Captives and Refugees. The Forced Migration of the Inhabitants of the Byzantine Eastern Frontier during the 5th–7th Centuries in Light of Byzantine-Slavic Hagiographical Texts

Zofia A. Brzozowska
University of Lodz, Faculty of Philology, Department of Slavic Philology, ul. Pomorska 171/173, 90-236 Łódź, Polska/Poland, zofia.brzozowska@uni.lodz.pl

Follow this and additional works at: https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/sceranea

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.18778/2084-140X.11.26
Available at: https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/sceranea/vol11/iss1/26

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact journals@uni.lodz.pl.
Captives and Refugees. The Forced Migration of the Inhabitants of the Byzantine Eastern Frontier during the 5th–7th Centuries in Light of Byzantine-Slavic Hagiographical Texts*

Abstract. This article is devoted to the image of a social situation in the eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire during the 5th–7th century, which is to be found in the East Christian hagiographical texts. They cannot be treated as a completely reliable source of information, due to exaggerations and simplifications typical for the genre. On the other hand, they testify a long-lasting and vital literary tradition – they were circulating in the Byzantine Commonwealth during the Middle Ages, were translated to several languages (inter alia to the Church Slavic). They formed the basis for stereotypes – specific for the Medieval European imagination – that the eastern frontier of the Empire was rather dangerous territory, its neighbors (Persians, Arabs) were unpredictable pagans and the Christian inhabitants of the region ought to be called their innocent victims.

Keywords: Church Slavic literature, Old Rus’ literature, Byzantine hagiography, Arabs, Persians

In this article I would like to present an excerpt from our current research carried out as a part of the scholarly project, entitled Muhammad and the Origin of Islam – Stereotypes, Knowledge and Notions in the Byzantine-Russian Culture. In this project we are interested not so much in the historical process itself as in the mechanisms of shaping the stereotypical perception of the ‘other’, ‘alien’ in the Byzantine-Slavic culture over the centuries. Our research covers not only the image of Muhammad himself, but also the ethnos from which he descended, namely the Arabs. We analyze sources referring to Arabs from the pre-Muslim era, the period in which Islam was born, as well as from the time of the military expansion of its followers in the Mediterranean basin during the rule of the Umayyad

* This article has been written under the research project financed by the National Science Centre (Poland). Decision number: DEC-2016/23/B/HS3/01891 (Muhammad and the Origin of Islam – Stereotypes, Knowledge and Notions in the Byzantine-Russian Culture) and the research project financed by the National Science Centre, decision number: DEC-2017/26/M/HS2/00335 (Orthodox Slavic Polemical Writings in the Middle Ages).
and early Abbasid dynasties. My own research is not focused on the sources of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) provenance, which are relatively well known, but on medieval Rus’ material, that is texts translated from the Byzantine Greek or originally written in the Church Slavic language between the 10th and mid-16th centuries, in Bulgaria (and then disseminated in Rus’) or in the Eastern Slavic region. Since their authors were already considerably distant in terms of time and space from the events they described (5th–7th centuries) and based their work on earlier accounts, Old Rus’ sources seem to be a very good material for research on the formation of a stereotypical image of the Arabs in cultural narratives. Moreover, unlike other East Christian texts (Byzantine, Syriac, Coptic or Armenian), they are surprisingly poorly explored, and much of them have not been published and are only available to researchers in their original, manuscript form.

Why are hagiographic texts such an important category within the analyzed source material? Their genre characteristics make them extremely susceptible to creating a stereotypical image of reality, based on a rigid division into the spheres of good and evil, which often translates into the opposition of ‘ours/Christian/Byzantine’ – ‘foreign/pagan or Muslim/Arab’. What is more, in the case of Old Rus’ literature, they constitute a significant part of the material that we have at our disposal in terms of quantity. It seems that for the inhabitants of medieval Rus’ hagiographic works – apart from several Byzantine chronicles known in the Church Slavic translation (inter alia, John Malalas and George the Monk/Hamartolus)¹ – were the main source of information about the Arabs in the pre-Muslim period and their place in the Byzantine-Persian conflicts, as well as their impact on the situation of the eastern frontier of the Empire in the 5th to 7th centuries.

Undoubtedly, a source that is important from the point of view of this research is Vitae monachorum Palestinensium (Lives of the Monks in Palestine) by Cyril of Scythopolis, who lived in the 6th century in monasteries in the Judean desert. His legacy includes the lives of seven anchorites from that area, living in the 5th and 6th centuries, which are abundant in historical details and, in the opinion of many researchers, quite reliable as far as facts are concerned². Four of them were


probably known in the Church Slavic tradition: Euthymius (BHG 648), Sabbas (BGH 1608), John the Hesychast (BGH 897) and Cyriacus (BHG 463). The first three texts are of particular importance for our research.

The Life of St. Euthymius the Great (ca. 377–473) was translated into the Church Slavic language probably as early as in the 10th century in Bulgaria, and then very quickly brought to Rus’. Its reminiscences can already be found in Old Rus’ texts from the 11th century (e.g. The Life of St. Theodosius, Abbot of the Crypt Monastery). The oldest preserved Slavic manuscripts containing this text can be dated to the 14th century. These are mostly the so-called Menaion Reader (Четьи-Минеи), i.e. collections of the lives of saints and other texts intended for reading, arranged according to the order of the liturgical year of the Eastern Church and collected in twelve volumes. The work dedicated to St. Euthymius by Cyril of Scythopolis was included on 20 January.

In the years 1488–1508, Nil Sorski (1433–1508), one of the most eminent Old Rus’ writers and thinkers of the late 15th century, included this text in his collection of saints’ lives. His initiative, aimed at organizing the hagiographic material known in Rus’ and gathering it in one collection, predated the undertaking of the Metropolitan Macarius (1542–1563), who developed the Great Menaion Reader (Великие Четьи-Минеи). This volume of Nil Sorski’s compilation is currently stored at the Russian State Library in Moscow (РГБ, 113.630, fol. 144–186). In the mid-16th century, this text was also included in the Great Menaion Reader by Metropolitan Macarius: it was placed in the January volume, under the date 20.01.

In the 10th century, the Life of St. Sabbas the Sanctified (438–532), was most probably also translated in Bulgaria. It also became popular in the Old Rus’ literature even before the Mongol invasion. The borrowings from it can be found...
in the aforementioned *Life of St. Theodosius, Abbot of the Crypt Monastery* from the end of the 11th century. The oldest, partially preserved copy of the text comes from the 12th century, and the complete copy from the 13th century. In the later centuries, this work spread in Rus’ within the Menaion Reader (under the date of 5 December), and in the 16th century it became part of Nil Sorski’s compilation, currently stored at the Russian State Library in Moscow (РГБ, 304.I.684, fol. 199–272) and of the *Great Menaion Reader*.

The *Life of St. John the Hesychast/Silent* (454–558) by Cyril of Scythopolis can also be included in the group of hagiographic works, assimilated into the Church Slavic literature already at its earliest stage, i.e. in the 10th century. The text has survived to our days within one of the oldest existing Cyrillic manuscripts: the so-called *Codex Suprasliensis*, a parchment Old Bulgarian manuscript from the late 10th century, containing a selection of the lives of saints for the month of March and several writings by the Fathers of the Church. This manuscript was separated in later centuries and is currently held in the collections of three libraries: in Warsaw, Ljubljana and St. Petersburg. The *Life of St. John Hesychast* is included in the part that is held in Warsaw. It can also be found in several Rus’ manuscripts from the 15th and 16th centuries, such as in Nil Sorski’s compilation and in the *Great Menaion Reader* of the Metropolitan Macarius (under the date of March 30).

An important group of sources from the point of view of our research are the lives of ascetics/stylites living in Syria and Palestine in the 5th and 6th centuries.

---

9 СанктПетербург, Русская Национальная Библиотека, РНБ, ОЛДП. Q.106.
10 Москва, Российская Национальная Библиотека, РГБ, 304.I.749, fol. 169–270’ (15th century); Москва, Российская Национальная Библиотека, РГБ, 173.I.90, fol. 72–138’ (16th century).
16 Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 113.595, fol. 206’–220’ (the end of the 15th century).
ries. Unfortunately, since the authors from the Slavia Orthodoxa area were rather selective in their approach to the Eastern Christian literary tradition, not all of the potentially interesting texts were assimilated by them. For example, among the hagiographic texts dedicated to St. Simeon Stylites the Elder (ca. 390–459), only two versions of his life (BHG 1683c and BHG 1685m) were translated into the Church Slavic language. *Historia religiosa* by Theodoret of Cyrus, on the other hand, which contains a lot of important historical information, most probably was not read at all in Rus’.

The oldest variant of the *Life of St. Daniel Stylites* (BHG 489) was known in the Slavia Orthodoxa region. It can be found on the pages of several Slavic manuscripts from the 15th to 16th century, as well as in the *Great Menaion Reader*, under the date of 11 December. Hagiographic texts dedicated to St. Symeon Stylites the Younger (ca. 520–592; also known as St. Symeon of the Admirable Mountain) also must have enjoyed considerable popularity in Rus’. On the pages of the Menaion Reader from the 15th and 16th centuries we can find both the oldest life of this saint, written soon after his death (BHG 1689), as well as the version by Nicephorus Uranus (BHG 1690), created in the 10th century. The latter, however, underwent significant editorial changes once in came to the Slavic territory, in the course of which, among other things, parts of the text containing an outline

of the political situation at the time were removed or abbreviated. The oldest variant of the life was also included in the compilation of Nil Sorski and in the Great Menaion Reader (under the date of 24 May).

What other Eastern Christian hagiographic texts, including references to the Byzantine-Persian struggles and the role that the Arabs played in them, were adapted in the Slavia Orthodоxa area? It is most likely that such important works as the Life of St. Theodore of Amasea (d. 306) or the Life of George of Choziba (d. 625) were not known there at all. On the other hand, it can be assumed that at the end of the 11th century the Life of St. Alexander the Sleepless (ca. 350–ca. 430), written in its original version shortly after the saint’s death, was translated into the Church Slavic language. We find it on the pages of several Rus’ manuscripts from the 15th to the 16th century and within the Great Menaion Reader (under the date of 19 February). Manuscripts from the same period also include the Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon (ca. 550–ca. 613) by George of Sykeon (BHG 1748). It was also part of the Great Menaion Reader (under the date of 22 April). The Life of St. Golinduch (d. 591) is an interesting and at the same time very poorly known work, set against the historical background of Byzantine and Persian relations during the reign of Khosrow I, Hormisdas IV and Khosrow II Parviz. It appears on the pages of the Rus’ Menaion Reader from the 15th to the 16th century and in the

**Great Menaion Reader** (under the date of 12 July). The material may also be supplemented by the *Martyrdom of St. Arethas*, referring to the events in Najran in 523, translated into Church Slavic language no later than in the 12th century, preserved in Rus’ manuscripts from the 15th to the 16th century and on the pages of the *Great Menaion Reader* (under the date of 24 October).

What image of the Eastern Rome-Persian frontier and the fate of its inhabitants in the 5th to 7th century emerges from the sources mentioned here? Probably the earliest chronological reference to this subject that can be found in the Old Rus’ hagiographic material is a fragment from the *Life of St. Alexander the Sleepless* (par. 32–35), referring to the second decade of the 5th century. The Osrhoene area was said to enjoy a short time of peace. The saint, accompanied by his disciples and not disturbed by anyone, crossed the river Euphrates and went “to the Persian desert” (в перськоую поустыню идоша). Since our travelers did not take sufficient supplies with them, God sent them “Roman tribunes and soldiers” to

---


35 Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ, Син. 991, fol. 530а.
help them (триоющы ринъланы и коины)\textsuperscript{36}. The Romans asked them to visit several castella (пришедше къ кольмагамъ) and bless them. Interestingly, the Slavic version of the work omitted the original information that there were many castella on the Roman-Persian border, erected in order to defend the area against barbarians (Arabs?)\textsuperscript{37}. In the subsequent part of the narrative the hagiographer informs us about one such attack, mentioning the herds of cattle captured by enemy warriors and houses they plundered (и скоти ихъ пленены была ратники и домове ихъ разграблены были ратныши)\textsuperscript{38}. Fleeing from the aggressors, Alexander and a huge number of people came to Palmyra (в поустыни нарицаемѣи Палмиръ)\textsuperscript{39}. However, its inhabitants closed the gates to refugees, fearing that they would not be able to feed such a large group.

Several years later, Cyril of Scythopolis mentions the events on the pages of the Life of St. Euthymius (par. 10). We read in it about the persecution of Christians that took place in Persia at the end of the reign of Yazdegerd I (420). Its consequence was said to be a mass flight of Christians from the territory of the Sasanid state to the Eastern Roman Empire\textsuperscript{40}. The Persians, trying to stop the refugees, ordered – as the hagiographer writes – the Saracen tribe leaders under their command (начальники колѣнъ срациныхъ)\textsuperscript{41} to obstruct all roads, so that not a single Christian could escape “to the Greeks”, i.e. to the Empire (не Персиды ко Грецомъ побѣгнеть). One of them, Aspebetus (descended, according to Irfan Shahid, from one of the Arab tribes subject to the Lakhmids)\textsuperscript{42}, although he himself was a pagan (елнъ)\textsuperscript{43}, did not stop Christians from escaping. When he was to be punished for this attitude by Yazdegerd, he fled to the empire, taking all his family and possessions with him. The strategos Anatolius (Анатонъ стратигъ)\textsuperscript{44} took him in and entrusted him with the command of the Saracens from Arabia, who recognized the sovereignty of the empire (старѣишинство колѣнъ сущихъ Срацинъ во Арави подъ Греки)\textsuperscript{45}. The Slavic translator of the Life offers a unique interpretation of the change in Aspebetus’ position, which is de facto a status of an ally (phylarch, foederatus)\textsuperscript{46}. The Rus’ author states that at first he paid tribute to the Persians, and later to the Greeks (подъ Персы дань дая потомъ подъ Греки)\textsuperscript{47}. Later, Aspebetus

\textsuperscript{36} Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ, Сиб. 991, fol. 530b.
\textsuperscript{37} G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, The Roman Eastern Frontier…, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{38} Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ, Сиб. 991, fol. 530d.
\textsuperscript{39} Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ, Сиб. 991, fol. 531a.
\textsuperscript{40} G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, The Roman Eastern Frontier…, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{41} Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.34, fol. 12’.
\textsuperscript{43} Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.34, fol. 12.
\textsuperscript{44} Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.34, fol. 12’.
\textsuperscript{45} Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.34, fol. 12’–13.
\textsuperscript{46} I. Shahîd, Byzantium…, p. 40–42.
\textsuperscript{47} Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.34, fol. 12.
and his relatives went to St. Euthymius, asking him to cure his son. The saint later baptized him.

An episode of the Eastern Roman and Persian relations that occurred several decades later is also reported by the author of the Life of St. Daniel Stylites. He notes the following event, which probably took place around 466⁴⁸: an Isaurian named Zeno came to the emperor, bringing with him letters from Ardaburius, magister militum per Orientem (магистъ восточныи имень Ардавурии)⁴⁹, in which the dignitary called on the Persians to raise their arms against the “Greek” government, i.e. the Roman (позывая Персы на въстанїе греческоу оустроенїа) and promised them his help. The emperor immediately dismissed him from his post and called him to the empire. In this passus, however, we will not find any information about the situation of people from the frontier region.

Several interesting fragments on the situation of the inhabitants of the frontier between Eastern Rome and Persia at the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries can be found in the texts by the aforementioned Cyril of Scythopolis. In the Life of St. Euthymius (par. 46) he notes that during the reign of Emperor Anastasius (according to Irfan Shahîd, c. 500) camps of Saracens baptized by the saint were ravaged by barbarians⁵⁰. The barbarian pagans – as the Slavic translator adds (В лѣто же Анастаса ц’ра села Срациньска съставленая великимъ Еоуфимьмъ варвари погѧни гопустѧша)⁵¹. Some of the Christian Arabs were killed, while others were taken captive. Most of them, escaping from attackers, scattered all over the area, causing considerable confusion there. According to expert on the subject, the barbarians mentioned by Cyril were also Arabs, most probably affiliated with the Lakhmids⁵². In the Life of St. Sabbas (par. 14), Cyril of Scythopolis describes a failed attempt of an attack by six barbarians “Saracen by nature” (in an old Rus’ version: “six Saracens of cruel nature” – .ѕ҃. Срацинъ нравомь лютость-номь)⁵³. The author assumes that the aim of the attackers was to take the monks into captivity.

In the Life of St. John the Hesychast/Silent (par. 13) by Cyril of Scythopolis we can find one of the earliest references to Al-Mundhir III (503/505–554), the ruler of the Lakhmids, allied with Persia, whose invasions would complicate the lives of the inhabitants of the eastern frontiers of the empire for several decades⁵⁴. In this

⁴⁹ Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 113.593, fol. 81.
⁵⁰ I. Shahîd, Byzantium…, p. 203.
⁵¹ Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.1.34, fol. 54.
⁵² I. Shahîd, Byzantium…, p. 203–204.
⁵⁴ N. Lenski, Captivity and Slavery among the Saracens in Late Antiquity (ca. 250–630), Ata 19, 2011, p. 245–246; T. Wolińska, Difficult Neighbours. Enemies, Partners, Allies, [in:] Byzantium and
fragment, most probably referring to the end of 503⁵⁵, we read that Alamundar, who had acquired the dignity of king over the Saracens subject to the Persians (in the Slavic version: After receiving the imperial status among those who gave tribute to the Persians – ἐν θυσίας ἔδωκεν τοῖς Πέρσαις ἐν θυσίας ἐμποτισμένοι), invaded Palestine and conquered Amida. He was extremely cruel to the Romans (in Slavic: Greeks), ravaged the frontier, and took enormous numbers of captives. The desert guardians (старщина и хранителем тол посткын) – probably the Arab phylarchs allied with the Empire – informed the surrounding monasteries of the imminent danger and recommended their dwellers to prepare themselves for defense. The hermits were advised to move into the walls of the monastery, but not all of them complied with the request of their confreres⁵⁷. Sometimes the inhabitants of the frontier were also failed by their Arab allies. One such case is mentioned by Cyril of Scythopolis in the Life of St. Euthymius (par. 51): two Saracen phylarchs and allies of Rome (in the Slavic version: “Leaders of Saracen tribes under the Greek rule”), i.e. Ghassānid Arethas⁵⁸ and a certain Asouades, who is difficult to identify, fought among themselves, forgetting their function and allowing the barbarians (i.e. the Lakhmids of Al-Mundhir III) to desolate the area with impunity⁵⁹. The threat from the Lakhmid ruler had to be very serious indeed: Cyril of Scythopolis in the Life of St. Sabbas (par. 72) notes that the saint wrote to Emperor Justinian I circa 530 asking him to build a fortress in the desert in the area where the monasteries were located in order to protect monks from Saracens’ invasions⁶⁰.

The subsequent Byzantine-Persian struggles and the role that Al-Mundhir III, the ruler of the Lakhmids, played in them, is also mentioned by the author of the oldest Life of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger, which, as we remember, was known in the Old Rus’ literature. Thus, in this work (par. 57) we find an extensive description of the conquest of Antioch by the troops of the “Persian Tsar” Khosrow I (Χέρουρο τοῦ Πέρσα Τσάρ)⁶¹ in June 540⁶². The fate of the inhabitants of the city was unenviable: many were killed, others found themselves in captivity, others yet – saved

---

the Arabs. The Encounter of Civilizations from Sixth to Mid-Eighth Century, ed. T. Wolińska, P. Filipczak, Łódź 2015 [=BL, 22], p. 152.
⁵⁶ Central Archives of Historical Records, Zamoyskis’ Archive in Warsaw, BOZ 201, fol. 12.
⁵⁹ T. Wolińska, Difficult Neighbours…, p. 183.
⁶¹ Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.669, fol. 66.
themselves by fleeing. There were also two monks among the refugees: one of them was murdered and the other was taken prisoner.

Al-Mundhir III reappears in the subsequent part of the narrative (par. 186–187). The Slavic hagiographer characterizes him as the leader of the Saracens subject to the Persian Empire (чѣ нѣ кто старшишна Срациномъ, подлежащемъ пер-съскомоу црѣ тову. имениль Аламоундаросъ)\(^{63}\). He also stresses that he was a pagan (глинъ слоужкого) and calls him by a significant epithet “man of blood” (моужкъ крои). Al-Mundhir was said to be a fierce persecutor of Christians for many years: unstoppable by anyone, he captured many inhabitants of the Byzantine frontier, whom he then imprisoned and starved, inflicting horrific torture on them and even – shaming them by forcing them to participate in the cult of devil (слоужба-мъ бѣсовскымъ приѡбщатисѧ). The question arises as to the character of that participation: as we know from other sources (e.g. the account of Procopius of Caesarea or the continuation of Zacharias Rhetor’s chronicle) he used to sacrifice captured prisoners to the goddess Al-’Uzzā\(^{64}\). From the Life of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger we learn that a Byzantine envoy came to the court of Khosrow (in the Slavic version: a Greek old man) to ask him for peace (въпросити яже в мирѣ). Most likely, it was a de facto resolution of the conflict between Al-Mundhir III and the ruler of the Ghassānids allied with Byzantium, Arethas (Al-Hārith) II\(^{65}\). The mission ended in failure, and Al-Mundhir III announced another attack on the empire, boasting that he would ravage all homes and kill their inhabitants. Soon (in June 554) he attacked the Byzantine frontier with enormous forces\(^{66}\). All those who lived in the east, as the hagiographer reports, were overcome with panic (вси иже на въстоцѣ живоущии смѧтошасѧ ѕѣло)\(^{67}\). Then the author of the life outlines the vision that St. Symeon was said to experience. In this vision he was on a hill, in the frontier area, between the land of Saracens, Persians and Greeks (близь предѣлъ Срациньскыхъ Персъ же и Грекъ). And he saw two enemy armies marching against each other: Arabs allied with Byzantines under the command

---

\(^{63}\) Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.669, fol. 103’.


\(^{65}\) G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, The Roman Eastern Frontier…, p. 129.


\(^{67}\) Moscow, Russian State Library, РГБ, 304.I.669, fol. 104.
of Arethas (конюмъ и Срациномъ, небесе Арефа старшина) and hosts under the command of the “tormentor Alamundar” (съ Аламоундаромъ мч҃тлемъ). In the confrontation the scales of victory were said to tip to the latter’s side, but then the Christians received assistance from the highest power: God’s angel appeared with a sword and chopped off Al-Mundhir’s head. This vision believed to anticipate real events, i.e. the defeat of the Lakhmids by the ruler of Ghassânids, Arethas II68.

Relations between Byzantium and Persia from the second half of the 6th century provide the historical background for the Life of St. Golinduch. According to the author of this work, during the reign of Khosrow I and Hormisdas IV Christians were subject to certain repressions in the territory of Persia, e.g. they were forced to leave larger urban centers and settle in remote, deserted places. Their fate was said to be radically improved during the reign of Khosrow II Parviz, who, having reclaimed the throne with the help of the Emperor Maurice, sought to maintain friendly relations with the empire and supported the spread of Christianity69. However, this source makes no mention the situation of people living in the Byzantine-Persian frontier.

Reminiscences of events from the first decades of the 7th century can be found in the text of the Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, written by his disciple George. Thus, from this source we learn (par. 120) that one of the first deeds of Phocas after the murder of Maurice and the assumption of imperial power was to send troops against the Persians, invading and plundering “our”, i.e. Byzantine estates70. Interestingly, the Slavic translator of Life preserved this perspective (плѣноующим наша веси)71. The hagiographer also describes the Persians’ attacks on Cappadocia in 610–612 (par. 153–154)72. He recalls that the invaders approached the vicinity of Caesarea, terrifying the local population and the monks living in the area, who even contemplated abandoning their homes and moving to a safer place (в мань-стриѣ и въ кесѣ ни въ боязни велицѣ съ, ёдя како доидутъ и насъ). In the subsequent part of the narrative, George of Sykeon also refers to the military action taken against the Persians by the new Emperor Heraclius in 613 (par. 166).

***

68 I. Shahîd, Byzantium..., p. 33; T. Wolińska, Difficult Neighbours..., p. 179; Z.A. Brzozowska, M.J. Leszka, T. Wolińska, Muhammad..., p. 31–33.
71 Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ, Син. 993, fol. 250d.
To sum up, the hagiographic texts contain a number of information on the fate of the inhabitants of the Byzantine-Persian frontier in the 5th to 7th century. The image of this region, captured in the sources analyzed here, is quite homogeneous: regardless of the specific historical moment, it was a dangerous area, and its population was exposed to constant invasions and armed actions. An interesting issue is the inclusion of this region in the imaginarium of a medieval Slav, inhabitant of Rus’. In many texts one can find signs that the author of the Slavic version identified himself with the Christian, Greek, i.e. the Byzantine side of the conflict.

The image of the Arabs is unexpectedly complex. Although all tribes mentioned in our sources are referred to by the same name (Saracens), the palette of its semantic shades is very broad indeed. It can be applied to the Ghassānids, allied with the Empire, Arabs converted to Christianity, desert nomads, supposedly attacking the frontier, as well as dangerous enemies of Byzantium and persecutors of Christian people, such as the Lakhmids. Our authors correctly identify the political orientation of individual tribes and their leaders, but often show it in a way more in line with the realities of medieval Rus’ than the era described in the sources discussed here (e.g. the status of foederati was reinterpreted, as it was probably incomprehensible for Old Rus’ readers). Alamundar – Al-Mundhir III, ruler of the Lakhmids, is an unambiguously negative figure. His character is demonized in the analyzed texts to such an extent that he becomes almost an archetype of a cruel barbarian and a pagan persecutor of Christians. Interestingly, his name was sometimes given in hagiographic texts to other characters who played such a role, for example the Persian ruler is called that in the passion of three saints from Chalcedon: Manuel, Sabel and Ishmael, who died during the reign of Julian the Apostate. Quite consistently, our authors also demonstrate the difference in the status of the persons described: Arab rulers (both Ghassānids and Lakhmids) are called leaders or chiefs, while the rulers Sassanid Persia, similarly to the Roman emperors, are referred to as the emperor (tsar).

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Literature


Detoraki M., Beaucamp J., Le martyre de saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons (BHG 166), Paris 2007.

Captives and Refugees. The Forced Migration of the Inhabitants...


Zofia A. Brzozowska
University of Lodz
Faculty of Philology
Department of Slavic Philology
ul. Pomorska 171/173
90-236 Łódź, Polska/Poland
zofia.brzozowska@uni.lodz.pl