

**Conversion and Empire: Byzantine Missionaries, Foreign Rulers, and
Christian Narratives (ca. 300-900)**

by

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To my mother Irina with all my love and gratitude

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Note on Transliteration from Byzantine Greek and Other Languages into English

In Byzantine Studies, there is no established protocol on how to write Byzantine Greek names or words into English. In the past, scholars usually Latinized or Anglicized the original Greek. For example, Ἰωάννης was Anglicized into “John;” Θεόδωρος became Latinized into “Theodore.” Recently, in an attempt to be more culturally sensitive, scholars have started to transcribe the Greek. Thus, instead of the Latinized “Constantine” or the Anglicized “John,” for instance, we now see in the modern literature “Konstantinos” or “Ioannes.” Generally, the new tendency to transcribe is a positive change as it gets us closer to the original language and additionally simplifies linguistic matters, especially when we deal with less familiar Byzantine subjects. However, it could easily confuse the general reader accustomed to the old Latinized or Anglicized names. As a result, I have decided to take the middle ground, so I have Anglicized or Latinized those Byzantine names, which I have assumed to be familiar to the general reader (i.e., Constantine, Paul, or Eusebius). I have transcribed the ones, which I have considered to be less known (i.e., Abochorabos, Alamoundaros, or Kaisos).

Besides relying on sources in classical and Byzantine Greek, this study deals with Latin, Bulgarian, Russian, French, and German. Generally, I have provided the original language and then translated it. In addition, when necessary, I have provided key explanations. For Bulgarian and other Slavic languages, I have written in the original Cyrillic.

Chapter 1

Introduction

At some time around A.D. 340, a Roman immigrant to Persia stood on a trial before the *shah* Shapur II himself (r. 309-379).¹ The defendant Pusicius had moved from Rome years before, managed to integrate well into his new state, married, worked hard, and eventually became a supervisor of an artisan guild at the Persian court. “On paper,” therefore, Pusicius seemed like a good Persian subject. Yet, he was now being tried for a crime so severe that it required no less than the direct attention of the *shah* himself. Pusicius was a declared Christian, and in the eyes of the Persian authorities, this made him a criminal of the worst kind.² He was, therefore, easily convicted for breaking Persian religious laws, for bringing up his daughter as a Christian, for transmitting his dangerous ideas, and for urging other religious converts to public sedition. In the face of such evidence, Pusicius himself must have cherished no illusions that the trial before the *shah* was only a legal formality with no chance of actual appeal. The verdict, which came as an immediate executive command, was to be an execution so brutal and

¹ Sozomen. *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Greek Edition, J. Bidez. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983. Book 2, Chapter 11.

² I am aware that Sozomen’s report fits the genre of martyrological hagiography and as such it aims to highlight the Christian heroism of its protagonist, yet I deliberately reframe the anecdote from a Persian perspective to raise questions about how state policies and rulers’ perceptions of inter-state relations affected Christians and their political and social status. When mixed in inter-state, political affairs, Roman (or later Byzantine) Christians could be perceived as conduits of threatening “outside” ideology, or at least this is how most modern historiography tends to frame the issue. We will examine below whether this was indeed the case, and we will also investigate the particular historical conditions, under which Christianity became embroiled in various inter-state relations.

uncompromising that it intended both to penalize and to serve as a radical example for the future. His neck pierced and his tongue dragged out slowly, Pusicius died in protracted agony while witnessing the parallel execution of his convicted daughter.

As historical contingency has it, the execution of Pusicius did indeed become an example. In the Persian empire, so long as Zoroastrian convictions dominated, his case was remembered as a strict example of penal law against enemies of the state. In the Roman empire, where Christianity was eventually supported by formal imperial laws, Pusicius' example symbolized heroism and was officially inscribed on the calendar as "his" day, April the 21st, a moment of perpetual commemoration and deep religious veneration of one of the first "Persian Christian saints." For a broader modern audience today, if taken somewhat journalistically, Pusicius' story is an example that cuts along cultural and religious lines that presumably originate in ancient, political divisions and confirm a "clash of civilizations" thesis. Finally, for careful historians, the story carries all too many cultural meanings to provide a straightforward answer. As a cultural symbol, it goes deep at the heart of ancient imperialism and its relationship to religion "in" and "outside" frontier lines.

In the specific context of Byzantium and Christianity, some of these frontier lines have been recognized, though they have been little explored. A field of study that drew some of its energies from an age of nationalism, "Byzantine Studies" have often been appropriated for modern ideologies and have been parcelled into certain key themes often framed tendentiously. One has been the relationship between Church and State in the empire.³

³ Traditionally, Byzantium has been depicted as a "caesaropapist" state where the institutional figure of the emperor supposedly combined "secular" and "religious" powers. Such characterizations simplify the

Another theme, central to the study of foreign elites' conversions to Byzantine Christianity, has revolved around characterizations of religion as a mere extension of imperial politics and thus as a technique for imperial domination. According to the imperialist framework, the Byzantine authorities actively sought to convert the foreign elites because Christianity supposedly assured foreign political allegiance to the Byzantine emperor. Alternatively, another dominant scholarly theme has emphasized the active role of the foreign elites who allegedly wanted to become Christians in order to assert their own political independence from the Byzantine empire itself. Paradoxically, scholars have rarely perceived the tension between the two views: the first, usually advocated by scholars of the empire, that presents the foreign elites' conversions as politically beneficial to the empire, and the second, usually supported by regional historians, that depicts the conversions as advantageous to the local state. On occasion, we could even find both points asserted in the same study with equal conviction without

historical reality, not least because they postulate a problematic dichotomy, stemming from Enlightenment ideas on "religion" as a sheer system of belief that could be extracted from general social and cultural practices. In this way for their own purposes, the Enlightenment thinkers ultimately pushed aside "religion" as a juxtaposition to "reason" and "rational philosophy." By the nineteenth century, the idea of "religion" intertwined with "ideology." Catholic theologians, especially, have found the connection between "religion" and "ideology" offensive and have continually resisted it. In either case, Byzantinists and modern western medieval historians ended up focusing on the political relationship between "Church" and "State," contrasting in effect "religion" and "secularism" on a presumptive basis, doing very little to show that such a distinction did in fact exist in the eyes of the Byzantines themselves. In effect, a study of "secularism" in Byzantium (if by "secularism" we mean a certain material, non-supernatural understanding of the world) does not exist. In introducing Ioannes Zonaras in his recent translation, for example, Thomas Banchich writes, "Zonaras' duty would have been to Church and State, a unity subsumed under the umbrella of Orthodoxy." *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*. Tr. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane. New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 2. But, Banchich simply imposes here the entrenched caesaropapist stereotype of Byzantium. He does not illustrate how this was in fact the case for Zonaras. For a conventional way of studying "caesaropapism" in Byzantium, see J.M. Hussey. *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. For Hussey's conclusion, see specifically pp. 299-300 where she argues that the Church was not a department of state, but functioned as its own independent institution.

explicitly finding out how the Byzantines or the locals themselves actually conceived of the conversion to Christianity.⁴

In addition to the problematic interpretations of the foreign elites' conversions, scholars of Byzantium have traditionally grounded the power of the Byzantine emperor on the sacred aura of Christianity.⁵ In such frameworks, the Byzantine emperor was supposedly God's direct representative on earth. When combined with the ideology of caesaropapism that presumably concentrated both the ecclesiastical and secular powers in the hands of the emperor, this allegedly meant that the advances of Byzantine Christianity

⁴ Dimitri Obolensky. *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. p. 98: "Yet, like Boris of Bulgaria, their rulers [i.e., of ninth-century Serbia] *must have come to realize that* [italics are mine], in the international Balkan world of the time, their paganism was an obstacle to political and cultural progress. It was at the beginning of Basil I's reign that the Serbs decided to seek admittance into the civilized world of Christendom." Note Obolensky's "national/international" framework for analyzing medieval politics. He may have not believed (and probably did not) that "the nation" in the Middle Ages was equivalent to modern-day "nation-states" with their ethos of exclusive ethnicity and cultural ideology. But, like many other historians, Obolensky postulates inherent connections and continuities between the cultural and political frameworks of his past actors and himself. Observe, moreover, Obolensky's unqualified equating of Christianity with "civilization" and of "paganism" with backwardness. Problems of historical determinism and progressivism aside, this point also highlights Obolensky's narrow equating of a ruler's accepting of Christianity with the state's presumed gaining of political membership into a larger (and somehow more civilized) consortium of states. But, royal conversions were generally accompanied with political and cultural turmoil, and they did not necessarily guarantee more stable foreign relations. Christianity, in other words, has never managed to establish a complete "political and cultural equality" among a fellowship of theocentric states. And anyway, the idea of "Christendom" as a global community of believers governed by "Christian" principles (understood in terms of monarchical political hierarchy) was a utopian ideal that came to flourish among Western thinkers in the High Middle Ages. In Byzantium, as my study will show, "Christendom," as described above, was an ideal only among a few theologians and ambitious patriarchs, but their views deviated from the general, elitist tendency of the Byzantines to see themselves as superior to the rest of the peoples both in terms of political organization and cultural achievements. Thus, Obolensky's argument is highly problematic and not well thought out. Observe also how he contradicted himself in a different context by claiming that the effects of the Slavic conversions in the southern Balkans did not result in "independence" and acceptance into an "international" community, but brought upon the converted Slavs Byzantine domination to the point of the Slavs' complete cultural and political obliteration. See pp. 80-81, "First subdued, then converted and finally civilized by Byzantium, the Slavs of the central and southern areas of the Balkan peninsula became Greeks." The referent "Greeks" is confusing here, for the Byzantine elites did generally imagine themselves as culturally "Hellenes," but not (or at least not until the later empire according to a recent study) as ethnically so. As is well known, the Byzantines thought of themselves as Romans. Obolensky's sentence, as it stands, could be taken to imply a certain form of Greek "proto-nationalism" or an anachronistic ethnic relationship between Greek-speaking Byzantines and modern Greeks. Much more could be said about Obolensky's highly problematic book. I will develop my objections in greater detail in the various chapters of my study.

⁵ Michael Angold. "Autobiography and Identity: the Case of the Later Byzantine Empire." *Byzantine Studies* 60, pp. 36-59. See specifically p. 37 where Angold claims that the emperor's Christianity assured his political sovereignty over his subjects.

were automatic advances for the Byzantine emperor, too. As we will see in this study, however, the emperor's actual relationship with Christianity was much more complicated, and Byzantine Christian groups at home or abroad regularly confronted the authority of the emperor and created difficulties for him that he could not always overcome.

In this study, we will encounter a number of cases involving Christians, like Pusicus above, who lived in polities foreign to the Byzantine empire. In particular, we will examine the degree to which the Byzantine imperial authorities were involved in the process of Christian proselytization and development abroad. Certainly, to look at the emperor and his relationship to Christianity outside of the boundaries of the empire is to fill a substantial gap in scholarship on Byzantium. It is also to put the empire where it belongs, not in "Eastern" isolation and exile, but within a larger and more integrated historical context on "religion" and "empire," "Christianity" and "conversion."⁶

Besides its obvious importance for understanding the development of Byzantine Christianity in foreign polities, the imperial mission abroad could also serve as a testimony to the general strength of the emperor's religious convictions. It would have been a secondary preoccupation of state authorities to proselytize abroad as opposed to the primary responsibility of defending the faith at home. If interested in his political survival, the emperor first needed to ensure the dominance of his own empowering ideology at home. Only then, he could turn to invest in Christian missions abroad.

⁶ Indeed, Byzantium does offer a marvelous example with relevance to modern definitions, scholarly and political, on "East" and "West," "European" and "Non-European." The empire contained in itself all the distinctive features of familiar contemporary debates over Christian/Non-Christian divides, "classical literature" as the symbol of the West, Roman law as an important factor of historically framing "European" mores and social categories. For explicit examples, see Anthony Kaldellis. *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Especially relevant are pp. 1-9 of the Introduction.

Finally, the Byzantine Christian imperial mission to foreign lands and their rulers is an important topic (perhaps even the most important in dispelling long-held assumptions) of the ways in which “the Christian Orthodox mission” operated in its most expansive stage to date. The Byzantine missions represent religious and cultural achievements, quite extraordinary and complex. Yet, they have been studied casually or on a case-by-case basis with little to no comparative effort.

This dissertation then, as it tries to be thorough and to connect various fields and approaches, is a hopeful invitation to scholars with relevant interests to participate, debate and where necessary to correct. Its questions are basic: “How did the Byzantine authors depict the role of the Byzantine emperor in Christian missions to foreign rulers? If the emperor was involved in proselytization, under what circumstances did he participate? Were the conversions of foreign royal elites to Christianity really an extension of imperial subject-making and thus of imperial expansion?”

This dissertation targets the issue of conversions of foreign royalty in particular, for this is where the most exploitable power to control and dominate was presumably concentrated: to convert the foreign ruler, some scholars tell us, is to convert the people. Where other studies on Byzantium and beyond see a “logical” and necessary connection between “religion and empire,” “conversion and expansion,” this dissertation challenges such assumptions and offers a much more nuanced perspective on Byzantine Christianity outside of the boundaries of the Byzantine state.

As this study would argue, scholars still have much work to do in order to remove many ungrounded assumptions about the ways, in which the Byzantines interacted with

Christianity, especially when they were dealing with foreign states and peoples.⁷ And, if compelled to state it in the extreme terms of the preceding scholarship, this dissertation ultimately advances a new thesis that the Byzantine emperors in the early period (at least according to the Byzantine writers on whose evidence we rely) remained generally uninterested in converting foreign rulers and elites. Thus, while in modern scholarly literature the conversion events hold a position of monumental importance, the Byzantines seemed to have been attracted to them only casually.

Broadly speaking, the conversion episodes examined in this dissertation functioned as literary tropes in the historical memory of the Byzantines. Later, post-Byzantine historians and writers, who went back to the conversion episodes, recast them according to their own objectives and for their own cultural and political purposes. Of course, the relationship between “ancient/medieval narratives” and their “modern interpretations” is always complicated, and my study offers no exception. However, by purposefully selecting foreign polities in the early Byzantine period (ca. A.D. 300-900) whose “royal conversions” their native modern ideologues have cast as monolithic and major events, I have tried to establish an explicit dialogue between “the Byzantine past” and “the modern present.” In every chapter, I have reserved a section that summarizes the influential modern interpretative trajectories along which the original Byzantine narratives have been reframed and imbued with new “relevant” meanings.

⁷ On the positive side, there has been a recent urge in modern scholarship to rethink the operations and repercussions of Byzantine missionary work. See Sergey A. Ivanov. *Византийское миссионерство: Можно ли сделать из “варвара” Христианина?* [Byzantine Missions: Is It Possible to Make a “Christian” out of a “Barbarian”?]. Москва: Языки Славянской культуры, 2003. Also, Jonathan Shepard, ed., *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe*. New Hampshire: Ashgate Variorum, 2007. And, Andrea Sterk. “Mission from Below: Captive Women and Conversion on the East Roman Frontiers.” *Church History* 79:1 (March, 2010), pp. 1-39. Also, see Andrea Sterk. “‘Representing’ Mission from Below: Historians as Interpreters and Agents of Christianization.” *Church History* 79:2 (June, 2010), pp. 271-305. None of these studies, however, examine explicitly the relationship between “conversion” and “empire” in Byzantium.

Despite the multiple important implications of the dissertation's findings, the main protagonists of my historical study are strictly Byzantium in general and "the Byzantine narrative of conversion" in particular. The focus on Byzantium will best allow us to see what "the foreign conversions to Christianity" meant to the Byzantines in the changing contexts of their long-lasting empire. Thus, we will travel from Armenia, to Georgia, to the Nilotic polities of Africa, into Arabia, and finally to the Balkans. Six hundred years and three continents make for a long journey. Anchoring the story back in Byzantium gives it coherence and keeps it true to the study's promised objective to trace the Byzantine depictions of foreign elite conversions to Christianity.

Before we turn to the Byzantines, however, we need to establish clearly our analytical categories and to define explicitly our terminology. Right at the outset, we need to note that the study ultimately revolves around two historical axes: one is the foreign elite's conversion to Christianity, and the other is the Byzantine state. Thus, "conversion" and "empire" are brought together and are recurrently interconnected in various contexts, but always with the larger comparative picture in mind that aims to put together the Byzantines' own notions on conversions abroad, including the Byzantines' perceptions on the relevance of Christian missions to empire-building. Given the intense scholarly debates and recent preoccupations with theories on "conversion" and "empire," we should provide some explanations and basic analytical definitions relevant to our specific case of Byzantium here.

The Byzantine Emperor and the Christian Narrative

Christianity and emperorship have been two major coordinates of Byzantine history ever since fourth-century writers started to measure time, evaluate historical movement, or appraise execution of power in Christian terms. Incorporated into the genre of the Christian chronicle in particular, the emperor was inserted into a sacred history, in which he behaved as a divine agent on earth and was measured on a scale of personal piety and spiritual commitment. For example, here is how the chronicler Theophanes in the ninth century was still writing about the emperor Constantine of the fourth, “Becoming by God’s providence the first emperor of the Christians, he gained power over many barbarians from Britain to Persia and over tyrants from his own people, destroying his enemies by the sign of the life-giving Cross.”⁸ Such associations of Christianity with divine empowerment of the emperor became widespread in Byzantine literature and, as we have pointed out above, have managed to seduce even modern scholars who have consistently depicted the Byzantine emperor as an absolute ruler, a religious leader, or as “God’s direct representative on earth.”⁹ We need to be more critical of “the Christian narrative,” and, in this study, we will place the emperor in the

⁸ Theophanes Confessor. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor. Vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963): pp. 3-503. p. 33, lines 26-28: πρῶτος βασιλεὺς Χριστιανῶν θεοῦ προνοία χρηματίσας πολλῶν βαρβάρων ἐκράτησεν ἀπὸ Βρετανίας ἕως Περσικῆς καὶ τῶν ὁμοφύλων τυράννων, τῷ σημείῳ τοῦ ζωοποιοῦ σταυροῦ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὀλέσκων. I keep the literal translation of “τυράννων” as “tyrants.” But, most modern translators, who deal with Byzantine sources, tend to prefer “usurpers.” Explicit reasons for such choices are rarely provided, but my understanding is that translators prefer “usurpers” so as to highlight the divine association of the Byzantine emperor, though, as we have already pointed out above, modern scholars have largely simplified and exaggerated the notion of caesaropapism in Byzantium.

⁹ For one extreme example among many, see Deno Geanakoplos. *Byzantium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. p. 17. See also George Ostrogorsky. “The Byzantine Emperor and the Hierarchical World Order.” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 35, No. 84 (Dec., 1956), pp. 1-14. See especially p. 2. Art historians have adopted and proliferated the same facile claims. See for one example, Robin Cormack. *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. p. 252: “The emperor inherited or usurped his title and claimed a unique position in the political organization as the representative on earth of a divine order in Heaven—a divine order which itself mirrored the scheme on earth.”

historical context of his everyday activities and of his practical concerns with government. Then, we will evaluate the Byzantine narratives of the emperor's Christianity and his dealings with it.

In Byzantine Christian literature, conversions, too, have been framed along the lines of specific narrative tropes that revolved around divine miracles, providential change of heart, or personal crises healed by Christianity's salvific force. Primarily, it was the story of Apostle Paul that inspired and prompted future writers to imitate it when dealing with issues and effects of conversion. The sudden and powerful change of mind and heart that presumably shook Paul from his old "evil" ways was repeated in numerous subsequent hagiographies that sought to impress and attract future disciples. Quite interestingly, the later, Byzantine narrative did not choose to draw its plot from the discipleships of Peter or Andrew on the Sea of Galilee, both of whom were supposedly in direct contact with Jesus and thus were closer to "the source," God Himself as the Council of Nicaea in 325 would have it. Instead, narratives, like the one quoted above about Constantine, borrowed motifs from Luke and conceived of conversion in particular as a sudden and dramatic change of a profound and internal disposition. The unique feature of Luke's story, which attracted its future imitators, was that Paul was not converted by Jesus' teachings, but was rather transformed by an experience, a *post-mortem* revelation of Christ.¹⁰ In following Luke and his protagonist Paul, therefore,

¹⁰ For a study that examines Paul's conversion, see Alan F. Segal. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Segal engages with social anthropology and thus emphasizes the specific influence that the Pharisaic and other Jewish communities exercised upon Paul both before and after his reported point of conversion to Christianity. Segal studies conversion as a socio-cultural phenomenon whose modes of expression are shaped and dictated by the idioms of specific communities. Generally, Segal criticizes psychological models as they tend to universalize "conversion" and thus tend to neglect the cultural specificity of the ways "subjects" imagine and narrate their experiences. For the explicit objectives of Segal's study, see p. xiv of the Introduction. For Segal's definition of "conversion," see p. 6: "By using the term *conversion* I wish to stress the wrenching

future generations shifted attention away from “the historical Jesus” to preoccupations with divine revelations and miracles through which God supposedly participated in His creation and worked directly in people’s lives. This thematic line eventually found numerous and quite complex theological justifications and intricate argumentations.

Especially in terms of conversion, the early Christian narratives have powerfully affected even modern scholars. Focusing on Paul-like experiences in the existing evidence, A.D. Nock provided a now famous definition of conversion. “By conversion,” Nock wrote, “we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”¹¹ Defined so narrowly, “conversion” is strictly reserved for a limited number of cases. According to Nock, the majority of people only “adhere” to a new religion. In cases of “adhesion,” people merely “adopt” and “assimilate” a few basic beliefs without changing their general lifestyles and religious practices.

Criticizing Nock for his limited definition of conversion, largely focused on a radical change of belief, recent cultural anthropologists and social historians have emphasized the complexity of factors that lead people to move to a new religious system. Continuous hesitations, personal and communal challenges after the reported conversion

and decisive change of Paul’s entrance to Christianity, thereby linking Paul with many modern accounts of conversion. Despite considerable difference of opinion in modern scholarship about the definition of a convert, conversion does involve a radical change in a person’s experience. In modern usage and social science the word *conversion* can denote moving from one sect or denomination to another within the same religion, if the change is radical.”

¹¹ A.D. Nock. *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998 (reprinted, first edition: 1933), p. 7. For a recent example, employing Nock’s definition, see Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier. *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.

haunt and frame the “new” *self* of the neophyte.¹² In light of this, recent scholars have depicted conversion as a process, not as a single, identifiable moment that marks a point of no return as Luke and many other Byzantine writers would have us believe.¹³

In this study, we are interested in determining to what degree (if at all) the Byzantine emperor made any attempts (successful or not) to affect the religious beliefs and/or practices of foreign royal families and/or elites. In Nock’s framework, therefore, we are technically dealing with examples of “conversion” and “adhesion.” However, it is important to remember that we are limiting ourselves only to the Byzantine depictions of the events. Thus, we will keep a critical perspective, informed by modern anthropology and ethnography that highlight the complexities of conversion, but will not attempt to uncover the long social and cultural processes that operated in the foreign lands to bring about Christianity there. Obviously impossible to answer questions about the convert’s sincerity and issues of individual or social psychology will not be explored either.

Since our specific context is the foreign imperial mission, it is important to point out that the problematic understanding of “empire” as entailed both in Byzantine historiography and in the broader scholarship poses serious analytical challenges. Thus,

¹² For a comparative and methodological example see E. Natalie Rothman. “Becoming Venetian: Conversion and Transformation in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean.” *Mediterranean Historical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2006. pp. 39-40. For an anthropological criticism on modern definitions of conversion, see Webb Keane. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. For an anthropologist’s tracing of the production of “religion” as a separate historical category, ultimately rooted in Western conceptions of “the sacred” and an Enlightenment emphasis on “belief,” see Talal Asad. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons for Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

¹³ For a study of religion as a set of complex and shifting social practices, see Paul Christopher Johnson. *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Johnson argues that by focusing on religion in practice and studying it as a historical category we can better understand “how beliefs may remain in place without the practice that ideally accompanies them or, in the inverse case, how ritual practice may be detached from cognitive beliefs that once buttressed them; how different religions may favor actions over belief, and vice versa; and how the symbols of any religion may break free from a community of practice and be appropriated elsewhere...” See particularly, pp. 14-17.

for Byzantinists who have continuously seen the hand of the emperor everywhere, it is easy to see practically all missions as “imperial.” As pointed out above, Byzantinists have become accustomed to understand Byzantine Christianity abroad as a mode of diplomacy, in fact a particularly “byzantine” technique to establish control without the expense of war and the disruption of conflict. For these reasons, I have provided large sections that establish the political and geographical context in the given region. I have also highlighted the Byzantines’ own cultural and social priorities in constructing their narratives.

“Kingdoms,” too, present a problem of terminology. Generally, scholars have used the political term without having made important qualifications. By reading through the modern literature, one could easily get the false impression that the foreign polities, with which early Byzantium interacted, were more centralized and more stable than they were in reality. The foreign “kings” of Armenia, Georgia, Ethiopia, or Bulgaria whom we will meet in the subsequent chapters, were basically nominal figures of authority in largely decentralized polities. Certainly, they struggled to strengthen and entrench their power, but they had no tangible means to publicize or enforce their policies. Even the rulers themselves and the local noblemen were often basically illiterate as, of course, were most of the people in their polities.

Emerging out of tribal societies where kinship and brute force were determining factors of power, the “kings” were essentially local strongmen. Generally, they relied on their own physical strength and ability to inspire and lead, usually in person, their “soldiers.” Standing, professional armies were a luxury, so “the soldiers” were usually gathered from the local population. Thus, when we come upon the words “kingdom” and

“king” in this study, we should remember the social, institutional, and logistical limitations that prevented the local political elite to enforce any policy in the wider society.

In a political context where “the king” could tangibly exercise his power in a very limited way, the royal Christian converts usually affected first their close family members, then their relatives, and finally the noblemen who felt obliged to follow “the king” in order to avoid his possible attacks or penalties. But, even then, “the king” and his family were concerned with practical, this-worldly affairs. Eternal salvation through Christ or worrying about the nuances of theology and “orthodoxy” were rarely issues that preoccupied them. Instead, “the king” sought God’s personal favor and material benefits for his kingdom. We need to remember the lessons of ethnography and realize that, with few exceptions, most people simply “adhered” to Christianity, adopting certain basics of the new religion and vaguely assimilating them into their traditional practices.

Even the building of local churches could change local peasant customs in a limited way. The functions of magical spells, amulets, miraculous trees, rocks, village women with special gifts, fortune-tellers, etc. were not supplanted by the coming of a priest in the local community. They all continued to be practiced and were believed to “work.” Thus, they were thought to deliver cures against disease, to provide conversations with dead ancestors, to reveal secrets for hidden treasures, or to make promises for future successes, etc. in *this world*, not the one to come. As we are about to witness numerous hagiographical examples of dramatic royal conversions and miraculous divine interventions, we need to remember the specific historical context, in which the Christian stories were written as well as the audiences for whom they were composed.

The repetitive insistence on Christ's miracles, the power of God's healing, or Christ's deliverance of a royal victory aimed to establish and assure, time and again, everyone, from powerful rulers to most despondent slaves, that Christianity "worked," and, of course, in the best possible way, too.

Note on Sources and Methodological Approach

In its most basic sense, my dissertation relies on research that primarily consists of reading through a variety of sources in Byzantine Greek and examining closely the ways, in which their authors describe the foreign elites' conversions to Christianity. Thus, I have studied conversion narratives as they appear in saints' lives, chronicles, histories, letters, poems, or ancient and medieval travel literature. In addition to later Byzantine writings, I have engaged with ancient classical Greek or Latin authors. The Byzantines loved their "Classics" and productively interacted with the ancients. Key philosophical and literary ideas travelled from antiquity into Byzantium and continued to ring true and relevant to the Byzantines during all phases of their historical development. Especially in ethnographic depictions and cultural evaluations, both of which have been important for this study, the Byzantines largely re-applied classical norms and terms. I have tried to establish and explain these and other important intellectual and cultural relationships between the ancients and the Byzantines. Similarly, I have drawn from biblical texts or motifs and have interacted at length with famous stories from the Jewish or early Christian past that also powerfully framed the Byzantine ways of thinking about the world.

Where I have thought it important and it has been possible for the purposes of establishing historical context or to deepen the level of analysis, I have included significant native authors' perspectives. In some of these cases, I have had to rely on other scholars' translations. I have used the native sources only to clarify and to deepen the historical context around the Byzantine perspectives. Right at the outset, I have admitted that I have not set out to examine the complex, long processes of Christianization in any of the regions included in my dissertation. Thus, I have used only these select local perspectives that have most aptly highlighted (by contrast or comparison) the views of the Byzantines.

Each chapter, with the exception of the first that sets out to establish the larger imperial context, is a variation on a theme. First, I provide the geographical, political, and cultural context of the Byzantine empire vis-à-vis the given polity that the particular chapter explores. Then, I organize in a chronological order the different narratives of regional Christianity in general and of the native elite's conversion in particular. Finally, I examine some of the modern dominant interpretations and their political and cultural implications.

Since all of the conversions in this study have ultimately been appropriated by nationalist ideologies, I have accentuated the effects of the use of Christianity in modern nationalism and have traced in broad scopes the trajectories along which national Churches and their presumed traditions developed. Strictly speaking, the modern sections to my chapters are tangential to the primary scope of the dissertation. Yet, I consider them important. Even today, the nationalist interpretations of the Byzantine stories are repeated and taught in these countries' schools. Thus, it is important to make

explicit the interpretative problems that derive from the tendentious parcelling of the empire and Christianity. In addition, when read carefully with all of their implications, the modern sections open new critical possibilities for more productive cultural and social interactions among separate Christian Churches, their communities, and even between Christians and non-Christians.

Strictly in terms of the Byzantine narratives, I have tried to situate them within the general context of the author's work and also within the larger political and cultural framework of the Byzantine empire. In this way, I have tried to show how even seemingly formulaic narratives of Christian conversion brighten up with new meanings and wonderful surprises when set in different contexts. Clearly, this is an approach designed to be sensitive to the specific Byzantine notions of conversion and their iterations over time. But more than that, my approach examines equally thoroughly all the variations in a given story. Thus, I have purposefully avoided from dismissing some stories as "legendary" while embracing others as "facts." Instead, I have thought it sufficient that they all made sense in one way or another to the Byzantines. My challenge has been to explain why the Byzantines wrote their stories the way they did and what cultural and political contexts underpinned the conversion narratives to make them plausible to various Byzantine audiences.

In most of the instances, the conversion narratives were written several centuries after the presumed original events. Thus, even to the Byzantines, the narratives stood as cultural retrospections that had their own separate agendas independent from the original events. It has been my conscious goal to unveil these agendas in order to elucidate the complex process of historical remembering in Byzantium. To create a vivid cultural

memory asked for more than the personal intellectual resources of a given author. To be successful, the conversion narrative had to be adjusted to the tastes and expectations of a given audience. Thus, as we will see, the Byzantines readily reframed the conversion narratives and turned them into their own cultural symbols whose meanings changed over time.

Through the age-old themes of the conversion narratives, the Byzantines tended to convey sharp social and political commentaries pertinent to their own times. When understood as cultural retrospections, in other words, the conversion narratives blur conceptual historical divisions between “fact” and “fiction.” Often “fictional” from the perspective of the original events, they become “factual” from the perspective of the contemporaneity for which they were designed. It has been one my biggest challenges to navigate between the two. By providing deep political and cultural context around each case, I have tried to make clear to the critical reader the significant nuances in every Byzantine story.

Chronological Scope and Historical Parameters of the Study

The dissertation opens with a chapter that focuses on the foreign policies of the emperor Constantine (r. 324-337) after his reported Christian conversion. In light of scholarly insistence that Constantine used his Christianity as a tool of foreign policy, I explore the political tensions between the Romans and the Persians. I focus on Constantine’s famous letter to the Persian *shah* Shapur II (r. 309-379), in which the Roman emperor inserted issues of Christianity. Finally, I examine the personal turmoils of Shapur’s elder brother Hormisdas, the rightful heir to the Persian throne, and focus on

his life in exile in Constantine's Christian empire. Primarily, the chapter is concerned with the particular ways, in which Constantine's letter envisioned the emperor's role in Christian communities outside of the Roman empire. Only then, does it move to explore Constantine's treatment of the non-Christian Persian exile Hormisdas in the officially Christian Roman state.

The first chapter is designed to set the tone and to provide the context for the rest of the dissertation. All subsequent chapters cover a specific polity and examine the various ways, in which the Byzantines understood and depicted local Christianity. We will also explore to what degree the empire helped to further local Christianity. In particular, *Chapters 2 through 5* focus on local elites and their conversions to Christianity, though the reader will encounter relevant ancient and medieval authors who supply the pre-Christian cultural connections. We will also look at "the forward" (post-Christian conversion) cultural relationships between the Byzantine empire and the local polity. In order to make it easier for the reader and to accommodate different scholarly interests, I have divided each chapter into sections. In each section, I study an important historical variable: political geography, imperial and foreign polity's cultural and social relationships, the foreign elite's conversion narratives primarily written by Byzantine authors, and finally dominant modern interpretations.

Although each chapter offers its separate conclusions, the dissertation is linked by the overarching theme of the study: the nature of the Byzantine narratives of foreign conversions. Since this dissertation covers six centuries of Byzantine history, I have added broad introductory overviews of important developments to these chapters that mark major transitions in Byzantium. Thus, there is no general summary of Byzantine

events between the chapter on Armenia and the chapter on Georgia. However, there are detailed transitional sections in the chapters on Africa and Bulgaria respectively. To certain impatient readers, familiar with basic Byzantine history, these general summaries might appear superfluous as they do postpone the direct examination of the local conversions. However, after some hesitation, I have decided to include them as I have come to believe that they help with the setting of historical context and show some of the inner imperial tensions that have influenced the Byzantine foreign relations with the local polities.

In the long chronology of the study, there are groups whose reported conversions I have not covered. In the West, for example, there were the Goths, the Franks, the Lombards, and others. In the East, there were the Lazis, the Huns, the Chinese of the Tang Dynasty, the people on the Malabar coast of India, and others. In addition to the fact that such an exhaustive treatment would have required a multi-volume work, I have focused only on those eastern polities that have developed independent and still-dominant national ecclesiastical traditions. Early on in my research, I decided to exclude the West first because the national traditions are better known to general medievalists and also because the Byzantines themselves, due to the diminution of their imperial territory, commented mostly on the eastern polities.

For the ninth century, I have constrained myself only to Bulgaria due to the great importance that scholars have placed on this example. Thus, I have treated Bulgaria in some detail, first presenting “the traditional scholarly narrative” and then I have presented the Byzantine perspectives on the conversion events. Usually conflated into a single narrative, the multiple Byzantine perspectives find themselves either silenced or

subordinated to scholarly interpretations that have tried to discover in the Byzantine sources the voice of the Bulgarians. The chapter is important because it indicates the ways, in which scholars tend to amplify this case and to label it as representative for all Byzantine proselytizing operations.

Aside from the brief chapters' overview here, I should make a note of my chronological boundary. Given the objectives of the dissertation to trace the Byzantine narratives, which have been swept into tendentious modern interpretations that stand as supporting platforms for national Churches, it would have been fitting to include the conversion of medieval Rus'. However, my treatment of Rus' at this point would have added very little. In addition, the famous story of the Russian elite inviting the Byzantine proselytizers already supports one of the general points of my study. The story nicely highlights the passivity of the Byzantine administration in the conversion scenario.

Basic Terminology

Before we turn to the Byzantines in the subsequent chapters, two final terminological and conceptual remarks are necessary. The first one goes back to the roots of "Byzantine Studies" as a modern academic discipline. The second remark nicely takes us to a key episode at the turn of the twentieth century with Adolf von Harnack, one of the most important pioneering scholars of Christianity and Christian missions.

The first issue reminds us of the well-known fact that the historical people whom scholars today identify as "Byzantines" actually called themselves "Romans." Affected by visions of Western Europe as the epitome of historical progress, scholars and intellectuals appropriated "Rome" for their notions of political and cultural identity.

Thus, while “Rome” stood for “Western” glory, “Byzantium” signified “Eastern” decadence and corruption. For example, here is how the philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel, who famously understood “History” as an inevitable progress culminating into Western/Germanic supremacy, thought about “Byzantium:”

The history of the highly civilized Eastern Empire—where, as we might suppose, the Spirit of Christianity could be taken up in its truth and purity—exhibits to us a millennial series of uninterrupted crimes, weaknesses, basenesses and want of principles.¹⁴

Such basic generalizations have been prevalent among scholars and intellectuals for much longer than they should have, though the good news is that today we have moved beyond them. Thus, instead of ideological divisions, the term “Byzantium” now basically marks the beginning of the post-Constantinian empire in the fourth century A.D., though some scholars have pushed the Byzantine origin as late as the reign of the emperor Heraclius in the seventh century. The end of “Byzantium” is almost universally agreed upon and is thus set with the fall of Constantinople under the Ottomans in 1453. This chronology is fine, so long as we recognize that many of the divisions are artificial and that they should serve to clarify major historical transitions, not to support tendentious ideological claims.

In light of the above concerns, I have been tempted to refer to the “Byzantines” consistently as “Romans,” but this would have twisted too many scholarly habits at the same time. Thus, I have used the two cultural referents interchangeably, especially in the earlier Constantinian period. From the emperor Justinian in the sixth century onwards, I have used “Byzantium,” but even then “Rome” and “Roman empire” do appear in my

¹⁴ Philosophy of History. Tr. J. Shibree. New York, 1944. p. 338.

text. All in all, I have moved beyond the strict demarcations of the field and thus freely employ both referents.

With the above stipulations in mind, let us now turn to the second point of terminology highlighted with an anecdote involving Adolf von Harnack in the year 1900. A historian and a theologian, Harnack's greatest accomplishment was his multi-volume work on the development of Christian dogma.¹⁵ The scholarly recognition for his intellectual accomplishments came. As a way of honoring him, Harnack in 1900 was asked to give a series of lectures at the University of Berlin. In response to the cultural shifts at the turn of the century, Harnack published his lectures under the title, "The Essence of Christianity."¹⁶ From the perspective of intellectual history, Harnack's lectures came at a very opportune time. In 1900, Friedrich Nietzsche died, and Sigmund Freud was in the process of publishing his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Harnack had to confront some basic presuppositions:

The question may even be asked whether there is any such generic conception as "religion" at all. Is the common element in it anything more than a vague disposition? Is it only an empty place in our innermost being that the word denotes, which everyone fills up in a different fashion and many do not perceive at all?¹⁷

Harnack's essential response to his own difficult question was that "at bottom we have to do here with something which is common to all, and which in the course of history has struggled up out of torpor and discord into unity and light."¹⁸ Today, scholars continue to grapple with Harnack's question about "the essence of religion," and some of

¹⁵ Adolf von Harnack. *History of Dogma*. Tr. Neil Buchanan (from 3rd German edition). 1976.

¹⁶ The lectures were published in English under the title, *What Is Christianity?* Tr. Thomas Bailey Saunders. Philadelphia: Fortress Texts in Modern Theology, 1986.

¹⁷ *What Is Christianity?*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *What Is Christianity?*, p. 9.

their theoretical conclusions get quite labyrinthine. Two are the basic points of theoretical criticism relevant to my study here.

One criticism cautions against defining “Christianity” too narrowly by prioritizing “religious belief” over “religious practice,” thus excluding the majority of theologically-illiterate people who prioritize “practice” over “belief.” Especially in the context of illiterate societies, as was largely the case in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, most people’s “Christianity” boiled down to certain basic practices into which they could assimilate a saint or Jesus Christ without significant changes in their ritual habits. We have already outlined some of these patterns above. Thus, so long as the new adaptations were thought functional and beneficial to the individual or the community, even obvious theological inconsistencies were found unproblematic.¹⁹ In other words, from a modern analytical perspective, we are describing a culture of “syncretism,” but to the people living in such a context, this was simply their way of being, “their actual reality.”²⁰ In these cases, even basic theological knowledge is lacking, and thus “conversion” in the strict Pauline belief-based sense is not possible. Instead, we could write about “adhesion,” “acculturation,” “assimilation,” or “socialization.” Given my focus on the Byzantine narratives and their ways of framing the foreign elites’ conversion, this caveat is important to the degree to which some scholars are quick to believe the medieval depictions of sudden mass conversions.

The second criticism questions the analytical adequacy of terms like “paganism,” “heresy,” or “orthodoxy.” The argument is that Christianity is a complex social system

¹⁹ For a clear discussion on some of these issues, see John V.A. Fine, Jr. *The Bosnian Church: Its Place in State and Society from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century, A New Interpretation*. London, 2007 (second edition). See especially Chapter 1: “Religion in Bosnia’s Peasant Society.”

²⁰ For some interesting examples, see Joseph L. Conrad. “Bulgarian Magic Charms: Ritual, Form, and Content.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp. 548-562.

and if studied historically, these terms blur the particular social contingencies and box the historical subjects into categories that they themselves would not have recognized or accepted. In addition, the terminology carries the sense of predetermined teleology as “Orthodoxy” supposedly travelled without interruption or changes through the ages. This is a valid concern, particularly for the terminology that I employ in my study. Several points of clarification are, therefore, necessary.

I have decided to deal with the above conceptual problems in a relatively straightforward way. Since I follow the Byzantine notions, I have kept their own terminology with one major exception. The exception comes with the referent “Christianity.” I write “Christianity” when I mean to include all possible beliefs and practices that derive their authority, however putatively, from claims about Jesus Christ. Most Byzantine theologians would have reserved “Christianity” only for those people who shared their own particular views and would have sought to discredit their opponents as “non-Christians” or “heretics.”

Obviously, the notions of legitimate Christianity changed over time. Thus, I have brought in “orthodoxy.” I use lower-case “orthodoxy” to denote the official traditional stance of all Churches and their communities that accepted the primary seven ecumenical councils (from Nicaea in 325 to Second Nicaea in 787). I have reserved upper-case “Orthodoxy” for the institutional Church that rejected the papal claims for ultimate supremacy in Catholicism. I have kept the terms “paganism” and “heresy.” The Byzantines used all of the above terms even if they recurrently debated and fought over what stood behind the actual categories. By keeping to the Byzantine terms, I not only stay true to my particular historical subjects and their preferred terminology, but also

show how their specific categories historically developed and what was excluded or included from them at a given time or place.

A final comment, even if self-evident, is necessary. My study would not have been possible without the findings and hard work of so many other scholars. My deep admiration for their efforts have inspired me and have guided my own scholarly investigations. Here at the end of this *Introduction*, I would like to reset some of Harnack's words above for a different context.

“Torpor and discord,” it appears to me, often stir historians, but it is “unity and light” that guide the best of their intentions. Even in these cases, in which I have disagreed with other scholars, I have done so with profound respect and openness for their different interpretations and conclusions. Thus, with this important acknowledgement in mind and remembering the stipulations and definitions from above, we are now ready to turn to the Byzantines and their depictions of Christian conversions abroad.



Map 1: The Mediterranean in 350

Chapter 2

Bishop over “Those Outside”: Imperial Diplomacy and the Boundaries of Constantine’s Christianity

The unprecedented decision of Constantine to propound Christianity throughout the Roman empire and the long-lasting historical consequences of that decision have justifiably generated a vast number of analyses and opinions: ancient, medieval, and modern. In retrospect and as a broad generalization that wraps together many events and centuries, it was Constantine’s insertion of Roman-style institutional mechanisms into Christianity that outlined and sustained the basic tenets of “Orthodoxy,” steered its particular kind of “belief” and “practice,” and tried to minimize the effects of local cultural differences right from the beginning. From a strictly historical perspective (for theology and metaphysics have their own set of separate premises), Constantine did for “Orthodoxy” just as much as Paul had done for “Christianity.” For, in effect, Constantine’s intervention codified the “Authority of the Church” as divinely inspired and built into the future Orthodox Church a permanent inner connectivity with a specific “Apostolic and Patristic Tradition.”

Conventionally, scholars have dated Constantine’s personal conversion to 312 with his famous vision at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. As important as this date might be in the private life of the emperor, it indicates little about the ways, in which he

explicitly imagined his own role in Christianity. Thus, it is another seemingly more minor event that should draw our attention here. At some point, around the Council of Nicaea in 325, Constantine invited some close friends and bishops over for dinner. It was in the comfort of good food and a private circle that Constantine slipped his own musings on what a Christian emperor should actually be. “You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside,” these were Constantine’s words as recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea who insisted that he had overheard them in person (εἰπὼν ῥήμασιν ἐφ’ ἡμετέροις ἀκοαῖς).²¹

Eusebius inserted the short anecdote after mentioning Constantine’s prohibitions against non-Christian practices for those under Roman rule (τοῖς ὑπὸ τῆ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆ δῆμοις)²² and an order for strict enforcement of a new calendar.²³ Both of these decrees aimed no less than to eliminate old habits and to reorganize time by centering it

²¹ Eusebius. *Vita Constantini*. Ed. F. Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke, Band 1.1: Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975]: 3-151. Book IV: 24: Ἐνθεν εἰκότως αὐτὸς ἐν ἐστίασει ποτὲ δεξιούμενος ἐπισκόπους λόγον ἀφήκεν, ὡς ἄρα καὶ αὐτὸς εἶη ἐπίσκοπος, ὧδέ πη αὐτοῖς εἰπὼν ῥήμασιν ἐφ’ ἡμετέροις ἀκοαῖς. “ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος ἐπίσκοπος ἂν εἶην.” ἀκόλουθα δὲ τῷ λόγῳ διανοούμενος τοὺς ἀρχομένους ἅπαντας ἐπεσκόπει, προὔτρεπέ τε ὅσπηρ ἂν ἡ δύναμις τὸν εὐσεβῆ μεταδιώκειν βίον. See Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, translators. Eusebius of Caesarea. *Life of Constantine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. p. 161. Also, see p. 320 in the Commentary for important bibliography on Constantine’s phrase, “bishop of those outside.” The scholarly dispute on the authenticity of Constantine’s speeches as inserted by Eusebius is wide-ranging. For a careful study of Eusebius’ sources in writing the *Life*, see A.H.M. Jones and T.C. Skeat. “Notes on the genuineness of the Constantinian documents in Eusebius’ ‘Life of Constantine.’” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5 (1954), pp. 194-200. The authors support indeed the authenticity of some Eusebian materials used in his writing.

²² The precise meaning of “δῆμοις” in the plural dative is unclear here, for it could mean “the people” in general, or “peoples,” thus implying all political entities whose allegiance lies with Rome.

²³ For a study that traces the long development and establishment of the Christian calendar as normative throughout the Roman empire, see Angelo Di Berardino. “Un temps pour la prière et un temps pour le divertissement (CTh XV, 5).” Eds. Jean-Noël Guinot and François Richard. *Empire Chrétien et Église aux IVe et Ve siècles: intégration ou “concordat”?, le témoignage du Code Théodosien*. Paris: Institut des Sources Chrétiennes, 2008. pp. 319-340. See p. 332 (the English translation is mine), “From the second century, Christians developed in their turn a calendar, which was appropriate to them—different and distinct from the pagan calendar—centered on Easter, the Pentecost, the Sundays and different commemorations of the martyrs.” The author draws his evidence from Tertullian, *Cor. 13, 4* and again for the claim that Christians should not participate in pagan feasts, Tertullian, *Idol. 14, 7*.

on the importance of Sunday and on the days of various saints.²⁴ Thus, local, spontaneous cults and practices were converted into state-decreed holidays. Functioning now as mandatory public events, they sought to teach and to inspire their audiences by sermons, or speeches, elaborate processions, or state parades.²⁵ A long chain of laws enforcing the new calendar and the ban against pagan practices extends throughout the laws of the Theodosian Code.²⁶ It reaffirms Eusebius' report here in the *Life of*

²⁴ For a study that examines the history of "Sunday" during the first three centuries after Christ see Klaus Martin Girardet. "L'invention du dimanche: du jour du soleil au dimanche: le *dies Solis* dans la législation et la politique de Constantin le Grand." Eds. Jean-Noël Guinot and François Richard. *Empire Chrétien et Église aux IVe et Ve siècles: intégration ou "concordat"?, le témoignage du Code Théodosien*. Paris: Institut des Sources Chrétiennes, 2008. pp. 341-370. See p. 341 where Girardet points out that in antiquity, the Romans already conceived of Sunday as a special day associated with the god *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquerable Sun). Already in the first century, little after the death of Jesus, Sunday for the Christians became the day of the divine service. However, neither "pagan" nor Christian thinkers at the time associated Sunday as a day of rest. Before the fourth century, there had never been an official day of rest that was to reoccur each week in the entire ancient world with the sole exception of the Jewish Sabbath (modern Saturday in the Christian calendar that we now follow). But, after Constantine's legislative reforms (the two laws of 321 in particular), the *dies Solis* (Sunday, the day of the Sun) became a mandatory day of celebration and rest. This Constantinian law revolutionized completely the Roman system of measuring public time, and as a result it drastically changed the entire rhythm of life, which we have adopted and follow. Western thinkers in the later Middle Ages further developed the specifics of the Christian calendar when they tried to find precise ways of calculating Easter (i.e., the Gregorian instead of the Julian calendar. Today, the Gregorian calendar has largely prevailed, though certain Orthodox communities still follow the Julian one). For a comparative study on "time" that highlights its cultural and social dimensions as it also evaluates the ways, in which different cultural conceptualizations of "time" affect the very production of historical or anthropological narratives, see Diane Owen Hughes and Thomas R. Trautmann, eds. *Time: Histories and Ethnologies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. For a more theoretical framing of the problem within the fields of "history" and "anthropology," see specifically the Introduction, pp. 1-18.

²⁵ Eusebius. *Vita Constantini*. Ed. F. Winkelmann. Book IV, 23: 1-5.

²⁶ For laws enforcing Sunday as a day of special veneration, see *Code Théodosien I-XV, Code Justinien, Constitutions Sirmondiennes*. Volume II, Book II: 8.1 (Sunday as a day of veneration); Book II: 8.18 (Sunday as a day of rest); Book II: 8.20 (games and spectacles prohibited on Sunday); Book II: 8.23 (races, spectacles, theatrical plays prohibited on Sunday, especially in the regions of the East); Book III: 12, 2 (obligatory day of rest on Sunday); Book VIII: 8.1 (tax collecting prohibited on Sunday); Book IX: 3.7 (humane treatment of prisoners on Sunday). For some examples of imperial laws against the so-called paganism, see *Code Théodosien XVI: Les Lois Religieuses des Empereurs Romains de Constantin à Théodose II*. Volume I. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005. 10.6 (prohibition against sacrificial practices and worship of imperial statues); 10.7 (prohibition against seers and diviners of the future); 10.9 (prohibition against trying to divine the future); 10.10 (general interdiction against paganism); 10.11 (general interdiction against paganism); 10.12 (prohibition against pagan usage of incense, wine, perfume for family gods, suspended garlands, or lighting up lamps; prohibition also against the worship of trees); 10.13 (general prohibition against paganism in the East); 10.14 (paganism and its leaders banished); 10.19 (statues must be removed from their base; pagan temples' pensions to go to the military); 10.21 (pagans excluded from administrative and state offices); 10.22 (law that opens with a remark of surprise that there were still pagan practices and reiterates a general prohibition again).

Constantine and illustrates also Constantine's determination and commitment to implant a Christian "common sense" by rooting it into the novel conception of time and the practices of a new "everyday."

Yet, these laws could be enforced effectively only in Roman lands. After all, even within the empire, such policies faced massive obstacles. Distance and bureaucracy bogged down the communication between the central and the local governments. Local police forces, too, had a hard time putting laws into practice if we are to take seriously the loud outcries of many victims against thieves, bandits, pirates, or even what were *de facto* mafia bosses with their own networks of power. As is now well-known, village communities emerged out of the shards of broken cities in the later empire and were (as they still are) skeptical of novelties and quite good at dodging the administrative hand of the central government. The very inadequacies of practically illiterate local priests or monks, who were often themselves attracted by the perceived power of local superstitions, magical objects, or practices blurred Constantine's laws and diminished their actual effectiveness, too.²⁷ Perhaps the best attestation to the entrenched strength of these obstacles of legal enforcement and the stubbornness of "the local" is the long-lasting survival of "pagan," non-Constantinian practices in certain regions of the former

²⁷ Even in formal imperial decrees, certain pagan elements persisted. For example, Constantine prohibited private *haruspices*, but allowed the public ones. If lightning were to strike the imperial palace, Constantine decreed in 319, professional *haruspices* had to be consulted. See *Code Théodosien XVI: Les Lois Religieuses des Empereurs Romains de Constantin à Théodose II*. Volume I. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005. 10.1. Public *haruspices* remained legal until 410, see ff. 2. For primary evidence, the *Code*'s commentators rely on Sozomen IX, 6 and Zosimos V, 41, 2-3. The occupation of the Roman *haruspices* was to divine the future, which they did by a method that involved cutting animals open and discerning their insides.

Roman empire to this very day, particularly in villages where a Christian veneer is attached to basically “pagan” rituals and practices.²⁸

What did then Constantine (or Eusebius) mean by “bishop over those outside”?²⁹

Abundant evidence suggests that emperors since Augustus recognized the Roman state as a cohesive geographical entity contained by the three great rivers, the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates.³⁰ Moreover, surveyors since the time of the Principate had painstakingly mapped local landscapes and had charted out their boundaries in great

²⁸ For example, venerating an old tree and having a communal meal, usually consisting of a roasted ram or ram soup (*kourban čorba*: note here the word borrowing from Turkish), around such a sacred tree is still a common practice in some modern Bulgarian villages. Beliefs in the healing powers of brook water, spring water, mountain rocks, or special places (usually amidst distant and thick forests) continue, too, and interestingly enough seem to be resurging in recent years even among urban populations and educated people. Magic practices also persist throughout Bulgaria and are usually (but not always) seen as the special gifts of Gypsies, *imams*, or Pomaks (i.e., a group of people, who live now mostly in southern Bulgaria, and are seen as descendants of Christian Bulgarians who had converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria). Magic could be both good (i.e., white) and bad (i.e., black) in terms of its effect upon a given person. It could also be used to foresee one’s future. Magic could also be employed to call upon the dead, to have conversations with their spirits and to receive from them advice or protection. Early imperial Christian laws, especially, fought against this practice of calling upon the dead because Christian thinkers saw the Romans’ evocation of *manes*, dead spirits perceived as gods, to be particularly sacrilegious and demonic. See, for instance, *Code Théodosien I-XV, Code Justinien, Constitutions Sirmondiennes*. Volume II, Book IX: 16.5. All modern Bulgarian examples, which I have provided here, I have personally observed and have also participated in some of the communal rituals. I lived for two months (June-July, 2007) in the small village of Lâga, near the town of Etropole, in the Stara Planina mountains (i.e., ancient Hemus). The experience was particularly revealing to me as I observed no social or communal tensions between the local Christians and Muslims. The local people, including the *pop* (the village priest), did not have a nuanced understanding of Christianity in terms of its liturgical practices and much less in terms of its theology. What trained Christian theologians or scholars would see as “superstitions” to the community of Lâga were “най-важното,” “the most important ways” (as they would put it) of celebrating God and asking for health and prosperity (these two being the most common invocations, spoken out loud by the *pop* or whispered by each individual during the ritual celebration).

²⁹ The nature of Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine* is largely hagiographical and as such Eusebius depicts Constantine as a great Christian hero. However, the same could be said about most Christian sources on Constantine. Additionally, whether Constantine did or did not make this statement is less important than the way he was seen and framed by the writers on whose narratives we are destined to rely, often exclusively. In any case, it is important to point out that the *Life of Constantine* is a particularly difficult source, for Eusebius offers a number of speeches, many of which he claims to have heard himself, but which we could not correlate with any other text. We do know that *the Life* was Eusebius’ last and unfinished work, which Eusebius, who tended to obsess over revision, could not edit himself before its publication. We should remember that the piece was eventually published by his friend Acacius. For a commentary on the *Life*, see T.D. Barnes. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. pp. 258-259.

³⁰ Fergus Millar. “Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378.” *Britannia*, Vol. 13 (1982), pp. 1-23. p. 19: “A conflict thus arose between that conception and the long tradition and ideology of continuing conquest.” See also Gilbert Dagron. “L’oecuménicité politique: Droit sur l’espace, droit sur le temps.” *To Vyzantio hos oikumene*. Athena: Ethniko Hidryma Ereunon Institure, 2005. pp 47-57. p. 47, for a point that there was a territorial boundedness of the Byzantine empire.

detail.³¹ Those maps had their obvious utility in navigating and directing movement throughout the empire, but also, especially when lying before the eyes of emperors or their generals, they served to re-affirm a fixed sense of imperial sovereignty. In other words, on a practical level, neither the Romans nor the later Byzantines conceived of their “empire” as a state without set frontiers.³² Therefore, recent studies are quite right to qualify and to put into context the oratorical embellishments of certain Byzantines so as to call into question long-established renditions of “βασιλεία” as an “empire” whose leaders supposedly had infinite ambitions for universal domination and lacked a sense for geographical or political constraints of their respective sovereignty.³³

Thus, by “bishop over those outside,” did Constantine’s line reveal proselytizing ambitions or protection of Christians beyond imperial borders? Or, was it a reference to non-Christians “within” the empire who, as a result, were not under the ecclesiastical authority of a local bishop? Eusebius, an established bishop himself at the time of his

³¹ C. Nicolet. *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor, 1991, pp. 149-169. On the other hand, Fergus Millar argues that there are no clear instances in the sources of “the use of maps in strategic or tactical planning as opposed to subsequent representations of the terrain of campaigns.” p. 18. “Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378.” *Britannia*, Vol. 13 (1982), pp. 1-23. The point that campaigns produced maps is plausible to accept, but the claim that maps were not used for strategic planning is hard to imagine for obvious reasons of utility. Preserved maps may be missing from the historical record in the period that Millar covers simply because they were later improved and replaced. Millar himself points out how Pliny the Elder criticized Corbulo’s map of the Caucasus. According to Pliny, Corbulo’s cartographers had misrepresented the Caucasian Gates (the Pass of Dariel) as the “Caspian Gates.” In Millar’s “Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations,” p. 18, ff. 113. In Pliny’s *Natural History*, VI, 40. Even in the early stages of Roman imperial expansion, Arnaldo Momigliano points out how the Romans sought and employed Greek geographic and ethnographic expertise. “What they [the Greeks] had not done when the Celts were plundering Greece and Asia Minor, they did later for the benefit of the Romans. Greek technicians probably helped in the routine work of mapping conquered countries.” *Alian Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 (reprint). p. 66. Momigliano’s comment specifically refers to “conquered territories,” of course, but it does also suggest that Romans cared to invest in maps, seeking specialists (in this case Greeks), and “routinely” doing such work.

³² For Rome, see David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. p. 227: Potter argues that the overall military posture of the Roman state was passive and that the ideology of world domination that was an important feature of Rome’s makeup was accommodated by the notion that all the world that was worth ruling was already under Roman control.

³³ Anthony Kaldellis. *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. See specifically Chapter 2.

first drafting of Constantine’s biography, made the latter interpretation: “It follows by this saying that having in mind those over whom he ruled, he was a bishop over them all” (ἀκόλουθα δὲ τῷ λόγῳ διανοούμενος τοὺς ἀρχομένους ἅπαντας ἐπεσκόπει).³⁴ But, did Constantine’s actions and their ramifications confirm Eusebius’ interpretation here?

According to the fifth-century lawyer and ecclesiastical historian Sozomen, the Persian *shah* Shapur II (309-379), whom we briefly met in the *Introduction*, turned against the Christians after Constantine’s conversion. The high-profile trial of Symeon, the leading Christian bishop in Persia at the time, was only the beginning of a series of anti-Christian policies. As Sozomen had it, the chief Zoroastrian priests and the leading Jewish rabbis joined efforts to witness against Symeon.³⁵ Symeon was charged with being a traitor to Persia. In addition, Shapur imposed high taxes on all Christians in his state and put to death various priests and missionaries. Churches were destroyed, and their properties confiscated. In short, at least according to Christian sources, great and painful was Shapur’s “terror,” and many lives, like those of Symeon and Pusicus, were swept away by this anti-Christian wind of change. Clearly, Shapur perceived Constantine’s domestic agenda to instill Christianity in Rome as a threat to Persia, but we need to ask whether Constantine’s foreign policy had any actual bearing on Shapur’s bloody response.

As an heir to a father whose political base was Britain, Constantine’s first official communication with Shapur in the distant East came rather late. To be sure, however, Constantine was not new to “the Eastern Question.” He had spent some of his younger

³⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea. *Vita Constantini*. Book IV: 24: 4-1.

³⁵ Sozomen. *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Chapter IX.

days with the troops of Diocletian's protégé, Galerius, on the Persian front and together they advanced into Ctesiphon and even made time to sightsee around the ruins of ancient Babylon.³⁶ Thus, when Constantine eliminated his brother-in-law Licinius in 324, he came to a now united empire well-prepared. Speaking both Latin and Greek, a westerner who grew up in the East, a son of a military man himself successful in army campaigns, an ambitious personality ready to eliminate anyone in his way, even his own family members and closest relatives, Constantine as a sole Roman ruler triggered a justified Persian concern. In the 310s, moreover, the tactical military charges of Shapur's father Hormisdas II (r. 302-309) against certain Roman camps on the border had failed miserably. Hormisdas' raid experiments created volatile tension between Rome and Persia. They did not blow up only because the internal political mess in a divided Roman empire prohibited even the most remote possibility for a common agreement on a cohesive and adequate foreign policy.

From a Persian perspective, Constantine's victory in 324 over Licinius ended Rome's civil wars and after a long pause opened a viable possibility for an already active and "hawkish" Roman military to create a united front against Persia. Shapur decided to play it safe and to step back on the clauses of the treaty of Nisibis from 299.³⁷ The treaty was already advantageous to Rome, but Shapur obviously wanted to make sure that Constantine would not break the peace, so in 324, he sent a delegation, heavy with

³⁶ Constantine. *Oratio* 16, 4.

³⁷ R.C. Blockley. *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*. pp. 6-7.

compliments for Constantine's recent triumph and with plentiful gifts.³⁸ In late October--early November of the same year, Constantine sent back his "thank-you" letter.³⁹

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine wrote the letter to Shapur in Latin and "in his own words," abandoning on this special occasion the formal protocol. Constantine must have liked his own free style, for he circulated the letter throughout the empire, which was how Eusebius supposedly got it and translated it into Greek for the convenience of his targeted audience.⁴⁰ If authentic in fact, as many scholars seem to agree, Constantine's letter stands as the emperor's clearest Christian manifesto, in which he declared the new religion's luminary effect upon his own *self* and onto the empire at large.⁴¹ As such, it is important to call it to attention and to analyze here several extensive portions of it:

³⁸ Eusebius. *Vita Constantini*. Ed. F. Winkelmann. Book IV, 8.

³⁹ For a commentary on this letter, see Timothy D. Barnes. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. pp. 258-259. Barnes believes in the authenticity of the letter, "The letter was polite and personal, not dictated (as was normal), but written in Constantine's own hand, its gentle phrasing designed to allow the two monarchs to reach an agreement without either appearing to lose face." p. 258. For another proponent of the letter's authenticity, see Fergus Millar. "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378." *Britannia*, Vol. 13 (1982), pp. 1-22. p. 22. For the letter's dating, see Timothy D. Barnes. "Constantine and the Christians of Persia." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 75 (1985). pp. 126-136. p. 132.

⁴⁰ Eusebius. *Vita Constantini*. Ed. F. Winkelmann. Book IV, 8: 5-11: οἰκείαις δ' οὖν αὐτὸς καὶ τοῦτο παραστήσει φωναῖς δι' ὧν πρὸς τὸν Περσῶν βασιλέα διεπέμψατο γραμμάτων, σὺν ἐμμελείᾳ τῇ πάσῃ καὶ ἐπιστρεφείᾳ τοὺς ἄνδρας αὐτῶ παρατιθέμενος. φέρεται μὲν οὖν Ῥωμαία γλώττη παρ' αὐτοῖς ἡμῖν καὶ τοῦτο τὸ βασιλέως ιδιόγραφον γράμμα, μεταβληθὲν δ' ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλήνων φωνὴν γνωριμώτερον γένοιτ' ἂν τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσιν, ὧδέ πη περιέχον.

[Therefore, he will put this in his own words through the letter which he dispatched to the Persian emperor, commending these people (i.e., Christians in Persia) with all the tact and concern. Thus, this document is also brought to us in the Roman language (i.e., Latin) and is written by the emperor personally, which may be more easily understood by those who happen to read it. It goes like this].

⁴¹ Eusebius. *Vita Constantini*. Ed. F. Winkelmann. Book IV, 9: 1-14 and 10: 1-2: Τὴν θεῖαν πίστιν φυλάσσω τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας φωτὸς μεταλαχάνω. τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας φωτὶ ὀδηγούμενος τὴν θεῖαν πίστιν ἐπιγινώσκω. τοιγάρτοι τούτοις, ὡς τὰ πράγματα βεβαιοῖ, τὴν ἀγιωτάτην θρησκείαν γνωρίζω. διδάσκαλον τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ ἀγιωτάτου θεοῦ ταύτην τὴν λατρείαν ἔχειν ὁμολογῶ. τούτου τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δύναμιν ἔχων σύμμαχον, ἐκ τῶν περᾶτων τοῦ Ὀκεανοῦ ἀρξάμενος πᾶσαν ἐφεξῆς τὴν οἰκουμένην βεβαίως σωτηρίας ἐλπίσι διήγειρα, ὡς ἅπαντα ὅσα ὑπὸ τοσοῦτοις τυράννοις δεδουλωμένα ταῖς καθημεριναῖς συμφοραῖς ἐνδόντα ἐξίτηλα ἐγεγόνει, ταῦτα προσλαβόντα τὴν τῶν κοινῶν ἐκδικίαν ὥσπερ ἐκ τινος θεραπείας

Guarding the divine faith, I participate in the light of truth. Led by the light of truth, I recognize the divine faith. Certainly, by these things, as deeds confirm, I acknowledge the most holy religion.⁴² I confess that I hold this religious service to be the teacher of the knowledge of the most holy God.⁴³ Having the power of this God as ally, beginning from the shores of the Ocean I have raised up the whole community (“ecumenical world”)⁴⁴ step by step with

ἀναζωπυρηθῆναι. τοῦτον τὸν θεὸν πρεσβεύω, οὗ τὸ σημεῖον ὁ τῷ θεῷ ἀνακείμενός μου στρατὸς ὑπὲρ τῶν ὤμων φέρει, καὶ ἐφ’ ἅπερ ἂν ὁ τοῦ δικαίου λόγος παρακαλῆ κατευθύνεται· ἐξ αὐτῶν δ’ ἐκείνων περιφανέσι τροπαίοις αὐτίκα τὴν χάριν ἀντιλαμβάνω. τοῦτον τὸν θεὸν ἀθανάτῳ μνήμῃ τιμᾶν ὁμολογῶ, τοῦτον ἀκραιφνεῖ καὶ καθαρᾷ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἀνωτάτῳ τυγχάνειν ὑπεραυγάζομαι. I disagree on a number of issues with the translation of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall. *Life of Constantine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. p. 156. My clarifications (discussed explicitly in the footnotes below) try to bring out more clearly the semantic nuances in Eusebius’ Greek rendition from Constantine’s Latin original. Again, it is important to keep in mind that the text (whether or not authentically Constantinian) is in any case Eusebius’ refracted account. If Eusebius’ claims are to be taken seriously, the text then becomes a Greek translation from an original in Latin. Presumably, in addition, the purpose of Eusebius’ own translation was for a wide consumption, too. The intended audience and the several stages of detachment from the presumed original source should be kept in mind when imposing a modern interpretative story on this text, which in the final analysis was presumably Constantine’s Latin text sent out throughout the empire, then translated by Eusebius into Greek, and distributed throughout Eusebius’ own ecclesiastical networks in the Greek-speaking East. Clearly, a straightforward interpretation of the kind we often find in modern historiography is to push aside a number of serious problems here. For arguments on the authenticity of Constantine’s letter to Shapur, nevertheless, see Timothy D. Barnes. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. pp. 258-259.

⁴² *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 9: 3: τὴν ἀγιωτάτην θρησκείαν: Note the emphasis on religion as “practice” and “observance” rather than “belief” here. “Deeds” and not merely “faith” are evoked as actual witnesses to Constantine’s religious commitment. In broader studies on religion, such lines are usually highlighted to illustrate how Enlightenment thinkers supposedly inserted a “belief/practice” divide in definitions of “religion” and thus created a specific analytical category with an inherent bias towards “belief” and a reciprocal de-emphasis of “practice.” In the pre-Enlightenment period, for the chronological divisions in such theoretical studies are broad and conceptual, “religion” supposedly was deeply embedded in social practice and was not perceived or imagined as a separate entity of individual or group behavior.

⁴³ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 9: 4: ταύτην τὴν λατρείαν: an emphasis on “practice” again with a particular focus on “religious worship” or what we would call today “liturgy.” I do not use the word “liturgy” in my translation here because the nature of the symbolically charged ritual motions, the precise sequence of scenes in the communal worship, or the catechetical specifics of the complex celebratory presentation of the Eucharist were still not fully developed at this moment. Broadly speaking, the Orthodox liturgy as it stands today consists of the ritual basics introduced by John Chrysostom (though earlier liturgies existed) who lived at the end of the fourth century. Yet, for example, the important insertion of the Cherubic Hymn, which now follows the Augmented Litany, happened as late as the sixth century, and tradition credits it directly to the emperor Justinian himself who probably did not create it but supported its incorporation. For a later Byzantine explanation of the Divine Liturgy, see Nicolas Cabasilas. *Explication de la Divine Liturgie*. Sources Chrétiennes. Paris, 1967. For a modern study on the liturgical development and its theological symbolism, see Hugh Wybrew. *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003. For a general introduction to the everyday worship in Orthodoxy (a liturgical catechesis), see Stanley Samuel Harakas. *Living the Liturgy: A Practical Guide for Participating in the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church*. Light and Life Publishing Co., 1974. See also the classic study of M.M. Solovey. *The Byzantine Divine Liturgy: History and Commentary*. Tr. D.R. Wysochansky. Washington, 1970.

⁴⁴ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 9: 6: πᾶσαν ἐφεξῆς τὴν οἰκουμένην: “oikoumene” (an ecumenical community) is a charged word in the Christian vocabulary and especially so in Byzantine writing.

sure hopes of salvation, so that all those things, which under the slavery of such great tyrants yielded to daily misfortunes and had come near to vanishing, have enjoyed the general restoration of right, and have come back to life as if by some treatment. The God I profess is the one whose sign my army, dedicated to God, carries on its shoulders, and to whatever task the Word of Justice summons it goes directly;⁴⁵ and from those men I receive thanks immediately in the illustrated ways.⁴⁶ This is the God I confess to honor with undying remembrance, and I make it shinningly clear that I hold Him with an unsullied and pure mind to the highest...⁴⁷

This is how Constantine's letter opened.⁴⁸ The main feature of Constantine's introduction was the obvious extolling of God, but beyond that, there was also the ancient motif of restoration, which was for centuries now deeply embedded in Roman political thought and employed with particularly brilliant skill by the propagandist machinery of Augustus in the first century A.D.. But, there was also Constantine's peculiar innuendo to a presumed imperial participation in God's salvific plan. This was a very skillful line

Numerous modern commentaries have dealt with the concept. The word choice, which Cameron and Stuart make in their translation, is "world," but this is already to assume Eusebius'/Constantine's worldly ambitions, which might or might not have been present. Even in later Byzantine texts, moreover, "oikoumene" is predominantly reserved for Christian adherents and does not signify "the world at large" nor empire itself. For Cameron/Stuart's word choice, see *The Life of Constantine*. p. 156. For a study that analyzes the relationship between "imperialism" and "ecumenism" in Byzantium, see Gilbert Dagron. "L'oecuménicité politique: droit sur l'espace, droit sur le temps." *To Vyzantio hos oikoumene*. Athens, 2005. pp. 47-57.

⁴⁵ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 9: 10: *προσβεύω*: the verb, especially in a political context, carries the denotation of "to be an ambassador" as it also could imply a position of superiority on the part of the declarative subject. It is a classical Attic word, but is kept in later Byzantine Greek with all of its rich semantic nuances.

⁴⁶ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 9: 10: *τὴν χάριν ἀντιλαμβάνω*: a skillful rhetorical expression that opens a wide range of meanings and allusions. In Christian theology, "χάρις," which is usually translated as "grace," has provoked heated and fundamental debates (ancient and modern) about God's operations on earth and His relation to humanity particularly in relation to evil in humanity and God's salvific plan. I give here a conservative translation, assuming Constantine's more narrow theological sophistication and Eusebius' close translation, of course.

⁴⁷ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 10: 1: *ὑπεραυγάζομαι*: the word is entailed in the semantics of "light," a favorite Christian metonymy. Another possible and perhaps even stricter translation here could be, "to enlighten profoundly."

⁴⁸ There is a dissertation entirely focused on Constantine's letter to Shapur. See Miriam Raub Vivian. *A Letter to Shapur: The Effect of Constantine's Conversion on Roman-Persian Relations*. University of California, Santa Barbara. July 1987. Vivian's arguments are 1) that the letter is best understood not merely as evidence for Constantine's Christianity, but as a diplomatic correspondence with Persia, 2) "Constantine's conversion changed the relationship between a Roman emperor and Christians abroad by adding a concern for their welfare to his responsibilities as a Christian king," 3) as a result, "Christians in Persia became politically as well as religiously suspect," and 4) "international alliances often came to turn on the question of religious faith." *Abstract*. I disagree with some of Vivian's conclusions. See below.

that has managed to trick even keen modern commentators into some hasty oversimplifications.⁴⁹ The magic of its success lay in the subtle, diplomatic weaving of an entirely novel idea into the standard Roman rhetorical panoply on liberation from tyranny.

In fact, the rhetorical agility was truly remarkable, not least in its wide ramifications. For example, it managed to coax one modern historian to attribute the addressee of this entire letter to one Constantinian co-religionist: the Christian king of Armenia.⁵⁰ The novelty of the idea was that it presented and, more importantly, was determined and bold enough to export an image of the Roman emperor as a quasi-religious leader entailed in a monotheistic “Great Awakening.” Moreover, to a presumed follower of Ahura Mazda as Shapur supposedly was, it was a way to appeal to a common affinity towards one Supreme God, an Uncreated Creator. Finally, the inherent ambiguity of Constantine’s opening aimed to impress Shapur while simultaneously sending positive messages to the reading audience in Constantine’s own empire at home. Even if Eusebius actually invented the entire letter, the skill with which he revealed the opening assertions of Constantine’s manifesto attested the bishop’s sensitivity to foreign relations and a perceived audience at home and abroad.

⁴⁹ David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. p. 446: “The letter opens with an interesting variation on the then standard Constantinian line that he had set out from the shores of the western ocean to free an empire groaning under the oppression of tyrants.” Note also that Eusebius/Constantine never specified that “the Ocean” was necessarily “the western” one. The expression could in fact be taken in a metaphoric sense: “from the ends of the Ocean,” i.e. “everywhere.” Diplomatic subtlety, of course, invites a wide array of possibilities and semantic ambiguities. And in my opinion, the multiple ways in which this line could be taken is “the magic” of its success. For the line’s interpretation as a referent to “the entire world,” see T. D. Barnes. “Constantine and the Christians of Persia.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 75 (1985), pp. 126-136. p. 131: “Constantine begins by affirming his devotion to God—the God whose sign Constantine’s army, dedicated to God, bears on its shoulders, the God who protects Constantine, who sent Constantine from the far shores of the Ocean to rescue the world from oppression and misery.”

⁵⁰ D. de Decker. “Sur le destinataire de la lettre au roi des Perses (Eusèbe de Césarée, *Vit. Const.*, IV, 9-13) et la conversion de l’Arménie à la religion chrétienne.” *Persia VIII* (1979), pp. 99-116. Qtd. also in T.D. Barnes. “Constantine and the Christians of Persia.” Footnote 36, p. 131.

But, this is only the beginning, for the plot thickens. Constantine rejected officially the policies of his predecessors and promoted even further his commitment to God here:

I believe I am not mistaken, my brother, in confessing this one God the Creator and Father of all, whom many of those who have reigned here, seduced by insane errors, have attempted to reject. But such punishment finally engulfed them that all mankind since has regarded their fate as superseding all other examples to warn those who strive for the same ends.⁵¹

In the entire exposition of Constantine's letter, this passage served both as a condemnation of the anti-Christian Roman past and as instigation for an antithetical future within the Roman empire and in Shapur's Persia. In addition, the referent "brother" has drawn a lot of attention among Byzantine scholars who have tried to discern the extent to which Byzantines claimed exclusive titular rights and pretensions for a single universal empire.⁵² Traditionally, "brother" has been read as an indication for

⁵¹ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 11: 1-6: Οὐ μοι δοκῶ πλανᾶσθαι, ἀδελφέ μου, τοῦτον ἓνα θεὸν ὁμολογῶν πάντων ἀρχηγὸν καὶ πατέρα, ὃν πολλοὶ τῶν τῆδε βασιλευσάντων μανιάδεσι πλάναις ὑπαχθέντες ἐπεχείρησαν ἀρνήσασθαι. ἀλλ' ἐκείνους μὲν ἅπαντας τοιοῦτον τιμωρὸν τέλος κατανάλωσεν, ὡς πᾶν τὸ μετ' ἐκείνους ἀνθρώπων γένος τὰς ἐκείνων συμφορὰς ἀντ' ἄλλου παραδείγματος τοῖς παρὰ τούτοις τὰ ὅμοια ζηλοῦσι τίθесθαι.

⁵² See, for example, Evangelos K. Chrysos. "The Title Βασιλεὺς in Early Byzantine International Relations." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 32 (1978), pp. 29-75. For the section on Persia, see p. 33. Such studies have preoccupied Byzantinists for generations. For an argument that favors the supposed Byzantine acceptance of Persia as an empire, too, see an early scholarly example drawn from the roots of this popular Byzantinist debate, A. Gasquet. "L'empire d'Orient et l'empire d'Occident. De l'emploi du mot βασιλεὺς dans les actes de la Chancellerie byzantine." *Révue Historique*, 26 (1887), pp. 281-302. A major downside of such studies is that they obsess over whether or not "βασιλεύς" was a self-descriptor reserved only for Byzantium and spend almost no efforts in studying the broader social, political, and cultural context within which each author operated and the specific influences that steered the given author when employing "βασιλεύς." A better approach would be to follow the complex variations through which the title passed in its almost millennium-long history by correlating its changing (if so) conceptual aspects with the actual operations of the Byzantine state at home and abroad. In other words, we should not simply assume, as already discussed above, that the Byzantines imagined their state as empire with no limits and then proceed from that assumption to conclude that they reserved the title only for themselves and thus tried to keep the image of "the empire's universality" intact. This deeply entrenched historiographical conviction becomes especially hard to sustain in the later stages of Byzantium when the state was progressively reduced to its capital, Constantinople. All sorts of suppositions for Byzantine "arrogance" could be read in numerous scholarly writings, and all are based on bizarre assumptions revolving around Byzantine "denial," classicizing tendencies, or imagining a fake empire that lacked actual geographical or

Byzantine acceptance of Persia as an empire with equal sovereign rights. And though this is a debate, which we will skip at this point as its specifics call for a separate study, it is significant to mention here that the word could be interpreted from a Christian perspective with little bearing on “empire,” but signaling an appeal to humanity centered on a common Creator.

In any case, it is in the conclusion that Constantine made the nature of his position explicit and advocated to the Persian *shah* (an audacious move displayed for the first time ever in such foreign relations) the same type of Christian confessional commitment:

With this class of persons—I mean of course the Christians, my whole concern being for them—how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned! May the very best come to you therefore, and at the same time the best for them, since they also are yours. For so you will keep the sovereign Lord of the Universe kind, merciful, and benevolent. These therefore, since you are so great, I entrust to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety. Love them in accordance with your own humanity. For you will give enormous satisfaction both to yourself and to us by keeping faith.⁵³

Unfortunately, Shapur’s take on this letter is missing, for we have no sources that contain the Persian response. We do have, on the other hand, Eusebius’ personal interpretation, which followed right after the end of the letter:

Thus finally, since all peoples from everywhere in the ecumenical world (τῶν

political substance, but wanted to advertise itself and hence used this as a diplomatic tool to seek aid. But, among other things, this is to brush aside the intricacy of Byzantine writers, their sense of often pressing realism, and mostly to reduce the rich complexity of their political thought.

⁵³ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 13: Τούτου τοῦ καταλόγου τῶν ἀνθρώπων, λέγω δὴ τῶν Χριστιανῶν (ὑπὲρ τούτων ὁ πᾶς μοι λόγος), πῶς οἶμι με ἠδεσθαι ἀκούοντα ὅτι καὶ τῆς Περσίδος τὰ κράτιστα ἐπὶ πλείστον, ὥσπερ ἔστι μοι βουλομένῳ, κεκόσμηται. σοὶ τ’ οὖν ὡς ὅτι κάλλιστα ἐκείνοις θ’ ὡσαύτως ὑπάρχοι τὰ κάλλιστα, ὅτι σοὶ κάκεινοι. οὕτω γὰρ ἔξεις τὸν τῶν ὄλων δεσπότην [πρῶτον] ἴλεω καὶ εὐμενῆ. Τούτους τοιγαροῦν, ἐπειδὴ τοσοῦτος εἶ, σοὶ παρατίθεμαι, τοὺς αὐτοὺς τούτους, ὅτι καὶ εὐσεβεῖα ἐπίσημος εἶ, ἐγχειρίζων· τούτους ἀγάπα ἀρμοδίως τῆς σεαυτοῦ φιλανθρωπίας· σαυτῶ τε γὰρ καὶ ἡμῖν ἀπερίγραπτον δώσεις διὰ τῆς πίστεως τὴν χάριν.

ἀπανταχοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐθνῶν),⁵⁴ just as if being steered by a single governor and embracing the political order under the servant of God (τὴν ὑπὸ τῷ θεράποντι τοῦ θεοῦ πολιτείαν),⁵⁵ with no one any longer troubling the rule of the Romans, all led their lives in well-being and undisturbed livelihood.⁵⁶

Precisely what Eusebius meant by this highly charged and ambiguous summary is hard to discern, for theoretically he could have simply meant that Constantine had secured peace for his Christian Roman empire or that he brought peace upon all Christians everywhere, including Persia. But, in any case, it is peace and tranquility that Eusebius actually emphasized, so it is quite a stretch to conclude here that “Eusebius believed that Constantine wanted to place the Christians of Persia under his own care and

⁵⁴ I have already discussed the charged meaning of “οἰκουμένη” when found in a Christian literary context. In fact, it could be taken as “the world,” which is how Cameron and Hall translate it. However, this would be a translation more justifiable at a later stage of the empire and if inserted in a completely different literary setting (a funerary speech or a ceremonial oration, for example), but under the reign of Constantine and in the given context and assumed audience, the semantic meaning has to be restricted to the specifically Christian peoples, and not the world at large. For Cameron and Hall’s translation, see *The Life of Constantine*, p. 158.

⁵⁵ Both “πολιτεία” and “θεράπων τοῦ θεοῦ” have a rich set of connotations. “Πολιτεία” in classical Attic Greek is usually translated either as “a political order,” or as “a political constitution,” or even as a “republic” (the last being the established translation of Plato’s *magnum opus*, of course). But, in later Christian writers the word could indicate a conglomerate of complicated identities. See, for example, Nathanael J. Andrade. “The Syriac Life of John of Tella and the Frontier *Politeia*.” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, Vol. 12.2 (2009). pp. 199-234. “Θεράπων τοῦ θεοῦ” is a favorite Christian *topos*. Note here, however, that Eusebius did not use the more common “δοῦλος τοῦ θεοῦ” (slave of God). Eusebius wanted to allow more free agency on the part of Constantine to whom the expression refers. For another example of “θεράπων τοῦ θεοῦ” in Patristic literature, see Ignatius. *Epistulae*. Eds. F. Diekamp and F.X. Funk, *Patres apostolici*, vol. 2, 3rd edn. Tübingen: Laupp, 1913: 83-268. Epistle 9: 2: 1: in this case, the expression refers to Moses, the law-receiver, who instructed the people out of sincere devotion to God. For the more prevalent and biblical “δοῦλος τοῦ θεοῦ,” see Isaiah 48: 20 and 49: 5-6. *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007. In the Old Testament plot where God is often an angry, rigid, and severe protagonist, “δοῦλος,” which evokes the semantics of “obedience,” clearly makes more sense, even when inserted in the highly ambiguous, mystical narrative of Isaiah.

⁵⁶ *Vita Constantini*, Book IV, 14: Οὕτω δὴ λοιπὸν τῶν ἀπανταχοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐθνῶν ὡσπερ ὑφ’ ἐνὶ κυβερνήτῃ διευθυνομένων καὶ τὴν ὑπὸ τῷ θεράποντι τοῦ θεοῦ πολιτείαν ἀσπαζομένων, μηδενὸς μηκέτι παρενοχλοῦντος τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχήν, ἐν εὐσταθεῖ καὶ ἀταράχῳ βίῳ τὴν ζωὴν διηγόν οἱ πάντες. Note here also the usage of “ἐν εὐσταθεῖ,” which could literally mean “good standing” or “good health.” Here at the very conclusion, the word is a skillful way to remind again of the restorative work of Constantine, an idea with which the letter began. Constantine supposedly cured the empire as a doctor would cure patients. This is an idea inspired from the New Testament, and the “healing” imagery became widely popular especially in the effective genre of later Byzantine hagiography. Broad audiences must have found soothing consolation against the pains and diseases of everyday life upon hearing (if not always reading) about the healing miracles of Christian saints and heroes.

regarded this as one expression of Constantine's desire to take thought for all men" as one scholar has recently done.⁵⁷ And, given the political context, in which the letter was prepared and finally sent, the insistence on peace in Eusebius' summary is quite plausible indeed. However, modern scholars, eager to depict Constantine as a fanatical expansionist, have read the emperor's last words here as a veiled Roman declaration of war against Persia.⁵⁸ Yet, this interpretation would be a two-fold mistake. First, it would be to project backwards Constantine's preparation for a military campaign against Persia (a disputed affair in any case).⁵⁹ For, Constantine's campaign supposedly began in 336, only a year before his actual death in 337. Yet, this first diplomatic encounter happened in 324, twelve years earlier.

⁵⁷ Clifford Ando. *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 345. Note also that even Ando is implicitly uneasy with his interpretation and weakens it by adding, "But Constantine did not question the legitimacy of Sapor's governance over Persia, nor even his rulership over his Christian subjects—so long as Sapor's piety toward them remained unquestioned."

⁵⁸ T.D. Barnes. "Constantine and the Christians of Persia." *The Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 75 (1985), pp. 126-136. p. 132: "And did Constantine not allude, even in his letter to Shapur, to a career of conquest which began in the far west and proceeded eastward? Where would Constantine cease his conquests? Shapur had good reason to suspect that the Roman emperor was planning to make war against him." Also, David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. pp. 446-447: "In the last section of the letter, however, Constantine says something that could be regarded as deeply troubling, for there he reveals that the god about whom he is speaking is the Christian God, and that he expects the Persian king to look after Christian communities in his realm. The veiled threat implicit in this statement is softened by the assertion that Constantine's religiosity is not dissimilar to that of the Persian king himself." But, "Shapur may have had reason to be deeply suspicious of what Constantine was saying." In a final analysis, Potter concludes that Constantine's letter effectively meant war. We will discuss Potter's comments in some detail below. See also R.C. Blockley. *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*. p. 9: here Blockley develops the odd concept of "aggressive defence." Thus, "Constantine's dealings with the Goths and with the Persians in the period after the Gothic settlement strongly suggest that for him it was an instrument of a policy that was militarily and politically aggressive, even expansionist." Yet, "in 324/5...Shapur II, now in his fifteenth or sixteenth year, began to assert control over affairs and move Persia towards more overt and coordinated aggression..." On page 11, Blockley explicitly calls Constantine's letter a military threat.

⁵⁹ Neither Rufinus (d. 410). *Historia Ecclesiastica. Patrologia Latina, Vol. 21*. Book X, 12, nor Philostorgius (d. ca. 439), *Church History*. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007. Book II. 16, nor Socrates (d. after 439). *Histoire ecclésiastique, Livre I*. Tr. Pierre Périchon and Pierre Maraval. *Sources Chrétiennes, No. 477*. Paris, 2004. Book I. 39, nor Sozomen (d. ca. 450). *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Greek Edition, J. Bidez. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983. Book II. 34. I, nor Theodoret (d. c. 466), *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler. *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edition. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954. Book I. 32 mention any reference to Constantine's Iranian campaign. For details, see Garth Fowden. "The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and Their Influence." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 84 (1994), pp. 146-160. p. 152.

The second problem with a militaristic interpretation of the letter is to connect it prematurely to the purges of the 340s (a fast-forward mistake) when Shapur went against the Christians as we have already seen. Such presumptive framings of the letter obscure its own unique features. For, the real historical virtue of the letter is that it carried an unprecedented correspondence that illustrates the ways, in which the first Christian emperor communicated his religion abroad for the first time (or at the very least the ways in which Eusebius presented the imperial Christian image when exported abroad). First, the letter cast the emperor as a Christian activist and as a defender of the faith, at least within the realm of the empire if not beyond it. Then, the letter extended an unprecedented invitation to Shapur to do the same in Persia. But, these were diplomatic words and as such were carefully crafted, ambiguous and charged with complex nuances and meanings. As we have indicated, more examples and historical context is needed before we may claim that Constantine's Christian manifesto was "a veiled threat," which one historian has so comfortably declared.⁶⁰ Quite to the contrary, Constantine's letter may very well have been an advice on how to make it as an emperor in difficult times.⁶¹

If we are to politicize Constantine's religiosity, as a way of engaging with the conclusions that other scholars have reached, we can confirm that there are grounds to

⁶⁰ See the following footnote.

⁶¹ For an interpretation of the last words of Constantine's letter (quoted above), see David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay, A.D. 180-395*. p. 447. Potter argues that Constantine implicitly threatened Shapur while at the same time "softened [the threat] by the assertion that Constantine's religiosity is not dissimilar to that of the Persian king himself, and that Constantine is willing to back away from the style of diplomacy known from his predecessors. Constantine thereby suggests that a new relationship is possible so long as the Persians respect the freedom of the Christians to worship as they wish in the land of the Persian king." "A veiled threat" or an invitation for "a new relationship" based on religious similarity? Potter wants to combine the two, but while "the new relationship" is clear, given the context and the nature of the letter, the "veiled threat," which Potter detects, needs more explanation. Potter briefly introduces us to Hormisdas, the Persian refugee and exiled heir to the Persian throne (whom we will discuss below), and asks us to believe that Hormisdas' presence in Rome factored in this "veiled threat." Potter also inserts the Christianization of Armenia as evidence, but he himself tells us that the Persian-Roman status quo lasted until 330, six years after Constantine's letter. I find Potter's explanation unconvincing.

believe that Constantine sent the letter to Shapur in the hopes that a Christian Persian *shah* would assure better foreign relations between the two states. But, nothing in the letter suggests that Constantine wanted to replace Shapur with someone else at the time of the exchange (the 320s). In addition, the letter does not support scholarly claims that Constantine believed that a potential conversion of the *shah* could also convert Persia into Roman vassalage. In fact, as we will see in the following section, even within the borders of the Roman empire, Constantine did not insist that Persian dignitaries convert in exchange for safe Roman refuge and political promotion in the Roman state.

Immigration and Refuge in the Christian Roman Empire: The Case of Hormisdas

According to the fifth-century historian Zosimos, around the time when Constantine was supposedly preparing his letter to Shapur (ca. 324), Hormisdas, Shapur's elder brother and rightful heir to the Persian throne, escaped from prison.⁶² Zosimos' story contained some sensationalist features and given how little we know about Zosimos himself, it is hard to determine his credibility, though modern historians have taken this specific account at face value.⁶³ In any case, it is just as much Zosimos' own authorial focus that is interesting here as it is the actual precise historical reconstruction of events.⁶⁴

In Zosimos' account, Hormisdas' plot of escape was elaborate and successful. Putting his prison guards to task with lavish food and drink, prepared by his conniving

⁶² Ed. and Tr. François Paschoud. *Zosime. Histoire nouvelle*, vol. 2. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1979. Book 2: 27.

⁶³ David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. p. 447. R.C. Blockley. *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*. pp. 8-12. *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Hormisdas 2, p. 443.

⁶⁴ For Zosimos' historical objective and an analysis of his methodology, see Walter Goffart. "Zosimus, the First Historian of Rome's Fall." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr. 1971). pp. 412-441.

wife, Hormisdas drank them into oblivion. He knew to look in the belly of the fish served to him for dinner that day where his wife had threaded a file. Cutting with it the chains that bound his feet, Hormisdas was ready for his run to freedom. He put on the clothes of a eunuch and under their cover crossed safely into Armenia where he resided for a while as a friend and guest of the Armenian king himself (ἀφικνεῖται πρὸς τὸν Ἀρμενίων βασιλέα, φίλον ὄντα καὶ ξένον αὐτῷ).⁶⁵ Then, he moved to Constantine's court where he was completely safe and, when given all honor and respect, felt content to settle there for life (διασωθεὶς τῷ Κωνσταντίνῳ προσέδραμε καὶ πάσης ἡξιώθη τιμῆς τε καὶ θεραπείας).⁶⁶

Evaluated from the perspective of a convict doomed to jail forever, Hormisdas' story brought him to the happy end of successful escape to freedom. And even though flight across the borders by threatened elites was common throughout the history of the Byzantine empire, we should not be too quick to brush aside this anecdote as commonplace. Byzantine authors were drawn to it, and they added nuances and asserted new points of view, which are important to consider in our attempt to understand Christianity's movement across imperial frontiers and its effect (real or imagined) on foreign relations. What was the price of Constantine's risky hospitality towards Hormisdas? Were Rome and Armenia around 324 allies that stood against Persia? Did Hormisdas, now a refugee in Constantine's new Rome, have to become a Christian in order to enjoy Constantine's generous accommodation? Was Hormisdas already a

⁶⁵ Zosimos. *Histoire nouvelle*. Book 2: 27: 6-7.

⁶⁶ Zosimos. *Histoire nouvelle*. Book 2: 27: 8-9.

Christian before he went to Armenia and Rome, a convenient possibility which could explain to us why he chose to go there in the first place?

If the story as presented by Zosimos is taken as fact, we may guess that Hormisdas never converted, for Zosimos would have presumably mentioned the high-powered conversion of such an important Persian dignitary. But, on the other hand, Zosimos was a pagan, so he may have preferred to skip over an episode that could be used to buttress a Christian triumphalist narrative.⁶⁷ When read from the perspective of foreign affairs and when taken in its current version, in any case, Zosimos' story relates two important points that we should keep in mind: first, that Hormisdas' run to freedom led him to Armenia and Rome and thus it drew an imaginary line of opposition between these two political entities against Persia, and second, that Christianity so far as one can determine from this anecdote alone had nothing to do with Hormisdas' choice of final destination and place of refuge.

Zosimos lived in the later part of the fifth century when Roman and Persian relations were strained over the contested borderlands of Armenia.⁶⁸ The peace treaty, which the two states had signed in 422, fell apart after about twenty years, so at the time of Zosimos' writing, Roman armies were lined up along the eastern frontier yet again.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ For a short presentation of Zosimos' career and personal life along with an evaluation of his work, see Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 107-114.

⁶⁸ Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. p. 108 where he posits that Zosimos was born in the 430s and died around 501.

⁶⁹ For a short overview of fifth-century Roman-Persian relations in the context of Armenia, see George Ostrogorsky. *The History of the Byzantine State*. Tr. Joan Hussey. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969. pp. 56-57. Military conflicts between Rome and Persia were intense and tended to be quite draining for both states regardless of which one happened to be a victor on a particular occasion during the long history of intermittent clashes between these two powers. Both Rome and Persia had disciplined and well-equipped armies, and significant contingents of the troops were often used to patrol the Roman-Persian frontier. From a Roman perspective, the fact that emperors chose to lead campaigns against Persia in person was indicative of the importance that the Roman rulers placed on dealing carefully with Persia. We have already pointed out how Caracalla died on the eastern frontier. We may here add also the example of Julian who was killed in 363 on a campaign against Persia. One version on Julian's death held that a

Looked at from the perspective of Zosimos' own political times and evaluated in the context of mounting military pressure, Hormisdas' escape route that drew a symbolic alliance between Armenia and Rome against Persia must have made sense to him. It must have continued to make sense even in the seventh century during the times of emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641) and his Persian campaigns when John, a certain monk from Antioch, presented another description of Hormisdas' story.⁷⁰

Extant now only in fragmentary form, John's history is interspersed with passages that could leap midway from telling about Moses and the Exodus, for example, to various famous Greek myths, like Heracles capturing the Minotaur.⁷¹ When trying to reconstruct Hormisdas' story, scholars, presumably suspicious of such discomfiting gaps that blot

Christian guide betrayed the emperor. The Christian wanted to put an end to Julian's repressive religious policies. For a description of Julian's final days, see Sozomen. *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Greek Edition, J. Bidez. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983. Book 6. Also in Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History* (History of the Church, from A.D. 324 to A.D. 440). Tr. Edward Walford. London, 1855. Book 6, p. 244. The account of Sozomen may be legendary, and we will examine some other accounts on Julian's death below. Here we should keep in mind that in general later Christians fabricated many stories to blemish the reputation of Julian and to dismiss his reign as oppressive and demonic. The scholarship on Julian is extensive. In recent years, attention on this emperor has additionally increased as "Late Antique" historians have spent much effort to examine the complex interactions between "classical culture" and "Christianity." In the history of Byzantium, Julian represents the last large-scale imperial attempt to reverse Christianity's expansion and to institutionalize "classical literature and culture" in Christianity's place.

⁷⁰ *Chronological History*. Ed. K. Müller. *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* 4. Paris: Didot, 1841-1870: 538-622. Fragment 178. For details, see Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. p. 311. We know little about John's life and even his actual identity is much disputed in scholarship. Treadgold contends that John was a monk from Antioch who lived past the year 610. p. 312.

⁷¹ *Chronological History*. Ed. K. Müller. *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* 4. Paris: Didot, 1841-1870: 538-622. Fragment 1, but there are many other such "leaping" occurrences as is quite normal in a fragmentary account, of course. I have used the more accessible Müller edition. The ongoing debate on John of Antioch and the details of the new editions does not pose problems for my particular analytical context and subsequent interpretation. Here are some of the details of the debate. S. Mariev in his 2008 edition and English translation rejects the post-518 fragments attributed to John. Mariev also dates John to the early sixth century instead of the seventh. S. Mariev, ed. and tr. *Ioannes Antiochenus: Fragmenta quae supersunt omnia*. Berlin and New York, 2008 (*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 47). On the other hand, Umberto Roberto ascribes these post-518 fragments, the so-called Salmasian fragments of John, back to John and not to a different author as Mariev more recently has argued. See his *Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta ex Historia chronica. Introduzione, edizione critica e traduzione. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 154. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005. For an excellent review of Roberto's edition and a quick introduction to the problems that preoccupy modern scholarship on John of Antioch, see Alan Cameron. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. 2006.07.37 (available also online at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2006/2006-07-37.html>).

the current fragmented text, have bypassed John's account altogether.⁷² They have relied exclusively on Zosimos, curiously neglecting even the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus who has otherwise secured a high reputation for credible insight and is also our earliest source on the matter of Hormisdas.⁷³ Therefore, we will examine here Ammianus' account and will also investigate a letter by the fourth-century rhetorician Libanios. We will see the different ways, in which these earlier authors presented Hormisdas and his Roman sojourn, suggesting that already by the fifth century Zosimos had options to choose from. After we add the necessary nuances to Zosimos' story, we will move to John.

To Byzantinists and late-antique historians, Ammianus Marcellinus needs little introduction, for his incisive history is a standard source on the first four centuries of the empire. However, it is important to recall several biographical aspects and cultural influences here in order to understand the perspective from which Ammianus was looking at the case of Hormisdas. We should not forget that a sophisticated historian like Ammianus selected his examples carefully and used them to develop and promote a

⁷² For some scholars who have used John's fragments as a source, but have not considered this interesting, yet problematic sentence, see David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. p. 447. A.D. Lee. *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. p. 65. R.C. Blockley. *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*. Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992. p. 10.

⁷³ Scholars have avoided John, with the exception of the so-called Salmasian excerpts, which stand in the center of scholarly debate on John, and which we have briefly introduced above. The Salmasian excerpts are so called because they were first published by Claude de Saumaise (1588-1653) who found some of John's fragments in a separate manuscript extant only in a single copy. As we already pointed out, the debate is whether to ascribe the Salmasian excerpts to John or not. We mentioned Mariev and Roberto, but see also Panagiotis Sotiroudis. *Untersuchungen zum Geschichtswerk des Johannes von Antiocheia, Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα της Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής* 67. Thessalonica: Αριστοτελείο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης, 1989. Sotiroudis argues against the connection between the two source groups. On the *Excerpta Salmasiana*, see Ioannis Antiocheni *Fragmenta ex Historia Chronica, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 154. Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. Palgrave 2007. Especially pp. 314, 317. Also see Warren Treadgold. "The Byzantine World Histories of John Malalas and Eustathius of Epiphania." *The International History Review*/ 29 (2007). pp. 709-745 for how Ammianus Marcellinus becomes relevant to these Greek source problems.

particular philosophical and cultural program.⁷⁴ As we will show below, a traditional understanding of classical *paideia*⁷⁵ and a personal antagonism against Christianity steered Ammianus' account. Thus, we will find Hormisdas implicated in Ammianus' disgruntled ponderings on what it meant to be "a Roman" in a new empire so different from its past that the emperor Constantius was visiting the city of Rome for the first time at the age of 40. In this bizarre context, Ammianus' Hormisdas reminisced side by side with Constantius on the unsurpassed and unsurpassable glory of Rome despite the fact that emperors no longer resided there. Most importantly in our context, we will see that Constantius' unforgiving paranoia, which otherwise had swept away his own family members, officials, or anti-Arian Christians, had spared Hormisdas without pressuring him into Christianity. Thus, with these broad contours in mind, let us now turn to the important specifics of Ammianus' biography and his perspectives on Hormisdas' story.

Born in 330 in Antioch, Ammianus grew up in one of the major centers of Christianity, but he never converted and described himself as a committed "Hellene" instead.⁷⁶ "Hellenism" for Ammianus was a loaded label wielded against Christian intellectuals who were in the fourth century drawn back to the classical texts and were trying to assimilate them into Christianity. Thus, fourth-century "Hellenists," like Ammianus, programmatically insisted on *paideia*, defined it conservatively, and tried to exclude Christians from taking part in it.⁷⁷ *Paideia* for Ammianus meant a rigorous study

⁷⁴ Libanios. *Letter 233.4*. Tr. Timothy Barnes. *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. pp. 61-62.

⁷⁵ Strictly translated as "education," but note below the important clarifications.

⁷⁶ Ammianus. *Histoires*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002. XXXI.16.9 with Timothy Barnes. *Ammianus and the Representation of Historical Reality*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. pp. 65-78 and Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. pp. 51-78.

⁷⁷ The secondary literature on *paideia* is vast. Scholars (among whom the most prominent being perhaps Peter Brown in English and Henri-Irénée Marrou in French) have argued that *paideia* was the basic social mechanism, which sustained and dispersed a common Roman culture and identity. Apart from monks who

of classical, “pagan” texts and hence was the basic mechanism to instantiate a culture based on a sense of aristocratic elitism.

In pursuit of knowledge and refinement, privileged boys like Ammianus were to travel around the empire to find the best teachers and learn from them the lessons of the ancient philosophers, rhetoricians, historians, or scientists. True to his convictions, therefore, Ammianus wrote his histories in the tradition of the classical historians (most notably Tacitus), keeping away from recent Christian genre developments. In this period, Christian authors preferred and formed a distinct style of history-writing and biography, ascribing historical progression to the operations of divine providence and focusing on presenting moral character as a witness to God’s existence and ways of involvement in the world.⁷⁸ Instead, Ammianus made sure to keep the supernatural and the mystical entirely away from his history. For philosophical and political reasons, Ammianus admired and befriended the emperor Julian who wanted to build up “Hellenism” as a

rejected *paideia* (or most women who were not allowed to participate in it), prominent Christian leaders were steeped in classical education, which they employed to integrate Christianity into the social and cultural structures of the empire. Therefore, as the argument goes, the Christianization of the Roman empire was not a process of obliterating Roman identity as such, but it was a process of its modification through Christianity’s interaction with classical cultural idioms and norms. For a case study that involves these issues, see Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (a new edition with an epilogue). Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 where Brown is interested in making explicit how Augustine’s “Romanness” extended as it were into his Christianity without the one fully displacing the other. For Brown’s broader positions on “late antiquity,” see *The World of Late Antiquity, A.D. 150-750*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989. For a short monograph that brings forth Marrou’s perspectives on Christianity’s affect on Roman identity (quite original especially for its time), see *L’Église de l’Antiquité tardive, 303-604*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985. For education in the ancient world, see the still standard Henri-Irénée Marrou. *Histoire de l’éducation dans l’antiquité*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965 (second edition). The classic monograph on post-classical *paideia* is Werner Jaeger’s *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

⁷⁸ For a critical overview on seminal contributions to the genre of biography in pre-Christian antiquity, see Arnaldo Momigliano. *The Development of Greek Biography* (expanded edition). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. For the Christian period, many studies have used and have been based on “hagiography.” For a study on “hagiography” as a separate literary genre, see R. Aigrain. *L’Hagiographie: ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire*. Paris, 1953. For Byzantium, see Paul Alexander. “Secular Biography in Byzantium.” *Speculum* 13 (1940). pp. 194-209.

religious system to counter Christianity and who led an ambitious campaign against Persia.

Ammianus wrote with some detail on Hormisdas, but what survives today is only an excerpt before he redirects us to a book, which we have now lost.⁷⁹ In this surviving piece, Ammianus placed Hormisdas at the court of Constantius and not at Constantine's as Zosimos had it. It was in 357, according to Ammianus, when Constantius at the age of 40, visited the city of Rome for the first time. Touring the city, Constantius was stunned by the overwhelming beauty of the various sights. Particularly impressed by the Forum of Trajan, Constantius supposedly realized that he could not compete with the architectural achievements of his predecessors. Finally, he ventured "to copy Trajan's steed alone, which stands in the center of the vestibule, carrying the emperor himself."⁸⁰ But, still in need of some confirmation and assurance, Constantius turned to Hormisdas for advice. The Persian supposedly replied, "First, oh emperor, command a like stable to be built if you can. Let the steed, which you propose to create, range as widely as this, which we see."⁸¹

Hormisdas' enigmatic message, when read from the perspective of Ammianus' larger cultural objective, serves to challenge Constantius. It meant to juxtapose the glorious past and the decrepit present, in which Ammianus thought that he had the

⁷⁹ For Ammianus Marcellinus' perspective, see *Histoires*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002. Book XVI.10.16. Here is Ammianus' sentence: "And the royal prince Hormisdas, whose departure from Persia we have already mentioned, standing by answered (the emperor Constantius) with the refinement of his nature..." This translation comes from Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 147.

⁸⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus. Tr. John C. Rolfe. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956. Vol. 1. XVI.10.15: *Omni itaque spe huius modi quicquam conandi depulsa, Traiani equum solum, locatum in atrii medio, qui ipsum principem vehit, imitari se velle dicebat et posse.*

⁸¹ Ammianus Marcellinus. Tr. John C. Rolfe. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956. Vol. 1. XVI.10.16: "Ante" inquit "imperator, stabulum tale condi iubeto, si vales; equus quem fabricare disponis, ita late succedat, ut iste quem videmus."

misfortune to live, making the remark presumably more objective by ascribing it to a Persian immigrant who had a broader frame of reference. If taken as a metaphor, and in fact classical authors often meant such anecdotes to be symbolic, Ammianus in a Socratic twist urged Constantius to replicate Trajan's political feats and to assure the glory of the former empire before he could present himself as being triumphant. In any case, at the end of Constantius' tour, Hormisdas was asked to summarize explicitly what he thought of Rome. "He said that he took comfort in this fact alone, that he had learned that even there men were mortal."⁸² Hormisdas' line was praising and criticizing at the same time. Hormisdas found Rome certainly grandiose and impressive, but he also associated the city with the transient mortality of men. Built by men, Rome could die along with men. Hormisdas' summary was then Ammianus' programmatic call for a cultural and political return to the old Rome before it was too late.

The differences between the accounts of Zosimos and Ammianus are clear. Broadly speaking, Zosimos' story highlights Constantine's hospitality towards Hormisdas, but lacks the pungent criticism that Ammianus injected into the anecdote. Given how little we know about Zosimos, it is hard to determine with certainty whether he was aware of Ammianus' writing. Certainly, Zosimos preferred historians who wrote in Greek. He borrowed and at times directly copied from Dexippus, Eunapius, Olympiodorus, and Malchus.⁸³ Just as Tacitus was Ammianus' intellectual inspiration, Polybius was Zosimos' hero.

⁸² Ammianus Marcellinus. Tr. John C. Rolfe. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956. Vol. 1. XVI.10.16: *Is ipse interrogatus quid de Roma sentiret, id tantum sibi placuisse aiebat, quod didicisset ibi quoque homines mori.*

⁸³ For an introductory overview on the sources that Zosimos used, see François Paschoud. *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle*. Tome I, Livres I et II (deuxième tirage). Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003. Introduction, pp. XXXVI—LXXI.

Despite Zosimos' preference for Greek, we know that he received a formal education and grew up in a scholarly family. Thus, it is likely that he picked up Latin, too. Olympiodorus, from whom Zosimos borrowed for his own work, liked to insert Latin in his text or to use difficult Latinisms, which were especially hard to understand unless one already had a good familiarity with the formal language. One philologist has even drawn a connection between the fourth-century Latin historian Aurelius Victor and Zosimos.⁸⁴ In addition, some scholars maintain that Zosimos wrote his *Book 3* based almost exclusively on Ammianus' *Books 23-25* and Libanios' *Oration 18, 204-280*.⁸⁵ Thus, we have multiple reasons to believe that Zosimos knew Latin. If in fact Zosimos did follow Ammianus, which is more likely, Zosimos had consciously simplified and shortened Ammianus' presentation of Hormisdas.⁸⁶ Zosimos focused on Hormisdas' escape and did not follow the Persian's later sojourn in the Roman state. Always prone to simpler reportage and avoiding interpretation and allusion, Zosimos might have missed the importance of Hormisdas' dialogue with Constantius.

Apart from establishing the possible familiarity of Zosimos with Ammianus, we also need to make sure that both referred to the same Hormisdas. Chronologically, it is possible that Hormisdas could have lived after Constantine's death in 337, for only a single generation separated Constantine, the father, from Constantius, the son. Thus, Ammianus and Zosimos could be referring to the same person who found refuge in the

⁸⁴ François Paschoud. *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle*. Tome I, Livres I et II (deuxième tirage). Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003. Introduction, p. XLVI.

⁸⁵ François Paschoud. *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle*. Tome I, Livres I et II (deuxième tirage). Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003. Introduction, p. XLIX.

⁸⁶ Philologists divide strongly on the issue. We have already pointed out one side of the debate, arguing that Zosimos used Ammianus, which would explain the major overlap in Zosimos' *Book 3* and Ammianus' *Books 23-25*. On the other hand, opponents to this thesis explain the overlap with a common source that both Ammianus and Zosimos have independently used. We do not need to get into the complex details of this debate that has a rather long intellectual genealogy. For, even if Zosimos did not use Ammianus, but some other source, the fact still remains that Zosimos omitted the episode with Constantius.

court of Constantine and remained there even after Constantine's death. But, we need to remember that this would not have been an easy political transition for Hormisdas as the regime change was nothing short of being nasty and brutal. In the context of Christianity, Constantius reversed his father's Nicaean policies and supported Arianism. Quickly after his coming to power, Constantius ordered a series of purges directed at relatives, family members, or impeached officials whom he perceived as possible threats to his rule.

If we are to combine Zosimos' and Ammianus' accounts, Hormisdas' survival in this drastic regime change would have meant that Constantius considered Hormisdas an exceptionally valuable political asset. One possible explanation for Hormisdas' stay at Constantius' court is that the emperor relied on informants and spies. Constantius openly encouraged a culture of suspicion and slander among his political entourage and rewarded informants with confiscated lands from the very people against whom they had testified. In times when Hormisdas' brother Shapur II was still active, Constantius may have kept Hormisdas in the top levels of his government as an informant about his brother the Persian *shah* who had deprived him of his legitimate power.

Unfortunately, Ammianus' remark does not give us explicit information on Hormisdas' relation to Christianity. However, it is more likely to assume that Hormisdas did not convert, for the pagan Ammianus gave him the voice of reason, sending through the Persian Hormisdas didactic messages to all Christian *parvenus* emperors who had forgotten the inimitable glory and beauty of Rome. With a touch of Socratic irony, the Roman emperors now had to hear these messages from a foreigner who had made it in the Roman state, but had remained a Persian nonetheless, so he prophetically alluded to

the gloom that awaited Rome because the emperors had abandoned the city and had left it to fade away.

Ammianus' narrative hands us a hefty stack of reshuffled historical possibilities, which scholars, who have relied only on Zosimos, have missed. If we trust Ammianus' account, we see that Hormisdas integrated well into Roman society and served as a close advisor to Constantius despite the tormented regime transition. We cannot establish for certain Hormisdas' relation to Christianity, but given the narrative agenda of Ammianus, which we suggested, it is more reasonable to believe that Hormisdas did not convert. Thus, Constantius threatened and pressed Romans into conversion, but presumably trusted in Hormisdas' loyalty without pushing the Persian to commit to Christianity. In the context of our investigation, these are the relevant points from Ammianus. Now, let us turn to the famous professor of rhetoric Libanios whose subtle reference to Hormisdas needs to receive some consideration, too.

Libanios had much in common with Ammianus. Both authors grew up in Antioch. Both of them loved Hellenic culture, and respectively both of them lauded the emperor Julian's anti-Christian policies. As a professor, Libanios ended up teaching prominent Christians like John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. After the death of Julian, however, Libanios' personal opposition to Christianity got him in trouble. Although Libanios had trained in rhetoric some of the key Christian figures of the time, the Christian emperors looked at him with suspicion and exiled him from Constantinople where he had comfortably taught. After a short stay in Nicomedia, Libanios finally settled back in his native Antioch and was kept at bay there for the rest of his life. During

his eventful career, Libanios wrote many letters, a large number of which still survive. We will look here at *letter 1402* for more information on Hormisdas.

In 363, Libanios sent a letter to one of his friends, in which he praised the campaign successes of the emperor Julian. Libanios wove Julian into a Herodotean narrative, in which fourth-century Hellenes fought in the spirit of their classical predecessors who had managed to push back the armies of the Persians Darius and Xerxes. During Julian’s campaigning against the Persians, Libanios wrote, “he [Julian] killed six thousand who came to spy and also to battle [technically “business” from ἔργον, but I use the semantics of “trouble” to render “battle”] if the occasion permitted.”⁸⁷ Libanios had gotten the news from prompt messengers who rode their camels from the front. Supposedly, Julian’s ultimate intentions were to replace the current ruler of Persia with the “fugitive” residing now in the Roman state (παραδόντα δὲ τῷ φεύγοντι τὴν ἀρχήν).⁸⁸

We know that Julian’s dream to win over the Persians did not come to fruition, for the emperor was killed on the military front unexpectedly. Ancient sources divide on the issue of Christian involvement in the murder of Julian. The fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Sozomen, whom we have already encountered on the matter of Puscicus and on the Persian anti-Christian massacres of the 340s, neatly summarizes for us all the

⁸⁷ Libanios. *Libanii Opera*, Vols. 10-11. Ed. R. Foerster. Leipzig: Teubner (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1997). Volume 11. Letter 1402, line 2: ἀπέκτεινε δὲ καὶ ἑξακισχιλίους ἦκοντας ὡς ἐς κατασκοπήν καὶ ἅμα ἐπ’ ἔργον, εἰ συμβαίῃ. Translated also by Michael H. Dodgeon in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363): A Documentary History*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 258. However, I have not accepted Dodgeon’s translation.

⁸⁸ Libanios. *Libanii Opera*, Vols. 10-11. Ed. R. Foerster. Leipzig: Teubner (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1997). Volume 11. Letter 1402, line 3: καὶ ταῦτα ἀγγέλλουσιν οἱ ἐπὶ τῶν πτηνῶν διαιτώμενοι καμήλων τετιμήσθω γὰρ αὐτοῖς τὸ τάχος τῷ ὀνόματι τῶν πτερῶν--ἐλπίς τε ἤξειν τὸν βασιλέα τὸν μὲν νῦν ἄρχοντα ἄγοντα, παραδόντα δὲ τῷ φεύγοντι τὴν ἀρχήν.

circulating theories on Julian’s death.⁸⁹ According to Sozomen, Libanios himself blamed a Christian for the secret “murder” of Julian (Χριστιανὸν γενέσθαι ὑποδηλοῖ Τουλιανοῡ τὸν σφαγέα).⁹⁰ And Sozomen deemed this version plausible, for “all Hellenes until now praise themselves as being murderers of the tyrants of old. Thus, the Hellenes have been appointed to kill for the common freedom of all.”⁹¹ “Hellenes,” whom Sozomen now equated with Christians, killed Julian in order to preserve “the family of citizens and friends” (πολίταις ἢ συγγενέσιν ἢ φίλοις προθύμως ἐπαμύναντας).⁹²

We can see how Sozomen was re-appropriating the Hellenic identity here at the end of Julian’s life and was linking it up to Christianity while peculiarly alluding to an ethos of democracy. This is Julian, Ammianus, or Libanios reversed. With the death of Julian, “pagan” Hellenism as an official doctrine in Rome had lost. And Ammianus and Libanios were sensing aspects of the future that they already in the fourth century bemoaned. But, apart from Julian’s failed attempt to convert Rome to pagan Hellenism and to colonize Persia, we need to ask who the “fugitive” was that would have been appointed to power in Persia as a Roman protégé across the frontier.

⁸⁹ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 2, especially sections 1-5. See also for commentary, Edward Walford, tr. Sozomen’s *Ecclesiastical History*. London, 1855. p. 244.

⁹⁰ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 2, section 1.

⁹¹ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 2, sections 1-2: οὐ γὰρ ἀπεικός τινα τῶν τότε στρατευομένων εἰς νοῦν λαβεῖν, ὡς καὶ Ἕλληνες καὶ πάντες ἄνθρωποι μέχρι νῦν τοὺς πάλαι τυραννοκτόνους γενομένους ἐπαινοῦσιν, ὡς ὑπὲρ τῆς πάντων ἐλευθερίας ἐλομένους ἀποθανεῖν καὶ πολίταις ἢ συγγενέσιν ἢ φίλοις προθύμως ἐπαμύναντας.

⁹² Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 2, section 2, line 1.

Libanios left the person unnamed. He may have avoided specifics in order to protect the identity of “the fugitive” in case the letter fell in the wrong hands. When analyzing epistolary correspondence in late antiquity and Byzantium, scholars often forget that the cryptic nature of the letters was not due to a frivolous change in fashion and in taste of writing alone. Frustrated with Byzantine epistolography, one scholar has gone to the point of claiming, “To us a letter is a message accompanied by an expression of personal regard; a Byzantine letter is an impersonal rhetorical flourish which either contains no message at all, or if it does, the message is couched in so obscure and allusive a fashion as to be nearly unintelligible.”⁹³ This is to miss the context of the Byzantine letter and to overlook the subtle messages that Byzantines planted in their correspondence. Many of the surviving letters, like Libanios’, were sent from exile, and their authors had all the reasons to fear interception and to heed against the dangers of imperial scrutiny that aimed to control and suppress dissidence. Thus, Libanios’ silence may not be coincidental or due to mere rhetorical playfulness.

Although left unnamed, Libanios’ fugitive has been identified as our Hormisdas.⁹⁴ Thus, the Persian survived the drastic changes in the political regimes of Constantine, Constantius, and finally Julian. We should remember that when we combine the accounts of Ammianus, Libanios, and Zosimos, we observe Hormisdas, who moved from one political regime to the next with seeming ease, always remaining at court. In this historical scenario, therefore, we see that Christianity did not operate as a necessary precondition for immigration, refuge, and promotion. Hormisdas built up imperial trust

⁹³ Romilly Jenkins. “The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963), p. 45.

⁹⁴ Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 258.

on personal loyalty and was not required to rely on state-demanded religious affiliation. This is the basic message from the pagan accounts. Now, let us examine the Christian side and thus turn to the seventh-century fragments of the Christian monk John, which we briefly introduced above.

The general outline of John's story overlapped with that of Zosimos, but instead of seeking the protection of Constantine, Hormisdas in John's version went to the emperor Licinius (r. 308-324).⁹⁵ John differed also from Ammianus who (we should recall) had placed Hormisdas in the court of Constantius. The variations in the versions of John and Ammianus are particularly interesting, for there are reasons to believe that John may have actually read Ammianus' histories.⁹⁶ In any case, John had Hormisdas fleeing to Licinius who in the early fourth century was in fact situated in the East and was occupied with the Persian frontier. Thus, so long as Hormisdas' escape happened before 324 when Licinius was still alive, John's account is plausible. Disguised as a slave, Hormisdas rode across the frontier successfully and met with the emperor. John's fragmentary account does not relate what happened afterwards, but the important point in considering Christianity's movement across imperial frontiers is that somehow the

⁹⁵ *Chronological History*. Fragment 178: 15-18: Ὁ δὲ καιρὸν εὐρῶν ἐπιτήδειον τὰ δεσμὰ ῥήξας ἔφυγε, καὶ ἵππῳ χρησάμενος κατὰ διαστήματα ἐν σχήματι δουλικῷ παρὰ Λικιννίου φιλοτίμως ὑπεδέχθη [Finding the opportune moment, he cut his chains and fled, and at due time mounting a horse and being dressed as a slave, he was welcomed honorably by Licinius]. Note here also the description of Hormisdas' undercover as the more general "slave" instead of "eunuch." Conversely, he was more specific to point out that Hormisdas traveled by horse, a piece of information, which Zosimos did not provide.

⁹⁶ The debate on this issue is still ongoing, but Michael DiMaio's arguments that John had read Ammianus have gained more adherents in recent years. See his "Antiochene Connection: Zonaras, Ammianus Marcellinus, and John of Antioch on the Reigns of the Emperors Constantius II and Julian." *Byzantion* 50 (1980), pp. 158-185 and "Infaustis Ductoribus Praeviis: The Antiochene Connection, Part II." *Byzantion* 51 (1981), pp. 502-510.

Persian runaway Hormisdas from Zosimos' story became in John's a memorialized hero, possibly even a Christian saint.⁹⁷

As we have already indicated above, modern historians have generally neglected John's account, but the relevant section on Hormisdas has actually been translated.⁹⁸ It is important to consider here John's last sentence and the way it was rendered: "He [Hormisdas] was such a good javelin-thrower, however, that he alone was reported to have possessed a spear which was unstained which thereafter he was depicted as holding 'ἐν εἰκόνι.'" ⁹⁹ For reasons that have not been provided, which is unfortunate given the importance of this one word, the translator took the original Greek "εἰκών" in a limited classical sense and rendered it to mean "a statue." Therefore, at least according to this translation, Hormisdas supposedly ended up being commemorated as a "good" spear-thrower who presumably never really hit his enemies, for John made it a point to emphasize that Hormisdas' spear remained unstained with blood (ἀναίμακτον).¹⁰⁰

Undoubtedly, "εἰκών" translated as a statue is lexically possible, but it does beg the question why the Romans would choose to commemorate a Persian refugee who was somehow "good" at throwing a spear without ever reaching his enemies. And it is unlikely that Hormisdas ended up becoming an accomplished professional athlete or a

⁹⁷ We will discuss the possibility that John depicted Hormisdas as a saint in detail below. Although difficult to prove, I believe that there are strong reasons to think that John's Hormisdas ended up as a saint.

⁹⁸ Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 148 where Lieu translates John's fragment.

⁹⁹ I provide here Lieu's translation from p. 148 in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. But, I have a number of objections to his translation, which I will point out and develop step by step below.

¹⁰⁰ *Chronological History*. Fragment 178: 18-21: Ἦν δὲ ἀκοντιστῆς τοιοῦτος, ὥστε ἐκεῖνον μόνον ἀναίμακτον λέγεται ἐσχηκέναι τὸ δόρυ... [It is said that he was such a spearman that his spear remained bloodless...]. K. Müller, ed. *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum (FHG)* 4. Paris: Didot, 1841-1870: pp. 538-622.

star entertainer. As is well known, many early theologians saw acting as a form of prostitution, and they thought that competitive games were vulgar, aggressive, and corrupting. Even though the Olympic competitions technically continued until 394 when Theodosius I (r. 379-395) formally prohibited them, signs of such legislative antagonism against Greco-Roman sports and performative arts could be found under Constantine as well.¹⁰¹ Therefore, even if technically possible, it is a stretch to imagine that Hormisdas threw javelins as a professional athlete and became so good at it that he was immortalized in a statue despite these shifting legal attitudes. Thus, we should consider another possibility.

Technically, even in classical Greek, sensitive authors used “εἰκόν” to refer to an image or to a dignifying portrait of some notable figure. In a strict sense, for it is hard to determine to what degree such technical specifics were actually observed outside of lexicographic or encyclopedic works, “εἰκόν” did not carry any religious connotation. It simply referred to an honorary image to be admired, but never to be worshipped.

“Ἄγαλμα,” on the other hand, meant a real cult-statue, and especially one representing a Roman emperor.¹⁰² Before the advent of Christianity (and long afterwards), people in the Roman empire sought the solace and protection of an imperial statue when feeling threatened or abused. As it may be concluded from the uneasy language in relevant legislature, Christian Roman emperors, too, liked the idea of using the imperial statue as a way of multiplying and making their authority more immediate throughout the empire.

¹⁰¹ Gladiatorial games are irrelevant here since they were too gory for the supposed “statue” of Hormisdas. But, in any case, Constantine was the first to begin restricting gladiatorial shows, thus giving a rise to the famous Byzantine chariot races. Little is known on theater and playwriting in Byzantium.

¹⁰² For “ἄγαλμα” and “εἰκόν”, see Arnaldo Momigliano. *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. p. 101.

But, under the influence of Christian convictions and pressures, they recognized the need to insist that statues should not be worshipped as they had been in the pagan past. In the late fourth century, for example, John Chrysostom dedicated an entire series of fiery sermons teaching his audiences how to relate properly to the Roman statue in a new Christian context.¹⁰³

By the seventh century when John of Antioch mentioned Hormisdas and his “εἰκῶν,” specifically Christian artistic forms and symbols had already emerged, having assimilated pagan motives and techniques. Statues, and the more widespread cheaper statuettes, continued their existence in the Christian Roman empire. But, the subsequent production was discouraged as early theologians associated statues with paganism. Thus, many statues were either destroyed or marred (usually by having their noses cut off) because rigorous Christians believed that bad demons were chased away in this manner. Instead of the statue, therefore, “the icon,” from the Greek “εἰκῶν,” became the most popular and characteristically Christian artistic object.¹⁰⁴

We should not get too sidetracked with the history of the Byzantine icon here, but it is important for the purposes of figuring out what John meant by “εἰκῶν” to highlight several additional points. Eventually, theologians defined the icon as a religious object

¹⁰³ *Homilies on the Statues. Patrologia Graeca* 49, cols. 15-222. See also F. van de Paverd. *St. John Chrysostom: The Homilies on the Statues. Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 239. Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1991.

¹⁰⁴ Perhaps, we should point out that Christians, at least theoretically, did not celebrate individual artistic genius (though *topoi* of humility or cryptograms may also be read as signatures that sought recognition and conveyed a sense of proud accomplishment and individuality). The debate on what constituted “art” and “artistic individuality” in Byzantine society is too large to summarize here, but it does seem to me that even though artistic self-awareness was not expressed in the terms of Renaissance or Romantic obsessions with “genius,” the Byzantine sense of tradition should not blind us from noticing originality and innovation in the rich artistic legacy of the empire (which we should remember was even richer than what historical contingency has permitted us to witness today). Trained and inspired by the Greco-Roman “classics,” the Byzantines, who kept this “classical” tradition anyway, had a very refined sense of aesthetics and artistic accomplishment (personal or communal).

that was not to be worshipped, thus trying to insure against idolatry. Theologians mandated that the icon had to be respected; stealing it or disregarding it was a sacrilege and, under Christian law, constituted a serious crime. Thus, the icon's eighth-century definition drew a thin line between "respect" and "worship." Christian intellectuals assimilated "εἰκῶν" and not "ἄγαλμα." As is often the case, actual practice deviated from formal definitions, and people did steal, did abuse, did pray *to* saints (instead of pray *through* saints), and did blur miraculous interventions of saints with the presumed powers of the icon as an object of worship itself. But, the important point is that the word "εἰκῶν" was integrated into the Christian vocabulary and thus its specific Christian meaning at a high theological level was eventually fixed.

When we place John's fragment and his "εἰκῶν" in the context of later Christianity (we should recall that John was a monk) and after we recognize that by the seventh century (when John wrote) specifically Christian artistic forms had fully matured, it becomes clear that he meant "an icon," and not "a statue" as John's modern translator has it. Thus, in this fragment, John reported that Hormisdas eventually became a saint who never killed with his spear. Hormisdas was then supposedly depicted in an icon, holding such a "bloodless" spear to symbolize perhaps his readiness to protect "good" against "evil" or to illustrate the peaceful passivity of a Christian who preferred to endure suffering instead of imposing it on others.¹⁰⁵ Many Byzantine iconographic protagonists (saints, angels, or archangels) were portrayed with such unstained spears, sometimes held up in guarding posture, other times, stabbing at a dragon or an evil spirit.

¹⁰⁵ *Chronological History*. Fragment 178: 18-21: Ἦν δὲ ἀκοντιστῆς τοιοῦτος, ὥστε ἐκεῖνον μόνον ἀναίμακτον λέγεται ἐσχηκέναι τὸ δόρυ, ὃ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐν εἰκόνι κατέχων ἐγράφη [It is said that he was such a spearman that his spear remained bloodless. And after these events, he was depicted as holding such spear in an icon].

Before we evaluate what Hormisdas' icon at least in the Christian tradition means for our discussion of Christianity across the frontier, we should address two points that could be raised as objections to his reported sanctification in John's account. One objection against Hormisdas' sainthood might be that John conflated the fourth-century Persian refugee with a different fifth-century Persian aristocrat also named Hormisdas who was murdered under the Persian *shah* Vahram.¹⁰⁶ In this fifth-century hagiography, Vahram stripped Hormisdas publicly naked and ordered him to attend to the camels of the army. The humiliating insults and mockeries of the soldiers directed at the flashing nakedness of the camel-tender were meant to push Hormisdas away from Christianity. But, this was to no avail. Infuriated by Hormisdas' stubborn resistance, Vahram put Hormisdas to unspeakable torture. This Hormisdas died a Christian and was later canonized. Certainly, it is quite possible that John confused the brother of Shapur (the prince in exile) with this later martyr and saint. But, for the purposes of our analysis, this confusion is not significant because we are predominantly interested in understanding the ways (real or imagined) in which the Byzantine authors conceived Hormisdas' Christianity in the context of foreign imperial relations.

Another objection to Hormisdas' sainthood might be that John may have had more details on Hormisdas, which the current compilation of the extant fragments has not included. Doubtlessly, the willful discretion of various scribes over time and the complex itineraries that manuscripts travel before they arrive into our hands could have conflated or blurred some or all of the details that the original author might have included on Hormisdas' sojourn in Licinius' realm. This is certainly possible, but the last

¹⁰⁶ Theodoret. Book V, chapter 39. *Acta Sanctorum*, August, Volume II. See also Assemani. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Volume III, pt. 2. p. 384. For another possible mention of the same Hormisdas, see also the martyrology of Rabban Sliba. *Analecta Bollandiana*, Volume XXVII (1908), p. 193.

sentence, which we have analyzed in detail so far, does not seem out of place and though it has labyrinthine syntax, we know that Byzantines enjoyed such a mode of expression. To John, a monk from Antioch, Christianity presumably mattered in a positive sense (certainly more than it did to the pagan authors before him), so he sought ways to make it relevant and important. Thus, based on the text as we currently have it, we should conclude that John considered Hormisdas a saint.

If we accept that Shapur's brother Hormisdas died (again whether John conflated him with the later saint is only a secondary issue for our purposes) as a Christian martyr in Roman territory and was later depicted in an icon, John's story illustrates the internal Roman imperial politics towards Christianity. It is important to note the possible Christianization of the earlier narrative of Hormisdas through the explicit appropriation of Hormisdas into Roman imperial internal politics. A saint framed in an icon to direct believers towards God, Hormisdas, according to John, assimilated into Roman society, but only when pushed retrospectively into the cultural memory of a Christian Roman empire several centuries after the fact. In the 300s, Christianity would not help Hormisdas to integrate into Rome or to be promoted in the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy.

Before examining the next version of Hormisdas' story, which Ioannes Zonaras produced in the twelfth century, we need to make explicit the important differences between the separate accounts that we have studied thus far. We began with the narrative of the pagan Zosimos, on which most scholars have based their interpretations. Zosimos traced Hormisdas' run from Persia to Armenia and finally into Roman territory. We saw how Zosimos drew a symbolic line of alliance between Rome and Armenia against Persia

and how he sent Hormisdas from Shapur to Constantine. According to Zosimos, it was Persian hereditary politics at home that caused Hormisdas' imprisonment and then necessitated his subsequent flight away from Persia.

Ammianus and Libanios placed Hormisdas in the midst of the fourth-century politics of Hellenism and classical *paideia*, which the pagan authors saw as being threatened by a Christian cultural and political invasion. If we combine these accounts, we see that Hormisdas transitioned from one political regime to the next without pressures to convert to Christianity. The only exception on the Christian affiliation of Hormisdas is the seventh-century account of the monk John. According to John, Hormisdas became a Christian saint whose later iconography depicted him as carrying a spear. But, even in John's account, Christianity did not function as a necessary precondition for Hormisdas' immigration and refuge.

After the seventh-century account of John, the case of Hormisdas dropped from Byzantine sources. We find it resurrected in the tumultuous twelfth century when the canonist and historian Ioannes Zonaras picked it up again in his *Epitome of Histories*.¹⁰⁷ In the meantime, so much has changed in Byzantine society (and beyond) that we are dealing practically with a completely different historical reality from the one that earlier Byzantine historians, who had dealt with Hormisdas, inhabited. The Persian empire was long gone and was by then replaced by the state of the Seljuk Turks. Crusaders were traversing Byzantine lands in trying to recapture Jerusalem, inspired by a religious rhetoric of divine mandates, personal duties, and, of course, by various individual ambitions, desires, and commitments. The Byzantine government and economy were in

¹⁰⁷ *Epitomae historiarum*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum*, 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1868-1870.

crisis, the state having lost most of its Western lands as well as crucial sectors in the East. And Ammianus' and Libanios' cultural, programmatic preoccupations with Hellenism and *paideia* had taken completely different forms. In all of this, we should keep in mind that roughly eight centuries had passed from Ammianus and Libanios to Ioannes Zonaras.

Ioannes Zonaras came from an aristocratic family and used his personal connections to secure a cushy job in the Constantinopolitan bureaucracy. At first, things went well for him, for the ruling Komneni governed based on familial, mafia-like personal contacts. But, Zonaras could not manage his own finances, so poverty forced him to withdraw to the monastery of St. Glykeria (on present-day Ineir Adasi in the Bay of Tuzla), where he wrote his *Epitome*.¹⁰⁸

The intellectual and chronological scope of the *Epitome* was ambitious, for Zonaras set out to cover the major historical events from the universe's creation to the death of the emperor Alexius Komnenos in 1118. As we may imagine, given the vast chronology (6,619 years by Byzantine reckoning), Zonaras relied less on his own primary research than on the works of past historians. In his *Prologue*, Zonaras explained that he would avoid speeches and learned excurses, but would still keep a high historical and critical style that would be different from the basic reportage typical to the chronicle.¹⁰⁹ For our objective to trace Hormisdas' story, it is important to note here that modern scholarship has been polarized on the issue of whether or not Zonaras used John of

¹⁰⁸ For a short overview of Zonaras' political life, see K. Ziegler. "Zonaras." Vol. XA.1. *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Munich: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1972. cols. 718-732. For a quick contextualization, see also Hans-Georg Beck. *Kirche und Theologische Literatur im Byzantinischen Reich*. München, 1959. p. 143, p. 265, and p. 652.

¹⁰⁹ *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*. Tr. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane. New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 1.

Antioch's earlier history.¹¹⁰ In recent years, however, scholars have reverted to the original nineteenth-century opinion and have accepted again that Zonaras employed the seventh-century text of John of Antioch.¹¹¹ If this was in fact the case, we will see the interesting ways, in which Zonaras re-interpreted Hormisdas' story and redefined its cultural symbolism in contrast to John's narrative, which we explored above.

Like the earlier Zosimos, Zonaras placed Hormisdas in the center of Persian dynastic intrigues.¹¹² Eager to secure his power, Hormisdas' brother Shapur, the *shah* to whom Constantine had sent his famous diplomatic letter, blinded one of their brothers and put Hormisdas in prison. But, his mother and wife came to Hormisdas' aid. They bribed the prison guards to secure a visit with Hormisdas and managed to sneak in a file, with which Hormisdas later cut through the prison chains. After his wife tricked the guards with lavish food and soporific intoxication, Hormisdas ran away to the Romans and was kindly welcomed to reside in their state.¹¹³ Up to this point, as we can see, Zonaras' story (with minor variations) is practically the same as Zosimos' account.

¹¹⁰ E. Patzig. "Über einige Quellen des Zonaras." *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 5 (1896). pp. 24-53. Patzig argues for Zonaras' usage of John of Antioch. For the opposite view, see P. Sotiroudis. *Untersuchungen zum Geschichtswerk des Johannes von Antiocheia*. ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΗ ΕΠΕΤΗΡΙΔΑ ΤΗΣ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΚΗΣ ΣΧΟΛΗΣ 67. Thessalonica: ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΕΙΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ, 1989.

¹¹¹ See the commentary to the recent edition of Umberto Roberto. *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 154, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005. Roberto's work has major explanations for John of Antioch's fragments, too. We have already discussed some of them above.

¹¹² *Epitomae historiarum*. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. pp. 29-30. The relevant passage is also translated by Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 149. A full translation of Zonaras' Book XIII is found in *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*. Tr. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane. New York: Routledge, 2009. For our passage on Hormisdas, see specifically pp.159-160.

¹¹³ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 30: εἶτα τοῖς φρουροῖς ἢ ἐκείνου σύνευνος δεῖπνον παρέθετο δαψιλές· οἱ δὲ καὶ βρωμάτων ἐμφορηθέντες καὶ τοῦ ἀκράτου σπάσαντες ἀκρατέστερον ἐλήφθησαν ὑπνω βαρεῖ. ὁ δ' Ὁρμίσδας κοιμωμένων ἐκείνων καὶ τὰ δεσμὰ τῆ

In the later progression of the story, however, Zonaras gave an unprecedented and original perspective. According to Zonaras, Shapur was glad that Hormisdas had fled to the Roman state. Apparently, Shapur was so excited at the good news that he dispatched Hormisdas' wife back to her husband in Roman territory "with honor" (ἐντίμως). Thus, Shapur had no fear that Hormisdas and his reconvened family could organize a plot against him from across the foreign frontier in the same effective way that they had already contrived when they got Hormisdas out of prison in the first place.¹¹⁴ In the Roman state, the foreign Hormisdas felt at home and fared very well.

We would have appreciated more detail here, but Zonaras apparently did not find anything important to add on Hormisdas' integration in his new place of residence and moved beyond that. Zonaras either did not have actual evidence in front of him or simply found the matter too trivial, for he did promise in his *Prologue* that he would mention everything that he deemed important in his ambitious *Epitome*. In any case, after Zonaras followed Hormisdas across the frontier, his next remark was that "Hormisdas was very strong and expert with the spear so much so that while aiming at someone, he could predict where it would strike the enemy."¹¹⁵ If Zonaras was indeed familiar with John of Antioch, as recent scholarship attests, we can immediately see how Zonaras refashioned the earlier story that we examined above. The idea of an icon with Hormisdas carrying a

ρίνη διέκοψε καὶ τῆς φρουρᾶς ἐξελαθὼν ᾤχετο καὶ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους ἀπέδρα καὶ ὑπεδέχθη φιλομότατα.

¹¹⁴ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. pp. 30-31: δὲ Σαπώρης ἐώκει τῇ φυγῇ ἐκείνου ἐφήδεσθαι, οἷα τὸν ἐξ ἐκείνου ἀποσκευασάμενος φόβον· οὐ μόνον γὰρ ἐκδοθῆναί οἱ τὸν φυγάδα οὐκ ἐξεζήτησεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτῷ ἐντίμως ἐξέπεμψεν.

¹¹⁵ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 31: ἡ δὲ Ὁρμισδᾶς καὶ πολὺς τὴν ἰσχὺν καὶ ἀκοντιστῆς περιδέξιος, ὡς ἐν τῷ πάλλειν κατὰ τινος τὸ ἀκόντιον προλέγειν, ὅπου βαλεῖ τὸν πολέμιον.

“bloodless spear” did not make sense to Zonaras, not least because he probably never saw it. The icon either never existed or the iconographic character, known to John in the seventh century, had by the twelfth collapsed into a generic motif that blurred authenticity and virtually turned Hormisdas into an unknown figure. As Byzantine art historians indicate, the nature of Byzantine iconography is such that it is very difficult even for experts to distinguish specific iconographic characters unless their identity was inscribed in an actual colophon or the icon could be readily related to an original text.¹¹⁶

Instead of depicting Hormisdas as a saint, therefore, Zonaras presented Hormisdas as a master of the spear. This actually could have been a trendy motif to signify heroism at the time. In the earlier Roman and later Byzantine society, those kinds of fashions (literary, but also, more broadly, culturally, displayed in hairstyles, popular names, attire, organization of private space, etc.) were directly connected to (and sometimes deliberately orchestrated in) the imperial court.¹¹⁷ Thus, we find Hormisdas as a spearman, and we discover as a neat parallel that Julian’s grave epitaph in the suburb of the city of Tarsus commemorated the dead emperor as “both a good ruler and a strong

¹¹⁶ For a general study on art in Byzantium as well as an introduction to some of the problems and methodologies of the field, see Robin Cormack. *Byzantine Art*. Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2000. See especially the section “What is Byzantine Art?” pp. 2-6.

¹¹⁷ We have abundant examples of this Roman/Byzantine cultural phenomenon. With the change of a given emperor, a proliferation of this new emperor’s name occurred throughout the empire. We also may observe Constantine’s peculiar haircut (his hair curled up, possibly to mask advancing baldness), becoming popular after Constantine secured his power. His son Constantius had his own version of it even, so far as we could tell from his surviving busts, before he was displaying any signs of his father’s baldness. The mimicry of Byzantine fashion and taste was not only restricted to people within the state. Many regional studies (especially popular among Balkan scholars) have examined the ways, in which local rulers affected a Byzantine persona with all the perceived mannerisms, peculiar attire, or even posture and style of walking. For the most recent study that deals with some of these issues in medieval Bulgaria, see Boris Todorov’s dissertation. *Bulgaria between the Two Romes: The Discourse of Power in Medieval Bulgaria*. University of California, Los Angeles, 2007. See also in Bulgarian Petur Angelov. България и българите в представите на Византийците [*Bulgaria and the Bulgarians according to Byzantine Perspectives*]. Sofia, 1999.

spearman” (αἰχμητής with the caveat that the word could also mean the more general “warrior,” of course).¹¹⁸

In any case, before Zonaras got to discuss Hormisdas’ days in the presence of Julian, the historian reported that the Persian had first served the emperor Constantius. Impressed by Hormisdas’ abilities, Constantius appointed him to command a large cavalry regiment and commissioned him to campaign against his own people in his native Persia (κατὰ τῶν ὁμοφύλων).¹¹⁹ Supposedly, Hormisdas was quite good, for he led several campaigns. Thus, we witness how personal strength and ability to fight at those opportune times, when the Romans had set against the Persians, promoted Hormisdas across the frontier and made him a trusted military commander in the Roman army. As the pagan authors before him, Zonaras made no mention of Christianity and of the ways it affected Hormisdas’ status in the Roman state.

In Zonaras’ *Epitome*, Hormisdas resurfaces one more time. On this occasion, the Persian was at Julian’s court, accompanying the Roman emperor on a campaign that started off well for the Romans and eventually brought them in front of the walls of the

¹¹⁸ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 69: ἀμφότερον βασιλεύς τ’ ἀγαθὸς κρατερός τ’ αἰχμητής. Here is the full epitaph: Κύδνω ἐπ’ ἀργυρόεντι ἀπ’ Εὐφρήταο ῥοάων Περσίδος ἐκ γαίης ἀτελευτήτω ἐπὶ ἔργῳ κινήσας στρατιῆν τὸδ’ Ἰουλιανὸς λάχε σῆμα, ἀμφότερον βασιλεύς τ’ ἀγαθὸς κρατερός τ’ αἰχμητής. For “αἰχμητής,” translated as “spearman” without a comment or explanation for the decision, however, see *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*. Tr. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane. New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 176 where they also translate the entire epigraph, of course. Banchich and Lane have simply taken the more popular (primary dictionary meaning) of the word. But, this need not be the case, for in an epitaph, it would make actually more sense that Julian be described more generally as a successful “warrior.” Above, I have only pointed out the possible connection, but I do not insist on it and am not committed to the “spearman” meaning.

¹¹⁹ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 31: οὗτος τοίνυν τῷ Κωνσταντίῳ κατὰ τῶν ὁμοφύλων συνεστρατεύετο, ἄρχειν ταχθεὶς ἱππέων ἴλης πολλῆς.

Persian capital Ctesiphon.¹²⁰ But once at Ctesiphon, the Romans could not breach the defense or figure out ways to take the city. In a moment of stalemate, two Persians, pretending to be deserters from their side, approached Julian and convinced him to abandon and burn his own fleet. The rationale was to prevent the Persians from capturing the abandoned ships while the Romans were being taken on a secret path to Ctesiphon. Julian fell for the conniving guidance of the Persian informants. According to the story, which Zonaras was here retelling, our Hormisdas was there at that crucial moment to warn the emperor against the planted Persian deceit (δόλον εἶναι τὸ προᾶγμα).¹²¹ But, Julian did not listen to Hormisdas' advice. Not trusting the expertise of the Persian refugee cost the Roman emperor his life. Thus, the story put Hormisdas in the limelight and gave to him a central role in the Roman theater of dramatic military affairs.

It is hard to tell with certainty whether Zonaras himself believed his own account. But, judging from Zonaras' eagerness to move quickly on what "others have said" (οἱ μὲν... οἱ δὲ), he might have been skeptical of the story.¹²² Thus, he proceeded to show how Julian's military demise and personal death resulted from depletion of supplies, which forced the unruly withdrawal of Julian's suffering armies. The withdrawal was

¹²⁰ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 65: Στρατεύσας δὲ κατὰ Περσῶν πρότερον μὲν εὐτύχησε καὶ πόλεις εἶλε τινὰς καὶ πολλοὺς ἀνεῖλε καὶ λείας πολλῆς καὶ αἰχμαλώτων ἐκράτησε καὶ Κτησιφῶντα ἐπολιόρκει.

¹²¹ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 66: τούτοις φρενοβλαβῶς ὁ ἀλιτήριος ἐκεῖνος πεισθεῖς, καὶ ταῦτα πολλῶν λεγόντων αὐτῷ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ Ὁρμίσδου δόλον εἶναι τὸ προᾶγμα, πῦρ ἐνέβαλε ταῖς ναυσὶ καὶ πάσας κατέκαυσε πλὴν δυοκαίδεκα.

¹²² Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. p. 66: Οἱ μὲν οὖν οὕτως ἀπατηθῆναι φασὶ τὸν Ἰουλιανόν, οἱ δὲ ἀπειπάμενον λέγουσι τὴν πρὸς Κτησιφῶντα πολιορκίαν δι' ὀχυρότητα καὶ ὅτι καὶ τῷ στρατεύματι τὰ ἀναγκαῖα ἐπέλιπον, ἐπανόδου μνησθῆναι [Thus, some state that Julian was deceived in this manner while others say that, after he had abandoned the siege against Ctesiphon due to its strength and also because supplies for the army failed, he thought of withdrawal].

additionally complicated by the confused and chaotic movement through the unfamiliar geography of the foreign land.¹²³ We have already discussed some of the issues surrounding Julian's death in the fourth-century context of Hormisdas' story. Given that our primary concern is to get at the conditions under which Hormisdas was allowed to reside in the Roman state, we will not get into unnecessary details in Zonaras' account of Julian's death. But, it is worthwhile to point out that Zonaras' depiction of Julian's last days spent in an ugly campaign quagmire is unique among Roman and Byzantine authors who dealt with the issue.¹²⁴

To us what matters most in Zonaras' account is that he did not mention Christianity as a factor for Hormisdas' Roman refuge. This is particularly interesting if Zonaras was familiar indeed with the work of John of Antioch. The fact that Zonaras did not comment on the "εἰκὼν" (icon) of Hormisdas does not necessarily negate the meaning that we ascribed to it above when we argued that John depicted Hormisdas as a saint in an icon. Given the distance of time (five hundred years) between John of Antioch and Zonaras, the icon might have been lost or its specificity might have shattered and dispersed into an unrecognizable, general motif. In addition, Hormisdas as a Christian could not have made sense to Zonaras because the historian thought of Hormisdas as a close counsellor to Julian who was strictly opposed to Christianity. In Zonaras' account, the Roman emperors (first Constantius and then Julian) clearly did not make Christianity an issue for the Persian refugee Hormisdas.

¹²³ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. pp. 66-67.

¹²⁴ Ioannes Zonaras. Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, vol. 3. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1897. pp. 66-67. See also *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*. Tr. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane. New York: Routledge, 2009. pp. 175-177 and p. 234 (ff. 112).

As we pointed out in the beginning of this section, several Byzantine authors were drawn to the case of Hormisdas. We have engaged with all of them in a chronological order, trying to grasp the variation in the Roman and Byzantine views on Christianity as a necessary prerequisite for immigration and refuge in the Roman and Byzantine state. In scrutinizing Hormisdas, we have spanned from the fourth to the twelfth century, and we have reviewed Hormisdas' actions within the specific historical context of his writers, keeping in mind their backgrounds, political, and cultural agendas. We have critically looked for Christianity below the surface of the authors' explicit words and have found out that, in neither of the cases, Christian conversion was expected or required for Hormisdas' integration and promotion in the Roman state.

Having covered the relevant works of various, independent authors, we will now turn to the synthetic account of the late tenth/early eleventh-century Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Souda* (written ca. 1000).¹²⁵ Chronologically, of course, we will be moving back from Zonaras' twelfth century to the *Souda*'s late tenth/early eleventh century, but the nature of the previous sources has compelled this leap backwards. For, the encyclopedic (most likely multi-author) nature of the *Souda* would have otherwise disrupted the neat, single-author, comparative approach that we developed above.

Already in the twelfth century, the scholar and churchmen Eustathios of Thessalonike had difficulties identifying the authorship of the *Souda*. Relying on

¹²⁵ I have not been able to find any studies that have exclusively focused on the *Souda*. I have found some articles (though not many) that deal on detailed aspects on the encyclopedia. Besides those listed by the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Volume 3, p. 1931, I have retrieved Thomas M. Banchich. "Eunapius, Eustathius, and the Souda." *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (Summer, 1988). pp. 223-225. Thomas M. Banchich. "An Identification in the Souda: Eunapius on the Huns." *Classical Philology*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (January, 1988). p. 53. Barry Baldwin. "Book Titles in the Souda." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 103 (1983). pp. 136-137. Robert J. Penella. "An Unidentified Quotation from Philostratus in the Suda." *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Summer, 1977). p. 126. Valentin Rose. "Suidas Lateinisch (Liber Suda)." *Hermes*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1871). pp. 155-158. As is obvious, these articles are rather short and devoted to narrow textual identifications within the *Souda*.

similarities in name, Eustathios thought that a certain person Suidas had produced the work. Modern scholarship, too, has moved little beyond the basics on this very complex Byzantine source, facing such fundamental problems and uncertainties as precise dating, identification of specific accounts on which it relied, or figuring out the methods used and the people involved in the encyclopedia's compilation. Thus, there are few certain facts about the *Souda* today.

We could comfortably say that the encyclopedia was an ambitious project planned and executed on a grand scale. In an alphabetical order, it featured entries on grammar, etymological explanations of rare words, proverbs, institutions, short biographical entries on important persons, definitions with brief commentaries on abstract concepts, etc.. Not surprisingly then, given the *Souda*'s convenient structure and the quick fix that it could provide on any given subject, it became a very popular work with longevity beyond the end of *Byzantium proper* in 1453. Late authors like Constantine Laskaris and Maximos the Greek, who lived into the sixteenth century, used it, too.

The *Souda* mentioned our Hormisdas in an entry on "Marsuas," famous apparently for designing high-quality flutes and for having a river named after him. The river adopted Marsuas' name because in a moment of despair during a serious bout of depression, he plunged in and let himself drown.¹²⁶ The context, in which the *Souda* inserted Hormisdas, was pseudo-mythological. Hormisdas was implicitly compared to the famous story of Jason and the Argonauts told by Apollonius of Rhodes in the early

¹²⁶ Ed. A. Adler. *Suidae lexicon*, 4 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1931. II. Entry 230: ἐν τοῖς χρόνοις τῶν Ἰουδαίων Κριτῶν καὶ Μαρσύας ἐγένετο σοφός, ὅστις ἐφεῦρε διὰ μουσικῆς αὐλοὺς ἀπὸ καλάμων καὶ χαλκοῦ· ὃς παραφρονήσας ἔρριψεν εἰς ποταμὸν ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀπώλετο· καὶ ὠνομάσθη ὁ ποταμὸς Μαρσύας. For a reference and a translation, see Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*. London: Routledge, 1991. p. 148-149. Lieu is the actual translator of the passage.

third century B.C..¹²⁷ Despite the context in which the two stories were combined, however, it is important to note that the *Souda* made a distinction between Jason's "μῦθος" (myth) and Hormisdas' "λόγος" (story).¹²⁸

According to the story then, after a day of hunting in Persia, Hormisdas treated his guests to a formal dinner. Not greeted appropriately by them, however, Hormisdas lost his temper and threatened to kill Marsuas. After the Persian nobles found out what had happened, they immediately proclaimed the younger son (Shapur) as a *shah* after their father died. According to the *Souda*, the Persian dignitaries put Hormisdas in prison, thus shifting the responsibility away from Shapur upon whom all the other accounts bestowed it. Being fortunate for having a loving and creative wife, however, Hormisdas did not stay in prison for long, for she sneaked in the metal file, with which he cut his prison chains and ran away. He went to Constantine and became his "ἰκέτης" (suppliant or fugitive). "The story" [though technically "history," for note the different word here: ἱστορία], the *Souda* concluded, "is well known" (ἡ ἱστορία δήλη).¹²⁹

The *Souda* clearly did not mention anything about Christianity in the context of Hormisdas. However, given the nature of the source and the specific entry here, it would be unrealistic to expect an in-depth discussion even if Hormisdas did become a Christian. This was a description of "Marsuas," not of Hormisdas, and Hormisdas was included on

¹²⁷ Ed. A. Adler. *Suidae lexicon*, 4 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1931. II. Entry 230: κατὰ δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ἐγένετο καὶ τὰ κατὰ Ἰάσονα καὶ τοὺς Ἀργοναύτας, ὡς Ἀπολλώνιος ὁ Ῥόδιός φησι. λέγεται μῦθος, ὅτι ἐξεδάρη ὑπὸ Ἀπόλλωνος. καὶ φέρεται λόγος περὶ Ὁρμίσδου τοῦ Πέρσου, ὃς ἠῦτομόλησε πρὸς Κωνσταντῖνον τὸν μέγαν.

¹²⁸ Obviously, a lot could be said on the word "λόγος" alone, but in this case the contrast between "myth" as a more fantastical narrative and "story" as a more grounded, "rational," or "logical" (from another meaning of λόγος) is in operation.

¹²⁹ Ed. A. Adler. *Suidae lexicon*, 4 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1931. II. Entry 230. The primary meaning of "δήλη," feminine for "δῆλος, δήλη, δῆλον" is "visible, clear, manifest, plain." I use "well known" by deduction, for the story/history would be "clear" or "plain" if well-known.

the principle of relevance alone. It is hard to discern why the *Souda* exonerated Shapur, though we should not exclude the possibility of an actual mistake. The compilation and sorting out of data that went into the encyclopedia was quite laborious. Given the lack of scholarly consensus on the basic aspects of the *Souda* as a source, however, we will refrain from further speculation.

The *Souda* was the last source on Hormisdas, which we will discuss here, for other accounts do not seem to be available. In this section, therefore, we have examined the extent to which Christianity was (or was perceived to be) a factor in the various renditions of this popular Byzantine story. We have determined that Christianity affected the story's authors, but neither of them saw it as a necessary political and social prerequisite for the Persian immigrant and refugee Hormisdas. Only one author possibly suggested it.

We have relied only on the case of Hormisdas, so any generalization would be quite problematic. All along, we have played and replayed Hormisdas' various scenarios, aware that they should not necessarily be relevant to any other (much less to all) frontier-crossings and refugees in the Byzantine state. We have followed this methodology, however, because broader, demographic studies in Byzantium are notoriously difficult to do. Earlier generations of historians readily trusted the bold numbers that ancient authors tossed around, and they ran all sorts of analyses and conclusions on such "numerical" basis.

Recent scholarship has been (rightly) skeptical and more critical, and, especially for the earlier Roman empire, scholars have employed serious statistical methodologies to extrapolate data and conduct more reliable quantitative studies. Nonetheless, issues of

migration and refuge are among the hardest to resolve even in the modern world, for people travel (and hide) across political borders, in ways that censuses and legal authorities cannot always detect. And even when “detected,” migrants frame their “personas” in expedient ways and obey the nature of the circumstances that justify detailed social and cultural approaches of the kind that we have undertaken with our Hormisdas.

In the specific context of Christianity as a prerequisite for obtaining Roman citizenship or legal residency within the empire, we have shown that Hormisdas moved in the high circles of the Roman state (at least as imagined by his narrators), transitioning from one emperor to the next, without having to convert. It is important to point out that the *Theodosian Code* does not include any laws on Christianity as a necessary condition for proper immigration and refuge into the Roman and Byzantine state. Constantine (or the writers that presented Hormisdas’ affair) did not compel the Persian refugee to become a Christian.

The Emperor Constantine in the Context of Christianity Abroad: Conclusions

In this chapter, we have tried to establish the general picture of imperial Christianity after Constantine’s personal conversion supposedly in 312. Given the specific objectives of the study, we have emphasized the role in Christianity that Constantine and his propagandists delineated for the Roman emperor outside of the boundaries of the Roman state. We have focused on three major episodes. First, we joined Constantine’s dinner party at which he supposedly declared himself “a bishop over those outside.” Then, we read through his letter to the Persian *shah* Shapur. We have

seen that Constantine ultimately embraced and advocated Christianity as a supreme religion, but was diplomatic and careful not to provoke the Persian *shah*. As we have argued, contrary to prevailing scholarly opinions, the letter did not threaten Shapur with a Roman invasion at all. Instead, Constantine remained purposefully vague and, at best, supported only nominally the Christian communities of Persia during the time of the *shah*'s persecution policy.

To advance further our understanding of the ways, in which early Byzantine emperors dealt with non-Christian foreign dignitaries, we have finally turned to the life of Hormisdas (Shapur's elder brother and rightful heir to the Persian throne) as a refugee in the Roman empire. We have read through all of the available Byzantine authors, who were drawn to the case of Hormisdas, and have witnessed the multiple contexts, in which the exiled Persian was drawn. The changing political and cultural climate of the Byzantine empire as well as the particular agendas of the Byzantine authors themselves affected Hormisdas' story, but, with one possible exception in a confused source, he was not depicted as a Christian.

Instead of emphasizing Christianity, the Byzantine authors depicted the Persian dignitary as an important figure present at key moments of Byzantine imperial history. Through Hormisdas, the Byzantines commented on the internal affairs of their state and expediently used him to magnify their own personal, authorial views and notions of politics and culture. As Constantine and his immediate heirs worked hard to secure Christianity's powerful position inside the Byzantine state, they were uninterested in imposing it upon the Persian dignitary at home. This distinction in treatment vis-à-vis Christianity between Hormisdas as a foreigner and the rest of the Romans at the imperial

court is important to remember as we are about to enter the foreign lands of Armenia in the next chapter. There, as in the other regions that the study covers, we will seek to evaluate the precise nature of imperial involvement by reading through the relevant Byzantine narratives and by revisiting the important events surrounding the reported conversion of king Trdat (r. 298-330).



Map 2: Armenia in the early fourth century

Chapter 3

The Royal Conversion of Armenia: Byzantine Christianity at the Eastern Frontier

The ancient kingdom of Armenia was surrounded by a number of minor polities whose own territories and rulers were bound to it at various times and to various degrees. In the period between the late third and the early fourth centuries when the Armenian king Trdat (r. 298-330) supposedly converted to Christianity, the smaller kingdoms of Iberia and Albania, whose territories are now largely held by modern Georgia, lay to the north of Armenia. Those two kingdoms played a key role in the region because they held the Caucasus passes, leading to the steppes of central Asia.¹³⁰ To the southwest, Armenia's borderline ran along Aruastan and the so-called Armenian Mesopotamia after the southern part of the principality (at the time) of Greater Sophēnē (Armenian *Mec Co'pk'*) passed to the kingdom of Adiabēnē (Armenian *Asorestan*, i.e., *Assyria*). In A.D. 299, the Romans annexed most of the (by then) kingdom of Sophēnē, thus significantly shrinking Armenia's western border.¹³¹

¹³⁰ The historical tradition of East Georgia as we now have it is largely contained in two ancient documents. The first is the eight-century *History of the Kings of Armenia* by Leontius, bishop of Ruisi. The second document is *the Conversion of Iberia*, a seventh-century compilation. See for details Cyril Toumanoff's article "Caucasia and Byzantine Studies." *Traditio*, 12 (1956).

¹³¹ In ca. 371, the Romans took the rest of the former kingdom. See Robert H. Hewsen. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 46. I have largely relied on Hewsen's atlas, though I have tried to verify his maps by comparing them against other scholarly findings or ancient sources. Hewsen's atlas commemorates "the 1700th anniversary of the conversion of Armenia to Christianity in 301." But, the actual date of Armenia's conversion is largely disputed. Armenian historians

The eastern Armenian borders, too, were put under pressure by equally complicated state dynamics.¹³² The peace of Nisibis, signed in 299 by the Romans and the Persians, set the border between Armenia and the Persian empire at the otherwise unknown fortress of Zintha.¹³³ A major road connected the important cities of Armavir, Eruandašat, and Artašat in Armenia to the former capital Ekbatana of the ancient Persian state. Thus, the Persians had a notable advantage over the Romans because they could expediently reach the very heartland of Armenia via that important road. Of course, it is true that the Romans controlled instead the northern system of roads that passed through Armenia, but the access to key centers within the heartland of Armenia if coming from the north was harder. All in all, the southeastern borderland between Persia and Armenia fluctuated around lake Urmia while the northeastern part of Armenia reached the Caspian Sea, thus driving a wedge between the kingdom of Caucasian Albania to the north and the Persian empire to the south.¹³⁴

usually prefer to date it to 301 since this makes Armenia the first state whose king formally accepted Christianity (before the traditional date, 312, given for the emperor Constantine). We will explore the issue of dating Trdat's conversion in greater detail below, but it is important to make clear here that 314 is the alternative date, which Nina Garsoïan, among other such serious scholars, has supported. The principalities of the kingdom of Sophēnē were Lesser Sophēnē, Ingilēnē, Anzitēnē, and Greater Sophēnē (Sophanēnē). See Cyril Toumanoff. "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: The Formative Centuries (IVth-VIIIth)." *Traditio* 15. 1959. pp. 1-106. Specifically pp. 105-106 for the maps. Toumanoff's article is quite detailed, but his analysis is superficial as he inserts a "feudal structure" in Armenia and organizes his information accordingly without really showing how the operations of a presumed "fief system" affected "the lord-vassal" relationships. In any case, even in western medieval history, this "classic" outlook on "feudalism" has been widely re-thought in more recent years. Some scholars have come to reject completely its existence. To date, the most complete monograph on the issue is Susan Reynolds. *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

¹³² For a brief geographical overview, see Robert H. Hewsen. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. pp. 36-46.

¹³³ Robert H. Hewsen. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 56. For a Byzantine account, see Peter the Patrician, fragment 14: Ἀρμενίαν δὲ Ζίνθα τὸ κάστρον ἐν μεθορίῳ τῆς Μηδικῆς κείμενον ὁρίζειν [The Armenian castle Zintha stood as a border at the boundary line with Media].

¹³⁴ Robert H. Hewsen. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 58.

Between the late third and the early fourth centuries, the Romans, the Persians, and the Armenians signed several mutual treaties in order to fix territorial possessions and to keep the major roads from west to east open. The road system passing through Armenia and through the surrounding regions was especially important since it extended all the way to China and to subcontinental India to the east and to North Africa through Syria to the west.¹³⁵ Generally, the state authorities had vested interests in keeping the regular flow of traffic and thus the stability of relations on the border.¹³⁶ The picture of seemingly constant violence, conflict, surreptitious military strategizing, and disruption in the border zones that many modern historiographies portray is misleading and largely due to scholars' affinity for exceptional cases, historical shifts, and cataclysmic conditions. In fact, life on the frontier, as everywhere else, was mundane, and major military debacles were sporadic.

Of course, at various moments, major political and military conflicts did occur, and quite naturally they often erupted from the border zones. Under the administrations of Diocletian and Constantine, the borders were secured by settling troops at key locations and then dispatching them quickly to a conflict zone.¹³⁷ To patrol the Armenian

¹³⁵ *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*. Ed. Richard J.A. Talbert. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000. Maps 64 and 89.

¹³⁶ To date, scholars have discussed border issues rather vaguely, and their approaches are driven by a general sense of a fluid frontier. Such lines of analysis are typical in the overall scholarly literature on "empire." There are few serious studies on borders, however, with a modern comparative nation-state framework in mind. Yet, it is important to understand how the Romans set, protected, and generally imagined their borders and to evaluate whether they saw them as lines of exclusive sovereignty that demarcated legally bounded citizenship. A serious study on issues of being Roman with all legal notions in Byzantium is altogether lacking.

¹³⁷ Zosimos. Ed. François Paschoud. *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle*. Volume 1. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971. Book II, Chapter 34. For sources reporting on spies (both Roman and Persian) and how they were funded, organized, and commanded by the state, see the later authors Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth. *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Volume 1. Book I, Chapter 21.11 and Maurice. *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*. Einführung, Edition und Indices von George T. Dennis, Übersetzung von Ernst Gamillscheg. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1981. Book II, Chapter 11, Book 7, Chapter 3, and Book 9, Chapter 5.

border, for example, the Romans strategically placed the 15th Legion at the fortress of Satala to the north.¹³⁸ From there, it was easy for them to control both the Armenian frontier and the crucial northern road passing through Asia Minor and leading on to China. This was quite an efficient solution, especially for an immense empire with an overextended military, trying to allay the potential for clash that could surge from anywhere around the Mediterranean and beyond. We should note particularly that the Romans did not encamp troops beyond the border and used careful diplomacy with the Persians, for the Romans were primarily interested in keeping the regular flow of traffic through northern Armenia. There is no indication that the Romans were trying to provoke the Persians in order to expand “the frontier.” In fact, scholarly approaches on “frontier studies” have mostly repeated generalizations based on selective passages and an inherited assumption that “empire” inherently entails “conquest” (or at least desire for conquest).

Certainly, around the early fourth century, the borderlands around Armenia were relatively secure. Given the considerable importance of Armenia both for the Romans and the Persians, many treaties between the two empires were signed in relation to the kingdom. Two of those treaties were particularly significant for our period. Signed in A.D. 63, the Treaty of Rhandaia established that a member from the Arsacids, the Persian ruling dynasty at the time, was to rule in Armenia.¹³⁹ To counterbalance the direct Persian connection, the Arsacid king of Armenia was to be instructed and supervised by the Romans. It is difficult to understand precisely how that arrangement actually worked,

¹³⁸ For Roman legions in Armenia, see C. S. Lightfoot. “Armenia and the Eastern Marches,” Chapter 15. Cambridge Histories Online. Cambridge University Press, 2008. p. 485. See also A.H.M. Jones. *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. p. 57.

¹³⁹ Pliny. *Natural History*. Book XXX, Chapter VI, 16-17. Cambridge, Mass., 1963.

for the Persian-Roman treaty did not stipulate clearly enough the nature of control and intervention that each empire was supposed to exercise.

Whatever the case, Trajan's expansion in the early second century temporarily revoked the Treaty of Rhandaia, but by 217 its principles had been restored. The Arsacids effectively continued to rule Armenia until A.D. 428 when the new Sassanid dynasty officially annexed the kingdom to Persia. If, in fact, the bond between the royal houses of Armenia and Persia was "indissoluble" in "the Armenians' own eyes," the political annexation would not have been socially problematic.¹⁴⁰ And, scholars, who have depicted Armenia's royal conversion as a straightforward political alliance between Constantine and Trdat in preparation against Persia, have a lot to explain. Certainly, the "native" perspective suggests (or so regional scholarship indicates) a much stronger Armenian allegiance to the Persians. But, since we will examine these issues in further detail below, let us continue for now with building up the actual historical context.

Thus, the first important treaty was Rhandaia, the second was that of Nisibis in 299.¹⁴¹ We have already discussed some of its stipulations. Specifically in terms of interstate division-lines, the treaty of Nisibis gave substantial territories to the Romans, bringing them close to the Tigris river due to the annexation of the entire kingdom of

¹⁴⁰ Nina Garsoïan. "Prolegomena to a Study of the Iranian Aspects in Arsacid Armenia." *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 1-46. pp. 9-11.

¹⁴¹ Basic Armenian chronology is largely disputed. Some scholars have adopted 299, others 298 as the proper date. R.C. Blockley. *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*. pp. 6-7 and T. D. Barnes. "Constantine and the Christians of Persia." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 75 (1985). pp. 126-136. p. 131 go for 299. Benjamin Isaac. "The Eastern Frontier." *The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, eds. Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 437 and Nina Garsoïan. "Armenia in the Fourth Century. An Attempt to Re-Define the Concepts of 'Armenia' and 'Loyalty.'" *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 341-352. p. 343 go for 298.

Sophēnē.¹⁴² It was the treaty of Nisibis in fact that the Persian *shah* Shapur in the fourth century breached in a campaign to restore those territories. We will examine these activities in greater detail later in this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to point out that around the time of king Trdat's conversion, the treaty of Nisibis was in effect, giving a substantial territorial advantage to the Romans over the Persians.

All in all, as it can already be seen even from this general outline, the geographical location of Armenia and the political dynamics in the late third and the early fourth centuries placed it within a complex historical grid. The presence of regional polities, actual state borders, imperial operations trying to control and fix those borders with their own interests in mind, interactions of local rulers with one another as well as with the Romans and the Persians, migration, social and cultural mixing, multilingualism, all those interconnected processes were taking place, thus making Christianity just one of the many phenomena at the time.

If we are to understand the conversion of king Trdat historically, therefore, we need to keep these factors in mind and to continue developing them and making their operations and mutual influences clear. At this point, we have placed Armenia within its historical geography and have overviewed the major stipulations between the Romans and the Persians that affected it. Let us now turn to the internal organization, social, and cultural conditions of Armenia in the late third and early fourth centuries.

¹⁴² For more details on specific regions, see Cyril Toumanoff. "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: The Formative Centuries, (IVth-VIIIth)." *Traditio* 15. 1959. pp. 1-106. ff. 162.

Political Structure and the Social Realities of Rule

In the early fourth century, the kingdom of Armenia was a highly decentralized state that consisted of political units called satrapies.¹⁴³ Paralleling the Persian state organization, each Armenian satrapy was governed by a tributary ruler who by hereditary right presided over the people (*gentes* in Latin or ἔθνη in Greek).¹⁴⁴ In addition to exercising full administrative control, each satrap also had his own independent army. During war, this heavy concentration of military and civil power in the hands of the local satrap posed particular problems for the overseeing Arsacid dynasty. As we may easily see, the high level of local independence made it difficult to gage common allegiance, and we may legitimately wonder whether the Arsacids (or any other dynasty) would have survived without outside Roman or Persian support.

¹⁴³ In the context of “satraps” and “satrapies,” it is important to make clear what scholars have meant when they have interchangeably used “kings” and “kingdoms” instead. Modern scholars, especially regional ones, have usually applied the term “kingdom” both to each separate satrapy and to the entire realm of Armenia without a number of necessary qualifications. In nationalist narratives, the term is usually left undefined, but the operative framework simplistically implies a contrast between “kingdom” and “nation-state.” Thus, in the past, Armenia (when independent) was presumably an ancient and then medieval “kingdom” and eventually it became a modern nation-state. Even in other less nationalist and teleological studies, the unqualified term “kingdom” has implied a much stronger degree of Arsacid suzerainty and has bestowed a higher level of monarchical ethos on the part of the general populace. We should provide some necessary qualifications then. By “rex” or “ἄρχων,” official state documents referred to an independent local ruler, exempt from imperial taxation and other formal responsibilities. Technically, the Arsacid ruler was, therefore, a “king.” But, many of Armenia’s satrapies were still “civitates foederatae.” This meant that they were exempt from imperial taxation and had full rights to organize and control their own administration, but were obliged to provide military assistance to the Romans upon need. This arrangement additionally weakened the power of the “Arsacid king.” For, in terms of our frontier dynamics, there was not much difference for the local satraps who would be the nominal administrator of the larger polity. The Romans, the Persians, or the Arsacid kings of Armenia practically offered the same political barter: relative local autonomy in exchange for foreign policy compliance and military aid when needed. Even though I have kept the traditional terminology, those cautionary qualifications are important to keep in mind. For, a de-centralized state such as Armenia, whose overseeing administrator was an outside appointee and whose real power generally seems to have rather been weak were it not for the Romans and the Persians, could hardly be compared with the independent, hereditary, and internally institutionalized “kingdoms” that would eventually emerge in the West. For a more detailed overview of Armenia’s political development, see N. Adontz. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*. Tr. N. Garsoïan. Louvain-Lisbon, 1970. pp. 7-74. See also, Cyril Toumanoff. *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*. Georgetown, 1963. p. 133. See also Nina Garsoïan. “Armenia in the Fourth Century.” *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 341-352. pp. 344--345.

¹⁴⁴ Translating “gentes” and “ἔθνη” is particularly difficult today, for the two words are wrapped into a complex scholarly discussion on ethnicity and identity formation in the ancient and medieval world.

Since there were no institutional channels to impose and to disseminate the royal court's decisions, it was only up to the discretion of the local satrap to implement them in his realm. Even the later (for the purposes of this study) processes of Christianity's formal institutionalization in Armenia did not introduce episcopal sees that coincided with great urban centers, as it was the case in the Roman empire. In Armenia, the episcopal sees were patterned after the satrapal system and thus coincided with all the important local polities.¹⁴⁵

Even when certain satrapies were affiliated with Rome, they continued to function as autonomous polities (*civitates foedaratae*).¹⁴⁶ This meant that they were exempt from taxation and had control of their own administration. The only obligation of those satraps was to provide military assistance to the Romans upon need. All of this meant that there was not much difference for the satraps who the nominal administrator of the larger polity would be. The Romans, the Persians, or the Arsacid kings of Armenia practically offered the same political barter: relative local autonomy in exchange for foreign policy compliance and military aid when needed. In the early fourth century, the Armenian king was exempt by an official imperial decree from tributary obligations to the Romans.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Cyril Toumanoff. "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: The Formative Centuries, (IVth-VIIIth)." *Traditio* 15. 1959. pp. 1-106. p. 86.

¹⁴⁶ The primary difference between federates and provinces in the Roman empire was the degree of their integration in the empire. See for Armenia Nina Garsoïan. "Armenia in the Fourth Century." *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 341-352. p. 344. Garsoïan stresses the autonomy of the *civitates foederatae liberae et immunes* at least until the end of the fifth century.

¹⁴⁷ C.Th. XI.1.1: <http://ancientrome.ru/ius/library/codex/theod/liber11.htm#1>. See for more, my discussion with the relevant footnotes above.

The urban population of Armenia was small and contained a large proportion of foreign traders and craftsmen.¹⁴⁸ A central administration even in Armenia's capital was lacking almost completely. For example, no evidence survives for bureaucracy in the Armenian kingdom. Until the fifth century when the Armenian alphabet was invented, Greek and Aramaic were the principle languages used in written transactions, presumably reflecting the cultural affiliations of the intellectual elite.

Within the period of consideration here (up to the A.D. fourth century), the geographer Strabo provides the best short overview of the cultural situation in the region from a Roman perspective. We should read through it to get some sense of the social reality that confronted the rule of the Arsacids in the period:

For the people of the Armenias and that of the Syrias and Arabias display close affiliation in terms of their dialect, lifestyle, their physical features, and this is particularly so wherever they are bordering one another. Mesopotamia, which is inhabited by these three peoples, gives proof of this, for in the case of these peoples the similarity is particularly noticeable. And if, comparing the differences of latitude, there does exist a greater difference between the northern and the southern people of Mesopotamia than between these two peoples and the Syrians in the center, still the common characteristics prevail. The Assyrians and the Arians [the referent should not be confused with the early Christian heresy], too, display a certain likeness both to those just mentioned and to each other. Indeed, he (Posidonius)¹⁴⁹ conjectures that the names of these peoples also are akin; for, he explains that the people whom we call Syrians are by the Syrians themselves called Aramaeans; and there is a resemblance between this name and those of the Armenians, the Arabians and the Erembians since perhaps the ancient Greeks gave the name of Erembians to the Arabians, and since the very etymology of the word "Erembian" contributes to this result. Most scholars, indeed, derive the name "Erembian" from "ἔρραν ἐμβάινειν" (i.e., to go into the earth) a name which later peoples changed to "Troglodytes" for the sake of greater clearness (i.e., cave-dwellers). Now these Troglodytes are that tribe of Arabians who live on the side of the Arabian Gulf next to Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ The main trade in Armenia seemed to have been with people in the Aramaic/Syriac speaking regions in the Middle East. See C. S. Lightfoot. "Armenia and the Eastern Marches," Chapter 15. Cambridge Histories Online. Cambridge University Press, 2008. p. 488.

¹⁴⁹ Strabo attributes a lot of his knowledge on geography to the ancient scholar Poseidonius (ca. 135 B.C. - 51 B.C.).

Clearly, Strabo postulated a high level of inter-relatedness, but we should also note its composite complexity. From Strabo's first century to the early fourth, the constant passage of people through the region added towards the great cultural and linguistic intricacy there. In addition, the mountainous layout of Armenia, on which many ancient authors commented, aided the development of numerous local dialects.¹⁵¹

Even in modern times, linguists have counted more than 50 languages in the Caucasian region.¹⁵² We can hear, for example, Armenian,¹⁵³ Greek, Ossetic, Kurdish, Tat, Talysh, the Turkic languages Azeri, Turkoman, Karachay-Balkar, the Mongolic Kalmyk, and the Semitic Aisor among many others. This is not to suggest any cultural

¹⁵⁰ Strabo. *Geographica*. Ed. A. Meineke, *Strabonis geographica*, 3 vols. Volume 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1877 (repr. 1969). Book 1, Chapter 2, Section 34: τὸ γὰρ τῶν Ἀρμενίων ἔθνος καὶ τὸ τῶν Σύρων καὶ Ἀράβων πολλὴν ὁμοφυλίαν ἐμφαίνει κατὰ τε τὴν διάλεκτον καὶ τοὺς βίους καὶ τοὺς τῶν σωμάτων χαρακτήρας, καὶ μάλιστα καθὸ πλησιόχωροί εἰσι. δηλοῖ δ' ἡ Μεσοποταμία ἐκ τῶν τριῶν συνεστῶσα τούτων ἔθνων· μάλιστα γὰρ ἐν τούτοις ἡ ὁμοιότης διαφαίνεται. εἰ δέ τις παρὰ τὰ κλίματα γίνεται διαφορὰ τοῖς προσβόρροις ἐπὶ πλεον πρὸς τοὺς μεσημβρινούς καὶ τούτοις πρὸς μέσους τοὺς ὄρους, ἀλλ' ἐπικρατεῖ γε τὸ κοινόν. καὶ οἱ Ἀσσύριοι δὲ καὶ οἱ Ἀριοὶ παραπλησίως πως ἔχουσι καὶ πρὸς τούτους καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους. εἰκάζει γε δὴ καὶ τὰς τῶν ἔθνων τούτων κατονομασίας ἐμφερεῖς ἀλλήλαις εἶναι. τοὺς γὰρ ὑφ' ἡμῶν Σύρους καλουμένους ὑπ' αὐτῶν τῶν Σύρων Ἀραμμαίους καλεῖσθαι τούτῳ δ' εὐοκίαναι τοὺς Ἀρμενίους καὶ τοὺς Ἀραβας καὶ Ἑρεμβούς, τάχα τῶν πάλαι Ἑλλήνων οὕτω καλούντων τοὺς Ἀραβας, ἅμα καὶ τοῦ ἐτύμου συνεργοῦντος πρὸς τοῦτο. ἀπὸ γὰρ τοῦ εἰς τὴν ἕραν ἐμβαίνειν τοὺς Ἑρεμβούς ἐτυμολογοῦσιν οὕτως οἱ πολλοί, οὓς μεταλαμβάνοντες οἱ ὕστερον ἐπὶ τὸ σαφέστερον Τρωγλοδύτας ἐκάλεσαν· οὗτοι δὲ εἰσιν Ἀράβων οἱ ἐπὶ θάτερον μέρος τοῦ Ἀραβίου κόλπου κεκλιμένοι, τὸ πρὸς Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ Αἰθιοπία.

¹⁵¹ Modern linguists have not established clear criteria to distinguish between “dialect” and “language.” I keep the popular conception, therefore, that understands “dialects” as more closely related one to another linguistic structures than “languages,” which are usually imagined as distinct and separate systems of expression. For the mountainous nature of Armenia, see Plutarch. “Life of Crassus.” Chapter XIX: ἔπειθε δὲ Κράσσον ἐμβαλεῖν δι' Ἀρμενίας εἰς τὴν Παρθίαν· οὐ γὰρ μόνον ἐν ἀφθόνοις τὴν στρατιὰν διάξειν αὐτοῦ παρέχοντος, ἀλλὰ καὶ πορεύεσθαι δι' ἀσφαλείας, ὄρη πολλὰ καὶ λόφους συνεχεῖς καὶ χωρία δύσιππα πρὸς τὴν ἵππον, ἢ μόνη Πάρθων ἀλκή, προβαλλόμενον [And he (Artabazes, king of Armenia) tried to persuade Crassus to invade Parthia by way of Armenia, for thus he would not only lead his forces along in the midst of plenty, which the king himself would provide, but would also proceed with safety, confronting the cavalry of the Parthians, in which lay their sole strength, with many mountains, and continuous crests, and regions where the horse could not well serve].

¹⁵² J.C. Catford. “Mountain of Tongues: The Languages of the Caucasus.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 6 (1977), pp. 283-314. p. 283.

¹⁵³ For an overview of the complex development of classical Armenia, see Roger D. Woodward, ed. *The Ancient Languages of Asia Minor*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. pp. 124-144.

conflation of “the modern” and “the ancient,” but it does give us some sense of what Pliny might have meant when he said that the Romans could do business in the city of Dioscurias only by hiring 130 interpreters.¹⁵⁴ Later, in the Middle Ages, too, many Arab travelers marveled at the polyglossia of Armenia, and the tenth-century geographer al-Mas‘udi labeled the Caucasus *jabal al-alsun*, “the mountain of tongues.”¹⁵⁵

With this overview of Armenia’s political structure and social realities on the ground, we have gleaned some of the local factors that were at play when Trdat reportedly converted. Trdat lacked basic administrative and institutional mechanisms to exercise power and to induce coercion upon a highly diverse society. His own political position was unstable in a decentralized satrapal system, too. Thus, we need to wonder about the degree to which Trdat’s reported conversion affected the larger Armenian population or even the local elite.

Looking from Constantine’s perspective, scholars have argued that the emperor converted the king in preparation for a campaign against Persia.¹⁵⁶ Thus, Constantine supposedly converted in 312, Trdat in 314, and the campaign was planned for the 330s. But, given the context that we have delineated above, this straightforward tactical interpretation of the conversion bestows upon Constantine both too much foresight and too much naiveté. It is too much foresight because it presumes that Constantine would have made plans for a campaign about 15 years in advance. And, it is too much naiveté because it presumes that Constantine would have seriously believed that converting a local king would be a quick and smooth process, especially given the intricate social and

¹⁵⁴ J.C. Catford. “Mountain of Tongues: The Languages of the Caucasus.” p. 283.

¹⁵⁵ J.C. Catford. “Mountain of Tongues: The Languages of the Caucasus.” p. 283.

¹⁵⁶ For some examples, see David S. Potter. *The Roman Empire at Bay*. Oxford: Routledge, 2004. p. 446. T. D. Barnes. “Constantine and the Christians of Persia.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 75 (1985), pp. 126-136.

political dynamics in Armenia, which Constantine knew very well from his boyhood days on the Eastern frontier.

In fact, in 312, Constantine's own position in the Roman empire was precarious, and his basic preoccupation was to secure his own political stability there. The Eastern frontier, Persia, or Armenia were quite literally the least of his concerns. Constantine himself did not have the East until 324. Moreover, Constantine's own conversion was not a simple strategic act to mobilize a social majority against his political rivals. In 312, there were only about six million Christians in an empire of about sixty million.¹⁵⁷ Thus, Constantine was not aligning with a dominant majority.

In the early 300s, serious Christian controversies rattled the empire, thus hardly signaling to Constantine that Christianity could automatically bring peace and unity even within the Roman state. And, of course, we should not forget that Constantine's personal sense of Christianity was undefined in 312, for he continued to invoke *Sol Invictus* (Unconquerable Sun), conquered the East and only convoked the Council of Nicaea in 325. Yet, scholars of the Christian royal conversion (and not only those who have studied Constantine) have continually relied on the formulaic assumption that ancient and medieval Christianity automatically generated sudden transformative powers. According to some scholars, conversion supposedly molded major cultural and political divisions into a social consensus that inevitably enhanced the ruler's authority.¹⁵⁸ But, the formation of this social consensus (if it ever really happened anyway) is precisely what

¹⁵⁷ Keith Hopkins. "Christian Number and Its Implications." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 185-226. p. 193. For estimated major population changes in the Roman and Byzantine empire, see also John Haldon. *The Palgrave Atlas of Byzantine History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 7. Thus, in the late second century, the population (including Britain and the Balkan provinces) was approximately 67-70 million, decreasing to around 27-30 million by the early eighth century.

¹⁵⁸ For one more recent example among many, see Tiran Nersoyan. *Armenian Church Historical Studies: Matters of Doctrine and Administration*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 1996.

scholars should try to explain instead of taking it for granted. In fact, in the post-conversion period in Armenia, there was much tension between the ecclesiastical centers and the Arsacid rulers. And, local royal power, even from the perspective of the church, never became absolute. The Romans, too, had little authority over the Armenian church, and concerning various dogmatic assemblies, the church simply had a high degree of autonomy right from the beginning.¹⁵⁹

Having put in proper perspective the political and social conditions of Armenia and the Eastern Roman frontier in the late third and the early fourth centuries, we move in this next section to investigate the local religious groups and narratives (real or imagined) prior to Trdat's conversion. The reader should keep in mind the fact that many of the relevant texts were written later than the actual events that they purport to describe. But, by carefully placing them in proper context, we will attempt to determine as much as possible the degree to which Christianity played a role in Armenia before Trdat and his entourage are said to have formally embraced it.

Local Christianity, Christian Heroes, and Their Narratives on the Frontier

For Greek and Roman intellectuals, accustomed to measure distance from Athens or Rome, ancient Armenia stood as a remote land on the brink of the world. In the *Phaedo*, Plato's Socrates basically conjured up Armenia as the underworld where the

¹⁵⁹ See for the later ecclesiastical development Nina Garsoïan. "Secular Jurisdiction over the Armenian Church (Fourth-Seventh Centuries)." *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 220-250. pp. 228-229. See also p. 235: "The king's choice, or even sanction, of ecclesiastical candidates was severely restricted. Whatever he might achieve was *de facto* by a show of force, the jealously guarded traditional privileges that united secular and spiritual nobles set definite limits on his lawful jurisdiction."

soul went after it abandoned its body.¹⁶⁰ Plutarch, too, marveling at the splendid military careers of Lucullus and Cimon, pointed out how no other Greek nor Roman, besides such mythological heroes as Heracles, Dionysus, Perseus, and Jason, had ever before dared to march through those remote lands.¹⁶¹ Certainly, the distance and exoticism of Armenia were favorite tropes for ancient Greek and Roman authors, and they planted them within different genres to enhance their narratives. Yet, those very reiterations of Armenia's remoteness brought the place closer on the cultural horizon of the Greeks and the Romans. And when ambitious generals like Lucullus, Cimon, or Pompey actually found themselves in Armenia, they were inspired by and also employed those stories to build support and to frame their own reputations within the context of mythological heroes and grand deeds.

¹⁶⁰ *Phaedo*. Ed. J. Burnet. *Platonis opera*. Volume 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900 (repr. 1967). For the famous setting of the Greek world between the river Phasis to the East and the pillars of Heracles (the strait of Gibraltar) to the West where "we live around the sea...like ants or frogs around a swamp," see p. 109 (Stephanus's system): Ἔτι τοίνυν, ἔφη, πάμμεγά τι εἶναι αὐτό, καὶ ἡμᾶς οἰκεῖν τοὺς μέγροι Ἡρακλείων σπηλῶν ἀπὸ Φάσιδος ἐν σμικρῶ τινι μορίῳ, ὥσπερ περὶ τέλμα μύρμηκας ἢ βατράχους περὶ τὴν θάλατταν οἰκοῦντας...For Socrates' mystical, yet detailed depiction of the transformative nature of the underworld as well as its location, see pp. 112-113 (Stephanus's system): Τὰ μὲν οὖν δὴ ἄλλα πολλὰ τε καὶ μεγάλα καὶ παντοδαπὰ ρεύματά ἐστι· τυγχάνει δ' ἄρα ὄντα ἐν τούτοις τοῖς πολλοῖς τέτταρ' ἄττα ρεύματα, ὧν τὸ μὲν μέγιστον καὶ ἐξωτάτω ρέον περὶ κύκλῳ ὁ καλούμενος Ὠκεανός ἐστιν, τούτου δὲ καταντικρὸν καὶ ἐναντίως ρέων Ἀχέρων, ὃς δ' ἐρήμων τε τόπων ῥεῖ ἄλλων καὶ δὴ καὶ ὑπὸ γῆν ρέων εἰς τὴν λίμνην ἀφικνεῖται τὴν Ἀχερουσιάδα, οὗ αἱ τῶν τετελευτηκότων ψυχαὶ τῶν πολλῶν ἀφικνοῦνται καὶ τινας εἰμαρμένους χρόνους μείνασαι, αἱ μὲν μακροτέρους, αἱ δὲ βραχυτέρους, πάλιν ἐκπέμπονται εἰς τὰς τῶν ζῶων γενέσεις [Certainly, there are many other large rivers of all kinds, and among these there are four of note; the biggest which flows on the outside in a circle is called Oceanus; opposite of it and flowing in the opposite direction is the Acheron; it flows through many other deserted regions and further underground makes its way to the Acherusian lake to which the souls of the majority come after death and, after remaining there for a certain appointed time, longer for some, shorter for others, they are sent back to birth as living creatures].

¹⁶¹ Cimon. Ed. K. Ziegler, *Plutarchi vitae parallelae*, Vol. 1.1, 4th edition. Leipzig: Teubner, 1969. Chapter 3, section 2: οὔτε γὰρ Ἑλλήνων Κίμωνος οὔτε Ῥωμαίων Λευκόλλου πρότερος οὐδεὶς οὕτω μακρὰν πολεμῶν προῆλθεν, ἔξω λόγου τιθεμένων τῶν καθ' Ἡρακλέα καὶ Διόνυσον, εἰ τέ τι Περσεῶς πρὸς Αἰθίοπας ἢ <πρὸς> Μήδους καὶ Ἀρμενίους [ἢ] Ἰάσονος ἔργον ἀξιόπιστον ἐκ τῶν τότε χρόνων μνήμη φερόμενον εἰς τοὺς νῦν ἀφίκεται [No Hellene before Cimon and no Roman before Lucullus carried his wars into such remote lands, if we leave out of our account the exploits of Heracles and Dionysus, and whatever credible deeds of Perseus against the Aethiopians or Medes and Armenians, or of Jason, have been brought down in the memory of man from those early times to our own].

For Plato, Armenia symbolized the final destination of one's life-journey. In the Old Testament, however, Armenia was the place of fresh beginning. Shortly into *Genesis*, we discover that Armenia was where wrecked humanity was washed ashore for its second chance. After the serpentine disgrace of Adam and Eve, after Cain's maniacal murder of his brother Abel, after the abysmal corruption of generation upon generation, God sent His angry downpour to drown every living thing on the face of the earth. He made a single exception for Noah and his family. The flood lasted 150 days before God's mercy finally brought the ark of Noah to the mountains of Ararat.¹⁶² The waters receded, and Noah set a redeemed humanity onto its providential future.

Later writers (including modern ones) would hearken back to this early Old Testament story to highlight the unique position of Armenia within biblical history. By the late fourth and the early fifth centuries, the Arian historian Philostorgius, born in Cappadocia from where Gregory (the future Illuminator) brought Christianity to Trdat, grasped this Old Testament opportunity to highlight Armenia's primordial Christian legitimacy. We should look here at Philostorgius' extended account both for its presentation of Noah's ark and for the geographical positioning of Armenia at his time:

The Euphrates, however, to all appearance, takes its rise among the Armenians; in this region stands the Mountain of Ararat so called even to the present day by the Armenians: it is the same mountain on which Scripture says that the ark rested. Many fragments of the wood and nails, of which the ark was composed, are said to be preserved until today in those localities. This is the place where the Euphrates takes its rise. At first, it is but a small stream, but gradually increases in size and absorbing into itself many other tributary rivers which flow into it, it passes through Upper and Lower Armenia in its onward course. First of all, it cuts through Syria Euphratensis so called after the river. Afterwards, however, it cuts its way through the rest of Syria, winding along with many varied folds in every region which it passes through until it reaches Arabia where it takes a circular

¹⁶² *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007 (12th printing). Genesis 8.4 for Ararat (Καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἡ κιβωτὸς ἐν μηνὶ τῷ ἑβδόμῳ, ἑβδόμη καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ μηνός, ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη τὰ Ἀραράτ), but see also chapters 6 through 8.

course when nearly opposite to the Red Sea; and embracing in its windings a large tract of land, finally turns its course towards the wind called Caecias, or Northeast and rushes into the Tigris. Here its waters do not entirely mingle with those of the Tigris; but though partly absorbed in it, it flows parallel to the Tigris with the largest portion of its waters and finally mixes with the Tigris near about Susa; and thenceforward, the Euphrates having lost its independent name, the two rivers flow conjointly into the Persian Gulf. The district which lies between these two rivers, the Euphrates, namely, and the Tigris is called Mesopotamia.¹⁶³

In this section on Christianity, we need not digress with discussions of geography, but it was worth making clear Philostorgius' placing of Armenia in a Mesopotamian context away from Roman control.

The eighth-century Armenian historian Moses of Khoren went so far as to put Noah's ark in the center of the Armenian kingdom.¹⁶⁴ Local New Testament traditions developed, too. Already in the first century, Thaddaeus, one of the 70 apostles,

¹⁶³ *Historia ecclesiastica (fragmenta ap. Photium)*. Ed. F. Winkelmann (post J. Bidez). Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981. *Epitome of Book III*, Fragment 8: Ὁ δὲ Εὐφράτης ποταμὸς ἐξ Ἀρμενίων κατὰ τὸ προφανὲς ἀνατέλλει, ἔνθα τὸ ὄρος ἐστὶν τὸ Ἀραράτ, ἔτι καὶ πρὸς Ἀρμενίων οὕτω καλούμενον, ἐφ' οὗ καὶ τὴν κιβωτὸν ἰδρυθῆναί φησιν ἡ γραφή· ἥς ἄχρι καὶ νῦν εἶναί φασιν οὐ μικρὰ λείψανα τῶν τε ξύλων καὶ τῶν ἥλων ἐκεῖσε σωζόμενα. ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ὁ Εὐφράτης ὀλίγος τὰ πρῶτα ῥυεῖς, προβαίνων ἀεὶ γίνεται μείζων, πλείστους ἐμβάλλοντας αὐτῷ ποταμοὺς εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ προσηγορίαν συνεφελκόμενος. τὴν Ἀρμενίαν δὲ τὴν τε μεγάλην καὶ τὴν μικρὰν διελθὼν, ἔπειτα πρόεισι, τέμνων μὲν πρότερον τὴν Συρίαν τὴν ἰδίως Εὐφρατησίαν καλουμένην, ἔπειτα μέντοι καὶ τὴν ἄλλην· καὶ ταύτην δὲ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην διαμειψάμενος, καὶ ἔλικα διασπῶν ὧν δίεσι ποικιλωτάτην κλασθεῖς, ὀπηνίκα τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ πελάσει, ἐνταῦθα δὴ κυκλοτερῶς κατ' ἀντικρὺ τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης παρενεχθεῖς καὶ χώραν οὐκ ὀλίγην ἐγκολπωσάμενος, ἔπειτα πρὸς καικίαν ἄνεμον ἐπιστρέφει τὸ ῥεῖθρον, ὅσπερ οὖν βορέου τε καὶ ἀπηλιώτου μέσος ἔστηκε. καὶ πρὸς τὸν Τίγρητα ποταμὸν ὀρμήσας ἀπηλιώτου μέσος ἔστηκε. καὶ πρὸς τὸν Τίγρητα ποταμὸν ὀρμήσας οὐχ οἷός τε ἐστὶν αὐτῷ ὅλως συμμίξει, ἀλλὰ μοίραις τισὶν ἐν τῷ διὰ μέσου παραναλούμενος, τῇ ὑπολειπομένῃ, μεγίστη τε οὐση καὶ ναῦς ἀνασχέσθαι δυνατωτάτη, τῷ Τίγρητι κατὰ Σούσας μάλιστα συμπίπτει. καὶ δὴ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ προσηγορίας ἀποπαυσάμενος, σὺν ἐκείνῳ πρὸς τὸν Περσικὸν κατασύρεται κόλπον. καὶ τὸ μεταξὺ τῶν δύο ποταμῶν τούτων, τοῦ τε Τίγρητος καὶ τοῦ Εὐφράτου, Μεσοποταμία τυγχάνει προσαγορευόμενον. We do not know much about Philostorgius, for his affinity for Arianism caused the suppression of his writings. The ninth-century patriarch Photius abbreviated Philostorgius' history and commented on his style and presentation. As I indicated above, Philostorgius was born in Cappadocia. Later in his life, Philostorgius moved to Constantinople.

¹⁶⁴ History of Armenia. II. Chapter 6, p. 90. For modern scholars who have tried to identify the precise place where the ark supposedly landed according to available Armenian sources, see Peeters, *La legende de saint Jacques*, p. 318-336 and V. Inglisian, *Armenien in der Bibel* (Vienna, 1935), p. 21 and p. 454.

supposedly brought Jesus' teachings to Armenia, for which he was martyred there. It was also said that the apostle Bartholomew, one of the original 12 and a personal witness of Jesus' Ascension, traveled widely in Armenia, spreading the Christian message.¹⁶⁵ According to one tradition, Bartholomew was beheaded in Armenia. Another account, the more popular one, has it that Bartholomew converted the king of Armenia himself, Polymius. Appalled at what he presumably saw as a betrayal of local customs, Polymius' brother seized Bartholomew, vengefully flayed and then crucified the Christian apostle.¹⁶⁶ Keeping to this tradition that centered on the grotesque flaying of Bartholomew, Michelangelo in the *Last Judgment* famously portrayed him as holding in hand his own skin.

All in all, both Old and New Testament traditions in Armenia were taken to collaborate in confirming that various great Christian heroes had traversed the lands of Armenia from the very beginning. Thus, the modern "One Holy Universal Apostolic Orthodox Armenian Church" considers the apostles Thaddaeus and Bartholomew as its founders. And, modern Christians and tourists, if trusting in the Armenian tradition, could visit and commemorate the tombs of Thaddeus and Bartholomew, said to be located at the sites of Ardaze (Magou) and Albac (Bashkalec) in the southeastern part of the country.

It is important to note here that the modern Armenian Church regards St. Gregory, who converted king Trdat (in 301 according to the Church), only as the first official

¹⁶⁵ *The Greek New Testament*. Eds. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005 (10th printing). Acts 1: 4, 12, 13.

¹⁶⁶ J.F. Fenlon. "St. Bartholomew." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved July 10, 2010 from *New Advent*: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02313c.htm>. The chronology generally accepted computes the mission of St. Thaddeus as eight years (A.D. 35-43) and that of St. Bartholomew as sixteen years (A.D. 44-60).

bishop of Armenia. Even Trdat himself (despite the pre-Constantinian conversion from the Church's perspective) is not technically seen as the first Armenian royal convert. The Church has appropriated the story of the healing and conversion of king Abgar V in Osrhoēnē in the first century. Given the centrality of this account in the teachings of the modern Armenian Church and our objective to trace early Christianity in Armenia, it is important to consider briefly Abgar's interesting story.

King Abgar fell ill.¹⁶⁷ Hearing about Jesus' miracles, Abgar sent a formal letter to Jesus, asking Him to come to the city of Edessa and ease his pain. Jesus actually replied, apologizing that He was too busy to visit at the moment. But, He promised that after His earthly mission was completed and He had reached heaven, He would send one of His disciples to visit Abgar and to cure him from his illness. From heaven, Jesus did not forget Abgar and sent his disciple Thaddeus. Thaddeus came, saw, and healed, converting and baptizing Abgar in the process. Quickly thereafter, the temples of the false gods were closed, and the statues of the idols, placed on columns and altars, were dismantled. Yet, or so the story continues, Abgar did not directly force anyone to follow him. Nonetheless, the number of Christians in his kingdom increased.

Eventually, Abgar wrote to the Roman emperor Tiberius (r. 14-37). As a devout Christian, Abgar wanted Tiberius to punish the Jews because they had crucified Jesus after having disregarded completely His great achievements and numerous miracles. At the time of the Crucifixion, Abgar reported, the sun went dark, and a colossal earthquake shook the world. Then came Jesus' Resurrection on the third day and His appearance to

¹⁶⁷ Lérubna d'Édesse. *Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Traduite pour la première fois sur le manuscrit unique et inédit de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris par Jean-Raphael Émine. Victor Langlois, ed.. *Collection des historiens anciens et modernes de l'Arménie*. Paris, 1881. [This and all subsequent translations from French into English are mine]. Chapter XXXIII, p. 328.

several people. All of this, Abgar pointed out, had to be enough to convince anyone (including the recalcitrant Jews) to believe in Jesus' divinity.¹⁶⁸ Yet, the Jews remained unforgivably skeptical. Thus, Abgar was urgently petitioning the emperor for a general anti-Jewish policy and for an official decree "throughout the world" proclaiming "Christ as the true God."¹⁶⁹

Tiberius wrote back. In fact, he had already received the news about Jesus from Pontius Pilate. Tiberius then informed Abgar of his decision:

I have wanted to order this, which you have proposed (i.e., to declare Jesus divine and to punish the Jews for crucifying him¹⁷⁰), but it is the custom of the Romans to accept a god not simply by the order of the sovereign but also by a decision from the senate. Therefore, We had to propose the admission of this god to the senate. The senate rejected the proposition with contempt... However, We have allowed all those, who see it fit, to accept Jesus among the gods, and We have threatened with death all those who speak against the Christians. In terms of the Jews, who have dared to crucify Jesus, who, so far as We understand, did not deserve either the cross nor death, but was worthy of honor and adoration, We will examine the issue after We have put down the revolt of the Spaniards, and We will treat the Jews accordingly.¹⁷¹

Shifting into a short theological excursus, Abgar replied to Tiberius:

I received the letter, which your majesty had written, and I am pleased with the orders brought about by your wisdom. If you allow me, my opinion is that the decision of the senate is ridiculous because, according to reason, it is up to the

¹⁶⁸ Léroubna d'Édesse. *Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Chapter XXXIII, p. 329. In Victor Langlois' *Collection*.

¹⁶⁹ Léroubna d'Édesse. *Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Chapter XXXIII, p. 329. In Victor Langlois' *Collection*: Ta majesté sait donc ce qu'elle doit ordonner à l'égard du peuple juif qui a commis ce forfait; elle sait si elle doit publier partout l'univers l'ordre d'adore le Christ comme le Dieu véritable.

¹⁷⁰ I do not capitalize here for Jesus because Tiberius did not accept Christ as a god. In my own general text and in quotations from Christian sources, I have conventionally capitalized.

¹⁷¹ Léroubna d'Édesse. *Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Chapter XXXIII, p. 329. In Victor Langlois' *Collection*: J'ai voulu moi aussi faire ce que tu proposes; mais comme il est d'usage chez les Romains de ne pas admettre un Dieu [nouveau, translator's addition] sur l'ordre du souverain seulement, tant que le sénat ne s'est pas réuni pour discuter l'affaire, j'ai donc dû proposer l'admission de ce Dieu au sénat qui l'a rejeté avec mépris... Toutefois, nous avons donné ordre à tous ceux à qui cela conviendra, de recevoir Jésus parmi les dieux; et nous avons menacé de mort quiconque parlera en mal des chrétiens. Quant aux Juifs qui ont osé crucifier Jésus, qui, ainsi que je l'ai appris, ne méritait ni la croix, ni la mort, mais était digne d'être honoré et adoré, j'examinerai l'affaire quand j'aurai apaisé la révolte des Hispaniens, et je traiterai ces Juifs selon leur mérite.

people to confer divinity. Then, if God is not fitting to man, He cannot be god because it is absolutely necessary that God be accepted by man. Then, my majesty should think that it is necessary to send another governor to Jerusalem to replace Pilate who has to be chased with ignominy from the post on which you have placed him because he had followed the desire of the Jews and had crucified Christ unjustly and without receiving your command.¹⁷²

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the author of Abgar's story above.

The original text is lost, and Moses of Khoren in the eighth century is simply the only one from whom we can receive any information at all. Thus, we learn from Moses that the author is a certain Leroubna of Edessa. Supposedly, Leroubna was a contemporary of Abgar and a historian of his reign in the first century. It is from this history of Abgar that the epistolary exchange between Abgar and Jesus, and, later, between Abgar and Tiberius is presumably extracted. A son of a local pagan priest, Leroubna most likely never converted, for the Christian priest Moses of Khoren would have probably mentioned it.¹⁷³

In the fourth century, the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea was also drawn to Abgar's story.¹⁷⁴ In fact, he found it so important that he claimed to have gone

all the way to the archives of Edessa to retrieve public documents (ἔχεις καὶ τούτων

ἀνάγραπτον τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐκ τῶν κατὰ Ἐδεσσαν...γραμματοφυλακείων

¹⁷² Lérubna d'Édesse. *Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Chapter XXXIII, pp. 329-330. In Victor Langlois' *Collection: J'ai reçu la lettre écrite de la part de ta majesté et je me suis réjoui des ordres émanés de ta sagesse. Si tu le permets, mon avis est que la conduite du sénat est ridicule; car, selon la raison, c'est d'après le jugement des hommes que se confère la divinité. Ainsi donc, si Dieu ne convient pas à l'homme, il ne peut être Dieu, car il faut de toute nécessité que Dieu soit accepté par l'homme. Donc, mon seigneur pensera qu'il est juste d'envoyer un autre gouverneur à Jérusalem, en place de Pilate qui doit être chassé avec ignominie de l'emploi élevé où tu l'avais appelé; car il a fait la volonté des Juifs et crucifié le Christ injustement et sans ton ordre.*

¹⁷³ Victor Langlois, ed.. *Collection des historiens anciens et modernes de l'Arménie*. Paris, 1881. pp. 315-316.

¹⁷⁴ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13. For a scholarly attempt to determine the historical veracity behind Eusebius' account see Sebastian Brock. "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity." *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992. pp. 212-234. Brock's conclusion is, "In light of the evidence set out above there seems to be no choice for the historian but to reject Eusebius' account on Thaddeus' mission to Edessa as a legend without historical basis." p. 227. As it will become clear from my narrative above, my objective in recalling Eusebius' account is different, for I try to understand and address critically Eusebius' own authorial perspective.

ληφθεισαν... ἐν γοῦν τοῖς αὐτόθι δημοσίοις χάρταις).¹⁷⁵ In the records of Edessa, Eusebius stumbled upon Abgar's letters and translated them in full from the original Syriac into Greek (ἐκ τῆς Σύρων φωνῆς μεταβληθεισῶν).¹⁷⁶ In one of those letters, Eusebius claimed that Abgar was hailed as "the king ruling the most noteworthy of the peoples beyond the Euphrates" (βασιλεὺς Ἀβγαρος, τῶν ὑπὲρ Εὐφράτην ἔθνῶν ἐπισημότατα δυναστεύων). Immediately, we can see that the direct association of Abgar with Armenia, which Leroubna made, is here non-existent.¹⁷⁷ In Eusebius' account, the nature of Abgar's sovereignty was illustrious, but nebulous.¹⁷⁸ From the beginning, therefore, we begin to see points of difference in our two stories of Abgar. We should examine them in further detail, keeping in mind their authorial perspective.

Eusebius' quotation of Abgar's letter to Jesus shares Leroubna's major points, but the theological sophistication of Abgar is here enhanced. Abgar supposedly wrote, "Having heard all these things [miracles and healings] about you, I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God, who having come down from heaven, does these

¹⁷⁵ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.5.

¹⁷⁶ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.5.

¹⁷⁷ *Léroubna d'Édesse. Histoire d'Abgar et de la prédication de Thaddée*. Chapter XXXIII. In Victor Langlois' *Collection*. p. 329: Abgar introduces himself as "a king of the Armenians" (roi des Arméniens). Note also Eusebius' interchangeable usage of "king" (βασιλεὺς) and "toparches" (τοπάρχης). *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.6 for "toparches" (τοπάρχης). In the Hellenistic and early Roman period, "toparches" (τοπάρχης) stood for a medium-ranked official administering a district. At least for Eusebius in the fourth century, the title apparently became synonymous with "king."

¹⁷⁸ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.2. Note here Kirsopp Lake's confused translation from the Loeb: "King Abgar, the celebrated monarch of the nations beyond the Euphrates." Lake misses the superlative referent of 'ἐπισημότατα' and the participial form of 'δυναστεύων.'" Presumably, Lake was affected by Eusebius' intent to keep Abgar's political sovereignty non-specific, thus implying larger breadth and illustrious supremacy. Thus, Lake has relied on "the semantic feel" of the sentence, which I believe he has captured, though ultimately he is grammatically incorrect. See Lake's Eusebius. *The Ecclesiastical History*. Volume I. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998 (last reprint). pp. 85-86.

things or that you are a Son of God for doing these things.”¹⁷⁹ It is difficult to render the theological point here without deviating into complex Trinitarian debates, and given our objectives, there is no need to go in that direction.¹⁸⁰ But, it is important to point out that the nature of Abgar’s sentence puts into question the authenticity of the entire letter. The high level of understanding of the Father-Son relationship displayed in this line actually developed progressively during the three centuries from Abgar’s reign in the first to Eusebius and the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century. Thus, putting words in the mouth of Abgar, Eusebius was playing contemporary theological politics. Eusebius skipped (assuming that the original included the earlier version of Leroubna, of course) Abgar’s subsequent exchange with Tiberius. We have no tangible evidence to explain Eusebius’ omission (if Eusebius was even making an omission).

We should also note that Eusebius’ account is significantly less anti-Jewish than Leroubna’s. Eusebius’ version goes against the Jews only once, more briefly, and more implicitly, especially when compared to Leroubna’s prolonged and explicit harangues. According to Eusebius, Abgar wrote, “For, I also heard that the Jews are mocking you and want to harm you. I have the smallest and [yet] illustrious city, which is sufficient

¹⁷⁹ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.7-8: καὶ ταῦτα πάντα ἀκούσας περὶ σοῦ, κατὰ νοῦν ἐθέμην τὸ ἔτερον τῶν δύο, ἢ ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ θεὸς καὶ καταβάς ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ποιεῖς ταῦτα, ἢ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ ποιῶν ταῦτα. Note that “ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ” literally means “from the sky,” though even in classical literature the word refers to “the place beyond the sky vault where the gods reside.” Thus, in Christian literature, “οὐρανός” is rendered as “heaven.”

¹⁸⁰ By the middle of the fourth century, Orthodoxy embraced a type of theology that drew no distinction in substance between the Father and the Son. It also insisted on the lack of subordination between the Father and the Son, a point which came to the fore in the ninth-century debates on the procession of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Papacy argued that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *through* the Son, which from an Orthodox perspective implied subordination.

for both of us”¹⁸¹ The last sentence would not make much sense if it were not actually an allusion to a passage in the Book of Ecclesiastes where a poor man saves his small, yet important city from the grasp of a powerful king.¹⁸² Abgar compared Jesus and himself to that pauper whose wisdom and power to save and to protect were bigger than mere outward appearances might suggest.

If we collate both accounts of Abgar, we can detect an overlap in the claim that there was an early Christian conversion of a local king. And, we can also see that both accounts set religious distance from the Jews. We should note, in contrast, that Moses of Khoren later claimed that Abgar’s wife Helene did charity work in Jerusalem, generously distributing corn during ravenous famines.¹⁸³ In fact, Helene, the queen of the kingdom of Adiabene, was not Abgar’s wife at all, so Moses’ misrepresentation, if conscious, might be indicative of later cultural re-alignments with the Jews in the region.¹⁸⁴

Given these references to Jews in the stories about Abgar, early Christianity’s strong interconnection with Judaism, and our attempt to isolate a historical core from these narratives, we need to examine carefully here the nature of the Jewish presence in

¹⁸¹ *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952. Book I, Chapter 13.9: καὶ γὰρ ἤκουσα ὅτι καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καταγογγύζουσι σου καὶ βούλονται κακῶσαί σε. πόλις δὲ μικροτάτη μοί ἐστι καὶ σεμνή, ἣτις ἐξαρκεῖ ἀμφοτέροις.

¹⁸² *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007 (12th printing). Ecclesiastes 9.14: Πόλις μικρὰ καὶ ἄνδρες ἐν αὐτῇ ὀλίγοι, καὶ ἔλθη ἐπ’ αὐτὴν βασιλεὺς μέγας καὶ κυκλώσῃ αὐτὴν, καὶ οἰκοδομήσῃ ἐπ’ αὐτὴν χάρακας μεγάλους· καὶ εὖρη ἐν αὐτῇ ἄνδρα πένητα σοφὸν, καὶ διασώσῃ αὐτὸς τὴν πόλιν ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἐμνήσθη σὺν τοῦ ἄνδρος τοῦ πένητος ἐκείνου. Καὶ εἶπα ἐγώ, ἀγαθὴ σοφία ὑπὲρ δύναμιν· καὶ σοφία τοῦ πένητος ἐξουδενωμένη, καὶ οἱ λόγοι αὐτοῦ οὐκ εἰσακούμενοι [Suppose there were a small city and a few men in it. Suppose also that there should come against it a great king, and besiege it, and build great mounds against it. Suppose then that he finds there a poor, wise man and he should save the city through his wisdom. Yet, no man would remember that poor man. And I said wisdom is better than power, but the wisdom of the poor man is neglected, and his words are not heeded].

¹⁸³ Jacob Neusner. “The Jews in Pagan Armenia.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1964). pp. 230-240. p. 235.

¹⁸⁴ Jacob Neusner. “The Jews in Pagan Armenia.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1964). pp. 230-240. p. 235: Neusner argues that Moses of Khoren’s rendition of Abgar’s story “has no historical value whatever.” See also ff. 14 where Neusner points out that Josephus presents Helene as “the queen mother of Adiabene” who went and passed out free corn in times of famine.

the region. For, in addition, we know from elsewhere in the Roman empire that early Christianity traveled throughout the Mediterranean precisely within Jewish communities. And, scholars to this day have repeated after Adolf Harnack that from 7% to 10% of the Roman population in the first several centuries after Jesus' birth was Jewish. In the beginning of the first century when Abgar reigned, there was a total of 4-4.5 million Jews out of 60 million people in the empire.¹⁸⁵ Of course, the number is difficult to establish with certainty, but it gives us a general sense of proportion.

We have already pointed out that by the fourth century Aramaic was one of the primary languages in Armenia, and, as we have seen, some ancient authors even drew etymological connections between "Aramaic" and "Armenian," implying the predominant Jewishness of the region. In pre-Christian Armenia, there was a Jewish community around lake Urmia at the Persian border.¹⁸⁶ The community traced its origins to the northern Israelites. Between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., a large number of Jews lived around the city of Nisibis on the border with Armenia.¹⁸⁷ For a few years during the first century A.D., a Jewish dynasty even ruled large portions of Armenia. The Romans supported those rulers from the house of Herod as part of their effort to assure the allegiance of the eastern principalities. Thus, Greater Armenia was ruled for a time by Tigranes, son of Alexander (a Herodian) and his wife, a daughter of Archelaus, king of Cappadocia. Nero (r. 54-68) confirmed a second Herodian, Tigranes, in Greater Armenia. In Lesser Armenia, Nero enthroned Aristobulus, Herod the Great's

¹⁸⁵ Adolf Harnack. *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. Tr. and ed. James Moffatt. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961. pp. 7-8.

¹⁸⁶ Jacob Neusner. "The Jews in Pagan Armenia." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1964). pp. 230-240. p. 231.

¹⁸⁷ Jacob Neusner. "The Jews in Pagan Armenia." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1964). pp. 230-240. p. 234.

grandson. These Roman political appointments eventually led to the Treaty of Rhandaia in A.D. 63, which we have already overviewed above. As a brief reminder here, the Romans gained the privilege formally to appoint through a lavish Roman ceremony the local Armenian kings and thus “to supervise” them while the Persians gained the dynastic control.

All those early kings in Armenia were compelled to downplay their Judaism as a trade-off for Roman and Persian support. Certainly, Josephus considered them as bad Jews.¹⁸⁸ Yet, the very need to appoint Jewish kings on the Armenian throne points to a large Jewish population in the local demography. There were also two major resettlement campaigns that brought more Jews into Armenia. One was done by the Assyrians, and the other by Trdat II in the third century who deported Jews from Palestine into Armenia. We also know that there were Jews in Armenia’s major cities Valarshapat and Artaxata. Later in the 380s, the Persian *shah* Shapur II (r. 309-379), deported those of them who had converted to Christianity.

Clearly then, Abgar’s story of his reported conversion in the first century if put in a specific Armenian context demands that we look at it from a Jewish perspective. In Leroubna’s account, there is reason to believe that the pagan historian attempted to turn the local Jews against Abgar and the Christians by pointing out the king’s uncompromising aggressiveness. Eusebius’ account, on the other hand, is more delicate. It tries to persuade the Jews of the wisdom of Christianity more than it seeks to attack them. Calling to his aid a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, Eusebius carefully

¹⁸⁸ Josephus. *De bello Judaico*. Ed. B. Niese, *Flavii Iosephi opera*. Berlin: Weidmann, 1895 (repr. 1955). Book II, Section 222, and Section 252. See also Josephus. *Antiquitates Judaicae*. Ed. B. Niese, *Flavii Iosephi opera*, vols. 1-4. Volume 4. Berlin: Weidmann, 1890 (repr. 1955). Book 18, Chapter 5, Section 4. Also, Tacitus. *Annals*. Tr. John Jackson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library). 1998. Book 2, Chapter 3 for the earlier history.

presented Christianity as “wiser” Judaism. The wisdom of Solomon had taught the Jews not to underestimate the pauper facing the powerful king, and Christianity, Eusebius suggested by a way of simile, was like that poor man in whom actually the truth and the city’s salvation lay. Thus, by converting a familiar Old Testament story that focused on human and divine wisdom presumably pointing to Jesus Christ, Eusebius subsequently hoped to convert his Jewish audience, too.

Having studied Abgar’s story from a specifically Jewish perspective, we can see better some of the local tensions of early Christianity in the region. Even when it affected the local political elite, Christianity jarred mostly the Jewish communities and did not call for imperial intervention. In Leroubna’s version, a Christian king demanded the persecutions of Jews from the Roman emperor who postponed his decision, for he needed to deal with more pressing and important affairs. In this case, it was the Spanish revolt.

Even during the early Roman expansion into Armenia that essentially relied on appointing Jewish kings on the local throne, the Roman protégés actually had to downplay their Judaism to secure imperial support. Judaism or Christianity were not the primary concerns of the Roman emperor who had the everyday administrative problems of an entire empire to deal with. Above all, the emperor’s job was to secure internal stability and social prosperity. Strange eastern cults like Judaism and Christianity became a preoccupation only when they jolted the Roman governance of the provinces. The political pragmatism of the Roman emperor is important to keep in mind as we are about to enter the next section on Armenia’s supposed unique status in global Christianity.

Armenia: The First Christian State in the World?

In this section, we will not run a strict verification test on the highly disputed Armenian conversion date. Instead, we will keep to our objectives and will present some of the most important early accounts on “the Armenian conversion as an entire people” and will analyze them from the particular perspectives of their authors and within the context of “frontier dynamics” if relevant. We will comment on their plausibility for an early date only marginally. In addition to the actual methodological impasse in all scholarship set on a quest to find “the exact date,” Trdat’s early conversion (from the strict perspective of this study) would mean that the Roman emperor did not directly influence it, and my general point would be established with no further effort. But, let us stop here with these stipulations and step into the world of the ancient authors and their views on Armenia and its Christianity.

In the late second century and the early third century, the North African theologian Tertullian was the first to refer to the Armenians broadly (and vaguely) as an entire Christian people.¹⁸⁹ Interested in converting the Jews, Tertullian wrote a polemical piece in which he extolled the greatness of Christianity.¹⁹⁰ In order to substantiate his arguments in front of a Jewish audience, Tertullian related numerous Old Testament citations to New Testament examples of “prophecy fulfillment.” His theological technique was allegorical exegesis, which would become the hallmark of the North

¹⁸⁹ For a very good introduction on Tertullian, including a rich bibliography for further studies, see Hubertus R. Drobner. *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007. pp. 153-164.

¹⁹⁰ *Adversus Iudaeos*. Übersetzt und eingeleitet Regina Hauses. Brepols, 2007.

African biblical methodology.¹⁹¹ Thus, the Bible was imbued with multifaceted symbolism for Tertullian, but at its semantic core everything pointed to Jesus. All peoples, according to Tertullian, seemed to have understood it, even some Jews in Jerusalem. Tertullian rhetorically asked:

For whose right hand does God the Father hold but Christ's, His Son?--whom all peoples have heard, that is, in whom all peoples have believed, whose preachers and the apostles have been pointed in the Psalms of David: "Into the universe," says he, "has travelled out their voice, and unto the ends of the world have reached their words. For, in whom else have the peoples around the world believed, but in Christ who has already come? In whom have the peoples believed: the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites, and they who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia, and they who dwell in Pontus, and Asia, and Pamphylia, the inhabitants of Egypt, and those who live in the region of Africa which is beyond Cyrene, Romans and natives, yes, and in Jerusalem the Jews, and all other peoples; as, for instance, by this time, the varied peoples of the Gaetulians, and the manifold groups of the Moors, all the peoples within the domains of Spain, and the diverse peoples of Gaul, and the groups of the Britons, unconquerable by the Romans, but subjugated by Christ, and the Sarmatians, and the Dacians, and the Germans, and the Scythians, and many remote peoples, and those of provinces and islands many of them, to us unknown, and whom we can scarce enumerate?"¹⁹²

Clearly, Tertullian's passage does not isolate the Armenians as the first Christian community. Quite to the contrary, the Armenians are put in a list that practically included the entire world. Tertullian's objectives were polemical, and the little historical observation that we could extract from this quotation is about the rich diversity of the

¹⁹¹ As opposed to typological exegesis, which developed in the school of Antioch. Thus, instead of taking biblical anecdotes symbolically, the Antiochene school sought anecdotal parallels between the Old and the New Testament, so events and personages of the Old Testament were "types" on foreshadowing of events and personages of the New Testament.

¹⁹² *Adversus Iudaeus*. Übersetzt und eingeleitet Regina Haues. Brepols, 2007. Chapter 7.3-4: Cui etenim tenet dexteram pater deus nisi Christo filio suo, quem et exaudierunt omnes gentes, id est cui omnes gentes crediderunt, cuius et praedicatorum apostoli in psalmis David ostenduntur: "In universam," inquit, "terram exivit sonus eorum et ad terminos terrae verba eorum?" In quem enim alium universae gentes crediderunt nisi in Christum qui iam venit? Cui etenim crediderunt gentes, "Parthi et Medi et Elamitae et qui habitant Mesopotamiam Armeniam Phrygiam Cappadociam, incolentes Pontum et Asiam Pamphyliam, immorantes Aegypto et regiones Africae quae est trans Cyrenen inhabitantes, Romani et incolae," tunc et in Hierusalem Iudaei et ceterae gentes, ut iam Gaetulorum varietates et Maurorum multi fines, Hispaniarum omnes termini et Galliarum diversae nationes et Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca Christo vero subdita et Sarmatarum et Dacorum et Germanorum et Scytharum et abditarum multarum gentium et provinciarum et insularum multarum nobis ignotarum et quae enumerare minus possumus?

ancient world at which a non-specialist may perhaps marvel. But, to the specific problem of “the Armenian conversion,” Tertullian’s quotation has quite plainly nothing to add. And, it is rather *strange* (to put it mildly) that scholars have actually recalled it to advance a historical claim about the event at all.¹⁹³

Eusebius of Caesarea presents another account, which scholars have regularly summoned to argue for the early conversion. Famous for his ecclesiastical history, a genre that he basically invented, Eusebius structured his narrative on the basis of a moral dichotomy (good Christians vs. bad pagans). Thus, Eusebius evaluates emperors and kings on a scale of personal piety and the degree to which the ruler formally supported Christianity. In a dark passage that bemoaned the recent experiences of such natural disasters as a drought, followed by a subsequent famine, a plague, and the searing incursions of “anthrax,” a type of ulcer (Eusebius explained) that inflamed the body and usually led to blindness, he lashed out against the emperor Maximinus Daia (r. 308-313):¹⁹⁴

In addition to these things, the tyrant had the further trouble of the war against the Armenians, men who from ancient times had been friends and allies of the Romans; but as they were Christians and exceedingly earnest in their piety towards the Deity, this hater of God, by attempting to compel them to sacrifice to idols and demons, made of them foes instead of friends, and enemies instead of allies.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Nicholas Adontz. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*. Tr. and comm. Nina Garsoïan. Lisbon, 1970. pp. 270-271.

¹⁹⁴ For the explanation of “anthrax,” see *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. Vol. 3, 1967 (reprinted). Book 9.8: ἔλκος δὲ ἦν φερωνύμως τοῦ πυρῶδους ἔνεκεν ἄνθραξ προσσαγορευόμενον [This was an ulcer, which on account of its inflammatory symptoms was called “anthrax”].

¹⁹⁵ *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. Vol. 3, 1967 (reprinted). Book 9.8.2: τούτοις προσεπανίσταται τῷ τυράννῳ ὁ πρὸς Ἀρμενίους πόλεμος, ἄνδρας ἐξ ἀρχαίου φίλους τε καὶ συμμάχους Ῥωμαίων, οὓς καὶ αὐτοὺς Χριστιανοὺς ὄντας καὶ τὴν εἰς τὸ θεῖον εὐσέβειαν διὰ σπουδῆς ποιουμένους ὁ θεομισῆς εἰδώλοις θύειν καὶ δαίμοσιν ἐπαναγκάσαι πεπειραμένους, ἐχθροὺς ἀντὶ φίλων καὶ πολεμίους ἀντὶ συμμάχων κατεστήσατο.

Maximinus spent most of his career in the East where he was the caesar (junior emperor) under his uncle Galerius (r. 305-311). Eventually, Galerius adopted Maximinus, thus giving his nephew a formal promise to the senior emperorship. In 303, Galerius dragged Diocletian (r. 284-305) into declaring a general persecution against the Christians in the empire. Eight years later, Galerius gave up and revoked his own policy. Thus, in 311, he issued his Edict of Toleration and permitted again the practice of Christianity in the empire. Shortly thereafter, however, Galerius died, and Maximinus took his place as a senior emperor of the East. Almost immediately, Maximinus revoked Galerius' promulgation and turned against the Christians again. It is this decision that Eusebius, in the above quotation, reproached.

If taken at face value, Eusebius' account certainly suggests that the Armenians were Christians before Constantine's personal conversion in 312. But, we should simply recall the political, social, and geographical context that we established above, and we can quickly see how vague and imprecise Eusebius' referent actually is. Suddenly, Eusebius' "Armenia" dilutes into an ocean of possibilities. Any of Armenia's numerous satrapies could stand behind Eusebius' referent. If we have to venture a guess, Eusebius probably had in mind the western Armenian territories, which the Romans had annexed in 299. We find a number of Christian communities around the important theological schools that developed in the cities of Nisibis and Edessa. But, beyond such exercises in historical conjectures, we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that Eusebius' passage has basically nothing to do with the Armenian conversion.

Moreover, Eusebius never mentioned king Trdat at all. Thus, looked strictly from Eusebius' perspective, the conversion of king Trdat *never actually happened!* It is

modern scholars who have readily (and imaginatively) interpolated Trdat's conversion into the quotation above. Armenia, too, was merely a shadowy place on Eusebius' historical horizon. Besides the quotation above, we may find only one other lonely reference to it in the entire *Ecclesiastical History*! To pay Eusebius' "Armenia" a visit, we should go to the city of Alexandria in Egypt in the third century where we get to meet the Alexandrian bishop and later saint, Dionysius.

Born in a wealthy family, Dionysius grew up in one of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities of the empire. From an early age, he read voraciously and sought the best teachers. Destined for a high bureaucratic position, Dionysius suddenly converted to Christianity. The conversion drastically reoriented Dionysius' personal ambitions, and he abandoned forever any desire for "worldly glory."¹⁹⁶ He decided to devote his life to the Christian cause. Having heard of Origen's vast erudition and impressive theological mind, Dionysius went to study under him. And, even when Origen later in his career fell from favor in Alexandria, excommunicated by the ecclesiastical authorities, Dionysius stood behind his professor.

Unlike Origen, however, Dionysius was endorsed by the Alexandrian church. Eventually, he became a bishop of Alexandria and thus assumed responsibility over one of the most important centers of Christianity in the empire. But, those were difficult times for Christians within the Roman state, for the government treated them as cultural and political dissidents. Dionysius, therefore, had a hard job to do, building local and distant ecclesiastical communities and structures (despite formal imperial prohibitions), finding money, recruiting and instructing priests and deacons, "defending the faith" from "heresy" and "paganism," defining and elaborating fine points of theology and

¹⁹⁶ *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. Vol. 3, 1967 (reprinted). Book 7, Chapter 2.

doctrine... To be successful, Dionysius had to write a lot, keeping in touch with friends and coaching distant bishops on how to shepherd their flocks. Thus, Dionysius' correspondence spanned throughout the empire, from Rome in the West, to Tarsus on the eastern Mediterranean coast, to Cappadocia next to Armenia, to Palestine, and to various other towns in his home province of Egypt.

At some point, for Eusebius did not bother to indicate exactly when, Dionysius sent an instructional letter "On Repentance" to "those in Armenia whose bishop was Meruzanes" (τοῖς κατὰ Ἀρμενίαν ὡσαύτως περὶ μετανοίας ἐπιστέλλει, ὧν ἐπεσκόπευεν Μερουζάνης).¹⁹⁷ We could deduce from the general context, in which Eusebius inserted *this single line*, that the letter was written as a response to the Novationist controversy. For, after the emperor Decius' persecutions, Christian theologians fought over whether to readmit into the Church those "lapsed Christians" who, under fear of torture, had renounced their faith. Presumably, Dionysius advocated forgiveness and extended Christian charity to all the Christian *Lapsi*. But, Eusebius provided no explicit commentary on any of that at all. Meruzanes and his Armenian flock could have been virtually anywhere in the large list of satrapies that we overviewed above.

Eager to emphasize Armenia's early conversion as well as the presence of Christianity there, modern scholars have failed to take a note of Eusebius' utter lack of interest either in Trdat or in Armenia.¹⁹⁸ This is striking... especially if we remember that

¹⁹⁷ *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. Vol. 3, 1967 (reprinted). Book 6.46.2.

¹⁹⁸ I should point out that when scholars have mentioned Meruzanes at all, they have repeated after Nicholas Adontz that Dionysius' letter to him "indicates a sizable community" in Armenia. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*. Tr. and comm. Nina Garsoïan. Lisbon, 1970. pp. 270-271. Of course, this could have been the case, but it did not need to be so to have a bishop in a period prior to standardizing the significance of the title "bishop."

Eusebius was basically a contemporary to the supposed royal conversion. We need to pause and think more carefully here. And, we need to ask why *the first* ecclesiastical historian did not write about *the first* (presumably) royal conversion at all. Certainly, he liked to tell conversion stories, and we have even witnessed one of them with Abgar.

To get closer to an answer, we need to examine Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* not merely as a lifeless database, but as an intellectual project that preoccupied its author over a significant period of time. Eusebius finished his *Ecclesiastical History* at some time in A.D. 324 or 325, but had written drafts of some earlier chapters years before. The publication of his earlier chapters also meant that he had already compiled some of the basic sources, had established the relative chronology, and had outlined the political narrative against which he later traced the development of the Church. Writing the *Ecclesiastical History*, in other words, was an immense task, and though scholars have regularly commented on its "avant-garde" genre, they have rarely appreciated the staggering amount of research that it took to produce it. Eusebius used Greek, Syriac, and Latin sources, visited local archives, did interviews, and critically collated overlapping stories. He used such diverse sources as private and imperial letters, state decrees and ecclesiastical proceedings, theological and philosophical texts... basically any relevant material that he could find and was able to read. It is true, of course, that the Christianity, in which he believed, was his heroic protagonist, but he was honest about it and still went at pains to situate it in a larger context. Thus, we should be more careful and less tempered than Edward Gibbon's angry bite, "The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might

redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace of religion.”¹⁹⁹

Generally, Eusebius’ historical focus veered to the East. For one, he was born and spent most of his life in Caesarea Maritima where Origen’s school had been and where Eusebius was ordained as a bishop in 314. But, it was also in the East that the major Christian centers (with the exception of Rome) happened to be, so Eusebius’ historical preoccupation made additional sense. This general tendency, of course, did not mean that he skipped over the Christian development in the Latin West, for he did bring in such seminal Latin authors as Tertullian and Cyprian despite his admitted struggle with the language. The important point for us here is that Eusebius tried to trace as much as he could Christianity’s general development. And he followed it from East to West, within the domains of the Roman empire and beyond. Naturally, given the accessibility of sources and his particular expertise, Eusebius’ narrative presents in greater detail Christianity in the empire. But, he did include apostolic stories about Christian prophets and missionaries to Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, or India.²⁰⁰

The fact that Eusebius did not include Trdat, therefore, raises the serious possibility that the conversion, at least as defined by early Christian writers who insisted that it represented a sudden and dramatic reorientation of *the self* (or “the soul” to use their authentic expression), did not happen. As we saw with Abgar, Eusebius’ historical

¹⁹⁹ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: Modern Library (Random House). Chapter 16. The passages, to which Edward Gibbon refers, do not support his conclusion. See *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 1967. Volume 3. Book 8: Chapter 2 and *De martyribus Palaestinae*. Ed. G. Bardy. 1967 (reprint). Chapter 12.

²⁰⁰ For Ethiopia, see *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Ed. G. Bardy. 1952. Volume 1. Book 2: Chapter 1. For Arabia, see Volume 2 (published 1955). Book 6: Chapter 19 and Chapter 33. See also Volume 3 (reprint 1967). Book 8: Chapter 12. For Persia, see Volume 2. Book 7: Chapter 31. For India, see Volume 2. Book 5: Chapter 10. We will explore the specifics behind all of these cultural and geographical referents in Chapter 5.

scope did expand towards the Armenian satrapies and their borderlands. We have already noted that there are no immediate surviving local sources reflecting on Trdat's conversion either, so Eusebius had basically nothing to read from Armenia. And, specifically for our objectives, Eusebius' omission of Trdat also meant that Constantine did not subsidize any missions in Armenia to promote local Christianity.

By 324-325 when Eusebius completed his history, Constantine openly promoted Christianity and tried to make it more concrete by establishing a common creed and by forging a Roman-style administrative mechanisms within it. Thus, Eusebius would have seized the opportunity to praise his favorite emperor even further if the news of such a major accomplishment as the conversion of a foreign king had circled around Christian communities. If Trdat in fact converted in 314 (or even earlier), it was such a minor affair from a Roman perspective that even Eusebius, invested in highlighting the Christian progress, failed to notice it or learn about it.

As we have already remarked, simplistic presumptions about the effects of conversion upon a royal persona and the prevalent national framework, imported from modern political life into scholarship, have repeatedly twisted the ancient stories of the Armenian conversion. With the case of Eusebius, we see the strongest example of an imagined (if not completely invented) historical reality. To see the beginnings of this process, we should travel back to the eighteenth century and the world of late Rome's most seminal modern historian, Edward Gibbon.

A man of the Enlightenment, Edward Gibbon did not hide his anti-Christian views and lashed against the corrupting force of religion any chance he could get. Thus, while Eusebius had turned Roman history into a Christian moral story, Gibbon turned

Christianity into an example of the very depravity of Rome that supposedly brought about the great empire's ultimate collapse.²⁰¹ Bad health and a frustrated personal life on almost all levels affected Gibbon's worldview and collaborated towards his rather gloomy vision of later Rome. It must have taken a lot of pain to imagine and then set a period of about 500 years on an aggravating scale of "decline and fall."²⁰²

Years of research resulted in a vast compilation of sources of impressive variety. Gibbon broke methodological grounds and established the fundamentals of late Roman imperial history. When he first reached the episode of Armenia's conversion, he saw it strictly from a Roman perspective and represented it as a subsequent event to Constantine's acceptance of Christianity. But then, Gibbon found some local Armenian sources. Those sources made a strong impression on him, and Gibbon looked at Eusebius' passage with eyes that omitted to notice that the local sources had been written years after the events. In one of his personal notes, Gibbon confessed his major mistake as he saw it:

The historian Eusebius considers the pious Armenians as a nation of Christians who bravely defended themselves from the hostile oppression of an idolatrous tyrant. Instead of maintaining that the conversion of Armenia was not obtained

²⁰¹ For Edward Gibbon's views on Christianity as a corrosive factor in Roman society, see *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: Modern Library (Random House). Volume 2, pp. 439-440.

²⁰² Of course, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* extended until the end of "the Byzantine empire" in 1453 (and even beyond into political aspects of the Ottoman empire and the Italian republics), but he thought that "the majesty of Rome was faintly represented by the princes of Constantinople, the feeble and imaginary successors of Augustus." New York: Modern Library (Random House). Volume 2, p. 436. Thus, according to Gibbon, the Roman empire proper ended in the 470s with the barbarian invasions and the settling of Odoacer in the Italian peninsula (Volume 2, pp. 342-343). From that point on, Gibbon turned to "the history of the *Greek* [italics are his] emperors, [which] may still afford a long series of instructive lessons and interesting revolutions." Volume 2, p. 436. Note also that Gibbon saw the Byzantines and the Greeks as one and the same. He also progressively juxtaposed Greeks/Byzantines/Easterners to Latins/Romans/Westerners. See, for example, "The Byzantine court beheld with indifference, perhaps with pleasure, the disgrace of Rome, the misfortunes of Italy, and the loss of the West. Under the succeeding reigns the alliance of the two empires was restored; but the aid of the Oriental Romans was tardy, doubtful, and ineffectual; and the national schism of the Greeks and the Latins was enlarged by the perpetual difference of language and manners, of interests, and even of religion." p. 438.

with any degree of success till the scepter was in the hands of an Orthodox emperor, I ought to have observed that the seeds of the faith were deeply sown during the season of the last and greatest persecution, that many Roman exiles might assist the labors of Gregory, and that the renowned Tiridates [Trdat], the hero of the East, might dispute with Constantine the honor of being the first sovereign to embrace the Christian religion.²⁰³

A “nation defending itself from tyranny,” “planted seeds of Christianity growing into blooming Armenian identity,” “a special relationship between Orthodoxy and the ruler,” these are familiar images whose portraits in modern scholarship, not to mention in popular or in openly politicized literature, make a rich gallery. In this historical study, we have turned our backs on such modern affectations and fiery slogans to notice clearly these images’ limited grounding on ancient reality. To put it succinctly, according to the contemporary Romans (and Armenians), when it came to Trdat’s royal conversion and its supposed political implications both for the empire and for the kingdom, all was quiet on the Eastern front.

Armenia’s Royal Conversion: Ancient and Medieval Retrospections

Given the prevalent scholarly opinion that the Byzantine state conducted foreign royal conversions as conscious and deliberate imperial policies, the primary objective of this study is to evaluate critically the nature of imperial involvement abroad and the ways, in which the Byzantines themselves depicted it. In Armenia specifically, we have argued that Constantine’s government was not involved in king Trdat’s conversion. And, we have also claimed that contemporary Christian writers did not even notice Trdat’s supposed acceptance of Christianity. Moreover, they have referred to Armenia only

²⁰³ Edward Gibbon. *Miscellaneous Works*, 3 vols.. Volume 3. Dublin, 1796. pp. 349-350.

marginally and in vague terms. Yet, modern scholars have repeatedly maintained exactly the opposite on all three accounts.

In this subsequent section, therefore, we need to visit the favorite sources of modern scholarship and see why they have been found so convincing. But, unlike previous approaches that have sought to establish a single historical narrative, thus falling in the trap of indiscriminate temporal, authorial, or contextual confluences of sources, we will analyze all the relevant accounts precisely as what they were: authorial and cultural retrospections produced years after Constantine and Trdat had passed away. Thus, we will look at each one of them separately and will treat them as stories coming from different contexts, offering different authorial perspectives, and having complex histories of their own. In the process, we will present several versions of the Armenian royal conversion, bringing out all the nuances and examining the cultural and social factors that affected the authorial presentations of the past event.

The invention of an authentic Armenian script in the beginning of the fifth century, more so than Trdat's supposed conversion a century earlier, should actually be credited as a monumental event in local history. The new Armenian alphabet allowed local writers to bypass Greek or Latin and enabled, at least theoretically, the population in that diverse region to coalesce around a local linguistic group, minimizing the direct influence of the Greek, Latin, or Persian as dominant languages. In effect, local Armenian rulers quickly recognized the cultural and social opportunities that came with the invention of a common literary language. Quickly after the invention of the Armenian script, they commissioned groups of young men to learn it and paid for local scholars to go abroad and to produce translations of important works. Thus, within a

century of the invention of the alphabet, the Armenians had successfully developed a rich literature of their own. And, local literary output was marked primarily by a Christian affectation. In that Christian cultural mode, the Armenians began to write about (and to construct) their own earlier history.

By the mid-fifth century, the importance of Mesrop Mashtots', the philologist who had devised the Armenian script, was formally recognized. And, shortly after Mesrop's death in 440, Koriun wrote his professor's biography.²⁰⁴ Praising Mesrop's saintly selflessness and dwelling on his missionary feats, Koriun's piece is hardly a historical account to suit modern academic norms. Elaborate rhetorical passages, endless biblical references, and bold assertions of unqualified character reveal an authorial taste for baroque creativity rather than for austere historical and critical reconstruction. Preoccupied with Mesrop, Koriun did not mention the conversion of Trdat at all.

After the *Life of Mashtots'*, we begin to see a rise in local historiography. The *History of Faustos*, for example, traces the Armenian development from the death of Trdat in 330 to the division of the kingdom between Rome and Sasanian Persia in 387.²⁰⁵ It purports to have collected numerous examples of local heroism, which it connects to a wide array of often enigmatic references. At the end of the fifth century, Lazar, a local monk who apparently regularly annoyed the Armenian ecclesiastical establishment, produced a *History*, that described the division of Armenia in 387, the final demise of the

²⁰⁴ Koriun. *The Life of Mashtots*. Tr. B. Norehad. Reprinted in the *Delmar Classical Armenian Text Series*. New York, 1964.

²⁰⁵ Pavstos Buzand. *The Epic Histories: Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*. Tr. and comm. N.G. Garsoïan. Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies. Cambridge, 1989.

Armenian Arsacid royal line forty years later, and the struggle for religious freedom of the Armenians in the East under the Sasanian rule of Persia, too.²⁰⁶

Another important historical account is the work of Elishe.²⁰⁷ He expanded upon the narrower theme of the struggle with Persia that erupted in unsuccessful revolt in 450/51. Some scholars take the *History* to be an eyewitness account while others place it at the end of the sixth century. In either case, Elishe's work is the first example of local history set within a moral framework. Christianity and local patriotism clashed against sin and betrayal. More than any other Armenian ancient historian, Elishe displays Christian affectations indiscriminately transposed into his narrative. With Elishe, in other words, we can begin to talk about Christian Armenian historiography, for specific Armenian events were inserted into a Christian teleological universe.

The *History* of Moses Khorenatsi, whom we have encountered on several occasions above, follows Armenia from the time of "the giants" down to the death of Mesrop.²⁰⁸ Moses collected the unwritten Armenian traditions about their legendary heroes and fashioned them to go together with the history of the ancient world as described in Eusebius' *Chronicle*. Although he claims to be a pupil of Mesrop, Moses used numerous Armenian and foreign sources of later times and his work is primarily aimed at glorifying the Bagratuni family which rose to power in the eighth century.²⁰⁹ Moses Khorenatsi's *History* has a pre-eminent place in Armenian historiography as the "received" account of the origins and development of the Armenian people.

²⁰⁶ Lazar Parpetsi. *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*. Tr. and comm. R.W. Thomson. Atlanta, 1991.

²⁰⁷ Elishe. *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*. Tr. R.W. Thomson. Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 5, Cambridge, 1982.

²⁰⁸ Moses Khorenatsi. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and comm. Robert W. Thomson. Cambridge, 1978.

²⁰⁹ I have relied here on Robert Thomson's "Armenian Literary Culture through the 11th Century." In Richard Hovannisian, ed. *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times: The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*. St. Martin's Press, 1997.

As a very brief overview, those were some of the primary works that came about with the emergence of the original written script in Armenia. None of these works mentioned Trdat's conversion. It was the important fifth-century *History* of Agathangelos, which tells for the first time Trdat's conversion story, within popular literary preoccupations that sought to emphasize Armenia's glorious past and to recount the fabulous deeds of its notable local heroes. In other words, Agathangelos' seminal depiction of Trdat's Christian conversion is an example in a chain of attempts to build local tradition and to establish distinct self-awareness.

The real identity of "Agathangelos" is unknown, though the author of the *History* claims to have been an eyewitness of the conversion of king Trdat and depicts himself as a learned intellectual from the city of Rome itself.²¹⁰ It is important actually to read through the introduction here:

Now a command came to me, one Agathangelos from the great city of Rome, trained in the art of the ancients, proficient in Latin and Greek and not unskilled in literary composition. Thus, we came to the Arsacid court in the reign of the brave, virtuous, mighty and heroic Trdat who has surpassed all his ancestors in valor and who has done deeds in battle worthy of champions and giants. He ordered us to narrate, not a falsified account of his own brave deeds, nor unworthily to elaborate capricious fables, but what really occurred in various times, warlike battles, the slaughter of men with great bloodshed, the clash of vast armies, the subjection of lands, the plundering of provinces, the razing of cities, the capture of towns, the struggle of many men for renown or vindictive revenge.²¹¹

Right from the very opening, we can get a sense of Agathangelos' style and immediate preoccupations. Bravery, might, valor, glorious battles, those were the primary issues on Agathangelos' authorial horizon, and even though he assures us in the veracity of his

²¹⁰ For a critical evaluation on Agathangelos, see Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. *Foreword*.

²¹¹ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 21.

account, we are invited into a kind of apology for local power rather than into a critical evaluation and literary chastisement of king and government in a Thucydidian or Tacitian manner.

In fact, it is highly unlikely that we are dealing with a contemporary version of events at all. According to R.W. Thomson, who translated Agathangelos in English, the Armenian text is an original work composed in the second half of the fifth century.²¹² Even more than Faustos, whom we noted above and who is one of the major sources for the *History*, Agathangelos improvises freely on supposed historical realities from Armenia. And, more than any other Armenian historical work, the narrative is extensively based on texts that originally had nothing to do with the purported subject. For example, Agathangelos used Koriun's biography of Mesrop Mashtots' and adapted it to fit the story of Gregory the Illuminator. The general bibliography of Agathangelos consisted of translations: biblical and apocryphal texts, lives of saints from Syriac and Greek, or homilies of the major church fathers. Thus, Agathangelos' story of Trdat's conversion is not only temporally detached from the original event, but it is also deliberately set within a Christian narrative tradition and genre expectations.

Since modern scholars today are expected to find and to deliver originality, it is easy to forget that Christian writers (in antiquity and now) establish their authority by appealing to tradition and by keeping close to conventional norms. Thus, it is the very suppression of the authorial *self* and the abrogation of assertive appeals to novelty that mark narrative success and build Christian credibility. "Past precedents" are seen as paradigmatic and are sought as keys to "the eternal" and thus are the primary directives

²¹² Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. xiii.

of Christian authorial evaluation. When interpreting Christian writers, we should always keep in mind the truly original and fundamental in Christian literature and its general outlook and presentation of the human world: the repeatedly stressed conviction that life's ultimate meaning is grounded on a truth unraveled through Incarnational history.

Seen from that perspective, the most climactic moment in human history is not in some indeterminate future, but has already happened when God chose to reveal Himself directly. Everything subsequent is a mere preparation and a period of eager awaiting. In this cultural context, therefore, Agathangelos' Trdat is deliberately set as a paradigmatic protagonist that repeats and thus confirms many past precedents, a persona that seeks to transcend into a Christian reality and to find saintly immortality by a process of Christ-like imitation.

Keeping in mind this distinct authorial outlook, we should let Agathangelos speak for himself:

So the order came to me from the great king Trdat to compose a narrative from literary historical sources: first, the valiant deeds of his father the brave Khosrov, and whatever valorous acts were performed in battle when his kingdom was in confusion and flux; and then the death of the valorous Khosrov, whence, why, and how and what took place; and then the bravery of Trdat equal to his father's, and whatever deeds he accomplished in his own time; and then about God's beloved martyrs, how and why they came, who arose like luminaries to scatter the mist of darkness from this land of Armenia; then how they gave up their lives for God's truth; how God had mercy and visited this land of Armenia, and showed great miracles through one man, who endured many and various torments and afflictions in prison, as in his solitary struggle he triumphed for Christ over a double tyranny in the city of Artashat, who acquired the title of martyr, who came as far as death yet by God's will returned from there and was raised up again to life in this land of Armenia. He entered the gates of death, but returned by the will of God; he became the messenger of Christ's teaching, after God's miraculous and merciful punishment. Then how the meritorious Trdat accepted unhopd for salvation and became dear to all, becoming by the grace of God the son of his reborn native land and heir to eternal life.²¹³

²¹³ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 23.

It is easy to detect the Christ-like motifs applied both to Gregory and Trdat. Messianic miracles and teachings, earthly afflictions, martyrdom, and a return from death, those were some of the classic features in Christian story-telling, and Agathangelos had adopted them without much pretension, but rather with balanced submission to literary typology.

Chronologically, Agathangelos sets the conversion of Trdat after Constantine's, for he continues his introduction by promising to tell us:

How Trdat went back to the land of the Greeks in the reign of the pious Constantine, the established king of the empire of Greeks and Romans. And how he made a covenant and strengthened him in piety and then returned with great gifts and much honor. And how Trdat dedicated to God many places. All this we will relate in detailed succession, with the *Teaching* of the saint who was made worthy of ascending the great episcopal throne and who inherited the patriarchal title as the champion of virtue—whence, from what descent, from what family and who was he who became worthy to do this by divine-given grace.²¹⁴

This has been a favorite passage for the scholars who have argued that Constantine signed a treaty with Trdat to go on a campaign against Persia in the 330s. But, given the context that we have established above, even within the narrow parameters of Agathangelos' literary world, we can see that it takes imagination and credulous source conflation to insert a planned militarism in this passage.

Agathangelos sets the actual conversion event in a context of murder, remorse, and redemption. An ugly fatherly crime brought two destinies together and haunted them until Christly absolution finally arrived. In a brutal betrayal, a certain Anak killed his king Khosrov. Still a child, Anak's son Gregory was taken to Caesarea in Cappadocia where he was put in a Christian family and was brought up there. Khosrov's son Trdat,

²¹⁴ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 27.

on the other hand, was sent to the court of Licinius, presumably to keep away from seditious factions. Time passed, and a devout Gregory learnt about his father's sinful crime. Remorse immediately seized him, and Gregory returned to Armenia where Trdat in the meantime had been restored to power. Finding it unnecessary to divulge his true identity, Gregory sought employment in the court, intending to devote his life to selfless obedience to Trdat as an attempt to expiate his father's sin.²¹⁵ Trdat's general anti-Christian policies, however, brought attention to Gregory, and the king managed to find out that he was the son of his father's murderer. Showing no mercy, Trdat imprisoned Gregory and kept him in a dark pit for 13 years.²¹⁶

Insanely in love with a picture of a local Armenian Christian lady, Rhipsimē, the emperor Diocletian declared the famous anti-Christian policies throughout the entire Roman empire when he could not have her.²¹⁷ Irresistible love with Rhipsimē herself pushed Trdat to offer marriage and when she rejected him to murder her brutally.²¹⁸ But, divine punishment quickly fell on Trdat for having killed a faithful Christian nun and suddenly he lost his human form:

An impure demon struck the king and knocked him down from his chariot. Then he began to rave and to eat his own flesh. And in the likeness of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, he lost his human nature for the likeness of wild pigs and went about like them and dwelt among them. Then entering a reedy place, in senseless abandon he pastured on grass, and wallowed naked in the plain.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 53.

²¹⁶ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 135.

²¹⁷ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 152.

²¹⁸ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 205.

²¹⁹ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 217.

Trdat's demonic disease spread throughout the country. "All the king's household, including slaves and servants, were afflicted with torments. And there was terrible mourning on account of these afflictions."²²⁰ God again had to interfere:

Then there appeared a vision from God to the king's sister whose name was Khosrovidukht. So she came to speak with the people and related the vision, saying: "A vision appeared to me this night. A man in the likeness of light came and told me, 'There is no other cure for these torments that have come upon you unless you send to the city of Artashat and bring thence the prisoner Gregory. When he comes he will teach you the remedy for your ills.'"²²¹

Gregory was thus released from prison, but the restorative healing and conversion took some time and were taxing even for a true future saint:

They (the king and the nobles) were dressed in hair-shirts...and fasted for sixty-six days. And in this way for sixty-five days blessed Gregory tirelessly and unceasingly, day and night, never ceased from reasoning, advising, teaching, and confirming them. Like a wise doctor he tried to find the appropriate remedy that they might entrust themselves to him as patients, and he like a skilled physician might heal their souls with the gospel of Christ.²²²

Finally, the sixty-sixth day arrived:

At the dawn of the morning, the nobles and king and princes and the common people, with the crowd of women and young children, approached and fell down in flocks before saint Gregory, beseeching and begging for healing from the torments which had fallen on them as punishment because they had been struck in a just judgment by the rod of (God's) anger. Especially the king because he had been changed into the form of a wallowing pig. For his whole body had become hairy, and on his limbs bristles had grown like those of great wild boars. And the nails of his hands and feet had hardened like the claws of beasts that dig the earth or eat roots. Similarly the appearance of his face had turned into the likeness of the hard snout of an animal living among reeds. Because of the beast-like nature of his way of life he had fallen from the honor of his throne, and he roamed about in the likeness of pasturing beasts among the animals in the reeds, lost to the society of

²²⁰ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 219.

²²¹ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 219.

²²² Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 265.

men.²²³

Eventually, everyone was healed, except Trdat. The king continued to suffer until local churches were built and all of Armenia was practically converted. Local shrines of pagan gods were quickly destroyed. Then, Trdat wanted to be baptized, but Gregory was not a consecrated bishop. Trdat petitioned bishop Leontius of Caesarea in Cappadocia to promote Gregory.

Gregory went to Caesarea with many gifts and was officially consecrated as a bishop. Already recognized as a great man, he was widely celebrated, and huge crowds paraded to greet him. Always charismatic, Gregory recruited many priests and monks to accompany him to Armenia. The new bishop entered Armenia, carrying with him the very bones of John the Baptist and of Athenogenes who was martyred in Sebaste during Diocletian's persecutions.²²⁴ Eventually, Gregory brought his two sons from Cappadocia to Armenia. The older one became a priest only later in life. The younger son, Aristakēs, was already a famous Cappadocian hermit.²²⁵ It is Aristakēs who would come to replace his father and would become the catholicos of Greater Armenia. Aristakēs eventually attended the Council of Nicaea personally:

He arrived at the great Council of Nicaea with all the bishops. There were defined the acceptable traditional faith for the whole world and the illuminating ordinances, the regular canons, the divine power of the will of God the all-highest. There the great emperor Constantine entered and confessed the faith and was crowned with blessing by the council, leaving on earth renown and assuring justification in heaven.²²⁶

²²³ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. pp. 267-8.

²²⁴ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 349.

²²⁵ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. p. 396.

²²⁶ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. pp. 416-417.

We can see the minimal degree of involvement on the part of the emperor Constantine from this long summary and series of quotations from Agathangelos' narrative. We can also enjoy the wonderful twists and supernatural metamorphoses of the story that sought to display the outward effects of conversion. As we have pointed out, the ancient Christian idea of conversion was one of utter inner transformation. Such a psychological shift, from an authorial perspective, is hard to illustrate, so in order to make the point clearer, Agathangelos borrowed the biblical imagery of demonic transformation of men into animals and applied it to Trdat.²²⁷ Inner corruption led to an ugly transformation of the body. Remorse and conversion brought back restoration and final redemption, both for body and soul. For a Christian, the two (body and soul) are intertwined. For a writer, this is a ready opportunity to enhance a story and illustrate conversion by elaborate and fabulous metaphors.

As to the historical truthfulness of the story, we should recall here again the literary objectives of Christian hagiography and the emphasis on Incarnational history that drove Agathangelos' plot and authorial vision. And, we also need to remind ourselves of the general conclusions of modern anthropological studies on conversion, which we overviewed in the *Introduction*, pointing out their emphasis on the long and taxing period that conversion entails.

With a change of belief, the person faces social obstacles, shifting as it is from one community to the next and replacing old customs and conceptions with new ones. Complete eradication of "the old" never happens, and "the new" persona is very much defined within the framework of "the old." The degree of belief and commitment to "the

²²⁷ For the biblical reference, see *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007 (12th printing). Daniel 4.1-36 where the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar turns into an animal, runs into the wilderness, and starts eating grass "like cattle."

new” is proportionate to blunt antagonism to “the old.” Overall, the social and psychological experience is jarring, and personal confrontations within oneself and within one’s community are almost inevitable. A long process of acculturation and internalization of belief and practice is thus necessary unless we are dealing with a prophet or a charismatic holy man (and even then a context of juxtaposition is very much at play). By insisting on divine miracles, Agathangelos was inserting Trdat in an already established Christian tradition. Historical accuracy or intricate psychological analysis were not Agathangelos’ priorities; legitimizing Trdat’s Christianity by inserting him in familiar Christian context of divine miracles and redemption, on the other hand, was.

Aside from Agathangelos’ rich account on Trdat’s conversion, we have several Byzantine narratives that are contemporary to Agathangelos in the fifth century. We should examine them, for it is precisely the imperial side that we are ultimately trying to evaluate. But, we should also hold to the details from Agathangelos’ seminal story in order to have a clear comparative context.

Our first example comes from the ecclesiastical historian Sozomen. By birth, Sozomen was a provincial, for he grew up in the village of Bethlelea near the city of Gaza in Palestine. But, as a lucky Christian living in times fortunate for Christianity, Sozomen received grants from various imperial institutions and traveled a lot. He visited Jerusalem, Cyprus, towns in Arabia, Antioch, Berytus (where he studied law), towns and villages in Lower and Upper Egypt. For his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen bragged to have used imperial archives in the capital, the documents of several churches, and even

supposedly visited and consulted leading scholars.²²⁸ He dedicated his book to the emperor Theodosius II (r. 408-450), seeking perhaps both recognition and remuneration.

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen included several chapters on conversion. According to Sozomen, imperial decrees in support of Christianity and strict prohibitions against all practices, which were deemed pagan, collaborated to the conversion of the Roman empire. But, divine signs, irresistible spells of earth-shattering dreams, or the charismatic allures of monks and bishops were among the primary vehicles of the Roman conversion, too. For, “a great many other cities turned to the religious observance²²⁹ in this way and did so by themselves without any edict being issued by the emperor; they destroyed the adjacent temples and the statues and built instead houses of prayer.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 1, Chapter 1.13: μεμνήσομαι δὲ πραγμάτων οἷς παρέτυχον καὶ παρὰ τῶν εἰδότην ἢ θεασαμένων ἀκήκοα, κατὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν καὶ πρὸ ἡμῶν γενεάν. τῶν δὲ περαιτέρω τὴν κατάληψιν ἐθήρασα ἀπὸ τῶν τεθέντων νόμων διὰ τὴν θρησκείαν καὶ τῶν κατὰ καιροὺς συνόδων καὶ νεωτερισμῶν καὶ βασιλικῶν καὶ ἱερατικῶν ἐπιστολῶν, ὧν αἱ μὲν εἰσέτι νῦν ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις καὶ ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σῶζονται, αἱ δὲ σποράδην παρὰ τοῖς φιλολόγοις φέρονται. τούτων δὲ τὰ ῥητὰ περιλαβεῖν τῇ γραφῇ πολλάκις ἐννοηθεὶς ἄμεινον ἐδοκίμασα διὰ τὸν ὄγκον τῆς πραγματείας τὴν ἐν αὐτοῖς διάνοιαν συντόμως ἀπαγγεῖλαι, πλὴν εἰ μὴ τι τῶν ἀμφιλόγων εὐρήσομεν, ἐφ’ ὧν διάφορός ἐστι τοῖς πολλοῖς δόξα· τῆνικαῦτα γὰρ εἰ εὐπορήσω τινὸς γραφῆς, παραθήσομαι ταύτην εἰς ἀπόδειξιν τῆς ἀληθείας [I will record the affairs, which are familiar to me and also those concerning which I have been informed by persons who, from their own observation or otherwise, were well acquainted with them; and I will cover our own history and the history of the preceding generation. And, I have looked for records of events of earlier date in the established laws concerning religious worship, in the proceedings of the synods in the period, in the innovations, and in the imperial and ecclesiastical letters. Some of these letters are now repositied in imperial and ecclesiastical archives, and others are scattered and in the possession of scholars. I thought seriously, at one time, of transcribing the whole, but on further reflection I thought it better, on account of the prolixity of the documents, to give merely a brief synopsis of their contents. Yet, whenever controversial topics are introduced, I will readily transcribe openly from any work that may aid the clarification of the truth].

²²⁹ “Θρησκεία” is difficult to render in English. In Greek, it is a word that reflects the mechanics of religious worship, the very motions and observances of service. The word does not connote “belief.” The English “religion,” which modern scholars unhesitatingly use, is too broad. But, Sozomen’s point is more careful and deliberate here, for he asserts that the inhabitants of those cities turned to certain religious practices (what we tend to call “rituals” today) without necessarily adopting clear dogmatic beliefs and processing them in an intellectual way. Sozomen describes “mass Christianity,” and his version is quite plausible here.

²³⁰ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 5: πλεῖσται γὰρ δὴ καὶ ἄλλαι πόλεις τῆνικαῦτα πρὸς τὴν

Outside of the Roman state where the barbarians ruled, Christian captives carried forth the work of God. Sozomen described the process of conversion across the Roman frontier in the following way:

For when the nameless multitude of mixed peoples passed over from Thrace across into Asia, and when other barbarians from elsewhere conquered those peoples bordering with the Roman empire and also subjugated the passing multitude itself, many priests of Christ, who have been taken captive, were with them. And they healed the sick there and cleansed those who were demon-possessed by simply invoking the name of Christ and by calling on the Son of God. Moreover, they inquired deeply into the nature of religious life, conquering sin by virtues.²³¹ The barbarians, amazed at the life and miraculous deeds of those men, thought that it would be prudent on their part and pleasing to God if they imitated the ones who have proven to be better and also if they were to worship like them in a superior way.²³² Therefore, proceeding with their decision, they were taught the leading aspects of the practice,²³³ were baptized, and were admitted into the church.²³⁴

θηρησκείαν ηὐτομόλησαν καὶ αὐτόματοι βασιλέως μηδὲν ἐπιτάπτοντος τοὺς παρ' αὐτοῖς ναοὺς καὶ ξόανα καθεῖλον καὶ εὐκτηρίους οἴκους ὠκοδόμησαν.

²³¹ This is a sentence that is difficult to capture as a direct translation. In the previous chapter, I have already discussed some of the labyrinthine semantics of “πολιτεία” in Greek literature. For, in addition to “a religious act” or “an ascetic practice,” “πολιτεία” may mean “constitution,” “citizenship rights,” “polity,” “republic,” “state,” or “statehood.” In fact, classical Greek emphasizes the state/constitution string of meaning as primary. “Φιλοσοφῶ” (here in the 3rd person plural, aorist tense: “ἐφιλοσόφουν”) is the Greek verb from where we derive in English the noun “philosopher.” Thus, Sozomen could quite plausibly be saying that the Christian captives were studying as philosophers the barbarian statehood practices and were successfully changing them, i.e. replacing “sin/disgrace” with “virtues.” I have kept the other alternative in the primary translation above because it is less explicitly sinister and thus is more suitable in a Christian text. But, Sozomen’s ambiguity is most likely not coincidental. Christianity often said to be the true philosophy.

²³² Here, too, there is an important dual sense. For, “θεραπεύω,” from where English gets “therapy,” could also mean “to heal/to cure.” I have already noted in the previous chapter the importance of healing or the perception of Christian successes in treatment practices in antiquity that helped Christianity’s early spread in the Mediterranean.

²³³ Note here the emphasis on “practice” not “belief,” which makes the account more plausible, for it is by rehearsing ritual motions that large populations to this day participate in Christianity. High theology and doctrinal belief is accessible to those with intellectual proclivities. For the majority of Christians, it is religion is really equated with “practice” and “activity” even if Protestants theoretically reject and scoff at a formalized idea of “ritual.”

²³⁴ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 6: ἐπεὶ γὰρ τότε πλῆθος ἄφατον μιγάδων ἐθνῶν ἐκ τῆς Θράκης περαιωθὲν τὴν Ἀσίαν κατέδραμεν ἄλλοι τε ἄλλαχῆ βάρβαροι ταῦτόν εἰργάσαντο τοὺς παρακειμένους Ῥωμαίους, πολλοὶ τῶν ἱερέων τοῦ Χριστοῦ αἰχμάλωτοι γενόμενοι σὺν αὐτοῖς ἦσαν. ὡς δὲ τοὺς αὐτόθι νοσοῦντας ἰῶντο καὶ τοὺς δαιμονῶντας ἐκάθαιρον Χριστὸν μόνον ὀνομάζοντες καὶ υἱὸν θεοῦ ἐπικαλούμενοι, προσέτι δὲ καὶ πολιτείαν ἄμεμπτον ἐφιλοσόφουν καὶ ταῖς ἀρεταῖς τὸν μῶμον ἐνίκων, θαυμάσαντες οἱ βάρβαροι τοὺς ἄνδρας τοῦ βίου καὶ τῶν παραδόξων ἔργων εὐφρονεῖν συνείδον καὶ τὸν θεὸν ἴλεων ἔχειν, εἰ τοὺς ἀμείνους φανέντας

In the West, Sozomen pointed out as a matter of fact that the Celts, the Gauls who “dwelt upon the most distant shores of the ocean,” the Goths, and “the tribes who formerly dwelt on both shores of the Ister (the Danube)” had converted by thoroughly mimicking Roman society (ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν Ῥωμαίων οἰκουμένην)²³⁵ and thus came to accept “our customs and worldview”²³⁶ (πάλαι μετασχόντες τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ἐπὶ τὸ ἡμερώτερον καὶ λογικὸν μεθηρομόσαντο).²³⁷

In short, Sozomen depicted the mass conversion of the Roman state as a composite result of legislative pressure from Constantine, violent repression of dissident groups, targeted destruction of traditional customs or practices as well as reportedly unregulated, spontaneous enthusiasm of local communities for Christianity. On the other hand, he described the mass conversion of foreigners as a process that did not involve direct imperial participation at all. Instead, the foreign rulers and their elites voluntarily chose to imitate Roman imperial practices.²³⁸ Wrapped in the general social and cultural

μιμήσαιντο καὶ ὁμοίως αὐτοῖς τὸ κρεῖττον θεραπεύειν. προβαλλόμενοι οὖν αὐτοὺς τοῦ πρακτέου καθηγητὰς ἐδιδάσκοντο καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο, καὶ ἀκολούθως ἐκκλησιάζον.

²³⁵ Note here the specific usage of “οἰκουμένη,” on which I have commented at length in the previous chapter. In brief here, the word could mean “the entire world.” However, in many occasions, as is the case here, it simply meant the Roman society/community/people. In other words, it had a more restricted sense, which scholars have neglected to notice since they have been too uncritically devoted to the idea of imperialism through conversion.

²³⁶ See for the literal translation and commentary on this, my footnote on “dogma.”

²³⁷ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 6: Πληθυνούσης δὲ τῆς ἐκκλησίας τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν Ῥωμαίων οἰκουμένην, καὶ δι’ αὐτῶν τῶν βαρβάρων ἢ θρησκεία ἐχώρει. ἤδη γὰρ τὰ τε ἀμφὶ τὸν Ῥῆνον φύλα ἐχριστιάνιζον, Κελτοὶ τε καὶ οἱ Γαλατῶν ἔνδον τελευταῖοι τὸν ὠκεανὸν προσοικοῦσι, καὶ Γότθοι, καὶ ὅσοι τούτοις ὄμοροι τὸ πρὶν ἦσαν ἀμφὶ τὰς ὄχθας Ἰστρου ποταμοῦ, πάλαι μετασχόντες τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ἐπὶ τὸ ἡμερώτερον καὶ λογικὸν μεθηρομόσαντο.

²³⁸ For anthropological discussions on differences between “conversion,” “adhesion,” and “adoption,” see my *Introduction*. In Sozomen, we find a keen commentator on “religious change on a mass level.” Adoption of new practices, their progressive assimilation into the everyday social life lead to broader social

envelop of “customs and worldview,” according to Sozomen, Christianity traveled across the Roman border by a process of emulation.

Thus, Sozomen calls to our attention two different social and political contexts within which Christianization operated. First, we witness the internal Christianization of the Roman empire where the emperor exercised a primary role aided by instances of local spontaneity. Then, we observe the external spread of Christianity across the frontier where the emperor exercised a passive, hegemonic power at best. In Sozomen, we find for the first time a clear and explicit distinction between “the domestic” and “the foreign” conversion.

After that careful distinction between “domestic” and “foreign” conversions, Sozomen presented at length the Christianization of Iberia (roughly the territory of modern Georgia). A series of miracles and the devout dedication of a holy woman brought about the Iberian royal conversion.²³⁹ Again, Constantine was not directly involved and learnt about the events in Iberia only after the fact.

Having concluded with the conversion history of Iberia, Sozomen then wrote:

[Subsequently, the dogma²⁴⁰ spread through the neighboring tribes, and the majority embraced it .]²⁴¹ I have found out through my research that (“on the

transformations in the community. For most people, it is “practice,” the mechanics of worship, that defined “religion.”

²³⁹ I will study the conversion of Iberia in Chapter 4.

²⁴⁰ Note that the author uses “dogma,” referring to a set of beliefs and practices that he imagined to be the basis of Christianity. “Dogma” was established by the Church and, at least for the author of this sentence, went together with acquiring certain features of Romanness, but accepting the Christian dogma did not guarantee becoming a full Roman either. Celts, Goths, and others could get Christianity and thus obtain (if translated literally) Roman “reason” (λογικὸν μεθηρομόσαντο), but they remained “barbarians” nonetheless. Such passages are extremely important for the proper evaluation of Byzantine ethnography and ways of imagining and depicting foreign tribes and peoples. Obsessed with the framework of “us vs. others,” scholars have repeatedly polarized the two categories while “alterity” was rarely drastic and much more nuanced. Becoming Christian did not automatically mean becoming Roman/Byzantine just as being a “foreigner” in Byzantium did not mean an indiscriminate categorization as “the other.” I plan to conduct a separate study on this very important issue.

²⁴¹ Some editors of Sozomen’s text dispute the authenticity of this sentence. For us, this is particularly important, for it might push the conversion of the Armenians behind that of the Iberians. But, it also could

contrary” or “in the past” for “πάλιν,” depending on whether we accept the preceding line; see the footnotes here) the Armenians were the first to become Christians. It is said that Trdat, the sovereign of that people, was converted by means of a miracle which was wrought in his own house; and that he issued commands to all those in rule, by a herald, to adopt the same religion. I think that the introduction of Christianity among the Persians was owing to the intercourse which these people held with the Oshroenians and Armenians; for it is likely that by associating with such divine men they were stimulated to imitate their virtues.²⁴²

This is all that Sozomen wrote on the conversion of Armenia. It is really puzzling why he was so succinct here, especially after he had told us that he had indeed conducted research on the matter. He had also gone at length to describe other, seemingly more minor instances of Christian conversion. Why abbreviate then the conversion events of “the first Christians?”

For one, it is unclear where Sozomen went to find his information. By the fifth century, the Armenian church was quite independent from the Constantinopolitan center, and in 451, it even rejected the Council of Chalcedon. Thus, it is possible to imagine poor and sporadic imperial and patriarchal communications with the Armenian churches, which may have made the Roman imperial and patriarchal archives on Armenia’s early Christianity relatively sparse. If this is true, Sozomen may have heard Trdat’s conversion story during one of his many trips around the Roman empire, but having found Armenia

mean that they were the first everywhere, for “πάλιν” could be taken as a juxtaposition, i.e., “on the contrary.” For the sake of argument, I will analyze this passage as though the first sentence is spuriously interpolated.

²⁴² Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 8: [Ἐφεξῆς δὲ καὶ διὰ τῶν ὁμόρων φυλῶν τὸ δόγμα διέβη καὶ εἰς πλῆθος ἐπέδωκεν.] Ἀρμενίους δὲ πάλιν πρότερον ἐπυθόμην χριστιανίσαι. λέγεται γὰρ Τηριδάτην τὸν ἡγούμενον τότε τοῦ ἔθνους ἕκ τινος παραδόξου θεοσημείας συμβάσης περὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ οἶκον ἅμα τε Χριστιανὸν γενέσθαι καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀρχομένους ὑφ’ ἐνὶ κηρύγματι προστάξει ὁμοίως θρησκεύειν. Ἐφεξῆς δὲ καὶ διὰ τῶν ὁμόρων φυλῶν τὸ δόγμα διέβη καὶ εἰς πλῆθος ἐπέδωκε. καὶ Περσῶν δὲ χριστιανίσαι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἡγούμεναι, ὅσοι προφάσει τῆς Ὀσροηνῶν καὶ Ἀρμενίων ἐπιμιξίας, ὡς εἰκός, τοῖς αὐτόθι θείοις ἀνδράσιν ὠμίλησαν καὶ τῆς αὐτῶν ἀρετῆς ἐπειράθησαν.

too inconsequential from a Roman imperial perspective, he moved on his narrative to the more important affairs of Christianity in the Persian empire. For, as we indicated, Sozomen was interested in representing Christianity from a Constantinopolitan perspective, seeking the attention of the emperor Theodosius II (r. 408-450).

In fact, we find Armenia and its post-conversion Christianity mentioned only once more in the entire work of Sozomen. Again, it was only marginally inserted, this time in the context of the famous preacher John Chrysostom's many exiles. In 408, John was moved to Armenia, a favorite destination where Roman authorities shipped off intractable men. Even in exile, Sozomen wrote, John did not cease to stir crowds and to prod them to intense Christian activity that was seen as counter-productive both by the state and by the Church. Gracefully accepting money from rich women, John was then donating it to the poor, purchasing captives only to send them back to their families, and was speaking daringly against indiscriminate power and oppression. In distant Armenia, John's fame grew rapidly, and his reputation traveled to "all the people of the neighboring states and the inhabitants of Antioch and of the other parts of Syria and of Cilicia."²⁴³ This is all we have from Sozomen on Armenia after Trdat's supposed conversion. All in all, we witness with Sozomen a minimal interest in Armenia and in its Christian affairs. About two centuries separated Trdat's reported conversion and Sozomen's writing, so presumably stories around local Christian cults had developed, yet the Roman writer still had little to say.

The Latin writer and translator from Greek, Rufinus of Aquileia, is another author, contemporary to Agathangelos in the fifth century, whom we need to introduce in

²⁴³ Sozomen. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, eds.. *Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, chapter XXVII.

order to evaluate the degree of Roman interest in the conversion of Armenia. A well-educated and well-traveled man in his own right, Rufinus devoted his life to studying, teaching, setting up and helping various monastic communities. Born in Italy, he lived at one point or another in Alexandria, Jerusalem, Rome, Pinetum, and Sicily. In scholarship, he distinguished himself primarily with some key translations from Greek into Latin. One of them is Origen's famous *On First Principles*, and the other is Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. Since we do not have Origen's original, it is impossible to verify Rufinus' translation, but we can easily see his modifications on Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. In effect, Rufinus expanded Eusebius' work to include the reign of Theodosius I, thus he went to 395. In terms of conversion, Rufinus recounted at some length the early Christianization of the Indians²⁴⁴ and of the Iberians.²⁴⁵ He imagined no direct involvement of Constantine in either of these conversions. And, he had nothing to say on Armenia at all. He had skipped even the brief remarks in the original.

Our next Roman retrospection of Armenia's conversion comes from the early sixth-century antiquarian historian Theodoros Anagnostes. In a work that synthesized the fifth-century ecclesiastical writers, Theodoros inserted only a single line on Armenia and its conversion.²⁴⁶ He simply noted the fact that Armenia had converted under Trdat, "the ruler of those people" at the time.²⁴⁷ A reader on the staff of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Theodoros had some intellectual interests, but was not drawn to serious research and did not bother to add much new in his historical compilation. On Armenia,

²⁴⁴ For Rufinus and Byzantine "India," see Chapter 5.

²⁴⁵ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Liber Primus. *Patrologia Latina*. Volume 21. For India, pp. 478-480. For Iberia, pp. 480-482.

²⁴⁶ Theodoros Anagnostes. *Epitome historiae tripartitae*. Ed. G.C. Hansen, *Theodoros Anagnostes. Kirchengeschichte* 2nd edn. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995.

²⁴⁷ Theodoros Anagnostes. *Epitome historiae tripartitae*. Book 1.34: Ἀρμένιοι ἐν τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ χριστιανίζουσιν, ἀρχὴν λαβόντες Τιριδάτου τοῦ ἡγουμένου τοῦ ἔθνους τὴν σωτηρίαν.

he simply reflected the general lack of interest that other imperial insiders before had already displayed.

To see the first Byzantine association of Trdat and Constantine in the context of conversion, we need to leap forward to the early ninth century. But even then, the reference to Armenia is brief and marginal. The exact nature of Constantine's role is nebulous, and perhaps purposefully so. Thus, we find Constantine and Trdat together in Theophanes' important *Chronographia* that charted out major events in Byzantine history from the late third century to the early ninth.

A devout Christian, who separated from his wife to dedicate his life to ascetic practices and monastic communities, Theophanes highlighted the importance of Christianity in Byzantium and organized his chronicle around Christian issues. He glorified the emperor Constantine to the point of linking him up to the great heroes of Homer at the Trojan war and conveniently repeated the traditional story that told how Constantine deliberated on building his new city "bearing his own name on the plain before Troy above the tomb of Ajax..."²⁴⁸ But, the Christian God was ultimately more powerful than the entire Homeric pantheon, so He intervened, and Constantinople was built on the Bosphorus. It was in such a sequence of indulgent praises that Theophanes inserted his single line on Armenia's conversion. "Also, the Armenians were fully converted under him, receiving their salvation through Trdat their emperor (βασιλεύς)²⁴⁹ and Gregory their bishop."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Theophanes Confessor. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor. Volume 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963. p. 23: ὁ εὐσεβῆς Κωνσταντῖνος πόλιν εἰς ἴδιον ὄνομα κτίσαι βουλευθεῖς ἐν τῷ πρὸ τοῦ Ἰλίου πεδίῳ ὑπὲρ τὸν Αἴαντος τάφον...

²⁴⁹ I deliberately keep the word "emperor" here to indicate that the title "βασιλεύς" was not always guarded by Byzantine writers as modern scholarship repeatedly insists. The word could mean "king" or "emperor," and we should be careful to keep consistency in translation. As I have indicated in my

Most likely, Theophanes meant that the Armenians had converted during the rule of Constantine, but it is also possible that the writer wanted to bestow some direct agency upon his favorite emperor. Yet, Theophanes did not elaborate on Trdat's story and kept away from inventing additional encomiums. The role of Constantine in the conversion of Armenia amounted to a mere example that the Armenians had chosen to follow.

The later ninth-century chronicle of George the Monk practically repeated Theophanes' version.²⁵¹ Placing the conversion of the Armenians next to a long oration on the emperor's mother Helena and her archaeological adventures in Jerusalem where she finally discovered the Holy Cross and built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, George wrote: "Under the blessed one, both the innermost Indians and the Iberians went forth to holy baptism, and finally the Armenians with their emperor (βασιλεύς)²⁵² believed through the work of the much-tried martyr and great archbishop of theirs, Gregory."²⁵³ But, such remarks hardly amount to major acknowledgments of Armenia's unique status among Christian states that modern scholarship has so readily carved out from Byzantine history. And, we can see that according to George, the primary emphasis falls on Gregory, his martyrdom, and later episcopacy.

Introduction, modern definitions of "empire" are unclear, which has led to confusing and inconsistent interpretations of "imperial" behavior in ancient as well as modern societies.

²⁵⁰ Theophanes Confessor. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor. Volume 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 24: ὁμοίως καὶ Ἀρμένιοι τελείως ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσαν, διὰ Τηριδάτου βασιλέως αὐτῶν καὶ Γρηγορίου ἐπισκόπου αὐτῶν τὴν σωτηρίαν δεξάμενοι.

²⁵¹ Georgius Monachus. *Chronicon*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Georgii monachi chronicon*, 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1904 (repr. 1978). Volume 2. p. 502.

²⁵² See my footnote in the Theophanes' passage.

²⁵³ Georgius Monachus. *Chronicon*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Georgii monachi chronicon*, 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1904 (repr. 1978). Volume 2. p. 502: ἐπὶ τούτου γὰρ τοῦ μακαρίου καὶ οἱ ἐνδότεροι Ἴνδοι καὶ Ἰβηρες προσῆλθον τῷ ἀγίῳ βαπτίσματι, καὶ οἱ Ἀρμένιοι τελείως ἐπίστευσαν μετὰ καὶ τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτῶν Τηριδάτου διὰ τοῦ πολυάθλου μάρτυρος καὶ μεγάλου Γρηγορίου ἀρχιεπισκόπου αὐτῶν.

We do not need to continue browsing through later Byzantine history and literature to establish the general observation that even the historical and temporal distance from the original event did not remove the marginality of Trdat's conversion in the cultural imagination of the Byzantine writers. While Agathangelos went at length to produce what was in essence a hagiography on Gregory and Trdat in Armenia, the Byzantine authors remained largely uninterested in the affairs across the frontier. And, their narratives insinuated at best that Trdat had converted in imitation of Constantine just as the Goths, the Celts, or "the innermost Indians" had supposedly done. But, even this was a passing remark that could hardly be read as reflecting a surreptitious technique on the part of Constantine and his staff to control the foreign Armenian state by planting Christianity there.

In fact, Sozomen's comments rejected precisely that as he drew careful distinctions between "the domestic" and "the foreign" conversion. Specifically, Sozomen insisted that the spread of Christianity across the frontier was a process of indirect, voluntary social, cultural, and even political imitation of the empire by the barbarian peoples. It was a deliberate attempt of the foreign rulers and elites to build a better "πολιτεία" (political organization). Such an indirect role of the Byzantine emperor in the process of the foreign royal conversion should invite us today to think harder about the operations of cultural hegemony in antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as to reconsider our crude definitions of "empire" and "imperialism," particularly in the context of religion.

Modern Presentations and Appropriations

Today, we find Armenia located in the Southern Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. To the north, this new nation-state borders with Georgia, and to the south is Iran. Azerbaijan is to the east, and Turkey is to the west. In the recent post-Soviet imagination of Armenian nationalists, the cultural relationship between the ancient Armenian kingdom and the modern nation-state is held to be inherent. In this context, historical geography has become a battlefield for modern territorial claims and incendiary political agendas both on the part of the Armenians and on the part of their neighbors. Thus, by conflating historical change and by arbitrarily fixing borders within historical geography, modern Armenian nationalists have turned “the fourth-century conversion of king Trdat” into a monumental and symbolic event that somehow foreshadowed Armenia’s entire future. For one recent example among many, “The conversion reinforced the political and cultural affinity of Armenia with the Roman Empire and determined the pro-western orientation of the country throughout its history.”²⁵⁴

But, even such serious and non-programmatic scholars as Robert W. Thomson have been trapped by the prevalent in Byzantine scholarship association of the Armenian king’s conversion to Christianity with a great transformation that supposedly brought about foreordained long-term repercussions. And, one can easily detect how the threads of Thomson’s interpretation lead to a modern national framework retroactively inserted into the past. “The conversion of Armenia to Christianity in the early fourth century A.D.,” Thomson writes, “not only wrought a momentous change within Armenia itself but was also significant for the general history and culture of the Near East. Christian

²⁵⁴ Tiran Nersoyan. *Armenian Church Historical Studies: Matters of Doctrine and Administration*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 1996. p. 63.

Armenia produced an original art and architecture as well as a rich native literature. The Armenian church played a major role in the development of Eastern (non-Greek) Christianity.”²⁵⁵ We should note here Thomson’s caveat, too, which betrays signs of his association of “Eastern Christianity” (possibly even of “Byzantium”) with “Greekness.” Thus, Thomson wants to make sure that “Armenia” and its Christianity are set apart as authentic and not “Greek.”

Such sweeping interpretations are so entrenched within the modern scholarly literature on the royal Christian conversion (and not only in Armenia) that Thomson is not puzzled even by his own subsequent caveat, “But despite the importance of this fundamental change in Armenian life and thought, there is no contemporary historical record of the conversion to Christianity.”²⁵⁶ Perhaps, the conversion in the eyes of its contemporaries was not so momentous after all, and ancient Armenia had its separate historical dynamics, different from modern concerns and cultural retrospections. Yet, Thomson insists:

In the pre-Christian period, Armenian culture had close parallels with that of other Near Eastern states, now perished, which flourished after Alexander destroyed the Old Persian empire and before the Near East was divided between the Romans and the Sasanians. But Armenia was to survive when others disappeared as *national states* [italics are mine]; and it is in large measure to the centripetal force of the Armenian church as a *national institution* [italics are mine] that Armenia’s longevity is to be ascribed.²⁵⁷

Nina Garsoïan, who is perhaps the most reputable and able scholar on ancient and medieval Armenia, has succumbed to the heritage of this deeply established interpretative

²⁵⁵ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. *Foreword*, p. Uii.

²⁵⁶ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. *Foreword*, p. Uii.

²⁵⁷ Agathangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Tr. and commentary R.W. Thomson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976. *Foreword*, p. ix.

topos and has reiterated it as commonsensical, too. Offering no supporting evidence nor clarification, she declares the result of the Armenian conversion:

The conversion of Armenia to Christianity was probably the most crucial step in its history. It turned Armenia sharply away from its Iranian past and stamped it for centuries with an intrinsic character as clear to the native population as to those outside its borders, who identified Armenia almost at once as the first state to adopt Christianity.²⁵⁸

A we have seen, the status of Armenia as “the first state to adopt Christianity” is seriously disputed. Nina Garsoïan herself points out on the following page of the same essay that she accepts 314 as the formal conversion date, thus dismissing other scholarly opinions that range from 284 to 301. For Garsoïan, the Roman state and its presumed conversion in 312 was the first to adopt Christianity after all.²⁵⁹ Yet, her introductory paragraph to a section entitled “The Christianization of Armenia” reveals the kind of formulaic, almost instinctive replication of the interpretative *topos* on the royal conversion that had seized the scholarly literature. Moreover, in a separate essay, Garsoïan writes, “For, if the Satrapies may be considered as sovereign Armenian states, is

²⁵⁸ Nina Garsoïan. “The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12—[180?]-428).” In *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, Volume I: *The Dynastic Periods from Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*. Richard G. Hovannisian, ed. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997. pp. 63-94. p. 81. Note also the very title of the book and the inner connectivity that it implies between “the ancient” and “the modern” state. Specifically in Garsoïan’s quotation, the reference to “Iran” is also technically problematic as it may be taken to link Sassanid Persia implicitly to modern Iran. At least in theory, modern Armenian scholars in Armenia could be excused for reproducing “the national” interpretation of the royal conversion, for the contemporary political dynamics, including those in the Armenian academy with posited “unwritten” rules for publication, may be such as to oblige this kind of scholarship. Many scholars, who have worked under the direct pressure of political regimes, would recognize the situation and could empathize. But, in this particular case, outside political coercion could not serve as a justification. For, the book was written and produced in the United States under the auspices of Richard Hovannisian, a full professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the article is by Nina Garsoïan, a full professor at Columbia University.

²⁵⁹ Nina Garsoïan. “The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12—[180?]-428).” In *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, Volume I: *The Dynastic Periods from Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*. Richard G. Hovannisian, ed. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997. pp. 63-94. p. 82. For seminal articles that try to establish the complex chronological matters in early Armenia, see N.H. Baynes. “Rome and Armenia in the Fourth Century.” *English Historical Review*, XXV (1910), reprinted in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*. London, 1955. P. Peeters. “Le début de la persécution de Sapor d’après Fauste de Byzance.” *Revue des études arméniennes*, I (1920), reprinted in *Recherches d’histoire et de philologie orientale*, 2 vols.. Brussels, 1951. P. Ananian. “La data e le circostanze della consecrazione di S. Gregorio Illuminatore.” *Le Muséon*, LXXXIV, 1961.

it altogether impossible that it is to their early conversion, attested by Eusebius, and not to that of the northern kingdom that the traditional description of ‘Armenia’ as the first Christian state refer?”²⁶⁰ Again, Garsoïan is tempted by the possibility of Armenia being “the first.” She promises to offer a separate study on “the relationship between the Satrapies and the Christianization of Armenia,” which I have not been able to find.²⁶¹

We need not continue here with more of these examples, though they could be easily multiplied. In fact, practically *all* scholars on the Armenian conversion (as well as on other regions that have come to be appropriated by and affiliated to modern nation-states) have at least implicitly incorporated a national interpretative framework. The local royal acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century is seen as a great step towards the emergence of a common, ethnic identity (in more extreme cases even of an explicit “national” identity).²⁶²

In the particular case of Armenia, as I have argued above, scholars have disregarded the historical participants’ actual lack of concern with the royal conversion and have anachronistically insisted on its immediate importance. The operative assumption in scholarship has been that the explicit merging of Christianity (“religion”)

²⁶⁰ Nina Garsoïan. “Armenia in the Fourth Century.” *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 341-352. p. 346.

²⁶¹ Nina Garsoïan. “Armenia in the Fourth Century.” *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985. pp. 341-352. p. 346. ff. 16.

²⁶² Modern scholarly literature on “ethnicity” and “nationalism” is vast. To overview it in a footnote is impossible. The basic debate revolves around establishing and tracing the historical conditions and factors that coalesce to bring about a common group awareness that transcends “the family” or the imposed legalistic restrictions and constitutional grounds of “a state.” Ideas such as imaginary social ties and concepts of belonging without blood relationship are important. In pre-modern studies, polarities of the debate stretch from perceived national and ethnic awareness of the modern kind on the one hand (usually advocated by regional historians) and the complete lack of such binding categories on the other. For a book that presents seminal authors and key writings on the issue, see Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. For a recent important study on ethnicity in the medieval Balkans, see John V.A. Fine, Jr., *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans: A Study of Identity in Pre-Nationalist Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006. For terminology and key issues, see specifically pp. 1-26.

and politics (“secular power”) in the person of the local king somehow managed to plant and, centuries after the fact, to bring to fruition authentic “Armenia.” As we will see in subsequent chapters, this logic has been applied non-discriminately elsewhere, too.

Conclusions

Currently, the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All the Armenians deems himself “the worldwide spiritual leader of the Nation, for Armenians both in Armenia and in the Dispersion [Diaspora].”²⁶³ Glamorous titles are typical in the hierarchies both of the Eastern churches that link themselves to ancient Orthodoxy and Catholicism with its Western trajectory, but the oxymoronic tinge in the Armenian titlature is reflective of an ecclesiology molded to fit a particularly modern “Eastern Christian” narrative. In this chapter, we have examined the central points in this narrative found convincing by the leadership of the One Holy Universal Apostolic Orthodox Armenian Church, presumably by all those 9 million people that the current patriarch Karekin II purports to shepherd, and by many modern scholars. Thus, we have highlighted the interpretative issues surrounding the cultural symbolism, which has been construed around the early date of Trdat’s conversion, and have exposed the deeply set analytical veils that have continually blinded even careful and serious modern scholars. We have also critically re-evaluated the relevant ancient narratives and have offered drastically different interpretations.

We have argued that neither the Romans nor even the contemporary Armenians found Trdat’s conversion (if it occurred) worthy of any note. Instead, we have suggested that only with the invention of the Armenian script in the fifth century, about two hundred years after the actual conversion event, local enthusiasm for independent cultural

²⁶³ See the official website of the Armenian Church at <http://66.208.37.78/index.jsp?sid=1&id=14&pid=3>

traditions sparked a series of local epics and stories of saintly feats. It was only in that particular context of local tradition-building that the hagiographical account of Trdat's conversion was written and found its receptive audience that disseminated it and translated it in other languages, too. But, from a Byzantine perspective, this royal conversion continued to attract only marginal attention. Up to the ninth century, Byzantine authors merely glossed over Trdat and his Christianity in Armenia usually inserting the anecdote as a brief supporting evidence for something that they considered much more important.

Accustomed to see imperialism everywhere, modern Roman and Byzantine scholars have fancifully depicted Trdat's conversion as a product of Constantine's strategic planning for a campaign against Persia. Thus, supposedly wielding conversion as a diplomatic weapon, Constantine deliberately proselytized and indiscriminately endorsed Christianity across the frontier. To explore this issue better, we have carefully examined the political and cultural issues on the frontier. And, we have shown that instead of seeking war, Rome and Persia usually tried to establish diplomatic compromises in order to secure the important traffic passing through the roads of Armenia. Evaluated strictly from the perspective of Constantine, local preoccupations with the internal Roman affairs, Constantine's personal political insecurity, uncertain sense of his own Christianity, and an apparent lack of understanding of dogma into the 320s, all mitigate against scholars' interpretations of Trdat's conversion as ultimately a military and political technique on the part of Constantine. It is important to remember that Christianity does not automatically enhance imperialism, and scholars should be more careful both in terms of definitions and assumptions.

Often spilled onto the pages of historical interpretation, personal scholarly secularism, too, uncritically colors cultures and societies that had their own separate analytical categories and ways of framing and understanding the world. In antiquity and in the Middle Ages, Christianity did not miraculously inject a social and cultural symbiosis that a political regime then readily embraced. Ancient religion was deeply intertwined in a complex cultural and social panoply that require extremely careful building of historical context if we are to adequately peel away “Christianity” and “political power” as analytical categories from the historical reality under evaluation. Even for Karl Marx, the devout doctor of universal historical laws, religion had at least two faces: it was “the opium of the people” and “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world.”²⁶⁴ Therefore, religion could, according to Marx, oppress and decompress depending on contingencies.

In the case of Trdat and his conversion, we have seen that the conversion to Christianity was a minor local affair that no one seemed to have immediately noticed. Only from later stories, with all the necessary caveats, we can extract that the royal elite converted by way of a cultural, social, and political imitation of the Byzantine empire. After a long process of local development and aided by the invention of a local script, local Christians began to construct authentic narratives.

Eventually, the general path of the Armenian Church veered away from the imperial center. Even a cursory outline of early ecumenical decisions and canon law codifications makes this clear. For, at first, the sixth canon of the Council of Nicaea placed the Armenian Church under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Caesarea in

²⁶⁴ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*. pp. 53-65. p. 54.

Cappadocia. But, already by 373, canonical ties with Caesarea were severed. By 451, the Armenian Church openly stood against the Council of Chalcedon.²⁶⁵ Then came the subsequent three ecumenical councils: Constantinople II in 553, Constantinople III in 681, and Nicaea II in 787.²⁶⁶ The Armenian Church kept away and did not make any formal pronouncements on any of them. Beyond the Roman border in the East, Trdat had converted without the direct interference of Constantine and his Byzantine staff. And, the later Church of Armenia continued to develop apart and away from the imperial and patriarchal center of Constantinople, setting up, so to speak, its own ecclesiastical frontier.

²⁶⁵ *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*. Ed. Edward Schwartz. Volume 1. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Co., 1933. See especially pp. 266-495.

²⁶⁶ *Sacrorum conciliorum et amplissima collectio*. Eds. Louis Petit and Jean Baptise Martin, eds.. Paris, 1905. Volume I.



Map 3: Georgia in the late fourth century

Chapter 4

Byzantium and the Conversion of Georgia

As in the neighboring kingdom of Armenia in the fourth century, multiple regions with their complex internal political and social dynamics blotted the territory that modern scholars have often casually called “medieval Georgia.” Technically, the referent “Georgia” does not exist even in the modern language, and it is the word “Sak’art’velo” that the native citizens actually employ.²⁶⁷ A citizen of “the Republic of Georgia,” the referent that Westerners have ascribed to it, today is called by the natives a “k’art’veli,” and “K’art’uli” refers to the Georgian language. “Sak’art’velo” achieved common usage in the eleventh century when Bagrad III (978-1014) first succeeded in uniting the core region of K’art’li with Tao/Tayk, and with the western region of Ap’xazet’i.²⁶⁸ In this chapter, I will keep the referent “Georgia” in order to engage with modern scholarship, but I will be precise with respect to the specific territories and changing cultural meanings that this geographical and political identification included.

Prior to the eleventh century, a unified Georgia (i.e., Sak’art’velo) did not exist. And even in the eleventh century during the height of the medieval kingdom, the nature

²⁶⁷ The European designation “Georgia” and the Russian “Gruziya” are traceable to Persian (*Gorj*) and Arabic (*Kurj*) roots. See Elguja Khintibidze. *Georgian-Byzantine Literary Contacts*. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1996. p. vi. For a brief overview of the etymology of the referent “Georgia,” including ancient explanations on the origins of the native inhabitants, see David Marshall Lang. *The Georgians*. London, 1966. pp. 17-18.

²⁶⁸ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. pp. 2-3.

and extent of the political and social unity were weak. In contrast to many modern states, the eleventh-century Georgian polity lacked even the most basic means and institutions to instill and establish linguistic, religious, or broad social coherence and standardization that could refashion local customs and lifestyles into a widely accepted and shared “Georgian” ethnicity. Especially when evaluating the consequences of conversion among the political elites in the territory of medieval Georgia, we should pay attention to the multiple local contexts, ancient and medieval concerns so as to avoid retroactive interpretations of history, which are prevalent among modern Georgian nationalists.

All extant ancient and early medieval “Georgian” writers actually discuss the history strictly of the core region of K’art’li (Iberia in classical Greek sources) and its rulers.²⁶⁹ Classical Greek and Roman writers engaged with Colchis (Egrisi in Georgian) because Greco-Roman political and economic interests concentrated along the coast.²⁷⁰ In other words, we know about the history of early Colchis/Egrisi largely due to classical (foreign) evidence while K’art’li, which would later emerge as the core of Sak’art’velo, is depicted in local sources. Both local and foreign authors often inserted many anachronisms into a historical past that they exploited for their own contemporary reasons. Among the native writers, for example, unity and glorified political power were the two literary tropes that they loved to repeat and to imagine being present in their own remote past.²⁷¹ Therefore, if we are to understand the royal conversion to Christianity in

²⁶⁹ For an overview on major events and historical problems in Caucasian history, see Nina Garsoïan and Bernadette Martin-Hisard. “Unité et Diversité de la Caucasic Médiévale (IVe-XIe S.) [*Unity and Diversity in the Medieval Caucasus (IV-XI centuries)*].” *SSCISSM= Il Caucaso: Cerniera fra Culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia* (43a). 1996. pp. 275-347.

²⁷⁰ For an overview of the historical geography of Georgia, see Jondo Gvasalia. *Историческая география Восточной Грузии [Historical Geography of Eastern Georgia]*. Tbilisi, 1991.

²⁷¹ For a very helpful collection of sources on Georgia, see K. Gan. *Izvestiia drevnikh grecheskikh i rimskikh pisatelei o Kavkaze [Collection of Ancient Greek and Roman Writers on the Caucasus]*. *Sbornik Materialov dlia opisaniia mestnostei i plemen Kavkaza*. Volume 4, 1884. pp. 1-248.

the fourth century, we need to navigate properly between the literary techniques, interests, and agendas of the relevant ancient and medieval authors. To keep the framework of the previous chapter and to put the narratives of local Christianity in proper historical context, we will begin here with an overview of Georgia's political geography and social context, emphasizing those factors most relevant to the royal conversion in the fourth century.

Just as in Armenia, classical Greek and Roman authors linked themselves to the distant lands of Georgia at first by postulating multiple mythological threads. Thus, Colchis in the west (later Byzantine authors would call this region Lazica) is known to us from the famous myths of the Argonauts and of Medea, the daughter of the Colchian King Aetes. Eastern Georgia (part of K'art'li) was called Iberia in Greek sources, and Strabo tried to explain the resemblance in geographical nomenclature between Spanish and Black Sea Iberia by presuming that the Spanish Iberians had migrated to the East. Even later Christian authors like Gelasius of Caesarea, Rufinus, and Socrates continued to refer to eastern Georgia as Iberia Pontus Euxini, or Black Sea Iberia. Plutarch thought that "the greatest of these peoples [in the Caucasus] are the Albanians and the Iberians, of whom the Iberians extend to the Moschian mountains and the Euxine Sea (modern Black Sea) while the Albanians lay eastward as far as the Caspian Sea."²⁷²

The trade route system, which stretched from the Roman empire to the west into the Indian subcontinent to the east, played an important role in the region of Georgia. Such an expansive system of roads carried diverse groups of peoples that intersected here. At some point, up to seventy polyglot tribes did business with the Greek settlers

²⁷² "Life of Pompey," chapter xxxiv. Loeb Classical Library. Volume 5. Ed. Jeffrey Henderson.

and Roman soldiers at Dioscurias at the mouth of the Rioni.²⁷³ This was a busy port from where ships made regular sailings to Amisus and Sinope. In the first centuries A.D., Colchis was better developed since it was more closely integrated into the Greco-Roman trade system that spread round the shores of the Black Sea from the mouths of the Danube to the Caucasian Mountains. Iberia remained the rougher land over the mountains at the border between the Persians and the Romans. When Strabo knew it, Colchis already had a long tradition of urban life and foreign trading. Presumably, the days of its commercial history went back to the period when the cities of Greece were opening up the Euxine Sea business. As in Armenia, it is this context of commercial interaction and strategic importance of roads that connected the Roman empire to the near and far East that framed the local politics. Stability more than annexation is what the Roman elite wanted because it assured steady economic transactions and removed the risk of conflict with the Persians.

This geographical location of Georgia between the Roman and Persian empires has prompted many modern historians to assume constant tension for hegemony in the region between Rome/Byzantium and Persia.²⁷⁴ Generally, however, the Romans and the Persians had split the region and tried to maintain a status quo that was beneficial to both.²⁷⁵ Thus, the Romans exercised stronger influence in the western territories of Colchis (Lazika/Egrisi) along the Black Sea rim and in northeastern Anatolia than in K'art'li proper. Certainly, Greek inscriptions (even in Mc'xet'a, the K'art'velian royal

²⁷³ David Marshall Lang. *The Georgians*. London, 1966. p. 79.

²⁷⁴ For the important context in some detail, see Clive Foss. "The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity." *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 357 (Oct., 1975), pp. 721-747.

²⁷⁵ For the opposite view that holds that the struggle between the Romans and the Persians over Caucasia was always present, see Cyril Toumanoff. "Christian Caucasia between Byzantium and Iran: New Light from Old Sources." *Traditio* (10). 1954. pp. 109-189. p. 113: "The history of the Christian Caucasian States between the decline of the Ancient world and the rise of Islam is marked by one permanent factor—the ceaseless struggle of two world-claiming empires, Roman and Iranian."

city), Roman coins, and other artifacts testify to substantial Roman contacts and trade with Kartli, but the Kartvelian historical sources themselves ignore the Roman presence there. They do not relate even such dramatic events as Pompey's invasion of Caucasia, or even P'arsman III's triumphant visit to Rome in ca. A.D. 141-144.²⁷⁶ Even the important Georgian medieval chronicle *The Life of the Kings* names only two Roman emperors: Vespasian, in connection with the exodus of Jews to Caucasia and Constantine during the account of Mihran/Mirian's conversion to Christianity. This contrasts starkly with the numerous Persian kings named throughout the text. Hagiography further confirms this, for both the fifth-century *Martyrdom of Shushaniki* and the sixth-century *Martyrdom of Evstat'i* are ignorant of the Roman empire and in both "the king" invariably refers to the Persian King of Kings (the *shah*).²⁷⁷

It was only with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641) and his appearance in Kartli en route to Persia that native historical and hagiographical works began to integrate detailed information about the Romans/Byzantines. Heraclius' eastern campaigns were considered so important that three medieval Georgian historians engaged with them. But even as the Byzantines emerged on the historiographical horizon of the medieval Georgians, the Byzantine authors themselves connected Kartli to the Persians. The ninth-century Byzantine historian Theophanes wrote that Heraclius imprisoned a

²⁷⁶ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. p. 79. On P'arsman's audience with the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius, see Dio Cassius. Volume VIII. Loeb Classical Library. Ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Book LXIX.15.3. pp. 470-1. See also David Braund. *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 BC-AD 562*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. pp. 232-234.

²⁷⁷ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. pp. 79-80.

certain Barsamouses (P'arsman?) who was "the commander of the Persians' Iberian subjects."²⁷⁸

The earliest Georgian list of Roman emperors appears in the tenth century. This is the Shatberdi codex. It is found in a translation in a section of Hippolytus' *Chronicle* that was brought down to the second half of the tenth century. It omits a couple of brief reigns, even for contemporary emperors, for it ends with Theophilus, Michael, Basil, Leo, Romanos, Constantine, Romanos, and Nicephorus. In those instances when a Roman emperor is named, they are usually not references contemporaneous with the accounts at hand, but rather vague recollections.²⁷⁹ Thus, by the time of the composition of three ca. 800 Georgian histories, the local historians themselves used Persian and Near Eastern traditions instead of the Roman/Byzantine one so as to describe the K'art'velian past.

All in all, both the Persian Sasanians and the Caucasians placed late antique and early medieval K'art'li in the Persian cultural and social sphere. As it appears from local sources, even the Christianization of the K'art'velian kings, and the very collapse of the Sasanid Empire, did not engender a sudden and conscious denial by the K'art'velians of their Persian heritage. No Old Georgian translations of Eusebius or of the later seminal ecclesiastical historians Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen are known to have existed. As we will see in subsequent sections of this chapter, modern scholars of Christianity in Georgia tend to draw hasty conclusions on the effects of the royal conversion due to a lack of proper cultural contextualization of the region. When studied carefully, the

²⁷⁸ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. pp. 23-9. For Heraclius' campaigns in Caucasia, see specifically pp. 18-19. Sebeos. *The Armenian History*. Tr. R.W. Thomson. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999. Chapters 24-30, pp. 91-128. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*. Ed. G. Moravcsik. Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1967. pp. 206-7. Nicephorus. *Short History*. Tr. Cyril Mango. 1990. pp. 55-67.

²⁷⁹ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. p. 155. See also footnote 52.

influence of Persian oral and written historical traditions on K'art'li was overwhelming. The author of the important *The Life of the Kings*, who was a Christian (though not necessarily a cleric), wrote considerably later than the events he described, but believed it proper to situate early K'art'li in a Persian framework. Thus, as late as the ninth century when *The Life of the Kings* was written, the K'art'velians continued to associate themselves with the Persians.²⁸⁰

The Persians themselves regarded K'art'li as a part (even if peripheral) of their empire. At the end of the third century (as in inscription data), the Persians claimed territories at least to the littoral of the Black Sea. And although the Persians did not regard the K'art'velians as part of their own community, nevertheless the land of K'art'li was believed to belong to the *shah*.²⁸¹ The Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. also noted the connection of the ancient people in K'art'li with the Achaemenid world. Drawing upon the evidence of Hecataeus (early fifth century B.C.), Herodotus wrote that the nineteenth satrapy of the Persian king Darius consisted of the Moschoi, the Tibareni, the Makroes, the Mossynoikoi, and the Mares.²⁸² Writing in the sixth century A.D., the Byzantine historian Procopius repeated that the Meschians (in Herodotus, Moschoi) were in K'art'li “from ancient times.”²⁸³ We should note that those nominally different groups interacted in complex ways; on the one hand, they shared similar lifestyles, and on the other, they often went to battle against one another.²⁸⁴ For us the important point here is the consistent positioning of central Caucasia, including the lands

²⁸⁰ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. p. 80.

²⁸¹ Stephen Harold Rapp, Jr. *Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past*. Volume 1. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997. p. 172.

²⁸² Herodotus. Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. Paris, 1970. Book III.94, p. 123.

²⁸³ Procopius. Ed. J. Haury. Leipzig, 1962. *Wars*, VIII.2.24, pp. 70-1.

²⁸⁴ Herodotus. Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. Paris, 1970. Book VII. 78, pp. 386-7 and Book VII.78, pp. 388-9.

inhabited by the peoples in the region of K'art'li, within the Persian sphere from the fifth century B.C. onwards.²⁸⁵

Along with those peoples whose history is largely lost to us now, Jews came in considerable numbers to settle in K'art'li from the end of the first century mostly in Urbnisi and in the second century mostly in Mc'xet'a.²⁸⁶ Some of those migrations resulted perhaps from the First and the Second Jewish Wars. By the second century, some archaeologists maintain, Christianity had a fair number of followers in Mc'xet'a, and, presumably, Christians lived not only in Mc'xet'a and Urbnisi, but elsewhere in Georgia as well.²⁸⁷ As in Armenia, Christianity in Georgia travelled at first precisely through those Jewish communities. In late antique Georgia, the number of archaeological finds that could (though not *necessarily*) be connected to Christianity reached a height in the fourth century, which is to be expected given the royal acceptance and support of Christianity precisely at that time.²⁸⁸

In pre-Christian K'art'li, the prevalent religious practice was Persian Mazdaism, which included sacrifices by animal burning. In Colchis, the gods and goddesses of the

²⁸⁵ For later developments, see Clive Foss. "The Persians in the Roman Near East (602-630 A.D.)." *JRAS*, Series 3, 13, 2 (2003), pp. 149-170.

²⁸⁶ Tamila Mgaloblishvili and Iulon Gagoshidze. "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia." pp. 39-58. In Tamila Mgaloblishvili, ed. *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*. Iberica Caucasia, Volume One. Curzon, Caucasus World. Curzon Press, 1998. p. 56.

²⁸⁷ Tamila Mgaloblishvili and Iulon Gagoshidze maintain that this is reflected in the archaeological record. "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia." pp. 39-58. p. 57: "Thus, for instance, in Mtskheta and also among the ruins of a first-century palace on Dedoplis Gora Hill (Kareli District) bronze spade-like ritual objects, the so-called *batilli* were unearthed, and the area where these *batilli* were spread coincides with the area where Jews settled (Palestine, Syria, Carthage, Rome...). Most probably, these Jews used *batilli* as objects in performing their religious rituals. On the strength of the fact that representations of these objects occur on Jewish tombstones in Northern Africa, it may be inferred that *batilli* must have somehow been used in funerary rites. The discovery of one such example in Mtskheta is yet further evidence attesting the presence of Jews there as early back as in the first century. We also believe that at least two Jewish families must have served and lived in the above-mentioned first-century palace on Dedoplis Gora where the two *batilli* were discovered." It is easy to see that such evidence is highly problematic, but the assumption that Jews and Christians did not segregated in ghettos in this period seems likely.

²⁸⁸ Tamila Mgaloblishvili and Iulon Gagoshidze. "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia." pp. 57-58.

Greek pantheon were revered by members of the ruling classes who were in touch with the Hellenic cultural sphere of the Black Sea. Strabo described a temple of the sun goddess Leucothea and an oracle of Phrixus in the land of the Moskhoi—the Georgian province of Samtskhe; this temple was formerly rich but was later desecrated and robbed of its treasures.²⁸⁹ A temple of Apollo existed at Phasis (Poti) at the mouth of the Rioni as early as the fifth century B.C.. Apart from Greco-Roman practices, Strabo attested the practice of shamanic-like trances in Georgia.²⁹⁰ Thus, a variety of religious practices and communities operated in the region. As happened elsewhere, Christianity assimilated many of those local practices, but this was a very slow process, and certain “pagan” habits continue to exist even to this day. Thus, such scholarly statements that “it would be hard to overestimate the importance of Georgia’s conversion to Christianity” need many qualifications.²⁹¹ By introducing the important political, social, and geographical factors that framed ancient and early medieval Georgia, we have already provided some of these qualifications. We have shown the complexity of that frontier region, and, by implication, we have questioned the immediate or even long-term repercussions of the Christian royal conversion that modern scholars have ascribed to it. In this next section, we will turn specifically to the major narratives that have shaped the historical record of the region to examine how the royal conversion of Georgia was imagined and what its effect was beyond the narrow circle of the local elites.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ *Geographica*. Book II, Chapter 2. Ed. A. Meineke, *Strabonis geographica*, 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1877 (repr. 1969).

²⁹⁰ *Geographica*. Book XII, Chapter 3. Ed. A. Meineke, *Strabonis geographica*, 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1877 (repr. 1969).

²⁹¹ David Marshall Lang. *The Georgians*. London, 1966. p. 91.

²⁹² For a recent study that includes the conversion of Georgia, see Andrea Sterk. “Representing ‘Mission from Below: Historians as Interpreters and Agents of Christianization.’” *Church History* 79.2 (June, 2010). Sterk focuses on the agency of women in Christian conversions and missionary activities. For a study that focuses on children, see Cornelia B. Horn. “The Lives and Literary Roles of Children in Advancing

Georgia in the Christian Narrative: Changing Cultural Portraits

The most detailed account of the social and cultural genesis of the Caucasus is found in the eleventh-century Georgian chronicle *Life of Kings*. The author Leonti Mroveli, possibly a clergyman, traced all the native peoples to a common ancestor who was in turn connected to the biblical Noah:

First let us recall that for the Armenians and Georgians, Ransians and Movkanians, Hers and Leks, Megrelians and Caucasians, there was a single father named T'argamos. This T'argamos was the son of T'arši, grandson of Iap'et', son of Noah. Now this T'argamos was a giant. After the division of tongues—when they built the tower at Babylon, and the tongues were divided there and they were scattered from there over the whole world—this T'argamos set out with his family, and he settled between the two inaccessible mountains, Ararat and Masis.²⁹³

The plot, into which Leonti inserted his local protagonists, interwove biblical motifs and Greek mythological allusions:

His family was large and innumerable because from his many wives he had sons and daughters, and children and grandchildren of his sons and of his daughters. For he lived for 600 years. And the land of Ararat and Masis was no longer sufficient. Now the land which fell to him by lot—this is the border of his land: to the east, the sea of Gurgun; to the west, the Pontus sea; to the south, the sea of Oret'i; and to the north, the Caucasus mountain. Among his sons eight men became renowned, powerful and famous giants. Their names were these: the first was called Haos, the second K'art'los, the third Bardos, the fourth Movakan, the fifth Lek, the sixth Heros, the seventh Kavkas, the eighth Egros. These eight were giants. But the biggest giant of them all was Haos; for there had never been such a one, neither before the flood nor after, in stature, power and courage.²⁹⁴

Conversion to Christianity: Hagiography from the Caucasus in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages." *Church History* 76:2, 2007. pp. 262-297.

²⁹³ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 2.

²⁹⁴ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. pp. 3-4.

Prosperity and longevity pushed T'argamos' family members to divide the land among themselves. Many of the Caucasian regions subsequently took their names allegedly from T'argamos' sons. K'art'los, the second eldest, received the lot that extended from Heret'i and the river Berduji to the east and to the Pontus sea in the west. According to Leonti, that territory was rather large:

From the south the mountain which runs to the west whose source passes towards the north and joins the Mtkuari, and the mountain which runs between Klarjet'i and Tao as far as the sea. From the north the boundary (was) Gado, a small mountain which goes down as a branch from the Caucasus and whose point reaches the end of Gado, which they now call Lixi. And all (the land) between their boundaries he gave to K'art'los.²⁹⁵

K'art'los settled in the mountains where he built "fortresses and a house."²⁹⁶ He named the mountains after himself, K'art'li.

Until the idol of Armazi was erected there, the mountain was called K'art'li. After that the whole of K'art'li was called K'art'li, from Xunan as far as the sea of Sper. After this the same K'art'los built the castle of Orbi, which is now called Samšwilde. He also built the castle of Mtueri, which is now called Xunan. He lived for many years and his family multiplied. Among his children five giants became noteworthy, whose names were: of the first Mc'xet'os, of the second Gardabos, of the third Kaxos, of the fourth Kuxos, of the fifth Gač'ios.²⁹⁷

According to Leonti, those were the seminal events in the early history of K'art'li.

The next major moment in the development of the region, as he saw it, was the coming of the Jews after king Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem. Upon their arrival in K'art'li, the Jews requested some territory from Mc'xet'a in return for tribute. They settled on

²⁹⁵ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 4.

²⁹⁶ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 9.

²⁹⁷ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. pp. 9-10.

“the Aragvi, at a spring which was called Zanavi. They held the land under tribute, and because of the tribute it is now called Xerk.”²⁹⁸

In those early times of local history, Leonti wrote that the language of the descendants of K’art’los had been Armenian. With the mixing of local peoples, however, the K’art’veilians abandoned the Armenian language and by a process of linguistic amalgamation created K’art’uli (i.e., Georgian). Yet, all peoples in K’art’li became so mixed that six languages were spoken there: “Armenian, Georgian, Xazar, Syrian, Hebrew, and Greek. All the kings of Georgia, (and) the men and women, knew these languages.”²⁹⁹

The narrative of Leonti sets up a common Caucasian ancestry and in the later sections of the chronicle, Leonti’s rhetoric was openly anti-Persian, connecting K’art’li to Byzantios, the legendary founder of the city of Byzantium (the ancient predecessor of Constantinople). In the eleventh century, Leonti glorified Georgia’s past when primordial giants and biblical heroes supposedly roamed the region. This was juxtaposed to the more recent times when Persians and “these wild heathen peoples which we call ‘real’ Turk and Kipchak” dwelled in the Caucasus.³⁰⁰ There was no civilization in the region before Christianity, “for in marriage and fornication they paid no attention to family relationship; they ate everything that was living; they ate corpses like wild beasts

²⁹⁸ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 21.

²⁹⁹ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 23.

³⁰⁰ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 23.

and animals; the description of their way of life is inexpressible.”³⁰¹ Leonti’s chronicle presents Christianity as a road leading up to ultimate deliverance.

Another source, which we have on early Georgia, comes to us from neighboring Armenia. In this legend, Artavazd (reigned 160-115 B.C.) is said to have perished while on a hunting party near Masis (Ararat) by falling with his horse from a high precipice. A different legend holds that Artavazd is still alive and chained in a cave of Masis, and two dogs, gnawing at his chains, try to set him free in order that he may bring the world to an end. The chains thin out around the season of Navasart (i.e., the ancient New Year festivities in August). Blacksmiths, therefore, used to strike a few blows with their hammers on their anvils in order to strengthen the chains that restrained Artavazd and save the world, a custom which continued into Christian times.³⁰²

The legend shares features with the Greek story of Prometheus Bound and also closely resembles the most popular Georgian cycle of folk tales about Amiran, the titan who challenged Jesus Christ to a rock hurling contest and was also chained up in a cave for temerity. The gnawing away of the chains by a dog and the striking of blacksmiths’ anvils as a precaution are paralleled elsewhere in the Caucasus.³⁰³

Broadly speaking, in those later medieval accounts, pagan Georgia is depicted as a cultural intersection; the narratives incorporated Greek and biblical motifs. Centuries after the royal conversion to Christianity and with the development of local alphabet and Christian schools, this Christian and Greek cultural influence should not surprise us. But

³⁰¹ Robert W. Thomson. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 23.

³⁰² Zabelle C. Boyajian. *Armenian Legends and Poems*, 2nd edition. London, 1958, pp. 65-66.

³⁰³ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds.. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 222.

even then, medieval authors did not spare details about “witches, sorcerers, heathen priests, finger-cutters, and poisoners.”³⁰⁴ The medieval *History of the Caucasian Albanians* by Movses Daskhurantsi gives a detailed account of the group of the finger-cutters.³⁰⁵ *The Life of Georgia* and *The Life of St. Nino* describes the official cults of ancient, “pagan” Georgia.³⁰⁶ According to the *Life of St. Nino*, the local gods were Armazi (to be identified with Ahura-Mazda of the Zoroastrian pantheon), Zaden, Gatsi and Gaim. Armazi is depicted as a man made of copper, clothed in golden armor and having shoulder pieces and eyes made from emeralds and beryl stones, and holding in his hand a sword which revolved in his grasp. Gatsi was made out of gold, Gaim out of silver. At the town of Urbnisi, people worshipped the sacred fire of the Zoroastrians, and also images of stone and wood; there was also a miracle-working tree.³⁰⁷

Tree worship is attested through the cult of the wood-goddess Dali. Byzantine accounts of the Emperor Justinian’s Lazic wars speak of tree worship as an official cult among the Abasgians (Abkhazians) of the Black Sea up to the sixth century A.D..³⁰⁸ Generally, we should bear in mind that we get a glimpse into the Georgian “pagan” past through Christian sources. Unlike elsewhere, however, the authors of those texts did not offer broad condemnations of non-Christian practices and beliefs, but provided detailed accounts. “Paganism,” in other words, was persistent, and the memory of those local

³⁰⁴ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 222.

³⁰⁵ Tr. C.J. F. Dowsett. Book. I, Chap. 18. Oxford University Press, 1961. pp. 29-32.

³⁰⁶ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 223.

³⁰⁷ For a general overview of persistent pagan practices in the Christian Church broadly defined, but with a focus on the Caucasus, see F. C. Conybeare. “The Survival of Animal Sacrifices inside the Christian Church.” *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Jan., 1903). pp. 62-90.

³⁰⁸ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 223.

deities and their subsequent practices were carried from the fourth century to the later medieval annals.³⁰⁹

Having presented “the pagan” cultural portrait of Georgia, we should now turn to Georgia’s early Christianity. Syria and Palestine were the Christian centers that most influenced Georgia. The Bible itself came from Syria as did important Byzantine texts. Once Georgia produced its local Christian leaders, they set their own centers near Jerusalem: at Bethlehem and in the monastery of Saint Sabas. In other words, Christians from Georgia connected to the major centers of Christianity, not to the centers of imperial administration. As in Armenia, Christians in Georgia had their own priorities, and concerns with inter-imperial ideological debates, which modern scholars import into their analyses, are simply not present in our sources. We need to be careful, therefore, not to amplify Christianity too much and should keep it within the horizons of the historical contemporaries. With the specifics of the local context in mind, let us now turn to the actual narratives of the royal conversion.

Eventually, the narrative of the royal conversion of Georgia (i.e., Iberia in the east) was written in the major languages of the region: Georgian, Greek, Latin, and Armenian. All traditions agree on the basic plot that a slave woman from Cappadocia was brought to the royal court of Iberia due to her powerful healing abilities. As in

³⁰⁹ For a brief overview on modern Georgian practices of Christianity, see Ernest Gellner. “Ethnicity and Faith in Eastern Europe.” *Daedalus*, Vol. 119, No. 1, Eastern Europe. Winter, 1990. pp. 279-294. Gellner concludes, “Georgian Christianity, unlike the Islam which almost surrounds it, appears to feel no strain between its unitarian-theocentric and its communal-pagan elements. It is not merely that in the mountains, operational shrines abound which are much in use for sacrifices but quite untouched by any Christian symbolism, or that prestations at shrines which do have some Christian symbolism include such instruments of mundane joy as playing cards; the churches, and above all the cemeteries adjoining them, express and articulate communal organization and solidarity, rather than the relationship of solitary souls to a unique deity” (p. 284). Moreover, “in the Georgian heaven, the dead are provided with self-filling wine goblets, and their perpetual topping-off is conditional on the living continuing to drink toasts to their deceased predecessors. Once they fail to do so, the topping-up mechanism no longer operates” (p. 284).

Armenia, the involvement of the emperor Constantine in all versions was depicted as marginal or non-existent. Moreover, the names of the story's protagonists remained unknown for a long time indicating the Byzantines' limited knowledge or interest in basic details. Of course, we will examine the story's specifics below, but it is helpful to provide the names of the protagonists here. Thus, the captive woman came to be known as Nino. The queen, whom Nino converted, was Nana. The king of Iberia, Nana's husband, was Mirian.

The earliest account on Mirian's conversion is found in the ecclesiastical history of Rufinus.³¹⁰ Rufinus completed his chronicle in 403. The conversion presumably took place in 337 (some scholars push the conversion date even back to 319). Thus, the event remained unnoticed for a full generation. Moreover, Rufinus' work was essentially an extended translation of Eusebius' original ecclesiastical history, but Eusebius had completely missed Iberia's conversion.

No contemporary Georgian wrote on the life of Nino or even more broadly on the conversion of Iberia. *The Conversion of K'art'li*, the oldest written Georgian account, is a seventh-century document, and the considerably more elaborate version, *The Life of Nino*, was written in the ninth or the tenth centuries.³¹¹ And even though the Council of Nicaea in 325 was attended by bishops from both Trebizond (a principal seaport of Lazica) and Bichvinta (the strategic port and metropolitan see on the Abkhazian coast), Christianity was not formally adopted in Lazica until the sixth century. In other words,

³¹⁰ For a thorough textual study on Rufinus' conversion account, see Françoise Thelamon. *Païens et Chrétiens au IV^e siècle* [Pagans and Christians in the Fourth Century]. Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981. Chapter 2: *La conversion des Ibères* [The Conversion of the Iberians].

³¹¹ Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. "Georgian Christianity." *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Ed. Ken Parry. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. pp. 137-155. p. 138. For details on the sources, see E. T'aqaisvili. *La conversion du K'art'li et Une nouvelle recension de la vie de Sainte Nino*. Tiflis, 1891. Also, O. Wardrop. *Life of St. Nino. Studia biblica et ecclesiastica*. Volume 1. Oxford, 1900. pp. 1-66.

the royal conversion of Iberia in the fourth century was a minor and regional event whose significance increased only with the passing of time and with the successful development of Christianity in the region and beyond.

The fact that Rufinus followed established Christian tropes on the conversion so closely should raise our suspicions about the story's truthfulness. On the other hand, Rufinus actually claimed to have learnt about the royal conversion from a reliable source. He had heard the story directly from prince Bacurius whom Rufinus had met in Palestine. In any case, the important point for us to note is that years after the royal conversion, the story of the event circulated in small Christian circles and was not noted in imperial archives.

In Rufinus' account, the story of Iberia's conversion was preceded by a somewhat detailed description of the travails of Helena, Constantine's mother, in search for Jesus' crucifixion place in Jerusalem. Constantine himself is mentioned briefly to point out that he managed to conquer the Sarmatians, the Goths, and other barbarian peoples after he himself had turned Christian.³¹² "The more he [Constantine] submitted to God in a spirit of religion and humility, the more widely God subjected everything to him."³¹³ This was a standard phrase used to build the image of the new Christian emperor. Eusebius of Caesarea was the first to develop the explicit association of Christian conversion and political empowerment. But, we need not read too much into such Christian rhetoric that ultimately served as a form of apologetics and, as we have seen in previous chapters, had

³¹² Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.8. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 18.

³¹³ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.8. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 18.

little to do with Constantine's policy-making or even with his immediate political concerns.

After this short section on Constantine, Rufinus moved to "those things which, however reliable the record of them may be, have escaped the notice of those far removed from them through not being so well known."³¹⁴ Rufinus went back to the very beginnings of Christian missionary activity:

In the division of the earth, which the apostles made by lot for the preaching of God's word, when the different provinces fell to one or the other of them, Parthia, it is said, went by lot to Thomas, to Matthew fell Ethiopia, and Inner India, which adjoins it, went to Bartholomew. Between this country and Parthia, but far inland, lies Further India.³¹⁵

According to Rufinus, Christianity spread slowly in those distant African lands (i.e., "India" in his narrative) due to language impediments and difference in customs among the multitude of peoples residing there. Successful Christianization, at least among the local elites, came in the fourth century, long after the passing through of the early apostles. Local developments and the influence of a philosopher from Tyre led to the eventual conversion of the elite.³¹⁶

According to Rufinus, it was during the same period that the Georgians converted, too. Geographically, he placed them in Pontus (the southern coast of the Black Sea).³¹⁷ Impressive piety exemplified by "sleepless supplications to God" of a captive woman ultimately led to the local royal conversion. In Rufinus' narrative, the name of the captive woman remained untold. This is quite interesting, especially considering the

³¹⁴ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.8. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 18.

³¹⁵ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.9. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 18.

³¹⁶ For "India," see Chapter 5.

³¹⁷ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 20.

great importance that later authors (and above all modern ones) have ascribed to this story. Given that Rufinus had mentioned the names of the major protagonists in the African conversion, perhaps the most likely explanation for this omission here is a simple one. Rufinus plainly did not know the woman's name. In most early ecclesiastical histories, including Rufinus', every miracle that testified to God's involvement in the world was important and sometimes even took precedent in the narrative over major imperial defeats or victories. Thus, the captive woman (Nino whose name we learn from later sources) was barely known even to the local elite. This should surprise us only if we take seriously such scholarly statements:

The introduction of Christianity into Armenia by St. Gregory the Illuminator (A.D. 301) and into Eastern Georgia by St. Nino (A.D. 330) counts among the most important events in the history of these two peoples. Christianity helped to prevent the assimilation of the Transcaucasian nations by the Persians, Arabs, and Turks. The vitality of Christianity in Armenia and Georgia is amply demonstrated by the survival of the two national Churches today, after fifty years of Soviet anti-religious propaganda.³¹⁸

Concerns such as dating and retroactive ideological interpretations aside, this conclusion has disregarded completely the historical context of local Christianity and the fact that even Rufinus, who would have sought all the available details on this story, omitted the name of his most important protagonist. In short, the opposite is true. The conversion of the Iberian aristocracy had minor repercussions. It became important many centuries later when it was transformed to serve as a cultural symbol of modern Georgian national identity.

Imitating the narrative of Paul's conversion, Rufinus insisted on the instantaneous transformation that religious change instigated. Thus in Iberia, a miraculous curing of a

³¹⁸ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 224.

child made the captive woman famous throughout the kingdom. Gravely sick and hopeless at the time, the queen sought the help of that captive woman. “She [the captive woman] declined to go, lest she appear to pretend to more than was proper to her sex.”³¹⁹ Then, the queen herself visited that unusual woman. By placing the queen on a hair shirt and praying over her, the captive woman quickly removed the inexplicable illness. After the successful healing, she explained to the queen, “It was Christ, God and Son of God most high, who had conferred healing upon her.” She then advised the queen “to invoke him whom she should know to be the author of her life and well-being, for he it was who allotted kingdoms to kings and life to mortals.”³²⁰ Rufinus had to raise the credibility of his female protagonist, for women occupied a tenuous position in early Christianity. On the one hand, they were the first mortal witnesses of Christ’s resurrection, and on the other, they lived in a society that generally disregarded them. Paul’s teachings, too, encouraged men to remain single and argued for male priests alone. Those lines were quite subtle, therefore, making sure that the conversion was legitimate and reiterating again the greatness of Christ, God and Son of God.

The healing of the queen made her husband happy, so the king offered rich gifts. The captive woman rejected them. She demanded his conversion. Contrary to his wife’s urgings, the king remained stubborn and declined Christianity. Up to this point, the story is conventional. We should only remark that just as the captive woman, the queen and the king remain anonymous, too. To Rufinus, the story is important as a symbol of the

³¹⁹ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 21.

³²⁰ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 21.

advancement of Christianity, but the most basic details, a generation after the fact, remain sparse.

Rufinus was not precise about chronology, and it is uncertain how much time had passed before the king went on the hunting trip that frightened him so much that he quickly converted. Moving from terrifying darkness that fell upon him in the middle of the day to revealing light after a restorative prayer to God, the king galloped back home and proclaimed himself a Christian. “He required that the woman captive be summoned at once and hand on to him her manner of worship, insisting that from then on he would venerate no god but Christ.”³²¹ Thus, “the captive came, instructed him that Christ is God, and explained, as far as it was lawful for a woman to disclose such things, the ways of making petition and offering reverence. She advised that a church be built and described its shape.”³²² The king gathered all his people, told them the entire story, and “before even being initiated into sacred things became the apostle of his ‘nation’ [a better translation would be “people”].”³²³ Everyone followed the call to Christianity and began building the church.

The construction of the outer walls of the church went quickly, and everyone was full of enthusiasm. But, the building of the third column inside proved impossible. No one could find a device to lift it up. The prayers of the captive woman were the only successful solution. “Then indeed all the people looking on glorified God and accepted the witness of the miracle before them that the king’s faith and the captive’s religion were

³²¹ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 22.

³²² Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 22.

³²³ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 22.

true.”³²⁴ After the church was built, the captive advised the people to send an embassy to the emperor Constantine, which they did. “They implored him [Constantine] to send priests who could complete God’s work begun among them. He dispatched them with all joy and honor, made far happier by this than if he had annexed to the Roman empire unknown peoples and kingdoms.”³²⁵ Then Rufinus gave us his source:

That this happened was related to us by that most faithful man Bacurius, the king of that nation [better translation “people”] who in our realm held the rank of *comes domesticorum* and whose chief concern was for religion and truth; when he was *dux limitis* in Palestine he spent some time with us in Jerusalem in great concord of spirit. But let us return to our topic.³²⁶

This is all we get from Rufinus on the conversion of Iberia. In his chronicle, the event was a momentary deviation from the major discussion on Helena, the family grief after her death, and the restoration of Arianism in the empire.³²⁷ In other words, Rufinus’ true historical focus was inside the perimeters of the Roman state. The development of Christianity abroad was treated marginally. His sources were few, and, in his narrative, the imperial administration was barely involved.

The next Byzantine account on the conversion of Iberia comes from the ecclesiastical history of Socrates Scholasticus. Socrates finished his work in 439. As Rufinus before him, Socrates, too, was inspired by Eusebius’ history. Socrates inserted the section on foreign conversions right after a long explanation of Constantine’s radical dealings with pagan rites and his violent transformation of cities and villages, many of

³²⁴ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 22-23.

³²⁵ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 23.

³²⁶ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 23.

³²⁷ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 23.

which he renamed after himself or after his family members.³²⁸ In the West, Socrates wrote, Constantine defeated the Sarmatians and the Goths, which freed the Romans from the burdensome fees that previous emperors had to pay to keep them at peace. According to Socrates, Constantine credited his victory to the formidable power of Christianity. This supposedly impressed the Sarmatians and the Goths so much that they voluntarily converted to Constantine's religion, too.³²⁹ As Rufinus before him, Socrates mentioned the Sarmatians and the Goths marginally, being more interested in telling us about imperial constructions of churches that erased the sacred spaces of ancient paganism. Even the most basic questions about the early development of Christianity among the Sarmatians and the Goths are left unanswered.

When it came to the conversion of Iberia (i.e., Georgia in modern academic literature), Socrates relied on Rufinus, too, and respectively reported no direct Byzantine involvement in the process. Yet, Socrates made interesting deviations from Rufinus' original, which we need to consider:

By the providential ordering of God, a certain woman, leading a devout and chaste life, was taken captive by the Iberians. Now these Iberians dwell near the Euxine Sea and are a colony of the Iberians of Spain. Accordingly, the woman in her captivity among the barbarians devoted herself to the practice of virtue. For, she not only maintained the most rigid continence, but spent much time in fastings and prayers. The barbarians observing this were astonished at the strangeness of her conduct. It happened then that the king's son, then a mere baby, was taken with a disease. According to the custom of the land, the queen sent the child to other women to be cured in the hope that their experience would supply a remedy. After the infant had been carried around by its nurse without obtaining relief from any of the women, he was finally brought to this captive.³³⁰

³²⁸ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 18.

³²⁹ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 18.

³³⁰ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 20: Γυνή τις βίον σεμνὸν καὶ σώφρονα μετερχομένη θεία τινὶ προνοία ὑπὸ Ἰβήρων αἰχμάλωτος γίνεται.

Immediately, we see that Socrates had decided to extend Rufinus' account. He imported from Strabo the ethnographic link of Caucasian Iberians with colonial Spaniards. The captive's first miracle, which Socrates retold and re-adjusted to come closer to the center of the royal family, served him to magnify his protagonist's fame and to increase the degree of her accomplishment. Thus, more details, even if questionable due to Socrates' personal agendas, expanded his narrative. The fact that he did not mention the captive's name or did not provide us with her early biography, however, meant that up to 439 basic points of Iberia's conversion were still unknown to Byzantine writers.

The episode with the healing of the royal child illustrates how Socrates struggled to get into more specifics, but had little original sources at his disposal:

After the infant had been carried around by its nurse without obtaining relief from any of the women, he was finally brought to this captive. She had no knowledge of the medical art and applied no material remedy; but taking the child and laying him on her bed which was made of horsecloth, she simply said in the presence of other women, "Christ, who healed many, will heal this child, too." Then having prayed in addition to this expression of faith and having called upon God, the boy was immediately restored, and was well from that period on...³³¹

Ἰβηρες δὲ οὗτοι προσοικοῦσι μὲν τὸν Εὐξεινον πόντον, ἄποικοι δὲ εἰσὶν Ἰβήρων τῶν ἐν Σπανία. Ἡ γυνὴ τοίνυν ἢ αἰχμάλωτος ἐν μέσοις οὔσα τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐφιλοσόφει· σὺν γὰρ πολλῇ τῇ σωφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀσκήσει νηστεία τε βαθυτάτη καὶ συντόνοις προσέκειτο ταῖς εὐχαῖς. Τοῦτο ὀρῶντες οἱ βάρβαροι τὸν ξενισμὸν τοῦ πραττομένου ἐθαύμαζον. Συμβαίνει δὲ τὸν τοῦ βασιλίσκου παῖδα νήπιον ὄντα ἀρρωστία τινὶ περιπεσεῖν, καὶ ἔθει τινὶ ἐγχωρίῳ παρὰ τὰς ἄλλας γυναῖκας ἢ τοῦ βασιλέως γυνὴ τὸν παῖδα θεραπευθησόμενον ἔπεμπεν, εἰ πού τι βοήθημα πρὸς τὴν νόσον ἐκ πείρας ἐπίστανται. Ὡς δὲ περιαχθεὶς ὁ παῖς ὑπὸ τῆς τροφῆς παρ' οὐδεμιᾶς τῶν γυναικῶν θεραπείας ἐτύγχανεν, τέλος ἄγεται καὶ πρὸς τὴν αἰχμάλωτον.³³¹ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 20: Ὡς δὲ περιαχθεὶς ὁ παῖς ὑπὸ τῆς τροφῆς παρ' οὐδεμιᾶς τῶν γυναικῶν θεραπείας ἐτύγχανεν, τέλος ἄγεται καὶ πρὸς τὴν αἰχμάλωτον. Ἡ δὲ ἐπὶ παρουσίᾳ πολλῶν γυναικῶν ὑλικὸν μὲν βοήθημα οὐ προσέφερεν (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἠπίστατο), δεξαμένη δὲ τὸν παῖδα καὶ εἰς τὸ ἐκ τριχῶν ὑφασμένον αὐτῇ στρωμάτιον ἀνακλίνασα λόγον εἶπεν ἀπλοῦν· ὁ Χριστός, φησὶν, ὁ πολλοὺς ἰασάμενος καὶ τοῦτο τὸ βρέφος ἰάσεται. Ἐπευξαμένης τε ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῷ λόγῳ καὶ ἐπικαλεσαμένης Θεὸν παραχορήμα ὁ παῖς ἀνερωώννυτο καὶ εἶχεν ἐξ ἐκείνου καλῶς...

The direct quotation from the captive, invoking the aid of Christ, tries to enhance Socrates' authority as a writer, but ultimately it is quite formulaic and stands as a literary embellishment. The continuation of the story preserves the same authorial incentive to develop further the original account:

Amazed at his wife's sudden restoration to health, the king of the Iberians wished to pay her with gifts because he had found out that she had cured his wife. The captive, however, said that she did not need any riches, for she possessed as riches the worship of God. But, she said that she would regard as the greatest present the king could offer her his own recognition of the God whom she worshiped and proclaimed. With this she sent back the gifts. The king kept this answer in mind, and going on a hunt the next day, the following thing happened: a mist and thick darkness covered the mountain tops and forests where he was hunting, so that all the retinue was scared, and their path became invisible. In this perplexity, the king earnestly invoked the gods whom he worshiped; and as nothing happened, he decided to implore the assistance of the captive's God. Quickly after he began to pray, the darkness, arising from the mist, was completely dissipated. Amazed at what happened, he returned to his palace rejoicing and told his wife the story. He also immediately sent for the captive stranger and begged her to inform him who that God was whom she revered. The woman on her arrival caused the king of the Iberians to become a preacher of Christ. For, having believed in Christ through this devoted woman, he convened all the Iberians who were under his authority. When he had declared to them what had taken place in reference not only to the cure of his wife and child, but also to the circumstances connected with the hunt, he exhorted them to worship the God of the captive. Thus, both the king and the queen were made preachers of Christ, the one addressing their male, and the other their female subjects. Moreover, the king having ascertained from his prisoner the plan on which churches were constructed among the Romans, ordered a church to be built, and immediately provided all things necessary for its construction. The building was accordingly started.³³²

³³² Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 20: Θαυμάσας δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰβήρων τὴν ἐκ τῆς νόσου εἰς ὑγίαν ταχύτητα, πυθόμενός τε τίς εἶη ὁ θεραπεύσας, δῶροις ἡμείβετο τὴν αἰχμάλωτον. Ἡ δὲ οὐκ ἔφη δέεσθαι πλοῦτον· ἔχειν γὰρ πλοῦτον τὴν θεοσεβίαν καὶ μέγα δέχεσθαι δῶρον, εἴ γε ἐπιγνώσειεν τὸν Θεὸν τὸν ὑπ' αὐτῆς γινωσκόμενον. Ταῦτα εἰπούσα τὰ δῶρα ἀντέπεμπεν. Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὸν μὲν λόγον ἐταμιεύσατο, μεθ' ἡμέρας δὲ ἐξεληθόντι αὐτῶ εἰς θήραν τοιόνδε τι συμβέβηκε. Τὰς κορυφὰς τῶν ὄρεων καὶ τὰς νάπας ἔνθα ἔθήρα κατέσχεν ὀμίχλης σκότος πολὺ, καὶ ἦν ἄπορος μὲν ἡ θήρα, ἀδιεξίτητος δὲ ἡ ὁδός. Ἐν ἀμηχανίᾳ δὲ γενόμενος πολλῇ τοὺς θεοὺς ἐπεκαλεῖτο οὐς ἔσεβεν. Ὡς δὲ οὐδὲν ἦνυεν πλέον, τέλος εἰς ἔννοιαν τὸν Θεὸν τῆς αἰχμαλώτου λαμβάνει, καὶ τοῦτον καλεῖ βοηθόν. Ἄμα τε ἤνυχετο καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς ὀμίχλης εὐθέως διελύετο

Socrates skipped over the preliminary conversion of the queen and instead dealt directly with the turmoils of the king. Determined to enhance the credibility of Christianity, Socrates omitted the initial hesitation on the part of the king, removed the mediation of his wife, and cast the darkness motif in the story as an affirmative, providential miracle. After this, Socrates basically repeated Rufinus' description of the miracle with the column that resulted in the complete conviction in the truthfulness of Christianity among the Iberians. In the last sections of the story, however, Socrates deviated the most:

Afterwards, an embassy was sent to the emperor Constantine, offering to be an ally to the Romans and requesting to receive from them a bishop and clergy because they sincerely believed in Christ. Rufinus says that he learned these facts from Bacurius who was formerly one of the small princes of the Iberians, but subsequently went over to the Romans and was made a leader of the military force in Palestine. Greatly entrusted with the supreme command in the war against the tyrant Maximus, he assisted the emperor Theodosius. In this way then, during the days of Constantine, the Iberians also turned to Christianity.³³³

σκοτός. Θαυμάζων δὲ τὸ γενόμενον, χαίρων ἐπὶ τὰ οικεῖα χωρεῖ καὶ τὸ συμβεβηκὸς διηγεῖται τῇ γυναικί, καὶ τὴν αἰχμάλωτον μεταπέμπεται καὶ τίς εἶη ὃν σέβοι Θεὸν ἐπυνθάνετο. Ἡ δὲ εἰς πρόσωπον ἔλθοῦσα κήρυκα τοῦ Χριστοῦ τὸν τῶν Ἰβήρων βασιλέα ἐποίησεν. Πιστεύσας γὰρ τῷ Χριστῷ διὰ τῆς εὐσεβοῦς γυναικός, πάντας τοὺς ὑπ' αὐτὸν Ἰβήρας συγκαλεῖ, καὶ τὰ συμβάντα περὶ τὴν θεραπείαν τῆς γυναικός καὶ τοῦ παιδίου, οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ κατὰ τὴν θήραν ἐκθέμενος παρήνει σέβεσθαι τὸν τῆς αἰχμαλώτου Θεόν. Ἐγένοντο οὖν ἀμφότεροι κήρυκες τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ μὲν βασιλεὺς τοῖς ἀνδράσιν, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ταῖς γυναιξίν. Μαθὼν δὲ παρὰ τῆς αἰχμαλώτου τὸ σχῆμα τῶν παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις ἐκκλησιῶν, εὐκτῆριον οἶκον ἐκέλευσεν γενέσθαι, εὐθύς τε τὰ πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν εὐτρεπίχετο, καὶ ὁ οἶκος ἠγείρετο.

³³³ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 20: Πρεσβεία τε ἐντεῦθεν πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Κωνσταντῖνον ἐγένετο, παρεκάλουν τε ὑπόσπονδοι μὲν τοῦ λοιποῦ Ῥωμαίοις γενέσθαι, λαμβάνειν δὲ ἐπίσκοπον καὶ ἱερὸν κλῆρον· πιστεύειν γὰρ εὐλικρινῶς ἔλεγον τῷ Χριστῷ. Ταῦτα φησὶν ὁ Ῥουφῖνος παρὰ Βακκουρίου μεμαθηκέναι, ὃς πρότερον μὲν ἦν βασιλίσκος Ἰβήρων, ὕστερον δὲ Ῥωμαίοις προσελθὼν ταξίαρχος τοῦ ἐν Παλαιστίνῃ στρατιωτικοῦ κατέστη καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα στρατηλατῶν τὸν κατὰ Μαξίμου τοῦ τυράννου πόλεμον τῷ βασιλεῖ Θεοδοσίῳ συνηγωνίσατο. Τοῦτον μὲν τὸν τρόπον καὶ Ἰβηρία ἐπὶ τῶν Κωνσταντίνου χρόνων τῷ χριστιανισμῷ προσελήλυθεν.

According to Socrates, Christianity and peace with the Romans went together. The Iberians guaranteed their allegiance to Constantine and requested a bishop along with subordinate priests to set up a local church. This is much more than Rufinus had written earlier, and though the implications of the assertions are not developed, they are planted before the reader to pursue. For Socrates, it is less important to convey Constantine's spontaneous reaction. Instead of re-writing Rufinus' point that the news "made [Constantine] far happier...than if he had annexed to the Roman empire unknown peoples and kingdoms," Socrates suggested that Christianity meant political stability and assured faithful diplomatic alliance.³³⁴ When we add the fragment about Bacurius fighting against tyranny in Rome, we see the military and political line that Socrates drew in Iberia's conversion and its consequences.

To distinguish himself from his predecessor Rufinus, Socrates sought various ways to expand on the story of Iberia's conversion. In those sections where he lacked anything to add, he relied on simple literary embellishment. In parts, which he deemed crucial, he imported his own narrative priorities. In the conclusive remarks, he finally gave us his interpretation on the consequences of the foreign conversion for Rome: military alliance and the foreigners' loyalty. But, this was a voluntary acceptance of Christianity, and the Iberians themselves asked Constantine to provide them with an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus in Socrates, Constantine remained only a passive beneficiary.

After Socrates, Sozomen was the next fifth-century author who discussed the Iberian conversion. In evaluating the way in which Sozomen presented the conversion

³³⁴ Rufinus of Aquileia. *Church History*. Book 10.11. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 23.

event, we need to recall from the previous chapter his Christian background and his successful career as a lawyer, which ultimately led him to Constantinople in the staff of the emperor Theodosius II (reigned from 408-450). On the conversion of Iberia, Sozomen followed Rufinus' account and dated it to the period of Constantine's rule. He located the Iberian kingdom "north of Armenia."³³⁵

Since Sozomen went back to Rufinus, he returned to the episode with the ill boy who was miraculously healed by the captive woman.³³⁶ This wonderful achievement was repeated for the queen who immediately accepted Christianity and "held the woman in much honor."³³⁷ The queen pled with her husband to convert as well, but he did not comply. From this point on, Sozomen repeated Rufinus without any deviation. There was the hunting trip, the building of the church, and the miracle with the third column that turned all Iberians to Christianity. After the mass conversion, the captive instructed the king to send an embassy to Constantine, "bearing proposals for alliance and treaties, and requesting that priests might be sent to their state."³³⁸ Then, Sozomen ended his section on Iberia and its conversion:

On their arrival, the ambassadors related the events that had occurred and reported how the whole people worshiped Christ with much care. The emperor of the Romans was delighted with the embassy. He met every request that was made and dismissed the ambassadors. Thus, the Iberians received the knowledge of Christ, and they worship him diligently until this day.³³⁹

³³⁵ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 7.

³³⁶ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 7.

³³⁷ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 7.

³³⁸ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 7.

³³⁹ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 2, Chapter 7:

διεξελαθόντων δὲ τῶν πρέσβων, οἷα παρ' αὐτοῖς συνέβη, καὶ ὡς τὸ πᾶν ἔθνος ἐν ἐπιμελείᾳ πολλῇ σέβει τὸν Χριστόν, ἦσθη τῇ πρεσβείᾳ ὁ Ῥωμαίων βασιλεύς, καὶ πάντα κατὰ γνώμην

Sozomen deviated from Rufinus and mixed Christianity with issues of diplomacy. Yet, the historical evidence that he provided for this relationship was tenuous, so it stands to us as an interpretative assumption. Just like Rufinus and Socrates, Sozomen offered nothing specific on the development of Christianity in the Iberian foreign court and did not study the emergence of Christian centers in Caucasia and beyond.

The story of the Iberian conversion drew the interest of the controversial Christian theologian Theodoret of Cyrrhus, too. Born in Antioch and educated in a monastery, Theodoret became a bishop of the small city of Cyrrhus, situated in the region between Antioch and the Euphrates. Although he spent most of his life there, he became very involved in the Christological controversies of his time, and as a result, his letters travelled the empire. Right in the midst of rigorous theological polemics, Theodoret undertook his ecclesiastical history. For the section of Iberia, he followed his predecessors and also went back to Rufinus. Thus, the section on Iberia appears right after the discussion of the conversion of India³⁴⁰ and the alleged great achievements of the future bishop Frumentius:

About the same time, Iberia was led to the way of the truth by a captive woman. She prayed ceaselessly, allowing herself no softer bed than a sack spread upon the ground and considered fasting to be her highest luxury. This austerity was rewarded by gifts similar to those of the apostles. The barbarians, who were ignorant of medicine, were accustomed when attacked by disease to go to one another's houses in order to ask those who had suffered in a similar way and had gotten well by what means they had been cured. In accordance with this custom, a mother who had a sick child, went to this remarkable woman to enquire if she knew of any cure for the disease. The latter took the child, placed it upon her bed, and prayed to the Creator of the world to be propitious to it and to cure the

πράξαντας τοὺς πρέσβεις ἀπέπεμψεν. ὧδε μὲν Ἰβηρες τὸν Χριστὸν ἐπέγνωσαν, καὶ εἰσέτι νῦν ἐπιμελῶς σέβουσιν.

³⁴⁰ See Chapter 5 for "India."

disease. He heard her prayer and healed the child.³⁴¹

Theodoret's opening was distinctive. He was the first to compare the captive to the apostles and thus implicitly called her a saint. All previous authors admitted that the captive had no knowledge of medicine, but Theodoret skipped this and accused instead the barbarians of that ignorance. Exposed in his early education to monastic literature that emphasized apostolic austerity, Theodoret framed the opening scenes of the story as a hagiography. The following section with the healing of the queen kept true to its predecessors. Then came the miracle with the king. Unlike the other writers, Theodoret isolated the king and submerged in darkness only him, not his companions:

A short time after, he went out hunting, and the loving Lord made a prey of him as He did of Paul.³⁴² For, a sudden darkness enveloped him and forbade him to move from the spot. While those who were hunting with him enjoyed the customary sunlight, he alone was bound with the fetters of blindness. In his perplexity, he found a way of escape, for calling to mind his former unbelief, he implored the help of the God of the captive woman, and immediately the darkness was dispelled. He then went to the marvellous captive and asked her to show him how a church ought to be built.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler, *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn. *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 44. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954. Book 1, Chapter 23: Ἰβηρας δὲ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον γυνὴ δορυάλωτος πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν θειαν ἐξενάγησεν. αὕτη γὰρ προσευχῇ μὲν ἐχρηῆτο διηνεκεῖ, εὐνή δὲ ἦν αὐτῇ καὶ στρωμνὴ μαλακὴ σάκκος ἐπὶ τοῦ δαπέδου καθηπλωμένος, τρυφὴν δὲ ἄκραν τὴν νηστείαν ἐνόμιζεν. οὗτος ὁ πόνος τῶν ἀποστολικῶν αὐτῇ μεταδέδωκε χαρισμάτων. ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οἱ βάρβαροι τῆς ἰατρικῆς σπανίζοντες ἐπιστήμης εἰώθασιν ἀρρωστοῦντες πρὸς ἀλλήλους φοιτᾶν, καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἤδη νεοσηκότων καὶ τῆς ἀρρωστίας ἀπαλλαγέντων μανθάνειν τῆς υἰαθείας τὸν τρόπον, ἀφίκετό τις γυνὴ πρὸς τὴν ἀξιέπαινον ἄνθρωπον παιδίον ἀρρωστοῦν ἔχουσα καὶ μαθεῖν τὸ πρακτέον ἀντιβολουῖσα. ἡ δὲ τοῦτο λαβοῦσα καὶ εἰς τὴν εὐνήν κατακλίνασα, ἰκέτευε τὸν τῶν ὅλων δημιουργὸν νεῦσαι καὶ λῦσαι τὴν νόσον· ὁ δὲ τὴν ἰκετείαν δεξάμενος παρέσχε τὴν υἰαθείαν.

³⁴² Notice here the play with words and the subsequent allusion: the king went to hunt, but it was actually he who was being hunted: αὐτὸς μὲν εἰς θήραν ἐξῆλθεν, ὁ δὲ φιλάνθρωπος αὐτὸν δεσπότης κατὰ τὸν Παῦλον ἐθήρευσε. Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler, *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn. *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 44. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954. Book 1, Chapter 23.

³⁴³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler, *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn. *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 44. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954. Book 1, Chapter 23: Ὀλίγου δὲ διελθόντος χρόνου, αὐτὸς μὲν εἰς θήραν ἐξῆλθεν, ὁ δὲ φιλάνθρωπος αὐτὸν δεσπότης κατὰ τὸν Παῦλον ἐθήρευσε. ζόφος γὰρ αὐτῷ ἐξαπίνης

The conversion of the king, Theodoret acknowledged, shared similar features with that of Paul. Of course, Theodoret used that similarity as a positive sign of the miraculous work of God. To us, it is an example of how writers carefully molded their narratives to legitimize their authorship even when they lacked additional evidence. As we saw in our other examples, Christian historians did not blindly copy from one another, but adjusted the original to fit into their own authorial agenda. Sometimes, these were seemingly minor deviations, but when studied more closely, they destabilize the comfortable picture of consensus and smooth manuscript transmission that modern scholars often depict.

Interestingly, Theodoret skipped the second miracle of the captive. In his account, she instructed the converted king to build a church, which he did without major obstacles. After the church was finished, they sent an embassy to Constantine:

For she persuaded the king to send an embassy to the Roman emperor asking for teachers of worship... When informed of the reason for the embassy, the emperor Constantine, who was warmly attached to the cause of religious worship, gladly welcomed the ambassadors and selected a bishop endowed with great faith, wisdom, and virtue. Presenting him with many gifts, the emperor sent him to the Iberians, that he might make known to them the true God. Not content with having granted the requests of the Iberians, he of his own accord undertook the protection of the Christians in Persia. For, learning that they were persecuted by the pagans and that their king himself, a slave to error, was contriving various cunning plots for their destruction, he wrote to him, entreating him to embrace the Christian religion himself as well as to honor its priests. His own letter will better convey his devotion to the cause.³⁴⁴

προσπεσών οὐκ εἶα περαιτέρω προβαίνειν. καὶ οἱ μὲν συνθηρεύοντες τῆς ἀκτίνος συνήθως ἀπῆλθον, οὗτος δὲ μόνος ἀποληφθεὶς τοῖς τῆς ἀορασίας ἐπεδήθη δεσμοῖς· ἐν ἀπορίᾳ δὲ ὧν πόρον εὗρε τῆς σωτηρίας. εὐθύς γὰρ εἰς νοῦν τὴν ἀπείθειαν λαβὼν καὶ τὸν τῆς αἰχμαλώτου θεὸν καλέσας ἐπίκουρον, ἀπηλλάγη τοῦ ζόφου. καὶ τὴν ἀξιάγαστον ἐκείνην καταλαβὼν δορυάλωτον, παρεκάλει δεῖξαι τῆς οἰκοδομίας τὸ σχῆμα.

³⁴⁴ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler, *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn. *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 44. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954. Book 1, Chapter 23: ἔπεισε γὰρ τὸν τοῦ ἔθνους ἡγούμενον πρὸς τὸν Ῥωμαίων πρεσβεύσασθαι βασιλέα καὶ αἰτήσασθαι πεμφθῆναι σφίσι διδάσκαλον εὐσεβείας. ὁ μὲν οὖν

We should note how Theodoret embellished the final points of the story. The bishop, whose talents seem as countless as the gifts that he brought to the Iberians, was immediately sent to teach them about “the true God.” But, this was not enough for Constantine. Presumably inspired by the voluntary petition of the Iberians to help them convert, Constantine boldly declared himself protector of the Christians in Persia and urged the *shah* to turn to Christianity, too. We have already studied Constantine’s letter to Shapur. The reactions, which Theodoret ascribed to the emperor, were Theodoret’s own assumptions and casual interpretations.

Theodoret was the last contemporary of Rufinus in the fifth century to engage with the story of Iberia’s conversion. It took four centuries for it to come back to life. Finally, Iberia’s royal conversion found itself again in the ninth-century world chronicle of the monk Theophanes the Confessor. Theophanes continued the work of his friend Georgios Syncellus and thus began with the third century and ended with his own times in the ninth. This was a lot to cover, and he had to be discerning about what to include. But, presumably, the spread of Christianity and its effects in relation to the empire would have been interesting to Theophanes and his audience. It is reasonable to expect an extensive account on the Iberian conversion if source materials were readily available. Instead, Theophanes simply glanced over the story, grouping it together with a series of

δεξάμενος τὴν εἰσήγησιν τοὺς πρεσβευσομένους ἐξέπεμψεν· ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς, τῆς αἰτήσεως τὴν αἰτίαν μαθὼν (Κωνσταντῖνος δὲ ἦν ὁ τῆς εὐσεβείας θερμότατος ἐραστής), φιλοφροσύνῃ μὲν παμπόλλῃς τοὺς πρέσβεις ἠξίωσεν, ἄνδρα δὲ πίστει καὶ συνέσει καὶ βίῳ κοσμούμενον καὶ τῆς ἀρχιερωσύνης ἠξιωμένον κήρυκα τῷ ἔθνει τῆς θεογνωσίας ἐξέπεμψε μετὰ δώρων ὅτι μάλιστα πλείστων. ταύτης μὲν οὖν τῆς προμηθείας τοὺς ἠτηκότας ἠξίωσε. τῶν ἐν Περσίδι δὲ τῆς εὐσεβείας τροφίμων αὐτόματος προύνοηθη. μαθὼν γὰρ αὐτοὺς ὑπὸ τῶν δυσσεβῶν ἐξελαύνεσθαι καὶ τὸν ἐκείνων βασιλέα τῇ πλάνῃ δεδουλωμένον παντοδαπὰς αὐτοῖς καττύειν ἐπιβουλὰς ἐπέστειλε, καὶ παραινῶν εὐσεβεῖν καὶ τοὺς εὐσεβοῦντας τιμῆς ἀπολαύειν αἰτῶν. ἄμεινον δὲ τὴν τοῦ γεγραφότος σπουδῆν ἐπιδείξει τὰ γράμματα.

other conversions. In Theophanes' account, this supposedly seminal moment in Caucasian history is reduced to a little more than a line:

Then many peoples turned to baptism due to the occurring miracles, which were done by the captives when those of the priests [ἱερέων] were first captured during the reign of the emperor Gallienus at the time of the attacks against the Romans by the Goths, and the Celts, and the Gauls from the West.³⁴⁵ And now during the reign of the victorious Constantine, many of the peoples, who attacked [προσδραμόντα], were enlightened in Christ.³⁴⁶ The inner Indians believed in Christ when Meropius, a philosopher from Tyre took his students Aidesius and Frumentius with him and went there to investigate its places and taught them the word of God. Athanasius ordained Frumentius as their first bishop. At the same time the Iberians, too, believed in Him, having seen the miracles done by a Christian captive woman and the falling of the darkness over their king while on a hunt. These things Rufinus records, having heard them from Bacurius, the same king of the Iberians (sic). At the same time also the Armenians, accepting salvation, finally believed in Him during the reign of their king Tiridates and their bishop Gregory.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ This is a somewhat convoluted phrase that would be better rendered in English if broken in two. I have kept close to the original syntax, however, to show how compact Theophanes' narrative on those early conversions is.

³⁴⁶ This is an ambiguous expression, for Theophanes might have meant the peoples coming together in Christ or the peoples, who attacked the Roman empire under Constantine, were converted. The fifth-century authors, whom we have encountered, wrote that Constantine first won over those foreign tribes and then they voluntarily converted. I assume that Theophanes wanted to abbreviate the earlier accounts and thus translate "attacked," but given that the previous sentence refers to the missionary work of Roman captives among foreign peoples, Theophanes could have thought that it was their work, not Constantine's, that "rushed" those peoples to Christ. In either case, this is a very skillful expression on the part of Theophanes.

³⁴⁷ Theophanes the Confessor. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963): 3-503. p. 24: τότε πολλά ἔθνη τῷ βαπτίσματι προσῆλθον τοῖς θαύμασι τοῖς γινομένοις ὑπὸ τῶν αἰχμαλώτων τῶν ἐπὶ Γαλιήνου τοῦ βασιλέως αἰχμαλωτισθέντων ἱερέων πρότερον ἐκ τῶν ἐπιδραμόντων τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις Γόθων καὶ Κελτῶν καὶ Γαλατῶν τῶν ἔσπεριων. καὶ νῦν δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ νικητοῦ Κωνσταντίνου πλεῖστα τῶν ἔθνῶν ἐφωτίσθησαν τῷ Χριστῷ προσδραμόντα. Ἰνδοὶ οἱ ἐνδότεροι ἐπίστευσαν τῷ Χριστῷ, Μερωπίου φιλοσόφου Τύρου Αἰδέσιον καὶ Φρουμέντιον τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λαβόντος καὶ εἰσελθόντος ἐκεῖ ἱστορεῖν τοὺς τόπους καὶ διδάξαντος αὐτοὺς τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ. πρῶτον ἐπίσκοπον Φρουμέντιον χειροτονεῖ Ἀθανάσιος ἐν αὐτοῖς. ὁμοίως καὶ Ἰβηρες ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσαν τὰ ὑπὸ τῆς αἰχμαλώτου γυναικὸς Χριστιανῆς ὄρωντες γινόμενα θαύματα καὶ τὴν ἐπιπεσοῦσαν ἀχλὺν τῷ βασιλεῖ αὐτῶν κунηγοῦντι. ταῦτα Ρουφίνος ἱστορεῖ παρὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ βασιλέως τῶν Ἰβήρων Βακκουρίου ἀκηκοώς. ὁμοίως καὶ Ἀρμένιοι τελείως ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσαν, διὰ Τηριδάτου βασιλέως αὐτῶν καὶ Γρηγορίου ἐπισκόπου αὐτῶν τὴν σωτηρίαν δεξάμενοι.

In a single paragraph, Theophanes recounted the conversions of at least six different peoples and suggested that many more had actually turned to Christ under Constantine. He added nothing new to the story of Iberia. What Theophanes meant by “the same king Bacurius” is unclear. Given the preceding line, however, he seems to imply that Bacurius was the very king who went through the frightening experience of darkness that shook him to the bright conversion of Christianity. The earlier accounts gave no name to the Iberian king and suggested that Bacurius was a later king over a small part of broader Georgia whom Rufinus had met in Palestine. The chronology of conversion with respect to all those various peoples is not made explicit.³⁴⁸ If we assume that Theophanes followed the progressive chronological arrangement of his chronicle, then his dating of the Armenian conversion after the Iberian one would not be accurate.

All of this is to suggest that with the passing of time, the interest in the conversion of the Iberians among Byzantine authors almost completely disappeared. When it was finally recalled four hundred years after the fact, it was made nondescript, stuck in between other similar experiences whose details were nebulous and confused. Working on a large and mostly synthetic project, Theophanes did little independent research and relied mostly on others’ work. Yet, if the conversion episodes were so magnanimous and important for the early history of the respective peoples and the Byzantine empire at large, he would have presumably included more. Instead, even when he ventured a guess about the identity of the Iberian king, he had it wrong. And, Theophanes kept the story so short that he even omitted the details about the miracles of the captive woman and the embassy to Constantine.

³⁴⁸ For the chronology of the conversion of India, see Stuart C. Munro-Hay. “The Dating of Ezana and Frumentius.” *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 32 (1988), 111-127.

Pressed for time and space, Theophanes in the ninth century might have thought that the details of the miraculous events during the conversion of Iberia were not anything special. There were plenty of miracles in all of early Christian literature and beyond, so Theophanes moved on to the accomplishments of Dorotheos of Tyre and the anti-Christian policies of Julian.³⁴⁹ In contrast to the conversion events, Theophanes dated precisely Julian's promulgations, which made a profound impact on the nature of Christian relationship to imperial rule as well as on Christianity's outlook on pagan classical culture at large. To a Byzantine, those were actually the truly important issues with implications in the deepest recesses of the contemporary Byzantine cultural and philosophical worldview.

At least judging strictly from the available literary record, Byzantine authors after Theophanes forgot the story of the Iberian conversion completely. There was not even a single casual mention of it. On the other hand, it was precisely beginning with the ninth century that the Georgian tradition developed, and many local authors elaborated on the royal conversion. While the Byzantine authors never mentioned any of the protagonists' names, the Caucasian writers quickly fleshed out the captive woman, giving her the name

³⁴⁹ Theophanes the Confessor. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963): 3-503. p. 24: τότε καὶ Δωρόθεος, ἐπίσκοπος Τύρου, ὁ ἐπὶ Διοκλητιανοῦ πολλὰ κακοπαθήσας καὶ ἐξορίας καὶ βάσανα ὑπομείνας, ἤκμαζεν, πλεῖστα συγγράμματα καταλιπὼν Ῥωμαϊκὰ καὶ Ἑλληνικά, ὡς ἀμφοτέρων γλωσσῶν ἐμπειρότατος καὶ πολυῖστωρ δι' εὐφυΐαν γενόμενος. οὗτος ἀκριβῶς καὶ περὶ τῶν ἐπισκόπων τοῦ Βυζαντίου καὶ ἄλλων πολλῶν τόπων διεξῆλθεν. ὁ αὐτὸς ἐπανελθὼν ἐκ τῆς ἐξορίας καὶ ἐν τῇ συνόδῳ εὐρεθεὶς, καταλαβὼν τὴν ἰδίαν παροικίαν διήρκεσεν ἕως Ἰουλιανοῦ τοῦ παραβάτου. καὶ ἐπειδήπερ οὐ προφανῶς ἀλλὰ κρυπτῶς διὰ τῶν ἀρχόντων ὁ μιὰρὸς ἀνὴρ εἰς τοὺς Χριστιανούς παροίει, πάλιν ὁ μακάριος Δωρόθεος κατέλαβε τὴν Ὀδυσσόπολιν, ἐνθα καὶ συσχεθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχόντων Ἰουλιανοῦ καὶ πολλοὺς ὑπομείνας αἰκισμοὺς ἐν βαθυτάτῳ γῆρα διὰ τὴν εἰς Χριστὸν ὁμολογίαν ταῖς βασάνοις ἐναπέθανεν ρζ' ἐτῶν ἤδη τυγχάνων.

Nino, and they identified the king as Mirian. Many more details were added and a hagiographical tradition around Nino developed.

Outside of Caucasian literature, there was only one more author who returned to the story. He was a Christian from Syria in the twelfth century when much had changed both for the Byzantine empire and for Christianity. This was the patriarch Michael whom local followers came to call “the Great.”

In the twelfth century, Michael presided over a monophysite Christian community in Syria surrounded by Turkic groups. By his own admission, he regularly dealt with passing Crusaders and approved of the work of the Templars and the Hospitallers even though theologically he stood against the dyophysite Western Catholic and Byzantine churches. Those were particularly tumultuous times when old Christian principles and expectations for universal unity as proclaimed ideals were shattered in reality. If Michael looked back at Iberia’s conversion in the fourth century from that perspective, he might have felt somewhat melancholy. Stories about the early successes of Christianity were now bright contrasts to opposite and gloomier prospects for any Christian proselytizing advance to the East.

Most early Christians from all regions of the empire chose to write in either Latin or Greek. Michael wrote his chronicle in Syriac. He started with the creation of the world and traced its development to his own times. It was an ambitious project, and he relied largely on secondary materials. An heir of a monophysite tradition, Michael tilted his chronicle in that direction. As a result, he introduced many authors who are now lost

to us and gives us an interesting perspective on the development of early Christianity in the Roman empire and abroad.³⁵⁰

Michael followed the narrative organization of the earlier Byzantine authors. “Inner India” was the first foreign conversion that he discussed.³⁵¹ It occurred to him that Frumentius and Aidesius, the proselytizers of “Inner India,” were like Joseph in Egypt, assisting the local king in government and ultimately ruling on his behalf. Working from within, Aidesius and Frumentius converted the local Indians. Thus, “Apostle Thomas preached in Exterior India and among the Parthians and Matthew among the Koushites, but the Inner India was converted at the time of Constantine.”³⁵²

After those brief references to the previous accounts, Michael then presented his version of Iberia’s conversion. For reasons that are difficult to discern, he took the basics from Socrates and not any other historians, but supplemented them in ways that made most sense to him:

Inner Iberia also came to believe in Christ during the time of Constantine in the following way: A chaste woman was captured by an Iberian from Exterior Iberia, which neighbors Pont Euxine. These are different from the Iberians of Spain.³⁵³

Having the complete account of Socrates in front of him, Michael decided to specify where the captive woman came from and made clear the geographical distinction between the two Iberias. No other author had explained where the woman was captured

³⁵⁰ For an overview of Michael’s sourcebase, see J.-B. Chabot. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite D’Antioche (1166-1199)*. Vol. 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted, 1963). pp. 24-37.

³⁵¹ For details, see Chapter 5.

³⁵² Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 258: Il s’agit de l’Inde Intérieure; car l’apôtre Thomas avait prêché dans l’Inde Extérieure et chez les Parthes et Matthieu aux Koušites; mais l’Inde Intérieure se convertit à l’époque de Constantin.

³⁵³ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 258: L’Ibérie Intérieure crut aussi dans le Christ du temps de Constantin, de cette façon: Une femme chaste fut faite captive par un Ibère de l’Ibérie Extérieure qui est dans le voisinage du Pont-Euxine. Ceux-ci sont différents des Ibères de l’Espagne.

and precisely how she found herself in Iberia. Michael was clearly improvising since he cited no additional sources. The sequence of miracles that led to the conversion of the king and his people went from the young prince to his mother, the queen, and ultimately to the king himself. A storm and a hurricane blasted over the king and his retinue while on their hunting trip. Once converted, the king ordered the building of the church. Demons inhabited the column that no one could lift. The prayers of the woman chased them away and put the final touches of the church. All people immediately believed in Christ, and the miracle “is famous to this day.”³⁵⁴ Then, the Iberians went to Constantine and received bishops, priests, and clergy. “This is how they believed and were baptized.”³⁵⁵

Michael magnified the story about the Iberian conversion as much as he could. The miracles of the captive woman, he claimed, were still remembered in the twelfth century. The dark clouds from the previous versions have now turned into a heavy storm and a hurricane. The number of clergy, which Constantine presumably sent out,

³⁵⁴ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 259: Il arriva que le fils de leur roitelet tomba malade. Sa mère le soignait de toutes façons selon leurs usages et il n'en était pas soulagé. Elle demanda à cette captive de lui rendre la santé parce qu'elle voyait ses oeuvres saintes. Celle-ci l'ayant placé sur sa natte de poil dit: “Que le Christ qui a guéri beaucoup [d'infirmes] guérisse aussi cet enfant!” et à l'instant elle fut guérie. Après cela, la femme du roi tomba elle-même malade et eut recours à cette même captive. Elle alla la trouver et, pareillement, à l'instant elle fut guérie. Elle devint célèbre et prêchait à tous la foi dans le Christ-Dieu. Le roi lui envoya des présents. Elle ne les accepta point, mais elle dit: “Que le présent soit la promesse du roi de croire dans le Christ,” mais le roi n'y consentit pas. Quelques jours après, il sortit à la chasse. Une tempête et un ouragan s'abattirent sur eux et ils étaient sur le point de mourir; [il invoqua ses dieux] et n'en reçut point de secours. Il eut recours au Dieu de cette captive, et, à l'instant même, la tempête se dissipa et le calme se rétablit. C'est pourquoi, à son retour, il rassembla tout son peuple et leur ordonna de confesser le Christ; et ils se mirent à bâtir une église sur le plan que la sainte leur exposa. Comme ils ne pouvaient ériger une grande colonne de marbre blanc qui demeurerait attachée par l'opération des démons, cette femme pria, et elle-même la colonne s'éleva dans l'air; comme ils la regardaient, plongés dans l'étonnement et glorifiant [le Seigneur], elle se plaça d'elle-même sur la base où ils voulaient l'ériger. Et jusqu'à ce jour ce prodige est célèbre.

³⁵⁵ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 259: Alors les Ibères envoyèrent trouver l'empereur Constantin et en reçurent des évêques, des prêtres et des clercs. Et ainsi ils crurent et furent baptisés.

increased to an entire retinue. If an entire people would be converted and baptized, it made sense to Michael to suggest that it was more than just one bishop and some accompanying priests who went to Iberia. But, in terms of details, he could add no more.

From the perspective of the earlier accounts, Michael misplaced the piece about the Sarmatians and the Goths and put it after the two conversion stories about the Indians and the Iberians. It was a single line that made known the victory of Constantine over the Sarmatians and the Goths, which immediately resulted in their respective conversions.³⁵⁶ Then, Michael described where Constantine built important churches. One of them was constructed in Phoenicia, Michael wrote, where men shared their women and thus no one knew one's actual father. Even virgins were offered to travellers passing by "to violate them." Thus, Constantine gave those Phoenicians a bishop, and they reformed their alleged horrifying customs.³⁵⁷

As in all other accounts, conversion for Michael meant radical transformation and an inevitable change in lifestyle. But, given how little substantial evidence all authors provide, this comes across as a formula that goes back to the New Testament and subsequent hagiographical literature. It is interesting to note how superficially those moments were treated and how little the authors cared to figure out the specifics of the local developments. On the conversion of Iberia, Michael was satisfied to follow Socrates and chose only to strengthen some aspects of the original story. Moreover, he

³⁵⁶ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 259: De même, quand Constantin le Victorieux eut vaincu à la guerre les Sarmates et les Goths, ils crurent à la religion des chrétiens.

³⁵⁷ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 259: L'empereur bâtit une église à côté du chêne de Mambré, où Abraham avait reçu la révélation.—Il bâtit aussi une église à Ba'albek de Phénice, car les habitants de cette ville étaient plongés dans une grande erreur; leurs femmes étaient en commun et on ne connaissait pas le père de chacun. Ils donnaient même leurs vierges aux passants pour qu'ils les violent. Il leur fit ordonner un évêque, et peu à peu ils se rangèrent.

made the Iberian conversion into one case in a chain of many. All of them were worth mentioning even if briefly, not due to any strategic location or calculative plans on the part of the Roman administration, but because they testified to the power of Christianity and the progressive change of lifestyle that it guaranteed. In a sense, they were more relevant to the apologetics of Christianity than they were for tracing its specific historical development.

For Michael, the long chain of successful foreign conversions during the rule of Constantine extended to the very end of the emperor's life. Keeping precise chronology unclear, he wrote that at some point, presumably after the conversion of the Iberians, Constantine built a bridge over the Danube. The Roman troops crossed over it and conquered the Scythians. Thus, Constantine supposedly led the Scythians to the faith.³⁵⁸ Quite schematically, Michael combined several accounts on the reported conversion of the Scythians across the Danube, but did not follow through with necessary details. He never explained who those Scythians were and kept instead the nebulous classical referent. Forced conversion was a difficult business, and Michael in the twelfth century knew it. None of this prevented him from keeping to the formula and run the narrative forward. Moreover, some of the subsequent events in Constantine's life, Michael got confused at least from the perspective of the conventional sources:

The pagans accused the Christians before their king Shapur to have sent an embassy to the emperor of the Romans. Shapur was angered and moved to suppress the Christians and to destroy their churches. The victorious Constantine wrote to him, saying: "Note that I guard the divine faith; I dwell in the light of the truth; I profess the faith, etc." Shapur did not accept his words and immediately went on a campaign against Nisibis. He moved away full with confusion due to the prayers of Mar John and Mar Ephrem. In his madness, he

³⁵⁸ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). p. 259: Il fit un pont sur le fleuve du Danube. Ses armées le franchirent; il soumit les Scythes et les amena à la foi.

pillaged Mesopotamia. Constantine left to fight against the Persians. When he arrived to Nicomedia, he fell ill and was baptized at that place because he was not yet baptized since he wanted to be baptized in the Jordan river. He made his will and split his empire between his three sons. He left his will in the hands of a priest that he knew through his sister and who was an Arian.³⁵⁹

The history of the last days of Constantine is difficult to piece together, and Michael's account is just as plausible as any other.³⁶⁰ But, if our guiding principle is proximity to the contemporary events, Michael, who relied on Julian's tradition that held that Constantine was moving against Persia before he died, was misguided. Eusebius, Constantine's first biographer, did not include a Persian campaign and had Constantine peacefully die in the hands of a priest who baptized the emperor. The framing of Constantine as the defender of the faith and an Arian is certainly an interesting choice. It shows that Michael was following an established tradition and was not interested in adjusting the narrative for his own immediate purposes. He could have skipped the volatile issue of Arianism and simply cast Constantine as an ecumenical Christian emperor. Michael's available sources told him otherwise, and he kept close to them. Thus, Constantine was supposedly willing to go to war with the Persians to protect the local Christians as he coerced the northern Scythians to become Christians, too. The

³⁵⁹ Michael the Syrian. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. Volume 1. Paris, 1899 (reprinted 1963). pp. 259-260: Les païens calomnièrent les chrétiens auprès de Šabhour leur roi, [les accusant] d'avoir envoyé une ambassade à l'empereur des Romains. Šabhour s'irrita et se mit à opprimer les chrétiens et à détruire leurs églises. Constantin le Victorieux lui écrivait en disant: "Attendu que je garde la foi divine, je demeure dans la lumière de la vérité, je professe la vraie foi, etc."—Šabhour non seulement n'accueillit pas ses paroles, mais il se mit aussitôt en campagne et monta contre Nisibe. Il s'en éloigna couvert de confusion, grâce aux prières de Mar Jacques et de Mar Ephrem. Dans sa colère il pilla la Mésopotamie. Constantin sortit pour combattre les Perses. Étant parvenu à Nicomédie, il tomba malade et fut baptisé en cet endroit, car il n'était pas encore baptisé parce qu'il désirait être baptisé dans le Jourdain. — Il fit son testament et attribua les deux empires à ses trois fils. Il remit son testament entre les mains d'un prêtre qui lui avait été recommandé par sa soeur, et qui était arien.

³⁶⁰ For a discussion on Constantine's final days and an evaluation of the existing accounts, see Garth Fowden. "The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and Their Influence." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 146–170.

royal conversion of Iberia, however, was depicted as a product of regional developments and was instigated voluntarily by the native royal elite.

After Michael, no subsequent foreign authors in the Byzantine period dealt with the conversion of Iberia. As the outside concern with the story subsided, Caucasian interest in it grew. From the fourth to the fifth century, the head of the local church had the rank of archbishop; he was hierarchically subordinate to the authority of the patriarch of Antioch. By the end of the fifth century, however, during the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, the Church of K'art'li (Iberia in Greek sources) was radically re-organized. A new structure of the church was formed. The church was now headed by a catholicos with twelve new bishoprics under him. Since the end of the fifth century, worship began to be localized.

From the fifth century up to the tenth century, Jerusalem regulations were in force and the first liturgical books used by the local church in the divine service reflect Jerusalem practices. Thus, the development of early Georgia broadly speaking was set very much in an eastern and Persian cultural context. The conversion of the local royal elite was a marginal event and remained unnoticed for many centuries, especially by local Christian writers. Once they started to be drawn to the conversion story, they tended to frame it away from Byzantium and towards an independent, native tradition. Outside of intellectual circles, local practices continued to amalgamate Persian religious motifs into a Christian framework as well as other ritualistic habits and inherited ancestral customs. The emergence of the modern Georgian Church, apart from monophysite Armenia and Caucasian Albania, was only linear and progressive in textbook overviews or ideological interpretations. In the realities of history, the path was labyrinthine and dependent on

numerous contingencies and particular choices made by the historical figures and the intellectuals that cast them in one political and cultural framework or another.

Georgia and Its Conversion in Modern Narratives: The Past as a Political Trope

Today, the Georgians trace their Christian roots back to biblical times. Competing with the Armenians about bold claims of early Christian conversion, the Georgians point to apostle Andrew as the first missionary to preach in their lands. In reality, this tradition has its origins in the work of the Byzantine author Nicetas of Paphlagonia (died. ca. 890) who wrote that “Andrew preached to the Iberians, Sauromatians, Taurians, and Scythians and to every region and city on the Black Sea, both north and south.”³⁶¹ Later Georgian writers readily adopted this obviously exaggerated and almost all-inclusive remark focused on the superhuman accomplishments of Andrew and not on any specific historical details of his journeys around the Black Sea and beyond. It was Ephrem the Minor (died ca. 1101/3) who reconciled St. Andrew’s story with the earlier evidence of the fourth-century conversion of the Georgians by St. Nino, the captive woman. The medieval Georgian church made Ephrem’s interpretation official after a formal council proclamation in 1103.³⁶²

In this chapter, we have carefully examined the flimsy nature of the available Byzantine sources that have dealt with the conversion of Iberia. In modern narratives, however, self-reliant conclusions are perpetuated and preclude the open examination of the available ancient and medieval material, in which we see that the Roman intellectuals

³⁶¹ Patrologia Graeca 105. See also, Peter Megill Peterson. *Andrew, Brother of Simon Peter: His History and Legends*. E. J. Brill, 1958. p. 20.

³⁶² Stephen H. Rapp, Jr.. *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts And Eurasian Contexts*. Peeters Publishers, 2003. p. 433.

and their administration invested little in those foreign conversions, and they did not prioritize the Iberian conversion over the others. Many modern accounts present another story.³⁶³ Even in nuanced studies, the influence of the long-established interpretative tradition persists:

The arrival of Christianity developed and accelerated that process of integration (Iberia into the Greco-Roman world by the means of Christianity). The complete avoidance of personal names in Rufinus' version enhances a sense of universal parable expressed in the familiar terms of the Greco-Roman world. However, although the Roman empire was to derive substantial benefit from the Christianization of Iberia, the role of the emperor is distant and reactive. The emperor does not send Christianity to Iberia, but responds enthusiastically to its adoption there. It was in response to events that Constantine sent bishop John, two priests, three deacons, and paraphernalia for Nino. The king also brought craftsmen from the Byzantine empire to build churches in Iberia as he had once received them from the emperor to build fortifications there. Iberia and its Christianization are presented as linked inextricably with the Greco-Roman world and its models of Christianity, Christianization, and Christian behavior.³⁶⁴

We could see the automatic association of the conversion to Christianity with deliberate cultural and political calculations. In reality, Rufinus and his followers presented the conversion in a formulaic, Christian way, in which religious change, epitomized by Paul, required a miraculous legitimization and confirmation. Connections with the Greco-Roman world were tenuous at best, and one of the determining reasons for this was the limited interest of Roman and Byzantine authors in the development of Christianity abroad.

We have previously noted how the exploitation of Byzantine history for the nationalization of political and social life in key regions of the former empire has infected

³⁶³ Interpretations that depict Christianity in Georgia as an immediate and progressive political and cultural transformation become popular in the scholarship of nineteenth-century Caucasianists. See, for example, Kniaz Sulkhan Baratov. *История Грузии* [The History of Georgia]. Saint Petersburg, 1871. Note in particular pp. 14-15.

³⁶⁴ David Braund. *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 B.C.—A.D. 562*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. p. 252.

numerous studies. In Georgia as it was in Armenia, it is interesting to observe how this process of reframing the Iberian conversion continues even today:

Although the Georgian Church enjoyed this great power and unquestionable authority, it never debased itself by persecuting representatives of the other nations and creeds to which Georgia was home. Even today one can see Georgian Orthodox churches standing in close proximity to Jewish synagogues, Islamic mosques, Armenian Gregorian cathedrals, Roman Catholic churches and so on. Not only were these “foreigners” respected in Georgia, but they were reflected in the Church itself—St. Shushanik was an Armenian, Sts. Razhden and Evstati Persians, St. Abo an Arab and there were many other non-Georgian martyrs who sacrificed their lives in promoting Christianity and were given their rightful place in the ranks of the Georgian saints. In the fourth century, after Christianity was declared the official religion, the Georgians started to learn Christian culture and to translate and distribute the literature the new Church required. With this in view, Georgian spiritual and secular figures, readily supported by the monarchy, strove to establish literary centres and seats of Georgian culture not only inside the country, but also beyond her boundaries.³⁶⁵

Political borders, cultural boundaries and the making of a nation-state, ethnicity, the idea of being foreign and the presence of Georgian identity, the secular and the sacred, all these categories that are at the forefront of modern political and cultural debates find themselves somehow solved in antiquity and in the Middle Ages.³⁶⁶ But, to wrap ancient and medieval Christianity in such predetermined frameworks is to lose the threads of its early development and the nuances of its history. Early Christians liked to assert the universality and salvific power of their religion. However, their concerns tended to be within the boundaries of their state and in the rare occasions when funds and travelling allowed, they touched on the events abroad.

³⁶⁵ Tamila Mgaloblishvili, ed. *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*. Iberica Caucasia, Volume One. Curzon, Caucasus World. Curzon Press, 1998. p. 8.

³⁶⁶ For an examination of modern views and inherited perspectives on these issues shared by Georgians, see Ernest Gellner. “Ethnicity and Faith in Eastern Europe.” *Daedalus*, Vol. 119, No. 1, Eastern Europe. Winter, 1990. pp. 279-294. For Georgia in particular, see pp. 282-287. Unlike of the above quotation, Gellner writes, “But, tolerant and generous hosts or not, minorities continue to be the major problem facing Georgian nationalism. Georgia constitutes a geographic and a historic unity between the Caucasus and Anatolia. But within this unity, a very large proportion of the territory, something of the order of a third, is inhabited by a wide variety of minorities...” (p. 286).

In ancient Georgia broadly defined, the conversion of the royal elite remained a minor event, noted in passing and wrapped in the general Christian rhetoric of success. The role of the Byzantine emperor was only marginal. And, the way, in which Constantine presumably affected the local decision to convert is by a process of imitation, not coercion.

Radical modern conclusions that put great emphasis on the conversion events have adopted their own trope whose implications are consequential both for the ecumenical ambitions of Christianity and for the political life of the respective nation-states. For example, here is one among many programmatic interpretations:

The introduction of Christianity into Armenia by St. Gregory the Illuminator (A.D. 301) and into Eastern Georgia by St. Nino (A.D. 330) counts among the most important events in the history of these two peoples. Christianity helped to prevent the assimilation of the Transcaucasian nations by the Persians, Arabs, and Turks. The vitality of Christianity in Armenia and Georgia is amply demonstrated by the survival of the two national Churches today, after fifty years of Soviet anti-religious propaganda.³⁶⁷

Such sweeping conclusions are possible when modern concerns need a mythological platform.³⁶⁸ From the perspective of the early witnesses of the conversion, as we have seen in this chapter, the historical reality was quite the opposite. The conversion did not shift the political orientation of Iberia, and the general cultural and social development of the region of K'art'li remained in the Persian orbit. It took many centuries to construct a new local self-identification. In the more recent modern period, it has been the anti-Soviet, pro-Western orientation and ideological ambitions of the local

³⁶⁷ Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, eds. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. p. 224.

³⁶⁸ For an interesting example of an earlier development of the same process during Russia's expansion and the formation of ideological justifications, see Michael Khodarkovsky. "Of Christianity, Enlightenment, and Colonialism: Russia in the North Caucasus, 1550-1800." *The Journal of Modern History* 71 (June 1999). pp. 394-430.

writers that have shaped yet again the ways, in which the conversion of Georgia as a cultural symbol has been depicted and interpreted.³⁶⁹ But, even this is an example of a local calculus and desire to benefit from perceived stronger political and economic powers, not of a premeditated attempt on the part of a nebulous “West” to reframe and colonize Caucasia. We need to remember that successful political and cultural change requires sufficient local support. In the specifics of the conversion of Georgia as a cultural symbol, we find numerous historical contingencies and the politics of local elites that have shifted the conversion story and thus through a constructed past have tried to accommodate their vision for their coveted future.

³⁶⁹ For a detailed illustration of employing the past for the purposes of modern nationalist agendas in the Post-Soviet period in the Caucasus, see Ronald Grigor Suny. “Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (December 2001). pp. 862-896. For a study that looks at the earlier period of Russian expansion and formation of Russian colonialism, see Michael Khodarkovsky. “Of Christianity, Enlightenment, and Colonialism: Russia in the North Caucasus, 1550-1800.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), pp. 394-430. Notice the difficulties that the Russians faced in the region even in the Early Modern period. Looking comparatively, scholars of Roman and Byzantine imperialism should be more careful in depicting ready conquest and inevitable control through Christianity or military force in the ancient and medieval period, especially when their conclusions largely rely on assumptions. “The annexation of the North Caucasus was a long and arduous process. The lack of resources in Moscow, the inhospitable terrain of the barren steppes and rugged mountains, and the resistance of the local population, inspired by Muslim clergy and aided by the neighboring Islamic states, all conspired against a quick and successful conquest” (pp. 397-398). Ultimately, Georgian Christians appealed voluntarily for Russian Orthodox help against “the infidel dogs who capture Christians at night and then convert them to Islam” (p. 409). See also footnote 23. Finally, “yet the [Russian] government policy linking the process of the region’s colonization with Christianity only pushed the natives further to embrace Islam. At the same time as the Russian government was winning the battle over the region’s landscape, it was losing the battle over the region’s people. The natives would learn to rally under the banners of Islam, which became both the means and the goal of their resistance” (p. 430). In other words, Christianity did not guarantee or somehow naturally protect local “nationhood” and a fixed common ethnicity.



Map 4: The Red Sea region between the fourth and the sixth centuries

Chapter 5

Byzantine Christianity and the Politics of Africa and Arabia

Already in the second century, the Roman philosopher Celsus remarked that Christians resembled “a cluster of bats, or ants coming out of a nest, or frogs holding council round a marsh, or worms assembling in some filthy corner, disagreeing with one another which of them was the worse sinner.”³⁷⁰ Celsus and the Christian Origen, who recorded Celsus’ words in order to refute them, duelled at a time when Christianity was not endorsed by the Roman authorities. As we have noted in the introductory chapters, however, even the emperor Constantine’s adoption of Christianity and the promulgations of the first ecumenical council in Nicaea (325) did not bring Christian unity. And by the time of the emperor Justinian (527-565), who is one of our protagonists in this current chapter, Christianity in the Roman empire had been debated in four official ecumenical councils, numerous synods, and unofficial meetings. In the two hundred years that elapsed since Constantine, the Roman emperors swayed between pro-Nicaean, anti-Nicaean (Arian), and even pro-Hellenic (anti-Christian) religious positions.

³⁷⁰ Origen. *Contra Celsum*. Ed. H. Chadwick. IV, 23. Cambridge, 1953. We do not have Celsus’s original work *The True Word*, from which Origen in his famous theological piece *Against Celsus* presumably quoted. Acknowledging the internal problems with ascribing words and ideas to one’s opponent in a Christian apologetic piece, scholars have generally agreed to trust Origen in representing Celsus’s polemic adequately so as to allow Celsus’s rhetorical reconstruction.

The council of Chalcedon (451), the last official ecumenical council prior to Justinian's formal entrance into power in 527, tried to finesse the precise relationship between Jesus Christ's human and divine natures as well as the derivative issues involving Mary's identity as a "Theotokos" (the Bearer of God) and Theopaschism (the question of God's suffering).³⁷¹ In addition to strictly theological resolutions, in canon 28, the council recognized the Roman pope's honorary position in Christianity, but rejected Rome's primacy over Constantinople. This controversial clause, added to lure the Constantinopolitan patriarch and thus better to lobby the emperor towards the official endorsement of Chalcedon, further fueled ecclesiastical disputes and amplified possibilities for division. Thus, in the West, Chalcedon was theologically accepted, but it did plant the seeds of ecclesiastical tension between the papacy and the Constantinopolitan patriarchate. In the East, it resulted in an open split between the Alexandrian and Antiochean theological schools and their followers.

The Coptic (Egyptian) theology is generally labelled as "monophysite." It highlights Christ's divine nature at the expense of His human one (as the opponents would insist). On the other hand, the followers of the fifth-century theologian Nestorius from the school of Antioch are negatively branded as "dyophysite."³⁷² Issues of monophysitism and dyophysitism in the Eastern churches have remained unresolved, not

³⁷¹ For a thorough study on the issues of Chalcedon, see Patrick T.R. Gray. *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451-553)*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979.

³⁷² To illustrate this division of "Eastern Orthodoxy" best, we should look at the modern churches in Antioch. We find the Greek Church of Antioch, the Greek Melkite Catholic Church of Antioch, Latin Church of Antioch, Maronite Church of Antioch, Syrian Catholic Church of Antioch, and Syrian Orthodox "Jacobite" Church of Antioch. Each one of these churches claims unique authority in Christianity in general and over this important ancient center of early apostolicity in particular. Many of the theological and historical reasons for these splits lead back to the Council of Chalcedon and the following Second Council of Constantinople (553). For a convenient introduction to modern Orthodox churches and their theological traditions, see Michael Burgess. *The Eastern Orthodox Churches: Concise Histories with Chronological Checklists of Their Primates*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2005.

least because the leading theologians derogated one another instead of considering the similarities in their positions. In the case of Nestorius, he was condemned for purportedly believing that no union between the human and divine natures of Christ was possible. Hence comes the term “dyophysite,” regardless of the fact that the traditional Orthodox and Catholic view of Christ is technically “dyophysite,” too, meaning that Christ has two natures united in one full being so that there would be one Jesus Christ, but both fully human and fully divine. Of course, the specific theological points are much more nuanced, though when one looks closely at the details, the polarities still become less pronounced and quite blurred as many of the arguments (when not *ad hominem*) revolve around tenuous semantic differences.

In addition to the ecclesiastical fragmentation at the beginning of the sixth century, the Byzantine empire had fractured politically, having lost key territories in Spain, in Italy (including the control over the city of Rome), and in North Africa. Inheriting the imperial power from his basically illiterate uncle Justin I (r. 518-527), the ambitious Justinian set out to solve all those issues in a radical sweep. He sent armies around the empire to regain its former territories. He prided himself as a theologian and set out to resolve the inherited theological disputes. He also instituted monumental building projects, of which the church Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is the most famous. A widely controversial emperor, even in his own time, Justinian’s way of governing certainly did not lack scope and drastic resolution.

In trying to deal with the recurrent problems of Chalcedon, Justinian orchestrated the election of his own protégé Vigilius to the papal throne in Rome. But when, as pope, Vigilius refused to cooperate with Justinian’s theological program, the emperor

kidnapped him from Rome, locked him in a church in Constantinople and kept him there until Vigilius accepted the imperial Christological decision. After multiple discussions and heated debates, the fifth ecumenical council met on May 5, 553, at Constantinople. Only 165 bishops attended (about half the number at Nicaea if tradition is correct). As pope, Vigilius ratified the council, so Justinian finally released him and permitted him to return to Rome. Emaciated from torture, Vigilius never arrived. He fell ill in Syracuse and died in 555, leaving the Roman papacy in a precarious situation, having to accept the decisions of a council against its own ecclesiastical interests.

This general historical background of the empire in the sixth-century is well-known, though the bibliography on Justinian has grown in recent years, and scholars have re-evaluated this critical period in the history of the Roman empire and the emerging Western kingdoms in significant ways.³⁷³ In the currently popular field of “Late Antiquity,” the scholarly focus on Justinian has tended to place him in a large Mediterranean context while in the previous generation, Byzantinists looked at Justinian from strictly Constantinopolitan or, in the context of reported ethnic and political changes, from Balkan/Slavic perspectives.³⁷⁴ Those approaches have made necessary and interesting contributions. However, Justinian’s dealings away from the core of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea have been understudied even though important kingdoms for the security, economy, and even the religious composition and history of the empire and the future Europe were situated south of Egypt around the Red Sea rim

³⁷³ Peter Sarris. *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian*. New York : Cambridge University Press, 2006. For a succinct introduction to Justinian and modern scholarship, see Anthony Kaldellis. *Prokopios: The Secret History with Related Texts*. Hackett Publishing Company, 2010.

³⁷⁴ Most recently, Florin Curta. *The Making of the Slavs : History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, ca. 500-700*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. For his argument, involving Justinian, see especially Chapters 4 and 5.

and in southern Arabia. Thus, we will look precisely at those kingdoms, and, given the objectives of this dissertation, we will examine the key moments of their reported royal conversions to Christianity while keeping in mind and recurrently coming back to the general historical background established above. Preserving the structure of the previous chapters, we will first carefully set the political geography in the period, and then we will survey the important internal and external dynamics of those various polities before we ultimately come to investigate their Christianity and the various narratives of royal conversion.

Byzantium and the Kingdoms of Africa: Political Geography

With Roman expansion to the East and the increase of trade with the Indian subcontinent, especially with towns on the Malabar coast, the polities around the Red Sea grew richer and stronger. Frankincense, other fragrant spices, ivory, cinnamon, pepper, and cotton were transported through the Red Sea. Among other commodities of east Africa, which figured significantly in the social and economic life of the Romans, were ostrich feathers, tortoise shells, hides, wild animals, ebony, and slaves.³⁷⁵ Strabo noted in his *Geography* (ca. 26-24 B.C.) that as many as 120 vessels annually sailed from Egypt to subcontinental India.³⁷⁶ When the Roman empire dipped into decline in the third century A.D., the control of the Red Sea passed into the hands of the expanding Aksūmite kingdom. By the fourth century, it came to dominate the Red Sea coast at least as far

³⁷⁵ Thomas M. Jones. "East African Influences Upon the Early Byzantine Empire." *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 43, No.1 (Jan., 1958), pp. 50-61. p. 57.

³⁷⁶ *The Geography of Strabo*. Tr. Horace Leonard Jones. Loeb Classical Library. 1917-1949. Book 1: 454-5 and Book 8: 52-5. See also V. Begley and R.D. De Puma (eds.). *Rome and India: The Ancient Sea Trade*. Madison, 1991. The book highlights the quantity and variety of imported Roman material found in India, and it studies many other aspects of this trading network. On problems with the referent "India," see below.

south as Cape Guardafui on the Horn of Africa. Aksūm became the first sub-Saharan kingdom to mint its own coinage.³⁷⁷ The kingdom traded heavily with Arabs and Persians in the East who controlled the Indian Ocean. In the third century, the Persian prophet Mani listed Aksūm along with Rome, Persia itself, and China as one of the four great powers of his time.³⁷⁸

The rise to power of the Aksūmite kingdom was intimately linked with the strategic role of Adulis and Aksūm, both gateway cities that funneled diverse resources from the continental hinterland of the Abyssinian Plateau and the Sudanese plains into a maritime exchange network which moved commodities and brought them together from such disparate places one from the other as subcontinental India, China, the lands around the Black Sea, and Spain. In the first and second centuries A.D., both Pliny and the anonymous author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* [*Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*] specified ivory, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus hides, and slaves as exports from Adulis.³⁷⁹ In the sixth century, two Byzantine travellers, Nonnus (ca. A.D. 526-530) and Cosmas Indicopleustes (ca. 525) witnessed the trade of elephants, elephant tusks, hides, and slaves in the region.³⁸⁰ “Pseudo-Callisthenes” claimed that there were many merchants from Aksūm at the markets of what is modern Sri Lanka.³⁸¹

³⁷⁷ Jacke Phillips. “Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa.” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1997), pp. 423-457. p. 451.

³⁷⁸ Stuart Munro-Hay. *Aksum: A Civilization of Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1991. p. 13.

³⁷⁹ For Pliny the Elder. *Natural History*. Berlin, 1866-1873. Book 6:173. For the *Periplus*, see Wilfred H. Schoff. *Periplus of the Outer Sea: East and West, and of the Great Islands Therein by Marcian of Heraclea*. Philadelphia. 1912. p. 13.

³⁸⁰ For Nonnus, see Yuri M. Kobishchanov. *Axum*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979. pp. 104-105 and p. 265. For Cosmas, see *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973.

³⁸¹ Yuri M. Kobishchanov. “On the Problem of Sea Voyages of Ancient Africans in the Indian Ocean.” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1965), pp. 137-141. p. 138. A conventional name assigned to an unknown author of the small treatise *On India and the Brahmins*, “Pseudo-Callisthenes” is included in the *Alexander Book*. The treatise is considered to have been borrowed from the *Lausiaca History*, compiled by

The earliest attested usage of the name “‘Ityōpyā” in the region itself as a substitute for the kingdom of Aksūm appears on the stone inscriptions of king Ezana (ruled in the 320s to the 360s) who is also associated with the first Ethiopian king to convert to Christianity.³⁸² In English, and generally among people outside of modern Ethiopia, the country has also been called “Abyssinia,” derived from the Arabic “*ḥabaš*,” meaning “mixed” (presumably to indicate the many peoples and customs of the country).³⁸³ Today, Ethiopia lists around 80 different ethnic groups with the two largest being the Oromo and the Amhara.³⁸⁴

As with many other places so with Ethiopia, Greco-Roman intellectuals labelled that African land for posterity. Thus, the modern ethnonym “Ethiopia” is derived from the Greek “Αἰθίοψ,” meaning “burnt-face.” Homer was the first to mention the Ethiopians, “most distant of men, who live divided some at the setting of Hyperion,³⁸⁵ some at his rising.”³⁸⁶ Herodotus, too, puzzled by the peculiar custom of circumcision, speculated on why and how so many peoples had picked it up from the Egyptians and the Ethiopians.³⁸⁷

Palladius about A.D. 420. For “Pseudo-Callisthenes,” see also N. Pigulevskaya. *Vizantiya na putyakh v Indiyu [Byzantium at the Road to India]*. Moscow, 1951. p. 70.

³⁸² For Ezana’s Greek inscription, see *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*. Eds. Tormod Eide, Tomas Hägg, Richard Holton Pierce, and László Török. Norway, 1998. Vol. III. pp. 1100-1103.

³⁸³ Adrian Fortescue. *The Lesser Eastern Churches*. London, 1913. p. 307, ff. 2.

³⁸⁴ For modern developments, see Toyin Falola and Salah M. Hassan. *Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa*. North Carolina Academic Press, 2008. See especially p. 80.

³⁸⁵ In Greek mythology, Hyperion is a Titan, son of Uranus and Gaea, father of Helios (Sun), Selene (Moon), and Eos (Dawn). For details, see Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths*. New York, 1988.

³⁸⁶ *Odyssey*. Ed. P. von der Mühl. *Homeri Odyssea*. Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1962. Book 1, 22:

Αἰθίοπας, τοὶ διχθὰ δεδαίαται, ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν, οἱ μὲν δυσσομένου Ὑπερίονος, οἱ δ’ ἀνιόντος...

³⁸⁷ Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. *Hérodote. Histoires*, 9 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963. Book 2, Section 104:

Αὐτὸς δὲ εἴκασα τῆδε· καὶ ὅτι μελάγχροές εἰσι καὶ οὐλότριχες (καὶ τοῦτο μὲν ἐς οὐδὲν ἀνήκει· εἰσὶ γὰρ καὶ ἕτεροι τοιοῦτοι), ἀλλὰ τοῖσδε καὶ μᾶλλον ὅτι μούνοι πάντων ἀνθρώπων Κόλχοι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ Αἰθίοπες περιτάμνονται ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς τὰ αἰδοῖα [My own idea on the subject was based first on the fact that they have black skins and woolly hair (not that that means much as other peoples have the same), and second and even more important, on the fact that the Colchians, the Egyptians, and the

In a later rich ethnographic section, Herodotus decided to survey the diverse Indian peoples.³⁸⁸ Apparently, Herodotus observed, some of them ate their own sick and despite the occasional protests of the future victims that they were in fact fine and perfectly healthy, hungry friends or relatives would splurge over their cooked meat. As a drastic contrast and to illustrate the wide diversity of customs among the Indians, Herodotus pointed out how another tribe lived in complete harmony with nature. Being full vegetarians, the local people would move away from their relatives as soon as they became sick so as not to burden or inconvenience them in the smallest. Concluding this colorful ethnography on India, Herodotus wrote:

All the Indians I have mentioned copulate in the open like cattle. Their skins are all of the same color just as the resembling skins of the Ethiopians. Their semen, when it comes into their women, is not white like other peoples' semen, but black like their own skins. The Ethiopians, too, ejaculate black-colored semen. These ones of the Indians live farther away from the Persians in the direction of the southern wind, and they were never subject to the emperor Darius.³⁸⁹

Later authors, if not as graphic, were just as blunt as Herodotus. Put off by the darkness of the natives' skin, Pseudo-Aristotle thought that the blackness served as a mark of Ethiopian cowardice as apparently did excessive whiteness and womanhood,

Ethiopians are the only peoples of all that have practised circumcision from the beginning]. See also further down Book 2, Section 104: Αὐτῶν δὲ Αἰγυπτίων καὶ Αἰθιοπῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰπεῖν ὁκότεροι παρὰ τῶν ἑτέρων ἐξέμαθον· ἀρχαῖον γὰρ δὴ τι φαίνεται εἶναι [Between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians, I cannot say which learned from the other, for the custom is obviously a very ancient one]. For a summary on the rich bibliography on this point of Herodotus and its purported meaning, see John Marincola. *Herodotus: The Histories*. Penguin Classics, 2003. p. 134, ff. 59.

³⁸⁸ Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. *Hérodote. Histoires*, 9 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963. Book 3, Sections 97-100.

³⁸⁹ Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. *Hérodote. Histoires*, 9 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963. Book 3, Section 101: Μίξις δὲ τούτων τῶν Ἰνδῶν τῶν κατέλεξα πάντων ἐμφανῆς ἐστὶ κατὰ περὶ τῶν προβάτων, καὶ τὸ χρῶμα φορέουσι ὅμοιον πάντες καὶ παραπλήσιον Αἰθίοψι. Ἡ γονὴ δὲ αὐτῶν, τὴν ἀπίενται ἐς τὰς γυναῖκας, οὐ κατὰ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων ἐστὶ λευκὴ, ἀλλὰ μέλαινα κατὰ περὶ τὸ χρῶμα· τοιαύτην δὲ καὶ Αἰθίοπες ἀπίενται θορῆν. Οὗτοι μὲν τῶν Ἰνδῶν ἕκαστέρῳ τῶν Περσέων οἰκέουσι καὶ πρὸς νότου ἀνέμου καὶ Δαρείου βασιλέος οὐδαμὰ ὑπήκουσαν.

too.³⁹⁰ For Philo of Alexandria, it was ironic and sad that the land of Ethiopia was surrounded by the river Geon, which signified “courage,” yet “Ethiopian” itself signified “ταπεινῶσις” because “cowardice,” Philo explained, “is lowly.”³⁹¹ The Old Testament also mentions that the river Geon “encompasses the whole land of Ethiopia”³⁹² and that Moses “had married an Ethiopian woman.”³⁹³ “Ebedmelech the Ethiopian” appears in Jeremiah 38, and in Psalm 68:31, “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”³⁹⁴

From this quick run through some of the sources, we can see that “Ethiopia” was a popular referent in antiquity. But, contrary to the popular modern imagination, which readily equates Ethiopia with the kingdom of Aksūm, one of the puzzles of modern scholarship is where precisely to locate ancient Ethiopia. Usually the Hebrew “Cush” is ascribed to Nubia (roughly modern Sudan), yet the Septuagint translated it into Greek as “Ethiopia.”³⁹⁵ In a seemingly precise passage, Herodotus wrote that “the Ethiopians inhabit the country immediately above the Elephantine, and one half of the island while the other half is inhabited by Egyptians... Finally, you will arrive at a large city called

³⁹⁰ Aristotle. *Physiognomonica*. Ed. I. Bekker, *Aristotelis opera*, vol. 2. Berlin: Reimer, 1831 (repr. De Gruyter, 1960). 812a13-14: Οἱ ἄγαν μέλανες δειλοί· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, Αἰθιοπίας. οἱ δὲ λευκοὶ ἄγαν δειλοὶ· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τὰς γυναῖκας. τὸ δὲ πρὸς ἀνδρείαν συντελοῦν χροῶμα μέσον δεῖ τούτων εἶναι.

³⁹¹ Philo. *Legum allegoriarum libri i-iii*. Ed. L. Cohn, *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*, vol. 1. Berlin: Reimer, 1896 (repr. De Gruyter, 1962). 1.68: καὶ ὄνομα τῶ ποταμῶ τῶ δευτέρῳ Γηῶν· οὗτος κυκλοῖ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν Αἰθιοπίας. συμβολικῶς ἐστὶν ὁ ποταμὸς οὗτος ἡ ἀνδρεία. For the later passage: περικυκλοῖ δὲ καὶ περικάθεται προσπολεμοῦσα τὴν Αἰθιοπίαν, ἧς ἐστὶν ἐρμηνευθὲν τοῦνομα ταπεινῶσις...

³⁹² The Septuagint with Apocrypha. Ed. and tr. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton. London, 2007 (12th reprint). Genesis 2:13-14: Καὶ ὄνομα τῶ ποταμῶ τῶ δευτέρῳ, Γεῶν· οὗτος ὁ κυκλῶν πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν Αἰθιοπίας.

³⁹³ The Septuagint with Apocrypha. Ed. and tr. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton. London, 2007 (12th reprint). Numbers 12:1: Καὶ ἐλάλησε Μαρίαμ καὶ Ααρὼν κατὰ Μωυσῆ, ἕνεκεν τῆς γυναικὸς τῆς Αἰθιοπίσσης ἣν ἔλαβε Μωυσῆς, ὅτι γυναῖκα Αἰθιοπίσσαν ἔλαβε...

³⁹⁴ The Septuagint with Apocrypha. Ed. and tr. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton. London, 2007 (12th reprint). For Ethiopia: Ἡξοῦσι πρέσβεις ἐξ Αἰγύπτου, Αἰθιοπία προφθάσει χεῖρα αὐτῆς τῶ Θεῶ.

³⁹⁵ We have already seen this passage above with the marriage of Moses. The Septuagint with Apocrypha. Ed. and tr. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton. London, 2007 (12th reprint). Numbers 12:1. See footnote 23. In this case, it is translated in the Greek as “Ethiopia,” but in Hebrew, it is “Cush.”

Meroë, this city is said to be the capital of the other Ethiopians.”³⁹⁶ According to this, therefore, Herodotus seemed to point to the kingdom of Meroë, Nubia that was ruled by “the other Ethiopians” (τῶν ἄλλων Αἰθιοπίων). In another passage, he observed:

The eastern Ethiopians—for there were two sorts of Ethiopians in the army—served with the Indians. These were just like the southern Ethiopians except for their language and their hair: their hair is straight while that of the Ethiopians in Libya is the crispest and curliest in the world. The equipment of the Ethiopians from Asia was in most respects like the Indian except that they wore head-dresses consisting of horses’ scalps, stripped off with the ears and mane attached—the ears were made to stand erect and the mane served as a crest. For shields, they used the skins of cranes.³⁹⁷

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, the anonymous first or second-century account of travel and trade in the Indian Ocean, which we encountered above, introduced the famous harbor of Adulis as “a fair-sized town,” and here we also find what is probably the first

³⁹⁶ Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. *Hérodote. Histoires*, 9 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963. Book 2, Section 29: Καὶ ἔπειτα ἀπίξεται ἐς πεδῖον λεῖον, ἐν τῷ νήσον περιρρέει ὁ Νεῖλος· Ταχομψῷ οὖνομα αὐτῆ ἐστὶ· οἰκέουσι δὲ τὰ ἀπὸ Ἐλεφαντίνης ἄνω Αἰθιοπεὺς ἤδη καὶ τῆς νήσου τὸ ἡμισυ, τὸ δὲ ἡμισυ Αἰγύπτιοι. Ἔχεται δὲ τῆς νήσου λίμνη μεγάλη, τὴν πέριξ νομάδες Αἰθιοπεὺς νέμονται· τὴν διεκπλώσας ἐς τοῦ Νεῖλου τὸ ῥέεθρον ἤξεις, τὸ ἐς τὴν λίμνην ταύτην ἐκδιδόι. Καὶ ἔπειτα ἀποβάς παρὰ τὸν ποταμὸν ὁδοιπορίην ποιήσεται ἡμερῶν τεσσαεράκοντα· σκόπελοί τε γὰρ ἐν τῷ Νείλῳ ὀξέες ἀνέχουσι καὶ χοιράδες πολλαί εἰσι, δι’ ὧν οὐκ οἶά τέ ἐστι πλέειν. Διεξεληθῶν δὲ ἐν τῆσι τεσσαεράκοντα ἡμέρησι τοῦτο τὸ χωρίον, αὐτὶς ἐς ἕτερον πλοῖον ἐσβάς δωδέκα ἡμέρας πλεύσει καὶ ἔπειτα ἤξεις ἐς πόλιν μεγάλην τῆ οὖνομά ἐστι Μερὸν. Λέγεται δὲ αὕτη ἡ πόλις εἶναι μητρόπολις τῶν ἄλλων Αἰθιοπίων... [After this, one reaches a level plain where the river is divided by an island named Tachompso. South of the Elephantine, the country is inhabited by Ethiopians who also possess half of Tachompso, the other half being occupied by Egyptians. Beyond the island is a great lake, and round its shores live nomadic Ethiopians. After crossing the lake, one comes again to the stream of the Nile, which flows into it. At this point one must land and travel along the bank of the river for forty days because sharp rocks, some showing above water and many just awash, make the river impracticable for boats. After the forty days’ journey on land, one takes another boat and in twelve days reaches a big city named Meroë, said to be the capital of the other Ethiopians].

³⁹⁷ Ed. Ph.-E. Legrand. *Hérodote. Histoires*, 9 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963. Book 7, Sections 70-71: οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἡλίου ἀνατολέων Αἰθιοπεὺς (διζοὶ γὰρ δὴ ἐστρατεύοντο) προσετατάχατο τοῖσι Ἰνδοῖσι, διαλλάσσοντες εἶδος μὲν οὐδὲν τοῖσι ἑτέροισι, φωνὴν δὲ καὶ τρίχωμα μῦνον· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀπὸ ἡλίου Αἰθιοπεὺς ἰθύτριχες εἰσι, οἱ δ’ ἐκ τῆς Λιβύης οὐλότατον τρίχωμα ἔχουσι πάντων ἀνθρώπων. Οὗτοι δὲ οἱ ἐκ τῆς Ἀσίας Αἰθιοπεὺς τὰ μὲν πλέω κατὰ περὶ Ἰνδοὶ ἐσεσάχατο, προμετωπίδια δὲ ἵππων εἶχον ἐπὶ τῆσι κεφαλῆσι σύν τε τοῖσι ὡσὶ ἐκδεδαρμένα καὶ τῆ λοφιῆ· καὶ ἀντὶ μὲν λόφου ἢ λοφιῆ κατέχρα, τὰ δὲ ὦτα τῶν ἵππων ὀρθὰ πεπηγῶτα εἶχον· προβλήματα δὲ ἀντ’ ἀσπίδων ἐποιεῦντο γεράνων δοράς.

reference to “the city of the people called Auxumites.”³⁹⁸ In his *Christian Topography*, which dealt among other things with cosmological arguments and geometrical calculations for the shape of the Earth based on the Bible, the Alexandrian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes described his visit to the kingdom of Aksūm in about A.D. 525. He found Adulis a flourishing port and visited the antiquities and churches of Aksūm as well as other places in the kingdom. Reportedly, he was also present at Adulis where king Ellatsbaas (also called by other authors Ella Asbeha or Eleseboas) was preparing an expedition against the kingdom of the Homerites (usually referred to as “Himyarites” by scholars) in Arabia across the Red Sea.³⁹⁹

The seeming clarity in the works of those authors, however, does not solve the problem of Ethiopia’s precise location, for north of Aksūm, in the deserts east of the Nile, were the Blemmyes, a broad conglomeration of nomadic tribes. West of the Nile were numerous tribes, sometimes called “Ethiopians,” sometimes called “Nubians,” whose itineraries and organization are hard to disentangle. In the southern part of this western region, in the hilly lands of Kurdufan (a former province of central Sudan with an equally

³⁹⁸ Tr. and comm. Wilfred H. Schoff. *Periplus of the Outer Sea: East and West, and of the Great Islands Therein by Marcian of Heraclea*. Philadelphia. 1912. p. 23.

³⁹⁹ *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 2, Chapter 56. p. 369: Παρόντι οὖν μοι ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις, πρὸ τούτων τῶν ἐνιαυτῶν εἴκοσι πέντε πλέον ἔλαττον, ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ τῆς βασιλείας Ἰουστίνου τοῦ Ῥωμαίων βασιλέως, ὁ τηνικαῦτα βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἀξωμιτῶν, Ἐλλατζβάας, μέλλων ἐξιέναι εἰς πόλεμον πρὸς τοὺς Ὀμηρίτας τοὺς πέραν γράφει τῷ ἄρχοντι Ἀδούλεως ἀναλαβεῖν τὰ ἴσα τῶν γεγραμμένων ἐν τῷ δίφρῳ τῷ πτολεμαικῷ καὶ τῇ εἰκόνι καὶ ἀποστεῖλαι αὐτῷ [When I was in those places, it was about twenty five years ago at the beginning of the rule of the Roman emperor Justin, Ellatsbaas, at that time emperor of the Aksūmites, was about to go to war against the Homerites. Ellatsbaas wrote to the governor of Adulis to remove the inscriptions on the throne of the Ptolemies and on the column and to send them to him].

complex modern history), there arose in Roman times a great migration of peoples called the Noba.⁴⁰⁰

To make matters even more complicated, especially after the fourth century A.D., the geographical and cultural referents behind the terms “Ἰνδία” and “Ἰνδοί” started to vary considerably in the Byzantine documents. It was often unclear whether authors meant by “Ἰνδία” subcontinental India, Ethiopia at Aksūm, or south Arabia.⁴⁰¹ The fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus revealed decent knowledge of subcontinental India.⁴⁰² In the *Persian Wars*, an account on the emperor Justinian’s campaigns, the sixth-century Procopius referred to “Ἰνδία” as the subcontinent, too.⁴⁰³ But, in his *Buildings*, Procopius connected India with Ethiopia, “the Nile river, flowing out of India into Egypt, divides that land into two parts as far as the sea.”⁴⁰⁴ Given the unresolved mystery of the source of the Nile for the ancients, Procopius might have purposefully used the vague term “India,” but in either case, it is more reasonable to

⁴⁰⁰ L.P. Kirwan. “Rome beyond the Southern Egyptian Frontier.” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 13-19. p. 15.

⁴⁰¹ Philip Mayerson. “A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Apr.—Jun., 1993), pp. 169-174. p. 169.

⁴⁰² Loeb Classical Library. Ed. G.P. Goold. Volume 2, 1956. Book 23.6.21: Nos autem dicimus quod in his terris amnes sunt duo perpetui, quos ipsi transivimus, Diabas et Adiabab, iunctis navalibus pontibus, ideoque intellegi Adiabenam cognominatam ut a fluminibus maximis Aegyptos, Homero auctore, et India et Euphratensis ante hoc Commagena, itidemque Hiberia ex Hiberno (nunc Hispania) et a Baeti amne insigni provincia Baetica. [But, I myself say that there are two perpetually flowing rivers to be found in these lands, the Diabas and Adiabab, which I myself have crossed, and over which there are bridges of boats; and therefore it is to be assumed that Adiabab was named from them, as from great rivers Egypt was named, according to Homer, as well as India, and the Euphratensis before my time called Commagena; likewise from the Hiberus, Hiberia (now Hispania), and the province of Baetica from the noble river Baetis]. Note also Ammianus’ hearkening back to Homer.

⁴⁰³ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1.19. Procopius describes the entire region in relative detail, but here is just a line to indicate his focus on the Indian ocean: αὕτη δὲ ἡ θάλασσα ἐξ Ἰνδῶν ἀρχομένη ἐνταῦθα τελευτᾷ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς [This sea, starting from India, ends in the Roman rule].

⁴⁰⁴ Procopius. *De aedificiis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 4. Leipzig: Teubner, 1964. Book 6.1.6: Νεῖλος μὲν ὁ ποταμὸς ἐξ Ἰνδῶν ἐπ’ Αἰγύπτου φερόμενος δίχα τέμνει τὴν ἐκείνη γῆν ἄχρι ἐς θάλασσαν.

assume that he had meant the lands of Africa instead of the subcontinent. Otherwise, the Nile had to make a loop from Asian India into Egypt, crossing through “the sea,” which would make Procopius’ point somewhat incoherent.

During his business travels, Cosmas Indicopleustes (note his ascription “Indicopleustes” in translation from the Greek, “the Sailor of India”) recorded that after having crossed several gulfs, he came to “inner India” (ἐπὶ ἐσωτέραν Ἰνδίαν).⁴⁰⁵ The phrase “inner India” is repeated several times in association with specific far-eastern regions and products. The silk country, he wrote, was in “the innermost India of all (ἐν τῇ ἐσωτέρῃ πάντων Ἰνδία),” and he called it, “Τζίνιστα” (=perhaps China).⁴⁰⁶

Cosmas placed Tzinista far beyond the island called by “the Indians,” “Serendiva,” and by the Greeks, “Taprobane” (=Sri Lanka according to modern scholars).⁴⁰⁷ On Taprobane, “an island of inner India where one finds the Indian Sea,” Cosmas visited a

⁴⁰⁵ *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 2, Chapter 30.

⁴⁰⁶ *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 2, Chapter 45: Αὕτη δὲ ἡ χώρα τοῦ μεταξίου ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ἐσωτέρῃ πάντων Ἰνδία, κατὰ τὸ ἀριστερὸν μέρος εἰσιόντων τοῦ Ἰνδικοῦ πελάγους, περαιτέρω πολὺ τοῦ Περσικοῦ κόλπου καὶ τῆς νήσου τῆς καλουμένης παρὰ μὲν Ἰνδοῖς, Σελεδίβα, παρὰ δὲ τοῖς Ἑλλησι, Ταπροβάνη, Τζίνιστα οὕτω καλουμένη, κυκλουμένη πάλιν ἐξ ἀριστερῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ Βαρβαρία κυκλοῦται ἐκ δεξιῶν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ. Καὶ φασιν οἱ Ἰνδοί, οἱ φιλόσοφοι, οἱ καλούμενοι Βραχμάνες, ὅτι ἐὰν βάλῃς ἀπὸ Τζίνιστα σπαρτίον διελθεῖν διὰ Περσίδος ἕως Ῥωμανίας ὡς ἀπὸ κανόνος τὸ μεσαίτατον τοῦ κόσμου ἐστὶ, καὶ τάχα ἀληθεύουσιν [This land of the silk is in the most interior India of all. It is to the left if one reaches it from the Indian sea, much beyond the Persian gulf and the island, which the Indians have called Selediva and the Greeks have called Taprobane. This is the country named Tzinista bordering to the left the Ocean just as Barbaria is circled from the right by it. And the Indians, the philosophers called Brahmins, say that if one casts a rope from Tzinista to Romania [note here the interesting reference to the Roman empire] in such a way as to cross through Persia, one would cut as a carpenter’s ruler the world in half. And, they probably speak the truth].

⁴⁰⁷ *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 2, Chapter 45. See also Philip Mayerson. “A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Apr.—Jun., 1993), pp. 169-174. p. 170.

church.⁴⁰⁸ From “Barbaria” (east Africa or the lands of modern Somalia according to modern scholars),⁴⁰⁹ Cosmas traced goods that were shipped by sea to Adulis, to “the Homerites, to inner India, and to Persia.”⁴¹⁰ On the west coast of India, Cosmas located Male (Malabar) and Kalliana (Kalyan).⁴¹¹ He placed “Sindou” at “the beginning of India (ἀρχὴ τῆς Ἰνδικῆς)” where the river Indus forms the boundary between Persia and India.⁴¹² This is particularly convincing since in Sindhi (the language of the Sindh region of Pakistan), “Sindhu” stands for the Indus river.

This is as clear a geographical description as we may find. Two centuries earlier, the Arian historian Philostorgius (ca. 368-430/40) had described the mission of Theophilus “the Indian” following the initial labors of the apostle Bartholomew in “innermost India.” Theophilus was supposedly born on the island of Divus (usually associated by modern scholars with one of the Maldivian islands) and spent many years among the Romans, when around 356, the emperor Constantius (r. 337-361) supposedly placed him at the head of an embassy “to those Indians formerly called Sabaeans but now called Homerites...to a region called by the Greeks Arabia Magna and Arabia Felix.”⁴¹³ Theophilus performed a number of miracles among the people and converted the ruler

⁴⁰⁸ *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 3, Chapter 65.

⁴⁰⁹ For east Africa, see Philip Mayerson. “A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Apr.—Jun., 1993), pp. 169-174. p. 170. For Somalia, see L.P. Kirwan. “The Christian Topography and the Kingdom of Axum.” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 138, No. 2 (Jun., 1972), pp. 166-177. p. 170. Neither of the two, however, explain their rationale for their respective identification.

⁴¹⁰ *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 2, Chapter 49.

⁴¹¹ *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 3, Chapter 65.

⁴¹² *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie Chrétienne*. Ed. and tr. Wanda Wolska-Conus. Paris, 1973. Book 11, Chapter 16.

⁴¹³ Philostorgius. *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* (GCS). 1913: 18, 32-34.

who built churches at Tapharum (Zafar), Adane (Aden), and at the Persian trading site near the mouth of the Persian Sea.⁴¹⁴

Given the mentioning of royal conversion here, we need to note that Constantius most likely appointed Theophilus as the head of the embassy due to his presumed familiarity with local culture and languages. The many miracles and the ultimate conversion might simply be Philostorgius' way of Christianizing the story. Given the short account of Philostorgius, clipped as it were in the notes of the ninth-century patriarch Photius, it is hard to know for sure. But, in any case, we will come back to the Homerites and their kingdom in south Arabia later in the chapter.

Another contemporary of Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century, who had something to say about India, was the lawyer and historian John Malalas. John dealt almost exclusively with the struggle between the Aksūmites and the Homerites in the sixth century.⁴¹⁵ Interested in more detail, John Malalas saw a difference between “the Homerites” and what he called “the Amerites:”

The king of the Aksūmites is more inland (ἐνδότερος) than the Amerites, but the king of the Homerites is near Egypt. Roman traders travel through the land of the Homerites to Aksūm and to the inner (ἐνδότερα) kingdoms of the Indians. For, there are seven kingdoms of the Indians and the Ethiopians; three of the Indians and four of the Ethiopians, the latter being near the sea in the eastern regions.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Philip Mayerson. “A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Apr.—Jun., 1993), pp. 169-174. p. 172.

⁴¹⁵ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia [Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae]*. Bonn, 1831. p. 433: 3-5: Ἐν αὐτῶ δὲ τῷ χρόνῳ συνέβη Ἰνδοῦς πολεμήσαι πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς οἱ ὀνομαζόμενοι Αὐξουμίται καὶ οἱ Ὀμηρίται· ἡ δὲ αἰτία τοῦ πολέμου αὐτῆ.

⁴¹⁶ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia [Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae]*. Bonn, 1831. p. 433:6-11: Ὁ τῶν Αὐξουμιτῶν βασιλεὺς ἐνδότερός ἐστι τῶν Ἀμεριτῶν, ὁ δὲ τῶν Ὀμηριτῶν πλησίον ἐστὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου. οἱ δὲ πραγματευταὶ Ῥωμαίων διὰ τῶν Ὀμηριτῶν εἰσέρχονται εἰς τὴν Αὐξούμην καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἐνδότερα βασιλεία τῶν Ἰνδῶν. εἰσὶ γὰρ Ἰνδῶν καὶ Αἰθιοπίων βασιλεία ἑπτὰ, τρία μὲν Ἰνδῶν, τέσσαρα δὲ Αἰθιοπίων, τὰ πλησίον ὄντα τοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ ἐπὶ τὰ ἀνατολικά μέρη.

It was in the early 520s, according to John Malalas, when king Dimnos of the Amerites radically prosecuted Christian Roman traders in his state and ordered their systematic execution. The reasons for such a capital verdict were reported Christian violations and regular murder of resident Jews.⁴¹⁷ The new Aksūmite king Andas, upset by the subsequent loss of trade with the Romans, declared war against the Amerites and swore to himself that if he were victorious, he would become a Christian. Andas won, so he converted to Christianity and immediately asked Justinian to have all the Indian land (πᾶσαν τὴν Ἰνδικῆν χώραν) Christianized.⁴¹⁸ Indian ambassadors visited the Byzantine empire, selected for themselves a bishop and clergy to assist him and brought them back to the land of India.⁴¹⁹

As is relatively easy to see, this was a complex region, and the Byzantine historians had difficulty in capturing the precise geographical and political boundaries between the peoples. We need to pause and wonder why the Byzantine intellectuals and

⁴¹⁷ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*]. Bonn, 1831. p. 433:13-17: ἐγνωκῶς Δίμνος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Αμεριτῶν, ἐφόνευσεν αὐτοὺς καὶ πάντα τὰ αὐτῶν ἀφείλετο, λέγων ὅτι οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι οἱ χριστιανοὶ κακῶς ποιοῦσι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ἐν τοῖς μέρεσιν αὐτῶν καὶ πολλοὺς κατ' ἔτος φονεύουσι...

⁴¹⁸ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*]. Bonn, 1831. p. 434:10: ἐν τῷ δὲ μέλλειν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Αὐξουμιτῶν πολεμῆν συνετάξατο λέγων ὅτι Ἐὰν νικήσω Δίμνον τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Αμεριτῶν, χριστιανὸς γίνομαι· ὑπὲρ γὰρ τῶν χριστιανῶν πολεμῶ αὐτῷ. καὶ νικήσας ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Αὐξουμιτῶν καὶ παραλαβὼν αὐτὸν αἰχμάλωτον, ἀνείλεν αὐτὸν καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν βοήθειαν αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὴν χώραν καὶ τὰ βασίλεια αὐτοῦ ἔλαβε.

⁴¹⁹ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*]. Bonn, 1831. p. 434:14, 18: Καὶ μετὰ τὴν νίκην ἔπεμψε συγκλητικὸς αὐτοῦ δύο καὶ μετ' αὐτῶν διακοσίους ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ, δεόμενος τοῦ βασιλέως Ἰουστινιανοῦ ὥστε λαβεῖν αὐτὸν ἐπίσκοπον καὶ κληρικοὺς καὶ κατηχηθῆναι καὶ διδαχθῆναι τὰ χριστιανῶν μυστήρια καὶ φωτισθῆναι καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν Ἰνδικὴν χώραν ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίου γενέσθαι. Καὶ ἐμνηύθη τῷ βασιλεῖ Ἰουστινιανῷ πάντα διὰ Λικινίου, αὐγουσταλίου Ἀλεξανδρείας· καὶ ἐθέσπισεν ὁ αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς ὄντινα βούλονται ἐπίσκοπον λαβεῖν αὐτοὺς. καὶ ἐπελέξαντο οἱ αὐτοὶ πρεσβευταὶ Ἰνδοὶ τὸν παραμονάριον τοῦ ἀγίου Ἰωάννου τοῦ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ, ἄνδρα εὐλαβῆ, παρθένον, ὀνόματι Ἰωάννην, ὄντα ἐνιαυτῶν ὡς ἐξήκοντα δύο. καὶ λαβόντες τὸν ἐπίσκοπον καὶ τοὺς κληρικοὺς, οὓς αὐτὸς ἐπελέξατο, ἀπήγαγον εἰς τὴν Ἰνδικὴν χώραν πρὸς Ἄνδαν τὸν βασιλέα αὐτῶν.

bureaucrats, some of them (like John Malalas) being even members of the inner circle of the imperial administration, could not go into more precise description of those otherwise strategic and important lands. Calling the local people “Homerites,” similarly to the “Scythians” in northern Europe, preserved classical (in the case of the “Scythians,” Herodotean) terminology, but it hardly conveyed any specific and critical cultural deliberation. When interpreting the conversions of royalty, we need to keep these terminological ambiguities in mind, for the foreign conversions during the rule of Justinian, which scholars have casually depicted as strategic and imperialistic, quickly become problematic interpretations since the Byzantines were ambiguous on precisely which royal elite supposedly received Christianity.

There is no mention in John Malalas that the Aksūmites technically had already been Christian for the last two centuries. It was king Ezana in the fourth century, we may recall here from the traditional scholarly narrative, who had introduced Christianity to those lands. Like other contemporary Byzantine authors who mention conversions of foreign royalty, John Malalas remains brief and runs quickly through the episode without much analysis. From the little we have, we can see that the anecdote stands as another example of a passive local conversion, accomplished not by Byzantine imperialistic coercion, but by voluntary imitation on the part of the receiving polity. According to John Malalas, the conversion of Andas brought Christianity to the entire land of India, stretching from somewhere in Africa to somewhere in Arabia or even beyond. At best, this is an argument for Christian expansionist rhetoric, but it is hardly an indication from the perspective of its original author that the conversion of royalty was critical and historically significant enough to deserve detailed analysis and meticulous precision.

Clearly, it would be a challenge, if even possible, to disentangle all the Byzantine geographical and cultural references in the region and then to translate and place them precisely onto a modern map. However, our approach and focus on royal conversions allows us to examine the entire region from the Nile across the Red Sea and into southern Arabia as a whole. After all, the Byzantines themselves grouped together those peoples and their changing polities. And, of course, it is the Byzantine perspective on those foreign affairs that we have set out to examine.

Following the historical consensus and for analytical clarity, we should position the Aksūmite kingdom roughly around the area between Adulis, Aksūm, and modern Addis Ababa (the current capital of Ethiopia), which is a territory extending to the western coast of the Red Sea. Then, the ancient and medieval Nubia falls to the west of the kingdom of Aksūm, roughly in the lands of modern Sudan. For historical sources on Nubia in the sixth century, we rely mostly on Procopius of Caesarea and on the ecclesiastical historian and monophysite bishop John of Ephesus.

Writing about 545, Procopius in his *History of the Persian Wars* mentioned tribes that apparently inhabited the land between the Nile's first cataract and the city of Aksūm, "Within that space many peoples are settled, and among them the Blemyes and Nobatai who are very large peoples. But the Blemyes dwell in the central portion of the country while the Nobatai possess the territory about the river Nile."⁴²⁰ John of Ephesus, whose account of Nubia's conversion to Christianity we will revisit, related that when the missionary Julian arrived between 540 and 548 he found the polity immediately to the

⁴²⁰Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1.28: ἐνταῦθα ἔθνη ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἴδονται καὶ Βλέμυες τε καὶ Νοβάται, πολυανθρωπότατα γένη. ἀλλὰ Βλέμυες μὲν ταύτης δὴ τῆς χώρας ἐς τὰ μέσα ὤκηνται, Νοβάται δὲ τὰ ἀμφὶ Νεῖλον ποταμὸν ἔχουσι.

south of the first cataract in the hands of the Nobadai (Nabadoos).⁴²¹ “At a great distance from them, “ he wrote in a later passage, “was another powerful tribe whom the Greeks call Alodaei” while “between the Nobadaei and the Alodaei is a country inhabited by another people, called Makoritaei.”⁴²²

Apparently, the Makoritai and the Nobadai were great enemies. The Makoritai have been variously identified with the “Μακκοῦραι” of Ptolemy⁴²³ and the “Μεγάβαροι” of Strabo.⁴²⁴ But, the truth is that little is actually known as other ancient authors have mentioned the “Mārīkōs,” or “Mazikes,” a tribe of the western desert in the lands of Libya.⁴²⁵

According to modern historical geographers, Alodia (Ⲁⲗⲱⲟⲁⲓⲁ in Coptic, in Greek Ἀλωός, in Arabic ‘Alwah), the country of the Alodai (Syriac *Alūdūs*), may be traced back to the fourth century B.C..⁴²⁶ The town of ‘Alwa is mentioned in the Aksūmite inscription of Ezana in the fourth century and was situated apparently on the Nile (Sēdā) and to the south of the junction with the Atbara (Takkazē). It is numbered among the cities “built of bricks” captured from Noba by Ezana about A.D. 350.

Thus, to put everything succinctly, at least as late as 580, Nubia seemed to have been composed of three distinct and independent kingdoms, each with its own king or

⁴²¹ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, 6.

⁴²² John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, 57.

⁴²³ L. Duchesne, *L'Église au sixième siècle*. Paris, 1925. p. 300.

⁴²⁴ L.P. Kirwan. “Notes on the Topography of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms.” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Sep., 1935), pp. 57-62. See especially p. 58.

⁴²⁵ L.P. Kirwan. “Notes on the Topography of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms.” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Sep., 1935), pp. 57-62. p. 58 where Kirwan argues that “Mārīkōs” never even existed, but were a later scribal error in the chronicle of John of Nikiu for the “Mazikes” in the deserts of Libya.

⁴²⁶ L.P. Kirwan. “Notes on the Topography of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms.” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Sep., 1935), pp. 57-62. pp. 58-59.

leading chief.⁴²⁷ From north to south, those kingdoms were Nobatia, Makuria, and Alodia. However, we need to remember that the borders were regularly shifting, so the Byzantines themselves gave only vague, often confused, geographical descriptions.

Arguably, Nobatia represented approximately the extent of the sixth-century kingdom of the Nobatai, which would have stretched from the first to the third cataract of the Nile. Makuria, the land of the Makoritai, seems to have extended as far as the ancient Meroë. From Meroë to the south was Alodia.

A major overland road connected Nubia to the Red Sea coastal regions. It went from the sea itself through the Aksūm and Kassala areas, probably via or near the Gash (Mareb) and Atbara rivers through to the eastern bank of the Nile valley around the Kurgus area and then up to Aswan. Thus, it bypassed the Nile river almost entirely. This ancient journey is comparable with the well-known and apparently still busy *shariya el-arba'een*, the “forty-day road” in the western desert of Sudan and Egypt. Camels have been in use in this area for centuries.⁴²⁸

As our sources have made clear, inhabitants of the ancient African coast crossed and interacted with the natives on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea to the point that the Byzantines had difficulties in distinguishing them. According to modern scholars, the most ancient intercontinental sea voyages in the Indian Ocean were made along the coast. Indians, Sinhalese and Southern Arabians were first to use monsoon routes for establishing shorter sea trips between the coasts of India and Hadramaut and, later on, of East Africa. There took place a great migration of Malayan sea voyagers, who crossed the whole breadth of the Indian Ocean to Madagascar, the Comoros, and East Africa. The

⁴²⁷ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, 53.

⁴²⁸ P. Rowley-Conwy. “The Camel in the Nile valley: New Radiocarbon Accelerator (AMS) Dates for Qaşr Ibrîm.” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, LXXIV (1988), pp. 245-8.

monsoon route was also used by Roman subjects for sailing to India, Sri Lanka, and to Eastern Asia.⁴²⁹ The south Arabian region on the eastern coast of the Red Sea was the kingdom of the Homerites.

The interconnected geographical setting, which we have just surveyed, already points to the wonderful variety and historical complexity of those rich African and Arabian lands. The cultural multiplicity and the regional differences are significant to keep in mind if we are to understand the dynamics of the reported royal conversions in Africa and Arabia. Unlike in Armenia and in Georgia where the regional variety was also rich, the climactic variations brought in yet another layer of complexity in the African and Arabian domains. They were drastic, for the regional settings switched from oceanic monsoons on the coasts, to vast mountain ranges, and to arid deserts.

All in all, geographical, political, and cultural variety intersected in the African and Arabian regions, making Roman relations with the local peoples difficult, but absolutely mandatory, for the Romans had to rely on local expertise if they were to overcome successfully all the challenges that came along with such regional breadth. To understand local Christianity vis-à-vis the Byzantine empire, therefore, we need to examine some of the ways in which the Byzantines interacted with the locals and to delineate the key issues for the empire in the region. It is in this particular context that we will unravel the stories about royal conversions that have come down to us.

⁴²⁹ Yuri M. Kobishchanov. "On the Problem of Sea Voyages of Ancient Africans in the Indian Ocean." *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1965), pp. 137-141. Note Kobishchanov's reliance on Strabo.

Byzantium and the Natives: Imperial Foreign Relations in the African and Arabian Lands

In the region of Nubia, the Romans penetrated between the first cataract of the Nile and Khartoum. Nubia, at large, is a purely geographical term of disputed origin, coined in medieval times. In so far as it has a political connotation, it is connected to the Christian Nubian kingdoms which were present in this region between the middle of the sixth and the first quarter of the fourteenth century. A geographically rich area, Nubia transitions from a northern arid zone of desert to the rain belt and grasslands of Africa. Intrigued and inquisitive of potential economic development, the emperor Nero in the first century had sent an exploratory expedition that witnessed this geographical transition.⁴³⁰ As in other parts of north-east Africa, the whims of the Nile were among the most important determinant factors of the local economy. Through the Nubian sandstone, today too, the Nile moves easily, but when it reaches Khartoum, the river is obstructed and cascades through rocks, which have created the famous cataracts of the Nile.

Those cataract regions, whether as political boundaries, defense structures, or as places of refuge for a fleeing population, have played an important role in the history of Nubia.⁴³¹ In general, the Roman traveller sought to avoid the worst of the turbulent waters of the cataracts and thus tried to cut off the two great bends of the river between Khartoum and the lands near Wadi Halfa. Thus, the ancient caravan route went right across the flat and windy desert. As is easy to imagine, camels were a crucial commodity in the region and were of primary importance for the people whose means of livelihood

⁴³⁰ L.P. Kirwan. "Rome beyond the Southern Egyptian Frontier." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 13-19. p. 13.

⁴³¹ L.P. Kirwan. "Rome beyond the Southern Egyptian Frontier." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 13-19. p. 13.

came from transporting goods along the caravan route. Desert lands, camels, nomadic tribes, small raiding bands, we need to imagine then how this affected the Byzantine imperial policy ultimately dictated from distant Constantinople. Perhaps, a modern observation on the British experiences in Somalia could help us capture the tenuous relationship between the camel, the local peoples, foreign and state interests that intersected across the African and Arabian lands around the Red Sea region over time:

Camels can retrieve water from vegetation directly and store it for several months, but the realization of this capacity required a mixed diet of trees, shrubs, and grasses without which camels simply cease to thrive. The Somali herders by virtue of their strategic treks over hundreds of miles annually were able to achieve the diverse seasonal forage conditions necessary for their animals' survival. About 25% of a camel's food intake should be from a species of plant which takes up salt occurring in the soil, and in northern Somalia these small shrubs are called *daraan*. When *daraan* was not abundant in the Ogaden, Somalis carried salt called *carro* to the camels. Nomads can identify (and in fact prefer) the saltier taste of meat from a camel which has eaten a quantity of *carro* soil. "Life in Somaliland is balanced on a knife's edge," acknowledged a British veterinarian who spent 25 years there, "and how many of the Somalis' European advisors could take livestock into the bush and bring them (and himself) back alive and have lush stock to peddle in the markets of Aden to boot?"⁴³²

The Byzantines dealt carefully when it came to those foreign nomadic tribes. It was not only due to difference in customs, but also to their strategic importance and unique knowledge to navigate the desert and connect Africa, Arabia, and subcontinental India by the way of the caravan. At the first cataract, in about 29 B.C., Cornelius Gallus, the close friend of the poet Vergil and the first Prefect of Egypt, established the Nubian border with Egypt.⁴³³ It was later moved southwards 70 miles to Hieria Sycaminos (Maharraqah) to include the zone known as the Dodekaschoinos. The Roman military

⁴³² Charles L. Gesheker. "Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1985), pp. 1-32. pp. 15-16.

⁴³³ L.P. Kirwan. "Rome beyond the Southern Egyptian Frontier." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 13-19. p. 15.

stations (and roads) in this frontier zone were almost exclusively west of the Nile, with a few bridgeheads on the eastern bank. The garrisons included at different times both cavalry and camel troops. On the west, they were strategically well-placed, for the Nile was a natural barrier. In the eastern desert, the Blemy-Beja tribes roamed about and on occasion raided into Egypt. Incapable of appeasing them or lacking knowledge to be able to move deep into the desert, the Romans eventually consolidated the frontier at the first cataract by the end of the third century.⁴³⁴

Interstate relations have always had their challenges, but interactions between sedentary, organized states and nomadic peoples present their intricacies. Usually, the Byzantines dealt with regional tribes by paying them off, hiring them for their military campaigns, or relying on the economic network, dictated by the desert, to sustain them without breaching into imperial domains. Remains of surviving Roman and Byzantine forts in the region chart out, as elsewhere, a clear border line between the domains of the empire and everything else that was not a part of it. The desert and the sea, however (according to an explicit legislative act by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century), was no man's land; everyone could get to use it as seen fit.⁴³⁵

If we are to zoom in away from the macrocosmic level of the empire and on the ground of private relations, we can see that venturesome travellers and entrepreneurs needed the locals' knowledge, too. The well-known Nessana Papyri are an informative

⁴³⁴ L.P. Kirwan. "Rome beyond the Southern Egyptian Frontier." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 13-19. p. 15.

⁴³⁵ Percy Thomas Fenn, Jr. "Justinian and the Freedom of the Sea." *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Oct., 1925), pp. 716-727. p. 727: "The sea is *res communis*... incapable of being appropriated, open to the common use of all men. For this reason, the shores of the sea have the same legal status. That is to say, the shores of the sea are common to all men, both as to ownership and as to use. The shore extends as far as the winter tide reaches. Harbors (ports) are *res publicae*; that is, the *proprietas* thereof is lodged in the state."

source for the life of the desert in the sixth century.⁴³⁶ Several of them cite the presence of nomadic tribes on the fringes of agricultural settlement in the Negev region. For example, the Nessana Papyrus 89, dating to the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century, is a partial account of the income and expenditures of a caravan traveling from the Negev to the southern Sinai and back. This group of merchants bought and sold various commodities, traded animals, especially camels, and conveyed food products and sums of money from the Negev to Sinai. The document consists of two main sections. *Lines 12-29* present a diary-like description of the traders' activities prior to departure: sale of camels, purchase of slaves, and preparations for visiting the holy sites in southern Sinai. One of the expenditures listed was the payment of three solidi, a very hefty sum for the period, to a Bedouin guide.

Lines 30-43 were an account of transactions made during the journey, involving mainly pack animals, wool, oil, textiles, barley, and wine along with a description of the return trip from southern Sinai to the Negev. On their way home, the traders encountered various setbacks, including the loss of a camel, which was recovered by a Bedouin and held for ransom.

Nomads also served as couriers between the Negev and points farther south. According to Papyrus 51, the Bishop of Aila sent a substantial sum of money to the churches in Elusa and Nessana by means of a Saracen messenger. Anastasius, a seventh-century Sinai monk, mentioned how a dying hermit employed a nomadic messenger to Aila to give the news of his grave condition. Earlier testimony to the relationship

⁴³⁶ For a description, see Gideon Avni. *Nomads, Farmers, and Town-Dwellers: Pastoralist-Sedentist Interaction in the Negev Highlands, Sixth-Eighth Centuries C.E.*. Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1996.

between the nomadic tribes and the sedentary settlers may be found in the narrative of the fourth-century monk Nilus of southern Sinai whose son was abducted by the nomads and sold as a slave in Elusa.⁴³⁷

Accounts by travelers and pilgrims comprise another source of information about nomads. The Placentia Pilgrim crossed the Negev Highlands around 570 on his way to Mount Sinai. After reaching Nessana by way of Gaza and Elusa, he continued southward and reached southern Sinai by way of *darb el-Ghaza* and the Tih Desert. His colorful account of the trials of the road include encounters with nomadic tribes:

We walked through the desert for five or six days. Camels carried our water, of which each one of us received a *sextarius* (about one half liter) in the morning and in the evening. As the water in the skins became rancid, we added sand to sweeten it. Families of Saracens, or their women, would suddenly appear from the desert, sitting on the roadside dressed in rags, their bundles at their feet, begging for bread from the travelers. The men emerged from the desert, bringing skins with cold water, given to us in exchange for bread. They bore rope baskets containing roots whose pleasant odor surpassed any perfume... The number of people wandering through this large desert reaches 12,600.⁴³⁸

From those personal experiences, we can extrapolate how the rigors of the desert framed local peoples' lives and how they presented the specific kinds of challenges. The historical sources indicate the intricate relations between the Byzantines and nomad chiefdoms on the frontiers of the empire. After signing a series of treaties with the Byzantines, some tribes were appointed to guard the borders of the empire, or hired as mercenaries to defend its remote corners. Local phylarchs (chieftains) were held responsible for maintaining order in the territory under their control. As elsewhere, the

⁴³⁷ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Volume 79, cols. 625-640.

⁴³⁸ Quoted in Gideon Avni. *Nomads, Farmers, and Town-Dwellers: Pastoralist-Sedentist Interaction in the Negev Highlands, Sixth-Eighth Centuries C.E.*. Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1996. p. 81.

Byzantines tried to adapt to the local conditions and to protect the regular flowing of people and goods through the imperial borders.

Specifically in the region of the Negev, the network of treaties, which seems to have existed since the late fourth century, apparently collapsed at the beginning of the seventh century. Theophanes in the ninth century described how payments to the Arab tribes ceased during the reign of Heraclius (610-641) and wrote about a government official sent to a border outpost to pay the salaries of the regular soldiers stationed there. When the Arabs demanded their due, at least according to Theophanes, they were colorfully reproached: “The Emperor pays his soldiers with difficulty, with how much more to dogs like you?”⁴³⁹

Away from the regions of Egypt, south of the Euphrates, the imperial frontier extended along the edge of the Syrian desert for about 800 km. to the Red Sea.⁴⁴⁰ At first, Rome exercised indirect control through a system of client states, but by the early second century, the Romans were guarding the southeastern frontier with regular imperial forces and a system of roads and fortifications. The southern end of this fortified frontier was within the province of Arabia. The original Roman frontier in Arabia is still not well understood, but was based on a chain of forts along the important road, the *via nova Traiana*, originally built in the early second century AD.. A few forts served as outposts east of this line. By ca. 300, the Romans had developed a defense in depth, based on a fortified zone some 20-30 km. deep.

⁴³⁹ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). pp. 335-336: ὁ δεσπότης μόγις τοῖς στρατιώταις δίδωσι ῥόγας, πόσῳ μᾶλλον τοῖς κυσὶ τούτοις.

⁴⁴⁰ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. p. 2.

Scholars, who have examined the literary evidence for the region, have concluded that the term “inner *limes*,” which the Byzantines tended to use, refers to the entire broad, fortified zone extending from Syria to ‘Aqaba. The meaning of “inner,” in this case at least, is simply “inside the frontier.” An “outer *limes*” would make no sense since that would be the territory of another polity, presumably hostile, on the other side of the frontier.” In fact, the term “outer *limes*” in this region never occurs in ancient sources. Thus, scholars have come to believe that the term *limes* in the East came to mean a broad, fortified zone, not a single fortified line.⁴⁴¹

The appearance of Germanic tribes on the Roman side of the *limes* in the West had major influences on the East, too. Due to the initial disruptions and the time that it took to establish proper relations, merchants from the West had declined in importance, and their position had been taken by easterners—Syrians, Jews, and Greeks.⁴⁴² By the sixth-century, this reliance on eastern traders and markets for the Byzantines had increased, of course, since the western kingdoms were moving on their separate trajectory. The diplomatic relations that Justinian tried to establish with various peoples and tribes in the Red Sea region were a testimony to the crucial role that those lands played in the imperial economy, especially in times when the emperor needed money to restore the western territories, which, as we have seen above, was part of Justinian’s plan.

The Wadi Sirhan, the great migratory route between southern Syria and the interior of the Arabian peninsula, was controlled by a chain of forts at least by the

⁴⁴¹ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. pp. 2-6.

⁴⁴² Howard L. Adelson. “Early Medieval Trade Routes.” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Jan., 1960), pp. 271-287. p. 273.

Severan period (193-235).⁴⁴³ On the other hand, the Romans made no apparent move to occupy a series of watchtowers in the Hisma, well east of the *via nova Traiana*. Those posts were located in the Wadi Ram, another migration route. Despite the absence of their fortifications in the Wadi Ram, the Romans may have cooperated with local Thamudic allies in regular reconnaissance patrols of this region. The Romans clearly had the capability for desert patrols. Units such as *ala dromadariorum* in the northern Hejaz Desert or *ala Antana* (or *Antoniniana*) *dromedariorum* were obviously suited for such operations.⁴⁴⁴

Bostra was the hub of the regional road system.⁴⁴⁵ It served as the end of the *via nova Traiana* from the southwest. From Bostra other roads led west to Der'â, south to Umm el-Quttein, and east to Salkhad and Imtân, to a junction with the *strata Diocletiana*. The latter two roads merged south of Deir el-Kahf and reached Azraq, at the head of the Wadi Sirhan. Crucial to defense of the north was control of the Wadi Sirhan, the natural migration route between southern Syria and the interior of the Arabian peninsula. The wadi is a long, shallow valley extending southwest from the Jebel Druz to al-Jawf in Saudi Arabia. The area includes a large section of the desert of central Jordan west to the wadi. By erecting a chain of forts to block the northwestern outlet of the wadi, the Romans could monitor and when necessary control the movements of the nomadic tribes. The fort at Azraq was especially important because it guarded the major oasis of this arid region.

⁴⁴³ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. p. 9.

⁴⁴⁴ *Notitia Dignitatum*. Ed. Otto Seeck. Frankfurt am Main, 1962.

⁴⁴⁵ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. p. 15.

The central sector of the Arabian frontier stretched from Philadelphia (Amman) south to the Wadi al-Hasâ. It basically comprised the region east of the Dead Sea. From the Dead Sea, there is a steep rise to the east to form a plateau. This plateau, an area of drainage, is cut at intervals by deep wadis created by erosion. From north to south, the major wadis are the Zarqâ Mâ‘in, the Wadi Wâla (and its eastern extension, the Wadi Themed), the Wadi Mûjib, the Wadi Karak and the Wadi Hâsa. Each flows generally westward and empties into the Dead Sea. Although much of the plateau is composed of sedimentary formations, there are several outcrops of igneous basalts in the area around Karak. To the east, the plateau slopes down towards the Wadi Sirhan and the Syrian Desert.

The great canyons formed the wadis hinder movement from north to south. Thus, a series of bridges was constructed along the *via nova Traiana* to facilitate north-south traffic. A second road, farther east and parallel to the *via nova* came from the south. This outer road, which avoided the deep wadi canyons farther west, is amply attested by watchtowers and milestones, but whether it continued very far north of the Wadi al-Hasa is unclear. Although no paved road has been found far north of the wadi, it is entirely possible that none was needed. The relatively level and compacted surface of the desert fringe required no special engineering. The presence of several forts, caravanserai, and numerous watchtowers in this region imply the existence of such unpaved routes. It should be remembered that Muslim pilgrims from Syria to Mecca in the late Ottoman period used this same route because it avoided the deep wadis.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986.

The *Limes Arabicus* was most heavily fortified in the fourth and fifth centuries. The economic prosperity of the Byzantine era was due to several factors. Constantine's conversion to Christianity elevated Palestine overnight from a provincial backwater to the home of the new state religion. Imperial patronage on a grand scale was extended to the region for the construction of churches and monasteries. Additional income was derived from the pilgrim traffic to sacred Christian sites. Another important factor was the shift in trade routes between the Empire and its eastern neighbors. The fall of Palmyra and the rise of Sassanid Persia led to renewed importance of routes through the Arabian peninsula. Commercial caravans passed through Roman Arabia and *Palaestina Salutaris* carrying myrrh, frankincense, silk, and other luxury products. Maritime traffic through the Red Sea remained important; the port of Aila on the southern tip of the *limes* was a major crossroad of several commercial routes from the Red Sea and the Hejâz. Caravans continued to use the Wadi Sirhan, which terminated near Azraq in the northern sector of the Arabian *limes*. Finally, the increased security brought by the strengthened frontier led to a significant expansion of areas under cultivation. This expansion is best documented thus far in the Negev, central Moab, and northern Edom.

Justinian's reduction of the *limitanei* in favor of a powerful Ghassanid client kingdom was a workable policy and was initially successful.⁴⁴⁷ Military and financial resources from the southeastern frontier could be used instead against Persia, on the Danube, or in the reconquest of the West. But, such a policy depended heavily upon maintenance of good relations with a strong Ghassanid ally. His successors seriously weakened the Ghassanids without any corresponding strengthening of regular Roman

⁴⁴⁷ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. p. 154.

forces in the area. The resulting strife between the empire and the Ghassanids contributed to the disasters of the early seventh century. The Persian invasion and occupation of much of the East between 613 and 628 was a major blow to the eastern frontier defenses. Heraclius (610-41), after finally defeating the Persians and restoring the status quo before the war, had insufficient time to restore the Arabian frontier before the Muslim's expansion. But the imperial government was still committed to the active defense of the southeastern frontier. In 629, the initial Muslim advance was defeated at Mu'ta, just south of the Wadi Mujib along the old *via nova Traiana*.⁴⁴⁸

The lack of regular troops farther south is demonstrated by events of the following years. In 630 Muhammed received the negotiated surrender of Udruh and Aila without resistance. The talks with the latter town were apparently conducted with the local bishop; *legio X Fretensis* and whatever unit had garrisoned Udruh had long since disappeared. The capture of Aila provided the Muslims with a secure base and opened the door to the Sinai and southern Palestine. In the absence of adequate imperial troops the empire was forced to rely on federate Arabs, but about this time Heraclius terminated subsidies to at least some of the local tribes in southern Palestine. Some of these disaffected Bedouin, who had been paid to guard the desert south of Palestine, promptly guided the Muslim incursion of 633, which reached the territory of Gaza. There was no longer any fortified frontier to block their advance and subsidies to some Roman

⁴⁴⁸ For the early Muslim expansion, see Hugh Kennedy. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*. New York, 2004 (second edition). See especially Chapters 2 and 3.

federates had been terminated. The decisive Muslim victory at the Yarmuk in 636 sealed the fate of Transjordan, Palestine, and Syria.⁴⁴⁹

This detailed overview of the Byzantine imperial dynamics in the region should testify to the vested interests that the imperial government had in the Red Sea region. Generally peaceful relations between sedentary households and nomadic tribes in the desert regions, garrisoned sections on the key *via nova Traina, strata Diocletiana*, as well as the natural travelling routes by the water-flowing wadis through the arid zones administered the political and economic dynamics. In the sixth-century, Justinian's ambition to reunite the Roman empire and to center it back on the Mediterranean Sea required that he refocus military power to the West. In doing so, the emperor created the tide of abandonment of Arabian and Red Sea garrisons. Justinian had hoped to rely on well-entrenched local customs and established peace as well as on outsourcing the political rule to local chieftains and tribal leaders in order to concentrate his energy to the West. In his own time, strictly speaking, this strategy worked, proving to us the successful integration of the region in the diplomatic and economic network of the empire.

A general picture of the geography, economic routes, political, and social dynamics along the Red Sea rim should have emerged by now. We have started with the region of Nubia, south of Egypt, with its three independent sixth-century kingdoms (Nobatia, Makuria, and Alodia). Then moving to the east, we visited the kingdom of Aksūm with the strategic port of Adulis on the maritime coast. Crossing the Red Sea, we have found ourselves in the southern tip of Arabia, in the kingdom of the Homerites (i.e.,

⁴⁴⁹ S. Thomas Parker. *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*. The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986. p. 154.

Himyar). The basic point from this journey is that each of those kingdoms were connected not only by the passing caravans, the Roman roads, and economic interests, but also by the cultural references of the Byzantines. Deeply rooted, as it seems, in their ancient tradition, going back to Homer and the Bible, the Red Sea rim and its peoples stood as “Ethiopia,” “India,” or the land of the “Homerites.” Amidst those intricate cultural and political dynamics, we need to place now the reported advent of Christianity among the local royal and elite families.

Byzantine Christianity in Ethiopia

Already in the Old Testament, the Red Sea region became associated with many important Jewish figures and thus came to be inserted into the biblical narrative as part of God’s immediate setting. In a list of Solomon’s accomplishments, I Kings 9:26-28 mentions that Solomon “also built ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea. And Hiram [the Phoenician king of Tyre who reigned from 980 to 947 B.C.] sent his men--sailors who knew the sea--to serve in the fleet with Solomon’s men.”⁴⁵⁰ But, the subsequent chapter, 1 Kings 10, which happens to be basically repeated in 2 Chronicles 9, plays a seminal role in the medieval and modern imagination of

Ethiopian Christians:

When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon (fame due to the name of the Lord), she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. When the queen of Sheba had observed all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, their valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more

⁴⁵⁰ The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2001.

spirit in her. So she said to the king, “The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. Not even half had been told me; your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard. Happy are your wives! Happy are these your servants who continually attend you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the Lord your God who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he had made you king to execute justice and righteousness. Then she gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold, a great quantity of spices, and precious stones; never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. Moreover, the fleet of Hiram, which carried gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a great quantity of almug wood and precious stones. From the almug wood the king made supports for the house of the Lord, and for the king’s house, lyres also and harps for the singers; no such almug wood has come or been seen to this day. Meanwhile King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed as well as what he gave her out of Solomon’s royal bounty. Then she returned to her own land with her servants.”⁴⁵¹

Usually scholars equate “Sheba” with the kingdom of Saba in southwestern Arabia (i.e., Himyar), but already in the medieval imagination of the Ethiopians, “the realm of Sheba” referred to their own lands.⁴⁵² Written in the fourteenth century in the ecclesiastical Ge’ez language, *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*), which combined canonical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphic, rabbinic, patristic, and local traditions, appropriated the Old Testament story of the queen of Sheba’s visit to the court of Solomon. Ultimately, *Kebra Nagast* served to legitimize local rule and to ground local Christianity around the possession of Moses’ ark of the covenant.

According to *Kebra Nagast*, Solomon was enamored with the queen of Sheba. Putting to use his celebrated intellect, he tricked her to sleep with him. Apparently, this was part of God’s plan, for soon after the queen’s return home, she gave birth to a son whose name was Menelik. Years passed, and Menelik matured enough to learn about his true father. He then went to visit Solomon in Jerusalem. Immediately recognizing the

⁴⁵¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁴⁵² Barry Hoberman. “The Ethiopian Legend of the Ark.” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring, 1983), pp. 113-114.

resemblance, the king embraced his first-born son. The father offered the son the inheritance of the throne, but Menelik refused. As an alternative, Solomon's priest Zadok anointed Menelik to be the king of Ethiopia. To provide a staff for the new kingdom, Solomon ordered the chief men of his court to send their own first-born sons to accompany Menelik to Ethiopia and to serve him there.

Comfortable at home, the young men were disgruntled to leave their families and friends in Jerusalem, but above all, they were attached to the ark of the covenant, which was referred to in the *Kebra Nagast* as "Our Lady of Zion." To alleviate the pain, Azariah, the son of the priest Zadok, contrived a plan. He hired a local carpenter to construct a raft with the exact dimensions of the ark. The night before Menelik's caravan had to depart, Azariah went into the Holy of Holies in the Temple, removed the real ark, and substituted for it the fake raft. It was not until Menelik reached Egypt that he learnt about Azariah's doing. Menelik was ecstatic, for the ark served as the outward symbol of God's holy presence. To Menelik, this was a divine sign that the Ethiopians were now the heirs of Israel as God's Chosen People. Overnight, the kings of Ethiopia had become the legitimate successors of the kings of Israel and Judah. The ark was taken to Aksūm, the capital of Ethiopia, where people welcomed it with great joy. They immediately abandoned their native gods and embraced the God of Israel.

Apparently, the notion that the ark was extant in Ethiopia was quite popular in the Middle Ages. In the early thirteenth century, Abu Ṣaliḥ, a visitor from Egypt, wrote:

The Ethiopians possess also the Ark of the Covenant, in which are the two tablets of stone, inscribed by the finger of God with the commandments which he ordained for the children of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant is placed upon the altar; it is as high as the knee of a man, and is overlaid with gold; and upon its lid there are crosses of gold; and there are five precious stones upon it, one at each of the four corners, and one in the middle. The liturgy is celebrated upon the Ark

four times in the year, within the palace of the king; and a canopy is spread over it when it is taken out from its own church to the church which is in the palace of the king: namely on the feast of the great Nativity, on the feast of the glorious Baptism, on the feast of the holy Resurrection, and on the feast of the illuminating Cross. And the Ark is attended and carried by a large number of Israelites descended from the family of the prophet David, who are white and red in complexion, with red hair.⁴⁵³

Even in modern times, the idea that Ethiopia possesses the ark of the covenant is deeply ingrained in local Christianity. During the imperial period of Ethiopia, which technically lasted up to the late twentieth century, the ark played the traditional role, inherited from the Middle Ages. Thus, in 1974, when civil wars broke tradition and transformed Ethiopia into the current Federal Democratic Republic, Haile Selassie came to stand for the last emperor, “King of Kings, Lion of the tribe of Judah, descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba who bore for him Menelik I in pre-Christian times.”⁴⁵⁴ Given our discussion in the previous chapters, we should not be surprised to discover how powerful this Christian story has been in Ethiopia. Through the ark of the covenant, modern Ethiopia has inherited the late-medieval virtuosity to appropriate and convert ancient narratives and biblical heroes to expedient political accounts of legitimization and notions of privileged Christianity.

To continue with tracing back the development of local tradition, we now need to turn to *Maṣḥafa dorho*, or *Book of the Cock*. It is an apocryphal passion narrative that survives in a Ge’ez version, which in turn has been translated from Arabic.⁴⁵⁵ The anonymous author describes it as an oral teaching that he or she had received directly

⁴⁵³ Barry Hoberman. “The Ethiopian Legend of the Ark.” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring, 1983), pp. 113-114. p. 114.

⁴⁵⁴ For the section in the quotation marks, see Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 146.

⁴⁵⁵ Pierluigi Piovanelli. “Exploring the Ethiopic ‘Book of the Cock.’ An Apocryphal Passion Gospel from Late Antiquity.” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 427-454. p. 427.

from the apostles themselves. One of the author's main concerns is to relate "in detail" (4:18) "all that has happened" to Jesus (4:8). At the end of the narrative, the author acknowledges his or her debt to John the Evangelist, who was—"in tension with, yet finally in harmony with Peter"—one of the foremost eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' passion.⁴⁵⁶ The *Book of the Cock* plays a major role in the liturgy of the modern Ethiopian church, but from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic canonical Christianity, it is an apocryphal text, the origins of which are in the fifth or sixth century A.D..

We need to overview the basic plot of the *Book of the Cock* in order to see the unique ways in which local tradition developed. On Holy Wednesday, Jesus and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives where a rock miraculously announced Judas' imminent betrayal of Jesus (1:3-20). The following morning, Judas went to Jerusalem to meet the Jewish religious leaders for the first time and then returned to the Mount of Olives with a servant of the high priest (1:21-31). At that point, Jesus decided to travel to Bethany to celebrate the Passover in the house of Simon the Pharisee and his wife, Akrosenna. Jesus sent Peter, James, and John to inform the couple of his arrival (2:1-9). In the afternoon, Jesus and his disciples arrived at Simon and Akrosenna's house, but Alexander the gatekeeper, troubled by some ominous visions of the unfaithful Judas, delayed the future betrayer (2:10-22). During the Passover meal in Simon's house, a sinful woman anointed Jesus. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, foretold the denial of Peter, and confirmed what the rock on the Mount of Olives had already proclaimed, namely that Judas would betray him.

⁴⁵⁶ Pierluigi Piovanelli. "Exploring the Ethiopic 'Book of the Cock.' An Apocryphal Passion Gospel from Late Antiquity." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 427-454. p. 427.

When Jesus revealed his plans and expressed his wish to return to the Mount of Olives, Judas quickly left the group and ran to betray his master to the religious leaders of Jerusalem. As soon as Judas left, Jesus resurrected a rooster that Akrosenna had cooked and ordered it to follow Judas (4:1-8). Well under cover, the rooster spied on Judas in Jerusalem. First, the rooster witnessed how Judas slept with his wife who also collaborated and advised her husband how best to bring Jesus to his enemies. Then, the rooster followed Judas who went to get paid for his betrayal and to establish with Saul of Tarsus the signal that would enable Saul to recognize and seize Jesus (4:9-16). Having witnessed all this, the rooster flew back to Bethany and reported everything to Jesus and the disciples. In return for the great service, Jesus sent the rooster directly to heaven for a period of one thousand years. Before leaving Bethany, Jesus gave a special blessing on the believers gathered in Simon's house (4:7-32). Jesus and his disciples went back to Gethsemane, in the Kidron valley, where Jesus offered a final prayer to God the Father. Judas and Saul arrived at seven o'clock in the evening, and Judas handed Jesus over to Saul and his band of soldiers who immediately dragged him before Caiaphas, the high priest (5:1-17).⁴⁵⁷

Drawing from canonical gospels, especially from Matthew, Luke, and John, as well as from some apocryphal and local traditions, the *Book of the Cock* basically follows the genre of narrative gospel that recounts the last moments of Jesus' life.⁴⁵⁸ Today, though technically in an ambivalent position, it is still in circulation among Ethiopian

⁴⁵⁷ Pierluigi Piovanelli. "Exploring the Ethiopic 'Book of the Cock.' An Apocryphal Passion Gospel from Late Antiquity." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 427-454. p. 429.

⁴⁵⁸ Pierluigi Piovanelli. "Exploring the Ethiopic 'Book of the Cock.' An Apocryphal Passion Gospel from Late Antiquity." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 427-454. p. 431.

Christians and has attained quasi-canonical status.⁴⁵⁹ The plot of the *Book of the Cock* allows us to witness the creative ways, in which Christians in the Red Sea region interacted with the biblical texts. Being far away from the concerns of the Constantinopolitan emperor, generally interested in unifying the beliefs of his imperial Christians, Ethiopians had more leeway to experiment even with the basic canons of Jesus' passion narrative. It was as late as the fifth or the sixth century when someone was free to record and distribute the popular story in the *Book of the Cock*.

Having traced the development of local tradition in a reversed chronological order, moving from the fourteenth century through the sixth and fifth centuries, we now need to come back to the early material on the arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia. In this context, too, we can immediately see a difference in opinions on the native origins of Christianity. Thus, John Chrysostom in a detailed passage charted out the entire world of early apostolic missions along with their respective aftermath for eternity:

Peter thereupon teaches Rome. Paul delivers there the good news to the universe. Andrew sets straight the wise men of Greece. Simon teaches the barbarians about God. Thomas whitens the Ethiopians through baptism.⁴⁶⁰ Judaea honors the seat of Jacob. Alexandria on the Nile embraces the throne of Mark. Luke and Matthew write the Gospels. In addition to being a theologian, John, both after his death and while living, heals Ephesus. Bartholomew guides the Lycaonians to wisdom.⁴⁶¹ Through miracles, Phillip saves the Holy City. All of them do not stop doing good deeds for everyone and everywhere. Having left behind their immortal ashes in their graves, they have been first declared healers and, shortly after, the judges of the universe.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁹ Pierluigi Piovanelli. "Exploring the Ethiopic 'Book of the Cock.' An Apocryphal Passion Gospel from Late Antiquity." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 427-454. p. 433.

⁴⁶⁰ Notice here the charged play of words, which presumably John's audience found effective: "λευκάνει" ("whitens," "purifies," "bleaches"), "διὰ βαπτίσματος" ("through baptism," but also, more literally, "through dipping in water," "bathing"), and "τοὺς Αἰθίοπας" ("the Ethiopians," but also "the burnt-faced ones" or "the blacks," implying impurity).

⁴⁶¹ Note here the rhetorical play with "παιδαγωγεῖ" (which has in its root, pais, meaning "child"). Thus, John implies that Bartholomew led the Lycaonians from silly childhood into prudent maturity.

⁴⁶² Joannes Chrysostomus. *In duodecim apostolos*. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1857-1866. Volume 59. p. 495: Πέτρος ἐντεῦθεν μαθητεύει τὴν Ῥώμην. Παῦλος ἐκεῖθεν εὐαγγελίζεται κόσμον. Ἄνδρέας τῆς Ἑλλάδος σοφοὺς διορθοῦται.

In a less colorful passage, Socrates Scholasticus sent Thomas to the Parthians, Matthew to the Ethiopians, and Bartholomew to “the Indians.”⁴⁶³ The New Testament itself devoted a chapter on the conversion of an Ethiopian.

In Acts 8:26-40, Phillip happens to baptize the chief treasurer of the Ethiopian queen Candace. All of the above accounts are important in their own right, but given the canonical status of the *Acts of the Apostles*, it is worthwhile to read through the text here:

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road). So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Σίμων διδάσκει τὸν Θεὸν τοὺς βαρβάρους· Θωμᾶς διὰ βαπτίσματος λευκαίνει τοὺς Αἰθίοπας·
Ἰακώβου τὴν καθέδραν ἢ Ἰουδαία τιμᾶ· Μάρκου τὸν θρόνον Ἀλεξάνδρεια ἢ παρὰ Νεῖλον
ἀσπάζεται· Λουκᾶς καὶ Ματθαῖος γράφουσι τὰ Εὐαγγέλια· Ἰωάννης ἔτι θεολογῶν, καὶ μετὰ
τέλος ὡς ζῶν θεραπεύει τὴν Ἐφεσον· Βαρθολομαῖος παιδαγωγῆ σωφρονεῖν τοὺς Λυκάονας·
Φίλιππος θαυματουργῶν σώζει τὴν Ἱεράπολιν· Ἄπαντες ἀπανταχοῦ πάντας εὐεργετοῦντες
οὐ παύονται· κόνιν ἀθάνατον ἐν τάφοις καταλελοίπασιν, νῦν μὲν θεραπευταί, μετ’ ὀλίγον δὲ
δικασταί τοῦ κόσμου προκαθήμενοι.

⁴⁶³ Socrates Scholasticus. *Historia ecclesiastica*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007. Book 1, Chapter 19: Ἦνίκα οἱ ἀπόστολοι κλήρω τὴν εἰς τὰ ἔθνη πορείαν ἐποιοῦντο, Θωμᾶς μὲν τὴν Πάρθων ἀποστολὴν ὑπεδέχετο, Ματθαῖος δὲ τὴν Αἰθιοπίαν, Βαρθολομαῖος δὲ ἐκκληροῦτο τὴν συνημμένην ταύτῃ Ἰνδιάν. Τὴν μέντοι ἐνδοτέρω Ἰνδιάν, ἣ προσοικεῖ βαρβάρων ἔθνη πολλὰ διαφόροις χρώμασι, οὐδέπω πρὸ τῶν Κωνσταντίνου χρόνων ὁ τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ λόγος ἐφώτιζεν.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing, through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.⁴⁶⁴

The account from the *Acts of the Apostles* focuses on a single conversion of an Ethiopian official and clearly does not suggest that the entire land of the Ethiopians followed him. It was only later in the Middle Ages that this episode was made to fit the common tendency among Christian authors to import “Ethiopia” into the general framework of Christian success and thus to claim the entire lands of the converts for the purpose of God. Ideally, even the distant corners of the earth, the Christian narrative would have us believe, welcomed the arrival of Christianity. This, of course, makes sense. And if committed to retrieving a historical kernel, we should pay more attention to the casual encounter, the friendly dialogue, and the spontaneous decision of the Ethiopian to immerse himself in water. In a world of many everyday cultic practices, water immersion was as good as any. The insistence of immediate divine presence through the Holy Spirit was the Christian writer’s adjustment of the story’s basic plot. In addition to exciting miracles typical for gospel literature, however, there are other, even more unusual, early contexts, in which we find “Ethiopia,” too.

In the third century, the Greek writer Heliodorus completed a popular, action-driven novel, entitled *Aethiopica*. One of his protagonists was a white girl who turned out to be the long-lost daughter of an African king and queen, rejected at birth because of her white color.⁴⁶⁵ In a sensationalist attempt to provoke our attention right from the beginning, Heliodorus started his novel with a scene in which a band of robbers at one of

⁴⁶⁴ The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2001. Acts 8:26-40.

⁴⁶⁵ O.A. W. Dilke. “The Aethiopica: A Classical Melodrama.” *The Classical World*, Vol. 62, No. 9 (May, 1969), pp. 353-354. p. 353.

the mouths of the Nile were pillaging an empty ship with many dead and wounded bodies washed ashore. Throughout the book, the attractive and noble young couple, Theagenes and the white princess Chariclea, come close to death, but are always miraculously saved. On occasion, they are even at the brink of utter despair and are seriously pondering suicide.

The central setting of the story is in Egypt, regarded as a mysterious and wild land where one may at any time expect a reversal of fortune. In the ninth book, during hostilities against the Persian satrap, king Hydaspes of Ethiopia captures Theagenes and Chariclea and takes them to his capital, now in the Sudan.⁴⁶⁶ In Heliodorus' writing, the Ethiopians are depicted as respectful people and are even identified as progeny of the ancient Greeks, so they treat the couple well.

According to the Byzantine historians Socrates Scholasticus in the fifth century and Nicephorus Callistus in the fourteenth century, the author of *Aethiopica*, Heliodorus, eventually became a bishop. Later in Heliodorus' career, however, Christian purists confronted him about the content of his novel and forced Heliodorus to resign from his bishopric, for he refused to condemn his own book. Generally, modern scholars do not accept the Byzantine tradition that Heliodorus became a bishop. Thus, they identify him as the son of a priest of the sun who never converted to Christianity.⁴⁶⁷ In the Byzantine tradition, however, it made sense that Heliodorus recounted the native exoticism of Ethiopia on account of which he lost his ecclesiastical position, for his novelistic

⁴⁶⁶ O.A. W. Dilke. "The Aethiopica: A Classical Melodrama." *The Classical World*, Vol. 62, No. 9 (May, 1969), pp. 353-354. p. 353.

⁴⁶⁷ Glanwill W. Bowersock. "The Aethiopica of Heliodorus and the Historia Augusta." In *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Genevense*, 1991. p. 43.

techniques were too profane and thus did not keep close to hagiographical or other established Christian writing techniques.

As an alternative to Heliodorus' more dramatic and less specifically religious account, we can turn precisely to those typical Christian hagiographies that became so popular and defined for centuries the nature of Christian writing altogether. In the famous *Life of Anthony*, written by Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century, we become familiar with numerous episodes, in which the devil tried to tempt the young monk Anthony. In one of them, the Serpent darted at his target painful thoughts of home and family. He also came to Anthony disguised as a woman. When all else failed, the Serpent appeared as a black boy.⁴⁶⁸ Unmoved, Anthony informed the devil, "You are black in your mind and as weak as a boy."⁴⁶⁹

Many tales, preserved in the monastic literature from the fourth and fifth centuries, had the devil or one of his demons appear in a human body with the black skin of an actual Ethiopian. A young monk, haunted by sexual thoughts, encountered an Ethiopian woman with a foul smell. An older monk ran into an Ethiopian girl whom he quickly remembered to have seen in his youth. Unable to control himself, he hit her, and an unbearable stench stuck to his hand. Afflicted by pride, another monk was divinely instructed to reach for his neck where he peeled off a young Ethiopian, casting him to the sand with great relief. A monk, who disobeyed his elder, discovered an Ethiopian lying

⁴⁶⁸ Athanasius. Ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie, Vie d'Antoine* [Sources chrétiennes 400]. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004. Vita Antonii, 6: Τέλος γοῦν, ὡς οὐκ ἠδυνήθη τὸν Ἀντώνιον οὐδ' ἐν τούτῳ καταβαλεῖν ὁ δράκων, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔβλεπεν ἑαυτὸν ἐξωθούμενον ἀπὸ τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ, τρίζων τοὺς ὀδόντας, κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον, καὶ ὡσπερ ἐξιστάμενος, οἶός ἐστι τὸν νοῦν, τοιοῦτος ὕστερον καὶ τῇ φαντασίᾳ μέλας αὐτῷ φαίνεται παῖς.

⁴⁶⁹ Athanasius. Ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie, Vie d'Antoine* [Sources chrétiennes 400]. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004. Vita Antonii, 6: Ὁ δὲ Ἀντώνιος εὐχαριστήσας τῷ Κυρίῳ καὶ καταθαρήσας αὐτοῦ φησὶ πρὸς αὐτόν· Πολὺ τοίνυν εὐκαταφρόνητος τυγχάνεις· καὶ γὰρ μέλας εἶ τὸν νοῦν καὶ ὡς παῖς ἀσθενῆς ὑπάρχεις· οὐδεμία μοι λοιπὸν ἐστι φροντίς περὶ σοῦ.

on a sleeping mat, gnashing his teeth. Many more similar Ethiopian or black demons continued to tempt or frighten Christian ascetics well into the medieval period.⁴⁷⁰

Most Christian discussion of Ethiopian or black people was exegetical. The notion that black skin symbolized the sin that Christian grace removed was pervasive. The devil's appearance as a black boy in the *Life of Antony* is the earliest datable appearance of a black (or Ethiopian) demon in monastic literature (ca. 357), and it belongs to the exegetical tradition that associated "blackness" with sin.⁴⁷¹

Alongside the notion of the Ethiopians as a people comparable to other barbarian peoples, the Romans thought of the Ethiopian (*Aethiops*) as a somatic type, a kind of body that differed from the somatic norm in several ways, including but not limited to skin color. The Ethiopian was identified as such not because he or she was born from Ethiopians, but because he or she did not visually conform to the Roman ideal.

Once again, the ideal somatic type (in respect to the male sex) consisted of pale-brown complexion (described as *inter nigrum et palladium* or the mean between the extremes of *Aethiops* blackness and "nordic" whiteness), straight (but not large) nose, moist, bright eyes of a brown color midway between jet blackness and pale-brown, brown hair (of a texture midway between the straight and the tightly-curved, and between excessive softness and excessive coarseness), lips neither thin nor thick, and moderate tallness.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ For these stories and others, see David Brakke. "Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 10, No. ¾ (Jul.-Oct., 2001), pp. 501-35. p. 509.

⁴⁷¹ David Brakke. "Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 10, No. ¾ (Jul.-Oct., 2001), pp. 501-35. p. 509.

⁴⁷² Quoted from Lloyd Thompson. *Romans and Blacks*. Norman, OK., 1989, p. 105.

With their depiction as having black skin, flat nose, and curly hair, the Ethiopians deviated from the Roman cultural norms, as did the Nordic type, the “paleface” (*candidus* or *flavus*). The mode of categorization was not what we would call racial; rather, it was “purely and simply a matter of the observer’s optical registration of somatic distance or of the somatic norm, uninfluenced by the facts of the observed person’s biological descent, and uncomplicated by an ideological operative link with social role or social distance.”⁴⁷³

We have seen the broad scope of cultural references that was ascribed to the Ethiopians. From symbols of divine power extending to all the extremes of the earth, to conveyors of the diabolic, and to victims of negative Roman stereotypes, the Ethiopians were deeply set on the horizon of the imperial intellectuals. But, in all instances, they behaved as political and cultural foreigners. Thus, as with the other examples from the previous chapters, the conversion of king Ezana in the fourth century remained largely unnoticed in the Byzantine contemporary historiography.⁴⁷⁴

According to tradition and scholarly consensus, Rufinus and Socrates were the first Byzantine authors to recount the story of Ezana’s conversion. Both authors actually referred to the local region as “India,” and neither of the two mentioned explicitly the name of the local king:

A certain philosopher, Meropius, a Tyrian by descent, decided to investigate the land of the Indians, being inspired by the example of the philosopher Metrodorus who had investigated the land of the Indians before him. Thus, taking with him two young men related to him by Greek education [Ἑλληνικῆς

⁴⁷³ Lloyd Thompson. *Romans and Blacks*. Norman, OK., 1989. p. 77.

⁴⁷⁴ In modern scholarship, Ezana is considered the first Ethiopian royal convert, mostly due to information extracted from his famous inscription in the fourth century.

παιδείας]⁴⁷⁵, Meropius reached the land by ship; and when he had inspected whatever he wished, he boarded at a certain place which had a safe harbor for the purpose of procuring some supplies. It so happened that a little before that time the treaty between the Romans and Indians had been breached. The Indians, therefore, having seized the philosopher and those who sailed with him, killed them all except his two young assistants; but sparing them out of compassion for their young age, they sent them as a gift to the king of the Indians. Pleased with the looks of the young men, he made one of them, whose name was Aidesius, cup-bearer at his table; the other, named Frumentius, he entrusted with the care of the royal records.⁴⁷⁶

Diligence and loyalty characterized the two boys and when the local king died, the queen asked them to serve as regents to the heir who was too young to occupy his father's empty throne:

Accordingly, the young men accepted the task, and entered the administration of the kingdom. Thus, Frumentius controlled all affairs and ordered an inquiry about whether there were any Christians to be found among the Roman merchants trafficking with that land. And having discovered some, he informed them who he was, and exhorted them to select and occupy some appropriate places for the celebration of Christian worship. After a little time, he built a house of prayer. Having instructed some of the Indians in the principles of Christianity, they fitted them for participation in the worship. On the young king's reaching maturity, Frumentius and his associates resigned to him the administration of public affairs, which they had honorably managed, and asked for permission to return to their own country. Both the king and his mother entreated them to stay; but being committed to revisit their native place, they could not be dissuaded, and

⁴⁷⁵ Socrates here emphasizes the bond that the study of Greek culture established between professors and their students. Even more, before the advent of Christianity, it was Greek classical culture that dictated the social norms and ethos in the Roman empire. This was a very deliberate and rich line to put in context both the protagonists of this story and the overall tension that Christianity inserted in the Roman cultural and political life.

⁴⁷⁶ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 19: Μερόπιός τις φιλόσοφος τῷ γένει Τύριος ἱστορήσαι τὴν Ἰνδῶν χώραν ἔσπευσεν, ἀμιλλησάμενος πρὸς τὸν φιλόσοφον Ἰνδῶν χώραν ἔσπευσεν, ἀμιλλησάμενος πρὸς τὸν φιλόσοφον Μητροδώρον, ὃς πρὸ αὐτοῦ τὴν Ἰνδῶν χώραν ἱστόρησεν. Παραλαβὼν οὖν δύο παιδάρια συγγενῆ Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας οὐκ ἄμοιρα καταλαμβάνει πλοίῳ τὴν χώραν, ἱστορήσας τε ὅσα ἐβούλετο, προσορμίζει χρεια τῶν ἐπιτηδείων τόπω λιμένα ἔχοντι ἀσφαλῆ. Συμβεβήκει δὲ τότε πρὸς ὀλίγον τὰς σπονδὰς διεσπᾶσθαι τὰς μεταξὺ Ῥωμαίων τε καὶ Ἰνδῶν. Συλλαβόντες οὖν οἱ Ἰνδοὶ τὸν τε φιλόσοφον καὶ τοὺς συμπλέοντας, πλὴν τῶν δύο συγγενῶν παιδαρίων ἅπαντας διεχρήσαντο, τοὺς δὲ δύο παῖδας οἰκτῶ τῆς ἡλικίας διασώσαντες δῶρον τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Ἰνδῶν προσκομίζουσιν. Ὁ δὲ ἦσθεις τῇ προσόψει τῶν νέων ἓνα μὲν αὐτῶν ὀνόματι Αἰδέσιον οἰνοχόον τῆς ἑαυτοῦ τραπέζης καθέστησεν, τὸν δὲ ἕτερον (Φρουμέντιος ὄνομα αὐτῶ) τῶν βασιλικῶν γραμματοφυλάκων φροντίζειν προσέταξεν.

consequently they left. Aidesius went to Tyre to see his parents and relatives; but Frumentius arriving at Alexandria, reported the affair to Athanasius the bishop, who had but recently been invested with that dignity; and acquainting him both with the particulars of his wanderings and the hopes Indians had of receiving Christianity. He also begged him to send a bishop and clergy there, and by no means to neglect those who might thus be brought to salvation.⁴⁷⁷

Rufinus and Socrates after him give us some details in this case that we should evaluate. In this story, it is clear who the major protagonists were and also that “the Indian conversion” was not an immediate result of marvellous miracles. In other words, the conventional rules of hagiography were suspended here. Yet, it remains uncertain how Frumentius himself had become a Christian or even how he came to be interested in Christianity at all. The philosopher Meropius, whom he had assisted, was presumably a pagan, for the study of philosophy in the period was associated with paganism, and the dismissive association of philosophy with mendacious blasphemy at least among Christian writers persisted in the intellectual history of Byzantium for several subsequent centuries.

Of course, we have the possibility that Christianity came to be associated with proper Roman identity, which would explain why Frumentius sought Roman merchants.

⁴⁷⁷ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 19: ἡ πείθονται οἱ νεανίσκοι καὶ προνοοῦσι μὴ παριδεῖν τῶν τοῦ βασιλέως πραγμάτων. Φρουμέντιος δὲ ἦν ὁ διοικῶν μάλιστα σύμπαντα· ἔργον δὲ ἐποιεῖτο τοὺς ἐπιδημοῦντας τῇ χώρᾳ Ῥωμαίους ἐμπόρους ἐπιζητεῖν, εἴ που τινὰ τῶν χριστιανιζόντων ἐφεύροι. Εὐρῶν δὲ καὶ τὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὸν διδάσκων παρεκάλει τόπους καταλαμβάνειν ἰδιάζοντας ἐπὶ τῷ τὰς χριστιανικὰς εὐχὰς ἐκτελεῖν. Κατὰ βραχὺ δὲ προΐοντος τοῦ χρόνου καὶ εὐκτῆριον οἶκον κατεσκεύασαν καὶ τινὰς τῶν Ἰνδῶν κατηχοῦντες συνεύχεσθαι αὐτοῖς παρεσκεύασαν. Ἐπεὶ δὲ ὁ τοῦ βασιλέως παῖς τῆς τελείας ἡλικίας ἐπέβη, οἱ περὶ τὸν Φρουμέντιον παραδόντες τὰ καλῶς παρ’ αὐτῶν διοικηθέντα πράγματα ἤτουν ἐπὶ τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἀναχωρησάμενοι πατρίδα· τοῦ δὲ βασιλέως καὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ μητρὸς ἐπιμένειν παρακαλούντων καὶ μὴ πεισάντων ἀπεχώρουν ἐπιθυμία τῆς ἐνεγκαμένης. Αἰδέσιος μὲν οὖν ἐπὶ τὴν Τύρον ἐσπουδάξεν ὀψόμενος γονεῖς τε καὶ συγγενεῖς, Φρουμέντιος μὲντοι καταλαβὼν τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ Ἀθανασίῳ τότε νεωστὶ τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς ἀξιωθέντι πᾶν ἀναφέρει τὸ πρᾶγμα, διδάξας τὰ τε τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀποδημίας καὶ ὡς ἐλπίδας ἔχουσιν Ἰνδοὶ τὸν χριστιανισμὸν παραδέξασθαι, ἐπίσκοπόν τε καὶ κληρὸν ἀποστέλλειν καὶ μηδαμῶς περιορᾶν τοὺς δυναμένους σωθῆναι.

However, he specifically looked for Christian Romans, and the association of Christianity with Roman identity was a much slower process and in reality mostly a dream of persistent Christian writers. Major Byzantine thinkers fought against such attempts, and the relationship between Christianity and “Romanness” was repeatedly questioned and re-evaluated throughout the long history of the empire. And even if we take this connection to be true, Frumentius should have chosen to travel to Constantinople. In the capital, he could have hoped for imperial subsidies. It is true that Alexandria was the cultural center of the East, yet the see of Alexandria was volatile under bishop Athanasius who was ultimately exiled five times due to factional wars in the church to establish the relationship between Christ the Son and God the Father. Given that Frumentius’ story was not cast as a hagiography, it would be reasonable to expect some answers to those concerns. But, perhaps, this is all that Rufinus and Socrates actually knew, so we are left with major gaps and conundrums.

As with our other examples of foreign conversions, the story of India’s (i.e., Ethiopia’s) Christianization ends abruptly:

Having considered how this could be best accomplished, Athanasius requested that Frumentius himself accepted the bishopric, declaring that he could appoint no one more suitable than he was. This was done. Invested with episcopal authority, Frumentius returned to India and became there a preacher of the Gospel and built several churches. Assisted by divine grace, he performed various miracles, healing with the souls also the bodily diseases of many people. Rufinus assures us that he heard these facts from Aidesius who was afterwards ordained to the priesthood at Tyre.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁸ Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007: Book 1, Chapter 19: Ἀθανάσιος δὲ λαβὼν εἰς ἔννοιαν τὸ λυσιτελοῦν, αὐτὸν Φρουμέντιον τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν ἀναδέξασθαι προετρέψατο, εἰπὼν μὴ ἔχειν αὐτοῦ ἐπιτηδειότερον. Γίνεται δὲ τοῦτο, καὶ Φρουμέντιος ἀξιωθεὶς τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς αὐθις ἐπὶ τὴν Ἰνδῶν παραγίνεται χώραν, καὶ κηρῦξ τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ γεγονῶς εὐκτήρια {τε} πλεῖστα ἰδρύεται, ἀξιωθεὶς δὲ καὶ θείας χάριτος πολλὰ μὲν εἰργάζετο σημεῖα, πολλῶν δὲ σὺν τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ τὰ σώματα ἐθεράπευεν. Ταῦτα δὲ ὁ

Athanasius' decision to appoint Frumentius as a bishop was prudent, for Frumentius was well-assimilated into the local elite. The final lines about miracles and the help of divine grace were perhaps inserted to legitimize Frumentius and distract us from wondering how he managed to move so quickly from layman to bishop.

All in all, the conversion of "Ethiopia" (India in Rufinus' and Socrates' narratives) gives us some interesting insights into early Christian development beyond the Roman frontier. Many important details, however, are missing, and we learn little about the actual process of local assimilation and adoption of Christian ideas and practices. Given the objectives of this study, we should point out again that no direct involvement on the part of the imperial administration is recorded. It was at least fifty years after the original events (ca. 350), if we trust the dating of the Ethiopian tradition, when Rufinus brought the royal conversion into the historical annals of the Byzantines.⁴⁷⁹ Incapable of finding many details, Rufinus' version is quite sparse. As we have seen, he did not even know the name of the converted king.

For the purposes of this chapter, we have acknowledged the rich cultural associations that the Byzantines had with the Ethiopians. But when it came to their foreign conversion, the imperial writers went almost completely silent. It was not the local Christianity that excited the Byzantines as much as it was local goods and the general exoticism of the area that could inspire their imagination as they enjoyed the luxuries from the East that travelling caravans carried across the desert and delivered to the local Byzantine markets and ultimately to their private homes.

Ῥουφῖνος παρὰ τοῦ Αἰδεσίου, ὕστερον καὶ αὐτοῦ ἱερωσύνης ἀξιωθέντος ἐν τῇ Τύρῳ, ἀκηκοέναι φησίν.

⁴⁷⁹ A.J. Arkell. *A History of the Sudan: From Earliest Times to 1821*. London: The Athlone Press, 1961. See p. 180 for the conversion date of king Ezana in 350.

Byzantine Christianity in Nubia

In Greek historiography, it was first the geographer Strabo (ca. 63 B.C.-A.D. 24) who tried to put the general region of Nubia on the imperial cultural map.⁴⁸⁰ As with other such geographical and cultural references, Strabo inherited his terminology from the Hellenistic scholars who charted out the new world, which Alexander's famous conquests in the East in the fourth century B.C. had brought to them. Thus, Strabo took his information from Eratosthenes, the distinguished geodesist who was head of the great library at Alexandria in the third century B.C.. Both Strabo and Eratosthenes had visited the northern borders of Nubia. Strabo accompanied the Roman general Aelius Gallus towards the end of the first century B.C. while Eratosthenes had visited the region because Aswan, together with Alexandria, had been one of the two stations that Eratosthenes used in his measurements for a geographical meridian.⁴⁸¹

Located south of Egypt, the region of Nubia was on the horizon of the later Byzantines. But, unlike Egypt, which played a central role in the development of imperial Christianity, Nubia was not a part of Byzantine territory. Thus, at least according to the Byzantine tradition, the native elite did not accept Christianity until the sixth century. The events around the reported conversion of the local elite of Nobatia (the northern polity of the Nubian region) are synthesized in the now fragmentary history

⁴⁸⁰ Strabo. *Geographica*. Ed. A. Meineke, *Strabonis geographica*, 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1877 (repr. 1969). Book 16, Chapter 4: 4-17 and Book 17, Chapter 1: 53-54. Chapter 2: 1-3, and Chapter 3: 1-11.

⁴⁸¹ L.P. Kirwan. "Nubia and Nubian Origins." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 140, No. 1 (Feb., 1974), pp. 43-51. p. 46.

of John of Ephesus.⁴⁸² We will examine John's narrative, of course, but before that, we need to look at his life.

John of Ephesus was born in the early part of the sixth century at Amida, a city in northern Mesopotamia.⁴⁸³ Ordained a deacon in 529, he went to Palestine in 534 to steep himself in the rigors of eastern asceticism. A year later, John moved to Constantinople where he rose in the ranks of the imperial administration. Eventually, the emperor Justinian befriended John and thus he lived in great comfort for more than thirty years in the imperial capital. Presumably a monophysite, the theological camp that Justinian wanted to suppress, John was actually commissioned to a number of important religious programs. First, a series of successful missions in Asia Minor promoted John to the bishopric of Ephesus in the late 550s. As a church administrator, he boasted about stopping the performance of sacrifices, destroying many pagan temples, and constructing ninety-six churches and twelve monasteries. Over the span of thirty five years, as he told us, "thousands" were converted.⁴⁸⁴ Clearly, John had no qualms about self-promotion, and his brutal tactics to establish Christianity actually fitted well with Justinian's general religious policy within the empire.

Already in the 530s, just several years after Justinian had become sole emperor in 527, he turned against anti-Christians in Byzantium. In 529, the emperor closed the famous philosophical school at Athens, which he associated with corrupting paganism. Some time between 535 and 539, Justinian ordered Narses, military commander in the

⁴⁸² *Extracts from the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*. Ed. Jessie Payne Margoliouth. Gorgias Press, 2003.

⁴⁸³ For a thorough study on John, see Jan Jacob van Ginkel. *John of Ephesus. A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-century Byzantium*. Groningen, 1995.

⁴⁸⁴ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 3.2.44 and 3.36.

Thebaid, to halt sacrifices to the goddess Isis and to ship her cult statues to Constantinople, thereby obliterating the pagan holy space.⁴⁸⁵ Similar orders converted the oracular shrine of Zeus Ammon in Libya into a Christian church dedicated to Mary, mother of God.⁴⁸⁶

Suspicious of crypto-pagans, Justinian went on to purge the imperial administration itself.⁴⁸⁷ He removed from position officials accused of pagan or heretical beliefs. Performance of pagan sacrifices could carry the death penalty, and the emperor further ruled that all bequests to support any pagan sacrifices were null and void. There followed investigations of imperial officials and teachers who received state salaries. A second set of regulations, embodied in *Codex Justinianus* XI.11.10 denied pagans and heretics imperial office and the right to succeed to an estate.⁴⁸⁸ Apostasy was punishable by death. Failure to comply with these laws within three months left offenders at the mercy of the full letter of the law.⁴⁸⁹

On the radar of Justinian, paganism was apparently everywhere, for he kept appointing committees to look into his officials' beliefs and practices. When Justinian's agents first probed into the beliefs of his high officials, they discovered that a number of

⁴⁸⁵ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book I, chapter 19, 24-29: "The Blemyes are accustomed also to sacrifice human beings to the sun. These sanctuaries in Philae were kept by these barbarians even up to my time, but the emperor Justinian decided to tear them down. Accordingly Narses, a Persarmenian by birth, whom I have mentioned before as having deserted to the Romans, being commander of the troops there, tore down the sanctuaries at the emperor's order, and put the priests under guard and sent the statues to Byzantium."

⁴⁸⁶ Procopius. *De aedificiis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 4. Leipzig: Teubner, 1964. Book 6.2.15-18.

⁴⁸⁷ *Codex Iustinianus* in *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Ed. P. Krueger, 2 (Berlin, 1929). i.11.9-10. See Procopius. *Historia arcana*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 3. Leipzig: Teubner, 1963. Book 11. John Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L.A. Dindorf. Bonn, 1831. p. 449. Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1883-5. Volume I, p. 180. W.S. Thurman. "How Justinian I Sought to Handle the Problem of Religious Dissent?" *Greek Orthodox Theol. Review*, xiii (1968), pp. 115-40.

⁴⁸⁸ *Codex Iustinianus* in *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Ed. P. Krueger, 2. Berlin, 1929.

⁴⁸⁹ For more details, see K.W. Harl. "Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Byzantium." *Past and Present*, No. 128 (Aug., 1990), pp. 7-27. pp. 22-23.

prominent men had performed pagan rites. Among the guilty were the former prefect, Asclepiodotus; Thomas, the emperor's quaestor; and Phocas, son of Craterus, a patrician and probably a member of the first commission in compiling and arranging the famous Justinianic corpus of law. Once condemned, some converted and saved themselves. Others, as the ex-prefect Asclepiodotus, preferred voluntary death to conversion to Christianity.

Imperial legislation alone was not enough for Justinian. In 546, the emperor commissioned John of Ephesus to head a second investigation that uncovered many pagan senators, grammarians, lawyers, and physicians. Among the denounced were many who had professed Christianity in 529, most notably Phocas, son of Craterus, who committed suicide knowing that his reported relapse carried the death penalty.⁴⁹⁰

Pagan senators, bureaucrats, and scholars who offered secret sacrifice or were deemed to conduct theurgic mysteries always risked denunciation by Christians as practitioners of magic and demonology. Pagans accused by Justinian's investigators thus fell victim to stock charges. Pamprepius, an outspoken pagan grammarian, was one of them. He had been charged on the grounds not only of his pagan beliefs, but also of sorcery against the emperor Zeno and the empress Verina.⁴⁹¹

In the face of such legal disadvantages, we may feel the personal anguish of Justinian's victims, and we may shudder at his oppressive regime. In the specific case of John of Ephesus, we may also wonder how he managed to survive and keep his reported monophysite convictions. It is important to grapple with this question, for if we are to

⁴⁹⁰ Procopius. *Historia arcana*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 3. Leipzig: Teubner, 1963. Book 11. Michael the Syrian. Ed. and Tr. J.-B. Chabot. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite D'Antioche (1166-1199)*. Paris, 1899 (reprinted, 1963). IX.24.

⁴⁹¹ Malchus. *Historia*, frag. 23. In *Fragmentary Classicizing Historians*. Ed. and Tr. R. Blockley. II, pp. 452-3. Theophanes. *Chronographia*, I, a.5972 (ed. de Boor, I, p. 128).

understand John's account on the Nubian foreign conversions, we cannot casually brush it aside as a curious anomaly.

At the outset, we should remember that Justinian's theology and subsequent imperial ratification developed over time. It was not until the 550s that the emperor finally supported "dyophysitism" and officially went against the Monophysites. And even then, at the end of his life, Justinian relapsed into a version of monophysitism, the so-called aphtardocetism.⁴⁹² In other words, we should be careful not to look retroactively at Justinian's religious policies. Even Procopius in his condemnatory *Secret History* avoided such strict theological predeterminism.

In fact, Justinian's religious policies reverberated from his general social and political platform. Thus, we need to place his theological development in the context of his personal political career. An unstable persona, quite different from the theological determinist familiar in the traditional studies on Justinian, quickly emerges. Justinian came to the edge of death at the outset of his independent rule. In 532, the Constantinopolitan elite rose up against Justinian's regime and openly boycotted the new emperor. The first wave of political dissent became an open military conflict of massive proportions. To keep his government, Justinian ordered the systematic killing of his opponents.

In about a week of rioting, thousands died and forever lodged in the memory of the Byzantines the so-called Nika uprising as one of the bloodiest in the history of Constantinopolitan politics. Ultimately, Justinian managed to keep his power. But, he

⁴⁹² The name of this theological group comes from the Greek "ἄφθαρτος", which means "incorruptible," and "δοκεῖν," meaning "to seem." The leader of Aphtardocetism, Julian of Halicarnassus (lived in the early part of the sixth century), taught that Christ's body was always incorruptible. For more details, see W. H. C. Frend. *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*. Cambridge University Press, 1972. See especially, pp. 252–255.

knew the price that he had paid, and it is quite plausible that the fear of sedition haunted him throughout his life. It is in the context of early political instability that led to lifelong paranoia that we need to think about Justinian's later purges. Afraid of disloyalty, Justinian used religion to legitimize the removal of threatening political dissent. Distrusting the Constantinopolitan institutions and the officials that worked in them, he tried to build an empire-wide cult of personality, and judging from the official Byzantine contemporary literature, he invested quite lavishly in it. In addition to commissioning intellectuals to write on his behalf, he built numerous churches and placed his own statue, in which he was depicted as holding a globe with a cross on it while looking to the East, in downtown Constantinople.⁴⁹³

Relying on personal friendship, Justinian employed John of Ephesus and offered him generous material comfort. A provincial outsider, John was a convenient tool to wield against the inner-circle of established Constantinopolitan politicians. Judging from the record, Justinian surrounded himself with other political *parvenus* such as John himself and relied on them against the aristocracy in the capital that the emperor seems to have held in fear.

This was the social and political context that propelled John's career. Personal loyalty to the emperor had assured the bishop's security and prosperity, but a political career based strictly on a personal relationship has its planted danger. The death of Justinian in 565 replaced the happy days of his protégés with utter misery. Under Justin II, Justinian's nephew who ruled from 565 to 578, anti-monophysitism became an official policy now stringently endorsed. Condemned as one of the leaders of what was declared

⁴⁹³ For a description of the statue and analysis, see Nadia Maria El Cheikh. *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*. Harvard University Press, 2004. p. 146.

to be a dangerous heresy, John of Ephesus was sent to prison and most probably died there at some point after 588. In prison, John was apparently allowed to write, and he took advantage of it, for he succeeded in carrying his *Ecclesiastical History* up to 588. Perhaps to communicate directly with his native constituency, John decided to write in Syriac. As we may imagine, the quality of the language as well as the structure and content of his historical narrative deteriorated with the passing of the years. Prison discomfort and the advancement of age put their toll on the author who transplanted his personal agonies on the pages of his *Ecclesiastical History*.

The first part of John's *Ecclesiastical History* is now lost, but the second, which is of interest to us, survives. It is found in a chronicle, conventionally attributed to Dionysius of Tell Mahre (a ninth-century patriarch of the Syrian church).⁴⁹⁴ Thus, clipped in between the pages of this later Syriac chronicle, we read John's version on the episodes, leading to the conversion to Christianity of the Nubatians.⁴⁹⁵

Unlike all of the other conversion accounts for the previous regions which we have visited, John's original history devoted a significant section to the conversion of Nubatia. Unfortunately, however, most of the first five chapters of *Book Four*, where we find the background to the Nubatian conversion, are now missing.⁴⁹⁶ Thus, we lack major information on the persons involved in the local mission. We do not have John's own version on the important politics in the church of Alexandria in the sixth century. All the details in the biography of the Alexandrian patriarch Theodosius, who was ultimately deposed as a heretic, are now missing, too. The only thing we learn about

⁴⁹⁴ See the more recent scholarly view in Witold Witakowski. *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle, Part III*. Liverpool, 1997.

⁴⁹⁵ *Extracts from the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*. Ed. Jessie Payne Margoliouth. Gorgias Press, 2003. See the *Introduction*.

⁴⁹⁶ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4.

Theodosius is that he presided over the Alexandrian church for more than thirty one years. Apparently, old age eventually caught up with him, and Theodosius was in the precarious position of being a patriarch, but unable to lead a single liturgy. Too weak even to stand at the consecration of the Eucharist, the patriarch finally appointed the priest Longinus to act as his immediate proxy. Theodosius eventually appointed Longinus as a bishop of the Nobadai after their formal conversion to Christianity.

These are some of the important aspects in the general historical context that surrounded John and his main characters in the 540s. Now, we are ready to read through his *Book 4, Chapter 6* in the third part of the *Ecclesiastical History*:⁴⁹⁷

Among the clergy in attendance upon pope Theodosius,⁴⁹⁸ was a presbyter named Julianus, an old man of great worth, who conceived an earnest spiritual desire to christianize the wandering people who dwell on the eastern borders of the Thebais beyond Egypt, and who are not only not subject to the authority of the Roman empire, but even receive a subsidy on condition that they do not enter nor pillage Egypt. The blessed Julianus, therefore, being full of anxiety for this people, went and spoke about them to the late queen Theodora, in the hope of awakening in her a similar desire for their conversion; and as the queen was fervent in zeal for God, she received the proposal with joy, and promised to do everything in her power for the conversion of these tribes from the errors of idolatry. In her joy, therefore, she informed the victorious king Justinian of the proposed undertaking, and promised and anxiously desired to send the blessed Julian thither. But when the king heard that the person she intended to send was opposed to the council of Chalcedon, he was not pleased, and determined to write to the bishops of his own side in the Thebais, with orders for them to proceed thither and instruct them, and plant among them the name of the synod. And as he entered upon the matter with great zeal, he sent thither, without a moment's delay, ambassadors with gold and baptismal robes, and gifts of honour for the king of that people, and letters for the duke of the Thebais, enjoining him to take every care of the embassy, and escort them to the territories of the Nobadae. When, however, the queen learnt these things, she quickly, with much cunning, wrote letters to the duke of the Thebais, and sent a mandatory of her court to carry them to him; and which were as

⁴⁹⁷ I rely completely on R. Payne Smith's translation from the original Syriac. As a result, I have not adjusted his English to contemporary ways of expression.

⁴⁹⁸ Disagreeing with the traditional and western Roman position in the council of Chalcedon, the Alexandrian patriarch came to identify himself as a "pope," too. Of course, the word in its simplest sense means "father." The additional semantic connotations have their own complex history, an important stage of which we are witnessing in this chapter.

follows: “Inasmuch as both his majesty and myself have purposed to send an embassy to the people of the Nobadae, and I am now despatching a blessed man named Julian; and further my will is, that my ambassador should arrive at the aforesaid people before his majesty’s; be warned, that if you permit his ambassador to arrive there before mine, and do not hinder him by various pretexts until mine shall have reached you, and have passed through your province, and arrived at his destination, your life shall answer for it; for I will immediately send and take off your head.” Soon after the receipt of this letter the king’s ambassador also came, and the duke said to him, “You must wait a little, while we look out and procure beasts of burden, and men who know the deserts; and then you will be able to proceed.” And thus he delayed him until the arrival of the merciful queen’s embassy, who found horses and guides in waiting, and the same day, without loss of time, under a show of doing it by violence, they laid hands upon them, and were the first to proceed. As for the duke, he made his excuses to the king’s ambassador, saying, “Lo! when I had made my preparations, and was desirous of sending you onward, ambassadors from the queen arrived, and fell upon me with violence, and took away the beasts of burden I had got ready, and have passed onward. And I am too well acquainted with the fear in which the queen is held, to venture to oppose them. But abide still with me, until I can make fresh preparations for you, and then you also shall go in peace.” And when he heard these things, he rent his garments, and threatened him terribly, and reviled him; and after some time he also was able to proceed, and followed the other’s track, without being aware of the fraud which had been practised upon him.

From the perspective of all previous conversion accounts that we have examined, John’s testimony is certainly unusual and interesting. First, in this particular case, the initiative for conversion came from within the Byzantine imperial circles. Then, the Byzantine missionaries went right up to the imperial authorities to lobby for subsidies. Finally, there are the two competing missions between the emperor and the empress. The thread of these bizarre events has tangled up all historians who have followed it. The odd proselytizing policies struck as shocking even the very contemporaries of the imperial couple. Thus, the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius Scholasticus suspected a calculated agreement between Justinian and Theodora in an attempt to bluff the various religious

factions.⁴⁹⁹ In his *Secret History*, Procopius of Caesarea blatantly accused them of building a sinister trap to seize and suppress bold Christian dissenters.⁵⁰⁰

Scholarly consensus puts the conversion events of the Nobatians in the 540s.⁵⁰¹ According to John of Ephesus, the monophysite Julian, financed by the empress Theodora, was the first to arrive at the court of the Nobatians. Julian and his entourage offered to the local elite many gifts, “magnificent honors,” “numerous baptismal robes,” and “everything else richly provided for their use.”⁵⁰² Impressed by the glamorous, and seductive, generosity of the Roman missionaries, the king of the Nobadae rejected “the error of his forefathers” and “confessed the God of the Christians.” After baptizing quickly the local elite, Julian proceeded to instruct them in basic theology. For Julian, and for John of Ephesus who told his story, the council of Chalcedon was a thorny issue. Thus, Julian taught the Nobatians to side with the Monophysites and their leaders, pope Theodosius of Alexandria and the empress Theodora in Constantinople. Apparently, Julian’s mission impressed the local elites, for when Justinian’s dyophysite missionaries finally arrived in Nobatia, it was simply too late for them to make any difference.

Like Theodora’s Monophysites, Justinian’s Dyophysites were well-funded. Lavishing the Nobatians with gifts and imperial praise, Justinian’s proselytizers instructed the local king that there was more to Christianity than a simple baptism. They pointed out that accepting and keeping true to the orthodox teachings of the Church as

⁴⁹⁹ Evagrius Scholasticus. *Historia ecclesiastica*. Eds. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, *The ecclesiastical history of Evagrius with the scholia*. London: Methuen, 1898 (repr. 1979). Book 4, 10.

⁵⁰⁰ Procopius. *Historia arcana*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 3. Leipzig: Teubner, 1963. Book 10, 14-15.

⁵⁰¹ L.P. Kirwan. “Notes on the Topography of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms.” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Sep., 1935), pp. 57-62. Kirwan gives a range from 540 to 548. p. 57. See also A.J. Arkell. *A History of the Sudan: From Earliest Times to 1821*. London: The Athlone Press, 1961. Arkell dates the conversion precisely to 543. p. 181.

⁵⁰² John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 7.

well as obeying the right ecclesiastical leadership were fundamental obligations of every proper Christian.⁵⁰³ But, Julian had prepared the Nobatians well, for they supposedly replied:

The honourable present which the king of the Romans has sent us we accept, and will also ourselves send him a present. But his faith we will not accept: for if we consent to become Christians, we shall walk after the example of pope Theodosius, who, because he was not willing to accept the wicked faith of the king, was driven away by him and expelled from his church. If, therefore, we abandon our heathenism and errors, we cannot consent to fall into the wicked faith professed by the king.⁵⁰⁴

We can easily see how John of Ephesus transplanted his own theological interests and politics into the supposed response of the Nobatians. In reality, it is unlikely that the Nobatians themselves were either interested or versed enough in theology to confront Justinian's missionaries about issues of doctrinal faith. In the *History* of John of Ephesus, therefore, the exaggerated (if not completely invented) Nobatian response primarily served to affect John's already Christian readers inside the empire.

According to John of Ephesus, Julian eventually spent two years as a missionary in Nobatia. His biggest enemy there was the flogging sun. "For he [Julian] used to say that from nine o'clock until four in the afternoon he was obliged to take refuge in caverns, full of water, where he sat undressed and girt with a linen garment, such as the people of the country wear. And if he left the water, his skin, he said, was blistered by the heat."⁵⁰⁵ Even Julian's zeal could not soften the rigors of the sun. Thus, he worked in the later hours of the day when the brunt of the heat was less severe.

⁵⁰³ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 7.

⁵⁰⁴ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 7.

⁵⁰⁵ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 7.

In Nobatia, Julian was not alone. He had several priests who accompanied him, but his closest friend was an old bishop from the Thebais, Theodore. After two years of intense work, Julian decided that the Nubatian mission no longer required his personal presence there. Thus, he commissioned Theodore to take it over. Julian himself returned to Constantinople where many gifts and much honor awaited him in the court of the empress Theodora. There were many more wonderful details regarding the conversion of the Nobadians, which Julian supposedly reported to Theodora, “but they are too long for us to write, nor can we spare space for more than we have already inserted.”⁵⁰⁶

It is important to note that John of Ephesus decided to skip the further specifics of Julian’s reported actions in Nobatia. By John’s own admission, he had already inserted too much detail. To our regret, John’s priorities were not concerned with the conversion of the Nobadians; they were elsewhere. The battles of Chalcedon, the theological nuances that tried to discern between “heresy” and “orthodoxy,” and the conflicts of Christianity within the empire were the basic themes that drew John’s attention and pushed him to provide numerous examples and personal anecdotes.

As a result, we do not learn much about what happened to Julian as a missionary, and we know even less about his life in Constantinople where he presumably died. The passing of the monophysite patriarch Theodosius, who had supported Julian, came soon thereafter, too. Committed to monophysite Nobatia, however, the empress Theodora did not give up her cause and designated as a bishop of the foreign people, Longinus, Theodosius’ former confidant in Alexandria. During Theodosius’ final years, Longinus had *de facto* replaced the aged patriarch and served as his direct representative in

⁵⁰⁶ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4.

Alexandria. Thus, Longinus was a trusted man and well-experienced to lead the monophysite cause of Theodora.

The generous funds that the empress Theodora initially poured in Longinus' mission did not buy off his opposition. Rival Dyophysites reached Justinian and informed the emperor that Longinus was getting ready to board a ship and to sail to the Nubatians. "And should he go," the Dyophysites supposedly explained, "for he is a passionate man, and arrive among that people in safety, he will immediately stir them up to make war upon and pillage the territory of the Romans. Give orders, therefore, for his immediate arrest."⁵⁰⁷ Justinian took them seriously and prohibited all sailors to take Longinus on board. Three years passed, and Longinus' attempts to convince or even to bribe anyone to take him from Alexandria to Nobatia proved futile.

Longinus had to go undercover. Normally, he did not hide his natural baldness, but to escape the imperial agents, he put on a wig. Accompanied by two servants, who were also in disguise, Longinus finally arrived in Nobatia. The locals accepted Longinus and embraced his teachings. In a short time, Longinus "built a church, ordained local clergy, and taught them the order of divine service, and all the ordinances of Christianity."⁵⁰⁸

Longinus' success in Nobatia supposedly worried Justinian in Constantinople. As soon as the emperor found out about Longinus' escape and work in Nobatia, Justinian ordered the monophysite bishop's capture. Even the presents and the honorary salutations from the Nobatian king, which Longinus had effectively gained for the

⁵⁰⁷ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 8.

⁵⁰⁸ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 8.

emperor, failed to move Justinian. John of Ephesus claimed to have been personally present in the court of Justinian when the Nubian envoy to the emperor said, “Though we were Christians in name, yet we did not really know what Christianity was until Longinus came to us.” Then, John of Ephesus added, “And much more he [the Nubian ambassador] related, greatly to his [Longinus’] honour; but the king [Justinian] retained a bitter feeling against him [Longinus], though he said nothing.”⁵⁰⁹

Longinus spent in Nubia about five years. Then, Theodosius, the archpresbyter of the clergy at Alexandria, and Theodore, Longinus’ nephew, who was an archdeacon in Alexandria, urged Longinus to leave Nubia and to come to the suburbs of Alexandria to consecrate a new monophysite patriarch there. “When...Longinus received these letters, he was stirred up, and burnt with earnest zeal; and, despising all danger of death, began to make preparations for his journey, and for fulfilling what was enjoined in the letters.”⁵¹⁰ The Nubian king and his nobles tried to dissuade Longinus from leaving them. “The business for which I am commanded to set out upon this journey,” Longinus supposedly said, “is one for the common good of the whole church, and I cannot therefore refuse to go.”⁵¹¹

Remembering the departure of Julian, who never returned, the Nubians were supposedly afraid that they would be left once again “like orphans without a father.”⁵¹² Nothing could dissuade Longinus, and “finally, with much sorrow and bitter lamentation,

⁵⁰⁹ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4.

⁵¹⁰ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 9.

⁵¹¹ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 9.

⁵¹² John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 9.

they let him go, and provided him with means for his journey.”⁵¹³ First, Longinus went to Theodore, the bishop of Philae in the Thebais and the old friend of Julian, and asked him to accompany him to Alexandria. Advanced age prevented Theodore from joining Longinus, but the fragile bishop commissioned Longinus to act on his behalf. Strengthened by Theodore’s allegiance, Longinus arrived in Mareotis, the Alexandrian suburb where the new patriarchal consecration was to take place. Five years or so abroad, however, had not removed the imperial order against Longinus, so he was still a wanted man. Thus, Longinus was petrified that the news of his entrance in Roman territories might reach the imperial authorities, “in which case he would die a painful death.”⁵¹⁴

We need to note here that in the height of the monophysite controversy, Longinus found it his duty to risk his life and go back to Alexandria in the name of the entire Church. From the strict perspective of John’s account, Christian welfare outside of the realms of the empire mattered less. Despite the persistent supplications of the Nubatians, Longinus left. Read along with the other conversion stories, which we have brought back to life in this dissertation, John’s account, otherwise uniquely interweaving the complexities of the Christian missions abroad, follows the general tendency of Byzantine writers to subdue their narratives to Christian development internal to the empire.

Thus from Chapter 9 on, John preoccupied himself with the Alexandrian ecclesiastical intrigues. Their final outcome could be summarized in the gruesome account of Chapter 19:

⁵¹³ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 9.

⁵¹⁴ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 9.

...For the bishops and clergy and monasteries, great and small, joined some one side and some the other, as also did the people of the churches, both in towns and villages, and in the country: and each faction eagerly set itself to injure, and ruin, and revile, and speak evil of the other, with barbarous and unmitigated violence, seeking the other's wrong, and slandering them, and dividing the people, and producing schism in the churches, and tearing the congregations to pieces, till each one abominated his neighbour, and rent himself from him, and endeavoured to enlarge his own party, doing his utmost to produce division, and make others stumble, and cause schisms, and bring men over to his own views...For even of heathens and Jews and heretics, no one, however fierce and savage, would venture to speak so reproachfully as the believers did of one another at the very time when in matters of faith there was difference or dispute between them.⁵¹⁵

Eventually, in Chapter 48, John of Ephesus came back to Nubia where he pointed out that Longinus and his monophysite friends had appointed as a patriarch of Alexandria, Theodore, a former monk in the Egyptian desert. We also learn that soon after the consecration, Longinus had gone back to Nubia. The Alodians in the southern Nubian regions called for Christianity, and Longinus went to set up a mission there. In Longinus' absence, the newly-appointed patriarch Theodore lamented his precarious situation and inability to weather alone the stormy attacks of the Dyophysites. Thus, Theodore was not impressed by Longinus' renewed missionary activities, but demanded his immediate return. "For after coming...and exposing me to trouble, and getting me away from the desert, they [Longinus and his friend Paul] have now left me, and neglect me, and do not even inquire whether I am alive or dead..."⁵¹⁶

The times were hard for the Monophysites in the empire, and the high-profile patriarchal post in Alexandria exposed Theodore even more to the dyophysite opposition further boldened by Justinian's formal support. Theodore's life was under threat. In distant Alodia, contrary to Theodore's complaints, Longinus was actually working hard for the monophysite cause in Alexandria and in the empire at large. By establishing his

⁵¹⁵ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4.

⁵¹⁶ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4.

Christian mission there, Longinus hoped to assure and harness Alodian allegiance for the ecclesiastical and theological battles of the day. Audacity, zeal, physical strength, and energy were required for being a missionary in the Nubian desert. Theodore, Julian's friend and bishop of Philae, had travelled back and forth, through the desert sand, between his own see in the Thebais and Nوباتيا for eighteen years. Before Longinus moved to Alodia, he, too, devoted five years to Nوباتيا, risking his own life by breaking imperial law.

Like other royal conversions in the early Byzantine period, the Alodian one was depicted as a result of personal volition on the part of the local king and not as a product of imperial coercion. "When the people of the Alodaei heard of the conversion of the Nobadae," John of Ephesus wrote, "their king...requested the Nobadae to permit the bishop, who had taught and baptized them, to come and instruct them in like manner."⁵¹⁷ The Alodian call for conversion, however, coincided with Longinus' trip for the Alexandrian patriarchal consecration, so he had to postpone the opening of the new mission abroad. In the meantime, the Dyophysites sent to the Alodian king a formal letter declaring Longinus' deposition in Nubia. The king supposedly replied, "We will not receive any one but our spiritual father who begot us again by a spiritual birth; and all that is said against him by his enemies, we regard as falsehoods."⁵¹⁸

We need to cherish the wonderful details of John's account, which have been absent in numerous other authors that we have encountered. Following the specific objectives of our study, we also need to note that the Alodians and the Nوباتians

⁵¹⁷ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 49.

⁵¹⁸ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4, Chapter 49.

collaborated and ultimately chose their own Christian leadership. Through the eyes of John of Ephesus, we get a glimpse into the workings of inner-Church factionalism, the lobbying of the emperor and his advisors, the agendas of the native peoples as well as the actual historians that frame the conversion events to fit the ideological goals of their narratives. These are difficult variables to handle, and the formulaic remarks that turn the Byzantine conversion actions into a ready mechanism in the hands of the emperor to expand his domains certainly fail to show a good grasp of them.⁵¹⁹

The efforts of the Dyophysites to seize Longinus and to supplant his mission in Alodia persisted for a long time. Formal correspondence failed to convince the Alodians that Longinus was a heretic who could no longer perform sacred rites. As a last resort, therefore, two dyophysite bishops were sent to Alodia to instruct the locals in person. The bishops were accepted there, but when they approached the subject of Longinus, the Alodians supposedly threatened them, “We know not who you are, nor can we receive you, or be baptized by you. But, we will receive him who baptized the Nobadae, and by him will we be baptized...Depart, therefore, from our land, that you may not die miserably.”⁵²⁰

We can see how difficult it was to proselytize abroad. Even when the locals were receptive to Christianity, there were ecclesiastical factions to compete in the conversion process. Technically, the Dyophysites were the stronger faction, for they had the formal

⁵¹⁹ Observe the interpretation of one scholar who tries to fit the imperialist line of thought on conversion. When the evidence does not obey, he simply dismisses the imperial motives. Byzantine scholarship is quite rich with such examples. “Justinian was certainly aware that the Christian mission beyond the imperial borders had its value as an instrument of imperial policy. But in Nubia, as in the similar case of the Ghassanids on the Syrian frontier, he could scarcely have hoped that any form of Christianity would succeed in those remote places except that prevalent in the provinces nearest to them. I suspect that the imperial mission was rather a formal gesture, not really intended to achieve its supposed purpose.” Edward R. Hardy. “The Egyptian Policy of Justinian.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 22 (1968), pp. 21-41. p. 36.

⁵²⁰ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 50.

backing of the emperor. In distant Nubia, however, the imperial support meant very little. Condemned in Byzantium, Longinus was praised in the foreign courts of Alodia and Nobatia. Of course, this was the limited perspective of the monophysite John of Ephesus. And, as we have pointed out above, John had his reasons to embellish or even invent certain specific moments in Longinus' life. Regardless of how accurate John's narrative is, however, we should pay attention to the politics (Nubian or Byzantine; ecclesiastical or state) that complicated the straightforward connection between "conversion" and "empire," with which readers of Byzantine scholarship are quite familiar.

Local climate and terrain, too, were significant factors in the dynamics of the natives' conversions. We have shown above the challenging weather and landscape in the region. Thus, when Longinus set out to travel from Alexandria, where he had consecrated Theodore, to Alodia, where his new mission was, he was well-prepared. But, the desert was a rough obstacle. First, Longinus himself fell ill. Then, his companions followed him in sickness. Poor diet, as Longinus explained in one of his letters, intense heat, sickness, and loss of at least seventeen camels, which carried his belongings and provisions, almost put an end to his life there in the sands of Nubia.⁵²¹

Somehow Longinus recovered, but only to discover that the middle Nubian kingdom of the Makoritae had turned dyophysite and thus was against him. The Makoritae "set watchers in all the passes of the kingdom on all the roads, both in the

⁵²¹ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 51.

mountains and in the plains, as far as the Sea of Weeds,⁵²² in hopes of arresting Longinus.”⁵²³ Divine guidance alone, according to John of Ephesus, led Longinus past the Makorite garrisons and to the safe refuge of the Alodians. Aitekia,⁵²⁴ a local dignitary, welcomed Longinus with great pomp. The king met him in person, too, “and received him with great joy.” After a few days’ instruction, the Alodian king himself and all his nobles were supposedly baptized. As time passed, all the Alodians followed and were baptized, too.⁵²⁵

We should recognize the strength of Longinus’ conviction that pushed him to endure the beating heat, to creep cautiously through the arid sands, losing in the process some of his camels, and to circle around the well-trodden paths of the wadis in the desert so as to dodge the state militia. This certainly is a devout attempt to proselytize. But, we should also note that the great efforts to spot and murder the Christian Longinus were urged from within Christian groups whose specific theology and interests did not align with Longinus’. The Nubian mission was not a simple Christian/pagan or empire/colony issue, but a display of rigorous Christian factionalism to build and legitimize one’s own ecclesiastical constituency beyond the empire. The dynamics of foreign conversion resonated from the inner imperial Christian divisions, which were deemed more important to their contemporaries.

⁵²² R. Payne Smith identifies “the Sea of Weeds” as “the constant appellation given by all Syriac writers to the Red Sea.” John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 51. ff. 28.

⁵²³ According to R. Payne Smith, the Syriac “Aitekia” is probably a corruption of the Greek name Eutychius. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 51.

⁵²⁴ According to R. Payne Smith, the Syriac “Aitekia” is probably a corruption of the Greek name Eutychius. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 51. ff. 29.

⁵²⁵ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 51.

More than any other accounts that we have investigated, John's chapters draw us into the inner conflicts of conversion when moved away from the theoretical plain of theological discourses and onto the ground of its actual workings. If we are interested in history, we need to be thinking through those multiple layers of provocative complexity. Thus, after his baptism, the Alodian king sent a thank-you letter to the Nobatians. He expressed the joy of Christianity and praised Longinus for his hard work and commitment.⁵²⁶

Supposedly, Longinus, too, sent from Alodia a letter to the Nobatians with the request that the Nobatians forward it to Alexandria.⁵²⁷ Clipped from the original and inserted in the history of John of Ephesus, the letter summarized Longinus' travails through the desert and his success on the mission field in Alodia. Humbleness and self-sacrifice have always been praiseworthy Christian virtues, so Longinus insisted in his correspondence on having made them integral to his life. Piety and a sense of mission, Longinus insisted, sustained him and softened his hardship. In his early life, he had lived in Alexandria, but duty had sent him abroad. Current ecclesiastical feuds, Longinus complained, prohibited him from ever coming back home.

In his final letter from Alodia to the patriarchate, Longinus hearkened back yet again to Alexandria and thus showed us where he actually belonged. Many were Longinus' enemies: the officials who were after him, the clergymen who thought him dangerous, the complacent people in the empire who refused to give him help and money and thus tossed him empty-handed to the harsh frivolities of the desert. Yet, Longinus

⁵²⁶ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 52.

⁵²⁷ John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Tr. R. Payne Smith. Oxford University Press, 1860. Book 4. Chapter 52.

found it his duty to steer the entire Church in what he thought was the right direction. Thus, he kept his contacts with Alexandria.

Many were the colors that painted Longinus' kaleidoscopic life. On the one hand, his Christian identity trumped his sense of imperial loyalty. On the other hand, his self-identification with Byzantium trumped his desire to settle abroad. Poverty in the later period of his life did not freeze his movement around the empire and beyond, but his travels were in fact harsh travails that certainly pained him. He rejected the official state policy, but inevitably carried with him some aspects of the imperial culture, in which he was born and grew up.

If there is a common thread that leads us out of the labyrinthine operations of conversion and the consequences of the Byzantine missions, which we have traced through Longinus' life, it is that "foreign conversions" and "imperial ideology" are hard to align. In the Byzantine experience, the imperial officials rarely thought that the missionary affairs would contribute to their advantage. Certainly, Longinus' contemporaries did not find him beneficial, so they targeted him as a criminal, forcing him to hide in the deserts of Egypt and Nubia. Yet, certain foreign polities sided with Longinus, supported him, and even paid for his clandestine trips around the empire. Given how little the foreign elites most likely understood the nuanced theological points that separated Longinus from the other clergymen in the empire, they sided with him based on his personal charisma.

Once Longinus integrated himself into the foreign communities, became a friend, and even a leader, the locals were ready to protect him as one of their own. None of these dynamics should signify local resistance through the person of Longinus against

grand imperial ambitions. The story about Longinus' missions in Nubia is a tale about one's successful integration into a foreign community to the point of assuming its leadership. The communal trust and affectation empowered Longinus and gave him discretion to channel that social energy in the ways that he found most sensible and expedient.

According to John of Ephesus, the feats of Longinus were saintly. The official imperial theology, however, had discredited him as a criminal. It was a matter of perspective, and John of Ephesus, too, had conveniently decided to skip over the uncomfortable moments in Longinus' career and the failed monophysite attempts to convert Makuria. According to John of Ephesus, around 580, Nobatia, in northern Nubia, was monophysite; Makuria, south from Nobatia, was dyophysite, and Alodia, south from Makuria, was monophysite. The region was split, and so was Byzantium itself. Despite their great efforts, the Byzantine emperors could not control the workings of the clergymen, and all their legal regulations did not manage to bring together different communities and their leaders under one common, Christian, "orthodox" doctrine.

Governing its people was the responsibility of the Byzantine administration. But, foreign polities had their own agendas. In the case of the Nubians, they eventually turned to Islam. In the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon thought that those complex religious and social shifts were actually quite straightforward and simple:

But the Nubians at length executed their threats of returning to the worship of idols; the climate required the indulgence of polygamy, and they have finally preferred the triumph of the Koran to the abasement of the Cross. A metaphysical religion may appear too refined for the capacity of the negro race: yet a black or a parrot might be taught to repeat the *words* [italics are Gibbon's] of the Chalcedonian or Monophysite creed.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁸ Edward Gibbon. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: Modern Library (Random House). Volume 2. p. 862.

Even when twentieth-century scholars tried to vindicate the Nubians and to correct inherited interpretations, their attempts did not much improve on Gibbon's line of thought:

Secondly, on the intellectual side the people were, and for centuries had been, what we must call a cultured race: some Greeks regarded them as the first parents of all civilization, and Herodotus himself felt no qualms about equating the gods of Ethiopia with his own. They had long been familiar with hieroglyphics, and about the beginning of our era they invented a script of their own: a little later, but before the general introduction of Christianity, both Blemyan and Nubian kinglets were aping the ceremonial of a Byzantine court and keeping legal records in execrable Greek. If they had not been a civilized race and had not impressed other civilized races as such—if, for example, they had been an uncultured negroid tribe—can anyone who knows anything of the Greeks imagine that the Church in Constantinople would have sent missionaries to convert them to Christianity?⁵²⁹

Today, we shiver at the face of such frightening and ugly explanations. And, in light of the evidence above, we should also cringe at persistent interpretations that portray the Christian conversions as a simple Byzantine imperial technique for domination. The historical events, the experiences, hopes, and passions of those involved as well as the multiple contingencies in the official state agendas were much richer than the modern scholarly formulas have allowed them to be.

Through John of Ephesus and his protagonist Longinus, we have shared a first-hand experience of the actual powerful and complex dynamics of conversion in the foreign lands outside of Byzantine Egypt. Internal ecclesiastical conflicting agendas, personal anxieties and enmities pierced through and impeded Longinus' missions. At best, the imperial government played the role of a political broker who sided with the stronger lobbyist. In this case, the state ultimately went against Longinus.

⁵²⁹ J.W. Crowfoot. "Christian Nubia." *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 13, No. ¾ (Nov., 1927), pp. 141-150. p. 142.

In the end, from the traditional perspective of monophysite Christianity that came to appropriate John of Ephesus and his *Ecclesiastical History*, the Nubian missions represented heroic accomplishments. For Byzantine orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, they stood as heretical threats against established authority and sacred dogma. Thus, we can see how in the realm of tradition, separated from the original historical events by time, political interests, different cultural agendas and religious priorities, the Nubian conversions have been split into two polarities. The explosive inner conflict, still at the center of this extreme division, is powerful even today. But in between the two polarities, there are many nuances that bridge together the purely human personal objectives, shocking surprises to the historical actors themselves, communal and state actions and communications in the process. Thus, it is in the many twists and turns of Longinus' experience in the mission field, which lasted over twenty years, that we have sought to find the multivaried and context-specific relationship between the Christian conversion and the agendas of the Byzantine state.

Indeed, we have found many examples of power dynamics that framed and channeled the activities of the Nubian protagonists. But, most of those examples were rooted in local social relationships that were foreign to the distant imperial government in Constantinople. To the degree to which there was a Byzantine state involvement in the local affairs at all, it was mediated and executed by the local representatives themselves whose actual stakes were planted in their own professional ambitions and the interests of the local political coalitions that tried to exploit the official imperial representatives in their own turn. At the very end of this section, before we cross the Red Sea and find ourselves on the Arabian peninsula, we need to remember these interesting dynamics of

conversion and then see more clearly its actual historical operations. Despite the reported direct Byzantine imperial involvement, the locals appropriated Christianity from the heretical factions that the Byzantine officials persecuted. The Christian conversion of Nubia did not bring about Byzantine expansion.

Byzantine Christianity in Arabia

Among those Byzantines who had to travel into the foreign regions of Africa or Arabia, Longinus was not the only one who ultimately gravitated back towards the familiar Alexandria. In 356, a formal imperial law forbade Byzantine ambassadors “to the people of the Aksūmites and the Himyarites” to stop over in Alexandria for more than a year.⁵³⁰ The attractions of rich Alexandria as well as the dangerous travelling conditions to their final destinations around the Red Sea coast must have kept the Byzantine ambassadors from actually leaving the city. Clearly, this was a habitual affair to provoke the angry imperial officials.

Already we get a glimpse into the lackadaisical ways, in which the imperial officials dealt with the foreign kingdoms. Presumably, once in Alexandria, the ambassadors tried to appoint their own local representatives to get to Aksūm and Himyar or to arrange a meeting with foreign ambassadors sent to them in Alexandria. However, for the emperor, who sought speedy resolutions, meeting in the middle was not an option. Thus, it took imperial pressure, personal interests on the part of individual entrepreneurs, or serious religious convictions to prod the Byzantines to leave home and to venture into the foreign lands that were marked by exotic tales and unsettling stereotypes.

⁵³⁰ Codex Theodosianus. Ed. T. Mommsen. Berlin: Weidmann, 1954 (Reprint of 1905 edition). XII.12.2.

In the lands of Arabia, the first conversion of royalty to Christianity came during the reign of the emperor Valens (364-378). We find the details of the story in the

Ecclesiastical History of Rufinus (ca. 340-410):

...Mavia, the queen of the Saracens, began to rock the towns and cities on the borders of Palestine and Arabia with fierce attacks, and to lay waste to neighboring provinces at the same time; she also wore down the Roman army in frequent battles, killed many [soldiers], and put the rest to flight. Sued for peace, she said she would agree to it only if a monk named Moses were ordained bishop for her people. He was leading a solitary life in the desert near her territory and had achieved great fame because of his merits and the miracles and signs God worked through him. Her request, when presented to the Roman sovereign, was ordered to be carried out without delay by our officers who had fought there with such unhappy results. Moses was taken and brought to Alexandria, as was usual, to receive the priesthood. Lucius, to whom the ceremony of ordination was entrusted, was present. Moses, when he saw him, said to the officers who were there and were anxious to make haste, and to the people, "I do not think that I am worthy of such a great priesthood, but if it is judged that some part of God's providence is to be fulfilled in me, unworthy as I am, then I swear by our God, the Lord of heaven and earth, that Lucius shall not lay on me his hands, defiled and stained as they are by the blood of the saints." Lucius, seeing himself branded with so heavy a reproach in the eyes of the multitude, said, "Why, Moses, do you so easily condemn one whose faith you do not know? Or if someone has told you something different about me, listen to my creed, and believe yourself rather than others." "Lucius," he replied, "stop trying to assail even me with your delusions. I know well your creed, which God's servants condemned to the mines declare, as do the bishops driven into exile, the presbyters and deacons banished to dwellings beyond the pale of the Christian religion, and the others handed over some to the beasts and some even to fire. Can that faith by truer which is perceived by ears than that which is seen by the eyes? I am sure that those with a correct belief in Christ do not do such things." And thus Lucius, now loaded with even more disgrace, was forced to agree that he might receive the priesthood from the bishops he had driven into exile, since the need to look to the welfare of the state was so pressing.⁵³¹

We have met Rufinus before and have discussed his preoccupations in previous chapters, so we should not be surprised to find out how quickly he moved over from Mavia's conversion to inter-ecclesiastical disputes within the Alexandrian circles. As with other similar examples, the conversion of Mavia was not of great interest to Rufinus.

⁵³¹ *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia*. Tr. Philip R. Amidon. Oxford University Press, 1997. *Book XI*, Chapter 6.

Instead, he used it primarily to convey how Moses employed the conversion to correct the misdemeanors of his theological opponent Lucius and to set theology straight inside the empire.

All of Rufinus' major contemporary ecclesiastical historians were drawn to Mavia's story as well. They all readily improvised on the theme of her conversion, too. Socrates, who basically repeated Rufinus' version, added that Mavia, in a final pious swing, married her daughter to a Roman general.⁵³² Sozomen, who referred to the Saracen leader as "Mania" instead of "Mavia," inserted some details about her campaigns in Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, and Arabia.⁵³³ He quickly outlined Mania's conversion and rejected the possibility that Moses had managed to change Lucius' pro-Arian theology. Instead, in Sozomen's history, Moses actually pressured the Romans to allow him to get ordained by Christian bishops in imperial exile.

Instead of expounding the details of Mania's conversion, Sozomen found it more interesting to explain the ancestral origins and customs of her Saracens:

It appears that the Saracens were descended from Ishmael, the son of Abraham, and were, in consequence, originally denominated Ishmaelites. As their mother Hagar was a slave, they afterwards to conceal the opprobrium of their origin, assumed the name Saracens, as if they were descended from Sara, the wife of Abraham. Such being their origin, they practise circumcision like the Jews, refrain from the use of pork, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs. If, indeed, they deviate in any respect from the observances of that people, it must be ascribed to the lapse of time, and to their intercourse with neighbouring peoples. Moses, who lived many centuries after Abraham, only legislated for those whom he led out of Egypt. The inhabitants of the neighboring countries, being strongly addicted to superstition, probably soon corrupted the laws imposed upon them by their forefather Ishmael. These laws, though not set down in writing, were the only ones known to the ancient Hebrews before the promulgation of the written laws of Moses. These people certainly served the same gods as the neighboring

⁵³² Socrates. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. P. Maraval and P. Périchon, *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Livres I-VII). Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004-2007. Book 4, Chapter 36.

⁵³³ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 38.

peoples, recognized them by the same appellations, and rendered them the same species of homage; and this clearly evidences their departure from the laws of their forefathers. It appears probably that, in the lapse of time, their ancient customs fell into oblivion, and that they gradually learnt to follow the practices of other peoples. Some of their tribes afterwards happening to come in contact with the Jews, gathered from them the facts of their true origin, and returned to the observance of the Hebrew customs and laws. Indeed, there are some among them, even at the present day, who regulate their lives according to the Jewish precepts.⁵³⁴

According to Sozomen, and many other Byzantines who agreed with him, the Saracens in Arabia were ultimately of Jewish descent. This made sense to all those Byzantines, who took the Old Testament seriously and literally, for it brought the Saracens back to the genesis of all men and peoples. It also conveniently characterized the Saracens as natural-born slaves, which readily explained the circulating stereotypes about their bizarre lifestyles and provided easy justifications for the Byzantine exploitative relations with them.

There was another etymological explanation for the referent “Saracens,” popular among the Byzantines, but which Sozomen did not mention. It argued that “Saracens” came from the Greek word “σκηνή, ή,” meaning “tent, camp.” Thus, “Σαρακηνοί” presumably stood for “tent-dwellers,” which to the Byzantines captured the essence of those peoples’ nomadic lifestyle. Given what most Byzantines knew about the Saracens’ Jewish practices and their cultural habits, prompting them to migrate and camp across the desert, both explanations made perfect sense to them.

Having linked the Saracens to the Jews and having pointed out the Saracens’ inherent cultural propensity to be easily swayed by those who lived next to them, Sozomen quickly explained the local conversions to Christianity:

⁵³⁴ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 38.

Some of the Saracens were converted to Christianity not long before the accession of Valens. Their conversion appears to have been the result of their intercourse with the priests who dwelt among them, and with the monks who dwelt in the neighboring deserts, and who were distinguished by their purity of life, and by their miraculous gifts. It is said that a whole tribe, and Zocomus, their chief, were converted to Christianity and baptized about this period, under the following circumstances: Zocomus was childless and went to a certain monk of great celebrity to complain to him of this calamity; for among the Saracens, and I believe other barbarian peoples, it was accounted of great importance to have children. The monk desired Zocomus to be of good cheer, engaged in prayer on his behalf, and sent him away with the promise that if he would believe in Christ, he would have a son. When this promise was accomplished by God, and when a son was born to him, Zocomus was baptized, and all his subjects with him. From that period, this tribe was peculiarly fortunate, and became strong in point of number, and formidable to the Persians as well as to the other Saracens. Such are the details that I have been enabled to collect concerning the conversion of the Saracens and their first bishops.⁵³⁵

Sozomen's identification of Mavia's Saracens with the biblical Ishmaelites was not unique. Theodoret of Cyrrhus took this for granted and labelled Mavia directly as a leader of the Ishmaelite tribes.⁵³⁶ He placed Moses somewhere between Egypt and Palestine and had him clash with Lucius over doctrine, too. Unlike the other historians, Theodoret did not even bother to explain why Mavia decided to convert to Christianity.

By the time the story of Mavia reached Theophanes in the ninth century, it had gone through additional adjustments. Thus, Theophanes made her queen of the Saracens again, but, according to Theophanes, Mavia had asked the Romans to ordain Moses as a bishop strictly over those of her Saracens who were already Christian:

When the emperor accepted this eagerly, Moses insisted that he be ordained not by the Arian Lucius, but by one of the orthodox who were in exile. This was done. Mavia took him and made many Christians among the Saracens. They say that she herself was a Christian and a Roman by race, and that after she had been

⁵³⁵ Sozomen. *Ecclesiastical History*. Eds. J. Bidez and G.C. Hansen, *Sozomenus. Kirchengeschichte [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 50]*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960. Book 6, Chapter 38.

⁵³⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Eds. L. Parmentier and F. Scheidweiler, *Theodoret. Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn. [*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 44*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954]: 1-349. p. 261: Κατ' ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον τῶν Ἰσμαηλιτῶν τὰ φύλα τὰς πελαζούσας τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίας ἐληΐζετο χώρας. Μαβία δὲ τούτων ἡγεῖτο...

taken prisoner, she pleased the emperor of the Saracens by her beauty, and so she gained control of the empire. Sozomen relates many things about this race, its origins and name and that they are circumcised at the age of 13.⁵³⁷

We can immediately see the laxity with which Theophanes improvised and even imposed claims on behalf of the earlier historians that they had never actually made. Given the freedom with which Theophanes treated his sources, it is interesting and indicative to note how little deliberation and fictional invention he was willing to devote to the actual details surrounding the conversion. Moreover, Theophanes even took credit away from Mavia by making her a Christian Roman who was captured abroad. Instead of being a capable politician and a great general, features explicitly compared to exceptional masculinity in the previous accounts [ἄνδρεία], for Theophanes, Mauia relied on her feminine beauty. Once a queen, she planted Moses first among the Christian Saracens and then, drawing on his charisma, extended Christianity to many others. Clearly, Theophanes was not invested in figuring out the historical truth. And, he was not invested in praising Mavia for choosing Christianity on her own and daringly leading her people to it either.

According to the Byzantine historians, the next major moment in the history of Christianity in the lands of Arabia coincided with the rule of Justinian in the sixth century. Procopius, the primary historian of the period, described the polity of the Himyarites (i.e., “the Homeritai” in his writings) and set it within the geography and politics of the Red Sea region. In his description, Procopius emphasized the importance of the desert and explained the difficulties that it posed for the Romans who could not travel on their own through the arid sands and thus had to rely on local people. Even the

⁵³⁷ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 99.

Red Sea, Procopius explained, was hard to sail, for immense shoals could easily capture passing ships. Some of the best sailors stuck their vessels into the sand, especially if they were foolish enough to travel at night. The high demand for local commodities explained the heavy risks that traders were willing to take, carrying goods through the desert or the sea, in the hopes of getting rich. Thus, the uninterrupted channels of trade were the primary concerns of the Romans, not the inter-tribal local politics or the impossible-to-control religious development.

A certain Abochorabos, Procopius pointed out as an example, offered his lands and allegiance to the emperor Justinian. Abochorabos “always seemed a man to be feared, and exceptionally energetic, both to the barbarians over whom he ruled and to the enemy no less so.”⁵³⁸ Thus, Justinian accepted Abochorabos’ free gift. “Formally, therefore,” Procopius explained, “the emperor holds the Palm Grove, but it is impossible for him to control it in the slightest, for a land completely destitute of human beings, and extremely parched, lies between, extending for a distance of ten days’ journey.”⁵³⁹

It is important to keep in mind the geographical obstacles that prohibited the Byzantine emperors from ever tangibly controlling the region. Local alliances, too, could easily change, for the tribe of Abochorabos was not the only powerful one in the region.

There were “the Maddenoi, subjects of the Homeritai.”⁵⁴⁰ “These Homeritai,” Procopius

⁵³⁸ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1. Chapter 19:...ἐπεὶ τοῖς τε ἀρχομένοις βαρβάροις καὶ οὐδέν τι ἦσσαν τοῖς πολεμίοις φοβερός τε αἰεὶ Ἀβοχάραβος ἔδοξεν εἶναι καὶ διαφερόντως δραστήριος.

⁵³⁹ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1. Chapter 19: τῷ μὲν οὖν λόγῳ τὸν φοινικῶνα βασιλεὺς ἔχει, μετεῖναι δὲ αὐτῷ τῶν ταύτη χωρίων οὐδ’ ὅπωςτιοῦν δυνατὰ ἐστι, ἐπεὶ τοῖς τε γῆ τε γὰρ ἀνθρώπων παντελῶς ἔρημος καὶ ἀτεχνῶς ἀνυδροσ ἐν μέσῳ οὔσα ἐς δέκα ἡμερῶν ὁδὸν διήκει, καὶ αὐτὸς λόγου ὅτουοῦν ἄξιός ὁ φοινικῶν οὐδαμῆ ἐστίν...

⁵⁴⁰ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book I. Chapter 19: οἱ δὴ Μαδδηνοὶ καλοῦνται, Ὅμηριτῶν κατήκοοι ὄντες.

clarified, “inhabit the land farther on from the shore [of the Red Sea]. There are many other groups (ἔθνη) beyond them, settled, they say, as far as the cannibal Saracens.

After them is the kin (τὰ γένη) of the Indians, but of these, let each man talk as he may wish.”⁵⁴¹ By getting a glimpse of sixth-century Arabia as Procopius understood it, we can readily imagine how difficult, if even possible, it would have been for the Roman emperors to dictate and enforce Byzantine policy there. Procopius knew it, too, so he concluded, “But, the gift that Abochorabos presented was purely nominal, and the emperor accepted it with full knowledge.”⁵⁴²

As we have seen above, Christianity and “Orthodoxy” were important issues for the emperor Justinian. There was even one time, Procopius noted, when Justinian tried to use Christianity to convince king Hellestheaios of the Ethiopians (i.e., Aksūmites, for Procopius made it clear) and king Esimphaios of the Himyarites to ally with “the Romans by reason of their common faith in order to go to war against the Persians.”⁵⁴³ This was not, however, a call for a religious crusade. Silk, Procopius explained, was “commonly used for making dresses, which the Hellenes of old called ‘Medic,’ but is now termed ‘Serike’ [Chinese],” and it was precisely silk that prompted Justinian to try to ally the Ethiopians and the Himyarites against Persia. Traditionally, both the Ethiopians and the Himyarites used to buy silk in subcontinental India, transport it through Persia, and after

⁵⁴¹ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book I. Chapter 19, 2-16: οἱ δὲ Ὀμηρίται οὗτοι ἐν χώρᾳ τῇ ἐπέκεινα ῥικηνται πρὸς τῇ τῆς θαλάσσης ἡϊόνι. ὑπὲρ τε αὐτοὺς ἄλλα ἔθνη πολλὰ μέχρι ἐς τοὺς ἀνθρωποφάγους Σαρακηνοὺς ἰδρῦσθαι φασι. μεθ’ οὗς δὴ τὰ γένη τῶν Ἰνδῶν ἐστίν. ἀλλὰ τούτων μὲν περὶ λεγέτω ἕκαστος ὡς πη αὐτῶ βουλομένω ἐστίν.

⁵⁴² Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1. Chapter 19: ἀλλ’ ὄνομα δώρου ὃ τε Ἀβοχάραβος ἔδωκε μόνον καὶ βασιλεὺς εὖ εἰδῶς ἔλαβε.

⁵⁴³ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury). *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1. Chapter 19.

paying customs fees to the *shahs*, sell it to the Romans. Sometimes, the locals bought silk directly from the Persians, thus completely skipping the trip to subcontinental India. Interested in reducing the price of silk in the Byzantine empire and in weakening the Persian economy, therefore, Justinian wanted to exclude the *shah* from the lucrative trade.

Justinian's was an elaborate plan. First, it required the appointment of a new Himyarite phylarch, named Kaisos, over the Maddenoi. "This Kaisos," Procopius clarified, "belonged by birth to a family of phylarchs, and was eminently successful in war. But, after killing some relative of Esimphaios, he fled to a land completely destitute of men."⁵⁴⁴ Kaisos' military expertise and the alliance between the Maddenoi, the Himyarites, and the Ethiopians appeared strong enough to Justinian to hope for a Persian defeat. At first, Justinian's promise for great profit managed to seduce the local kings, and they assured Justinian's ambassador that they would go on with the plan.

In the end, Procopius observed, "neither of them carried out the promises. For it was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk directly from the Indians since the Persian merchants commonly bought all the available cargoes. The Persians were always first at the very ports where the Indians' ships disembarked."⁵⁴⁵ The Himyarites, too, decided that it was impossible to fight against the much stronger Persian armies, especially when the Himyarite military leaders took into account that their armies would have to cross "a desert...extending over a distance of many days' journey."⁵⁴⁶ "Even Abramos later,"

⁵⁴⁴ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury)/ *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20, 9-13.

⁵⁴⁵ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury)/ *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

⁵⁴⁶ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury)/ *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

Procopius pointed out, “when he was most securely established as ruler, though he frequently promised the emperor Justinian to invade Persian territory, only started out on that expedition on one occasion, and retired immediately.”⁵⁴⁷

After Procopius’ analysis of the historical events, we can see how marginal Justinian’s concern with religion was in the region. According to Procopius, economic profit was the primary logic that could unite the local polities against Persia. But, Justinian’s schemes to get richer proved unrealistic. Thus, the local kings dropped the emperor’s plan before they even tried to implement it. We need to remember this episode as an example of the everyday realities of rule. Both the Byzantine emperor and the foreign elites tended to be practical people whose primary concerns were the financial and political affairs of their states. The spread of Christianity abroad was not an ultimate concern even for the otherwise quite active in religious policies and debates emperor Justinian.

Later Byzantine historians were keen on commerce as being the primary reason for Byzantium’s involvement in the region. Precious and luxurious goods traversed the local seas and were taken across the deserts to reach the homes of rich Byzantines. When the Byzantine historians thought Christianity relevant, they inserted it in the context of commercial relations. Here is how Theophanes in the ninth century described the conversion of the Homerites in 542/3:

In this year the emperor of the Auxoumite Indians of the Jews came to fight one another for the following reason. The emperor of the Auxoumites dwells further inland with regard to Egypt of the Jewish religion. Roman traders travel across Homerite [territory] to the Auxoumite and the inland areas of the Indians and Ethiopians. When some traders crossed into Homerite borders, as usual, Damianos, the emperor of the Homerites, killed them and took away all their

⁵⁴⁷ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury)/ *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20, 9-13.

goods, saying, “The Romans wrong the Jews in their own country and kill them.” As a result the trade of the inland Indians of the Auxoumite region ceased. The emperor of the Auxoumites Adad, announced his resentment to the Homerite, saying, “You have harmed my empire and inland India by preventing Roman traders from reaching us.” Great enmity developed and war broke out between them. When they were about to begin the war, Adad, emperor of the Auxoumites made a vow saying, “If I conquer the Homerite, I shall become a Christian, since I am fighting on behalf of Christians.” With the help of God, he gained the victory by force of arms and captured Damianos, their emperor, alive and also took their land and their palace. Adad, emperor of the Auxoumites, thanked God and sent a request to the emperor Justinian to obtain a bishop and clergy so that after instruction he could become a Christian. Justinian rejoiced greatly at this and ordered that whichever bishop they wanted be given them. The legates, after thorough inquiries, chose John the custodian of St. John’s in Alexandria the Great, a devout man, virgin and 62 years old. They took him back with them to their own country and to Adad their emperor and so became believers in Christ and were baptized all of them.⁵⁴⁸

From the perspective of John Malalas, contemporary of Justinian in the sixth century, Theophanes’ chronology is incorrect. According to John, the Aksūmite invasion happened in 527/528 or 528/529.⁵⁴⁹ The incident however must actually have occurred rather earlier because the names of the respective kings in Justinian’s reign are Elesboas and Esimiphaios. Since Elesboas had been on the throne at the beginning of Justin I’s reign (518-527), J.B. Bury has suggested that the incident belongs to the reign of Zeno (reigned from 474 to 475 and again from 476 to 491) or Anastasius (reigned from 491 to 518).⁵⁵⁰ Anastasios did send a bishop to the Himyarites. The Aksūmites, we may remember from above, were certainly thought Christian by the reign of Justin I.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 323.

⁵⁴⁹ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 324. footnote 1.

⁵⁵⁰ J.B. Bury. *History of the Later Roman Empire: From Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.)*. Amsterdam, 1966. Volume 2, p. 322. See also D.H. French and C.S. Lightfoot, eds. *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire*. Oxford, 1989. pp. 383-420.

⁵⁵¹ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 324. footnote 1. Note that Mango and Scott do not seem to be aware of the problems on identifying the precise referent of the “Ethiopian conversion.”

We have already seen the liberty with which Theophanes organized his chronicle, so the chronological improvisation should not come as a surprise to us. Recalling details from above, we should note how confused Theophanes was on regional geography and how unaware he was of earlier Byzantine depictions of the conversion of the Aksūmites. Presumably, Aksūm had already converted in the fourth century under king Ezana (ca. 320-360). Without a mention, Theophanes made them Christians about two hundred years later than the traditional modern scholarly dating would have it. As we have established above, “Ethiopia,” “India,” and “Nubia” remained unclear to the majority of the Byzantines, and Theophanes was no exception.

Just as Sozomen, on whose theories Theophanes seems to have relied, Theophanes drew a connection between the Jews and the peoples in the Red Sea region. It made sense to both of them, for they knew the close connection between the nuclei of Christianity and the Jewish centers throughout the empire. They also knew the explosive tension between the Christians and the Jews ever since Christians started to insist on defining themselves against the earlier Judaism.

From a contemporary perspective then, Theophanes relied on interpretative clichés. It was a cliché to blame the Jews for the evils of the world, and it was also a cliché to set the conversion of Adad, the king of the Aksūmites, in the Eusebian terms of the emperor Constantine’s own seminal experience at the battle of the Milvian bridge in 312. Associating Christianity with military victory was a favorite trope of Christian writers.

If we take Theophanes at face value, we should note the Aksūmite association of Christianity with Romanness. The connection was presumably strong, for the breach of

trading relations that led to war meant to Adad that he was now siding both with the Romans and as a result with the Christians. In previous chapters, we have observed the process of the foreigners' voluntary cultural and political imitation of the Romans. It is more noteworthy in this case to observe how Justinian presumably allowed the Aksūmites to shop around on their own for a bishop. Many of Theophanes' details are too stylized and thus appear as historically dubious, but we still can observe and wonder at the state passivity that the Byzantine authors portrayed in their accounts. Right at the height of Justinian's religious and political purges, Theophanes thought that the emperor casually allowed the Aksūmites to choose freely their own bishop.

As in all other cases, Christianity did not guarantee Homerite allegiance to Rome. Right after the death of Justinian, the commercial interests in the region shifted again, and the Homerites were taken by the Persians. The sixth-century historian Theophylact Simocatta blamed the emperor Justin's own governmental inadequacy:

When the emperor Justinian had migrated to the inviolate sphere, after directing the Roman scepters for thirty-nine years, the younger Justin succeeded to the control of events; this man was in fact a nephew of the emperor Justinian. Accordingly in the seventh year of the reign of the younger Justin, the Romans broke the treaty through the levity of the king; the blessings of peace were shattered and rent asunder; there came upon Romans and Medes war, the receptacle of evils...The fifty-year agreement which had been concluded between Romans and Persians was destroyed and cut short by the great folly of the king, and hence came the evil procession of Roman misfortunes. The Romans blamed the Parthians and proclaimed that they were architects of the war, alleging that the Homerites (the race is Indian and is subject to the Romans) had been incited by them to revolt; and that next, when those people had not succumbed to these overtures, they had suffered irreparably from attacks by the Persians since the peace between the Persians and the Roman state had been dissolved.⁵⁵²

The fact that the change of allegiance could shift after fifty years of presumed Christianity in the local kingdom with a pro-Persian re-appointment is mostly indicative

⁵⁵² Theophylact Simocatta. *Historiae*. Eds. C. de Boor and P. Wirth. Reprint of 1887 edition. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1972. Book 3.9.3-7.

of the Byzantine economic decline after Justinian's heavy expenditures and political re-focus to the West. With the weakening of the Byzantine presence in the region and the inability of the Byzantine economy to sustain the commercial channels in Arabia, probably due to the luxurious nature of the goods that were being traded, the local polities turned to Persia. In those political and economic affairs, Christianity played a minor role.

For the local development of Christianity, we are fortunate to have a Syriac source that traces the imagined Christianization of the Himyarites on the ground. Written in the sixth century, *the Book of the Himyarites* currently exists in a fragmentary form.⁵⁵³ It makes the Himyarites Jewish and credits women for the early conversions from ancestral Judaism and to the new faith of Christianity. Neither prison, nor torture, nor murder could impede the waves of Christian conversions among women in Himyar.⁵⁵⁴ Even merciless flogging, usually reserved for men, could not dissuade women from changing their faith.⁵⁵⁵

The women's challenge of the established religious traditions were irrevocable. Pushed over the edge of humanity, king Masrūq "in order to intimidate the Christians, who worshipped Christ, ordered that they should throw the excellent Ruhm on her back and slaughter the girl, her granddaughter, and pour of her blood into the throat of her

⁵⁵³ *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*. Ed. and tr. Axel Moberg. *Skrifter Utgivna av kungl. Humanistika vetenskapssamfundet I Lund. VII. Acta Reg. Societatis Humaniorum Litteratum Lundensis. VII.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924.

⁵⁵⁴ *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*. Ed. and tr. Axel Moberg. *Skrifter Utgivna av kungl. Humanistika vetenskapssamfundet I Lund. VII. Acta Reg. Societatis Humaniorum Litteratum Lundensis. VII.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924. p. cxiv.

⁵⁵⁵ *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*. Ed. and tr. Axel Moberg. *Skrifter Utgivna av kungl. Humanistika vetenskapssamfundet I Lund. VII. Acta Reg. Societatis Humaniorum Litteratum Lundensis. VII.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924. p. cxxxi.

grandmother.”⁵⁵⁶ Many women presumably died in such gruesome ways, and the events in the city of Najrān came to be commemorated as a great symbol of Christian fervor and devout martyrdom in the region.

Pity from across the Red Sea saved the Christian women of Najrān. The Aksūmites crossed the sea and attacked the ferocious Masrūq. The Aksūmite campaign was successful. Desperate and aware of his upcoming punishment, Masrūq drowned himself in the Red Sea. Modern scholars have dated the events described in the *Book of the Himyarites* to 523, when Masrūq turned against Christianity, and to 525, when Aksūmite aid arrived.⁵⁵⁷

Along with the liberation of women, the Aksūmite victory brought a Christian king to the Himyarites. The reign of the Christian king Abraha was important for the development of Christianity on the Arabian peninsula.⁵⁵⁸ According to Arabian tradition, Abraha built an imposing church at Sana‘a in an attempt to displace the sacred significance of the holy Ka‘ba in Mecca. Abraha supported local monasticism, and Sergius Bahira, an Arabian monk, supposedly gave Muhammed, the future prophet of Allah, his first lessons in Christianity. Later, among the first converts of Muhammed was

⁵⁵⁶ *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*. Ed. and tr. Axel Moberg. *Skrifter Utgivna av kungl. Humanistiska vetenskapssamfundet i Lund. VII. Acta Reg. Societatis Humaniorum Litteratum Lundensis. VII.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924. p. cxxxii.

⁵⁵⁷ Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 259.

⁵⁵⁸ For an evaluation of Abraha’s Christian heritage in the Arabian peninsula, see Irfan Shahīd. “Byzantium in South Arabia.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 33 (1979), pp. 23-94. p. 39: “In spite of the fact that Zafār was the capital of the country and naturally became the seat of the bishop, there is no doubt that Najrān continued to have a bishop of its own. This is fully documented in the Arabic sources. It is practically certain that the bishopric of Najrān must have been revived some time after the Ethiopian victory, in view of the fact that Najrān had been the seat of martyred bishops, Paul I and Paul II, and in view of its importance in the history of Christianity in South Arabia. Najrān probably enjoyed politically a somewhat autonomous status in the sixth century, and this would have been another consideration justifying its being an ecclesiastically autocephalous see, which, however, might have been related to the see of Zafār, the capital of the country, whose bishop must have been the metropolitan of the whole South Arabian region. If Abraha led South Arabia to the Chalcedonian fold, then that country would have had two ecclesiastical hierarchies as did Syria in the sixth century, and this circumstance would have both ensured the continuance of the see of Najrān and enhanced its autonomy.”

Bilal the Ethiopian. In 676, a Christian synod gathered in southern Arabia with the patriarch Georgius of Seleucia (660-680) presiding. Nomadic tribes like the Banu Salih considered themselves Christian as late as 779 when the caliph al-Mahdi wished to convert them to Islam. Apparently, he was not successful, for in 823, al-M'amun ordered their systematic persecution.⁵⁵⁹

The reign of Abraha left its mark on Islamic tradition, too. In Sura 105, the Qur'an records Allah exclaiming:

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the army of the Elephant?
Did He not cause their stratagem to miscarry?
And He sent against them birds in flocks (ababils),
Claystones did they hurl down upon them,
And He made them like stubble eaten down!⁵⁶⁰

In Islamic tradition, this Sura is associated with Abraha's invasion of Mecca that intended to expand the Himyarite kingdom to the north and, given Abraha's plan to destroy the Ka'ba, to replace Arabic religious practices with Christianity.⁵⁶¹ Presumably, Abraha's invasion happened in 570, the year of Muhammed's birth. Abraha's campaign failed. Some scholars have taken the Qur'anic passage literally and have claimed that Islamic tradition insisted on birds that carried stones, hurling them against Abraha's marching elephants.⁵⁶² Other scholars believe that it was small-pox, which prevented Abraha's armies to advance. They explain that the Arabic word for "small-pox" also means "small stones."⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁹ Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 259.

⁵⁶⁰ *The Koran*. Tr. J.M. Rodwell. Phoenix Press, 2005.

⁵⁶¹ Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 148. See also Aubrey Vine. *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians*. London, 1980. p. 77. Vine dates Abraha's expedition against Mecca to 568.

⁵⁶² For Qur'anic miracles, see Adrian Fortescue. *The Lesser Eastern Churches*. London, 1913. p. 298.

⁵⁶³ *The Koran*. Tr. J.M. Rodwell. Phoenix Press, 2005. p. 501.

In any case, Abraha's failed campaign against Mecca and its central sacred space around the holy Ka'ba came to glamorize the birth of Muhammed and the advent of the final prophet in the past Judeo-Christian tradition. It was a sign of Allah that Christianity, which had developed out of Judaism, now came to collapse in Mecca, the center of future Islam, right at the birth of the new and supposedly final prophet. As in other Christian connections, Islamic teachers did not completely discredit Abraha, but positively assimilated him as a significant part of Allah's supreme plan. Abraha and his invasion were forever remembered in the sacred Battle of the Elephant (al-Fil).

Byzantine historians insisted on a completely different story surrounding the events of Abraha. To trace the development of the Byzantine view, we need to return to Procopius in the sixth century. Thus, when king Hellestheaeus of the Ethiopians, the same one who was implicated in Justinian's schemes to prevent Persian silk trade, found out that the Homerites (i.e., Himyarites) across the Red Sea were oppressing Christians, he declared war. According to Procopius, many of the Homerites were either "base Jews" or "held in reverence the old faith which men of present day call 'Hellenic.'"⁵⁶⁴ Hellestheaeus' campaign was successful. He killed the local king and many Homerites. Hellestheaeus then appointed "a Christian king, a Homerite by birth," called Esimiphaeus.⁵⁶⁵ In effect, it was a regime change, so Esimiphaeus agreed to pay tribute to the Ethiopians to secure his throne and to receive protection.

Many of the Ethiopian soldiers and slaves who had fought against the previous, presumably Jewish elite of the local Homerites refused to return to Ethiopia.

⁵⁶⁴ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

⁵⁶⁵ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

Hellestheaeus did not insist, for many of them were “predisposed to crime.”⁵⁶⁶

Eventually, the same Ethiopian soldiers and slaves rose against Esimiphaeus, Hellestheaeus’ protégé in Himyar, and imprisoned him in one of the fortresses there. Abramos (Abraha from above), the primary leader of the rebellion, became the new king of the Homeritae. “Now this Abramos,” Procopius explained, “was a Christian, but a slave of a Roman citizen” who owned ships and thus traded in the city of Adulis in Ethiopia.⁵⁶⁷

Abramos’ revolt provoked Hellestheaeus’ immediate response. The Ethiopian king sent “an army of three thousand men with one of his relatives as commander.” When the Ethiopian army arrived, however, its soldiers refused to fight. Impressed by the local land and its wealth, the soldiers, without the knowledge of their commander, opened negotiations with Abramos. The negotiations went well for Abramos, for the Ethiopian army killed their own commander and joined the ranks of Abramos. Hellestheaeus sent a second army now. This time, they fought against Abramos, but suffered a great defeat. Those, who did not die, were extradited back home. “Thereafter the king of the Ethiopians became afraid, and sent no further expeditions against Abramos. After the death of Hellestheaeus, Abramos agreed to pay tribute to the king of the Ethiopians who succeeded him, and in this way he strengthened his rule. But this happened at a later time.”⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁶ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

⁵⁶⁷ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

⁵⁶⁸ Procopius. *De bellis*. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1-2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1962. Book 1, Chapter 20.

We need to keep in mind the local dynamics if we are to understand the development of Christianity in the region. We may remember from above that Justinian tried to take advantage of those very dynamics and attempted to convince the local kingdoms to enforce an embargo against Persia. Ultimately, this had proven unworkable, for the important silk trade from China or subcontinental India into Byzantium needed to go through Persia. Thus, the internal religious conflicts between Christians, Jews, and “Hellenic” followers had also an economic undertone, for as soon as a new Christian ruler was imposed over Himyar, he was expected to pay tribute to the Ethiopians.

The revolt of Abramos (the same Abraha above whose name Procopius assimilated into the Greek) was a local upsurge for independence. A liberated slave himself, Abramos might have thought that the times were ripe for a prosperous beginning, leading local slaves, captives, expatriated soldiers, and local enthusiasts to revolt and set up their own government. The lands of Himyar were too precious, however, and the Aksūmite campaigns for restoration were persistent. Abramos successfully resisted two Aksūmite campaigns, but eventually he found it more expedient to settle down and pay them off.

Like John of Ephesus in the section on Nubia, Procopius gave us a unique zoom into the local dynamics to show us how the Byzantine administration tried to navigate (with various levels of success) the regional political and economic developments. This was not a straightforward dictation from Constantinople, but a tenuous and intricate diplomatic relationship in an attempt to sustain the channels of the Byzantine economy to the Byzantines’ advantage. Imperial policies were not, of course, always the same. They changed according to the local shifts and the governmental regimes in Constantinople.

More than the local Christianization, Justinian wanted local trade and access to the expensive silk, ideally to the detriment of the Persians.

According to another sixth-century historian Theophanes of Byzantium (not to be confused with the ninth-century chronicler by the same name, Theophanes the Confessor), Justinian ultimately succeeded in eliminating the Byzantine reliance on silk from or through Persia. But, apparently, the success was not due to effective diplomacy or military campaigning. A Persian traitor, apparently, smuggled silkworms' eggs in a hollow cane and delivered them from China to Justinian's staff in Constantinople.⁵⁶⁹ Removing reliance on foreign silk was a great boost for Justinian's domestic production and a major hit to the Red Sea economy.

Unfortunately, we do not have Theophanes' complete history, but we find a synthesis of his ten-volume oeuvre in the ninth-century patriarch Photius' *Bibliotheca*.⁵⁷⁰ Thus, Theophanes' views seep through Photius' note-taking habits, personal concerns, and interests. Photius' entry included only a brief remark on the Red Sea region:

... Chosroes thereupon marched against the Ethiopians (formerly called Macrobii [meaning the "long-lived"], and at that time Homerites), who were on friendly terms with the Romans; with the aid of Miranes, the Persian general, he captured Sanaturces, king of the Homerites, sacked their city and enslaved the inhabitants...⁵⁷¹

Even a casual perusal through Photius' entry would show us his primary interests. Amidst war with the Persians, charting out the diplomatic alignments on each side dictated Photius' note-taking. He found it more important then to explain the shifting

⁵⁶⁹ Scholars debate the details of the *Bibliotheca*'s writing. Some believe that it was the sole production of Photius. Others maintain that it was the intellectual outcome of a circle of readers around Photius. This debate does not affect much the subsequent analysis below.

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⁵⁷¹ Theophanes of Byzantium. In Photius. *Bibliotheca*. Ed. R. Henry, *Photius. Bibliothèque*, 8 vols. Paris: Les Belles, 1959-1977. Codex 64.

political regimes, court intrigues, and the important discovery of silk production rather than being preoccupied with matters of Christianity among local polities.

With Photius, we also find the Ethiopians and the Homerites inserted in a general Turkish context. To a Byzantine reader in the ninth century, the rise of the Turks was of great importance. Thus, Photius mentioned the Homerites briefly and only as part of a much larger context focused on the Turks.

In the ninth century, it made sense to frame the entire story of Arabian Christianity in the context of Turkish rule and the rise of Islam. The world chronicle of Theophanes conveniently presented the story to the Byzantine reader in precisely that way. Thus, keeping all the details from above, we need to see how Theophanes dealt with the local complexities and how he decided to arrange his narrative. Theophanes' account developed in two stages. The first stage focused on the Roman-Persian conflict:

In the same year [571/2], the Romans and Persians destroyed the peace and the Persian war was renewed once again because the Homerite Indians sent an embassy to the Romans and the emperor sent Julian, the *magistrianus* with an imperial letter to Arethas, the emperor of the Ethiopians. [Julian travelled] from Alexandria along the river Nile and the Indian sea and was received by emperor Arethas with great delight since he desired the friendship of the Roman emperor. Julian, on his return, described that at his reception emperor Arethas was [nearly] naked. From his belt to his loins he had gold-threaded linen cloth. Over his stomach he wore straps of precious pearls. On each arm he had five bracelets and gold rings on his hands. Round his head was wound a gold-threaded linen turban, with four tassels hanging from each of the two knots, and round his neck was a gold collar. He stood on top of four upright elephants which supported a yoke and four disks and above those something like a lofty chariot adorned with gold leaf, like the carriages of provincial governors. He stood on top of this carrying a small gilded shield and two golden lances. His whole senate, under arms, was there singing musical refrains. So after the Roman envoy had been brought in and had made his obeisance, he was ordered by the emperor to arise and be led to him. After receiving the emperor's letter, [Arethas] kissed the seal which bore the emperor's portrait bust.⁵⁷²

⁵⁷² Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.p. 361.

If we are to judge from the lavish parade, which Arethas put together, he must have been truly excited to meet the imperial ambassador. Adorned in heavy gold, mounted on four elephants, a political elite holding hands in circle and singing his praises, Arethas wanted to erase all uncertainty that he was, in fact, on top of the world. If nothing else, he surely made Julian's eyes widen and his pomp forever stuck in the ambassador's memory. This was Arethas' way to assert legitimacy and to make clear that the distant lands of his kingdom were not parochial backwaters. Rich and lavish, Arethas' ceremonial demanded that his rule be taken seriously and his power be deemed glorious.

At least according to Theophanes, the Byzantine-Persian conflict was directly connected to the Byzantine dealings in the Homerite lands. But even then, despite Arethas' power complex and obsessions, we need to note that Justin had sent a relatively minor bureaucrat to lead the local negotiations. We should see what the nature of the negotiations was:

And on receiving the gifts, he [Arethas] rejoiced greatly. When he read the letter, he discovered that it contained [instructions] for him to take up arms against the emperor of the Persians and to destroy the land of the Persians that lay close to him and, in the future, not to have any dealings with the Persians, but to carry on trade through the territory of the Homerites, which he had subjected, along the Nile as far as Alexandria in Egypt. The emperor Arethas immediately gathered his army before the eyes of the Roman envoy and declared war against the Persians, sending ahead those Saracens who served under him. He himself proceeded against the Persian land and destroyed all that there was of it in those parts. The emperor Arethas took Julian by the head, gave him the kiss of peace and released him in great favour and with many gifts.⁵⁷³

Immediately, we find ourselves at the mercy of Theophanes' free improvisation. None of the earlier accounts had the local king going on an immediate campaign against

⁵⁷³ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 362.

the Persians. In fact, according to the contemporary sources, the events that Theophanes was describing happened about 40 years earlier than Theophanes had them.⁵⁷⁴ Moreover, for the year 522/3, Theophanes wrote that “the deeds concerning the holy Arethas and those in the city of Negra were perpetuated by the Homerites, and war was undertaken by Elasbaas, emperor of the Ethiopians, against the Homerites, and he was victorious.”⁵⁷⁵ Presumably, Theophanes assumed that his readers knew an entirely separate story of Arethas and the martyrs of Najrān, but of course this does not become clear from his account.⁵⁷⁶

There are many examples of Theophanes’ casual approach to history. In 512/3, Alamoundaros, the phylarch of the Saracens, was supposedly baptized. A colorful story followed that served to illustrate the post-Chalcedonian ecclesiastical wars. Thus, Theophanes wrote:

The impious Severus [of Antioch] sent two bishops to win him [Alamoundaros] over to his leprous heresy; but, by the providence of God, the man had been baptized by the orthodox who accepted the synod. When Severus’ bishops attempted to pervert the phylarch from the true teaching, Alamoundaros refused them wonderfully with the following theatrical act. For he said to them, “I received a letter today telling me that the archangel Michael was dead.” When they replied that this was impossible, the phylarch continued, “How is it then according to you that God alone was crucified, unless Christ was of two natures, if even an angel cannot die?” And so Severus’ bishops departed in ignominy. Kabades hamstrung some of the Christians in Persia who later were still able to walk.⁵⁷⁷

Yet, we know that Al-Mundhir, king of the Lakhmids (505-54), traditionally sided with the Persians. The sixth-century bishop Zachariah of Mytilene wrote that at some

⁵⁷⁴ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 363. footnote 4.

⁵⁷⁵ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 258.

⁵⁷⁶ For the Greek version of Arethas’ life, see “Martyrium S. Arethae et sociorum,” *Acta Sanctorum*. Oct. 10: 721-62.

⁵⁷⁷ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. pp. 240-1.

point Al-Mundhir sacrificed 400 Christian virgins to his favorite divinity.⁵⁷⁸ Roughly when Theophanes had thought that the Himyarites were allowed to shop for their own bishop, he had also told us that Hesaias, bishop of Rhodes, and Alexander, bishop of Diospolis in Thrace, were deposed due to sexual molestation of children from the local laity. Their verdict was castration followed by a public parade as a preventive measure for others. According to other Byzantine historians, Hesaias and Alexander got away easily, for molesting bishops usually had their genitals stuffed with sharp straw and then were taken in full humiliation to the public forum.⁵⁷⁹ The times were harsh, and the Himyarites endured similar legislation, too.⁵⁸⁰ Ecclesiastical freedom in this case was not allowed, but the emperor administered justice as he saw fit. Yet, when it came to a bishop abroad, Justinian supposedly proved to be quite lax.

It is interesting to observe the ways, in which Theophanes, who had read through the earlier historians and through some of their actual sources, compiled the materials and made authorial decisions. When he had little to say for a given year, he conveniently adjusted the chronology and nicely spread out his evidence to sustain the reader's interest. Based on usually disjointed anecdotes, fabricated chronology and propensity towards sensationalism, Theophanes managed to write a popular chronicle. Of course, this hardly added to his credentials as a painstaking historian. But even if we remain unimpressed with his scholarly abilities, Theophanes' authorial priorities point to the interest of his contemporary audience, which he tried to engage. In Theophanes'

⁵⁷⁸ Zachariah of Mytilene. *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta* (CSCO Scr. Syr. 3rd. ser. 5). Tr. E.W. Brooks. Louvain, 1924. Book VIII.5.

⁵⁷⁹ Joannes Malalas. *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*]. Bonn, 1831. p. 436.3-16. Georgius Cedrenus. *Compendium historiarum*. Ed. I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae*, 2 vols. [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1838. Vol. 1, pp. 645-6.

⁵⁸⁰ *Homeritarum Leges* PG 86.1:581 ff.

chronicle, local dynamics usually worked independently of the empire, and when the Byzantines decided to get involved, they were invited into the local lands with great pomp and enthusiasm. Apparently, lavish ceremonials awaited even minor imperial officials.

To put a conclusion to the story of the Christian development on the Arabian peninsula in the period, we need to turn to the second stage in Theophanes' narrative on Christianity in the region. Thus, we should read through Theophanes' depiction of the days of Muhammed and the rise of Islam:

In this year [A.D. 629/30] died Mouamed, the leader and false prophet of the Saracens, after appointing his kinsman Aboubacharos [to his chieftainship]. At the same time his repute spread abroad and everyone was frightened. At the beginning of his advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses, who saw God. Those who did so were ten in number, and they remained with him until his murder. But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized that he was not the one they thought him to be, and were at a loss what to do; being afraid to abjure his religion, those wretched men taught him illicit things directed against us, Christians, and remained with him. I consider it necessary to give an account of this man's origin. He was descended from a very widespread tribe, that of Ishmael, son of Abraham; for Nizaros, descendant of Ishmael, is recognized as the father of them all. He begot two sons, Moudaros and Rabias. Moudaros begot Kourasos, Kaisos, Themimes, Asados, and others unknown. All of them dwelt in the Midianite desert and kept cattle, themselves living in tents. There are also those farther away who are not of their tribe, but of that of lektan, the so-called Amanites, that is Homerites. And some of them traded on their camels. Being destitute and an orphan, the aforesaid Mouamed decided to enter the service of a rich woman who was a relative of his, called Chadiga, as a hired worker with a view to trading by camel in Egypt and Palestine. Little by little he became bolder and ingratiated himself with that woman, who was a widow, took her as a wife, and gained possession of her camels and her substance. Whenever he came to Palestine he consorted with Jews and Christians and sought from them certain scriptural matters. He was also afflicted with epilepsy. When his wife became aware of this, she was greatly distressed, inasmuch as she, a noblewoman, had married a man such as he, who was not only poor, but also an epileptic. He tried deceitfully to placate her by saying, "I keep seeing a vision of a certain angel called Gabriel, and being unable to bear his sight, I faint and fall down." Now she had a certain monk living there, a friend of hers (who had been exiled for his depraved doctrine), and she related

everything to him, including the angel's name. Wishing to satisfy her, he said to her, "He has spoken the truth for this is the angel who is sent to all the prophets." When she had heard the words of the false monk, she was the first to believe in Mouamed and proclaimed to other women of her tribe and that he was a prophet. Thus, the report spread from women to men, and first to Aboubacharos, whom he left as his successor. This heresy prevailed in the region of Ethribos in the last resort by war: at first secretly, for ten years, and by war another ten, and openly nine. He taught his subjects that he who kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy goes to Paradise; and he said that this paradise was one of carnal eating and drinking and intercourse with women, and had a river of wine, honey, and milk, and that the women were not like the ones down here, but different ones, and that the intercourse was long-lasting and the pleasure continuous; and other things full of profligacy and stupidity; also that men should feel sympathy for one another and help those who are wronged.⁵⁸¹

This is how Theophanes in the ninth century understood Islam, its rise, and the issues, leading to the spread of Muhammed's teachings. There are several important motifs within which he fitted the prophet's deeds. Theophanes situated Muhammed amidst tribal politics, trade issues revolving around one's ability to connect the Arabian peninsula to Syria and Palestine, the prowess of the caravan, and the religious knowledge of Jewish-Christian relations. Evil Jews had bequeathed to Muhammed his anti-Christian beliefs. And then, a heretical Christian monk gave legitimacy to his puzzling prophecies.

By the seventh century, if we try to read beyond Theophanes' account, the Byzantine empire had weakened its presence in the region, which created inter-tribal tensions, for the local population sought to sustain itself in the harsh local conditions that needed trade to subsist. Muhammed emerged as a new leader who understood as well as his predecessors the economic importance of the camel and the caravan. This precious knowledge gave him social strength. Unlike his tribal predecessors, who relied on their native, clan-based traditions, however, Muhammed was uprooted and learnt non-discriminately from the people with whom he interacted. Thus, merchants, Jews, or stray

⁵⁸¹ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. pp. 464-465.

monks taught him how to fit his revelations into the specific culture and traditions of Arabia beyond the constraints of the clan or the tribe. Sensitive to broader context, Muhammed opened the cultural horizons of the clan ultimately to forge an entirely new community. Even if his movement had failed to spread into an expansive religion, Muhammed's attempt would have been a true feat.

To us, preoccupied with the Byzantine Christian missions to foreign lands, the early spread of Islam is important to observe because it nicely highlights the channels of interaction that connected the Arabian region to the imperial centers in the Byzantine East. As those channels eroded due to the Byzantine reorientation to its West, the old caravans were forced to push beyond the long-established and mutually beneficial divide between "the nomadic" and "the settled." In addition, the supposedly rapid conversion to Islam tested the degree of established local Christian commitment on a mass level.

We do not need to belittle individual or communal beliefs and convictions, for the coming of Islam was certainly accompanied with force and power. We should not be overly skeptical about local understanding of Christianity either. But, we should be aware of the imperial channels that brought Islam home, from distant Arabia across the desert to the major Byzantine centers on the Mediterranean coast. In a sense, the success of Muhammed's religion had a lot to do with the fact that he knew how to placate the whims of the camel. Despite its derogatory tinge, upon a second thought, Theophanes' remark on Muhammed's camel-eating habits rings ironically true.

Thus, through the desert, where the Byzantine empire did not want to go, local tribes transported luxurious goods. At the height of Byzantine presence, the locals sought imperial imitation. Christianity was welcomed in Arabia. When Byzantium turned

away, local factions were left alone to determine the future of the region. Conservative traditions and trading customs that led the local caravans to the Byzantine Mediterranean were eventually re-aligned. Byzantine tradition was assimilated into the new religion of Muhammed.

If we allow our thought today to sail back to Byzantium and Arabia, the rise of Islam was never a complete cultural annihilation of an old empire. Mixing local traditions with Judeo-Christianity, Islam was the locals' independent way of translating Byzantium into their lands. Far away from Constantinople and the ecclesiastical centers of its imperial Christianity, local culture assimilated itself into a providential past that presumably led forward to the new revelations of Muhammed. As Christianity in ancient Roman Palestine had previously assimilated Judaism and Hellenism, Islam in Arabia claimed to have brought all of this together and much more.⁵⁸² From the perspective of Theophanes, this was heretical. But, from the perspective of Byzantium and its legacy on foreign lands, we may remember that in every heresy, there is a link to a common core. In Muhammed's success, there is the shadow of Byzantium.

Most Christian Byzantines agreed with Theophanes on the disparities of Islam and Christianity. Of course, their view was easy to justify, for the victories of Islam usually came at the expense of Christianity. Many historical contingencies made the two religions' relationship checkered from the moment of their more immediate contact.

Before we leave Islam to its own separate trajectory, we need to look at Theophanes one

⁵⁸² Even a casual reader of the Koran quickly discloses a number of passages on Jesus and on Christianity. See Koran, II, 59; III, 30-50; IV, 168-170; V, 76, 79, 109-118; XVII, 112; XVIII, 1-36; XLIII, 56-64; LXI, 6. For a list of passages relating to Jesus, with full translations, see Samuel M. Zwemer. *The Moslem Christ: An Essay on the Life, Character, and Teachings of Jesus Christ according to the Koran and Orthodox Tradition*. New York, 1912. pp. 43-53.

more time in an episode, in which he narrated one of the most severe Byzantine clashes with the Muslim Arabs:

On 8 October [A.D.716/7], their leader Suleiman died and Oumar became emir. That winter proved very severe in Thrace so much so that for a hundred days the earth could not be seen beneath the congealed snow. As a result, the enemy lost a multitude of horses, camels, and other animals. In the spring, Souphiam arrived with a fleet that had been built in Egypt: he had 400 transports laden with corn as well as dromones. Having been informed of the efficacy of the Roman fire, he sailed past Bithynia and crossed to the harbor of Kalos Agros on the other side where he anchored. Shortly thereafter, Izid, too, arrived with another fleet that had been built in Africa: he had 360 transports, a store of arms, and provisions. He had received the same information about the liquid fire and so put in at Satyros and Bryas, all the way to Kartalimen. Now the Egyptian crews of these two fleets took counsel among themselves and, after seizing at night the skiffs of the transports, sought refuge in the City and acclaimed the emperor; as they did so, the sea, all the way from Hieria to the City, appeared to be covered with timber. When the emperor had been informed by them of the two fleets hidden in the bay, he constructed fire-bearing siphons which he places in the dromones and biremes and sent these against the fleets. With God's help, thanks to the intercession of the all-pure Theotokos, the enemy were sunk on the spot. Our men took the enemy's supplies as booty and returned in joyous victory. Furthermore, while Mardasan was raiding with his Arab army from Pylai to Nicaea and Nicomedia, the imperial officers who, like Mardaites, were concealed with their foot soldiers at Libos and Sophon, suddenly attacked them and broke them in pieces and so forced them to withdraw from those parts. In this way, the seacoast on the other side gained a short respite, so that ships could go out of the City and obtain plentiful provisions. Likewise, fishing boats were not prevented from catching fish near the islands and the city walls. The Arabs, on the other hand, suffered from a severe famine, so that they ate all of their dead animals, namely horses, asses, and camels. It is said that they even cooked in ovens and ate dead men and their own dung which they leavened. A pestilence fell upon them also and killed an infinite number of them. Furthermore, the Bulgarian peoples made war on them and, as well-informed persons affirm, massacred 22,000 Arabs. Many other calamities befell them at that time and made them learn by experience that God and the all-holy Virgin, the Mother of God, protect this City and the Christian Empire, and that those who call upon God in truth are not entirely forsaken, even if we are chastised for a short time on account of our sins.⁵⁸³

Arabs, devouring human cadavers or being pushed over the edge of despair to bake their own excrement in order to overcome the inflictions of famine, multi-front

⁵⁸³ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 546.

wars, and the strength of military technology, all of this, wrapped into the prevailing Christian narrative, would become the trademark of anti-Muslem slogans. Incidentally, they were cast and served to mobilize the Western Christians even more so than the Byzantines themselves. When the Westerners arrived to fight supposedly on behalf of their Byzantine Christian brothers, they failed to take for long the major Islamic centers. Instead, they took Constantinople itself. The capital was sacked in 1204, proving to us, among other things, that the contingencies of history are difficult to anticipate and that we should respect them as such and thus not rely on general formulas and intuitive interpretations.

Even after the Arabs had taken the North African coast, Jerusalem, Damascus, and parts of Anatolia, the Byzantine Christians were protective of their firm definitions of conversion. In canon 8 of the ecumenical council of Nicaea II in 787, the fathers of the Church declared that insincere converts should not be accepted into the Christian fold. It was supposedly more preferable to let people live in error than to tarnish the name of Christ with fake pretenders.⁵⁸⁴ We need to remember once again that the agendas of the Byzantine Christians and the Byzantine imperial administrators did not intuitively overlap. When it came to the Christian conversion, even in the face of advancing Islam, religious sincerity was more important than any direct imperialist strategies that modern scholars from the distance of time have been so willing to impose upon their Christian subjects.

Of course, sincerity has always been difficult to weigh. Thus, earlier in the 580s when Turks from the East had fought along with the Byzantines against the Persians, they

⁵⁸⁴ Joannou, *Discipline*, i/I, 261-3. *Fonti*: Fascicolo IX, *Discipline Generale Antiqua* (II-IX s.). Ed. Périclès-Pierre Joannou. Tipografia Italo-Orientale "S. Nilo". 1962.

“had on their foreheads the symbol of the cross tattooed in black. When asked by the emperor how they came to have that sign, they said that many years earlier there had been plague in Turkey and some Christians among them had suggested doing this and from that time their country had been safe.”⁵⁸⁵

Tattooing the symbol of one’s religion on the forehead was not a sure mark of faithful allegiance. In this case, the cross was rooted in the superstitious habits of a people afraid of the deadly ravishes of the plague. No external sign necessarily guaranteed coveted internal commitment to Christianity. Knowledgeable Byzantine theologians were well aware of this and stated it time and again. Much to the chagrin of the emperors, bishops and other clergymen met and bickered with one another at synods and councils in endless attempts to finesse the doctrines of the faith. Even today, Celsus’ ancient remark stings with its bitter relevance as it highlights quite astutely the Christians’ inability to bridge divisions and to allow for a peaceful and productive reconciliation on all sides.

From Ancient History to Modern Boundaries

From its very beginning, Christianity was torn over the question of legitimate authority. After the passing of Jesus, his apostles took over the Christian message. But, the Apostolic Age lasted a lifetime, so the Christian communities, struggling to gain access to this legitimizing apostolicity, were shaken by internal struggles and intense conflicts. In the imperial city of Alexandria, whose ecclesiastical centrality drew to its core all the emerging churches in Africa that we have examined in this chapter, Mark was

⁵⁸⁵ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle*. Tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 389.

the saint who supplied the cultic grounds of authority. In A.D. 68, according to tradition, a determined group of Egyptian conservatives seized Mark, convicted him quickly, tied a rope around his neck, and dragged him through the city streets. Two days of torture put an end to Mark's life. Huddled over the ravaged body, preparing it for cremation, the local authorities were disrupted by a miraculous rain. The Christians took Mark's corpse and secretly buried it in a grave, which they carved in a rock under the altar of a church in Alexandria.

Christian factionalism did not leave St. Mark's body in eternal peace. During the post-sixth-century schism between the Copts (monophysites) and the Melkites (Byzantine imperial Chalcedonian followers), the Melkites administered St. Mark's church.⁵⁸⁶ In 642 when the Arabs took Alexandria, St. Mark's church was pillaged and the vestments and the head of the apostle were stolen. With the establishment of peace in the city, the church, together with St. Mark's beheaded body, were generously restored to the Melkites. But, the head, freed from its body, independently travelled through the black markets of antiquity. Eventually, it resurfaced and came into the possession of the Arab governor in Alexandria. Generous and perhaps uninterested, the Muslim governor donated Mark's head to the Coptic patriarch.

The dynamic story of St. Mark's body had a subsequent follow-up. According to a later Western tradition, Venetian merchants stole St. Mark from Alexandria in 828. They smuggled it across the sea in a tub of pickled pork. Put off by the prohibited meat, the nauseated Muslim customs officers failed to see the hidden body. This is how Venice legitimized itself as the Republic of St. Mark.

⁵⁸⁶ The term "Melkite" is derived from the Syriac "*malkāyā*" and the Arabic "malaki," meaning "royal," "imperial." Those were the followers of the official Byzantine imperial Christianity with implication of being Byzantine collaborators.

By following the circuitous routes of St. Mark's parcelled body, we find ourselves travelling along the historical paths of disputed Christian legitimacy. In antiquity, the body of St. Mark passed through religious, cultural, and political boundaries, and thus torn into pieces, it failed to institute Christian unity. Today, too, St. Mark's body, wrapped in the doctrinal ideas of Orthodox Christianity, is symbolically shredded by ideological and political divisions.

As we have seen in other chapters, the merging of Christianity with ideologies of nationalism is one of the ways, in which "Orthodoxy" finds itself broken into numerous shards today. Here is one example of how modern scholars have traditionally introduced the Alexandrian church:

The Copts pride themselves on the apostolicity of their national church, whose founder was none other than St. Mark, one of the four Evangelists and the author of the oldest canonical Gospel used by both St. Matthew and St. Luke, probably also by St. John. John Mark is regarded by the Coptic hierarchy as the first in their unbroken chain of 116 patriarchs. He is also the first of a stream of Egyptian saints and glorious martyrs.⁵⁸⁷

Ethiopia follows the same pattern:

Addis Ababa has almost a million inhabitants at present and is the seat of the emperor, the legislature, the center of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, a new and thriving state university, a theological seminary and the headquarters of the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church with its new patriarch-catholicos Anba Basileus, the first native *abuna* of the Ethiopians. This is the land where the torch of Christianity was kept lighted in Africa without interruption throughout the centuries while in others it was either totally extinguished or engulfed in the surging sea of Islam, whose waves of invasion drowned the countries of the Middle East on both continents of Asia and Africa. Nevertheless, the unswerving adherence of the Ethiopians to Coptic doctrine can be matched only by their inborn national sentiments.⁵⁸⁸

The strength of Christianity, supposedly exemplified in its inbred ability to create nation-states, could somehow also bring the most intense divisions:

⁵⁸⁷ Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 25.

⁵⁸⁸ Aziz S. Atiya. *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968. p. 147.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church was originally an archdiocese of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Following the declaration of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia on 24 May 1993, after a long civil war between the two countries, the Church of Eritrea also separated from its mother church on 28 September 1993, becoming an autonomous ecclesiastical body under the aegis of the Coptic Orthodox Church [in Alexandria]. The church was elevated to patriarchal status and autocephaly by the Coptic Patriarch in April 1998, and Abuna Filippos was consecrated the first Patriarch of Eritrea on 8 May 1998. The primate bears the title Patriarch of Asmara and All Eritrea. The principal language is Amharic.⁵⁸⁹

Modern scholarship on these churches is rich with such inconsistencies that see Christianity at the same time as a creative power for national unity, preserved intact over the ages, and as a fragmented ideology split between numerous national communities. Much has been done to make these evident inconsistencies seem believable. Forging a narrow, simplified narrative is one of the most common scholarly techniques:

There is in the Sudan of course every conceivable degree of admixture between the Brown and the Negro races. The former is thought to have originated in Arabia, various waves having left the Arabian peninsula at different times, owing primarily to climatic change, periodical droughts forcing part of the population to emigrate. Thus the Beja of the eastern Sudan and the Masai of Kenya and Tanganyika are probably descendants of earlier waves which left Arabia before the beginning of history, while the Arabs belong to a historical wave dating from the seventh century A.D.⁵⁹⁰

Modern nationalism has not been the only force that has divided and blocked the possibility for productive regional communication and peaceful living. Stereotypes and pretentious sense of superiority have jabbed at the possibility to create a fruitful context and a ground for fair interaction and proper cultural exchange. In an 1865 article, entitled “Efforts of Missionaries among Savages,” here is what W. Winwood Reade published in a British journal:

⁵⁸⁹ Michael Burgess. *The Eastern Orthodox Churches: Concise Histories with Chronological Checklists of Their Primates*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2005. p. 134.

⁵⁹⁰ A.J. Arkell. *A History of the Sudan: From Earliest Times to 1821*. London: The Athlone Press, 1961. p. 22.

During my stay of five months in Equatorial Africa, those days, which were not spent in actual travelling, were passed beneath the roofs of two American missionaries, viz., Mr. Walker of Gaboon and Mr. Mackey of Corisco. It was then and there that my eyes were fully opened to the absolute futility of Christian missions. Had these gentlemen been incompetent men, such as the Wesleyans of the Gambia, and with rare exceptions the Church of England missionaries upon the coast, I might have ascribed their failure to themselves. But they completely realized one's beau-ideal of what a missionary ought to be. They were men of practical abilities and cultivated minds; not only classical, but even Hebrew, scholars; they could speak with facility the dialects of the tribes among whom they laboured; they could build houses, sail boats, do everything in fact which would force both whites and blacks to look up to them as superior men.⁵⁹¹

Having established the credibility and actual superiority of the American missionaries over those foreign savages, here is how Reade explained the Americans' failure:

If Saxon Christianity could be made to grow in Africa, these I was convinced were the men to make it grow. But it had failed to do so; and I attribute this failure not to them, but to that silly system to which their noble lives were sacrificed. They had both in Corisco and Gaboon their congregations, which were very small. And I failed to discover that the members of this little band were more honest, more truthful, more sober, or more virtuous than their Pagan brethren. I found that my Christian servants, although they believed in Jesus, and refused to work on the Sabbath, and sang hymns in a very high falsetto voice, made mental reservations about the eighth commandment; and their wives, according to all that I heard and saw, were equally ready to infringe the seventh. In plain words, I found that every Christian negress was a prostitute, and that every Christian negro was a thief.⁵⁹²

As a self-proclaimed practical man, Reade ventured into blunt arguments as to why the Christian missions in Africa were always bound to fail:

The Protestant Church in Africa excommunicates such of its members as may be polygamists; and this alone will prevent Africa from becoming nominally Christian. A negro's social position is marked by the number of his wives; but, putting aside all these minor considerations, it is sufficient to say that in Africa polygamy is the natural state of married man; and he is warned by instinct never

⁵⁹¹ W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. pp. clxiv- clxv.

⁵⁹² W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxv.

to abandon it. In England, polygamy would produce a frightful excess of population; but in Africa monogamy would exterminate the negro.⁵⁹³

As for the dogmas of the Christian religion, how can a savage understand these? How can he be made to understand that there is only One God and yet Three? That the Old Testament is the word of a God who cannot change, and yet that this word is superseded by the New Testament? Imagine, for instance, a negro in the Gaboon. He sees the French Catholics and the American Protestants competing for converts like two rival joint-stock companies, and, being puzzled to know which sells the right article, asks advice of a free-thinking trader, who tells him not to bother his head about either the one or the other.⁵⁹⁴

Boggled by the calculus of trade and the divine Trinity, the native African apparently would usually choose to keep away from Christian conversion. Why did Islamic conversion, however, fare better? Reade's answer was straight and simple:

Mohammed appeared as a Christian prophet among the ancient Arabs, a people who strongly resembled the Africans of the present day. The religious laws which he made, apply perfectly to the latter people. The Arabs were idolators, gamblers, drunkards, liars, and thieves, as the negroes are: he made laws against these vices.⁵⁹⁵

What could European Christianity do to convert Africa? Reade had little hesitation:

I reply that it can do nothing. The only manner in which we could elevate the negro would be by establishing a commercial mission, of which the churches should be workshops, and master artisans the priests. But, owing to the pestilential nature of the climate, all efforts of this kind would result rather in degrading the white man to a level with the negro than to elevate the negro to anything like our own standard.⁵⁹⁶

To substantiate his point, Reade cited from another source:

A certain bishop had taken great pains to convert an African chief, and he had induced him to put away several of his wives, and thought he was on the point of

⁵⁹³ W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxvi.

⁵⁹⁴ W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxvi.

⁵⁹⁵ W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxvii.

⁵⁹⁶ W. Winwood Reade. "Efforts of Missionaries among Savages." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxvii.

becoming a Christian. The chief, however, insisted on retaining two of his favourites, but this compromise the bishop would not agree to. At length, however, the chief came to the bishop and told him that he had put away one of his two wives, and was ready to become a Christian. With this announcement the bishop was greatly pleased, but on inquiring what he had done with the wife he had put away, the chief said that he had eaten her! Sir G. Denys said that they had been told by African travellers that it was customary in some parts of the country for the natives to eat their aged parents when they became infirm and burdensome, thus summarily avoiding the necessity of a poor law; he thought it would be very desirable to give the natives a taste for beef and mutton before attempting to initiate them into the mysteries of Christianity.⁵⁹⁷

How did this affect the Christian missionaries? Reade gives us an excerpt from the everyday life of the Christian mission field in Africa:

On the Slave Coast we have at Whydah the Wesleyans, who contrast sadly with the Lyons mission. Our unfortunate ministers are mulattoes, whose wretched salaries compel them to support their large families by the sale of arms and ammunition, rum and urinals. Amongst them there have been scandals, into which I will not enter. Their neighboring station is Badagry, where a single mulatto saunters through life amidst nonchalant barbarians, Popos, and others. The next in the chain is Lagos, celebrated for its quarrels between consuls and missionaries in olden days. It is the port of Abeokuta where Episcopalians and Methodists, Northern Baptists, Southern Baptists, and now, I believe, Roman Catholics, offer difficulties to the negro in search of the best of religions. This “nearly Christian city,” as some have miscalled it, is a den of abominations; human sacrifice abounds there, and its people, the Egbas, popularly called Akus, have made for themselves the worst names from Sierra Leone to Brazil.⁵⁹⁸

I now come to Abyssinia where the saddest tale of all remains to be told. Ethiopia, commonly known as Habash or Abyssinia, is a Christian empire, once rich and powerful, whose emperors derive their lineage from Menelek, son of Solomon by the Queen of Sheba, and ‘whose progenitors...received the Christian faith, and possessed a native version of the Holy Scriptures as early as the fourth century.’ Of course this land of primitive Christianity was a suitable field for missionary enterprise even whilst the savage Gallas, Shangallas, Danakils, and Somal remained unconverted...⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁷ W. Winwood Reade. “Efforts of Missionaries among Savages.” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. pp. clxviii-clxix.

⁵⁹⁸ W. Winwood Reade. “Efforts of Missionaries among Savages.” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxxii.

⁵⁹⁹ W. Winwood Reade. “Efforts of Missionaries among Savages.” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 3 (1865), pp. clxiii-clxxxiii. p. clxxiv.

To us, interested in Byzantine Christian conversions, this extensive panorama into the cultural and political tensions of British imperialism and Christianity in Africa and Arabia, conveys the sad prejudices and cultural miscommunications that have stood at the center of forced attempts to import specific versions of one's own religion. In charting out Byzantine Christianity in the Ethiopian region, defined broadly in the Byzantine way, we have circled around both sides of the Red Sea, from Egypt to Arabia and, when necessary, back again. We have witnessed the numerous agendas, judgments, and misjudgments, individual, and state operations that moved around with the people that carried them out. We have focused on ancient and medieval perspectives, for we should not, as many before us have done, modernize ancient Christianity in order to appropriate it.

In his seminal book on the Nuer, the British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard wrote:

The pastoral Nilotic religions resemble less other Negro religions than some of the historic religions. They have features which bring to mind the Hebrews of the Old Testament...Miss Ray Huffman, an American Presbyterian missionary who spent many years among the Nuer, remarks that "the missionary feels as if he were living in Old Testament times," and in a way this is true.⁶⁰⁰

Idealizing the mission field, and inspired by the Old Testament anecdotes to begin with, Miss Huffman, not surprisingly, recognized familiar biblical types in the Nuer. This excited her and made her willfully subscribe to the tensions of the mission. But, in perceiving the locals as her dear Old Testament heroes, she failed, even in the best of her intentions, to open up herself and to understand the local culture. Innocently, but with powerful implications, Miss Huffman, and Evans-Pritchard who agreed with her, blurred "the ancient" and "the modern" without many so very necessary qualifications.

⁶⁰⁰ E.E. Evans-Pritchard. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956. p. 7.

In this chapter, we have travelled back through the African and Arabian centuries and have seen how the local Christian missions were told, through what cultural stereotypes they refracted, how they inspired and mobilized individuals and polities. Just as with the parcelled body of St. Mark, many Christian communities since the Middle Ages appropriated and reframed each of those early Christian stories. Conflations and expedient narrations have built the interpretative formulas, with which most of us are familiar. Edward Gibbon in an often-quoted passage wrote, “Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten.”⁶⁰¹ Hopefully, we have shown that it was not the Ethiopians who were sleeping a slothful sleep, but those historians, unwilling to unravel the tangled-up knots of their rich history.

⁶⁰¹ Edward Gibbon. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: Modern Library (Random House). Volume 2. p. 863.



Map 5: The Balkans in mid-ninth century

Chapter 6

Khan Boris and His Conversion to Christianity on Former Imperial Lands: Byzantine Perspectives

“The emperor,” wrote the chronicler Theophanes about his contemporary Nicephorus I (r. 802-812), “was an ardent friend of the Manichees (now called Paulicians) and of his close neighbors, the Athinganoi⁶⁰² of Phrygia and Lykaonia, and rejoiced in their prophecies and rites.”⁶⁰³ In the ninth century, accusations against a Byzantine emperor for being a Manichaean and for bringing strange practices and magical spells right into the imperial palace in Constantinople were condemning Christian verdicts. Essentially, Theophanes framed Nicephorus as a heretic since the chronicler blamed the emperor for having effectively turned against six centuries of orthodox dogma. According to Theophanes, Nicephorus preferred pagan magic over

⁶⁰² On a possible association of Athinganoi with Gypsies/Roma in Byzantine writing, see George C. Soulis. “The Gypsies in the Byzantine Empire and the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 15 (1961), pp. 143-165. Soulis points out that the heretical group “Athinganoi” was conflated with the Gypsies/Roma because both supposedly practiced magic and shared a reputation for fortune-telling. For example, the famous Byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon (d. ca. 1204), thinking through canon LXI of the Council in Trullo (692), which promised a six-year excommunication for any member of the Church who displayed bears or other animals for amusement or by telling fortunes, wrote: “Those who lead around bears are called bearkeepers. They place dyed threads on the head and on the entire body of the animal. Then they would cut these threads and offer them along with parts of the animal’s hair as amulets, and as cure from diseases and the evil eye. Others, who are called Athinganoi, would have snakes wound around them, and they would tell one person that he was born under an evil star, and the other under a lucky star; and they would also prophesy about forthcoming good and ill fortunes.” Quoted in Soulis, p. 146.

⁶⁰³ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488: τῶν δὲ Μανιχαίων, τῶν νῦν Παυλικιάνων καλουμένων, καὶ Αθιγγάνων τῶν κατὰ Φρυγίαν καὶ Λυκαονίαν, ἀγχιγειτόνων αὐτοῦ, φίλος ἦν διάπυρος, χρησιμοῖς καὶ τελεταῖς αὐτῶν ἐπιχαίρων...

Christian miracles. In Theophanes' world, everything sprang from one's unorthodox habits, so all went downhill from there:

Ungodly control over the purchase of all kinds of things, cattle and produce, the unjust confiscations and penalties imposed upon the elite, and the exaction of interest on ships, he who issued laws against usury, and numerous other evil new policies. To describe all of them in detail would appear burdensome to those who seek to learn events in a brief form.⁶⁰⁴

Other Byzantines must have agreed with Theophanes. On Tuesday, October 1, 6303 in Theophanes' dating (A.D. 810/811), a man dressed as a monk sneaked into the imperial palace and tried to kill the emperor with a sword that he had obtained from someone in the military staff.⁶⁰⁵ Evidently, the man was a skilled professional, for it took Nicephorus' entire bodyguard to pin him down. Severely wounding two men, the assassin was finally stopped and then put in jail. Even merciless torture could not bring the man to disclose any of the conspirators against the emperor. Savvy enough, the killer hid his true motives behind the mask of intense religion. He pretended to be a demoniac and successfully convinced Nicephorus to spare his life and "to put him in chains with others who have suffered from the same [madness]."⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). pp. 487-488: Τούτω τῷ ἔτει Νικηφόρος τὰς κατὰ Χριστιανῶν ἐπινοίας ἐπέτεινεν, ἐποψίας ἀθέους ἐπ' ἀγορασμοῖς παντοίων ἀλόγων βοσκημάτων τε καὶ καρπῶν, ἀδίκους δημεύσεις τε καὶ ζημίας τῶν ἐν τέλει τοκισμοὺς ἐν πλοίοις, ὁ πᾶσι νομοθετῶν τὸ μὴ τοκίζειν, καὶ ἄλλας μυρίας κακῶν ἐπινοίας, ὧν ἡ κατὰ μέρος ἱστορία φορτικῆ τοῖς ἐπιτετημημένα ζητοῦσι πέφυκε μανθάνειν τὰ πράγματα. Notice that Theophanes explicitly mentioned that Nicephorus had turned against the Christians.

⁶⁰⁵ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488: τῇ δὲ α' τοῦ Ὀκτωβρίου μηνός, ἡμέρα γ', σπασάμενός τις ἀφανῆς ἐν σχήματι μοναχοῦ ξίφος τινὸς τῶν στρατευομένων εἰσέδραμεν ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ Νικηφόρον ἀνελεῖν ζητῶν.

⁶⁰⁶ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488: ὁ δὲ τοῦτον ἐν τῷ ξύλῳ κατησφαλίσατο σὺν τοῖς πάσχουσιν.

Thirty-eight imperial governments, successes and failures, numerous plots, rebellions, impressive and precarious economic policies encompassed the long history of Byzantium from Constantine in the fourth century with whom we began this dissertation to Nicephorus and his successors in the ninth century with whom we will end it. The empty treasury, which Nicephorus' predecessors in government bequeathed to him, cornered the new emperor and gave him no other alternative but to push his tax-payers actually to contribute for the upkeep of their state. The lavish tax cuts, favoring the wealthy, had been the staple of the empress Irene's previous government, and they were also the bane that had drained the state's resources. To stitch Byzantium's economy together, Nicephorus went back to long-forgotten seventh-century fiscal precedents.⁶⁰⁷ Indeed, contrary to what Theophanes thought, Nicephorus was, in fact, a very able emperor.

Anchoring sailors to key ports and forcing them to own land property was one of Nicephorus' creative fiscal techniques. Placing soldiers in village communities and then ordering local peasants to pay for their upkeep was another savvy solution that tried to hold on to a standing army, but at a minimal cost for the state. Re-designing family taxation and strictly scrutinizing for tax evasions were some other formidable attempts of the emperor to bring the Byzantines back to responsible fiscal policies. All in all, Nicephorus' reforms reflected the intelligent policies of a practical emperor facing an empty treasury. But, none of his intelligent financial policies helped his political cause, and bitter opposition persisted against Nicephorus.

⁶⁰⁷ George Ostrogorsky. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999 (sixth edition). pp. 186-200.

In the same 6303 (A.D. 810/811), according to Theophanes, Nicephorus' enemies organized another attentate against him. Unlike the first attempt, which was cautiously clandestine, the second one was an open confrontation. Headed by the patrician Bardanios, rebels attacked Nicephorus. According to Theophanes, Nicephorus was at a loss, for he had little means for defense and had to resort to black magic:

For he tied an ox by the horns to an iron stake in some sort of hollow and as the animal was bent to the ground, bellowing and writhing, he had it slaughtered and then ground the clothing of Bardanios in a mill with a contrary motion and performed certain incantations. As a result, he won a victory which God allowed because of the multitude of our sins.⁶⁰⁸

It was hard for the Christian Theophanes to bring himself to admit that black magic actually worked on its own, so he had to invite the ultimate approval of God. But, in fact, he was clearly interested in the supernatural concoctions of Nicephorus and depicted step-by-step the emperor's recipe for success.

This rich episode in Theophanes' narrative brings together the threads of historical development in Byzantium that are important for the background of the current chapter set in the ninth century. We have already seen that Justinian's attempts to restore the territories of the Roman empire around the Mediterranean Sea and then ideologically to unite all Byzantines under one common, "orthodox" Christianity ultimately failed. The two broad strands of Christianity ("monophysite" and "dyophysite") divided the imperial Church and created a chain of Christian communities behind each theological school. But even in Constantinople, as the case of Nicephorus aims to suggest, the orthodoxy of the emperor remained under question in the eyes of scrutinizing Byzantine

⁶⁰⁸ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488: ταῦρον γὰρ ἔν τινι λάκκῳ ἐν σιδηρῷ πάλῳ ἐκ τῶν κεράτων προσδήσας εἰς γῆν νενευκότα, οὕτω μυκώμενον καὶ ἰλυσπώμενον ἀποκτανθῆναι πεποίηκεν, τὴν δὲ τούτου ἐσθῆτα ἐν μύλωνι ἀλήσας ἀντιστρόφως καὶ ἐπαιδίαις χρῆσάμενος νίκην ἤρατο, παραχωρήσαντος τοῦ θεοῦ διὰ πλῆθος ἀμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν.

monks. In the particular case of Nicephorus, we have an able emperor whom Theophanes disliked and thus depicted as a pagan practitioner of magic.

In terms of foreign policy in the interim between Justinian in the sixth century and Nicephorus in the ninth century, with the defeats and pull-backs of Byzantine troops from the eastern borders in Africa and Arabia to the European West, local Arabian leaders were given the opportunity to develop their own native culture into the broader religious system of Islam. The new religion wisely brought together Judaism, Christianity, and Muhammed's revelations to claim unique divine legitimacy. Armed with such sense of superiority and freed by the abandoned Byzantine military garrisons in the East, the caliphs and their followers expanded into Byzantine territory and deprived the Byzantines of the Near East and the southern coast of the Mediterranean, reducing Byzantium to the core of Anatolia.

In the West, by the ninth century, the Roman empire included only the southern parts of the Balkans, mostly the territories of modern Greece and the never-lost European parts of modern Turkey. In the Italian peninsula, first after the Lombard invasions of the sixth century and then after the Frankish successes in the eighth century, Byzantium was left basically with Apulia, Calabria, and the eastern part of Sicily stretching out from Syracuse on a north-south axis. The loss of that extended territory, which has been very lucrative for the Byzantines reduced imperial finances. Nicephorus is one of the vivid examples of someone who seriously struggled to restore parts of the lost empire.

Subsequent to the religious controversies after the death of Justinian in 565 that continued with the previous intensity, the issue of the theological soundness of Christian iconography and art in general polarized Christian communities around the 720s. The

Christians, who defended iconography, were labelled by their opponents as “iconodules” (“the icon-slaves”). In turn, the “iconodules” called their enemies “iconoclasts” (“the icon-smashers”).

It took over a century and many political reversals to decide that in the Byzantine orthodox Church, two-dimensional Christian art (if used as a window to God, but without making claims for His real, authentic representations) was allowed. Just as a good book lifts up the spirit of the reader to God so does contemplating a Christian icon. Thus, iconography did not violate the second commandment because it merely served to point to God and His kingdom. As we may imagine, outside of the educated theological circles, most people did not make those distinctions, and nuances, especially between “veneration,” which was allowed, and “worship” of saints and their icons, which was prohibited because reserved only for God, blurred in the mind of the common Christian.

In any case, the last official Iconoclast emperor in Byzantium was Theophilus (r. 829-842). After Theophilus, his two-year-old son, Michael III, technically came to power. Thus, in 842, his iconodule mother Theodora and the eunuch Theoctistus effectively governed. Able advisors surrounded Michael throughout his reign. Even Michael’s murderer, Basil, was technically a great choice, for after he took over the government, Basil (r. 867-886) and his heirs marked one of the most successful periods in Byzantine rule.

In broad strokes, this is the general picture of Byzantine political and religious development since we parted with Justinian (r. 527-565) in the last chapter. What we need to keep in mind from the general overview above is the political context of the empire as well as the social reality of the fragmentation of Christianity into disparate

religious communities around the Mediterranean. In addition, as the period of the iconoclast emperors suggests and the case of Nicephorus more vividly confirms, it is important to remember that the orthodoxy or even the basic Christian position of the emperor in Byzantium was open for challenges.

Paying attention to Nicephorus' counter-example to formulaic statements in support of Orthodox "caesaropapism," especially popular among modern scholars, we need to remember actually the basic realities of rule and the fact that Byzantine emperors often clashed with Church leaders in the empire. The politics of the Byzantine State did not readily align with the politics of the Byzantine Church. This fundamental reality in Byzantine imperial politics will serve as the background to the complicated dynamics of *khan* Boris's conversion in the ninth century, which we are about to examine below.

Before we move forward to Bulgaria⁶⁰⁹ and its ninth-century Christianity, however, we need to turn back to Nicephorus' last days and the Bulgar polity's traumatic impact upon the imperial cultural imagination. According to Theophanes, Nicephorus

⁶⁰⁹ Modern Bulgarian historians usually differentiate between the polity (khaganate) of "the Bulgars" before the Christian conversion of Boris and the kingdom (in some authors even the empire, especially under Boris's son Symeon) of "the Bulgarians." This division of the two cultural and political referents stems from the foundational and still dominant interpretation of Vasil Zlatarski. *История на Българската държава през средните векове*. Том 1, Първо Българско Царство, част 2: *от славянизацията на държавата до падането на Първото царство* [History of the Bulgarian State during the Middle Ages, Volume 1, First Bulgarian Kingdom, part 2: from the Slavonization of the state to the fall of the First Bulgarian Kingdom]. Академично издателство "Марин Дринов." София [Sofia], 1994 (1927 първо издание [First edition]). Zlatarski argued that the Christian conversion of Boris brought together the two disparate "ethnic," Slavs and Bulgars, into one common Bulgarian state and finally allowed the new Christian Bulgarians to participate in "the family of the European states" (p. 34). Given my focus on the Byzantine side, I will not address directly the internal affairs of the Bulgars and thus will not evaluate Christianity's social repercussions in the polity. I am skeptical of Zlatarski's emphasis on clear ethnic lines that Boris's conversion somehow eradicated. Even Zlatarski himself remarked on the apparent contradiction between "the fact that no one doubted the obvious advantages of Christianity over paganism" and the aristocratic rebellion against Boris. Zlatarski dismissed the possibility that the rebellion had much to do with Boris's conversion because he believed that the entire aristocracy was in agreement of the political and international importance of the conversion (p. 49). In any case, Zlatarski generally drew a distinction between "Bulgars" before the conversion and "Bulgarians" after the conversion to indicate that Christianity supposedly unified the Slavs and the Bulgars into one common ethnicity. Since I disagree with Zlatarski and his followers, I use "Bulgars" and "Bulgarians" interchangeably.

put in power many heretics and magicians at home.⁶¹⁰ Then, he supposedly ordered his military officers “to treat bishops and clergymen like slaves” and to confiscate their ecclesiastical property.⁶¹¹ According to Theophanes, Nicephorus argued that sacred objects in churches should be made public and thus collected them. Finally, Nicephorus supposedly disclaimed the Christian emperors before him and openly denied the workings of “Providence by saying that no one was more powerful than the ruler provided the latter was determined to exercise his authority skillfully.”⁶¹² Clearly, Theophanes disliked the emperor and worked hard to demonize Nicephorus who was actually a very able emperor. But, the offended ecclesiastical concerns of Theophanes pushed him to depict Nicephorus as a bad ruler who had gone against legal tradition and Christianity.

The controversial domestic policies of Nicephorus affected the ultimate outcome of his foreign affairs, for he lacked the necessary political support at home. In 811, the emperor went on a campaign against the plundering Bulgars of *khan* Krum (r. 803-814) who had settled in the lands around the Danubian delta. It was a torturous military operation marked by mountainous passes in the Balkans which Nicephorus and his cumbersome troops were not prepared to manage. In 811, *khan* Krum and his army surrounded Nicephorus in the mountains and killed him in a battle that turned into one of

⁶¹⁰ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488.

⁶¹¹ Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 488: τοὺς στρατιωτικοὺς ἄρχοντας δουλικῶς χρᾶσθαι τοῖς ἐπισκόποις καὶ κληρικοῖς ἐκέλευσε καταγομένους αὐθεντικῶς ἐν τοῖς ἐπισκοπεῖοις καὶ μοναστηρίοις, καὶ καταχρᾶσθαι τὰ αὐτῶν.

⁶¹² Theophanes. *Chronographia*. Ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1883 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963). p. 489: τοὺς πρὸ αὐτοῦ βασιλεῖς ἅπαντας ὡς ἀκυβερνήτους ἐμέμφετο, καθόλου τὴν πρόνοιαν ἀναιρῶν καὶ μηδένα λέγων γίνεσθαι τοῦ κρατοῦντος δυνατώτερον, εἰ βούλοιτο ὁ κρατῶν ἐντροχῶς ἄρχειν.

the greatest and most glorious victories in the Bulgarian medieval and modern imagination. From a Byzantine perspective, it was to the contrary, of course, as Nicephorus' death traumatically marked one of the most painful catastrophes in the imperial history before 1204.

Five centuries had passed since the death of Valens in 378 at the battle of Adrianople against the Visigoths. If we include Julian's murder on the Persian front in 363, Nicephorus in the ninth century was only the third Byzantine emperor ever killed in battle against foreign enemies. And in Nicephorus' case, it was even more dramatic, for Krum, intoxicated with the spirit of victory, turned the emperor's skull into a drinking cup. Krum used Nicephorus' skull to drink with his *boyars* (local elites). Nicephorus' son, too, barely escaped the gruesome fate of his father, though he was mortally wounded. All in all, if the Byzantines had previously any doubts about the power and the political longevity of a Bulgar state when the tribes first crossed the Danube in the seventh century, Krum's victory in 811 put his polity on the map of Byzantium and traumatically highlighted its explosive strength.

Medieval Bulgaria in the Context of Byzantium's Theme System

Typically, scholars begin the political history of medieval Bulgaria in the 680s when the nomadic tribe of the Bulgars crossed the Danube river from the north.⁶¹³ The Bulgars defeated the troops of Constantine IV (r. 668-685) and settled around the

⁶¹³ For a general book in English on Balkan medieval history, see John V.A. Fine, Jr. *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991. More recently, but with a different emphasis largely based on archaeological evidence, see Florin Curta. *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. For a collection of articles, see Florin Curta, ed.. *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Danube delta. The peace treaty was in Bulgar favor, so the *khans* could now reside freely inside what had been Byzantine territory. But, even before the arrival of the Bulgars in the seventh century, Slavic tribes had already occupied the Byzantine Balkans, so to the Byzantines, the Bulgar invasion perhaps stood as another wave of strange foreign intruders.

In the seventh century when the Bulgars came, the Byzantines were preoccupied with the Arab takeover of the eastern territories and since the Slavs dominated in the Balkans, the Byzantines did not concentrate much on the early Bulgar operations. A possible Byzantine response to the Bulgar invasion was additionally complicated, for it was difficult to deal with loose tribes. At first, the Bulgars kept to the north of the Balkan range and since Slavs and Avars were already in the area to pressure the Bulgar *khans*, the Byzantines might have even expected that they would self-destruct. The Bulgars had no military obligations to the emperor who generally regarded them as outsiders. Thus, the Byzantines did not manage to turn the *khans* into *foederati* as they had done with many other peoples in the earlier centuries of imperial history.⁶¹⁴

By the ninth century, with the major exception of Nicephorus' loss, Byzantium started to recover its direct political presence in the Balkans. During the preceding period of 200 years, Slavs as loose tribes with no central leadership had locked out the Byzantine military and administrative system, stretching from the Danube to the southernmost point of Greece.⁶¹⁵ Throughout those two centuries, Byzantium maintained

⁶¹⁴ For a recent overview of these events, see Boris Todorov. *The Bulgarians between the Two Romes: The Discourse of Power in Medieval Bulgaria*. Dissertation Thesis. University of California, Los Angeles, 2007. See especially Chapter 1.

⁶¹⁵ For the following overview of Byzantium's "theme system," I rely largely on George Ostrogorsky's "Byzantium and the South Slavs." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 42, No. 98 (Dec., 1963), pp. 1-14.

its authority only in some coastal towns. Instead of Byzantine provinces, the Balkan peninsula consisted of a number of “Sclavinias.” Those were regions occupied by the Slavs over which Byzantium had lost direct control even though the fictional presence of the empire was kept.

Between the seventh and the ninth centuries, the Byzantine provincial administrative system in areas the empire controlled was redesigned into large territorial units called “themes.” Each theme was organized under a military commander, usually a *strategos* (στρατηγός, ό). Thus, military and some specific civil duties were combined in the office of the *strategos*. The judicial and financial branches remained almost entirely civil. Beginning in the mid-seventh century, Asia Minor was the first to be re-organized along the lines of the “thematic” system. The restructuring of Byzantium along themes was seen as efficient and spread to other parts of the empire.

The first theme in the Balkans was formed in the later part of the seventh century in the territory nearest to the Byzantine capital. The Byzantines referred to it as the Thracian theme. It was founded in the 680s when the Bulgars first crossed the Danube. In 687, we see present the exarchs of Ravenna and Carthage, the στρατηγοί of the three themes in Asia Minor, and the only military governor in the Balkans, the στρατηγός of Thrace.

The Helladikoi theme was organized around 695. We do not know its territory, though it went presumably beyond Thrace. Thus, towards the end of the seventh century, there were only two, relatively small themes in the Balkans: Thrace and “Hellas.” All other parts of the Balkan peninsula remained beyond Byzantium’s direct administrative control. No additional progress with the establishment of themes in the Balkans was

made for about a century, and even then, Byzantium had difficulty in expanding its theme system in other Balkan regions.

Towards the end of the eighth century, another theme was finally organized. The Byzantines called it Macedonia. Byzantine Macedonia included western Thrace with Adrianopolis as its main city. The rest of the lands continued to be in the hands of the Slavs.

The ninth century proved to be more charitable to the Byzantines. Two lucrative themes were organized in Dyrrhachium and Thessalonica.⁶¹⁶ The new themes largely relied on customs, for they were little more than the city and its harbor. Thus, Dyrrhachium was the main Byzantine military and commercial center on the Adriatic Sea. Thessaloniki was a naval base on the Aegean Sea.

At the same time, new themes were formed in the Greek regions. The Peloponnesian theme was created some time between the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the ninth. In the first years of the ninth century, the Cephallonian theme was organized on the territory of the Ionian islands. Later, in the second half of the ninth century, a theme was established in Epirus with its center in Nicopolis. Finally, about 870, Dalmatia also acquired the status of a theme. The Byzantine theme did not correspond to the territory of modern Dalmatia nor did it overlap with the old Roman province of that name, which had stretched inland on a broad front as far as the Drina River. Instead, Byzantine Dalmatia included only the islands on the Adriatic Sea and certain coastal towns. The hinterland was in possession of the Slavs. In such ways, a Byzantine presence re-asserted itself at least in the urban centers on the sea coasts.

⁶¹⁶ George Ostrogorsky. "Byzantium and the South Slavs." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 42, No. 98 (Dec., 1963), pp. 1-14. p. 5.

From this general survey of the slow rebuilding of a Byzantine institutional presence in the Balkan regions, we can see that Byzantium, by the middle of the ninth century, managed to form an orbit of “themes” around the shores of the Balkan peninsula in the west, in the east, and in the south. The empire concentrated on those coastal regions because the Balkan interior was too politically chaotic and because the Slavic polities proved to be resilient in their own ways. All in all, however, the majority of the Balkans remained outside of the Byzantine reach.

Thus, when compared to the great past expanses around the Mediterranean, the political situation in the empire of the ninth century was still rather bleak. Byzantium lacked major territories. Remembering the old days and angry at the constant newcomers, traditional Byzantines heightened their air of superiority and lashed out against various foreigners. For example, the powerful abbot of the great monastic complex in Constantinople, Theodore the Stoudite (759–826), wrote in one of his letters: “ We insist that the emperors wage war upon Scythians (i.e., Bulgars) and Arabs who slay the people of God and that they [the emperors] show no mercy.”⁶¹⁷

Such anti-foreign Byzantine rhetoric was aimed against the Bulgars quite often, especially in the ninth century when the Byzantines openly started to mock them as unclean people and referred to them as Scythians haughtily incorporating Herodotus’ term to disclaim the coming to be sedentary by then Bulgars as uncivilized nomads. Masterful horse-riders, pagan ritualists, and diviners that told the future based on dead animals, the Bulgars displayed to the Byzantines all the features of rough, nomadic pagans in Scythium. For example, Liudprand of Cremona (ca. 922-972) heard a rumor

⁶¹⁷ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Volume 99, col. 1485 B. Also quoted in Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 31.

spread in Constantinople that one of the brothers of the Bulgarian ruler Peter (r. 927-69), Baianos, the son of the famous Symeon (r. 893-927), indulged in witchcraft and could easily turn himself into a wolf or any other ferocious animal.⁶¹⁸ Apparently, other Turkic tribal leaders could communicate with wolves, too.⁶¹⁹

The function that such stories played in Byzantine writing depended upon the context, in which the particular author chose to put them, and on the general political climate in the empire. One of the extremes in the broad spectrum of cultural possibilities was that those exotic stories illustrated the barbarian nature of the Bulgars. The other extreme marked the Bulgar peculiar connection to the supernatural realm that was both intriguing and fearsome to trusting Byzantines.

In this general overview and contextual setting, we need to remember that the political and the ecclesiastical development of Byzantium did not move in predetermined synchrony. The age of Iconoclasm (720s-840s) brought about drastic changes in the relations between the Byzantine Orthodox Church and the papal Church of Rome.⁶²⁰ The Roman Church did not accept the Iconoclastic practices prevalent in Constantinople at the time, but remained in good diplomatic relation with the Byzantine state. In the beginning, regardless of the conflict over Iconoclasm, pope Gregory III (731-741) and his successor Zacharias (741-752) tried to stay in good terms with the Byzantine emperor.

⁶¹⁸ *Liudprandi Antapodosis*, 3.29 in *Die Werke Liudprands von Cremona*, ed. by J. Becker (3rd ed., Hanover, 1915), 88: “Baianum autem adeo ferunt magicam didicisse, ut ex homine subito fieri lupum quamvecumque cerneret feram.” See also Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 32.

⁶¹⁹ See P.B. Golden. “Wolves, Dogs, and Qipčak Religion.” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 50 (1997), fasc. 1-3, 93, n. 35. D. Ovcharov. Прабългарска религия: произход и същност [Proto-Bulgarian Religion: Origin and Essence]. Sofia, 1997, pp. 59-74, interprets many graffiti from the so-called First Bulgarian empire [A.D. 681-1018] as testimonies to pagan practices, but R. Rashev. “Съмнителни и недостоверни паметници на прабългарската култура [Dubious and Unreliable Sources of the Proto-Bulgarian Culture].” In K. Popkonstantinov (ed.). *Studia protobulgarica et mediaevalia europensia*. V chest na prof. Veselin Beshevliev (Sofia, 2003), pp. 158-74, argues against many of his identifications. For a recent commentary in English, see Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 32.

⁶²⁰ George Ostrogorsky. “The Byzantine Background of the Moravian Mission.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 19 (1965), pp. 1-18. See especially p. 12.

Both popes hoped that Byzantium, as it had done in the past, would be able to prevent the barbarian danger in Italy and to secure for the papacy uninterrupted papal peace and ecclesiastical prosperity.

In 751, the Byzantines failed to defend against the Lombards and lost Ravenna, opening the gates to the barbarians' expansion into the Italian peninsula.⁶²¹ Losing any hope, the Roman papacy abandoned the Byzantines and turned for help to the court of the Frankish Merovingian king Childeric III (r. 743-752). What followed was a complicated political bargain. In the end, pope Zacharias deposed Childeric III and consecrated as king the former mayor of the palace, Peppin the Short (r. 752-768), father of the famous Charlemagne (r. 768-814) who launched the powerful Carolingian dynasty of the Franks.

After Zacharias's death in 752, his successor, pope Stephen II (752-757) continued the policy of his predecessor and signed a treaty with king Peppin that marked a new direction in the ecclesiastical development and foreign relations of the papacy. Through clever diplomacy, the papacy had managed to self-sustain and assure its protection from the Frankish polity in the West and thus stood independent from Byzantium. In its turn, the Byzantine Church removed the hellenized regions of southern Italy and the Balkan peninsula from Roman jurisdiction. Emperor Leo III (r. 717-741) put Calabria and Apulia under Byzantine administration. Calabria and Sicily were under the patriarchate of Constantinople. Apulia remained under the pope.

For the purposes of this chapter, the important outcome of those complicated ecclesiastical maneuvers, which we need to remember, was that the Balkan peninsula, the western part of which was originally under the jurisdiction of Rome, came to be part of

⁶²¹ George Ostrogorsky. "The Byzantine Background of the Moravian Mission." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 19 (1965), pp. 1-18. pp. 12-13.

the Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical network. By this savvy decision of the Iconoclasts, the entire major prefecture of Illyricum, especially the important coastal cities, came under the jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Constantinople. Split and the territories north from it were under Rome. Dubrovnik was usually under Rome.

Looking at these dramatic ecclesiastical changes, we need to note immediately that the boundaries of the jurisdiction of the Constantinopolitan Church did not exactly correspond to the political borders of the Byzantine State. Even the successes of Byzantine reoccupation at the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century in Illyricum were limited mainly to the southern part of this area, for the Sclavinias were not really under the control of the empire. In other words, by the change of boundaries in the Roman and Byzantine ecclesiastical spheres, the domain of the patriarchate of Constantinople was extended beyond the actual boundaries of the empire. The Byzantine Church had jurisdiction over lands that were not under the auspices of the Byzantine military and administrative state authorities.

Predictably then, the controversial policies of the Iconoclasts turned the Balkans into a contested ecclesiastical zone over which the two powerful churches in Rome and Constantinople continued to clash for years to come. Even the news of the restoration of the cult of icons in 843 brought mixed feelings in Rome, for the ecclesiastical territorial measures of the Iconoclast administration were not revoked. Thus, Calabria remained under the Church of Constantinople.

The political and ecclesiastical context, in which the conversion of *khan* Boris (r. 852-889) developed with its own separate dynamics, entailed the important territorial disputes between the Roman popes, the Constantinopolitan patriarchs, and the Byzantine

emperors. The expansion of the Bulgars into former Byzantine lands and the network of Byzantine “themes” wrapped around the Balkan peninsula were additional important political developments in the context of Boris’s conversion. Thus, many were the political interests that intersected at the time of the *khan*’s decision-making. And when we are considering the Byzantine perspectives on the Bulgar elite’s conversion, we need to remember the wide array of Constantinopolitan, Roman, or other ecclesiastical options that presented themselves to Boris.

Even if Byzantine imperial agendas were in play, revolving around Byzantine Christianity’s presence in the Balkans, they were severely impeded not only by the Roman clergymen but also by the savvy political maneuvering of the pragmatic, Bulgarian elites. The intricate historical context, which we presented, enabled Boris to choose for a time his Christian alignment, type of ecclesiastical organization, or, to the degree to which he even cared, favorite “theological” teachings. Shifting between Constantinople and Rome, Boris was hardly a passive recipient or a poor victim of papal or imperialist Constantinopolitan forces. To the contrary, the Bulgar *khan* played off the two major Christian centers against each other brilliantly to maximize his own personal agendas.

The Bulgarian Conversion: The Traditional Scholarly Narrative

Unlike some of the other cases, which we have witnessed in the previous chapters, the story of *khan* Boris’s conversion is well-known and is often rehearsed as a clear example of supposedly unchanging Byzantine political habits that skillfully harnessed Christianity for its outright imperialist and expansionist policies. For example,

here is how one scholar, who purported to write a comparative article on eastern and western methods of missionary activity, summarized his findings:

Political pressure was the chief weapon of Byzantine society in creating and exploring missionary opportunities. An almost stereotyped procedure had been developed. The imperial government singled out for conversion pagan groups where a prince had already established his authority, a concept of Christianization that derived from the state-dominated religious establishment in Byzantine society. Then operating through war, diplomacy, economic concessions, and its own example of effective statecraft, the Byzantine government sought to convince or compel the pagan prince that it was advantageous to accept the new religion. It would be impossible to recount here the complicated political relationships between the imperial government and various Slavic groups prior to 900. However, a few cases, directly associated with the Christianization of certain groups, will illustrate the Byzantine technique of using political forces to encourage conversion.⁶²²

We witness a simplistic presentation of the historical dynamics leading up to Byzantine missionary successes. In addition, instead of witnessing “a few cases,” we are really exposed to one, i.e., the Bulgarian conversion. Refracted through nineteenth and twentieth-century political concerns and inherited ideologies, modern scholars on medieval Bulgaria have seen Boris’s conversion as a way of strengthening and forming an independent Bulgarian state.⁶²³ Alternatively, scholars, who have focused on Byzantium, have emphasized the opposite, presenting Boris’s conversion ultimately as a great success of Byzantine imperial policy against the western papacy and as a benefit to

⁶²² Richard E. Sullivan. “Early Medieval Missionary Activity: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Methods.” *Church History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Mar., 1954), pp. 17-35. p. 18. Sullivan was a western medievalist and not a Byzantine specialist.

⁶²³ To this day, V.N. Zlatarski’s views continue to shape scholarly interpretations in Bulgaria. Zlatarski’s work was organized around two basic assumptions: 1) that the political history of medieval Bulgaria was shaped by the perpetual struggle of the Bulgar rulers to assert their independent political sovereignty against the universalism of the Byzantine empire, and 2) that Boris’s conversion was a way to consolidate the two opposing ethnies in Bulgaria, the Bulgars and the Slavs. For an outline of his views in English, see V.N. Zlatarski. “The Making of the Bulgarian Nation.” *The Slavonic Review*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (Dec., 1925), pp. 362-383. A representative of a later generation of Bulgarian scholars, influenced by Soviet theoretical approaches, Dimitar Angelov proceeded “to improve” upon Zlatarski. Angelov claimed that all nations pass through three distinct stages of development. Boris’s conversion, then, supposedly moved the medieval Bulgarians to the second stage of national consolidation—народност [nationality, “peoplehood,” national sentiment]. *Образуване на Българската Народност* [Formation of the Bulgarian Nationality]. Sofia: Наука и изкуство, 1971.

Byzantine imperialism.⁶²⁴ According to the scholarly perspective, which focuses on Bulgaria, Christianity supposedly freed the Bulgars from foreign domination, legitimized them, and made them free from foreign powers overnight. According to the perspective, which emphasizes the Byzantines, Christianity effectively inserted the Bulgars into the Byzantine “commonwealth,” depriving them of their cultural independence. The two mutually exclusive perspectives have even been repeated together without any meaningful attempt for reconciliation.

In order to examine critically the Bulgarian conversion, we need to begin by presenting briefly the traditional story of *the khan*’s religious change. Then, we will turn to the major Byzantine accounts of the conversion, which will be our main contribution to the scholarly discussion. Finally, we will draw our own independent conclusions.

Thus, in about 863, tangled up in Balkan politics and struggles for power, *khan* Boris I (r. 852-889) formed an alliance with Louis the German (r. 843-76) against Rastislav of Moravia (r. 846-70) and Louis’s own son Carloman.⁶²⁵ Already a year later, in 864, a papal letter testified to Boris’s intent to receive baptism from the Roman Church. Yet, sometime in the same 864 or the following 865, Boris actually converted to

⁶²⁴ Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. More recently, but following the same interpretational frame, Garth Fowden. *Empire to Commonwealth*. Princeton University Press, 1993. See also Richard Sullivan. “Khan Boris and the Conversion of Bulgaria: A Case Study of the Impact of Christianity on a Barbarian Society.” Reprinted from *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, Vol. III. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966. p. 121. Sullivan writes, “The introduction of Christianity revealed their [the Bulgarians’] cultural backwardness, and it set the Bulgars the monumental task of making themselves culturally worthy of the new religion.”

⁶²⁵ The scholarly bibliography on any of the following points is vast. Some of the major books on the conversion are V.N. Zlatarski’s *Formation of the Bulgarian State*, quoted above. Vasil Giuzelev. *КНЯЗ Борис Първи* [Kniaz Boris the First]. Sofia, 1969. In English, Francis Dvornik. *The Photian Schism*. Cambridge, 1948. And also, Dvornik’s *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: Ss. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*. Rutgers University Press, 1970. More recently, Liliana Simeonova. *Diplomacy of the Letter and the Cross: Photios, Bulgaria, and the Papacy, 860s-880s*. A.M. Hakkert, 1998.

Byzantine Christianity and took the name of his godfather, the Byzantine emperor Michael III.

With his decision to receive Christianity from Byzantium, the new convert Boris-Michael surprised even the highest ecclesiastical officials in Constantinople. In his famous encyclical letter to the eastern bishops, in which patriarch Photius (858-867 and 877-886) excommunicated the Roman pope Nicholas I (858-867), the Constantinopolitan patriarch also mentioned the conversion of Bulgaria.⁶²⁶ Many were the reasons for Photius' drastic decision to excommunicate Nicholas. One was the theological dispute over the issue of *filioque* that concerned the Latin innovation on the procession of the Holy Spirit "from the Father *and* the Son." Another reason involved papal objections against Photius' rapid promotion from a layman to a patriarch in Constantinople. There were also issues around customary practices such as priestly beards, which Photius himself actually insisted were unimportant, and married clergy. Finally, of course, there were the papal attempts to expand into the Constantinopolitan dioceses of the Balkans and the important issue over the final authority in the Church—the pope (Roman position) or the ecclesiastical council (Constantinopolitan position). In this same, charged letter, sent out in 867, Photius added, "But the barbarian and Christ-hating tribe of the Bulgarians changed direction to such cultivation and divine knowledge." This is how Photius reflected on Boris's decision, "With the result that they abandoned their demons and ancestral orgies, and packing away the error of *Hellene* [italics are mine; see

⁶²⁶ Photius *Επιστολαι*. Ed. Johannes N. Baletta. New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1978 (reprint). Letter 4.

footnote below] superstition, they were spurred to the faith of the Christians unexpectedly [παραδόξως].”⁶²⁷

Beyond this initial moment of 864/865, Boris’s time as a Christian under Constantinople was short-lived. First, almost immediately after the *khan*’s conversion, his political elite organized a massive revolt against him. In the summer of 866, Boris, after putting the revolt down, executed 52 noble families, including altogether children and relatives. This was a veritable *pogrom*. In August 866, either at the time of Boris’ purges or a little later, the *khan* sent a delegation to Rome to seek consultation on various issues of Christian dogma, ecclesiastical organization, religious discipline, secular law, and local customs. In November 866, a Roman mission led by bishops Formosus of Porto and Paul of Populonia arrived in Bulgaria. They delivered the papal answers to the Bulgarian questions and effectively started the second Roman mission to the Bulgarian people.

In the first two months of 867, Michael III and Basil I (then co-emperors) sent a letter to Boris. This letter contained the patriarchal response of the same questions that Boris had posed to the papacy. Unfortunately, the Byzantine responses do not survive, but the basic content is suggested in pope Nicholas I’s epistle to the Frankish bishops

⁶²⁷ Photius. *Επιστολαι*. Ed. Johannes N. Baletta. New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1978 (reprint). Letter 4. p.168 (γ): Ἀλλά γε δὴ καὶ Βουλγάρων ἔθνος βαρβαρικὸν καὶ μισόχριστον εἰς τοσαύτην μετέκλινεν ἡμερότητα καὶ θεογνωσίαν, ὥστε τῶν δαιμονίων καὶ πατρῶων ἐκστάντες ὀργίων, καὶ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς δεισιδαιμονίας ἀποσκευασάμενοι τὴν πλάνην, εἰς τὴν τῶν Χριστιανῶν παραδόξως μετενεγκεντρίσθησαν πίστιν. For “Hellenism” as a cultural construct and its referential function from antiquity to the high Middle Ages, see Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

from October 22, 867.⁶²⁸ In the middle of this complicated correspondence (sometime in 867), a separate Frankish mission, headed by bishop Ermanrich of Passau, arrived in Bulgaria. Up to this point, three independent missions had operated in Bulgaria, not counting various heretical, non-official groups that had settled in the polity as well as freelance Orthodox Christians who had lived there for centuries.

The Frankish mission of Ermanrich of Passau did not last long and left the country without influencing much the development of local Christianity. Earlier in the same year, Boris had actually expelled the Byzantine clergy from his lands in order to open space and free up resources for the Latin bishops' work. Thus, presumably, a similar policy prohibited Frankish operations and pushed their missionaries to leave. Reacting to the expulsion of his own Byzantine clergy, patriarch Photius sent the excommunication letter of 867, to which we referred above. Photius had blamed the papal authorities for the prevarications of Boris. In the summer of 867, Photius organized a formal synod in Constantinople. It formally excommunicated pope Nicholas. In the meantime, Boris sent a second delegation to Rome, which sought a larger number of presbyters, and the specific aid of bishops Dominic of Trivento and Grimoald of Polimartium.

In Constantinople, in 867, Basil the Macedonian, by then the co-emperor with Michael III, murdered his patron and became the sole emperor. He removed Photius from the patriarchal post and brought back Photius' opponent, Ignatius (847-858 and 867-877). In the West at the same time, pope Nicholas died and, in December 867, Hadrian II took over. In 869, Hadrian II condemned patriarch Photius and continued the

⁶²⁸ For more details, see Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 42. See also Matthew Spinka. "Slavic Translations of the Scriptures." *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1933), pp. 415-432. p. 416.

policies of his predecessor Nicholas. Hadrian II, however, was not a skillful diplomat, and his relations with Boris worsened. The two could not agree on the person to head the Bulgarian Church. Boris wanted to have Formosus as an archbishop of the Bulgarian see, but Hadrian II rejected the request. After two years of indecision, Boris turned back to the Byzantines. In February 870, at the end of the council in Constantinople that confirmed the deposition of Photius and the annulment of Nicholas I's excommunication, a Bulgarian delegation opened the question of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over their kingdom.

The eastern bishops' allegiance was rooted in Constantinople, and, in addition, the synod was carefully set in the Byzantine capital where the bishops' decisions could be controlled if need be. Thus, the representatives of the eastern patriarchates decided to give Bulgaria to the Constantinopolitan Church. The bishops' argument rested on the fact that the original local priesthood consisted of Byzantines. Boris expelled the last Latin missionaries from Bulgaria in 870.

After 870, the papacy did not give up on its claims and worked hard to bring Boris and his church back to Rome. At first, pope John VIII (872-882) tried to appeal directly to Boris. This proved futile. Then, the papal efforts were gradually re-directed to the patriarch of Constantinople. This brought no result either. Reconciled to the fact that it had lost to the Constantinopolitan patriarchate for the time being, the papacy focused on the northern and central regions of Europe.

After 885, when archbishop Methodius of Moravia died, a large part of the Slavic-speaking clergy in Greater Moravia, a polity to whose conversion Methodius and his brother Constantine-Cyril (lived from 828/9 to 869) had devoted their lives, was

driven out of the country. The new ruler of Greater Moravia decided to receive Christianity from the papacy. The Slavic-speaking exiles from Moravia crossed the Danube and sought refuge in Bulgaria. Boris gladly welcomed them and encouraged their vigorous missionary activity in Slavic. In 889, having built two major missions (one in the Northeast near the capital Pliska and another near Ohrid in the Southwest), Boris voluntarily abdicated and moved in a monastery in favor of his eldest son Vladimir-Rasate (r. 889-893).

A supporter of the old Bulgarian aristocracy and unconvinced by the cultural policies of his father, however, Vladimir went back to traditional, Bulgar paganism. After four years of Vladimir's anti-Christian rule, the horrified Boris re-emerged from the monastery. Gathering back his loyal forces, Boris deposed and blinded his own son. Depriving Vladimir-Rasate from future claims to the throne, Boris appointed as a ruler his third son Symeon (r. 893-927). Educated in Constantinople for a decade and groomed to be a future Christian leader of the Bulgarian Church, Symeon suddenly found himself as a head of state. Armed with Byzantine culture and knowledge, he took Bulgaria on a major military conquest, through which he aimed to bring home his ultimate claims to the emperorship.

The intricate diplomacy of Boris, maneuvering between the two Churches, speaks on its own against interpretations that emphasize simple unilateral imperialism. Quarrelling over ecclesiastical boundaries in the post-Iconoclastic age, the patriarchate of Constantinople and the Roman papacy technically voiced legitimate reasons in support of their diocesan pretensions. However, instead of constraining Boris, their disputes actually empowered the *khan* to explore alternative possibilities. Thus, he bargained for

his own bishops. He demanded an independent native church. He controlled the flow of missionaries in and out of his polity. As it turned out, he finally decided on a Slavonic liturgy and Slavonic schools that worked from each end of his territory.

All in all, Boris's conversion was not a neat example of the savvy operations of Byzantine imperialism that ultimately prevailed. It was illustrative of the dynamic local politics and the *khan's* struggle for carving out his control in his territory that was formerly part of the Byzantine empire, then placed in the ecclesiastical periphery of the Roman papacy, and then tipped over indirectly to the Constantinopolitan patriarchate. The major actors in this intricate historical process had their own variegated agendas. First, there were the Roman popes from Nicholas I to John VIII who sought to expand their jurisdiction. Then, there were the patriarchal and state politics in Constantinople.

Promoted in a matter of days from layman to patriarch, Photius had to establish his own ecclesiastical legitimacy against rival Constantinopolitan factions. There were also the agendas of the political leaders whose interests intersected in the Balkans. Peppin the Short, Boris of Bulgaria, and Basil of Byzantium (after the murder of his patron Michael III) sought legitimacy and political stability amidst aristocratic factionalism at home.

Even through the traditional scholarly interpretations that piece together Boris's conversion, we could see the multiple agendas that intersected in the historical plot, making it clear that the predetermined Byzantine imperialism is misleadingly too simplistic. Wedged between ecclesiastical disputes, struggles for legitimacy, novel arguments about allowing Slavonic liturgies, revolts, and the apostasy of his own son,

Boris managed to carve out a Slavonic-based Christianity. It took Boris over two decades to establish Christianity formally in his state.

The immediate consequences of Boris's conversion to Christianity were an advantage to the Byzantines only to the extent that Boris did not become a Roman Christian. Thus, Photius's famous letter, in which he instructed Boris how to be a proper Christian, was effectively a "mirror of princes." Photius showed a remarkable insight into the repercussions of the foreign elite's conversion. Teaching Boris basic Christian morality should not be dismissed as the patriarch's impractical and inadequate understanding of the concerns of a new royal convert. Instead, it should be seen as Photius' careful attempt to tame Boris and to convince him that being Christian meant being humble and obedient.⁶²⁹ In essence, Photius had urged Boris not to employ his Christianity for personal political agendas and aggrandizement at the expense of his spiritual father in Constantinople.

The Bulgarian Conversion: Byzantine Narratives and Their Historical Specifics

The story of Boris's conversion, which we have summarized above, has been assembled by generations of modern historians who have sifted through and combined together Byzantine Greek, Latin, and native sources usually written in Slavonic. In trying to isolate historical kernels of truth, noble and admirable attempts indeed, modern historians have not explored the illuminating variations and re-adjustments of the Bulgarian conversion within different narrative contexts and more broadly within the

⁶²⁹ Photius. *Επιστολαι*. Ed. Johannes N. Baletta. New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1978 (reprint). Letter 1.

historical period during which each version was written.⁶³⁰ By conflating the sources into one main narrative, scholars have deprived their audience from experiencing the different authorial perspectives and unique Byzantine ways of understanding Boris's conversion. Given our objectives in this study, which focuses on the Byzantine perspectives of conversion, it is precisely these various Byzantine views that we need to investigate.

In fact, the events surrounding Boris's conversion in the 860s attracted a number of Byzantine authors. Recorded first in the ninth century, repeated and modified well into the twelfth century and even beyond in local sources, the story of Boris's decision to accept Christianity travelled together with the broader development of the empire itself. Several were the broad themes of the story that the Byzantines asserted. Famine in Bulgaria that pushed the *khan* to Christianity was one of them. Wars between Boris and the empress Theodora (the mother-regent of the young Michael III) was another. In a separate version, a Byzantine imperial campaign against the *khan* intimidated the Bulgar ruler and gave him no option but to seek peace through Christianity. Yet another story pointed out how land exchanges in the border zones between the Byzantines and the Bulgars were sealed through the Christian baptism of the *khan*. A different theme focused on how a proselytizing Byzantine prisoner in the Bulgar court convinced Boris to become Christian, too. The persuading power of Boris's Christian sister was another explanation that a Byzantine author provided. Another theme involved a Christian mural

⁶³⁰ In effect, Ivan Dujčev's article "Légendes Byzantines sur la conversion des Bulgares" briefly outlines the contents of the Byzantine "legends" and focuses mostly on highlighting four post fifteenth-century manuscripts, mentioning the conversion. The first reference is to an addition in a manuscript copied by Vladislav Grammatik, a fifteenth-century scribe from Serbia. The second source, which Dujčev presents, is a sixteenth or seventeenth-century Greek vulgate source from St. Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai. The other two sources are in Greek vulgate as well; one was found in a Macedonian monastery (Kousnica); the other was discovered on Mt. Athos. The variations in these sources are certainly very interesting and require further historical analysis. *Medioevo byzantino-slavo*, Vol. III. Roma: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 1971. pp. 63-75. See specifically pp. 67-73.

painting that supposedly instilled the fear of God in Boris and led him to Christianity which then rid him of his nightmares. In another Byzantine version, the pagan rebellion of the Bulgar aristocracy that turned against Boris, followed by the *khan*'s victory due to the power of the Cross, expediently convinced Boris to convert his entire polity as it had persuaded Constantine before him.

We will put in context and develop below each story in more detail. But, we need to address right away how different and, strictly speaking, limited the actual Byzantine perspectives were from the broader pan-European reconstructions of modern scholarship. Of course, the vast scholarly literature on the general events surrounding Boris's conversion has been extremely valuable, but the traditional narrative has obscured the specific ways, in which the Byzantine historians understood and explained in their own terms Boris and his decisions. It is important for us to uncover and to investigate carefully the Byzantine views if we are to determine the proper place that the conversion occupied in the historical memory of the Byzantines.

In the Byzantine medieval historiography, even the very name of the Bulgarian *khan* remained undecided. Thus, we find Βώγωρις (pronounced Bōgōris in conventional Erasmian classical Greek or “Voghoris” if we take the modern Greek pronunciation as standard for the Byzantines, also note the long vowel “ω”),⁶³¹ Βόγαρις (Bogaris or Vogharis, note the short “ο”),⁶³² but only a bit later in the same source Γόβορις (Goboris

⁶³¹ Theophanes Continuatus. *Chronographia*. Ed. I. Bekker. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1838. p. 162: Ὁ γε μὴν ἄρχων Βουλγαρίας (Βώγωρις οὗτος ἦν).

⁶³² Symeon Magistros or Pseudo-Symeon. *Chronicle*. *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Vol. 33 (2). p. 664.

or Ghovoris),⁶³³ Βωρίσης (Bōrisēs or Vorisis, note the “ω” and the “η”), Βορίσης (Borisēs or Vorisis)⁶³⁴ or Βορώσης (Borōsēs or Vorosis, note the place of the “ω” and the “η”) in the same source but different edition,⁶³⁵ and finally the familiar Βορής (Borēs or Voris).⁶³⁶ In addition to variations in spelling and the confusion among writers due to dialects and changing pronunciation in later common Greek while in the context of classicizing attempts of Byzantine historians, the different ways of recording Boris’s name allude to the typological fashion, in which the Byzantines looked at the Bulgarian conversion. The correct spelling of the name of this major, from a modern perspective, historical figure was not consistent even in the writing of a single author (or copyist) who wrote it differently in a single text. This should make us suspicious about the relative importance that the Byzantines ascribed to Boris in particular and perhaps to his conversion in general. With this in mind, let us proceed to the actual accounts.

The first Byzantine author, who mentioned Boris’s conversion, wrote sometime after 886. Thus, it was about twenty years after the fact, when Nicetas David of Paphlagonia wrote a celebratory biography of patriarch Ignatius of Constantinople. In it, Nicetas congratulated Ignatius on his wonderful accomplishments and praised him for all the sacrifices that he had made for the proper upkeep of the Church during the difficult years of Iconoclasm and in coping with its torturous heritage. Acerbic and openly partisan, Nicetas went after Photius, the patriarchal rival of Nicetas’ beloved Ignatius.

⁶³³ Symeon Magistros or Pseudo-Symeon. *Chronicle. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Vol. 33 (2). p. 665.

⁶³⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*, 2nd edition. Ed. G. Moravcsik. *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 1. Washington, D.C., 1967. Chapter 31.

⁶³⁵ Constantine Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*. Ed. Bon., p. 150.

⁶³⁶ Theophylactus Bulgarus. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Vol. 126, col. 197 and 213. Note that the newer editions have corrected the P.G. to Βορίσης. See Ed. P. Gautier, *Theophylacte d'Achrida. Lettres [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Thessalonicensis* 16.2. Thessalonica: Association for Byzantine Research, 1986]. Letter 22, line 35.

Therefore, when discussing Bulgaria's conversion, Nicetas omitted Photius' involvement altogether.

This was quite unfair, for Photius' correspondence with Boris had played an important part in the *khan's* decision-making process. In addition, Photius carefully administered missionaries in the Balkans and even beyond in medieval Rus' and the lands of the Khazars. Even Photius' earlier career as a leading professor in Constantinople technically contributed to Christianity. In Constantinople, Photius had prepared many able students among whom was Constantine-Cyril, the leader of the missionary activities among the Slavs and the great Byzantine philologue who developed the *glagolitic* alphabet.

Skipping all of this, Nicetas went directly to the Bulgarian conversion. In essence, it was a brief mention. According to Nicetas, the true agent of Boris's conversion was a combination of famine among the Bulgars, some unspecified military conflict, and the seductive attraction of imperial gifts.⁶³⁷ Even after a casual reading, it is easy to see that Nicetas' real concerns were elsewhere. Boris's affairs were a simple caveat in a larger story that focused on making clear Ignatius' virtues.

Writing about a century later, thus in the 900s, the continuator of the Orthodox extremist Georgius Hamartolus (George the Sinner) confirmed the precondition of famine among the Bulgars, but ascribed the conversion mostly to the supposedly intimidating

⁶³⁷ *Vita Ignatii*. Ed. Migne. PG, vol. CV. Col. 525: Καὶ Βούλγαροι δὲ τότε προνοίαις Θεοῦ, βιαίῳ κατατακέντες λιμῶ, ἄμα δὲ καὶ τοῖς δώροις τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος θελχθέντες, τὰ ὄπλα καταθέμενοι, τῷ ἁγίῳ προσήεσαν βαπτίσματι. As if to eliminate all possible connection, Niketas' next sentence hurried to frame Photius as an enemy of the papacy who supposedly bribed papal delegates to vote against Ignatius: Τότε καὶ οἱ προλεχθέντες τοποτηρηταὶ Ῥώμης φιλοφρόνως ὑπὸ Φωτίου δωροδοκηθέντες, τὴν Ῥώμην παλινοστήσαντες κατέλαβον.

military power of the emperor Michael III and his regent Bardas Caesar.⁶³⁸ Recognizing the superior imperial strength, the Bulgars presumably retreated before any actual conflict and begged to become Christians and even volunteered to be subjects to the emperor and the Romans.⁶³⁹ In the tenth century and later, Boris's conversion had already become and continued to be a memory revived in various contexts according to the given historian's own contemporaneity.

Since Michael was preoccupied with the Muslim ruler of Melitene, Amer, in the East and the city of Nicaea close to Constantinople, it is unclear whether Michael was actually accompanying his army in the Balkans. In any case, the appropriation of the Bulgarian conversion and its insertion into the later grand narrative of Byzantine imperialism needed its protagonist to be present there at the very moment of this easy, and of course God-given, victory. Even the propaganda of the newly-in-power Macedonian dynasty, which was hard at work to depict Michael as an irresponsible drunkard, did not want to suppress and to interrupt completely the promotion of the Byzantine success story carried on in various degrees and with certain nuances by the imperial chroniclers. Thus, the Bulgarian conversion was turned into an easy victory for the Byzantine emperor that characterized Byzantium as God's providential force bound to prevail over pagans and Muslims.

⁶³⁸ *Chronicle*. Ed. I. Bekker. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1838: 763-924. For a summary of scholarly positions on the authorship and dating of the *Continuation of George the Monk*, see Karl Krumbacher. *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Litteratur*, vol. 1. New York: Burt Franklin, 1958. pp. 354-356. As Krumbacher points out, the authorship of this chronicle is unclear. Following certain manuscripts, some scholars have ascribed it to the equally enigmatic Symeon Logothete in the mid-tenth century; still the dating of the work varies from 948 to 1143 and in some manuscripts extends even to 1078, a little after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, through which the Seljuk Turks seriously incapacitated the empire.

⁶³⁹ Georgius Monachus Continuatus. *Chronicle*. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. pp. 824-825: οἱ δὲ Βούλγαροι τοῦτο μαθόντες ὡς ἦχον βροντῆς ὑπεκλίθησαν καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἀγώνων καὶ τῆς μάχης περὶ τῆς νίκης ἀπέγνωσαν, καὶ Χριστιανοὶ γενέσθαι καὶ ὑποτάττεσθαι τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ Ῥωμαίοις ἠτήσαντο.

Other high-level insiders and protégés of the Macedonian court were interested in the story, too. Joseph Genesisios, an aristocrat close to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (r. 913-959), repeated and developed the known components of the conversion narrative. First, Genesisios introduced the Bulgars as descendants of Avars and Khazars who had supposedly taken “their name from some lord named Bulgaros.”⁶⁴⁰ Placing them somewhere around Dorystolon⁶⁴¹ and Mysia,⁶⁴² a territory that the Bulgars had supposedly received from the Romans, Genesisios mentioned the Bulgar ruler’s intention at the time of the regency of Theodora to invade Byzantium. Finding out about the Bulgar plans, “the empress gathered the army and marched to the Bulgarian border in a manly fashion.”⁶⁴³ Theodora (r. 842-855) then forewarned her enemy: “If you defeat a woman, you will have small occasion to boast. But if you lose, your defeat will be ridiculed by all.”⁶⁴⁴ This was enough for the Bulgar *khan* and convinced by the power of this feminist argument, he voluntarily retreated.

In a later passage, Genesisios presented the details of an impressive Byzantine victory over the Saracens. Looking from the margins, the Bulgarian ruler was greatly impressed by the Byzantine operations abroad. At the same time, great famine fell upon and ate at the Bulgars at home. Through this painful experience, the Bulgars understood the great Homeric saying, “All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches, but famine is the most pitiful, the worst end that a man can come to.”⁶⁴⁵ It was this morbid famine that

⁶⁴⁰ Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. Passage 61. For a modern discussion on the origin and establishment of the Bulgars in the Balkans, see John V.A. Fine. *Early Medieval Balkans*, pp. 43 ff., 66 ff..

⁶⁴¹ Modern Silistra on the right bank of lower Danube.

⁶⁴² Genesisios means ancient Moesia. See Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. passage 61, ff. 344.

⁶⁴³ Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. passage 61.

⁶⁴⁴ Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. passage 61.

⁶⁴⁵ Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. passage 69.

pushed the Bulgars to seek Christian conversion.⁶⁴⁶ The Byzantines sent some of the most learned archpriests who immediately began to spread Christianity in Bulgaria.

In essence, Genesisios' story on the Bulgarian conversion was a short interlude, placed in between Byzantium's great success over the Saracens and a longer section on the great imperial administrator Caesar Bardas and his patronage of the arts and sciences in Constantinople. Primarily, the story served to promote Byzantine power both exemplified through military strength and a cultural renaissance. Thus, Genesisios did not even bother with the native name of the Bulgar ruler, mentioning only that he had changed it to "Michael" after his godfather, the Byzantine emperor.

In a certain sense, the *Basileiai* was a work where Genesisios, a writer patronized by the sophisticated and scholarly Constantine Porphyrogenitus, was at pains to cast the emperor's uncouth and half-literate grandfather Basil in a good light so as to legitimate and promote the Macedonian authority, which not so coincidentally happened to keep Genesisios rich.⁶⁴⁷ Keeping the story of Boris' conversion simple and attributing it to the famine that pushed the Bulgars over the edge was Genesisios' strategy to play it safe, giving little direct credit to Michael III who was murdered by his usurper Basil. It was both expedient and easier for Genesisios to make the impersonal agency of famine and some unrelated military success the personal motive behind Boris's religious change.

Unlike Genesisios, the emperor Constantine VII (or his appointed ghost writer) focused on the people in Boris's life as agents of the *khan's* conversion. Women had always played a definitive role in Constantine's life. His very birth brought upon his father Leo VI (r. 886-912) the conservative invectives of powerful religious people who

⁶⁴⁶ Genesisios. *On the Reigns of the Emperors*. Tr. Anthony Kaldellis. Canberra, 1998. passage 69.

⁶⁴⁷ For Basil I's education, see *Vita Basilii* 220.1 in Theophanes Continuatus. Ed. I. Bekker. Bonn, 1837.

found Leo's many marriages blasphemous and as a result sought to impeach him. Women played a decisive role in Constantine's account of the conversion, too. In a divinely inspired dream, the empress Theodora was told to request the return of a monk, Theodoros Kouphara, a captive in Boris's court. Therefore, she quickly approached Boris, who complied, but in exchange for his sister who was imprisoned in Byzantium. As a captive in Constantinople, Boris's sister learnt reading and writing, their civilizing power ultimately bringing her to Christianity.⁶⁴⁸ Upon her arrival back to Bulgaria, Boris's sister introduced her brother to Christianity. But, this was only the beginning. In the aftermath of Iconoclasm, it was the power of an image, painted on Boris's wall, which scared its commissioner into conversion. Boris accepted baptism secretly "at the untimely hour of the night," anticipating the rebellious reactions of his more conservative elites.⁶⁴⁹

We can easily see the Byzantine adjustments and modifications of the conversion story. Even when they re-inserted the themes, which they had inherited, the Byzantine authors refracted them through their personal experiences and the historical standing of the empire at the time. As we have seen in other conversion episodes already, the Byzantine historians seemed to have been either unfamiliar or uninterested in the details of those initial events. Their priorities were focused on the internal political and ecclesiastical development of Byzantium.

⁶⁴⁸ Theophanes Continuatus. *Chronographia*. Ed. I. Bekker. *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*. Bonn: Weber, 1838. p. 163: 21, 1-5: αὕτη δὴ οὖν πρὸς τὴν πίστιν καλῶς μετενεχθεῖσα, καὶ γράμματα κατὰ τὸν τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας παιδευθεῖσα καιρὸν, καὶ ἄλλως τὴν τῶν Χριστιανῶν τάξιν τε καὶ περὶ τὸ θεῖον αἰδῶ τε καὶ δόξαν, ὡς ἔστι, θαυμάζουσα διαφερόντως, ἐπεὶ τῆς ἐπανόδου τῆς πρὸς τὸν ἀδελφὸν τετύχηκεν, οὐ διέλιπεν ἐκθειάζουσά τε καὶ παρακαλοῦσα καὶ σπέρματα καταβάλλουσα τῆς πίστεως πρὸς αὐτόν.

⁶⁴⁹ Theophanes Continuatus. *Chronographia*. p. 165: 14-15: ταῦτ' οὖν, ἐπειδὴ πέρας εἶχεν ἡ γραφή, κατιδῶν, καὶ δι' αὐτῶν τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φόβον ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβῶν, καὶ κατηχηθεὶς τὰ καθ' ἡμᾶς θεῖα μυστήρια, νυκτῶν ἄωρι τοῦ θεοῦ μεταλαγχάνει βαπτίσματος.

By the time of the twelfth-century historian and theologian Ioannes Zonaras, the story of Boris's conversion had already gone through several variations. Paraphrasing them, Zonaras summarized briefly all of them. He also mentioned Boris's sister in Constantinople who was exchanged for Theodoros Kouphara.⁶⁵⁰ Instead of a simple monk, however, Theodoros was now introduced as a "remarkable" man, possibly though not certainly, as an aristocrat.⁶⁵¹ And this introduction, after all, was only appropriate. Ioannes Zonaras wrote during the time of the Komneni (1081-1185) who transacted "empire" as a family business, which made it easier for them to have what they so flamboyantly loved, the good time. The Komneni proudly occupied themselves with such affairs as jousting and regular parties. In literature, the novel emerged as the favorite trope and genre to inspire, frame, and entertain educated audiences in the empire. It is in this cultural context that Zonaras was writing. Thus, in order to understand better Zonaras' framing of the story, we need to continue by sketching out in some detail the Komneni period and the prevalent literary preoccupations at the time.

In fact, the twelfth century must have opened up a high demand for literature, for all of a sudden more writers and quite a few of them were not directly associated with the imperial court. Living off one's own writing was now possible, though as to be expected, it was a hard path to follow. Unable to generate enough income from his intellectual endeavors, Ioannes Tzetzes at some point had to sell his library and on another occasion he complained for having to be neighbor to a priest's family that kept smelly pigs

⁶⁵⁰ *Chronographia*. Ed. L. Dindorf. *Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum*, vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1868. pp. 387-389.

⁶⁵¹ Ioannes Zonaras. *Chronographia*, p. 387: ἀδελφή δὲ τοῦ ἄρχοντος Βουλγαρίας αἰχμαλωτισθεῖσα ποτε καὶ ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις διάγουσα τῷ θεῷ τε ἐτελέσθη βαπτίσματι καὶ γραμμάτων ἐν μυσίῃ ἐγένετο. ταύτην ὁ ἀδελφὸς ἀναδοθῆναί οἱ ἤξιωσε· καὶ ἡ μὲν ἐδόθη αὐτῷ, ὁ δ' ἀντέδωκεν ἄνδρα τῶν λογίμων Θεόδωρον τὸν Κουφαρᾶν.

indoors. Tzetzes finally managed to secure some sort of a pension and finished his life in a semi-monastic retirement. But, by and large, the twelfth century freed writers, competing for the interest of the reading public and its money, to experiment with plot and themes, which varied from the dramatic and teary retelling of the *Suffering Christ* where Jesus' mother the Virgin Mary displayed the characteristics of a Medea, Hecuba, Andromache or a Cassandra to Theodoros Prodromos' comic epic *A War of the Cats with the Mice* where he parodied, or at least so he thought, Homer's *A War of the Frogs with the Mice*.⁶⁵²

Pushing literary boundaries and insuring against a boring presentation, Konstantinos Manasses wrote his world chronicle in verse while Niketas Eugenianos' novel *The Adventures of Drossila and Kharikleios* was full of blunt eroticism and profanities.⁶⁵³ The Komneni literature then twisted the old moral grandeur and conventional virtues into a new world of more lax social norms. From the levity of Homer to Archilochos' cynical rejection of ideals and his burlesque view of love drenched in gross obscenities, the Komneni authors replayed and modified familiar themes with surprising effects. It was in this cultural atmosphere that Ioannes Zonaras found himself writing his *Chronographia*.

Under the Komneni, Zonaras' account of Boris's conversion was quite worldly and gentlemanly. And, Zonaras had brought back previous themes that made sense to him now. Thus, realizing that the empire was ruled by a woman and a child, Boris

⁶⁵² For Χριστὸς Πάσχων (the Suffering Christ), see Ivan Bujukliev's commentary in his translation of Constantine Manasses. *Synopsis Historike*. Sofia: St. Kliment of Ohrid Press, 1992. p. 10. For Theodoros Prodromos' *Catomyomachia*, see H. Hunger. *Der byzantinische Katz-Mäuse-Krieg*. *Byzantina Vindobonensia* 3. Vienna, 1968. pp. 80-124.

⁶⁵³ Constantine Manasses. *Breviarium Chronicum*. *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 36.1. Athens: Academy of Athens, 1996. Niketas Eugenianos. *Τῶν κατὰ Δρόσιλλαν καὶ Χαρικλέα βιβλία θ'*. Ed. R. Hercher. *Scriptores erotici gr.*, vol. 2. Lipsiae, bibl. Teubn., 1859.

considered invasion. But, the empress reminded him that there was no nobility and dignity in winning against a woman.⁶⁵⁴ Even Boris, “a barbarian,” knew what this meant, so he quickly rescinded his plans and withdrew.⁶⁵⁵ According to Zonaras, Boris had in fact been introduced to Christianity, first by Theodoros Kouphara and then by the constant reminding of his sister. But here again, famine played the crucial role. Starving himself to Christianity, so to speak, Boris invited the Byzantines to send an archpriest in order to baptize him and his people.

A Byzantine archpriest promptly baptized Boris. However, the rest of the Bulgarians were still loyal to their “patriarchal faith” and revolted against their ruler. Armed with the cross, Boris, here just as a Constantine or maybe actually as a twelfth-century crusader, was empowered and managed to win.⁶⁵⁶ Impressed by this feat, all Bulgarians converted. Having become a Christian, Boris demanded from the empress Develtos, a land along the Byzantine border. She was happy to reward Boris with it. This transaction, which would have made little sense to the Byzantine elites of the ninth century, seemed quite “logical” to Zonaras.

Writing from a monastery in the mid-twelfth century, Zonaras criticized the emperor Alexius (r. 1081-1118) for placing public revenue into the hands of his relatives,

⁶⁵⁴ Ioannes Zonaras. *Chronographia*, p. 387: ὁ δὲ ὄπλα κατὰ τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς. πρὸς ταῦτα τοῖσιν δηλοῖ αὐτῷ ἡ βασίλισσα ὡς “ἀντιτάξομαί σοι πάντως κἀγὼ, καὶ εἰ μὲν θεοῦ διδόντος ὑπερέξω, ἔση νικηθεὶς ὑπὸ γυναικὸς, καὶ ὅσονσοι τὸ τῆς αἰσχύνης ὑπόγυον λόγισαι· εἰ δὲ νικήσεις ἴσως αὐτὸς, οὐκ ἔσται σοι σεμνὸν τὸ εὐτύχημα γυναικῆ νικήσαντι.” τῶν Βουλγάρων ἀρχῶν γυναικὶ τὴν τῶν Ῥωμαίων βασιλείαν καὶ παιδὶ νεαρῷ κυβερνωμένην μαθῶν στέλλει τινὰς τῶν σπονδῶν καὶ ἄραι.

⁶⁵⁵ Ioannes Zonaras. *Chronographia*, p. 387: ὡς οὖν ταῦτα τῷ βαρβάρῳ ἠγγέλθησαν, ἀνέστειλαν αὐτῷ τὴν ὁρμὴν, καὶ οἱ συμφέρον ἔκρινεν ἀνανεώσασθαι τὰς σπονδὰς· καὶ αὗται ἀνεκαινίσθησαν.

⁶⁵⁶ Ioannes Zonaras. *Chronographia*, p. 389: ὁ δὲ τῷ τοῦ σταυροῦ σημείῳ θαρρήσας προπορευομένῳ αὐτοῦ νικᾷ τοὺς ἀντιστάτας αὐτῷ, καὶ οὕτω πάντες εἶλοντο τὰ τῶν χριστιανῶν.

giving them properties as large as cities.⁶⁵⁷ To clergymen, Alexius was a favorite target, too, because he tried to confiscate church property in order to subsidize his war against the Normans. This was an unpopular act, which raised enough opposition to force Alexius to repudiate his own decision, an embarrassing political necessity for him no doubt, and in addition he had to prohibit for the future all such ecclesiastical alienation.⁶⁵⁸

Retold within this mafia-like economic structure of the Komneni, the story, which “donned” Boris with land for religion must have seemed reasonable to Zonaras, so his “common sense” dictated to him to include it in his *Chronographia*. Iconoclasm, on the other hand, was too distant for Zonaras and his contemporaries, some three centuries away indeed, so he skipped the bit about the miraculous painting, which was otherwise featured in Constantine VII’s account in the tenth century where the painting’s divine aura supposedly captivated and ultimately transformed Boris’s religious life.

For the period after 811, it is clear that Zonaras used the works of Ioannes Skylitzes and Michael Psellos. Born some time before 1050, Skylitzes had a career as a jurist, ultimately becoming a high-level bureaucrat in the court of Alexius Komnenos. Michael Psellos, a *parvenu* with meager hereditary connections, climbed to the top of the social hierarchy of the eleventh century, employing formidable political techniques and maneuvers.⁶⁵⁹ In his personal career and in his recurrent pieces of advice to various emperors, Psellos was quite savvy.⁶⁶⁰ And he played such a crucial role in the

⁶⁵⁷ Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae. Bonn: Weber, 1897: 3:767.2-8.

⁶⁵⁸ George Ostrogorsky. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969. p. 373.

⁶⁵⁹ For Michael Psellos’ truly impressive career see Ja. N. Ljubarskij, *Michail Psell: Ličnost’ i tvorčestvo* [Michael Psellos: The Man and His Works]. Moscow, 1978. pp. 23-24.

⁶⁶⁰ For a modern characterization of Psellos as an early version of Nicolo Machiavelli, arguably one of the founders of modern Western philosophy, see Anthony Kaldellis. *The Argument of Psellos’ Chronographia*. Leiden: Brill, 1999. In this book, Kaldellis strongly dissents from the traditional depiction of Psellos as a Christian Neo-Platonist. He writes, “To my knowledge, Psellos was the first European thinker to attempt to rehabilitate the life of the body in explicit opposition to the inherited Platonic-Christian tradition, which

government of Byzantium that he defined a political as well as a philosophical era in the empire's history, thus shifting the historical focus away from the emperors who had appointed him. With respect to Boris's conversion, however, Psellos, who preferred to dwell on lofty Platonic philosophy and systems of government, said nothing. Most likely then, Zonaras learnt the story about Boris and his Christianity from Ioannes Skylitzes who also mentioned the land transaction as the conversion's final outcome.

There was yet another possibility. The *Chronicle* of Symeon Magistros mentioned the Bulgarians' land acquisition, too.⁶⁶¹ The work of Symeon Magistros has reached us in a single redaction from the twelfth or the early thirteenth century, but paleographers have credited the original to the tenth century.⁶⁶² This chronicle must have been deemed important enough, and by the fourteenth century, it was translated into Old Church Slavonic. Presumably in wide circulation, Zonaras may have had access to it, too. Either the late redactor of Symeon or the author himself, however, appeared quite confused about the specifics of Boris's conversion. Within pages, the chronicle confronted Zonaras with two options.⁶⁶³

The first version introduced Boris's initial intent to attack the Byzantines because he found out that a woman was in a position of rule. Then, there was the anecdote about

was dominated by concern for the state of one's soul. A similar reaction would not attain philosophical status in the west until Montaigne, instigated by Machiavelli's teachings, decided to overhaul the ethics of both ancient philosophy and Christianity. Although he had more success than Psellos in the long run, the fundamental basis of his position was not greatly different from that pioneered by the eleventh-century philosopher." pp. 165-166.

⁶⁶¹ Some modern scholars refer to Symeon Magistros as Pseudo-Symeon, thus emphasizing the disputed authorship of the chronicle.

⁶⁶² The original manuscript is Paris, B.N. (Bibliothèque Nationale). gr. 1712. Scholars base their judgments for the chronicle's original date on internal evidence that reflects traces of an anti-Photian pamphlet, which Niketas David Paphlagonos also used for his biography of patriarch Ignatius.

⁶⁶³ Symeon Magistros or Pseudo-Symeon. *Chronicle. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Vol. 33 (2). pp. 603-760. For version 1, see p. 664 and for version 2, see pp. 665-666.

Theodoros Kouphara, but here, unlike in Zonaras, he was a captive in the Bulgarian court. The exchange of Kouphara for Boris's sister was recounted and finally famine as the ultimate converting force was re-emphasized.

The second version re-named the Bulgarian *khan* from Boris to Goboris. Famine and the upcoming attack by sea of emperor Michael and Bardas Caesar pushed the Bulgarian ruler to submit and become Christian. The emperor baptized Goboris and the Bulgarian ruler took the name of the emperor, Michael. Then Symeon Magistros inserted the passage where a monk, named Methodios drew a painting, but Symeon Magistros was very unclear about what happens on account of it. Then he made a point about the revolt against the *khan* and his success due to the power of the Cross despite low odds since his army was small. Finally, Goboris received from the emperor, and not the empress, the land which the Bulgarians called Zagoria. If Zonaras had in fact read Symeon's chronicle, he, as many historians (Byzantine and modern alike), made "the best of it" by conflating the two versions into one that fitted best his common sense. Since he admired the glory of the Macedonian dynasty, he had bought into their disparaging propaganda against Michael III. From Zonaras' perspective, Michael and his forces then could not have intimidated Boris into conversion, hence the gentlemanly withdrawal with the reception of land as a religious reward coming from the empress and not the emperor.

Early Christian hagiography had sought to persuade its audiences that "conversion" led ancient men to moral excellence and bestowed upon them redemptive virtues without the high costs of pagan education and the intense years dedicated to "worldly" philosophy. Christian "revelation" allowed even the social outcast to come to the forefront because theologians had brought together and even praised the seemingly

oxymoronic: “the holy fool.” They re-imagined “the marginal classes” and enabled them to be prophetic heroes and religious geniuses who served to urge local communities into visions of Christian utopia. Since God was transcendent, yet very much present in human affairs, it was figures, like the holy fool, who were in demand to channel out, interpret, and, with their sainthood eventually displayed the unveiling of the deep meaning of God’s messages. The twelfth-century story of Boris’s ninth-century conversion did not seek to make him a shining saint. Instead, it highlighted his gentlemanly qualities.

Hobnobbing with political elites in Constantinople and enjoying Byzantine libraries and archives, Ioannes Zonaras’ presentation of Boris’s conversion was a good example of a historian accustomed to work at leisure and under little pressure. Presented with several possibilities, Zonaras tried to puzzle out the most sensible one; it was his attempt at historical reconstruction. Later withdrawing to a monastery, Zonaras never went “abroad.” But if this were to be a shortcoming, it was corrected, though not voluntarily, by his contemporary Theophylakt Hephaistos.

Born on the island of Euboea, Theophylakt (lived ca. 1050-1126) traveled to Constantinople in order to study with the celebrated Michael Psellos.⁶⁶⁴ Theophylakt, an impressive thinker in his own right, must have loved Psellos. He never sought to define himself against his more famous mentor, and later on wrote two letters, in which he extolled Psellos; one was a consolation for Psellos’ death to his brother, and the other was a recommendation for his grandson.⁶⁶⁵ Theophylakt served as a deacon of Hagia Sophia and also became a teacher of Constantine Doukas, the son of emperor Michael VII (r.

⁶⁶⁴ For Theophylakt’s career, see R. Katičić. “Biographika peri Theophylaktou archiepiskopou Achridos.” *EEBS* 30 (1960-1961), pp. 364-385.

⁶⁶⁵ *Letters*. Ed. and Tr. P. Gautier. *Théophylacte d’Achrida: Lettres*. Thessalonike: Association de recherches Byzantines. 1986, Letters 27, 132.

1071-1078). At an undetermined date and for unknown reasons, Theophylakt was appointed an archbishop of Ohrid in Bulgaria by Alexius Komnenos.⁶⁶⁶ Shipped away to the former diocese, which was set up as a separate jurisdiction by Basil II in the late tenth century, Theophylakt found himself suddenly alone in a place very distant for a Byzantine.

Theophylakt's time in Bulgaria proved to be a very difficult experience. Ebbing and flowing between feelings of abandonment, under-appreciation by the locals, or utter loss without books or intellectual companions, he hated and loved "the natives" at the same time. At what must have been an intense bout of depression, Theophylakt at one point wrote that nothing in that backwater of a place moved besides the fleas jumping in abundance around him; frustrated and presumably in itching pain, Theophylakt described Bulgaria to Byzantine officials as a land measured by the leaps of the flea alone.⁶⁶⁷

In another letter to Gregorios Pakourianos, an aristocrat and chief military commander who received from Alexius Komnenos vast estates in the Balkans in return for his loyalty and service against the Seljuk Turks, Theophylakt lamented that he had to live in what was practically a hut among a people whom he deemed such lovers of reason as bugs were friends of incense.⁶⁶⁸ Comparing himself to Plato who traveled the sea in order to educate nobles in philosophy and proper government, Theophylakt might have

⁶⁶⁶ For a detailed overview on the scholarly debate for dating Theophylakt's appointment to the archbishopric of Ohrid, see Metropolitan Symeon. *Pismata na Teofilakt Ohridski, Arhiepiskop Bâlgarski [The Letters of Theophylakt of Ohrid, Archbishop of Bulgaria]*. Sofia: National Publishing House, 1931. Metropolitan Symeon suggests that Theophylakt became archbishop in 1091/1092. See his Introduction, p. XIII. Metropolitan Symeon also argues that Theophylakt's appointment was practically an exile away from Constantinople where he kept dangerous connections to the Doukas family, which threatened the newly established regime of the Komneni, see pp. XIV-XV.

⁶⁶⁷ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Volume 126, col. 316.

⁶⁶⁸ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Volume 126, col. 333.

been hoping for an endowment or at least an invigorating stipend. Judging from his other letters, however, he must have remained disappointed and never received it.

Despite these disparaging complaints and personal agonies, Theophylakt stayed loyal to his sense of duty. He loved and eulogized Greek and its literature, pagan and Christian alike, but he diligently learnt Slavonic. He was a strong representative of Constantinopolitan snobbery and a committed Platonist, yet he protected the local peasantry from various abuses of the larger landholders and proprietors. He wanted to return to Constantinople, though he never did, yet he took it upon himself to preserve and in a certain sense to create the ecclesiastical past of Bulgaria.⁶⁶⁹ In a letter to Ioannes Komnenos, the brother of the emperor Alexius, Theophylakt asked for money to restore the church in Develtos, originally built by Boris.⁶⁷⁰

Theophylakt was the first to write a life of St. Clement who played a crucial role in the Christianization of Bulgaria; Clement had established schools, had written and translated various Christian texts from Greek to Slavonic, and in the process, had developed and transformed Cyril and Methodius' original alphabet and script. For his hagiography on Clement and another one on the fifteen martyrs of Tiberiopolis, Theophylakt used Slavonic sources in what was in effect his attempt to apply the ancient genre to the specific interests and concerns recorded in the local stories. An ambitious man whose plans were frustrated, Theophylakt sought to make the best of it, grappling

⁶⁶⁹ “Theophylakt was long thought of as the prime representative of Byzantine imperialism during the period of Byzantine rule in Bulgaria, with a mission to destroy local Slavonic culture, or alternatively as a metropolitan émigré, exiled from life of the court by an ill-advised allegiance and venting his spite against his flock in xenophobic outbursts. Writings of dubious authorship were ascribed to Demetrios Chomatenos rather than to him when they showed any knowledge of Slavonic or sympathy towards the Bulgars.” Margaret Mullett. *Theophylakt of Ochrid: Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Bishop*. Vermont: Variorum, 1997. p. 266. Mullett also points out that there is no evidence that Theophylaktos opened or closed any Slavic schools or that he introduced Greek language services, see p. 268.

⁶⁷⁰ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) (MPG)*. Paris: Migne, 1856-. Volume 126, col. 529.

with his wounded humanity in extensive writing and recurrent correspondence. Sensing that his intellectual life was dim and fading away without appropriate support and community, he worked hard to be noticed and remembered.

A proud intellectual “left behind,” Theophylakt set drastic boundaries between himself and the locals: all that he was, they were not. And, he reiterated these cultural divisions as if to make sure he would be remembered correctly. Strictly speaking, Theophylakt never went native, but even he himself was sometimes vacillating, with circumstances and everyday matters of life pressing on his resisting *ego*, “And that is why I descend among the Bulgarians, I, who am a true Constantinopolitan, and strangely enough a Bulgarian, exuding like them the smell of sheepskin...”⁶⁷¹

In the late eleventh century, when Theophylakt became the archbishop of Ohrid, canon law prohibited the Constantinopolitan patriarch from interfering on any administrative level in the affairs of this archbishopric. To guard the interests of the Church, ecclesiastical law succeeded to declare against the emperor’s involvement in the appointment and distribution of any church offices, including even the high ones. Archbishops were then elected by ecclesiastical figures, and, theoretically at least, by the people, too. Practically, however, the archbishops of Ohrid were appointed by the emperors and were consecrated by the Constantinopolitan patriarchs and their bishops. The emperor chose from the names of three candidates, usually coming from Constantinople or the surrounding nearby dioceses and if the person was not an arch-priest, he was quickly promoted.⁶⁷²

⁶⁷¹ Ed. and Tr. P. Gautier. *Théophylacte d’Achrída: Lettres*, II, pp. 131-142. For a characterization of Theophylakt as a go-between, see Margaret Mullett. *Theophylakt of Ochrid: Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Bishop*. Vermont: Variorum, 1997. See specifically, p. 266.

⁶⁷² Pseudo-Codinus, *De officiis*, ed. Bonn. Chap. 20, 101-105.

Generally, the archbishops of Ohrid were, in theory and often in practice, independent from the patriarchs in Constantinople as well as from the emperors or their representatives. But, when Alexius Komnenos seized power in 1081, he found a state in disarray, territorially reduced, financially exhausted, and militarily weak. He did what political thinkers since Thucydides had warned against: he broke precedent. He made the army mercenary, hiring Turks to fight Normans and then Franks to fight Turks, and his reliance on nepotism, which blocked impersonal, merit-based office appointment, ultimately splintered the empire into a myriad of political units feeding off family disputes and intrigues. So he appointed Theophylakt as an exception to his rule of prioritizing familial connections, but then gave him the cold shoulder instead of the warm embrace despite Theophylakt's strategic sycophancy, "The emperor victor, he who deployed for us the inexpressible charms, it is he who tames people without sweetness, an attitude more divine, here is how he unites them through God, and then he introduces them into his empire and makes them members of the senate..."⁶⁷³

An archbishop in Ohrid, Theophylakt would have preferred to be a senator in Constantinople. But, it never happened. Alexius restricted Theophylakt's finances and sent him off to Bulgaria. The emperor might have even wanted him dead, for at one point Theophylakt begged for never-arriving medical help first for himself and later for his dying brother. When Theophylakt finally got to telling the story of Boris's conversion, which happened several centuries earlier, therefore, Theophylakt was practically a dissident, a cleric, and a member of a reduced empire.

⁶⁷³ Théophylacte d'Achrida. *Discours, Traités, Poésies*. Tr. Paul Gautier. *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*. Vol. 16/1. Thessalonique, 1980. p. 229.

Theophylakt split the story in two halves. He never wrote the life of Boris; that was to be done by Slavonic speaking natives. But, first, in his life of St. Clement, he attributed Boris's conversion to knowledge and goodness, a great gift to the Bulgarians, which was later supplemented by Cyril and Methodius' invention of the alphabet.⁶⁷⁴ Theophylakt's version was short, but suggestive. No emperor nor empress, no land nor gifts, no painting nor even the suggestive conversation with one's sister, it was knowledge and virtue alone that enlightened Boris to Christianity. This made sense as a story coming from an abandoned man reduced to talking mostly to himself.

In a second version, enclosed within the pages of his *Lives of the Fifteen Martyrs from Tiberiopolis*, Theophylakt repeated some of the familiar themes: famine, war (this time not against the Byzantines, but against the Franks), and a peace treaty proposed voluntarily by Boris with the Byzantines. To confirm his brotherly love toward the Byzantine emperor, Boris offered to convert.⁶⁷⁵ Boris opened the doors of his polity to Byzantine priests and changed his name to the Roman emperor's. Many Bulgarians followed the *khan* and accepted Christianity, but a small minority of rebels were subdued by force.

Ultimately, according to Theophylakt, Boris's reign was peaceful, and many people followed him without further opposition. Eventually, Boris became a monk and left the throne to his eldest son Vladimir. Boris spent three years in the monastery. After his death, many miracles testified to his sainthood. His relics brought people together who relied on them for miraculous intervention. Theophylakt's *Lives of the Fifteen*

⁶⁷⁴ Theophylaktos. *Vita Clementis Ochridensis*. Ed. A. Milev. *Гръцките жития на Климент Охридски* [The Greek lives of Klement of Ohrid]. Sofija, 1966: 76-146.

⁶⁷⁵ *Fontes graeci historiae bulgaricae*, vol. IX, pt. 2. Ed. I. Iliev. Sofia, 1994, p. 67: καὶ προσετίθει πίστιν ἀσφαλῆ, τὸ καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ θεῖον δέξασθαι βάπτισμα.

Martyrs from Tiberiopolis is the only source that explicitly mentioned Boris's sainthood.⁶⁷⁶ The reason Boris was inserted in those hagiographies was largely due to the fact that he had ordered the saints' relics to be translated from Tiberiopolis in eastern Macedonia to the bishopric of Bregalnica.⁶⁷⁷

Between the two separate texts, Theophylakt presented Boris's conversion as a product of his enlightened knowledge, famine, and a treaty with the Byzantines against the Franks. After the Bulgar ruler's conversion, he ordered the translation of the great saints of Tiberopolis, supported the Slavic teachers, became the spiritual son of Methodius of Moravia, and supposedly built seven episcopal cathedrals.⁶⁷⁸ Even when combined into a single piece, Theophylakt's story was quite selective. He omitted the miraculous mural painting, the Byzantine prisoner's proselytizing power, reframed the war between the Bulgars and the Byzantines as a conflict between the Bulgars and the Franks, and skipped Boris's sister altogether. Theophylakt alluded to the pagan rebellion, but omitted the details around Vladimir's anti-Christian policies and remained silent about the details surrounding his death.⁶⁷⁹ Writing two centuries after the fact, Theophylakt was less interested in strict historical accuracy and more preoccupied with legitimizing the Bulgarian Church through reframing its tumultuous past.

To others, less involved contemporaries of Theophylakt, the story breathed from its former life. Leo Grammatikos was still talking about the conversion as a response to

⁶⁷⁶ *Fontes graeci historiae bulgaricae*, vol. IX, pt. 2. Ed. I. Iliev. Sofia, 1994. pp. 68-9.

⁶⁷⁷ The location of Bregalnica is unclear. The river of that name is a tributary of Vardar in northeastern Macedonia. The town must have been in proximity to present-day Štip. Theophylakt is the only author who mentions such an eparchy. Eleventh-century sources suggest that this area was in possession of the bishopric of Morozvzd. See B. Nikolova. *Устройство и управление на Българската православна църква, IX-XIV век* [*Organization and Government of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, IX-XIV Centuries*]. Sofia, 1997, pp. 72-3. See also Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 54. ff. 128.

⁶⁷⁸ *Fontes graeci historiae bulgaricae*, vol. IX, pt. 2. Ed. I. Iliev. Sofia, 1994. p. 102.

⁶⁷⁹ I.G. Iliev. "The Long Life of Saint Clement of Ohrid. A Critical Edition." *Byzantinobulgarica* 9 (1995), pp. 81-106. p. 99 and p. 101.

imperial threat and famine. It was a voluntary conversion for the benefit of imperialism with a happy end. Ioannes Skylitzes tried to bring together all components of the conversion narratives accumulated through time.⁶⁸⁰ He mentioned the monk Kouphara, presumably getting his first name wrong, Theodosios instead of Theodoros.⁶⁸¹ There was Kouphara's exchange, famine overrunning the land, the eventual conversion due to the painting in Boris's palace, the revolt subdued by the power of the Cross, and the reception of territory from the generosity of the empress. Skylitzes and the later, twelfth-century Georgios Kedrenos came back full circle. They drew on Theophanes Continuatus, Symeon Magistros, and Georgios the Monk. Unable to isolate an "objective" historical kernel, they compiled all the evidence and allowed future historians to follow up.

The emphasis on the Byzantine perspectives of the Bulgarian conversion above allows us to locate properly its place in the larger Byzantine historical memory here below. We have seen that some of the themes of conversion were quite formulaic. And, impressed by these thematic similarities, one recent scholar has even ventured to speculate that there had been a single source, written or oral, underlying all of the Byzantine variations.⁶⁸² Whatever the case, our close analysis on each version has shown us for the first time the various choices that each Byzantine author decided to make. Moving through time, we traced the ways, in which the Byzantines appropriated Boris's

⁶⁸⁰ Georgius Cedrenus/Ioannis Scylitzae. *Chronicle*. Ed. I. Bekker. 2 vols. [*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*]. Bonn: Weber, 1:1838; 2:1839: 1:3-802; 2:3-638.

⁶⁸¹ Georgius Cedrenus/Ioannis Scylitzae. *Chronicle*, volume 2, p. 151: διεπρεσβεύσαντο δὲ ἀλλήλοις πάλιν ἢ τε βασιλῆς καὶ ὁ ἄρχων, ἢ μὲν περὶ τινος Θεοδοσίου τοῦ ἐπίκλην Κουφαρᾶ, ἀξιολόγου ἀνδρὸς καὶ χρησίμου τῷ πολιτεύματι, αἰχμαλώτου ὄντος ἐν Βουλγαρίᾳ, ὁ δὲ περὶ τῆς οἰκειᾶς ἀδελφῆς, κατὰ τινα προνομὴν ληφθείσης καὶ τοῖς βασιλείοις διατριβούσης. The Thurn edition of this text, however, corrects Theodosios to Theodoros. See *Ioannes Scylitzes Synopsis historiarum*. Ed. I. Thurn. Berlin, 1973. p. 80.

⁶⁸² Boris Todorov. Dissertation. p. 67.

story. And, contrary to the prevalent scholarly conclusions, we have discovered that the Byzantine authors were not much interested in the details of the Bulgarian conversion. For them, it remained a relatively minor event mentioned only in passing.

As in the other regions, which we have studied in previous chapters, the Byzantine writers added little or no further information to explain Boris's conversion. From the earliest account to the latest, the variations revolved around similar themes, each author choosing to accentuate, include, or exclude, one factor or another. All in all, at least judging from the existing evidence, it was more important for the Byzantines to discuss pressing issues, usually within the empire itself and around Constantinople than to deal with the specifics of Boris and his Christianity. Strangely enough, especially given the independent development of Slavonic letters, liturgy, and ecclesiastical literature, the conversion of Boris to Christianity did not interest much even local authors. The full substantial treatment of Boris's conversion came well into the eighteenth century.⁶⁸³

Generally, the Byzantines, too, remained uninterested in the details of Boris's conversion. This was one of the similarities between Bulgaria and the other polities that we have studied in this dissertation. One of the major differences, on the other hand, was

⁶⁸³ In the 1760s, monks in the Athos monasteries of Hilandar and Zograph produced three independent chronicles. The first, and most famous one, was written in 1762 by Paisii Hilendarski. *История славеноболгарская, собрана и нареждена Пансием Иеромонахом в лето 1762* [Slaveno-Bulgarian History, compiled and organized by hieromonk Paisii in the year 1762]. Ed. I. Ivanov. Sofia, 1914. The second chronicle is the so-called *Zographou Chronicle*, which is found in a copy by a monk called Iakov. The copy dates to 1785. It is published in I. Ivanov. *Български старини из Македония* [Bulgarian histories from Macedonia]. Sofia, 1970 (repr.). pp. 628-648. For an argument that the chronicle was originally written in the same time as Paisii's, see Iu. Trifonov. "Зографската българска история [The Bulgaria History from Zograph]." *Списание на Българската академия на науките и изкуствата*. 60 (1940), pp. 1-66. The final chronicle was written by hieromonk Spiridon of the Neamtu monastery in Moldova who finished it in 1792. Ieroshimonah Spiridon. *История во кратце о Болгарскомъ народе Славенскомъ, сочинише и списаше в лето 1792* [Brief History on the Bulgaro-Slavic People, composed and written in the year 1792]. Ed. V.N. Zlatarski. Sofia, 1900. For more on this, see Boris Todorov. Dissertation, p. 23. Moreover, Todorov points out, "It is only in the fifteenth century, after the Ottoman conquest, that we witness interest in the Bulgarian conversion anywhere in the Bulgarian space..." (p. 24).

that the Bulgarian conversion (at least according to some of the Byzantine authors) did result from direct Byzantine involvement. According to some of the Byzantine writers, savvy diplomacy and seductive gifts steered Boris to Byzantine Christianity. An aggressive, military campaign and threats stood at the other extreme in the wide spectrum of presumed Byzantine involvement. With Christianity supposedly came voluntary submission to the Byzantine strong empire. Looked from the broad perspective of this dissertation, these aggressive interpretations were quite unique. If taken at face value, they suggest that the conversion of the Bulgarian *khan* actually stands as an exceptional experience in the Byzantine Christian proselytizing history.

Thus, instead of depicting Boris's conversion as a widely applicable illustration of some all-encompassing grand strategy of Byzantine imperialism, which is what most modern Byzantine scholars tend to do, we need to recognize the disparate and, in certain cases, unique ways, in which the Byzantines themselves remembered and recorded the story of this conversion. For the specific objectives of this dissertation that focuses on the relationship between Byzantine Christianity and Byzantine imperialism, we should point out again that the Byzantines did not know or care enough to investigate the actual historical specifics. If we recall the modern traditional narrative above, we easily see how much evidence and nuances were out in the archives for keen and interested Byzantine historians to examine. But, their priorities were elsewhere.

For those Byzantines who chose the theme of war, the fact that the Bulgar polity was a political trespasser on their former sovereign lands was perhaps lurking in the background. And even then, the Byzantines did not suggest any hidden imperial tactics to employ Christianity. In fact, first came Byzantine military and political power. Then

followed Christianity. This is a complete reversal of modern scholarly depictions.

According to the militaristic Byzantine interpretations of Boris's conversion, Christianity in Bulgaria spread because the empire was strong.

After Boris and His Personal Conversion: The Past and Its Present Reconstructions

From a strict perspective, the subsequent processes of slow Christianization in Bulgaria lie outside of the scope of this study. However, a brief overview, largely dependent on modern scholarly findings, will deepen our conclusions and will highlight for us some of the historical trajectories that native Bulgarian Christianity followed. Then, we will move forward in time and will note how the story of Boris's conversion continues to influence Bulgarians today.

The original Cyrillo-Methodian missions that sparked the later Christian development in Bulgaria highlight for us three important points. The first point is that the initial Cyrillo-Methodian mission in Moravia, which took place in the 860s, was, strictly speaking, a failure.⁶⁸⁴ Trained in Byzantium, Cyril and Methodius entered territories that the Frankish bishoprics of Freising, Passau, and Salzburg had been converting and administering for the past hundred years. Thus, the Franks saw the Byzantine missionaries as intruders, and Cyril and Methodius could only survive if they could learn to navigate the complex agendas of the princes of Moravia and Pannonia as well as those of the papacy.

At first, the Byzantine mission in Moravia was supported by Rastislav (r. 846-870). But, Svatopluk (r. 871-894) overthrew him, backed by the Franks, and expelled the

⁶⁸⁴ Ihor Sevcenko. "Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission." *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964). pp. 220-236. pp. 220-221.

Byzantine mission. Thus, some Slavic priests were exiled to the Bulgarian frontier, and others were sold on the slave market in Venice.⁶⁸⁵ Around 907, the Hungarian invasion destroyed the Great Moravian state altogether. This had radical ramifications for the Slavonic Church in Moravia and Panonia. Over time, it was subsumed by the archbishoprics of Esztergom, Gniezno, and Mainz. In contrast to the East, Cyril and Methodius in the non-Slavic West “were not remembered for their missionary activity but for what the Westerners—whether of the ninth, the twelfth, or the thirteenth century—came to consider the brothers’ greatest deed: the bringing of the reputed relic of Pope Clement [r. 92-99] from the Crimea to Rome.”⁶⁸⁶

After the initial failure of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission in the West, it unexpectedly flourished in the East. By 886, Bulgaria was less thoroughly Christianized than Moravia had been by 863. Determined to spread Christianity in his lands, Boris in the 880s welcomed the Christian refugees from Moravia and Pannonia. He gave free rein to the future St. Clement and the other intellectuals who came with him from across the Danube. Given that Methodius had been training ecclesiastics in Moravia for about a dozen years before his death, presumably the number was significant. Boris’s patronage and the aid of his administration opened many opportunities for the new missionaries.

The second point of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission is the spirit of the friendliness and equality with which this mission was conducted by the two Byzantines. Presumably, “their Byzantine cultural background must have conditioned them to hold a low opinion

⁶⁸⁵ Methodie Kusseff. “St. Nahum.” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 29, No. 72 (Dec., 1950), pp. 139-152. p. 143.

⁶⁸⁶ Ihor Sevcenko. “Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964). pp. 220-236. p. 223. For more details on St. Clement’s relics, see Francis Dvornik. “The Significance of the Missions of Cyril and Methodius.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964), pp. 195-211. p. 205.

of all barbarians, particularly that low man on the barbaric totem pole, the Slav.”⁶⁸⁷

Supposedly, barbaric peoples as opposed to individual barbarians, were considered too low to be equated with Byzantium even after they had accepted Christian baptism.⁶⁸⁸

Byzantine authors began to idealize foreigners and thus to make relativist arguments in regard to the value of Byzantine culture only when the empire was on the road to steady decline. In order to survive, Byzantine intellectuals had to accommodate other peoples and cultures. In the early and middle-Byzantine times, barbarians who lived closer by, and especially the neighbors of the empire, were framed along the lines of negative stereotypes.⁶⁸⁹ We have seen some examples above with the Bulgars and their reported body odor.

The third point of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission is the relatively limited control of the Christian development in Bulgaria that the Byzantines exercised. Divided and uncertain over the course of events in Bulgaria, the Byzantine elites argued among themselves just as much as they disputed over doctrine, liturgical practices, languages, and ecclesiastical boundaries with the papal authorities. The work of the missionaries was not automatically welcomed in Byzantium.

The success of Christianity in Bulgaria had more to do with Boris’s diplomatic prowess and ability to establish his political rule than with Byzantine strategic planning to assert its imperialism through Christianity. As we have seen, it was only in the later Byzantine histories and chronicles that the Byzantine authors asserted Byzantine

⁶⁸⁷ Ihor Sevcenko. “Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964). pp. 220-236. p. 226.

⁶⁸⁸ Sevcenko’s finding is confirmed more recently in Sergey Ivanov. *Византийское Миссионерство: Можно ли сделать из “варвара” христианина?* [Byzantine Missionary Activities: Is It Possible to Make a Christian out of a “Barbarian?”]. Moscow, 2003.

⁶⁸⁹ Ihor Sevcenko. “Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964). pp. 220-236. p. 227.

supremacy to explain the Bulgarian conversion. And even then, the story-line varied from one author to another, each setting up his own interpretative line dependent upon the specific situation in the empire and the personal experiences in the author's own life.

The grandiose success of Byzantine diplomacy through Christianity in Bulgaria, which so many modern studies project, was studied and understood poorly in the Byzantines' own historiography. The Byzantines applied to the Bulgarians the relatively conventional explanations and typological ways of looking at the conversion events, which we may recall from the previous chapters. Between the tumultuous years of post-Iconoclasm, the Photian controversy in Constantinople, the scandals around the high imperial advisor Bardas Caesar, blamed to have had an affair with his own daughter-in-law (though this was highly dubious), or Basil's murder of Michael III, there was simply too much for a historian to account for. Christianity in foreign lands, even if those lands had been Byzantine at some point in the past, was apparently not a high enough priority on the list of great events to be recorded and analyzed deeply for Byzantine posterity.

The Conversion as a Cultural Symbol

By the fourteenth century, Boris's conversion had already been appropriated from the Byzantine cultural elite into the programmatic imaginations of people educated in Balkan missionary schools and monasteries. In a translation from Greek into Slavonic of Konstantinos Manasses' twelfth-century chronicle, the anonymous transcriber inserted in red ink what the original text did not reflect: Boris's conversion.⁶⁹⁰ Not military threat or war, but peace between the emperor Michael and Boris was the backdrop of his story.

⁶⁹⁰ Constantine Manasses. *Synopsis Historike*. Tr. Ivan Bujukliev. Sofia: St. Kliment of Ohrid Press, 1992. p. 171.

Boris's sister was captured in Constantinople, how it was done and under what circumstances, the translator admitted he did not know. Then, Boris's sister was exchanged for Theodoros Kouphara, here not a monk, nor a Byzantine aristocrat, but a *boyar* (term for nobleman in Bulgaria).⁶⁹¹ When Boris's sister returned from Constantinople, educated and a Christian, she converted her brother, too. Shortly thereafter, Boris converted all the rest; some became Christians by force; others followed voluntarily. The translation of Manasses' chronicle already illustrated the insertion and deletion of the Byzantine past to create a more localized "present."

The specifics of the balkanization of Byzantium are complex. But, the general tendency of the authors involved was to simplify and make Boris's conversion story into a symbol that could be repackaged for a new reality. And eventually even in professional journals and scholarly monographs, the medieval and modern Bulgarians came to behave and think the same, sharing a common reality. In a Christian Europe, the conversion of Boris conveniently serves to mark Bulgaria's titanic, anti-barbarian, "European" beginning.⁶⁹² Nineteenth-century nationalist heroes, even Communist divinities otherwise restricting Christian practices, and current political figures learning (hopefully) through their painful failures at democracy were and are measured against the medieval greats, Boris and his son Symeon.

According to modern statistical surveys, about 80% of western democracies support some religions over others, and half restrict at least one minority religion.⁶⁹³ Formally, every western democracy except the United States legislates at least some

⁶⁹¹ Constantine Manasses. *Synopsis Historike*, p. 172.

⁶⁹² Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007.

⁶⁹³ Robert M. Kunovich. "An Exploration of the Salience of Christianity for National Identity in Europe." *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter 2006), pp. 435-460. p. 436.

aspect of religion. In contemporary Bulgaria, 46% of the population believes that Christianity is important for national identity.⁶⁹⁴ In a country where the largest majority of non-Christians are Muslims and in which both religions have shared a complicated history, Boris's medieval Christianity is seen as having contemporary relevance.

Professional and amateur historians, politicians, and popular writers have speculated and recreated the story as a symbol of “national” religion, a marker of identity, a poetic reference to patriotism.⁶⁹⁵ The modern interpreters then, some of them without intention, isolated from the past a mythologized memory. Institutionalized knowledge and mass education pressed it into the fabric of a small country that liked to imagine itself as a medieval empire. But even in this simplified view, which saw Christianity as one of the essential factors for the successful legitimization of Bulgaria on the international arena of great medieval polities, there is a great irony.

While Orthodox Christianity in Bulgaria today is largely seen as a strict marker of national belonging, thus sparking divisions along confessional and ethnic lines, in the traditional interpretation, medieval Christianity supposedly brought about Bulgarian unity. Through Boris's conversion, national historians have argued, the disparate tribes of Slavs and Bulgars had come together into one great polity. In fact, as we have seen in

⁶⁹⁴ Robert M. Kunovich. “An Exploration of the Salience of Christianity for National Identity in Europe.” *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter 2006), pp. 435-460. p. 440.

⁶⁹⁵ Perhaps the most magnanimous example of this phenomenon and the popularization of the conversion as a national symbol was a large-scale, two-part movie produced in the 1980s that described Boris as a prophetic national hero. Notice the description tag of the movie, “Втората половина на IX век. Младият хан на българите Борис осъществява сливането на двете племена - българи и славяни - в единна държава. Той разбира, че това което ще заздравя държавата му е религията. Така се извършва знаменателното събитие - покръстването. През 864 г. България става първата славянска държава приела християнството” [The second part of the IXth century. The young *khan* of the Bulgarians accomplished the merging of the two tribes—Bulgarians and Slavs—into one united state. He realizes that what will make his state stronger is the religion. In this way, he executes the great act—the conversion. In 864, Bulgaria becomes the first Slavic state to accept Christianity]. The movie won awards in Bulgaria for best script, best directing, and best cinematography among others. See *Борис I: Покръстването* [Boris I: The Conversion], and *Борис I: Последният Езичник* [Boris I: The Last Pagan]. Sofia: Кино Център, Бояна, 1984.

this chapter, many were the views that the medieval authors shared on the Bulgarian conversion. Perhaps, by becoming aware of the numerous refractions of the story over time, we could find in the fluidity of Boris's conversion story a new way to think about its complex history. We may also hope that it will allow us to open up new possibilities for mutual interaction and understanding in the polarized politics of the modern Balkans.



Map 6: The Mediterranean in 870

Chapter 7

General Conclusions

The six centuries that stand as the chronological backbone of this study have marked one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Christianity. From the fourth to the ninth centuries, Christians managed to spread to and beyond the cultural and political frontiers of the Roman empire. Christian intellectuals assimilated Greco-Roman philosophical traditions. Borrowing from the institutional mechanisms of the Roman state, the Church put forth the authoritative foundations of its doctrines. Byzantine emperors were compelled to ascribe at least nominally to Christianity at home. Christian communities developed abroad and brought about, according to tradition, the largest expansion of Orthodoxy to date.

Many scholars have covered the various aspects of the important historical developments in the period. In their studies on Christianity, scholars have emphasized the importance of the Roman emperor as one of the primary forces that propelled Christianity's general progress. Yet, the actual relationship between the Byzantine state and the conversions of foreign elites to Christianity has remained largely unexplored. Thus, with the basic question of the Byzantine imperial involvement in Christian proselytization abroad in mind, I have considered a wide array of Byzantine and native conversion accounts. Contrary to the assumptions of modern scholars, I have found that

the Byzantine narratives depict very limited imperial involvement. According to the Byzantine writers, foreign elites converted to Christianity largely as an attempt to emulate culturally and politically the empire.

In fact, the adoption of Christianity in foreign lands incidentally empowered the local elites and allowed them to create over time their own traditions and ways of legitimizing their local power. In principle, the relationship between the small foreign polities, which adhered to Christianity, and the Byzantine empire, which gave it to them, was hegemonic. However, the outcome of Byzantium's hegemonic influence did not procure the magnanimous political or economic benefits for the empire, which many scholars have hurried to describe. By the early ninth century, Byzantium was largely reduced to Anatolia, Thrace, and the Peloponnesus while Christianity and the independent kingdoms, which had at least nominally welcomed it, went around the northern Mediterranean and moved even beyond. The fact that many of the foreign rulers had technically received their Christianity from the empire barely guaranteed peaceful relations. Certainly, it never automatically assured the political obedience of the foreign elites to the Byzantine emperor.

In retrospect, it is tempting to assume that the Byzantine emperors grasped the implications of Christianity's social and political power. Many scholars have written about the complicated ways in which the Byzantine rulers expediently wielded conversions of foreign elites and local populations as handy political tools. In reality, however, we have witnessed not only the mixed results of these conversions, but also the limited interest on the part of the Byzantines in the development of Christianity beyond the borders of their state. Different, more pressing priorities occupied the emperors and

the Byzantine intellectuals who wrote the histories of their rulers. It proved difficult enough to keep Christian groups inside the empire united under one, Orthodox Christian vision. Thus, the Byzantine ecclesiastical historians focused on the internal theological debates and Christian factional wars. Tracing Byzantine Orthodoxy's spread abroad was a bold ambition that only the most committed Christian writers attempted. But even in these cases, as we have seen, they gave us only vague rhetoric that rested on early Christian tropes of ecumenism. Concrete, detailed Byzantine accounts of Christian development abroad are ultimately lacking or are sketchy. In addition, actual theological ecumenism broke down as eastern peoples displayed heretical deviations in the imperial Byzantines' eyes. Many people in the Horn of Africa and in Egypt became monophysite.

At home, Byzantine Christians engaged in rigorous polemics, often resulting in conflicts that tore apart not only Christianity and its leaders but the state itself. We have overviewed the major Christian battles that inflamed Byzantium in the period. But even with these intense and ravaging religious wars in mind, we should not forget that there was more than Christianity and its authoritative voice in the everyday political rule of Byzantium. Imperial legislation offers us some pertinent examples of decisions that did not line up with strict religious logic.

Thus, slaves and captives, an important commodity in the empire, who dared to join monastic communities without a legal granting of freedom, were punished with the severing of their hands and legs.⁶⁹⁶ Driven by similar logic aimed to guard Byzantine proprietary rights and to maintain labor force, another edict prohibited slaves from

⁶⁹⁶ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. Νεαραι και Χρυσουβουλλα των μετα τον Ιουστινιανον βυζαντινων αυτοκρατορων. Volume 1. Ed. C.E. von Lingenthal. Athens, 1931. p. 218: Κβ'. Οί δουλοι η απελευθεροι ανδραποδιζοντες ελευθερους δερομενοι και κουρευόμενοι χειροκοπείσθωσαν. Κγ'. Απαγορευει η διάταξις αμφοτέρας τὰς χείρας και τούς πόδας τέμνεσθαι.

entering the clergy without the permission of their masters.⁶⁹⁷ A law, issued in 566, explicitly prohibited mixed marriages of Romans with non-Christian Persians and Saracens who lived in the border zones of Mesopotamia, Osrhoene and the Euphrates.⁶⁹⁸ Strictly protecting Roman identity on the frontier was apparently more important to the emperor Justin II, who ratified the law, than the opposite possibility to assimilate non-Christian, border peoples through Roman marriage. By obliging the Persians and the Saracens to convert to Christianity and to go through a mandatory church ceremony, Justin II could have attempted to wield Christianity as a political tool. Certainly, many modern scholars would have expected him to go in this direction. Instead, Justin set protectionist policies and prohibited mixed marriages.

In theory, the supreme ruler of Byzantium was the law. The emperor was simply its adjudicator. A ninth-century legal constitution listed as the primary responsibility of the Roman emperor the administration of justice, which “is equally good for all subjects; he executes punishment neither due to [personal] dislike, nor is he sympathetic out of internal passionate predilection.”⁶⁹⁹ Unlike western medieval kingdoms whose political order was largely based on families and their entrenched dynasties, the long-lived state of the Romans preceded the emperors. Recurrent attempts on the part of ambitious rulers to found a dynasty ran up against the built-in obstacles of the Roman *res publica*. Even Christianity did not abrogate the Roman ideals of Byzantium.

⁶⁹⁷ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. Novella 9 in *Basilica*, p. 67.

⁶⁹⁸ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. Νεαραι και Χρυσοβουλλα των μετα τον Ιουστινιανον βυζαντινων αυτοκρατορων. Volume 1. Ed. C.E. von Lingenthal. Athens, 1931. Novella 3.

⁶⁹⁹ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. *Epanagoge*, p. 240: Κεφ. α'. Βασιλεύς ἐστιν ἔννομος ἐπιστασία, κοινὸν ἀγαθὸν πᾶσι τοῖς ὑπηκόοις, μήτε κατὰ ἀντιπάθειαν τιμωρῶν, μήτε κατὰ προσπάθειαν ἀγαθοποιῶν, ἀλλ' ἀνάλογός τις ἀγνοθετής τὰ βραβεῖα παρεχόμενος.

Broadly put, the duties of the emperor were to observe and apply “everything written in the Holy Scriptures, the canons in the Seven Holy Synods, and the Roman laws.”⁷⁰⁰ When studying Christianity in Byzantium, we should not forget the final clause of this decree, which urged the emperor to keep true to Roman law. Ultimately, the Roman legal tradition secured the emperor’s legitimacy, in which Christianity was simply a later, albeit important, addition. “It was not power that was legitimate; but whoever appropriated power could be made legitimate by choosing to respect the law.”⁷⁰¹ Thus, we should be careful not to magnify the importance of Christianity in foreign relations and not to overemphasize ambiguous “caesaropapist” notions in the Byzantine circles of power.

Just as the responsibilities of the emperor were legally bound so were those of the Constantinopolitan patriarch. In the same legal constitution of the ninth century that listed the legal duties of the emperor, we find several chapters on the patriarchal office. Characterized as the living icon and spirit of Christ, the Constantinopolitan patriarch was expected to defend Christian doctrine, to keep the unity of the Church, to fight against heresy, and “to turn unbelievers to the brightness of the faith.”⁷⁰² Chapter 4 in the same law added:

The specific responsibility of the patriarch is to be a teacher, and to be impartial indiscriminately between the upper and lower classes, and to be gentle in bestowing justice, and critical towards those who do not obey, and on behalf of

⁷⁰⁰ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. *Epanagoge*, p. 241: Δ’.

Ἐπόκειται ἐκδικεῖν καὶ διατηρεῖν ὁ βασιλεὺς πρῶτον μὲν πάντα τὰ ἐν τῇ θεῖᾳ γραφῇ γεγραμμένα, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τὰ παρὰ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἁγίων συνόδων δογματισθέντα, ἔτι δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἐγκεκριμένους ῥωμαικοὺς νόμους.

⁷⁰¹ Gilbert Dagron. *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 19.

⁷⁰² *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. *Epanagoge*, p. 242.

truth and enforcement of the dogmas to speak face to face with the emperor and not to be afraid.⁷⁰³

Seen as a mediator of justice to the emperor, the Constantinopolitan patriarch had secured for himself a high position in Roman politics. And ultimately, it was the harmony between the religious and the political branch that Chapter 8, in accordance with Justinian's Code of the sixth century, confirmed:

The state is maintained together from parts and sections analogous to men, the greatest and most involved parts are the emperor and the patriarch. By the two, the peace both in terms of mind and body assures the fortune of the empire and the archpriesthood in all. Both need to function in common way and in common voice.⁷⁰⁴

In practice, the harmony between the patriarch and the emperor was often disrupted as patriarchs challenged imperial decisions and vice versa. But whatever the particular case, it is important to note and remember that the legal delineations of the two offices formally separated the duties of the emperor from those of the patriarch and thus allowed for a wide array of political positioning between the two poles of power. Even in law, therefore, there was a key division of authority that tried to prevent complete centralization of power in the hands of the emperor, so the gains of Christianity did not automatically strengthen the imperial office.

In addition to the legal constraints on the patriarchal and imperial offices, we need to wonder whether the cultural prejudices of the Byzantines against barbarians changed

⁷⁰³ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. *Epanagoge*, p. 242: Δ'. Ἴδια πατριάρχου τὸ εἶναι διδακτικόν, τὸ πρὸς πάντας ὑψηλοὺς τε καὶ ταπεινοὺς ἀστενοχωρήτως ἐξισοῦσθαι, καὶ πρᾶον μὲν εἶναι ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, ἐλεγκτικὸν δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀπειθοῦντας, ὑπερὸν δὲ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ τῆς ἐκδικήσεως τῶν δογμάτων λαλεῖν ἐνώπιον βασιλέως καὶ μὴ αἰσχύνεσθαι.

⁷⁰⁴ *Jus Graecoromanum*. Ed. Ioannes Zepos and Pan. Zepos. Athens, 1931. *Epanagoge*, p. 242: Η'. Τῆς πολιτείας ἐκ μερῶν καὶ μορίων ἀναλόγως τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ συνισταμένης, τὰ μέγιστα καὶ ἀναγκαιότατα μέρη βασιλεύς ἐστὶ καὶ πατριάρχης. Διὸ καὶ ἡ κατὰ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα τῶν ὑπηκόων εἰρήνη καὶ εὐδαιμονία βασιλείας ἐστὶ καὶ ἀρχιερωσύνης ἐν πᾶσιν ὁμοφροσύνη καὶ συμφωνία.

after their conversion to Christianity. We do not have a monograph on the problem. However, H.-G. Beck and Sergey Ivanov in short exploratory articles have suggested that “Greek and Roman pride...became an obstacle to mission-work” and that “barbarians were regarded as unworthy of Christianity.”⁷⁰⁵ If these strong statements are indeed true, such powerful cultural convictions would have prohibited Christianity from ever becoming a social and political equalizer that could theoretically serve to integrate foreigners in the empire.

Interestingly, from the moment some bishops were appointed over foreign flocks or even in backward places in the empire itself, they would try to avoid going there at all cost. When they finally arrived at their barbaric destinations, the bishops continued to hearken back to the empire and tried to figure out ways to come back home. The detailed account of Longinus in Africa and his life-long connection to Alexandria, which we have traced in *Chapter 4*, was one such example from the sixth century. Theophylakt of Ohrid’s mixed feelings about Bulgaria, which we presented in *Chapter 5*, was another illustration of a similar phenomenon in the twelfth century, for by the 1030s Bulgaria was within the imperial borders.

The notion that Christianity was understood as a civilizing force, employed by the Byzantines to transmit their imperial ideology, did not develop in the early Byzantine empire. Moreover, even in the final Byzantine centuries, the success of Byzantine Christianity generally rode on the back of the state’s political prosperity. Eager to imitate

⁷⁰⁵ H.-G. Beck. ‘Christliche Mission und politische Propaganda im byzantinischen Reich.’ *Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo*, 14 (1967): 658 (repr. In H.-G. Beck, *Ideen und Realitäten in Byzanz*. London, 1972 (no. 4). Also, Sergey A. Ivanov. “Mission Impossible: Ups and Downs in Byzantine Missionary Activity from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century.” pp. 251-265. In Jonathan Shepard, ed., *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe*. New Hampshire: Ashgate Variorum, 2007. See p. 258 where Ivanov agrees with Beck.

the empire, foreign elites asked for its Christianity. When the empire was weak, Christianity moved along different political channels.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which marked a period of hardship for the empire, we observe how Christianity spread from a non-Byzantine political center. In 1235, the Bulgarians managed to establish a patriarchate in their capital, Turnovo. The Byzantine imperial and patriarchal authorities, then exiled by crusaders in Nicaea, approved of it. Turnovo became the new major religious center, using literary Slavonic as the language of worship and biblical study. In addition to strictly religious preoccupations, the literary output in Slavonic aimed to propagate and plant ideas about a “Bulgarian empire” that insisted on its political independence from Byzantium. Thus, as the Bulgarian church in the thirteenth century worked to create and promote native traditions, the local rulers tried to legitimize their own sovereignty in the region.

Certainly, foreign elites, and especially local intellectuals, wrapped Christianity in various agendas. Yet, the political and religious concerns of the Byzantine and foreign elites, which we have highlighted throughout this study, should not obfuscate the basic fact that the influence of reported Christian conversions on the general way of life was quite minimal. After all, it takes a lot to alter a peasant culture significantly. Even in Byzantine narratives, we find such evidence. Thus, the Bulgarians, who had theoretically converted in the ninth century, were still depicted as wild beasts in the eleventh century.⁷⁰⁶ Michael Psellos presented the Bulgarians as though they were pagans.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁶ Vita of St. Athanasios of Athos. I. Pomialovsky. *Zhitie prepodobnogo Afanasiia Afonskogo*. St. Petersburg, 1895. pp. 109-11.

⁷⁰⁷ Michael Psellus. *Chronographia*. Ed. É. Renauld, *Michel Psellos. Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976-1077)*, 2 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1:1926; 2:1928 (repr. 1967): 1:1-154; 2:1-185. See Chapter 4.

In the rural communities of the Middle Ages, “Christianity” functioned in effect as a this-worldly, practice-oriented social custom. The nuances of dogma, which preoccupied leading theologians, were of no interest to most people who were largely illiterate and, when not nomadic, focused on tending their fields and making ends meet. Thus, even mutually exclusive ideas and principles were readily accommodated, especially if they were considered practically beneficial.

In modern times, too, we find clear examples, which by focusing on practical utility, shrink the theoretical division between different “religions,” “religion and superstition,” or “Christianity and magic.” To illustrate the everyday intertwining of mutually exclusive theoretical categories, let us invoke here a twentieth-century Bulgarian spell against “the evil eye” whose awful gaze presumably incapacitates in some way its unfortunate target. In full, the spell goes as follows:

A bird flies across my field,
From its wings fresh milk drips,
And it drips on trees,
On stones;
Thus, the stones burst,
And the trees withered.
From whom did [here the name of the victim should be supplied] get the gaze of
the evil eye?
If it's from a woman,
Let her breasts burst;
If it's from a man,
Let his eyes burst;
If it's from a girl,
Let her hair fall out.
They took Stojan off to church,
Put him on the throne,
Charmed the spells (*uroci*) away,
And removed the spells from him.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁸ Joseph L. Conrad. “Bulgarian Magic Charms: Ritual, Form, and Content.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp. 548-562. p. 556: През полъе ми птиче лети,от крила му пресно млеко капе, та капе по дървѐе. по каменъе; та се каменъе изпуца. та дървѐе узпосънаа. От кого е (името) очи ванал? Ако ѝе от жена—боски ю пукнали; Ако ѝе от мъж—очи му

The magic breaks through many neat theoretical categories. It mixes “white” (good) magic with “black” (bad) magic. It orders the suffering of the evil-doers as it heals their unfortunate victim. In a final twist of the spell, Stojan was taken to church where he was eventually cleansed and triumphantly cured.

In folklore, spells are straightforward and simple. They have two basic aims: to punish and/or to heal. Only when inserted in lofty discussions on putative differences between “religion” and “magic/superstition,” spells amalgamate layers of complexity. But, the actual magical practitioners in Bulgaria, especially in rural communities, are not preoccupied with such intellectual concerns. To them, it is perfectly possible to be a fine Christian even if one benefits from the magical practices and fortune-telling gifts of famous Roma seers (in Bulgaria usually women) or the expertise of local Muslims. It is also important to point out that even clergymen believe in the existence and effectiveness of magic. But, while peasants, for example, are preoccupied with this-worldly concerns, the clergymen (at least the well-educated and the theologically-consciousness ones) insist on the ultimate importance of other-worldly salvation. Since magic is the work of the Devil, the Church formally prohibits magic and condemns it as infernal and demonic.

Many examples of spells or fortune-telling could be invoked to illustrate the practical operations of Christianity in medieval and in modern societies where religion is generally manifested as a series of ritualistic steps. Thus, the specific motions, secret words, deliberate ways of public delivery, the sheer mechanics of the performed ritual, are actually more important than the theological doctrines and authoritative tenets, which

пукнали; Ако ѝе от мома—коси ю паднали. Стоян у църкви отнесоя, у престоле го турия, от уроци му пребаяа, та му се уроци разтурия. I have modified Conrad’s translation in several lines, with which I have disagreed.

are generally the specialty of scholars and intellectuals. In everyday life, Christianity actually blurs within social and cultural customs. When not polarized by politicians and ideologues, sophisticated theology struggles to delineate Christianity as distinct from general culture. Only few, however, engage with theology.

Today, we find ourselves in a fast-paced, novelty-obsessed world. From such a vantage point, it is difficult to imagine fully the slow social motion of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Cumbersome communications and closed-off rural communities without formal education and literacy did not allow for easy changes in traditional lifestyle. Thus, even in the supposedly extreme conversion context of Christianity and later Islam, Bosnian peasants actually “accepted a few obvious and new practices [when they adopted Islam], but basically continued to live and believe as they always had.”⁷⁰⁹ We should always stop to think more deeply, therefore, when we encounter arguments that readily depict religion in antiquity and the Middle Ages as powerfully affecting the wider society. Even if the Byzantines wanted to harness Christianity for their imperialist goals, they lacked basic amenities, particularly those in the modern world like T.V., radio, mass literacy, newspapers, etc., to make the actual indoctrination possible.

When placed within the slow-paced, largely rural world of the times, in which the Byzantine narratives of foreign conversions were written, the reasons for their simple, formulaic nature become clearer. Even for those Byzantines, interested in exploring the foreign developments, long-range communications were limited; it was difficult and dangerous to travel. Depending on precise location, correspondence via the imperial mail took months, and the mailing system itself was entirely intended for state and official

⁷⁰⁹ John V.A. Fine, Jr. *The Bosnian Church: Its Place in State and Society from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century, A New Interpretation*. London, 2007 (second edition). p. 39.

Church communications anyway. Even if mailed, however, letters could easily never arrive.

We can imagine then the additional complications in trying to deal with foreign societies whose native habits and languages puzzled the Byzantines. We have already seen the dismissive ways, in which the Byzantines depicted the Ethiopians. When it came to foreign Christianity, therefore, it was easier and perhaps more expedient to rely on established, early Christian tropes that praised God and depicted Him, not the emperor, as the ultimate Christian missionary. Thus, the specifics of the local affairs were left unexplored for practical reasons in addition to the general Byzantine tendency to place priority on the events at home.

Many centuries passed before religion was wrapped into notions of “civilization” and “universal progress” for all of humanity. No Byzantine author contended, as John Stuart Mill did in the 1800s, that “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.”⁷¹⁰ It took a particular intellectual culture to bring cogency to the daring beliefs of John Stuart Mill in a world “more improved, more eminent in the best characteristics of Man and Society, farther advanced on the road to perfection; happier, nobler, wiser.”⁷¹¹ “This is one sense of the word civilization,” Mill wrote, “but in another sense, it stands for that kind of improvement only, which distinguishes a wealthy and powerful nation from savages and barbarians.”⁷¹²

⁷¹⁰ J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Representative Government*. Everyman edition, 1910. p. 73.

⁷¹¹ J.S. Mill. “Civilisation” in *Dissertations and Discussions*. Volume 1. New York, 1867 (original publication). p. 160.

⁷¹² J.S. Mill. “Civilisation” in *Dissertations and Discussions*. Volume 1. New York, 1867 (original publication). p. 160.

In 1895, the British politician Cecil Rhodes even thought that imperialism was the best prescription against civil war under the premise that imperial expansion diminished discontent by guaranteeing economic and social improvements for both the locals and the British.⁷¹³ In the name of “Freedom” and “the State,” Georg Friedrich Hegel brandished religion, advocating it as the ultimate social panacea. “Religion must be brought into it [the State]—in buckets and bushels as it were—and impressed upon people’s hearts.”⁷¹⁴

In the previous chapters, we have seen how some of these modern ideas have influenced scholars of Byzantium in general and their interpretations of the Byzantine neighbors’ conversions to Christianity in particular. For one example among many, we should recall Vasil Zlatarski, the most influential historian of medieval Bulgaria, who idealistically believed that Christianity in the Middle Ages abolished all ethnic and social differences. Zlatarski understood Boris’s conversion to Christianity in the ninth century as a sign of cultural and political progress. Christianity “subdued the wild tendencies and allowed the more developed [cultural] elements to conquer the less perfect ones.”⁷¹⁵ In essence, Zlatarski shared the powerful philosophy operating in his entire generation. In fact, its appeal has continued even into more recent times.

Many of the tendencies among modern historians to depict Byzantine Christianity as a civilizing force among backward medieval states have been, at least on the surface,

⁷¹³ For a larger discussion, see E.J. Hobsbawm. *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987. See especially p. 69.

⁷¹⁴ Georg Friedrich Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. Tr. J. Sibree (third edition). New York, 1894. p. 53.

⁷¹⁵ Васил Златарски. *История на Българската държава през средните векове* [History of the Bulgarian State during the Middle Ages]. Том 1, Първо Българско Царство, част 2: *от славянизацията на държавата до падането на Първото царство*. Академично издателство “Марин Дринов.” София, 1994 (1927 първо издание). p. 40:

Християнството изглаждало всички етнически и социални различия; неговитѣ принципи проповѣдвали равенство на всички членове прѣдъ църквата, а слѣдов. и прѣдъ държавата, които въ онова врѣме сж били тѣсно свързани помежду си; то укротявало дивите нрави и дѣйствувало за подчинението на по-малко свършенитѣ елементи подъ по-развититѣ.

innocent. Generally, it made sense to believe that Christianity was a sign of progress even if only because it was still a major force in the societies of the historians who wrote about it. From such a presentist vantage point, “paganism” was quickly defined as backward and barbaric. Today, we are much more critical both of the past with its complex legacies and of the present with its competing, often depressing, ideologies and agendas. The difficult heritage of the twentieth century has taught us, the hard way, to build our notions of “civilization” and “progress” more carefully and with more attention to the lessons of the past.

In the new, fast-paced, technologically-driven twenty-first century, it is perhaps easier to find ourselves lost in dreams braver than ever before. Beyond “the nation,” we have found today the European Union and the bold ideas of globalization. In their tangible presence, the classic question on the role of religion in society still probes with new and urgent relevance for many people and their communities. There are great opportunities and great dangers in possible answers and resulting political decisions. In this study, we have recalled the Byzantine voices and experiences, hoping to ground our future dreams on lessons from the past worth remembering.

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