure considerable prestige as a Christian sponsor within the Church of the East as a whole: Syriac sources relate how al-Nuʿmān received the body of Sabrishoʿ's predecessor Ishoʿyahb for burial in al-Ḥīra.[88]

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued here that the histories of al-Ḥīra that were available to ninth-century authors such as Hishām ibn al-Kalbī or Ishoʿdnaḥ of Basra were themselves composed under the Naṣrid king al-Nuʿmān III. The king-lists that are found in all of the Abbasid-era Arabic historians give pride of place to al-Nuʿmān III's own reign and to the foundation of the city. The only other point where historical anecdotes have "gathered" is the reign of al-Nuʿmān I. These seem to have been written to anticipate his namesake's good relations with the Sasanians and his conversion to Christianity.

Both al-Nuʿmān III's good relations with the Sasanians and his prestige as a Christian ruler, however, were initially dependent on the ʿIbād. They produced their own accounts of the events of the late sixth century and of the more distant past to negotiate their continued importance in al-Ḥīra—the Ḥīran episcopate could claim an institutional history of its own, just as the Banū Liḥyān could assert the antiquity of their own conversion and their precedence over the reigning dynasty.

Even if it was only a brief period, al-Nuʿmān's reign as a Christian king led the ʿIbād to stake out their own version of the past in reply. And the continued fame of the ʿIbād in both Muslim and Christian Arabic compilations meant that this variegated history survived into the Abbasid period to provide raw material for the imagination of the pre-Islamic past.

One issue not yet addressed is the language in which pre-Islamic Ḥīran history was composed. Both Syriac and Arabic are possibilities. The city was the site of an East Syrian school and bishops who were actively involved in ecclesiastical politics. But al-Ḥīra was also said to have been the place where the Arabic script was first developed, and its kings certainly played a role in the sponsorship of Arabic poetry.[89] The wide interest in Ḥīran history among Muslim Arabs may itself also indicate that they found the sources relatively

    87. Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, 190ff.
    88. Khuzistan Chronicle, ed. and tr. I. Guidi as *Chronicon anonymum*, in idem, *Chronica minora*, CSCO 1–2 (Paris, 1903), §17.
    89. Note especially, amid a wide bibliography, F. Briquel-Chatonnet, "De l'araméen à l'arabe: Quelques réflexions sur la genèse de l'écriture arabe," in *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient*, ed. F. Déroche and F. Richard (Paris, 1997), 136–49; R. G. Hoyland, "Arab Kings, Arab Tribes and the Beginnings of Arab Historical Memory in Late Roman Epigraphy," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. H. Cotton et al. (New York, 2009), 374–400; and the summaries of the debates in the literature in Fisher, *Between*

accessible. Hishām ibn al-Kalbī claimed to have done his research in church archives and Abbasid caliphs are said to have read the inscriptions on the walls of a Ḥīran monastery.[90] Unless a translator was used, and this fact was omitted by our sources, it seems likely that the sources were composed in Arabic.[91]

APPENDIX

THE ḤĪRAN KINGS ACCORDING TO AL-ṬABARĪ

ʿAmr b. ʿAdī
Imruʾ l-Qays
ʿAmr II b. Imruʾ l-Qays
Aws b. Qallām
Imruʾ l-Qays II
al-Nuʿmān I b. al-Shaqīqa
al-Mundhir I b. al-Nuʿmān I
al-Aswad b. al-Mundhir I
al-Mundhir II b. al-Mundhir I
al-Nuʿmān II b. al-Aswad
Abū Yaʿfūr b. ʿAlqama
al-Mundhir III b. al-Mundhir II
ʿAmr III b. al-Mundhir III
al-Mundhir IV b. al-Mundhir III
al-Nuʿmān III b. al-Mundhir IV

Empires (supra, n. 6), 134, 148, 155–56. Al-Ṭabarī (ed. de Goeje, 1: 2061) gives one version of the story of the genesis of Arabic script at al-Ḥīra.

90. Ṭabarī, ed. de Goeje, 1: 628; Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. Wüstenfeld, 2: 709, translated and discussed in H. Munt et al., "Arabic and Persian Sources for Pre-Islamic Arabia," in *Arabs and Empires*, ed. G. Fisher (supra, n. 12), 434–500, at 465–66.

91. Cf. the use of translations for Syriac to write a local history of Maypherkat in the Islamic period: H. Munt, "Ibn al-Azraq, Saint Marūthā, and the Foundation of Mayyāfāriqīn (Martyropolis)," in *Writing "True Stories,"* ed. A. Papaconstantinou (supra, n. 23), 149–74.