

Robert Hoyland/Simon Brelaud/Charlotte Labedan-Kodaş/Andrew Palmer/Alexandre Varela (eds.): *The Life of Sallara and his Mother Elishbah*. East Syrian Christianity in Northern Mesopotamia from Late Antiquity to Early Islam. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2024 (Texts from Late Antiquity 81). X, 250 p., 23 ill., 5 maps. \$ 114.95. ISBN: 978-1-4632-4802-4.

Robert Hoyland has once again assembled an admirable interdisciplinary team of learned specialists to bring a little known late antique Syriac hagiography to light, and to present it in the fullest, most broadly usable terms. This is the third such volume he has overseen, following the editions of “The Life of Simeon of the Olives” (2021) and “The Life of Theodotus of Amida” (2023).<sup>1</sup> Like its predecessors, this is an impressive production, the more so for the apparent obscurity of its subject: two little known local saints whose stories are preserved only in fragmentary and late witness. Yet there are riches to be had here, whether for social or literary historians, folklorists, or scholars of lived religion.

Sallara and his mother Elishbah pursued their ascetic careers in northern Mesopotamia during the tumultuous changes of the seventh century, as the Sasanian Empire fell and Muslim Arab conquerors arrived. The larger historical canvas was dramatic, yet their lives played out among the villages and monasteries of the fabled Mount Izla in the hinterland beyond Nisibis in markedly local terms. They did not travel outside a very small region; they did not interact with political or governmental authorities. Theirs was an insular world of villagers and monks. Problems they addressed included natural disasters, local rivalries, witches, demons, illnesses, and monastic reforms. Their hagiography was anonymously composed.

The first four chapters of the book present a series of essays providing substantial historical and geographical contextualization. Chapter 1 (Robert Hoyland: “The Historical Context of the *Life of Sallara and His Mother Elishbah*”, pp. 1–16) sketches the shadowy history of Sallara and his *Life*, suggest-

1 R. G. Hoyland/S. P. Brock/K. B. Brunner/J. Tannous (eds.): *The Life of Simeon of the Olives. An Entrepreneurial Saint of Early Islamic North Mesopotamia*. Piscataway, NJ 2021 (Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 66); R. G. Hoyland/A. N. Palmer (eds.): *The Life of Theodotus of Amida. Syriac Christianity under the Umayyad Caliphate. With an Archaeological Appendix by C. Labedan-Kodaş*. Piscataway, NJ 2023 (Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 73).

ing that the mid-seventh century was an appropriate setting for Sallara's tenure as abbot of the East Syrian (dyophysite) monasteries of Mar Yoḥannan Ṭayyaya and Mar Awgen – a double headship – and that the *Life* was composed soon afterwards. This dating would allow for the relative absence of Muslim authorities in the narrative and the lack of terms or concepts indicating Muslim rule in the text. Hoyland draws attention to the material aspects of rural life in the region attested in the narrative. He further emphasizes the importance of the text's witness to women's history, in its portrait of Elishbah, a holy woman in her own right profoundly revered by the neighboring villages and monasteries. Finally, he sketches the religious history behind the text: the events that led to Christianity's strong presence in the region by the seventh century, including politically, and the flourishing of monasticism as a key component of social and religious life.

Chapter 2 (Simon Brelaud: "The Expansion of East Syrian Monasticism during Sallara's Lifetime", pp. 17–41) provides a helpful overview of East Syrian monasticism as represented in the career and *Life* of Sallara. Monastic history in Persia followed a different trajectory to that in the Roman Empire. Brelaud covers a broad spectrum of monastic history here, inclusive of both Eastern and Western Syriac traditions as they rooted and expanded in Persia, emphasizing their interconnections as well as distinct developments. What emerges is confirmation of the intensely local focus of the *Life of Sallara*. This text is consonant with other East Syriac monastic literature in portraying close interaction between monastic and local village communities. But little or no awareness can be seen of the larger political or social landscape of its time, despite the enormity of historical events at play.

Chapter 3 (Charlotte Labedan-Kodaş: "The Physical and Environmental Context of Sallara's World", pp. 43–72) attends to the physical and environmental realia in which Sallara and Elishbah lived. The *Life* portrays a basic subsistence economy produced in a hostile physical environment. That picture is explored here through attention to settlement patterns, the impact of political upheaval, and a survey of the harsh series of climate and epidemiological disasters that played out between the sixth and eighth centuries. These conditions encouraged the inward-facing tone of the *Life of Sallara* and rendered the need for miracles such as those worked by Sallara and Elishbah the more acute. Reliable bread supply, healthy farm animals, protection from marauders, predatory creatures, and crop sabotage: such basic desires speak to the constant pressures of rural precarity.

Chapter 4 (Alexandre Varela: “The Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan Ṭayyaya: A Case Study for the Understanding of Syriac Monasticism in Mount Izla”, pp. 73–99) gives a close analysis of archaeological remains of the Monastery of Mar Yoḥannan Ṭayyaya (Saint John the Arab), where Sallara spent much of his monastic career before finally establishing his own monastery in the final years of his life. In the absence of archaeological data for Sallara’s monastery, the remains of Mar Yoḥannan provide important material evidence for the monastic life that Sallara and Elishbah knew, and which they cultivated. A series of tantalizing color photographs (figs. 11–28) follows the essay, limited in the extent of what survives yet alluring even so, especially in the details of architectural sculpture and painted adornments.

Finally, Chapter 5 presents Andrew Palmer’s edition and translation of the Syriac text (pp. 101–215). These are accompanied by a generous commentary providing helpful explanations of specialized terms or cultural references, biblical and hagiographical allusions and cross-references, and relevant textual analysis. Palmer’s expertise shines as he wrestles with the uneven quality of the manuscript witness, producing a vivid English rendering of the text. He captures well the varying literary textures of the narrative: hagiographical tropes interlaced with folkloric elements; episodes of high drama, sometimes with dashing comedic flare. The bullying of a demon into whining servitude is especially fun (sec. 45.1–46.2). The death and funeral of Elishbah (sec. 39.1–43.4, 49.1–49.4), by contrast, is a moving tribute to the profound veneration in which she was held by villagers and monastics alike throughout the region; even the witches wept unconsolably at her loss. Sallara’s monastic building enterprises were salutary (sec. 50.1–58.1) although no archaeological remains survive to confirm the account. The ascetic reforms Sallara sought to implement give insight into a monasticism strongly characterized by idiorhythmic solitaries who lived in caves, bound together by a liturgical life also occasionally shared with local villagers (sec. 66.1–74.2). The miracles worked by both Sallara and Elishbah enliven the story without diminishing the poignant needs they addressed.

Bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, and a helpful index complete the volume (pp. 217–240). All together this volume is a useful and substantive resource for literary, economic, social, and religious historians. The authors have done us all a great service.

---

Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Brown University, Providence, RI  
Willard Prescott and Annie McClelland Smith Professor of Religion and History  
Susan\_Harvey@Brown.edu

**www.plekos.de**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Susan Ashbrook Harvey: Rezension zu: Robert Hoyland/Simon Brelaud/Charlotte Labedan-Kodaş/Andrew Palmer/Alexandre Varela (eds.): *The Life of Sallara and his Mother Elishbab*. East Syrian Christianity in Northern Mesopotamia from Late Antiquity to Early Islam. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2024 (Texts from Late Antiquity 81). In: Plekos 28, 2026, S. 57–60 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2026/r-hoyland.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

---