

SEVERAN CHRISTIANS BETWEEN THE ROMAN AND ARAB EMPIRES

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In the immediate aftermath of the Arab conquest of Roman Egypt (AD 640–642), the victorious general ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ is said to have issued a letter bidding Benjamin ‘the patriarch of the Coptic Christians’—hitherto, according to tradition, in hiding from the persecutions of his Roman enemies—to return to Alexandria, and there ‘manage all his church, and the administration of his sect’. When the patriarch had returned, the same tale continues, he proceeded to an audience with ‘Amr, in which the Arab general asked him to pray for the successful conquest of Pentapolis and the Maghreb. Then Benjamin pronounced a marvellous moral discourse, and ‘he revealed to him [‘Amr] certain things, and he departed from his presence honoured and revered’. ‘And all that the blessed father said to the emir ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ’, our tale concludes, ‘proved true, and not a single letter went unfulfilled’ (*History of the patriarchs*; Evetts 1904–1915, 1: 495–97).

This short vignette is embedded in the *History of the patriarchs of Alexandria*, a Medieval compilation of patriarchal biographies which belongs to the ‘Severan’ tradition, that is, to the tradition of those Egyptian Christians who resisted the doctrinal formulation of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, who adhered to the doctrine of Severus of Antioch (d. 538), and who would come to form the Coptic Orthodox church. Our vignette comes from a section of the compilation which depends upon a text completed in around 715 (den Heijer 1989, 121–24), and seems to encapsulate the Severans’ evolving conception of their church’s place between the Roman and Arab empires. Here, that church is a regional ethnic church, that of *al-aqbāṭ* or ‘the Copts’; and the persecution of ‘the Romans’ against that church is contrasted with the tolerance, and active patronage, of ‘Amr. In this context, legitimate rule passes from Roman emperor to Arab governor, and thus the patriarch can perform, even if with some tension, the traditional role of the philosopher-cum-prophet at court, instructing the ruler and predicting the success of his conquests.

The themes explored within the *History of the patriarchs* (the presentation of Severanism as the traditional and authentic faith of local Christians; the

identification of such Christians as ‘Copts’; and the cultural and political antagonism of these indigenous ‘Copts’ towards the foreign, persecuting ‘Romans’) have long influenced conceptions of the pre-Islamic period, although much recent work has now undermined its basic assumptions. Even when it is accepted that the discourse of Severan Christians living under Arab rule did not correspond to complexities on the ground, it is often nevertheless assumed that such discourse was monolithic in its emphases, that is, that all Severan authors sang from the same sheet. But outside of the mainstream of transmitted texts, we catch precious glimpses of the range of contemporaries’ responses both to the Roman past and to the Arab present.

The patriarch Benjamin provides a case in point. In the so-called ‘Vulgate’ recension of the *History of the patriarchs* (as cited above) Benjamin, being in reported exile, is at a safe remove from the conquest, and there is no suggestion that he was complicit in it; but in an alternative recension, we discover the dramatic claim that the conquest occurred upon ‘Amr’s being apprised of the patriarch’s fate, and a celebration of the Arabs, in far more explicit terms, as liberators of the orthodox from persecution (den Heijer 2000). Indeed, in both the Syrian Orthodox and Islamic traditions, it will later be said that Benjamin ‘surrendered’ Egypt to the Arabs on account of Roman persecution (Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē; Palmer 1993, 158; Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam; Torrey 1922, 58). There is no point in attempting to assess the truth of such claims, and it is impossible to determine when they were first generated or modified. But these competing interpretations of the conquest at once suggest that Severan conceptions of their church’s relation to the successive empires of the Romans and the Arabs were neither static nor monolithic.

In this chapter I want to pursue the same point through another marginal text, the extensive but neglected seventh-century *Chronicle* of John, bishop of Nikiu in the Nile Delta (fl. c. 690). As we shall see, the *Chronicle* shares with other contemporaneous texts a conception of the Arab conquest as a punishment for Chalcedonian sin, and an ethnic differentiation of anti-Chalcedonian ‘Egyptians’, who represent the

indigenous population, and Chalcedonian ‘Romans’, who are the representatives of the Roman empire. But in contrast to other contemporaries, John does not limit his political or cultural horizons to his own region, nor to his own church. Rather, he adopts the genre of the universal chronicle, situating Egypt’s recent past within a long narrative starting from creation and embracing all of the eastern Mediterranean. John’s *Chronicle* is thus caught between two impulses. Janus-like, it looks back, to the ecumenical traditions of the Christian Roman empire, at the same time that it looks forward, to an Arab empire in which some Christian sects were beginning to think of themselves as distinct peoples embedded in distinct regions.

From Roman to Arab rule

According to an older historiographical tradition, Late Antique Egypt was divided between two ethnic groups: Greeks or Romans and Egyptians or Copts. This ethnic division, in the same tradition, is mapped onto other spatial, social and cultural dichotomies: urban vs rural; northern vs southern; rich vs poor; hellenized vs unhellenized; etc. With the divisive Council of Chalcedon (451), these pervasive divisions were then widened in the doctrinal differentiation between (Roman, urban, northern, rich, hellenized) Chalcedonians and (Coptic, rural, southern, poor, unhellenized) anti-Chalcedonians. This dogmatic conflict, according to this view, further alienated the Copts from a Roman empire perceived to be heretical, encouraged the spread of Coptic ‘nationalism’, and thus eased the transition from Roman to Islamic rule (see e.g. Müller 1964; Orlandi 1986, 74–78).

Some of the basic suppositions of this narrative still persist in various, prominent publications. In his stimulating *The early Coptic papacy* (2004) for example, Stephen Davis has approached post-Chalcedonian Egypt through the lens of postcolonial criticism. Davis’ vision conceives post-Chalcedonian Egyptian society to be polarized into two distinct ‘parties’: on the one hand, the colonialist, alien, pro-Roman, Chalcedonian minority; and, on the other, the colonized, indigenous, Coptic, anti-Chalcedonian majority. Here, anti-Chalcedonism is the natural, unflinching, confession of the indigenous ‘Copts’, and of the majority of Egyptian bishops; while the pro-Chalcedonian patriarchs of Alexandria are isolated accomplices in the political, socio-economic, and cultural colonialism of ‘the Byzantines’, whose policies aim ‘to displace and

disenfranchise the Coptic opposition’. In response to ‘imperialist discourses of power’ and ‘colonial social dynamics’, and through a complex political and cultural ‘resistance’, according to Davis, ‘a type of populist “national culture” was constructed, a shared community defined in terms of religious ethnic solidarity and created through the production of “minority discourse”’ (Davis 2004, esp. 86–88, 119–21).

Davis’ perspective depends for the most part on formal written texts, not least those composed in anti-Chalcedonian circles in the aftermath of Chalcedon, and now extant, for the most part, in Coptic or in Copto-Arabic. This so-called ‘plerophoric’ literature celebrates the heroic resistance of anti-Chalcedonian bishops and ascetics in the face of persecuting emperors, presents anti-Chalcedonism as the natural and legitimate confession of indigenous Christians, and sometimes intimates an ethnic distinction of those ‘Egyptian’ Christians from their ‘Roman’ oppressors (see Johnson 1986). The dating and provenance of individual texts within this ‘plerophoric’ corpus is often far from secure, but we can perhaps be confident that at least some belong to the period before the Arab conquest. Nevertheless it is also certain that these themes intensified in anti-Chalcedonian literature of the Arab period, in which the focus on local heroes, and the ethnic differentiation of ‘Copt’ and ‘Roman’, are far more patent (Papaconstantinou 2006; Palombo 2016).

Such texts provide, therefore, the evidential basis for the historiographical narrative described above. But we must, of course, be cautious not to assume that these discursive themes—produced and transmitted within a small religious elite, and performed and consumed in particular contexts—are somehow the prime constituents of the identities of the wider population, nor that religious identities must be coterminous or consistent with wider political, socio-economic and cultural ones. In recent decades various scholars, through turning to the period’s rich documentation (papyri, ostraca, etc.), have assaulted the basic assumptions of this narrative of burgeoning antagonism between ‘Romans’ and ‘Copts’, and the supposed spread of separatist, or ‘nationalist’, sentiment among the latter (e.g. Wipszycka 1992). This revisionism has shown that the existence in the late Roman period of two bounded, distinct, and self-conscious ethnic groups (Greek/Roman vs Egyptian/Copt) is a phantom; that the evident differentiation of Coptic and Greek in texts and documents cannot be mapped onto distinct socio-economic, political, and cultural identities, but is reflective of those

languages' function and context; and that there is little to no suggestion that Severan Christians, however antagonistic to the religious policies of Constantinople, ever contemplated political secession from the Roman empire (see further: Clackson 2004; Papaconstantinou 2008; Fournet 2011; Palme 2012). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that various elements of Roman law, administration, and culture long persisted after the Arab conquest, so that the Severan discourse described above was developed in a context of significant continuities with the Roman past (Papaconstantinou 2009; Sijpesteijn 2013).

Nevertheless, recent critics of the traditional narrative have tended to acquiesce in the assumption that there existed among the Severans, in the words of one eminent scholar, an 'emerging totalising discourse of Coptic Christianity' (Goehring 2012, 43, *inter alia*), that is, a single, hegemonic discourse which cast the Romans in the role of alien, heretical oppressors. This notion of a singular monolithic discourse seems *a priori* improbable; and indeed we can disprove it through turning to a contemporaneous text which Coptic tradition has nevertheless forgotten: the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu.

The *Chronicle* of John

The *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu is a universal chronicle across 123 chapters, stretching from creation to the Arab conquest. Most of the text is much indebted to the earlier *Chronicle* of John Malalas, but is interspersed with episodes derived from the Greek ecclesiastical historians and from other, more local sources, one of which seems to be a liturgical calendar. The last recorded event occurs in 646/7 (or perhaps 643/4), but it is probable that our author is identical with the 'bishop John of Nikiu' whom two later sources present as active in the 690s (Mena of Nikiu, *Life of Isaac* [Porcher 1915, 354]; *History of the patriarchs* [Evetts 1904–1915, 5: 20, 22, 32]). We can perhaps conclude, then, that John decided to end his narrative soon after the conquest, perhaps for fear of offending the Arab regime; or perhaps for the more prosaic reason that he lacked a decent source on subsequent events.

The *Chronicle* survives in three complete manuscripts, and one partial manuscript, in Ge'ez or Classical Ethiopic, all derived (as we discover from a colophon to the text) from a translation produced at the Ethiopian court in 1602. This translation in turn depended on an Arabic translation which appears to be

lost. In 1883 Hermann Zotenberg published an edition and French translation of the Ethiopic based upon two manuscripts, but he did not consult Paris BN d'Abbadie 31, which contains significant new readings and even some additional sentences. (Note that the inferior English translation of Charles [1916], whose line numbering I sometimes reproduce below, is also based on Zotenberg's edition.) On the basis of evident residual words in both Greek and Coptic, Zotenberg suggested that the original text oscillated between passages in both languages, but such a bilingual text would be unparalleled, and since Coptic incorporates large numbers of Greek loanwords, it is probable but not certain that the original text was in Coptic. It can be demonstrated in numerous places that ambiguities or nonsenses within the Ethiopic result from the Arabic translator's misunderstanding, or simple transcription, of words or constructions in Coptic (see e.g. Crum 1917). A Greek original is still not precluded; but it seems certain that the Arabic, at least, was based upon a Coptic text.

The complex process of transmission is but the beginning of the modern interpreter's problems. Difficult to explain, for example, is a large chronological lacuna between chapters 110 and 111 within the main text, which leaps from 610 and restarts, *in medias res*, in c. 640, omitting almost all of the reign of Heraclius (610–641). It is probable, I think, that the lacuna is original to John of Nikiu's text, but it is nevertheless clear that the contents of the extant Ethiopic version are different from those of the original. Prefaced to the *Chronicle* are a set of chapter rubrics which serve as a table of contents. These sometimes refer to episodes which are absent from the corresponding chapters within the main text, suggesting that that text has at some point been abbreviated. At the same time, a significant dissonance between the rubrics and the main text towards the end of the *Chronicle* suggests—I have argued in detail elsewhere—that an editor has altered an earlier arrangement so as to account for a new source, a source covering events in Constantinople in the period 641–642 (Booth 2016). It is probable, though not certain, that the editor is John of Nikiu himself. I will return to the significance of this editing below. But suffice it to note here that in approaching the *Chronicle* we must bear in mind both the levels of translation through which we have the current Ethiopic text *and* the complex processes of composition and editing through which it was arranged in its earliest existence. Throughout the text, it is difficult to

disentangle the voice of John from the voices of his sources, which can often seem inconsistent. This should be borne in mind throughout our examination of the text.

Interpretations of the *Chronicle*

Although it is the sole historiographical source extant from seventh-century Egypt, the survival of the *Chronicle* in Ethiopic has entailed a remarkable dearth of reflection upon it—indeed, it has often been excluded from reviews of the period's Coptic literature (e.g. Orlandi 1986). I would like here, however, to highlight the successive and contrasting contributions of three important critics: Antonio Carile (1981); Ewa Wipszycka (1992); and Jean-Michel Carrié (2003).

In one of the few articles dedicated to the *Chronicle*, Carile contended that John of Nikiu was an advocate of a kind of proto-pharaonism. Carile pointed to those places in the opening part of the *Chronicle* in which John speaks of the ancient pharaohs, and contended that he had refrained from referencing their paganism, pointing to the existence of now lost Coptic traditions on the pharaonic past. For Carile, this celebration of the pharaohs, as well as a relative dislike for the Roman emperors, is indicative of John's appreciation for an independent Egyptian culture, which in turn reflects the 'intransigent anti-Chalcedonism' and 'anti-imperial dissent' which characterize the attitudes of 'the Copts' in this period, and which point to the 'emergence on the political plane of a separatist tension' (Carile 1981, 119–23). In Carile's interpretation, therefore, the *Chronicle* finds a neat place in the older 'nationalist' narrative described and critiqued above.

Carile's interpretation was challenged within a celebrated article of Wipszycka, as part of a wider critique of the notion of a late Roman, Coptic 'nationalism'. In addition to questioning the posited existence of lost Coptic traditions on the pharaonic past (cf. Colin 1995), Wipszycka pointed to a perceived preponderance of local traditions and vignettes, and suggested that this 'egyptocentrism' was the product both of traditional local patriotism, in distinction from 'nationalism', and of the 'narrowing of geographical horizons' which marked the wider transition from the ancient to the Medieval worlds (1992, 98–99). In a more recent contribution, let us also note, Wipszycka has added important further reflections on the *Chronicle* (2015, 420–23). Here she notes that the *Chronicle* is the sole historiographical source from Egypt which extends to

events outside of the church, but also contends that the schism of Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians is 'completely absent', and speaks of John's 'relative indifference to doctrinal divisions'. 'It is clear', she concludes, 'that the conflicts of such nature are, in his opinion, not important enough to determine the fate of the country'.

In 2003, the tenets of Wipszycka's earlier comments on the *Chronicle* were also reproduced in an important article of Carrié. Like Wipszycka, Carrié questions John's investment in the notion of an 'eternal Egypt', or of Egypt as the cradle of civilization, even if the *Chronicle* sometimes departs from its main source (Malalas) to include some anecdotes of local interest. Carrié defines the *Chronicle* as 'Egyptian', not because of its nationalistic perspective on the distant past, but rather for its local focus. Carrié perceives in the progression of the narrative a slippage from universal to regional chronicle, so that in its later sections important, empire-wide events (the Heraclian revolt, the Arab conquest) are treated simply from an Egyptian perspective. Carrié thus speaks of a 'provincialisation of the Egyptian cultural and mental universe ... on the historiographical plane', mirroring the political and territorial dislocation of the province from the Roman empire. He links this provincialization to a 'national identity', constructed not however with reference to a glorious, pharaonic past, or to political separatism, but 'in a religious conflict which pitched Egyptians against others and in particular imperial power', that is, the conflict over the Council of Chalcedon. For John, Carrié contends, the Arab conquest is the proof of divine displeasure at the empire's recognition of Chalcedon, so that '[to] describe in detail the events in Egypt was at each instant to prove the error of the Chalcedonian faith and the justice of miaphysitism'. John's *Chronicle* is therefore an attempt to understand the fate of his religious community in the transition from Roman to Arab rule.

The horizons of the *Chronicle*

How then should we negotiate a path through these competing interpretations? First, we can concur with Wipszycka and Carrié that Carile's suggestion that John of Nikiu celebrates the pharaonic past is without foundation. It is true that in the first part of the text he sometimes departs from his central source (Malalas), using Herodotus in three chapters on the pharaohs (*Chronicle* 17–19; Zotenberg 1883, 31–32); and it is

also true that he includes some otherwise unique passages on local matters (e.g., the foundations of the Busirs and of Nikiu, at *Chronicle* 13, 31). But it also seems that he *omits* passages from Malalas on pharaonic Egypt (e.g. *Chronicle* 28; cf. Malalas 2.7–8; Thurn 2000, 22–24). Indeed, in his précis of the same source contained within the *Chronicle*'s earlier chapters, John follows no particular regional agenda, but embraces the entire *oikoumene*. Egypt is afforded no special status or position.

John's overwhelming frame of reference within the text is not the Egyptian but the Graeco-Roman—and, to a lesser extent, biblical—past as described in Malalas. This panoramic vision is indeed characteristic of the text until the *Chronicle* of Malalas gives out, at the end of the reign of Justinian (r. 527–65). At this point, as Carrié has observed, the text becomes more focused on Egyptian affairs, but it is doubtful that this is somehow representative of an overall narrowing within John's cultural universe. It should be remembered that his basic instinct is to compose or compile a universal chronicle, and that he has evidently gone to some considerable effort in doing so. This genre is not thrust upon him. It is far more probable that this narrowing of geographical focus, then, reflects a dearth of available sources for wider affairs, as is inevitable for this kind of text, as the narrative approaches the lifetime of the author. That the same narrowing begins with the end of Malalas must be significant.

It is moreover false that the *Chronicle* henceforth adopts a consistent provincial perspective. In the section leading from the end of Malalas up to the aforementioned chronological lacuna (610–640), there is a consistent reference to events in Constantinople and Antioch, even if political affairs in Egypt are dominant. But even after that lacuna, when the narrative focuses on the Arab conquest, Carrié's argument effaces a large amount of material within chapters 119–20, and focuses on political machinations in Constantinople in the period 641–642. As I have pointed out above, I have elsewhere argued that this material belongs to a single source which has been integrated into a pre-existing scheme of the *Chronicle*, in order to take account of the new information, and that it is probable, but not certain, that this editor is John of Nikiu (Booth 2016). But if this is correct it demonstrates two important points: first, that the geographical horizons of the later sections of the *Chronicle* were determined through the available sources; and, second, that John himself (or, perhaps, a later editor) maintained an active interest in narrating

past affairs in the (now distant) Roman capital. All of our critics have, then, exaggerated the 'Egyptocentrism' of the text. When he began that text, John's impulse was to compose a universal chronicle. This impulse remained until the end.

Doctrine and ethnicity

What of the contested status of doctrine in the *Chronicle*? First let it be said (*pace* Wipszycka) that Chalcedon, and the deposition of the Alexandrian patriarch Dioscorus, are here important events, presaged in an ominous darkness which descended on the day of Marcian's accession (*Chronicle* 87.38). For the period from 451 to the death of Justinian (565), the secular aspects of John's narrative depend for the most part on Malalas, but he interweaves selections from the latter with various episodes from ecclesiastical history. His sources for such episodes seem to be diverse, and most are unidentified, but one is no doubt a pro-Severan, Alexandrian patriarchal history covering the succession of Alexandrian patriarchs to the exile of Theodosius (r. 536–66). (This source is, let us note, distinct from those used for the biographies contained in the *History of the patriarchs*.) In the later sections covering the Arab conquest, moreover, one encounters a scattering of clear, anti-Chalcedonian comments. Thus, for example, a prediction of Severus of Antioch that no son would succeed his father on the throne while the emperor adhered to Chalcedon is twice repeated (*Chronicle* 116, 120); the conquests of the Arabs are several times presented as the product of Chalcedonian persecution (*Chronicle* 116, 117, 121); and the text at the end celebrates the return of the Severan patriarch Benjamin, with whom we began, from his exile (*Chronicle* 121). It would be too much, then, to conclude that John is uninterested in doctrine.

It is nevertheless true that if, as Carrié suggests, Chalcedon is a pivotal event for John, there are some striking ambiguities. After the patriarch Theodosius, when the *Chronicle* turns to the post-Justinianic period, there is a remarkable dearth of material on ecclesiastical matters. Thus there is nothing, for example, on the establishment of the Severan episcopate under the patriarch Peter IV (r. 575–77), or the high-profile clashes of his successor Damian (r. 577–c. 606) with his Antiochene counterpart, Peter of Callinicum. This was a formative period for the Egyptian Severan church (Blaudeau 1999; Booth 2017), but neither patriarch is mentioned even in passing. In the sections dealing with

the Arab conquest, moreover, the *Chronicle* casts the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus in an unexpectedly positive light, while nevertheless calling him, in two places, a persecutor (*Chronicle* 116, 121), as per his wider reputation within Coptic literature. Both of these problems—that is, the absence of the Severan patriarchs after Theodosius, and the positive presentation of Cyrus—can, however, be mitigated if we once again consider the text's composition. Since John includes material on earlier Severan patriarchs, we must suppose that the absence of Peter IV and his immediate successors reflects the absence of a decent patriarchal source for that period (however surprising that might seem); while the material on Cyrus seems to be based upon a pre-existing, apologetic source, the general tone of which John has, for one reason or another, not troubled to alter (Booth 2016).

There can be little doubt, then, that doctrine is important for John, despite some surprising omissions and inclusions. But we can also detect within the *Chronicle*, as Carrié has further suggested, hints of the process through which John's church was assuming, within Severan discourse, an ethnic dimension. Within the later sections of the text there is a pervasive (but hitherto little remarked) differentiation—as in other Coptic texts of this period—between 'Romans' (*rom*) and 'Egyptians' (*māsrāwyān*). We must bear in mind that the extant Ethiopic text is the product of a complex transmission, which might have introduced some significant distortions. But it is not impossible that these terms represent an original distinction, in Coptic, of *rōmaioi* and *nrmnkēme* (via Arabic *rūm* and *miṣriyūn*). What do these terms mean? For the most part of the text 'Roman' is used to designate the inhabitants of Rome or of the Roman empire, in particular in the context of foreign campaigns. In the sections covering the Arab conquest, however, it seems instead to designate representatives of the Roman state: administrators and soldiers. 'Egyptians', in turn, means for the most part of the text 'inhabitants of Egypt', and is used most often in the context of the pharaonic period. With the description of the Arab conquest, however, the usage again intensifies, and appears here to designate the general, civilian, population. Within the text, therefore, the conquest marks the introduction of a stricter ethnic differentiation of 'Roman' and 'Egyptian', in which the former are combatants, and the latter non-combatants.

In at least one place, moreover, this differentiation also assumes a religious dimension. The final chapter

of the text memorializes the patriarch Benjamin, with whom we began:

And Abba Benjamin, patriarch of the Egyptians (*māsrāwyān*) [the text records] entered the city of Alexandria, thirteen years after his flight from the Romans (*rom*). He went to the churches and inspected them all. And everyone began to say, 'This persecution and the conquest of the Muslims are on account of the oppression of the emperor Heraclius and the affliction of the orthodox through the patriarch Cyrus. For this reason the Romans were destroyed and the Muslims gained dominion over Egypt'. (Zotenberg 1883, 219–20)

Here, then, the religious distinction of anti-Chalcedonians and Chalcedonians also corresponds to an ethnic distinction of Egyptians and Romans.

Egypt between empires

All this might lend the impression that the *Chronicle* conceives the Arab conquest as liberation from Roman-Chalcedonian oppression—but this would be misleading. In the later sections of the text, the Chalcedonian emperors from Justin I (r. 518–27) onwards are for the most part presented with disapproval, although John's somewhat indiscriminate oscillation between sources again introduces some inconsistencies (see, for example, a passage where he lavishes praise on Justinian for his protection for the poor, his restoration of the empire, and his great faith [*Chronicle* 90.49–51, 54; Zotenberg 1883, 155]). When the narrative reaches the Chalcedonian Tiberius (r. 578–82), however, it exalts the emperor for his various virtues, but lauds in particular his lack of persecution, and the favour which he showed to the anti-Chalcedonians. This presentation of the reign of Tiberius—whose renunciation of persecution is also recorded in other Severan texts—reflects a real historical situation, in which the emperor's relative disengagement from doctrinal politics in effect sanctioned the establishment in Egypt of a Severan patriarch and episcopate (Booth 2017). But it suggests that, for John, the emperors at Constantinople are not irredeemable heretics whom God has punished for their simple deviation from the faith. The true spur to divine anger is not adherence to Chalcedon, but the persecution of the orthodox.

Indeed, the *Chronicle* claims that under the tolerant regime of Tiberius, God caused peace to prevail throughout the empire, and the Persians and others to be conquered. In the progression of the narrative, however, this clear equation between religious tolerance

and imperial success—and thus also between religious persecution and imperial defeat—stands in contrast to the situation under Heraclius where, as we have seen above, the Arab conquest is several times attributed to divine anger at the persecution of the orthodox. In one perspective, then, Arab rule is a scourge sent from God to punish the persecutors; but that rule itself then comes also to be contrasted with the previous regime. In the aforementioned final chapter of the text describing the return of Benjamin—in which, as we have seen, a clear association is made between Roman religious persecution and Arab success—the text continues to refer to ‘Amr’s burdensome taxation, but nevertheless notes with approval that, ‘he took nothing from the possessions of the churches, and he committed no plunder or act of pillage, but protected them for the entire length of his reign’ (Zotenberg 1883, 220). The Arab regime might, then, be burdensome in terms of taxation, but can nevertheless be celebrated—much like the reign of Tiberius—for its religious tolerance.

Can we conclude, then, that the advent of Arab dominion is for John a positive development? This seems doubtful. The *Chronicle* sets out the terrible violence of the conquest in vivid and undaunted detail; it describes the conqueror, ‘Amr, as a treacherous barbarian (*Chronicle* 120.36; Zotenberg 1883, 215); and it twice refers to, and laments, the conversion of some Christians to Islam (*Chronicle* 114.1, 121.10; Zotenberg 1883, 202, 221). Indeed the overwhelming sense is that the end of Roman (and thus Christian) rule, though attributable to persecution, is in fact something to be regretted, even abhorred. It should be remembered that John belonged to a generation of Egyptians who had, for the first time in centuries, never experienced inclusion in the Roman empire. Arab rule was a *fait accompli*, and John gives no indication that Roman reoccupation was a realistic expectation. But the Roman empire nevertheless continues to exert a powerful pull on his interest, on his sense of the relevant past. Besides his dependence on a range of Roman sources, and the considerable effort expended on reporting events, both secular and sacred, within the Roman empire, John writes in a Roman idiom, and his geographical vision is, as we have seen, throughout determined by the borders of the former Roman empire. His perspective on the Roman empire, its past and its present, is therefore complex. On the one hand, the *Chronicle* connects with other contemporaneous Coptic texts in drawing a religious and ethnic distinction between ‘Romans’ and ‘Egyptians’, and in casting the former as persecutors of

the latter; but, on the other, it also expends a remarkable effort in recounting for its readership the diverse events which occurred across several centuries of Roman rule, and which continue, for John, to be relevant. This tension should not be dismissed or reduced. It is indicative of the conflicts of perspective which marked the transmission from Roman to Arab rule within Severan circles, and of contemporaries’ attempts to conceptualize their place between the two empires.

Conclusion

In the period from 690 to 692, according to his extant Coptic *Life*, the Severan patriarch Isaac used to attend upon the ‘king’ (*rro*) of the Saracens, the Arab governor ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Marwān. The governor, we are told, had held Isaac’s predecessor John in great affection, and after John’s death continued to court his successor. Having once beheld a miraculous light surrounding Isaac at the altar, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz considered him a prophet, began to call him ‘patriarch’, and included him within his permanent entourage. In a series of anecdotes, the *Life* describes various miracles of Isaac which the governor witnessed, and which ever deepened both his devotion to the patriarch and his patronage of churches and monasteries. The *Life* describes, then, the more or less harmonious relationship which existed between the Severan patriarch and the Arab governor, who has here even assumed the Coptic title, *rro*, once reserved for the Roman emperor.

The author of the *Life of Isaac* is one Mena, bishop of Nikiu, who is no doubt our chronicler’s successor in that office. John of Nikiu himself appears within the text, where he is placed in Isaac’s entourage following his election as patriarch, and described as *apotritēs* (sc. vicar) for Upper Egypt (*Life of Isaac*; Porcher 1915, 354). Both John and Mena belong, then, to a circle of literate clerics within the Severan patriarchate, writing in c. 700 and producing original texts, it seems, in Coptic. Within this circle we can also include one George the Archdeacon, who authored (c. 715) a Coptic compilation of patriarchal biographies from Cyril to Simon I (412–700), and which in turn was used as a basis for those sections in the aforementioned *History of the patriarchs* (den Heijer 1989, 121–24, 142–43). From this we ascertain that he was a personal acquaintance of John of Nikiu (Evetts 1904–1915, 5: 20). Here, the concord said to characterize the relationship of Benjamin and ‘Amr—as described in the introduction to this chapter—becomes programmatic

for the subsequent relations of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz with the patriarchs John and Isaac, as also remembered in Mena’s *Life* of the latter.

Besides their shared celebration of Arab patronage over the Severan church, the *Life of Isaac* and the *History of the patriarchs* contain several further themes which we have also encountered in the *Chronicle* of John: for example, the ethnic and confessional distinction of ‘Egyptians’ and ‘Romans’; and the remembrance of the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus as a persecutor. Nevertheless, it is important that we also distinguish the preoccupations of John from those of his contemporaries and associates. Both the *Life of Isaac* and the *History of the patriarchs* are Egyptocentric texts, in which events outside of Egypt (often garbled and disordered in the latter) are of interest only in so much as they impact upon it. Both, moreover, are ecclesiastical texts, focused on the Severan patriarchate and for the most part disinterested in secular affairs. Neither point is true of the *Chronicle*.

Indeed, those scholars who have emphasized the *Chronicle*’s Egyptocentrism, or have seen a sectarian agenda as its guiding principle, risk collapsing it into the texts of John’s contemporaries. Thus it might well seem that Severan churchmen did indeed produce a monolithic ‘totalizing’ or ‘hegemonic’ discourse in this period, in which the effective past is reduced to the level of the local, the Roman empire cast as heretical and oppressive, and Arab rule celebrated for its relative moderation. I have tried in this chapter to counter this impression. It is natural, when assessing the *Chronicle*, that commentators have tended to focus on its later, less derivative sections, for which the source material is not otherwise extant. But in assessing John’s political and cultural horizons, it is imperative to take account of the entire text. Thus I have argued that the *Chronicle* embraces the same ecumenical vision as its main source, Malalas, even in the later sections, where the source material is more local and more limited; and that its interests throughout encompass both the secular and the sacred. Within its narrative, the long centuries

of the Roman empire loom large, and the Arabs’ subjugation of Egypt—whose inhabitants John and some contemporaries had come to consider a distinct people, belonging to a distinct ethnic church—was not something to be revelled in so much as regretted, attributed to the intolerance of Chalcedonian persecution.

Although the *Chronicle* is for us a precious source—in particular for the seventh century, for which it often proves an invaluable guide (Booth 2011; 2013; 2016)—it was not to prove as popular as other texts produced within its author’s immediate circle. We know that it was at some point translated into Arabic, and it is not impossible that the Arabic version is still to be discovered. Nevertheless, the *Chronicle* had no demonstrable impact on later Coptic or Copto-Arabic authors, and if it were not for the commissioning of a further translation at the Ethiopian court in 1602, the text would remain unknown. A recent book has suggested that the text has been forgotten in the Coptic tradition because its vision of the Arab conquest is too conflictual and too violent, and that it therefore proved discordant with the dominant discourse of the Severan church which, as we have seen, emphasized instead the comfortable coexistence of anti-Chalcedonian Christians and their new Arab masters (Mikhail 2014, 32). I would suggest, however, that the divergence between the *Chronicle* and other contemporaneous texts might be more fundamental. Where others contented themselves with a regional focus centred on the Severan patriarchate, John adopted the Late Antique tradition of the universal chronicle, with all its demands towards chronological, geographical and topical breadth. Although the *Chronicle* did not, it seem, prove so resonant as to be read or copied to a significant extent in subsequent generations of Coptic historians, the fortunate survival of the text in Ethiopic constitutes a precious witness to a discordant voice within the Severan church of the post-conquest period, and to a pivotal moment in which contemporaries’ understanding of the effective past, of the past that mattered, was transforming.

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