The St. Sisynnios Ethiopian Legend Revisited

A Hitherto Unknown Version from the St Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (Eth. 119)

Ekaterina V. Gusarova

Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Higher School of Economics

(St. Petersburg), National Library of Russia

ekater-ina@mail.ru

Abstract

The St. Sisynnios legend is an integral part of both Christian and popular Ethiopian historical traditions. It is known to exist in the Ge'ez language and constitutes a part of the compilation corpus based upon the so called magic or protective scrolls. There are two versions of the vita of St. Sisynnios. The shorter one is found in the Synaxarion, whereas the longer one is included in a corpus of hagiographical compilations “The Lives of the Martyrs”. The text of the legend comprises various stories based on real facts from the Saint’s life. However only some of them have been preserved intact; others have been re-told. Until recently have been discovered only three redactions of the vita. A new redaction recently discovered by the author of this article is of a paramount importance since it changes our view on how this legend did exist indeed in the Ethiopian cultural tradition.

Keywords

St. Sisynnios – hagiography – Ethiopian Church – Ethiopian manuscripts – magic scrolls – protective scrolls – female evil force – witch

St. Sisynnios is one of the equestrian Saints widely respected in Ethiopia even today. His vita is known in many medieval literary traditions¹ and also

1 A detailed overview of the legend in different traditions has recently been realized by a group of authors (cf. А.Л. Топорков (отв. ред.); А.К. Лявданский, Е.Б. Смагина, Т.А. Агапкина, А.Л. Рычков (науч. ред.), *Сисиниева легенда в фольклорных и рукописных традициях*

constitutes an integral part of Ethiopian apocryphal literature. The story about St Sisynnios was included into the corpus of religious writings read in the Coptic Church.² Religious literature started to be translated into Ge'ez from the 4th century AD, the time when Christianity became officially accepted in Axum. The text of St. Sisynnios' vita was most likely translated ten centuries later from the Arabic original, when Arabic replaced Coptic as the language of the Coptic Church.³

The vita tells us about the fight of the Saint Sisynnios with the female evil called Wurzelya, which is similar but not identical to the text preserved in the folk Legend of St Sisynnios. In this text the female adversary is not the sister of the Saint but a witch who killed children. The folk Legend, which comprises the exploits of the Saint seemed to be popular throughout the centuries since it can be traced even nowadays in the texts of protective amulets written on the mostly in form of scrolls.⁴ The scrolls were commissioned both for men and women, however when written for women they were aimed to protect them from various female diseases especially those related to pregnancy and childbirth, including the womb bleeding. This connection appears to be clear since according to the Legend St. Sisynnios fought the witch, who used to kill new-born children by sucking out their blood and also to provoke dangerous womb bleeding of their mothers.

At least starting from the 13th century the classical Ethiopic, the language in which the legend was initially transcribed was no longer in use: both the clergy and especially the lay people who used to read and to transcribe the text did not understand it. Nevertheless, the text continued to be copied, often purely

Ближнего Востока, Балкан и Восточной Европы [St. Sisynnios Legend in Folklore and Manuscript Traditions of the Near East, Balkans and Eastern Europe], Moscow, 2017).

- 2 This fact is confirmed by the absolute identity of the Arabic and Ethiopic texts of the vita of the Saint.
- 3 Comparison of Arabic and Ethiopian Synaxarion versions of the vita proved that they completely match. The text of the vita arrived in Ethiopia as a part of Coptic tradition and was then translated from Arabic language into Ge'ez. The short versions of the Synaxarion texts are equal. See edition of the text in: G. Colin, *Le Synaxaire éthiopien. Mois de Miyāzyā* (PO, t. 46, fasc. 4, Nr 208), Turnhout, 1995, pp. 578-581 (98-101). For Arabic version see: R. Basset, *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte). IV. Les mois de barmahat, barmoudah et bachons* (PO, t. 16), Paris, 1922, pp. 978-980 (336-338). The extensive version, included in the collection of hagiographyc texts known as Gädlä Säma'ətat «Vitae of the martyrs» (A. Bausi, "Gädlä Säma'ətat", in: S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden, 2005, pp. 644-646). The main difference is that the long version includes a detailed description of all the tortures of the Saint.
- 4 The scrolls were usually worn on a textile lace around the neck or handed on a wall in the habitation. The wearing of such kind of amulets is one of the magic practices, generally widespread among the Ethiopian Christians.

mechanically which is indicated by a specific lacunae and common mistakes. This is understandable since the scrolls were not any longer meant to be read, however, in this instance did only matter the physical presence of the text written in sacred characters.⁵ The comparison of existent texts of the *vita* and the folk Legend enabled researchers to identify three redactions of the same text, which apparently could be traced back to a common prototype, which has been lost.

The *vita* narrates that a certain man called Sisynnios lived in the city of Antioch at the time of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. He had to leave his native city; on his return he discovered that his sister who gave birth to a girl, had subsequently killed the baby and sucked her blood. Later she gave another birth but that time it was a male baby who did not look like humans. Being affected by these circumstances the Saint's sister started killing newborn children all over the country. The Saint who had to protect innocent Christians killed his witch sister as well as her child who appeared to be the Devil's son. Moreover, after that he had to kill even her husband who was apparently possessed by the evil spirit.

The longer version of the *vita* provides reader with some more interesting details. According to it the Saint's father belonged to the people who constituted the close circle of the Emperor Diocletian. Sisynnios for some reasons was sent to the city of Nicomedia where he became a Christian. On his return to the city of Antioch he realized that his sister gave birth to a girl, then killed the baby and sucked off her blood. She also became capable of taking form of birds and reptiles (a snake). After that, she gave birth to a boy who didn't look like a human. The Christian Saint had to kill his witch sister, her child and her husband. After his father discovered what he had done he brought him before Diocletian requesting a punishment, which he deserved. Being a pagan king Diocletian invited Sisynnios to offer sacrifices to pagan gods, which appeared to be unsuccessful: the statues of the gods did break down as Sisynnios entered the sanctuaries. In retaliation for that Sisynnios was severely tortured and finally killed. His soul was immediately ascended to the heavens with the help of the angels.

Inside the amulets, significant modifications occurred and the text finally lost some parts of the narration and on developed and extended others. These changes significantly impede a reader to build up an idea about how did the narration look initially. On the basis of preserved versions of the text it became possible to select five major textual segments. These segments help a research-

5 It was believed that all the illnesses and accidents were caused by the ghosts and demons and the amulets protect people from such evil forces.

er to reconstruct the main sequence of episodes, which did constitute the narration about St. Sisynnios.

1. A man called Sisynnios (later St. Sisynnios) gets married. His wife gives birth to one/two children. A witch called Wurzelya comes to the woman and kills the baby. Sisynnios hears the poor woman's crying and inquires her about the reasons. She tells what has happened to her and the Saint mounts his horse, takes the spear and leaves looking for the evil witch.
2. On his way he meets an old lady and asks her, whether she did see Wurzelya. She replies that the witch in question lives in the forest/garden, which is in front of Sisynnios.
3. The Saint enters the forest and finds Wurzelya laying under a tree being surrounded by "an army" of evil spirits. The Saint dismounts from his horse, kneels and prays the Almighty to grant him a victory over the witch to prevent her killing babies in the future.
4. A voice from the Heaven allows him to do everything he wants with the witch. The Saint gets back on his horse, takes the sword in the right hand and pierces her in the side.
5. The end of the story differs greatly from one manuscript to another. There are the versions as follows: a) Wurzelya is killed; b) Wurzelya is killed and she promises in the names of the Archangels to approach neither the houses where children are born, nor their mothers as well as the places where the prayer (legend) of St. Sisynnios is read (or inscribed); c) Although Wurzelya's side is pierced, she still does not die and promises not to kill newborn children and not to approach their mothers (see the version "b" as above); d) Wurzelya promises to go to the church and to become a good Christian.

As consequence, the Saint Sisynnios forever becomes the protector of the newborn children and women who give birth.

The above three variants of the same narration prevail with slight differences in the absolute majority of the manuscript scrolls, which contain the folk Legend. However, there is one scroll, which comprises the different version. This is the Eth. 119 parchment scroll from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg, Russia).⁶

In comparison to majority of the texts which provide simplistic and concise narration that one preserved in the scroll from the IOM RAS is different. It comprises a set of differently phrased lively details, e.g. the description of how the

⁶ Shelf mark Eth. 119. Dating – the 17th-18th century. It contains magical prayers and the legend of St. Sisynnios.

poor mother meets the evil witch. Contrary to the traditional texts it includes even lively dialogues.

Normally segment 1 reads as follows (Kunstskammer (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, 4693 n° 1, parchment scroll of the 17th century; ll. 21-31):

ወሀሎ፡ ፩፡ ብእሲ፡ ዘስሙ፡ ሱስንዮስ፡ ወአውሰበ፡ ብእሲተ፡ ወወለደ፡ ወልደ፡ ተባዕተ፡ ወአንስተ፡
በቀዳማይ፡ ወልዱ፡ ቡአት፡ (sic) ወርዝልያ፡ ወቀተላቶ፡ ለወልዱ፡ ከልሐት፡ ወበከየት፡ እሙ፡
ወሶበ፡ ስምዓ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ሱንዮስ፡ (sic) ተፅዕነ፡ ዲበ፡ ፈረሱ፡ ወነሥኦ፡ ኩናተ፡ በየማኑ፡ ... አንዝ፡
ይኅሥሣ፡

“There was a man called Sisynnios and he got married to a woman, and gave birth to a boy and a girl. And in front of his son appeared Wurzelya and killed the boy. His mother shouted and cried. And when St. Sisynnios heard this, he got on his horse, took the spear in his right hand ... to look for her”.

In the Eth. 119, ll. 28-43 the same events are narrated quite differently (fig. 1-2):

ወሀሎ፡ ፩፡ ብእሲ፡ ዘስሙ፡ ሱስንዮስ፡ ወአውሰበ፡ ብእሲተ፡ ወወለደ፡ ውሉደ፡ ተባዕተ፡ በቀዳማይ፡
ወልዱ፡ መጽአት፡ ወርዝልያ፡ ወትቤላ፡ ለብእሲቱ፡ አስኩ፡ ዝሕፃንኪ፡ ወመጠወታ፡ ይእቲ፡ ብእ
ሲት፡ ወተቀበለታ፡ እንዝ፡ ታከሞስሰ፡ ወሰዓመት፡ አፉሁ፡ ወነፍሐት፡ ውስተ፡ ጉርዒሁ፡ ወፍጡነ፡
ሞተ፡ ሶበሃ፡ ወእመ፡ ርእየት፡ በድነ፡ ከዊኖ፡ በከየት፡ እንዝ፡ ትብል፡ ወሶበ፡ ሰምዓ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ሱስን
ዮስ፡ ብካያ፡ ለብእሲቱ፡ አውሥኦ፡ ወይቤላ፡ ምነተ፡ ያበከየኪ፡ ብእሲቶ፡ ወትቤሎ፡ ይእቲ፡ ብእ
ሲት፡ መጽአት፡ አኃቲ፡ ብእሲት፡ ዘስማ፡ ወርዝልያ፡ ወትቤላኒ፡ እስኩኬ፡ ዝሕፃንኪ፡ ወመጠወ
ከዋ፡ ውስተ፡ እዴሃ፡ ወነፍሐት፡ ውስተ፡ ጉርዒሁ፡ ወቀተላቶ፡ ለወልድኖ፡ ወሰሚኦ፡ ነገረ፡ ደንገ፡
ወተጽዕነ፡ እምላዕለ፡ ፈረሱ፡ ወነሥኦ፡ ኩናተ፡ በየማኑ፡ ወሐረ፡ ይሔስሣ፡

“There was a man called Sisynnios. He got married to a woman and [she] gave birth to boys. And in front of the son appeared Wurzelya and said to [Sisynnios]’ wife: “I shall look after that baby of yours”. The woman gave (the baby) to her and welcomed her with a smile. [Wurzelya] kissed the baby’s mouth and breathed onto his neck. Soon he died. And when [the mother] saw that he is dead, she cried, telling [this story]. When St. Sisynnios heard his wife crying, he retorted to her saying: “What did make you cry, woman?” And the woman responded: “A woman called Wurzelya came and told me: “I shall look after this baby of yours”. And I gave [him] in her hands. And she breathed onto his neck and killed my son”. Having heard these words [Sisynnios] shuddered, got on his horse, took the spear in his right hand and went to look for her [that witch]”.

A comparison between the two texts clearly shows that the scribe/copyist of the latter was more discursive and used literary techniques of the Ge’ez

language. Besides, the segment is twice longer and includes vivid narration. The text in question proved the fact that the narrations about St Sisynnios as represented in the Ethiopian tradition did greatly vary. Some variants were not used in the hagiographic narrations, however, they were present in the magic scrolls and hand-written amulets, some of which were not read.

It still remains not clear, when an oral tradition of the Legend was once written down.⁷ The evidences of different versions of the St Sisynnios narration confirm that the legend passed through a long process of transformation both as an oral or written text. The analysis both of the original texts, as well as the secondary scholarly literature does not provide us with any idea about the actual nucleus of the St. Sisynnios legend. It could be both: either extended shorter narration or a longer one, which was subsequently shortened. The only aspect, which will definitively invite scholars to have a fresh look at this text is the signaled discovery of the St Petersburg version preserved in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts.

7 Parchment scrolls, worn or handed in the houses (sometimes with extensive humidity) were easily damaged and corrupted. Sometimes scrolls were put in the tomb of a deceased (for protecting reasons – common tradition for the north-eastern Africa peoples as the Egyptians and Nubians). Few parchment scrolls anterior to the 17th century have survived.