CHAPTER 7

The Marshes of the Ṣābians

Abū ‘Alī states that his Ṣābians lived in the marsh districts of the regional capital al-Wāṣīṭ. The specifics are important because they locate real Mandaean populations around 900. Of the sites he mentions, I have not been able to identify Sitrāyā.1 It was probably a small village. Ad-Dūl, another village of these Ṣābians, is also unknown, but, being connected with aṣ-Ṣalīq, located on a lake deep in the Marshes, it may have been quite remote. The site called Bayādir, “known as ‘the Jewish’” (tuʿraf bi-l-Yahūdī), “all of the inhabitants of which were Ṣābians,” appears to be identical with a village mentioned by at-Ṭabarī in the context of the Zanŷ rebellion a few decades earlier “known as the Village of the Jews” (tuʿraf bi-qaryat al-Yahūd).2 Perhaps the Mandaeans inhabitants had claimed to be Jews to maintain their security under Muslim rule; perhaps a formerly Jewish village had become entirely Mandaean. In any case, the Village of the Jews to which at-Ṭabarī refers was at the Tigris near the canal of as-Sīb (sēb, Persian for “Apples”), which ran south of Wāṣīṭ away from the Tigris, meandering through the drained lands (al-ǧawāmid) into the Marshes.3 Better known is the bigger nearby town mentioned, al-Ǧāmida, and the river station of al-Ḥawānīt, where some Mandaeans were also to be found according to the heading of the report. All these places were in and around the northeastern edges of the great Marshes of southern Iraq, off the Tigris.

The presence of Mandaeans in the region of these towns and villages will make more sense when the history of the Marshland itself is taken into account

1 Perhaps the name is mispointed and to be read with initial by-, from Aramaic be(t).
2 at-Ṭabarī 3/3.755-5. The village may be associated with the canal leading from the Tigris known also as “al-Yahūdī”; on this canal and its location see Verkinderen 2015: 58, 76–77, 186.
3 Le Strange 1895: 20 and 271. Al-Balāḏūrī (291.11–13) notes that the excess waters of “the swamps of as-Sīb” merge with waters of the Euphrates in an “ancient” canal called al-Bazzāq, which, he states, is the popular pronunciation of Aramaic (an-Nabatḥya) bassāq (properly Babylonian and Mandaic Aramaic *passāq, less likely psāq*), “the cutter,” or as al-Balāḏūrī explains, “that which cuts (yaqṭaʿu) the water connected with it and draws it to itself.” The verbal root psq for “cutting” is coincidentally the same used in Mandaean texts to refer to water that is “cut,” that is stagnant and “dead,” not flowing and “living,” and unusable for ritual purposes. If this is the sense of the word here, then the proper name given to the canal into which the Sīb canal’s waters flow, having passed through turbid swamps (āǧām), may attest to the presence of Mandaeans in the vicinity, specifically upstream on the Sīb above the cutting-off of the waters’ free flow.
as a context. The wetlands were ancient, but they spread widely and submerged previously settled and cultivated land in the later Sasanian period, when the Tigris catastrophically shifted its course in the reign of Kawād (r. 488–496 and 498–531). Despite the efforts of Ḩusrō I (531–579) to avert the waters, a second major avulsion of the Tigris and perhaps of the Euphrates, too, occurring under Ḩusrō II (590–628), caused disastrous and permanent further changes to the landscape. The formerly wet and rich regions of Goḫay and the eastern part of Mesene became desiccated (in Ibn Rusta’s terms, ṣahārā and mafāwiz, “deserts” and “wastes”) as the course of the waters moved away.\footnote{Ibn Rusta 94.21–96.3.} Eastern Mesene became known henceforth as Dašt i Mayšān (Arabic Dast Maysān or Dastumaysān, Mandaic Dašt Mesān), Persian for “the Desert of Mesene.” Now the Tigris merged with the Euphrates’ waters higher upstream to form a great wetland-producing flood which grew progressively wider after the Arab conquest as dykes decayed without repairs, to the point that it reached about 180 km (112 miles) in breadth in every direction, at least doubling the size of the wetlands on the Tigris before Kawād’s time.\footnote{Ibn Rusta 94.4–6; Hinz, “Farsakh,” \textit{EI} 2; Le Strange 1895: 297–299; Le Strange 1905: 25–30, 41–44. Cf. Pliny, writing in 77 CE, \textit{Historia Naturalis} 6.31, on the course of the Tigris south of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, where he says that the Tigris “flows into the Chaldaean lakes, and fills them up to sixty-two thousand passus (~89.9 km or 55.2 miles) in extent,” \textit{in lacus Chaldaicos se fundit eosque LXII p. amplitudine implet}. If this figure is correct, then between the first century and the end of the ninth, the “Chaldaean Lakes” had expanded 56 miles in extent, at least in one direction, on its way to becoming the great Marsh. In other words, it had doubled in extent in that period. Given the likelihood that it had been drained progressively after Pliny’s time, through cultivation under late Arsacid and Sasanid rule, before the flood of Kawād’s reign, then the loss through flooding at the end of the Sasanid dynasty must have been even greater.} Several former Sasanian irrigation districts (Arabic ṭasāṣiḏ) of Mesene were submerged, at least one of them completely. Ruins could be seen under the still water deep in the Marshes as late as the tenth century.\footnote{Ibn Rusta 95.9–10; Verkinderen 2015, esp. 50–55.} From the point of view of a modern archaeologist studying settlements in the lower floodplain of the Euphrates from the late Sasanian period and thereafter, the region becomes a blank on the map, with no traces of new construction for a thousand years. It is striking that this ruinous change in the environment is supposed to have occurred just about the time that the