

On the *Vita* of St John of Gotthia

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THE *Life* of St John of the Crimean Goths has many merits.¹ It helps to illuminate the history of the first Iconoclasm; it provides evidence for the growth of Chazar power; and like many other *βίοι* of saints, it gives an insight into society remote from the capital of the empire, thus being a precious supplement to the Constantinopolitan chroniclers.² Details in the *Life* have drawn the attention of several scholars; here the work of the anonymous hagiographer is examined as a whole for its historical worth and chronological consistency.

In chapter 1.1 (167F–168A) the origins and parentage of the saint are briefly described: the extant *Vita* throughout shows signs of being an epitome of a longer text, but the factual character of the narrative encourages trust. John, we are told, was bishop of Gotthia in the time of the emperors Constantine (V) and Leo (IV). His place of birth was Parthenitai, a harbour-mart in territory subject to the (Crimean) Goths in the land of the Tauroskythians *across* the Euxine, ἐκ τῆς περατικῆς τῶν Ταυροσκυθῶν γῆς. The hagiographer, then, was not writing in the northern coastlands of the Black Sea; he later states (1.6) that the body of the saint crossed by ship (ἀντεπέρασεν) from Amastris for burial at Parthenitai (on the southern coast of the Crimea), but it does not follow that he was writing in Amastris. He was at work on the *Life* after 815 and before the restoration of Orthodoxy in 843, since he prayed to the saint for protection against the

¹ AA.SS. June VII (1867), June 26, 162–72, ed. with Latin transl. and Greek text from *Cod. Vat.* 655 (s. XVI) ff.378–81. Another ms.: *Vat.* 1667, ff.257^v–261^r (s. X, according to F. Halkin, “Le Synaxaire grec de Christ Church à Oxford,” *AnalBoll* 66 [1948] 58–90, at 82 n.1). ms. *Ath.Philotheou* 8 (s. XI) gives the *Vita* at 22 June (Halkin, *loc.cit.*).

² P. Peeters, “Les Khazars dans la Passion de S. Abo de Tiflis,” *AnalBoll* 52 (1934) 21–56, esp. 39–43. A. A. Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1936) 89–96. I. Ševčenko, “Hagiography in the Iconoclast Period,” 115 and n.14 (bibliography), in *Iconoclasm*, edd. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin (Birmingham 1977). Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica* I² (Berlin 1958) “Quellen” 565–66. F. Halkin, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 80–83. Chr. Loparev, *VizVrem* 18 (1911) 15.

harmful company of iconoclasts (2.10, 171c):³ thus the biographer, like the bishop, was a firm iconodule.

The parents of holy John were Leon and Photeine. Leon's father came from a place on the coast of Pontus Polemoniacus call Βοῶν (ἐκ τοῦ λεγομένου Βοῶνος τοῦ κατὰ τὸ Πολεμόνιον τοῦ Πόντου κειμένου ὑπῆρχε, 168A)⁴; he had been an ensign (βανδοφόρος)⁵ in *thema* Armeniak. The regimental antecedents befitted a saint who distinguished himself in battle against the Chazars (1.5). John, having been born in consequence of the prayer of Photeine, was destined to the religious life.

An earlier bishop of Gotthia, who had attended the synod of Hiereia in 754, had afterwards been rewarded by the emperor Constantine V for his support of Iconoclasm with appointment as metropolitan of Herakleia in Thrace. The Orthodox people of Gotthia, however, rejected the findings of the synod (1.2), and being now without a shepherd, they promoted the holy John to be their pastor. To obtain consecration John could not go to the Iconoclast patriarch in Constantinople. He went first to Jerusalem to visit the holy places; he would also have conferred with Melkite dignitaries there. John stayed in the Holy Land for three years; so he returned thence about 758. Next the people of Gotthia sent him to the throne of the Iberian *katholikos*, who ordained him bishop (1.2, 168B).⁶ The consecration took place at Mtskheta, as we learn from the Georgian *Life* of St George the Hagiorite, who took pride in the fact that in the age of imperial Iconoclasm the Iberians had remained Orthodox.⁷

Determined to foster resistance to Iconoclasm outside the Empire and no doubt encouraged by iconodule exiles in Gotthia, John sent his deacon and disciple Longinus with a letter to Jerusalem urging the patriarch, whose name is not given in the *Vita*, to convene a synod

³ See Ševčenko, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 115.

⁴ The printed text in *AA.SS* has *Βοβοτροῦ*. The correction is due to W. Tomaschek, *Die Goten in Taurien* (Vienna 1881) 22. *Βοῶν*, an ἀκρωτήριον καὶ χωρίον, lay between Polemōnion and Kotyoros: *Peripl.Pont.Eux.* 30–32 (GGM I 409). For the district see A. A. M. Bryer, *DOPapers* 29 (1975) 131.

⁵ Correct *Κανδοφόρος* in the printed text at 168A. The rank *βανδοφόρος* is found in the *arithmos* and the *hikanatoi* in addition to *thema* Armeniak: see N. Oikonomidès, *Les Listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris 1972) 331–32.

⁶ See also *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* p.772, 32 [*Propylaeum ad AA.SS. Nov.*], ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels 1902).

⁷ Para. 51, transl. P. Peeters, *AnalBoll* 36/37 (1917–19) 117.

and asking for a definition of faith to be sent to him in Gotthia. In answer to John's request the *ῥοσ* contained excerpts from the Old and New Testaments and testimonies of the Fathers concerning holy images, venerable relics and the intercession of saints. The hagiographer contrives to suggest not only that the synod assembled at the prompting of John his hero but also that the definition of faith was sent specially to the bishop of Gotthia. In fact this *synodikon* was widely distributed: a copy directed to Pope Paul I had reached Rome by 12 August 767, and a Latin and a Greek version of it were sent on to the king of the Franks, Pippin, by the usurping Pope Constantine II during the debate in the West concerning Holy Images.⁸ The *ῥοσ πίστεως* had been sent out by Theodore the patriarch of Jerusalem with the approval of the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch and many eastern metropolitans and bishops. Not only did the Easterners defend the veneration of images, they also expressed approval of relics and the intercession of saints, in opposition to the more rigorous ecclesiastical policies the emperor Constantine V enforced during the 760's.⁹ John later sent a copy of the *τόμος* of faith to Paul, the patriarch at Constantinople (1.3, 168B). Paul was patriarch from 780 to 784, when the iconophile party was gaining in strength in the capital. The *synodikon* of Theodore was also read at the second Council of Nicaea in 787;¹⁰ thus the work of Theodore and his Synod *ca* 766 helped to prepare for the restoration of images to the empire more than twenty years later.

After Theodore's *ῥοσ* in the *τόμος* had been sent on to the patriarch Paul, the Augusta Eirene invited John of Gotthia to visit Constantinople. He came to the capital and, having spoken openly in praise of

⁸ Mansi, *Concilia* XII 680–81. E. Amann, *Histoire de l'Eglise VI, L'Epoque carolingienne* (Paris 1947) 35. P. Jaffé and W. Wattenbach, *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum I*² (Leipzig 1885) 283–84, no.2375 (A.D. 767): "Nunclat [Constantinus], Theodori, patriarchae Hierosolymitani (quocum Alexandrinus et Antiochenus patriarchae consentiant) epistolam synodicam, Paulo inscriptam, die duodecimo 'praeteriti Augusti mensis quintae indictionis' sibi redditam esse; cuius mittit exempla, Latine Graeceque confecta, 'ut agnoscat [Pippinus], qualis fervor sanctarum imaginum orientalibus in partibus cunctis Christianis immineat'."

⁹ G. Ostrogorsky, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites* (Breslau 1929) 33 n.1.

¹⁰ Actio III (Mansi, XII 1135c–46c). Veneration of images is praised in the *synodikon* (1143D–46D); the powers of saints and their relics are also acknowledged (1143BC). Ostrogorsky, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.9), asserts that the letter of Theodore sent on by John of Gotthia to the patriarch Paul (IV) was different from the *synodikon* of Theodore read at the Council of Nicaea II.

images, returned home. This happened before Paul's retirement to the *μονή τῶν Φλώρου* on 31 August 784.¹¹

After the resignation of the patriarch, the *Life* mentions the accession of Tarasios and briefly describes events before and during the second Council of Nicaea (1.4, 168c). In 1.5 we return to the history of Gotthia. "Thereafter the holy bishop John with his own people was betrayed to the nobles of the Chazars because he had joined forces with the lord of Gotthia and his nobles (*ἄρχοντες*) and all the people to oppose domination of their land by the Chazars. The chagan of the Chazars had sent a force to take the Gothic fort called Doros¹² and had placed there a garrison (*φύλακας ταξάτους*) to protect it. The holy bishop drove out the guards with his own people and gained control of the passes. But when the people saw that their chief priest had been betrayed by one village (*ὑπὸ ἐνὸς χωρίου*), they fled to the chagan, who spared the lord of Gotthia but put to death (*ἐκούρασεν*) seventeen innocent slaves. The holy man was placed under guard, but he ran away and was able to cross over to Amastris, the city beloved of Christ. After four years there he was told of the chagan's death and said, 'I too depart after forty days to plead my cause together with my persecutor before God my judge'." (169D).

The bishop's spirited fight against the Chazars' penetration of Crimean Gotthia did not meet with universal approval in the countryside, since he was betrayed. There is no sign that the villagers who handed over the holy man were iconoclasts, but it may well be that some Christians in Gotthia or elsewhere in the peninsula did not wish to oppose the Chazars.

The *Life* of St John gives no hint that in the 780's or at the time of writing Chazars had already been converted to Judaism: that there had been hopes in John's lifetime for the conversion of Chazaria to Christianity is suggested by the eighth century "Ikonoklastennotiz" preserved in *Paris.gr.* 1555A.¹³ The list was not composed as a unity, and it can hardly have been an official document as it stands; but the

¹¹ Theophanes 1.457, 13–17 de Boor.

¹² Possibly at Eski-Kermen, but the massif of Mankup is more impressive. Compare Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 49–52.

¹³ C. de Boor, *ZfKirchengeschichte* 12 (1891) 519–34. See also H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich 1959) 150. G. I. Konidares, *Αἱ μητροπόλεις καὶ ἀρχιεπισκοπαὶ τοῦ οἰκουμενικοῦ πατριαρχείου καὶ ἡ "Τάξις" αὐτῶν*, I (Athens 1934) 83–85, proposed to date the composition of the entire list, including the Gothic entries, between 733 and 746.

entries concerning the Gothic eparchy reflect Byzantine concern with the Crimean peninsula and its hinterland in the mid and late eighth century. *ὁ Δώρου* appears as metropolitan of the eparchy of Gotthia (p.521, 45 de Boor) and again at the head of seven bishoprics (p.531, 645–53): *λη'. Ἐπαρχία Γοθθίας, α'. Δόρος μητρόπολις. β'. ὁ Χοτζήρων. γ'. ὁ Ἀσπήλ. δ'. ὁ Χουάλης. ε'. ὁ Ὀνογούρων. ς'. ὁ Ρετέγ. ζ'. ὁ Οὔννων. η'. ὁ Τυμάταρχα.* The bishops in the second, fifth and seventh places are those of ἔθνη, Chazars, Onogours and ‘Huns’. A note added at the end of the list explains that Ἀσπήλ is a river and fort of Chazaria (p.534, 821). Rheteg is unidentified. The fort of Tymatarcha (Tamatarcha) lay in the Taman peninsula opposite to Bosporos.¹⁴ The name Χουάλη resembles the old Russian name of the Caspian Sea, *Khaviliskoye*, so Chouale may have been situated on the Chazarian coast of the Caspian.¹⁵ The note at the end of the “Ikonoklastennotiz” also states *ὁ Χοτζήρων κύνεγγυς Φούλων καὶ τοῦ Χαρακίου ἐν ᾧ λέγεται τὸ μάβρον ναιρῶν. Χοτζήρων* in the list and *Χοτζήρων* in the note mean Chazars—by whom St John of Gotthia was kept prisoner at Phoullai (2.9, 171b). When the note was composed, they had not yet taken Phoullai but perhaps had advanced close to the place. *τὸ μάβρον ναιρῶν* ‘Black Water’ is a translation of *Χαρακίου*, a rendering of Turkic *Kara Su*. The position of Phoullai has not been identified, and it is doubtful that Doros was regularly the seat of a metropolitan in the eighth century.

It has been suggested that because Constantine the Philosopher converted the people of Phoullai to Christianity in 861 or 862, the list of bishoprics in the Gothic eparchy in *Paris.gr.* 1555A was not completed before that date.¹⁶ The argument is not cogent, because the Life of St John of Gotthia (1.5) shows that Christians had fled to the chagan of the Chazars *ca* 785, and John himself bore witness to the faith at Phoullai (2.9). Missionary activity at Phoullai in the 860’s does not exclude the presence of Christians there, and elsewhere in Chazaria, late in the eighth century. The *Passio* of St Abo of Tiflis, who died in 786, states that when the saint visited Chazaria there were

¹⁴ Const.Porph. *De admin.imp.* 42.92 Moravcsik/Jenkins.

¹⁵ Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 99.

¹⁶ G. Vernadsky, *Byzantion* 15 (1940/41) 69–70. For Constantine’s visit to Phoullai and the pagan worship of an oak tree there, see F. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs, SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick [N.J.] 1970) 69.

many towns and villages in which men lived in safety according to the law of Christ.¹⁷

Paris.gr. 1555A, then, provides evidence of an intention to create bishoprics for the Christians in Chazaria under a metropolitan at Doros; the holy John naturally objected to the Chazars' occupation of the metropolis. In the 780's, however, the evangelizing of Chazaria was less urgent than the need to defend Christian territory in Gotthia. So the bishop took a leading part in the resistance.

The bishops of Cherson, Sougdaia(i) (Surozh) and Bosphoros are all listed as autocephalous within the eparchy of Zechia in the so-called "Ikonoklastennotiz" (p.522, 85–87). The metropolitan of Doros, in contrast, is said to be subject to Constantinople (p.521, 44). John's episcopal neighbours were not subject to him; we do not know how their attitudes to the Chazars' growing power differed from his, though an iconodule exile in Cherson in the time of the emperor Constantine V is said to have become a bishop in Chazaria;¹⁸ nor are we informed why the treacherous villagers betrayed John. Another obstacle to the understanding of local Crimean politics of the 780's is the story that the bishop himself was held responsible for the loss of τὸ κάστρον τῆς Γοτθίας, that is Doros, to the Chazars (*Vita* 2.9, 171B); the impious accuser is said to have fallen at once to his death from his horse, but the accusation is another sign that the saint had his critics in Gotthia.

The *Vita* of St John (2.4) mentions the Council of Nicaea II in 787. The saint, however, did not attend it, and his absence is to be explained by his detention amongst the Chazars at Phoullai.¹⁹ The imprisoned cleric had been replaced in the bishopric of Gotthia by a certain Niketas, whose representative at the Council was a monk Cyril.²⁰

¹⁷ Peeters, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 25.

¹⁸ See *Menologium Basilii*, PG 117, 181; and GRBS 18 (1977) 100–01 n.14.

¹⁹ Peeters, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 41.

²⁰ Mansi, *Concilia* XII 994c. Κυρίλλου μοναχοῦ καὶ τὸν τόπον ἐπέχοντος Νικήτα ἐπισκόπου Γοτθίας. See also 1154A and XIII 366D, 384B. At 1095A in the Greek text Cyril is incorrectly called bishop of Gotthia, but the Latin version has *Cyrillus ex persona sanctissimi episcopi Gothiae*. At 994E the bishop of Sougdaia is said to be Theophanes, but elsewhere in the acts of the Council he is called Stephanos (1096E, XIII 137E, 366D, 384B). This Stephanos is not likely to be the famous St Stephen of Surozh, for according to the Slavonic *Vita* of St Stephen he was first appointed to the Crimean bishopric by the patriarch Germanos (ch.12 pp. 87–88, ed. Vassilievskij, *op.cit.* [*infra* n.22]). Germanos ceased to be patriarch in 730, some 57 years before the Council of Nicaea II. There was also present from the Crimea Euthymios, deacon and monk, notary of the bishop of Gotthia (Mansi XIII 21B). J. Darrouzès has studied the names in the lists of signatories at the Council of 787 (*REByz* 33 [1975] 5–76).

The appointment of a successor is the reason why John, having escaped from Phoullai, did not return to Gotthia but instead crossed to Amastris.

On the fortieth day after news of the chagan's death had come to Amastris, John gave up his spirit to God (1.6, 169D). The corpse, having been placed in a sarcophagus, was conducted to the ship by George, bishop of Amastris, and the citizens. The saint died on 26 June; on 27 June the ship sailed; and the sarcophagus reached the monastery of the Holy Apostles at Parthenitai during the all-night vigil on 29 June. John, the founder of the monastery at his birthplace, had given it fine buildings, holy vessels and numerous books; and he had installed there many monks (1.6, 169E).

Excavations of the *Petropavlovsky monastery* at Parthenit were conducted in 1871: the earliest remains were alleged to date from the eighth century, and a Greek inscription of 1427 found in the excavations mentioned that John, "archbishop of the city Theodoro and all Gotthia," had erected the Church of the Apostles Peter and Paul.²¹

The date of John's death cannot be earlier than the appointment of George to the bishopric of Amastris. The appointment can hardly be placed earlier than *ca* 790.²² The stay of John in Amastris lasted some four years and forty days until his death; and since he was in captivity about 787 at Phoullai, his death cannot well be set earlier than 791.

The second part of the *Vita* of St John is concerned with miracles. Here too there are details having historical significance. The deacon and pupil of John, Longinus, on his way back from Jerusalem was about to be crucified by the Saracens, but the saint appeared before his eyes (*ὀφθαλμοφανῶς*), and in no time at all the protonotary of the emir paid five hundred *milliaresia* and had him freed (the protonotary could have been a Melkite) (2.7, 170F); afterwards the deacon was imprisoned, but he had only to pray to the saint for the irons to fall from him. Later, when some of his disciples were about to be put to death by the chagan, the holy man, then at Amastris, ensured—through prayer so intense that he was lifted a cubit above the ground—that the chagan recognized the innocence of the prisoners and freed them (171A). In the church at the emporium Kourasaitoi the saint was seen to converse with the dead in their tombs (2.8, 171A). On another

²¹ For D. M. Strukov's excavations, see Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 93–94.

²² So M. Vassilievskij, *Žitija svv. Georgija Amastriskago i Stefana Surožskago* (St Petersburg 1893) xx–xxvi, followed by Peeters, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 40–41. (Ševčenko, *art.cit.* [*supra* n.2], argues that Ignatios was the author of the *Vita* of George.)

occasion, when he was a prisoner of the Chazars at Phoullai, he cured the diseased child of the lord of Phoullai (2.9, 171B).²³ These stories show that the saint even during his lifetime enjoyed a great repute in Gotthia and elsewhere for potent holiness. The *Vita* illustrates the truth that the Byzantines (including Orthodox people living beyond the imperial frontiers) lived in a world where miracles could happen and did happen; it shows, too, that “belief in miracles is a fact of history which the student ignores at his peril.”²⁴ Writing in the age of Iconoclasm, St John’s biographer brings us as close to the spiritual as to the political life of a provincial Orthodox society; thus both parts of his work amply reward historians.

It remains only to set out the consistent chronology provided by the *Vita*:

ca 700–725	Leon and Photeine at Parthenitai.
ca 755	Bishop of Gotthia appointed metropolitan of Herakleia.
ca 756–758	Three-year visit of John to the Holy Land.
ca 760	Consecration of John by Iberian <i>katholikos</i> .
ca 766	Mission of Longinus to Jerusalem. <i>Horos</i> sent to John by Theodore, patriarch of Jerusalem.
Between 780 and 784	<i>Horos</i> of Theodore sent by John to patriarch Paul at Constantinople. Visit of John to Constantinople.
ca 785	War against Chazars. Recapture of Doros. John betrayed to Chazars.
787	Second Council of Nicaea. Cyril, representative of bishop Niketas, present (John in captivity at Phoullai); Gregory bishop of Amastris present. ²⁵

²³ His title would have been *Τουδοῦνος*. Compare *Τουδοῦνον τὸν ἄρχοντα Χερσῶνος ὡς ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ Χαγάνου ὄντα* (Theoph. 1.378, 3–5 de Boor). Tomaschek, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 20, refers to *Etym.Magn. s.v. τούδουνοι. οἱ τοποτηρηταὶ παρὰ Τούρκοις* [p.763, 24 Gaisford].

²⁴ N. H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London 1955) 248.

²⁵ Mansi, *Concilia* XII 997A. Note that Amastris did not become the seat of a metropolitan until the emperor Nikephoros I promoted his friend the bishop George (*Vita S. Georgii Amastreni* 6 (21) [AA.SS. Feb. III 277]): before that the bishopric had been subject to the metropolis in Gangra; there had been difficulties between George and his metropolitan. Consistently the “*Ikonoklastennotiz*” (de Boor, *art.cit.* [*supra* n.13] 526, nos. 343 and 345) has ὁ Ἀμάστριδος under *Γάγγρα μητρόπολις* in the eparchy of Paphlagonia.

- ca* 787 Escape of John to Amastris.
ca 790 George appointed bishop of Amastris.
ca 791 Body of John sent to Parthenitai for burial in
 Church of Holy Apostles.

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