The Syriac vita of Rabbula is in many aspects a very remarkable document. It presents a highly laudatory portrait of the Edessene bishop, of his great spiritual authority, his exemplary ascetic lifestyle and of his care for the urban poor, the orphans and widows of Edessa. But there is much the vita does not tell us. It is totally silent on the Council of Ephesus of 431 and Rabbula’s role there. It does not mention Hiba, Rabbula’s adversary in doctrinal and political matters, whom the bishop sent into exile in 433, but who became his successor in 436 after Rabbula’s death. We do not hear a word about the plague or famines at Edessa or about the flood of the river Daisan that occurred in 412/13, the very year in which Rabbula was appointed to the metropolitan see of Edessa.1 The vita does not contain any details about urban life at Edessa, let alone about what happened outside this town. Actually it is not a real vita, a biography, but rather a panegyric, n’en déplaise Baumstark’s very high opinion of it:

Seine von einem ihm persönlich nahestehenden Edessener abgefasste Biographie ist eines der vorzüglichsten Denkmäler ihrer Gattung, das die syrische Literatur aufzuweisen hat, von dem grossen B. ein mit warmer Liebe geschaffenes Bild von plastischer Schärfe bietend.2

The vita describes the heroic deeds of Mar Rabbula, bishop of Edessa, the blessed city, as the title of the Syriac text says. Such a title belongs to the genre of the martyrs acts more than to real hagiography. Rabbula’s life is related as a witness to Christ, to whom he totally devoted and sacrificed it.3 As a living witness to Christ Rabbula

2 A. Baumstark, Geschichte der syrischen Literatur (Bonn, 1922), pp. 72–3.
3 The vita was published by J.J. Overbeck, S. Ephraemi Syri, Rabulae episcopi Edesseni,
is portrayed as a model of spiritual authority; as an aristocratic bishop in fifth century Edessa he also was at times an aggressive bearer of secular power. These two sides of Mar Rabbula confront us with the question of how and by what means spiritual authority was exercised.\textsuperscript{4} “Biography was from its inception a genre that found its home in controversy”; and this also applies to the Syriac \textit{vita} of Rabbula.\textsuperscript{5} It was written as a propaganda tract in defence of the highly controversial bishop before the \textit{Latrocinium Ephestonum} of 449. Its proper context, together with the \textit{Legend of the Man of God}, was the very tense atmosphere at Edessa, where the adherents of the Rabbula party attacked the then bishop Hiba and stirred up public riots, so that the \textit{comes} Chaereas entered the town with troops to restore law and order.\textsuperscript{6} The \textit{vita} is, however, almost the only source for Rabbula’s life and his secular and ecclesiastical career. In addition we have the Syriac text of a homily of Rabbula allegedly delivered in the cathedral in Constantinople, and some of his letters from a collection originally containing forty-six.\textsuperscript{7} We possess Rabbula’s canons for the monks, for the clergy and for the “benay” and “benat qeyama”, the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, an inner circle of ascetics in the Christian community of Edessa.\textsuperscript{8} Part of his liturgical poetry on


\textsuperscript{5} Patricia Cox, \textit{Biography in Late Antiquity. A Quest for the Holy Man} (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1983), p. 135.


\textsuperscript{8} See A. Vööbus, \textit{Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation relative to Syrian Asceticism}, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 11 (Stockholm, 1960),