Anonymity is believed to be a cardinal virtue of Christian chronography for it reflects supposedly the humility of the author. There must be some truth in this tenet, but in the case of Georgios Synkellos’ Chronographia anonymity and humility were not his primary concerns. It is well known that Synkellos accepted the chronological system of Sextus Julius Africanus and at the same time rejected in strong language the chronologies proposed by Eusebius, whom he disliked not only because he erred in matters of biblical dates but on doctrinal issues as well, having been a follower of Origenes. Synkellos did not hesitate to express his views strongly, as he was convinced that he was right in the chronologies he was proposing. Apart from Africanus he had exploited Panodoros and Annianos, along with a series of biblical apocryphal texts that are known today only by their title. It is not very clear, of course, to what extent these works were transmitted in his text, whether he copied them verbatim as some headings suggest (according to Africanus, Eusebius etc.) or in free adaptation. The matter has not been yet resolved and I am not about to venture into this particular problem. I will instead limit my modest contribution in honour of my esteemed colleague Ralph-Johannes Lilie to the so-called autobiographical references that we encounter in the Chronicle of Synkellos. Heinrich Gelzer, a great authority on Synkellos, at first thought that the autobiographical references applied to Julius Africanus, but later in his second volume changed his mind and attributed them to the pen of Synkellos.¹

Apart from the fact that George had served in the capacity of synkellos to Patriarch Tarasios we know practically nothing about him. He was an iconodule and around 807/808 he authored the Chronographia that bears his name. Cyril Mango maintained that he was the real author behind the Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor.² If the eyewitness reports that we encounter in his discourse are authentic, then he must have spent some time as a monk in Palestine, he might have even been a native of the Holy Land as H. Gelzer thought. Still more important than his sojourn in Palestine is that he may have gathered the material for the composition of his chronicle (and by extension of the one ascribed to Theophanes) in eastern libraries and not in the Byzantine capital. With this thought in mind we can explain also

the provenance of the historical sources in the chronicle of Theophanes on Syrian Christianity and the Arab expansion.

Synkellos intrudes into his text quite frequently and particularly in matters dealing with his sources and the choices he had to make in following them or rejecting them out of hand: ἐν συντόμῳ ἐστοιχείωσα, σπουδάσω ποιῆσαι, συνεϊδον ... παραθέσαι, ἀναγκάζομαι χρήσασθαι.3 There are, however, certain passages in his text that recount travel experiences around Palestine which have been assigned as a matter of course to him,4 although doubts were expressed regarding their attribution to him.5 Nonetheless the view still persists that Synkellos lived as a monk in Palestine in the Laura of Saint Chariton, that he had also traveled to the Sinai desert, that he had even seen the Dead Sea and had frequently travelled to Jerusalem as a representative of his monastery. The text in this connection does not necessarily imply that Synkellos belonged to the brotherhood of Saint Chariton. It only states that as he was heading to Bethlehem and to the Laura of Saint Chariton he passed by the tomb of Rachel. Be that as it may, the above cited examples are the only autobiographical statements made in his work. Elsewhere he claimed to have visited Parthia (in north-eastern Iran) and Phrygia (in central Asia Minor) and that he had eaten Parthian manna and found that it had the same taste as the one mentioned in the Pentateuch! There are other numerous instances in which he describes monuments, ruins of cities and names as if they were still surviving in his time, although it is clear that he was simply reproducing his sources. But more interesting than that is that some of his statements appear in other sources as well and in this case one ponders whether Synkellos is the primary source and not a mere copyist.

(I) ὡς δὲ ἔληξε τὸ ὕδωρ, ἡ κιβωτὸς ἱδρύθη ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη Ἀραράτ, ἅτινα ἴσμεν ἐν Παρθίᾳ, τινὲς δὲν ἐν Κελαιναῖς τῆς Φρυγίας εἶναί φασίν· εἶδον δὲ τὸν τόπον ἑκάτερον (22, 6-8 [MOSSHAMMER]).

There was obviously a double tradition as to the exact location of Mount Ararat, upon which had rested the ark of Noah, one favouring Parthia and the other Kelainai of Phrygia (Apameia). According to Ioannes of Antioch, a certain Pergamos placed Mount Ararat in Pisidia, but Josephus and others placed it in Armenia, be-

3 Synkellos 1, 20; 4, 19; 5, 26; 6, 1; 16, 30; 37, 14; 232, 13; 265, 1; 272, 8; 315, 376, 26; 381, 23; 389, 20 (MOSSHAMMER).
tween the Parthians and the Armenians. This latter tradition passed on to subsequent chronicles, as in Codex Parisinus gr. 1712, f. 22v (Pseudo-Symeon) and in Georgios Kedrenos without, of course, the eyewitness statement. Their wording suggests that the two had either copied Synkellos or all three had recourse to a common source, which is more likely: ὅτι τὰ ὄρη Ἀραράτ ἴσων ἐν Παρθίᾳ τῆς Ἀρμενίας εἶναι: τινὲς δὲ φασιν ἐν Κελαιναίς τῆς Φρυγίας (Georgios Kedrenos, Historiarum Compendium, ed. I. Bekker. Bonn 1838, I 20, 18–19). It should also be noted that the section in Synkellos’ text is ascribed to Sextus Julius Africanus, which implies that Synkellos copied him verbatim.

At the time of Synkellos, Parthia both as a political entity and as a geographic name had long ceased to exist and except for historical events of the past it is scarcely mentioned in contemporary terms after the Justinianic period. But there is still another reference to Parthia supposedly made by Synkellos who had not only visited this distant land but had tasted its manna as well: τοῦτο μὲν οὖν τὸ μάννα κομισθὲν ἐκ τῆς Παρθικῆς ἔδον ἐγὼ καὶ μετέσχον αὐτοῦ, τῆς αὐτῆς γεύσεως ὄν, ἀλλ’ οὖχ οὐτω πλούσιως οἶον ὄρη κατὰ τήν ἔρημον (150,17-19 [Mosshammer]). The author claims to have seen and tasted manna brought from Parthia, although where and when he tasted it he does not say, except that it had the same taste as the biblical.

The author claimed that he had been in the Sinai desert, traveling the distance from Kades Barne to the valley of Zareth in less than five days, although it had taken the Israelites thirty-eight years to complete this journey. The exact same passage is found in Pseudo-Symeon (Parisinus gr. 1712, f. 36r) and in Kedrenos though in a different context and without the personal remark made in the text of Synkellos “as we know from our own experience”: ... ὃς Ὅδηρ βαρνη ἔως φάραγγος Σαρεθ διὰ οὔσης ἔνας ἡμέρης, ὡς ἡμεῖς ἐπειράθημεν, της αὐτοῦ καταρέμβεομενοῦς ὕπο τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν λα’ και η’ χρόνος διήνυσται (165, 16-18 [Mosshammer]).

(III) In another instance the author claimed to have traveled to the Dead Sea and to have seen a great many marvelous things there: συνέβαλλον δὲ παρὰ τῆν

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6 Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum, ed. C. Müller. Paris 1851, IV 541, 14: ὡς μὲν Πέργαμος συνεγράφατο ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι Ἀραράτ τῆς Πισιδίας ἐπαρχίας, ἢς μητρόπολις ἡ Ἀπάμεια· ὡς δὲ Ἰώσηπος καὶ άλλοι ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι Ἀραράτ τῆς Ἀρμενίας μεταξύ Πάρθων καὶ Ἀρμενίων ἐδιαβηθήν. 7 I wish to thank Professor Athanasios Markopoulos for providing me with a number of photographs from Parisinus gr. 1712. 8 Reliquiae sacrae: sive auctorum fere jam perditorum, ed. M. J. Routt. Oxford 1846, II 243, 1-4. 9 The incongruity of the name or rather of the phrase ἐκ τῆς Παρθικῆς did not fail to notice Gelzer, Sextus Julius Africanus, I 10.
θάλασσαν τὴν ἁλικήν, ἣ καλεῖται νῦν θάλαττα νεκρά· ἐν ταύτῃ πλείστα τῶν θαυμασίων τεθέαμαι (114,12-13 [MOSHAMMER]). Next he goes on to describe the richness of the place in bitumen, alum and salt together with the vegetation that was grown there. The whole section of Synkellos’ description is transmitted also by Pseudo-Symeon (Parisinus gr. 1712, f. 31r) and by Kedrenos with slight differences in the wording including, however, Synkellos’ personal remark “I have witnessed”: συνεβάλλον δὲ παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν τὴν ἁλικήν. Καὶ καλεῖται νῦν θάλασσα νεκρά, πλείστα θαυμάσια ἔχουσα, ἃ ἐγώ ἔθεασάμην (Kedrenos, I 51, 9-11 [BEKKER]). The section in both Synkellos’ text and in Parisinus gr. 1712, f. 31r is ascribed, however to Sextus Julius Africanus – Αφρικανοῦ – to whom obviously belongs the eye witness account.10

ἐνταῦθα εἰσιν αἳ τῆς ἀσφάλτου πηγαί-φέρει δὲ στυπτηρίαν καὶ ἄλας, ὀλίγον τι τῶν ἄλλων διαφέ-ροντα· πικρὰ τε γάρ ἐστι καὶ διαυγή ἐνθα δ’ ἂν καρπὸς εὑρεθῇ καπνοῦ πλέον εὑρίσκεται θολερωτάτῳ ...

ἔστι δὲ παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν τὴν ἁλικήν. Καὶ καλεῖται νῦν θάλασσα νεκρά, πλείστα θαυμάσια ἔχουσα, ἃ ἐγώ ἔθεασάμην (Kedrenos, I 51, 9-11 [BEKKER]). The section in both Synkellos’ text and in Parisinus gr. 1712, f. 31r is ascribed, however to Sextus Julius Africanus – Αφρικανοῦ – to whom obviously belongs the eye witness account.10

An earlier description of the Dead Sea in strikingly similar language as in the above cited texts is traced in Eustathius of Antioch’s (fourth century) commentary on the Hexaemeron, a fact that shows that their ultimate source goes several centuries before.

Zώων τε γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκεῖνο φέρει τὸ ὕδωρ,
καὶ νεκροὶ μὲν ὑποβρύχιοι φέρονται, ζῶντες δὲ οὐδ’ ἂν ῥάδιως βαπτίσαντο.
Λύχνοι δὲ καιόμενοι μὲν ἐπιφέρονται, σβεσθέντες δὲ καταδύνουσιν.

Ἐνταῦθα εἰσιν αἳ τῆς ἀσφάλτου πηγαί φέρει δὲ στυπτηρίαν καὶ ἄλας, ὀλίγον τι τῶν ἄλλων διαφέ-ροντα πικρὰ τε γάρ ἐστι καὶ διαυγή ἐνθα δ’ ἂν καρπὸς εὑρεθῇ καπνοῦ πλέον εὑρίσκεται οὐδέν ...

Εὐσταθίου, ΠΓ 18: 752

10 Reliquiae sacrae, XIII 265–266 (ROUTH).
The Chronographia is a composite work made up of various texts copied by Synkellos at times verbatim and with no regard as to their chronological relevance at the time he was writing. The wife of Lot, for instance, who had turned into a pillar of salt, he writes, was still visible, but this again is a borrowing from Africanus as the text itself suggests (Ἀφρικανοῦ περὶ Ἀβραάμ – Synkellos, 112, 16 [Mosshammer]) or possibly from Josephus, who claimed to “have seen this pillar, which remains to this day”. The supposed eyewitness testimonies are numerous: if one traveled by boat from Patras to Corinth he could still see the ruins of the ancient cities of Elike and Boura, which had been wiped out by a disastrous earthquake (Synkellos 310, 16-18 [Mosshammer]). The disastrous event is transmitted almost verbatim by Kedrenos (I 255, 18-20 [Bekker]) and is also inserted in the Paschal Chronicle (ed. L. Dindorf. Bonn 1832, 317, 9-10). Likewise the biblical city of Charan supposedly remained idolatrous to his time (μέχρι τοῦ νῦν – Synkellos 107, 30 [Mosshammer]) and on Mount Lebanon some people cutting stones discovered in his time sea fish in petrified state, a discovery that confirmed the Flood and the ark constructed by Noah. In Mosshammer’s edition this latter section is assigned to Eusebius, according to the Hebrew text used by the Samaritans (Synkellos, 95, 26; 96, 4-12 [Mosshammer]). The story is recorded in various sources: Kedrenos (I 27, 16-18 [Bekker]), Georgios Monachos (I 49, 1-7 [Wirth]), according to whom this story goes back to Josephus and in the Ἐκλογὴ Ἱστοριῶν (II 170, 5-16 [Cramer]), which transmits faithfully the text of Synkellus but names Eusebius explicitly as an eyewitness of this incident: καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς ταῦτα γράφουσιν ἀληθῆ ταῦτα ἐπιστώσατο Εὐσέβιος, αὐτοψεὶ τοὺς ἰχθύας ἰδών [...]. Another ancient source which preserves in similar language the story is Eustathius of Antioch (PG 18: 761), the well known opponent of Arius.

Be that as it may, similar examples which present Synkellos as a contemporary to various events and incidents abound in his text and there is no sense in discussing them any further because their veracity is suspect at first glance. In several

12 In this connection, Gelzer, Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie, I 11, proposed Africanus as the source of Synkellos and even an earlier Greek source like Strabo and Eratosthenes, but he seems not to have noticed the testimony of the Paschal Chronicle, a carrier of an intermediary source for subsequent chronographers: ὧν κατὰ θάλασσαν ἄχρι νῦν τὰ ἴχνη (317, 9). In his second volume, however, Gelzer, 154, connects the text to Eusebius.
14 Synkellos 123 (Mosshammer): ἥτις μέχρι νῦν εἰς τιμὴν τῶν πατριαρχῶν ὑπὸ τῶν πλησιοχώρων τιμᾶται – the veneration of the terebinth tree at Shechem to this day. The exact same passage is encountered in Eusebius, Εὐαγγελικῆς Ἀποδείξεως, V 9. PG 22: 384A. Synkellos 167, 18 (Mosshammer): εἰσὶν ἐκεῖ ἥξις σήμερον – the twelve stones of Joshua in the Jordan that are there until today. 168, 12: ὅπερ μέχρι νῦν ἐστὶ ιδεῖν ἐν Ἰεριχώ – grain harvesting at the spring equinox to this
instances I have cited corresponding passages from Pseudo-Symeon and from Georgios Kedrenos, which transmit verbatim parts of Synkellos. Heinrich Gelzer maintained of course that Kedrenos did not use Synkellos as a source because he had access to chronographic material similar to those used by him. Yet in the course of his researches he reverted his opinion accepting the priority of Synkellos over Kedrenos and Parisinus 1712. Nevertheless, H. Gelzer was the first to propose the idea of Synkellos’ stay in Palestine. He was probably led to this conclusion by a well known in the meantime passage that cannot be easily refuted or dismissed in which the chronicler wrote that he had frequently passed by the tomb of Rachel on his way to the Old Laura of Saint Chariton and Jerusalem: Ταύτης ἡ Ῥαχὴλ ἐγὼ τὴν λάρνακα τῆς γῆς ὑπερκειμένην πολλάκις ἐκεῖσε παροδεύων ἐπὶ Βηθλεέμ καὶ τὴν παλαιὰν λεγομένην λαύραν τοῦ ὁσίου Χαρίτωνος ἑώρακα (Synkellos 122, 20-22 [MOSHAMMER]).

The possibility that Georgios Synkellos lived for a period of time in the Holy Land or that he may have been a Palestinian cannot be altogether excluded. Yet his eyewitness accounts, as the foregoing discussion has shown, are more or less derivative being connected mainly to biblical events and places and bringing to mind the Onomastikon of Eusebius and other similar texts of the period. Adler and Tuffin accept, for instance, that the description of the Dead Sea (114, 1-24 [MOSHAMMER]) and the terebinth tree at Shechem (123, 13, 21 [MOSHAMMER]) have been borrowed from Julius Africanus. And what about his travels to Phrygia and Parthia or that he ate manna brought from Parthia (to where?) are they more credible? The contemporary events have no place in Synkellos’ Chronicle and the few allusions made to the Arab aggression are phrased in biblical language (6, 7-12, 56, 1-4 [MOSHAMMER]). And yet the Arabs are known to have attacked the monastery of Saint Chariton in 796 and 809, when he was supposedly still working on his chronicle. Certain parts of his work especially towards the end comprise lengthy excerpts from well known sources which have been often transcribed word by word and do not deviate too much from the original (Josephus, Eusebius). Did Synkellos follow the same method in his other borrowings from Africanus, Panodoros and Annianos? It is hard to say.
It has been pointed out that his text is marred by unnecessary repetitions and contradictions that suggest that in the form it survives it is only a draft and not the final version.\(^\text{18}\) If this is the case then his so-called autobiographical references might derive from his sources – which makes more sense instead of assigning the various problematic remarks we have discussed to his own experience.

For one thing, however, we are sure that Kedrenos and the chronicler of the Paris manuscript did not reproduce his personal statements except for once, in the case of Kedrenos’ description of the Dead Sea, where he also stated ἐθεασάμην πλεῖστα θαυμάσια (I 51, 11 [BEKKER]). Does their method imply that in copying Synkellos the two chronographers intentionally skipped over his personal experiences? Or they simply used some other source? Perhaps after all Pseudo-Symeon and Kedrenos did not work mechanically in using the cut and paste method. The matter may be clarified in the future when we will have new editions of these two chronicles. But regardless of what one believes on this minor issue, in the final analysis the sojourn of Synkellos in Palestine and his travels in far-away Phrygia and Parthia provided the basis of a theory that has been by now advanced – admittedly without great effort – to a fact.

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