THE SECRET LIFE OF ELIAS OF BABYLON AND THE USES OF GLOBAL MICROHISTORY

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Anyone who asks for this volume, to read, collate, or copy, transcribing it, and who appropriates it to himself or herself, or cuts anything out of it, should realize that if he will have to give an answer before God’s awesome tribunal as if he had robbed a sanctuary. Let such a person be held anathema and receive no forgiveness until the book is returned. So be it, Aman! And anyone, who removes these anathemas, digitally or otherwise, shall himself receive them in double.
Here are the bare facts of a life lived in the seventeenth century. In 1668 a man named Elias left the Ottoman city of Baghdad for good. His reasons for leaving are a mystery, and it is unclear whether he ever intended to return home to his family. What is certain is that, by the time of his death, Elias had travelled across Europe and as far away as the Spanish colonies of Latin America—a part of the world, he would write years later, that even the great St Augustine had believed to be uninhabited. As he travelled the world over, Elias left traces of himself scattered across archives and chanceries in the Middle East, Europe and South America. And as he walked across empires, Ottoman, European and Atlantic, his name was noted in bureaucratic documents in an unpredictable assortment of languages. In Italy those who met him described him as Elias di San Giovanni, a garbled reference to the Arabic ʿIyās ibn Hanna, or Elias, son of John, a name that becomes rather ordinary when it morphs into the Spanish Elias de San Juan. More often than not, the people he encountered would refer to him simply as Elias de Babilonia—or Elias of Babylon.

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1 On the uses of identity documents, see Valentin Groebner, Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe, trans. Mark Kyburz and John Peck (New York, 2007). For the use of the name Elias de Babilonia, see ‘Catálogo de pasajeros a Indias’, xiii, 825: Archivo General de Indias, Seville (hereafter AGI); AGI, Indiferente General, 430, vol. 41, fos. 361v–362v; and his own signature in AGI, Casa de Contratación, 5440, n. 2, r. 135. In the register of the notary Francisco Alonso Delgado for the year 1697, Elias has signed his name ‘Elias de San Juan, canonigo de Babilonia’: Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cádiz.
It was under this name that a priest from Mosul made his way across Europe and all the way to the Spanish Empire of the Atlantic world. Elias belonged to the Church of the East, which had its roots in the early Christian communities established in Persia beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire. It was this same Church that had played an important role in the spread of Christianity, having established its own missionaries in China by the seventh century. In the seventeenth century Europeans referred to Elias's people as 'Nestorian' or 'Chaldean', a reflection of European ideas about the ancient pedigree of those Christians who lived around the Tigris and the Euphrates near the site of the famed city of Babylon. When it came to his appearance, at any rate, Elias played up these origins in the ancient world of the East. When he was spotted in Mexico City in 1682, for example, a Spanish chronicler wrote in his diary that he was dressed like a 'Turk' in a long black cassock and the white collar of a priest. Elias himself wrote of the magnificent beard he kept as he travelled across the world. In this way he cut a striking figure wherever he went, leaving references to a 'priest from Babylon' in the diaries and papers of the people he encountered, all of them witnesses to a life spent constantly in motion. During a journey that lasted some eighteen years, he lived the life of a rolling stone in such places as Rome, Naples, Paris, Lisbon, Madrid, Lima and Mexico City before he returned from the New World to Spain, where he likely spent the last years of his life.

His was a life lived across empires, across languages and across confessional boundaries, perhaps the reason why Elias was all but

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Archivos Notariales, Distrito de El Puerto de Santa María, sig. 385. References to 'Elias de San Juan' can also be found in the report by Archbishop Melchor de Llinán y Cisneros in Los viajes españoles en América durante el gobierno de la Casa de Austria, ed. Lewis Hanke, 7 vols. (Madrid, 1978-80), v, 205. In the Archives of the Propaganda Fide, Rome, he is invariably referred to as 'Elias di San Giovanni'. I have been unable to locate any examples of his signature in Arabic.

See Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, The Church of the East: A Concise History (London, 2003). While both terms would have been used by contemporaries, I shall use 'Chaldean' throughout this article if only to avoid the problems inherent in using the term 'Nestorian'. See, in particular, S. P. Brock, 'The "Nestorian" Church: A Lamentable Misnomer', Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, lxxviii (1996). For contemporary ideas about the location of Babylon, see The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bonbo, ed. Anthony Welch, trans. Clara Bargellini (Berkeley, 2007), 118-20.

forgotten until his writings came to the attention of Arab scholars in the first years of the twentieth century. It was in Lima in 1680 that he had started writing an account of his travels to the New World. The original manuscript in his own hand has never been found, but in 1905 the Jesuit scholar Antoine Rabbath stumbled across a copy of the manuscript in the library of the Syrian Catholic archbishopric in Aleppo. The discovery sparked a flurry of interest among reading circles in the Middle East, and they took advantage of the burgeoning Arabic press to communicate and exchange their findings with each other across the region. On the heels of Rabbath’s discovery, the Egyptian thinker Salāma Mūsā, at the time studying law in London, wrote to the Cairo-based journal *al-Muqtaṭaf* in 1909 to report that he had found a second copy of Elias’s manuscript in the India Office Library. Mūsā included a copy of its description from the library’s catalogue, and he begged historians in Iraq to search for more traces of the priest. For their part, Iraqi scholars pored over the details of the entry that Mūsā had included in his letter to *al-Muqtaṭaf*. They mined local libraries and private collections held by notable families, and they managed to uncover a few more copies of Elias’s writings. No stone was left unturned. Colophons were compared, the identity of unknown scribes speculated upon, and even the elderly were interrogated for memories they might have of stories their grandparents had told them about a man who had left Baghdad to wander the world. In 1931 the local historian Yaʿqūb Sarkīs even turned up a few scraps of biographical information about the man. Yet what these Iraqi scholars could not have known was that decades earlier, garbled stories about Elias had already left Iraq through the migration of a few local men to Britain in the nineteenth century. The stories these Christian migrants carried with them found their way into the English language, where they lie hidden today in the diaries, letters and reports of British missionaries, imperial officials and even Oxford dons. As late as 1945, so little progress had been made that the Princeton historian Philip Hitti could still ask in the pages of a journal in Beirut, ‘Who is the priest Elias?’

Rabbath published the first half of the Aleppo manuscript as ‘Rūḥlāt awwal sharqī ilā Amfrīkā’ [The Journey of the First Oriental to America], *al-Maḥrīq*, viii (1905), 821–34, 875–86, 974–83, 1022–33, 1118–29. Salāma Mūsā’s contribution is in ‘Siyāḥat al-khūri ʾIlyās al-Mawṣīl’ [The Voyage of the Priest ʾIlyās al-Mawṣīl], *al-Muqtaṭaf*, xxxv (1909), 860–2, and see 1112 for his reference to Otto Loth, *A
If Elias's identity kept people guessing in the early twentieth century, it is the stories he told in his writings that have attracted the attention of a second generation of scholars in recent decades. These stories were preserved in a single work, which exists today in at least two known manuscripts. In both copies, the manuscript is divided into two main sections. The first half comprises what Elias called his Book of Travels (Kitāb siyāḥat), an account of the journey he made from Baghdad across Europe and to the Americas beginning in 1668. The second half of the work consists of a 'History' of the New World. The two sections are connected by a bridge in the text where Elias's account of his journey bleeds into the first chapter of his 'History'. Although Rabbath first published an Arabic edition of the Book of Travels in 1905, European orientalists initially showed little interest in the work. It was not until the late 1990s that Elias's journey captured the interest of scholars working in Middle Eastern history, global history and the history of cultural encounters. The result was a stream of translations, but only of the first half of the work, that is, the Book of Travels, into Italian, Dutch, English and, most recently, French. In contrast, the 'History' was never published, and it has yet to receive any critical attention from modern scholars.


The manuscripts are held in London and Rome: the oldest, dated 1751, is preserved at the British Library, IO Islamic MS 3537 (formerly Loth Arabic MS 719), hereafter BL, Kitāb siyāḥat. The copy in Rome is the same as that first discovered by Rabbath in Aleppo, now held at the Vatican Library and catalogued as Sbath MS 108. A colophon indicates that this copy was made in 1817. ’Imād Ab al-Salām Ra’āf suggests the existence of a third copy held in the Iraqi National Archives, Baghdad, in al-Tārīkh wa-al-mi’arrikhān al-‘Iraqīyīn fil al-‘asr al-‘uthmānī [History and Iraqi Historians in the Ottoman Period] (London, 2009), 136–8, but, despite my best efforts, I have been unable to confirm the existence of this manuscript.

Although it did manage to capture the interest of Roland Dennis Hussey, the historian of Latin America, who referred to Elias in an article entitled 'Spanish Colonial Trails in Panama', Revista de historia de América, vi (1939), 62, 69, where he speculated nonetheless that Elias’s writings were ‘fanciful in the extreme’. It appears that Hussey had obtained a translation from Philip Hitti.

The text originally published by Rabbath in al-Machriq was republished a year later, still in Arabic but with a French title, Le Plus ancien voyage d’un oriental en Amérique, 1668–1683: voyage du curé chaldéen Elias fils du prêtre Jean de Mossoul, d’après le manuscrit de l’archevêché syrien d’Alep, ed. Antoine Rabbath (Beirut, (cont. on p. 55)
That the *Book of Travels* has attracted the attention of so many audiences, in so many languages, is a testament to the enchanting story of Elias's adventure, not least for an academic and general public increasingly captivated by (or, perhaps, anxious about) questions of encounters between East and West. Yet for all the ink spent reprinting the *Book of Travels* in recent years, there has been almost no simultaneous effort to explore either his motivations for writing or, indeed, the wider context in which his work was produced. No attempts have been made to answer even the most basic questions about his actual identity. In search of answers to such questions, I have been piecing together the clues he left behind. Here, I present an early account of my findings on the trail of Elias in preparation for a wider study of his life and his writings. What follows, then, is necessarily an incomplete tale, in part because of the disparate nature of the sources. Because Elias lived at the nexus of several documentary traditions, we can only capture glimpses of him as if in a hall of mirrors where each new source distorts, skews and stretches certain elements of his person in unforeseen ways. At one time or another, I have thought him to be a victim, a charlatan, a genius, even a murderer. All are possibly true. What I present here, therefore, is not a complete, or completed, biography, but rather a series of snapshots of a man taken at different moments of his life. If the picture presented here

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remains too blurred, I hope that it may be regarded in part as a consequence of the fact that he lived his life in constant motion.

In emphasizing the ambiguities inherent in writing about early modern lives, I am also interested here in a wider question about how historians should use a life such as that of Elias of Babylon. In a way, his story would seem to resonate with contemporary interests in global history and, in particular, the study of what I shall refer to here as ‘connectedness’ in the early modern world. In recent years, scholars have painted an impressionistic picture of a ‘connected world’ in which the distant reaches of the globe were linked through flows of objects, information and people. These connections expressed themselves in myriad ways, for example, in the design and manufacture of commodities like porcelain and cotton, the circulation of artistic and architectural knowledge, and even in the writing of world history. Other scholars have paid special attention to the human element of connectedness, and they have done so primarily in two ways. The first is through the study of particular groups or communities, who usually masquerade in the historiography under a wide range of categories: gens de passage, trans-imperial subjects or diaspora networks, to name just a few. Rooted in extensive and meticulous archival research, such approaches have explored the ways in which


specific groups carved a space for themselves at the interstices of multiple societies. In doing so, these works have given depth to our understanding of the lived experience of connectedness in this period.

But I am more interested here in a second approach, which has come in the form of a growing cast of characters whose global lives have been used by scholars to construct general accounts of the nature of connectedness in the early modern world. Blurring the boundaries between biography, microhistory and global history, these works vary in their specific approaches, yet what unites them is the idea that the lives of individuals might be used as keyholes through which to view the worlds in which they lived. Tonio Andrade has even called for the accumulation of such stories as a way of writing the history of ‘our interconnected world, one story at a time’. This is symptomatic of a wider reassessment of microhistory led by various historians working across several different fields. Not all have been as optimistic about the future of what Andrade has called ‘global microhistory’. In an incisive article, Francesca Trivellato, for example, has argued that the potential of a microhistorical approach has yet to be fully


exploited by global historians, who, she suggests, are too detached from the ideological and theoretical impulses at the heart of *microstoria* as it was practised by Italian historians in the 1970s and 1980s.\(^\text{14}\) As Trivellato sees it, the original concerns of microhistorians, captured in cryptic formulations like Edoardo Grendi’s ‘exceptional normal’ or Carlo Ginzburg’s ‘clues’, were with ‘extraordinary documents’ that appeared to be idiosyncratic but actually revealed broader trends. In contrast, macrohistory, she argues, ‘leans towards simplification in the interest of generalizability’.\(^\text{15}\) Where Andrade calls for a proliferation of ‘stories of individual lives in global contexts’, therefore, Trivellato worries, rightly, that such an approach risks simplifying the complexity of intercultural encounters in the past.

While the movement of, say, porcelain from China to Amsterdam might very well reveal the workings of early modern connectedness, I am less persuaded that the movement of people offers a similarly unproblematic way of recovering the connected world so sought after by global historians, myself included. People are not plates, inanimate bits of porcelain in motion from one part of the world to another. And so, when dealing with the mobility of individuals, we must adopt a more refined approach that more effectively incorporates what we have learned in recent years from scholars working on questions of subjectivity and the history of everyday life. For when we consider some of the finest examples of studies of individuals in a global context — I am thinking here of Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Women on the Margins*, Jonathan Spence’s *The Question of Hu* or Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s recent *Three Ways To Be Alien*\(^\text{16}\) — what emerges from these works again and again is a sense of the importance of dissimulation, self-fashioning and improvisation as critical elements in the experience of individuals whose lives were lived on a global stage.

In our rush to populate global history with human faces, there is a risk of producing a set of caricatures, a chain of global lives


\(^{15}\) *Ibid.*, section III. Obviously, not all global historians would agree with Trivellato’s characterization of what is, it must be said, a diverse and varied field of historical writing.

whose individual contexts and idiosyncrasies dissolve too easily into the ether of connectedness. Indeed, we risk finding ourselves in a world populated by faceless globetrotters, colourless chameleons and invisible boundary crossers, individuals stretched so far out of any local, confessional or personal context as to make them little more than panes of glass through which to view the worlds in which they lived. For this reason, this article resists the impulse to transform Elias into yet another ‘grain of sand’ or to use him simply to tell a story about the connected world in which he lived. For when it came to Elias’s global life, everything about it, from his reasons for leaving Baghdad to how he represented himself while travelling, makes sense only when rooted in the study of the world he left behind. Even his own writings are the musings of a man who never stopped thinking of home.

Global history can and should do more than lead us towards the study of connected worlds. Instead, I offer here an alternative in which the close study of a global life drags us back necessarily to a deep, local history. Beneath the picture of the global life presented in Elias’s own writings, there lies a secret life, one that had less to do with the global connections of the world in which he lived than with local phenomena related to confessional change among Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire in the late seventeenth century. Section I of this article deals with the actual writings that Elias left behind and the genealogy of traditions reflected in them. Looking beyond the frontiers of travel literature, I argue that the work represents a confluence of genres, oral and written, European and Ottoman, Christian West and Christian East. By incorporating never-studied portions of the text, I also highlight the pro-Catholic and propagandistic features of Elias’s writings, which have received little attention from scholars. These elements in the text are crucial to uncovering the importance of local and personal contexts at the heart of his global storytelling. These local contexts are the subject of section II, which presents new evidence mined from European and Middle Eastern sources to construct a fuller picture of Elias’s life both before and after his journey. Here I draw on a tradition of local history, oral and written, which reveals the distinct image of Elias that circulated in popular memory. Among his kin and the people that knew him, he was remembered mainly for his status as one of the earliest converts to Catholicism in his community. This local memory of the man should matter to how we as historians represent his life and,
therefore, how we use such lives more generally in early modern global history. For a man who had left his home, his family and his faith behind, the act of writing offered a chance for permanence, stability and certitude in a moment of personal crisis and dislocation.

I

I am not the first to tell the story of Elias of Babylon. But virtually everything that has been written about him has relied, uncritically and exclusively, on the stories he spun about himself in his own writings. That his writings have not been subjected to more scrutiny is striking when one considers that his Book of Travels appears to be not only the first eyewitness account of the Americas by an Ottoman subject but also the earliest description of the New World ever written in Arabic. Before considering the work in some detail, let us briefly consider how Elias narrated his journey to his readers. By the time he left Spain to travel to the New World in February 1675, he had already been travelling around Europe for some seven years. This is a period of his journey about which he had very little to say; in fact, his time in Europe is described in a mere six folios. The Book of Travels opens with a journey to Jerusalem to visit the holy sites, a standard formula used in Christian pilgrimage narratives. From Jerusalem he continued onwards to Aleppo and then to the port city of Iskenderun, in today’s southern Turkey, at which point he boarded an English ship bound for Venice. He spent three weeks in that city before travelling to Rome, where he stayed for some six months. Apart from mentioning a few churches he had visited, he reveals nothing further about how he passed this time in Rome. Later in the manuscript it becomes clear that he must have interacted at some point with officials at the Vatican, for when he arrived in Spain months later, he would be carrying with him a letter of introduction signed by Clement IX. From Rome he continued to Florence and Livorno before travelling by sea to Marseille, then

17 BL, Kitāb siyāhat, fos. 4° 9°.

18 Interestingly, Elias never refers to himself as al-maqdisi, the usual epithet adopted by Eastern Christians who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, much like the use of the term al-hājjī among Muslims who have travelled to Mecca.

19 Elias’s six months in Rome is covered in a few lines in BL, Kitāb siyāhat, fo. 5°. For his reference to a ‘letter from Pope (dement IX’, see fo. 6°.
north to Avignon, followed by a journey by horse-drawn barge to Lyon. He took up residence somewhere in Paris. There he remained, in his own words, ‘amusing myself in this country, which is unrivalled in the entire world for its beauty, the justice of its laws, and the great love of its inhabitants for foreigners’. This may be a reference to his picaresque encounters with a string of French notables, even Louis XIV. From France he travelled to Spain, and it is here in the text that he offers his readers the first sign of a possible purpose behind his journey. In Madrid he presented the regent, Mariana of Austria, mother of Charles II, with the letter from Clement IX. Upon reading it, she ordered that 2,000 pesos be given to him by her representatives in Sicily and Naples. It is unclear what exactly this money was for, or why Elias would have to travel to collect it himself. At any rate, his journey to Palermo and Naples was unsuccessful (both viceroys refused to hand over any money) and he returned ‘without hope’ to Spain to refer the matter to the regent. Along the way, he stopped in Portugal, where he claims to have lived in the household of Peter II, at the time regent for Alfonso VI. Having returned to Madrid seven months later, he took up residence in the household of a local notable, most likely Pedro de Lencastre, the duque de Aveiro.

It was one of Lencastre’s friends, a woman whom Elias describes only as the ‘Marquesa de Los Velez’, who arranged for Elias to celebrate mass in the presence of Charles II sometime in late 1674 or early 1675. This is how Elias describes that fateful moment:

I entered the chapel of the Sultan [Charles II], and I said mass before him and his mother. Afterwards, the Queen ordered the [governess] who had raised the Sultan to ask [that I be given] what I requested, whatever it was. I took my leave of her and went to speak to some of my friends. They advised me to request a licence (ijaza) and an order to travel to the country

20 *Ibid.*, fo. 5°. Among those notables were François Picquet, formerly French consul in Aleppo, the prince d’Orléans and the duc de Saint-Aignan.

21 Elias’s time in Spain, and his travels in Sicily and Naples, are described *ibid.*, fos. 6°–8°. The Arabic rendering of his host’s name is ‘Oveyro’ (literally, ‘eyyro’). This could also plausibly be a reference to Lencastre’s sister María de Guadalupe, later the duquesa de Aveiro, who appears to have been in Spain at this time. Later in life María de Guadalupe would win a reputation as the madre de las misiones for her efforts in support of Catholic missionaries. See Ernest J. Burrus, *Kino escribe a la duquesa: correspondencia del P. Eusebio Francisco Kino con la duquesa de Aveiro y otros documentos* (Madrid, 1964). Fernando Díaz Esteban has written of her long-standing interest in the Orient in ‘Una mujer orientalista del siglo XVII: la duquesa de Aveiro’, *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia*, cciv (2007), perhaps a reason for Elias’s ties to this family. I am very grateful to James Amelang for bringing this to my attention and, more generally, for his generous help with my many queries.
of the West Indies. I was worried about the idea but I put my trust in God and took comfort in Him. And so I asked for the licence.

Armed with several letters of introduction from the regent, Elias travelled to Cádiz and boarded one of sixteen galleons that set sail for America on 12 February 1675. ‘Among the travellers’, Elias writes, ‘there were some who were celebrating and there were some who were sad to leave their families behind’. Elias appears to have been among the latter because he describes the regret he felt at not having someone with him from his own people (min aavlād bīlādī).

The rest of the Book of Travels charts Elias’s peregrinations in the Americas from his arrival in 1675 until his departure from Mexico City in 1684. From Cartagena, on the northern coast of present-day Colombia, he travelled south along the western coast to Lima in Peru, from where he went eastwards as far as the huge mining centre of Potosí in Bolivia before returning again to Lima, where he lived from February 1680 to September 1681. On leaving Peru, he travelled north through Venezuela and onwards to Mexico City, where he resided for some two years before embarking on a ship back to Spain, via Cuba, in November 1684.

Subtle shifts from singular to plural first-person pronouns suggest that he may have been accompanied, perhaps by people he had met on the outbound voyage. More importantly, his itinerary

22 BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fos. 8'-9'. Elias’s reference to the marquesa is on fo. 8', a title held at the time by the king’s governess (aya) Maria Engracia de Toledo y Portugal. For a copy of Elias’s licence to travel to the New World, see ‘Real Cédula dando licencia a Don Elias, de nacionalidad Caldea, Canonigo de la iglesia de Babilonia, para pasar a Indias a pedir limosna por tiempo de 4 años’: AGI, Indiferente General, 430, vol. 41, fos. 361v-362v. On the ceremonial and devotional uses of the royal chapel by Spanish monarchs, see Juliet Glass, ‘The Royal Chapel of the Alcázar: Princely Spectacle in the Spanish Habsburg Court’ (Johns Hopkins Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2004), ch. 4. So far as I can tell, there appears to be no reference to Elias in the archives of the royal chapel.

23 BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fo. 9v. Extensive records relating to the fleet, which was under the command of Nicolás Fernandez de Córdoba, are in AGI, Casa de Contratación, 5781, n. 194. Individual registers for each of the ships are included in AGI, Casa de Contratación, 1226; for the full list of passengers, see ‘Catalogo de pasajeros a Indias’, xiii, 825.

24 My account of his itinerary uses events mentioned by Elias as a way of dating his whereabouts. His final return to Europe was witnessed by Antonio de Robles, a chronicler in Mexico City, who noted the departure of ‘the priest of Babylon’ (el canonigo de Babilonia) on 18 November 1684 in Diario de sucesos notables, ed. Castro Leal, ii, 76.

25 At various points in the manuscript Elias refers, for example, to ‘three noblemen among us, each headed to take up their posts’ (BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fo. 15'), two horse-drivers, ‘one of whom was an Indian and the other a mestizo’ (fo. 22v) or ‘two poor men, each of whom was missing a hand’ (fo. 26'). Others include a guide on fo. 29v, ‘two Armenian servants’ on fo. 65v and ‘Don Juan González’, a member of the cabildo (cont. on p. 63).
reflects the popular routes taken by alms collectors who plied their trade in the New World. Although we still know very little about such fundraising networks, what is certain is that Elias was not the only Eastern Christian to travel to the New World for the purpose of collecting alms. Their presence was a recurring concern for Spanish imperial officials. Eastern Christians were even singled out for their ‘unacceptable behaviour’ (*malos modos*) in a chapter on alms collecting in the compilation of the *Laws of the Indies* printed in 1681. Strangely enough, a prohibition on issuing licences to ‘Greeks and Armenians’ also appears in a royal decree in January 1675, issued only a few days before Elias obtained his own licence to travel.

Be that as it may, his own description of his activities clearly reveals how he collected donations throughout his journey. His account of his experiences in Colón is typical in this respect:

I stayed in the house of the priest, and it was the eve of the Feast of St James, brother of Jesus. The next day, the priest invited me to celebrate mass. All the offerings that were given to the priest would be given to me. The next day, I said mass, and all the Indians attended, some 4,000 of them. When mass was finished, I sat on a chair and prepared the *baraka*, i.e. the holy bread. The people kept coming and kissing my hand, taking the *baraka*, and throwing offerings into the tray. When this was over, I had gathered offerings amounting to 280 kuruş.

In most of these anecdotes, Elias claims to have celebrated mass in Syriac while wearing vestments that had been given to him by the Pope. Incidentally, at no point in the *Book of Travels* does he...

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(...municipal council) of Charcas, on fo. 46', with whom Elias claims to have carried out an inquiry into one of the viceroys. If true, traces of Elias might be found in one of the massive casebooks produced by the inquiry, each of which amounts to over a thousand folios: AGI, Lima, 284–5; Escrivania, 536A–544B.


27 See ‘Real Cédula para que ningún griego ni armenio pueda pasar a Indias a pedir limosna bajo ningún pretexto’: AGI, Indiferente General, 430, vol. 41, fos. 359v–361v. Elias’s own licence appears immediately afterwards in the same register, but the relationship between the two documents is not immediately clear.

28 BL, *Kitāb siyāḥat*, fos. 23r–24r.

29 See, for example, *ibid.*, fos. 19r, 25v, 26r, 27v.
explicitly refer to his having left Baghdad expressly for the purpose of collecting alms, but he may have wanted his readers to think this was the case. The point would have been understood, at any rate, by his readers given the wider genre of similar accounts written by Eastern Christian alms collectors that circulated in this period. In this way, he travelled from one village to another, collecting funds as he celebrated mass at chapels in Indian villages and makeshift altars in silver mines. In 1681 his presence was even the subject of some concern by the archbishop of Lima, who complained in a report that he had overstayed the four years allowed by his licence.

In the course of his adventure, Elias suffered one tribulation after another, from bouts of altitude sickness, to struggles with wild plants, to death-defying escapes from powerful whirlpools and merciless storms. The sheer entertainment value of the story, littered as it is with amusing *hikāyas* (anecdotes), recalls other celebrated works in the Arabic tradition of travel writing called the *rihla*. But if Elias’s work is reminiscent of Arabic travelogues, a closer study of the layers of the text suggests a complex interaction of multiple traditions, both Eastern and Western, at the heart of his *Book of Travels*. In the first place, this is because so little is known about the circulation of Arabic travel literature in his own community that it remains near-impossible to conclude that the *rihla* acted as a model for him. Such works were not mentioned, for example, in one of the few surviving pieces of evidence about the history of reading among the Chaldeans in this period, namely, a list of thirty books used for the instruction of children in the 1720s. The list consists mainly of Syriac and

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11 See the letter from Melchor de Lañán y Cisneros, 15 Aug. 1681: AGI, Lima, 81, no. 20.

12 See, for example, the account of Elias in Hilary Kilpatrick, *‘Between Ibn Battūṭah and al-Tahtāwī: Arabic Travel Accounts of the Early Ottoman Period’*, *Middle Eastern Literatures*, xi, 2 (2008), 241; Elias Muhanna, *‘Ilyās al-Mawsīlī’*, in Joseph E. Lowry and Devin J. Stewart (eds.), *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850* (Wiesbaden, 2009).

13 The list was preserved in the journal of Khidr bin Hurmuz, a schoolteacher suddenly forced to flee Mosul in 1724, and it can be found today in the University of Birmingham Mingana Collection, Christian Arabic MS 72, fo. 27v. Much like Elias, Khidr would spend the rest of his life in Europe, and as yet there has been no extensive

(cont. on p. 65)
Arabic grammars, psalters, copies of the Gospels, saints’ lives and liturgical books. The only example of what might be called secular literature is an Arabic translation of *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a collection of popular Indian fables and stories. Elias would have carried this oral culture of storytelling with him to the New World, and indeed there are passages in the work that switch from prose to poetry almost as if he was remembering rhymes from stories once told to him in his youth.\(^3\)

Yet Elias’s own formation as a storyteller was influenced in a more significant way by the devotional practices and beliefs of the Church of the East. I have already described how the text begins as a sort of pilgrimage narrative, but Elias also drew on the powerful tradition of miracle tales that were central to the Christian Arabic and Syriac traditions. At one point in the *Book of Travels*, he appears to be toying with these traditions as he describes a strange encounter with the miraculous that he experienced in Charcas:

When I was in Charcas, I had with me an image (*ṣūra*) of the head and face of Jesus. I had brought it with me from Rome, and I had given it to a Jesuit monk [*sic*]. But when I arrived at the town of Potosi and opened my trunk, I found that it was still there. I remained confused, along with my servants and companions, about this miracle. The head monk of the monastery of the Mercedarians later asked for this picture from me. So I gave it to him as a gift, in hopes that it would return to me a second time — but it didn’t.\(^3\)

Here, Elias casts himself in the role of a faithful believer who has been left disappointed when the miracle he wished for failed to materialize. This is one of several moments in the text when he seems to be playing with miracle tales and, in a way, even poking fun at them. It would be incorrect to view these episodes as mere anecdotes somehow untouched or uninformed by his vocation as a priest.

It is difficult at times to identify the origin of certain elements in Elias’s writings. This is especially the case when the *Book of Travels* betrays the influence of what might appear to be distinctly European traditions of writing. His representation of himself as

\(^{(n. 33 \text{ cont.})}\)


\(^3\) Rabbath first suggested this in 1905 with reference to Elias’s description of whirlpools in BL, *Kitāb siyāhat*, fo. 15v.

\(^3\) *Ibid.*, fo. 44v.
a missionary is a case in point. As he travelled around Peru, for example, he described his efforts to heal the sick in the following manner:

One of the Jesuits had a sick sister and he asked me if I knew anything about medicine, and to go and visit her, and to treat her. So I went and visited her, and I treated her with some things appropriate to her condition, and I gave her a dose of toad powder. With the power of God, she recovered. There was also a nun who was sick in a convent, and the Archbishop gave me permission to treat her because without permission from the Archbishop, no one may enter the convent. After I had entered the convent and treated this nun, through the wisdom of God and His care, she recovered.  

In a similar episode, he intervened on behalf of several Indians who had been imprisoned unjustly and without reason. Upon arriving in a village, he travelled to the jail carrying a list of names and ordered the guard to release each of the innocent men one by one. According to Elias, his actions earned him the praise of the local governor, who said to him, 'You have honoured us by coming here'. Such anecdotes crop up unexpectedly in the text, almost as if they were inserted into the work as an afterthought. The effect is an image of Elias as the ideal missionary: curing the sick, reconciling people to one another, intervening in local politics and setting an example to all those around him.

How are we to make sense of such passages? On the one hand, Elias would have been exposed to representations of missionaries in published works circulating in Europe in this period. Published collections of Catholic missionary dispatches, for example, advocated the practice of medicine as a way of integrating into local Christian (and Muslim) communities. In the 1650s, before he left Mosul, Elias had known personally the author of one such work, the *Teatro della Turchia*, written by a Capuchin missionary based in Aleppo and Baghdad for over twenty years. It is difficult not to be struck by how much Elias’s representation of his own activities in the New World has in common with the manner in which Catholic missionaries characterized their own acts in the Middle East. But, at the same time, it is important to remember that the

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18 Michele Febure, *Teatro della Turchia: dove si rappresentano i disordini di essa, il genio, la natura, & i costumi di quattordici nazioni, che l’habitan*, (Milan, 1681). Long the subject of arcane debate, Febure was a pseudonym, most likely for Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Aignan. Elias refers to having carried a letter for him to his nephew the due de Saint-Aignan in BL, *Kitab siyāhat*, fo. 5r.
Church of the East had its own history of missionary activity, still a matter of pride to the Chaldeans as late as the nineteenth century. When Elias emphasized his acts as a missionary, therefore, he could also have been invoking local memory of the historic role played by the Church of the East in the spread of Christianity to China in the seventh century. The question of how best to read his self-fashioning speaks more generally to the difficulty of interpreting works that were written in this context of global circulation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of European influences in the Book of Travels comes in some of the more fanciful anecdotes scattered like pearls throughout Elias’s work. Consider, for an example, the account of his experiences in the port of Santa Elena in Peru:

In that port, they told me about a man from among the Indians who was 150 years old. I decided to go and visit him, and I found him healthy of body and ancient in years. He began to tell us about the old times, and he said to us, ‘Near this port, about one league away, there is a big cave where giants (al-jababira) are buried’. When I heard this information and about the giants buried there, I wanted to see it with my own eyes. So I took with me twelve men from among the Indians, all armed with swords, and we headed to the cave to witness what we had heard about. Upon our arrival there, we lit the candles we had with us, out of fear that we might get lost in the cave. We walked into the cave with the candles in our hands, and at every ten steps, we left a man standing with a light in his hand so that we would not lose our way back to the entrance. I led them myself with my sword drawn in hand. I arrived at the spot where the bones were, and examined them, and found them to be thick. As for the skulls, they were very big. I pulled a tooth out of one of the skulls — a molar — and it was so big that it weighed 100 mithqals [about 365 grams] ... I also examined the leg bones, and measured one of them.

Given the ‘fictive’ elements in Elias’s story, one might wonder whether it was nothing more than the product of his fanciful imagination. However, from textual and philological clues in his ‘History’ of the New World, it becomes apparent that much of his writings relied on information collected from a range of European sources, especially Spanish chronicles and books. This is as true

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40 BL, Kitāb siyahāt, fo. 16v. Although Elias took the molar with him, he lost it soon after when it was passed around a group of nuns who were interested in seeing it: fo. 19v.

of his ‘History’ (where it might be expected to be the case) as it is of the supposedly first-hand account of his voyage that appears in the *Book of Travels*. Among the works that can be identified are several sixteenth-century Spanish printed chronicles. Not only did these works inform his ‘History’, but they also provided the raw materials from which he concocted some of the stories he told about his experiences in the *Book of Travels*. That this has gone unnoticed for so long is in part due to how little attention has been paid to the ‘History’.

While it is certain that he relied on Spanish sources, Elias reveals less about how he actually worked through these books, or where he got them. He does, however, reveal something about the principles that guided his selection of sources. In a revealing passage tucked away in the ‘History’ he explains:

As for what the aforementioned [Spanish] historians report in their books about the miracles of the apostle [Thomas], we are unable to recount all of it in our book — this abridgement (al-mukhtasar) here — because of the sheer amount of it. Instead, we have extracted some pieces of it, and we have selected the most exceptional ones from among the certain and proven histories of those Spanish scholars that are Catholic and [are approved] by the Council of the Society of Judges, which is called in Spanish the ‘Inquisition’.

By his own account, Elias only incorporated material from books that had been sanctioned by the Catholic Church. This is an important clue to the purpose behind his writing, as will be discussed below.

This detail is also one of the few instances in which Elias refers explicitly to the act of writing the *Book of Travels*. The other comes in a separate passage where he describes how, having journeyed as far as Potosi, he returned to Lima in 1680 and took up residence in the house of a friend whom he had met on the voyage from

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12 The list includes Francisco López de Gómara, *La historia general de las Indias, con todos los descubrimientos, y cosas notables que han acontecido en ellas, donde que se ganaron hasta agora* (Antwerp, 1554); Garcilaso de la Vega, *Historia general del Perú* (Cordova, 1617); Agustín de Zarate, *Historia del descubrimiento y conquista del Perú: con las cosas naturales que señaladamente allí se hallan, y los sucesos que ha auido* (Antwerp, 1555); Gregorio García, *Origen de los Indios del Nuevo Mundo y Indias occidentales* (Valencia, 1607); José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias, en que se tratan las cosas notables del cielo, elementos, metales, plantas y animales de ellas; y los ríos, ceremonias, leyes, gobierno y guerras de los Indios* (Seville, 1590). This list is not exhaustive, nor does it include Elias’s sources among classical and patristic authorities.
Spain. This man, Juan de La Cantera, had been travelling to Peru to take up his new post as head of the Inquisition in Lima. Elias writes that he spent over a year living with La Cantera in the coastal town of Magdalena del Mar, and it was here that Elias began writing ‘this chronicle of my travels’ (tawārīkh safīrni). Apart from its ‘beautiful garden’, he mentions little about La Cantera’s house, but La Cantera would certainly have had at least a small selection of books with him. These are probably the books referred to by Elias, which he consulted as he wrote his Book of Travels. Indeed, most of his ‘History’ tilts heavily towards the conquest of Peru, and the sources he used most were the sort of books one would expect to find in the possession of an official charged with stamping out idolatry in Peru.

The association with La Cantera goes some way towards explaining why an Arabic text aimed at an Eastern Christian audience reads much like many other specimens of European autobiography or travel literature from this period. The two men might even have worked together in a process of ‘collaborative translation’ whereby La Cantera guided Elias through the Spanish sources. To this end, Elias’s characterization of the work as an abridgement (mukhtāsar) is significant as it recalls similar ventures taking place in the Ottoman Empire. From the 1620s onwards some of the earliest Catholic missionaries arrived in the Middle East, and they worked alongside local Christians to translate into Arabic some of the classic texts of the Catholic Reformation. The fruits of these early collaborations, often referred to by the translators as mukhtāsars, were rarely simple translations but rather were original Arabic compositions assembled around abridgements of European works. In this way, the key texts of the Catholic Reformation from the sixteenth century experienced long afterlives in Arabic into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although

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44 He is described as ‘El Licenciado Don Juan de La Cantera, Fiscal de la Inquisición de Lima, al Perú’ in ‘Catalogo de pasajeros a Indias’, xiii, 825. Incidentally, La Cantera’s name appears in the register directly before that of Elias, suggesting the possibility that the two men had known each other even before they left Spain in 1675.

45 BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fo. 49r.


47 The history of these collaborations and the texts they produced deserve further study. For a classic account, see Louis de Gonzague, ‘Les Anciens missionnaires

(cont. on p. 70)
Elias does not explicitly say whether he worked alongside La Cantera in a similar fashion, the assistance of a European informant would have been invaluable to him in navigating the vast sea of Spanish sources in the way that he did. Further research into La Cantera’s own writings, very few of which survive, might confirm the exact nature of his contribution.  

Since we know at any rate that Elias did draw on Spanish sources, his discovery of the bones of giants makes better sense when read alongside an anecdote from the pages of one of the books that he consulted in Lima. In the Royal Commentaries of the Incas, Garcilaso de la Vega reports

> a very remarkable story which the natives have received as a tradition handed down by their ancestors for many centuries. It refers to some giants who they say arrived in their country from over the sea and landed at the point now called Santa Elena . . . This is the account [the Indians] give of the giants, and we believe that it happened, for it is said that very large bones have been found and still are found thereabouts and I have heard Spaniards say they have seen pieces of teeth which they thought must have weighed half a pound when whole, and who had also seen a piece of shin-bone of wonderful size, all of which bears witness to the truth of the incident.  

Clearly Elias has poached an anecdote from a book that he had read, and has made it his own. From his encounters with vampire bats and deadly insects, to his discovery of a dead boy in the stomach of a crocodile, to vines that stretched out from the ground to capture him, he roamed wildly in a garden of stories, many of which had first been told by Spanish writers. Of course, there is nothing unique in his incorporating other written sources into his own travelogue, which is itself a common feature of travel writing in this period. Less clear is what his readers made of such stories given that they had no access to the wider body of works from which Elias’s own Book of Travels emerged. What they could not have known was that, when Elias narrated the story of his journey, he lived like Don Quixote as much through the stories

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18 Most of what does survive of La Cantera’s papers relates to his work for the Inquisition, for example his reports and letters in Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Consejo de Inquisicion, lib. 1024, 1032, 1045.  
he encountered in the pages of books as through the real world he encountered in the Americas.

Yet for all its novelty and charm, entertainment was not the main purpose behind Elias’s writings, and this becomes clear if we consider the work in its entirety, that is, the Book of Travels alongside the ‘History’ of the Americas. The ‘History’ is divided into seventeen chapters, covering a wide range of topics including the political history of the Spanish Empire from 1492 until the 1560s; the religious history of the Americas including the mission of St Thomas and the efforts of Catholic missionaries to convert the Indians; and finally what can only be called an ethnography of the Incas, comprising a genealogy of the royal family and a study of their religious practices, marriage customs and superstitions. Within this seemingly commonplace history of the Indies, it becomes possible to discern the real purpose behind Elias’s writings, namely, a celebration of the spread and triumph of Christianity — and in particular the Catholic Church — across the entire world. Some sense of this can be gleaned in the preface to the Book of Travels. It consists of a potted history of Christianity. Elias writes, for example, about the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles spread out to ‘the countries of the East and others to the West’. He makes special mention of Peter, ‘head of the Holy Church, the bride of the Saviour, and of those who would follow Him’, whose leadership was challenged by Satan when he sought to divide the Church by tempting its members away from the Vatican in Rome:

The Cursed One, enemy of virtue and truth, did not cease to muddle the consciences of believers so that he cut them off from the bosom of their mother, the Church. He set out traps for them, and he planted seeds of envy, pride, and rebellion in some of their hearts, to the extent that some of the sects rebelled against the Roman Church and its leader, who is the Holy Pope and pastor of all pastors. They chose different leaders, who opposed each other, and the Almighty set their enemies upon them, and they became like slaves and servants to them.

At first glance, Elias’s allusion to rebellion against Rome might appear to be little more than an unsurprising reference to the Protestant Reformation. This was a standard element of Spanish accounts of the New World, in which the discovery, conquest and conversion of the Americas was framed as a...
providential gift to strengthen the Church against the Protestants. But if this was the message Elias was meaning to convey, his description of these people as ‘slaves and servants’ to their enemies seems muddled. Indeed, there is a second way to read the preface, one that relates more obviously to his own origins in the Church of the East. As such, his reference to ‘sects [who] rebelled against Rome’ recalls debates within the Church of the East between pro-Catholic and anti-Catholic factions in the late seventeenth century. As we shall see in the next section, the emphasis on discord between ‘different leaders, who opposed each other’ captures perfectly the fierce rivalries taking place among Elias's own people. As for the description of ‘servants and slaves’, the passage might be read as a reference to the religious and legal restrictions placed upon Christians living under Ottoman rule, a theme that crops up elsewhere in his work.\textsuperscript{52} Within this context of the schism between Eastern and Latin Christianity, he even seems to describe the discovery of the New World itself as a sign of God’s disapproval of the Eastern Churches:

> When the aforementioned sects separated from the bosom of the Holy Church, the Holy Saviour decided to admit instead other people into their place: people of different races and customs who spoke foreign languages and lived in the valleys and mountains, following evil lifestyles, with little difference between them and beasts. Ignorant of the true God, and enslaved and muddled by the cursed Satan, some of them worshipped stones, others worshipped beasts, while others worshipped trees. The rest offered themselves as sacrifices to the cursed Satan. They lived in the fourth clime, which had been hidden out of sight and unknown.\textsuperscript{53}

For Elias, the spread of Christianity in the New World was directly linked to the refusal of the Eastern Churches to accept the supremacy of Rome. The consequence was that the newly converted populations of the Americas threatened to replace the Eastern Christians in the providential history of the world. Or, as he put it, ‘after their acceptance of Christ, many among them achieved the status of even the greatest saints’. When faced with this passage in 1909, Salāma Mūsā speculated that it must have been copied from a totally separate work, so strange and out of place did it seem to him.

Judging from Elias’s ‘History’, the \textit{Book of Travels} appears to function merely as the backdrop to a greater story about the spread and triumph of Roman Catholicism across the world.

\textsuperscript{52} See, for example, his reference to the \textit{kharaj} in BL, \textit{Kitāb siyāhat}, fo. 84\textsuperscript{r}.
\textsuperscript{53} BL, \textit{Kitāb siyāhat}, fo. 3\textsuperscript{r}.
For, when dealing with the Christian past, he is totally in his element: he could take advantage of written and oral traditions at the heart of the liturgical and devotional practices of Eastern Christianity. He includes, for example, an entire chapter on the miracles of the Virgin Mary in the New World, which transplanted to the Americas those very collections of miracle tales that had been incredibly popular in both the Christian Arabic and Syriac traditions. He also seizes upon small kernels of information in the Spanish tradition that would be of particular interest to an Eastern Christian audience, and develops them into extensive and detailed stories. The chronicle of Francisco López de Gómara, for example, mentions a man named Pedro de Candía, or Peter of Crete, among the followers of Pizarro. Drawing on this detail, Elias concocts an elaborate tale about a ‘true Christian soldier’ from the East who had contributed to the valiant efforts of the great Spanish conquerors. The most intriguing example of Elias’s treatment of the Christian past comes in his account of the missions of St Thomas to India and the New World. That Thomas had travelled to India was a tradition already circulating in Syriac in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas. In his version of the story, Elias draws on a strategy already in use in the sixteenth century by Spanish chroniclers who had come up with clever ways of locating the Americas within the itinerary of Thomas’s missions to India. This move was, of course, utterly foreign to the Arabic tradition, and so, because the Spanish authorities would have meant little to his readers, Elias insists instead on the authority of his own observations. In chapter 11 he describes how he has seen ‘with his own eyes’ the footprints of St Thomas that had miraculously appeared on the very rock on which Thomas had stood in Peru. Lest anyone doubt him, he even includes a drawing of the rock. (See Plate 1.)

51 The miracles are in BL, Kitāb siyāhat, fos. 129–32.
52 BL, Kitāb siyāhat, fos. 75–7. For the original story of Pedro de Candía, see López de Gómara, La historia general de las Indias, ch. 109.
53 Sabine MacCormack, Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru (Princeton, 1991), 312. Elias appears to have acted as an informant to Diego Andrés Rocha, a local official in Lima who published a treatise in 1681 arguing that the Indians were descended from the Jews, a common belief in this period. See Diego Andrés Rocha, Tratado unicoy singular del origen de los Indios Occidentales del Piruli, México, Santa Fe y Chile, ed. José Alcina Franch (Seville, 2006), esp. 211 for the reference to Elias.
Wrapped within Elias’s account of a marvellous journey, therefore, is a clever and triumphalist piece of Catholic propaganda. Not only does Elias seem impressed by the Spanish enterprise in the Americas, but at times he even goes so far as to criticize officials he has met during his travels for not having worked hard enough to consolidate the Spanish Empire in the New World. Fascinated as scholars have been by the global connections of Elias’s world, this propagandistic function of the text has not been appreciated, and yet it enables us to ask a wider set of questions about the composition of the work. If Elias intended it as more than just a travelogue, what was his reason for writing it in the first place? Indeed, why was such a work written by someone who, as far as the Vatican was concerned, could not even claim to be a true Catholic? For, at the moment that Elias left Baghdad in 1668, the Church of the East maintained no formal links with Rome. Admittedly, a century earlier there had been a branch of the Chaldeans that had corresponded with Rome, but by the 1660s memories of this union were garbled and inchoate among both Catholics and Chaldeans. Knowing something more about Elias’s life, therefore, reveals how such pro-Catholic rhetoric could come from the pen of a man who was ostensibly a Nestorian and therefore a heretic in the eyes of the Pope.

II

In the world Elias left behind, autobiography usually took the form of inscriptions, colophons and surprising notes and passages scribbled in the margins of manuscripts. When placed

57 See, for example, Elias’s criticism of the failure of the Spanish to harvest pearls in an area under threat from local tribes: BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fo. 52r.
58 See, for instance, the discussion of John Sulaqa in Baum and Winkler, *Church of the East*, 113–15.
59 The study of Arabic self-narratives has undergone something of a revolution as scholars have expanded their focus to include these types of documentary sources. See, for example, Dwight F. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley, 2001); Ralf Elger and Yavuz Köse, *Many Ways of Speaking about the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, Fourteenth–Twentieth Century* (Wiesbaden, 2010); Andreas Görke and Konrad Hirschler (eds.), *Manuscript Notes as Documentary Sources* (Würzburg, 2011). The creative use of colophons and inscriptions, for example, has vastly widened our knowledge of Eastern Christianity in the early modern period. For some of the most compelling examples, see the collection of articles by H. L. Murre-van den Berg, especially ‘‘I the weak scribe’’: Scribes in the Church of the East in the Ottoman Period’, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, lviii (2006); Aida Gureghian, ‘Eternalizing a Nation: (cont. on p. 76)
1. Drawing of the footprints and staff of St Thomas, with (pseudo-Hebrew?) inscription. Reproduced with permission from © The British Library Board, India Office, IO Islamic MS 3537, fo. 108v.
alongside such examples, the *Book of Travels* is remarkable for its great length, running to about 140 folios. Yet, for all this information, the text reveals very little indeed about the man behind the work. What was Elias’s life like before he left Baghdad in 1668? Was he running to or from something, and what became of him in the years following his return to Europe? The more we search for answers to such questions, the more it seems that the *Book of Travels* was inscribed on a palimpsest of silences, a secret life that Elias chose not to divulge to his readers. A glimpse of this secret life only emerges if we set our sights on a wider range of sources beyond Elias’s writings. Not surprisingly, fascination with his adventure was shared as much by those Europeans who encountered him during his travels as by those he had left behind in the Ottoman Empire. This fascination gave rise to two independent narrative traditions, which I bring together here. The first comprised a paper trail of documents produced by Elias’s contemporaries, people who knew him or knew of him during his lifetime, and this consists mainly of documents scattered across archives in Italy, France, Spain and, to a lesser extent, Peru and Mexico. The second was a more localized tradition centred around Baghdad and Mosul. It comprised a set of stories that had been passed down from one generation to another, mainly in Chaldean circles, including branches of Elias’s family but also among British missionaries and diplomats active in the region in the nineteenth century. Taken together, these two traditions offer an intriguing account of Elias of Babylon, one that differs in important ways from that contained in his writings. It also reminds us of the significance of the personal, the local and the particular when it comes to making sense of global lives.

In the *Book of Travels*, Elias reveals nothing about his life before the day he set out on his journey from Baghdad in 1668. He is silent, for example, about two earlier journeys that he had made to Europe. In fact, the earliest reference to the man that can be identified in any source comes in an account of a journey to India written by the Carmelite missionary Girolamo Sebastiani (1623–89). In 1656 Sebastiani had been sent to India to minister

to the St Thomas Christians in Malabar. On his return journey, he passed through Baghdad in September 1658, where he mentions having met a ‘priest [named] Elias’, who was going to Rome ‘for some purpose’ (per qualche interesse). That Elias was still a young man in 1658 is suggested by Sebastiani’s description of the ‘many tears’ (molte lagrime) shed by his mother at his departure. Elias travelled with Sebastiani to Aleppo and onwards to Rome. This first visit to Rome could not have lasted for more than a year or so, for, when Sebastiani passed through Baghdad in 1661 on a second journey to India, he encountered Elias on the shores of the Tigris. This time Elias helped Sebastiani to obtain the necessary provisions and permissions for his journey to India. Documents in the archives of the Propaganda Fide in Rome also speak in more ambiguous terms of a second journey to Rome made by Elias in 1661. Upon his arrival, he claimed to have been sent by the French consul in Aleppo, François Picquet, although he carried no letters from Picquet to substantiate this claim.

Among the details revealed about Elias in these two journeys is crucial information about his family. In the Book of Travels he identifies himself only as ‘the cleric Elias, son of the priest John of

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61 Throughout the Italian text, Sebastiani describes Elias as ‘il Casis Elias’, a rendering of the Arabic qasis, literally meaning ‘the priest Elias’: Sebastiani, Prima spedizione all’Indie Orientali del P. F. Giuseppe di Santa Maria, 241–2.

62 Sebastiani’s description of the entire journey can be found ibid., 241–75. Curiously, Sebastiani describes a group of twelve travellers, which recalls Elias’s own account of his departure from Baghdad in 1668 in the Book of Travels, prompting the question whether Elias was modelling his work on Sebastiani’s own published account. For Vincent of St Catherine’s account of this same journey, see Vincenzo Maria Murchio, Il viaggio all’Indie Orientali del P. F. Vincenzo Maria di S. Caterina da Siena, procuratore generale de’ Carmelitani Scalzi (Rome, 1672), 466–76, with Elias described on p. 469 as a ‘sacerdote Nestoriano che disegnava di venire a Roma’ (‘Nestorian priest who intended to come to Rome’).

63 Girolamo Sebastiani, Seconda spedizione all’Indie Orientali di Monsignor Sebastiani, Fr. Giuseppe di S. Maria dell’ordine de’ Carmelitani scalzi, prima vescovo di Hieropolis (Rome, 1672), 25.

64 Archives of the Propaganda Fide, Rome (hereafter PF), Acta 31 (1662), fos. 1–3.
Mosul of the ‘Ammūn family’. 65 Sebastiani, however, specifically notes that Elias was a nephew of the patriarch of the Church of the East. 66 This is an important detail inasmuch as the patriarchate had been a hereditary office, passed down from uncle to nephew from at least the fifteenth century. 67 Since that time the office had been under the control of the Abūna family of Mosul, and Sebastiani’s characterization of Elias would make him the nephew of Eliya Shimūn, patriarch from 1617 until 1660. 68 Sebastiani also refers to Elias’s having two brothers, the elder named ‘Abd al-Masīḥ and the younger named ‘Abdallah. 69 Without recourse to a complete family tree, little more can be said with any certainty about Elias’s own eligibility for the patriarchate. 70 Nor does this explain why he used the name ‘Ammūn, and not Abūna, in his own writings. 71


66 Sebastiani, Prima spedizione all’Indie Orientali del P. F. Giuseppe di Santa Maria, 241.


69 They are referred to as ‘Abdel Messia’ and ‘Abdalla’, respectively, in Sebastiani, Prima spedizione all’Indie Orientali del P. F. Giuseppe di Santa Maria, 275; Sebastiani, Seconda spedizione all’Indie Orientali, 228–30.

70 The various ‘patriarchal lists’ do not offer a complete account of all branches of the family; only those that succeeded directly to the patriarchate are mentioned. In other words, one can only speculate how many other nephews Elias would have had to contend with for the office of patriarch. In addition, eligibility for the patriarchate required that an individual had been raised a Nazarite, a vow that included celibacy and a special set of dietary restrictions. For a nineteenth-century description of this, see Asahel Grant, The Nestorians: or, The Lost Tribes. Containing Evidence of their Identity, an Account of their Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies, together with Sketches of Travels in Ancient Assyria, Armenia, Media, and Mesopotamia, and Illustrations of Scripture Prophecy (London, 1841), 182.

71 There is some reason to speculate that ‘Ammūn’ is a garbled form of ‘Abūna’; the reason behind this is unclear. An account of Elias’s family history written in 1692 by Francesco Romorantino, a missionary who had lived for nearly thirty years among
Alongside this detail about Elias's genealogy, Sebastiani also writes that he was a 'Nestorian turned Catholic' (*prima Nestoriano, e poi fatto Cattolico*), an allusion to important transformations taking place among the Chaldeans in the seventeenth century. From the 1630s Catholic missionaries had set up households in Aleppo, Diyarbakir, Mosul and Baghdad as part of their campaign to persuade local patriarchs, bishops and priests to submit to Rome. Normally, this involved submission of a creed of faith to Rome, along with changes to certain elements of devotional practice. Within the Church of the East, the consequence of the Catholic presence expressed itself through growing rivalries between pro- and anti-Catholic factions in the community. Throughout his long tenure, Eliya Shimün, the patriarch, had maintained only limited contacts with Catholic missionaries, in 1619, 1629, 1638 and 1653, and he never went so far as to take any steps towards formal union with Rome. In this context, Elias's support for the Catholics, as described by Sebastiani, must have been a concern for the patriarch. That Elias was entangled in some wider disagreement within the Abûna family is also suggested by an anecdote reported by Sebastiani during Elias's visit to Rome in 1659. Elias had witnessed the Holy Thursday ritual washing of the feet of the poor by the Pope, Alexander VII. The sight of the Pope engaged in this ritual moved him so much that he declared that he would spread word of it (*celebrare*) to all the 'heretics' of his nation, especially his

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(See 71 cont.)

the Chaldeans, also refers to the 'family of Amun': Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, MS Misc. 1266.1.


In the case of the Chaldeans, this included the erasure of the name of Nestorius from service books, a prohibition on endogamous marriage, and changes to the use of images and iconography in the Church: see, for example, Febure, *Teatro della Turchia*, 429–31.

Murre-van den Berg, 'Patriarchs of the Church of the East', 245.
uncle the patriarch. The result of this, Sebastiani says, was that both Elias and his brother were given honours and a donation by the Propaganda Fide. As early as 1659, therefore, Elias’s attempts to travel to Europe were linked with his support for the Catholic cause as against the long-standing opposition to Catholicism expressed by his uncle Eliya Shimūn and perhaps more generally by other members of the Abūna family.

Missionary records from the 1660s point to the increased isolation experienced by Elias (along with one of his brothers, it seems) as a result of his close relations with the Catholic missionaries. In 1660 Eliya Shimūn died and was succeeded by one of Elias’s cousins, a young boy named Yuhanna Maroghīn, who would adopt the name Eliya like the patriarch before him. The Capuchins’ immediate response to this change in leadership was to send a mission to persuade the new patriarch to turn his loyalties to Rome. In a report written in 1661, the head of the Capuchins in Aleppo describes a journey made by Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Aignan and Jean-Baptiste de Loches to meet the new patriarch. The missionaries were led to the patriarch by two Chaldean priests, one of whom is described as a ‘disciple to our missionaries’. Although the report stops short of naming this ‘disciple’ as Elias, his access to the patriarchal family means that it probably was him along with one of his brothers. When the missionaries met the patriarch, they found a ‘young boy of only sixteen or seventeen years’ who was dominated by the will of his father and his tutor. The patriarch informed them that he was unwilling to engage in any correspondence with Rome. He feared that writing such a letter risked upsetting the local Ottoman officials, who would suspect the local Christians of colluding in espionage with Europe, and he refers specifically to rumours that the patriarch of Constantinople had recently been executed for this very reason. In this same visit, the missionaries reported that one of the two Chaldean disciples had publicly scolded the

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76. The somewhat cryptic passage is in Sebastiani, Prima spedizione all’Indie Orientali del P. E Giuseppe di Santa Maria, 275. I thank Stefano Zacchetti and Mary Laven for their suggestions on its interpretation.

77. A copy of the report exists in ‘Mission de Perse’, fos. 66–73; the reference to a ‘disciple’ is on fo. 68.

78. At any rate, this was certainly what took place on another occasion in 1661 when Elias’s younger brother Abdallah offered to take Sebastiani to meet the patriarch: Sebastiani, Seconda spedizione all’Indie Orientali, 22–3.

patriarch for allowing individuals to take communion without confession. If this is a reference to Elias, it suggests that his conflict with his cousin was already a very public affair by 1661. Over the next few years, the tensions showed no signs of diminishing. In a report written from Mosul in October 1664, Saint-Aignan writes of the great travails faced by the ‘Nestorian priest who has travelled twice to Rome’, certainly another reference to Elias. According to Saint-Aignan, Elias had been anathematized by the patriarch, who had ordered that he was no longer to be allowed to perform any sacramental acts (de dire la Messe, de baptiser, et de marier) in any of the local churches. The reason for this was his close relations with the missionaries, and the patriarch even spread rumours that he had ‘turned Frank’ (il s’estait fait la Franc). Such an accusation could prove extremely dangerous if it reached the ears of Ottoman officials because it suggested that one’s political loyalties were not to be trusted.

On one level, the picture of Elias that emerges from these sources is a rather archetypal image of countless Eastern Christians whose support for the Catholic Church left them isolated within their own communities. What remains ambiguous, however, is whether the conflict with Elias’s family was indeed driven only by confessional differences or whether there were other reasons behind the dispute that are not attested to in the European sources. For example, there is at least some indication that a struggle over the patriarchate between rival branches of the Abûna family might have played a part in his decision to leave the Ottoman world. This is suggested by a peculiar anecdote in a history of the Abûna family written in the 1920s by one of its members, the Chaldean bishop Mar Eliya of Abûna. According to Mar Eliya, a disagreement over the succession of the patriarchate resulted in a murder in the Abûna family sometime around 1653. In this account, Elias is mentioned incidentally as one of three brothers alongside an elder one called Denha and a younger

80 Ibid., fos. 68–9.
one named Abraham, both of whom had sons. Of the three, therefore, it appears that only Elias was possibly eligible for the patriarchate as he had been a celibate, although it is unclear whether or not he had been raised as a Nazarite (mandhīr). Whatever the case, for reasons that Mar Eliya does not explain, one of Abraham’s sons, Hnanisho, was appointed as successor to the patriarch, much to the disappointment of Denha, who believed the position ought to have been given to his own son. In a fit of rage, Denha murdered his nephew Hnanisho and fled to establish a rival patriarchate further east in Qodshanis in the Hakkari mountains. Mar Eliya makes no explicit reference to the role Elias played in this drama, if any, nor does he elaborate on the impact of the murder on the family. Needless to say, the story is murky and problematic, as is the brief reference to Elias.

J. F. Coakley has questioned, rightly it seems, the use of Mar Eliya’s work as a historical source, while recognizing that it contains the kernels of stories going back hundreds of years. Be that as it may, it is remarkable that Mar Eliya locates the event in the 1650s (not to mention the fact of Elias’s own connection to the story), and this speaks to the possibility at least of some sort of split in the family having taken place in this period, memory of which persisted in oral tradition into the 1920s. Regardless of whether murder was at play, it is a sure sign that Elias’s troubles with his family, while expressed in religious terms in European sources, might in fact have been rooted in deeper enmity.

Whatever the case, when Elias arrived in Rome in 1668, he claimed that he had been driven out by ‘Nestorian heretics’. Having submitted himself to the care of the Catholic officials, he was given permission to travel around Europe as an alms collector. At this point, whatever was specific, particular or unique about the circumstances of his life bleeds into the general, widespread, ordinary experience of Eastern Christians in Europe in this period. On the heels of the Council of Trent, the Vatican’s interest in the Eastern Churches had been renewed, and this was reflected

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82 Strangely enough, Mar Eliya does not mention either ‘Abd al-Masīh or ‘Abdallah, Elias’s brothers, as they were referred to in Sebastiani’s account described above.
84 His arrival in Rome was recorded in PF, Acta 38 (1669), fos. 8–9; Acta 38 (1669), fos. 206–7. For reference to his permission to collect alms, see PF, Lettere 75 (1686), fos. 103–4.
in the establishment of the Greek and Maronite colleges of Rome, which offered Eastern Christians instruction in Catholic theology, ecclesiastical history and European languages. But beyond these centres of study, recent scholarship has also uncovered a much wider circle of Eastern Christians living in Europe. Like Elias, some of these men gained entrance to elite circles of power and patronage. In April 1673, only a few years after Elias had passed through France, for example, a Chaldean priest identified only as Dom Hissa (‘Isa?) celebrated mass in Syriac at the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Others eked out a living for themselves as librarians, printers’ correctors, translators and much more. At the Bibliothèque Mazarine in the 1680s and 1690s, the director, Louis Picques, maintained an entire team of Eastern Christians as copyists and translators. We still know very little about the lives of any of these men — and they usually were single men — not least because scholars are only beginning to discover their ghosts in the archives. But to give an idea of the scope of this phenomenon, we might consider one estimate based on some of the finest work on the subject written by Bernard Heyberger. In his meticulous study of the archives of the Propaganda Fide, Heyberger identifies no fewer than 178 Eastern Christians in Rome between 1690 and 1779. While outside the scope of this article, there was clearly a wider presence of interlopers like Elias in Europe in this period,

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88 Louis XIV ordered a French translation of the mass to be made by Abbé Morel, which can be found in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Syriaque MS 89, fos. 23–46. An edition was printed in 1678 as La Sainte Messe des caldeens et des maronites du mont Liban, mise en français, suivant le souhait de plusieurs personnes pieuses, et par l’ordre exprès de la reine, lors que Sa Majesté vouloit bien entendre celle que Dom Hissa Présire caldeen, célèbra en langue syriaque, et avec les ceremonies qui sont propres aux chrestiens de son pais, dans la chapelle du vieux chasteau de St Germain en Laye, le vingt deuxiemes jour du mois d’avril de l’an 1673 (Paris, 1678). A Spanish translation also appears to have circulated as La Santa Missa de los Caldeos y de los Maronitas (Bayonne, 1679), although I have been unable to consult a copy of it.


about whom we have only the most basic information and whose lives warrant further study.

Although Elias does not mention in the Book of Travels whether or not he had been travelling with any other Eastern Christians while in Europe, his name does crop up in a report that was written to the Vatican about the exploits of another priest, one Timothy Karnūš from Mardin. In 1674 Timothy was reported to be collecting alms, without authorization, in the company of a ‘Nestorian priest’ named Elias. If it is certain that Elias had joined the ranks of Eastern Christian alms collectors, what remains unclear is exactly how much money he could have collected during this time. At the start of his voyage to Peru he was already able to loan 2,000 pesos to a friend. The scope for fundraising was even greater in the New World, and evidence from Spanish archives reveals some of the stories that Elias used to persuade people to hand over their money. The cathedral in Lima, for example, recorded a donation of 1,000 pesos in January 1677 given to ‘Don Elias de San Juan, a canon from Babylon, who has come with a letter from his Holiness to collect alms for certain purposes (para ciertos fines)’. A sense of what these ‘certain purposes’ might have been appears in a petition he presented to the Royal and Pontifical University in Mexico City in July 1682, in which he claimed to be raising money for the ‘rescue of his Holy Church and of 4,000 families and 20,000 Catholics suffering under the cruel oppression of the barbarous Muslims (barbaros mahometanos)’. Presumably, this is a reference to the Chaldeans, even if Elias was playing on the ignorance of his interlocutors about the religious situation of the Church of the East. As for his claims that this money was destined to rejuvenate his community, this is a detail that he never mentions himself in his own writings. What is

91 On Karnūš, see Bernard Heyberger, ‘La Carrière manquée d’un ecclésiastique oriental en Italie: Timothée Karnūš, archevêque syrien catholique de Mardin’, Bulletin de la Faculte des lettres de Mulhouse, xix (1995), esp. n. 15. I am grateful to Professor Heyberger for drawing this to my attention.
92 BL, Kitāb siyāḥat, fo. 30v.
93 José Manuel Bermúdez, Anales de la catedral de Lima, 1534 à 1824 (Lima, 1903), 146. Interestingly, the ambiguity of ciertos fines echoes the qualche interesse of Sebastiani’s account described at n. 61 above.
94 See Alberto María Carreno, Efemérides de la Real y Pontificia Universidad de México según sus libros de claustros, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1963), i, 298. A similar story appears in Antonio de Robles’s description of Elias’s journey as a mission on behalf of his church (para aquella catedral) in Diario de sucesos notables, ed. Castro Leal, ii, 21.
certain is that he never returned to the Middle East, and it is not clear what became of the funds he collected in Europe and the New World.

Elias's return to Europe in 1684 is also shrouded in mystery. In the *Book of Travels*, he claims that he had wanted to travel from Mexico to the Philippines and from there to Surat, whence he hoped to return home, but that he could not do so owing to a disagreement between him and a ship's captain. But when he finally did arrive in Rome, he told the Propaganda Fide that he would be killed if he returned home. Instead, he put his talents to work for the Vatican. In March 1688 he acted as a representative for Antonio de León, a Spanish bishop in Arequipa, who had been unable to make the requisite *visita ad limina*, the journey to the Vatican required of all bishops at some point in their career. Elias was still in Rome in October 1691, this time requesting an audience with Innocent XII. The reason behind this request is not clear, but he may have been trying to keep himself relevant to the Propaganda Fide's continued efforts to correspond with the Church of the East. About this same time he also participated in the publication of an Arabic prayer book for the Propaganda Fide. The lengthy Arabic colophon included in the book suggests that Elias contributed in some way to the preparation of the work and that he was assisted in this by a man called Andrawús ibn ‘Abdallah. The last reference to Elias in the archives of the Propaganda Fide comes in 1694, by which point he is reportedly living in Spain.

So far I have detailed the trail of documentation generated about Elias by his contemporaries in Europe. Across this body of sources there is little mention of the great journey he made to the New World. Instead, the emphasis is placed over and over

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95 PF, Acta 56 (1686), fos. 94r–95r.
96 Misael Camus Ibacache, 'La visita *ad limina* desde las Iglesias de América Latina en 1585–1800', *Hispania sacra*, xlv (1994), 176. This Antonio de León was the same man that Elias referred to as a dear friend with whom he had exchanged gifts: BL, Kitāb *siyāhat*, fos. 15r, 46r.
97 PF, Lettere 80 (1691), fo. 137.
98 The most comprehensive study of this period of exchange between Rome and the Chaldeans remains Albert Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer der Union mit Rom: Joseph I., 1681–1696, Patriarch der Chaldäer* (Einsiedeln, 1966); for Elias’s role, see esp. 205–9.
99 *Horae diurnae, et nocturnae, ad usum orientalium* (Rome, 1692). The book was published again in 1725, although Elias’s name seems to have been replaced here by that of another Eastern Christian, a Maronite.
100 PF, Lettere 83 (1694), fos. 86r–87v.
again on his status as an Eastern Christian allied with the Catholic Church, in other words a convert. At the same time, among his own people his absence left space for the emergence of a local, Arabic tradition that circulated mainly in Iraq. These oral stories left traces in written chronicles, to be sure, but they also cropped up, seemingly out of nowhere, in printed works in the twentieth century. One such work was a two-volume history of the Syrian Churches written by Buṭrus Naṣrī and published in 1913 at the Dominican Press in Mosul. Very little is known about Naṣrī other than that he had left Iraq at some point to study at the Propaganda Fide in Rome. Unlike Elias, he returned to Mosul. Naṣrī’s history was cobbled together from oral traditions and local manuscripts, many of which are not cited in enough detail to allow them to be located today. In a section on the establishment of the Dominican mission in Mosul in the 1750s, Naṣrī makes special mention of the role played by the Halabī family (bayt al-Halabi), who acted as strong supporters of the Dominican missionaries in Iraq in the 1750s. As Naṣrī explains, the pro-Catholic stance of the Halabis went back to the 1660s, when ‘a priest named Elias converted to Catholicism and travelled to Rome and later the New World’. After returning to Europe, Elias was joined by a nephew who, Naṣrī speculates, was called Ishāq. This nephew returned to Aleppo, where he married a local woman, Maryam Ṭarbush, and thereafter Ishāq adopted the epithet al-Halabī, meaning ‘of Aleppo’. In the next generation Ishāq’s sons, one of whom Naṣrī says was named Elias in honour of his uncle, returned to Mosul and married into the prominent Rassām family of Christian merchants. It was this combined Halabī–Rassām clan that played a central role in the propagation of the Catholic faith among the local Christians. As for Ishāq, Naṣrī writes that he ultimately died on board ship during one of his journeys from Aleppo to Europe and was laid to rest at sea. By way of sources, Naṣrī does not refer to any actual documents but only to stories that had been ‘reported’ in his time. What is notable, however, is


102 The full account is in Naṣrī, Kitāb dakhīrat al-adhān fi tawārikh al-mashāriq wa-l-maghāriba al-Suryān, ii, 368–70.
the extent to which he identifies the spread of Catholicism among the Christians of Iraq with a set of events that began with Elias’s journey to Europe and, moreover, the extent to which these Catholic loyalties persevered through the descendants of Elias’s nephew. The story of the spread of Catholicism in Iraq is a story that begins, in Naṣrī’s telling at least, with Elias’s journey to Rome in 1668.103

Naṣrī’s account probably drew on much older oral traditions that had been passed down from one generation to another within the Rassām family. The existence of such a tradition can be traced back to at least the 1830s in a peculiar set of stories circulated by one of the members of the family, a man called ‘Isa (later, Christian) Antūn Rassām. Originally from Mosul, ‘Isa Rassām had come into contact in 1829 with British missionaries in Cairo, who enlisted him as an Arabic translator at the Arabic press established by the Church Missionary Society in Malta. Much like his better-known brother Hormuzd, ‘Isa had a long history of service with the British, first with Protestant missionaries in the Middle East, later with the East India Company and ultimately with the Foreign Office in the capacity of British vice-consul in Mosul.104 During these various contacts with Europeans, ‘Isa gave several different and often conflicting accounts of his ancestors and their origins. At various points in his life he claimed that his father (or grandfather, depending on the story) had migrated to Mosul from India. Other stories speak of a family ancestor who shared a remarkable resemblance to Elias. The most relevant is an account of his family that ‘Isa gave in 1837 to his friend and patron William Palmer, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. Palmer copied the story down in his diary, noting that

103 Naṣrī’s account of the emergence of Catholicism in Iraq resonates with what modern scholars have written about the spread of Catholicism among the Christians of Mosul in the eighteenth century. See, for instance, the accounts of the Rassāms, Sayighs and Halabis in Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 127; Dina Khoury, State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834 (Cambridge, 1997), 147–8.
[Isa’s] great-grandfather was a Spaniard sent by the Pope to attempt to reconcile the Nestorians. He died at Aleppo, having first married a woman of that place and leaving a family. His grandfather, with his sisters, removed to Mosul or Nineveh, and married into the first Christian family there, and was the means of reconciling twenty-five bishoprics in the plain to Rome, while the great mass of the Chaldeans in the mountains remain Nestorian.

The main elements here recall the outline of the account given by Naṣrī. ‘Isa’s stories about his origins have met with scepticism from some scholars, understandably so, but the story speaks to the existence of a certain tradition linking the ancestors of the Rassām family to support of the Catholic Church and, more importantly, to links with Catholic notables in Spain and Rome. From a mark of ownership scribbled onto the London manuscript of the Book of Travels, there is good reason to believe that the copy of Elias’s work had in fact been owned at one time by ‘Isa’s own father, Antūn Hormuzd Rassām. Whether it was in fact ‘Isa’s access to this manuscript that inspired his stories remains an important question. At any rate, by the time Rabbath discovered Elias’s Book of Travels in 1905, ‘Isa’s stories had already spread to Britain. Although ‘Isa died in Mosul in 1872 leaving no heirs, his younger brother, Hormuzd, moved to England in the early 1880s and died in Hove in 1910. At the end of the nineteenth century, the only written traces of these stories remained in Palmer’s correspondence and diaries, which are preserved today in Lambeth Palace Library. Even Naṣrī’s history, which contained an echo of Rassām’s stories, remains exceedingly rare, and it appears never to have been consulted by Rabbath or other Middle Eastern scholars.

At the intersection of these two traditions as they circulated separately in Europe and the Middle East, one thing is consistent: the outline of Elias of Babylon as a man from within the patriarchal family who stood out in his community for his pro-Catholic inclinations. Whether or not these loyalties were genuine, whatever that means, is still difficult to say. If Mar Eliya’s story of a

107 The note, dated 1786, is scribbled at the top of title page in BL, Kitāb siyāḥat.
108 See, for example, Lambeth Palace Library, London, MS 2817, 2819, 2821.
murder within the patriarchal family is to be credited, then Elias must have been involved in some way, whether he was complicit, an innocent bystander or even directly responsible. At any rate, this murder is only attested by a single work, written centuries after the events they describe, and so much depends on how much faith one has in the power of oral tradition to preserve memories of the past. For our purposes, what is most relevant here is that in both traditions of local memory, European and Arabic, the significance of Elias’s life lies not in his having travelled to the New World but rather in his role as a key figure in a wider story about the spread of Catholicism in the Middle East. When seen through the eyes of his contemporaries and his descendants, the global life of Elias pales in comparison to the local significance he had within his community as an early convert to Catholicism.

III

Elias of Babylon was not simply an early modern globetrotter. His adventure was more accurately that of a convert to the Catholic faith, and not just any convert but a member of a notable patriarchal family. In the post-Reformation struggle for the hearts and minds of Eastern Christians, his stories about the New World under Catholic rule represented a powerful form of propaganda, and this is how the Book of Travels would have been read by his contemporaries. Seen in this light, the secret life of Elias of Babylon becomes as relevant to the study of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation as it is to the interests of scholars working on mobility, connectedness and cultural encounters.

Interestingly enough, both the written and the oral sources produced by Elias’s contemporaries and his own community point to his being in Spain in the final years of his life, a detail not mentioned anywhere in the Book of Travels. Indeed, it was in Spain that he put the finishing touches to his tale of the triumph of the Catholic faith in both the East and the West. That such a work was written in Spain — and in Arabic no less — reveals not so much about early modern global connections as it does about the changes taking place in Eastern Christianity in the seventeenth century. In this respect, if we consider Elias’s writings in the wider context of a handful of similar works written in Europe by other Eastern Christians in this period, we find a wild assortment of confessional polemic: anything from Arabic hagiographies of
Catholic bishops to treatises against popery in Latin. Few of these works were ever published. Rather, most of them were deposited in libraries across Europe and even presented as gifts to patrons and religious or secular officials. In many ways, these works functioned much like public creeds or 'testaments of faith' in which the act of writing and depositing a manuscript served as a very clear expression of loyalty to either the Catholic or the Protestant faith. While a closer study of these works is outside the scope of this article, it is crucial to recognize here that they shared one feature in common: they were all written by Eastern Christians who were making lives for themselves in Europe. Indeed, some of the manuscripts never circulated in the Middle East at all. Whether they were written in Arabic, Syriac or Karshuni, they were written by boundary crossers who never stopped thinking of home. At the same time, for Eastern Christians set adrift in Europe the actual task of composing such works functioned on a second level as a sort of badge of identity, or a way of publicizing their confessional loyalties to potential friends, patrons and employers in Europe.

Without a better sense of Elias's own circumstances at the time when he completed his writings, it is difficult to say why exactly he wrote these works in the way that he did. For it is in Spain that the paper trail left by his travels comes to an end, most likely because this was where he died, sometime around 1700. Evidence from colophons in the existing manuscripts of the Book of Travels indicates that the earliest copy of the work had been completed in El Puerto de Santa Maria in 1699, and the name of the scribe was Andrawus ibn Abdallah. This was the same person who had been named as Elias's assistant in the prayer book that he published in Rome in 1692. Notarial records preserved in the Provincial Archives in Cádiz reveal that Elias was indeed a 'resident of El Puerto de Santa María', and several documents attest to his relations with local individuals, some of whom appear to have represented him in various matters related to trade and business in Madrid. Tragically, the documents are mostly illegible owing to extreme damage from water and insects.

What few scraps of information can be obtained about his life in Spain come from a
The case concerns a man named Juan de Zalaeta, who died shortly after borrowing some money from Elias. In the proceedings, Elias sought to recover 142 pesos from Zalaeta’s family. Intriguingly, the case also refers to a chest of ‘chocolate, papers, and other curiosities’ (might these even be other, unknown writings by Elias?) that Zalaeta had transported from Elias’s home in El Puerto de Santa Maria to someone in Madrid called Don Andrés de San Juan. Elias describes this Don Andrés elsewhere in the case documents as ‘my nephew. . . and the interpreter of His Majesty at the court in Madrid’. Taking the Spanish name Andrés de San Juan back to its Arabic origins, it is easy enough to identify this nephew as the very same Andrawüs ibn ‘Abdallah who had worked with Elias on the prayer book in Rome. In other words, after his return to Europe from the New World, Elias had been joined in Spain by the son of his younger brother Abdallah, a reminder — if any was needed — of the importance of personal, familial contexts in Elias’s global life. Beyond this, nothing more can be said about the final years of his life in Spain, at least not until new sources are uncovered.

What did Elias expect to get out of writing such a polemical work in Arabic? All we can do is speculate. Given his earlier foray into print with the Propaganda Fide, he may have intended the work for publication and even distribution in the Ottoman Empire. If so, the reason behind his leaving Baghdad becomes paramount to understanding the work itself: if he was driven out by personal conflicts, he may have seen the work as an opportunity to settle old scores back home. But if his conversion was genuine, the work may have been meant to function as an instrument

(signatura 385 for the year 1697. At any rate, I am grateful to José Ramón Barroso for his generous assistance during my visit to the Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cádiz. ‘Elias de San Juan, presbitero, Conde Palatino y canónico de Babilonia, vecino del Puerto de Santa María, con Juan de Zalaeta, sus bienes y herederos sobre paga de 142 pesos. 1699’: AGI, Escribanía, 1048B. I thank Esther González for her assistance in the transcription of this case file.

Ibid., fo. 10r. In 1699 one Andrés de San Juan, a Chaldean (de nación caldeo), is mentioned among a list of coffee vendors in Madrid, in María del Carmen Cayetano Martín, Cristina Gallego Rubio and Pilar Flores Guerrero, ‘El café y los cafés en Madrid, 1699–1835: una perspectiva municipal’, Anales del Instituto de Estudios Madrileños, xxxvi (1996), 237.)
for proselytizing the Chaldeans. Indeed, the two motivations, personal and confessional, might easily reinforce each other. Less clear is what Elias would have achieved locally in Europe by writing this work. Other Eastern Christians who sought to curry favour with Europeans usually did so by writing in European languages, as was the case with the Maronite scholar Abraham Ecchellensis. If Elias intended the work for an audience of potential patrons, then why write it in a language they could not understand, telling them things they already knew from Spanish printed books? And yet, early modern orientalists across the Catholic world might have been drawn to such a peculiar work. Indeed, such a curiosity could have helped Elias to secure a post as a translator or cataloguer in one of the many libraries in Spain whose collections included Arabic documents, perhaps even the Escorial itself. Even so, the answer could be much more straightforward. For a man nearing the end of his life, writing such a work, and doing so in Arabic in particular, could simply

112 Ecchellensis wrote mainly in Latin; see, in particular, Bernard Heyberger (ed.), Orientalisme, science et controverse: Abraham Ecchellensis, 1605–1664 (Turnhout, 2010).
have offered him a powerful way of remembering the past, remembering his family, even remembering his own language after so many years spent wandering the world.

Whatever the case may be, Elias never returned home to Mosul, a sure sign that the stories he told must have served some purpose in Spain. What this purpose was is difficult to say since the registers that carry traces of his life after 1700 have been reduced to piles of dust after decades, perhaps centuries, of decay. All that remains is the scrawl of his characteristic signature, ‘Don Elias de San Juan, canónigo de Babilonia’, barely discernible on the pages of a notarial register in Spain from 1697 (see Plate 2). For someone who spent much of his life in motion, it is striking that he should remain here, frozen in time, somewhere near the Atlantic coast in El Puerto de Santa María, where he spent the last years of his life, revising his work, thinking of home and receiving occasional visits from his nephew Andrawūs ibn ‘Abdallāh — or Andrés de San Juan as the locals called him.

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