A note on

monks in captivity

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This note contains observations on the treatment of a similar topic in hagiographies several hundreds of years apart from each other in different languages: the *Life of Malchus* by Jerome in Latin at the end of 4th cent., later translated into Greek, Syriac and 'most of the vernaculars of modern Europe',[1] and the *Life of Samuel of Kalamun* by Isaac the Presbyter in Coptic somewhere in the 9th cent., later translated into Arabic and then Ethiopic: [2] the former achieving, as it were, international celebrity, the latter firmly within the confines of a culture based essentially on the geographical area of the Nile. The topic common to both texts is an episode involving the kidnapping of monks and the attempt to force them into a sexual union during their captivity.

Before examining the episode itself it may be useful to consider the context and purpose of both texts. Jerome offers two reasons for his production: one, that, since he was proposing to write an extensive history of Christianity, *Malchus* was an exercise 'to clean away any rust of language, so that I might come to a more extensive history (*veluti quamdam rubiginem linguae abstergere, ut venire possim ad latiorem historiam*)'; two, that it was meant to be a story of chastity for the chaste (*castis historiam castitatis)*.[3] Jerome says that he was told the story by Malchus himself. The story of Samuel, however, was written down by a priest in his monastery, who gathered the information several generations after Samuel's death. The purpose of the text was to commemorate Samuel on his feast day.

Malchus was taken prisoner while travelling in a caravan of some seventy people from Beroea (mod. Aleppo) to Edessa, who travelled together to protect themselves from nomadic tribes who levied a sort of tribute on travellers. The nomads are given two names: Saracens and Ismaelites. The second name is of course that of Abraham's child born of his Egyptian servant Hagar and has long been associated with Arabs and, later, Islam. The first name has caused a

1 H,C. Jameson 'The value for purposes of textual criticism of the Greek version of the Life of Malchus' *TAPA* 69 (1938) pp. 411 ff., where the sometimes considerable differences between the Latin and Greek versions are pointed out

2 A. Alcock (ed. and tr.) *The Life of Samuel of Kalamun* (1983). The two forms of the name are: Coptic ⲕⲁⲗⲁⲙⲱⲛ (*kalamôn*) and Arabic القلمون (*al qalamûn*). My writing is a compromise between the two without the need of accents.

3 Chastity, especially in the marital state, was probably as highly prized in Northern Mesopotamia as it was in Egypt cf., for example, Amoun in Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 8, 1ff.

certain amount of speculation. Two relatively popular suggestions are that it is from (a) سارقين (*sâraqîn* thieves, brigands) and (b)شرقين (*sharaqîn* orientals). Both are plural, which would mean that the Greek/Latin name is derived from this plural form. There is another possibility, viz. that it is formed from a place name cited by Ptolemy the 2nd cent. geographer: *sarakêne*.[4] My guess is that, like other nomadic peoples, they were something of a mystery to the sedentary.[5] Samuel was taken prisoner when he arrived at what was to be his final destination after wanderings from monastery to monastery: Kalamun.[6] Samuel's captors are described as 'barbaroi' and Maxyes. I translated the former, right or wrongly, as Berbers. The latter, however, seems to an ethnic designation. The name is first used in Greek by Herodotus in Bk 4,191 and it may be derived from a people named for the first time in Egyptian documents of the New Kingdom (16th to 11th cent. BC): *Meshwesh.*

During their captivity both saints were forced into an unconsummated sexual union. After the initial shock of being taken prisoner Malchus was put to work as a shepherd and came to enjoy captivity (*delectabat captivitas mea*). He was a successful shepherd and his master wanted to join him in wedlock with a woman whose husband had been taken prisoner in another raid. The couple eventually agreed to live together but chastely: the unnamed woman declares that she will be 'more a partner of the soul than the body' *magis animae copulam quam corporis.* At length, Malchus is inspired to return to the monastic life by a visual parable of ants collaborating with and supporting each other. He persuades his 'wife' to join him in flight and they eventually return to the safe confines of a Roman military garrison (*castra Romana*). There are elements of the adventure story in *Malchus*, not unlike the stories of Xenophon of Ephesus or Achilles Tatius. Jerome's strikes me, a non-Latinist, as one of studied simplicity.

Samuel was taken prisoner twice. On the first occasion (§14), he was alone in the deserted church of Kalamun when he was taken by the nomads but was subsequently rescued by the 'angel of the Lord' . On the second occasion (§17) the nomads apparently came on a marauding expedition of the whole area, including Kalamun, when Samuel was at work in the monastery garden. He was taken to their home and put to work tending the camels, which is

4 C.F.A Nobbe *Claudii Ptolemaii Geographia* 2 (1845) p. 69, who places it to the east of Egypt. Ptolemy's work seems reliable. He was a native of Polemais Hermiou, the largest 'Greek' city in Upper Egypt.

5 In Ancient Egypt one 'blanket' description of people who lived largely in the desert was *hryw šʿ* 'those who are on the sand'. Consider the various names attached to those who pursue a non-sedentary life in contemporary Europe: gypsies, tinkers, travelling people, Roma, Sinti and several others

6 cf. *Samuel* §14. Samuel met another monk, John the Hegumen of Scetis, while in captivity..

when he encountered another monk in captivity. His life as a camelherd was 'peaceful and without disturbance', until the devil intervened and suggested to Samuel's master that the saint be shackled to a young woman that they might 'breed' slaves, as indeed his father had done successfully with one of his slaves. Samuel was ultimately able to extricate himself from captivity by performing miracles, which made his captors apprehensive about what he might be able to do to them. A noteworthy aspect of the episode is the use of names: the 'Berbers' move from an amorphous designation to the more specific designation of Maxyes and Samuel's master becomes an identifiable person called Sokortes. The young woman is not named. Unlike Malchus and his 'wife', Samuel does not have to escape but is in fact provided with an escort back to Egypt.