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MONEY IN *HISTORIA MONACHORUM IN AEGYPTO**

Abstract. The text discusses the accounts of money in *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*. There are not many of them and, in addition, they are quite succinct. The first illustrates the face of early Byzantine fiscalism, the difficulty of paying taxes, and the resulting sanctions for the insolvent debtor and his family members. The next, equally laconic, shows the nature of the business of a merchant trading his goods from Thebaid to Alexandria. The remaining analyzed information is comprised of isolated and very brief references to the issue of money in other spheres of everyday life. *Historia monachorum*, an important text for studying the early history of Egyptian monasticism, unfortunately, does not constitute a valuable source of information about money and the history of the economy of early Byzantium.

Keywords: early Byzantine hagiography and monasticism, early Byzantine economy, money in hagiographic texts, digits and numbers in early Byzantine hagiographic texts

Introductory remarks

*H*istoria monachorum in Aegypto is the story of Christian monks who set out from Jerusalem to Egypt in the last years of the 4th century (allegedly between 394 and 395), traveling on the trail of monastic centers in the land on the Nile¹. In addition to the best-known Greek and Latin versions, the text is also known in Coptic, Syriac (four different late antique translations), Slavonic, Arabic, Georgian and Armenian². This fact proves that the work enjoyed considerable

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¹ C.P. BAMMEL, *Problems of the Historia Monachorum*, JTS 47, 1996, p. 92–104; A. DE VOGÜÉ, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique dans l'antiquité*, vol. III.1, *Le monachisme latin: Jérôme, Augustin et Rufin au tournant du siècle (391–405)*, Paris 1996, p. 317–320; A. CAIN, *The Style of the Greek Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, REAP 58, 2012, p. 57–96.

² P. DEVOS, *Fragments coptes de l'«Historia Monachorum» (Vie de S. Jean de Lycopolis BHO. 515)*, AB 87, 1969, p. 417–440; P. ΤÓΤΗ, *The Syriac Versions of the Historia Monachorum in Aegypto. A Preliminary Investigation on the Basis of the First Chapter*, OCh 94, 2010, p. 58–104; A. CAIN, *The Greek «Historia Monachorum in Aegypto». Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century*, Oxford 2016 [= OECS], p. 26.

readership in the following decades and even centuries. The relationship between the two main versions, Greek and Latin, and the question of mutual dependence, has been the subject of scholarly dispute for decades. Some scholars, such as E. Preuschen³ and R. Reitzenstein⁴, have taken the position that the original text of *Historia monachorum* was written in Latin by Rufinus of Aquileia⁵. C. Butler⁶ and, above all, A.-J. Festugiere⁷, the author of the most recent critical edition of *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, were of a completely different opinion. They claimed that the Greek text was the original text. In support of their thesis, they offer considerable evidence from comparative analyses but also the information found in Sozomen. He attributes the authorship of *Historia monachorum* to Timothy of Alexandria. Sozomen, most likely, mistakenly identified him with a bishop of the same name⁸. In fact, according to C. Butler⁹ and A.-J. Festugiere, he was the presbyter Timothy, one of the clergy of the Church of Alexandria in the early 5th century. It seems reasonable to assume that a decision was made to translate the Greek text into Latin out of a desire to disseminate among the newcomers from the West a new pattern of life – a kind of “perfect life” whose fulfilment was the life of monks¹⁰.

From the point of view of the considerations in the following text, the question of the language of the original version of *Historia monachorum* is irrelevant. The description of events begins in Upper Egypt, in the Thebaid. Having visited a number of monks there, including those from the area of Oxyrynchos, the protagonists of the story head north towards Lower Egypt. On their journey, they visit other monastic communities and learn their stories. An important element of these stories are the so-called edifying tales and exemplary patterns of behaviour. The text also includes anecdotes from the lives of monks, descriptions of their alleged mantic abilities, and various miracles, including miraculous healings, which are the essence of every hagiographic work. Of course, in these stories, we often have a mixture of the miraculous and the real, which makes it all the more difficult to use this material in research on the society and economy of the time. In the margins of the aforementioned accounts, we find only several bits of information concerning monetary issues. Their detailed analysis will be discussed below.

³ E. PREUSCHEN, *Palladius und Rufinus. Ein Beitrag zur Quellenkunde des ältesten Mönchtums. Texte und Untersuchungen*, Giessen 1897, p. 1–131.

⁴ R. REITZENSTEIN, *Historia monachorum und Historia Lausiaca. Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Mönchtums und der frühchristlichen Begriffe Gnostiker und Pneumatiker*, Göttingen 1916.

⁵ TYRANNIUS RUFINUS, *Historia monachorum sive De vita sanctorum patrum*, ed. E. SCHULZ-FLÜGEL, Berlin 1990 [= PTS, 34].

⁶ C. BUTLER, *The Lausiatic History of Palladius*, vol. I, Cambridge 1898, p. 10–15, 257–264.

⁷ A.-J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Le problème littéraire de l'Historia monachorum*, H 83, 1955, p. 257–284.

⁸ SOZOMENUS, *Kirchengeschichte*, 6, 29, ed. J. BIDEZ, G.C. HANSEN, Berlin 1995 [= GCS.NF, 4].

⁹ C. BUTLER, *The Lausiatic History...*, p. 276–277.

¹⁰ Extensive discussion of the above problems (the language of original text, its authorship, and the time of its writing), cf. A. CAIN, *The Greek...*, p. 9–49.

The plight of the tax debtor

Among the issues that interest us here, the problem of tax debt is the most extensively reported. It is discussed in the story of Paphnutius¹¹. However, the account is rather questionable. The story's protagonist enters into a conversation with an anonymous "flute player" who used to be a robber. Once, he had met a woman along one of the trails who had been driven out of town to the desert by an official's armed entourage because of her husband's tax arrears (...κατὰ τὴν ἔρημον φυγαδευθεῖσαν ὑπο τῶν ταξεωτῶν τοῦ ἄρχοντος καὶ τῶν βουλευτῶν διὰ χρέος δημόσιον ἀνδρικόν...). Failing to pay tax for two years resulted in a debt that totalled 300 gold pieces (...ὑπὲρ χρέους δημοσίου χρυσίνων τριακοσίων)¹². Allegedly, throughout that time, the insolvent debtor was locked in jail and subjected to corporal punishment, their three children were sold at auction, and the debtor's wife – who, for whatever reason, had been spared this fate – was banished from the town. The account further indicates that the woman was repeatedly found in the vicinity of the town by the associates of the collectors; flogged and then left to her own devices, she would wander around the surrounding wilderness. Moved by the woman's story, the robber offered her 300 gold pieces (...δοὺς αὐτῇ τοὺς τριακοσίους χρυσίνους...), obviously, accumulated from robbery. For this sum, she bought her husband and their three children out of captivity¹³.

The above-mentioned account is not only very laconic, but also its cognitive value is questionable. First of all, it is difficult to say what tax liability is referred in this case. Is it a specific tax or financial obligations due to, for example, acting as a city official? How is it to be understood that this obligation is defined as χρέος δημόσιον (public debt)? In the above account, however, most doubts are raised by the nature of the sanctions that were imposed on the entire family of the tax debtor. Let us try to compare it with the information on penalties for delaying payment of taxes found in the imperial legislation of that time. None of the regulations known to me considers an analogous case. It cannot be ruled out that various sanctions, including corporal punishment, were applied locally to tax debtors. First of all, it is not clear from the above-cited account which tax obligation was neglected. Due to the fact that members of the town council participated in the penalties (if the account is considered reliable on this point as well), it could be concluded that it concerns city taxes. However, we cannot say for sure.

How did the issue of sanctions or penalties towards the tax debtor come under the legislation of those times? Obviously, the state's approach to this issue should be considered chronologically. The earliest is the regulation of Constantine the Great,

¹¹ *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, 14, ed. A.-J. FESTUGIERE, Bruxelles 1971 [= SHa, 53] (cetera: *Historia monachorum*).

¹² *Historia monachorum*, 14, 5–7.

¹³ More, in the literary context, on the analyzed account cf. also D. ROMERO GONZÁLES, *La imagen de la mujer en "Historia monachorum in Aegypto"*, ARSCSH 20, 2008, p. 12–13.

which allowed the tax collector to seize certain goods of the debtor for a loan for a period of two months. These were forfeited and monetized at auction, in the case of the debtor's insolvency¹⁴. Another decree, also promulgated in Constantine's time, even provided for the confiscation of all the debtor's property¹⁵. Enforcement of outstanding debts often gave rise to various abuses. One of the decrees of Emperor Constantius II promulgated in 353 warns against them¹⁶. Probably in view of the frequent insolvency of debtors, almost thirty years later, during the reign of Theodosius the Great, a decree was issued providing for a graded penalty¹⁷. The conclusion is that the practice of everyday life forced a flexible approach to specific cases. The debtor was summoned three times to pay the tax¹⁸. If they failed to pay, the tax execution was handed over to a "military collector"¹⁹. This probably opened a door to a great deal of abuse. It is possible that this situation is illustrated in the above-quoted account from *Historia monachorum*.

Regulations concerning specific financial penalties for the tax debtor do not appear until the end of the 4th century. They mention a fine equal to twice the amount owed by the debtor²⁰. It is also worth looking at a decree issued in 400 regarding obligations towards the imperial *res privata*. It suggests that in such a case, the legislator provided for the assessment of the debtor's financial situation when determining the amount of penalties. In the case of a "non-affluent debtor" (whatever that meant), the penalty amounted to 50 percent of the sum owed; in the case of a "wealthy debtor," it was as much as 400 percent of the overdue sum²¹. I suspect that in practice, such a broadly worded provision created enormous room for abuse. It is worth mentioning here that, although in the Theodosian Code *quadrumplum* as a penalty for the tax debtor does not appear until the decree of the Emperors Arcadius and Honorius (400), we know that it was already in use earlier, at least in the 370s. This is confirmed by one of the letters of Basil the Great²². This fact may indicate that not all the regulations on the tax system used in the 4th century were found in the Theodosian Code.

Let us note that in the late antique legislation preserved to this time, which regulates the procedure towards the tax debtor, there is quite a large chronological gap. Even if we tried to juxtapose these regulations chronologically with the case described in *Historia monachorum* (assuming it is credible, which is not at all obvious), we note periods when the above-mentioned regulations were not in force.

¹⁴ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 9, 1 (323), ed. T. MOMMSEN, Berolini 1905 (cetera: *Codex Theodosianus*).

¹⁵ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 7, 4 (327).

¹⁶ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 7, 7 (353).

¹⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 1, 18 (381).

¹⁸ *Codex Theodosianus*, 1, 5, 11 (398).

¹⁹ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 1, 34 (429).

²⁰ *Codex Theodosianus*, 1, 5, 11 (398).

²¹ *Codex Theodosianus*, 11, 1, 27 (400).

²² BASILIUS MAGNUS, *Epistula* 21, [in:] PG, vol. XXXII.

In other words: either other regulations that were not included in the Theodosian Code were applicable at the time, or the question of the nature of the sanction for the tax debtor was not sufficiently clarified, which in practice would create enormous room for abuse, and their echoes can be found in the analyzed account. Considering the above-mentioned doubts, it does not seem reasonable that the described sanction was actually applied: expulsion of the debtor's wife from the town, with simultaneous imprisonment of her husband, and auctioning their children into slavery. It cannot be ruled out that in the case of the above-discussed woman, we are dealing with desertion in order to avoid being sold for debts. However, in the case of the analyzed account, a more banal explanation is conceivable. The convention of a hagiographic work required creating a situation – without caring about the accuracy of facts – in which a character in the story could appear in the desert, providing an opportunity for the protagonist, in this case a repentant robber, to show mercy. After all, he offered the woman the money he had collected from robbery and stealing from travelers.

Judging the cognitive value of the above-analyzed account – leaving aside the circumstances and nature of the sanctions described – another issue should be pointed out, namely, the unreliable amount which the taxpayer allegedly owed. All sums using the digit three or one and their multiples appear most frequently in Greek texts. These are topical numbers, completely unreliable cognitively, and thus, they cannot constitute comparative material in the study of the nature of the early Byzantine tax system²³.

The above-discussed case confirms not only the fact that the tax system of the time was negatively assessed by contemporaries but also that there were real difficulties in meeting this obligation. Although probably somewhat exaggerated, it is mentioned in the writings of numerous Christian authors of the time that the voice of the tax collector was the one most often heard in the marketplace²⁴. Gregory of Nazianzus in one breath places side by side the thief, the tax collector, and the latter's collaborator – the criminal prefect²⁵. John Chrysostom repeatedly emphasizes the ruthlessness of tax collectors and the brutality of their methods in collecting taxes, mentioning also that many of them appropriated part of the gold collected from taxes, even though they were threatened with severe repercussions, including corporal punishment²⁶. Cases of tax collectors appropriating part of tax dues,

²³ P. DEVOS, *Les nombres dans L'Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, AB 92, 1974, p. 97–108. Cf. also R. MEHRLEIN, *Drei*, [in:] RAC, vol. IV, ed. T. KLAUSER, Stuttgart 1959, col. 269–310; I. MILEWSKI, *Money in the Apophthegmata Patrum*, SCer 9, 2019, p. 603–614; IDEM, *Textile Prices in Early Byzantine Hagiographic Texts. Three Case Studies*, SCer 10, 2020, p. 399–413.

²⁴ BASILIUS MAGNUS, *Epistula*, 74.3, [in:] PG, vol. XXXII; GREGORIUS NAZIANZENUS, *De rebus suis (Carmina 2, 1, 1)*, 147–151, [in:] PG, vol. XXXVII.

²⁵ GREGORIUS NAZIANZENUS, *De exterioris hominis vilitate (Carmina 2, 15)*, 63–65, [in:] PG, vol. XXXVII.

²⁶ The collector “collects taxes by shouting and rape”, cf. JOANNES CHRYSOSTOMUS, *In Matthaëum*, hom. 66 (67), 4, [in:] PG, vol. LVII. Cf. also analogous statements in IDEM, *In Epistolam ad*

in agreement with local authorities, probably occurred quite often. It should be remembered, however, that the Emperor Constantius' decree of 349 allowed the tax collector to keep one percent of the collected amount²⁷, which probably further motivated the taxman to collect taxes. Identical complaints about the oppressiveness of the tax system, and above all, the brutality of the collectors, are also found in texts from the mid-5th century²⁸. In other words, the account of the plight of the tax debtor and the ruthlessness of the collectors found in *Historia monachorum*, although rather unreliable in terms of the amount owed, corresponds with other accounts from the early Byzantine period.

The Alexandrian merchant and his trading activities in Thebaid

In the same chapter of *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, we find an account of an anonymous merchant who led a fleet of "100 ships" (...μετὰ ἑκατὸν πλοίων...) on the Nile from Thebaid to Alexandria, with a cargo worth 20,000 gold pieces (...δύο μυριάδας χρυσίνων)²⁹. In the Latin version of *Historia monachorum*, this merchant carried his goods worth the same amount in just three ships³⁰. Later in the account we learn that the merchant traded in vegetables. He gave some of them – ten sacks of vegetables – to the protagonist of the story, the monk Paphnutius³¹. Although the account is short and very succinct, one can be tempted to discuss two issues. First, the figures; as in the case of the above-discussed account of the tax debt, the number of ships on which the goods worth 20,000 gold pieces were supposedly transported is topical. Let us remember that the Greek text mentions 100 ships, while the Latin version mentions three³². Both numbers are topical and typical of the "Greek" way of expressing numerical data. If the author of the original *Historia* was Rufinus of Aquileia and it was written in Latin (that is, for a Western audience), it would mean that the author had spent a long time in the East and had adopted the Greek way of expressing this type of data. A similar pattern is also found in the writings of other Latin authors from the turn of the 5th century,

Colossenes, hom. 2, 6, [in:] PG, vol. LXII; IDEM, *Comparatio regis et monachii*, 3–4, [in:] PG, vol. XLVII; IDEM, *De Lazaro*, 2, 4, [in:] PG, vol. XLVIII.

²⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, 12, 6, 3 (349).

²⁸ THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Epistulae*, 36, [in:] PG, vol. LXXXIII. Cf. also I. HAHN, *Theodoretus von Cyrus und die frühbyzantinische Besteuerung*, AA.ASH 10, 1962, p. 124–131.

²⁹ *Historia monachorum*, 14, 19. It is worth mentioning, that there is a mistake in the Polish translation of the Greek version of *Historia monachorum*. It shows that the merchant sailed down the Nile from Alexandria to Thebaid. Meanwhile, the exact opposite follows from the Greek text: ...ἐκ τῆς [...] Θηβαΐδος. We also read the same in the Latin version (16, 3, 2): ...*ex Thebaide*.

³⁰ *Historia monachorum*, (lat.) 16, 3, 2.

³¹ *Historia monachorum*, 14, 18–20. Cf. also A. CAIN, *Jerome and the Monastic Clergy. A Commentary on Letter 52 to Nepotian, with Introduction, Text, and Translation*, Leiden 2013 [= VC.S, 119], p. 265.

³² *Historia monachorum*, (lat.) 16, 3, 2: ...(*Paphnutius*) *occurit cuidam negotiatori Alexandrino viginti millibus solidorum mercimonia tribus navibus deferenti ex Thebaide*.

such as Jerome³³ and John Cassian³⁴. The different number of alleged ships carrying the cargo may also indicate another fact, namely that already at the beginning of the 5th century there were at least two Greek versions of *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*. Otherwise, how would the “three ships” instead of the “hundred ships” referred to in the Greek version of *Historia monachorum* as we know it appear in the Latin translation?

Another issue is the nature of the Alexandrian merchant’s trading activities and the destination of his trading expedition on the Nile, to Alexandria. The trade of foodstuffs was directed towards the great centers, led by Alexandria, which was the proverbial window to the world for all production generated in Egypt at that time. Indeed, during the early Byzantine period, foodstuffs (grain, vegetables, and fruit) as well as crafts (olive lamps, pottery, textiles) were traded in large numbers in the Thebaid area³⁵. Due to the very general nature of the above-mentioned account, it is difficult to say anything rational about the information it contains. It is possible that the merchant brought craft products from Lower Egypt, buying food products in Upper Egypt, with which he returned to Alexandria. The laconic character of the account allows at most to formulate such a general conclusion.

Money in other areas of everyday life

Apart from the above-described references, we find only a few minor mentions about money in *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*. There is the story of an anonymous tribune who accidentally meets two monks: Macarius the Alexandrian and Macarius the Egyptians while crossing the Nile on a ferry. After a conversation with him and learning what the “true value of life” is, he decides to took off his “official” robe, gave away all his wealth by generously distributing alms, and then joins one of the monastic groups (...καὶ μονάζειν ἤρῆσατο ποιήσας πολλὰς ἐλεημοσύνας)³⁶. Other times, *Historia monachorum* mentions monk who allegedly possessing gold attract the interest of thieves³⁷. This is a fairly common motif in hagiographical literature, but it probably maps with reality. Monks had certain cash reserves obtained from the sale of goods they made (woven mats, baskets, clay pots, etc.)³⁸, the received alms, and larger monetary donations from visiting pilgrims. Monks with even small sums of money were easy targets for thieving gangs³⁹.

³³ HIERONYMUS, *Vita Hilarionis*, 3, 5; 5, 11; 8, 14; 20, 30; 21, 31; 22, 32; 27, 38; 28, 38; 29, 40; 30, 42 and above all 17, 26–27 (the story of the hermit’s vineyard and its crops), [in:] *PL*, vol. XXIII.

³⁴ JOANNES CASSIANUS, *Institutis coenobiorum et octo principalium remediis libri XII*, IV, 14, [in:] *PL*, vol. XLIX.

³⁵ R. ALSTON, *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt*, London–New York 2002, p. 337–344.

³⁶ *Historia monachorum*, 23, 4. On the “historicity” of this account from *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, cf. D. WOODS, *An Imperial Embassy in the “Historia monachorum”*, *JTS* 48, 1997, p. 133–136.

³⁷ *Historia monachorum*, 6, 2.

³⁸ I. MILEWSKI, *Money in the Apophthegmata patrum...*, p. 605–607.

³⁹ K.-H. STEINMETZ, *Latro und Eremit. Ein spiritualitätsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Anachorese, Transliminalität und Theologie der Freiheit bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Berlin 2014, p. 119sq.

Concluding remarks

Historia monachorum in Aegypto is undoubtedly a valuable source of knowledge about the emerging Egyptian monasticism. It is surprising, however, that in the analyzed text we find little information concerning economic issues, including money. These details usually appear more abundantly on the margins of the accounts discussing the monks' contacts with their "secular" surroundings. This sparse information, however, corresponds in its nature with analogous accounts from other early Byzantine source accounts. The above-analyze figures, such as the amount of tax arrears (300 gold pieces) and the number of ships used by the merchant from Alexandria to transport his goods (100 in the Greek version or three in the Latin one), are either unverifiable (such as the value of the cargo estimated at 20,000 gold pieces) or unreliable. The latter case is more interesting critically because it confirms the repetition in the Latin version of *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* of figures typical for Greek texts (1, 10, 100, 1,000, 10,000 and 3, 30, 33, 300, 3,000, 30,000), although with one remark. If we assume that the Latin text of *Historia monachorum* is indeed a translation of the Greek text, this could mean that there were at least two slightly different versions (if only in terms of numerical data) of the text written in Greek.

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