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The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Syriac and Arab sources – a comparative study

The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, in the Syriac tradition known as Aḥē Dmīḥē or Ṭalyē d-Efesōs, in Arabic as Aḥl al-Kahf or Aṣḥāb al-Kahf, is one of many examples of borrowings from the Christian tradition made by the Muslim one and above all by the Koran. In the region where Islam evolved in the beginning, there was a population professing Judaism and Christianity. Judaism was professed by ca. 1 per cent of the population of the Arabian Peninsula. Christianity, for its part, was professed by ca. 10 per cent.¹ Thus Mohammed had an easy access to the monotheistic religious ideas that existed on the Arabian Peninsula.

The Muslim tradition maintains that one of the first questions Jews asked Muhammad, when he came to Medina, concerned exactly the Seven Sleepers.² Finding the influence of the Jewish tradition on the emergence of a Muslim version of the legend, however, seems unlikely. The text of Ibn ‘Abbās, a cousin of Mohammed, one of the first exegetes of the Koran, sheds some light on it. Ibn ‘Abbās reported that one of the Brothers descended to Ephesus after their awakening and after sleeping more than 300 years he pointed to the house where he claimed to live, thus proving his Ephesian origin to a local ruler. In this house he claimed to meet his great-grandson who opened an old book and read a supplication prayer to God in Hebrew.³

¹ S. Maṭar, *Aḍ-Ḍāt al-ḡarīḥa*, Beirut 1997, p. 142.

² M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Narodziny islamu*, Warszawa 1988, p. 320.

³ F. Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants. Une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans*, Paris 2001, p. 30. It is possible that it was a mistake in the name of the language: a possible transposing of letters “r” and “b” in the name of the languages (‘*arabī* and ‘*ibrī*) in the Arabic text could indicate then the Arabic language, not Hebrew, which is much more likely.

The famous Orientalists, such as Ignazio Guidi (*Testi orientali inediti sopra i Sette dormienti di Efeso*, 1885), Bruno Krusch (*Monumenta Germaniae Historien*, 1884), Theodor Nöldeke (1886), Paul Bedjan (1890) and Karl V. Ryssel (1894–1896) worked on this legend. The Bollandists also took up the subject in the 19th century.⁴

The manuscripts of the legend and some hypotheses on its origin

Over 200 manuscripts are known mainly from the 9th to the 13th centuries dated:

- 104 Latin manuscripts (10 written by St. Gregory of Tours),
- 40 Greek manuscripts,
- 33 Arabic manuscripts (including 8 Christian Arabic ones),
- 17 Syriac manuscripts (8 versions),
- 6 Ethiopic manuscripts (3 versions),
- 5 Coptic manuscripts,
- 2 Armenian manuscripts,
- 1 Middle Irish manuscript (translated from Latin).

The currently available translations in modern languages include all the main European languages (English, French, German). In Polish there are hitherto seven texts of the legend, including two translations of the author of this article.

There are three hypotheses on the origin of the legend:

1. The legend was written first in Latin, then translated into Greek and later into Syriac, from which it was translated by St. Gregory of Tours. According to this hypothesis, the Coptic and Ethiopic versions were translated from Greek (Jacob de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*).

2. The legend came into existence originally in Greek. This origin of the legend is defended by Michael Jan de Goeje, K. V. Ryssel, I. Guidi, P. Peeters and Ernest Honigmann; E. Honigmann postulated as the source version from 448 that of Stephen,⁵ Bishop of Ephesus, from which the Greek version was written a year later and then the Syriac one of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor in 569.

3. The legend was originally invented in Syriac. This origin of the legend is defended by T. Nöldeke, B. Heller, K. V. Ryssel and A. Allgeier. The Syriac version was claimed to evolve into the Greek and Latin versions. M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes also considered Syriac origin of the legend. Famous authorities

⁴ See P. Peeters, “Le texte original de la passion des Sept Dormants,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 41 (1923), pp. 369–385.

⁵ It cannot be excluded that this is St. Stephen, then bishop of Ephesus. The Syriac calligraphers and scribes practiced the custom of using abbreviated names of saints. In the case of the name “Stephen” the abbreviation was most likely “mār S.,” which could be read incorrectly as “Māris.”

in the field of history of the Syriac Church wrote about the legend, including Zacharias Rhetor (Scholastic), John of Ephesus and a monk from the monastery in Zoqnān. Jacob of Serugh (Ya'qūb dā-Srūḡ) also wrote kasida about the Seven Sleepers in the heptasyllabic meter divided in 74 verses.

Over the course of time many texts in prose and poetry (kasidas), theatrical ones (*Ahl Al-Kahf*, a drama written by Tawfīq Al-Ḥakīm) and the oratorio (C. Loewe, *The Seven Sleepers. A Sacred Oratorio*, 1845) were composed based on the legend.

Historical and religious background of the legend in the 5th century

The plot of the legend begins in the mid-3rd century during the reign of Roman Emperor Decius.⁶ He was described as a good emperor, and senatorial historians regarded him merely as an incarnation of the old Roman virtues.

In January 250, Decius issued an edict for the suppression of Christianity, requiring all citizens in the Roman Empire to sacrifice, making offerings of the gods, the completion of which was the basis for issuing the certificate – libellus. The edict, however, did not seek to exterminate Christians, but to make them loyal citizens, participating in all forms of state worship. It had mainly a propaganda and demagogic character and claimed to show an ideological unity of the Empire threatened by invaders, particularly by the Goths, who had defeated and killed Decius during the battle of Abrittus. The edict was prepared for a relatively long time and gradually implemented in different areas.⁷

The time of waking up of the Sleepers fell on the politically and religiously turbulent time of the reign of Theodosius II, commonly called the Younger. Unlike his grandfather, Theodosius, the Great, who fought chiefly with Arianism, Theodosius, the Younger, exterminated paganism and destroyed many temples and monuments of the pagan culture. During his reign there were major disputes within Christianity concerning the understanding of the nature of Christ. Nestorius of Antioch became the inventor of a new theory. He saw two substances in Christ (*ūsīyas* from Greek *usia*), two hypostases (*qnūmē*, in Greek *hypostasis*) and one person (*paršūfō*, in Greek *prosopon*). To *kyōnō* (in Greek *fysis*) Nestorius did not refer, hence he was considered to understand *qnūmē* as persons at the Ephesian Council. This conflict at the level of Christology, one of the longest lasting conflicts in Christianity, was finally resolved in 1994 by declaring *The Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*. The two churches also recognized the legitimacy and accuracy of the expressions *Christotokos* and *Theotokos*.

⁶ *Imperator Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Augustus*, 249–251 A.D.

⁷ M. Jaczynowska, *Dzieje Imperium Romanum*, Warszawa 1995, p. 351.

It is worth noting that the Assyrian Church of the East never considered itself to be “Nestorian.” Eutyches (370–455), the head of a large monastery in Constantinople, was the second who caused a serious theological dispute within the church. In the fight against Nestorius he was one of the most fervent supporters of Cyril of Alexandria, whom Pope St. Celestine I entrusted the task to execute a sentence passed on Nestorius.⁸ He enjoyed a considerable influence at the imperial court thanks to his godson, Crizaf, an influential minister of the emperor. After Eutyches had been denounced to Patriarch Flavian he was asked to explain his christological opinions. Tormented by members of the patriarchal synod he appealed to the Pope and patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem for their aid. Theodosius II also interceded for him with the Pope, who called him a very inexperienced and unwise old man. While Eutyches’ views were actually monophysite, the Christology of the churches of Egypt, Syria and Armenia, which were attributed to these views, one would rather call miaphysite after Cyril’s famous formula: *mia fysis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene* – one nature of God’s Incarnate Word. Here again we come to the aid only after several centuries when *Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas* was announced in 1984, which confirms the theological correctness of the above-mentioned formula and sees reasons for the split really in “differences in terminology and culture and in the various formulae adopted by different theological schools to express the same matter.”⁹

Comparison of some texts of the legend

The Syriac texts are probably the oldest original material for the legend of the Seven Sleepers, written in the early 6th century, i.e., around one hundred years before the rise of Islam.

A shared version of the various Christian and Muslim relations could be as follows: for some reason several young men had took refuge in a cave, where they fell asleep. After many years they were raised to become a divine sign of hope of resurrection. It seemed to these young men that they were in their hideout for a very short time, one day, but in fact they were sleeping there for many years. After waking up the Brothers sent one of their companions to the city where he could buy food.

In the texts of both traditions, however, there are significant differences. They are associated with the religious nature of the legend, and even though they

⁸ J. Szymusiak, M. Starowieyski, *Słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa Wschodu*, vol. 2, Poznań 1971, p. 291.

⁹ “Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas (October 27, 1971),” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 63 (1971), pp. 814–815.

do not concern the truth of resurrection in general, accepted by both Christians and Muslims, they relate primarily to the religion of those Brothers.

The Syriac texts followed by all Christian ones say that these Brothers were persecuted by Decius for their faith in Christ. The persecutions in the days of Decius are confirmed by all historical sources. On the other hand, the Koran followed by some other Arabic sources does not specify the religion of those Brothers, describing them generally as “believers” or “believers in God”. Aṭ-Ṭabarī writes that the Brothers came from “the people who worshipped the Roman gods. Allah, however, led them to the true faith – Islam. Their law¹⁰ was the law of ‘Īsā”¹¹ Similar “insinuation” also occurs when Malchus – the Brothers’ minister – goes down to the city for food. One of the official Arabic texts that is in circulation in Egypt says that he saw a sign at every gate of the city “which belongs only to people who believe.”¹² The Syriac sources specify clearly that this mark was the cross.

There is no consensus in the texts concerning the number of the Brothers or their names: once they were three, sometimes five, seven or even eight.¹³ They probably relate to some different traditions: Jews and western Assyrians (“Jacobites”) from Naḡrān believed that they were three. Yet eastern Assyrians (“Nestorians”) argued that there were five.¹⁴ Aṭ-Ṭabarī gives the number seven, eight or nine Brothers together with a dog,¹⁵ which is supported by the orthodox Muslim tradition, according to which the eighth brother was a dog named Ar-Raqīm¹⁶ or Qiṭmīr. Such a hypothesis is a serious concern because Aṭ-Ṭabarī states that Ar-Raqīm is the name of a plaque on which an inscription was engraved. The plaque was laid at the entrance to the cave or placed in a box set in the middle of it by the Brothers.¹⁷ It is doubtful that in the 3rd century

¹⁰ In Arabic: *ṣarī‘a*, which means generally law or specifically the Koranic law.

¹¹ M. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ ar-rusul wal-mulūk*, Beirut 1989, p. 455, part 1. Furthermore, the phrase “the law of ‘Īsā” has no basis in the Gospel or in the church’s history. Jesus himself said that he came not to abolish the law (Moses’ law), but to complete it (see Matthew 5: 17).

¹² M. Barāniq, *Ahl al-kahf*, [in:] *Maḡmū‘at al-qiṣaṣ ad-dīniyya*, Cairo 1987, p. 21.

¹³ Adopted names of the brothers are in various versions as follow: [1] Maximilian, Malkhus, Martinian, Dionisius, John, Serapion, Constantine, Anthony; [2] Malchus, Maximian, Martinian, Dionisius, John, Serapion, Constantine; [3] Yamblikh, Maximilian, Martinian, Dionisius, John, Constantine, Anthony; [4] Achillides, Diomedes, Diogenus, Probatas, Stephanus, Sambatus, Quiriacus (according to St. Gregory of Tours); [5] Yamliḥā (Yamniḥ), Maḡṭimilīnā (Maksimilīnā, Maḡsimilīnā), Mišlīnā, Marnūš (Martūs), Saḡnūš, Dabranūš (Bīrōnos), Kafašṭayūš (Ksōṭōnos), Samōnos, Buṭōnos, Qālos, Qiṭmīr (dog’s name; according to Aṭ-Ṭabarī and Ad-Damīrī); [6] Ikilios, Dionisios, Istifanos, Fruṭtis, Sebastos, Qiryaqos (according to History of Michael the Syrian); [7] Aršellītīs, Diōmetios, Sabbastios, Probatios, Avhenios, Stafanos, Kīriakos (in Coptic according to I. Guidi, op. cit., p. 14).

¹⁴ M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Narodziny islamu*, op. cit., p. 319.

¹⁵ M. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ ar-rusul wal-mulūk*, op. cit., part 1, p. 454.

¹⁶ M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Narodziny islamu*, op. cit., p. 319.

¹⁷ M. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ ar-rusul wal-mulūk*, op. cit., part 1, p. 454.

A. D. there was a custom or a need for human friendship with dogs, except for shepherds and hunters.

Christoph Luxenberg explains the name of Ar-Raqīm in a different way: according to him it is either incorrectly read the name of Decius in Hebrew (רַקִּים *rāqīm* instead of דַּקִּיּוֹס *dāqiyōs* – note the similarity of the graphical forms) or the expression *ar-ruqād*, which means “dream” in Arabic.

Significant differences in the texts occur also with regard to the number of years, which the Brothers spent in the cave (from 196 to 373 years). This issue was best explained by Patriarch ʿĪwāš in his translation of the legend. He believes that the number 372, reported by some writers, indicates rather the age of coins, which the Sleepers had than the time period spent in the cave.¹⁸ These coins had to be in circulation when the refugees fled to their hideout. St. Gregory of Tours also writes about the number 373 as the duration of the Brothers’ sleep¹⁹ and 372 years to determine the age of coins,²⁰ which as he claims came from the times of Decius. M. Barāniq’s text²¹ states that the origin of these coins comes from the days of Decius.²² In his *Legenda Aurea (The Golden Legend)* Jacob de Voragine reports at the end of his text as follows: “However, one can have doubts whether they have been sleeping for 372 years because they rose in 448 and Decius reigned only one year and three months, namely, until 252 AD,²³ and therefore, they have been sleeping only 196 years.”²⁴

The Barāniq’s text, like the Koran, suggests that the Brothers were sleeping for 309 years. If we assume that these were Muslim lunar years, we can easily calculate that – according to the text of the Koran – the Sleepers’ sleep lasted about 299 years. It would mean that their resurrection occurred in 549 or 550, nearly one hundred years after the death of Theodosius II.

Another inaccuracies in the texts relate to the place and names appearing in the legend. All of them are of Greek origin, and in such versions they were written in Arabic, probably through Syriac. The name of Emperor Decius is the only exception. In the Syriac text he was listed as *Dāqiōs*, and similarly in Arabic – *Diqyānōs*. Moreover, both the Christian tradition and the Muslim one explicitly state that it concerns Emperor Decius.

Moreover, the name of the mountain where the cave was placed is controversial. The Arabic text uses the form *Bangilos*, in Syriac *Onkilos* or *Okhlon* whereas St. Gregory of Tours called it Olympus or Celion. It is not known

¹⁸ Z. ʿĪwāš, *Rāʾiḥat al-Masīḥ ad-dakīya*, Damascus 1984, p. 29.

¹⁹ L. Santucci, S. Klimaszewski, *Legendy chrześcijańskie*, Warszawa 1988, p. 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²¹ M. Barāniq, *Ahl Al-Kahf*, op. cit. The author was a supervisor of religious education at the Egyptian Ministry of Education.

²² M. Barāniq, *Ahl Al-Kahf*, op. cit., p. 23.

²³ In fact Decius reigned from 249 to 251 A. D.

²⁴ J. de Voragine, *Złota legenda*, Warszawa 1983, p. 300.

whether there was a mountain of that or similar name at Ephesus or not. It is not conceivable that there could exist some analogy to the name *Cælius*, one of the seven Roman Hills.²⁵ Then *Celion* (Latin *Cælion*) comes from the Greek words *koilion*, *koilos*²⁶ and it means a cave.

The Syriac text gives the names of two Christians-guards: Antodoros and Arbos who aimed to engrave an inscription on the plates or on the cave wall. It also informs about Adolis whom God inspired to build a corral for a cattle on the mountain. In St. Gregory's text these names sound *Theodore* and *Ruffino* and that builder was "a noble inhabitant of Ephesus." Also the Arabic text mentions a shepherd with his dog, who showed the refugees the way to the cave, but does not mention his name.

Conclusions

The popularity of the legend of Seven Sleepers is testified in proverbs, too. One of them, popular among the inhabitants of Mārdīn²⁷, sounds: "they were sleeping as Brothers from Ephesus," which means that someone's sleep was deep and lasted for a very long time. In Polish, a saying was preserved, but now rarely used, "the Seven Sleepers' weather" – in the sense of rainy and cloudy weather.

The analysis of the individual elements of the legend reveals serious errors of historical and religious nature, especially in the discussed Muslim texts. These inaccuracies, which occur in majority of such works, only confirm the evolutionary process transforming it from a probable oral communication as attested by records into a kind of "fairy-tale." A question remains that somehow imposes itself: how to set boundaries for this process and from which point can it still be regarded as reliable, corresponding at least in general to the natural narrative evolution?

In the case of the legend that process ended at the latest when the present version of the Koran was established. A possible conversion of the facts in the Greek and Syriac versions were – the natural course of things – less than Koranic one. In his work Gaudefroy-Demombynes says explicitly that the Koranic text was based on Syriac one.²⁸ Here another question could be raised, "could Mohammed have gone to any of the Christians for information about the legend after his discussion with the Jews?" According to the accounts he had the whole day to do so, and then every tenth inhabitant of the Arabian Peninsula

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 598.

²⁶ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, Oxford 1996, p. 967.

²⁷ I. Armala, *Amṭāl Mārdīn*, Beirut 1967, p. 98. Mārdīn is a city located in south-eastern Turkey. Its inhabitants, commonly known as *merdallīye*, speak a specific dialect of Arabic. In the years of persecution (1895–1918) the majority of Christian inhabitants of Mārdīn took refuge in Syria (mainly in the newly built city Al-Ḥasaka) and in Lebanon. The Syro-Catholic bishop Armala was one of them.

²⁸ M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Narodziny islamu*, op. cit., p. 320.

was Christian.²⁹ In addition, the Koran itself and the Muslim tradition say about the so-called Mohammed's "informers." Apparently one of them was a man called Kūsā Ibn Sa'īd, who was considered the bishop of Nağrān, a supporter of the introduction of monotheism in the pagan parts of Arabia.³⁰

One of the unquestionable events of this legend is the fact of the persecution of Christians by Decius. Naturally, the name of two Roman emperors whose reign periods are well known should be considered as further historical facts. Although the Muslim tradition speaks of Decius there is no mention of Theodosius II, during whose reign the Brothers were raised. Leaving the date of the resurrection of the young men open to question allows some speculations, which seems to be clear and unfair – embezzlement and conversion of the religious story having a certain religious tradition by another story. One can reach the same conclusion by adding a specified duration of the Brothers' stay in the cave mentioned in the Koran to the date of Decius' death. The eventual construction of the mosque³¹ on the grotto or nearby is not even a single mention in the historical sources. However, the church was built at this site and its ruins can be seen up to this day.

Appendix

The text of the legend presented below is the translation by the Syro-Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Zakkā I 'Īwāš. He analyzed both the text written in prose and verse, preserved in numerous copies of the ancient and modern manuscripts. The text was first published in "The Patriarchal Magazine" in 1969, No. 66 and 67, and then issued as a booklet in 1980.

After Decius had acceded to the throne he came from Carthage to Byzantium and thence to Ephesus, to include authority over all churches. In fear of him Christians scattered, because since king's arrival his cruelty has increased. Decius built in the middle of the city altars for idols. He also issued an order to the patricians of the city to sacrifice to idols, and then he anointed their bodies with the blood of these offerings. A huge number of people subordinated to him coming every day from all sides and going to the city center, over which a pitch black clouds of smoke hovered rising from the ovens. At the sight of those dark seances believers were seized by confusion, anxiety and deep sadness. Feeling humiliated, they hid their faces in fear of persecutors. The king has already ordered the arrest of Christians the third day since the beginning of this seance. The army received assistance from the Gentiles and Jews, who accompanied the soldiers. They dragged away the believers from their hiding places and led them where the people

²⁹ In general about one million inhabitants lived in the Arabian Peninsula, out of whom Christians were 10 per cent and Jews 1 per cent (S. Maṭar, *Aḡ-Ḍāt al-ğariḡa*, p. 142).

³⁰ K. Kościelniak, *Tradycja muzułmańska na tle akulturacji chrześcijańsko-islamskiej od VII do X wieku [Muslim Tradition in the Background of Christian-Islamic Acculturation in the 7–10th Centuries. The Origin, History and Meaning of New Testament Borrowings in Ḥadīth]*, Kraków 2001, p. 153.

³¹ See sura Al-Kahf [The Cave] 21; the whole story is mentioned in ayats 9–26.

gathered together with the king in order to make the victims. Strong faith is not denounced Christ, persevering patiently in tribulation and not paying attention to these cruel experience. Through them the name of the Lord was glorified.

Maximilian, Malchus, Martynian, Dionysius, John, Serapion, and Constantine and Anthony persisted in faith in the Son of God. They were well-known leaders, not leaving the royal palace. When the king together with all people sacrificed to idols, they entered stealthily to the library, where they fell on their faces before God, sprinkling their heads with dust and pleading with Him. At that time their comrades sought them because they noticed their absence during the ceremony. When they entered the palace one day, they found them kneeling, praying with tears. Immediately they told about them to Decius, saying, "O mighty king! At a time when Your Majesty called on the farthest to sacrifice to the gods, those closest ignored Your Majesty's orders. They cheated your army, performing Christian rituals, hidden inside your palace. Their leader is Maximilian, son of the governor and his companions are well-known leaders of this city." The king trembled with anger. Young men were brought immediately before his face, and they sobbed aloud, and their heads were covered with a layer of dust. "What has prevented you from sacrificing with us and with all the people constantly to the gods?" the king inquired. Then Maximilian replied saying: "We have the Almighty and the Invisible God. To Him only we plead incessant supplications, clean and unseen offerings of our faith: the incense of praise flowing from our mouths by our unblemished consciences. As for idols, we do not sacrifice them the incense, thus defiling our souls and bodies by unlawful offerings." After these words the king turned, furious, to each of them in turn. But they confessed their faith as they did it previously. The king therefore ordered that they would be deprived of their insignia, in a speech, "As you do not believe in the gods of our kingdom, you will be deprived of your high ranks. We give a chance to you to be able to think deeply. Maybe you will leave from your straying? Then you will appear before me a second time and we will see what will be your fate." Later they were driven out from his face. Decius then hit the road visiting other cities adjacent to Ephesus, to get back after visiting to Ephesus a second time for the purpose mentioned above.

Patricians took a lot of gold and money from their parents' homes giving of alms to the poor. Later they conferred among themselves, saying: "Let us go away from the city and hide ourselves in the great cave at the Okhlon mountain.³² Let us stay there until the return of the king praying constantly. Then we appear before him and he may give us a sentence as he wants." Since they all decided to do so, they took bags of money and climbed to the cave at the Okhlon mountain. They have stayed there for many days. Malchus, dressed in rags, pretending to be a beggar, walked down to town to buy food for all and get information about what was happening in the royal palace. He also distributed alms to the poor, then he returned to his companions informing them about everything. That very day the king Decius returned to Ephesus, commanding officers of his palace to sacrifice along with Maximilian and his companions. Malchus went from Ephesus, terrified, fleeing with his life. On that day, he bought just a little food. Distressed by the situation he has reached to the cave, to his companions, informing them of the arrival of Decius to the city and his command, including all officials of the palace, concerning sacrificing offerings to the idols. Having heard the news, Malchus' comrades fell to his knees terrified. They get their faces dirty with ground, pleading with supplications to God in sorrow and despair and commending their souls to him. After the prayer Malchus rose placing the bought in the city food in front of them. They all sat down, eating and preparing for the battle with the tyrant. When they talked about what was happening, suddenly their eyebrows became heavy as a result of grief, sadness

³² This is a suggestion of the author instead of Greek "Onkilos" (J. de Voragine, *Złota legenda*, op. cit., p. 598).

gripped the souls and sleepiness has overcome them. They fell asleep³³ in peace with God's plan, in order to be announced a wonderful miracle after years.

On the morning of that day the king commanded that the young men appeared before him. He looked for them in the palace, in the city and its surroundings, but he did not find anyone. Then he said to the most distinguished people of his kingdom, "Flight of the young men worried me greatly, because they guessed our anger for the sin which they have committed. They did not know, however, that for anyone who returns to our gods in repentance, forgiveness is available." "Let Your Majesty do not worry because of the rebellious youth," replied the high and mighty of the city. "We were informed that they are still underway in his stubbornness. Since then, the Most Honorable, you ordered that they appeared before you, take up now their parents and bring testimony from them about place where they have hidden themselves." The king was seething with anger, listening to notables' speech. Immediately he sent people who had brought to him the parents of the youths. When they presented themselves, he asked them, "Where are those disobedient, who fled from the first ranks of the army of our kingdom, with the contempt for our wonderful orders and worshipping the gods worthy of respect? We decided to condemn you to death instead of them." "Oh, Lord, a great king," replied the caught, "we have not shown disobey to the command of Your Majesty and we did not reject worshipping the distinguished gods. These young men spent our silver and gold, and now they are hiding themselves in a cave at the Okhlon mountain, which is placed near the city. We have not seen them since the time when they disappeared. Nor do we know if they are still alive." When the tyrant heard their excuse, he released them. While pondering of harsh punishment, which he intended to affect them, God inspired him to command to block the entrance to the cave with stones, resulting burying the clean bodies of these saints. "This is my sentence on those rebels who have not proved to obey my straight orders" said the king "they are contemptuous of the cult of the gods and thus they are unable to raise the rank of a kingdom. So why would they present themselves to our gods? Therefore, let the gate of the cave be closed in front of their eyes, where they have taken refuge, and this building will be with hewn stones so that they have died in torment, forever trapped.

So the king commanded, because everyone thought that the believers³⁴ were still alive in his cave.

At that time Arbos and Antodoros served as advisors to the king and they were believers – Christians – who hid their religious beliefs for fear of the king. Having conferred among themselves they said, "Let us write confession of faith of these young men in the lead plates, which will be placed inside a sealed copper box buried in the building, erected at the entrance to the cave. Perhaps God will decide, before the second coming of the Savior that the cave will be open and that their holy bodies will be honored because of their faith would be known from the inscription located at the entrance to the cave.

And God willed that these two men realized what they thought, making sure secretly on this inscription.

Decius died, and with him his entire generation. After him many kings reigned, until the throne was acceded by Theodosius, son of Arcadius, who was a believer. In his time a repulsive heresy appeared,³⁵ disrupting purity of the Church by attempt to challenge the dogma of the common resurrection of the dead. It was tried to hide all traces of the promises of the resurrection of the dead, which gave Christ the Lord to his flock. The king was troubled by relationships, which came to his ears. In addition, the heathen shown publicly to the king falsified books, and some bishops of this period, living immorally, were the cause of lapsing to the Church of God. A certain

³³ I.e., they died.

³⁴ Here in the sense of those Christians who confessed their faith before the persecutors and for this reason, even tortured, but even so they survived (see Z. 'Īwāṣ, *Rā'ihāt al-Masīh ad-dakīya*, op. cit., p. 22).

³⁵ This is probably a local heresy, more widely unknown.

Theodore, bishop of Galos, stood at their head and besides him the others who are not worthy to mention their names in this story, because they destroyed the Church of God, tiring it. They disrupted purity of faith by unproductive discussions and blind searching.

At the time King Theodosius was haunted by violent doubts which disturbed him. He poured forth abundant tears, weeping over the simple faith of the Church, which two forces tore – uncertainty and doubt. Some heretics denied the resurrection of the dead. Others said that the spread and scattered body will not live a second time and will not be resurrected, but the spirit alone will receive a promise of life. Indeed, they have gone astray and lied who said in such way. They did not understand that a child, while born of his mother, is not a spirit without a body or a body without breath of life. Darkness enveloped their minds and their ears have become deaf to the words of God's promise that our Lord declared, when he said: "when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live."³⁶ It was also said: "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust!"³⁷ Also it was said, "Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves."³⁸ But the heretics, deprived of life, they turned the sweetness of life in the bitter more bitter than their souls, disrupting by doubts the integrity of the believers' consciences.

The king got lost in his thoughts, sadness seized him and diseases pervaded him. The king dressed in the hair-shirt, lying in ashes. But the merciful God who does not delight in destruction of man nor giving up of the way of truth by him, he returned health to ill consciences. He strengthened faith in the promise of life by raising the dead, whom he prepared – thanks to his prior, divine knowledge – to ensure that they became an effective medicine, treating the Church of the poison that was poured on it. They restored it to its integrity and enhanced the pillars of its structure, because they are not able to overcome it striking about him, raging waves. In this way, the king Theodosius was shined by light of consolation and he received the crown of victory with their fathers.

In order to occur all of this, God sent inspiration to Adolius, the owner of the pasture, where the cave was placed, to build an enclosure for his cattle. Many slaves and laborers took bravely to work. For two days they pulled out stones of the holes grave, using them to build the enclosure. They also removed the stones, closing the entrance to the cave. When it was opened the next day, God decided to revive the Sleeping Youths. This is not surprising, since he is the Almighty God who gives life to the dead and gives the breath of life to embryo, hidden in the womb. He also gathered pieces of bone in the middle of the valley and revived them.³⁹ He called out also by his divine power Lazarus from the grave and he came out alive, wrapped in shroud.⁴⁰ God wanted also to return a breath of life to his followers, sleeping in that cave. So they woke up and their faces were fine. Then they saluted one another, just as it had in their habit each morning, and there was no visible trace of their death. There was not also changed their appearance nor their clothes they had on them from the moment of falling asleep. It would appear that they fall asleep in the night and woke up in the morning. Immediately an anxiety entered in their thoughts, because they thought that Decius is still looking for them. A grief returned that filled their hearts and tears began to flow from their eyes. The brothers stared sadly at Malchus, his minister, and began to question him about what has happened in the evening, the day before.

– As I mentioned to you yesterday afternoon – began to report Malchus – an order was issued by the king Decius, pursuant to which he demands from us and from all the palace officials, that we sacrifice in his presence offerings to idols. So I do not know what will become with us.

Then Maximilian said to his companions:

³⁶ John 5:25 (American Standard Version).

³⁷ Isaiah 26:19b (American Standard Version).

³⁸ Ezekiel 37:12b (American Standard Version).

³⁹ Ezekiel 37:1–10.

⁴⁰ John 11:1–44.

– My brothers! Take note of the fact that one day we will stand before the tribunal of the Formidable Christ. Therefore, we must be not afraid to stand before a human court and we must think about the grace of life, which we have received through faith in the Son of God.

After him they all said to Malchus:

– It is time for a meal. Take a coin and go to the town. Hurry back to us as soon as you find out what are the effects of royal orders. Buy for us more food than yesterday, because it was not enough and we are very hungry.

They said so thinking that they have slept one night, waking up in the morning.

Malchus got up, like every morning, he took from the purse coins sixty-two and forty-four, which were then in circulation⁴¹, and which were coined before the period when they were falling asleep, that is, three hundred seventy-two years before their waking up and he walked out of the cave very early, before dawn. Seeing the stones lying at the entrance, he was surprised, but he did not bother it. He came down from the mountain and he went on to the town, avoiding a tamped road in fear that someone having noticed him, would not check his identity. Then he would tell about him to Decius and bring him to him. He did not know that notables, who were in the service of that evildoer, fell into hell, joining with those who were sentenced to death.

When Malchus approached to the gate of the city, he was very surprised seeing the cross carved on its top. He looked furtively, looking here and there, baffled. Walking along the outer side of the wall, Malchus came pensively to another gate. There, however, he saw the same view, and his astonishment has only increased. In the end he went around the whole city, seeing the cross carved on each gate. After he entered the town, he did not recognize it because he saw the new buildings that were unfamiliar to him. Malchus was enormously surprised and went like a man who was seized by phantoms. Going like this, he returned to the gate, to which he arrived at the start and he began to think, “I wonder what kind of riddle is it? Here is a cross placed publicly on the urban gates, and last night it was hidden in the darkness.” Malchus tried to collect his thoughts. He pinched himself and he said, “Am I asleep?”

Entering the town, as usual, he hid her head in a cloak and he went to the market, where he heard many people swearing in their talks to the Christ. Then everything was confused for him. Very frightened he began to speak:

– If I knew what is the explanation of this riddle! Only yesterday no one would dare utter out loud the name of Christ, and today I hear how respectful it is pronounced. Is this Ephesus or any other city? Its buildings are in fact different from that one, as well as expressions of language used here, but I really do not know. I have not seen such city near Ephesus.

While Malchus was amazed by all this, he met a young man and asked him:

– Tell me, for your Lord, what is the name of this city?

– It is Ephesus – replied the young man.

These words only increased his embarrassment.

– For my life, I do not know what happened to me – he said – Have I lost my mind and my head? Better, if I hasten to come out of the city, before I get mad and die. Indeed, it seems to me that fantasies possessed me and I was taken aback.

Malchus told to his comrades about these events, when he had climbed to the cave. Later, when they became known, they were written down.

Because Malchus wanted to leave the city in a hurry, he approached in beggar’s dress to bakers, stretching from the pocket pieces of silver he gave to one of them and that began to stare at them. He saw the fact that they were of large sizes, differing in reverses from reverses of the silver coins

⁴¹ These numbers are likely to have a symbolic meaning as in the Roman Empire coins of similar denominations never occurred. There were probably silver coppers, which were used at that time due to financial and monetary crisis in Rome (see E. Wipszycka, *Vademecum historyka starożytnej Grecji i Rzymu*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1979, pp. 280–282).

in circulation. The seller was very surprised and showed it to his colleague. Soon all the vendors began to talk about them with each other, standing at their stations. They whispered among themselves, looking at Malchus, who – as they supposed – has found a treasure hidden for centuries. Seeing when they are conferring among themselves, not taking his eyes from him, Malchus trembled with fear. He thought they recognized him, and they will lead him to the king Decius, because some of them started watching him closely. Then, overcome by terror, he said to them:

– I give you this money and I do not want bread.

But they hold him and began to question:

– Where are you from, man? You have surely found a treasure belonging to the first kings. Show it to us to conceal what you have discovered, dividing it with you. Otherwise you will issue to death.

Malchus, very surprised, thought: “That is not against what I have kept, has increased my fear.”

– Do not think, young man – the seller said – that the treasure remains hidden.

Malchus, however, did not know what he asked. When they saw that he does not say any word, they wrapped him with his cloak and began to fling insults at him in the middle of the market so that he admits and shows them where the treasure is.

News about capture of a young man who found the treasure of the first kings spread throughout the city. People gathered around him, staring at his face, but nobody knew him.

– This young man is a foreigner – they said – we did not have seen him before.

Malchus was stunned. He was unable to say anything. He could not also convince them that he did not find any treasure. But he was self-confident, thinking that he has parents, brothers and a large family known in the city. He was also absolutely sure that even yesterday he knew many residents of the city, but this morning he was not able to identify any of them. He looked at the crowd like a madman, trying to see someone from among his brothers or friends, but he did not notice anyone. He got dizzy from that, driven by phantoms. The whole town was touched, and the news was made known also to the church. The bishop of Ephesus, St. Maris,⁴² whom Antobatis, the governor of the city just visited, heard everything. The Divine Providence was willing to gather them together this hour to show to all the people the treasure of the resurrection of the dead.

Then the bishop and the governor had ordered to bring the young man with his money. Malchus was dragged to the church, while he was thinking that he would stand before Decius. He began to look right and left, and the crowd laughed at him, just as people are laughing with someone crazy. Then he was put to the church where the bishop resided. There was also the governor Antobatis. They were astonished to see the money of the young man and Antobatis asked him:

– The money is a proof that you found a treasure. Tell us, therefore, where is it?

– I have never found any treasure – Malchus said. – And as to the money, they came from my parents’ purse and coins of this city. But I can not explain what happened to me.

– Where are you from? – the governor asked.

– I suppose that I come from this city – Malchus replied.

– Whose son are you and who knows you here? Let him come and testify in your favor – the man replied.

⁴² This is probably a Hellenized version of the name of a Syriac bishop of the city on the Upper Euphrates, Martyropolis, St. Marutha of Mayferqat (Mārūṯā də-Mayperqat, died 420 or 421 A. D.). Because of his high authority as a scholar and a mediator in the Byzantine-Persian conflict he was often seconded by the Emperor of Constantinople to hold talks with the Persian king, Sapore II (Shapur II). His stay in Persia also used to transfer the relics of Christian martyrs who were murdered on the orders of Sapor, together with the relevant acts. For more on the diplomatic and scientific activities in a floodplain of the Byzantine-Persian relations, see A. 'Abūnā, *Tārīḥ al-Kanīsa as-Suryānīya aš-Šarqīya*, vol. 1, pp. 45–46, and A. Baršōm, *Al-Lu 'lu 'al-manṭūr fī tāriḥ al-'ulūm wal-'ādāb as-suryānīya*, [in:] *Mağma 'al-luğa as-suryānīya*, p. 207.

Malchus then mentioned his parents' names, but there was none who knew them or him.

– You are a liar. You are not telling the truth – said Antobatis.

Malchus was dismayed and silent with bowed head. Then some of the people around him said that he could be insane. Others claimed that he is simulating insanity to save himself from this difficult situation.

– How can we consider you insane? – Antobatis said, looking at him suspiciously. – How do I believe that the money is from your parents' purse, since their appearance indicates that they have been coined three hundred seventy-two years ago, that is for many years before the Decius' reign? In addition, the reverse did not appear on other pieces of silver. Nor is it similar to the reverse of coins now in circulation. Did your parents live many centuries ago, and you stayed young? Or maybe you are trying to deceive the elderly and the wise men of our city? I think I will have to give orders to put you in chains and torture for so long, until you admit to that treasure you have found.

When Malchus heard what they said, he threw himself on his knees before them saying:

– Just answer me, gentlemen, to one question, and I discover to you the depths of my heart. Tell me, by your Lord, where is now the king Decius, who yesterday was in this city?

– Son, there is no king in the world today, who would be called Decius – said the bishop – there was only one such king, who died long ago.

– My lord, either phantom possessed me, or what happened to me is too difficult for anyone to believe it – Malchus said. – Come with me to the cave at the Okhlon mountain, and I will show you my comrades. From them you can learn everything with absolute certainty. I know only so much that we fled before Decius few days ago. Yesterday I saw as he entered to the city, but now I do not know if it was Ephesus or not?

At the time when Malchus was telling, the bishop Maris thought intensively about what he heard.

– God wants to show us something through this young man – he said after some thought – Let's go with him to see what really happened.

Having said that, the bishop and the governor stood up and with them the leaders of the city. They got into carts and came out on the mountain. When they reached to the cave, where these believers were, Malchus entered first, followed by the bishop. Entering the bishop came upon a copper box, sealed with silver seals, which were on the right side of the entrance. He lifted it, and standing opposite to the entrance to the cave he called the most distinguished men of the city and patricians with Antobatis. In their eyes Maris broke the seals and opened the box. Inside it he has found two copper plates. He took them out and then he began to read the inscription engraved on them, "To this cave believers had fled before the king Decius and their names are: Maximilian, son of the governor, Malchus, Martynian, Dionysius, John, Serapion, Constantine and Anthony, and the entrance of the cave has been obstructed by stones." It was written on the tablets also their profession of faith.

When the inscription was read, everyone was amazed, giving glory to God for the miracles and signs, which appeared to all the people. They went into the cave and saw these brothers, sitting with dignity. Their faces shone like blooming roses. Then the bishop and the governor and all the accompanying leading citizens fell on their knees in front of these followers of Christ and they glorified their Lord, who caused, that they became worthy to see this unusual phenomenon. Their reports testify to the fact that they were talking with these followers, who informed them of the full sequence of events that took place in the times of Decius.

Immediately after these events, a telegram was sent to the king Theodosius as follows, "Let Your Majesty hastily come to see how wonderful wonders were revealed by God Most High in the time of your blessed reign. In fact the light of promise of life risen from the dust of the earth and the rays of the resurrection of the dead flashed from the darkness of tombs by resurrection of the saints' clean body."

When this news reached Theodosius, at the time the ruling, he took courage, took off his hair-shirt and rose from the ashes, on which he laid, then raised his hands to heaven, saying:

– Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of heaven and earth, for the rays of mercy, which you enlightened me because my belief, the light coming from the lamp of my parents, did not extinguish. Either no pearl of faith, inlaid in the crown of Constantine-winners, has fallen.

This good news was heard by bishops and leading citizens. They joined the king, leaving right away with him the town on horseback, ships and cars. When they came to Ephesus, all residents – including clerics and leaders – came out to greet the newcomers. Then, they all went up to the Okhlon mountain, to the cave of these followers, who also came out to meet the king. He saw with his own eyes their shining faces, and went to the cave and fell on his knees before them. Then he took them, weeping, sat down with them on the ground and stared at them, praising God. His heart was filled with gratitude.

– It seems to me that I hear his voice on his second coming in glory – he said. – In that time, when the dead come out from their tombs to meet him, there will be no longer unusual.

– Now we are leaving you in God, when your faith has reached fullness – said Maximilian to the king – May Christ, the Son of God, preserve Your Majesty from unrest, which devil stirs up. Be sure that our Lord because of you raised us from the ground before the Big Day of Resurrection. We were like a child that, while he is in the womb, does not feel respect, humiliation, power or weakness, and though he is alive, does not feel the presence of living or the dead. So were we, as if we were asleep, unmoved, resting and deprived of all thought.

When he had finished talking, Maximilian fell asleep and all his companions. They laid their heads on the ground, giving their souls to God. The king in turn, the bishops and leaders of the people looked up to them. Then Theodosius rose. Standing over their bodies he wept. Then he commanded to do for them eight gold coffin, but the Brothers appeared to him in a dream, saying:

– Our bodies are resurrected from the earth, not from gold or silver. Leave us in the earth, in the same place in the cave, so that God will raise us from there.

The king ordered to put their bodies on gold plates and left there until that day.

Synod of Bishops approved the great feast of those believers,⁴³ and the king on this occasion gave abundant alms to the poor and freed bishops kept in exile, whom allowed returning with him to Constantinople. Filled with joy because of the faith of the king, the bishops praised the Supreme God for everything that happened.

⁴³ In the old Syriac calendar the feast accounted for October 24. The celebrations had a rich setting and a special ceremony, which presented both in an oratorical and theatrical way setting of sleep and resurrection of the Seven Sleepers (Z. ‘Īwās, *Rā’iḥat al-Masīḥ aḏ-ḏakīya*, op. cit., p. 33). Christians of the Arabian Peninsula celebrated the feast of the Seven Sleepers together with the feast of the martyrs from Naḡrān, who were executed in 524 A.D. (M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Narodziny islamu*, op. cit., p. 320). *Martyrologium Romanum* mentions the Seven Sleepers on July 27 (J. de Voragine, *Zlota legenda*, op. cit., p. 296). The Byzantine calendar mentions them twice: 4 August (falling asleep) and 22 October (the Brothers’ death).

