

**THE HIMYARITE KINGDOM ON THE EVE OF AND AFTER THE  
ETHIOPIAN DOMINANCE IN THE SIXTH CENTURY A.D. IN  
THE *MARTYRDOM OF ST. ARETHAS AND HIS COMPANIONS*  
AND IN THE *ACTS OF ST. GREGENTIUS***

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on two important hagiographical works written in Greek, the *Martyrdom of St. Arethas and his companions* and the *Acts of St. Gregentius*, the aim of this paper is to continue my preliminary study of the countries around the Red Sea in pre-Islamic times, especially in the sixth century A.D. The most valuable information in the *Martyrdom* concerns the hazardous voyage of the Ethiopian army from the main port of Adulis across the Red Sea to South Arabia (ca 525 A.D.). This work illuminates aspects of that expedition which do not appear in such detail in any other source. In addition, it describes the ports of the Red Sea in the sixth century, i.e., Klysmā, Bereniki, Adulis, etc., corroborating the finds of archaeology and epigraphy. Concerning the controversial *Acts of St. Gregentius*, the present author has tried to discuss only some vital information reflecting the social structure of South Arabia during its Ethiopian occupation until the Persian conquest of it (ca 525 A.D. – ca 570 A.D.), and attempted to trace the origin of just one law (the treatment of animals) among those supposedly imposed on the Himyarites by the so-called archbishop Gregentius.

**INTRODUCTION**

Hagiography, when cautiously used, is a useful instrument for the study of many aspects of the historical events, providing valuable details which are usually omitted in the sources of epigraphy and archaeology. The present author espouses Agius' provocative view that "archaeology is an important source but it does not come with full answers unless the finds are compared to the written text and iconography" (Agius 2013:91). It is for this reason that I believe that the two Byzantine hagiographical

works written in Greek, i.e., the *Martyrdom of St. Arethas and his companions (MA)* and the *Acts of St. Gregentius<sup>1</sup> (Acts)*, are not only helpful for the study of South Arabia and its relations with Ethiopia in the sixth century but are indeed indispensable for the study of navigation in the Red Sea in this period.<sup>2</sup> The two hagiographical works, especially the *MA*, corroborate the finds concerning the ports of the Red Sea in the sixth century, i.e., Klyisma, Bereniki, Adulis (Bruyère 1966; Tomber 2008:66–67). It is only in the *MA* that we learn that ships were being built in Adulis, which surpassed the Byzantine shipbuilding in the Red Sea. Thus, the information of the *MA* concerning the Red Sea and beyond bespeaks an author who was an eye-witness thoroughly acquainted with navigation in the Red Sea at the time of the Ethiopian invasion of South Arabia (ca 525 A.D.).

It should be noted that the recently published translation and edition of the *Acts of St. Gregentius* by A. Berger has facilitated research on the authenticity of the text (Berger 2006). However, Berger's assumption that the *Acts* was written by an unknown Byzantine author in the mid tenth century cannot be sustained (Berger 2006:44), since this source does not mention the Islamic expansion into South Arabia that took place in the seventh century. In contrast, the unknown author of the *Acts* emphatically states that after the Ethiopian conquest of South Arabia (ca 525 A.D.), no foreign nation around it dared attack it.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding this controversial source, which is divided into three parts – the *Bios*, the *Nomoi* and the *Dialexis* – I believe that the third part, the *Dialexis*, was written by a later Byzantine author, as indicated by the difference in linguistic styles and corroborated by specialists in religious studies.<sup>4</sup> Of the other parts, the *Bios* seems to have the most reliable historical information, which contributes to the understanding of the dark period following the Ethiopian conquest of the Himyarite kingdom (ca 525 A.D.) that ended in ca 570 A.D., when the Persians occupied the land of the Himyarites. During this period, as it is clearly described in the *Bios*, absolute religious

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<sup>1</sup> Detoraki (2006); Berger (2006).

<sup>2</sup> See my preliminary study (Christides 2015, Appendix B, p. 41).

<sup>3</sup> *Acts, Bios* 10, p. 410, lines 83–84.

<sup>4</sup> See Déroche (1999:149) and Galenianos (2015:62) who date the *Dialexis* to the seventh century.

intolerance was imposed on the Himyarites, especially on the Jewish population.

Unfortunately, because many generations have passed from the time the *Nomoi* was first written by an eye-witness author and has since been overlaid with continuous changes, we will never be able to acquire the original written account. Therefore, each law which appears in the *Nomoi* must be examined separately, a task which by far surpasses the limitations of the present work. In this paper only one law, concerning the proper treatment of domestic animals, will be discussed.

A comprehensive discussion of the historical value of these two hagiographical works will follow.

## THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. ARETHAS AND HIS COMPANIONS

It should be noted that the authenticity of the *MA* has been recently accepted by most, but not all, modern scholars, although many problems are still unresolved. Of course, neither the fluidity of the boundaries between history and myth, nor the disruptive insertion of miracles, should destroy the trustworthiness of certain references to historical events. Thus, the report of a miracle which made possible the voyage of the Ethiopian army from Adulis to the Arabian coast (ca 525 A.D.) can simply be understood as a fortuitous change in the force of the wind.<sup>5</sup>

The assumption that the *MA* was simply a translation of another Syriac text, either of the type of the *Martyrs of Najrān* (Moberg 1924) or the two Syriac texts, known as *Letter of Guidi*<sup>6</sup> and *Letter of Shahid*,<sup>7</sup> can easily be dismissed since obviously the *MA* is not a typical martyrdom, augmented with “quelques embellissements fabuleux”, as suggested by Peeters (1950:88),<sup>8</sup> who did not pay attention to the positive elements of the *MA*. In contrast, although the *MA* focuses on the description of the dramatic martyrdom of a large number of Christians in the city of Najrān in the Himyarite kingdom at the turn of the sixth century, it is an unusual “martyrdom” written in a

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<sup>5</sup> *MA* (2006), §33, l. 2–3, p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> For the *Letter of Guidi*, see Guidi (vol. 7 1881:471–515); reproduced in *Raccolta di scritti* (1945:1–60). See also Taylor (2010:145–146).

<sup>7</sup> For the *Letter of Shahid* see Shahid (1971). See also Taylor (2010:146–147).

<sup>8</sup> See this remark in the otherwise excellent book by Paul Peeters (1950:88).

lucid style and augmented with detailed topographical and historical diversions. Its language is simple and vivid and some of its dialogues are written almost in the colloquial. A characteristic example appears in the dialogue between the king Dhu-Nuwās and a child, in which the latter shouted “Ἄμμᾶ, ἄμμᾶ...,”<sup>9</sup> “τὴν μητέρα μου θέλω”.<sup>10</sup> There is no linguistic evidence indicating that the *MA* was derived from a Syriac text. In general, as it will be shown further in this study, the *MA* is an independent source in spite of a great number of similarities of particular parts of it with the relevant Syriac sources which also describe the martyrdom of the inhabitants of Najrān (Detoraki 2006:46). Taylor (2010:172) correctly points out that neither the *MA* nor any other relevant Syriac source is derived from an earlier original Syriac source, now lost.

The topographical reference in the *MA* is succinct but comprehensive. The author describes the caravan city of Najrān in Yaman<sup>11</sup> as located south of the Byzantine Phoinicon and he considers it properly as a semi-autonomous province (ἐνορία) of the Himyarite kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Najrān, which included the area adjoining the city, was a key station on the overland trade route which originated in the Himyarite port of Qāni’ (see Map 1) and through the sea trade route to Ayla, passed through Mecca, and from there to the Mediterranean (see Map 2).<sup>13</sup>

The author of the *MA* seems to be well aware of the international trade leading from the Himyarite kingdom dealing in products such as aromatics, pepper, silk and pearls.<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that, through the whole text of the *MA*, the image clearly emerges of Najrān as a semi-autonomous caravan city state where the tribal elite evolved into an urbanised leadership, enriched by its agricultural products and its key

<sup>9</sup> *MA*, §21, line 22, p. 243.

<sup>10</sup> *MA*, §22, line 13, p. 245.

<sup>11</sup> For Najrān see Shahid (1993:873–874); Schiettecatte (2010:26–27); Robin (2010a:42–106).

<sup>12</sup> *MA*, §2, line 1, p. 187. For the reported distances in the text, see Detoraki’s note 20 in her edition of the *MA* (2006).

<sup>13</sup> For the importance of the sea trade leading from the Himyarite kingdom to the Mediterranean in the sixth century A.D. see Calligaro, Perin, Vallet and Poirot (2006–2007:111–144).

<sup>14</sup> *MA*, §2, line 20, p. 189: “ἀρώματα, πέπερ, μέταξις, μαργαρίτης”.

position on the silk route.<sup>15</sup>

Within the framework of this edifying “martyrdom,” which focuses on the tragic death of the Christian inhabitants of Najrān, we discern the city’s organisation, which corroborates the epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Thus, we learn that the leaders of the province of Najrān enjoyed great freedom by having their own local army which was well enough equipped to resist any attack by the state’s well-armed military.<sup>16</sup> The leaders’ position, based on their tribal affiliation, was usually hereditary and was ratified by the king;<sup>17</sup> in addition, their political decisions needed to be taken in consultation with the council.<sup>18</sup> But above all, as it has been pointed out, the *MA*’s contribution is its detailed information concerning the invasion and conquest of the Himyarite kingdom by the Ethiopians under their king Ēlla Aṣḃēha in ca 525 A.D., and the information on navigation in the Red Sea in the sixth century is of unique value.

The most significant information in the *MA* is the lengthy depiction of the amphibious expedition of the Ethiopians from Adulis to the land of the Himyarites in ca 525 A.D. in order to subdue the Himyarite kingdom. This description does not appear with such vividly realistic details in any other source.<sup>19</sup> The first part of the account of the preparations for this expedition is reported in a passage of the *MA* which is frequently mentioned, interpreted and, more often, misinterpreted. This account, which describes the only naval operation in the Red Sea known in Pre-Islamic times, offers a glimpse into the naval capabilities of the most important Red Sea ports at the turn of the sixth century. It closely corresponds to the finds of underwater archaeology.

According to the *MA*, the huge Ethiopian army embarked on a number of

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<sup>15</sup> Christides (2015:31–36) reports that the tribal leaders acquired administrative positions.

<sup>16</sup> See for example the resistance of the Najranite local army against the army of their king Dhu-Nuwās, which was equipped with siege machines, in *MA*, §3, l. 25–29, p. 191.

<sup>17</sup> *MA*, §38, l. 13–14, p. 283.

<sup>18</sup> For the political power of the members of the local council of Najrān, see Christides, note 15 above.

<sup>19</sup> The relevant reference in *The Book of the Himyarites* (Moberg 1924:p.civ, ch. XLII) is laconic and dry. True, part of *The Book of the Himyarites* is lost, but its author could not be interested in any lengthy description of naval activities.

merchant ships, which happened to be stationed in their capital, the port of Adulis, and on ten more vessels constructed there. Unfortunately, even until recently, a number of modern authors mention that all these ships were either part of the Byzantine war fleet stationed in the Red Sea or a collection of warships of non-existent allies (Zazzaro 2013:7; La Spisa 2014:24–28). In reality, until the Fatimid period, not a single warship existed in the Red Sea.<sup>20</sup> It is a notoriously turbulent sea, exposed to strong underwater and surface currents, violent adverse winds and unexpected rocky shoals. The only means for protection against piracy was to employ soldiers on merchant ships (Christides 2013:85).

In reality, the text of the *MA* clearly indicates that, to transport their army, the Ethiopians used all the merchant ships anchored in Adulis, which happened to be there, as the author believed, “by divine providence”.<sup>21</sup> These merchant ships were obviously commandeered, and rather than being part of any organised fleet, belonged to independent ship owners who might be Byzantines, Indians and even Persians (the perpetual rivals of the Byzantines).<sup>22</sup> The text of the *MA* identifies all the home ports of the merchant ships and how many vessels originated from each, indicating their naval strength. Thus, it is reported that fifteen ships came from Aylah, located at the end of the land trade route which originated from Qāni’, and twenty from Klyisma, located at the terminus station of the maritime silk route (see Map 1).

Concerning Klyisma, situated roughly at the location of the Ptolemaic town Arsinoë founded by Ptolemy II (286–246 B.C.), it should be mentioned that in spite of its remoteness at the head of the Gulf of Suez, exposed to the perilous northerly gales,<sup>23</sup> this port was chosen as a terminus for the silk route by those who avoided the overland trade route. The urbanisation of Klyisma reached its peak from the third

<sup>20</sup> Warships in the Red Sea for guarding the ports are reported a few centuries later; see Bramoullé (2012:132) who reports that in the year 1118, the Egyptian vizier Al-Afdal sent a Fatimid fleet to the Red Sea for the first time, which was composed of only five military vessels (harrāriq), to be stationed in Aydhāb, quoting Al-Maqrīzi (ed. A. F. Sayyid, vol. III, 2002:57–58), and Al-Qalqashandi (ed. M. H. Shams al-Dīn, vol. III, 1987:597).

<sup>21</sup> *MA*, §29, line 3, p. 263: “κατ’οικονομίαν δὲ τοῦ σωτήρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ”.

<sup>22</sup> *MA*, §29, line 4, p. 263: “Πλοῖα τῶν ἐμπόρων Ῥωμαίων, Περσῶν καὶ Ἰνδῶν”.

<sup>23</sup> For the land trade route leading from the ports of Bereniki and Myos Hormos to Koptos through the river Nile, see De Romanis (2003:117–122).

century to the seventh century A.D. and was revived in the Islamic period (Abuljadayl 2000:34–41; Al-Tahir 2000:53–61). According to the information in the martyrdom of St. Athanasius of Klyisma, many churches were built there in the third century A.D. by the early Christians who escaped from Alexandria and found refuge there (Christides, Høgel and Monferrer-Sala 2012: Greek text p. 76, English trans. p. 85). During the time of the Ethiopian expedition (ca 525 A.D.), Klyisma was a religious center because of the cult of St. Athanasius of Klyisma, for whom Justinian (527–565) later built a church (Christides, Høgel and Monferrer-Sala 2012:34). In spite of its arid climate and its distant location, Klyisma remained active on the silk route in the sixth century and its merchant ships, as mentioned above, were used by the Ethiopians in their invasion of the Himyarite kingdom. Hence, the information in *MA* about the naval activities of Klyisma corroborates the archaeological and numismatic evidence, which reveals the prosperity of Klyisma in the sixth century (Bruyère 1966; Tomber 2008:66–67). Of particular importance are the references in the *MA* to two more ports, Bereniki and Adulis.

Of great significance is the information the *MA* provides concerning the port of Bereniki, although there is no reference to its neighbouring port, Myos Hormos. The *MA* reveals Bereniki's prominent place as an active port, reporting that it participated in the Ethiopian expedition with two merchant ships.<sup>24</sup> Both ports held a key position on the sea trade route leading to Koptos (Desanges 1978:269–270); Casson 1989:96; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998:453–454; Whitewright 2007:282–292; Peacock and Blue 2011:345–352). The *MA* confirms the archaeological evidence, according to which Myos Hormos must have temporarily declined in the sixth century and thus it did not contribute any ships to the Ethiopian expedition.<sup>25</sup>

The most conspicuous example of the unique valuable information of the *MA* is its reference to the port of Adulis, which appears in literary sources after the first century A.D.<sup>26</sup> The anonymous author of the middle second century A.D. who wrote the

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<sup>24</sup> *MA*, §29, line 6, p. 263.

<sup>25</sup> Blue, Whitewright and Thomas (2011:189–191); according to Tomber (2008:64), the reason for Myos Hormos' decline was its silting.

<sup>26</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 6.173.

*Periplus Mari Erythraei* considered it a modest town (Casson 1989:§4,2, and p. 103). The first century modest city of Adulis developed rapidly, being, on the one hand, the gateway to the African hinterland and on the other, a major stop on the lucrative Indian Ocean trade route by the sixth century. Based on a preliminary assessment of pottery, Chiara Zazzaro and Andrea Manzo, in their recent archaeological finds, have shown that Adulis had developed tremendously by the third century A.D. and had reached its peak in the seventh century A.D. (Zazzaro and Manzo 2012:238). Of particular importance is the discovery of the ruins of a Christian church dated to the sixth-seventh century A.D. (Zazzaro and Manzo 2012:235). Adulis was the spearhead from where the Greek language spread throughout Ethiopia and was used in inscriptions and on Ethiopian coins,<sup>27</sup> although the influence of Greek gradually diminished by the early sixth century, replaced by the Ethiopic Geez (Phillipson 2012:50).

In general, it is evident that in the early sixth century, Adulis was a cosmopolitan, polyglot city with a diverse population. A large number of sailors and merchants who were engaged in the incense trade route either resided there or were forced to remain there during the intervals between their long trips to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India. In addition, fauna remains reveal the existence of populations from the eastern desert residing in the ports of the Red Sea (De Romanis 2003:121).

It should be noted that the trade activities of Adulis were facilitated immensely by the spirit of free international navigation which prevailed in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean on the eve of the Ethiopian invasion of South Arabia in ca 525 A.D. We clearly discern this impressive freedom from studying the *Christian Topography*, written by Cosmas Indicopleustes, a merchant sailor who was travelling in the Red Sea at the time of the preparation of the above mentioned Ethiopian invasion.<sup>28</sup> He describes how, in a port of Taprobane (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka), merchant ships of Persians and Byzantines, the perennial rivals, anchored side by side and their

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<sup>27</sup> Zacharopoulou (2010:229–242); see also Hendrickx (1998:179–185).

<sup>28</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustès (1973: vol. III, Book II, §56, 3–5). For a comprehensive bibliography see Christides (2014:531–546). Of special interest is Makrypoulas' article (2005:321–332).



passengers mingled freely on the island.<sup>29</sup> The *MA* describes this golden age which was interrupted by the Ethiopian invasion. The Ethiopians re-established Christianity in the Himyarite kingdom but destroyed the free international sea trade in the Red Sea.

### **THE SEABORNE ETHIOPIAN EXPEDITION FOR THE SUBJUGATION OF THE KINGDOM OF THE HIMYARITES IN THE GREEK VERSION OF THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. ARETHAS AND HIS COMPANIONS<sup>30</sup>**

It is noteworthy that in the first stage of the Ethiopians' preparation for their seaborne expedition against the Himyarites, there is no mention of any Byzantine participation; not a single Byzantine soldier embarked on their merchant fleet. Concerning the merchant ships that transported the Ethiopian army, as has been previously stated, ships originating from various ports were utilised, the majority of them coming from the Ethiopian port of Adulis, while only a small number came from the Byzantine ports of Egypt in the Red Sea.

According to the author of the *MA*, the ships constructed in Adulis were built according to the local naval technology, known as sewn boat technology, but we can assume that most of the rest, save for those constructed in the Byzantine ports Bereniki and Klysmā, were also built according to the indigenous sewn boat technology.<sup>31</sup> In any case, none of these vessels could easily undertake the sailing in the turbulent Red Sea from Adulis to the South Arabian coast. The text of the *MA* vividly describes how thousands of the Ethiopian soldiers on board died from thirst under the scorching sun.<sup>32</sup> Finally, despite this dreadful trip, the Ethiopians landed successfully on the Himyarite coastline, managed to defeat the army of the Himyarites

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<sup>29</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustēs (1973: vol. III, Book XI, §17).

<sup>30</sup> For a preliminary introduction to the Ethiopian invasion of the kingdom of the Himyarites in ca 525 A.D., see Christides (2015:40–44).

<sup>31</sup> For the two types of construction of ships in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the indigenous and the Mediterranean, see Christides (2013:93–99).

<sup>32</sup> *MA*, §34, lines 5–8, p. 273.

and killed their king Dhu-Nuwās.<sup>33</sup>

The lengthy description in the *MA* of the perilous trip of the Ethiopian army in the Red Sea and their ensuing successful disembarkation not only reveals that the author was an eye-witness but that he was also well acquainted with naval technology.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the days after the Ethiopian victory, i.e., the administrative and ecclesiastical re-organisation of the Himyarite kingdom, are succinctly reported. The *MA* laconically states that after the Ethiopian victory, Christianity was re-established in the Himyarite kingdom and that an archbishop, who was Chalcedonian (ὀρθόδοξος), was sent there by the patriarch of Alexandria.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the *MA* reports, again succinctly, that priests were appointed in every area and that a large number of Himyarites were baptised.<sup>36</sup>

## GENERAL REMARKS

Although the *MA* focuses on the martyrdom of a large number of Christians in the Himyarite city of Najrān at the turn of the sixth century A.D., it is in reality a narration written in a lucid style which encompasses several historical events concerning the rivalry between the Himyarites and the Ethiopians, within the broader struggle between the Byzantines and the Sassanian Persians in this period.

The main points of the *MA* are the following. It reveals the spirit of “laissez-faire” that prevailed in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean navigation during the early sixth century, when ships of many countries could sail freely and anchored side by side in any of the ports of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; this information is corroborated

<sup>33</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 14–15, p. 281. For the personality of Dhu-Nuwās, see Robin (2008:1–124); Abuljadayl (2015:123–135).

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed analysis of the knowledge of maritime technology of the original author of the *MA*, see Christides (1999–2000:79–80).

<sup>35</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 6–9, pp. 282–283. The title of the patriarch of Alexandria is wrongly mentioned as “ἀρχιεπίσκοπος” (archbishop) and the archbishop of Arabia as “ἐπίσκοπος” (bishop).

<sup>36</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 8–11, p. 383.

by that of the sixth century Byzantine traveller, Cosmas Indicopleustes.<sup>37</sup> This unique situation was abruptly overturned by the Ethiopian seaborne expedition, ca 525 A.D., which ended with the victory of the Ethiopians and the transformation of the Himyarite kingdom into a tributary state.

According to the *MA*, this Ethiopian intervention, led by their king Ēlla Aṣbēḥa, was solely the result of the persecution of the Christian Himyarites by their king Dhu-Nuwās. However, the Byzantine authors attributed this expedition to the trade rivalry between Byzantines and Persians (Hendrickx 1984:72).

Most modern historians refute the *MA*'s view, for example Abuljadayl, who emphatically reports, "this was not a religious war [between Himyarites and Ethiopians]" (Abuljadayl 2015:133). The present author believes that, while there is no doubt that the religious war was not the main cause, we should also recognise the religious rivalry as a supplementary cause, which should not be dismissed.

A conspicuous example of the religious rivalry appears in the Syriac source *The Book of the Himyarites*, in which it is reported that when the Ethiopian conquerors roamed the country of the Himyarites after their victory, they massacred only the Jewish Himyarites but spared the Christians.<sup>38</sup>

The author of the *MA* ends his narration reporting that the victorious Ethiopian king returned to his country carrying his booty, after leaving a number of Christian Ethiopians in the kingdom of the Himyarites, without pointing out that they remained there as an occupation force.<sup>39</sup> Of course, in reality, as Hitti states, "they [the Ethiopians] came as helpers, but as it often happens, remained as conquerors" (Hitti 2002:62). Actually, as Gajda remarks, with or without the Byzantines' urging, the Ethiopians were waiting for an opportunity to invade the Himyarite kingdom (Gajda 2009:103). Gajda's view is somewhat exaggerated because she ignores the religious factor which also played an important role.

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<sup>37</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes (1968: vol. I, Book III, 505); see also Makrypoulias (2005:321–332).

<sup>38</sup> *Book of the Himyarites* (1924:cxxxviii).

<sup>39</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 21–22, p. 283.

## SEARCH FOR AN ARCHETYPE – INTENDED AUDIENCE – THE LANGUAGE OF THE MA

The intriguing question which is naturally raised is: “Who is the original author of the *MA*?”, and the question that was not even raised is: “Why was the *MA* written in Greek and for whom was it written?” Any attempt to find the original author of the *MA* is bound to be conjectural, while, for the second hagiographical work *The Acts of St. Gregentius*, as it will be seen later in this work, we will never be able to acquire its first written account since it was composed many generations before the written version we have now.

We can assume that the *MA*, following the most common practice of the composition of martyrdoms, was first created in Najrān, the place where the martyrdom took place. No doubt, the Himyarites of Najrān, deeply moved by the tragic massacre of Arethas and his companions, must have created an oral tradition of the martyrdom in various forms, attached to the place they suffered the martyrdom. Obviously, these oral accounts originated in the local Himyarite language, the only language most of the people knew in Najrān.

It is from these various oral accounts that the narrations we now have drew their inspiration, i.e., the Syriac *Book of the Himyarites*, the two Syriac epistles of Guidi and Shahid and the *MA*. As Taylor has shown, there was most probably no archetype, now lost, from which all sources derived separately (Taylor 2010:172). The Syriac versions were obviously written by the priesthood of the Himyarites since Syriac was a language used by both Monophysites and Nestorians. Since the Himyarite language, close to ancient Arabic, was not written before Islam and only the authors of the late Himyarite inscriptions used it (Robin 2010:123), undoubtedly these original accounts were oral.

Concerning the Greek version of the *MA*, most probably it was not composed to serve the specific audience of a monastery, but as van Esbroeck has suggested, it was the product of the emperor Justinian’s propagandistic effort to reinforce Christianity throughout the whole of the Near East (van Esbroeck 1974:117–199). We can add, as characteristically pointed out by Efthymiadis and Kalogeras, that “all hagiographical works were designed to transcend the boundaries of place and time” (Efthymiadis and

Kalogeras 2014:247), and a Greek version of the Martyrdom of St. Arethas, written by an unknown author, was an excellent instrument for the edification of the faithful.

The Syriac narrations about the martyrdom of Najrān can easily be explained since no other written language could be used for the local Himyarites. Although, by the time of the persecution of Najrān (ca 518 A.D.) the Bible had been translated into the Ethiopic Geez (Phillipson 2012:12), this language was not known by the local Himyarites, according to *The Book of the Himyarites*.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the Himyarites did not know the Greek language, which was only used by the few Greek-speaking Byzantines, as reported in the *MA*,<sup>41</sup> who were obviously visiting merchants.

On the other hand, we should not dismiss the possibility that the unknown author of the *MA*, who was so thoroughly familiar with navigation in the Red Sea and an eyewitness of the Ethiopian invasion, was a merchant sailor like the contemporary author Cosmas Indicopleustes who, based on his personal traveling experience, wrote his *Christian Topography* in simple Greek for Alexandria's Greek speaking audience.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Nöldeke expressed the view – rejected by Detoraki without any argument – that the author of the *MA* was a merchant from Adulis (Nöldeke 1879, repr. 1973:188, n.1).<sup>43</sup> In general, there is a certain amount of subjectivity in any attempt to discover the author of *MA*. There can be little doubt that he was not a clergyman, as sometimes suggested (Detoraki, 2007:83), since the style of the book does not reveal any interest in ecclesiastical matters. Nonetheless, despite all the difficulties of its authorship, the *MA* contributes to a better understanding of the prevailing situation in the Himyarite kingdom in a period of transition in the sixth century.

Unfortunately, nothing is reported in the *MA* about the organisation of the re-established Christian church in the Himyarite kingdom, as well as about the language of the liturgy and of the clergymen. It only laconically reports that after the Ethiopian king Ālla Aṣḃḃḥa conquered the Himyarite kingdom, he appointed a local king called

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<sup>40</sup> *Book of the Himyarites*, note 38 above.

<sup>41</sup> *MA*, §1, line 11, p. 185.

<sup>42</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes (vol. I:1968; II 1970; III:1973).

<sup>43</sup> See Detoraki (2007:83), where she reports Nöldeke's assumption

Abraha, and that an archbishop was also sent there by the patriarch of Alexandria.<sup>44</sup>

## THE ACTS OF ST. GREGENTIUS

This significant hagiographical work, known as *The Acts of St. Gregentius*, is marred by numerous interpolations of irrelevant material without a real thematic correlation.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the unknown author of the *Acts* indicates a high degree of familiarity with the existing conditions in the Himyarite kingdom in the sixth century, especially at the time span extending from the Ethiopian conquest of the kingdom until its subjugation by the Persians (ca 525 A.D. – ca 570 A.D.).<sup>46</sup>

A short discussion will be undertaken by the present author, based on certain parts of the *Acts* which, in combination with the evidence in the *MA*, reveal some insights of the sixth century Himyarite kingdom. It should be pointed out that of the three parts of the *Acts*, i.e., the *Bios* (Life), the *Nomoi* (Laws) and the *Dialexis* (Dialogue), the most significant information is found in the first part, the *Bios*.

### The *Bios* (Life)

While an archbishop named Gregentius never existed – in contrast to the *Bios* that refers to a certain Gregentius<sup>47</sup> – no doubt an archbishop of an unknown name was appointed or, rather, imposed by the Ethiopian conquerors of the Himyarite kingdom in ca 525 A.D., since the restoration of Christianity would require ecclesiastic leadership to survive. The *Bios* confirms the evidence of the inscriptions that Ṣafār remained the capital of the Himyarite kingdom (‘ἡ βασιλεύουσα Ταφάρ τῶν

<sup>44</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 19–21, p. 283.

<sup>45</sup> Numerous works have been written about the *Acts*, mainly by Shahid, Fiaccadori, Patlagean, Papastathis, Christides, Letsios and Mesis. Suffice it to mention here the most recent one by Mesis (2012), which has extensive references to the works of most of these scholars.

<sup>46</sup> For the Persian conquest of the Himyarite kingdom see Potts (2008:197–213); Bosworth (2000:52).

<sup>47</sup> See “the name Gregentius” in the *Acts, Bios*, p. 28–31 and *passim*.

‘Ομηριτῶν’),<sup>48</sup> and the residence of the king of the Himyarite kingdom after the Ethiopic conquest. The *Bios* further informs us that *Zafār* became the seat of the archbishop and that a cathedral was built close to the palace of the king.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the *Bios* provides us with supplementary information about the changes which were imposed by the Christian kings of the Himyarite kingdom. Above all it describes the ruthless persecution of the Himyarite Jews by the new rulers of the Himyarites.<sup>50</sup> The *Bios* clearly reports the forcible conversion of the Himyarite Jews, which is also mentioned in the *MA*.<sup>51</sup> The despair of the Jewish population is more vividly described in the *Bios*, where it is reported that a great number of Himyarite Jews decided to accept baptism and survive as crypto Jews, pretending to be Christians.<sup>52</sup> The *Bios* leaves no doubt that forced Christianisation was applied, although it also mentions that an effort at peaceful persuasion preceded it.<sup>53</sup>

It should be taken into consideration that as Robin and Gajda have demonstrated, Himyarite Judaism was of a particular nature and it seems that the Himyarite Jews did not faithfully follow the traditional pattern of Jewish community life, which is not limited to religious beliefs solely but includes a *modus vivendi*, i.e., fasting, special dietary rules, change of names, circumcision, etc.<sup>54</sup> From the few remarks in both the *MA* and the *Bios*, we can glean that the abundant Jewish population at the turn of the sixth century was widespread in the Himyarite kingdom.<sup>55</sup> According to the *MA*, these Jews did not strictly follow Moses’ law<sup>56</sup> and they were even idol worshippers.<sup>57</sup> The

<sup>48</sup> *Acts, Bios* 9, line 187, p. 396; for the evidence of the inscriptions see Robin (2009:169); Schiettecatte (2009:217).

<sup>49</sup> *Acts, Bios* 9, line 151, p. 394.

<sup>50</sup> *Acts, Bios* 10, lines 285–286, p. 404. It should be mentioned that the Arab author Ṭabari reports that the Himyarites suffered “oppression and humiliation” under the Ethiopian rule, without mentioning any forced conversion to Christianity (Bosworth 1999:237).

<sup>51</sup> *MA*, §38, lines 1–3, p. 281; *Acts, Bios* 10, lines 285–286, p. 404.

<sup>52</sup> *Acts, Bios* 10, lines 5–7, p. 404.

<sup>53</sup> *Acts, Bios*, 10, lines 39–42, p. 408.

<sup>54</sup> Robin (2003:151), calls it “un judaïsme plus himyarite que juif”; Gajda (2009:239) states “judaïsant mais pas exactement juif”.

<sup>55</sup> *MA*, §1, line 16, p. 185; *Acts, Bios* 9, p. 145.

<sup>56</sup> *MA*, §1, lines 11–12, p. 185: “οὐ κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ νόμου ζῶντες”. It is interesting that in the Arabic translation of the *MA*, it is reported that the Himyarite Jews did not observe Moses’ law, save for some dietary matters; see Monferrer -Sala (2010:41).

<sup>57</sup> *MA*, §1, lines 16–17, p. 145.

*Bios* reports that the Jews had numerous synagogues in many towns and that among them there were well educated rabbis.<sup>58</sup>

### The *Nomoi* (Laws)

The second part of the *Acts*, the *Nomoi* (Laws), was probably a fictitious work by the unknown original author. He considered the Christian community of Najrān as representative of the whole population of the Himyarite kingdom, but did not take into account its pagan and Jewish population. While the unknown author created a series of laws supposedly written and imposed by the archbishop of the Himyarites on the whole population, there are scattered references in them reflecting the actual social institutions of the sixth century Himyarite society.<sup>59</sup>

An analytical examination of all the *Nomoi* mentioned in the *Acts* is far beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, I will focus solely on the examination of just one law concerning the protection of animals: “Those that burden their animals or also themselves with heavy and unbearable burdens shall be observed. Such men shall be arrested, receive thirty-six lashes and be dismissed, having received an exhortation. For the strong mule shall be burdened with twelve measures, the weaker with ten and the ass with eight, if it is feeble with six. And in such a way they shall receive their load. For it is written: *the righteous has compassion with the souls of his animals, but the heart of the unfaithful is merciless.*”<sup>60</sup>

Obviously, this law prohibiting the overburdening of the animals was issued for their protection. Such a law for the protection of animals inspired by actual interest in them does not exist in the Byzantine legislation. In contrast, as will be seen, such laws were issued in the later Arabic period and their origin should be traced to the pre-Islamic period. True, certain Byzantine laws prohibit the mistreatment of animals, but the Byzantine legislators were not actually concerned with the protection of animals. As characteristically mentioned by Troianos (2004:83–84), they simply tried to avoid

<sup>58</sup> *Acts, Bios* 10, line 16, p. 406: “νομοδιδάσκαλος λόγιος”.

<sup>59</sup> For the first efforts to trace such references see Irvine (1967:277–291). For the interaction between the Byzantine laws and Gregentius’ laws see Letsios (1991:141–155); Papastathis (1991:115–126); Messis (2012), *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> *Acts, Nomoi*, text p. 426, lines 7–12, trans. p. 427.



any financial loss caused by such mistreatment.

The intense international interest in the protection of animals found in various laws of modern times was alien to the Byzantines (Troianos 2004:83–84).<sup>61</sup> No doubt Christianity ameliorated the attitude of the people towards animals. The Byzantine Church fathers condemned the fighting with animals as early as the fourth century, but it is only after the seventh century that laws appear prohibiting the mistreatment of animals useful for the agricultural development of Byzantium (Troianos 2004:79).<sup>62</sup> A sincere expression concerning the mistreatment of animals appears only in the special synod that took place in Constantinople in 692, in which those called “ἄρκτοτρόφοι” (those raising bears) were condemned because of their brutal treatment of the bears (Troianos 2004:84).

While the Byzantine legislation has no reference to proper humane protection that prohibited the mistreatment of domestic animals, especially concerning their overloading, there were certain later Islamic instructions to the *muhtasib*, the overseer of the proper behaviour of the Muslims, clearly indicating a real interest in protecting animals. The *muhtasib* was asked to supervise the feeding of the animals and to protect them by prohibiting their overloading while moving in the streets (Tyan (1960:634, 638)).<sup>63</sup>

Any interpretation of St. Gregentius’ immensely complicated *Nomoi* is bound to be conjectural. Yet, the *Nomoi* still needs to be examined chapter by chapter and be correlated not only with Byzantine law but with pre-Islamic Arab institutions as well.

### **The *Dialexis* (Dialogue)**

The third part of St. Gregentius’ *Acts* comprises a long dialogue between a Christian and a Jew, which lies beyond the scope of the present work.<sup>64</sup>

To conclude, the *Acts* has been hunted down by certain modern authors, but the

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<sup>61</sup> See also Bredimas (2004:173).

<sup>62</sup> For the development of agriculture and cattle raising in the Byzantine Empire of the seventh century, see Kaplan (2011:407–420).

<sup>63</sup> A special study concerning the treatment of animals by the Muslims remains a desideratum and it can only be suggested; useful is the study by Tlili (2009).

<sup>64</sup> About its dating see note 4 above.

indebtedness to the early original eyewitness author and his valid information cannot be taken away.

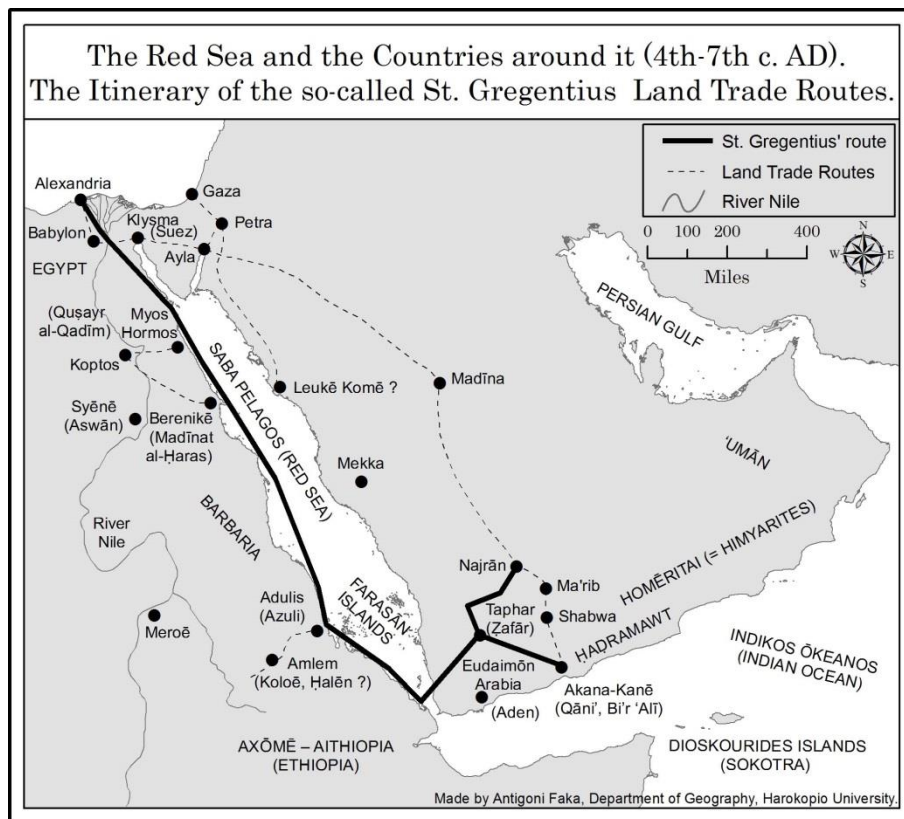
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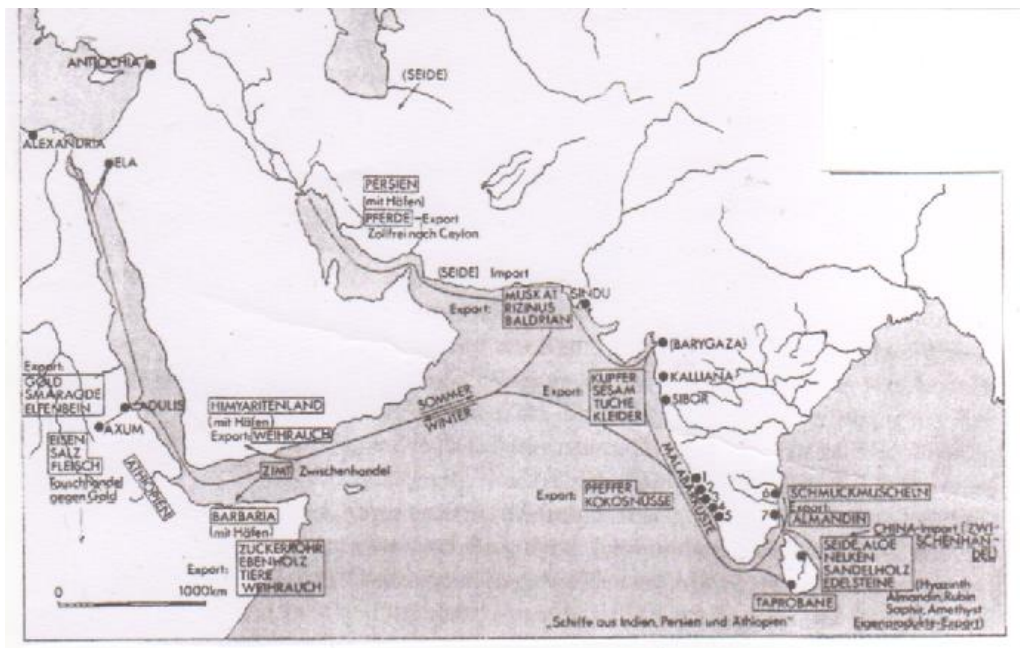
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Map I. The Red Sea and the countries around it (4th -7th c. A.D.). The itinerary of St. Gregentius. Land trade routes. Courtesy of Prof. Aisha Abuljadayl.



Map II. Maritime trade routes towards India in the sixth century according to Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian topography*, book 18. According to H. Roth (1980), “Almandinhandel und -verarbeitung im Bereich des Mittelmeeres”, *Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie- Beiträge* 2, Munich, 309–335.