

Muslims and Byzantines in Byzantine Hagiography

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1. Introduction

Between Muslims and Byzantines, there was a long history of contacts and relations where war and peace alternate through many centuries. These relations are referred to in different sources, Arabic and Byzantine, but there is a kind of sources which contains information about this subject but they were said to be useless, that is the Byzantine hagiographical sources.

Hagiography is a special literary genre which tells about the good life and gives exemplar from the story of holy men and women. This kind of art was developed in Christian era and “it was one of the most important genres of Byzantine literature, both in terms of quantity of written material and the wide audience that read or listened to these texts”¹. Originally this popular literature served the believers to have the good models or what is called *exempla* so as they have to follow it.

For this, the tales can reproduce ancient stories but change in time and place to be credible and adapted to the moment of the writer and the users, then we can find some *topoi* because the hagiographic texts can present “reality” itself and the hagiographers’ vision of reality².

The Byzantine hagiographical sources are used for another purpose, and allowed to renew the researches in historical field’s social, economic and mental subjects with the religious topics³, but not for understanding how the holy life in Byzantine area was conditioned in some ways by the presence of Muslims in the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire. Historians were interested in the internal history of Byzantium and scarcely in its foreign relations and especially through this literary genre in which reality and imagination are simultaneous. Can we use Byzantine hagiography to understand the evolution not only of the relations between the two empires which were culturally different and religiously opposed, but also the evolution of religious life in Byzantium and the image of the others in cultural Byzantine life?⁴

1 Alexander Kazhdan and Alice-Mary Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, Dumbarton Oaks, 1998, p.1.

2 Ibidem, p.2.

3 S. Eftimiadis, «New developments in Hagiography: the rediscovery of Byzantine hagiography» in *21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (2006).

4 See for this, Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, «“L’altérité” dans le témoignage des récits hagiographiques serbes: l’exemple des *Vies de Théodose*», *Recueil des travaux de l’Institut d’études byzan-*

To achieve this aim, we will use some hagiographic texts where we find information about Muslims and try to show how the Muslims are necessary for religious men and women to build the holiness in the boundaries between the two empires.

2. *Image of Muslims*

In general, when we read Byzantine historical or hagiographic texts dealing with Muslims in the east or in the west, we find a static image repeated through centuries with some evolutions and adaptations to the period of writing. The ancient texts like those of Ammianus Marcellinus or Sozomenos give us a plethora of terms of designating the Arabs as *saraceni* or *barbaroi*⁵. To these terms will be added others like Persian and *agarainoi*⁶. Through these words, we can sense the feeling of Byzantine authors and behind them the idea that the elite had about the oriental neighbors of Byzantium.

But the names attributed to Muslims are in general mixed with some negative images of violence, destruction, evil and bad conductive morality. In the “*passion des 42 saints martyrs du Christ*”, we read at the beginning of the text that Ishmael was pushed out by Sara because of his bad relations with Isaac. The text presents Ishmael as a slave, and Agar as his mother. But the feeling of Ishmael seems as the text said that “*killling a Christian or leading him to the bad situation was his best hope*”⁷. For the Byzantine text, the aim of Muslims or Ishmaelites is to eliminate the Christians – here Isaac – and his actions were against all people who are high born. This means that the sons of Ishmael – Muslims – are not as a people having the right to be as they are but as destructors of the Christians and “good people”⁸.

The presence of Muslims on the frontiers of their empire is a danger and any form of resistance against it is a duty towards Christianity, giving to those who die against Muslims a special place in the collective memory and especially in the religious memory. Resisting the Muslims is not a mere heroism but a duty to Christ.

The story of the 42 martyrs of Amorium conveyed to us a dark image of Muslims with excessive violence against the city of Amorium.

Most of the lives of the oriental holy men and women seem to be based on the relations

tines, XLV, 2008, pp.191-202. See also the different subjects of researches made using hagiography cited by Kazhdan and Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, p. 3, there is no any interest for this data to study neither the foreign relations of Byzantium nor the Image of others in Byzantine eyes trough the hagiographical sources.

5 I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, Washington, D.C. 1989.

6 M. T. Mansouri, «Les Musulmans à Byzance du VII e au XIe siècle», *Graeco-Arabica*, vols VII-VIII, Nicosie, 2000, pp.379-394.

7 *La passion des 42 saints martyrs du Christ exécutés en perse* in *Subsidia hagiographica*; textes inédits publiés en grec et traduits en français par F. Halkin; Société des Bollandistes, Bruxelles, 1876, p.162.

8 *Ibidem*, p.162.

with Muslims. We can find many kinds of information about these relations: invasions; famines; captures; exchange of ambassadors and pilgrimage.

Under the reign of Empress Irene, Euthymios of Sardis was sent as ambassador to Bagdad;⁹ though we do not have an idea about his mission but we can suppose that it is in relation with the payment of tribute by Irene to Haroun al-Rashid and an attempt to establish peaceful relations between the neighbors. This period was well informed by traditional sources but not about the contribution of the holy man in the evolution of the relations between Abbasids and Byzantines.¹⁰

In 911, Demetrianos, bishop of Chytroi (Cyprus) was sent to Bagdad to discuss the release of Cypriots captured in an Arab attack against the island.¹¹ It seems that we do not have information about this embassy by other sources and in general the names of ambassadors are neglected by the classic texts; especially the Arabic ones¹². The hagiographic texts can partially help us in this particular point though they did not give much information. But with traditional historical sources we can have a supplement of data about this subject.

The lives of holy men and women give us other information about their Muslim neighbors which is characterized by the repetitive invasions and attacks against Byzantine territories in the west, in Sicily and in the east in Asia Minor.

We learn that Elias Spelaiotes (from the ninth to the tenth century) was obliged to travel and change his residence due to the Arab raids¹³. The family of Sabas the Younger was also obliged to move from Sicily to Calabria fleeing from the Arab invasion¹⁴. It appears that the presence of the Arabs in the texts shows their influence on the ecclesiastical geography, the distribution of Christians inside the boundaries of the empire and their settlements far from the zone of contacts. This idea can not be general because many people are mixed and they coexist despite their cultural differences; but we can consider it as a standard *topos* which justifies in another way the holiness of those who are the main actors in this field.

Many other cases of holy men and women were captured and tortured and in many cases crucified and at the end martyred because they refused to abjure¹⁵. This treatment can be administrated to one or a group of Christians. The hagiographic sources give us some examples like “the sixty martyrs of Jerusalem”¹⁶ or the tale of Michael of Zobe and 36 monks who were martyred with him in their monastery when attacked by a certain Alim¹⁷ or “the passion of 42

9 Kazhdan and Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, p.38.

10 See D. Barbe; *Irène de Byzance, la femme empereur*; Paris, 2006.

11 Kazhdan and Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, p.33.

12 M. Tahar Mansouri, *Chypre dans les sources arabes*, Nicosie, 2001.

13 Kazhdan and Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, p.35.

14 *Ibidem*, p.81.

15 *Ibidem*, p.33, 34, 56, 70, 90.

16 *Ibidem*, p.90.

17 *Ibidem*, p.70. It seems that the attack was leaded in 785 by a general of Abbasid army named Ali b. Suleiman.

martyrs”¹⁸ added to this on the individual cases.¹⁹

The hagiographic texts tell us about the relations between Muslims and Christians which were not always bad but sometimes they give us an idea about the feeling of the authors more than about the reality as it is in the case of Theodore of Edessa whose hagiography attributed the task of having converted the Muslim Caliph.²⁰ Other cases are cited as having good relations with their environment and never worried by the Muslim power. John of Damascus is the most famous example of coexistence between Muslims and Christians under the power of the Omayyad caliph, Mou’awiya. He was integrated in the financial administration of the state and he could discuss with the high dignitaries of power without any trouble.²¹ In this case we can know about the interactions between the two cultures and religions “and the evolution of the process of Arabization and Islamization of the Syrian space”²².

In general, from the Byzantine texts as the Arabic ones, we do not see any good in the contact with the enemy; but we see in everyone having relations with the enemy as a kind of trouble and even a traitor.

3. *Role of religious men and women to defend the Christianity*

The religious factor has played an important role during the middle Ages to define the identity of peoples and define the kind of relations between the neighbors and in this case the relations between Byzantines and Muslims. But also it was used to create a certain internal stratification of both Muslims and Christians.

In many cases the texts present the religious men or women in heroic situation or in a position of defender of their belief or predicting the victory to the Byzantine army against the Arabs. In the case of Antony the young who accompanied the chief of army Petronas in a military expedition against the Arabs, he predicted the victory of the Byzantine general; and the Byzantine army over Arabs was realized²³.

Another case of religious resistance against the Arabs is cited in the history of holy women. In the vita of St. Theoktiste of Lesbos, she succeeded in escaping from her jailers. She took refuge and lived an ascetic life alone on the island of Paros. For this only can take a high place in the system of Byzantine hagiography²⁴.

18 *La passion des 42 saints martyrs du Christ*, op.cit., pp.166-167, where they are cited the important personalities who were executed after the capture of the City.

19 *La passion des 42 saints martyrs du Christ*, op.cit.

20 Kazhdan and Talbot, *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography database*, p.99.

21 Ibidem, p.53; see also A. Ducellier, *Le Miroir de l’Islam*, Paris, 1971.

22 Ibidem, p.93.

23 Ibidem, p.24; F. Halkin, «Saint Antoine le Jeune et Petronas le vainqueur des Arabes en 863», *Analecta Bollandiana*, 62, 1944, p.194.

24 Niketas the most glorious Magistre, *The life of our blessed mother Theoktiste of Lesbos* translated by Angela C. Hero in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, edited by A-Marie Talbot, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, Washington, D.C. 1996, pp.102-116.

4. *Construction of holiness*

The hagiographic texts contribute to building the best life of Martyrs. This construction began by presenting the facts which consist of justifying how to become holy in an indirect way.

There are steps on the path to beatification and the authors of the hagiographic texts emphasize the evolution of the lives of concerned persons: To be a religious man or woman, to be captured by the enemy, to resist in front of flattery and promises of rewards in this world as in the hereafter and to different kinds of pressure, to defend the belief by all means and finally induce the anger of the enemy who decided to kill the concerned person.²⁵

We can see this evolution in different lives cited by the text of "Passions des 42 martyrs" like the life of Theodore surnamed Krateros who was presented to the chief of the Muslim expedition, and after different promises and pressures Theodore was executed²⁶, the story of Basoes is not very different but he is presented more to be martyred²⁷.

The holy men and women are in many cases associated with the war between Byzantines and Muslims, Petronas was accompanied by Antony the young who gives the victory over the Arabs perhaps just by his presence more than by his advices.²⁸

The Muslims are presented as the killers of holy men and their actions contribute to building a double image, the image of the martyr who resists the Muslims (*agarainoi* in the text²⁹) and the image of the Muslims as enemies of the faith not of the empire.

People concerned by this status are in general religious who resist the different proposals of the enemy: they refuse conversion to Islam when the Muslim chiefs proposed. Sometimes they try to demonstrate the superiority of their faith compared to that of their executioner.³⁰ Their task consisted not only in their own resistance but also in encouraging others to defend their sanctuaries; their belief and using means to stay Christians.³¹

It appears from different texts that to be martyr and to be holy at the end, the way was traced: resisting the Arabs in the West as in the east defending his or her faith.

5. *Conclusion*

In the western part of the empire, the lives of holy men and women were holy due to the different local actions and miracles of those people and their work to promote Christianity

25 Ibidem, p.166-167.

26 Ibidem, p.166-167.

27 Ibidem, p.167.

28 F. Halkin «Saint Antoine le jeune et Pétronas le vainqueur des Arabes en 863», *Analecta Bollandiana*, 62, 1944, p.195.

29 Ibidem, p.163.

30 Ibidem, p.166.

31 Ibidem, p.167.

through building churches and monasteries or converting *barbaroi* to Christianity; the holiness in the orient is based on the bad relations with Muslims. In general, these holy people were persecuted, tortured imprisoned and at the end killed by Muslims. Their resistance in Christianity and their refusal of apostasy give them the high title of holy man or woman.

It seems that the *topos* of the violent Muslim is necessary to build a deep sense of Christian society as if it is not possible to be Christian without the existence of an irreducible enemy.

But *in fine*, *barbaroi* and *agarainoi* are useful for the religious life, they contribute to building the religious story and emboldening people to defend not just the empire and the crown but specially Christianity. Dying when defending Christianity against these enemies, offered martyrdom and paradise.