

Was Constantine VI ‘Lassoed’ at Markellai?

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THE TWO PRE-METAPHRASTIC VERSIONS of the *Life of St Ioannikios* (d. 846)¹ present descriptions of the battle of Markellai² 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 (5). 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 (ἕνα τότε τῶν μεγιστάνων) and that the emperor honored him for his bravery (6). 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

¹ *BHG* 935–36; ed. P. J. van den Gheyn, *Acta Sanctorum*, Nov. II/1 (1894) 332–435. References to the text are by chapter number.

² A κάστρον on the Byzantine-Bulgarian border of uncertain location, but identified as Hisarlûk near Karnobad in Bulgaria by I. Dujčev, “Markellai-Marcellae: un toponyme Latin méconnu,” *Medioevo Bizantino-Slavo* III (Rome 1971) 57–62. For alternative views on the origin of the name see V. Beševliev, “Ein verkannter thrakischer Ortsname,” *Izvestija na Institut za Bulgarski ezik* 16 (1968) 75ff; G. Taverdet, “Au sujet du toponyme ‘Marcellai-Marcellae,’” *RevEtSEEUr* 7 (1969) 397ff. For discussions of the battle (20 July 792) in the sources, including the two versions of the *Life of Ioannikios*, see P. Speck, *Kaiser Konstantin VI* (Munich 1978) 244f, 665f; V. Beševliev, *Die protobulgarische Periode der bulgarischen Geschichte* (Amsterdam 1981) 231f. Both scholars mention the lassoing of the emperor only in a footnote.

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 pavillion 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 χριστιανῶν τὸ τῶν Οὐννων ἔθνος, ἤγουν τῶν Βουλγάρων. Ἀντικινεῖται δὲ κατ' αὐτῶν καὶ ὁ τότε σκηπτοῦχος καὶ εὐσεβέστατος βασιλεὺς Κωνσταντῖνος τούνομα, υἱὸς γεγυνώς τῆς μακαριωτάτης καὶ ὀρθοδόξου βασιλίσσης Εἰρήνης. Καὶ δὴ ἀμφοτέρων παραταξαμένων ἐν τόπῳ προσγορευομένῳ Μαρκέλλαις, συγκρούσεως τε μεταξὺ αὐτῶν γεναμένης, ἠττηθῆναι μὲν κατὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν καὶ νῶτα τοῖς ἐχθροῖς δοῦναι τὸ τῶν χριστιανῶν φύλον, καὶ, τῶν ἐχθρῶν ὀπίσω ἐπιδιωκόντων καὶ πτώσιν σφοδρὰν εἰσπρατομένων, ὡς καὶ αὐτὸν ἤδη τὸν βασιλέα ὑπὸ τινος μηχανήματος σωκισθέντα ὑπὸ χειρᾶς ἀλόντα ἔλκεσθαι καὶ κρατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀσεβῶν ἐκείνων. Τοῦτο θεασάμενος ὁ γενναιότατος ἐκεῖνος Ἰωαννίκιος, ζήλω τε θείῳ κινηθεὶς καὶ, προφητικῶς εἰπεῖν, περιζωσάμενος δύναμιν ἐξ ὕψους, εὐθαρσῶς εἰς μέσον αὐτῶν εἰσεπήδησε καὶ τὴν παγίδα ἐκείνην ἣν εἶπω καὶ διαβολικὴν τεχνουργίαν τῷ ξίφει τάχιστα διατέμνων τὸν μὲν βασιλέα παραδόξως διέσωσεν.⁵

³ C. Mango, "The Two Lives of St. Ioannikios and the Bulgarians," in C. Mango and O. Pritsak, edd., *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Sevčenko on his Sixtieth Birthday* (=Harvard Ukrainian Studies VII [Cambridge (Mass.) 1984]) 401 n.22.

⁴ Theoph. *Chron.* I 467f: Ἐπανέρχεται δὲ φυγὰς ἐν τῇ πόλει πολλοὺς ἀποβαλῶν.... Ἐπῆραν δὲ καὶ τὸ τοῦλδον, χρήματά τε καὶ ἵππους καὶ τὴν κόρτην μετὰ πάσης τῆς βασιλικῆς ὑπουργίας.

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 enemy was pursuing 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."

One prominent aspect of this description is Peter's fascination with the method by which the emperor is captured, *i.e.*, lassoed (σωκισθέντα).⁶ Peter describes the lasso as "some kind of device" (τινος μηχανήματος), a "snare" (παγίδα), and a "diabolical contrivance" (διαβολικὴν 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 τινος ἱμαντώδους κατασχεθέντα, and the saint frees him μαχαίρα ταχὺ διακόψας τὴν μηχανὴν αὐτῶν. The verb σωκίζειν (σοκίζειν, σοκ[κ]εύειν) and the noun σῶκος (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 περιβαλὼν τις πόρρωθεν ἔμελλεν ἐπισπάσειν, εἰ μὴ τῷ ξίφει θάπτον ἐκείνος τὸν τόνον κόψας ἔφθη διαφυγεῖν; and, with a different outcome, *Sozom. Hist. Eccl.* 7.26.8 Bidez, where a Hun tries to lasso a bishop (βρόχον παρασκευάσας ... ἀνασχὼν τὴν δεξιὰν ἀκοντίζειν ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὸ σχοινίον ἔμελλεν), but his arm is suddenly paralyzed.

⁷ For later illustrations of demons using lassos see J. R. Martin, *The Illustrations of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton 1954).

⁸ R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire* (Liverpool 1981–83) II 182, fr. 18, which describes the capture by the Goth Adaulphus of Sarus: σόκκοις (*var. lect.* σάκκοις) ἐζώγησαν. Blockley, following C. D. Gordon (*The Age of Attila: Fifth-Century Byzantium and the Barbarians* [Ann Arbor 1960] 198 n.9), favors the reading "with lassos" over "with sacks" on logical grounds.

⁹ Malalas 14.68f, a description of a single combat in 422 between Areobindus, a Gothic *comes foederatorum*, and a Persian: ὁ δὲ Ἀρεόβινδος ἐβάσταζε καὶ σωκάρην κατὰ τὸ Γοθικὸν ἔθος ... ἐσόκκευσεν αὐτὸν, καὶ κατενεγκῶν ἐκ τοῦ ἵππου ἔσφαξε; 18.170, an incursion of "Huns" into Thrace in 538/539: οἱ Ῥωμαίων στρατηγοὶ δέδωκαν νῶτα· καὶ καταδιώξαντες οἱ Οὐννοι ἐσόκκευσαν φεύγοντας τοὺς ἐξάρχους Ῥωμαίων. καὶ ὁ μὲν Γοδιλάς ἀποσπάσας τὸ ἴδιον ξίφος ἔκοψε τὸν σόκον καὶ ἐξείλησεν.

¹⁰ *PG CX* 744A, following Malalas 14.68f: ὁ δὲ Γότθος ... ἐσώκισεν αὐτὸν κατὰ τὸ Γοθικὸν ἔθος, καὶ τοῦτον ἐκ τοῦ ἵππου καταγαγὼν, αὐτίκα ἀνείλεν.

Τούτω τῷ ἔτει ἐκίνησαν οἱ Βούλγαροι, δύο ρήγες μετὰ πλήθους Βουλγάρων καὶ δρούγγου, εἰς τὴν Σκυθίαν καὶ Μυσίαν, στρατηλάτου ὄντος τῆς Μυσίας Ἰουστίνου καὶ τῆς Σκυθίας Βαουδαρίου, οἳ τινες ἐξελθόντες κατὰ τῶν Βουλγάρων συνέβαλον πόλεμον, καὶ ἐσφάγη Ἰουστίνος ὁ στρατηλάτης ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ, καὶ ἐγένετο ἀντ' αὐτοῦ Κωνσταντίνος ὁ Φλωρεντίου· καὶ ἦλθον οἱ Βούλγαροι ἕως τῶν μερῶν τῆς Θράκης, καὶ ἐξῆλθε κατ' αὐτῶν ὁ στρατηλάτης Κωνσταντίνος ... καὶ ἐν τῷ ὑποστρέφειν αὐτοὺς μετὰ χαρᾶς ὑπήνησαν αὐτοῖς ἄλλοι Βούλγαροι, καὶ ὡς ἀπὸ κόπου ὄντες οἱ στρατηλάται δέδωκαν αὐτοῖς νῶτα, καὶ κατεδίωξαν αὐτοὺς οἱ Βούλγαροι καὶ ἐσώκισαν αὐτοὺς φεύγοντας, Κωνσταντίνον καὶ τὸν Ἀκούμ καὶ Γώδιλαν, καὶ ὁ μὲν Γώδιλας μετὰ τοῦ παραμηρίου αὐτοῦ κόψας τὸν σῶκον ἐξείλησεν, ὁ δὲ Κωνσταντίνος σὺν τῷ Ἀκούμ συνελήφθησαν ζῶντες.

The main differences in the version of Malalas are that the Bulgarians are called Huns (κατὰ τῶν Οὐννων), Constantine is called Κωνσταντίολος ὁ Φλωρεντίου, and the form for “lassoed” is ἐσόκευσαν.

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 Ioanikkios 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 τοῦ πονηροῦ 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 accomodating 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," *OxDictByz* II 897.

¹² For a summary of the history of the controversy, with bibliography, see *OxDictByz* II 1388f.