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***AND A GREAT SLAUGHTER OF ROMANS OCCURRED:  
THE FALL OF TAORMINA IN 902 AND ITS ECHO IN THE  
BYZANTINE ECUMENE***<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract:* The following paper deals with the fall of Taormina to the Arabs of emir Ibrāhīm II of Ifrīqīya in 902. The way in which this event was written about is noteworthy since we usually do not see such qualifications reading this kind of texts. We examine not only Byzantine histories and chronicles, but other narratives in Greek from Sicily and Southern Italy, how they wrote about these events and what kind of language did they use. We especially pay attention to the use of the ethnonyms *Romans* and *Christians* in these writings, uncovering a set of meanings and the salience of Byzantine identity, shifting from the Sicilian to the Constantinopolitan and general Byzantine perspective. Thus, a local version of the story of the Arab conquest of Sicily and Southern Italy echoes in other Byzantine narratives, where we see a distinction from the first texts that mentioned the fall of Taormina, and later authors who either preserved the initial narrative course of events or failed to do so.

*Keywords:* history of Taormina, Sicilian history, Arab conquest of Byzantine Sicily, Byzantine history writing, Byzantine identity, St Elijah of Enna.

The Arab conquest of Byzantine Sicily was a major historical event, since it left the Christian Roman Empire without its largest island. It took place in the turmoil of the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Arabs also managed to deprive Byzantium of Crete and many territories in Southern Italy. Chronologically speaking, the invasion started in 827 and it was over in 965 with the second fall of Rometta, the last Byzantine stronghold in Sicily. What was started by the Aghlabid emirs from *Ifrīqīya* (Arab North Africa with its centre in present-day Tunisia), a century later was accomplished by the Sicilian Kalbid emirs, protégés of the strong Fatimid caliphs from Egypt. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium tried to retake Sicily

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Fig. 1 detail from *Madrid Skylitzes fol. 110v* depicting the fall of Taormina.

Сл. 1 детаљ из *Madrid Skylitzes fol. 110v* који приказује пад Таормине.

for the last time but failed. With the Norman arrival in Sicily, the Byzantines lost their once biggest island forever. Nevertheless, the key moment during the Arab conquest of Sicily occurred during the reigns of Byzantine emperors Basil I the Macedonian (867-886) and his son and heir, Leo VI the Wise (886-912). They had the responsibility to hold off the Aghlabids, who were little by little bringing the whole island to their rule. Although some cities were occupied already in the first half of the century, Byzantium faced its largest loss when emir Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad (875-902), simply known as Ibrāhīm II, took Syracuse on 21<sup>st</sup> May 878. Syracuse was significant since it was the capital of the Sicilian *thema* and thus the island's most important city. Another valuable city that fell to the Arabs was Taormina, on 1<sup>st</sup> August 902. It is a strategically significant city East of Etna, on the shores of the Ionian Sea between Syracuse and Messina. The fall of Taormina in 902 was the real loss of Sicily for Byzantium, even though, as we have said, it would take the Arabs almost an entire century to conquer all Byzantine outposts in the island.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on the subject of Byzantine presence in Sicily and Arab conquest of the island is too numerous to be cited here, thus here is a brief list of useful and relevant titles: V. von Falkenhausen, *La dominazione bizantina nell'Italia meridionale dal IX all'XI secolo*, Bari 1978; J. Shepard (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge 2008, 395-464, 537-582; S. Cosentino, *Storia dell'Italia meridionale (VI-XI secolo) da Giustiniano ai Normanni*, Bologna 2008; A. Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, Edinburgh 2009; A. Nef, V. Prigent (éds.), *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam*, Paris 2010; M. Di Branco, K. Wolf, *Hindered passages. The Failed Muslim Conquest of Southern Italy*, Journal

What is interesting here is just how was this event viewed in Byzantine sources. Taormina's fall gives us an insight into the Byzantine perspective and the correlation of events linked to the loss of Sicily with the rest of the Empire and the Byzantine emperors themselves, mainly Leo VI. Byzantine historians from Constantinople, writing from the capital's perspective and primarily focused on the events regarding the emperors, such as Symeon Logothete and the so-called *Theophanes Continuatus*, note that during the fall of Taormina in 902 'a great slaughter/murder of Romans occurred'.<sup>4</sup> This explicit appellation of Taormina's inhabitants as *Romans*<sup>5</sup> is rather unusual in such sources. It is unusual because we are dealing with a reference to a distant, Sicilian, provincial city. When we encounter such passages, the local population or inhabitants of a provincial town are usually portrayed as 'men/people' (λαός), 'populace' (πλῆθος), 'locals' (ἐγχώριοι), 'those [who dwell] inside the city' (οἱ ἔνδον τῆς πόλεως), or something else in a similar fashion. That being said, it is very interesting that Byzantine historians who were not from Sicily or Southern Italy chose to refer to the Taormina's inhabitants as Byzantines, i.e. *Romans*, instead of applying this name only to the Byzantine army or those who were from the Empire's centre and the capital itself.

In evaluating this question, we can refer to a local chronicle that covers the Arab conquest of Sicily.<sup>6</sup> It is preserved in two languages – Greek (of which we have two manuscripts, in Paris and in Vatican) and Arabic (in Cambridge, leading the scholars to name this anonymous work as 'The Cambridge Chronicle').

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of Transcultural Medieval Studies (Vol. 1, No. 1), (2014), 51-74; L. C. Chiarelli, *A History of Muslim Sicily*, Malta 2018<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> παρελήφθη ἐν Σικελίᾳ τὸ Ταυρομένιν ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀφρων τῇ ἀμελείᾳ, μάλλον δὲ προδοσίᾳ Εὐσταθίου, δρουγγαρίου τῶν πλοῦμων, καὶ Καραμάλου ἐκεῖσε ὄντος, καὶ Μιχαὴλ τοῦ Χαράκτου, γενομένης πολλῆς σφαγῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων (Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon, rec. S. Wahlgren, Berlin-New York 2006, 133.34); τοῦ δὲ στόλου ἐν Σικελίᾳ Ταυρομένιον ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀφρων παρελήφθη καὶ πολὺς τῶν Ῥωμαίων φόνος ἐγένετο (Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus, rec. I. Bekker, Bonn 1838, 365.3-6); this is also evident later in the work of John Scylitzes: ὁ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν στόλος τὸ ἐν Σικελίᾳ ἐξεπολιόρκησε Ταυρομένιον, καὶ πολὺς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἐγένετο φόμος (Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis Historiarum, ed. I. Thurn, Berlin-New York 1973, 181.19-21).

<sup>5</sup> The people whom we today call 'Byzantines' are in Byzantine sources always *Romans*. For various understandings of Byzantine identity, cf.: H. Ahrweiler, *Byzantine concepts of the foreigner: The case of the Nomads*, in "Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire", eds. H. Ahrweiler & A. E. Laiou, (Washington DC 1998), 1-15; M. McCormick, *The Imperial Edge: Italo-Byzantine identity, movement and integration*, in "Studies on the Internal Diaspora", 17-52; C. Carras, *Greek identity: A long view*, in "Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory", ed. M. Todorova, (London 2004), 294-326; I. Stouraitis, *Roman identity in Byzantium: a critical approach*, Byzantinische Zeitschrift (vol. 107, no. 1), (2014), 175-220; A. Kaldellis, *The Social Scope of Roman Identity in Byzantium: An Evidence-Based Approach*, Βυζαντινά Σύμεικτα (τόμ. 27), (2017), 173-210; idem, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2019; J. Haldon, Y. Stouraitis, *Introduction: The ideology of identities and the identity of ideologies*, in "Identities and Ideologies in the Medieval East Roman World", ed. Y. Stouraitis, (Edinburgh 2022), 1-16.

<sup>6</sup> La cronaca siculo-saracena di Cambridge con doppio testo greco, scoperto in codici contemporanei delle biblioteche vaticana e parigina, per G. Cozza-Luzi e Can. B. Lagumina, Palermo 1890.



Fig. 2 detail from *Madrid Scylitzes fol. 111v* depicting the sack of Thessalonica.

Сл. 2 детаљ из *Madrid Scylitzes fol. 111v* који приказује похару Солуна.

The versions vary to some extent regarding the providing information, but usually both have the same passages in these two languages. The Greek manuscripts are more concerned about the Christian population in Sicily and their history regarding martyrs, bishops, etc. For example, in the Greek version, it is stated that in 845/46 Arabs had slaughtered 9000 *Christians*.<sup>7</sup> This form of appellation for the local, native Sicilian population is of no surprise if we imagine a chronicle concerning Christians under Muslim rule. However, an examination of the ethnonyms in the chronicle will lead us to realise that Byzantines are called all collectively 'Christians' in this text. This is the case for example when the Byzantines captured Arab ships near the coast of the Byzantine *thema* of Hellas.<sup>8</sup> Far clearer example is in 895/96 when ἐγένετο εἰρήνη μέσον τῶν χριστιανῶν καὶ σαρακινῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ βουλχάσεν τοῦ ἀμηνρά.<sup>9</sup> This means that in the chronicle we do not find any use of the term 'Roman' but only 'Christian', since they mean the same thing – *Christian Romans*, i.e. Byzantines. That being said, we also see the chronicler's need to distinguish Sicilian Byzantines from the rest by calling the first οἱ τῆς Σικελίας χριστιανοί.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ἐσφάγησαν τῶν χριστιανῶν χιλιάδες θ (ibid., 26); ἐσφάγησαν χιλιάδες θ' χριστιανοί (ibid., 100).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 32. We have a similar example again in ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 40.

On the other hand, we can verify this stance if we take a look at the Arabic version of the same chronicle. In every line of the Greek text where we encounter 'Christians', in the Arabic manuscript we see 'Byzantines/Romans' (the Arabic collective form (*Rūm*)), both in the instances where we have Greek χριστιανοί, or when in the Greek version the subject is not explicitly named but it is clear from the context who it is.<sup>11</sup> This word is used in Arabic to denote both Byzantines and Orthodox Christians. Similarly, when in the Greek manuscripts we have Σαρακηνοί (*Saracens*, i.e. Arabs) we find in the Arabic version (Muslims). It means that ethnic and religious designations (Roman/Christian and Saracen/Muslim) refer to the same group of people and that in a way they are synonymous, depending only on the language which one will be applied. Additionally, we know that 'Christians' was only used for Byzantines (Sicilian or other) and not for other Christian groups, because we see the term Φράγγοι (Franks) in the Greek manuscripts indicating Frankish rulers and their men.<sup>12</sup>

If we were to read how does the chronicle describe our key events regarding the fall of Syracuse in 878<sup>13</sup> and Taormina in 902,<sup>14</sup> we would not find any reference to a potential slaughter of Christians/Romans in these cities. Such descriptions are to be found regarding mostly Palermo, since it was the capital of Arab Sicily.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to Taormina and its fall in 902, the chronicle stops narrating the plunders of the future emir Abd Allāh II (902-903) and explains how the old emir Ibrāhīm II led a great army, from both Ifrīqīya and Sicily, and took Taormina with no reference to any slaughter of the city's inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Only in the Parisian manuscript we see a corrupted sentence regarding the defeat of the Sicilian *strategos* Balsacius/Barsacius<sup>17</sup> by Arabs in 881/882 as 'ετράπη ὁ πολέμιος βαλ... εἰς ταυρωμέν... καὶ ἐσφαγ... πολ...' <sup>18</sup> but we cannot entirely comprehend the meaning of the sentence since the later part is omitted in other versions of the text, even though we can clearly see the verb σφάζω and the adjective πολύς.

It is obvious that the chronicle used extensively this kind of formula for the murder of the local population, but it is not to be seen in Taormina in 902 and in general the Greek manuscripts speak exclusively of 'Christians'. However, we have seen that it is only a synonym for the Byzantines, no matter if they were from Sicily or somewhere else in the Empire. We should now turn to Byzantine historians and chroniclers from Constantinople, who described the fall of the

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 25, 27, 33, 35, 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 109. This can be corroborated in other Sicilian narrative sources in Greek, e.g., when we see the difference between 'our Christians' (Byzantines) and Longobards: cf. C. Rognoni, *Au pied de la lettre ? Réflexions à propos du témoignage de Théodose, moine e grammaticus, sur la prise de Syracuse en 878*, en « La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam », 221.

<sup>13</sup> La cronaca siculo-saracena, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., when Abd Allāh II reached Palermo from Ifrīqīya: ἐπίσθη ἡ πάνορμος ὑπὸ τοῦ βολαμβῆς καὶ ἐγένετο σφαγὴ μεγάλη (*ibid.*, 38).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> On Barsacius cf.: Von Falkenhausen, *La dominazione bizantina*, 79-80.

<sup>18</sup> La cronaca siculo-saracena, 104.

city in a much more dramatic manner than the author(s) of the Sicilian chronicle. We also need to examine the context of the capital's historians, because they focused foremost on the emperors and their reigns.

In their narratives, Taormina's fall, like the Syracuse's fall 24 years earlier, was linked to the foundations constructed under the members of the Macedonian dynasty. Before Syracuse fell to the Arabs, we have a description of how Basil I was preoccupied with the foundation of his remarkable palatine church, the so-called *Nea* (New). Since the Byzantine fleet was engaged in its construction, it could not make it in time to assist the besieged Syracusans, which led to the city's fall and its destruction following the conquest. Although authors differ as in who was it to blame for such a tragic event and what happened exactly in the first place, all are unanimous that the succour from Constantinople was not there in time. On the other hand, the fall of Syracuse had no immediate consequences for the rest of the Empire – at least that is what we read in the sources, who manipulate the events' chronology and place Byzantine army's successes and failures before or after the city's fall.<sup>19</sup>

We find a similar pattern for the Taormina's fall. Even though the details are different in each individual text, their stories have a somewhat identical plot: while emperor Leo VI was in Constantinople preoccupied with the foundation or restauration of several notable churches, the Arabs from Sicily conquered Taormina in 902 and killed a great number of *Romans*. Afterwards, the Arabs of Leo of Tripoli<sup>20</sup> from the other side of the Mediterranean took Lemnos. At the end of the narrative course, we see the incident when emperor Leo was wounded by accident in the Constantinopolitan church of St Mocius and it was foretold to him that it was a sign that he will reign for 10 more years after which he would die. Until the last days of his reign, he had to deal with Arabs who were still threatening the Aegean basin.<sup>21</sup> The prophecy was fulfilled and the emperor died in 912. So, the story starts with the emperor's foundations, it mentions the fall of Taormina and Lemnos under the Arabs, and it ends with the prediction of the emperor's death, while the 'slaughter of the Romans' is only attributed for the fall of Taormina (and not Lemnos e.g.).

We think that the reason for this peculiar passage regarding Taormina is the result of a narrative course of events, where the fall of this Byzantine city personifies plausible dangers and actual calamities that befell both the Empire and *the emperor of the Romans* himself. The bringers of these calamities were

<sup>19</sup> Chronographiae quae Theophanis continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur, ed. A. Kambylis, rec. Ihor Ševčenko, Berlin 2011, 69-70; Symeonis Magistri, 132.12; Theophanes Continuatus, 691.15-16; Ioannis Scylitzae, 158.26-160.68, 262.16-20; Ioannis Zonarae Epitomae historiarum vol. IV, ed. Ludwig Dindorf, Leipzig 1899, 33.12-25. The two distinct traditions that have originated about these events we can see in *Vita Basilii* (or the whole *Theophanes Continuatus*) and Symeon Logothete, who generally disagree on their evaluation of the Macedonian emperors (cf. B. Станковић, *Цариградски патријарси и цареви Македонске династије*, Београд 2003, 19-20).

<sup>20</sup> On Leo of Tripoli, cf. A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* vols. I-III, New York-Oxford 1991, 1216.

<sup>21</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, 364-366, 376-377, 704.3-707.18; Symeonis Magistri, 133.33-38, 133.62; Ioannis Scylitzae, 180.14-183.36, 191.3-8; Ioannis Zonarae, 42-45.

Arabs, coming from different directions towards Byzantine territories. After the falls of Taormina and Lemnos, it was feared that, as the sources testify, Leo of Tripoli might attack Constantinople itself, but alas he was stopped at Hellespont and thus he turned towards Thessalonica, that he sacked on 31<sup>st</sup> July 904. In Thessalonica we also find a great slaughter and bloodshed, however the sack of this very important Byzantine city was not described with more detail than Taormina by the Constantinopolitan writers, nor were the Thessalonians characterised as *Romans*.<sup>22</sup>

It seems then that there is something special about the case of Taormina and the description of its fall – which was described in the same way as the Cambridge Chronicle labelled other events concerning slaughters of Sicilian Christians.<sup>23</sup> Yet we have two very important cities, provincial and ecclesiastical centres, taken by Arabs in a quarter of a century (878-904), and Taormina stands aside as a *Roman* tragedy, greatly differing from Lemnos, even though at a first glance they both seem similar. We could say that Taormina was important for it represented the loss of Sicily, and although this may be true, it is from our later perspective that we can claim this, since it was not a Byzantine manner to view things as such – mostly because the centre of the province – Syracuse – and its fall was seen as the real loss of the island among later Byzantine historians.<sup>24</sup> Also, Taormina does not have a narrative text describing its own fall and sacking, as the other two very important cities for the story of Arab conquests during the first Macedonian emperors – the so-called *Letter* of Theodosius the Monk<sup>25</sup> and John Caminiates's *Capture of Thessalonica*.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the story of Taormina among Constantinopolitan authors was constructed on the basis of the idiom employed by the local Cambridge Chronicle and other Sicilian and South Italian texts, but for a different occasion, i.e. Taormina in 902.

I find crucial for understanding these (rather important) nuances another local Byzantine text from Italy, written sometime in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is the anonymous *Vita of St Elijah the Younger*, written by one of his disciples after the saint's death.<sup>27</sup> St Elijah of Enna, also known as St Elijah the Younger, was a Sicilian and South Italian Byzantine monk from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. He was born John Rachites around 823 in Enna, a city in central Sicily, and he was a youth when African Arabs started invading the island. He was even taken hostage and brought to Africa. Later in his life John/Elijah travelled to the Holy Land, parts of the Balkans by the Ionian Sea, and Italy. He died on his way to visit emperor Leo VI, in Thessalonica on 17<sup>th</sup> August 903. After his death, his disciples returned his body to the monastery he had founded in Salinae in

<sup>22</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, 368.1-5, 705.13-708.3; Symeonis Magistri, 133.40; Ioannis Scylitzae, 184.7-15.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. pp. 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (cf. V. R. Samčević, The Most Noble Part of the Empire: *The Image of Italy and Sicily in 11th-Century Byzantine Historiography*, Collection of Papers of the Faculty of Philosophy LIV (3), (Kosovska Mitrovica 2024, 213-236).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Rognoni, *Au pied de la lettre*, 205-228.

<sup>26</sup> Ioannis Caminiatae De expugnatione Thessalonicae, rec. Gertrud Böhling, Berlin-New York 1973; cf. Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 1098-1099.

<sup>27</sup> Vita di Sant'Elia il Giovane, ed. Giuseppe Rossi Taibbi, Palermo 1982.

Calabria (today Seminara in the province of Reggio Calabria). St Elijah of Enna had, according to his *vita*, a gift of foresight, so he is often compared in the text to the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament, and his prophecies are very important in his *vita* for they are one of the greatest of his miracles. He is not to be confused with St Elijah Spelaeotes, another 10<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine saint from Calabria who dwelled in a cave close to Melicuccà, near Salinae. The two homonymous saints have been in later tradition mistakenly regarded as the same person, although St Elijah Spelaeotes was younger than his namesake from Enna and, according to the *vita* of St Elijah Spelaeotes, they even met.<sup>28</sup>

In the *vita* of St Elijah of Enna, we can trace this connection of Sicily and the rest of the Byzantine *ecumene*, during the events after the fall of Syracuse until the fall of Thessalonica. Just how closely were these two incidents seen, we can observe by realising that the text claims that even prior to 886 (i.e. from at least 880 to 886 – years prior to that are not mentioned in detail, since only around that time Elijah returned from the Levant to Sicily) the Byzantine emperor was Leo VI and not his father Basil I.<sup>29</sup> Already this mistake in the *vita* (which is renowned for its historical accounts)<sup>30</sup> indicates how the later occurrences from the reign of Leo VI influenced the author to place all the incidences with Arabs in Sicily and Southern Italy to the reign of the same emperor, Leo VI.

Since St Elijah of Enna was like his namesake from the Kingdom of Israel, he too was foretelling his contemporaries the tragedies that were about to befall them for their sins. While he was in Taormina, Elijah warned the citizens that the Arabs will take their city; later while he was in Amalfi, he saw in a vision that the Arabs of Ibrāhīm II took Taormina following a great slaughter of Christians, as he had foreseen.<sup>31</sup> So, the text periphrastically says that many Christians were murdered, i.e. many *Romans*. A similar pattern in the *vita* can be found for the previous year, when Ibrāhīm's son Abd Allāh II took Reggio in 901<sup>32</sup> (which is, as we have seen, mentioned in the Cambridge Chronicle but not in other Byzantine sources). Taormina, taken by the old emir Ibrāhīm II in 902, was of greater significance than the raid of his son in 901 when he conquered a city in Italy – at least that is what we can deduct from the information given to us by Byzantine historians.

However, there was another story in the *vita* that did not find its way to the histories written in Constantinople. After Ibrāhīm II took Taormina, according to the *vita*, he continued his conquest further into the Byzantine territory, landing in Italy and besieging Cosenza. The *tyrant* (as the *vita* characterises Ibrāhīm) did not by his actions only attack Christians, but Christ himself<sup>33</sup> (and

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. D. Hester, *Monastic spirituality of the Italo-Greek monks*, in "Greek Monasticism in Southern Italy: The Life of Neilos in Context", eds. B. Crostini and I. A. Murzaku, (London-New York 2018), 17-43.

<sup>29</sup> *Vita di Sant'Elia il Giovane*, 480-484.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1002-1007, 1022-1035, 1047-1059, 1107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 847-848, 875-902.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1105-1119. Also, this is not the only time that an emir is characterised as



if we read Christians as Romans, the Roman Empire itself, embodied in the Christ's representative on Earth – the emperor). In this kind of context, while besieging Cosenza and threatening Christendom (who's political centre was in Constantinople), Ibrāhīm II died thanks to the prayers of St Elijah of Enna: “Ὁ τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν καταλήψεσθαι κακεὶ τελευτᾶν οἰωνιζόμενος Βράχιμος, τῇ εὐχῇ τοῦ δικαίου καταβλήθεις, ἐν Κωνσταντίᾳ τῆς Ἰταλίας δεινῶς τετελεύτηκεν.”<sup>34</sup> So, the death of Ibrāhīm II on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 902 caused by dysentery, 22 days after the beginning of the siege, was credited, in the *vita*, to St Elijah – thus the holy man saved Christendom (and the Roman Empire) by the virtue of his prayer and stopped the tyrant besieging one Italian *Constantine* city (keep in mind the Greek form *Konstantia* for Cosenza), that if it was to be conquered would finally lead to the fall of *the* Constantine's city, i.e. Constantinople. Employing this paronomasia, the author of the *vita* clearly indicates the existing connection inside the Byzantine ecumene – if the enemy of Christians/ Byzantines is not stopped in the periphery, he will continue to the Empire's centre. And the starting point for this enterprise was not the fall of Reggio in 901, nor Syracuse in 878, but the fall of Taormina in 902. Luckily for Christendom and Romans, St Elijah, by his virtue and miracles, was able to halt the tyrant already at Cosenza.

This episode of the *vita* is in accordance with a message of Leo VI sent to St Elijah, earlier in the text, to *pray for the Empire and the whole polity*.<sup>35</sup> The *topoi* of Leo's admiration for the saint and the praiseworthy depiction of the same emperor are omnipresent in the text.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Leo VI calls St Elijah to come to Constantinople after the events of 902, where in the *vita* we see the same motive of fear that Constantinople is in danger of Syrian Arabs, as in the Byzantine narrative historical texts – however, while in Thessalonica, travelling towards the capital, St Elijah tells his entourage that the Arabs would not be able to make it past the Hellespont, but will sack Thessalonica instead, which surprised some of them greatly, especially those from Constantinople.<sup>37</sup> It was yet another of Elijah's visions that came true, but he had died in Thessalonica before ever reaching the capital, and his remains were translated to Calabria the following year, just a few months before the Arab sack of the city.<sup>38</sup>

All these episodes of Elijah's life portray him as a personification of Byzantines and their encounter with Arabs, be it the ones from Africa or Syria. His birthplace of Sicily was conquered by Arabs, he died in a city that was finally sacked by Arabs, and he never reached Constantinople – as nor did the ‘adversaries of Christians’. He was the one who, always according to his *vita*, stopped the Arab emir in Italy from reaching Constantinople. Interestingly

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tyrant in the *vita*, e.g. *ibid.*, 322.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1121-1124.

<sup>35</sup> Ἐφθασε δὲ καὶ μέχρι βασιλείας ἢ αὐτοῦ φήμη· ταῦτα μαθὼν ὁ μνημονευθεὶς εὐσεβέστατος βασιλεὺς Λέων ἐθαύμαζε καὶ ἐμήνυνεν αὐτῷ ὑπερεὔχεσθαι τῆς βασιλείας καὶ τοῦ παντὸς πολιτεύματος (*Ibid.*, 997-1000).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 480, 1432, 1630-1635.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1478-1484.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1495-1596.

enough, we also see in later Arab historians that they portray this intention of emir Ibrāhīm II to take Constantinople at one point during his reign, although *he died in the country of the Rūm, in a place called Cosenza*.<sup>39</sup> It seems that St Elijah and other Byzantines from Sicily and Southern Italy, who often migrated to the Balkan parts of the Empire running from the Arabs, were the transmitters of these narratives (such as those from the Cambridge Chronicle or Elijah's vita) that at the end, found their way to the texts composed by the authors from Constantinople. Only for them, the initial threat from Ibrāhīm II has shifted to and merged with the activities of Leo of Tripoli. The Sicilian and Italian migrations to the Balkans (especially in Peloponnese and Corfu, but we can trace people from Calabria and Sicily even as far as Thessalonica and Constantinople) are well documented in this vita and can be found in other texts as well.<sup>40</sup>

The narratives from Sicilian and Italian Byzantines reached the capital, and the ongoing menace from the Arabs, both from Africa and Syria, became one threat for the whole Empire and so the activities of Ibrāhīm II and Leo of Tripoli became segments of the same story, as we can observe in the texts of the Constantinopolitan authors. At the same time, Leo VI (so important for the vita of St Elijah) and his destiny are intertwined with the losses to the Arabs, from Taormina in 902, followed by Lemnos and Thessalonica. Just as many Romans were slaughtered in Taormina, the incident in the church of St Mocius signified the emperor's future end. The fall of Taormina was a danger for Constantinople, but the advent of Arabs stopped at Thessalonica. That is why we find a different name for the people of Taormina, and the need for their appellation as such in the first place, that they were Romans – and not Christians as usually in local Sicilian and Italian texts. The salient identity in the face of a war with Muslims is *Christian*, however if you are writing about the emperor and the Empire, the *Roman* identity will be the salient one – both meanings constitute an identity of the same group, and it is only a matter of circumstances (or context) which one will become the most salient and thus be exploited.<sup>41</sup>

Lastly, we can see this connection of Taormina's Romans with the fall of Thessalonica and the threat to Constantinople in later Byzantine narratives, where some who did not pay attention to this peculiarity of Taormina's fall (i.e. that Romans had been killed in the city) fail to see the whole picture and miss the nuanced undertone. For example, Pseudo-Symeon Magistrus, writing probably at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and who mostly found his information in *Theophanes Continautus* and Symeon Logothete<sup>42</sup> (sources in which the killed inhabitants of Taormina are *Romans*), omits this qualification and says only that the city was handed over to the *Agarenes*.<sup>43</sup> More than a century later, John

<sup>39</sup> Di Branco, Wolf, *Hindered passages*, 55-56.

<sup>40</sup> The best example is in Vita di Sant'Elia il Giovane, 1460-1464; Cf. Theophanes Continautus, 368.6-16.

<sup>41</sup> On the salience of identity and identity meanings, cf. M. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, Hove-New York 2004; P. J. Burke, J. E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, Oxford-New York, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 1983.

<sup>43</sup> τοῦτ' αὖ τῷ καιρῷ παραδίδοται Ταυρομένιον τοῖς Ἀγαρηνοῖς (Theophanes Continautus, 704.6-7).

Zonaras while also omitting to describe the slaughter of Romans in the fallen Taormina (although he does say that many men perished in both Taormina and Lemnos), in his narrative about Leo VI even misses out the opportunity to mention the fall of Thessalonica in 904.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, John Scylitzes, who was also writing his history many years after the Arab conquest of Sicily, by keeping the original narrative from the 10<sup>th</sup> century was able to transfer (intentionally or not) the original concept of Roman disaster at Taormina,<sup>45</sup> all the way to the capital (and the emperor), finally resulting in the fall of Thessalonica. This idea of transfer of the original meaning and its importance can be confirmed by taking a look at a manuscript of Scylitzes's history with illustrated miniatures – Biblioteca Nacional, Vitr. 26-2, simply known as the *Madrid Scylitzes*.<sup>46</sup> On fol. 110<sup>v</sup> we can see a scene of Arabs taking Taormina (Ταυρομένιον - Ἀγαρηνοί) (fig. 1) and below a scene of Leo VI in St Mocius with no caption. These two scenes were probably regarded as the most important in this part of the text, and thus we can visually relate the fall of Taormina with the incident at St Mocius's church that both symbolised a turmoil for the Empire. Even though in the caption above the scene of Taormina there is no mention of *Romans* (which is present in the text itself), the caption for the scene of the sack of Thessalonica on fol. 111<sup>v</sup> writes Ἀγαρηνοί – ἡ Θεσσαλονίκη – αἰχμάλωτοι **Ρωμαῖοι** – στόλος Ἀγαρηνῶν (fig. 2). In the case of Taormina *Romans* are present in the text but not in the caption, and in the case of Thessalonica it is vice versa<sup>47</sup> – the captions' author<sup>48</sup> wrote resumes of the main text, trying to make the meaning of the narrative as clear as possible and thus there are no Romans in the caption for Taormina, but he found it suitable to mention them for Thessalonica, since the word was missing from the main text. In this way the Roman character of the chain of events from 902 to 904 and their significance for the Roman emperor and the Empire remain obvious. The information preserved in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by John Scylitzes thus found its way to a manuscript from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (which was, lest forget, later found very near Taormina).<sup>49</sup>

In Scylitzes's example we can observe the echo of the initial narrative found in the primary sources from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, who were themselves influenced by the same ideas and idioms found in Sicilian and Italian Byzantine texts (i.e. the Cambridge Chronicle and the vita of St Elijah of Enna) but modified to fulfil the needs of their respective genre and purpose. The view on the fall of Taormina is thus a product of different narratives and their retelling or rewriting, which was in some cases missed but in others preserved. In another place of his history, when he starts again writing about the position of Byzantine Italy

<sup>44</sup> Ioannis Zonarae, 42-45.

<sup>45</sup> Ioannis Scylitzae, 181.19-21.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. A. Grabar, M. Manoussacas (éds.), *L'illustration du manuscrit de Scylitzès de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid*, Venise 1979.

<sup>47</sup> In the text itself in Ioannis Scylitzae, 184.7-15.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Grabar, *L'illustration du manuscrit*, 13-15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. The manuscript was kept in the Greek monastery of St Saviour *in lingua phari* (Messina) until it was taken to Madrid in 1712.

under the Arab threat, John Scylitzes mentions the fall of Syracuse in 878 as the moment when the Byzantines lost Sicily, and from there on, he narrates the history of Byzantine-Arab relations in Southern Italy.<sup>50</sup>

The fall of Taormina in 902 was not itself the key moment, but it could have not been omitted in various Byzantine texts because it was a bridge for the construction of a narrative switching from the South Italian to the Constantinopolitan perspective. Syracuse, Reggio Calabria, and Thessalonica were far more important Byzantine cities, although as we have demonstrated, Taormina's case remained unique. It had all the necessary characteristics to connect a distant Sicilian city to the capital and the emperor. All the things that we read in the Cambridge Chronicle or the vita of St Elijah, and that are missing from the Constantinopolitan histories and chronicles, left their imprint in this small piece of information about Taormina in 902.

This leads us to yet again realise the connection and vicinity of the area usually considered distant, which geographically surely was,<sup>51</sup> alas in terms of ideas and communication, it was much closer – from Sicily, across Thessalonica, all the way to Constantinople (and thus all over the Byzantine ecumene). Reading different sources about same events – one local and others 'from the centre' – helps us gain further insight into the world of the Byzantine ecumene and the echo some (at a first glance) minor events left. Analysing local texts, we begin to understand the narratives of the capital and how the initial stories started to diverge and evolve. This echo, or echoes, were not just spreading through space, but also through time, so we can find them outside of 10<sup>th</sup>-century Sicily.

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И БИ ВЕЛИКИ ПОМОР РИМЉАНА: ПАД ТАОРМИНЕ 902.

И ЊЕГОВ ОДЈЕК У ВИЗАНТИЈСКОЈ ЕКУМЕНИ

Таормина је била византијски град на истоку Сицилије, чијим су освајањем Арабљани из Северне Африке фактички освојили Сицилију 902. године, иако ће до коначног освајања острва доћи тек крајем истог столећа. Оно је почело још у првој половини IX века, а најпресуднији моменат је за Византинце био када су 878. изгубили тадашњу сицилијанску престоницу - Сиракузу. Драстични губитак Сицилије се у Византији поклапа са владавином првих царева из династије Македонаца, Василијем I и Лавом VI, док је тада аглабидски емир био Ибрахим II. Специфичност Таормине је што се код престоничких византијских историчара из X века, најпре код Симеона Логотета и тзв. *Теофановог настављача*, наводи да се током арабљанског заузимања Таормине збио „велики покољ/помор Римљана“. Како би се дошло до бољег разумевања ове неуобичајене карактеризације становника једног провинцијског византијског града, уз консултовање локалних извора на грчком језику долази се до бољег разумевања овог феномена. Најпре тзв. *Кембричке хронике*, анонимног списа

<sup>50</sup> Ioannis Scylitzae, 262.16-20.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. McCormick, *The Imperial Edge*, 17-46.

о арабљанском освајању Сицилије који је сачуван на грчком и арапском; хроника нам пружа увид у начин на који су локални Византинци писали о освајању острва, а иако нису говорили о покољу Римљана у Таормини, имамо сличне описе за неке случајеве на Сицилији, с изузетком да се ту увек спомињу *хришћани* уместо *Римљана*. Читањем хронике долази се до закључка да су и „Византинци из Византије“, из средишта Царства такође хришћани, и да у хроници *хришћани* заправо значи *Римљани*. То нам потврђује и арапска верзија која на арапском увек делове где смо имали хришћане даје облик *Рум* (Римљани, православни хришћани), као и други локални списи. Међутим, наведеног описа за Таормину нема у Кембричкој хроници. Престонички историчари углавном прате један утврђени шаблон при опису пада Таормине, угледајући се на то како су донекле већ писали о паду Сиракузе 878: Лав VI је био заокупљен зидањем задужбина у Цариграду, да би онда наратив прешао на то да су у Таормини убијени Римљани, да су Арабљани освојили Лимнос и да се у цариградској цркви Св. Мокија десио један инцидент након кога је цару Лаву проречено да је то знамење да ће умрети за десет година. У овој наративној конструкцији је пад Таормине, једна несрећа која је задесила Римљане, на почетку низа који се завршио са најавом смрти *цара Римљана* – стога су они на тај начин узрочно-последично повезани у историјским наративима. Кључ за разумевање и спону између локалне сицилијанске хронике и престоничких историјских текстова је *Житије Св. Илије Новог*. Св. Илија Енски, познат и као Св. Илија Нови, је био византијски светац из IX и X века, чија нам анонимна хагиографија говори о овој повезаности Сицилијанаца и осталих Византинаца, пре свега везе које су постојале са византијским царом Лавом VI. Осим што је путовао по хришћанском Медитерану, Св. Илија Енски је био у Таормини у којој је прорекао да ће ју освојити Арабљани након чега ће доћи до великог покоља хришћана. То се и обистинило, а након што је емир Ибрахим II исте године напао и опсео Козенцу у Италији, посредством молитава Св. Илије *тиранин* је заустављен и тиме је спасено и васколико хришћанство и читаво Царство, јер Илијин животописац описује Ибрахима као некога ко се дигао не само на хришћане већ и на самог Христа, те да је намеравао да освоји и Цариград. Ту јасно видимо везу периферије са центром Царства, као и када Св. Илија одлази у Цариград да посети цара али је у међувремену умро у Солуну 903, где је прорекао да ће Арабљани Лава Трипољског, за кога се страховало да ће напасти сам Цариград, освојити Солун а не престоницу како су сви мислили. Житије Св. Илије Енског показује како су локални концепти са Сицилије и из Италије доспели до Цариграда, уједно пружајући и информације о миграцијама византијског становништва из западних крајева Царства на Балкан све до Босфора. Еволуција коју видимо у наративу је плод другачијих потреба различитих текстова, зависно од места и времена настанка, те видимо одјек иницијалних идеја код Византинаца са Сицилије и из Италије код осталих византијских писаца. Опасност од Ибрахима II се пренела на деловање Лава Трипољског, које је резултовало не само освајањем Солуна 904, већ и општом претњом по Византију у подручју Егеја. Тај одјек можемо пратити и након X века, пре свега код Јована Скилице и нарочито у илустрованом мадридском рукопису његове историје. Други пак текстови који су занемарили Римљане у Таормини и нису их споменули, некад маше узрочно-последични низ, што се најбоље види код Јована Зонаре у XII веку који током владавине цара Лава VI није ни споменуо похару Солуна 904. године. Питање употребе етнонима *Римљани* или *хришћани* зависи од одређеног значења тог идентитета и питања које значење ће у ком контексту бити истакнуто: из угла борбе са муслиманима то је хришћански, а римски из угла свеопште византијске ситуације и lika самог цара. Стога можемо закључити да су византијска Сицилија, као и Јужна Италија, иако провинције географски удаљене од Цариграда, биле у идејном и комуникацијском смислу блиске престоници и да одјеке онога што се дешавало у једном делу Византије можемо пратити широм византијске екумене.

