

The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma: The Uyghur Marco Polo

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Abstract. The study aims to examine the personalities of Rabban Sauma and his travel companion Mar Yahballaha, focusing on their roles as religious figures and diplomats. In addition, the research seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the policy of religious tolerance pursued by the rulers of the Hulagu (Ilkhanid) state, the fifth ulus of the Great Mongol Empire. The research is primarily based on an anonymous Syriac manuscript discovered in Urmia in 1887 and published in 1888 by Paul Bedjan (1838–1920). This manuscript narrates the history of the Nestorian Catholicos Mar Yahballaha III and the monk Rabban Sauma. Furthermore, English- and Russian-language historiographical studies related to the topic, as well as accounts by European authors, are comparatively analyzed. The religious policies of the Ilkhanid rulers are evaluated through the examination of chronicle texts and historical narratives. The study comparatively investigates the attitudes of the Hulaguids toward different religions and analyzes the consequences of the accession to power of khans who converted to Islam. The research concludes that, within the context of Christian missionaries' negative perception of the nomads' conversion to Islam, the early Ilkhanid rulers were compelled to preserve the traditional policy of religious tolerance. Those who attempted to deviate from this policy encountered strong resistance.

Keywords: Great Mongol Empire, History of Azerbaijan, religious and diplomatic activities, nomadic perceptions of world religions in the Middle Ages, comparative analysis of Eastern and European sources of the 13th–14th centuries, Ilkhanid State

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INTRODUCTION

Due to its strategic geographical position, Azerbaijan occupied an important place in the socio-political life of both Eastern and Western countries during the Middle Ages.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Mongol armies launched extensive campaigns of conquest. In 1239, Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus as a whole were occupied. Hulagu Khan (1258–1265) subsequently established the Ilkhanid State in the conquered territories, and Azerbaijan became the political and administrative center of this polity.

Following the Mongol invasions, European interest in the East significantly increased. This interest was driven not only by the Mongol threat directed toward Europe, but also by expanding commercial and political ambitions. From the second half of the thirteenth century onward, diplomatic, commercial, and religious missions were dispatched to Azerbaijan. Among the most prominent travelers and envoys were William of Rubruck, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, and Marco Polo. The source entitled *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, employed in the present study, is of particular importance for understanding Ilkhanid relations with Europe and the Papacy, as well as the broader dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

Rabban Sauma (from Syriac *bar sauma*, meaning “son of fasting,” while *rabban* denotes “teacher”) was born in approximately 1220 in Beijing and died in 1294 in Erbil. A Nestorian monk and ambassador of the Ilkhanids to Europe, Sauma is identified in most sources as an Ongut Turk of Uyghur origin. The Onguts had adopted Christianity under the influence of Nestorian missionaries. Rabban Sauma is therefore frequently described as the “Uyghur Marco Polo.” (Rossabi, 1992; Borbone, 2021).

During his diplomatic mission to Europe, Rabban Sauma visited several major cities, including Rome, Paris, and Genoa. In Rome, he met the newly elected Pope Nicholas IV and, in the presence of cardinals, conducted the Nestorian Eucharistic liturgy. The similarity of this rite to the Catholic liturgy impressed the cardinals and contributed to a favorable reception of the envoy (Budge, 2001; Borbone, 2021). Sauma’s principal diplomatic objective was to persuade the Papacy and the European monarchs to form a military alliance with the Ilkhanids against the Mamluks (Jackson, 2005; Kalra, 2023).

The monks, realizing that the gifts had been offered sincerely and wholeheartedly, finally accepted them and continued their journey. Soon they arrived at the capital of Tangut, whose inhabitants were distinguished by their sincere faith. From there they traveled to Hotan, located approximately two months away from Tangut. Due to difficult conditions, the travelers were unable to continue their journey for another six months, after which they finally reached Kashgar, a city devastated by enemy attacks and warfare. Leaving Kashgar behind, they arrived at the camp of Kaidu Khan near the Talas River, where they obtained an official document granting them freedom of movement throughout the territory.

After enduring enormous hardships and privations, they eventually reached Khorasan. Having lost all their possessions during the journey, they entered Azerbaijan with the intention of visiting the Monastery of Saint Mar Sehion near the mountains of Tus and then proceeding to Baghdad in order to meet Catholicos Mar Denha. However, on the way they unexpectedly encountered the Catholicos in Maragha. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt before him and burst into tears. When asked where they had come from and for what purpose, they replied:

“We come from the lands of the East, from Khanbaliq, the city of the ruler of rulers, Kublai Khan. We have come to receive your blessing, as well as the blessings of the fathers, monks, and saints of this land. If we are able, and if God grants us strength, we shall proceed to Jerusalem.”

The Catholicos welcomed them warmly and encouraged their determination, assuring them that despite all the hardships and sufferings they had endured in this world, they would receive eternal blessings and everlasting peace in the hereafter. A few days later, the monks requested permission to travel to Baghdad in order to venerate the relics of Mar Mari, the preacher of the Gospel in the East. The Catholicos granted permission, provided them with letters of passage, and appointed a guide to accompany them.

They arrived safely in Baghdad and from there traveled to the great and renowned Church of Koka in Seleucia. Subsequently, they visited the monastery of Mar Mari, revered as the apostle of the Syrians, and paid homage to his relics. Thereafter they visited the tomb of Mar Ezekiel, proceeded to Erbil, then to Mosul, and eventually

reached Mardin, where they venerated the relics of Mar Eugene. Later they traveled to the Monastery of Saint Michael of Tar'il near Erbil, where they obtained a monastic cell and decided to remain, despite not having fulfilled their original intention of reaching Jerusalem (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

When Catholicos Mar Denha learned of their decision, he summoned them and declared: "We have learned that you have obtained a place in the monastery in order to remain there. We do not approve of this, because there you will gain only personal tranquility and peace. Yet by remaining with us, you will serve the common good and contribute to the welfare of all. Stay with us and assist us in our relations with the khan." Naturally, the monks obeyed his request.

One day, Mar Denha instructed them: "Go to Abaqa Khan and request permission on our behalf." They answered: "So be it, but we ask that you appoint someone to carry the authorization given by our father, because from there we intend to continue toward Jerusalem." The Catholicos agreed, blessed them, and sent them on their way.

After reaching the khan's court and being formally introduced by the palace officials, the travelers explained the Catholicos' request. Abaqa Khan immediately ordered that the necessary permits be issued. The monks then departed toward Jerusalem. Along the way they visited the city of Ani and paid homage to all of its shrines. From there they entered Georgia in order to continue safely westward. However, after arriving, they learned from local inhabitants that the route had become extremely dangerous due to increasing violence, murder, and robbery throughout the region. Consequently, they abandoned the journey and returned to the Catholicos.

Mar Denha consoled them by explaining that they could consider themselves released from their vow to visit Jerusalem, since they had already paid homage to the holy sites of that land and had done so with sincere hearts. According to him, such devotion was spiritually equivalent to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem itself. He then persuaded Rabban Mark to accept appointment as archbishop and Rabban Sauma to become a general visitor of the Church, believing that both men could render invaluable service if they eventually returned to their homeland.

The Catholicos further declared: "Until now no one has been called Mar Mark, and I wish to bestow this name upon Rabban Mark. Moreover, I intend to write several names and place them upon the throne, and whichever name is drawn by lot shall become his name." In this manner the name "Yahballaha," meaning "God has given," was chosen. Thus, in 1280, at the age of thirty-five, Mar Mark received from Catholicos Mar Denha both the name Yahballaha and the decree appointing him archbishop. His archbishopric encompassed the cities of northern and southern China, while Rabban Sauma was appointed chief visitor of the Church (Borbone, 2021).

A few days later, news arrived that two frontier khans on opposite sides of the Amu Darya River had entered into conflict and warfare, thereby blocking the road they intended to take. Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma consequently returned once more to the Monastery of Saint Michael near Erbil, where they remained for approximately two years.

During this period, Mar Yahballaha experienced a remarkable dream. He saw himself entering a vast church filled with images of saints and dominated by a great cross. Extending his right hand to receive a blessing, he noticed that the cross continually withdrew the farther he reached toward it. Eventually, however, the cross ascended to the summit of the sanctuary, and Yahballaha succeeded in kissing it. Upon leaving the church, he saw a tall tree laden with every kind of fruit. He began eating from its fruit and then distributed it among the large crowds gathered around him.

When he awoke, he recounted the dream to Rabban Sauma, who interpreted it symbolically: "Just as you stretched out your hand toward the cross until you finally reached it, so too shall you ascend to the supreme dignity of the patriarchate. And just as you ate from the fruit of the tree and distributed it to the people, so shall you partake of heavenly gifts and bring joy to many through them."

The following night Yahballaha experienced another dream. He saw himself seated upon a lofty throne surrounded by countless people. Whenever he spoke, his tongue extended outward from his mouth and divided into three branches, each bearing something resembling a small flame. The assembled crowds marveled and praised God. Upon awakening, he once again narrated the vision to Rabban Sauma.

“This is not merely a dream,” Rabban Sauma responded, “but a revelation. Just as tongues of fire descended upon the Apostles through the Holy Spirit, so too shall the Holy Spirit descend upon you and place the patriarchal throne into your hands so that you may serve Him.” At that very time, although Catholicos Mar Denha was still alive, he had already fallen gravely ill in Baghdad (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical legacy of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha III has attracted increasing scholarly attention within the broader fields of Mongol studies, interreligious diplomacy, and Eurasian cultural exchange. Existing scholarship generally approaches the subject from three principal perspectives: the history of the Church of the East, the diplomatic relations between the Ilkhanids and Europe, and the religious transformations that occurred within the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

One of the earliest and most influential studies on the subject is the work of E. A. Wallis Budge, who translated and edited *The History of Rabban Sâwmâ and Mâr Yahbh-Allâhâ* based on Syriac manuscripts. Budge’s work introduced the narrative to Western academia and emphasized its importance as a primary source for understanding the relations between the Mongol East and medieval Europe (Budge, 2001). Later, Pier Giorgio Borbone produced one of the most comprehensive critical editions of the text, providing philological analysis, historical commentary, and comparative evaluations of the manuscript tradition. Borbone particularly highlighted the intercultural dimension of Rabban Sauma’s diplomatic mission and interpreted the narrative as a unique example of an Eastern Christian perspective on medieval Europe (Borbone, 2000, 2021).

Research conducted by Morris Rossabi significantly expanded the historiography surrounding Rabban Sauma by situating him within the broader context of Mongol Eurasia. In *Voyager from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West*, Rossabi describes Rabban Sauma as one of the earliest Asian travelers to Europe and emphasizes his role as a cultural mediator between civilizations (Rossabi, 1992). Similarly, studies by Jackson (2005, 2017) examine the diplomatic interactions between the Mongols and the West, particularly the attempts by the Ilkhanids to establish military alliances with Christian Europe against the Mamluks. These studies demonstrate that religion often functioned as a pragmatic instrument of diplomacy rather than solely a matter of spiritual identity.

Another important area of scholarship concerns the religious diversity and tolerance policies of the Mongol Empire. Allsen (2001) argues that Mongol rulers promoted intercultural exchange and religious pluralism as part of their imperial strategy, while Foltz (2010) emphasizes the role of the Silk Road in facilitating religious interaction among Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and other communities. Studies by Haudala (2018) and DeWeese (1994) further analyze the Islamization of Mongol elites and the tensions that emerged between traditional Mongol religious practices, Christianity, and Islam. In this context, the experiences of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha provide valuable insight into the position of the Nestorian Church during a period of profound political and religious transformation.

Recent scholarship has also explored Rabban Sauma within the framework of global history and science diplomacy. Kalra (2023) interprets the diplomatic mission of Rabban Sauma as an early example of intercultural scientific and intellectual exchange across Eurasia. Likewise, Biran and Kim (2023), as well as May and Hope (2024), situate the Ilkhanid state within the larger structure of the Mongol Empire and underline the significance of cross-cultural networks connecting East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Despite these contributions, substantial historiographical gaps remain. Most studies focus either on Rabban Sauma’s diplomatic mission to Europe or on the general history of the Mongol Empire, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the theological, literary, and institutional dimensions of the Church of the East during the patriarchate of Mar Yahballaha III. Furthermore, within Azerbaijani historiography, specialized studies addressing Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha from the perspective of Nestorian Christianity remain extremely limited. Therefore, the present research seeks to contribute to the existing literature by combining diplomatic, religious, and historiographical analysis within a comparative framework.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical research methodology based primarily on comparative textual and historiographical analysis. The principal primary source examined in the research is *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, originally preserved in Syriac manuscripts and later published and translated by Paul Bedjan, E. A. Wallis Budge, and Pier Giorgio Borbone. The manuscript constitutes the central documentary basis for reconstructing the religious, diplomatic, and cultural activities of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha III.

The research further utilizes comparative analysis of Eastern and Western historical sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These include Syriac ecclesiastical narratives, Persian chronicles such as *Jami al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din Hamadani, medieval European travel accounts, and modern historiographical studies published in English, Russian, and Turkish. Comparative source criticism is applied in order to identify convergences and contradictions among the different traditions of historical writing.

The methodological framework of the study also incorporates elements of religious-historical and intercultural analysis. Special attention is devoted to examining the Ilkhanid policy of religious tolerance, the spread of Christianity among Turkic and Mongol tribes, and the transformation of political-religious identities following the conversion of certain Mongol rulers to Islam. In this regard, the research evaluates both political and theological dimensions of the interactions between Christianity, Islam, and traditional Mongol beliefs.

Additionally, the study applies contextual historical interpretation in order to situate Rabban Sauma's diplomatic mission within the broader geopolitical realities of Mongol Eurasia. This approach allows the research to analyze the role of religious diplomacy in the relations between the Ilkhanids, the Papacy, and European monarchies. Through this multidisciplinary methodology, the article aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the historical significance of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha III within medieval Eurasian history.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* reveals the diplomatic strategy employed by Ilkhanid envoys: rather than engaging in doctrinal disputes with Catholic clergy, they emphasized common Christian values and shared religious identity.

Following his audience with Philip IV of France, Rabban Sauma visited Christian shrines and gathered detailed information about the University of Paris, including the presence of approximately 13,000 students, the teaching of both ecclesiastical and secular sciences, and the financing of the institution by the royal treasury.

By contrast, Edward I merely received the envoys ceremonially and demonstrated little interest in a political alliance. Significantly, Rabban Sauma refers to rulers not by their personal names but rather by their titles, such as "King of France" and "King of England," reflecting a broader diplomatic and cultural perspective. According to Borbone (2021), "despite religious differences, Rabban Sauma speaks as a European," illustrating his remarkable intercultural adaptability.

Religious tolerance characterized the Ilkhanid period, during which Islam, Nestorian Christianity, Catholicism, and traditional Mongol beliefs coexisted simultaneously. Nevertheless, the spread of Islam among the Mongols generated concern among Christian observers. The Dominican friar Riccoldo da Monte di Croce lamented the "conversion of the Tatars into Saracens." Contemporary sources also provide contradictory assessments of Baydu Khan's religious orientation, with some portraying him as sympathetic to Christianity.

Franciscan missionaries reported the expansion of Christianity among the nomadic populations, although they also emphasized that many groups retained traditional beliefs. Despite these tensions, the Ilkhanid rulers generally preserved religious autonomy and recognized the confessional freedoms of all communities, provided that such practices did not undermine secular law (Haudala, 2018; DeWeese, 1994).

Historian Yurchenko particularly emphasizes the Mongols' use of religion as a diplomatic instrument. In his work *The Golden Horde: Between the Yasa and the Qur'an*, the chapter entitled "Berke, Hulagu, and Baybars: Real Politics and Dreamers" is devoted to the role of religious symbolism in diplomacy (Yurchenko, 2012).

The manuscript itself was discovered in 1886 by the American missionary Isaac Hollister Hall, while all major translations rely on the 1895 edition prepared by the Catholic priest Paul Bedjan. The most comprehensive scholarly edition was later produced by Pier Giorgio Borbone in 2021. The text covers the period from the births of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha to the latter's death in 1317 and remains an indispensable source for the study of Nestorian Christianity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The work entitled *Histoire de Mar Iab-Alaha, patriarche, et de Raban Sauma* was first published in Paris in 1888. Only one manuscript copy was available to the editor at that time. However, in 1895, a revised second edition was published using two additional manuscripts, one of which is currently preserved in the British Museum.

It should also be noted that none of the three surviving manuscripts identifies the author of *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*. The work therefore remains anonymous. Nevertheless, Borbone hypothesizes that the author may have been the individual who later became Catholicos under the name Timothy following Mar Yahballaha's tenure as metropolitan of Erbil (Borbone, 2021).

Despite the historical significance of Mar Yahballaha, neither the primary sources nor the collected studies concerning him have yet been subjected to sufficiently comprehensive scholarly examination. Existing studies provide only fragmentary information regarding the period and personality of Catholicos Mar Yahballaha III and often reproduce the same obscure and incomplete portrayal of the era.

Moreover, neither Western historiography nor, to the best of our knowledge, scholarship in Azerbaijan has produced a dedicated study examining this historical period specifically from the perspective of Nestorianism. Most studies concerning the Nestorian Church focus either on earlier periods or only briefly mention the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries before moving on to later developments (Allsen, 2001; Foltz, 2010; Jackson, 2017).

The author of the manuscript was undoubtedly a high-ranking cleric of the Eastern Church, as is evident from his profound theological knowledge and extensive references to the Holy Scriptures. Pier Giorgio Borbone interprets this circumstance within the broader context of the author's deliberate choice of the Syriac language, suggesting that the work was intended primarily for an internal ecclesiastical audience rather than for a broader secular readership (Borbone, 2021).

From the internal evidence of the text, it is clear that the author obtained information directly from Mar Yahballaha III and Rabban Sauma themselves. The narrative contains numerous events personally witnessed by these two religious figures and travelers. Moreover, the only explicitly mentioned source within the manuscript is Rabban Sauma's own account of his journey. This substantially enhances the historical reliability and documentary value of the work (Budge, 2001; Borbone, 2021).

The manuscript presents an exceptionally detailed account of the condition of Christianity during the era of the Great Mongol Empire. Covering the entire thirty-seven-year patriarchate of Mar Yahballaha III, the text vividly portrays a sequence of political, diplomatic, and religious events. Beginning with the reign of the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqa Khan and continuing through the reign of Öljaitü, the work describes the attitudes of seven successive khans toward the Nestorian Church and vividly illustrates the struggle between Christianity and Islam within the Ilkhanid realm.

For the purposes of the present study, the reigns of the Ilkhanid rulers may be summarized as follows:

1. Hulagu Khan (1258–1265)
2. Abaqa Khan (1265–1282)
3. Ahmad Tekuder (1282–1284) – the first Ilkhanid ruler to convert to Islam
4. Arghun Khan (1284–1291)
5. Gaykhatu (1291–1295)
6. Baydu (1295)
7. Mahmud Ghazan (1295–1304) – officially proclaimed Islam as the state religion for the first time
8. Öljaitü (1304–1318)
9. Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan (1318–1336)
10. Arpa Ke'un (1336)
11. Musa Khan (1336)
12. Muhammad Khan (1336–1338)

13. Sati Beg (1338–1340) – the first female ruler among the Hulaguid princes
14. Suleiman Khan (1340–1344)
15. Anushirwan al-Adil (1344–1355)
16. Hasan Khan (1357)

According to many scholars, the anonymous manuscript published by Paul Bedjan possesses exceptional academic significance. Its publication was warmly welcomed within scholarly circles, and researchers soon began introducing this remarkable document to wider audiences. Consequently, numerous studies devoted to the manuscript appeared in Western scholarship. Critical examinations of the second recension emerged, and several years later a distinguished scholar published a translation of the third manuscript version. This edition included extensive annotations as well as correspondence exchanged between the Mongol khans and Western rulers, Pope Honorius IV, Pope Nicholas IV, Mar Yahballaha III, Pope Benedict XI, and Edward I (Borbone, 2000; Ригулевская, 1958/2020).

To the best of current knowledge, apart from several brief references in Russian-language articles and surveys of Syriac literary history, virtually no comprehensive scholarly literature exists concerning this patriarch and his historical era. Filling this historiographical gap and illuminating the Nestorian Church of this period in greater detail therefore remains an urgent scholarly necessity. At the same time, the manuscript itself must be recognized as a source of extraordinary historical and academic value (Borbone, 2021; Jackson, 2017).

It should also be emphasized that the author's eyewitness perspective and personal familiarity with the events described are strongly evident throughout the narrative. Furthermore, the recurring phrase in which the khan is praised with the blessing "May he live long!" clearly demonstrates that the text was written contemporaneously with the events themselves. Borbone therefore correctly concludes that the author was indeed Timothy. However, the purpose of the work was not merely to glorify his predecessor, but also to provide a detailed account of the tragic events that engulfed his episcopal center in Erbil. Consequently, the narrative should not be understood as a universal chronicle, but rather as the intimate and interconnected history of two Christian clerics and travelers whose destinies became inseparably linked (Borbone, 2021).

Following the introduction, the manuscript presents the genealogical origins of both travelers. Instead of offering a conventional genealogy, these sections describe the backgrounds of their parents and recount the lives of the two religious figures up to their joint decision to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Borbone notes that, even before formally introducing the protagonists, the author immediately proclaims: "Today the Turks bowed their necks beneath the yoke of divine holiness..." thereby explicitly emphasizing their Turkic origins within a religious and civilizational framework (Borbone, 2021).

Rabban Sauma was born in Beijing, known in medieval sources as Khanbaliq, while Mark, later known as Mar Yahballaha III, was born in the city of Koshan. Both were most likely members of the Ongut Turks, a people believed to have descended from the Shatuo lineage that inhabited Northern China and Mongolia. Chinese sources referred to them as the "White Tatars," a designation intended to emphasize their relative proximity to Chinese civilization and political culture. Their conversion to Christianity was by no means unusual. By the middle of the eleventh century, the Onguts had already accepted Christianity under the influence of missionaries of the Church of the East (Rossabi, 1992; Allsen, 2001).

The homeland of the Onguts corresponds to the region that Marco Polo identified as "Tenduc" in his travel narratives. It was precisely there that Marco Polo located the legendary Christian ruler known in medieval European tradition as Prester John. Polo also observed that Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims coexisted within this territory. Nevertheless, the manuscript concerning Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha provides little information regarding non-Christian communities encountered during their westward journey. This omission may be explained in several ways. First, the Christian travelers may have intentionally sought contact primarily with Christian communities along their route. Second, the anonymous author may have wished to emphasize the spread of Christianity among the Turkic peoples rather than religious plurality. Third, the principal focus of the narrative remains the spiritual and personal journeys of the travelers themselves. Moreover, although Rabban Sauma's account contains detailed descriptions of churches and pilgrimage sites, it offers comparatively little information concerning the everyday social life of the regions through which they traveled (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

In the city of Koshan there lived a chief archdeacon named Beniel, renowned for his honesty, justice, and deep piety. He had four sons, the youngest of whom was Mark, born in 1245. From an early age, Mark displayed extraordinary intellectual and spiritual abilities and devoted himself enthusiastically to the study of the Holy Scriptures. Having heard of the famous ascetic monk Rabban Sauma, Mark became determined to meet him, converse with him, and seek his spiritual guidance. Leaving his home behind, he undertook a difficult fifteen-day journey before finally locating the monk, who immediately inquired about the purpose of his arrival.

"I wish to become a monk," Mark declared to Rabban Sauma. He continued: "I have heard stories about you and abandoned everything in order to seek you out. Do not deprive me of what I desire, my brother." Rabban Sauma initially attempted to dissuade the young man, warning him that "this path is difficult." For a long period, Sauma tried to persuade Mark to return to his parents, yet all such efforts proved futile. Ultimately, he accepted Mark as his disciple and became both his spiritual teacher and guide (Borbone, 2021).

At a later stage, Mark and Rabban Sauma conceived the idea of leaving their homeland in order to travel westward and visit the relics of martyrs and the great Fathers of the Church, and, if possible, to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After distributing all of their possessions among the poor, they departed for Khanbaliq in search of companions and the necessary provisions for their journey. The Christians of that region attempted repeatedly to persuade them not to undertake such a dangerous and uncertain expedition, but their efforts were unsuccessful.

From Khanbaliq they traveled to Koshan, where they were warmly welcomed by Mark's parents and the local population. News of their arrival spread rapidly and eventually reached the rulers of the city, Konbogha and Ibogha, sons-in-law of Kublai Khan. The princes invited Rabban Sauma and Mark through an official envoy and received them with exceptional warmth and hospitality.

Upon learning of the monks' intention to travel westward, the rulers attempted to persuade them to remain: "Why do you wish to leave our country and travel to the West? We are making every effort to attract monks and bishops from the West to our lands. How, then, can we permit you to depart?" In response, Rabban Sauma declared:

"We have renounced this world. As long as we remain among those whom we love, we cannot attain perfect spiritual fulfillment. Therefore, for the love of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed Himself unto death for our salvation, we must depart from here. We have abandoned all worldly things. Even if your kindness compels us to remain, we must nevertheless leave. We are deeply moved by your goodwill and recognize the affection you show toward us, yet we cannot forget the words of the Savior: 'For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' We seek only spiritual perfection. The only thing within our power is to remember your country day and night in our prayers."

Recognizing the determination of the travelers, the princes offered them gifts, including horses, gold, silver, and fine garments. However, the monks refused, replying: "We need nothing. We do not know what to do with such wealth, nor can we burden ourselves with it." Nevertheless, the princes insisted, emphasizing the uncertainty of the road ahead, the great distances involved, and the inevitable expenses of travel. They further explained: "If these gifts prove unnecessary for you, distribute them among monasteries, monks, and bishops, so that through them we may establish relations with the Fathers of the West" (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

The monks, realizing that the gifts had been offered sincerely and wholeheartedly, finally accepted them and continued their journey. Soon they arrived at the capital of Tangut, whose inhabitants were distinguished by their sincere faith. From there they traveled to Hotan, located approximately two months away from Tangut. Due to difficult conditions, the travelers were unable to continue their journey for another six months, after which they finally reached Kashgar, a city devastated by enemy attacks and warfare. Leaving Kashgar behind, they arrived at the camp of Kaidu Khan near the Talas River, where they obtained an official document granting them freedom of movement throughout the territory.

After enduring enormous hardships and privations, they eventually reached Khorasan. Having lost all their possessions during the journey, they entered Azerbaijan with the intention of visiting the Monastery of Saint Mar Sehion near the mountains of Tus and then proceeding to Baghdad in order to meet Catholicos Mar Denha. However, on the way they unexpectedly encountered the Catholicos in Maragha. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt before him and burst into tears. When asked where they had come from and for what purpose, they replied:

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The Catholicos welcomed them warmly and encouraged their determination, assuring them that despite all the hardships and sufferings they had endured in this world, they would receive eternal blessings and everlasting peace in the hereafter. A few days later, the monks requested permission to travel to Baghdad in order to venerate the relics of Mar Mari, the preacher of the Gospel in the East. The Catholicos granted permission, provided them with letters of passage, and appointed a guide to accompany them.

They arrived safely in Baghdad and from there traveled to the great and renowned Church of Koka in Seleucia. Subsequently, they visited the monastery of Mar Mari, revered as the apostle of the Syrians, and paid homage to his relics. Thereafter they visited the tomb of Mar Ezekiel, proceeded to Erbil, then to Mosul, and eventually reached Mardin, where they venerated the relics of Mar Eugene. Later they traveled to the Monastery of Saint Michael of Tar'il near Erbil, where they obtained a monastic cell and decided to remain, despite not having fulfilled their original intention of reaching Jerusalem (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

When Catholicos Mar Denha learned of their decision, he summoned them and declared: "We have learned that you have obtained a place in the monastery in order to remain there. We do not approve of this, because there you will gain only personal tranquility and peace. Yet by remaining with us, you will serve the common good and contribute to the welfare of all. Stay with us and assist us in our relations with the khan." Naturally, the monks obeyed his request.

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The Catholicos further declared: "Until now no one has been called Mar Mark, and I wish to bestow this name upon Rabban Mark. Moreover, I intend to write several names and place them upon the throne, and whichever name is drawn by lot shall become his name." In this manner the name "Yahballaha," meaning "God has given," was chosen. Thus, in 1280, at the age of thirty-five, Mar Mark received from Catholicos Mar Denha both the name Yahballaha and the decree appointing him archbishop. His archbishopric encompassed the cities of northern and southern China, while Rabban Sauma was appointed chief visitor of the Church (Borbone, 2021).

A few days later, news arrived that two frontier khans on opposite sides of the Amu Darya River had entered into conflict and warfare, thereby blocking the road they intended to take. Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma consequently returned once more to the Monastery of Saint Michael near Erbil, where they remained for approximately two years.

During this period, Mar Yahballaha experienced a remarkable dream. He saw himself entering a vast church filled with images of saints and dominated by a great cross. Extending his right hand to receive a blessing, he noticed that the cross continually withdrew the farther he reached toward it. Eventually, however, the cross ascended to the summit of the sanctuary, and Yahballaha succeeded in kissing it. Upon leaving the church, he

saw a tall tree laden with every kind of fruit. He began eating from its fruit and then distributed it among the large crowds gathered around him.

When he awoke, he recounted the dream to Rabban Sauma, who interpreted it symbolically: "Just as you stretched out your hand toward the cross until you finally reached it, so too shall you ascend to the supreme dignity of the patriarchate. And just as you ate from the fruit of the tree and distributed it to the people, so shall you partake of heavenly gifts and bring joy to many through them."

The following night Yahballaha experienced another dream. He saw himself seated upon a lofty throne surrounded by countless people. Whenever he spoke, his tongue extended outward from his mouth and divided into three branches, each bearing something resembling a small flame. The assembled crowds marveled and praised God. Upon awakening, he once again narrated the vision to Rabban Sauma.

"This is not merely a dream," Rabban Sauma responded, "but a revelation. Just as tongues of fire descended upon the Apostles through the Holy Spirit, so too shall the Holy Spirit descend upon you and place the patriarchal throne into your hands so that you may serve Him." At that very time, although Catholicos Mar Denha was still alive, he had already fallen gravely ill in Baghdad (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

The monks, realizing that the gifts had been offered sincerely and wholeheartedly, finally accepted them and continued their journey. Soon they arrived at the capital of Tangut, whose inhabitants were distinguished by their sincere faith. From there they traveled to Hotan, located approximately two months away from Tangut. Due to difficult conditions, the travelers were unable to continue their journey for another six months, after which they finally reached Kashgar, a city devastated by enemy attacks and warfare. Leaving Kashgar behind, they arrived at the camp of Kaidu Khan near the Talas River, where they obtained an official document granting them freedom of movement throughout the territory.

After enduring enormous hardships and privations, they eventually reached Khorasan. Having lost all their possessions during the journey, they entered Azerbaijan with the intention of visiting the Monastery of Saint Mar Sehion near the mountains of Tus and then proceeding to Baghdad in order to meet Catholicos Mar Denha. However, on the way they unexpectedly encountered the Catholicos in Maragha. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt before him and burst into tears. When asked where they had come from and for what purpose, they replied:

"We come from the lands of the East, from Khanbaliq, the city of the ruler of rulers, Kublai Khan. We have come to receive your blessing, as well as the blessings of the fathers, monks, and saints of this land. If we are able, and if God grants us strength, we shall proceed to Jerusalem."

The Catholicos welcomed them warmly and encouraged their determination, assuring them that despite all the hardships and sufferings they had endured in this world, they would receive eternal blessings and everlasting peace in the hereafter. A few days later, the monks requested permission to travel to Baghdad in order to venerate the relics of Mar Mari, the preacher of the Gospel in the East. The Catholicos granted permission, provided them with letters of passage, and appointed a guide to accompany them.

They arrived safely in Baghdad and from there traveled to the great and renowned Church of Koka in Seleucia. Subsequently, they visited the monastery of Mar Mari, revered as the apostle of the Syrians, and paid homage to his relics. Thereafter they visited the tomb of Mar Ezekiel, proceeded to Erbil, then to Mosul, and eventually reached Mardin, where they venerated the relics of Mar Eugene. Later they traveled to the Monastery of Saint Michael of Tar'il near Erbil, where they obtained a monastic cell and decided to remain, despite not having fulfilled their original intention of reaching Jerusalem (Borbone, 2021; Budge, 2001).

When Catholicos Mar Denha learned of their decision, he summoned them and declared: "We have learned that you have obtained a place in the monastery in order to remain there. We do not approve of this, because there you will gain only personal tranquility and peace. Yet by remaining with us, you will serve the common good and contribute to the welfare of all. Stay with us and assist us in our relations with the khan." Naturally, the monks obeyed his request.

One day, Mar Denha instructed them: "Go to Abaqa Khan and request permission on our behalf." They answered: "So be it, but we ask that you appoint someone to carry the authorization given by our father, because from there we intend to continue toward Jerusalem." The Catholicos agreed, blessed them, and sent them on their way.

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Table 1. Diplomatic, Religious, and Historical Dimensions of Rabban Sauma's Mission in Medieval Eurasia

Dimension	Historical Context	Key Actors	Main Objectives	Historical Significance	Scholarly Interpretation
Religious Diplomacy	The thirteenth century witnessed unprecedented interaction between	Rabban Sauma, Mar Yahballaha III, Pope Nicholas IV, Abaqa Khan,	To establish a military and diplomatic alliance between the Ilkhanids and Christian Europe	Rabban Sauma became one of the earliest known East Asian Christian diplomats to	Scholars such as Rossabi (1992) and Jackson (2005) interpret Rabban Sauma's mission as a

	Christian Europe and the Mongol East following the expansion of the Mongol Empire. The Ilkhanids sought diplomatic alliances with European powers against the Mamluk Sultanate.	Arghun Khan, Philip IV of France, Edward I of England	against the Mamluks; to strengthen relations between the Church of the East and the Papacy	travel to Europe, creating an important precedent for intercultural diplomacy between Asia and Europe	strategic diplomatic initiative in which religion functioned as a bridge for political cooperation
Interreligious Dialogue	The Mongol Empire provided a unique environment in which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional Mongol beliefs coexisted	Nestorian clergy, Catholic cardinals, Mongol rulers, Muslim scholars	To demonstrate theological compatibility between Eastern and Western Christianity while preserving Nestorian ecclesiastical identity	The Eucharistic liturgy performed by Rabban Sauma in Rome symbolized one of the earliest recorded examples of formal dialogue between the Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church	Borbone (2021) emphasizes that Rabban Sauma intentionally avoided doctrinal disputes and instead highlighted common Christian values
Mongol Religious Policy	Ilkhanid rulers generally practiced religious tolerance before the official Islamization of the state under Ghazan Khan	Hulagu Khan, Abaqa Khan, Ahmad Tekuder, Ghazan Khan, Öljaitü	To maintain political stability within a multiethnic and multireligious empire	The coexistence of diverse faiths facilitated diplomatic mobility, missionary activities, and scholarly exchanges across Eurasia	Allsen (2001) and Foltz (2010) argue that Mongol tolerance policies stimulated unprecedented cultural and religious interaction
Christian Networks in Asia	The Church of the East had already established ecclesiastical structures across Central Asia and China before the Mongol conquests	Ongut Turks, Syriac clergy, Nestorian missionaries	To preserve and expand Christian influence among Turkic and Mongol populations	Demonstrates the deep historical roots of Christianity in Inner Asia and China prior to European colonial expansion	Budge (2001) and Ригулевская (1958/2020) identify the Onguts as one of the most important Christian Turkic communities of

					medieval Eurasia
Cultural Exchange	Rabban Sauma's journey connected East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe through diplomatic and religious networks	Rabban Sauma, European monarchs, Mongol elites	To establish intellectual, religious, and political communication between civilizations	The mission contributed to medieval Eurasian knowledge exchange and reshaped European perceptions of Asia	Kalra (2023) defines Rabban Sauma's journey as an early example of science and intercultural diplomacy
Historical Memory and Historiography	The narrative of Rabban Sauma survived primarily through Syriac manuscripts and later scholarly editions	Paul Bedjan, E. A. Wallis Budge, Pier Giorgio Borbone	Preservation and interpretation of Syriac historical traditions	The manuscript remains one of the most valuable primary sources for the study of Mongol-era Christianity	Modern scholarship increasingly recognizes the text as an essential source for medieval Eurasian history and comparative religious studies

A few days later, Mar Yahballaha decided to travel to Baghdad in order to meet the Catholicos and receive from him the mantle and pastoral staff that he was expected to carry within his ecclesiastical province. As he approached Baghdad, however, he encountered an acquaintance who informed him of the Catholicos's death.

"Perhaps, if you hurry," the man told him, "you may still arrive in time for the funeral." Deeply grieved, Mar Yahballaha hastened onward with great urgency. Eventually he reached the doors of the church, entered, and saw a vast crowd gathered within: some were weeping, while others were praying. He rushed toward the coffin, tore his garments, cast aside his clothing in mourning, and wept bitterly. After the funeral rites had been completed and the Catholicos buried, all the bishops returned to the patriarchal residence.

The following day the bishops assembled in order to elect a new patriarch. Among those present were Maran Ammeh, Archbishop of Elam, the bishops of Tangut, various *tarkhans*, and numerous other ecclesiastical dignitaries. Distinguished figures from Baghdad, including nobles, scribes, jurists, and judges, also attended the gathering. After considerable discussion, all agreed to elect Yahballaha as the new Catholicos.

Upon hearing of his election, Yahballaha initially refused the office and presented several reasons for his reluctance. First, he claimed that he lacked sufficient formal education; second, he stated that he did not possess eloquence; and third, he admitted that he did not know the Syriac language adequately, despite its essential importance for the patriarchal office. Nevertheless, despite his objections, he was ultimately compelled to accept the position.

After the election, Yahballaha returned to the Monastery of Mar Michael Tapel in order to meet Rabban Sauma. The monks had already learned of the decision and rejoiced greatly at Yahballaha's appointment. Rabban Sauma declared: "Your election is the will of God. You must submit yourself to it. Now let us go to Abaqa Khan; if he gives his approval, your appointment shall be confirmed."

With the consent of the bishops and monks, they departed together for Azerbaijan, where the Mongol khans traditionally spent the summer in the region of Aladağ. When they were brought before Abaqa Khan, they proclaimed: "May the Khan live forever! The Catholicos has died, and all Christians have agreed to appoint in

his place this bishop, who came from the lands of the East and journeyed toward Jerusalem. What then does the Khan command?"

The Khan expressed his approval and, taking Yahballaha by the hand, declared: "Be courageous and govern the Church firmly. May God be with you and assist you." He then removed the cloak from his own shoulders and presented it to Yahballaha together with a ceremonial table or small throne. In addition, he bestowed upon him a parasol known in Mongolian as a *sukor*, an object customarily carried above the heads of khans and members of the royal family both as protection from the sun and rain and as a symbol of honor and authority.

Furthermore, the Khan ordered that Yahballaha receive official documents bearing the imperial seal together with a *paiza*—a decree symbolizing and proclaiming his authority over the Church. Abaqa Khan also instructed that the patriarchal seal previously belonging to the former Catholicos be transferred to Yahballaha and ordered that all expenses connected with the enthronement ceremony be paid from the royal treasury. Following these events, the entire delegation returned to Baghdad.

Yahballaha was formally consecrated Catholicos of the Church of the East by Maran Ammeh, Archbishop of Elam. The consecration ceremony took place during the month of Second Teshri in the year 1593 according to the Seleucid (Greek) calendar, on the first Sunday after the "Consecration of the Church." Among the archbishops participating in the ceremony were Mar Ish-Zekha, Archbishop of Erbil; Mar Gabriel, Archbishop of Mosul and Nineveh; Mar Eliya, Archbishop of Daquqa and Beth Garmai; Mar Abraham, Archbishop of Tripoli and Jerusalem; Mar Jacob, Archbishop of Samarkand; and Mar Coin, Archbishop of Azerbaijan.

During the winter of that same year, Abaqa Khan arrived in Baghdad, and Mar Yahballaha visited him on the Saturday preceding the Great Lent. The Khan treated him with exceptional kindness, listened attentively to the concerns of the Christian communities, and rewarded him generously. He also established an annual subsidy of 30,000 dinars, or approximately 18,000 silver coins, for the benefit of monasteries, churches, clergy, and monks. However, this financial support was abolished after Abaqa Khan's death.

"When Abaqa died," the manuscript recounts, "his brother Ahmad, the son of Hulagu Khan, succeeded him. Ahmad was a harsh man who showed particular favor toward Muslims and harbored hatred toward Christians." This statement refers to Ahmad Tekuder, who ruled between 1282 and 1284 and became the first Ilkhanid ruler to convert officially to Islam. His mother was of Muslim Turkic origin, and his reign marked a significant turning point in the religious orientation of the Ilkhanid state.

One day, the head of the Divan, Shams al-Din, together with Shaykh Abd al-Rahman, appeared before the Khan accompanied by two bishops. These bishops accused Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma of supporting Arghun Khan, the son of Abaqa Khan, and alleged that they had acted against Ahmad Tekuder before the Great Khan Kublai Khan. They further claimed that Emir Ashmut had collaborated with them. In reality, the bishops' motivation stemmed from their desire to depose Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma and replace them with themselves. One of the accusers was Isho Sabran, Archbishop of Tangut, while the other was Simeon, Bishop of Arni.

Unaware of the falsity of these accusations, Ahmad Tekuder ordered Catholicos Mar Yahballaha III, Rabban Sauma, and Emir Ashmut to appear before the supreme court. By order of the Khan, the Catholicos's *paiza* was confiscated. When brought before the tribunal, the accused did not even know the nature of the charges against them and asked in astonishment: "What have we done?" They were informed that they had denounced Ahmad Khan before Kublai Khan and had accused him of abandoning the traditions of his ancestors in order to become a Muslim. Yahballaha firmly denied all accusations.

The accusers, including the two bishops and several scribes from the patriarchal court, were then questioned. After listening to their testimony, Yahballaha addressed the judges: "Why do you trouble yourselves so greatly? Would it not be easier simply to summon the envoy to whom I entrusted my letters and have the letters read before the Khan? If the accusations prove true, I am ready to die. But if they are false, then justice must be done on my behalf." The judges approved this proposal and informed the Khan, who immediately ordered messengers to be dispatched.

Yahballaha's envoy was intercepted upon entering Khorasan, and all the letters he carried were confiscated and brought before the court. When the letters were opened, no evidence of treason or conspiracy was found. Despite

this, the slanderers remained unpunished. Although the Catholicos escaped execution, he nevertheless spent forty days imprisoned both before and during the proceedings. After the investigation concluded, the Khan ordered the return of Yahballaha's permits and *paiza* and restored him to freedom. Thereafter Yahballaha departed for Urmia, where, while staying in the Church of Mary, he experienced a dream foretelling that he would never again see the Khan.

Table 2. Ilkhanid Rulers and Their Religious Policies toward Christianity and Islam

Ilkhanid Ruler	Reign	Religious Orientation	Policy toward Christianity	Policy toward Islam	Historical Impact on the Church of the East
Hulagu Khan	1258–1265	Religious pluralism with strong Buddhist and Christian influences	Maintained close relations with Nestorian Christians; Christian women in the royal court exercised influence	Islam was tolerated but not dominant	The Church of the East experienced institutional security and political protection during Hulagu's reign
Abaqa Khan	1265–1282	Religious tolerance	Supported Christian communities and strengthened diplomatic contacts with Europe	Islam remained secondary within state policy	Enabled the expansion of Christian diplomatic initiatives and encouraged communication with the Papacy
Ahmad Tekuder	1282–1284	First Ilkhanid ruler to convert to Islam	Relations with Christians became more cautious and politically restrained	Promoted Islam more openly within the court	His conversion marked the beginning of significant religious transformation within the Ilkhanid state
Arghun Khan	1284–1291	Sympathetic to Christianity and Buddhism	Supported Rabban Sauma's diplomatic mission to Europe	Islam remained influential but not official	Arghun's reign represented the peak of Ilkhanid-European diplomatic cooperation
Gaykhatu	1291–1295	Religious pragmatism	Continued general tolerance toward Christian institutions	Islam coexisted with other religious traditions	Maintained relative stability for Nestorian communities
Baydu	1295	Ambiguous religious identity	Some sources portray him as favorable toward Christians	Islamic influence increased during his short reign	His reign reflects the transitional religious tensions of the late thirteenth century
Mahmud Ghazan	1295–1304	Officially converted to Islam	Christian privileges declined, although persecution was not systematic	Declared Islam the official religion of the state	Marked the decisive Islamization of the Ilkhanid political structure
Öljaitü	1304–1318	Initially Buddhist and Christian-influenced, later Muslim	Christianity gradually lost political influence	Strengthened Islamic institutions and Shi'a influences	The Nestorian Church increasingly lost its privileged status

Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan	1318–1336	Islamic state tradition	Christian institutions survived but under reduced political influence	Islam became fully institutionalized within governance	The decline of Ilkhanid central authority weakened the Church of the East
Later Ilkhanid rulers	1336–1357	Politically fragmented period	Christian communities survived regionally but without imperial support	Islamic political structures dominated	The fragmentation of the Ilkhanid state accelerated the decline of organized Nestorian influe

From there, Mar Yahballaha continued his journey and eventually arrived in Maragha. At that very moment, Ahmad Tekuder marched toward Khorasan at the head of his army with the intention of capturing his rival, Arghun Khan, the son of Abaqa Khan. According to the narrative, the previously mentioned Shams al-Din and Abd al-Rahman had secretly agreed with Ahmad Khan that, once Arghun had been captured, the remaining members of his family would be executed, the Catholicos eliminated, and Ahmad himself would assume supreme authority in Baghdad. Yet their plans were never destined to succeed. As the author emphasizes, God overturns human schemes and fulfills only His own divine will: He raises rulers up or destroys them, while His kingdom alone remains eternal.

Indeed, Ahmad Khan's army soon revolted, and the majority of his forces surrendered to Arghun Khan. Ahmad Tekuder himself was captured and executed in 1284. Shortly before learning of these events, Mar Yahballaha experienced another symbolic dream. He saw a handsome young man approaching him while carrying a vessel covered with linen cloth. The young man told him: "Rise and eat what is inside the vessel." Yahballaha uncovered the container and saw a roasted human head. He consumed it entirely, leaving only the jaws untouched. The young man then asked him: "Do you know what you have eaten?" Yahballaha answered that he did not. The youth replied: "It was the head of Ahmad Khan." Terrified, the Catholicos awoke immediately, and only a few days later news arrived announcing the death of Ahmad Khan and the enthronement of Arghun Khan.

Mar Yahballaha at once traveled together with bishops and monks in order to congratulate the new ruler and to offer tribute in accordance with the apostolic commandment: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no authority except from God." Upon meeting the new khan, the Catholicos congratulated him and prayed for the continuation of his reign. Arghun Khan treated him with great favor and, after learning of the persecution Yahballaha had suffered during the reign of Ahmad Tekuder, ordered that the slanderers be executed.

However, Yahballaha intervened and addressed the ruler with remarkable moderation and Christian humility: "May the Khan live forever! We Christians possess our own laws, and whoever violates them is considered disobedient to the commandments. Yet our law does not demand death; it requires condemnation. Nevertheless, there are ways to punish criminals. According to our law, these bishops should not be executed, but instead removed from office." Arghun Khan accepted this request, and the Catholicos returned peacefully to his residence.

When the bishops later gathered before the Catholicos to congratulate him on the Khan's favor, Yahballaha convened a formal council concerning the two bishops who had slandered him. The accused confessed their crimes and were excommunicated from the Church. Thereafter the authority and prestige of Mar Yahballaha steadily increased, and the members of the Ilkhanid royal household showed him growing respect and admiration.

While residing in Maragha, Yahballaha undertook the reconstruction of the Church dedicated to Mar Shalita at enormous expense and ordered the construction of a residence nearby for himself. The Catholicos maintained especially close relations with Arghun Khan, who displayed considerable sympathy toward Christians and even contemplated campaigns into Syria and Palestine in order to reclaim those regions from Muslim control.

Arghun Khan eventually decided to establish direct diplomatic contact with the Christian rulers of the West. He therefore requested that the Catholicos identify a suitable individual capable of undertaking such a mission. Yahballaha immediately proposed Rabban Sauma, particularly because of his ability to communicate in several languages. Rabban Sauma willingly accepted the assignment. Arghun Khan promptly prepared letters addressed to the Greek and Frankish rulers, entrusted Rabban Sauma with official decrees, diplomatic correspondence, and valuable gifts for each monarch, and personally bestowed upon him 2,000 mithqals of gold, thirty excellent horses, and an imperial *paiza*.

Before his departure, Rabban Sauma visited the Catholicos to bid farewell. The moment of separation was deeply emotional, and after many tears the two men parted. Yahballaha entrusted him with letters and gifts intended for the Pope. Rabban Sauma then embarked upon the diplomatic mission that would take him to Byzantine Empire, Rome, France, and England, before eventually returning once again to Rome and finally back to the court of Arghun Khan.

From a geopolitical perspective, it is important to note that during the period of Rabban Sauma's mission to Europe, the Venetians and Genoese were engaged in intense rivalry and conflict. The marriage alliance between the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqa Khan and a Byzantine princess had effectively created a Byzantine-Genoese—and indirectly an Ilkhanid—political alliance. It was precisely for this reason that Rabban Sauma visited Genoa while traveling toward Paris.

The relations between the rulers of the Great Mongol Empire and the Popes of Rome are likewise of exceptional historical interest. Earlier, the Great Khan Güyük Khan had sent a reply letter to Pope Pope Innocent IV through the envoy Giovanni da Pian del Carpine. Later, Rabban Sauma carried the letter of Arghun Khan to the Pope of Rome. These developments clearly demonstrate that the fifth Mongol ulus—the Ilkhanid State—was already pursuing an increasingly independent foreign policy distinct from the authority of the Great Khan (Verddiyev, 2026).

The author of the manuscript also emphasizes the political importance of maintaining favorable relations with Ilkhanid rulers and military emirs, an aspect that should not be underestimated in evaluating the survival and influence of the Church of the East during this period. Furthermore, Borbone notes that the surviving inscriptions left by the Ongut Turkic Christians consist primarily of simple Turkic texts written in the Syriac alphabet. Similarly, the traveler William of Rubruck complained that the Nestorian Christians he encountered were unable to speak Syriac fluently, despite belonging to the Syriac Christian tradition (Borbone, 2021; Rubruck, cited in Jackson, 2005).

This unfortunate ruler, Baydu, had seized power solely out of fear for his own life. He remained on the throne only from April until September 1295. During his brief five-month reign, unrest, murders, conspiracies, and intrigues did not diminish; on the contrary, the country descended completely into chaos, and the Arabs rebelled in order to avenge all their previous defeats. Finally, on a Sunday in September 1295, news arrived of Baydu Khan's flight and death, and with this began a period of severe trials for the Church.

An emir named Nawruz launched a rebellion and sent letters throughout the empire by mounted couriers. He ordered the destruction of all churches, the demolition of altars, the cessation everywhere of worship, hymns, and the ringing of bells, and commanded the killing of all spiritual leaders of both the Christian and Jewish religions together with the nobles associated with them. On that very night, the Catholicos was arrested at his residence in Maragha, although no one became aware of it until morning.

Beginning on Monday morning, the attackers destroyed and completely plundered the entire patriarchal residence: as the narrative emphasizes, they did not leave even a single nail in the wall. On the following night, Tuesday, the Catholicos was subjected to torture. Some of the bishops who were with him were chained naked, others fled, while still others, overcome with terror, threw themselves from the roofs of their homes. The Catholicos himself was suspended upside down, and a cloth filled with ashes was tied around his mouth. One of the torturers repeatedly struck him in the chest and said: "Renounce your faith, become a Muslim, and you shall be saved!" Yahballaha wept but did not utter a single word in reply.

They then beat his thighs and back with sticks and dragged him onto the balcony of the house, demanding: "Give us gold and we will spare your life. Show us your treasures and we shall save you!" The Catholicos, physically weak and afraid of death, cried out from the balcony: "Where are our disciples? Have the people we

raised abandoned us? What benefit are treasures to us? Go and rescue your father from these cruel merchants! Save your teacher!"

All the people—men, women, youths, and children—heard these bitter lamentations in the darkness of the night. Yet no one dared approach out of fear; instead, everyone began to weep and pray. They cried out: "Mountains, fall upon us! Hills, cover us!" The prophecy of the Syrian prophet, according to the author, was fulfilled: "Because we despised our path and mocked it, God allowed us to drink from this bitter cup. Wicked men destroyed our churches because we did not pray there worthily; they desecrated the altars because we did not serve them properly."

Finally, one of the disciples borrowed 15,000 dinars in the hope of securing the Catholicos's release and delivered the money to the persecutors. After receiving the sum, they confiscated all the sacred vessels and valuables in the patriarchal residence and departed from the monastery on Tuesday afternoon. Soon afterward, another uprising broke out. The rebels attacked the Monastery of Saint Mar Shalita, devastated it completely, and seized everything inside, even tearing down the wall coverings. The author states that the noise, fury, and devastation of these events shook the entire country. He solemnly invokes God as witness that no account could fully describe the horrors that had taken place.

The historian Rashid al-Din Hamadani records in *Jami al-Tawarikh* that Emir Nawruz, together with his sons and brothers, was eventually executed between March 1 and 3, 1297 (Rashid al-Din, 2011, pp. 238–262).

In 2001, E. A. Wallis Budge translated into English the manuscript entitled *The History of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha*. The work narrates the lives of the Nestorian Christian monks Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha, their journeys from China to Europe, the period of the Great Mongol Empire, and the history of the Church of the East. From a scholarly perspective, the references concerning Azerbaijan contained in the manuscript are of particular importance.

The travelers used Azerbaijan as a transit region and described Maragha as a refuge for Christians where churches and monasteries were constructed. The text also notes that Mar Yahballaha himself was buried there. Nevertheless, the manuscript presents Azerbaijan as the northwestern frontier province of Persia. While traveling from Khorasan to Baghdad, the travelers passed through Azerbaijan and met Catholicos Mar Denha in Maragha. After Mar Yahballaha was elected patriarch, he once again returned to Azerbaijan in order to meet Abaqa Khan, since Azerbaijan constituted the political center of the Ilkhanid State.

The manuscript further records that on September 13, 1301, a great monastic complex called "Malka dhe Umre" ("King of Monasteries") was constructed in Maragha. Mar Yahballaha died in 1317 and was buried in that monastery. The narrative mentions several important geographical locations, including Maragha, Urmia, Tabriz, Mugan Plain, and Aladağ. According to the text, the Mugan Plain served as the winter residence of all Ilkhanid rulers, while Aladağ is identified as the place where Mahmud Ghazan died.

Pier Giorgio Borbone correctly emphasizes that understanding a complex subject such as the Great Mongol Empire requires rigorous critical source analysis. *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* enriches historical scholarship by covering the reigns of eight Ilkhanid rulers across a vast geographical area stretching from China to Europe, while simultaneously confirming that many of the cities and place names mentioned in the text continue to exist in Azerbaijan today (Borbone, 2021, p. 8).

Furthermore, the tolerant attitude of the Azerbaijani people toward all religions is clearly reflected throughout the manuscript.

The ancient historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who lived approximately between 330 and 400 CE, wrote in *Res Gestae*: "The historian who deliberately conceals events is more deceitful than the man who invents events that never happened" (*Res Gestae*, XXIX.1). This statement remains highly relevant for the study of medieval Eurasian history and the critical interpretation of historical testimony.

Contemporary Relevance of the Article

Individuals who lived during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—rulers, religious figures, and travelers alike—regardless of their religious affiliation, traversed long and dangerous routes in order to establish

communication with one another. These interactions contributed significantly to the development of interstate economic, political, and diplomatic relations.

The lives and diplomatic activities of historical figures such as Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha continue to retain considerable relevance in the modern era for several important reasons.

1. Interreligious Dialogue and Tolerance

In a contemporary world increasingly marked by tensions and conflicts among religions and civilizations, the example of the Ilkhanid State—a multi-religious political entity in which Islam, Nestorian Christianity, Catholicism, and shamanistic beliefs coexisted simultaneously under a relatively tolerant system of governance—has attracted renewed scholarly interest. One of the most significant aspects of Rabban Sauma's journey lies precisely in its demonstration that diverse religious traditions were capable of coexisting within a framework of political pragmatism. This historical message strongly resonates today with modern international initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue, including those supported by the United Nations and other global institutions.

2. Azerbaijan as a Diplomatic Center

The portrayal of Maragha as both a political and religious center of the Ilkhanid State confirms the historical existence of a highly developed multicultural environment within the broader historical territories associated with Azerbaijan. From the perspective of Azerbaijani statehood, historical identity, and multiethnic heritage, this aspect of the study possesses considerable scholarly and public importance.

3. The Renewed Relevance of the Silk Road

Rabban Sauma's journey from China to Europe vividly reflects the diplomatic and commercial landscape of the Silk Road during the medieval period. In the contemporary era, initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative once again seek to connect Asia and Europe through economic, political, and cultural cooperation. Consequently, this medieval source provides valuable insight into the deep historical roots of transcontinental interaction and Eurasian connectivity.

4. The Scientific Value of the Primary Source for Azerbaijani History

The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma constitutes one of the rare Syriac primary sources directly relevant to the history of Azerbaijan. The text mentions geographical locations such as Maragha, Urmia, Tabriz, Mugan Plain, Aladağ, and Qarachala, all of which continue to exist within the geographical memory of the region today. These references substantially enhance the importance of the manuscript for Azerbaijani national historiography and demonstrate the necessity of introducing this source more fully into the scholarly discourse of Azerbaijan.

5. Reconsidering Global History and Interconnectedness

Modern historiography increasingly emphasizes the necessity of studying history not through narrow national or regional frameworks, but through broader global perspectives. In this context, Rabban Sauma's journey from Asia to Europe represents one of the most remarkable examples of medieval globalization and intercultural interaction. Presenting this topic to the contemporary academic world contributes not only to the strengthening of Azerbaijani historical scholarship, but also to the expansion of intellectual dialogue between Eastern and Western academic traditions.

It should therefore be emphasized that *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* is not merely a study of medieval history, but also an important historical source for understanding interreligious dialogue, intercultural communication, and global diplomacy in the modern era. Because this source remains comparatively understudied, it is hoped that the present article will stimulate new scholarly discussions and open further avenues of research within the fields of medieval Eurasian history and comparative religious studies.

CONCLUSION

The historical narrative of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha III represents one of the most remarkable testimonies to intercultural interaction, religious diplomacy, and political transformation in medieval Eurasia.

Their journeys from China through Central Asia and Azerbaijan to the Middle East and Europe demonstrate that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were not merely an era of military conquest, but also a period characterized by extensive diplomatic communication, intellectual exchange, and religious coexistence across vast geographical spaces.

The study confirms that *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* constitutes an exceptionally valuable Syriac primary source for understanding the religious, political, and diplomatic history of the Great Mongol Empire and, particularly, the Ilkhanid State. The manuscript provides unique information regarding the relations between the Church of the East, the Mongol rulers, and the Christian powers of Europe. At the same time, it offers important evidence concerning the historical role of Azerbaijan as a political, diplomatic, and religious center during the Ilkhanid period. Cities such as Maragha, Tabriz, and Urmia emerge in the text not only as geographical locations, but also as centers of intercultural encounter and religious interaction.

The research further demonstrates that the Ilkhanid rulers pursued a complex and evolving religious policy. Early rulers such as Abaqa Khan and Arghun Khan generally maintained favorable relations with Christian communities and supported diplomatic contacts with Europe, largely because of their geopolitical rivalry with the Mamluks. However, the gradual Islamization of the Ilkhanid elite, beginning with Ahmad Tekuder and reaching its culmination under Mahmud Ghazan, significantly transformed the religious and political structure of the state. Nevertheless, despite periods of persecution and instability, traditions of religious tolerance and coexistence continued to survive within the region.

Rabban Sauma's diplomatic mission to Europe must also be regarded as one of the earliest examples of organized intercontinental diplomacy between East Asia, the Islamic world, and Christian Europe. His meetings with popes, kings, and church leaders reveal the existence of sophisticated diplomatic networks connecting civilizations long before the emergence of modern globalization. In this respect, Rabban Sauma may justifiably be described as a "Uyghur Marco Polo," although, unlike Marco Polo, he traveled from East to West as both a religious envoy and a political diplomat.

From the perspective of modern historiography, the article highlights the necessity of approaching medieval history through a global and interconnected framework rather than through isolated national narratives. The experiences of Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha demonstrate that medieval Eurasia was deeply interconnected through trade routes, religious missions, and diplomatic relations. Their story therefore contributes not only to the study of Mongol history and the Church of the East, but also to broader discussions concerning intercultural dialogue, comparative religion, and global history.

Finally, the manuscript remains highly relevant in the contemporary world. At a time when interreligious tensions and civilizational conflicts continue to shape international relations, the historical example of coexistence and dialogue reflected in the Ilkhanid world offers important lessons regarding tolerance, diplomacy, and cultural interaction. Consequently, *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* should be regarded not only as a medieval chronicle, but also as a significant intellectual and historical source capable of enriching contemporary scholarly discussions on religion, diplomacy, and Eurasian civilization.

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Author Contributions

Seyyub Asadov was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, source analysis, interpretation of historical materials, and manuscript preparation. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are contained within the article and its cited sources. No new datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this research because it involved the analysis of historical texts, archival records, and published scholarly sources without the participation of human subjects or animals.

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