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New Light on Early Christianity in Nubia: The Martyrium of Saint Athanasios of Clysma

Vassilios CHRISTIDES

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VASSILIOS CHRISTIDES

NEW LIGHT ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN NUBIA:
THE *MARTYRIUM* OF SAINT ATHANASIOS
OF CLYSMA

Information about the early spread of Christianity in Nubia is scanty. The Christian zeal of Justinian, combined with the prospect of practical benefits for the State, led him to the decision to send Christian missions beyond the orbit of Byzantium¹. The veracity of the well known story reported by John of Ephesus, that Justinian sent an Orthodox mission to Nubia through southern Egypt while his wife Theodora sent a Monophysite one, is beyond the scope of the present study².

The question which naturally arises next is whether and how Christianity which was widespread in Egypt from the time of the Roman persecution and with which Nubia was inextricably linked, reached Nubia before the official efforts of the Byzantines to establish it there³.

* I would like to thank Prof. Chrysa Maltezou for inviting me to contribute to this volume, which is dedicated to Prof. D. Zakythinos who was not only a learned scholar of international repute but also an outstanding teacher to many generations of students.

1. For such Byzantine missions in Egypt and Nubia, see A. VON HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, Leipzig 1924, p. 705 ff.— See also G. FIACCADORI, «Theofilo Indiano I: Le Origini», *SCO* 33 (1983), pp. 295-331.— IDEM, «Theofilo Indiano II: Il Viaggio», *SCO* 34 (1984), pp. 271-308.

2. G. VANTINI, *Christianity in the Sudan*, Bologna 1981, p. 36 ff.— D. LETSIOS, *Βυζάντιο και Ερυθρά Θάλασσα. Σχέσεις με τη Νουβία, Αιθιοπία και Νότια Αραβία ως την αραβική κατάκτηση*, Athens 1988, pp. 277-279, where there is the relevant bibliography.

3. J. CUOQ, *Islamisation de la Nubie chrétienne VII^e-XVI^e siècles*, Paris 1986, pp. 7-8.

Numerous ceramics bearing Christian inscriptions dated to about the 3rd-4th centuries indicate a possible spread of Christianity in Nubia even at this early period⁴ (Fig. 1). Hagiography, which has not yet been adequately studied, could offer us valuable information to supplement the ceramic evidence. L. Török expresses some doubts about exclusive reliance on the ceramic evidence⁵. Of course, the hagiographical works should be used cautiously, since certain mythical elements crept into these narratives, whose purpose is to edify the faithful⁶.

One of such hagiographical works, hitherto unused for the study of Christianity in Nubia is the «Martyrium of Saint Athanasios of Clysma» (3rd c. A. D.). It was written by an anonymous eyewitness who, as H. Delehayé points out, must have been a local person, judging by the accuracy of the topography⁷. Saint Athanasios of Clysma lived in the 3rd c. A. D. at the time of Diocletian and Maximian. He was a friend of the latter, who appointed him Governor of Egypt: ζώννυσι μὲν αὐτὸν ἔπαρχον πάσης τῆς Αἰγύπτου ἕως τῶν Ἄνω Θηβαίων⁸. He went to Alexandria, where he met bishop Petros. From there he was sent to Clysma (near modern Suez), known in Arabic as Qulzum. There, instead of persecuting

4. V. CHRISTIDES, «Nubia and Egypt from the Arab Invasion of Egypt until the End of Umayyads», *Études nubiennes* 1 (1992), figs. 2a and 2b, and fig. 1 of the present study.

5. L. TÖRÖK, *Late Antique Nubia*, Budapest 1988, p. 70.

6. For hagiography in general see the seminal work by R. AIGRIN, *L'Hagiographie*, Poitiers 1953, especially pp. 132 ff., where the author discusses the *Martyria*; for a new approach see the recent article by VAN UYTFANGHE, «L'hagiographie: un "genre" chrétien ou antique tardif», *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993), pp. 135-180; a comprehensive use of hagiographical works is to be found in CHRISTIDES, «Once Again the "Narrations" of Nilus Sinaiticus», *Byzantion* 43 (1973), pp. 39-50.

7. See an extensive analysis in H. DELEHAYÉ, «Les martyrs d'Égypte», *AB* 40 (1922), pp. 5-154, 299-364.

8. A. PΑΡΑΔΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ-ΚΕΡΑΜΕΥΣ, Ἀνάλεκτα ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς σταχυολογίας 5, Petrogard 1888 (repr. 1963), p. 361.

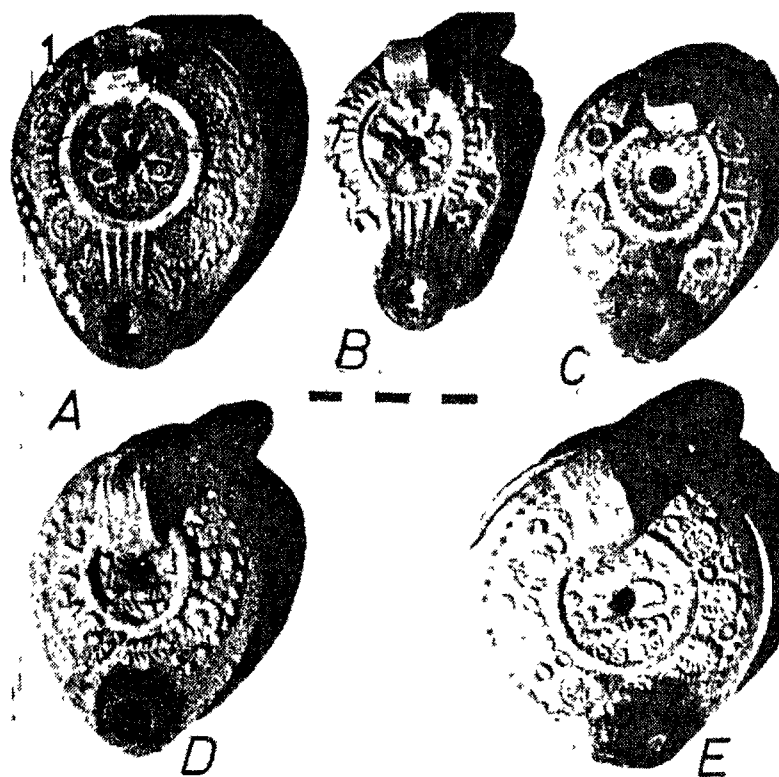


Fig. 1. Nubian ceramics bearing Greek inscriptions (PELLICER, M., et al., *Las necrópolis merouticas del grupo «X» y cristianas de Nag-el-Arab* (Argin, Sudan), Madrid 1965, Fig. XVI.)

the Christians, he joined them in espousing Christianity. Enraged, the Roman Proconsul arrested him and decapitated him.

Our hagiographical text records the importance of the Red Sea port of Clysma, as the head of the Gulf of Suez, where Saint Athanasios was sent by the Proconsul of Egypt. It is called Κλύσμα κάστρον (castle) in the sixth-century *Synecdemus* of Hierocles (map 1), indicating that it was a town with a fortress⁹. The Romans had build a fortress at Clysma or reinforced a previously existing one because it lay at the vital entrance of the Trajan canal, which led via the River Nile through Heliopolis to Alexandria (map 2). The canal, which had existed in Pharanonic times¹⁰, was restored by Trajan, fell into disuse later and was repaired again by the Caliph 'Umar I in 643/4. It was renamed after him «Khalidj Amir al-Mu'minin»¹¹.

It is noteworthy that the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios attests to the existence of a substantial number of Christians in Clysma as early as the third century: ἀκούω γὰρ πολλοὺς χριστιανούς εἶναι ἐκεῖ¹². It was natural, therefore, that Christianity spread from there as far as Berenike at the other end of the chain of Egyptian coastal towns (map 2)¹³.

The question is whether Christianity, moving further along the coastal towns of the Red Sea, reached Nubia at this early period. The town of Clysma became an important Christian

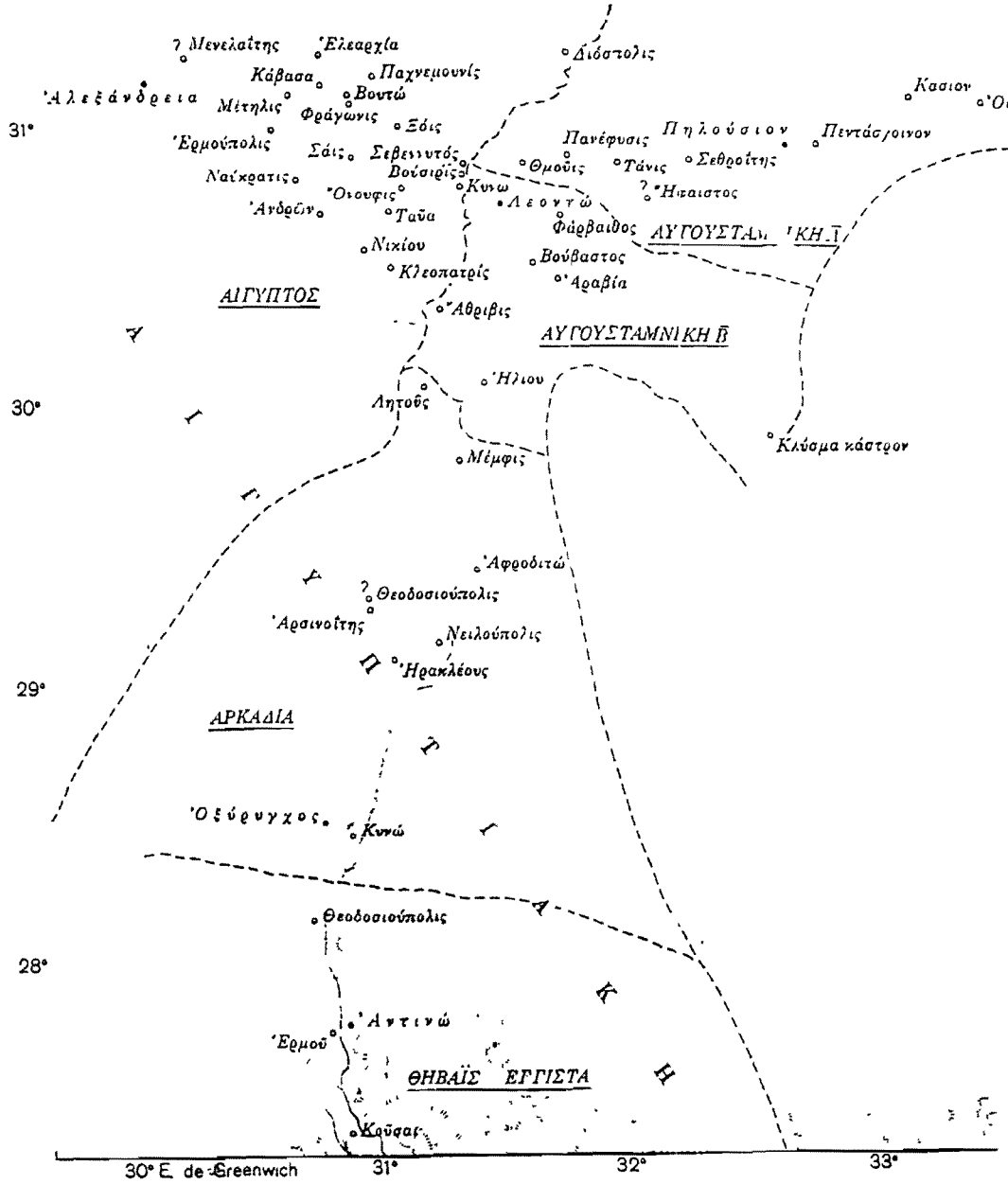
9. E. HONIGMANN, ed., *Synecdemus* of Hierocles, Brussels 1939, p. 46.

10. A. M. SAYED, «New Light on the Recently Discovered Port on the Red Sea Shore», *Chronique d'Égypte* 58 (1983), fasc. 115-116, p. 31.

11. E. HONIGMANN and R. Y. EBIED, «Al-Kulzum», *EF*², V (1986), 369 and C. H. BECKER and C. F. BECKINGHAM, «Bahr al-Kulzum», *EF*², I (1967), pp. 932-933, giving all relevant references to the Arabic sources; see also S. E. SIDEBOTHAM, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa 30 B. C.- A. D. 217*, Leiden 1986, p. 68.

12. PAPAPOPOULOS-KERAMEUS, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

13. For the causes of the rapid spread of Christianity in general see D. PRAET, «Explaining the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Older Theories and Recent Developments», *Sacris Erudiri* 23 (1992-1993), pp. 5-119.



Map 1. Clysma kastron in the *Synecdemus* of Hierocles (ed. E. HONIGMANN, 1939).

center in Egypt and was one of the first Christian bishoprics¹⁴. It is noteworthy that some holy places near the Red Sea, like the cave of Saint Paul, attracted pilgrims from early times¹⁵. Moreover, Clysma became the spearhead for the expansion of Christianity by way of the Red Sea to Nubia and Ethiopia. In the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios we find allusions to Nubia in Saint Athanasios' prayer just before his death: ἀνάστησον δέ, κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, τὰ σκῆπτρα τῶν χριστιανῶν βασιλέων ἐν τε τῇ Ρωμαίων πόλει καὶ Αἰθιοπία¹⁶. The term «Αἰθιοπία» here most probably does not apply to Ethiopia but rather to both Nubia and Ethiopia. Likewise Herodotus calls Meroitic Nubia «Αἰθιοπία» (II. 89). Greek, Roman and Byzantine authors often confused the terms Ethiopian, Nubian and Indian, and used them indiscriminately¹⁷.

As mentioned above the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios confirms the archaeological evidence for the early spread of Christianity to Nubia. It also shows that it was introduced via the Red Sea. A. S. Atiya expressed the view that Christianity reached Ethiopia via the Red Sea but entered Nubia upstream along the Nile valley¹⁸. Nevertheless, Christianity entered Nubia also through the Red Sea, as clearly shown not only in the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios but also in the *Synaxarium Arabo-Jacobiticum*.

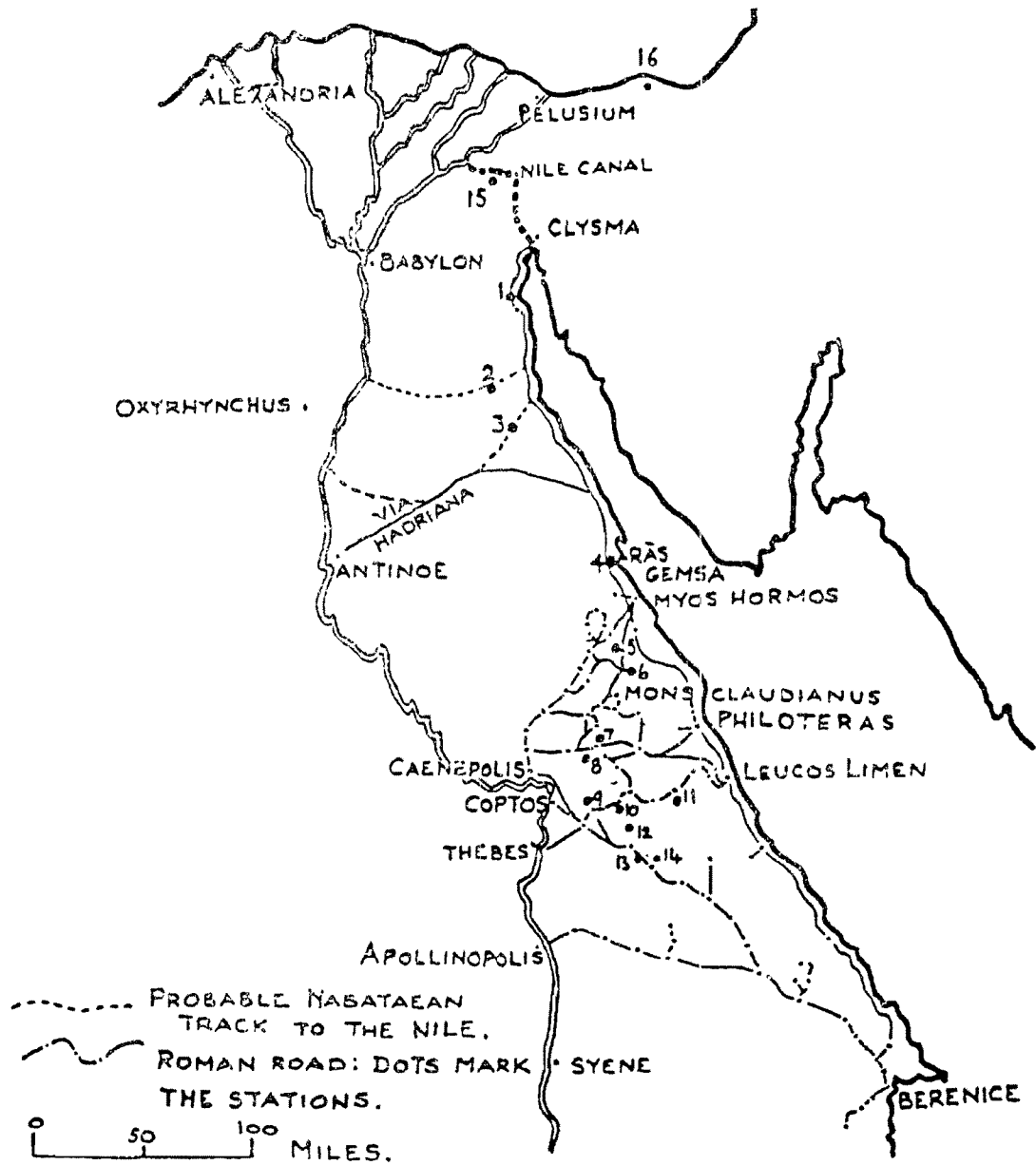
14. A. H. M. JONES, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd ed., Amsterdam 1983, p. 494, where the author gives references to the administrative position of Clysma.

15. P. MARAVAL, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient*, Paris 1985, p. 82.

16. PAPAΔOΠOYΛOΣ-KEPAMEYΣ, op. cit., p. 367.

17. CHRISTIDES, «Arabs as "Barbaroi" before the Rise of Islam», *Balkan Studies* 10² (1969), pp. 315-324—U. P. ARORA, «India vis-a-vis Egypt-Ethiopia in Classical Accounts», *Graeco-Arabica* 1 (1982), p. 131 ff. — PII. MAYERSON, «A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources», *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.2 (1993), pp. 169-174; for a panoramic view of the meaning of Αἰθίωψ and the position of blacks as evidenced in Byzantine sources, see A. KAPOZELOS, «Η θέση των Μάυρων στη βυζαντινή κοινωνία» in *Οι Περθωριακοί στο Βυζάντιο*, Athens 1993, pp. 67-81.

18. A. S. ATIYA, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, London 1968, p. 457.



Map 2. The Trajan Canal in Roman times. (E. LITTMAN, «Nabataean Inscriptions from Egypt», *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 15 (1961), p. 28)

In the *Synaxarium Arabo-Jacobiticum* there are clear references to the early Christianization of Nubia via the Red Sea through the agency of the Beja-Blemmyes, whose habitat, though variable, was usually between the Red Sea and the River Nile¹⁹. There is a reference to a roaming bishop of Aydhab whose territory, inhabited by the Beja-Blemmyes, included the area between Qift and Aydhab and was covered by him and one priest and one deacon. The Beja-Blemmyes carried the bishop on their camels along with the holy objects. Aydhab, a waterless port on the Red Sea, 12 miles north of Halayb, at 22° 20' N., 36° 29' 32'' E., acquired great importance in the Islamic period because of its location on the route to Mecca via Jedda²⁰. (Map 3).

In the early Christian period described by the *Synaxarium Arabo-Jacobiticum*, we find naval activity in the Sea of Qulzum and it is noteworthy that merchants and sailors are mentioned as receiving Holy Communion in the ports of this sea²¹.

لان ابونا اقتوا ذلك الكرسي منذ الديو من اجل التجار والنواخيد الذين
يسافرون في البحر الاحمر كي يتقربوا

Sailing in the Sea of Qulzum was always chancy and often perilous because of the strong winds and shallow water²². Ibn Hawqal²³ (middle of the 10th c.) remarks that ships sailed in the Red Sea only during the day and anchored at night.

19. R. BASSET, ed. and trans., *Synaxarium Arabo-Jacobiticum* (anonymous), in *Patrologia Orientalis* 3³, no. 13, Paris 1907 (repr. Turnhout [Belgium] 1982), p. 499 ff.

20. H. A. R. GIBB, «Aydhab». *EI*², I (1967), p. 782.—N. ÉLISSÉEFF, et al., *Mission soudano-française dans la Province de mer Rouge (Soudan)*, Lyon 1981.

21. Ed. R. BASSET, op. cit., p. 500. For the activities of the Beja-Blemmyes in the sea of Qulzum in the pre-Islamic period, see J. DESANGES, *Recherches sur l'activité des Méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique*, Paris 1978, p. 361.

22. M. LESOURD, «Notes sur les Nawakhid, Navigateurs de la mer Rouge», *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.* 22 (1960), p. 347 ff.

23. IBN HAWQAL, *Kitāb Sūrat al-Ard* (Configuration de la terre), eds. and trans. J. H. KRAMERS and G. WIET, I, Beirut-Paris 1964, p. 43.

In spite of all these dangers the Byzantine sources inform us that seafaring and seaborne trade continued from the fourth century until the seventh²⁴.

To resume, the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios offers us an additional piece of evidence concerning the maritime activities of the port of Clysma-Qulzum in the third century A. D. and the vitality of Christianity in the town at that time. Sailors and merchants were not afraid to load and unload their merchandise, which originated in Africa or was transhipped from China via the Red Sea. The port of Qulzum must have been well equipped to meet the needs of such a flourishing trade. Yāqūt describes how the waterless Qulzum was supplied by water brought from far away²⁵.

Sailors and merchants were the apostles of Christianity in Nubia and Africa before any official missions were sent there. Starting in the fourth century, their activities continued until the Arab conquest of Egypt. Their impact on the spread of Christianity in Nubia, whether Orthodox or Monophysite, has not yet been adequately studied.

Concerning the text of the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios, first published by Papadopoulos-Kerameus²⁶, a new edition is now in preparation by the present author together with its Arabic translation (Cod. Sinait. Arab. 440 and 535)²⁷. A comparison will also be undertaken with the incomplete Ethiopic version²⁸.

24. CHRISTIDES, «Some Remarks on the Mediterranean and Red Sea Ships in Ancient and Medieval Times: A Preliminary Report», *Tropis* 1 (1989), p. 76, with the relevant references.

25. YAQUT, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, ed. F. JUNDI, I, Beirut 1990, p. 440.

26. PAPADOPOULOS-KERAMEUS, op. cit., note 8 of the present work.

27. A. ATIYA, *The Arabic Manuscripts of Mount Sinai*, Baltimore 1955, p. 13, 21. For the manuscript of the Greek text, see F. HALKIN, *Bibliotheca hagiographica graeca* I, 3rd ed., Brussels 1957, pp. 70-71.

28. I. GUIDI, *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (1911), p. 351.— M. VAN ESBROECK, «L'Éthiopie à l'époque de Justinien: S. Arethas de Neḡrān et S. Athanase de Clysma».

Finally it should be noted that the literary activities of the Christians in Qulzum, where the *Martyrium* of Saint Athanasios was written, continued until at least the tenth century. An Arabic manuscript dated to 354/965 informs that the author wrote at Qulzum a hagiographical text on the passion of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem²⁹.

29. J. MEIMARIS, *Κατάλογος των νέων αραβικών χειρογράφων της Μονής Αγίας Αικατερίνης του Όρους Σινά*, Athens 1985, p. 24, note 13.

