Introduction

Presumably, early in the year 344—or perhaps late 343—there was a regional synod somewhere within the Persian Empire. The primary topic of conversation at this synod was, presumably, a certain unnamed ecclesiastical leader who had exploited the power of his office for personal gain and oppressed others in doing so. And, presumably, this synod empowered one of its attendees to write a formal synodal letter, which was dispatched to the leaders of the church in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. This presumed synodal letter survives as one of the Demonstrations attributed to Aphrahat, the Persian Sage—Dem. 14, to be precise. I keep saying “presumably” because none of what I’ve just said is verifiable historical data. It is merely a popular reconstruction of the historical circumstances that produced Dem. 14, even though this work never actually claims to represent a synod or council.

Dem. 14 plays a crucial role in the historiography of 4th-century Persian Christianity. It is significant because it seems to provide near contemporaneous historical verification for the disastrous episcopacy of Papa bar Aggai. Or, depending on who you ask, maybe it provides contemporaneous historical verification for the episcopacy of Papa’s successor, Simeon bar Sabbac. Or, maybe Dem. 14 is really about both of them at the same time. But regardless of whom, exactly, it is about, the dating of Dem. 14 to 344 provides absolute proof that the great persecution of Shapur had not yet begun, despite the fact that other sources appear to date its beginning to 341. Unless, that is, our reckoning of the years of Shapur’s reign are off, in which case either Dem. 14 or the Persian Marty Acts need to be re-dated. Or maybe the oblique language of Dem. 14 actually provides evidence that the persecution had already begun.

So, as we have briefly seen, Dem. 14 becomes the lynchpin in a number of complex historiographic narratives about the fourth century, which is rather intriguing when we come to grips with the fact that Dem. 14, on its own, provides virtually no evidence for…anything really. It is remarkable that there was a synod, about which we presume to know so much, when the only written record that survives of that synod actually tells us so little. And yet, the historicity of this synod has been taken at face value by historians of the fourth century.

As a historical source, Dem. 14 is like a star in the night’s sky—by itself it is not all that illuminating. But when you group it with just the right set of other stars, and squint your eyes just so, a constellation of meaning emerges, and by its light we are guided through the shadowy valley of historical uncertainty. The only question, of course, is which set of sources Dem. 14 should be aligned with. The precise shape of a constellation, of course, depends on which stars you choose to include.

So, in this presentation, I want to provide a brief overview of the competing places that Dem. 14 occupies in the historiography of fourth-century Persian Christianity, and then I will conclude with a few suggestions for the implications of using Dem. 14, or any of the Demonstrations for that matter, as data points for historical arguments. That is, I want to examine the historiographic trends that have been built around this text so that we can assess its value as a historical source. In particular, there are three historiographic narratives that include Dem. 14 as a significant piece of evidence: 1) the “synod” that stands behind the composition of Dem. 14 (that is, the presumption that this letter represents a synodal epistle); 2) the early fourth-century episcopal crisis; and 3) the origins of the “great persecution” of Shapur II. I should add that, although I’m treating these as distinct historiographic trends, they all overlap with each other in the ways that scholars have tried to piece together a coherent historical narrative from disparate sources.
I. Dem. 14 as a Synodal Letter

If there is a single, consistent thread that runs through the historiography of Dem. 14, it is the idea that this document must represent a regional synod that met somewhere in the Persian Empire. That is, Dem. 14 is a formal synodal epistle, for which its author, Aphrahat, served as scribe. This thread appears concurrently with the publication of the Syriac version of the *Demonstrations* and is thereafter woven through nearly all subsequent treatments of the topic. In the preface to his edition of the Syriac text published in 1869, William Wright does not dwell extensively on the historical circumstances of Dem. 14, but he observes the following:

Aphrahat “must have been a bishop, and as such had a seat at the council of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, held A.D. 344, when in consequence probably of his reputation for piety and learning, he was selected to draw up the encyclical letter of the Council…”

In the span of a single sentence, Wright provides the basis for the assumption that Dem. 14 represents the official encyclical of a historical synod, despite the fact that no other evidence for such a synod exists. And this assertion becomes historical fact by virtue of repetition. Nearly every piece of scholarship that deals with Aphrahat for over a century following Wright’s edition claims that Dem. 14 represents a synodal epistle. I could give you the full list of bibliographic citations here of everyone who mentions it, but that would take up the entire time of my presentation. So for the moment please just trust me when I say that the idea that Dem. 14 represents the official documentation of a historic synod that meet in the year 344 is ubiquitous in Aphrahat scholarship.

It is remarkable that this assumption has become so widespread because—as a few scholars have noted—there is no other evidence for any such synod ever having met. In fact, it is only very recently that this idea has been challenged. In an article published in 2014, Alberto Camplani argues that this letter was likely *not* the result of a synod, primarily because the contents of Dem. 14 are so different from any other actual synodal encyclical that has survived from late antiquity. Thus, for Camplani, the genre alone disqualifies Dem. 14 as a synodal epistle, not to mention the fact that there are no historical traces of the synod in other sources.

Moreover, it is all the more noteworthy that this assumption has remained unchallenged for so long because Dem. 14 never actually claims to be a synodal epistle. It never uses the word for “synod” or “council,” and it provides no details about any such meeting. The claim stems from the vague wording of the opening line of Dem. 14: “The idea took hold of all us when we were gathered together to write a letter.” That’s it. That’s the whole basis for the invention of a synod that is otherwise never mentioned or corroborated by any other historical source. So how did this idea become so entrenched? To answer that, we need to consider the second historiographic trend about Dem. 14: the historical circumstances that may have produced it. After all, it’s easy to imagine the existence of a synod when you think you know the reason such a synod would have met.

II. The Ecclesial Leadership Crises of the Early Fourth Century

The complex historiographic web surrounding Dem. 14 often centers on a single question: *whom or what* is it about? That is, if you read Dem. 14, you get the distinct impression that there is a particular problem or person against whom the argument is directed. At some points, the language of Dem. 14 casts a broader net and could be directed against multiple people, but at other times, it seems as though there is a specific individual who is the root of all the problems:

1 Wright, 9.
Among you, our brothers, is found one who has tied on a diadem, but his country is not aware of him. His country does not wish to receive him. He has drawn near to other kings who are distant from him, and has sought chains and fetters from them, and has begun to distribute them to his country and city.²

Given the seeming specificity of these accusations, it is no wonder that historians of early Syriac Christianity have tried to map it onto a specific historical circumstance. There’s just one problem, though: for all the intriguing pieces of evidence that Dem. 14 appears to provide about the context that produces it, it never names a single person. This, of course, has not stopped historians from trying to identify the person in question. And that is the topic of the second historiographic trend.

In contrast with the question of whether Dem. 14 represents a synod, there is a significant divide in the history of scholarship on the subject matter of Dem. 14. The fault line in this debate is whether the person—the one who as we just saw “tied on a diadem” and “has drawn near to other kings”—should be identified as Papa bar Aggai (otherwise known as Papa of Seleucia) or Simeon bar Sabbae. This debate reveals a much larger set of intertwining issues in narrating the history of early Syriac Christianity: 1) the problem of reliable dates, 2) the problem of reliable sources, most of which are written much later than the events they describe, and 3) a general lack of reliable information that can be corroborated by multiple sources.

Allow me to illustrate the problem briefly by asking a question: what do we know about Papa of Seleucia? Well, to start, it depends on which source you consult. The records of the Synod of Dadisho (in 424) tell a particular narrative about Papa and the circumstances of his episcopacy. According to this version of the story, Papa was unjustly removed from his office by a set of rival bishops and replaced by Simeon bar Sabbae. In response to this injustice, Papa sent an appeal to some bishops in the West who responded and vindicated Papa, demanding that he be reinstated. In this scenario, the idea of Papa appealing to some Westerners could sound a lot like Aphrahat’s accusation that “the one who put on a diadem” has “drawn near to other kings who are distant from him.” Or, depending on your perspective, maybe Simeon is the one who has “put on the diadem” but is not recognized by his own country. That’s the tricky thing about using a source like Dem. 14 that doesn’t provide specific details as a historical source: you can actually use it to support both sides of a zero-sum argument.

But this problem gets even more complex when we consider that there are other sources that change our view of Papa’s career. If Papa is the vindicated protagonist of the Synod of Dadisho, then he is the villain in another text: the Martyrdom of Miles. The Miles text presents Papa as a power-hungry, corrupt leader who will stop at nothing to consolidate supreme ecclesial authority in the seat of the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Thus, instead of being “unjustly” unseated by rebellious bishops as the Synod of Dadisho recounts, the Martyrdom of Miles presents the downfall of Papa as a just and right recompense for the corruption of his office. Here, again, it is easy to hear echoes of a power-hungry, corrupt ecclesial leader in Aphrahat’s accusations:

There are at this time men who lead through coercion and pervert justice. They are respecters of persons, who declare innocent the guilty and condemn the innocent. They love riches and hate the poor. They feed themselves and scatter the flock. They love bribes, excommunicate truth, hate admonition, and love impiety. They hate the humble but love those who are haughty, proud, and boastful.³

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² Dem. 14.8
³ Dem. 14.3
In other words, if the *Miles* text is correct in its depiction of Papa, then Aphrahat’s description of this person could sound a lot like Papa.

But even if you can convince yourself that the description in Dem. 14 is a perfect description for Papa, there’s still another problem: Dem. 14 is dated by its own colophon to 344 CE, which is fifteen years after Papa of Seleucia died (at least according to some sources). So, faced with this chronological problem, you could—as Fiey attempted—simply disregard the date in the colophon and claim that it must be about Papa and must have been written while he was still alive. Less convinced that the person in question must still be alive, George Nedungatt tries to have it both ways and argues that the letter does not have to be read in reference to a single person. In this reading, Dem. 14 can be about *both* Papa and Simeon.

The strongest argument for reading Simeon as the object of Aphrahat’s ire in Dem. 14 comes from Marie-Joseph Pierre. Pierre actually agrees with Fiey that the tone of the letter suggests that the person being described is alive at the time of writing but disagrees over the identity of that person. For Pierre, the identification of the corrupt bishop as Simeon solves most of the problems associated with Fiey’s argument, except for one: Dem. 14’s colophon is dated to 344, but Simeon’s death is traditionally dated to the beginning of the great persecution of Shapur II, which is supposed to have taken place 3 years earlier in 341. This brings us to the third historiographic trend: the relationship between Dem. 14 and the origin of Shapur’s persecution.

### III. The Timing of the “Great Persecution” of Shapur II

It is worth noting, of course, that the entire idea of Shapur’s “great persecution” is its own historiographic trend, as Kyle Smith has shown. One significant piece of that historiography is a complex argument about sources, dates, and calendars and the specific year of Simeon’s death. The short version of the problem is this: depending on which texts you consult, the great persecution began as early as 339 or as late as 345. So, you can see why Dem. 14, dated to 344 and thus supposedly written within that window, would play an important role in the debate.

As far as I can tell, it was Ioannes Parisot who first mentions the timing of Dem. 14 and its relationship to the beginning of the persecution, and he doesn’t say much about it. Parisot merely observes that the letter must have been written just before the beginning of Shapur’s persecution. Presumably, because he does not state his reason explicitly, Parisot concludes this because the text of Dem. 14 itself does not reference the persecution explicitly. Just a decade later though, Labourt asserts that when Dem. 14 was written in 344, the persecution had already been under way for several years. In fact, Labourt argues that Dem. 14 itself is proof that the imperial persecution that was already underway had no effect on the ecclesiastical in-fighting among leaders in Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

Kmosko, by contrast, argued that the great persecution could not have started yet, precisely because the situation described in Dem. 14 does not appear to be that of a persecuted church. Kmosko’s argument is concerned with a particularly tricky issue of dating provided by the colophon of Dem. 23 in conjunction with the colophon of Dem. 14 and the dates of Simeon bar Sabbae’s death in the recensions of his martyrdom. Kmosko resolves this problem by arguing that the dates in Simeon’s martyrdom texts are actually incorrect, and his death must have been after Dem. 14 was written.

Chavanis, whose monograph on the *Demonstrations* was published only a year after Kmosko’s discussion of this topic, agrees on this matter. For Chavanis, the fact that Dem. 14 contains no explicit reference to the persecution means it must not have started yet in February of 344. However, Chavanis also points out that Dem. 21 does discuss persecution, and it was written no later than 345, so the great persecution must have begun in late 344/early 345. In effect, for both Kmosko and Chavanis, Dem. 14 is *the reason* to re-consider the date of the beginning of the persecution and thereby disregard information provided by other sources as incorrect.
Oskar Braun, however, rejects Kmosko’s dating of the events and use of Dem. 14 precisely because adopting this new dating system would mean disregarding the dating system employed by nearly all the Persian martyr acts set during Shapur’s reign. More recently, M.J. Higgins champions the view of Kmosko and Chavanis, arguing that Simeon’s death must have taken place in 344 between the composition of Dems. 14 and 21.

In a comprehensive treatment of the question, Marie-Jospeh Pierre agrees with Kmosko and Higgins that the chronology of Shapur’s persecution must be changed in order to account for the persecution having not yet begun when Dem. 14 was written. But Pierre adds a unique twist to this argument. For Pierre, Dem. 14 is actually an integral part of the series of events that precipitated the persecution. Here’s the reconstruction in brief: Pierre begins with the tax that Shapur demanded from Simeon, which is found in Simeon’s martyrdom recensions. According to Pierre, Simeon did indeed attempt to impose this tax upon the Christians of Persia. But his efforts were rebuffed. And who, exactly, rejected Simeon’s request? None other than the supposed synod of 344, for which Aphrahat served as secretary and spokesperson. That’s right: in Pierre’s historical reconstruction, Dem. 14 is the “official” response of a synod of concerned Christians who met in response to Simeon’s request for taxes and collectively decided to say “no” to that request. Subsequently, Simeon was forced to admit to Shapur that he was incapable of collecting the tax, following which Shapur executed Simeon and thereby launched the great persecution. In this narrative, Dem. 14 plays an even more significant role than we have seen in previous treatments; indeed, in some ways, Dem. 14 is, for Pierre, the cause of the persecution.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to show in this presentation is that Dem. 14 stands at the center of a complex web of overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, historiographic narratives about fourth-century Christianity in the Persian Empire. If we think of historical research and writing through a particular metaphor, such as quilt-making, then all historians are engaged in the process of weaving together patchwork sources in order to produce something useful and functional—a narrative that helps us make sense of these sources and how they fit together. In the historiography of fourth-century Persia, we have seen that Dem. 14 is a useful piece of material. Its contours fit conveniently with other pieces, allowing it to be stitched together with various sources in interesting ways. But the functionality of Dem. 14 as a connecting piece is deceptive; for all its seeming transparency about the issues facing the Persian church, it provides very few, if any, historical details. What we find, then, is that despite the convenience of its shape, the precise material of Dem. 14 does not lend itself to the construction of a functional quilt. The threads we use to attach it to other sources simply do not hold it in place.

We know so little for certain about the author or authors that stood behind the creation of the Demonstrations corpus. But the dates included in the colophons of these writings are historiographically significant for other narratives precisely because all of our other sources about this time period are written well after the events they describe. In other words, if we already assume we know the narrative of what happened during the decade in which the Demonstrations were written, then there simply must be a way that we can fit those writings into a reliable historical narrative. But the problem is that the vague language of the Demonstrations, especially Dem. 14, can support multiple plausible narratives, which is really just another way of saying that it does not necessarily support any particular historical narrative. So, of what value is it, really, as a historical source?

The interpretation of Dem. 14 is a challenging and engaging exercise in mirror reading. The contours and contrasts that we can see in that mirror resemble shapes that we think we recognize, but upon closer examination those images remain frustratingly unclear. As such, Dem. 14 becomes a mirror for our own historiographic assumptions, and—for you Harry Potter fans in the room—it functions like the mirror of Erised: it shows you the narrative that you most deeply desire to be true.