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Three Martyrs of Chalcedon and the Persian Campaign of the Emperor Julian

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The present paper deals with one crux interpretum of the hagiographic tradition connected with the name of the emperor Julian. Among the **martyria** listed in the article of Baudouin de Gaiffier¹, one is of immediate interest for the history of Julian's reign and particularly for the history of the relations between the Romans and the Arabs in the IVth-Vth centuries. This is the **Μαρτύριον τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἐνδόξων μεγάλων μαρτύρων Μανουήλ, Σαβέλ καὶ Ἰσμαήλ**² which can be found in two slightly different versions constituting the dossier of the martyrs. These are:

1. *Acta vetera* published by the Bollandist D. Papebroch³;
 2. Martyrium by St. Symeon Metaphrastes published three times: Vienna (1803), Leipzig (1815) and finally in Moscow (1914) by the prominent Russian scholar Vasily Latyšev in his collection of Byzantine hagiographic texts⁴;
 3. Two Epitomae of the *Acta vetera*: one is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the other was published in 1912 also by Vasily Latyšev⁵.
- The predominant opinion as to the primary nature of the *Acta vetera* and the secondary nature of the Metaphrastes' version is to my mind not entirely true⁶. The Moscow synodal manuscript *Vlad. 382* which contains the Metaphrastes' version is of quite anciently attested origin⁷. Some textual problems and in fact

¹ B. de Gaiffier, "Sub Juliano Apostata" dans le martyrologe Romain', *Analecta Bollandiana* LXIV (1956), p. 21.

² These martyrs figure in the Synaxarium of Constantinople under 16 June: **ΜΗΝΙ ΤΩΙ ΑΥΤΩΙ ΙΖ**: "Ἀθλησις τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων ἐκ Περσίδος πατὴρ ἀρχιμάγου μητρὸς δὲ Χριστιανῆς... γράμματα παρὰ Ἐδνίκου... πρεσβυτέρου...παρὰ Βαλτανοῦ βασιλέως Περσῶν... Τριγώνου διαβληθέντος παρὰ Ἰνδικὸς κουβικουλαρίου... Τελεῖται δὲ αὐτῶν σύναξις ἐν τῷ ἁγιωτάτῳ αὐτῶν μαρτυρίῳ τῷ ὄντι πλησίον τοῦ ἁγίου προφήτου Ἑλισσαίου. (*Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum* (e cod. Sirmondiano). Ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels, 1902), coll. 753-754.

³ *Acta Sanctorum Junii*, III (1701), pp. 233-273.

⁴ V Latyšev, *Hagiographica Graeca inedita* (Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St.-Petersbourg, VIII. XII. n. 2; St. Petersburg, 1914), pp. 28-39.

⁵ V Latyšev, *Menologii anonymi byzantini saec. X quae supersunt*, fasc. 2 (Petropoli 1912), pp. 67-72.

⁶ G.V. Vasil'evskij, 'Sinodal'nyj kodeks Metafrasta', *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosvěščenija*, VI (1897), p. 376.

⁷ The colophon of the Ms *Vlad.382* reads: εἰληφε τέλος η υστατη αυτη δε λτος των δεκα βιβλων των μεταφρασεων του λογοθετου μηνι απριλλιω ινδ. πρωτης εκτους ιοφα

the more legendary character of the *Acta vetera* make me think that St. Symeon also had at his disposal not only the *Acta vetera* but some other sources as well.

Having in mind this classification of the documents of the dossier we will concentrate on the first two.

The contents of the martyrium may be summarized as follows. Three brothers Manuel, Sabel and Ismael arrive in Constantinople as ambassadors for the purpose of concluding a pact (συμβάσεις). Their coming is preceded by an exchange of letters between Julian and the Persian king. Julian sends a letter insisting on concluding a pact and venerating the same gods⁸.

Having arrived in the capital, the brothers are treated as dear and official guests with all due esteem. But as the hagiographer adds, this is not sincere, for Julian maliciously planned to play a trick on them. The next day a solemn feast (ἑορτὴ μεγάλη) is organized in a place called Κρύμνος or Τρίγωνος near Chalcedon. Julian naturally invites the three brothers to go there with all the court. During the feast Julian (or his cubicularius) invites the brothers to take part in the sacrifice to the gods. They refuse, undergo torture, all the while firmly confessing Christianity and finally are murdered by the tyrant.

The first special feature of these martyrs is that they were not Roman citizens but subjects of the shahanshah of Sasanian Persia. The martyrium tells us that they were brothers 'from Persis' appointed ambassadors to the Roman court of Julian the Apostate. The most interesting fact in view of their Christian beliefs is their official position. We are well aware of some Persian missions to Constantinople which included Christians⁹ in the subsequent centuries, but for such an early time it is somewhat unusual.

Secondly, we should notice the evidently semitic (and consequently not Persian) character of their names. This fact was noticed by H. Delehaye¹⁰, but no connection with the other data from the dossier was made. Their probable semitic (presumably Arabic) origin is also attested by other data. In the 'metaphrastic' version it is said that Manuel, Sabel and Ismael were ambassadors to Julian but not from the shahanshah (as it is logical to suppose) but from a local chief (τῆς χώρας κρατῶν) called Ἀλαμούνδαρος. In the *Acta vetera* there is no mention of Alamundar; on the contrary it mentions a wholly fictitious figure, the Persian king Βαλτανός. The only possible name here is

(= 1063!). The description of the Ms.: *Zhitije izhe vo sv'atyh otza našego Arsenija Velikogo*, publ. G.E. Tsereteli, (St Petersburg, 1899), p. III.

⁸ *Acta Sanctorum*, p. 233: Ἰουλιανὸς Καῖσαρ Βαλτανῶ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν· ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστι σχολάζειν ἡμῶς ταῖς θυσίαις τῶν θεῶν, καὶ μὴ ὡς εἰκῶς ἐννοίαις τισὶν ἀναπεισθόμενους πολέμους ἐγείρειν μεταξὺ ἡμῶν, εἰς ὄλεθρον ψυχῶν ἀνθρώπων γενομένους καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς ὁμοίοις πάθεσιν ἡμῶν ὑπάρχουσι· καὶ κρεῖττόν ἐστιν εἰρήνην βραβεύειν ἡμῖν διὰ τῆς θεραπείας τῶν θεῶν, ἵνα ἀταράχως διάγωμεν. Ἐρρωσο.

⁹ This was due to the fact that the bishops of the Church of the East usually knew some Greek.

¹⁰ H. Delehaye, 'Saints de Thrace et de Mésie', *Analecta Bollandiana*, XXXI (1912), p. 233.

certainly that of Šapur II. I am inclined to think that it is a corruption of some other name (possibly of Bahram?). We shall return to this point later. Alamundar is a more complicated case. In the Greek tradition Ἀλαμούνδαρος is a regular transcription of the Arabic name أَلْمُنْدِير. The main problem here is that the earliest phylarch Mundhir existed about a hundred years later. The well-known Lakhmid Mundhir I, a chief of the small vassal kingdom of Arabs called by the Syrians حمّة العرب, which derives from the Arabic حَمِير (fortress), took part in the Persian-Roman war of 421-422¹¹. Under the shahanshah Yezdigerd he supported the young prince Bahram (Βαραχράν of the Byzantine sources), who had been brought up in Hira. A supposition that Bahram was exiled to Hira as a result of his intrigues against his father appears to be true¹². In 421 after the death of Yezdigerd the Persian nobles made Khosrau shahanshah. He was not a direct heir of Yezdigerd and was not so compromised by his close contacts with the Arabs. It is likely that the situation could be interpreted as follows: Βαλτανός stands here for Bahram and Alamundar is thus not out of place.

The problem which emerges here is of a complex nature, both chronological and textual. To solve the problem we ought to have in mind the political position of Lakhmid Hira in Sasanian Persia. In the times of Julian the Apostate the Lakhmids abstained from entering into direct diplomatic relations with Byzantium. This means that the story of a Lakhmid chief sending a separate embassy to the Roman emperor in 363 is definitely confusing. At the same time other Arab tribes living in the frontier zone sometimes used to negotiate directly with the Romans.

I would like to suggest that the historical basis of the hagiographical legend developed as follows: during the Arab-Roman war of 421-422 an Arab Lakhmid tribe took part in the campaign which was intended to save Nisibis and even capture Antioch¹³. This turned out to be a failure, Arabs fled from the battle camp but the Romans nevertheless refused for some unknown reason to follow up their success. The subsequent years were difficult for relations between the two empires because of the expedition of Ardabourios and the defeat of the Persian Arabs by Vitianus. As shah Bahram from his earlier experience knew that there were many Christians among the Lakhmids he may well have asked his friend Mundhir-ibn-Nu'man to settle matters with the Romans. If he did so the negotiations were probably held not in Constantinople but somewhere on the frontier. Later opinion, unaware of this possibility, depicted the embassy of the Arabs as having been to the capital of Byzantium and put the name of Baltan-Bahram instead of Mundhir (Alamundar).

All these events were but a part of the whole body of the historical basis of the dossier. The martyrdom itself occurred in the time of Julian the Apostate. The latter conceived and conducted a well-known Persian campaign which turned out to be a complete failure, resulting in considerable losses of the Roman territories in Eastern Mesopotamia.

We know of a reluctance by some Roman allies and foederati to start a campaign. On the other hand, the Arabs were the only group which was directly interested in starting the military action. Lakhmides in the South and Tanukhides in the North had their own interests in weakening the Persians. As Irfan Shahîd points out, 'Arabs formed a substantial portion of the army of Julian. The Arabs were eager to join Julian, their eagerness derived from their animosity toward Shapur engendered by the later's brutal campaign against the Arabs in 326 when he sought them and beat them in various parts of the Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent'¹⁴. In fact Arabic participation in the campaign is a somewhat complicated subject as they sometimes changed sides. Some groups were Byzantine allies, others were allies of the Persians. Ammianus Marcellinus, who is in fact our major source for the history of the campaign, furnishes different information about Julian's contacts with the Arabs. Yet in Antioch (!) Julian received some 'legationes' from the nations offering him aid in view of the forthcoming campaign. The emperor declined their aid¹⁵. Then in Callinicum as early as the 28th of March, Julian received a delegation of Saracen chieftains coming to pay homage:

Saracenum reguli gentium genibus supplices nixi, oblata ex auro corona, tamquam mundi nationumque suarum dominum adorarunt, suscepti gratanter ut ad furtum bellorum appositi¹⁶.

So there is nothing unusual in an Arab phylarch's decision in pursuit of his anti-Persian interests, to send an embassy to the Roman emperor in order to become his ally. Once Julian had understood that the ambassadors were Christians he may have tried to force them to venerate the pagan gods he worshipped himself as he wanted the whole Empire to worship. Having met the obviously reluctant attitude of the Arab mission he may have been enraged and even commanded that they be made to perform libations and the rest of the pagan ritual.

Also we should take into account a considerable deterioration of relations between Julian and the Saracens after the unsuccessful siege of Coche/Ctesiphon (at the end of May 363) and especially after the burning of the Roman fleet. The situation was aggravated by Julian's refusal to pay 'salaria' to the Arab foederati¹⁷. It was clear to everyone that the Persian campaign had ended

¹¹ Socrates Schol., *Eccl. Hist.* VII,18.

¹² Tabari, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, übers. von Th. Nöldeke, (Leiden, 1879), pp. 90-91, notes.

¹³ Greg. Barhebraeus, *Chron. syriacum* (Parisiis, 1890), p. 70.

¹⁴ I. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century* (Washington, 1984), p. 116.

¹⁵ *Amm. Marc. Rer. gest.* XXIII.2,1.

¹⁶ *Amm. Marc. Rer. gest.* XXIII.3,8.

¹⁷ *Amm. Marc. Rer. gest.* XXV.6,9-10.

in a fiasco. The Arabs began to hesitate. Unlike the Roman army in general the Arabs were mostly Christians and Julian's policy towards Christians was inappropriate for them. If we admit the hypothesis that Manuel, Sabel and Ismael were of Arabic origin (I do not think it correct to specify now whether they belonged to the Lakhmid or Tanukhid phyle) the Martyrium tells us a story which may possibly reflect some historical facts.

The story of the campaign and particularly its final act in which the tyrant is killed by a spear thrust by the anger of God was a popular source for Byzantine hagiography. A Syrian tradition represented by the Syriac Julian Romance and some other hagiographic sources was focused on the figure of St Mercurius (who was in fact one of the Forty martyrs of Sebastia called Κυρίων transformed in the Syriac into ܩܘܪܝܘܢ ܩܘܪܝܘܢ) and then to Μερκούριος of Greek and Arab (الشهيد أبو مرقورة) tradition¹⁸. Another tendency represented by the majority of the Church and lay historians tells us a different story revealing the particular role of the Arabs in the defeat of the Roman army and even slaying Julian. Libanius the sophist, friend and co-religionist of Julian the Apostate, in his so-called 'Julianic' orations overtly blamed Christians for the slaying of Julian. In the *Epitaphion on Julian* he says:

[πολέμοι] ἔδοσαν ἡμῖν παρ' ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς τὸν σφαγέα ζητεῖν¹⁹.

In the 'On Julian's revenge' he says:

Χειρὶ δὲ Πέρσου τοῦτο οὐ πέπρακται, τί λοιπὸν ἢ ἐν τοῖς ἡμετέροις εἶναι τὸν φόνεα²⁰.

But the most interesting passage we find in the same oration:

ὁ δὲ προσπεσὼν ἦν καὶ τρῶσας Ταϊήνός τις ἐντολὴν πληρῶν τῷ σφῶν ἄρχοντι²¹.

The mysterious Ταϊήνός is an obvious Arabic ethnonym. In the Semitic East of that time and particularly among Syrians ܩܘܪܝܘܢ was a word regularly used to denote the Arabs²². The Greek term corresponds to it on all grounds. Sozomen describes the whole scene of the death of Julian as follows:

Σκότους δὲ καὶ πολλῆς ἀχλῆς οὐσης, παραδραμῶν τις ἵππεὺς φέρει ἐπὶ τὸν βασιλεῖα τὸ δόρυ, καὶ παίει καιρίαν· καὶ τὸν ἵππου καταβαλὼν, ὅστις ἦν ἀπέλθε λαθῶν. Λέγουσι δὲ, οἱ μὲν Πέρσην, οἱ δὲ Σαρακηνὸν εἶναι τοῦτον. Εἰσι δὲ οἱ Ῥωμαῖον στρατιώτην εἶναι τοῦτον ἰσχυρίζονται, καὶ ἐπενενοχέειν αὐτῷ τὴν πληγὴν, ἀγανακτήσαντα καθότι ἀβουλίᾳ καὶ θρασύτητι τοσοῦτοις περιέβαλε κινδύνους τὴν στρατιάν²³.

¹⁸ S Binon, *Essai sur le cycle de St Mercure martyr de Dèce et meurtrier de l'empereur Julien* (Paris, 1937).

¹⁹ Liban. Orat. XVIII,27.

²⁰ Liban. Orat. XXIV,21.

²¹ ibidem, 6.

²² Although originally it denotes the tayy tribe (cf. Shahîd... p. 126).

²³ Sozom. Hist. Eccl. VI,1.

Though the phonetic connection between Ταϊήνός and Σαρακηνός is not altogether proved, both terms designate more or less the same entity — the Arabs. The thing to notice here is the doubt of Sozomen as to whether it was a Roman or Persian lancer. The probability that some Roman or Arab warrior killed the Emperor in anger seems quite probable to the Constantinopolitan historian. We should mention two other statements that an Arab was Julian's slayer. The first is Theodoret's *Church History*:

τὸν μέντοι τὴν δικαίαν ἐκείνην ἐπενεγκότα πληγὴν οὐδεὶς ἔγνω μέχρι καὶ τήμερον· ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν τινα ἀοράτων ταύτην ἐπενενοχέειν φασίν, οἱ δὲ τῶν νομάδων ἓνα τῶν Ἰσμαηλιτῶν καλουμένων...²⁴

Another source of interesting information for us is John Lydus who tells:

Εἷς δὲ ἐκ τῆς Περσικῆς φάλαγγος τῶν λεγομένων Σαρακηνῶν, ἐκ τῆς ἀλουργίδος βασιλεῖα ὑπολαβῶν ἀνέκραγε πατριῶς μαλχάν οἶονε βασιλεῦς, καὶ ἐπαφείδω ῥωίζω τὴν λεγομένην ῥομφαίαν διήλασεν αὐτὸν κατὰ τοῦ ἤτρου...²⁵.

This evidence is opposed to the Persian tradition itself. The bas-relief from Taq-e-Bustan which Arthur Christensen thought was a scene of the investiture of Ardashir proves to be a triumphal picture of Shapur II, made after the victory over the Romans in 363. The figure of Ahura-Mazda (and not Shapur) in the picture is putting his foot on the head of Julian. This obviously means that the glory for killing the Roman emperor belongs not to the Persians but to the god himself. In the *Syriac Julian Romance* Shapur pronounces a speech in which he calls the death of Julian 'the merciful deed of Ahura-Mazda'²⁶.

So we may try to reconstruct the situation as follows: some chief of an Arab phyle (certainly not Alamundar) was looking for a way to become a Roman ally and thus to oppose the power of the Persian state. Thinking traditionally of the Roman empire as a Christian state he sent a mission to Julian which consisted of Christians (presumably Manuel, Sabel and Ismael) but he did not take into account the complete volte-face of Julian's politics towards Christians after his desperate effort in Antioch to restore paganism there. The brothers were tortured and then killed by Julian's servants — to his mind killing Arabs was a trivial matter. The phylarch however was apparently displeased. It is interesting to notice that in the Metaphrast's *Martyrium* it is said that 'the Persian king was extremely angry with Julian and when the latter audaciously entered the Persian territory the war began and the impure one was shamefully defeated and received a blow in his belly'²⁷. The *Acta vetera* go even further

²⁴ Theodor. Cyr. Hist. Eccl., III,25,6.

²⁵ Joh. Lydus. De mens. IV,118.

²⁶ *Julian der Abtrünnige. Syrische Erzählungen*, hrsg. von G. Hoffmann (Leiden, 1880), p. 191.10-14.

²⁷ AASS, loc. cit., p. 237.

in contending that the war was a result of Julian's perfidy and the Persian king began hostilities because he was enraged by the death of his ambassadors. The absence of information on this embassy may be due to the unimportance of the episode with the Arabs in the eyes of the Byzantine historians.