

ATHANASIUS OF CLYSMA

A third-century martyr and undoubtedly an Egyptian saint although probably not a Coptic saint. His Passion exists in Greek, Georgian, and Arabic. It may be considered to be a Greco-Palestinian document. The Greek text ([Bibliotheca](#) Hagiographica Graeca 193) was published by A. Papadopoulos Kerameus in 1898 from the still unique Paris manuscript (Coislin 303, tenth century). In the following year, H. Delehayé noted the close links between this text and that of Saints Sergius and Bacchus ([Bibliotheca](#) Hagiographica Graeca 1624). The Georgian text was published in 1962 by K. Kekelidze from three manuscripts, two of which were from the tenth century. But there are still other Georgian copies that he did not use. The Arabic version is in three manuscripts (Sinaiticus 440, 1251, fols. 99v-106; Sinai Arabic 535, thirteenth century, fols. 111-18; and British Museum, Or. Add. 26117, eleventh century, fols. 23-35, which is a manuscript also with a Sinai provenance).

There is nothing original about the Passion. It tells of the following events: under [Diocletian](#) and Maximian, persecution set in throughout the whole empire. Athanasius is a burning light because of his faith and holds an important post in the imperial household. His two brothers, Sergius and Bacchus, resemble him. Maximian sends Athanasius as a faithful servant and a relative to close all the churches in Egypt as far as the Thebaid and to open temples to the gods. Athanasius sheds tears as he takes leave of his brothers, Sergius and Bacchus, foreseeing the martyrdom to which they are all called. Arriving at Alexandria he treats Bishop Peter like a brother and shows contempt for idols. At once he is denounced to Maximian. The latter appoints a judge to interrogate Athanasius. The [prefect](#) of Egypt receives the letter and summons him.

The dialogue follows the most classical of patterns. Athanasius states that he is stopping at Clysma where his heart's desire will be fulfilled. Once at the town, Athanasius halts "not far from the spot where today there is a cross" and there makes a prayer. He enters the town just when Christ's

nativity is being celebrated, participates in the rejoicings, and then announces the closure of the churches in accordance with the emperor's order. The judge then orders Athanasius to sacrifice to the gods, but the saint refuses and turns to God in his prayers. Confronting the judge, Athanasius quotes Saint Paul against the wisdom of the heathen. The judge argues to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" but the saint continues to save his soul, forcing the judge to demand the supreme sacrifice. In the final [prayer](#) before he is beheaded, Athanasius makes a strange and rare invocation; he calls on God to protect the Christian kings in the [lands](#) of the Romans and the Ethiopians. This phrase, which has disappeared in the Greek but remains in the Arabic and Georgian, is also found in the Ethiopian Synaxarion. In fact, Saint Athanasius of Clysma is one of the rare saints not in the Coptic-[Arabic SYNAXARION](#) but present in Ethiopian tradition. The Arabic text of [the Passion](#) adds an epilogue after the decapitation on 18 Tammuz. The population of Clysma went out to the judge with Julian, their bishop, and asked him for the body. They arranged for its burial at the church of Our Lady of Clysma, covering it with precious cloths and laying it in a marvelous coffin. From then on numerous cures took place at his tomb.

Among the foundations of [Justinian](#) in the Sinai area listed by Euty chius ibn Batriq is a church dedicated to Saint Athanasius. The plenipotentiary sent to the governor of Egypt "gave the order to build a church at al-Qulzum, and to build the monastery of Rayah, to build the monastery of Mount Sinai and to fortify it to the extent that there was none better fortified in the world. When the legate arrived at al-Qulzum, he built in al-Qulzum the church of Mar Athanasius, and built the convent of Rayah and went to Mount Sinai and found the Bush there" (Euty chius, ed. E. Chiekho, 1906, pp. 202-03).

[ABU SALIH](#) THE ARMENIAN writes about a century after Euty chius: "Al-Qulzum was the king's fortress, on the frontier with the Hijaz, named after the weaving loom cord and known as Qulzum. A Church of Athanasius existed there, so did the convent within the bounds of Rayah

founded by Justinian” (Evetts, 1895, p. 73). Rayah, says Yaqut, is also the name of a village in Egypt opposite al-Qulzum (Yaqut, 1846, p. 199). Procopius in *De Aedificiis* (1906, pp. 167-68), knows that [Justinian](#) founded Phoinikon, the Greek equivalent of Rayah. This place-name was famous because tracks were shown there of the chariots of the [pharaoh](#) who went down into the Red Sea, according to COSMAS INDICOPLEUSTES (1968, and Peter the Deacon in the twelfth century; Geyer, 1898, pp. 115-17).

Thus the cult of Saint Athanasius was linked with Justinian’s policy for defense against invasions from the south, within the framework of an alliance with Ethiopia, where the cult of Saint Arethas of Najran appears to be a further warrant. In fact, the expansion of the cult of Saint Athanasius was strictly linked with Justinian’s Chalcedonian policy. A complete liturgical canon has been preserved in Georgian (Mount Sinai manuscripts 1 and 56; Garitte, 1958, p. 283). But the Greek Passion expediently dropped the [prayer](#) for the Ethiopian sovereigns after it had become clear that the church there was developing in a direction different from Chalcedonianism. In the Life of JOHN COLOBOS, the saint withdraws to Clysma and is finally buried there: “He was laid beside other saints such as Saint Athanasius the martyr, abba Djidjoi, and abba Djimi, and the [grace](#) of God effected marvels by means of the bodies of these saints excessively, and above all through that of our holy father John [Colobos], for the healing and salvation of anyone, until there took place the Devil’s Synod at Chalcedon and polluted the earth with a perverse and abominable doctrine like a prostitute” (Amélineau, 1894, pp. 405, 406). It is not impossible that [Justinian](#) had looked for the body of the martyr of Clysma at the spot where the consecrations stopped at the time of the [Council](#) of CHALCEDON. In every way [the Passion](#) of the martyr and its relationship with the record of Sergius and [Bacchus](#) make the account of the martyrdom itself extremely artificial. According to the Arabic supplement there would only be the slenderest data on a Bishop Julian to make it possible to extract commonplaces. This name is not

elsewhere attested.

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