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Ireneusz Milewski (Gdańsk)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5743-8060

Merchants in Early Byzantine Hagiographic Texts*

Abstract. This article deals with accounts devoted to merchants and merchant activity that can be found in hagiographic texts from the early Byzantine era. Such accounts are few and far between, which is surprising, especially when compared to the patristic texts of the time. The accounts pertain both to rich merchants and to small "retail" vendors whom the merchants employed to distribute the imported goods or to sell them at market fairs. As shown by the cases dealt with in this article, merchants ran a serious risk of losing their merchandise, which could either be stolen (the case described by Theodoret of Cyrus) or destroyed as a result of naval disasters (cases described by Leontios of Neapolis).

Keywords: early Byzantium, early Byzantine hagiography, money, merchants, trade and markets in early Byzantium

In the accounts of the lives of holy men and of wonders done through their intercession with God, authors of early Byzantine hagiographical texts usually offered passing remarks regarding the social and economic issues of the time. It can thus come as a surprise that they provided relatively little information about merchants and their trades[1]. Among those who did offer such information was Theodoret of Cyrus. His work contains remarks pertaining to some mechanisms to which trade, specifically sale at the market fair, is subject. One of the protagonists of his *Historia Religiosa* is a monk Polybius. Living in Syria at the turn of the fifth century, Polybius, the leader of a group of other monks, is reported to have

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[1] I. Milewski, *Einige Bemerkungen zum Markt in der spätantiken christlichen Literatur*, [in:] *Market(s) Market Buildings – Market Squares, Seminar für Alte Geschichte Universität Kassel, 26.–28. Februar 2019*, Wiesbaden 2022, p. 584–586.

quickly gone from the organisation of a hermitage to the organisation of the whole community. Since his co-brothers were not convinced about the line of action he followed, Polybius, in arguing for his agenda, drew their attention to a positive interdependence, a kind of harmony existing between those who trade at the market fair:

> As at town fairs, one sells bread and the other sells vegetables, one deals in clothing and the other makes shoes, and all of them, satisfying their own needs, make their lives more comfortable: He who sells clothes buys shoes, and he who sells vegetables buys bread…[2]

What a concise descritption of macroeconomic logic. Let's turn to more specific cases. *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* contains a reference to an anonymous merchant who travelled down the Nile river from Thebaid to Alexandria, leading a "fleet of 100 ships" (…μετὰ ἑκατὸν πλοίων…), with a cargo worth twenty thousand pieces of gold (…δύο μυρίαδας χρυσίνων). In the Latin version of the text, the merchant transported the same value of cargo using only three ships[3]. As can be inferred from further account, the merchant traded in vegetables. Ten sacks of those vegetables were given to the hero of the story, a monk named Paphnutius[4]. Although the account is brief and laconic, two issues can be noted. The first concerns the figures. Symbolical is the number of ships used to transport the cargo worth twenty thousand pieces of gold. Let's keep in mind the fact that the Greek text mentions 100 ships while the Latin version of it mentions only three[5]. Both numbers are characteristic of the "Greek" way of expressing numerical amounts. The account also testifies to the fact that Egypt in the early Byzantine era sold its food products mainly in big urban centres, primarily Alexandria, which was not only their greatest consumer, but with its large harbour also served as a "window to the world" for everything that was produced in Egypt. Indeed, in Thebaid in the early Byzantine period, food products (grain, vegetables, and fruit) were traded on a massive scale, as were various articles of craftsmanship[6]. Because of the general nature of the account mentioned above, it is hard to say anything specific about its content. The merchant may have brought artisanal products from Alexandria and Lower Egypt and then may have gone back to the north with food products he bought in Upper Egypt. Since the account is very terse, it only permits for such a general assumption.

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[2] THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Historia religiosa*, 5, 4, ed. P. CANIVET, A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, Paris 1977–1979 [= SC, 234, 257] (cetera: THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*).

[3] *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Lat.), 16, 3, ed. A.J. FESTUGIERE, Bruxelles 1971 [= SHa, 53] (cetera: *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*). Cf. also I. MILEWSKI, *Money in Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, SCer 11, 2021, p. 653–662.

[4] *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, 14, 18–20.

[5] *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Lat.), 16, 3, 2: *…(Paphnutius) occurit cuidam negotiatori Alexandrino viginti millibus solidorum mercimonia tribus navibus deferenti ex Thebaide*.

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

Some information regarding merchant activities can be found in *Vita Joannis Eleemosynari*. From this work, we learn that Alexandrian ἔμποροι, just like merchants from other cities of the empire (for example, Antioch), made some financial contributions to the shared savings[7]. However, the nature and amounts of these contributions were not clearly specified. Spots at the market fair were also paid for, obviously. Some of the fairs belonged to the Church, which derived some financial benefits from local leaseholders. As can be inferred from the account in question, these payments were burdensome for petty merchants who intervened with the Patriarch to lower them. The local prefect, Nicetas, is reported to have unsuccessfully attempted to tax the income the Church in Alexandria derived from leasing the fair plots[8].

One issue that appears in the analysed material concerns insolvent merchants who incurred loans to pursue commercial activity. However, accounts that touch upon this issue are far and few between and contain few details. Thus, we are led to conclude that some merchants did not have enough cash to pursue their trade, or did not want to use their own means for fear of loss to pirates or a naval disaster. One way or another, this caused financial difficulties for both sides: the usurer or banker who temporarily, and sometimes irretrievably, lost the lent capital and the merchant who, having lost his merchandise, had no means to pay off the loan or refused to sell his property to obtain funds for repayment. The latter case is described in the work by John Moschus. Moschus' account pertains to the owner of a ship who lost his cargo in a naval disaster. When he returned to his home town (Palestinian Ashkelon), his creditors captured him and brought him before the local prefect who threw him in jail. The creditors then went to his home and took everything that could be removed, including his and his wife's clothes which were then sold to recoup part of the loss[9].

References to commercial activity at the market fairs can also be found in Theodoret of Cyrus and Palladius of Helenopolis. The bishop of Cyrus mentions a cyclically organised fair in the village of Imma, 40 kilometres away from Antioch. The event is known to have attracted many merchants, not only from Syria. It lasted the whole day and when it was getting dark, the merchants folded up their stalls and with all their takings and unsold merchandise set off for their homes, becoming easy targets for various prowling bands of thieves. Theodoret describes the

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[7] W. Ceran, *Artisans et commerçants à Antioche et leur rang social (seconde moitié du IV^e siècle de notre ère)*, Łódź 2013, p. 153–155.

[8] Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 13, [in:] H. Gelzer, *Leontios von Neapolis Leben des hl. Johannes des Barmherzigen*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1893 (cetera: Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*). The same text informs us that the local patriarchate let out space to be used as a tavern (καπηλεῖον), Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 14. See also R.S. Lopez, *The Role of Trade in the Economic Readjustment of Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, DOP 13, 1959, p. 76; E. Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church. People and Institutions*, Warszawa 2015, p. 216.

[9] Joannes Moschos, *Pratum spirituale*, 189, [in:] *PG*, vol. LXXXVII, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1863.

case of a merchant who was robbed and murdered. In keeping with the convention of hagiographic works, the just punishment meted out to the assassins was obviously inevitable[10]. Palladius of Helenopolis, in turn, refers in the life of Moses the Ethiopian to another issue bound up with trade at the fair. As can be inferred from Palladius' account, butchers selling meat had to fend off intrusive dogs that tried to take advantage of their inattention and steal the "assortment" they offered. For the entire trading day the dogs kept close to the sellers[11].

There is one special type of "merchandise" that is mentioned in hagiographical texts. Other than the food sellers and representatives of a variety of other professions, the market fairs were also attended by slave traders. This issue was raised by Gerontius of Jerusalem and Leontios of Neapolis[12]. In the Life of John the Almsgiver, Leontios refers to some low-ranking clergymen who derived financial benefits from buying and selling slaves. The value of those benefits is not specified. If the information is quite peculiar, then the way in which the Patriarch supposedly reacted to these clergymen's dealings is even more so. He did not condemn them, but increased their pay so that they should give up this practice[13].

Analysed texts provide some information regarding the amount of money earned by petty traders. John of Ephesus gives an account of a merchant who earned five to six pieces of gold a year with his trade in an unspecified range of goods pursued in a city located on the border with Persia. John adds that some brothers who earned their living in this way, received a pay raise of up to 10 pieces of gold after a period of honest work. After a few more years, they were given a raise of up to 20 pieces of gold. Finally, their pay was as high as 30 pieces of gold a year. As can be inferred from what John wrote later on in his account, the brothers acted as wholesale distributors of unspecified merchandise which their employer brought from Persia. The latter is reported to have owned many warehouses, pursuing his business in various corners of the empire[14]. An analogous case regarding this form of employing a seller is recounted by Leontius in *Vita Symeonis*. The protagonist

[10] THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, 7, 2.

[11] *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, 19, 6, vol. II, *The Greek Text Edited with Introduction and Notes*, ed. C. BUTLER, Cambridge 1904 (cetera: PALLADIUS, *Historia Lausiaca*). Saint Basil the Great also confirms this obvious fact when describing the market day in Caesarea of Cappadocia (BASILIUS MAGNUS, *In Haxaemeron*, 2, 5).

[12] GERONTIUS, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris (graeca)*, 62, ed. D. GORCE, Paris 1962 [= SC, 90].

[13] LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Elemosynarii*, 4. On the issue of the clergy's extra-church gainful activity in the early Byzantine period, see LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Elemosynarii*, 47; CYRILLUS SCYTHOPOLITANUS, *Vita Sabae*, 78, [in:] E. SCHWARTZ, *Kyrillos von Skythopolis*, Leipzig 1939. See also H.J. MAGOULIAS, *Trades and Crafts in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries as viewed in the Lives of the Saints*, Bsl 37, 1976, p. 25; S.R. HÜBNER, *Der Klerus in der Gesellschaft des spätantiken Kleinasiens*, Stuttgart 2005, p. 213–229.

[14] JOANNES EPHESINUS, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 31, ed. E.W. BROOKS, Paris 1923 [= *PO*, 17.1] (cetera: JOANNES EPHESINUS, *Vitae*), p. 578. See also D. CLAUDE, *Die byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert*, München 1969, p. 177.

of Leontius' account clearly failed to discharge his duties diligently. Not only did he binge on the lupine he was supposed to sell, but he also gave it to some of his clients free of charge, causing significant losses for the stall's owner[15].

Some information about petty traders can be found in *Miracula Sancti Artemi*, a work illustrating the reality of life in Constantinople in the latter half of the seventh century. In large measure, this information seems rather insignificant. We are told, for example, that one wealthy wine dealer could afford a big house in the district of Argyroupolis, located on the other side of the strait[16]. The work also refers to a silver dealer from Constantinople and his underpaid assistant[17], a silver dealer from the Capital, named Akakios[18], a lumber trader[19], and a wealthy merchant from Chios who was rich enough to spend three months on business in the capital[20].

Hagiographical texts also provide references to the commercial activity of the Church, including the Patriarchate of Alexandria, especially in the lifetime of John the Almsgiver. *Vita Joannis Elemosynari* informs us that at the beginning of the pontificate of John (610/611), the Patriarchate had a fleet of at least 13 large freighters. Once, during a storm, the crews had to dump the cargo in order to save the ships. The resulting losses were estimated at the substantial sum of 34 centenaria of gold[21]. Although this amount is not certain, it gives us an idea of the extent of the commercial activity of the Patriarchate of Alexandria at the beginning of the seventh century. In the same work, Leontius describes the case of a ship owner who, after his ship loaded with grain was wrecked, went to the Patriarch for a loan that would allow him to continue his business and recoup his losses. John lent the merchant five pounds of gold, which the merchant used to buy new grain. Unfortunately, the new cargo ship also sank, not far off the coast of Alexandria. Another loan was as high as 10 pounds of gold. After losing his grain a third time, the merchant was on the verge of committing suicide. However, John dissuaded him by saying that he kept losing his merchandise because he had dishonestly speculated on grain. The bankrupt merchant was then given another chance. The patriarch entrusted him with the command of one of the ships belonging to the Patriarchate. Supposedly loaded with as many as twenty thousand modii of grain (σίτον), the ship embarked on a 20-day voyage, arriving safely to Britain, where the grain was sold at one piece of gold per modius. The money earned from the grain was

[15] *Das Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis*, 147, ed. L. Rydén, Uppsala 1963.
[16] *The Miracles of St. Artemios. A Collection of Miracle Stories by an Anonymous Author in Seventh Century Byzantium*, 32, ed. V. Crisafulli, J. Nesbitt, New York–Leiden 1997 (cetera: *Miracula sancti Artemii*), p. 165.
[17] *Miracula sancti Artemii*, 32, p. 165.
[18] *Miracula sancti Artemii*, 95.
[19] *Miracula sancti Artemii*, 7, p. 91.
[20] *Miracula sancti Artemii*, 5, p. 85.
[21] Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 28. See also E. Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church*…, p. 215.

used to buy 50 pounds of tin (κασσίτερον), which was then sold at a considerable profit at the market fair in Alexandria. As the author of the account emphasises, all of the silver obtained from the sale of the tin was given to local church charities[22]. Although the core of the account seems to be pure fiction, it can be taken as a testament to the widespread economic activity pursued by the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the early Byzantine period, which ranged from lending activity to trading in grain and other food products that were usually produced on Church estates. Leontius offers an account of one more Alexandrian merchant who made regular and very profitable business trips to African harbours. On one occasion, the merchant did not return from his trade expedition as his ship was wrecked near Alexandria, not far from the Pharos lighthouse[23].

The issue of the trading and lending activities of the Church is also raised in the account by the author of the collection of legends illustrating the life of Spyridon, the bishop of Trimythous. The original version of the text came into being at the end of the fourth century while that used by modern scholars dates back to the mid-seventh century and most likely reflects the socio-economic reality of the early Byzantine period. From this account, we learn that Spyridon's bishopric made financial loans. It is reported that the loans were made to only one borrower (which needs to be considered dubious as long as we are inclined to believe that the bishopric was actually involved in the lending business), a local cargo ship owner whom we are told often turned to the bishop for loans. The author of the account points out that the bishop had full confidence in the merchant and, consequently, allowed him to go into the church's treasury vault on his own and return the money he had borrowed. This situation continued until the merchant committed fraud (he simply returned less than he had borrowed), which was quickly exposed.

The account goes on to suggest that the incident led the bishop to end his practice of providing loans. It could hardly come as a surprise that this type of hagiographical text makes no mention of the interest rates charged for these loans[24]. However, the account in question, similar to that by Leontius, can clearly be adduced as evidence that the bishop gave loans subject to interest, and it is above all hard to assume that he could have been so disregardful of the financial interests of the Church.

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[22] LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 8. See also E. WIPSZYCKA, *The Alexandrian Church*…, p. 233.

[23] LEONTIOS, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*, 24.

[24] *La légende de s. Spyridon, évêque de Trimithonte*, 92–95, ed. P. VAN DEN VEN, Louvain 1953. See also A. SAMELLAS, *The Anti-usury Arguments of the Church Fathers of the East in their Historical Context and the Accommodation of the Church to the Prevailing "Credit Economy" in Late Antiquity*, JAH 5, 2017, p. 161.

Examples of commercial activity in the early Byzantine period are also provided in accounts illustrating the everyday life of monks. These accounts indicate that, apart from receiving alms and significant financial donations[25], both individual monks and monastic communities relied on manual labour for their livelihood by weaving mats, and making ropes, baskets and simple clothing[26]. Egyptian monks are known to have exercised the specialized and well-paid profession of being a calligraphist[27]. Some general references to the income monks earned from selling their own handmade products at the market fair can be found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*[28].

In conclusion, early Byzantine hagiographers, when describing the background of their heroes, paid little attention to merchants or the merchant trades. The same can be said of all other kinds of economic activity pursued by those about whom they wrote. The scarcity of this information is puzzling, especially as it significantly contrasts with contemporary patristic texts created in the East.

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[25] See, for example, Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, 10, 2 and 4; 54–55, 6; 58, 2 and E. Wipszycka, *Le monastere d'Apa Apollôs: un cas typique ou un cas exceptionnel?*, [in:] *Les archives de Dioscore d'Aphrodité cent ans apres leur découverte*, ed. J.–L. Fournet, Paris 2008, p. 261–273.

[26] Cf. I. Milewski, *Money in Apophthegmata patrum*, SCer 9, 2019, p. 605–607; E. Wipszycka, *The Economy of Syrian Monasteries (Fifth–Eighth Century)*, USS 19, 2020, p. 257.

[27] Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, 45, 3.

[28] *Apophthegmata Patrum*: *De abbate Lucio* (75), [in:] *PG*, vol. LXV, col. 253; Agathon 16 (98). See Joannes Ephesinus, *Vitae*, 33, p. 595. See also R.S. Bagnall, *Monks and Property: Rhetoric*, *Law and Patronage in the Apophthegmata Patrum and the Papyri*, GRBS 42, 2001, p. 7–24.

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Ireneusz Milewski

University of Gdańsk
Faculty of History
Institute of History
Department of Ancient History
ul. Wita Stwosza 55
80-952 Gdańsk, Polska/Poland
ireneusz.milewski@ug.edu.pl