

**A Greek Orthodox Armenian in the Seljukid Service:  
the Colophon of Basil of Melitina**

There are some extant inscriptions and colophons preserved in Greek that give us some insight into the Seljuks of Rūm's imperial identity. According to these, when communicating with their Greek subjects the sultans employed the title ὁ μέγας σουλτάνος (“the great Sultan”) with its variants ὁ ἅγιος... αὐθέντης ὁ πανυψηλότατος μέγ(ας) σουλτάνος Ῥωμανίαν Ἀρμενίαν Συρίαν καὶ πασῶν (sic!) τόπους καὶ χώρας Τουρκῶν γῆς τε καὶ θαλάσσης... (“the holy sovereign the most high great Sultan of Rhomania, Armenia, Syria and all the territories and provinces of the Turks on the sea and the land”) and the πανυψηλότ[ατος] μεγαλογένος μέγας σουλτάνος (“the most high, [the one] of noble descent, the great Sultan”). Of these titles, the most interesting is the one that lists the lands which the sultan ruled (“Rhomania, Armenia, Syria and all the territories and provinces of the Turks on the sea and the land”). To the best of my knowledge, this particular form of the title appeared for the first time in a colophon of a Greek gospel book composed in Rūm in 1226. Why should the title from a non-documentary source be considered as documentary evidence?

The answer lies in the colophon's details. It reads:

“The present book, [written] in perfect and carefully lined miniature minuscule calligraphy (τέλειον καὶ ἡσόστιχον ψυλογραφία [sic]), of the four Gospels of the great God's messengers (θεοκηρύκων) and evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was completed by the hand of me, the protonotary Basil Meliteniotes (βασιλείου πρῶτονοταρίου μελιτηνιώτου), son of the priest Orestes [...] <sup>1</sup>, at the time when my holy sovereign the most high great sultan Kay-Qubād, son of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Kay-Khusraw was lord of Rhomania, Armenia, Syria and all the territories and provinces of the Turks on the sea and the land. [The Gospel-book] was completed in Great Caesarea (Kayseri). And those of you who come across this book of the four Gospels either to copy or read it (lit – ‘see it’, κᾶν τε εἰς μεταγραφὴν κᾶν τε εἰς θεωρίαν [sic]), pray for me, the sinner Basil, and for those who in the Lord gave birth to me (τῶν τεκῶντων με [sic]) – the aforementioned priest Orestes (διὰ τὸν κ[ύριο]ν πρῶτόντος ὀρέστου ἱερέως [sic]) and my mother Sophia. For this reason may

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<sup>1</sup> Three or four letters were erased.

the all-good God, [who] is abundant in mercy and beyond words in His love for mankind, have mercy upon you all, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages, amen. [In] the year 6734 (AD 1226), in the fourteenth indiction, 1<sup>st</sup> of May”<sup>2</sup>.

The Greek Gospel-book, very small in size, also contains two Armenian colophons written in the same hand. Though lacking a title they give us some insights into the personality of their author:

- (1) “Glory to God to the ages of ages, amen. This Gospel-book was written and embellished by the hand of me, the protonotary (*dprapet*) Basil (Vasil) from Melitina, son of the priest Orestes (Ařest), in the era 675 (AD 1226), in the month of May (*mayis*), for my personal use and remembrance of my soul, by the will of Christ”<sup>3</sup>.
- (2) “May you pray to Christ for [the sake of] the scribe (*grich*‘) Basil, so that someone may [later] pray for you (lit – ‘so that you may be prayed for [it]’)<sup>4</sup>.

It should be noted that whilst the Greek colophon is full of appalling mistakes (e.g. *πρωϋπόντος* instead of *προειπόντος*, and even the corrected form cannot explain the use of the active participle (‘saying’) instead of the expected passive one (‘said’)), yet its Armenian counterpart is written in elegant and grammatically correct language. Even Basil’s mistakes in Greek were partially caused by his mastery of Armenian: for example, the usage of the active participle *προειπόντος* arose from Armenian grammar in which the Participle has both an active and a passive meaning. It is the language and the dating that give us a clue – the author of the colophons was a Greek-Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup> J.Bick, *Die Schreiber der Wiener griechischen Handschriften* (Vienna, Prague, Leipzig, 1920), pp. 67-68, n. 60. This is the most accurate reproduction of the colophon. I also collated the text with the photocopy reproduction of the relevant pages of the manuscript (Bibl.Genn. MS 1.5, fol. 166r-v): H.A.Stathatou, *Collection Hélène Stathatos*, 4 vols. (Strasbourg, 1953-71), ii : *Les objets byzantins et post-byzantins*, ed. E. Coche de la Ferté et al. Plate XIV, 110, 3-4. On the description of the manuscript and the publications of the colophons, see: E. Zomarides, “Eine neue griechische Handschrift aus Causarea vom J. 1226 mit armenischer Beischrift”, in *Studien zur Palaeographie und Papyruskunde*, ed. C. Wessely, Vol. 2, 1902, pp. 21-24; *idem*, *Die Dumba’sche Evangelienhandschrift vom Jahre 1226 mit 2 Lichtdrucktafeln* (Leipzig, 1904), *passim*; M. Vogel, V. Gardthausen, *Die griechischen Schreiber des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1909), p. 55; N. Bees, *Die Inschriftaufzeichnung des Kodex Sinaiticus graecus 508 (976) und die Marie Spiläotissa Klosterkirche bei Sille (Lykaonien) mit Exkursen zur Geschichte des Seldshukidentürken* (Berlin, 1922), p. 36, n. 9; P.-J. Croquison, “Manuscripts”, in Stathatou, *Collection Hélène Stathatos*, ii, p. 79; A.S.Mat’evosyan, *Hayeren jeragreri hishatakaranner, xiii dar* (Colophons of the Armenian Manuscripts, xiii century) (Erevan, 1988). N 107 (g), p. 145; B. Atsalos, *La terminologie du livre-manuscrit à l’époque byzantine: première partie, termes désignant le livre-manuscrit et l’écriture* (Thessaloniki, 2001), p. 252, n.2.

<sup>3</sup> Mat’evosyan. *Hishatakaranner...* N 107 (a). P. 145.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*. N 107 (b). P. 145.

(‘Chalcedonian’) Armenian, who, or whose parents, had moved from Melitina (Melitene, Malatya) to Caesarea (Kayseri) by 1226. His dating of both the Greek and the Armenian colophons clearly indicated the Church to which he belonged. For the date of 1 May, 14 indiction, AM 6734 (AD 1226), perfectly corresponds to the first line of another Greek document, issued by the Patriarch Germanos II (1223-1240) in the same year 1226, 6 February, 14 indiction, in Nicaea. Thus, Basil Meliteniones used the same indiction calendar system as was employed in the Nicaean chancery.

How can one interpret the term ‘protonotary’ in Basil Meliteniotes’ colophons? He was certainly a head of the corporation of the *νοτάριοι*. Was he a lawyer? No: the term *νοτάριος*, either private or state, meant a scribe or a secretary (*γραμματικός*) and as such was used in documents from the eleventh century onwards. But the Byzantine terms for ‘notary’ (‘lawyer’) were *νομικός*, *ταβουλάριος*, and *συμβολαιογράφος*, and never *ὁ νοτάριος*. The only exception was Southern Italy, in which the *νοτάριοι* acted in the same, or similar, way as the *νομικοί* in Byzantium. As far as the Sultanate of Rūm was concerned, the Greek *νοτάριοι* were recorded in Ibn Bībī who wrote that in 1214 the text of the peace treaty between Alexios I Grand Komnenos of Trebizond and Sultan ‘Izz al-Dīn Kay-Kāwūs I was composed in the presence of both sovereigns by the “*nūṭārān* of the *dīwān* of the Sultanate” (“the scribes of the state chancery”). In the second Armenian colophon Basil Meliteniotes mentioned himself as a ‘scribe’ (*grich*). As he did not write the Gospel-book for someone else, but for himself (hence his statement ‘for my personal use’), the term ‘scribe’ in this context could only have meant his profession, and not the job he had done when copying the manuscript.

The nature of his office, however, is more problematic. It might have been in the chancery of the patriarch, as Basil was Greek Orthodox, or in the Rūmī chancery of the sultan, or in a local chancery of the city authorities of Kayseri or Malatya. As to the first option, we must remember that the patriarchal protonotaries were heads of the church

secretariat, and as such usually resided in the office of the patriarch, in our case in Nicaea. The protonotary of the Great Church, who was sometimes called the ‘chief dignitary of the patriarchal notaries’ (ὁ πριμμικήριος τῶν πατριαρχικῶν νοταρίων) held the seventh rank among the Church officials’ taxis. Such a person could not write the illiterate πρωτόπντος. The extant Church documents that mentioned a protonotary were composed in the fourteenth century almost exclusively in Constantinople or within the boundaries of the empire. There was no indication that the holder of the office acted outside the Byzantine borders. The same should be said about the office of protonotary at the Imperial court.

This conclusion leaves us with no option but to define the office of Basil Meliteniotes as either private (head of a local chancery in the city of Kayseri or Malatya) or state (head of the Rūmī, or Christian, chancery of the sultan); and in both cases he acted in the Sultanate of Rūm. That Basil Meliteniotes worked in the Rūmī chancery is conformed by his excellent knowledge of the titles used by the Greek chancery of the sultans of Rūm. However, our scribe did not possess an excellent Greek education, and as such could have hardly been a protonotary of a Greek community with other Greek notaries as his subordinates. His excellence in Armenian suggests that he was the *Armenian* protonotary.

Of Basil Meliteniotes’s two cities, Caesarea/Kayseri and Malatya, the former is to be preferred as his permanent residence, for it was here that the Gospel-book and the colophons were composed. He was an émigré from Malatya. Given the fact that two metropolitans of Melitina acted as intermediaries between the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Church in the thirteenth century; that the Greek Orthodox community in Malatya showed unprecedented resistance to the Nicaean patriarch in 1224-1226; that in 1258 two representatives of the Armenian family of the Gabrades, who belonged to one of the most famous Byzantine aristocratic dynasties, lived in Malatya; that our

protonotary Basil, obviously an Armenian by origin, was Greek Orthodox; that Malatya, which served as residence for the distinguished Greek Orthodox metropolitans, never had Armenian bishops of its own; that the city, although lacking senior Armenian clergy, possessed a Armenian population large enough to form a ‘Christian’ *koinē* at the beginning of the fourteenth century, - all these facts suggest that Malatya was centre of a substantial Armenian community, whose members were Greek Orthodox (‘Chalcedonian’) and belonged to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Unlike Malatya, Kayseri was not only the centre of the flourishing Cappadocian Greek community, but also had a large Armenian community with its own archbishop who belonged to the Armenian Church. If Basil were the head of a corporation of the secretaries in the service of the religious authorities of Kayseri, it is not clear how he could have been employed by a Greek community, being an Armenian scribe; and how he could have been working for the Armenian clergy being a Greek Orthodox. We have no evidence that in Kayseri the Chalcedonian Armenians represented a large, or even a considerable, group; otherwise Basil’s nostalgic reference to Malatya in his colophons remains inexplicable. The most likely explanation of his status is that he was a member of the Sultan’s chancery department responsible for issuing charters and maintaining correspondence in Armenian with the kings of Cilician Armenia. It is also evident that this Armenian chancery had close contacts with the Greek secretaries employed by the sultan.

Despite the absence of other evidence for the existence of an Armenian chancery in the Sultanate of Rūm, the existence of such a chancery would account for two apparently mutually contradictory impressions given by the sources: Basil’s excellent knowledge of chancery practice and his mastery of Armenian. Together, these suggest that he was the Armenian protonotary in the sultan’s chancery.