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The Theme of the First Muslim Women in *Chronographia* of Theophanes the Confessor

Abstract. This article concerns itself with a small fragment of Chronographia by Theophanes the Confessor. The fragment is devoted to the role of women in the rise and spread of Islam. Although generally considered to express anti-Islamic propaganda, upon closer examination, it is quite consistent with some Muslim traditions. The author interprets the fragment in a way that takes those traditions into account.

Keywords: Byzantine historiography, Theophanes the Confessor, Byzantine-Muslim relations, Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronographia*

The role of women in the spread of the Muslim faith and the rise of the first Muslim community is among the important issues that Theophanes the Confessor raised in his account of the life and career of the Prophet Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam. However, this aspect of the Confessor's work has not yet been dealt with in a separate study. Scholarly attention has hitherto been drawn to Theophanes' strong criticism of Islam and to his opinions regarding Muhammad himself, especially the epilepsy from which the Prophet supposedly suffered. Fragments pertaining to women have usually been taken to supplement the negative view of the new religion which the Confessor clearly tended to offer. It is hard to disagree with the opinion that the expostulation of the role of women in the establishment of the Muslim community formed part of the efforts to create the community's deliberately negative image. However, the problem is that Theophanes was probably right to claim that women played an important role in the rise of Islam. This article deals with the chronicler's statements regarding this issue. In doing this, it also aims to contribute an answer to the question of whether Theophanes' account was created only as a kind of a pamphlet against the new religion

or whether it also sought to reflect the real state of affairs by providing a number of true facts about the religion in question. It is also legitimate to assume that the chronicler referred to generally known and undisputed facts in order to lend credence to the views discrediting the Prophet Muhammad. The memory of women's role in the rise of Islam could also have served such a purpose. Therefore, analysis of the way in which the role is presented in *Chronographia* becomes, it is claimed here, part of the discussion about the credibility of Theophanes' account.

The first fragment to indicate the important role that women played in spreading Muhammad's message is recounting the behaviour of his wife, Khadija. There is no doubt that it was designed to contribute to the Prophet's black legend. This holds true especially for the account of the Prophet's attempts to conceal his epilepsy. Let us take a closer look at each of the lines in the account separately. First, Khadija appears in the same sentence where Theophanes mentions Muhammad's origin, pointing out that he was an orphan deprived of any means of support. We are told that the situation he was in made him go to Khadija, whom the chronicler described as Muhammad's relative, and, at the same time, as a woman who was very rich and who was involved in organizing commercial caravans to Egypt and Palestine[1]. Khadija's high status is also underlined in one of the next sentences, in which she is referred to as well-born or noble – *eugenés*[2]. The same fragment contains the motive of Muhammad's epilepsy, an illness that worried his wife[3]. According to Theophanes, the Prophet's marriage to his cousin actually came about as a result of a ruse. The chronographer reports that Muhammad kept trying to ingratiate himself with Khadija until he finally managed to become involved with her, thus taking over her wealth[4]. The Confessor was the first Christian to emphasise that the Prophet was ill. According to his account, Muhammad attempted to keep his ailment concealed, arguing that his strange behaviour was caused by the visions he had[5]. The chronicler also reports that some Christian monk played a crucial role in confirming the Prophet's version. However, the monk *had previously been banished for adhering to an immoral doctrine*[6]. Perhaps it was Waraqah ibn Nawfal, Khadija's cousin, since Theophanes clearly indicates that the legitimacy of Muhammad's message was confirmed according to the wish of his wife[7]. This passage does not seem to be equivalent to the legend of young Muhammad's

[1] *Theophanis Chronographia*, AM 6122, ed. C.G. De Boor, Lipsiae 1883 (cetera: Theophanes), p. 333.21–25; 334.1.

[2] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.6.

[3] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.5–7.

[4] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.1–3.

[5] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.5–10. In this way Theophanes suggested that Muhammad invented his message for a trivial reason. He simply tried to preserve the social status he had acquired thanks to his marriage to Khadija.

[6] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.10–14.

[7] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.10–14.

encounter with Bahira. The Christians of Mecca and Medina were too few in number to establish organised Christian communes there. However, many Christians lived in Syria. Some, such as Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith or Abu ʻAmir al-Rahib, were accused of collaborating with the Byzantines. Muslim sources report that the latter even asked Heraclius to help stop the changes that Muhammad was introducing in Medina. Abu ʻAmir al-Rahib was afraid that the changes posed a threat to the freedom of Christian worship[8].

The Confessor's belief that Muhammad suffered from epilepsy became quite widespread in Western Europe in periods to come. It can be found in works by Vincent of Beauvais or Ricoldo da Monte di Croce (the thirteenth century)[9]. George the Monk mentions it in his own work, thus testifying to its presence in the Byzantine culture[10]. It is also likely to have spread to the Christians of Syria, but we do not know when or where it came from – the work by Bartholomew of Edessa that explicitly refers to the ailment came into being as late as the thirteenth century[11]. When approaching the issue from the perspective of the evangelical accounts that linked epilepsy with possession (Mt 17: 14–20; Mc 9: 14–29; Lc 9: 37–43), of which Christian apologists were of course clearly aware, it should be remembered that Theodore Abu Qurrah, Theophanes' peer representing the Melkite branch of the Syriac Christianity (much closer to the Byzantine)[12], wrote that Muhammad was simply tormented by demons[13]. The question which remains open here is, what came first? The accounts of Muhammad's possession or the ones about his illness? One way or another, the theme of his epilepsy seems crucial in Theophanes' account. Consequently, the woman who became involved in the efforts to keep the ailment secret automatically gained importance, even if, as the Confessor emphasises, she was deceived by her cousin about the veracity of the Prophet's vision.

To sum up, Theophanes certainly discerned the important role of the Messenger's wife, Khadija, who strongly supported him in the initial period of his activity.

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[8] For more on this topic, see: G. Osman, *Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources*, MWo 95, 2005, p. 67–80.

[9] N. Daniel, *Islam and the West. The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh 1966, p. 27–28.

[10] Georgios Monachos, *Chronicon*, vol. II, ed. C. De Boor, Lipsiae 1904, p. 698–699 (= *PG*, vol. CX, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1863, col. 865).

[11] Bartholomaeus Edessenus, *Elenchus et confutatio Agareni*, [in:] *PG*, vol. CIV, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1857, col. 1384–1385. See Bartholomaios Von Edessa, *Confutatio Agareni. Kommentierte griechisch-deutsche Textausgabe von Klaus-Peter Todt*, Würzburg 1988.

[12] Theodore was born in Edessa around 750, and died between 820 and 825. Although he was one of the first Christian apologists who wrote in Arabic (also in Syriac), part of his legacy found its way to the empire and was translated into Greek (*PG*, vol. XCVII, col. 1461–1610). There are many significant studies on Theodore Abu Qurrah. One should mention here in the bibliography.

[13] Theodorus Abucara, *Opuscula ascetica*, XX, [in:] *PG*, vol. XCVII, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1865, col. 1545–1548. The puzzlig coincidence of referring to epilepsy and possesion to explain Muhammad's revelations was pointed to me by the work: T. Wolińska, *Elity chrześcijańskie wobec islamu (VII–X wiek)*, VP 35, 2015, p. 553.

It should be emphasised that this view remains in agreement with the Muslim tradition[14], and the Confessor's account regarding the Prophet's rich wife is essentially consistent with what we know from Muslim sources. Furthermore, the references to Muhammad's poverty can hardly be interpreted in terms of a disapproval of his low descent[15]. This issue is just a matter of simple information and not of value judgments.

It should be noted that Theophanes remarked in his account that Islam was first adopted by women. Only later, through women's agency, were men converted to it[16]. His remark seems to have been aimed at further debasing the Muslim religion. However, it is important to realise that recently conducted research has shown the chronicler's "charge" to be true: women did play an important role by the Prophet's side. It should be kept in mind that the charge of 'feminization' of religion links itself with a topos that can be found in Byzantine historiography and apologetics. According to the topos, Arabs continued to adhere to the ancient cult of three female deities – Al-Lat, Al-Uzza and Manat, a cult that was also associated with the morning star and Aphrodite. This theme appears in works by John of Damascus, Nicetas of Byzantium, George the Monk, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and George Kedrenos[17].

Accounts of the community formed around Muhammad indicate that he consulted women about various issues and that he entrusted at least one of them, Umm Waraqa, with conducting prayers, including those attended by men, which some Islamic theological schools take to be a key argument in favour of allowing women to celebrate mixed prayers (that is, those also attended by men)[18]. Umm Waraqa was also one of the few people involved in preparing the Qur'an's first

[14] For the picture of Khadija in Muslim sources (which is not always unambiguous), see: M. Dziekan, *Ḫadīǧa, żona Proroka Muḥammada w Usd al-ǧāba fī maʿrifat aṣ-ṣaḥāba ʿIzz ad-Dīna al-Aṯīra i innych klasycznych źródłach arabskich*, [in:] *Kobiety Bliskiego Wschodu*, ed. idem, I. Kończak, Łódź 2005, p. 11–23. On Khadija as the first to believe: S.W. Anthony, *The Conversion of Khadīja bt. Khuwaylid Muḥammad b. Isḥāq (d. 150/767)*, [in:] *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age. A Sourcebook*, ed. N. Hurvitz, Ch.S. Sahner, U. Simonsohn, L. Yarbrough, Berkeley 2020, p. 46–50.

[15] In this way, the remark seems to be interpreted by: T. Wolińska, *Elity chrześcijańskie wobec islamu*…, p. 554. Of course, if we take into consideration later and extended versions of these references, for example those in Bartholomew of Edessa who claimed that even Muhammad's appearance testified to his poor financial condition, then we can be led to recognize their unambiguously negative connotations. These references, however, date from much later.

[16] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.14–17.

[17] Z. Brzozowska, *Boginie przedmuzułmańskiej Arabii (Al-Lat, Al-Uzza, Manat)*, [in:] *Bizancjum i Arabowie. Spotkanie cywilizacji VI–VIII wiek*, ed. T. Wolińska, P. Filipczak, Warszawa 2015, p. 86–89.

[18] Ch. Mechert, *Whether to Keep Women out of the Mosque. A Survey of Medieval Islamic Law*, [in:] *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam. Proceedings of the 22nd Congress of L'Union Europeenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. B. Michalak-Pikulska, A. Pikulski, Leuven 2006, p. 59–69.

redaction[19]. Woman prayed in mosques along with men, worked in trade, and even participated in war[20], along with still widely known Khawlah bint al-Azwar who is used as a symbol of women's participation in Jihad and who took part in the first phase of the Muslim raids on Syria and Palestine and who is compared to Islam's sword Khalid ibn Walid[21]. This information led Leila Ahmed to formulate the following conclusion:

> Broadly speaking, the evidence on women in early Muslim society suggests that they characteristically participated in and were expected to participate in the activities that preoccupied their community; those included religion as well as war. Women of the first Muslim community attended mosques, took part in religious services on feast days and listened to Muhammad's discourses. Nor were they passive, docile followers but were active interlocutors in the domain of faith as they were in other matters. Thus the hadith narratives show women acting and speaking out of a sense that they were entitled to participate in the life of religious thought and practice, to comment fothrightly on any topic, even the Qur'an, and to do so in the expectation of having their views heard[22].

Their testimonies were deemed credible in confirming particular hadiths. The important role of women in the initial phase of Islam's development is well documented both in politico-religious and socio-economic contexts. In terms of extending a number of women's rights and unifying their situation irrespective of their tribal origin, Islam initially played a definitely positive role[23]. It is important to single out the moment when they began to lose their rights[24]. As B. Koehler wrote:

> However, a comparison of female entrepreneurship in pre-Islamic society and in Mohammed's era shows that women occupied leadership roles before and after the establishment of Islam. Mohammed's wives were commercially astute, and Mohammed and his

[19] W. Wiebke, *Woman in Islam*, Princeton 1993, p. 111.

[20] See, for example F. Qazi, *The Mujahidaat. Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam*, [in:] *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, ed. L. Sjoberg, C.E. Gentry, Athens, Ga. 2011, p. 35.

[21] D. Cook, *Women Fighting in Jihad?*, [in:] *Female, Terrorism and Militancy, Agency, Utility and Organisation*, ed. idem, New York 2008, p. 38–39.

[22] L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Heaven 1992, p. 72.

[23] F.A.A. Sulaimani, *The Changing Position of Women in Arabia under Islam during the Early Seventh Century*, MPhil., University of Salford 1986, p. 170–171. The role of women was quite significant under the Rashidun Caliphate: N. Abbott, *Women and the State in Early Islam*, JNES 1.1, 1942, p. 106–126; eadem, *Women and the State on the Eve of Islam*, AJSLL 58.3, 1941, p. 259–284.

[24] J.I. Smith, *Women, Religion and Social Change in Early Islam*, [in:] *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Y. Yazbeck Haddad, E. Banks Findly, New York 1985, p. 19–35. A discrepancy between the behaviour of Muhammad and his first successors and women's later situation is characterised, among others, by: J.A. Sechzer, *Islam and Woman. Where Tradition Meets Modernity. History and Interpretations of Islamic Women's Status*, SRol 51, 2004, p. 263–272, and his text encourages us to raise the question of what should actually be regarded as Muslim societies' true traditions and which of those traditions should be respected by the conservatives.

contemporaries respected the rights of women to make decisions regarding finances, matrimony and religious affiliation[25].

The topic has been widely covered in Muslim religious literature. Khadija and Aisha were not the only women who held the title of the "Mother of the Believers". Except for Khadija and Aisha, it contains references (among others) to Sawdah bint Zam'ah, Zaynab bint Khuzayma (p. 55–60), Umm Salama bint Abi Umayya, and Umm Habibah bint Abu Sufyan. Offering guides to the faithful, they do not contain information verified in the course of historical discussion. However, they should be regarded as proof that the issue of the role of women in the rise of Islam is still considered important in Muslim discourse[26]. It must also have been important for first Muslims. Indeed, one of the most important Muslim genealogists, Muhammad ibn Sa'd, living at the turn of the ninth century, included in his great dictionary *Kitāb al-Tabakāt al-Kabīr* (the *Great Book of Generations*) biographical information about approximately 600 women, noting their contributions to the development of the early *umma* (the dictionary contains 4250 entries devoted to those who had an impact on Islam's development in the first two generations of believers, including military and tribal leaders)[27]. Women could also make their mark in Islam's unorthodox branches[28]. The important role they played in the rise of the Prophet's religion is often referred to in present-day debates about women's rights in Muslim countries[29]. It is interesting to note that reinterpretations of early Muslim law sometimes use women's initial contribution to Islam to criticise modern ideas, such as feminism[30].

Regarding the efforts to debase the religion by highlighting its supposed feminized origin, it is worth noting that further on in the same section of Chronographia, devoted to the rise of Islam, Theophanes focuses on the criticism of some Islamic beliefs (interpreted in a way that he understood them or that he wanted others to understand them) and also critically refers to the positioning of Muslim

[25] B. Koehler, *Female Entrepreneurship in Early Islam*, EcoA 31.2, 2011, p. 93–95.

[26] As indicated by popular Muslim guides to the Qur'an and hadiths containing references to the Mothers of the Believers mentioned above. See, for example, S.Z. Qasmi, M.T. Salafi, *Question and Answers on the Mothers of Believers*, Darussalam–Riyadh–Lahore–Houston [*s.a.*], p. 19–26, 55–68, 85–92.

[27] K. Abbou Hershkovits, *Women Converts and Familial Loyalty in the Tine of the Prophet Muhammad b. Sa'd (d. 230/845)*, [in:] *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age…*, p. 54–57.

[28] C. Baugh, *Revolting Women? Early Kharijite Women in Islamic Sources*, JIMSt 2.1, 2017, p. 36–55.

[29] Both in academic debates (E. Akhmetova, *Women in Islamic Civilisation. Their Rights and Contributions*, ICR 7.4, 2016, p. 474–491; eadem, *Women's Rights. The Qur'anic Ideals and Contemporary Issues*, ICR 6.1, 2015, p. 58–75) and in theological debates (S.A.Gh. Bukhari, *Role of Women in the Development of Islamic Civilization*, JI 5.2, 2012, p. 7–18; M. Elius, *Islamic View of Women Leadership as Head of the State. A Critical Analysis*, ArtFJ 4, 2010–2011, p. 195–205).

[30] S. Nawab, *The Contribution of Women to Muslim Society. A Study of Selected Autobiographical and Bibliographical Literature*, MA Thesis, Faculty of Arts Rand Afrikaans University 1997, p. 129–132.

women as sexual objects. Theophanes' criticism, however, only generally pertains to the sin of sensuality, and the question of how women are treated is used simply as an example to justify his accusations. The chronicler criticises the Muslims by arguing that, as a reward for living their lives properly, they can only imagine sensual and mundane pleasures. Among the latter, he singles out excessive eating and drinking, as well as intercourse with women able to be exchanged by men according to their whims[31]. The Byzantine concludes his remarks by stating that Christians should show compassion for people living in such error[32]. There was, of course, nothing new in accusing Muslims of holding the sensual and mundane image of paradise. Similar charges were made by John of Damascus[33]. The claim became quite popular in the circle of Syriac apologists. A good example of this is provided by Moshe bar Kepha[34] who contrasted the image of Muslims' mundane paradise with the spiritual vision of Christians, deriving from this contrast one of the key points of his criticism of the Prophet's religion[35].

In conclusion, it seems that the analysis presented above allows us to say that although Theophanes' intention was to subject Islam to detailed criticism and to create a negative image of it, some parts of his account clearly contain elements of truth. Theophanes' account of the origin and position of Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, as well as his remarks about the important role of women in the rise of the Muslim community, remain in agreement with the views held by present-day scholars. The popular perception of Islam, in turn, attaches importance to its image of heavenly rewards. This simplified way of presenting Islam has survived since Theophanes' days and can still be found in a significant number of texts. Theophanes's work provides a great deal of information about Muhammad. The chronicler's knowledge of the Prophet can therefore be considered to have been quite detailed. Given the fact that he had no direct contact with the Arabs, the accuracy of his account can, to some extent, come as a surprise. In this way, some scholars have been led to advance the thesis that Theophanes became acquainted with the translations of some fundamental Muslim literature regarding the topic (i.e., *Sirat* by Ibn Hisham or rather an earlier work by Ibn Ishak[36] whose fragments

[31] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.22–24.

[32] Theophanes AM 6122, p. 334.26–27.

[33] R. Hoyland, *The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad. An Appraisal*, [in:] *The Biography of Muḥammad. The Issue of the Sources*, ed. H. Motzki, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2000, p. 276 n. 2.

[34] The monk of the Syriac Monophysite Church. Remaining attached to Iraq throughout his life (around 813–903), he was the bishop of three communities – Bet-Ramman, Bet-Kionaya and Mosulu on the River Tiger. For more, see: J.F. Coakley, *Mushe bar Kipho*, [in:] *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed. S.P. Brock, A.M. Butts, G.A. Kiraz, L. Van Rompay (Gorgias Press, 2011; online ed. B. Mardutho, 2018), https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Mushe-bar-Kipho [10 V 2021].

[35] A.-M. Saadi, *Ninth Century Syriac Exegete and Apologist. Moshe bar Kepha's Commentary on Luke*, H.JSS 20.1, 2017, p. 240–241.

[36] Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq ibn Yasār ibn Khiyār, he probably died in 767.

survive in Sirat)[37]. Without sharing this bold opinion, it should be stated that the Byzantine chronicler lived in a country (150 years after the Prophet's death) that maintained constant relations with the Caliphate, both in war and on peaceful terms. Therefore, it was impossible for Islam's founder to remain an unknown figure in the empire. It is necessary in this context to refer to the theory developed by Robert Hoyland. According to this scholar, Chronographia's information regarding Muhammad comes from Theophilus of Edessa. However, it should be emphasised here that scholars have attempted to revise the generally accepted interpretation indicating Theophanes's reliance on Theophilus of Edessa. The last of those attempts was undertaken a few years ago by Maria Conterno who tried to demonstrate that the chronicle of Theophilus was not the main source which Theophanes used in writing his own work. Her line of reasoning rests on a claim that the Confessor must have used and reworked several sources, and the question of what inspired him is more complex than is generally assumed. However, the problem is that we are not in a position to determine which sections of Theophanes's work were based on specific Syrian sources, especially as Theophanes did not draw directly on Theophilus, using other works that contained excerpts from Theopilus's work[38]. A successful summary of the existing discussion of the use by Theophanes of Theophilus's work has been presented by Muriel Debié. Debié notes that authors writing on Theophilus have, for more than a decade, treated his work as a certainty (as if we had some manuscripts at our disposal), while, she claims, we are dealing here with nothing but a hypothesis aimed at explaining the possibility that there was supposedly a common source for *Chronographia* – the work by Agapius of Manbij and the chronicle by Dionysius of Tel Mahre. According to the syriologist, Theophilus, who was a Christian of Chalcedonian creed, an orthodox with ties to the Abbasids' court, uninvolved in monastic life, perfectly fitted the theory of cultural exchange between Muslim and Christian worlds (to which Debié also raised her objections, claiming that it is difficult to speak of cultural differences based on faith alone. People of different religions who served at the Abbasids' court must have relied on similar, mutually comprehensible cultural codes). The above-mentioned fragments by Dionysius of Tel Mahre and by Agapius do not allow us to determine to what extent Theopilus was an important sources for them. The former emphasised that he had used only those fragments that remained consistent with his own doctrine, while the latter openly admitted that he had introduced many changes to Theophilus's work. Theophanes, in turn, never informs his readers of drawing on works by the chronicler of Edessa. Debié is therefore right to argue that while Theopilus is often mentioned, he is never directly quoted[39].

[37] Ju. Maksimov, *Prp. Feofan Ispovednik Sigrianskij ob islame*, BVe 4, 2004, p. 312–335.

[38] M. Conterno, *La "descrizione dei tempi" all'alba dell'espansione islamica. Un'indagine sulla storiografia greca, siriaca e araba fra VII e VIII secolo*, Boston–Berlin 2014, p. 21–38.

[39] M. Debié, *Theophanes 'Oriental Source'. What Can We Learn from Syriac Historiography?*, TM 19, 2015, p. 365–382.

The Byzantine chronicler's information may have been so precise because he aimed to give an account of Muhammad's life rather than of Muhammad's ideas, and therefore focused on details unnoticed by other chroniclers, whether Byzantine or from countries under Arab occupation. However, it is still puzzling that, as far as the Byzantine perspective is concerned, his chronicle offers the fullest account of the Messenger's life[40]. This is all the more reason to note that sections regarding women contain views consistent with Muslim tradition.

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[40] Cf. L. Boras, *A Prophet has appeared coming with the Saracens. The Non-Islamic Testimonies on the Prophet and the Islamic Conquest of Egypt in the 7th–8th centuries*, MA Thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen 2017, p. 14.

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