

600: Pope Gregory the Great Intervenes in Favour of the Exiled Ġafnid Prince al-Mundir b. al-Ḥārīt

Daniel G. König



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Abstract: In a letter to Innocentius, the praefectus Africae, written in July 600, Pope Gregory I declares his support for the Ġafnid prince al-Mundir. Based on this letter, the article describes the situation of the pre-Islamic Arab ruling dynasties of the sixth and early seventh centuries which were active in the orbit of the Byzantine Empire. In this context, it sheds light on their Christianisation and religious-confessional tensions with Constantinople, the difficult situation between Byzantium and the Sassanid Empire, and the Roman Church's knowledge of these Arab-Byzantine relations.

Source

Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum Epistularum*, ed. Ludwig Hartmann (MGH Epp. in Quart 2: Gregorii papae registrum epistularum, libri VIII-XIV), Berlin: Weidmann, 1899, lib. X, cap. 16 (a. 600), p. 251, trans. Daniel G. König.

De Anamundaro autem quae scripsistis fecimus, sed voluntatem utinam sequatur effectus, quia, quantum ad nos pertinet, afflictis intercessionis nostrae solacium non negamus.)

With regard to al-Mundir, we have done what you have written. If only this wish would be brought to execution. For as far as we are concerned, we have not denied the comfort of our intercession to the afflicted.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Gregory I (sed. 590–604) came from a wealthy Roman senatorial family, probably assumed the office of Roman city prefect in 573 and founded seven monasteries with the help of his father's inheritance, six of them in Sicily. Ordained deacon by Pope Pelagius (sed. 579–590) in 579, he was sent to Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Tiberios (r. 574–578 as co-regent, 578–582 as sole ruler), where he asked first Tiberios, then Maurikios (r. 582–602) for help against the Langobards, before he was recalled to Rome in 586 and elected Pope in 590.¹ The letter to Innocentius, *praefectus Africae*, written in July 600, forms part of Gregory's huge collection of letters.

Content & Context

[§2] Gregory congratulates Innocentius on assuming the prefecture and expresses his certainty that, thanks to the prefect's activity, roses will sprout from thorns. He gratefully acknowledges that the prefect has equipped a fleet to support the pope. He also reports that he has negotiated

¹ Richards, Gregor I., col. 1663.

a peace treaty with the Langobard king [Agilulf (r. 590–615)] until March of the coming fourth fiscal cycle, but now does not know whether the king has died and whether the treaty is now void. In response to the prefect's request that Gregory's "Commentary on the Book of Job" be sent to him, he recommends the writings of Augustine. He also thanks the prefect for his support of the *pauperes beati Petri*, which Gregory's secretary Hilarius had informed him about.² A short passage in the letter is dedicated to a certain Anamundarus. He can be equated with the Ġafnid prince al-Mundir (r. ca. 569–582), who is also mentioned by John of Biclaro.³ The letter reveals that an exchange concerning this person had previously taken place between the pope and the prefect. In this context, the prefect had given the pope advice on how to intercede in al-Mundir's favour, who is described here as part of a group of "afflicted persons" (*afflictis*). Gregory confirms that he has been working on their behalf and that his efforts have given them moral support. However, he does not see that this has borne any fruit yet.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§3] The context of this letter can only be deduced from Greek and Syriac sources. The Ġafnid prince al-Mundir had been exiled to Sicily in 582 by Emperor Maurikios (r. 582–602).⁴ Al-Mundir's grandfather and father had already served the Byzantine Empire as phylarchs. Al-Mundir had built up a powerful position for himself under Emperor Tiberios in the border zone between the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanians with their Arab allies, the Naṣrīds of al-Ḥīra.⁵ Unlike his predecessor Justin II (r. 565–578), who had taken action against al-Mundir in 572, Emperor Tiberios supported the Ġafnīd, e.g. in the context of the latter's honourable reception in Constantinople in 575 or 580 described by John of Biclaro.⁶ The reason for al-Mundir's banishment to Sicily seems to have been his campaign against the Persians conducted in 580–581 together with the *comes excubitorum* and later emperor Maurikios.⁷ During this campaign, the Byzantine and Ġafnid troops came across a destroyed bridge over the Euphrates, which was supposed to lead them into Sasanian territory and to Ctesiphon. Maurikios blamed the destruction of the bridge on al-Mundir and voiced the accusation that the latter had cooperated with the Persians and consequently committed high treason.⁸ An additional factor that seems to have contributed to the estrangement of the two individuals was that al-Mundir undertook a successful campaign against the Sasanians' Naṣrīd allies in 581, which had not been agreed upon with the imperial centre.⁹

[§4] Al-Mundir's conflict of al-Mundir with Maurikios must also be seen against the backdrop of fundamental confessional tensions between the Ġafnids and the Byzantine imperial centre with its civil and ecclesiastical administration. The Ġafnids and the Ġassānids represented by al-Mundir followed and supported a form of miaphysite Christianity that had been classified as heretical by Constantinople at the latest from 542 onward.¹⁰ This variant of Christianity had then been condemned at the Council of Chalcedon (451) and had alienated numerous Christians in Egypt and Syria from the Byzantine imperial church.¹¹ Maurikios's accusations, thematically related to military and political issues, were possibly supported by other actors. Among these

² Jaffé, *Regesta*, § 1785 (1322), p. 201.

³ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 602–605, 618; König, 575: A Hispano-Roman Visitor.

⁴ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 538–539.

⁵ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 339–438.

⁶ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, p. 440; König, 575: A Hispano-Roman Visitor.

⁷ Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 123, 176–183.

⁸ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 441–447.

⁹ Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 420–425.

¹⁰ Irfan Shahîd, Ghassān, p. 1020; Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber*, pp. 75–80; Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 56–57; Fisher, From Mavia to al-Mundhir, pp. 28–30.

¹¹ *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, trans. Price, pp. 51–55.

we find the Patriarch Gregorios of Antioch, who endorsed the Chalcedonian creed and took exception both to the Ġafnids' miaphysite Christian denomination and to their involvement in spreading this form of Christianity among Arab groups in the south, including in Nağrān on the Arabian Peninsula.¹² The confessional issue may have played a role for Maurikios as well who tried to impose the Chalcedonian creed on the Armenians after his accession to power.¹³ However, in view of the complexity of the relations between imperially supported representatives of the Chalcedonenian creed and miaphysite groups, the confessional opposition should not be overemphasized.¹⁴ While it seems wrong to negate the relevance of religious issues, the opposition between Maurikios and al-Mundir is likely to have been of a political rather than a religious nature.

[§5] Shortly before the death of Tiberios, al-Mundir was taken prisoner in Constantinople. Immediately after Maurikios came to power in 582, he was exiled to Sicily. He seems to have been accompanied by his wife, a daughter and a son, as well as several other people.¹⁵ Pope Gregory's letter was probably written in the later period of the al-Mundir's exile. In his function as *apocrisiarius* who had been sent by Pope Pelagius II to Constantinople, Gregory may have been a witness to al-Mundir's "coronation" described by John of Biclaro in his chronicle under the year 575 or 580.¹⁶ Yet, Gregory may have also witnessed how al-Mundir was accused of treason, imprisoned and then sent into exile.¹⁷ It is clear in any case that he took up the cause of the exiled prince after his return to Italy and his election as pope.¹⁸

[§6] Irfan Shahid explains the pope's commitment against the backdrop of Gregory's critical attitude towards the emperor Maurikios, which was related, among other things, to the emperor's lack of support against the Langobards.¹⁹ Shahid suggests that the pope stood up for a Miaphysite Arab ruler because he hoped to win over al-Mundir to the Chalcedonenian creed and the dogmatic compromise position advocated by Rome.²⁰ In the cited letter, al-Mundir appears as a person known to the pope, who had already addressed al-Mundir's case in a previous letter to the prefect of North Africa. The cited letter shows that Gregory empathised and supported the afflicted (*afflictis*), but that his efforts to plead al-Mundir's case vis-à-vis the imperial government had so far been unsuccessful. A turning point was reached with the deposition of Maurikios and the usurpation of Phocas (r. 602–610). Phocas immediately allowed the ageing Ġafnid prince to return from exile in 602, possibly in order to gain the Ġafnids' support for his usurpation and their military aid in the subsequent conflict with the Sasanians.²¹

[§7] Gregory's letter provides insight into the history of Latin–Arabic entanglement and transmediterranean relations. Thanks to its intensive connections with Constantinople, the Roman Church of the late sixth and early seventh centuries seems to have been well informed about the pre-Islamic Arab sphere, its Christianization, and its political relations to the Eastern

¹² Shahid, Ghassān, p. 1020; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 21, 445–448.

¹³ *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, trans. Thomson, cap. 19, p. 37.

¹⁴ Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 60: "Both Chalcedonian and miaphysite positions were characterised by numerous rifts and schisms of varying severity in the sixth century; any picture of two well-defined and opposing religious movements would be misleading."

¹⁵ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 103–104.

¹⁶ König, 575: A Hispano-Roman Visitor.

¹⁷ On Gregory's activities as *apocrisiarius*, see Dal Santo, Gregory, pp. 63–65.

¹⁸ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 602–605, 618.

¹⁹ See, for example, Gregory's letter to Emperor Maurikios of June 595: Gregorius I papa, *Registrum epistolarum*, vol. 1 (libri I–VII), ed. Ewald and Hartmann, ep. V,36, pp. 318–320; Dal Santo, Gregory, pp. 73–75.

²⁰ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, p. 604.

²¹ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. I,1, pp. 619, 622.

Roman imperial government. Among others, Gregory also maintained relations with Bishop Marianus of Arabia, to whom he sent relics in 601.²²

Edition(s) & Translation(s)

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²² Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum*, ed. Norberg (CCL 140a), lib. XI, cap. 20 (Febr. 601), p. 889; *ibid.*, ed. Hartmann, p. 281. Also see Rotter, *Abendland und Sarazenen*, p. 246; König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, p. 231.

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