

570: Contacts with the Pre-Islamic Arab World in the Pilgrimage Account of Antoninus Placentinus

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Daniel G. König, 570: Contacts with the Pre-Islamic Arab World in the Pilgrimage Report of Antoninus Placentinus, in: *Transmediterranean History* 1.1 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18148/tmh/2019.1.1.4>

Abstract: The pilgrimage account of the anonymous man who is commonly known as “Antoninus” from Piacenza gives insights into a Latin-Christian perception of the pre-Islamic sphere. The pilgrim not only visited numerous places he had previously only known from the Bible, but also encountered Arab groups which he referred to as “Saracens.” These are portrayed as rather poor, pagan, and potentially aggressive desert dwellers. Unlike better-informed contemporaries, he seems to have known little about either the actual conditions of contemporary Arab groups, or their partial Christianisation.

Source

Antoninus Placentinus, *Itinerarium*, ed. Paul Geyer (CCL 175), Turnhout: Brepols, 1965, cap. 36–47, pp. 147–153, trans. John Aspinwall.

[cap. 36] *Familia autem Saracenorum uel uxores eorum uenientes de heremo, ad uiam sedentes in lamentatione, et sareca missa ante se petiebant panem a transeuntibus et ueniebant uiri ipsarum, adducebant utres cum aqua frigida de interiore parte heremi et dabant, et accipiebant sibi panes et adducebant resticulas cum radices, quorum odor suauitatis super omnia aromata, nihil licentes; quia anathema habebant et dies festos suos celebrabant. Populus autem, qui per ipsum maiorem heremum ingrediebatur, numerus duodecim milia sexcenti (...).*

A family of Saracens, or rather their wives, coming from the desert and sitting weeping by the road with a sack placed before them asked for bread from those passing by. Then their husbands came bringing containers of cold water from the interior of the desert, and giving them in exchange for bread. They also carried strings of roots, the smell of which surpassed all smells in sweetness. Yet, of these, they offered nothing. For they were under an anathema and were celebrating their feast days. And the people that came in through the great wilderness numbered twelve thousand and six hundred (...).

[cap. 38] *Et in ipso monte [Mons Sina] in parte montis habent idolum suum positum Saraceni marmoreum, candidum tam quam nix. In quo etiam permanet sacerdos ipsorum indutus dalmatica et pallium lineum. Quando etiam uenit tempus festiuitatis ipsorum recurrente luna, antequam egrediatur luna, ad diem festum*

On a part of this mountain [Mount Sinai] the Saracens have set up their marble idol, which is as white as snow. In this place, one of their priests, clothed with a dalmatica and a linen pallium dwells permanently. When the time of their festivities arrived with the waxing moon, that marble began to change colour on the day of their feast day just before the moon

ipsorum incipit colorem mutare marmor illa; mox luna introierit, quando coeperint adorare, fit nigra marmor illa tamquam pice. Completo tempore festiuitatis reuertitur in pristinum colorem, unde omnino mirati sumus (...).

[cap. 39] *Et quia iam se complebant dies festi Saracenorum [recensio altera: dies festi Hysmahelitarum], praeco exiuit: ut, quia non subsisteret per heremo reuerti, per quo ingressi sumus, alii per Aegyptum, alii per Arabiam reuerterentur in sanctam ciuitatem. De monte Sina in Arabia in ciuitatem, quae uocatur Abila, sunt mansiones octo. In Abila autem descendit nauis de India cum diuersis aromatibus (...).*

[cap. 40] *Ipsa est terra Madian et ipsi inhabitantes in ea ciuitate dicitur, quia ex familia Iethro, soceri Moysi, descendunt. Octingentas condomas militantes in publico cum uxoribus suis, annonas et uestes de publico accipientes de Aegypto, nullum laborem habentes, quia nec habent ubi, eo quod totum harena sit, et praeter singulis diebus habentes singulas equas Saracenas, qui capitum paleas et hordeum, de publico accipient, discurrentes cum ipsis per heremum pro custodia monasteriorum et heremitarum propter insidias Saracenorum, ante quorum timorem non exagitantur Saraceni (...).*

[cap. 47] *Exeuntes de Apamia uenimus Antiochia maiore (...). Exinde uenimus in Carran, ubi natus est Abraham, et descendentes nos inde uenimus in ciuitate Barbarisso, ubi requiescit sanctus Bacchus, frater sancti Sergii. Deinde uenimus in ciuitate Suras, per qua ciuitate media descendit fluuius Eufrata, qui in ipso loco per ponte transitur. In ipsa passi sunt sanctus Sergius et sanctus Bacchus, et ad duodecim milia intus in heremo inter Saracenos requiescit sanctus Sergius in ciuitate Tetrapyrgio.*

rose. As soon as the moon appeared and they began to worship, the marble became as black as pitch. When the time of their festivities had ended, it regained its original colour, as we all noted with amazement (...).

Since the end of the Saracens' festivities [cf. *recensio altera*: the Ishmaelites' festivities] was already approaching, it became necessary to leave. Because it was not possible to return the same way through the desert that we had come, some returned to the holy city via Egypt, others via Arabia. From Mount Sinai to the city called Abila it is eight days' journey. Incidentally, ships from India with various spices dock at Abila (...).

This is the land of Midian, and it is said of the inhabitants of this city that they are descended from the family of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Here, eighty guards (*condomas*) serve in the military [and live] with their wives. They receive grain and clothes from the public funds of Egypt, and they have no work to perform, since there is no place to do so as there is only sandy desert everywhere. They have a few Saracen mares at their disposal, which receive chaff and barley per head from public funds. On certain days, they use these to roam the desert to protect the monasteries and hermitages from Saracen ambushes. Out of fear of them, they do not provoke the Saracens.

From Apamea we came to the great Antioch. From there we came to Ḥarrān, where Abraham was born. From there we descended to the city of Barbarisso, where St. Bacchus, the brother of St. Sergius, rests. From there we came to the city of Sura, through which flows the Euphrates, crossed at this place by a bridge. Over this St. Sergius and St. Bacchus passed, and about twelve miles into the desert St. Sergius rests among the Saracens in the city of Tetrapyrgium.

Authorship & Work

[§1] A number of citizens from Piacenza undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land between 565 and 570. The *Itinerarium* is anonymous, but it was long believed to have been authored by a certain Antoninus due to a mistaken belief that St Antoninus of Piacenza had been a participant in the journey.¹ The anonymous author began his journey to the holy places in Piacenza (chap. 1: *a ciuitate Placentina egressus sum*), in around 570. This dating argument is supported by numerous textual clues. The anonymous author reports that he could still see the destruction caused by an earthquake, which took place during the reign of Justinian I (r. 527–565) in around 550. Since he refers to the reign of Justinian in the past tense, the journey took place after the emperor's death in 565. While passing through Beirut, the author met the local bishop who had been witness to the earthquake. Since the bishop was still able to give the names of the deceased, it seems reasonable to assume that the journey cannot have taken place much later than 565.² The source is available in two recensions, with the *recensio altera* containing fewer references to the Saracens.

Content & Context

[§2] The pilgrimage began in Piacenza and took the traveller to Constantinople, Cyprus, and several Levantine coastal towns, including many biblical places such as Nazareth, Tiberias, Capharnaum, Jericho, and, Jerusalem (chap. 1–18). This was the starting point for further journeys both to the surrounding countryside and to Egypt and Mesopotamia. The author also visited other biblical places, such as Bethlehem, in the surrounding countryside (chap. 27–30).

[§3] The journey to Egypt went via Ascalon, Gaza (chap. 31–35) and the Sinai. Here, the author met nomads (chap. 35,1: *raros homines cum camelos*) and the Saracens mentioned in the quoted excerpt, who begged him and his travelling companions for bread and provided them with water in exchange (chap. 36). From there, the pilgrim went to the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai and the Saracen stone sanctuary described there (chap. 38). According to the pilgrim, it lay eight days' journey from Abila (Eilat/'Aqaba), which the pilgrim names as a landing place for merchant ships coming from India, i.e. from Ethiopia or the Indian Ocean (chap. 39). He set off for Egypt with part of the group. While travelling through the town of Fara (*Wādī Fayrān?*), a town boasting its own bishop and located in the biblical land of Midian, he took note of the security measures against nomadic raids organized in Egypt (chap. 40).

[§4] The visit to Egypt, during which the pilgrim, among other things, interpreted the pyramids as the granaries of the biblical Joseph, ended in Alexandria. From there, the pilgrim returned to Jerusalem by ship (chap. 41–46). After a stay there due to illness, the pilgrim set off eastwards via Damascus, Ḥims and Apamea (chap. 46). At the end of his travelogue, he mentions the sanctuary of St. Sergius in Tetryrgium (chap. 47).³

Contextualisation, Analysis & Interpretation

[§5] The anonymous pilgrimage account gives us an insight into a Latin-Christian perception of the pre-Islamic world. In Abila, the traveller could even have met with Meccan traders who frequented this city (today Eilat/'Aqaba) on the Red Sea because it was one of the points for the spice and transit trade to Ethiopia or India (*India* in Latin can mean both in this case).⁴

¹ Kraft, Antoninus, cols 728–729; Rotter, *Abendland*, pp. 10–11.

² Tobler, *De locis sanctis*, pp. 57–59.

³ Rotter, *Abendland*, pp. 12–21; Antoninus Placentinus, *Itinerarium*, ed./trans. Gildemeister, pp. 35–62.

⁴ Crone, *Trade*, pp. 40–41; McCormick, *Origins*, pp. 35–6; Sivan, *Palestine*, p. 343.

[§6] The Saracens he describes refer to a group whose habitat extended from Sinai to Mesopotamia. It is not clear to what extent the pilgrim was able to distinguish between different “Saracen” ways of life. His description of Saracens in the Sinai gives us insights into the way of life of rather nomadic desert dwellers who entered into certain trade relations with pilgrim groups, but otherwise also posed a threat to the monasteries, hermitages, and cities of the Sinai.⁵

[§7] They are associated with a non-monotheistic stone cult, which can perhaps be identified as a moon cult,⁶ and which contains elements that also appear in the later Islamic tradition. These elements include a connection between the calendar and the lunar phases, which is characteristic of the Islamic calendar. A parallel can also be found in a legend of a stone changing its colour from white to black, which is occasionally attributed to the Ka‘ba.⁷ Finally, the twice-mentioned period of Saracen festivities, which apparently went hand in hand with abstinence from fighting, is reminiscent of the holy months documented both in the Qur’ān (Q 9:5 and 9:36) and in the Arabic-Islamic tradition describing the pre-Islamic period. During these months and apparently also in spring, fighting was forbidden and ritual acts were performed.⁸

[§8] It should be emphasized that the anonymous pilgrim does not make any derogatory comments about the Saracens’ pagan cult on Mount Sinai, which would have been quite common from a Christian perspective at the time.⁹ It is not clear whether, by locating the shrine of St. Sergius in “Saracen” territory in Syria, he wished to allude to processes of sedentarisation and the Christianization of certain Arab groups, which is already mentioned in earlier and contemporary sources, including Latin ones.¹⁰ The pilgrim locates the burial place of St. Sergius, which he probably did not visit, in the city of Tetrapyrgium, although it is actually located in nearby Risapa, today’s al-Ruṣāfa.¹¹

[§9] Al-Ruṣāfa was founded as a Roman fort, located in the northern section of the *Strata Diocletiana*, which became the site of the martyrdom of St. Sergius and, thus, a place of pilgrimage, and, finally a *civitas* and episcopal *metropolis*.¹² At the time of the travelogue, it lay in the dominion of the Ghassanids or Ġafnīds, who, as a Christianized Arab group also connected with the cult of Sergius,¹³ took on a kind of buffer function vis-à-vis the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Sassanid Empire on behalf of the Byzantines.¹⁴ In al-Ruṣāfa, the Ġafnid al-Mundir b. al-Ḥārīt (r. c. 569–582) had some buildings erected.¹⁵

[§10] The anonymous pilgrim was just as unaware of all this as he was of the interaction of Ġafnid and Naṣrīd princes with Byzantium and the roles they played in the Christological controversies of the sixth century, all of which was described, for example, by Victor of

⁵ Rotter, *Abendland*, p. 23. See also Goffart, *Roman Taxation*, pp. 177–183, for the military posts known as *condomas*.

⁶ Rotter, *Abendland*, pp. 23–24.

⁷ Wensinck, *Jomier*, Ka‘ba, p. 321.

⁸ For the dating of the rite described by the anonymous author to the spring season, see Rotter, *Abendland*, p. 14. On the sacred months of the pre-Islamic period, see Kister, *Radjab*, pp. 373–374. At the end of the sixth century, probably between about 580 and 602, there is even a documented intra-Arab dispute between tribal units during which the sacred months were explicitly not respected. See Fück, *Fidjār*, pp. 883–884.

⁹ Rotter, *Abendland*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁰ See Hieronymus, *Vita Hilarionis*, ed./trans. LeClerc, Morales (SC 508), cap. 16,1–12. Cf. Fisher et al., *Arabs and Christianity*, p. 287; Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber*, pp. 35–136.

¹¹ Rotter, *Abendland*, p. 21, note 44; Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, p. 60, note 2.

¹² Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, pp. 60, 90.

¹³ Fisher et al., *Arabs and Christianity*, S. 282; Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber*, pp. 76–77; Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 52–53.

¹⁴ Shahīd, *Ghassān*, p. 1020; Edwell et al., *Arabs*, pp. 214–275.

¹⁵ Genequand, *Archaeological Evidence*, pp. 202–205, Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, pp. 149–173; Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 54–56.

Tununna (fl. 555–567) and John of Biclaro (fl. c. 540–620).¹⁶ This lacuna is mainly due to the anonymous author's perspective as a pilgrim: he mainly documented biblical reminiscences, itineraries, and conspicuous phenomena on the route, but did not attempt a systematic ethnographic, and both geo- and religio-political classification of pre-Islamic Arab groups.

(Translation: John Aspinwall)

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¹⁶ Victor Tonnenenensis, *Chronica*, ed. Mommsen (MGH AA 11), p. 195; Rotter, *Abendland*, S. 132; Iohannes Biclarensis, *Chronica*, ed. Mommsen (MGH AA 11), a. 575,3, p. 214; König, 575: A Hispano-Roman Visitor; König, 600: Pope Gregory the Great. On Ġafnids and Naṣrids, see Nöldeke, *Die Ghassânischen Fürsten*; Fisher, *Between Empires*.

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