Was Constantine VI ‘Lassoed’ at Markellai?

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The two pre-metaphrastic versions of the *Life of St Ioannikios* (d. 846) present descriptions of the battle of Markellai that involve an interesting factual discrepancy, both with each other and with the account in Theophanes’ *Chronicle*. The earlier version, written shortly after the saint’s death by the monk Peter of the Agauroi monastery on Mt Olympus in Bithynia, relates that Ioannikios saved the life of Constantine VI during the battle. The revised version, by the monk Sabas of the St Zacharias monastery at the foot of Olympus, says that the saint saved not the emperor but an anonymous grandee (ἐνα τότε τῶν μεγίστανον) and that the emperor honored him for his bravery. In his persuasive article on the relation between the two vitae, Cyril Mango strongly supports (against Sabas) Peter’s credentials as a witness: he had met Ioannikios personally, derived much of his information from his superior Eustratios, Ioannikios’ closest companion and right-hand man for a good fifty years, and he may have had a memoir or set of notes composed by Eustratios; but Mango suggests that Sabas in this instance “took care to tone down Peter’s exaggerated statement that Ioannikios

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saved the emperor’s life on the battlefield.”3 I believe that this suggestion might be reformulated to indicate a possible source that Peter (or Eustratios) used for his ‘exaggeration’, as Theophanes’ description of the battle4 does not mention the emperor’s capture, only his flight to the city after losing a number of prominent men as well as baggage, money, horses, and the imperial pavilion and household.

The text of the passage in Peter’s version (5) is as follows:

Ἐν δὲ τοῖς χρόνοις ἐκείνοις κινεῖται μὲν πρὸς πόλεμον καθ’ ἡμῶν χριστιανὸν τὸ τῶν Ὀὐννών έθνος, ἥγουν τὸν Βουλγάρων. Ἀντικινεῖται δὲ κατ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ὁ τότε σκηπτοῦχος καὶ εὐσεβεστάτος βασιλεὺς Κωνστάντινος τοῦνομα, ὦδε γεγονός τής μακαριστάτης καὶ ὀρθοδόξου βασιλίσσης Εἰρήνης. Καὶ δὴ ἀμφότερον παραταξαμένον ἐν τόπῳ προσ- 
αγορευμένῳ Μαρκέλλαις, συγκρουσάτος τε μεταξὺ αὐτῶν γεναιμένης, ἡμεθηνάνει μὲν κατά τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν καὶ 
νῦνα τοῖς ἑρθοῖς δοῦναι τὸ τῶν χριστιανῶν φύλον, καὶ, τῶν 
ἐχθρῶν ὑπὸ ἐπιθυμόκυντον καὶ πτῶσιν σφοδράν εἰσπρατ- 
τομένων, ὡς καὶ αὐτῶν ἤδη τὸν βασιλέα ὑπὸ τῶν 
μαχηνή- 


4 Theoph. Chron. I 467f: Ἐπανέρχεται δὲ φυγής ἐν τῇ πόλει πολλοὺς ἀπο- 

5 “In those times the nation of Huns, that is Bulgarians, moved to war against us Christians. And in response there moved against them the sceptered 

and most pious emperor named Constantine, the son of the most blessed and 

orthodox empress Irene. And when both <armies> were drawn up at a place 
called Markellai, there was a clash between them, and the Christians were 
defeated on account of our sins and turned their backs to the enemy; the 

everyday from behind and exacting severe casualties, so that even 

the emperor himself, after being lassoed by some device, was captured, 
dragged off and held by those impious men. Having seen this, that most noble 

Ioannikios, impelled by divine zeal and, to speak with the prophet [Ps. 17 (18): 

32], girded with power from on high, courageously leapt into their midst and 

with a sword severing that snare (which I would call a diabolical contrivance) 
most quickly, miraculously saved the emperor.”
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One prominent aspect of this description is Peter’s fascination with the method by which the emperor is captured, i.e., lassoed (σωκίσθέντα). 6 Peter describes the lasso as “some kind of device” (τινὸς μηχανήματος), a “snare” (παγίδα), and a “diabolical contrivance” (διαβολικήν τεχνουργίαν). 7 In Sabas’ version the method receives considerably less elaboration, and the reference to the lasso is less specific: the grandee is said to be ὑπὸ μηχανῆς τινὸς ἴμαντοδοὺς κατασχέθεντα, and the saint frees him μαχαίρα ταχὺ διακόψας τὴν μηχανήν αὐτῶν. The verb σωκίζειν (σοκίζειν, σοκ[κ]έζειν) and the noun σόκος (σόκος, σόκκος, σωκάρη) are quite rare, attested through the ninth century only in Olympiodorus once, 8 in Malalas four times (in two episodes with noun and verb in each), 9 twice in Theophanes (I 217f, noun and verb in one episode derived from Malalas 18.170), and once in George Hamartolus (derived from Malalas). 10 The relevant sections of Theophanes’ description of a Bulgarian incursion into Thrace (538/539) are worth quoting in detail (I 217f):

6 For a discussion of the use of the lasso by various tribes see J. O. Maenchen-Helfen, The World of the Huns (Berkeley 1973) 239f. For similar incidents but with a different term for lasso, see Jos. BJ 7.250, an attack of the Alani in 72–73 against the Armenian king Tiridates I: βρόχον γὰρ αὐτῷ περιβαλόν τις πόρρωθεν ἐμέλλεν ἐπισάσανε, εἰ μὴ τὸ ἔξωθεν βάττον ἐκείνος τὸν τόνον κώμας ἔσθη διαφυγείν; and, with a different outcome, Sozom. Hist. Eccl. 7.26.8 Bidez, where a Hun tries to lasso a bishop (βρόχον παρασκευάζας ... ἀνασάον τὴν δεξίαν ἀκοντίζειν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὸ σχοινίον ἐμέλλεν ), but his arm is suddenly paralyzed.


9 Malalas 14.68f, a description of a single combat in 422 between Areobindus, a Gothic comes foederatorum, and a Persian: οὗ ἧ Ἀρεόβινδου ἐβάσταξε καὶ σωκάρην κατὰ τὸ Γοτθικὸν ἔδος ... ἐσόκκευσεν αὐτῶν, καὶ κατενεκόρεν ἐκ τοῦ ἱπποῦ ἐσφαξε; 18.170, an incursion of “Huns” into Thrace in 538/539: οἱ Ἱππαυρικὸν στρατηγοὺς δέδωκαν νῦσα· καὶ καταδιώξαντες οἱ Οὐρνοὶ ἐσόκκευσαν φεύγωντας τοὺς ἐξάρχους Ἱππαυρίων. καὶ οὐ μὲν Γοτθικὰς ἀποσπάσαις τὸ ἱππον ἐσφαξε νὰ καὶ σώκος καὶ ἐβάσταξεν.

10 PG CX 744Δ, following Malalas 14.68f: οὗ ἦ Ἐσόκκευσαν αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸ Γοτθικὸν ἔδος, καὶ τούτον ἐκ τοῦ ἱπποῦ καταγαγών, αὐτίκα ἀνεῖλεν.
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The main differences in the version of Malalas are that the Bulgarians are called Huns (κατὰ τῶν Ὑδννῶν), Constantine is called Κωνσταντίνος ὁ Φλωρέντιος, and the form for “lassoed” is ἐσόκεσαν.

Aspects of the phrasing in Peter’s version of Markellai and Theophanes’ description of the Bulgarian incursion of 538/539 are suspiciously similar, even allowing for the limited physical realities to be described. “Bulgarians move to war,” a “Constantine” leads the Roman forces, the Romans “turn their backs” at Markellai as they do in Thrace, the Bulgarians (Huns) “pursue,” in each case a Constantine is “lassoed,” and in each case the lasso is cut to escape. In Theophanes’ description of the events of 538/39, however, “Constantine, son of Florentios” is lassoed along with Akoum and Godilas, and Godilas subsequently frees himself. But in the hagiographer Peter’s description of Markellai in 792, it is the emperor Constantine VI alone who is lassoed, and it is St Ioannikios who courageously saves him. Given the lack of evidence for the lassoing of Constantine VI in Theophanes’ account of Markellai, the deliberate revision by Sabas, the dependence on Malalas of the only other attested ninth-century references to the lasso, and modern scholars’ skepticism about the event (directly by Mango and tacitly by Speck and Besevliev in relegating it to footnotes), I suggest that the exaggeration of the part played by Ioannikios at Markellai has a precedent in chronography and that Peter (or Eustratios), who clearly plays up the exotic nature of the device, has
adapted an incident in Theophanes' *Chronicle* \(^{11}\) to turn his saint into a hero.

The adaptation may also be connected with another aspect of Peter's version, his open and virulent hostility to the Stoudite monks, whom he calls *e.g.* τὰ ἀχάριστα κτίσματα, τὰ τῶν πονηρῶν πλάσματα (57), and τῶν μυσαρωτάτων Στουδιτῶν (70). Peter's hostility stems in large part from Stoudite opposition to the patriarch Methodios' moderate approach to the Iconoclasts following the restoration of icons in 843; Peter presents Ioannikios as strongly supporting Methodios. Another source of Peter's hostility is found in his description (36) of Ioannikios' friendly reception of Joseph of Kathara, the priest who performed the second marriage of Constantine VI, who had divorced his first wife. In the resulting *Moechian* controversy the Stoudites, who considered the second marriage uncanonical, led the rigorist opposition to Constantine VI and the accommodating patriarch Tarasios, an opposition that continued in subsequent years when the deposed Joseph was rehabilitated by the patriarch Nikephoros I.\(^{12}\) As Mango notes (*supra* n.3: 395 with n.9), hostility to the Stoudites is completely absent in the version by Sabas, who also camouflages the identity of Joseph of Kathara by not giving his full title. Peter's adaptation from Theophanes, then, may be seen as another aspect of his anti-Stoudite rhetoric, falsely presenting Ioannikios as saving the life of the emperor whose second marriage three years later in 795 would create this major division between the rigorist Stoudite monks and the emperors, patriarchs, and other members of the clergy.

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\(^{11}\) It might be noted that Peter specifically mentions (37) the visit of Ioannikios to the tomb of Theophanes and his monastery, Megas Agros. On the use of chronicles in hagiography see A. Kazhdan and A. M. Talbot, "Hagiography," *Oxford DictByz* II 897.

\(^{12}\) For a summary of the history of the controversy, with bibliography, see *Oxford DictByz* II 1388f.