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THE USE OF THE TERM *PHYLARCHOS* IN THE ROMAN-BYZANTINE EAST

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## The Use of the Term *Phylarchos* in the Roman-Byzantine East

During the past several decades, interest has focused on the role of the Arab nomad, generally known as Saracens, within the political and military structure of the provinces of the Byzantine East. Roman authorities, as is well known, enrolled Arab tribes as *foederati* to keep peace along the broad frontiers of the eastern provinces and to serve as an auxiliary fighting force in Rome's wars against the Persians and Goths. Some scholars have perceived a change from the fourth century on in the way in which Rome organized these relationships by giving one tribal chief authority over other tribes; that is, giving him control over other tribal chiefs. For the designated chief Roman authorities used the term "phylarch" (φύλαρχος) as an official administrative title, a title derived from Greek historical antecedents.

M. Sartre found the first indication of this process in Cyril of Scythopolis' account of the Persian phylarch Aspebetos who, unhappy over the Persian treatment of Christians, defected with his tribe (c. 420) to the Romans. Anatolius, then *magister militum* of the East, received the tribe, enrolled its members as *foederati*, and conferred upon Aspebetos the position of phylarch (φυλαρχία) in Arabia. Sartre remarks that Aspebetos became "le chef de tous les Arab nomades" in the Roman province of Arabia, and "pour la première fois, un phylarque arab étend son autorité sur d'autres tribus que la sienne propre grâce à Rome; pour la première fois, la φυλαρχία est un titre administratif romain, répondant à une charge précise et confiée par Rome dans le cadre d'une province romaine. C'est une étape intéressante car elle marque un pas de plus vers l'intégration des tribus nomades dans l'organisation militaire et administrative de l'Empire. De simple alliés admis en territoire romain, les nomades deviennent, au temps d'Aspébet, l'une des composantes de l'administration romaine en Arabie." Sartre was aware of the ambiguity in the term phylarch since it was used to denote a tribal chief not only of Saracens but of other tribal organizations; but, "il est des cas où ce titre, reconnu par Rome, acquiert une valeur officielle et le phylarchat devient un titre romain."<sup>1</sup>

I. Shahid pursued this same theme in several of his studies on the relationships of the Arabs to Byzantium. In his view, the word *phylarchos* became, towards the end of the fourth century, the standard term designating the Arab tribal chief allied to Rome.<sup>2</sup> The transliteration of the Greek word into Latin *phylarchus* "reserved the use of the term to the Arab chief and

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<sup>1</sup> M. Sartre, *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine* (Brussels 1982), 150 and 152. See also Theodoretus of Cyprus, *H.R.* 26.15 edited by P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen in *Sources Chrét.* CCL VII,II (1979), 193. With the appearance of the word phylarch, the editors note: "Titre donné aux chefs de tribus arabes fédérées (Saracènes) avec mission d'assurer la garde du *limes* correspondant au titre de *dux*. In *R.E.* Suppl. XI (1968) F. Geschnitzer has presented an almost exhaustive survey of the appearance of the word *phylarchos* in a variety of historical sources. He does not, however, enter into a discussion of the term as an official administrative title.

<sup>2</sup> *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Dumbarton Oaks 1984), 31.

this contributed to the emergence of the phylarchate as a distinctive military office."<sup>3</sup> Shahid was aware, as was Sartre, that there was some ambiguity in the use of the word in Greek sources and cites Sozomenus *H.E.* 6.38.14-16 where the term is used in the literal sense of a tribal chief but with the suggestion that he was also a *foederatus* of Rome.<sup>4</sup>

In a work dealing with the fifth century, Shahid is more explicit in stating that the term phylarch emerges clearly "as a technical term that designated the Arab chief who was a federate of Byzantium." He goes on to say that in the sixth century, "the phylarchate became an office in the Byzantine administrative system in the Orient, and when the title phylarch is used in texts that document Arab-Byzantine relations, it almost certainly means an Arab official in the services of Byzantium, a *foederatus*, not a tribal chief, a *sayyid* or *shaykh*. This is seen in the use of the term νέος in one of the Nessana papyri."<sup>5</sup> To Shahid, Zokornos, rather than Aspebetos, became "a phylarch in the new sense of the term as an administrative title" (*ibid.* 44, n. 99). The significance of the two words νέος φυλάρχω in the undated fragment, *P. Ness.* 160.6 is, in Shahid's view, a reference not to a tribal chief (*shaykh*), but to a "Byzantine phylarch in the technical sense" (*ibid.* 144-145), i.e. to an Arab newly appointed by the Romans as a *foederatus*.

A further development took place in 530/1. Justinian, in an attempt to counteract the military successes of Mundhir, the Saracen ally of the Persians, decided to, in Procopius words, "put in command as many tribes as possible, Arethas, the son of Gabalas, who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia, and bestowed upon him the dignity of king" (Bell. 1.17.47). Shahid viewed this decision of Justinian as creating a hierarchy among Saracen tribal chiefs: "a unified organization comprising all his Phylarchs under the leadership of one Phylarch, consequently around the year 530 A.D. he (Arethas) was made Supreme Phylarch."<sup>6</sup> In using the term Supreme Phylarch, Shahid was adopting Nöldeke's description of Arethas' new status as "Ober-Phylarch."<sup>7</sup>

The above outlines the position of Sartre and Shahid with respect to the development of the word *phylarchos* as an official administrative title. This writer takes a contrary position, namely that the word was not part of the official terminology of the Roman government, and that the word means, in dealing with Saracens, a tribal chieftain, a *sayyid* or a *shaykh* or a *malik* (king). I take this position despite the two statements of Procopius on the issue. In speaking of the successes of Mundhir, he mentions the inability of the Roman *duces* and any leader (ἡγούμενος) of the Saracens allied (ἐνσπόνδων) with the Romans, who are called "phylarchs" (φυλάρχοι) to cope with the Persian Saracens.<sup>8</sup> On another occasion, after re-

<sup>3</sup> *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks 1984), 516.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 211. Cf. p. 298 for an unsupported inference that the deceased head of a tribal organization (*phylarchia*) deep in Sinai had been a *foederatus* of Rome.

<sup>5</sup> *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks 1989), 500-501.

<sup>6</sup> *B.Z.* 50 (1957), 46, 56, 61, 63. See also *op. cit.* (above, n. 3) 20, 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Die Ghassânischen Fürsten aus dem Haus Gafna's* (Berlin 1887), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Bell. 1.17.46: "...neither any commander of the Roman troops, whom they call 'duces' nor any leader of the Saracens allied with Romans who are called 'phylarchs'..." The *ut appellant(ur)* formulas in this citation of Procopius has led P.H. Lammens to believe that Justinian "créa pour eux (the Ghassanids) la dignité de *phylarque*." (*La Mecque à la veille de l'hégire*, ix, fasc. 3 [1924], 244). As A. and A. Cameron have demonstrated,

ceiving the Palm Groves as a present from Abocharabus, the ruler (ἄρχων), Justinian appointed him phylarch (φύλαρχον over the Saracens in Palestine (*idem*, 1. 19. 10). The third and last reference in Procopius to the term phylarch comes in connection with a pagan Saracen tribe known as the Maddeni who were subject to the Homeritae. Justinian sought the latter as an ally in his war against the Persians and suggested that the fugitive Caisus be appointed phylarch over the Maddeni since he was by birth of "phylarchic rank" (ὁ δὲ Καϊτὸς οὗτος γένος μὲν ἦν τοῦ φυλαρχικοῦ).<sup>9</sup> It is clear from this reference that Caisus was a descendant of men who held the rank of phylarch, not as *foederati* of the Romans, but as *shaykhs* or kings of the Maddeni. An even more compelling statement on the issue of appointment is provided by Theophanes, who reports for the year 563 that Arethas, patricius and phylarch of the Saracens, went to Byzantium to inform the emperor which of his sons should hold his position in the tribal organization as phylarch (φυλαρχία) (Chronogr. [de Boor], 240).

As for the words νέφ φυλάρχω in *P. Ness.* 160.6, the fragmentary condition of the document does not lend itself to be taken as evidence of a newly-appointed federate of Rome. Secondly, the editor of the document, who used the word "newly-appointed," upon which Shahid based his interpretation, mistakenly considered that the fragment related in some way to a liturgical official with the title of phylarch, a title used in Egypt that did not survive the third century.<sup>10</sup> At best, the Nessana document appears to have been part of a letter requisiting certain foodstuffs to be given "to the new phylarch" for an unknown purpose.

Phylarchs, insofar as they were Arab tribal chieftains, were not appointed by government officials, but acquired the title by right of succession. This was the case, among others, of Mauia who succeeded her husband at his death, of Terebon, the son of Aspebetos, of Mundhir, the son of Arethas, of Naaman, the son of Mundhir. The position of a phylarch as a *foederatus* was determined by a treaty or contract (ὑπόσπονδος), written or oral, in which the amount and kind of *annona*—in money (ρόγα) or in kind (ρουζικόν)—that he would receive from the government for his services and that of the tribe (or tribes) under his control. The treaty might also have included the right to raid enemy territory and to keep the booty acquired during his service as a *foederatus*. It is in this connection that the political administration considered the chieftain the ἄρχων of his tribe(s) φύλη. He was answerable to the government in consideration of the *annona* that was granted him; and when that was not forthcoming, the phylarch considered that he was no longer bound by the treaty.<sup>11</sup>

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historians of the late empire have employed these formulas as a display of erudition in imitation of earlier writers (*Class. Quart.* 14 [1964], 324-327).

Procopius was certainly not unfamiliar with the term "duces" as military officers, and with "phylarchs" as tribal leaders. The context of 1.17.46 deals with Saracen phylarchs who were allied with the Romans and not with phylarchs in general.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, 1.20.10. See also E. Honigman, *CSCO* 146, Subsidia 7, 136.

<sup>10</sup> *Excavations at Nessana* III, C.J. Kraemer, ed. (Princeton 1958), 323. The document is dated paleographically to VI/VII.

<sup>11</sup> *E.g.*, Naaman, the son of the Ghassanid Mundhir, rose up against the Emperor Tiberius and plundered Roman territory, not only for imprisoning his father, but also because Tiberius "cut off our food supplies (*annona*) so that we have no means of living" (John of Ephesus, *H.E.* III 42, *CSCO* 106, *Scriptores Syri* 55,

It is also doubtful whether the Roman government, on its own authority, could place tribes under the leadership of one phylarch without the willingness of the tribal leaders themselves. The statement of Procopius that Arethas was placed in command of *as many tribes as possible*, is an indication that Arethas had to negotiate his position with other tribal leaders who, for a variety of reasons, especially the consideration of material benefits, may or may not have agreed to serve under him. The idea that Arethas could exercise effective control over *all* Saracen tribes federated with Rome, is difficult to accept if one considers the geographical distribution of Arab tribes over the vast eastern frontier. From Justinian's point of view, his primary objective was to amass an army of Saracens large enough to neutralize the activities of Mundhir in the area of the Persian conflict. Equally difficult to accept is the view of Sartre that Aspebetos, a recent Persian ally, could receive the obeisance of *all* the Arab nomads in the Roman province of Arabia.

In the matter of usage, the term phylarch has a long history, from the Classical period on, during which time its meaning changed in accordance with the character of the group of persons under the leadership of an individual. In a general sense, a phylarch was the head of a group of families, or of a body of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor, or of an official in charge of a tribal unit of operation including a political division. During late antiquity, the term had no precise specific meaning that would limit its use to a particular organized group of people, a fact that militated against it becoming an official title in the Roman hierarchy. A prime example can be found in Sozomenus whom Shahid cites as providing the first suggestion of the use of the term phylarch as an official administrative title. In *H.E.* 6.38.14 Sozomenus refers to Zokomos, the Saracen converted to Christianity, as a phylarch; but at the outset of his history (1. 1.3), Sozomenus cites Judah, the son of the biblical patriarch, as a phylarch. Similarly, John Chrysostom uses the word phylarch in connection with biblical tribal leaders, but he also employs the word, in the usage of the Classical period, as a military officer.<sup>12</sup> Libanius, demonstrating his knowledge of the historical past, also uses the word for an officer of a cavalry unit.<sup>13</sup> For Epiphanius, the term phylarch is applied solely to the tribal leaders of the Hebrew Bible,<sup>14</sup> while Dio Cassius cites Sporaces as the phylarch of the city of Anthemousia in Mesopotamia.<sup>15</sup> Five hundred years later, Nicephorus calls Omar, the Umayyad Caliph, "phylarch of the Saracens" (*op. cit.* [n. 11], 24 and 26).

As for restricting the meaning of phylarch to Roman federates, the word is found in association with a variety of other ethnic tribal groups, including Saracen allies of Persia. Comes Marcellinus reports for the year 536 that Chabos and Hesidos, phylarchs serving under the Persian Saracen Mundhir, attempted to move into Roman territory with their tribes.<sup>16</sup>

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132). For other examples of Romans renegeing on their agreement, see Theophanes, *Chronographia* (de Boor), 336; Nicephorus, *Opusc. hist.* (de Boor), 23.

<sup>12</sup> *P.G.* 48, col. 922; *P.G.* 57, cols. 74 and 179; *P.G.* 61, col. 582.

<sup>13</sup> *Or.* 25, 58.3 (R. Foerster); *Decl.* 26, 16.10.

<sup>14</sup> *Haer.* (K. Holl) 25, 187.21; 37, 127.8; 37, 464.18.

<sup>15</sup> *Hist.* 68.21. For the city of Edessa, see J.B. Segal, *Edessa* (Oxford 1970) 17.

<sup>16</sup> *P.L.* 51, col. 943. See also Theophanes *Chronographia* (de Boor), 141, who notes for the year 497/8 that the Saracen allies (ὑπόσπονδοι) of the Persians "were of the tribe (φυλῆς) of the phylarch Naaman."

The *Bibliotheca* of Photius provides a wide range of phylarchs who cannot be considered Roman *foederati*. Mundhir, the Persian Saracen is cited as a phylarch, as well as a phylarch(s) of Goths, of Blemmyes, of Burgundians, and of Slavs.<sup>17</sup>

The documents from Roman Egypt add yet another wrinkle to the way in which between 245/8 and 285/7 the term phylarch was used for liturgical officers of the city of Oxyrhynchos which was divided into φυλαί. In the year in which a φυλή provided the liturgical services, its officer was called ὁ τῆς πόλεως φυλάρχος (sc. of the city of Oxyrhynchos; *P. Harr.* 64.4-11).<sup>18</sup>

Some years later (c. 500), several documents from Nubia dealing with Blemmyes and Noubades attach quite a different meaning to the term. According to T.C. Skeat, local tribal leaders appear to have been called "Kings" (*Basileis*), who owed allegiance nominally to the Chief King (*Basiliskos*). The sons of these tribal rulers were called phylarchs and *hypotyran-ni* (princes and princelings).<sup>19</sup> In sum, the use of the term phylarch in Greek historical literature shows considerable variation in meaning and in application which, if used as an official administrative title, could only lead to misinterpretation and confusion. Viewed in another way, the word φύλαρχος is no more a Roman-Byzantine administrative term than ἄρχων is or ἡγούμενος.

There is an even more compelling argument, an argument *ex silentio* to be sure. If, as Nöldeke and Shahid believe, Greek terms of such Roman ranks as *illustris*, *spectabilis*, *clarissimus*, and *gloriosissimus* were translated into Syriac,<sup>20</sup> there should be the reasonable expectation that the term *phylarchos* would also be translated if it were an official title. It is not found. Writers in Syriac—for example, Zacharias Rhetor, John of Ephesus, Joshua Stylites—who record the conflict between Rome and Persia and their Saracen allies in Mesopotamia, do not employ any term suggesting a translation of Greek *phylarchos*. Tribal leaders of the Tayyaye (Saracens) were generally called *riše* or *rišane*, simply meaning "head(s)," the Syriac equivalent of ἄρχων and ἡγούμενος. The other designation in Syriac for a tribal leader is *malkā* "King." Perhaps the best example of the proper use of both "King" and "phylarch" is to be found in Ammianus Marcellinus (24.2.4) when he refers to the Saracen Podosarces as the "Malechus Podosarces tribal chieftain of the Assanitic Saracens" (... *malechus Podosarcis nomine*, phylarchus Saracenorum Assanitarum).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> R. Henry, ed. (Paris 1959), I, 4, 30; 167, 42; 179, 2; 181, 39; 182, 10-11; 172, 30; 9, 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Before 245/8 the officer was called amphodogrammateus, after 285/7 systates. The phylarch was also involved in the administration of the dole. For this office see A. Moscardi in his introduction to *P. Oxy.* 3137; D. Hagedorn introd. to *P. Köln* II 87; J.R. Rea, introd. to *P. Oxy.* vol. 40, pp. 6-8; N. Lewis, *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt*, Pap. Flor. XI, Firenze 1982, 52 s.v. φυλάρχης; and P. Mertens, *Les services de l'état civil*, Acad. Royale de Belgique, Mem. 53.2, Bruxelles 1958, 16-30.

<sup>19</sup> *JEA* 63 (1977) 164. See also J. Rea, *ZPE* 34 (1979) 147-162.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* (n. 7) 13-16; *BZ* 52 (1959) 334-337.

<sup>21</sup> Lately R. Paret's note on a passage of Malalas concerning Arab phylarchs (*Islamica* 5 [1958] 251-262) which, among other issues, shares the main point of this paper has come to this writer's attention.