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Striking a match on Byzantium's "Dark Age": evidence of historiographical production between the VII and VIII centuries in Theophanes' Chronographia and three Syriac chronicles.

Foreword

As prof. Peter Brown once wittily remarked, up to the Eighties Byzantinists were proud to be distinguished from historians of Western Europe because they did not have to deal with a Dark Age; after Kazhdan and Cutler's article *Continuity and Discontinuity in Byzantine History*, Byzantinists began proudly to claim a Dark Age for Byzantium. The aim of this paper is not to challenge again or even to deny the idea of a Dark Age applied to the Byzantine Empire by some sort of optimistic revisionism: I am aware that the matter is broad and complex, since it concerns not only cultural issues – quantity and quality of historical sources, literary production, survival of secular scholarship – but also political, social and economic processes, the complex dichotomy between change and continuity, and the never-ending debate about the notion of "crisis". My purpose is to show that this age is worth investigating from the point of view of history of culture notwithstanding its darkness, or maybe even more because of it.

Theophanes Confessor's *Chronographia* is the first Greek source that gives us information about the VII-to-VIII centuries. The *Breviarium* of Patriarch Nikephoros deals more or less with this period too, extending from 602 to 769, but it gives no information at all about the reign of Constans II (641-668) and, for the rest, only Constantinopolitan

events or matters directly related to the Byzantine Empire. By contrast, Theophanes' narrative is uninterrupted and reaches beyond the former eastern provinces of the empire, recording even internal political matters of the Islamic state. Since no Greek contemporaneous source comes down to us for this period of time and we have no sure evidence that any existed, an inevitable question arose long ago: how did this material end up in the *Chronographia*? Where does it come from? An answer was suggested long ago, too: it is of oriental origin. This idea was first proposed in the XVIII century by the pioneer of Orientalism Johan Jakob Reiske. In the last two centuries it has been variously deepened and reworked, on the basis of the significant resemblance shown at several points by Theophanes' *Chronographia* with some later historical texts written in Syria: the chronicle of Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of the Year 1234* (both written in Syriac in the XII century), and Agapius of Mabbug's chronicle (written in Arabic in the X century). It would be time-consuming and boring to set out all the contributions and different hypotheses that followed one another up to our time, so I will come directly to the last, supposedly most exhaustive and commonly accepted solution, that is Lawrence Conrad's theory of the so-called "circuit of Theophilus of Edessa". Conrad's reconstruction is clear, plain and almost without nuance: the information shared by Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles is alleged to come all from the lost *History* written in Syriac by Theophilus of Edessa, a Maronite scholar who lived in the VIII century and worked as an astronomer in the Abbasid court. Theophanes is supposed to have had access to it via a Greek translation made by a Syrian Melkite monk around 780, Michael the Syrian and the anonymous Edessan author of the *Chronicle of 1234* via the lost *History* of the patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre (IX century), whereas Agapius is thought to have used Theophilus as a source directly.

This theory, in the end, turned out to be inconclusive and has some weak points, but this is not what we are going to delve into now. What is relevant for today's topic is the final argument that Conrad drew from it: actually he formulated a diagnosis of "brain death" for both Byzantine and Syriac historiography, thus extending the Dark Age to the eastern regions. I quote from his essay *The Conquest of Arwād*: «It has often been noted that

Byzantine historiography for the period beginning with the Arab conquests is extremely sparse, and a similar picture now emerges in the Syriac and Christian Arabic traditions, in which the apparent wealth of material on the seventh-century Near East seems likely to consist in large part of extracts from a single source, the chronicle of Theophylus» (p. 348).

Yet a closer and more extensive scrutiny of the “common material” in the *Chronographia* and the Syriac chronicles reveals a different picture. At the very beginning my research stemmed from Conrad’s theory and was aimed at finding out more about the supposed Greek translation of Theophylus’ work. At first, I planned to analyse all the significantly similar passages in the four chronicles from a linguistic point of view, in order to find evidence of a transposition from Syriac to Greek. Then I meant to compare the contents as well, to assess whether the historical information had undergone any intentional reworking or ideological distortion when moving from the eastern regions to the capital of the Empire.

As often happens with work in progress, at one point I noticed that this work was progressing down a different road. The linguistic analysis, far from giving further evidence of a Syriac-Greek translation, revealed traces of a translation from Greek to Syriac and it even led me to take into account the possibility that some information passed directly from Arabic to Greek, without Syriac mediation.

As for the contents, I realised that comparing versions of the same episodes in the four texts was not the only thing to do, since the “common material” showed a wide range of items, differing in subject, length, writing style (and hence maybe original literary genre), geographical collocation (and hence maybe geographical provenance). In the four chronicles we can read the same long anecdotal and probably fictitious narrations about heroic war deeds alongside the same short, almost telegraphic, pieces of information about earthquakes and other natural calamities. We can find accounts of plots in the Byzantine court, alongside records of political or administrative measures taken by Caliphs and the succession conflicts in the Islamic state, besides notes on events of ecclesiastical and religious relevance for Christians. This undeniable variety suggests

that these materials come from sources of different kinds, different in origin and even different in language. The supporters of the theory of the "Theophilus' circuit" managed to have it both ways saying that Theophilus himself use different sources. Even granting that this hypothesis is true does not change what I want to point out today, that is that the landscape of historiography was richer and more multifarious than Conrad claimed.

I cannot replace Conrad's theory with another one so perfectly constructed, giving to these sources names times and places. From my research the picture comes out richer in colours, yes, but also much more blurred. Yet it is possible to draw some conclusions from this evidence, though they are still raw, and it is worth taking a look at the wider context where they are to be set. The first thing I think we must now state for certain is that there were some Greek texts unknown to us, supposedly more than one and of Syro-Palestinian origin. They were not written in the Byzantine "Hochsprache", but neither in a contemptible Greek. They exploit, at times with some literary pretension, the expressive potential of a current language, lacking any classicizing veneer, reflecting the syntactic, grammatical and lexical evolution of Greek in the Middle Ages. I am pretty sure that more evidence of this is to be found even in those parts of the Syriac chronicles that have no parallel in Theophanes' *Chronographia*, since Dionysius of Tellmahre, in a passage reported by Michael the Syrian, explicitly says that he made use of Greek Chalcedonian translated books.

One more aspect we have to change our mind about is the possibility of a direct transfer of information from the Arabic-speaking to the Greek-speaking world, probably even through oral sources. This hypothesis has never been taken into serious consideration simply because a Syriac *medium* has always been taken for granted. But contexts where such an exchange could happen were not lacking. First of all we must remember that in the eastern provinces of the Empire a certain familiarity with Arabic language existed already before the Islamic expansion, due to the contacts with the Arabic-Christian buffer-states and the settlement of Arabic ethnic groups in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. It is well-known that in the conquered regions Muslim rulers kept the Greek administrative apparatus with its officers and these ones kept on writing public

registers in Greek until at least the age of the Caliph al-Walīd (that means the beginning of the VIII century). Contrary to what one would think, religion was another crucial meeting-ground of the two languages: the islamicization of society fostered by ‘Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walīd created a further occasion for clash and the cases of conversion or apostasy we know about (mainly from hagiographical sources related to the so-called “neo-martyrs”) are very telling. Finally, what might sound obvious, diplomatic exchanges between the two states did happen and implied the existence of interpreters or bilingual individuals of a middle-to-high education level. All these examples must lead us to consider as realistic the hypothesis that someone could write down in Greek something he had read or heard about in Arabic.

This does not mean that Syriac must be completely excluded from the reconstruction: most probably behind the “common material” there were Syriac sources too, but it is difficult to say how many and of what kind, size or origin. So, even if it is impossible, at this stage of research, to identify the common sources precisely- and I wonder whether it will ever be possible and with what degree of precision -, I think that what has emerged is sufficient proof at least that the written material produced in Syria-Palestine during the Dark Age with the aim of recording what was going on is not so scanty and the circulation of information and texts among Greek, Syriac and Arabic cultural-linguistic areas was lively.

In his article *Greek Culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest* (1991), referring to John of Damascus’ theological production, to a new flowering of Byzantine hymnography and to a significant Palestinian hagiographical *corpus*, Cyril Mango says «all this activity could not have taken place in a *vacuum*». Cyril Mango and Guglielmo Cavallo took the first steps on a potentially fruitful research path suggested by Robert Blake’s *La littérature grecque en Palestine au VIIIe siècle* (written in 1938, but published posthumously only in 1965). They both focused more on the continuity of what we could call, using Paul Lemerle’s words, «le premier humanisme byzantin». It is to Averil Cameron, instead, that we must give credit for drawing Byzantinists’ attention to the substantial literary production of religious nature that is to be found in Syria-Palestine in

this period, and for enhancing its value and its potential use even outside theological discourse. An attempt to map out the links among the prominent figures that emerged from these studies was made by Daniel Sahas in his essay entitled *Cultural interaction during the Umayyad period: the “circle” of John of Damascus*, where he tried to reconstruct what could be called, if not properly a “school”, at least an “intellectual circle”. Let us give a cursory glance, then, to the context of Greek culture in Syria-Palestine during the Dark Age, as these few but fundamental studies have outlined it.

Jerusalem, and in particular the monasteries of the Judaeen desert in the vicinity the Great Lavra of Mar Saba, were a fertile basis of intellectual exchange and writing production. Several names can be associated with this centre: to quote just some of the most well-known, John Moschus (550-619), Sophronius patriarch of Jerusalem (560-638), Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662), John of Damascus (c. 676-749) and, according to Kazhdan, the unknown author of the hagiographic novel *Barlaam and Josaphat*. Beside Jerusalem we can list the main Syrian cities, too: Damascus, where the members of the Greek-speaking élite working under the Umayyads operated in close contact with the caliphal court; but even Antioch, Edessa, Harran, Ba'albek, cities where the Greek-speaking Chalcedonian hierarchy had to guard its own identity in the daily contact with both Monophysites and Muslims. But the knowledge and use of Greek was not a prerogative of Chalcedonians, as testified by the example of the Jacobite monastery of Qenneshrin, where intense translation activity of both religious and secular literature was undertaken.

If we look at the flourishing of the Anacreontic genre and at the second phase of Byzantine hymnography we are brought back to the Syro-Palestinian region as well: Sophronius of Jerusalem, Arethas of Caesarea, Elias Synkellos, John of Gaza, for the Anacreontics; Andreas of Crete, Cosmas of Maiouma, Stephen of Mar Sabas, John of Damascus and Theophanes the so-called “Graptos” for the hymnography. We must not forget Alexandria, either, where the tradition of logic and dialectic *compendia* was born. And the Sinai region, with the monastery of Saint Catherine and its rich library: this was a standing post in the communications between Egypt and Palestine and a *fulcrum* in

manuscript production and circulation, in relation to which we find the name of Anastasius of Sinai, one of the main writers of the VII century.

These centres I have mentioned were not like isolated oases in the desert. The people in them did move: we find the same names in different contexts, we learn about travels from town to town and from monastery to monastery, circulation of both people and writings, situations that allowed the exchange of material, information, teachings and thoughts. A few examples: Sophronius of Jerusalem was born in Damascus and studied in Alexandria before becoming patriarch of the Holy City; John of Damascus was grown and educated in Damascus, where he began a civil career before going to Jerusalem and devoting himself to religious life and pastoral activity; the scientific tradition of the school of Alexandria spread as far as Armenia, as we know from the biography of Ananias of Shirak (610-685), who studied at Trebizond with Thychikos, a pupil of Stefanus of Alexandria's; Anastasius of Sinai travelled in Egypt and Palestine and, supposedly, to Cyprus too.

As the probable occasion for the transfer of written material from the eastern regions to the capital, scholars often mention the flight of monks from conquered territories to territories still under Byzantine rule between the VIII and IX centuries. This was a consequence of persecution and pillages by the Arabs. But that may not have been the only probable occasion: when a more or less definitive border was settled between Empire and Caliphate no "Iron Curtain" descended across the Middle-East. Notwithstanding the ongoing state of war, which soon became a *routine* of seasonal Arabic raids, border-crossing does not seem to have been troublesome: clergy members moved to take part in local synods, the Greek navy was active on Syrian and Lebanese coasts and the migration of Greeks towards Byzantine core-zones was not limited to the first conquests but continued, though diminished, depending on slight border variations.

It is worth remarking the relevant presence of foreigners in the making of a new "service élite" in Constantinople during the VII century, an aspect that was particularly stressed and investigated by prof. John Haldon. We are more informed about Armenians, but we also know of some important figures of Syrian origin holding high rank that implied a

high-level, though pretty functional, education. They were most probably bilingual, and most probably they travelled, not only moving within the Empire in fulfilment of their tasks but even keeping contacts with their country of origin.

Finally, since in this age religion was the most powerful driving force of intellectual life we must not overlook the impulse that both the Monoenergetic-Monothetic and the Iconoclastic dispute gave to production, exchange, gathering, copying, translation and even falsification of written material. *Florilegia* of Church Fathers' quotations, theological treatises, dogmatic epistles, *quaestiones et responsiones*, hagiographical texts, accounts of events and official documents did circulate as the most relentless supporters of one side or the other circulated among the most important centres of Christianity.

The cultural landscape of these two centuries is not a paltry one, though different in contents and forms from what came before and after. It involves peripheral areas even more than the core of the Empire, and it requires crossing linguistic borders in order to see and understand it in full. Being aware of this background, we cannot think, just because classical "high" historiography fell silent, that people did not feel the need anymore of keeping a memory of themselves and of what they were experiencing. A drop in the quality and the quantity of historiographical sources is undeniable: there has been a change in perspective, in breadth of the focus, in *criteria* of selection, even in historical sensitivity and in literary quality, but this does not diminish the value for us of what can be found.

The "common material" in Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles is precious proof of this. It testifies to a continuing practice of recording facts in annalistic format at local level, both in Syriac and in Greek, most probably linked to local institutions such as monasteries, bishoprics or town administrations. It testifies to the existence of war tales, popular narrations of ongoing or recent historical events, what I would like to call some sort of "romanticized para-historiography": they were surely written down in pro-Byzantine (that does not necessarily mean pro-imperial) circles, in a non-religious context probably close to the military one. It testifies to the early spread and influence of the Arabic *akhbār*, single narrative units of different length and content that circulated

orally in multiple versions and began to be gathered in collections at the beginning of the VIII century: that is in fact the likely provenance of some information of clearly Arabic origin which can be found not only in the “common material” but even in parts of the *Chronographia* that have no parallel in any of the Syriac chronicles. Finally, it testifies that exploiting what there is can prove to be more fruitful than merely complaining of scarcity.

We used to think of this period as a parenthesis between the death of Greek Byzantine culture and its miraculous resurrection with the so-called “Macedonian Renaissance”. I am not here to wave the flag of continuity, but I want to stress that what is in the middle cannot be completely free from ties with what there had been and what there would be. The reasons for this transformation, and its links with the contemporaneous historical upheavals, have been already investigated to some degree, both with regard to the shift in historiography and to cultural reorientation. A profitable research project would be to assess whether in this period we can find any seed of what flourished afterwards. The mutual influence between Greek and Syriac, without leaving Arabic aside, is a key point to start with and here there are several lands to explore beside historiography: again, religious production is predominant, with hymnography, liturgy, hagiography, homiletics, dispute and dialogue poems, apocalyptic; but secular sciences are present as well, astronomy-astrology, treatises dealing with linguistic matters (grammar, syntax, lexicography), and the tradition of ancient philosophy.

Without the material of eastern provenance, Theophanes would have offered to his readers a very meagre account of what happened in the VII and VIII centuries. The *Chronographia* is a pivotal source because it was the only one that later Byzantine historians could draw on for such an account and, thanks to the Latin translation of Anastasius Bibliotecarius, it was read in the West too. We can say that it has been a door through which a certain representation (and unavoidably a certain interpretation) of fundamental historical facts, like the Arab conquests, spread beyond the Bosphorus. We must ask ourselves if this representation was somehow conditioned by the fact that the information came from outside the Empire. As I said at the beginning, one of my

purposes was to assess whether the “common material” was taken over as it was or underwent any intentional, ideologically motivated, reworking.

What clearly emerged from my analysis is that the contents received from the East were exploited from a Byzantine perspective and used to support a double thread shaping the whole chronicle, that is anti-imperial criticism and religious concern. The Arabs are not seen anymore as a temporary divine punishment that will stop when sinners repent: they have definitively replaced the Persians as the Enemy par excellence, they deserve only contempt and loathing, they represent a permanent negative touchstone and a versatile narrative element to use anytime in order to condemn implicitly an emperor’s behaviour, to eulogise Chalcedonian orthodoxy, to point out God’s favour or disfavour. An effective ideological filter manifests itself in the selection of information, in implicit links hinted at by the simple juxtaposition of notices, in light shades of expression and explicit pronouncements, a filter that nullifies the potential influence of the context of information’s provenance and allows only facts and data to be pushed through. Therefore, although based on sources of different nature and origin, chronologically and geographically closer to the events, Theophanes’ *Chronographia* does not reflect the point of view of the eastern multilingual and multiethnic provinces where Empire and Caliphate clashed, but the point of view of the iconophile Constantinople between the VIII and the IX centuries.

As stated in my title, what we can do for the time being is just strike a match, not switch on floodlights to show a totally different situation from the one we imagined when looking in the dark.

Afterword

I have collected numerous comments and suggestions that will be extremely useful for the prosecution of my work, both during the discussion that immediately followed the presentation of this paper and afterwards, in private conversations and e-mail exchanges. I think it is worth complementing this text with a brief summary of the feedback I have received and, in doing this, I want to thank all the people that have

offered to me ideas, remarks and constructive observations.

I have said that the Middle East in this critical period must not be thought of as a static, paralysed world, because people still had many occasions for moving and circulate information. I have listed some of them, but others can be added. Commerce allowed and stimulated contacts among people and exchange of news: to trace the path that the first echoes of any fundamental event were likely to follow, one must of course look at the routes of commercial travels in the area. In addition to merchants, I should mention also prisoners and slaves, who were often on the move. The deportation of war prisoners was one of the main examples of boundary crossing: captives brought with them in the enemies' land their knowledge, their culture, their tradition, their language and – dwelling there for indefinite periods of time, before being returned during a prisoner exchange, or for the rest of their lives, in case they were sold as slaves – they were likely to share this “baggage” with others. Slaves, then, were frequently moved en mass, to meet needs for labour force or simply to revitalise depressed areas. A particularly fitting example is the big movement of slaves and skilled craftsmen required by the magnificent building project of the Ummayyads at the end of the VII century.

In my list of educated persons moving within the Byzantine empire and beyond, a very important name was missing: Theodore of Tarsus. Born at Tarsus (Cilicia) in 609, in his youth he experienced the Persian rule in the region and came in contact with the Persian culture. He studied at Antioch and probably travelled to Edessa, since he shows familiarity with Syriac literature and language as well. After the Islamic conquests he left his homeland for Constantinople, where he resided for about twenty years pursuing his studies in a wide range of disciplines. He then went to Rome and finally to Canterbury, after being consecrated archbishop of that see in 668. His life and his works are a striking example of how knowledge (and most probably also written materials along with it) could migrate not only from the eastern regions to the core of the Byzantine empire, but from the empire itself to the West.

The study of the “intercultural transmission” of historiographical materials and of the connections among historical works produced in these two centuries would greatly

benefit from an extension of the research also to Arabic and Armenian sources. I am currently working on Arabic, but having no knowledge of Armenian language I am not competent enough to enter the field of Armenian historiography. I am pretty confident, though, that I can profitably complement my research with the achievements of other scholars' work.

As I have tried to stress during my presentation, the purpose of this research is not a sterile reconstruction of source genealogies, nor a "lost-source hunt" for its own sake. It is, instead, a sort of archeological excavation of the available texts aimed at digging up an underlying cultural layer. This point emerged during the discussion, producing a lively and stimulating dialogue, based on the general agreement that it is not worth striving to find out a name to ascribe this or that lost work to, but rather to try to understand why a certain event was registered and told in that particular way, in which environment and for whom.

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