THE CULT OF THE MACCABEES IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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How, then, should we understand the Maccabees? Namely today is their holiday. True, they are not honored by many since their struggle did not take place after Christ, but they merit being honored by everyone because their steadfastness was for the sake of defending the ways of their fathers. Indeed, what would those who suffered their martyrdom before Christ’s Passion have done had they been persecuted after Christ and had followed the example of His death for us? Would not those who had been so virtuous without the help of such an example proved even more noble facing danger after Christ’s example?

An often-cited sermon by the church father Gregory of Nazianzus begins with these words, which was probably written between 378 and 381, when Gregory was bishop of Constantinople. The passage quite clearly shows that the Cult of the Holy Maccabees, that is, the cult of the seven brothers who had been martyred for their faith according to 2 and 4 Maccabees, had been newly introduced in that city and was not yet firmly established.

The cult of the Holy Maccabees had begun at the martyrs’ grave in Antioch; in the later fourth century it spread over the Roman Empire, soon reaching Constantinople, as the sermon indicates. From Antioch itself, we have only a single reference to the cult in between the time John Chrysostom departed from the city in 398 to become Patriarch of Constantinople and a reference more than 150 years later. It stems from an anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza who passed through the city in 570 on the way to the Holy Land.

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2 This new dating, according to Ziadé, Les martyres Maccabées, 136–154. The traditional dating of the sermon to the 360s appeared to demonstrate an early cult of the Maccabees in Kappadokien to which there are actually no references.
Throughout the decades previous to his pilgrimage, Antioch had experienced a strong decline. In 525 and 528 the city was destroyed by earthquakes and in 540 it was conquered and plundered by the Persians. The subsequent reconstruction was apparently carried out on a reduced scale. But it seems, to judge from the pilgrim’s report, that the Maccabees’ relics survived all these events. The report has been preserved in two versions. In one of these we read: “the Maccabee brothers, this means nine graves, and over each grave their torments hang”, pendent tormenta ipsorum. The other version, referring to only seven graves, reads as follows: “…over every single grave their passion is depicted”, scripta sunt passiones illorum. In the first case, the reference is to the graves of the seven brothers, their mother, and Eleazar; in the second case, there is only reference to the graves of the brothers.

Soon after the visit of the pilgrim from Piacenza Antioch was again threatened by the Persians and the Maccabee relics were evacuated to the West. When and in what circumstances this move happened is uncertain: In 572 a war began between the Romans and Persians that lasted into 591; on several occasions the battles drew dangerously close to Antioch, which, however, was not actually attacked. In 609 the war broke out anew and the Persians eventually took the city, which they occupied between 614 and 628. Antioch then again came under Roman rule for ten years before falling in 638 to Islamic Arabs and soon losing its political significance.

The only extant reference to the point in time when the Maccabee relics were moved is from an inscription now lost concerning their deposition in the church of St. Peter ad Vincula in Rome. The inscription, however, only dates to the eleventh or twelfth century. It points to the event as having taken place under a Pope Pelagius who, on account of the terminus post quem of 570, can only have been Pelagius II, who occupied St. Peter’s throne between 579 and 590. Hence, at the time he took office, the Persian war had already been underway for some years.

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6 Downey, A History, 560–78.
7 If a sermon transmitted under the name of Pope Leo I (440–461) entitled In natali sanctorum septem fratrorum Machabaeorum is authentic, this took place over a century after the cult’s introduction in Rome; see Margaret Schatkin, “The Maccabean Martyrs,” Vigiliae Christianae 18 (1974): 97–113, 109.