

The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem

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COISLIN 303, a tenth or eleventh-century manuscript of Palestinian provenance now in Paris, includes *Lives* of Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian saints. Amongst the *Lives* is a *Passio* in Greek of sixty Roman officers said to have been put to death in Palestine in the reign of Leo III.¹ The text states that the work was translated from Syriac at the prompting of a monk called John, who had read the original, as he himself remarks (*κυριετι ανέγνων*, ch.12). The name of the translator is not given. Nor are we told the name of the original author.

According to the *Passio* (ch.3) the Arab calif Suleiman son of Abdulmalik invaded Romania with a mighty army (the literal rendering of his name as *Σολομών ο του Ανακτοδούλου* is consistent with the claim of the *Passio* to be a translation into Greek). The army of the calif was opposed by the emperor Leo III (here is a confusion with one of the Saracen generals then called Suleiman, since the emperor Leo and the calif Suleiman never faced each other in battle).² Leo surrounded the invader with water diverted from springs near and far (ch.4):³ Suleiman is not said in the *Passio* to have commanded a navy

¹ Fol. 177–81, edited by A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Pravoslavni Palestinski Sbornik* 12 (1892) 1–7. There is a transcription of the Paris text by Papebroch in *Brussels Ms Bibl. roy.* 18864–74 (see *AnalBoll* 13 [1894] 57). A Latin translation of the transcription is given in *AA.SS.* Oct. ix 360–362 (21 October). *Coislin. 303* is described by R. Devreesse, *Le Fonds Coislin* (Paris 1945) 286–88.

² It is necessary to distinguish the calif from the Solomon or Suleiman who brought the Arab fleet to Constantinople in 717 and from the Solomon who commanded the Arab army before Amorion: see E. W. Brooks, *JHS* 19 (1899) 26 n.1, on Theoph. 1.395,23 de Boor, and Nikephoros, *Hist.* p.53,16 de Boor (the naval commander), and Theoph. 1.386,28 de Boor (the general in Asia Minor).

³ According to S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* (Louvain 1973) 86, the *Passio* states that Leo ordered water to be stored up (before the siege of Constantinople) when he heard news of the Arabs' approach, but the Greek cannot be interpreted in that sense: Leo surrounds the enemy with a flood, *γνοὺς δὲ ὁ τῆς ὀσίας μνήμης Λέων ἐκέλευσε παντάχοθεν τῇ ἐπιχύσει τῶν ὑδάτων ἐκ τῶν πορρωτέρω καὶ σύνεγγυς ἐπιρρεουσῶν κρηνῶν πολιορκῆσαι τῷ πλήθει τῶν ὑδάτων τὸν δαίλιον* (p.2,31–3,3 P.-K.). Later the waters are withdrawn, *τότε δὴ ἐπισχόντες παντάχοθεν τὰ ὕδατα τὸν τύραννον τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων χώρας ἀπέλυσαν ἀνευ ὀχληρᾶς ἐπιθέσεως καὶ βλαπτικῆς ἐπιχειρήσεως* (p.3,23–25 P.-K.).

in addition to an army, and it is hard to connect this legend with any part of the sea and land campaigns of 717 to 718 at Constantinople; nor does the legend find a place in the complicated dealings of Leo as general of *thema Anatolikon* in Asia Minor with the Saracens at Amorion and elsewhere in 716. The dramatic date of the supposed encirclement by water must be before Suleiman's death on 22 September 717.

In desperation Suleiman arranged for a subtle retainer, a eunuch, to negotiate with Leo. When a truce to last seven years had been arranged, the surrounding waters were checked, and the Saracen army withdrew. Thereafter merchants from both sides crossed the frontier, and pilgrims were able to come to the Holy Land "as deer run to springs of water" (ch.5). There is no other evidence for the alleged truce, but if the author of the Syriac original imagined the truce as beginning with the defeat of the Saracen expedition to Constantinople in 718 (later in fact than the death of Suleiman), he thought the peace to have lasted till about 725. During the years 718 to 725 there was an attack by Hisam six years after the defeat, according to Theophanes (1.403,27–28); and in Arab historians there is evidence of frequent campaigning after 718: Ṭabari, for example, mentions a raid in the year 102 (12 July 720 to 30 June 721) on the Romans in Armenia (*i.e.* θέμα Ἀρμενιάκον), another on the Romans in 103, and another in 104.⁴ All of these campaigns come within the period of the supposed seven-year truce. The truce, then, has no historical reality: it is an invention of the hagiographer.

In the seventh year seventy Roman officers (ἄρχοντες) came under arms with a large bodyguard to Jerusalem. They visited the holy places, gave alms to the poor, and travelled to the monasteries of the wilderness, before setting out for home. They came to the spring of Koloneia three miles from the city, but unknown to them the period of the truce was complete (ch.6)—perhaps they were imagined to have had difficulty in reconciling the Arab and Roman calendars.

Envious Arabs, says the hagiographer, pursued the pilgrims and dragged them off to prison in Jerusalem. When the governor of Palestine at Caesarea had been alerted, the captives were transferred to the prison there. News of the capture having been sent on to the πρωτοσύμβουλος (here, as in Theophanes, the word means 'calif'), orders came that if the Roman officers apostatized, they were to lose

⁴ See Brooks, *JHS* 18 (1898) 197–98.

only their weapons and horses; but if they kept their faith they were to be tortured and crucified (ch.7).

Three of the Romans, George, John and Julian, asked to be killed in front of the gates of Jerusalem, near the tower of David. Fifteen *nomismata* from their possessions were paid to John, a pious man of Caesarea, who undertook to buy a plot of land at Jerusalem for the martyrs' burial (ch.9). Three of the seventy Romans died on the way from Caesarea. Seven apostatized, only to catch dysentery the same day; they were soon all dead (ch.10). When the remaining sixty (including George, John and Julian) had died for their faith, John of Caesarea bought a plot near the Church of St Stephen outside the gates of Jerusalem. There, according to the *Passio*, the people of Jerusalem celebrated the martyrs' anniversary every 21 October (ch.11).

Their relics, venerated in the cemetery, effected cures. John, the humble monk who arranged for the translation of the *Passio* into Greek, had seen the relics and had spoken with persons who had been healed. Thus the martyrs were thought to possess the 'hagiographical co-ordinates', as Père Delehaye called them,⁵ of anniversary and of tomb-cult, which are distinguishing marks of sainthood.

If there was a seven-year truce, it is odd that the pilgrims travelled so heavily armed. If, however, they were caught on a raiding expedition, there was no truce. In fact, as we have seen, there was no truce. The difficulty in the alleged truce was felt by a monk Symeon, the composer of the later, longer *Passio* of the Sixty-Three Martyrs.⁶ In the longer *Passio* no truce is mentioned: instead the officers take a convenient opportunity for their pilgrimage—*εὐθέτου δὲ καιροῦ δραξάμενοι* (ch.4). The longer *Passio* offers nothing of historical significance. The placing of the Arab *ἀρχηγός* in Egypt (ch.8) points to a time of composition long after the eighth century. The martyrs are said to come from Ikonion in the time of Leo III, who is castigated as an Iconoclast (ch.2). The alleged names of all the martyrs are supplied (ch.29). Numerous miracles occur before their deaths. The anniversary 21 October is mentioned.⁷

If the truce is a fiction, is the multiple martyrdom also unhistorical?

⁵ See P. Peeters, "Le R. P. Hippolyte Delehaye" at p. xxvi in H. Delehaye, *Les Légendes hagiographiques*⁴ (Brussels 1955).

⁶ A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Pravoslavni Palestinski Sbornik* 19 (1907) 136–63.

⁷ For a comparison of the two *martyria* see Chr. Loparev, *VizVrem* 19 (1912) 1–10.

None of the historical sources notes such a massacre of Byzantine ἄρχοντες ca 726, as Gero remarked.⁸ Having dismissed the possibility that the shorter *Passio* in Greek is a Byzantine pseudograph, he argued, with evident correctness, that the work was written originally in Syriac in a Palestinian milieu by a Christian. This *dhimmi* was full of hatred towards the Saracens and their “tyrant” Suleiman. In contrast he admired Leo III intensely for being “a godloving and pious emperor” who ruled over a “most Christian people.” He was “of holy memory”—words which cannot have been written or translated before Leo III’s death. The author revealed no hostility towards imperial Iconoclasm; he wrote as a subject of the Saracens, but his loyalty was directed towards the Roman emperor. Filled with hatred of the Moslems, he invented the truce and the anniversary and the martyrdom.

There had indeed been sixty (or sixty-three) soldiers martyred by the Arabs in Palestine, and ten (or twelve) of them were buried at the shrine of St Stephen the Protomartyr at Jerusalem. But they died in the reign of Heraclius, not of Leo III. The evidence is a Latin *Passio* poorly translated from Greek.⁹

According to the Latin *Passio* the city of Gaza was compelled to yield to the Arabs’ siege in the twenty-seventh year of Heraclius.¹⁰ In the capitulation the sixty soldiers were taken prisoner. Their lives were promised to them by the Arab commander Ambrus (Amr) on condition that they apostatized. They refused, and after thirty days in prison they were taken to Eleutheropolis, where they stayed for two months. (A lacuna follows, because we are told that the captives were brought back to Eleutheropolis, but we are not informed that they were taken from the place.) Three months later the soldiers were sent to Jerusalem. There the patriarch Sophronios comforted them. They again refused to apostatize ten months later. The heads of ten

⁸ *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 178.

⁹ Ms. St Peter’s Basilica, Rome, A5 fol. 222–23^v, *saec.* IX or X, published by H. Delehaye, “*Passio Sanctorum Sexaginta Martyrum*,” *AnalBoll* 23 (1904) 289–307. H.-G. Beck (*Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* [Munich 1959] 506–07) refers to this article but fails to make clear that the Latin *Passio* describes a joint martyrdom in the time of Heraclius, not of Leo III; Beck correctly states that the Latin *Passio* is more to be trusted than the Greek.

¹⁰ This implies a date for the fall of Gaza later than August or September 634, to which the event is conventionally assigned: the year-number in the *Passio* may be corrupt (*cf.* Delehaye, *art.cit.* [*supra* n.9] 291). Theophanes says that the whole territory of Gaza was taken by the Arabs already in Year 23 of Heraclius (1.336,16).

of them were then cut off at the command of the local emir acting on the instructions of Ambrus on 11 November of Indiction 13.¹¹ Sophronius buried them before founding the 'oratorium' of St Stephen.¹² The *Passio* lists twelve, not ten, names of martyred soldiers here (ch.2).

The survivors were brought before Ambrus at Eleutheropolis a month later. Since they remained steadfast, orders were given to cut them down (fifty-one names are listed). The date is given as Thursday 17 December, Heraclius Year 28, Indiction 13 (again there is corruption in the year-numbers, and possibly in the weekday also).¹³ The bodies were bought for 3,000 solidi. After their burial the Church of the Holy Trinity was built at Eleutheropolis.

The total number of martyrs is not certain—there were sixty or sixty-three (10+ 50 or 12+ 51)—but the story is coherent and simple; miracles are lacking; and there is a secure historical context. If there were sixty Palestinian soldier-martyrs, then they died, not all of them at Jerusalem, soon after the Arab conquest, towards the end of Heraclius' reign. In the Syriac *Passio* translated for the lowly monk John into Greek some time after the death of Leo III, the Melkite propagandist converted the historical martyrdoms of *ca* 637 into fictitious martyrdoms of *ca* 726; he invented the seven-year truce; he transferred the burial of all sixty to Jerusalem; and he adopted a single anniversary, 21 October¹⁴ instead of 11 (or 6) November at Jerusalem and 17 December at Eleutheropolis.

The Greek *Passio*, then, like its Syriac original, is almost devoid of historical content. But it does not entirely lack historical value. Through it we look into the embittered world of the *dhimmis*, who

¹¹ *Passio* ch.2. Both numbers may be corrupt: see Delehayé (*art.cit.* [*supra* n.9] 291 and 298), who proposed on the evidence of Usuard, Adon and other martyrologia to change *die undecima* to *die sexta*.

¹² Sophronios died in Heraclius' Year 26 according to Theophanes (1.399.30), but the chronographer there combines events of more than one year. It is customary to place the death of Sophronios on 11 March 638 (*Vita*, PG 87 (3) 3144, following AA.SS. March II (March 11) [1865] 70); if that is correct, the ten martyrs at Jerusalem died not later than 11 November 637. Compare Delehayé, *art.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 291–92.

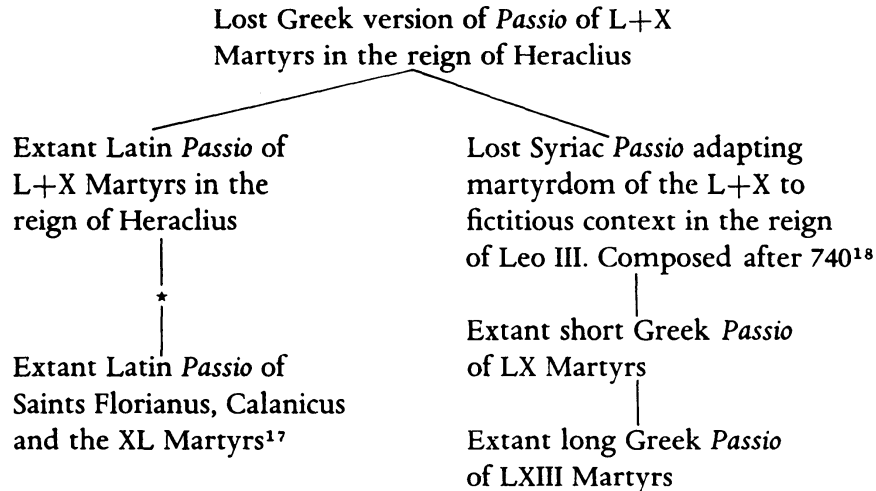
¹³ Delehayé (*art.cit.* [*supra* n.9] 291) considers 17 December 638 possible. If that is correct, then the death of Sophronios would have occurred not earlier than 11 March 639. These and other chronological problems connected with the Arab conquest of Palestine cannot be discussed here.

¹⁴ The date 21 October is found in some Greek *menaia* as the anniversary of the Martyrdom of the Sixty of Jerusalem. See AA.SS Octob. XI (1869) 253 [J. Martinov, *Annus Ecclesiasticus Graeco-Slavicus*].

a century or so after the conquest still hoped for a Christian liberator to come from Romania. The anonymous pseudepigrapher lived in a harsher and more truculent society than that of St John Damascene, who had enjoyed the patronage of califs and served them before he retired to a monastery. From the safety of the Saracen dominions John, the urbane Greek-speaking Arabized Syrian Mansour, confidently attacked the heterodoxy of Leo III's imperial Iconoclasm.¹⁵ In those same dominions our anonymous Syriac author, loathing the Saracen conqueror, invented an atrocity in order to give vent to his hatred.

In some Syro-Palestinian Christians such hatred turned to fanaticism: one of them was St Peter of Capitolias, who deliberately won martyrdom by abusing the rulers and the religion of the Saracens.¹⁶ Our anonymous hagiographer, however, did not seek a martyrdom for himself; instead he borrowed one for the benefit of his readers.

The connexions between the *martyria* can now be set out:



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¹⁵ For the family background of St John Damascene see P. Peeters, *Le Tréfonds orientale de l'hagiographie byzantine* (Brussels 1950) 214.

¹⁶ P. Peeters, "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias (†13 Janvier 715)," *AnalBoll* 57 (1939) 299-333.

¹⁷ A text of this derivative composition is given by Père Delehaye, *art.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 303-05; for the number XL see Delehaye p.297.

¹⁸ The preamble (chs. 1 and 2) with its quotations from the Greek vulgate cannot have been in the Syriac original (Gero, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.3] 176-77 n.3). The colophon (ch.12) was added by John the monk. The Syriac original is represented in the Greek by chs.3 to 11 inclusive.