

# The poet-patriarch Abdisho of Gazarta (d.1570) and the Church of the East in schism

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The year 1552 witnessed a schism within one of the ancient Christian churches of Mesopotamia, the so-called ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East. Part of the church rebelled from the existing hierarchy and elected a new patriarch, Yohannan Sulaqa, whom, in an historically unprecedented move, they sent to Rome to be ordained by the pope. Upon his return to Mesopotamia, Sulaqa soon suffered a violent death at the hands of the local authorities, apparently at the instigation of his rival as patriarch. Sulaqa’s successor, Abdisho of Gazarta, wrote three poems about these events, poems which stand as an unparalleled



testimony to the continued vitality of Syriac literature in this period. This paper will examine these poems in depth, arguing that they are more complex and sophisticated pieces of polemic than has yet been appreciated. It will use the poems to explore, inter alia, the relationship of author, text and manuscript, the nature, foundations and limitations of East Syrian religious-political authority, and the ambiguities of identity, belief and belonging among the sixteenth-century Christians of Mesopotamia.

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