

The Relationship between Refugee Pressure and Local Control under the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria

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Abstract. The beginning of the 7th century was of major conflict and changes to the people residing within the borders of the East Roman Empire, with the revolt of Phocas, the seizing power of Heraclius, and later, the invasion of the Persians all happening together within a narrow time duration. All of these conflicts had major effects on regional population and power dynamics structure. This paper discusses the assumption that the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, under the leadership of John the almsgiver, dealt with refugees fleeing Levant. It transformed refugees into hermits and built local influence in the process. The paper uses autobiographical primary sources and references to the geological conditions then. In the fifth century, the Council of Chalcedon re-asserted the teachings of the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus against the heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius, leading to a grand division within Egypt. The consequences—the commemoration of two non-Chalcedonian churches along with the absence of imperial influence due to the Byzantine-Persian War—prompted Patriarch John of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria to take measures to create new hermit populations from the refugees in Jerusalem to once again infiltrate church control.

Keywords: Refugee; Patriarch; Alexandria; Byzantium; Rome; Palestine; Egypt.

1. Introduction

The beginning of the 7th century was of major conflict and changes to the people residing within the borders of the East Roman Empire, with the revolt of Phocas, the seizing power of Heraclius, and later, the invasion of the Persians all happening together within a narrow time duration. All of these conflicts had major effects on regional population and power dynamics structure. The re-communion of the non-Chalcedonian patriarchates of Antioch and Alexandria happening then also cast a long-lasting influence over clergies of all religions in the East Mediterranean regions.

This paper discusses the assumption that the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, under the leadership of John the almsgiver, dealt with refugees fleeing Levant by transforming them into hermits as well as building local influence in the process using autobiographical primary sources as well as references to the geological conditions then. The study is mainly based on a primary source, *The Life of St. John the Almsgiver* by Leontius of Neapolis, with multiple other secondary sources relevant to the social and economic situations of Egypt in the late antiquity era.

The general assumption is that most elite-class refugees created by the Byzantium-Persian war became either hermits or monastic residents as a result of John's trying to enhance local influence of the Orthodox Church. The topic has been barely mentioned by modern East-Roman historical research. This paper provides an insight into the power dynamics of Egypt, the region that had fed up half of the population of the empire for the past centuries. It was an era that changed the empire from its "cross-three-continents" geopolitical state to the latter well-known "two-peninsula" structure.

2. Historical Background

Mark the Evangelist founded the Patriarchate of Alexandria in 42 A.D., in one of the most outstandingly Hellenized areas within the Roman Empire—Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs, where Roman control had infiltrated into every hierarchy and Coptic individual. Coptic Christians and missionaries found ways of binding local culture into Christianity [1], and gradually undermined the

influences of Polytheism as one of the most loyal and faithful Christians dominated the barn of the Imperium. Through the first century towards the beginning of late antiquity, Copts have been loyal subjects of the empire and the Lord.

Entering the fifth century, the Council of Chalcedon re-asserted the teachings of the ecumenical Council of Ephesus against the heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius; as the latter being the dominant theology in Alexandria and even the whole of Egypt, this inevitably led to the division of the Greek Orthodox Church of Egypt and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, with the former following the adjudication of Constantinople and the latter following their own interpretations of the Nicaean Creed.

The sixth century witnessed ups and downs of the East Roman Empire and the Greek Orthodox Church of Egypt. With the revolt of Phocas, the rising of Heraclius, the Sassanian invasion of Levant as well as the combined factors of inner and outer pressure from both churches and the imperial administrations affecting the Orthodox Church through the seventh century, the research of actions and measures taken by John the almsgiver (John the Merciful), the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Alexandria from 606 A.D. to 616 A.D, would reveal the confrontation between powers on the rich lands of Egypt. This article would focus mainly over several topics related with hermit groups then.

Though the revolt of Phocas was devastating to Phocas, it did not influence the Patriarchates, especially Alexandria, so hard as some would have anticipated. John was elected by Alexandrian Orthodox bishops and metropolitans to take the throne of the Patriarch left behind by his predecessor, Patriarch Theodore, and later officially appointed by Phocas. During this period, regional churches did not intervene in the everyday politics of the empire intensively, as their allegiance was only to the throne of the Imperium, rather than the people that possessed it. Therefore, due to the revolutionist position that John always took, and that he was supported by almost all of the Orthodox and Greek Christians of Egypt, Nicetas (cousin of Heraclius Sr.), helped him secure the Patriarchate despite his being appointed by Phocas. This is constantly neglected in almost all the church files as they must demonstrate their firm hatred and disagreement towards the tyrant that had irritated and exploited almost every single individual of the empire, enhancing the point that the church cares much more about establishing and enhancing its own theological authority and control over hierarchies than to have and entanglements with imperial politics.

What really completely changed the delicate balance between powers present in the eastern Mediterranean region was the outbreak of the Roman-Sassanian war. As the Persians captured all of Syria, Armenia as well as all the lands east of the Taurus Mountains. The war directly caused the collapse of the Patriarchate of Antioch and the City of Jerusalem, forcing local elite clergies to flee to the east: as the plains of Cilicia and Tarsus were conquered one by one by the Persians, the refugees had no choice but to seek asylum in Egypt, where imperial control was still firm. Unfortunate for John the Merciful, many of the clergies that came from Antioch were mainly non-Chalcedonian Christians, as according to the policies practiced by his predecessors, all non-Chalcedonian Christians were to be expelled and barred from the Orthodox Church for the rest of his life, leading to almost natural hatred and tension between Chalcedonian Christians and the Refugees from the east, who had joined Coptic Christian communities through the unification of the Syriac Orthodox Church (non-Chalcedonian) and the Coptic Orthodox Church (non-Chalcedonian) under Patriarch Anastasius of Alexandria and Athanasius of Antioch, under the pressure of the Persians as the Syriac Patriarchate of Antioch fell into ruins [2].

This led to the immediate attention of Patriarch John, as Chalcedonian Christians were definitely minorities in Egypt (it is estimated that only seven Orthodox churches were present at the beginning of John's term)—should this not be dealt with swift action, it was possible that the non-Chalcedonians would eventually push the Chalcedonians out of Egypt and dominant the theological world there. As a result, John carried out several countermeasures to this massive change in the local population structure [3].

3. John and His Orthodox Patriarchate

To begin with, it is crucial to identify what problems of John's Orthodox Patriarchate were revealed through the unification. It was recorded that Anastasius was barred from the city of Alexandria during the division of the Coptic Orthodox Church, provoked by Phocas and his puppet clergies [2], meaning that Anastasius could only have resided in monasteries loyal to the Coptic Church outside of Alexandria. To be able to organize synods and make official contacts with Antioch under that circumstances means that the Coptic Church possessed a complete and operating clergy system aside from their Cathedrals and Basilicas as well as the bishops and metropolitans that were bound to church assets and would be easily controlled through administrative methods, such as fiats. In this case, Anastasius relied on the monks and monasteries of Egypt (Coptic Monks, rather than Coptic Hermits who were individual monks), indicating that the monasteries (whose number is impossible to estimate, but it is speculated that there could have been at least hundreds of them whose resources could be directly managed by the Patriarch of the Coptic Church) possessed at least properties enough to amass a medium-sized passenger fleet to for Anastasius to travel to Antioch and return, as well as spent massive amounts of capital to rally upon synods and make official connections with Antioch. Therefore, to unify with Antioch was no different from revealing that the Coptic Church had controlled literally every Monastery of Egypt, and it undoubtedly led to panic within the Greek Orthodox, or "Chalcedonian" Church.

4. Measures to Refugees by John

John's bibliography, written by Leontius, the bishop of Neapolis, Cyprus, John's hometown, described these different measures multiple times. He first granted all priests and clergies from Levant amnesties, have they been heresies to the Chalcedonian Orthodox doctrines—John ordered that all their past "sins" of disobeying the Orthodox Church could be completely pardoned if they promise that they would never convert to a non-Chalcedonian again and signs a confession letter, without any monetary or any sorts of punishments [3]. This "tolerant" policy compared to his predecessors immediately eased the tension between diversified Christian groups, but also aroused problems over how to settle the enormous populations of asylum-seekers that had become "brothers and sisters of Orthodox Faith".

Other than this method, John also tried to use a more collaborative strategy toward the Persians. We know from now that many bishops and clergies then were very patriotic and loyal to the imperial central government and refused to open up negotiations with the Persians, but there were also multiple individuals that tried to collaborate with Parisians to secure Christian control in occupied lands (as the war was not favoring the East Roman Side), such as John himself [4]. John gathered much gold and other monetary resources, with which he redeemed many non-Chalcedonian clergies and Christians from Persian occupation. This can be seen as a preemptive tactic from multiple dimensions.

It can be speculated that John anticipated the potential massive domestic unrest brought by eastern refugees, and there was no way to ease such pressure using merely external methods from the Greek Orthodox Church given the previously existing tension. Therefore, through trading out personnel of the Oriental Churches, John would successfully demonstrate mercy and showing signals of hopes for easing tension, making it easier to mediate the conflict between different religious groups. It is also recorded that the clergies that John redeemed were mostly nuns and less educated priests [4], meaning that it was much easier to control such groups, either with monetary methods or authority pressure.

To continue, the discussion of Coptic monks and hermits must be introduced. Unlike most Greek or Russian Monks, who were mostly isolated from the secular world, Coptic monks own huge amounts of wealth and means of production that were often bound with monasteries [5]. Due to laws from the beginning of the Roman Empire, Coptic monasteries were not allowed to sell any of their properties, including land and any bulk commodities that they owned, making them one of the richest (collectively speaking) hierarchies of Egypt. What is more, as monasteries strictly limited monks' entering or leaving, it was easy to cast influences on them, both theologically and secularly. For the

imperial government, a steady population and production meant guaranteed taxation. As for the non-Chalcedonian Church of Egypt, they never had to worry about monasteries being converted to other beliefs, as the legacies and structures of these facilities eliminated any possibilities of hostile infiltration.

The situation would be completely different for Coptic hermits, individual monks that do not belong to any church organizations or monasteries. They were mainly individuals or masters and disciples that did not have a strict code of belief. Most Coptic hermits were wanderers that traveled from city to city, making it almost impossible to create an accurate census of them, therefore, a social security risk and potential instability deemed by imperial Egyptian officials [5].

In the past, when the Chalcedonian Patriarchate was still protected by imperial authorities as the church of the “orthodox” belief, the Patriarchs had no need to utilize any of the mentioned resources. As the social situations were stable, they could simply build their own churches and monasteries with resources provided by Constantinople. And as most of the hermits were deemed “unorthodox heresies that deviated from the true path to God”, the Patriarchs simply disdained to integrate them into the Orthodox church system.

Just as what is mentioned above, the Sassanian invasion changed everything. The imperial was busy confronting the Persians, leaving no spare attention or capital for the Patriarchates, while the heretics continued to expand. Under these circumstances, John had to adapt to the new situations.

Though there are not many sources that might reveal John did start using the previously neglected hermits on his side, the biography written by Leontius in the same era as John as well as many other archaeological findings do prove the theory.

In the biography of John written by bishop Leontius in the same era, it is described that John granted the refugees a certain amount of gold and other properties to help them settle down and restart the cause of evangelization. These resources were all demanded by John from the non-Chalcedonian churches as a means of weakening these churches—in fact, the unification of the Syriac Church and the Coptic Church gave John the excuse to make such orders as it would be a duty to help brother churches. However, none of the contents of any existing church files told the later settlements of these clergies except that John asked them to continue their sacred duty as priests. It is of very high possibility that a majority of them became Chalcedonian hermits and helped convert citizens to Chalcedonian Christians so as to seek shelter and support from the Patriarchate, as there were no other ways of settling down so many clergies except building new monasteries and basilicas, but neither was recorded in any existing files and there was simply no possibility that John could have that many resources to complete such construction programs [6].

Another key piece of evidence that supports this theory is the vast change in the attitude toward hermits and monk populations of the Orthodox Church during the reign of John. As has been mentioned before, due to the flexibility and obscurity of hermit populations, they had always been deemed as peddlers of heresy and evil by every Church in the land of Egypt, including the Orthodox church under the jurisdiction of John’s predecessors. However, a rather curious phenomenon is that during the beginning of the seventh century, the Orthodox Church of Egypt almost entirely changed its comments towards groups of independent monks, starting initially from the highest rank of the church, from systematically persecuting them to using the authority of the Patriarchate to protect the personal and property security of monks and even allowing the traditions of hermits to interfere with the daily intercessions and ritual practices of the Church [7].

It is recorded in the biography of John the almsgiver written by Leontius as well as its supplements written in the same era that the name of St. Menas was mentioned multiple times during daily conversations of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. St. Menas, or Martyr Menas, Menas of Egypt, is an Egyptian Saint from the earliest hermit groups of Egypt in the third century, and both the Coptic Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) church and the Greek Orthodox Church deem him as a saint.

This is a very interesting phenomenon, as there is a very strict rule about Orthodox rituals and prayers to Patrons; although St. Menas was canonized and memorized during regular church communions, it is still astonishing that a Patron of soldiers and hermits would appear so extensively

in daily church life of the Greek Orthodox Church, as is mentioned in the very beginning that hermits and monks were not very welcomed before the era of John the Merciful, and the biography of John the almsgiver also includes an event in which an independent monk was discriminated and beaten and thrown into detention merely for entering the city with a lady, making the pieces of evidence even weirder. What is even more astonishing is that the Patriarch (John) himself heard of this issue and dealt with this himself by giving a fair jurisdiction and helping the monk regain freedom, demonstrating fairness and respect for hermits which would be simply impossible during the reign of his predecessors.

All of these combined together can only lead to one reasonable explanation, that due to some historic events and reasons, the tolerance, or even respect, towards the monk and hermit hierarchy suddenly shifted. This could only result from a direct link of interests between these groups and the church, as there was no other incentive that the Church would violate the traditions that had been practiced for hundreds of years. Therefore, it is of very high possibility that either many Orthodox Christians became hermits, urging the Patriarch to reconsider his policies, or that the Church was at such a desperate risk (or crisis) that it had to use all resources at hand to regain authority. Both are of rather high possibility and have already been evaluated in the previous paragraphs, what is to be discussed next is another potential aim and outcome about the intentionally increased population of hermits.

There exists another curious record, which is relevant to the beginning of the Persian-Byzantine war rather than the middle or final stages, during which the church still had a reasonable amount of money to spend and conduct almsgiving [8]. In the 12th chapter of John's Biography, Leontius also wrote that during the beginning of the Persian invasion as well as many years before the invasion, John settled much personnel within monasteries and convents during the beginning of the war, most of whom were redeemed and resettled due to his treaties with the Persians, when the war was still not at its peak [9], but was never mentioned in any other part of the book, indicating that the Patriarchate gradually ran out of resources to ensure material abundance, further strengthening the assumption of the hermit strategy.

It must be acknowledged, that, though Patriarchs seldom interfered with imperial politics, especially when it relates to Basilus himself, do try to undermine imperial influences, especially when it comes to the case of Egypt. Egypt had never been a place of either internal or external conflict after the Romans conquered it. As most cities were distributed on the coastlines, in the delta region or near the river banks and valleys of the Nile River, the Romans did not have a hard time controlling the cities and villages (which were mainly agricultural regions) since any insurgents or fugitives would have nowhere to go other than the deserts [10], and the Romans only had to seize a few fortresses and ports to gain solid control of the whole Egypt, making most of the imperial administrations of Egypt to be taxing and statistical agencies. However, the church also has a need to establish its control within the villages to collect tithes and, according to the idealism and fundamentalism the churches then possessed, redirect people's worship from the emperor and authorities of the Imperium to God and Christ, as theologies were treated very seriously in that era, particularly the eastern Mediterranean regions.

Therefore, as the control of the Imperium weakens due to the war, and though the Church had to start protecting itself as the protection of the Imperium was no longer valid, there came a sudden chance for the Church to permanently change the power dynamics of Egypt, or at least alter the situation that had existed for hundreds of years. Though Emperor Heraclius prepared for the worst outcome during the Persian-East Roman war and even thought of giving up the title of Emperor to the Persians and making the Imperium a Protectorate, no Romans ever had a single thought that the Persians would prevail, and most of them merely thought that the war as a temporary punishment convicted by the Lord due to their sins, making it logical to determine that John's actions could have been using the war as a chance to later seize influence and local control from the Imperial authorities.

5. Conclusion

The recordings within primary resources must be viewed as a whole with the geopolitical situations and power dynamics researched. As in this case, hermits could easily be an ignored factor, but should have been given great attention, as any abnormalities in history should not be considered as mere coincidences. Such result implies that the structure of the theological features of Egyptian Orthodox Churches could be more complicated and diversified than what used to be thought, and could offer reference to the research of the social and population structure, combined with demographic and archaeological data, of Egyptian society for the latter two centuries.

Most of the confrontations between the Patriarchate and the Imperium were in the economic areas, as market surveillance and taxation policies were extremely chaotic in that era. John's biography written by Leontius recorded such a scene that a local patrician, Nicetas (who could be the cousin of Heraclius), advocated carrying out a much more severe regulation of the market, but was opposed by John as it would "hurt the interests of the poor". In the end, after hours of debates and contentions, Nicetas yielded to the Patriarch and the advocacy of the Church [11], indicating that the power of the Church had already grown to a surprisingly high level that even the local governor could not disobey under certain occasions.

To maintain such control over imperial regional affairs, just as what has been discussed in the previous passage, the Patriarchate had to at least create confusion and chaos in certain areas of the Imperium civil affairs for the Church to act as a mediator in these matters, which were extremely changed during a war. There were martial laws during the seventeenth century and temporary military administrations as well, and the damage of a full-scale war towards trade and commercial activities was devastating. Therefore, to maintain the control, the Patriarch had to come up with a whole new method, in this case, using hermits as infiltrations into cities and Imperial influences.

Medieval empires and political entities did not have a functional census system, and dispatching populations that were original registered priests and Christians into cities and villages to become hermits could only undermine the intelligence that the Imperium possesses of Egypt, and, in the long turn, build a network of monks that included commercial systems as well. Though this is a pretty bold guess, it indeed is always reasonable to determine that humans would always want to keep their power at hand, and with the sources at hand, this is an explanation with a rather high possibility.

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