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# THE MARVELOUS LIFE OF PATRIARCH SOPHRONIUS I

His Company of Saints,  
and the Fall of Byzantine Jerusalem

*by Mother Nectaria McLees*

**S**aint Sophronius of Jerusalem (c. 560-638, feast-day March 11) stands among the most intriguing and attractive of Byzantine hierarchs, his eight decades encompassing a wealth of life experience as a highly-trained sophist, traveling ascetic pilgrim, esteemed church writer, and eventually patriarch. The monastic spiritual son and friend of two of the 6th-century's great Christian luminaries, John Moschus (author of *The Spiritual Meadow*) and St. John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria, St. Sophronius' own spiritual son, St. Maximus the Confessor, would continue his life-long combat with heresy. An author of church services and hagiography, St. Sophronius is best-known as the author of the Life of St. Mary of Egypt, the only saint's life read aloud as part of an official service in the yearly liturgical cycle of the Orthodox Church. This great hierarch ended his days as Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem, which, in the absence of higher political or military authority, he surrendered to Muslim conquerors in 638 to avert the destruction of the city and its population after a six-month siege.

Born in Damascus c. 550-560, by his mid-twenties Sophronius was already a noted teacher of rhetoric, so much so that in his companion John Moschus' 6th-century collection of narratives on the ascetic life, the *Leimonarion*

*Opposite: St. Theodosius Monastery, Palestine, 2004.*

(*The Spiritual Meadow*), he is referred to as Sophronius the Sophist, a title that follows him through the Byzantine literature of the period until his enthronement as Patriarch of Jerusalem.

The meeting between John Moschus and Sophronius in the late 6th century marked the beginning of one of the most fruitful spiritual friendships of church history. A decade older than Sophronius and already a priest, Moschus' first years as a novice and his monastic tonsure were at the Monastery of St. Theodosius, which had been founded in 478, five miles west of Bethlehem on a hilltop containing a cave where the Magi hid from Herod. Moschus had arrived thirty years after the 529 repose of St. Theodosius the Cenobite, the monastery's founder, but within the lifetime of monks who had known him.<sup>i</sup>

After his tonsure Moschus spent ten years at a smaller monastery, the New Lavra of St. Sabbas at Pharan, southwest of Bethlehem in the Judean Desert where Sophronius eventually joined him in 575-580. Although the two men were both from Damascus, there is no indication that they had known each other previously and the layman Sophronius quickly became Moschus' "inseparable friend and disciple."<sup>ii</sup>

Within a few years the compatriots began their famed travels, collecting the anecdotal wisdom and experience of cenobitic and hermit monks, a spiritual treasury that Moschus hoped to preserve in the face of a younger, less ascetic generation of monks. Although it adds gorgeous detail to our understanding of late 6th-century Byzantine ascetics and their society, *The Spiritual Meadow* was not written as history. Moschus' intent, according to one author, is "to move his readers to a new inner compunction, which he sees as a deep need for the troubled times through which he is living."<sup>iii</sup> The first round of visits with Sophronius is through Egypt, the monastic communities of the Thebaid, and the Desert of the Oasis, where they reside for a time with Stephen of Alexandria, a commentator on Aristotle and later professor of philosophy in Constantinople. Upon reaching the Lavra of the Ailiotai on Mount Sinai, the two companions seem to have found a spiritual home, for they settle into the community there for a decade. It is during these Egyptian travels or perhaps their later sojourn in Alexandria, that they visit the shrine of Sts. Cyrus and John at Menuthia, the inspiration for Sophronius' later panegyric<sup>1</sup> for the two saints, along with an account of seventy healing miracles including Sophronius' own dramatic healing from ophthalmia.<sup>iv v</sup>

1 Panegyric: A sermon of praise, often delivered on a feastday.

Sometime before 594 we find Moschus and Sophronius back in Palestine, where Sophronius is finally tonsured at St. Theodosius Monastery which, to the end of their lives, he and Moschus will regard as their spiritual home, "the monastery of their repentance."<sup>2 vi</sup> Continuing their search for edifying examples of spiritual life, they travel freely through the region and Sophronius is mentioned during this period as being with Moschus in Petra and the Jordan Valley.

Within a decade, two events spark another round of pilgrimage: the murder of the Orthodox Emperor Maurice in 602 by the tyrant Phocas, and renewed attacks by the Persians, whom Maurice had held in check during his reign. As early as 603-4, the Persian attacks on the Holy Land under Chosroes II are serious enough to induce Moschus and Sophronius to travel north through Phoenicia, Syria Maritima, Antioch, and Cilicia, finally sailing to Alexandria via Cyprus and Samos.<sup>vii viii</sup>

Arriving in Alexandria sometime before 607, the two monks enter the service of Patriarch Eulogios (581-607), and his two successors, Theodore Scribo (607-9) and St. John the Almsgiver (609-619), under whose omophor Moschus and Sophronius struggle against the Severian Monophysite heretics.<sup>3</sup> Many anti-Severian (or "Akephaloi") stories are recounted in *The Spiritual Meadow*, the contemporary face of the Chalcedonian Orthodox-Monophysite struggle. Although the Orthodox position had been clearly stated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the debate over the nature of Christ was so thoroughly engaged in by both sides that in much of the Middle East the dispute had reached an impasse. Even miracles, such as those described in *The Meadow*, were produced by both sides and within a generation after Moschus, we find Anastasius of Sinai warning his Orthodox readers that, "since wonders could be produced by Jannes and Jambres, as well as by Moses, by Simon Magus as well as by St. Peter, no reliance can be placed upon them."<sup>ix</sup>

2 A moving account of a prelude to Sophronius' tonsure is recorded in *The Spiritual Meadow*, c. 102: "When my brother, Abba Sophronius was about to make his final profession, I stood by him together with Abba John the Scholasticos, Abba Kerikos and some other fathers. He said to us: 'I set out on my way and a company of young women danced before me saying: "Welcome Sophronius; Sophronius has been crowned." It is difficult to believe that this was simply a group of village girls congratulating a monk. It seems more to be in the realm of a heavenly visitation of saints or angels. In "John Moschus and His Friend Sophronius the Sophist", Henry Chadwick speaks of it directly as a "vision of welcome by the celestial choir.""

3 The Chalcedonian-Monophysite Controversy: The Monophysites held that Christ has only one nature, His humanity being absorbed by His divinity, as opposed to the Chalcedonian Orthodox position established by the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451, which affirmed that Christ maintains two natures, one divine and one human. The Severian heresy, a form of Monophysitism was promulgated by Severus Akephalos, the most prolific of all the Monophysite writers, who was patriarch of Antioch from 512-518, and died in 538.

Henry Chadwick remarks, “So both reason and revelation were ending in an identical deadlock.... The only alternative left seemed to be sanctity and trust in God.”<sup>x</sup> Moschus also picks up this thread in *The Meadow*, where one early translation of Chapter 74 has him remarking: “Our failure to love God and our neighbor is the sole cause of the schism.” Sanctity is as essential to theology and Church unity as it is to personal salvation, and although Sophronius would eventually write lengthy theological works about the heresy, *The Meadow’s* anecdotes of ascetic life and practice were an attempt to persuade through example. Presumably, as examples, neither John Moschus nor Sophronius were lightweights.

### *The Meadow* and the Friendship

*The Meadow* reveals the relationship between Moschus and Sophronius as one of warm companionship and respect. Sophronius speaks of John Moschus as ‘my spiritual father and teacher’, while in *The Meadow*, Moschus addresses Sophronius variously as ‘my lord’, ‘the brother’, ‘my companion’, ‘Abba’, and ‘my holy and faithful son’. Moschus is undoubtedly Sophronius’ spiritual teacher, responsible for his formation, yet the relationship is one of mutual support, and an attentive reader senses the substratum of genuine friendship threading its way through the text.

The forward to *The Meadow*, a dedication to Sophronius himself is in some ways the narrative’s leitmotif, a classic beginning that has echoed through monastic trapeza readings in the Christian East for centuries:

John Eviratus<sup>4</sup> to His Beloved in Christ, Sophronius the Sophist

In my opinion, the meadows in spring present a particularly delightful prospect. They display to the beholder a rich diversity of flowers which arrests him with its charm, for it brings delight to his eyes and perfume to his nostrils....

Think of this present work in the same way Sophronius, my sacred and faithful child. For in it, you will discover the virtues of holy men who have distinguished themselves in our own times.... From among these I have plucked the finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a crown which I now offer to you, most faithful child; and through you, to the world at large....<sup>xi</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In some sources *Eviratus* is translated as “the Abstemious”, while others say its meaning is unknown.

Opposite Top: Wadi Feran Oasis, Sinai Desert, Egypt. Bottom: St. Anthony’s Monastery, Egypt.



After thirty-five years together, Sophronius is still “the most faithful child”.

Although now generally accepted, the identification of Sophronius the Sophist of *The Spiritual Meadow* with the future Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem was widely questioned in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup> Within a century of Sophronius’ death, however, the identification is so taken for granted by St. John of Damascus that he and later writers even credited “... Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem” with the authorship of *The Spiritual Meadow*.<sup>xii</sup> It is difficult to understand how such an attribution could have been made unless they possessed only portions of the text or knew of it only by hearsay. In time, Moschus’ authorship was recovered.

### St. John the Almsgiver, St. Sophronius and John Moschus: Spiritual Companions

The tragedy of the Persian invasions of the Holy Land had at least one providential fruit for the Church; the seed of piety was scattered to the wind. Driven to Alexandria, the two monks entered the service of the patriarchate, where they would find in Patriarch John the Almsgiver (+620), someone who could share in and cultivate their spiritual friendship. Providing physical and ecclesiastical refuge, he found in the monks spiritual teachers, co-workers, and friends.

Born in the mid-6th century to a wealthy family, John had pursued a secular career until the death of his wife and children, soon after which, though still a layman, he was approved as Patriarch of Alexandria (609-615) by Emperor Phocas at the request of the Alexandrians.<sup>6</sup> After his enthronement Patriarch John devoted himself to the revival of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and the relief of the poor of North Africa. (One story is told of a rich man who presented him with a magnificent bed covering; the patriarch accepted it for one night, but then sold it, and disposed of the money in alms. The rich man rebought the article and again presented it to John, with the same result. This was repeated several times, until John drily remarked: “We will see who tires first.” It was not the patriarch.) He trained clergy, built churches,

<sup>5</sup> H. Chadwick says, “[...]the study by Schonborn has been able to point to so close a verbal parallel between the patriarch Sophronius’ Sermon on the Annunciation and the sophist Sophronius’ panegyric on Saints Cyrus and John that I do not think the identification can now be seriously questioned.” (John Moschus and his Friend..., JTS, pg. 4.)

<sup>6</sup> Enthronement of a layman: In the first millennium laymen were sometimes raised to the episcopate or even consecrated as patriarch on their merit and abilities, without the current prerequisites of first becoming deacon and priest.

fought the Monophysite heresy, and devoted the wealth of the Church to orphanages, hospitals and individual charity to Chalcedonians and Monophysites alike. Succoring refugees from the Persian attacks, he assisted in the restoration of the Christian holy places after the sack of Jerusalem.

Close collaboration with such an exemplary hierarch must have been a great spiritual consolation for Sophronius and John Moschus, who were eager to serve goodness wherever they found it. Although one was a writer and the other an orator-philosopher, in the decade of service that Moschus and Sophronius gave to Patriarch John, they would almost certainly have taken a hand in his remarkable benefactions. The instance of three such renowned Byzantine Christians living and working so closely together for years—each a major figure in his own right—is found in few other places in Church history.

Unfortunately, we no longer have the original *Life of St. John the Almsgiver* by Sophronius, for which he and John Moschus would have collected material from their own first-hand experience of St. John’s remarkable rule as patriarch of Alexandria (609-619). A supplement to Sophronius’ *Life of St. John* was written some years later by Leontius, Bishop of Neapolis (Cyprus), a compatriot of Patriarch John, who was almost certainly in touch with the saint during his lifetime. Fortunately, before both the original life and the supplement were lost, they had been forged into a single text, which in turn was reworked by Symeon Metaphrastes in the 10th century and has come down to us today.<sup>xiii</sup>

Leontius writes of Patriarch John’s friendship with the two monks:

To help this glorious man towards attaining his purpose which was indeed wholly divine, the Lord sent him John and Sophronius, who were wise in the things of God and worthy of perpetual remembrance. They were really honest counselors and the patriarch gave unquestioning ear to them as though they were his fathers, and was grateful to them for being most brave and valiant soldiers in the cause of the true faith. For trusting in the might of the Holy Spirit they engaged in a war of dialectics, setting their own wisdom against that of the mad followers of Severus and of the other unclean heretics who were scattered about the country; they delivered many villages, very many churches, and monasteries too, like good shepherds saving the sheep from the jaws of these evil beasts, and for this reason above others the saintly patriarch showed special honour to these saintly men.<sup>xiv</sup>





The years spent in service to St. John the Almsgiver were, for Moschus and Sophronius, probably among the most settled and satisfying of their lives. For the patriarch, who had taken up his hierarchical duties in 609 when only seven churches of the Alexandrian Patriarchate remained Orthodox, the presence of spiritually experienced Orthodox brothers and friends, one a writer and the other an accomplished rhetorician, must have given him new heart for the struggle. And struggle they did, for by the end of John's patriarchate, Orthodoxy had increased ten-fold—there were more than seventy Orthodox churches in Egypt.<sup>xv</sup> At the end of his introduction to the *Life of John the Almsgiver*, translator Norman Baynes praises the patriarch in words that could have applied to any of the three companions: “It has sometimes been said that the ascetic ideal of the East Roman was a barren withdrawal from the world of his day; the biography of John the Almsgiver may suggest why it was that the Byzantine in his hour of need turned instinctively for aid and comfort to the ascete in the full assurance of his sympathy and succor.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Although a staunch advocate of the Chalcedonian position, Patriarch John dealt equitably with all of the Egyptian Christians, going so far as to divide the money sent by Constantinople between the needy Monophysites and the Chalcedonian Orthodox.<sup>xvii</sup> The fall of Jerusalem to the Persians in 614 flooded Alexandria with thousands of refugees, and the following year, as the Persians advanced into Egypt, John and Sophronius withdrew to Rome, possibly with the patriarch.<sup>7</sup> It was in Rome that John Moschus completed the *Leimonarion* (*The Spiritual Meadow*) and died in 619 (some claim as late as 633)<sup>8</sup>. After his repose, Sophronius fulfilled Moschus' dying request to bury his remains at St. Theodosius', the monastery of their tonsure, and thus ended the earthly term of a spiritual friendship that had lasted for almost forty years.

### Fighting for Chalcedon: The Monothelite Controversy

After the death of John Moschus, Sophronius seems to have returned to North Africa where he established a monastery, the Eukrata, near Carthage

<sup>7</sup> Some sources report that Patriarch John went to Rome, others to Cyprus.

<sup>8</sup> While most writers accept the 619 date, a few claim 633 for Moschus' death, which would have made him well over 80. If so, then Moschus either desired to stay in Rome after 614, or was in such poor health that he had to be left, while Sophronius continued their campaign against Monophysitism in North Africa, returning only in time for Moschus' death. However, it is unlike Moschus to leave his spiritual father and life-long companion, and the 619 date for Moschus death fits better with Sophronius' later solitary labors.

*Opposite: Ruins of 6th century Monastery of St. Menas near Alexandria, Egypt.*

for Orthodox monks fleeing from the Persian invasion. Among the monks he served as abbot was Maximus the Confessor, the brilliant young theologian who regarded Sophronius as his spiritual father.<sup>xviii xix</sup>

About thirty years younger than Sophronius, Maximus (580-662) was from a wealthy Byzantine family and after a period at court as imperial secretary to Emperor Heraclius, Maximus left and took monastic vows in Constantinople, eventually becoming abbot. When the Persian Sassanid Empire conquered Anatolia, Maximus left for North Africa with his disciple Anastasius, where they entered Sophronius' monastery near Carthage. It was here, under Sophronius' tutelage, that Maximus began his career as a theological and spiritual writer, later to become one of the Church's most influential theologians. Organizing earlier patristic literature into a dazzling synthesis of Orthodox thought, along with extensive original commentaries, he has left over ninety extant works.

We lose sight of Sophronius after the burial of his long-time teacher and friend at St. Theodosius Monastery, but there is reason to believe that he would have been in Jerusalem in 629 to witness Emperor Heraclius returning the True Cross, captured in 614 by the Persians. Sophronius reappears again in the chronicles in 633 when his celebrated rhetoric and oratory have him traveling to Alexandria and Constantinople to persuade their respective patriarchs and Emperor Heraclius to renounce Monothelitism, a non-Orthodox teaching that assumes a single, divine will in Christ to the exclusion of a human capacity for choice, undoing the hard-won struggle at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon.<sup>9</sup> Emperor Heraclius had adopted Monothelitism as a compromise position between the Chalcedonians and the Monophysites, and this doctrine was seconded by the three eastern patriarchs—the patriarchal throne of Antioch was temporarily vacant) and by Pope Honorius I of Rome. This left Sophronius as one of the sole voices raised in defense of Orthodox doctrine.

As hagiographers are often historians rather than theologians, almost no space has been given to Sophronius' theological writings in the English-language articles and narratives of his life. Yet, according to the Rev. Professor

9 According to Di Berardino, "In 633 Sophronius was back in Alexandria, and there witnessed the monoenergist Pact of Union (the "Nine Chapters"), by which Cyrus of Phasis in Lazika, now Patriarch of Alexandria, had healed the schism between Orthodox and Monophysites in Egypt: something that must have seemed to Sophronius the undoing of the work in which he had shared two decades earlier. He protested to Cyrus to no avail, and then made his way to Constantinople to bring his case to the Patriarch of Constantinople. As a result Sergius issued his *Psephos*, which forbade discussion of either one or two energies or activities in the Incarnate Christ. This hardly satisfied Sophronius...." (Di Berardino, pg. 304).

George Dragas of Holy Cross Theological School, Brookline, MA, Sophronius was a brilliantly skilled theologian and part of his offering to the patriarchs was an Orthodox formula of belief that he hoped would unite the two sides, which spoke of Christ as a "composite" Person.<sup>10 xx</sup> Sadly, the suit was unsuccessful, and at his enthronement as Patriarch of Jerusalem the following year, Sophronius was the only patriarch of the "pentarchy" who had remained Chalcedonian Orthodox. Immediately after Sophronius' repose, however, the Chalcedonian banner was taken up—in almost single combat—by his spiritual son and student, Maximus the Confessor, who was eventually persecuted, mutilated and exiled by the Monothelitists, dying in 662. Even so, the Orthodox cause triumphed at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680-681 and Maximus was vindicated and canonized shortly thereafter.<sup>11 xxi</sup>

### Sophronius' Later Writings

Sophronius' later writings include the previously mentioned encomium and miracles of the Alexandrian martyrs Cyrus and John. John Duffy observes that the text of the martyrs, though based on a florid rhetorical style foreign to modern readers, is not unusual, "for the art of speaking and writing according to established norms was pervasive in the ancient world, and much of ancient and medieval literature can only be fully appreciated when its artistic basis is recognized and understood."<sup>xxii</sup> As an example of Sophronius' writing, it reveals something of the personality of the author, who carefully crafted his narrative with close attention to form, composition and order. In contrast to *The Meadow*, says Duffy, in *The Miracles of Cyrus and John*, "simplicity and the ordinary take a back seat to the elaborate... in a dazzling display of talent with words and phrases...." Another characteristic of the writer is his fondness for word-play which attests to his love and mastery of language and perhaps even a sense of humor, otherwise unexpected in a work of this nature.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Sophronius' works, most of which can be found in the *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 87, include over 950 troparia and stichera covering the period from Pascha to the Ascension, and twenty-three anacreontic (classical metre) odes on such themes as the Saracen siege on Jerusalem, holy places ravaged by the Persians, pilgrimage sites, various church feasts, saints' days. Odes dedicated to friends and relations demonstrate his deep capacity for love and

10 Unfortunately, this is formula of belief is not yet translated into English.

11 St. Maximus' feastdays are August 13 and January 21.

friendship. His liturgical verse includes the troparia of the Royal Hours for Christmas and Theophany, as well as the prayer for the Great Blessing of the Waters on Theophany.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### The Life of St. Mary of Egypt

Of all of Sophronius' works, the most well-known in our day is *The Life of Our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt*, one of the most celebrated saint's lives of the Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup> Mary, a dissolute Alexandrian harlot, is mystically refused entry into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre until she begs forgiveness, repenting before an icon of the Mother of God in the courtyard. She finally passes into the church and after venerating the Holy Cross, she returns to the icon to give thanks, where she hears a voice say, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest." Leaving Jerusalem for the monastery of St. John the Baptist on the bank of the River Jordan, she confesses and receives absolution and Holy Communion. The following morning she crosses the Jordan and retires to the desert to live the rest of her life as a penitent hermit, taking with her only three loaves of bread; when they are finished she lives on what she finds in the wilderness. Approximately a year before her death, Mary encounters a monk, Zosimas of Palestine, to whom she recounts her story, asking him to meet her again on the bank of the Jordan on Holy Thursday to bring her Holy Communion. When he does so, she crosses to his side of the river by walking on the surface of the water, and after receiving Holy Communion, asks him to return once more the following Lent. Traveling to the spot, Zosimas finds her newly reposed body in the desert. He is in despair as to how he will bury her, when God sends a lion to dig out the saint's grave. Returning to the monastery, Zosimas relates her life to the brethren, who preserve it as oral tradition until it is written down by St. Sophronius some decades later.

According to Orthodox tradition Mary reposed in 522, over a century before Sophronius became Patriarch of Jerusalem. Zosimas' own later hagiography (he was also canonized by the Orthodox Church) states that he met her at age 53, and that he lived to almost 100. If these details are true, his oral account of her life could have been told to the very Palestinian monks from whom Sophronius heard the life. The narrative's details are well-rooted

12 Although the *Life* of Mary of Egypt is traditionally believed to have been written by Sophronius, a few contemporary scholars dispute this. (See Di Berardino, pg. 305.)

Opposite: Icon of St. Mary of Egypt with scenes from her life.





in history: the Monastery of St. John the Baptist existed until the Middle Ages (its remains can still be seen today); St. Zosimas was undoubtedly an historical figure; and an icon of Mary of Egypt was reportedly enshrined at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre within a few centuries after her repose.

Sophronius had a warm love for Mary and her story, and took pains to describe his reasons for writing the *Life*:

It is good to hide the secret of a king, but it is glorious to reveal and preach the works of God (Tobit 12:7). So said the Archangel Raphael to Tobit when he performed the wonderful healing of his blindness. Actually, not to keep the secret of a king is perilous and a terrible risk, but to be silent about the works of God is a great loss for the soul. And I, in writing the life of St. Mary of Egypt, am afraid to hide the works of God by silence. Remembering the misfortune threatened to the servant who hid his God-given talent in the earth (Mat. 25:18-25), I am bound to pass on the holy account that has reached me. And let no one think that I have had the audacity to write untruth or doubt this great marvel—may I never lie about holy things! If there do happen to be people who, after reading this record, do not believe it, may the Lord have mercy on them because, reflecting on the weakness of human nature, they consider impossible these wonderful things accomplished by holy people. But now we must begin to tell this most amazing story, which has taken place in our generation...<sup>xxv</sup>

He ends with:

But I, as soon as I heard it, wrote it down. Perhaps someone else, better informed, has already written the life of the Saint, but as far as I could, I have recorded everything, putting truth above all else. May God Who works amazing miracles and generously bestows gifts on those who turn to Him with faith, reward those who seek light for themselves in this story, who hear, read and are zealous to write it, and may He grant them the lot of blessed Mary together with all who at different times have pleased God by their pious thoughts and labours.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the 8th century, St. John of Damascus cites Sophronius' *Life* of Mary in his defense of images, and the Seventh Ecumenical Council, when restoring icon veneration in 787, comments that the *Life* is "full of compunction and offers much consolation to the lapsed and sinners, if they wish to desist from their evil deeds."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Uniquely, Sophronius' *Life* of St. Mary of Egypt is appointed to be read in its entirety at Matins for the sixth Thursday of Great Lent, during the lengthy Canon of St. Andrew of Crete which also commemorates her. Traditionally, this service is held on Wednesday evening, and is the only saint's life read as an official part of a church service in the annual Orthodox typicon cycle. Mary is also celebrated on the 5th Sunday of Great Lent and on April 1.

Although some modern writers dispute Sophronius' authorship, others, along with church tradition, uphold it. Written in Greek, the *Life* was immensely popular in both East and West, and was later translated into a diversity of languages including Latin, Slavonic, Russian, Georgian, French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, English, Armenian, Ethiopian, Syrian, Ukrainian, Alaskan native dialects, and recently Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and several African languages. Immensely popular in the East and throughout the Middle Ages in the West, Mary was well-known not only in continental Europe but also in Anglo-Saxon England and Medieval Scandinavia: accounts of her life still exist in both Old English and Old Norse. Today, she is frequently mentioned in modern literature as diverse as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

### Besieged; the Last Days of Byzantine Jerusalem

In 634, after his apparently fruitless visits to the eastern patriarchs and Emperor Heraclius to induce them to renounce Monothelitism, Sophronius was elected Patriarch of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Although the Holy City was no longer in the hands of the Persians (Patriarch Zacharias, the last Patriarch of Jerusalem but one, had returned from exile only five years earlier), a new threat had appeared as Islam began its sweep through the Arabian Peninsula. Mohammed had died only two years previously, and the swift allegiance he had mustered among Arab tribes proved an unforeseen danger to the eastern patriarchates still recovering from the Persian invasions. In a Conciliar Letter that Sophronius wrote to the episcopal synod in Constantinople on his elevation to the patriarchal throne, he communicated the fear of the

<sup>13</sup> While Sophronius was known throughout the Holy Land and North Africa, it is not clear whether he was already in Jerusalem or summoned there from North Africa to be patriarch. In any case, he would have been well-known in Jerusalem as not only was St. Theodosius' his and Moschus' home monastery, but they certainly would have certainly have had a hand in helping rebuild the holy sites in Palestine after the Persian invasion. Patriarch John of Alexandria, in his assistance of Patriarch Methodius of Jerusalem, was one of the largest donors to the reconstruction, and since this was their monastic homeland, they would undoubtedly have acted as emissaries.



Christian population, and his own shock at the “revolt...of all the barbarians, especially the Saracens...who with raw and cruel disposition, impious and godless audacity were ravaging the Christian community unexpectedly.” As Daniel Sahas points out, “this unexpectedly betrays how much Sophronius and the neighbouring Christians, as well as Constantinople and the Emperor Heraclius had underestimated the social and religious upheaval which was brewing among the Arab tribes inside and outside of Arabia.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

In a Christmas sermon of 634 from Jerusalem, the new patriarch laments that he is unable to serve in Bethlehem, which has already fallen to the Arabs. Sophronius likens the state of the Palestinian Christians to that of Adam expelled from Paradise and once again characterizes the Moslems as the “unwitting representatives of God’s inevitable chastisement of weak and wavering Christians.” Still, he expresses the hope that the Arabs can be defeated once the Christians strengthen their faith in God through repentance.<sup>xxix</sup>

After Christmas Sophronius tries once again, this time by a synodal letter, to reason Pope Honorius and the eastern patriarchs back to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. Sophronius’ extensive writings on Orthodoxy and Monothelism at this time include an anthology (*The Florilegium*) of some 600 texts from the Church Fathers in favor of the Orthodox position. Unfortunately, both the anthology and the synodal letter are lost, as are any responses. Any fruit borne by the letter and proofs would only manifest decades later in 680 at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople.<sup>xxx</sup>

Three years later in 637, Patriarch Sophronius delivers an Epiphany sermon, acutely aware that Jerusalem’s days as a Christian Byzantine city are numbered. The advancing Saracens, he says, leave behind a train of bloodshed, destruction, and havoc, a trail of corpses devoured by wild birds. The “villainous and God-hating Saracens” capture cities, destroy the crops, burn down towns, set churches ablaze, attack monasteries, and rout Roman armies—all the natural result of sin on the part of the Christians, and he calls his flock to repentance. With the Byzantine defeat at the Battle of Yarmuk the previous August, Damascus has also fallen, and there is little hope of Byzantine military reinforcements to man the holy city. In late spring, the Moslems begin a six-month siege of Jerusalem.

As food and water give out, the final reckoning comes in November of 637, when Abu Ubayda Ibn al-Jarrah, the general conducting the siege, issues an ultimatum of either conversion or immediate capitulation, including the

*Opposite: The Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.*

payment of indemnities and taxes by Jerusalem's Christians. Resistance, if defeated, would result in the pillaging and destruction of the city and its inhabitants.

Jerusalem had already been destroyed in the Persian attack of 614, and only regained by the Byzantine Romans in 629. Another complete destruction was unthinkable; equally unthinkable was the possibility of conversion. Even as a Christian heresy (as St. John Damascene later characterizes Islam), conversion to Islam is out of the question for the Orthodox city or its chief hierarch. Damascus has already been surrendered by its bishop in 634 as will Alexandria by Patriarch Kyros in 641, and capitulation was considered

neither treason nor apostasy. Sophronius' decision to surrender was based on a reality that had no acceptable alternatives.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In negotiating the capitulation, the patriarch had little bargaining room. Missing entirely from the Arab negotiations are the centuries of diplomatic experience that had made the Persians a familiar foe and might have allowed him to use his rhetorical



Mount of Olives (photo c. 1926), where Patriarch Sophronius met Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab in 638 to surrender Jerusalem.

gifts. The beliefs of Islam were still largely opaque to outsiders, and even if the patriarch clearly understood what the invaders professed, his classical oratory would have been of little help in confronting an almost illiterate tribal mentality.

Once again, the factor of 'unexpectedness' played in. Mohammed had died six years earlier, and few onlookers could have known that his eclectic beliefs would outlive him. To Patriarch Sophronius, the Monothelite heresy must have seemed a far great spiritual danger than the mirage of a primitive and little understood Islam. The feeling of unreality and a continuing hope that divine or human help would turn back the Arabs probably died slowly, until finally the enemy was at the door and starvation imminent.

Sophronius was alone. The two great friends of his life were dead, his eminent spiritual son far away, and there was no effective military or political

presence in the city to help shoulder the decision that was now his alone. Though he retained his strong faith in God's providence, but as a pastor and a man, it must have been a bleak loneliness.

Patriarch Sophronius' response to the ultimatum was explicit. The city would capitulate, but only to Islam's second caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab (634-44), a personal friend of Mohammed who had defeated the Sassanid Persian Empire in less than two years. In his article on the capitulation, Daniel Sahas questions whether this was a symbolic act of defiance towards Abu Ubayda, who had held the city in siege, or whether Sophronius had information on Umar's qualities as a person and a ruler that made him want to negotiate with him personally. Was this condition an exercise of the patriarch's "independent ethnarchic role" in the absence of any other political or military authority, or did he believe that only a ceremonial capitulation would benefit Jerusalem's dignity and sacredness? It may have been for all of these reasons, and the result was that the caliph, after receiving news of Sophronius' request, immediately rode from Syria, arriving in Jerusalem on a camel in February of 638.

Umar encamped at the Mount of Olives, where he met the patriarch; in one account of the encounter, Sophronius offered him a clean gown while his travel-worn cloak was cleaned, a custom that continues today as a sign of Middle Eastern hospitality.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Immediately after signing the capitulation, the two descended the Mount of Olives and entered Jerusalem, where Caliph Umar was ceremoniously shown over the Christian holy places by Patriarch Sophronius. In an account three centuries later by the educated Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius Sa'id Ibn Batriq (935-40), when the gate of the city was opened, the caliph entered with his entourage, and went first to the Church of the Resurrection. As the time of Moslem prayer approached, the caliph expressed a desire to pray, and the patriarch, to whom the request was neither strange nor problematic, responded, "...pray in the place you are now." The caliph replied that he did not want to, nor would he pray at their next stop, the Church of St. Constantine. Instead he went out to the eastern gate and prayed alone on the steps, telling the patriarch that if he had prayed inside, the Christians would have lost the church after his death, "because the Moslems would say, 'Umar prayed here.'" The commander then composed an edict forbidding Muslims to gather in the churches of Jerusalem or in Bethlehem for communal prayers, nor could they be called there to prayer by a muezzin. They could only pray in a church as individuals.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

If this story is true, then this, one of the earliest Christian-Muslim encounters, has at its center an exchange about prayer. Although Patriarch Sophronius left no account of the capitulation or his feelings about it, the Greek sources on the conquest of Jerusalem emphasize the advantageous negotiations he made for the city; his insistence on meeting the caliph face-to-face had obtained protection for Christian Jerusalem. Still, it must have been a bitter surrender.

Within a few weeks, relations with the Arabs took a harder turn. Sixty Christian soldiers arrested after Gaza submitted under siege were imprisoned in Jerusalem, where they were given the choice of conversion or martyrdom. Hearing of their plight, Patriarch Sophronius brought supplies, sacraments and spiritual encouragement, and after the execution of the first nine (the others were martyred a month later), buried their bodies on the grounds of a new church he was building in memory of St. Stephen the Protomartyr.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Actively attending to the spiritual needs of his flock, the patriarch strengthened them for martyrdom with his own hope in Christ.

A month later, in March of 638, Patriarch Sophronius reposed in Jerusalem; some accounts relate that his death was hastened by grief at giving up the holy city. A long and varied life of deep personal friendships and an unremitting struggle for personal virtue, for the integrity of Orthodox dogma, and for the defense of Christian Byzantium had not found him wanting in either love or faithfulness. ✝

<sup>i</sup> Angelo di Berardino, "John Moschus," *Patrology: The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon to John of Damascus*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, England, 2008, pgs. 301-3.

<sup>ii</sup> "Sophronius", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, 1984, pgs. 355-356.

<sup>iii</sup> H. Chadwick, "John Moschus and His Friend Sophronius the Sophist", *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., Vol. XXV, pt. 1, April, 1974, pg. 48.

<sup>iv</sup> Di Berardino, *Ibid.*, "Sophronius of Jerusalem," pgs. 303-304.

<sup>v</sup> Chadwick, *Ibid.*, pg. 49.

<sup>vi</sup> Intro/Trans. John Wortley, *The Spiritual Meadow (Patrum Spirituale)* by John Moschos, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1992, c. 102, pg. 82

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. xviii-xix.

<sup>viii</sup> Chadwick, pgs. 48-49.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 71.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 72.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

<sup>xii</sup> Chadwick, pg. 49.

<sup>xiii</sup> Dawes and Baynes, trans., *Three Byzantine Saints*, (Intro., "The Life of St. John the Almsgiver"), SVS Press, New York, 1948 (1977), pgs. 194-196.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 242.

<sup>xv</sup> Di Berardino, "John Moschus," *Patrology: The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon to John of Damascus*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, England, 2008, pgs. 301-3.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dawes and Baynes, pg. 198.

<sup>xvii</sup> Note from conversation with Fr. George Dragas, Holy Cross School of Theology, Brookline, MA, Nov. 13, 2009.

<sup>xviii</sup> Conversation with Fr. George Dragas, Holy Cross School of Theology, Brookline, MA Nov. 13, 2009.

<sup>xix</sup> Di Berardino, "Sophronius of Jerusalem", pg. 304.

<sup>xx</sup> Conversation with Fr. George Dragas, Nov. 17, 2009.

<sup>xxi</sup> Di Berardino, pgs. 304-5.

<sup>xxii</sup> John Duffy, "Observations on Sophronius' *Miracles of Cyrus and John*", *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., Vol. 35, Pt. 1, April 1984, pg. 71.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.* pgs. 73-74.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Di Berardino, "Sophronius of Jerusalem", pg. 306.

<sup>xxv</sup> Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, *The Life of Our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt*, St. Nectarios Press, Seattle, WA, 1975. Pgs. 1-2.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 37.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *St. Mary of Egypt: Three Medieval Lives in Verse*, R. Pepin and H. Feiss, trans., Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 2006, pgs.10-11.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, "The Face to Face Encounter Between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph 'Umar Ibn Al-Khattab: Friends or Foes?" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2006, pg. 34.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 35.

<sup>xxx</sup> "Sophronius", *Ency. Brit.* *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxi</sup> Sahas, pg. 37.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 38.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza (BHL 5672m)", at <http://www.ucc.ie/milmart/BHL5672m.html>.