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## BANKERS AND USURERS IN THE EARLY BYZANTINE HAGIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS\*

**Abstract.** The text discusses accounts from early Byzantine hagiographical texts depicting the activities of bankers and usurers in the period from the early 5<sup>th</sup> to the second decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Texts by Palladius of Helenopolis, John of Ephesus, John Moschos, and Leontius of Neapolis are analysed. In the collated material we find relatively little information depicting the activities of bankers and usurers. Neither do we find any further details of the conditions under which money loans were granted. However, we note the statement that the cancellation of a loan, even if forced by circumstances (even if due to the intervention of a holy man), is charitable in nature and the ‘lost’ capital by the creditor in such a case bears the characteristics of a merciful deed. Most of the analysed accounts are presented in a somewhat fanciful way, which, however, should not question the information conveyed by the narrative. Two aspects of the analysed accounts are most significant. Firstly, the absence of any criticism of the Alexandrian Church deriving, even if not high, some profits (interest) from monetary loans. Secondly, in the accounts analysed we note a peculiar narrative, or in fact a new way of reasoning, by means of which the authors wanted to reach their audience, the potential benefactors. Thus, we become acquainted with somewhat naïve tales of how the benefits of granting a non-refundable loan to the needy, not only to the poor but also to merchants who traded on the high seas (?) would quite quickly return to the merciful benefactor, in a tangible material benefit, while he was still alive. We do not find such an argument in the patristic texts of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, where accounts of this kind merely refer to a prediction or even a guarantee of ‘heavenly interest’ that could tip the scales in favour of the merciful donor (creditor) at the Last Judgement.

**Keywords:** early Byzantium, early Byzantine hagiography, money, bankers and usurers in early Byzantium

### Introduction

Hagiographical texts are a valuable source of insight into early Byzantine daily life, especially in the provinces. Compared to patristic texts of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Lives of the Saints devote relatively little attention to people who

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made their living lending money<sup>1</sup>. The presence of bankers (τραπεζῖται) and usurers (τοκιζωνταί), and the lending activities they carried out, is generally seen as an indicator of the economic condition of the area whose daily life is illustrated by the group of sources studied. In the following article, we will juxtapose the accounts of four early Byzantine authors: John of Ephesus, John Moschos, Leontius of Neapolis and Palladius of Helenopolis<sup>2</sup>.

### The Saint versus the usurers. John of Ephesus on the monetary loans in the forgotten Syrian countryside

Several references to the activities of bankers and usurers are found in the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* by John of Ephesus. The first mentions a certain usurer living in an unspecified Syrian town who ‘terrorised’ the local population by claiming to be in possession of old (?) debentures (χάρταις, also called ὁμολογίαις<sup>3</sup>). The residents informed the local holy man, Habib, of the situation, who went to the usurer, who, seeing the holy man coming, tore up the financial documents in question<sup>4</sup>. According to the practice of the time, also known to us from other source texts, tearing up a debenture (χάρτης) meant the cancellation of a debt<sup>5</sup>. However, the aforementioned usurer did not cease his activities in the following years. When he died, his children searched his house, took all the scripts they found there and brought them to Habib, who in turn returned them to the debtors<sup>6</sup>.

An analogous story also appears later in the same *Life*. We read in it that there was a banker (τραπεζῖτης) living in Martyropolis who was in possession of contracts (χάρταις) which confirmed the loans taken out by many local residents. Unsurprisingly in this case, this man was infamous. News of his activities also

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. JUNDZIŁ, *Pieniądz w łacińskiej literaturze chrześcijańskiej późnego cesarstwa rzymskiego*, Warszawa 1984; I. MILEWSKI, *Pieniądz w greckiej literaturze patrystycznej IV wieku (na przykładzie pisma kapadockich Ojców Kościoła i Jana Chryzostoma)*, Gdańsk 1999.

<sup>2</sup> More on the authors of the analysed texts and on their works, Cf. A. HÜBNER, *Einführung*, [in:] PALLADIUS, *Historia Lausiaca. Geschichte aus dem frühen Mönchtum*, trans. et comm. A. HÜBNER, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2016 [= *FCh*, 67], p. 7–77; E.D. HUNT, *Palladius of Helenopolis. A Party and its Supporters in the Church of the Late Fourth Century*, *JTS* 24, 1973, p. 456–480; S.A. HARVEY, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis. John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Berkeley 1990 [= *TCH*, 17]; H. CHADWICK, *John Moschos and his Friend Sophronius the Sophist*, *JTS* 25, 1974, p. 41–74; B.L. IHSSSEN, *John Moschos’ Spiritual Meadow. Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World*, Washington 2013, p. 1–19; I. MILEWSKI, *Textile Prices in Early Byzantine Hagiographic Texts. Three Case Studies*, *SCer* 10, 2020, p. 401–402.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. I. MILEWSKI, *Bankers, Usurer and Merchants. Businessmen of the Late Antiquity Cities in Reports of Greek Church Fathers of the Fourth Century*, *MBAH* 20, 2001, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Vitae*, 1, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. I. MILEWSKI, *Bankers...*, p. 102–103.

<sup>6</sup> JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Historia beatorum orientalium. Lives of Eastern Saints*, 1, ed. E.W. BROOKS, [in:] *PO*, 17.1, Paris 1923 (cetera: JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Historia beatorum orientalium*), p. 9.

reached Habib, who decided to go to Martyropolis, to the aforementioned banker. Unfortunately, the rest of the text is corrupted, but presumably the visit ended with the same result as in the previous case<sup>7</sup>. There is yet another, almost identical situation in the same text. Here, too, the inhabitants asked the holy man to go to the usurer to recover their debentures (χάρταις). Thus, it was done. The saint arrived at the usurer's house, stood in front of his door until the usurer, repentant or perhaps just embarrassed by the situation, asked for forgiveness, after which he destroyed said documents<sup>8</sup>.

The *Life of Harphat*, bishop of the Syrian Anzetene (Arsamosata), on the other hand, shows that usury could in principle be practised by anyone with some surplus cash. Even small sums could be borrowed at interest. This practice is also attested to by other early Byzantine accounts<sup>9</sup>. In the aforementioned *Life* we read that the protagonist's cousin, when he was a child, managed his estate, also multiplying the money obtained from rent by lending it at interest, in other words he was a usurer. If the author of the account is to be believed, local debtors brought interest to his house every day. Seeing this, the protagonist of the story demanded a division of the property. The assets to be divided were allegedly '5,000 dinars' (miliarensia?) in cash and unspecified real estate, mainly landed estates from which leases were collected<sup>10</sup>.

### **It is worth giving loans (giving alms) without expecting anything in return from the borrowers (recipients). Accounts by John Moschos**

The issue of money-lending activities appears several times in the *Pratum spirituale* by John Moschos. The first of these is rather peculiar. It is basically a generously distributed almsgiving that develops into a monetary loan given to the poor. The guarantor of the 'return' of the capital and the payment of the 'interest' in this case is Christ himself. The account states that there was a Christian woman living in the Mesopotamian city of Nisibis who, unsurprisingly for a 'didactic' story in a hagiographical text, had a pagan husband. According to the author of the account, the couple were considered poor despite having fifty pieces of silver (μυλιαρίσια πεντηκοντάς). One day, the husband announced to his wife that he intended to put their savings into a deposit (παρακαθήκη)<sup>11</sup> with a usurer (δανειστής) in order to obtain interest for them. The wife, trying to dissuade him, said that if he really wanted to give it to a usurer, then only to a trusted and tested one, the God of the Christians, and then she led her husband to the local church and

<sup>7</sup> JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Historia beatorum orientalium*, 1, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Historia beatorum orientalium*, 1, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. I. MILEWSKI, *Bankers...*, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> JOANNES EPHEINUS, *Historia beatorum orientalium*, 11, p. 159.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. RAUF, *Depositum*, [in:] RAC, vol. III, ed. T. KLAUSER, Stuttgart 1957, col. 778.

pointed to the beggars crowding there, explaining that by offering them the money he had saved, not only would he not lose it, but he would also gain a generous interest, a gain that no usurer would offer him. This is what they did. They distributed the 50 miliaresions among the poor gathered there. After three months, the Christian woman's husband, worried about the lack of funds to cover current household expenses, began to reproach his wife for the fact that the God of the Christians have not offered them anything, even though they had given away all their savings, so that they themselves were now struggling. The woman reassured her husband and instructed him to go near the church to collect the interest. The obedient husband went to the place indicated, but soon returned to find that he had not met anyone at the church who could pay him the interest. However, he saw more beggars crowding there. Wondering which one of them he should ask for the interest due, he looked at the ground and found one piece of gold, picked it up and returned home. The convention of a hagiographic work demanded a twist at this point. A wise wife, a Christian woman, sent her husband to the market to buy food. So he went to the market and bought bread, wine and fish. In the gutted fish, the wife found a precious stone, which, as it turned out, the local jeweller (in this case referred to by two different terms: *τραπεζίτης* and *ἀργυροπράτης*) bought back from the couple for the enormous sum of 300 gold pieces. What is obvious is that the story carries a message. Seeing the sum obtained from the sale of the stone in question, the wife said to her husband, a pagan:

See how great the God of the Christians is, how good and generous! How inexhaustible are his riches! Not only has he returned to you the fifty pieces of silver which you lent him (by distributing them to the poor – I.M.), but he has also multiplied your capital many times over. Know therefore that there is no other God, either in heaven or on earth<sup>12</sup>.

Leaving aside the fanciful, if not naive, nature of the above story, three aspects should be noted. Firstly, the statement that the cash they had, 50 pieces of silver, according to the author of the account, placed the couple among the poor (?). What, then, can be said of the heroes of other stories in hagiographical texts, whose daily wage was often 'three' or 'ten' nummia, the proverbial 'pennies'? Another issue, in case of the story cited above, is the dissemination of the belief that the charitable practice and the giving of alms, can bring tangible material benefits to the donor while he is still alive, a measurable financial benefit offered by God. And finally, the third point is the husband's consideration of putting his savings into a deposit

<sup>12</sup> JOANNES MOSCHOS, *Pratum spirituale*, 185, [in:] PG, vol. LXXXVII.3, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1865 (cetera: JOANNES MOSCHOS, *Pratum spirituale*); trans.: JOHN MOSCHOS, *The Spiritual Meadow*, ed. et trans. J. WORTLEY, Kalamazoo 1992. Cf. also H.L. ADELSON, *A Note on the Miliarenses from Constantine to Heraclius*, ANSMN 7, 1957, p. 125sqq; R. BOGAERT, *Changeurs et banquiers chez les pères de l'Église*, AS 4, 1973, p. 263.

so that he would earn interest, thus, the usurer mentioned in the account would make use of them by bringing some profit to the depositor. In this case, the author of the account is trying to instil the notion that, firstly, if anything, the profit from the usurer would be meagre and, besides, is laden with the risk of losing the capital. The profit described in the subsequent parts of the story would be far greater.

In the source material analysed, there is also the problem of insolvent merchants who borrowed money in order to carry out commercial activities. Accounts on this subject are few and, above all, very laconic. They show that some merchants operated without adequate cash reserves, or deliberately did not commit them for fear of losing funds due to a maritime disaster or pirate attack. Such circumstances created financial difficulties for both parties: the usurer (or banker), who at least temporarily, and often even irretrievably, would lose the borrowed capital, and the merchant, who, having lost the goods, often had no means to repay the loan taken out to cover the cost of the investment. The second of these situations is illustrated by another story by John Moschos. The protagonist lost all his cargo, the goods he had bought on credit, in a shipwreck and escaped from the sinking ship. When he returned to his home town, Askalon, his creditors captured him, threw him in jail<sup>13</sup>. And from his house they took all his movable property, which they then cashed in to cover part of their losses. The convention of the hagiographic work in such a case called for a rescue, which came from a rather unexpected party, from a repentant fellow prisoner, a robber and murderer. No longer able to save himself (he was waiting in prison for the judge to arrive and pronounce the sentence), he decides to support the aforementioned merchant by revealing to his wife hiding place in the suburb where he had hidden a jug of stolen money (χρήματα). As there was no way he could use it anymore, in this situation he decided to at least do a good deed at the end of his wicked life. Instructed, the woman went to the indicated place, where she actually found the loot. With the money she found, she bought her husband out of prison and paid off his creditors<sup>14</sup>.

### **Controversial activity: the money-lending operations of the Alexandrian Church in the account of Leontius of Neapolis**

We find some information about the activities of bankers and usurers in the *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, a text depicting daily life in Alexandria in the second decade of the seventh century. In one of the stories reported, we read that a certain

<sup>13</sup> In antiquity, including its later period, the concept of 'arrest for debt' (δεσμοτήριον, φυλακή or πρακτόρειον), in which the debtors were jailed for a time, was well known, Cf. S. ARBANDT, W. MACHEINER, *Gefangenschaft*, [in:] *RAC*, vol. IX, ed. T. KLAUSER, Stuttgart 1976, col. 327–328, 335–336, 342–344, where this type of institution is referred to by the authors of the text with the unambiguous term 'Schuldhaft'.

<sup>14</sup> JOANNES MOSCHOS, *Pratum spirituale*, 189.

landowner, as a result of a crop failure, fell into financial difficulties<sup>15</sup>. In order to save himself from insolvency, he decided to take out a loan of 50 pounds of gold (about 3,600 solidi) from an Alexandrian banker. The loan was to be taken out at 200 per cent, a truly usurious interest rate! However, its payout was postponed because the banker did not have such a large sum at his disposal, which is surprising, as it was not some dizzying sum for a professional money-lender in such a large city as Alexandria. In this situation, the perplexed debtor decides to knock on the patriarch's door. As we read in the account of Leontius, John promised to grant him a loan, allegedly without even specifying the terms of the loan. However, this is not the end of the story. According to the author of the account, the patriarch 'appeared by night' to the aforementioned banker and encouraged him to grant the loan with truly evangelical words, stating: *Woe to the man who, having the intention of doing good, puts it off*<sup>16</sup>. As it was allegedly taken out 'for a just cause', by a man 'in need', its granting was thus elevated to the rank of an act of mercy towards the debtor. On this occasion, however, we do not even find a word of criticism of the interest rate, the aforementioned 200 per cent, a usurious interest rate by any standard. At the end of antiquity, including in Alexandria of the early seventh century, it was still the law to collect at most 8 per cent on so-called maritime loans<sup>17</sup>. Admittedly, papyrological texts from the Egyptian area confirm the charging of much higher interest rates as well (up to 50 per cent), but these are isolated cases<sup>18</sup>. The account discussed above is one of many depicting the story of John the Almsman, which ends rather unexpectedly. We do not find out whether the loan was actually granted and, more importantly, by whom: by the banker or by John? Perhaps, then, it is the awkwardness of the situation described (after all, we are probably talking about an interest-bearing loan of money) that has resulted in the information provided being rather imprecise.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. A.Ch. JOHNSON, L.C. WEST, *Byzantine Egypt. Economic Studies*, Amsterdam 1967, p. 254–259. Similar problems were also faced in other provinces of the empire, Cf. I. HAHN, *Theodoretus von Cyrus und die frühbyzantinische Besteuerung*, AA.ASH 10, 1962, p. 124–131.

<sup>16</sup> LEONTIUS NEAPOLEOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 29, [in:] *Leontios von Neapolis Leben des hl. Johannes des Barmherzigen*, ed. H. GELZER, Freiburg im Breisgau 1893 (cetera: LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*); trans.: LEONTIUS OF NEAPOLIS, *Life of John the Almsgiver*, [in:] E. DAWES, N.H. BAYNES, *Three Byzantine Saints. Contemporary Biographies Translated from Greek*, Oxford 1948, p. 207–270.

<sup>17</sup> R. BOGAERT, *Geld (Geldwirtschaft)*, [in:] RAC, vol. IX, ed. T. KLAUSER, Stuttgart 1976, col. 878.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, col. 878. Cf. also W.N. ZEISEL, *An Economic Survey of the Early Byzantine Church*, New Brunswick–New Jersey 1975, p. 138.

we also find a description of another analogous case. This time it concerns an anonymous Alexandrian merchant who, having wrecked his ship loaded with grain, came to the patriarch to borrow money in order to continue his trade and consequently make up for his losses. The patriarch lent him 5 pounds of gold, with which the shipowner purchased the grain, but this shipment too went down near Alexandria. The next loan was already for the sum of 10 pounds of gold. Having once again lost his cargo, the merchant broke down and came close to committing suicide, which, unsurprisingly in this case, he was dissuaded from doing by the patriarch in a dream vision. John explained to the unfortunate man that he had lost his cargo because he had been doing dishonest business, speculating in the grain trade, but that he could change that. The patriarch, giving the bankrupt another chance, entrusted him with the command of one of the ships of the Church's grain-trading flotilla<sup>19</sup>. The ship, allegedly loaded with twenty thousand *modii* of grain, made the trading expedition safely despite a storm, as the author of the account points out. After 20 days of sailing, the ship reached the shores of Britain (!), where the grain was sold at a price of one gold piece per *modius*. The grain sold was used to purchase 50 pounds of tin, which was then miraculously transformed into silver in the ship's holds 'due to the prayers of the patriarch' (who had been in Alexandria all this time!). The author of the account, Leontius of Neapolis, likens the event described to the miracle at Cana and the Gospel multiplication of bread. Obviously, the imported silver was used entirely for the needs of the Alexandrian poor<sup>20</sup>. In assessing the above account, the information about the deep-sea trade carried out by the Alexandrian Patriarchate at this time is not objectionable. Trade ships belonging to the Church reached ports in Palestine, Pentapolis, Sicily, ports of the Adriatic Sea, including Italy<sup>21</sup>.

The question of the lending activities carried out by the Alexandrian bishopric recurs in the next story described by Leontius. Among the borrowers, the clientele of the Alexandrian Church, there were sometimes crooks who knew that the merciful patriarch would not refuse them a loan. In other words, in a city as big as Alexandria, there was always someone who tried to borrow money without any intention of returning it. Thus, there was an impostor, who extorted a loan of twenty pounds of gold (just over 1400 *solidii*), which is quite a lot, and then started spreading the word that he had not borrowed anything from the patriarch. The circumstances described could suggest that, in this case, no written agreement had been drawn up between the parties, and no terms of repayment were specified

<sup>19</sup> On the grain trade of the Alexandrian patriarchate in the early Byzantine period, Cf. G.R. MONKS, *The Church of Alexandria and the City's Economic Life in the Sixth Century*, S 28, 1953, p. 356–360; M.J. HOLLERICH, *The Alexandrian Bishops and the Grain Trade: Ecclesiastical Commerce in Late Roman Egypt*, JESHO 25, 1982, p. 187–207; H.-J. DREXHAGE, *Handel I (geschichtlich)*, [in:] RAC, vol. XV, ed. T. KLAUSER, Stuttgart 1992, col. 550–552.

<sup>20</sup> LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. W.N. ZEISEL, *An Economic Survey...*, p. 81–82, 111–113.

either, which seems unlikely in the case of the responsible financial management of a patriarchate with innumerable needy people on its payroll<sup>22</sup>. As the author of the account states, church officials captured the conman and imprisoned him in the bishop's prison<sup>23</sup>, after which they made the sum that the captive had extorted public. According to Leontius, John was opposed to punishing him, and thus the dishonest debtor also escaped any sanction<sup>24</sup>. It is not even clear from the story whether the borrowed money was ever recovered. What was the purpose of such rather naive tales? It is possible that they were intended to whitewash somewhat the fact that the Patriarchate was engaged in lending activities, because, as it were, if even a small amount of interest was applied to such transactions, the final assessment of this activity could nevertheless be somewhat questionable.

### Other cases

We have discussed above the most extensive accounts depicting the activities of bankers and usurers that we found in early Byzantine hagiographic texts. Others barely mention their activities, for example, in another of John Moschos' stories we read that certain two brothers who came from Syria ran a banker's office in Constantinople<sup>25</sup>. In another case, in the *Historia Lausiaca* by Palladius of Heleopolis, we find a somewhat fanciful account in which it is mentioned that one of the Alexandrian bankers was entrusted with a deposit of 20 *solidii*, a sum that the hero of the story received by making a 'self-sale' into slavery<sup>26</sup>. Clearly, the story described devalues the veracity of the information provided. Of yet different type is another story by John Moschos, in which he reports the case of an insolvent peasant who, unable to pay his rent, takes out a loan from a monk. Obviously, in this case we are not dealing with a usurious loan but with the implementation of the Gospel recommendation encouraging people to lend (including money) without expecting anything in return (Lc 6: 27–38). Thus, the protagonist of the story, the monk John the eunuch, when asked by the peasant to borrow one piece of gold, not having such a sum takes it from the monastery treasury. The peasant promises to return the loan after a month. When two years passed and the farmer still has not paid it back, the monk called him in and demanded the money to be returned. The man refused, explaining that he did not have it. The convention of a hagiographic work required that from this seemingly hopeless predicament 'something good' would arise, in this case a positive solution to the problem. The

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D.S. CONSTANTÉLOS, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare*, New Brunswick–New Jersey 1968, p. 70sqq; R. BOGAERT, *Geld (Geldwirtschaft)*..., col. 869.

<sup>23</sup> Such 'instruments of repression' were known in late antiquity, Cf. S. ARBANDT, W. MACHEINER, *Gefangenschaft*..., col. 344.

<sup>24</sup> LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> JOANNES MOSCHOS, *Pratum spirituale*, 188. Cf. also R. BOGAERT, *Changeurs et banquiers*..., p. 261.

<sup>26</sup> PALLADIUS, *The Lausiaca History*, 37, 2–4, vol. II, ed. et trans. C. BUTLER, Cambridge 1904.



monk proposed that the debtor come to him whenever he had time, and that he recite thirty prayers in his presence each time. For each such visit, the peasant was to receive 1 *keration* (1 piece of silver) from the monk. After twenty-four visits, the debtor, having collected 24 silver coins, thus collected one gold *nummus* (*solidus*), which he could finally return to the monastery treasury<sup>27</sup>.

### Closing remarks

In the material compiled above, we find relatively few accounts of lending activities conducted by bankers and usurers. They show that usury could in principle be practiced by anyone with even a small surplus of money. The analyzed accounts of John of Ephesus depicting daily life in the remote Syrian countryside, describe the holy man's interventions against usurers to get them to not only stop collecting interest but also to renounce the loan whatsoever. In these accounts, unfortunately, we do not find any further details regarding the terms on which said loans were granted. We note, however, another claim, namely, that the cancellation of a debt, a loan taken out, even if forced by circumstances, has a charitable character and the capital 'lost' in such a case by the creditor (in such cases called a usurer) bears the characteristics of a merciful deed. In the texts analyzed, without exception, information about usurers appears in descriptions of certain negative events. However, the convention of a hagiographic work dictates that, as a rule, they also have a positive ending. Many of the analyzed accounts are presented in a somewhat fanciful way, which, however, should not question the main insights from the text. The second group of collated information concerns the lending activities of the Alexandrian Church. Only three accounts on this subject are presented, rather vaguely, without any evaluation of this activity, as something taken for granted. The accounts discussed show that the customers of usurers in the remote provinces (cases described by John of Ephesus) were generally destitute people, living on the poverty line, who took out small consumer loans. The situation is different in the case of bankers' loans and those made by the Alexandrian Church. The customers there are merchants, insolvent landowners, or tenants. We also read about their solvency troubles in other contemporary source accounts<sup>28</sup>.

The accounts on the circumstances of money-lending reported by: John of Ephesus, John Moschos, Leontius of Neapolis, and Palladius of Helenopolis are of little research value, providing no specific information on the money-lending market at the time. However, two aspects of these accounts are important. First, the absence, already signaled above, of any criticism of the Alexandrian Church deriving, even if not high, some profits from money-lending; not even a word of condemnation. What's more, in relation to the account of the merchant who

<sup>27</sup> JOANNES MOSCHOS, *Pratum spirituale*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. I. HAHN, *Theodoretus von Cyrus...*, p. 124–131.

was ready to borrow from a banker in Alexandria, the author of the account is not outraged by the information (even if false) of a loan bearing interest at 200 per cent, which was a truly usurious interest rate. The analyzed accounts confirm that in case of the inability to repay a debt, one was sent to prison for insolvency. One can only surmise what the purpose of this sanction was. Antiquity did not know the penitentiary system as we understand it, and detention was instead used to scold the inmate<sup>29</sup>. Under such circumstances, the family hastily collected money to satisfy the claims of creditors and thus also to free the inmate. The authors of the analyzed accounts try to instill with their stories the belief that it is possible to lend money without charging interest, but also to return it by those borrowers who could afford it. Let us note that this last remark applies only to the lending activities carried out by the Church (in this particular case by the Alexandrian patriarch John), and not by secular usurers. That is the theory and, perhaps, a kind of wishful thinking. But how would such a recommendation work in everyday life, if only in the case of the bishoprics, which probably without exception struggled with a lack of money to carry out ongoing charitable activities especially in the case of the Alexandrian Church of Patriarch John's time compounded by the massive influx of refugees from the Persian-invaded Levant? It is likely out of the question that the prudent Patriarch John would lend so recklessly, to the detriment of the Church treasury, especially since other bishoprics at the time were engaged in interest-bearing lending activities<sup>30</sup>. Thus, puzzling is the opinion of R. Bogaert, who was inclined to perceive such accounts in hagiographic texts quite literally, claiming: *Diese Darlehen sind in den Heiligenviten erwähnt, weil sie zinslos waren*<sup>31</sup>. What, then, was the purpose of disseminating such, somewhat infantile, stories? It cannot be ruled out that they were intended to whitewash to some extent the fact that the Patriarchate was engaged in lending, because, after all, the final assessment of this activity may have been questionable.

In the collected accounts, we note a peculiar narrative with which the recipient of those stories, the potential benefactor, was targeted. Thus, we are exposed to somewhat naive stories about the benefits of giving money to the poor, of providing them with a non-refundable loan, which would quite quickly return to the merciful donor, with a tangible material benefit, while he was still alive. We do not find such arguments in the patristic texts of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, where similar accounts merely refer to the guarantee of 'heavenly interest', which can tip the scales in favour of the merciful donor (or creditor) at the Last Judgement<sup>32</sup>. What, then, was the purpose of promoting somewhat naive examples in hagiographical

<sup>29</sup> Cf. S. ARBANDT, W. MACHEINER, *Gefangenschaft...*, col. 327–328, 335–336, 342–344.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. W.N. ZEISEL, *An Economic Survey...*, p. 138–145, 157–158, 185–186, 193–195.

<sup>31</sup> R. BOGAERT, *Geld...*, col. 877.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. I. MILEWSKI, *Pieniqdz...*, p. 104–139, 222–239.

texts, which life could, after all, verify quite quickly? Could it be that insufficient generosity at a time of growing needs, of increasing poverty, forced their authors to resort to this type of narrative? Likely, that was the case.

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