"Georgian Manuscript"

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Conference Proceedings

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St. Michael of Mar Saba and its Georgian version

The hagiographical tradition testified by Arabic Christianity preserves the memory of many local saints and martyrs who serve as eloquent examples to the Christian faith under Muslim rule. This literature genre got increased interest in recent scholarship, as especially the eloquent book Christian Martyrs under Islam by Christian Sahner testifies to. Although such stories flourished among Christians of all confessional backgrounds living across the Islamic world, I would like to focus in the present paper on those texts which originated in the monastic environment of Palestine. In particular, I want to present some features of the Martyrdom of saint Michael, monk of the Mar Saba Monastery in the Judean desert. This life, originally written in Arabic at the very beginning of the 9th century CE has only been preserved in a Georgian translation and in a Greek adaptation of later date which was incorporated in the Greek life of St. Theodore of Edessa. The Georgian version was translated in the 10th century by the same monks in Palestine who translated other Arabic Christian texts which can be found today, among others at the Iviron Monastery at Month Athos. Although the author of the martyrdom of St. Michael is anonymous, he seems

to stem from the monastic context of the Mar Saba monastery. He speaks in the first person plural, in the name of an audience to whom 'Father Basil, a priest of St. Sabas, had recounted the story of Michael.' Basil in his turn heard the story from the monk Theodor Abu Qurrah while paying him a visit at his cell near the laura. The close ties with the monastery and some of it famous monks are also visible in the panegyric dedicated to the monastery which closes the story of saint Michael:

Just as Jerusalem is the queen of all cities, so is the laura of Sabas the prince of all deserts, and so far as Jerusalem is the norm of other cities, so too is St. Sabas the exemplar for other monasteries. That praiseworthy and splendid Saba [was] chosen, having come from the ends of the earth […]. Fortunate Saba the spiritual teacher discovered such disciples as Stephen and John and Thomas and Theodore Abū Qurrah.

The story of Michael can be summarized as follows: Michael was a young monk at the aforementioned monastery of Mar Sabas and – at least according to the Georgian version – originating from Tiberias in Galilee. The narrative framework of the story recounts that one day the young monk went to Jerusalem in order to sell the handywork products of the monastery. On the market place in Jerusalem he met an agent of the wife of the Umayyad caliph Abd el-Malik. The eunuch invited Michael to come to the residence of the caliph's wife in order to meet her. As she received him at her residence, smitten with love for him, she attempted to attract him into her service. In a way reminiscent to the story of Joseph, Michael did not respond to her seduction therefore provoking her anger and desire for revenge. In order to get him forced to her disposal, she then brought Michael to the caliph's court. There the monk expounds the reasons for his refusal to abandon monastic life and to enter the service of the queen. Admiring his wit and wisdom, Abd el-Malik acquitted him of his shackles. The Caliph thereupon opened a dialogue about religion with Michael, also inviting a Jewish scholar to take part. The debate touched questions about ascetical life and their biblical legitimacy. As the caliph insinuated that Paul led the follow-

er of Jesus astray, a common accusation raised by Muslim apologists towards Christians, and as he tried to offer him material incentives to convert to Islam, the monk brought forward a refutation against the prophethood of Muhammad, asserting that Islam was only able to spread and gain new followers by the sword and by virtue of promises of earthly goods such as food and marriage in paradise. By contrast, Paul spread the Christian message to the gentiles without any of these allures. And so, while the Saracens 'have gained one island' only, most of the inhabitants of the earth would still adhere to Christianity, even most of the servants and physicians at the caliph's court. The apologetic argument then led the way to insult and blasphemy, as the monk proclaimed to the whole assembly, 'Muhammad is most certainly not a prophet or an apostle but an imposter, a deceiver, and a forerunner of the anti-Christ'. In this way, frank conversation between the followers of two religions devolved into accusations of insult. The caliph therefore orders him to undergo two ordeals. In the first one the monk had to stand barefoot on hot coals, while in the second he had to ingest fatal poison, but both ordeals had no effect on him. On the instigation of the servants, who were fearing that the miracle would unmask the weakness of Islam, the caliph ordered then to behead Michael. After the monk's death the citizens of Jerusalem and the monks of Mar Saba monastery argued over the possessions of the body of the martyr, but it was to the monastery where eventually the relics have been brought.

This highly fictional story blends together literary genres and themes which were quite common in Christian Arabic literature of the Abbasid period. For reason of time we can only briefly hint at the most important features. The literary genre of a martyrology, to which the narrative framework of our story belongs, is well attested in the literary production of the Palestinian monasteries. Famous examples for the first Abbasid century are the accounts of the martyrs Abd al-Masihi an-Najrani or St. Anthony Ruwah. Both accounts present stories of Muslims converts to Christianity who, after taking up monastic life, suffered martyrium after they publicly professed their faith. Other martyrs like Romanos and Peter Capitolias are more like to Michael as they were condemned to death

after defaming Islam during their interrogations by Muslim officials. And this is why several martyrs accounts also dedicated larger sections to theological debates between the Christian hero and the Muslim ruler with the latter's court as the setting of the debate. To use a term minted by Sidney Griffith, the theme of 'the monk in the emir's majlis' was a prominent feature among apologetic texts from the early Islamic period, the most famous examples being the dialogue between the Nestorian patriarch Timothy (780-823) and the caliph al-Mahdi or the disputation of the monk Abraham of Tiberias. The latter debate, which allegedly took place in Jerusalem around the year 820, shares some interesting features with the case of Michael, both relating an elaborate story which explained how the Christian monk got involved in the debate and both presenting the monk as well informed in the Quranic teaching about Jesus. Compared to this dialogue, however, the dialogue staged in the story of St. Michael has only a few but nonetheless significant topics, giving a prominent place to the question on the reliability of the preaching of the apostle Paul and on the value of monasticism.

The Georgian text seems to offer a rather faithful translation of the original account and preserves several peculiarities of the Arabic language. This is especially visible in the handling of proper names and nomenclatures. An evident case is for example the fact the Georgian text presents the caliph by the name Abddal-melik, a careful reproduction of the Arabic ʿAbd al-Malik. In the same way, the epithet amir mumli which the Georgian text uses as title for the caliph, again reproduces the Arabic term amir al-muʾminin with which the caliph is usually designated in his military role as commander of the faithful. Concerning the names of places and regions, the Georgian translator on the other hand chose

to resort to accepted Georgian forms rather than literal transcriptions from the Arabic original. So for example in the designation of the twelve farthest regions of the world listed by the monk in order to stress the spread of Christianity, the translator chose to employ the term apʿriketʿi to designate Northern-Africa and not to follow the Arabic ifriqiya, as other Georgian texts chose to do. In one case, however, the translator did not seem to understand the peculiarity of Arabic nomenclature. The fact that in the Georgian translation the monk asserts that the Saracens only conquered 'one island' (hertʿvisi) calls to mind the jazīrat al-ʿarab with which Arab geographers used to designate the Arab peninsula, the land of the Arabs. Last but not least, in the case of Greek loan words, it is more difficult to recognize the hand of the Georgian translator, as most of the Greek terms used in the Arabic original already entered Georgian language, as for example the terms lavra (monastery), eklesia (church) or episkoposi (bishop).

Compared with the peculiarities of the Georgian translation, the Greek version of the story presents a quite different picture. On the one hand the dialogue staged at the caliph's court between Abd al-Malik preserves quite faithfully the original Arabic text. On the other hand, the narrative frame of the account presents longer interpolations and additions. In the introduction of the story, the Greek version even provides the reader with a polemical description of the Islamic conquest, setting the historical stage for the theological controversy between the caliph and the monk. The Greek version also seems to insist more than the Georgian translation on the holiness of Jerusalem, not just praising the city itself but also mentioning her most important religious sites. These peculiarities are also explained by the fact that the Greek version originated from a different context than its Arabic original, namely in Antioch during the second half of the 10th century. At that time the Byzantine regained again political and military control over Antioch and its surrounding territories, offering therefore a new historical context with its new perspective on Islam and Arab Christianity.

The value of the Georgian translation is therefore given by the very fact that it closely reflects the monastic milieu of Palestine from which the Arabic ver-

sion originated and from which also the translator himself originated, blending together literary genres which had both currency in these circles, praising the spiritual heritage of the Sabaite monastery and presenting a theological plea not just for Christianity but for monasticism itself.