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**The Economic Condition of the Bishopric of Gaza (Palestine) during the Rule of Bishop Porphyry (circa 395–420)**

Not much is known about property owned by bishoprics in Late Antiquity outside of Egypt, be it in the Western or the Eastern provinces of the Empire. Due to the lack of concrete data concerning the property owned (including real estate and buildings of various uses) or cash reserves, a rough idea of the size of the relevant financial assets may be inferred from information on the scale of the charities run by individual bishoprics (i.e. the sums of money mentioned at such occasions), the donations received, as well as residual data concerning the economical operations undertaken, including leased property. The latter information is rather scarce; and in view of its laconic nature, even the little that we do have leaves much to be desired. This also applies to the cases that will be addressed below, where we shall attempt to describe the financial condition of a small provincial bishopric, namely the church in Gaza (Palestine) during the rule of bishop Porphyry (395–420 AD). All of the information on the subject comes from the *Vita Porphyrii*, a source whose historical value has often been disputed. Despite the unequivocal title, the text is not a typical hagiographic work: in the version in which we know it today, it is more of a record of bishop Porphyry’s struggle against pagans in Gaza. Only in passing, it seems – while describing the consecutive stages of the disputes

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1 As a matter of fact, the literature on Church property in early Byzantine Egypt is so extensive that it is hardly possible to list even the most important works here; cf., among others, E. Wipszycka, *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Égypte du IVe au VIIIe siècle*, Bruxelles 1972 [= PapB, 10]; J. Gascou, *Les grands domaines, la cité et l’état en Égypte byzantine. (Recherches d’histoire agraire, fiscale et administrative)*, TM 9, 1985, p. 1–90; R. Bagnal, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1995.

does Mark the Deacon make certain observations shedding some light on the economic standing of the bishopric. The analysis of those accounts will be the subject of the present study.

First, however, a few remarks on the Vita Porphyrii and its author are in order. Little is known about Mark the Deacon; all information about him comes from his work. As he himself assures us, he came from Asia and was a calligrapher by profession. In the early 390s, as a pious pilgrim, Mark reaches Palestine and settles down in Jerusalem, where he meets Porphyry. The latter was probably ordained priest there in 392, by bishop John (in the Vita replaced by Praylios, his Orthodox substitute). At that point, the lives of both personae of The Life become intertwined, so that Mark will accompany his bishop – as a participant of the events described – until his mentor’s death in 420 AD\(^3\). Already in 395 AD, however, Mark is ordained deacon and follows his bishop to his new seat in Gaza\(^4\). Mark the Deacon claims that he was an eyewitness of the events he describes; nonetheless, such assurances are frequent in hagiographic works.

As was mentioned above, The Life is not a typical hagiographic work; besides, in view of its numerous problems, it belongs to the most controversial early Byzantine sources. Some of the difficulties are connected with the chronology of the work’s origin (as well as the location where it was written down); others relate to the anachronisms that appear in it\(^5\). In the version known to us today, it constitutes, most of all, a narrative of the clashes between the Christians and the pagans in Gaza at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries. Such a statement is indeed justified, since the text is dominated by descriptions of Gaza and the religious conflicts in the city\(^6\). The Vita Porphyrii bears traces of later thorough redactions, probably in the middle of the 6th century\(^7\). It is worth mentioning that, apart from the Greek version of The Life used in the research on the history of the late Empire,
a Georgian version (probably based on a Syriac one) is also extant⁸, as is a still unpublished Slavonic one. In terms of historical value, they do not differ from the Greek version, which will constitute the basis for the findings presented below.

Thus, let us proceed to discussing the main issue at hand, i.e. the size of the assets held by the bishopric of Gaza under Porphyry's rule.

The property of the bishopric of Gaza: real estate

In the *Vita Porphyrii*, Mark the Deacon mentions property in possession of the church of Gaza on two occasions. At the turn of the 5th century AD, the city was pagan⁹, as were most towns in the East at the time. Local Christians, if we are to believe Mark's account, only counted 280 souls at the moment of bishop Porphyry's arrival in Gaza (circa 395 AD)¹⁰. According to the statistic presented by the author in a later part of the text (the credibility of which I doubt), the city had barely over 400 inhabitants at the point when the pagan shrines were destroyed (the event may be dated to the late spring of 404 AD based on the clues given by Mark). Thus, unfortunately, we have practically no reliable information to determine the number of inhabitants at the turn of the 5th century AD, when Porphyry was the bishop of the city¹¹. Still, it is clear that the Christian community of the town was sparse, and as such probably reflected the typical proportion in the towns of the Roman East at the time. As we learn from Mark the Deacon's account, the bishopric of Gaza owned property managed by means of lease, also to local pagans. At one time, an attempt to execute such due rent (ἐκκλησιαστικὸς κανών) resulted in the battery of deacon Barochas, who had been sent to collect the money – he served in the church of Gaza as a steward (treasurer)¹² at that time. The incident led to an upheaval in the town after Barochas, beaten unconscious and presumed dead by the pagans, was taken into the city by the Christians¹³. Here, the thread

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⁹ F.R. Trombley, *Hellenic…*, p. 246 sqq; ffv
¹² Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii*, 22.
of the property owned by the Gaza bishopric breaks; it recurs, however, in the final part of *The Life*. Naturally, managing real estate assets entailed keeping in contact with pagan local officials (a fact stressed by Mark the Deacon). Due to the fact that, at the turn of the 5th century AD, the cities in the East still remained pagan for the most part, the relations between the local Christians and the pagan officials were quite strained. Judging by Mark the Deacon’s account, in Gaza the relations worsened significantly after the local shrines had been demolished, which also testifies of the power of pagan communities in the early decades of the 5th century AD in the East. Even when bereaved of their temples, the pagans still played an important role there, mostly in terms of economy. Around the year 420 AD (as follows from Mark the Deacon’s chronology), Gaza become a place of a dispute that broke out in connection with certain property (ἀντιβολῆς γεναμένες χάριν χωρίον) between an anonymous church steward and Sampsychos, one of the local officials (πρωτεύοντες) and a member of the city council. This disagreement likewise led to a brawl, which culminated in a pogrom of the local Christians. What could have been the subject of the dispute in question? What, apart from religious matters (not mentioned by the author in this case), may have generated animosities between the local bishop and the decurions? I suppose that the conflict was in fact caused by financial issues – such as taxation burden, some unpaid obligations, or taking advantage of fiscal privileges on such occasions (these were allegedly bestowed on the bishopric of Gaza by empress Eudoxia; more on this below). If the account of the feud with Sampsychos were to be taken at face value, we should conclude that financial matters were the only factor at play here. If religious issues had been one of the causes, the author of the account would not have left this fact unmentioned, since he never does this in the other parts of his work (where, in fact, he widely describes the “persecutions” of Gaza Christians by the local pagans).

**Cash reserves owned by the bishopric of Gaza at the beginning of the 5th century**

In the *Vita Porphyrii*, we only find one piece of information concerning the topic in question, connected with an event dated to the early autumn of 403 AD. At that time, bishop Porphyry travelled to Palestinian Caesarea intending to resign from his office: as he claimed, he was not able to withstand the ever more aggressive actions on the part of the pagans. The tone used in the narrative is somewhat

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16 Cf. also P. Filipczak, *Historia…*, p. 119.
dramatic, yet it may well reflect the actual problems concerning the relations with pagans in Gaza. The latter group still constituted a numerous and economically superior community, which drew its wealth mainly from wine trade, as confirmed not only by the accounts of Mark\(^\text{17}\) but also by archaeological finds from early Byzantine Gaza\(^\text{18}\). In Caesarea, the decision is reached for bishop Porphyry not to step down from his post yet, but to go to the capital city of Constantinople together with his metropolitan. The power of paganism in Gaza was considered to be rooted in the temples – and rightly so, as those were not only places of pagan cult (including a renowned oracle in the temple of Zeus Marnas, also called the “lord of the rains” – κύριος τῶν δμβρων)\(^\text{19}\), but first and foremost an economic supply base. In the latter capacity, they had grown and developed for centuries, although Mark the Deacon does not utter a single word on this aspect. If the temples were to be destroyed, their assets would be liquidated as well–probably quite arbitrarily, yet the local Church would nevertheless certainly be one of the beneficiaries in such a case\(^\text{20}\). Undoubtedly, the economic supply base was also an important element of Christianisation.

\(^{17}\) Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 20.


\(^{19}\) Zeus Marnas was the Hellenistic incarnation of Dagon, the local god and patron of agriculture, cf. J. Straub, Marnas, [in:] Historia-Augusta-Colloquium, Bonn 1963, ed. idem, Bonn 1964 [= Ant, 4; BHAF, 2], p. 165–170; P. Chuvin, Chronique des derniers païens. La disparition du paganisme dans l’Empire romain, du règne de Constantin a celui de Justinien, Paris 1990, p. 64sqq; N. Belayche, Iudaea-Palaestina. The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century), Tübingen 2001 [= RRP, 1], p. 232–256.

Therefore, Bishop Porphyry was to travel to Constantinople (ἐπὶ τὴν βασιλιάδα πόλιν) together with his metropolitan, aiming to reach the court and beg the emperors (…) to allow him to demolish the shrines in Gaza (καταστρέψαι τοὺς ναοὺς τῶν εἰδώλων), particularly the local temple of Zeus (Marneion). The idea was not ungrounded, after all, and it was hoped that John – the bishop of the capital – would help. If the two priests had not had at least a shred of hope of reaching the court, the whole trip would have been pointless. When summoned to Caesarea, Mark, the deacon of the church of Gaza, takes with him 43 pieces of gold (τεσσαράρακον τρία νομίσματα) as well as certain laconically described “three books” (τρεῖς βίβλους) for the purpose of the trip, thus emptying the bishopric’s treasury. The books do not appear in the later part of the account, yet it may be presumed that they were volumes of the Scripture, or even the Gospels only. Why would as many as three volumes be taken, then? There can only be one explanation: they were to be sold to help cover the expenses of the travel and stay in Constantinople. An analogical case is known from another work of hagiography completed in Palestine during the second half of the 4th century AD. The text in question is *The Life of Hilarion*, where the protagonist, as Hieronymus claims, sold a volume of the Gospel that he owned in order to pay for his sea voyage from Africa to Sicily. We are not told whether it was the whole set of the canonical Gospels or just one of them.

If the assumption concerning the aforementioned books is valid, how much could they be worth? If a volume was not made in a particularly exquisite fashion, its value may have reached the sum of 20 solidi per piece. Such a price is stated by the author of one of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. In the case at hand, however, there is no information regarding the value of the codex put on sale, the quality of its making, or the condition in which it was preserved. Let us now return to the account, according to which Mark was ordered to deliver the cash as well as the aforementioned “three books” from the church treasury to Caesarea. It would follow that the bishopric of Gaza at the end of 403 AD (October or November, as the beginning of Porphyry’s journey to Constantinople is dated to that time) only had very modest means at its disposal, given that the cash and objects taken to be

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22 Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii*, 34.


24 Cf. *Apophthegmata Patrum*. *De abbate Gelasio*, [in:] *PG*, vol. LXV, col. 145–146, where the prices of 16 (νομίσματα δεκαέξ) and 18 solidi (ἄξιον δεκαοκτὼ νομίσμάτων) are mentioned for the Old and New Testament codices, respectively.
sold would have been worth a total of ca. 100 solidi. We may note that the money that Porphyry had come into from his inheritance in Thessaloniki totalled 4400 solidi, while the valuables cashed in Jerusalem totalled 1400 solidi. This money was spent on charitable causes.

**Charitable activities of the bishopric of Gaza**

The information on the charity work conducted during the period of bishop Porphyry’s rule gives us certain insight into the wealth of the church of Gaza at the time. The first relevant piece of information is the record of the alms amounting to three solidi (τρία νομίσματα), which was to be paid to a mother of a seven-year-old boy who, as a medium, communicated God’s will to the Christians of Gaza concerning the local temple of Zeus. Further information concerning the alms distributed by the bishopric of Gaza only appears at one more spot in our text – when the circumstances of the consecration of the Eudoxiane, a basilica erected at the site of the destroyed Marneion, are described. According to the Mark the Deacon’s account, bishop Porphyry spent generous amounts on this purpose and ordered to give out alms. The narrative mentions donations totalling from 6 to 10 obols. In order to cover these expenses, Porphyry assigned a certain sum from the income of the bishopric of Gaza. However, he highlighted that if for whatever reason the money was not distributed in Gaza, it should be spent on supporting the poor in Palestinian Caesarea.

In addition, another piece of information – laconic as it may be – sheds some light on the financial situation of the Gaza bishopric around 420 AD. It seems that bishop Porphyry, intending to return the favour to certain women who had helped him by providing shelter during the pogrom of Christians in the city, ordered to pay them financial gratifications. A woman named Salaphta and her grandmother were to receive 4 solidi each, daily, for an indefinite amount of time, whereas her aunt was to be given a single payment of 1 solidus. The information is not too clear, not least as regards the amounts cited. If valid, the latter would indicate that the economic condition of the bishopric of Gaza towards the end of Porphyry’s rule was at least fairly good.

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25 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 34.
26 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 6, 9.
27 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 68.
28 J. Straub, Marnas..., p. 165sqq; G. Mussies, Marnas God of Gaza, [in:] ANRW, vol. XVIII.4, p. 2412sqq. The financial means for this purpose were transferred to bishop Porphyry by empress Aelia Eudoxia. cf. Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 53.
29 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 92.
30 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 94 (…ὀβολοὺς ἕξ..., ..., ὀβολοὺς δέκα...).
31 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 94.
32 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 100.
Endowments of the imperial court to the bishopric of Gaza

It is difficult to assess the validity of the account concerning one of the main themes of *The Life* – i.e. Porphyry’s journey to Constantinople, including the endowments he received there (the latter being a crucial issue from the point of view of our inquiry). Similarly, it is unclear what we should make of the poorly described fiscal privileges mentioned there, which – we may presume – must have had a significant influence on the economic situation of the church of Gaza in the times of bishop Porphyry and after his death. The essential question is, however, whether the donations by empress Eudoxia and her husband, emperor Arcadius, really took place. Since hagiographic texts are infamously unreliable on issues such as this, it is difficult to settle the case unequivocally. Firstly, we may ask whether such a journey was even possible to undertake in the first place. It probably was, it would seem, considering the fact that the bishops would travel to Constantinople convinced of support from the local bishop John (a fact conspicuously emphasized by Mark the Deacon). Secondly, is it conceivable that blatantly false information concerning such an important journey might have been included in the narrative – the more so that it had such a crucial meaning for the development of later events? Let us recall that the story culminates in the destruction of the shrines in Gaza, including the Marneion, at whose location a luxurious basilica was erected and named after empress Eudoxia. The latter circumstance, in particular, seems to confirm the validity of Mark the Deacon’s account. All the same, it does not mean that one should necessarily embrace all of the details found in it, including the description of how the Palestinian bishops were received at the court and what donations they received on these occasions. If the story is true, such donations must have indeed occurred (the generosity of Arcadius and Aelia Eudoxia towards those who were allowed to appear before their imperial majesties was obvious), yet perhaps not in the amounts cited by Mark the Deacon. The bishopric of Gaza, which had no more than 43 pieces of gold in its treasury in 403 AD, could not have afforded to build a lavish basilica of the kind that Mark describes. We must bear in mind that the text, even if it was not created shortly after the demise of bishop Porphyry (as Mark the Deacon assures us), could not have contained a distortion in a matter as important as the imperial court’s financing the construction of the

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basilica (although we know that the empress died several months after Porphyry had left Constantinople\textsuperscript{35}). Thus, the account may well have been embellished or even distorted regarding certain points. Nevertheless, the essential part of the message still remains credible: the existence of an exquisite basilica in the centre of Gaza has been confirmed not only by the aforementioned accounts as well as the depictions in the mosaics of Madaba\textsuperscript{36}, but also by an accidental discovery made at the beginning of April 2016 in Gaza\textsuperscript{37}. The latter proves that a majestic church or basilica once stood within the early Byzantine limits of the city. In the published photographs from the site of the discovery, one may see not only a huge column capital bearing the sign of a cross (90 centimetres in height), but also at least two impressive columns, shattered and perhaps duly left at the spot where the demolished basilica once stood. As far as I know, there is no unequivocal confirmation of the fact that we are indeed dealing with the basilica described by Mark, yet it is certainly a temple dating back to the early Byzantine period, and it appears to be the one depicted in the mosaics of Madaba. The author of the mosaic – or rather the person who ordered and funded it – evidently considered the grand building as a symbol of the city (in the period in question, this was the key according to which motifs or buildings to be included in mosaics were chosen).

However, let us return to Porphyry’s journey to Constantinople, the main goal of which was to reach the imperial court and obtain the permission to demolish the pagan temples in Gaza. Mark the Deacon claims that, during a series of audiences, bishop Porphyry was able to secure great amounts of gold from the imperial couple. Besides a total of 200 solidi to cover the expenses during the stay in Constantinople\textsuperscript{38}, Porphyry received significant amounts for the needs of his bishopric as well as the planned construction. Porphyry received two \textit{kentenaria} of gold (δύο \textit{κεντηνάρια} – 200 pounds of gold, circa 14 400 solidi) from empress Eudoxia\textsuperscript{39}; he also obtained an unidentified sum for building a \textit{ksendodocheion} in Gaza\textsuperscript{40}. In addition, emperor Arcadius endowed the sum of 20 pounds of gold (\textit{χρυσοῦ})

\textsuperscript{35} O. Seeck, \textit{Eudoxia}, [in:] \textit{RE}, vol. VI.1, col. 926.
\textsuperscript{40} Marcus Diaconus, \textit{Vita Porphyrii}, 53.
λίτρας εἴκοσι) for the needs of the bishopric. Finally, the church in Gaza received from the emperor the aforementioned fiscal privileges (…καὶ προνόμια τῇ ἁγίᾳ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ τοῖς Χριστιανοῖς καὶ πρόσοδον παρασχεϑῆναι), which would guarantee its economic development in the forthcoming decades.

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To conclude, what can be said of the financial standing of the church of Gaza in the years 395–420 AD, during the rule of bishop Porphyry? In spite of the scarcity of the relevant data, we do gain some insight into the financial standing of the bishopric. In comparison to analogical accounts concerning other bishoprics in the Eastern provinces of the Empire in late Antiquity, we may in fact speak of an abundance of information, as in most cases the data are still more sparse or non-existent at all. Outside of Egypt, it is hard to find a case better documented than the one under discussion. To be sure, we do have certain accounts concerning the church in Ephesus at the turn of the 5th century AD, yet that information relates to the personal wealth of the corrupt bishop Antoninos (who mostly acquired it through practising simony). A similar case is that of Nazianzos (in Cappadocia) under Gregory’s rule: this bishop’s Testament, although a valuable source of information on the monetary history of late Antiquity, only refers to his personal wealth. The rich legacy of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Church furnishes little information concerning the economic state of the bishoprics they managed. We may note that – according to Mark the Deacon – bishop Porphyry owned private property towards the end of his life; he acquired it during his tenure in Gaza. Let us recall that he came to the city without a dime in his pocket (all cash reserves, inheritance, and other assets had been given out to support the poor in Jerusalem), while his last will is described by Mark as “bequeathing gifts to many”.

Surprising as it may seem, even as regards churches such as those of Antioch or Constantinople, little is known about their wealth at the turn of the 5th century AD. In most cases (save for the several statements by John Chrysostom, Palladius of Helenopolis, and the anonymous author of the Vita Olym-

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41 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 54.
42 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 46, 48–50.
45 Marcus Diaconus, Vita Porphyrii, 103.
47 Cf. G. Dagron, Naissance…, p. 496–509.
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...piadis⁴⁹), we are dealing with bare estimates; the main gauge that allows to appraise the financial standing of these churches is the information on the charity work undertaken there (usually with no specific figures cited).

Consequently, the data presented above – albeit admittedly scanty – are still quite remarkable when compared with those from other churches in the Eastern provinces of the early Byzantine period. Undeniably, it seems justified to treat at least some of the amounts cited in the Vita Porphyrii as reflecting particular topoi (especially when we hear of three solidi, three handfuls of solidi, or the sums of 100 and 1000 solidi⁵⁰); nevertheless, the source under analysis greatly enhances our knowledge of the wealth of the Church as well as its functions in the early Byzantine period.

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Abstract. The study attempts to determine the economic condition of a small provincial bishopric, namely the church of Gaza (Palestine) during the rule of bishop Porphyry (circa 395–420 AD). All of the information on the subject comes from the Vita Porphyrii by Mark the Deacon – a source whose historical value has often been disputed. Although the information on the wealth of the church in Gaza at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries is not particularly vast or illuminating, it is nevertheless possible to identify several spheres of economic activity of the Gaza bishopric. These are, among other things, the property owned by the bishopric (real estate), its cash reserves (mostly at the beginning of the 5th century), the endowments of the imperial court (given by emperor Arcadius and his wife, empress Aelia Eudoxia), as well as the charitable activity of the bishopric (especially on the occasion of erecting the Eudoxiane, probably in 407).

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