575: A Hispano-Roman Visitor from the Visigoth Kingdom Observes Arab-Byzantine Relations

Daniel G. König

Abstract: The chronicle of the Hispano-Roman abbot John of Biclaro describes a meeting between the Ghassanid prince al-Munḏir b. al-Ḥāriṯ and the Byzantine emperor Tiberios in 575. This meeting is said to have facilitated a reconciliation between the two rulers which resulted in an exchange of gifts, and perhaps even some form of coronation for al-Munḏir. The chronicler's brief passage does little to testify to the chronicler's deep insight into Arab–Byzantine relations. Nonetheless, it proves that a sixth-century Hispano-Roman chronicler from the Visigothic realm had some knowledge about the Arab groups who were operating in Constantinople's sphere of influence..

Source

Iohannes abbas Biclarensis, *Chronica*, ed. Theodor Mommsen (MGH AA 11), Berlin: Weidmann, 1894, a. 575,3, p. 214, trans. Daniel G. König.

Aramundarus Sarracenorum rex Constantinopolim venit et cum stemmate suo Tiberio principi cum donis barbariae occurrit. qui a Tiberio benigne susceptus et donis optimis adornatus ad patriam abire permissus est.

Al-Munḏir, the king of the Saracens, came to Constantinople and appeared with his wreath (*cum stemmate suo*) before the prince Tiberios with gifts from the barbarian sphere (*donis barbariae*). He was received favourably by Tiberios and, having been provided with better gifts, was allowed to return home.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Born in Santarém/Lusitania around 540, John of Biclaro spent the years around 570–577 in Constantinople. On his return to the Iberian Peninsula he came into conflict with the Visigoth king Leovigild (r. 569–586) and was exiled to Barcelona around 580. There he was apparently harassed by adherents to the Arian compromise dogma propagated by Leovigild. Probably after Leovigild's death, he founded a monastery at Biclar, an unidentifiable place in present-day Catalonia, of which he became abbot. Around 590–591 he became bishop of Girona and died around 620. Of his works only a chronicle survives. It continues the chronicle of the North African bishop Victor of Tunnuna (d. after 566), which John probably brought to the Iberian Peninsula from Constantinople, where Victor had died in exile. John's chronicle is based on his

own experiences and, consequently, contains information on both Byzantium and the Visigothic kingdom for the years 567–590.[1]

Content & Context

[§2] John of Biclaro's entry provides only a brief notice of a diplomatic meeting between the Byzantine emperor Tiberios (r. 574–578 as co-regent, 578–582 as sole ruler) and the Ġassānid prince al-Munḏir (r. 569–582), which is not contextualised otherwise. Neither before nor after this passage does the chronicler discuss Arab groups again, even though he continues to report on Byzantine affairs, including Sasanian–Byzantine relations. Al-Munḏir's visit is dated to the ninth year of the reign of Emperor Justin II (r. 565–578) and the seventh year of the Visigoth king Leovigild (r. 569–586) and is consequently placed in the year 575 by the editor Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903).

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§3] Between 569 and 590, al-Munḏir led the dynasty of the Ǧafnids, which is often equated with the so-called Ġassānids or Banū Ġassān in older research. In 569–570, he had successfully fought against another Arab group subject to the Persian Sasanians. This group was led by the Naṣrid dynasty, often equated with the so-called Laḫmids or Banū Laḫm in older research.[2] Following this conflict, al-Munḏir demanded support from Constantinople for his losses. When he became victim of a failed assassination plot commissioned by the Byzantine emperor, Justin II (r. 565–578), al-Munḏīr ceased to fulfil his mission to protect Byzantine territory against attacks, and allowed Laḫmid and Sasanian looting in the province of *Oriens* between about 572 and 575. In the cited source excerpt John of Biclaro reports that a reconciliation between al-Munḏir and the Byzantine emperor took place in 575 during his visit to Tiberios, co-regent and successor to Justin. According to the interpretation of Ekkehard Rotter and Irfan Shahîd, this visit entailed a kind of coronation, i.e. an official elevation of al-Munḏir's status. In their view, this elevation of status is not only manifest in the fact that the emperor endowed the Ǧafnid prince with "better gifts" (*donis optimis*). They also regard the wreath (*stemma*), worn by al-Munḏir when he appeared before the emperor, as a crown. Since al-Munḏir did not receive the *stemma* from the emperor during this visit, but seems to have brought it along himself, this interpretation may go too far. The wreath could also suggest that the Ǧafnid prince used this official visit of reconciliation to symbolically assert his independence. While Rotter and Shahîd assume on the basis of the ecclesiastical history of John of Ephesus that al-Munḏir visited Constantinople again in 580, other scholars only acknowledge one single visit in 580. Greg Fisher, for example, ignores the report in the chronicle of John of Biclaro, which—if one trusts the reconstructed dates of his life—could not have been written after 577 since John was already back in the Visigothic Kingdom at that time. The consensus among scholars is that al-Munḏir was actually crowned in 580, i.e. that his wreath (*stemma*) was replaced with a more dignified sign of rule. All in all, al-Munḏir's visit or visits to the imperial centre do not seem to have resolved the tensions arising from mutual distrust between the Ǧafnids and the Byzantine imperial centre. In the same year, i.e. 580, al-Munḏir was placed under house arrest in Constantinople. When, in 582, Emperor Maurikios (r. 582–602) came to power, al-Munḏir was exiled to Sicily, from where he did not return until around 602, probably thanks to an intercession by Pope Gregory the Great.[3]

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[1] Alonso-Núñez, Johannes, col. 557; Collins, John of Biclaro, p. 445.

[2] On the problem of equating Ǧafnids and Ġassānids as well as Naṣrīds and Laḫmids, see Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 3–7, 95–99.

[3] Nöldeke, *Die Ghassânischen Fürsten*, pp. 24–25, 27–30; Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 339, 386–389, 403, 602–605, 618; Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 72, 99, 121–124, 174–178.

[§4] The fact that a Hispano-Roman chronicler from the Iberian Peninsula collected information about Arab groups in the vicinity of Constantinople and carried it back to the Visigoth kingdom sheds light on the relations between the Latin and Arab spheres before the beginning of the Arabic-Islamic expansion. As is demonstrated in the later commentaries on *Arabes*, *Saraceni*, etc. in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (d. 636),[4] Arab groups were not entirely unknown in the western Mediterranean in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Nevertheless, exchanges were too sporadic, to the effect that historiographers in the Latin West were not able to gain deep insight into Arab–Byzantine relations.[5] Only the papacy in Rome might constitute an exception. Due to its manifold relations with Byzantine and ecclesiastical authorities in Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, it had access to very good sources of information. Because of this, it was even able to intervene actively in pre-Islamic Byzantine–Arab relations, at least to a certain extent.[6] According to Rotter, "the Western reader is unlikely to learn much more from the note in John of Biclaro than that relations between Byzantines and Saracens existed and could also be friendly [...]; from the 'foreign gifts' (*dona barbariae*) presented to Tiberios by al-Munḏir, he may infer a (considerable) distance between the Eastern Roman cultural sphere and the world of the Saracens." Rotter denies the chronicler the ability to distinguish between different Arab groups.[7] It is clear, in any case, that John establishes a clear hierarchy between the Byzantine imperial leadership and the barbarian visitor.

Edition(s) & Translation(s)

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[4] König, 621: Isidore.

[5] Rotter, *Abendland und Sarazenen*, pp. 135–138; Valenzuela, „Ritu", pp. 137–138; König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, pp. 32–33, 151.

[6] König, 600: Pope Gregory the Great; König, 653: Papst Martin I.

[7] Rotter, *Abendland und Sarazenen*, p. 138.

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