

“When Justinian Was Upsetting the World”: A Note on Soldiers and Religious Coercion in Sixth-Century Egypt

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The Bohairic Coptic *Life of Daniel of Sketis*, preserved in the tenth-century Cod. Vat. Copt. 62, tells the following story:

It happened at the time when the impious Justinian was king, the one who defiled and upset the whole inhabited world and the universal church everywhere, that he tried to establish the accursed faith of the defiled Council of Chalcedon in every place; and he scattered Christ's sheep, expelled the orthodox bishops and archbishops and deposed them from their sees. And the impious Justinian was not satisfied, but he sent the impious Tome of Leo, which the impious Council of Chalcedon had received, and sent it to every place that lay under his rule, that everyone might sign it. And when it was brought to Egypt a great tumult occurred among all the orthodox faithful who were in the *chora* of Egypt. And it was brought to the holy mountain of Sketis for the fathers to sign. But as for our holy father Abba Daniel, since he was the superior of Sketis at that time, the Lord revealed the matter to him before it was brought to Sketis. The holy man gathered all the elders together and told them what the Lord had revealed to him, and taught them all to be firm in the upright faith unto death and not to waver. When the king's soldiers brought the Tome full of every impiety of the lawless Leo into the holy mountain of Sketis, our holy father Abba Daniel the hegoumenos (superior) went out to meet them with a crowd of elders as holy as himself. And when the elders met the soldiers bringing the impiety-filled Tome, they (the soldiers) held it out to the elders saying, "The king has commanded you all to sign the symbol of faith." Our holy father Abba Daniel, the blessed hegou-

menos, answered and said to the soldiers, "What symbol of faith is this?" They said, "That of the great Council of Chalcedon in which the 634 bishops assembled." Our father Abba Daniel, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, jumped up and seized that Tome full of every impiety and tore it up, shouting and saying to the soldiers, "Anathema to the defiled Council of Chalcedon, anathema to everyone in communion with it, anathema to everyone who believes according to it, anathema to everyone who denies the salvific passion of Christ. Far be it from us ever to receive this impious definition of faith: we rather anathematize everyone who receives it or believes according to it. We believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial Trinity in one Godhead, with our last breath." And it happened that when the soldiers saw the great firmness of our Abba Daniel and the way he bore himself, they became very angry and seized him and inflicted great torments upon him so that he almost died from the many blows they dealt him. The elders too had many sufferings and travails imposed upon them, so that they were scattered in the whole *chora* of Egypt.¹

Notwithstanding what may be more or less of a *topos* in hagiographical writing,² what this narrative presents is the by now familiar picture³ of the use of military force by the Byzantine state to compel assent to the Chalcedonian confession in key provinces. Such armed coercion has been briefly mentioned in passing in earlier treatments of Justinian's rule over Egypt;⁴ its measure of success can be gauged by, for example, the Chalcedonian takeover of the Pachomian monastic movement.⁵ We are fortunate to possess abundant papyrus documentation of Byzantine soldiers in Egypt.⁶

1. Text and Italian trans., Guidi, in *ROC* 5 (1900): 547-49, 561-62. Nau placed the story in the 530s: *ibid.* 6 (1901): 78. In the Greek Chalcedonian tradition of the *vita*, this episode is of course not found. The Coptic story ends with Daniel taking his disciple and moving to the village of Tambok to build another monastery (presumably a *kellion* or semi-hermitage), spending his time in prayer and penance until Justinian's death enables him to return to Sketis.

2. Cf. Johnson, "Anti-Chalcedonian Polemics," 216-34, esp. 224.

3. Cf. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, 34-42. Soldiers are the torturers in innumerable martyrdom stories from the Great Persecution on.

4. Hardy, "Egyptian Policy of Justinian," 21-41; Demicheli, "Politica religiosa," 217-57.

5. Goehring, *Chalcedonian Power Politics*. It has long been known from papyri that the *Scythae Justiniani* were quartered at the monastery of Pbow in the 540s: e.g. P. Freer 08.450-d II 26, on which see Gascou, "Table budgétaire d'Antaeopolis," 301, 303, and 309.

6. See now Carrié's forthcoming *Prosopographie de l'armée romaine*. This ex-

What the historian ought to do is, assuming that something like this dramatic story might indeed have happened, to examine such a narrative against the background and in the light of these documentary papyri. Operationally how might Byzantine soldiers have been used to impose a belief system on a local population?

For most of the period of Roman rule in Egypt it was a familiar fact of life that the army was deployed to deal with small-scale problems;⁷ the mid-fourth century Abinnaeus archive, for example, illustrates how the military interacted with the civilian population.⁸ Local militias were raised to investigate crimes, apprehend wrongdoers, and see to the imposition of penalties. With the growth of late fourth- and fifth-century imperial legislation that defined religious heresy as harm to the state,⁹ naturally the state's armed force became more involved in such damage control. Justinian's own preamble to Novel 109 of A.D. 541 reiterates the ban on heretics in both civil and military service.¹⁰ However, the army at Justinian's disposal in Egypt was principally made up of locally recruited citizen soldiers, settled in place and well established in normal family lives.¹¹ Since the conventional picture of sixth-century Egyptian society is one of a majority non-Chalcedonian

haustive work will include full identifications, documentary references, and ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural data on all known military personnel of both command rank and enlisted grade. At last we will have something to replace and provide much more detailed information than Maspero, *Organisation militaire de l'Égypte*.

7. Alston, "Violence and Social Control in Roman Egypt." Cf. Price, "Limes of Lower Egypt," 150 on the prevalence of policing over defense.

8. Cf. Leslie MacCoull, "Abinnaeus Archive," in *ODB*, 1:4; Bagnall, "Military Officers," 47-54.

9. The literature on this subject is very large: cf. most recently M.-Th. Fögen, "The Symbolic Functions of Legislation: Law-Giving as a Political Technique," paper at the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium "Law and Society in Byzantium," 3 May 1992.

10. *CIC*, 3: p. 517; cf. *Cod. Just.* I.5.12 (A.D. 527). Justin I had obliged the army to subscribe to Chalcedon (Vasiliev, *Justin I*, 242-43). Of course, repeatedly legislating something indicates that the desired result is not happening, as reflected in the question of military confessional loyalty in Egypt and Syria.

11. Cf. Keenan, "Evidence for the Byzantine Army," 139-50, and Keenan, "Soldier and Civilian in Byzantine Hermopolis." Owing to the preservation of our papyrus sources, one must extrapolate from Upper Egyptian papyri to infer with regard to Lower Egypt the conditions of integration of soldiers into the society.

local population, the questions arise of how soldiers could have been mustered to enforce Chalcedon at sword point, and whether their obedience to government orders would have overridden their personal confessional allegiance given that locals would have tended to be non-Chalcedonians. Rather, would the soldiers who figure in Egyptian hagiographical stories have been units recruited from a Chalcedonian province such as Palestine? Such information is not recorded in the surviving evidence, papyrological or epigraphic.

If soldiers were sent to Sketis, they would have come from the nearest military camp, at Terenuthis in the first eparchy of Aegyptus, recorded in the fourth-century *Notitia Dignitatum* as the quarters of the *ala tertia Arabum*.¹² Though Terenuthis, strategically located at the end of the natron road and at the west end of the trans-Delta route, is better known from its early grave stelae and a couple of fourth-century papyri,¹³ it was a bishopric in the fifth century, was visited by John Moschos in the sixth century, and recorded by George of Cyprus in the early seventh century.¹⁴ Since the monks of Sketis went to Terenuthis for refuge after a fifth-century barbarian attack,¹⁵ they could not at that time have regarded the soldiers there as inimical—if the attack in question had taken place before 451, the problem of confessional difference would, of course, not have arisen. Since fewer papyri survive from Lower Egypt, we have no explicit papyrus evidence of Terenuthis' function as a military camp in the sixth century or of what unit would have been stationed there, especially at the time when for-

12. Seeck, ed., *Notitia Dignitatum, oriens*, para. 28.24; see Worp, "Observations on Some Military Camps," 291. For the fourth century see Price, "Limes of Lower Egypt," 145 and 147. These *Arabes* might have been, not Arabs, but from a pastoral people of Upper Egypt/Nubia: cf. Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, 58, and note 32. On possibly Arab federate soldiers in sixth-century Upper Egypt compare the *arabarches* John attested at Antinoe in *P. Cair.Masp.* II 67166.8, *P.Lond.* V 1677.16, perhaps a Christian Arab (but of which confession?). This title has, however, also been read as *alabarches*.

13. *P.Lond.* II 231.13 = *P.Abinn.* 9.13 (ca. A.D. 346; with note *ad loc.* in *P.Lond.* II); *P.Köln.* V 232 (ca. A.D. 314), in which a soldier buys a slave. See Calderini and Daris, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici*, 4.4:394.

14. Gelzer, ed., *Descriptio orbis Romani*, section 728, and note *ad loc.*, p. 125. It is, however, not listed as a *polis* among the 23 cities of Aegyptus in Burckhardt, ed., Hierokles, *Synekdemos*, 43-44, probably reworked early in Justinian's reign.

15. Gelzer, ed., *Descriptio orbis Romani*, note to sec. 728, p. 125.

mer units were being replaced by *Justiniani*.¹⁶ We can suppose, however, that it was soldiers stationed nearby at Terenuthis that were envisaged by the writer of the Sketis story.

Justinian began his crackdown on Egyptian Monophysites in 536,¹⁷ when the newly acceded Monophysite Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodosios, was taken into internment at Constantinople.¹⁸ At that time, before Justinian reorganized Egypt and unified civil and military commands by his Edict XIII of 538/39, the military installation at Terenuthis would have been under the authority of the *dux* of Aegyptus, Aristomachos. With the reconquest of Vandal North Africa for Byzantium by 534, Justinian was concerned with the security of the entire southern Mediterranean littoral, and in 539 would establish the *Libyci Justiniani* for the western defense.¹⁹ By this time the Byzantine army in Egypt was becoming more concentrated in the towns as opposed to the countryside,²⁰ and Terenuthis would have looked not only toward Alexandria but also toward the west. Just before 536 Sketis itself was riven by disputes between rival Monophysite groups, the Julianists/Gaianites versus the Severan "Theodosians" who split off to found their own "Monasteries of the Mother of God."²¹ Thus the western Delta in the mid-530s would have been seen as in need of stronger Byzantine governmental control.

What we see reflected in the story of Daniel of Sketis and the soldiers is the degree to which the use of armed coercion became imprinted upon the common memory of the Egyptian church. In the Coptic narrative those who bring the hated Tome of Leo are

16. Keenan, "Soldier and Civilian in Byzantine Hermopolis"; Gascou, "Table budgétaire d'Antaeopolis."

17. According to John of Ephesus (*Lives of the Eastern Saints*, PO 17: no. 25), who was a witness to events in Constantinople: Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, 79.

18. *History of the Patriarchs*, PO 1:463-64; cf. E. R. Hardy in *Coptic Encyclopaedia*, 7:2241. This traumatic absence is recalled in the Coptic homily on the Archangel Michael attributed to Chrysostom but probably written in the interregnum of A.D. 566-76 between Theodosios and Peter IV: Depuydt, ed., and Brakke, trans., *Homiletica from the Pierpont Morgan Library*, 525:54 (sec. 22): "Has not our patriarch been a sojourner in many lands for many years?" (in a context lamenting conditions in Egypt).

19. Gascou, "Table budgétaire d'Antaeopolis."

20. Price, "Limes of Lower Egypt," 146.

21. A. Cody, *Coptic Encyclopaedia*, 7:2104, summarizing the earlier work of Evelyn White. "Theodosians" here is a somewhat later appellation.

the *king's* (emperor's) soldiers, and they proclaim the emperor's directive that it be subscribed. Such men would have been perceived and labeled differently from the local citizen soldiers familiar from the papyri, some of whom, members of traditionally military families, retired after their tour of duty and took holy orders.²² We know from papyri that Byzantine local recruiters offered high cash bonuses as an incentive to enlistment.²³ How could this process of "taking the emperor's shilling" have transformed the army unit of Terenuthis, a day's march from Sketis, into "an alien body . . . at odds with its subject population"²⁴ (which in fact they were not)? We also know from papyri that the units of *Justiniani* that replaced earlier units in Egypt in the late 530s and 540s were not outsiders brought in from other provinces because of their reliability and loyalty to the emperor but rather continued to be made up of the same sort of locals as the earlier forces.²⁵ As we try to construct background for the literary narratives, we look for evidence for soldiers' actual religious life, but again this is elusive in the documents: for example, military chaplains are known only from Chalcedonian sources,²⁶ and no texts of military religious services have survived on papyrus. Rather than incline toward a twentieth-century reader's concept of the conflict within the mind of a Monophysite soldier ordered to enforce Chalcedon upon the locally revered holy men of his district, what we face in bringing together the two types of evidence, literary and documentary, is the way that by its nature the latter does not reflect the religious preoccupations of the former.²⁷

22. Keenan, "Soldier and Civilian in Byzantine Hermopolis": John, son of Taurinus, *primicerius* of the *Equites Mauri Scutarii* of Hermopolis and landowner/lessor, was followed by his *scriiniarius* son Taurinus II who by A.D. 510 had become a priest of the Catholic church of Hermopolis (BGU XII 2182), one assumes of the Monophysite confession (but, of course, this is not explicitly stated).

23. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 176, with note 156.

24. *Ibid.*, 177.

25. Keenan, "Soldier and Civilian in Byzantine Hermopolis"; Gascou, "Table budgétaire d'Antaeopolis," 281-82. Soldiers from outside Egypt are, of course, also attested in the papyri: cf. Remondon, "Soldats de Byzance," 41-93; Gascou, "Militaires étrangers," 203-6; J.-M. Carrié, "L'État à la recherche de nouveaux modes de financement des armées (Rome et Byzance, IV^e-VIII^e siècles)," in *Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, forthcoming.

26. Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 2:632-33.

27. Cf. Wipszycka, "Christianisation de l'Égypte," 122-25; Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 305-6.

Justinian, it is true, needed loyal and efficient agents to enforce his plan for a religiously unified Roman empire:²⁸ such a preoccupation doubtless underlay Edict XIII. What historians are beginning to ask, however, is to what extent religious ideology actually influenced the allocation of state resources on a province-by-province basis, especially bearing in mind the preoccupation of earlier historians with the question of a relation between religious disaffection and the military disasters of the seventh century.²⁹ Relying upon the documents, one ascribes to the Monophysite hagiographer of Justinian's reign the same tendentiousness as can be discerned within those documents themselves, in which oppression by soldiers had long been a *topos*.³⁰

The Coptic church came to see itself as the church of the martyrs: of those who suffered for their faith at the hands, first, of pagans, then of Chalcedonians, and finally of Moslems, all of these ideologies that made use of armed force to compel the submission of Egyptian Christians.³¹ The historiography of eighty years or so ago used to picture late antique Egypt as a feudalized, highly militarized society: modern papyrological scholarship has pretty well demolished this image.³² With a no more than average local recruitment³³ the Roman armed force was not seen as an undue

28. For example, since, after the late fifth century, bishops had been involved in the local administration of the *annona militaris* (*Cod. Just.* I.4.18), they, though increasingly drawn from monastic ranks (cf. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 294), were preferably to be Chalcedonians: hence the hagiographer's complaint at the ousters of Monophysites from their sees.

29. See the papers by L.M. Whitby, J.-M. Carrié, R.-J. Lilie, and F.M. Donner at the Third London Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam (October 1992), to be published in *Late Antiquity and Early Islam*.

30. J.-M. Carrié, "Esercito: trasformazioni," cited from Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 180, note 186.

31. Since the Roman state was to make use of the Gospel imperative "compel them to come in" (Lk 14.23), it is unfortunate that, if the sixth-century Egyptian Monophysite exegete Rufus of Hypselis did comment on this verse, his commentary has not been found among his surviving fragments: Sheridan, *The Homilies of Rufus*.

32. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 172.

33. *Ibid.*, 175. In the early seventh century, by way of comparison, in a seven-leaf papyrus tax register (BM 1077) only three taxpayers are soldiers (one an *exoptio*), in the midst of listings for many clerics and charitable institutions. At the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh century it is estimated that there were perhaps 25,000 troops in Egypt: see Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 42; cf. 18-19.

burden at the village level from which most of our documentation comes. A very small number of actual incidents, perhaps not in fact directed from Constantinople, could have prompted the growth of an entire genre of narratives such as that in the *Life of Daniel*.³⁴ With such a tool as the new *Prosopographie* at our disposal we can begin to reevaluate the hitherto uniform concept of "the Byzantine army" as it actually functioned in a province important both for its economic role in the empire and for the religious orientation of its people.

34. Johnson, "Anti-Chalcedonian Polemics," 221.