

NONNOSUS AND BYZANTINE DIPLOMACY IN ARABIA

For Emilio Gabba, precious friend and admired scholar

Thanks to the voracious reading of the ninth-century patriarch Photius, three successive generations of a family of Byzantine diplomats who specialized in missions to nations on both sides of the Red Sea can be rescued from historical oblivion. Three emperors at Constantinople in the early sixth century – Anastasius, Justin, and Justinian – entrusted delicate negotiations to members of this family. One of them, Nonnosus, wrote about his own activities in an account available to Photios and took care to place them within the context of the work done by both his grandfather and his father¹. These civil servants must have been well known and trusted at the Byzantine court, and, their embassies, five in all to the Arabian peninsula, imply a high level of competence in the culture and presumably languages of the region. It is not surprising that one of these Arabian embassies was also combined with a visit to the Ethiopian court at Axum at a time when Ethiopia had established a Christian king of its own in southwestern Arabia.

Fergus Millar has recently assembled the raw data on this family in his article on Rome's Arab allies in late antiquity, but, as he says, his objective was "only to outline the type of information provided (and not provided) by sources from within the Empire"². The present article will attempt to provide a context for the various diplomatic missions. So many embassies within a single family illustrate a

¹ The surviving texts in Greek, as summarized and paraphrased by Photios, are still most conveniently examined in C. MÜLLER, *FHG* IV, pp. 178-180.

² F. MILLAR, *Rome's Arab Allies in Late Antiquity*, in ed. Henning Börm and Josef Wiesehöfer, *Commutatio et contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East, In Memory of Zeev Rubin*, Düsseldorf, 2010, pp. 199-226. The quotation is from p. 208.

rising tide of imperialism on both sides of the Red Sea, in Ethiopia (in East Africa) and Ḥimyar (in the Arabian peninsula), as well as the efforts of the Byzantine emperors to contain imperialist ambitions in the early decades of the sixth century. Constantinople was confronted at that time with a crisis that had serious implications for Byzantine foreign policy. Persia had already begun to discover occasions for extending its influence in Arabia through its clients, the Naṣrid sheikhs (Lakhmids) of al-Ḥīra. The history of Nonnosus and his family opens up a unique perspective on Byzantine efforts to influence and control Arab tribes in southwestern and central Arabia both directly and indirectly (through the Ethiopians).

Nonnosus's account of his family's diplomatic activity, begins with a brief allusion to a mission led by his grandfather, and then includes more detailed accounts of overlapping missions led by his father and himself. The text that Photius read and summarized was clearly available to Malalas when he wrote his *Chronography* not much later than Nonnosus was writing. Later Theophanes Confessor also had access to Nonnosus' work when he was composing his *Chronography* early in the ninth century, not many decades before Photius. But it is Photius who provides a precise and useful report of what he found in Nonnosus' text. His information spans the reigns of Anastasius, Justin, and Justinian. Although Nonnosus does not register the diplomatic events in chronological order, it is possible, despite his somewhat confusing cross-references, to segregate the several embassies comprehensibly.

First, the family. Nonnosus tells us that his father's name was Abramēs³. This is a variant of the Greek form of his father's name, Abramios, in the *Martyrium of Arethas* 27. The name, but not the person, also appears in Procopius as Abramos for a king of Ḥimyar we know from inscriptions as Abraha⁴. This name may be rendered as Abraham, as indeed it appears in Syriac precisely in reference to Nonnosus' father⁵. It is obviously Semitic. Whether it means, as Müller thought when he prepared the Nonnosus *testimonia* for his *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, that Nonnosus was a Syrian may be doubted. But a near eastern origin is very likely. In view of the missions in which this family was involved, it would be reasonable to assume that the family was not only Arab but conversant with sixth-

³ PLRE II. Abramius 2, p. 3.

⁴ PROCOP., *Bella* I. 20.

⁵ PS. ZACHARIAS, *Hist. Eccles.* VIII. 3.

century Arabic, then in its formative period⁶, and perhaps Sabaic and Syriac as well. All these languages would have been useful for ambassadors to the Arabian peninsula. Since Nonnosus himself, unlike his father and grandfather, was also dispatched to Axum in Ethiopia, where he was formally received by the *negus*, who was standing in a bizarre pavillion on top of four elephants⁷, it is possible that this diplomat of the third generation had taken the trouble to master Ge'ez, the classical Ethiopic language of the Axumite court, which is itself another Semitic language. Familiarity with local cultures was nothing new in the appointment of governors and military officers throughout the Roman and Byzantine empires, but a diplomatic specialization across three generations of one family was most unusual.

Nonnosus reports that the emperor Anastasius had sent his grandfather on an embassy to the Arab phylarch Arethas (Hārith), with whom he concluded a peace treaty. There can be little doubt that this is the peace treaty assigned by Theophanes to the year 502/3: "Anastasius made a treaty with Arethas, the father of Badicharimos and Ogaros..." For the previous year Theophanes recorded a broad Arab invasion into Phoenicia, Syria, and Palestine when Badicharimos launched a fierce campaign after the death of his brother Ogaros (Hujr). How or where Ogaros died is beyond knowing, but the devastation that Badicharmos wrought understandably attracted the attention of Constantinople⁸, not least because about the same time (502) the Persian Shah, Kawad, revoked a treaty between Persia and Byzantium that had been in effect for more than half a century. Hārith, the father and phylarch, was the Hujrid ruler of Kinda in central Arabia⁹, and he had to take account of his Arab enemies, the pro-Per-

⁶ For early pre-Islamic Arabic, see the rich dossier assembled in M.C.A. MACDONALD ed., *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language*, Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40, Oxford, 2010.

⁷ MÜLLER, *FGH* IV, p. 178. For a picture of a comparable ceremony, L. OECONOMOS, *Remarques sur trois passages de trois historiens grecs du moyen âge*, «Byzantion», 20 (1950), 177-183.

⁸ This must be the devastation by eastern nomads that Procopius of Gaza mentions in his *Panegyric of Anastasius* 7 (pp. 9-10 Chauvot), written between 498 and 502.

⁹ Cf. I. KAWAR (Shahīd), *Byzantium and Kinda*, in «Byz. Zeitschr.» LIII, 1960, 57-73. ID., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Washington DC, 1989, pp. 127-129. Ogaros' Semitic name was Hujr, Badicharmos' name was Ma'dikarib: C.J. ROBIN, *Les Arabes de Himyar, des 'Romains' et des Perses III^e - VI^e siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, in «Semitica et Classica» 1, 2008, 167-202, particularly 178. It is hard to accept Robin's view (p. 178) that the father of Hujr was not Hārith, the phylarch of Hujrid Kinda, but a hypothetical homonym of the Ghassān.

sian Nasrids of al-Ḥira, who would have been responsive to Kawad's decision to renew hostility against Byzantium. He would therefore have been disposed to make a settlement with the Byzantines after the Hujrid invasion of Palestine.

Anastasius acted at once and despatched an expert, Nonnosus' grandfather, who, as we know from a later Syriac source, bore the name Euphrasius¹⁰. So far as can be told from Photios, Nonnosus did not even mention his grandfather's name, but it points to Mesopotamia, and perhaps an origin for the family not far removed from al-Ḥira itself and the Arabian peninsula. In view of the success of Euphrasius' embassy, it seems that Anastasius chose well.

With this background from 502 it is hardly surprising that Nonnosus' father, Abraham, was despatched by Justin to ransom two Byzantine *duces* whom the forces of the Nasrid sheikh al-Mundhir had captured along with their soldiers. Procopius reports that these two officers were Timostratus, brother of Rufinus, and John, son of Lucas¹¹. Nonnosus names them both as the *duces* (he calls them στρατηγοί) who were the prisoners of war whom his father managed to recover by paying, according to Procopius, an extravagant ransom. Abraham went subsequently with al-Mundhir southeast of al-Ḥira to participate in a conference that the sheikh convened in 524 at Ramla. It may be that this was not far from the homeland of Abraham's family, descended from Euphrasius, since we already know that another of the delegates to that conference, Symeon of Beth Arshām, definitely came from southern Mesopotamia¹². Hence Abraham and Symeon may have spoken to one another in the same language, Syriac or Arabic, or possibly both.

There is no way of telling where al-Mundhir's forces had captured the two *duces*, but the narrative in Procopius implies that it was somewhere in central or northern Arabia, where none of the Byzantine officers or client phylarchs were strong enough to resist them¹³. Relations between al-Ḥira and Kinda were inevitably unstable, be-

¹⁰ *PLRE* II. Euphrasius 3, p. 425. The name in Greek could, it may be suggested, be analogous to the name Fıratlı in Turkish.

¹¹ *PROCOPIUS, Bella* I. 17. 44, reprised in Evagr., *HE* IV. 12. Cf. *PLRE* II, p. 1120 (Timostratus), p. 611 (Ioannes 70).

¹² D.G.K. TAYLOR, *A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Himyarite Martyr Texts*, in ed. J. BEAUCAMP - F. BRIQUEL-CHATONNET - C.J. ROBIN, *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux V^e et VI^e siècles: Regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris, 2010, pp. 143-176, particularly p. 144. For Ramla, I. KAWAR (Shahīd), *The Conference of Ramla*, in «Journ. Near Eastern Stud.», XXIII, 1964, pp. 115-131.

cause Persian support for the Naṣrids had to be balanced against Byzantine support for the Hujrids as secured by Euphrasius in 502. Malalas reports that al-Mundhir, with a force of 30,000 men, had pursued the Kindites of Hārith southwestward into the desert, where he captured and killed "the phylarch of the Romans"¹⁴. It has sometimes been supposed that Abraham's negotiations on behalf of Justin in 524 led to a peace treaty with al-Mundhir, but Nonnosus makes no mention of anything other than the recovery of the two prisoners, who, he says explicitly, had been held according to the law (*nomos*) of war. But it was during Abraham's next mission to Arabia, early in the reign of Justinian, that he actually did conclude a peace treaty, but this was with the ruler of Kinda, Hārith's successor¹⁵.

At least as far as can be told from Photios's summary, Nonnosus introduced this second embassy of Abraham out of chronological order. Photios explicitly states that it had occurred before Nonnosus' own embassy for Justinian, even though that is mentioned first. The confusing structure in the patriarch's summary arises from the appearance of the Kindite phylarch Kaïsos (Semitic Qays) in both missions. The peace treaty that Abraham negotiated provided for the remission of Qays' own son, Mu'awiyya, to Constantinople as a hostage¹⁶. Justinian then sent Nonnosus himself to bring Qays to the city as well. He identifies this man as a descendant of Hārith, with whom Abraham had negotiated in 502¹⁷, and he goes to identify him correctly as a ruler of two Saracen tribes, the Chindenoi and the Maadenoi – precisely the peoples of Kinda and Ma'add in central Arabia. Now that Qays' son was a hostage in Constantinople, Justinian evidently wanted to bring the phylarch himself there. The motivation for this mission is unclear, but it may well have represented an effort to remove a powerful leader who might have been open to solicitation from the Persian side as represented by the Naṣrids. In any case, it is clear from Nonnosus that he failed to bring back Qays, and so Justinian sent his father Abraham back again to Arabia to try again.

¹³ PROCOP., *Bella* I. 17. 40 (Alamoundaros, Πέρσαις ...πιστός, plundered the lands from the boundaries of Egypt to Mesopotamia), 46 (neither δοῦκες nor φύλαρχοι could resist).

¹⁴ MALALAS, *Chron.* 18. 16, Bonn, pp. 434-435.

¹⁵ *Martyr. Arethae* 25 confirms Nonnosus on this treaty.

¹⁶ The name of the son is Μαρία, not Mavia (as in Müller's Latin translation), which would be a woman's name (Arabic Māwiyya), but Mu'awiyya.

¹⁷ Millar (n. 2 above), suggests that Qays was a son of Hārith, but Robin (n. 9 above) shows that he must have been a grandson.

Abraham succeeded in bringing out Qays and, at the same time, to transfer Qays' phylarchy to his two brothers, Ambros and Iezidos, whose Semitic names were obviously 'Amr and Yazīd. This was a brilliant piece of diplomacy that allowed Justinian to enlarge his influence in Arabia by personally appointing the new rulers of Kinda and Ma'add, which are both explicitly named in Nonnosus' report.. In Constantinople Justinian expressed his pleasure with the new arrangements by formally bestowing upon Qays the hegemony (*hēgemonia*) over the three Palestines as well as the tribes that had been subjected to him previously. From Nonnosus' Greek, at least as reported by Photios, there appears to have been a clear administrative hierarchy in which Qays' hegemony ranked above the phylarchies of his brothers, and it included their subjects in Arabia as well as those who resided in the Palestinian lands¹⁸. Since Procopius reports that the Jafnid Abūkarib was phylarch of Palestine later in the reign of Justinian, he must have operated under the general hegemony assigned to Qays¹⁹.

Nonnosus' failed mission to Kinda was but one part of a twofold diplomatic assignment that Justinian had given him. The other had been an embassy to the king (*negus*) of Ethiopia in Axum. Since this king is explicitly named in Greek as Elesbaas, we can be sure, from his appearance in comparable Greek renderings (above all in Procopius and the *Martyrium of Arethas*²⁰), that he is the *negus* known from inscriptions at Axum as Ella Asbeha, or, as he was generally known, Kālēb²¹. He was the energetic Christian ruler who launched an invasion of the Arabian peninsula in 525 to wipe out a savage Himyarite monarchy of Arab converts to Judaism²². This government had been responsible for a pogrom against the Christians of Najrān in 523. Kālēb's support of his persecuted co-religionists served op-

¹⁸ The Greek formulation of the hegemony of Qays is carefully phrased: αὐτὸς τὴν Παλαιστινίων ἡγεμονίαν παρὰ βασιλέως ἐδέξατο, πλήθος πολὺ τῶν ὑποτεταγμένων αὐτῷ σὺν αὐτῷ ἐπαγόμενος (*FHG* IV, p. 179).

¹⁹ For Abūkarib, *PROCOPIUS*, *Bella* I. 19. 10-13, and *P. Petra* IV. 39, l. 165 [ὁ φύλαρχ[ος] Ἀβου Χρήστος].

²⁰ *PROCOPIUS*, *Bella* I. 20. (Hellestheaios). *Mart. Areth.* I, 2, 27, 29, 32, 34 35, 37-39 (Elesbaas).

²¹ E.g. in E. BERNARD - A.J. DREWES - R. SCHNEIDER, eds., *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Ethiopie*, 1991, vol. 1., no. 191, pp. 272-273, ll. 7-8, 'n klb 'l sbh.

²² This date, like others in this article, reflect 110 BC, which is now agreed to have been the era of Himyar in dated south Arabian inscriptions. See C.J. Robin in n. 8 above.

portunately to reinforce his own agenda for establishing Ethiopian influence in Arabia, just as he had briefly tried to do some five years earlier²³. The monarchy in Axum had never forgotten the Ethiopian presence in third-century Arabia. In the centuries that followed it traditionally claimed a sovereignty there that it did not possess²⁴. So Kālēb's initiative signalled a disposition to intervene in Arabia that was considerably more than religious. The horrors at Najrān inflicted by the Jewish king of Ḥimyar gave him precisely the excuse he needed.

After his victory over the king, Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar, Kālēb left behind a contingent of Ethiopian Christians in charge of Ḥimyar under a certain Sumyafa 'Ashwa', whom Procopius knew as Esimphaaios. This man was soon overthrown by another Ethiopian Christian in the occupying army, a certain Abraha from Adulis. Although Kālēb made a few abortive attempts to remove Abraha²⁵, we know that the aging *negus* soon abdicated and apparently retreated to a monastic life of piety.

It must have been between his Arabian victory and his retirement to a monastery that Kālēb received Nonnosus in Axum, a city that Nonnosus calls Auxoumis and Procopius Auxōmis²⁶. It is clear from Malalas that Nonnosus took a lively interest in the exotica of the royal ceremony as well as in the ethnic customs he observed as he made his way from the port town of Adulis to the capital. But his visit principally reflected a policy that Justinian had devised in his early years as emperor. This was to strengthen Byzantine opposition to Persia by intervening in Arabian affairs with the help of Ethiopia²⁷. Procopius is explicit about Justinian's decision to appeal to the Ethiopian Christians, both those in their native highland of East Africa and those

²³ For Kālēb's first invasion, see IWONA GAJDA, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste*, Paris, 2009, pp. 76-81.

²⁴ The Axumite inscriptions of Aezanas illustrate the claim: cf. *Recueil* (n. 15 above), nos. 185, 185bis, 187, 188, 189 in Ge'ez with Ethiopic and Sabaic scripts, in Greek nos. 270, 271. I plan to discuss this issue at greater length in a forthcoming book on the Adulis Throne.

²⁵ PROCOP., *Bella* I. 20. 4-7.

²⁶ For Procopius see *Bella* I. 19. 17. Already in the *Periplus of the Red Sea*, from the middle of the first century AD, the Greek form of the city name was *Axōmis*, *Periplus Maris Eryth.* 4.

²⁷ PROCOP., *Bella* I. 19. 1: "The emperor Justinian had the idea of allying himself with the Ethiopians and the Homerites (Ḥimyarites) in order to work against the Persians." Cf. *Bella* I. 20. 9 on the envoy Julian, whom Justinian sent to Ethiopia and Christian Ḥimyar to join the Byzantines, because of their common religion, to war against the Persians.

who had been settled in Arabia, to join forces with the Byzantines. He implemented this policy despite the fact that the Ethiopians were monophysites and the Byzantines Chalcedonians. The three missions of Nonnosus' father Abraham must therefore be seen in the light of Justinian's effort to gain support in the Red Sea territories.

Joëlle Beaucamp has recently and compellingly argued that this kind of interventionism in the region did not characterize Byzantine foreign policy before Justinian²⁸. But there were clearly adumbrations of it in the mission of Euphrasius under Anastasius as well as in Abraham's first mission, which took place under Justin. We can readily accept Procopius' report that Justinian was the first to lobby both the Ethiopians and the Arabs as a means of thwarting the Persians, but there is no doubt that the Persians had themselves been active well before that in supporting the cruel regime of the Jewish rulers of Himyar, whose anti-Christian policies had ultimately led to the pogrom at Najrān. That would not have escaped the notice of Anastasius and Justin. Both emperors, like their successor Justinian, had ample need of the energy and talents of the family of Nonnosus.

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APPENDIX

Tabular representation of the embassies of Nonnosus' family

502 Euphrasius, sent by Anastasius to Hārith (Arethas) of Kinda and concludes peace treaty.

523/524 Abraham (son of Euphrasius) sent by Justin to al-Mundhir at al-Hīra to ransom two captured *duces* and to participate in the conference at Ramla

ca. 528 Abraham sent by Justinian to Qays (Kaïsos) of Kinda, concludes peace treaty, and arranges for Qays' son, Mu'awiyya, to go to Constantinople

ca. 530 Nonnosus, Abraham's son, sent by Justinian to Kinda to have Qays himself removed to Constantinople; Nonnosus then sent, as part of the same mission, to Axum to meet the *negus* Ella Asbeha (Kālēb).

²⁸ J. BEAUCAMP, *Le rôle de Byzance en Mer Rouge sous le règne de Justin: mythe ou réalité?*, in BEAUCAMP *et al.*, eds., *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie* (n. 10 above), pp. 197-218.

ca 530/531 Abraham sent again by Justinian to Kinda because Nonnosus had failed to remove Qays. Abraham successfully negotiates transfer of Qays to Constantinople and arranges for his brothers, 'Amr and Yazid, to assume his phylarchy in Arabia.

Abstract

In the first half of the sixth century a single family provided ambassadors to Arabia on five separate occasions, and the ambassadors themselves represented three generations of that family. They served under three Byzantine emperors – Anastasius, Justin, and Justinian. Nonnosus, grandson of the first ambassador, wrote an account of his diplomatic activity that was available to both Malalas and Theophanes. Fortunately Photius read it, and we owe to him the only surviving glimpse into Nonnosus' autobiographical narrative. The five embassies all went to Arabia, although the penultimate one also included a famous visit to the Ethiopian *negus* in Axum.

Nella prima metà del sesto secolo una sola famiglia fornì ambasciatori verso l'Arabia in cinque diverse occasioni e gli ambasciatori stessi rappresentarono tre generazioni di quella famiglia. Essi furono al servizio di tre imperatori bizantini, Anastasio, Gustavo e Giustiniano. Nonnosus, nipote del primo ambasciatore, scrisse un resoconto della sua attività diplomatica che era accessibile tanto a Malalas che a Teofane. Fortunatamente Fozio lo lesse e noi gli dobbiamo l'unica informazione di cui disponiamo del racconto autobiografico di Nonnosus. Le cinque ambascerie si recarono tutte in Arabia, anche se la penultima includeva una famosa visita al *negus* dell'Etiopia a Axum.

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