

The Last Arab Siege of Constantinople (717–718): A Neglected Source

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IN 716, a great Arab expedition set out from Dābiq on the Syrian frontier on the orders of the new caliph, Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik. It was commanded by the caliph’s brother, Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik, and was composed of soldiers from all over the caliphate. Its goal was to fulfill the long-held dream of the Umayyad caliphs: the conquest of Constantinople. Since the days of Mu‘āwiya’s campaigning under the caliph ‘Uthmān, the city had been the strategic goal of the caliphate, and four campaigns against the city are described in the surviving sources.¹

The greatest of these campaigns would also be the final one, with naval and land-based components and much of the apparatus of the caliphal state poured into it. It would, of course, also be a failure. The siege proper began in 717 and concluded almost exactly a year later, on the feast of the Dormition (August 15) in 718. There are varying accounts of the campaign and siege in a wide range of sources. Greek, Arabic,

¹ In chronological order: the campaign associated with the Battle of Phoenix (or the Battle of Masts) in the early 650s, which several sources say reached Constantinople; the campaign of Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya in the late 660s or early 670s; the campaign based at Kyzikos in the early-mid 670s, described most fully by Theophanes the Confessor and Patriarch Nikephoros, though it is unlikely that this should actually be considered a concerted campaign, as Marek Jankowiak has made clear; and the campaign which interests us here, that of Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik in 716–718. See M. Jankowiak, “The First Arab Siege of Constantinople,” *TravMém* 17 (2013) 237–320.

Latin, Armenian, Syriac, and even Chinese sources describe in varying degrees of detail and accuracy this monumental campaign.

This paper examines three sources which have received surprisingly little attention. In the Greek tradition are three relevant *synaxaria*, collections of brief historical notes and hagiographies to be read at or to inform the liturgy of a given service. The first is in *Vindob.hist.gr.* 45.² The second is a very similar text with some omissions and slight variants in the *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*.³ The third is a heavily abridged version found in the *Menologium* of Basil II.⁴ The manuscripts can be dated, roughly, to the eleventh century for the *SL*,⁵ the mid-tenth century for the *SC*,⁶ and during the reign of Basil II (r. 976–1025) for the *MB*.⁷ The original text, however, seems to be earlier. As we shall see, many elements seem to extend back at least to the time of Theophanes, and the latest, the *SL*, seems to preserve the most of the original text upon which the three *synaxaria* are based.

Apparently no one has used these texts as sources for discussion of the campaign of 717.⁸ This is their concern in their entries on August 15 (or August 16 in the *SC*, though this is presumably an error).⁹ As the two longer texts have never

² S. Lampros, *Ἱστορικὰ Μελετήματα* (Athens 1884: hereafter “*SL*”) 142–144.

³ H. Delahaye, *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Brussels 1902: hereafter “*SC*”) 901–904.

⁴ *PG* 117 (hereafter “*MB*”) 585D–588.

⁵ F. Halkin, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*³ III (Brussels 1957) 134, MS. 1063f.

⁶ Lampros, *SC* LVIII–LVIII.

⁷ *MB* 3–4.

⁸ S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III: With Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* (Louvain 1973) 181–186, mentions these texts but only in summary and with some conjectures in his notes.

⁹ It is possible that the *SC* preserves the true date and later Byzantines moved the commemoration back to the feast of the Dormition to honor the

been translated into English, or into any modern language, it seems useful to provide the text and a translation here. The basis is the *SL*, which is the fullest of the texts;¹⁰ it also seems likely to be the closest to the original. The additions which the *SL* includes that are not found in the *SC*, which generally runs parallel to it, are underlined. These additions usually provide elaborating details or make sense of an otherwise bare-bones sentence, making it most likely that they were included in some form in the common *synaxarion* upon which both these texts drew and were omitted by the *SC*, not added by the *SL*.¹¹ Where the *SC* includes relevant details or differs from the *SL*, I have included additions in brackets {}, and alterations italicized in brackets. As the *MB* is simply an abridgement of the common text from which these two are drawn, it will be dealt with after discussion of the two longer *synaxaria*. The translation is fairly literal, though sometimes the sentence structure has been altered in the interest of clarity. The Greek text is also drawn from the *SL* with supplements noted with the same symbols from the *SC*.

{Τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἀνάμνησιν ποιούμεθα τῆς περὶ ἡμᾶς μεγίστης καὶ ἀνυπερβλήτου τοῦ Θεοῦ φιλανθρωπίας, ἧς ἐνεδείξατο τότε ἀποστρέψας μετ' αἰσχύνης τοὺς ἀθέους Ἀγαρηνοὺς.} Ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς

Virgin, but since almost every source that provides a date for the ending of the siege gives it as August 15, I find that possibility unlikely, especially as the *SC* itself states in its narrative that the siege ended on August 15.

¹⁰ While Gero (*Byzantine Iconoclasm* 181) correctly points out that the text of the *SL* has corruptions, it remains the fullest account and thus ought to be the paradigm for the translation, especially as the divergences in the *SC* are, with one exception, of quite minimal importance.

¹¹ There were very few historical sources current in Constantinople at the time, making it unlikely that the *SL* drew these clarifications from any source other than its paradigmatic *synaxarion*. The only significant addition found in the *SC*, its introductory note, is almost certainly not original as it refers to the Arabs as Ἀγαρηνοί—whereas the rest of the text refers to them as Σαρακηνοί. Text found only in the *SL*, however, does follow the same terminological trends as the rest of the narrative.

βασιλείας Λέοντος τοῦ Ἰσαύρου τοῦ καὶ Κόνωνος ἀνήλθε πλῆθος Σαρακηνῶν διὰ πολλῶν πλοίων {τὸν ἀριθμὸν χιλίων ἑννακοσίων} κατὰ τῆς μεγίστης {ταύτης καὶ θεοφυλάκτου} Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, βουλόμενοι πολιορκῆσαι καὶ παραλαβεῖν αὐτὴν καὶ τὴν πίστιν τῶν Χριστιανῶν εἰς τὴν ἑαυτῶν πλάνην μεταποιῆσαι:

ὅπερ μιαρὸν ἔθνος τῶν Σαρακηνῶν ἀρχῆθεν ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ πολλοῖς ἔθνεσι κατέμιξεν αὐτὸ καὶ οὐδέποτε ἄφετον δουλείας ἐγένετο, ἐκφεύγοντες τὸ τῆς δουλικῆς ὀνομασίας ὄνειδος. Τὴν μοναρχίαν δὲ διδάσκονται ὑπὸ τινος ψευδαββᾶ Ἀρειανοῦ· καὶ ἔκτοτε πολέμοις καὶ αἵμασι τὴν πλάνην αὐτῶν συνεστήσαντο, ἀντικρυς τῆς εἰρηνικῆς τοῦ σεπτοῦ εὐαγγελίου κηρύξεως δράσαντες ὡς ἀντίχριστοι. Τὰς οὖν θυγατέρας αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸν Βαλαάμ στολίσαντες καὶ μύροις εὐώδεσι καὶ κρόκῳ διανθίσαντες πρότερον τοῖς τῆς Φοινίκης νέοις ἐπισυνῆψαν, καὶ προκαταλαμβάνουσι τὴν τῶν Περσῶν βασιλείαν, ἥτις ἐπὶ χρόνοις πολλοῖς τῇ ῥωμαϊκῇ βασιλείᾳ ἀντιπαρετάξατο, εἶθ' οὕτως τὴν Αἴγυπτον καὶ Λιβύην, διδόντες λόγον τοῖς Χριστιανοῖς ὡς οὐκ ἐάσονται αὐτοὺς παραβῆναι τὴν ἀμώμητον καὶ ὀρθόδοξον εἰς Χριστὸν τὸν θεὸν ἡμῶν πίστιν, ὅνπερ οὐκ ἐφύλαξαν, ἀλλὰ πολλοὺς μάρτυρας ἀπέδειξαν διὰ τὸ μὴ πατηθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτῶν τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ πανσέπτου καὶ τιμίου σταυροῦ. Τοῦτο γὰρ πράττειν τοὺς Χριστιανοὺς ἠνάγκαζον, πᾶσάν τε τὴν γῆν μέχρι τερμάτων ἐλήϊσαντο, Ἰνδοὺς καὶ Αἰθίοπας καὶ τὰ Μαυρούσια ἔθνη, Λίβυάς τε καὶ Ἰσπανούς.

Ἐσχατον δὲ ἦλθον καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν, βουλόμενοι καὶ ταύτην ἐλεῖν. Τοῦ δὲ βασιλέως Λέοντος προθεμένου δοῦναι αὐτοῖς πάντα {πάκτα}, αὐτοὶ καὶ φύλακας τῇ πόλει ἐγκαταστήσαι ἀπήτουν. Διατρέχοντες δὲ οἱ πολέμοι ἐξω τοῦ τείχους, εἰς τις ἐξ αὐτῶν βλασφήμοις ῥήμασι Κωνσταντίαν καλῶν τὴν πόλιν καὶ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ψιλῶ ὀνόματι Σοφίαν προσαγορεύσας, εἰς βάραθρον σὺν τῷ ἵπῳ αὐτοῦ ἐμπεσὼν κατερράγη, καὶ τοῦ κήρυκος αὐτῶν ἐν ὑψηλῷ ξύλῳ ἀνελθόντος κηρύττειν τὴν μιαρὰν αὐτῶν προσευχὴν, αὐτίκα καὶ αὐτὸς καταπεσὼν διεσκορπίσθη. Προσβαλόντες δὲ τοῖς Βουλγάροις ἔπεσον ὑπ' αὐτῶν Σαρακηνοὶ τὸν ἀριθμὸν δισμύριοι, καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ αὐτῶν πεζοποροῦντες ἐν ἀτιμίᾳ ὑπέστρεψαν. Τῶν σκαφῶν δὲ αὐτῶν καταλαβόντων τὴν ἀκρόπολιν, τῆς ἀλύσεως ἐκταθείσης ἀπὸ τοῦ περάματος ἕως τὰ Γαλάτου οὐκ ἴσχυσαν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὸν Λάκκον. Τότε ἀνήλθον εἰς τὸ στενὸν καὶ ὥρμησαν τὰ πλοῖα αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ λεγόμενον Σωσθένιον καὶ εἰς ἐτέρους βραχυτάτους λιμένας, ὧν τινῶν τὰ πλείω χειμῶνος γεγονότος συνετρίβησαν. Ἐξ ὧν

τὰ μείζονα αὐτῶν πλοῖα οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι πυρπολοῦσι.

Καὶ ἡ μὲν πόλις ἐστενοχωρεῖτο, τροφὰς μὴ ἔχουσα· αὐτοὶ {Χρονοτριβήσαντες} δὲ {καὶ} πάντα ἀφειδῶς τὰ προστυγχάνοντα ἀφανίσαντες καὶ μηδὲν πρὸς φυλακὴν τῆς ἑαυτῶν ἀποτροφῆς κατάλειποιότες {, ἡ μὲν πόλις λίαν ἐστενοχωρεῖτο τροφὰς μὴδ' αὐτὴ ἔχουσα, αὐτοὶ δὲ εἰς μεγάλην ἀνάγκην ἑαυτοὺς περιέστησαν.} εἰς τοιαύτην ἦλθον ἀπόγνωσιν λιμοῦ ὡς σαρκῶν ἀνθρωπίνων καὶ ἐρεπῶν καὶ μυῶν καὶ ζῶων τεθνηκότων γεύσασθαι· ὕστερον δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην κόπρον μετὰ βραχυτάτου φυράματος προσμάττοντες ἦσθιον, ὥστε πολλοὺς τῶν μεγιστάνων αὐτῶν τῇ πόλει προσρυῆναι. Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἀπαίρουσιν ἐκ τοῦ χερσαίου τείχους καὶ ἔρχονται ἐν Συκαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς Πηγαῖς· κάκει εὐρηκότες ἄνδρα ἐπ' ἐγκλήμασι κατεγνωσμένον καὶ προσφυγόντα εἰς αὐτοὺς, τοῦτον, ἐπιλαβόμενοι ἀνηγόρευσαν βασιλέα Ῥωμαίων, περιστήσαντες αὐτῷ καὶ δορυφόρους καὶ σπονδὰς θέμενοι πρὸς αὐτὸν περιῆγον τὸ τεῖχος, εὐφημίαις ἐγκωμίων ἀνακηρύττοντες αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν πίστιν τῶν Χριστιανῶν δῆθεν μεγαλύνοντες. Ἀλλὰ μηδὲν δυνηθέντες ἀνῦσαι διὰ κενῆς ἔμενον.

Αἰτήσας δὲ Σουλεῖμᾶν ὁ πρῶτος αὐτῶν εἰσελθεῖν ἐν τῇ πόλει καὶ θεάσασθαι αὐτήν, λαβὼν λόγον ἔρχεται ἔφιππος εἰς τὸ Βοοσπόριν καὶ τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ εἰσιόντων ἀβλαβῶς τὴν πόρταν αὐτὸς οὐκ ἠδύνατο εἰσελθεῖν τοῦ ἵππου ὀρθοβολήσαντος καὶ τὰ σκέλη ὑψώσαντος. Ἀναβλέψας δὲ Σουλεῖμᾶν ὄρᾳ ὑπερθεν τῆς πόρτης ἰστορισμένην διὰ ψηφίδος τὴν δέσποιναν ἡμῶν τὴν ἁγίαν Θεοτόκον καθεζομένην ἐπὶ θρόνου καὶ βαστάζουσαν ἐν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις αὐτῆς τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, καὶ αὐτίκα κατελθὼν εἰσήει πεζός, καταγνοὺς τῆς ἑαυτοῦ βλασφημίας ἧς ἐβλασφήμησε.

Λοιπὸν οὖν ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ Σαρακηνοὶ ἄπρακτοι πολεμηθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ {καὶ τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου} διὰ λιμοῦ τε καὶ θανατικοῦ, ἀποβαλόντες πλήθη πολλὰ ἐκ τῶν οἰκείων στρατευμάτων. Τὰ δὲ πλοῖα αὐτῶν ἐξερχόμενα κατὰ τὰ πελάγη καὶ τοὺς λιμένας καὶ τὰς ἀκτὰς καὶ τὰς ὑφάλους πέτρας καὶ τοὺς σκοπέλους διερράγησαν. Τὸ δὲ μέγιστον καὶ παραδοξότατον γέγονεν ἐν τῷ Αἰγαίῳ πελάγει. Χαλάζης γὰρ πλῆθος αὐτοῖς ἐπέπεσε πυρώδους, ἥτις ἐν τῷ ὕδατι βαπτιζομένη βρασμὸν ἐποίει, καθάπερ σίδηρος πεपुरακτωμένος ἐν ὕδατι βρεχόμενος καχλάζει καὶ βρασμὸν ἀποτελεῖ. Ὅθεν καὶ ἡ τῶν πλοίων πίσσα λυθεῖσα αὐτανδρα τὰ σκάφη τῷ βυθῷ παρέπεμψεν, ἐξ ὧν δέκα μόνον τὸν ἀριθμὸν διασωθέντα τὴν τῶν συμβάντων γνῶσιν ἐν τῇ Συρίᾳ διεσάφησαν.

Τῇ οὖν πεντεκαιδεκάτῃ τοῦ Αὐγούστου μηνὸς κατέλαβον τὴν

βασιλεύουσαν πόλιν καὶ τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ παρωχηκότος πάλιν τῇ αὐτῇ πεντεκαίδεκάτῃ τοῦ αὐτοῦ μηνὸς ἐν τῇ κοιμήσει τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ μιαιοὶ Σαρακηνοὶ κατησχυμμένοι καὶ ἄπρακτοι. Εὐκαιρον οὖν ἐστὶν ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐκβοῆσαι καὶ νῦν τὸ προφητικὸν ἐκεῖνο λόγιον. Τίς θεὸς μέγας ὡς ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν; ἀληθῶς σὺ εἶ θεὸς ὁ ποιῶν θαυμάσια μόνος, ὁ λύτρωσιν τῷ λα[ῶ] σου καὶ τῇ πόλει σου διὰ τῆς ἀχράντου μητρός σου καὶ Θεοτόκου Μαρίας παρέχων ἀεὶ καὶ μέχρις αἰῶνος καὶ τῆς πόλεως αὐτῆς ὑπερασπίζων δι' ἄφατον ἔλεον, ὅτι δεδοξασμένος ὑπάρχεις εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

{On this same day [August 16], we celebrate the remembrance of the greatest and unsurpassable benevolence of God towards us, which He showed forth at that time by having turned back the godless Hagarenes in shame.} ¹² In the beginning of the reign of Leo the Isaurian, also called Konon, a multitude of Saracens came up, on many ships {one thousand nine hundred in number}, ¹³ against the Greatest {and God-protected} ¹⁴ Constantinople. They intended to besiege and capture her and to convert the faith of the Christians to their own error [i.e., Islam].

The same abominable race of the Saracens, from of old in the days of Israel, interbred with many nations and was never freed from slavery, but they have [now] escaped the disgrace of the name of slave. But they were taught monarchianism by a certain false monk of the Arians;¹⁵ and from that time they have sustained their error by means of wars and blood, acting like antichrists contrary to the holy gospel's proclamation of peace. Therefore, dressing their daughters in the manner of Balaam and adorning them with sweet-smelling perfumes and saffron, they first united them with the young men of Phoenicia.¹⁶ And then they con-

¹² *SC* 901.30. For unknown reasons, the *SC* here places the narrative on August 16, not August 15 as in most other traditions.

¹³ *SC* 902.2.

¹⁴ *SC* 902.2.

¹⁵ That is, this Arian monk taught Muhammad non-Trinitarian theology. This story of an Arian monk, often identified by scholars with the Bahira of Islamic tradition, who taught Muhammad Christianity had great currency in early Christian writings about Islam. See, for example, John of Damascus: F. Chase, *St. John of Damascus, Writings* (Washington 1981) 153.

¹⁶ Gero gives a helpful discussion of the likely reference of this passage to a Byzantine exegetical tradition of Numbers 25:1: *Byzantine Iconoclasm* 182 n.19.

quered the kingdom of the Persians, which had withstood the Roman Empire for many years, then in this [same] way [they conquered] Egypt and Libya, giving word to the Christians that they would not permit them to pass on the blameless and orthodox faith in Christ our God, which [command] they [the Christians] did not obey, but they produced many martyrs because the sign of the all-holy and honored cross was not trampled on by them. For this they [the Saracens] forced the Christians to do, and they plundered the whole earth up to its limits, the Indians and Ethiopians and the tribes of the Moors, and the Libyans and Spaniards.¹⁷

Finally they went also to Constantinople, intending to capture it too. And when Leo proposed to give them everything {*tribute*},¹⁸ they demanded also to station guards in the city. And the enemy spread about outside the walls, and when one of them, with blasphemous words, called the city Constantia and named the church merely Sophia, falling from his horse into a pit, he was rent asunder. And when a herald of theirs climbed up a lofty tree¹⁹ to announce the abominable prayer of theirs, he also immediately, having fallen himself, burst. And the Saracens, clashing with the Bulgarians, died at their hands in the number of twenty thousand, and the remainder of them [the Saracens] retreated, marching on foot in disgrace. And [while] their ships were besieging the acropolis, since the chain was extended from the Port of Perama up to Galata,²⁰ they could not enter into the harbor [i.e., the Golden Horn]. Then they went up into the strait [the Bosphorus] and anchored their ships in the [harbor] called Sosthenion and in other small harbors,²¹ and

¹⁷ Gero notes that the reference to India likely indicates that this passage, at least, cannot have been inserted until the 10th/11th centuries—though he notes that it is possible the author could have meant Ethiopia, which would not require such a late dating. If India refers here to the Indus Valley, however, and not India proper, then the eighth century would be equally viable; this seems the most likely to me.

¹⁸ *SC* 902.17.

¹⁹ It is also possible to translate ξύλω as a sort of wooden construction, though it seems unlikely that the Arabs built a full minaret in their camp. The tree is certainly serving as one, however.

²⁰ On the port of Perama, near the southern terminus of the modern Galata Bridge, see R. Janin, *Constantinople Byzantine* (Paris 1964) 292 and Map I.

²¹ Sosthenion, also known as Pegadion, was a port about halfway along

when a wintery storm came up, the greater number of them were run aground. Among these, the Romans burned the larger of their ships.

And the city was in dire straits, not having food; but they [the Arabs], {Having wasted time and}²² having wastefully devoured all of the provisions they had and having kept nothing for provision of their own nourishment, entered²³ into such an unheard of famine as to eat the flesh of men and of serpents, of mice and dead animals; and later they ate even the excrement of men kneaded together with a small amount of dough, so that many of their great men deserted to the city. And after that they departed from the land wall and went to Sykai and to Pegai;²⁴ and there, having found a man who had been charged with crimes and taken refuge with them, having taken him along, they proclaimed him Emperor of the Romans. Also placing bodyguards around him and making a treaty with him, they led him around the wall, proclaiming him with laudatory praises and extolling a pretended faith of the Christians. But they remained unable to accomplish anything through [these] fruitless [efforts].

Then Sulaymān, the first among them, asked to go into the city and to behold it. Having received a safe conduct, he went on horseback to the Bosporan Gate,²⁵ and while those going before him entered without harm, he was himself unable to enter the gate, because his horse was immediately stricken and reared its legs. Looking up, Sulaymān saw above

the Bosphorus between Constantinople and the Black Sea, located on a small natural inlet. The modern Şehir Hatları ferry line still has a stop here, near the Turkish İstinye. See Janin, *Constantinople* 476 and Map XI.

²² *SC* 903.2–3, Χρονοτριβήσαντες...

²³ The *SC* includes here the information from the beginning of this paragraph which had been found exclusively in the *SL*: “while the city was in very dire straits, being unable to bring supplies, and having trapped themselves in great want...” The Greek is included above but, because of its obvious similarity to the text which started the paragraph and to avoid duplication, I omit it from the translation.

²⁴ Regions of Galata: Janin, *Constantinople* 466–467 (Sykai), 463–464 (Pegai), and Map VIII. It is worth noting that there is another area known as Pege (ἡ Πηγὴ) just outside the Theodosian Walls near the Pege Gate (the modern Silivrikapı), though this cannot be the location intended; see Janin 453–454 and Maps I and VIII.

²⁵ This was both a harbor and a gate, the Proosphorion, just beyond the chain which stretched across the Golden Horn: Janin, *Constantinople* 235 and Map I.

the gate, recorded in mosaic, Our Lady, the Holy Theotokos, seated upon a throne and bearing in her arms Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and immediately descending [from his horse], he entered on foot, realizing his own blasphemy, which he had blasphemed. Therefore the unsuccessful Saracens then turned back, having been attacked by God {and the all-holy Theotokos}²⁶ through famine and disease, having lost many multitudes from their own army.

Then the Saracens turned back in failure, being fought by God {and the all-holy Mother of God} by means of famine and plague, losing many multitudes from their own armies. And their ships, having embarked, were smashed upon the seas and the harbors and the capes and the underwater rocks and the promontories. And the greatest and most incredible thing happened in the Aegean Sea; for a great multitude of fiery hail fell upon them, which, having plunged into the water, made it boil, just as iron, having been fired and steeped in water, bubbles and produces boiling.²⁷ As a result, the pitch of the ships having melted, it sent the ships, men and all, to the depths. Only ten in number from among them being preserved, they reported the news of the events in Syria.

Therefore, on the fifteenth of the month of August they besieged the imperial city and, a year having passed, again on the fifteenth of the same month, on the Dormition of the All-Holy Theotokos, the abominable Saracens turned back, in shame and unsuccessful. Thus, it is the right time, truly, to proclaim even now this word of the prophet [David]: “What god is as great as our God?” Truly “You are the only God who does wonders,”²⁸ always granting redemption to Your people and Your city through Your immaculate Mother, the Theotokos Mary, and shielding from age unto age also her city, through Your inutterable mercy, for which You are glorified forever. Amen.²⁹

The narrative itself does not present much in the way of new details about the campaign. It is, as would be expected from a liturgical text, a generally theologized account: God, Christ,

²⁶ *SC* 904.5–6.

²⁷ This is one of the lines that especially seems to indicate the *SL*'s nearness to the original, as the metaphor is difficult to understand in the *SC*, which omits this clarifying line.

²⁸ *LXX* Psalm 76:14–15.

²⁹ *SL* 142–144.

and the Theotokos are key players in the events, directly responsible for the victory. Other than his role as a chronological marker and an over-eager negotiator, Leo III does not figure in the account—indicating a likely iconodulic, or at least post-iconoclastic, origin for the text, which is not surprising given its liturgical role. Several different strands of narrative about Leo are found in the sources for this campaign, ranging from that of the conniving trickster in most of the Arabic tradition³⁰ to a paragon of virtue in the Armenian and some of the Syriac traditions.³¹ It is not uncommon, however, for Leo to be a minor figure in the sources, and indeed it seems likely that the downplaying of his role in the defense (which must have been fairly distinguished for the city to have survived) was due to his subsequent promulgation of iconoclasm, which certainly seems to have tainted his memory in the Byzantine tradition.

Even if there is little new information in the *synaxaria*, some details in these texts are worth considering. The digression on the origin of the Arabs seems likely to be a later addition to the text, probably not found in the original source of both the *SC* and the *SL*, though whether the compiler of the *SL* added it himself or found it in an earlier edition is unclear.³² In general,

³⁰ See, for example, the account of al-Ṭabarī, where Leo deceives Maslama “by means of a trick that would shame even a woman”: E. Yar-Shater, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī* (Albany 1985–2007) XXIV 41.

³¹ See especially the entire account of the campaign (misdated and misremembered though it may be) in the history of the early-9th-century bishop Łewond of Armenia: Z. Arzoumanian (transl.), Łewond, *History of Ghevond, the Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians* (Burbank 2007) 109–113. For the Syriac account, see the extremely competent preparations of the emperor before Maslama’s arrival in the anonymous *Chronicle of 1234*, based upon the lost work of Dionysios of Tel-Mahre: A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool 1993) 85–221; the narrative of this campaign is found at 211–221, but see especially the acclamation of Leo and his preparations at 214–215.

³² But its absence from the paradigmatic *synaxarion* is not certain. Its Greek does not seem different in character or substance from the rest of the account of the *SL*.

the differences between the *SC* and *SL* are minor and mostly about troop numbers, such as when the *SC* gives the unlikely figure of 1900 ships for the Arab fleet. The one exception to the inconsequential nature of these divergences is the mention in the *SL* that Leo offered “to give them everything”³³ and that the Arabs demanded to place a garrison in the city. It seems clear from context, as well as from the fact that the *MB* also follows the *SC* (see below), that the *SL* has made an error here and that the *SC* preserves the accurate reading, that Leo offered to “give them tribute.”³⁴ This difference, one similar letter in the Greek, is easily explained as a copyist’s error. “Tribute” also fits much better with the narrative details found in many of the other sources on this campaign throughout the varying traditions. Leo seems here to have offered, essentially, to ‘vassalize’ the Empire to the Caliphate.

Notable also are the statements about the deaths of the blasphemers, unique in this form to the *synaxaria*. Gero in his brief comment mentions the possibility that these stories were current in Constantinople during the siege itself, perhaps even spread by Leo to encourage the defenders.³⁵ This seems very possible. The emperor comes across in most sources as a master strategist, negotiator, and manipulator, able to convince Byzantines and Arabs alike to follow his carefully-crafted plans. He certainly would have been capable of using these skills in the city itself to help boost morale.

Some familiar narrative elements find their way into the *synaxaria*, such as the Bulgarian defeat of the Arabs and the ubiquitously-mentioned famine. Mentioned, too, is the report that the Romans burned a good portion of the Arab fleet, found in Theophanes’ account.³⁶ The Arabs’ wintering loca-

³³ *SL* 143: δῶναι αὐτοῖς πάντα...

³⁴ *SC* 902.17: δῶναι αὐτοῖς πάκτα...

³⁵ Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm* 183 n.23.

³⁶ C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford 1997) 545, A.M. 6208.

tions conform roughly to those found in Theophanes, and the narrative of the divine storm's sinking the retreating Arab fleet also bears a striking similarity to his account (550, A.M. 6210). Indeed, there is a great deal of overlap between this narrative and that of Theophanes. This raises the question of the sources of both the *synaxaria* and Theophanes, for the parts where he and they align are the parts where Theophanes is, in general, not aligned with the other sources which share his dependencies. The sources of Theophanes' narratives for this period have been much debated, but there is general agreement that two major sources formed the bulk of his narrative of the early days of Islam and especially of this campaign.³⁷ One is a Byzantine source shared by both Theophanes and the Patriarch Nikephoros, identified by Warren Treadgold and James Howard-Johnston as the lost work of Trajan the Patrician.³⁸ The other is often referred to as "the eastern source," a phrase used to denote narratives that Theophanes shares with Agapios of Manbij and the dependents of the lost Dionysios of Tel-Mahre: Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*.³⁹ This

³⁷ Cyril Mango's introduction in *Chronicle* xliii-c is an excellent discussion of the traditional reading of the composition of the text, followed up in W. Treadgold, *The Middle Byzantine Historians* (New York 2013) 38-77, who proposes further solutions to the problems broached by Mango. It should be noted, however, that C. Zuckerman, "Theophanes the Confessor and Theophanes the Chronicler, or, A Story of Square Brackets," *TravMém* 19 (2015) 31-52, proposes a substantial rereading of the text and its authorship.

³⁸ W. Treadgold, "Trajan the Patrician, Nicephorus, and Theophanes," in D. Bumazhnov et. al. (eds.), *Bibel, Byzanz, und Christlicher Orient* (Leuven 2011) 589-621; J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford 2010) 306-307.

³⁹ For Agapios see the English translation (rearranged) in R. Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool 2011), and the Arabic edition with French translation of A. A. Vasiliev, *Kitāb al-ʿUwan: Histoire universelle écrite par Agapios (Mahboub) de Menbidj (PO 8 [Paris 1912])* 399-547. For Michael the Syrian see J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris 1901). This French translation remains the definitive version of Michael's text outside of the Syriac.

source, too, has been debated—but is often identified as the lost work of Theophilos of Edessa.⁴⁰

This still leaves narrative elements in Theophanes that find no parallel in his co-dependents, but which do have parallels here in the *synaxaria*. Stephen Gero briefly notes that it is unlikely that the *synaxaria* simply rely on Theophanes, and Theophanes is too early to be reliant on them, so he posits that both may be reliant on the same source.⁴¹ Thus it would benefit us to examine these points of overlap. The Bulgarians' defeat of the Arabs, for instance, is not present in Nikephoros, nor likely was it in Agapios (though part of his narrative is lost in a lacuna, this is late enough in the narrative that it seems Agapios did not include anything about Bulgarians).⁴² The texts do also share a strong similarity in their accounts of where the Arabs wintered during the campaign, though much of this is also shared with Nikephoros—indicating that Trajan and the *synaxaria* likely belong to the same tradition here, drawing upon official court records.⁴³ Most striking are the accounts of the storm which destroys the retreating fleet. Nikephoros, of course, mentions a storm—but it is without any elements of

There is also a translation into English by Matti Moosa: *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo* (Teaneck 2014), and much of Michael's *Chronicle* can also be found in Hoyland, *Theophilos. The Chronicle of 1234* is found both in Hoyland, *Theophilos*, and, more completely, in Palmer, *The Seventh Century* 85–221.

⁴⁰ For the argument in favor of this see Hoyland, *Theophilos* 1–41.

⁴¹ Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm* 185 n.30.

⁴² While the narrative *is* present in a fashion in the texts dependent on Dionysius, it seems quite likely that Michael's (*Chronique* 485) and *1234's* (Palmer, *The Seventh Century* 215–216) narrative of the Bulgarians is drawn from a tradition which Theophilos did not use. This tradition centers on a certain Sharāḥīl b. Ubayda, the Arab general who fought unsuccessfully against the Bulgarians during Maslama's campaign, and is preserved in several portions of the Arabic historical tradition, notably in the history of Khalifa b. Khayyāṭ: C. Wurtzel and R. G. Hoyland, *Khalifa ibn Khayyat's History on the Umayyad Dynasty* (Liverpool 2015) 191.

⁴³ It is of course possible that the *synaxaria* draw upon Trajan; but as they are so different from Nikephoros, this seems unlikely.

divine judgment or wrath. There are also accounts of the storm in the texts dependent on Dionysius.⁴⁴ Given, however, that the Dionysian sources do not sacralize the narrative, it seems that Theophilus had mentioned the storm but had *not* given it a theological reading, as seems also to be true of Trajan.⁴⁵ Thus, we are left with two narratives which provide a strongly theological reading of this storm, both of Byzantine origin, and this seems to point to some sort of connection between the two.⁴⁶

Again, because it is unlikely that either source is relying directly upon the other, we must posit a shared source. As we know that all three of our *synaxaria* are drawing upon an earlier, common *synaxarion*, it stands to reason that these narratives entered into the *ecclesiastical* historical tradition—that is, the *synaxaria*. Thus, the most likely source for Theophanes' discussion of the Bulgarians and for his heavy theologizing of the storm which sank the Arab fleet is to be found in the same place from which the *synaxaria* drew them—that is, in the earlier *synaxarion* which served as their paradigm. It seems, then, that there were at least three major currents of tradition on Maslama's campaign current in Constantinople during the ninth century: that of the imperial court, likely via Trajan the Patrician; that of the Eastern world, likely via Theophilus of Edessa; and that of the church's interpretation of these events,

⁴⁴ Whether Agapios mentioned the storm and in what context is of course lost to us because of the lacuna.

⁴⁵ One would expect Nikephoros to have kept such a reading of the storm if it had been present in Trajan, given his high ecclesiastical position. But it admittedly is conceivable that Theophilus, as a layman of great prominence in the caliphal court, may not have done so even if it was found in his source material. Regardless, it seems likely that Theophanes' theologized reading did not originate with Theophilus or with Trajan.

⁴⁶ In the Armenian tradition of this campaign, the events also are heavily theologized. The Armenian tradition, too, seems to be drawing upon a source originally from the Greek tradition, potentially Constantinopolitan, and of almost certain ecclesiastical origin, making it more likely that such a text existed for Theophanes and the *synaxaria* to draw upon. See especially Łewond, *History of Ghevond* 109–113.

preserved most fully in these *synaxaria* but also with traces in Theophanes and other places.⁴⁷

There remain, however, two unique notices in the *synaxaria*. First, they mention the pretender whom the Arabs raise from the suburbs. This story is, as far as I have been able to tell, unique to these *synaxaria*, found in no other source tradition. While it is impossible without other evidence to rule definitively on its veracity, it does not seem entirely farfetched: Maslama had had success working with Leo until he showed himself untrustworthy and betrayed him, and the city had welcomed Leo to try to counter Arab destruction and devastation. Why should Maslama not have thought that he could do the same thing again with another Byzantine to greater effect? The notice is fascinating, too, in that it gives us a glimpse into Arab maneuverings as they found their military options declining. As is seen in several other traditions, Maslama was not one to surrender easily.⁴⁸ Finally, there is the note about the caliph Sulaymān's trying to enter the city and being struck from his horse, or at least prevented from entering. This narrative finds a parallel in the work of Constantine VII, though it is much more fully developed here.⁴⁹ Constantine, too, gives us a glimpse into the

⁴⁷ See, for example, some of the works of the Patriarch Germanos I, most notably the homily often attributed to him: V. Grumel, "Homélie de saint Germain sur la deliverance de Constantinople," *REB* 16 (1958) 183–205, at 196, where the same divine storm is described. This homily's authorship has been hotly contested, with Grumel assigning it to Germanos I and Paul Speck arguing against this, preferring to place it shortly after the Avar siege of 626: P. Speck, "Classicism in the Eighth Century? The Homily of Patriarch Germanos on the Deliverance of Constantinople," *Understanding Byzantium: Studies in Byzantine Historical Sources* (Ann Arbor 2017) 123–142. While Speck's argument is intriguing, Grumel's identification remains the most convincing.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the account in the *Chronicle of 1234*, where, in an attempt to prolong the campaign, Maslama lies to the messenger sent from 'Umar to tell him to call off the siege and return home: Palmer, *The Seventh Century* 217–218.

⁴⁹ Constantine, generally reliant on Theophanes though not here, notes

ecclesial traditions current in Constantinople, as the narrative of Sulaymān's humbling and repentance must have been found in liturgical sources or *synaxaria* during his day, and it is from here that he drew this narrative. This story cannot be factual, at least in its preserved form, as Sulaymān had been dead for nearly a year by the time the siege concluded, dying at his base in Dābiq in September 717. Even so, it is possible that some variant of this tradition has a kernel of truth to it. It could be that the liturgist has mistaken the Sulaymān who accompanied the campaign, Sulaymān b. Mu'ad, for the Caliph, a confusion that seems to occur in many accounts in various traditions—though he, too, was likely dead by the time the siege ended.⁵⁰ It is also possible that it was Maslama and not Sulaymān who entered the city, as other traditions discuss such an event,⁵¹ and

that the caliph “was awed and put to shame” by an image of Mary, and thus “he fell from his horse.” G. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De Administrando Imperio* I (Washington 1967) 93.

⁵⁰ See the *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire* I, Sulayman 1, and the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, Sulaimān ibn Mu'ad, 7160. Indeed, the *PmBZ* interprets the Sulaymān of the *synaxaria* as this Sulaymān and *not* the Caliph. The *Kitāb al-Uyūn*, however, records Sulaymān b. Mu'ad's death during the campaign itself, before the conclusion of the siege: E. W. Brooks, “The Campaign of 716–718, from the Arabic Sources,” *JHS* 19 (1899) 19–31, at 25–26.

⁵¹ Maslama tours Constantinople at the end of the account of the campaign as found in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, where we are informed that “Maslama asked Leo to bring him into the City that he might have an interview with him. He entered it with thirty horsemen and toured it for three days, admiring the monuments of the kings; and afterwards they were dismissed and left the City with nothing accomplished”: Palmer, *The Seventh Century* 64. Other, later Arab traditions record a version similar to the account of *Zuqnīn*, though in it Maslama's tour of the city is much more antagonistic—he breaks a cross from a church and carries it with him upside down—and the Ottomans adopt elements of this narrative for their own propagandistic purposes after the capture of Constantinople in the fifteenth century: N. Khalek, “Dreams of Hagia Sophia: The Muslim Siege of Constantinople in 674 CE, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī, and the Medieval Islamic Imagination,” in A. Q. Ahmed et al. (eds.), *The Islamic Scholarly Tradition: Studies in History, Law and Thought in Honor of Professor Michael Allan Cook* (Lei-

the liturgist simply applied the story to the Caliph and not to the general. This last possibility is the most likely of the three to explain the origins of this story in the *synaxaria*, though even it seems unlikely to have genuinely occurred.

While the *Menologion* of Basil II contributes little new to our discussion, it is useful, for the sake of completeness, to look briefly at the text and content.

Καὶ ἡ ἀνάμνησις τῆς γενομένης καταστροφῆς ἐλέει Θεοῦ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν.

Ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας Λέοντος⁵² τοῦ Ἰσαύρου ἦλθε πλῆθος πολὺ τῶν Σαρακηνῶν, καὶ περιεκύκλωσαν τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν, διὰ τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης, καὶ ἐβούλετο πολιορκῆσαι αὐτήν. Ἰδόντες δὲ τὴν ἀνάγκην τοῦ βασιλέως, βουλευθέντος δοῦναι αὐτοῖς πάκτα, αὐτοὶ καὶ φύλακας ἔλεγον ἐγκαταστήσαι τῇ πόλει. Ἄλλ' ὁ τοῖς ὑπερηφάνοις ἀντιτασσόμενος Κύριος, ἄπρακτον ἔδειξε τὴν βουλήν. Καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ ἄρχων αὐτῶν, ὅτι οὐδὲν ἀνύει, κἂν εἰσελθεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Βοσπορίου πόρτης ἔριππος, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀβλαβῶν εἰσελθόντων, ὁ αὐτοῦ ἵππος μόνος ὀρθοβολῶν οὐκ εἰσήρχετο. Καὶ ἀναβλέψας καὶ ἰδὼν ἐπάνω τῆς πόρτης τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Θεοτόκου, ἔγνω τοῦτο παθεῖν, διὰ τὸ βλασφημῆσαι εἰς αὐτήν. Λοιπὸν οὖν ὑπέστρεψαν⁵³ ἄπρακτοι· καὶ κατὰ τὸ Αἰγαῖον πέλαγος γενόμενοι σὺν τοῖς πλοίοις, ὑπὸ χαλάζης πυρώδους ἀπώλοντο.

Also [today] the Remembrance of the Subjugation of the Hagarenes through the mercy of God.

When Leo the Isaurian was emperor, a great multitude of Saracens came, and they encircled Constantinople, by both land and sea, and they desired to besiege it. Having seen the dire straits of the emperor, who desired to give them tribute, they said that they would also station guards in the city. But the Lord, resisting those arrogant ones, revealed their plan as vain. And their leader, seeing that he was

den 2011) 131–146. In the Armenian tradition Maslama enters the city in a fashion, as in both the works of Lewond (*History* 112–113) and Stephanos of Taron (T. Greenwood, *The Universal Chronicle of Stephanos Tarōnec' ī* [Oxford 2017] 192), the general is captured and brought before Leo himself in the capital.

⁵² My emendation. Γέοντος *PG*, which is surely an error.

⁵³ ὑπέστοεψαν *PG*, which must be either a misprint or a mistake.

accomplishing nothing, [sought] even to enter by the gate of the Bosphorus on horseback, and while the others [with him] entered without harm, his horse alone, having been stricken, did not enter. And looking up, and seeing above the gate the icon of the Theotokos, he understood that he had suffered this because of his blaspheming of her. Then they turned back, having accomplished nothing; and going upon the Aegean Sea with their ships, they were annihilated by fiery hail.

The *MB* has few divergences from the two *synaxaria*, though it is substantially abridged. It begins by noting that the Arabs came against the city “by both land and sea” (585) to besiege it. Leo desired to give them tribute, as in the *SC*, indicating again that this is the correct reading. Then the Arabs demanded to station guards in the city, but God foiled them. Sulaymān saw that the whole expedition was futile and tried to enter the city but, “his horse alone, having been stricken, did not enter” (585–587). He saw an icon of Mary upon the Bosporan gate and realized that he had blasphemed against her, yet, in contrast to the versions of the *SL* and *SC*, he does not seem to enter the city; rather, the army simply departs. But, “going upon the Aegean Sea with the ships, they were annihilated by fiery hail.” The narrative is far shorter and eliminates any real discussion of the siege, preferring to focus on several of the more miraculous elements. But it is clearly drawing upon the same narrative and the same tradition as the other *synaxaria*.

While these related *synaxaria* do not contribute much new to the history of this pivotal campaign against Constantinople, they do help us to understand the flow of ideas in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries. Their connections to Theophanes and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos establish that their roots date back to at least the early ninth century, and help fill in some of the gaps in the sources of Theophanes, our most complete Byzantine source for the era. The *synaxaria* also likely provide a unique glimpse into the mindset of the inhabitants of the city during the siege itself, where stories and rumors of the deaths and humiliations of the invaders helped to boost morale and possibly were stoked by the emperor himself. Finally, the *synaxaria* give us at least one more detail to consider about this

campaign, for they report the raising of an unnamed pretender. His existence, though unattested in other sources, seems perfectly plausible. In short, these brief narratives ought to be fully incorporated into the long list of sources on which historians draw to discuss this pivotal campaign and era.⁵⁴

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