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ARTICLE

Farewell to the bishop of Hami: locating the thirteenth-century bishop of Kamul

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Abstract

This article[1] sets out to reassess the idea, repeated by many scholars, that there was a bishop from the Central Asian city of Qumul (or Hami) who was present in Baghdad around the time when one patriarch of the Church of the East – Makkika II – was buried and another – Denḥa I – was consecrated. After an initial consideration of what we know about the city of Qumul/Hami, we examine the various authors who have held to this idea and the sources, both primary and secondary, which they invoke as proof that the idea is correct. Gradually moving back to the earliest witnesses, we eventually arrive at the Maronite scholar Joseph Assemani's *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* and the fourteenth-century primary source, Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā. A suggestion is made for how the idea originated and developed, thanks in part to the account of Marco Polo, but more definitively to Michel Le Quien's *Oriens Christianus*.

Keywords: Central Asian Christianity; Christian monasticism; Church of the East; Marco Polo; Syriac Christianity

Introduction

Many of my academic publications thus far have been concerned with providing evidence for people, places or events related to the history of Christianity in Central Asia, but here I wish to reassess something that has been repeated time and time again in survey articles on that history. A classic example can be found in Alphonse Mingana's 1925 article "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document":

> Another Bishopric of China, the name of which is mentioned in Syriac literature, is that of the town of Kamul which sent its Bishop John in 1266 to the consecration of the Patriarch Dinha. It is the town called in Mongol Khamil, and in Chinese Hami. See about it Yule-Cordier, *Marco-Polo, ibid*. i. 211. (Mingana 1925: 328–29)

Other important scholars of either Eastern Christianity or Central Asian history have said much the same thing, including Jean Dauvillier (1948: 308), Arnold van Lantschoot (1949: col. 671), Yoshiro Saeki (1951: Map III), Paul Pelliot (1973: 9, 134), Jean Richard (1982: 107), Giorgio Fedalto (1988: 994), Jean-Maurice Fiey (1993: 120) and Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1999: 226).

[1] The title of this article is inspired by Henning (1952).

Qumul/Hami

Before addressing whether Mingana and those who followed after him (named above) are correct in their assertion that there was a Christian bishop in Kamul/Hami, let us review what is known about this Central Asian city located roughly 400 km east of Turfan and another 400 km north-northwest of Dunhuang, known in modern Uyghur as Qumul (قۇمۇل, pronounced Qomul) or in Chinese as Hami (哈密). Pelliot, who wrote an excellent entry on "Camul" (as it is spelled in Polo's text)[2] in his *Notes on Marco Polo* (Pelliot 1959: 153–56), suggests the city was first mentioned in the form *Km'yδ*, to be read as *Kamēl, in a Sogdian document (Sogdian Ancient Letter II),[3] perhaps from the end of the second century. However, this reading in the Sogdian letter was corrected to *Kmzyn*, representing the city of Jincheng (金城), by W.B. Henning, who also adjusted the date of the letter to *c.* 311 (Henning 1948: 604, 606, 610).[4]

It is thus in the mid-eleventh century that we get our first verifiable reference to Qămūl (قمول) by the Persian historian Gardīzī (Martinez 1982: 137). Marco Polo himself (1298–99) says of Camul that "the people of that province are all idolaters [i.e. Buddhists] like the others narrated above" (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 154), an observation which should give us pause regarding Mingana's assertion above. We shall return to the Venetian historian below.

In contrast to Polo's description, the *Tarikh-i Khataʾi* (1494/95), the report of an embassy to China from the Timurid ruler Shah Rukh in Herat which passed through the region in the summer of 1420, observes of Qāmul/Qāmïl (قامل) that there was "a large idol-temple. In it the image of a marvellous cross was set up ... In front of that cross a copper image representing a ten year old boy was set up" (Bellér-Hann 1995: 159). Presumably, this account is describing the results of religious syncretism; in the absence of direct ties with their co-religionists in the Middle East, Christians in Qamul gradually adopted local (i.e. Buddhist) religious practices, while still retaining symbols important to them, such as the cross.

Returning to Pelliot's essay on Camul, we read also of two Latin missionaries who spent time in Qamul: John Marignolli (1340–42) (Yule and Cordier 1914: 265–66) and Benedict Goës (1604–05) (Yule and Cordier 1916: 239). It was also a significant enough place to be noted on important medieval maps such as the Catalan Atlas (*c.* 1375) and the World Map of Fra Mauro (d. 1459) – where it appears as "Camul" (Cresques 1975: 129) or "Chamul" (Falchetta 2006: 624–25) – as well as a map attached to the encyclopaedic Chinese work *Jingshi dadian* (經世大典), assembled *c.* 1330. Moreover, there are frequent references to the city in the dynastic history *Yuan Shi* (元史), compiled in 1370.

Before leaving Pelliot, we must note the following in his entry on Camul:

> The existence of a Nestorian[5] bishopric of Qomul («Camula»), whose occupant was present at the inauguration of the Catholicos Denha in 1266, is mentioned as probable by YULE [Yule and Cordier 1921] (I, 211) and given as established in SAEKI, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 1937, chart facing p. 348 [cf. Saeki 1951: Map III], but omitted from HERRMANN, *Atlas of China*, map 45; and would require substantiating. The source is a list in ASSEMANI, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, II [Assemani 1721], 455–456, and the name may be corrupt or refer to another place. (Pelliot 1959: 154)

[2] For another general overview, see also the entry for Ḳomul in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

[3] A view echoed in Bailey (1985: 10).

[4] My thanks to Nicholas Sims-Williams for this information (personal communication, 8 July 2024).

[5] The term "Nestorian" is avoided in this article, given its historical inaccuracy and the fact that the Church of the East has never referred to itself by this epithet; see Brock (1996).

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Pelliot (1959) takes a very different approach here from the work referred to previously (Pelliot 1973), where he all but accepts the idea, without any mention of the need for substantiation:

> We only know of the existence of a bishop in Qamul (the Camul of Marco Polo, Qamil, the present Hâ-mi) in 1265. ʿAmr reports that this bishop, called John (Yôḥannàn) attended the coronation of the patriarch Denḥâ; ed. Gismondi, *op cit*. [Gismondi 1896–97], p. 122–123. (Author's translation from the French in Pelliot 1973: 9)[6]

It is unclear which work was written first, as they were both published posthumously, but it is nonetheless interesting to see the difference in perspective between the two.

A plethora of witnesses?

It may be instructive to see the sources referenced in the works mentioned above, from Mingana to Gillman and Klimkeit. Apart from references to Mingana (1925), Dauvillier (1948), van Lantschoot (1949), Saeki (1951) or Pelliot (1973) in later works, the new sources are, in chronological order: Assemani (1721: 455–56); Le Quien (1740: col. 1311–12); Pauthier (1865: 156–59); Yule (1866: 390, 578–79); Gismondi (1896–97: 70, 121, 122); Sachau (1919: 47–48); Yule and Cordier (1921: 211); and Moule and Pelliot (1938: 154–56). We will deal with Assemani, Le Quien and Gismondi separately below.

Not surprisingly, many of the secondary sources mentioned by writers from Mingana onwards are various translations of Marco Polo. The Venetian's description of "the province of Camul" is rather long (Pauthier 1865: 156–59; Yule and Cordier 1921: 209–12; Moule and Pelliot 1938: 154–56; Latham 1958: 87–88). After mentioning some basic geographical information on the province, we encounter the aforementioned statement that "the people of that province are all idolaters like the others narrated above". Polo tells us that "they are men of very cheerful looks and all greatly given to amusement, for they are devoted to nothing else but the playing of instruments and singing and dancing and briefly in taking great bodily enjoyment" (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 154).

Further down, we read of a common custom in the province which would have sounded scandalous to Polo's readers: when a stranger passed through the region, they were welcomed by the inhabitants of Camul into their homes, after which the host left for several days so that "the stranger stays with his [the host's] wife in the house and does as he likes and lies with her in a bed just as if she were his wife, and they continue in great enjoyment" (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 154). The rest of Polo's description of Camul concerns the efforts of the Mongol ruler Mongu (Möngke Khan) to bring this custom to an end, efforts which ultimately proved unsuccessful. Needless to say, Polo, who is usually very quick to mention whether Christians are present in a given place, has nothing to say about Christians in Camul. However, he does contribute something important to the idea that there was a Christian bishop in the region, namely the spelling (in Franco-Italian) of Camul. We shall see below why this was so crucial in the development of the notion we are examining.

However, before leaving Polo, we should consider what the above translators or commentators say in their notes regarding a Christian bishop. Pauthier has nothing to say about it; neither do Moule and Pelliot or Latham. Only Yule and Cordier (1921: 211) mention it in the notes that follow "Chapter XLI": "Kamul appears to have been the see of a Nestorian bishop. A bishop of Kamul is mentioned as present at the inauguration of the Catholicos

[6] See also Pelliot (1973: 134).

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Denha in 1266. (*Russians in Cent. Asia*, 129; *Ritter*, II. 357 *seqq.; Cathay, passim; Assemani*, II. 455–456.)". The first two references – Valikhanov (1865) and Ritter (1832) – contain absolutely no information on a bishop in Kamul, although there are interesting observations on the city and its role in history. The third reference, to Yule's (or Yule and Cordier's) *Cathay and the Way Thither* is scarcely more helpful with its "*passim*". This leaves only "*Assemani*, II" (Assemani 1721), which (as noted above) will be addressed below.

Cathay and the Way Thither (mentioned by van Lantschoot 1949) was published initially in two volumes by Henry Yule in 1866, with a revised edition in four volumes, appearing between 1913 and 1916 and including additional material by Henri Cordier. Van Lantschoot refers the reader to page 390 of the 1866 edition (which corresponds to Yule and Cordier 1914: 265–66) and to pages 578–79 (which correspond to Yule and Cordier 1916: 239). The first extract concerns John Marignolli and deserves to be quoted at length, due to its subject matter:

> And a case occurred in my own experience at Kamul, when many Tartars and people of other nations, on their first conversion, refused to be baptized unless we would swear that after their baptism we should exact no temporalities from them; nay, on the contrary, that we should provide for their poor out of our own means. This we did, and a multitude of both sexes in that city did then most gladly receive baptism. (Yule and Cordier 1914: 265–66)

Since we know nothing more about this than what Marignolli tells us, it is hard to perceive what exactly happened at this "conversion event". Whether the locals were merely agreeing to perform a religious rite in order to benefit financially from these foreigners (which seems the most likely reading of Marignolli's account) or there was a genuine religious conversion which led to the establishment of a Christian community (which might explain the remnants encountered by Shah Rukh's embassy), there is certainly no mention of a local bishop or existing ecclesiastical structures that could validate the idea that such a bishop existed in 1265 (Pelliot) or 1266 (Mingana, Pelliot), a mere 75 years before Marignolli's visit to Kamul. The second extract from Yule (1866), concerning the visit of Benedict Goës to the city, en route to Khanbaliq (Beijing), is of no concern to us, having nothing whatsoever to do with any religious matters. In short, these two extracts really tell us nothing about the existence of our (thus far) elusive bishop. Moreover, nothing is said about this bishop in the relevant footnotes on "Kamul, Komul, Qomul, or Kamil" (Yule and Cordier 1914: 265; cf. Yule and Cordier 1916: 239).

The final reference, also given by van Lantschoot, is found in Eduard Sachau's *Zur Ausbreitung des Christentums in Asien*, which also deserves to be quoted in full:

> Kemûl, a town of unknown location, but somewhere near the Jebel Judî, attested as a bishopric under the Patriarchs Makkîkhâ II (1257–1265) and Denḥâ (1265–1281). Kemûl belonged to the region of Gordyene, cf. my Catalogue of Syrian Manuscripts in the Royal Library in Berlin, I. 558, 2nd Col. ܕܒܝܬ ܚܘܙܝ ܕܒܝܬ ܣܘܪܝܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܟܘܠ. According to Jâḳût II. 644 the old name was preserved in the form ديراكمل or ديراكمن. (Author's translation from the German in Sachau 1919: 47–48)

Although Sachau is not sure of the exact location of "Kemûl", he places it somewhere near Jebel Judi – Mount Cudi in southern Turkey, one of the reputed places where Noah's Ark came to rest – just north of where the borders of Syria, Iraq and Turkey meet, and about 170 km northwest of Mosul. As Sachau notes, Kemul belonged to the (former) country of Gordyene (or Corduene), a Roman province located roughly 100 km south of Lake Van and

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170 km west of Lake Urmia. Although Sachau is not able to locate it more precisely, it is clear that he is describing a monastery, the Monastery of Mar[7] Yoḥannan of Kamul, in northern Mesopotamia, not the Central Asian city we are concerned with here. So far, we have failed to find a primary source for the idea that there was a bishop in Qamul in Central Asia in the thirteenth century.

Back to Assemani

Since none of the references examined thus far have provided anything approaching proof that there was a bishop from Qumul/Hami who attended the consecration of the new patriarch Denḥa in 1265, it is time to look back at the earliest sources mentioned by the authors cited above, from Mingana to Gillman and Klimkeit. The very earliest is Volume II of the Maronite scholar Joseph Assemani's *magnum opus*, the *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*. In his list of the "Eastern patriarchs" (i.e. patriarchs of the Church of the East), under "Machicha" (Makkika II, 1257–65), he notes that when the patriarch died on 18 April in the Greek (Seleucid) year 1576 (1265), the funeral liturgy was celebrated by Simeon, metropolitan of Mosul; Emmanuel, bishop of Ṭirhan; Brikhishoʿ, bishop of al-Wasiṭah; John, bishop of Susa; and John, bishop of "كمول Camulæ" (Assemani 1721: 455). Let us, from here on, replace the English name John with the Syriac name Yoḥannan.[8] Assemani then moves on to the next patriarch "Denha" (Denḥa I, 1265–81), who was ordained (or consecrated) patriarch on 15 November in the Greek year 1577 (1265). Present at his consecration were a great number of metropolitans and bishops (16 by my count), including (again) Yoḥannan, bishop of "Camulæ" (Assemani 1721: 456).

This seems to be as far back as we can go in our search for proof. Obviously, a bishop of Kamul (كمول) named Yoḥannan was present at both the funeral of Makkika II and the consecration of Denḥa I, in April 1265 and then again in November of the same year (the new Seleucid year begins on 1 October), but where was this Kamul that he came from? Was Bishop Yoḥannan from Central Asia? If so, travelling from Hami to Baghdad (approximately 5,650 km) would have taken him somewhere between 23 and 31 weeks, travelling 30–40 km per day in a camel caravan over a rugged route that would have included the Taklamakan Desert and the Tien Shan or Pamir mountain ranges. In order to arrive in time to attend Makkika's funeral, the trip from Central Asia could not have been planned with the patriarch's death in mind; it must have been embarked on for some other reason. Given the distance, time, costs and dangers involved, it looks less and less likely that our bishop was from Hami.

Even the Arabic form of the name (كمول) should give us pause, especially if we compare it to the forms found in Gardizi (قمول) and the *Tarikh-i Khataʾi* (قامل), not to mention the modern Uyghur rendering of Qomul/Qumul (قۇمۇل). The name of the Central Asian city begins with /q/ (ق), not /k/ (ك). Given the presence of two distinct sounds /k/ and /q/ in all the relevant languages – Arabic, Persian, Chaghatai Turkish, Syriac – there would be no need to render the initial letter in the Central Asian placename Qamul/Qomul/Qumul with the sound /k/ in the Arabic source that Assemani is using (more on that below). Put another way, our bishop came from Kamul, not Qamul; none of the languages we are concerned with would have confused the two (not so with Latin, as we shall see below).

Assemani has more to say about Kamul elsewhere in his four-tome work. In Volume III,1 – an expansion on the *Catalogue of Syriac Writers* written *c.* 1318 by ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha – we read the following Syriac entry: ܟܗܢܐ ܒܪ ܟܒܪ ܩܡ ܟܠܚܐ ܒܝܫܘ, "Behishoʿ

[7] "Mar" is a Syriac title which can mean "lord, master, Sir, saint".

[8] Unless of course a quotation uses "John".

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Kamulaya composed the Book about the Monastic Life". The gentilic ending on Kamulaya (ܟܡܘܠܝܐ) indicates that Behishoʿ is from Kamul (ܟܡܘܠ). Below this, in the accompanying notes, Assemani gives more information about Behishoʿ, the monk from the monastery of "Camul", noting that the monastery of Kamul was founded during the time of Shapur, ruler of the Persians (Shapur II, r. 309–79) and Barbaʿshmin, Catholicos of the Church of the East (r. 345–46). This is followed by an extensive quotation from "Amr" (more on him below) which mentions the founding of كمول بالجزيرة غمر "the Monastery of Kamul in al-Jazirah", the latter referring to a province of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid Caliphates located in Upper Mesopotamia (Assemani 1725: 275).

There are also some important references in Volume III,2 of the *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*. In an alphabetical list of "Metropolitan and Episcopal Churches, which are subject to the Nestorian Patriarch" (Assemani 1728: 705), we read:

> Camula ܟܳܡܽܘܠ, a village in Zabdicene, which the Syrians call Beth-Zabde, or the island of Zebedee. There was a monastery founded there in the time of Shapur [II], king of the Persians, which was afterwards founded by Ukama, the disciple of Abraham [of Kashkar, founder of the Great Monastery on Mount Izla, *c.* 500–588]. Gregory Barhebraeus in the Syriac Chronicle says about the monks of this monastery [see below for the Syriac text and translation of Barhebraeus's account] … (Author's translation from the Latin in Assemani 1728: 731–32)

Camul (or rather Kamul) is thus a village with an adjoining monastery, located in the same general part of northern Mesopotamia discussed above by Sachau, referred to here as Zabdicene, "one of the Transtigritanae regions … an Armenian satrapy located on either side of the Tigris including the cities of Bezabde [a shortened form of Beth-Zabde] and Phinika (Finik), ceded to the Persians after 363" (Crow 2018: 1605).[9] An unpublished Syriac text by Yoḥannan bar Penkaye (on whom, see below) contained in BL Or 9385 provides even more information about the placename Kamul:

> In his *memra* [speech, discourse, homily, treatise] … John [bar Penkaye] refers metaphorically to the "ship" that carried three solitaries, ʿUkama, Sabrishoʿ and Sabrishoʿ [two disciples of ʿUkama]: "Like a ship, [God] guided [them] without harm [a reference to Noah's Ark]; and He wisely directed it to sail towards Mount Kmol; and it came and rested on the Qardu mountains around the Ark". (Mar-Emmanuel 2015: 60–61, n. 227)[10]

Before moving on, we should also consider the quote from the famed Syriac Orthodox prelate and writer Gregory bar ʿEbroyo that Assemani inserts into his discussion of Kamul:

> ܘܒܫܢܬ ܬܫܥ ܕܛܝ̈ܝܐ... ܫܠܡܘ ܒܡܫܬ̈ܝ ܦܪ̈ܫܐ ܠܒܪ̈ܝܐ ܠܕܝܪܐ ܕܫܠܝ̈ܚܐ ܕܡܬܩܪܝܐ ܕܐܟܡܘܠ
> [ܕܒܐܟܡܘܠ؟] ܘܐܝܬ ܗܘܐ ܒܗ ܗܕܝܟ ܐܪܒܥܡܐܐ ܕܝ̈ܪܝܐ ܘܢܦܩܘ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܡܐܐ ܘܒܫܢ̈ܝܢ ܕܝ̈ܪܝܐ.
> ܘܕܒܪܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܢܦܫ̈ܬܗܘܢ ܒܥܠܬܐ ܒܟܠ̈ܝܐ ܕܕܗܒܐ ܘܣܐܡܐ.

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[9] For a first-hand account of travel through the region in the mid-nineteenth century, see Oppert (1863: 63–64).

[10] As the author goes on to say (and building on what was mentioned earlier by Sachau), "Mount Kmol is identified by Islamic sources as 'Mount Judi' (see Quran, sura 11:44), which is located close to Jazirat ibn Umar, the modern Cizre in Turkey" (Mar-Emmanuel 2015: 61, n. 227). The *Book of Chastity* (discussed below) makes specific mention of Yoḥannan of Kamul (also discussed below) going "to the place where the Ark stopped" (Chabot 1896: 230). Jebel Judi / Mount Cudi has already been mentioned above, of course.

(Assemani 1728: 732, corrected by Bedjan 1890: 235)

> And in the year 449 of the Arabs [1057/58 CE] ... twenty Oghuz horsemen went up to the monastery of the Nestorians that is called Akhmul [Kamul]. And there were in it at that time four hundred monks. And of them they slew one hundred and twenty monks. And the rest of them ransomed their lives with six measures of gold and silver. (Author's translation; cf. Budge 1932: 209)

Of note in this quotation is the occurrence of an alternate version of the place name: Akhmul (ܐܟܚܡܘܠ) in place of Kamul (ܟܚܡܘܠ), something which Bedjan observes in his edition of the Syriac text, noting that Assemani's text of bar ʿEbroyo seemed to have the latter form. Certainly, Payne Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus* considers that ܐܟܚܡܘܠ Akhmul, "Nestorian monastery at Qardu" and ܟܚܡܘܠ Kamul, "Nestorian village and monastery in Zebadene [Zabdicene]" both refer to the same place (Payne Smith 1879–1901: col. 183, 1753; cf. Margoliouth 1927: 166, which adds ܚܡܘܠ). We may also recall Sachau's observation above that the Muslim geographer Yaqut (1224–28) gives the forms دير اكمل (monastery of AKML) or دير اكمن (monastery of AKMN).

Before moving on from Assemani, there is one final quotation to note in his entry on "Camula":

> It is clear from Amr that the village of Kamul was adorned with episcopal dignity, that John the Bishop of Kamul, together with others, attended the funeral of Patriarch Makkika and the ordination of Denḥa in 1265. Behishoʿ, a monk from Kamul, is praised by Sobensi [ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha] among the writers. Moreover, the Bishopric of Kamul formerly belonged to the Metropolitan of Nisibis, under the jurisdiction of Beth-Zabde or Bakerda. Afterwards it came to the Patriarchal province, when the Seat of the Patriarchs was fixed in Beth-Zabde itself, which is otherwise called the island of Zebedee or Jazirah. (Assemani 1728: 732)

There can be little doubt that, in Assemani's view, Kamul was located in northern Mesopotamia, not in Central Asia, a view that is corroborated by the aforementioned extract from Sachau, but we need to go even further back to verify all this, to examine what the primary source that Assemani calls "Amr" has to say.

Back to ʿAmr

The name ʿAmr has come up frequently in our examination of the evidence thus far. ʿAmr ibn Mattā al-Ṭīrhānī, who probably lived between the mid-tenth and early eleventh centuries, composed a work called *Kitāb al-majdal li-l-istibṣār wa-l-jadal*, "Book of the Tower, for Reflection and Discussion", "a massive theological and ecclesiastical compendium in seven major sections, written in rhymed Arabic prose" (Swanson 2010: 627). After much thorough analysis of the text (and the need to discard an earlier, convoluted theory of its origin), scholars now view the seven-chapter work published in Gismondi (1899) as the work of ʿAmr, not Marī ibn Sulaymān (as the former theory posited); the latter possibly contributed some additional material for the "patriarchal history found in the fifth chapter" (Swanson 2010: 628).

This work is to be distinguished from what was published as the second part of the *Kitāb al-majdal* in Gismondi (1896–97), a work which is in fact part of the *Asfār al-asrār*, "Books of the Secrets" by Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā. Written in 1332, it was long thought to have plagiarized the *Kitāb al-majdal*, but is now viewed as a separate work in its own right (Swanson 2010:

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628; Holmberg 1993). As will be seen, these two works, both of which Assemani attributed to ʿAmr, are the sources for much of what the Maronite scholar wrote about Kamul.

Let us deal first with the *Kitāb al-majdal* of ʿAmr ibn Mattā, in which we read the following, under the section on the patriarch Barbaʿshmin (r. 345–46):

> In these days the convent of Kamul was built in the Jazirah. One of the nobles of Shapur was governor of Nisibis and when he saw the miracles and the light from heaven at the killing of Shahdost [the patriarch before Barbaʿshmin], he opposed Shapur in killing the Christians and freed many of them.
>
> He was denounced to Shapur who did not believe it. He [the governor] asked God to help him; he left the kingdom and went to Rabban Mar Awgen [a famous ascetic, fl. fourth–early fifth centuries]. He was baptized and took the name Yoḥannan. Shapur looked for him, but could not find him.
>
> He came to a cave near the village of Kamul. Many miracles appeared at his hands. He died and was buried in the cave. After him came Rabban Ukama, a disciple of Mar Abraham, who built a monastery there. (Author's translation from the Italian in Gianazza 2022: 265, cf. Gismondi 1899: ٢٥-٢٦/22)

This is the original source for Assemani's information on the founding of the monastery of Kamul, which seems to have occurred twice. The initial founding took place during the mid-fourth century patriarchate of Barbaʿshmin, when Yoḥannan,[11] the former governor of Nisibis, after converting to Christianity and being baptized by the great ascetic Awgen, became an ascetic himself, dwelling in a cave near the village of Kamul. However, as Fiey suggests, "It is not correct, however, to attribute to him the title of 'founder', because it was only at the beginning of the seventh century that the monk Ūkāmā made the funerary cave the nucleus of a convent, the ruins of which can still be seen about twenty kilometres east of Cizré" (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 2004: 121).

Several centuries later – perhaps in the early seventh century, as Fiey suggests, or more precisely between 608 and 628, as Mar-Emmanuel (2015: 62) argues – Ukama, a disciple of Abraham of Kashkar, founded the monastery of Kamul, although whether this was a refounding of the monastery or in fact its original founding is unclear from the text. If indeed the monastery had been founded initially by Yoḥannan, what had happened to it in the meantime? Had it just fallen into disrepair and, if so, why? Or had it never really been there in the first place? And what of the village? Had it been there before Yoḥannan moved into his cave (as the text suggests), or had it rather developed after news spread of Yoḥannan's miracle-working? Although one can see the appeal of a direct link via Yoḥannan to Mar Awgen, the traditional founder of Mesopotamian monasticism, the argument seems to be more in favour of that initial link being through Ukama back to Abraham of Kashkar, the great reformer of East Syriac (Church of the East) monasticism. Leaving aside the contradictions and questions in the text then, a likely progression would have Yoḥannan moving into the grotto first (in the absence of a village initially), followed by the gradual settlement of what would become the village of Kamul nearby, followed by Ukama moving to the vicinity in order to build a monastery (no doubt, as Fiey suggests, centred around the funerary grotto of Yoḥannan), after which it is likely that the village would have grown even more, with all the commercial implications of having a monastery nearby. This sequence of events (namely that Yoḥannan was more an ascetic than a builder) seems to be affirmed by the aforementioned unpublished Syriac text by Yoḥannan bar Penkaye, which provides

[11] We do not know his original Persian name.

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additional information on Ukama and his precursor, Yoḥannan of Kamul, that is not found elsewhere (Mar-Emmanuel 2015: 62–63).

Moving on to the fourteenth century *Asfār al-asrār* by Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā,[12] we have two relevant excerpts, the first of which also relates to the mid-fourth century patriarchate of Barbaʿshmin:

> During his [Barbaʿshmin's] time, the monastery of Mar Jonah was built in Iraq, as well as the monastery of Kamul in Mesopotamia and the monastery of al-Zarnuq. (Author's translation from the Italian in Gianazza 2017: 414–15, cf. Gismondi 1896–97: ٢٠/12)[13]

As the translator Gianmaria Gianazza notes, this excerpt refers to a "monastery built in the village of Kamūl in Mesopotamia, where the monk Yoḥannan, who had previously been in Shapur's retinue, lived" (Author's translation from the Italian in Gianazza 2017: 415).

It is with our final two extracts that we finally come to the primary source (already encountered in Assemani above) that is the origin of the "bishop of Hami" narrative. The first extract occurs near the end of the section on the patriarch Makkika II (r. 1257–65):

> He died on Saturday after the Sunday after Easter,[14] on the 18th of April in the year 1576 of the Greeks [1265] ... Present at the prayer were Simeon, metropolitan of Mosul; Emmanuel, bishop of Ṭirhan; Brikhishoʿ, bishop of al-Wasiṭah; Yoḥannan, bishop of Susa; Yoḥannan, bishop of Kamul, and all the priests and people of Baghdad. (Author's translation from the Italian in Gianazza 2017: 517, cf. Gismondi 1896–97: ١٢١/69–70)

The second extract follows shortly after, under the section on patriarch Denḥa I (r. 1265–81):

> Present at his consecration were the ordainer, Eliya, metropolitan of Jundishapur; Simeon, metropolitan of Mosul; Eliya, metropolitan of Bagirmi [Beth Garmai]; Yoḥannan, metropolitan of Adharbaygan; Emmanuel, bishop of Ṭirhan, who acted as archdeacon; Bukhtishoʿ, bishop of al-Bawazig; Ṣlibhazkha, bishop of Akhlat; Brikhishoʿ, bishop of al-Wasiṭah; Yoḥannan, bishop of Tamanon; Yoḥannan, bishop of Kamul; Ishoʿdnaḥ, bishop of Mardin; Maran ʿAmmeh, bishop of Badiyal; Ishoʿzkha, bishop of Babgash [Beth Bgash]; ʿAbdishoʿ, bishop of Maʿalthā; Malkishoʿ, bishop of Banuhadra [Beth Nuhadra]; Simeon, bishop of Tella and Barbelli; Matthew, bishop of Dasin [Beth Dasen]. (Author's translation from the Italian in Gianazza 2017: 518, cf. Gismondi 1896–97: ١٢١-١٢٢/70)[15]

Surely these three references to Kamul in the *Asfār al-asrār*, along with the one reference in the *Kitāb al-majdal* (all of which use the same Arabic spelling كمول), are evidence that

[12] For the structure of this work, see Swanson (2012: 901–03).

[13] The foundation of these three monasteries is narrated in more detail by the Arabic *Chronicle of Seʿert*, probably written in the tenth century, which gives the History of Yonan/Jonah, anchorite of Anbar, the History of Yoḥannan/John of the Monastery of Beth Zabde and the History of the Monastery of Zarnoqa (Scher 1910: 246–52). As noted above, Beth-Zabde is another name for Kamul. The Arabic name of the monastery in this text is عمر بازبدى.

[14] Both Gismondi (Latin) and Gianazza (Italian) translate this as 'the Sunday in Albis', from Latin *Dominica in albis depositis*, referring to the first Sunday after Easter, when those who have been baptized on Easter Eve can lay aside (*depositis*) their white baptismal robes (*albis*). The Arabic term used by Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā is الأحد الجديد, "new Sunday" the equivalent Syriac term is ܚܕܬܐ ܚܕܕ̈ܐ. My thanks to Gabriel Rabo, Thomas Carlson, Jan van Ginkel and Alex Neroth van Vogelpoel for helping me to sort this out (personal communication, 13–14 July 2024).

[15] I am grateful to David Wilmshurst for clarification on several of these names (personal communication, 13 July 2024).

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the authors of these two primary sources had only one place in mind when they referred to Kamul: the site of a village and monastery in northern Mesopotamia, not the Central Asian place name.[16] Before concluding with a reconstruction of how the (by now) obviously erroneous idea of a bishop of Hami may have developed, it seems in order to provide further primary sources from the literature of the Church of the East that demonstrate the important role that Kamul played in that Church and its unquestioned location in northern Mesopotamia.

The place of Kamul in the Church of the East

Towards the end of the Syriac *Life of Mar Awgen*, we read a list of ܬܠܡܝܕܝ ܡܪܝ ܐܘܓܝܢ ܩܕܝܫܐ, "the holy disciples of Mar Awgen" that includes ܝܘܚܢܢ ܡܪܝ ܕܟܡܘܠ, "Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul", one of the few names that is attached to a geographic place in this list of 73 disciples (Bedjan 1892: 473). Kamul also figures prominently in the *Book of Chastity*, composed by Isho'dnaḥ of Baṣra in 849/50, which has (1) a short section on ܡܪ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܕܒܢܐ ܠܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ "Mar Yoḥannan who founded the Monastery of Kamul"; (2) a reference under those sent out by Abraham "the Great" of Kashkar to ܡܪ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܕܫܪܐ ܠܡܥܪܬܐ ܕܐܘܟܡܐ ܕܒܪ ܩܪܝܐ ܕܟܫܟܪ "Rabban Mar Ukama, who restored the cavern of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul (and) made it a monastery"; (3) a reference to Mar Aba (not the patriarch of that name) which mentions that ܒܙܩܘܗ ܐܬܘ ܐܚܘܗܝ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܠܘܬ ܒܝܬ ܡܫܟܢܗ ܘܒܢܐ ܠܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܕܒܐܪܥܐ ܕܩܪܕܘ ܘܬܡ ܐܬܦܣܩ ܡܢ ܗܕܐ ܥܠܡܐ "in the time of his old age, his holy brothers came out [of their cells] to him and he came and built the Monastery of Kamul, which is in the land of Qardu. And there he departed from the temporal life"; (4) a long section on ܡܪ ܐܘܟܡܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܒܢܐ ܠܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܕܒܐܪܥܐ ܕܩܪܕܘ, "Holy Mar Ukama who founded the Monastery at the cavern of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul, the village that is in the land of Qardu"; (5) a reference to ...ܐܬܦܣܩ ܠܛܘܪܐ ܕܩܪܕܘ ܘܫܟܢ ܬܡ ܒܩܪܝܒܘ ܕܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ "the blessed Cyriacus [who] went to the mountains of Qardu and abode there in the neighbourhood of the Monastery of Kamul"; and (6) a note under Joseph Hazzaya[17] about how ܐܬܐ ܕܩܪܝܩܘܣ ܒܪ ܐܠܝܐ ܠܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܕܒܐܪܥܐ ܕܩܪܕܘ ܘܚܙܐ ܠܗ ܠܡܪܝ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܕܒܥܕܬܐ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܕܩܪܝܒ ܠܗ ܠܩܪܝܬܐ ܘܚܙܐ ܡܢ ܗܘ ܓܒܪܐ ܕܒܥܘܬܐ ܕܡܪܢ ܘܩܒܠ ܡܥܕܐ "he [Joseph's Christian friend Cyriacus] led him to the Monastery of Kamul, which is in the neighbourhood of the village. And seeing the conduct of the solitary monks, the young man became fervent with the love of our Lord and received baptism in the Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul" (Author's translations from Bedjan 1901: 442, 447, 455, 459, 497–98, 510, 510; cf. Chabot 1896: 230, 233, 238, 241, 269, 278).

Joseph Hazzaya is not the only famous Syriac writer with a connection to the Monastery of Kamul. As a notice found in two Syriac Orthodox manuscripts on ܝܘܚܢܢ ܡܪ ܒܪ ܣܒܝܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܦܢܩܝܐ "the blessed Mar Yoḥannan the Solitary bar Penkaye"[18] notes, ܠܒܫ ܐܬܪܗܒܘܬܐ ܒܕܝܪ ܡܪ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܕܟܡܘܠ ܬܚܘܬ ܪܫܘܬ ܡܪ ܫܒܪܝܫܘܥ. "he put on the holy habit of monasticism in the Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul under the head of the monastery, Mar Sabrisho'" and, at the end of his life, ܒܒܝ ܫܢ ܫܒܥܝܢ ܘܬܠܬ ܫܢܝܢ ܐܫܠܡ ܗܢ ܥܠܡܐ ܘܦܓܪܗ ܩܒܝܪ ܒܪܒܬܐ ܕܝܪ ܡܪ ܝܘܚܢܢ ܕܟܡܘܠ. "when he was seventy three years old, he left this world and his holy body was laid in the great Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul" (Scher 1907: 162–67).

[16] Despite having clarified that the first mention of this place name in *Asfār al-asrār* refers to the "monastery built in the village of Kamūl in Mesopotamia" (Gianazza 2017: 415), the translator then explains the second (and by inference third) mention of the place name as an "oasis at the main crossing point of caravan routes, which led from (the) Tarim (Basin) to the north of Central Asia (and) to northern China", quoting Fiey (1993: 120) as proof of this conclusion.

[17] On whom, see Kitchen (2011).

[18] On whom, see Brock (2011).

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We may also recall here the aforementioned Mar Behishoʿ Kamulaya, who was mentioned in ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha's *Catalogue of Syriac Writers*. His life is recorded in Syriac hagiographical literature, where he is also referred to as ܡܪܝ ,ܒܫܝܫܘܥ ,ܣܥܝܕܐ "Mar Bishoy the Solitary" (Bedjan 1892: 572–620). Although he "entered monastic life under the guidance of John of the Kemol [sic] monastery ... 80 percent of his life [i.e. his written *vita*] is dedicated to his deeds and words in the Egyptian monasteries" (Sanders 1995–96: 277). As a native Syriac speaker who lived most of his life in Egypt, it is not surprising that the various sources that mention him spell his name in different ways; Bishoy (or Bishoi) seems to indicate Coptic or Arabic influence, whereas Behishoʿ suggests his native East Syriac origins.[19] In addition to his *vita*, extracts from his discourses (i.e. the *Book about the Monastic Life* mentioned by ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha) have also been published (Blanchard 2012).[20] Sadly, "no rules of the Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan have survived ... [but] John [bar Penkaye]'s work *On Virginity and Holiness* ... and another surviving metrical hymn entitled 'A Beneficial *memra* of Mar Yoḥannan bar Penkaye' provide ample information regarding the ascetic life within his monastery" (Mar-Emmanuel 2015: 65).

It is not only in the area of hagiographical literature that Kamul has made its mark. It also merits mention in the liturgy of the Church of the East, specifically the "Motwa for Wednesday 'Before'", with this remembrance of Joseph Hazzaya: "Raban Joseph the Seer. Whose monastery is in the Kurdish mountain. Saw exalted revelations. Above the nature of man. And the great habitation near thereby. Called Kmul, the fountain of love. Hath the fame of the Paradise of Eden. Thus history relateth" (Maclean 1894: 140). Indeed, Kamul can be considered one of five places where East Syriac mysticism flourished, a flourishing that was rooted in the monastic reforms of Abraham of Kashkar:[21]

> In the same region of Qardu there is another centre to which three other of our authors are linked in different ways; it is the monastery of John of Kamoul, founded by Ukama, one of the disciples of Abraham of Kaškar. Here John bar Penkaye and Beh Išoʿ were trained in monastic life; and it was by seeing the monks of this monastery that Joseph Ḥazzaya was drawn to the Christian life and it was here that he was baptized. (Author's translation from the French in Chialà 2011: 68)

Origins of the "bishop of Hami" idea

Having examined first Assemani's references to Kamul and then the references in his primary source (or rather, sources, as it turns out) ʿAmr ibn Mattā al-Ṭīrhānī and Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā, it is clear that there is absolutely no basis for thinking there was a bishop in Qumul/Hami in the thirteenth century who visited Baghdad and was present for the death of one patriarch and the consecration of another. Which brings us to the question: How did this idea originate and develop to the point that by the late twentieth century it was taken for granted by the majority of scholars writing on the subject of Christianity in Central Asia? The brief survey below attempts to summarize the sources used by twentieth-century scholars who support this idea, with a reminder of what has been said above regarding each source mentioned; the few scholars who do not list any sources are overlooked.

The first place in modern scholarship where we encounter this idea is in the quote from Yule and Cordier (1921: 211), discussed above and not itself based on any useful sources that say the same thing. The next statement of the notion comes from Mingana (1925:

[19] For more on this, see Sanders (1995–96).

[20] On this literature, see also Chialà (2012).

[21] Syriac mysticism is of course bound tightly with Syriac monasticism; the other four centres of East Syriac mysticism are the Monastery of Rabban-Shabur, the Monastery of Beth ʿAbe, the Monastery of Mar Yozadaq (also in the Qardu region) and the Great Monastery of Mount Izla itself.

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328–29), who (as noted at the beginning of this article) refers only to Yule and Cordier and Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā (whom he thinks is ʿAmr). Again, neither of these sources provides anything approaching conclusive proof that a bishop of Hami ever existed. Following Mingana, Dauvillier (1948: 308; translation by the author) makes a statement that may provide a clue as to the origin of the idea. He mentions "Ha-mi ... (the Camul of Marco Polo) ʿAmr reports a Chaldean bishop in 1265", referring the reader to the same page (122/١٢٢ in Arabic text) as Mingana (70 in Latin translation).

The most impressive bibliography thus far seems to be in van Lantschoot (1949: col. 671), but it becomes less so as one examines the references. Pauthier (1865: 156–59) has no information about a bishop in the Central Asian Camul. Neither do Yule (1866: 390, 578–79) or Sachau (1919: 47–48). Both Yule and Cordier (1921: 211)[22] and Mingana (1925: 328–29) have been examined and found wanting. The references to Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā (Gismondi 1896–97) have already been discussed extensively above. The only reference worth following up is Le Quien (1740: col. 1311–12), on whom more below.

As noted above, one posthumous work by Pelliot (1959: 154) contains the author's suggestion that the idea of a bishop in Camul "would require substantiating". Nonetheless, Pelliot mentions three sources for the idea, all of which can be easily dispensed with. Yule and Cordier (1921: 211) and Assemani (1721: 455–56) have both been addressed above. The third source, "SAEKI, *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 1937, chart facing p. 348" (equivalent to Saeki 1951: Map III) is merely a map indicating that there was a bishop at Hami, with no proof given for this claim. Again, as noted above, in another posthumous work, Pelliot (1973: 9, 134) seems more certain of the existence of a bishop of Hami, this time referring to Gismondi (1896–97: 122/١٢٢, for the Arabic text), a passage which has been examined above. For his part, Fedalto (1988: 994) rests his case on Dauvillier (1948: 308) and Pelliot (1973: 9), both of which have already been addressed above.

Again, based on what already has been said regarding Assemani, ʿAmr ibn Mattā al-Ṭīrhānī and Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā, it is clear that none of the secondary sources examined thus far that report a bishop of Hami can point to solid evidence to support that notion. We now turn to two final players in the course of events that resulted in the idea of a bishop of Hami being accepted without question by so many scholars. We begin with the most recent of the two: Jean-Maurice Fiey. Unlike (it seems) many of the other scholars discussed in this article, Fiey was well aware of the Monastery of Kamul; indeed, it is likely that he visited the site during the 34 years he lived in Iraq, as the following description of "John of B. Garmaï and Ūkāmā, the convent of Kamūl" suggests: "The ruins of this large convent, with about twenty rooms, can still be seen in Qardū, on the southwest slope of Mount Gūdi, near the village of Dādār, half an hour west of Kewulla. Today it is called Déra Kamōlé in Kurdish. It is therefore located about twenty kilometres east of Cizre" (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 1977: 199).

There follows a helpful overview of the history of the monastery according to the available sources, including the lives of both "founders", Yoḥannan of Kamul[23] and Ūkāmā. Fiey clearly sets out the order of things concerning the latter: "He built cells and a convent, which became known as the nearest village, Kamūl in Qardū". Fiey ends with an interesting discussion of the idea of a bishop of Kamul:

> Was the convent the episcopal seat (and therefore of the province of Nisibis) in 1265? We see a certain John, bishop of Kamūl, attending the burial of Makkīḫa on this date, then the coronation of Denḥa I.

[22] Van Lantschoot actually refers to an earlier edition of this volume: Yule (1875: 212).

[23] Yoḥannan of Kamul is also included in Fiey's posthumous survey of Syriac saints (Fiey 2004: 120–21).

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> In fact, the well-attested presence of a bishop in the neighbouring town of Tamanōn at exactly the same date excludes the existence of another diocese so close. Moreover, it is likely that if Bishop John had had his seat here, he would have been called bishop "of the convent" of Kamūl. It therefore seems preferable to look elsewhere for the location of the bishopric of Kamūl, unless we are in the presence of a bishop retired to the convent and to whom the title was given *pro hac vice*. (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 1977: 199, 201)

And here we see a hint of what may have caused Fiey to opt for a bishop of Hami later on; in a footnote, he observes that "Le Quien had already suggested that it was perhaps a locality in the province of Tangut, cited by MARCO POLO, *Description du monde*, ch. LIX ... However, no mention is made of Christians; on the contrary, Khan Mangu tried in vain to combat their 'evil custom' of 'kindly' offering their wives to travellers" (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 1977: 201, n. 247).

The "later on" occurred in Fiey's masterful *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus* (1993), an updated and expanded version of the three-volume *Oriens Christianus*[24] (1740) which had been assembled by the French theologian and historian Michel Le Quien (1661–1733). Fiey wisely limited himself to the dioceses of the two main streams of Syriac Christianity: "East Syriac Dioceses" (the Church of the East) and "West Syriac Dioceses" (the Syriac Orthodox Church). His entry on Qamul deserves to be quoted in full:

> **QAMUL** – Oasis on the main crossing point for caravans, which led to the North of Central Asia, from the Tarim to North China.
> The name, given by Sliwa (p. 122) as Kamul, is the seat of Bishop JOHN in 1265.
>
> In fact, it is the oasis of Ha-mi, in Turkish Qamil, in Mongolian Qamul. It is Marco Polo's Camul. (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 1993: 120)[25]

In addition to Sliwa (Ṣalībā), already examined above, Fiey provides three other sources: Le Quien's *Oriens Christianus*, vol. II, col. 1311–12, s.v. *Camulae*; van Lantschoot's *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* entry on "Camul"; and Pelliot's *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient*, pp. 9, 134. Curiously, van Lantschoot and Fiey are the only two (among the many authors we have surveyed in this article) to point the reader towards Le Quien (perhaps because, in a pre-digital world, it would have been very difficult for the average reader to physically access any of Le Quien's three volumes).

And so, having already examined van Lantschoot and Pelliot, we come to the last source to be investigated: Le Quien (in fact, most of the page is formatted as one column). Halfway down the page is the title **ECCLESIA CAMULÆ** with the following text below it:

> Marco Polo the Venetian, Book I, Chapter 46. The province of Camul is within the great province of Tangut, subject to the rule of the great Khan, having many cities and towns. It touches two deserts, one assuredly large and another somewhat smaller. It abounds in those things which man needs for the maintenance of life. The inhabitants have a language of their own, and seem to have been born for no other purpose than to occupy themselves with sports and dancing. They are idolaters and worshipers of demons. In the age of this Paulus [Polo], I find there to have been a bishop of Camul, which is evidence that Christians existed there also, just as in the

[24] The complete Latin title is *Oriens christianus in quatuor patriarchatus digestus, in quo exhibentur Ecclesiae patriarchae caeterique praesules totius Orientis*, "The Christian East divided into four patriarchates, in which the patriarchs of the Church and the rest of the bishops of the whole East are presented".

[25] Fiey also has an entry for Kamul: "**KAMUL** v. Qamul" (Fiey 1993: 99).

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> neighbouring provinces which the same Paulus names Ghinghintalas [location uncertain] and Succiu [Suzhou 肃州, in Gansu] and the city of Campçio [Ganzhou 甘州, in Gansu], which is the largest city of the Tangut region. (Author's translation from the Latin in Le Quien 1740: col. 1311–12)

Underneath this text we read the subtitle **EPISCOPI CAMULÆ**, below which is the following text (in the original Latin): "I. JOANNES. Anno Græcorum 1577. Christi 1266. *Joannes episcopus Camulæ* adfuit promotioni Denhæ I. Catholici, qui decessoris illius Machichæ perinde adfuerat exequiis". The source is given as Tome II of *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (Assemani 1721, 455–56), which we have examined above and which (again) has its source in Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā (although Assemani thought it was ʿAmr ibn Mattā al-Ṭīrhānī).

Here we see all the hints coming together in a relatively clear manner. Le Quien reads in both Marco Polo and Assemani about Camul and assumes that both are referring to the same place, given the identical spelling in the two (Franco-Italian and Latin) sources. He quotes Polo, who (again) says nothing about Christians and, if anything, makes it clear how "unChristian" the residents of Camul are. Le Quien then says that he has found there is a bishop in Camul (switching sources here to Assemani) and therefore there must have been Christians in Camul (he is, of course, speaking here of Qamul in Central Asia, not Kamul in northern Mesopotamia), despite what Polo wrote about the place and its inhabitants. His final quote from Assemani seems to clinch his argument: "John, bishop of Camul, was present at the promotion [consecration] of Catholicos Denḥa I.; he had likewise been present at the funeral of his predecessor Makkika."

We can see now how not only Le Quien and those who referenced him (namely van Lantschoot and Fiey), but also other authors who did not reference him (such as Mingana, Dauvillier and Fedalto) came to the conclusion that there had been a bishop of Hami in the thirteenth century. They read Marco Polo and then they read Assemani (or, later on, Gismondi's late nineteenth-century translations of Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā) and made a connection between the two, based primarily on the fact that both sources use the name "Camul", thus joining the account of the Venetian with the references to a bishop's attendance at the funeral of one patriarch and the consecration of another into one "proof text" for the notion of a bishop of Hami. However, as the investigation of sources above has shown again and again, such a bishop never existed; he was being confused with a bishop of Kamul in northern Mesopotamia.

Arguments for and against

Quite apart from the evidence from our primary source, Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā, which seems to point overwhelmingly towards northern Mesopotamia as the location of the bishop who participated in the patriarchal funeral and consecration, we might ask what other evidence would suggest this option over a bishop from Central Asia. The matter of distance from Baghdad has already been addressed above. As a reminder, travelling from Hami to Baghdad (a distance of roughly 5,650 km) would have taken between 23 and 31 weeks, depending on how quickly the camel caravan moved. A resident of Hami would have had to embark on such a long journey roughly half a year before the death of the patriarch in order to arrive in time for the funeral. The logistics involved in making such a journey make it highly unlikely; by contrast someone could make the 550 km journey from Kamul to Baghdad (again, by camel) in roughly 14–19 days, more than adequate to arrive in time for a patriarchal funeral (especially considering that others from northern Mesopotamia were also there, including the metropolitan of Mosul, who celebrated the funeral liturgy).

Another question has to do with the motivation for going on such a trip from Central Asia. Although we cannot know it conclusively, it seems reasonable to assume that most

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bishops in Central Asia at the time were probably local inhabitants, whereas most (if not all) metropolitans would have been appointed by and sent from the church centre in Baghdad. In short, they were from the heartland of the Church, in what at this time was the Mongol-occupied former territory of the ʿAbbasid Caliphate (the Mongols, led by Hülegü, had famously captured Baghdad in 1258). Such a journey would have been inconvenient and disruptive for an ecclesiastical province in Central Asia, but it would have been perfectly feasible for a metropolitan from somewhere in the former ʿAbbasid domains to make the trip. However, what would be the motivation for a bishop, most likely born in Central Asia, to do so? The only reason that comes to mind would be in order to make pilgrimage to the holy sites in the Middle East, as was the case *c.* 1275, when Rabban Bar Ṣauma and Marqos, two Turkic monks from the vicinity of Khanbaliq (Beijing), said to each other, "If we left this land for the West, we would have a lot to gain in receiving the blessings of the shrines of the holy martyrs and the fathers of the Church" (Borbone 2020: 69). It also seems logical, if the local church in the Mongol province of Tangut – where, as Polo notes, Qamul/Hami was located at the time – wished to send someone to Baghdad, surely it would make more sense to send a metropolitan than a bishop.

In opposition to these arguments in favour of the bishop of Kamul over the bishop of Hami, we must address the point raised by Fiey above, namely, the presence of "Yoḥannan, bishop of Tamanon" alongside "Yoḥannan, bishop of Kamul" at the consecration of Makkika II, as mentioned by Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā. As Wilmshurst (2000: 40) notes, Qardu was "renamed Ṭamānōn in the tenth century" and excerpts from the *Book of Chastity* above make it very clear that "the Monastery of Kamul ... is in the land of Qardu"; there seems no way of getting around Fiey's objection that a bishop of Tamanon (which is Qardu) "excludes the existence of another diocese [i.e. Kamul] so close". Put another way, there was no room for two bishops in such close proximity. Fiey further argues that if Yoḥannan's episcopal seat was tied to the monastery (more on that shortly), then "he would have been called bishop 'of the monastery' of Kamul" (which he was not, according to Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā). Although Fiey concludes that it "seems preferable to look elsewhere for the location of the bishopric of Kamul" (an option which really leads us nowhere), he does seem open to the idea that Yoḥannan was "a bishop retired to the convent and to whom the title was given *pro hac vice*" (Fiey 1977: 201).

Whether there was a permanent episcopal position at the monastery of Kamul or Yoḥannan merely had the title "on this occasion only", we should not discount the idea of a bishop being attached to a monastery in the East Syriac tradition. Admittedly, the practice was more common in the West Syriac (Syriac Orthodox) tradition than in the Church of the East: "An urban episcopate of the Church of the East would contrast with the tendency of Syriac Orthodox bishops to dwell in monasteries outside the walls" (Carlson 2018: 34).[26]

Thus, there are not many examples of East Syriac bishops associated with monasteries, but it is not without precedent in the literary record.[27] Arguably, our first occurrence is in the Arabic list of metropolitans and bishops in the Church of the East compiled by Eliya Jawharī (or Eliya of Damascus) around the year 900. Eliya includes under هوفركيا مرو "the province of Merv" a certain اسقف ديرحنس "bishop of Dayr ḤNS" (Assemani 1721: 458, 460). Although we have no other information on this episcopal seat in the province of Merv, the word دير (*dayr*) is, of course, the typical way of referring to a monastery in Arabic. Similarly, Dayr Harql, apparently connected to the Monastery of Ezekiel,[28] refers, according to Fiey,

[26] See also the reference in Barsoum (2003: 535) to a Bishop John of Mar Gabriel's monastery who was present at the consecration of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Michael the Great (Michael the Syrian) in 1166.

[27] My thanks to Thomas Carlson, Chip Coakley and David Wilmshurst for information provided in response to my query on the Hugoye email list (personal communication, 7, 9 and 27 May 2024).

[28] Could Dayr Harql (دير هرقل؟) be a confused rendering of the Monastery of Ezekiel (دير حزقيل)?

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to the diocese of Zawabi, located between the "Royal Cities" of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Kashkar, to the south-east. As Fiey explains, during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, "the bishop's residence was then the Convent of Ezekiel at al-Nuʿmaniya" (Author's translation from the French in Fiey 1993: 74, 145).

There are also two early fourteenth-century references in the context of the Church of the East. One is contained in a note found in manuscript BSMS 446 in the Cambridge University Library Repository,[29] a note which mentions ʿAbdishoʿ the bishop of the monastery of the patriarchal cell, seemingly accompanied by the date 1627 in the Seleucid era (1315/16 CE) (Coakley 2018: 171). The second instance can be found in the Syriac *History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, the story of the aforementioned Turkic monks Rabban Bar Ṣauma and Marqos who, on their way to Baghdad, "arrived at the holy monastery of Saint Ṣehyon, near the city of Ṭus. They were blessed by the bishop and the monks of that place" (Borbone 2020: 75). The text seems to be saying that "that place" – the monastery (located near, but not in, the city of Ṭus, Persia) – had a bishop.

A plausible (although not definitive) explanation of how Yoḥannan came to be named as the bishop of Kamul is offered by an anonymous reviewer of this article:

> The Nestorians did not normally name their dioceses after monasteries, but this is not a decisive objection [to the argument in this present article]. More cogent is the consideration that the monastery of Kamul was included in the Nestorian diocese of Ṭamanon, which at this period had a bishop named Ḥnanishoʿ (who was executed by the Mongols in 1268). His existence, indeed, was the main reason why Fiey hesitated to assign Yoḥannan to the monastery of Kamul. Again, though, this is not a decisive objection. Yoḥannan may have been a rival bishop of Ṭamanon who stood unsuccessfully against Ḥnanishoʿ in an election a few years earlier, refused to accept his defeat, and continued to oppose him from the safety of a large monastery within his diocese. He might have taken the opportunity of the death of the patriarch Makkikha II in April 1265 to travel down to Baghdad in order to press his claim with his [the patriarch's] successor. Pending a decision on his status one way or another, it would have made sense for the patriarchal administrators to call Yoḥannan simply a bishop of Kamul.[30]

And so we reach the end of our investigation. I think the most important lesson for academics to learn is the potentially dangerous habit of relying on the conclusions of others, no matter how well-respected they may be in academia, rather than tracing references back as far as we can, especially when it is possible to look at primary sources. I hope I have been successful in laying out the evidence for an argument that I am, in fact, not the first to make. As David Wilmshurst (2011: 261) has written:

> A bishop named Yohannan from the otherwise-unattested diocese of "Kamul" was present at the consecration of the patriarch Denha I in 1265. The French scholar Paul Pelliot, by a heroic stretch of the imagination, identified Kamul with the oasis of "Qamul" in eastern Turkestan mentioned by Marco Polo, but it is far more likely to have been a diocese in Mesopotamia. The diocese may have been connected with the monastery of Mar Yohannan of Beth Garmai, near the town of Tamanon in the Gazarta region, which was also known as the monastery of Kamul.

Wilmshurst's statement is spot on and I hope, with this article, that we may once and for all bid "farewell to the bishop of Hami".

[29] https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/2/archival_objects/228737.

[30] Communicated to me by email, 25 November 2024.

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