ŁUKASZ KARCZEWSKI
Faculty of Historical and Social Sciences
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

THE MARTYRDOM OF THE GAZA GARRISON DURING THE EARLY MUSLIM CONQUESTS IN THE LIGHT OF *PASSIO SANCTORUM SEXAGINTA MARTYRUM*

Preface

Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum[1] is an intriguing testament to the policies of the Muslim conquerors towards the Christian population of Palestine between 633 and 640. More akin to a hagiography than a historical record, the text gives an account of the martyrdom of sixty soldiers of the Gaza garrison.

1. Regarding the two Latin editions of the text

Two editions of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* have survived. The earlier (shorter) version dates back to the 10th or 11th century A.D.[2], while the subsequent (longer) edition was written in the 15th century, also in Latin. The latter version is supplemented with a hagiography of Saint Florian of Gaza following the martyrdom of the city's garrison[3].

The shorter version, edited and published by "Analecta Bollandiana", consists of four chapters and amounts to four pages, which recount the events from the capture of Gaza by the Muslims to the martyrdom of the second group of the Christian soldiers. As mentioned above, the subsequent version of the account is an enlarged edition. It is comprised of six chapters. The first four recount the lives of the martyred soldiers across the first five pages of the "Analecta Bollandiana" edition. Chapters five and six describe the martyrdom of Saint Florian and the miracles he performed in Jerusalem.

The original language version of *Passio sanctorum* is difficult to determine beyond any doubt. Scholars suggest that the earlier translation (made at the turn of the 10th and 11th century) was inspired by the lost Greek original. Such contentions were made based on the quality of Latin used by the translator-editor of the text. His Latin is faulty, likely indicating an imperfect command the language, as manifested e.g. in the use of proper nouns and names[4].

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[1]   Hyppolytus Delhaye, *Incipit passio sexaginta martyrum qui passi sunt a Sarracenis mense december die XVII* [hereinafter: PSSM], Bruxelis 1904, "Analecta Bollandiana" , p. 300-303.

[2]   For more on the subject, see D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza and Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem*, "Aram", 15/2003, p. 129-130.

[3]   Hyppolytus Delhaye, *Ista est legenda sancti Floriani et sociorum suorum, 30 que ex antiquissomis scriptures et approbatis inventia est* [hereinafter: LsF], Bruxelis 1904, "Analecta Bollandiana", p. 303-307.

[4]   See D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza…*, p. 129-130.

J. Pargorie stresses the chaotic spelling of names, arguing that the list of names attached to the account mixes them with the designations of the two cohorts of Scythians and the Voluntarii: "[…] Sunt enim nomina sanctroum qui passi sunt in sanctum Dei civitatem Cithon, Devandus […]"[5], followed elsewhere by: "[…] Devandus, Sciton, Iohannes, Paulus et item Iohannes, Paulus, Fotinus, Zitas, Eugenius […]"[6]. According to Pargorie, despite the spelling differences in the name *Cithon* (also spelled *Sciton* or *Cito* in the text), it may designate the same proper noun, i.e. the Scythian tribe, and hence combining it with the alleged first name *Devandus* was incorrect. Pargorie contends that *Devandus* is not a first name, but rather a transliteration of the Greek term βάνδου, referring to a "group of soldiers"[7]. The resulting transliteration would be that of the phrase ἐκ βάνδου Σκυθῶν i.e. *of the Scythian group of soldiers*. Pargorie notices an analogical pattern with reference to the second cohort: "[…] *Devandum autem volutarisiorum* […]"[8], which refers to the cohort of volunteers (*cohors Voluntariorum*), whose Greek name may have sounded ἐκ βάνδου βολουνταρίων[9].

The same applies to certain names and proper nouns that were erroneously transliterated from Greek to Latin. The list of names includes one *Zitas*, which likely stands for *Sita* (Σιτᾶ[10]) or *Sittas* (Σιττα[11]), a common name among the soldiers of the Byzantine army. Other names suggestive of the Greek provenance of the original text include *Ambrus* and *Conon*. *Ambrus* is a transliteration of the name of the Arab commander who took Gaza, and presumably refers to 'Amr ibn al-Ās, whose name is easy to find in the Byzantine chronicles, transliterated as Ἄμβρος[12]. In this context, the Latin appellation *Ambrus* is simply a transliteration of the Greek name. The typically eastern name of one of the martyrs, *Conon*, is evocative of the Greek original, Κόνων. Popular in Byzantium, it was encountered sporadically in the Latin part of Europe, too[13]. Other typical Greek names referenced in the narrative include *Philoxenus,* i.e. Φιλόξενος, and *Thepentus,* i.e. Θεόπεμτος, among others[14].

Another noteworthy point involves the discrepancies between geographical appellations. According to the earlier version of the text, Ambrus ordered to transfer the prisoners to the city of *Eleutheropolis* (Ἐλευθερόπολις) or, as it is called in another passage of the text, *Theropolis*. The editor of the text replaced *Theropolis* with *<Eleu>Theropolis*[15] (gr. Ἐλευθερόπολις). D. Woods considers the name to be an error, and replace it with the Greek

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[5]   See PSSM , p. 302.

[6]   See PSSM , p. 303.

[7]   The same translation of the term "to\ ba/ndon" can be found in G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, p. 283.

[8]   See PSSM, p. 303.

[9]   For more on the subject, see J. Pargoire, *Les LX soldats martyrs de Gaza*, "Échos d'Orient", 8/1905, no. 50, p. 40-43.

[10] Ibidem, p. 42. See also *Vita S. Auxentii,* PG 114, col. 380 B; the name's Latin translation is *Seta*.

[11] Si/tta, Lat. *Sitta*, is the name of one of Justinian I's generals I. See Procopius Caesariensis, *De Bello Persico,* Bonnae 1883, „Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae", vol. 1, p. 162.

[12] See *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinopole Short History*, translation and commentary C. Mango, Washington D.C. 1990, 23:12, 17; 26:18.

[13] Konon was the original name of Emperor Leo III the Isaurian. The name was quite popular in the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire, too. For more on the history of the name in the East, see S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Region of Leo III with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*, Louvain 1973, p. 13-24.

[14] Examples as cited in J. Pargoire. For more, see J. Pargoire, *Les LX soldats martyrs…*, p. 42.

[15] See PSSM, ch. 1, p. 301.

Θεοῦ πόλις, thus arriving at the "City of God", i.e. Jerusalem[16]. Such a correction seems plausible, given the subsequent mention of the martyrs being put under lock and key in the "holy city" (*in sanctam civitatem*)[17], along with a reference to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Saint Sophronius. On the other hand, *Legenda sancti Floriani et sociorum* mentions Florian's stay in *Eutropolim civitatem*[18], and the subsequent transfer of the martyrs to Jerusalem (*sanctam civitatem Ierusalem*)[19]. Such accounts are hardly of assistance to those wishing to reconstruct the events described in the text. Naturally, one may also assume that the translator-editor of the Greek text was not privy to either the detailed description of the martyrs' route or, by extension, the specifics of Palestinian geography.

Last but not least, one should address two fundamental differences between the first and the second version of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum*. The earlier Latin edition provides a chronological account of the martyrs' imprisonment in the successive cities. The translator lists these events chronologically in the context of reigning rulers or indictions. The author of the said Latin edition, however, struggled to integrate these two timelines, which results in various inconsistencies in the chronology of events, from the capture and imprisonment of the garrison to the execution of the last group of the soldiers[20]. Conversely, the author of the latter edition of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* pays greater attention to the events that constitute the backdrop for the drama, either because the second edition aimed to resonate with the reader's imagination, or because the author-editor drew his information from a different version of the text.

2. Structure and substance

Both editions of the text detail the fate of the Gaza garrison, which was made up of an unspecified group of soldiers who defended the city from the Saracens. The two versions nonetheless differ from each other, as the latter edition was supplemented with the history of the obscure figures of Saint Florian of Gaza and his "companions". The latter version does not constitute the primary subject of this study, which focuses on the fate of the Gaza garrison. And yet, one should ask, what is the common denominator for these two different accounts?

First of all, one should note the subtitle of the latter version, in which the author establishes that the story "[…] was discovered in an ancient and trustworthy record […]"[21]. The annotation may suggest an unspecified source behind the second edition of the text, in which the fate of the Gaza garrison is but a historical backdrop for the narrative of Saint Florian and his companions. Both editions begin at the same point in time, detailing the events in Gaza, and situating them in the 27th year of Emperor Heraclius' reign, which fell between 610 and 641 A.D.[22]. They then relate the circumstances of Gaza's surrender and the transfer

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[16] See D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza…*, p. 131-132.

[17] See PSSM, ch. 1, p. 301.

[18] See LsF, ch. 3, p. 305.

[19] See LsF, ch. 4, p. 305.

[20] For more on the subject, see D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza…*, p. 132-134.

[21] See LsF, p. 303: "[…] quo ex antiquissimis scripturis et approbatis inventa est […]."

[22] Previous edition (PSSM): "[…] regnante domino nostro Iesu Christo, anno vicesimo septimo Heraclii imperatoris a Deo coronatus […]. Subsequent edition (LsF, p. 304): "[…] Hoc autem factum est regnante Domino nostro, anno vigesimo septimo Heraclii imperatoris a Domino coronati […]."

of the future martyr soldiers to the Saracens[23]. Having outlined these events, however, the editors of the two versions present the subject matters in different ways. The earlier edition places emphasis on recounting the successive periods of the martyrs' imprisonment in different locations. Conversely, the latter edition stresses the miraculous events that transpired during their imprisonment. In the earlier version, the author-editor provides the reader with a specific topographic and historical background, enumerating the cities in which the imprisoned soldiers were kept. The earlier version also dwells on the various trials to which the soldiers were subjected. Still, the narrative is more akin to a historiographic one, in contrast to the hagiographic character of the latter edition, which details the miraculous events accompanying the martyrdom of the respective groups of soldiers.

An interesting case in point for the aforementioned differences in the accounts of the soldiers' imprisonment can be found in the description of the night visit paid by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius[24], and the fact that it was Sophronius who bought out and buried the corpses of the first nine martyrs[25]. This account, however, is only featured in the first edition. The second edition replaces Sophronius' visit with Saint Florian's night vision of an angel. Immensely detailed, the angel's visit even contains dialogues between Saint Florian and the angel[26]. It is here that the differences between the respective editions come to the fore. The author of the earlier version stresses the "realistic" aspects of the presented events. In contrast, the second version pinpoints the "miraculous" nature of the martyrs' act of defiance of their conquerors. At the same time, it introduces the figure of Saint Florian as the leader of the martyrs[27] who were brought before the Emir of Jerusalem. Equally interesting is the substitution of the angel for Sophronius. D. Woods identifies the angel with Patriarch Sophronius, suggesting that the Latin word *Angelus* be interpreted as a "messenger". The scholar substantiates his hypothesis by analyzing the situational context, and contends it is possible to interpret the primary meaning of the Greek term ἄγγελος precisely as a "messenger"[28]. Such an explanation for the replacement for Sophronius with the angel is acceptable if one takes into consideration the fact that the author may have based the translation on an unknown source text. As mentioned above, the very author of the second edition supplemented it with a subtitle which states that the narrative of Florian and his companions was based on "an ancient and trustworthy record", which may have been originally penned in Greek.

Upon closer inspection of the two accounts, however, D. Woods' clarification seems somewhat less convincing. The earlier version provides the reader with as little as a laconic bit of information of Sophronius' night visit, with the patriarch arriving at the jailhouse to tearfully encourage the soldiers to persist in their decision and keep their faith[29]. On the other hand, the second edition depicts Florian's emissary not as a mere messenger but a radiant, heavenly figure[30]. It is no doubt difficult to unambiguously attribute this depiction

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[23] See PSSM, p. 301; LsF, p. 304. For more on these events, see below.

[24] See PSSM, p. 302: "Haec audiens sanctissimum patriarcha Sophronius non requievit ipsa nocte, cum lacrimis supplicans unum quemque ammones de Christi fide […]".

[25] See PSSM, p. 302: "Quos et tollens sanctissimus patriarcha Sophronius, sepelivit eos in unum ubi et condidit oratorium sancti Stephani primi martyris […]".

[26] See LsF, p. 304-305.

[27] See LsF, p. 304.

[28] See D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza…*, p. 136-141.

[29] See PSSM, p. 302.

[30] See LsF, p. 304: *Quibus angelus cum maxima luce eos confortans apparuit* […].

to a mistake made by the editor of the second version or a consciously used literary measure aimed to stimulate the reader's imagination and underscore the glorious and heroic struggle in the name of Christian faith, undertaken by the martyrs.

Since both editions of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* direct the reader's attention to different aspects of the narrative, it seems worthwhile to stress Florian's role in solidifying the martyrs' faith. In the earlier version, it is Sophronius who reinforces the soldier's decision and bolsters their courage before the upcoming trial. Historically, such a measure seems plausible, given Sophronius' position as the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Conversely, the second edition pinpoints Florian's leadership among the martyrs from the very beginning. It is him who, assured by his "miraculous vision", prevents them from committing the sin of apostasy.

In the earlier version, Sophronius only buries the first group of the "holy martyrs"[31], while the bodies of the second group executed by the Saracens at a later stage are bought out by an anonymous person, who is merely referenced as a God-loving man[32]. On the other hand, in the second edition it is Florian who is responsible for the burial of the holy martyrs[33]. Granted, it is possible to infer that the anonymous benefactor in the earlier account was in fact Florian himself, however due to the incompatibility of these two editions, this notion will likely remain unsolvable.

The earlier edition of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* concludes with the martyrdom of the second group of the Gaza garrison soldiers, followed by a list of the martyrs' names. On the contrary, the subsequent edition also contains a narrative of Florian's fate in the wake of the martyrdom of the last group of soldiers.

The narrative of Saint Florian's life attached to the second edition of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* is a mixture of miraculous events and historical facts. A vivid and dynamic tale, it spans the length of two concise chapters. From the outset, the editor directs the reader's attention to the figures of two antagonists: Ambrus (leader of the Saracens)[34], and Florian ("spiritual leader" of the Gaza garrison). The author-editor depicts their relation in a Manichean fashion, painting Ambrus as a "Devil's tool", and portraying Florian as a faithful and heroic "soldier of Christ". Such a clear-cut dichotomy is hardly surprising given the hagiographic nature of the text, in which historical facts merely adorn its main theme. In view of the above, the narrative warrants at least a brief investigation.

Having executed the last group of martyrs, Ambrus learns that it was Florian who thwarted his attempt to convert the soldiers to Islam, and subsequently buried the martyrs' bodies. Ambrus faces Florian, asking the soldier if he is ready to renounce his Christian faith. Interestingly enough, the account of the meeting between Ambrus and Florian depicts the Saracens as idolaters: "[…] Having heard they were led by Florian, who – as rumor had it – strengthened their faith in Christ and ensured their adequate sepulture, Ambrus sent for Florian, and asked him if he was ready to renounce Christ and worship his deities. To this said Florian, «It is astonishing that you have thought it possible for me to renounce Christ, knowing full well of my love of him, and it is just as foolish of you to believe I would worship your idols» […]"[35]. Such a narrative measure was likely used to discredit the Saracens' faith and depict them as

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[31] See PSSM, p. 302.

[32] See PSSM, p. 303.

[33] See LsF, p. 306.

[34] For more on Ambrus, see below.

[35] See LsF, p. 306: "[…] Ambrus autem audiens quod beatus Florianus eorum dux eratet quasi quidam patriarcha, et quod eius monitionibus firmi steterunt in fide Christi, et quod etiam eorum corpora honorifice sepeliri decit, advocavit illum dicens si vellet ipse Christum negare et deos uos colere. Cui beatus Florianus inquit: «Miror quod

pagans in the eyes of the Christian readers of the hagiography. Naturally, accusing Muslims of idolatry was no novelty in polemical literature, hence the emphasis on the Christian leader's resistance to the erroneous, "idolatrous" faith of the Saracens. Florian's heroism is underscored by his uncompromising rejection of Ambrus' proposal. The author further augments the account by mentioning a range of miraculous events that transpire when the angered Ambrus orders his archers to shoot Florian. As a result of Florian's fervent prayer, God sends the archers into frenzy, having them kill one another as they mistake their companions for Florian. According to the narrator, the collective fit of madness kills as many as two hundred Saracens[36].

Yet another miraculous event mentioned by the author-editor is tied to the collapse of the first Muslim temple on the Rock in Jerusalem, presented as a manifestation of the Christian God's power to the Saracens. As if Florian's miraculous rescue from the hands of Ambrus' archers (ascribed by the Saracen commander to Florian's magic tricks ((*arti magicae*))[37] were not enough in its own right, Ambrus decides to lead him to a Muslim temple to demonstrate the power of the deities allegedly worshipped by the Saracens[38]. Here, too, Florian's pious prayer causes the "temple" to collapse[39], burying scores of Saracens in the debris[40].

Another miracle that occurs via Florian's intermediacy is the conversion of the prison guards who keep watch at his cell, which begins to glow and exude the scent of flowers. Struck by the phenomena, the guards ask Florian to baptize them, which exacerbates Ambrus' anger and dissuades him from attempting to convert Florian to Islam. The soldier is sentenced to death, and his corpse is to be thrown to the dogs. Florian's story concludes with a vision granted to his soul. The angel who takes Florian to Heaven shows him the martyrdom of the converted Saracen guards, whom he sees dying in the name of Christ[41].

It is evident that the two narratives place their respective emphases on different protagonists. The earlier account stresses the fate of the Gaza garrison, while the latter edition details the history of Saint Florian. The common denominator of the two stories is their vantage point, i.e. the capture of Gaza and the imprisonment and martyrdom of its Christian soldiers.

3. The Arab conquest of Syria and Palestine

The Arab invasion of the eastern provinces of Byzantium began in the wake of the exhaustive strife between the two superpowers of late antiquity: the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and the Sassanid Persia. While it seemed that the decisive Byzantine victory over Persia would ensure a lasting peace in the easternmost provinces of the empire, Byzantium's

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te sapientem esse putas, et quantam Christum dominum meum amem ignores, et stultitiam atque impositionem tuorum idolorum non intelligas» […]".

[36]   See LsF, p. 305.

[37]   See LsF, p. 305.

[38]   See LsF, p. 305: […] *imo ad templum deorum iussit ut duceretur, ut eorum pototestatem et virtutem videret* […].

[39]   The collapse of the first Muslim temple on the Rock is corroborated by other historical sources, a.o. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, Byzantine and the Near Eastern History AD 284-813*, trans. C. Mango, R. Scott, Oxford 1997, p. 476) or the account of Bishop Arculf, written by Adamnán of Iona (*Adoman z Hy*, *O miejscach świętych*, in: *Do Ziemi Świętej, Najstarsze opisy pielgrzymek do Ziemi Świętej (IV-VIII w.)*, ed. P. Iwaszkiewicz, Kraków 1996, "Ojcowie Żywi", vol. 13, p. 288). For more on the subject, see D. Woods, *The 60 Martyres of Gaza…*, p. 135-137.

[40]   See LsF, p. 305.

[41]   See LsF, p. 306-307.

military success overlapped with the emergence of the charismatic figure of Muhammad, who proclaimed himself a "messenger of God" and "preacher" of the one true religion of Islam, which he promulgated across the Arab Peninsula. Driven by religious zeal, the Arabs began to conquer the lands outside of the peninsula, entering a collision course with the Christian Byzantine Empire.

The first Muslim sortie into southern Palestine may have occurred while Prophet Muhammad was still alive. In 629 A.D., the Byzantine troops defeated a small Muslim detachment near the border town of Mu'ta (Μουχέων κώμης)[42]. The actual conquest of Syria and Palestine began in 633 or 634, which saw the defeat of a Byzantine unit by the Arabs in a skirmish near Dāthin, in the region of Gaza. 634 also saw the Arab victory in the Battle of Scythopolis. 635 marked the fall of Homs and Damascus, which were shortly reclaimed in the course of a Byzantine counter-attack carried out before the end of the year. On September 20, 636, the Byzantine armies suffered a defeat in the Battle of Yarmouk, followed by the second fall of Damascus at the turn of 636/637, and the capture of Baalbek and Homs (Emesa). In 637, Patriarch Sophronius surrendered Jerusalem to Caliph Umar I. That same year saw the captures of Gaza[43] and Antioch. Between 633 and 640, with no Byzantine reinforcements in sight, all Syrian and Palestine cities gradually succumbed to the invading forces.

4. Circumstances of the conquest of Gaza and the fate of the Christian soldiers

Failure to make overdue payments to the Byzantine soldiers protecting the Empire's desert borderlands rendered southern Palestine permeable to the Muslim forces. The unpaid Imperial soldiers, who were mostly Arab by origin, surrendered the region to their Muslim kinsmen[44]. To salvage the remainder of the province, a Byzantine detachment was sent to southern Palestine, led by Sergius, who lost his life in the subsequent Battle of Dāthin, alongside most of his men. Led by 'Amr ibn al-Ās, the Muslims could easily penetrate the immediate surroundings of Gaza, wreaking havoc throughout the area. The city fell to the Muslims in September 637, with 'Amr sparing the civilians and executing the local garrison[45].

According to both versions of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum*, the siege of Gaza was a long and tiresome affair. As soon as the Saracens learned that the city was protected by a Christian garrison, they immediately called for reinforcements, likely in order to stage a display of force as a customary leverage for the attackers, on the one hand, and a substitute for storming the city walls, on the other. Starved, beleaguered, and vastly outnumbered by the enemy, the city was bound to negotiate its surrender at some point to avoid the complete destruction of its infrastructure and the indiscriminate slaughter of its residents[46].

The description of the siege makes an interesting mention of the negotiations between the invaders of Gaza and its residents. The Saracens promise to abstain from looting the city

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[42] See *Theophanis chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, vol. 1, Lipsiae 1883, p. 335. See also L.I. Konrad, *Thephanes and the Arabic historical tradition: some indications of intercultural tra"smission*, „Byzantinische Forschungen", 15/1990, p. 21-26.

[43] See W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquest*, Cambridge-New York 1992, p. 67.

[44] See *Theophanis chronographia…*, p. 335.

[45] See W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium…*, p. 89-95.

[46] See LsF, ch. 1, 304.

and slaughtering its population if the city surrenders[47]. Calculated to coax the besieged into submission, this negotiation strategy was a staple of the Muslim conquest, as ascertained by the account of the capture of Damascus written by the Arab historian Al-Balāduri. The Arab invaders would routinely guarantee safety to besieged cities, their residents and property, and the local churches on condition of a peaceful surrender. Oftentimes, the invaders also promised to leave the city walls intact, and prohibit any Muslim from quartering in civilian homes. On top of that, the citizens would be protected by the caliphs and their Muslim subjects, on condition of paying capitation[48]. One may only guess that, in the case of Gaza, the city garrison was excluded from the negotiations.

Following the surrender of Gaza, the soldiers of its garrison were captured by the Saracens, chained, and imprisoned. They were then brought before Ambrus ('Amr ibn al-Ās), who was intent on forcing them to renounce Christianity in favor of Islam. Faced with their adamant refusal, Ambrus had them thrown into the dungeon for thirty days[49], following which they were chained and transferred to Eleutheropolis (Jerusalem?), where they spent two more months as prisoners[50].

As per *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum,* while under lock and key in Jerusalem, the soldiers are visited by Patriarch Sophronius, who urges them to keep their faith[51]. It is in Jerusalem that Ambrus subjects the prisoners to a number of elaborate trials to weaken their convictions and coax them to renounce Christ and His cross. Despite repeated pushing and pulling, the soldiers refuse, prompting Ambrus to send them back to the casemates for another month[52].

Two months later, Ambrus writes a letter to the Muslim emir (*Ammiram*), requesting him to question the soldiers and, should they refuse to renounce their faith, have them executed in the cruelest of ways. As the first ten soldiers refuse to save their lives at the cost of apostasy, they are put to death in front of their comrades, who persist in their faith. The surviving soldiers are once more thrown into jail before returning to the emir's seat for another questioning. Encouraged to commit apostasy – "Why do you so obstinately refuse to bend low before our will? If you bend to my will, I shall make you rich lords in my kingdom, but if you refuse to obey me, you shall suffer terribly […]"[53] – the soldiers refuse to heed the emir's advice and stay true to their Christian faith. Their repeated refusal infuriates Ambrus, who orders the soldiers to be taken outside of the city walls to be executed. The execution is accompanied by a number of miraculous phenomena, among others the appearance of a flock of doves,

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[47] See LsF, ch. 1, p. 304: "[…] *ne civitas destrueretur, et cives interficerentur* […]".

[48] See Al-*Imâm* abu-l 'Abbâs Ahmad ibn-Jâbir al-Balâdhuri, *The Orginis of Islamic State*, tłum. P.K. Hitti, vol. 1, New York 1916, p. 187. For a Polish translation of the excerpt P.K. Hitti, *Dzieje Arabów*, trans. W. Dembski et al., Warszawa 1969, p. 129.

[49] See PSSM, ch. 1, 301.

[50] See PSSM, ch. 1, 302.

[51] See PSSM, ch. 1, 301.

[52] See LsF, ch. 3, p. 305.

[53] See LsF, ch. 1, p. 305: "Usque modo durae cervicis estis, non consentientes nobis; si quidem nostrum velle facietis, magni domini in regno nostro eritis; quod si noletis consentire, crudelissime patiemini […]".

whose number matches that of the martyred soldiers[54]. Following their martyrdom, the bodies of the slain Christians are bought out from the Arabs at a hefty price[55].

Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum poses a major problem to historians due to the fact that no other written records mention the existence of a military garrison in Gaza[56]. The sole Christian record casting any light on the events accompanying the capture of Gaza is the 10th-century *Annales* by the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius. Eutychius' account of the conquest of the Middle East by the Muslims mentions the Patrician of Gaza, who negotiated its surrender with the Muslim commander, 'Amr ibn al-Ās. When recounting these negotiations, Eutychius does, in fact, reference an attempt to force the Gaza garrison to convert to Islam. The patrician inquires about 'Amr's reasons for his relentlessness in besieging the city, to which 'Amr responds by saying he only follows *his Lord's* will. The defenders face the choice of survival at the expense of renouncing their faith. The patrician replies by saying he was commissioned by the emperor (Heraclius) to protect the city[57]. According to the Arab historian Tabarī, the patrician mentioned in Eutychius' account was named Michael and served as the governor of Caesarea[58]. Somewhat oddly, Eutychius seems to suggest that in the early stage of the Arab conquests the Christian population of the subjugated lands was forced to convert to Islam, while – historically speaking – the practice was limited to Arab Christians only, who did indeed suffer religious persecution over the discussed period[59]. One notable example of such persecution was the fate of the Arab Christians from St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, referenced by Anastasius Sinaita, whose accounts mentions Saracen Christians living in their tent around the monastery. Having spotted the approaching Muslim detachment, they fled inside the sanctuary with their families. According to Anastasius, one of these families committed suicide, fearing the prospect of forced apostasy[60]. *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* suggests that upon being separated from their wives and sons, the soldiers of the Gaza garrison were disarmed (*Ambrus separari ab eis uxores et filios et arma eorum*)[61]. This would mean that the soldiers stationed in Gaza were accompanied by their families, similarly to the Christians making camp at St. Catherine's Monastery. The text also states that the soldiers were disarmed (*arma eorum*). If one were to translate the Latin term *arma* foregoing its primary sense ("weapons") in favor of its secondary meaning ("soldiers"), it would indicate that the garrison was made up of two groups of soldiers, with one of them possibly comprised of Arab Christians. Complementing this hypothesis is the fact that the soldiers were executed in two separate groups.

Based on the short reference that precedes the description of the capture of Gaza, one may put forward an alternative hypothesis. The description of Saint Florian's martyrdom

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[54] See LsF, ch. 4, p. 305-306.

[55] See PSSM, ch. 3, p. 303; LsF, ch. 4, p. 306.

[56] See R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writing on early Islam*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997, p. 349.

[57] See Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini, *Annales*, PG 111, col. 1093-1094.

[58] Hoyland considers Eutychius' and Tabarī's accounts as ahistorical. See R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw…*, p. 350.

[59] See K. Kościelniak, *Grecy i Arabowie, Historia Kościoła melkickiego (katolickiego) na ziemiach zdobytych przez muzułmanów (634-1516)*, Kraków 2004, p. 77-78.

[60] See F. Nau, *Les récits inédits du moine Anastase: Contribution à l'histoire du Sinaï au commencement du VIIe siècle*, "Revue de l'Institut catholique de Paris", 1-2/1902, p. 87, 129.

[61] See PSSM, ch. 1, 300.

states that the said Christian soldiers had defended other cities from the Saracens before their eventual capture, and that the Muslims allegedly declared they would pay the soldiers' weight in gold to anyone that seizes them[62]. This would mean that the detachment in question had already been known to the Muslim troops and their commander. Theophanes mentions the deployment of a suit of three hundred troops in southern Palestine, commanded by Sergius[63]. Sergius' unit is also mentioned in Michael the Syrian's chronicle, which references a troop of three thousand Roman and Samaritan soldiers. According to his account, Sergius' detachment was notorious for its ruthlessness in fighting the Arabs[64]. Finally, it could be argued that the Gaza garrison was made up of marauding soldiers left behind by Sergius' expedition corps.

Conclusion

Passio Sanctorum Sexaginta Martyrum is the sole historical record detailing the situation in Gaza at the moment of its capture by the Muslims. To identify the soldiers of the Gaza garrison poses a twofold challenge, since 1) the historians can only use the Latin translation of the lost Greek original; 2) other historical records make no mention a garrison in Gaza at the time of the Muslim conquests. Another problematic factor lies in the nature of the text, which details the martyrdom of the Gaza garrison, and as such focuses on the glorification of their steadfastness. Despite these obvious shortcomings, the text constitutes a valuable historical reference for those studying the Muslim conquest of the Middle East.

The martyrdom of the Gaza garrison during the early Muslim conquests in the light of *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum*
Summary

The acts of the sixty martyrs of Gaza is a Latin translation of an original text, describing the conquest of Gaza and the martyrdom of its Christian garrison who died in the name of their Christian faith. Since there is little information describing the capture of the garrison in 7th century, *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* is one of the few sources describing the event that allows us to reconstruct the dramatic train of events that transpired at the time. The text also discusses Muslims policies towards Christians in the Middle East back in the day. The study strives to identify the anonymous soldiers of the Gaza Garrison who gave their lost their lives at the hands of the Muslim conquerors because of their refusal to abandon Christianity.

Note on the Author: Łukasz Karczewski (M.A.) majored in the History of Early Christian Literature at the Faculty of Historical and Social Sciences of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, where he currently works towards his doctoral dissertation.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

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[62] See LsF, ch. 1, p. 303-304.

[63] See *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor …*, p. 467.

[64] See *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite D'Antioche (1166-1199)*, vol. 2, ed. J.-B. Chabot, Paris 1901, p. 413.